

Playing Along with Esther: What Christian Readers Can Learn from Jews

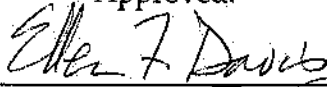
by

Katrina Schaafsma

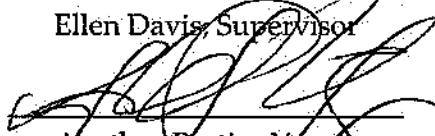
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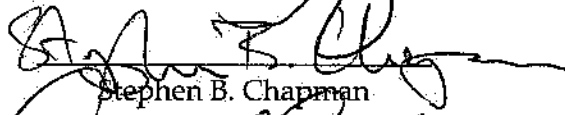
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Charles Campbell

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Theology in the Divinity School
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ABSTRACT

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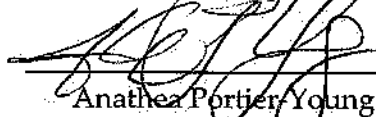
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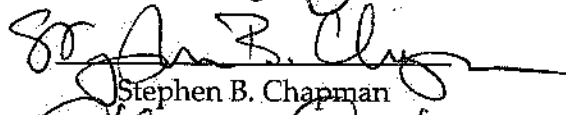
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Abstract

In this dissertation, I attend to historical receptions of Esther MT to illustrate problematic trends in the Christian use of the book and to identify avenues for the development of ethically responsible modern Christian approaches. The receptions under consideration—both Christian and Jewish—are principally premodern. I examine them with attention to the social locations of the communities from which they emerge and the dynamics of power and domination they reflect.

An overview of Christian reception of Esther reveals a history of relatively sparse and at times openly hostile treatment of the book. It further shows that in Christian hands, Esther has been viewed from an overwhelmingly serious aspect. More often than not, the book has been read from the perspective of and in overt alignment with the interests of the religiously and politically dominant. In striking contrast, the body of Jewish Esther receptions produced across the centuries is rich and abundant. While many of these works are serious in tone, there is also a prominent strand marked by humor, mirth, and play. Furthermore, many are recognizably written from the position and perspective of communities living on the underside of (usually Christian) domination. I contend such receptions reveal that Jewish communities recognized Esther MT as what James C. Scott terms a ‘hidden transcript’—literature responding to the experience of domination—and extended its work with hidden transcripts of their own.

Beyond identifying and illustrating the above trends, the core contribution of this project is to read rabbinic Esther receptions through the lens of the hidden transcript. I illuminate ways in which the rabbis respond to contemporary experiences of domination through play with characters such as Haman and King Ahasuerus. I argue that such play

is far from frivolous; instead, through play, the rabbis perform work of utmost ethical and theological importance, work worthy of modern attention. Given the harm they have perpetrated through both the use and neglect of this book, modern Christians reading from positions of power and seeking to develop appropriate responses to Esther must first attend to rabbinic and other Jewish voices from across history. In so doing, they will confront the discomfiting fact that they often have been recognized as Haman-like villains by those whose survival Esther was written to support. They will also encounter teachers who model the ethical and theological possibilities of responding to a biblical text in what may be for them an unfamiliar mode: that of play.

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Introduction

It would be difficult to overstate the stark difference in the ways in which Esther has been received in Jewish and Christian communities. Broadly speaking, where Christian reception of Esther has been sparse and conducted from an overwhelmingly serious perspective, Jewish reception has been abundant and marked by a distinct playfulness. The simple fact of a contrasting reception of a book in two different religious communities is not especially surprising or necessarily problematic. The problem, however, is that while Jews have known what to do with a book such as Esther, even a cursory look at reception history reveals that Christians often have not. Christians clearly need help understanding why this book is in their canon of Scripture. Worse, where Christians *have* attended in any detail to the book, all too often this has resulted in readings that have directly undermined the survival of the Jewish community. There is an urgent need for Christians to attend to Jewish receptions of Esther, not in order to imitate them but rather to learn other possibilities for engaging with this book. In light of the witness of Jewish receptions, Christians might experiment with ways of responding to this book that are faithful both to the character of the book and to their own theology and—perhaps most crucially—that do not harm the very community whose survival Esther celebrates.

One reason Christians have struggled to receive the festive book of Esther is that they, unlike Jews, lack an obvious festive context (Purim) in which to do so. However, another key reason Christians, particularly those reading from positions of dominance, have struggled to receive Esther appropriately is that it is a kind of literature that reflects and speaks to experiences on the underside of domination. In other words, Esther is a

hidden transcript, a form of communication characteristically difficult for those who are dominantly-positioned to understand. Since the social location of the reader is a crucial factor in discernment of a hidden transcript's meaning and function, this project foregrounds throughout the relative power positions (dominant/dominated) of writers, characters, and reception communities.

As a European North American Christian, I read from a dominant position within religious culture. Because of the cultural and theological barriers to perception inherent in such a reading position, I choose to read in conversation with select, representative Jewish receptions of Esther. These Jewish conversation partners read from discernibly marginal social locations and are themselves recognizable as extensions of Esther's hidden transcript in successive generations and contexts. Or, put differently, I read Esther along with experientially qualified, Jewish reading partners in order to discover what Esther sounds like to non-dominant ears. Rather than attempting to provide a comprehensive history of interpretation of Esther for either Jewish or Christian communities, I read with an interest that is more practical and hermeneutical. The examples included in this project point the careful listener toward fitting themes, appropriate character identifications, and modes of reception more suited to this playful, carnivalesque book. Through the writings of these experientially qualified reading partners from previous centuries, contemporary readers, even those whose social position is not closely aligned with the one that Esther MT seems to assume for its "ideal readers," may recognize the canonical gifts of play offered in this book.

Esther MT is, of course, not the only version of the biblical book known to Christians. Catholic and Orthodox canons include the so-called additions to Esther based

on the LXX version. For several reasons the current project focuses exclusively on the MT text. Esther MT and Esther LXX are very different stories. In one, God is decidedly absent; in the other, God's action is noted, and God's intervention is sought. It would be difficult to do justice to both versions of the story in a single project. A focus on Esther MT best suits the present project, with its emphasis on conversation with Jewish reception. Esther MT is the version that is canonical for Jews, and so it is the text that is shared scripture with many Christians. Additionally, the MT has been treated in prominent Christians receptions of Esther since the medieval period, even by those who have the LXX in their canon, so the text provides a fruitful locus of dialogue.¹

The Jewish Esther receptions I study are primarily premodern. I give primary attention to rabbinic voices from third- to sixth-century Palestine and Babylonia but trace certain key threads across the centuries and into materials from fifteenth-century Europe and North Africa. These conversation partners give abundant attention to the experience of domination in both the Esther story and in the contexts of their reception communities. They express pain at the indignities of such an experience and treat its vulnerabilities seriously. At the same time, in their emphases and modes of reception, the texts they produce are marked by an undeniable playfulness, even as they perform work of the utmost ethical and theological gravity. This is not to suggest that all Jewish communities everywhere have read Esther from the underside of domination. Nor is it to suggest that all Jewish Esther readings are playful; on the contrary, there are ample examples of

¹ As we will see, while aware of the existence of the so-called additions, Rabanus Maurus, in the very first full Christian commentary to Esther, chooses to focus exclusively on the MT version. The Ordinary Gloss continues this focus, including the so-called additions but commenting on them in only the most minimal fashion.

Jewish Esther receptions that treat the text in an exclusively serious mode, even one of intense grief. Nevertheless, a playful-serious strand of interpretation is persistently if not universally attested in Jewish reception history of this book; moreover, it reveals the playful-serious potential of Esther MT as recognized by Jews living on the underside of domination. It is a mode of interpretation absent in the history of Christian reception of Esther and worthy of attention.

Chapters 1 and 2 introduce the approach of the project and furnish the necessary theoretical frames. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of the hidden transcript as developed by James C. Scott and describes how such a designation can best inform Esther reception. It explains why Christians reading from positions of dominance may require reading partners in general, and Jewish reading partners in particular, in order to receive this book responsibly. Finally, the chapter connects the hidden transcript to humor theory as well as to the literary carnivalesque, a designation advanced by Kenneth Craik and André LaCocque that draws on the work of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Chapter 2 connects the language of carnival to that of play and provides theoretical perspectives on play that will resource the rest of the project. The chapter also engages theological perspectives on play in conversation with the work of Hugo Rahner.

Chapters 3 and 4 turn the project's attention to its primary conversation partner: the hidden transcript of Jewish Esther reception. Both chapters attend to the ways in which the hidden transcript treats the character Haman. In Chapter 3, the focus is on rabbinic play at Haman's expense in Esther Rabbah, Targum Sheni, and the Babylonian Esther Midrash (tractate *Megillah* in the Babylonian Talmud). Chapter 4 attends to the ways in which Jews from ancient times through at least the medieval period have

identified contemporary Christian oppressors with the villain Haman. It treats the midrashic and talmudic sources addressed in Chapter 3, but also draws on a wide variety of materials, from Byzantine liturgical poetry to medieval art, parody, and commentary.

Chapter 5 functions as something of a foil to the previous chapters; it attends to the public transcript of Christian Esther reception against which the hidden transcript plays into the medieval period. Primary sources include the commentary of Rabanus Maurus and the treatment of Esther in the Ordinary Gloss. The chapter demonstrates that, while Jews were recognizing Christian oppressors as contemporary Hamans, Christians were simultaneously reading Jews into this same character location. In this case, however, Christians inhabiting positions on the upper side of domination turned Jewish victim into villain, a reading that set the pattern for anti-Jewish Christian readings of Esther into the twentieth century.

Chapters 6 and 7 return attention to the hidden transcript, this time with a focus on King Ahasuerus. Both draw primarily on Esther Rabbah, Targum Sheni, and the Babylonian Esther Midrash. Chapter 6 explores the ways in which the rabbis playfully poke and prod the Persian king and his empire with ambivalent humor. In doing so, they show how a dominated group recognized Esther's hidden transcript and echoed and extended it with their own. As they diminish the Persian king and his empire through the use of humor, they also assert a kind of subaltern superiority vis-à-vis their contemporary overlords. Chapter 7 continues the focus on play with the king, but this time it concentrates on how the rabbis use the portrayal of this human character to take aim at the divine king. The rabbis show a remarkable boldness and creativity in the ways in which they draw God into their game. Examples of such play reveal both frustration and

familiarity; they can express anything from pain and protest to doubt, hope, and trust. Such carnivalesque treatment of God is a mode of Esther reception present in the rabbinic corpus but absent from the history of Christian interpretation, despite the approach's consonance with Christian theology.

Finally, Chapter 8 returns attention to the public transcript. It picks up where Chapter 5 left off and attends selectively to key instances of Esther reception in Christianity in the Reformation, in the modern period, and into the twenty-first century. In this chapter I give particular attention to the impact of Martin Luther on Esther reception and to the highly unusual twentieth-century commentary of Wilhelm Vischer. I establish the ways in which Christian Esther reception persisted in its relative antipathy toward the book and, most troubling of all, in its ongoing anti-Jewish reading. I also seek to identify some promising strands of interpretation.

Esther MT offers communities of faith a model and space for play—license to laugh at kings and empires, ourselves, and even God. Esther extends within the canon space and invitation to experiment with, explore, and express deep (and potentially dangerous) thoughts and feelings such as rage and perplexity; to learn by trying on different costumes for size; to rehearse reversal and escape. Much as the book of Lamentations provides not only permission but also patterns for people to lament, cry out, and question, so Esther invites readers of faith to get involved, albeit in prose rather than poem and in a world more distinctly marked by playfulness, humor, even joy. These are canonical gifts recognized by Jews but ill-received by Christians. This project, then, is addressed to Christians who seek to receive Esther faithfully, whether pastors, students, are teachers. My hope is that the conversations it begins with premodern Jewish reading

partners will help such individuals and their communities recognize and receive Esther's gifts.

Chapter 1: Esther as Hidden Transcript

Esther tells the story of two underdog figures (Esther and Mordecai) successfully navigating their precarious status before an overwhelmingly powerful empire, much to the delight of the minority community to which they belong.¹ Moreover, it was produced by and for a community that knew for themselves what it was like to be vulnerable before a dominating power. Scholars are divided on the precise historical or geographical context of Esther's composition, yet all propose the same social location: that of relative weakness before a powerful empire.² In other words, Esther is a 'hidden transcript,' a form of communication emerging from the underside of domination and liable to misunderstanding by those on the other side of domination.

This chapter introduces the concept of the hidden transcript, along with related theoretical frames that will be crucial to this project. These include laughter and humor theories, as well as the literary carnivalesque. It also presents a comparative overview of the contrasting ways in which Esther is received in Jewish versus Christian communities,

¹ On the delighted response of the community to Mordecai's honor, see 8:15-17.

² Credible proposals regarding Esther's origins range from the Persian to the Hellenistic period and from Susa to any diaspora community. Carey Moore dates the final form of Esther MT to the late Persian or early Hellenistic period. *Esther* (New Haven: Yale University, 1971), lix. Michael Fox argues for the Hellenistic period on the basis of some inaccuracies in the portrayal of the Persians. *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001, 2nd ed.), 139-140. In contrast, Jon Levenson argues that the Persian period not be excluded from consideration, since so-called inaccuracies can be explained as part of the book's typical exaggeration. Levenson further considers the book may have emerged from Susa. *Esther* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 25-26. Adele Berlin similarly favors an earlier date (fifth century, or at least prior to Alexander) and suggests any diaspora community could have been a location of composition. *Esther* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), xli-xlii.

before explaining why modern Christians may require Jewish reading partners in order to learn faithfully to imbibe this book they have so little understood.

1.1 The Hidden Transcript

Political scientist James C. Scott theorizes that dominated communities produce what he calls hidden transcripts: rich, insider-only discourses that respond to experiences of domination. It is a foundational point of this project that Esther can be accurately designated as one such hidden transcript. Such forms of communication are called hidden because they take place offstage, among the weak, and “outside the earshot” of the dominant.³ The theory rests upon the assumption that systems of domination are injurious to humans, whether such injury comes in the form of a direct “assault on one’s physical body” or as an ongoing threat to one’s dignity.⁴ Moreover, a defining feature of relative powerlessness before domination is an inability to settle the score for such injuries in the public sphere, a phenomenon Scott calls a “systemic frustration of reciprocal action.”⁵ The hidden transcript is one forum in which such systemic frustration can be addressed, a space of communication outside the public sphere in which “the accounts of reciprocity are, symbolically at least, finally balanced.”⁶ Outside the hearing of the dominant, the weak may say what they wish they could say in public to or about the dominant. The

³ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University, 1990), 4, 25.

⁴ Scott, *Domination*, 37.

⁵ Scott, *Domination*, 37.

⁶ Scott, *Domination*, 38.

hidden transcript is where the weak may take their symbolic revenge or assert a dignity denied them in the public life. It is thus best understood as a response or counterpoint to what is said or performed publicly (the “public transcript”).⁷

Produced among and for the benefit of the weak, the hidden transcript is characteristically inaccessible to the dominant for a variety of reasons. It may be safeguarded by the weak, voiced only in sequestered spaces or in disguised or coded form.⁸ Alternatively, as Ellen Davis aptly notes and as is the case with Esther MT, “Hidden transcripts are often in languages (such as Hebrew) that are not generally spoken by those in power and may be viewed with contempt.”⁹ Hidden transcripts are composed and nurtured in spaces and modes where they are unlikely to be encountered by dominant outsiders; even if they spill over into public spaces and are overheard by the dominant, they may be difficult for the dominant fully to understand.

To identify Esther MT as a hidden transcript is not to say that Esther’s authors necessarily feared political retribution for what they wrote; rather, it is to contend that Esther speaks to an ingroup who know what it is to be dominated by another and would recognize and appreciate the book’s themes and modes of communication. Since Esther

⁷ Scott, *Domination*, 5.

⁸ On ambiguous or encoded communication, or on attempts to shield the identity of speakers, see Scott, *Domination*, 19. This is not to say that the dominant never overhear the hidden transcript. As Scott notes, “a partly sanitized, ambiguous, and coded version of the hidden transcript is always present in the public discourse.” Sanitization, ambiguity, and encoding are all strategies of protecting the dominated from potential retribution.

⁹ Ellen Davis, “Joking about Genocide—Esther,” in *Opening Israel’s Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 383.

is a hidden transcript, readers equipped by way of their experiences in parallel social locations of relative disempowerment may be best qualified to recognize the book's interests and idioms. As a logical extension of the previous point, this also means that readers better versed in experiences of dominance (religiously, geographically, socially, politically) may be less qualified faithfully to receive Esther without assistance.

Social location is a complex matter, with vast historical and geographical variation as well as intra-societal variety.¹⁰ Furthermore, identities of race, ethnicity, sex, gender, geography, and more overlap and intersect within individuals.¹¹ Even so, it may be said that Jews throughout history often have navigated life as minorities within larger, Christian-dominant societies. Trends in Jewish Esther reception across the ages reflect this social reality. Moreover, the rich body of interpretations emerging from Jewish communities often resemble hidden transcripts themselves, recapitulations of Esther transposed for a new day.¹² In contrast, Christians—at least those best resourced to circulate ideas in written form—have interpreted Esther from positions of relative power, or at least of participation in the dominant culture. Prominent Christian interpretations even display an overt social alignment with the interests of the monarchy rather than the underdog. As I discuss in Chapter 5, such is expressly the position of the first full

¹⁰ For a fuller discussion of the complexities of social location, see Chapter 4.

¹¹ The term “intersectionality” was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (“Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *U. Chi. Legal F.* (1989): 139-167) and opened a vast and fruitful body of literature.

¹² This is particularly obvious in rabbinic readings of Esther treating the king and his empire, as well as the enemy Haman. These are treated in separate chapters.

Christian commentary to Esther (Rabanus Maurus, 836 CE), a work which set the tone for Christian reception for the rest of the medieval period. Christians who persistently read Esther from such positions are gravely impeded in their ability to understand Esther without outside help. They may need to read with others better equipped to recognize Esther's hidden transcript and play along with the grain of the text.

1.2 Christians Require Jewish Reading Partners

It would be difficult to overstate the contrast between Jewish and Christian reception of Esther across the ages.¹³ Certainly, both communities have at times entertained serious doubts as to Esther's suitability as scripture. Both also ultimately decided in favor of Esther's canonicity. Similarly, concerns about Esther's violence have been entertained in Jewish and Christian communities alike.¹⁴ But there the similarities end. Broadly speaking, whereas Esther reception has been enthusiastic and abundant among Jews, it has been skeptical and spare among Christians. Among Jews, Esther has been answered with extraordinary literary creativity, communal festivity, and a good dose of humor. Where it has received any attention at all among Christians, Esther has been read with unwavering seriousness.

Often, Esther MT has been received with marked antipathy among Christians.

Martin Luther was notoriously hostile to the book, and his views cast a long shadow in

¹³ Of course, while social location can explain some of this contrast, it is by no means the full story. Differences of religion, particularly in festival practice and canonical location, account for a significant part of the contrast.

¹⁴ For an excellent overview of both Christian and Jewish discomfort with Esther, see Elliott Horowitz, "The Book of Esther: For and Against," in *Reckless Rites* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2006), 23-45.

Christian interpretation and continue to be cited approvingly by Christians into the twentieth century.¹⁵ Yet even an unfavorable reception may be preferable to no reception at all; unfortunately, Esther's life among Christians has been marked also by long periods of disuse. Esther received little comment from the church fathers and no substantial treatment of the full book until the ninth century.¹⁶ This cannot have been because there was, objectively speaking, little of interest to say about the book or little of worth with which to encourage or challenge communities of faith. Indeed, the wealth and variety of written reception of Esther by Jews throughout the centuries of Christian neglect of this same book confirm that Jews recognized plenty of value therein. Yet it was a richness often unmined among Christians.¹⁷

¹⁵ Lewis Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908), writes, "The verdict of Luther is not too severe," 2. A fuller discussion of Luther and his impact is taken up in Chapter 8.

¹⁶ Rabanus Maurus wrote the first Christian commentary to Esther in 836 AD. When the church fathers do refer to Esther, it is often in order to address the question of canonicity, or of the historical identity of Ahasuerus. Furthermore, it is worth noting that early Christian writers (aside from Maurus) seem to have read the LXX version. Hence, Esther is known not only as a model of bravery, which is evidenced in both MT and LXX, but also and especially a model of piety, an attribute emphasized in LXX but absent in MT. Esther and Mordecai's fasting and prayer attract particular attention. Esther is also read as a type of the church (an interpretive move that will become prominent in medieval Christian Esther interpretation). Agnethe Siquans, "Esther in der Interpretation der Kirchenväter: Königin, Vorbild der Tapferkeit oder Typus der Kirche?" *ZAC* 12 (2008): 414-432.

¹⁷ As the final chapter will explore, there are certain periods of greater interest in Esther among Christians. Most are receptions that emphasize themes emphasized in Esther LXX but absent from Esther MT, i.e., God's presence in the story world and the extreme piety of the leading characters.

In contrast, Jewish communities have taken up with enthusiasm Esther's invitation to play. Purim-related practices and literary creations reveal a hearty playfulness. Purim festivities make free and full use of costumes, games, experimentation, inversion, and traditions of humor that range from lighthearted buffoonery to wry wit and biting critique. Other Purim practices include masquerade, the mock election of royalty, the hanging or burning of Haman in effigy, the Purim spiel (Purim play), and the use of noisemakers.¹⁸ Corresponding to such embodied practices is a literary body no less rich in responses to and extensions of Esther's play. Sometimes Purim practices themselves produced written afterlives: scripts of innumerable Purim plays produced across the world and across ages, examples of Purim Torah (spoofs of sacred texts written for the entertainment of the gathered), and the rich collection of Aramaic Purim poetry recently translated by Laura Lieber.¹⁹ Yet Esther's written play extends far beyond such festival writings.

Esther is remarkable in the volume of treatment it received in targum, midrash, and Talmud. For example, it has the unusual distinction of being the subject of two complete targums, Targum Rishon and Targum Sheni.²⁰ The book also generated an

¹⁸ Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 158.

¹⁹ Laura Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry from Late Antiquity: Translations and Commentaries* (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

²⁰ For text of the two targums to Esther, see Bernard Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther: Translated, with Apparatus and Notes*, The Aramaic Bible Volume 18 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991). Targum Sheni is highly aggadic in character and reads more like a midrashic collection than a true targum.

expansive midrashic reception, far out of proportion with any of the other Megillot and more comparable to the midrashic treatment of the five books of Torah.²¹ The largest of these collections by far is Midrash Esther Rabbah, but other notable works include Midrash Abba Gurion and Midrash Panim Aherot, along with fragmentary evidence to a variety of other collections. As evidenced by the multiplicity of copies extant, such midrashic collections were very popular.²² Even more striking is the fact that Esther received a complete midrashic exposition in the Babylonian Talmud. Located in tractate *Megillah* (10b-17a) and often called the Babylonian Esther Midrash, the work is anomalous to say the least. As Eliezer Segal emphasizes, it is

the only full midrashic exposition of an entire biblical book to have been incorporated into the Babylonian Talmud, making it the only complete midrashic work that has come down to us from that prominent Jewish community and its rabbinic teachers.²³

Jewish reception, whether embodied in Purim practices or attested in unusually expansive bodies of literature, shows an embarrassment of riches recognized in and mined from Esther MT.

²¹ For a comprehensive catalogue and assessment of midrashic literature on Esther, see Myron B. Lerner, “The Works of Aggadic Midrash and the Esther Midrashim,” in *The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud, Volume 3: The Literature of the Sages*, 133-229 (Brill, 2006). For comment on the disproportionate volume of Esther midrash see especially pages 176 and 228.

²² Lerner, “Esther Midrashim,” 191.

²³ For a critical edition of the Babylonian Esther Midrash, see Eliezer Segal’s three-volume *The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary Volume* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994).

One reason Christians need to read with Jews is that Jews demonstrably have known what to do with a book like Esther and Christians mostly have not. Christians need help understanding why this book is part of their canon of Scripture. To take a verse from the Christian canon somewhat out of context, the book of Esther may be “like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to their playmates, ‘We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn’” (Matt 11:16-17 NIV).²⁴ The children complain that their playmates were simply no good at playing along, like those who loll on the ground when it is time to play tag. In a similar way, Esther MT issues an invitation to play, an invitation answered by Jews but inadequately answered in Christian reception.

On some level, the richness of Esther reception among Jews can be explained quite simply, without reference to experiences of relative powerlessness or domination. Esther is a festal book best interpreted in festive modes with festive sensibilities. Jews have a festival context in which to receive the book, while Christians do not. Moreover, for Jews, the festival of Purim is the primary context of Esther reception; they perform its meaning in celebration of its carnivalesque festival. Certainly, the idiom of carnival exists also in Christian tradition.²⁵ Yet Christianity is in a sense disadvantaged in its reception of Esther because, having extracted the book from its festival context, it has not been

²⁴ André LaCoque cites this verse at the head of his preface. *Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 2008). Hebrew Bible references will be author’s own unless otherwise noted.

²⁵ On carnival in the Christian tradition, especially in connection with Christmas, see Charles L. Campbell and Johan H. Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco: Baylor, 2012), 77-79.

immediately obvious that it is festal literature. Certainly, Christians and Jews alike may share in the broader societal changes throughout history that led Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin to complain of a lamentable loss of fluency in the idiom of carnival.²⁶ Moreover, the trend in scholarship by both Christians and Jews in recent decades has been to a fuller appreciation of the significance of the carnivalesque designation in Esther interpretation.²⁷ Nevertheless, within the embodied, annual life of Christian communities, it remains true that there is no obvious venue for festival reception of the book. Canonical context compounds the challenge. While in the Jewish canon Esther is numbered among the Megillot and readers are thereby canonically primed for recognition of its character as festival literature, Christians find Esther among their historical books and are thereby predisposed to receive it from an overwhelmingly serious aspect.²⁸

Limitations of festival calendar and canonical context may go a long way to explaining barriers to Christian reception of Esther in any abundance or in modes faithful to the character of the book. But as should become clear as this project unfolds, the barriers to faithful, fruitful Christian reception of Esther are not only ones of religious practice or canonical arrangement. Rather, the deficit may be one of relative social

²⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

²⁷ More on this below.

²⁸ This perception persists despite the presence of humor across the Hebrew Bible even among the so-called historical books. See Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner, eds., *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), especially chapters by Y.T. Radday, "On Missing the Humour in the Bible," 21-38, and J.C. Exum and J.W. Whedbee, "Isaac, Samson, and Saul: Reflections on the Comic and Tragic Visions," 117-159.

location. The abundance and richness of Jewish reception of Esther can be accounted for to some degree because Jewish communities, suffering their own experiences of domination and vulnerability before a variety of imperial powers, recognized, appreciated, and welcomed Esther as a hidden transcript, written from and for an experience like their own. To the degree they have *not* known experiences of minoritization and domination, Christian communities may have simply failed to recognize the character and value of a piece of literature emerging out of and speaking to a situation so unlike their own.

If neglect of the book were the only problem in Christian interpretive history, that would be sufficient reason to seek Jewish reading partners. However, Esther has not only suffered neglect in Christian hands; it has also been subject to misuse and, most troublingly of all, weaponized against those it was written to support in their very weakness.²⁹ As later chapters will demonstrate, when Esther did receive official

²⁹ On Christian mobilization of the Esther story against Jews, see for example Jo Carruthers, “Esther and Hitler: A Second Triumphant Purim,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, ed. Michael Lieb et al, Oxford University Press, 2011, online ed., 2011, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199204540.003.0036. In fact, fear of the book’s potential to elicit harm against Jews led some Jews to wonder if Esther should continue to be used at all. Elliott Horowitz implicitly explores this question in the title of his book, *Reckless Rites* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2006). Certainly, acts of violence inspired by Esther have also at times been taken by dominantly positioned Jews against weaker minority groups in their midst. Horowitz notes that in modern Israel “acts of violence against non-Jews have clustered around the days between Shabbat Zakhor and Purim. It was over the holiday of Purim that religious settlers from Kiryat Arbah festively reconquered Beit Hadassah from an Arab upholsterer in 1981, it was on that holiday that Dr. Goldstein of Kiryat Arbah gunned down twenty-nine prostrate Muslims ... in 1994, and it was on the Sabbath before the holiday that one year later Moshe Ehrenfeld spat conspicuously in the presence of an Armenian procession in Jerusalem” (*Reckless Rites*, 11).

treatment in dominant Christian society, it was accomplished in such a way so as to reverse the roles of victims and victimizers in the story and to fix the Jews who lived as minorities in their societies in the location of characters destined for annihilation. Time and again, this annihilation in the story world was acted out against real Jewish bodies in Christian lands.³⁰ Christians have perpetrated great harm with this book, particularly from positions of dominance with respect to Jews. A pattern like this suggests there is a moral imperative for Christians to read with Jews as a guard against such egregious distortions of a book meant to support the survival of a vulnerable minority, not justify their decimation.

If a deficit in receptive capacity and a history of perpetration of harm both suggest a moral imperative to listen to an ill-understood ‘other,’ there are more positive reasons for Christians to read Esther with Jewish assistance. There are riches in this part of the canon that have simply not been apprehended in Christian communities. The following chapters will uncover interpretive riches in Jewish interpretations of Esther that could bear fruit among Christians. For example, close attention to Jewish reception of Esther will provide Christians reading from positions of power opportunities to reckon with their own social location with respect to the text and its characters. Through the eyes of Jews, Christians can learn how they have been experienced by those with whom they share the book, a discovery which might well result in healthful grief and repentance. Christian communities are by no means uniform in their social locations. Those who, like many communities of Jews throughout history, find themselves reading from the underside of

³⁰ This will be explored extensively in chapter 6.

domination may discover in Esther resources for survival within the canon of Scripture. By reading Esther, all, dominant and dominated alike, may learn to undermine and destabilize the prevailing captivity of their imaginations to human powers and empires. Finally, Christians may, in listening to Jews, discover in Esther surprising resources for relating to God in unexpected modalities—for example, the opportunity to play with God, or what lament in the key of laughter might look like.³¹ Such are the riches of Esther mined in Jewish interpretation which are consonant with Christian theology and may be enriching to the Christian life, but are simply absent from the public record of the history of Christian interpretation.

1.3 A Closer Look at the Characteristics of Hidden Transcripts

Hidden transcripts such as Esther MT have characteristic motifs and themes that are best understood as emerging in response to the experience of domination; these motifs may make little sense or be gravely misunderstood if interpreted without reference to this experience. One favorite motif of the hidden transcript is that of the “world turned upside down,” in which the community imagines a “total reversal of the existing distribution of status and rewards.”³² Such a fantasy may provide for the community “an imaginative breathing space,” room to imagine that the way things are is not the way things always must be.³³ World reversal elevates the dominated in the fantasy world,

³¹ I pass over the broad themes in this paragraph quickly because they are all the subject of extensive exposition in later chapters.

³² Scott, *Domination*, 80.

³³ Scott, *Domination*, 168. Importantly, though, Scott emphasizes that such imaginings do sometimes lead to actual rebellions, *ibid.*, 171.

allowing them to experience a “counterfactual” reality, a positive counter to their actual experience of domination.³⁴

Even as it lifts the dominated, reversing the world reduces the dominant in a way in which they may never be reduced in the real world. Thus, an extension of the motif of reversal is that of the revenge fantasy. The payback the dominated may never dare seek in the public sphere may be exacted in the hidden transcript. Offstage, the dominated may say what is too risky to say in public; they may take symbolic action to settle scores they would never, in real life, have the opportunity safely to address. Moreover, the dominated may enjoy punishing the dominant in the fantasy world, taking pleasure in seeing the ones who have hurt them experience pain (*schadenfreude*).³⁵

Another favorite way of asserting dignity and besting the dominant in the hidden transcript is through a trickster figure, one who asserts the self in dangerous ways and yet “manages to outwit his adversary and escape unscathed.”³⁶ Members of a dominated community may be all too aware that if they took the reciprocal action they wished, they could pay for it with their lives. Through the trickster, however, they can admire from a safe position the courage and cleverness of one they claim as their own and vicariously

³⁴ Scott, *Domination*, 41.

³⁵ Scott, *Domination*, 41.

³⁶ Scott, *Domination*, 41.

experience or participate in his or her triumph.³⁷ Finally, joking and other forms of humor are characteristics of hidden transcripts that will be significant for our purposes.³⁸

Characteristic motifs of hidden transcripts are readily recognizable in Esther. As a hidden transcript, it is no accident that reversal is Esther's organizing principle and favorite motif, so much so that, as Levenson contends, the entire book might be "summed up in two Hebrew words . . . 'the reversal occurred' [וינהפוך הוא] (9:1)."³⁹ With the turning of the tables, the villain meets his downfall and receives the very punishment he had planned to inflict. The conclusion of the Esther story is dominated more by a spirit of generous joy than of vengeance, but the plot does present opportunities for revenge fantasy.⁴⁰ The narrative also presents two protagonists who may be read as trickster figures. Consider Scott's description of a trickster:

³⁷ Scott notes the mixture of fear and admiration with which the dominated may view those real-life-tricksters who risk acting out the hidden transcript and pay for it with their lives. *Domination*, 41.

³⁸ Scott mentions the use of jokes in passing, *Domination*, 19. Humor is, of course, culturally contextual and exists at least partially in the eye of the beholder. Nevertheless, the rabbinic receptions examined in this project reveal that the rabbis perceived humor extensively in Esther MT.

³⁹ Levenson, *Esther*, 8.

⁴⁰ Care is warranted on this point, as Esther often has been characterized as vengeful, and this purported vengefulness has been characterized as a particularly Jewish failing, in contradistinction to Christianity. A few representative comments from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: Arthur Stanley notes the "natural objection of the civilized—we may add, of the Christian—conscience, to the Book of Esther" and "the wild passion of Esther's revenge in the impalement of Haman's innocent family" ("Lectures on the History of the Jewish Church," Lect. XLV (1877), 200). For Bernhard Anderson, "The book is inspired by a fierce nationalism and an unblushing vindictiveness which stand in glaring contradiction to the Sermon on the Mount" ("The Place of the Book of Esther in the Christian Bible," *Journal of Religion* 30.1 (1950), 32). Lewis Paton suggests the

Typically the trickster makes his successful way through a treacherous environment of enemies out to defeat him—or eat him—not by his strength but by his wit and cunning. . . . Only by knowing the habits of his enemies, by deceiving them, by taking advantage of their greed, size, gullibility, or haste does he manage to escape their clutches and win victories.⁴¹

Certainly, both Esther and Mordecai successfully navigate a treacherous environment with an enemy (Haman) out to defeat them, and they do so with great skill and cunning, taking advantage of what they know about their enemies and overlords.⁴² Finally, Esther is a book rife with humor.

1.4 Laughter, Humor, and the Hidden Transcript

It is evident from the embodied and written reception of many Jewish communities that they recognized humor as one of the most important ways Esther communicates as a hidden transcript. Esther has prompted laughter among oppressed peoples of Jewish faith, and their receptions have generated an extraordinary body of humor, extending Esther's joke. Jews have long situated interpretation of this book and its serious matters within the complex frivolity of Purim; hence, Esther has been read

church fathers ignored Esther because of their “[d]islike for its revengeful spirit,” a dislike Paton clearly shares (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark (1908), 101).

⁴¹ Scott, *Domination*, 162. On Esther and Mordecai as trickster figures, see Susan Niditch, “Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority,” in *Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner, 26-46 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1985), reprinted from *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Folklore* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) and idem., *War in the Hebrew Bible: A Study in the Ethics of Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 119-122.

⁴² Consider Esther's use of Haman's vanity in her feast-invitation strategy. Of course, it should also be noted that at one point in the story, Mordecai acts out the hidden transcript publicly to grave consequence, refusing to bow to Haman and thereby bringing the threat of death on his own people.

seriously and at the same time with an ear for laughter.⁴³ Chapters 3 and 6 especially will demonstrate how Esther's humor from at least rabbinic times has been recognized and received with enthusiasm and ample creativity among Jewish communities.⁴⁴ But this laughter largely has been missed by others. Until recent decades, Esther's humor was not recognized—or at least not recognized as important enough to warrant comment—in Christian reception or in the Western academy. By the 1990s, as we will see below, Esther scholarship took a literary turn, allowing increasing recognition of humor.⁴⁵ Before then, however, there simply is no hint of laughter-prompting humor in the history of Christian Esther reception.⁴⁶

Esther reception is not the only arena in which Christian interpreters have missed the presence and potential of laughter. In *The Laughter of the Oppressed*, theologian Jacqueline Bussie argues that people of faith have laughed and continue to laugh in extremely oppressive situations, but that Christian theologians operating from positions

⁴³ This is not to say Jewish interpretations are monolithic.

⁴⁴ This is not to say that Esther was never interpreted in a serious mode in Judaism.

⁴⁵ While not quite arguing in terms of humor, literary scholar Stan Goldman's 1990 essay made a significant impact on Esther studies in arguing for Esther's extensive use of irony. Goldman, "Narrative and Ethical Ironies in Esther," *JSOT* 47 (1990): 15-31. The same year, Yehuda Radday brought the conversation further in the influential essay, "Esther with Humour," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (1990). Since Radday's essay, many have extended the work.

⁴⁶ Prior to the 1990s, when Christian scholars increasingly responded to the literary (carnavalesque) turn in Esther scholarship. Chapters 5 and 8 will examine key trends in the overwhelmingly serious reception of Esther across Christian history.

of power have failed to notice or adequately account for such laughter.⁴⁷ Christian theology's official (public transcript) view of laughter has been overwhelmingly negative, dismissing the phenomenon as suspect, sinful, or unbecomingly frivolous. But Bussie uncovers a hidden transcript of laughter of oppressed people of faith that is far from mere frivolity. Building on the work of sociologist James C. Scott and drawing on a positionally-inflected account of the three primary theories of humor, Bussie builds a positive account of the ethical and theological potential of laughter.

One significant barrier preventing Christians from reading Esther through the lens of laughter is discomfort with the idea that laughter could be a fitting or worthy part of the Christian life.⁴⁸ Furthermore, the fact that Esther finds its place within a biblical canon may lead readers of faith to assume that it is religious and thus can be no laughing matter. Yet if Bussie's work is applied to the question of Esther reception, one of the most significant barriers to reading Esther through the lens of laughter is the assumption that seriousness and humor do not belong together.

Certainly, Esther deals with serious themes: the marginality and vulnerability of women within a vast empire, exile and loss, the dangerous consequences of a weak ruler who is easily swayed, and, above all, near-genocide. Nevertheless, Bussie shows us that seriousness and laughter coexist fruitfully, especially in the face of the absurdity of oppression. Importantly, for Bussie these paradoxical phenomena coexist not only in the

⁴⁷ Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007).

⁴⁸ A theory extensively and convincingly explored by Bussie.

literature of the oppressed, but in lived experience as well. Although Bussie locates serious laughter within literature (specifically, in three tragic novels), she does not seek a primarily literary explanation for the widespread presence of laughter there. Instead, she uses the novels to uncover witnesses to the real laughter of oppressed peoples and to study this laughter from ethical and theological perspectives.

Bussie finds the concept of laughter, not humor, best suited to the study of tragic texts and contexts, and she works with texts that make frequent reference to laughter.⁴⁹ In contrast, there are no references to laughter in either Esther MT or in the sections of the rabbinic Esther corpus treated in this project. However, there is ample evidence of humor. Moreover, this humor is by no means foreign to tragic topoi. While laughter is not identical with humor, there is a large degree of overlap between theories on the related phenomena. The present project thus uses the category of humor while drawing on the explanatory power of Bussie's laughter theory for Esther MT and rabbinic Esther receptions.

1.5 Aspects of Humor Theory

There is significant continuity among theories of humor (and, by extension, laughter) across a variety of fields with an interest in the phenomenon; these include philosophy, psychology, sociology, trauma studies, and literature, among others. Across

⁴⁹ Bussie favors laughter because it is an embodied phenomenon. Moreover, she rejects the category of humor for her purposes, since she associates it (incorrectly, I think) exclusively with comedic modes, while her interest lies with tragic texts and contexts. She aptly observes that much that is absurd is far from funny and yet can prompt laughter (radical suffering, for example). I understand humor as possible across both comedic and tragic texts and situations.

these various disciplines, scholars operate with three major theories concerning the essence of humor: superiority, relief, and incongruity. The first two (superiority and relief) relate somewhat more to the function or result of humor, while the latter (incongruity) tends to focus more on what elicits a perception of humor. These three categories of analysis are not necessarily incompatible, as they explain different aspects of humor.

Superiority theory, as explored by such prominent philosophers as Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Hobbes, and Nietzsche, posits that people laugh because they feel (or aspire to feel) superior to other people.⁵⁰ As Bussie explains, the “locus of laughter . . . is derision and a sentiment of superiority.”⁵¹ Laughter’s targets, moreover, are “those who are powerless, weak, and self-ignorant.”⁵² Superiority theorists tend to treat laughter as quite a negative phenomenon; they caution against its immoderate use, note its potential unsuitability, and consider certain topoi such as “misery and crime” off-limits for laughter.⁵³ Their assumed audience consists of ethical actors who are relatively powerfully located individuals like themselves. And, it should be granted, it is morally suspect for the more powerful to laugh at the weak. But what if the laugher is the underdog?

⁵⁰ For summaries of these views, see Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 11.

⁵¹ Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 11.

⁵² Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 11.

⁵³ Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 11.

What superiority theorists propose as a universal theory of humor or laughter actually constitutes an ethical analysis based on a particular kind of social location, that of the relative power enjoyed by the ancient elite. (It may be added that this is a position akin to that experienced by many in the modern North American and European academy.) As Bussie incisively notes, such “superiority theory . . . proves revelatory not of the general nature of laughter as much as revelatory of the relative social dominance of its own proponents.”⁵⁴ Yet superiority as a category of analysis still holds much explanatory power with respect to humor and laughter, if it can be sharpened through the lens of social location. In Bussie’s words, superiority theory

needs the following caveat: when the ‘weak’ and oppressed laugh, their laughter also affirms autonomy and power, and thereby struggles to be heard over the laughter of the hegemony. The competing laughter of the oppressed serves as counterpoint to the dominant laughter, and destabilizes the oppressor’s assertion of dominance.⁵⁵

It is no accident that this laughing “counterpoint” is framed in terms parallel to that of a hidden transcript. The use of humor to assert superiority from a subaltern position merits study as a potent ethical tool, and it will provide a crucial analytical lens in Chapters 3 and 6.

Relief theory finds its roots in Freudian thought, yet its influence is much wider than that one stream of psychology. The core of the theory is that humor can function as a kind of release valve. For example, individuals might find they need to laugh in awkward or stressful situations in an attempt to dissipate tension. The relief lens can sometimes

⁵⁴ Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 13.

⁵⁵ Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 13.

result in a trivializing view of the significance of laughter, framing it as a ‘mere’ release of pent-up frustration or socially awkward situations. Yet Bussie’s strongest critique of relief theory is its failure to “consider the political and social ramifications of such laughter.”⁵⁶ Humor is a well-documented, if apparently incongruous, response to serious threat. This can range from the “inappropriate laughter” of trauma survivors, to the concentration-camp jokes that may be funny to survivors but incomprehensible to outsiders, to fully developed works of art, such as the novels Bussie studies.⁵⁷ Granted, humor emerging from situations of radical suffering may be difficult for those outside the experience to recognize or understand; topics the traumatized find humorous may not be recognizably humorous to others. To properly identify and understand such humor, qualified interpretive partners may be necessary; in fact, this is why Bussie develops her constructive theory of laughter out of close engagement with the novelistic testimony of voices “from below.”

For those who do consider social location in their studies of humor from a relief perspective, there is debate regarding whether such humor merely provides momentary escape from suffering, or whether it can foster active political resistance. While carnivalesque laughter may seem revolutionary, some argue, it instead functions as a release valve for frustrations that might otherwise build to produce real social change.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 15.

⁵⁷ On inappropriate laughter, see Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 2.

⁵⁸ For a refutation of the view that carnivalesque expression is a mere “safety valve” and method of social control, see Scott, *Domination*, 167-72, 177-81.

From such a perspective, laughter serves to uphold the status quo in situations of domination. Allowing for the potential for its cooptation, however, even laughter for the purpose of relief can be a creative, ethical response to oppression. The humor of the oppressed can still be serious and consequential, even if it never leads to regime change.⁵⁹ First of all, it is used as a survival strategy, and survival is in itself a valuable ethical goal.⁶⁰ Second, Bussie contends that laughter may function as an interruption of the status quo “*by labeling as absurd what everyone else has accepted as banal and commonplace.*”⁶¹ In other words, humor can function as an “antidote to apathy,” as it draws attention to absurdity and hence can arrest attention and “draw a response” to evil.⁶²

While superiority and relief perspectives consider the function of the humor for the participant, incongruity theory pertains to the source or content of humor. Simply put, people seem to find incongruous situations and paradoxical ideas funny. As Bussie explains, incongruity theory frames laughter as “a reaction to the absurd” emerging “out

⁵⁹ See Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 15.

⁶⁰ On the value of an ethic of survival, see for example womanist theologian Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1988), 4: “Black women have justly regarded survival against tyrannical systems of triple oppression as a true sphere of moral life.”

⁶¹ Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 53, emphasis in original.

⁶² Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 53 and 52.

of the incongruity between our expectations and a reality that negates those expectations.”⁶³

Incongruity is a widespread and uncontroversial theory of humor, and Bussie’s primary critique of incongruity theorists is that they assume a comedic frame of analysis.⁶⁴ As Bussie notices, there is plenty of incongruity to be found in tragic situations and literature as well. In fact, the experience of incongruity, framed as the incompatibility of narratives or beliefs, is one of the most prominent theories of trauma.⁶⁵ Moreover, the hidden transcripts Bussie uncovers reveal that oppressed peoples of faith have laughed at the absurdity of radical evil in such situations of intense suffering. Incongruity is an important frame of analysis, but it must be inflected to account for the experiences and laughter of those on the underside of domination. Thus adapted, incongruity theory helps identify instances in which the laughter of the oppressed functions as a response to the absurdity of radical evil. Of particular importance to the

⁶³ Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 13.

⁶⁴ In fact, this is the locus of Bussie’s rejection of the category of humor in favor of laughter, and she critiques Kierkegaard for collapsing the two phenomena. Against Bussie, I find humor a useful frame of analysis beyond comedic literature and situations.

⁶⁵ The idea is that trauma opens a gap between beliefs and experience, a gap experienced as cognitive dissonance. Trauma recovery is then conceptualized as the ability to re-narrate or make sense of what happened in a way that closes this gap. For a synthesis of the literature and extensive bibliography, see Crystal Park, “Making Sense of the Meaning Literature: An Integrative Review of Meaning Making and Its Effects on Adjustment to Stressful Life Events,” *Psychological Bulletin* 136, no. 2 (2010): 257-301.

present project is Bussie's concept of laughter as a potent theological response to the incompatibility of narratives of faith with the experiential narrative of suffering.⁶⁶

1.6 The Scholarly Conversation: The Challenge of the Frightening and the Funny

In reading both Esther MT and Jewish reception of Esther as examples of hidden transcripts emerging from the underside of domination, this project responds to twin challenges, one in Christian reception and the other in biblical scholarship. To this point in the chapter, the emphasis has been on challenges in Christian reception of Esther MT in a mode appropriate to its playful character. Specifically, the problem has been a long history of underuse and even abhorrence of Esther coupled with deafness to its humor. Such imperviousness has denied Christian communities access to the many rich gifts this canonical book might offer, resources richly received in Jewish communities across the ages. Worse, rejection of Esther's story world humor and violence can be linked to real world violence wrought by Christians on Jewish bodies throughout history. The challenge as it appears in biblical scholarship has been a difficulty in reckoning with both the gravity and the hilarity of Esther, with a tendency to emphasize one at the expense of the other or to bifurcate the frightening and the funny in Esther interpretations.⁶⁷

For modern readers of all kinds (not just Christians), reading Jewish interpretations of Esther that emerge from the underside of domination can enhance current scholarly conversations on Esther's genre. Modern biblical scholars have

⁶⁶ Taken up especially in Chapter 7.

⁶⁷ Perhaps the best articulation of this problem can be found in Melissa A. Jackson, *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

struggled to hold Esther's playful features in tension with the book's grimmer elements. Melissa Jackson has incisively named the temptation to bifurcate the book, treating some parts as funny and others as decidedly *unfunny*. She summarizes the problematic reading: "The foolishness of the king is funny; the slaughtering of thousands is frightening. That Haman meets his end on the very gallows he constructed is comic; that Haman's ten sons are killed is murderous."⁶⁸ But such designations about what is and is not funny are not true to the spirit of the book. As Jackson puts it, "The truth . . . is that Esther is both frightening and funny from the first verse to the last, the fright and the fun occurring together hand in hand."⁶⁹ Even more common is the tendency not so much to bifurcate the book as to treat it from either an overwhelmingly serious or frivolous perspective. Some interpreters attend to Esther from an exclusively sober aspect, producing accounts with little or no reference to Esther's humor and playfulness.⁷⁰ In stark contrast, prominent scholars such as H.L. Ginsberg and Adele Berlin emphasize Esther's levity almost to the exclusion of its seriousness.

Certainly, the trend in recent decades toward a greater recognition and emphasis of Esther's humor has been salutary. For example, Adele Berlin's Esther commentary depicts Esther as "hilariously funny" and argues compellingly that the book's humor is

⁶⁸ Jackson, *Comedy*, 199.

⁶⁹ Jackson, *Comedy*, 199.

⁷⁰ One example of a humorless reading of Esther is Francisco-Javier Ruiz-Ortiz, *The dynamics of violence and revenge in the Hebrew book of Esther* (Brill, 2017). Even though Michael Fox (*Character and Ideology*) mentions humor in his account, Adele Berlin critiques his work primarily for its relative lack of attention to this significant aspect of Esther. Review in *Biblica* 75, no. 1 (1994): 106-112.

central to its meaning.⁷¹ Yet even as an approach like Berlin's provides an important corrective to works that underrate Esther's hilarity, it errs in the opposite direction by inadequately accounting for the gravity of the book. Berlin admits the presence of serious matters in Esther but thinks "[t]he frivolity of the book's style . . . undercuts the gravity of its theme."⁷² In her view Haman is "not darkly evil," "the threat to the Jews is not real," and the killing of thousands in the final chapters "is no more real than anything else in the plot."⁷³ Yet such an approach is inadequate to Esther, which demands a mode of interpretation that makes meaning of its fright alongside its fun.

Scholars who have gone furthest in accounting for the interplay of both hilarity and horror in Esther have done so with the help of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the phenomenon of carnival. Kenneth Craig and André LaCocque have argued that Esther exemplifies the literary carnivalesque.⁷⁴ They convincingly illustrate how Esther partakes in the themes, imagery, and idioms of carnival as articulated by Bakhtin and how Esther's particular mixture of the humorous and horrific makes sense within the bounds of such genre expectations. A fuller articulation of Bakhtin's work on carnival will be presented below, but for the moment it is sufficient to note that carnivalesque is a genre in which there need be no fundamental

⁷¹ Berlin, *Esther*, xvi, xviii.

⁷² Berlin, *Esther*, xvi.

⁷³ Berlin, *Esther*, xx.

⁷⁴ Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995); André LaCocque, *Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007).

incompatibility between the bone-chilling and the belly-laughing elements of a work like Esther. There is room for Haman to be both darkly evil and hilarious; given the right audience, the book's excessive violence can be simultaneously horrifying and humorous.

Scholars like Craig, Beal, and Jackson make a literary point, arguing that violence and terror are not inimical to comedic literary forms but are indeed part and parcel of the carnivalesque. Thus from a literary perspective the current project walks well-trodden ground: as an example of literary carnivalesque, Esther's hilarity and deadly seriousness belong together. What has been less explored is the kind of social location or experiential reality that would produce or require such a carnivalesque text with its particular *mélange* of fright and fun. But carnivals and carnivalesque literature have a social context and a social function that is deeply connected to experiences of a certain kind of community experience, namely, that of the underside of domination.⁷⁵ This is the point at which Scott's work again becomes helpful, because he treats carnival as an instance in which the hidden transcript comes temporarily to fuller expression. In his words, "Carnival, in its ritual structure and anonymity, gives a privileged place to normally suppressed speech and aggression."⁷⁶ Thus while Esther scholarship through the lens of the *literary* carnivalesque provides an important foundation, the interest of this project goes beyond literary explanation to study Esther's gravity and hilarity as received by people of faith living in conditions of oppression. In other words, this project seeks to listen to this

⁷⁵ Bakhtin wrote against the backdrop of Stalinist totalitarianism. On this context, see LaCoque, *Esther Regina*, 3.

⁷⁶ Scott, *Domination*, 181.

understudied hidden transcript and to better understand the existential and theological meaning of its serious humor.

Interestingly, more than a few of the Esther scholars cited above have hinted at the sociological or experiential situation that corresponds to the production or use of a text like Esther. Jackson, for example, calls Esther “a story of survival” and notes that “Esther’s comedy aids that survival,” but the literary focus of her study does not allow a substantive pursuit of key questions to which her comments gesture.⁷⁷ If Esther aids survival, the survival of whom, from what, and how? Even Berlin, for all her emphasis on Esther’s unserious nature, hints at the reality the book may be meant to address. If as Berlin notes, “The book sets out a threat to the Jews so that the Jewish audience can watch with glee and laugh with relief as it is overcome,” it is worth asking why that particular audience would need or crave such an experience. In another incisive moment, Berlin captures a key dynamic that will be explored in the current project: that the story of Esther provides a space of play for a minority community.

The mad and threatening world of the beginning of the story fades into a happy ending where, for a brief moment, the Jews, through their two representatives can play at wielding the highest power in the great empire to which they were in reality subservient and in which they were an insignificant minority.⁷⁸

The kind of play described here is time limited (“for a brief moment”) and counterfactual, affording Berlin’s imagined Esther audience an experience of power that is far from the

⁷⁷ Jackson, *Comedy*, 199.

⁷⁸ Berlin, *Esther*, xxii.

subaltern situation they navigate in the real world.⁷⁹ Not incidentally, it sounds strikingly like the favored world reversal motif of a hidden transcript. What Berlin has recognized here is that the interplay between Esther's fright and fun is meaningful in connection with a certain kind of experiential reality: that of a vulnerable, minority community before a dominating power.

Modern readers of Esther—religious or otherwise—can enrich their understandings of this book through close attention to readers who recognize from experience (i.e., due to their social location) this precise kind of existential reality. Over the broad sweep of the history of Esther interpretation, communities of Jews who have experienced such marginal, vulnerable realities—and recognize its accordant mixture of emotions and forms of humor—can provide just such reading partners. Many of the voices to which this project attends will be ancient, but not exclusively so. The important factor is that of social rather than precise historical location. In fact, one relatively contemporary voice provides an important, self-consciously *located* rebuttal to modern scholarly readings.

As an observant Jew, Israeli-American rabbi David Hartman does not write of the book of Esther as literature severed from social experience or religious practice. Instead, he roots his discussion above all in the practice of Purim—a festival which, for him, is about the survival of the Jewish body. He seeks a way to square the levity of the festival with the deadly serious experience of existential vulnerability. Thus Hartman locates the meaning of Esther's paradoxical fright and fun not only within a festival context, with its

⁷⁹ These are all important elements of the phenomenon of play, as discussed in Chapter 2.

concordant literary expectations; more significantly, he locates this tension within a particular social and religious experience: one of danger and pain. Hartman writes as someone whose life spanned the Shoah and the establishment of the State of Israel, and as someone who lived and wrote there. He identifies fully with Jews, slipping eventually from speaking of “they” to “we.” And because of their experiences in history, he reads from the perspective of a community that understands the danger of “Haman” and of annihilation to be real, serious, and ongoing. For Hartman, then, the suspension of the serious on Purim (and in the book of Esther) is only comprehensible and meaningful within this broader situation of real and ongoing danger. Hartman writes: “Having lived at the margins of history where they were repeatedly victimized by Hamans in one form or another, Jews were fully aware of the fact that they were always vulnerable to the outbreak of anti-Semitism.”⁸⁰ For Hartman, the story of Esther is still celebrated against the backdrop of a decidedly tragic history:

we know that Haman has not died, that our enemies still seek our destruction, that the problem of anti-Semitism has not been solved and that, in many respects, we are vulnerable. Hitler’s genocidal ‘final solution’ and its near realization are fresh in our memories. Only the naive would dare believe that Hitler has been permanently removed from the stage of history. We know full well the horror of the precariousness and vulnerability of Jewish physical existence. Yet, in spite of this tragic assessment of human history, we are able to set apart a day on which we act as if the distinction between Haman and Mordecai has been eradicated . . . to affirm the joy of life despite the presence of death.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Hartman, “Purim: Joy in the Midst of Uncertainty,” unpublished manuscript, 35.

⁸¹ Hartman, “Purim,” 49.

Given such an ongoing experience of vulnerability, the joy of Purim cannot be carefree. It does not celebrate the permanent end of Haman but is rather a counter-factual (“as if,” “despite”) enactment of danger removed.

Hartman conveys a sense of urgency that the festivity of Esther should not be accounted for without reference to such experiences of danger and pain. Rather than posing the question literarily, with regard to what genre might accommodate both humor and horror, Hartman locates the tension existentially. The paradox is not so much the coexistence of humor and extreme violence in one text, but about the persistence of joy and faith in a community dogged by experiences of the radical absurdity of evil. As Bussie does with laughter, Hartman locates the phenomenon of Esther’s humor firmly within an experience of existential absurdity and pain. It seems significant, though, that Hartman does not articulate the central puzzle so much in terms of humor as he does of joy. His title indicates his focus: “Purim: Joy in the Midst of Uncertainty.” In contrast to the way the puzzle is typically articulated in modern Esther scholarship, the challenge for a reader like Hartman is not so much to account for frivolity in the book of Esther in light of the danger and violence also contained therein. Rather, it is to account for the joy in that book—and in the lives of generations of Jews—in light of the grave violence and danger of the real world. In shifting his focal category from humor to joy, Hartman echoes the ways in which the rabbis articulated the challenge of Esther, as we will see in later chapters.

Significantly, Hartman views humor as a tool for the survival of a paradoxical reality in which the narrative of faith is contradicted by lived experience. Esther’s

holiday, Purim, “teaches how to live with the dream of a redeemed world while knowing full well that you live in an unredeemed world.”⁸² The reading of Esther and the celebration of Purim accomplish this by practicing humor and joy. As Hartman explains:

Purim uses ecstasy as a tool to strengthen the faculties of humor and imagination. Humor can distance reality and thus enable a person to persevere despite the presence of evil. Imagination can expand one’s perception of the range of the possible. Through humor one can learn to live with Haman.⁸³

Humor as a tool of perception will be an important point of exploration in later chapters—not only the perception of what is possible, but also the more accurate perception of what *is*.

