

# Esther the Hero: Going beyond “Wisdom” in Heroic Narratives

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FROM THE THIRD MILLENNIUM ON, ancient Near Eastern writers attempted to identify and communicate principles for living a successful life—a category of writing that modern scholars denote “wisdom.” Sometimes what constitutes wisdom literature is fairly obvious; collections of pithy saying such as in Proverbs, or ruminations on the nature and meaning (or meaninglessness) of life, as in Ecclesiastes, are fairly straightforward examples. The motifs and themes of wisdom are not limited to wisdom literature proper in the Hebrew Bible. The boundaries of what constitutes wisdom literature are particularly nebulous, and it can be particularly difficult to categorize some pieces of literature as wisdom or not. In fact, wisdom is a particularly ambiguous and unstable category of text or genre. Given the difficulty in defining what exactly constitutes wisdom literature, it is not surprising how frequently these motifs are identified. One of the most notable examples of this is the Book of Esther, whose wisdom characteristics (or lack thereof) have been subject to a debate between Shemaryahu Talmon and James L. Crenshaw.<sup>1</sup> Much of the problem stems from the way that the author(s) of Esther applies negative wisdom characteristics to secondary characters but does not uniformly apply positive wisdom characteristics to the protagonists. Esther herself conforms to wisdom characteristics in the first chapters of the book, but gradually her actions supersede or contradict expectations of behavior established in wisdom literature.

<sup>1</sup> Shemaryahu Talmon (“‘Wisdom’ in the Book of Esther,” *VT* 13 [1963] 419-55) is best associated with initial attempts to understand Esther as a wisdom narrative. James L. Crenshaw (“Method in Determining Wisdom Influence upon ‘Historical’ Literature,” *JBL* 88 [1969] 129-42) offers an extended criticism of this interpretation.

Esther is forced to go beyond the ordinary in order to save her people. In this way, Esther becomes not a wise woman of the Persian court but a hero for the Jews of Persia and a literary hero for the readers/hearers of the book.

### I. The Problem of Genre: What Is Esther?

Part of the reason for the multiplicity of interpretations of Esther is the difficulty in identifying the genre of the book. Esther has been notoriously difficult to define; from a narrative standpoint the story is straightforward and clear, perhaps allowing for a greater degree of ambiguity in interpretation. Context has always been a problem, from the book's status as a canonical work to the changing historical circumstances of the reading audience. Certainly a story involving genocide has very different connotations for readers who have lived in a time when the Holocaust is within living memory. Although questions of historicity have basically been settled in the negative, the question of genre still elicits difficulty.<sup>2</sup> Sara Johnson has put forward an interpretation, based on the final MT version of Esther, that suggests that the story displays "novelistic elements" similar to those found in Greek literature.<sup>3</sup> Johnson further argues that this may reflect a parallel development of Second Temple literature and Greek novellas, an argument that is quite plausible.<sup>4</sup> Yet these are simply "elements" of a book that does not fit neatly into any attested genre of Second-Temple-period literature. Jon D. Levenson warns "that it would be a capital mistake to view it from only one angle."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, forcing the story of Esther into a preconceived notion of genre can smooth out the variable, conflicting, and contradictory readings that the narrative itself allows. What follows in this article is not a search for satisfactory genre categories but an attempt to demonstrate what this search elucidates about the narrative and characters of this story.

Recent commentators have concentrated on emphasizing the comedic aspects of the story. Although scholars generally agree on which aspects of the story are comedic, there is more significant disagreement about the underlying role of humor in the narrative. Kenneth Craig's interpretation of Esther as a carnivalesque story, based on Mikhail Bakhtin's approach to literary criticism, has been influential, and

<sup>2</sup> For recent scholarship on the lack of historicity in Esther, see, e.g., Carey A. Moore, *Esther: Introduction, translation, and notes* (AB 7B; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971); Jon D. Levenson, *Esther* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997); and Adele Berlin, *Esther [= Ester]: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Sara Johnson, "Novelistic Elements in Esther: Persian or Hellenistic, Jewish or Greek?" *CBQ* 67 (2005) 571-89.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, esp. 588-89.

<sup>5</sup> Levenson, *Esther*, 1.

it has been wholeheartedly followed by Adele Berlin.<sup>6</sup> For Bakhtin, the carnivalesque in literature represents a folk narrative that at a surface level inverts social norms and power structures but at the same time reifies these same power relationships.<sup>7</sup> If Esther is read in this light, it is an inherently conservative tale, created for the enjoyment of a Jewish Diaspora audience but at the same time not substantially attacking existing power structures. Levenson's reading, although also emphasizing the humor of the book, sees the work as satire that points to important social, political, and theological matters. As he states, "On its surface, the narrative of the book of Esther approaches the category of farce on occasion (especially in chapter 6), but the more serious category of satire always lurks behind the crude, visual humor to remind the attentive reader of the larger issues."<sup>8</sup> André Lacocque similarly argues that the work is a satire told through the caricature of the Persian court.<sup>9</sup> Timothy K. Beal argues that the work is a farce not in the comedic sense but in its use of exaggeration as a method of conveying meaning.<sup>10</sup> These two interpretations (comedy or satire) situate the purpose of the story very differently and demonstrate the ambiguity in what appears to be a relatively simple tale.

Lawrence M. Wills puts forth a diachronic interpretation of the genre of Esther. Throughout the source-critical development of the book (as he reconstructs it) the genre changes. In its earliest incarnation, Wills sees the book as a wisdom court legend, but in its final incarnation it is a "proto-romance." In Wills's view, a wisdom court legend is "a legend of a revered figure set in the royal court which has the wisdom of the protagonist as a principal motif." The MT version of Esther, according to him, differs from the original court legend because of the addition of the etiology of Purim, the several climaxes, the farcical elements, and the fact that the action of the story takes place throughout the empire rather than just at court.<sup>11</sup> Although Wills's reconstruction of the textual history of the book is plausible, it clearly reflects the difficulty in defining the genre of Esther.

By defining at least one stage of the textual transmission of Esther as a wisdom court legend, Wills acknowledges the debate about the existence of "narrativized wisdom tales" in ancient Near Eastern literature, which began with Gerhard

<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Berlin, *Esther*.

<sup>7</sup> Craig, *Reading Esther*, 33.

<sup>8</sup> Levenson, *Esther*, 12.

<sup>9</sup> André Lacocque, *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition* (OBT; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 51.

<sup>10</sup> Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (New York: Routledge, 1997) ix. For Beal, meaning in Esther is derived from the book's exploration of identity and from particular crises that arise out of the instability of identity (p. 19).

