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AHASUERUS AND THE SCROLL OF THE TORAH: A LITERARY-THEOLOGICAL NOTE ON ESTHER 1

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The question of a theological message in the book of Esther has long presented a challenge. Although the book makes no explicit reference to God, many scholars acknowledge an implied divine role.[1] In particular, according to one recent proposal, the portrait of Ahasuerus in chapter 1 contributes to the book's theological dimension: the Persian monarch, in this view, acts in pointed contrast to the ideal Israelite king, who follows the laws prescribed by God in the book of Deuteronomy (17:14–20).[2] Esther and Mordecai, in turn, consistent with one approach to the book's message, resist not only the genocidal decree against the Jews but also the decadent, radically impious royal leadership that governs them in the Persian exile.[3] In this note, I offer some

[1] A recent concise summary of approaches to the issue, along with citations, appears in Rachelle Gilmour, "Overturning Sovereignty: Esther in Dialogue with the Books of Samuel," in *Reading Esther Intertextually*, ed. David G. Firth and Brittany Melton (LHBOTS 725; London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2022), 57–67, here 57. Among substantial discussions, see Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 235–47; Aaron Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), part 2; Stephen P. Lewis, "Narrative Analogy and the Theological Message of Esther: Israel's Conflicted Relationship with an Angry Sovereign" (Ph.D. diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 2018).

[2] David Silber with Ben-Zion Ovadia, *For Such a Time as This: Biblical Reflections in the Book of Esther* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Maggid, 2017), 21–24. I elaborate on this argument below.

[3] On theological reversal in Esther, see esp. Abraham Winitzer, who sees the transformations in the book as a rejection of Babylonian divination in favor of submission to a divine order ("The Reversal of Fortune Theme in Esther: Israelite Historiography in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context," *JANER* 11 [2011]: 170–218); Jonathan Grossman, for whom the story may be characterized as a "theological carnivalesque" underscoring that human beings, including those in power, ultimately do not control events (*Esther: The Outer Narrative and Hidden Reading* [Siphrut 6; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011], 238–39); and Moshe David Simon, who likewise perceives the book's reversals as an expression of the rejection of human power in favor of divine

new evidence in favor of this proposal, arguing that, to help generate the relevant contrast to ideal kingship, the book of Esther contains as many as three implied references to the "Torah"-informed conduct of Israelite kings.[4]

BACKGROUND: AHASUERUS'S COURT, THE TEMPLE, AND THE LAW OF THE KING

At the beginning of Esther, the book describes two opulent banquets thrown by Ahasuerus, who seeks to flaunt the riches that adorn his palace. In the text's depiction of the Persian royal abode, scholars observe a set of parallels to the sanctuary of God, suggesting a purposeful correlation between the two locations.[5]

Some cautionary notes warrant acknowledgment from the outset. First, as often true for arguments of this kind, the parallels vary in their distinctiveness. Furthermore, the relevant terms pertaining to God's sanctuary do not all concentrate in one context but instead relate to different divine spaces: the tabernacle in the wilderness, the first and second Israelite temples, and the prospective temple described by Ezekiel. In some limited instances, moreover, the parallel terms elsewhere in Scripture do not clearly predate the composition of Esther.[6] In spite of these concerns, however, the cumulative evidence in favor of the correlation—which scholars have not, to this point, considered in its entirety—remains quite suggestive.

Specifically, only the Persian palace and God's sanctuary feature a חצר פנימית ("inner court") and a חצר חיצונה ("outer court").[7] Only they are protected by שמרי הסף ("guardians of

control (" 'Many Thoughts in the Heart of Man. . . ': Irony and Theology in the Book of Esther," *Tradition* 31.4 [1997]: 5–27).

[4] For the purposes of this study, we need not be concerned about the precise content of the "Torah" scroll in each passage.

