

Jewish Identity on Trial:  
The Case of Mordecai the Jew

AYELET SEIDLER

# JEWISH IDENTITY ON TRIAL: THE CASE OF MORDECAI THE JEW\*

AYELET SEIDLER  
BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY

The Book of Esther belongs to the category of exilic literature, and, as such, one of the issues it addresses is that of Jewish identity in exile. Some scholars have noted the contrasts between the Jewish identity portrayed in Esther and those depicted in other exilic works, especially the Books of Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah.<sup>1</sup> According to these scholars, unlike Jewish identity in other exilic literature, the Jewish identity of Esther is not associated with loyalty to God and adherence to the commandments of the Torah.<sup>2</sup> Vari-

---

\*My thanks to Dr. Jonathan Grossman and to Dr. Yael Shemesh for kindly agreeing to read a preliminary version of this article. Their valuable comments helped me in completing this final version.

<sup>1</sup> S. Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther," *VT* 13 (1963), 419–55 (427–29); W. L. Humphreys, "A Lifestyle for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel," *JBL* 92 (1973), 211–23 (216–17); S. B. Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure* (SBLDS, 44; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 144–45; T. S. Laniak, "Esther's 'Volkcentrism' and the Reframing of Post-Exilic Judaism," in S. White Crawford and L. J. Greenspoon (eds.), *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (JSOTSup; London: T&T Clark, 2003), 77–90 (78–79). For categorization of the various approaches to Jewish identity in Esther, see: J. Berman, "'Hadassah bat Abihail': The Evolution from Object to Subject in the Character of Esther," *JBL* 120 (2001), 647–69 (648).

<sup>2</sup> The LXX translation of Esther, the Alpha-Text of Esther and the Aramaic translations include many addenda to the text, many of which serve to lend the Esther story the dimension of Jewish identity that is lacking in the Masoretic text. For a discussion of the theological significance of the addenda, see, for example, H. Bardtke, "Zusätze zu Esther" in *JSHRZ*, vol. 1.1 (Gütersloh: Mohn, 1973), 20–22 and note 27. The particular nature of the Jewish identity discussed in this article, along with the hypotheses proposed to explain it, are based on the Masoretic version, and for this reason, our discussion will refer to this version alone. Many scholars maintain that the delayed and ambivalent acceptance of Esther as part of the religious canon is related to the fact that the Book of Esther lacks a religious dimension. See, for example, C. A. Moore, *Esther* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), xxxii; S. A. White, "Esther: A Feminine Model for Jewish Diaspora," in P. L. Day (ed.), *Gender and Difference in Ancient*

ous explanations have been suggested for this phenomenon, with some scholars suggesting that Esther offers a new Jewish identity, and others claiming that the Book of Esther displays characteristics of wisdom literature.<sup>3</sup>

Some of the literature has raised the issue of Esther's Jewish identity.<sup>4</sup> This article, while focusing primarily on the Jewish identity of Mordecai, will also discuss Esther because of the connection between the two characters. Specifically, the term "Jewish identity" will be used in this article to address the following issues: (a) To what extent do these protagonists perceive themselves as Jewish? (b) To what extent do their Jewish and gentile contemporaries perceive them as Jewish? and (c) What attributes can be identified that characterize them as Jews in their own eyes and in those of their contemporaries?

In discussing these issues, a distinction should be drawn between chs. 2–3 and the continuation of the text. In chs. 2–3, Mordecai and Esther, both Jews with conspicuously pagan names, are depicted as working in tandem to win the heart of a foreign king, all the while concealing their Jewish identity. Undoubtedly, such behavior does not conform to either the conventional characteristics of Jewish identity in general or to those emerging from exilic literature in particular. Haman defines the Jews as people "whose laws are different from those of all other people" (Esth 3:8), and the books of Ezra and Nehemiah focus much attention on the topic of intermarriage. Esther marries a gentile king and her decision to conceal her Jewish identity compels her to refrain from performing acts which would identify her as a Jew. Mordechai's identity is also concealed and, as will be seen, it is he who chooses not only how his identity is revealed, but also the location and time of his revelation.

In contrast to their initial concealment of their Jewish identity, from ch. 4 until the end of the book, Mordecai and Esther follow the accepted codes of Jewish identity. In essence, they overtly identify as Jews, exhibit concern for the welfare of their Jewish brethren and are commanded to mark a Jewish holiday every year.<sup>5</sup> This paper posits that this disparity can be attributed to a change in consciousness on the part of Mordecai, which ultimately has an impact on Esther. The first part of the narrative suggests that by concealing their Jewish identity, Mordecai and Esther behave in a way that is consistent with the goal of assimilating into Persian

---

*Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 161–77 (161–62).

<sup>3</sup> Laniak, *Post-Exilic Judaism*, 79 onwards, and Talmon, *Wisdom*, 430, maintain that in Esther, one finds religious worldviews that characterize the wisdom literature.

<sup>4</sup> See White, "Esther"; Berman, "Hadassah bat Abihail"; A. Roitman and A. Shapira, "The Book of Judith as a 'Reflection Story' of the Book of Esther," *Beit Mikra* 49 (2004), 127–43 [Hebrew].

<sup>5</sup> Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 75, 91, n.76; White, "Esther," 162.

culture. However, their subsequent change in consciousness sparks a renewed identification with their Judaism. This reversal is related to the conflict with Haman and its resulting decree. This article will review the characteristics of the Jewish identity reflected in ch. 2, the conflict between Haman and Mordecai related in ch. 3, as well as the Jewish identity expressed from ch. 4 onwards. This examination should support the thesis that the Book of Esther in fact perceives the phenomenon of assimilation within a foreign society as a danger to Jewish existence in exile and suggests a way to achieve a balance between maintaining Jewish identity and integrating into the non-Jewish environment.

## CHAPTER 2 OF ESTHER: JEWISH IDENTITY?

In ch. 2 we encounter Mordecai and Esther, with v. 5 introducing “. . . Mordecai, [who lived in the fortress of Shushan].”<sup>6</sup> This name, which many scholars regard as being derived from the name of the Babylonian god Marduk, meaning “worshipper of Marduk” or “man of Marduk” is rather surprising.<sup>7</sup> As Moore remarks, “That a religious Jew should have had such an unhebraic, not to say idolatrous, name has been of some concern to scholars.”<sup>8</sup> To our mind, the pagan name presented in the text is the first hint of Mordecai’s assimilation. The disparity between the father’s Hebrew name Yair, derived from the Hebrew root א"ר, strengthens the impression that we are witnessing the transition from a generation that bears Hebrew names testifying to Jewish origins to a generation that adopts names that ease their integration into the local culture. Possibly it was the previous generation that adopted local names for their children, so that Mordecai’s parents may be considered representatives of the intermediate generation.

The phenomenon of using adopted local names is even more pronounced in the case of Esther. Esther is introduced with two names: “Hadassah—that is, Esther” (Esth 2:7). The first name is a Hebrew one, referring to the myrtle, while the second name, like Mordecai’s, is a pagan one, referring to the Babylonian goddess of love, Ishtar.<sup>9</sup> Her Hebrew name, Hadassah, appears only in this

---

<sup>6</sup> The English translation of Esther and other biblical sources cited here are from A. Berlin, M. Z. Brettler, and M. Fishbane, *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). When necessary, changes were made to reflect the reading proposed by this article.

<sup>7</sup> So surprising, in fact, that E. J. Bickerman in *Four Strange Books of the Bible: Jonah, Daniel, Kobelet, Esther* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), is prompted to question Mordecai’s Jewishness. For different possible explanations of the unusual name, see Moore, *Esther*, 19. For the appearance of the name Maraduka or Maraduku in Elamite tablets from Persepolis, see E. M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1990), 235.

<sup>8</sup> Moore, *Esther*, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Some view the Iranian word *stāra* (star) as the source of the name;

initial introduction and is not mentioned again, prompting the question of why it is mentioned at all.<sup>10</sup> We suggest that the mention of the Hebrew name is meant to allude to Esther's gradual assimilation into Persian society.<sup>11</sup> Assuming that the name Esther was given at birth, as was done in the case with Mordecai, then the desire to assimilate was apparently evident already in the previous generation.<sup>12</sup> However, since her name appears in proximity to the description of her adoption by Mordecai, it is quite possible that it is Mordecai who gives Hadassah her new name, Esther, borrowed, like his own, from the Babylonian pantheon.<sup>13</sup> Following the death of her parents, Hadassah, daughter of Abihail, becomes Esther, the adopted daughter of Mordecai.<sup>14</sup>

---

see Yamauchi, *Persia*, 233. According to S. T. Lachs in "Hadassah that is Esther," *JSJ* 10 (1979), 219–20, the goddesses of fertility in Ancient Babylon, Greece and Rome are also identified with the myrtle plant. Thus, there might be a connection between Esther's Hebrew name and her Persian one.