<sup>11</sup> Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King: Ancient Jewish Court Legends* (HDR 26; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990) 137, 170-72, 185, 189; quotation from 137.

von Rad's assertion that the Joseph story in Genesis is a narrativized wisdom story.<sup>12</sup> Shemaryahu Talmon applied this designation to the Esther story, explicitly categorizing the story as a "historicized wisdom-tale."<sup>13</sup> For both von Rad and Talmon, a historicized wisdom tale attempts to provide sapiential teachings not through pithy sayings, as in Proverbs, but by demonstrating wisdom ideals through narrative action. Here once again is a tendency, after acknowledging that the story of Esther is not serious history, to demonstrate that there is some moral meaning or teaching to be gained from the book. Talmon even acknowledges this, stating that this observation, "may help in explaining the disturbing lack of any specifically Jewish religiosity in the book, on which many a scholar has commented."<sup>14</sup> Whereas it may lack religiosity (although see Levenson for an alternate viewpoint), it certainly does not lack for Jewish "nationalism," and perhaps it is anachronistic to see these elements as separate in an ancient story.<sup>15</sup>

For the scholars who see Esther and other such works as historicized wisdom tales, the purpose of these stories is inherently didactic. Von Rad claims that the original purpose of wisdom literature was to train able bureaucrats.<sup>16</sup> In *Wisdom in Israel*, von Rad argues that the sages were searching for the "rational rule"—rules that could be observed in this world for use in this world. For him, the quest for wisdom was a search for a specific type of knowledge presented through a specific literary expression and widely disseminated. Von Rad notes that wisdom does not provide rules for behavior (as does divine law) but attempts to instill a type of understanding in the individual, who still retains final choice over his or her behavior.<sup>17</sup> Talmon does not explicitly argue for a specific audience or authorial intention for the historicized wisdom tale, apart from offering general comments that this is another method through which wisdom motifs were conveyed. Jon L. Berquist offers a plausible, although necessarily speculative, reconstruction of the

<sup>12</sup> Gerhard von Rad, "Josephsgeschichte und ältere Chokma," in *Congress Volume: Copenhagen 1953* (VTSup 1; Leiden: Brill, 1953) 120-27.

<sup>13</sup> Talmon, "'Wisdom,'" 426. Ludwig A. Rosenthal ("Die Josephsgeschichte mit den Büchern Ester und Daniel verglichen," *ZAW* 15 [1895] 278-84; idem, "Nochmals der Vergleich Ester-Joseph-Daniel," *ZAW* 17 [1897] 126-28) was the first to demonstrate that the Esther story is closely related to the Joseph story, if not dependent on it.

<sup>14</sup> Talmon, "'Wisdom,'" 427.

<sup>15</sup> Levenson, *Esther*, 12-23. The use of the term "nationalist" is problematic, given that the story of Esther takes place well before the existence of the nation-state as a meaningful political entity. Michael V. Fox (*Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* [Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991] 219) defends the use of the term in this ancient context: "The book of Esther is indeed nationalistic in the sense of affirming Jewish distinctiveness in the Diaspora—but it is not narrow, segregationist, or exclusivistic. It portrays Jews living and working in the gentile court as members of one national group among many."

<sup>16</sup> Von Rad, "Josephsgeschichte," 122.

<sup>17</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (trans. James D. Marton; London: SCM, 1972) 291, 309.

location of wisdom literature—the scribal schools of the province of Yehud under the Persian empire. The authors of wisdom literature were educated, elite bureaucrats. For Berquist, the scribe (and thus the wisdom sage) played an essentially conservative role. As bureaucrats, scribes perpetuated institutions of dominance and social cohesion. As writers, they were similarly supportive of the dominant social structures and reified the status quo. Berquist comments: “as record keepers and as the guardians of institutional memory, they [scribes] embodied the power of the institutions to define reality.”<sup>18</sup> Mary E. Mills has recently demonstrated how well the foreign court represents a “moral universe,” a good location for conveying information about social boundaries.<sup>19</sup> Thus, if the story of Esther is understood as wisdom literature in this light, although it does not deal with historical facts, it participates in the creation and maintenance of social and ideological reality.

Berquist, however, does not see Esther as wisdom literature; in fact, he argues that the book plays a substantially different role. He classifies Esther as a short story, a genre that, in the context of colonial Yehud, sought to provide examples of “correct living.” Although this may not seem different from wisdom literature, Berquist describes wisdom as inherently conservative (derived out of “mainstream thought”), whereas the short story expresses notions that are contrary to mainstream thought. In Esther, according to him, these notions include a “strategy for salvation” in the context of imperial-colonial relationships and a pluralistic society.<sup>20</sup> It is not clear, though, how a story such as Esther necessarily subverts the normative construct; the positive ending, if anything, reifies the social norm by demonstrating that salvation is possible within the pluralistic-colonial environment. Susan Niditch, taking Esther as a type of folk tale, argues for a function of these stories that is almost the opposite of that proposed by Berquist: “The plot of the folktale, in which one knows all will turn out well for the heroes whether via their wisdom or ‘some other source,’ thus makes real suffering bearable and helps to bridge the gap between the way things are and the way they should be.”<sup>21</sup> In other words, these stories alleviate social anxiety about the status quo and thus preserve it. These definitions of the genre of Esther seem adequate, but it is worth considering in more detail whether or not Esther attempts to communicate sapiential ideas, subvert them, or not interact with them at all.

<sup>18</sup> Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 165-68; quotation from 167.

<sup>19</sup> Mary E. Mills, “Household and Table: Diasporic Boundaries in Daniel and Esther,” *CBQ* 68 (2006) 408-20, here 411.

<sup>20</sup> Berquist, *Judaism*, 221, 230.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Folklore* (New Voices in Biblical Studies; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987) 145.

## II. The Wisdom Debate

The idea that Esther reflects an attempt to communicate “wisdom” teachings is, at first glance, appealing. Talmon lists numerous elements of the story that correspond to other types of wisdom literature found in the Hebrew Bible and in the ancient Near East more generally. The setting of the story (the royal court) is a common subject of wisdom literature, and the character of good and bad advisors is likewise a subject of both Esther and wisdom literature more generally.<sup>22</sup> Talmon points to the wisdom interest in skilled speech, eloquence, and rhetoric as narrativized in the Book of Esther. Esther’s adoption by the wise Mordecai is compared with that action in other ancient Near Eastern literature, although Talmon is on shakier ground in attempting to demonstrate that this idea is a theme of wisdom literature, having to argue from the story of Aḥiqar.<sup>23</sup> He interprets the elimination of Vashti from the narrative as a reflection of wisdom sentiments rather than as a lack of narrative interest in the character once her role in moving the plot along has concluded.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, King Ahasuerus is a stereotype of the king in wisdom literature; he is unpredictable and moody, quick to anger and quick to act.<sup>25</sup>

The most convincing elements of Talmon’s arguments are his comparisons of Haman and Mordecai with the wise man and the fool from wisdom literature (especially Proverbs). Haman displays many characteristics that are frowned upon in wisdom literature: he is controlled by his emotions (rage, conceit, jealousy, and covetousness) and is completely self-interested. Mordecai, on the other hand, is the embodiment of the wise courtier as portrayed in wisdom literature. He is even-tempered, careful, and not loquacious, and he can plan with foresight.<sup>26</sup> Michael V. Fox is not convinced by these arguments, since the epithets given to typical figures in MT wisdom literature (e.g., the wicked man) are not present in Esther.<sup>27</sup>

Where Talmon’s theory shows its major weakness, however, is in his treatment of the main character, Esther. He finds examples of “wise women” in the Hebrew Bible, such as the wise woman of Tekoa, but these are not examples from

<sup>22</sup> Talmon, ““Wisdom,”” 437.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 439–40. In the Aramaic story of Aḥiqar, the wise Aḥiqar adopts his sister’s son, Nadin, who is trained with precepts of wisdom but eventually turns against his uncle and wisdom teaching in general. Talmon argues that even though this is not exactly parallel with the situation in Esther, it reflects a motif of adoption by the wise man (pp. 441–42). This may be true, but these two very different examples do not constitute strong evidence.

