



**PORTRAITS OF ESTHER: A RECEPTION HISTORY READING OF ESTHER IN JEWISH
AND CHRISTIAN LITURGY AND THE ARTS**

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Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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PORTRAITS OF ESTHER: A RECEPTION HISTORY READING OF ESTHER IN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN LITURGY AND THE ARTS

“All biblical scholars, perhaps without knowing it, use ‘Reception History’ in their studies. Whenever they take up a commentary and assess the text of the bible through the words of a commentator, they are, in effect, using reception history, because they are allowing the text to be received through the prism of a third party: they are thus engaged with the ‘reception’ of that text.”¹

ABSTRACT

This dissertation is focused on the character of Queen Esther from the Book of Esther and the reception of this figure in Judaism and Christianity. The Book of Esther is first of all considered in relation to its situation in Jewish and Christian biblical tradition as well as the significance of the book in the respective liturgies; additionally, within Judaism, the traditions and annual celebration of Purim are described. Thereafter, the character of Queen Esther is reviewed in relation to instances where she is depicted in works of art, literature, or where her character is central to an individual's lived experience. Instances reviewed are drawn from both traditions beginning with the third century CE wall painting at the Dura-Europos synagogue in present-day Syria. Further iterations considered include typological portrayals from medieval Christianity, situations where Queen Esther has provided solace or inspiration, finishing with Queen Esther's appearance within a contemporary art collaboration from 2023. The purpose of these reviews is to offer an evaluation of how Queen Esther has resonated with Jewish and Christian audiences throughout the centuries. Appearances are treated chronologically beginning in the third century CE and finishing in April 2023; given the huge timescale and the limitations of this dissertation, works chosen are necessarily selective.

¹ Sue Gillingham, ‘An Introduction to Reception History With Particular Reference To Psalm 1’, in *Revue Des Sciences Religieuses*, (85, 2011) p.571.

Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose

Queen Elizabeth I (1553-1603) prayed that God would give her the strength to prevail over her nation's enemies and thus become "like another Deborah, like another Judith, like another Esther,"². In doing so she called on the memory of three biblical women famed for their leadership, courage, and piety. According to the Old Testament narratives in which they figure, each individual engineered the conquest over powerful enemies intent on destroying the people of Israel³. Sojourner Truth (1797-1833), a former slave and outspoken activist for abolition, temperance and civil and women's rights addressed the crowd assembled in New York City for the Women's Rights Convention on 7th September 1853 in what became known as the 'mob convention' due to excessive heckling⁴:

'There was a king in the Scriptures; and then it was the kings of the earth would kill a woman if she come into their presence; but Queen Esther come forth, for she was oppressed, and felt there was a great wrong, and she said I will die or I will bring my complaint before the king. Should the king of the United States be greater, or more crueller, or more harder?'⁵

It is remarkable that two such diverse figures should call upon figures from the Old Testament to support their causes, particularly that of Queen Esther who is the focus of this study. Queen Esther, who has always been at the centre of the story that she herself is described as having penned (Est. 9:29)⁶.

This dissertation is focused on the Book of Esther and the reception of the titular character in Judaism and Christianity. Firstly, it will be necessary to

² Elizabeth I, *Elizabeth I: Collected Works*, ed. by Leah S Marcus, Janel M Mueller, and Mary Beth Rose (Chicago: University Of Chicago Press, 2000), p.157

³ Saralyn Ellen Summer, "'Like Another Esther': Literary Representations Of Queen Esther In Early Modern England" (unpublished DPhil Thesis, Georgia State University, 2006), p.1.

⁴ Stuart W Halpern, (ed.), *Esther In America*, (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2020), p.8.

⁵ <https://susanbanthonyhouse.org/blog/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Sojourner-Truth-Mob-Convention-1853.pdf>.

⁶ Marc Michael Epstein, *The New Venice Esther* (Philadelphia: Print-O-Craft Press, 2023), p.123.

situate the Book of Esther in Jewish and Christian biblical tradition as well as to uncover the significance of the book in the respective liturgies; additionally, within Judaism, this will lead to a description of the traditions and annual celebration of Purim.

Secondly, the character of Queen Esther will be reviewed in relation to instances where she is depicted in works of art, literature, or where her character is central to an individual's lived experience. The purpose of this will be to offer an evaluation of how Queen Esther has resonated with Jewish and Christian audiences throughout the centuries; how, why and to whom has Queen Esther continued to have relevance? Appearances are treated chronologically beginning in the third century CE and finishing in April 2023; given the huge timescale and the limitations of this dissertation, works chosen are necessarily selective.

1.2 The Book

As with the majority of Biblical books, the Book of Esther underwent a process of development, with both early and later variants⁷ and as a result the text exists in many different versions: the Hebrew (MT), two Targums (Targum Rishon and Targum Sheni⁸), two Greek versions as well as a Latin, a Coptic and an Ethiopian Esther⁹. Esther is also paraphrased in Josephus' 'Antiquities'¹⁰. The text is rewritten as a result of intertextual activity, a joyful and constant telling and retelling of material¹¹. There are necessarily variations in these biblical Esthers and these are most noticeable in the six additions in the Greek versions, Additions to Esther A-F¹²; these are considered

⁷ Michael V. Fox, *Esther Character And Ideology In The Book Of Esther* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1991), p.254.

⁸ Isaac Kalimi, *The Book Of Esther Between Judaism And Christianity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), p.338.

⁹ Else K. Holt, *Narrative And Other Readings In The Book Of Esther* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2021), p.20.

¹⁰ Else K. Holt, *Narrative And Other Readings In The Book Of Esther*, p.20.

¹¹ Ibid. p.20.

¹² Ibid. p.20.

apocryphal and in Christian bibles often printed as such¹³. The effect of the Additions is to create stories and theologies at odds with the MT¹⁴ a consequence of which is a difference in the manner in which the character of Esther appears¹⁵. In order to look at the reception history of the Book of Esther in both Christianity and Judaism it is most relevant to view the MT as the main source of the book's afterlives. This choice is based on its position in the canon in Judaism and mainstream Christianity. There will, however, necessarily be influences from the Greek editions evident when considering Christian reception history, particularly with regard to pre-Reformation Christianity and Catholicism.

1.3 Reception Historical Stance

There is nothing new in collating the responses of different readers to a particular text, it is therefore not possible to date reception history as a practice¹⁶. As a discipline, however, reception history is in its infancy and therefore subject to debates concerning its meaning, methodology and goals¹⁷. A large part of this involves an examination of our *zeitathaftes Leben* and of the diverse ways in which the Bible has been interpreted, adapted, and appropriated to suit the needs or desires of particular peoples, places or ages¹⁸. As with many reception historical studies, this piece of work is interested in the creation of meaning from the text in a variety of media through history¹⁹, thus moving away from delving into the meaning of the text and rather moving towards meanings created as a result of the text and the

¹³ Ibid. p.20.

¹⁴ Linda Day, *Three Faces Of A Queen Characterization In The Books Of Esther* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), p.10.

¹⁵ Linda Day, *Three Faces Of A Queen Characterization In The Books Of Esther* p.10.

¹⁶ Jonathan Roberts, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook Of The Reception History Of The Bible*, ed. by M Lieb, E Mason, and J Roberts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p.6.

¹⁷ Holly Thompson, "'The Reception History of Esther a Genderqueer/Non-Binary Reading of the Ancient Texts and in Modern Scholarship'" (unpublished DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 2022) <<https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:f263f6cd-ff25-4497-9a28-1c04c2113578>>, p.34.

¹⁸ Alison Gray, 'Reception Of The Old Testament', in *The Hebrew Bible A Critical Companion*, ed. by John Barton (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), p.425.

¹⁹ Ibid. p.408.

influences these created meanings contribute to people's lived experience. Therefore, there is recognition of the dynamic living relationship between a text and the reader rather than an attempt to isolate and stabilise textual meanings from the fluidity of human life²⁰.

Given the extensive number of individual lives shaped by the bible over the length of its existence, choice of media and voice carry a responsibility²¹. The parameters²² of the choices below have been set by taking a dual faith approach and selecting responses that endeavour to illustrate the appeal of the narrative and the titular figure of Queen Esther. The result has been a voyage of unexpected revelations. It is exciting to think that to accompany Esther on this odyssey through the centuries, and two global belief systems, is to contribute to the rich reception historical studies that the Book of Esther has already garnered.

Various authors have shone a spotlight on particular aspects of the reception history of the Book of Esther, for example, Barry Dov Walfish in *Esther in Medieval Garb*²³, reviews medieval Hebrew commentary through which he shows effectively how 'biblical exegesis was often used as a medium of cultural self-expression'²⁴. Elliott Horowitz explores the reception of the Book of Esther and its characters especially in relation to the seeming legitimacy of violence in his monograph *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence*²⁵ and Adam Silverstein deals explicitly with the reception of *Esther* in Islamic lands in *Veiling Esther, Unveiling her Story*²⁶. The most comprehensive study is offered by Jo Carruthers in her well-written and entertaining volume

²⁰ Jonathan Roberts, 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook Of The Reception History Of The Bible*, p.8.

²¹ Ibid. p.5.

²² Ibid. p.1.

²³ Barry Dov Walfish, *Esther In Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation Of The Book Of Esther in the Middle Ages*, (New York: SUNY Press, 1993).

²⁴ Barry Dov Walfish, *Esther In Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation Of The Book Of Esther in the Middle Ages*, p.2.

²⁵ Elliott Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim And The Legacy Of Jewish Violence*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

²⁶ Adam J. Silverstein, *Veiling Esther, Unveiling Her Story The Reception Of A Biblical Book In Islamic Lands*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

*Esther through the Centuries*²⁷ composed as part of the Wiley-Blackwell Commentary series. Carruthers approaches the reception history of this 'irredeemable book'²⁸ chapter by chapter in consideration of both Christian and Jewish tradition. The most recent addition to this field is Isaac Kalimi's *The Book of Esther: Between Judaism and Christianity*²⁹. Kalimi demonstrates how the different interpretations of the biblical text have impacted on the reception of the Book of Esther as well as on Jewish Christian relations.

1.4 Setting the Scene

Before moving on to examining Queen Esther in her varied contexts and receptions, it is appropriate to offer a succinct synopsis of the book itself. Esther is a young Judean woman living in the Persian diaspora (Est. 2:7-8). Finding favour with the king following the rejection of the current queen (Est. 2:17), Esther, hiding her identity (Est. 2:19), herself becomes queen (Est. 2:17). Despite the manifold dangers inherent in her acquired position, she risks her life to save her fellow Judeans from destruction (Est. 5:1-5) when the court official Haman persuades the king to authorize a genocide against all the Judeans of the empire (Est. 3:7-12). Haman's plans are thwarted in a remarkable reversal (Est. 7:10) and the Festival of Purim is instituted on Queen Esther's instruction (Est. 9:24-32).

The date of the composition of Esther MT is much discussed. Some commentators propose a date in the 5th and 4th centuries BCE which place it in the early Persian period; others propose the time of Hyrcanus the Hasmonaean High Priest, who reigned 135-140 BCE³⁰. The arguments presented by Kalimi, which propose that the core story was composed in the

²⁷ Jo Carruthers, *Esther Through The Centuries* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2020).

²⁸ Jo Carruthers, *Esther Through The Centuries*, p.7.

