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Receiving Esther: Novels and the Explicit Religious Nature of Esther

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# Receiving Esther: Novels and the Explicit Religious Nature of Esther

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An abstract of
A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the
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**Abstract**

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By Kelsey Spinnato

The biblical book of Esther, that received in the Masoretic Text, is often considered a secular text. God is never mentioned, and only vague references to such religious practices as fasting are mentioned. However, in Esther Rabbah I's reception of Esther, the authors or compilers of the text used seven hermeneutical tools to draw out Esther's implicit religious nature. These tools are transformed and similar methods used in the reception of Esther in contemporary novels, namely *Hadassah: One Night with the King* and *The Gilded Chamber*. This thesis explores these two texts, using Esther Rabbah I as a case study, to show how although the biblical book of Esther is only implicitly religious, authors across time have sought to highlight that religious character and make it explicit. The contemporary novels do this in four ways: employing intersecting verses, creating dialogue, creating circumstances and events, and inserting explicit language and terminology.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION ....................................................................................................1

Why the Reception of Esther? 1

Reception History: A Definition in Context 2

Receiving Esther 4

WHERE IS GOD IN ESTHER? ...........................................................................7

MIDRASH ..........................................................................................................9

Definitions 9

Why Was Midrash Developed? 10

Midrashim on Esther 11

ESTHER RABBAH I: A CASE STUDY .........................................................12

Dating and Authorship 12

Themes and Goals 14

Making the Religious Nature of Esther 2 Explicit in Esther Rabbah I 15

Employing Intersecting Verses 16

Creating Dialogue or Events 17

Exegeting Clause by Clause 18

Comparing Structures 19

Reporting Dialogues between Sages 20

Quoting a Sage 21

Providing Basic Commentary 23

The Message of Esther Rabbah I 23

*HADASSAH: ONE NIGHT WITH THE KING* ....................25

Introduction: Context and Plot 25

Making Explicit the Religious Nature of Esther 26

Employing Intersecting Verses 26

Creating Dialogue 34

Creating Circumstances and Events 38

Inserting Explicit Language and Terminology 42

Conclusion: The Message of *Hadassah* 50

*THE GILDED CHAMBER*....................51

Introduction: Context and Plot 51

Making Explicit MT Esther's Religious Nature 53

Employing Intersecting Verses 54

Creating Dialogue 59

Creating Circumstances and Events 64

Inserting Explicit Language and Terminology 74

Conclusion: The Message of *The Gilded Chamber* 80

MORDECAI'S REFUSAL TO BOW: A COMPARISON ....................80

CONCLUSION....................84

BIBLIOGRAPHY ....................85

# RECEIVING ESTHER: NOVELS AND THE EXPLICIT RELIGIOUS NATURE OF ESTHER

## Introduction

### Why the Reception of Esther?

Elaine Rose Glickman defines the underlying theme of the book of Esther as "the triumph of the exiled Jew over his oppressor and would-be destroyer."[1] This theme does not require an active God. The Jews could triumph over their enemies in completely logical, nonreligious ways. This is how the book of Esther presents the narrative. Esther and Mordecai succeed at saving their people because of coincidence, good timing, and bravery; the success has nothing explicitly to do with God.

However, few interpreters have allowed that surface-level reading to stand. Many Jews and Christians have interpreted the Masoretic Text of Esther (MT Esther) as having a religious nature, even if that nature is implicit. Jo Carruthers believes that the fruitfulness of Esther's reception is due to the "book's lack of religious content," which, "instead of thwarting religious readings, makes it a fascinating spur to theological creativity."[2] She continues, "obscurity and opacity have never presented any real challenge for the religious reader, who is always keen to identify, and thereby be the possessor of, a special key that will unlock the mysteries of faith."[3] This is why, despite

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1. Elaine Rose Glickman, *Haman and the Jews: A Portrait from Rabbinic Literature* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1999), 2.

2. Jo Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries*, Blackwell Bible Commentaries (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 7.

3. Ibid.

its secular nature on the surface, Jews and Christians have sought to draw out the implicit religious nature within the text and make it explicit for their audiences. The coincidental aspect of the story of Esther "did not ring as true to our rabbis"[4] in their diasporic situation. Instead, "to our sages, everything that befell them happened only by the will of God."[5] The book of Esther, according to Jewish tradition, promotes "a theology of God's hiddenness," a theology of providence that does not need explicit mention of God to be operative.[6] The earliest evidence of Christians making the religious qualities of Esther explicit are in the connection of Esther to Mary,[7] and early Christian paintings of the story show Mordecai and Esther praying.[8]

## Reception History: A Definition in Context

In Brennan Breed's definition of reception history, any text that "moves beyond its original context . . . enters into the world of reception history."[9] Although not taking a historical stream approach to the reception of Esther, this thesis is a project in reception history because it considers retellings of a text that has left its original context. This thesis discusses two different points in time and two different genres—medieval midrash and contemporary novels—to analyze how retellings of Esther have received the MT.

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4. Glickman, *Haman and the Jews*, 2.

5. Ibid.

6. Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries*, 21.

7. Ibid., 13.

8. Ibid., 23.

9. Brennan W. Breed, *Nomadic Text: A Theory of Biblical Reception History*, Indiana Series in Biblical Literature (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 3.

Authors of the novels discussed here have clearly drawn also from the Greek versions of Esther and rabbinic tradition. The use of these other sources in addition to MT Esther, however, do not dismiss the importance of seeing how, compared to MT Esther, these retellings draw out the story's religious nature.[10] For just as earlier versions of the text of Esther had differences between them (without making value judgments), so there are differences between MT Esther, Esther Rabbah, *Hadassah*, and *The Gilded Chamber*. This thesis is an attempt to study one specific set of those differences and the way the authors or editors of the texts methodically presented them, that is, how they used specific interpretive tools to draw out from MT Esther the religious character of the biblical story and make it explicit for their audiences.

Throughout history, Esther has been the subject of numerous retellings. Anthony Swindell provides short summaries of a number of these works, and he concludes that Esther "attracts rewritings which focus on questions of women's identity and also on Jewishness as a topic" and cover topics as wide ranging as "the Jewish Diaspora, medieval courtly love, . . . life in pre-war Hungary, the Spanish Civil War, modern romantic love, women's careers in the England of the 1970s, . . . and the Holocaust and the settlement of its few survivors."[11] The retellings that Swindell considers cover a variety of literary genres and periods. His work is not, however, exhaustive. While *The*

10. Breed "argues that the phrase 'the original text' actually means 'the text I have chosen to study for various contingent reasons'" (ibid., 13). The original text, for the purposes of this thesis, is the MT of Esther. This is because, as the text upon which English translations of the Hebrew Bible are generally based, the MT is the text that is most immediately familiar to modern readers. The MT eventually became the choice text within both rabbinic and Protestant communities. The choice to use the MT as the original text for my purpose is not, however, an argument for MT being *the* original text, if such a text can even be posited, let alone reconstructed. This thesis is therefore *not* positing that the MT "is the natural endpoint of production and the natural beginning of reception" (ibid., 66).

11. Anthony C. Swindell, *Reworking the Bible: The Literary Reception-History of Fourteen Biblical Stories*, The Bible in the Modern World 30 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), 175.

*Gilded Chamber* is summarized, *Hadassah* is not. Neither are other contemporary novels with similar themes and goals (like *Esther: Royal Beauty* by Angela Elwell Hunt; *A Reluctant Queen: The Love Story of Esther* by Joan Wolf; and *Chosen: The Lost Diaries of Queen Esther* by Ginger Garrett). Swindell also does not consider other forms of media, such as movies. Like Swindell, other scholars have studied the reception of Esther through history, but this is done broadly and often without a particular focus within the text.[12]

Other scholars have compared the major versions of Esther to one another (MT, LXX, and Alpha) through close readings, but these do not address any literature outside of those works considered scripture.[13] So what's missing in reception history scholarship on Esther then are close readings of *individual* receiving texts to understand their relationship to the received text.

## Receiving Esther

A common term used for works like rabbinic midrashim—and any other work of another genre that retells a biblical story—is *rewritten Bible*. Rewriting can also come through other mediums, "from painting and sculpture to music, theatre, and cinema: catacombs and Sistine Chapels, church portals, . . . and any number of Hollywood and television

12. Carruthers's volume *Esther Through the Centuries* is distinct in that it walks closely through the text of Esther itself and discusses the ways various texts, summarized earlier in the book, receive the text. It does not, however, walk through the history of reception chronologically; instead it references other texts as they apply thematically or in language to Esther.

13. See Linda Day, *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 186 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); Karen Jobes, *The Alpha-Text of Esther: Its Character and Relationship to the Masoretic Text*, SBL Dissertation Series 153 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996); Charles V. Dorothy, *The Books of Esther: Structure, Genre and Textual Integrity*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 187 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

'Bibles'."[14] Although Steven Fraade uses the term *rewritten Bible*, he is concerned about a common misconception: "While the term, 'rewritten Bible' might presume the status of a fixed, canonical Scripture prior to its 'rewriting,' such a presumption may be a retrojection from the Bible's subsequent acquisition of closed, canonical authority."[15] Although Fraade speaks specifically about midrash, because of the uncertain dating of rabbinic writings and the fluid nature of the Jewish canon, the same sentiment can apply to later works as well. Unless the texts state the source(s) on which they are drawing, the reader cannot know if the work they've done is based on any closed version of the scriptural canon. For this reason, I do not claim that the texts discussed in this thesis are based solely or mainly on the MT of Esther.

However, for the sake of a common point of comparison, this thesis will consider how Esther Rabbah and two contemporary novels—Tommy Tenney's *Hadassah* and Rebecca Kohn's *The Gilded Chamber*[16]—receive MT Esther in terms of making the implicit religious nature of the story more explicit. The sections in Esther Rabbah I on Esth 2 showcase seven interpretive tools that the editors or compilers of the midrash use to draw out the already implicit nature of MT Esther in a systematic way.[17] Carruthers categorizes these two novels as being "by biblically knowledgeable authors" who "return

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14. Piero Boitani, *The Bible and Its Rewritings*, trans. Anita Weston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), vii.

15. Steven D. Fraade, "Rabbinic *Midrash* and Ancient Jewish Biblical Interpretation," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Talmud and Rabbinic Literature*, ed. Charlotte Elisheva Fonrobert and Martin S. Jaffee (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 106.

16. Tommy Tenney with Mark Andrew Olsen, *Hadassah: One Night with the King* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2004); Rebecca Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber: A Novel of Queen Esther* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).

17. The seven interpretive tools are the following: employing intersecting verses, creating dialogue or events, exegeting clause by clause, comparing structures, reporting dialogues between sages, quoting a sage, and providing basic commentary.

to rewriting the story" instead of merely alluding to it.[18] Both novels are set in the original context of MT Esther, making for better comparative work with Esther Rabbah I, which also leaves the narrative of MT Esther in its context.[19]

Using Esther Rabbah I then as a case study, this thesis argues that the two contemporary novels use versions of three of the seven interpretive tools—employing intersecting verses, creating new dialogue, and creating unique circumstances and events—and one of their own—imbuing the text with religious language and terminology[20]—to do the same thing Esther Rabbah I does to MT Esther; that is, make the text *explicitly* religious.[21]

Before turning to the retellings of Esther in novels, it is necessary to do two things: first, to look at the MT of the book of Esther to determine what is already present in the narrative, and second, to lay out Esther Rabbah I as a case study.

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18. Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries*, 17.

19. *Rewritten Bible*, a term that Fraade applies to midrash, can also apply to these two novels because they, at their most basic, *rewrite* the biblical text. Thus these novels work better in comparison to Esther Rabbah than others that might be closer to rabbinic literature chronologically because these other works might only allude to or drawn upon, not rewrite.

20. This new tool is distinct because the language added to the text is not connected to other parts of scripture or to new dialogue or events (the other tools) nor does it affect the plot. It merely affects the overall *tone* of the text.

21. The final section of this thesis compares the same single short scene in each of the four texts to one another to show how the three receiving texts make MT Esther explicitly religious in their own unique ways.

## Where Is God in Esther?

The book of Esther in the MT never mentions God. Heinrich Guggenheimer calls Esther "totally profane."[22] It "reads more like a secular melodrama than a sacred religious text."[23] There is no mention in the text "of Torah, prayer, covenant, or dietary restrictions," let alone God.[24] Michael Fox notes that some readers of Esther have understood the lack of religious language in Esther as reflecting "a secular nationalism," but "others, including all early interpreters and most modern ones, believe that God is simply assumed to be present and active."[25] However, "some early Christians, thinking the story too nationalistic and inimical to Gentiles, opposed Esther's inclusion in their Bibles."[26] Some Jews, too, have debated the canonical status of Esther, especially because it is the only biblical book without representation at Qumran.[27] The book of Esther in the Septuagint, which is one of Esther's earliest interpretation/recension, does explicitly introduce God into the narrative.[28]

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22. Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, *The Jerusalem Talmud: Second Order: Moʿed: Tractates* Taʿaniot, Megillah, Ḥagigah *and* Moʿed Qaṭan (Mašqin), Studia Judaica 85 (Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 187.

23. Glickman, *Haman and the Jews*, 1.

24. Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, *Far More Precious than Jewels: Perspectives on Biblical Women*, Gender and the Biblical Tradition (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1991), 166.

25. Michael V. Fox, "Esther, Book of," in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 604.

26. Darr, *Far More Precious than Jewels*, 166.

27. Ibid. However, A. Kay Fountain notes that "whereas the Hebrew version appears irreligious, the Greek versions," despite their use of religious language and themes, "are too nationalistic" (*Literary and Empirical Readings of the Book of Esther*, Studies in Biblical Literature 43 [New York: Peter Lang, 2002], 4).

28. Fox, "Esther, Book of," 604.

But is there anything in the content of MT Esther that is already "religious"? By religious I mean the mention of God or gods as either passive or active characters, the mention of characters participating in cultic acts (prayer, fasting, sacrifice, and so on), or the connection of the text to the rest of scripture and Jewish history. This section will first look at Esth 2, since it is on this chapter that the case study is based, and then the thesis will zoom out to the rest of MT Esther. Esther 2 is connected to Jewish history but only as the setting of the story. For example, Mordecai is introduced as a Jew, a Benjaminite who had been among the exiles taken to Babylon by Nebuchadnezzar (Esth 2:5–6). Although an orphan, Esther is taken in by Mordecai, one of her close relations (Esth 2:15). She does not tell anyone in the palace about her race or family background, but the text gives no reasoning for such a decision. Other than the genealogical and historical connection (the exile) to Jewish history, Esth 2 merely tells a story about one girl being chosen out of many to replace Vashti as queen because she is beautiful (2:7) and people like her (2:15). The end of this chapter also tells the story of how Mordecai and Esther help foil a plot against King Ahasuerus.

Elsewhere in the book of Esther there is mention of "sackcloth, ashes, and fasting," but that is the extent of what might be considered religious material in Esther.[29] Instead "Esther and Mordechai appear to succeed by clever schemes conceived and enacted by humans, not by the performance of *mitzvot* or the heaven-directed prayer and penitence our sages advocated."[30] With this understanding of the situation in the book of

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29. Jacob Neusner, *Esther Rabbah I*, vol. 2 of *The Midrash Compilations of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries: An Introduction to the Rhetorical, Logical, and Topical Problem*, Brown Judaic Studies 188 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 142.

30. Glickman, *Haman and the Jews*, 8.

Esther, this paper can turn toward a discussion of Esther Rabbah I, but to do that, it must first seek to define its genre: midrash.

## Midrash

### Definitions

Many scholars have tried to define midrash. James Kugel snarks, “There are many recent works that seek to define midrash, and nothing would be gained here by attempting to reduce these efforts to a few sentences; though one might say more pointedly . . . that, since these studies have already not defined midrash in ample detail, there is little purpose in our not defining it again here.”[31] Kugel’s point is valid, but a quick catalogue of definitions that scholars have offered is still an appropriate starting place. Gary Porton defines midrash as “an oral or written literature composed by the rabbis that has its starting point in a fixed, canonical biblical text.”[32] Carol Bakhos includes in her definition that midrash is “a form and method of scriptural interpretation.”[33] In this basic definition, she makes no claim about the original authority (or canonical status) of the starting text, whereas Porton does not limit his definition of midrash to interpretation of the biblical text itself. Gerald Bruns defines midrash as “simply the ancient Hebrew word for interpretation. It is the word for the relationship of Judaism to its sacred texts

31. James L. Kugel, “Two Introductions to Midrash,” in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 91.

32. Gary G. Porton, “Midrash, Definitions of,” in *Encyclopedia of Midrash: Biblical Interpretation in Formative Judaism*, ed. Jacob Neusner and Alan J. Avery Peck (Boston: Brill, 2005), 1:520.