<sup>10</sup> Unlike Daniel, who appears throughout his book with both his Hebrew name, Daniel, and his Babylonian name, Belteshazzar; and in contrast to Joseph, whose Egyptian name is mentioned only once (Gen 41:45).

<sup>11</sup> For other suggestions, see J. D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM, 1997), 56, who proposes that the loss of Esther's name is symbolic of the fate of the Jewish people. Just as they have lost their land and their king, and are now forced to live in foreign lands, so she has lost her parents and has taken on a foreign name. J. Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 75, proposes that the concealment of Esther's Hebrew name is symbolic of the concealment of her Jewish identity in this chapter.

<sup>12</sup> According to B. W. Anderson, "The Book of Esther" in G.A. Buttrick et al. (eds.), *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 3 (New York: Abingdon, 1954), 821–74 (841), the name Esther is bestowed at the time of her coronation. Since it appears at the start of the chapter, we find this possibility difficult to accept.

<sup>13</sup> The relationship between Mordecai and Esther is defined using the root **יָמַן**, meaning nourish or support (see *BDB* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994], 50). Moore, *Esther*, 20, and others view Mordecai as a foster or adoptive father to Esther. Laws of adoption do not appear in the Bible. G. R. Driver and J. C. Miles (eds.) in *The Babylonian Laws* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1952–1955), 384, discuss the biblical adoption stories of Jacob's adoption of the sons of Joseph (Gen 48:5–6), and the daughter of Pharaoh's adoption of Moses (Exod 2:10). In n. 8, Driver and Miles suggest that Naomi might have adopted Obed (Ruth 4:16–17). For some reason, they ignore the explicitly noted adoption of Esther by Mordecai. Pharaoh's daughter gives the name Moses to her adopted child. The Babylonian adoption laws also included the giving of a name, but make no explicit mention of renaming. See Driver and Miles, *The Babylonian Laws*, 388–90.

<sup>14</sup> Berman, "Hadassah bat Abihail," 650–68, focuses on the appellation "daughter of Abihail." In his view, this appellation, which appears

Another indication of Mordecai's and Esther's assimilationist tendencies is revealed in the selection of Esther to be the new queen. The fact that she is taken to the royal palace and chosen to be Ahasuerus's wife does not appear to raise specific religious issues in the Book of Esther.<sup>15</sup> Many scholars have noted the links between the story of Esther and that of Daniel.<sup>16</sup> A comparison between the accounts of these two figures provides a contrasting analogy. Daniel struggles to maintain the dietary laws, and thereby his Jewish identity. However, in the Persian palace, there is no mention of Mordecai and Esther being troubled in any way about the question of Esther's diet.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, while the post-exilic books present a struggle against mixed marriages, the text of the Book of Esther expresses no criticism of the imminent mixed marriage between Esther and King Ahasuerus.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Esther follows the advice of Hegai, which is presumably aimed at helping her to become chosen as queen. When Esther prepares for the fateful encounter with the king, "she did not ask for anything but what

---

twice in the Book of Esther, marks two important points in the narrative. It first appears when Esther comes to the king (2:15), losing her Jewish identity and becoming Esther, wife of Ahasuerus. It appears again when she returns to her identity as "daughter of Abihail" at the end of the Book of Esther (9:29).

<sup>15</sup> Some scholars view the passive case "was taken" (Esth 2:16) as an expression of Esther's unwillingness to be considered as a candidate for the position of queen. See, for example, J. Jacobs, "Characterizing Esther from the Outset: The Contribution of the Story in Esther 2:1–20," *JHS* 8 (2008), 8–10. Nevertheless, this passive case could simply reflect the firm authority of the king's ministers to take girls to the king without seeking their agreement.

<sup>16</sup> For the biblical tendency to create links between narratives in order to compare their respective characters, see M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 365; M. Garsiel, *The First Book of Samuel: A Literary Study of Comparative Structures, Analogies and Parallels* (Ramat-Gan: Revivim, 1985), 9–31; D. N. Fewel (ed.), *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992); M. A. Fishbane, "Inner-Biblical Exegesis," in M. Sæbø (ed.), *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, vol. 1 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996), 33–48. For links between Esther and Daniel, see below, n.76.

<sup>17</sup> Laniak, *Post-Exilic Judaism*, 83; Roitman and Shapira, "The Book of Judith," 127–28; White, "Esther," 162. Moore, *Esther*, 28, similarly assumes that in order for Esther to keep her identity a secret, she must behave like a Persian.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Ezra 9–10; Neh 10:31. For a discussion of how the sages viewed the absence of any critical note in the text regarding Esther's conduct, see Roitman and Shapira, "The Book of Judith," 129–31; A. Atzmon, "'And He Advanced Her to the Best': Identity and Interpretation in Rabbinic Literature," *Beit Mikra* 57 (2012), 107–23 [Hebrew].

Hegai, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women, advised" (Esth 2:15).<sup>19</sup>

Mordecai, too, monitors Esther devotedly and advises her about how to behave. When she is taken to the palace, the text informs us that "Esther did not reveal her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had told her not to reveal it" (Esth 2:10). Esther's silence is the subject of the verse, while the explanation for her behavior appears to be the fact that Mordecai has commanded her to act in a certain fashion. Thus, the narrator presents Esther's behavior as having some rationale, based on Mordecai having charged her, obscuring the fact that this chapter does not reveal any reason for Mordecai's charge.<sup>20</sup> A common explanation for Mordecai's motives, offered both in the classical commentaries and in modern scholarship, is that Mordecai feared that Esther might suffer demonstrations of antisemitism or hatred if her Jewish origins were known. Such displays would likely diminish her chances of being chosen as queen.<sup>21</sup> In this context, it should be noted that Mordecai's Jewish identity also seems to be concealed. Beal draws our attention to the fact that Mordecai's own Jewishness is revealed only later (Esth 3:4), when he chooses, for some unspecified reason, to declare it to the king's courtiers.<sup>22</sup>

Together with attempting to explain Mordecai's motives, it must also be asked why the narrator refrains from providing any explicit reason for the prohibition that Mordecai imposes on Esther before and after her selection as queen (Esth 2:10, 20). Clarifying Mordecai's motivation could shed light on the events of the chapter, as well as on Mordecai, who is a main character in the book.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> According to Moore, *Esther*, 27, Hegai's motivation is his desire to forge a connection with the woman who, in his view, is the most likely candidate to become the next queen.

<sup>20</sup> W. Dommershausen, *Ester* (Würzburg: Echter, 1980), 17–18, notes that the revelation of Esther's Jewish origin is the climax and turning point of the story, and the concealment of this fact is therefore vital to the literary structure. Nevertheless, even in view of this technical reality, the concealment of Esther's identity must still have meaning in the context of this particular chapter.

<sup>21</sup> See, for example, the commentary of Rabbi Joseph Kara, versions a and b to verse 10, in M. Cohen (ed.), *Mikraot HaGadolot. Haketer*, (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2012), 227 [Hebrew]; L. B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908), 175; L. H. Brockington (ed.), *Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther* (Greenwood, SC: Attic, 1997), 176.

<sup>22</sup> T. K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London: Routledge, 1997), 55.

