

Summary Doctoral Dissertation
“Theological Themes in the Book of Esther”
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Introduction

Compared with the other canonical books of the Old Testament, the Book of Esther, in the Hebrew version, has a peculiar theological profile, which involves the omission of the name of God and the absence of the most important religious elements mentioned in other Old Testament writings except fasting. In addition, sometimes the Book of Esther is thought to have a nationalistic, even chauvinistic character and to display overt hostility towards the Gentiles. Another element which gives the book its peculiar character is the feast of Purim. This not only is missing from the list of festivals commanded in the law, but seems to be the celebration of the victory which Jews had over their enemies, a victory achieved at the expense of many lives (Est. 9.12, 15, 16). Taking into account these aspects, we might be led to believe that the scroll of Esther, as the book has been known in the Hebrew tradition, has a purely secular character.

All these elements that intrigue the reader at first sight are in themselves sufficient to justify a fresh study on the Book of Esther, a study which aims to highlight its message. Through our research, we intend to call into question the false labels affixed to the book and shed new light on its theological message. A fresh analysis of the book is all the more necessary, since a cursory glance at the relevant literature reveals that within the Romanian scholarship devoted to the Old Testament the Book of Esther usually occupies an insignificant place. To our knowledge, in the last two decades in Romania, there was only a single scientific study written on the Book of Esther. Although rigorously documented, the study refers only incidentally to the theology of the book.

The weak interest which researchers have shown to the Book of Esther is probably due to the little liturgical use of this book in the Romanian churches. If Protestant and Evangelical churches only rarely make homiletic use of the book, Esther is not used at all in the Orthodox Church (not even for the public reading of excerpts taken from the Septuagintal tradition). Whenever ministers do preach from this book, they interpret it allegorically or semi-allegorically.

For these reasons, in this dissertation we aim not only to bring the Book of Esther back to the attention of the Romanian scientific theological community, but also to the attention of the churches, in an attempt to mend the injustice done to this book, which has come to occupy an undeserved marginal place not only in research, but also in the life of the church. We believe that, in order to achieve this goal, we will have to identify and

articulate the theological message of the Book of Esther, thus eliminating the prejudice with which the book is usually met.

We should take note that our research begins from the premise that the theological meaning of the Book of Esther emerges from a simultaneous analysis of the historical context of the book and of the literary one. If in the past researchers have mainly focused on the historicity of the book, seeking to understand “what really happened”, currently they usually focus on the book’s literary features, in order to see “how the narrative functions”. We believe that an interpretation that omits either of these two dimensions is unbalanced and may lead to erroneous conclusions.

Chapter 1: The Book of Esther in the history of the Old Testament canon

The paradoxical lack of God’s name and the absence of religious elements have long intrigued scholars, prompting some to question the presence of the Book of Esther in the Old Testament canon. However, as part of the Holy Scriptures, the Book of Esther enjoys the status of the Word of God, whose author is ultimately God himself, the creator and lord of Israel’s history. Canonization has bestowed upon the Book of Esther the same status enjoyed by the other narratives of the Bible which contain the sacred history of Israel. Following this process, the book itself became a source which reveals the divine will manifested in the events of history.

Given the considerations mentioned above, we have deemed it necessary to examine the process of canonization of the Book of Esther. By this process we will trace the moment in which the book was accepted into the canon, we will highlight the theological (and ideological) reasons which led to its canonization and the reception it enjoyed at different times. For an objective presentation of the factors which led to the canonization of the Book of Esther, we have given attention first to the relevant ancient sources and to various studies on this subject. The issue was examined diachronically and set against the larger background of the Old Testament canon formation, taking into account especially the canonization process of its final section – The Writings – of which Esther is a part, according to the Hebrew tradition. Therefore, for each step of the canonization process we have supplied specific information which is relevant and useful for the explanation of the process leading to the inclusion of the Book of Esther in the Hebrew canon.

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Chapter 2: Historicity, authorship and dating of the Book of Esther

Any initiative to study the historicity of the Book of Esther is both legitimate and necessary, because the Book of Esther presents itself as having a historic character. A proof in this sense is the use of formulas encountered in the historical books of the Bible. In addition, the only document which gives testimony about the Purim feast is the Book of Esther, and if the historicity of the events on which Purim was founded could not be proven, this holiday would lose some of its power or would even be meaningless among the other Jewish festivals.

It is important to be aware that the historicity of the Book of Esther was not called into question until the 18th century. Beginning with the Enlightenment and up to the present, the subject of historicity was intensely debated. As a result, the Book of Esther came to be evaluated by critics with much skepticism as one of the least credible stories in the Bible.

For these reasons, in the second chapter of our work we will focus on the historicity of the Book of Esther. We will first identify the main perspectives on historicity, and then we will offer a brief chronology of the Persian Empire, in order to establish from the outset a chronological framework. Thirdly, we will give attention to the characters of the Book of Esther and to the Persian context as suggested by the book, in order to see whether, and to what extent, the data contained in the book can be harmonized with extra-biblical sources. In taking this approach, we will describe the historical context of the Book of Esther, which is important not only for its credibility (truthfulness), but also for the correct interpretation of its message. Finally, in this chapter we will identify the elements pertaining to the authorship and dating of the Book of Esther, by relying on the internal and external evidence available.

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Chapter 3: Important textual versions of the Book of Esther

In this section we present the main text versions of the Book of Esther. We will not be able to analyze each of them in detail, given the fact that the required space for such a task would greatly exceed the one assigned to this work. Therefore, we will confine ourselves to a cursory presentation of each version: the Masoretic text of the Book of Esther, the Aramaic and the Greek versions, respectively (LXX - text B and AT – the Alpha text). At the end of this chapter the reader can find an excursus which surveys the reception of the Book of Esther in Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*. The purpose of this section is to highlight the particularities of each textual version of the Book of Esther, in order to see how the MT was understood and adapted by its translators.