²⁹ Isaac Kalimi, *The Book Of Esther Between Judaism And Christianity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

³⁰ Else K. Holt, *Narrative And Other Readings In The Book Of Esther*, p.21.

reign of Ahasuerus/Xerxes or within a generation or two, seem most convincing; this would place composition between 475 and 425 BCE³¹. The book can be defined as an early Jewish diaspora novella, written by a single author with the purpose of being read rather than recited³². Although it has been suggested that the book could have been written anywhere in the diaspora³³, Kalimi argues that the author seems familiar with Susa, therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that the setting is also the place of writing³⁴. The plot consists of a single chain of events played out within a limited timeline moving from tension to resolution³⁵. Similar writings are the Joseph narrative (Genesis 37-50) and the books of Tobit, Daniel and Judith³⁶. Diaspora novellas deal with issues surrounding the preservation of identity and survival in the mist of cultural pressures and hostile environments³⁷ and thus present inspiration for those living outside the Promised Land³⁸. The Book of Esther is an entertaining read and Holt argues that this is due to the important feature of peripety³⁹ whereby the result of an action is actually the reverse of what was expected⁴⁰. The use of peripety can be either tragic or comic depending on the outcomes but in all cases it is ironic⁴¹. This use of irony and humour enable an exploration of darker themes such as power and its absence, ethnic tension and the sin of pride together with its consequences⁴². The Persians are mocked, but the Judeans presented as wise, loyal, and discerning. Their ultimate triumph, combined with the book's lack of interest in religiosity be it Judean or Persian, contribute to the idea that

³¹ Isaac Kalimi, *The Book Of Esther Between Judaism And Christianity*, p.16.

³² Sidnie White Crawford, 'Esther', in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. by C. A. Newsome and J. E Lapsley (London: SPCK, 2014), p. 202.

³³ Isaac Kalimi, *The Book Of Esther Between Judaism And Christianity*, p.16.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p.16.

³⁵ Sidnie White Crawford, 'Esther', in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, p. 202.

³⁶ Else K. Holt, *Narrative And Other Readings In The Book Of Esther*, p.2.

³⁷ Sidnie White Crawford, 'Esther: Bible', *Jewish Women's Archive*, 2021
<<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/esther-bible#:~:text=In%20the%20biblical%20book%20named>> [accessed 27 July 2023]

³⁸ Else K. Holt, *Narrative And Other Readings In The Book Of Esther*, p.7.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p.25.

⁴⁰ Michael V. Fox, *Esther Character And Ideology In The Book Of Esther*, p.158.

⁴¹ Else K. Holt, *Narrative And Other Readings In The Book Of Esther*, p.25.

⁴² Sidnie White Crawford, 'Esther', in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, p.202.

its purpose is mainly to emphasise and celebrate the identity and survival of a people in their ongoing circumstances of dispersal and lack of autonomy⁴³. However, the explicit message of the Book of Esther may not be that which is most meaningful to readers. This dissertation will be exploring some of the hidden meanings readers have found and their creative responses derived from those readings.

⁴³ Deborah W. Rooke, *Handel's Israelite Oratorio Libretti* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 6-7.

Chapter 2 THE BOOK OF ESTHER IN THE CANON

2.1 Jewish Canonicity

From a Jewish perspective, the arguments surrounding the canonicity of the Book of Esther revolve around all that is missing, something rabbis have long discussed⁴⁴. There are no distinctly Jewish rituals, no references to the Torah or the Temple. Esther eats with gentiles (Est. 5:6-8; 7:1-6), conceals her Jewish identity (Est. 2:10), and marries a gentile king (Est. 2:17)⁴⁵. The consensus is that *Esther* is the only book of the canon not found at Qumran⁴⁶ although there has emerged an intriguing debate as to whether Esther was indeed part of the canon of the sect based at Qumran⁴⁷. It has also been suggested that due to the small size of the text it is unsurprising that no fragments have been found; only a tiny fragment from the lengthy book of Chronicles (4 QChr) has been uncovered⁴⁸. There is evidence that rabbinic authorities at the end of the first century CE were still debating the canonicity of a number of books which later were accepted into the scriptures⁴⁹. The Book of Esther is perhaps included in this debate which revolved around a technical issue: whether or not these texts 'defiled the hands'⁵⁰. Rather surprisingly the phrase 'defiling the hands' is a desirable quality which correlates to canonicity; if a text 'makes the hands unclean' it means 'being canonical'⁵¹. It has been recorded that the Book of Esther does not 'make the hands unclean' in writings from 1st – 4th century (Babylonian Talmud Megillah 7a) meaning that

⁴⁴ Hindy Najam. 'The Importance Of Writing In The Book Of Esther.' 1993.

<https://www.chabad.org/multimedia/video_cdo/aid/5056022/jewish/The-Importance-of-Writing-in-the-Book> [accessed 5 February 2023].

⁴⁵ Mary Joan Winn Leith, 'Esther', *The Oxford Encyclopedia Of The Books Of The Bible*, ed. by M. D Coogan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.252.

⁴⁶ Mary Joan Winn Leith, 'Esther', *The Oxford Encyclopedia Of The Books Of The Bible*, p.252.

⁴⁷ Hindy Najman, 'The Vitality Of Scripture Within And Beyond The "Canon"', *Journal For The Study Of Judaism In The Persian, Hellenistic, And Roman Period*, 43.4/5: 497–518. 2012.

<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/24670760>> [accessed 5 February 2023] p. 510.

⁴⁸ Michael G. Wechsler, *Encyclopedia Of the Bible And Its Reception*, ed. by Dale C Allison et al (Berlin - Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), p.15.

⁴⁹ John Barton, *A History Of The Bible* (London: Allen Lane, 2019), p.218.

⁵⁰ John Barton, *A History Of The Bible*, p.219.

⁵¹ Ibid. p.219.

the text was considered lacking in spiritual authority⁵². Moore, however, states that there was no reason to doubt the canonicity of the Book of Esther by the time of the Council of Jamnia in 90 CE⁵³, the council at which the version found in the Septuagint was rejected⁵⁴. The book's claim to be an accurate historical account of a time when Jews were saved from almost certain extinction⁵⁵ with Jerusalem destroyed by the Romans in 70 CE and the diaspora wider than ever before, would have been consoling and given hope that a second Esther or Mordecai might rise up⁵⁶. A further reason would be that the book provided the basis for a popular religious festival⁵⁷ although this was resisted by some as lacking Mosaic authority⁵⁸. Indeed, it has been argued that the popularity of Purim, to which the final two chapters of the book are devoted, may have secured its place in the Jewish canon⁵⁹. Parallel to the recognition in the Common Book of Prayer that states the Book of Esther as being part of the Christian Holy Scriptures for Salvation, the book's presence in the Jewish canon makes a powerful statement about the role human beings play in furthering God's mission⁶⁰. However, Moses ben Maimon (1138-1204) commonly known as Maimonides, a Sephardic Jewish philosopher and Torah scholar, adds a surprising level of significance to the Book of Esther. Maimonides, citing Esther 9:28, asserts that *Esther* should continue to be read in the Messianic era when other sacred texts need no longer be read in public:

All prophetic Books and Sacred Writings will cease [to be recited in public] during the Messianic era except the Book of Esther. It will continue to exist just like the five Books of the Torah and the laws of the Oral torah that will never cease. Although ancient troubles will be remembered no longer, as

⁵² Mary Joan Winn Leith, 'Esther', p.252.

⁵³ Carey Moore, *Esther* (New York: Yale University Press, 2011), p.xxii.

⁵⁴ Saralyn Ellen Summer, "'Like Another Esther': Literary Representations Of Queen Esther In Early Modern England. ', p.12.

⁵⁵ Carey Moore, *Esther* (New York: Yale University Press, 2011), p.xxiv.

⁵⁶ Ibid. p.xxiv.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.xxiv.

⁵⁸ Mary Joan Winn Leith, 'Esther', p.252.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p.252.

⁶⁰ Joshua Rabin, 'Who Saves the Synagogue?', *Blogs.timesofisrael.com*. 2017.

<<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/who-saves-the-synagogue/>> [accessed 5 February 2023]

it is written [Isaiah 65:16] 'the troubles of the past are forgotten and hidden from my eyes', 'the days of Purim will never be abolished as it is written' [Esther 9:28]: 'these days of Purim should never fail to be celebrated by the Jews – nor should the memory of these days die out among their descendants (Mishneh Torah, Hilkhhot Purim 2:18)⁶¹.

In this way, Maimonides argues beyond canonicity but rather for the eternal significance of *Esther* beyond humanity's reaching the apex of divine achievement⁶². Paradoxically, therefore, what is selected for eternity, is the only text in which God's face is hidden⁶³. The subsuming of those festivals linked with Exodus and the acceptance of those promises at Sinai which were forced, 'Everything the Lord has spoken we will do' (Exodus 19:8), are set against the festival which remains, the festival which is a reminder of human agency and a voluntary acceptance⁶⁴. By ensuring that the story of *Esther* continues to be read in public, listeners are compelled to remember that a human contribution is necessary to complete God's story.

2.2 Christian Canonicity

Given the actions and character of its heroine, the Judean woman *Esther*, it should not be surprising that the book had difficulty gaining canonical status in both Judaism and Christianity⁶⁵. In the Hebrew text, there is seemingly a complete absence of divine agency, as observed above, and together with the violence carried out by the Jews against their enemies and the sexual connotations, the text is thought to have 'no redeeming features'⁶⁶. Also significant, from a Christian perspective is the fact that the Book of *Esther* is

⁶¹ Joshua Rabin, 'Who Saves the Synagogue?', *Blogs.timesofisrael.com*. 2017.

<<https://blogs.timesofisrael.com/who-saves-the-synagogue/>> [accessed 5 February 2023]

⁶² Joshua Rabin, 'Who Saves the Synagogue?',

⁶³ Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *The Murmuring Deep: Reflections On The Biblical Unconscious* (New York: Schocken Books, 2011) <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Murmuring-Deep-Reflections-Biblical-Unconscious-ebook/dp/B002361NHS/ref=sr_1_1?crid=3PN6CA0UC7Z> [accessed 5 February 2023], p.116.

⁶⁴ Hindy Najam. 'The Importance Of Writing In The Book Of Esther.'

⁶⁵ Sidnie White Crawford, 'Esther', in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, p.201.

⁶⁶ Holly Thompson, "'The Reception History Of Esther A Genderqueer/Non-Binary Reading Of The Ancient Texts And In Modern Scholarship'", p.103.

not alluded to in the New Testament⁶⁷. In Western Christianity, canonical status was gained in the fourth century CE⁶⁸; in the list of canonical books put together by Bishop Melito of Sardis (d. 180 CE) in 170CE, *Esther* was not included⁶⁹, however, the canonicity of this book appears to have gone unquestioned at the Councils of Hippo (393 CE) and Carthage (397 CE)⁷⁰. Despite this, discomfort and anxiety remained as evidenced by the paucity of commentaries on *Esther*⁷¹. Some early Christian reflections on the text remain⁷² in brief commentaries by Tertullian, St Augustine, and Clement of Alexandria⁷³, however, Christians in the West had to wait until the ninth century CE for the first full commentary written by the Frankish Benedictine theologian Rabanus Maurus Magmentius (c. 780-856 CE)⁷⁴. In the Eastern Church, the debate over *Esther's* canonical status raged for much longer with theologians Athanasius (c. 296/298-373 CE), Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329-390CE) and Theodore of Mopsuetia (c. 350-428 CE) continuing to discuss the inclusion of *Esther* until the fifth century CE⁷⁵. Given the aforementioned absence of God, prayers and the perceived lack of law and covenant, in the East, full canonical status was only gained in the eighth century⁷⁶. With the advent of the Reformation, the Protestant Church affirmed the MT version of the Book of Esther causing questions to resurface about this shorter and less religious version of the text⁷⁷. Martin Luther (1483-1546), the seminal figure of the Protestant Reformation is inconsistent in his statements concerning the Book of Esther⁷⁸. In his early career he refers positively to the character of Esther, later references to

⁶⁷ Mary Joan Winn Leith, 'Esther', p.252.

⁶⁸ Sidnie White Crawford, 'Esther', in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, p.203.

⁶⁹ Marion Ann Taylor, *Ruth, Esther* (Michigan: Zondervan Academic, 2020), p.86.

⁷⁰ Holly Thompson, p.103.