<sup>23</sup> M. V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 194–95, proposes that the concealment of Mordecai's motives lends depth to his character. This claim seems rather questionable. In comparison to what is related about Esther, Ahasuerus and even Haman, the narrator tells us relatively little

Before proposing an explanation for the narrator's reluctance to explicitly reveal Mordecai's motives, we posit that the text itself alludes to them. At the beginning of the chapter, before Esther is chosen as queen, Mordecai is described as "a Jew living in Shushan the fortress" (Esth 2:5). Immediately after her selection, the text notes, "Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate" (Esth 2:21). Similarly, in the Book of Daniel, we find that after Daniel's promotion, "Daniel was at the king's gate" (Dan 2:49). In light of this corollary, comparing the description of Mordecai's position at the beginning of the chapter and his subsequent position "sitting at the king's gate" (Esth 5:13) leads to the conclusion that Mordecai was promoted to a new office following Esther's selection as queen. This promotion may provide a clue to his motives, suggesting that Mordecai seeks to consolidate and boost his status in the royal court. The fact that his beautiful adopted daughter is now queen may help to advance him, even though—or perhaps even because—their family connection is not publicly known.<sup>24</sup> Because Esther's Jewish origins may harm her chances of being chosen as queen, Mordecai instructs her to hide this information. It seems that Esther's marital relations with a foreign king do not disturb Mordecai at this point in the story.<sup>25</sup> If this is true, it also answers the question of why the narrator does not disclose Mordecai's motives at this juncture in the narrative, as doing so would cast Mordecai in a negative light. As we know, Mordecai later identifies with his Jewish brethren and brings about their salvation. In order not to cast him in too negative a light, the text avoids explicitly characterizing Mordecai as alienated from his Jewish identity. Nonetheless, the text does appear to hold sufficient clues to lead the reader to this conclusion regarding Mordecai's Jewish identification.

As mentioned, many scholars have tried to make sense of the Jewish identity presented in this chapter. Rather than viewing the chapter as a portrayal of an unusual Jewish identity, it is possible to understand it as describing two Jews who deny their Jewish identity.<sup>26</sup>

---

about Mordecai. Against this background, the narrator's silence at central junctures in the story impedes rather than contributes to a deeper understanding of or familiarity with Mordecai. According to L. Day, *Esther* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 69, Mordecai remains inscrutable up until the very end.

<sup>24</sup> A further attempt to advance his own status and that of Esther is manifest in Mordecai's revelation of the plan by Bigthan and Teresh at the end of the chapter (Esth 2:21). The chapter concludes by describing how Esther and Mordecai help each other reinforce their popularity with the king even though the connection between them is still concealed.

<sup>25</sup> For the biblical prohibition on mixed marriages, see, for example, Deut 7:3.

<sup>26</sup> It appears that rather than concealing her identity, Esther assumes a new one. For more on this adopted identity, see Berman, "Hadassah bat

### CHAPTER 3, VERSES 1–6 OF ESTHER: WHAT IS BEHIND THE CONFLICT BETWEEN HAMAN AND MORDECAI?

The opening verses of chapter 3 record a clash between Haman, the king's most senior minister, and Mordecai. This confrontation drives the entire plot. It spurs Haman to issue the decree of annihilation against the Jews, and motivates Mordecai and Esther to take action in order to save their people, ultimately achieving success. Given the centrality of this clash, it is therefore surprising that the text provides no clear explanation for it.<sup>27</sup> However, a closer reading of vv. 1–6 can help reveal the cause. In vv. 1–3, the narrator once again chooses to hide Mordecai's motives. While vv. 4–6 appear to provide an answer to the question of motive, in effect, no satisfactory explanation is actually given.

#### *Verses 1–6*

- (1) Some time afterward, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite; he advanced him and seated him higher than any of his fellow officials.
- (2) All the king's courtiers in the palace gate knelt and bowed low to Haman, for thus had the king ordered concerning him; but Mordecai would not kneel or bow low.
- (3) Then the king's courtiers who were in the palace gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's order?"
- (4) When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's words would prevail; for he had explained to them that he was a Jew!
- (5) When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel or bow low to him, Haman was filled with rage.
- (6) But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone; having been told who Mordecai's people were, Haman plotted to do away with all the Jews, Mordecai's people, throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus.

The subject of verse 1 is King Ahasuerus, and the verse focuses on his actions towards Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite.<sup>28</sup>

---

Abihail."

<sup>27</sup> B. Ego, in "Mordecai's Refusal of Proskynesis before Haman According to the Septuagint Traditio-historical and Literal Aspects," in G. G. Xeravits and J. Zsengeller (eds.), *Deuterocanonical Additions of the Old Testament Books: Selected Studies* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2010), 17, agrees that virtually nothing is said about the inner motivation that led Mordecai to refuse proskynesis before Haman. She proceeds to show how Esther-LXX, Josephus and the translations fill in this gap.

<sup>28</sup> Agag appears in 1 Sam 1:15 as the king of Amalek, who battled Saul. For the significance of attributing Amalekite ancestry to Haman see below.

Three verbs are used: גִּדְּלָהּ (promote); נִשְׂיָא (advance); and שׁוּ"ם (seat). The next verse focuses on the behavior towards Haman of the king's courtiers, who are the subject. The king's courtiers "knelt and bowed low to Haman," as a result of another action on the part of the king: "for thus had the king ordered." The use of the past perfect tense here refers back to the first verse.<sup>29</sup> The reader now understands that in addition to having promoted Haman, the king also commanded that all bow and prostrate themselves before Haman.

The previous chapter already noted that "Mordecai sat in the king's gate" (Esth 2:19). The reader, upon being informed now that "All the king's courtiers in the palace gate knelt and bowed low" (Esth 3:2), can conclude that Mordecai, who is the only individual mentioned by name as sitting in the king's gate, is among those who prostrated themselves. As a result, the singling out of Mordecai from the other servants of the king comes as a surprise.<sup>30</sup>

It is important to note that the command to bow before Haman could have been included among the other actions described in v. 1. Why does the narrator convey this detail only in v. 2?

A possible answer to this question may be found by examining the structure of v. 2, which is composed of two contrasting halves:

All the king's courtiers in the palace gate knelt and bowed low to Haman; for thus had the king ordered concerning him	But Mordecai would not kneel or bow low.
---	--

While the king's courtiers kneel and bow low, Mordecai does not. The postponement of the recounting of the king's decree from v. 1 to v. 2, so that it appears in juxtaposition to the behavior of the king's courtiers, serves to emphasize the severity of Mordecai's refusal to prostrate himself. The postponement also creates an asymmetry between the two parts of the verse, as the obedience of the king's courtiers is explained in full, while the explanation for Mordecai's behavior is conspicuously absent.

The surprise engendered by Mordecai's defiance is expressed immediately in the question addressed to him by the king's courtiers who are in the king's gate and who are, in effect, Mordecai's colleagues: "Then the king's courtiers who were in the palace gate

<sup>29</sup> For additional instances of the pluperfect in the Book of Esther, see G. Gerlemann, *Esther* (BKAT, Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), 35–36. For more on this meaning of the pluperfect in the Bible, see S. R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Questions*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 22.

<sup>30</sup> Day, *Esther*, 67, emphasizes that this defiance of the king's order is especially surprising in light of the loyalty that Mordecai displayed towards the king in the previous chapter, when Mordecai revealed the plot against the king.

said to Mordecai, ‘Why do you disobey the king’s order?’ ” (Esth 3:3).<sup>31</sup> Notably, the question refers not to what Mordecai does or, rather, refuses to do, but to the ramifications of his behavior. The king’s courtiers do not ask, “Why do you not kneel and bow low?” but rather, “Why do you disobey the king’s order?” (Esth 3:3). This emphasizes once again the egregious nature of Mordecai’s behavior and the severity with which it is viewed.<sup>32</sup> With this question, the narrator, who in v. 2 refrained from offering any commentary about Mordecai’s behavior, creates yet another opportunity for offering a satisfying explanation. Yet, once again, the subject is not addressed. Mordecai’s reply is not recorded. As noted, until this stage of the conflict, it seems clear that the narrator has deliberately concealed Mordecai’s motives. The following verses, as will be seen, likewise conceal more than they reveal about this issue.

The king’s courtiers do not back down, and verse 4 describes their ongoing efforts to engage Mordecai. This time, their words are not recorded as direct speech, nor even summarized as part of the narrative. All that we know is that “they spoke to him day after day” (Esth 3:4). The reader, who is required to imagine what the king’s courtiers told Mordecai, can assume that they repeat their question and perhaps demand that Mordecai prostrate himself before Haman. Mordecai “would not listen to them,” **ולא שמע (אליהם)** (Esth 3:4). The verb **שמע**, used in conjunction with the preposition **אל** means listen to, or yield to.<sup>33</sup> Because Mordecai’s response to the first question of the king’s courtiers is not recorded, the reader could imagine that Mordecai simply ignores them. Another possible explanation is that he gives some response which fails to satisfy them, and so they continue to demand that he prostrate himself before Haman. Mordecai, for his part, persists in not listening to them, or in refusing to accede to their demands. As we

---

<sup>31</sup> Dommershausen, *Ester*, 20, notes that the question posed by the king’s courtiers is actually the reader’s question.