1.7 From Carnival to Play

Bakhtin’s work on carnival has made a significant impact on Esther scholarship in recent decades. It also provides ways to articulate the connections between the hidden transcript and play, which will be the focus of the next chapter and a key lens of analysis for this project. In the introduction to *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin sets out a compelling description of carnival, its symbolic world, its literature, and its social function. Importantly, he describes carnival not merely in terms of its medieval instantiation but as an idiom of folk culture reaching back in history at least as far as the Roman Saturnalia. According to Bakhtin, cultures had been conversant in the carnivalesque across the centuries but had in the modern age lost fluency in this idiom, a loss which led to misapprehension of carnivalesque literature. (Following Bakhtin, I

⁸² Hartman, “Purim,” 48.

⁸³ Hartman, “Purim,” 48.

understand this dynamic to be at work in the modern reception of Esther, as unfamiliarity with the symbolic world and social functions of the literary carnivalesque seems to have led Christians into a widespread misapprehension of and hence misplaced hostility toward the book.)

For Bakhtin, carnival and play are closely connected: carnival's images manifest a "strong element of play," so much so that he can describe carnival as "life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play."⁸⁴ In fact, many of carnival's features, as described by Bakhtin, closely parallel the features of play as described by sociologists, philosophers, and theologians. Thus, while carnival is by no means equivalent with the concept of play, it does fall within the broader bounds of a playful mode of apprehension. Bakhtin has provided a fruitful articulation of the issues at stake and of the serious-playful functions of carnival.

One of the most important aspects of Bakhtin's exposition for this project is the connection he draws between carnival and the possibility of perceiving a new world. (On this point Bakhtin's work is especially consonant with Hartman.) In carving out festival time and space, carnival offered the opportunity not only to glimpse the possibility of another world but to inhabit it and experience it for a while. In Bakhtin's words, the rituals of carnival "built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year."⁸⁵ Spending time in this second world "offered a completely different . .

⁸⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 7.

⁸⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 6. On the relationship between carnival and the Christian liturgical calendar, specifically before Lent, at Easter, and most prominently of all around

. aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations.”⁸⁶ Importantly, this world was participatory. As Bakhtin explains,

carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. ... [contra theatre, which needs footlights] ... Carnival is not a spectacle to be seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it.⁸⁷

That there is no other life outside of carnival while it lasts connects strongly with the phenomenon of play, particularly how a child will become completely immersed in it as if there is no other reality outside. And what was the carnival world like?

First, it was a time of unusual possibility with respect to familiar contact and communication. As Bakhtin explains, “carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” and thus “created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life.”⁸⁸ Bringing things that

Christmas, see Charles L. Campbell and Johan H. Cilliers, *Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2012), 77-79. They note, “While Christian carnivals today have been relegated to a few days before Lent, they grew out of the wild festivities of the Christmas season,” in response to the mystery and incongruity of the incarnation, *ibid.*, 77. See also their comments on Easter laughter: “[I]n some traditions amusing stories and jokes have been told from the pulpit during the Easter season (the so-called *risus paschalis*). The mocking of Christ on the cross leads to the mocking of death and the devil during Easter. Just as carnival laughter precedes the season of Lent, so laughter returns during Easter, as resurrection life is itself celebrated in a carnival mode,” *ibid.*, 150.

⁸⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 6.

⁸⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 7.

⁸⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 10

are usually far off and secluded into the zone of familiar contact allows them to be examined, probed, and even critiqued. Proximity enables new perception.⁸⁹ Unusual proximity is important in Esther, as will be discussed in Chapter 6; Esther brings the Persian court up close, especially for the reader, who is allowed to see into the harem, the king's sleep chamber, an exclusive feast, Haman's home, and even his heart—all unusual moves in biblical narrative.

Second, the angle of perception was joyful. Yes, carnival was marked by forms of violence and by a certain delight in ritual decrownings and bringing low the lofty, but its mode was joyful. During carnival, people “for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.”⁹⁰ It was the world as one might wish it would be, i.e., the world as it most decidedly was *not* for most of the year. Thus, its joy contained an edge. Carnival took delight in the conviction that things will not always be as they are, that those with the crown will not always wear it, that life gives way to death (and vice versa).⁹¹ It is the kind of joy one might note in Hannah's song or in the Magnificat.⁹² In Bakhtin's words,

All symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with . . . the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the ‘inside out’ (*à l'envers*), of the ‘turnabout,’ of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and

⁸⁹ In Chapter 7 I will write of Esther as carving out a zone of more familiar contact with God, where some of the barriers of rank are relativized, making more familiar contact and even critique possible.

⁹⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 9.

⁹¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 11.

⁹² 1 Sam 2:1-10; Luke 1:46-55.

travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a 'world inside out.'⁹³

Third, it was a world in which laughter reigned; the carnival spirit "made a man renounce his official state as monk, cleric, scholar, and perceive the world in its laughing aspect."⁹⁴ Laughter is for Bakhtin a complex and fruitful phenomenon, as opposed to the reduced modern-day definitions of laughter which, Bakhtin complains, "explain[] it either as purely negative satire . . . , or else as gay, fanciful, recreational drollery deprived of philosophic content."⁹⁵ To the contrary, festive laughter is ambivalent, capable of being "gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding."⁹⁶ Further, the laugher is not outside the reach of carnivalesque laughter; it "is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants."⁹⁷ As opposed to the satirist, "whose laughter . . . places himself above the object of his mockery" and in opposition to it," the sword of laughter Bakhtin has in mind can cut inward as well.⁹⁸ Such laughter is not an exclusively destructive force; rather it can allow for critique and even bring growth in participants. Bakhtin shows how festive, playful laughter is not to be easily dismissed. It is neither

⁹³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 11.

⁹⁴ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 13.

⁹⁵ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 12.

⁹⁶ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 11-12.

⁹⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 11.

⁹⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 12.

mere frivolity nor exclusively serious, destructive, deriding satire. Laughter can both deride and create.

With Craig and LaCocque, I find that Esther prominently evidences many features of carnival, and that Bakhtin's description of the carnivalesque assists in unearthing the book's many treasures. However, although Craig and LaCocque look through the lens of the carnivalesque at the book of Esther, neither uses this lens to study the book's written reception.⁹⁹ Yet if the book contains, evokes, and reflects aspects of carnival, surely this should impact the book's appropriation. Carnival demands participation, immersion in the experience, and experimentation; it demands, in a word, play. In this work, I thus explore the implications of the carnivalesque not only for the rational understanding of critically distanced readers but for the fitting imbibement of this particular book by communities of faith. If Esther is a feast-book, its appropriation may be feast-like; if Esther is carnivalesque, and carnival is the real world "shaped according to its play element," perhaps the best readings of Esther will be shaped by play. The next chapter takes up a theoretical and theological exploration of play as it pertains to Esther reception.

⁹⁹ Craig has a short chapter on Purim.

Chapter 2: Play

As discussed in the previous chapter, Mikhail Bakhtin's account of carnival furnishes compelling lenses for the study of Esther. Building upon this foundation, the present chapter uses the language of play to offer a wider frame of analysis that includes but extends beyond the carnivalesque. Play is not only a useful heuristic category for the study of Esther; it also provides clues as to fitting modes of appropriation for this book. Because Esther is fundamentally playful in its communication of meaning, the best acts of reception will be informed by the book's invitation to play.

2.1 The Alternative Worlds of Play

For theologian Hugo Rahner, play is a "faculty," and he writes of it as a treasure, "forgotten riches" that are a grievous loss to modern humankind.¹ His lament sounds remarkably akin to that of Bakhtin over modern society's loss of fluency in the idiom of carnival. The priceless faculty of play is notoriously difficult to define, and Rahner echoes the voices of many others when he calls play "a phenomenon . . . almost incapable of description in so many words."²

Despite this difficulty, there are points of commonality among definitions of play. Most accounts, for example, note that play has something to do with freedom and should be described over against the 'real' world or in contrast to productivity required of workers. Yet even in such broad definitions, theorists quickly come up against paradox:

¹ Hugo Rahner, *Man at Play* (Providence: Cluny Media, 2019), 6.

² Rahner, *Man at Play*, 7. In fact, the difficulty of defining play is one of the reasons Bakhtin's vivid and descriptive account of carnival is an unusually rich asset, furnishing as it does language and imagery for the discussion of play.

the free phenomenon of play imposes its own rules, and the supposedly unproductive mode of operation produces remarkable, if intangible, goods. In the face of such complexity, this study will take as an initial focal concept the idea of *play as a bounded time and space in which one inhabits a second or alternate world*. Four features of play contribute to the creation and possibilities of this alternate world: separateness, freedom from or suspension of ordinary life, the adoption of new rules or conventions, and immersive participation. Each of these features are examined in turn, with brief connections drawn to the scroll of Esther along the way.

2.1.1 Separateness

In his foundational study of play, French sociologist and philosopher Roger Caillois turns to separateness as one of play's defining features. He explains, "play is essentially a separate occupation, carefully isolated from the rest of life" and "circumscribed within limits of space and time."³ In terms of special demarcation, "There is place for play: as needs dictate, the space for hopscotch, the board for checkers or chess, the stadium, the racetrack, the list, the ring, the stage, the arena, etc."⁴ In the case of the play by Jews in response to Esther MT, the place of play has often been anywhere there is a gathering of people who agree and consent to enter into Purim festivity. In situations of dominated or minority status, such separate space may be characterized as

³ Roger Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1961), 6, 9-10. The six primary features of play for Caillois are that it is (1) free, (2) separate, (3) uncertain (i.e. there is "some latitude for innovations"), (4) unproductive, (5) governed by rules and "conventions that suspend ordinary laws," and (6) make-believe.

⁴ Ibid.

the “offstage” space that allows the hidden transcript to flourish, safe from dominant eyes.⁵ The circumscription of space for play contributes to the safety of play by reducing the risk of discovery and retribution, thereby allowing free, uninhibited expression to flourish.

Just as there is a space for play, there is also a circumscribed time for play. Storytime is one such separate time. The time taken to dedicate one’s attention to reading or listening to an absorbing narrative such as Esther is one way playful time is set aside; the time has a clear beginning (“It was in the days of king Ahasuerus . . .” Esther 1:1) and the ‘spell’ of the story is similarly broken when the story ends and hearers turn their attention back to regular life. Festival time is another example of such careful circumscription of time, and Esther evidences a distinct interest in providing answers to those seeking to know the correct time for festival observation and the reasons for and permissibility of regional variation on this front. No less than eleven of thirty-one verses in Esther 9 refer to specific dates or days (9:1, 15, 17-19, 21-22, 27-28, 31), and there is a striking emphasis on observation of “these two days” (v. 27), “these days,” “these days of Purim” (v. 28), and “these days of Purim at their appointed times” (v. 31). In modern practice, Purim continues to occur on specific days each year, and its beginning may be further delineated and emphasized by a prior day of fasting, the fast of Esther, marking a time when the festival has clearly not yet begun.

2.1.2 Suspension of the Usual Rules

⁵ On the hidden transcript as “offstage” space, see James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, (New Haven: Yale University, 1990), 4.

Inside play's circumscribed arena of space and time the rules of the world-as-usual are suspended. Per Caillois, the player enters the play zone "accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life."⁶ In carnival, this second reality involved a temporary liberation from the usual rules.⁷ Significantly, carnival's liberation was "for a time" only; rules were suspended, not permanently abolished.⁸ In fact, play seems to rely on the continued existence of the usual rules against which to exercise unusual liberty, else this aspect of play would lose its satisfaction. Yet however temporary the play, Bakhtin explains that the festivals of the medieval ages "were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance" characterized by "suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions."⁹

Suspension of the usual rules affords players a certain degree of freedom to experiment and express without facing the usual, 'real world,' consequences. During carnival, a commoner may dress like a king or mock the clergy; during play, a child may play the adult, fly a spaceship, or command an entire army. Such freedom means the scope of what is possible is wider than in ordinary life. Play grants temporary permission

⁶ Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 10.

⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 10.

⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 9.

⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 9, 10.

“to be someone else.”¹⁰ Using roleplay to upend or reverse usual power structures may be especially attractive to participants on the underside of domination, for it

permits the lower classes to play the part of social elites and creates space for social elites to be viewed as comic or farcical figures. Put another way, play is the context in which the first becomes last and the last becomes first.¹¹

Experimentation through roleplay is rife with possibility. The experience may allow the participant to discover what it feels like to inhabit the world in a different way; it may allow them to simply enjoy a more powerful position than they usually find themselves in. Alternately, it may be a vehicle for the expression of frustrations toward the character played, perhaps by acting out what a pompous, ridiculous, foolish, or mean-spirited person that character is, or by playfully subjecting the character to the consequences the player wishes that person would suffer in real life. All this is possible because the usual rules—and consequences—are suspended.

In a sense, the time spent reading Esther has often allowed an oppressed minority to play, to temporarily inhabit the roles of those who successfully sway and command the power of an entire empire.¹² On the holiday of Purim, participants can dress up as a bumbling king, a heroic queen, or even a scheming vizier, and some will act out these roles in Purim spiels. Called Purim spiels, these plays retell the Esther story, usually with a healthy dose of humor, and they pepper Esther’s world with references to contemporary news and culture. For example, in 2019, I attended a rousing production of *Hamilstein*, a

¹⁰ James H. Evans Jr., *Playing: Christian Explorations of Daily Living* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 10.

¹¹ Evans, *Playing*, 10.

mashup of Esther characters and plot with the popular musical *Hamilton*. In Purim spiels, contemporary villains may find themselves with Haman the butt of the joke.

Such responses to Esther are possible because what happens in the zone of play does not necessarily happen in the real world. As Caillois defines it, play is “unproductive,” meaning “ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game.”¹³ “Unproductive” may seem a negative assessment of play; as we have seen, studies of phenomena such as the carnival and hidden transcripts have attracted critique for confusing so-called real resistance with mere frivolity or a release valve that supports the status quo. However, it is precisely play’s unproductive nature that supports its freedom, allowing unusual possibilities for discovery and expression without the usual fears of danger or retribution, and for experimentation with different roles. A child may practice for grownup life, playing at cooking or firefighting without any real danger of getting burnt (usually). An oppressed minority may stage a mock execution of an oppressor without ending up at a *real* execution for treason.

2.1.3 Adoption of Alternate Rules

Paradoxically, the suspension of the usual rules does not mean an absence of constraint. Play operates under rules; they are just *different* rules. As Caillois explains, players operate “under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts.”¹⁴ Since most definitions of play begin with the idea that it must be somehow free, it is perhaps paradoxical that play also tends

¹³ Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 9-10.

¹⁴ Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 10.

to be governed by rules. Yet rules or conventions may be in fact the very things that allow play to function at all. This is particularly the case with games, which cannot function unless participants agree to abide by certain rules: to treat the doll as a real baby for the purposes of play; to keep the soccer ball within the field of play; to agree that bishops can *only* move on the diagonal on the chessboard. Similarly, to participate well in Esther's story world requires recognition that certain usual rules are suspended and adoption of the story's own particular logic and priorities. These are priorities it shares with carnival culture: viewing the serious in its "droll aspect," hyperbole, and an emphasis on wine and banqueting.¹⁵ To read it as if normal rules apply and judge it according to outside standards would be to refuse its invitation to play.

The text of Esther epitomizes this paradoxical relationship between permissiveness and constraint, between license and a rigorous application of the rules of the story world. Permissiveness permeates the Esther story, particularly with respect to the inhabitation of unusual roles. In the opening scenes, in fact, a feast is thrown for "all the people found in the fortress of Susa, from the greatest to the least" (לכל־העם הנמצאים) (בשושן הבירה למגדול ועדיקטן 1:5). All are invited into the heart of the royal compound—the men into the court of the king's garden and the women into "the royal house, which belonged to King Ahasuerus" (בית המלכות אשר למלך אחשוורוש) (v. 9). There they can feast their eyes on royal luxury the likes of which they would usually not have had the chance to see. They drink like kings, tasting royal wine in vessels of gold and silver (v. 7), and they have access to as much of it as they please. This is not to say there are no rules;

¹⁵ Aspects of the idiom of carnival, per Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 11, 278-303.

rather, there are unusual rules. For example, “the drinking was according to the rule ‘no restraints’” (והשתיה כדת אין אנס) and the king has specifically ordained that “each man should do as he pleased” (לעשות כרצון איש-ואיש) (1:8). The book that begins with unusual permission for participants to do as they please ends that way as well, except this time, it is the Jews who “did as they pleased,” and this time, the object of their liberty is not wine but their “haters” (ויעשו בשנאיהם כרצונם) (9:5).

Rules and laws function in striking interplay with the tale’s license (and licentiousness). The freedom to “do as one pleases” is paradoxically enacted by law. Laws figure prominently in the narrative; they are discussed in lengthy speeches, promulgated in writing, sealed, copied, translated, and delivered at high speed to the furthest reaches of the empire. They are carefully followed (cf. the episode in 3:2-4) and feared by high and low alike (cf. Esther’s hesitation in 4:11 in light of the fact that all, even the queen, face “one law” if they approach the king uninvited, which is death). Moreover, these laws constrain even the king, which is why he seeks to know what, according to the law, should be done with Vashti (1:15) and why he seems unable to revoke the decree of death and instead counsels the writing of a new law (8:8).¹⁶ Strikingly, the rules of the real world seem to be turned on their heads in the story world. Much has been made of Esther’s historical ‘errors’—for example, the fact that, to the best of our knowledge, Persian royals were only allowed to marry from seven royal families, and so the idea that a Jewish girl like Esther could become queen is historically

¹⁶ On Ahasuerus as unable to revoke a law, see Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 95.

implausible.¹⁷ However, this may be exactly the point: in the world of Esther, the usual rules do not apply. Even a foreign orphan can become queen. And new rules do apply—for example, it helps the plot along that laws are irrevocable in Ahasuerus’s Persia, but there is no historical evidence that this would ever have been practiced in a real empire. These things are possible because it is a world of play. But if we hope to play along, readers must adopt and adapt to Esther’s own rules and logic rather than imposing their own.

2.1.4 Immersive Participation

In play, the usual rules are suspended, and new patterns of behavior are authorized and even required. During carnival, as Bakhtin explains, new ways of relating “were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced.”¹⁸ For Bakhtin, the carnival offers the opportunity not only to glimpse the possibility of another world, but ways to deeply, albeit temporarily, experience it. This is true of play more broadly, as well; playful ways of knowing engage embodied participation. As Bakhtin emphasizes, there are no “footlights” in carnival, “in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectator.” Rather than watching carnival as if it were a spectacle, the people “live in it, and everyone participates.”¹⁹

¹⁷ On this and other historical improbabilities, see Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 131-34.

¹⁸ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 10.

¹⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 7.

Carnival participation was physical and embodied, connected with eating and drinking, costuming, the sounds and sights of crowded, festive gatherings, and even hearty laughter. Similarly, play is often an intensely physical phenomenon. As play therapist Dennis McCarthy attests, “When the child squats by the sandbox and begins to manipulate the sand, especially when she is truly engaged, she often begins to breathe deeper, drool, pass gas, flush, and sometimes even break out in sweat.”²⁰ For McCarthy, these bodily indicators signal deep somatic engagement with the imaginary world of play. This is significant, as McCarthy works with children who have experienced trauma. As leading trauma psychologist Bessel van der Kolk emphasizes in *The Body Keeps the Score*, trauma’s cognitive effects cannot be isolated from its physical, embodied impacts. For decades, trauma theory typically had been describing and treating trauma as a breakdown in narrative. The assumption was that events could not be accommodated within existing meaning structures, resulting in a painful gap in meaning between belief and reality which produced a kind of cognitive dissonance.²¹ Now, however, there is wider acceptance of the fact that what happens in the sphere of meaning may not be isolable from what happens in the body. The same is true of play. Play is often quite obviously physical; even when it is not, it is worth considering how playfulness is

²⁰ Dennis McCarthy, “Sandplay Therapy and the Body in Trauma Recovery,” in *Expressive and Creative Arts Methods for Trauma Survivors*, ed. Lois Carey (Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley, 2006), 168. See also 165.

²¹ Crystal Park, “Making Sense of the Meaning Literature: An Integrative Review of Meaning Making and Its Effects on Adjustment to Stressful Life Events,” *Psychological Bulletin* 136, no. 2 (2010): 257-301.

operating on the whole human. For when play is immersive and the body gets involved . . . as Dennis McCarthy puts it, “there is more potential for deep change.”²²

The Jewish canonical placement of Esther among the Megillot (the five festival scrolls) foregrounds the possibility and suitability of a festive, celebrative, and embodied reception of the book. Moreover, the primary Jewish site of Esther reception—the festival of Purim—is obviously an immersive, embodied phenomenon. While Christian interpretation throughout the ages has scoured the contours of the story line for moral guidance, evaluating the characters’ actions for how they might inform our own in the present day, the scroll itself is not particularly prescriptive in terms of political or royal court ethics. Instead, the only thing it insists on—and it does so repeatedly, in detail—is the perpetual and community-wide practice of a time for feasting and rejoicing. The invitation is to remember this story and spend time with it and, moreover, to experience its joy: “they made it a day of feasting and joy [שמחה]” (9:17 and 18); a day of “joy and feasting and a good day [i.e., a holiday]” (9:19). The adoption of this practice is taken up by the Jews throughout the land as a custom (9:17,18, cf. 23). It is further enjoined on them by no less an authority than Mordecai (v. 21), and finally by Queen Esther herself (v. 29). The practice is confirmed in writing, apparently in triplicate—first by Mordecai’s letter, then by Esther’s, and then by the fact of Esther’s command seems to have been confirmed in another written context (v. 32).²³ In a sense, the practice became scripture,

²² McCarthy, “Sandplay Therapy,” 168.

²³ Perhaps in the “annals of the kings of Media and Persia” referenced in 10:2

“as it was written” (v. 27). The obligation of this practice is emphatically universal and perpetual:

the Jews established and accepted for themselves, their descendants, and all who would join themselves to them [i.e., converts], as an obligation not to be transgressed, to perform these two days in accordance with their writing [written instruction] and at their appointed time every year. These days are to be remembered and performed in every generation, clan, province, and city. These days of Purim must never be transgressed among the Jews, nor their memory come to an end among their descendants (9:27-28).

The book of Esther institutes joy. It carves out space for enjoyment, for the observance and enactment of calendrical joy. In doing so, it draws an explicit analogy between its inauguration of a time of feasting and rejoicing and the tradition’s prior inauguration of practices of fasting and lamentation. “just as they had established for themselves and their descendants words pertaining to fasts and cries for help” (*וכאשר קימו*) (*ועל-נפשם ועל-זרעם דברי הצמות וזעקתם* , 9:31).²⁴ Just as the tradition has carved out times for the experience of sorrow and has provided literarily for the expression of woe, so the Megillah designates a recurring period of time and furnishes a literature for a rather different kind of experience and expression, one that has often looked a great deal like play. Christians, who have no parallel festive Esther practice, can benefit from reading with Jews, who have more experience receiving Esther in modes that accord with the book’s playfulness.

²⁴ The precise reference is unclear, but perhaps the fasts in mind are those of the fourth, fifth, seventh, and tenth months referenced in Zech 8:19. On this connection, see Jon D. Levenson, *Esther* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 131.

2.2 Serious Play

As should be clear by now, that play is “not real” does not mean it is not serious. For example, a children’s mimetic play may be nonproductive in the sense discussed above, and yet it is “preparation for the serious business of an adult responsible existence.”²⁵ While play may not produce tangible, economic goods or obvious change in the world order, it can be productive of intense learning, so much so that the line between work and play can be blurry. As Walter Ong explains in his preface to Rahner,

is this *Spass* or *Ernst*, ‘fun’ or ‘for real’? There is of course no way of saying, for it is both. And this is the situation, where play and work coincide, in which learning (and life itself) is maximal. Educators have known this and have tried to keep alive this initial situation or to recover it in the classroom, making learning ‘fun.’ The Latin term *ludus* encapsulate the initial infantile work-play situation: it means both play and school.²⁶

Play, while “unproductive,” performs serious work in allowing new perception, practice, and learning. In fact, for Caillois, play is characteristically “uncertain,” in that the outcome is not predetermined; in play there is “some latitude for innovations.”²⁷ In other words, it is a space for imagination, experimentation, and new perception.

2.2.1 Play and Perception

Play has a serious—even if at times lighthearted—relationship with truth. It has deep connection to the real world in that it often imitates the real world, and so it may

²⁵ Evans, *Playing*, 15.

²⁶ Walter Ong, “Preface,” in Rahner, *Man at Play*, ii.

²⁷ Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 9-10.

provide opportunities for shifted perceptions that might clarify the way things are.²⁸ As Bakhtin writes, the carnival spirit “made a man renounce his official state as monk, cleric, scholar, and perceive the world in its laughing aspect.”²⁹ This “laughing aspect” may have been difficult to see for these individuals while wearing their official robes, but it was every bit as true as its serious aspect. Things may be seen in the playful mode that would be more difficult to see otherwise; as Caillois puts it, “play exposes, publishes, and somehow *expend*s” the secret and mysterious.³⁰ It is a way of knowing, which is perhaps why Walter Ong calls it a zone of “maximal” learning.³¹

Specifically, play may facilitate perception of truth.³² It is somewhat counterintuitive that make-believe could work this way, but as Rahner explains “the spirit of fun, of irony, and of humor often digs deeper and seems to get more easily—because more playfully—down to the truth.”³³ This may be because it lowers players’ guards enough to allow a new perception about themselves to arise before they are prepared for it. If play may allow an uncomfortable truth to sidle up to someone in the wrong, it may

²⁸ Carol Fleisher Feldman, working particularly on mimetic play, writes of “The artful imitation of life found in narrative and play” which “always takes place on a plane somehow distinct from that of the real world that it represents.” “Mimesis: Where play and narrative meet,” *Cognitive Development* 20 (2005): 505.

²⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 13.

³⁰ Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 4.

³¹ Ong, “Preface,” in Rahner, *Man at Play*, ii.

³² Evans, *Playing*, 2: “play is an avenue to the truth.”

³³ Rahner, *Man at Play*, 39.

also allow a wronged party to risk expressing an uncomfortable truth. The playful mode allows for a kind of plausible deniability in introducing uncomfortable truths; play promotes daring as it allows the protection of retreat if things get too dangerous. One can always say, “I was only kidding!” or “It was just a game!” A classic example of this delicate dance of expression and perception is in Hamlet’s play-within-a-play. The character Hamlet has “heard / That guilty creatures sitting at a play / Have by the very cunning of the scene / Been struck so to the soul, that presently / They have proclaim’d their malefactions.”³⁴ And so he forms a plan, hoping the real-world king who has done real-world wrong may be able to see and recognize this by watching a play that imitates what he has done.³⁵ In Hamlet’s words, “the play’s the thing // Wherein I’ll catch the conscious of the king.” The players hope to engage the king in the play world in such a way that new perception (and action) is possible with respect to the real world.³⁶ Later chapters in this project explore the ways in which the slipperiness of character identification in the book of Esther leaves open the possibility that those who read from positions of relative power may, in fact, discover themselves unwittingly cast in the role of Haman.

³⁴ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 2, scene 2, lines 599-603.

³⁵ Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, act 2, scene 2, lines 615-616.

³⁶ Play as a phenomenon is not identical with a play in the theatrical sense. However, plays (theatric spectacles) are broadly encompassed within the wider category of play, and they rely on the faculty of play—a playful mode of engagement/perception—in the actors and audience both.

As much as play imitates and potentially exposes real life, that same real life may also come to be informed by or even resemble play. In providing space for imagination and experimentation, play may prepare the way for change in the real world. C.H. Feldman writes that the world of play “can be seen as the world of the possible.”³⁷ In this “world of the possible,” creativity and imagination play a key function. That is perhaps why, for Caillois, play is characteristically “uncertain” in outcome; in play, there is “some latitude for innovations.”³⁸ One might imagine another way of being, particularly in cases of counterfactual play, where participants imagine things as they are turned upside down, much as occurs in the world reversal motif of the hidden transcript. Play may allow participants to catch glimpses of things not only as they are but as they might be.

2.2.2 *Play as Expression*

Much as play may be a zone of discovery, it is also a zone of expression of very real joys and frustrations. In cases where conflicting emotions need to be addressed, theologian James H. Evans Jr. notes that play can provide the “safe space” needed to work these out.³⁹ Examples from play therapy are instructive on this point. For children who have experienced trauma, play can provide the safe space needed to reencounter

³⁷ Feldman writes, “Mimesis ... is a mechanism for moving from the actual to the possible, through an artful representation of life. And just to anticipate a bit, after art imitates life, the life so represented undergoes changes in the way it is patterned too: life comes to imitate art,” “Mimesis,” 505.

³⁸ Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 9-10.

³⁹ Evans, *Playing*, 9. Specifically, this is “the safe space of the imagination.”

what has happened to them as they journey toward healing.⁴⁰ In a parallel way, communities experiencing painful domination may seek secluded times and spaces where they can play out in jokes and stories and angry speech what they wished they would be able to do in the real world. In other words, as James C. Scott describes, they create a hidden transcript. Importantly, while such hidden transcripts may occasionally break out onto the public stage, in general, like play, they do not much alter the lived situation, however much they may support survival of it. Nevertheless, these transcripts did burst onto the public stage in carnival time. As Bakhtin explains, carnival brought the high and mighty into the zone of contact. The free, familiar contact and the suspension of the usual order of things allowed in festival time made possible “a special type of communication impossible in everyday life.”⁴¹ We have already explored ways in which the Esther story provides unusually free and familiar contact between commoners and royals; later in this project, we will study rabbinic reception of Esther to see how this text has enabled free and familiar communication with another royal: the divine king.

2.3 Playing in the Dark

Play springs from and contributes to joy; it is in Caillois’s words “a free and voluntary activity, a source of joy and amusement.”⁴² Play tends to be pleasurable and fun. So the extent to which the discussion that unfolds in this dissertation emphasizes

⁴⁰ See, for example, Gary Landreth, “The Meaning of Play,” in *Play Therapy: The Art of Relationship* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 7-25.

⁴¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais*, 10.

⁴² Caillois, *Man, Play and Games*, 6.

deadly serious matters may come as a surprise. Two things must be kept in mind. First, the field of play is, so long as this world shall last, always one marked by pain and brokenness. Second, play can support survival. Not incidentally, these two things may also be said of the hidden transcript of the laughter of oppressed peoples uncovered by Bussie.

Although play takes place within times and spaces secluded or demarcated from the real world, the separation is never total. Since the backdrop against which much play occurs is one of suffering, play should be understood as informed by and even responding to that suffering. James H. Evans Jr., drawing on the work of Toni Morrison, calls this “playing in the dark.” He writes:

Among the strategies employed by enslaved Africans to open new and fresh space within the confines of confinement was storytelling, specifically the Brer Rabbit tales. Though the telling of these stories was initially thought to be a harmless diversion, they actually functioned as part of a broader cultural effort to mitigate the destructive, inhumane, and immoral effects of chattel slavery.⁴³

Storytelling is one example among various life-affirming play practices Evans notes; music is another.⁴⁴ In a multitude of ways, enslaved people expressed “a creative claim to freedom and joy in the midst of nearly impossible circumstances.”⁴⁵ Like all play, this required the carving out of protected times and spaces; for example, “the period from sundown to sunup. . . . the period in which enslaved Africans could find the freedom and

⁴³ Evans, *Playing*, 21.

⁴⁴ On the singing of spirituals as a practice affirming life in the face of death, see also Luke A. Powery, *Dem Dry Bones* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 31-17.

⁴⁵ Evans, *Playing*, 22

capacity to participate in the divine act of constituting themselves.”⁴⁶ As Evans explains, “They found in these stolen moments and hidden spaces the opportunity to engage in a kind of playful reconstruction of their world.”⁴⁷ What looked to outsiders (white masters) to be mere frivolity instead performed serious survival work. At play, enslaved people exercised a faculty that supported survival—or at least impeded the death-dealing impacts of slavery. Like the laughter of the oppressed in Bussie, what might have looked to an outsider as “fooling around” was actually a courageous, creative “act of self-preservation.”⁴⁸

Play is marked by joy and laughter and may often be lighthearted; this however does not mean it is frivolous. Instead, it may very well address matters of utmost seriousness and perform serious work in surviving them. Real hurts and traumas may be expressed and worked through in the space of play, providing not only relief but even the courage and imagination necessary to survive.

2.4 The Dangers of Esther-Play

Thus far, this project’s account of the ethical potential of play has been overwhelmingly positive. To some extent, this is because the project seeks to draw attention to an undervalued category of study and mode of reception. However, to say that play has underrecognized value is not to say it is without its pitfalls. Just as humor

⁴⁶ Evans, *Playing*, 23.

⁴⁷ Evans, *Playing*, 24.

⁴⁸ Evans, *Playing*, 25-26. Evans aptly notes, “a facile and radical distinction between creative play and fooling around is not always helpful in ferreting out the true meaning and function of play,” 26.

may encourage or deride, depending on context, so also play may destroy. Obvious examples include bullying among children or mocking play at the expense of the most vulnerable.⁴⁹ Play inspired by Esther has a similar potential to be destructive, particularly when undertaken by a more powerful group against a vulnerable minority in their midst.

On Purim day 1994, an Israeli doctor, Baruch Goldstein massacred twenty-nine Muslims as they prayed at the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron.⁵⁰ Elliott Horowitz traces the road that led to the massacre back through a series of increasingly provocative Purim day ‘festivities’ in Hebron, including a festive “reconquest” (i.e., destruction) of an Arab’s upholstery shop (1981), and a confrontational Purim parade through Arab Hebron in which Jews carried an Arab in effigy and “Jewish children carried toy rifles, which they pointed menacingly at their Palestinian counterparts” (1989).⁵¹ Festive play, even in such apparently innocent forms as costume play and play-acting, can generate real-world violence against vulnerable people. It may even be perpetrated by people who themselves belong to a group with a recent and acute history of suffering on the underside of domination. Membership in a group (Jews) that has formerly been marked out for destruction does not permanently inoculate that group against parallel acts of destruction against others. Christians who would seek to respond appropriately to Esther’s playful invitation need to remember that they belong to a group with a long history of Purim-

⁴⁹ I think, for example, of the way Roman soldiers played dress-up with their prisoner as a way to further humiliate him. Matt 27:27-30

⁵⁰ Elliott Horowitz, *Reckless Rites* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2006), 4.

⁵¹ Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 6-7.

season violence against Jews. As Horowitz details, the offense taken by dominant culture Christians at Jewish Purim festivities often prompted retaliation in the medieval era; in this sense, provocative Purim play could put the Jewish participants themselves in danger.⁵²

As the following conversation on the ethical potential of play unfolds, then, a caveat is needed. Play is not necessarily a safe phenomenon. Nor is play always a creative practice; it may produce extreme destruction and harm. Nevertheless, its ethical and theological potential, along with its particular suitability to the Esther text, makes play a compelling lens for Esther study and a fruitful mode of Esther reception. In Jewish communities, such playful reception has often taken the form of Purim festivities. Christian communities lack a comparable festive setting in which to receive Esther in a playful mode, and it is by no means the contention of this project that Christians should respond to Esther by appropriating Jewish Purim practices. Rather, the question of how Christian Esther reception might respond fittingly to the playfulness of this book will be a matter for careful discernment. One crucial consideration will be the social location of the readerly community; another will be the implication of that community in the kinds of threats to the survival of the Jewish community the book of Esther depicts. Despite such complexities, the playfulness of the Esther text calls into question the suitability of the overwhelmingly serious aspect from which Christian reception has regarded the book. Similarly, it undermines the suitability of a detached, disinterested reading position that would only evaluate, distance, or “other” (identify who or what is wrong or evil and push

⁵² See Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, chapter 9, “Purim, Carnival, and Violence,” 248-77.

them away). Rather, the invitation of Esther MT is to join its world and play for a while, all the while knowing it is not quite identical to the real world. The question of *how* to take up this invitation will not be a straightforward one for Christians, yet a good place to begin will be to attend carefully to the hidden transcript of written Jewish Esther reception; this is precisely the project of the following chapters.

2.5 Theological Perspectives on Play

That a biblical text—indeed, even a whole biblical book such as Esther—might be seen or treated as an object of play may seem odd or even disrespectful. However, hesitation on this front might result from misapprehensions regarding God’s own relationship with delight and play and God’s attitude toward *human* delight and play. Crucially, there are theological reasons to suspect God might be more playful than typically imagined and might welcome human play, not least with Scripture.

2.5.1 A Playful God

The idea that God might invite play in or with biblical text is founded on certain assumptions about the person and character of a deity who would be open to this kind of engagement. Theologian Hugh Rahner, in his work *Der Spielende Mensch* (the playing human), contends that God indeed welcomes human play.⁵³ For Rahner, our understanding of the human at play (*homo ludens*) is rooted in the deeper and prior reality of a God who plays:

Deus ludens, God the Creator who, one might say, as part of a gigantic game called the world of atoms and spirits into being; for not even the most inspired

⁵³ The work is published in English under the title *Man at Play*.

gesture of man at play can be other than a clumsy, childish imitation of the Logos, who, since the beginning of time, has made play before the face of the Father.⁵⁴

Human play takes its cue from the playful God in whose image we are created. We create because God creates; we play because God plays.

That God is playful is for Rahner amply evidenced in God's creative work, as the quote above makes clear. Yet for Rahner, the supreme example of God at play is the incarnation: "for in this game of grace Christ has actually become the playmate of man."⁵⁵ Christ, who was not content to remain a spectator, but in becoming incarnate, entered the fray and "put his skin in the game," so to speak.⁵⁶

What makes both these acts of God—creation and incarnation—so particularly playful for Rahner is their freedom. He writes that these two acts are both "expressions of God's love" which, "though full of meaning and purpose, is a love that works in creative freedom wholly ungoverned by necessity or constraint."⁵⁷ Moreover, as Rahner makes clear, God's game is still very much afoot. God is still at play in the church "in which the Logos made man carries on his 'game of grace'" and where the human "answers the game of grace with his counterplay of liturgy and sacrament."⁵⁸ In the church humans are invited to play as a kind of rehearsal for the future life, much as children at play rehearse for adulthood. Rahner writes,

⁵⁴ Rahner, *Man at Play*, 10.

⁵⁵ Rahner, *Man at Play*, 62.

⁵⁶ See for example Rahner, *Man at Play*, 20, 23.

⁵⁷ Rahner *Man at Play*, 29.

⁵⁸ Rahner, *Man at Play*, 1.

this playing here on earth, whether we conceive of it as an activity or a state of mind, is but a feeble and tentative imitation of what is in store for us, and the Christian has never ceased to use the concept of play as a verbal figure that most aptly describes, as far as he is able to conceive it, the state of the blessed in the world to come.⁵⁹

In a striking depiction, Rahner imagines “the streets of the heavenly city will be full of playing children and the Ancient of Days, whose face is forever young, will never cease to say to men: ‘*Ite et ludite* [Go and play].’”⁶⁰

The human imitates God in play. The human responds to the divine invitation to become a playmate. And the human at play rehearses for a future life of joy and freedom. Thus Rahner shows that play is sanctioned both by God’s example and by God’s invitation.⁶¹ And if play is made permissible, it is made possible in light of God’s fidelity and promises. As almost every definition across the disciplines notes, play requires a certain degree of freedom. Theologically speaking, such freedom arises from a certain security in what a human knows of God: a human “who truly plays” is only able to do so insofar as he or she realizes “that existence is a joyful thing, because it is secure in God.”⁶²

As free and full of joy as it can be, the kind of play worthy of playmates of God is not a denial of the serious; indeed, it could never be so in a world so profoundly loved by

⁵⁹ Rahner, *Man at Play*, 75.

⁶⁰ Rahner, *Man at Play*, 80.

⁶¹ This apologetic is necessary as Rahner “seek[s] to salvage some of those treasures so sadly neglected by our modern theologians with all their professorial earnestness,” *Man at Play*, 62.

⁶² Rahner, *Man at Play*, 36.

God and so full of peril and tragedy.⁶³ In Rahner's words, "Life ... has this dual character. It is joyous because secure in God, it is tragic because our freedom continually imperils it, and so the man who truly plays must be both joyous and serious at the same time; we must find him both smiling and in tears."⁶⁴ Yet as seriously as those who love God must take the suffering of this world, a deep knowledge of God may also provide the critical distance necessary to take a more free—and therefore playful—posture with respect to the world's powers. Knowledge of God fuels more accurate perception of humanity; thus, as Rahner puts it, the one who knows God "sees through the tragically ridiculous masks of the game of life and has taken the measure of the cramping boundaries of our earthly existence."⁶⁵ Taking God seriously can help provide a check against overestimation of the seriousness of anything else, by comparison. So Rahner writes "anyone who is truly in earnest about God will not be able to treat man as though the whole meaning of all created things were comprised in him" and "will avoid applying to the consideration of even the most serious things a seriousness that wholly distorts them."⁶⁶

Extreme confidence in God plus a healthy dose of skepticism about the kingdoms of this world seems to be a promising recipe for play. Confidence in God provides enough freedom from fear to play. Skepticism of the world's powers provides the

⁶³ If play is suited to the human who knows and imitates God, so are tears.

⁶⁴ Rahner, *Man at Play*, 52-53.

⁶⁵ Rahner, *Man at Play*, 37.

⁶⁶ Rahner, *Man at Play*, 18, 42-43.

requisite critical capacity—or, put differently, the freedom from captivity of imagination. Yet this step back from the world’s thrall—which we might call the willingness to consider the world in its droll aspect—is never abandonment. Play that images God is grounded in love; it is an “eager lightness of touch” which contains seriousness and hope with regard to the objects and matters engaged. This is to be starkly contrasted with “mere frivolity,” which Rahner calls “always the sign of a secret despair.”⁶⁷ Rahner rather envisions a kind of detachment that is at the same time a deep involvement; he puts it most vividly in depicting one who “kicks the world away from him with the airy grace of a dancer, and yet, at the same time, presses it to his heart” for the sake of God the Creator.⁶⁸

A further word on play and seriousness is warranted, as this seems to be at the heart the skepticism people of faith may have regarding handling serious matters with a lighter touch.⁶⁹ Play may be viewed suspiciously as mere frivolity by the person of faith—although as we have discovered, this rests on a profound misunderstanding of play, for true play is not antithetical to seriousness. But Rahner writes what is echoed by countless other scholars of play: “there is no play that has not something profoundly

⁶⁷ Rahner, *Man at Play*, 35.

⁶⁸ Rahner, *Man at Play*, 10.

⁶⁹ On Christian skepticism of laughter and humor, see Jacqueline Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 17-21. On barriers to the perception of humor in biblical text in both Judaism and Christianity, see Yehuda T. Radday, “On Missing the Humour in the Bible,” in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990), especially 33-38.

serious at the bottom of it.”⁷⁰ Play and the serious are fitting companions. In fact, play may even be a helpful aide to the serious matter of truth: in Rahner’s view, “mere seriousness does not get down to the roots of things” whereas “the spirit of fun, of irony, and of humor often digs deeper and seems to get more easily—because more playfully—down to the truth.”⁷¹

Everything that follows in this project’s exploration of Esther’s invitation to play is rooted in the conviction, articulated so well by Rahner and developed above, that God invites and welcomes human play (Prov 8:30-31; Ps 104:26; 119:16, 47, 70; Zech 8:5). Play is not antithetical to the seriousness of the tragedies of this life nor to the deep care people of faith are to offer the world God so loves. As we will see in the coming chapters, the reception of Esther in communities of Jews across the ages shows that they saw this permission and invitation to play extending even to the realm of Scripture. They treated Esther simultaneously as high holy Scripture *and* a playfield in which humans may creatively frolic with enemies, monsters, and even God. In the chapters that follow, we will encounter Jewish communities who understood how to practice a kind of play suited to Esther. We turn first to rabbinic play with Esther in a world haunted by Haman.

⁷⁰ Rahner, *Man at Play*, 36.

⁷¹ Rahner, *Man at Play*, 39.

Chapter 3: Playing with Haman

Jewish communities throughout the ages have recognized in the Esther scroll an invitation to playful enjoyment of Haman's downfall. Purim practices such as Purim spiels, costuming, the blotting out of Haman's name with noisemakers, and the eating of cookies named after the villain (אוזני המן, "Haman's ears") all extend possibilities for play at Haman's expense.¹ Midrashic treatments of Esther show that they too recognized in Esther MT an invitation to play with this villain. The rabbis were careful readers of the biblical text, and their play responds to invitations they saw extended in Esther itself. They take full advantage of textual opportunities to mock Haman, playing in the playground Esther opens.

The present chapter studies this rich hidden transcript of midrashic play at Haman's expense. The exercise of attending to such play can yield insight into the canonical gift of laughter the scroll offers to those experiencing oppression. Importantly, the Haman-humor in these texts in no way diminishes the seriousness of the threat the character represents.² Rather, Esther MT and its interpreters invite laughter at Haman precisely because he and all he represents in the world are such real, existential dangers to the communities producing and receiving these texts. Hidden transcripts, as we have

¹ The cookies are also known as *Hamantaschen*, "Haman pockets."

² Contra Adele Berlin. Esther's humorousness leads her to believe Haman is "not darkly evil," and "the threat to the Jews is not real." *Esther* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), xx.

seen, are best understood as responses to experiences on the underside of domination.³

Moreover, since the richness of the hidden transcript often corresponds to the severity of domination, it is worth noting that the body of Haman-humor with which the midrashim extend Esther's work is particularly lavish.⁴

3.1 Introduction to the Texts

Esther MT produced an expansive body of midrashic receptions. The present chapter will focus on just three of the largest collections which will serve to illustrate the continuity of themes and modes of Haman-play across the corpus.

The first, Esther Rabbah (Esth. Rab.), is by far the largest of the Esther midrashim.⁵ It is composed in the same manner as the classic midrashim to the five books of Torah, which are also designated "Rabbah," or "great." After an extensive prefatory collection of proems, its 10 sections treat Esther MT in a verse-by-verse fashion. Esther 1–7 is treated in the most detail and the remainder of the book in only a cursory fashion.⁶ The composition history of Esth. Rab. is complex. Nevertheless, it can be safely said that

³ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 27.

⁴ Scott, *Domination*, 27: "If the domination is particularly severe, it is likely to produce a hidden transcript of corresponding richness."

⁵ For English translations of this rabbinic Hebrew and Aramaic work, the standard Simon edition of 1939 is used. Citations of the Hebrew text are taken from the modern critical edition of Joseph Tabory and Arnon Atzmon. English: *Midrash Rabbah: Esther*, trans. Maurice Simon (London: Soncino, 1939). Rabbinic Hebrew: Joseph Tabory and Arnon Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah: Critical Edition Based on Manuscripts* (Jerusalem: Schechter, 2014).

⁶ Perhaps this is because Haman is dispatched from the story world at 7:10.

the work is of Palestinian origin and that the bulk of its material is ancient. It is best read as emerging from third- to sixth-century Palestinian synagogues.⁷

The second midrashic work studied in this chapter is technically a targum. (A targum is an Aramaic translation intended to be read alongside the Hebrew biblical text in liturgical contexts.) Its provenance is Palestinian, and it could be dated as early as the fourth century and no later than the very beginning of the seventh century (the end of Christian Byzantine rule of Palestine).⁸ Its name, Targum Sheni (T. Sheni), which literally means “second targum,” responds to the fact that there are two targums to Esther in existence. The first, Targum Rishon (“first targum”) is a relatively close translation of Esther. In contrast, T. Sheni makes such extensive aggadic additions to the story that it reads more like a midrash than a translation. Moreover, it parallels the modes and themes of Esther play found in the other two works under discussion here and hence makes a useful addition to the conversation.⁹

⁷ Sections 1–5 are ancient, redacted no later than the sixth century CE. The dating of sections 6–10 is less clear, and much of the Haman material appears in this later part of the work. Nevertheless, even if these sections have a late date of final redaction, they situate themselves firmly within the ancient Roman world (referring, for example, to Roman festivals such as Calends and Saturnalia). On the composition and dating of Esth. Rab., see Myron B. Lerner, “The Works of Aggadic Midrash and the Esther Midrashim,” in *The Literature of the Jewish People in the Period of the Second Temple and the Talmud*, vol. 3, *The Literature of the Sages* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 133-229. Lerner suggests final redaction in the medieval period, possibly “as late as the twelfth-thirteenth centuries on European soil,” 187.

⁸ All citations of this text are from Bernard Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther: Translated, with Apparatus and Note*, *The Aramaic Bible*, vol. 18 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 23. Internal evidence suggests a context of hardship under Roman/Christian rule, 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*

The third composition for consideration appears in Tractate *Megillah* of the Babylonian Talmud (Meg. 10b-17a).¹⁰ Known as the Babylonian Esther Midrash, this work provides a midrashic treatment of Esther MT, the only such exposition of a full biblical book within the Talmud.¹¹ Despite its unusual literary context in a work associated with study houses rather than synagogues, the Babylonian Esther Midrash (Meg.) is in form and content a true midrash to Esther, and it participates in the same themes, tropes, and set pieces as T. Sheni and Esth. Rab.

The three primary interlocutors for this chapter are to some extent distinct types of literature with distinct literary contexts. However, all three are midrashic in character, and for ease of use I will refer to the voices they reflect as “the rabbis,” even if only Meg. and Esth. Rab. explicitly cite the opinions of various rabbis while the voices reflected in T. Sheni might more properly be called “targumists.” Moreover, T. Sheni and Esth. Rab. share an oral context, that of the synagogues of Palestine of the third to sixth centuries. They are best understood as having been used homiletically or to accompany the reading of the biblical text for the benefit of the gathered community.¹²

3.2 Haman in Esther MT: Sites of Midrashic Play

Haman’s presence in Esther MT is concentrated in four chapters (Esth. 3, 5-7). Haman appears on the scene in Esth 3:1 as a newly promoted, second-in-command to the

¹⁰ For translation and analysis, this chapter relies on Eliezer Segal’s three-volume critical commentary. Eliezer Segal, *The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary*, 3 vols. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994).

¹¹ Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 1:1.

¹² On the oral context of the texts under discussion, see Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 1:16-18.

king. He promptly finds himself in conflict with a Jew named Mordecai, and the rest of chapter 3 treats Haman's successful bid to the king for the destruction of the Jews (vv. 8-15). Haman reappears in 5:9-14, at which point the narrative notes his pleasure at being invited to Esther's feast and records a discussion in Haman's home in which his wife suggests he build a stake upon which to hang Mordecai. Chapter 6 follows Haman as he seeks an audience with the king in order to request Mordecai's death but is instead forced to honor Mordecai publicly. The chapter concludes with Haman rushing home in grief, only to be met by his wife's accurate but discouraging assessment, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish seed, you will not succeed against him. Surely you will fall completely before him!" (6:13). Chapter 7 tells the story of the second feast, during which Esther accuses Haman and the king condemns him to death. Haman's exits the story world of Esther at 7:10, impaled on his own stake.¹³

The most abundant midrashic play clusters around Haman's speech advocating annihilation of the Jews (Esth 3:8-9) and Haman's being forced to honor Mordecai (6:10-12). That these two contrasting incidents prompted such prolific and creative responses provides a window into the two primary modes of Haman-play on display in the aggadic

¹³ The basic meaning of the Hebrew word תלה is "to hang." Many of the sources under discussion in this project assume this indicates hanging upon gallows as a means of execution. However, wider biblical usage (Deut 21:22-23; Jos 8:29; 10:26; 2 Sam 4:12) and ancient Persian practices both point to the greater likelihood of תלה in Esther indicating the shaming display of bodies (which may or may not already be dead) upon a wooden pole. This is especially likely since Haman's ten sons were already dead when they were thus "hung" (Esth 9:13, 25). See Jon Levenson, *Esther* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 93; Carol Bechtel, *Esther* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 55; Michael Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001, 2nd ed.), 74-75. For a discussion of ancient Persian practices of impalement in Herodotus, see Berlin, *Esther*, 32.

material. In the first section of the chapter, I treat play that ridicules Haman; Esth. 6:10-12 provides the anchor for this discussion. The second section addresses a more complex form of play epitomized in expansions of Haman’s slanderous speech (Esth 3:8-9).

3.3 Playing with a Believable Villain

The bulk of this chapter will focus on play that makes Haman appear ludicrous. It is important to emphasize from the outset that such play is only comprehensible against a backdrop of oppression. The text in which the rabbis discern their opportunities for play with Haman certainly treats the situation of the Jews before Haman with due gravity. While Esther MT leaves the villain utterly diminished by the end, it also presents him as a serious threat. Haman may refrain from specifying his precise plans for the Jews in his speech to the king, saying only, “Let it be written that they be destroyed [אבד] . . .” (Esth 3:9).¹⁴ In writing, however, the plan is drawn in bone-chilling clarity: “to exterminate [שמד], kill [הרג], and destroy [אבד] all Jews, from young to old, including children and women, in a single day, on the 13th day of the 12th month (that is, the month of Adar), and to plunder their goods” (3:13). Two further verbs are added (שמד and הרג) beyond what Haman told the king, leaving no doubt as to intent. Who is meant by “all Jews” is specified, lest someone underestimate the scope of the plan; young and old, women and children, are all to be annihilated. Even the specific day is given. Moreover, no Jew in

¹⁴ All biblical translations author’s own, unless otherwise noted. Carol Bechtel suggests it is possible that the king may have misunderstood what Haman was saying, due to the similar sound of “destroy” [אבד] and “enslave” [עבד]. Bechtel draws on Sandra Beth Berg’s intriguing suggestion that “the words for ‘destroy’ . . . and for ‘enslave’ . . . are virtual homophones,” *Esther*, 42, citing Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure*, Society of Biblical Literature: Dissertation Series, no. 44 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), 101-2.

any corner of the Persian world will be safe; the law is distributed “in every province” and “announced to all peoples” (3:14).

The book further underscores the severity of the threat by recording the reactions of a variety of characters. It begins with the city: “The city of Susa was in confusion” (והעיר שושן נבוכה) (3:15). Since the verb בוך may evoke a disturbed condition or state of confused wandering, the vivid JPS “dumbfounded” or NIV “bewildered” may communicate the state of affairs even more effectively. But this is only the first in a series of reactions. Esther slows down the action considerably at this point and, it could be argued, spends most of chapter 4 pausing to allow time for the news to reach various parties and corners of the empire and to record the severity of their reactions. First, Mordecai hears the news and lets out a loud and bitter cry (ויזעק זעקה גדלה ומרה) (4:1). He goes into a full mourning ritual, publicly displaying his grief for his people by tearing his clothes, putting on sackcloth and ashes, and moving through the public spaces of the city in this state. Next, news spreads to the provinces, resulting in “great mourning [אבל] for the Jews and fasting and weeping and mourning rites, and many lay in sackcloth and ashes” (4:3). Finally, word reaches Esther, and the terror of the news seems to hit her as physically as labor pains (חיל), even though, as the rest of the chapter makes clear, she has not yet understood the full horror of the situation (4:4).¹⁵ The narrative device of having the servant Hathach go back and forth between the two protagonists greatly slows the action and allows readers to dwell in the moment as Esther gradually comes to grips

¹⁵ Hence she sends Hathach to learn more (4:5). The rabbis connect the physicality of Esther’s response to the uterine contractions of the onset of menstruation. See Esth. Rab. 7.18. ותתחלחל המלכה מעד, מהו “ותתחלחל”? מלמד שפרסה גדה. (Lines 335-336).

with the gravity of the situation and what she must do. The narrative creates space for the reader to feel Haman's threat as real and to linger in that feeling. In fact, the book shows that Haman is so dangerous that even when he himself is dispatched on the stake, his decree of destruction lives on. This is why Esther needs to remind the king, who thinks he has done everything necessary by having Haman killed, of the ongoing threat to her people (8:1-3). The function of any interpretive hilarity at Haman's expense must be understood against this backdrop of terror.¹⁶

The midrashim under consideration in this chapter recognize Esther MT's particular blending of the truly terrifying with the hilarious. The world within which they read is one in which their people have long managed the difficulties of life under a series of dominating world powers. The backdrop of oppression is discernible in all three works, but Esth. Rab. is the most explicit. It opens with an extended compilation of proems that all serve to introduce Esth 1:1, "Now it came to pass [וַיְהִי] in the days of Ahasuerus."¹⁷ Most of them do so within an interpretive tradition that reads וַיְהִי as a harbinger of woe. As Segal explains, "The exegesis builds upon the similarity between the Hebrew word for 'and it was' or 'and it came to pass'—'vayhi'—and a common expression of grief, 'vay' or 'way.'" Accordingly, the word is read as a combination of

¹⁶ Melissa A. Jackson notes that the text performs something socially by way of its literary form: "Esther is a story of survival, and the comedy of Esther aids that survival," *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 199. Yet she does not further explore this function.

¹⁷ Proems are sermon-like forms that occur before and serve to introduce the reading of a biblical text.

two words, ‘vay hi’: ‘It is ‘Woe!’”¹⁸ From beginning to end, the humor of Esth. Rab. operates within an overwhelming context of threat as various parties (nations, kings, even God) seek the people’s destruction.¹⁹ In fact, Esth. Rab. 7 provides a sobering parodic sketch of history as one long train of people who have “devised evil against Israel,” each learning from the mistakes of the previous ones and hence coming up with more elaborate and sinister plans to destroy them. For example, since Cain kills his brother while his father is still alive, Esau waits until his father is already dead; Pharaoh ‘improves’ on Esau’s plan by not waiting so long and killing children when they are “scarce out of their mothers’ womb”; Haman points out the flaw in Pharaoh’s plan—Pharaoh had let the daughters live—and so seeks to more thoroughly “annihilate, kill, destroy,” and so on.²⁰ These stories are told with tongue firmly in cheek even as they reflect a rabbinic experience of the world as one in which someone is always trying to destroy them. In sum, the midrashim present Haman as simultaneously a death-wielding power and a joke. As in Esther itself, the frightful and the funny are kept in tension throughout the midrashim; the rabbis take the threat of Haman seriously, even as they make the most of every opportunity to poke fun at him.

¹⁸ “This rule of exegesis has been transmitted to us from the Captivity, that wherever Scripture uses the expression [וַיְהִי] ... it presages trouble” (Esth. Rab. Proem 11). The Babylonian Esther-Midrash opens with this same rule (Meg. 10b). Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 1:31, see also 1:32-33.

¹⁹ At the end of one *mashal*, God says to Haman: “Stupid fool, I said that I would destroy them, and even I, in a way, was not able” (Esth. Rab. 7.10, page 85).

²⁰ Esth. Rab. 7.23, page 101.