[5] Concerning the parallels, which I document in the next paragraph (and which have some precedent in rabbinic literature), see Lewis Bayles Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908), 138–39; and more recently Grossman, *Hidden Reading*, 22–24; Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought*, 100; Yoel Bin-Nun, "The Scroll of Reversal" (Hebrew), in *Hadassah hi Ester: Sefer zikkaron la-Hadassah Esther (Dassi) Rabinovitch z"l: Kovets ma'amarim 'al Megillat Ester*, ed. Amnon Bazak (Alon Shevut, Israel: Tevunot, 1997), 47–54, here 53. In addition to the parallels presented below, Bin-Nun observes that unsolicited entry into the king's inner court results in death (Esth 4:11) as does forbidden entry into the inner sanctuary of God's dwelling (Lev 16:2).

[6] See the generally skeptical presentation by Gabriel F. Hornung, *Esther Against Joseph's Backdrop: The Theology and History of an Intertextual Relationship* (BZAW 553; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2024), 129–30; and cf. n. 12 below.

[7] Esth 4:11; 5:1; 6:4; 1 Kgs 6:36; 7:12; Ezek 8:16; 10:3; 40:17, 20, 34, 37; 42:1, 3, 14; 44:17, 19, 21, 27; 45:19; 46:1, 20, 21. The account in this paragraph closely corresponds to my earlier presentation in "Mordechai and Flowing Myrrh: On the Presence of God in the Book of Esther," *Tradition* 49.3 (2016): 1–5 (1–2).

the threshold").[8] Scripture uses the term בירה—which may denote a wider space than a palace or sanctuary—only in reference to the Fortress of Susa, the Fortress of Jerusalem, and God's temple.[9] Some colors/materials that adorn the Persian palace, specifically תכלת ("blue"), ארגמן ("purple"), and בוץ ("fine linen"), occur overwhelmingly in connection with the Israelite sanctuary.[10] The phrase עשי המלאכה, denoting individuals who perform official tasks, appears only in relation to the sanctuary and the Persian court.[11] The presence of "drinking from golden vessels and other assorted vessels" at the banquet of Ahasuerus (Esth 1:7)—considered together with other parallels between Esther and the text of Daniel—recalls the feast of Belshazzar, whose participants drink from "golden vessels" plundered from the Israelite temple while paying homage to gods of gold and other materials (Dan 5:3–4).[12] And the women assembled in Ahasuerus's palace are treated with שמן המר ("oil of myrrh") and בשמים ("spices"; Esth 2:12), these substances bringing to mind the sanctuary's anointing oil (שמן), which is composed of מר and different types of בשמים.[13]

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[8] Esth 2:21; 6:2; 2 Kgs 12:10; 22:4; 23:4; 25:18; Jer 35:4; 52:24; 1 Chr 9:19; 2 Chr 34:9.

[9] Esth 1:2, 5; 2:3, 5, 8; 3:16; 8:14; 9:6, 11, 12; Dan 8:2; Neh 1:1; 2:8; 7:2; 1 Chr 29:1, 19.

[10] The terms appear together in Esth 1:6; 8:16. By Grossman's count (*Hidden Reading*, 23), forty-two out of forty-nine biblical occurrences of תכלת relate to the sanctuary, as do twenty-nine out of thirty-eight occurrences of ארגמן, and four out of five of בוץ apart from its two occurrences in Esther.

[11] Esth 3:9; 9:3; Exod 36:8; 2 Kgs 12:12, 15, 16; 22:5, 9; Neh 11:12; 13:10; 2 Chr. 24:13; 34:10, 17. In relation to the temple, the phrase also occurs with the spelling עשה המלאכה in Ezra 3:9; Neh 11:12; 1 Chr 23:24; 2 Chr 34:10; but once in relation to Jerusalem generally (Neh 2:16). עשי\עשֵׂה מלאכה, without the definite article, occurs in relation to the temple in 1 Chr 22:15; 2 Chr 34:13, but pertaining to other matters in 1 Kgs 11:28; Ps 107:23. The relevance of this phrase to the wider argument has not, to this point, commanded the attention of scholars.

