



Diversity, Difference, and Access to Power in Diaspora: The Case of the Book of Esther

STEED VERNYL DAVIDSON

The Bible offers intriguing stories of life outside of the land of Israel. The stories of Daniel, Esther, and Joseph in the canonical Old Testament use the foreign courts of Babylon, Persia, and Egypt, respectively, as their settings. These locations afford insider insight into the operations of imperial powers from the perspective of ordinary outsiders. Border crossings and transgressions abound in these stories that teach techniques of survival, encourage maintenance of identity, define relationships with foreigners, and simply point out the realities of life in the context of foreignness. Whether labeled as court tales, diasporic tales, or diasporic novellas, these stories form a peculiar genre in the Bible and make complex the otherwise smooth historical patterns presented by the terms exile and postexile. The fact that the locations and concerns of these stories happen to be foreign centers of power, without much concern for the details of life in an ancestral homeland, exposes the truth of the continuation of life outside of the land even after circumstances made return possible. The notion of a discrete period of exile, historically verifiable and sociologically defined, appears as a theological fiction in light of these stories.

Whatever the term exile may connote in the minds of interpreters, the term diaspora presents another reality, another form of existence that shapes reading

“Diaspora,” more than “exile,” assumes an open-ended absence from one’s land, making the Bible’s diaspora stories valuable resources for considerations of access to power and survival among immigrant peoples.

and interpretation of biblical texts. For one thing, diaspora assumes an open-ended absence from the land and, therefore, speaks to continued existence in foreign contexts. Timothy Laniak views diaspora as marking a “peripheral identity,”¹ since diasporans live outside of the cultural norms of their host countries. A social location on the periphery of foreign context raises issues of access to power as a means of communal survival. That these diasporic stories² focus attention on the centers of ultimate power—imperial courts—suggests a concern for using this form of power to protect and advance communal survival in diaspora. In these stories, this access takes place in the midst of stated fears about the threat posed by the presence of outsiders. As the Joseph story evolves into the exodus story, the ruling pharaoh voices fears about the potential destabilizing effects of the demographic imbalance posed by the Israelites (Exod 1:9). In the book of Daniel, the failure of exiled Jews to obey royal commands forms the basis of complaints against them (Dan 3:9–12; 6:13), hinting at fears of lawlessness and dissent. Similarly, in Esther, the legal question shapes the argument for eradication of Jewish presence in the empire (Esth 3:8). Interestingly, these fears and prejudices emanate from official circles rather than in the ordinary discourse of personal relationships. The literary context addresses the issues of exclusion and difference at the level of imperial power. This move may well indicate historically grounded fears but also points to the reality that access to power and protection from arbitrary power stand as a concern for diasporic communities.

that these diasporic stories focus attention on the centers of ultimate power—imperial courts—suggests a concern for using this form of power to protect and advance communal survival in diaspora

This article offers an exploration of the issues of power and access to power in the context of diaspora. It focuses on the book of Esther as an exemplar of how the matter is treated among diasporic stories. In doing so, it explores the background of openness that historically characterized the Persian Empire and probes for the source of fears about Jewish presence expressed in the book. Arguably, the stated and unstated fears in the book derive from actual experience, making access to power an urgent reality.

THE BOOK OF ESTHER

Set within the context of the Persian court, the book of Esther presents the

¹Timothy S. Laniak, “Esther’s *Volkcentrism* and the Reframing of Post-Exilic Judaism,” in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, ed. Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard J. Greenspoon (London: T & T Clark, 2003) 79.

²I am using Michael V. Fox’s term “diaspora story” in preference over diaspora novella, since the length of these stories make them more properly stories. Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991) 146.

unlikely story of a Jewish woman's rise to become the Persian queen and her cousin's to become the second in command of the empire. The book's status as canonical Scripture derives mostly from its etiological story of the Jewish festival of Purim. For a number of years, both Jewish and Christian communities appeared reluctant to include the book of Esther among their canonical lists.³ Nonetheless, by the fourth century C.E., the book's place in Jewish and Christian canons seems secure.⁴

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther's seemingly off-hand comments about the book of Esther shape its place among Christian communities. Remarking on the overt Jewish content in the book, Luther comments in his Table Talk, "I am so hostile to this book [2 Maccabees] and to Esther that I wish they did not exist at all, for they Judaize too much, and have much heathen impropriety."⁵ Luther's comments will generate later anti-Semitic views both about the book of Esther and Jews in general.⁶ Largely seen as a "Jewish" book (unlike Exodus or Daniel, even though they appear to deal with similar experiences by the same ethnic group), the book of Esther finds little place in the three-year cycle of the Revised Common Lectionary.⁷ Christian usage of the book of Esther appears more regularly in children's stories as "the girl who became queen." The official marginalization of the book of Esther among Christians in some ways mirrors the sentiments expressed by Haman to the king about the difference of Jews and the inappropriateness of their presence in the kingdom (Esth 3:8). The exiled status of the book of Esther within Christian discourse not only exposes the power dynamics that play out over the Bible, but also the marginalization of those who insist on living out their difference.