<sup>24</sup> Timothy K. Beal (*Esther, in Ruth and Esther* [Berit Olam; Colleagueville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999]) makes the opposite argument—that Vashti never really leaves the narrative but remains a central presence.

<sup>25</sup> Talmon, ““Wisdom,”” 444.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 446, 447.

<sup>27</sup> Fox, *Character*, 143.

wisdom literature per se.<sup>28</sup> Esther is captivating, as Talmon notes, but it is not clear that beauty and charm are by necessity sapiential characteristics.<sup>29</sup> He must also admit that with a female heroine, the Book of Esther is unique in ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature.

Other problems have been noted with Talmon's theory, most vociferously by Crenshaw, who finds fault with much of his reading of Esther.<sup>30</sup> For Talmon, the lack of reference to a deity in the story signals a connection with the remote deities of wisdom literature; Crenshaw sees this as possible but not proven, and for Fox it is absolutely not the case.<sup>31</sup> Crenshaw criticizes Talmon's argument for the adoption by a wise man for lack of evidence, and he considers Talmon's discussion of wise women to be equally weak. Crenshaw does not see Mordecai as exemplifying the characteristics of a wise courtier, since he never demonstrates eloquence in speech nor any tact whatsoever.<sup>32</sup> In fact, had Mordecai followed wisdom precepts and bowed to Haman, the Jewish population would never have been threatened (yet neither would there have been the happy ending).

In Crenshaw's view, the most difficult element of Talmon's theory is that it does not take into account the various nonwisdom elements of the Esther story. The strong nationalist sentiment in Esther is not typical of wisdom literature.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, nationalism is not a motif of wisdom literature, yet it is difficult to understand Esther apart from a context of Jewish distinctiveness.

From a literary perspective, what is most problematic for Talmon's theory is that the main plot arcs, at least in the final redaction, do not well fit wisdom motifs. Talmon himself admits that divine retribution is not a characteristic of wisdom literature but is a theme that informed other biblical writers. Crenshaw argues that this is not typical of wisdom theology.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, it is difficult to reconcile the fates of Haman and Mordecai with wisdom literature; the ironic chiasmus in plot arc for these characters would not necessarily be expected by an adherent of Proverbs. Willis attempts to solve this problem in his reconstruction of the redaction history of Esther, but even if one assumes an original exclusively court setting for the story, the plot does not necessarily imply a wisdom lesson—if anything, it seems to suggest the opposite.

The issue of whether the Book of Esther should be considered wisdom literature points to the type of storytelling that is employed in the book—storytelling that reflects the prominence of wisdom values in exilic or postexilic audiences. As

<sup>28</sup> Talmon, "Wisdom," 451.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 449.

<sup>30</sup> See Crenshaw, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence."

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 141; Fox, *Character*, 143.

<sup>32</sup> Crenshaw, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence," 141-42.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>34</sup> Talmon, "Wisdom," 446; Crenshaw, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence," 141.

Roland E. Murphy points out, "It is not a question of direct influence of the sages or of wisdom literature, but of an approach to reality that was shared by Israelites in varying degrees."<sup>35</sup> Although Murphy does not follow up this comment, it is quite insightful. Like an early modern fairy tale, the story of Esther takes place in a world turned upside down, a world of continuously liminal space and time, of feasting and celebration. At the same time, however, it tells the story from within the framework of the values contemporary to the writer. It is not surprising that some elements of the tale evoke values associated with wisdom, while other aspects of the story seem to contradict wisdom values. Wisdom literature provides the modern scholar with a window into the moral universe of the ancients and how that moral universe was under constant negotiation. Indeed, where the Book of Esther diverges from wisdom values and where it converges with them is remarkably consistent with a typical folk story, given that wisdom values reflect a dominant moral benchmark of behavior.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, the types of characters and the roles played by those characters in Esther are remarkably consistent with folk stories.

### III. The Hero

Consistent definitions of heroism or heroes are difficult. Nonetheless, one of the most important characters in this type of folk story is the hero, who drives the action of the narrative. In studies of the Book of Esther, both Esther and Mordecai have been taken as the hero of the story. What makes one the hero and the other not, or both heroes or both not, is difficult to determine when one lacks stable criteria for identifying the heroic. Conceptualizing and limiting a hero as a literary character is daunting, in view of the number of ways one can approach the issue. One can take the vague Campbellian approach, using Jungian psychology to paint a broad picture of heroes in all cultures and all times. Or, following the path of classical scholars, heroes can be seen as by-products of historically specific times and events. Here I do not assume that one can come up with stable and consistent constellations of traits that mark the heroic. Nevertheless, no matter how one defines heroism, it is present in the Book of Esther.

Joseph Campbell, well associated with stories of heroes but generally scorned among academics outside of Jungian psychoanalytic traditions, roots the heroic in the psychological development of the child into adulthood.<sup>37</sup> For Campbell, stories of the hero follow the same sort of pattern as rites of passage, which involve

<sup>35</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther* (FOIL 13; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 3.

<sup>36</sup> This is not inconsistent with interpreting Esther as a novella or a Greek romance, if one follows Johnson's ("Novelistic Elements") understanding of the genre of this work.

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Campbell, with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988) 152.



moments of separation, initiation, and return.<sup>38</sup> The story of Esther fits well into this schema: as she is taken from her people to join the royal court, Esther is forced to take action when appearing unsummoned before the king. She returns (metaphorically) to her people at the end of the story through her deliverance of them. The story is filled with many moments of rites of passage, with marriage perhaps the most consistent of these themes. Problems with Campbell's methodology are apparent to most commentators, and detailed criticism is not required here. Suffice it to say, his wide-ranging conclusions based on superficial readings of English-language versions of world literature through a spurious pseudo-academic perspective should not provide the foundation for the interpretation of heroic literature.

