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"Exodus" in Diaspora and the Homeland: Narrative Technique and a Model for Salvation in Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther

"EXODUS" IN DIASPORA AND THE HOMELAND: NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE AND A MODEL FOR SALVATION IN EZRA-NEHEMIAH AND ESTHER

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INTRODUCTION

The books of Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah share an important aspect of their narrative technique: allusion to the exodus story. However, I will argue that the meaning of the exodus for each of these stories differs according to what is possible according to the setting and circumstances of each of these books. Thus, the narrative is free to adopt exodus motifs for the sake of making a rhetorical/theological point to the reader, but the way in which the author/editor uses these motifs is constrained by the circumstances. The goal of this paper is, first, to justify that it is legitimate to read both Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah as making use of events of the exodus story and, second, to compare the differences in the ways that these two texts do so (as demanded by the differences in the context of each one).

To approach this problem, I am using elements of Schmid's narrative theory, especially his work on narrative constitution.[1] Since the references to exodus are not to the book of Exodus but to the story of an exodus, this is not primarily a question of intertextuality or quotation[2]—at least not of the sort where one

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[1] See especially Wolfgang Schmid, *Elemente der Narratologie*, 3rd ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014) and note 43 below.

[2] Biblical scholarship often uses terms like allusion, citation, quotation and intertextuality imprecisely. Properly speaking, intertextuality refers to the relationship between the text, the reader, and other texts, and the interplay of those three. It arises from Bakhtinian dialogism and was developed as a theory by Kristeva. However, Biblical scholarship has been much more interested in questions of allusion and citation (but often using the word "intertextuality" to talk about these concepts). Thus, Biblical scholars typically differentiate between an "author-oriented" and a "reader-oriented" approach to intertextuality. See for example, the discussion in Geoffrey Miller, "Intertextuality in Old Testament Research," *CurBR* 9 (2010): 283–309. The division that Miller identified in 2010 persists. See, for example, the essays in Marianne Grohmann and Hyun Chul Paul Kim, eds., *Second Wave Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta: SBL, 2019), which exhibit both tendencies. However, in

written text refers to another written text. Rather, it is primarily a question of narrative technique: Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah each narrate a particular series of events (at the level of fabula/Geschichte),[3] organised into a narrative text. However, at the level of the text, those events can be shaped and presented according to what fits with the story that is being told. In both Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah, the events have a degree of similarity with the exodus story, even before the events of the *fabula* are constructed into the text. However, I will suggest that certain events are emphasised, or portrayed in a particular way, with the goal of maximising the similarity with the exodus story for the reader.

This inquiry is not, primarily, a question of *Traditionsgeschichte*[4] or other diachronic methodologies. If one grants that reference to Exodus (or even just the story of an exodus) is possible in the late Persian or early Hellenistic period,[5] then the goal is not to trace the history of pre-textual exodus traditions or to investigate the nature of their influence on Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther. Rather, the goal of this paper is to examine (from a synchronic perspective) the narrative techniques by which the Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah integrate reference to the exodus—and why they differ in some of the ways that they do so. It is a difference in emphasis: if *Traditionsgeschichte* seeks to understand how the "*contents* of the author's statements are *determined* by pre-existing elements from the author's intellectual world,"[6] the narrative approach to this problem emphasises, rather, how the books of Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah manipulated the intellectual material that was available (i.e., the exodus story) in a way that impacts their readers' responses to the stories they are telling.[7]

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reality this picture of "intertextuality" (even the reader-oriented approach) has very little to do with intertextuality as it was originally conceived.

[3] For these narratological terms, see the discussion of narrative constitution below.

[4] See, for example, Uwe Becker, *Exegese des Alten Testaments: ein Methoden- und Arbeitsbuch*, 5th ed. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 133–36; Michael Chan, *The Wealth of Nations: a Tradition-Historical Study* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2017), 12–14; Douglas Knight, *Rediscovering the Traditions of Israel*, Studies in Biblical Literature, 3rd ed. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2006), 17–25; Odil Steck, *Old Testament Exegesis: A Guide to the Methodology*, trans. James Nogalski, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 1998), 121–42. However, some of the methodological assumptions in *Traditionsgeschichte* are incompatible with my view of the overlap of orality and literacy (see the discussions of allusion below, including note 13; cf. Steck, *Exegesis*, 121, who argues for a simple transition from an oral stage [pre-text] to a written stage [text]).

[5] On the dates of Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah, see note 8.

[6] Steck, *Exegesis*, 122.

[7] In this sense, the approach is somewhat prospective as well as synchronic. Although I am analysing the composition of the final form of the books synchronically, there are also some implications for the way that these two compositions contribute to the unfolding diversity of the exodus tradition. On a prospective approach to the study of

Before commencing, it is also worth justifying that a comparison between Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther deserves to be made. Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther are simultaneously quite similar and quite different. Both are narrative texts, probably written in the same time period.[8] Both are intimately concerned with the conduct of Jews/Judahites[9] in the context of subjugation to world empires—both the Persian empire in which the books are set, and the Hellenistic kingdoms under which they reached their final form. Yet the perspective of the two works can be quite different: whereas Ezra-Nehemiah is

tradition, see Hindy Najman, "Traditionary Processes and Textual Unity in 4 Ezra," in *Fourth Ezra and Second Baruch*, ed. Matthias Henze and Gabriele Boccaccini with Jason Zurawski (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 99–119 (102).

[8] I take the Hebrew book of Esther to be written no earlier than the late Persian period (due to the fact that it frames itself at a distance from its setting). The terminus ante quem is usually given as the colophon in the Septuagint, i.e., 114 BCE (following Bickerman's interpretation of the date). Elias Bickerman, "The Colophon of the Greek Book of Esther," *JBL* 63 (1964): 339–62; Frederic Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, WBC 9 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 295–97, 345; Beate Ego, *Ester*, BKAT 21 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 55–69; Jon Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 23–27; Jean-Daniel Macchi, *Esther*, IECOT (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2018), 38–49; Carey Moore, *Esther*, AB 7B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), l–liii. The date of Ezra-Nehemiah (at least in its final form) can be no earlier than the Hellenistic period, since it chronicles high priests down to that time (Neh 12:10–11). The time of the final priest mentioned, Jaddua (fl. c. 330 BCE) seems the most plausible date for the completion of the book. Nevertheless, Williamson's point that the book was probably substantially complete at an earlier date is well-taken. For further discussion of the date, or other points of view see: Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988), 336–41; Lisbeth Fried, *Ezra: a Commentary*, Critical Commentaries (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2015), 4–5; Hugh Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, WBC 16 (Waco: Word Books, 1985), xxxv–xxxvi, 361. Both Ezra-Nehemiah and even more so Esther have Greek "translations" that are highly distinct from the Hebrew/Hebrew-Aramaic versions. It is plausible that 1 Esdras predates Ezra, but the debate is still unsettled. See for example the articles in Lisbeth S. Fried (ed.), *Was 1 Esdras First? An Investigation into the Priority and Nature of 1 Esdras*, AIL 7 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011). Some have also argued that parts of an earlier version of Esther are preserved in the shorter Greek version (the "Alpha" Text), e.g., recently Macchi, *Esther*, 25–27. However, this article is primarily interested in the narrative technique of the Masoretic editions of these texts, with the Greek (and Latin) versions an avenue for future research.

