



Research Article

Sorrel Wood*

Writing Esther: How do Writing, Power and Gender Intersect in the Megillah and its Literary Afterlife?

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2020-0146>

received September 07, 2020; accepted January 12, 2021

Abstract: There are two instances in the entire Hebrew Bible in which women feature as the to write. “One is Esther (Esther 9:29) and the other is:” כתב subject of the verb Jezebel (1 Kgs 21:8). This paper takes this fact as a starting point from which to illuminate the narrative and thematic junctures of writing, power and gender in Esther and its literary afterlife. It utilizes the hermeneutical framework of feminist literary theory, as well as drawing upon narratology and linguistic theory related to gender and power, and textual theory related to metatextuality and intertextuality, in order to explore the ways in which the narrator, the canonization process and the reception history of the text have functioned to constrain and restrain Esther’s authorial identity and status, and conversely the places and spaces where it has been developed and emphasised. Key areas of exploration include the writing culture of the Late Persian and Early Hellenistic periods, creative rewritings of Esther in the Targums and in Rabbinic Haggadah, and a consideration of the implications of the fact that Esther and Jezebel are the only explicitly identified female writers in the Hebrew Bible (Esther. (9:29, 1 Kings 21:8–9)).

Keyword: Esther, writing, textuality, feminism, authorship, Hebrew Bible

1 Introduction

Esther 9:29 uses the feminine singular verb תכתב to depict Esther as a writer.¹ In a pointedly metareferential text, which foregrounds and satirises writing as a futile attempt to codify power and to suppress and homogenise the heteroglossia of colonised peoples, this is indubitably significant. In a text which narrates the plucky survival of an oppressed “other,” who secures a total reversal of their circumstances through recourse to the unorthodox means of a female rising to power, in one of only two biblical books with a female eponymous protagonist, this should not be ignored. Indeed, throughout this thesis I shall argue that תכתב functions as a nexus for the intersecting themes of power, textuality and gender in a narrative which combines a dense matrix of intersectional themes in order to explore what necessitates survival and identity outside of the land. I shall also demonstrate the ways in which the lexeme can be situated, and should be interpreted, through recourse to textual theory, feminist literary criticism and ancient Near Eastern comparative study.

¹ This article will focus on MT Esther unless otherwise stated.

* **Corresponding author: Sorrel Wood**, Independent Scholar, Oxford, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, e-mail: sorrelmaywood@gmail.com

The כתב verb form is a *dis legomenon* with 1 Kgs 21:8, in which it is used with Jezebel as the feminine singular subject. This means that, as Davidson states, “Queens Jezebel and Esther provide the only indication of women writing in the Old Testament.”² The potential implications of this fact for feminist biblical hermeneutics are staggering. Why are Esther and Jezebel the only female writers in the Hebrew Bible? Is it a reasonable hypothesis that this is a deliberate intertextual allusion, and if so, how does that affect our reading of the text? In what sense can we say that Esther is a “writer”? How unusual would it be for a powerful, royal woman to write (or dictate) public documents in the ancient world? In what sense, if any, is her act subversive, in a highly subversive text which depicts a gentile marriage and presumably the breaking of food laws, and which only just made it into the canon?³

In its response to the above questions, this thesis will attempt to demonstrate the legitimacy and importance of reading Esther as a writer, and consider some possible interpretative frameworks for evaluating her action. It will argue that the depiction of Esther as a writer can be seen as a proto-poststructuralist comment on the perpetual deferral of meaning in a time and place where God is apparently absent, and also that there is persuasive evidence for interpreting it as an intertextual allusion to 1 Kgs 21:8. It will also argue that despite the scarcity of female writing figures in the Hebrew Bible, the trope is not as unusual as we might initially suppose. It is my intention that the weight of these considerations will have a cumulative and heuristic force, ultimately demonstrating that recognising the importance of כתב makes a small but significant contribution to the construction of a feminist hermeneutical framework for reading the Megillah.

1.1 Writing Esther

I shall briefly contextualise the reference before beginning analysis. Esther 9:29 states:

ותכתב אסתר המלכה בת אביחיל ומרדכי היהודי את־כל תקף לקים את אגרת הפרים הזאת השנית

And Esther – the Queen and daughter of Avihayil, with Mordecai the Jew – wrote with full authority⁴ to ratify this second Purim letter.⁵

This is a second letter which functions to confirm or ratify⁶ Mordecai’s edict in 8:9. The implication from Mordecai dictating to scribes or secretaries in 8:9 is that Esther is not physically writing the edict, and not even necessarily literate, but rather dictating her words to scribes, as a function of the authority delegated to her by the king.⁷ Thus, it is the ascription of authorial identity, not the physical act of writing, which designates someone as the subject of כתב.

The verb כתב is a Qal waw consecutive imperfect third-person feminine singular: it indicates that a single female subject is conducting the writing. The syntactical construction is not straightforward, though, since this singular, feminine verb is associated with a compound, masculine and feminine subject. In this instance, we should normally expect the masculine plural form of the verb. This lack of agreement between the singular verb and multiple subjects draws attention to itself. There are various possible reasons for this incongruity. One, as Bush and Moore conclude, is that “and Mordecai” belongs to a later redactional layer

² O’Brien, *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Bible and Gender Studies*.

³ McDonald, (*The Canon Debate*, 56) states that, from the second to the fifth centuries CE, there was “so much discussion [...] about whether books like Ezekiel, Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes and Sirach ‘defile the hands’.” Esther has also not been found at Qumran.

⁴ BDB and HALOT state that the noun connotes power, strength, energy and authority; it appears here, 10:2 and Daniel 11:17.

⁵ Translations my own unless otherwise stated. Since “wrote” in English can be either a singular or a plural perfect past tense verb, any sense of Esther as the primary actor, or the possible redactional implications of the lack of verbal agreement, is lost in translation.

⁶ קום in the Piel carries this sense.

⁷ 4:8 may also indicate that Esther is illiterate.

of the Megillah's history, perhaps mitigating or correcting the surprising presence of a female writer.⁸ Another, Holmstedt and Screnock's view, is that the text deliberately wishes to place Esther in the foreground, highlighting her as the main, predominant subject. Alternatively, the anomalous form may be a deliberate intertextual allusion.⁹ Finally, it may mean nothing at all: Biblical Hebrew grammar is far from perfectly regular. However, the picture of evidence which I shall proceed to outline indicates that this irregularity is not merely an anomaly. On the contrary, the narrator is signalling that we should read Esther as the writer of the document.

2 Writing, power and gender in the Megillah: the theory

I shall begin my argument by demonstrating how the themes of writing, power and gender are hugely prominent in the Megillah, and consider how תכתב can be situated within these broader themes, as well as how it can function as an intersectional nexus between them. Insights from broader conversations about writing, power and gender can be helpful for directing how we should read and תכתב as I shall proceed to demonstrate.

2.1 Writing and power

Firstly, writing. The Megillah's particular thematic obsession with writing and textuality, and its designation of the text as a locus of power, is crucial to understanding why the presence of a female writer in *Esther* is particularly significant. The post-exilic period was characterised by a shift towards what Stern describes as a process of "scripturalization," which featured a "shift in the locus of primary authority from venerated teachers to texts."¹⁰ Post-exilic texts such as Ezra-Nehemiah foreground textual authority, for example, through the ritualisation of Torah readings and the inclusion of letters and documents as a source of authority. Niditch details the way in which 1 Chronicles evidences this shift towards a less oral and more textual culture, by sometimes transforming oral prophets in the so-called Deuteronomistic History into writers.¹¹

Esther unquestionably participates in this post-exilic process of textualisation. It is a hyperbolically metareferential text: that is to say, it is a text which draws attention to its textuality, and to the limits of textuality, particularly at critical plot junctures. It features a proliferation of documents, scribes and edicts, which function to characterise both King Ahasureus' reign, and the Persian Empire, as paradoxically both oppressively bureaucratic and dysfunctional.¹²

We are told in the exposition that royal edicts are unalterable (1:19); a vital plot point which will become significant later in the narrative. Thus, from the beginning, the power of text is foregrounded. As soon as they are written, Persian royal edicts take on an enduring status regardless of the author's intention: the author cannot alter or retract them, even if he wishes to. The post-structuralist Roland Barthes theorised this inescapable loss of control, the way a text takes on a life of its own distinct from and irrespective of the author's wishes, in his seminal work "The Death of the Author:"

⁸ Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 492; Moore, *Esther: Introduction, Translation and Notes*, 95. Moore suggests that the entirety of verses 29-23 are a "later addition," and that the phrase ומרדכי is "probably an early gloss from verse 31."

⁹ Holmstedt and Screnock, *Esther: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*, 252.

¹⁰ Stern, "Esther and the Politics of Diaspora," 239.

¹¹ See, for example, Elijah's prophetic letter in 2 Chronicles 21:12-5 in Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature*, 91. It is important to emphasise that this was a shift of focus, as opposed to a total transition: as Niditch details, the relationship between the oral and literary was fluid in the ancient world.

¹² See, for example, 1:22, 2:23, 3:12-5, 4:8, 4:15, 8:5, 8:9-14, 9:14, 9:20, 9:29-32.

As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to acting directly but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disconnection occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters his own death, writing begins.¹³

Thus, in *Esther* the text paradoxically constitutes a loss of power and control for the author/authority who writes it, even though it is characterised as one of the greatest sources of power for the imperial authorities. It is a limiting, ossifying force as well as a channel of communication, and hence its ostensibly oppressive power is ironically juxtaposed with impotence. As reader-response theory has argued, a text without a reader is meaningless: it is as dead and impotent as the noise of a tree falling in a forest which nobody hears.

This anxiety about the text's precarious capacity for both power and impotence is explored in the plot thread in which Mordecai foils an assassination attempt upon the king. Mordecai's bravery is recorded in an edict (2:23), but since the edict has not been read, his heroism has been forgotten. It is only by chance when the king wishes to hear the book of annals read to him when he cannot sleep (6:1) that the oversight is discovered and rectified. Thus, not only is there a humorous element implied by the fact that annals are only good for curing insomnia, but also a proto post-structuralist understanding of the limitations of the text: something is lost, as well as gained, through such intransigent fixity and a text without a reader is meaningless. Barthes summed up the phenomenon thus: "Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost."¹⁴ This ambiguity is hugely important for our inquiry because it alerts us to the fact that the Megillah demands a nuanced understanding of the evasive relationship between writing and power: Esther is a writer, an authorial authority, in a story which presents text and power as inextricably linked, but that does not necessarily mean that she is powerful.

The crisis of faith in the text in the Megillah is undoubtedly bound up in its crisis of theological faith and in the presentation of King Ahasuerus as comically out of control. Wherever one looks in the story world for a source of authority whether that be king, text or deity – one is instead met with a terrifying silence. Where a king should be, there is a void: an empty vessel whose heart is liable to be filled with different emotions, and with alcohol.¹⁵ His authority – which is inextricably bound up with his authorship – is constantly deferred; satirically appropriated by a plethora of courtiers who couch their requests in exaggerated politeness, when they are really planting thoughts into the king's head.¹⁶ There is an absence, a void, where an authoritative, authorial presence should be.