An almost diametrically opposed viewpoint is provided by hero studies in classical scholarship (especially scholars working with Greek literature, from Homer to the writings of fifth-century Athens).<sup>39</sup> Generally, classicists discuss heroism in historically specific situations and usually only in isolated works. The result has been a bewilderingly large number of definitions of the heroic. For John E. Rexine, heroes are different in Near Eastern, Greek, and Roman literature. All, however, according to Rexine, "provide models of human action and character to be studied, admired, and even imitated."<sup>40</sup> For Martin Clarke, heroes are heroes because "they stand at an intermediate stage between the gods' infinite vitality and the sickly feebleness of modern man." The hero, in Clarke's view, can be seen as "having abundant or excessive manhood."<sup>41</sup> Odysseus's major heroic act, in Gregory Nagy's view, is to kill the suitors of his wife Penelope.<sup>42</sup> So although Penelope's situation motivates him to act heroically, where his heroism is evident to the Homeric audience is in his physical conquest of his opponents. In contrast, Seth L. Schein's view of the heroic emphasizes what can be lost rather than what can be gained. What makes the heroes of Homer heroic and the gods not is the fact that the gods cannot die, so they risk nothing in their actions, whereas human heroes risk all.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (New York: Pantheon, 1949) 30.

<sup>39</sup> Of interest here are studies of the heroic in literature, as distinct from hero cults, although these studies are not necessarily unrelated.

<sup>40</sup> John E. Rexine, "The Concept of the Hero," in *Approaches to Teaching Homer's Iliad and Odyssey* (ed. Costas Myrsiades; New York: Modern Language Association, 1987) 71-76, esp. 73; quotation from 76.

<sup>41</sup> Martin Clarke, "Manhood and Heroism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Homer* (ed. Raymond Fowler; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) 74-90, here 79, 80.

<sup>42</sup> Gregory Nagy, *The Birth of the Achaean* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979) 38.

<sup>43</sup> Seth L. Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) 69-70.

Classicists do not take only physical traits and actions as defining features of heroes, but also intellectual skills. Joseph P. Wilson, arguing that Oedipus should be viewed as a hero, demonstrates that it is not his military exploits that are of interest in the tales about him, but his intellectual skill, reasoning, and judgment.<sup>44</sup> From a comparative framework, Richard P. Martin argues that classical heroes, like the heroes of the Icelandic sagas, are best understood as “style-conscious performers,” whose good form in speaking and demonstrations of moral worth define them as heroes.<sup>45</sup> Cedric Whitman likewise defines heroic traits in intellectual characteristics, in terms remarkably similar to Campbell’s view of the hero. Whitman sees Achilles’ heroic acts as “the search for the dignity and the meaning of the self,” a spiritual or intellectual as opposed to a physical quest.<sup>46</sup>

In the classical traditions, although scholars argue over the exact traits that make a hero a hero, all suggest some attributes that go beyond the norms of everyday character traits. Whether a hero has an excessive degree of manhood, or whether the hero displays an intellect of stunning proportions, these are traits that go beyond the normal and are beyond typical expectations. Perhaps these heroes are meant to be emulated—but not as players in Egyptian wisdom literature are meant to be emulated, by their conformity to certain expected standards of behavior. These heroes are emulated because they supersede the expectations of the everyday. Herein lies the crux of the problem with the Book of Esther; many of the characters reflect norms (both good and bad) identified in wisdom literature. Esther herself, however, does not act in accordance with sapiential expectations. If this book is a didactic wisdom story, then it can be expected that the central protagonist—Esther—should provide the model for emulation. Instead, Esther better reflects heroic tendencies by superseding expectations of daily behavior set out in wisdom literature.

This assumes that Esther is the central figure in the story. Talmon remarks that scholars have found difficulty with a woman playing the central role in the biblical story of the origins of Purim.<sup>47</sup> Carey A. Moore, in his commentary on Esther, takes Mordecai as the true hero, since it is Mordecai’s plans that Esther follows to save the day.<sup>48</sup> Indeed, there seems to be a reluctance to admit that a woman could play such a heroic role, even in view of the numerous instances of female heroism throughout the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Deborah and Ruth).

<sup>44</sup> Joseph P. Wilson, *The Hero and the City: An Interpretation of Sophocles’ Oedipus at Colonus* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992) 178.

<sup>45</sup> Richard P. Martin, *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the Iliad* (Myth and Poetics; Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989) 93-94.

<sup>46</sup> Cedric Whitman, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958) 193.

<sup>47</sup> Talmon, “Wisdom,” 449.

<sup>48</sup> Moore, *Esther*, lii.

What have been equally problematic for scholars reading Esther in the light of present-day morality are the actions of Esther. Lewis Bayles Paton's commentary on Esther from 1908 emphasizes that Esther is a liar who lacks intelligence but is quick to act out of greed and without mercy.<sup>49</sup> In the context of the values of his time, it is no surprise that Paton came to such conclusions. In modern stories of heroes, heroic traits typically involve offering mercy to the opponent—something that Esther clearly does not do for Haman or the Gentiles of Persia. That being said, there is nothing to indicate that “mercy” was a heroic trait in antiquity.

Some feminist scholars have been equally unkind to Esther. Esther Fuchs argues that the story reflects a patriarchal ideology, and, by evaluating the story and character of Esther according to modern values, she comes to conclusions similar to those of Moore and Paton.<sup>50</sup> Alice Laffey similarly suggests that Esther is an unfortunate role model for women: a role model of compliance with patriarchy.<sup>51</sup> These criticisms are problematic, since they judge Esther's actions by the values of modern times; this lack of consideration of historical context is a typical criticism leveled at so-called Second Wave feminists by Third Wave feminists. Sidnie White Crawford responds to views such as those of Fuchs and Laffey: “Lacking public power, women have historically been able to gain individual or private strength only by successfully exploiting the male power structure around them.”<sup>52</sup>

Crawford argues quite cogently that Esther is the heroine and a model intended for emulation.<sup>53</sup> She observes that Vashti appears to be a more attractive character for modern feminists but notes that although Vashti may oppose the male power structure, in the end she fails whereas Esther succeeds.<sup>54</sup> Crawford repositions the discussion, arguing that male and female heroic acts should be considered separately; the subaltern position of women makes Esther's heroic actions different from a man's heroic actions, which are from a position of dominance.<sup>55</sup> As she points out, this position of weakness reflects the subordinate position of Jews in a Diaspora setting, making Esther the figure with whom Diaspora Jews would iden-

<sup>49</sup> Lewis Bayles Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (ICC; New York: Scribner, 1908) 96.

<sup>50</sup> Esther Fuchs, “Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative,” *Mankind Quarterly* 23 (1982) 149-60, here 159.

<sup>51</sup> Alice Laffey, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988) 216.

<sup>52</sup> Sidnie White Crawford, “The Book of Esther and The Additions to Esther,” *NIB* 3. 853-972, here 872-73.

<sup>53</sup> Sidnie Ann White [Crawford], “Esther: A Feminine Model for Jewish Diaspora,” in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (ed. Peggy L. Day, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) 161-77, here 164.