[9] On the nomenclature, see John Collins, *The Invention of Judaism: Torah and Jewish Identity from Deuteronomy to Paul* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), 1–19; Steve Mason, "Jews, Judaeans, Judaizing, Judaism: Problems of Categorization in Ancient History," *JSJ* 38 (2007): 457–512. On the appropriateness of the label "Jew" in the context of Esther, see: Jonathan Thambyrajah, "Jews in Susa—The Significance of Setting in the Book of Esther," *ABR* 69 (2021): 23–36 (23 n. 1).

written from a perspective that emphasises the importance of the homeland, Esther is written from a diasporic perspective that does not seem interested in returning to the homeland. Thus, the two texts are both eminently comparable, yet cast light on two very different experiences of the early Second Temple Period, homeland and diaspora. This situation provides an opportunity to get a sense of the way that the idea of an exodus was treated differently in a homeland and a diaspora context by looking at the way that each text adapts the idea of exodus. It is this homeland–diaspora distinction that will explain most of the differences between the ways that Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah use the events of the exodus.

In this paper I will first outline a theory of a type of allusion that relies on the reader's perception of the narrative constitution. Then, I will examine the exodus motifs found in Ezra-Nehemiah and then those found in Esther. In each case I will suggest that although these motifs do not rise to the level of *quotation* of the text of Exodus,[10] the author(s) present their events in a way that maximises their similarity with the general shape of the exodus story. Then, I will explain how the allusion functions as a narrative technique. Finally, I will draw together the implications for the interpretation of both Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther, with particular attention to the political environment of each narrative and the legitimising effect of the exodus story in each context.

A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO ALLUSION

Biblical scholarship is highly accustomed to thinking about "intertextuality" (or more accurately, allusion) in terms of a concrete, "intentional" relationship between two texts.[11]

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[10] For some, the use of specific wording is the *sine qua non* of "intertextuality" in the Bible (see, for example, the discussion of Becking's objections, below). This would require an allusion to the exodus to quote Exodus' exact words. However, in fact, there are many ways of "citing" the Torah or bringing it into conversation with the text at hand—without actually quoting it. For example, Ezra-Nehemiah frequently appeals to the authority of the Torah and other documents. This can involve using an appeal to the authority of the law to grant authority to a particular interpretation of it (e.g., Ezra 9:10–13; 10:3) or to a particular figure (e.g., Ezra 7:10). The Torah can also be cited by referring to it as a book with which the characters interact (Neh 10). That is, Ezra-Nehemiah alludes to the content of the Torah, to the social capital of the Torah, and to the physical object that is the Torah, without necessarily needing to quote its words. Allusion to the exodus *could* take any of these forms (or others), and so cannot be limited only to those cases that involve quotation. See also Laura Carlson Hasler, *Archival Historiography in Jewish Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 51–92, for a discussion of the citation of archival materials. However, in this paper, I am interested in another kind of allusion to entire narratives.

[11] Particularly characteristic is the insistence on "objective" models by which one can determine whether an allusion is present. One widely adopted process for identifying allusion is that of Ziva Ben Porat. According to her model, the reader identifies a "marker" that triggers

However, even in cases of stable textual transmission, with all of the relevant texts available to the reader—and many Biblical texts may not meet these criteria—the process of identifying intertextuality is not as simple as identifying precisely quoted words. One problem with such approaches to allusion (especially those that insist on the quotation of precise wording) is that they do not fully appreciate the possibility of the transmission of narratives outside the corpus of the Hebrew Bible—whether that is in the form of unattested literary texts, of variant editions, or of oral texts.[12] In such cases it may not be possible (or desirable) to draw straightforward lines from one text to another, in the form of a quotation of a written text that happens to have

the intertextuality, whether or not it is "intentional." Then, the text that is being alluded to is identified by the reader, resulting in a rereading of the text at hand. Finally, the reader seeks other connections between the two texts. Ziva Ben Porat, "The Poetics of Allusion" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1973); Ziva Ben Porat, "The Poetics of Allusion—A Text Linking Device—In Different Media of Communication," in *A Semiotic Landscape. Panorama sémiotique: Proceedings of the First Congress of the International Association for Semiotic Studies, Milan June 1974 / Actes du premier congrès de l'association Internationale de Sémiotique, Milan, juin 1974*, ed. Seymour Chatman, Umberto Eco and Jean M. Klinkenberg (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019) 588–93; Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms Through the Lens of Intertextuality* (New York: Lang, 2001); John Vasser, "Methodology," in *Recalling a Story Once Told: An Intertextual Reading of the Psalter and the Pentateuch* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2007), 10–27. A similar approach is found in Heinrich Plett, "Intertextualities," in *Intertextuality*, ed. Heinrich Plett, Research in Text Theory 15 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1991), 3–29 (17). Klingler is much more critical of approaches that are grounded in the reader's perception of whether or not an allusion is present (on philosophical grounds). David Klingler, *Validity in the Identification and Interpretation of a Literary Allusion in the Hebrew Bible* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2021). However, his position that an allusion might be "valid" but not necessarily be correct or veracious (p. 16, 176) ultimately leaves the identification of intertextuality in the mind of the reader. However, even those models that ground the allusion in the perception of the reader are very dependent on comparing two written texts that have survived from antiquity in order to be compared, without any regard for the multiplicity of other narratives that must have existed.

