

CHAPTER I

*An Introduction***I The Story of Esther**

The biblical book of Esther tells a short but horrifying story about the threatened annihilation of all the Jews in the Persian Empire, a near Holocaust/Shoah, which is averted only thanks to the rapid, courageous, and decisive actions of courtier Mordecai and Queen Esther, who took a tremendous amount of risk on herself in order to save the Jewish people. The catastrophe is turned upside down as the threat of annihilation is not merely cancelled but instead inflicted on the enemies of the Jews, resulting in them suffering the violence and death that they had intended against others. Set in the Elamite city of Shushan (/Susa), the book mixes reality, drama, humor, irony, and sarcasm to create a series of tragic-comic moments – all expressed in a fluid and appealing style, sophisticated literary performs, and rich language – in order to attract its audience to the frightening and dramatic story that hides an important theological and social message.

II Esther, Jews, and Christians

Among Jews, *Megillat* (i.e., the Scroll of) Esther is included with the Five *Megillot* in the Hebrew Bible, namely: The Song of Songs, Ruth, Qohelet, Lamentations, and Esther. Among Christians, the book of Esther comes under the umbrella of the historical books of the Old Testament, alongside books such as Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings, and located after Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah.¹ In both Jewish and Christian Bibles, however, Esther and the Song of Songs stand out: Despite their differing

¹ For the form and location of the book in Christian canons, and the differences compared with the Jewish canon, see Chapters 8, §II and 10, §III.

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literary genres, they are the only biblical books that explicitly do not mention any form of God's name or religious practice, cult, or institution.² No wonder, therefore, that both books were discussed in early Jewish and especially Christian societies, whether they should be included in the canon of the Holy Scriptures or not,³ though in the end, they were accepted in both canons.

Yet, concerning the Song of Songs, the two sister religions, Judaism and Christianity, both maintained allegorical approaches to the book,⁴ reading it as a poem on divine love, while disputing its precise allegorical meaning. Each religion allegorized the “bride – groom” of the biblical text, according to its own unique theological orientation: either as “God – Israel” or “Jesus – Church.”⁵ In contrast, when it comes to the book of Esther, there is a gaping chasm between these two religious denominations. Generally speaking, Jews adore the book of Esther and grant it a central place within their interpretation, theology, liturgy, festivals, literature, and art, while Esther does not play any role in Christian theology or liturgy, and Christians have usually neglected the book, often even condemning it and the Jews and Judaism with it.

² The ending יה of the *hapax legomenon* שלהבתיה in the Song of Songs 8:6 is not an abbreviated form of God's name (*contra* W. Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth. Das Hohe Lied. Die Klagelieder* [Kommentar zum Alten Testament 17,1–3; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus Gerd Mohn, 1962], pp. 179–180: “Jahweflammern”; *New Jerusalem Bible* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985], p. 1040: “a flame of Yahweh himself”). Rather, it is a third feminine singular pronominal suffix (referring to אהבה), or a sort of superlative (see D. Winton Thomas, “A Consideration of Some Unusual Ways of Expressing the Superlative in Hebrew,” *VT* 3 [1953], pp. 209–224 esp. 221), and should be translated as “a blazing flame” (*Jewish Publication Society Hebrew-English Tanakh* [3rd ed.; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1999], p. 1739), or “a raging flame” (*New Revised Standard Version* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989], p. 697). G. Gerleman (*Ruth. Das Hohelied* [Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament 18; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 1965], p. 216), translated: “eine gewaltige Flamme.” On p. 217, Gerleman expounds: “sehr wahrscheinlich [יה] ein Intensivsuffix ist. מאפליה ‘tiefes Dunkel’ [ist die Intensivform von מאפיל]... In ähnlicher Weise scheint שלהבתיה eine Intensivform von שלהבת zu sein, also ‘eine mächtige Flamme’”). Thus, Meinhold's statement that Esther is the only biblical book that does not mention God's name יהוה is inaccurate. See A. Meinhold, “Esther/Estherbuch,” in H. D. Betz *et al.* (eds.), *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (4th ed.; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1999), vol. 2, pp. 1594–1597 esp. 1596.

