ESTHER

Dr. Orit Avnery

1

Esther 2: 5

In the fortress Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite.

Esther 3: 1:

Some time afterward, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite

Tamar Messer

2

- **Saul and Vashti Replaced with Someone Better**—Ahasuerus' promise to replace Vashti (Esth 1:19) and God's promise to replace Saul (1 Sam 15:28).

אִם־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב יֵצֵא דְבַר־מַלְכוּת מִלְפָנָיו וְיִכָּתֵב בְּדָתֵי פָרַס־וּמָדַי וְלֹא יַעֲבֹר אֲשֶׁר לֹא־תָבוֹא וַשְׁתִּי לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ

אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ **וּמַלְכוּתָהּ יִתֵּן הַמֶּלֶךְ לִרְעוּתָהּ הַטּוֹבָה מִמֶּנָּה**׃

Morgan Bible

וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו שְׁמוּאֵל

קָרַע יְהוָה אֶת־**מַמְלְכוּת** יִשְׂרָאֵל מֵעָלֶיךָ הַיּוֹם **וּנְתָנָהּ לְרֵעֲךָ הַטּוֹב מִמֶּךָּ**׃

3

- **Replaying Saul's Destruction of Amalek**—The Megillah's killing of Haman the Agagite while not taking from the booty (9:10, 15–16, 24–25) and the story of Saul's taking booty from Amalek and sparing their king, Agag (1 Sam 15).

<u>אסתר ט׃</u>

עֲשֶׂרֶת בְּנֵי הָמָן בֶּן־הַמְּדָתָא צֹרֵר הַיְּהוּדִים הָרָגוּ וּבַבִּזָּה לֹא שָׁלְחוּ אֶת־יָדָם׃... וּבַבִּזָּה לֹא שָׁלְחוּ אֶת־יָדָם... וּבַבִּזָּה לֹא שָׁלְחוּ אֶת־יָדָם׃

<u>שמואל א טו׃</u>

וַיִּתְפֹּשׂ אֶת־אֲגַג מֶלֶךְ־עֲמָלֵק חַי וְאֶת־כָּל־הָעָם הֶחֱרִים לְפִי־חָרֶב׃

וַיַּחְמֹל שָׁאוּל וְהָעָם עַל־אֲגַג וְעַל־מֵיטַב הַצֹּאן וְהַבָּקָר וְהַמִּשְׁנִים

וְעַל־הַכָּרִים וְעַל־כָּל־הַטּוֹב...

Morgan Bible

וְלָמָּה לֹא־שָׁמַעְתָּ בְּקוֹל יְהוָה וַתַּעַט אֶל־הַשָּׁלָל וַתַּעַשׂ הָרַע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה׃

וַיֹּאמֶר שָׁאוּל אֶל־שְׁמוּאֵל אֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתִּי בְּקוֹל יְהוָה וָאֵלֵךְ בַּדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר־שְׁלָחַנִי יְהוָה וָאָבִיא אֶת־אֲגַג מֶלֶךְ עֲמָלֵק וְאֶת־עֲמָלֵק

הֶחֱרַמְתִּי׃ וַיִּקַּח הָעָם מֵהַשָּׁלָל צֹאן וּבָקָר רֵאשִׁית הַחֵרֶם לִזְבֹּחַ לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בַּגִּלְגָּל׃

4

אסתר ד 13-14:

וַיְאמֶר מָרְדֳּכַי לְהָשִׁיב אֶל־אֶסְתֵּר אַל־תְּדַמִּי בְנַפְשֵׁךְ לְהִמָּלֵט
בֵּית־הַמֶּלֶךְ מִכָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים׃
כִּי אִם־הַחֲרֵשׁ תַּחֲרִישִׁי בָּעֵת הַזֹּאת רֶוַח וְהַצָּלָה יַעֲמוֹד
לַיְּהוּדִים מִמָּקוֹם אַחֵר **וְאַתְּ וּבֵית־אָבִיךְ** תֹּאבֵדוּ וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ
אִם־לְעֵת כָּזֹאת הִגַּעַתְּ לַמַּלְכוּת׃

Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther: "Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while **you and your father's house** will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis."

Esther before Ahasuerus (1547-48); Tintoretto Jacopo

5

Esther 4:16-17

"Go, assemble all the Jews who live in Shushan, and fast in my behalf; do not eat or drink for three days, night or day. I and my maidens will observe the same fast. Then I shall go to the king, though it is contrary to the law; and if I am to perish, I shall perish!" 17 So Mordecai went about [the city] and did just as Esther had commanded him.

J James Tissot

לֵךְ כְּנוֹס אֶת־כָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים הַנִּמְצְאִים בְּשׁוּשָׁן וְצוּמוּ
עָלַי וְאַל־תֹּאכְלוּ וְאַל־תִּשְׁתּוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים לַיְלָה וְיוֹם
גַּם־אֲנִי וְנַעֲרֹתַי אָצוּם כֵּן וּבְכֵן אָבוֹא אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲשֶׁר
לֹא־כַדָּת וְכַאֲשֶׁר אָבַדְתִּי אָבָדְתִּי׃

יואל א 14:

קַדְּשׁוּ־צוֹם קִרְאוּ עֲצָרָה אִסְפּוּ זְקֵנִים כֹּל יֹשְׁבֵי הָאָרֶץ בֵּית
יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם וְזַעֲקוּ אֶל־יְהוָה׃

Solemnize a fast, Proclaim an assembly; Gather the elders—all the inhabitants of the land— In the House of the LORD your God, And cry out to the LORD.

6

Aert de Gelder, 1685

אסתר ב 9:
וַתִּיטַב הַנַּעֲרָה בְּעֵינָיו וַתִּשָּׂא חֶסֶד לְפָנָיו וַיְבַהֵל אֶת־תַּמְרוּקֶיהָ וְאֶת־מָנוֹתֶהָ לָתֵת לָהּ

The girl pleased him and won his favor, and he hastened to furnish her with her cosmetics and her rations,

דניאל א 8:
וַיָּשֶׂם דָּנִיֵּאל עַל־לִבּוֹ אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יִתְגָּאַל בְּפַתְבַּג הַמֶּלֶךְ וּבְיֵין מִשְׁתָּיו וַיְבַקֵּשׁ מִשַּׂר הַסָּרִיסִים אֲשֶׁר לֹא יִתְגָּאָל׃

Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the king's food or the wine he drank, so he sought permission of the chief officer not to defile himself,...
"Please test your servants for ten days, giving us legumes to eat and water to drink.

7

	Ruler	Event	מנהיג	
559-529	Cyrus the Great	538: Cyrus' declaration. 537: Founding of Second Temple	כורש	.1
529-522	Cambyses II		כנבזי	.2
522-486	Darius I	520: Construction of Second Temple begins again 515: Inauguration of Second Temple	דריוש הראשון	.3
486-465	Xerxes I		חשיארש (כסרכסס)	.4
465-425	Artaxerxes I	458: Ezra immigrates to Judea 435: Nehemia begins first term as governor of Judea	ארתחשסתא הראשון	.5
425-404	Darius II		דריוש השני	.6
404-359	Artaxerxes II		ארתחשסתא השני	.7
359-338	Artaxerxes III		ארתחשסתא השלישי	.8
338-336	Arses		ארסס	.9
336-331	Darius III		דריוש השלישי	.10

8

- Vashti and Mordecai both refuse to carry out the king's command.
- The text omits the reason for refusal in both cases.
- The king's wrath is mirrored by Haman's anger.
- In both cases, personal issues are transformed into matters of national concern, the minority group as a whole being punished rather than the specific individual. Just as Vashti's behavior leads to an edict demanding that all wives "treat their husbands with respect, high and low alike" (1:20), Mordecai's results in Haman's desire to eradicate the entire Jewish community.
- Both stories feature the root בו"ז "disgrace" in the context of expanding the edict issued in the wake of an individual's actions to the entire community (1:17–18, 3:6). This contrast evinces how the rebelliousness of the Other forms the pretext for their mistreatment by their superiors.
- In both cases, letters are written and sent throughout the land in a variety of languages.
- The individual receives a separate punishment than that meted out to the collective. While Vashti is banished from her husband, the women of the land are commanded to show respect to their husbands. Haman likewise plans to kill Mordecai immediately irrespective of the plan to rid the kingdom of all Jews at a later date.

9

Esther 2:5-7

In the fortress Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite. 6 [Kish] had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.—7 He was foster father to Hadassah—that is, Esther—his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was shapely and beautiful; and when her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter…

ANDREA DEL CASTAGNO

The Coronation of Queen Esther, from the 1617 Scroll of Esther from Ferrara, Italy.

10

Esther 2

When the king's order and edict was proclaimed… Esther too was taken into the king's palace under the supervision of Hegai, guardian of the women.

The girl pleased him and won his favor…

Esther did not reveal her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had told her not to reveal it…

When each girl's turn came to go to King Ahasuerus at the end of the twelve months' treatment prescribed for women (for that was the period spent on beautifying them: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and women's cosmetics, and it was after that that the girl would go to the king), whatever she asked for would be given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. She would go in the evening and leave in the morning for a second harem in charge of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, guardian of the concubines. She would not go again to the king unless the king wanted her, when she would be summoned by name.

When the turn came for Esther daughter of Abihail—the uncle of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his own daughter—to go to the king, she did not ask for anything but what Hegai, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women, advised. Yet Esther won the admiration of all who saw her.

Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus... The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace and favor more than all the virgins. So he set a royal diadem on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

11

John Everett Millais, 1865

Esther 1:1-3

וַיְהִי בִּימֵי אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ הוּא אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ הַמֹּלֵךְ מֵהֹדּוּ וְעַד־כּוּשׁ שֶׁבַע וְעֶשְׂרִים וּמֵאָה מְדִינָה׃ ב בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם כְּשֶׁבֶת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ עַל כִּסֵּא מַלְכוּתוֹ אֲשֶׁר בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירָה׃ ג בִּשְׁנַת שָׁלוֹשׁ לְמָלְכוֹ עָשָׂה מִשְׁתֶּה לְכָל־שָׂרָיו וַעֲבָדָיו חֵיל פָּרַס וּמָדַי הַפַּרְתְּמִים וְשָׂרֵי הַמְּדִינוֹת לְפָנָיו׃

It happened in the days of Ahasuerus—that Ahasuerus who reigned over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Ethiopia.

2 In those days, when King Ahasuerus occupied the royal throne in the fortress Shushan,

3 in the third year of his reign, he gave a banquet for all the officials and courtiers—the administration of Persia and Media, the nobles and the governors of the provinces in his service.