[12] For the idea of texts that are oral (from a narratological perspective) and a categorisation thereof, see, for example, Monika Fludernik, "Conversational Narration—Oral Narration," in *Handbook of Narratology*, ed. Peter Hühn et al., 2 vols (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 2:93–104. On the coexistence of oral literature (i.e., oral texts) with written literature, particularly in the context of Ancient Israel and its neighbours, see Robert D. Miller II, "The Performance of Oral Tradition in Ancient Israel," in *Contextualizing Israel's Sacred Writings: Ancient Literacy, Orality, and Literary Production*, ed. Brian Schmidt (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 175–96.

survived.[13] Moreover, it is very simplistic to assume that the only possible type of allusion is quotation.[14]

Instead, I will approach this as a problem of how the narratives of Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah are constructed. To that end, it is helpful to put this investigation in terms of Schmid's four-tiered theory of narrative constitution:[15]

Four-tiered model	Three-tiered model	The levels, as reconstructed by the reader from the text
Präsentation der Erzählung ("presentation of the narrative")	Text	The narrative as it appears on the page
Erzählung ("narrative")	Story	The events in the (artificial) order they are granted for the purpose of narration
Geschichte ("story")	*Fabula*	All the events of the narrative in their chronological order
Geschehen ("happenings")		The set of events (implied to the reader) from which the narrative is drawn

These levels are reconstructed by the reader as a part of the act of reading. However, the text is the only level that "exists." The key difference between Schmid's model and others is the proposal of *Geschehen* as a level (or rather the fact that Schmid identifies a distinction between two levels of *fabula*). As readers read the text, they must identify the events of the narrative (reconstructing the *Erzählung*), put those events in their chronological order (reconstructing the *Geschichte*), and put those events in the context of all events that must have happened, even if they find no expression in the events of the text (reconstructing the *Geschehen*). In Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah, the allusions to exodus will operate at these deeper levels.

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[13] Plett points out that the norm for intertextuality is not direct influence from one single text to another, but from multiple texts to multiple texts. Plett, "Intertextualities," 23–24.

[14] See above, note 10.

[15] Schmid, *Elemente der Narratologie*, 205–50.

Ezra-Nehemiah and the Exodus Story

Many commentators do find the idea of a direct literary link between Ezra-Nehemiah and the book of Exodus persuasive.[16] Others are less convinced of the relevance of the book of Exodus, or even just the events of the exodus. In what follows, I will argue against this second position. Although I am not convinced that Ezra-Nehemiah quotes the *text* of Exodus, I will suggest that Ezra-Nehemiah nevertheless structures and orders the events of its *Geschichte* so that the *Erzählung* better resembles the exodus story.

Ultimately, the closest parallels, in which the similarity between the story of the Exodus and the story of Ezra-Nehemiah is maximised, are the following:

1. YHWH's intervention with the king (Exod 3:19–20//Ezra 1:1//Ezra 7:28//Neh 1:11, 2:8);

2. the king's instruction to go and worship (Exod 12:31–32//Ezra 1:2–3//Ezra 7:17);

3. the provision of goods by the ruling power/people (Exod 12:35–36//Ezra 1:6–11//Ezra 7:15–16, 18–20//Neh 2:7–8);

4. the goodwill of the people (Exod 3:21, 11:3, 12:36//Ezra 1:6);

5. and the journey out of a foreign land to Israel/Jerusalem.

There are other potential parallels: the building of the tabernacle and the building of the temple; the giving of the law and Ezra's re-establishment of the law; the people's sins of the Golden Calf and of intermarriage. However, these parallels are of a less exact nature.

This creates three nexuses of allusion to the exodus: Ezra 1, Ezra 7 and Neh 1–2. Three different journeys are presented in analogy with the exodus: the journeys of Sheshbazzar, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Each one of these is presented as a divine intervention with the king that brings the people into Jerusalem. In the journeys of Sheshbazzar and Ezra, the journey has a purpose, which is to re-establish Judahite worship. Nehemiah's

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[16] Gordon Davies, *Ezra and Nehemiah*, Berit Olam (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999), 10–12, 56, 67; F. Charles Fensham, *The Books of Ezra and Nehemiah*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 44–45, 156; Klaus Koch, "Ezra and the Origins of Judaism," *JSS* 19 (1974): 173–97 (184–89); Donna Laird, *Negotiating Power in Ezra Nehemiah*, AIL 26 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 76–80; Donald Moffat, *Ezra's Social Drama: Identity Formation, Marriage and Social Conflict in Ezra 9 and 10*, LHBOTS (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 138–45; Samuel Pagán, *Esdras, Nehemías y Ester*, Comentario Bíblico Hispanoamericano (Miami: Caribe, 1992), 39, 53; Mark Throntveit, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, Int (Louisville: John Knox, 1992), 15–18, 44–46, 51–52; Johanna van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, WeBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998); Hugh Williamson, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, WBC 16 (Waco: Word Books, 1985), 16, 19–20, 111; Philip Yoo, *Ezra and the Second Wilderness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), *passim*, but especially 94–95, 102–4, 107.

commission to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem cannot, in all probability be separated from this purpose either (cf. Neh 4:2). Thus, it is not just once but on three separate occasions that Ezra-Nehemiah presents its events in terms of this specific understanding of the exodus story: that an exodus is about divine intervention, to rescue YHWH's people from a foreign place and re-establish worship in Jerusalem. Not only does this selection and ordering of events produce an analogy with the exodus, but it also presents each of the three journeys as analogous to one another, part of the same divine intervention.

Becking objects to the possibility of an allusion, in part, because of the lack of similar wording in the text— בכלי כסף בזהב and עלה are too generic.[17] However, the parallels between Ezra-Nehemiah and the exodus do not stand at the level of the text, but rather at deeper levels of the narrative constitution of Ezra-Nehemiah: events, *Erzählung, Geschichte, Geschehen.* It is, therefore, a mistake to seek to justify the existence (or not) of the parallel in terms of the words of the text, when the parallel aspects of Ezra-Nehemiah and the exodus do not belong to that level of the narrative.

Becking and others also raise some other objections. Becking suggests that the goods in Ezra are a gift, not plunder,[18] and Knowles similarly points to the more "triumphalist" tone in Exodus and that not just the Gentiles but also the Judahites give the gifts in Ezra-Nehemiah.[19] However, in Ezra-Nehemiah, even if YHWH does not explicitly command the giving of the gifts,[20] it is very much presented as a result of YHWH's intervention (Ezra 1:1, Ezra 7:28, Neh 1:11, 2:8). This is in fact very similar to what is described in Exod 12:35–36, even though the word "plunder" (נצל) is used. Although the tone and circumstances may be somewhat different, the event is the same: YHWH intervenes so that the Gentiles are generously disposed towards the Judahites. The difference in tone is a result, as I will discuss, of the difference in circumstance.