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Chapter 4: The theology of the Book of Esther and the rhetorical strategies used to articulate it

1. Chapter 4 starts with a preliminary section which discusses the theological (religious) character of Book of Esther, beginning from the well-established idea of those who think that this writing is the expression of a secular perspective. The omission of the name of God, doubled by the lack of other theological elements (except fasting) encountered in the other books of the Old Testament (Est. 4.3,16), as well as the lack of OT virtues such as love, kindness, mercy, accompanied by the presence of vengeance, of a thirst for blood, of a chauvinistic spirit and of virulent hostility towards the Gentiles, are the causes which lead some scholars to doubt the religious character of the Book of Esther.

Following the investigation developed in this preliminary subchapter, we discover that the author fully integrates the Book of Esther within the sacred tradition of Israel, without promoting an unethical or xenophobic nationalistic agenda. The omissions which are often invoked in order to question the theological character of the Book of Esther are meant to “hide” the theology of the book. We can therefore speak of a theology of the book, but its character is not explicit but rather implicit, a situation which we no longer meet in the other books of the Old Testament.

2. The Book of Esther is a “narrated history”. In literary terms, it belongs to the epic genre, therefore in order to convey its own theological message, it makes use of various literary devices (which we will highlight in the last part of this chapter). Thus, in the second section of the fourth chapter, we will first attend to the reasons which motivate us to speak of “narrated history” in connection with the Book of Esther. It should be stated first that the phrase “narrated history” highlights an important aspect: the Book of Esther narrates real events, not imaginary ones, but in narrative form, because the story is a genre easy to grasp by most people, it has immediate and powerful effects. Secondly, the phrase suggests that, under the direct guidance of the Holy Spirit, the biblical authors have used all means of communication (story, dialogue, description, etc.) usually encountered in narrative art in order to emphasize the true meaning of events, allowing readers to take some practical decisions regarding their relationship with God.

We also show that in determining the character of the Book of Esther scholars often begin from false premises which often distorts the discussions about the nature of the book, suggesting that it should be read either as wisdom literature, or as a work with historical

character or simply as a narrative without other implications. We believe that the author's literary skill and the use of motifs taken from wisdom literature should not be set at odds with the historicity of the narrative (the presence of specific wisdom literature themes does not invalidate the historical foundation of the book). In other words, the fact that Esther, as historical narrative, is skillfully crafted in literary terms should not lead us necessarily to the conclusion that its details are false or invented.

We must keep in mind that in antiquity history was narrated or retold, furthermore, works of history had a certain "literary flavor" meant to motivated readers or listeners to take appropriate decisions from a moral, patriotic, aesthetic etc. point of view. Therefore, the fact that the author of the Book of Esther gave his writing a literary "flavor", in order to make it more captivating, should not come as a surprise.

The importance of narrated history for the communication process is highlighted by the two effects it produces. First, a narrated story has the ability to build and define relationships. What we mean by this is that stories about ourselves or about others mediate to a large extent our knowledge of each other. From a biblical point of view, biblical stories, such as the Book of Esther, which have been written under the guidance of God, reveal God to us by revealing "the story of God", which is a prerequisite if we want to establish a relationship with Him. Secondly, a narrated history has the power to change people's lives, as they come to identify with it. Each community, each nation defines itself, at least in part, by means of shared stories. "Narrated histories" found in the Holy Scripture are meant to lead us to a relationship with God and define us as the people of God, if we accept them as being our own.

On the other hand, like any narrated history, the Book of Esther is an interpretation of past events, an interpretation whose clear purpose is to highlight the true meaning of the facts found in the book. This interpretive element has been embedded in the Book of Esther in two ways. First, by selecting and including the material which the author has deemed relevant for his purpose. Second, by the way in which he has expounded his material, using literary and rhetorical strategies relevant for his contemporaries.

3. The Book of Esther is both narrated history and the Word of God as part of the Old Testament canon. Given this dual nature of the book, the identification and correct assessment of its theological message is based largely on a good knowledge of the literary features of the book, because its theology is conveyed to us by means of rhetorical strategies.

Literary techniques used in the Book of Esther are: irony, peripety and recurring motifs. The purpose of these devices is to help the reader grasp the true meaning of the events narrated in the Book of Esther. Thus, in the last section of the fourth chapter of our work we will analyze and highlight these techniques and their theological role.

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Chapter 5: God and the human factor in the Book of Esther

1. The first part of Chapter 5 analyzes and highlights the way in which the person of God and His work are reflected in the Book of Esther. First, in this first section we will show that the omission of God’s name does not have an “accidental” character, but a premeditated one. This lack is part of the rhetoric of the text. The author would have had many occasions in which he could have insert the name of God or alluded to the person of God, but he chose not to do so. We reach this conclusion after analyzing verses such as 2.9, 5.2, (where the terms dsx, and lxe are used), 4.3, 16, (which fasting is mentioned), 4.14 (which the phrase rxæ; ~AqMmi occurs, showing the author’s faith in Providence), 8.17, 9.2, 10.3, (where various intertextual references and allusions appear: the fear of Hebrews, the people of Mordecai, “and he spoke peace for all his descendants”), 2.5, 6 (verses which show that the author of Esther is well acquainted with “Israel’s history of salvation”). These passages give the book a religious flavor and show that the author deliberately avoided religious terminology, even when the context would have required its use.

Second, we will try to identify the reasons for which, in our opinion, the author chose to omit God's name, despite the religious language used in the book. Research on this topic led us to conclude that the deliberate omission of God's name is meant to emphasize that the Diaspora represents a universe situated outside the "borders" of the will of God, since the Jews who refused repatriation after the edict of Cyrus the Great have stepped out of the plan God had for the land of Israel. At the same time, the absence of God's name in the Book of Esther construes the Diaspora as a space devoid of the direct presence of God.