THE FEAR FACTOR

In a carefully crafted appeal (Esth 3:8–9), Haman articulates to king Ahasuerus the potential threat of dissent posed by the Jewish community in the empire. In his argument, Haman leaves the threatening group unnamed, using only the phrase "a certain people" (Esth 3:8). The privileged position of the phrase in the sentence keeps the focus on this unnamed group and the exceptional threat they pose. Haman describes them as "scattered"; therefore, they are a universal

³Michael Broyde discusses the ongoing debates among rabbis about the book of Esther, occurring as late as 200 C.E. Michael J. Broyde, "Defilement of the Hands, Canonization of the Bible, and the Special Status of Esther, Ecclesiastes, and Song of Songs," *Judaism* 44 (1995) 65–66.

⁴Sidnie Ann White Crawford, "Esther," in *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 132.

⁵D. *Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe, Tischreden*, vol. 3 (Weimar: Herman Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1914) 302, #s 3391a/b.

⁶Timothy Beal traces the impact of Luther's words on shaping anti-Jewish sentiments around the book of Esther. Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London: Routledge, 1997) 6–7.

⁷Only in year B on Pentecost 17 (Proper 21) is there a reading from the book of Esther (7:1–6, 9–10; 9:20–22), where the queen pleads for help with the king and Haman is hanged. This reading, though, is used by the United Methodist, Baptist, Reformed, and Congregational Churches, but not by the ELCA, Episcopal, and Roman Catholic Churches.

threat rather than localized. “Separate,” this “one people” stands out in a bad way from among all the “peoples” in the land (in the Hebrew דָּבָר אֶחָד versus עַמּוֹת). In concluding his appeal, Haman helps the king personalize the threat and ultimately approve the eradication of the Jews.

Haman describes the Jews as “scattered”; therefore, they are a universal threat rather than localized

While the book locates Mordecai’s ongoing slight of Haman’s authority as the motivation for Haman’s actions (see Esth 3:1–6), steps from personal affront to official action seem both short and, as David Clines puts it, “disproportionate.” Clines parallels Haman’s overreaction with that of Memucan in response to Vashti’s slight of the king (see Esth 1).⁸ In both cases, the king receives advice that exaggerates fears of dissent into potentially destabilizing impacts upon the empire. Scholars generally rationalize what may otherwise seem like irrational fear by exploring the “natural” tensions between Haman (the Agagite) and Mordecai (the Jew) as “tribal as well as personal.”⁹ Although Haman’s name and his father’s name, Hammedatha, appear Persian, his origins as an Agagite presumably go back to Agag, the Amalekite king spared by Saul (1 Sam 15). Mordecai’s ancestry traces back to the tribe of Benjamin, making him a kinsman of Saul (Esth 2:5). These two designations recall the incomplete slaughter by Saul as well as the historical animosities between the two groups (1 Sam 15:2).¹⁰

Locating the motivation for the fears articulated by Haman in tribal conflict deflects attention away from the capricious and insecure portrayal of imperial power. As long as Haman and Mordecai’s conflict belongs to the realm of the tribal, it exculpates the Persian king of complicity for involvement in the eradication of an ethnic group from his kingdom. The appeal of Haman plays to fears held by the king and not singularly those of Haman. Ultimately, he wins the king’s favor with an argument that shows the unacceptability of the group he characterizes in his presentation. Similarly, Clines’s observation of the overreaching nature of imperial power points to insecurity on the part of the Persian court. That the queen’s refusal to be displayed by the king will set off a chain of dissent that will ultimately undermine royal rule not only exaggerates the threat but reveals the extent to which imperial power views itself as susceptible to even the smallest threat. Haman articulates for the king a fear that the outsider who insists on being different stands to dismantle the unity of a diverse kingdom. In both these cases,

⁸David J. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 295.

⁹Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 42.

¹⁰Fox, Clines, and Jon Levenson all hold that Agag is a gentile (one whose name is derived from the name of a particular locality) who replays the battle between Saul and the Amalekites. Clines further cites Josephus, who renders Agag as Amalekite, as proof of early interpretations of the name. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 42; Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 293; Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) 66.

imperial power needs to marshal its resources to head off even the slightest threat. The irrationality of the arguments reveals the extent to which imperial power can be toppled by a single chink in its armor.