[12] The relevant formulations in Esther and Daniel, moreover, both feature ambiguity concerning whether or not any of the drinking vessels were fashioned out of the non-golden materials. For parallels between Esther and Daniel, and on the question of the dating of the Daniel material for this purpose, see recently the (skeptical) discussion by Hornung (*Joseph's Backdrop*, 112–18) and the earlier literature cited there.

[13] See Exod 30:23–25, and my argument in "Mordechai and Flowing Myrrh." According to Exod 30:32–33, the anointing oil may neither be replicated for other purposes nor placed on the bodies of non-priests. The placement of these substances on the bodies of the objectified women of Persia—instead of on the priests and the vessels of the sanctuary—thus underscores Ahasuerus's desecration of the holy. Accordingly, as I argue in that study, there is excellent reason to embrace the rabbis' observation (*b. Meg.* 10b) that the name of מרדכי ("Mordecai")—who helps bring about a transformation—plays on the phrase מר דכי, a targumic rendering of the phrase מר דרור ("pure/flowing myrrh") in the same passage in Exodus (30:23). Let me add here that

These parallels call attention to a basic contrast: whereas the appurtenances of the temple afford honor to God, the corresponding attributes of the Persian court underscore the decadence of the king. If the court of Ahasuerus, then, usurps the sacred features of the temple, this adds to the conception that, in the story of Esther, the Jews in the Persian exile contend with a threat that is religious/theological as well as existential.[14]

This perspective finds support in an additional, less common observation. The second verse of the book begins, "In those days, when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne (בשבת המלך אחשורוש על כסא מלכותו)." Two scholars, independently of one another, have proposed that this formulation calls to mind the law of the king—specifically Deut 17:18, which contains the only other formulation in Scripture featuring the prefix כ- conjoined to infinitive ישב plus the expression על כסא מלכותו\ממלכתו: "When he sits on his royal throne (כשבתו על כסא ממלכתו), [the king] shall write for himself a copy of this Torah on a scroll in the presence of the levitical priests."[15] The intentionality of this parallel, moreover, draws support from the awkwardness and extraneity of the verse in Esther.[16] In principle,

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the rabbis' assertion (*b. Ḥul* 139b) that the name אסתר ("Esther") plays on the root סתר, calling attention to God's "hiddenness," draws support from Deut 32:20: אסתירה פני מהם [...] כי דור תהפכות המה בנים לא אמן בם ("I will hide [אסתירה] my face from them […], for they are an upside-down [הפך] generation, children possessing no faithfulness [אמן]"). To wit, when introducing Esther (אסתר), whose name resonates with אסתירה ("I will hide"), the text states ויהי אמן את הדסה היא אסתר ("[Mordecai] was raising Hadassah; that is, Esther"; Esth 2:7). The word אמן ("raising") parallels the (differently vocalized) word אמן ("faithfulness") in the same verse in Deuteronomy, suggesting that Mordecai instilled in Esther the piety that, in spite of God's hiddenness, will help bring about a providential salvation. Likewise, the widely noted reversal theme in Esther, underscored by the root הפך (Esth 9:1, 22), suggests a corrective to the fate of the דור תהפכות ("upside-down generation") described in that same verse.

[14] See the sources cited above, n. 3.

[15] Silber, *Biblical Reflections*, 21–22; Ron Lindo, Jr., *Literary Allusions in Esther: A Study on the Convergence of Intertexts and Narrative* (Studies in Biblical Literature 181; Lausanne: Peter Lang, 2023), 108–9. Lindo is probably correct that, in conjunction with other parallels to the story of Solomon, this formulation also recalls the more moderately resonant phrase וגם ישב שלמה על כסא המלוכה ("And Solomon also sat on the royal throne"; 1 Kgs 1:46). Regarding connections in Esther to the story of Solomon, see my discussion in "Esther and Benjaminite Royalty: A Study in Inner-Biblical Allusion," *JBL* 129 (2010): 625–44, here 641–44, where I argue that Mordecai ultimately emerges as the figure who parallels—and even surpasses—the figure of Solomon.