⁷¹ Ibid, p.103.

⁷² Marion Ann Taylor, *Ruth, Esther*, p.86.

⁷³ Holly Thompson, p.103.

⁷⁴ Marion Ann Taylor, *Ruth, Esther*, p.86.

⁷⁵ Ibid, p.86.

⁷⁶ Sidnie White Crawford, 'Esther', in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, p.203.

⁷⁷ Marion Ann Taylor, *Ruth, Esther*, p.86.

⁷⁸ Isaac Kalimi, *The Book Of Esther Between Judaism And Christianity*, p.251.

'Queen Esther' are limited to her as 'a most pious queen'⁷⁹. Luther directs sharp criticisms, however, toward the Book of Esther as a whole, particularly later in his career; he is often cited thus, 'I am so great an enemy to the second book of Maccabees, and to Esther, that I wish they had not come to us at all, for they have too many heathen unnaturalities.' This translation offered in *The Table Talk of Martin Luther*⁸⁰, is, although damning, much kinder than the more common rendering whereby the translation reads that Esther 'judaizes too much'⁸¹. Kalimi asserts that Luther's positive attitude towards the characters yet negative attitude toward the book derive from a selective Christian theological appropriation of Hebrew scripture⁸² and that his changing attitude toward the Book of Esther mirrors his increasingly negative attitude toward the Jews⁸³. This antipathy will have influenced the reception of the Book of Esther and the creative responses produced as a result. However, this did not influence the reformed Christians accepting the MT Esther in the canon.

In England, The Book of Common Prayer (1662) unequivocally states the canonicity of the MT Esther as being part of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation and names the Book of Esther as one of those canonical books of the Old and New Testament 'of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church'⁸⁴. 'The Rest of Esther' is listed to be read 'for example for life and

⁷⁹ Isaac Kalimi, 'Martin Luther, The Jews, And Esther: Biblical Interpretation In The Shadow Of Judeophobia.' *Journal of Religion*, vol. 100, no. 1, Jan. 2020, pp. 42–74. <EBSCOhost, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/10.1086/706157>> [Accessed 24 August 2023], p.45.

⁸⁰ Martin Luther, *The Table Talk Of Martin Luther*, William Hazlitt (ed) and Alexander Chalmers (London: H. G. Bohn, 1857), p.11.

⁸¹ Marion Ann Taylor, *Ruth, Esther*, p.86; Dave Armstrong, 'Did Martin Luther Deny The Canonicity Of The Book Of Esther?', *Biblical Evidence for Catholicism*. 2015. <<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/davearmstrong/2015/09/did-martin-luther-deny-the-canoncity-of-esther.html>> [accessed 14 February 2023].

⁸² Isaac Kalimi, *The Book Of Esther Between Judaism And Christianity*, p.251.

⁸³ *Ibid.* p.251.

⁸⁴ Articles of Religion VI <<https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2019-10/the-book-of-common-prayer-1662.pdf>>.

instruction of manners' but not 'to establish any doctrine' and thus non-canonical⁸⁵.

The Catholic Church retained the Vulgate Bible in Latin translated by Jerome which included the Greek Additions to Esther at the close of the core text. Whilst an official Catholic translation of the Vulgate into English was complete by 1610 (Rheims-Douai) in order that English speaking Catholics might reply to Protestant proclamations and to avoid 'heresies', the use of vernacular bibles was not encouraged, and Catholic worship remained exclusively in Latin until the 1960s⁸⁶. Contemporary Catholic Bibles consist of the MT version with the Greek Additions either at the end of the text or, as in the case of the New Revised Standard Edition (Catholic Version), interspersed chronologically. As stated previously, the content of the Additions alters the main themes of the book of Esther⁸⁷ and thus the character of Queen Esther, which ultimately impinges on any Catholic or Eastern Orthodox creative response.

The interpretation of *Esther* continues to be problematic in Christian circles⁸⁸ not least as it is so difficult to link the text to the Gospel without using allegory or typology⁸⁹. However, Lee Beach claims that the Book of Esther is especially valuable to Christian communities today as they work to thrive in a post-Christian context, a situation which mirrors that of the exiled Judeans in the Persian Empire⁹⁰.

⁸⁵ Ibid. Articles of Religion VI.

⁸⁶ John Barton, *A History Of The Bible*, p.450-451.

⁸⁷ Isaac Kalimi, *The Book Of Esther Between Judaism And Christianity*, p.28.

⁸⁸ Sidnie White Crawford, 'Esther', in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, p.201.

⁸⁹ Marion Ann Taylor, *Ruth, Esther*, p.86.

⁹⁰ Ibid. p.87.

Chapter 3 THE BOOK OF ESTHER IN THE LITURGY

3.1 Jewish Liturgy

Spring is an important time of year for observant Jews. The religious momentum in the months of Adar (usually coinciding with February and March) and Nisan begins to build up two weeks before Purim with *Shabbat Shekalim* (18th February 2023), culminating at the night of the first Seder of the Passover celebrations (5th April 2023). On Shabbat, during this time, four additional Torah readings called *Arba Parshiot* (four Torah portions) are recited. The four Saturdays are named after their readings: *Shabbat Shekalim*, *Shabbat Zakhor*, *Shabbat Parah*, and *Shabbat Hachodesh*. The first two Sabbaths relate directly to Purim. On *Shabbat Shekalim*, the reading recited in addition to the regular Torah portion, is Exodus 30:11-16, pertaining to the mitzvah of alms-giving and a special haftarah (prophetic reading) II Kings 11:17-12:17. The Purim collection of alms is a reminder of the 10,000 talents of silver offered by Haman to King Ahasuerus to pay for the destruction of the Jews (Est. 3:9). A further significance is the symbol of redemption through the giving of charity (*tzedakah*)⁹¹. *Shabbat Zakhor* (Sabbath of Remembrance), the Sabbath preceding Purim, prepares the way. The extra Torah portion Deuteronomy 25:17-19 ('Remember what Amalek did to you') together with the haftarah I Samuel 15:2 (containing the story of Agag) must be read once a year. Twelve months is significant as this is the period of time after which things are forgotten, therefore, the Sabbath preceding Purim is the appropriate time to hear the command to remember the deeds of Amalek, his pedigree⁹², and to heed the warning of the consequences of not eliminating that which threatens destruction.

Ta'anit Esther is the name given to the fast on the eve of Purim. This stems from the command that Esther gave to the Jews of Shushan to fast for three

⁹¹ Lesli Koppelman Ross, 'Special Sabbaths', *My Jewish Learning* <<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/special-sabbaths/>> [Accessed 17 February 2023]

⁹² Simon Lehrman, *A Guide To Hanukkah And Purim* (London: Jewish Chronicle Publications, 1958), p.63.

days to support her uninvited audience with Ahasuerus (Est. 4:16). Tradition has established that this fast should last one day only and of all the national fasts *Ta'anit Esther* does not proclaim a catastrophe but rather an act of salvation⁹³. The end of the fast heralds the reading of the Megillah (the Scroll of Esther) immediately following the *Ma'ariv* service, after three stars have appeared in the sky⁹⁴. The Torah reading is Exodus 17:8-16, the battle between Israel and Amalek⁹⁵, a reminder of the genealogy of Haman⁹⁶. Three blessings precede the reading of the Megillah; the first praises God for giving the commandment that the story should be read, the second in praise the miracles he performed 'for our fathers in days of old, at this season' and the third is a benediction recited customarily at all festivals and on the enjoyment of any novelty⁹⁷. The Megillah must be read standing⁹⁸ and the scroll itself should be one written with the care of a *sefer Torah*⁹⁹. Prior to the reading, the cantor should spread the scroll out in full as if it were a dispatch thus mirroring an *iggeret* (letter/dispatch) as mentioned in Esther 4:26¹⁰⁰. Further laws require that the Megillah should not be recited from memory¹⁰¹ and that all are required to hear the reading (including women and children)¹⁰². The chant for the Megillah is a special cantillation used only for the Book of Esther¹⁰³. In order to heighten the drama of the recital, four special verses, called 'verses of redemption' are traditionally said aloud by the congregation and then repeated by the reader (Est. 2:5; 8:15-16; 10:3)¹⁰⁴.

⁹³ Simon Lehrman, *A Guide To Hanukkah And Purim* (London: Jewish Chronicle Publications, 1958), p.69.

⁹⁴ Simon Lehrman, *A Guide To Hanukkah And Purim*, p.63.

⁹⁵ Adele Berlin, 'Esther', in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. by A Berlin and M. Z. Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.1625.

⁹⁶ Simon Lehrman, *A Guide To Hanukkah And Purim*, p.65.

⁹⁷ Theodor Herzl Gaster, *Purim And Hanukkah In Custom And Tradition*. (New York: Henry Schuman, 1950) p.49.

⁹⁸ Ronald H. Isaacs, 'Reading The Megillah', *My Jewish Learning* <<https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/reading-the-megillah/>> [accessed 15 February 2023]

⁹⁹ Simon Lehrman, *A Guide To Hanukkah And Purim*, p.64.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. p.63.

¹⁰¹ Ronald H. Isaacs, 'Reading The Megillah', *My Jewish Learning*.

¹⁰² Simon Lehrman, *A Guide To Hanukkah And Purim*, p.63.

¹⁰³ Ronald H. Isaacs, 'Reading The Megillah', *My Jewish Learning*.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

Similarly, the reader raises their voice during the verses relating to the origin of Mordecai and his triumph (Est. 1:22; 2:17; 4:14; 5:4; 6:1) this last indicating a turning point in the story¹⁰⁵. Further dramatic effects are instigated by the congregation making inordinate noise whenever the name Haman is read including stamping and the use of *greggers*¹⁰⁶. Justification for the congregational din is given in Proverbs 10:7, 'The memory of the righteous is for a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot.'¹⁰⁷ The reader is also tasked with reciting all ten of Haman's sons in one breath¹⁰⁸, the justification for this being argued many different ways from a comic perspective to one wanting to gloss over the shame of the events. The customs surrounding the reading were intended to release overwhelming feelings of joy and these have often taken on a wild form¹⁰⁹. Following the Megillah reading the blessing which appears in BT Megillah 21b is chanted:

'Blessed art thou God and King of the World who has contended for us and defended our cause avenging us by bringing retribution on all our enemies. Blessed art thou God and Redeemer who deliverest thy people Israel from all their adversaries.'¹¹⁰

The weekday *Amidot* are recited as is customary, however, religious poems (*kerovot*) attributed to Kaliri (Eleazar ben Kalir c.570-c.640), are inserted in each but one (15th) of the benedictions recounting the Purim story with Midrashic embellishment¹¹¹. Psalms 113-118 (*Hallel*) which are normally read in synagogues on festive occasions are omitted as the Talmud stipulates that the Megillah replace the *Hallel* on Purim¹¹². The *Al ha'Nissim* (For the Miracles), the comprehensive summary of the Purim story, is included in the eighteenth

¹⁰⁵ Ronald H. Isaacs, 'Reading The Megillah', *My Jewish Learning*.

¹⁰⁶ Simon Lehrman, *A Guide To Hanukkah And Purim*, p.63.

¹⁰⁷ Ronald H. Isaacs, 'Reading The Megillah'.

¹⁰⁸ Ronald H. Isaacs, 'Reading The Megillah', *My Jewish Learning*; Simon Lehrman, *A Guide to Hanukkah and Purim*, p.63.

¹⁰⁹ Ismar Elbogen, *Jewish Liturgy: A Comprehensive Liturgy* (Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1994), p.110.

¹¹⁰ Simon Lehrman, *A Guide To Hanukkah And Purim*, p.67.

¹¹¹ Ibid. p.68.