As Derrida argued, a theistic story world has been the *status quo* for most of literary history, since "Western philosophy has governed a reading of texts which presupposes a divine logos."¹⁷ But when the presupposition of objective truth and unequivocal meaning is rejected, faith in the text and its unproblematic relationship to truth and meaning is irrevocably problematised. Derrida espoused the rejection of writing as "sign signifying a signifier itself signifying an eternal veracity" in which "reading and writing [...] allow themselves to be confined within secondariness; a truth, or a meaning already constituted by and in the element of the logos which precedes them."¹⁸ Rather, he argued that when this "logocentric" approach to texts is dismantled, the signifier (writing) "flares up and erases its own production."¹⁹ Writing no longer points to a truth beyond itself; it is no longer "the signifier of the signifier" and instead spectacularly implodes into a feedback loop which both fails to mean anything and also transcends its own boundaries in a playful loss of control.

¹³ Barthes, "The Death of The Author," 313.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Beal, "'Who Filled His Heart to do this?' Conceptual Metaphors of the Self in the Book of Esther" for a comprehensive and persuasive analysis of how the heart (conceptualised as the seat of emotions) functions in Esther as a void to be filled.

¹⁶ See 1:19, 3:9, 5:4, 7:3, 8:5, 9:13.

¹⁷ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 15.

¹⁸ Ibid., 15.

¹⁹ Ibid., 7.

This poststructuralist approach to textuality is particularly pertinent to *Esther*, not least because it was a favourite text of Derrida's.²⁰ MT *Esther* is a text in which God is ostensibly absent. The "signifier of the signifier," that is, the written text, has been fissured from the "signifier," that is, God, speaker of the divine word. The Persian Empire, and by extension, Jewish diaspora existence, becomes the mirror image, the ultimate subversion, of everything that was ideal and uncomplicated about pre-exilic life in the land. Thus, whereas in the Torah, God speaks to Moses, and the words are unproblematically recorded in the text; in King Ahasureus' court, people subtly manipulate the king and tell him what to say. The "word of the king" is terrifying; it has the power to bring death, but it is also erratic and uncontrolled. Moreover, unlike the divine word in the Torah, which points outwards to God, the king's word in *Esther* is "a tale of sound and fury, told by an idiot, signifying nothing." The king's words are unpredictable, governed by emotion and susceptible to manipulation. The king regrets his actions (2:1) and forgets what has been written (6:1); he is both omnipotent and impotent; a terrifying void where God should be. Thus, the satirisation of Persian bureaucracy in the text can be interpreted as part of the representation of diaspora existence: life for the Jews has become terrifying, unstable and unpredictable.

How does this poststructuralist framework aid our analysis of *Esther* as a writer? It depends whether we interpret her act of writing as a corrective to the terrifyingly unstable state of truth and power in the story world, or as a further symptom of that disfunction. Stern (2010) argues that the presentation of the king and the text in *Esther* form part of a "trope of inversion" (33) in a "negative fantasy about the Diaspora" (44) in which life in Susa is "counternormative and radically unstable" (45). She argues that the "overabundance" and "irreversibility" of the law (25), the preference for "baroque coincidence" over "stabilizing paradigm" and the "backwardness of kingship" (40) coalesce into a "darkly comic fantasy of Diaspora living" which constitutes a "satirical reversal of the ideological construction of life in the land of Israel" (45). Could it be, that a female writer is part of this strategy of counter-normative instability? Or, alternatively, is it part of the solution, located in the denouement and its joyful fantasy of a different, upside-down reality?

Jobling and Roughly understand the deferral and displacement of power in the text as creating a space for the carnivalesque. They highlight the intersection between language and power in the Megillah, and follow Kristeva's model of a text as a system of intertextual signs, in "reading the contesting economies of power which constitute the intertextual structures in which identity and authority are constructed and reconstructed within the text."²¹ Defining their method as a "heuristic reading" of the text, they use Derrida's frame theory of the destabilisation and deferral of textual boundaries, to argue for a perpetual deferral of power in the text. They label Ahasureus' "continued delegation of his power" as "carnival."²² Like Bal, they argue that for *Esther* and Mordecai, the only way to secure power in the story and prevent themselves being written out of the narrative is to rise to power and write the story themselves. Thus, for them *Esther* and Mordecai's act of writing constitutes an ending to the carnival; a reassertion of order and control.

Polaski also interprets *Esther* as a carnivalesque parody of bureaucracy, but argues that this satirisation is only valid to a point: he states that, ultimately, "writing encodes imperial power in ways that the scroll of *Esther* leaves unquestioned."²³ He charts the text's presentation as a tool of imperialist power and its production of "colonial subjects"²⁴ stating that "*Esther* becomes enmeshed in imperial writing"²⁵ as soon as an edict is published for beautiful virgins to be taken to the royal court. He also notes that part of the text's scheme of reversals is that by the end, *Esther* and Mordecai are now the ones doing the writing.²⁶ However, for him, the power of the text is never completely destabilised: authorship remains unproblematically

²⁰ See Ofrat, *Postcards and The Jewish Derrida*.

²¹ Jobling and Roughly, "The Right to Write: Power, irony and identity in the book of *Esther*," 322.

²² *Ibid.*, 325.

²³ Polaski, "And Also to the Jews in Their Script," 114.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 114.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 117.

bound up with authority. In this reading of the text, Esther's act of writing would indisputably be a demonstration of power.

It seems, therefore, that Esther's act of writing could be interpreted as an assertion and imposition of power, stability and control on the chaotic and hostile story world as the denouement approaches, a righting of wrong. However, it could also be interpreted as part of the carnival: symptomatic of the topsy-turvy story world; a parodic mutation, akin to the fool-king or fool-scholar figure in the world of the Bakhtinian carnival.²⁷ It would, therefore, be hasty to simply see her writing act as an assertion of power without taking into consideration the important detail that she is a female writer, and to consider the ways in which gender is intersecting with the textuality and the dynamics of imperial power in this equation.

Scholars concerned with issues of textuality and power in the Megillah tend to highlight the significance of Esther's act of writing only briefly, with a passing comment or at most a paragraph. They also disagree on its significance. Thus, it is Bal's assessment that writing gives Esther subjectivity; that is, agency and control. Jobling and Roughly define Esther's act of writing as a "textual slippage" and argue that this momentary "slippage" is ended shortly after when Esther loses the "silent struggle for authority" when she is "written out, and written over" in the final chapter of the book and in its reception history.²⁸ The opinions of feminist biblical scholars vary considerably on this matter. For example, whilst Bronner notes that the festival of Purim is codified through Esther's act of writing,²⁹ Wyler states "Mordecai writes the first decree, Esther only signs the second one."³⁰ She also notes that by the end of the story "Esther remains bound to the decrees of men, written in the script and language of her own husband the king."³¹ Bach states "Esther is said to cooperate with Mordecai in writing down the great events of the day" since "In the penultimate chapter of the book of Esther, the scene is virtually taken over by Mordecai, who orchestrates the reversal of events from the tragedy to happy ending."³² Thus, there is no consensus about the extent to which she can be credited with authorial status of the letter, and consequently her authority is open to question.

There are further considerations to be explored before we can ascertain how Esther's act of writing contributes to the Megillah's interrogation of the relationship between writing and power. Is Bal correct, in her assertion that Esther's act of writing constitutes an assertion of control, an act of agency and subjectivity? Is it a proto-feminist rebuttal of patriarchal and imperial oppression, a total reversal of the structures of imbalanced power in the text? We must take a closer look at the ways in which gender functions in relation to text and power in the Megillah before we can confidently suggest a categorisation and interpretation of Esther's action.

2.2 Gender

The importance of gender in *Esther* has been studied at length from a plethora of angles, including the function of eunuchs and the emasculation of the colonised subject.³³ Here, I will solely focus on the aspects most relevant to our inquiry: the relationship between gender and textual power, and whether Esther's authorial status can be interpreted as part of her alleged journey towards subjectivity.

Firstly, it is important to note that the act of writing as an assertion of power is thematically associated with the oppression of women from the outset of the story. The opening banquet scene ends with a royal edict going out, to declare both that Vashti must no longer "come before" the king (1:19) and also that men

²⁷ See Craig, *Reading Esther: a Case for the Literary Carnavalesque* for a detailed and persuasive exposition of why the Megillah can be interpreted through that hermeneutical framework.

²⁸ Jobling and Roughly, 324.

²⁹ Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women*, 196.

³⁰ Wyler, *A Feminist companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, 132.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Bach, *Seduction and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative*, 83.

³³ See, for example, Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*.

should be the master of their household and that women should give them honour (1:20). It also includes the detail that men should “speak according to the language of [their] people” (1:22):

ומדבר כלשון עמו

Thus, the pervasive power of the written text to control and dictate, even in the private sphere of the household, is thematically linked to the suppression of women’s voices, and to the policing of their subordination.

The systematic gathering of “beautiful young virgins” (2:3) in support of the king’s search for a new queen is also orchestrated by a written edict (2:8):

ויהי בהשמע דבר המלך ודתו ובהקבץ נערות רבות אל שושן הבירה

And when the king’s word went out and his edict was proclaimed, and many young women were gathered to the palace of Susa [...].

This constitutes the total abjuration of the young women’s subjectivity, as they are referred to en masse and rounded up to a fate some scholars have interpreted as sexual slavery.³⁴ The niphil verb presents the act in passive terms, conveying both the faceless bureaucracy of the imperial machinery and its total power over the lives of its subjects.

From these two examples, we see that text, power and gender are inextricable in Esther and that the *status quo* is men writing texts to control women. The presence of a woman writing at the end of the narrative is therefore surprising and significant.

2.2.1 Esther as writing subject

Western art history has perpetuated a *status quo* in which men are the makers of art, controlling the frame and wielding the pen, and women are objectified as the focus of their gaze. As Simone De Beauvoir posited in *Le Deuxième Sexe*, man is typically construed as subject, woman as “other.”³⁵ This binary is problematised, though, along with its inherent power dynamic, if a female character is portrayed as a writer. In the essay provocatively titled “Raped by the pen,” Sabbath argues that the presentation of women in biblical narrative constitutes a form of symbolic, or “textual” violence, since “androcentric” narrators present a voyeuristic, and sometimes pornographic, image of women from the vantage point of the male gaze.³⁶ She argues that androcentric narrators typically deny female characters a voice and leave them vulnerable. Using the stories of Bathsheba and the Judges 19 woman as examples, she identifies a “phallogocentric economy” in biblical texts, in which women’s experience is suppressed and distorted. She suggests that these biblical stories both represent and perpetuate gender roles and expectations, in their presentation of women as submissive, obedient and subject to voyeuristic situations with no real choice.

Esther is both like and unlike the examples of Bathsheba and the Judges 19 woman. She is called to the king’s palace with a distinct lack of volition or agency. She is the replacement of Vashti, who was punished for refusing to submit to being placed in a voyeuristic situation. However, her act of writing could be interpreted as refusal to be focalised through an androcentric narrative: a bid to be the subject and the author: to shape the story and the way of its construction of female characters.