33. Carol Bakhos, “Midrash, Midrashim,” in *The Eerdmans Dictionary of Early Judaism*, ed. John J. Collins and Daniel C. Harlow (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 944.

(Torah)."[34] However, Bruns expands his definition (and most others') and calls for an understanding of midrash "as a form of life (in Wittgenstein's sense) rather than simply as a form of exegesis (in the technical sense)" because it "is concerned with practice and action as well as with (what we think of as) the form and meaning of texts."[35] Along these lines, Kugel calls midrash "not a genre of interpretation but an interpretive stance, a way of reading the sacred text."[36] He agrees with Bruns that midrash is more than a type of interpretation. Instead, it calls for a specific attitude toward the text.

## Why Was Midrash Developed?

The reasoning for the creation of midrash is unknown, though scholars have attempted to offer suggestions. Porton notes that "many scholars have argued that Midrash grew out of the rabbis' need to make the Torah relevant to their world, to update the Torah to fit an age different from the ones in which the biblical authors lived."[37] Included among these scholars are Addison Wright, Carol Bakhos, and Joseph Heinemann.[38] Porton disagrees. He would rather say that the rabbis wrote midrash to clarify "the intimate connection

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34. Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics: Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 104.

35. Ibid., 105.

36. Kugel, "Two Introductions to Midrash," 91.

37. Porton, "Midrash, Definitions of," 526.

38. Addison G. Wright, "The Literary Genre Midrash," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 28 (1966): 137: "a midrash is a work that attempts to make a text of Scripture understandable, useful, and relevant for a later generation." Bakhos, "Midrash, Midrashim," 945: "Midrash . . . grew out an attempt to understand laconic or obscure biblical verses, to make biblical ordinances relevant to the contemporary Jewish community, to teach moral lessons, and to maintain the Jewish metanarrative." Joseph Heinemann, "The Nature of the Aggadah," trans. Marc Bregman, in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman and Sanford Budick (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), 43: "the aggadists were able to find in Scripture—which might otherwise have come to seem irrelevant to contemporary needs—the new answers and values which made it possible to grapple with the shifts and changes of reality."

between the Rabbinic world of late antiquity and the words of the Written Torah."[39] Making the biblical text relevant was not even in the mind of the rabbis, who could clearly see the importance of the Torah for their own world. Martin Jaffee, too, keeps relevance out of his definition of midrash. Like Porton, he highlights the connection between the Written and Oral Torah: "Most of the surviving midrashic compilations, however, are dominated by aggadic discourses in which verses of the Written Torah are amplified by the traditions of the sages' Oral Torah."[40] Keeping these scholars' views in mind, another understanding of the role of midrash is possible: Midrash does not seek to make the text relevant (Porton has already shown why this is unnecessary) but to make clear how the text is *already* relevant. This "making clear" is accomplished through the midrashist's close reading of the biblical text and the application of hermeneutical tools.

## Midrashim on Esther

Almost all collections of midrashim on Esther known today "originated in the land of Israel."[41] This includes Esther Rabbah. However, one collection we do have from Babylonia is the section on Esther in Tractate Megillah in the Babylonia Talmud. The "earliest rabbinic midrashic collections date from the middle to late third century, even though they contain interpretive traditions, whether attributed or anonymous, that might be significantly older."[42] Mack claims that there are other midrashim on the five scrolls

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39. Porton, "Midrash, Definitions of," 526.

40. Martin S. Jaffee, *Early Judaism: Religious Worlds of the First Judaic Millennium*, 2nd ed. (Bethesda: University Press of Maryland, 2006), 84.

41. Porton, "Midrash, Definitions of," 531.

42. Fraade, "Rabbinic *Midrash* and Ancient Jewish Biblical Interpretation," 99.

besides Midrash Rabbah, but they "were on the whole not printed until just before the end of the 19th century."[43] Solomon Buber published *Sammlung agadischer Commentare zum Buche Esther* in 1886. This is a collection of midrashim on Esther, and it includes Midrash Abba Gurion, which is older than Esther Rabbah;[44] Midrash Panim Aḥerim A (11th century) and B; and Leqaḥ Tob. There are several other midrashim on Esther.[45] Despite the many midrashic texts on Esther, this thesis will analyze only one, Esther Rabbah I, as a case study for the way its compilers and authors made explicit the religious nature of the text of Esther.

## Esther Rabbah I: A Case Study

### Dating and Authorship

Esther Rabbah is part of a larger compilation of midrashic texts called *Midrash Rabbah*, which contains interpretations of each of the books of the Torah plus Lamentations, Esther, Ruth, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes. This compilation "is a collection of *haggadic* literature, for the most part composed in Palestine over a period of several hundred years."[46] Bakhos warns that "because rabbinic writings were transmitted gradually in a cumulative manner, they are resistant to fixed dating."[47] However, Hananel Mack posits that all five of the *Midrash Rabbah* on the five scrolls were "compiled

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43. Hananel Mack, *The Aggadic Midrash Literature*, trans. John Glucker, Broadcast University Series (Tel Aviv: MOD Books, 1989), 107.

44. Ibid., 108.

45. H. L. Strack and Günter Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, ed. and trans. Markus Bockmuehl, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 321.

46. Bakhos, "Midrash, Midrashim," 947.

47. Ibid., 946.

between the fifth and eighth centuries C.E.," with Esther Rabbah being the latest.[48] The authorship of Esther Rabbah is unknown; this is not uncommon for rabbinic writings because "for no document in the canon of Judaism produced in late antiquity . . . is there a named author internal to the document."[49] Instead of naming an author, Esther Rabbah presents itself "as the statement of a consensus . . . from the anonymous authorities behind the document as we have it."[50] Despite the lack of a singular author, Neusner claims that Esther Rabbah I "is a document about one thing, and it makes a single statement, and that statement is coherent."[51] That coherent statement will be discussed in the conclusion.

The earliest of the manuscripts of Esther Rabbah, from the early fifteenth century, are divided into six sections. This midrash can be characterized as Esther Rabbah I. Because of the sources that Esther Rabbah I quotes and the sources that quote Esther Rabbah I, Strack and Stemberger date this text to after around 500, later than Hananel Mack would date it.[52] Later editions of Esther Rabbah have ten sections instead of just six. Since Esther Rabbah I can only account for the first six of those sections, Strack and Stemberger posit a second midrash: Esther Rabbah II, which would include the other four sections. They suggest that the two midrashim were combined "in the twelfth or

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48. Mack, *The Aggadic Midrash Literature*, 107.

49. Neusner, *Esther Rabbah I*, 6.

50. Ibid., 10.

51. Ibid., 144.

52. Strack and Stemberger, *Introduction to the Talmud and Midrash*, 319.

thirteenth century," understanding Esther Rabbah II to have only been created "in the eleventh century, as a replacement for the original continuation of EsthR I."[53]

Esther Rabbah, no matter the edition, treats the text of Esther unequally. Esther 1–2 is given much more space than is the rest of the book. In fact, this is all that is officially included in Esther Rabbah I, whose *parashiyyot* begin at 1:1, 4, 9, 13; 2:1, and 5. Freedman and Simon think Esther Rabbah I had an additional chapter beginning at 3:1.[54]

The Soncino translation of Esther Rabbah by Maurice Simon is based on the later, ten-chapter editions. Jacob Neusner, although working from Simon's translation, confines his translation to only Esther Rabbah I.[55]

## Themes and Goals

Although Esther is a "secular" text on its surface, the authors and compilers of the midrash on Esther interpreted the story of Esther as having everything to do with God. Esther Rabbah I does this through two specific routes: (1) the equation of the events of Esther with previous events of punishment and salvation in the Hebrew Bible and (2) the role of Mordecai and Esther in the salvation of their people because of their righteousness. The parts of Esther Rabbah I related to Esth 1 have much to do with the first route. Haman or Ahasuerus (or the Persian people) is just one figure in a line of oppressors from whom God has saved God's people. So will God do again in Esther. So will God continue to do in the lives of the rabbis. The book of Esther's "validity . . . lies

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53. Ibid.

54. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, eds., *Midrash Rabbah: Esther*, trans. Maurice Simon, 3rd ed. (New York: Soncino, 1983), vii.

55. Jacob Neusner, *Esther Rabbah I: An Analytical Translation*, Brown Judaic Studies 182 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

not in its historical accuracy but in its representation of a *type* of event that has occurred in Jewish history."[56] The parts of Esther Rabbah I on Esth 2, however, deal much more with the second route: depicting Esther and Mordecai as righteous and thus having a role to play in the salvation of their people.

The authors or compilers of the text of Esther Rabbah I make, in many ways, the text of Esther more explicitly religious, and they accomplish that in a number of ways using multiple hermeneutical tools: (1) employing intersecting verses from elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible; (2) performing exegesis on the verses of the base text clause by clause; (3) identifying structural similarities between the base text and other texts; (4) reporting dialogues (whether real or invented) between sages having to do with some aspect of the base text; (5) reporting a statement of a singular sage; (6) creating new dialogue, circumstances, or events within the narrative; and (7) providing basic commentary. (This final tool often results in the use of one of the others, but it never begins there; instead it seeks to say, anonymously, "This is the meaning.") Examples of the ways the compilers of Esther Rabbah I have used these interpretive tools to make explicit the religious nature of Esther (specifically chapter 2) form the bulk of this section.

## Making the Religious Nature of Esther 2 Explicit in Esther Rabbah I

Esther 2 comprises two main stories: the beauty contest through which King Ahasuerus chooses Esther to replace Vashti and the foiled plot of Bigthan and Teresh to kill King Ahasuerus. As explained above, there is nothing overtly religious about this text as presented in the MT. Esther is beautiful and wins everyone's favor, so King Ahasuerus

56. Fox, "Esther, Book of," 603.

chooses her over all the other women. Mordecai just happens to overhear Bigthan and Teresh's plot and reports it to Esther, who in turn tells the king. However, through the use of a number of interpretive tools, the authors and compilers of Esther Rabbah I take this basic, secular piece of the narrative and draw the religious undertones out of it and therefore alter the message of Esth 2 as a whole. This fits the definition of midrash developed above: midrashic authors do not feel the need to make the biblical text relevant for their contexts but instead attempt to bring to light the relevance that is already present in the text. The interpretive tools are sevenfold, and they will be treated in turn with examples from Esther Rabbah I on Esth 2.

### *Employing Intersecting Verses*

By introducing sections with intersecting verses, the authors/compilers of Esther Rabbah I create connections between Esther and the rest of scripture. This is sometimes tangential, and when that is the case, the result of making the religious nature of Esther explicit is not applied to the book of Esther itself. For example, R. Aha tells a story that the compilers place in relation to Esth 2:1. The intersecting verse is Prov 23:32: "In the end, it [wine] bites like a snake / and poisons like a viper" (CEB). The story R. Aha tells is about a man who sells all he has to purchase wine. One time when he is drunk, his children leave him in a cemetery because they are angry at his actions (no inheritance will be left for them). Merchants come along and unload their haul of wine skins into the very grave the man is in. When his children come back to the gravesite three days later to see whether he is dead or alive, they find him drinking from those wine skins, and they say, "Even here your Creator has not abandoned you among the dead, but he has left you

among the living. Since this is what Heaven has meted out to you, we don't know what we can do for you" (32.i.3.E).[57] Although this story in no way comments directly upon the book of Esther, it does highlight some of the language that is not found in Esther and that can serve to draw out the religious implications of the text ("Creator" and "Heaven" language in particular).

The above example uses an intersecting verse (Prov 23:32) to make a comment on the base verse from Esther (2:1). However, this particular story does not relate to the book of Esther, even though it does—along with numerous other instances of this function—serve to imbue all of Esther Rabbah with more overtly religious tones. This is not the only way to use intersecting verses. Intersecting verses can be applied more directly to base verses from Esther and thus make explicitly religious that text in particular instead of altering the overall tone of the book.

### *Creating Dialogue or Events*

The authors/compilers of Esther Rabbah I sometimes create new dialogue or events for the book of Esther itself to make the text explicitly religious instead of using an intersecting verse from elsewhere in scripture. In the interpretation of Esth 2:5, the authors want to know why Mordecai was given the attribution "Judean" when he is a member of the tribe of Benjamin. They use Esth 3:2 and invented dialogue to explain this. When Mordecai refuses to bow down to Haman because of the idol on his chest (reasoning not present in MT Esther), "he affirmed the unity of God before everyone in the world" and said, "There is a Lord who is exalted above all who exalt, and how am I

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57. Unless otherwise noted, the translations of Esther Rabbah I come from Neusner, *Esther Rabbah I: An Analytical Translation*.

going to abandon him and bow down to an idol?" The connection to Esth 2:5 is the emendation of "Judean" to "unique" by changing a single letter (36.ii.3–4). This single example uses invented dialogue (Mordecai's response to Haman), invented circumstances (an idol on Haman's chest), and emended text to alter the message of Esth 2:5. A second example of invented dialogue applies to Esth 2:11 (via 2:7 for no apparent reason): Mordecai talks to himself as he paces in front of the women's house, whence Esther has been taken, saying, "How is it possible that this righteous woman can be married to an uncircumcised man? It must mean that some calamity is going to befall the Israelites, and through her they will be saved" (38.i.8).[58]

### *Exegeting Clause by Clause*

Intersecting verses are not the only means the authors/compilers of Esther Rabbah I used to draw out the religious nature of Esther. Another exegetical move is to interpret a verse from Esther clause by clause. This type of move always serves to explicate the text, but sometimes that explication involves giving Esther a more religious flavor. One such example is for Esth 2:1, specifically on the phrase "he remembered Vashti." An anonymous source asks why Vashti was killed if her actions had been proper but the death sentence improper. The answer: "Because she would not give permission to Ahasuerus to give permission to rebuild the house of the sanctuary, saying to him, 'What my ancestors have destroyed do you want to rebuild?'" (32.ii.3–4). Earlier comments in Esther Rabbah I explain that Vashti is a descendant of Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar (9.i.1). Nebuchadnezzar is the king who destroyed the Temple in Jerusalem. The rabbis

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58. Neusner also puts this story with the appropriate base verse at Esth 2:11 (42.i.1.O–Q).

seem to equate Ahasuerus with Artaxerxes,[59] who in Ezra 4 puts a stop to the efforts to rebuild the Temple (6.i.2). The compilers of Esther Rabbah I, then, blame Vashti, not Ahasuerus, for the cessation of the work on the Temple.

A second, more positive example of this kind of clause-by-clause exegesis of a verse from Esther is from Esther Rabbah I on Esth 2:5. Because of the use of the term “man” to identify Mordecai, the rabbis explain, “This teaches that Mordecai in his generation was equivalent to Moses in his generation,” and they expound upon the ways that Mordecai and Moses are equivalent (by standing up for their people and teaching Torah) (36.ii.1).

### *Comparing Structures*

Another method the authors/compilers of Esther Rabbah I use to draw out the religious nature of Esther is to present a structural feature of the book and find other attestations of that same feature in other places in the Hebrew Bible so as to equate an event or character with the rest of Jewish history.

One specific example connects Mordecai more than genealogically to other Israelite leaders (thus making Mordecai a leader of the people as well). After quoting Esth 2:4, an anonymous interpreter asks, “Who was the appropriate person for this task?” (35.i.1.B). Neusner supplies the connecting tissue (“The verse immediately following answers the question”; 35.i.1.C) between this question and the answer, which is a

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59. Ahasuerus, the name of the king in MT Esther, “ruled from 485–464 B.C.E.” (Darr, *Far More Precious than Jewels*, 167). However, MT Esther claims that Ahasuerus ruled soon after Nebuchadnezzar (who reigned in Babylon in the early sixth century), which cannot be true. Only the Targumim to Esther (and modern scholarship) identify Ahasuerus with Xerxes. The other rabbinic works identify Ahasuerus with Artaxerxes. It is this pairing that leads to “the important role the Temple plays in [the sages’] understanding of the *Book of Esther*” (Glickman, *Haman and the Jews*, 5n7). This emphasis on the Temple is not overly prominent in Esther Rabbah I.

quotation from Esth 2:5 identifying Mordecai. This same structure is applied to Ex 2:25; 3:1 and Moses; 1 Sam 8:22; 9:1 and Saul; 1 Sam 17:11, 12 and David; Judg 4:3, 4 and Deborah; and Judg 10:18; 11:1 and Jephthah. This overt connection between the story in Esther and Israelite history, especially specific characters in that history, is one of the ways that Esther Rabbah I makes Esther more explicitly religious. Another example of this structural comparison is related to Esth 2:5, as part of the clause-by-clause exegesis mentioned previously. The authors/compilers of Esther Rabbah see a correlation between the name of a person coming before or after the word "name" and that person's character as either wicked or righteous. Mordecai, whose personal name comes after "name," is one of the righteous, equated with Manoah, Kish, Saul, Elkanah, and Boaz, who are all introduced with similar phrasing. Their righteous designation is in part due to this word pattern also being applied to God: "But by my name the Lord I made me not known to them" (Ex 6:2) (36.ii.2).