³ Although it should be stressed that the book of Esther is much less disputed in Judaism than in Christianity, and also much less disputed than the Song of Songs; see Chapters 7, 8, and 10, §I and §III.

⁴ Regarding the Song of Songs among the Jews and Christians, see G. L. Scheper, “The Spiritual Marriage: The Exegetic History and Literary Impact of the Song of Songs in the Middle Ages” (Ph.D. dissertation; Princeton University, 1971); J. P. Tanner, “The History of Interpretation of the Song of Songs,” *BibSac* 154 (1997), pp. 23–46, with references to the primary sources and bibliography.

⁵ For a recent discussion on this and other issues regarding the Song of Songs, see I. Pardes, *The Song of Songs: A Biography* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019).

III Challenges and Purposes

Generations of exegetes, theologians, philologists, historians, and folklorists, particularly Jewish but also some non-Jewish, have sought to comprehend and interpret the book of Esther from various viewpoints. Indeed, Esther is one of the most challenging books in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, not only due to the difficulty of understanding the book itself in its time, place, and literary context, but also for the long and torturous history of interpretation it has provoked in Jewish and Christian traditions.

This volume addresses both challenges: a focus on the book itself as well as its reception history among Jews and Christians. In other words, it treats the book's canonical validity and different traditions and usage in Judaism and Christianity, without neglecting the fundamental questions regarding the book in scholarship.

The volume strives to accomplish these goals through a meticulously structured approach to the subject matter, in which attention is paid to providing the building blocks for the reader to follow the line of argumentation. Accordingly, it divides the argument into three overarching subject areas, which lay out my approach: Part I provides a comprehensive introduction to the study of the book of Esther, as an essential background for the following parts and for better understanding of them. I contextualize this within the comparative reception history in the Jewish and Christian traditions in Parts II and III. The latter examines the contrasting place of both the book and the characters (i.e., Esther, Mordecai, and their important literary companions) within the Jewish and Christian communities, and the impact that it has had on the relation between the two communities and community identity. Thus, the latter is a description of the different historical receptions, impacts, and continuities of the former. Let us turn our attention to these in some detail.

The first part of the volume concentrates primarily on the book itself. It opens with a presentation of the book's story, investigation of its date and place, and questions its literary unity and possible textual development, literary genera and stylistic features, noble characters, historical setting, historicity, and the apparent core theological message of the composition. All these issues have played too important a role in modern scholarship to ignore. Furthermore, these explorations contribute not only to a better, deeper, and more appropriate comprehension of the book of Esther itself – issues which are significant for their own merit – but they also serve as an essential background for a closer reading, understanding,

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and evaluation of the reception of Esther in biblically oriented societies, namely Jews and Christians. In different words, by means of the issues that are discussed in the first part of the volume it will be possible to comprehend, support, or challenge the positive or negative approaches to the book of Esther and its reception that will be addressed in the remaining two parts of the volume.

The second and third parts, which comprise almost two-thirds of the volume, focus on the “after life” (*Nachleben*) of the book and its key characters, their reception history (*Rezeptionsgeschichte*), and their impact, treatment, and roles (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) in Jewish and Christian societies, religions and cultures, from earliest times to the modern era.⁶ The volume does not intend to be merely a survey of Esther’s reception, as is commonly done in the field regarding some other biblical books. Instead, it endeavors to evaluate the uses, reuses, abuses, as well as various interpretations and misrepresentations of the book of Esther across centuries, among Jews and Christians. It presents and compares the two sides of the reception history of Esther and shows that still there is some positive approach toward the book among certain Christians, and there is also hostility to Esther among some Jews.⁷ Nevertheless, the latter cases are relatively in the minority in both religious groups. Thus, the volume contrasts the embrace of Esther by most of the Jewish people, tradition, and literature, with the condemnation of Esther by many Christians and in Christian tradition, especially since Martin Luther.