[16] Such awkwardness, sometimes called "ungrammaticality," may help mark the presence of an allusion; see inter alia Cynthia Edenburg, *Dismembering the Whole: Composition and Purpose of Judges 19–21* (AIL 24; Atlanta: SBL, 2016), 168, 172–73. To be sure, I have argued, in line with the opinion of others, that ungrammaticality ought not be regarded as a *necessary* criterion for the identification of allusion. See my discussion in *Jonah in the Shadows of Eden* (ISBL; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 96–97 n. 7.

the opening of the book—leaving the first verse intact—might have read as follows: "In the days of Ahasuerus—that is, the Ahasuerus who reigned over a hundred and twenty-seven provinces from India to Cush—he made a banquet in the Fortress of Susa during the third year of his reign [. . .]."[17] As it stands, however, the second verse ("In those days [. . .]") disrupts the syntax, while making a seemingly redundant reference to Ahasuerus's occupation of the throne ("when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne").[18] There is reason to think, therefore, that the author constructed this odd presentation precisely to generate an allusion to the law of the king.

Notably, this proposed correlation bears an important thematic dimension, which makes a distinctly fitting theological contribution to the Esther text: Ahasuerus not only usurps the sacred characteristics of God's sanctuary but also, in specific ways, exhibits the opposite of the pious conduct that the passage in Deuteronomy requires of a king.[19] According to that passage, the king must not have too many wives. He must not amass too much silver and gold. And "when he sits on his royal throne" (כשבתו על כסא ממלכתו), he must "write for himself a copy of this Torah on a scroll" and "read in it all the days of his life," so that he will fear God, follow divine law, and "not exalt himself over his kin." Ahasuerus, by contrast, accumulates gold, silver, and other riches in abundance. He later gathers all the young women of the kingdom into his harem. And, we are told, "when King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne" (כשבת המלך אחשורוש על כסא מלכותו), he made a banquet to "display the wealth of his glorious kingdom (עשר כבוד מלכותו) and the splendor of his grand majesty." If, accordingly, this wider theory is correct, Ahasuerus not only misappropriates the glamor that befits God's temple but also, by his flamboyance and self-indulgence, presents a stark contrast to the Torah-heeding king that Scripture envisions.

SUPPORTING EVIDENCE

With this hypothesis in mind, I wish to propose some additional evidence that the text, in depicting Ahasuerus's perversions, invokes the motif of the Scroll of the Torah, whose contents must inform the conduct of a divinely sanctioned king. We have seen that the phrase כשבת המלך אחשורוש על כסא מלכותו, while resembling כשבתו על כסא ממלכתו in Deuteronomy, introduces—ironically—not a reference to writing and observing God's

[17] After v. 1, the Hebrew might simply have continued: בשנת שלוש למלכו עשה משתה בשושן הבירה [...].

[18] The problem is widely acknowledged; see inter alia Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 16; Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 44; and Adele Berlin, *Esther: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 6–7; and note recently the various conjectures presented in Jean Daniel Macchi, *Esther* (IECOT; Stuttgart: Kolhammer, 2018), 93.

[19] Cf. Silber, *Biblical Reflections*, 19–24.

teaching but instead a depiction of Ahasuerus's court that stands at odds with the law of the king. Consider, therefore, that this depiction begins with the phrase בשנת שלוש למלכו ("in the third year of his reign"; Esth 1:3). Significantly, this phrase occurs only one other time in Scripture, in a narrative featuring its own parallels to the rules of Israelite governance prescribed in Deuteronomy. I am referring to the descriptions of Jehoshaphat's managerial initiatives in the book of Chronicles (2 Chr 17, 19), which according to one view depend directly on Deuteronomy 16–18—including on the passage immediately preceding the law of the king (17:8–13)[20]—and which include the following report (2 Chr 17:3–9):[21]