***Reporting Dialogues between Sages***

The authors and compilers of Esther Rabbah I also use the method of dialogue between sages (similar to that created in the Babylonian Talmud) to add religious aspects to the book of Esther. One such example still follows an intersecting verse (Ps 106:3), and thus the discussion relates to who "'does righteousness at all times'?" (36.i.1.E). The answer is, unsurprisingly when considering the story of Esther, the one who raises an orphan (36.i.1.F). This first discussion of Ps 106:3 does not make the connection to Mordecai and Esther, but the following one does, by explicating Ps 106:3 clause by clause. Mordecai is the one who keeps justice and who does righteousness always because he

brought up an orphan (36.i.2). A third discussion expands the intersecting verse to Ps 106:3–4. Here Mordecai is connected to David, both of whom are favored by God, "by being ascribed to the tribe of Judah."[60] Thus Mordecai (and Esther) are the ones through whom God will work out salvation for Israel (36.i.3.A–B). Other dialogue between sages is given for Esth 2:15, which says that "Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her." R. Judah compares Esther to "an icon, which a thousand people see and pleases all of them." R. Nehemiah says that Esther, when compared to the Median and Persian women, is the prettiest. The anonymous rabbis, however, add "a supernatural aspect to the beauty contest"[61] because they expand the meaning of "all" to refer specifically to those above and below, that is, (with reference to Prov 3:4) to God and man (46.i.1).

### *Quoting a Sage*

Sometimes the authors or compilers of Esther Rabbah I do not recreate whole dialogues between rabbis but merely quote a single sage who said something related to the base verse from Esther. In a clause-by-clause exposition of Esth 2:7, which speaks of Esther as an orphan, R. Berekhiah quotes God in the name of R. Levi: "Said the Holy One, blessed be he, to Israel, 'You have wept: "we are to become orphans and fatherless" (Lam. 5:3).' By your lives, the redeemer whom I am going to provide for you in Media will have neither father nor mother'" (38.i.3).

In another case (52.i.2 on Esth 2:21), R. Berekhiah in the name of R. Levi offers reasoning for Bigthan and Teresh's plot against Ahasuerus: "The servants he [God] made

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60. Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, 72n7.

61. This is a comment from Neusner in *Esther Rabbah I: An Analytical Translation*, but it is not part of the text of Esther Rabbah (p. 151).

angry with their master so as to give greatness to the righteous," that is, Mordecai. In Esther Rabbah I, there is also a previous explanation for the assassination plot. Neusner notes that the first "gives a this-worldly explanation for the servants' rebellion," while the second "allows God a role in the narrative."[62] Because the book of Esther calls Bigthan and Teresh "the king's eunuchs" instead of "King Ahasuerus's eunuchs," the rabbis read this as God inciting Bigthan and Teresh against Ahasuerus, "ensuring that Mordechai will expose their plot and gain the favor of the king."[63]

The final pericope of Esther Rabbah I, that related to Esth 2:23, is another example of a single sage's quotation. In this case, "R. Levi in the name of R. Aha bar Shila of Kefar Temarta said, 'If in the book of a mortal [Book of the Chronicles] things work out in such a way, when the book of the Holy One, blessed be he, of which it is written, "And the Lord hearkened and heard and a book of remembrance was written before him" (Mal. 3:16), how much the more so!'" (54.i.1). Simon notes that the effect of recording the events in the Book of the Chronicles was "to bring about the deliverance of the Jews, when it was read to Ahasuerus" in Esth 6.[64] This comment "underlines the salvific power of God, even though God makes so rare an appearance in this narrative."[65]

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62. Ibid., 157.

63. Glickman, *Haman and the Jews*, 4. The idea that the text must refer to King Ahasuerus by name in order for the text to mean him unequivocally (instead of God) is found in a number of places in Esther Rabbah (e.g., 18.vi.9).

64. Freedman and Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*, 79n3.

65. Neusner, *Esther Rabbah I*, 44.

***Providing Basic Commentary***

A final method of interpretation the authors/compilers uses to draw out the implicit religious character of Esther is basic commentary. It is not exegesis of words or of clauses or through the interpretation of an intersecting verse. No dialogue is added to the narrative; no sages are named. For the commentary on Esth 2:20, the anonymous author uses the following interpretive introduction: “This teaches.” Esther’s silence regarding her heritage is compared to the silence of Rachel, Benjamin, and Saul, thus connecting Esther to her ancestors, Jewish leaders, just as Mordecai has also been connected to Jewish history.

## The Message of Esther Rabbah I

Despite the openness of midrash to various meanings and interpretations, Neusner argues, at least for Esther Rabbah I, that even in “‘another interpretation’ sequences . . . we do not find endless multiple meanings but a highly limited repertoire of a few cogent and wholly coherent meanings, to be replayed again and again.”[66] Thus, Neusner claims that Esther Rabbah I has a single message: “the nations are swine, their rulers foolish, and Israel is subjugated to them, though it should not be, because of its own sins. But just as God saved Israel in the past, so the salvation that Israel can attain will recapitulate the former ones. The theme, then, is Israel among the nations.”[67] Despite this claim of a single message, Neusner immediately gives another: “it is the critical role of Esther and Mordecai, particularly Mordecai, who, as sage, emerges in the position of messiah.”[68]

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66. Ibid., 145.

67. Ibid., 142.

Through the authors' or compilers' use of the seven hermeneutical tools laid out above, it is this messianic, salvific understanding of the role of Mordecai and Esther that is on display in Esther Rabbah's interpretation of Esth 2. Mordecai, then, is not just a good person. He is righteous, a leader of his people along the lines of Abraham, Moses, and David. Esther, too, is closely identified with her ancestors. God has an active role in the narrative of Esther Rabbah. In particular, God honors some characters and deposes others.

The seven interpretive tools are not mutually exclusive, but they have been categorized according to their dominant feature. The ultimate aim of this section is to highlight the variety of ways the authors and compilers of Esther Rabbah could perform a close reading of the text. One of the outcomes of this work is the connection of Esther to the rest of the Torah and to the history of Israel, bringing the already religious (though hidden) character of the text to the fore. Although only Esther Rabbah I has been considered for this case study, with an understanding of midrash as a genre, the likelihood is high that these or similar tools have been used in b. Megillah or Midrash Abba Gurion or any other midrash on Esther. The rest of this thesis will illustrate that these hermeneutical tools have been used in contemporary novels, though with different emphases (due to novels being a distinct genre). It is to these novels that we now turn.

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68. Ibid., 143.

## *Hadassah: One Night with the King*

### Introduction: Context and Plot

Written by Tommy Tenney with Mark Andrew Olsen in 2004 and later adapted to film, *Hadassah: One Night with the King* retells the story of Esther.[69] In this novel, the Esther story is set within a larger frame: Hadassah Kesselman, a Jewish bride-to-be, is presented with a letter written by Queen Esther to one of the potential brides of the next king of Persia; Hadassah is a descendant of this ancient woman. Thus, Esther's story is told by Esther herself as if she were writing a letter about her life to another young Jewish potential queen of Persia.

The tale is presented as a love story between the King Ahasuerus, here named Xerxes, and Esther, here more often called Hadassah or Star. But before the love story begins, Hadassah is orphaned when then-unknown assailants systematically murder the Jews of Babylon. Hadassah moves to Susa with Mordecai, her cousin and only living relative. Because of these events and her later abduction to the Persian palace, Hadassah is angry at God. Haman's role as a descendant of Agag is integral to the plot, but otherwise the events of the narrative closely follow those of Esther in the MT. Hadassah's friendships with Jesse (the eunuch named Hathach in MT Esther), Hegai, and Mordecai give Hadassah the tools and courage to succeed, especially once she regains her faith in God.

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69. Tommy Tenney has been involved in Christian ministry for more than three decades (Tommy Tenney, "Tommy Tenney: Still Chasing after God," interview by Craig von Buseck, Christian Broadcasting Network, accessed April 2, 2017, http://www1.cbn.com/tommy-tenney-still-chasing-after-god). With this background, Tenney approaches the text to draw out its implicit religious nature, sometimes sacrificing historical accuracy to do so.

## Making Explicit the Religious Nature of Esther

This section illustrates the ways Tenney connects the story of Esther to other aspects of Jewish history, but, in addition, this novel is unique in the way it connects the story of Esther to Jewish future (particularly the Holocaust). The novel remains fairly true to the story in the MT, but it expands the story to make the text more explicitly religious in tone. *Hadassah: One Night with the King*, not being sacred Jewish literature, does not replicate exactly the seven hermeneutical tools used in Esther Rabbah I to draw out the religious nature of the text. It does, however, use several, especially employing intersecting verses and creating dialogue and circumstances or events within the narrative.[70] Because midrashim and novels are two distinct genres, it makes sense that *Hadassah* cannot replicate exactly the tools used in Esther Rabbah I. To these three most prominent tools, Tenney adds an overall sense of religious language. Language about prayer and God, in particular, is folded into the narrative, unconnected from any reference to scripture or any new dialogue or event, and it is usually not integral to the plot, instead merely imbuing the novel with a more heightened religious tone overall.

### *Employing Intersecting Verses*

One of Tenney's most common devices for making Esther more explicitly religious is his use of "intersecting" verses to connect the story of Esther to the rest of Hebrew scripture and Jewish history. Intersecting verses come from elsewhere in scripture and are used tangentially to connect that scripture to what is happening in Esther at the time of its quotation. I've used scare quotation marks around "intersecting" because unlike Esther

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70. Although creating dialogue or events was a single tool used with Esther Rabbah I, it is split into two tools for both contemporary novels to better reflect these tools' power and frequency.

Rabbah I, *Hadassah* isn't set up in a verse-by-verse structure and thus does not place a verse from elsewhere in scripture at the beginning of a paragraph. However, the spirit of this tool is still very much at work in the novel. Tenney uses numerous references to and quotations of scripture throughout the narrative, but they are almost never cited as such.

The first major implementation of an intersecting verse begins in chapter 3. This chapter retells the story of Saul and Agag. Although there are no indications of quotations from 1 Sam 15, the text in which this story is originally told, the events are retold here, fictionalized in a way similar to how *Hadassah* as a whole fictionalizes MT Esther. The dialogue between Saul and Samuel in *Hadassah* is remarkably like that in MT Esther.[71] First Samuel 15 is retold in the context of the story of Esther as an etiology for why Haman hates the Jewish people. Haman is a descendant of Agag the Amalekite. The Amalekites fought the Hebrews as they were (disobediently) attempting to enter the promised land,[72] and so God, through Samuel, requires Saul and his army to place the Amalekites under the ban, completely destroying them. However, Saul disobeys God and spares Agag and the sheep and cattle (for a sacrifice).[73] In the MT, it is this event that causes God to reject Saul as king. In *Hadassah*, the event has an entirely different purpose. Although Samuel kills Agag after his capture in the MT, in *Hadassah*, an Amalekite woman (whom Saul has also not killed in disobedience to the ban) finds Agag,

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71. Cf., e.g., Samuel to Saul in *Hadassah* ("Why, then, are my ears suddenly full of the bleating of sheep and the lowing of oxen?" [Tenney, 37]) and 1 Sam 15:14 ("What then is this bleating of sheep in my ears, and the lowing of cattle that I hear?"). Unless otherwise noted, quotations of scripture come from the NRSV.

72. Num 14:40–45.

73. 1 Sam 15:8-9.

though he is still under capture, and becomes impregnated by him. She escapes, thus perpetuating the line of Agag.

Haman is of this line, and so the enmity between the Amalekites and the Israelites continues, coming to a head in the story of Esther.[74] Although Esth 3:1 and 10 describe Haman as "Hammedatha the Agagite's son," MT Esther contains no stated information on the importance of this epithet. It is thus an *implicit* reference to Jewish history, one that Tenney makes *explicit* in *Hadassah*.

At the end of *Hadassah*, Hadassah asks Mordecai if all the descendants of Agag have been killed via the new edict. His negative answer is the impetus for the second day permitted to the Jews to follow the edict.[75] Such reasoning is not present in MT Esther. Hadassah here connects the survival of Haman's sons to the unfulfillment of "Samuel's ancient order to Saul."[76] She wants "to finish what King Saul, five hundred years before, had failed to do. Exterminate the final ranks of Israel's oldest and most evil foe."[77] In MT Esther, the ten sons of Haman are killed on the first day of the edict, but Esther has them hanged from gallows on the second day anyway. So although the sons of Haman are killed in the biblical text, the reason for highlighting—and they are highlighted by being individually name—their deaths, other than to spite Haman, is unclear.[78] An astute reader

74. It does not become clear until much later in the novel, but Haman is aware of why he hates the Jews. It is not just some innate yet unexplainable hatred. It is because he has the role, "as a son of Amalek, a descendant of Agag . . . to exterminate the Jews" (Tenney, *Hadassah*, 280).

75. Ibid., 337–38.

76. Ibid., 337.

77. Ibid., 338.

78. Esth 9:7–10, 13–14.

of the biblical narrative, one familiar with the rest of the biblical canon, would supply for him- or herself this kind of reasoning, but Tenney makes that reasoning explicit.

Each section of the novel is given a title—always a character—and an epigraph. The first epigraph is from a fictional news article announcing the wedding of Hadassah Kesselman. The last is likewise a quotation from *The Jerusalem Star*. Thus these two epigraphs are not proper intersecting verses; they aren't verses at all. The sections in between, however, are given epigraphs from the MT of Esther. These quotations come from Esth 1:1; 2:7, 17; 3:2, 4, 10 (though not in that order) and relate to each section's title character.[79] For example, the first section is entitled "Haman, son of Hammedatha," and its epigraph is from Esth 3:10: " . . . the king removed his signet ring from his hand and gave it to Haman, son of Hammedatha the Agagite, the foe of the Jews."[80] In this section, Hadassah discusses how she came to be an orphan before a change in point of view results in the recounting of the story of Saul and Agag, king of the Amalekites. The final two chapters of this section are from still a third point of view and describe how Haman gains power and comes to be in the service of the king of Persia. These three narratives are all drawn together under the common theme of Haman as the descendant of Agag although nowhere in the text is there a direct mention of Esth 3:10. So although the epigraphs for the novel's sections are clear uses of biblical citations, they are from the book of Esther itself and not elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible and thus are not intersecting verses as defined by Esther Rabbah I.

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79. Note how these epigraphs only come from the first three chapters of MT Esther. The epigraphs do not reflect the contents of their corresponding section of *Hadassah*. However, this is similar to the *parashiyyot* of Esther Rabbah I, which also come only from the first few chapters of MT Esther.

80. Tenney, *Hadassah*, 25.

Several times throughout the novel, Tenney refers to Song of Songs. The first time he does so, he refers to the entire book, so although it is a broad “intersecting verse,” it nevertheless serves to connect the story of Esther to the rest of the canon, even if only vaguely. One of Hadassah’s biggest concerns before her night with King Xerxes is the morality of sleeping with a man who is not yet her husband. Slowly, she comes to believe that she is doing all she can and that she is “here for a good reason . . . that would reveal itself over time.”[81] Mordecai comforts Hadassah in her preparation for that night by “quoting passages from the Song of Solomon.”[82] As Hadassah’s night with Xerxes approaches, Mordecai refers again to Solomon and reminds Hadassah of “the part where King Solomon with a thousand wives fell in love with the simplicity of a shepherd girl, and he advised [Hadassah] to follow [Song of Songs’s] instructions concerning the marriage bed.”[83] Even these small and loose references to another book of the Hebrew Bible help focus the reader on the religious character of this story. This is an interaction between Esther and Mordecai that does not occur in MT Esther, and nowhere in MT Esther is there reference to Jewish law, per sexuality or otherwise. With the nod to morality and to Song of Songs, Tenney offers an interpretation of MT Esther that makes it more explicitly religious.

When Hadassah still cannot stop worrying about defiling herself, Mordecai urges her to see this night as the first night of an arranged marriage and reminds her of the story

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81. Ibid., 163.

82. Ibid. Hadassah herself refers to Song of Songs later in the story after her marriage to Xerxes. Certain bedroom behaviors she claims she “learned from the instructions of the Chamberlain, Hegai, and, yes, from the writings of Solomon” (ibid., 241).