<sup>54</sup> Crawford, “Book of Esther,” 883.

<sup>55</sup> White [Crawford], “Esther: A Feminine Model,” 166-67.

tify.<sup>56</sup> Similar arguments could be made for the heroic acts of Ruth, also a woman in a subordinate position. Linda Day argues that the character of Esther, in all of the different textual recensions, reflects, “a search for new models, for women and for all persons.”<sup>57</sup> She similarly sees a connection between Esther’s gender identity and her Jewish identity and emphasizes the liberative element of the story.<sup>58</sup>

Lillian R. Klein’s reading of Esther is slightly different. Although she agrees that the dependent position of the Jews is mirrored by Esther’s gender, she argues that the book suggests that “in threatening situations, social paradigms may be creatively interpreted as long as the prescribed gender role is publicly observed.”<sup>59</sup> The text, in Klein’s reading, allows women to act in heroic manners, but requires that they at least appear to be operating according to gender (and, by extension, ethnic) norms. Claudia V. Camp similarly argues that “[t]he exclusion of women (as of any disenfranchised group) from the established hierarchies of authority and power in a society obviously must lead them to utilize less direct means to achieve their goals.”<sup>60</sup> In these readings, then, the text does not provide new models for women, but instead prescribes how to operate within the normative model.

Crawford identifies the particular actions of Esther that can be deemed heroic. Whereas Paton interprets Esther’s use of her beauty and charms to win favor negatively, Crawford rightly reads this action as heroic.<sup>61</sup> Following Moore, Crawford takes as intentional the use of the active  $\text{וַיִּשָׂא חַסַּד}$  (“she won favor”) in 2:9, as opposed to the more typical passive construction.<sup>62</sup> Indeed, the use of an active phrasing here shows that Esther acts purposefully to gain favor with the harem guard, as opposed to simply being favored because of her charm and beauty. Crawford goes on to show that Esther’s skills at finding favor are emphasized throughout the story, especially when she does so with the king.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 167. Fox (*Character*; 219) questions whether Jews should be seen as subordinate in the context of the book, since Esther’s position is higher than non-Jews in the harem. This does not take into account the fact that Esther keeps her Jewish heritage hidden. Though Jews may have been subordinate to the other unnamed groups in the story, in the book’s narrative structure, the Jews are subordinate to the imperial authority.

<sup>57</sup> Linda Day, *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther* (JSOTSup 186; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 240.

<sup>58</sup> Linda Day, *Esther* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 2005) 1-2.

<sup>59</sup> Lillian R. Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003) 95, 118; quotation from 118.

<sup>60</sup> Claudia V. Camp, *Wisdom and the Feminine in the Book of Proverbs* (Bible and Literature Series 11; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1985) 124.

<sup>61</sup> Paton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, 96; White [Crawford], “Esther: A Feminine Model,” 167.

<sup>62</sup> Moore, *Esther*, 22; White [Crawford], “Esther: A Feminine Model,” 167.

<sup>63</sup> White [Crawford], “Esther: A Feminine Model,” 168-71.

Esther's intelligence and skills are evident to Crawford in these strategies of finding favor with powerful individuals first and then using that favor to convince them to behave in certain ways.<sup>64</sup> Using her unique skills, Esther is able to position herself more favorably within the harem and to convince the king to save the Jews.<sup>65</sup>

Perhaps more easily understood as heroic by a modern reader is Esther's uninvited appearance before the king, which could potentially lead to her death. Crawford is correct that Esther's initial statements of fear in 4:11 should not be taken as signs of cowardice.<sup>66</sup> In spite of the potential danger, Esther appears before the king and takes an active role in saving the Jews of Persia. Fuchs takes the unexpected positive reaction of the king as evidence of Esther's own weakness or unwillingness to act heroically (presuming that the character of Esther has exaggerated the danger).<sup>67</sup> There is no indication in the text, however, that Esther's fears are unfounded. Rather, the king's positive response is plausible because the reader has already been conditioned to expect unexpected behavior from him and has been informed that Esther has found favor with him. In view of the king's previous treatment of Vashti, Esther's fear appears, at least to the reader, to be appropriate.

As both Talmon and Crawford point out, Esther's actions toward Mordecai further demonstrate her heroic nature. Talmon notes that she becomes Mordecai's protector after he goes into mourning following the edict against the Jews (4:1).<sup>68</sup> Indeed, as Crawford observes, it is Mordecai's actions that cause the problem and it is Esther's actions that solve the crisis.<sup>69</sup> In her opinion, real power in the Book of Esther is having the wisdom to know how to use power—a trait that the character of Esther develops as the story progresses.<sup>70</sup>

Esther is not the sole "heroic" woman in the Hebrew Bible, nor are Esther's heroic traits unique to her. Camp identifies a theological connection among many of the female characters in the biblical narrative, noting that women in the OT act without instruction from Yhwh but still enact Yhwh's goals of overturning the current order and replacing it with a new order.<sup>71</sup> She finds this motif associated with numerous biblical women: the wise women of Tekoa and Abel (from 2 Samuel 14 and 20), Ruth, Tamar, and Esther.<sup>72</sup> From an intertextual perspective, Esther

<sup>64</sup> Similar strategies are enacted in the Book of Ruth; Ruth saves herself and her husband's family name by finding favor with her kinsman, Boaz.

<sup>65</sup> White [Crawford], "Esther: A Feminine Model," 167, 172.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>67</sup> Fuchs, "Status and Role," 154.

<sup>68</sup> Talmon, "'Wisdom,'" 437-38.

<sup>69</sup> White [Crawford], "Esther: A Feminine Model," 169.

<sup>70</sup> Crawford, "Book of Esther," 883.

<sup>71</sup> Camp, *Wisdom*, 124-25.

<sup>72</sup> Camp's argument about the wise women of Abel and Tekoa is more complex; see Claudia

appears as one of many heroic women who act without express instruction from God.

Heroic events and heroic activities are not incompatible with moralizing or didactic messages. As Crawford suggests, the Book of Esther, although “fast-paced” and “suspenseful,” attempts “to teach Jews how to live a productive life in the diaspora.”<sup>73</sup> This is consistent with understandings of the role of the hero in Greek and Roman studies. Crawford is correct that the story of Esther presents a female hero and, through the presentation, messages about morality and society in a not-so-subtle manner. Given the importance of wisdom philosophy in exilic and postexilic Judaism, it is not surprising that there would be some overlap between these heroic messages and the moral and social ideas associated with wisdom literature. The question is how, if at all, these traditions relate.

#### IV. Heroes, Villains, Danger, and Wisdom

I mentioned above that the strongest connection between wisdom ideals and the Book of Esther is the personality types of the secondary/supporting characters.<sup>74</sup> The actions and personalities of characters other than Esther line up neatly with expectations that are established by close reading of wisdom literature. The author of Esther does not directly inform the reader about the morality of the various supporting players; however, clear inferences can be made about the characters through their actions in the story. The author rightly assumes that the reader will bring a certain level of socio-moral knowledge to the story and will understand the characters’ actions in that light. The narrative style depends on this, or the story would lack suspense, interest, and believability.