12

Esther 2:15-17

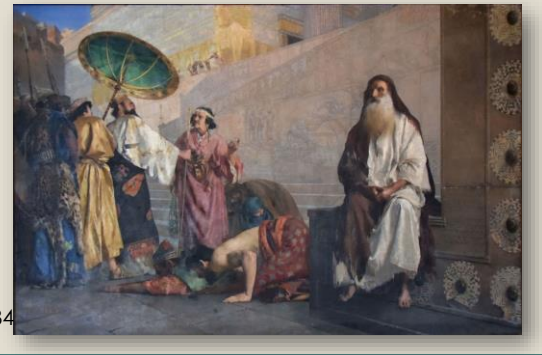
15 When the turn came for Esther daughter of Abihail—the uncle of Mordecai, who had adopted her as his own daughter—to go to the king, she did not ask for anything but what Hegai, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women, advised. Yet Esther won the admiration of all who saw her. 16 Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, in his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. 17 The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace and favor more than all the virgins. So he set a royal diadem on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.

Tamar Messer

13

Esther 3:1-4

Some time afterward, King Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite; he advanced him and seated him higher than any of his fellow officials. 2 All the king's courtiers in the palace gate knelt and bowed low to Haman, for such was the king's order concerning him; but Mordecai would not kneel or bow low. 3 Then the king's courtiers who were in the palace gate said to Mordecai, "Why do you disobey the king's order?"4 When they spoke to him day after day and he would not listen to them, they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's resolve would prevail; for he had explained to them that he was a Jew.



Paul Alexander Leroy, 1884

14

Esther 3:5-7

5 When Haman saw that Mordecai would not kneel or bow low to him, Haman was filled with rage. 6 But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone; having been told who Mordecai's people were, Haman plotted to do away with all the Jews, Mordecai's people, throughout the kingdom of Ahasuerus. 7 In the first month, that is, the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, *pur*—which means "the lot"—was cast before Haman concerning every day and every month, [until it fell on] the twelfth month, that is, the month of Adar.

Dura-Europos, 244

15

Jan Steen, ~1668

… in the third year of his reign

Esther was taken to King Ahasuerusin the seventh year of his reign

in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, *pur*—which means "the lot"—was cast before Haman

בשנת שלוש למלכו...
בשנת שבע למלכותו..
בשנת שתים עשרה למלך אחשורש

16

Esther 5:1

On the third day, Esther put on royal apparel and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, facing the king's palace, while the king was sitting on his royal throne in the throne room facing the entrance of the palace.

Artemisia Gentileschi

וַיְהִי בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁלִישִׁי וַתִּלְבַּשׁ אֶסְתֵּר **מַלְכוּת** וַתַּעֲמֹד בַּחֲצַר בֵּית־**הַמֶּלֶךְ** הַפְּנִימִית נֹכַח בֵּית **הַמֶּלֶךְ** ו**הַמֶּלֶךְ** יוֹשֵׁב עַל־כִּסֵּא **מַלְכוּתוֹ** בְּבֵית **הַמַּלְכוּת** נֹכַח פֶּתַח הַבָּיִת׃

17

Esther 5 4-9:

"If it please Your Majesty," Esther replied, "let Your Majesty and Haman come today to the feast that I have prepared for him." The king commanded, "Tell Haman to hurry and do Esther's bidding." So the king and Haman came to the feast that Esther had prepared. At the wine feast, the king asked Esther, "What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." "My wish," replied Esther, "my request—if Your Majesty will do me the favor, if it please Your Majesty to grant my wish and accede to my request— let Your Majesty and Haman come to the feast which I will prepare for them; and tomorrow I will do Your Majesty's bidding." That day Haman went out happy and lighthearted.

Esther accusing Haman, Ernest Norman, 1888

18

Esther 7 1-5:

So the king and Haman came to feast with Queen Esther. On the second day, the king again asked Esther at the wine feast, "What is your wish, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to half the kingdom, it shall be fulfilled." Queen Esther replied: "If Your Majesty will do me the favor, and if it pleases Your Majesty, let my life be granted me as my wish, and my people as my request. For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated. Had we only been sold as bondmen and bondwomen, I would have kept silent; for the adversary is not worthy of the king's trouble."
Thereupon King Ahasuerus demanded of Queen Esther, "Who is he and where is he who dared to do this?"

Unknown, 1505

19

Esther 10:1-3

1King Ahasuerus imposed tribute on the mainland and the islands. 2 All his mighty and powerful acts, and a full account of the greatness to which the king advanced Mordecai, are recorded in the Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia. 3 For Mordecai the Jew ranked next to King Ahasuerus and was highly regarded by the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brethren; he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his kindred.

וַיָּשֶׂם הַמֶּלֶךְ אחשרש [אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ] מַס עַל־הָאָרֶץ
וְאִיֵּי הַיָּם׃ ב וְכָל־מַעֲשֵׂה תָקְפּוֹ וּגְבוּרָתוֹ וּפָרָשַׁת
גְּדֻלַּת מָרְדֳּכַי אֲשֶׁר גִּדְּלוֹ הַמֶּלֶךְ הֲלוֹא־הֵם
כְּתוּבִים עַל־סֵפֶר דִּבְרֵי הַיָּמִים לְמַלְכֵי מָדַי
וּפָרָס׃ ג כִּי מָרְדֳּכַי הַיְּהוּדִי מִשְׁנֶה לַמֶּלֶךְ
אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ וְגָדוֹל לַיְּהוּדִים וְרָצוּי לְרֹב אֶחָיו
דֹּרֵשׁ טוֹב לְעַמּוֹ וְדֹבֵר שָׁלוֹם לְכָל־זַרְעוֹ׃

20

Esther 9:20-22, 27-28

Mordecai recorded these events. And he sent dispatches to all the Jews throughout the provinces of King Ahasuerus, near and far, 21 charging them to observe the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar, every year—22 the same days on which the Jews enjoyed relief from their foes and the same month which had been transformed for them from one of grief and mourning to one of festive joy. They were to observe them as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor…

27 The Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants, and all who might join them, to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year. 28 Consequently, these days are recalled and observed in every generation: by every family, every province, and every city. And these days of Purim shall never cease among the Jews, and the memory of them shall never perish among their descendants.

Rembrandt

21

Esther 9:29-32

29 Then Queen Esther daughter of Abihail wrote a second letter of Purim for the purpose of confirming with full authority the aforementioned one of Mordecai the Jew. 30 Dispatches were sent to all the Jews in the hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the realm of Ahasuerus with an ordinance of "equity and honesty:" 31 These days of Purim shall be observed at their proper time, as Mordecai the Jew—and now Queen Esther—has obligated them to do, and just as they have assumed for themselves and their descendants the obligation of the fasts with their lamentations. 32 And Esther's ordinance validating these observances of Purim was recorded in a scroll.

GIOVANNI BATTISTA MORONI

22

Jan Victors, 1640

In the first month, that is, the month of Nisan

On the thirteenth day of the first month, the king's scribes were summoned and a decree was issued…

do not eat or drink for three days

On the third day, Esther … stood in the inner court of the king's palace

בחודש הראשון הוא חודש ניסן..
בחודש הראשון בשלושה עשר יום בו ויכתב ככל אשר ציוה המן..
ויהי ביום השלישי ותלבש אסתר מלכות

23

- **Esther and Moses**
- Both Esther and Moses were adopted
- They were both brought into the household of a foreign king
- Both of them save the Israelites from an existential crisis
- Both of their stories end with immense victories on their side and a yearly festival commemorating them

Rembrandt, 1660

24

MEGILLOTH STUDIES

Hebrew Bible Monographs, 78

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Contents

List of Abbreviations vii
List of Contributors ix

Introduction
Brad Embry 1

Ruth and Esther as the Thematic Frame of the Megilloth
Andrew R. Davis 7

Esther, Vashti, Ruth, and Naomi:
Kindred Heroines in Megilloth
Leonard Greenspoon 20

Miqreh in Retrospect: An Illumination of *Miqreh*
in Light of Ecclesiastes 3.1-8 and the Book of Ruth
Brittany N. Melton 30

Ruth and Esther:
A Journey through Gender, Ethnicity and Identity
Orit Avnery 43

A Male Speaker's Obsession with the Feminine:
The Strange Case of Lamentations 3
Mayer I. Gruber and Shamir Yona 72

Solomon and Qoheleth
Stuart Weeks 80

The Covenant Curses Transposed: Allusions in
Lamentations to Deuteronomy 28–32 and Leviticus 26
Denise Flanders 96

Permanent and Temporary Ethnicities in the Esther Scroll
Janelle Peters 110

Horizontal Theology in the *Megilloth*
Garrett Galvin 125

The Macro-Structure of the *Megilloth*
Timothy Stone 141

Initiative and Agency:
Towards a Theology of the Megilloth
Megan Fullerton Strollo 150

Index of References 161
Index of Authors 165

Ruth and Esther: A Journey through Gender, Ethnicity and Identity

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Two works in the biblical canon relate the story of a heroine—the book of Ruth and the book of Esther.[1] Upon a first reading, these works seem to have little in common, besides the fact that both feature a female protagonist. Each is set in a different location and a different period in history; each is written in a different style. Indeed, even though each work has been the subject of countless studies over the generations, there has been almost no comprehensive, systematic attempt to compare them.[2] In this article, I will attempt to present these works within a single thematic framework that reveals a panoply of connections between them. I will claim that each book is engaged with the concept of the Other and otherness and with finding the elusive border between 'us' and 'them.' This thesis serves as a basis for

1. This paper was presented on the panel of Gender, Ethnicity, and Identity in the Megilloth at the SBL conference, San Diego, CF, November 23, 2014. This article is part of a larger project—my book, 'Liminal Women: Belonging and Otherness in the Books of Ruth and Esther' (Hebrew) which analyzes the figures of Ruth and Esther and the connection between them. I am grateful to my teacher, Professor Ed Greenstein, for feedback of this chapter and for his insightful comments and to Tamara C. Eskenazi for her fruitful dialogue and for all her encouragement to keep writing.

2. Specific points have been addressed in: Ronald M. Hals, *The Theology of the Book of Ruth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), pp. 47-53; Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (WBC, 9; Dallas: Thomas Nelson, 1996), pp. 307-308; Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 76-77; Timothy S. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther* (Atlanta, GA: SBL, 1998), p. 61; Adele Berlin, *Esther with Introduction and Commentary* (*Mikra Ley-israel* Series; Tel Aviv-Jerusalem: Am Oved-Magnes, 2001), p. 41. A more detailed, but still basic, discussion can be found in Sandra B. Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (Missoula, MT: SBL, 1979), pp. 146-47; Orit Avnery, 'Esther and Ruth: Sister Works' (MA Thesis, Hebrew University at Jerusalem, 2003); Zipora Yavin, 'Ruth, the Fifth Mother: A Study in the Scroll of Ruth', *JJS* 44 (2007), pp. 167-213; Orit Avnery, 'The Threefold Cord: Interrelations between the books of Samuel, Ruth and Esther' (PhD thesis, Bar Ilan University, 2011).

comparison between the two works, by highlighting a single motif shared between the two books.