83. Ibid., 190.

of Rebekah and Isaac, two of the many biblical figures who have an arranged marriage.[84] Just as Rebekah "trusted in the fact that God had ordained their union," so Hadassah trusts God and finds comfort. This intersecting verse gives biblical precedent to the love story in *Hadassah* by connecting Hadassah's situation to other biblical characters. Although the reference to Rebekah and Isaac is far removed from Esther in time, Tenney also refers to the story of Daniel, also a tale of diaspora.

In MT Esther there is a character named Hathach, a eunuch who runs messages between Esther and Mordecai. In *Hadassah*, Hathach is actually Jesse, the grandson of Rachel (Mordecai's Jewish housekeeper) and Hadassah's childhood friend. Jesse is taken from the city (like Hadassah) and made a eunuch in the palace. When Hadassah finally finds him in the palace, he tells her, "I am now Hathach. I hate it. My real name came from the line of David. I don't even know where Hathach came from. For all I know, it is some pagan god."[85] Hadassah comforts Jesse—now Hathach—by reminding him of the story of Daniel: "Remember our Jewish brothers Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah? They were all given pagan names when they entered royal service. And look how G-d remained with them and used them to accomplish His purposes."[86] Although not a direct quotation of a verse, this reference to a story in the Hebrew Bible connects the story of Esther to the entire body of Jewish scripture.

Hadassah goes also to Jesse/Hathach about the issue of breaking Jewish law during her night with King Xerxes, and his response, like Mordecai's, uses an

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84. Ibid., 177. The arrangement of the marriage of Isaac and Rebekah is in Gen 24.

85. Ibid., 169.

86. Ibid.

intersecting verse. She first wonders if “the Jewish code by which I vowed to live mention[s] a penalty for an act some might label fornication—even though it was coerced?”[87] Jesse doesn’t have an answer to her question, but he gives her an example from his own life by invoking the command of Gen 1:28: “be fruitful and multiply.” He says, “What the King’s men did left me incapable of obeying that commandment. Does that make me a nonperson? A non-Jew?”[88] Jesse’s use of a verse from Genesis shows that scripture is part of his regular vocabulary. This verse applies only tangentially to the story of Esther, but nevertheless its very presence helps draw out the religious character of the text.

Hadassah justifies some of her actions in the harem by appealing to Hebrew scripture. As she learns from Hegai about the king’s preferences, she shares these details with the other queen candidates. While she recognizes that this might make her appear weak, she knows instead that it will cause the other girls to like her and find her deserving of becoming queen. Although not quoting from scripture or even citing a specific reference, Hadassah writes, “This plan was scriptural . . . The Sacred Texts teach us to love God supremely, to honor our parents, to not lie or cheat or steal. When we follow these commandments, I believe He ordains our path so that what might seem like weakness turns to our advantage.”[89] Hadassah appeals to the ten commandments, although not calling them such, to defend her understanding of how God works for

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87. Ibid., 175.

88. Ibid.

89. Ibid., 180.

good.[90] Even without the intersecting verse allusion to the ten commandments, the language of Hadassah's speech is highly religious.

In terms of language for God used in *Hadassah*, "G-d" and "YHWH" are common (see the section on religious language and terminology for more on names for God in *Hadassah*). However, Hadassah once also uses the term "King of Kings."[91] Although Hadassah uses this terminology to describe God, it recalls language used in the Hebrew Bible for Babylonian and Persian kings. Daniel 2:37 applies the term to Nebuchadnezzar, and Ezra 7:12 applies it to Artaxerxes. Tenney, by using "King of Kings," is playing around with words. The term is used in the Hebrew Bible to describe earthly kings, but the New Testament takes it and applies it to God, which is exactly what Tenney does in *Hadassah*.[92] This is an example of how Tenney allows his experience in Christian ministry to inform the way he draws out the implicit religious nature of MT Esther.

*Hadassah*'s final reference to elsewhere in scripture is to the story of Ezra. After the return of some of the exiles to Jerusalem, Ezra, "a scribe skilled in the law of Moses," also goes to Jerusalem from Babylon in order "to study the law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach the statutes and ordinances."[93] In Tenney's novel, Hadassah plans to go with Ezra and others to "return across the deserts to live my last days in the land of my fathers."[94] This final "intersecting verse" connects the story of Esther to post-exilic

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90. See Ex 20:1–17; Deut 5:6–21.

91. Tenney, *Hadassah*, 300.

92. See 1 Tim 6:15; Rev 17:14.

93. Ezra 7:6, 10.

94. Tenney, *Hadassah*, 343.

writings. Unlike the references to the Holocaust or the exilarch (both discussed later), the reference to Ezra is a reference to a future event much nearer to the time of Esther itself.

### *Creating Dialogue*

By creating dialogue between characters in relation to or in the midst of events present in MT Esther, Tenney is able to emphasize explicitly religious characters and circumstances. These characters and circumstances may have only been implicitly religious in MT Esther, so like the editors or compilers of Esther Rabbah I, Tenney uses new dialogue to adjust the force of the text.

During Hadassah's early years with Mordecai, Mordecai tells her about the Amalekites and their relationship to the Israelites. Hadassah asks Mordecai about why the Amalekites attacked the Hebrews. He answers, "Because they were servants of the Evil One, the spirit who hates G-d. And not only does that spirit hate *G-d*, but because we are His chosen people, he hates *us* very fiercely, too. And the Amalekites worship either him or one of his foulest spirits."[95] This dialogue is a new creation within the story of Esther, and, additionally, nothing in Num 14 speaks of the Amalekites' worship of "the Evil One."[96] By creating this exchange between Mordecai and Hadassah, Tenney expands the religious character not only of Esther but also of Num 14.

One of the most well-known parts of the book of Esther involves Mordecai's command that she not reveal her Jewishness. This command is told almost

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95. Ibid., 72.

96. Numbers 14:41-45 details how the Amalekites struck down the Israelites as they attempted to enter the promised land. God has already decreed that no Israelite over the age of twenty (save Joshua and Caleb) would enter the promised land, but when the Israelites try to disobey God, they are attacked by the Amalekites. There is no reference in this story to the worship practices or allegiances of the Amalekites. The events are due only to the disobedience of the people.

parenthetically in the narrative.[97] The story does not explain why Mordecai commands Esther not to say anything about her heritage, and the dangers for Jews in Persia are not outlined. Tenney develops this idea further, placing even greater emphasis on the need for secrecy. Hegai questions Hadassah's secrecy ("Why? Jews are well respected, even revered, throughout the kingdom."[98]), but at this point in Tenney's novel, Mordecai and Hadassah know who killed their family and that those people are powerful members of palace life. Despite his command, Mordecai urges her, "Just stay as observant a Jew as you can. Privately, G-d will understand the things you are compelled to do upon pain of death. And you *will* be forced to break some commandments. But try your very best not to. Remember who you are, even if you keep it silent. Keep up your prayers to the Lord. Do not follow the others—the common sentiment—but remember what I taught you about the Word of G-d."[99] An otherwise unexplained command by Mordecai, the command in *Hadassah* is intimately connected to religious matters. It is her Jewishness itself that puts Hadassah in danger. However, that danger does not permit Hadassah to abandon her faith altogether.

Also through new dialogue, Tenney expands the meaning of one of the most famous lines in the book of Esther: "Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this."[100] This sentiment is expressed, not only when Hadassah plans to approach Xerxes without permission, but also throughout the novel. MT Esther reveals no actor.

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97. Esth 2:10. The CEB, in fact, does place this command in parentheses.

98. Tenney, *Hadassah*, 147. In *The Gilded Chamber*, it is not for religious reasons that Mordechai asks Esther to keep her heritage a secret. Instead, it is for political reasons. He is afraid "his position at court would be compromised if he were exposed as a Jew" (Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 34).

99. Tenney, *Hadassah*, 135.

100. Esth 4:14.

However, in the novel, the actor is unambiguous—God—even if the specifics are still unknown. Hadassah herself once tells Jesse, "Somehow I believe all of this is part of my destiny—even though I don't understand it all yet."[101] Although this quotation just has a vague comment about "destiny," the understanding is that God's hand is in destiny.[102] Mordecai speaks to that idea and tells Hadassah, "I do not know why G-d allowed you to be taken in such a manner. I do not know His mind or His intricate reasons. But I know He has a purpose for you. I am convinced He has placed you here deliberately. . . . He can do mighty things through us. He can reveal a purpose for our suffering."[103] By connecting ideas about destiny explicitly to God's role in the narrative, Tenney combats the understanding of MT Esther as a secular text that depends on fate and coincidence.

Although the previous paragraph discusses how the sentiment of Esther 4:14 is expressed in *Hadassah* earlier than the reader familiar with MT Esther would expect, still the closest reference to that verse in *Hadassah* is in exactly the part of the narrative matching the context of it in MT Esther. But even here, Tenney expands the conversation. Just like in the MT, this exchange between Mordecai and Hadassah takes place through a mediator (Jesse/Hathach), for it is unsafe for Hadassah to go to Mordecai herself. Tenney paraphrases Mordecai's words from 4:13 and puts them into Jesse's mouth ("He said you will most likely die with all the other Jews when the truth is known and the order is carried out."), but he uses the exact words of Mordecai as found in Esth 4:14: "Furthermore, if you remain silent now, G-d will surely raise a deliverer from some

101. Tenney, *Hadassah*, 175.

102. Hadassah herself explicitly connects her idea of destiny to God later: "I could feel His Spirit within me, fortifying my resolve and thrilling me with a sense of purpose and destiny I had never known before" (Ibid., 197).

103. Ibid., 178.

other source. But you and your father's house would perish forever in the process . . . Who knows, Hadassah, but what [sic] you attained the Palace for such a time as this?"[104] MT Esther never answers this rhetorical question; the narrative just moves on. However, in totally new dialogue in *Hadassah*, Mordecai tells Hadassah, "You were faithful to the position where G-d placed you. You were brought to the Palace for this purpose. To save our people."[105] So the answer to Mordecai's original question is that Hadassah was meant to become queen so that she could save the Jews from destruction. However, that isn't due to fate or chance or coincidence. *God* has put her in that position.

Tenney creates a new conversation between Hadassah and Jesse (the eunuch Hathach) that allows Hadassah to explicitly talk about her faith in God despite her circumstances. Jesse asks her if she believes in God, and Hadassah responds, "I didn't a year ago. Not truly. But today I can tell you I couldn't live a moment without Him. I feel His presence as strongly as I feel you right here and now."[106] Hadassah's arrival at the palace and preparation for her night with the king have been the experiences through which she has come to know God personally and through which her anger at God dissipates.

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104. Ibid., 294. Esther 4:13–14 reads, "Mordecai told them to reply to Esther: 'Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this.'" This important scene in Esther is surprisingly not made at all explicitly religious in *The Gilded Chamber*. The text there is almost identical to MT Esther: "This was his reply: 'Do not imagine in your heart that you, of all the Jews, will escape because you are in the king's palace. If you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another place. But you and your father's house will perish . . . '" (Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 235). Hathach doesn't relate Mordechai's final statement until a few paragraphs later: "Who knows, Hadassah, if it was not for this purpose that you have come into royalty" (ibid., 236).

105. Tenney, *Hadassah*, 331.

106. Ibid., 193.

One final aspect of created dialogue in *Hadassah* is direct speech in the form of prayer to God. Oftentimes Hadassah prays directly to God, instead of narrating the act of prayer; because the Esther of MT Esther never prays, all of the prayers in *Hadassah* are created dialogue. As Hadassah is transported from the harem to the king's chamber for her first night with Xerxes, she maintains communication with God through prayer. She thanks God and asks for peace.[107] After that first night, she prays to God, "*Oh, YHWH . . . show me your way and help me to trust you in all this uncertainty*."[108] Hadassah's understanding of the concept of destiny returns near the end of the novel in another prayer. Hadassah prays, saying, "I embrace your plan, your destiny for this moment. I want no other outcome but the one you have ordained. Please do not let me take one step outside your will."[109] Hadassah has moved from thinking about her own destiny and its connection to God to seeing even her one small life as a piece of God's destiny ("your destiny"). Although just stating that the characters of the novel pray is enough to draw out the implicitly religious character of MT Esther, giving words to some of those prayers increases that change in narrative tone.

### *Creating Circumstances and Events*

New circumstances and events (including new characters or relationships) help fill in some of the gaps in the narrative of MT Esther. Tenney uses many of his new scenes to

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107. Ibid., 203, 205.

108. Ibid., 226.

109. Ibid., 303.

tie Esther to Jewish history and future and to make explicitly religious the already implicitly religious text of MT Esther.

First of all, Tenney creates in *Hadassah* a modern-day frame for the story of Esther. This frame, that of a young bride-to-be discovering that she is a descendant of a Persian queen and reading the letter Queen Esther once wrote to said ancestor, is only vaguely religious itself but serves to position the reader (and at the end, remind the reader) to see the biblical story of Esther as one with a highly, though not yet explicit, religious nature. In this scene, modern-day Hadassah makes a reference to the Tanakh.[110] Hadassah Kesselman, at the end, looks out over Jerusalem, reminisces about the story she has read, and summarizes a piece of what it taught her: "Here was the ancestral home of the Jewish people—beloved children of the Most High G-d who always, even when He is silent, watches over His own."[111] This is one of the final points of the novel, and it is the only time Tenney makes a reference to MT Esther's silence of the subject of religion. God might be silent in that text, but the text is still religious. Tenney seeks to make that religious nature explicit by retelling the story the way he does. The Hadassah Kesselman frame makes this point clear and also connects the story of Esther to Jewish future.

The first event Tenney creates for ancient Hadassah is the death of her family. In the MT, Esther is described as an orphan who has been adopted by her only living relative, Mordecai. Tenney offers an explanation for these circumstances. Hadassah, at ten years old, is living with her family in Babylon when the Jews of Babylon are systematically slaughtered (Hadassah, and the reader, will come to learn that it is Haman

110. Ibid., 17.

111. Ibid., 349.

and his men who kill her family). Hadassah refuses to believe that her survival is due to chance or luck. Instead, she thanks God for circumstances that she could not understand at the time, noting, for example, that "The Lord must have stilled [her] tongue" so that she could not cry out and reveal her position.[112] Just as the Hadassah Kesselman frame connects Esther to Jewish future, so does this event (and others). Haman and his followers sport swastikas on their clothing or as tattoos.[113] Tenney describes Haman's bloodthirst for the Jews (his destruction of them in Babylon and his failure to destroy them in Susa and throughout the Persian empire) as an ancient holocaust.[114] By giving Hadassah a backstory, Tenney connects the story of Esther to the future suffering of the Jews and also begins to give Hadassah language that dispels the myth of chance or coincidence in her life.

Tenney also creates an event that involves a completely new character. Jacob, a priest, comes to stay with Mordecai and Hadassah on his way from Jerusalem after bringing offerings to the new temple. During his visit, he speaks eloquently about the presence of God. This conversation affects the faiths of the two main characters in powerful ways. Mordecai gains a renewed "fervor toward G-d," but Hadassah is "filled with a fresh resentment" toward God because she has now had to reckon with the reality of God and thus the trauma that befell her as a child.[115] The faith (or lack thereof) of the characters in the novel is the strongest avenue through which Tenney makes the religious

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112. Ibid., 29.

113. Tenney never uses the term "swastika," instead describing the shape as a twisted cross (see, e.g., ibid., 152).

114. Ibid., 65.

115. Ibid., 82.

nature of MT Esther explicit, and this event with Jacob sets up those faiths, attitudes toward God that will persist and yet develop throughout the novel.

In Esth 2:11, Mordecai paces in front of the place where Esther is held "to learn how Esther was and how she fared." The text is not clear, however, on how Mordecai learns this information; is it through Esther herself or someone else? Tenney writes his narrative as if the information comes through secret nighttime meetings with Hadassah. On the occasion of their first such rendezvous, Hadassah is still in a place of frustration and resentment toward God. However, after speaking with Mordecai, she feels "the presence of G-d himself" and hears God speaking to her.[116] This is the first time Hadassah actively prays in the novel, and it is a turning point in her attitude toward God and toward her situation. Hadassah, after communing with God, notes,

> My rejection and resentment had broken G-d's heart as badly as all the tragedies that had ever scarred my life. I resolved there and then to try and atone for the pain I had caused Him with every minute left to me on earth. I was a Jew in spirit now, not just by lineage. And from that fateful morning on, I found that I could feel His presence more in that pagan, foreign environment than I ever had in the familiar confines of Mordecai's home. It truly seemed He was flanking my steps, a silent yet wise companion, His Spirit whispering into my innermost being words of instruction and exhortation. G-d spoke to me about my challenges ahead. The first words of wisdom that came to me had to do with my upcoming night with the King.

By introducing a scene only possibly hinted at in MT Esther, Tenney continues the transformation of Hadassah's character, which causes or alters many of the later plot points and explains the increase in religious language in the novel.