<sup>32</sup> D. J. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), 45.

<sup>33</sup> BDB, 1034. For this meaning of the verb **שמע** see Gen 16:11; 21:17; 49:2; Deut 3:26 and more. A similar verse appears in the story of Joseph in Gen 39:10: “And it came to pass, as she spoke to Joseph day by day, that he hearkened not unto her, to lie by her, or to be with her.” The verse in Genesis states explicitly that Joseph “hearkened not.” In essence, he did not acquiesce to the demand of Potiphar’s wife that he lie with her. On the basis of a comparison between the stories of Mordecai and Joseph, Grossman, *Esther*, 87–88, concludes that the narrator seeks to portray Mordecai’s conduct in a positive light, as standing firm and not giving in to temptation. However, the connection between the two verses may suggest other interpretations that do not necessarily view Mordecai’s conduct favorably. For example, A. Berlin, *Esther* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 36, notes that Joseph’s stubborn rejection of the pleadings of Potiphar’s wife, like Mordecai’s stubbornness in this present case, leads to the hero paying a heavy price.

shall see, only later does it become clear that “refusing their demand” is a more accurate explanation for Mordecai’s behavior.

The description of the entreaties of the king’s courtiers and Mordecai’s refusal are, syntactically speaking, subservient to the main clause of “they told Haman” (Esth 3:3). “When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai’s resolve would prevail; for he had explained to them that he was a Jew!” (Esth 3:3). The text does not record exactly what the king’s courtiers said to Haman, and here again the reader must fill in the missing information. In this case, the content of the report seems clear from the continuation of the text: “When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel or bow low to him . . .” (Esth 3:5). It appears that the king’s courtiers reported to Haman that Mordecai was not bowing or prostrating himself before the king. Further on we see that the matter of Mordecai’s Jewish identity was also brought to Haman’s attention, “having been told who Mordecai’s people were” (Esth 3:6).

In addition to relating that Mordecai’s behavior has been reported to Haman, the narrator proceeds to clarify the purpose of the report: “in order to see whether Mordecai’s words would prevail; for he had explained to them that he was a Jew” (Esth 3:4). For the first time, the reader now knows that Mordecai has made some statement, and the king’s courtiers want to see whether Mordecai’s words will stand.<sup>34</sup> What were Mordecai’s words which the king’s courtiers now wished to test? Numerous commentators over the generations have tended to connect the latter clauses of the verse: “to see whether Mordecai’s words would prevail” and “for he had explained to them that he was a Jew.” In their view, “Mordecai’s words” were an assertion of his Jewish identity. Based on this interpretation, Mordecai’s refusal to bow down is understood by the Septuagint, the Aramaic translations, midrashic and other sources as arising from his Jewish faith, which prohibits prostration before anyone or anything but God.<sup>35</sup> In this context, the word “Jew” is understood as referring to Mordecai’s religious faith. Others have suggested that Haman’s Amalekite origins—since he is referred to as “the Agagite”—prompted Mordecai’s refusal to bow down before him.<sup>36</sup> The underlying assumption would be, then,

---

<sup>34</sup> The use of the verb עמד (stand) presents a contrasting image to the command to bow down. According to Day, *Esther*, 67, “The text literally states, ‘to see whether Mordecai’s words would stand’—an allusive phrase: neither Mordecai nor his word will bend.”

<sup>35</sup> L. B. Paton, *Esther*, 196, lists the commentators who adopt this view. See also B. Grossfeld, *The First Targum to Esther* (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1983), 49. Mordecai’s refusal is also explained on the grounds that Haman presented himself as a god, according to Rashi’s commentary on the verse, or hung some idolatrous pendant around his neck (Esth. Rab. 6:2).

<sup>36</sup> Moore, *Esther*, 37; Grossman, *Esther*, 89–90; Clines, *The Esther Scroll*,

that Mordecai the Jew is not prepared to bow down before Haman the Amalekite because of the hostility that prevails between the two nations. In this sense, the word “Jew” would be meant here as referring to nationality rather than to religion.<sup>37</sup>

Both interpretations, regardless of the different forms in which they are posed, are problematic. With regard to the first interpretation—namely, that Mordecai refused to bow down because of his faith—many of the commentators have noted that Jews are not forbidden from bowing in cases where they need to show politeness or respect to their superiors.<sup>38</sup> Esther also prostrates herself before Ahasuerus, making it difficult to conclude that Mordecai, in his position as second to the king, would have believed that he was prohibited from bowing down before Ahasuerus. The second interpretation, asserting that Haman’s Amalekite nationality is the reason for Mordecai’s refusal to prostrate himself, assumes that the appellation Agagite (Esth 3:1) is a biographical detail that is integrated into the plot. This interpretation thus presumes that Haman is aware of the fact that he is a descendant of the King Agag, and that Mordecai, too, is familiar with Haman’s lineage; or, perhaps, that it is a well-known fact in the Persian kingdom. However, other than the term “Agagite,” Haman’s Amalekite origins play no role in the plot, and furthermore, Haman is not represented as a descendant of Agag but, rather, simply as an “Agagite.” Therefore, it may be concluded that the term “Agagite,” like the appellation “the enemy of the Jews” (Esth 8:1), is meant to describe a behavioral trait rather than to provide genealogical information. The appellation unquestionably helps to mold the struggle between Mordecai the Jew, whose lineage suggests that he is a descendant of Saul, and Haman, who is associated with Agag by the text (see 1 Sam 15). Nevertheless, the question remains whether this interpretation focusing on Haman’s appellation provides sufficient justification for Mordecai’s refusal to bow before Haman.<sup>39</sup>

---

45. A. Meinhold, *Das Buch Esther* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1983), 43.

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion of these two meanings, see Moore, *Esther*, 37. According to Day, *Esther*, 69, “The Jews . . . are not a religious category . . . Jews in the book of Esther are treated as an ethnic . . . group.” For further discussion of Mordecai’s motives, see Gerlemann, *Esther*, 92.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, Day, *Esther*, 66; Grossman, *Esther*, 88. The Bible itself offers examples of Jews who prostrate themselves, only two of which are Abraham prostrating himself before the children of Het (Gen 23:7) and Joseph’s brothers prostrating themselves before the second to the king (42:6).

<sup>39</sup> For a similar understanding of the status of the names Agagite and Kish in Esther, see Levenson, *Esther*, 57. In contrast to Levenson’s view, there are scholars who maintain that the term Agagite does indeed refer to Haman’s biological forebears, and that his Agagite identity was actually known to all. Day, *Esther*, 65, posits that that Haman’s actually being an Agagite alludes to the openness of the Persian Empire to advancing those of foreign ethnicities to key positions in the empire. Beal, *The Book of*

Another major obstacle to accepting either of the two interpretations recounted above is the issue of how to connect the two parts of the verse. If indeed Mordecai declares that his Jewishness prevents him from bowing to Haman, then what does the narrator mean by the phrase, “to see whether Mordecai’s words would prevail”? What is it that the king’s courtiers are testing? If Mordecai’s response to them is that his Judaism, either in the religious or the national sense, prevents him from prostrating himself before Haman, surely this cannot be evaluated or verified by the servants. An understanding of the connection between the two parts of the verse, “to see whether Mordecai’s words would prevail” and “for he had explained to them that he was a Jew” requires filling in another gap in the text.<sup>40</sup>

Various possibilities have been proposed. One is that Mordecai argues that, as a Jew, he is entitled not to bow down to the king’s deputy, and the king’s courtiers want to see whether Mordecai is indeed exempt from this obligation.<sup>41</sup> This possibility appears unlikely. According to Herodotus, prostration was important for the Persians.<sup>42</sup> How probable is it that the Persian Empire was so enlightened that it would exempt its Jews, for religious or national reasons, from fulfilling the king’s command and bowing down to him? Other exegetical solutions have been offered. The explanations considered include the following suggestions: Mordecai argues that he is ready for an open confrontation with Haman, and the king’s courtiers want to see whether he will “stand up to” such a confrontation;<sup>43</sup> or Mordecai is asserting that Haman will forgive

---

*Hiding*, 58, suggests that the possibility that Haman is not Persian fuels his hatred towards Mordecai, who is likewise not a native; Haman hates in Mordecai that which he hates in himself. All of these explanations relate to Haman’s Agagite origins as an element in the plot. As noted above, I see no justification for granting the appellation this meaning.