¹¹² 'Hallel | Judaism | Britannica'. 2007. www.britannica.com
<<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hallel>> [accessed 15 February 2023].

benediction of the Amidah during evening, morning and afternoon prayers as well as the second benediction of *Birkat Hamazon* (Grace after meals)¹¹³. This verse (Est. 8:16) is recited in the *havdalah* service marking the conclusion of the Sabbath when it is supplemented with the words 'and may this befall us as well'¹¹⁴.

The celebration of the Book of Esther as part of the Jewish liturgy has ultimately woven this story and its characters, crucial to the Jewish people¹¹⁵, into the heart of Jewish life and thought. Esther is a household name and celebrated throughout the world during the annual festival of Purim. The liturgy legitimises Esther's position and it is, therefore, unsurprising that creative responses have taken such varied shapes and forms as presented below.

3.2 Christian Liturgy

3.2.1 Catholic Liturgy

In the Catholic Church, before the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II 1962-1965), readings from the Old Testament were never used in the Sunday liturgy, but only at the Easter Vigil, the Vigil of Pentecost, the feast of Epiphany and its octave, during Holy Week, and on some weekdays¹¹⁶. In the document *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (#51) the Bishops assembled at Vatican II declared that:

The treasures of the Bible are to be opened up more lavishly so that a richer fare may be provided for the faithful at the table of God's word. In this way the more significant part of the Sacred Scriptures will be read to the people over a fixed amount of years¹¹⁷.

¹¹³ Simon Lehrman, *A Guide To Hanukkah And*, p.69.

¹¹⁴ Adele Berlin, 'Esther', in *The Jewish Study Bible*, ed. by A Berlin and M. Z. Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p.1631.

¹¹⁵ Colbert Cairns, Emily, *Esther in Early Modern Iberia and the Sephardic Diaspora* (Springer, 2017), Introduction.

¹¹⁶ Felix Just S.J., *Lectionary Statistics*. [Online]. The Catholic Lectionary Website. Last Updated: 2 January 2009. Available at: <https://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Statistics.htm> [Accessed 11 February 2023].

¹¹⁷ https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html [Accessed 8th August 2023].

As a result, since Vatican II, Masses on Sundays and major feast days have included three biblical readings, the first of which is usually taken from the Old Testament. The Old Testament reading is normally very brief and necessarily thematically related to the Gospel reading of the day, therefore, the pattern from one Sunday to the next is only obliquely detectable¹¹⁸. Since many parts of the Old Testament are still not included in the Lectionary, for example, of the 16 chapters (272 verses) of the Book of Esther only 7 are used (2.6%)¹¹⁹, one must go beyond the readings used at Mass to cover the entire Bible¹²⁰. This is designed to be accomplished through observance of the Divine Office, a requirement of religious in the Catholic Church. In the introduction to the Divine Office, or Liturgy of the Hours, there is the following instruction:

143 The arrangement of the readings from sacred scripture in the Office of reading has taken account of both sacred seasons during which certain books are traditionally read, and the sequence of readings at Mass; in this way the history of salvation is viewed as a whole¹²¹.

The rationale behind the selection is also explained:

152 ... The sequence of Old Testament books follows the history of salvation: God led and enlightened his people step by step revealing himself in the course of its life. Thus, the prophets are read in between the historical books, taking into account the time in which they lived and taught¹²².

The reading of the Book of Esther is therefore included in the Office of Readings as the first reading on successive days from the Sunday of the 29th Week in Ordinary Time and the readings are presented thus:

Sunday 1:1-3, 9, 13, 15-16, 19; 2:5-10, 16-17/Monday 3:1-15/Tuesday 4:1-16/Wednesday C:12-30 (14:1-19); Thursday 5:1-5; 7:1-10.

¹¹⁸ Felix Just S.J., *Lectionary Statistics*. [Online]. The Catholic Lectionary Website. Last Updated: 2 January 2009. Available at: <https://catholic-resources.org/Lectionary/Statistics.htm> [Accessed 11 February 2023].

¹¹⁹ Felix Just S.J., *Lectionary Statistics*. [Online].

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ *The Divine Office: The Liturgy Of The Hours According To The Roman Rite*, Volume I, as Renewed By Decree Of The Second Vatican Council And Promulgated By The Authority Of Pope Paul VI, (London: Collins, 2019), p. lxiv.

¹²² Ibid. p. lxvi.

Participating in the Divine Office is written into the rule of religious orders and the laity in the Catholic Church are encouraged to participate in three daily offices one of which is the Office of Readings, thus ensuring their witnessing the history of salvation. In addition to the above, there is scope to include readings not in the Lectionary in special Masses as will be discussed below in relation to Edith Stein.

3.2.2 Protestant Liturgy

The Book of Esther is not included in the Lessons for Proper Sundays in the Church of England. In the Daily Eucharistic Lectionary, Esther 14:1-5, 12-14 appears in Lent Years 1 & 2 Week 1 Thursday. On Sunday between 25th September and 1st Oct Year B Esther 7:1-6, 9, 10; 9:20-22 appears in the Principle Service.

The Book of Esther's inclusion in Morning and Evening Prayer is as follows:

Week: Trinity 5/Days: Thursday Esther 1/Friday Esther 2/Saturday Esther 3

Week: Trinity 6/Days: Monday Esther 4/Tuesday Esther 5/ Weds Esther 6:1-13/Thurs Esther 6:14-7/Fri Esther 8/Saturday Esther 9:20-28.

The Additional Weekly Lectionary provides two readings on a one-year cycle for each day (except for Sundays etc.). It is intended particularly for use in those churches and cathedrals which attract occasional rather than regular congregations. Each of these readings is designed to 'stand-alone'. These are designed to complement rather than replace the existing weekday lectionary position. The Book of Esther appears as follows:

Week: 4 before Advent/Day: Monday/OT: Esther 3:1-11;4:7-17

Week: 5 before Lent/Day: Saturday/ Ecclesiasticus 40:18-27 OR Esther 3:1-11; 4:7-17

Week: Trinity 22/Day: Saturday/as above.

In both the Catholic Church and the Church of England, it can be seen that the Book of Esther does not figure greatly in the liturgy available to the laity; knowledge of the narrative is therefore determined by encounters through

independent bible study, Sunday School and exposure to artworks both in contemporary life as well as historically.

Chapter 4 THE JEWISH TRADITION OF PURIM

Liturgical use of Esther is prominent in Orthodox communities¹²³ and it forms the basis of the annual festival of Purim¹²⁴ a rabbinically decreed Jewish holiday. It has been said that 'the light of divine wisdom shines more brightly on Purim than on the Sabbath'¹²⁵. Esther taught the Jewish people how to pray together as a nation in times of peril (Est. 4:16). Two opposing traits are drawn together; that of pragmatic cunning and the ability to pray.

Pragmatic cunning is a skill that comes to adults via years of experience, they are able to correlate all possible factors and devise schemes of action. In order to pray sincerely, one must believe the unbelievable and hope for the impossible both of which come to children naturally. The liturgy and festivities of Purim call believers to engage both of these traits which are found working in harmony in the character of Queen Esther¹²⁶.

The festival takes its name from the lot (*pur*) cast by Haman to determine the best time to attack the Jews (Est. 3:7)¹²⁷. Robert Alter states that the word *pur* is a Persian loan word, the Hebrew plural of which has become the name of the festival based on the Book of Esther¹²⁸. The idea of this casting, this gamble, implies blind chance incorporating all the accidents and coincidences in history¹²⁹ which as it turns out would be an unlucky time for Haman and his followers¹³⁰. And yet the hinterland is one of exalted spiritual content¹³¹. The clear message behind this name is that it is God, rather than

¹²³ Carruthers, Jo, *Esther Through The Centuries* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2020), p.12.

¹²⁴ Holly Thompson, p.101.

¹²⁵ Alan Unterman, Alan, *Dictionary Of Jewish Lore & Legend* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1997), p.162.

¹²⁶ Soloveitchik, Joseph, *Purim: The Face And The Mask. Essays And Catalogue Of An Exhibition At The Yeshiva University Museum, Feb.-June 1979* (New York: Yeshiva University Museum, 1979), p.13.

¹²⁷ Alan Unterman, *Dictionary Of Jewish Lore & Legend*, p.162.

¹²⁸ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible, Volume 3, The Writings*, (New York – London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019), p.725.

¹²⁹ Norman Lamm, *Purim: The Face And The Mask. Essays And Catalogue Of An Exhibition At The Yeshiva University Museum, Feb.-June 1979* (New York: Yeshiva University Museum, 1979), p.16.

¹³⁰ Alan Unterman, *Dictionary Of Jewish Lore & Legend*, p.162.

¹³¹ Norman Lamm, *Purim: The Face And The Mask*. p.16.

fate which is the determining factor¹³². The deep inner level of the narrative has been shown to be that morality counts, history does indeed make sense and the weaknesses of humanity are overcome with the awakening awareness of the hidden hand of God¹³³. The casting of the *pur* determines the date of the festival as 14th day of Adar (in Jerusalem and all ancient walled cities 15th day of Adar).

There has been much discussion regarding the origins of the festival, the earliest mention of Purim as a fixed observance being in the Maccabean age (2nd century BCE)¹³⁴. That it was already established before 70 CE is evidenced in BT Megillah 3b whereby the priests officiating in the Temple were told to listen to the reading of the Megillah rather than attend to sacrificial duties¹³⁵, the presence of a tractate in the Mishnah giving instructions about reading the Esther scroll on the days of Purim establishes a firm date of at least the second century CE¹³⁶. Whatever the origins, Purim continues to serve as a memorial of the events related to the Book of Esther in Jewish life and tradition¹³⁷. Described as a minor festival¹³⁸ Purim is nonetheless held in high regard. So much so that it is said that Purim serves as a model for Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the year; this derives from a pun on the Hebrew *Yom Kippurim* which can mean 'a day like Purim'¹³⁹.

There are four main laws pertaining to the festival of Purim; these comprise two liturgical as discussed above (the public reading of the Megillah and recitation of *Al Ha'Nissim* during daily prayers and grace after meals) and two concerning the community, donating charity to the poor (at least two poor people and to any pauper who asks for a donation¹⁴⁰) and the sending of

¹³² Alan Unterman, Dictionary Of Jewish Lore & Legend, p.162.

¹³³ Norman Lamm, Purim: The Face And The Mask, p.16.

¹³⁴ Simon Lehrman, A Guide To Hanukkah And Purim, p.60.

¹³⁵ Ibid. p.61.

¹³⁶ Deborah W. Rooke, *Handel's Israelite Oratorio Libretti* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.3.

¹³⁷ Theodor Herzl Gaster, *Purim And Hanukkah In Custom And Tradition*, p.19.

¹³⁸ Alan Unterman, Dictionary Of Jewish Lore & Legend, p.162.

¹³⁹ Ibid. p.162

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. p.162

food gifts to at least one friend¹⁴¹. This is supported by Esther 9:22, '...to make them days of banqueting and rejoicing and sending of portions of food to each other and gifts to the poor...', as well as Maimonides, near the end of the laws of Purim (Est. 2:17):

Better that a person should increase his gifts to the poor on Purim than to expand his Purim feast and gifts of food to his friends. For there is no greater and more beautiful celebration than to make happy the poor, the orphan, the widow and the immigrant. One who rejoices the hearts of these sorrowful people is similar to the Divine Presence, as the prophet says (Isaiah 57:15), 'To revive the spirit of the downtrodden and to revive the heart of the oppressed'.¹⁴²

Similarly, a celebratory meal, known as *se'udat Purim* is eaten in the late afternoon commemorating the victory of the Jews over the Persians¹⁴³. It should be noted that the Megillah refers to 'days' of rejoicing, therefore the obligation to eat drink and be merry is not fulfilled with the evening service alone¹⁴⁴. The purpose of the laws are fostered in the unstable belief that, 'the Eternal One of Israel does not falsify or disappoint' (1 Sam 15:29), therefore, rather than commemorating revenge and vindictiveness, a hope is kept alive of the triumph of the just¹⁴⁵.