In my reading the central theme that ties the two works together is the tension between otherness and belonging; this is the thematic filter through which the narrative horizon and sphere of dialogue can be defined. The motif of otherness is manifested in different ways in each work, but the most salient example of the Other is found in the figure of the heroine herself. Ruth and Esther are described as entirely foreign to their environments, in an ethnic sense—each arrives from a different culture and must adjust to her local surroundings; and from the perspective of gender—each woman must operate within a man's world, despite her limited power and influence. Each book, therefore, focuses on one woman's struggle against the labels of otherness that constrict her. Ruth must deal with ethnic, gender and social otherness because she is Moabite, a woman, a widow, barren, and destitute. Esther must deal with ethnic, gender and social otherness because she is Judean—part of an ethnic minority—a woman, and an orphan, within a radically hierarchal and patriarchal society.

Both works were composed roughly around the same period—within the same historical reality—although their geographical origins were presumably different.[3] There is no textual proof that one text was aware of the other's existence, but through the paradigm I have just proposed, the reader is able to construct a possible connection between them.

This work is an intertextual reading; it is not concerned at to whether or not the authors of those biblical texts were familiar with, influenced by, or disputed with each other. I do not claim that the narratives are linked historically. I will suggest a synchronic reading which reveals a myriad of intriguing and significant links between the texts.[4]

3. It is generally accepted that the book of Esther was compiled in the fourth century BCE, presumably outside of Judea, and that Ruth was composed in the fifth century BCE, apparently in Judea.

4. The intertextual approach enables a broader range of references both to the text and to links between texts. In addition to the innovative interpretive options embedded in the concept, intertextuality keeps the texts from stagnation. The text is constantly revitalized by the reader. This process emphasizes the interpretative role of the reader. Indeed, this approach has aroused wide attention in biblical research in recent years. See, for example: Kirsten Nielsen, 'Intertextuality and Biblical Scholarship', *SJOT* 2 (1990), pp. 89-95; Gary A. Phillips, 'Sign/Text/Difference: The Contribution of Intertextual Theory to Biblical Criticism', in *Intertextuality* (ed. H.F. Plett; New York: W. de Gruyter, 1991); Adele Berlin, 'Literary Exgesis of Biblical Narrative: Between Poetics and Hermeneutics', in *Not in Heaven: Coherence and Complexity in Biblical Narrative* (ed. J.P. Rosenblatt and J.C. Sitterson, Jr; Bloomington: University of Indiana, 1991), pp. 78-97, 120-28; Danna Nolan Fewell (ed.), *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992); J. Cheryl Exum and David J.A. Clines (eds.), *The New Literary Criticism and the*

A comparative reading of the texts reveals a wide range of potential ties that weave the two works into a single tapestry.

1. First, similar plot lines can be traced in the two works. Both relate a story of an *existential threat*—either that of an entire people by royal decree (in the book of Esther), or that of a single family, who lost their sons and the ability to bear the next generation (the book of Ruth). In each work, those threatened are saved from annihilation thanks to the resourcefulness of its *female protagonist*. The heroine in question takes action that benefits herself and simultaneously saves the Jewish family or community from being wiped out. Despite her lowly place in society, the woman takes initiative and sets salvation in motion—in light of her inferior status, this initiative is especially heroic—and moreover, in each case, she endangers herself in the attempt.[5] In the process of reaching a solution, it seems that the plot reaches a *dead end*, and the preferred route to salvation is jeopardized. In the book of Esther, even after Haman is hanged and Mordecai takes his place, it is unclear how the Jews will be saved from the royal decree, 'for no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked' (Esth. 8.8). In the book of Ruth, too, even after Ruth successfully strikes up a dialogue with Boaz and wins his admiration, it is unclear if he will be able to redeem her, or if the closer redeeming kinsman will do so.

2. The similar plot lines in both works exhibit stylistic tendencies towards realism. Although the backdrops of each story are completely different, each one contains realistic elements which lend authenticity and reliability to the unfolding events. The book of Esther features the names of geographic locations; the names of the supporting characters are indigenous to the setting; realistic administrative processes, such as the governmental system and the dissemination of edicts and decrees, are described in great detail, as is the process of choosing a queen; and the fabrics, colors and embellishments of clothing and furniture are related at length. In parallel, the book of Ruth also features place names; almost all the characters are named; the field work—reaping, gleaning, binding—is described in vivid

Hebrew Bible (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); George Aichele and Gary A. Philips (eds.), *Intertextuality and the Bible* (Semeia, 69/70; Atlanta: Scholars Press 1995); Ellen van Wolde, 'Intertextuality: Ruth in Dialogue with Tamar', in *Reading The Bible, Approaches, Methods and Strategies, A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible* (ed. A. Brenner and C. Fontaine; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), pp. 426-51; Diane M. Sharon, 'Echoes of Gideon's Ephod: An Intertextual Reading', *JANES* 30 (2006), pp. 89-102; George W. Savran, 'Beastly Speech: Intertextuality, Balaam's Ass and the Garden of Eden', *JSOT*, 64 (1994), pp. 33-55; Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40–66* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 8-9. Patricia K. Tull, 'Bakhtin's Confessional Self-Accounting and Psalms of Lament', *BibInt* 13 (2005), pp. 74-79.

5. Johanna W.H. Bos, 'Out of the Shadows', *Semeia* 42 (1988), pp. 37-67.

detail, as are the dynamics between the different groups in the field. The legal procedure at the town gate is also extensively described.

3. Each plot is shaped by the motif of *peripeteia*, reversal of fate, a *complete reversal* of the plot's initial complication. This reversal is expressed through literary devices—through repetition of identical expressions and motifs at the stories' opening, when the crisis is presented, and at its end, when the crisis is resolved. This structure lends symmetry and balance to the plot, wherein every detail is chiastically parallel to another. In the book of Esther, this reversal is most salient through the analogy of chaps. 3–4, which describe the disaster that looms over the people, and chap. 8, which describes their complete salvation and their vengeance upon the enemies of the Jews.[6]

The salvation of the final chapter of the book of Ruth, chap. 4, is also presented as the reversal of the crisis of the first chapter.[7]

4. There is incongruence between the narrative's opening line and the rest of the plot. Both works open with an identical expression that places the

6. In contrast with the ring given to Haman in chap. 3, Mordecai receives the ring in chap. 8. In contrast with the clothes ripped in mourning and the donning of sackcloth, Mordecai dons royal robes. In contrast with the bewildered city, the city of Susa celebrates and rejoices. In contrast to mourning, fasting and wailing—joy, feasting and gladness. And so on and so forth. Moreover, each work employs central motifs of reversal and duplicity, from both linguistic and narrative perspective. On this idea, see Berg, *The Book of Esther*; Athalya Brenner, 'Looking at Esther through the Looking Glass', in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (ed. A Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 71-80; Edward L. Greenstein, 'A Jewish Reading of Esther', *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (ed. J. Neusner, B.A. Levine and E. S. Frerichs; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 225-43.

7. To bring a few striking examples: a chorus of townswomen notes and interprets Naomi's situation at the story's beginning and end. However, while their words in chapter 1 are brief, expressing grief and wonder: 'Could this be Naomi?' (Ruth 1.19), their words in chap. 4 are lengthier, expressing joy and consolation: 'Blessed is the Lord, who has not withheld a redeemer from you today, and let his name be called in Israel, and he will renew your spirit and sustain your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you bore him, she who is better to you than seven sons' (Ruth 4.14-15). Similarly, both chapters are concerned with naming. In chap. 1, Naomi re-names herself: 'call me *Marah* ("bitter")' (Ruth 1.20), thus expressing her bitter fate, her crisis and hopelessness. In contrast, the naming in chapter 4 is performed by the townswomen, expressing the reversal of Naomi's fortune and the redemption that has taken place: 'and the neighborwomen gave him a name' (4.17). Additionally, in contrast with Orpah and Ruth's ten years of marriage with Mahlon and Chilion, when no children are born to either couple, conception is immediately related when Boaz and Ruth marry: 'and Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife, and he cohabited with her, and the Lord granted her pregnancy and she bore a son' (4.13).

plot within a specific period: 'And it was in the days—ויהי בימי'.[8] In either case, the reader develops certain expectations following this introduction, expectations that dissipate as the plot progresses, thus creating tension and discrepancy between the introduction and the development of the plot. The opening of the book of Esther introduces King Ahasuerus and his immense Empire, thus raising expectations for an organized system of government and a powerful king who rules the hundred and twenty seven provinces of his empire with a mighty hand. This expectation is challenged as the plot progresses and the reader learns of the absence of leadership that characterizes Ahasuerus's reign. The great king emerges as one who is greatly subject to the influence of his advisors, his ministers, all those around him, and even his volatile moods. Nothing is stable, and no unifying policy seems to govern the king's decisions and actions. Moreover, his position has no practical importance, for his kingdom is 'ruled by the ring' in the sense that the seal of the royal signet ring overrides the king's will, and 'no document written in the king's name and sealed with his ring can be revoked' (Esth. 8.8)—not even by the king himself. Thus, the content of the narrative is antithetical to its opening sentence.

In a different way, but with an apparently similar objective, tension arises between the opening of the book of Ruth and its continuation. The narrative opens in the 'days when judges ruled'. A reader familiar with the Bible will associate this period with chaos, violence and enmity between the tribes of Israel.[9] Against this backdrop of violence and anarchy, a story of tranquil, pastoral atmosphere unexpectedly emerges, its heroines demonstrating mutual concern and responsibility far beyond the call of duty.

5. Beyond the identical introductory phrase, both works are characterized by a similar relationship between their frameworks and contents: the protagonist of each story is a woman; but the narrative opens and closes with its male characters. We may say that both books tell a feminine tale

8. This expression is uncommon in the Bible, and occurs in only three other places: Gen. 14.1; Isa. 7.1, and Jer. 1.3. However, this opening takes on a different meaning in each work: in the book of Esther, the expression refers to the reign of a specific king, Ahasuerus, while in the book of Ruth, this opening presents a much broader bracket of time wherein the story may have occurred (anytime during the period 'when judges ruled').