<sup>40</sup> For a discussion of this problem, see Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 45. Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 55, proposes that the description “he had told them” indicates that the fact that Mordecai was Jewish was not discernible. The narrator offers no explanation for why Mordecai would reveal his identity at this point, and Beal concludes: “. . . he [Mordecai] remains highly visible yet unreadable, even in the act of self-revealing.”

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, S. Abramsky, “Pre-Ideological Antisemitism in the Scroll of Esther,” in B. Z. Luria (ed.), *Sepher Moshe Goldstein* (Tel Aviv: The Society for Biblical Research, 1988), 1–23 (19), who proposes that “Mordecai does not hesitate to justify the violation of the king’s command with the fact that he is a Jew. This is, as it were, a unique quality that allows him to be different, to bypass this royal custom . . .” Abramsky maintains that antisemitism is not a theme in the Book of Esther, and therefore, in his opinion, Mordecai’s Jewish identity may be regarded as a “unique quality.”

<sup>42</sup> Berlin, *Esther*, 136, discusses the importance of prostration to the king in Persian culture, and notes that the Greeks viewed this practice as an expression of Persian tyranny.

<sup>43</sup> Bickerman, *Four Strange Books*, 181 “They went to see ‘whether the

him for his behavior, and the king's courtiers want to see whether this is true.<sup>44</sup> It should be noted that none of these suggested explanations offers any substantial connection between the two parts of the verse, "to see whether his words would stand" and "for he had told them that he was a Jew."

An anonymous French commentator seems to have been the first to offer a different understanding of the verse:<sup>45</sup>

(4) . . . **They told Haman, to see whether Mordecai's words would prevail**—And for what reason did they envy him and **tell Haman? For he had explained to them that he was a Jew**—for had he remained silent and not **told them that he was a Jew**, they would not have entertained suspicions, and envied him, and **told Haman**. (6) **Having been told who Mordecai's people were**—for if he had been Persian, or from the other nations, he [Haman] would have killed him [Mordecai] alone, but since they told him that [Mordecai] was a Jew, it was contemptible **to lay hands on Mordecai alone**.

According to this interpretation, the clause, "for he had explained to them . . ." (Esth 3:6) appears in order to explain why the king's courtiers report Mordecai to Haman. Why would they divulge Mordecai's conduct to Haman? Because Mordecai had told them that he was a Jew.<sup>46</sup>

As the commentator mentioned above already suggested, support for this interpretation can be found, in the continuation of the

words of Mordecai would stand up,' that is . . . whether Mordecai would dare to affront the vizier openly."

<sup>44</sup> In L. E. Keck (ed.), *Kings—Judith*, vol. 3 of *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 893, the verse reads: "Day after day they spoke to him but he refused to comply. Therefore they told Haman about it to see whether Mordecai's behavior would be tolerated, for he had told them he was a Jew."

<sup>45</sup> His commentary appears in Cohen, *Mikraot HaGadolot*. The commentary is based on MS Parma 2203. In an oral address, Prof. Yosef Ofer attributed this manuscript to the school of R. Joseph Kara, a disciple and friend of Rashi, 11th to 12th century (his exact life span unknown).

<sup>46</sup> A similar idea, albeit expressed less explicitly, appears in the commentary of Rabbi Samuel Ben Meir. Commenting on Esth 3:4 (Cohen, *Mikraot HaGadolot*, 234) he writes: "Whether . . . would prevail—if his words not to bow and prostrate before him would prevail, for he had told them that he was a Jew—and therefore he was contemptible in their eyes." A similar understanding of the verses is to be found in White, "Esther," 169; and in J. Fleishman, "Why was Haman Successful at Winning King's Ahasuerus' Approval to Exterminate the Jews in the Persian Empire?," *HUCA* 68 (1997), 35–49 (40). This understanding gives rise to the question of why Mordecai chooses to reveal his Jewish identity at this point. According to Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 55, the text offers no explanation. For other explanations of the Mordecai's behavior, see Moore, *Esther*, 37; Day, *Esther*, 68; Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 45.

text. The justification, “for he had told them that he was a Jew” is repeated again in v. 6 in the context of Haman’s decision: “But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone; having been told who Mordecai’s people were” (Esth 3:6). This time it is clear that Mordecai’s Jewish identity is raised not to justify his behavior, but solely in order to explain the motivation for Haman’s decision not to lay a hand on Mordecai alone.<sup>47</sup> According to the anonymous commentator, the text emphasizes that it is because of Mordecai’s Jewishness that Haman decides to punish his entire community. Had Mordecai belonged to a different community, he alone would have been punished.<sup>48</sup>

The following features of the text may substantiate the anonymous commentator’s view. First, the king’s courtiers concentrate on Mordecai and identify his nationality: “He had explained to them that he was a Jew” (Esth 3:4). However, Haman takes a broader view of the Jewish people as a whole: “having been told who Mordecai’s people were” (Esth 3:6). In addition, the expression “Mordecai’s people” is repeated once again at the end of the verse. The expression “Mordecai’s people” modifies the expression “all the Jews,” however, it is relocated to the end of the verse, and juxtaposed with the words “throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus,” creating an ambiguity.<sup>49</sup> The appellation “Mordecai’s people,” appearing at the end of each clause of the verse, might represent an epistrophe, the aim of which is to emphasize the hostility towards the Jewish people the verse expresses.<sup>50</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> For the cumulative evidence that the text offers for his hatred for the Jews; see below, n. 50.

<sup>48</sup> Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 55, notes that, in a similar way, all the women in the kingdom are punished for Vashti’s refusal. He claims: “Just as the scandal of Vashti’s refusal was necessarily linked to her place, her identity, within the social order, so it is with Mordecai.” In comparison, Bigthan and Teresh’s attempted assassination of the king as recorded at the end of chapter 2 does not bring collective punishment.

<sup>49</sup> It may be for this reason that the Septuagint omits the expression “Mordecai’s people” at the end of the verse. Moore, *Esther*, 37, influenced by H. Gunkel, proposes that *עַם מֹרְדֵכַי*, Mordecai’s people, be read as *עַם מֹרְדֵכַי*, with Mordecai.

<sup>50</sup> Many scholars have identified early patterns of antisemitism in the Book of Esther. Y. Kaufmann, *The History of Israelite Faith* (Israel: Bialik Institute, 1963), 441 [Hebrew], views the Book as a testament to ancient antisemitism. He is joined in this view by Paton, *Esther*, 204. Fleishman, “Why was Haman Successful,” 38, reviews the accumulated evidence in the Book of Esther that points to the presence of antisemitism. Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 55, too, maintains that Haman loathes Jews. In contrast, as noted, Abramsky, “Pre-Ideological Antisemitism,” maintains that the Book does not portray hatred towards Jews. Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 46 proposes that Esther is a text comprising a number of narratives. In his view, the description of the battle between Haman and Mordecai does not express hatred for Jews. Rather, such expressions are found elsewhere in Esther, and their source is in a different narrative that was merged with

Further emphasis on Mordecai's Jewish identity is to be found in the fact that both times when it is mentioned— "for he had explained to them" and "having been told"—the information deviates from the chronological order of the story and actually represents a flashback.<sup>51</sup> "He had explained to them" (Esth 3:4) takes place before the king's courtiers convey this information to Haman. Similarly, "having been told" (Esth 3:6) occurs at the stage when the king's courtiers transmit their information to Haman. The appearance of these pieces of information out of chronological order emphasizes that both the king's courtiers and Haman act as they do because of Mordecai's Jewish origins.

By integrating information about Mordecai's Jewish identity within the plot of the story, the narrator creates the impression that the conflict is in some way connected to Mordecai's Jewishness. And the conflict is indeed, to a rather large extent, related to this fact. Even if Mordecai's refusal to bow down is not overtly a result of his Jewish identity, the ensuing problems that this act provokes against him and the entire Jewish people certainly are.