IV Sources and Approach

The core basis for discussion of the Esther story here is its Hebrew version – the Masoretic (i.e., traditional) Text, and most likely the oldest version – while the differing Greek and Aramaic versions are discussed distinctly and included in the discussion of the book’s reception histories.⁸ The volume utilizes the valuable contributions of classical Jewish exegesis and literature, without overlooking the results of up-to-date modern exegesis and historical-critical research.⁹ It integrates the discussions in

⁶ For the reception of Esther in Islamic contexts, see A. Silverstein, *Veiling Esther, Unveiling Her Story: The Reception of a Biblical Book in Islamic Lands* (Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic Religions; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁷ As we will see, the hostility to the book of Esther is not only among the strict religious Qumranic community in the far distant past, but also among certain modern Reform Jewish scholars, each group for its own unique reasons.

⁸ See the detailed discussion in Chapter 2, §IV and Chapter 10, §I (Greek versions), and Chapter 8, §IV (Aramaic translations).

⁹ Unfortunately, a classical Christian exegesis of Esther is not available; see Chapter 10, §IV.

the most recent studies of the historical, philological, literary, interpretive, and theological aspects of the book, with differing written sources in several languages throughout many eras and locations, as well as the archaeological finds from ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean cultures. The approach adopted here is interdisciplinary, addressing multilingual, multicultural, and multireligious communities across Esther's origins and reception, and crosses ethnic, linguistic, and geographical borders.¹⁰ Thus, the volume combines the analysis of Esther's various aspects with an exploration of its receptions. Finally, texts and terms from foreign languages are translated to English in order to make the volume accessible for a large readership.

V State of Research

The Jewish reception of Esther has been addressed to some extent in a few studies. This includes Barry D. Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb*,¹¹ who devotes a chapter to medieval Jewish debates concerning some issues in the book. In one chapter Walfish refers to medieval commentaries referring to the faithfulness or unfaithfulness of Esther and Mordecai in allowing her to marry a gentile king, and the justice of the Jews slaughtering their enemies at the end of the book.¹² In another chapter, Walfish reviews the diverse ways in which Haman's accusation is elaborated upon by medieval commentators,¹³ an issue that will be taken up much more broadly and from a different angle in Chapters 8 and 9 of this volume.

In his monograph, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*, Elliott Horowitz explores the history of violent accusations and acts associated with the book of Esther, particularly in relation to the Purim festival that is based on it.¹⁴ The first half of the monograph focuses on the question of whether the book of Esther celebrates vengeance or hidden divine rescue, on the contrast between Vashti and Esther, the significance of Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman, the supposed parallels to Haman's hostility toward the Jews, and finally the reception of Amalek.¹⁵ The second half of the monograph then focuses on the accusations of violence since late

¹⁰ All translations from non-English languages are mine, unless noted otherwise.

¹¹ B. D. Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages* (New York: SUNY Press, 1993).

¹² Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb*, pp. 121–141 (ch. 6).

¹³ Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb*, pp. 142–155 (ch. 7).

¹⁴ E. Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Jews, Christians and Muslims from the Ancient to the Modern World; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

¹⁵ Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, pp. 21–146 (chs. 1–5).

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antiquity, by and against Jews, in association with Purim.¹⁶ Though only very rarely, Horowitz argues that Purim celebrations have sometimes led to real or imagined violence against outsiders or their symbols.¹⁷ At the same time, however, non-Jews have also frequently pointed to Purim and its celebration to support accusations of Jewish violence, usually with no real basis. They have blamed the Jews for ritual murder and bloodthirsty vengeance and used this to justify their own violence *against* Jewish communities.¹⁸ There has been a tendency among many Jews to identify later oppressors with Haman in their celebrations of Purim, for example, dressing up “Haman” to look like contemporary oppressors, in Purim plays, theatrical shows, and public processions.¹⁹ Also, local “Second Purims” have often been established, in which particular communities celebrate later moments of deliverance from violence according to the models provided by Esther.²⁰