There is a notable difference between these midrashic readings and those of most Christian interpreters who, as a rule, focus not on the threat to the Jews but rather on the ethics of the actions of Jews in the story. Interpreters of various eras respond less to Haman's request to kill the Jews (3:8-9) than to Mordecai's counter-decree in allowing Jews to kill those threatening them (8:11). They question whether Mordecai's actions were justified, or whether they live up to the standard of Christian love, and they consider whether or not Esther's vindictiveness may be characteristic of Jewish bloodthirstiness. One striking instance is Bernhard Anderson's well-known 1950 essay, "The Place of the Book of Esther in the Christian Bible," in which he calls Esther "an emphatically Jewish book." For Anderson, Esther strikes a "discordant note . . . in the ears of those accustomed to hearing the Christian gospel" due to its "fierce nationalism and an unblushing vindictiveness which stand in glaring contradiction to the Sermon on the Mount."²¹ Anderson, one of the most influential Christian OT scholars of the twentieth century, writes these words only a few years after the near-extirmination of European Jewry, carried out with the support of the German state church. And yet it seems the reality of the hamanic threat represented in these events has made no discernible impact on his ethical assessment of Esther. For Christian communities who would listen carefully to the interpretive play of Jewish communities with Haman, responsible

²¹ Bernhard Anderson "The Place of the Book of Esther in the Christian Bible," *Journal of Religion*, 30, no. 1 (1950): 32-43. More Christian reactions to Esther will be discussed in the final chapter. For the moment, the comments of English church historian Adeney P. Stanley in his 1877 *Lectures on the History of the Jewish Church* may be added. He "cannot imagine a scene more foreign to the patience and gentleness inculcated by our Lord" and turns with his audience "with loathing from this gigantic horror," 358.

reception of this existentially-won wisdom will also require careful discernment of relative social location. Specifically, as we will see in a later chapter, it will necessitate consideration of the comparability of readerly positions vis-à-vis the shifting social and existential locations both of the characters in the text and of the communities who have received it. It will also require careful consideration of the roles Christians have played throughout history in these communities' experiences of hamanic evil.

3.4 Diminishing Haman: Play at Haman's Expense

3.4.1 Playing with Haman at the Apex of His Power

Esther MT introduces the character Haman to the plot in the same breath as it tells its audience that the king has promoted him above all his princely peers.

אחר הדברים האלה גדל המלך את־המן בן־המדתה האגגי וינשאהו וישם את־כסאו מעל כל־השרים
אשר אתו

After these things, the king promoted Haman son of Hammedata, and he elevated him and set his throne above all the princes with him (Esth 3:1).

There are few hints in Esther MT chapter 3 that Haman is ludicrous. Instead, he looks powerful, vindictive, politically savvy, and dangerous. Nevertheless, even at this point in the plot, while he is still at the height of his power, the rabbis and targumists devise ways to make Haman appear ridiculous and his efforts ineffectual. One important way in which they best him is through the extensive employment of dramatic irony. At various points in the story they savor the things they know to which Haman remains clueless. Of course, the Esther scroll itself makes ample use of dramatic irony at Haman's expense, particularly in chapter 6; the rabbis simply anticipate this trajectory and lean into it with

relish. They use humor to emphasize the incongruity between the success that Haman is currently experiencing and the dramatic downfall he will soon undergo.

One *mashal* makes a barnyard comparison that pointedly likens Haman to a pig: “It was like the case of a man who had a sow, a she-ass, and a filly, and he let the sow eat as much as it wanted but strictly rationed the ass and the filly” (Esth. Rab. 7.1). When the filly complains, the ass explains: “The hour will come when you will see her downfall, for they are feeding her up not out of respect for her but to her own hurt.” Surely enough, when the time for a feast came, “they took the sow and stuck it.” In a particularly comic turn, the filly becomes afraid to eat, connecting the eating with the slaughter. Her mother disabuses her of this misunderstanding: “My daughter, it is not the eating which leads to slaughter but the idleness.” The implication is that Haman is a particularly useless kind of beast, good only when dead.²²

In another *mashal*, the rabbis compare Haman to a bird who builds his nest where sand meets sea. As the water promptly washes away his foolishly located nest, bird-Haman takes up an even more ridiculous course of action. Rather than moving his nest, it attempts to move the shoreline:

What did it then do? It took water from the sea in its mouth and poured it on the dry land, and it took dust from the dry land and cast it into the sea (Esth. Rab. 7.10).

²² A parallel *mashal* makes a similar point: R. Levi compares Haman to a common soldier that the king promotes to officer and then commander simply in order to be able to kill him without being criticized for executing a common soldier (Esth. Rab. 7.2).

A friend of the bird comes and stands on the shoreline to observe the Haman-bird's folly and points out his error, at which point God calls Haman, "Stupid fool."²³

In another scene illustrating Haman's ignorance and folly, the rabbis depict Haman casting lots over and over again and struggling to find any single day on which he would be able to destroy the Jews (cf. Esth 3:7). Having no luck with days, Haman turns to months. He must go through every single month before finally finding success with the very last one, Adar. He congratulates himself, noting that Adar, the month of Moses's death, should be an auspicious month for the downfall of the Jews. Ironically, unbeknownst to Haman, Adar is also the month of Moses's birth, suggesting it may also be a most propitious month for the good of the Jews.²⁴ Haman tells himself, "Just as fishes swallow one another, so I will swallow them." But Haman does not have the last word. In this extended *mashal*, God chimes in:

Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: "Wretch! Fishes sometimes swallow and sometimes are swallowed, and now it is you who will be swallowed" (Esth. Rab. 7.11).

That the fish who is typically swallowed swallows the swallower is a kind of reversal typical of the hidden transcript. The rabbis' celebration of the certainty of Haman's impending downfall, as well as its satisfying symmetry, is underscored in the concluding

²³ The *mashal* goes on to take an interesting turn, as the friend is read as God, who calls Haman, "Stupid fool." The theologically interesting implications of this are taking up in detail in Chapter 7.

²⁴ The month of Moses's birth is not recorded in Torah, but is Adar per rabbinic reckoning.

outburst of praise to God that “the slain slay their slayers and the executed execute their executioners” (Esth. Rab. 10.15).

The midrashim particularly highlight the irony that Haman builds the very stake upon which he will be executed. In one uproarious scene, the rabbis picture Haman struggling to instruct his servants regarding the construction of the gallows for Mordecai. In his zeal, Haman actually climbs onto the gallows himself to test it for size against his own stature. A voice from heaven calls out, “It fits you, wicked Haman” (T. Sheni to 5:14).²⁵ Along the same lines, a saying in Meg. finds a double entendre in Esth 6:4, in which Haman comes “to speak to the king about executing Mordecai on the stake he had prepared for him” (לאמר למלך לתלות את־מרדכי על־העץ אשר־הכין לו). The saying exploits the grammatical ambiguity of “for him” (לו). As Segal explains, “Haman of course believes that the phrase *‘for him’* alludes to Mordecai, but the author of the story . . . can identify Haman as the antecedent of *‘him.’*”²⁶

The scroll itself provides many opportunities to savor the downfall of the enemy Haman; the rabbis simply lean into these opportunities and expand them in creative ways. The dynamics of these midrashim thus provide a window into the experiences of oppressed people of faith who live with contradictory narratives, specifically the stark contrast between the promises regarding their relationship with God and the reality of apparent vulnerability to enemies like Haman. Picturing Haman’s downfall before it has even begun is the kind of imaginative move an oppressed minority might need to take as

²⁵ Similarly: “For thee is the tree fitting” (Esth. Rab. 9.2).

²⁶ Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 3:58. On Meg. 16a.

an exercise in hope *despite* the present situation. Imagining the situation of inversion that may one day come is an exercise in hope, affirming “the joy of life despite the presence of death.”²⁷ Rabbi David Hartman believes imagination to be a faculty that is essential for those who must “learn to live with Haman.”²⁸ Playing with Haman can strengthen this crucial survival skill.

The midrashic treatments of Haman in the portions of the narrative in which he is at the apex of his power function as counter-factual spaces of play in which the world is turned upside-down for a while. This is typically of hidden transcripts, as Scott explains, in which “inversions . . . create an imaginative breathing space in which the normal categories of order and hierarchy are less than completely inevitable.”²⁹ The Esther story provides just such an inversion, gradually flipping the villain on his head so that participants can enjoy the experience and perhaps long for a day when it might come true. The midrashim simply begin and foreshadow the process of reversal much earlier in the plot than does Esther MT. Hartman writes eloquently of this counter-factual aspect of the scroll’s significance:

We know full well the horror of the precariousness and vulnerability of Jewish physical existence. Yet, in spite of this tragic assessment of human history, we are

²⁷ David Hartman, “Purim: Joy in the Midst of Uncertainty,” unpublished manuscript, 49. On hope, see Michael Fox, “The literary force of the narrative . . . helps us believe . . . that ‘relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews,’” *Character and Ideology*, 12.

²⁸ Hartman, “Purim,” 48.

²⁹ Scott, *Domination*, 168.

able to set apart a day on which we act as if the distinction between Haman and Mordecai has been eradicated.³⁰

The experience, he says, “teaches how to live with the dream of a redeemed world while knowing full well that you live in an unredeemed world.”³¹ In their play with Haman, this is the work of the Esther midrashim.

3.4.2 *Esther 6: Watching Haman Squirm*

Scholars of Esther agree that the main device of Esther 6 is dramatic irony, specifically the contrast between what Haman thinks and what the audience and the king know. In addition to providing the turning point of the plot, then, one of the primary purposes of Esther 6 seems to be to provide detailed access to Haman’s ironic misapprehension, his humiliation, and his distress.³²

It is rare for Hebrew narrative to disclose the thoughts of a character, yet readers have access to Haman’s eager and comically mistaken inner monologue: “It’s me the king wants to honor! Who else could it be but me?!” (6:6). The reader knows from the earlier verses of chapter 6 that it is, in fact, *not* him, that the man the king has in mind to honor is instead the very person whose mere existence Haman’s honor can least bear. The narrative has already let the reader in on this secret, but it takes time to script Haman’s misapprehension nonetheless. It lingers considerably over Haman’s speech, letting him reveal his imagination run wild as he unwittingly heaps up honor upon honor that will

³⁰ Hartman, “Purim,” 49.

³¹ Hartman, “Purim,” 48.

³² Berlin calls this one of the funniest episodes in the Bible. *Esther*, 56.

land on his rival's head (6:7-9). Then comes the *coup de grâce*. The king tells Haman the unthinkable: not only will these honors go to his nemesis, Mordecai, but he, Haman, will be the one to make all the preparations and lead Mordecai through the city (v.10).³³ Worst of all, Haman is forced to call out words that must have been excruciatingly difficult for such a man to say regarding his enemy: "This is what is done for the man the king is pleased to honor!" (v. 11) After dispensing a mere four words on Mordecai's response to the experience (וישב מרדכי אל־שער המלך) ("Mordecai returned to the king's gate," v. 12), the rest of the chapter zeroes in on its real interest: the horrified reactions of Haman and his family with respect to this humiliation.³⁴ What has happened to him is so bad that he rushes home with his head covered and in mourning (v. 12), suggesting that in his eyes what has befallen him is a kind of death.³⁵

The midrashim to Esther 6 provide myriad opportunities to enjoy Haman's humiliation, creatively extending the MT's description with longer speeches and added humiliations. The rabbis pick up where they seem to have perceived Esther 6 to have left off. While vv. 1-9 provided descriptions of Haman's inner thoughts and motivations along with rich, revealing speeches, once his happy ignorance is burst in v. 10, the

³³ Of course, Haman *had* suggested that someone from among the nobility be thus tasked (v. 9), but he could not have imagined it would be himself.

³⁴ Fox writes, "Nothing is said about Mordecai's reaction to the honors. The sparseness of the description suggests that there was no particular effect," *Character and Ideology*, 79.

³⁵ In Fox's words, "Haman is bewailing the death of his honor," *Character and Ideology*, 79. That Haman is mourning a death is certainly how the rabbis read this, except they add a literal death: that of his daughter.

character falls silent.³⁶ No reply to the king is recorded, nor is the audience privy to his thoughts or feelings. Esther's readers are afforded no depiction of his devastation until he rushes home in a state of mourning. Compared to the more elaborately rendered vv. 1-9, vv. 10-12 are spare in detail.

ויאמר המלך להמן מהר קח את־הלבוש ואת־הסוס כאשר דברת ועשה־כן למרדכי היהודי היושב בשער המלך אל־תפל דבר מכל אשר דברת. ויקח המן את־הלבוש ואת הסוס וילבש את־מרדכי וירכיבהו ברחוב העיר ויקרא לפניו ככה יעשה לאיש אשר המלך חפץ ביקרו. וישב מרדכי אל־שער המלך והמן נדחף אל־ביתו אבל וחפוי ראש.

The king said to Haman, "Hurry, take the robe and the horse just as you have said and do [as you described] for Mordecai, the Jew, the one who sits in the gate of the king. Don't neglect a single thing from what you have said." And Haman took the robe and the horse and he dressed Mordecai and rode him through the city and called out before him, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor." Then Mordecai sat at the king's gate, but Haman rushed home mourning and with his head covered (Esth 6:10-12).

The midrashists observe a gap between 6:10 and 6:11, between the king's command and Haman's carrying out his orders. They wondered how Haman reacted. Did he show his shock, his disappointment? The midrashim step in to answer such questions and provide visual descriptions of Haman's state and record his dismayed verbal reactions. Esth. Rab., for example, furnishes Haman with a script to voice his woe:

"What an ill fate is mine! Yesterday I was busy erecting a gallows for him, and God is preparing for him a crown! I was preparing for you ropes and nails, and God prepares for you royal apparel. I was going to request from the king permission to hang you, and he has bidden me mount you on horseback" (10.5).³⁷

³⁶ V. 4 describes Haman's purpose in coming to the court; v. 6 portrays his inner monologue; and verses 7-9 provide his speech describing in vivid detail exactly the kind of honor he hopes to receive from the king.

³⁷ The translator assumes that the method of execution of hanging on gallows is in view. Modern scholarly consensus understands the shaming display of a body on a stake as more likely. See footnote 13.

Each of Haman's statements underscores the utter reversal. T. Sheni similarly enhances the audience's ability to picture Haman's distress in this moment, describing him undertaking his tasks "with bowed stature, . . . with clogged ears, dimmed eyes, a distorted mouth, a sealed heart, his clothes torn, the joints of his loins loosened, his knees knocking against each other."³⁸ The picture that emerges is of a diminished villain indeed.

If the first textual opportunity the midrashim respond to is a dearth of detail, the second is an apparent surplus. The rabbis and targumists appear to have noticed that the king's identification of Mordecai as, "the Jew, the one who sits in the gate of the king" (v.10) is somewhat more specific than strictly necessary. Only one Mordecai has been introduced in the narrative, and only one Mordecai looms large in Haman's imagination. Both Meg. and T. Sheni thus explain the elements of this phrase as part of a longer conversation in which Haman attempts to escape the inevitable. When the king says he must honor Mordecai, Haman hopes it might be someone other than his enemy and asks, "Which Mordecai" (Meg. 16a)?³⁹ When the king clarifies he means "Mordecai, the Jew," Haman still resists, suggesting that there may be many Jews named Mordecai. This is what draws forth the king's final phrase after which there can be no confusion about which Mordecai is meant: "the one who sits at the king's gate." At this point, with no further space for negotiation as to the honoree, Haman tries to reduce the honor,

³⁸ T. Sheni, 173.

³⁹ Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 3:60

suggesting that something much less would suffice for someone like Mordecai. But the king insists: “Don’t neglect a single thing.”⁴⁰

If the midrashim slow down over 6:10, they linger even longer in 6:11. One of the most expansively recounted episodes is that of Haman attempting to carry out his already-embarrassing orders to honor Mordecai.⁴¹ The midrashim expand upon every possible detail of events only tersely narrated in 6:11. At every step of the process, Mordecai finds a way to make what Haman must do a little more humiliating.⁴²

In the telling of Esth. Rab., Mordecai first makes Haman’s task more difficult by refusing to don the royal robe without a bath first. “How can you insult royalty so?” he asks Haman. “Can a man put on a royal robe before he has washed himself?” (Esth. Rab. 10.4). In Meg., Mordecai claims to need a bath because he has been fasting and is disheveled. Either way, in both versions Haman is forced to seek a bath attendant but is unable to find one. In Meg., this is because Esther has involved herself to make things more difficult for Haman and has concealed the location of all public baths.⁴³ With or

⁴⁰ Segal writes that Haman tries “to squirm out of his obligation by means of the legalistic argument that the identification had left some room for ambiguity,” *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 3:59.

⁴¹ Esth. Rab. 10.4, page 116-17.

⁴² Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 3:73. Segal comments, “In keeping with the spirit of the previous pericope, the roots of this delightful expansion of the biblical story lie in the darshan’s desire to elaborate on the magnitude of Haman’s frustration and disgrace as he was forced to heap honors upon his greatest enemy.”

⁴³ Concealing the locations of public baths would presumably make it difficult to find a bath attendant.

without that delicious detail, the results are the same: Haman must hike up his own robes and wade in to do the job himself.⁴⁴

Next, Mordecai presents Haman with another barrier. He will not put on the royal crown without a haircut. Unable to find a barber (according to Meg., Esther has also hidden all barbers), Haman must go home, get scissors, and perform the low-level task himself. The Haman of Esther MT receives and carries out his humiliating orders in silence, holding his tongue until he returns home (6:13). But Haman in Meg. at this point begins to sigh and moan:

As he was cutting he sighed and moaned.

[Mordecai] said to him: Why are you sighing?

He said to him: A man who was more important to the king than all his nobles has been made into a bath-attendant and barber.⁴⁵

Yet Haman falls much lower still. When it comes time to mount the horse, Mordecai claims to lack the strength. In Meg., his weakness is due to fasting; in Esth. Rab. to old age. In both cases, the rabbis treat their communities at this point to the pièce de resistance: Haman hunches over so that Mordecai can use him as a footstool and literally tread on his enemy. Meg. adds a slapstick moment: “[Haman] bent down for him and [Mordecai] mounted to ride. As he was mounting he kicked him.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ The tradition of the various menial offices Haman is forced to adopt is summarized in Esth. Rab. 10.7. Haman hurries home in utter humiliation, “having performed four [menial] offices—of a bath-attendant, a barber, an orderly, and a herald” (Simon, 118).

⁴⁵ Meg. 16a, Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 3:79.

⁴⁶ Meg. 16a, Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 3:84.

Things become even worse for Haman as he undertakes the embarrassing work of leading Mordecai through the city and thus honoring him publicly. While Esther MT limits description of Haman's family membership to a wife and ten sons, the midrashim furnish him with a daughter as well. They depict this daughter up on the roof of her father's house, watching and waiting to see Haman hanging Mordecai, which is the purpose for which Haman left their home early that morning (cf. 6:4). Instead, she sees Haman leading Mordecai through the streets. In Meg., the event partakes in carnivalesque, scatological humor. In this version, the daughter mistakes Haman for Mordecai and dumps a chamber pot on his head.⁴⁷ She is horrified when she realizes both what she has done and the humiliating situation of her father. Esth. Rab. also includes Haman's daughter in his humiliation, but not the chamber pot (10.5). Nevertheless, in both versions, she falls to her death in distress or disorientation. In Meg., the daughter's fall from the roof could be interpreted as accidental or a result of shock, but in Esth. Rab., it is clearly suicide in response to the disgrace of her family (10.5).⁴⁸ The rabbis, with the help of the Esther story, have thus reduced Haman to mourning, to the condition in which the Jews found themselves in at 4:3. As Michael Fox puts it, "now their enemy is as

⁴⁷ Berlin connects this incident to Bakhtin's work on the carnivalesque, noting that "Although the text of Esther contains none of this bodily humor, the midrashic addition to the story is completely within the spirit of the ancient expression of the carnivalesque," *Esther*, 63.

⁴⁸ Haman's sons are punished with death in Esther 9:10. Perhaps adding a daughter to the tale so that she, too, can be killed off, is simply another way of punishing this villain. Nevertheless, the material responds to a textual detail: the fact that Haman rushes home with his head covered and in mourning. Entering into this textual gap which is not otherwise explicitly explained, the rabbis provide Haman a specific cause of mourning: the death of his daughter. See Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 3:89-90.

wretched as they were earlier.”⁴⁹ For Fox, this reversal points the reader toward hope, an important function which will be discussed further below. Yet one of the most important licit pleasures of reading this passage is certainly also that it feels good to see the oppressor suffer.

3.4.3 *Relishing Haman’s Downfall: Chapter 7*

Humor at Haman’s expense continues in midrashic expansions of Esther 7, the account of his demise. As his wife predicted, Haman will continue to spiral downward with accelerating speed from that point onward. He is whisked away to the next feast with his wife’s words still ringing in the air (“while they were still speaking,” 6:14). At this second feast, Esther denounces Haman’s misdeeds. When the king storms out in anger, Haman attempts a desperate appeal to the queen and falls on her couch, presumably to beg for mercy. Unfortunately for Haman, this is precisely the moment when the king reappears, misreads Haman’s pose, and cries, “Will he even molest the queen with me in the house?!” (הגם לכבוש את־המלכה עמי בבית) (7:8).⁵⁰ The irony is heightened as Haman, who deserves the punishment he receives, is nevertheless punished for something he did not actually do.⁵¹

After the couch scene Esther 7 is tersely narrated, the action swift. Haman’s head is covered as soon as the king has spoken (7:8). Harbonah, one of the king’s attendants,

⁴⁹ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 79.

⁵⁰ Cf. Berlin, who writes that Ahasuerus “misinterprets Haman’s pose, casting the supplicant as a seducer.” Berlin, *Esther*, 70.

⁵¹ For Berlin, it is the funniest in the chapter; for Levenson, the king’s outraged response is “the funniest line of the whole book,” *Esther*, 4.

reminds the king of the availability of a convenient stake (the one Haman had constructed for Mordecai), and the king says, “Let him be hung on it” (7:9). There is no description of Haman’s reaction, nor a single word from his mouth. Neither does the narrative describe his death in any great detail. It simply says, “And they hanged Haman on the stake he had prepared for Mordecai” (7:10) (ויתלו את־המן על־העץ אשר־הכין למרדכי).

The midrashists see ample opportunity for exploration in between the lines of these relatively spare verses. Yet they do not expand upon Haman’s death, nor do they revel in the addition of gory details. This is a striking fact, for they otherwise seem to take it as a primary invitation of the Esther scroll to punish Haman in the story world, and they generally take up this work with creative gusto. Yet they dwell remarkably little on the violence of a book that features much bloodshed. They seem to enjoy Haman’s discomfort and embarrassment rather than the physical pain of his gruesome death. In fact, the scene of Haman’s condemnation and death attracts a midrash that clarifies the fact that Mordecai and Esther’s victory against Haman was not achieved by means of violence: “not with sword or buckler but with prayers and supplication” (Esth. Rab. 10.9).

One way Esther Rabbah has fun within the dangerous world of this story is by populating it with trickster figures who stir up trouble—in this case, Elijah and the angel Michael. When the king storms out to the gardens in anger, the angel Michael further enrages the king by cutting down his beloved plants so that he is even angrier by the time he returns to Haman and Esther. If that was not enough, Michael then pushes Haman so that he falls on Esther in a most inappropriate fashion, making matters worse. When it

becomes clear that the king is angry enough to get rid of Haman, Elijah pops into the scene disguised as Harbonah and provides the perfect solution, pointing out to the king that Haman already has a stake ready for use.⁵²

T. Sheni similarly includes the angel tree-cutting incident, but the gap it explores most extensively is the space between 7:9 (“Let him be hung on it”) and 7:10 (“And they hung him on it”). They pause in this moment and take time to depict Haman’s distress. In the telling of T. Sheni, Mordecai is personally entrusted with his doomed enemy. This factor allows the scripting of an extended scene in which Haman begs for his life from Mordecai, or, if not for his life, then at least for a more dignified way to die.

“Before they will raise me on the gallows, I beg of you, O righteous Mordekhai, do not hang me as they hang common criminals. For have I not held in esteem great men, and governors of provinces have been subjected under me. I have caused kings to tremble at the word of my mouth, and with the utterances of my lips I have frightened provinces. ... I trembled [sic] from (before) you, O righteous Mordekhai, that you do not do to me as I schemed to do to you. Have pity on my honor and do not kill me or destroy me like my ancestor Agag. You are good, Mordekhai; do according to your kindness rather than taking a life. Do not kill me as there are no killers among you. Do not call against me the hatred of Agag nor the vengeance of Amaleq. Do not take vengeance against me, with enmity in your heart. Nor nurture a grudge against me, as my father Esau nurtured a grudge and vengeance. ... I beg of you, spare my life, O my righteous lord Mordekhai; do not summarily blot out my name like that of my ancestor Amaleq and do not hang my grey head upon the gallows. But if you are determined to kill me, remove my head with the king’s sword, with which all the nobles of the provinces are killed.” (Then) Haman began to cry out and weep, but Mordekhai paid no attention to him.⁵³

⁵² Esth. Rab. 10.9.

⁵³ T. Sheni to Esther 7:9. Grossfeld, *Two Targums of Esther*, 179-180. Again, the execution of Haman by hanging on gallows is assumed. See footnote 13.

Besides portraying the enemy's suffering, the scene also inserts Mordecai into the position of power opposite Haman's desperate, blubbing terror. It thus allows its audience to participate through its proxy, Mordecai, in a kind of counter-factual play, one in which the usual roles are completely reversed. With Mordecai, the targum's audience can imagine what it would feel like to have their present oppressors diminished to this state and to hold over them the power of life and death. It is particularly interesting that Haman appeals to the state of Mordecai's heart as well, suggesting that he may be nurturing a grudge or acting in vengeance. The rendering thereby opens opportunities for the targum's audience themselves to consider what they would do in a similar situation and whether or not it is right for them to nurse a desire for revenge.

Mordecai is impervious to Haman's pleas, and Haman turns in desperation to another audience: "Thus when Haman realized that his words were not heeded, he started lamenting and weeping for himself in the midst of the palace garden; and thus he started, saying: 'Listen to me, you trees and plants . . .'" (T. Sheni to 7:9). Haman's plea to the trees, whether for pity or help, does not improve his situation. Instead, the plea provides a segue into a set piece with numerous parallels among the midrashim: a scene in which the trees engage in an anti-competition to avoid being the one chosen to host Haman's body. Textually, this responds to the fact that the word for the wooden implement of execution set up by Haman is the same word as tree (עץ, 7:9, 10). Other trees (the garden variety) thus appear concerned that they would be the selected for the task. But none of them wants to help or host Haman. (The various versions of the tree-selection trope will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.)

Through play with Haman in Esth 6 and 7, the villain is dealt his just deserts. In the story world at least, if not elsewhere, Haman is made to feel and suffer consequences. Susan Niditch has observed that Esther provides opportunity for the “enactment of ultimate vindication,” and this is an opportunity of which the midrashists clearly avail themselves.⁵⁴ As we learned from Scott, the dominated are not often able to enact vindication in public.⁵⁵ The midrashim thus provide space that otherwise would not exist in which to get revenge.⁵⁶ What cannot be said or performed in public, to use Scott’s words,

finds its full-throated expression backstage. The frustration, tension, and control necessary in public give way to unbridled retaliation in a safer setting, where the accounts of reciprocity are, symbolically at least, finally balanced.⁵⁷

Part of the function of this kind of play is “wish-fulfillment.”⁵⁸ And the wishes the reader of Esther has for Haman are certainly not for his thriving. Scott explains that

fantasy life among dominated groups is also likely to take the form of *schadenfreude*: joy at the misfortunes of others. This represents a wish for

⁵⁴ Susan Niditch, “Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority,” in *Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1985), 46.

⁵⁵ Scott calls this the “systematic *frustration of reciprocal action*,” *Domination*, 37. Emphasis in original.

⁵⁶ “At its most elementary level the hidden transcript represents an acting out in fantasy—and occasionally in secretive practice—of the anger and reciprocal aggression denied by the presence of domination.” Scott, *Domination*, 37-8.

⁵⁷ Scott, *Domination*, 38.

⁵⁸ Scott, *Domination*, 38.

negative reciprocity, a settling of scores when the high shall be brought low and the last shall be first.⁵⁹

This is why the scroll of Esther and the midrashim that interpret it luxuriate so much in Haman's emotional suffering. Contrary to Anderson and many other Christian interpreters through the ages, this is not an indication of a general Jewish thirst for revenge; rather, it is an indication of the more general human experience of frustration under oppression to which the scroll bears witness.⁶⁰

Partially, a villain like Haman needs to be ridiculed and reduced because this is a way of releasing anger against him and other oppressors, as we will see below. But it can do much more than provide such a relief valve; it can also shift the imagination. Fear can be debilitating, and while it would be absurd to speak of a total freedom from fear, laughter may afford at least some small measure of release from its paralyzing power. Here, the superiority theory of laughter may be helpful, albeit in a form modified for the subaltern context. Subaltern laughers obviously cannot exult in their unrivaled superiority, since those they laugh at clearly have real power and advantage over them. Nevertheless, laughter can reduce apparent superiority.

3.5 Playing with Prejudice

To this point, we have examined play that diminishes Haman and cuts the target down to size. In the context of the hidden transcript, such Haman-humor can be understood as a reaction to experiences on the underside of domination by real-life,

⁵⁹ Scott, *Domination*, 42.

⁶⁰ For a discussion of the views of Anderson and others, see Chapter 8.

Haman-like figures. It may be a way of settling scores in a literary world that may never be settled in real-life—a manner of punishing real-world villains vicariously, taking revenge on a literary proxy. The midrashim examined to this point punish Haman at length, in a variety of creative and humiliating ways. In addition to functioning as a form of revenge, however, the exercise of making Haman ridiculous may also be an exercise in hope, a form of counterfactual play proclaiming a world in which justice is restored and villains receive their due. Such play may strengthen the imagination to hope that tables may similarly turn one day in the real world. Finally, humorous play at Haman’s expense may serve as a device for defusing fear.⁶¹ For those that are forced to live continually under threat of real-world, hamanic dangers, it may help to exercise the faculty of humor against such terrifying people and forces. Such humor may have no power to diminish the real danger, but it may strengthen courage to at least imagine such powers reduced.

For all of the reasons discussed above, the presence of play at Haman’s expense in the midrashim is not difficult to explain. What is perhaps more puzzling is the way in which Haman’s slanderous speech (3:8-9) also attracts an abundance of creative play. As much as the midrashim delight to elaborate upon Haman’s downfall and humiliation, they wax almost as eloquently on another favorite subject: what their enemies think and say about Jews. The midrashim at times pass by certain textual details without comment. One may wonder why the same was not done with Haman’s hateful words. Yet Haman’s slander is treated to remarkably detailed and creative expansions.

⁶¹ This will be discussed more at the end of the following section.

Esther MT provides two speeches in which a certain characterization of the Jews is expressed. In 3:8, Haman tells the king, “There is a certain people, scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from all other people, and they do not keep the laws of the king. It is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them” (ישנו עם־אחד מפזר ומפרד בין העמים בכל מדינות (מלכותך ודתיהם שנות מכל־עם ואת־דתי המלך אינם עשים ולמלך אי־שוה להניחם). In 6:13, it is Haman’s wife and advisors who give their understanding of the Jews: “If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish descent, you will not succeed against him. Instead you will fall before him completely” (אם מזרע היהודים מרדכי אשר החלות לנפל (לפניו לא־תוכל לו כי־נפול תפול לפניו).⁶² The midrashim reveal intense interest in such perceptions, and they expend significant amounts of creative energy imagining what *else* might have been said, thought, or written about them. These imagined speeches are at times quite humorous, even parodic. And yet they contain marked distortions and misapprehensions about the Jews. Moreover, when they contain a grain of truth, it is presented in the most damaging light possible. In other words, the rabbis and talmudists spill large amounts of ink providing scripts in which their enemies have even more time than Esther MT affords them to air inaccurate, distorted, and downright slanderous views about the Jews. They do so as people who know what it is to live as oppressed and vulnerable minorities and to face such distorted, slanderous, and hostile views in their daily lives. In fact, Joshua Berman has argued that glimpses of the specific kinds of

⁶² There are also two other hints as to the question of how Jews are perceived by those outside their communities. Cf. Esth 2:4 and 8:17.

antisemitic prejudices the rabbis faced in their own world can be discerned in how they write about the Persian one; they place on Persian lips opinions readily recognizable as antisemitic tropes held widely across eras and cultures.⁶³

One perception of the Jews reflected in T. Sheni is that they are unusually difficult to kill. In its expansion of Zeresh's suggestion to kill Mordecai on a stake (Esth 5:14), the targum interprets this as a result of a long conversation in which various other death strategies are explored and rejected. The contents of the speech are reasonably accurate in reflecting genuine stories found in the Hebrew Scriptures. The counter-factual element of the speech lies in the way it attributes such detailed knowledge of these same Scriptures to Zeresh and Haman's other companions.

“If it pleases you, let us speak a word in your presence as to how punishment may be accomplished against that Jewish man Mordekhai. . . . If you try to kill him by the sword, the sword would already be reversing itself and be thrown upon us. Were we to condemn him to stoning, David had once stoned Goliath the Philistine. If we try to cast him into a chain of bronze, Manasseh had broken it and extracted himself from it. Throwing him into the sea, Moses once split it for the Israelites and passed through its midst. Sticking him into a fiery furnace, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah once uprooted it and emerged from it. Throwing him into the lions' mouth, once before the lions did not hurt Daniel. Throwing him before dogs, once before the mouths of dogs were stopped up in the land of Egypt. If we were to banish him into the wilderness, once before they increased exceedingly in the wilderness. By what method of execution can we kill him . . . ? Should we cast him into prison, once before Joseph was crowned from prison. Should a knife be thrown at his throat, once before the knife was turned away from Isaac's throat. Should we blind him in the eyes and leave him, he would surely kill some of us as Samson had killed. We do not know how to accomplish

⁶³ Joshua Berman, “Aggadah and Anti-Semitism: The Midrashim to Esther 3:8,” *Judaism* 38, no. 2 (1989): 185-96.

(an effective) punishment against this man. Let there be made a big gallows for him . . .” (T. Sheni to 5:14).⁶⁴

If Jews are difficult to kill, so it is thought, they may also be lazy and bad for the economy.⁶⁵ One explanation of Haman’s phrase, “There is a certain people” (ישנו עם־) (אזחא) (3:8), develops this idea by means of a play on the consonance between ישנו and שן, the word for tooth.

He said to him: “Their teeth [שניהון] are powerful; they eat and drink much, and say, ‘We have to enjoy the Sabbath, we have to enjoy the Festival,’ and so they cause a diminution in the wealth of society. Once every seven days they have a Sabbath; every thirty days a New Moon; in Nisan Passover, in Sivan Pentecost, in Tishri New Year and Atonement and the Feast of Tabernacles” (Esth. Rab. 7.12).⁶⁶

In this view, the Jews are a people who rest and feast too much and consequently damage the economy. Or, as Haman puts in in Meg. 13b, “they pass the year in fiddle-faddle.” In a supreme twist of irony, God’s response to Haman’s speech in this midrash is to give the Jews yet another holiday (Purim), this one to celebrate Haman’s downfall.

The specific thing about this people that Haman finds most offensive in the telling of T. Sheni is not so much that these people are constantly having their own feasts, but that they do not participate in those of the rest of the people. Haman complains, “our bread and our cooked dishes they do not eat, our wine they do not drink, our festivals they do not celebrate, and our customs they do not observe” (T. Sheni to 3:8). Haman’s

⁶⁴ T. Sheni here participates in a similar trope as Esth. Rab. 7.23, that of Israel’s enemies each trying to learn from each other’s failures how better to kill Israelites.

⁶⁵ This is a common theme of antisemitic libel as detected by Berman across a variety of texts, “Aggadah and Anti-Semitism,” 188-90.

⁶⁶ For Hebrew text, see Tabory and Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, 137, line 176.

criticism is similar in Meg. 13b, although he extends it to the offense of Jews refraining from intermarriage: “they do not eat with us, and they do not drink with us, and they do not marry from among us, and they do not get married to us.” Meg. records a variety of Haman’s slanders. One is that “Jews, unlike other peoples, did not produce any important benefit for society.”⁶⁷ As proof, Haman points to the word “dispersed” (מפּרֵד) (3:8), which has similar consonants to the word for mule (פּרָדָה). He thereby draws the spurious conclusion that, as a mule fails to produce progeny, so the Jews fail to be productive members of society (Meg 13b). But the most damaging accusation Haman enlists is the charge that Jews insult the king. He says they “belittle the king in the marketplace.” He further implies that the Jews think of the king as more unclean than a fly and suggests that their practices regarding contact with Gentiles are actually a personal affront to the king: “even if a fly falls into the cup of one of them, he tosses it away and drinks it, however if my lord the king touches the cup of one of them he thrusts it to the earth.” As Segal notes, such an interpretation relies on “the selective juxtaposition of two unrelated rules [of kashrut], taking out of their proper contexts.”⁶⁸ He adds, “It is easy to imagine that, then as now, such pseudo-arguments would be employed regularly by malicious adversaries who had acquired just enough familiarity with the details of Jewish laws to uncover their supposed negative implications, but not enough erudition or good will to examine the statements on their own terms.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:122.

⁶⁸ Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:131.

⁶⁹ Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash*, 2:132.

The rabbis knew what it was like to be misunderstood. What is most striking about this fact is that they not only suffer fear and discrimination because of such misunderstandings, they take hold of them and play with them in masterful parody. A midrash in the name of Resh Lakish on Esther 3:9 (“If it please the king, let it be written that they be destroyed”) is just such a parodic triumph, a spoof on a most terrifying scene. It is full of rich detail and merits lengthy exposition.

The scene opens with Haman approaching King Ahasuerus, who is not only aware of the existence of the Jews (contra the perspective of the scroll) but also thoroughly acquainted with their history and God and, most surprisingly of all, afraid of them. He, the head of 127 provinces, hesitates to accept Haman’s plan because he thinks his great empire is no match for this people. It is not hard to imagine a minority population that knows the actual precariousness of their situation enjoying Ahasuerus’s speech:

You cannot prevail against them, since their God will not entirely forsake them. See what he did to the kings who preceded us and who laid hands on them and who were much mightier and more powerful than we are. Whoever comes against them to destroy them and whoever schemes against them is wiped out. . . . How much more so then we who are not equal to those others. Let me hear no more of this (Esth. Rab. 7.13).

This is the counter-factual play of a people in reality much intimidated by the overwhelming force of an empire. They imagine these roles reversed, with a king too intimidated to make a move against them. They also exercise imagination in placing their one great hope—that “their God will not entirely forsake them”—on the lips of a foreign king.

As the scene continues, the king summons all the wise men and magicians of all the nations. They, too, are equally and unanimously against the idea of destroying the Jews. They show a thorough knowledge of Israel's scriptures, quoting from Jeremiah, 1 Kings, Psalms, Exodus, and Deuteronomy (in addition to, ironically, the scroll of Esther itself) to show just how foolhardy such a plan would be. The reason? These are the children of the Holy One, "And if a man seeks to lay hands upon the relatives and children of the Holy One, blessed be He, how shall he escape?" For some reason, these people are dear to the ruler of all the world, so it is dangerous to harm them: "Take a lesson from the previous kings who transgressed by laying hand on Israel; see what happened to them, as for instance to Pharaoh and Sennacherib."

Haman does not dispute this history nor the power of God in the past; instead, he convinces them that God "is now old and cannot do anything." That the rabbis would place these words on Haman's lips is in one sense an exercise in dramatic irony. For example, in another midrash on the same theme, God hears Haman's claim that he is asleep and unresponsive and immediately retorts, "There is no sleep for me," citing Ps 121:4. "As you live, I will awake from [the semblance of] sleep against you and destroy you from the world" (Esth. Rab. 7.12).⁷⁰ Despite such a confident assertion placed on the very lips of God, the rabbis also at times may have wondered if what Haman supposes

⁷⁰ The midrash responds to the word ישנו (Esth 3:8) and its consonantal similarity to ישן, the verb "to sleep," along with the phrase עם־אחד (Esth 3:8), which it reads as "the people of [the one called] אחד." Since Israel's God is known especially as "One," the midrash reads the whole phrase ישנו עם־אחד as indicating that God is asleep to his people.

might indeed be true, that their God was somehow beyond helping them (cf. Num. 11:23; Isa. 59:1).

As the scene proceeds, Haman eventually wins the support of the king and his advisors, and a long letter is composed explaining their decision to the empire. In the letter, we see a master propagandist at work. The request is made palatable by calling it “a very slight request.”⁷¹ The people in question are not identified but kept strange and abstract as “a certain people.” Classic anti-Semitic tropes are mobilized to show how “contemptible” is this people: “they desire our evil and they are forever cursing the king”; moreover, “they are ungrateful to their benefactors.” Next, key points of their history are recounted in laughably distorted terms. The mighty Pharaoh’s oppression of them becomes “kindness” for which they are inexplicably “ungrateful”; their escape from a murderous regime becomes “the way they treated that hapless Pharaoh.” His conscription of them into harsh labor sounds innocuous: “When he had some palaces to build they built them for him,” as if it were a voluntary, mutually-beneficial economic arrangement. Their request to worship in the desert becomes “a crafty pretext,” and the Egyptians’ gifts of silver and gold become “loans” with which they unexpectedly ran away (ctr. Ex 12:35-36). Pharaoh, despite choosing to pursue them with a full army (cf. Ex 14:6-7), was apparently only trying “to recover his money.” Similarly, the Israelites are described as “very cruel and pitiless” when Amalek attacked them, a version of events that glosses over the small detail that they fought in self-defense (cf. Ex 17:8). Here we see a serious confusion of victim and victimizer, played up for its utter incongruity with reality.

⁷¹ Esth. Rab. 7.13.

As distasteful as the propagandist finds the Israelites' ingratitude and cruelty as described above, he stirs up a special fear regarding the parts of the stories he understands least: their strange "magic." Israel's experience of deliverance at the Sea is described through outsider eyes: "There was with them a certain man named Moses son of Amram who by means of his magic arts took a certain staff and uttered incantations over it and smote the sea with it." The narrator gives the impression of trying to piece together something highly mysterious and hence highly frightening: "*and no one knows* how they crossed and how the waters became dry" and "*in some strange way* [Pharaoh] was thrust into the midst of the sea and he and all his host drowned."⁷² In the case of Amalek, a similar mystery pertains:

I don't know if those men whom he [Joshua] chose were sorcerers or great warriors, but what did that Moses do? He took a staff in his hand, and did something or other with it, and when Amalek attacked them he uttered some incantation or other against them and they became powerless and fell before him.

The same trouble befell the kings of Sihon and Og, as well as those of Midian: this poorly understood people "managed by unknown means to kill them."

Perhaps the most poorly understood aspect of Jewish existence, if the themes of this parody are any indication, was the Temple. The details this foreign official knows are sketchy: someone named Solomon

erected a certain building called the Temple. They had certain things in it, and when they made war they used to go into it and do some magic there, and when they came out they used to slay and lay waste without end.

⁷² Italics added.

A very thin and highly distorted understanding of religious life around the temple, indeed.

On the surface, the letter's portrayal of an outsider's understanding of Israel's history and life is high comedy for anyone with insider knowledge of the tradition, worthy of uproarious laughter at a synagogue on Purim. But laughter can hold great ambiguity. On the one hand, the misunderstandings are pitched to provide comic relief. On the other hand, though, they echo real-world anti-Semitic tropes that connect the faith and worship of this people with extreme and habitual violence. Moreover, these hilariously mistaken perspectives are portrayed in the midrash *as part of an argument in favor of this people's extermination*. This 'history' is written to support the thesis that their ways are so vile that their continued existence is insupportable. Ironically, the majority culture as depicted here feels somehow threatened by the perceptions of the religious minority ("although they are in exile among us they mock at us and our religion"), a level of insecurity which would be funny, except that they have "come to a unanimous decision . . . to destroy them."

In the case of Haman or the many villains he has since come to represent, the enemy is and has been frightful. Fox explains, "I, like many Jews, have a sense of narrow, accidental escape. . . . The Haman legend has pursued us through history as an ongoing potential. Thus I know the sense of precariousness that impelled Esther's author . . ." ⁷³ Because of his community's experience, Fox knows Haman to be a believable villain—in fact, he sees the emergence of future Haman-like figures as much more

⁷³ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 12

believable than the happy ending of the Esther story. He writes, “As the annual reading of the Esther Scroll comes to an end, I breathe a sigh of relief, but this expresses a prayer more than a certitude, for the resolution of the crisis is less believable than its onset.”⁷⁴

Rabbi David Hartman similarly writes from the perspective of a community that understands the danger of Haman and of annihilation to be real, serious, and ongoing. For him, the suspension of the serious at Esther’s festival (Purim) is only comprehensible and meaningful within this broader situation of real and ongoing danger. Hartman writes:

“Having lived at the margins of history where they were repeatedly victimized by Hamans in one form or another, Jews were fully aware of the fact that they were always vulnerable to the outbreak of anti-Semitism.”⁷⁵

It is precisely this vulnerability and sense of existential threat that necessitates the kind of laughter the parodic letter above is designed to elicit. And it is a kind of laughter the midrashim saw as made possible by Esther MT itself. As Fox later explains,

The book’s [Esther] incongruous humor is one of its strange hallmarks. It mixes laughter with fear in telling about a near-tragedy that is chillingly reminiscent of actual tragedies. We laugh at the confused sexual politicians [*sic*], the quirky emperor, and, above all, the ludicrous, self-glorifying, self-destructive villain. This is almost literally gallows humor, except that the gallows are finally used on the hangman. Humor, especially the humor of ridicule, is a device for defusing fear. The author teaches us to make fun of the very forces that once threatened—and will again threaten—our existence, and thereby makes us recognize their triviality as well as their power. “If I laugh at any mortal thing,” said Byron, “t’is that I may not weep.”⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 12.

⁷⁵ Hartman, “Purim,” 35.

⁷⁶ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 253.

The midrashists model laughter at Haman as an aid to the survival of ongoing existential threat like that posed by villains like Haman.

One of the important functions of such humor is that it brings the object of laughter—in this case, the fearsome Haman—up close for examination. Kenneth Craig mobilizes the work of Bakhtin on carnival as a vital lens through which to understand Esther. Here, he quotes Bakhtin at length on laughter and distance:

Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its center, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it.⁷⁷

When Haman is brought up close, and even his private thoughts and words examined, he is exposed. Hartman finds that one thing the Esther scroll most reveals about Haman is “the utter absurdity of radical evil,” particularly in 3:14. He writes:

People can laugh and drink while knowing that children are being sent to their death. This verse describes succinctly the nature of radical evil in history. Its stark eloquence captures the potential depravity of human beings. People can commit or acquiesce in unspeakable horrors without feeling disturbed or uneasy.⁷⁸

Something similar is underway in midrashic play with antisemitic slander. Playing with the enemy’s character and exploring his behavior and perceptions through laughter can help unmask and realistically name evil.

⁷⁷ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael T. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), 23. Quoted in Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 148-9.

⁷⁸ Hartman, “Purim,” 45.

As much as it reveals the monstrosity of evil, play with Haman also exposes him in a way that reduces him in the eyes of those who fear him. In Fox's view, this kind of exposure is much worse, since, from what we know of Haman's character, "Haman would not be bothered by being shown to be deeply evil [although the book of Esther does accomplish this], but he would be mortified to be revealed as an impulsive bungler."

⁷⁹ Nevertheless, this is exactly what Esther and her midrashic interpreters reveal.

Throughout this chapter, we have seen play that diminishes and reduces this villain. In the midrashim as in Esther MT, Haman's "folly ... unmasks itself" and he is revealed to be "superficial and silly," "a buffoon, a clever fool." As Fox writes:

I am reminded of Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, a satirical attack on Hitler, which showed the Führer to be not only an evil and dangerous power but also a gesticulating, screeching, frenetic ninny. Rather than attacking evil in its own terms, Chaplin, like the author of Esther, denigrated it by exposing it for what it most deeply fears to be: weak within and ludicrous without.⁸⁰

Fox writes in reference to Esther MT, but these terms certainly describe much of the attack waged by the rabbis on Haman as well.

3.6 Conclusion

The three midrashic collections studied reveal a rich hidden transcript of play with Haman. While much of the transcript's play comes at Haman's expense, it also takes up

⁷⁹ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 183.

⁸⁰ Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 183-4. Consider also that as Jacqueline Bussie recounts, "One of the Third Reich's first actions was to pass a censorship law that prohibited mockery of the Nazis"; "This law made even telling jokes against the Fuhrer or government an act of treason bearing the death penalty," *Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007), 39.

such complicated topoi as the toxic misapprehensions of Jews promulgated throughout history. Against a backdrop of vulnerability and pain on the underside of domination, such humorous play emerges as a creative ethical response to suffering—and as anything but mere frivolity. For the oppressed, this transcript models modes of laughter at Haman-like threats that may support survival. For the oppressor, this transcript may be more difficult to receive. In fact, the transcript is likely to be misinterpreted by those it targets with its tendentious humor.

Chapter 4: Wait, How Did I Become Haman?

No one wants to be Haman. Yet to read Jewish Esther interpretations across the ages is to uncover a rich hidden transcript that arises out of experiences of vulnerability and violence at the hands of Christians powers. Christians who risk attending to these texts are therefore confronted with an uncomfortable fact: Jews in various times and places appear to have recognized Christians in the role of the villain in the Esther tale, the one who represents all others who have sought to annihilate Jews throughout the centuries. The association of Haman with Christians is by no means universal, but it recurs with unmistakable persistence across genres and eras. The primary task of this chapter is to trace the recurring identification of Haman with Christ/Christians across the ages as reflected in Jewish commentary, midrash, poetry, and art. The goal is to surface this hidden transcript with the hopes it might be given the attention it deserves among contemporary Christian readers of Scripture.

4.1 The Complexities of Social Location

For those habituated to identifying themselves with the protagonists in any biblical story—Esther included—it may come as quite a shock to be cast in the opposite role. Yet if this study asks the question of what Christians can learn by listening to the hidden transcripts of Jewish Esther reception, one of the answers of this chapter is that Christians who read from social locations of relative power can discover where they have been located in the text by those on the underside of (their) domination.¹ Such a perspective is crucial with a book like Esther, written from the perspective and for the

¹ Of course, not all Christians read from such a position.

enjoyment of a vulnerable minority.² There is good reason to suspect that Christians whose primary social location is one of dominance are impeded in their ability to understand this literature on their own—a fact that may help explain why Esther often has garnered an at best lukewarm reception among Christians. Even more problematic in the case of Esther is the fact that Christians became, in many eras and regions, *the* primary threat to the existence of the community that had birthed this book and continued to receive it as literature closely tied up with its survival of the Christian threat. Christians may struggle to recognize Esther’s subversive humor—so often directed against them in the text’s afterlives—and understand why it is in the canon of Scripture. In these cases, it is necessary for Christians to listen to the ways in which the interpretive riches of Esther have been recognized by Jewish communities. One of these interpretive gifts recognized by Jews has been the opportunity to identify themselves with the book’s heroes and to recognize contemporary oppressors as Hamans. Doing so allows a kind of reckoning with these oppressors—in the hidden transcript, at least, if not in public.

As Justo and Catherine González observe with respect to the interpretation of biblical stories, “the message conveyed by the story depends in part on where we place ourselves in it.”³ Whether such placement of the self and others is consciously chosen or (more often) not, it is a crucial determinant of the perceived meaning of the story. A

² Esther is a work that emerges from “the underside of domination,” as Ellen Davis puts it. *Opening Israel’s Scriptures*, 380. Or, in James C. Scott’s terminology, it is a “hidden transcript.” *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University, 1990).

³ Justo and Catherine González, *The Liberating Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 84, 81.

cursory look at Christian interpretation throughout the ages reveals that they, too, have read the story of Esther from the perspective of its protagonists. Yet careful attention to Jewish reception of Esther provokes questions as to whether Esther and Mordecai truly are the characters whose social location most credibly correspond to the real-life situations of all Christians everywhere.⁴

Of course, social location is a complex phenomenon, and it is a gross oversimplification to treat one religious group throughout time and space as majority/powerful and another as minority/vulnerable. There is temporal variation—times when Christians existed as small, beleaguered minorities subject to the vicissitudes of a hostile imperial Rome and times when they benefited from the full backing of that imperial power. There is geographic variation: contemporary Jewish communities experience a greater sense of minority status within Christian America than in the state of Israel, where it is (Arab) Christians and Muslims who may feel more acutely the challenges of subaltern status. Even within a religious group in one region, there may be enormous variation in relative status and power along racial, gender, or socioeconomic lines. Furthermore, even within a single human there can be elements both of relative power and disempowerment, as González and González explain,

most of us find ourselves in multiple roles. We may be the powerful by race if we are white, yet among the powerless if we are women. We may be part of a powerless group if we are in an ethnic minority, yet if we are well educated and employed, we join the powerful in that category. Even within the family structure,

⁴ Again, I am assuming a reader reading from the upper side of domination. A critical reevaluation of character location by Christians who do not share such a reading position may well discover an appropriate affinity with the vulnerable in the story. For examples of Christians self-locating in the story with Esther and/or Mordecai, see the next chapter.

the child is often the last victim of those who have no one else over whom to rule and yet are oppressed themselves. Our tendency is to claim only one part of our identity, to think of ourselves always as part of the oppressed group or to think of ourselves as the powerful. A much more creative dynamic is possible when we claim both parts of our identity, and the liberation given by the gospel can nurture a constant interior dialogue within our own lives.⁵

Further complicating the matter is the fact that the complexities of the social location of literary characters may mirror those faced by living humans. For example, while we may accurately write of Mordecai or Esther as vulnerable minorities, other facets of their complex situations are that (1) they operate from positions of extreme power in the second half of the story and (2) even from the beginning, they are relatively highly positioned, as indicated by their proximity to the palace and power.⁶ If their positionality is complex, so is their opponent's: even a politically high-status character like Haman had to negotiate the complexities of foreign identity.⁷

⁵ González and González, *Liberating Pulpit*, 28-29. Of course, what González and González are discussing here is better known by the term “intersectionality.” See Chapter 1.

⁶ In fact, Mmadipoane Masenya writes that Esther's position may be too high, too far removed from ordinary life to be of much use to many African women: “The class portrayed in this document cannot be helpful to many African women whose socioeconomic conditions render them largely invisible.” “Esther and Northern Sotho Stories: An African-South African Woman's Commentary,” in *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, 27-49, ed. Musa W. Dube (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 31. On the other hand, Esther seems to function as a role model for women in South Sudan—who know well the reality of the threat of genocide Esther faced—where, Ellen Davis attests, Esther is one of the most popular women's names.

⁷ On Mordecai and Haman as “mutual outsiders,” see Timothy Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 58.

Social location can be complicated. While Christians in America may sometimes experience themselves as under attack, such perceived religious persecution is likely only one facet of a much more complex alignment of power. At the same time, while the case can be made that Christians are numerically and politically dominant in America, it does not mean there are not many Christians in America who are well acquainted with perils akin to those faced by Esther. (I think of those who have faced systemic violence on the basis of race, or those who live in fear and face the constant, complex moral negotiation necessitated by their status as undocumented in this country—insiders, perhaps, from a religious perspective, but outsiders in almost every other way.) Nevertheless, given a long history of Christian alignment with world power, it would be disingenuous for Christians everywhere to identify exclusively with a character like Esther, the underdog who beats the odds, especially since the hidden transcript reveals that Christians more often have been recognized as Haman.

Creating and attending to hidden transcripts is risky for dominant and dominated alike, but it is dangerous in vastly different ways and to different degrees. For the dominated, one of the most obvious risks is that the hidden transcript will be overheard and understood by the dominant and thus spark retribution and further suffering. Indeed, Jews of various times and places have raised the concern that this book (Esther) which is about the survival of a minority may, in fact, make this same minority in later generations odious to the majority among whom they seek to survive.⁸ Indeed, there is clear evidence

⁸ See Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, for examples. The general message from these nineteenth-century thinkers is, to their fellows: they will think Jews are violent and bloodthirsty if we continue to favor this book.

from periods and places as disparate as the Theodosian empire of 408 CE and Hitler's Germany of the 1930s and 40s of Esther's hidden transcript catching the notice of the powers of the day and producing backlash against the Jews.

For the dominant to attend to the hidden transcript is more to risk the survival of one's self-image as just and good than to risk the survival of one's body. As uncomfortable as it may be, Christians must read Esther as a hidden transcript and attend to the even richer transcript of interpretations generated by this book among those who have struggled to survive under Christian domination. The risks to Jews have been and continue to be great whenever Christians have looked closely at Esther and her interpretations and been offended by what they have found there. But those perceptions of offense are alive and well and will continue to have a dangerous afterlife even if Christians never look at Esther again. The only fitting response is to look again, listen more carefully, and to risk attending Esther's carnival.⁹

4.2 Tracing the Hidden Transcript

4.2.1 The Experiential Connection: Haman, Eternal Adversary

In Jewish interpretation of Esther across the ages, there is widespread tradition of associating Haman with contemporary oppressors; not always, but often enough, these oppressors were Christians. This link between Haman and Christians emerges out of an association experiential in nature: that of violent oppression at the hands of Christians.

Haman, known in the Esther story by the epithet "adversary of the Jews" (צַרֵּר הַיְהוּדִים)

⁹ It may be worth comparing these risks to those involved for king and commoner in attending a medieval carnival, as described by Bakhtin. At carnival, unusual license is taken, and kings are mocked and ritually de-crowned. See Chapter 1.

(Esth 8:1; 9:24), has come to represent the spirit of the adversary of the Jews in every generation.¹⁰ Or, perhaps better: Haman is read as a reappearance of Amalek, the archetypal and ancient enemy about which Israel is charged:

Remember what Amalek did to you along the way when you came out from Egypt, that he encountered you along the way and attacked from behind all the stragglers lagging behind you—and you were exhausted and weary. He did not fear God. When God gives you relief from all your enemies who surround you in the land which Adonai, your God, is about to give you as an inheritance to take possession of, you shall wipe out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens. Do not forget! (Deut 25:17-19).¹¹

In the Exodus account, God promises to “completely wipe out the name of Amalek from under the heavens” (17:14). In fact, it is due to his grave failure to destroy the Amalekites in his own generation—particularly the Amalekite King Agag—that Saul is rejected as king (1 Sam 15). Haman is introduced in the Esther account as an Agagite (3:1), and the Amalekite connection of this name is made explicit in reception. Targum Sheni, for example, introduces Haman as “son of King Agag, son of great Amalek.”¹² Midrash Esther Rabbah has Haman claim Amalek as his “original ancestor” (7.13), and presents the Persians warmly introducing Haman as “of royal descent, from the seed of Amalek,

¹⁰ As Eliezer Segal explains, there has been a “repeated tendency of Jews to equate Haman or Amalek with their contemporary enemies,” “The Purim-Shpiel and the Passion Play,” 127-131 in *In Those Days at This Time: Holiness and History in the Jewish Calendar* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007), 131.

¹¹ Biblical translations are author’s own unless otherwise noted.