Becking and Knowles also object to fact that the lists of gifts are not exactly the same.[21] The gifts included in Ezra-Nehemiah (vessels of gold and silver, livestock,[22] and "precious gifts" (מִגְדָּנוֹת) [Ezra 1:6–11, 7:15–16] and wood [Neh 2:7–8])

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[17] Bob Becking, "Does Ezra Present the Return from Exile as a Second Exodus?" *BN* 117 (2018): 65–73 (69–71).

[18] Becking, "Second Exodus?" 68.

[19] Melody Knowles, "Pilgrimage Imagery in the Returns in Ezra," *JBL* 123 (2004): 57–74 (58–59). Although Knowles argues that pilgrimage imagery is predominant, she does still acknowledge the relevance of the exodus (57).

[20] Cf. Knowles, "Pilgrimage Imagery," 59.

[21] Becking, "Second Exodus?" 68–69; Knowles, "Pilgrimage Imagery,"59–60.

[22] There is another element in the list in Ezra 1:6, where MT reads רכוש, "property," where 1 Esdr 2:6–7 apparently reads *רכש, 'horses' > ἵπποις. For the purposes of the argument at this point, it does not matter which reading is prior: either way, the list in Ezra/Esdras only matches the list in Exodus in a broad way.

may not be exactly the same as those in Exodus (vessels of gold and silver, and clothing [Exod 3:22, 12:35]), but the parallel is between two extraordinary acts of gift-giving, rather than the specific gifts.

Piani also downplays exodus imagery in favour of parallels between Ezra and Joshua, Josiah or the Levites, as interpreters of the law.[23] However, the existence of parallels between Ezra-Nehemiah and other books does not exclude parallels to the exodus story. It is possible for a single book to contain reference to multiple other books.[24] Moreover, the fact that the exodus allusions are based in the way the narrative structures the *events*, whereas any allusions to Joshua and Josiah are based in the way the narrative constructs the characters means that these allusions can sit side-by-side very easily.

Finally, Becking objects that Pharaoh and the Persian kings each play a different role in the narrative and that the people are in Babylon for a different reason.[25] However, this is attributable to the fact that Ezra-Nehemiah and Exodus are telling different stories. It is certainly true that the events of Ezra are not *the same* as the events of Exodus. However, that does not exclude the possibility that the events of Ezra, though different, are narrated in a way that maximises their similarity with the exodus. In this way, the positive attitude of Cyrus and Artaxerxes towards the returnees and their involvement in the process are indispensable to the events of Ezra-Nehemiah, and thus cannot be made to conform to an exodus model. This explains why the Persian kings play a different role from Pharaoh and the Egyptians. The fact that Judahites remained in the diaspora after the missions of Zerubbabel, Ezra and Nehemiah—something that would be only too apparent for any audience of Ezra-Nehemiah from its composition onwards—and the fact that Judahites, whether exilic or returnee, remained subjects of the Persian emperors mean that the neat division between Israelite and oppressor cannot be applied to the situation of Ezra-Nehemiah. The same applies to Becking's objection that the people are in Babylon for a different reason from the people being in Egypt—the necessary components of the story are different.

Yet, despite these necessary differences, where there is freedom, Ezra-Nehemiah maximises the similarity of these

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[23] Roberto Piani, "The return from the exile in Ezra-Nehemiah: a second exodus, a re-conquest or a reestablishment of the status quo ante?" (Paper presented at the International SBL Meeting in Amsterdam 2012). However, for the view that Ezra represents Moses, see Mark Leuchter, "Ezra's Mission and the Levites of Casiphia," in *Community Identity and Judean Historiography*, ed. Gary Knoppers and Kenneth Ristau (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 173–96 (193); Yoo, *Ezra and the Second Wilderness*, 91–93.

[24] Cf., on Esther, Jonathan Grossman, "'Dynamic Analogies' in the Book of Esther," *VT* 59 (2009): 394–414.

[25] Becking, "Second Exodus?" 68–71. Along similar lines, Eskenazi finds the possible allusion "suggestive" but "too subtle" to be of much importance. Tamara Eskenazi, "The Structure of Ezra-Nehemiah and the Integrity of the Book," *JBL* 107 (1988): 641–56 (650–51 n. 40).

events with the exodus story. For example, many parallel elements of the story could easily have been omitted in Ezra-Nehemiah—such as whether or not to explicitly attribute the king's decision to YHWH's intervention, or whether or not to mention that the goods used to build the tabernacle (in Exodus[26]) or the temple (in Ezra-Nehemiah) come from foreigners. Though such events are part of the *Geschehen*, the choice to include these elements at the level of *Erzählung* both in Ezra 1–2 and in Ezra 7 greatly strengthens the capacity for the story to be perceived as a 'new exodus.' As I have shown above, Ezra-Nehemiah does not have complete freedom to shape its story and so must maintain certain elements that do not conform to the exodus model. However, where there is freedom, the story is moulded to the exodus.

ESTHER AND THE EXODUS STORY

The way that the Esther story adapts the exodus story differs from Ezra-Nehemiah. Just like Ezra-Nehemiah, the Esther story adapts those parts of the story that best suit its circumstances. However, since the circumstances differ, so too does the way in which the exodus story is transformed by this narrative.

First, however, I will justify the basis of comparison between Esther and Exodus. Esther's borrowing from Samuel is well-recognised.[27] Parallels between Mordecai and Joseph or Daniel are also broadly accepted.[28] Therefore, that the idea that Esther could have parallels with Exodus does not stretch the bounds of plausibility. Gerleman suggested a number of parallels between the books of Esther and Exodus.[29] These parallels include, but are not limited to:

- the setting in the foreign court;
- the danger of the Israelites at the hands of a foreign power;
- an orphaned Israelite at the heart of the foreign court;
- the fact that the hero's ethnicity is hidden;
- the hero's reluctance;

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[26] On identifying the plunder as the source for the construction in Exodus, see: William Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, AB 2 (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 370.

[27] Yitzhak Berger, "Esther and Benjaminite Royalty: A Study in Inner-Biblical Allusion," *JBL* 129 (2010): 625–44; David Firth, "When Samuel Met Esther: Narrative Focalisation, Intertextuality, and Theology," *STR* 1 (2010): 15–28; Rachelle Gilmour, "Overturning Sovereignty: Esther in Dialogue with the Book of Samuel," (paper presented at SBL San Diego 2019); Grossman, "Dynamic Analogies."