Thirdly, we show that the presence of God in the Book of Esther is manifested by the providential survival of the Jewish people, which Haman wanted to annihilate. Even if God is not mentioned, given the context of the intrinsic link between God and the Jewish people (Est. 2.5, 5.13, 6.13, 9.29, 9.31, 10.3), He is alongside his people anywhere, even in the Diaspora (Est. 9). As we know, survival is due to a providential change in the situation, despite the fact that the fate of the people seems to be permanently sealed (Est. 3.7-15, 8.8, 17, 9.1-2). We will also emphasize the limited nature of human power, an aspect which the Book of Esther clearly shows, whether we refer to Ahasuerus or to Haman. The book strongly emphasizes the idea that above humans there is a spiritual force infinitely superior who, by using various means, does not allow the wicked to have their own way.

In the last two chapters of this section we highlight the indirect character of God's work, which is manifested in the Book of Esther through peripeties and coincidences and which has a manifestly mysterious character. These features of the work of God, as highlighted by the Book of Esther, are not restricted to it, but can be found in other Old Testament narratives.

2. The last part of Chapter 5 of our work investigates the way in which the human factor and its actions are depicted in the Book of Esther. At this level, our research shows that in the Book of Esther the divine factor and the human factor are not mutually exclusive, nor are they stationed on conflicting positions. Rather, they coexist in a close complementary relationship. At the foundation of the salvation of the Jews lie both God's mysterious work and the effort undertaken by Mordecai and Esther. In the universe portrayed by the Book of Esther, the cooperation between the divine and the human factor is quite natural (as it is in Ezra 6.19-22). This perspective is not at all theologically problematic, even though it is different from the one promoted by other Old Testament books (such as Genesis).

In the Book of Esther, the main purpose of the Jewish protagonists' actions is to show as clear as possible that they have chosen, in the most practical way possible, that is, by their actions, to identify with God's covenant, even if this option was ultimately determined only by the dire circumstances in which they found themselves. The practical identification, on the heroes' part, with God's covenant equals a "conversion" which, in our opinion, makes possible to divine intervention on behalf of the Jews in the Persian

Diaspora. In this sense, the Book of Esther says in an indirect fashion that human actions become useful to the divine cause only when men prove their allegiance to the covenant (by assuming their own ethnic identity) and act on its behalf (a fact which derives from the first and which is practical proof that the heroes effectively appropriated their own Jewishness). With a view specifically to Esther's experience, we conclude that it reflects the experience of the entire Jewish community living in the Persian Diaspora. The threat of annihilation makes the heroine abandon hiding in the Diaspora, along with all the other "secular" Jews, forcing them to identify with God's covenant and reaffirm their ethnicity and religion. This, in turn, will bring the long sought deliverance.

In addition, the actions undertaken by Mordecai and Esther articulate in a special way the human responsibility in saving the Jews from the threat which looms over them. The example set by the two Jewish protagonists of the book illustrates the role each man has in the places which were assigned by Providence, namely the role and responsibility to work for the welfare of his people without sparing any effort for this goal. Once accepted and assumed, this position transforms man as an agent of God working together with and for God. Therefore, every Jew who professes to be faithful to his own national state is under obligation to act so as to change the course of events in a positive way, hence stopping the spread of evil. He must actively express his loyalty to his own people, an action which equals to casting his lot with the people of which he is a member. On the other hand, this situation necessarily involves the admission that God works in history on behalf of his people. Consequently, at some point in history a Jew might express his loyalty to God indirectly, that is, by proving loyal to his own people. Neutrality is not an option – given that the lack of involvement is always fatal to those who choose it, even though salvation eventually comes from another place.

Finally, the Book of Esther clarifies the fact that, according to the example set by Mordecai and Esther, loyalty to the community must take precedence over obedience to civil law. The fate of the Jews in the Diaspora changes only when the two have acted contrary to the specifications of the royal law, by being ready to accept unreservedly the consequences of this fact. If the Jew living in the Diaspora finds himself in a difficult situation created by the impossibility to reconcile loyalty to his own people with his allegiance to the king of Persia, he will have to ignore the latter, if the fate of his people is endangered. If it be necessary, he should disobey the civil law, therefore in this case this disobedience is "holy". Also, in order to overcome any crisis, the personal commitment of every Jew is particularly important for the community to which he belongs. Consciously or unconsciously, every Jew must break the law and sacrifice personal safety to safeguard the welfare of the community. Otherwise, the danger becomes impossible to contain.

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Chapter 6: Jewish Identity in the Persian Diaspora, according to the Book of Esther

1. Chapter 6 consists of two sections. The first section aims to discover the theological implications of the dynamics of the Jewish identity in the Book of Esther. Therefore, in this first section I shall review first those passages which refer to ethnic origin of Mordecai, Esther and the Jewish people (Est. 2.5-7, 10, 3.2-8, 4.13-14, 7.3-4, 8.17).

Also in this section, I shall highlight the theological implications of these references to the ethnic identity of the Hebrew characters of the book. First, following this approach, we discover that by mentioning the ethnic identity of Mordecai and Esther, directly from the beginning of the Book of Esther, the two Hebrew protagonists, as representatives of the Jewish Diaspora, are integrated into the sacred history of Israel. Their ethnic origin indicates that their duty is to live according to their Jewishness, keeping God's covenant and submitting to His will. Their non-Jewish name, with obvious pagan overtones, especially in the case of Mordecai, in a context which makes mention of their ethnic background, suggests that Diaspora Jews have assimilated the Babylonian lifestyle (we could talk about a process of acculturation), which made them remain there, and thus voluntarily situate themselves out of the will of God.

Secondly, the advice which Mordecai gives to Esther, that she should conceal her ethnic identity, after her election into the imperial harem, was determined, most likely, by

the fact that most Jews perceived the Diaspora as a hostile “space”. The concealment of ethnic identity, against the background of God hiding himself, is telling in itself. It shows that Jews have to resort to extreme measures, such as hiding their identity. Because God is hiding from the Jews in the Diaspora, they, in turn, are forced to conceal their identity, due to the hostility of the environment in which they live.