¹² Bernard Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther: Translated, with Apparatus and Notes* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 151.

and . . . one of the most eminent men of our day” (7.13).¹³ Since Mordecai is introduced as a descendant of Kish (father of Saul), the Esther story has long been understood as a recapitulation of that ancient battle in which the descendant of Saul crushes the descendant of Amalek in his day.¹⁴

Haman, as identified with the eternal spirit of Amalek, has been understood to reappear in generation after generation. In fact, Jewish communities through the centuries have identified new “Hamans” in new situations and even at times inaugurated regional Purims to celebrate these deliverances, understood as recapitulations of the Esther story in their own day and time. Many of these date to the sixteenth century, but as recently as 1944 a version of the Esther scroll, *Megillat Hitler*, was composed in Casablanca to commemorate the liberation of Jews in North Africa.¹⁵

Now, the identification of Haman with someone as universally vilified as Hitler may be readily relatable to contemporary Christians. However, if Christians probe a bit further into the hidden transcript of Jewish readings of Esther, they must eventually encounter a truth much less comfortable: many times throughout the ages, Jews have

¹³ All references to Esther Rabbah, unless otherwise marked, are from H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 9, trans. Maurice Simon (London: Soncino, 1939).

¹⁴ For a discussion of this point, see Aaron Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 86-89.

¹⁵ Elliot Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 312-313. Other examples include regional Purims among Jews in Saragossa, Cairo, Algiers, Crete, and various towns and cities of Italy. The earliest such local Purims date to the sixteenth century, and their celebration continued into the twentieth century. See *ibid.*, 279-315, especially 305-307.

recognized *Christians* as reenacting Haman's part in their own day. As difficult as the association may be to swallow, the interpretive pattern responds logically to two basic facts: (1) as has been established, Jews have read contemporary oppressors across the generations as Hamans/Amaleks; and (2) Christians have oppressed Jews in just about every generation since the fourth century.

When associated with Haman/Amalek, Christians may be named through the sobriquet *Edom*. Edom is, biblically speaking, descended from Esau, who also represents an ancient opponent of Israel/Jacob. Targum and midrash draw a genealogical connection from this ancient opponent to Amalek.¹⁶ In midrash, moreover, Edom is treated as equivalent to Rome.¹⁷ In a proem of *Esther Rabbah*, for example, there are lists of imperial regimes that all brought distress and woe to Israel; in these, Edom follows in fourth position after the consecutively listed Babylon, Media, and Greece—in other words, in the place of Rome (Proem 2).¹⁸ The connection is so clear that translator Maurice Simon glosses Edom as “Rome” in a footnote in his standard edition of the

¹⁶ For the conflict between twin brothers Jacob and Esau, see Gen 27-28. For Jacob as Israel, see Gen 32:28. For Esau as Edom, see Gen 36:1.

¹⁷ This is not to say the midrashim never name Rome directly. In some instances in *Esth. Rab.*, Rome is named or evoked by its own identity or recognizable features. For example, Proem 4 refers to “the days of the Romans” and names the emperors Vespasian and Trajan; elsewhere, Haman accuses the Jews of failing to observe the (Roman) holidays of Calends and Saturnalia (7.12).

¹⁸ *Esther Rabbah*, Proem 2. While the complete *Esther Rabbah* may not have been redacted until the medieval period, the proems in question are ancient, no later than the beginning of the sixth century. See Myron B. Lerner, “The Works of Aggadic Midrash and the Esther Midrashim,” in *The Literature of the Sages* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 187.

midrash.¹⁹ Of course, Christianity's own scriptures and other early writings contain memories of an ancient Rome hostile to its community and practice, and so an identification of Haman/Amalek/Edom with Rome may not elicit much concern. However, Christianity's position within ancient society was not static, and it was not long before Jewish interpreters discerned the spirit of Amalek alive within Christendom as well: as Eliezer Segal explains, "With the Christianization of Rome, some Jews continued to apply the symbolism of Esau to the Christian church and to the Byzantine Empire that was so implacably hostile towards Judaism."²⁰ If Rome represents Christianity, and Edom/Esau stands in for Rome, it is not much of a leap to trace this lineage to Amalek, whose eternal spirit Haman is understood to embody. Jews have readily recognized the reappearance of the spirit of Haman/Amalek at work in Christian dominant powers among whom they struggled to survive as a vulnerable minority. Though it would perhaps be more surprising if the Christian/Haman character association had *not* been made, it is an association with which Christians have largely failed to reckon.

4.2.2 The Exegetical Connection: Haman Crucified

If there were experiential reasons for Jews to associate Christians with Haman, there was also a significant exegetical opportunity. The association between Haman and Christ, and, by extension, Christians, responds to similarities between the fates of Haman and Christ in the Jewish and Christian Scriptures. Both Jesus and Haman die on a tree;

¹⁹ Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, 2, footnote 4.

²⁰ Segal, "Purim-Shpiel and Passion Play," 128-29.

moreover, it is a tree—the cross—that eventually becomes the central identifying symbol of Christianity. This similarity was not lost on Jewish interpreters.²¹

Haman’s fate is indicated in Esther MT with the verb תלה, a root that occurs nine times in the book (2:23; 5:14; 6:4; 7:9, 10; 8:7; 9:13, 14, 25) and refers each time to death upon a wooden implement (ץא, “tree”). Though the precise form of punishment this would designate in the ancient Persian context is a matter of debate (current consensus suggests impalement on a stake), the ancient translations render תלה with verbs that indicate crucifixion, the most common form of capital punishment in the ancient Roman world. The Aramaic versions, for example, use צלב (crucify).²² The Greek version of Esther reflected in the Septuagint (LXX) uses σταυρώ (7:9) and κρεμάννυμι (all other instances). While the semantic range of κρεμάννυμι is broad, indicating various kinds of hanging including but not limited to capital punishment, σταυρώ refers specifically to crucifixion.²³ Since the Greek version of the story is the one that would have been read by the majority of Greek-speaking Jews in the Roman Empire in the first two centuries CE, as T. C. G. Thornton explains, “for many Jews the most familiar crucified figure,

²¹ The similarity was not entirely lost on Christian interpreters, either, although it is treated with much less frequency. As we will see in the following chapter, it produced rather opposite results in Christian interpretation.

²² Eliezer Segal, “Purim-Shpiel and Passion Play,” in *In Those Days at This Time: Holiness and History in the Jewish Calendar* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2007), 128.

²³ In the New Testament, for example, κρεμάννυμι occurs seven times and evokes scenes and concepts as disparate as a millstone hung around a neck (Matt 18:6), the “hanging” of the law and prophets on just two commandments (Matt 22:40), or a snake that has bitten and continues to dangle from a hand (Acts 28:4).

whose death they would read and rejoice every year, was Haman, the arch-enemy of the Jewish people.”²⁴

In fact, the idea that Haman was crucified was widespread among both Christians and Jews in the first few centuries CE. For example, that Haman died on a cross was the understanding of Josephus; what Haman constructed for Mordecai is described as a cross, and his punishment is to be hung on this same cross until dead.²⁵ A few centuries later, Jerome seems to have shared Josephus’s understanding; in his Latin translation Jerome uses the noun *crux* for the locus of death of Haman and his sons (Esth 5:14; 8:7; 9:25 Vulgate).²⁶ Jerome’s understanding of Haman’s execution was persistent enough to reappear a millennium later in at least a few Christian works. Haman is depicted as crucified in works as important as Dante’s *Divine Comedy* and the ceiling of the Sistine

²⁴ T. C. G. Thornton. “The Crucifixion of Haman and the Scandal of the Cross,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986): 426. See also *ibid.*, 420.

²⁵ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, vol. 4, Books 9-11, trans. Ralph Marcus (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1937). What Haman has set up is described as a cross (4:11, lines 261, 266), and his death sentence is described as hanging on the cross until dead (τοῦ σταυροῦ κρεμασθέντα ἀποθανεῖν) (4:11, line 268).

²⁶ Old Latin Esther, by contrast, refers to hanging on a wooden pole at 5:14; 7:9-10; and 8:7 (much of Esther 9, which narrates the killing of the Persians by the Jews, finds no parallel in Old Latin, and this includes 9:25). See Simon Bellmann and Anthea Portier-Young, “The Old Latin Book of Esther: An English Translation,” *Journal for the Study of the Pseudepigrapha* 28, no. 4 (2019): 267-89. Nevertheless, having described Haman’s death as hanging in the aforementioned verses, Old Latin Esther also includes its description as crucifixion at E:18, indicating that a translator or editor could expect readers of the full work to understand hanging and crucifixion as compatible references to the same form of death.

Chapel.²⁷ However, while both Christians and Jews have read Haman’s death as crucifixion, the reading attracted significantly more attention among Jews. While as a common form of Roman punishment, crucifixion “originally had no uniquely Christian associations,” as Segal explains, “for later generations all references to crucifixion were naturally associated with that of Jesus.”²⁸

The exegetical association of Haman and Jesus was not as ‘natural’ for Christians as it seems to have been for Jews, but the textual invitation was certainly there. However broad the usage of κρεμάννυμι and whatever form of a hanging execution it was understood to denote at the time of the of the LXX translation, it is the same verb used by the NT authors a few centuries later to describe Christ’s death. More than half of the NT occurrences of κρεμάννυμι refer to death by hanging/exposure on a tree, and three of these refer to the crucifixion of Christ in particular (Acts 5:30; 10:39; Gal 3:13). Each of these occurrences combines κρεμάννυμι with the prepositional phrase ἐπὶ ξύλου (on a tree/cross), mirroring its use in LXX Esther: Zeresh suggests that Mordecai be hung ἐπὶ τοῦ ξύλου (Esth 5:14); Haman entered the court to convince the king to hang Mordecai ἐπὶ τῷ ξύλῳ (6:4); Haman was hung ἐπὶ τοῦ ξύλου (7:10); and the king uses the

²⁷ Dante, *Purgatorio* XVII, 9-12 (1308-1320). Michelangelo, *The Punishment of Haman*, 1511, fresco, 585 x 985 cm, Cappella Sistina, Vatican. See also the illuminations of Haman on a cross in the *Bible Historiale* (1357), Royal British Library 19 D II, f. 237v. and the “Death of Haman” by the Azor Master in the *Nederlandse Historiebijbel* (c. 1430) at the Royal Library, The Hague.

²⁸ Segal, “Purim-Shpiel and Passion Play,” 128. This is likely due to the general dearth of Christian commentary on Esther for most of the first millennium CE. The more limited ways in which Haman’s death as crucifixion impacted Christian commentary—reflected in the 836 CE commentary of Rabanus Maurus and in the Ordinary Gloss—are explored in the next chapter.

phrase to describe Haman’s death (8:7). In fact, the verb κρεμάννυμι is combined with the phrase ἐπὶ τοῦ ξύλου each time it refers to the death of Haman alone (or the planned death of Mordecai, which lands on Haman’s own head); similarly, it appears in tandem with the same phrase each time it describes the crucifixion of Christ in the NT.²⁹ Between LXX Esther and the NT, there is ample textual invitation to understand Jesus as being subjected to the same kind of death as Haman, however such a death on a tree is conceptualized.³⁰

Of course, Jesus’s death in the NT is linked even more particularly with the verb σταυρόω. Occurring much more frequently in the NT than κρεμάννυμι (forty-two times compared to seven), σταυρόω is strongly associated with the identity of Christ as *the* crucified one. Jesus uses this verb to predict what is about to happen to him (Matt 20:19; 26:2), and the gospel writers use it repeatedly in the crucifixion accounts (Mark 15, seven times; Luke 23, three times; John 19, eight times). After the resurrection, Jesus’ identity as one crucified becomes prominent: angels in the resurrection accounts of both Matt 28:5 and Mark 16:6 recognize that it is “Jesus, the crucified one” (Ἰησοῦν τὸν ἐσταυρωμένον) who is sought. Similarly, Jesus as one crucified becomes

²⁹ When κρεμάννυμι occurs without ἐπὶ τοῦ ξύλου in LXX Esther, it refers to the death or exposure of others—Haman’s ten sons, or the two treasonous eunuchs.

³⁰ Sara Kattan Gribetz notes that “crucifixion is often referred to as a type of hanging in Roman and Christian sources; there does not seem to have been much of a distinction in late antiquities,” “Hanged and Crucified: The Book of Esther and *Toledot Yeshu*,” in Deutsch, Y., Meerson, M., & Schäfer, P., eds., *Toledot Yeshu (‘The Life Story of Jesus’) Revisited: A Princeton Conference* (Princeton: 2001), 170. She explains that “the two forms of death penalty—hanging and crucifixion—were conflated,” and, indeed, a modern alternate title for *Toledot Yeshu* is “The Story of the Hanged One,” *ibid.*, 171.

central in early preaching of the gospel. In Peter’s sermons, it is Jesus, “whom you crucified” (ὃν ὑμεῖς ἐσταυρώσατε Acts 2:36; 4:10) who is Lord and Christ. For Paul, Jesus’ crucifixion becomes similarly the central feature of his proclamation as he explains it to the Corinthians: “But we preach Christ crucified (Χριστὸν ἐσταυρωμένον), a scandal to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23); “I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and this one crucified (Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν καὶ τοῦτον ἐσταυρωμένον)” (2:2).

In fact, the verb σταυρώω is so strongly associated with Christ that it is astonishing to Christian ears (at least mine) to encounter it in association with the archvillain Haman—even more startling that this is the only occurrence of the verb in the (Greek) Old Testament.³¹ In Esth 7:9, having been reminded by Harbona of the stake (ξύλον, tree) Haman had erected, the king says, σταυρωθήτω ἐπ’ αὐτοῦ (7:9). However anachronistic it might be to imagine the practice of crucifixion occurring in the ancient Persian context, the king’s word is identical to that the crowds later shout to the Roman Pilate when asked what should be done with Jesus: “Let him be crucified (Σταυρωθήτω)” (Matt 27:22-23).³²

³¹ Especially since this is the sole occurrence of the verb in the entire Old Testament, at least the Protestant Old Testament. It appears a second time in the additions to Esther (E:18 or Vulgate 16:18). On its occurrence in the additions, see T. C. G. Thornton, “The Crucifixion of Haman and the Scandal of the Cross,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 37 (1986): 421.

³² λέγει αὐτοῖς ὁ Πιλάτος· Τί οὖν ποιήσω Ἰησοῦν τὸν λεγόμενον χριστόν; λέγουσιν πάντες· Σταυρωθήτω. ὁ δὲ ἔφη· Τί γὰρ κακὸν ἐποίησεν; οἱ δὲ περισσῶς ἔκραζον λέγοντες· Σταυρωθήτω (Matt 27:22-23).

Despite such exegetical opportunity, the association of the two crucified ones—Haman and Jesus—has drawn little to no attention in Christian interpretation. By contrast, it became an important locus for interpretive creativity regarding Jewish experiences with Christians and Christendom.³³

4.2.3 *First Hints of the Hidden Transcript as Reported in the Public Transcript*

The first hints of a Jewish identification of Haman specifically with Christ (not merely with Amalek, Edom, or Rome) can be traced back to the Theodosian Code of 438 CE. This codification of the laws of the then Christian Roman Empire contains a statute prohibiting

the Jews from setting fire to Haman in memory of his past punishment, in a certain ceremony of their festival, and from burning with sacrilegious intent a form made to resemble the Holy Cross in contempt of the Christian faith, lest they introduce the sign of our faith into their places, and they shall restrain their rites from ridiculing the Christian law, for they are bound to lose what had been permitted them till now unless they abstain from those matters which are forbidden.³⁴

³³ The only Christian text I am aware of that explores the theological significance of Jesus' and Haman's shared fate—crucifixion—is Wilhelm Vischer's Esther commentary of the 1930s, discussed in Chapter 8. Crucifixion is a prominent theme in anti-Jewish polemic in medieval Christian Esther interpretation, but the readings locate Christ so firmly in the role of King Ahasuerus that the possibility of his crucifixion or of having shared Haman's fate is not in view. Instead, Jews are located in the position of both those who sought his crucifixion and those who end up on Haman's cross. This is discussed in the next chapter.

³⁴ As cited in John Victor Tolan, "The rites of Purim as seen by the Christian Legislator: *Codex Theodosianvs* 16.8.18," in *Ritus Infidelium. Miradas interconfesionales sobre las prácticas religiosas en la Edad Media*, *Collection de la Casa de Velázquez*, ed. José Martínez Gázquez y John Victor Tolan (Madrid, 2013), 166. A codification of a law issued already in 408 CE. See also Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 17; Segal, "Purim-Shpiel and Passion Play," 128.

The existence of such a law suggests that Christians had witnessed or at least heard of some Jews during Purim celebrations burning an effigy of Haman attached to something that looked like a cross and had understood this to be a mockery of the cross of Christ.

Of course, the statute in question records the public transcript, indicating the *dominant* power's perception of Jewish Purim practices. It is not necessarily a reliable witness to actual Jewish practices, let alone to the true meaning of those practices. As we have established, Haman was widely read by Jews as having been crucified, and so it is no surprise that his ritual mocking at Purim would involve cruciform destruction.

Whether an intentional anti-Christian polemic was at play is unclear; in fact, many scholars have dismissed the portrait the Theodosian code paints of Purim practices as at best erroneous ("imagining an anti-Christian affront where none was intended") and perhaps even libelous.³⁵ Eliezer Segal, for example, sees Theodosius's code as yet another in a long line of "instance[s] of Christians permanently typecasting the Jews as the bloodthirsty taunters of their messiah."³⁶ Nevertheless, the Code at least provides access to a Christian understanding of Purim practices that were prevalent enough to attract legislative attention.

Such a perception reappears a few centuries later: a Byzantine pre-baptismal oath broadly dated to the eighth through eleventh centuries required Jewish converts to Christianity to "curse those who keep the festival of the so-called Mordecai . . . nailing

³⁵ Segal, "Purim-Shpiel and Passion Play," 128.

³⁶ Segal, "Purim-Shpiel and Passion Play," 131.

Haman to wood and then mixing him with the emblem of the cross and burning them together, subjecting Christians to all kinds of imprecations and a curse.”³⁷ Segal is right to point out that the alleged Purim offenses implied by Theodosius’s law and by the Byzantine baptismal oath “emanate from hostile sources” and are therefore not reliable for reconstruction of Jewish practices of Purim in these times and places.³⁸ Caution is warranted especially in light of the fact that hostile sources have perpetuated false accusations associated with Purim that have haunted Jews throughout the centuries. Most famous is the notorious Inmestar incident (Syria, early fifth century) in which, according to the account of church historian Socrates Scholasticus, drunken Jewish revelers (perhaps accidentally) killed a Christian child affixed to a cross during their celebrations. Segal emphasizes “we have good reason to suspect the story is nothing more than an anti-Semitic fabrication”; moreover, Socrates’s account is our only source.³⁹ Nevertheless, this one incident, real or not, lies behind centuries of patently false ritual blood accusations against the Jews, including, for example, the belief that Jews require Christian blood for their festivals and for the baking of Purim *Hamentaschen*.⁴⁰

³⁷ Thornton, “Crucifixion of Haman,” 424.

³⁸ Horowitz confirms this assessment, while maintaining his concern about incidents of Jewish violence in association with Purim. He writes: “This subject is fraught with historiographical complexities. For Jewish scholars living in Christian countries writing about Jewish violence against Christians or abuse of Christian symbols on Purim—especially by linking the similar fates of Haman and Jesus—was, as we shall see, no simple matter,” *Reckless Rites*, 16.

³⁹ Segal, “Purim-Shpiel and Passion Play,” 129.

⁴⁰ Segal, “Purim-Shpiel and Passion Play,” 129. See also Horowitz, who traces this history from its first appearance in twelfth-century Europe through the confident articulation of the view published in the propogandist *Der Stürmer* in 1937 that “Today

While caution is necessary when reading Christian sources for evidence of Jewish practices, the Theodosian Code may represent an early glimpse of what within a few centuries would become a widespread hidden transcript. For, as we have seen, there has been ample reason both textually and experientially for Jews to draw associations between Haman and Christ—and between Haman and Christian oppressors. Across the centuries, from ancient Palestine to medieval Europe, there is textual evidence of a robust tradition associating Haman with the crucified Jesus and with Christianity more broadly. It is certainly possible that hints of this hidden transcript had spilled over into public view in the carnivalesque atmosphere of Purim celebrations already in Theodosius's day. In what follows, we trace this lively hidden transcript across time, continents, and genres.

First, a reminder: hidden transcripts emerge in response to experiences of domination. If the Jewish hidden transcript used Haman as a vehicle through which to vent frustration with Christians with such persistence and creativity, it is worth looking for the very real experiences of Christian domination that would have fueled the need for such a transcript in the first place. And if the hidden transcript we discover has a detectable anti-Christian edge, it is worth remembering that the public transcript was often starkly anti-Jewish (although that is a subject for another chapter).

4.2.4 Haman as Christ/Christians in Poetry: Purim Piyyutim

The association of Christians/Jesus with Haman finds rich expression in a collection of Aramaic liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) written for the festival of Purim.

everyone knows that it is the custom of the Jews at the festivals of Purim and Passover to murder non-Jews and use their blood for ritual purposes," *Reckless Rites*, 227.

Composed between the fourth and seventh centuries CE, these poems emerge from a Jewish Palestinian community that knew a vulnerability akin to that experienced by Esther's protagonists. As Laura Lieber explains in her translation and commentary upon the *piyyutim*, "the setting of Esther—a diaspora community in jeopardy and facing an existential crisis—provided Jewish poets of late antiquity with a powerful opportunity to work through their own fraught issues of identity and powerlessness."⁴¹ In particular it seems to have been "the drama of impending catastrophe" that caught the attention of the poets and "resonate[d] with a community that also exist[ed] by virtue of toleration rather than in security."⁴² In several of the poems the villains Haman and Amalek are identified with Jesus and the Christians; this fact provides an illuminating witness to the sense of threat the poets' communities must have experienced at Christian hands.⁴³ Since, as Lieber explains, the poems "dramatize the idea that each generation will triumph over its own Amalek," such a message presumably provided hope to a generation struggling under Christendom.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Laura Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry from Late Antiquity: Translations and Commentaries* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 86.

⁴² Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 87. As Lieber notes, the emphasis of interest was on the experience of "impending catastrophe" rather than on the slaughter at the end of the book.

⁴³ The poems also include one possible reference to Islam. See Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 90.

⁴⁴ Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 89.

One such poem (“A Poetic History”) is an alphabetical acrostic that traces the history of Israel “as a tale of enemies overcome.”⁴⁵ The list of enemies, ranging from Nimrod to the Babylonians, includes such notable foes as Amalek, Sisera, and Sennacherib. Amongst these opponents, however, prominence of place is given to Esau/Edom: Jacob’s twenty-year exile on account of Esau’s hatred is treated expansively near the beginning of the poem, spanning six letters of an acrostic in which most of the historical episodes are treated in just one. Similarly, the end of the poem draws attention back to this same enemy, concluding with a promise of vengeance upon Edom:

He who wrought vengeance on the enemies of old / will destroy the final foes
May he wreak vengeance against the Romans and Saracens⁴⁶ / by the hand of the
Jewish nation!

As it is written:

I will set My vengeance upon Edom by the hand of my people Israel; and they shall act in Edom according to My anger and according to My wrath; and they shall know My vengeance, says the Lord God (Ezek 25:14).

And as it is said:

For the Jews there was light and gladness, joy and honor (Esth 8:16).⁴⁷

Vengeance on Edom is linked by apposition to the joy the Jews had in Esther upon the defeat of Haman (Esth 8:16).⁴⁸ Since, as we have seen, Esau/Edom is strongly associated

⁴⁵ Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 92. The naming and numbering of the poems follows Lieber.

⁴⁶ Romans: “that is, Christians, but perhaps specifically Western or Latin Christianity”; Saracens: “that is, nomads or Arabs, who live in the east.” Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 92.

⁴⁷ *ShBM* 26, lines 48-end. Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 95.

⁴⁸ Notice the point of the plot at which the celebration occurs follows Haman’s demise and the issuing of the counter-edict allowing the Jews to defend themselves and

with Rome and, through Rome, with Christendom, the poem's implication is clear: just as God gave vengeance upon the community's ancient enemies, so God will respond to the community's present enemies. The poem thus illuminates the way in which invocation of the Esther story can performatively become a kind of prayer of imprecation ("May He wreak vengeance . . .").

Although the book of Esther is humorous and the holiday of Purim carnivalesque, many of the *piyyutim* take their cue from references to exile in Esther 2 and "closely resemble the laments (*qinot*) of Tisha b'Av," taking "listeners into the bleakest, most dire moments of Esther's story."⁴⁹ One such lament ("Esther's Entreaty") portrays Esther begging for her people's rescue from Haman. Although it contains no direct reference to Christ or even Edom or Rome, Lieber explains that "[Esther's] words evoke earlier and later crises" and thereby "would have spoken clearly to Jews living under Christian rule in the early Byzantine period."⁵⁰ Thus a prayer for the downfall of these Christian rulers should be heard below the surface of the poem's closing prayer for the downfall of Haman: "Hear our voice / and answer us! // Bring us out / from constraint to freedom // O You who shatter mighty ones / shatter Haman // And let there not be / a restoration of his downfall!"⁵¹

annihilate those who attack them (8:11); it does not celebrate the later, wider killing of Persians.

⁴⁹ Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 86, 96.

⁵⁰ Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 96.

⁵¹ Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 97. Though the implied meaning of such a prayer may be startling to Christian ears, such a sentiment is not in fact foreign to Christian scripture and liturgy. Consider Mary (carrying in her womb the Jesus who—ironically—will

That the carnivalesque holiday of Purim and the humorous book of Esther would spark poems that look more like lament and imprecation strengthens the thesis, developed in other chapters, that Esther's humor is a kind that responds to great pain. The story of Esther and Esther's holiday have provided opportunities for communities not only to laugh at their enemies but also to reencounter in the safe world of play the traumas of domination. The pain of the experience of domination in Christian Byzantium is expressed in the *piyyutim* by linking Christ with Haman in the modes of both humor and lament. The above two *piyyutim* pen the hidden transcript in a minor key; the next two *piyyutim* recapitulate it in a laughing mode.

Humor at Haman's expense comes to the fore in at least two poems in which Haman's downfall is paralleled to that of Jesus. The poem "The Enemies of Israel Hold Forth" is formed as a lengthy collection of dialogues between Haman and the various enemies of Israel throughout the ages (Nimrod, Pharaoh, Amalek, Sisera, Goliath, Sennacherib, etc.).⁵² These characters all are taken from the Jewish Bible, and they appear in the poem in chronological order. The only aberration from this pattern is Jesus, euphemistically called "a certain man." He appears in the middle of this list, out of chronological order, and as the lone character from outside the Jewish Bible, announcing,

become associated with later oppressors), who revels in the way God performs might deeds, scatters the proud, and brings down rulers (see Luke 1:51-52). Her prayer figures prominently in Christian prayer and song, particularly in the Advent season.

⁵² This acrostic poem is only extant up to the letter ז, so the full list of enemies is unclear.

“’Tis I who am called Christ.”⁵³ The poem thus joins Jesus to a long line of biblical enemies of Israel, subjecting him and them both to what Münz-Manor calls carnivalesque ambivalence, “an ambivalence that is characterized by a simultaneous flow of empathy and mockery.”⁵⁴ Each inauspicious character complains to Haman about the fate that has befallen him. Haman replies to the complaints unsympathetically, emphasizing that in each case the punishment was deserved.⁵⁵ In each case, the character attacks back. It is an unruly and contentious ensemble: Amalek critiques Haman for foolishly growing in arrogance and exalting himself, but Haman refuses to listen: “Cut short your words / lest you prattle on,” he responds.⁵⁶ Pharaoh calls Haman a “wicked whelp,” and Haman fires back with worse: “But you are the son of the defiled . . . Judge yourself before me / for all of us can see / that you are the king of lies.”⁵⁷ Sisera mocks Haman for the menial jobs he had to undertake to tend to Mordecai (stories also recounted in the midrashim); Haman compares him to “a stumbling ass / that runs about in disarray,” presumably an

⁵³ Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 123, footnote 202. The Greek loanword *χριστός* is used.

⁵⁴ Ophir Münz-Manor, “Carnavalesque Ambivalence and the Christian Other in Aramaic Poems from Byzantine Palestine,” in *Jews in Byzantium*, ed. Robert Bonfil et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 831. Whereas others see in the poem a parody striking a consistently mocking tone. Münz-Manor has pointed out that Jesus is unique in being the only villain who Haman does not critique, so perhaps he is portrayed with more sympathy and less ire than the others.

⁵⁵ Except in the case of Jesus, as we shall see. For this analysis, see Münz-Manor, “Carnavalesque Ambivalence,” 831.

⁵⁶ Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 118.

⁵⁷ Liber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 117.

unfavorable likening.⁵⁸ Sennacherib calls Haman “deceitful and mocking / and entirely untrustworthy,” and although he concedes that Haman is “cunning,” he chides Haman for failing to learn from his own sad case.⁵⁹ They call each other names: Goliath addresses Haman as “fool” and the Cushite (Pharaoh Neco) says, “A dog are you, and arrogant!”⁶⁰ When Jesus joins the conversation, it is to correct Haman, who seems to think he is special in what he suffered: “You think only of yourself, / that you alone were crucified, / but I participated alongside you.” Jesus then describes his crucifixion and scourging in detail and presents himself as the object of great humiliations, perhaps winning the poem’s contest to determine who is most wretched of all: “Studded with nails / driven into my limbs / an ‘eater of barley’ is better off than I.”⁶¹

In one sense, the poem is sad, as character after character laments his pitiable fate. And yet, it would be people who identify with the victims of these sad villains who dramatize their tales of woe, and the recitation or dramatization would have taken place in the context of a carnivalesque holiday. Read in such a situation, it is most likely that the poem intends to evoke enjoyment at the expense of these villains, whether it comes

⁵⁸ Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 119.

⁵⁹ Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 122. “You should have learned from me / for you are greater than me.”

⁶⁰ Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 120-121.

⁶¹ Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 123. The meaning of ‘eater of barley’ is uncertain; likely a beast of burden or perhaps a gladiator. Gribetz sees in Jesus’s speech to Haman “a glimmer of self-mockery,” hinting at the “irony of his situation,” being born a human and yet worshipped; called a savior and yet suffering a tortured death, “Hanged and Crucified,” 160.

through comedic delight or through *schadenfreude*, the pleasure of hearing them voice their woe. Whether or not something is intended to be humorous is of course a culturally relative question, but here the bent seems to be toward comic pleasure.⁶² The *piyyut* provides opportunities to laugh at these erstwhile oppressors as they lament their fates in over-the-top language and mock one another, saving their victims the trouble of calling them names like “dog” and “stumbling ass.”⁶³ The *piyyut* presents an ensemble cast, a gaggle of unruly villains vying for pride of place, and could have been quite funny to its audience if performed well.⁶⁴ Either way, the poem shows that in Esther interpretation of

⁶² With regard to a different poem, “Zeresh’s Lament,” which Lieber calls “a carnivalesque take on the Passion narrative; whereas Mary mourned one son, Zeresh, Haman’s wife, mourns ten,” Lieber notes “It could have been delivered in tones ranging from ambivalently compassionate to unironically gleeful,” *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 109. The same is true for “The Enemies of Israel Hold Forth.”

⁶³ This view is strengthened by the similarity between the conceit of this poem and that of an extended midrash found in the later section of Esther Rabbah. The midrash in question is a riotous parody of Haman’s speech before the king as an extended reflection on how one villain after the other failed before (Est. Rab. 7.13). It includes a similar cast of characters—Pharaoh, Amalek, Balaam, the kings of Og and Sihon, Sisera, Agag, and Nebuchadnezzar—although its portrayal of them is more obviously tongue-in-cheek, depicting them as innocent, hapless victims of the “ungrateful” Israelites. In a similar vein, although presented in a less apparently comedic tone, R. Levi describes Israel’s long train of historic enemies as each attempting to improve on the one previous, “each one devising according to his own idea and saying, ‘My device is better than yours’” (7.23). Although R. Levi’s telling does not include Jesus, it does begin with Esau, who as has been established is often associated through Edom with Christian Rome. As an extended debate about the various reasons the enemies of Israel failed throughout history, and how they learned (or at least *should* have learned) from their forerunners’ mistakes, this poem participates in a wider conceit of what I might call the “community of villains” as comrades in a similar aim who both commiserate in their common woe and deride each other for their follies and failings.

⁶⁴ Lieber suggests the multi-voiced poem “may have been brought to life by a single cantor using body language, physical positioning, and intonation to convey the persona of Haman and the others, or perhaps by multiple performers,” *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 115.

the Byzantine era Jesus seemed a fitting character to include among the parade of historical enemies associated with Haman's ilk.

The final poem to consider, "A Dispute among Trees," is unambiguously humorous. It depicts a series of trees of different varieties, each giving their regrets as to why they are unable to host Haman's crucifixion. They engage in an anti-competition which, in Lieber's words, "reflects the trees' lack of enthusiasm for a task—they engage in a contest to evade a duty rather than a competition to secure an honor."⁶⁵ The trees act as though they wish they could accept the dubious honor. The fig tree, followed by the olive, myrtle, and pistachio each exclaim, "Oh, that he could be crucified at my top / — but I can't . . . ," each coming up with different reasons why. In the end, they are all spared the duty when the cedar comes up with the solution: "Hang him / and his ten sons / On the cross / that he prepared for himself!"⁶⁶ The poem is obviously designed to mock Haman by means of the fact that "no tree is eager to be associated with him in his death."⁶⁷

The contest of the trees motif is not unique, appearing also in Judges 9, Targum Sheni, Esther Rabbah, and Toledot Yeshu.⁶⁸ In Toledot Yeshu (treated below), it is Jesus

⁶⁵ Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 99-100.

⁶⁶ Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 102.

⁶⁷ Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 100.

⁶⁸ Although in Esther Rabbah (9.2) the trees are all willing to offer their services, and the person for whom the tree is being prepared is Mordecai. By the end of this particular midrash it becomes clear that only the thorn is fitting for the hanging of a "thorn" like Haman.

who is the target of the comedy of the catalogue of trees. Here, the focus is on Haman. Nevertheless, all the humor at Haman's expense can be heard on a double level as applying to Jesus as well, for in the opening lines, Haman is presented as "seek[ing] to ascend / To the quarters / of the son of Pandera."⁶⁹ As Lieber explains, the son of Pandera is a "particularly polemical" way of invoking Jesus, as it alludes to the tradition of reading Jesus as not the product of a virgin birth but as the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier named Pandera. Crucifixion, the means of Haman's execution in this poem, is so inextricably associated with Jesus that the top of a cross can be called his "quarters." The *piyyut* thus anachronistically places Jesus as prior to and perhaps the greater reference point for that which Haman represents. In other words, Jesus is so strongly associated with Haman that Haman is represented as imitating him rather than the other way around.⁷⁰ Like Haman, the Jesus who is so beloved of the powerful under whom the Jews of Byzantium negotiate their vulnerable existence is someone with whom no self-respecting tree would want to associate.

The four Purim *piyyutim* discussed here give witness to a rich hidden transcript linking Jesus with Haman—the paradigmatic enemy of Israel—and vice versa. The association centers around the pair's shared fate of crucifixion. Less explicit but nonetheless discernible in the mode of lament are imprecations against Christendom as Edom. In the humorous poems, poetic conceits like the contest of the trees or an

⁶⁹ Lieber, *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 100.

⁷⁰ In Lieber's words, "The poet denies any kind of distinctiveness to these paradigmatic foes. They do not even have the privilege of being unique," *Jewish Aramaic Poetry*, 100.

argument among the enemies of Israel are used to display the humiliation of both Haman and Jesus and allow the audience to take pleasure in their poetic diminishment.

4.2.5 *Haman as Christ/Christians in Parody: Toledot Yeshu*

Similar modes of associating Christ with Haman appear in *Toledot Yeshu*, a sixth- to ninth-century collection of parodies of Jesus' life.⁷¹ The work provides a counter-narrative to Christian accounts, telling the 'real story' of Jesus as the illegitimate child of a Roman soldier (rather than the son of God), a false prophet who worked magic (rather than miracles), and, in the end, a corpse relocated by the gardener (rather than an ascended Lord). In contrast to the works discussed to this point, *Toledot Yeshu* does not purport to retell the Esther story; its focus is on the life of Jesus. Nevertheless, Gribetz contends that "references to Haman and the Book of Esther are subtly intertwined" into this account of Jesus' life.⁷²

The clearest evocation of an association between Haman and Jesus comes at the point of Jesus' death, when the tree upon which he is supposed to be crucified breaks. As the story goes, Jesus has used magic to make it so that no tree will or can hold him and so that it should be impossible to crucify him. Yet his clever plan fails to account for the existence of a tree-like plant that is not technically a tree. Jesus is thus thwarted and

⁷¹ Gribetz, "Hanged and Crucified," 160. The work exists in many versions. Sarah Emanuel helpfully suggests the title "*Toledot Yeshu*" translates the first words of Matthew's gospel, Βίβλος γενέσεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (1:1) (Virtual Presentation, SBL 2020, "Roasting Rome: Humor as Jewish Imperial Resistance in the Book of Revelation"). The opening words of Matthew themselves imitate Genesis's recurring phrase, אֹתָהּ הָ בִּיבְלוֹס גֵּנֶסֶעוֹס / תולדות ה'א (Gen 2:4, etc.), echoed in the title "*Toledot*."

⁷² Gribetz notes that there are a variety of manuscripts of *Toledot Yeshu*, but they all contain references to Esther, "Hanged and Crucified," 161-2.

narratively killed off in a humiliating way: upon a cabbage stalk.⁷³ Toledot's crucifixion account participates in the wider tree-selection trope seen in targumic and midrashic treatment of Haman, particularly those in which the trees each seek to avoid bearing the body of Haman resulting in his disposal upon a plant of no merit. Evoking such an association between Haman and Jesus sends a clear message. As Gribetz explains:

The presentations of Jesus as a Haman-like figure and the devout Jews as comparable to Esther and Mordecai, allude to the gravity of the threat Toledot Yeshu's authors perceived in Jesus (and, by extension, Christianity). Haman sought physically to destroy the Jews. . . . Jesus of the canonical Gospels, of course, desired nothing of the sort. But for Toledot Yeshu's authors, we might surmise, the Jewish community was at risk: Christianity, like Haman, represented an existential threat to Judaism, whether because of the threat of Christian violence, or (ironically) because of the allure of Christianity.⁷⁴

Just as the reading of the Haman story allowed hearers on Purim to mock that villain and enjoy his downfall, so a work like Toledot Yeshu provides opportunity to mock Christ and his cross, a symbol that held so much fear and power. Rehearsing Christ's downfall—he was, after all, by all accounts crucified like Haman—also provided an opportunity to enlarge imaginations in a hopeful direction. Perhaps it looked like Christians would always be in power and would always threaten Jewish existence, but if Haman met his downfall, maybe Christian oppressors would one day be brought low too. As Gribetz writes, the account thus “functions simultaneously as a polemic against

⁷³ Gribetz, “Hanged and Crucified,” 163.

⁷⁴ Gribetz, “Hanged and Crucified,” 168.

Christianity and as a story of encouragement to those Jews for whom Christianity appeared to be an insuperable threat.”⁷⁵

The precise historical shape and locale of the threat is difficult to ascertain, as Toledot Yeshu is difficult to date. Yet as we have seen, the link between Haman and Jesus can reasonably be traced to at least the fifth century, and it continued through the centuries. The association “was common to the numerous historical contexts into which the compositions of Toledot Yeshu fit, regardless of the precise dating of the various traditions in and the numerous version of” it.⁷⁶ Since Christianity represented the most persistent threat to their existence, Jews in various locales and ages understandably read Haman “as a double or counterpart of Jesus” and even “a *prototype* for Christianity more generally.”⁷⁷

4.2.6 Midrash

The association of Haman with Christ/Christians, so richly expressed in poetry and parody, also seems to have left its mark on later midrashim in the form of an intensification of references to crucifixion.⁷⁸ In midrash Panim Acherot B, a running commentary on Esther 1-7 redacted in the seventh to eighth century, the verb צלב occurs more frequently than in other midrashim. Translators Dagmar Börner-Klein and Elisabeth

⁷⁵ Gribetz, “Hanged and Crucified,” 161.

⁷⁶ Gribetz, “Hanged and Crucified,” 169.

⁷⁷ Gribetz, “Hanged and Crucified,” 175.

⁷⁸ In more ancient midrashim (for example, the earlier portions of Esther Rabbah), the place of Christianity may be discerned in references to Edom and Amalek, but the language of crucifixion and the cross is not as present.

Hollender attribute this to a thoroughgoing replacement of tree/hanging references with cross/crucifixion language.⁷⁹ For example, in its comment on Esth 5:14, Panim Acherot B records Zeresh's suggestion that Haman request Mordecai be hung (תלה) and then clarifies that it will be the sight of his enemy crucified that will give Haman joy: וראה את שמה שנאך צלוב כנגדך ולבך שמח.⁸⁰ Similarly in its comment on the part of the verse where Haman makes the "tree" (ויעש העץ), the midrash clarifies that this tree is a cross: כן הוא עושה צלוב לו ולבניו.⁸¹

Of course, as we saw, the ancient versions of Esther already employed cross/cruciform language that reflected the form of execution most prevalent in the Roman world. For example, the Aramaic versions used צלב (crucify), and no connection to the Christian cross was necessarily implied. In Panim Acherot B, however, there does seem to be a pointed challenge to Christians, since it emphasizes that crucifixion is the one form of peril no one has ever escaped.⁸² Abba Gurion, a tenth-century text that

⁷⁹ Dagmar Börner-Klein and Elisabeth Hollender, trans., *Rabbinische Kommentare zum Buch Ester*, vol. 2, *Die Midraschim zu Ester* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 84. "Auffällig ist in Panim Acherim B die fast durchgehende Verwendung von צלב (kreuzigen) als von Haman gewählte Todesart für Mordechai, nach der er schließlich selbst gerichtet wird."

⁸⁰ Salomon Buber, ed., *Sifre de-agadeta 'al Megilat Ester* (Vilnius: 1886), 73. No English translation of this text is available; for German, see Dagmar Börner-Klein and Elisabeth Hollender, *Rabbinische Kommentare zum Buch Ester*, Vol. 2, *Die Midraschim zu Ester*: "[S]iehst deinen Feind dir gegenüber gekreuzigt. Und dein Herz freut sich," 118.

⁸¹ Buber, *Sifre de-agadeta*, 73. Cf. Börner-Klein and Hollender: "So machte er ein Kreuz für sich und seine Söhne," *Rabbinische Kommentare*, 118.

⁸² Panim Acherim on Esth 5:9. Börner-Klein and Hollender: "Und was sah er [für einen Grund], ihn kreuzigen [zu wollen]? Vielmehr sagte er: Siehe, es ist eine Zeit, in der der Heilige, gepriesen sei er, ihn von jeder Sache erretten kann [außer vor dem Kreuzigen]," *Rabbinische Kommentare*, 115.

became one of the most popular Esther midrashim in the medieval period, participates in the same polemic. It has Zeresh advise Haman to do away with Mordecai on a cross for a very specific reason: “Crucify him on a cross, because one cannot find anyone who has ever escaped it [that method of execution]” (אלא צלוב יתיה על צליבא דלא אשכחן דשיזיב (מניה).⁸³ Neither Christ nor the Christians need to be named in order for it to be clear that the claim that no one has ever been saved from crucifixion directly undercuts the central Christian claim that Jesus, the Crucified One, lives.⁸⁴ Börner-Klein and Hollender are thus correct in their contention that the emphasis of these two works upon crucifixion should, in context, be understood as “a conscious choice based on anti-Christian polemic.”⁸⁵

A similar impulse seems to be at work in the thirteenth-century midrashic anthology *Yalqut Shim'oni* (*Yalqut*), where the Haman/cross association is also strong. One poetic line, for example, delights in the symmetry of the reversal Mordechai

⁸³ Abba Gurion on Esth 5:14. Buber, *Sifre de-agadeta*, 37. Cf. Börner-Klein and Hollender: “Vielmehr, kreuzige ihn mit einem Kreuz, denn man findet keinen, der davon errettet wurde,” *Rabbinische Kommentare*, 57.

⁸⁴ This substitution again, Börner-Klein and Hollender confirm, “muss in diesem Kontext als anti-christliche Polemik verstanden werden,” *Rabbinische Kommentare*, 116, footnote 134.

⁸⁵ Börner-Klein and Hollender, *Rabbinische Kommentare*, 84, my translation. German: “die fast durchgehende Verwendung von צלב (kreuzigen) als von Haman gewählte Todesart für Mordechai, nach der er schließlich selbst gerichtet wird. Panim Acherim B benutzt—konsequenter als andere Midrashcim—nicht die biblische Formulierung „ans Holz hängen“, sondern den zuerst in der Mischna belegten Begriff, der die römische Hinrichtungsart des Kreuzigens bezeichnet, mit der auch Jesus hingerichtet wurde. Hier ist eine bewusste, auf anti-christlicher Polemik beruhende Wortwahl anzunehmen. (Seresch rät Haman zur Todesart des Kreuzigens mit dem Argument, vom Kreuzestod sei noch nie jemand errettet worden.)”

experienced: “Mordecai—yesterday he was about to be crucified, and now he crucifies his crucifier.”⁸⁶ Similarly, at the point in the plot where Bigtan and Teresh have been executed and Haman is first introduced (Esth 3:1), Yalqut alerts its audience to the happy ending they can expect: “The one who allowed us to see the crucifixion of Bigtan and Teresh will also let us see Haman’s. The one who demands it from the former will also demand it from the latter.”⁸⁷ Despite the fact that the Yalqut is an anthological work, most of its crucifixion references lack parallels in earlier literature. There is thus good reason to surmise, as Kogman-Appel does, that the additional references to crucifixion are “modifications made in thirteenth-century Germany . . . adding an explicitly anti-Christian polemical feature to the earlier midrashic sources the Yalqut relies on.”⁸⁸

Interestingly, the cross of Christianity is evoked in the midrashim not only as a site of execution shared by Haman and Jesus but also as an idolatrous symbol shared by Haman and Christians. The tradition responds to a puzzle in the plot of Esther, the question of why Mordecai would have refused to kneel to Haman despite the king’s command (Esth 3:2-5). Esther itself gives no explanation, and this gap in detail has been

⁸⁶ Yalqut on Esth 2 :5. Börner-Klein and Hollender, *Rabbinische Kommentare*, 453. “Mordechai—gestern war er zur Kreuzigung vorgesehen und jetzt kreuzigt er seinen Kreuziger.”

⁸⁷ Yalqut on Esth 3:1. Börner-Klein and Hollender, *Rabbinische Kommentare*, 466. “Wer uns die Kreuzigung von Bigtan und Teresch sehen lässt, der wird uns auch den Fall Hamans sehen lassen. Wer es von den Früheren einfordert, wird es auch von den Späteren einfordern.” My translation of the German.

⁸⁸ Katrin Kogman-Appel, “The Tree of Death and the Tree of Life: The Hanging of Haman in Medieval Jewish Manuscript Painting,” in *Between the Image and the Word: Essays in Honor of John Plummer*, ed. Colum Hourihane (University Park: Penn State University, 2005), 198.

explored in interpretations throughout the ages, since Mordecai’s choice has such grave consequences, provoking as it does Haman’s wish to destroy Mordecai’s entire people (3:6). Even the patriarchs bowed to other humans, and if it were mere stubbornness or pride that kept Mordecai from bowing, that would seem a selfish, reckless endangerment of his people. The solution the tradition provides is that Haman had affixed some sort of embroidered image to his clothing. In *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* (eighth-century Palestine), for example, Haman “had an ‘image’ [צלם] embroidered on his garment, and anyone who bowed down to Haman bowed also to the ‘abomination’ [תועבה] which he had made. Mordecai saw this and did not consent to bow down to his ‘disgusting thing’ [שקוץ].”⁸⁹ A righteous man like Mordecai, being no idolater, could not bow. As Horowitz explains, “The author of this late midrash transforms Haman into a Christian bishop who proudly wears upon his chest the sign of the cross, referred to by the uncomplimentary trinity of Hebrew terms” (צלם, תועבה, and שקוץ).⁹⁰ This midrash witnesses to—or perhaps better, nurtures—the offstage understanding that the abominable Haman was, of course, a Christian—and Christians, by venerating the cross, practice idolatry.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Translation from Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 157. For the Hebrew text (added above), see Dagmar Börner-Klein, *Pirke de-Rabbi Elieser* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2004), 689. Börner-Klein’s German translation obscures the variety of terms somewhat by using “Götzen” (idols) for both תועבה and שקוץ.

⁹⁰ Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 157-8.

⁹¹ Similarly, in *Esth. Rab.*: “the king ordered all to bow down and prostrate themselves before him [Haman]. What did Haman then do? He attached an embroidered image to his garment upon his breast, and everyone who bowed down to Haman bowed down to the image” (7.5). However, in this case it is less clear than in PRE that the image in question is a cross.

Beyond clearing Mordecai of the suspicion of reckless pride, the interpretation also became a point of association between the Haman of the world of Esther and the crusaders of the medieval world. For they, too, would have an embroidered image on their clothing—the image of the cross. And how to respond—whether or not to ‘kneel to’ these dominant powers—would have been a question of pressing, ongoing concern for medieval Jews. In other words, this is yet another example of Jews recognizing Haman in the actions of the Christians of their day, albeit in connection with an episode at the very beginning of Haman’s story (Esth 3:2) rather than at the point of his demise (7:10).

4.2.7 Thirteenth- and Fourteenth-Century Tree Imagery

The well-developed association of Christ/Christians and the cross with Haman appears with varying degrees of explicitness across the ages. The scholar of Hebrew manuscript painting Katrin Kogman-Appel argues that this same message is discernible in a more disguised fashion in Jewish art of thirteenth- to fourteenth-century Franconia (southern Germany). In a time and place of increasing violence against Jews, Jewish manuscript illuminators seem to have taken up motifs from Christian art and transformed them into a subversive, visual message.

The Tree of Jesse and the Tree of Life are both important motifs in medieval Christian art. Both draw on themes found in Hebrew Scriptures—the tree in Eden and the shoot emerging from the stump of Jesse—to communicate specifically Christian messages. A Tree of Jesse, for example, might emerge from a reclined Jesse’s chest and bear several prominent figures from the Hebrew Scriptures on its branches, yet it will

culminate in the prominent depiction of Jesus.⁹² The tree thus communicates the Christian understanding of the connection between the Old Testament and the New; Jesus is part of this family tree and grows out of the “stump” of Jesse. The image may not be directly anti-Jewish, but it does imply a certain deadness to Hebrew Scriptures apart from the life of Christ. Similarly, Christian Tree of Life imagery may merge the Edenic tree with the cross, displaying a crucified Christ thereupon. The implication is that the tree upon which Jesus died is the tree through which life is received.

While the Christian Tree of Life need not communicate a directly anti-Jewish message, it often did. For example, the Tree of Life miniature in the Scherenberg Psalter (13th century) includes a depiction of crowned *Ecclesia* joyfully receiving life (represented in the chalice collecting Christ’s blood) while opposite her, veiled *Synagoga*, head bowed, turns away.⁹³ In another example, the Tree of Jesse in the Kremsmünster *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, a tree emerging from Jesse’s chest grows

⁹² Or, at times, Mary holding the child Jesus. For an example c. 1260, see Wurzel Jesse mit Maria und Kind, Miniatur aus dem Scherenberg-Psalter, Pergamenthandschrift, 158 Blätter, 18.5 x 13 cm; Straßburg, Badische Landesbibliothek, Cod. St. Peter perg. 139, Blatt 7v.

⁹³ Straßburg, c. 1260. Badische Landesbibliothek, Cod. St. Peter perg. 139, Blatt 8r. https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Cod_St_Peter_perg_139_Scherenberg-Psalter_8r.jpg&oldid=321781604. *Synagoga* and *Ecclesia* are personifications of the two ‘sisters’—Synagogue and Church—frequently used in Christian literature and art to represent both their similarities and strongly polemical polar opposition. See Miri Rubin, “*Ecclesia* and *Synagoga*: The Changing Meaning of a Powerful Pairing,” in *Conflict and Religious Conversation in Latin Christendom*, ed. Israel Yuval and Ram Ben-Shalom, 55-86 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014) and Nina Rowe, *The Jew, the Cathedral, and the Medieval City: Synagoga and Ecclesia in the Thirteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

toward the top into “vegetal cross carrying the Crucified.”⁹⁴ The image weaves together many themes: the fulfillment of the Old Testament in the New, Jesus’s human descent from Jesse, and the crucifixion tree as, paradoxically, a tree of life for those identified with Christ. Importantly, it does not leave the viewer wondering about the implications of these beliefs for Jews; rather, it includes crowned *Ecclesia* and—far off in the corner—*Synagoga*, blindfolded and clutching a goat.

Startingly, Jewish miniatures of Haman from the same period and region resemble these kinds of Christian trees. For example, viewed out of context and without close examination, the Worms Mahzor (13th century) icon of Haman and his sons hanged might easily be mistaken for a Tree of Jesse, with its various figures suspended in medallions on a tree and one figure prominently placed at the top.⁹⁵ Yet whereas in a Christian Tree of Jesse the figure at the top would be Jesus, here it is Haman. Furthermore, upon closer examination, the ten medallions depict not eminent figures from the Old Testament but Haman’s sons, each with his hands bound. Another miniature, the hanging of Haman and his sons in a German Mahzor (c. 1290) bears striking resemblance to the Tree of Life in Gisela von Kerssenbrock’s Gradual (c. 1300), including the placement of animals on

⁹⁴ Kogman-Appel, “Tree of Death,” 189. Anonymous, “Jessebaum,” *Speculum Humanae Salvationis aus Weißenau* (14th century). Illumination. Codex Cremifanensis 243, fol. 55r. Stiftsbibliothek Kremsmünster.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cod_Crem_243_img01.jpg.

⁹⁵ Worms Mahzor, Vol 1. Fol. 19. Würzburg, 1272.
<http://cja.huji.ac.il/browser.php?mode=alone&id=9153>

either side of the base of the tree.⁹⁶ Each of these Mahzors, along with other illuminations, “takes up the Christian motifs of the Tree of Jesse and the closely related Tree of Life and translates them to represent a sobering, large tree of evil and death, thus inverting some of Christianity’s most sanctified images.”⁹⁷

The weakness in this argument is that even though the manuscripts were made for Jewish patrons, the illuminators themselves are anonymous. It is impossible to know if the artists were themselves Jews; they may have been Christian miniaturists hired for the project. Complicating matters is the vexed question of whether the use of an image reflects purposeful evocation or perhaps general borrowing from a common vocabulary of images (i.e., from an idea of what a tree should look like, rather than an imitation of a specifically Christian tree). These are difficulties of which Kogman-Appel is well aware.⁹⁸ Nevertheless, the patrons of the illuminations were Jews, and it is at least plausible that the miniatures they commissioned participate in the well-documented Haman/Christian association reflected in the written works explored in this chapter. The

⁹⁶ Haman’s Tree, German Mahzor. Dresden, 1290. <https://talivirtualmidrash.org.il/double-mahzor-a46a-f-82r-hamans-tree/>. Tree of Life, Gisela von Kerssenbrock Gradual, c. 1300. <https://theindex-princeton-edu.proxy.lib.duke.edu/s/view/ViewWorkOfArt.action?id=0FB07544-0C7D-455B-B3C4-2FEA3AC343D6>

⁹⁷ Kogman-Appel, “Tree of Death,” 188. According to Kogman-Appel, this was conscious borrowing: “they were aware of its implications and were creative in transferring it into an image with a distinct polemical message.”

⁹⁸ Idem., “Pictorial Messages in Mediaeval Illuminated Hebrew Books: Some Methodological Considerations,” in *Jewish Manuscript Cultures*, ed. Irina Wandrey (De Gruyter, 2017), 443-67. Kogman-Appel explores, for example the questions raised by the “three-way relationship between patrons, artists, and viewers,” *ibid.* 443. Many thanks to Jonathan Homrighausen for pointing out the challenges of this reading.

miniatures do seem to invoke the longstanding association between Jesus's tree and Haman's.

The symbol of life so cherished by Christians could well have come to represent to Jews in this era an emblem of death. Indeed, as Kogman-Appel explains, the situation for Jews under Christian domination by the thirteenth century had become grim:

What had begun in late Antiquity as a relationship between two competing cultures had grown into a majority culture violently persecuting the Jewish minority. Late antique and early medieval anti-Judaism did not normally call for violence. In the post-Crusade atmosphere of the thirteenth century, however, anti-Jewish hostility and bloodshed had become the rule.⁹⁹

The Haman tree miniatures were composed in a world in which “religiously motivated violence had become an integral characteristic of Christian society” and “Jews and heretics were to be eliminated either by conversion or by persecution and expulsion.”¹⁰⁰ Kogman-Appel cites for example the killing of thousands of Jews in France between the 1230s and 1250s, the incitement to anti-Jewish violence by the preaching of Berthold of Regensburg in Germany in the 1240s-1260s, the Rintfleisch massacres of 1298 which “involved the whole of Franconia and parts of Bavaria, including at least forty-four communities,” the Armleder massacres from 1336-38, and Europe-wide persecution of Jews during the Black Plague.¹⁰¹ Such persecutions were fueled by anti-Jewish

⁹⁹ Kogman-Appel, “Tree of Death,” 192.

¹⁰⁰ Kogman-Appel, “Tree of Death,” 192.

¹⁰¹ Kogman-Appel, “Tree of Death,” 193-4.

stereotypes, including accusations of ritual murder associated with Jewish celebrations like Purim.

Hidden transcripts, as James C. Scott's work demonstrates, are products of domination, and, as Scott notes, "If the domination is particularly severe, it is likely to produce a hidden transcript of corresponding richness."¹⁰² In such cases, Scott also leads us to expect symbols of the dominant to be taken up and inverted against them. Following this reasoning, the message of Jewish iconography of Haman in thirteenth-century Franconia—at least for those sensitive to the plight of the Jews—may well be that the savior the Christians worship is a Hamanic figure, the archetypal adversary of the Jews; his tree (the cross) represents those who seek Jewish annihilation. Even more provocatively, by associating Haman with Jesus, the miniatures may imply that just as Haman was defeated, so too will be the Christian Hamans who currently threaten. This is a rather daring message for a vulnerable minority to present in a world where retribution could be severe.¹⁰³

Yet if Jewish tree imagery expressed an implicit wish for Christian defeat, it is important to remember that Christian tree art of the era often proclaimed its anti-Jewish message openly.¹⁰⁴ Living Cross imagery, for example, combined the trees of crucifixion

¹⁰² Scott, *Domination*, 27.

¹⁰³ Scott leads us to expect an element of disguise in the hidden transcript in cases where severe retribution is possible, as clearly would have been the case for Jews in thirteenth-century Franconia.