> The Lord was with Jehoshaphat because he followed the ways of his father David before him. [. . .] The Lord established the kingdom under his control, and all Judah brought gifts to Jehoshaphat, so that he had great wealth and glory (עשר וכבוד). His heart was uplifted (ויגבה לבו) toward the ways of the Lord, and he also removed the high places and the Asherah poles from Judah.
>
> In the third year of his reign (ובשנת שלוש למלכו), he sent his officials [. . .], and with them the [following] Levites [. . .] and the priests Elishama and Jehoram, to teach in the towns of Judah.[22] [. . .] They taught throughout Judah, taking with them the Scroll of the Torah of the Lord: they went around to all the towns of Judah and taught the people.

This passage begins by affirming Jehoshaphat's righteousness and his divinely bestowed reward, including his "wealth and glory" (עשר וכבוד). The text, moreover, states ויגבה לבו ("his heart was uplifted"), an expression that, in nearly all cases, denotes arrogance. In this one instance, however, it yields a markedly different meaning: uplift in the ways of the Lord.[23] Thus, we

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[20] See Gary N. Knoppers, "Jehoshaphat's Judiciary and the Scroll of YHWH's Torah," *JBL* 113 (1994): 59–80; cf. idem, "The Relationship of the Deuteronomistic History to Chronicles: Was the Chronicler a Deuteronomist?" in Martti Nissinen, ed., *Congress Volume Helsinki 2010* (VTSup 148; Leiden: Brill, 2012), 307–341. Jozef Tiňo, in partial endorsement of earlier views, has challenged aspects of Knoppers's position (*King and Temple in Chronicles: A Contextual Approach to Their Relations* [FRLANT 234; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010], 79–83). Tiňo too, however, acknowledges that the Chronicler, at least in one instance, draws on the law of the king in Deuteronomy (100, 106). For another proposed allusion by the Chronicler to the law of the king, see Knoppers, "Relationship," 317.

[21] I substantially follow the NRSV translation.

[22] The elisions in this paragraph pertain to names of Jehoshaphat's emissaries. When the text, accordingly, then asserts that those emissaries imparted the teachings of the Scroll of the Torah, that assertion is not meaningfully separated from the phrase ובשנת שלוש למלכו.

[23] See, e.g., Sara Japhet, *I & II Chronicles: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 747–48.

are told, ובשנת שלוש למלכו ("In the third year of his reign"), Jehoshaphat sent emissaries throughout Judah—including various Levites and priests—to impart the teachings found in "the Scroll of the Torah." Indeed, according to one articulation, this effort "broadly conforms to passages in Deuteronomy in which the Levites enjoy custody of the Torah (17:18 ["(the king) shall write for himself a copy of this Torah on a scroll in the presence of the levitical priests"]; 31:9) and are entrusted with the responsibility to educate the people, employing the Torah (31:10–13; 33:10)."[24]

It seems decidedly noteworthy, therefore, that in the text of Esther, immediately after the clause featuring כשבת המלך אחשורוש על כסא מלכותו, we encounter another formulation (בשנת שלוש למלכו) whose lone biblical parallel marks an account of divinely favored kingship guided—in keeping with the law in Deuteronomy—by the Scroll of the Torah.[25] This additional parallel, in turn, enhances the probability that Ahasuerus—who, in contrast to Jehoshaphat, shows off his עשר and כבוד in a display of genuine arrogance—not only usurps the grandeur designated for the sanctuary but also, by his decadent conduct, presents a purposeful contrast to the Torah-informed paradigm of royalty endorsed by God.

This proposed reference to the narrative of Jehoshaphat, while intrinsically suggestive when considered together with the similarly unique phraseological parallel to the law of the king, rests on the assumption that the text of Chronicles—or the relevant source on which it drew—was circulating when the book of Esther was written.[26] In support of this assumption, it bears

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[24] Knoppers, "Relationship," 315.