For example, the king was probably viewed as a comical figure by the audience because of his decadent tastes and propensity for writing unrealistic laws while in the midst of celebration. Although the ancient readers (or hearers) of Esther may have found him amusing, they would also have recognized that he provides the main danger for the protagonists and is the driving force of suspense. Wisdom literature warns against kings who behave in this manner. For instance, Eccl 10:16-19 contrasts a good king with a poor king. The described traits of a poor king include laziness, decadence, and acting as a lackey to his advisors. What

Camp, “The Wise Women of 2 Samuel A Role Model for Women in Early Israel?” *CBQ* 43 (1981) 14-29, here 14-15 She argues that both women fulfill a particular political role “It was a role that we might classify as a regularized set of functions rather than an official position, a definition that accords well with what we can ascertain of that society’s tendency toward the diffusion of political functions throughout the community”

<sup>73</sup> White [Crawford], “Esther A Feminine Model,” 164

<sup>74</sup> For a useful discussion of understanding “characters” in literature, see Day, *Three Faces*, 19-25

is explicit in Ecclesiastes is that it is the land that suffers from a king who behaves in this manner, not necessarily the king himself. The company that a king keeps may cause problems for the land; as Prov 29:12 instructs, a ruler who listens to lies will have only evil advisors—as is the case with Haman. Aside from the instructions for royalty in wisdom literature, the king in Esther demonstrates further incompetence according to wisdom precepts. Most notably, the king's inability to keep his emotions under control (see especially his response to Vashti's refusal to come before him and the ministers in 1:12) is a danger to himself, to those around him, and to the people of his land. By letting his rage get the better of him, the king is clearly not following the advice of Prov 29:22 or Sir 6:2-4. Decadence and gluttony are traits that should be avoided (Prov 23:20-21). Carol M. Bechtel, in her commentary on Esther, notes that a "healthy sense of proportion is one of the things that distinguishes the wise from the foolish in the Bible's wisdom literature."<sup>75</sup> Clearly, the king does not have a healthy sense of proportion. Whether or not the ancient reader was familiar with these themes from directly experiencing wisdom literature, this would have been part of the cultural background that helped the reader navigate the story in a manner consistent with the author's desire.

Likewise, it is immediately apparent to the reader that Haman is the main antagonist. That Haman is a braggart is explicitly demonstrated in 5:10-12 when he sends for his friends and wife to regale them about his wealth, children, and the favor shown to him by the king and Esther. Careful wisdom readers will have seen this as indicative of Haman's downfall, for, as stated in Prov 27:1, one should not boast about the future since it is impossible to know what it will bring.<sup>76</sup> Likewise, Prov 29:23 states: גאות אדם תשפילנו ("a man's pride will humiliate him"). This wisdom precept is directly demonstrated in 6:6-12, in which Haman's pride leads him to assume wrongly that he is the one to be honored by the king. In both of these sections of the book, Haman also demonstrates his love of wealth, another character trait that is not approved by wisdom writers (e.g., Prov 11:29; Eccl 5:9). Both of these events also demonstrate that Haman does not think through what he says, a vice spoken of in Prov 12:23; 29:20; and Eccl 10:12. As Crawford states: "[t]o anyone familiar with the wisdom traditions, Haman's downfall seems more and more assured."<sup>77</sup>

Haman's foil, Mordecai, however, embodies the other half of these precepts: the wise one knows when to speak by keeping concealed what one knows (recommending that Esther conceal her ethnicity), as in 2:10. Likewise, Mordecai knows when he should speak. By informing Esther of the conspiracy against the king (2:21-23), Mordecai sets himself up for later reward. There are other indications that Mordecai's behavior well fits the wisdom precepts. For example, Prov

<sup>75</sup> Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 7.

<sup>76</sup> Crawford, "Book of Esther," 912.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

24:5-6 explains that knowledge is the real power and that victory comes out of planning and strategizing. These precepts are demonstrated by Mordecai's actions throughout the story and culminate in 8:9 when, in the king's name, he sends out the edict that allows the Jews of Persia to save themselves.

The character of Mordecai, however, is relatively difficult to understand if interpreted only through wisdom teachings. As Talmon, Crenshaw, and others point out, he does not really fit the mold of someone who has taken wisdom teachings to heart.<sup>78</sup> Crenshaw rightly notes that the Jews would never have been in danger if it had not been for Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman.<sup>79</sup> His refusal can be understood in a number of ways, but the most likely reasons are that it is due to Mordecai's pride or to his belief that it is inappropriate to show respect to Haman. If the former, then this certainly goes against wisdom teaching. It has already been discussed above how Proverbs views pride (29:23) or allowing one's emotions to get the better of one's judgment (29:22). If the latter, and Mordecai refuses to bow based on strongly held principles, then Mordecai is more sympathetic to the modern reader but likewise does not follow wisdom precepts. If Mordecai's action is based on his view that Haman is not deserving of respect (perhaps because he is a descendant of the Amalekites, as Moore suggests), he is contradicting advice given in Eccl 10:20, which suggests that one should not speak badly of rulers or powerful people because the words may come back to haunt the speaker.<sup>80</sup> If, as some later readings indicate, Mordecai is refusing to bow to a secular authority because of religious values, he may be pious, but he is certainly not following the secular-practical advice of wisdom literature, in which religious piety plays a limited role at best.<sup>81</sup> Bechtel argues that Mordecai may have acted differently had he known that he was putting his entire people at risk.<sup>82</sup> Beal sees this ambiguity regarding Mordecai's motivations as part of the narrator's larger tendency toward ambiguity and the frustration of reader expectations.<sup>83</sup> Whatever the case may be, the whole problem, in good classical heroic style, derives from a character flaw or moral stance of a protagonist.

Mordecai certainly does not shun praise when it is offered to him. In 6:11 he is rewarded by the king for informing the court about the conspiracy against the king. Mordecai is dressed in clothing of honor and paraded (by Haman) through the city on horseback, while Haman proclaims that Mordecai is being honored. None of this is particularly consistent with wisdom teaching. Yet, as Crawford

<sup>78</sup> See Talmon, "Wisdom," 437; and Crenshaw, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence," 141.

<sup>79</sup> Crenshaw, "Method in Determining Wisdom Influence," 141.

<sup>80</sup> See Moore, *Esther*, 42.

<sup>81</sup> For problems with this interpretation, see Levenson, *Esther*, 67.

<sup>82</sup> Bechtel, *Esther*, 9.

<sup>83</sup> Beal, *Esther*, 46.



notes, Mordecai seeks no reward in 2:19-23; he has simply done a good deed without thought of reward.<sup>84</sup> Perhaps his actions in 6:11 are part of a larger strategy to antagonize Haman; in that case, Mordecai's actions could be considered heroic but not necessarily consistent with wisdom teachings.