Tenney creates a love story out of the story of Esther. Briefly, the author of MT Esther states, "The king loved Esther more than all the other women; of all the virgins she won his favor and devotion, so that he set the royal crown on her head and made her

116. Ibid., 153.

queen instead of Vashti."[117] However, Tenney goes into great detail to describe how this love came to be. It begins even before Hadassah's night with Xerxes. She prays for "freedom from fear and revulsion, or even an unquenchable desire for the man."[118] By praying specifically about her first night with Xerxes, Hadassah sees God in every aspect of her story. God does give Hadassah the desire for which she asks. After the king's return from a four-year campaign against Greece, Hadassah reflects, "It was as if G-d had given me a mad love for the man. An irrational one, perhaps, but undeniable nevertheless."[119] Although the heart of *Hadassah* is a love story, Tenney's explicitly religious language puts God at the center as the cause and sustainer of their love.

### *Inserting Explicit Language and Terminology*

Although adding explicit language and terminology to the narrative can be understood as happening in both the creation of dialogue and of circumstances and events, it deserves its own category because the novel is imbued with explicitly religious language and terminology that isn't a part of a larger new creation or that does not substantially alter the plot. The examples in this section are not at all exhaustive because Tenney fully saturates the text with religious themes and language.

For example, at the very beginning of Hadassah's letter to the potential new queen, Hadassah mentions why she has picked out this specific girl: she has reason to believe she's Jewish. Hadassah writes, "I spotted you praying in the Palace orchard

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117. Esth 2:17.

118. Tenney, *Hadassah*, 189.

119. Ibid., 269.

yesterday morning . . . From the manner of your prayer I'm convinced you must be a follower of YHWH, like me. That you are a Jewess and follow the living G-d is the supreme factor in my decision to contact you in this manner."[120] The language of prayer and names for God are spread throughout the narrative, even in parts that have no feasible counterpart in MT Esther.

Reflecting on her preparation for and the events of her first night with Xerxes, Hadassah writes an extended muse about God. She says, "YHWH is a righteous G-d, I know, a G-d of the law. But He is also a gracious G-d who sees our hearts, our intentions, who meets us in the very difficult and nuanced situations where our lives take us."[121] This is who Hadassah understands God to be based on her own experiences of God. She talks about God's "vast and all-loving arms," God's "righteousness and power," and God's "jealous anger."[122] Hadassah often refers to God as her father or as "Lord."[123] These are all vague references to some of the descriptions of God found in the Hebrew Bible. Despite their vagueness, their presence in the text is more than the total absence of reference to God in MT Esther, so they serve their purpose of drawing out the religious character of the text.

It is clear in MT Esther that Esther and Mordecai are Jews, but no explanation is given for the secrecy of their heritage and faith. Tenney describes how Esther and Mordecai live as well as they can as Jews while still not revealing this to any non-Jews. In order to talk about this situation, Tenney has to add much religious terminology. For

120. Ibid., 21.

121. Ibid., 215.

122. Ibid., 301.

123. See, e.g., ibid., 300, 303, 304.

example, Hadassah comments that “Mordecai was a secret and yet a dedicated, observant Jew—with but one notable exception: neither of us attended services at the local synagogue.”[124] To explain Mordecai’s one weakness regarding his Jewishness, Tenney has to mention the synagogue, a term never brought up in MT Esther. Tenney also has to explain Hadassah’s knowledge of her people’s customs, so he makes references to Hebrew ceremonies, traditions, and observances. Tenney also has Mordecai tell Hadassah “tales of this faraway place called the Lard of Promise that was supposed to be our homeland.”[125] All of these remarks at the beginning of the novel to explain Hadassah’s relationship to her Jewish heritage serve as setups for events that occur later in the novel.

At times during Hadassah’s childhood, Jewish visitors from across the empire would stop at Mordecai’s house for a safe resting place on their journeys. After greeting these visitors (with phrases such as, “May our Lord YHWH bless you for your hospitality”), Mordecai would ask them about the temple, the sacrifices, and the Shechinah.[126] Terms like these help to imbue the entire novel with religious tones.

When Hadassah begins praying regularly, more for communication with God than for the fulfillment of the law, the rest of the novel becomes imbued with explicitly religious tones. Hadassah’s faith has blossomed and become her own, and thus God becomes more a part of her life than before. She sets aside special time for prayer but also prays whenever she can multitask in such a way (while taking a myrrh bath or receiving a massage, for example).[127] Tenney does not always relate the wording of her prayers

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124. Ibid., 65.

125. Ibid., 68.

126. Ibid., 74–75.

(examples of Tenney providing the exact wording are included in the earlier section on created dialogue), but sometimes he does note the subject matter of them. For example, after Hadassah's first night with Xerxes, she "simply asked G-d to give [her] peace and direction."[128] On another occasion, while waiting for Xerxes to call her to him again, Hadassah "implored G-d to again give [her] purpose and direction."[129] Because of the setup in the rest of the novel for Hadassah's prayer life in the palace (not to mention the use of "G-d" here), Tenney does not even have to say that Hadassah prays; he does not have to be that heavy handed to alert the reader that this is an explicitly religious text.

MT Esther has so little religious language, there is not even much about pagan religions or the religious life of the palace. This type of language is much more important for *The Gilded Chamber*, treated next, than *Hadassah*. However, the novel does have a couple of examples. Haman, reflecting on his invitation to Hadassah's banquet, says, "I am truly blessed by the gods."[130] A second reference to pagan religions comes from the mouth of Xerxes; he calls on "the name of our god Ahura."[131] Ahura is a Zoroastrian god, a character whose presence (or at least name) would make sense in both MT Esther and *Hadassah*. These are the only two references of their kind in *Hadassah*, but this lack—which is at least less than in MT Esther—is not strongly felt because *Hadassah* is filled with so much Jewish language.

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127. Ibid., 161. Hadassah's description of her new attitude toward her days begins here, but the practices continue throughout the rest of the novel.

128. Ibid., 219.

129. Ibid., 228.

130. Ibid., 312.

131. Ibid., 319.

Combatting the aspect of chance in the narrative, Tenney (through his characters) ascribes to God credit for many of the circumstances. These aren't necessarily new circumstances or even new dialogue within events originally described in MT Esther. Instead Tenney just looks at the story in a different way, thus making the text explicitly religious. For example, Hadassah narrates that during her first night with Xerxes, she and the king discuss many topics; they talk about "things Hegai had never prepared [her] to converse about. Only G-d himself prepared [her] for that night."[132] Simple references like this to "G-d" saturate the novel.

One of the most glaring omissions in MT Esther is any reference to prayer. As has been shown multiple times already, prayer is one of the main additions Tenney makes to the story to give it a more explicitly religious flavor. Comparing one specific passage from MT Esther and one from *Hadassah* highlights this kind of addition because the circumstances are identical—Tenney practically quotes from MT Esther—except for a small change that makes a big difference in the reading of this particular event.

| MT Esther | *Hadassah* |
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| Then Esther said in reply to Mordecai: "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish."[133] | I sent Jesse to find Mordecai and tell him this: "Please go home, assemble all the Jews in Susa and ask them to fast and pray for me for three days. My handmaidens and I will do the same. Then I will go in to the King unbidden, even though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish."[134] |

Hadassah asks Mordecai and the Jews of Susa to fast and *pray for her*. Esther in the MT only mentions fasting. It is a slight change, but because of the change's content, it draws

132. Ibid., 216.

133. Esth 4:15-17.

134. Tenney, *Hadassah*, 296–97.

out the religious nature of the story of Esther. Hadassah, as narrator, then explains what those three days were like for her: "During those three days I prayed by the hour, simply pleading and imploring and, yes, cajoling Him to show me why He would visit such a fate upon His people—why He would allow their systematic deaths in this way. And the more I spoke with him, the more I was certain He was answering, quietly exhorting me to have faith and remain intent on Him."[135] This entire paragraph (and a few on either side of it) is unique to *Hadassah*. In MT Esther, as soon as Mordecai leaves to do as Esther has said, the three days are over and Esther goes to the palace.[136] The *Hadassah* additions compound the simple, slightly religious, reference to fasting.

There are two references to the idea of an afterlife in *Hadassah*. Hadassah, anticipating her own death, begins to think about "the hereafter. A reunion with my family. With my mother, who had suffered the same form of death."[137] Mordecai, when guards come for him in order to bring him to Xerxes to be honored, believes that he is being taken to his death. He "believed himself on the way to heaven" and did not expect to see Xerxes and Haman "after the passing of his soul."[138] Neither reference reflects the

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135. Ibid., 297.

136. Esth 5:1: "On the third day Esther put on her royal robes and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, opposite the king's hall. The king was sitting on his royal throne inside the palace opposite the entrance to the palace."

137. Tenney, *Hadassah*, 300.

138. Ibid., 320.

biblical concept of the afterlife.[139] However, such references still add to the religious character of this text.[140]

Although MT Esther notes that the king could not sleep after his banquet with Esther, it does not give a reason. Tenney attempts to fill this gap in the text. Hadassah wonders about what may have caused Xerxes's insomnia—indigestion, bewilderment, palace concerns—but she does not seriously consider any of these options, knowing that "it was the Spirit of the Most High sent down to trouble his slumber and cast his attention in a direction of G-d's own choosing."[141] By filling the gap in the narrative with religious language, God, not fate or chance, is the reason for Mordecai's salvation and honor. When Haman learns he has to honor Mordecai, he thinks that this is "some sort of diabolical coincidence."[142] In this way Tenney does not cast off the language of coincidence, but he does modify it. Hadassah then comments that it is a coincidence, sure, but one "entirely divine."[143] This turn of events is one of irony, even in MT Esther. Tenney keeps the irony but attributes it explicitly to God: "For several hours the streets of Susa bore tribute to one of YHWH's most delicious ironies."[144]

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139. The Hebrew Bible does not mention heaven, and it does not have a concept of the soul apart from the body. The biblical witness indicates that "the dead go down to Sheol, a king of Hades, where they live an ethereal, shadowy existence" (Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik, "Afterlife," in vol. 2 of *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik [Jerusalem: Keter, 1971], 338). However, von Rad explains that "the Hebrew did not distinguish between the intellectual and the vital function of the body" and that we should not, for this reason, translate all occurrences of שנפ as "soul" (Gerhard von Rad, *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions*, vol. 1 of *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker [New York: Harper & Row, 1962], 153). The *nephesh* "dwells in the 'flesh' (Deut. XXII.23), though it is clearly distinguished from it (Is. X.18)" (ibid.).

140. This might be another example, like the reference to the phrase "King of Kings," through which Tenney reveals his hand as a Christian.

141. Tenney, *Hadassah*, 314.

142. Ibid., 319.

143. Ibid.

In *Hadassah*, after the first Purim, Mordecai becomes known as the exilarch. He has become the liberator of the Jewish people and "leader of those in exile."[145] The exilarch is a historical figure, the layleader of the Jews in Babylon, but the connection to Mordecai is Tenney's invention.[146] This connection, however, like Haman's connection to the Nazis, links the story of Esther to Jewish future.

The entire narrative of Esther is reframed in *Hadassah*. There is no possible way to interpret this story as one divorced from religion. Hadassah herself shuts down any secular interpretation of the events of her life: "Our whole people could have been wiped out forever had I not listened to the voice of G-d and those He sent to counsel me . . . In fact, you yourself [writing to the queen candidate] would not be alive if I had not heeded the sage advice of my own mentor, along with the inner voice of G-d's Spirit."[147]

Esther is portrayed as a prudent and thoughtful character in the Hebrew text, especially as the rabbis have interpreted it. She is "the ideal Jewish woman: Modest, beautiful, and obedient," staying "faithful both to her God and to her people in the face of life-threatening danger" in clever and intelligent ways.[148] However, Hadassah critiques this understanding of her role early in the novel. She writes to the new candidate for queen, "The right approach demands more than just prudence or solemnity. It calls for G-

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144. Ibid., 322.

145. Ibid., 335.

146. Some rabbinic sources "trace the origin of the institution [of the exilarch] to the last years of the exile of Jehoiachin, on the basis of II Kings 25:27" (Eliezer Bashan, "Exilarch," in vol. 6 of *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik [Jerusalem: Keter, 1971], 1023). However, "the first clear evidence of the existence of the exilarch comes in the middle of the second century C.E." (ibid.). The idea that Mordecai was the first exilarch is thus quite unfounded.

147. Tenney, *Hadassah*, 23.

148. Darr, *Far More Precious than Jewels*, 186.

d's anointing and a healthy dose of wisdom gleaned from the Sacred Texts."[149] Even when there is not an explicit reference to any text or event, Tenney gives Hadassah and others the language of "Sacred Texts," reminding the reader that this story does not occur in a vacuum but instead takes place within the context of the larger Jewish narrative. Tenney here pushes against a secular understanding of Esther's character; Hadassah sees everything as a result of God's plan for her life and the lives of all Jews.

All of these examples, and many others like them, especially because of their sheer number, imbue the story of Esther with religious significance.

## Conclusion: The Message of *Hadassah*

Tenney has spent the entirety of his novel attempting to make the religious character of MT Esther more explicit by connecting the narrative to other parts of scripture; creating new dialogue, circumstances, and events; or filling the narrative with basic religious language. Much of this work has been done subtly but clearly. However, just in case the reader has somehow missed the point, Tenney, through Hadassah's voice, concludes the novel with heavy-handed comments:

> Of course, there is another character in this drama, the One who, despite our limited view of circumstances, watched and cared for His people through every twist and turn. He is the One who oversaw its whole outcome—and with whom I still revel in a rich and amazing relationship. He is YHWH, the G-d of my fathers. . . . I do feel His Spirit with me, I speak to Him constantly, and sometimes at the oddest of moments—watching a sunset over the Palace mount, holding a small child, walking with Mordecai or Jesse—I feel his presence as vividly as ever.[150]

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149. Tenney, *Hadassah*, 22.

150. Ibid., 342.

Tenney doesn't need to say that God is a character in this story. He has made that obvious by using interpretive tools to read into the story of Esther and draw out its implicit religious nature. However, this summary comment does bring together what Hadassah has been saying about God and her relationship with God throughout the novel, and it drives home for the reader the importance of God's role in the story of Esther.

## ***The Gilded Chamber***

### Introduction: Context and Plot

*The Gilded Chamber: A Novel of Queen Esther*, written by Rebecca Kohn in 2004, like *Hadassah*, also makes the implicit religious nature of MT Esther more explicit by using the same four hermeneutical tools. The effect for Kohn's novel, however, is completely different. Whereas Tenney creates a love story out of the relationship between Esther and Ahasuerus, Kohn explores Esther's sense of duty in her relationship to Ahasuerus (here called Xerxes, like in *Hadassah*) despite her love for her cousin and betrothed, Mordechai (also known as Marduka the Babylonian[151]). Compared to *Hadassah*, *The Gilded Chamber* has much more of an emphasis on Zoroastrian and Babylonian religion, which does create an impact on the overall tone of the novel. Thus, the religious nature of MT Esther made explicit by Kohn is more widespread. *The Gilded Chamber* also has a strong emphasis on Jewish law, and the right keeping of that law is a concern for Kohn's Esther, especially in relation to idolatry.

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151. Mordecai is the Hebraized form of the name Marduka, from Marduk, the Babylonian god. Marduka is the name of an administrator in Susa known from a text with dating similar to Esther's, either the end of Darius's reign or the beginning of Xerxes's (Carey A. Moore, *Esther: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, The Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971], L, 19).

Kohn takes greater liberty with the text of MT Esther than Tenney does. Part of this has to do with how highly influenced by rabbinic tradition Kohn's novel is.[152] Another distinctive to *The Gilded Chamber* is how negative the Esther character is about her situation. From the beginning, Esther lays out the sorrow to come. When even just relaying the story of Vashti's banishment, she calls the king's advisors the "authors of my misfortune."[153] Toward the end of the novel, she laments, "I would have given any of God's gifts to me, my health or my youth, my sight or my teeth, to have escaped the life of the palace, to be spared what I had become."[154]

Esther never comes to love the king, unlike Hadassah in Tenney's novel. He is not the powerful and loving king he is in *Hadassah*, and it is only with God's help (and Ishtar's) that Esther has any desire for him at all. Vashti's role in this novel is greater than in any of the other studied texts. She is an active enemy, working through her son, Haman, and Haman's wife, Zeresh. Mordechai is an almost entirely peripheral character, replaced by Esther's servant Puah and her friends in the harem.

The Esther in this novel is also an orphan, her father and mother dying in a violent revolt and childbirth, respectively, on the same day. As the novel progresses, it follows the main plot points of MT Esther with some significant modifications, and while the end of MT Esther is present in *The Gilded Chamber* (meaning that Purim is instigated and the Jews are delivered from Haman's decree), Kohn's story does not end there. The final scene of the novel is "an unfaithful continuation by reversing the outcome of the

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152. Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries*, 103.

153. Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 30.

154. Ibid., 269.

narrative."[155] Xerxes is killed by his own son at Vashti's bidding, and Esther, Puah, and Hathach escape to Ecbatana, where Esther waits for Mordechai to join them.

Much of *The Gilded Chamber* is about Esther justifying her actions on the basis of religion. As long as she does not commit idolatry, she reasons, God will understand everything else on which she has to compromise. When idolatry seems to be the only option, she uses Freni's amulet as a buffer and convinces herself that she is praying to God and not worshipping Ishtar. Even when she finally has to betray Mordechai by going in to the king for the first time, she explains to herself that because she is dressed like Ishtar, she isn't going to the king as herself and therefore isn't turning her back on Mordechai.

## Making Explicit MT Esther's Religious Nature

Kohn uses the same four main interpretive tools as Tenney to draw out the religious nature of MT Esther: intersecting verses, creating dialogue and circumstances or events, and imbuing the text with religious language and terminology. However, the specific ways Kohn uses these tools are distinct from Tenney, and so while the basic effect is the same—making explicit the implicit religious nature of the biblical text—the details of that effect are entirely unique.

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155. Swindell, *Reworking the Bible*, 172.

***Employing Intersecting Verses***

Like the authors of Esther Rabbah and *Hadassah*, Kohn uses “intersecting” verses to connect the events of Esther to the rest of Jewish history and scripture. Like in *Hadassah*, these are rarely truly intersecting and most often not direct quotations.

Kohn uses her only true intersecting verse as an epigraph for the novel on the acknowledgments page: “Vast floods cannot quench love, Nor rivers drown it —Song of Solomon 8:7). This is the single time she cites a biblical verse and gives the reference for it. Unfortunately, this verse is disconnected from the text by its placement in the front matter. However, it does foreshadow the enduring love Esther has for Mordechai, her cousin and betrothed, and it claims that Esther’s love for Mordechai is scripturally valid. Kohn’s use of scripture from Song of Songs is in stark contrast to Tenney’s. In *Hadassah*, it is *Mordecai* who quotes from Song of Songs, and he is doing so to comfort and encourage Hadassah before her night with Xerxes. Hadassah allows herself to love Xerxes in part because of Mordecai’s reminder about this poetry. So although the epigraph in *The Gilded Chamber* is disconnected from the text, it sets the religious tone of the novel: this will not be a secular text.

Critiquing the Jews who assimilated into Babylonian culture and religion, Esther notes that these Jews have forgotten “that King Nebuchadnezzar had exiled their grandparents from Jerusalem.”[156] This is a reference to the events of 597 and 587/6, the deportation of Jews to Babylon.[157] Although not citing a verse from scripture here, Esther

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156. Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 2.

157. See 2 Kgs 25.

is clearly familiar with Jewish history and uses references to it to critique even her own people.

Several times throughout the novel, Esther quotes from Ps 23. For example, when she is first captured by soldiers, she narrates, “My bones collapsed, and the light left my eyes. I walked in the valley overshadowed by death and my heart grew cold.”[158] The phrase *valley overshadowed by death* is from Ps 23:4. CEB and NRSV translate this as “the darkest valley,” but NRSV gives a note saying, “Or *the valley of the shadow of death*.” Kohn recontextualizes this reference. In Ps 23, the psalmist says that even in this dark, dangerous place, he or she will not be afraid because God is present. Esther, however, makes no mention of God. The place she is in is dark and dangerous, but she does not feel comforted in any way. Esther’s anger toward God seems to come and go in waves in the novel. It returns with full force after she miscarries and learns about Haman’s decree. She bitterly says, “I knew that whatever God gave me with one hand, He took away with the other. However many times I had found my way out of the valley overshadowed by death, the imprint of my footsteps remained behind.”[159] Even this much later in the novel, Esther still has no conception of God being with her in the darkness. She even gives herself credit for finding a way out of her periods of darkness. Despite its indication of Esther’s rough relationship with and conception of God, this intersecting verse still does its job of connecting the story of Esther to the rest of Jewish scripture.

The death of Esther’s mother (in childbirth to a younger sibling) causes deep distress for Esther. The language of creation gives her words to describe how she feels in

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158. Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber,* 33.

159. Ibid., 228.

this moment. She narrates, "It seemed as if God had reversed his creation and all that had been separated—light from dark and ocean from firmament—was joined into a great nothingness."[160] Esther's words refer to God's actions on the first two days of creation: the creation of light and its separation from the darkness (the creation of day and night) and the creation of a dome (a firmament) to separate the waters above and below the dome (the creation of heaven and the waters from which God would next create the earth).[161] Esther's world is so shaken by her mother's death that she imagines creation is being undone. Everything that seemed sure now seems to be falling apart. Although again showcasing Kohn's knowledge of scripture, continuing to give Esther scriptural language to color her speech also serves to reinforce the background Kohn has given Esther: a childhood steeped in the Jewish faith. It makes sense that this is the language she would use to understand herself and her circumstances.

Sometimes Kohn makes references to Jewish history without ascribing any of that information to scripture. However, because one of the main purposes of the use of intersecting verses is to connect the story of Esther not only to the rest of scripture but also to Jewish history, a reference to Jewish history necessarily calls to mind the scripture that recounts it. In a childhood flashback, Esther reflects on Nebuchadnezzar, "the evil king [that] destroyed the Temple and forced our people to live in Babylon."[162] Thinking about Nebuchadnezzar makes Esther think about Cyrus, who "had been our friend," and Darius, who had not been.[163] These kings—Babylonian, Persian, and Median—are

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160. Ibid., 37.

161. Gen 1:3–8.

162. Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 52.

163. Ibid., 53.

known historically but also through the biblical narrative. Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and the exile of the Jews is found in 2 Kgs 24–25 and 2 Chron 36. Cyrus, the first king of Persia after the defeat of Babylonia, allowed Jews to begin to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. These events are known from 2 Chron 36 and Ezra 1, 5–6. Darius is a complicated character in the textual witness. In Ezra 6, he allows the continued rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem. However, in Dan 6, he unwittingly goes along with a plot against Daniel by writing an edict that prohibits the worship of any person or god other than Darius. When God saves Daniel, Darius writes a new edict, declaring that everyone must follow the God of Daniel.

Sometimes intersecting verses are little more than mentions of other biblical figures. For example, Esther imagines her marriage to Mordechai as the one between Isaac and Rebekah, quickly retracing their story and making it her own.[164] Kohn's use of these characters and their narrative connects the story of Esther to Genesis. To go one step further, however, Kohn has Esther herself claim a connection to the stories of her people by giving her the language instead of just narrating the link.

Although Esther claims to not remember much about her faith from the time before her parents died, her numerous biblical allusions suggest otherwise. For example, she turns to a biblical allusion even to describe how she feels physically. One evening before going to see the king, Esther claims she feels "as old and dry as the dust from which my bones were made, the dust to which they would return."[165] This is a reference

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164. Ibid., 129–30. The stories about Isaac and Rebekah that Esther recontextualizes are from Gen 24. Tenney also uses this story, but there Mordecai reminds Hadassah of it so that she can think of her first night with the king as the first day of a loving arranged marriage (see Tenney, *Hadassah*, 177).

165. Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 165.

to the curse on Adam in Gen 3: "By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread / until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; / you are dust, and to dust you shall return."[166]

Several intersecting verses are employed when Haman parades Mordechai around the acropolis according to the king's instructions. Jews gather to watch and begin chanting with Mordechai. Mordechai's words "seemed familiar to all of the Jews, for one by one they joined in until it seemed that even heaven and earth were part of the chorus."[167] The idea of heaven and earth singing is not unfamiliar in the biblical texts,[168] but the main intersecting verse in this scene is *what* the people were chanting, "a poem by David, a great king of the Jews from long ago."[169] A young Jewish woman translates for Hathach: "I will exalt You God for You have drawn me up and not let my foes rejoice over me . . . Lord, my God, I cried out to You and You healed me."[170] These words are the first couple of lines of Ps 30, which the superscript in the MT claims is "a song at the dedication of the temple."[171] The use of this intersecting verse drives the plot forward because it reminds Esther of her people and her God, the one who listens and does not let "foes rejoice." She now believes that there is nothing to fear for "the One God will hear

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166. Gen 3:19.

167. Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 279.

168. E.g., 1 Chron 16; Ps 66; 98.

169. Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 279.

170. Ibid..

171. Ps 30:1–2: "I will extol you, O LORD, for you have drawn me up, and did not let my foes rejoice over me. O LORD by God, I cried out to you for help, and you have healed me."

me."[172] The use also connects the story of Esther to the wider practices of Jewish worship, and it being a psalm of David connects the story of Esther to Jewish history.

### *Creating Dialogue*

Kohn creates dialogue between characters as a way of making the religious nature of MT Esther explicit. A first example of this also highlights Esther's concern for Jewish law. When Esther begins to eat her first meal after her arrival at Mordechai's house in Babylon, she quickly realizes that she has begun to eat before saying the blessing over the meal. She admits this to Aia, Mordechai's non-Jewish housekeeper, who responds, "No blessings are wanted here!"[173] This exchange highlights Esther's Jewishness and her upbringing according to the law. It showcases how Mordechai has not been living according to the law and sets up a main tension for Esther in the rest of the novel.

Puah, the Jewish servant assigned to Esther in the harem, is the first person to whom Kohn affords the words of Esth 4:14: "But who knows? Maybe it was for a moment like this that you came to be part of the royal family." Like in *Hadassah*, the first reference to this line from MT Esther comes earlier in the narrative and is spoken by a character other than Mordecai. Puah, in the context of warning her not to dwell upon the past and find herself just as numb and intoxicated by it as the other women are by the haoma wine, asks, "And who knows for what purpose you were sent to us?"[174] At this

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172. Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 279.

173. Ibid., 13.

174. Ibid., 91. When Mordechai makes this same comment later in the novel (where it fits in accordance with MT Esther), he also does not use religious language (ibid., 236). Even though neither Puah nor Mordechai make explicit use of religious language in telling Esther that she has a purpose in these events, Esther reads God into their comments, and she thinks to herself, "Perhaps God's almighty hand would have brought justice to those I loved without my intervention. Mordechai, though he did not live his

point in the story, Puah still does not know that Esther is Jewish. However, that does not change Puah's belief that Esther has a purpose here. Although in this line Puah does not mention God, because of the way her character has already been set up, the reader knows that Puah can think nothing but that God is the director of these events.

Kohn's focus on Jewish law arises several more times in the novel, especially in relation to dietary restrictions. Freni, a Jewish girl in the harem who trusts Esther although she does not know Esther is Jewish also, struggles because she has not learned, like Esther, to do what is necessary to avoid idolatry while remaining free from suspicion and pleasing to Hegai. Freni, attempting to follow Jewish dietary laws while in the harem and thus continuing to be too thin for Hegai's (and the king's) liking, is afraid of being sent to the barracks for the soldiers to do whatever they wish to her. Esther urges her to eat more, but Freni exclaims, "I cannot eat the food here! . . . It is not prepared in accordance with the laws of my people."[175] Esther, still keeping her true faith a secret, tells her, "You are not among your people."[176] Because Esther cannot reveal her Jewishness to even Freni, she finds another way to help her new friend. Knowing that Puah, her servant, is Jewish, she arranges for Puah to help Freni learn what foods are safe according to the dietary laws. These conversations serve to draw out the religious nature

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life by God's commandments, seemed certain that someone would rescue our people. But I could know nothing with surety beyond what my own voice cried out for me to do" (ibid.). It is this thought that pushes Esther into action. Right before approaching the king unbidden, Esther brings her thoughts together: "I could not know God's plan for me, if indeed He had one. I could not know why my cousin's actions had brought the Jews of Persia to this crisis. I could know nothing for sure but the necessity of doing what was right in my own eyes, for those who I held dear in my heart, and to honor the memory of the parents who gave me life" (ibid., 247). It is not God alone that gives Esther the final bit of courage she needs. She's still a little unsure about God's role in her life.

175. Ibid., 75.

176. Ibid.

of MT Esther by once again making the keeping of the law important to the Jewish characters.

It is not long before Puah discovers Esther's true heritage. Puah tells Esther the story of her past, from her birth in Egypt to her arrival and her time at the palace. She also tells some of the stories of her parents. One of those stories involves a conversation between her mother and a Persian soldier. In retelling the story to Esther, Puah quotes her mother in Hebrew, and when Esther understands what she is saying, Puah knows Esther is Jewish. She thus takes the opportunity to reveal her new knowledge through words of encouragement: "Do not forsake the One God, though He must remain hidden in your heart."[177] Esther is surprised and concerned by the revelation of her secret, but of course, loving her and knowing her dangerous situation, Puah promises never to disclose Esther's heritage.

MT Esther gives very little explanation for why Esther is considered the favorite candidate. In *The Gilded Chamber*, however, Hegai tells Esther that he favors her because Ishtar foretold of her coming, sending her as a gift. This is in strong contrast to *Hadassah*, which makes the God of the Jews the one ultimately responsible for Hadassah's success. Hegai tells Esther the whole story about why he believes the goddess Ishtar is responsible for sending Esther to them and thus why he favors her so. First, Ishtar's symbol is that of an eight-point star.[178] Esther, a Persian name, can derive either from Ishtar or from the word for star.[179] Immediately, Hegai claims, "The name was a

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177. Ibid., 95.

178. Izak Cornelius, "'Revisiting' Astarte in the Iconography of the Bronze Age Levant," in *Transformation of a Goddess: Ishtar, Astarte, Aphrodite*, ed. David T. Sugimoto, OBO 263 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014), 91.

179. Moore, *Esther*, 20.

sign."[180] Second, Hegai tells Esther that her eyes are the same color as Ishtar's. Finally, Hegai says to Esther, "Your words revealed your lineage. . . . Your words were taken from the mouth of the Great Goddess herself."[181] During a gathering at the fire temple, Ishtar appeared to Hegai and others in a vision. She said to them, "I am your obedient servant."[182] This was the same sentence Esther said upon her first meeting with Hegai.[183] Hegai tells Esther all of this the day before she is to go to the king for the first time, and he gives her a star necklace to wear that "was consecrated by the goddess herself through the high priestess at Uruk."[184] Esther does not like the necklace, but her distaste for it is nothing compared to her distaste for Hegai's instructions regarding it: "She must kiss it in the name of the goddess three times when she retires."[185] He then describes to Esther what will come next: "The great goddess will enter you with the ripe fruit of her desire to serve the king's pleasure. Tomorrow we will dress you in the skin of a lion and make your hair like the sun. You will go in to the king—as Ishtar herself."[186] Esther reacts strongly but silently to the gift of the necklace and what Hegai is commanding her to do. Although she eats food that doesn't correspond to Jewish dietary laws and has accepted a

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180. Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 123–24.

181. Ibid., 124.

182. Ibid., 123.

183. This is all foreshadowed earlier in the novel. Hegai is set to dismiss Esther from the competition and send her to the barracks when she first tells him, "I shall be your obedient servant" (Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 60). Even at that moment Hegai's reaction is one of surprise, and when she tells him her name, his "thick lips [go] slack and his mouth [falls] open as if gasping for air" (ibid.). Thus, Hegai not only keeps Esther in the running but also favors her, giving her separate quarters and special attention.

184. Ibid., 124.

185. Ibid.

186. Ibid., 124–25.

life in the harem, she cannot "worship the gods that were an abomination to [her] father. . . . [She cannot] crush the memory of his righteous ways."[187] She is even concerned with remaining true to Mordecai in his own peculiar righteousness, for "he would walk among the idolators, but he would not worship a stranger's gods."[188] However, knowing that her quality of life, if not her life itself, is at stake, Esther resigns herself to following Hegai's instructions. She creates "a plan to seek the protection of [her] father's God," a God she has not much considered since her arrival in Susa.[189] To get around the issue of idolatry, she wraps up Freni's amulet[190] with the star and prays so that "only the One God Himself could hear": "*Who is like you among the heavenly powers, God? Who is like you, mighty in holiness?*"[191] This is the prayer Freni teaches Esther earlier in the novel.[192] At the time, Esther thinks she is helping Freni. Instead, the prayer ends up bringing Esther comfort. Unfortunately, the amulet does not protect Esther from visions of Ishtar that night.[193] However, all she needs from that amulet is comfort and a way to avoid idolatry.

The above example is one of only a few in the novel in which Kohn provides the specific words of one of Esther's many prayers. Another example begins with the same prayer, taught to Esther by Freni, but this time Esther continues with extemporaneous

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187. Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 125.