We are not wrong if we assume that it was precisely concealing her identity which brought Esther in a position to violate the law of God: living at the court of the Persian king, the heroine must break the food stipulations in the law and conform to the pagan customs.

Because Esther is a symbol of the entire Jewish community in Persia, her gesture (concealing her identity) seems to reflect both the “secular” character of the Diaspora and the identity crisis of her compatriots, a crisis which the author of the Book of Esther only suggests. Therefore, God hides Himself from his people in the Diaspora, given the fact that Esther also, as a symbol of the whole Jewish Diaspora, rejects His will and hides her own identity, following the advice given by Mordecai.

Thirdly, the ascension of Haman to the rank of great vizier is used by Providence to awaken the dormant conscience of those who belong to the Jewish nation. When Mordecai is required to bow before Haman, and thus follow the command of the king, Mordecai refuses to comply. What prevented him from doing that gesture was precisely his ethnicity. The consequence is that, injured in his egocentrism, Haman now wants to destroy all the Jews in the Diaspora and thus destroy Mordecai. The charges he presents to Ahasuerus, although biased, contain an element of truth in them, namely that the Jewish people have their own law. It is God’s covenant, that element which in the Diaspora is the only source of identity for the Jewish people, the element through which the latter truly becomes God’s people, a people different and separate from all the other peoples. If the Diaspora Jews have forgotten this aspect, it is ironic that precisely their enemy, Haman, is the one to remind them that they should have a law – the law of Moses, a law which defines them in terms of identity and according to which they must live (Est. 3.8).

The Diaspora is characterized by much hostility, and Esther, upon arrival at the king’s court, will have to hide their ethnic identity, following Mordecai’s advice. Haman’s decree will compel Mordecai to ask Esther to reconsider her decision and intervene, pleading with the king for her people and thus rescue them from the threat that looms over them. Thus, hostile circumstances have forced Esther to (re)define herself in terms of identity, perhaps in spite of her wishes. The heroine is faced with a capital decision: taking her ethnicity in earnest, and thus identify with God’s covenant, or deny her own identity and adopt the pagan lifestyle which dominates Ahasuerus’ court.

Fourth, by the episode in which non-Jews convert to Judaism, the author of the book demonstrates once again to the Jews in the Diaspora that loyalty to the covenant and

obedience to God's will are the best weapons with which they can withstand the perils which come upon them, even when life in the Diaspora has atrophied their national and religious consciousness. They should know that only the open assertion of their national and religious identity, which they had concealed or which they had previously denied, will bring deliverance. This idea is illustrated very ironically by the conversion to Judaism of some people of the country.

2. The second section of Chapter 6 is meant to highlight the theological significance of the Diaspora, as it is portrayed in the Book of Esther. The first image of the Diaspora, in the Book of Esther, is that of a secularized world, at the outskirts of the Jewish world. It can be argued that both the omission of God's name, as well as the lack of explicit references to the religious life of the Jews in the Diaspora, although being striking aspects of the Book of Esther, are a part of the rhetorical strategy used by the author to convey the idea that the Diaspora is a space dominated by "secularism", whose inhabitants neglect God. These omissions are meant to describe the Diaspora without saying anything about the nature and the work of God. In fact, the omission of God's name does not indicate the absence of God in an absolute sense, but rather His "hiding", since where the people of God are, there also is God.

Thus we see along with highlighting the "secularism" of the Diaspora and of the fact that God is neglected by the Jews living there, the omission of God's name in the Book of Esther and the lack of any explicit references to religious life are due to the fact that the Jewish Diaspora, leading its existence outside the Holy Land, is actually at the outskirts of the Jewish postexilic world. The Diaspora Jews, represented by Esther and Mordecai, live in a world whose center is not in the Holy Land, but at Susa, a city ruled by Ahasuerus (Est. 1:1-2). The idea that the Jews of the Diaspora live in a world which does not revolve around Jerusalem, is highlighted by the author of the book by way of many details about the splendor of the Persian imperial court, in the first chapter (Est. 1.3-8). The book fails to say anything about the temple, while Jerusalem is mentioned only in passing, in a short biographical note (Est. 2.5-6).

Such a "space", which however does not include God, is not favorable to the flourishing of the Jews, but rather is hostile to them. Therefore, the existence of Jews in this "space" is under a real and continuous threat, a fact which of course causes them much anxiety. Jews must hide their identity (Est. 2.10, 20) or bear the consequences of asserting it (Est. 3.4-6). The hostility associated with life in the Diaspora is not meant to make the Jews live continuously under threat, but to call it to their attention that they need to rediscover (or redefine) their identity in relation to God's covenant (something which Esther eventually did). This in turn will of course ensure their survival, both individually and as a nation.

A second image of the Diaspora, according to the Book of Esther, is that of a universe subject to the will of the king. As a periphery of the Jewish postexilic world, the Diaspora has at its center King Ahasuerus, not God. It does not revolve around God, but rather is oriented towards the capricious (and easy to manipulate) will of the king. The episode narrated in Est. 1.10-22 is particularly suggestive of this. It clearly demonstrates that the Diaspora, as part of the Persian Empire, whose absolute master is Ahasuerus, is a universe in which the king's will acquires almost instantaneously the status of law and in which the king's desire is often tantamount to his whims (Est. 1.12) or his own fancies (Est. 1.21). But the biggest problems of the Diaspora do not stem out of the fact that the laws issued by Ahasuerus sometimes reflect his own whims and caprices. Rather, that they stem from the obvious intention of Ahasuerus to subjugate the will of his subjects and from the fact that, by refusing to think for himself, the king is unable to make decisions on his own and is easily manipulated by those in his close proximity. Consequently, in many cases his laws no longer reflect his will, but that of his servants and councilors. Thus, both Memucan and Haman, can each transform their desires into imperial laws, without encountering any opposition whatsoever.