¹⁰⁴ Kogman-Appel, "Tree of Death," 190. As Kogman-Appel explains, "From the early thirteenth century onward, the tree motif could often convey a polemical anti-Jewish undertone."

and life with the popular theme of triumphant *Ecclesia* and defeated *Synagoga*. Kogman-Appel describes what one might typically see in such a Living Cross:

the Crucified appears on a tree-cross whose right branch grows into a hand blessing *ecclesia*, whereas the sword-grasping extension of the left branch pierces the figure of *synagoga*. The latter is shown in a particularly derogatory manner, riding a goat, or a donkey, or some other demonic creature.¹⁰⁵

(For a visual reference see the Living Cross, a fresco in the chapel of St. Francis of Assisi in Poniky, Slovakia dating from 1310.) The visual is violently anti-Jewish—in Kogman-Appel’s words, “not only legitimizing violent persecution of the Jews and bloodshed, but actually calling for it.” The living tree is, for Jews, very clearly a tree that invites their own annihilation. Similarly, Christian portrayals of the trees of good and evil take up the message of Jewish doom. In them, the tree of good is identified with *Ecclesia*, the “lively, fresh, and colorful” portrayal of which contrasts with “the monochromatic, dry” and “barren fig tree” (cf. Matt. 21:18-20) that represents *Synagoga*.¹⁰⁶ As if the message were not clear enough, an axe is laid at the latter’s roots (cf. Matt. 3:10). If Jewish art of the thirteenth century “inverts some of Christianity’s most sanctified images,” it does so in a context where Christian tree imagery poses an unmistakable negation of their own community’s right to exist—an Hamanic message if there ever was one.¹⁰⁷ Thirteenth-

¹⁰⁵ Kogman-Appel, “Tree of Death,” 190. For more on the iconography of the Living Cross, see Achim Timmermann, “The Avenging Crucifix: Some Observations on the Iconography of the Living Cross,” *Gesta* 40, no. 2 (2001): 141-60. Accessed February 17, 2021. doi:10.2307/767243.

¹⁰⁶ Kogman-Appel, “Tree of Death,” 190.

¹⁰⁷ Kogman-Appel, “Tree of Death,” 188.

century Franconian Jewish miniatures depicting Haman's death thus may represent a recapitulation of the richly developed association of Haman with Christ/Christians.

4.2.8 *Outside Christian Lands: Abraham Saba's Esther Commentary*

If its articulation is somewhat ambiguous in the miniatures above, the identification of Christ/Christians with Haman comes to explicit expression in the late fifteenth-century commentary of Abraham Saba on the book of Esther.¹⁰⁸ Saba originally wrote his commentary on Esther in Portugal, where he had taken refuge after his 1492 expulsion from Spain. Yet just four years later, King Manuel I of Portugal ordered the expulsion of all Jews, the conversion of their children, and the burning of all Hebrew books. Saba thus lost everything dear to him, as Abraham Gross explains:

Let us simply list all that he had prior to his personal disaster and that was lost to him within a very brief period. He had a wife and two very much beloved, married sons. He owned a big library, which was a rare and precious property in those days. From the fluency of his quotations from memory, it is obvious that he made good use of it, and consequently was sentimentally attached to it. He had autographs of his commentaries on ten biblical books (Pentateuch and Five Scrolls), on one tractate (Avot), and a code of Qabbalistic laws and customs, which represented several years of labor. . . . All that was close and dear to him vanished. . . . In addition, he saw a mass 'spiritual death'—the loss of the great Jewry of Portugal, including the refugees from Spain, after the various stages of persecutions—previously unheard of and conducted by the Crown itself.¹⁰⁹

Whatever the original, lost version had looked like, the Esther commentary Saba rewrites from North Africa in the immediate wake of these losses is marked through by the trauma he suffered at Christian hands. It was as if the Esther story had played out before his own

¹⁰⁸ On Saba's life and writing see Abraham Gross, *Iberian Jewry from Twilight to Dawn: The World of Rabbi Abraham Saba* (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

¹⁰⁹ Gross, *Iberian Jewry*, 16.

eyes, but without the happy ending. And this time the role of Haman had been reenacted in history by the Portuguese and Spanish Christians.

Saba's association of Haman with Christians was, as we have seen, not original; by the time the story replayed itself in his own life, he was able to draw from a rich and centuries-old interpretive tradition developed offstage in Purim celebrations, midrash, poetry, and art. By Saba's time, for example, it had long been a rabbinic practice to understand Edom as Christendom and the command to bow to Haman as a temptation to idolatry. Saba continues this interpretive practice and makes the connection more explicit, depicting Haman as wearing a cross on his chest, "like the Edomite kings [read: Portuguese or Spanish Christian kings] who have their officials come in, carry on their clothes a cross which is their abomination, so that everyone who sees them would kneel or bow down."¹¹⁰ For Saba, the line between Haman and the Portuguese authorities and between the past and the present is a thin one indeed; as he retells the Esther story, he slips easily between the two: "there is no better proof than our own experience that we saw with our own eyes, that the Edomites do all sorts of tricks to Israel to frighten and cause them to panic, so that they will pity their children and convert. And this was Haman's intention."¹¹¹

Saba seems haunted by his inability to protect his children from forced conversion and wonders whether this outcome was worse than death. As he considers Mordecai's inability to prevent Esther from being taken up into the Persian harem, Saba wonders

¹¹⁰ Saba as cited by Gross, *Iberian Jewry*, 21.

¹¹¹ Saba, cited in Gross, *Iberian Jewry*, 22.

“why didn’t [Mordecai] put himself in danger to lead her to a land which is cut off (in order) to hide . . . or to lead her to another country?”¹¹² Echoes of Saba’s own questions and regrets can be heard: why had he not taken the risk of fleeing with his children sooner? Or why had not he (or Mordecai) followed the examples of others in Portugal who “strangled and slaughtered themselves and their wives” and “took their sons and daughters and threw them into wells,” preferring death to conversion. Saba wonders,

why didn’t Mordecai do any of these things, which were done by the common people of Israel . . . in Portugal. It was fitting for Mordecai to kill himself for such a thing rather than see it within his own eyes... and why did he wait until they took her... Why didn’t he protect Esther, the righteous, from idolatry, and why wasn’t he careful?... and where was his righteousness, his piety, his courage . . .¹¹³

Through identification with Mordecai, Saba asks himself these same questions.

As was the case for so many before him, spending time in Esther’s world gave Saba a container for some of his grief, a space to express and work through some of his profound pain and wonder if there was anything he could have done differently.¹¹⁴ Saba’s commentary is not characterized by the lighthearted play of Purim. If it partakes in Esther’s play, it is the play of the recently traumatized. It reencounters the events in order to renarrate them, to punish the offenders, or to provide a counterfactual ending. As Gross explains, when Saba wrote his commentary, “the events were still fresh and he was

¹¹² Saba, cited in Gross, *Iberian Jewry*, 23.

¹¹³ Saba, cited in Gross, *Iberian Jewry*, 23. Ellipses in original.

¹¹⁴ Gross, *Iberian Jewry*, 23. In the section on Mordecai’s failure to protect Esther, for example, Gross notes that “Through [Saba’s] outstanding, lengthy presentation of the problem, his excessive use of question marks, and his use of poetical expressions, we can feel Saba’s emotions pouring out.”

definitely preoccupied with them.”¹¹⁵ Clearly, this is not an example of an interpretation laced with the laughter of the oppressed we have seen elsewhere; Saba is in a place of tears. But his work surfaces the ways in which Esther interpretation may perform a hidden transcript and may provide an imaginative space of what we might call a kind of pained play for those who survive with the Megillah’s help. For example, writing the Portuguese and Spaniards into the role of Haman may have been a way of having them punished for the horror they wrought on Saba’s community—a form of retribution Saba could extract in the story world but never in the real one. Spending time in the book of Esther was also an opportunity to engage in a counterfactual narration of history, to imagine a better world. As Gross explains, the writing of the commentary “gave Saba the opportunity to relive the tragedy of the Spanish and Portuguese Jewries, only with a different and happy ending.”¹¹⁶ Indeed, Saba paints a very happy ending, adding to the Esther story a tax exemption for Jews and, for anyone with a connection to Haman, “an extra heavy load of taxes, to teach them a lesson and break their spirits.”¹¹⁷

Saba’s commentary provides a rare, explicit articulation of a rich and long cultivated transcript of Esther interpretation. He undertook such an open articulation of the identification of the dominant Christian powers with Haman while outside their realm of power; elsewhere in the late Middle Ages and early modern period, by contrast, Jewish exegetes “never went so far as to associate Haman clearly and unambiguously with

¹¹⁵ Gross, *Iberian Jewry*, 19

¹¹⁶ Gross, *Iberian Jewry*, 24.

¹¹⁷ Gross, *Iberian Jewry*, 24.

Christ,” at least “not officially and explicitly in exegetical or polemical texts.”¹¹⁸

Although Saba’s commentary is unique in its degree of explicitness, the interpretive paths he followed were by no means new. Rather, they had been well-worn over centuries by others who had struggled for survival in the face of Christian domination.¹¹⁹

4.3 Conclusion

The testimony of the hidden transcript of Jewish Esther interpretations is that in various times and places Christians have been Haman incarnate to those to whom this book is most precious. In identifying a contemporary Haman, Jewish readers of various eras seem to have asked: Who do I experience as threatening my or our existence? Who hates me or seeks my destruction? Who has the ear of the king and might use it to hurt us? It has been the project of this chapter to illuminate the troubling reality that in many times and places the most obvious answer to that question was: the Christian powers that be. Jewish interpretations of Esther reflect the perception that Christians have enacted the story of Esther in history, from the various expulsions and massacres of the Jews in the Middle Ages to the Shoah of living memory. In these stories, Christians have of course

¹¹⁸ Kogman-Appel, “Tree of Death,” 196. Saba, “[r]emote from Christian persecutors and censorship,” could articulate this hidden transcript unambiguously, 197.

¹¹⁹ Scott provides a lively example from George Eliot’s *Adam Bede* of the way a long-cultivated hidden transcript may burst onto the scene. In the episode, Mrs. Poyser finally tells the landlord what she really thinks about him. Scott notes, “Delivered in a moment of anger, Mrs. Poyser’s speech was, one might say, spontaneous—but the spontaneity lay in the timing and vehemence of the delivery, not in the content. The content had, in fact, been rehearsed again and again,” *Domination*, 8. The metaphors and themes had been developed with others long before that moment; she drew from a rich reservoir of creative frustration in her moment of speech.

played various roles, not all of them nefarious.¹²⁰ Nevertheless, it is vital to attend also to the fact that Christians at times have played roles closely akin to Haman and his minions. Christians need to explore this reality with a repentant heart. When Christians have felt threat from Jews, by contrast, it has most often been of the kind that a majority feels from a minority in its midst—maybe even of a poorly-understood Other. This is the kind of feeling well-captured in Haman’s words in Esth 3:8: “There is a certain people, scattered and separated among the peoples . . . and it is not fitting for the king to tolerate them” (ישנו עם־אחד מפוזר ומפרד בין העמים . . . ולמלך אין־שוה להניחם). For Christians, receiving Esther more appropriately may be akin to praying the psalms of imprecation while asking, “Is there anyone in the world who could legitimately pray this against me?”¹²¹ In fact, Christians do not need to extend their imaginations far in pursuit of the answer to such a question, for the transcript of Jewish reception of Esther gives ample testimony: yes, the story of the downfall of the villain often has been used as a kind of carnivalesque imprecation against the Christian oppressor.

To say that Christians must learn to wrestle with the possibility of their identification with Haman is by no means an argument for the stability or exclusivity of such a character location. Rather, the ethical imperative is to consider the fittingness of

¹²⁰ I owe it to my (Christian) maternal and paternal grandparents to acknowledge the serious risks they took during the Nazi occupation of the Netherlands—dissembling, disobeying, sabotaging, and concealing in order to save what lives they could.

¹²¹ For this question as it pertains to imprecation, see Ellen Davis, *Getting Involved with God* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2001), 28. “The ancient rabbis said of scripture: ‘Turn it and turn it, for everything is in it.’ If you have the courage (and it will take some), try turning the psalm a full 180 degrees, until it is directed at yourself, and ask: Is there anyone in the community of God’s people who might want to say this to God about me—or maybe, about us?”

such a self-location within the Esther story; in other words, it is a character location contemporary North American (white) Christians should “at least try on for size.”¹²² Importantly, this is not to suggest that Christians should align themselves with Haman or Haman’s cause; such a clarification may seem unnecessary, but it bears emphasis in light of Hitler’s own apparent self-identification with Haman as a defender of the people against the Jews and his proclaimed desire that they not gain victory over the Nazis and thereby obtain the opportunity to celebrate a second “Purimfest.”¹²³ Rather, Christians must (1) attend to the fact that they have been associated with Haman in the minds of those who have treasured the book of Esther and (2) consider the possibility that this unflattering character attribution is not entirely without warrant. In other words, it may be beneficial for Christians to consider the ways they have been Haman to others in history and then experiment with how their implication in Hamanic history might inform the way they hear Esther. For contemporary Christians living on the upper side of domination, access to Esther’s riches requires navigation of this uncomfortable path.

¹²² González and González, *Liberating Pulpit*, 83.

¹²³ See the discussion of the rather complex reception history of this January 30, 1944, speech in Jo Carruthers, “Esther and Hitler: A Second Triumphant Purim,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Reception History of the Bible*, 515ff.

Chapter 5: The Public Transcript in the Medieval Period

Jews have read Christians as Haman. At the same time, Christians have produced readings of Esther that decisively identify Jews with this same villain. The previous two chapters attended to the hidden transcript of premodern, Jewish interpretive play at Haman's expense and, by identification with this villain, at the expense of Christian oppressors. The present chapter shifts focus to the public, Christian transcript against which this hidden transcript played in medieval Europe. This public transcript shares the hidden transcript's interest in identifying contemporary groups with characters in the Esther story, yet it works to strikingly different ends. While dominated Jews throughout history recognized Christian oppressors as contemporary Hamans, Christians inhabiting positions of power wrote contemporary, relatively powerless minorities—Jews—into the positions of both Vashti and Haman, characters in the Esther story who are destined for annihilation.

5.1 Jews in the Commentary of Rabanus Maurus

The hidden transcript of Jewish interpretive play with the character Haman is richly attested throughout antiquity. Moreover, the previous chapter traced the pattern of associating this villain with Christian oppressors from at least the fifth to the fifteenth centuries CE. The present chapter's documentation of the public transcript begins much later in history because examples of Christian reception of Esther are relatively sparse prior to the ninth century CE. Esther occasionally is mentioned in the church fathers, but typically appears in passing as one biblical example among many in support of

discussions on topics such as prayer, fasting, women's adornment, or persecution.¹ In contrast to the Jewish receptions we have studied, the version of the Esther story interpreted by the fathers was the LXX; this is clear from their emphasis on Esther and Mordecai's prayers, which are present in the so-called additions but absent from the MT.²

The lengthiest reference to the book of Esther among the fathers appears in Aphrahat (c. 280–c. 345 CE), a Syriac Christian sometimes called the "Persian Sage."³ The passage is unusual in its degree of attention to the Esther story (still only about 340 words in translation); it is also a rare example of an early Christian interpretation of Esther from outside the Roman world. In his *Demonstration* "Of Persecution," Aphrahat discusses a list of Old Testament figures who were persecuted "as Jesus was persecuted."⁴ Aphrahat includes Mordecai in this list of persecuted heroes, treating him as the hero of the Esther story and drawing parallels between his saving of Esther and Jesus's saving of the Church.⁵ Having placed Mordecai in the position of Jesus, Aphrahat completes the parallel by associating Haman, Mordecai's enemy, with the Jews, "the

¹ The best overview of themes in the use of Esther in the fathers is Agnethe Siquans, "Esther in der Interpretation der Kirchenväter: Königin, Vorbild der Tapferkeit oder Typus der Kirche?" *ZAC* 12 (2008): 414-432.

² See Siquans, "Esther in der Interpretation der Kirchenväter," 414.

³ Aphrahat, "Selections Translated into English from the Hymns and Homilies of Ephraim the Syrian and from the Demonstrations of Aphrahat the Persian Sage," in *Gregory the Great (II), Ephraim Syrus, Aphrahat*, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, ed. John Gwynn, series 2, vol. 13, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans). For this dating, see Gwynn's introduction to the *Demonstrations*, 153.

⁴ Aphrahat, "Of Persecution," in *Demonstrations*, trans. John Gwynn, *NPNF* 2/13:660.

⁵ "Because Mordecai sat and clothed himself with sackcloth, he saved Esther and his people from the sword; and because Jesus clothed Himself with a body and was illuminated, He saved the Church and her children from death." Aphrahat, "Of Persecution," *NPNF* 2/13:660.

foolish People” he holds responsible for the death of Christ. He thus shifts the position of Jews in the Esther story from that of the victim to the enemy:

Mordecai received the honour of Haman, his persecutor; and Jesus received great glory from His Father, instead of His persecutors who were of the foolish People. Mordecai trod upon the neck of Haman, his persecutor; and as for Jesus, His enemies shall be put under His feet. Before Mordecai, Haman proclaimed, *Thus shall it be done to the man, in honouring whom the king is pleased* [Esth 6:11]; and as for Jesus, His preachers came out of the People that persecuted Him, and they said:—*This is Jesus the Son [sic] of God* [Matt 27:54]. The blood of Mordecai was required at the hand of Haman and his sons; and *the blood of Jesus*, His persecutors took *upon themselves and upon their children* [Matt 27:25].⁶

Significantly, Aphrahat writes his treatise on persecution from within the Sasanian empire at a time when persecution against Christians was on the rise.⁷ During Aphrahat’s lifetime Sasanian tolerance toward Christians gave way to increasing hostility as war broke out between the Sasanians and a newly Christianized Rome. As such, Aphrahat read Christian Scriptures as part of a vulnerable minority within a larger, non-Christian empire and, more specifically, as a *persecuted* minority. In other words, while his work presages important themes of what would later become the public transcript of

⁶ Aphrahat, “Of Persecution,” *NPNF* 2/13:660-661. Ital. in original. Against Aphrahat’s interpretation of Matt 27:25 against the Jews, see Ellen Davis, *Opening Israel’s Scriptures* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 75: “The connection between Jesus’s blood and the forgiveness of sins in this Gospel should unsettle the common understanding of the cry from the Jerusalem crowd: ‘His blood be on us and on our children!’ ([Matt] 27:25). Christian readers have far too often taken that as an assumption of guilt by the Jews, but Matthew, whose own imagination was deeply shaped by Israel’s Scriptures, probably intended something else altogether: a call for the renewal of God’s covenant with Israel.”

⁷ On the context of increased persecution and martyrdom, see Kyle Smith, *Constantine and the Captive Christians of Persia: Martyrdom and Religious Identity in Late Antiquity* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016). On a specific case of martyrdom in the year this demonstration was purportedly written, see Kosiński, Rafał “The Date of the Martyrdom of Simeon bar Sabba’e and the persecution of Christians in Persian under Shapur II,” *Zeitschrift für antikes Christentum* 21, no. 3 (2017): 496–519.

dominantly-positioned, European Christians, Aphrahat writes from a markedly different power position vis-à-vis those against whom he writes. Unfortunately, he read Esther not against the imperial source of the persecution Christians were facing, but against another minority within the empire: the Jews.

It is not until 836 CE that the first Christian commentary on Esther appears, and it emerges from a position and perspective fully aligned with power. Rabanus Maurus (c. 780–856 CE), Archbishop of Mainz, was a Benedictine monk who authored commentaries on most books of the Bible. His Esther commentary is addressed to Queen Judith of Bavaria, a royal figure in the Christian Carolingian Empire.⁸ Rabanus writes to her with approval and encouragement. Neither the queen’s own actions nor those of the royals in the Esther world are the targets of any detectable critique in Rabanus. This is in striking contrast to the reception of the rabbis who, as we will see in later chapters, recognized that the Esther narrative provides ample opportunities to expose the failings of royals and their empires.

Rabanus makes no claim to the originality of his reading of Esther. He writes that “the faithful reader” may find “these sentiments and others like them” in the works of the fathers and therefore “should not give the credit to us if we choose to include assertions of a similar character in our own brief works.”⁹ Yet it is difficult to trace Rabanus’s

⁸ For English translation of the Latin text, see Peter Wyetzner, “Commentary of Rabanus Maurus on the Book of Esther” (Jerusalem: Herzl Institute, 2015). All citations of Rabanus are from Wyetzner. A PDF can be found at <http://www.yoramhazony.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Rabanus-Maurus-Esther-Commentary-English-v.-1.1-Dec-1-2015.pdf>.

⁹ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 5. Rabanus notes he has chosen “not to comment upon all the other passages that have been added to it in accordance with the language and the literature of the Greeks,” *ibid.*, 1.

interpretations to particular sources, except for the two instances when he specifically names them.¹⁰ Significantly, in contrast to the brief references to Esther that appear in the fathers and rely on the LXX version of the story, Rabanus relies exclusively on the portions of the story attested in Hebrew. While he is aware of what he calls “the other passages that have been added to it in accordance with the language and the literature of the Greeks, and marked by an obel” in the Vulgate version he had before him, he chooses not to comment upon these.¹¹ Even more significantly, there is simply no precedent in the history of Christian reception of Rabanus’s reading of Esther in terms of its scope and detail. Rabanus is, in that sense, innovative.

For Rabanus, the central figural interpretation upon which the whole reading of Esther hangs is the identification of King Ahasuerus with Christ as king. All other character identifications fall into place in Rabanus’s system on the basis of parallels between the person or group’s relationship to Christ and a character’s relationship to King Ahasuerus. Esther, as the wife of the king, must represent the bride of Christ, the Church. Mordecai, loyal servant to the king and the one most occupied with Esther’s growth and instruction, stands for the teachers and preachers of the Church. Aphrahat’s allegorical reading, which also reads Esther as a figure of the Church, provides the closest precedent to Rabanus’s allegorical approach. Yet the difference between Aphrahat’s identification of Christ with Mordecai and Rabanus’s association of Christ with King Ahasuerus is far from insignificant.

¹⁰ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 4, 5. He uses Jerome’s preface and cites Josephus. Otherwise, he refers to “the short works of the Fathers” and “the statements of the sacred Fathers,” and once to Augustine.

¹¹ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 1.

Rabanus finds in Esther a trove of figurations of the sacraments and of the relationship between the King of heaven and the Church. The evident intention of Rabanus's allegorical interpretation is to make the text spiritually useful to contemporary Christians. He provides them opportunities to glory in the magnificent love of Christ for the Church and in the abundance of God's gifts to the people, as well as reminders to be obedient to their bishops and preachers, just as Esther remained obedient to Mordecai even when she rose to a position of great power. To modern ears, some of the associations drawn can seem inapt; a harem where women are treated as sexual objects for the king's consumption is unlikely in the twenty-first century to be perceived as fitting analogy for finding a home in the Church. Nevertheless, Rabanus's purpose of rendering the book immediately applicable to the Christian life comes through clearly. Yet his reading comes at a cost: in realigning character identifications, Rabanus effectively displaces contemporary Jews from any favorable character location they might find in the story and relegates them to roles slated for annihilation: those of Vashti and Haman. Here we can see how Aphrahat's interpretation presages the ways in which Rabanus shifts the position of Jews within the Esther story from that of vulnerable victim to enemy.

Throughout Rabanus's interpretation of Esther 1-2, the Jewish community is cast in the marginal role of Vashti, a character who is quickly removed from the court and soon disappears entirely from the story. Because Rabanus understands the contemporary Jewish Synagogue to be the repudiated bride of the true King, Vashti as the replaced wife of King Ahasuerus is in Rabanus's view a natural figure for Jews after the coming of

Christ. Moreover, since for Rabanus the king Vashti rejects is no mortal king but Christ, her rejection is inexcusable and must be attributed to her own stubbornness or arrogance. Such reasoning provides plentiful opportunities for Rabanus to read these unflattering descriptors back onto the Jewish people. In refusing to come to the king when summoned (cf. Esth 1:12), Vashti was “not only showing her contempt for the emissaries but even rejecting the authority of the supreme king.” The episode reveals for Rabanus that Jews “are forever brittle and hard, full of rancor and indignation.”¹² Rabanus calls Vashti “the most foolish of queens” and frames the entire conflict between Ahasuerus and Vashti as a parable of the relationship of the stubborn and foolish Jews to God.¹³ It is striking that Rabanus does not attend at all to the ways in which this Persian court debacle recounted in Esther 1 might shed light on contemporary court problems, particularly since he addresses a queen who was familiar with such issues, having been publicly and falsely shamed and exiled to a convent as part of a stepchild’s bid for the throne.¹⁴ For Rabanus, Vashti illustrates how God is justified in his verdict against the Jews.¹⁵ Rabanus thus finds it fitting that the punishment of the Jews mirrors Vashti’s: “that they should be driven from the seat of the king, i.e. from their relationship with God.” Rabanus shows no regret regarding this rejection but depicts it vividly, supplementing it with images from Matthew 8 (weeping and gnashing of teeth) and Luke 13 (a house left desolate). He

¹² Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 10.

¹³ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 10.

¹⁴ On this episode, see Mayke de Jong, “Bride Shows Revisited: Praise, Slander and Exegesis in the Reign of the Empress Judith,” in *Gender in the Early Medieval World: East and West, 300-900*, ed. L. Brubaker and J.M.H. Smith (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 257-77, especially 268-70.

¹⁵ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 11.

strengthens the sense of the rightness of the judgment via Paul, “through whom the Jews are properly reproached for their faithfulness.”¹⁶ Even after Vashti has been ousted from the story by the end of Esther 1, Rabanus continues to use every textual opportunity to strengthen and reinforce the lesson. The favor Esther finds in the harem (2:9) is interpreted through Hosea, which provides Rabanus the opportunity to emphasize that Esther (the Church) “finds before the eyes of God more mercy and grace than the Synagogue of the Jews which the prophet Hosea rightly calls ‘No-mercy’ on account of its wickedness.”¹⁷ Similarly, at the end of Esther 2, Vashti’s final passing mention in the book provides Rabanus the opportunity to explain: “‘in place of Vashti’ [Esth 2:17], i.e. the Synagogue of the Jews which lost its place of honor when it spurned and crucified our king.”¹⁸ Thus Rabanus transforms the Esther of the text, who struggled to ensure the ongoing survival of the Jewish community, into someone who represents why the continued existence of the Jews is undesirable. He turns the hidden transcript of Esther MT against a marginal group in his own society.

By the end of Esther 2, Vashti has disappeared from the story, and one might expect that Rabanus’s focus on the unworthiness and rejection of the Jews he has equated with Vashti would similarly trail off. However, Esther 3:1 introduces a new character who will function as an allegorical container for Rabanus’s teaching about the faithlessness and deserved punishment of the Jews: Haman. The Jews are neither the first nor the only people Rabanus associates with Haman; he includes the haughty, pagans,

¹⁶ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 11.

¹⁷ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 13.

¹⁸ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 17.

and heretics along with the Jews in this unfavorable character location. For example, he draws an apt parallel between Haman and those in the present world who seek for themselves “the honor and reverence which should properly be paid to God alone” and persecute those who refuse. In Rabanus’s view, the Esther story contains a warning for them: the Judge sees these haughty and “turns the grief caused by the wicked back upon their heads.”¹⁹ Yet Rabanus adds another possibility:

It may also be that this Haman the Agagite, who according to Josephus was descended from the line of Amalek, prefigures the bloody people of the Jews who killed their prophets and were not afraid to kill even the Lord of the prophets and his apostles.²⁰

It is this latter possibility which is by far the most persistent and well-developed theme of Rabanus’s interpretation of Haman. Rabanus marshals the prophets against their own people, noting how even Isaiah and Ezekiel “regard them as enemies of the law of God.”²¹ In Rabanus’s view, the Jews, like Haman, “rush to lay their hands not only on Mordecai, that is, on the preachers of the Gospel, but also on the entire catholic people, and to wipe them out from this life.” Yet just like Haman, these enemies, the Jews, will have their evil turned back upon their own heads: “the death they were scheming to

¹⁹ For example, Rabanus identifies Haman with the powerful: “Now, what could the arrogant Haman symbolize if not the haughtiness of the powerful of this world”? Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 20. These haughty seek for themselves “the honor and reverence which should properly be paid to God alone” and persecute those who refuse. In Rabanus’s view, the Esther story contains a warning for them: the Judge sees these haughty and “turns the grief caused by the wicked back upon their heads,” *ibid.*, 21. Here, Rabanus draws an apt parallel between the social location and actions of Haman in the story and those like him in the present world: powerful, honor-hungry, and willing to persecute.

²⁰ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 21.

²¹ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 21. Specifically, Rabanus notes how Isaiah “called them the princes of Sodom and the people of Gomorrah,” and how Ezekiel said, “Your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite.”

inflict upon the innocent in this world they are forced to endure endlessly within their souls because their own actions demand it, and a just judge is paying them back.”²²

Here Rabanus blurs the past and the present. The situation of the early church in Jerusalem (indeed a vulnerable minority before the Jewish religious powers) is transmuted into an enduring principle. It is not that they *did* this, but they *do* this: Jews in Rabanus’s view still seek to wipe out the entire catholic people. Rabanus communicates a sense of ongoing threat, even though Jewish-Christian roles have been dramatically reversed by this point in history. Rabanus writes to a Christian queen from a firm position within an expansive Christian Empire in which Jews could only exist at the pleasure and protection of the monarch. In this way, it must be emphasized, Rabanus’s situation contrasts markedly with that faced by Aphrahat several hundred years prior and outside of Christian lands. Nevertheless, he writes that “the enemies and persecutors of the name of Christ are constantly stirring up attacks against the community of the faithful . . . and making every effort to oppress them.”²³

The identification of the enemy Haman with the Jews is not just presented at one point in the commentary, as one option among many. Rather, it is pursued persistently at each plot turn, with no apparent awareness of the strangeness of having shifted the victim into the role of the perpetrator in the second half of the simile. Haman’s request for “the death of the Jews” is immediately followed by the comparison “and so too the Jewish people . . . planned the death of the true witnesses to Christ.”²⁴ Next, Haman’s use of the

²² Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 21.

²³ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 36. Although in this case the threat is not named explicitly as the Jews.

²⁴ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 21.

king's seal in sending his letters (Esth 3:12) figures the way "the faithlessness of the Jews wrongly exploited . . . the books of divine law in which the seal of the supreme king is impressed."²⁵ When Haman is forced to honor Mordecai and hurries home in shame,

Rabanus notes:

Here we see how the stubbornness of the Synagogue of the Jews was crushed, and the humility of the Church of the nations exalted; how the persecutors of the Christian faith who once tore apart the flock of Christ like savage lions, have now been destroyed and reduced to nothing; and how those who proclaim Christ throughout the world have been raised up in a state of vigorous faith and exalted through the power of the virtues. The head has been turned into the tail and the tail into the head.²⁶

Repeatedly Rabanus exults in how the present status of the Church vis-à-vis the Jews is merited: they have been brought low by their own evil, arrogance, and folly.²⁷ Moreover he continually emphasizes the pattern of the Jews' replacement with "true Jews," namely, Christians. The fact that Ahasuerus gives Esther "the house of Haman *the enemy of the Jews*" in Rabanus's view "must refer to" the way "the true king" gave the Church "all the dignity and honor" which had formerly been held by the Jews.²⁸ Likewise the ring transferred to Mordecai (Esth 8:2) is

an allegorical expression of the fact that the seal of faith, which the faithless Jews and all the persecutors of the name of Christ did not want to accept . . . was transferred to the nations. . . . So Esther holds onto the house of Haman the enemy of the Jews, just as the Church of Christ possesses the world which was once the enemy of Christianity.²⁹

²⁵ The seal refers to the grace of the Holy Spirit.

²⁶ Wyetzner, "Commentary," 28.

²⁷ Interestingly, Rabanus leans heavily into this theme of just deserts and the bringing down of the lofty. Ironically, carnivalesque delight in reversal is typically targeted at those who currently wear the crown, a position with which Rabanus is fully aligned.

²⁸ Wyetzner, "Commentary," 31. Emphasis added.

²⁹ Wyetzner, "Commentary," 32

Similarly, when the king's edict gives permission for the Jews to assemble to defend themselves (Esth 8:11),

this can only mean that our king, who rules over all of Heaven and earth, is—through his preachers—ordering the true Jews [Christians] . . . to assemble . . . and to fight for the salvation of their souls; and to condemn all their enemies both visible and invisible, i.e. the false Jews who are the synagogue of Satan and the incorrigible pagans and heretics.

This pattern of displacement continues at Esth 9:5, where the blow the Jews strike against their enemies is a blow against “the actual Jews of the flesh.” Rabanus emphasizes that these “actual Jews” deserve their punishment; they “are quite rightly forced to bear the torments of Hell” because they “violated the Decalogue of the Law of Moses, and were guilty of the cross of Christ.”³⁰

Rabanus is definitive regarding the rightness of the punishment of the Jews, as enemies of Christ. Startlingly, he particularly emphasizes the necessity of thoroughness in the extermination of such enemies. He writes:

Nor should they permit any remnant of these to survive, or even their wives and children, i.e. they should wipe out completely the carnal desires and works of sinners together with their houses, namely with their worldly ambitions; or allow to remain any offshoot of these things that could pose a threat to them.³¹

Now, Rabanus writes of this as a “spiritual slaughter,” but it is not clear at every point that the annihilation of enemies of the faith is always limited to the spiritual sense.³² He invokes other biblical examples on this point, emphasizing the need for total annihilation:

So it is that in the Law, the Lord commanded the Israelites to kill and to wipe out those nations in the Promised land that were antagonistic to them; so too he

³⁰ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 37.

³¹ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 34.

³² Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 34. He adds further that this “spiritual slaughter” must “symbolize the last age of our world when this spiritual war is being waged above all by the soldiers of Christ,” 34-35.

afterward commanded them to destroy the Amalekites until they were all slaughtered, because he wanted to deprive them of any occasion for misbehavior. This is what the prophet is thinking of when he says in the Psalms: “In the mornings [*sic*] I was killing all the sinners of the land, to wipe out from the city of the Lord all the evildoers [Ps 101:8].”³³

Given his favorable view of thoroughness in such matters, Rabanus reads Queen Esther’s request for a second day of killing (Esth 9:13) approvingly:

she fights to have her enemies aggressively attacked and wiped out, express[ing] the zeal and ingenuity of the true queen, that is, of the holy Church which harasses her enemies without respite and struggles to scatter them completely and subject them to itself.³⁴

While later Christian readers have been appalled by Esther’s request for a second day’s permission to kill, Rabanus has no such qualms. At precisely the point in the story where many, later Christian exegetes will break with Esther, Rabanus commends Queen Esther’s zeal to Queen Judith as a model for what her own zeal should be like on behalf of the contemporary church in her domain.³⁵

Rabanus does not condemn all Jews as an ethnic group; he recognizes that there were “Jewish members of the early Church.”³⁶ Moreover, in his view, Jews who worshipped in the Jewish way were acceptable, even beautiful, prior to the coming of Christ. Similarly, even Jews of the present day continue to be invited to convert and join the fellowship of the catholic faith:

³³ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 34.

³⁴ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 38.

³⁵ For later Christians, this request of Esther’s is their proof that they are nothing like her—that she is too Jewish in her bloodthirstiness and vengeance. But Rabanus has no problem with the violence of the Jewish characters in the book . . . which is not to say he has no problem with the Jews.

³⁶ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 18.

Of course, the Church invites to this refreshment . . . not only her friends but even her enemies and persecutors, namely pagans, Jews and heretics, so that—leaving behind the isolation of complete error—they may rejoice in the common good in the single home of catholic belief.³⁷

Nevertheless, there is no room for those who resist this invitation; in the end, they will be “expelled to be punished, together with the Devil, with the torments of Hell.”³⁸ Those who refuse the invitation are justifiably rejected; they are “enemies and persecutors,” be they pagans, heretics, or Jews.

In Rabanus’s commentary, the Jewish Synagogue thus finds itself cast not only as the rejected Vashti but also in the role of the archvillain of the story. This is especially ironic, since Haman according to Esther MT is, emphatically, the enemy of the Jews. Both Vashti and Haman are characters who are decisively removed from the story world, either by death or replacement. By locating Jews in both these character positions, Rabanus’s reading is able to perform a double removal of Jews from a story written to support their survival. Rabanus is quite clear that the focus of his writing is the spiritual or allegorical meaning of the text. Yet this spiritual overwriting adumbrates later, historical attempts to annihilate the Jews. In Esther MT, Haman created what he hoped would be a persuasive argument against the fittingness of the Jews’ continued existence: ואת־דתי המלך אינם עשים ולמלך איך־שוה להניחם (“There is a certain people . . . they are not obeying the king’s laws and it is not fitting to the king to tolerate them”) (3:8). Through the systematic figural displacement of the Jews in their own story, Rabanus has helped further Haman’s goal. Rabanus does not seem to see much benefit in

³⁷ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 25.

³⁸ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 26.

the continued existence of Jews in, if not the entire world, then at least the realm of the queen he addresses, wherein the Church is ascendent. In other words, it may not be suitable for the king—or, in this case, a Carolingian queen—to tolerate their continued presence.

5.2 Jews in the Ordinary Gloss

Rabanus's interpretation is no outlier. As Mark Biddle aptly puts it, Rabanus's allegorical reading of Esther "became virtually standard in the half-millennium prior to the Reformation."³⁹ In fact, Rabanus's commentary provides the bulk of the material out of which the reading of the Ordinary Gloss (the Gloss) on Esther is constructed.⁴⁰ The (Latin) Gloss—the *de facto* Bible of Europe for several centuries—is a format of the Bible in which "the biblical text [is] laid out continuously, separately and distinctly from the glosses which surround and weave between it."⁴¹ Sometimes the glosses are interlinear and come in the form of a single word or phrase between the lines of the biblical text. Other times more extensive comments are included in the margins, at times attributed to a specific church father or later commentator. Thus the Gloss combined

³⁹ See Mark E. Biddle, "Christian Interpretation of Esther before the Reformation," *Review and Expositor* 118, no. 2 (2021): 149–160. "Rhabanus Maurus gave the allegorical reading of Esther a form that became virtually standard in the half-millennium prior to the Reformation," 149.

⁴⁰ For the full text of the Gloss to Esther, see *Glossae Scripturae Sacrae-electronicae* (Gloss-e) <http://gloss-e.irht.cnrs.fr/php/editions.php?livre=../sources/editions/GLOSS-liber24.xml>. On the dependence of the Gloss on Rabanus, see Biddle, "Christian Interpretation," 157-158.

⁴¹ Lesley Smith, *The Glossa Ordinaria: The Making of a Medieval Bible Commentary* (Brill, 2009), notes that "we need to beware thinking of the Gloss as an immutable single entity at any point in its lifetime," 2. Nevertheless, the text stabilized soon after 1200 CE.

commentary and biblical text on the same page, at times blurring the distinction. As Lesley Smith explains,

text and glosses are allowed to co-exist, cheek-by-jowl on the same page. The Gloss layout means that the visual distinction between the words of Scripture and their exegesis is maintained; and yet the placing of the glosses alongside and between the biblical text allows one to blur into the other.⁴²

In the case of the Gloss on Esther, primarily formed from abbreviations of Rabanus's commentary, Rabanus's way of locating Church and Synagogue in the Esther story became almost canonical.

Given its dependence on Rabanus, it is no surprise that the Gloss to Esther is much interested in locating contemporary groups and figures within Esther's world. One of the most frequent use of glosses is simply to provide an interlinear identity association for a character named in the story. So, for example one finds King Ahasuerus frequently in conjunction with the interlinear gloss *Christus* (see, for example 3:1), indicating that readers of the biblical story are meant to understand references to Ahasuerus as references to Christ.⁴³ Similarly, references to the word king are glossed with words such as *verus* ("true," 8:1) or *celestem* ("heavenly," 2:12) so that one understands that references to this earthly King Ahasuerus signify in the spiritual sense Christ, the true King.⁴⁴

⁴² Smith, *Glossa Ordinaria*, 4-5.

⁴³ For other examples, see Esth 2:17, 21; 8:17.

⁴⁴ According to Jo Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries* (Blackwell: Oxford, 2008), such allegorical readings faded in prominence over the centuries. Yet echoes do later appear. For example, Jonathan Edwards (early eighteenth century) saw Esther as "a shadow of gospel things and times," although he makes a surprising association: "Vashti, the queen, is the church, or God's people," *ibid.*, 29. Similarly, Carruthers points to the 1837 commentary of Rev. Niblock: "Make but a few changes . . . such as *Mordecai* to

It is not that the Gloss is uninterested in the literal, historical king signified by the name Ahasuerus. Indeed, it includes a substantial marginal comment on this question alongside Esther 1:1, citing the opinions of Josephus and Eusebius and concluding agnosticism on Ahasuerus's historical identity.⁴⁵ Despite this and other occasional references to the literal meaning of the text, the emphasis of the Gloss on Esther is otherwise almost exclusively on what is signified spiritually, particularly in terms of the coming of Christ and the era of the Church. And if King Ahasuerus is always read as Christ, then the bride of this king must be the bride of Christ, namely, *Ecclesia* (the Church). Thus, references to Esther as a Jewish woman are systematically overwritten as the Gloss repeatedly reminds the reader to read references to Esther as references to the Church.

As is the case of Rabanus's commentary, the Gloss's total identification of Vashti with the Jewish Synagogue is stark. In Esther MT, Queen Vashti enters the story at 1:9, when the narrative notes that she also gave a party for women. The biblical narrative describes her as lovely to look at; in fact, the king commands her to come to his party wearing her royal crown in order to show off her beauty (vv. 10-11). Vashti refuses to come (v. 12) and consequently is barred from the king's presence and removed from her royal position (v. 19). The Gloss interprets all these elements of Vashti's storyline through the lens of God's relationship with the Jewish people. From the first mention of

Christ, and Jews to Christians or believers, and . . . the whole will read as if it were a chapter taken out of the very Acts of the Apostles themselves!" *ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁵ *Historiam Esther tempore Assueri fuisse non dubitamus, sed quis fuerit Assuerus ignoramus.* "That the story of Esther took place in the time of Ahasuerus we do not doubt, but who Ahasuerus was we do not know."

her name at 1:9, the Gloss indicates with an interlinear note that Vashti represents *iudaicam plebem*, “Jewish people.” The royal crown she is to wear is religious honor, and the summons of the king is the summons of God to a spiritual feast. The Gloss clarifies that this queen—the Jewish people represented in Vashti—was not always or inevitably evil. In fact, Vashti’s feast in the king’s house (Esth 1:9) is viewed positively as a reference to the ancient Jewish people who used to worship God in the place he liked to be, i.e., the Jerusalem temple (see marginal gloss on 1:9). However, the Gloss holds that a new era dawned with the incarnation of Christ and that this new era came with a summons that the Jewish Synagogue has refused.⁴⁶ Thus the Jewish community of faith, like Vashti, is justifiably rejected and replaced. Although Vashti’s tenure in the story world of Esther is not long, the Gloss reiterates its message every time she is mentioned. When Vashti’s name appears in Esth 1:19 she is glossed as *Synagoga que contempsit* (“Synagogue, which he despised”). The message is reinforced at the head of chapter 2, which contains an extended marginal gloss equating *repudiata Iudea* (“rejected,” or perhaps “divorced Judea”) with *repudiata Vasthi*. Even in 2:17, when Esther has won the Queenship in Vashti’s place (*in loco Vashti*), the Gloss takes the opportunity afforded by this passing reference to remind readers that Vashti represents *Synagoga que regem spernendo et crucifigendo regni dignitatem amisit* (“Synagogue, which by spurning and crucifying the king lost the dignity of the kingdom”).

⁴⁶ In a lengthier marginal gloss, Vashti is likened to the older brother who stayed away from his father’s feast (Luke 15); the point is that both are rejected justifiably: *iuxta indignationem patrisfamilias reiecti sunt et alii loco illorum constituti*. “Following the anger of the paterfamilias they were rejected, and others are put in their place.” Thank you to Frans van Liere for help with this and other Latin citations. Any errors that remain are my own.

The Gloss's treatment of Vashti has several important impacts. It functions to emphasize the culpability of contemporary Jews who, post-Incarnation, have failed to convert. The message for contemporary Christians is that Jews fully merit the lesser situation in which they may find themselves in Christian lands. At the same time, as the Gloss stresses that the Jews have been replaced by "one better" (cf. Esth 1:19), *Ecclesia* (the Church), this encourages a sense of superiority among readers who identify with this preferred Bride of God. Most troubling of all, the Gloss cultivates a sense that this Vashti has wronged not only the king (God) but also the Church. Memucan's famously overstated concern that Vashti has sinned against all the peoples and leaders of all the provinces of the empire (Esth 1:16) is glossed to communicate that the Jewish community's error is also against the preachers of the Church. In other words, the Gloss instills in *Ecclesia* not only a sense of superiority but also a sense of having been wronged. Given that the era in which the Gloss was at the height of its popularity was the few hundred years beginning around 1140 CE, this was a sentiment with grave consequences. Whereas the rejection of the Jewish Synagogue in the gloss may be spiritual, the violence inflicted and vengeance exacted by *Ecclesia* on Jewish bodies in these centuries was literal and corporeal.⁴⁷

A similar program of replacement is pursued in the Gloss's treatment of Haman. His biblical identity as the adversary of the Jews *par excellence* (cf. Esth 9:24) does not preclude his place in the story from being systematically overwritten with Jews, who are themselves cast into the position of the enemy. In the Gloss on Esth 3:7, Haman becomes

⁴⁷ For an overview of anti-Jewish violence in Europe in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, see Chapter 4.

persecutors of the faithful and the Jewish people whom Haman persecutes become confessors of the faith.⁴⁸ By the next verse, the shift is complete and Haman is simply glossed as Jewish people (*iudaicus populus*) and the people against whom he conspires are Christians (3:8, 3:10). The house of Haman, which is taken from Haman and given away, is the former dignity and honor that the Jews possessed in having the Law and the Prophets (8:1). Similarly, the king's ring, taken away from Haman, is a sign of the faith that the Jews refused (8:2). Not only does Haman lose his house and power, but he and his associates are to be thoroughly annihilated. The Gloss is not reticent about this violence. Esth 8:11, the verse that records the king's edict allowing the Jews to assemble and destroy, kill, and annihilate anyone attacking them, is highly annotated. It notes that the enemies who are to be destroyed, killed, and annihilated are Jews, pagans, heretics, and devils. Of course, this is an allegorical reading, and it is not entirely clear that death beyond the spiritual is intended. At Esth 9:5, for example, the great blow (*plaga magna*) with which the Jews struck their enemies is glossed as *spirituali* (spiritual). Yet regarding 8:11, wherein the king's decree permitting the Jews to attack their enemies is described, the following extended comment is added on the word *interficerent* ("kill"), pointing to three other scriptural instances where total, literal annihilation seems to have been warranted:

Lest revived plantings sprout from the bad seeds. Similarly the Lord ordered the seven nations who lived in the promised land to be killed and afterwards (he ordered) Amalek to be completely destroyed, to take away all occasion for

⁴⁸ The phrase *coram Aman* ("before Haman," ablative) is glossed *persecutoribus fidelium* ("near the persecutors of the faithful"). The phrase *gens Iudeorum* ("Jewish nation," genitive) is glossed *confessorum fidei* ("confessors of the faith").

stumbling. Hence David said: In the morning I killed all the sinners of the land [Ps 101:8].

Ne mali germinis pullularent rediviva plantaria. Similiter septem gentes que habitabant in terra promissionis Dominus interfici iussit et postmodum Amalechitas omnimode deleri, ut omnem occasionem scandali auferret eis. Unde David ait : « In matutino interficiebam omnes peccatores terre » etc.

Haman's ten sons, along with Vashti and Haman, are interpreted as carnal Jews who fully merit their punishment. Specifically, the fact that there are ten of them indicates for the Gloss that they are transgressors of the Decalogue. Moreover, their punishment, which is regarded as crucifixion in the Vulgate (Esth 9:25), is seen as particularly fitting; as representatives of the Jews, they are crucified as punishment for the crucifixion of Christ.⁴⁹ As in Rabanus, Esther's request for a second day of killing and for the impalement of Haman's ten sons is held up as model of the Church, which should be similarly zealous in pursuing her enemies.⁵⁰

5.3 Conclusion

The public transcript of medieval European Christian Esther reception pursues a fixed identification of Ahasuerus with Christ. There are significant costs to this approach. Foremost among these is the fact that the approach forces other characters into immutable and unfavorable roles. Such relocation of roles is a kind of literary violence, since it

⁴⁹ *Carnales Iudeos transgressores decalogi pro crucifixione Christi cruciandos.* "Carnal Jews, transgressors of the decalogue, who must be tortured because of the crucifixion of Christ." Gloss to 9:12. See also Gloss to 9:25.

⁵⁰ Marginal on 9:13. *Esther que cum tanta constantia hostes suos extirpare contendit studium atque sollertiam Ecclesie exprimit que hostes suos pacifica mente persequitur et sine fine Deo subiice reconatur.* "Esther who with such great constancy strove to destroy her enemies signifies the zeal and skill of the Church which pursues her enemies with a peaceful mind [i.e., in a peaceful manner] and ceaselessly attempts to make them subject to God."

locates contemporary communities in a manner very much against the grain of the text; moreover, it may have contributed to real-life violence. The impact of this reading is the annihilation of Jews in and by means of the story. But while this is the gravest cost of the fixed positional association of Christ with Ahasuerus, it is not the only cost.

The approach also obviates two angles of exploration that, as we will see in chapters to come, are both richly developed in the hidden transcript of Jewish Esther reception. The first is the ability to “roast” human kings with humor through the lens of Ahasuerus. The second is the opportunity to turn Ahasuerus’s questionable behaviors into probing questions about the behavior of the divine king.

Reading the human King Ahasuerus as a figure of Christ results in a certain blindness regarding this character’s flaws. The rabbis, as we will see in Chapter 6, recognize the ways in which Esther MT reveals Ahasuerus’s weaknesses and casts him in a droll aspect, and they extend the Scroll’s critical, laughing work. In contrast, in neither Rabanus nor the Gloss is there a whisper of critique of Ahasuerus. There is evidence that Ahasuerus’s flaws as displayed in Esther MT were observed; Rabanus anticipates, for example, that some may reject his allegorical interpretation of King Ahasuerus “merely because this actual king was faithless.”⁵¹ Rabanus notes that “we do not say that anyone’s treacheries or transgressions are the sum of his behavior” and then goes on to draw an implicit parallel between the case of the imperfect Ahasuerus and the many biblical leaders who were in some way flawed. He begins with the example of “David’s behavior toward Uriah and his wife,” but includes many others: “Moses’ doubts at the ‘waters of

⁵¹ Wyetzner, “Commentary,” 3.

dissension,' Aaron's deception about manufacturing the calf, Solomon's lust, Ezekiel's arrogance, Peter's denial, and Saul's blasphemy."⁵² Rabanus's main point is that even such flawed persons can be read as figuring Christ. In practice, this means that aspects of the narrative that cast Ahasuerus in a more negative light (which, as we will soon see are exploited fully in the midrashim) are either passed by with little attention or are explained in a favorable light. The model Rabanus provides, then, is that in the case of a king in the biblical text, one is to learn from the good features and ignore the bad.

The fixed identification of Christ with King Ahasuerus seems also to have prevented Christian readers of Esther from taking up the text's potential for theological resistance—for the voicing of frustration, protest, questions, and critique to God.⁵³ Such theological resistance is amply attested in the midrashim, as we will see. Often, the rabbis compare Ahasuerus to God and relativize his supposedly great power before that of the true King of Kings. Such readings diminish Ahasuerus but leave God unscathed. Yet if Ahasuerus is an imitation of God (albeit pale), the rabbis also recognize that there are ways in which God can be understood through the manner in which his behavior seems to parallel that of Ahasuerus. The rabbis do not shy away from probing such frightening questions with sometimes dark humor. Christians of the medieval period also located God in the position of King Ahasuerus. But whereas in rabbinic treatments the king and the ways of his palace could be treated somewhat wryly and exposed for their flaws—and this treatment could be extended to God—Christian medieval readers failed to cast such a

⁵² Wyetzner, "Commentary," 3-4.

⁵³ On theological resistance, see discussion of Bussie in Chapter 1.

critical gaze on human monarchs, and by extension, the divine king.⁵⁴ In fact, there is lengthy defense in Rabanus, preserved in the Gloss, explaining why only the good aspects of the human kings in biblical narratives are read as illuminating what the divine king is like.⁵⁵ The allegorical approach thus declaws the text, precluding its provocative use regarding monarchy and deity, which is precisely the kind of license a hidden transcript such as Esther MT is designed to offer.

⁵⁴ This is probably also a function of the relationship of the writers of these commentaries to the Christian monarchs of their time. It behooved them to portray the royals favorably, as responsible rulers.

⁵⁵ Wyetzner, "Commentary," 3-4.

Chapter 6: Carnivalizing the King

Esther MT describes the actions, trappings, and customs of the Persian king and his empire with interest and in detail. Yet its treatment is equivocal. On the one hand, it presents the empire with a seriousness bordering on awe; it depicts Ahasuerus as overwhelmingly dominant and the protagonists as existing at imperial whims. On the other hand, it draws the king into the zone of familiar contact and there undercuts him with irony and humor.

The rabbis recognized the ambiguity in Esther's depictions of the Persian royals, and they saw therein plentiful opportunities for play. They read from positions on the underside of imperial domination, a stance that seems to remain fairly constant in their understanding of their peoplehood and world, even as the names and faces of the empire change over time. Moreover, their interpretive play is recognizable as a creative response to this experience of vulnerability and pain.

After an extended discussion of the treatment of king and empire in Esther MT, this chapter attends to aggadic extensions of its playful work. The rabbis play with names and with imagined scenarios in order to render the Persians ridiculous. They take advantage of textual openings no larger than a single letter in order to undercut Ahasuerus's power and dignity. And they engage in counterfactual play, imagining their long-deceased King Solomon and his splendors as the present envy of the nations.

6.1 The Field of Play: Imperial Control and the Experience of the Dominated

From its very first verses onward, Esther MT clarifies the power dynamics at play in the world in which this tale will unfold. The reality that presses on all play that occurs

within this book is life under an overwhelmingly dominant Persian empire. Esther opens by introducing Ahasuerus as the ruler of the entire known world (1:1-2) and then immediately proceeds to recount two feasts which demonstrate this king's power and wealth (vv. 3-8). The first feast shows a king with such command over the people in his vast domain that all the officials and nobility of all the provinces abandon their posts and the affairs of their regions for a full six months to attend (1:3).¹ As theologian Sam Wells puts it, "There may be life beyond the lands that Ahasuerus rules over, but it hardly matters."² The feast further demonstrates that Ahasuerus is wealthy enough to furnish the astonishing volume of food and drink that would be required to feed so many guests for 180 days. In sum, this is a feast "in which he displayed the wealth of his glorious kingdom and the honor of his great splendor" (בהראתו את־עשר כבוד־מלכותו ואת־יקר תפארת) (גדולתו 1:4).³

If the king's display at the first feast functions to impress the royal message upon elite attendees, the highly visual description provided in connection with the second feast conveys a parallel impact to readers. It is this second feast which is described most fully and from the perspective of one immersed in its sensory experience; it is thus at this point that the reader is admitted to the palace along with everyone else ("all the people

¹ This is true even if the numbers are exaggerated. In Michael Fox's view, "The length of the feast is legendary hyperbole," yet even this hyperbole "show[s] awe of Persian wealth and luxury." *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 16.

² Samuel Wells, "Esther," in *Esther & Daniel*, Samuel Wells and George Sumner (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013), 25.

³ The point holds whether or not one translates the inseparable preposition as indicating purpose ("in order to display . . .) or temporally ("when he displayed . . ."). Either way, this was the purpose of throwing the feast or what he spent the time doing.

found in the fortress of Susa, from the greatest to the least,” v. 5). The descriptions come in the order a party attendee might experience them, from the draped fabric (white and purple and expensive), to the couches (silver and gold and placed on stunning mosaics), to the drinking vessels (gold and silver and each one-of-a-kind), to the quantity of the wine (limitless) (vv. 6-7). As the narrator describes the royal space festooned for a party through the eyes and palates of attendees, the picture serves to impress the imagination of the reader as well.⁴

As the narrative proceeds, the impression of royal dominance continues. Neither the reader of Esther nor any character within the text is ever far from royal reach. The words *king*, *queen*, *reign*, *royal*, and *kingdom* (permutations of the root מלך) saturate the pages, appearing 46 times in the first chapter. The king’s presence is pervasive in the book and in his empire; commands in his name proceed to the far corners of the empire in every language imaginable (1:22; 3:15; 8:9-14) and with legendary speed.⁵ The king’s reach is extended by a vast bureaucratic apparatus, and his directives aim to control everything from domestic arrangements (1:22) to the fate of an entire people (cf. 3:15; 8:10, 14).⁶

The experience of the dominated under imperial control comes into focus as the narrative introduces the tale’s protagonists. Regardless of which empire is in power, both

⁴ As Michael Fox puts it, the visual impressions of the party come as “an exclamatory listing” which “creates a mass of images that overwhelm the sensory imagination.” Fox, *Esther*, 17.

⁵ This perception of the Persian apparatus was shared widely in the Mediterranean world; Herodotus described it “as the fasted means of mortal communication.” Fox, *Esther*, 23, referencing Herodotus VIII, 98.

⁶ The domestic arrangements in question are the absolute authority of the husband in the home and the language spoken between a husband and wife.

Esther and Mordecai exist at imperial whims. Esther is caught up in a vast reshuffling of women, taken whether she wanted or no into the king's harem with so many others (2:8, 16). Mordecai is no more master of his own destiny than his orphaned niece. As the introduction of this character to the story emphasizes, he is a Judahite man "who was exiled from Jerusalem with the exiles who were exiled with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon exiled" (אשר הגלה מירושלים עם־הגלה אשר) (2:6). In this introduction, Mordecai and his people are the subjects of a (repeated) passive verb, גלה Hophal; the only one with agency in this verse is a foreign king. In that case, the potentate was Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon rather than Ahasuerus of Persia. Yet the change of regime makes little difference to the dominated status of Mordecai and his people: neither he nor Esther, nor so many others in this empire, are masters of their own destinies. Moreover, life under domination is here not only a static condition of relative powerlessness. Rather, it is depicted in Esther MT as the experience of having been diminished, stripped of place and identity. The fourfold repetition of the root גלה in our introduction to Mordecai hammers home the painful story of what happened to this man of distinguished ancestry who has become an exile among exiles. The strong resonance between the two basic meanings of גלה—to go into exile and to be disrobed, stripped, or exposed—is instructive.⁷ In Esther, the detailed

⁷ On the semantic relationship between *strip* and *exile*, see Daniel Smith-Christopher, "Ezekiel in Abu Ghraib: Rereading Ezekiel 16:37-39 in the Context of Imperial Conquest," in S.L. Cook, et al., eds., *Ezekiel's Hierarchical World: Wrestling with a Tiered Reality* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004): 141-58. See especially 154-55. Smith-Christopher explains how stripping defeated warriors naked was a common military practice across Assyrian, Babylonian, and Persian contexts. On the stripping metaphor of Ezek 16, Smith-Christopher writes, "Ezekiel's imagery . . . reveals the impact of a degrading imperial hierarchy on himself and his fellow exiles," 157.

truth of Mordecai's identity is defined in the names of his ancestors and in the details of what was stripped away from them. He is introduced as a Benjaminite son of Kish (כִּישׁ בֶּן־יִמְיָי 2:5), and since the rejected King Saul too was a son of Kish (cf. 1 Chron 12:1), Mordecai stands in synecdoche for a family line stripped of royalty.⁸ Mordecai represents a people who have been reduced from their former glory.