188. Ibid.

189. Ibid., 126.

190. See the next section (pp. 69–71) for a discussion of Freni's amulet.

191. Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 126–27. This prayer is part of the Song of the Sea in Exod 15. Moses, praising God after the crossing of the sea, says, "Who is like you, O LORD, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?" (Exod 15:11).

192. See Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 111.

193. Ibid., 130.

prayer: "Give me courage, King of the gods and the Father of orphans. Make me persuasive before the lion and turn the king's favor from the one who fights against my people. Help me, Your servant. Let me be met with mercy by this man whom I will approach against his law, whose wrath I fear. Bring him low before me, for You are the One who humbles the proud. I turn to no one but You, Lord, the One God, God of my Father."[194] Even just alluding to the prayers of Esther serves to draw out the religious nature of MT Esther. However, by including in this case the text of her prayer itself, Kohn can better lay out a bit of Esther's theology and be even clearer that the story of Esther can be nothing other than a religious one.

### *Creating Circumstances and Events*

Kohn doesn't create the same events, circumstances, relationships, or characters as Tenney or the compilers of Esther Rabbah I. Nevertheless, her new creations do make the text of MT Esther explicitly religious by altering the narrative in such a way that new language and scenes are necessary.

In MT Esther, there is no mention of religion practiced in any way in Mordecai's house before Esther is taken to the palace as a queen candidate. In *The Gilded Chamber*, although Mordechai does not allow the practice of any religion, both Aia and Esther secretly keep to their faiths.[195] In an event unique to *The Gilded Chamber*, Esther

194. Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 247.

195. Mordechai's normal disposition toward religion (that of not practicing any religion) is what causes such surprise in Esther when she hears that he clothes himself in sackcloth, reveals himself as a Jew, refuses to bow to Haman, and gives up his position at the palace. All of her previous experience with Mordechai has told Esther that "nothing, not even the God of his father, stood in the way of his devotion to the king's interests" (ibid., 221). She cannot understand his motivation. Mordechai asks "Jew and non-Jew alike to pray for salvation," but Esther does not see how this will do any good, especially since Mordechai

eavesdrops on a Babylonian priest's visit to Aia, who is afflicted with a skin disease. Esther describes the scene, the words said and the implements used, but as much as she wishes Aia to find relief from her disease, she knows "that the healing of an idolater would never work."[196] Young Esther, seen here, is already concerned with idolatry, a theme that continues throughout the novel.

MT Esther gives no reason for Ahasuerus's feast (the one which leads to Vashti's downfall), but Kohn claims this event was in honor of the birth of Xerxes's second son. The feast is "to celebrate the glory of Ahura Mazda, the god who had made him king and given him another son."[197] This event is the first that shows Zoroastrianism as the religion of the palace. Aia, a Babylonian, worships Marduk and Ishtar and the other Babylonian gods. Esther is thus surrounded by Babylonian religion in Mordechai's house but Zoroastrian religion once she is taken to the palace. Esther describes some of the Zoroastrian practices that took place during the feast: "the Zoroastrians among the group gathered in the fire temple. There they drank a potion known as haoma—brewed from the red fly agaric mushroom—and sat before the sacred fires, dazzled by strange and wondrous visions. The magi threw the pur to foretell the future."[198] This detailed scene, and others like it, help highlight the religious context of the Persian empire and thus draw

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"has never been a pious man." Hathach, a nonreligious character in the narrative, offers Esther hope: "Perhaps your God will hear him nonetheless" (ibid., 232–33).

196. Ibid., 19.

197. Ibid., 21.

198. Ibid., 23. Notice the reference to "pur," which is also in MT Esther ("In the first month, which is the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur—which means 'the lot'—before Haman for the day and for the month, and the lot fell on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar," Esth 3:7). Kohn describes the setting of Haman casting lots with much more detail than the scene has in MT Esther. She places the scene in the fire temple of the Zoroastrians. Here magi were drinking haoma, chanting, drawing magic circles, and throwing pur (Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 204–5). It is from these pur that the festival of Purim is named (see Esth 9:24–28).

out the religious nature already implicit in MT Esther and otherwise imbue the story with religious themes and language.

As Tenney does in *Hadassah*, Kohn creates a new character in *The Gilded Chamber*, specifically a Jewish character whose role is to offer support to Esther. In *Hadassah* this character is Jesse (who later becomes Hathach, a eunuch known from MT Esther). In *The Gilded Chamber*, the character is Puah, a servant in the king's harem.[199] In one of Esther's first conversations with Puah, Esther says, "I am glad fate brought you to take care of me."[200] Esther would not normally talk of fate instead of God, but she uses this language, aware of the danger she is in as a Jew and unwilling to reveal that part of herself even to a woman who has helped her. However, Puah, although unaware of Esther's true lineage, quickly corrects her: "It was my God, the God of the Jews, who called me to you. . . . I thanked the One God for giving me even a few hours to care for you."[201] Puah becomes Esther's closest confidante, and her support as a Jewish character means that language about God abounds when the two are together.

Vashti, although never quite a character herself, is very much a part of the narrative in *The Gilded Chamber*. She is characterized as a haughty and spiteful woman. She is "reported to be beautiful and cruel, good to the eye and savage in disposition."[202]

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199. This specific Puah character is unknown in MT Esther. However, Puah is the name of one of the Hebrew midwives who disobey Pharaoh and allow baby Hebrew boys to live (Exod 1:15–21). In this way, the name Puah is associated with respect for God and strength of character in the face of great adversity and danger. The allusion to the Puah of the exodus narrative grows stronger when Puah tells Esther her life story and the story of her family. She was born on the island of Yeb in the middle of Egypt's Nile River (Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 92).

200. Ibid., 63.

201. Ibid.

202. Ibid., 25.

She treats her servants unkindly, especially her Jewish servants, forcing them "to work unclothed on the Sabbath."[203] MT Esther does not report Vashti's reasons for refusing to appear before the king and the other men during the feast. So, although the events of Vashti's banishment closely match the narrative in MT Esther, in *The Gilded Chamber*, Vashti is given a voice: "Am I to display myself like a concubine?"[204] Puah, describing to Esther what Vashti was like, says, "From the highest advisor to the lowest eunuch, everyone prayed, each to his own god, to be rid of her."[205] Puah is nothing but glad about Vashti's banishment, but the stories about Vashti make Esther uneasy.[206]

Like Aia does, the midwife who tends Esther's mother practices Babylonian religion. After Esther's mother's death (the reason for which is unknown in MT Esther), Ninsun, the midwife, tells Esther not to move from her hiding place or else "Lamashtu will take [her]."[207] Esther recalls that it was common for Ninsun to talk about Babylonian gods, and her father often scolded Ninsun for such talk: "We are Jews in this household .

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203. Ibid.

204. Ibid.

205. Ibid., 113.

206. Esther is right to feel uneasy. Vashti carved the words on the walls of Esther's chambers that keep Esther up at night and give her nightmares. At the end of the novel, Vashti orchestrates the murder of Xerxes in order to secure the throne for her favored son. Esther has to escape to Ecbatana because Vashti will want her dead too.

207. Ibid., 36. Lamashtu is first introduced as "She who Erases" (ibid.). This idea is often alluded to. Esther, trying to remind herself of what Mordechai looks like, once says, "I knew the dread demon Lamashtu had taken possession of me, erasing from my heart all that had ever mattered" (ibid., 43). A few paragraphs later, she spots her reflection, but "all of [her] features had been erased" (ibid.). However, after meeting the other young women who were competing to be the new queen, Esther says, "I knew now that Lamashtu had failed to take all of me. And I vowed to fight her with every breath in my body" (ibid., 45). By establishing Lamashtu as the "Eraser," references to something about Esther's personhood being erased can call to mind the work of Lamashtu, now without requiring a mention of the demon herself.

. . We worship the One God."[208] In this one single event, Kohn inserts references to both Jewish and Babylonian religion.

Esther's being taken to the palace is not an event of Kohn's creation, but MT Esther gives no specifics about it. In *The Gilded Chamber*, during Esther's first walk through the palace, her escorts call out to other soldiers, praising "Ahura Mazda, the god of Xerxes and the Persian people."[209] Esther decides "to appeal to the God of [her] own people for help."[210] However, she has now been living in Mordechai's house, where prayer of any kind was discouraged, for a number of years, and she cannot remember the prayers she learned as a child. She says, "I was mute and the One God did not hear my distress. He did not protect me from the king's own god, who appeared above, watching over the courtyard from a cornice."[211] The description of Ahura Mazda that follows Esther's previous statement is detailed, and he seems to come alive to Esther, whispering to her. At this point in the narrative, the gods of other religions are more present and alive to Esther than her own God, but they do not comfort her; they threaten instead.

Friendships between characters do not play any sort of role in MT Esther. The audience especially never learns anything about the other queen candidates. Both novels, however, take the year of preparation in the harem as good fodder for the exploration of what Esther's life might have looked like. Tenney does name and give small roles to the other women in the harem, but Kohn does even more work on this aspect of the narrative. In *The Gilded Chamber*, when Esther first comes under Hegai's care, she meets three

208. Ibid., 36.

209. Ibid., 39.

210. Ibid.

211. Ibid., 40.

other young women. Based on their names, she determines two of them to be Persian ("daughters of the Zoroastrian faith") and one to be Jewish ("Sarah, descended from the worshippers of the One God, like myself").[212] This novel posits the underlying theme that Jews were not highly regarded in Susa (this is distinct from *Hadassah*), so when Esther meets Sarah, she quickly renames her ("Freni") and warns her not to reveal her lineage. Freni, coming to trust Esther immediately, also hands over an amulet, "a small gold tube with Hebrew characters etched on one side."[213] Esther says that her mother used to use a similar amulet to ward off "the night demon Lilith."[214] Kohn does several things in this one new scene. First, she sets up a relationship not otherwise present in MT Esther, giving Esther a Jewish friend and thus setting up future conversations of a religious nature. Second, she relates to the reader a Jewish practice, that of the use of protective amulets.[215] Third, she has another opportunity to use the name of a demon, something she does throughout the novel to imbue it with religious flavor (see the next section for details about this practice).

When Vadhut, one of Esther's concubine friends, becomes pregnant, she comes to Esther and says, "I want Freni to pray for me. Her God is so powerful that she was able to go home. Perhaps He will keep me safe."[216] Vadhut does not know that Esther is a Jew or

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212. Ibid., 46.

213. Ibid.

214. Ibid.

215. However, "it is not known whether amulets were used in the biblical period. Presumably they were, but there is no direct evidence to prove it" (Theodore Schrire, "Amulet," in vol. 2 of *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik [Jerusalem: Keter, 1971], 906).

216. Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 220. After becoming queen, Esther is able to secure Freni's release to her family before the king has a chance to call on her and she be stuck in the harem for life.

that Esther is responsible for Freni's release. Instead of searching for a logical explanation to Freni's good fortune, Vadhut assumes that Freni's God effected this change in her status. Freni happens to come to see Esther the same day on which Vadhut asks for Freni's prayers, which is also the day on which Esther communicates with Mordechai via Hathach about the fate of their people. The conversation that takes place during the encounter between Freni and Esther (and Puah) is full of religious language, in part because all three characters involved are Jewish. Esther takes this opportunity to mention Vadhut's request to Freni, and Freni responds, "I shall pray for everyone I love as long as I have breath in my body."[217] However, Freni is distracted because she has come to Esther to beg for the lives of her people (in response to Haman's decree). Esther finally confesses to her friend that she, too, is Jewish. Freni, surprised but excited, insists, "God will listen if you go to the king."[218] A despondent Esther is convinced that isn't true. She says, "God cannot hear me . . . I abandoned the ways of His people long ago."[219] However, Freni believes that God will listen and offers to "fast and pray" for Esther.[220] In MT Esther, Esther asks Mordecai to gather the people to fast for her (just as she and her servants will fast). Kohn here adds the aspect of prayer through Freni's promise. Even so, when Esther contacts Mordechai in *The Gilded Chamber*, she only asks that the people fast. She does not mention prayer.[221]

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217. Ibid., 239–40.

218. Ibid., 240.

219. Ibid.

220. Ibid.

221. See ibid., 241: "'Here is my answer to my cousin,' I said. 'Tell him to assemble all the Jews in Susa and fast for me. Do not eat or drink for three days, night or day, and I will fast too. Then I will go in to the king, though it is against the law. And if I perish, I perish." Cf. Esth 4:15–16: "Then Esther said in

Freni's amulet serves more than just the single purpose of encouraging Esther before her first night with the king (when she uses it to avoid worshipping Ishtar). After Freni comes to visit Esther and learns that she is Jewish, Freni gives Esther the amulet to keep. Esther finds great comfort in it again, saying, "Once it had given me courage to face Ishtar. Now it would help me face an even greater danger."[222] With this resolve, Esther puts into motion her plan to trap Haman and petition the king to save her people. Esther is moved for religious reasons. She knows that at one time the amulet and prayer had given her all the courage she needed, even if it did not ultimately protect her. The amulet and the promise of prayer have given her again that same courage, and similarly, Esther recognizes that none of it may be enough to spare her life. But all that matters to her is that she has the courage to try.

The Esther of *The Gilded Chamber* is angry at God, less in response to the deaths of her parents (as in *Hadassah*) than in response to her capture and her future as a concubine (or as queen, no better in her opinion). She grows frustrated with the other women in the harem, who praise Ahura Mazda for his "goodness, fairness, sweet-scentedness, strength, and power to grant them freedom from sorrow," because their god, let alone her God, is not protecting them from the circumstances of their lives.[223] Esther

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reply to Mordecai, 'Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat not drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do. After that I will go to the king, though it is against the law; and if I perish, I perish.'"

222. Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 241.

223. Ibid., 83–84. Esther herself uses this phrasing to praise Ahura Mazda in front of Hegai, claiming that it was "no more than a formula I had often heard from the worshippers of Ahura Mazda in the harem" (ibid., 97). Thus, even when she's using words of worship toward non-Jewish gods, she is not committing idolatry.

is not tempted by idolatry because she doesn't think any other god can help her either. This fact, however, does not assuage her anger at her God.

Kohn alters the events of the king's sleepless night to give Esther a role and to showcase God as the actor behind the scenes. At first, *The Gilded Chamber* closely corresponds to MT Esther. There is no real explanation for the king's insomnia (one possible cause would be his overindulgence in wine). Instead of calling for the annals to be read to him, Xerxes calls on Esther to play the santur. Esther knows about Haman's plot to kill Mordechai, and she goes to the king intending to find a way to save Mordechai; so in this way, the text of *The Gilded Chamber* is even more nonreligious than MT Esther itself. Everything up to this point has a logical explanation. That changes when Xerxes finally drifts off to sleep. In events unknown from MT Esther, the king first falls asleep and then awakens with a start after having a vision. The vision begins with his traitorous brother stabbing him in the back, but then his brother morphs into Haman.[224] The king asks Esther to attempt to interpret his vision, and she does so cautiously, not wanting to appear to be deceiving the king but also wanting to capitalize on the opportunity, for "surely the vision was a gift to [her] from God."[225] This is the first time Kohn uses any religious language in the scene beyond random references to names of gods and demons in exclamations or as literary devices. Esther here ascribes to God credit for the unfolding events. When she fails to interpret the king's dream in a way that satisfies him, she recommends he call for the "Record-Book of the Days" (the decision he makes for himself in MT Esther) in case "he has not rewarded those who have done him

224. Ibid., 266.

225. Ibid.

a service," an action punishable by the gods.[226] In MT Esther, it is by chance that the scribes read from the section about Bigthana, Teresh, and Mordecai. In *The Gilded Chamber*, Esther bribes the scribes to read this specific story. Kohn thus does two things with her reinterpretation of this specific scene: (1) she puts Esther in the scene and gives her agency, crediting her with much of what transpires, and (2) although in some sense making the text less religious by giving logical reasons for the unfolding of events (instead of something unexplained and possibly supernatural), she still allows God a role in the narrative, as the one who opens opportunities for Esther to try to implement a plan to save Mordechai.

In MT Esther, Haman is hanged on the gallows he built for the execution of Mordecai. It is said matter-of-factly, and nothing more is reported of this event. In *The Gilded Chamber*, the king forces Esther to go out from the palace and into the city to watch Haman's execution. Once in the market, many people cry out to Esther, believing that "if the queen spoke on their behalf, . . . the king would be moved to listen. He, in his turn, would appeal to his god, Ahura Mazda. Thus their prayers would have a better chance of being answered."[227] Esther compares that idea with one from her father—"that God listens to a mother's prayers first"—and realizes "that they were calling out to [her] as mother of the kingdom."[228] For the first time, Esther sees herself as a queen with a duty to those outside the palace, Jew and non-Jew. This short new scene shows the

226. Ibid., 268.

227. Ibid., 296.

228. Ibid.

interplay in Esther's mind between Zoroastrian and Jewish religion, as someone who has experience in and knowledge of both worlds.