[28] Gabriel Hornung, "The Nature and Import of the Relationship between the Joseph Story in Genesis and the Book of Esther" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2016); Ludwig Rosenthal, "Die Josephgeschichte, mit den Büchern Ester und Daniel verglichen," *ZAW* 15 (1895): 278–84; Shemaryahu Talmon, "'Wisdom' in the Book of Esther," *VT* 13 (1963): 419–55 (434–37, 454–55).

[29] Gillis Gerleman, *Esther*, BKAT 21 (Neukirchen-Fluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1973), 11–23.

- the destruction of Israel's enemies, reversing the peril;
- and the institution of a new memorial rite.

These parallels follow (approximately) the same order in both Esther and the exodus story. Gerleman thinks that the book of Esther is a deliberate detheologisation of Exodus.[30]

The reception of Gerleman's thesis has been mixed. While some authors are quite negative about any except the broadest parallels,[31] it has nevertheless reached a degree of acceptance.[32] There is very little vocabulary in common between Esther and Exodus of the sort that would support a case for close quotation.[33] Nevertheless, I will suggest that Esther does refer to the exodus, even if it does not refer to a text of Exodus (or any other *text* that tells the exodus story).

Over and above those mentioned already by Gerleman, one of the most convincing connections between Esther and the exodus story is the timing of Esther's fast, which coincides with the date of Pesach.[34] On the one hand, the text makes no overt

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[30] Ibid., 23.

[31] Sandra Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 6–8; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 299; Else Holt, *Narrative and Other Readings in the Book of Esther*, LHBOTS 712 (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 120; Carey Moore, "Esther Revisited Again: A Further Examination of Certain Esther Studies of the Past Ten Years," *Hebrew Annual Review* 7 (1983): 169–87.

[32] M.E. Andrew, "Esther, Exodus and Peoples," *ABR* 23 (1975): 25–28; David Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (Sheffield: A&C Black, 1984), 155; David Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NCBC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 267–68; Abraham Cohen, "'Hu Ha-goral': The Religious Significance of Esther," *Judaism* 23 (1974): 87–94; Ego, *Ester*, 25, 27–28; Danna Fewell, *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 12–15; Greg Goswell, "Keeping God out of the Book of Esther," *EQ* 82 (2010): 99–110 (104); Aaron Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 90–93; James Loader, "Esther as a Novel with Different Levels of Meaning," *ZAW* 90 (1978): 417–21; James Loader, "Das Buch Ester," in Hans-Peter Müller, Otto Kaiser, James Loader, *Das Hohelied; Klagelieder; Das Buch Ester*, ATD 16/2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 220–22; Macchi, *Esther*, 60–61.

[33] Sometimes a parallel of the language relating to Esther's birth and Moses' is cited: Esth 2:7 וַיְהִי־לָהּ לְבַ / לְקָחָהּ לוֹ לְבַת // Exod 2:10 (see Macchi, *Esther*, 125). However, the parallel is inexact (different verb) and the phrase in Esth 2:7 is more likely a calque of the Babylonian adoption formula ("ana mārūtim leqû"). See, e.g., Ego, *Ester*, 169. Macchi (*Esther*, 127) also connects Esth 2:11 (לָדַעַת אֶת־שְׁלוֹם אֶסְתֵּר וּמַה־יֵּעָשֶׂה בָּהּ) with Exod 2:4 (לְדֵעָה מַה־יֵּעָשֶׂה לוֹ). The language here is closer than in 2:10, but the phrase is composed of very generic vocabulary and similar enough to other biblical idioms (cf. Num 15:34, 1 Sam 22:3, 1 Chr 12:33, 2 Chr 20:12, Esth 6:3) that it is difficult to say confidently that this is an allusion.

[34] Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 398; Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 36–37; Ego, *Ester*, 253; Loader, *Ester*, 249; Macchi, *Esther*, 176–77. N. Collins ("Did Esther Fast on the 15th Nisan? An Extended Comment on *Esther* 3:12," *RB* 100 [1993]: 533–61) suggests a far more extensive set of parallels

comment on any problem with the date of Esther's fast. On the other hand, it seems implausible that an ancient author would not have expected them to notice this problem, at least in the Masoretic text: the book makes extensive use of (and assumes familiarity with) the Jewish calendar; the date of Pesach (and associated festivals) was well-known, if not necessarily observed, even outside Jerusalem;[35] and the ostensible goal of the Masoretic version of Esther is to establish a new festival in this very calendar.[36] It is plausible that Esther's diasporic authors and audience did not care about the practice of Pesach—there is no overt criticism of Esther ignoring the date. However, it stretches plausibility to suggest that they would not have even been aware of the date of Pesach.[37]

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between the dates of Esther and the events of the exodus, relying on the idea that the characters within the text (esp. Esther) use a different calculation of the beginning of the day from the editors of the text. However, I find it implausible that the editors of the text would have used the Jewish-Babylonian system of months and dates in combination with the Egyptian practice of counting the day from dawn, not dusk.

[35] See TAD A4.1, a letter that relates to the dates of a festival to a recipient at Jeb. The word "Pesach" (פסחא) is only reconstructed. However, from what is present, it is clear that the letter is talking about a festival that began on the fourteenth (TAD 4.1.3, [ארב]עת עשר)—although fourteen is partially reconstructed, given מנו, "count", it must be a number and given the appearance of fifteen in the following line, neither four nor forty is plausible. It becomes clear later in the letter (TAD A4.1.7) that Nisan is the month in question. Thus, at a minimum, both Jerusalem and Jeb knew of a festival held on Nisan 14, followed by a seven-day festival between Nisan 15 and Nisan 21. Becking, following the lead of Kottsieper, entertains the possibility that the festival in the letter might instead be interpreted as Matzot. Nevertheless, even if the letter is referring to Matzot, there are, as Becking points out, other texts that suggest that Pesach was known at Jeb (*TAD* D7.24, D7.6). Bob Becking, *Identity in Persian Egypt: The Fate of the Yehudite Community of Elephantine* (University Park: Eisenbrauns, 2020), 24–28. I find the most plausible explanation to be that the festivals held between Nisan 14 and 21 refer to Pesach and Matzot specifically (see also Bezalel Porten, "Aramaic Texts," in *The Elephantine Papyri in English: Three Millennia of Cross-Cultural Continuity and Change*, ed. Bezalel Porten, J. Joel Farber et al. [Leiden: Brill, 1996], 74–276 [125–26]), especially given the fact that other texts from Jeb mention Pesach. Moreover, as I will suggest, it seems quite implausible that MT Esther, would not have been aware of the date of Pesach (see note 37). It may be that Pesach was not celebrated outside Jerusalem, or that it was celebrated differently outside Jerusalem. However, it is difficult to reconcile the evidence with a situation in which Pesach and its date were not even known outside Jerusalem.