9. Regarding the tension between the book of Judges and the book of Ruth, see Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 2002), p. 238; Adrien Janis Bledstein, 'Female Companionships: If the Book of Ruth were Written by a Woman…', in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (ed. A. Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), pp. 116-33: 'The book of Ruth stands alone against the period of Judges as a humane tale of death, grieving, friendship, healing, rejuvenation and continuation of life in a community' (p. 118).

enclosed within a masculine framework, and without this framework, the inner story could not have developed as it did.

Thus, the book of Esther opens with a description of Ahasuerus and his kingdom, and when the Jewish heroes of the story are introduced, Mordecai is mentioned first. Moreover, Esther is presented in relation to him: 'And he had adopted Hadassah, that is, Esther, his cousin, for she had no father or mother' (Esth. 2.7). At the narrative's conclusion, the reader does not know what has become of Esther, in neither a personal nor political sense, while the narrative concludes with a triumphant report of Mordecai's position: 'For Mordecai the Jew was second to King Ahasuerus, and great amongst the Jews, desirable to most of his brothers, seeking good for his people and speaking up for the welfare of all his seed' (10.3).[10] The book of Ruth is similarly structured. At first Elimelech appears, with the other characters introduced in relation to him. The narrative concludes with a sketch of the male dynasty leading up to King David, not once but twice. The first dynasty begins with Ruth's son: 'and they named him Obed, the father of Jesse who is the father of David' (Ruth 4.17), while the second, immediately following the first, and far more impressive, is a ten generational model: 'These are the descendants of Peretz: Peretz begot Hezron, and Hezron begot Ram, and Ram begot Aminadav, and Aminadav begot Nahshon, and Nahshon begot Salmah, and Salmon begot Boaz, and Boaz begot Obed, and Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David' (4.18-22). Ruth's absence is striking, and it seems as if any woman could have fulfilled the role of producing Boaz's heir, as if the only important feature of a woman is her ability to bear the child of the next male in the dynasty in order to ensure its continuity.[11]

6. The feminine presence in both works is salient not only because the protagonist is a woman, as I have mentioned, but also because another female character is presented in the first chapter, one who rapidly enters and exits the stage. Vashti appears in chap. 1 in the book of Esther, while Orpah makes a brief appearance at the beginning of chap. 1 in the book of Ruth. Examining the roles of the two characters reveals that their literary functions are identical—both Vashti and Orpah serve as a foil to their female protagonist, illuminating and emphasizing her unique traits.[12] Thus, in the

10. See also Laniak, *Shame and Honor*: '…most would agree that the story returns, in chap. 10, to the male-dominated, hierarchical orientation of chapter 1. This leaves Esther as a feminist heroine only for some' (p. 6).

11. See Stephen Bertman, 'Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth', *JBL* 84 (1965), pp 165-68; Ellen van Wolde, *Ruth and Naomi* (London: SCM Press, 1997); Esther Fuchs, *Sexual Politics in the Biblical Narrative: Reading the Hebrew Bible as a Woman* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), pp. 81-84.

12. About the role of the minor characters see Uriel Simon, 'Minor Characters in Biblical Narrative', in *Reading Prophetic Narratives* (trans. Lenn J. Schramm; Bloomington:

book of Esther, Vashti's refusal to appear before the king is antithetical to Esther's initial obedience. The rash refusal which seals her fate stands in stark contrast to Esther's calculated conduct before the king and Haman.[13] In the book of Ruth, Orpah's return to Moab in response to the pleading of Naomi, logical and normative as it is, is a foil to Ruth's impressive decision to remain with Naomi and to return to Bethlehem with her. In light of Orpah's decision, Ruth's devotion to her mother-in-law emerges as an act that goes far beyond the call of duty.[14]

7. In both the book of Ruth and the book of Esther, the heroine is closely accompanied by a character who guides her actions and advises her throughout her ordeal. In both cases the elderly, authoritative character relates to the

Indiana University Press, 1997), pp. 263-69. He wrote: 'A primary function of some minor characters is to move the plot forward; others endow the narrative with greater meaning and depth' (p. 266), 'We shall conclude with the use of minor characters as a device for the moral evaluation of the protagonist. This evaluation, which is one of the chief concerns of the biblical authors of every period, is almost never expressed explicitly, but only indirectly, in the language of deeds and their consequences' (p. 268). About Vashti and Orpah, see Berlin, *Esther*, p. 41.

13. Some view Vashti as an arrogant, foolish character, a foil to wise, diplomatic Esther. For example, see Lewis B. Paton, *The Book of Esther* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908), p. 150; Susan Niditch, 'Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority', in *Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (ed. A. Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 26-46. It is worth noting that some view the contrast between Vashti and Esther by reading Vashti as the first, and even central, feminist in the story, rather than Esther herself. Whether her form of opposition was effective is subject to debate, but it can certainly be considered courageous, Vashti is all too aware of the price she will have to pay, yet she still retains her principles and refuses to follow the king's orders. This is expressed by Mary Gendler, 'The Restoration of Vashti', in *The Jewish Women; New Perspectives* (ed. E. Koltum; New York: Schocken Books, 1976), pp. 241-47; Alice L. Laffey, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), pp. 156, 216; Lucinda B. Chandler, 'The Book of Esther', in *The Woman's Bible, A Classic Feminist Perspective* (ed. E.C. Stanton; New York: European Publishing Company, 1895–1898; repr, Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002), pp. 86-88; Nicole Duran, 'Who Wants to Marry a Persian King? Gender Games and Wars and the Book of Esther', in *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible* (ed. C. Kirk-Duggan; Semeia Studies; Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), pp. 71-84.

14. To be more precise, Ruth and Boaz's personalities are not emphasized through contrast with negative characters, but rather through comparison to positive characters. This is consistent with the serene, even pastoral atmosphere of the book of Ruth, and the thread of kindness and compassion woven through both works. See the theory of T. Cohn Eskenazi and T. Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth* (JPS; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2011). As they note in their introduction, 'Hesed in Ruth is not so much a case of good people doing good things, but rather an example of how ordinary people with mixed motives become extraordinary through the cultivation of Hesed' (p. 50).

heroine as a daughter figure. Thus, in the book of Esther, Mordecai counsels Esther and watches over her actions, and the text emphasizes that he raised her: 'Mordecai took her for a *daughter*' (Esth. 2.7). And thus Naomi advises Ruth what course to take, beginning with her return from Boaz's field for the first time. The relationship between the two is also resonant of a parent-daughter bond, addressing her as she does as 'my daughter' at several points in the narrative, for example: 'It is best, *my daughter*, that you go out with his girls' (2.22).

Moreover, both works feature a story of adoption and, despite the considerable difference between these scenes, in both stories adoption serves as an expression of the special bond between the heroine and the character who guides her. The connection between Mordecai and Esther is describes thus: 'And he had *adopted* (**אמן**) Hadassah, that is, Esther, his cousin, for she had no father or mother, and the girl was fine figured and beautiful, and when her father and mother died *Mordecai took her for a daughter*' (2.7). The same word root, אמן, also features in the book of Ruth: 'And Naomi took the child and placed him in her bosom and she became an *adopted mother* (**אמנת**) unto him' (Ruth 4.16). This act of adoption testifies to the strength of the bond between Ruth and her mother-in-law even more than that of Naomi and the newborn child. By taking the child to her bosom, Naomi signifies that she has regained all that she had lost. Once again she has a child, who will renew her life and help fill the gaping vacuum created with the death of her sons.

What is more, in both works, the complication and crisis of the plot that must be resolved result from this guiding character. In the book of Esther, Haman's wrath is aroused when Mordecai refuses to bow down to him, leading to a decree of destruction for the entire Jewish nation. Correspondingly, in the book of Ruth, Naomi's age and economic situation prevent her from remarrying and bearing more children, thus disabling her from perpetuating the family name or ensuring her daughter-in-law's future.

While the crisis stems from the supporting character, only the heroine is able to save the situation. Only Esther—by virtue of her position—is able to approach the king and abolish the harsh decree. Only Ruth—young, able and fertile—is able to restore the family line and bear a child for Naomi.

Pursuing this 'dialogue' between the stories of Ruth and Esther, one should also point out opposites and inversions between the two works. Not only do these inversions fail to destabilize the connection between Ruth and Esther, they actually strengthen and deepen it, as they suggest that both works address the same issues from different angles. The two works are chiastically related to each other—what one work constructs, the other contradicts; what one proposes, the other questions. Thus the intertextual 'dialogue' becomes a part of the multidimensional representation of a complex reality, and its interpretation becomes more interesting and more fruitful.

Certain antithetical elements between the two works create the sense that one text is the mirror image of the other.[15]

1. The reader of both works is transported back and forth between the land of Israel and Persia. The contrast between the settings is not merely geographical, but two worlds of different character and quality are depicted—the atmosphere of one is simple, modest, restrained, while the other plunges the reader into a decadent, gaudy masquerade; one presents a pastoral scene of harvest, field and threshing floor, grain and humble loaf, while the other paints a dizzying urban palace, set with porphyry, marble and mother-of-pearl, silver hangings and gold vessels, royal robes of scarlet, purple and turquoise. One heroine is a destitute outsider, while the other is a pampered, privileged 'princess'. This luxurious atmosphere will pervade the entire narrative: vibrant fabrics, palaces, feasts and freely flowing wine, royal robes, oils and perfumes, pleasures of the flesh, indulgent grooming, a wealth of women—an air of seduction and erotic intoxication of the senses wafts from the pages of the book of Esther. All this generates a rich, seductive and sensual reading experience. The very language of the story also contributes to the sense of wealth and extravagance, loaded as it is with indulgent detail, hyperbole and repetition.[16] The reader is invited to become familiar with the intricacies of the Persian government, the extravagance lifestyle of the royal court, the wily ambitions of the courtiers and the devious plots of the guards—and is thus exposed to a rich, mysterious fantasy world far removed from everyday life.

In contrast, the book of Ruth depicts everyday life in ancient Israel. The reader walks amongst the reapers and the field owners, learns of their dependence upon the skies; of different types of crops; of the simple fare workers eat in the field; of the different kinds of field work: reaping, planting, gleaning and threshing. It seems that each scene of the narrative is deliberately set in the open, so as not to miss a single sight or smell of life in agricultural Bethlehem and its surroundings. In contrast to the splendor and luxury of the book of Esther, the book of Ruth depicts the simple life (and even more so—the hardship of poverty). The narrative opens with famine, with loss. Symbolically, once the famine has passed, Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem during the time of the barley season, which is lowlier, more humble fare than superior wheat. The other foods mentioned in the story are similarly humble—water, bread, vinegar. Continuing the same line, there is no physical description of any of its characters. It seems that no attention is

15. See Yair Zakovitch, *Through the Looking Glass: Reflection Stories in the Bible* (Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1995) (Hebrew).