It should so be said that the legislative status of the Diaspora, a space dominated by the will of the emperor, is characterized by instability and conflicting changes, caused, of course, by the wishes of those in the emperor's entourage (Memucan – ch. 1, the servants of the emperor – ch. 2, Haman – ch. 3, 5, Esther and Mordecai – ch. 5, 7-9). At the same time, these changes are not durable; rather, their effects are temporary, despite the repeated references to the irrevocable character of the royal law (Est. 8.8). Although King Ahasuerus has all the public and political power, he does not seem able to confer stability to his policy. It is noteworthy that he who opens the door for these changes at the political level, changes which sometimes are dramatic and antagonistic, is precisely the king, with his unstable personality. We can therefore conclude with relative certainty that no written law can guarantee the legal stability of his reign, because every written decree, always claiming to be irrevocable and universal, is inevitably followed by another one which amends it or bypasses it.

The third picture of the Diaspora, according to the Book of Esther, is that of a place in which the lost Jewish identity can be regained. The unfaithfulness of the Jewish people in relation to covenant has been repeatedly followed by divine punishment. The climax of this punishment and, at the same time of the "divine lesson", is the uprooting of the Jews from the land of their ancestors and their deportation to a foreign country (Deut. 28.63-64). Exile is associated with shame (Deut. 28.37), because it involves the loss of the country and of the temple. At the same time, the Diaspora, as an extension of exile, has inherited this shame as a consequence of people's refusal to repatriate. By contrast, the repatriates have wiped the shame of exile, returning to the land of their ancestors, "rebuilding the city and the temple

and restoring the official worship required by the cult of Yahweh". And because, "in the ancient world, separation from the country, the temple and the monarchy equals to a separation from the source of identity", repatriation, with all its implications, is equivalent to a recovery of this source of identity.

In light of these considerations, the idea that the Esther scroll extends an invitation to the Diaspora Jews to rediscover God's covenant - their sole source of identity – is not inappropriate. We know that living outside the covenant prevented the Jews in the Diaspora to repatriate. The return to their land was not a priority for them, and this lack of interest endangered their very existence. Also, the variability and ambiguity of the imperial power seems, at first sight, to put pressure on the Diaspora Jews to conceal their identity, as a prerequisite for survival. In fact, things are somewhat different, because hiding their ethnic (and religious) identity does not ensure survival, but rather works towards their annihilation. By contrast, assuming their identity, which in the Book of Esther equates with a return to the covenant of God and then with taking action on behalf of the Diaspora Jews (following the example set by Mordecai and Esther), will bring release from the danger brought on by Haman's edict.

Consequently, we believe that the purpose of the Book of Esther is to convey to the Jews in the Diaspora both a call and a warning, urging them to rediscover (or redefine) their identity in light of God's covenant. At the same time, in God's mysterious plan, the hostility of the Diaspora is simply a means by which the Diaspora Jews are forced to rediscover themselves as the people of God and live in conformity with God's covenant.

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Chapter 7: The Feast of Purim and its theological significance

Chapter 7 is devoted to identifying the theological meaning of the feast of Purim, the origin of which is associated with the events described in the Book of Esther. In this

chapter we will focus primarily on Esther 9.20-32, a passage which discusses to the establishment of Purim as a feast. Our main goal is to identify the theological meaning of this event, according to the Book of Esther. We discover that Purim is different from the other festivals, because it does not arise out of a divine command. He who asks Jews from all over the empire to celebrate the feast of Purim is Mordecai. Thus, the Purim is added to the other holidays established by God in the law, through his servant Moses. But before being formally established by the commandment of Mordecai, and recorded in his letters, the feast of Purim was celebrated spontaneously by the Jews in Susa and all over the Persian Diaspora (Est. 9.18-19). Once established, according to Mordecai decision, this feast was to be held every year, on the 14th and 15th of Adar.

In order to find out the theological significance of Purim, we have to analyze the most relevant passages: Est. 9.22 and Est. 9.23-28. Verse 22 of the Est. 9 is not only a summary of the events underlying the establishment of Purim. It has obvious theological significance. According to its meaning, at Purim Jews celebrate the rest they have received upon the elimination of the evil which had threatened them. Thus, on this occasion Jews do not celebrate the destruction of their enemies, but the rest which gave them the leisure to unite again as one people and live again as Jews. This fact implies, rightly, a revival of their national and religious consciousness. Est. 9.23-28 not only emphasizes the commitment of the Jews to celebrate the Purim, year after year, from generation to generation, according to the commandment of Mordecai, but it also makes clear that events are not governed by chance or the will of the gods, but by God, who is actually behind the history of Israel.

Secondly, in the last chapter of our work, we focus on the fact that letters written by Mordecai and Esther (mentioned in Est. 9) stipulate the requirements for the celebration of Purim, which must be respected by every Jew. We can speak of four "canons" of the Purim holiday, by which the event is defined as a festival in a biblical sense, that is, with an essentially religious character: i) Purim is given a perpetual and all-embracing character; it is to be held by all Jews from all generations (Est. 9.21, 27, 29, 31, 32); ii) the Feast of Purim is assigned a date when all Jews must celebrate it; the "appointed time" (Est. 9.31) corresponds to the 14th and 15th of Adar (Est. 9.17-19); iii) Moreover, the feast is supposed to be celebrated in a certain manner: the chosen days should be "days of feasting and joy" par excellence (cf. Num. 23.40, Deut. 12.12, 16.11-14), for sorrow was turned to joy (Est. 9.22) and because Purim does not celebrate victory over the enemies of Israel, but the rest which Jews had, when they were "rid of their enemies" (Est. 9.22). Mordecai and Esther's letters clarify this aspect, equating the survival of the people with a state of "rest" which must be interpreted as elimination of the peril. The defeat of the enemy is not taken into the account at the celebration; therefore the Purim feast is devoid of any nationalist or chauvinistic component. (iv) The last "canon" of the feast of Purim, recorded in letters included in the last chapter of the book (Est. 9.26, 27, 32), binds the Jews to keeping the

feast according to the written instructions (Est. 9:26). The festival must always comply with the written record of the events narrated in Chapters 1-8, to which the letters of Mordecai and Esther are appended.