Does 9:29 (תכתב) constitute the zenith of Esther’s rise to agency, subjectivity and power? One factor to consider when assessing the relationship between gender, text and power in the Megillah, and the ways in which those dynamics are interacting in תכתב, is to consider it against the backdrop of the construction of

³⁴ See Smith-Christopher, “Sleeping with the Enemy? Reading Esther and Judith as Comfort Women.”

³⁵ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

³⁶ Sabbath, “Raped by the Pen.”

Esther in the text as a whole. How can the characterisation of her as a writer, with its implicit associations of authority and control, be congruent with the wider narrative and character arcs in the story?

The extent to which Esther can be considered to achieve any kind of agency in the narrative at all is strongly disputed. Second-wave feminist biblical scholarship tended to characterise Esther as a passive “object” in a Miss Persia beauty contest; often comparing her unfavourably to the more assertive Vashti. In contrast to this, the postmodern suspicion of binaries has problematised De Beauvoir’s dualistic categories of man as subject and woman and “other,” and therefore challenged essentialist constructions of Esther as a traitor to the feminist cause. Scholars have become more attuned to the multilayered intersectionality that underpins power dynamics and social identity in biblical texts. Thus, Beal, Berman, Wetter, Song and Smith-Christopher all read Esther in terms of intersectional otherness: not just a woman in a patriarchal society, but also ethnically other: a threatened minority in a totalitarian Persian court, a “Jew” in the first biblical text to understand that term as signifying socio-ethnic and religious, rather than geographical, identity.³⁷ Esther, it seems, epitomises the concept of the “other,” and her passive submission has increasingly been read as a survival tactic, personifying the compromises demanded for the survival of the Jewish nation in the Diaspora.

However, contra the critics who characterise Esther as a passive object, passed from the ownership and control of one man to another, with very little autonomy, it is important to note that she is also the eponymous protagonist of the story; Brenner³⁸ suggests that the text “makes a female character visible” in contrast to the invisibility of women in the vast majority of historical or historiographical records. Some scholars identify a progression in Esther’s character throughout the story: a development in confidence and autonomy as she adopts the role of queen and takes responsibility for the fate of the Jewish people. Bush³⁹ sums up this character progression by stating that “she begins as a nonentity, valued in the courtly world only for her good looks and body” but “becomes a force to be reckoned with” and “the main agent in effecting [the Jewish people’s] deliverance.”⁴⁰

It could be argued, then, that although Esther is first introduced in the story as a patriarchal object: הנערה (“the girl”) in 2:9 and אסתר בת-אביחיל (“Esther, daughter of Abihail”) in 2:15, by 2:22 she is אסתר המלכה (“Queen Esther”); a new title to accompany significant – but limited – new power and status. However, if Esther does undergo a significant shift in the direction of autonomy and subjectivity in the biblical story, it could be argued that this change is only temporary, and only born of the un-ideal circumstances of diaspora existence, in which the normal rules of “the land” do not apply. It is also possible that the ending of the text functions to re-subsume the character of Esther into an orthodox, patriarchal/androcentric schema by rendering her abject: having served the function of securing a reversal of the threatened pogroms, she is ultimately punished for transgressing the acceptable sphere of Jewish morality and female behaviour by being banished from the narrative. Esther is not featured at all in Chapter 10 of the biblical text, effectively disappearing with no indication about her ultimate fate, and it is Mordecai who is credited with גדלת (“high honour,” “greatness”) and רצוי (“popularity,” “esteem”) as well as being תשנה (“second”) to King Ahasuerus.

³⁷ Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation and Esther*; Berman, “Hadassah bat Abihail;” Wetter, *On her Account: Reconfiguring Israel in Ruth, Esther, and Judith*; Song, “Heartless Bimbo or Subversive Role Model and Smith-Christopher,” “Sleeping with the Enemy? Reading Esther and Judith as Comfort Women.”

³⁸ Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, 11.

³⁹ Bush, *World Bible Commentary 9: Ruth/Esther*, 22.

⁴⁰ Several scholars identify a peripety in the narrative concerning Esther’s character in Chapter 4, during which the power shifts from Mordecai to her and she arguably takes control of events. Bush describes Esther’s acceptance of Mordecai’s “challenge” to use her position as queen for the good of her people as the “decisive moment” in the story. Lubitch writes, “at a certain point in the story [...] she ‘snaps’ out of the dream world she has been in and assumes a role which is good enough for any feminist,” (Lubitch, Rivkah. “A Feminist’s Look at Esther,” 438). Barton and Muddiman describe it as “the turning point of the tale” (OBC:2001). This difference is specifically pinpointed as occurring between 4:8 and 4:15. In verse 8, we read that Mordecai sends Esther a command via an envoy: לצוות עליה (“to declare it to her”). However, by verse 15 it is Esther who has taken control: להשיב אל-מרדכי לך ותאמר אסתר (“Esther told them in reply to Mordecai, ‘Go [...]’”).

Where does Esther's act of writing fit into her ambiguous, precarious and disputed subjectivity? To what extent can it be interpreted as the culmination of her transition from object to subject? For Klein, Esther's act of writing represents a denial of her femininity:

It is notable that Esther is given equal credit with Mordecai for writing (that is, for literacy and authority) and that the "decree of Esther" (9:32) accords her a distinctly "masculine" (public and legal) role.⁴¹

It seems that, within the "phallogocentric economy" of the biblical text, Esther's act of writing can be construed as a transgression from the female sphere and an appropriation of the male and phallic – the only way an oppressed other can make a bid for power. Certainly, there is an undertone of phallic symbolism in Esther associated with, and satirising, the confluence of male and political power in the character of King Ahasuerus. Could Esther's act of writing be an appropriation, or subversion, of that particular power dynamic?

Several scholars have noted the way in which the king's extending sceptre functions as a phallic symbol in *Esther*. For example, commenting on the banquet in Chapter 7, Day refers to the "unquestionable phallic dimension of the scene."⁴² Jobling and Roughly describe the moment as a "symbolic exchange of phallic and patriarchal power."⁴³ In doing so, they are drawing upon Freudian psychoanalytical literary criticism; specifically, Freud's contention in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, that any long, upright or penetrating object is a phallic symbol. Despite similar analysis of the scene, the scholars interpret it differently: for Day, Esther's manipulation of the phallic symbol identifies her as a traitor to the feminist cause. She writes:

Esther caters to the male whim, playing up to the male ego and pledging to comply with what a man wants her to do [...] to get what she wants, she plays the game on men's terms; one might argue that a true enactment of female power would be to make men play according to *women's*, or at least gender-free, rules.⁴⁴

For Jobling and Roughly, the move is a bid towards authority: "Esther literally gains an equal standing with the king as she rises and stands before him."

Is Esther's interaction with the phallic symbol of the sceptre an appropriation of patriarchal power or a submissive act of compliance? Either way, her act of writing – her assertion of authorial authority – is a less ambiguous deployment of a phallic symbol; that is, the pen. It is Derrida's interpretation of Freud (via Lacan), which illuminates the act of writing as a phallic act: a moment that is simultaneously both creativity and death. Ofra writes:

Derrida found it necessary to stress the role of the letter as phallus (as suprasignifier). [...] Any erotic alliance with authority, alliance with erection and penetration, begins with sex and ends with death. After all, the phallus is both being and nothingness, erection and contraction (absence), monumentality and circumcision [...] the phallus is thus the supreme signifier, but also the signifier of absence, bearing with it the sign of nothingness and mutilation.

Thus, in *Esther*, the writing implement is the phallus, which is ultimately a signifier of absence and perpetual deferral. This is, perhaps, more overt in a text replete with eunuchs, who rise to power at the king's expense, and direct his actions. The king, who should be the nucleus of patriarchal power, is instead a deferral, an impotent lacuna.

In that sense, Esther's act of writing is not so much an expression of subjectivity as one more deferral in a chain of deferrals: a sacrificial, symbolic death. In becoming a writer, her character enacts an ossification: just as something is gained by her act of writing, something is also lost: her subjective self. Foucault recognised this dynamic in *What is an Author*:

⁴¹ Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, 113.

⁴² Day, *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries: Esther*, 101.

⁴³ Jobling and Roughly, "The Right to Write: Power, irony and identity in the book of Esther," 238.

⁴⁴ Day, *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries: Esther*, 101.

Writing has become linked to sacrifice, even to the sacrifice of life [...] The work, which once had the duty of providing immortality, now possessed the right to kill, to be its author's murderer [...] This relationship between writing and death is also manifested in the effacement of the writing subject's individual characteristics. Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing.⁴⁵

Esther's fear of death is highlighted in Chapter 4 of the story, when she informs Mordecai:

כל־עבדי המלך ועם־מדינות המלך יודעים אשר כל־איש ואשה אשר יבוא־אל־המלך אל־החצר הפנימית אשר לא־יקרא אחת דתו להמית לבד מאשר ישיט־לו המלך את־שרביט הזהב וחייה ואני לא נקראתי לבוא אל־המלך זה שלושים יום

All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law – all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden sceptre to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days. (4:11)

Her abject terror is linked, in her explanation, to her uncertainty on whether or not the king extends the sceptre: that is, the symbol of phallic power. However, spurred on by Mordecai's chilling response, that her silence cannot save her, she resolves "if I perish, I perish" (4:16). Esther realises that her life is at risk, and that the stakes are demanding nothing less of her than the possibility of complete sacrifice.

Scholars who see Esther's act of writing as a bid for subjectivity, as an expression of agency, misread the text. Her act of writing is in fact a symbolic death – a deferral in which her subjective self is replaced by the phallic symbol, which is ultimately the signifier of anxiety and absence. Losing any remnant of subjectivity (which, from the beginning of the story, the patriarchal empire has systematically sought to destroy), she becomes the trope of the phallic woman: the monstrous other who is both dangerous and desirable.⁴⁶

Thus, her transgression of objective "other" into writing subject is not a victory for her subjectivity, but its ultimate death. In saving her people, and appropriating the phallic writing implement, she becomes both a nothing and a monster: a void into which to project patriarchal anxiety, both a terror and a deferral. Her act of writing is her death, an act of self-sacrifice at the behest of the man who controls her.

Interpreting the relationship between text, power and gender with the tools of literary theory illuminates the complex ways in which the themes are intersecting in תכתב. However, in order to interpret the lexeme more conclusively, this heuristic analysis of the meaning and significance of תכתב will now turn to broader contextual investigation. What would the impact of a woman writer be for the original intended audience of the text? Can we hypothetically reconstruct the reaction which תכתב is attempting to provoke? The forthcoming analysis of what we can reconstruct about the prevalence and role of women writers in the Ancient Near East, as well as clues from rabbinic sources, will help us to more fully appreciate what this signifier is signifying.