As well as the obligations of Purim there are many customs surrounding the proceedings; 'For the Jews there was light and joy and gladness and honour' (Est. 8:16)¹⁴⁶, therefore, candles should be lit even in the light as joy should be accompanied by light. 'Light' is also a reference to the Torah, and Torah study, which is undertaken before the meal, is a pre-requisite to every sensation of joy¹⁴⁷.

In all celebrations food plays an important part and it is customary to eat traditional foods, such as Hamantaschen (three cornered buns said to symbolise either Haman's hat or his ears). Drinking of intoxicating beverages is

¹⁴¹ Ibid. 162

¹⁴² Mishneh Torah, Hil. Megillah ve-Chanukah 2:17

¹⁴³ Alan Unterman, Dictionary Of Jewish Lore & Legend, p.162

¹⁴⁴ Simon Lehrman, A Guide To Hanukkah And Purim, p.65.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. p.62.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. p.60.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. p.65.

encouraged¹⁴⁸ for adults as the celebration was instituted as a joyful day and according to the Psalms, 'wine that gladdens the heart of man' (Psalm 104:15). Indeed, it is said that so much should be drunk that it is impossible to differentiate between the names of Haman and Mordecai¹⁴⁹.

Fancy dress is worn, particularly by children, to show that God works in mysterious ways and also possibly an allusion to Esther's hidden identity¹⁵⁰. This also links to the theme underlying the celebrations of reversal, a dominating motif of the narrative culminating in the climactic reversal serving as the foundation of the celebration:

...when the king's command and his rule came to be enacted, on the day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to dominate them and, on the contrary, it was the Jews who dominated their foes. (Est. 9:1)¹⁵¹

This overturning of the established order gives rise to the lawless nature of the festival celebrations, coined by one scholar as the 'celebration of disorder'¹⁵². The masking and trans vesting of Purim enables a self-recognition of the otherness of self, an invitation to recognise and celebrate this otherness that might otherwise be repressed or hidden¹⁵³.

The occasion has given rise to the custom of acting out parodies of established authorities known as *Purimspiele*¹⁵⁴, beginning in the fifteenth century and continuing to the present¹⁵⁵. This adds further hilarity to the celebration of an event that almost spelled genocidal doom¹⁵⁶. In light of this, many Jewish communities and families celebrate their own personal Purim commemorating escape from some past danger or persecution¹⁵⁷. This

¹⁴⁸ Alan Unterman, p.162

¹⁴⁹ BT Megillah 7b

¹⁵⁰ Alan Unterman, p.162

¹⁵¹ Deborah W. Rooke, Handel's Israelite Oratorio Libretti, p.3.

¹⁵² Monford Harris, 'Purim: The Celebration Of Dis-Order' in *Judaism* Vol.26, Iss.2. pp.161-170 (New York: Spring 1977).

¹⁵³ Timothy Beal, *The Book Of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, And Esther* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p.124.

¹⁵⁴ Alan Unterman, p.162

¹⁵⁵ Helen Leneman in Leneman and Walfish (eds.). 2015. *The Bible Retold By Jewish Artists, Writers, Composers And Filmmakers* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015), p.214.

¹⁵⁶ Norman Lamm, Purim: The Face And The Mask, p.16.

¹⁵⁷ Alan Unterman, p.162

reinforces the idea of Purim as a survival of the Book of Esther rather than a reiteration making it meaningful in the world of today¹⁵⁸. Ultimately, the message which is conveyed is timeless and important to all Jewish communities; Purim addresses the human condition, is relevant to both genders and celebrates a message of hope and courage¹⁵⁹.

¹⁵⁸ Timothy Beal, *The Book Of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, And Esther*, p.124.

¹⁵⁹ Norman Lamm, *Purim: The Face And The Mask*, p.16

Chapter 5 PORTRAITS OF ESTHER THROUGH THE AGES

5.1 3rd Century CE – Wall Painting at Dura-Europos

The Book of Esther enjoyed a significant stature in some Jewish communities despite rabbinical misgivings¹⁶⁰. The story has been an inspiration for Jewish artists for centuries with the earliest known examples discovered on the wall of the third century synagogue in Dura-Europos (Panel L WC2)¹⁶¹. There, the figure of Esther is situated among those figures and scenes associated with moments of salvation and future redemption from Hebrew scripture¹⁶². Dura-Europos is a small border town situated next to the Euphrates. Archaeological evidence presents a range of religious buildings, among these a synagogue built adjacent to the city wall¹⁶³. The town was destroyed following a siege by the Persians in 256 CE; as a prophylactic measure the inhabitants had filled the buildings next to the wall with sand so that they would not be destroyed should the city wall be breached, thus preserving the artworks¹⁶⁴. Dura-Europos was a cosmopolitan society ruled by tolerant Macedonians and therefore diverse places of worship could exist side by side. Those inhabitants frequenting the synagogue would consider themselves exiled and the remaining buildings and their decoration reflect issues important to those in the diaspora¹⁶⁵. Evidence at the synagogue suggests linguistic diversity¹⁶⁶ for this reason, together with a paucity of written materials whatever the

¹⁶⁰ Mary Joan Winn Leith, 'Esther', *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible*, p.252.

¹⁶¹ Barry Dov Walfish in Leneman and Walfish (eds.). 2015. *The Bible Retold By Jewish Artists, Writers, Composers And Filmmakers*, p.186.

¹⁶² Ori Z. Solles, 'Esther', *Encyclopaedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, ed. by D C Allison et al (Boston - Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), p.43.

¹⁶³ Shula Laderman, *The Story of Purim in Art: from the Dura Europos Synagogue to Rembrandt*, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U7agcv9kRnc>> (The Schechter Institutes, 2021) [Accessed 2 March 2023].

¹⁶⁴ Shula Laderman, *The Story of Purim in Art: from the Dura Europos Synagogue to Rembrandt*.

¹⁶⁵ Shula Laderman, (6:03).

¹⁶⁶ George Kilpatrick, *Dura-Europos: The Parchments and the Papyri* in *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, Vol.5 No.4 (1964), <<https://grbs.library.duke.edu/index.php/grbs/article/view/11891>> pp.215-255. [Accessed 9 August 2023].

language, pictures become important didactic tools despite the prohibition of the second commandment, 'You shall make you no carved likeness and no image of what is in the heavens above or what is on the earth below or what is in the waters beneath the earth', (Exodus 20:4). Further, a decorated Christian House Church was situated in the vicinity and the synagogue was duly decorated to establish approved teachings, telling the stories with midrashim¹⁶⁷.

Among the series of frescos discovered on the wall of the synagogue, the panel depicting Mordecai, Ahasuerus and Esther occupies a position of huge importance and honour directly to the left of the Torah alcove; to the right side is a panel showing the anointing of David by Samuel¹⁶⁸. The decoratively framed Esther panel consists of two episodes comprised of three separate groups of people. To the right, Queen Esther and King Ahasuerus, identified by inscriptions are shown as Persian rulers individually throned¹⁶⁹. To the left, Mordecai is dressed in Persian clothes similar to those of Ahasuerus. Four figures in the centre, representing the Jews, praising the scene are clothed as Romans¹⁷⁰. A further figure, also dressed in Persian attire, appears in front of the king reaching towards the king a rolled document¹⁷¹ – a letter, possibly a decree, to the king. Midrashic interpretation can be seen in Esther's crown which is fashioned like the walls of a city. Tyche was the goddess of the city in Greek art¹⁷², indeed the synagogue in Dura-Europos is next to a Tychaion. Jewish tradition holds that the throne of King Solomon described in 1 Kings 10:18-20, was removed to Babylon and this is the throne on which King Ahasuerus sits:

And the king made a great ivory throne and overlaid it with choicest gold. Six steps the throne had, and a round top behind it the throne had, and arms on each side at the seat and two lions standing by the arms.

¹⁶⁷ Shula Laderman. (7:17).

¹⁶⁸ Mary Joan Winn Leith, 'Esther', The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Books of the Bible, p.252.

¹⁶⁹ Shula Laderman, (7:19).

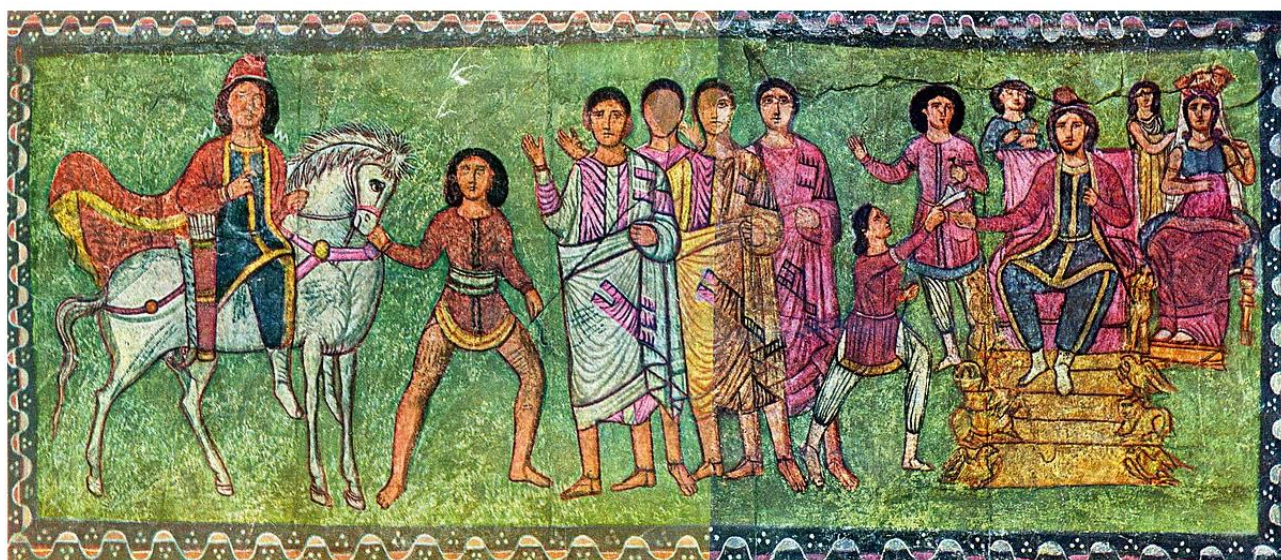
¹⁷⁰ Ibid. (8:30).

¹⁷¹ Ibid. (9:08).

¹⁷² Ibid. (9:08).

And twelve lions stood there on the six steps on each side. Its like was not made in all the kingdoms¹⁷³.

Ahasuerus is depicted sitting on just such a throne, a further indication of midrashic interpretation¹⁷⁴.



Esther and Mordecai, Panel L WC2, Dura-Europos. 175

Although it can be argued that *Esther* was not a story of central importance in this period, the patrons wish to promote the message held within¹⁷⁶. The precarious contemporary political situation is reflected from a Jewish perspective¹⁷⁷. The main threat to the Romans at the time the synagogue was enlarged and decorated was the Persians. The Jews in the depiction are dressed as Romans and therefore faithful citizens, seemingly to suggest that the presence of Jews in Dura-Europos will be the town's saving grace¹⁷⁸. In identifying with the danger threatening the city, the Jewish leaders must have wished to thank their benefactors. This custom of giving thanks to the ruling power or 'praying for the welfare of the government', stems from Jewish

¹⁷³ 1 Kings 10:18-20

¹⁷⁴ Shula Laderman, (12:34).

¹⁷⁵ Artist unknown *Esther and Mordecai* [wall painting], Panel L WC2, Dura Europos, Syria <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mordecai_and_Esther.jpg#filelinks>

¹⁷⁶ Shalom Sabar, 'The Purim Panel At Dura: A Socio-Historical Interpretation' in Lee I. Levine and Zeev Weiss (eds.), *From Dura to Sepphoris: Studies In Jewish Art And Society In Late Antiquity* (Portsmouth, Rhode Island: Journal of Roman Archeology, 2000), p.159.