[25] The phrase בשנת שלוש למלכו does not appear in the Alpha Text (see recently Macchi, *Esther*, 110–11), adding to the likelihood of a purposeful, "intertextual" motive for its insertion (cf. Macchi, *Esther*, 34).

[26] On average, conjectures regarding the date of composition of Esther do not fall much later than those regarding the date of Chronicles, but crucially, the relevant language might have been present in earlier source material used by the Chronicler. Frederic W. Bush assigns to Esther a late Persian or early Hellenistic date (*Ruth, Esther* [WBC 9; Dallas: Word Books, 1996], 295–97); cf. Levenson, *Esther*, 26; Berlin, *Esther*, xli–xliii. Fox regards a third-century date to be the most likely (*Character and Ideology*, 140), and Macchi perceives a process of composition extending from the third century to the second (*Esther*, 15). As for Chronicles, Japhet (*Chronicles*, 23–28) regards a late-fourth-century date as the most probable; and Gary N. Knoppers, in his lengthy discussion, sees the late fifth century as the earliest possible date and the mid-third century as the latest, with the late fourth or early third century as the most likely (*I Chronicles 10–29: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 12a; New York: Doubleday, 2004], 101–16). If an allusion is in fact present here, it is intrinsically more likely that Esther is the alluding text, because of the wide allusivity in Esther identified by scholars. On this methodological principle, see recently Cooper Smith, "Inner-Biblical Allusion and the Direction of Dependence: Toward a Comprehensive List of Criteria," *JHS* 22 (2022): 1–26 (12–18), https://doi.org/10.5508/jhs29632, and the literature cited there.

mentioning another narrative in Chronicles proposed—if cautiously—to have informed the text of Esther.[27] Second Chronicles 26 recounts the story of King Uzziah, who, having become arrogant (גבה לבו) because of his success, sets out to burn incense in the temple, thereby usurping the role of the priests (v. 16). In turn, we are told that the brazen Uzziah—rather unlike the humble king in Deuteronomy who writes a copy of the Torah "in the presence of the levitical priests" (מלפני הכהנים הלוים)—developed a disease on his forehead "in the presence of the priests" (לפני הכהנים) (v. 19), so that "they proceeded to hurry him (ויבהלוהו) out—and he too hurried (נדחף) to get out—because the Lord had struck him" (v. 20).[28]

Strikingly, the verbs ויבהלו and נדחף each occur only once elsewhere in Scripture—both in a single passage in Esther that concerns the arrogant Haman (6:12–14):

> Mordecai returned to the king's gate, and Haman hurried (נדחף) to his house, mourning and with his head covered. When Haman told his wife Zeresh and all his friends everything that had happened to him, his advisers and his wife Zeresh said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not prevail against him but will surely fall before him." While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived, and they hurried (ויבהלו) Haman off to the banquet that Esther had prepared.

Among various studies that emphasize our book's allusions (and for citations of other scholarship), see Grossman, *Hidden Reading* (and cf. idem, "Dynamic Analogies in the Book of Esther," *VT* 59 [2009]: 394–414); my essay, "Esther and Benjaminite Royalty"; Lindo, *Literary Allusions*; Hornung, *Joseph's Backdrop*; and the essays relevant to authorial intent in Firth and Melton, *Reading Esther Intertextually*. It is also worth mentioning the earlier work by Gillis Gerleman (*Esther* [BKAT 21; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag], 1973) who presents an oft-cited (if controversial) analogy between Esther and Exodus (11–30); cf. recently Jonathan A. Thambyrajah, " 'Exodus' in Diaspora and the Homeland: Narrative Technique and a Model for Salvation in Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther," *JHS* 23 (2023): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.5508/jhs29611. Finally, it warrants adding that, if Chronicles was composed not very long before Esther, this also bears a more positive implication for my argument: the author of Esther may suitably have drawn on the Chronicler's work, the two of them—writing in the same general historical time-frame—having shared an ideological emphasis on the necessity of a "Torah"-informed model of kingship.