16. This luxuriation in language in Esther is a point made by Greenstein, *A Jewish Reading*, pp. 225-43: 'This twoness manifests itself primarily in the following two ways: scences and language are both "doubled"' (p. ٧٣٢); Brenner, *Looking Glass*.

paid to their outer appearance or to their beauty, leaving room for their most striking characteristics to stand out.[17]

2. Not only is the difference in setting apparent, but the general atmosphere of the works is antithetical: the fantastic intricacies of life in the royal court can be pitted against the daily routine of the simple working class. In the book of Esther, the reader is introduced to a host of characters, an entire world that revolves around the king: advisors and viziers, traitors and servants, concubines and eunuchs. It can be assumed that the average reader does not usually encounter any such characters and is not acquainted with any on a personal basis. What is common to each of these characters is their participation in the power struggle to influence he who is (at least officially) the maker of all decisions—the king. The book of Esther is, in a sense, a narrative about power, thick with plots and players, and manipulation is the key to survival. This is the harsh reality of Susa—whoever manages to outwit his enemies will survive. Not a single character is exempt from this cruel game of survival, and no one is as guileless or as innocent as (s)he may seem. The decadent chambers of the palace are beset with intrigue, conflicts and clashes between powers above and below. Moreover, despite the apparent might of the vast Persian Empire, its laws are presented as arbitrary, spontaneous and inconsistent.[18] This creates inherent tension between the ruling powers within the palace and their ability to control what goes on outside of it.

In contrast, despite the fairy-tale elements of the book of Ruth (a poor, foreign girl who, against all odds, is rescued by a wealthy, important man), its descriptions do not stray from the familiar, everyday day world of the reader. The cast of characters is down-to-earth, consisting of regular working folk: poor people who glean in the fields, a well-off, hardworking landowner, town elders who sit at the town gates, neighbors, girls and boys. The story's audience certainly meets such characters during their own ventures to the field, whether they themselves are workers, gleaners, or field owners, and they can certainly imagine Ruth and Naomi's life in Bethlehem. The narrative's calm, even pastoral atmosphere is evident from the beginning, as is the thread of kindness and loyalty woven through the plot. Moreover, in complete contrast to the book of Esther, it is obvious that society is run in a clear, orderly fashion—even though the small farming town is run by the local council and not by a ruling class—according to the accepted law,

17. See also Mishael Maswari Caspi and Rachel S. Havrelock, *Women on the Biblical Road: Ruth, Naomi, and the female Journey* (Lanham, MD: University Oress of America, 1996), p. 169; Nancy M. Tischler, 'Ruth', in *A Complete Literary Guide to the Bible* (ed. L. Ryken and T. Longman; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), pp. 151-64.

18. Greenstein suggests that the Megillah pokes fun at Persian law and authority. *A Jewish Reading*, pp. 225-43.

and legal procedures are carried out at the city gate, legally witnessed by the public. On the surface, there seem to be no power struggles, let alone conspiracies. Even characters whose behavior is allegedly less than admirable are not actually wicked—their only 'crime' is failure to do more than their duty. Ruth and Boaz's legendary virtue shines through in contrast to reasonable, ordinary characters, not negative or wicked ones.

3. The striking contrast between the settings of each work is not merely superficial, but touches upon a more profound issue. The book of Esther takes place outside the land of Israel. Its author is clearly an expert on the Persian government, and uses technical terms taken from the local language and culture, creating an authentic sense of life in the palace in the shadow of a foreign culture. The book of Esther is not only physically remote from the land of Israel, it displays a complete disregard for all that is happening in the homeland. There is no mention of contemporary Jewish life in the land of Israel, and no reference to the religious or political leadership there.[19] The Esther narrative describes a community in exile with its own local autonomous leadership. This leadership proves capable of saving the entire community from destruction, as well as exercising spiritual authority to the point of successfully instituting a new festival in the Jewish calendar. The narrative's focus on life in exile is particularly salient in comparison to the Joseph cycle, which occurs mostly in Egypt.[20] Joseph's story con-

19. As Shlomo Goitein writes in *Bible Studies: A Literary and Social Examination* (Tel Aviv: Yavne, 1967), p. 59; Monford Harris, 'Purim: The Celebration of Dis-Order', *Judaism* 26 (1977), pp. 161-70.

20. The beginning of this comparison was already found in the midrash. A more detailed comparison can be found in an article by Moshe Gan, 'The Book of Esther through the Looking-Glass of the Story of Joseph in Egypt', *Tarbiz* 31 (1962), pp. 144-49; Berg, *The Book of Esther*, pp. 123-52; Jonathan Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading* (Siphrut: Litrature and Theology of the Hebrew Scripture, 6; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), pp. 210-13 ;Gillis Gerleman (*Esther* [BKAT; Neukirchen–Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1982]) noted many links between the narratives, and concluded that Esther was an alternative to the narrative in Exodus. He focused especially on the following similarities: a Jewish man within the court of a foreign king; the existential danger to the nation of Israel; the victory of the children of Israel over their enemies; the initiation of an annual holiday celebrating the event. See also Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, 'Ruth the New Abraham, Esther the New Moses', *Christian Century* 100 (1983), pp. 1130-134; Fewell, *Reading Between Texts*, pp. 13-14; David J.A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1984), p. 289. however, Esther offers an alternate solution: the Jews could remain in the Diaspora and achieve an influential position within the foreign government. André LaCocque, *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 58: '…while the Exodus tradition involves the leaving behind of the foreign land, Esther's concern is precisely to stay there! Jews may occupy high positions, even at the royal court, and become queen or vizier, prime minister or governor, but for them the issue always remains one of survival.' Subsequently,

cludes thus: 'And Joseph had the children of Israel swear, 'That when God remembers you, you shall take my bones out of here' (Gen. 50.25). This vow exemplifies the special attitude, only ever expressed towards the land of Israel, as the ideal, eternal home. In the book of Esther, there is no parallel to Joseph's vow; the Jews remain in exile, never referring to a return to the land.[21]

The book of Ruth, on the other hand, opens with the story of a family that leaves the land of Israel to evade famine, and moves to Moab. Despite their

LaCocque noted that Esther adopts the model of Joseph, instead of Moses (p. 62): 'To that problem the book gives an answer inspired, not by the possible model of the Exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, but by the one of the safe management of Egyptian affairs by Joseph, who stayed in the foreign land and made his people *and* the Egyptians prosper.' See also André LaCocque, *Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern, 2008), p. 127: 'The balance in Esther, however, finds the Jewish community celebrating the opportunity to stay in the empire and not to depart in a new Exodus.'

21. Linda M. Day, *Esther* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), p. 13; Timothy S. Laniak, 'Esther's *Volkcentrism* and the Reframing of Post-Exilic Judaism', *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (ed. S.W. Crawford and L.J. Greenspoon; London and New York: T. & T. Clark, 2003), pp. 77-90. On pp. 80-81 he writes: 'Esther risks her life to save the Jews in Persia with no anticipation of anything better or safer at "home"… To be more accurate, Esther closes with the Jews at home in Persia. Herein lies the surprising "message" of Esther to those in the diaspora: it is possible to survive here…we can exist not just temporarily or until we return to Yehud, but indefinitely.' And then at p. 90: 'The message is not that Jerusalem and Zion do not matter, but that *aliyah* (return to Zion) is only one way to regain the center'; Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1997), p. 133: 'The scene with which the Masoretic Esther closed is one for which Jewish communities in the Diaspora have always longed: Jews living in harmony and mutual goodwill with the Gentile majority, under Jewish leaders who are respected and admired by the rulers, yet who are openly identified with the Jewish community and unashamed to advance its interests and to speak out in its defense'; cf. Sidnie Ann White, 'Esther', in *The Women's Bible Commentary* (ed. C.A. Newsom and S.H. Ringe; Lousiville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 124-29 (129); David J.A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), p. ٢٦٢; Athalya Brenner, 'Esther Politicised in a Personal Context: Some Remarks on Foreignness', *European Judaism* 32 (1999), pp. 4-10 (6-7); W.L. Humphreys, 'Esther', in *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplementary Volume* (ed. K. Crim; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), pp. 279-81: 'This tale affirms to the Jew of the Diaspora that it is possible to live a rich and creative life in the pagan environment and to participate fully in that world… The Jewishness of Mordecai and Esther did not prevent them from living full and effective lives in interaction with their environment' (p. 281). Humphreys praises the fact that Esther and Mordecai lead a 'normal' life despite their Judaism. He implies that there is nothing wrong with a blurring of unique identifying qualities of minority groups; the problem with this position will be discussed below; Timothy S. Laniak, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), pp. 185-87; LaCocque, *Esther Regina*, p. 45.

hopes, life abroad does not deal kindly with this family, which is ravaged by untimely death. Three widows remain behind, two of them Moabite. When Naomi hears that the famine has ended, she decides to return to Bethlehem. From the narrative, it is clear that few leave the homeland—Jewish community life is found exclusively in Israel. Only within the community can a Jew seek aid and support. Naomi's return to the land is what ultimately enables her and Ruth to achieve continuity and redemption.

Reading the stories of Ruth and Esther in tandem imparts the story of two alternative realities, two polarized opposites of Jewish life: life in exile under foreign rule, with no connection to the land of Israel, as opposed to autonomous life in the land of Israel. This issue is essential to the understanding of these narratives, as I will emphasize below.

4. Issues of nationality also arise in the narratives in relation to the genealogical lists that feature in each work: ostensibly, two women are founders of a royal line. Ruth marries Boaz and gives birth to the royal Davidic dynasty. Esther marries Ahasuerus, King of Persia and Media, and becomes a queen. However, there is no mention of any dynasty or children that Esther bears who continue her line, as opposed to the book of Ruth, the entire plot of which culminates in the birth of her son. Esther marks the end of a dynasty, while Ruth is a link in a chain that stretches far beyond her. This is evident from the genealogical lists that feature in both works.In the book of Esther, the Judean dynasty is presented with the introduction of the Jewish hero, Mordecai. The list is formulated as 'X the son of Y,' that is, orientated towards the past: Mordecai's origins and roots. Even Esther, an orphan, is mentioned together with her father ('the daughter of Avihayil, the uncle of Mordecai', 2.15). There is marked importance in the mention of the heroes' family tree. At the story's end, however, there is no mention of descendants, neither Esther's nor Mordecai's. The narrative concludes with the lofty position of the two heroes, without any mention or hint of a family line that came after them.

In contrast, in the book of Ruth, the genealogical list is presented at the end of the text, and although it mentions the previous generations, it is formulated as 'X begot Y', that is, anticipating the future: recording who is born in every generation until the birth of King David. Ruth's own parents are not mentioned, but David's birth is recorded *twice*: 'He is the father of Jesse the father of David' (4.17), 'and Jesse begot David' (4.22).