Of course, Mordecai's social location within the story world is complex, even fluid.⁹ It is true both that he has some status and influence as an official at the king's gate and that his reality is strongly shaped by his subaltern status. Furthermore, by the end of the tale both Esther and Mordecai rise to positions of prominence and influence; their names are known and honored (cf. 5:3; 9:3). Yet the security they win for themselves and their people is haunted by the memory of the others before them who have risen to such heights and have been cut down swiftly and suddenly on the basis of a single conversation or the quickly changing tempers of the king (cf. Vashti, Haman, Bigthan and Teresh).¹⁰ Under the empire, Esther and Mordecai and their people will always be vulnerable.

⁸ On Mordecai's evocation of Saul, see Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, 49-53, 86ff; Jon Levenson, *Esther* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 56-57.

⁹ In fact, Carolyn Sharp argues that in their successful assimilation in order to survive, Esther and Mordecai have become "virtually indistinguishable" from the Persians. *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 80.

¹⁰ According to Timothy Beal, Vashti "will haunt the rest of the story. The story of Esther and Mordecai never shakes her memory," *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 29. On the similarities in the insecurity experienced by both Haman and Mordecai within the empire, see *ibid.*, 58.

6.2 Opportunities for Play: Proximity and Perception

Esther MT presents the Persian king as utterly dominant and life before his empire as an experience of vulnerability and disempowerment. Yet even as Esther MT casts the king and his empire as serious superpowers, it simultaneously undercuts this presentation with irony.¹¹ The narrative casts the king in his droll aspect, putting the absurdities of his character and rule on full display. In so doing, it exposes them to future readers who may recognize these ironies and absurdities and laugh at them.¹²

One of the most obvious ways Esther MT opens opportunities to play with the king is by bringing this awe-inspiring and typically distant figure, normally secluded behind palace walls, into a zone of proximity and familiar contact. In other words, this carnivalesque book subjects the king and empire to carnivalesque treatment. (Recall that carnival was a time of unusual access and license in communication with respect to royals.) In the zone of proximity, the king can be examined and potentially found wanting.

Indeed, Esther's characters—and through them, its readers—are afforded a startling degree of access to the private worlds of the royals. The first feast is impressive in the geographic breadth reflected in its invitees, as well as in the astonishing length of access afforded, although that is itself revealing; six months is probably too long for guests to stay in the palace without seeing cracks in the carefully curated presentation of

¹¹ See Sharp, who contends that a good reading of biblical texts like Esther must take into account “the dynamics of resistance and misdirection enacted by irony,” *Irony and Meaning*, 8. The rabbis recognized these dynamics, as we will see.

¹² As Sharp explains, the narrative fatally ironizes Ahasuerus and the Persians, relying especially on “excessiveness as the primary ‘key’ or tonality,” *Irony and Meaning*, 65.

royalty. The second feast, as we saw, extends access of another kind. It is limited in geographic scope to those found in the fortress of Susa, but it is all-embracing in terms of status, including everyone from the greatest to the least (Esth 1:5). Furthermore, the license extended these invitees is extraordinarily permissive. The commoners of Susa, and Esther's readers along with them, are invited into the king's palace, where they see the royal furnishings, taste the royal wine, and are even invited to gaze upon the royal woman (although, of course, Vashti refuses) (vv. 5-8).

The danger of offering such access is that it leaves the royals exposed. Indeed, it is immediately after the description of the second feast that Vashti refuses to appear at the king's command (v.12). The state responds as if this incident is a crisis of the highest order. Memucan, one of the king's advisors, opines,

“It is not against the king alone that Vashti has done wrong, but against all the princes and against all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus. For the matter of the Queen will go out to all the women and to despise their husbands in their eyes when they say, ‘King Ahasuerus said to bring Queen Vashti before him, but she did not come.’ This very day the princesses of Persia and Media, who have heard the matter of the Queen, will say [this] to all the princes of the king, and there will be no end of contempt and vexation” (vv. 16-18).

Memucan's speech and reasoning seem ridiculous and overblown (how can one woman's refusal become a state crisis with empire-wide implications?), and it may be read as an instance in which the royals are lampooned for their folly. Yet Memucan's assessment contains an element of truth. By opening up the palace compound and its wealth to people from across the empire and across social classes, the king has given access to everyone, even women, to what might otherwise be a private dispute between two married people.

Intimate access to the royal world continues as a Jewish orphan enters the secluded world of the harem, and readers are given access to this space through lengthy descriptions of Esther's experience there, with explanations of the various practices and procedures of this mysterious place (2:8-15). Esther enters the most intimate royal chambers (v. 16) and feasts privately with the king and his second-in-command (5:5; 7:1). She even manages to enter a space to which uninvited access is barred on penalty of death (5:1-2). Through Esther, and eventually Mordecai, all the Jews of the land and all the readers of the book gain some sort of connection to someone with intimate access to the king. In this zone of familiar contact, the king's true character becomes clear.

In the opening scene, which spans 187 days (1:1-10), the king is the subject of just one verb (עשה), repeated twice: "he threw a feast"—or more accurately, a long "drink" (עשה משתה, 1:3, 5). All he really wants is to show off his wealth and honor (1:4), and he redirects all the leaders and bounty of his entire empire toward this end for an absurd length of time (1:3).¹³ He can bend all these peoples and products to his wishes, but, ironically, not his own wife (1:12). Most ridiculous of all, he and his advisors mobilize the vast and efficient postal service to promulgate an unfeasible law: "that every man should be ruler in his house and should speak the language of his people" (1:22).¹⁴ (The rabbis particularly zero in on the ludicrousness of this proclamation, as we shall see.) The emotions of this king surge and subside suddenly (1:12 to 2:1; 7:7 to 7:10); he

¹³ Sharp, *Irony and Meaning*, 65: "Ahasuerus's ostentatious royal feast lasts an overblown 180 days for a crowd that is unthinkable huge."

¹⁴ As Sharp notes, "everything represented about the Persian court is hilariously overdone," including "decisions that are morally outrageous and pragmatically ludicrous," *Irony and Meaning*, 65, 66. The Persian court is thus ironized, according to Sharp. The presentation of pomp and control is undercut with irony.

will instigate empire-wide havoc in a moment of pique, but the details of what happened, and his role in it all, fade quickly from his memory. No sooner has he dispatched Vashti in his rage than he remembers her but not his own role in her absence (2:1).¹⁵ Even Esther, who the king loves “more than all other women” (2:17), seems quickly forgotten, as, by chapter 4, the king has not called for her in a month (4:11). This king bursts with rage against Haman (7:7) and has him immediately executed (7:10) but does not address with the ongoing threat Haman leaves behind, namely, the decree of destruction against the Jews, including his own queen (8:3, 6).¹⁶ Ahasuerus is appallingly unaware of what is happening in his own palace, among his leadership, and just outside his palace walls.¹⁷

Drawing the king into the zone of familiar contact playfully but inexorably exposes him for what he is and clarifies how power works in the kingdom. Behind stunningly purple and white curtains and all the other royal trappings is a king who is rash, easily manipulated, often drunk, and quite frankly, simply does not care about affairs in the empire outside his walls. The king is simultaneously all-powerful and ridiculous. This is a dangerous reality, and yet the truth is exposed playfully. Play can, as we have seen, through humor and exaggeration and other tools, both reveal absurdity and assist those who must survive it.

¹⁵ See Levenson, *Esther*, 51-52.

¹⁶ On Ahasuerus’s lack of “all sense of proportion and propriety” in this and other matters, see Levenson, *Esther*, 107.

¹⁷ For example, he seems oblivious to the ire between Mordecai and Haman, has not looked through the window to notice the surely imposing stake Haman has constructed nearby, and seems deaf to the outbreak of distress in the surrounding city in 3:15.

6.3 The Rabbinic Field of Play

As we will see, the rabbis recognize the ways in which Esther MT undercuts its own serious presentation of the Persian king, and they extend the book's work by developing a rich hidden transcript of play at the king's expense, even as they take seriously the real and ongoing threat of such a king and such an empire. The rabbis show in their Esther receptions that they recognize from personal experience the subaltern realities faced by Mordecai and Esther. In their eyes, empires may shift over time, but the life on the underside of domination is little changed.

It can be difficult to specify a context for the midrashic collections under consideration in this chapter.¹⁸ Their geographical range extends from Palestine to Babylonia, and their composition processes span centuries. Yet there are certain continuities. Both Esther Rabbah (Esth. Rab.) and Targum Sheni (T. Sheni) emerged in the context of Palestinian synagogues somewhere in the third through sixth centuries (in the case of Esth. Rab.) or fourth through seventh centuries CE (in the case of T. Sheni).¹⁹ Moreover, despite the fact that Esth. Rab. may have reached its final form some centuries later on European soil, both it and T. Sheni overtly read the text from the perspective of life under Roman rule.²⁰ Of course, what the rabbis mean by *Rome* appears to have shifted through the centuries. In some instances, the reference is clearly to ancient Rome.

¹⁸ For a fuller introduction to these texts, see chapter 3.

¹⁹ T. Sheni is a targum and not necessarily composed by rabbis. However, for ease of communication, I refer to the authors and compilers of all three works as rabbis.

²⁰ For the relative dating of Esth. Rab. 1-6 (Amoraic) and 7-10 (Late Midrashic) see Myron B. Lerner, "The Works of Aggadic Midrash and the Esther Midrashim," in *The Literature of the Sages II*, Shmuel Safrai et al., eds. (Assen: Royal Van Gorcum, 2006), 179–189. See also Arnon Atzmon, "Old Wine in New Flasks: The Story of Late Neoclassical Midrash," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 3, no. 2 (2009): 183-203.

Esth. Rab., for example, refers to the emperor Trajan (c. 98-117 CE) and to the ancient Roman festival of Saturnalia. Yet there is also evidence that the rabbis continued to identify Christian imperial powers as Rome. Hence references to Rome (aka Edom) may easily reflect experiences in the Byzantine period.²¹ As works emerging from Jewish synagogues, both are best understood with reference to an oral function (either a homiletic introduction or accompaniment to the reading of the biblical text) for the benefit of the gathered community.²²

While T. Sheni and Esth. Rab. are the primary sources in this chapter, material from Tractate Megillah (Meg.), an Esther midrash found within the Babylonian Talmud, will also be brought into the conversation. This work emerged in the Jewish study houses in Babylonia under Sassanian rule in the third through sixth century CE. Meg. thus emerged within a very different geographical and institutional context than either T. Sheni or Esth. Rab. It is also distinct from the other two works in that it does not present its context as one of Roman rule.²³ Nevertheless, it seems to be based on an originally Palestinian homiletical midrash.²⁴ Moreover, it emerged in a diasporic community that, tracing its history back to the Babylonian deportations of the sixth century BCE, understood well the situation of life at the mercy of shifting empires.

²¹ See discussion in Chapter 4.

²² On orality, see Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash I*, 16-18.

²³ Cf. Meg. 11a, where “the days of the Romans” seems to be referred to as a period some time in the past. Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash I*, 106.

²⁴ As Segal explains, it is “in large measure an originally homiletical midrash whose genesis was in Palestine but was afterwards, as a result of its inclusion in the curriculum of the Babylonian *yeshivah*, transformed into an exegetical-style commentary.” *Babylonian Esther Midrash, I*, 11-12.

It is evident even from the opening lines of Esth. Rab. that an overriding consideration governing the reading of the rabbis is that of the experience of domination. The world within which the rabbis read is one in which their people have long managed the difficulties of life under a series of dominating world powers. This tone is firmly established by the large collection of proems—interpretive, homiletical introductions to the first verse to be exegeted in a section of midrash—that precede the opening words of the Scroll: ויהי בימי אחשורוש (“It happened in the days of Ahasuerus . . .”) (Esth 1:1). The verses chosen from outside the Esther Scroll as starting points are telling. Again and again verses referencing danger and destruction are interpreted in terms of how aptly they describe the sequentially unfolding experiences of Israel under Babylon, Media, Greece, and Rome (sometimes called Edom). Thus, for example, the arrival of the time of Ahasuerus is interpreted through the lens of Amos 5:19, which describes a man who flees a lion (Babylon) only to meet a bear (Media), and then enters a house (Greece) only to be bitten by a serpent (Edom, i.e. Rome) (Esth. Rab., Proem 5).²⁵ In the world of this text, the rising and falling of various empires makes little difference to the security of this beleaguered people; the precise form of the danger may change, but not the basic fact of vulnerability. The empires, though varied in some particulars, all spell danger and destruction: as it has always been, so “it was in the days of Ahasuerus.” The field of play for the rabbis is full of threat and steeped in pain.

²⁵ Esth. Rab., Proem 5. As is clear from the similar reading based on Jer. 5:6, it does not make much difference whether a “lion out of the forest doth slay them” (Babylon), a “wolf of the deserts doth spoil them” (Media), or a “leopard watcheth over their cities” (Greece), for, in the end, “Everyone that goeth out thence is torn in pieces” (Edom, read Rome). On Edom as a reference to Rome, see Chapter 4.

The particular woe that presses most noticeably on many of the rabbis' readings is the experience of pain over the state of ruin of the temple—an ongoing state of affairs after 70 CE. Of course, Esther MT never mentions the temple and reveals no apparent concern over the situation in the land from which Mordecai has been exiled. For the rabbis, however, the temple's story is deeply tied up with that of Esther, and they layer their feelings about the state of ruin of the second temple onto the history of the first temple. In doing so, they were not careless readers, for Esther MT does include a reference to Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon (2:6), the king the rabbis remember most for his having destroyed the first temple. Moreover, they understand Vashti, Ahasuerus's wife, to be “the last remnant of the wicked dynasty of Nebuchadnezzar.”²⁶ As his last descendant, Vashti shares Nebuchadnezzar's interest in the temple's ongoing state of ruin and, according to the rabbis, actively impedes any attempts at rebuilding.²⁷ In the rabbinic view, Ahasuerus is to be identified with the Artaxerxes who ordered a halt to the rebuilding of the (second) temple (cf. Ezra 4:21), and it is Vashti, in their view, who is responsible for convincing the king to give this order.²⁸

But the rabbis have even greater reasons to resent Vashti and Ahasuerus. In their view, the pair used their feasts to show off the temple's loot. In a midrash on the phrase *גם ושתי* (“Vashti also”) (Esth 1:9), the rabbis explain:

Just as Ahasuerus opened six treasuries, so she opened six treasuries. Just as he went to all kinds of expense, so she went to all kinds of expense. Just as he feasted after the style of the Land of Israel, so she feasted after the style of the

²⁶ Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash I*, 292.

²⁷ On Vashti's lineage, see Esth. Rab. proem 12.

²⁸ In Meg. 12a, the angel Gabriel gives Vashti a tail as a punishment “because she did not give leave to Ahasuerus for the Temple to be built. She said to him: That which my forefathers have destroyed you wish to build!” Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash I*, 260.

Land of Israel. Just as he wore the high-priestly garments, so she wore the high-priestly garments (Esth. Rab. 3.9).

The reference to the high-priestly garments responds to the fact Ahasuerus is concerned with the display of his תפארת (splendor/beauty) (Esth 1:4), a word the rabbis associate closely with the temple world. Both Meg. and Esth. Rab. connect Esth 1:4 to Ex 28:2, wherein the high priestly garments are described with the same term: ועשית בגדי־קדש (“you shall make holy garments for Aaron, your brother, for glory and for beauty”). They thus read Ahasuerus as displaying and even donning these sacred garments, an astonishingly disrespectful move.²⁹ Worst of all, one midrash interprets the feasts of Ahasuerus and Vashti to have been celebrations of the destruction of the temple. In this midrash, God promises to punish these monarchs “because they rejoiced at the destruction of the Temple” (Esth. Rab. 3.3).

In the Esther story, the rabbis recognized a situation of diminishment and dishonor to which they could deeply relate.³⁰ And while Esther’s ending (victory over enemies) may not always have been something they could experience with respect to the dominant powers under which they suffered, they could certainly partake in Esther’s

²⁹ In Esth. Rab. 2.1, the king merely shows his guests the garments. In Meg. 12a, it is much worse: the king actually dons these garments himself.

³⁰ As Elaine Rose Glickman explains, “The parallels to our sages’ own situation appear obvious. In the Persians’ stoppage of the Temple rebuilding (as recounted in the *Book of Ezra*), our rabbis saw reflected their own failed attempt to reestablish the Temple and the sacrificial cult; and in Haman, the sages recognized the Roman enemies who so vehemently opposed a resurgence not only of Jewish worship, but of Jewish living. These parallels enabled our sages to relate more deeply to the plight of Shushan’s Jews as well as granted them assurance and hope: Just as the biblical Haman—like all those who opposed the rebuilding of the Temple—received his just punishment . . . so our sages looked forward to Rome’s similar debasement.” *Haman and the Jews: A Portrait from Rabbinic Literature* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson Inc., 1999), 44.

other pleasures. The rabbis seem to have provided relief and pleasure for their communities as they recognized and recapitulated Esther's less militaristic victories over the Persians. They played with the similarities they observed between the Persian cast of characters and the Romans who presently troubled them, and they subjected these contemporary characters to Esther's carnivalizing treatment. If, as we will see, Esther's humor with respect to the royals bears the marks of the pain and vulnerability of imperial domination, so does the provocative laughter of the rabbis.

6.4 Aggadah: Reducing King and Empire through Carnavalesque Play

6.4.1 Rendering the Persians Ridiculous

The book of Esther draws the all-powerful Persian king and his court into the zone of proximity and subjects them to awe-reducing humor; the rabbis recognize and extend this work. One way in which the rabbis subject the Persians to playful mocking is by exploiting their "tongue-twisting" names.³¹ The rabbis derive creative etymologies for the names of the king's eunuchs, based on their consonance with a variety of negative

³¹ For Adele Berlin, humor resides in the names themselves, with or without rabbinic mock etymologies, *Esther* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 13. Part of their humor may lay in faux-Persian-ness: "Greek dramatists would sometimes give their Persian characters names that sounded Persian but were not authentic, and perhaps the author of Esther did the same. The mention of these seven tongue-twisting names . . . provided an added touch of comedy," *ibid.*, 14. On humor with names, see Yehuda T. Radday, 59- "Humour in Names," in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, 61, footnote 1: "the innumerable biblical personages whom the Sages of the Talmud found so blameworthy that they twisted their names until they sounded comical." On Esther, Radday notes, "The technique of intertwining a high-tension story and a register of strange and rather comically sounding personal names reaches its apogee in the book of Esther. There we read of no fewer than thirty nonentities who crowd the Persian Royal Court, only four of whom play at most a very minor role, and only one ever utters a word," 71. Radday adds, "Whatever these names may mean in Persian . . . in Hebrew they just sound ludicrous," 71.

words. Similarly, Ahasuerus's name attracts a number of half-plausible etymologies that associate the syllables אהשוראש (*a-hash-ve-rosh*) with חש (*hash*) and ראש (*rosh*).³² Some of the associations do not so much diminish Ahasuerus as voice the pain inflicted by his rule. One explains that Ahasuerus earned his name “because he made the head of Israel ache [שהיש ראשן] with fasting and affliction” and another “because he made them drink gall and wormwood [שהשקה אותן לענה וראשן]” (Esth. Rab. 1.1). Other suggestions, however, take aim at Ahasuerus. One notes that he had this name “because he was the brother of the head [שהיה אחיו של ראש]” (1.1). The head in question is Nebuchadnezzar, a ‘head’ being true ruler.³³ The joke is that Ahasuerus is a diminished sibling of such a ruler. Another reading suggests Ahasuerus had this name “because no one could mention him without feeling a headache” [שהיה חושש את ראשן] (1.3), which is certainly not a flattering portrayal.³⁴ Or as R. Hanina puts it in Meg. 11a, “everyone who recalls him says ‘Ach’ for his head [*ah lerosho*].”

The kind of name play the rabbis undertake with the king's name they also extend to the characters in his court. Esth 1:10 lists seven eunuchs by name: Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar and Karkas. For the rabbis, that such otherwise minor characters were named must have some interpretive significance. They notice that the name Bizzetha (בזתא) shares consonants with בוז and בית, and so they imagine God commanding the angel in charge of wrath to declare, “despoil his house” (בוז ביתיה) (Esth.

³² Non-technical transliteration to help reader follow sound play.

³³ The rabbis base their identification of Nebuchadnezzar as the head on Dan 2:38.

³⁴ Maurice Simon's translation here must be based on root חוש/חושש (II), “to feel (pain).” *Midrash Rabbah: Esther* (London: Soncino, 1939).

Rab. 3.12).³⁵ For Harbona (חרבונא), they pick up on the consonants חרב and imagine God saying, “lay waste his house” (אהריב ביתיה). Connections are drawn from the other eunuchs’ names to lewdness, spoil, plunder, and other kinds of embarrassment. Bigtha and Abagtha receive the sentence of plunder (בזז ובזבוז), which seems to be a wordplay based on the difference between the qere and ketiv of Ezek 25:7; where the written syllable בג, found in both the names Bigtha and Abagtha, is vocalized as בז (plunder).³⁶ As Segal notes, the midrashic material on Esther “is replete with similar ‘etymologies’” and “fanciful interpretations of names.”³⁷ These connections are not meant to be taken “in full seriousness.”³⁸ They do, however, make for creative and memorable jokes at the expense of the Persians, and allow the players to vent some of their feelings toward these Persians and whichever contemporary overlords they take them to represent.

The rabbis further undertake comic diminishment of the all-powerful Persians by engaging in speculation as to the injured egos and personal slights that drive court politics. Memucan is the advisor who suggests a fitting punishment for Vashti (cf. Esth. 1:16–20), and the rabbis speculate as to why Memucan, listed last among those consulted

³⁵ Line 153, page 78. T. Rishon calls Biztha “shame of the house.” Bernard Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther: Translated, with Apparatus and Note* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 35.

³⁶ Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, 53, note 4: “Apparently a play on the word *bag* found for ‘plunder’ in Ezek. xxv, 7.”

³⁷ Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash I*, 118.

³⁸ As Segal writes, “It is doubtful however whether the etymologies were intended to be taken so seriously. In the present instance (as in most other examples in the literature), this is rendered obvious when we observe how forced the similarities are between the word and the various explanations which are supposedly derived from it, all of which involve (even after we have made allowance for the ephemeral status of Semitic vowels) the addition of extra consonants, or the metathesis of key radicals, etc.,” *Babylonian Esther Midrash I*, 119.

by the king (v. 14), is nonetheless first to speak.³⁹ They surmise he must have held a special hatred for Vashti and report three possible reasons why.

R. Johanan reported different opinions of three Amoraim. One said [that Memucan hated Vashti] because she used to strike his face on both sides with her shoe. A second said: It was because she did not invite his wife to the women's feast. The third said: It was because he had a daughter whom he wanted to marry into the royal house (Esth. Rab. 4.6).

In each case, the reasons derive from amplification of Memucan's recorded remarks. The first opinion is based on his assertion that "It is not against the king alone that Queen Vashti has done wrong" (לא עליהמלך לבדו עושה ושתי המלכה) (v. 16). The rabbis assume Memucan carries a grudge against Vashti. Besides giving the audience the enjoyment of venting some violence on a Persian potentate, the scenario reduces him to a cowering man, unable to defend himself from a woman with a shoe.⁴⁰ The second explanation for Memucan's anti-Vashti feelings is based on his concern that "what the Queen said will go out to all the women, to despise their husbands in their eyes" (כי יצא דבר המלכה על כל) (הנשים להבזות בעליהן בעיניהן) (v. 17). The rabbis understand Memucan's concern to reveal his own struggle to deal with his wife's contempt for him because he had not been able to secure her an invitation to Vashti's feast. Now he is worried that word of Vashti's behavior will reach even women who had not been invited (like his wife) and make life

³⁹ On Memucan speaking first, see Esth. Rab. 4.6. "How came Memucan to give his opinion first? From this we learn that an ignoramus always thrusts himself to the front." See also Meg. 12b, "Says R. Abba bar Kahana: From this {you learn} that a commoner jumps to the front." Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash I*, 286.

⁴⁰ Of course, the pleasure taken in this scene relies on a relatively low view of women, else being bested by Vashti would not be perceived to be quite so humiliating. See Athalya Brenner, "Who's Afraid of Feminist Criticism?" *JSOT* 63 (1994): 42-43. The superiority humor of those who experience themselves as weak may come at the cost of other relatively weak parties.

more difficult for husbands such as himself. The third opinion reads Memucan as taking revenge on behalf of his daughter, who apparently had been overlooked for royal marriage.⁴¹ Since Memucan suggests that “the king give her royal position to someone better than her” (ומלכותה יתן המלך לרעותה הטובה ממנה) (v. 19), the rabbis assume Memucan hopes that with Vashti out of the way there would be a better chance for his own daughter. All three explanations reveal the rabbis’ judgment that in gentile courts personal slights rather than sensible policy rule the day. Through play, the rabbis cut these potentates to their actual size: mere humans, with petty concerns and delicate egos.

The midrashim take similar pleasure in skewering Persian policy, already deeply ironized in the Esther narrative. Clearly, Persian laws and decrees have tremendous consequences for the people of the land, far from the rooms where the decisions are made, and these consequences can be disastrous. Furthermore, the basic facts of life under empire mean that there is little those outside the royal courts can do about even harmful and ludicrous laws. Nonetheless the otherwise powerless do wield one weapon against the powerful: the ability to mock them, even if quietly and only in private.⁴²

Regarding the king’s decree (Esther 1:22) they write:

R. Huna said: Ahasuerus was utterly devoid of sense. If a man wants to eat lentils and his wife wants to eat beans, can he force her? Surely she does as she likes. R. Phinehas said: Nay more, he made himself a laughing stock. If a Median marries a Persian woman, is she to speak Median? If a Persian marries a Median woman, is she to speak Persian? (Esth. Rab. 4.12).

⁴¹ Esth. Rab. 4.6

⁴² See for example, James C. Scott on these “weapons of the weak” in, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), v.

That the Persian king would command the impossible reveals the folly and the futility of his word.⁴³ A woman will not be able to speak a language she does not know; commanding her to do so will change nothing. Even God, R. Phineas wryly points out, could not demand that his ‘spouse’ speak a divine language they would not have known; rather, according to this tradition, “God ... spoke with the Israelites in the language which they had learnt.”⁴⁴ The fact that the Persians are terrifying does not preclude their being found ridiculous as well.

6.4.2 *Undercutting the King*

As the last example indicates, the rabbis take up textual opportunities to mock the Persian king. They concentrate their efforts especially upon the first two verses of Esther:

ויהי בימי אחשוורוש הוא אחשוורוש המלך מהדו ועד־כוש שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה. בימים
ההם כשבת המלך אחשוורוש על כסא מלכותו אשר בשושן הבירה.

It came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus – this was the same Ahasuerus who ruled from India to Cush, 127 provinces. In those days, when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne which was in the fortress of Susa (Esth 1:1–2).

At face value, these verses describe the impressive domain of the Persian king. Yet in their treatment of these verses, the rabbis take advantage of every textual opportunity to cut the all-powerful Ahasuerus down to size. In addition to the name-play we have already observed, they deliver their first blow in connection with the apparently

⁴³ On the impossibility of the king’s command, see Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, footnote 1, page 64.

⁴⁴ Esth. Rab. 4.12. This reading is based on the use of the first-person personal pronoun אנכי in Ex 20:2 rather than the more common אני. The rabbis read this as God having used a word that was from or at least similar to the language they knew at the time when first introducing himself to the people at Mount Sinai. In their words, the phrase “אנכי יי אלהיך” is in “Egyptian language” (לשון נאגד) (line 118, page 95).

superfluous phrase הוא אהשוורוש (“this is the same Ahasuerus,” Esth 1:1). The rabbis use this phrase as an opportunity to point out the extreme folly of this man: “Ahasuerus who put his wife to death on account of his friend, this is [the same] Ahasuerus who put his friend to death on account of his wife” (Esth. Rab. 1.1).⁴⁵

Next, they consider the number of provinces over which he has dominion. With 127 provinces (1:1), the empire seems impressive in size. Indeed, this number is commonly read as inflated beyond all historical probability and, hence, as an example of the hyperbolic style of the book.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the rabbis refuse to be impressed and instead treat this number as a mere half of what other, better kings had ruled: “Are there not two hundred and fifty-two governorships in the world?” asks R. Hanina (Esth. Rab. 1.5). The rabbis cite a variety of texts to demonstrate that kings such as David, Solomon, Ahab, Nebuchadnezzar, and Cyrus all ruled the whole world and that, at half that size, Ahasuerus’s 127-province reach represents a rather diminished domain (Esth. Rab. 1.6).

If the rabbis interpret Esther 1:1 in ways that undercut its depiction of his empire’s great size, they employ 1:2 to undermine the reader’s estimation of Ahasuerus’s authority and throne. A phrase that draws extensive comment and creativity is כשבח המלך (“when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne”) (1:2). In this case, the rabbis exploit a grammatical oddity. Typically, the infinitive construct functioning temporally would take כ rather than כ as its inseparable preposition, so the rabbis play with the possibilities this unusual construction affords. They wonder whether the כ indicates that Ahasuerus’s ascension was an imitation of an ascension; it was only “as if”

⁴⁵ T. Sheni has the same joke on Esth 1:1. See Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 99.

⁴⁶ See for example Berlin, *Esther*, 6.

he attained the throne, a poor likeness of much greater rulers. R. Isaac notes, “It is not written here *be-shebeth* [בשבת]..., but ‘*ke-shebeth*’ [כשבת], as if to say a seat which was yet no seat.”⁴⁷ They cite the use of בשבת in Judges 11:26 (בשבת ישראל בהשבון) to indicate that, by contrast, “the seat of Israel is a real seat” (Est. Rab. 1.11). Here we see the opening lines of what will become an important theme of rabbinic Esther interpretation: King Ahasuerus and his empire, as amazing as they are, are but poor imitations of the grandeur of Israel.

The next textual opportunity taken up by the rabbis is the phrase כסא מלכותו (“his royal throne”). These ancient interpreters noticed that Ahasuerus sits on “his” royal throne (in reference to the pronominal suffix ו) (Esth. Rab. 1.12). There is only one other biblical text where this phrase occurs, and in that case, the throne in question belongs to Solomon (1 Chron 22:10).⁴⁸ The rabbis thus conclude that the throne upon which Ahasuerus sits is not his own but “his”—i.e., Solomon’s. Worse, this throne is not actually Solomon’s, but a lesser copy. This is because Ahasuerus desperately longs to sit on Solomon’s throne but is “not permitted.” Solomon’s throne was made for someone who ruled the whole world and, as we have seen, at a ‘mere’ 127 provinces, Ahasuerus’s domain is insufficient. As a result, Ahasuerus is forced to make another throne, a dim version of Solomon’s, which he must pay for himself.⁴⁹ This interpretive point was popular and occurs also in Targum Rishon. In this version, Ahasuerus

⁴⁷ Esth. Rab. 1.11

⁴⁸ והכינתי כסא מלכותו על־ישראל עד־עולם (“I will establish his royal throne over Israel forever”).

⁴⁹ See also Beate Ego, “All Kingdoms and Kings Trembled Before Him: The Image of King Solomon in Targum Sheni on Megillat Esther,” *Journal for the Aramaic Bible* 3

wished to sit upon it [Solomon's throne] but was not able to, so he ordered the architects be brought from Alexandria to produce one like it but they were unable; instead, they made another one inferior to it. They were busy for two years with it . . .⁵⁰

Despite the fact that Solomon is nowhere mentioned in Esther MT, he and his throne loom large in rabbinic interpretation of Esther. Targum Sheni undertakes a particularly enthusiastic exposition of Solomon's incomparable glory, a discussion that continues for several pages with only an occasional nod to the world of the Esther story it purports to exegete (specifically, Esth 1:2). A few excerpts will indicate the general feel of the exposition.

He, that great king, Solomon, whom the Holy One, Blessed be He, appointed to rule from one end of the world to the other.⁵¹

Splendor and glory were lavished upon him, and the royal crown was placed upon his head.⁵²

All kings feared him, nations, and (speakers of all) languages as one were obedient to him; demons and evil spirits, ferocious beasts and (other kinds of) spirits were delivered under his control. . . . He was rich and powerful and acquired possessions, silver and gold in great abundance. He explained parables, (and) resolved mysteries, and made known secrets of infinite nature. His enemies and adversaries became his friends and all kingdoms obeyed him. They all proceeded to behold his presence and longed to hear the words of his knowledge.⁵³

He was perfect and honest, shunning evil . . .⁵⁴

His kingdom was more powerful than all the kingdoms . . .⁵⁵

(2001): 68. This exegetical impulse seems to be reflected in Esth. Rab. 1.12, although it is not as explicit.

⁵⁰ Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 29.

⁵¹ Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 104.

⁵² Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 104.

⁵³ Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 105-6.

⁵⁴ Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 106.

⁵⁵ Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 107.

All kings loved him, all rulers trembled before him . . .⁵⁶

Clearly, Solomon is superior to the Persian King Ahasuerus in every way imaginable. But the height of the whole panegyric is reached in its description of Solomon's throne:

covered with fine gold from Ophir, overlaid with beryl stones and inlaid with marble stones; it was overlaid with samaragel, carbuncle, diamonds and pearls and all kinds of precious ones. For no king was one made like it, or [*sic*] were any of the kings able to produce one similar to it.⁵⁷

It is a throne with 72 gold eagles and 72 gold lions, with six steps featuring creatures as varied as a bear, ox, lamb, panther, peacock, and dove.⁵⁸ It features lampstands with pomegranates and other ornaments; branches with portraits of the patriarchs; golden basins with oil; seats for the high priests; seventy more seats for the members of the Sanhedrin.⁵⁹ Near the top are dolphins, and vines to shade the king.⁶⁰ Most impressively of all, it is a moving throne; the animals would work together to pick up Solomon and seat him on the top; an eagle would bring his crown and set it on his head; animals would relocate to provide shade for him as necessary.⁶¹ When people come to inquire of the king or seek justice, the throne's astonishing "machinery" is set in motion:

the oxen lowed, the lions roared, the bears growled, the lambs bleated, the panthers screamed, the owls hooted, the cats mewed, the peacocks shrieked, the roosters crowed, the hawks screamed, and the birds chirped to frighten the hearts of the witnesses so that they not offer false testimony.⁶²

⁵⁶ Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 107.

⁵⁷ Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 108.

⁵⁸ Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 109.

⁵⁹ Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 110.

⁶⁰ Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 111.

⁶¹ Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 111.

⁶² Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 112.

The throne provides a full sensory experience, and in addition to these sound effects would also “sprinkle spices” whenever King Solomon would ascend it.⁶³ This is truly an astonishing, incomparable throne: “such a throne none of the [other] kings possessed.”⁶⁴

Obviously, such a throne would be a desirable prize to any conquering king. Every king who captures it, in the telling of Targum Sheni, longs to sit upon it. But this is where the telling turns comical: two kings receive some sort of permanent injury for attempting to ascend it. Nebuchadnezzar, for example, “was not aware that the machineries would be set in motion for him. So when he spread out his foot onto the first step a golden lion stretched out his right paw and struck him on his left flank. Thus he limped on it until the day of his death.”⁶⁵ Alexander takes the throne to Egypt and, apparently having not heard what happened to Nebuchadnezzar, suffers the same fate: “Thus he was called ‘the lame Pharaoh’ until the day of his death.”⁶⁶ Perhaps Ahasuerus was lucky that he simply was not permitted to ascend and hence escaped unscathed.

Ahasuerus’s goal in the opening scenes of Esther is to “display the wealth of his glorious kingdom and the honor of his great splendor” (בהראתו את־עשר כבוד־מלכותו ואת־) (“יקר תפארת גדולתו” (Esth 1:4). The purposes of the rabbis in interpreting these scenes are very much at odds with Ahasuerus’s honor. Imaginatively prying open the smallest of textual gaps—a single letter in some cases—they bring their own king to the competition and thus best Ahasuerus at his own game.

⁶³ Esth. Rab. 1.12 records a similar tradition, in which a voice speaks a separate instruction as the king ascends each step of his throne.

⁶⁴ Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 112.

⁶⁵ Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 112-13.

⁶⁶ Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 113.

6.4.3 *The Splendors of Israel, the Envy of the Persians*

The rabbis depict Ahasuerus as coveting Solomon's throne, but that is not the only thing he covets. In fact, the idea that the Persians were envious of Israel's splendors is a major motif in the aggadic material on Esther. They rebuff feelings of inferiority before Persia's glory and royal splendor by insisting on the superiority of their *own* glory and throne. Of course, there is extreme irony in these presentations. In both the story world and the world of the rabbis, Solomon's throne is no longer extant and the temple he built has been destroyed. Surely, both are as far beyond the bounds of interest of the Persian royals as they are of the Esther narrative—which is to say, completely absent. The rabbis, however, imagine it otherwise.

The envy that the midrashic Ahasuerus has for Solomon's throne is paralleled by Persian envy of the splendors of Israel's temple. Though the temple is absent from the story world of Esther and destroyed in the world of the rabbis, there is a decided enjoyment taken in delighting in the excellence of its furnishings and reading them as the envy of the nations. As we saw in Esth. Rab. 2.1, the rabbis read the king as having used the temple treasures and even the high priestly garments to show off his wealth. One rabbi compares the king to a raven that “decks itself equally with its own feathers and with those of others” (Esth. Rab. 2.1). In other words, Ahasuerus's splendor is that which he had to acquire from others. It makes sense within the pattern of rabbinic interpretation observed so far that the king would want to possess and show off Israel's splendors. After all, the consistent assertion of the rabbis is that just as Solomon's throne is the envy of the nations, so are Israel's treasures. No matter that the temple lies in ruins and that any relics

of the temple furnishings that survived the temple's destruction are no longer in the people's possession; they are still the most glorious things anyone could possess. One might think these glories have been absorbed along with all the other glories of Persia and would be unlikely to gain special notice among the vast variety of other treasures from around the world. But just as a Jewish woman will be singled out among all the peoples of the empire as the most beautiful (as Esther in 2:9, 17), so the rabbis are confident in their belief in the superiority of every captive Jewish treasure.⁶⁷ In a midrash on Esth 1:7, the rabbis depict Ahasuerus as comparing his drinking vessels to those other countries:

He brought out his own vessels and those of Elam, and his own were finer than those of Elam. He brought out his own vessels and those of the Temple, and they were finer and more beautiful than his. It was as if a mistress had a beautiful servant, and whenever she looked at her servant her colour changed. So whenever his vessels were brought face to face with those of the Sanctuary, they lost colour and became like lead (Esth. Rab. 2.11).

The reading plays on the verb שנה which signifies in Esth 1:7 that “each vessel was different from the others” (וכלים מכלים שונים). The verb can, however, also have the meaning of change or alteration. Perhaps the rabbis are informed by Lam 4:1, where שנה also appears with gold and indicates a fading or darkening of the fine metal. Even more likely, the rabbis build on one of the only two other occurrences of the root שנה in Esth. The first refers to Hegai “promoting” (וישנה, piel) Esther and her attendants above all the other young women in the harem because of the special favor she garners with her

⁶⁷ This is where the rabbis locate the temple furnishings in the story. See Esth. Rab. 2.11. On the status of the Jewish people as unremarkable among all the nations of the empire, note that Haman calls them only “a certain people,” rather than naming them, which suggests perhaps that the king has never heard of them (3:8).

supreme beauty (2:9).⁶⁸ The jealousy among the drinking vessels perhaps parallels the jealousy that one may imagine in a Persian harem. However, the final occurrence of שנה may inform the rabbinic reading as well. In his carefully crafted speech to the king, designed to win the king's approval for his plan to annihilate the Jews, Haman accuses the Jews, or at least their laws, of being "different" (שנות) than all other peoples (3:8). The midrash may reflect a playful reclamation of this libelous critique of Haman: difference can also mean superiority. The rabbis give their readers/listeners the pleasure of imagining their own superiority, enacting in the playfield opened by Esther MT a superiority they are unable to experience in real life.

The evocation of feelings of superiority is one of the three most prominent theories of laughter. Typically, it is assumed that the one laughing will be the more powerful party, putting down and delighting in their own superiority over a weaker individual or group. Yet the rabbis here play with the normal order of things by upending the obvious dominance of the Persians in wealth and splendor to assert their own superiority. Despite the counter-factual nature of these claims, the rabbis provide opportunities for their audience to practice claiming their own dignity, to remember and honor the splendor of what has been lost. In the next chapter, we see how the rabbis brought God into the game, using him as a proxy through which to best the Persians—although in the process even God will not remain unscathed by rabbinic play.

⁶⁸ וְיִשְׁנָה וְאֶת־נְעוּרוֹתֶיהָ לְטוֹב בֵּית הַנָּשִׁים / And she was good in his eyes and she found favor with him . . . and he promoted her and her young women to the best position in the house of women.

Chapter 7: God Comes to Carnival

In former chapters, we have seen how the rabbis bring the Persian royals and the archvillain Haman to carnival. Here we explore how they subject God to parallel treatment. As they pursue their work of diminishing their human oppressors through play and humor, the rabbis also play with their God, lightly mocking him while voicing complaint, protest, and lament in a joking mode. In other words, they bring God to Esther's carnival.

After an extended introduction setting the claims of this chapter in context, the heart of this chapter attends to examples from *Esther Rabbah* in which the rabbis most clearly carnivalize God. These examples will be arranged in three sections. The first plays with the possibility that God may be suffering the limitations of advanced age. The second aligns God with the archvillain Haman. The third—by far the longest section of the chapter—explores examples in which the character of God's kingship is explored with surprising interpretive freedom.

7.1 Introduction and Framing

The reason God's presence at Esther's party must be arranged by the rabbis is that their God is noticeably absent from the text of *Esther MT* itself.¹ To the canonical reader accustomed to encountering direct divine action and speech in the pages of the biblical text and human prayer in moments of crisis, Esther's lack of overtly religious reference is jarring. This is particularly the case in the narration of events taking place on Passover

¹ In contrast to *Esther LXX*, *Esther MT* lacks a single reference to Israel's or any other deity, prayer, temple, dietary religious observance, or any other form of piety, with the possible exception of fasting.

Eve, 14 Nisan, a date inscribed in Israel’s memory for God’s dramatic intervention on their behalf (see Lev 23:5-6). Haman’s decree goes out on 13 Nisan (Esth 3:12), which means that the three-day fast that follows takes place during one of Israel’s most important annual feasts. Yet neither the salvation the feast commemorates nor the God whose saving acts are celebrated are mentioned in Esther. Readers of faith, both Christian and Jewish, have typically followed one of two well-worn paths in addressing this uncomfortable absence.

The first approach is to keep God out of the story, on the assumption God is not a fitting guest at the scroll’s wine-filled party. H.L. Ginsberg, for example, suggests that references to God are carefully avoided in Esther out of religious respect. In his view, the author of Esther may have felt such references to be “irreverent” in a “mock-serious” text written for the opening of a carnival—an occasion of “licit levity” involving abundant drink.² In other words, God and levity do not mix well. Luther shares similar views on the incompatibility of piety and Esther, although he holds considerably less affection for the book and the holiday it promotes than does Ginsberg. He would simply prefer the book never existed, detesting it at least in part because it “contain[s] a lot of pagan impropriety.”³

² H. L. Ginsberg, “Introduction,” in *The Five Megilloth and Jonah: A New Translation*. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1969), 83-84.

³ Isaac Kalimi, “Martin Luther, the Jews, and Esther: Biblical Interpretation in the Shadow of Judeophobia,” *Journal of Religion* 100.1 (2020), 47. Luther’s other, perhaps more significant, objection to the book is its Jewishness. Full quote: “Ich bin dem Buch [5 2. Makkabäer] und Esther so feind, dass ich wollte, sie wären gar nicht vorhanden; denn sie judenzen zu sehr, und haben viel heidnische Unart,” *ibid.*, citing Tischreden, vol. 1, p. 208, lines 30–31.

The second approach is confidently to assert God's presence throughout the story but to keep him far removed from its levity. Typically this means that although God may never be named directly, his behind-the-scenes activity is everywhere implied. Such approaches are common across Jewish and Christian traditions, and there are some distinct patterns as to where God's presence is discerned. For many, the plot's many timely 'coincidences' leave a clear trail of evidence as to God's active, providential care. Similarly, Mordecai's reference to deliverance arising from "another place" (מקום אחר) Esth 4:14) is often read as a sobriquet for God.⁴ Others, both Jews and Christians, seek to illuminate God's connection with the book by interpreting its many references to "the king" as holding a double meaning, evoking in addition to the human king the divine King of Kings (rabbinic Judaism) or Christ (medieval Christianity).⁵ What all of these approaches share is that they bring God into the book of Esther but keep him at a dignified distance from the book's levity.

The rabbis model also a third possibility, absent from the history of Christian interpretation. This third mode, perhaps best-suited to Esther's carnivalesque genre, is to bring God to Esther's carnival and subject him to its ambivalent humor. Russian literary

⁴ All translations of the biblical text are my own unless otherwise noted. Carey Moore provides an overview of the ancient versions that, in his view correctly, "see in the Hebrew a veiled allusion to God." These include the Alpha Text, Josephus, and both Targums to Esther. *Esther* (New Haven: Yale University, 1971), 50. By contrast, Michael Fox rejects the ancient reading, adopting instead the view that Esther displays a "theology of possibility" rather than certainty regarding divine presence. Fox sees possibility—and only possibility—expressed in Mordecai's phrase, "Who knows?" (ומי ידע, Esth 4:14) *Character and Ideology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001/1991), 63, 247.

⁵ This approach will be explored in detail later in this chapter.

critic Mikhail Bakhtin describes the phenomenon of carnival in the introduction to his foundational *Rabelais and His World*. For Bakhtin, carnival can designate a particular time or event, but it also denotes a mode of perception, an idiom of folk humor.⁶ As a mode of perception, carnival's view of the world is "shaped according to a certain pattern of play."⁷ This pattern of play has several distinctive features, and chief among them is the celebration of reversal.⁸ In its delight in the topsy-turvy, the carnivalesque simultaneously tears down and creates new possibilities. At carnival, for example, "a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age" allowing a "special type of communication impossible in everyday life."⁹ At carnival, the high and mighty are temporarily removed from their protected pedestals and can be subjected to unusually bold, familiar discourse.¹⁰ As crowns and royal costumes are removed and redistributed, participants can find themselves cast in surprising new roles. While such upheaval may

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 11.

⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 7.

⁸ "We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the 'inside out' (*à l'envers*), of the 'turnabout,' of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a 'world inside out.'" Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 11.

⁹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 10. Familiarity may be part of a broader trend in aggadic literature in contrast to Second Temple literature, as suggested by Arkadi Kovelman, "Farce in the Talmud," *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 5, no. 1 (2002): 86-92.

¹⁰ On familiar discourse, see Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 11.

be experienced as threat, carnival's ethos is joyful and marked by humor. In fact, one of the most defining features of the carnivalesque is a kind of ambivalent laughter that is shockingly inclusive. It is ambivalent in that it is "gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding."¹¹ It is inclusive (or in Bakhtin's terminology 'universal') in that no one is immune from it; commoners may ridicule their kings, but they must risk themselves becoming the targets of laughter in the process.¹² Finally, in addition to reversal and laughter, carnival's play delights in the bodily, earthy aspects of human identity. Feasting, drinking, sex, and death are all standard fare.¹³

Several biblical scholars have noted in recent decades that the carnivalesque as described by Bakhtin provides a particularly good frame for understanding a book like Esther (MT), with its emphasis on reversal and its many feasts.¹⁴ Interestingly, while they would not have used the term themselves, the rabbis also show sensitivity to Esther's carnivalesque character; they respond to these same features of the text in the content and tone of their Esther reception. They bring God down to a more human level, making jokes about his age and comparing him with a mortal king with plenty of foibles. In

¹¹ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 11-12.

¹² Bakhtin notes that this festive laughter "is also direct at those who laugh. The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world," *Rabelais and His World*, 12.

¹³ Bakhtin writes of this phenomenon as "grotesque realism" which "degrade[s], bring[s] down to earth, turn[s] their subject into flesh." It is linked especially "with the bodily lower stratum." *Rabelais and His World*, 20.

¹⁴ See for example Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) and André LaCoque, *Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 2008).

carnival's topsy-turvy festive world, they even dare to explore what this ostensibly good deity has in common with a villain like Haman! They subject God to unusually bold speech and ambivalent—even mocking—laughter. (Since the laughter of carnival is universal in scope, no one is immune, not even kings or deities.) In Esther Rabbah, the rabbis model a carnivalesque mode of reception well-suited to a carnivalesque book.

Now, playful jesting with God is not unique to rabbinic interpretation of Esther. While such a mode of engagement is particularly suited to treatment of a carnivalesque book like Esther, parallel patterns of play occur across rabbinic and many other forms of Jewish literature. The rabbis' bold, familiar speech and ambivalent laughter in this particularly carnivalesque corpus (Esther Rabbah) should be understood as part of a wider pattern of joking with God. Importantly, the context of such joking is relationship. As Hershey Friedman puts it, "God is portrayed in Rabbinic literature . . . with warmth, wit, and affection"; humor at God's expense "is generally not meant to show disrespect or defiance towards God. On the contrary, it demonstrates a great love for God, even though God is blamed for the unhappy plight of His people."¹⁵ Such humor expresses familial closeness with God—after all, joking, like arguing, is what one does with a relative.¹⁶ And, as much as teasing may bear witness to the familiarity of a relationship, it

¹⁵ Hershey H. Friedman, "He Who Sits in Heaven Shall Laugh: Divine Humor in Talmudic Literature," *Thalia: Studies in Literary Humor* 17, no. 1 (1997): 50, 36. For an overview of forms of rabbinic humor—and instances of rabbinic *reticence* about humor—see Eliezer Diamond, "But Is it Funny? Identifying Humor, Satire, and Parody in Rabbinic Literature," in *Jews and Humor*, ed. Leonard J. Greenspoon (West Lafayette, IN: Purdue University, 2011), 33-53.

¹⁶ In Jewish humor more broadly, as Don Waisanen et al. explain, joking with God is "not seen as blasphemous; rather, since God is part of the family, he has to expect to be kidded." Don Waisanen, Hershey H. Friedman, Linda Weiser Friedman, "What's So

may also function to nurture or strengthen such closeness.¹⁷ Like argumentation, humor among intimates can come out of a desire not so much to win but rather to engage and provoke a response from the other party—a function that is of particular interest in situations when said party seems silent or absent. Throughout this chapter, rabbinic humor with God—even if it comes at God’s expense—will be read as emerging out of a context of and fueled by the desire for relationship.

As much as it can express warmth of relationship, though, rabbinic carnivalesque treatment of God—in Esther midrash as elsewhere—is far from toothless. Of course, it is often rather humorous, but not necessarily unserious. Rabbinic roasting of God can perform work of utmost gravity. Here the work of Jacqueline Bussie is illuminating. In her book, *The Laughter of the Oppressed*, she provides an ethical and theological account of the laughter of people of faith in situations of extreme suffering.¹⁸ As her primary texts, Bussie depends on the witness of tragic novels emerging from Jewish experiences of the Holocaust, African American experiences of slavery, and Japanese Christian experiences

Funny About Arguing with God? A Case for Playful Argumentation from Jewish Literature,” *Argumentation* 29 (2015): 74.

¹⁷ Don Waisanen et al. aptly note that “humor in which God plays a role can make the Almighty seem closer to humankind” and “minimize the distance,” so to speak. “What’s So Funny,” 73.

¹⁸ Jacqueline Bussie, *The Laughter of the Oppressed: Ethical and Theological Resistance in Wiesel, Morrison, and Endo* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007). For a concise description of laughter as ethical and theological resistance, see idem. “Laughter as Ethical and Theological Resistance: Leymah Gbowee, Sarah, and the Hidden Transcript,” *Interpretation* 69, no. 2 (2015): 169-82.

of religious persecution.¹⁹ Bussie observes that the laughter attested by these works is much more prevalent than might be expected and that it performs work that is more complex and nuanced than mere frivolity or escapism.²⁰ Instead, the laughter witnessed to in this literature performs what she calls ethical and theological resistance. Ethical resistance, taken up in the previous chapter, refers to resistance directed toward systems and states of oppression. More important for our present purposes is Bussie's second category, that of theological resistance: ambivalent laughter that is directed toward God, faith, or settled theodicies that may be inadequate to absurdly evil realities. Such laughter can come in the form of protest to God or challenge of God regarding an apparent failure to act in accordance with divine faithfulness. As with the rabbinic humor discussed above, the boldness of such laughter, even if mocking or deriding, is best understood in the context of relationship. Laughter, even bitter laughter, can be a form of engagement and an alternative to silence or despair in the face of suffering. Far from being a form of faithlessness, such laughter should be understood as a way of relating to God amid extremely difficult circumstances, of 'speaking' to God through jokes and stories about things that are almost too painful to name. In this sense, it comes very close to the phenomenon of lament. While keeping faith with God, however, such bitter laughter also keeps faith with reality as experienced by the human parties to the relationship. For there can be at times extreme gaps between the lived experiences of people of faith and their

¹⁹ The novels include Elie Wiesel, *The Gates of the Forest*; Toni Morrison, *Beloved*; and Shushaku Endo, *Silence*.

²⁰ Common criticisms of laughter.

narratives of faith—as Bussie puts it, between the incongruous narratives of Sinai (divine covenant with Jews) and Treblinka (eradication of Jews met by apparent divine silence).²¹ Laughter can help in the work of holding and communicating paradox, of surviving if not reconciling the apparently incompatible narratives of faith and empirical reality.

In engaging in play with God, then, the rabbis model a carnivalesque mode of reception well-suited to a carnivalesque book.²² Moreover, it is a mode of reception well-suited to a history of suffering. Their laughter arises from and bears the marks of profound pain related to experiences of oppression, and as they weave their playful *meshalim* and joke with God, they engage in theological resistance, pushing the boundaries of what might usually be considered acceptable theological speech if it were spoken directly.²³ Sometimes, as we will see, their laughter will serve to express and strengthen a warm and confident relationship; at other times, their jokes will communicate anger, frustration, fear, or pain. Laughter can function as complaint, protesting a family member’s apparent absence and exasperating lack of response.

²¹ Cf. Bussie, *Laughter of the Oppressed*, 60, 68.

²² On the suitability of what is otherwise a broader pattern of aggadic humor to Esther in particular, see Kovelman, “Farce in the Talmud,” 86-92.

²³ This is not to say that the Esther midrashim are universally bold or playful with the divine king. Indeed, some may be said to “tame” Esther, smoothing out the book’s rougher edges by filling the gaps in the text with assured theological answers. Such is the argument of Richard Treloar, *Esther and the End of ‘Final Solutions’* (Adelaide, ATF Press, 2008). Treloar reads the rabbis as misreading “Esther’s subtly crafted agnosticism” and “reinscribe theo-ideological order,” particularly in terms of theodicy, *ibid.*, 295. Contra Treloar, I argue that a bold, playful, challenging strain is decidedly present in the Esther midrashim, and it does important theological work.

This chapter examines instances in which the rabbis bring God—willing or not—to carnival. The examples are drawn primarily from *Esther Rabbah*, by far the largest collection of *Esther* midrashim in existence. The bulk of the cases—and the heart of this chapter—deal with God as king, comparing him and at times putting him in direct competition with King Ahasuerus. But first, we examine two midrashim that epitomize the rabbis' affectionate yet daring play with God. The first explores the question of God's advanced age; the second the possibility that his sympathies lie with their archenemy.

7.2 Is God Too Old? Ambivalent Humor

One midrash in which the rabbis warmly play with God comes in the form of an imaginative retelling of *Esth* 3:8-14. On the surface, the midrash is about the conversations that must have taken place between Haman, the king, and the king's advisors in order for Haman to win their support for his terrible plan to annihilate the Israelites. On a deeper level, though, the midrash functions as a slow-burning joke about God's advanced age. Now, the rabbis do not themselves call God old; they put those words on the lips of their adversaries. But they never quite defend God against this charge, either—and God, a great sport, plays along.

The midrash is attributed to Resh Lakish (c. 200 - c. 275), a prominent Palestinian amora. It appears in a section of *Esther Rabbah* compiled quite late, possibly as late as the medieval period. The chapter it appears in (*Esth. Rab.* 7) is focused on Haman and is by far the longest of the ten chapters in the collection, indicating a strong interest in

midrashic elaboration of Haman’s character, actions, and speeches.²⁴ The midrash in question (7.13) is notable in its length and spans multiple pages and several scenes.²⁵ It is also notable for its humor. Given the general scholarly consensus that aggadic midrashim developed and blossomed first in oral form in synagogue settings, it is easy to see how this particular composition would be well-suited to a riotous performance at a Purim celebration. Set in such a context, its remarkable length may function to extend the

²⁴ In fact, Resh Lakish’s is not the only midrashic renarration of Haman’s petition for the destruction of the Jews; Esther 3:8 has spawned a wealth of elaboration reflected in targum, midrash, and Talmud. Joshua Berman’s fascinating article does not include the midrash under discussion but assembles and compares the midrashim on Esther 3:8 that appear in *Megillah* 13b, Targum Sheni, Abba Gurion, Panim Acherim. “Aggadah and Anti-Semitism: The Midrashim to Esther 3:8,” *Judaism* 38, no. 2 (1989): 185-96. These renarrations of his speech expand creatively upon the particulars of Haman’s anti-Semitism—what specific laws he accused the Jews of breaking and what societal problems he saw them as causing. For example, one tongue-in-cheek version has Haman accuse the Jews of excessive feasting and Sabbath-rest-taking that interferes with their productive participation in the economy. For example, Abba Gurion depicts Haman as complaining: “One day in seven they make a Sabbath, every thirty days they celebrate New Moon, in Nisan, Passover, and in Sivan, Pentecost. They have an entire month where all they do is waste the world’s money . . . they eat and drink and do nothing productive,” as cited in *ibid.*, 188. Such subaltern, comedic treatments of Haman’s sinister speech perform functions with which we are already familiar. For example, they provide opportunities to laugh at and thereby comically reduce a truly threatening enemy and, hopefully, provide some tragi-comic relief for those who must daily navigate life amidst such enemies. Similarly, they provide opportunities to expose the ridiculousness of contemporary anti-Semitic misapprehensions of the Jews—opportunities for ambivalent laughter that exposes both the absurdity and real danger of such beliefs. Resh’s telling partakes in some similar comedic pleasures.