Horowitz’s monograph explores the reception of Esther and its characters, especially in relation to the seeming legitimacy of violence. In contrast to my volume, Horowitz does not explain and situate the book of Esther itself in its original form. He does not discuss the original content or context of the book, its unity and textual growth, and offers no detailed discussion of the purpose of Esther itself – its main theological and social-national message, its historical setting, or its time of composition, literary features, and historicity.²¹ Horowitz also does not discuss in detail the approach to the book as a whole in the Christian tradition from earliest times onward, as this volume does.²² For instance, he briefly mentions Luther’s attitude to the book,²³ but he does not dedicate any deep analysis to why, when, where, and in which contexts Luther said what he said, nor to explain how this might be correlated with Luther’s attitude toward the Old Testament in general, the Jewish people, and Judaism.²⁴ Although he refers to some followers of Luther, he does not discuss the full spectrum of later Christian reception and interpretations of Esther, and does not make any effort to analyze and question the common Christian allegation that Esther portrays a “Jewish pogrom” against Gentiles.²⁵

¹⁶ Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, pp. 147–316 (chs. 6–10).

¹⁷ Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, pp. 149–185 (ch. 6).

¹⁸ Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, pp. 187–247 (chs. 7–8).

¹⁹ Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, pp. 248–278 (ch. 9).

²⁰ Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, pp. 279–316 (ch. 10); see Chapter 9.

²¹ See Chapters 2–5.

²² See Chapters 10–13.

²³ See Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, p. 12.

²⁴ See Chapter 11.

²⁵ See Chapter 12.

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Horowitz's focus is purely on the conflicting ways in which later readers have interpreted and used the book, and he makes no attempt to evaluate the degree to which these later readings adapt, distort, or reject the key themes of the biblical book itself.²⁶ Even more extreme, his chapter on the different ways that Haman has been used as a model for later oppressors of Israel does not devote *any* discussion to the characterization of Haman within the biblical book itself or to ancient parallels to Haman's accusations.²⁷ All in all, Horowitz's monograph and my volume have different focal points and different approaches in general, and mainly cover different sources from different perspectives. Moreover, his specific conclusions do not always line up with mine. For instance, he emphasizes much more strongly than I can accept that violence against outsiders – again, real or only imagined – has commonly played a part in the celebration of Purim.

The most comprehensive study of Esther's reception history available to date is Jo Carruthers' commentary in the Blackwell Bible Commentaries series, *Esther through the Centuries*.²⁸ She offers an overview of the book's reception, with chapters devoted to each major section of the book. Carruthers also offers a short review of previous scholarship on Esther's reception, and a bibliography organized into categories. However, while she refers to Horowitz's monograph in her bibliography, she does not engage with it directly. Due to her general approach, Carruthers also does not focus on the specific issue of Esther's use by both Jews and Christians to demonize their opponents and glorify themselves.²⁹

The most recent monograph on the context and early reception of Esther among the Jews is Aaron Koller's *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*.³⁰ His focus is on the "politics" of the book of Esther: how it reflects early Jewish views of the Persian Empire, and how subsequent Jews struggled to explain and accommodate its message. He argues that the book deliberately challenges several core beliefs common in Persian-period Judaism, particularly regarding the centrality of Jerusalem, the Persian emperor as God's agent, the necessity to strictly separate themselves from all foreigners and their practices, and a commitment to the Davidic dynasty.³¹ For this

²⁶ For instance, regarding Mordecai, Horowitz spends only half a page on his characterization within the biblical book, noting the similarities between his refusal to bow to Haman and Vashti's refusal to appear before the king, before turning to the diverse later explanations and evaluations of Mordecai's refusal. See Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, pp. 63–80 (ch. 3).

²⁷ Cf. Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, pp. 81–106 (ch. 4).

²⁸ J. Carruthers, *Esther through the Centuries* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Victoria: Blackwell, 2008).

²⁹ Cf. the brief discussions of these issues in her chapter on Esther 9–10; Carruthers, *Esther through the Centuries*, pp. 254–279.