A comparison between these dynasties raises an important analogy—each of these lineages can be connected to a royal line of Israel. The book of Esther is connected to the house of Saul,[22] while Ruth is associated with the

22. Many have discussed the connections between the books of Esther and Samuel. See, for example: Carey A. Moore, *Esther* (AB; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), p. 37; Ariella Deem-Goldberg, 'The Artistic Infrastructure of the Book of Esther',

house of David.[23] However, there is a striking inversion—Esther represents the end of an ancient royal dynasty—that of Saul the son of Qish, while Ruth is a harbinger of a new dynasty—the royal house of David. Esther marks the end of a line, while Ruth is an active participant, a formative link in a new chain. One might add that Ruth's story consciously refers to the chosen dynasty, while the book of Esther consciously refers to a rejected dynasty, and must therefore deal with the implications of its failure.

5. The book of Esther elevates the law and subordination to it as a supreme value. It is no coincidence that the word דת, which means both 'law' and 'religion', is a keyword in the narrative. Due to the importance of legislation, every legal matter, great or small, is transmitted throughout the empire via a complex bureaucratic system. Many details provoke ridicule of the exaggerated adherence to these laws: the first law mentioned in the

Criticism and Interpretation 11-12 (1978), pp. 285-97 (Hebrew); Timothy K. Beal, *Esther* (Berit Olam; Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999), p. 25. Berlin identifies Kish in Mordechai's lineage as the father of Saul demands explanation for the illogical time gap between Kish and Mordechai (p. 81). According to this opinion, only selected figures feature in the list of names mentioned in Mordechai's dynasty—that is, the full line is not mentioned here. The reader must therefore perceive the particular names that feature in the list as having been selected in order to evoke certain connotations within the story. The reader's familiarity with these names from earlier narratives adds exegetical depth to the story; Avnery, *Threefold Cord*, pp. 257-60; Shmuel Abramsky, *The Reign of Saul and the Reign of David: The Beginning of Kingship in Israel and its Influence over the Generations* (Jerusalem: Shikmona & Ben Gurion University Press, 1977), pp. 371-78; Shmuel Abramsky, 'The Return to the Reign of Saul in the Book of Esther and Chronicles', *Mele'at* 1 (1983), pp. 39-63 (47); Yairah Amit, 'The Saul Polemic in the Persian Period', *Judah and the Judeans in the Persian Period* (ed. Oded Lipschits and Manfred Oeming; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2006), pp. 647-61.

23. In this context, it is important to note that some have claimed that these books raise a painful polemic dispute in regard to national leadership. See for example, Abramsky, 'The Return', pp. 55-56; Shlomo Bahar, 'Expressions of Support for Saul's Father's House in the Masoretic Version of the Book of Esther', *Bet Miqra* 48 (2003), pp. 42-53; Jona Schellekens, 'Accession Days and Holidays: The Origins of the Jewish Festival of Purim', *JBL* 128 (2009), pp. 115-34. Regarding the book of Ruth, see Osnat Zinger, 'The Book of Ruth's Objective—Defensiveness and Self-Justification, not Protest and Polemic, a New Study in the Wake of Professor Jacob Licht, of Blessed Memory, in the Study of Biblical Narrative', in *Fifty Years to the Study of the Dead Sea Scrolls* (Jerusalem: YBZ, 2001), pp. 23-36. This alludes to the book of Ruth's polemical struggles with the book of Samuel regarding government and kingship—as part of the struggle between the house of Saul and the house of David. Yavin claims that placing the two works side by side in the biblical canon declares that the editor wished to establish that 'these and these are Israel, the sons of Leah and the sons of Rachel… these two must find a way to live a common national existence, a life of national solidarity, reconciliation and unison' (p. 199). Regarding the connection between the two works and the book of Samuel and the stories of the dynasties of Saul and David, see Avnery, *Threefold Cord*, pp. 257-97.

narrative concerns the amount of wine a person may drink during the king's feast.[24] Even when the king must decide what to do about Vashti, there is extensive engagement with the law: 'what must be done to Queen Vashti according to the *law* (כדת), regarding her transgression of King Ahasuerus's word brought to her by the eunuchs' (1.15), followed by a ridiculous edict, which is rapidly transmitted by means of a sophisticated communication system. The newly announced law has no relation to Vashti's act, its content is vague, and it is unclear how this law will be enforced: 'every man should be ruler over his own household, speaking in his native language' (1.22). The beginning of the narrative presents Ahasuerus and his advisors as a group of men who are equally drunk on wine and power, overly concerned with rash, marginal laws, who cover up their hasty, impetuous decisions with a contrived legal veneer. The irony of this exaggerated, capricious application of the law will reappear later on in the story, when in stark contrast to the extensive legal debate in chap. 1, a drastic, fateful decree concerning the destruction of an entire nation will pass without the king even bothering to find out which nation is being sentenced to death. Towards the end of the narrative, the irony reaches new heights when the king himself is unable to cancel the decree sealed with his own signet ring, and therefore proposes that Mordecai and Esther deal with the law as it stands and find a solution within the existing legal system. Under the auspices of the law, the narrative sacrifices the rights of groups and individuals to its inflated sanctity, its word written and sealed by the king's signet ring.

A radically different atmosphere permeates the book of Ruth. There is almost no reference to the existence of laws, besides the mention of the custom of ritual shoe removal.[25] While many biblical laws inform the narrative, it seems that their fulfillment is an integral, welcome part of daily routine. There is no need to enforce the practice of allowing the poor to glean grain or collect stray produce from the fields of landowners, who seem, in this story, to go far beyond the call of duty. Moreover, a spirit of kindness and generosity infuses the narrative and its characters; the protagonists' concern for each other far exceeding normative behavior or legal obligation. This is particularly true when we consider a central law that was liable to prevent Ruth's acceptance into the community—the prohibition to marry Moabites (Deut. 23.4-7). The book of Ruth does not relate to this law at all, and it seems that the community accepts Ruth because of the great kindness and loyalty she displays towards Naomi, regardless of her suitability within the existing legal system.

24. 'According to the law, each guest was allowed to drink without restrictions' (1.8).

25. 'This was done in earlier times in Israel,' Ruth 4.7. For the relation between the biblical law and Ruth, see Cohn-Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, pp. 35-38.

6. Beyond the emphasis on the law as opposed to the importance of kindness, the two works are antithetical in regard to their theological perspective and their connection to God. One of the most famous features of the book of Esther is the complete absence of God's name. It is problematic to claim that His presence is not required in the story, for this omission is salient at many points in the story. Moreover, not only is God's name lacking in the story, but all mention of Jewish festivals (besides Purim), prayers, and any other aspect of the Jewish way of life is entirely absent from the narrative, nor even hinted at. In several places, this absence is especially striking.

There have been various attempts to explain why God's name is so obviously absent from the book of Esther, and why the work was nonetheless included in the biblical canon. Traditional exegesis pointed out hints of God's presence, and explained that His explicit absence is due to the secular nature of the story.[26] Others have used this absence to argue that the source of the text is not holy, or that its author intentionally created a non-Jewish story.[27] I wish to follow another proposed reading,[28] which claims that the omission of God's name is in itself an important theological statement: in exile, when there is no direct revelation, faith becomes complex. The story of Esther represents this complex, ambiguous reality—a person must choose whether he or she feels God's presence. Berg, for example, suggests that the narrative wishes to emphasize human responsibility for the course of history, to teach about hidden divine providence.[29] Similarly, Fox argues that the theology of the book of Esther is a 'theology of possibilities'.[30] According to this reading, the author deliberately generated continual ambiguity, hinting at God's indirect government of the world. The sheer diversity of attempts

26. Midrash Lekah Tuv. In the Talmud, this question is addressed through a reading of the name Esther as a first person imperfect from of the verb *str*, 'hide'. See Hullin 139b, Megilla 10b-17a.

27. Shemaryahu Talmon, 'Wisdom in the Book of Esther', *VT* 13 (1963), pp. 419-55; Robert Gordis, 'Religion, Wisdom and History in the Book of Esther', *JBL* 100 (1981), pp. 359-88.

28. Some have taken the opposite stance: that *because* of the book's holiness, and because it is publicly read on Purim, with all its festive revelry, God's name was omitted so that the story could be freely read at such gatherings. The book of Esther disguises itself in costume, as befitting such a feast, but it is clear that divine providence orchestrates the entire narrative. Greenstein, *A Jewish Reading*; Laniak, *Esther's Volkcentrism*; M. Day, *Esther*, who claimed that the narrative wishes to emphasize human responsibility for the course of history, to teach about hidden divine providence.

29. Sandra B. Berg, 'After the Exile: God and History in the Books of Chronicles and Esther', *The Divine Helmsman. Studies on God`s Control of Human Events, Presented to Lou H. Silberman* (ed. J. Crenshaw and S. Sandmel; New York: Ktav, 1980), pp. 107-127.

30. Michael V. Fox, 'The Religion of the Book of Esther', *Judaism* 39 (1990), pp. 254-55.

to deal with the apparent 'secular' nature of this work testifies to the ambiguity of its theological nature. Religion ultimately comes across as an optical illusion—the author emphasizes how God's hand in the world works in unfathomable, indefinable, mysterious ways; it is impossible to determine precisely how it shapes history. In this sense, the book of Esther places the human at the center by leaving him or her to choose whether to find God within his or her reality. Moreover, in the book of Esther, the reader must also seek out the divine providence behind God's concealment. The narrative sketches out a world where God's plans and actions are concealed from them; they must feel their way through the darkness and operate as if responsibility rests entirely upon their own shoulders. Even if the events that unfold are not entirely coincidental, they are still enshrouded in mystery—no direct conclusions about God's ways can be drawn from them.

In the book of Ruth, on the other hand, God's name is constantly invoked by the characters in their blessings and wishes.[31] God is at the forefront of the characters' consciousness, and is conceived as an integral, central figure in their lives. However, the narrator only attributes the story's events to God's direct intervention twice: once at the end of national crisis, when the famine is finally over—the narrator relates that 'the Lord had taken note of His people and given them bread' (1.6), and once at the end of personal crisis, when Ruth bears a son who will continue the family name: 'and the Lord granted her pregnancy' (4.13). In this context, let us note that the crises themselves are not attributed to God's hand, but are rather described in indefinite terms: 'and there was famine in the land' (1.1), and 'Elimelech died…and Mahlon and Chilion also died' (1.3-5).[32] Moreover, the narrator's use of the expression 'and it happened, by chance' to describe Ruth's arrival in Boaz's field emphasizes how human perception interprets events as coincidental, when all is, in fact, carefully orchestrated.[33]

31. Naomi blesses her daughters-in-law that 'May the Lord deal kindly with you' (Ruth 1.8), and later on, she expresses her excitement before Ruth: 'Blessed is the Lord, who has not withheld His kindness' (2.20); Boaz routinely greets his workers in God's name: 'and he said to his reapers, The Lord is with you, and they said to him, May the Lord bless you' (2.4), and also blesses Ruth 'May the Lord recompense you' (2.12); the women of Bethlehem exclaim to Naomi, 'Blessed is the Lord, who has not withheld a redeemer from you today' (4.14); the elders of Bethlehem bless Boaz: 'May the Lord grant that the woman entering your house…' (4.11).