[27] On this analogy, see Grossman, *Hidden Reading*, 149–51.

[28] We may also note that, in contrast to the unpretentious, Torah-abiding king in Deuteronomy who "reigns for a long time over his kingdom" (Deut 17:20), the now-afflicted Uzziah effectively loses his royal position, as his son immediately takes charge in his place (2 Chr 26:21). To be clear, my argument here does not depend on any intended reference by the Chronicler to Deuteronomy 17. Nevertheless, the contrasts in Chronicles to the law of the king remain noteworthy, especially insofar as they might have suited the purposes of the author of Esther.

Notably, reminiscent of the brazen Uzziah who must exit the temple when his head becomes afflicted, the self-important Haman proceeds home with his head covered in shame. More to the point, both men hurry (נדחף) and are hurried (ויבהלו\ויבהלוהו) on the path toward their displacement. Indeed, we might even argue that the entire assertion "they hurried (ויבהלו) Haman off to the banquet"—whose purpose in the narrative calls for explanation—serves to generate this parallel.[29] Considered together, the proposed allusions to Uzziah and Jehoshaphat—each involving phraseology unique to Chronicles and Esther—thus lend support to one another: in each case, the text of Esther, recalling a Judahite king about whom the book of Chronicles states ויגבה\גבה לבו, suggests a condemnation—by way comparison or contrast—of the arrogant posture of a grandiose Persian leader.

Finally, consider yet another biblical story, where the motifs of kingship, the sanctuary, and the Scroll of the Torah converge in a memorable way. The book of Kings recounts that the young, idealistic king Josiah, setting out to repair the house of the Lord, issued a command that the silver collected by the שמרי הסף ("guardians of the threshold") be given על יד עשי המלאכה ("into the hand of the workers") to fund the restorative task (2 Kgs 22:4–5; cf. 2 Chr 34:10). After citing Josiah's instructions, the text immediately reports that the high priest discovered a copy of the "Scroll of the Torah" in the temple (2 Kgs 22:8; cf. 2 Chr 34:14). The royal secretary—after confirming to Josiah that the silver was indeed given על יד עשי המלאכה (2 Kgs 22:9; cf. 2 Chr 34:17)—then reads to him from the scroll (2 Kg 22:10; cf. 2 Chr 34:18), which makes a profound impression and becomes a rallying point for serving God and purifying the temple. Thus, with all the people—"small and great" (למקטן ועד גדול)—assembled at the house of the Lord, Josiah reads from the scroll and inspires a reaffirmation of the covenant (2 Kgs 23:2–3; cf. 2 Chr 34:30–31). Then afterwards, he directs the priests and שמרי הסף to remove all the implements used for idolatry from the temple (2 Kgs 23:4).

As I indicated at the outset, the phrases עשי המלאכה and שמרי הסף occur only in connection with the Israelite temple and the Persian court. Notably, both expressions appear multiple times in this account of Josiah. Of particular interest, consider the more expansive phrase על יד\ידי עשי המלאכה ("into the hand/s of the workers"), uttered by Haman when he persuades Ahasuerus to authorize the annihilation of the Jews: "I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of the workers (על ידי עשי המלאכה) to deposit into the king's treasuries" (Esth 3:9). Initially, this expression seems decidedly extraneous: what would

[29] The apparent extraneity of ויבהלו in the verse in Esther adds to the argument, not only in favor of an intended correlation, but also that Esther is the later, alluding text. (Regarding this methodological principle, see Smith, "Direction of Dependence," 21–24.) Fox, aware of the problem, proposes that the verb helps underscore Haman's passivity and humiliation (*Character and Ideology*, 81).