Mordecai's advice to Esther borders on counsel to be deceitful, most notably in 2:10, where the reader is informed that Esther is told to conceal her ethnicity. Proverbs has much to say about the wickedness of lying, perhaps most strongly in 12:19-20. Wisdom teaching does not offer any nuances of situation in which deceit may be appropriate. From the reader's perspective there is nothing wrong and much that is valuable in this advice, but Mordecai's counsel should not be considered wisdom.

Although there may be much for the protagonists to rejoice over at the end of the story, Mordecai's decrees that festival days be established in perpetuity to celebrate these events (9:20-23) do not seem to stem from conventional wisdom teachings. Ecclesiastes certainly does not suggest that feasting and merrymaking are appropriate activities—ever. In fact, the opposite is stated in no uncertain terms in Eccl 7:1-4.

Mordecai's faith in the outcome of events, although pious and commendable to the reader, probably did not originate in wisdom teachings. His strategies throughout the entire story suggest that he is able to predict people's behavior and plan accordingly. Most notably, in 4:13-14 Mordecai tells Esther exactly what will happen to her if she does not go to see the king—she will perish and the Jews will be saved by another. The Book of Job may or may not support the kind of faith that Mordecai holds, depending on one's view of redaction history. Other wisdom writings, however, do not reflect teachings of this type. Ecclesiastes describes the problem of theodicy—that the good often suffer and the wicked go unpunished (8:10b-14). Ecclesiastes 10:14 likewise suggests that no one can predict the future; no one knows what will happen. Mordecai seems to act based on principles of retribution, that the wicked will get their just deserts and that this is a natural ordering principle in the universe. As Talmon is forced to point out, this is certainly not a wisdom value.<sup>85</sup>

Indeed, the traits of antagonists in the story seem consistent to some degree with characters (and values) described in wisdom literature, and this may help the reader recognize them as antagonists. In addition, the nationalist/ethnic affiliations of each of the participants also help situate the reader's loyalties to the characters. The Judean characters would have been immediately sympathetic to the ancient reader, and the "otherness" of Haman and the king would have signaled that they were dangerous characters. This kind of nationalistic sentiment, according to

<sup>84</sup> Crawford, "Book of Esther," 892.

<sup>85</sup> Talmon, "'Wisdom,'" 446.

Crenshaw, is inconsistent with wisdom literature.<sup>86</sup> Indeed, the prominent role that ethnicity plays in establishing reader loyalties strongly hints that wisdom is not the only socio-moral system invoked in this work. Mordecai, moreover, only partially fits the expectations of a “wise” character. Thus, although there may be some references to sapiential ideals in the story, these are mostly negative (traits that identify characters as evil or dangerous are traits that are described negatively in wisdom literature). The character of Mordecai, whom one would expect to be a character deserving of emulation, does not exemplify wisdom. As will be shown next, Esther herself is even more problematic.

## V. Esther the Hero

If the story of Esther is a historicized wisdom tale, then one should expect that Esther herself will be a model of wisdom values and traits. Crawford ably demonstrates that Esther is the central character of the story that bears her name and that her character would have been a role model for Diaspora Jews. Does any aspect of Esther’s example reflect wisdom ideals?<sup>87</sup> In truth, only some elements of Esther’s character seem to be based on wisdom characteristics.

Talmon points to Esther’s relationship with Mordecai as falling within wisdom parameters. He suggests that the story of her adoption fits within a general motif of adoption by a wise man found in ancient Near Eastern wisdom literature.<sup>88</sup> As discussed above, this may be true, but the only good example of this theme is the story of Ahiqar, whose adopted son turns against him in the end. Thus, although possible, this example is not strong evidence.

Esther’s filial piety is stronger evidence, for filial piety is an explicit concern in wisdom literature (e.g., Prov 23:22; Sir 3:1-16; Tob 3:10). Her filial piety is part of what Sandra Beth Berg identifies as a larger motif of obedience and disobedience in the story.<sup>89</sup> Esther consistently obeys Mordecai, from keeping her ethnicity a secret (2:10, 20) to agreeing to go see the king as instructed (4:8, 16). Esther remains observant about what is happening with her uncle. She sends him new

<sup>86</sup> Crenshaw, “Method in Determining Wisdom Influence,” 141-42.

<sup>87</sup> Beal (*Book of Hiding*, 46-47) takes issue with viewing Esther as a model, since, in his view, this is a rather superficial and static reading of her character. Indeed, he argues that this book should be read not as moral literature but as literature that problematizes identity. It is important to heed Beal’s advice and not oversimplify the story (or Esther’s character). Yet, as should be clear from the discussion so far, a character that is a role model does not necessarily have to be a simple character. Nor should the morality that is reified (and perhaps created) by a story be seen as the sole purpose of the telling of a story.

<sup>88</sup> Talmon, ““Wisdom,”” 437-38.

<sup>89</sup> Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structures* (SBLDS 44; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979) 72-82.

clothing when he is mourning, wearing sackcloth and ashes (4:4), and sends Hathach to find out what is wrong with him (4:5).

Esther, unlike Haman, knows when to speak and is skilled at staying quiet when necessary and speaking up when appropriate, a wisdom trait discussed above (see Prov 12:23; Eccl 10:12). Esther remains secretive about her ethnicity (2:10, 20) and does not make her request during the first feast but waits until the second. During the second feast, the time is clearly right for Esther to inform the king about what she has been concealing all along—her ethnicity (7:4) and Haman’s villainy (7:8). Later she reveals her relationship to Mordecai (8:1) and then intercedes on behalf of her people (8:5). She keeps quiet, however, when the king mistakenly assumes that Haman is accosting her (7:7-8), thereby sealing Haman’s doom. This behavior is consistent with what Carole R. Fontaine describes as a “routine expectation” that women intercede in conflicts through the pronouncement of wisdom. In Fontaine’s words:

Women appear to be “authorized” performers of the cultural tradition: they are expected to be competent in their group’s lore, and they display this competence when required. Whether it is a king listening to the warning of a prophetess, a general heeding a wise woman’s advice, or a slave woman “speaking up” for her own point of view, those who hear, listen, and those who speak have an *expectation* of being heard.<sup>90</sup>

Esther’s actions, then, are part of a broader context of female participation in conflict resolution in the Hebrew Bible.