Understanding that the words, "for he had explained to them that he was a Jew" (Esth 3:4) are not intended to explain the reason for Mordecai's behavior reemphasizes the question of why he refuses to prostrate himself before Haman. As argued above, along with trying to clarify Mordecai's behavior, the question of why the narrator refrains from offering a clear explanation must be addressed. Here, too, it seems that the text is concealing a situation that it considered improper. There would be no impediment for the text to present a national or religious struggle openly and in full.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, a personal struggle between courtiers, in the wake of which there is a decree of annihilation against the entire Jewish people, is not a worthy struggle, and it is therefore possible to understand why the narrator prefers to keep it concealed.<sup>53</sup>

It would seem, then, that even at this stage of the story, Mordecai is preoccupied with the question of his status in the king's court.<sup>54</sup> It can be assumed that Mordecai never imagines that a struggle over his status in the court could change into a national

---

the central narrative.

<sup>51</sup> According to Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 45, this deviation emphasizes the fact that the conflict is between the Jewish Mordecai and the Agagite Haman.

<sup>52</sup> It is just such a struggle that is at the center of the Book of Daniel, chs. 3 and 6; see Humphreys, "A Lifestyle for Diaspora," 220.

<sup>53</sup> This conclusion is maintained by Bickerman, *Four Strange Books*, 180–81; and by Humphreys, "A Lifestyle for Diaspora," 215.

<sup>54</sup> This view would be based, inter alia, on the description of Haman's promotion immediately after the king's life is saved by Mordecai. Or, as Moore, *Esther*, 35, puts it in his commentary on Esth 3:1: "This verse sets up a sharp contrast between the unrewarded merit of Mordecai and Haman's unmerited rewards." See also Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 73–75; Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 53.

struggle and cause harm to the Jewish people. It probably never even occurs to him that his Jewishness might invite harm to his own person.<sup>55</sup> If the interpretation proposed thus far is correct, then it is at this stage in the story that Mordecai discovers that he is viewed as a stranger by the king's courtiers.<sup>56</sup> Their response reveals to him that his attempts to mingle among the Persians have failed. Instead, he is viewed as the *other*: a Jew. Chapter 4 addresses how Mordecai reacts to this new discovery.

#### CHAPTER 4 OF ESTHER: FASTING, SACKCLOTH AND ASHES

While there is no reference to Mordecai and Esther's Jewish identity in chs. 2 and 3, ch. 4 extensively deals with their attitudes towards their Jewishness through their respective reactions to the edict to annihilate the Jews that is disseminated throughout the Persian kingdom. The chapter begins with a description of Mordecai's response, followed by the response of the Jewish people. These responses are characterized by external expressions of sorrow and mourning that are common both in the Bible and in other sources. In the Bible, these expressions appear both in the context of mourning over a death and in the contexts of trouble and affliction. This latter phenomenon has been referred to as "petitionary mourning,"<sup>57</sup> and its purpose is to bring about an end to the affliction or to nullify the impending disaster.<sup>58</sup>

Although the mourning in Esther is related to an impending disaster, and as such should be viewed as petitionary mourning, there is a significant difference between its expression here and descriptions of petitionary mourning elsewhere in the Bible.<sup>59</sup> The recipient of the entreaty is not made explicit in Esther, which would seem to drain the petition of its significance.<sup>60</sup> Olyan notes

---

<sup>55</sup> Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 56–57, turns our attention to the fact that the Persian Empire comprised many different cultures. Haman describes all the different nations as being united against the Jewish nation: the *other*.

<sup>56</sup> For a discussion of the attitude towards the other and discrimination and racism in Esther, see Day, *Esther*, 75; Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 50–51.

<sup>57</sup> For similarities between mourning for the dead and petitionary mourning, see E. Kutsch, "Trauerbräuche und Selbstminderungsriten im Alten Testament," in L. Schmidt and K. Eberlein (eds.), *Kleine Schriften zum Alten Testament* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1986), 78–98; S. M. Olyan, *Biblical Mourning: Ritual and Social Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 62–96. For another study on this subject see Olyan, *Biblical Mourning*, 2 n. 5.

<sup>58</sup> For further characteristics distinguishing petitionary mourning from mourning for the dead, see Olyan, *Biblical Mourning*, 26–27, 62–64.

<sup>59</sup> For similar expressions of petitionary mourning in the Bible, see, inter alia, Jonah 3:5–8; Dan 9:1; Neh 9:1–3; Ezra 9:1–15.

<sup>60</sup> For the purposes of comparison, it can be noted that the Greek translations include prayer to God by Mordecai and Esther along with the

this problem in the context of the fast decreed by Esther (4:16), asserting that the purpose of the fast is indicated clearly in the text: וְצוּמוֹ עָלַי, or “fast in my behalf.” He goes on to explain that the fast “must be petitionary in nature given that its intent is to benefit Esther. Presumably, it is directed towards Yhwh to secure his protection for her, though Yhwh is not mentioned directly in this passage or anywhere else in the book.”<sup>61</sup> Along with the evidence cited by Olyan, we might add Mordecai’s words, “. . . relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter” (Esth 4:14), attesting to Mordecai’s confidence that the decree would be annulled and supporting the assumption that the expressions of mourning are meant to help bring about the desired change. Thus, the fast should be viewed as petitionary mourning.<sup>62</sup> We might say, then, that the behavior of Mordecai and Esther represents a typical Jewish custom of turning to God in times of trouble.<sup>63</sup>

Referring to the different types of petitionary mourning described in the Bible, Olyan distinguishes between penitential petitionary mourning, expressions of remorse for sin, and non-penitential supplication.<sup>64</sup> Ostensibly, Mordecai’s behavior gives no indication of any remorse. Nevertheless, it can be argued that his rending of his garment and refusal to wear the garments sent to him by Esther testify to a change of identity. More precisely, they reflect an overt and clear attempt to shed the distinctive identifying features of a senior Persian minister and to assume instead the identity of a Jew mourning over the decree of annihilation proclaimed against him and his people.<sup>65</sup> According to Grossman, “By

---

fasting.

<sup>61</sup> Olyan, *Biblical Mourning*, 99–100 and 99 n.4. The question of the absence of God’s name from Esther has been debated in the research and will not be addressed within the present framework. For a discussion of the various explanations that have been proposed for this phenomenon, see Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 235–47. In contrast to Olyan’s view, T. Podella, *Şôm-Fasten: Kollektive Trauer um den verborgenen Gott im Alten Testament* (Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker, 1989), 189–92, maintains that the fast in Esther is not religious in nature and is addressed to the king. Since there is no indication in the text that the king is aware of either the decree against the Jews or their response to it (see the king’s response to Esther’s words in Esth 7:5), we tend to assume, as does Olyan, that the fast is a veiled appeal to God who is concealed in the text.

<sup>62</sup> Y. Shemesh, *Mourning in the Bible: Coping with Loss* (Israel: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2015), 15 [Hebrew]. Kutsch, *Trauerbräunche*, does not mention Esther explicitly, but does cite examples from the Book of Esther in describing mourning that does not relate to the deceased. See, for example, 94 n. 46.

<sup>63</sup> The Bible offers many examples of such behavior. See above, n. 59; and also 2 Kgs 21:27 and 2 Sam 12:16.

<sup>64</sup> Olyan, *Biblical Mourning*, 62–75.

<sup>65</sup> For the connection between wearing sackcloth and seeking atonement in the Bible and in the Ancient East, see Kutsch, *Trauerbräunche*, 83–84. For the role of rending garments as an expression of remorse in peti-

rending his clothes, Mordecai forfeited his status in Persian society and his station in its regime . . . Mordecai cried . . . as he shed one national identity and returned to his original, primary identity.”<sup>66</sup> Given this analysis, and in light of the above discussion of Mordecai’s behavior in chs. 2 and 3, it is possible to see Mordecai’s petitionary mourning as being also penitential, in that it expresses remorse for his previous desire to assimilate into the Persian culture.