Thirdly, we discover that the feast of Purim is meant to integrate the Book of Esther into the sacred tradition of Israel. The passage in Est. 9.20-32 gives the book a “normative” profile. We understand, therefore, that the ordinances established in Mordecai and Esther’s letters were written in the book (probably in the first version of the Book of Esther) with a precise purpose, namely to make it “normative scripture”. We can talk about a “canonical halo” which takes shape around the Book of Esther. Thus, from the theological point of view, the narrative acquires a special meaning because “Purim must (...) (be) interpreted in the context of Israel’s existence, which is a thoroughly religious one” (“the sacred tradition of Israel”).

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Excursus: The reception of the theology of the Hebrew version of the Book of Esther in the LXX

In the Greek text of the Book of Esther we encounter a refashioning of the MT according to the pattern supplied by biblical postexilic books such as Ezra, Nehemiah and Daniel, which are “Persian histories.” The Greek text contains several additional passages (the so-called “additions”) which explicitly see God behind all key events. These additions do not add supplementary information, as compared with what we already encounter in the “Masoretic narrative”. Their function is to make explicit what the “happy coincidences” of the Hebrew text state implicitly, without giving the Book of Esther a religious character, which apparently is missing in the MT. Conforming the Book of Esther to the character of postexilic literature is achieved by using the additions which narrate Mordecai’s dream and its interpretation (additions A and F) and by explicitly highlighting the religious concerns and outlooks of both Mordecai and Esther. Thus, the Book of Esther is transformed into an ideal narrative, which not only records the divine deliverance or the cooperation between the divine and the human factors, but also offers advice regarding the way in which a Jew should live in religious terms, in a foreign land or in a crisis situation. The similarity between the Greek version of the Book of Esther and the canonical postexilic books is increased also by the two edicts, that of Haman and that of Mordecai (additions B and E).

In the Septuagint version, the Book of Esther, refashioned after the pattern of a "Persian history" maintains unaltered its rhetoric directed against the Diaspora. In this case too, the Diaspora is a "space" hostile to the Jews. The Ptolemaic Egypt is particularly in view, but also, apart from Palestine, the whole Mediterranean space inhabited by Jews, a region which, at the moment when the Book of Esther was being translated, was under a strong Hellenistic influence. For this reason, the translator of the Book of Esther "updates" the ethnicity of the enemy of the Jews in the Diaspora, making it suitable to a new context: the enemy of the Jews is not longer "Haman the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite", an Amalekite (1Sam. 15), but "Aman the son of Amadathes, a Macedonian" (E:12k, Est. 9.24).

The pattern used to identify Haman, in the LXX version of Esther, corresponds to the pattern encountered in some Greek papyri discovered in Egypt (wills, contracts, petitions, etc.), in which each person is identified by name, patronymic and ethnic origin. And because the Ptolemies, that is the members of the ruling dynasty of Hellenistic Egypt, kept their title as Macedonians, we understand that by turning Haman into a Macedonian the translator of the Book of Esther was actually alluding to members of the Ptolemaic dynasty, who, in their double capacity as sovereigns of Egypt and promoters of Hellenism, would have been hostile to the Jews in certain circumstances.

Also, by turning Haman into a Macedonian (E:12k, East. 9.24), the translator of the Book of Esther probably intended to give Haman's hostility towards the Jews a religious motivation: Haman, being a Macedonian, that is, a supporter and promoter of Hellenism (as were all the Ptolemies), is intent upon eradicating Judaism. This change in Haman's ethnic identity "updates" the message of the Book of Esther, suggesting that there could be one Haman for each generation of Jews, regardless of their placement in the Diaspora (Persia or Egypt). In an implicit way, this "updating" which the translator makes in the Book of Esther is intended to help Jews in the Diaspora to become aware that Haman is not ultimately their most fearsome enemy, but rather Hellenism, which is the ideological engine of Haman's actions.

By upgrading thus the message of the Book of Esther, the translator succeeds, indeed, to raise the consciousness of the Jewish inhabitants of Egypt's Diaspora with regard to the fact that they live in an environment which is utterly unfavorable to Judaism, one in which they will have to face the hostility of Hellenistic paganism, if they truly want to preserve uncorrupted their own national and religious identity. The survival of the Jews in such an environment will be safeguarded to them only if they do not betray their national and religious identity, if they continue to live as Jews, despite the threats which they receive, if they comply with the demands of the covenant with God (cf. Chapter 4 and the addition C – the Prayer of Mordecai and the Prayer of Esther/C17x-y).

Conclusions

Through our study, which does not ignore previous research, reflected in several articles and scientific studies (especially in the English-speaking world), we offer a contemporary point of view and a new direction in the contemporary theological interpretation of the Book of Esther, a perspective which takes into account its canonical character, its historical context, its textual traditions and its main literary features. Although we cannot claim to have exhausted the subject, we believe that our approach leads to the following conclusions.

1) (a) Both the absence of God's name, and the apparently non-religious character of the Book of Esther have continuously raised questions about the presence of the book in the Old Testament canon. Despite these questions, the canonicity of the book has remained intact, but its status is not confined to the simple fact of belonging to the OT canon, but expresses the fact that, in terms of theological thought, the Book of Esther is compatible with the teaching of the OT, which it also enriches. Therefore, we cannot speak of a biblical theology of the OT, if we ignore the Book of Esther, as is often done. At the same time, canonicity ascribes to the Book of Esther the status as the word of God and that Esther becomes a writing which has its own theological message, one that of course, is to be interpreted in a canonical manner, not otherwise.

(b) analyzing the historicity of the Book of Esther has been necessary because the book itself claims this quality and because we have deemed it appropriate that in formulating its theology, whose character is implicit, we should start by necessity precisely by delineating the historical context claimed by the book. The veracity of the theological message of the Book of Esther is based on the historical reality of space and time coordinates.