³⁰ A. Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

³¹ Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, pp. 45–53.

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reason, Koller claims that many early Jewish allusions to and interpretations of Esther, particularly in the Land of Israel, were negative rather than positive, and that this only changed after the destruction of the Second Temple.³² At that point, according to Koller, Esther's popularity expanded significantly, and its more subversive and problematic aspects were widely ignored or given novel explanations in order to correspond better to mainstream Jewish belief, though some still continued to question the book, its characters, and its overarching story. Thus, Koller's book parallels some portions of the present volume, namely regarding the meaning of the book and its early Jewish reception. However, I take different approaches, and deal with different questions and themes. Here the main goal of the book of Esther is explained very differently than Koller does.³³ Moreover, he does not address the Christian reception of the book in ancient, medieval, and modern times, and pays little attention to certain key aspects of its Jewish reception that will be explored in this volume.³⁴ These include, especially, the tendency among both Jews and Christians to use the book to demonize their contemporary opponents while glorifying their own legacy.

In fact, Koller downplays the role that the respective contemporary interpretations of the book have played in its reception history, focusing on Jewish attempts to read the book for its own sake, even when their readings were extremely creative and non-literal.³⁵ Furthermore, Koller's book is marked by a number of oddities, perhaps the most significant of which is a broad willingness to speculate beyond the evidence. Nowhere is this more apparent than in his extended reflections concerning the thoughts and desires of the author/editor. For example, Koller describes in detail what he imagines the author of Esther thought about the parallels between Joseph and Daniel, and states: "This was quite a brilliant use of allusions, Marduka [a term he uses to refer generically to the anonymous author/editor of MT Esther] thought. What he found maddening was that the storyteller made

³² Though Koller finds positive use of Esther in 2 Maccabees (which he takes to be a work of the Diaspora; see Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, pp. 109–112), and of course, in the expanded Greek translation of the book of Esther (*ibid.*, pp. 113–123), he points to Qumran as evidence of its rejection by other Second Temple period Jews (*ibid.*, pp. 129–135). However, Koller overlooks that the Qumran community was a marginal minority among the Second Temple Jews; see Chapter 7.

³³ See Chapter 4.

³⁴ See Chapters 7–13.

³⁵ For example, Koller asserts that "much of the rabbinic interpretation is not focused on the relevance of the biblical text for the Rabbis' own time. Although there are of course such contemporizing readings within rabbinic literature, much of their exegesis is academic in nature: they are interested in interpreting the Bible, as a whole and in all its details, for the sake of plumbing the meaning of the sacred texts" (Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, p. 171). While this may be true of some interpretations of Esther, there are many exceptions, as we will see.

his hero [= Daniel] *superior* to Joseph.”³⁶ How Koller can know what the author of Esther found “maddening,” is an unexplained enigma. Additional points in Koller’s presentation will be challenged in later chapters.

To sum up, among the previous studies of Esther and its reception, this volume is exceptional. It suggests innovative avenues and fills in a gap in biblical, Jewish, and Christian studies. It demonstrates how the different interpretations of the biblical text have essentially impacted on those receptions as well as on Jewish–Christian relations. This particular form of engagement of “traditional” literary, textual, theological, and historical-critical discussion of Esther situated alongside comparative Jewish and Christian interpretive histories, while exemplifying how the former serves the latter, is indeed unique in scholarship of any biblical book. Additionally, this volume sheds a new light on and contributes numerous fresh insights throughout its three parts that moves us beyond the current state of scholarship in the field.

VI Outline

Following this introductory chapter, the volume addresses the content and context of the book itself in Part I, “Esther: Story and History, Literary Features and Theology.” This part presents the book of Esther and examines a number of the central discussions stimulating research on the book and analyzes certain themes regarding it – themes that play an important role in the later progression of my arguments. It includes five chapters.

Chapter 2 introduces the Esther story, and then discusses the presumed place and time of the composition, dating it to the fifth century BCE. It discusses the literary unity, textual development (Hebrew and Greek versions) of the book and prioritizes the witness of the Masoretic Text over the Greek versions. It presents the portrait of the noble characters in the book – Vashti, Esther, and Mordecai – as they are reflected in the Hebrew Bible.