3 Women writers in the ancient world

In our evaluation of the contribution of תכתב to the Megillah's intersecting themes of writing, power and gender, it is important to assess the extent to which her act of writing can be considered to be anomalous. When we broaden our focus to consider the wider literary milieu of the ancient Near East, it transpires that Esther's act of writing is far from a shocking, incidental anomaly and certainly not a comic parody of power. Rather, Esther's act of writing is participating in a cultural matrix, despite the paucity of female writers portrayed in the Hebrew Bible. Indeed, to be surprised by the lexeme is to project cultural baggage from the

⁴⁵ Foucault, *What is an Author*, 219.

⁴⁶ See Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 160.

later struggles of female writers, such as Virginia Woolf lamenting the need for a “room of one’s own” and imagining the fate of “Shakespeare’s sister,” onto a post-exilic ancient Near Eastern text.

A brief survey of the extant evidence for female authorship in the ancient Near East will enable us to situate תַּחַת and thus to interpret its connotations more accurately. This exercise can only ever be tentatively informative, because there is no sense in which the extant epigraphic material from the period is at all representative, since it has just been preserved by the vagaries of happenstance. Moreover, the vast majority of material is anonymous, and attributed texts may be pseudonymous. The extra-biblical evidence of female writing in the Persian period is scant, and therefore following this survey will cover a wider temporal and geographical range in order to illuminate the issue.

The first known named literary author was a woman: Enheduanna, who lived in twenty third century BCE Mesopotamia, in the Sumerian city-state of Ur. There are key differences between Enheduanna and Esther: the former was a high priestess and writer of poems and was ostensibly a historical figure. The latter is a fictional construct; we read about her writing, briefly, in the world of a narrative; she writes an edict, not poetry.⁴⁷ There are also, though, some fascinating similarities between Esther and Enheduanna, which arguably illuminate how female authorship is functioning in the Megillah.

The oldest extant copies of Enheduanna’s temple hymns and prayers can be dated to the Old Babylonian period, between four and seven hundred years after the historical Enheduanna existed. Some scholars, including Helle, see her more as a mythic, idealised figure representing certain, nostalgic and politically expedient ideals about ancient Sumer than as the genuine author of her named works. Helle writes:

Authorship was invented to represent a largely invented “Sumerian tradition” as a single, coherent and tangible object that could be appropriated by Old Babylonian scribes.⁴⁸

He notes that by the time a “mishmash of local traditions” were gathered into a “composite” under the figurehead of Enheduanna, Sumerian had “ceased to be a living language.” Enheduanna served as a focal point and an “embodiment” of a culture which was being represented as monolithic and unified, but was actually drawn from a range of disparate city states. This assessment of Enheduanna’s role fits Foucault’s definition of the role of authorship in society. Foucault states that “the function of an author is to characterize the existence, circulation, and operation of certain discourses within a society.”⁴⁹

Thus, just as Esther, and the Megillah, serve to further and cement a sense of religious and cultural identity for post-exilic Jews in the Diaspora (it is famously the first text to use היהודים as a religious or cultural identity marker as opposed to a geographical or tribal identity), so Enheduanna was a focus for cultural unity. Both figures emerged from a time of crisis: Helle notes that “in 1740 BCE, Nippur was struck by political crises and social disruption.” The Megillah depicts a dramatic, total threat to Jewish existence in the Persian Period: this may have reflected a later crisis, since the narrative’s internal dating is unconvincing (2:6) and Cyrus was, to some extent, more tolerant of religious pluralism than his Babylonian predecessors.⁵⁰ Both *Esther* and the *Exaltation of Inanna* contain explicit references to exile.

In the *Exaltation of Inanna* (1968), Enheduanna has been driven from the temple:

[Acimbabbar] stood there in triumph and drove me out of the temple. He made me fly like a swallow from the window; I have exhausted my life-strength. He made me walk through the thorn bushes of the mountains. He stripped me of the rightful crown of the en priestess. He gave me a knife and dagger, saying to me “These are appropriate ornaments for you.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ This article makes no attempt to argue that Esther was a historical person or that the presence of a female writer in the text is at all relevant to the suggestion by some scholars that the Megillah was written by a woman. Contra Brenner, I follow Fuchs in deeming the attempt to identify and isolate genuine “female” voices within or behind the Hebrew Bible to be a futile enterprise. I merely argue that it is interesting to find a female writer in the Megillah, and that it is also interesting, that the invention of literary authorship as a concept was associated with a woman from the beginning.

⁴⁸ Helle, “Enheduanna and the Invention of Authorship,” 1.

⁴⁹ Foucault, *What is an Author*, 305.

⁵⁰ Helle, “Enheduanna and the Invention of Authorship,” 5. Certainly, this is the propaganda exhibited by the Cyrus Cylinder, at any rate.

⁵¹ Enheduanna, *Exaltation of Inanna*, 317.

She also laments the temple's destruction:

He has turned that temple, whose attractions were inexhaustible, whose beauty was endless, into a destroyed temple. While he entered before me as if he was a partner, really he approached out of envy.⁵²

Esther has a post-exilic, as opposed to exilic, setting. It does not mention the destruction of the temple, but the crisis of exile evidently looms large in the cultural consciousness. 2:6 notes that Mordecai's grandfather⁵³ had been "exiled from Jerusalem with the exiles who were exiled with Jeconiah" (2:16). Most translations substitute synonyms such as "captives," "removed," "deported" and "carried away" in order to vary the lexis of the relative clause, but in the MT the cognates are stark. The two incidents which spark the plot's drama: namely, Moredcai's refusal to bow to Haman and Esther's secret Jewish identity, can both be traced back to the crisis of exile and to the unideal, complex existence of Jews living under a foreign imperial power outside of the land. Thus, both Esther and Enheduanna are female writers, and both serve as figureheads for cultural unity and the formation of shared identity at a time of division and crisis.

Esther and Enheduanna both appear in contexts in which text functions to serve the political machinery of empire and to suppress heteroglossia and dissent. In 1:22 of the Megillah, we read how a written edict attempts to control spoken language within the private, domestic sphere and to homogenise the multilingual empire.

וישלח ספרים אל-כל-מדינות המלך אל-מדינה ומדינה ואל-עם ועם כלשונו להיות כל-איש שרר בביתו ומדבר כלשון עמו

And he sent documents to every province of the king, to each province in its own script, and to every people in their own tongue, [saying] that each man should be master of his own house and speak in the tongue of his people.

The multilingual setting of the narrative, and the way that the Persian Empire attempts to hold it in check with recourse to bureaucracy, bears a striking similarity to the context in which Enheduanna's poetry emerged. Helle writes:

At this time, the region was bilingual. The south mainly spoke Sumerian and the north mainly Akkadian, but the two languages intermingled throughout the area and were written in the same script, cuneiform. King Sargon presumably spoke Akkadian as his mother tongue but installed his daughter, Enheduana, as high priestess in Nanna in the southern, Sumerian-speaking city of Ur.⁵⁴

In both the case of *Esther* and of Enheduanna, then, the written text serves as a force for unity and attempts to hold together a disparate, multilingual empire. In both cases, more overtly for Enheduanna and arguably more subtly in *Esther*, a female writer functions as a key figure and focal point for the unifying power of text. The text of *Esther* can also be seen as a bridge between two linguistic traditions, in its combination of Persian loanwords with Classical Hebrew words and phrases, which are possibly borrowed from the lexis of Samuel and Kings.

Finally, Esther and Eheduanna are both royal, and are both associated with goddesses. Enheduanna was the daughter of King Sargon of Akkad and probably also of Queen Tashlultum, as well as the first known holder of the EN (moon priestess) title, which was typically bestowed upon royal daughters and was imbued with political status. Helle suggests that part of her appeal as a figure for cultural unity was inherently bound up in her femaleness. He writes:

[A] factor that should not be overlooked is Enheduana's gender. Since all other known authors from cuneiform cultures were male, her femininity has struck many scholars as a particularly salient aspect of her authorship.⁵⁵

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Or a more distant ancestor, depending on which noun is identified as the head of the clause.

⁵⁴ Helle, "Enheduana and the Invention of Authorship," 3.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 17.

He argues that literacy was “associated with goddesses” and that, as a female priestess, Enheduanna “was ideally suited to embody Sumerian literature” because she served “as a human counterpart to the literary goddesses such as Nidaba.”⁵⁶ As a priestess, she functioned as an intermediary between humans and the goddess Inanna who was later worshipped as Ishtar.

Esther rises to a royal position, replacing Vashti as King Ahasureus’ wife; it is from this position of relative power and privilege that she uses her influence to ratify Mordecai’s letter and effect a dramatic change of fortune for her people. Interestingly, her name may derive from the figure of the goddess Ishtar.⁵⁷

3.1 Esther, Enheduanna and the female intermediary

Thus, we see some interesting similarities between Esther and Enheduanna: both are royal figures and female writers, both are associated with the goddess Ishtar, and both serve as a focus for cultural unity at a time of crisis; both are responding to exile. I am not suggesting a direct relationship between them, but it is likely that both swim in the same stream, in the sense that both share a cluster of features associated with a particular trope in the ancient Near East: that of the female intermediary.

Screnock (2019) argues that Esther conforms to the Levantine type of the “female intermediary;” a literary trope characterised by royal women, predominantly queens and queen mothers, who display wisdom and some degree of agency in effecting positive change for men, by means of their tact and propriety. He cites Anatu and Athiratu in the Baal Cycle, Abigail in 1 Samuel 25, a “wise woman from Tekoa” in 2 Samuel 14, Bathsheba in 1 Kings 1 and 2 and Esther as examples of this “literary tradition.”⁵⁸ Screnock suggests that this “plot-type” may be “rooted in realities from the ancient world,” citing evidence from Ugaritic letters to demonstrate that queen or queen-mother figures may have been “important advisor [s]” and held a powerful role in the court.⁵⁹

Screnock does not include Enheduanna in his list: perhaps because she was ostensibly a real person rather than a literary character. His focus on the fact that Ugarit letters *to* the queen mother demonstrate that she held considerable soft power, glosses over the fascinating point that there were also letters *from* the queen mother.⁶⁰ That is to say, like Esther and Enheduanna, the queen mother at Ugarit was a writer.

There were over one hundred epistolary documents found at Ugarit, from a corpus of 1500 prose texts. Two of those letters were written by women. Text 31: “A Double Letter: The Queen to ‘Urtēnu and ‘Ilīmilku to the same” is a panicked, secret message from the queen. It is fragmented, but it includes the detail that “disaster has arrived” and that, should some desired action not occur, the recipient can “kiss [his] head goodbye.”⁶¹ The queen is directing action and repeatedly demonstrates agency and initiative, stating “Then I will send a message to Ugarit” and “I will send another message.”⁶² Text 33: “The Queen to *Yarmihaddu* on the Matter of a Missing Slave” includes the queen directing the return of a slave: “this servant must be seized; and deliver him over to my messenger-party.”⁶³ These letters are private, as opposed to Esther’s public edict, but both texts feature a woman writing (or dictating) documents and demonstrating agency and initiative.

Similarly, the Amarna letters (c. 350–1335 BCE) include diplomatic correspondence from a Ugarit queen or princess named Heba to Pharaoh’s queen in Egypt. It includes the phrase, “I fall [at the feet of] my [mistress].” The deferential addressing of the Egyptian queen as “mistress,” combined with the self-

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ It may also be etymologically related to the Hebrew word “hidden.”