²⁵ The scenes may be divided as follows: Haman speaks with the king; the king consults his wise men; Haman’s adjusted, successful argument; the resulting letter; an encounter between Mordecai, some schoolchildren, and Haman.

pleasure of its audience and its performers (furnished as they are with speeches of such outlandish irony).²⁶

The midrash opens with a problem from Haman's perspective: his request for the destruction of the Jews (Esth 3:8-9) initially meets with strong opposition. King Ahasuerus dismisses the idea, protesting that such a goal is not only futile but reckless in the extreme:

“You cannot prevail against them, since their God will not entirely forsake them. See what he did to the kings who preceded us and who laid hands upon them and who were much mightier and more powerful than we are. Whoever comes against them to destroy them and whoever schemes against them is wiped out and becomes a byword to all mankind. How much more so then we who are not equal to those others. Let me hear no more of this” (לא יכלת להון בדיל דאלההון לא שביק לון כל עיקר. תא חדי מה עבד לון) (מלמכין קדמאי דהוון קומינן דהו פשטין ידהין עליהון. הו מלכיא רברביא וגובריא טפי מיננא, וכל מאן דאתי עליהון למיבדינהו מן עלמא ודיעץ עליהון מיבטיל מן עלמא והוי למתל ולשועי לכל דרי עלמא, ואנן דלא מעלינן כותיהו על אחת כמה וכמה. שביק לך (מלמללא תוב לפתגמא דנא) (Esth. Rab. 7.13).²⁷

Haman persists in his request, though, so Ahasuerus calls together his wise men to discuss the matter. In the speech Resh composes for them, the wise men all confirm the king's suspicions that to seek the destruction of Israel would be exceedingly dangerous. They display a remarkable knowledge of Israel's scriptures in making their case,

²⁶ On the development of aggadic midrash in the amoraic period, prior to its development as a written form, as attention-grabbing oral discourse in synagogues for Sabbaths and festivals, see Lerner, *The Works of Aggadic Midrash*, 142-45.

²⁷ All English translations of Esther Rabbah, unless otherwise noted, are from H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah*, vol. 9, *Esther*, trans. Maurice Simon (London: Soncino, 1939). All citations of the Hebrew text of Esther Rabbah are from the critical edition of Yosef Tabori and Arnon Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Schechter, 2014). Lines 200-204. All line references refer to the Hebrew text.

marshalling various texts to show the folly of attacking a people God considers family (Ps 148:14; Ex 4:22; Deut 14:1; Ps 145:18; Deut 4:7). Finally, they point to the examples of Pharaoh and Sennacherib as cautionary tales: “Take a lesson from the previous kings who transgressed by laying hands on Israel; see what happened to them” (לך התבונן) (במלכים הראשונים שעברו על שפשטו ידיהם בישראל, מה עלתה בידם).²⁸

Neither the king nor his wise men are easily convinced. Yet in keeping with the first rule of improvisational comedy, the ever-persistent Haman accepts their premise and adjusts his argument.²⁹ He concedes the point that it may have been, in the past, a terrible idea to attack Israel. But it is now safe to attempt because

the God who drowned Pharaoh in the sea and performed for Israel the wonders and mighty deeds of which you have heard is now old and cannot do anything (אותו אלוה שטבע פרעה בים ועשה לישראל נסים וגבורות ששמעתם צבר הוא זקן ואינו יכול) (לעשות כלום).³⁰

To bolster his case, Haman points to apparently incontrovertible evidence: where Pharaoh or Sennacherib once failed Nebuchadnezzar more recently has succeeded. If Nebuchadnezzar was able to destroy God’s house (the temple) and take God’s people

²⁸ Esth. Rab. 7.13, lines 221-222 (Tabori and Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, 141).

²⁹ This principle is often called “Yes, And.” On accepting the premise to build a scene in improvisational comedy, see Stacy DeZutter, “Professional Improvisation and Teacher Education: Opening the Conversation,” in *Structure and Improvisation in Creative Teaching*, R. Keith Sawyer, ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 34. The term “Yes, And” comes from comedy icon Tina Fey and the Second City comedy club.

³⁰ Tabori and Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, 141, lines 222-224.

captive, Haman asks, “Where is [God’s] strength and might, seeing that He is now old” (והיכן כחו וגבורתו? שכבר הזקין)?³¹

Haman’s reasoning wins over the king and his advisors, and they pen a letter retelling the sad history of past kings who have come to ruin by attacking Israel.³² They explain that, despite this history, they have come to a unanimous decision to destroy Israel.³³ The letter notes the key factors in their decision: that this people “rebelled against their God” (מרדו באלהיהם) and that this God “besides had grown old” (ועוד שהזקין) (אורו).³⁴ In other words, while they acknowledge that every lesson from history augurs against such a decision, they dare attack Israel now because they are betting on a breakdown in the relationship between this God and this people and—in the unlikely case that this relationship is still intact—on the impotent agedness of this God.

God’s ability, age, and relationship with the Israelites have been thoroughly discussed by the Persians. Now, we discover that God has been listening in with amusement the whole time and finds a way to make this known. As Haman and his associates emerge, rejoicing in their victory, Mordecai walks by. At the same moment, three children are walking home from school, and Mordecai chases them down to ask

³¹ Ibid., line 225.

³² The addressees of the letter are not specified, but it appears to be targeted quite broadly to anyone throughout the empire who needs to be aware of the decision and ready to take action against the Jews on the designated day. The closest clues to an audience are phrases like “Be it known to you,” and “keep yourselves in readiness for that day.”

³³ Line 281.

³⁴ Lines 278-79.

what they have learned that day.³⁵ The first recites Prov 3:25, a reminder not to fear the destruction planned by the wicked.³⁶ The second recites Isa 8:10, which refers to counsels brought to naught and words that do not stand and concludes “God is with us.”³⁷ Both of these texts provide reassurance. They also contribute to the dramatic irony of the narrative, making the audience party to facts about which the Persians have miscalculated, namely, God’s loyalty and presence. But the third text is the most amusing and reassuring of all. If God is understood to be speaking through this schoolchild, God does not quite deny the charge of advanced age. Instead, he accepts the premise and reassures Mordecai in the words of Isa 46:4, “*Even to old age I am the same, and even to hoar [sic] hairs will I carry you; I have made, and I will bear; yea, I will carry, and will deliver*” (ועד זקנה אני הוא ואד שיבה אני אסבול אני עשיתי ואני אשא ואני אסבול ואמלט).³⁸ “OK, I may be old,” the rabbis seem to imagine him saying, “I may even have a few gray hairs. Yet I’ve promised to take care of you just the same.”

The long retelling of Israel’s history from the perspective of outsiders is pitched in laughably distorted terms aimed at activating the pleasure of shared, insider

³⁵ For another example of asking children for a verse as a mode of bibliomancy, see b. Hagigah (15a-b). Bibliomancy with the help of children can occur either by overhearing a child read a verse or by asking them directly for the verse they are learning. For an overview of the function of children in bibliomancy in rabbinic literature, see Stephanie Bolz, “Rabbinic Discourse on Divination in the Babylonian Talmud” (dissertation, University of Michigan, 2012), 94-136.

³⁶ אֶל־תִּירָא מִפֶּחַד פֶּתָאִם וּמִשֶּׂאֵת רִשְׁעִים כִּי תִבֵּא

³⁷ עֲצוּ עֲצֵה וְתִפְרֵר דְּבַר דְּבַר וְלֹא יִקּוּם כִּי עֲמִנּוּ אֵל

³⁸ Lines 293-94 (Tabori and Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, 145).

knowledge. Resh can assume that his audience knows the ‘real’ stories of Torah better than the Persian cognoscenti he portrays and will recognize distortions of well-known stories and derive enjoyment from the incongruity between the two versions. Such an ‘insider’ experience may function to nurture feelings of community closeness. It also may be pitched to provide relief in what is, in reality, a rather painful experience: that of being consistently misunderstood by more powerful outsiders. For no matter how ludicrous are the outsider ideas parroted here, such misunderstandings could cause real-life difficulties for poorly-understood minorities living within powerful empires.

Resh Lakish and his audience share a very good sense of humor, and, it seems, so does his God. Resh Lakish’s God is willing to attend carnival and be subjected to ambivalent humor along with his people. In this instance, God plays on Israel’s team, even if he mostly does so from offstage and in the background. The relationship here expressed between God and Mordecai—and between God and Resh’s audience—is warm and confident. In fact, one of the greatest comedic pleasures of this midrash is that of dramatic irony, insider knowledge shared by and thus binding God and audience, while the Persians are woefully ignorant. Given their faulty understanding of Israel’s God, the Persians gravely miscalculate, and one of the pleasures afforded Resh’s audience is to watch them do so at length while cherishing anticipation of the moment when the Persians are forced to discover their error.

Besides expressing and nurturing closeness between Israel and Israel’s God, then, the two parties team up toward another end: that of putting the Persians in their place. Resh Lakish depicts the Persian potentate and his wise men as not only aware of the

identity of the Jews, but thoroughly apprised of their history and reputation and therefore too intimidated to attack them. The humor lies in the incongruity. While in the biblical account (and likely in the rabbis' own lives) the Jews are an utterly subjugated minority within a vast empire, here they have a fearsome reputation. Great kings and wise men know their story and their God so well that they are afraid of them. Moreover, Resh crafts the king's speech to make him indirectly admit to being rather a lesser ruler than all those who came before him ("How much more so then we who are not equal to those others . . ."). As with our discussion of subaltern superiority in a previous chapter, a large part of the fun here is the sheer incongruity between reality and the imagined scenario.

Primarily, the humor of Esth. Rab. 7.13 expresses warmth and confidence between Israel and God and unites them in solidarity against the Persians (i.e. ethical resistance). Yet there are hints of theological resistance as well. By placing a variety of ideas about God on the lips of the Persians, Resh provides his audience the opportunity to raise indirectly some weighty questions: Is God too old? Or worse, has God grown tired of us? Humor, as we have seen, can be ambiguous, and en route to the confident conclusion of the tale, a number of troubling possibilities are explored. The playful account illumines the painfully contradictory narratives with which the Jews live, for two things are true at the same time: they are God's beloved children *and* the record of history looks like God no longer takes any notice of them. On the one hand, the narrative's humor is set up to expose the Persians for being so foolish in their reasoning about God. On the other hand, the humor exposes to questioning God and the people's faith in God. The Persians make some good points, and the truth in them must have been painful for

the Jewish audience to recognize. Is it possible that the target of the humor might also be to issue a challenge to God? Ultimately, though, while the midrash allows the expression of some of the pain and paradox of faith, God emerges mostly unscathed. That will not always be the case in the examples that follow.

7.3 Is God Our Enemy?

In the above example, God aligns himself with Israel against Haman and the Persians. God and Israel are portrayed as trusted intimates who share knowledge to which the Persians are not privy. This next example is also told in a joking mode, but it takes a much greater theological risk, shaking up expected allegiances and aligning God with Haman against Israel. In the mashal, God converses and commiserates with Haman, as the two connect over a shared frustration: Israel.

To what can the wicked Haman be compared? To a bird which made its nest on the edge of the sea, and the sea swept away its nest, whereupon it said, 'I will not move from here till I turn the dry land into sea and the sea into dry land.' What did it then do? It took water from the sea in its mouth and poured it on the dry land, and it took dust from the dry land and cast it into the sea. Its companion came and stood by it and said: 'Luckless unfortunates, with all your labour what will you effect?' So God said to the wicked Haman: 'Stupid fool, I said that I would destroy them, and even I, in a way, was not able,' as it says, *Therefore He said that He would destroy them, had not Moses His chosen stood before Him in the breach, to turn back His wrath, lest He should destroy them [Ps 106:23]*, 'and you want *To destroy, to slay and to cause to perish?* By your life, your head will be taken off instead of theirs, since they are to be saved and you to be hanged'³⁹ משל דהמן רשיעא למה הוא דומה : לעוף שעשה קן על שפת הים ושטף הים (מה עשה? נוטל מים מן הים את קינו. אמר : איני זז מכאן עד שנעשה ים יבשה ויבשה ים. מה עשה? נוטל מים מן הים בפיו ושופך ליבשה, ונוטל עפר מן היבשה ומשליך לים. בא חברו ועמד לו על גביר ואמר לו : ביש גדא וטמיע מזלא, סוף סוף במה את יכול? כך אמר לו הב"ה להמן הרשע : אני אמרתי להשמידם ולא יכולתי, משה בחירי עמד בפרץ לפני והשיב חמתי ואתה אמרת להשמיד

³⁹ Literally, crucified.

(להרג ולאבר. חייך, רישך מתורם חלף רישיהון, דאינון לשיזבא ואת לצליבא 7.10).⁴⁰

On the surface, the target of the *mashal* is Haman. He is diminished by comparison to a witless bird that thinks it can stave off the sea with beak-sized quantities of sand. He is called “stupid fool” by no less an authority than God. Readers are given the opportunity to enjoy playfully diminishing Haman in these ways, all the while drawing encouragement from the metaphor the *mashal* provides for the utter futility of all efforts to destroy them. In this sense, the *mashal* is part of the larger project of asserting subaltern superiority: mocking Haman, revealing his folly, and exulting in the indestructibility of Israel.

And yet, even as the *mashal* skewers Haman, it has another target in its sights. For the *mashal* casts God in the narrative in a position parallel to that of Haman’s companion (חבר) (“Its companion came and stood by it and said”// “So God said”). This is a startling move, because it depicts God in association with Haman, as one who keeps company with him, even if he mocks him. Moreover, in this character position, God seems to commiserate with Haman’s difficulty. God can relate to the frustrating futility of Haman’s errand, having learned from experience that Israel can no more be destroyed than the shore can be moved. Thus, in the very narrative moment God mocks Haman and confirms his destiny of destruction, God identifies with Haman, admitting that he, too, had once planned to destroy Israel. Of course, God also admits to having been *unable* to carry out this destructive intention—in that case, due to the intervention of Moses.

⁴⁰ Lines 92-98 (Tabori and Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, 131-32).

Furthermore, the context is a joking one. Nevertheless, it is at the very least an ambivalent humor, one that recognizes that the God counted on for protection may also rise in wrath. In this mashal, the rabbis indirectly—through laughter—voice the very painful fact that maybe, just maybe, God sometimes wants to destroy them as badly as Haman does. The story surfaces painfilled questions: Is Israel indestructible *despite* God's wishes? How much is God like an enemy?

On this last question, it may be helpful to read Lamentations as a tear-filled intertext with Esther. With Esther the rabbis recognized an opportunity to experiment with locating God alongside the enemy; with Lamentations, they built upon a God/enemy identification that is already explicit in the biblical text. In Lamentations, the enemies are imagined as devouring mouths (2:16).⁴¹ And yet, if the enemy acts as a gaping, devouring mouth, so does Adonai; twice, God is depicted as one who also swallows up, in stark parallel to the characterization of the enemy (vv. 2, 5).⁴² The startling implication is made explicit: God is acting the part of the enemy. The poet writes,

He bent his bow like an enemy;
 he set his right hand like an adversary
 The Lord has become like an enemy;
 he has swallowed up Israel (vv. 4-5).⁴³

דרך קשתו כאויב

⁴¹ “All your enemies open their mouths against you. They hiss; they gnash their teeth; they say, ‘We swallowed you up! Ah, this is the day we hoped and waited for!’” פצו עליך פיהם כל-אויביך שרקו ויחרקו־שן אמרו בלענו אך זה היום שקוינהו

⁴² Translation follows qere (ולא).

⁴³ Note that the pair of terms the Lord is compared with in v. 5, enemy (איב) and adversary (צר), are the terms that together characterize Haman: “The man who is an adversary and an enemy is this wicked Haman” (Esth 7:6) (הרע הזה).

נצב ימינו כצר
היה אדני כאויב
בלע ישראל

Similarly, Lamentations 3 depicts what David Stern calls “an all-powerful antagonist,” and one particularly powerful image of this antagonist is a bear lying in ambush (דב ארב) (הוא לי (v. 10)).⁴⁴ The antagonist is not named, though, so Lamentations Rabbah builds on this ambiguity to provide two readings that make different identifications of “the unnamed and cruel enemy who is torturing the speaker”: one view reads the bear as God; the other as Vespasian.⁴⁵ So is the adversary God, or a Roman emperor/general known for subjugating Judea and responsible for the destruction of the temple? The distinction is again blurry—or perhaps has become academic.

My point is that what the rabbis experiment with in Esther Rabbah parallels a move already present in Lamentations itself and extended in Lamentations Rabbah. The rabbis notice an implicit opportunity in the Esther text to explore God’s stance toward them in parallel with different characters. As we will see in the remainder of the chapter, typically they locate God narratively in the position of the king, but here they also dare to associate him with the enemy. In doing so, the rabbis model how the Esther text can raise the same painful questions as Lamentations does, albeit in a mode of laughter rather than tears. In the mashal of Haman as a bird and his companion as God, the rabbis daringly albeit indirectly probe at the painful corners of the idea that there may be a connection

⁴⁴ David Stern, *Midrash and Theory: Ancient Jewish Exegesis and Contemporary Literary Studies* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 47.

⁴⁵ Stern, *Midrash and Theory*, 24.

between Haman's desire to destroy the people and *God's* desire to do that. By setting God in the *mashal* in such a way that he seems to commiserate with Haman about how difficult it is to destroy Israel, they joke at God's expense. Far from being an un-religious move, however, it should be understood within the context of relationship to God. It reveals the closeness of the relationship that they dare tease and simultaneously challenge God in this way. It also reveals their frustration—for it is a provocative jest, laced with accusation, and perhaps aimed to provoke a response.

7.4 Is God Like the King?

The first example shows God to be a good sport and willing to play along with some gentle mocking. It employs a generic anthropomorphism, that of old age. The second casts God in a much less favorable light, placing him in alignment with an archvillain. However, *Esther* is a book in which references to king and kingdom abound, and it is most frequently in relation to these royalty-related textual opportunities that the rabbis pursue their carnivalization of God in *Esther Rabbah*.⁴⁶ The rabbis cast God in the ambiguous character location of King Ahasuerus, comparing the two and putting them in direct contest. One obvious goal of comparison between the two kings is to continue the wider program of laughingly reducing Ahasuerus and his empire. In other words, the rabbis put God in contest with Ahasuerus so that God will win, extending their work of asserting subaltern superiority by besting Ahasuerus through a divine proxy. Yet as we

⁴⁶ The noun מלך occurs 196 times, מלכות 26 times, מלכה 25 times, and the verbal root מלך 4 times.

will discover, even when God in some sense ‘wins’ the contest, participation entails the risk that humor’s arrows may turn on him as well.

The extent to which the descriptions of a human king like Ahasuerus can provide any insight into their divine king is a live question. Indeed, the Hebrew canon makes wide use of the human king as a metaphor for God, and yet, as Samuel Wells aptly notes, the Hebrew scriptures reflect an implicit, ongoing debate as to “whether kingship highlights or obscures the way God is fundamentally king.”⁴⁷ In the case of Ahasuerus, might we learn something from him about how God is king? Or is he such a pale shadow of true divinity that he and his kingdom are mere parodies of the real thing?⁴⁸ For the rabbis, this question is taken up in almost every mention of “the king” in Esther, particularly in those instances in which Ahasuerus is not indicated by name. Instances in which Ahasuerus *is* named directly designate for the rabbis the human king. Yet the book’s many references to “the king” without this proper name are seen as requiring

⁴⁷ Samuel Wells, “Esther,” in Samuel Wells and George Sumner, *Esther & Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013), 26. Wells adds, “The ideal king points to the kingship of God; the less-than-ideal king points away from God to himself.” Interestingly, medieval Christian Esther reception wrestled with this same difficulty. See Chapter 5.

⁴⁸ Certainly, there are some similarities between God and Ahasuerus as depicted in the midrashim. They both seem to hold court in which ministers appear before them and raise concerns. For example, when Ahasuerus gives a feast, the midrash notes: “This was one of the occasions on which the ministering angels lodged complaints before the Holy One, blessed be He,” bringing God’s attention to the inappropriateness of his partying while the temple lies in ruins (1.10). Both are imagined to possess written records that play a significant function in world events. Commenting on the matter of Bigthan and Teresh, the midrashist notes “If a book of a human being can have such an effect, how much more so a record in the book of the Holy One, blessed be He, of which it is written, *And the Lord hearkened, and heard, and a book of remembrance was written before him* [Mal 3:16]!” (6.14).

more discernment: these may refer to the divine king, the human king, or both.⁴⁹ This guiding exegetical principle comes closest to a full articulation in a saying of R. Judan and R. Levi in the name of R. Johanan:

Wherever in this book we find the expression ‘to the king Ahasuerus,’ the text speaks of the actual king Ahasuerus; wherever we find just ‘to the king,’ it may be either sacred or profane (כל מקום שנאמר במגלה זו "למלך" (אהשוורוש" במלך אהשוורוש הכתוב מדבר, וכל מקום שנאמר "למלך" סתם משמש קדש וחול) (Esth. Rab. 3.10).⁵⁰

Although R. Judan and R. Levi refer to instances with the inseparable preposition ל, the exegetical pattern is clearly discernible across the corpus, whether or not this inseparable preposition is present. For example, when upon the demise of Vashti the king’s wrath subsides, it is significant for the rabbis that the king in question is indicated by name: המלך אהשוורוש (Esth 2:1). The rabbis thus understand the reference as pertaining exclusively to the human king, allowing them to note that while King Ahasuerus’s anger quickly fades, the anger of the divine king remains appropriately kindled so long as the villain Haman lives. Later in the story, when Haman finally is hung and “the king’s wrath” abates, the rabbis are alert to the absence of Ahasuerus’s name: המלך שככה (7:10). In their view, המלך has a double meaning, referring not only to King Ahasuerus’s anger but also to “the wrath of the Supreme King of kings, the Holy One, blessed be He (Esth. Rab. 3.15).”⁵¹ The fact that there are two כ in שככה provides a further clue to fact that there are two kings whose anger is at issue in the story of

⁴⁹ These are many: whereas מלך occurs 196 times, Ahasuerus is only named 30 times.

⁵⁰ Lines 141-43 (Tabori and Atzmon, 77).

⁵¹ Lines 194-95 (page 83).

Esther.⁵² In this case and in many others, what plays out in the emotional world of the earthly king mirrors in some way—even if in an imperfect and or diminished way—what takes place with God.⁵³ The rabbis take full advantage of these textual opportunities to take up comparison of the two kings, human and divine, to playful yet theologically profound ends.

7.4.1 *God Bests Ahasuerus*

As we saw in the previous chapter, one of the ways in which the rabbis put King Ahasuerus ‘in his place’ is by comparing him to a truly great king like Solomon and finding him but a poor shadow of such greatness. Yet the rabbis did not stop at reducing King Ahasuerus in comparison to Israel’s human kings; they relativize Ahasuerus’s patently tremendous wealth and power by comparing it to the overwhelming greatness their tradition claims for their divine king. In other words, one of the ways in which the

⁵² This is the view explained in *b Meg* 16a as discussed by Treloar, *Esther and the End of Final Solutions*, 335.

⁵³ Ever attentive to the text at a consonant-by-consonant level, the rabbis take note also of Esther’s use of כ rather than ב on כשך in 2:1. They conclude that whereas the human king’s anger may have been assuaged after the demise of Vashti (2:1), this must have been a surface level abatement (בשך rather than כשך), since the anger of the King of Kings was certainly not assuaged until the demise of Haman in 7:10.

”בשך המת המלך” אין כתיב צאן, אלא ”כשוך חמת המלך” -- שכיכה שאינה שכיכה. אימתי שככה המתו שלמלך? כשנצלב המג, הדא הוא דכתיב ויתלו את המן על העץ אשר הכין למרדכי וחמת המלך שככה -- חמתו של מלך מלכי המלכים הב”ה-191 (Tabori and Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, 83, line 191-194; Est. Rab. 3.15)

rabbis play with God is by enlisting him to compete on their behalf. They challenge and defeat the Persians through their divine proxy.

The midrashim emphasize God's superiority to Solomon, who is as high above Ahasuerus in kingly caliber as can be imagined. Yet even Solomon as he ascended his throne had a herald reminding the king each time he took his seat, "Know before whom thou sittest—before Him at whose word the world came into being" (Esth. Rab. 1.12). How much further, then, must their God be above Ahasuerus? Similarly, in a midrash on the phrase *הוא אחשוורוש* ("that same Ahasuerus," Esth 1:1), a variety of prominent biblical characters who are also introduced with the word *הוא* are listed and compared. But the midrashist notices that there is at least one time Israel's God too is introduced with *הוא*: "We have one better than all of them, namely *He is [הוא] the Lord our God; His judgments are in all the earth* [Ps 105:7] (*אית לן חד דטב מן כלהון -- הוא י"י אלהינו בכל הארץ*) (Esth. Rab. 1.2). In other words, a list of human kings who outshine Ahasuerus may easily be assembled from the scriptures, and Israel's God far outshines them all.

As the rabbis challenge and best the Persians through their proxy, God seems a most willing participant. In fact, God at times appears eager to settle a score:

R. Huna said in the name of R. Aha: God said to him [Ahasuerus]: 'Thou hast halved My kingdom, in saying, *He is the God who is in Jerusalem* (Ezra 1:3). As thou livest, I will halve thy kingdom.' The Rabbis say: 'God said to him: 'Thou didst halve the size of My house, saying *The height thereof three-score cubits* [Ezra 6:3]; as thou livest, I will halve they kingdom (Esth. Rab. 1.5).

The city and temple rebuilding stories of Ezra-Nehemiah are often drawn into the story world of Esther by the rabbis since they understand Ahasuerus to be the same person as the Artaxerxes who halted reconstruction in Ezra 4:21. In this case, God takes issue with the king's demarcation of God's domain as Jerusalem (i.e., *only* Jerusalem), implying that

God's reign has been reduced to the size of one city.⁵⁴ Similarly, the rabbis hold the king responsible for the reduced size of the temple (half the height of the former one as described in 2 Chron 3:4). God promises payback.

7.4.1.1 Comparing feasts

One theme around which divine-human royal competition clusters in Esther Rabbah is that of feasting. Esther 1 depicts the extreme size of the Persian empire, the impressiveness of its royal trappings, and the lavishness of its feasting in terms of length, provision, and luxury. As if to combat a sense of inadequacy before such a power, the rabbis particularly enjoy relativizing the human king's magnificence before the even greater magnificence of their God. As great as King Ahasuerus is, in other words, his splendor pales before that of the King of Kings.

Esther's description of the king's lavish feast (1:5-8) ignites comparisons with the feast of the heavenly King in the world to come.⁵⁵ This is pursued through a parable (mashal) about R. Hiyya's friend and his attempts to impress:

R. Hiyya had a friend in Ashna who made a repast for him and regaled him with all the finest dishes imaginable.⁵⁶ He said to him: 'What can your God do for you more than this?' He replied: 'Your repast has a limit, but the repast which our God will provide for the righteous in the time to come will have no limit,' as it is written, *Eye hath not seen, O God, beside Thee, what He shall do for him that waiteth for Him* [Isa 64:3] (ר' חייא הוה) ליה חד רחים באשנאי. עשה לו סעודה ואכילו מכל מה שברא בששת ימי בראשית. אמ' ליה: מה אלהכון עתיד דעביד לכון יותר מכון? אמ' ליה: סעודתכם יש לה קצבה, אבל סעודת

⁵⁴ It seems to have been of little concern to R. Huna and R. Aha that the king in question in Ezra 1 was Cyrus rather than Artaxerxes.

⁵⁵ The comparison is likely invited by the fact that 1:5 indicates that "the king" (המלך) made a feast, without specifying Ahasuerus by name.

⁵⁶ Literally: from all that which he created in the six days of Genesis.

(אלהינו שעתיד לעשות לצדיקים לעתיד לבוא עין לא ראתה אלהים זולתך יעשה למחכה לו
(Esth. Rab. 2.4).⁵⁷)

In the mashal, R. Hiyya's friend stands in the place of Ahasuerus, and his actions seem to indicate that the rabbis understood Ahasuerus's feast as an attempt to impress the Jews and to bring them to a place where they would admit this Persian king's ability to provide is even more impressive than that of God. In other words, the rabbis read Ahasuerus as engaging God directly in competition by providing his lavish feast. The question, "What can your God do for you more than this?" borders on the rhetorical, assuming it would never be possible to surpass such a splendid feast.

But R. Hiyya and his God are not so easily bested. The rabbi's answer is clever: even such an abundant feast has a limit; God, by contrast, operates on a much vaster temporal plane and can thus provide a limitless feast "in the time to come." Furthermore, although in the mashal R. Hiyya does not make the point directly, it is not without irony that all the fine dishes his friend is capable of providing must be sourced "from everything he created in the six days of Genesis" (מכל מה שברא בששת ימי בראשית).⁵⁸ In Genesis, the creator is not R. Hiyya's friend, nor is it King Ahasuerus, magnificent though he may be. Everything this human serves at his feast *was already first created by God*. If R. Hiyya's friend/Ahasuerus hopes to present himself as god-like in his munificence, he hopes in vain. Not only will God's future feast outshine the feast of the

⁵⁷ Tabori and Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, 53-54, lines 50-53.

⁵⁸ My translation.

human king, even what the king has presently provided is derivative and dependent upon God's prior provision.

The sense of a contest of feasts comes through even more explicitly in another *mashal* on King Ahasuerus's second feast (Esth 1:5), which the rabbis read as having been specifically targeted to the Jews:

R. Hanina b. Atel said: Jews participated in that feast. Said that wicked man [Ahasuerus] to them: 'Can your God do more for you than this?' They answered: "'*Eye hath not seen, O God, beside Thee . . .* [Isa 64:3]. If he provides for us nothing better than this feast [in the time to come], we could say to him, 'We have already enjoyed the like of this at the table of Ahasuerus'" (יהודים היו שם באותה הסעודה, אמר לון אותו⁵⁹ אמי ר' חנינא בר עגיל) : . . . [Isa 64:3] רשע: יכול אלהכון עתיד דעביד לכון יותר מיכן? אמרו לו: עין לא ראתה . . . (אם כסעודה זו הוא עושה לנו אנו אומרים לו: כבר אכלנוה על שלחנו של אחשוורוש (Esth. Rab. 2.5).⁶⁰

In the reading of this midrash, Ahasuerus's goal in throwing his second feast⁶¹ is specifically to outdo the God of the Jews and presumably to sway them from their loyalty to this God. Perhaps the rabbis read this way because it is the second feast in Esther that garners the most lavish a depiction, one portrayed through the eyes of one attending that feast (Esth 1:6-8). The description is visually and gustatorily lavish, and so the rabbis depict Ahasuerus as checking in with the Jews to see if they are suitably impressed. "Can your God do more for you than this?" he asks. The response of the Jews is confident—and a little cheeky! They point out God has promised them better things than any human

⁵⁹ Critical apparatus in Schechter shows textual variation in this name, attested as עגיל, עטל, and עגול.

⁶⁰ Tabori and Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, 56-57, lines 79-82.

⁶¹ An interesting gap in the Esther account: why would the king throw a second feast after a feast of six months?

eye has ever seen, so, God someday *must* do better than Ahasuerus. Otherwise, when God presents them a feast in the world to come, they could tell God, thoroughly unimpressed, “We have already enjoyed the like of this at the table of Ahasuerus.” The quip is playful and runs in two directions, aimed at undermining the self-satisfaction of the human king while offering a not-so-subtle challenge to God to do even better.

7.4.1.2 *Making Everyone Happy*

Another textual opportunity the Rabbis use to enlist God’s help in their game against Ahasuerus is Esther 1:8: “For thus the king had commanded concerning the greatness of his house, that each man should do according to his own pleasure,” כִּי־כֵן יִסַּד (Esther 1:8). The rabbis make fun of Ahasuerus’s wish to satisfy every man’s pleasure, extending it to its most absurd logical implications. Or better: they have *God* do this for them. Whereas in the previous examples, it is a Jew who speaks the witty repartee, here the rabbis have God speak to Ahasuerus directly. God cleverly points out the logical contradictions in Ahasuerus’s plan and wryly notes the goal of pleasing everyone is beyond even God’s own reach:

Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: ‘I cannot satisfy all My creatures, and do you seek to do according to every man’s pleasure? It often happens that two men seek the hand of the same woman. Can she marry both of them? It must be either one or the other. So two ships will lie in harbour, one waiting for a north wind, the other for a south. Can the same wind carry them both together? It must be either one or the other’ (Esth. Rab. 2.14).⁶²

אמ' לו הִבִּיחַ: אני איני יוצא מידי בריותי, ואתה מבקש "לעשות כרצון איש ואיש"? בנוהג שבעולם שני בני אדם מבקשין לישא אשה אחת, יכולה היא להנשא לשניהם? אלא או לזה או לזה. וכן שני ספינות שהיו עולות בלמן, אחת מבקשת רוח צפונית ואחת מבקשת רוח דרומית, יכולה היא רוח אחת להנהיג את שתיהן כאחת? אלא או לזו או לזו.

⁶² Tabori and Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, 62-63, lines 144-48.

The mashal demonstrates the difficulty of trying to please too many people for, inevitably, two will want the same thing (of which there is only one) or desperately long for opposite outcomes. Someone inevitably will be disappointed if another gets what they want. The mashal then turns from these generalities to predict the king's quite specific, impending problem:

To-morrow two men will appear before you in a suit, a Jewish man and a man who is an adversary and an enemy. Can you satisfy both? ⁶³

למחר שני בני אדם באין לפניך בדין, איש יהודי ואיש צר ואויב, יכיל אתה לצאת ידי שניהם?

Clearly the king will not be able to meet the desires of both Mordecai, who presumably desires to live, and Haman, who seeks his death. The king's wish to please everyone is as absurd and impractical in the particular as it is in the abstract. With his rhetorical questions, God lightly mocks Ahasuerus for his godlike pretensions and gives perspective about what is and is not within a human king's power.

But participation in the joke subtly exposes God as well. As with any comparison between God and human kings, it invites questions: does God have this same difficulty? How, for example, does God manage when two people are praying for—indeed, desperately *need*—opposite weather? Here the narrative of divine omnipotence collides with a common human problem: that of mutually exclusive, competing human needs.

⁶³ Ibid., lines 148-49.

Strikingly, God as depicted in the mashal admits the impossibility of satisfying both.⁶⁴ God's humble admission is theologically shocking, destabilizing assumptions about divine omnipotence, even though the rabbis eventually work their way in this case to a less theologically unsettling answer. R. Huna in the name of R. Benjamin b. Levi comes to God's aid, finding scriptural proof that in the world to come God will indeed perform impossible wonders like providing the opposite winds at the same time. He points to Isa 43:6, which says God will summon his children from the various corners of the earth with multi-directional winds: "I will say to the north, 'Give!' and to the south, 'Don't withhold them! Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth'" (אמר לצפון (תני ולתימן אל תכלאי הביאי בני מרחוק ובנותי מקצה הארץ). In other words, while in the immediate timeframe, it may seem like God does *not* have unlimited power to satisfy competing human needs, one merely needs to direct one's attention to a much longer timeframe. Over the longer term, God will certainly win this contest with King Ahasuerus. And yet it is hard to see God emerging from this mashal with his image as an omnipotent utterly intact.

King Ahasuerus's main wish is to be held in high esteem (see previous chapter). Esther Rabbah, acting quite in opposition to the character's wishes, laughingly reduces Ahasuerus and his empire. One of the ways in which the rabbinic roasting accomplishes this reduction is by way of comparison: holding up Ahasuerus's greatness against that of a truly great king like God and finding him wanting. In these cases, it is King Ahasuerus

⁶⁴ For another example of God admitting something is beyond God's capacity, see also 7.10: "So God said to the wicked Haman, 'Stupid fool, I said that I would destroy them, and even I, in a way, was not able.'"

who suffers by comparison to King Adonai, as we have seen in the examples to this point. But if the divine king is even somewhat comparable to the human king, Ahasuerus—a king who has been shown to have many weaknesses—this raises a troubling question: in what other ways might God be like this human king and his dangerous court? In the next section, we explore cases in which the association or comparison of Ahasuerus with God is potentially more damaging to *God's* reputation.

7.4.2 God's Reputation Suffers through Identification with the King

As the rabbis expand upon the foibles of King Ahasuerus and his court in order to comically reduce them, they also explore whether and to what extent these same questionable attributes might pertain to the divine king. In other words, as they enlist God's help in pursuing their work of ethical resistance through humor, they at times veer into the territory of theological resistance. If, for example, the text's references to the king's anger can indicate something about when and why *God* is angry, it might also be possible to learn from the king's sleepless night (Esth 6:1) something about divine sleep and from the king's lack of concern for the tumult outside his palace walls (3:15) something about God's apparent lack of concern for the trouble of humans on earth. The rabbis exploit to the full these opportunities to express rather shocking thoughts and feelings about—and *to*—God. Certainly, they have explanations for the theologically troubling aspects of Esther: Perhaps God is only apparently absent or asleep. Or maybe God is present throughout the story, detectable in every reference to the king. Another option is that while God has not stopped caring for Israel, the people are suffering on

account of their sins.⁶⁵ Yet alongside the more confident ‘facts’ the rabbis read into the Esther’s narrative gaps, there also appear tales that destabilize such certainty and voice something less like acceptance and more like protest.

In other words, if the book of Esther subjects the Persian king to carnivalesque treatment, the rabbis also carnivalize the King of Kings. Building upon anthropomorphizing biblical tropes such as royal robes (cf. Ps 93:1), the rabbis go beyond biblical anthropomorphizing to dress God as a human king, set him in a court, on a throne, and on a bed modeled on those of human kings. The rabbis find textual affinities between God and the bumbling, incompetent king ripe for exploration, and they probe these possibilities playfully but toward weighty expressive and theological ends.

7.4.2.1 Does God sleep like King Ahasuerus?

One matter on which the similarity between the divine and human king is explored is that of sleep. While the discussion is not noticeably humorous, it is carnivalesque in its frank exploration of possible weaknesses the Divine might have in common with humans. Esther 6:1 provides the textual opening: בלילה ההוא נדדה שנת המלך: (“That night the king’s sleep fled”). According to the exegetical principle already introduced, when the text reads only המלך and does not designate Ahasuerus by name, it leaves open the question of whether the reference is to the divine or human king. As Ahasuerus’s name is lacking in 6:1, the rabbis take the opportunity to ask whether it was

⁶⁵ On the filling of gaps in Esther toward a ‘smoothing’ theodicial end, particularly in terms of the ‘on account of our sins’ explanation, see Treloar, *Esther and the End of Final Solutions*, 366-68.

the divine or human king's sleep that was disturbed—or perhaps both.⁶⁶ And if the divine king's sleep can be disturbed, this implies that God otherwise *does* sleep—an anthropomorphism that may go a long way in explaining God's apparent absence in Esther.

Certainly, the human King Ahasuerus sleeps, and that his sleep just so happens to be disturbed on this particular night seems crucial to the salvation of the Jews. In his insomnia, the king has his records read to him and chances thereby to be reminded of the fact that Mordecai thwarted an assassination plot and was never rewarded (6:1-3). Haman has just entered to court to request the execution of Mordecai (v. 4), but he never gets to make his request because the king's attention is already occupied by the need to honor Mordecai. This is a pivotal moment; from here onwards the plot flows inexorably toward the downfall of Haman and the salvation of the Jews.⁶⁷ One can only imagine what might have happened to Mordecai if the king *hadn't* had trouble sleeping that night; the happy outcome of the story seems to depend on the king having a sleepless night at just the right time.

⁶⁶ Panim Acherot B makes explicit the exegetical principle assumed here in Esth. Rab.: “Gesagt ist nicht „der Schlaf Ahaschweroschs”, sondern *es floh der Schlaf Königs, König aller Könige, des Heiligen, gepriesen sei er.*” Dagmar Börner-Klein and Elisabeth Hollender, trans., *Rabbinische Kommentare zum Buch Ester*, vol. 2, *Die Midraschim zu Ester* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 74.

⁶⁷ Reversal is widely recognized as a major theme of the book, and the pivot/turning point takes place within chapter 6, a series of events set off by the king's sleepless night. Levenson identifies chapter 6 as “the pivot,” *Esther*, 7. Fox locates “the turning point” in 6:10-13, *Character and Ideology*, 162.

Whereas it may be less than ideal to have a human monarch whose attention to life and death matters depends on the chance of insomnia, the situation would be even more concerning if it were true of a divine king. Yet the rabbis read theologically and theocentrically, wondering whether and to what extent what is true of Ahasuerus may also pertain to God. They consider the question of whether the great king, God, also sleeps, and whether their lives might depend on something happening to rouse God out of that sleep at the critical moment. The following mashal, for example, building on the fact that the verb נָדַד, which 6:1 employs to indicate the fleeing of sleep, can also mean ‘to shake.’ It daringly portrays God as oblivious to the distress of his people until his throne shook him into a state of alertness:

The heavens shook the throne of the King of all Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, so that he saw that Israel was in distress (Est. Rab. 10.1, my translation, see note).⁶⁸

נִדְדוּ הַשָּׁמַיִם כִּסְאוֹ שֶׁל מֶלֶךְ מַלְכֵי הַמַּלְכִּים הַבִּי"ה שֶׁרָאָה אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל בְּצָרָה.

Such a scenario—that God needed to have his throne shaken in order to notice the distress of Israel—seems to imply that God had perhaps nodded off for a moment. Lest we fail to miss the implications, the midrash next poses its daring question

⁶⁸ Tabori and Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, 170, lines 4-5. I read the verb נָדַד as transitive, i.e., the heavens shook the throne, rather than being themselves shaken. This follows Marcus Jastrow, *Dictionary of Targumim, Talmud and Midrashic Literature* (New York: Choreb, 1926), 877. See also the translation of Börner-Klein and Hollender: “Die Himmel schüttelten (נָדַדוּ) den Thron des Königs aller Könige, des Heiligen, gepriesen sei er, damit er sah, dass Israel in Bedrängnis war,” *Rabbinische Kommentare*, 256. Simon’s translation, by contrast, reads the verb intransitively: “the heavens, the throne of the Supreme King of kings . . . were shaken when He saw Israel in such distress,” 115.

directly: “Is God then subject to sleep?” (וכי יש שינה לפני המקום?).⁶⁹ Two

apparently contradictory verses are marshalled to the discussion:

Is God then subject to sleep? Is it not said, *Behold, He that keepeth Israel doth neither slumber nor sleep* [Ps 121:4]? It can happen, however, when Israel are in distress and the other nations are at ease; therefore it says, *Awake, why sleepest Thou, O Lord?* [Ps 44:24]. King Ahasuerus’s sleep was also disturbed . . . (Est. Rab. 10.1).

וכי יש שינה לפני המקום? והלא כבר נאמר הנה לא ינום ולא יישן שומר ישראל. אלא בזמן שישראל שרויין בצאר ואומות העולם בשלוה לכך נאמר עורה למה תישן יי. ונדדה שנת המלך אחשורוש.⁷⁰

On the one hand, Ps 121:4 seems to provide the definitive answer: God neither slumbers nor sleeps. And yet (אלא), the rabbis admit, sometimes (בזמן) it happens. Else why would the psalmist need implore, “Awake, why sleepest Thou, O Lord?” (Ps 44:24). If God seems unresponsive to the distress of the people, it may be that he is merely asleep—a troubling idea, but at least somewhat less troubling than the idea that God simply does not care.

In fact, the majority of aggadic interpretations reject this anthropomorphism as too bold. For Targum Sheni (seventh century), the possibility suggested by Ps 44:24 is so uncomfortable that it adds, “if this verse were not written, it would not have been possible to say it.”⁷¹ Despite the license provided by this verse, the targum firmly closes the possibility the text seems to open: “God forbid, since sleep does not exist for him.

⁶⁹ Tabori and Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, 170, line 4.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, lines 4-8.

⁷¹ Grossfeld, *Two Targums of Esther*, 168. In contrast to Targum Rishon, which is more like a standard targum to Esther, Targum Sheni is more like an expansive aggadic (midrashic) compilation than a translation. *Ibid.*, 9. On dating, see *ibid.*, 19-21.

Rather, when Israel sinned, He made Himself to appear to be sleeping; however, when they do His will, He neither slumbers nor sleeps” (Targ. Esth. Sheni 6:1). Panim Acherot B (seventh/eighth century) agrees: in answer to the question “Is there sleep on high?” (i.e., does God sleep?), it asserts that it only appears this way because God *pretends* to sleep when Israel has sinned.⁷² Even Esther Rabbah elsewhere makes the more theologically conservative argument, that God does not sleep. In that case, the midrash responds to Esther 3:8, a verse that has no obvious association with sleep. It takes up the phrase ישנו עם־אֱהוּהוּ (“There is a certain [literally: one] people,” Esth 3:8) from Haman’s speech and paraphrases it to show what Haman really meant: אֱהוּהוּ שְׁנָאֵמֵר בּוֹ יִשְׁן לּוֹ (“He of whom it is said, ‘The Lord is one,’ is asleep to his people”) (Est. Rab. 7.12).⁷³ The rendering responds to the consonantal similarity between ישנו (there is) and the 3rd person masculine singular imperfect verb ישן (he sleeps). It also reads the word אֱהוּהוּ (one) as a reference to Israel’s God, whose identity is famously “One” (Deut 6:4). In this midrash as Haman presents his case for the destruction of the people he is emboldened by the belief that their God, known as אֱהוּהוּ, is asleep (or at least asleep to the situation of his people); he thus suggests to Ahasuerus that it will not be dangerous to do

⁷² Börner-Klein and Hollender, *Rabbinische Kommentare*, 121. “Gibt es den Schlaf in der Höhe? Vielmehr: Wenn Israel sich versündigt, so stellt er sich sozusagen schlafend, wie gesagt ist [cites Psalm 44:24]. Und wenn immer Israel den Willen Gottes tut: [cites Ps 121:4].” Panim Acherot B, sometimes called Panim Acherim, is a midrash in the form of a running commentary on Esther 1-7. It is primarily composed of sayings of Palestinian amoraim, redacted in the seventh to eighth centuries. See Lerner, *Works of Aggadic Midrash*, 195-201.

⁷³ Tabori and Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, 137, line 171.

away with this people, since their God will not do anything about it.⁷⁴ But Haman has miscalculated: God is awake enough to hear the assertion and to object in the strongest terms:

Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him: ‘There is no sleep for Me, as it says, *Behold, He that keepeth Israel doth neither slumber nor sleep* [Ps. 121:4] and you say that sleep does affect Me! As you live, I will awake from [the semblance of] sleep against you and destroy you from the world’: and so it is written, *Then the Lord awaked as one asleep . . . and He smote His adversaries backward* [Ps 78:65-66] (Esth. Rab. 7.12).

אמר להם הב"ה: אני אין לפני שינה הה"ד הנה לא ינום ולא יישן שומר ישראל, ואתה אמרת יש לפני שינה? חייך שמתוך שינה אני מתעורר על אותו האיש ומאבדו מן העולם הה"ד⁷⁵ ויקץ כישן י"י [...] ויך צריו אהור.

Here it is the enemy, not the people of God, who mistakenly believes that God is asleep. But the audience of this midrash is party to information Haman lacks: God never sleeps and will certainly arise to strike their enemies.

Yet this confidence in the impossibility of divine sleep is not everywhere maintained. As we saw in a midrash in the final section of Esther Rabbah, it is something that troubled the rabbis: maybe God *does* sleep sometimes. How else can you explain his apparent lack of response? While various midrashim assert definitively that God does not sleep, others keep the possibility open. Pirkei de-rabbi Eliezer (eighth/ninth-century aggadic work, PRE) reads Esther 6:1 as indicating that sleep eluded God on that night, implying that God otherwise *does* sleep. In answer to the puzzle of which king's sleep

⁷⁴ This midrash develops a similar theme as Esth. Rab. 7.13 above: that Ahasuerus is initially skeptical of Haman's plan because he knows that God protects this people and that it has ended badly innumerable times in history for those who have tried to attack them.

⁷⁵ Tabori and Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, 137, lines 172-74.

fled, the text's answer is both: the sleep of the King of Kings and the sleep of the earthly king.⁷⁶ Similarly, the Babylonian Esther Midrash (Megillah 10b-17a in the Babylonian Talmud) opens its treatment of Esth 6:1 with what translator and critical commentator Eliezer Segal calls a "terse dictum": "Says R. Tanhum: The sleep of the King of the Universe wandered."⁷⁷ On the one hand, Segal describes this as "the predictable religious response, that God was taking an active role in coordinating events."⁷⁸ Yet to describe God's active role in this verse in these terms—that he himself had insomnia—is not the only predictable religious option. Other interpretations give God an active role in the story without implying that he sleeps; instead, they have him directly intervening to disrupt Ahasuerus's sleep.⁷⁹ To ascribe the description of Esth 6:1 ("the sleep of the king

⁷⁶ Börner-Klein and Hollender, *Rabbinische Kommentare*, 287: "In derselben Nacht floh der Schlaf des Königs aller Könige, des Heiligen, gepriesen sei er, und der Schlaf des Königs auf der Erde. Er wurde unruhig und stand auf von seinem Schlaf" (PRE 50). PRE primarily retells stories from Torah, but it includes a chapter on Esther (chapter 50). There follows a description of a troubling dream the king has about Haman, but there is no further comment on the sleep of the King of Kings; his sleep seems to be an accepted fact.

⁷⁷ Meg 15b, Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash* III, 45-46. The Babylonian Esther Midrash is the only complete midrash on a biblical book found within the Babylonian Talmud. Segal notes a resemblance between the Babylonian Esther Midrash and Esther Rabbah: "There is a strong impression that the two compilations represent divergent expansions of an original pool of common material," *ibid.*, 22.

⁷⁸ Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash* I, 45.

⁷⁹ Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash* I, 47. As Segal notes, "most commentators have striven to explain the allusion to celestial insomnia in such a way that it refers not to God's wakefulness but to other heavenly forces, whether cosmic or angelic." This may be the intended impact of the dictum that immediately follows that of R. Tanhum: 15b "And the rabbis say: The upper ones wandered and the lower ones wandered." Segal is unsure (as am I) as to whether this second view is "a complementary or conflicting view to the one above," *ibid.*, 46. It is difficult to ascertain, given that these

fled,” (גדדה שנת המלך) to God is, as Segal puts it, “a bold anthropomorphism.”⁸⁰

Comparing King Adonai to King Ahasuerus exposes the former to certain vulnerabilities, chief among them the idea that he faces the same limitations as a human king.

7.4.2.2 *Is God as Unperturbed as Ahasuerus?*

In an extended midrash on Esther 3:8-4:1 (Esth. Rab. 7.13/18), R. Isaac Nappaha gives an account of Haman’s successful appeal to the king to destroy the Jews and the initial reactions to the decree.⁸¹ In doing so, he paints a scene that raises the question by analogy of whether things function similarly in the heavenly court. In other words, if King Ahasuerus is persuaded by Haman’s request, might there be a danger that the divine king could be just as easily swayed by the reasoning of an adept accuser?

In this version of the story, the second feast thrown by King Ahasuerus is a ruse designed by Haman to trick the Jews into sinning. This second feast is introduced in Esth 1:5: ובמלואת הימים האלה עשה המלך לכל־העם הנמצאים בשושן הבירה למגדול ועד־קטן משתה שבעת ימים (“At the end of these days, the king gave for all the people found in the fortress of Susa, from the greatest to the least, a feast of seven days”). That the feast is given for העם (the people), the rabbi reasons, must mean the feast is targeted specifically to Israel, the

short interpretations seem to be “no more than a truncated remnant of what were once extended literary homilies of the kind that can still be read in the Palestinian *midrashim*,” *ibid.*, 48. What is certain is that the question of whether or not God sleeps, as raised (indirectly) by Esther 6:1, was considered live, important, and worthy of continued conversation.

⁸⁰ Segal, *Babylonian Esther Midrash* *Babylonian Esther Midrash I*, 46.

⁸¹ Tabori and Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, 145-48, lines 298-336. This midrash is paralleled in Abba Gurion on Esth 4:1.

incomparable people, as it says in Deut. 33:29: “Blessed are you, Israel! Who is like you, a people saved by Adonai?”). Mordecai warns the people that the feast is a trap, but they fail to listen. More than 18,000 of them attend and sin in their drunkenness. Immediately—since this was the plan all along—Satan stands up to accuse them. Like Haman, he makes a case before the king for the destruction of the Jews.

“Sovereign of the Universe, how long wilt Thou cleave to this nation who turn their heart and their faith from Thee? If it so please Thee, destroy this nation from the world, because they do not repent before Thee” (Esth. Rab. 7.13/18).⁸²

רבוננו של עולם, עד מתי תדבק באומה זו שהם מפרישים לבבם ואמונתם ממך? אם רצונך, אבד אומה זו מן העולם כי אינם באים בתשובה לפניך.

Readers familiar with Esther will hear in Satan’s speech clear echoes of the speech

Haman made before the king:

Haman said to King Ahasuerus, “There is a certain people, scattered among yet segregated from the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. Their laws are different from all other people. They do not keep the laws of the king, and it is not in the king’s interest to tolerate them. If it seems good to the king, let it be written that they be destroyed” (Esth 3:8-9a).

ויאמר המן למלך אחשוורוש ישנו עם־אחדמפזר ומפרד בין העמים בכל מדינות מלכותך ודתייהם שנות מכל־עם ואת־דתי המלך אינם עשים ולמלך אין־שוה להניחם : אם־על־המלך טוב יכתב לאבדם

Although the language of Satan’s argument is not identical to Haman’s there are striking similarities between the two speeches. They both address their petitions to a king, even if it is a divine king in Satan’s case. Both accusers couch their request with an “if it pleases the king”-type phrase (אם רצונך/אם־על־המלך טוב). Their goal is the same (the destruction of

⁸² Tabori and Atzmon, *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, 146, lines 308-310.

the Jews), and they both give a reason for why it is not in the king's/God's best interest for the people to continue to exist (they do not keep the king's laws/they do not repent). What is also disturbingly similar is how amenable both the divine and human king are to the accuser's request. Ahasuerus asks no questions, simply hands over his signet ring and tells Haman to do with the people as he pleases (Esth 3:11). God at least has *one* hesitation, although it is notably not for his people, but rather for the endurance of Torah, a fear Satan quickly allays.⁸³ And so

God did indeed consent to wipe out Israel and said at the moment: 'Why do I want this nation for whose sake I have wrought so many signs and wonders to save them from all that rose up to harm them?'

וגם הב"ה השוה דעתו למחות את ישראל. באותה שעה אמר הב"ה "למה לי אומה שבשבילה הרבית אותות ומרפתים לכל הקמים עליהם לרעה?"⁸⁴

God's speech seems to indicate he thinks Satan has made a good point: these people are more trouble than they are worth. Chillingly, like Ahasuerus, God seems to care very little for the existence of an entire people and is shockingly easily steered into a cataclysmic decision. Like Ahasuerus, the decision is made hastily and irrevocably in writing: "Forthwith God said to the Accuser: 'Bring Me a scroll and I will write on it the doom of extermination'" (מיד אמר הב"ה לשטן: הבא לי מגלה ואכתוב עליה כלייה).

As the entire city of Shushan was in uproar over the king's decree while the king sat down to eat and drink (Esth 3:15), so in the midrash everyone but God, it seems, is thrown into turmoil and acts in accordance with the severity of the emergency. Everyone

⁸³ Instead, God's only concern seems to be for the endurance of Torah, a fear Satan quickly allays. God asks, "What will become of Torah?" (תורה מה תהא עליה?), *ibid.*, line 310.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, lines 311-13.

but God seems to know how to react appropriately to such a horror; all are appalled and spring into responsive action. Torah goes immediately into full mourning: “Straightway the Torah went forth in garments of widowhood and lifted up her voice in weeping before the Holy One, blessed be He, and the ministering angels cried aloud at the sound of her weeping . . .” (7.18).⁸⁵ The sun and moon pledge to don darkness and sackcloth as their fitting response. Elijah runs off “with all haste” to rouse the patriarchs and Moses to action. The patriarchs, admittedly, seem too sleepy to notice what is happening, and Elijah calls to them:

“How long . . . will ye be sunk in sleep and not behold the distress in which your descendants are plunged, for the ministering angels and the sun and the moon and the stars and the constellations and heaven and earth and the hosts above are weeping bitterly and ye stand aloof and take no notice!”

עד מתי אבות העולם רדומים בשינה ואי אתם משגיחם בצרה שבניכם שרויים בה? כי מלאכי השרת וחמה ולבנה וכוכבים ומזלות ושמים וארץ וכל צבא המרום בוכים במרד ואתם עומדים מנגד ואינכם משגיחם⁸⁶

In fact, Elijah is unsuccessful at rousing the patriarchs. They echo Ahasuerus’s response to Esther’s weeping entreaty in their talk of powerlessness before written law (cf. Esth 8:8): if the decree of destruction has been written, “what can we do?” (מה אנו יכולים).⁸⁷ Failing to rouse the patriarchs to action, Elijah turns to look for help elsewhere. Elijah has more success with Moses, the supreme example of one who knows

⁸⁵ מיד יצתה התורה בבגדי אלמנות ונתנה קולה בבכי לפני ה'” *ibid.*, line 315.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, lines 320-24.

⁸⁷ In Esther 8:8, Ahasuerus says “For what is written in the king’s name and sealed with his ring cannot be reversed” (כִּי־כֹתֵב אֲשֶׁר־נִכְתַּב בְּשֵׁם־הַמֶּלֶךְ וְנִחְתָּוּם בְּטַבְעַת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֵין לְהַשִּׁיב). See Esth. Rab. 7.18, line 325.

how to stand in the breach for his people.⁸⁸ Moses indeed agrees to intercede for Israel and also sends Elijah to have Mordecai also intercede so that both of them can seek mercy for them before God.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, the results of their intercession are left ambiguous; we are left to wonder whether God will take notice or take pity on the distress of his people.⁹⁰

What is particularly interesting is the appearance of the phrase *עד מתי* (how long) in the speeches of both Satan and Elijah. This phrase most often appears in the Hebrew Bible in situations in which one party is aggrieved and impatient with another, finds their behavior difficult to bear, and hints or urges them toward another course of action. It appears in the laments of Israel to their God when God seems absent to their distress (Ps 80:4; 74:10; 94:3; 6:3; 90:13).⁹¹ It also appears in the complaints of God to or about the people of Israel (Jer 4:14;⁹² 13:27; 23:25; 31:22; Num 14:27; cf. 1 Kgs 18:21 where

⁸⁸ The midrash cites Ps 106:23 to this effect: ...לולי משה בחירו עמד בפרץ לפניו.

⁸⁹ Line 331.

⁹⁰ Mordecai and Moses discuss whether there is any hope with respect to their intercession (like Mordecai and Esther in Est 4, they are separated and carry on their discussion by way of an intermediary: Elijah). They decide that if the decree is sealed in blood, there is no hope, but if it is sealed in clay, there is hope. There seems to be a ray of hope when Mordecai reports back to Moses, but when Esther hears the news of the decree, she spontaneously menstruates, i.e., bleeds (the rabbis' interpretation of the verb *וַתַּחַלְחַל* in 4:4), and with that ominous note, the midrash ends.