¹⁷⁷ Shalom Sabar, 'The Purim Panel At Dura', p.159.

¹⁷⁸ Shula Laderman. (14:47).

tradition evidenced by Jeremiah 27:7, 'And all the nations shall serve him and his son and his son's son until the time of his land comes,' and *Pirkei Avot* 3:2, 'Rabbi Hanina, the vice-high priest said: pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear it inspires, every man would swallow his neighbour alive¹⁷⁹'. Queen Esther, clothed as a Persian, her crown fashioned as a city together with the neighbouring Tychaion, would have been symbolism readily understood by inhabitants and visitors of the time, simultaneously signalling gratitude and offering reassurance.

5.2 14th Century CE - Speculum Humanae Salvationis – Kremsmünster, Austria

In early Christian and medieval art, images of biblical women served as a means to convey and emphasise typological meanings¹⁸⁰. Typology differs from allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament which need to be 'read' into the text and distinct from the historical intention of the author¹⁸¹. A typological reading is one in which there is deemed to be a continuation of God's plan in that the Old Testament is a true 'prefiguration' of the events of the New Testament. To the Old Testament 'type' there is a corresponding New Testament 'antitype'¹⁸², this is first described in 1 Peter 3:20b-21:

...when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight lives, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, ...

Such typological interpretations of New Testament events in terms of Old Testament prefigurations can be found in the earliest biblical commentators

¹⁷⁹ https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.3.2?lang=bi

¹⁸⁰ Mati Meyer, Mati, 'Art: Representation of Biblical Women | Jewish Women's Archive', 2020, *Jwa.org* <<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/art-representation-of-biblical-women>> [accessed 3 March 2023].

¹⁸¹ Brian McNeil, 'Typology', *A Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation*, ed. by R. J Coggins and J. L Houlden (London: SCM Press, 1990), p. 713.

¹⁸² Brian McNeil, B. 'Typology' p. 713.

(such as Tertullian c.155CE – c.220 CE)¹⁸³, typology continuing to provide the patristic and medieval periods a universal key to reading the Old Testament in the light of Christ¹⁸⁴. By the twelfth century this mode of interpretation had made significant ingress in Christian literature and art¹⁸⁵ and remains essential in the understanding of much in Christian liturgy and symbolism¹⁸⁶.

The character of Queen Esther posed a challenge to medieval biblical interpreters. She was among the least appreciated figures in the tradition given her perceived morally questionable, deceptive and unsavoury behaviour¹⁸⁷. Imagination was required to accept and appreciate the lessons of the Book of Esther and one interpreter who approached the text was Rabanus Maurus Magnentius (c. 780 – 856)¹⁸⁸.

Rhabanus wrote *Expositio in Librum Esther* in 836 following the tried and tested medieval practice of setting the story in its contextual history, retelling the story in full and then interpreting the hidden meaning for the Christian community¹⁸⁹. His dedication in the preface of his work was to the Virgin Mary thus preluding his reading of Queen Esther, who interceded for her people, the Jews, as a prefigurement of the Virgin Mary who showed concern for Christian humanity¹⁹⁰. In addition, he wrote that Esther is also a prefigurement of the Church¹⁹¹, 'That Esther ... is a type of the Church is doubtful to no one, nor can it be said in any other way that she is the spouse of Christ'. In this work of Rabanus, Esther, therefore, served as a prefigurement of both the

¹⁸³ Avril Henry, *The Mirour Of Mans Saluacioun. A Middle English Translation Of Speculum Humanae Salvationis*. (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1986), p.13.

¹⁸⁴ Brian McNeil, 'Typology', p. 714.

¹⁸⁵ Avril Henry, *The Mirour Of Mans Saluacioun. A Middle English Translation Of Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, p.13.

¹⁸⁶ Brian McNeil, 'Typology', p. 714.

¹⁸⁷ Kimberly Vrundny, 'Medieval Fascination With The Queen: Esther As The Queen Of Heaven And Host Of The Messianic Banquet', *ARTS the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies*, 11.2: 36–43, 1999

<https://www.academia.edu/33081990/Medieval_Fascination_with_the_Queen_Esther_as_the_Queen_of_Heaven_and_Host_of_the_Messianic_Banquet> [accessed 16 March 2023], p.36.

¹⁸⁸ Kimberly Vrundny, 'Medieval Fascination With The Queen' p.36.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. p.37.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. p.37.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. p.38.

Virgin Mary and the Church¹⁹². Rabanus' allegorical characterisation Christianised the story; Esther represented the Church which was understood to be the Bride of Christ thus equating King Ahasuerus with Christ¹⁹³. The adoption of Rabanus' interpretations through the subsequent centuries gave rise to their acceptance into medieval biblical understanding becoming apparent in the artistic iconographical tradition¹⁹⁴. This is witnessed in manuscript paintings portraying the interpretations of Esther's reign proposed by the educated elite. This transference of their theology to artistic form made possible the appreciation of the Book of Esther's inclusion in the canon to a wider audience¹⁹⁵.

In the matter of intercession, the comparisons, confections and some would say distortions¹⁹⁶, between Esther and the Virgin Mary became even more prevalent from the thirteenth century¹⁹⁷. Widely popular illustrated versions of the *Biblia Pauperum* and the *Bible Moralisee* during the late Middle Ages often juxtaposed Esther's intercession with Ahasuerus with that of Mary interceding with God on behalf of mankind¹⁹⁸. Mystic and philosophical writings also included this prefiguration; the *Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, a mystical dialogue between Wisdom and a Scholar (c. 1328) written down by the Dominican prior Heinrich Suso was extremely popular in the Middle Ages. Richly illustrated manuscripts were produced following the translation in 1389 by a Franciscan monk from Lorraine¹⁹⁹. Similarly, the German Okhamist philosopher Gabriel Biel (d1495) in his *Exposition on the Canon of the Mass*, linked Mary and Esther through their queenly possessions:

¹⁹² Ibid. p.38.

¹⁹³ Ibid. p.38.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. p.39.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. p.36.

¹⁹⁶ Mafi Meyer, 'Art: Representation of Biblical Women | Jewish Women's Archive', 2020, Jwa.org <<https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/art-representation-of-biblical-women>> [accessed 3 March 2023].

¹⁹⁷ Elliott Horowitz, 'Esther', *Encyclopaedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, ed. by D C Allison and et al. (Berlin - Boston: De Gruyter, 2014), p.31.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. p.31.

¹⁹⁹ Ingo Walther and Norbert Wolf. 2018. *Codices Illustres: The World's Most Famous Illuminated Manuscripts 400 to 1600* (Köln: Taschen, 2018), p.330.

Our heavenly Father gave half his kingdom to the most blessed Virgin, Queen of Heaven, which is significant in the case of Esther to whom Ahasuerus promised half his kingdom²⁰⁰.

A popular devotional book emphasising the medieval preoccupations of the desire of salvation and dread of damnation was the *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*, 'The Mirror of Human Salvation'²⁰¹. The title indicates this work's membership to a very large genre of medieval works which formed 'guides' to various subjects (Mirrors of the World, the Church, the Virgin, Christ)²⁰². This book portrayed, in text and illustration, the typological tradition depicting Old Testament stories which were seen to prefigure events in the life of the Virgin and the Passion of Christ²⁰³. The preface to the book states its intention; to be used as an aid in the instruction of the laity²⁰⁴. There are forty chapters each consisting of a leading event, usually from the New Testament, followed by three events, normally from the Old Testament, which sometimes share mutual symbolism. The intention of this structure is to reveal a divine plan linking the past and the material world together. If read correctly, an understanding of a divinely conceived pattern should be evident which is not accessible at a historical or literal level. A reflective truth can be glimpsed, 'For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.' (1 Corinthians 13:12)²⁰⁵. Hidden meanings are revealed via an artistic and textual juxtaposition of one event with three prefigurings. This 'reflective' method allows history to be viewed in light of the cloaked relationship to the Incarnation, in short, God's own view unlimited by time or space²⁰⁶. The typologies such as the one outlined by Rabanus in his *Expositio in Librum Esther* was especially appealing to the author of the *Speculum*.

²⁰⁰ Elliott Horowitz, 'Esther', *Encyclopaedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, p.31.

²⁰¹ Kimberly Vrundny, 'Medieval Fascination With The Queen' p.39.

²⁰² Avril Henry, *The Mirour Of Mans Saluacioun*, p.11.

²⁰³ *Ibid.* p.11.

²⁰⁴ Vrundny, p.39; Henry, p.11.

²⁰⁵ Henry, p.14.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.* p.15.

Speculum Humanae Salvationis of Kremsmuenster (Austria 1325-1330) is the oldest surviving copy of the Mirror of Human Salvation²⁰⁷. It offers two illustrations from the Book of Esther; the first is situated in Chapter 39. The Kremsmuenster artist followed the typical arrangement in which on each folio two panels are drawn side by side amid two columns of text. The four related panels are thus on two facing folios.



Panels 39a-39d, *Speculum Humanae Salvationis*. 208

39a: *Christus ostendit patri suo cycatirces et vulnera*: Christ beseechingly shows his father his wounds and scars. The quote originates from St Bernard of Clairvaux. Panels 39a and 39c show strong parallels, Christ (39a) shares the same halo as God (39c) and both are depicted in a mandorla²⁰⁹; the mandorla, which is almond-shaped, is a symbol of divine favour based on Numbers 17:1-8²¹⁰.

39b: *Antipater ostendit Julio Caesari cycatirces suas*: Antipater shows Julius Caesar his scars thus proving his loyalty to Rome in battle. 39b is strongly aligned with 39d²¹¹.

39c: *Maria ostendit filio suo ubera et orat pro populo*: Maria shows her son her breast and pleads for humanity. This quote originates from St Bernard of

²⁰⁷ <<https://www.facsimiles.com/facsimiles/speculum-humanae-salvationis-of-kremsmuenster>>

²⁰⁸ Willibrord Neumueller, *Glanzlichter Der Bildkunst Band 7* (Graz, Austria: Akademischer Druck - u. Verlagsanstalt, 1977), p.48.

²⁰⁹ Willibrord Neumueller, *Glanzlichter Der Bildkunst Band 7* p.48.

²¹⁰ George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p.27.

²¹¹ Willibrord Neumueller, *Glanzlichter Der Bildkunst Band 7*, p.48.

Clairvaux. The differing halos characterise both figures - one as God, the other as a sacred person²¹².

39d: *Hester orat pro populo suo regem assuerum*: Esther speaks on behalf of her people to King Ahasuerus (Est. 7, 2-4)²¹³.

Although the panels are conceived as a collection of four, for the purposes of this study 39c and 39d are the central focus. In 39c, briefly described above, the figures are Mary and Christ, both haloed. Christ is situated in the top right corner seated within a mandorla holding a book, he is bestowing a blessing. His halo mirrors that of God in 39a, his features and position almost identical, thus confirming his identity. Christ is frequently pictured in a mandorla in depictions of the Last Judgement²¹⁴ and in this instance Mary is interceding on behalf of Christians²¹⁵. The female figure is identifiable by her halo, that of a sacred being, and the stars in the sky above indicating divine favour²¹⁶. Mary is baring her right breast reminding Christ that her milk nourished him as a baby, this milk symbolises her power to intercede for sinners²¹⁷. Christ is conferring a blessing showing that he acquiesces to her pleas and these blessings are therefore forwarded to those who trusted in her²¹⁸.

39d depicts the Old Testament reflection of 39c with Esther interceding for her people before King Ahasuerus. Both figures are crowned rather than haloed and the panel is decorated with myrtle rather than stars. 'Myrtle' is the meaning of the Hebrew name 'Hadassah' (she later took the Persian name for Esther, from 'star' or possibly from the goddess 'Ishtar')²¹⁹. In Roman mythology, myrtle represents love and in Christian symbolism gentiles who

²¹² Ibid. p.48.