In support of this view, it should be pointed out that the text emphasizes the barrier that Mordecai’s garments create between his “new” identity and the previous one by noting, “until he came in front of the palace gate; for one could not enter the palace gate wearing sackcloth” (Esth 4:2).<sup>67</sup> Standing before the king’s gate, Mordecai displays his new identity, presenting himself as a Jew in mourning over the decree that has been promulgated against his people. By adopting this new identity, Mordecai can no longer maintain his previous one. The fact that he is outside of the gate is emphasized once again in the description of what follows: “Hathach went out to Mordecai in the city square in front of the palace gate” (Esth 4:6). Mordecai’s refusal to don the garments sent by Esther serves to stress his commitment to his new, or, more accurately, renewed identity and his desire to sever himself from his former one.<sup>68</sup> Esther’s behavior, in contrast, reflects her adherence

---

tionary mourning, see Olyan, *Biblical Mourning*, 79–80. We maintain that instances of garments being torn as an expression of mourning may have a dual meaning where the garment signifies an official position. While expressing mourning, the act simultaneously involves exchanging the identity associated with the garment. See, for example, the rending of the garment by Tamar in 2 Sam 13:18–19, or the shedding of the mantle by the king of Nineveh in Jonah 3:6. A similar view is offered by J. Grossman, “‘Dynamic Analogies’ in the Book of Esther,” *V/T* 59 (2009), 404–5 in relation to the shedding of the garment of Ahab (1 Kgs 21:17). Grossman proposes that both Ahab and Mordecai, in donning sackcloth, express a distancing of themselves from the palace.

<sup>66</sup> Grossman, *Esther*, 112. It should be pointed out that until this stage, Grossman does not accuse Mordecai of abandoning his Jewish identity. Instead, he maintains that this section depicts Esther as having exchanged her Jewish identity for a Persian one. For further discussion about the possibility that the verse is alluding to Mordecai’s regret see Grossman, below, n. 68

<sup>67</sup> Several scholars have grappled with the question of why Mordecai approaches the king’s gate. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 57–58, suggests that Mordecai hopes that the reports about him that will reach Esther will prompt her to take action. However, it is then reasonable to ask why Mordecai adopts this circuitous approach rather than addressing Esther directly, as he does, for example, in 2:22.

<sup>68</sup> Grossman, *Esther*, 113–14, identifies links between the story of Esther and the prophecies of Joel (2:12–14) and Isaiah (58:5). These links likewise reinforce the sense that Mordecai’s actions reflect a process of regret and return to his Jewish identity.

to her identity as the Persian queen. As Grossman observes, “Esther’s identity had become assimilated with her role as queen, at the expense of her Jewishness.”<sup>69</sup>

The change that began within Mordecai himself intensifies, finding expression in the demand that he addresses to Esther. He commands her to take action to have the decree nullified, revealing her Jewish identity in the process, presenting a stark divergence from his previous instructions. Esther finds it difficult to accede to this new demand. She fears for her fate if she dares approach the king without being summoned. In response to this concern, Mordecai utters the only instance of direct speech from him recorded in the entire book: “Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father’s house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis” (Esth 4:13–14).<sup>70</sup>

The only recorded utterance of direct speech from Mordecai concerns the commitment of the individual to his or her national identity: specifically, Esther’s commitment to the Jewish people. His admonition to Esther that she should not believe that she can cut herself off from the fate of the rest of the Jews by hiding herself in the king’s palace—“Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king’s palace” (Esth 4:13)—applies to himself no less than it does to her. In the wake of Haman’s decree, Mordecai, who had tried to assimilate in the Persian palace by hiding his Jewish identity, now understands that his attempt is doomed to failure. Armed with this conclusion, he addresses Esther, warning that if she fails to apply herself to trying to save the Jews, “you and your father’s house will perish” (Esth 4:14).<sup>71</sup> Since Mordecai is a member of Esther’s father’s house, this threat alludes to the danger for him, too.<sup>72</sup> Why does Mordecai think that he is deserving of death? It is plausible to conclude that

---

<sup>69</sup> Grossman, *Esther*, 114.

<sup>70</sup> For the development in this dialogue, see J. Grossman, “The Vanishing Character in Biblical Narrative: The Role of Hathach in Esther 4,” *VT* 62 (2012), 561–71 (567–69). For the teleological significance of this verse and its centrality to the Book, see Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 178–79.

<sup>71</sup> Different suggestions have been proposed as to who will be responsible for Esther’s demise. Dommershausen, *Ester*, 25, maintains that Mordecai’s words suggest that God will be responsible. At this stage, the proposal to destroy the Jewish people, which includes Esther, is being propounded by Haman. Mordecai hints that the attempt to escape and evade one’s Judaism ultimately leads to annihilation by the nations among whom the Jews wish to integrate.

<sup>72</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 62, raises this point and proposes that the narrator seeks to create an echo of narratives in which the entire family of the sinner is punished, as in the cases of Korach or Achan.

these words reflect his perception that he might be punished because of his previous effort to integrate into the king's court.

After her original hesitation, Esther appears to embrace this new direction proposed by Mordechai. She tells him, "Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!" (Esth 4:16). In contrast to Mordecai, Esther is not able to leave the palace and join her brethren in their mourning. However, she does ask that they fast for her while declaring that she, too, will fast. From inside the palace walls, Esther returns to her Jewish roots and, together with the Jews outside of the palace, she acts to bring about a nullification of the decree.<sup>73</sup>

### CHAPTERS 8–10 OF ESTHER: SECOND TO KING AHASUERUS AND GREAT AMONG THE JEWS

Mordecai's new realization involves more than merely understanding that it is impossible to flee from one's Jewishness into the royal palace. He also now apprehends that those with the good fortune to be in the king's palace should be active there on behalf of their own people. This responsibility, which Mordecai conveys explicitly to Esther when he asks, "who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis," (Esth 4:14) applies also to his own behavior from ch. 4 onwards.

Having previously rent his garments (Esth 4:1), Mordecai now wears royal apparel (Esth 8:15). This description appears immediately after the dispatch of his edict permitting the Jews to defend themselves. The location of the description seems incongruous, since it is logical to assume that the royal garments reflect his status as second to the king, and therefore would have been given to him when he assumed his position (Esth 8:2).<sup>74</sup> Indeed, the description of the royal apparel revisits the meeting between the king and Mordecai at the beginning of the chapter: "Mordecai left the king's presence . . ." (Esth 8:15). The use of pluperfect tense **וּמֵרְדֵּכַי יָצָא**—Mordecai *had* left—instead of the simple past **וַיֵּצֵא מֵרְדֵּכַי**—Mordecai left—indicates that this action refers to something that happened earlier and not chronologically.<sup>75</sup> Further support for the connection between the wearing of royal finery and Mordecai's appointment becomes apparent when comparing Mordechai's example to that of Joseph's appointment as second to the king.<sup>76</sup>

<sup>73</sup> For the stages of Esther's transition from her identity as a Persian queen to that of a Jew, see Berman, "Hadassah bat Abihail," 661.

<sup>74</sup> Meinhold, *Esther*, 78, suggests that the separation between the recounting of Mordecai's appointment and the description of his wearing the royal apparel hints at the king's identification with Mordecai's edict.

<sup>75</sup> See above, n. 29.

<sup>76</sup> Many scholars have pointed out similarities between the story of

The external tokens of Joseph's appointment include, *inter alia*, the king's signet ring, royal garb and going out from before the king: "And removing his signet ring from his hand, Pharaoh put it on Joseph's hand; and he had him dressed in robes of fine linen, and put a gold chain about his neck... Thus he placed him over all the land of Egypt" (Gen 41:42–45). Correspondingly, "The king slipped off his ring, which he had taken back from Haman, and gave it to Mordecai . . ." (Esth 8:2).<sup>77</sup> Yet it is only after the letters of the king saving the Jews are sent out (Esth 8:10) that the text informs us "Mordecai left the king's presence in royal robes of blue and white, with a magnificent crown of gold and a mantle of fine linen and purple wool" (Esth 8:15). As noted, the similarity between the narratives of Mordecai and of Joseph offers further support for the assumption that Mordecai's garments relate to his new position. Why, then, is Mordecai not described in his finery at what would seem to be the logical point when the king gives his ring to Mordechai (Esth 8:2), but only after the letters are dispatched (Esth 8:15)?