DIFFERENCE NOT DIVERSITY

Haman's appeal to the king builds upon the notion of Jewish difference. His descriptions pay attention to how their laws both separate them from other people and put them at odds with the imperial law. The statements paint Jewish law as a change from what obtains among other people (the Hebrew verb שָׁנָה—“different” in Esth 3:8—literally means “change”). And, in concluding, they invoke the idea of equivalence to emphasize the oddity of Jewish life (the Hebrew פָּרָה—“appropriate” in 3:8—literally means “not smooth or agreeable”). Johanna Van Wijk-Bos points out that difference stands as “the provoking element” in Haman's speech and, as such, “the numbers aggravate the threat posed by this difference.”¹¹

Hints of diversity abound in the book of Esther that make the issue of difference a confusing one. If the reference to Haman as an Agagite speaks to his nationality, then Haman himself is not Persian. In his own speech, he references the peoples of the kingdom and their respective laws. The royal decree defining marital relationships goes out in multiple languages (Esth 1:22), as should be assumed for an empire with a vast geographical reach (Esth 1:1). The search for a replacement queen extends to all the provinces of the kingdom, opening the possibility that the queen will not be ethnically Persian (Esth 2:3). In fact, the Persians prided themselves on the level of tolerance with which they managed their empire. Diversity, as it narrowly surfaces in contemporary discourse, appears not to be an issue for the book of Esther; rather, difference emerges as a focal point.

The distinction between diversity and difference lies in the forms of resistance to overarching homogenizing tendencies. “Diversity” is constituted by differences in ethnicities, languages, cultures, and religious expressions—the variations that empires anticipate and use to justify their existence. Diversity serves to constitute the Other against which the imperial Self makes sense, exists, and engages in empire building. Precisely because the imperial Self views itself as the paradigm of humanity, it requires diversity for its rule and, therefore, employs mechanisms to manage diversity. As long as diversity buys into the larger imperial narrative, accepts its overarching forms of rule, and keeps its place on the periphery, then stability is ensured in the empire. This essentially results in what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe as a “secular Pentecost, the bodies are mixed and the nomads speak a common tongue.”¹² “Difference,” on the other hand, resists the binary construction that secures imperial power. Difference opts out of the imperial narratives, discards the predetermined identities, and claims its unique

¹¹Johanna W. H. Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998) 119.

¹²Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) 362.

subjectivity. Difference, consequently, even in its smallest numbers, threatens imperial power.¹³ In the book of Esther, Haman paints the Jews as different and, therefore, potentially destabilizing of imperial rule.

AMBIGUITIES OF POWER

Given the insecurities of imperial power about outsiders, the location of the diasporic stories in the foreign court makes sense. More than the prejudices that emerge in personal relationships, diasporic Jews fear the vagaries of imperial power that hold the possibility of either physically eliminating them (the case of Joseph and Esther) or forcing assimilation (the case in the book of Daniel). Therefore, in the book of Esther, as in other diasporic stories, imperial power cannot be regarded as merely neutral or disinterested. Certainly, from the Jewish perspective, a high regard for the potentialities of this form of power exists that makes proximity to power a concern.¹⁴

in the book of Esther, as in other diasporic stories, imperial power cannot be regarded as merely neutral or disinterested

In passing judgment on the purveyors of power, the book of Esther takes an indifferent position towards King Ahasuerus. Not so with regards to Haman. The book makes no pretense about the moral quality of Haman, voicing its judgment through Esther (Esth 7:6) and the poetic justice suggested by Harbona (Esth 7:9). From this perspective, it appears that the book regards imperial power as benign but easily corruptible through the malefactions of someone like Haman. But the fact that the vaunted system of imperial rule could be distorted by the personal affront of its officeholders suggests a less than secure faith in the capacity of imperial power to secure Jewish well-being. Even further, the system's capacity to secure law and order comes into question with the mechanism initiated by Memucan to deal with the issue of Vashti. As Jon Levenson observes, the decree to control disobedient wives produces a queen who disregards a fundamental rule relating to regal access (Esth 4:11; 5:2) and a wife who instructs her power-hungry husband how to deal with an enemy (Esth 5:14). Levenson concludes: "Ahasuerus and his sages' attempt to control a matter as personal and as deep-seated as gender relations by official decree proves a crashing failure."¹⁵

Although the book of Esther leaves no judgment on the character of King Ahasuerus, it subtly comments on his competence and, by extension, the ability of

¹³Hardt and Negri (ibid., 142) believe that even the postmodern politics of difference as articulated here reach their limits and result in cooperation with imperial rule.

¹⁴Mary Mills regards the function of the royal court in the diasporic stories as the moral universe where individual actions play out in larger arenas of "social and political power." Mary Mills, "Household and Table: Diasporic Boundaries in Daniel and Esther," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68 (2006) 411.