[36] See Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 297–306.

[37] To assume ignorance of the date of Pesach in MT Esther is difficult: the book of Ezra-Nehemiah, written in a similar time period, assumes basic knowledge of Pesach in Ezra 6:19–22 and takes for granted that there was contact between Susa and Jerusalem (Neh 1:1–3). In particular, it assumes that its reader will know that the 14th day of the first month is the correct date for Pesach—the text attempts to demonstrate that in all of its details, Pesach was correctly celebrated,

The pilgrimage festivals, and especially Pesach, were connected with the exodus—or at least, whatever their early history,[38] this connection had been made by the time Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah were written. This can be seen, foremost, in the way the pilgrimage festivals are described in many places in the Pentateuch:[39] Pesach and Sukkot are explicitly connected with the departure from Egypt (Exod 12, 34:18, Lev 23:43, Num 9:1–2,[40] Num 33:3, Deut 16:3, 6). Shavuot emphasises the time of slavery, rather than the exit (Deut 16:12). In a similar manner, the exodus motifs in Ezra seem to be tied to the celebration of the pilgrimage festivals, especially Pesach and Sukkot.[41]

Another argument in favour of Gerleman's original proposition is that it is many versions of the Esther story do not resonate so clearly with the exodus. Although the "canonical" sections of the Septuagint version of Esther (LXX) are (in relative terms) close to the Masoretic Text (MT), the "additional" chapters downplay Esther's role significantly, in a way that minimises any possible parallels with Moses. The Alpha Text

an attempt that assumes its readers know how Pesach was supposed to be celebrated. Furthermore, Ezra-Nehemiah assumes a degree of communication between a Jewish community in Susa and the one in Jerusalem (Neh 1:1–3). Ezra-Nehemiah assumes this as background information, which suggests that at the time of the composition of the two books it was uncontroversial to assert that there was communication between the two. Even if we accept that the community that produced the book of Esther may not have thought that celebrating Pesach was important, it seems improbable that they would not have known about it.

[38] Łukasz Nieselowski-Spano, "The History of Passover: Changes in the Religion and Cult of the Judeans in 7th–5th Centuries BCE," *RB* 127 (2020): 338–51; Tamara Prosic, "Origin of Passover," *SJOT* 13 (1999): 78–94; Rainer Schmitt, *Exodus und Passa: ihr Zusammenhang im Alten Testament*, OBO 7 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982); Judah Segal, *The Hebrew Passover: From the Earliest Times to A.D. 70* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963); Jan Wagenaar, "Passover and the First Day of the Festival of Unleavened Bread in the Priestly Festival Calendar," *VT* 54 (2004): 250–68.

[39] Of course, other places in the Pentateuch (or other Biblical texts) may fail to explicitly connect Pesach with the exodus (e.g., Num 28:16–25, Josh 5, etc.). However, this does not subtract from the fact that the connection had been made and was mentioned with great frequency in the Pentateuch.

[40] The connection in this case may not be immediately obvious. However, the narrative is put in the timeframe of the first month of the second year after the exodus. To put it in modern terms, the context for the laws governing Pesach in Numbers 9 relate to the occurrence of the first anniversary of the exodus. See Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 177n1.

[41] See Paul Byun, "The Persian Emperor's New Clothes: A Literary Study of Imperial Representation in Ezra-Nehemiah" (PhD diss., Sydney University, 2020), 168–70, 206–7. On the connection between exodus and pilgrimage motifs, see also Mark Smith and Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *The Pilgrimage Pattern in Exodus*, JSOTSup 239 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1997), esp. 127–42. Cf. Knowles, "Pilgrimage Imagery."

(AT) has fewer parallels still: for example, Esther does not hide her ethnicity, and the calendar is different. However, in the Vetus Latina (VL) the parallels are almost entirely absent entirely: no mention is made of the date of Esther's fast, there is no institution of Purim, and there is no destruction of Israel's enemies; yet the story is still recognisably the Esther story. Given that three of the four major editions of Esther (LXX, AT, VL) downplay a connection with the exodus to such an extent, one might ask whether one should frame the question in terms of MT emphasising the connection with exodus, rather than in terms of the other versions downplaying it. Indeed, the calendrical framework, which is such a prominent connection to the exodus, is thought by some to be a late addition to MT.[42]

Thus, the *Erzählung* of MT Esther is conformed to the story of the exodus. The fact that there are other versions of the Esther story (different *Erzählung*, but similar *Geschichte* and *Geschehen*) confirms that the *Erzählung* is the level at which the allusion primarily operates: it is the selection and ordering of events that establish the parallel. However, in the case of Esther (as opposed to Ezra-Nehemiah) there is also a purely textual element (the calendrical system) that alerts the reader to the allusion.

SUMMARY OF THE PARALLELS IN BOTH EZRA-NEHEMIAH AND ESTHER

The parallels that I have noted are:

- the setting in the foreign court (Esther, and perhaps Neh 1:11b–2:8);
- the danger of the Israelites at the hands of a foreign power (Esther, and perhaps Nehemiah 4);
- an orphaned Israelite at the heart of the foreign court (Esther);
- the fact that the hero's ethnicity is hidden (Esther);
- the hero's reluctance (Esther);
- YHWH's intervention with the king (Ezra-Nehemiah);
- the king's instruction to go and worship (Ezra-Nehemiah);
- the provision of goods by the ruling power/people (Ezra-Nehemiah);
- the goodwill of the people (Ezra-Nehemiah, and Esth 8:17);
- the destruction of Israel's enemies, reversing the peril

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[42] Macchi, *Esther*, 76–79. Macchi dates the introduction of the Masoretic chronology to the Hasmonaean period. This may relate also to the role of Purim in each text (see below). The idea that this may be the result of editing of the Masoretic text is intriguing, but cannot fully be resolved within this paper, given the extent to which it impinges on currently unsettled questions of the very complex relationship between the MT, LXX, AT, and VL editions of Esther.

(Esther);

- the institution of a new memorial rite (Esther);
- and the journey out of a foreign land to Israel/Jerusalem (Ezra-Nehemiah).

BIBLICAL NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE: "REMODELLING" THE EXODUS STORY

According to this analysis, both texts under consideration should be understood as connected to the concept of the exodus. This allusion is grounded in the way the narrative is constituted;[43] that is, the allusion is sustained not by quotation, but instead by the way the story is constructed out of the *Geschichte* and *Geschehen*. In this section, I will explain how this narrative technique functions.