In the MT of Esther, the narrative moves immediately from the installation of Mordecai as Ahasuerus's chief advisor to Esther's plea for a way to save the Jews. However, in *The Gilded Chamber*, there is a gap in time, which Mordechai uses to ferret out those who worked with Haman. At the end of the day of Haman's execution, Esther and Mordechai meet in person for the first time since she was taken to the palace, five years earlier. Mordechai no longer looks like a Babylonian; instead he "speak[s] of God and [has] grown out [his] beard like a Jew."[229] Esther questions this change because this man is not the Mordechai she knows. Mordechai explains, "When you [Esther] left, I began to pray again . . . I took comfort in praying for your well-being and happiness. I prayed that you would bring honor to your people."[230] Mordechai's words help explain the change that Esther has perceived in his character throughout the novel, despite not having any personal contact with him. A character originally not unlike his counterpart in the MT—seemingly unconcerned with religion—Mordechai is now responsible for the lives of all Jews in Persia, and he embraces that role in part by returning to his family's traditions.

### *Inserting Explicit Language and Terminology*

The language of Zoroastrian and Babylonian religion is more common in *The Gilded Chamber* than Jewish language is. Kohn is not tied to the use of Jewish language alone,

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229. Ibid., 309.

230. Ibid.

even if she is intending to draw out the religious nature of MT Esther. This added language can be as simple as the reference to or invocation of the names of gods. In an early description of Mordechai, Kohn writes: he "hid himself among the Zoroastrians, who worship Ahura Mazda, and the Babylonians, who worship Marduk."[231] Characters often call out the name of Marduk or Ahura Mazda.[232] Esther, overwhelmed by her arrival at the palace, struggles to walk, "as if the hands of the demon Druj Nasu held [her] ankles."[233] Lamashtu figures prominently and often. Xerxes, in his insomnia, is "restless, his arms and legs twitching from time to time as if they were pricked by Aeshma, the fiend of the wounding spear."[234] Seeing her dead mother in a dream, Esther compares the whiteness of her face to "that of Allatu, supreme goddess of the underworld."[235] Because of suspicious markings on the walls of her chambers, Esther feel uneasys,[236] and she cannot sleep because she imagines that demons of the night are coming for her: "Lamashtu; Lilith; Azi Dahaka, the fiendish snake; Druj Nasu, who flies down from Mount Aresura and seizes human corpses; and Alaltu, goddess of the underworld, whose face is bone white and lips are black."[237] Examples, like these, of name-dropping different gods and demons are numerous, and they showcase Kohn's knowledge of religion in this period, but the detail also highlights Esther's own knowledge of her

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231. Ibid., 2.

232. E.g., "By Ahura Mazda, the man is right!" (ibid., 26.)

233. Ibid., 43.

234. Ibid., 268.

235. Ibid., 345.

236. Puah later reveals to Esther that Vashti carved these symbols into the walls right before her banishment. Esther comments, "I feel her there still" (ibid., 115).

237. Ibid., 82–83.

surrounding culture, something to be expected of a young girl growing up as a member of a minority faith and for many years in a non-Jewish household.

Kohn does more than just name different Babylonian and Zoroastrian religious figures. She shows her knowledge of related religious practices, so other aspects of Zoroastrian and Babylonian religion are dispersed here and there throughout the novel. For example, Aia curses those who do her wrong, "wishing them to Kurnugi, the land of no return."[238] When Esther is first presented to Xerxes as Ishtar, her escorts recite "familiar lines from the Hymn of Ishtar. *Ishtar is clothed with pleasure and love, She gleams with vitality, charm and voluptuousness. She is glorious, veils are thrown over her head. Her body is beautiful; her eyes are brilliant*."[239] The effect of referring not just to numerous gods by name but also outlining religious practices is one of creating a setting in which religion is a large part of culture and thus has colored the vocabularies of every person.

A reference does not have to be to a specific god to make the text of Esther explicitly religious. In even a simple description of the king, Esther as narrator states, "No one who ever beheld him . . . doubted that this was a man favored by the gods and born to the throne."[240] Even this innocuous reference to a pantheon of gods serves to make the story of Esther more explicitly religious in tone than MT Esther.

The Esther character in *The Gilded Chamber* is highly concerned with the keeping of Jewish law. She praises her father (and others like him) for his commitment to the law

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238. Ibid., 26.

239. Ibid., 139–40.

240. Ibid., 30.

and his desire to return to Jerusalem: "These Jews prayed three times each day for the rebuilding of the Temple. They observed the laws of Moses with utmost strictness and set themselves apart from their Babylonian neighbors in worship, speech, and dietary habits."[241] This is in direct contrast to Jews who had forgotten their true home, who "took Babylonian wives, who taught their children to pray to Marduk and Ishtar."[242] Mordechai appears to be one of the Jews who has assimilated. Esther critiques Mordechai's housekeeper for not being Jewish and not keeping "the dietary laws,"[243] and the first time she sees Mordechai in Babylon, she is shocked that "he had trimmed [his beard] close to his face in the Babylonian fashion, violating the laws of the Jews."[244] In fact, Mordechai is known only as Marduka the Babylonian. Esther's early reflection on living in Mordechai's house is worth quoting in full because it provides a good description of Mordechai's relationship to religion and its effect on Esther:

> I would never be a Jewish wife in custom or practice, like my mother had been before me. God did not dwell in the household of Marduka the Babylonian. We spoke no Hebrew and said no blessings. We did not observe the dietary laws or celebrate the holidays. We worked every day and took no Sabbath rest. I soon grew used to this and forgot that I had lived any other way.
>
> My cousin looked with no more favor on any other religious ritual or practice. Sometimes Aia mumbled a prayer to Ishtar or Marduk when she supposed me out of earshot; if she became aware of my presence, she bit her lips, shook her head, and raised a conspiratorial finger to her lips.[245]

No religion is outwardly practiced in Mordechai's home, neither Jewish nor Babylonian. This leaves open the possibility that Mordechai has not fully assimilated into Babylonian

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241. Ibid., 3.

242. Ibid., 2.

243. Ibid.

244. Ibid., 14.

245. Ibid., 16.

culture. Even within this no-religion household, Esther continues to keep as many of the laws as she can. Not responsible for the cooking, she cannot keep the dietary laws, but she continues to pray "like a Jew."[246] Even when maintaining her faith is difficult, she does not abandon it or its essential teachings. However, the inability to keep many laws, like the observance of the high holy days, no longer causes her to fear "the wrath of the One God."[247] She tells herself that the most important thing is to refrain from idolatry. If she can do that, "the God of my father would be satisfied."[248] Tenney's Hadassah is more concerned with the purity of her body (especially sexually) than with avoiding idolatry, but Tenney does not present other religions as prevalent or enticing. In Kohn's novel, Esther is surrounded by Babylonian and Zoroastrian religious traditions. Assimilating would be easier and more practical.

Esther's concern over idolatry arises one final time in the novel. She is trying to think of ways to save the Jews from Haman's edict. One of her ideas is to have the Jews "claim to be worshippers of Ahura Mazda and post symbols of the winged god on their homes. But," she reasons, "this would offend the One God and risk his wrath."[249] Esther recognizes that not even to save their lives would God allow them to practice idolatry.

In the second half of the novel, Kohn begins throwing around references to the oracle at Delphi. The oracle at Delphi is a piece of Greek mythology, so it feels a little out of place among all of the Jewish, Babylonian, and Persian religious terms. There is also no clear indication as to how Esther might be familiar with it, but if non-Greeks of

246. Ibid., 19.

247. Ibid., 20.

248. Ibid.

249. Ibid., 335.

the period knew anything about Hellenistic culture, they were familiar with the athletic games, the consultation of the oracle at Delphi, and the tales of the Trojan wars via Homer.[250] At one point, Esther compares the wind to "the voice of the Delphic Oracle herself, foretelling a future of horror and destruction."[251] In a second use of the term, Esther compares Puah to the oracle, attempting to put the fear of the Jews into Zeresh's heart. Esther lies to Zeresh, Haman's wife, about Puah: "Her people are the Jews, . . . but sometimes their God gives them the gift of soothsaying. I dare not lose her visions. They are more frightening than those induced by haoma, more true than the Delphic Oracle."[252] Esther intentionally misleads Zeresh about Puah having visions because she hopes that if Zeresh begins to fear the Jews and the God of the Jews, she might be able to caution Haman against pursuing their destruction.[253] Although Esther keeps her Jewishness a secret, it is not often in the novel that she speaks of the Jews in the third person, actively separating herself from them. But here, speaking with Zeresh, she is willing to go beyond a feigning of ignorance or indifference toward the Jews, instead speaking as one who respects and fears their God.

References to prayer are a simple way for Kohn to make MT Esther explicitly religious. During the period of fasting set aside by Esther and Mordechai, Esther prays.[254]

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250. Jennifer Larson, *Understanding Greek Religion: A Cognitive Approach* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 10.

251. Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 210.

252. Ibid., 215.

253. In fact, as Zeresh, sufficiently frightened, leaves Esther's company, Esther says, "We must beware of the Jews . . . They have a powerful God" (ibid., 216).

254. These prayers aren't in the form of direct speech to God, so they are placed in this section rather than in the section on the creation of dialogue.

Esther, as the narrator, writes, “I prayed for God to show His mercy on my people and on me. I prayed to bring honor to my father’s name through my actions. I prayed for the courage to face the king. I knew I might perish in the effort, and I was afraid.”[255] It is not often that Kohn provides the reader with the specific content or words of a character’s prayer. This is a feature much more common in Tenney’s work. However, this time of prayer is not the only instance in which Kohn allows Esther to describe what she is praying for specifically and why.[256]

### Conclusion: The Message of *The Gilded Chamber*

Kohn’s overwhelming use of language and terminology for Zoroastrian and Babylonian gods, demons, and practices, not to mention the references to the same in Judaism, create in the novel an overall religious tone. When combined with the effects of the other interpretive tools—employing intersecting verses and creating dialogue and circumstances and events—this religious tone becomes even more explicit. Kohn has created a rewritten version of Esther that emphasizes Jewish law, Esther’s anger toward God, Esther’s religion-caused sorrows, and the highly religious context of the Persian empire.

## Mordecai’s Refusal to Bow: A Comparison

In each retelling of Esther’s story, Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman. This one specific event is ideal for looking at the ways different texts have drawn out of MT Esther its

255. Ibid., 244.

256. See also, e.g., Ibid., 154.

religious nature. Let's begin with the event in MT Esther itself.[257] The MT says that the king ordered that everyone kneel and bow down to Haman after his promotion. Mordecai refuses but gives no reason. Because of Mordecai's refusal, Haman "thought it beneath him to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, having been told who Mordecai's people were, Haman plotted to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus."[258]

In Esther Rabbah I's reception of MT Esther, Mordecai's actions toward Haman are religiously motivated. Like in MT Esther, Ahasuerus commands the people to bow to Haman. However, after this announcement, Haman intentionally puts "an idol on his chest intending to make everyone bow down to an idol" (XXXVI.ii.4.C). Mordecai refuses to bow because of the idol, not because of Haman himself. As part of the proof text for why Mordecai is called "Judean," Mordecai voices his reasoning for his refusal: "There is a Lord who is exalted above all who exalt, and how am I going to abandon him and bow down to an idol?" (XXXVI.ii.4.D). Thus, Mordecai affirms "the unity of God before everyone in the world" and is therefore called "not 'Judean' but 'unique'" (XXXVI.ii.4.E-F). Aspects of Mordecai's reasoning are found in both *Hadassah* and *The Gilded Chamber*. Tenney's Xerxes commands everyone to bow to Haman. Kohn's Haman wears an idol on his chest, to which her Mordechai also refuses to bow.

Tommy Tenney in *Hadassah* ascribes to Mordecai an explicit reason for not bowing to Haman. The king has ordered "that everyone treat [Haman] as they would the King himself," and so Haman expects everyone to bow before him. Mordecai does not. In

257. This story is told in Esth 3:1-6.

258. Esth 3:6.

this narrative, Mordecai has just discovered the proof that connects Haman to the killing of his and Hadassah's family and the rest of the Jews of Susa. This knowledge means Mordecai has "difficulty treating Haman normally."[259] When questioned by his colleagues, Mordecai declares, "I bow to no man but the G-d of Heaven and my King, Xerxes."[260] When a royal guard questions Mordecai about his behavior, a bystander answers for him: Mordecai refused to bow "on religious grounds."[261] Mordecai then speaks up, saying, "I worship the one true G-d . . . YHWH. The Creator of heaven and earth. The G-d of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."[262] This is the event that precipitates Haman's hatred of Mordecai individually, just like in MT Esther, but according to Tenney, Haman already has it out for the Jews as a people. Thus, in *Hadassah*, Mordecai's reasoning for refusing to bow to Haman is as follows: because Haman is an enemy of the Jews (as is evident from his previous behavior, that is, the slaughter of the Jews in Susa), Mordecai refuses to bow on religious grounds.

Although Rebecca Kohn's Mordechai similarly offers reasons for his refusal to bow, and religious reasons at that, the impetus for his refusal is quite different from Mordecai's in *Hadassah*; it is more like Esther Rabbah I's reason. Like in both MT Esther and *Hadassah*, Esther sends the eunuch Hathach to discover why Mordechai is behaving in such a way. Although Mordechai admits he has in the past bowed to other government officials, he explains why this time is different: Haman has "an alien god on

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259. Tenney, *Hadassah*, 275.

260. Ibid., 276.

261. Ibid., 277.

262. Ibid.

his chest."[263] Haman generally wears a "silver breastplate embossed with the image of Ahura Mazda," and thus Mordechai refuses to commit idolatry by bowing down to a man sporting such an idol.[264] Mordechai has never told Esther his opinions on Jewish law and on idolatry specifically. Esther, after her arrival in Susa, determines for herself that God will not bring wrath upon her for any reason other than idolatry, and so she goes to great lengths to avoid it. In Kohn's treatment of this scene of the story, Esther learns that Mordechai has felt the same way all along, just as she hoped he did. Like in the other versions of the Esther narrative, Mordechai's refusal also results in the revelation of his Jewishness. Hathach notes, "he did not intend to reveal his secret . . . It came to his tongue as if through his God."[265] The relationship between Esther and Mordechai is common knowledge in *The Gilded Chamber*, so a revelation about Mordechai's Jewishness is also a revelation about Esther's. Mordechai's refusal and his subsequent revelation is the one and only impetus for Haman's determination to destroy the Jews. The comparison between Esther Rabbah I and *The Gilded Chamber* on this one scene highlights how some of Kohn's ideas for drawing out the implicitly religious nature of MT Esther come from rabbinic sources.

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263. Kohn, *The Gilded Chamber*, 223. Mordechai also knows (or has great reason to believe) that Haman was behind the plot by Bigthan and Teresh to kill the king because he wants the throne for himself. Hathach tells Esther, "For this reason as well, he will not bow to the advisor" (ibid., 237).

264. Ibid., 223. There is nothing in the text to say that Haman only puts the idol on his chest after the king promotes him, which is the case in Esther Rabbah I.

265. Ibid.

# Conclusion

MT Esther appears, on its surface, to be a secular text. It does not explicitly refer to other parts of scripture, does not use any name for God, and never talks about prayer, covenant, law, or other common Jewish themes. The plot seems dependent on fate and coincidence. The astute and religiously knowledgeable reader, however, will see MT Esther not as completely secular but as *implicitly* religious. It is this implicitness that the authors considered in this thesis seek to address.

The authors/compilers of Esther Rabbah I use seven hermeneutical tools to draw out the implicit religiosity of the Esther narrative and make it explicit. Following this tradition, Tommy Tenney and Rebecca Kohn, authors of contemporary novels that retell the Esther story, also use several interpretive tools. Three of those tools (employing intersecting verses, creating dialogue, and creating events and circumstances) were used by the authors/compilers of Esther Rabbah I. Tenney and Kohn do not use the other tools, but this difference can be ascribed to a difference in genre: midrash versus novel. Instead, Tenney and Kohn add a new tool; they imbue the narrative with religious narrative and terminology in ways unconnected from the other tools and not integral to the plot. This sort of imbuing affects the overall tone of the novels by making religious language (mostly Jewish for Tenney and Zoroastrian, Babylonian, and Jewish for Kohn) common, thus more accurately reflecting the Persian context of the book of Esther.

Contemporary novels, of which these two are only a sample, receive the narrative of Esther from a number of sources, but by comparing them only to MT Esther, the robust way in which they use the hermeneutical tools of Esther Rabbah I, their religious characteristics are more vividly highlighted.

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