⁵⁸ Screnock, “Reading Esther in the Levantine Literary Tradition,” 325.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 332.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 329.

⁶¹ Bordreuil and Pardee, *A Manual of Ugaritic*, 245.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 249.

depreciating “maidservant,” which is how Heba refers to herself, fits neatly into the genre Screnock describes as the “female intermediary.” Similar language is used in the extant fragment of letter EA 50:

Say] to [...] my mistress; Message of the daughter of, your maidservant. [I] fall at the feet [of] my mistress 7 times and 7 times [es]. [...] my mistress.

The pointedly deferential language demonstrates the “propriety” which Screnock suggests is a key trait of the Levantine “female intermediary.”⁶⁴ It mirrors the obsequious, indirect language which Esther, along with several other characters in the royal court, uses to address the king (8:5):

ותאמר אִם־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב וְאִם־מִצְאָתִי חֵן לִפְנֵי וְכִשֶׁר הַדָּבָר לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וְטוֹבָה אֲנִי בְעֵינָיו

And she said, “If it pleases the king, and if I find favour before him, and the thing [is] right before the king, and I am pleasing in his sight [...]”

It is therefore clear that evidence from the second millennium BCE, albeit scant, demonstrates not only that some royal women had considerable soft power and agency in the ancient Near East, but that they were writers. Esther, although probably dating to almost one thousand years later, shares some key characteristics with royal, female writers in the ancient world. We can therefore conclude with some confidence that תַּכְתֹּב can be considered striking, remarkable and participating in a cluster of characteristics which indicates the particular literary trope of the “female intermediary,” as opposed to being entirely shocking, anomalous or parodic.

3.2 Later Women Writers

The evidence from which I have drawn so far dates to much earlier than *Esther*, which was probably written in the late Persian or early Hellenistic period. What evidence exists to suggest that there were any women writers during that time? The short answer is very little, especially in post-exilic Judah and the Diaspora.

Estimated literacy rates for the post-exilic community vary widely. Contra Albertz and Zenger’s “theology of the poor,” which alleged that parts of Micah, Isaiah and the Psalms were written by an impoverished section of Israel railing against a powerful elite, Ro contends that literacy was reserved for a narrow, privileged circle.⁶⁵ It can be assumed that female literacy rates were significantly lower than male, although some scholars have argued that, at least since the emergence of formative Judaism, Jewish literacy rates have historically been higher than non-Jewish ones, for both boys and girls. Girls married young, often as young as twelve to fifteen years old in the Greco-Roman world, so any education they received would have necessarily ended sooner, and been less advanced, than that of boys. However, as Starr states, “connections between literacy rates and authorship are only indirect.”⁶⁶ In the Greco-Roman period, documents were often dictated to scribes, sometimes highly educated slaves, particularly in royal court settings. Lefkowitz notes that Emperor Augustus would call his slaves to read to him if he could not sleep; a striking parallel to *Esther* 6:1.⁶⁷

More helpful is Eskenazi’s survey “The Lives of Women in the Post-Exilic Era.” She notes that, whilst women in post-exilic Judah were primarily managers of their household, some of the Musharu documents, as well as those from the Elephantine Community, indicate that women had some involvement in business. Yoder demonstrates in detail how some dowry arrangements enabled women to maintain some control of

⁶⁴ Screnock, “Reading Esther in the Levantine Literary Tradition,” 337.

⁶⁵ Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament*; Ro, “Socio-Economic Context of Post-Exilic Community and Literacy.”

⁶⁶ Starr, “Reading aloud: *Lectores* and Roman Reading,” 339.

⁶⁷ Lefkowitz, “Did Ancient Women Write Novels?,” 81.

their property and finances, by including clauses which prevented their husband's from selling or spending it.⁶⁸ A Neo-Babylonian example of a similar case can be found in a trial record of a dowry claim from c. 559 BCE, which details the claim of a woman named Bunanītu against her stepson. The outcome of the claim is that both Bunanītu, and her stepson's wife Etellitu, have their dowries protected. Bunanītu's voice is recorded as direct speech in the lawsuit:

When Nabū-šumu-lišir [...] took me as a wife, he received 4 mina of silver as my dowry. Nabū-šumu-lišir died and Bēl-aplaidin, his son, took over his property, but to this day he has not repaid my dowry to me.⁶⁹

Thus, we can see that women had some, limited property rights and some voice in the public sphere during the exilic and post-exilic period. This does not tell us directly whether there were women *writers*, but it helps illuminate the wider context from which the text of *Esther* emerged.

Scholars including Eskenazi, Lefkowitz and Kraemer look beyond the Semitic languages to ancient Greece and Rome to help build a picture of women's lives in Persian period.⁷⁰ Eskenazi justifies widening the field of enquiry thus:

Although Greek sources do not specifically pertain to Jewish women, they augment our understanding of how women in the Persian period (in a neighbouring culture) were perceived socially, legally and economically. These multiple sources serve as a backdrop to the sparser sources from the Bible and the archaeology of Judah.⁷¹

It is also not uncommon for scholars to retroject insights from Formative and Rabbinic Judaism into the Persian Period, to help fill in gaps. If, acknowledging the limitations of that method, we broaden the survey to include women writers in the Greco-Roman world, the picture becomes much more interesting. As Plant surveys, there is a small but significant list of female writers from the ancient world, predominantly consisting of philosophers and poets.⁷² These include figures such as Sappho of Lesbos (c. 610-580 BCE), and Erinna, Korinna, Praxilla, Aesara of Luciana, Nossis of Locri, Moera, Phintys and Philaenis of Samos, all hailing from the fifth or fourth century BCE, making them roughly contemporaneous with estimated dates for *Esther*. The fourth century *Iamblichus' List*, which details Pythagorus' followers, also includes seventeen (out of 235) women. Kraemer notes that Philo of Alexandria asserted female Therapeutics "shared in all respects the contemplative calling of their male counterparts" and that "their activities must therefore have included education and study, and by analogy, composition as well."⁷³

Moving forward to the early Christian era, there is evidence that women corresponded with Jerome and Chrysostom, although none of the actual letters have survived. The second century CE also featured the Christian Montanist sect, deemed to be heretical partly on account of the fact that women, including Priscilla and Maximilla, had a prominent role in the community, including writing. Kraemer states, "women writing books in their own names was a source of controversy between Montanists and their opponents."⁷⁴ Some scholars have argued that a focus on female characters in *Ruth*, *Joseph and Aseneth*, parts of the *Testaments of Job* and the later apocryphal Christian *Paul and Thecla* may well indicate female authorship. However, I follow Lefkowitz, Kraemer and Fuchs in deeming such arguments to be baseless and speculative.⁷⁵

Having briefly surveyed the evidence, we can conclude that the occurrence of the verb תכתב in *Esther* is not entirely surprising, given the presence of female writers in the ancient Near East some millennia prior to

⁶⁸ Yoder, *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance*.

⁶⁹ Holtz, *Neo-Babylonian Trial Records*, 143.

⁷⁰ Eskenazi, "The Lives of Women in the Post-Exilic Era;" Lefkowitz, "Did Ancient Women Write Novels?;" Kraemer, "Women's Authorship of Jewish and Christian Literature in the Greco-Roman Period."

⁷¹ Eskenazi, "The Lives of Women in the Post-Exilic Era," 15.

⁷² Plant, *Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome: an Anthology*.

⁷³ Kraemer, "Women's Authorship of Jewish and Christian Literature in the Greco-Roman Period," 222.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ See especially Fuchs, "Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible for Women: The Neoliberal Turn in Contemporary Feminist Scholarship."

the text's composition, and evidence of female writers in the surrounding cultures in the centuries which followed it. In genre, Esther's act of writing is closer to the "female intermediary" paradigm which was prevalent many centuries earlier than the more business like and poetic extant female writing of the post-exilic, Hellenistic and later Greco-Roman periods. But there is an extant intermediary characterisation of a female writer who predates Esther in the Hebrew Bible: Jezebel.

4 Esther and Jezebel

Having swept the broader context and demonstrated that Esther is locatable, I shall now attempt to situate תכת within the Hebrew Bible itself. The most obvious place to start is with its only direct parallel. I have already alluded to the fact that *Esther* 9:29 may be an intertext with 1 Kings 21:8, since these constitute the only two uses of תכת in the Hebrew Bible. It is my contention that this *dis legomenon* phenomenon has particular intertextual resonance, and a richer understanding of how Esther is being characterised as a writer can be gained from this identification.

Firstly, it is useful to briefly define what is meant by "intertext," since the term can be fluid and different scholars use it differently. The term "intertextuality" was coined by Julia Kristeva, who understood it in the broad sense of a "mosaic of quotations," not just in literary texts but in the wider sphere of history and society.⁷⁶ Her theory was a radical critique of traditional historical-critical scholarship, which typically privileged authorial intent and conceptualised texts as a discrete unity. In contrast to this, Kristeva argued for an understanding of the text as participating in an all-encompassing textual web, in which the distinction between reader and writer is blurred because a writer is a reader of another text, and a text is reading itself even as it writes itself. Her work was a development of Bakhtin's ideas about the "dialogic" nature of texts: the idea that texts are socially located and participate in a wider sphere of meaning; meaning is not purely found in discrete, particular texts.

I have already also considered the ways in which Esther's writing can be mapped onto the wider social and cultural trope of the "female intermediary." This interpretation can be situated within the umbrella of Kristeva's understanding of intertextuality: explaining how Esther as a writer does not exist in a vacuum, but rather in dialogue with wider literary and cultural phenomena which help us understand how to read her act of writing.⁷⁷

However, in positing that there is a specific, direct textual relationship between תכת in *Esther* 9:29 and תכת in 1 Kings 21:8, I am doing something quite different and indeed contrary to Kristeva's understanding of "intertextuality." I am arguing for a diachronic, linear, hierarchical relationship between a specific word in *Kings* and a specific word in *Esther*. In this sense, my work is closer to the understanding of intertextuality employed by Michael Fishbane, who takes a more traditional approach in his prioritisation of single, specific intertexts and his identification of a canonical source. Fishbane's seminal work *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* argued that biblical texts are composed of two elements: the *traditum* and the *traditio*. The *traditum* constitutes the content of tradition, whereas the *traditio* represents the process of transmission for textual tradition. Fishbane proposed that biblical texts were shaped by a process of "inner-biblical exegesis," whereby older traditions were creatively reinterpreted to speak to the demands and challenges of the present. He states that:

The integration and reworking of many types of tradition at many different times and places [...] had the result of incorporating non-Israelite and local Israelite materials into a national corpus whose telling and retelling was a new basis for cultural memory.⁷⁸

⁷⁶ Kristeva, *The Power of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*.

⁷⁷ It is interesting to note that Kristeva was largely responsible for introducing Bakhtin to a western European audience.

⁷⁸ Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, 6.