Chapter 3 examines the virtuosity, literary style, and features of Esther story: The book as a world masterpiece literature, its secular presentation, its variety of literary techniques (e.g., *inclusio*, chiasmus, and chiasmic in parallel, antithesis, structures of reversed fate, *talionis*), the author’s overstatements and exaggerations, satirical and humoristic descriptions.

Chapter 4 questions whether the book of Esther is just a humorous and purely secular tale designed to entertain the reader as some scholars consider it; or whether it is – even with its humoristic style and the absence of God’s name – a thoughtful story about the dangerous destiny of the

³⁶ Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, p. 40, cf. pp. 30–34, 37–44.

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Jews in the Persian Empire, a religious text with an important theological message – particularly addressed to the Jews in Diaspora – that should be read cautiously and earnestly? And, if so, what precisely is that theological message, and why does the name of God not appear explicitly in any form, even once, among the entire 3,044 words of the 167 verses of the ten chapters of the Hebrew version of the book? The chapter discusses this issue within the book of Esther and its biblical contexts (further supported by extra-biblical sources), that is: the fear of total annihilation and hope for salvation by God, who is loyal to his covenant with Israel.

Chapter 5 investigates the historical setting and historicity of the book of Esther. It challenges both the view that Esther is a completely reliable historical account, and the assumption that Esther is a completely unreliable, fictional, or even mythological story. It calls for a balanced approach, arguing that Esther is best understood as a “novelistic history,” combining both plausible and implausible elements. Through a comparison with biblical and extra-biblical sources from Persian, Greek, and Jewish authors, as well as archaeological finds, it reveals that many elements in the Esther story are most likely grounded in historical reality, including the core theme of the threat to exterminate the Jews. Other topics addressed in this chapter include the empire and the imperial hierarchy; the identification of the king and his portrayal; the queen and harem; the capital city and the royal court; royal annals and imperial archives; the postal delivery system; the legal system; tolerance toward minorities; and conspiracy and murder in the royal court. The extended discussion of the historical setting of the book serves the dual purpose of bolstering his dating and of providing a historical matrix for the book’s composition. Although the central events of the book as related in Esther may not reflect what actually happened, the themes reflected in the book’s main narrative are, however, indicative of issues faced by the Jews living within the Persian Empire. Expanding on this theme, the volume adduces ancient parallels for the threats faced by the Jews in the book of Esther at the hands of Haman, which are discussed in Chapter 6. The parallels from several different ancient sources for Haman’s accusations against Jews in the writings of many Jew-haters support the claim that the accusations of Haman as stated in Esther are not fictional.

Part II, “Oh, How Much They Love the Book of Esther!”³⁷ – Esther among the Jews,” is concerned specifically with the reading and reception of Esther in Jewish thought through the ages. It shows how Jews have

³⁷ M. Luther, *Werke: Kritische Gesam(m)tausgabe* (121 vols.; Weimar: Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1883–2009), vol. 53, p. 433, lines 17–19; see Chapter II, §III, note 20.

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interpreted, addressed, grasped, modified, and adopted key aspects of this late biblical book. It demonstrates that the book of Esther has long been one of the most beloved biblical books within the Jewish community in spite of its lack of any explicit mention of God. This centrality of the book within Jewish reception history may be attributed to its understanding as a scheme providing hope to an exiled community living during precarious times that, no matter how bad the situation, there is always hope for redemption and salvation. Hence, it is a deeply theological book despite the apparent absence of the divine from the narrative. Indeed, as shown in Chapter 9, the book of Esther has been paradigmatic for Jewish confrontations with peril throughout the ages, including both during and after the Holocaust.