²¹³ Ibid. p.48

²¹⁴ George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols in Christian Art*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), p.148.

²¹⁵ Vrundny, p.40.

²¹⁶ George Ferguson, *Signs and Symbols*, p.44-45.

²¹⁷ Margaret R. Miles, *Image as Insight Visual Understanding In Western Christianity And Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p.79.

²¹⁸ Vrundny, p.40.

²¹⁹ Mark Madoff, 'Esther', *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1992), p. 241.

converted to Christianity²²⁰. As such, Esther can be seen to represent the Church which Christians believe gives eternal life to all who embrace it²²¹. The relationship between the two panels is marked. Both female figures are swathed in robes with left hands raised, palms upturned, pleading to the male figures aloft. Christ's divinity is clear due to his halo and his situation in the mandorla; however, King Ahasuerus is also conferred superior status seated not on a throne but over the Catholic Church. He holds a sceptre suggesting that he is a mediator of the blessings he bestows which are God-given²²².

Esther interceding on behalf of her people when she approached the king correlated directly to Christians praying to Mary as an intercessor to Christ on the Day of Judgement. The idea of Esther, the virgin from Susa, chosen by God to be Queen of Persia was understood by Christians, by the thirteenth century, to be a foreshadowing of Mary, the virgin of Bethlehem chosen by God to be Queen of Heaven²²³.

5.3 16th Century CE - Esther in the Americas

Esther is, of all biblical figures, the most beloved among crypto-Jews - *conversos*²²⁴ - crypto-Judaism being the secret adherence to Judaism whilst outwardly professing to be of another faith. Historically, the term is especially applied to Spanish Jews who outwardly professed Catholicism²²⁵ following the Massacre of 1391 (pogroms marking a peak of antisemitism and violence against Jews in Spain) and the expulsion of the Jews in 1492²²⁶. Many Jews throughout the Spanish speaking world were under threat of death by the

²²⁰ Ferguson, p34.

²²¹ Vrundny, p.40.

²²² Vrundny, p.40.

²²³ Vrundny, p.40.

²²⁴ Emily Colbert Cairns, 'Santa Esther in Latin America', in *Esther in America*, ed. by Stuart W Halpern (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2020), p.174.

²²⁵ Janet Liebman Jacobs, Janet, *Hidden Heritage : The Legacy of the Crypto-Jews*, p.1.

²²⁶ Renee Levine Melammed, 'Women in Medieval Jewish Societies', in *Women and Judaism: New Insights and Scholarship*, ed. by Frederick E Grenspahn (New York, Ny: New York University Press, Cop, 2009), p.105.

Inquisition between the years 1478 and 1834, for practising their faith²²⁷. Those who managed to flee to the Americas still faced persecution by the 'Suprema' (Council of the Supreme and General Inquisition) in Seville which directed branches in Mexico, Peru, Guatemala, and New Granada²²⁸. Conversos were 'created' in Spain after the first mass pogroms led by the preaching of Ferrand Martinez who sought to convert Jews to Christianity²²⁹. There were varied responses to this; some Jews chose to convert; others initially maintained their Jewish identity and then either converted while retaining their Judaism in secret or fled Spain when Judaism was officially outlawed in 1492. Until the expulsion the various groups co-existed²³⁰. In this atmosphere of 'death-defying' Jewish practice, one which gave rise to syncretic practices, Esther became uniquely important²³¹. Janet Liebman Jacobs defines 'syncretism' in this context as an invention of blended rituals and practices originally intended to conceal the continuance of forbidden traditions²³². The crypto-Jewish communities adopted a set of 'Jewish saints' who were similar to Christian saints in their ability to intercede with God²³³. Both Moses and Esther enjoyed huge popularity given that each were seen as 'deliverers' of the Jewish people from religious oppression²³⁴. Esther's story, her triumph in impossible circumstances, was deeply resonant for the Jews in similar positions throughout the Sephardic diaspora²³⁵. Indeed, due to the fact that public displays of Judaism in the synagogue were impossible, for the conversos Esther took on an importance even greater than in normative Judaism in the privacy of crypto-Jewish homes²³⁶. Given the hidden nature of the conversos' existence, individual religious practice depended on family

²²⁷ Emily Colbert Cairns, 'Santa Esther in Latin America', p.174.

²²⁸ Ibid. p.174.

²²⁹ Ibid. p. 174.

²³⁰ Emily Colbert Cairns, 'Santa Esther in Latin America', p.174.

²³¹ Ibid. p.175.

²³² Janet Liebman Jacobs, Janet, *Hidden Heritage : The Legacy of the Crypto-Jews*, p.62.

²³³ David M. Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit : The Religion of the Crypto-Jews* (Philadelphia and Jerusalem: The Jewish Publication Society, 1996), p.116.

²³⁴ David M. Gitlitz, *Secrecy and Deceit : The Religion of the Crypto-Jews*, p.116.

²³⁵ Emily Colbert Cairns, 'Santa Esther in Latin America', p.175.

²³⁶ Ibid. p.175

traditions, local community habits, personal preference and how closely monitored the communities were²³⁷. Despite this, trials analysis of eighty-six Judaizers sentenced in the 1593 'auto de fe' in Granada, revealed that the Festival of Santa Esterica was second only to Yom Kippur²³⁸. This emphasis may be due to the position of women in the Sephardic diaspora, and the home as the centre of hidden Jewish practices²³⁹. In colonial Latin America, crypto-Jewish women were faced with challenges beyond those of their male counterparts who participated in global trade networks²⁴⁰. The existence of the women necessitated an outwardly Catholic existence whilst simultaneously shouldering the responsibility of keeping the Jewish faith alive yet secret in homes maintained by Catholic servants²⁴¹. Women in this position used the most immediate means at their disposal in order to live out the Jewish faith, namely the inward tools of the home and their bodies²⁴². A syncretic concept of religious piety was formulated based in the material practices of the home reflected in washing and cleaning, culinary rites and bodily faith practices including fasting²⁴³. An example of a family living under such circumstances is the Carvajal family described by Emily Colbert Cairns in her work 'Esther in Latin America'²⁴⁴. She focuses on sisters Leonor and Isabel for whom Esther was an inspiration²⁴⁵. The family were put to death in New Spain for Judaizing following their second Inquisitorial trial (1595-96). The Book of Esther was important to the Christians in the Spanish-speaking world, used as a narrative of strong empire in sixteenth century Spain. The heroine was seen be a beauty who, politically not being a transgressive underdog, upholds contemporary norms of gender and behaviour. As an example of the surroundings with which Leonor and Isabel Carvajal would have been

²³⁷ David Gitlitz, 'Secrecy and Deceit', p.43.

²³⁸ Ibid. p.43.

²³⁹ Emily Colbert Cairns, 'Santa Esther in Latin America', p.176.

²⁴⁰ Ibid. p.176.

²⁴¹ Emily Colbert Cairns 'Santa Esther in Latin America', p.176.

²⁴² Ibid. p.176.

²⁴³ Ibid. p.177.

²⁴⁴ Emily Colbert Cairns, 'Santa Esther in Latin America', in *Esther in America*, ed. by Stuart W Halpern (Jerusalem: Maggid Books, 2020), pp.173-183.

²⁴⁵ Ibid. p.177.

familiar, Colbert Cairns describes three Flemish tapestry panels depicting the Esther narrative which were displayed on the outside of the Cathedral in Zaragoza, Spain every Holy Week for five hundred years²⁴⁶. The plaza would have been the epicentre of public discourse and the tapestries would have served as 'spiritual advisor' to peasants. Here Esther is seen not as a strident protagonist but in her role as supplicant, the king being the obvious source of power – a clear message to the Catholic citizens of Zaragoza. Living outwardly as Catholics, the Carvajal sisters would have been exposed to these Catholic views yet not losing sight of the importance Esther held for them as *conversos* due to their shared hidden identities. In addition to this, the figure of the Virgin Mary held cultish status in Iberia and the Spanish-speaking colonial world, and this culture of veneration was transposed to 'Saint Esther' for the Carvajal sisters who referred to her thus in their private letters²⁴⁷. As fasting was a central practice for the *conversos*, allowing women to control their own bodies and thus their religious identity²⁴⁸, the Fast of Esther became hugely significant. The holiday of Purim, preceded by one day of fasting, was celebrated by Iberian Jews before the forced conversions²⁴⁹. After this point, in sixteenth century Spain and Portugal the Fast of Esther was extended to mirror the behaviour of Esther in the biblical story²⁵⁰; the way that fasting was portrayed in the Carvajal trial parallels closely the biblical version of the narrative in the *Biblia Ladinada*²⁵¹, the bible version available to the family²⁵². Whilst this can be seen to be a measure necessary to enable a 'hidden' celebration of Purim, and that thirteenth century Jewish writings

²⁴⁶ Emily Colbert Cairns, "Crisis and Hope: YU Voices - Emily Colbert Cairns."

www.youtube.com, Yeshiva University Museum, 24 Feb. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kpot3yNwXj0. [Accessed 20 May 2023].

²⁴⁷ Emily Colbert Cairns 'Santa Esther in Latin America', p.178.

²⁴⁸ Ibid. p.178.

²⁴⁹ Janet Liebman Jacobs, Janet, *Hidden Heritage: The Legacy of the Crypto-Jews*, p.59.

²⁵⁰ Ibid. p.59.

²⁵¹ By the eleventh-century, Sephardim were making Romance translations of the Hebrew Bible and reciting them in the synagogue. It was also customary to read the Book of Esther at Purim to the women in the vernacular. (Jeremy Lawrance, "Jewish Forerunners of the Spanish *Biblia romanceada*: A Thirteenth-Century Witness (Bodleian MS Hunt. 268)" *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, vol. 138, no. 2, 2022, p339. <https://doi.org/10.1515/zrp-2022-0018>)

²⁵² Emily Colbert Cairns 'Santa Esther in Latin America', p.175.

informed the strict conditions under which the women fasted, it can also be argued that the emphasis on female sin and bodily atonement suggests a Catholic influence given the rituals of self-deprivation so common amongst medieval and premodern (female) religious²⁵³. The elements of the tradition linking the religious imagery and symbolism of Christianity with pre-conversion beliefs and observances establishes Esther in her position as 'patron saint' of *conversos*²⁵⁴. Martin Cohen demonstrates the devotion of the Carvajal sisters to the heroic Esther and looked to her to continue their crypto-Jewish practices despite their ongoing persecution²⁵⁵. Isabel was discovered to be a 'great faster' observed by her brother Gaspar on a visit during the three day Fast of Esther in 1586²⁵⁶. The importance of the fast together with its length and seriousness could result in life-threatening situations for observant women²⁵⁷. Such was the danger for Isabel who refused to take the customary evening refreshments and became so weak that she could hardly talk²⁵⁸. Isabel said that during her fast she prayed to God to give her the grace to continue her fast in order that her people might be freed just as they were as a result of Esther's interventions²⁵⁹. In addition to fasting, Isabel would use a ciliary²⁶⁰, the inclusion of flagellation and fasting in this penitentiary context reveals an emphasised Catholic practice in contrast with that of normative Judaism²⁶¹. The New Mexican construction of Saint Esther further emphasises the role of Catholicism on the development of crypto-Judaism showing the influence of syncretic ritual motifs. Within this framework of ritual fasting practice, the Jewish Queen Esther is transformed by Catholic hagiographical theology²⁶². Esther thus became the head and centre of a new form of

²⁵³ Janet Liebman Jacobs, Janet, *Hidden Heritage: The Legacy of the Crypto-Jews*, p.61.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p.64.

²⁵⁵ Martin Cohen, *The Martyr* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1973), p.134.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.* p.134.

²⁵⁷ Janet Liebman Jacobs, Janet, *Hidden Heritage: The Legacy of the Crypto-Jews*, p.61.