First, the research we have conducted reveals the high degree of affinity and harmonization between the extra-biblical sources and the Book of Esther. This led us to the belief that the book has an obvious historical character. The author wrote the book sometime between the end of the fifth century BC and the beginning of the fourth century, that is, very close to the reign of Xerxes, a temporal proximity which explains the author's good knowledge about the Persian milieu. Moreover, the author's proximity to the epoch of the events described makes the resulting text all the more credible in the eyes of the recipients. We should add here a caveat: the text of the Book of Esther should not be evaluated by using the criteria applied to modern historiography, since no other ancient work with historical claims can be classified in this category.

Once we have established the hermeneutic framework within which the book must be read, we can summarize the following aspects: (i) the Book of Esther is a biblical narrative with a historical character, or, rather, a trustworthy "narrated history". (ii) It can be considered a historical source about the events it describes. It goes without saying that in

describing the events the author selected and summarized only those historical details which he considered relevant, leaving aside other information. (iii) The Book of Esther records not merely historical facts, but God's intervention itself on behalf of His people, in a particular historical context. Therefore, as biblical (that is, canonical) narrative, historically trustworthy, its message is meant to reinforce the hope of readers in God's saving intervention in favor of the elect, both at present and in the future: just as God intervened in the past on behalf of his people, so He will deliver them from now on from the danger that comes from its enemies.

According to our analysis, the context claimed by the Book of Esther is the epoch of Xerxes' reign. Thus, the Book of Esther is not a description of the Babylonian exile, but a story about the life of the Jewish community in Persian Diaspora consisting of those Jews which had not returned to the land of their ancestors after the decree of Cyrus the Great. This fact cannot be ignored by those who attempt to articulate the theology of the Book of Esther.

2. Consequently, the Book of Esther is not simply a wisdom work, because every ancient historical work had also a moralizing character. It is a narrated history, like any other ancient works of history. This would be the first reason why the author made use, in the process of writing, of all literary devices he could use (irony, peripety, coincidences, recurring motifs and terms, doublets), wishing to make it attractive and theologically relevant. The literary conventions used by the author determine the implicit character of the theology the book contains. This means that, if we do not take into account the literary conventions, we will not be able to interpret the theology of the book in a correct manner, even if we reconstruct its historical context properly. The ultimate aim of the book is the revelation of God's will, so that its readers could (re)enter into relationship with Him. As narrated history, the book has the power to change people's lives, as they identify themselves with it. At the same time, like any other narrated history, the Book of Esther should be also seen as an interpretation of what happened, with a plain purpose of highlighting the true meaning of the events described in the book.

3. The Book of Esther has a marked religious character. Scholars who dispute the religious character of the book and point to the alleged nationalist and chauvinistic spirit of the book (citing as argument the apparent hostility of the Jews towards the Gentiles) do so without any basis. Our analysis shows unequivocally that the aforementioned issues are not part of the core of the book. Omitting God's name or the absence of any reference to the religious life of the Jews living in the Diaspora are not in themselves defining features of the Book of Esther. Rather, these "omissions" are used to talk about the state of the inhabitants of the Diaspora people and not about the nature and person of God or about the nature of the book.

4. Omitting God's name and the lack of any reference to the religious life of Jews living in the Diaspora people are intentional acts and have a rhetorical nature. They are designed to delegitimize or discredit the Diaspora in the eyes of readers of the book Esther. In this way, the Diaspora is portrayed as a "secularized" universe devoid of God's direct presence. In other words, the Diaspora is a space which does not fall within the perimeter of the divine will. On the one hand, the placement of the Diaspora outside God's will was caused by the refusal of the Jews to repatriate themselves, a refusal which is caused by their cultural assimilation and conformity to customs of the area. The Murashu Tablets suggests just this: the generation which came after the restoration has names of pagan origin and a change in this regard is visible only after the year 475 BC. Therefore, it should not surprise us that Mordecai had a pagan name and Esther's other name was non-Jewish. On the other hand, we can talk about the Jews who remained there as those who were did not integrate into God's plan for the restoration of the Holy Land and of the Temple in Jerusalem. It is important to note that the repatriation of the Jews in the land of their forefathers moved the center of the Jewish world from Babylonia back to the Holy Land. So the Diaspora became the periphery of the Jewish world, a world devoid of God's direct presence.

5. Diaspora emerges as a world characterized by much hostility towards the Jews. Being deprived of God's plenary presence, the space of the Diaspora is dominated by Ahasuerus and his counselors, who manipulate the emperor according to their wishes. Thus, the Jews in the Diaspora, because they refuse the call to repatriate, are under Haman's influence. Out of purely subjective and personal reasons, Haman has planned killing all Jews of Diaspora by means of a royal decree. Haman's hostility turns the Diaspora into a space outside God's will. The trials inherent to such a milieu have forced the Jews to conceal their identity. The most telling example is, of course, Esther.

6. The decree of Haman led Mordecai to ask Esther to reconsider her decision to hide her ethnic origin and then to intervene to the emperor in order to save her kinsmen, even though previously it was he who had asked her to hide her true identity. The crisis brought about by Haman's evil designs compels Esther to (re)define herself in terms of identity and to accept her own Jewishness. In the book, this coincides with an appropriation of the covenant, coupled with the recognition that she had not been living as a Jew ought to have lived. We note that the appropriation of her Jewishness compelled her to be loyal to her own people and to act on its behalf.

In the Book of Esther the human factor and the Divine Providence are not mutually exclusive, but rather are in a close relationship of complementarity. The salvation of the Jewish people can be found in both God's mysterious work and Mordecai and Esther's efforts, even though the latter's action takes place under pressure of deeply menacing circumstances. Identification with God's covenant through acceptance of their own

Jewishness is tantamount to a “reconversion”, an event which opens the way for a divine intervention on behalf of the Jews living in the Persian Diaspora. An important part is played not only by the courage and skill of the two heroes, but also by that step of faith which both took appropriating their Jewishness and acting in consequence. The actions of Esther and Mordecai have become useful to the divine cause only because the heroes have expressed their allegiance to the covenant and acted in accordance with the urgency of the moment. This is why, unlike in the other biblical books, in the Book of Esther human initiative is appreciated and seen as being complementary with the mysterious work of God, manifested through coincidences and serendipities. Complementarity between the human and the divine factor emerges when Mordecai and Esther identified themselves with God’s covenant.