The aggadic material, he claims, was able to do this is a more reflective, comprehensive and creative way than legal material:

The purveyors and creators of aggadic exegesis appear to live with ‘texts in mind’- that is, with texts (or traditions) which provide the imaginative matrix for evaluating the present, for conceiving the future, for organising reality (the inchoate, the negative, the possible), even for providing the shared symbols and language of communication.⁷⁹

Thus, as circumstances changed in the tumultuous history of ancient Israel, traditions recast and reconceptualised the traditions they had inherited to speak to their current context. This resulted in “the remarkable capacity of tradition to transform a diverse inheritance and thereby continually to build up a sense of national history and destiny.”⁸⁰ Fishbane suggests that these creative reinterpretations were particularly pertinent in instances “bereft of the immediacy of the divine presence” such as when interpreters were making sense of oracles.⁸¹

Fishbane’s understanding of an intertext as a creative reinterpretation of scripture or non-scriptural tradition is more helpful for my analysis of *Esther* than Kristeva’s. This is because Fishbane does not shy away from identifying specific, hierarchical diachronic relationships within the biblical canon. Also, he is flexible in shifting his hermeneutical lens from the minutiae of lexis and syntax, to identifying broader brushstrokes.

4.1 Esther as intertext

Esther is a prototypical example of Fishbane’s understanding of a *traditio* in his definition of inner-biblical interpretation.⁸² It is an undisputedly late biblical text, which means it has a heavy body of *traditum* behind it. It is asking questions about what tradition means in a new circumstance: namely, what it means to be a Jew living outside of the land, and how to survive as a culture and people in the face of persecution.⁸³ It is the archetypal instance of worldview “bereft of the immediacy of the divine presence:” the “book of hiding.”⁸⁴ It may well also be creatively reinterpreting non-biblical tradition and incorporating it into scripture: namely, Persian mythology and possibly also a festival.⁸⁵

Many scholars have explicated the intertextual resonances at the heart of the story’s plot, themes and structure. For example, Butting interprets *Esther* as a female retelling of the Joseph cycle, noting a cluster of lexical and plot similarities. She states that “the *Esther* authors intervene in the historiography of Israel” in order to “revise biblical historiography in order to reconstruct the history of women.”⁸⁶ The intertextual dialogue between *Esther* and 1 Samuel 15, Saul’s failure to completely destroy the Amalekites, is well-documented.⁸⁷ It is particularly pertinent in Chapter 9, the site of our focus for this discussion, and apparently developed from a process of revision and reflection, since it is not as prominent in Greek *Esther*. Grossman expounds what he defines as a series of “dynamic analogies” in *Esther*: textual parallels

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 7.

⁸¹ Ibid., 435.

⁸² *Esther* is also very much a *traditum* for the later book of *Judith*, and of course for rabbinic midrash and across the different versions of the text. It participates in the dynamic process of intertextuality by both reinterpreting tradition and, later, being reinterpreted itself. The different extant versions of the text make it a test case for Kristeva’s understanding of the synchronicity of textual dialogue, but that is not the focus of this essay.

⁸³ I am not suggesting that the persecution of the Jews described in *Esther* is a historical reality. Rather, it is a lens through which to view some other trouble facing the Jewish people, for example under Antiochus IV or Epiphanes in the Hellenistic Period.

⁸⁴ Beal, *The Book of Hiding*.

⁸⁵ See Silverstein, “The Book of Esther and the ‘Enūma Elish.’”

⁸⁶ Butting, “Esther: A New Interpretation of the Joseph Story in the Fight Against Anti-Semitism and Sexism,” 242; 248.

⁸⁷ See, for example McKane, “A Note on Esther IX and Samuel XV.”

which shift fluidly between characters, self-consciously disrupting and undermining analogies in order to highlight the confusing world of the text.⁸⁸ He argues for a “special degree of sophistication” in *Esther*’s manipulation of intertextual sources including the aforementioned examples, but also with *Daniel*, *Joshua*, Jacob and Esau (Genesis 27), some possible similarities to Moses and Aaron, the inauguration of Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 8) and, most relevant to our inquiry, the story of Ahab and Jezebel in 1 Kings 21.⁸⁹ Fishbane also identifies Chapter 9 of *Esther*, the site of our inquiry, as an intertext. For Fishbane, *Esther* constitutes “the reuse of an ancient oracles in the formulation of a new law,” drawing upon Zechariah 8:19 to theologise and authorise the festival of Purim. He argues that the language of regulating fasts (9:13) and the reference to “peace and truth” form a “network of language from Zechariah 8:19” and that this allusion “has been recognised since medieval times.”⁹⁰

Within this matrix of intertextual resonances, *Esther* has a particular relationship with the so-called Deuteronomistic History, and in particular with *Kings* (Frisch 1992). It consciously styles itself as a historiographical chronicle, replicating an archaic, elevated narrative style and referring to its place in “in the annals of the kings of Media and Persia.”⁹¹ Grossman, following Zakowitz notes that Haman and Mordecai’s practice of writing “in the name of the king” is reminiscent of Jezebel’s letter writing in 1 Kings 21:8:

ותכתב ספרים בשם אחאב ותחתם בחתמו ותשלח הספרים אל־הזקנים ואל־החרים אשר בעירו הישיבים את־נבוא

She wrote letters in the name of Ahab and she placed his seal [on them], and she sent letters to the elders and to the nobles who were in the city.

As Grossman notes, the language here is similar to *Esther* 3:12–13

בשם המלך אחשורוש נכתב ונחתם בטבעת המלך:

ונשלוח ספרים ביד הרצים אל־כל־מדינות המלך

It was written in the name of King Ahasuerus and signed with the king’s signet ring.

And letters were send by the hand of couriers to all the king’s provinces.

For Grossman, this is part of a strategy of “dynamic analogies” in which different characters from *Esther* take on the role of different characters in the story of Ahab and Jezebel, switching places to add to the story’s sense of disorientation. First, he argues, Haman is Jezebel when he sends letters in the king’s name (21:8), then Zeresh is Jezebel, as both scheme to have their husband’s enemy’s killed. He writes “Jezebel’s plan is identical to that of Zeresh: to have her husband’s adversary killed [...] even the manner of death that is planned is similar in both scenes, because in both cases the women hint that the adversary may be done away with in a formal, legal way.”⁹² He also suggests that King Ahab is represented by both Haman and King Ahasuerus at different points in the story.

Grossman highlights several linguistic and thematic similarities between *Esther* and 1 Kings 21. These include a sullen, moody king, a character “rendering his garments” and wearing “sackcloth” and a “negative judgement of the king.”⁹³ There are many more similarities between *Esther* and the account of Ahab’s reign in 1 Kings 17–21, which Grossman could have pointed out. These include a focus on food and drink, especially holding banquets;⁹⁴ drunkenness;⁹⁵ great slaughter;⁹⁶ the proclamation of a fast;⁹⁷

⁸⁸ Grossman, “Dynamic Analogies in the Book of Esther.”

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 413; 403.

⁹⁰ Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, 503.

⁹¹ See Sasson, “Esther” for the ways in which Esther attempts to style itself as a Persian chronicle.

⁹² Grossman, “Dynamic Analogies in the Book of Esther,” 404.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 404; 403.

⁹⁴ 1 Kings 17:6, 17:10–1, 18:4, 18:41, 19:6, 21:7; Esther 1:3, 1:5, 1:9, 2:18, 5:4–8, 5:12–14, 9:17.

⁹⁵ 1 Kings 20:16, Esther 1:7–8, 3:15.

⁹⁶ 1 Kings 20:29, Esther 9:5, 16.

⁹⁷ 1 Kings 21:9, 27; Esther 4:3.

descriptions of clothing;⁹⁸ hiding,⁹⁹ references to district governors;¹⁰⁰ a dramatic reversal from death to life;¹⁰¹ an improbable victory¹⁰² and the detail that lives are being given for silver.¹⁰³ Some of these tropes are, of course, found in many places in the Hebrew Bible, particularly Grossman's example of sackcloth and rendering garments. However, the evidence for an intertextual relationship between the two stories is cumulative: the similarities are more persuasive when they function together as a cluster.

I would like to suggest that Grossman missed a key “dynamic analogy” in his comparison between *Esther* and the story of Ahab and Jezebel, since there is also an intertextual connection between Jezebel and Esther. Both are queens. Both, as I have already stated, are the subject of the verb תכתב and constitute the only two uses of the third-person singular feminine form of the verb כתב in the Hebrew Bible. Both are, to varying degrees, morally suspect. Jezebel is the archetypal female “monster:” a killer of prophets, a Sidonian and a Baal worshiper who leads King Ahab to building a sacred pole and who is indubitably responsible for his gory demise.

Esther's behaviour is more ambiguous, but has nonetheless attracted suspicion in the text's reception history, and in debates about its canonicity.¹⁰⁴ Esther is a Jew who marries a Persian king; an inversion of the foreign marriage between Ahab and Jezebel, in which Jezebel is the foreigner and Ahab is the Israelite. Jezebel is a worshipper of Baal and a persecutor of Israel's prophets. Esther keeps her national/religious identity a secret until 7:4. Jezebel is a killer, and so is Esther: she demands the hanging of Haman's ten sons (9:13) in a resolution to the Saul and Agag conflict, and her and Mordecai's solution to the plot device of the unalterable edict is to overwrite it with a new edict demanding vast retributive violence (8:13) which results in a huge number of deaths (9:16). Both women fit Screnock's trope of the “female intermediary,” which I have already explored: royal women who use manipulative strategies to influence events. It could also be argued that *Judith* is a rewriting of both texts: Judith is a killer, like Jezebel, except her murderous act is for national interest, and she is on the good side of the conflict from the text's perspective, whereas Jezebel is positioned as an antagonist. Like Esther, Judith gains access to a powerful foreign man, but unlike Esther, she does not sleep with him. *Judith* has been interpreted as a response to some of the moral ambiguity in *Esther*; a creative rewriting of the story which nullifies some of its controversy.¹⁰⁵

There are also important differences between Jezebel and Esther. Esther is a subtler anti-heroine, in a much subtler story: whereas 1 Kings 17–21 features multiple, dramatic theophanies and miracles, since it is pervaded by the Elijah stories, in Esther there are no prophets and no God, or certainly no overt, explicit references to God, and God is not directly attributed with directing the course of events. Another key difference between Esther and Jezebel is, of course, that Esther is celebrated as a heroine, credited with saving her people, whereas Jezebel is a villain who dies an ignoble death. However, given the evidence which I have demonstrated, it could be argued that the תכתב intertext is a lexical clue which encourages the thoughtful reader to make more comparisons between Esther and Jezebel, and to consider some key similarities and differences between them.

What can be gained from reading the text in this way, and what are its limitations? One interpretation of noting the connection between Esther and Jezebel is that the reader is encouraged to interpret Esther's act of writing negatively and to decode her character and actions with more of a negative slant. In contrast to this, perhaps in highlighting similarities between Esther and Jezebel, which resonate from the nexus of similarity that they are both female writers, the narrator is in fact encouraging the reader to reflect upon the differences between the two stories. Any analogy necessarily highlights difference as well as similarity, and the most obvious difference is that the stories of the two women are set in contrasting periods of Israel's

⁹⁸ 1 Kings 22:10; Esther 4:4, 4:15, 6:9–11.