One possible answer to this question may be found in the structural considerations of the text. As is widely noted, the Book of Esther follows a concentric structure.<sup>78</sup> Following Haman's decree of death to the Jews, Mordecai tears his garments. Correspondingly, for structural reasons, the narrator chooses to present Mordecai's wearing of the royal robes after the second decree rescinding Haman's edict.<sup>79</sup> However, it appears that more than mere structural considerations underlie the narration here. In ch. 4, Mordecai sheds his Persian identity and returns to his Jewish roots. The mention of his wearing the royal garments only after the letters are sent indicates a return to the king's palace with a sense of mission. Mordecai is no longer a minister struggling over his status in the Persian kingdom, but rather the representative of the Jews in the royal court.<sup>80</sup> Only after Mordecai has succeeded in his task of

---

Joseph and his brothers and the story of Esther. Among the first to address the parallels was L. A. Rosenthal, "Die Josephgeschichte, mit den Büchern Ester und Daniel verglichen," *ZAW* 15 (1895), 278–84. For a further discussion of the similarities between the narratives, see, for example, Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 123–52.

<sup>77</sup> There is only one other instance in the Bible of the king removing his ring and handing it over to his deputy, which occurs in Esth 3:10, when Ahasuerus gives his ring to Haman.

<sup>78</sup> Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 106–13; Levenson, *Esther*, 7–9; F. Polak, *Biblical Narrative Aspects of Art and Design*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Bialek Institute, 1999), 218–19 [Hebrew]; Grossman, *Esther*, 12–16.

<sup>79</sup> See Dommershausen, *Esther*, 43.

<sup>80</sup> It may be that the use of the appellation "Mordecai the Jew" (Esth 8:7) when Ahasuerus addresses Esther and Mordecai to propose the writing of letters allowing the Jews to defend themselves alludes to the possibility that the king himself views Mordecai and Esther as defenders of the Jews. The appellation appears six times in Esther. Once it is used

saving the Jewish people from Haman's decree of death is he viewed by the narrator as a worthy leader. The readiness to assume the new position, symbolically expressed in the wearing of the robes that represent it, is inextricably tied to Mordecai's success in saving the Jews. While at the beginning of the narrative Mordecai strove for power, he now channels this power to help his people. As noted, his words to Esther, "who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis" (Esth 4:14) also reflect his own newfound awareness. He now believes that he has achieved his elevated status in order to help his people.

This idea finds stronger expression in the closing verse of the Book of Esther, which recounts Mordecai's status in the palace and goes on to describe the mutual relations between Mordecai and his people. At first, there are two indications of his acceptance by the Jews, which are followed by two expressions of his actions on their behalf: "For Mordecai the Jew ranked next to King Ahasuerus and was highly regarded by the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brethren; he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his kindred" (Esth 10:3).<sup>81</sup> It is important to note that the Jews are referred to by four different appellations in this verse. First they are "the Jews," corresponding to the reference to Mordecai himself as "Mordecai the Jew" and consolidating the connection between them. The other three appellations reinforce the bond and affinity between Mordecai and the Jews: they are "his brethren," "his people," and "his kindred."<sup>82</sup> Thus the Book of Esther concludes its description of what it considers Mordecai's important position: Mordecai is second to King Ahasuerus, but primarily the leader of his brethren the Jews.

---

by Haman (Esth 5:13), once by the king (Esth 6:10), and four times by the narrator (Esth 8:7; 9:29, 31; 10:3). Of these four times, the appellation appears twice in the context of the second set of letters issued by the king. Grossman, *Esther*, 203–4, suggests that the phrase "Mordecai the Jew" implies that Mordecai must establish himself as a Jewish authority amongst his brethren. For meanings of this appellation at the end of the story, see below, n. 81.

<sup>81</sup> In this verse, Mordecai is referred to as "Mordecai the Jew" and mention is also made of his position, "ranked next to king Ahasuerus," a combination that highlights the tension between these identities, as discussed above. For a similar understanding of the appellation "Esther the queen, the daughter of Abihail" (Esth 9:29), see Berman, "Hadassah bat Abihail," 668–69.

<sup>82</sup> Dommershausen, *Ester*, 48, maintains that this description reflects the pride that the Jews feel towards Mordecai and his position in the palace. In his view, this same pride is expressed at a later stage, as seen in 2 Macc 15:36, where the festival of Purim is referred to as "Mordecai's day." Gerlemann, *Esther*, 144, proposes that there may be some similarity between Moses's status as intermediary between the children of Israel and Pharaoh and Mordecai's position here.

### CONCLUSION: JEWISH IDENTITY IN ESTHER

While the Book of Esther is an exilic work, unlike other examples of this genre, it does not address the question of how to depart from exile and return to the Land of Israel. Many scholars attribute the writing of the scroll to the end of the Persian period and even the beginning of the Hellenistic period.<sup>83</sup> During this period, the hope that the majority of Jews residing in exile would return to their land dissipated. As Humphreys points out, the Book of Esther is written under the assumption that Jewish existence in exile is a reality that must be faced and that solutions for living with this situation must be found.<sup>84</sup> The Book of Esther clearly addresses the dangers facing the Jewish people in exile.<sup>85</sup> In contrast to the impression arising from a first reading, the danger is not just the existential threat presented by decrees of annihilation such as that issued by Haman. The Book actually opens by describing quite a different danger but one no less threatening to Jewish existence: that of the specter of assimilation arising out of the desire to integrate into the new culture. Ezra and Nehemiah openly oppose mixed marriages for religious and national reasons. The Book of Esther addresses the problem of assimilation from a different perspective. According to the narrator, even if the Jews try to assimilate, they will not succeed, because the nations into which they seek to merge consider the Jews foreign and different. Nevertheless, the solution proposed in Esther is not that of insularity, but rather of conscious and purpose-driven integration.

According to Humphreys, “Esther and Mordecai . . . present a style of life for the diaspora Jew which affirms most strongly that at one and the same time the Jew can remain loyal to his heritage and God and yet can live a creative, rewarding, and fulfilled life precisely within a foreign setting, and in interaction with it.”<sup>86</sup> We maintain that the Book of Esther emphasizes the danger inherent in this duality, while at the same time displaying an understanding of the need for it to ensure the survival of the Jewish people.<sup>87</sup> The

---

<sup>83</sup> For a discussion of the different opinions regarding the dating of the book and the various theological-linguistic perspectives on this issue, see Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 169–73.

<sup>84</sup> Humphreys, “A Lifestyle for Diaspora,” 211–13.

<sup>85</sup> The question of the influence of the ruling culture disturbed the Jews in the Hellenistic period as well. If we assume that the book was written in this period (see n. 81 above), we can also assume that the ideas therein are relevant to the time of its writing.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>87</sup> According to Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 179: “Diaspora Jews . . . were called upon to accommodate their loyalty to their socio-religious heritage with their allegiance to a foreign king. . . . The book of Esther . . . suggests that Jews who prove loyal to both people and king overcome any problem which their dual loyalties might engender.” Berg grants both loyalties equal status. As explained above, I believe that Esther awards preference to loyalty to the Jewish people.

Book of Esther conveys the message that the consciousness driving the interaction with the foreign setting should be one of Jewish identity and the purpose that of benefitting the Jewish people. This proposition finds expression in the closing verse of the book.<sup>88</sup> As noted, this verse offers a single description of Mordecai's status in the palace, and four different, progressive, descriptions of his relations with his people. Mordecai has achieved the goal that he aspired to at the beginning of the Book of reaching the position of "ranked next to the king" (Esth 10:3).<sup>89</sup> At the end of the story, Mordecai understands that it was "for just such a crisis" that he has "attained a royal position" (Esth 4:14), and he views his position as a way of advancing the welfare of Jews in foreign settings.<sup>90</sup>

---

<sup>88</sup> As to this verse belonging to the story, see Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 59–63.

<sup>89</sup> According to the Talmud (B. Talmud Megillah 16b), the sages were wary of Mordecai at this stage of the narrative because he was now immersed in his role in the palace as second to the king. The reading proposed above is the opposite of the sages' reading. We believe that Mordecai's total involvement in the palace and its concerns characterizes the beginning of the story, while the conclusion is marked by Mordecai's return to his Jewish identity. Nevertheless, the rabbinic reading, too, points out the dangers inherent in a position in a foreign administration.

<sup>90</sup> Another principle emphasized in the Book of Esther as essential for Jewish survival is that of mutual responsibility. This subject lies outside the scope of this article. For a discussion of it, see Laniak, *Post-Exilic Judaism*, 79; Berg, *The Book of Esther*, 180–81.