¹⁵Levenson, *Esther*, 13.

imperial power to guarantee Jewish well-being. At the outset, the book looks admiringly upon the wealth, reach, and power of Ahasuerus, details of which are given in the first chapter. That no other rival exists for the king and his imperial court becomes clear as the book proceeds. However, the performance of the king throughout the book suggests both his unfitness as well as the need for Jews to insert themselves into the governing structure of diasporic life. Michael V. Fox states that the capricious nature of imperial government means that Jews need to “manipulate its power for their own ends.”¹⁶ Ultimately, imperial power and positions rescue the Jews from destruction.

given the variability and ambiguity of imperial power, life in diaspora requires dissimulation in order to survive

Given the variability and ambiguity of imperial power, life in diaspora requires dissimulation in order to survive. The need for Esther to hide her ethnicity in a multiethnic search while Mordecai openly reveals his makes little sense in the book. Although Charles Harvey believes that this may reveal some form of Jewish servitude in the Persian Empire,¹⁷ hiding serves as the form of power to destabilize threats from enemies and a potentially dangerous empire. Esther’s coming out undercuts the plans of Haman and finally reveals the unnamed group against whom official plans for elimination had been established. Timothy K. Beal describes the revelation as a disturbance of the sameness that persists in every drinking party in the book. He views Esther’s revelation as placing the Other in the center that exposes the myth of sameness upon which the empire stands.¹⁸ But hiding also hints at divine power, the unstated alternative to imperial power. The absence of divine power in the book exposes the inadequacy of imperial power to protect the vulnerable and guarantee justice. Precisely because of the similarity of divine power and imperial power, the book mutes critique of power in general.

ACCESS TO POWER

The book of Esther shows the potential threats to imperial power without at the same time advocating for its dismantling. Access to power, more than its eradication, appears to be the concern of the book. The undoing of Haman’s edict follows the same scrupulous legal framework in which it was constructed. Esther and Mordecai use the imperial mechanism to assert their presence in the kingdom and to achieve relief from their difference being regarded as a liability. The festival of Purim receives imperial sanction (see Esth 9:20–23). Esther never appears as Esther the Jew but more frequently as “Queen Esther,” especially from non-Jews (the king

¹⁶Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 177.

¹⁷Charles D. Harvey, *Finding Morality in the Diaspora? Moral Ambiguity and Transformed Morality in the Books of Esther* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2003) 22.

¹⁸Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 98.

in 5:3; 7:2; Haman in 5:12). More tellingly, Mordecai shares power with the king. The end of the book starts out with a focus on the king but quickly turns into a split screen that brings Mordecai into focus (Esth 10:1–3). That the book notes Mordecai's Jewishness in connection with his position in the empire undoes the contempt with which Haman frequently refers to him (Esth 5:13; 6:10), and suggests that difference no longer appears to be problematic.

On the inside of imperial power, Esther and Mordecai advance the interests of their people without undoing the interests of the Persian Empire. The closing notice (Esth 10:3) adds superfluous detail of Mordecai's rule on behalf of his coethnics. It carefully notes the advantages he accrues for them without mentioning how his rule works in this multiethnic empire. Lee Humphreys notes that such cooperation makes sense in the context of diaspora even though all foreign contexts do not always prove so hospitable.¹⁹ In the end, a state of peaceful coexistence obtains. Jo Carruthers contends that the balance of power in the book of Esther can easily tip in either direction in violent ways.²⁰ Even though the book promotes what Levenson calls a "sober realism"²¹ that leaves Persian rule intact, at the end of the book, Jews stand on the inside of imperial power. From the perspective of marginalized Jews in a hostile environment such a move offers relief. But, from the perspective of the managers of diversity, the beneficiaries of master narratives, the gatekeepers of identity, and the purveyors of imperial power, it is the sum of all their fears.

POWER REVISITED

Diasporic stories deal with the marginal existence of life in a foreign land. In that context, separated from the institutions of state power, diasporans rely on new forms of power to ensure their survival. Accessing the prevailing power structures guarantees both resources and the ability to shape the environment to work in their best interests. That the diasporans' interests do not conflict with that of the host country stands as the telling theme in this book. The reassurances of their complementarity both encourage the diasporic community toward engagement and the hosts to accommodation of difference. In this regard, Esther's argument of the detriment to the king proves more definitive than Haman's appeal to the king does. She convinces the king that the annihilation of Jews poses damage to the king's reputation (Esth 7:4). In the world of the story and among her coethnics, this access to power makes all the difference. ⊕

STEED VERNYL DAVIDSON is assistant professor of Old Testament at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary, Berkeley, California.

¹⁹W. Lee Humphreys, "A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 92 (1973) 223.

²⁰Jo Carruthers, *Esther through the Centuries* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008) 32.

²¹Levenson, *Esther*, 15.