⁹⁹ 1 Kings 18:4; Esther 2:10.

¹⁰⁰ 1 Kings 20:14.

¹⁰¹ 1 Kings 17:17–24; Esther 7:4, 8:16–17.

¹⁰² 1 Kings 20:27–39;

¹⁰³ 1 Kings 20:39, Esther 3:9.

¹⁰⁴ See McDonald, *The Canon Debate*.

¹⁰⁵ See Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, 13.

history. Esther's more subtle actions fit the more ambiguous world of the post-exilic Diaspora; I have already explored the ways in which the device of the literary carnivalesque constructs a story-world which is permeated with ambiguity.

Thus, whereas Jezebel's characterisation is unequivocally, archetypally negative, Esther's is ambiguous, but ultimately falls on the side of positive, particularly in the reception history of the text, which I shall proceed to consider. The reader is invited to consider the actions of a manipulative women with violent tendencies, and a gentile marriage, and to reconsider them in the light of different circumstances. In the murky, ambiguous world of the post-exilic Diaspora, compromises are necessary to survive. In contrast to post-exilic Ezra-Nehemiah, which condemns exogamy and calls for a doubling down on national identity, the diasporic setting of Esther is an exploration of how a complex situation necessitates compromise, and to some extent embracing and reconsidering ambiguity.

The work of feminist biblical scholar Alice Bach is helpful for my interpretation here. Bach argues that there are tropes which permeate the biblical canon and postbiblical literature in their characterisation of women.¹⁰⁶ For example, Judith, Esther, Delilah and Salome all use food and sexuality to bring down their enemies. Some (Esther and Judith) are deemed to be good, whereas others (Delilah and Salome) are archetypal femme fatales. However, Bach insists that we should resist reading these texts "through the binary code of good and evil" Bach, *Women, Seduction and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative*, rather adopting the "strategy" of taking "an approach that is kaleidoscopic," comparing different portraits of biblical women both within and outside of the canon.¹⁰⁷ She states:

Part of the ideological effect of the text is to splinter the power of women, and the most efficient way of accomplishing this effect literarily is to isolate women from each other within textual units and commentaries.¹⁰⁸

In contrast to this, reading female characters across different biblical narratives, and indeed beyond them to encompass postbiblical responses and wider cultural depictions of biblical women, frees us from judging the actions of female characters in isolation and simplistically labelling them as morally good or bad.

A method suspicious of binary opposition [...] one that tries to increase the interpretative possibilities, offers the reader weary of wandering in the perfection of the biblical garden of good and evil a different landscape, where no category can claim hegemony.¹⁰⁹

Arguably, the intertextual signifiers in *Esther* already encourage this kind of reading strategy. By hinting that the eponymous protagonist of the Megillah shares similarities with the monstrous Jezebel, the text encourages the reader to see moral ambiguity in her actions, to view them with a degree of suspicion even though they help to procure victory and salvation. Esther's writing is, therefore, an ambiguous act in an ambiguous world. Women writers, like gentile marriages, are not ideal, but sometimes necessary.

5 Reception history

Finally, a consideration of the interpretation history of the Megillah is helpful for providing a broader view on the interpretation of Esther as a writer. By tracing whether the trajectory of her portrayal as a writer in the versions and in early rabbinic literature is one of augmentation or suppression, we can gain a clearer understanding of how her act of writing was read in the early reception history of the text. This can, cautiously and with an acknowledgment of the method's limitations, be helpful for constructing a

¹⁰⁶ Bach, *Women, Seduction and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative*.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

hermeneutical framework for interpreting תכתב. If Esther's act of writing continues to be acknowledged, we can conclude that it is more than an incidental anomaly, or the vestige of an earlier literary tradition which had all but faded into insignificance.

Of course, we cannot retroject this information back into MT *Esther* and claim to shed any further light on what the text "really" says. However, MT *Esther* exists as a moment in a complex redaction history, as evidenced by Septuagint and A-Text *Esther*: Clines suggests that the A-Text is "a very important witness to a pre-Masoretic form of the story."¹¹⁰ If we accept Clines's theory for the redactional layers in the text, Esther's act of writing at 9:29 comes after the end of the story proper and is found within one of the "appendices," which are "defective" in comparison to the main body of the narrative and serve to "create a *hieros logos* for the Purim festival."¹¹¹ In the A-Text, it is King Ahasureus who writes a letter on Esther's behalf, telling his subjects to ignore any letters sent by Haman, to let Jews live "according to their own laws" and to authorise them to defend themselves against attack. Mordecai also writes a book (8:47), but Esther does not write anything, although she does contribute ideas (8:19, 46).

In Septuagint *Esther*, the king gives Esther explicit permission to write in his name, declaring, "You also write in my name as it pleases you, and seal it with my ring" (8:8). However, Esther is not explicitly portrayed as writing; we are told that "secretaries were summoned" (8:9) and "it was written by the king" (8:10). Thus, we can hypothesise that writing Esther did not appear in the earliest forms of the text, but that the tradition is broader than simply being an anomaly in the version of the text preserved by the Masoretes: LXX *Esther* attests to a broader tradition in which Esther is conceived of as a writer, even if she does not write so explicitly. Contra Jobling and Roughly, this is more than an isolated "slippage."¹¹²

Just as looking behind the text can help shape a hermeneutical lens for the way we read it, so can looking beyond the text. Feminist readings of the text often point to the disappearance of Esther in Chapter 10, and the reference to "Mordecai's Day" in 2 Maccabees 15:26 to suggest a trajectory of marginalisation and erasure, by which Mordecai ultimately replaces Esther.¹¹³ For example, Klein writes "the narrative continues the transference of honour from Esther to Mordecai so that the conclusion specifies a male symbol of honour for patriarchal Jews."¹¹⁴ If we subscribe to Derrida's concept of the parergon – his argument that the frame, boundary or border, of a piece of artwork is often more powerful than the core – then the prominence of Mordecai in Chapter 10 is hugely significant. It has the potential to undermine the centre, analogous to the way that the ending to *Jane Eyre* reasserts the religious, patriarchal hegemony and undercuts the more subversive, "Reader, I married him."

However, if we define the parergon of the text in broader terms and stretch it out to include the reception history, then the picture looks quite different. Bach argues that this is an important factor when reading a text critically, and that considering the doxic traditions of a text are important for helping us to understand it:

Reading Second Temple narratives and rabbinic midrashim lets the reader in on the ancient doxa as well as the process of canonization. The biblical expansions provide the interpreter with prime examples of the efficacy of using extracanonical narratives to highlight and resolve textual irritants in the canonical version.¹¹⁵

Thus, if we widen our reading of Esther as a writer to include rabbinic midrash, and the periphrastic Talmud, we should be better positioned to determine whether writing Esther is a "textual irritant" – a one off, anomalous "slippage," or something more central.

Those who point to Maccabees 15:26 as evidence of Esther's erasure in the reception history of the Megillah, but read no further, are wilfully misreading the "doxic tradition." Far from erasing or marginalising Esther, the midrashim and the Talmud tend to accentuate her assertiveness and her prophetic role.

¹¹⁰ Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 7.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹¹² Jobling and Roughly, "The Right to Write: Power, irony and identity in the book of Esther," 332.

¹¹³ Butting (1995), Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, 19.

¹¹⁴ Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, 114.

¹¹⁵ Bach, *Women, Seduction and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative*, 4.

For example, the Talmud states that “the holy spirit clothed her” when she went in to see king Ahasureus. In doing so, they spiritualise her character and invoke connotations of prophecy and strength. Bronner states “the rabbis saw in Esther a spirit of prophecy, which strengthened her and enabled her to wield power to save her people.”¹¹⁶ In some rabbinic traditions, there is a jump from Esther as a writer to Esther as a prophet – Bronner notes that Seder ‘Olam 21 “bases tradition of Esther as a prophet on the verse that describes her writing [9:29], stating “her writing was divinely inspired.”¹¹⁷ Her act of writing is not just preserved, but elevated to the status of prophecy.

Even more significantly, in B. Megillah 7a Esther demands to be recorded for posterity, assertively and meta-referentially justifying her canonisation:

Esther sent to the Wise Men saying, “Commemorate me for future generations.” They replied, “You will incite the ill will of the nations against us.” She sent back the reply, “I am already recorded in the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia”. Rab and Rabbi Hanina and Rabbi Yohanan and Rabbi Habiba record: Esther sent to the Wise Men, saying, “Write an account of me for posterity.” They sent back an answer (and refused) until they found a verse written in the Torah.¹¹⁸

Contrary to any sense of an erasure is a quite remarkable foregrounding: Esther is portrayed as confidently putting herself forward and demanding to be remembered. Bronner writes, “Esther served as a female authenticator of a written tradition. In no other biblical context do we find a woman serving as the catalyst for the writing down of an oral tradition.”¹¹⁹ Klein states:

The *Megillah* portrayed her as an outstanding political figure and communal savior. The rabbis went even further and attributed to her the characteristics which were important in their eyes. They portrayed her as an halakhic authority.¹²⁰

This is significant to our enquiry, because it shows that Esther continued to be associated with writing and textuality in the reception history of the text.

However, just as Esther’s act of writing can be interpreted as type of death, in both Freudian and Foucauldian terms, her canonisation – her demand to be commemorated – constitutes a further death, particularly in terms of any subjectivity or agency. As Bronner explores, in spiritualising Esther and presenting her as inspired and directed by the Holy Spirit, the rabbis actually reduced her agency. She writes:

Rabbinic literature, by emphasizing God’s constant assistance, in a way diminishes Esther’s personal strength and independence of action; but it also increases her spirituality, which was, after all, where rabbinic interest really lay.¹²¹

To be a prophet is to speak, or write, the words of God and therefore to not write your own. To be canonised, written about and written into history, constitutes a memorialisation: a further stage of ossification in the “death of the author” trajectory.

Esther remains a writer in the rabbinic interpretative tradition, in fact, in some cases her act of writing is imbued with further, prophetic significance. But it is also changed: any intertextual resonance with Jezebel and the writing act of the female intermediary is lost or ignored. Instead, the rabbis find other intertextual allusions, for example, sometimes reading Esther as Mordecai’s wife, and seeing a parallel with Abraham’s wife Sarah, staying overnight with Pharaoh in Genesis 20:6. Her writing act is preserved, but it is also transformed into a signifier with a different meaning.

¹¹⁶ Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women*, 192.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹¹⁸ The Torah verse being referred to here is Ex 17:14.

¹¹⁹ Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women*, 196.

¹²⁰ Klein, *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*, 446.

¹²¹ Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women*, 197.