This part comprises one relatively short and two very large chapters. It opens with Chapter 7 that treats the intriguing absence of even a tiny fragment from the book of Esther amongst the hundreds of surviving manuscripts – mostly fragmental – of the Dead Sea Scrolls. Is this just incidental or accidental, or rather a reflection of the attitude of the Qumran community toward the figure of Esther and the book which bears her name? The chapter surveys some previous suggestions and proposes a few fresh ones.

Chapter 8 discusses Esther's place in Jewish tradition, culture, and thought more broadly, emphasizing the portrayals of its central Jewish characters, Esther and Mordecai, Haman, Agag, and Amalek in Jewish thought, the significance of the Megillah and the festival of Purim in Judaism over the centuries, and its place in Jewish art, play, music, and film. The chapter closes with a review of the attitude of some Reform Jewish scholars toward the book of Esther and the feast based on it.

Chapter 9 examines explicit Jewish identifications of particular persecutors and Jew-haters with the biblical Haman. Through creative applications of the book of Esther, they invented new "Hamans" and "Purims," and formed new "Megillot" in different Jewish communities, in various places and periods. A particular discussion devoted to the Esther story and Purim in the "Third Reich" Nazi Germany. An appendix to this chapter questions whether the "relief and deliverance" that was predicted by the author of Esther indeed characterize the Jews' long and bitter Exile. After this long history of Jewish persecution, and its horrific culmination in the Holocaust, is Esther's central theological message that God is always loyal to his covenant with Israel, as argued in Chapter 4, still credible? How do the major socio-religious streams of the Jewish people currently struggle with this problematic matter?

Part III, "Divine or Demon? – Esther among the Christians," examines the book of Esther in Christianity and Christian communities. This part comprises four chapters, and in fact stands in sharp contrast to the previous part.

It demonstrates that the book of Esther has at best a marginal place in Christianity, usually neglected or treated negatively, and even loaded with anti-Jewish and antisemitic assertions and allegations.

Chapter 10 points out the major differences between the Jewish “Megillat Esther” and the Christian “book of Esther.” It addresses the anti-Jewish trends already present in Esther’s Greek translations, which the Christian forms of the book of Esther follow. The chapter presents the authority, place, and name of the book of Esther in the Christian canon. It shows the general lack of interest in and neglect of Esther in Christian societies and literature. It discusses Esther in Christian theology in general, with a focus on the first Christian commentary on the book by Rabanus Maurus, and the negative attitude of Martin Luther to Esther. Luther’s harsh critique on the book of Esther and his long-term influence on generations of Christians scholars are carried forward in Chapters 11 and 12. Chapter 11 focuses on Luther’s complicated and conflicting attitudes toward the book of Esther and its Jewish characters: a friendly attitude toward the characters, and an extremely negative one toward the book itself. This chapter suggest a new understanding of Luther’s viewpoint, against the background of his attitudes toward the Old Testament, the Jewish people, and Judaism in general.

Chapter 12 demonstrates how Luther’s negative attitude toward and assertions against the book of Esther, Jews, and Judaism crucially affected Christian society, including the scholarly world, crossing the boundaries of territories and nations, throughout numerous generations. There is ample unjust hostility toward the book among Christian commentators, theologians, and thinkers, especially – but not exclusively – in Germany, the homeland of Luther and Protestantism. This chapter shows how the anti-Judaic agenda of some scholars has had a decisive impact on their misreading, mistranslating, and misinterpreting the book of Esther as a whole, and its various parts and particularities. It then suggests that a close reading of Esther from historical, literary, linguistic, and hermeneutical perspectives within its broad biblical and extrabiblical contexts, leaves no space for any anti-Judaic interpretation of the book. It shows that Esther is not a story of an “antisemitic pogrom of the Jews against their gentile persecutors,” but instead describes a just self-defense of the Jews in a hostile society, against a ruler who attempted to annihilate them.

Yet not all Christian interpreters followed Luther’s hostility. Chapter 13 lists and analyzes a handful of positive voices among Christian scholars regarding the book of Esther and the Jews, before and after the Shoah. Finally, Chapter 14 offers a comprehensive summary, synthesis, and conclusions to the entire volume.