⁹¹ Psalm 13 seems an especially apt intertext to as well, though it uses *עד אנה* rather than *עד מתי*. Additional points of contact between this psalm and Esther are its attention to the hiddenness of God (*סְתוּר*, cf. *אֶסְתֵּר*) and the presence of an adversary/enemy (*צַר/אֹיֵב*, v. 5), much like Haman, who is known as an adversary and an enemy (*אִישׁ צַר וְאִיֵּב הַמֶּן הָרַע הַזֶּה*, Esth 7:6).

⁹² In this case, the speaker (Jeremiah or God?) is unclear to me.

Elijah complains on God's behalf). This same language in the midrash seems to indicate there is a wedge between the two parties: each wonders 'how long?!' they will have to put up with the behavior of the other. Satan in this midrash cleverly picks up and uses God's exasperated and previously expressed feelings about Israel. Similarly, Elijah's implied rebuke of the patriarchs (how long will you 'take no notice'?!) seems to wing an unvoiced but equally exasperated question for God: how can *you* stand aloof and take no notice?! Still, there is no indication that God is particularly moved or upset by the devastating impact of this decision outside his courts.

The rabbis were careful readers of scripture, and they reveal their attention to the literary impact of Esth 3:15. It is one of the most stunning moments in the narrative: ויהמלך והמן ישבו לשתות והעיר שושן נבוכה: ("The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was in uproar"). Modern commentators have noted the dramatic contrast of these last few words of the third chapter of Esther.⁹³ Simply and succinctly, these seven words capture the extreme contrast between the reactions of Haman and the king on the one hand and of the city of Susa on the other. A decree for the destruction of an entire people has gone forth, and the city reacts in proportion with the horror: it is thrown into

⁹³ As Carey Moore puts it, "The author concludes the chapter with a striking piece of dramatic contrast: the city was in a state of confusion, but the king and Haman started to drink," *Esther* (New Haven: Yale, 1971), 44. Fox highlights the contrast between the king and his bureaucracy: "As the state bureaucracy goes into urgent activity, Haman and Xerxes coolly and callously sit down to feast," *Character and Ideology*, 55. Carol Bechtel uses the language of film to highlight the contrast between what occurs inside the place ("a close-up of Haman and the king, ensconced in the comfort of the palace having a civilized drink of sherry") and outside: "The camera would pan out over the city and the clink of their glasses would be drowned out by the cries of confusion outside the palace walls," *Esther* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox, 2002), 44.

agitation and confusion. The king and Haman act as if nothing is amiss. Is the king simply unaware of what is happening outside his gates? Or does he not even care? Either of these readings is possible, and either way the statement stands as one of the most damning moments in the portrayal of King Ahasuerus in Esther. One might expect such a reaction from a villain like Haman, but not from any kind of attentive king.

The contrast in this short phrase stands as a stunning critique of King Ahasuerus. But it is also a narrative moment over which the rabbis lingered with their questions about King Adonai. After all, Esth 3:15 only says that “the king” sat down to drink with Haman, without specifying that this refers to King Ahasuerus. Our exegetical principle then invites us to consider whether המלך refers to the holy or profane king. That consideration is the function of this extended midrash, which depicts the contrast of 3:15 as it would play out if it took place in the heavenly courts. Esther 3:15 indicates that “the king” sat down to eat and drink while the realm was in distress; without directly invoking this exegetical principle, this midrash explores in parable form the possibility that this is the *divine* king. In story form, it tacitly broaches urgent questions, painful prospects: How much is God like an out-of-touch, easily swayed king? Can God’s written law never be reversed, even if it seems to be a bad ruling? The rabbis use the Esther story to raise these uncomfortable and rather bold questions regarding the Sovereign of the Universe, ultimately leaving them unresolved.

7.5 Conclusion

The rabbis display their belief that, in gifting the Jews with the Megillah, God has consented to become ‘the playmate of man,’ to borrow a phrase from Hugo Rahner. Or,

as Bakhtin might put it, Esther opens up carnivalesque opportunities in which even a commoner may dare to mock a king, so long as they recognize they too must fall within range of laughter's sword. Carnival, as we have seen, is a time of unusual familiar contact that, in the ordinary day-to-day, may be impeded by the extreme distance between ranks in society or by the usual politeness. In carnival, the social mores that keep a king out of range of humor's barbs are suspended, and unusual communication is made possible. Reading Esther with the rabbis reveals the way in which Esther can host similar relational work. The rabbis use the text to poke fun at and even play with God. In doing so, they express extraordinary doubts and pain, but they do so with the seeming confidence that God can take it.

Chapter 8: The Public Transcript into the Modern Period

The hidden transcript of Jewish reception models rich possibilities for reading Esther along with the grain of this playful text. Unfortunately, Christian communities have failed to attend to the Jewish hidden transcript in ways that might enrich their reading of this book they have long undervalued. Worse, instead of learning from the testimony of communities of Jews who have found resources for survival in Esther, Christians have pursued readings of this book that have directly threatened the survival of those same communities. This study has traced Christian reception of Esther through the medieval period; the present chapter picks up where Chapter 5 left off and examines a few key instances of Christian Esther reception from the Reformation into the modern period. While the medieval allegorical approach remained the definitive Christian reading of Esther in Europe for several centuries, allegory is certainly not the only or primary way in which Esther has been received by Christians. In fact, during the Protestant Reformation allegorical readings such as that developed by Rabanus Maurus fell almost completely out of favor. Despite changes in hermeneutics, however, even a cursory examination of the history of Christian Esther reception since the medieval period reveals that Rabanus set the direction for a pattern of reading that would persist well into the twentieth century. This pattern was the tendency of Christians situated in positions of relative dominance to read Esther with antipathy and with a decidedly anti-Jewish edge.

8.1 Luther

The Protestant Reformer with the greatest and longest-lasting impact on Esther reception is Martin Luther. This is somewhat ironic, for among the many commentaries

and collections of sermons on Old Testament books he produced, there is none on Esther. Nevertheless, the occasional comments Luther did make about Esther throughout his career cast a long shadow and continued to be cited approvingly into the twentieth century.¹ Like other Reformers, Luther rejected what he saw as the excesses of allegorical interpretation, yet he did not entirely abandon a typological approach. Instead, with most books of the Old Testament he pursued a thoroughgoing Christological reading. In the case of Esther, however, Luther diverged from his broader practice, eschewing a Christological frame and instead reading on a strictly literal level. He focused on assessing the characters and the book in terms of their morality, and his assessment was primarily negative.² In fact, Luther famously expressed his wish that the book did not even exist, writing in 1533 of both 2 Maccabees and Esther: “I am so hostile to this book and Esther, that I wish they did not exist at all, for they show too much Jewishness and contain a lot of pagan impropriety.”³

¹ For example, Lewis Paton opines, “The verdict of Luther is not too severe.” *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908), 2. Paton’s views will be discussed further below.

² While he occasionally spoke approvingly of Esther or Mordecai as individuals, particularly toward the beginning of his career, he never had a positive word to say about the book of Esther. On the distinction between Luther’s views of the character Esther and of the book that bears her name, see Isaac Kalimi, “Martin Luther, the Jews, and Esther: Biblical Interpretation in the Shadow of Judeophobia,” *The Journal of Religion* 100, no. 1 (2020): 48.

³ Kalimi, “Martin Luther, the Jews, and Esther,” 47. As translated by Kalimi. “Ich bin dem Buch [2. Makkabäer] und Esther so feind, dass ich wollte, sie wären gar nicht vorhanden; denn sie judenzen zu sehr, und haben viel heidnische Unart”; WA, *Tischreden*, vol. 1, p. 208, lines 30–31.

Luther's antipathy toward the book of Esther is deeply connected to his antipathy toward Jews, a hostility which increased over the course of his life. Earlier in his career, Luther sharply criticized the harsh treatment of Jews by Christians (i.e., the Catholic Church), which he saw as "reducing the already small chance that they might receive the gospel."⁴ Luther hoped that his movement and preaching would succeed where the Catholic Church had failed and would attract Jews to convert to Christianity.⁵ However, at some point in the late 1520s, Luther's thinking changed dramatically. As Jews remained unresponsive to the missionary efforts of Protestants, Luther could no longer blame their resistance on the failures of the Catholic Church. Instead, as Thomas Kaufmann puts it, "he blamed the Jews for their own obduracy."⁶ Luther's anti-Jewish rhetoric reached its fullest expression in the early 1540s, toward the end of his life.⁷ In one work from this period, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, Luther opines,

Oh, how much they love the book of Esther which so well fits with their bloodthirsty, vengeful, murderous lust and hope. There is no nation that is so

⁴ Miller, "Luther's Views," 4.

⁵ As Thomas Kaufmann explains, "Luther argued that his own theological innovations opened the door, so long held shut by papist theology, for Jews to come to faith in Christ." "Luther and the Jews," *Antisemitism Studies* 3, no. 1 (2019): 49.

⁶ Kaufmann, "Luther and the Jews," 50.

⁷ Gregory Miller, "Luther's Views of the Jews and Turks," *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology*. Online Publication. 2013. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199604708.013.013.5. Three works especially demonstrate this: *On the Jews and their Lies*; *On the Schem Hamphoras and on the Lineage of Christ*; and *On the Last Words of David*.

bloodthirsty and vengeful under the sun [as] those who think that [because] they are God's people, that they must slay the pagans and suppress them.⁸

Luther perceives in Jewish love of the book of Esther an indication of Jewish resentment toward Christians in his contemporary world. In fact, he seems aware of the Jewish perception, documented in Chapter 4, that Christians have acted as Haman toward Jews.⁹ In the same work, Luther insightfully notes,

First they complain to God about us, that we hold them prisoner in misery, and fiercely plead that God would save his holy people and beloved children from our violence and imprisonment, call us Edom and Haman, whereby they want God to hurt us very much.¹⁰

Yet having identified such imprecatory wishes, Luther does not pause to consider whether Jewish feelings toward Christians may be justified. In fact, there is little room in Luther's thought for the ongoing existence of post-biblical Judaism; his earlier advocacy of more tolerant treatment of Jews only endured insofar as he thought this might lead them to convert.¹¹ By this point in his life, Luther's view of Esther reflects his view of the Jews. As Gregory Miller explains,

⁸ As cited in and translated by Kalimi, "Martin Luther, the Jews, and Esther," 66. "O, wie lieb haben sie das Buch Esther, das so fein stimmet auff ire blutdürstige, rachgyrige, mörderische begir und hoffnung, Kein blutdürstigers und rachgyrigers Volk hat die Sonne je beschienen, als die sich dünken lassen, Sie seien darumb Gottes Volk, dass sie sollen und müssen die Heiden morden und würgen"; WA, vol. 53, p. 433, lines 15–21." Kalimi's translation, corrected for English grammar.

⁹ Luther had little contact with actual Jews. His perceptions of Jewish thought came primarily through late medieval commentaries, the writings of Christian humanists, and polemic writings. He did have one encounter with Jewish representatives in 1525/6. Luther was deeply frustrated by this encounter, since he was not able to convince them to accept his views. See Miller, "Luther's Views of the Jews and Turks," 3-4.

¹⁰ Kalimi, "Martin Luther, the Jews, and Esther," 72. From *On the Jews and Their Lies*.

¹¹ Kalimi, "Martin Luther, the Jews, and Esther," 72.

Luther considered his earlier expressions to be foolish naïveté. . . . Luther's advice to the political authorities, described as a *sharfen Barmherzigkeit* ('sharp mercy' or 'harsh mercy'), advocates a chilling series of violent actions which remind the modern reader of the Nazi *Kristallnacht*: burn their synagogues, destroy their homes, burn the Talmud and Jewish books, ban the rabbis from teaching, take their possessions, make the young Jewish men into slave workers, expel those who refuse to be baptized.¹²

If Luther resented the fact that Jews would associate Christians with Haman, he nevertheless with his words contributed substantially to the aptness of the association. He may never have called for the annihilation of the Jews, but he reviled them, calling them liars and usurers, and further, "disgusting bugs" and "a pest in the heart of our territories."¹³ In a suggestion that sounds eerily akin to what Haman planned for Mordecai, he calls for such people to be hung on especially high gallows.¹⁴ Luther's vicious rhetoric echoed through the centuries and continued to cause harm. The sentiments he expressed about Jews received renewed attention particularly in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century antisemitic literature.¹⁵ Isaac Kalimi convincingly argues that these words of Luther's paved the way for future annihilation of Jews. Especially telling is the case of German emperor Wilhelm II who, in 1927, using language that echoed Luther's, suggests the German people rid themselves of pests like

¹² Miller, "Luther's Views of the Jews and Turks," 5.

¹³ Kalimi, "Martin Luther, the Jews, and Esther," 67.

¹⁴ Kalimi, "Martin Luther, the Jews, and Esther," 68.

¹⁵ Kaufmann contends that Luther's words were often taken out of context, but notes that the "impact [of his words] on the antisemitic literature of the late 19th and early 20th centuries was fatal, and although much of his case was misrepresented, this influence was possible only because of what he wrote," "Luther and the Jews," 60.

mosquitoes, Jews, and the press with the use of gas. As Kalimi writes, “Everyone knows what should be done with bugs: totally eliminate them.”¹⁶ This is of course precisely what Hitler attempted to do in Germany in the 1930s and 40s; moreover, Luther’s words, particularly from *On the Jews and Their Lies*, were edited into primers and used to provide justification for such actions. In fact, Bishop Hermann Sasse of Thuringia published one such primer a few days after the *Kristallnacht* of 1938 in support of the action.¹⁷

8.2 Rejection of Esther in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Christian Reception

Well into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Western scholarly works on Esther express perspectives akin to those of Luther; they continue to reflect disapprobation for the book and especially its perceived Jewishness. Some question the historical value of Esther, but by far the most damning concerns have to do with the book’s failure to live up to a Christian religious standard. In an 1877 lecture series, Arthur Stanley (Dean of Westminster Abbey, 1868-81) expresses “the natural objection of the civilized—we may add, of the Christian—conscience, to the book of Esther and the Feast of Purim.”¹⁸ He disapproves of “the exclusive spirit” of the book and “the wild

¹⁶ Kalimi, “Martin Luther, the Jews, and Esther,” 67.

¹⁷ Kaufmann, “Luther and the Jews,” 59. Kaufmann contends that “The wide circulation of *On the Jews and their Lies* makes the connection between the list of measures that Luther articulated in it and the events of *Reichskristallnacht* irrefutable,” *ibid.*, 60.

¹⁸ Arthur P. Stanley, “Lectures on the History of the Jewish Church.” Lect. XLV, 192-201. Stanley, 200.

passion of Esther's revenge" against "Haman's innocent family."¹⁹ He concludes that no modern Jew, "still less the modern Christian reader," should favor the book, implying that those Jews who *do* continue to hold the book dear are somehow morally inferior to or less civilized than Christians. Interestingly, Stanley does seem to recognize that there is some connection between the Jewish relationship with this book and the experience of a social location that is unlike his own. For example, Stanley suggests that Purim might persist among Jews "because of the more continual sense of danger" this people has felt throughout history.²⁰ He notes that Jews who have experienced persecution might recognize their own experience in that of Mordecai.²¹ He further recognizes that the Esther festival, Purim, may have functioned "as the natural vent of [Jewish] hatred to their heathen or Christian oppressors in each succeeding age."²² He even shows some empathy for the "bitter animosity" such oppression might produce:

Such a spirit reminds one inevitably of the union of fear and cruelty felt by those, not alone of Jewish descent, who find themselves in foreign lands exposed to hostile populations.²³

Nevertheless, Stanley still thinks of Purim as "the least pleasing" of Jewish festivals, and attributes at least some of its "bitter animosity" not only to the very human experience of

¹⁹ Stanley, "Lectures," 200.

²⁰ Stanley, "Lectures," 199

²¹ Stanley, "Lectures," 197. "Every Jew throughout the world felt with Mordecai, and has felt in many a time of persecution since."

²² Stanley, "Lectures," 198. Recall that Luther also noticed resentment toward Christians, but he certainly did not see it as natural or pardonable.

²³ Stanley, "Lectures," 199.

oppression but also to something distinct about the Jews—specifically, their “more indomitable instinct of nationality.”²⁴

Writing a few decades later and from a different denominational perspective, English Congregationalist minister and biblical scholar Walter Adeney (1849-1920) shows strong continuity with Stanley’s stance toward Esther.²⁵ He writes his 1903 Esther commentary for the evangelical Expositor’s Bible Commentary Series, published in the USA. He begins his commentary with a lengthy treatment of the various historical, religious, and moral objections to the book.²⁶ In other words, he does not begin with the assumption that Esther has a worthy place in the canon. Adeney explains that the “gravest charge” against Esther is that “the moral tone of it is unworthy of Scripture.”²⁷ In his view it reveals “savagery” and “unrestrained scorn and rage.”²⁸ Adeney is particularly distressed by the scenes in Esther of Jews defending themselves with violence: “The Jews defend themselves from threatened massacre by a legalised slaughter of their ‘enemies.’ We cannot imagine a scene more foreign to the patience and gentleness inculcated by our Lord.” He turns “with loathing from this gigantic horror.”²⁹ Yet Adeney also notes that Esther’s “purpose is to stir the soul of national enthusiasm *through the long ages of the*

²⁴ Stanley, “Lectures,” 199.

²⁵ Adeney studied and later taught at New College London.

²⁶ Walter F. Adeney, *Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1903).

²⁷ Adeney, *Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther*, 357.

²⁸ Adeney, *Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther*, 358, 359.

²⁹ Adeney, *Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther*, 358.

oppression of Israel.”³⁰ As did Stanley, Adeney reveals a glimmer of recognition that Esther’s popularity among Jews has something to do with an experience of oppression somewhat alien to the experience of his own community. Adeney writes at a time of growing awareness in England of the difficult experiences of Jews in Europe, particularly the wave of pogroms that broke out against Jews in the 1880s and into the twentieth century and the mass emigration that followed.³¹ In Europe more broadly, there was a growing sense of an urgent need for some sort of permanent homeland to be found for displaced Jews, a sense which led to the establishment of the Zionist political movement in 1897.³² Six years later, in the same year Adeney published his Esther commentary, the British put forward a serious plan to create a permanent homeland for Jews in Uganda.³³ Despite these wider historical currents of which Adeney must have been aware, he cannot join in the book’s celebration of Jewish survival. Instead, he writes that the book “is dedicated to nothing higher than the exaltation of the Jews”—not, in his view, a

³⁰ Adeney, *Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther*, 356. Emphasis added.

³¹ Albert S. Lindemann and Joel Beinin, “Anti-Semitism,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World* (Oxford University Press, 2008). <https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195176322.001.0001/acref-9780195176322-e-80>.

³² Maryanne Rhett, “World Zionist Organization,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World* (Oxford University Press, 2008). <https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195176322.001.0001/acref-9780195176322-e-1733>.

³³ Moshe Gershovich, “Zionism,” in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern World* (Oxford University Press, 2008). <https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy.lib.duke.edu/view/10.1093/acref/9780195176322.001.0001/acref-9780195176322-e-1749>.

particularly lofty end.³⁴ Moreover, while he can understand to some extent the need for self-defense, he does not condone it. He notes, “They were wild with terror, and they defended their homes with the fury of madmen”; nevertheless, he maintains, “This fact does not excuse the savagery of the action of the Jews.”³⁵ What is striking is that Adeney’s harsh condemnation of Esther—and, through his comments on Esther, of the Jews—is written as part of what he intends to be a *defense* of this book’s ongoing (albeit limited) usefulness. He explains, “clearly this Book of Esther cannot claim the veneration that we attach to the more choice utterances of Old Testament literature,” yet he maintains, “we must not therefore assume that it has not its use.”³⁶ Esther still deserves a place in the canon, he contends, but only for its value in depicting a phase in Jewish history and also, like a work of Shakespeare, for its ability to reveal human character.³⁷

A few years later in America, Presbyterian minister and biblical scholar Lewis Paton contributed an Esther commentary (1908) to the influential International Critical Commentary series. In the introduction, he undertakes a lengthy, historical consideration of Esther’s place in the canon, concluding, “The book is so conspicuously lacking in religion that it should never have been included in the Canon of the OT.”³⁸ He suggests the church fathers ignored Esther because of their “[d]islike for its revengeful spirit,” a

³⁴ Adeney, *Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther*, 357.

³⁵ Adeney, *Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther*, 359.

³⁶ Adeney, *Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther*, 359.

³⁷ Adeney, *Ezra, Nehemiah & Esther*, 360.

³⁸ Paton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 97.

dislike Paton clearly shares.³⁹ Moreover, he cites with approval Luther's wish that the book simply did not exist ("The verdict of Luther is not too severe").⁴⁰ Not only do the characters disappoint ("There is not one noble character in this book"), but so too the author ("All this the author narrates with interest and approval").⁴¹

Several decades later, prominent American biblical scholar Bernhard Anderson expresses remarkable continuity in perspective. Such continuity is remarkable in light of the fact that the intervening decades saw the near-extermination of European Jewry, illustrating in contemporary times the ongoing relevance of the situation faced by Jews in Esther.⁴² Nevertheless, he begins his well-known 1950 essay, "The Place of the Book of Esther in the Christian Bible," by noting that, "Like Saul among the prophets, the Book of Esther seems strangely out of place in the Christian Bible."⁴³ Anderson calls Esther "an emphatically Jewish book" which well strikes a "discordant note . . . in the ears of those accustomed to hearing the Christian gospel" due to its "fierce nationalism and an unblushing vindictiveness which stand in glaring contradiction to the Sermon on the Mount."⁴⁴ "Esther is," per Anderson, "a peculiarly offensive example of many passages

³⁹ Paton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 101.

⁴⁰ Paton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 96.

⁴¹ Paton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 96.

⁴² More on this below.

⁴³ Bernhard W. Anderson, "The Place of the Book of Esther in the Christian Bible," *The Journal of Religion* 30, no. 1 (1950): 32.

⁴⁴ Anderson, "Place of the Book of Esther," 32.

in Scripture where the saints show themselves to be sinners.”⁴⁵ It would be inexcusable for a scholar writing so soon after the Shoah to ignore the possibility of a connection between Esther and the Jewish experience of oppression and, indeed, Anderson notes the long history of threat to Jewish survival, “[f]rom the oppression of the Egyptian pharaoh to the Nazi ovens at Buchenwald.”⁴⁶ He connects Esther with “the Jews’ fierce struggle for survival” and notes that the book “describes in the most candid terms the natural reactions to unjust oppression.”⁴⁷ Nevertheless, even if such reactions are ‘natural,’ Anderson still regards the book’s response as distasteful and “emphatically Jewish,” and, most pointedly, unsuitable for Christians.⁴⁸ He writes, “Christians are under no obligation to read all parts of Scripture either for inspiration or for profit.” In his view, Esther is a book particularly unsuited for such use:

If a Christian minister is faithful to the context, he will not take his text from Esther; and, if the leader of a church-school class shows any Christian discernment, he will not waste time trying to show that the heroes of the book are models of character, integrity, and piety.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Anderson, “Place of the Book of Esther,” 41. Anderson does not specify ‘the context’ he means, but it might have something to do with the entire post-Incarnation period, i.e., the time in which “the veil has been lifted” and “many passages in the Old Testament have been superseded or understood in a new light.” He includes in his list of such ‘superseded’ passages along with Esther especially Leviticus and the imprecatory psalms.

⁴⁶ Anderson, “Place of the Book of Esther,” 40.

⁴⁷ Anderson, “Place of the Book of Esther,” 38.

⁴⁸ Anderson, “Place of the Book of Esther,” 32. In his words, “It is an emphatically Jewish book.”

⁴⁹ Anderson, “Place of the Book of Esther,” 42.

If the book has any use at all, in Anderson's view, it is as a witness to human sin and to the stark difference between the old and new covenants and, more to the point, the decisive superiority of Christianity.⁵⁰

I cite Stanley, Adeney, Paton, and Anderson not because they are unusual, but because they typify dominant-culture, Western Christian reactions to Esther in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Each explicitly raises the question of whether Esther has any fitting place as Christian Scripture. Some conclude Esther has some ongoing use for illustrating Jewish history or revealing human character, but none see it as a source of Christian edification. Like Luther, modern interpreters continue to recognize some connection of the book of Esther to Jewish resentment of Christian oppression, but they are unable to reckon meaningfully with this fact. Instead, they attribute any perceived resentment or desire for revenge as a typically Jewish moral failing. While hermeneutics shifted dramatically from the medieval to the modern period, this has not altered the anti-Jewish impact of Christian Esther readings.

8.3 An Outlier: Wilhelm Vischer

One work stands sharply against these trends: the 1937 Esther commentary of Wilhelm Vischer. A Swiss-born pastor and scholar, Vischer spent part of his career teaching in Germany, at the Kirchliche Hochschule Bethel.⁵¹ There he attracted the enmity of the Nazi party and was placed on leave from his teaching post (1933) and

⁵⁰ Anderson, "Place of the Book of Esther," 39, 41, 43.

⁵¹ This school, located in Bielefeld, positioned itself with the Confessing Church during National Socialist times. It was for this reason closed by the Gestapo from 1939-1945.

eventually banned from speaking anywhere in the Reich (1936).⁵² (Despite placing Vischer on leave, the school was not able to avoid conflict with the regime; it was closed in 1939 by the Gestapo for its alignment with the Confessing Church.) Vischer wrote and spoke in the context of rising German anti-Semitism, and, quite controversially, emphasized the ongoing significance of the Old Testament for Christians. He writes his Esther commentary after his return to Switzerland, but the work was first published in Munich, and Vischer still clearly holds the contemporary questions facing the German church in view.⁵³

Like so many others of his era, Vischer writes in response to the popular view that the book of Esther is “unChristlike” and that it might be “advisable, even obligatory, to expunge this ‘ebullition of Jewish vindictiveness’ from the Church’s Holy Scriptures.”⁵⁴ Yet having begun like many of his contemporaries, Vischer diverges from them sharply in at least three ways. First, it soon becomes clear that Vischer intends to launch a full-throated defense of the Christian relevance of Esther. Second, while his is a far cry from the fully-developed allegorical interpretation of the medieval era, Vischer’s reading is nevertheless unapologetically Christological (an extremely rare interpretive move which

⁵² Stefan Felber, “Vischer, Wilhelm Eduard,” *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexikon* 17:1494-95.

⁵³ Vischer, Wilhelm. “Esther” *Theologische Existenz heute* 48 (1937): 1-32 [German]. Unless otherwise noted, English citations are taken from Vischer’s English version of the text, published two years later: Vischer, Wilhelm. “The Book of Esther,” *Evangelical Quarterly* 11 (January 1939): 3-21.

⁵⁴ Vischer, “Book of Esther,” 3.

not even Luther undertook).⁵⁵ Third, Vischer places the question of the relationship between Christians and Jews squarely at the center of his interpretation and seeks to provide a robust theological response to the discomfort that lingers around the edges of the works of his contemporaries.

In Vischer's view, the main contribution of Esther to the Christian canon is the way it presents "the Jewish problem" in particularly stark relief. Echoing the words of Haman (Esth 3:8), Vischer expresses the so-called Jewish problem thus:

There is a peculiar people, dispersed amid all other peoples, and yet isolated from them all. It will not amalgamate with them, and it cannot for its own idiosyncrasy's sake. The nations receive it as a foreign body, nay, as a thorn in their flesh which must be extracted at all costs.⁵⁶

For the German-speaking people to whom Vischer writes, this problem is current and pressing, although it is not novel. As Vischer explains,

the hatred of the Jew did not spring up first in the Hellenistic era. It is as old as Judaism itself, whose very constitution involves that it cannot be inserted in the general world-outlook and civilization of the Nations, and accordingly excites universal odium.⁵⁷

Across history, many have attempted to resolve the problem by annihilating the Jews.⁵⁸

Yet, miraculously, this people persists—in Vischer's view, this is because of God's irrevocable promise to the Jews. Contemporary Germans may wish to do away with the

⁵⁵ On Vischer's rejection of allegory and its distinction, in his view, from his Christological approach, see James Barr, "Wilhelm Vischer and Allegory," in *Understanding Poets and Prophets: Essays in Honour of George Wishart Anderson*, ed. A. Graeme Auld (Bloomsbury, 2009), 38-60.

⁵⁶ Vischer, "Book of Esther," 8.

⁵⁷ Vischer, "Book of Esther," 6.

⁵⁸ Vischer, "Book of Esther," 6.

Jews, but like all others before them, they will certainly fail. Likewise, the contemporary church may wish to remove Esther from its canon, but this cannot eradicate the story of Esther, which is reenacted repeatedly in history.

If Esther is in Vischer's view particularly successful in posing the Jewish problem, the answer it provides is for him inadequate, at least without the Christological reading he supplies. In fact, in Vischer's understanding, from a human perspective "no answer can be given to [the Jewish problem] at last but that which Esther supplies; sanguinary strokes and counterstrokes without end."⁵⁹ The only one who can resolve the problem is God, since it is a 'problem' God created by setting apart the Jews and making irrevocable promises to them. When read Christologically, however, Vischer finds that the book of Esther not only poses the problem but also shows how it is decisively answered in Jesus Christ.

The central image of Vischer's reading, and the point of Christological connection, is the tree upon which Haman was hanged. This is the tree which Haman had originally intended for his nemesis, the Jew Mordecai. For Vischer, the central conflict of the plot, "the whole tension of the narrative," can be summed up in the question: "Who will hang on this fantastically lofty gallows, the Jew or the Jew's adversary?"⁶⁰ As someone who firmly believes in the witness to Christ in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is clear to Vischer that this tree, which stands "[c]onspicuously alone in the Old Testament,"

⁵⁹ Vischer, "Book of Esther," 9.

⁶⁰ Vischer, "Book of Esther," 11. He adds, "A commentator who should treat this feature as incidental would be to blame."

must be typologically related to the tree upon which Christ dies.⁶¹ As he puts it, “The two crosses, the one erected before the gates of the holy city and the fifty-cubit-high scaffold in Susa, greet one another across countries and centuries.”⁶² This connection is so crucial for Vischer’s reading of Esther that, partway through his commentary, he shifts his focus almost entirely to an examination of New Testament accounts of Jesus’s passion and death. Here Vischer finds that both Jews and the enemies of Jews (Gentiles) are united in “common cause”;⁶³ The Jewish council and the Gentile authority collaborate in crucifying Christ, and “both are one in their sin against [Jesus].”⁶⁴ God has thus resolved the division between Jews and Gentiles by allowing Jesus to die for both Jews and Gentiles and by the hand of both Jews and Gentiles. Both are implicated, and both are shown grace. True, the question does not yet seem solved; the division between Jews and (Christian) Gentiles persists into the present as an “open wound.”⁶⁵ This wound, for Vischer, will only be healed at some point in the future with the conversion of Jews.⁶⁶

Although he explicitly affirms the theological significance of the survival of the Jews, Vischer’s reading of Esther has several pronounced weaknesses. First, the extent to

⁶¹ Vischer, “Esther,” 20. “Und die beiden Kreuze, das vor den Toren der heiligen Stadt errichtete und der fünfzig Ellen hohe Galgen in Susa grüssen einander über die Länder und die Jahrhunderte hinüber.” My translation.

⁶² Vischer, “Book of Esther,” 11.

⁶³ Vischer, “Book of Esther,” 14.

⁶⁴ Vischer, “Book of Esther,” 14-15.

⁶⁵ Vischer, “Book of Esther,” 19.

⁶⁶ Vischer, “Book of Esther,” 21.

which he filters the Esther story through the lens of the cross overshadows the witness of the book in all its particularity. In fact, Vischer attends almost as much to a detailed exegesis of the passion narrative in the Gospel of John as he does to the textual details of Esther. He reads Jewish-Gentile relationships in Esther through the lens of New Testament views of the Jewish-Gentile relationship and thereby oversimplifies matters by depicting them as simple struggle between two groups. In reality, the Jewish protagonists of Esther have a variety of nuanced relationships with Gentiles, including the mutually-beneficial ones they establish with the Persian king and his officials; the Jewish-Gentile relationship in Esther is not as simple as the conflict between the Jews and the openly-hostile Haman. In a more nuanced reading of Esther than Vischer presents, Haman represents the epitome of all past and future anti-Semites, not necessarily all Gentiles. Furthermore, in giving inadequate space in his reading for Jewish witnesses as to the role of the book of Esther in their own survival, he undervalues the book as anything other than a witness to Christ. While he does refer in passing to the Targum and the Talmud, Vischer disregards centuries of Jewish reception of Esther when he concludes that the only answer it is capable of offering is “sanguinary strokes and counterstrokes without end.”⁶⁷ In fact, Esther offers many other things, including the canonical enactment of exceeding joy and centuries of mirth. Finally, while Vischer defends the survival of the Jewish people, he does so within a supersessionist framework that expects (and indeed longs for) the eventual end to the existence of an *unconverted* Jewish people. In this way,

⁶⁷ See above. Vischer undertakes no sustained treatment of the midrashim, but he does refer to a Targum once and three times to the Talmud. Vischer, “Book of Esther,” 4, 5, 7, 8.

his thought exists in a certain continuity with Luther's. Luther too, at least toward the beginning of his career, advocated better treatment of the Jews in the hopes that they would convert within his lifetime; his patience ran out however, and he later became frustrated with the ongoing existence of an unconverted Jewish community. Vischer takes a much longer view and certainly does not expect the immediate conversion of all Jews (although, as we will see below, he was for a few years president of an organization devoted to the proselytization of Jews). Nor would he suggest that God's patience with the Jews has run out and that humans should attempt to 'solve' the problem with violence. Instead, Vischer grieves the ongoing existence of an unconverted Jewish community but leaves the matter in the category of a mystery, one that only God can resolve.

Vischer's work did not receive wide scholarly approbation. It attracted, for example, the following assessment of Anderson, whose views on Esther were discussed above: "unfortunately much of [Vischer's] discussion is vitiated by a gratuitous exegesis which is a retreat from the assured gains of liberal biblical criticism."⁶⁸ Given Anderson's views on Jews, it is hardly likely that his criticism has to do with Vischer's supersessionism. More likely, Anderson identifies Vischer's 'retreat from the assured gains of liberal biblical criticism' in Vischer's typological, Christological approach, or in the fact that he reads Esther through the lens of the New Testament. Yet despite the concerns identified above, and despite this disparaging assessment of one of the most

⁶⁸ Anderson, "Place of the Book of Esther in the Christian Bible," 36.

prominent American Old Testament scholars of Vischer's time, there is much underappreciated value in his reading of Esther.

In several ways Vischer's commentary makes a contribution that is unique in the history of Christian Esther reception. For example, he provides a reading that seeks to interpret the book in light of the work of Christ and he does so in a way that is not blatantly anti-Semitic; this is an astonishingly rare achievement. Moreover, his commentary provides a robust defense of the physical survival of the Jewish people. (Of course, as we have seen, even such a defense is undercut by Vischer's belief in the ultimate conversion of Jews and hence in the eventual end to the existence of a Judaism outside of Christianity.) Vischer cautions his contemporaries who would seek to physically eradicate Jews, even directly naming the German people; they, like Pharaoh, the Romans, the Spaniards, and the Russians before them will fail.⁶⁹ This is particularly significant because Vischer knows it is not a theoretical possibility he addresses but one that is already underway. In fact, he writes his Esther commentary while President of the "Vereins der Freunde Israels" (Association of Friends of Israel) in Switzerland, an organization helping Jewish refugees remain in Switzerland after fleeing Germany. (It should be noted that this aid was motivated by the society's longstanding commitment to the proselytization of Jews.⁷⁰) Vischer later resigned this presidency and cofounded the

⁶⁹ See Vischer, "Book of Esther," 9.

⁷⁰ See Felber, "Vischer, Wilhelm Eduard," 1496. Such assistance was motivated in large part by the organization's longstanding goal of proselytizing Jews. See Thomas Metzger, "Zwischen heilsgeschichtlichen Erwartungen und Judenfeindschaft: der judenmissionarische 'Verein der Freunde Israels' 1870 bis 1945," *Schweizerische*

“Schweizerischen Hilfswerkes für die Bekennende Kirche in Deutschland” (Swiss Relief Agency for the Confessing Church in Germany), an organization that initially sought to support and encourage German members of the Confessing Church and Jewish converts to Christianity but later renounced the practice of proselytizing and shifted its focus to the support of Jewish refugees in Switzerland.⁷¹

Another significant contribution of Vischer’s is his unusual flexibility with respect to character location within the story world. Like so many others before him, Vischer at some points associates Christ and Christians with Esther and Mordecai. He notes for example the ways in which both Esther and Mordecai foreshadow Christ; this includes Esther’s willingness to lay down her life for her people and Mordecai’s counsel that in attempting to save her life, Esther will lose it.⁷² In such ways, the two protagonists also function as examples for later disciples of Christ. And yet, throughout Vischer’s reading, Gentiles (including Christians) are also implicitly identified with Haman, the villain of the story. As we have seen in previous chapters, Christians throughout history have consistently identified themselves with the story’s protagonists and the Jews with

Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte 104 (2010). DOI:
<http://doi.org/10.5169/seals-327774>.

⁷¹ Walter Wolf, “Als Schweizer Christen sich einsetzten: Flüchtlingsarbeit eines evangelischen Hilfswerks im Dritten Reich,” *Schweizerische Kirchenzeitung*.
<https://www.kirchenzeitung.ch/article/als-schweizer-christen-sich-einsetzten-9245>.

⁷² Vischer, “Book of Esther,” 16. Vischer notes how this echoes Christ’s counsel to his disciples.

Haman.⁷³ That Vischer would entertain the idea of Christians having something in common with Haman without immediately turning such an identification into an anti-Jewish reading is startling. In stark contrast to the trend of Christian interpretations, Vischer explores the possibility of Christian culpability together with Jews, since he sees both Jews and Gentiles as having worked together to kill Christ.

Finally, Vischer stands out for his attention to the theological significance of Haman's 'tree.' As we saw in Chapter 4, Vischer is not alone in recognizing the interpretive possibilities of the resonance between Haman's tree and that upon which Jesus is crucified; such an interpretive move was common in Judaism across the ages. Yet such a focus is otherwise nonexistent in the history of Christian reception. For Vischer, as we have seen, Jesus takes up Haman's place on the tree as a Jew and yet also consents to die as the enemy of the Jews. Vischer is without (Christian) precedent in thus locating Christ in the story in the position of Haman. Of course, this is not the only position with which he sees Christ identified; fluidity of character identification is maximal in Vischer's reading. As we have seen, Vischer observes parallels between Christ and the Jewish protagonists of the story. He also identifies Christ as a king in his Esther reading, albeit in a strikingly unprecedented way. In Chapter 5 we saw how medieval interpreters too located Christ within the story world of Esther, yet they located him fixedly in the position of King Ahasuerus, kept safe behind palace walls. In contrast to the view of divine kingship on display in the medieval interpretations, Vischer

⁷³ Although one wonders if Stanley's concern for "Haman's innocent family" betrays a sympathy for, if not quite an identification with the character. See above.

emphasizes the fact that Christ lives out his kingship by submitting to mockery and death. In this, Vischer's multifaceted location of Christ in the story world is much more theologically apt than that of medieval reception. Indeed, God in Christ does not elect to inhabit exclusively the role of the untouchable king; his coronation is a crucifixion, and his ascent is to a cross.⁷⁴ Far from sitting down to feast, oblivious or impassive to the tumult in the wider world (as the king and Haman do in Esther 3:15), Jesus is the kind of king who enters the tumult and faces the full consequences of this risk. Without ever invoking the category of carnival, Vischer shows how Jesus may be read—to speak anachronistically but perhaps with theological accuracy—as entering Esther's carnival on Haman's tree.

8.4 Conclusion

Ending this brief survey of trends in Christian Esther reception with figures such as Vischer and Anderson does not tell the full story. This chapter's treatment of historical sources is necessarily selective; moreover, seven decades have passed since the publication of the latest of the writings discussed. Nevertheless, even this brief survey demonstrates clear patterns of reading among dominantly situated Western Christians across the centuries. Without recourse to the allegorical methods of the medieval period, later interpreters have seen relatively little spiritual or religious value in Esther. It has been much more common to view the book with views ranging from mild suspicion to marked antipathy. Moreover, the historical record of Christian interaction with Esther

⁷⁴ The *piyyutim* written to mock Christianity were correct when they describe Christ's ascent to 'Pandera's quarters.' See Chapter 3.

shows not only a lack of interest in learning from Jewish reading partners but also the strong tendency to read the book against Jews.

Perhaps the most significant development in Esther scholarship since the mid-twentieth century has been the literary turn that came to prominence in the 1990s.⁷⁵ In that and following decades, there has been something of a convergence in the approaches of scholars in the West, whether Jewish, Christian, or secular in orientation; most now give increasing focus to literary genre and to the presence of humor and hyperbole in the book. Such literary approaches to the book's violence have led to a decided reduction in negative assessments of the book's moral value such as we saw from Luther to Anderson. Esther has been increasingly interpreted in light of its carnivalesque character and its connection to the feast of Purim. This festal connection, once observed, makes it more likely for interpreters who do not celebrate this feast themselves to seek to learn about Esther reception from the practices of observant Jews. Yet attention to the book's character as a hidden transcript and its connection to experiences of oppression has remained limited. Moreover, since Vischer there has been little attempt to develop an approach to Esther that seeks to read in a way that supports the survival of Jews but is also distinctly, theologically Christian.

One particularly promising exception is the 2013 Esther commentary of Christian theologian Samuel Wells. He directly addresses what he calls "the church's alienation from the Jews" and suggests that Christians may learn from Jews different ways of

⁷⁵ This turn was discussed in Chapter 1.

relating to the book of Esther.⁷⁶ While he does not point to the written sources studied in the present project, Wells notes that Christians may learn from Jewish Purim celebrations “about the interplay of humor and horror and discover the importance of inhabiting both, and find resources to stay at such a point of intersection.”⁷⁷ At the same time, this type of learning does not have as its goal the wholesale adoption by Christians of a Jewish interpretation of Esther.⁷⁸ Instead of imitation or appropriation, what Wells has in mind is more akin to improvisation.⁷⁹ Improvisers do not learn a script; instead, “[i]mprovisers in the theater are schooled in a tradition so thoroughly that they learn to act from habit in circumstances that spontaneously.”⁸⁰ In his discussion of Esther 9:20-10:3, for example, Wells points to promising avenues for exploration of how Christians might improvise on Esther’s emphases by learning to embody certain habits. Specifically, he points to the practices of remembering, recording, repeating, reading, and relishing.⁸¹ Rather than replicating the Purim feast, Wells suggests Christians might explore how Esther can

⁷⁶ Samuel Wells, “Esther,” in Samuel Wells and George Sumner, *Esther & Daniel* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2013), 90.

⁷⁷ Wells, “Esther,” 6.

⁷⁸ Wells, “Esther,” 8. Wells seeks a reading that is “sensitive to the ways the text may mean different but overlapping things to Jews and Christians respectively.” For example, Wells notes that “Christians may appropriately and legitimately differ from Jews in their understanding of precisely what is so serious and what is so funny,” *ibid.*, 6.

⁷⁹ Wells, “Esther,” 18. He writes, “Improvisation is a helpful way of thinking about ethics because Christians cannot simply replicate the story they find in scripture”—or, I might add, the interpretations they discover in Jewish sources.

⁸⁰ Wells, “Esther,” 18.

⁸¹ Wells, “Esther,” 87-90.

inform their celebrations of the Eucharist, that great celebration of reversal and of the fact that, although we deserved alienation from God, “the opposite happened” (cf. Esth 9:1).⁸² From Esther, Christians might learn something of lavishness and joyousness of a banquet, and of “the sheer joy of being released from the sentence of death.”⁸³ Unfortunately, Wells suggests, there is a deficiency in such perception among Western, dominantly-positioned Christians; while he notes that “[p]erhaps, among more deprived and oppressed peoples” such a sense exists, he adds that “maybe in the West the banquet feels disturbingly like one of a people who never believed the fearsome edict really applied to them.”⁸⁴

The contention of this project has been that dominantly positioned Christians in the West need the help of people who are positioned differently in order more faithfully to apprehend the book of Esther. Jewish premodern sources that recognize Esther as a hidden transcript and interpret it in light of their own experiences of oppression—often suffered at Christian hands—are a key conversation partner in this endeavor. The goal is not to bring Christian interpretation of Esther fully in line with Jewish reception of this book. Instead, as Wells might suggest, learning from their examples might help Christians find ways of improvising on this book that not only refrain from harm but are deeply informed by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ.

⁸² Wells, “Esther,” 90. He writes, “This should be the place and time where Christians celebrate the greatest of all reversals and where they reenact the death and resurrection of Christ, the definitive reversal greatly anticipated in the mission of Esther.”

⁸³ Wells, “Esther,” 89, 90.

⁸⁴ Wells, “Esther,” 90.

Conclusion

Esther MT has received an uneasy welcome from Christians and has been treated as something of a stranger within the biblical canon. In the medieval period, the response to this stranger was to allegorize it, thereby bringing the book fully in line with Christian theology and the expectations of Christian readers. As we saw in Chapter 5, this was accomplished by means of a complete overwriting of the Jewish character of the book. In fact, the reversal of the book's stance toward Jews was so complete that Esther, no longer a stranger to Christians, became a weapon that could be wielded to undermine Jewish survival. The goal of Christian spiritual edification thus was pursued at the cost of Jews. The allegorical method eventually fell out of favor, and without recourse to such an approach, later Christian exegetes did not so much subdue as revile Esther's strangeness. They were more likely to find little of value in the book and to treat it as unsuitable for the spiritual or moral edification of Christians. Rather than overwriting the book's Jewishness, they identified whatever they found unseemly in the book as characteristically "Jewish" and rejected it for that reason. One thing remained constant: the book of Esther remained a weapon that could be wielded to undermine Jewish survival. One goal of this project has been to find an alternative Christian stance toward Esther—an approach whereby Christians can remain in conversation with this book in all its particularity without abhorrence and can discover therein gifts for the Christian life that do not come at the expense of Jews.

What is perceived by Christians in a more heightened sense with Esther—that it is to some extent a stranger to us—is basically true of all Scripture. As Ellen Davis puts it,

“The Scriptures themselves are for the Christian community the paradigmatic ‘other’”; acts of interpretation must therefore “take respectful account of how deeply alien to us is this written witness to the Word of God.”¹ Interacting well with this stranger (Scripture) requires dispositions akin to those required in order to interact well with a human stranger, specifically, “curiosity and trust.”² With respect to Scripture, curiosity and trust

express themselves in a conviction that, no matter how strange or unappealing a given passage may be, there must be something in it for us, something to be gained from the work of painstaking, acute listening which is the fundamental act of obedience.³

This work of listening to the text involves the need to listen to a variety of voices: “the different voices within the biblical text, within the community, and also the voices of outsiders.”⁴ The current project has focused especially on the first and third of these—the need to listen to an especially different voice within the canon (Esther MT), and the need to listen to the voices of outsiders (Jews). Christians have struggled to find a way to receive Esther faithfully, but there are conversation partners outside the Christian community who have long demonstrated greater adeptness with Esther and facility in the book’s mode of communication.

¹ Ellen Davis, “Holy Preaching: Ethical Interpretation and the Exegetical Imagination,” in *Imagination Shaped: Old Testament Preaching in the Anglican Tradition* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1995), 253.

² Davis, “Holy Preaching,” 245.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

The primary work of this project has been to attend to Jewish conversation partners, particularly the written interpretations of premodern Jews. The goal of this listening has been to seek to understand these Jewish interpretations for their own sakes while also listening for clues that may help Christians better relate to the book of Esther. The following draws together and summarizes some of the clues that have emerged from this work of listening. These suggestions may be of use to scholars from a variety of faith perspectives and social positions, but they are targeted especially toward Christian exegetes who read from social positions of relative dominance and who seek to receive Esther faithfully.

1. Read Esther as a hidden transcript.

The conversations partners engaged in this project show that Jews of many times and places have recognized Esther MT as a hidden transcript. Moreover, they have creatively extended Esther's trajectory with a rich hidden transcript of their own. As these interpreters have understood, Esther is literature that reflects experiences of oppression and supports communities experiencing such oppression. Contemporary readers may struggle to recognize this fact and, more essentially, to factor it into their interpretation.⁵ Christians reading from the upper side of domination (a group that includes the author and, likely, many of the readers of this book) would do well to ask whether their expectations of a text like Esther MT are well-suited to its genre. In other words, are they

⁵ As we saw, while nineteenth- and twentieth-century interpreters may have recognized the connection of the book with the experience of oppression, they were unable to allow this recognition to usefully inform their assessment of the book, of the morality of the characters in it, and of the Jewish people who hold this book dear. See Chapter 8.

reading with the respectful curiosity one affords a stranger, or “imposing our cultural assumptions on a world we do not readily comprehend”?⁶ Before coming to an unfavorable judgment with regard to a character within Esther or with regard the book as a whole (as have so many Christians, from Luther into the modern period), it would be better to discern whether and to what extent a character’s actions or the style of a piece of literature accords with the purpose for which it was written and the audience it serves.⁷ For example, Christians have reacted with abhorrence to the violence depicted in Esther.⁸ Yet to conclude that it reflects the vengeful character of the Jewish people is a false moral judgment based on a mistaken literary understanding, in two ways. First, in a hidden transcript the depiction of literary violence may function as an imaginative *alternative* to a more risky or unrealistic enactment of real-world violence, rather than as a prescription for such violence. Second, since the wishes for retribution are typically expressed in terms that draw upon violence experienced by the dominated community, some of the aspects of Esther that have most troubled Christians may in fact reveal more about the moral failings of the dominant culture and community.

2. *Seek reading partners experienced in life on the underside of domination.*

Since hidden transcripts are notoriously difficult for those on the upper side of domination to understand, Christians reading from such positions need reading partners

⁶ Davis, “Holy Preaching,” 261.

⁷ On an “attitude of moral superiority to the biblical text,” see Davis, “Holy Preaching,” 263.

⁸ See Chapter 8.

who are better equipped to apprehend a work such as Esther. Admitting such a need will first require an honest assessment of one's own social location and that of one's reading community.⁹ As a general practice, reading shared scriptures together with contemporary Jews is a good idea for Christians.¹⁰ In addition to such in-person conversations, however, there is a vast trove of Jewish Esther receptions from across the centuries that can help Christians recognize fruitful and faithful paths for reading Esther. These riches have been the focus of chapters 3-4 and 6-7. Of course, it is not only Jewish communities who know or have known lives of faith on the underside of domination; moreover, not all Jews everywhere in the world will be able to place themselves accurately or exclusively in such a position. It could also be fruitful for Christians reading from positions of dominance to seek out other Christians who read Esther from contrasting social positions, whether in their own country or across the world.

3. *Always ask: Does this reading perform a Hamanic role?*

The public transcript of Christian Esther reception across the ages reveals an abundance of anti-Jewish readings that serve to justify annihilation of Jews. Given this history, contemporary Christians may wish to check their reading of Esther against a crucial question: Does this reading threaten the existence of the contemporary Jewish community, or could it threaten the survival of another community in the future? Does it presuppose that Jews will cease to be recognizable (to themselves and others) as Jews?

⁹ I laid out this argument more extensively in Chapter 1.

¹⁰ For a Jewish perspective on the benefits of Christians and Jews reading together, see for example Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Bible With and Without Jesus: How Jews and Christians Read the Same Stories Differently* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 2020).

4. *After attending carefully to the hidden transcript of Esther reception, seek to respond appropriately to its invitation to play.*

This project has argued that Esther is a playful book, and that the hidden transcript of Jewish Esther reception reveals that Jewish communities have long recognized and responded to its invitation to play. Such play has been apparent in the way the Purim festival has been celebrated as well as in the many playful texts produced in response to Esther MT. If Esther is a playful book, Christian reception, too, should seek to respond appropriately to its playful nature. This does not mean Christians should simply adopt or imitate Jewish Purim practices, a move that would amount to cultural (mis)appropriation. Still, careful attention to the hidden transcript of Jewish Esther receptions reveals openings for ethically responsible forms of Christian play, so long as they are undertaken with due consideration of the reading community's social location, particularly its historical location vis-à-vis Jews. What follows are suggestions of possible avenues for play, potentially fruitful paths for Christian experimentation and improvisation.¹¹

- a. *Experiment with Character Location: Trying on the Villain's Clothes*

Readers of Esther, both Christians and Jews, tend to identify themselves unquestioningly with the story's protagonists. Yet the playful, carnivalesque character of the book and its festive reception at Purim suggest the suitability of a more experimental approach with respect to character location. Carnival in general and Purim in particular are occasions in which masking and costuming abound and in which people may

¹¹ On improvisation, see discussion of Wells in Chapter 8.

experiment with playing a role quite opposite to that which they inhabit in everyday life. A commoner may dress as a king, and a faithful Jew may don the character of the archenemy of the Jews for the annual Purim play. Not coincidentally, Esther is a book full of interest in clothing, crowning, and uncrowning, and in the reversal of status(es) such changes represent. In keeping with the spirit of the book and of its festival, experimentation with self-location in the story may be a fruitful mode of play. It is not only the carnivalesque character of the book that indicates a need for such play. As we have seen, the hidden transcript reveals a long tradition of Jews recognizing Christians in the character of Haman, and this character identification is not without cause (see Chapter 4). For many Christians, to play along with the grain of Esther in light of the hidden transcript of Esther reception may require the sober work of self-interrogation. It may mean asking: In what ways have I and my community acted as Haman? Is there anyone in the world right now who has good reason to pray to God for a reversal in my fortunes like that experienced by Haman?¹² As argued in Chapter 2, such experimental play is not antithetical to seriousness but may be pursued toward ends such as discovery and repentance. Rather than adopting one fixed character location within the story, it may be best to experiment with a variety of self-locations to see what else might be discovered.

b. Experiment with Character Location: Playing with God

Another fruitful avenue of play that may be explored by Christians, even those living on the upper side of domination, is that of finding ways to play with God within

¹² For a similar suggestion with respect to Psalm 137, see Davis, "Holy Preaching," 261-62.

the story world of Esther. In the hidden transcript, play with God seems to occur primarily by means of experimenting with character location. Christians typically have located God behind the scenes in the Esther story. Where they have located God directly within the story world, as in the medieval period, it has been in the position of King Ahasuerus—albeit a sanitized version of King Ahasuerus whose flaws are not examined. By contrast, the rabbinic conversation partners treated in Chapter 7 demonstrate various modes of riskier play, such as recruiting God into a kingly contest with Ahasuerus, or drawing a comparison between the two kings, human and divine, and raising the question of whether they share some of the same flaws. The rabbis even toy with the idea that God may not be entirely unlike the villain Haman. Through such play, the hidden transcript expresses a variety of hopes, laments, and protests, thereby cultivating communication and even intimacy with God in the face of extreme suffering. These modes of expression are open to Christians as well. As interest in the practice of lament grows among theologians and pastoral practitioners, lament in the key of laughter as canonically authorized by Esther may be a fruitful mode of interaction with God in the face of great pain.¹³

In fact, Christians have a unique justification for play with God in light of the theological centrality of the incarnation and death of Christ. While Christians may not have a richly developed tradition of theological or interpretive play, they do affirm the

¹³ See for example Walter Brueggemann, “The Costly Loss of Lament,” *JSOT* 36 (1986): 57-71; Bruce Waltke et al., *The Psalms as Christian Lament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014); Sally Brown and Patrick Miller, eds., *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005); Luke Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2009).

reality of a God who entered the field of play as a human, with all the risks that entailed, and consented to die in a context of mockery and carnivalesque stripping and recrowning.¹⁴ In Christ, Christians discover their God to be the One who is not only willing to risk attendance at such a carnivalesque ordeal but also to be identified with victim and villain alike. Christians may thus find license to undertake risky experimentation in terms of locating God within the story world of Esther. They too may learn from the hidden transcript how to explore to what extent God may be likened to an oblivious king, and they too may voice frustration about the pain of experiencing God's apparent unresponsiveness. They may see in Esther's willingness to lay down her life for her people Christ's willingness to do the same. But perhaps most surprising of all, they may explore whether another apt location for Christ in the story world might be on Haman's cross (the option taken up by Vischer).¹⁵ Particular caution is warranted with this last possibility, however, as the public transcript reveals the troubling precedent of Christians identifying Jews as the killers of Haman with Jews as the killers of Christ, a move that has often resulted in Christian calls for vengeance against them.¹⁶

¹⁴ See discussion of Rahner in Chapter 2.

¹⁵ See Chapter 8.

¹⁶ See for example Barbara Newman, "'The Passion of the Jews of Prague': The Pogrom of 1389 and the Lessons of a Medieval Parody," *Church History* 81, no. 1 (2012): 1–26.

c. Laughing at Empires

Finally, the hidden transcript of Jewish Esther reception reveals the rich possibilities of play afforded by the book's depiction of King Ahasuerus and his empire. As we saw in chapter 6, the rabbis were able to use the Esther story to resist overawe before the great and terrible empires of their own day by mocking the Persians and, through them, their contemporary overlords. As part of the hidden transcript, of course, such an interpretive move reflects the perspectives and survival practices of those living on the underside of domination. Yet many Christians around the world also inhabit subaltern societal positions and struggle with the reality of control by less-than-perfect leaders and systems.¹⁷ Following the example of the rabbis, they may learn ways of playfully reading Esther with their own overlords in view and, by means of this practice, may resist excessive awe or fear before such powers. Even Christians who inhabit positions of relative power within some of the most dominant nations in the world may benefit from learning modes of reading Esther that challenge the total captivity of their imaginations to these systems of power. This is true even if they play a role in these world orders and benefit from them. In fact, such a complex social location is not unlike that faced by the characters Esther and Mordecai toward the end of the story, once they had risen to positions of tenuous power within the Persian Empire and become almost indiscernible from Persians and likely complicit in their ethical failings.¹⁸

¹⁷ As Ellen Davis attests, Esther is an especially popular name among Christians in South Sudan, a community familiar with a very recent history of genocidal war. Personal communication.

¹⁸ See note 9, page 171.

The above suggestions do not provide a definitive reading of Esther; neither do they attempt to determine the (or even *a*) moral to the story. Rather, the goal of this project has been to furnish resources for ethical reading and preaching, as opposed to a simplistic, moralistic approach. Indeed, Esther has enormous moral relevance for the Church, but not in the sense of providing clear rules regarding, for example, women and beauty products, bowing to other humans, or how to wield political power or violence. Instead, they are paths along which Christian readers might improvise, means of enlarging our imaginations before this biblical text so that we might be transformed through encounter with it. Esther seeks to work on our imaginations through its striking interplay of hilarity and horror. Through respectful listening to reading partners with greater facility in Esther's mode of communication, we might learn to give Esther a better hearing and thereby be transformed.

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Biography

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