32. While Naomi attributes her misfortune to God's doing: 'for the hand of the Lord has struck against me' (1.13), as she also tells the women of Bethlehem, 'for Shaddai has made my lot very bitter. I went away full, and empty has the Lord returned me, why should you call me Naomi, when the Lord has afflicted me and Shaddai has done evil to me' (1.20-21), even this accusation illustrates the extent of God's presence and responsibility for humanity's life in Naomi's consciousness.

33. The use of *qarah miqreh* can also be understood to indicate divine fate (as in Genesis 24). See Hals, *The Theology of the Book of Ruth*.

However, the book of Ruth's perception of the relationship between human action and divine providence is complex, as God's actions are performed by people. Thus, when Boaz blesses Ruth: 'May you be fully recompensed by the Lord, God of Israel, under *whose wings you have sought refuge*' (2.12), Ruth asks Boaz to fulfill his own blessing himself: 'Spread your wing over your handmaiden' (3.9). Similarly, while Naomi complains: '*empty* has the Lord returned me' (1.21), Ruth takes care to fill this void herself: 'for he said to me, do not go *empty* unto your mother-in-law' (3.17); when Naomi blesses her daughters-in-law: 'May *the Lord* deal kindly with you, that you may find *security* in the house of a husband' (1.9), eventually she herself takes action to fulfill this blessing: 'My daughter, *mustn't* ***I*** *seek security*, so you will be best off' (3.1). If so, the human must take action and initiative in order to secure divine blessing.[34] At the same time, however, the narrative emphasizes that although people are God's central, vital partners in action, there is a limit to human ability. Human action alone, without God's blessing, will not succeed. Therefore, God is depicted as the sole agent in two events: He is the One who ends the famine, and He is the One to open Ruth's womb. Prinsloo specifies that if, until now, the book of Ruth has emphasized the collaboration between human initiative and providential blessing, to the extent that human actions serve as substitutions for God's actions, then here, in Ruth's pregnancy, this perspective ceases. The word 'and He granted' shows that human initiative is limited—and even sterile and fruitless—without God's blessing or action.[35]

To conclude this theological discussion, we can say that each work sketches out a different human experience of existence, a different theological world. The book of Esther describes a world of ambiguity, of assumptions, of feeling one's way through the dazzling, blinding labyrinths of the Persian palace, never certain if a divine hand is hiding behind the silken mass of fabric, guiding the chaotic revelry. The book of Ruth describes a world of greater security, more trust and faith in God's doings; God will bring the rain upon the crops, God will cause the earth and the womb to yield their fruit.

This stark opposition between the two stories creates the impression of a latent literary polemic; of two alternate models of dealing with a complex reality. In this light, both similarities and differences reinforce the connection between the stories and serve as a solid base for uncovering the

34. Jonathan Grossman, 'The Structure of the Book of Ruth and its Purpose', in *El Asher Telchi: Studies in the Book of Ruth* (ed. E. Buchris; Jerusalem: Ketav Va'Sefer, 2002), pp. 49-63 (62); Yair Zakovitch, *Ruth* (Mikra Leyisra'el; Jerusalem-Tel Aviv: Magnes-Am Oved, 1990), p. 70.

35. Willem S. Prinsloo, 'The contributional'etude de', *VT* 30 (1980), pp. 330-41.

'dialogue' between them, even if such a dialogue is not rooted in authorial intention.

As in every drama, both Ruth and Esther feature a climactic scene where the characters' tension is almost palpable. Both scenes touch upon the theme of otherness, which, as I have suggested, brings the works together. In this way, these scenes generate a sense of self-reflexivity, a sense of *mise en abyme*, regarding the nature of the connections between the two works and the central theme they revolve around.[36]

Chapter 3 of the book of Ruth describes the encounter between Ruth, a foreign, Moabite woman, and Boaz, a wealthy man who symbolizes the heart of Judean, Bethlehemite society. Chapter 5 of the book of Esther sees Esther, the humble foreign Jewess, apprehensively entering the chamber of Ahasuerus, the ruler of the world's most powerful empire, where the Jews are a distinct minority. Both encounters, therefore, are encounters between polar opposites: man against woman, Jew against non-Jew; the peripheral against the central; the shunned against the chosen. This is a charged, definitive moment that has the power to lead to the heroine's utter destruction.

Let us first examine the details that emerge from a comparison between the two scenes. In each scene, the man holds the key to the existential crisis that the heroine faces; she alone cannot solve her problem. Esther cannot save her people without the help of Ahasuerus; Ruth cannot continue the family line without Boaz's cooperation. Each encounter testifies to the protagonist's love for a figure who is not present in the scene: Esther's approach to Ahasuerus proves her loyalty to Mordecai; while she has already displayed this loyalty by concealing her origins, her consent to approach the king is the ultimate act of devotion because it may well lead to her execution. Ruth's descent to the threshing-floor proves her love and devotion to Naomi; she is willing to sacrifice her reputation and life in

36. The term *mise en abyme* is well known in art and literature. Rimmon-Kenan prefers to explain this as 'reflection in miniature'; see Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *The Poetics of Modern Prose* (Tel Aviv: Poalim, 1984), p. 91. Greenstein defines it as a symbol, or borrowed use of a word or phrase, or structure, which reflects the larger structure in which it originally appears in a compacted, miniature form. Edward L. Greenstein, 'The Retelling of the Flood Story in the Gilgamesh Epic', in *Hesed Ve-Emet Studies in Honor of Ernest S. Frerichs* (ed. J. Magness and S. Gitin; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1998), pp. 197-204. Regarding the term, see: Lucien Dällenbach, *Le récitspéculaire, Essaisur la mise en abyme* (Paris: Le Sueil, 1977). For an example of this term applied to the book of Ruth, see: Mieke Bal, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), p 76. Regarding this term used in regard to the book of Esther, see Joshua A. Berman, 'Hadassah Bat Abihail: The Evolution from Object to Subject in the Character of Esther', *JBL* 120 (2001), pp. 647-69 (669). Regarding this phenomenon in biblical narrative in general, see David A. Bosworth, *The Story within a Story in Biblical Hebrew Narrative* (CBQMS, 45; Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association of America, 2008).

Bethlehem for the sake of establishing the name of the dead and producing a child to continue Naomi's line.

Neither heroine accuses her potential savior of injustice, but rather pleads for compassion beyond the letter of the law. Esther is careful not to accuse the king of irresponsible governance, even if it occurs without his knowledge; Ruth does not ask why Boaz has failed to do his duty until that point, and only pleads for future redemption.

The extent of the significance and implications of each scene is evident from the narrative focus upon it. The text leads the reader directly to the narrative circumstances by drastically zooming in on time, place and space until reaching intense focus on the specific point in the plot. This is frequently employed in narrative to establish a particular scene as a climax.[37] The beginning of the book of Esther describes several years within a few brief verses. Four years pass from the time of the first feast, which sees Vashti's downfall, until Esther is crowned as queen; she lives in the palace for five years before Haman casts his lot. With the exception of Mordecai's discovery of Bigtan and Teresh's plot, nothing is related about Mordecai or Esther's life during these years. In contrast, once the city learns of Haman's decree, the heroes' actions over the next twenty-four hours are related in painstaking detail, over the course of several chapters, generating narrative intensity. Towards the end of the story, the narrative pace once again dies down, and several years pass by in a few verses that describe the heroes' actions only briefly and generally. A similar spatial convergence follows this chronological pattern: while most of the characters move freely about the city throughout the plot, this scene sees three of the four main characters—Ahasuerus, Esther and Haman—within the same inner chamber.

A similar phenomenon can be observed in the book of Ruth. The story begins in a broad time frame—'in the days when judges ruled', without specification, and a decade passes in its opening verses. In chap. 2, the time frame narrows to a single harvest season, the wheat and barley harvest. Chapter 3 zooms in further and describes a single night, and focuses upon a single hour: 'at midnight' (3.8). Many verses are devoted to this brief moment in time, in direct contrast to the rapid passage of time before and after this night. A similar spatial pattern unfolds in parallel to the convergence of time in the text. At first, the plot is set on the wide open road between Moab and Bethlehem. The narrative then focuses on a particular field in Bethlehem (Boaz's field). Finally, chap. 3 takes place in a particular spot ('at the end of the heap of grain') within a particular threshing field.

The significance of the encounter between the heroine and her male savior are conveyed not only through a narrative focus in time and space,

37. To be more specific, it is the relationship between narrative time (the time that elapses in the story) and narrated time (the time devoted to telling).

but also because both take place after the two characters have not met for an extended period. Esther and Ahasuerus have not explicitly met in the narrative since their wedding, and the reader learns from Esther's message to Mordecai that she has not been summoned by the king for thirty days (Esth. 4.11). Similarly, Ruth approaches Boaz long after the description of their previous encounter; their first meeting takes place at the beginning of the barley harvest, while chap. 2 concludes with the phrase, 'So she stayed close to the young women of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests' (2.23). No encounter between Ruth and Boaz is reported over the course of the harvest season; presumably, they do not meet again until that night upon the threshing-floor.

In both stories, the climactic encounter between the heroine and the man contrasts sharply with their first meeting. Ruth and Boaz first meet in the field, in the light of day, in the public eye. Their fateful second meeting takes place in the dead of night, intimate and unseen. Esther's second approach to the king in chap. 5 is a public, official entreaty, witnessed by all who attend his court, while their first meeting is an intimate, nocturnal affair: 'In the evening she went in; then in the morning she came back' (Esth. 2.14). Upon the threshing floor, Ruth and Boaz's relationship changes from a general, public acquaintance to an intimate, personal relationship. In contrast to Esther's first intimate—though impersonal—meeting with the king, her second approach leads to a personal, though not intimate, relationship between the king and his queen, wherein she is acknowledged as an individual.