The most salient point of this narrative technique relates to the selection and ordering of events to create an analogy between Esther or Ezra-Nehemiah and the exodus. As we have seen, Masoretic Esther includes extraneous events that are absent from other versions of the story (e.g., the enactment of a fast on Passover, Esther's decision to hide her ethnicity, the destruction of the enemies of the Jews, the institution of a new festival, etc.), that align it more closely with the events of the exodus. In Ezra-Nehemiah, on three occasions (Ezra 1, Ezra 7, Neh 1–2), journeys are narrated including events that could have been omitted, which by their inclusion, align these journeys more closely with the idea of a "new exodus." The *fabula/Geschichte* has been manipulated at the level of story/*Erzählung* resulting in a text that presents itself as a "new exodus." This manipulation does not involve changing the basic facts of the assumed narrative but selectivity about which events to include or exclude, in service of a theological point. This is somewhat similar to (or a subspecies of) the concept of "narrative analogy."[44] However, the analogy is not constructed between two plots within the same text, or even between two plots within two different (written) texts—rather, the analogy is between the narrative on the page, and a narrative that the reader is expected to know, even if it might not be directly based on a written text. However, there is also a subtler point, namely that the texts must create a situation for the readers, in which the events of Esther or Ezra-Nehemiah stand in a kind of continuity with the events of the exodus. As we have seen, the texts of Esther and Ezra-

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[43] On narrative constitution, see: Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, 4th ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017); Michael Scheffel, "Narrative Constitution," in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, ed. P. Hühn et al. (Hamburg: Hamburg University, 2013); Schmid, *Elemente der Narratologie*, 205–51.

[44] Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 21. See also: Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, Indiana Literary Biblical Series (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 366: "On the level of plot, [a pattern of similarity] assumes the form of equivalences and contrasts between events, characters, and situations."

Nehemiah take for granted that their readers (if competent) will assume elements of the exodus story. The stories are not fully comprehensible without knowledge of the events of the exodus story. Yet these are not events that happen with the narratives of Esther or Ezra-Nehemiah, and so must be assigned to the level of *Geschehen*. To put that another way, the events of the exodus do not happen on the page of Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah, but they are nonetheless part of the narrative constitution of the books in that they are required for readers to understand the text completely. In their narrative constitution, the books of Esther and of Ezra-Nehemiah lead their readers to place the events of those books in a kind of continuity with the events of the exodus: the author(s) imply to the readers that the events of the exodus are relevant for understanding (near) contemporary events, because they are, in some sense, a part of the same narrative.[45] In fact, they are self-consciously writing narratives that belong to the Exodus tradition.[46]

Carlson Hasler has suggested that the imitation of archivalism in Ezra-Nehemiah acts as a locus of institutional power and cultural legitimacy for the purpose of supporting the restoration.[47] Books like Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah are also able to write themselves into an "archive" (not of imperial documents, but of traditional narratives) by drawing on the exodus. This "archive"[48] lends cultural legitimacy to the restoration (Ezra-Nehemiah) or to the diaspora community (Esther) that derives from a native source, rather than the imperial hierarchy.

In addition, by placing the events of the exodus in continuity with the narrated events, the readers also form an impression of the target audience of the text:[49] Esther and Ezra-

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[45] Compare this to the way that Najman argues ("Traditionary Processes," 108–10) that 4 Ezra "creates its own precursors." However, I would note that while this narrative technique does influence and shape the exodus story for its own purposes, it is subject to limits as well: the technique allows selectivity in constructing the allusion, but it cannot completely reconstruct the exodus story without running the risk that the allusion will fail to be noticed by the reader. In other words, the authors are bound by this allusive technique in such a way that they are able to put different lenses on their precursor story (i.e., the exodus), but they cannot entirely "create" it.

[46] Again, compare Najman, "Traditionary Processes," 116.

[47] Carlson Hasler, *Archival Historiography*, 92–94.

[48] To be clear, this is not an "archive" in the sense that Carlson Hasler meant. However, the function of granting cultural legitimacy is analogous. Compare, also, the way that 4 Ezra alludes to authoritative characters as part of the way it grapples with authority/legitimacy (Najman, "Traditionary Processes," 112–15).

[49] For this kind of relationship between the various fictive, implied, or narrative audiences or narratees and the actual audience, see Sarah Copland and James Phelan, "The Ideal Narratee and the Rhetorical Model of Audiences," *Poetics Today* 43 (2022): 1–26; James Phelan, " 'Self-Help' for narratee and narrative audience: how 'I' - and 'You'? - read 'How.' (Lorrie Moore's short story 'How' from the collection 'Self-Help') (Second-Person Narrative)," *Style* 28 (1994): 350–65.

Nehemiah are aimed at audiences who view themselves in continuity with the events of the exodus. Better, the texts invite their readers to view themselves in continuity with the events of the exodus.

Remodelling the Exodus According to the Circumstances

Because this technique is *selective* (not all of the events of the exodus need to be selected for use in the analogy), it also results in the reinterpretation of the exodus story according to the circumstances of the new story.

Thus, in constructing a narrative about the return to Jerusalem (in Ezra-Nehemiah), there are certain elements that are irreconcilable to an exodus model. In particular, these differences derive from the political situation of the Judahites within the Persian empire. The empire still exerts control over Jerusalem.[50] Thus, Nehemiah and other indigenous elites may exercise power, but they are also agents of the Persian empire.[51] The returnees still live under the hegemony of the Persians, and any conflicts with their neighbours must be conducted according to that context.[52] Ezra-Nehemiah presents the Persian empire as beneficent, enduring, and Cyrus as its divinely appointed leader.[53] At the end of the story, there is an ongoing (even complicit) relationship between the Judahites, especially their leaders, and the Persians that is entirely different from the relationship between Israel and Egypt. In light of this different political situation, Ezra-Nehemiah's use of the exodus story cannot be as a story of liberation from an oppressor and the establishment of an independent nation that is able to exert independent power against its neighbours. Rather, by introducing the exodus story to its narrative, Ezra-Nehemiah transforms it. By selecting those parts of the exodus story that are appropriate for this context, the exodus becomes a model for a journey to Jerusalem and the reinstitution of worship of YHWH. It advocates, thereby, that the return has divine sanction (and legitimacy) in the same way that the exodus did.[54]

However, whereas Ezra-Nehemiah emphasises the importance of returning to Jerusalem, Esther is diasporic in both setting and perspective. For such a book as Esther, it would be impossible to utilise the exodus narrative, if that narrative were

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[50] Laird, *Negotiating Power*, 26–29.