have been lost had Haman said that *he* would deposit the money?[30] Significantly, however, על יד\ידי עשי\עשה המלאכה occurs five additional times in Scripture—*all* in connection with the repair of the temple, including the four above-cited instances in the accounts of Josiah in Kings and Chronicles.[31] Quite possibly, then, the inclusion of the expression in Esther serves precisely to help generate an analogy to the Josiah text. Observe, furthermore, that Josiah gathers all the people of Judah and Jerusalem למקטן ועד גדול ("small and great"; 2 Kgs 23:2) to hear the Scroll of the Torah and reaffirm the covenant. Ahasuerus, by contrast, gathers all the people of Susa למגדול ועד קטן ("great and small") to behold his extravagant wealth (Esth 1:5)—the expression למגדול\למקטן occurring only once in Scripture outside Esther and the Josiah passage.[32] Taken in conjunction with our other observations, these parallels suggest a possible additional contrast between Ahasuerus and the Torah-affirming kings of Israel: unlike Josiah who, inspired by the Scroll of the Torah, revives the Judeans' commitment to the covenant, Ahasuerus acts in conflict with the law of the king and, at the instigation of Haman, blithely consents to the annihilation of the Jews in his empire.

In the final analysis, then, the portrait of the Persian court in Esther suggests as many as three analogies—and attendant contrasts—to accounts of royal conduct informed by the Scroll

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[30] Notably, the phrase does not occur in the Alpha Text; see Macchi, *Esther*, 160–61, and cf. above n. 25. On the wider relevance of Haman's financial offer, see my essay, "On the 'Sale' of the Jews in the Book of Esther," in *Meforash Ba'Sefer: Studies in Bible and Exegesis Presented to Amos Frisch*, ed. Michael Avioz, Jonathan Jacobs, and Itzhak Amar (Ramat Gan, Israel: Bar-Ilan University Press, forthcoming).

[31] The other occurrence, in 2 Kgs 12:12, relates to the repair of the temple under Joash, a passage that also features שמרי הסף (v. 10). It is worth noting that, in recounting the restorative efforts of Joash, the עשי המלאכה are said to operate באמנה "faithfully" (2 Kgs 12:16). (The same assertion appears in the story of Josiah, where out texts feature the more common, *plene* spelling באמונה; see 2 Kgs 22:7; 2 Chr 32:12). I suggested earlier (n. 13) that, in conjunction with other parallels, the formulation ויהי אמן את הדסה היא אסתר in Esther recalls בנים לא אמן בם in Deuteronomy—which features an identically spelled, if differently vocalized, version of אמן—underscoring the transformative faithfulness of Esther. Consider, then, that outside the Joash passage, באמנה occurs only in Esth 2:20 (vocalized *bĕ-'omnâ*), in a phrase affirming that Esther, after becoming queen, maintained the fidelity to Mordecai that she had displayed כאשר היתה באמנה אתו ("when under his guardianship"). Perhaps, then, the unique word באמנה in Esther serves to generate a similarly meaningful parallel: like the עשי המלאכה who restored the temple באמנה ("faithfully"), the transformations in Esther result from the queen's consistently faithful adherence to the covenantally informed guidance of Mordecai.

[32] The additional occurrence is in Jeremiah 42:8; cf. also למקטנם ועד גדולם, with possessive suffixes, in Jer 31:33. In Esther, the placement of גדול before קטן probably reflects later usage; cf. מגדול ועד קטן (without the *lamed* prefix) in the Josiah account in Chronicles (2 Chr 34:30), and cf. also Jonah 3:5.

of the Torah: the model of kingship set forth in Deuteronomy, the righteous leadership of Jehoshaphat, and the Josianic reform. These mutually reinforcing proposed allusions enhance the argument that, already at the beginning of Esther, the exiled Jews of Persia face a political reality that pointedly departs from the Torah-informed governance that Scripture envisions. If this is true, then by extension, we may endorse the position that when Esther and Mordecai—among a series of reversals—assume control of the office of Haman (Esth 8:1–2), they not only neutralize his genocidal decree but also, if only by implication, push back against the desecrations and depravities of Ahasuerus's court.[33]

[33] For sources on the theologically charged reversals in Esther, see above n. 3.