Crenshaw and Talmon disagree about whether Esther’s use of her feminine wiles constitutes a wisdom attribute.<sup>91</sup> Women are a cause of problems for men and are best avoided, according to some wisdom precepts (e.g., Prov 23:27-28). These admonitions are directed at men, not women. Women are never told not to use their femininity to control men. In fact, the reader of Proverbs is told that part of wisdom is to find favor in the eyes of men (Prov 3:4). Esther explicitly does so in 2:9, 15, 17; and 5:2. This is not a passive skill. As Moore points out, active verbs are used in these passages.<sup>92</sup> Beal notes that on this occasion, when Esther enters the contest, she becomes the grammatical subject of the sentences rather than the object.<sup>93</sup> Furthermore, Esther chooses how she will seduce the king and, in distinction from the other concubines, brings with her only what Hegai advises her to take into the king’s chamber (2:12-15). In Prov 9:1-6, Lady Wisdom gives a banquet for fools, a metaphorical passage to which the author of the book may allude

<sup>90</sup> Carole R. Fontaine, *Smooth Words: Women, Proverbs and Performance in Biblical Wisdom* (JSOTSup 356; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002) 268.

<sup>91</sup> See Crenshaw, “Method in Determining Wisdom Influence,” 141; and Talmon, ““Wisdom,”” 450.

<sup>92</sup> Moore, *Esther*, 27.

<sup>93</sup> Beal, *Esther*, 30.

when describing the banquets Esther establishes and to which she invites the foolish. Although Camp does not discuss Esther's use of sexual power as a means of gaining agency over men, she does examine Ruth's and Tamar's actions. On the basis of these two female characters, she argues that female sexuality was not viewed negatively and that in fact aggressive use of sexuality was valid, especially in the context of self-protection (at the level of the individual and at the level of the society as a whole).<sup>94</sup> Both Camp and Crawford argue that this type of action reflects a moral message that the use of female sexuality is a valid means for the disenfranchised to save themselves.<sup>95</sup>

There are more examples of Esther acting in ways that are inconsistent with wisdom teaching, but these actions are not portrayed negatively in the narrative. Most notable is how boldly Esther acts while at court. The typical wisdom teachings stress caution. Proverbs 20:2 says that one should not provoke a king to anger, yet Esther clearly risks this by appearing before the king unannounced, putting her own life in jeopardy (4:11). Likewise, Proverbs states that it is a good idea to be afraid of the king and not to mix with dissenters (Prov 24:21-22), yet Esther acts boldly and plots against the wishes of the king. Ecclesiastes also suggests that one should obey the king (Eccl 8:2), a precept that Esther breaks by entering into the king's presence unannounced, disobeying the traditional norms. The moment when she does so is one of the high points of suspense in the story, and her actions can in no way be justified according to sapiential values.

Furthermore, Esther is bold in establishing banquets as suitable forums to make requests of the king. This is an action-oriented attempt to find a solution to the danger facing the Jews in Persia. Wisdom literature would not suggest that one take such bold action. Indeed, there is advice for banqueting with kings in Proverbs, but it is cautionary and urges conservative action and prudence (Prov 23:1-8). For Camp, Esther's establishment of a pleasant banquet setting for her strategy of confrontation is "a classic maneuver of the traditional woman to gain her ends when the hierarchies of power are closed to her."<sup>96</sup> It is at these banquets that Esther intercedes on behalf of her people. She does not hold her tongue, nor is she reluctant to ask for more assistance for her people, once some assistance has already been granted (9:13). None of this suggests the meekness and conservative tendencies that one would expect of an individual demonstrating the proper application of wisdom strategies. There may be components of wisdom in Esther's use of eloquent speech and her ability to strategize when to use her persuasive skills, as noted by Camp, but this is not consistent with what the sages tell the individual to do at a banquet.<sup>97</sup> This may reflect intelligence, but not "wisdom."

<sup>94</sup> Camp, *Wisdom*, 127.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*; and Crawford, "Book of Esther," 924.

<sup>96</sup> Camp, *Wisdom*, 135.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

The most important events, and the actions that cause the story to come to a successful conclusion for the protagonists, are the actions Esther takes beyond her normative training. She may have learned sapiential precepts under Mordecai's tutelage (2:20), but she breaks with the norms of her community and, in so doing, saves it. As Crawford notes: "Her character has undergone a rapid change and growth, from passive girl to powerful woman."<sup>98</sup> What makes this story particularly interesting and exciting is that Esther supersedes the expectations that the audience would have for the character.<sup>99</sup> To save the day, she behaves in a manner that goes beyond the everyday and beyond her own best. In other words, Esther acts as a hero is expected to act.

## VI. Conclusions

Heroism in exilic and postexilic Judaism involved going beyond normative behavior—superseding the ordinary—just as it did in classical literature and as it does in modern literature. Heroes are persons who rise above the limitations of their own psyches and the societies in which they live, usually for the greater good of those societies. Esther clearly is a hero, for she breaks the rules of behavior in the courtly setting and, through her radical and bold departure from these norms, saves her people and brings glory to herself and her uncle. Day recognizes this aspect of Esther (although she does not use the term "heroic") when she discusses the theological implications of the story:

Actions begin with people, not with God, and the book places high emphasis upon human initiative, responsibility, and accountability. Whether God is perceived to be present or not, what is clear is that human beings are called to oppose the evil that they see around them.<sup>100</sup>

This cannot be anything but heroic.

There are hints of wisdom motifs and traits in this story, and they clearly make sense in association with a heroic context. Haman and the king appear as stock wisdom characters, examples of how not to behave or the types of people to avoid. They deviate from normative ideal behavior and thus are worthy adversaries/obstacles for the protagonists. Yet the protagonists do not fit the roles of wisdom characters. Esther may follow wisdom advice in her initial appearances in the story, but when her people become endangered, she must go beyond those normative mod-

<sup>98</sup> Crawford, "Book of Esther," 940.

<sup>99</sup> Fox (*Characterization*, 204-5) argues that Esther's character is initially imperfect and that her ordinariness allows the everyday person to identify with her. Although Fox has correctly identified where the tension and drama arise in the story, Esther's character should be seen as socially normative rather than as flawed.

<sup>100</sup> Day, *Esther*, 17-18.

els of behavior and act heroically. Likewise, Mordecai may also sometimes behave as a wisdom character; however, when he stops acting according to wisdom precepts, conflict in the story begins.

Wisdom, then, reflects normative and ideal behavior for everyday life. When conditions are normal or stable, wisdom provides good guidelines for behavior. When the normative construct is threatened, these behaviors are insufficient. Here is where a hero must step in. So the story of Esther, although reflecting wisdom values, must provide a character that supersedes those values as a savior. Wisdom is the appropriate behavior for successful life in normal circumstances. In our culture, we would not recommend that a businessperson behave like a hero in order to gain success in the corporate world. Yet we are unlikely to be moved by literature depicting a cautious, prudent businessperson's actions in securing a stable and safe life. The ancients likewise had heroes (or stories of heroes) who went beyond the norms of everyday behavior and, as such, became role models and provided values to be emulated. Their specific actions, however, were not expected to be emulated. Thus, although the story of Esther fulfills liberative fantasies, it is still inherently conservative. Esther herself becomes a marginal figure by acting outside the boundaries of normative behavior, but her heroic actions preserve Jewish participation in the Persian empire rather than creating a new sociopolitical framework.

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