[51] Ann Fitzpatrick-McKinley, *Empire, Power, and Indigenous Elites*, JSJSup 169 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 9–24.

[52] Fitzpatrick-McKinley, *Empire*, 199–202.

[53] See Tamara Eskenazi, "The Political Theology of Ezra-Nehemiah," in *Political Theologies in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Mark Brett and Rachelle Gilmour (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 242–56 (242–44).

[54] This puts Ezra-Nehemiah alongside other texts, like Isaiah 40–48, that mount complex rhetorical strategies in support of the notion that the exiles must return to the homeland. See Marshall Cunningham, "Re-Constructing Judeanness: Homeland, Diaspora, and the Construction of Judean Identity in the 6th and 5th Centuries BCE" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2020), 323–49.

conceived of *only* as the escape from a foreign land. Rather, the act of fitting an exodus narrative to the Esther story results in the development of a new conception of exodus, namely the salvation of the Jews, in a way that does not involve escape. This is a reconceptualisation of exodus that works with Esther but would be incompatible with a book like Ezra-Nehemiah.[55]

MT Esther's use of exodus ideology also supports its establishment of Purim: the peril of the Jews in Esther is placed on the same level as the peril in Exod 1–2. Thus, Esther presents Purim with the same level of legitimacy as Pesach. This justification may explain why the connections with Exodus are less prominent in those Greek and Latin versions that likewise downplay the importance of Purim (to the point of its nearly complete absence in VL).

The political situation described in Esther also has an impact on the way the book interprets the exodus story. Unlike Ezra-Nehemiah, the book of Esther affirms the importance of the ongoing existence of diaspora communities.[56] It must therefore discard any part of the exodus story that relates to a journey out of foreign lands. Furthermore, although Mordecai and Esther are enmeshed in imperial systems, their relationship to the state is different from that of Ezra, Nehemiah, or Zerubbabel. There is a greater consciousness of the degree to which the protagonists need to hold themselves apart from aspects of the Persian state (Esth 2:10, 20; 3:2), even if co-existence is possible.[57] The portrait of the king is mixed at best.[58] Thus, the political situation in Esther allows for a more negative picture of the king and state than would be possible for Cyrus'

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[55] Similar interpretative moves are made in both Judith (despite its setting within Judea) and some of the Dead Sea Scrolls. See: Agnethe Siquans, "Reception of Exodus in the Book of Judith," in *The Reception of Exodus Motifs in Jewish and Christian Literature: "Let My People Go!"* ed. Beate Kowalski and Susan Docherty, Themes in Biblical Narrative 30 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 56–73 and Mika Pajunen, "Exodus in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *The Reception of Exodus Motifs*, 137–61 (150–57).

[56] Thambyrajah, "Jews in Susa." See also Timothy Laniak, "Esther's *Volkcentrism* and the Reframing of Post-Exilic Judaism," in *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, ed. Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard Greenspoon, JSOTSup 380 (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 77–90.

[57] David Firth, "The Book of Esther: a Neglected Paradigm for Dealing With the State," *OTE* 10 (1997): 18–26; Jonathan Thambyrajah, "'Other Laws': Haman's Accusation against the Jews in the Book of Esther," *JSOT* 47 (2022): 43–55.

[58] Simon Bellman, *Politische Theologie im frühen Judentum: eine Analyse der fünf Versionen des Estherbuches*, BZAW 525 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), 60–69; Adele Berlin, *Esther*, JPS (Philadelphia: JPS, 2001), 5; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 314–17; Michael Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 2nd ed. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 171–77; Jonathan Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading*, Siphrut 6 (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 15–16, 40–44; Jonathan Thambyrajah, "The Rhetoric of Memucan's Speech: Genre and Characterisation in Esther 1," *ABR* 67 (2019): 60–68; Anthony Tomasino, *Esther*, Evangelical Exegetical Commentary (Bellinham: Lexham, 2016), 87–89.

Persian empire in the context of Ezra-Nehemiah. Likewise, Esther's use of the exodus story conforms with this greater degree of wariness by emphasising the need for salvation from a destructive empire over other elements. On the other hand, the king in Esther is *not as much* to blame as Pharaoh. In fact, like Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther shies from fully analogising Pharaoh's genocidal acts with the Persian king himself—rather, it shifts the blame so that the figure analogous to the Pharaoh becomes instead the king's official, Haman. This is consistent with the political outlook of Esther, namely that it is important to avoid engage with a hostile state, while still keeping the king on side as much as possible.[59] In this light, the celebration of Purim (through the lens of Pesach) becomes a political act as much as it is a commemoration: it becomes a way of celebrating diaspora Jews and promoting their political achievements, standing them in the context of creative engagement with an unpredictable, sometimes hostile state.

CONCLUSION: ESTHER AND EZRA-NEHEMIAH COMPARED

Comparison of these two texts' approaches to the exodus helps clarify a narrative technique, similar to narrative analogy or recapitulation, by which Hebrew narrative texts are framed according to the shape of well-known narratives like the exodus in order to provide additional, theological meaning to the events they wish to relate. This narrative "remodelling" inevitably creates a sense of continuity between the past events, namely the exodus, and the events being related.

This narrative technique is, nonetheless, flexible. Although the two books recount decidedly different stories and draw on different aspects of the exodus narrative, they both use the exodus narrative as a way to grant legitimacy to new cultural institutions and defend them. This capacity to explain and grant legitimacy in new political situations is the basis of the desirability of the events of the exodus as background to narratives as diverse as those of Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther.

However, the narrative technique also exerts pressure on the exodus tradition itself. The elements of the exodus narrative that are selected for each book relate to its own narrative circumstances: Ezra-Nehemiah emphasises the journey from Egypt and YHWH's intervention with the king, whereas Esther emphasises the salvation from mortal peril. Both are components of the exodus narrative, but just as a narrative of a genocidal state would be inappropriate for Ezra-Nehemiah, so would a narrative of journey or pilgrimage be inappropriate for Esther. By treating the exodus story so selectively, both Esther and Ezra-Nehemiah also augment the diversity of the developing exodus tradition, by reinterpreting it as either a story

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[59] Jonathan Thambyrajah, "The Narrative Motif of Anger and Esther's Ethics of Diaspora," *ABR* (forthcoming); compare Bellman, *Politische Theologie*, 87.

of escape from a foreign land and the (re-)establishment of worship or as a story of salvation from genocide.