Esther’s possible refusal to appear before Ahasuerus with a plea for the salvation of the Jews would not have protected her from the destructive effects of Haman’s decree, because, ironically, lack of action would have turned out to be more dangerous than action itself. The hostility of the Diaspora, fueled by the variability and ambiguity of the imperial power, would seem to demand at first sight a concealment of identity, as a prerequisite for survival. But in reality things are not so. Concealment will not ensure their survival, but rather will lead to their annihilation. By contrast, assuming their Jewishness, which, as we have seen, the Book of Esther likens first to embracing the values of God’s covenant and then with an action on behalf of the Jews in the Diaspora, in accordance with the example set by Mordecai and Esther, will ensure survival. Thus, survival in the Diaspora is guaranteed only to those who declare themselves Jews and who behave in consequence, to those who are loyal to God’s covenant and obey God’s will. It should be noted that, according to the Book of Esther, in Diaspora, unlike in the Holy Land, the covenant is the only source of identity for Jews, a fact which is revealed, ironically, by Haman himself (Est. 3.8).

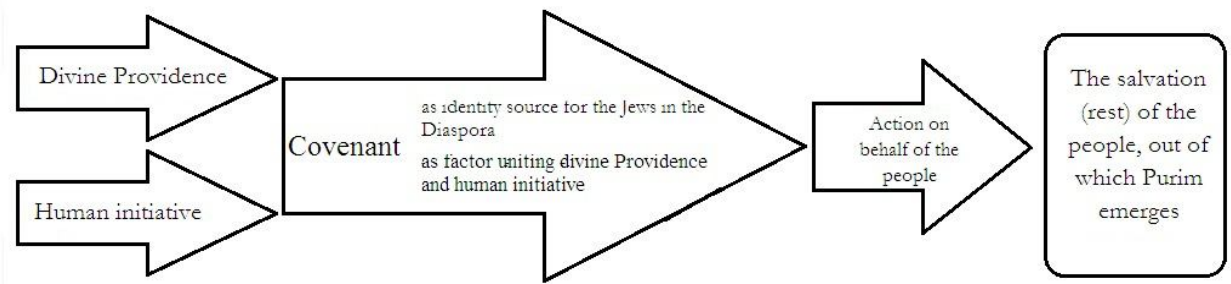
For example, at the end of the book we read that many of the native inhabitants, seized by fear, convert to Judaism in order to preserve their lives (Est. 8.17). The end is in stark contrast with the initial situation in which we see the Jews hiding their identity in order to keep the privileges acquired up to that moment. Thus, an open affirmation of their own identity in light of God’s covenant is a cardinal prerequisite for salvation from the hostility of the Diaspora. Paradoxically, this hostility is the means through which the Diaspora Jews are forced to rediscover themselves as the people of God and live according to the covenant.

Also, the Book of Esther makes it clear that any action on behalf of the people implies at the same time the exposure of one’s ethnic identity. The unmasking of Haman by Esther compels the latter to “unmask” herself ethnically (Est. 7.3-6), declaring her belonging to the Jewish people. In this manner, the book points out the reciprocity that

exists in relational terms between the individual and the community to which he or she belongs. But loyalty to the community, which in this case amounts to loyalty to God, also involves a personal commitment which can also lead to acts contrary to the civil laws. In the Diaspora, the Jew faces a peculiar situation, in that he is bound to reconcile his loyalty to his own people with the loyalty to the emperor of Persia and is forced to reject the latter, if the fate of his people is threatened. Such disobedience is holy, because the hero seeks the good of the community and must act unreservedly towards achieving this goal. The underlying suggestion is that, in times of need, every Jew should be willing to break the law and sacrifice himself for the sake of his community, because otherwise the danger becomes impossible to contain. This situation implies, of course, the recognition of the fact that God works in history through the people who make themselves available to him.

7. We therefore note that in the Book of Esther the action takes place on two levels. On the one hand we see the divine Providence, which manifests itself by coincidence and peripeties, and on the other hand we see, in contrast, the human initiative. The two levels of action converge when the heroes of the book (and especially Esther) appropriate their Jewishness, identifying with God's covenant, a covenant which works as a bridge among the two. Moreover, the central place in the book is occupied by the covenant and, implicitly, by the need for Jews to conform their lives to its requirements. Only by living in conformity with the covenant regulation does a Jew turn into an agent through which God can perform his work effectively. On the one hand, Jews must know that they will survive in the Diaspora only if they are loyal to the covenant of God, living openly as Jews, without hiding, and that any compromise on their part will be fatal. On the other hand, the Jews living in Diaspora (i.e., an universe subject to the will of the emperor) should know that loyalty to the covenant will force them to assume the practical condition of their people, acting on its behalf, even if this would be contrary to civil law. Basically, appropriating the covenant and living in conformity with its regulations impels them to act by faith – an action out of which emerges the very salvation of their people.

8. It is obvious that the theology of the Book of Esther should not be circumscribed around divine providence, human initiative, the election of the Jewish people and its redemption, although these theological themes are clearly present in the book and should not be overlooked. The theology the Book of Esther has at its core God's covenant, because only living according to the covenant guarantees the survival of people, despite the hostility of the Diaspora.



9. As Christian Scripture, the Book of Esther has the following theological implications: first, it shows that the survival of a Christian depends on assuming his identity in Christ and living according to this identity. Second, once Christians fully assume and openly assert their identity in Christ, they need to know that this makes them into God's agents. This new status implies the vocation to make theology. Therefore, regardless of circumstances and despite their menacing character, a Christian must act in support of and on behalf of those who cannot do it, thus becoming their voice, as part of a work that ultimately becomes the work of Christ in the world.