Other shared details construct the narrative climax of each work: both expose the woman to danger, as it is unclear how the man—and the environment—will react to her bold approach. Esther states this danger explicitly: 'All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death' (4.11). In the book of Ruth, this danger is only implied through Boaz's words: 'It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor' (3.14), and can be understood in light of the symbolic significance of the threshing-floor as a place of promiscuity. Boaz does not wish that Ruth's name to be disgraced, or that the people of Bethlehem to reject her.

It is presumably because of this danger, and a sense of responsibility towards the heroine, that each heroine receives detailed instructions from her mentor figure before she embarks on her dangerous mission. Yet each heroine displays ingenuity and initiative in executing the advice she receives. Mordecai advises Esther 'to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people' (4.8), and while she ultimately does so, she does not immediately fall into tearful supplication before the king; rather, she devises a plan to make this request from a place of manipulation

and authority.[38] Similarly, while Naomi instructs Ruth how to prepare for her encounter with Boaz, and adds that she must place the reins in his hands, 'and he will tell you what to do' (3.4). Ruth does otherwise, urging him to 'spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin' (3.9). This disregard of Naomi's instructions is emphasized through Boaz ironically stating that 'I will do for you all that you ask' (3.11).

Not only are both women instructed how to act *during* their meeting; each meeting is *preceded* by intensive preparation. Esther asks for the people to gather and fast for her sake; she herself fasts and dons royal garb. Ruth bathes, anoints herself with oil, and changes her clothing. In both stories, this preparation and changing symbolizes the end of one stage and the beginning of another. Esther's visit to the king marks the beginning of her own initiative; her transformation from a passive, obedient woman of suppressed origins to an active, authoritative figure who identifies with her people. Ruth's descent to the threshing-floor represents the end of her period of mourning and the beginning of a new relationship in her life, one of hope and fertility and continuity. These intense preparations and careful instructions, together with the sense of danger in the air, all build suspense for the crucial moment of encounter between two figures who are not merely individuals, but symbolic entities whose actions resonate with greater significance.

Yet even when the immediate danger has passed—even when Boaz acknowledges Ruth with kindness and Ahasuerus extends his scepter to Esther—the encounter between heroine and potential savior does not bring immediate results. Rather, a new element of suspense is introduced, because the heroine's dilemma is not resolved during this encounter. Esther invites Ahasuerus to a feast that same day, and then to another the next, whereupon she finally states her request. For the moment, her own life is spared, but the fate of her nation still hangs in the balance. Only after she pleads before the king again, this time in Mordecai's presence, are edicts dispatched across the empire. Boaz does not reject Ruth, but she must wait until morning in order to learn what will become of her, and Boaz must carry out certain legal procedures before a solution can be reached.

Another issue that complicates both plots and increases the heroines' plight is a legal impediment that prevents the characters from reaching a simple solution. Even though the king has Haman executed immediately and shows willingness to help, he cannot change Haman's decree, for 'for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked' (8.8). Mordecai devises a creative solution by writing a

38. See a detailed, developed discussion on this in Orit Avnery, *Liminal Women: Belonging and Otherness in the Books of Ruth and Esther* (Jerusalem: Hartman Institute, 2015), pp. 95-97, 107-114.

decree that does not revoke the previous one, but allows the Jews to defend themselves. Similarly, although Boaz is willing to redeem, another, closer kinsman has first rights and obligations, and Boaz must sort out the affair with him before securing Ruth's future himself, if necessary.

The plot elements we have mentioned so far indicate a clear connection between the scenes and the amplification of the sense that the heroine stands at a critical crossroad, an encounter that will seal her fate in a certain direction. The shared tension between the majority (represented by Boaz and Ahasuerus) and the minority (represented by Ruth, the Moabite woman, and Esther, the Judean woman) weaves the two works together. The extent of the encounters' reliance upon gender and social conventions is evident from another detail common to both scenes. Although the woman is the initiator of the meeting, she shows herself to the man and does not begin to speak until he has acknowledged her presence. Queen Esther stands in the king's inner courtyard and awaits the king's recognition and approval (5.2-3). Similarly, Ruth patiently waits by Boaz's feet in the darkness until he becomes aware of her: 'At midnight the man was startled, and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman!' (3.8-9).

As I previously discussed while drawing a general parallel between the stories, a certain inverse relationship between them exists alongside their similarities. This is also evident in regard to the climactic scenes at hand, and can also be explored in terms of otherness and the structure of society. Ruth ventures *out* to the threshing-floor, to a place on the border of civilization in several respects, while Esther journeys *inward*, into the heart of the palace—to the king's inner chamber. Ruth lies down, while Esther stands opposite Ahasuerus. Both women have prepared for this momentous encounter, but while Ruth prepares for physical intimacy and dresses for seduction (by washing and anointing herself), Esther dons royal garb; not necessarily the most feminine, attractive of clothing, but clothing that testifies to her power and authority and for political ploy.

The atmosphere of Ruth 3—the suggestive location in the dead of night, kneeling by a man's feet in the darkness, and the washing and anointing of the female body with intimate intentions—seems to fit in with the erotic, sensual revelry of the Persian palace—especially considering that Ruth approaches Boaz when 'he had eaten and drunk, and his heart was merry' (3.7).[39] Boaz's intoxication allows Ruth to draw near him and remain unseen

39. The only time that the heroine is required to groom herself is conveyed in brief, terse language: 'Wash and anoint and dress yourself' (Ruth 3.3). It will suffice to compare this description to Esther's 'hurried' preparations for her meeting with the king: 'And he *hurried* her treatments and her dietary regime…for she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatments prescribed for the women, six months with oil of myrrh and six with perfumes and cosmetics' (Esth. 2.9, 12). Moreover, the Ruth narrative does not

until midnight. In contrast, Esther's appearance before the king in his inner chamber appears to be one of the only scenes which presents the king sober, unaffected by wine. The king fully understands her request, senses the great tension and is quick to ask her about her request. This is one of the obvious moments in the book of Esther where the relationship between the king and a woman is not characterized by sexual tension, but rather by the authority and respect Esther exudes. If so, a comparative reading of these scenes creates the sense that the protagonists have switched places: Ruth's nighttime seduction is typical of the book of Esther, while Esther's straightforward, pragmatic meeting with Ahasuerus is more consistent with the atmosphere of the book of Ruth.

The fact that the female protagonist's appearance before the man, who represents the majority, is atypical of the nature of each text testifies, to my mind, that the relationship between the minority and the majority is infinitely more complex than is apparent upon a first reading. The attitude towards the Other is multi-faceted, fraught with different, even conflicting, emotions—alienation and estrangement coupled with curiosity and attraction. The climactic scenes that deviate from the nature of each work guide us, as readers, to recognize these unique moments as an important comment on the relationship between the peripheral and the central, between the woman and the man.[40]

repeat Ruth's execution of Naomi's instructions, brief as they are—even though the narrator describes how Ruth carries out her other instructions, her actual washing, anointing and dressing are omitted. It appears that the author of the text is not interested in such details, and wishes to downplay their value. In line with this principle, even the wealthy field-owner hero is presented as a hardworking man, and we first encounter him when he is visiting his field ('Just then, Boaz arrived from Bethlehem, and he said to the reapers', 2.4) and again when he is working ('Behold, he is threshing his barley at the threshing-floor tonight' 3.2-4).

40. Through their female characters, both works explore the relationships between the fringes and center of society. The biblical representation of the Other was chiefly and most significantly discussed in feminist literary criticism. Regarding the connection between feminist criticism and general minority studies, see Elaine Showalter, 'A Criticism of our own. Autonomy and Assimilation in Afro-American and Feminist Literary Theory', in *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism* (ed. R.R Warhol and D.P. Herndl; New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1991), pp. 168-88. Concerning the complex roles that women play in the Bible, see Fuchs, *Sexual Politics*; J. Cheryl Exum, 'Murder They Wrote: Ideology and the Manipulation of Female Presence in Biblical Narrative', *Ad Feminam: Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 43 (1989), pp. 19-39; Phyllis Trible, 'Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation', *JAAR* 41 (1973), pp. 30-48; Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978); Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984). Ahuva Ashman (*The Story of Eve: Daughters, Mothers and Strange Women in Bible* [Tel Aviv: Miskal, 2008]) claims that the dual representation of the woman in the Bible receives national ethnic significance.

But the most interesting element of comparison lies in the essential difference between the works, which is the Jewish nation's place in relation to the motif of otherness. In the book of Ruth, the Jewish people is the majority, dwelling upon its own homeland, and Ruth the Moabite stands on the outside and seeks entry. In the book of Esther, the Jewish people is a minority, surviving within a vast foreign culture, far from its homeland and fighting for its existence and identity, so that Esther is a symbol of the Jewish people in their feminine otherness.

The challenge the book of Ruth poses lies in the acceptance of the foreign, alien woman, and it relates directly to the question of constructing and preserving national identity. Can such an identity extend outwards and incorporate foreign elements that threaten its stability, even if the potential changes are beneficial? In contrast, the book of Esther presents the challenge of retaining and preserving identity without endangering its own existence when the nation has become a minority.

These questions, from both sides of the barricade, are the most critical questions for a nation constructing its identity while simultaneously struggling with the trials that arise within its homeland and outside of it. Not only does this understanding place the two works in relation to the question of attitude towards the Other, or the phenomena of otherness and liminality, but also in relation to the challenges that arise in the face of the necessity and desire to construct a distinct identity. Through the otherness of these women, this question emerges in full force and is weighed from both the inside and the outside—to the point that it can be argued that Ruth and Esther are no longer the main protagonists of their stories. A new character materializes from the intermeshed narratives, and it is the identity of the Jewish people. How it is constructed, how it is threatened, and how it is preserved.

A combined reading of the texts and careful attention to their similarities and differences—with emphasis on the depiction of the relationships between male and female characters—becomes a profound exploration of the question of Jewish identity over the generations, whether Jews are in their homeland, grappling with how to receive others, or outside of it, as a minority intent on surviving within a foreign culture.

Thus the two narratives complete each other, for they describe two alternate realities. The stories of both Ruth and Esther relate the story of the Jewish nation and the challenges it must face in order to define its identity, but from perspectives that are simultaneously opposing and complementary. Reading the two works together allows for extensive discussion

The mother figure is usually Israelite and her sphere is the home, at the heart of patriarchal society, within its borders; while the foreign woman is found outside these borders, symbolizing chaos.

about the issue of identity from two different perspectives. How identity can be preserved and the national, cultural, distinct and separate identity of a nation be retained—whether as a majority within its own land, or as a minority outside of it. Both alternate states of existence were relevant, accurate representations of the Jewish nation's bifurcated reality at the time of their writing, and have continued to reflect their dichotomous existence over the generations, thus constituting two alternate explorations of how a nation maintains its distinct existence.

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