6 Conclusion

Esther's act of writing in 9:29 is not an isolated phenomenon. On the contrary, it can be located within the Megillah's thematic exploration of gender, power and textuality and the ways in which they intersect. As I have demonstrated, the relationship between text and power is unstable in the Megillah: the link between author and authority is fissured as a symptom of the post-exilic, postlapsarian world of the story. The contribution of a female writer to this interrogation of the relationship between text and power further complicates the issue, in a text which presents the story world as frighteningly confusing and complicated. Despite being the eponymous protagonist, Esther is characterised as having precarious and disputed subjectivity throughout the story, an intersectional "other" as both female and foreigner. Her act of writing in 9:29 is, on one level an assertive act of power, which imposes control onto the story world and inaugurates the denouement. However, reader-response theory reveals that it is also an act of sacrifice and death: the final dissolution of her precarious subjectivity as she becomes ossified in the intransigent role of author. It is, therefore, a misstep to unproblematically cast Esther's act of writing as a victory for female agency and subjectivity, when the link between power and writing is so amorphous.

In a text replete with theological absence, Esther's act of writing could be interpreted as simply another deferral in a chain of deferrals: a futile attempt at imposing meaning and control in a frighteningly meaningless world. However, when we locate תכת within the broader cultural milieu, we see that it is functioning in a particular way. We see that Esther's writing can be mapped onto the wider ancient Near Eastern trope of the "female intermediary," in which powerful, royal women exerted influence by means of careful, tactful interventions including sometimes the writing of letters. When we compare Esther with another mythical female writer figure, that of the Sumerian Enheduanna, we can trace some of the key features of this trope operating in Esther's act of writing in the Megillah. These include female writers serving as a cultural focus at crisis points, including after exile, and a particular association with the goddess Ishtar. Within this paradigm we see that the figure of Esther is functioning as a focus of cultural unity and identity at a time when it needed to be reimagined. Esther's power as a writer, then, is limited to a specific, female role and operates within the constraints of a particular genre.

Within the wider ancient Near Eastern genre of the "female intermediary," תכת also functions more specifically as an intertext with Jezebel's act of writing in 1 Kgs 21:8; a link which signals the profound ambiguity of her action. Esther both is and is not Jezebel, and Esther's act of writing is ambiguous, both salvific and suspect, a cause for both celebration and concern. It is simultaneously both the horrifyingly monstrous activity of the "phallic woman" and the tactful, appropriate involvement of the sage-like queen.

The cognitive dissonance of this ambiguity is symptomatic of the profound ambiguity of the Megillah and its exploration of the relationship between text and power. Thematically, the Megillah is navigating the complexity and ambiguity of Jewish identity outside of the land: what is normative is no longer certain, and this is a source of great anxiety: an anxiety which permeates the text, and which the carnival of Purim can't completely shake off. As the eponymous protagonist of the text, Esther is not so much a female subject as a projection of the values and identity of Second Temple Diaspora Judaism: vulnerable yet resilient, and learning to adapt in order to survive.

It is particularly pertinent that Esther is portrayed as a writer in the post-exilic epoch, when the text was taking on more significance for the diasporic Jewish community. The various strands, which come together in the post-exilic – or possibly Hellenistic – moment, testify to a shift in which the text and its power became an overarching concern and identity marker for the dispersed, beleaguered Jewish community. Earlier *traditum* – both within and outside of the proto-biblical corpus – were being reimagined in order to speak to new challenges in profoundly uncertain times. The Megillah's interrogation of the relationship between text and power, crystallised through its coalescence with the theme of gender, points to an ambivalence about this shift and a desire to test its limits and implications. By the time we see writing Esther in the rabbinic tradition, though, this ambivalence has largely resolved: Esther is portrayed as a more confident and more spiritual writer in line with a more confident acceptance of the power of the text. This spiritualisation should not be confused with a proto-feminist augmentation of her role as a writer: on the contrary, it diminishes her agency in the writing act by indirectly attributing her words to God.

By heuristically situating Esther's act of writing within a wider biblical and cultural discourse, as well as using critical theory to analyse the complex ways in which her act can be interpreted, I have attempted to demonstrate that recognising Esther's identity as a writer is important for understanding the interaction between language, power and gender in the Megillah. I have argued that the ambiguous figure of the female writer exemplifies the complicated relationship between text and power which was being negotiated in the post-exilic context, as well as the desire to find new foci for cultural identity and unity. תכתב also speaks to the intersection of text, power and gender more broadly: like all writers, Esther's written act is both an assertion of power and an ossification: paradoxically both imbued with potency and yet also a kind of death. Like all female writing, it is a challenge to androcentric narratives: a refusal to be "other" and a bid for subjectivity, but ironically also a sacrifice.

References

- Albertz, Rainer. *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament*, Vol. 1. London, Chicago: SCM Press, 1996.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. In *Modern Literary Theory: a Reader*, 3rd edn, edited by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. London: Arnold, 1996.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Death of the Author." In *Modern Literary Theory: a Reader*, 3rd edn, edited by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh. London: Arnold, 1996.
- Barton, John and Muddiman, John. *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Oxford: OUP, 2001.
- Beal, Timothy K. *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation and Esther*. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Beal, Timothy K. "Who Filled His Heart to Do This?" Conceptual Metaphors of the Self in the Book of Esther." *JOT* 40:1 (2015), 97–111.
- Berman, Joshua. "Hadassah bat Abihail": The Evolution from Object to Subject in the Character of Esther." *JBL* 120 (2004), 647–69.
- Bordreuil, Pierre and Dennis, Pardee. *A Manual of Ugaritic*. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009.
- Brenner, Athalya. *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995.
- Bronner, Leila Leah. *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women*. Westminster: John Knox Press, 1994.
- Bush, Frederick. *World Bible Commentary 9: Ruth/Esther*. World Books: Dallas, Texas, 1996.
- Butting, Klara. "Esther: A New Interpretation of the Joseph Story in the Fight Against Anti-Semitism and Sexism." In *A Feminist companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, edited by Athalya Brenner-Idan, 239–48. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2005.
- Clines, David J. A. ed. *The Esther Scroll*. Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1984.
- Craig, Kenneth. *Reading Esther: a Case for the Literary Carnavalesque*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.
- Davidson, S. V. "Writing." In *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of the Bible and Gender Studies*, edited by Julia M. O'Brien. Oxford: OUP, 2014.
- Day, Linda M. *Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries: Esther*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005.
- De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Shelia Malovany-Chevallier. New York: Random House, 2010. First published in French, 1949.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Of Grammatology*. Translated Arthur Bradley. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008.
- Enheduana. *Exaltation of Inanna*. Translated William W. Hallo and J. J. A. van Dijk. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968.
- Eskenazi, Tamara Cohn. "The Lives of Women in the Post-Exilic Era." In *The Writings and Later Wisdom Books*, edited by N. Calduch-Benages and C. M. Maier. Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2014.
- Fishbane, Michael. *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*. Online Resource, 1985.
- Foucault, Michel. "What is an Author?" In *Literary Theory: an Anthology*, edited by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Incorporated, 2017, 3rd edn.
- Freud, Sigmund. *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1995.
- Frisch, Amos. "Between the Scroll of Esther and the Book of Kings." *Mehqerei Hag* 3 (1992), 25–35.
- Fuchs, Esther. "Reclaiming the Hebrew Bible for Women: The Neoliberal Turn in Contemporary Feminist Scholarship." *JFSR* 24 (2008), 45–65.
- Grossman, Jonathan. "Dynamic Analogies in the Book of Esther." *Vetus Testamentum* 59:3 (2009), 394–414.
- Helle, Sophus. "Enheduana and the Invention of Authorship." *Authorship*, 8:1 (2019).
- Holmstedt, Robert D. and Screnock, John. *Esther: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2015.
- Holtz, Shalom E. *Neo-Babylonian Trial Records*. Atlanta, GA: SBL, 2014.
- Jobling, J'Annine and Roughley, Alan. "The Right to Write: Power, irony and identity in the book of Esther." In *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives*, edited by J. C. Exum. 2nd edn. London: T&T Clark, 2016.
- Klein, Lillian R. *From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

- Kraemer, Ross. "Women's Authorship of Jewish and Christian Literature in the Greco-Roman Period." In *Women Like this: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991.
- Kristeva, Julia. *The Power of Horror: an Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.
- Lefkowitz, Mary K. "Did Ancient Women Write Novels?" In *Women Like this: New Perspectives on Jewish Women in the Greco-Roman World*, edited by Amy-Jill Levine. Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991.
- Lubitch, Rivkah. "A Feminist's Look at Esther." *Judaism* 42:4 (1993), 438–46.
- McDonald, Lee Martin and Sanders, J. A. *The Canon Debate*. Hendrickson: Peabody, Massachusetts, 2005.
- McKane, William. "A Note on Esther IX and Samuel XV." *Journal of Theological Studies* 12 (1961), 260.
- Moore, Carey A. *Esther: Introduction, Translation and Notes*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971.
- Niditch, Susan. *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature*. Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996.
- Ofrat, Gideon. *The Jewish Derrida*. Syracuse University Press, 2001.
- Plant, Ian Michael, ed. *Women Writers of Ancient Greece and Rome: an Anthology*. London: Equinox, 2004.
- Polaski, David. "'And Also to the Jews in Their Script': Power and Writing in the Scroll of Esther." In *Reading and Teaching Ancient Fiction: Jewish, Christian, and Greco-Roman Narratives, Writings from the Greco-Roman World Supplements, 11*, edited by Sara Raup Johnson, Rubén R. Dupertuis and Christine Shea. Atlanta, GA: SBL Press, 2008.
- Ro, Johannes Unsok. "Socio-Economic Context of Post-Exilic Community and Literacy." *ZAW* 120:4 (2008), 597–611.
- Sabbath, Roberta S. "Raped by the Pen." In *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament and Qur'an as Literature and Culture*. Boston: Brill, 2009.
- Sasson, Jack. "Esther." In *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, edited by Robert Alter and Frank Kermode. London: Fortuna Press, 1987.
- Screnock, John. "Reading Esther in the Levantine Literary Tradition." *BIBLICA* 100:3 (2019), 321–38.
- Silverstein, Adam. "The Book of Esther and the 'Enūma Elish'." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 69:2 (2006), 209–23.
- Smith-Christopher, Daniel. "Sleeping with the Enemy? Reading Esther and Judith as Comfort Women." *Women and Exilic Identity in the Hebrew Bible*, edited by Katherine Southwood and Martien A. Halvorson-Taylor. New York: T&T Clark, 2017.
- Song, Angeline. "Heartless Bimbo or Subversive Role Model?: A Narrative (Self) Critical Reading of the Character of Esther." *Dialog* 49 (2010), 56–69.
- Starr, Raymond J. "Reading aloud: *Lectores* and Roman Reading." *Classical Journal* 86 (1991), 337–43.
- Stern, Elsie R. "Esther and the Politics of Diaspora." *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100:1 (2010), 25–53.
- Wetter, Anne-Mareike. *On her Account: Reconfiguring Israel in Ruth, Esther, and Judith*. New York: T&T Clark, 2015.
- Wyler, Bea. In *A Feminist companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, edited by Athalya Brenner-Idan. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995.
- Yoder, Christine R. *Wisdom as a Woman of Substance: a Socioeconomic Reading of Proverbs 1-9 and 31:10-31*. New York: W. de Gruyter, 2001.