²⁵⁸ Martin Cohen, *The Martyr*, p.134.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p.134.

²⁶⁰ Emily Colbert Cairns 'Santa Esther in Latin America', p.180.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.* p.180.

²⁶² Janet Liebman Jacobs, Janet, *Hidden Heritage: The Legacy of the Crypto-Jews*, p.64.

religiosity, one which was matriarchal, home-based and body centred, with 'hidden' or silent rituals that became more focused in the face of a challenged cultural heritage²⁶³. The Carvajal sisters were not isolated in their 'veneration' of Esther, Mencia de Luna who was burned at the stake during the Great Jewish Complicity of 1635-1639 in Lima, Peru created a feminine community around her crypto-Jewish worship²⁶⁴ with the Fast of Esther cited as its central principal. Although the Inquisition ended in 1834, crypto-Judaism remained, and the veneration of 'Saint Esther' persisted in all of the colonial legacy areas. Only in the Southwest of the United States did the Festival of Esther become less popular due to the intervention of the Archbishop of Santa Fe (1964-74) who did his best to expunge the veneration of Esther by explaining to his congregations that they were in actual fact celebrating the Jewish festival of Purim²⁶⁵.

5.4 19th Century CE – Esther by Sir John Everett Millais (1829-1896)

Considered to be a woman of great beauty and inner strength, Esther and her story continued to be an inspiration for many European artists in non-Jewish circles²⁶⁶. Artists often altered an image to accentuate or minimise the physical, psychological, or social traits that were important at the time²⁶⁷. The Christian reading of elements of the story of Esther typologically, as discussed above, led to a variety of depictions as the centuries progressed. Beloved among artists of the Renaissance was the image of Esther fainting subsequent to her approaching her husband the king without permission (Est. D15:7). This image is drawn from the Greek Additions and not present in the MT. Artists such as Jacopo Tintoretto (1546-7), Paolo Veronese (1556) and Artemesia Gentileschi (1620s) among many others, chose to portray the 'swooning'

²⁶³ Emily Colbert Cairns, "Crisis and Hope: YU Voices - Emily Colbert Cairns." www.youtube.com, Yeshiva University Museum, 24 Feb. 2021, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kpot3yNwXj0. [Accessed 20 May 2023].

²⁶⁴ Emily Colbert Cairns 'Santa Esther in Latin America', p.183.

²⁶⁵ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Festival_of_Santa_Esterica>.

²⁶⁶ Shula Laderman, (20:15).

²⁶⁷ Ibid. (20:43).

Esther interceding for her people. The theme of resistance and unlikely individuals having the possibility and responsibility of taking charge resonated particularly with the Protestant Dutch, who saw themselves as the 'New Israel' with Catholic Spain as the bullying tyrant²⁶⁸. During and after the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) artists such as Jan Lievens (*The Feast of Esther* -1625), Rembrandt (*Ahasuerus and Haman at the Feast of Esther* 1660/*Haman Begging the Mercy of Esther* – 1635-1660), Jan Victors (1619-1679) all produced paintings in this vein.

It may seem surprising, given the limited exposure that the Book of Esther received in the Christian liturgy in England that there would be an audience for paintings of Esther, however, by the nineteenth century the English had become 'the people of a book' to a degree that was rare in the rest of Christendom'²⁶⁹. Scriptures were the foundational textbook in schools and the means by which people gained literary skills²⁷⁰. Sunday schools and faith schools were key in children advancing in literacy skills²⁷¹ and Sunday school libraries facilitated access to pious publications for families through their children providing an important link between biblical teaching and literature²⁷². The centrality of the Bible in the Victorian age is revealed in its literature²⁷³, annotated editions of Victorian novels include biblical allusions which the author would never have thought would need explaining²⁷⁴; 'Now, king Ahasuerus! What do I want with half your estate?' exclaims the titular character in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*²⁷⁵. Scriptural content was also

²⁶⁸ Ibid. (26:36).

²⁶⁹ Willis B. Glover, *Evangelical Nonconformists And Higher Criticism In The Nineteenth Century*, (London: Independent Press Ltd, 1954), p.16.

²⁷⁰ Timothy Larsen, *A People Of One Book The Bible And The Victorians*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.2; Rosemary Scott, 'Poetry and Piety: The Role of Verse in Mid-Victorian Sunday Reading.', (unpublished PhD Thesis, Open University, 1992) <<https://doi.org/10.21954/ou.ro.0000d523>> [accessed 15 February 2023], p.36.

²⁷¹ Timothy Larsen, *A People Of One Book The Bible And The Victorians*, p.2.

²⁷² Rosemary Scott, 'Poetry and Piety: The Role of Verse in Mid-Victorian Sunday Reading.', p.35.

²⁷³ Timothy Larsen, *A People Of One Book The Bible And The Victorians*, p.2.

²⁷⁴ Ibid. p.4.

²⁷⁵ Charlotte Bronte, *Jane Eyre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 264.

prominent in nineteenth century visual arts²⁷⁶ and the members of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood were no exceptions.

Sir John Everett Millais (1829-1896), an English painter and illustrator who was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, painted *Esther* in 1865 in his 'Aesthetic' phase during which he was influenced by the work of Frederic Leighton and James McNeil Whistler. Millais chooses to represent Esther at a pivotal point in the narrative. Esther has agreed to approach the king to speak up for the Jews despite the danger she will put herself in as a result (Est. 4:5-17). After asking Mordecai to gather the Jews and ask them to fast for three days, she utters the phrase, 'And so, I shall come to the king not according to rule, and if I perish, I perish'. (Est. 4:16b). The painting is a depiction of the moment immediately prior to Esther's entering the inner court of the king's palace readying herself to enter the king's presence (Est. 5:1). Millais emphasises Esther's intrepidity by the setting of her figure against white walls and a rich blue curtain, the royal blue textile standing for the kingly presence beyond²⁷⁷. The contrast of her costume with the rich blue curtain highlights the viewer's awareness of the threshold she is about to cross and her boldness in crossing it²⁷⁸. In actual fact, 'Esther' began as a New Testament subject, Millais' Account book of 1864 stating that he was painting Susan Anne McKenzie – the model recorded as posing for 'Esther' – as Mary of Bethany²⁷⁹. Quite when the subject was changed to Esther is unclear, however, for 'Mary of Bethany', the loosening of her hair in preparation for washing the feet of Christ so intrinsic to the narrative²⁸⁰ (Luke 7:36-50), has

²⁷⁶ Timothy Larsen, *A People Of One Book The Bible And The Victorians*, p.4.

²⁷⁷ Ayla Lepine, 'Esther's Performative Body', in *The Visual Commentary Of Scripture* ed. by Ben Quash. (London: The Visual Commentary on Scripture Foundation, 2018). <<https://thevcs.org/esther-pleads-her-people/esthers-performative-body>> [Accessed 10.8.2022].

²⁷⁸ Ayla Lepine, 'A Turncoat', in *The Visual Commentary Of Scripture* ed. by Ben Quash. (London: The Visual Commentary on Scripture Foundation, 2018). <<https://thevcs.org/esther-pleads-her-people/turncoat>> [Accessed 10.8.2022].

²⁷⁹ Jason Rosenfeld and Alison Smith, *Millais*, (London: Tate Publishing, 2007), p.154.

²⁸⁰ Although not named as such in the Gospel of Luke, in the nineteenth century the woman wiping the feet Jesus with her hair was understood to be Mary of Bethany with many named statues depicting her thus.

been adapted by Millais and used, in combination with her resolute demeanour, to demonstrate Esther's bravery and guile in her attempt to entice the king²⁸¹. The Rossettian device of flowing auburn tresses emphasises Esther's sensuality (presumably one of the reasons that the king chose her to be his queen following the year-long preparations), and the lack of idealisation in her face makes the viewer aware that this is a real woman bracing herself to make her appeal giving integrity and authenticity to the subject. Thompson²⁸² reads this stance as presenting two personas, the masculine trait of being 'willing to take a stand' and her femininity expressed in the depiction of her hair and clothing²⁸³. The tension between the psychological import of the moment and the rich setting is further accentuated by the 'royal robes' in which Esther is clothed. Millais has dressed his model in the yellow jacket given to the national hero General Gordon by the Chinese government²⁸⁴. Whilst Valentine Prinsep RA (1838-1904) painted his subject wearing the same Mandarin uniform in the full-length portrait of Gordon exhibited at the RA in 1866, Millais turned the jacket inside-out accentuating the opulence of the Persian king's court²⁸⁵. This glossy, silken gift between contemporary male leaders acts as an 'armour' for Esther who embodies the dual roles of strength and vulnerability. This garment is both her robe but also, in its reversal, a metaphor of her subversion of royal authority, turning the prevailing system inside-out from within²⁸⁶. Emerging from an educational system that prized the text above visual image, Millais strove to 'posit a synergetic dialogue between the arts'²⁸⁷. In his depiction of Esther at these crucial moments (his interpretation could be argued to conflate Est. 5:1 and Est. 8:1-12²⁸⁸), his aim is to enable the visual elements of his painting to provoke a narrative in the mind of the viewer thus

²⁸¹ Jason Rosenfeld and Alison Smith, *Millais*, p.154.

²⁸² Holly Thompson, p.108

²⁸³ Ibid. p.108

²⁸⁴ Jason Rosenfeld and Alison Smith, *Millais*, p.154.

²⁸⁵ Ibid. p.154.

²⁸⁶ Ayla Lepine, 'A Turncoat'.

²⁸⁷ Jason Rosenfeld and Alison Smith, *Millais*, p.19.

²⁸⁸ Ayla Lepine, 'A Turncoat'.

engendering agency in the making of meaning rather than passive acceptance of received information²⁸⁹. This relationship between the subjectivity of the beholder and the subject of representation is key to Millais' art²⁹⁰.



Esther, John Everett Millais (1865) ²⁹¹

Millais' decision to rework Mary of Bethany into a portrait of Esther would have been a commercial decision, indeed, he was criticised by former supporters for abandoning his ideals and changing his style. There was an

²⁸⁹ Jason Rosenfeld and Alison Smith, *Millais*, p.19.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.* p.19.

²⁹¹ <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esther_\(Millais\)#/media/File:Esthermillais.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esther_(Millais)#/media/File:Esthermillais.jpg)>

audience for this developing style and Millais became one of the wealthiest artists of his day. In choosing Esther, Millais was supporting current understanding of Esther as the ideal Victorian wife - beautiful, pious, sympathetic and an improving influence on her husband²⁹². At the time of painting, women were demanding the vote, therefore, for women, Esther could signify a woman effective in the domestic scene yet exerting a beneficial political influence²⁹³. This ideal did not offend Victorian moralism as fundamental social values were not disturbed, thus making this Esther a portrait both unthreatening for a male audience as well as inspiring for women²⁹⁴.

5.5 20th Century CE – Esther and Edith Stein

Edith Stein, Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (12th October 1891 – 9th August 1942) was a German philosopher and women's rights activist of Jewish descent. She was baptised a Catholic in 1922 and in 1933 entered the order of Discalced Carmelites. Under the Nazi regime, Stein became a victim of the Holocaust and is venerated in the Catholic Church as a saint and a martyr. She was beatified by Saint Pope John Paul II on 1st May 1987 and canonised on 11th October 1998.

The character of Esther, familiar to Stein from early childhood, became increasingly important to her as her life progressed and above all in the face of the persecution of the Jews during the National Socialist era²⁹⁵. Stein would have been familiar with the Catholic tendency to link Esther with the Virgin Mary, an example of which can be seen in Albi Cathedral, France where Esther, positioned in the vicinity of the choir, is almost 'back-to-back' with the

²⁹² Margarita Stocker, *On The Frontier: 'Judith And Esther In The Myth Of America'* in *Borders, Boundaries And The Bible*, Martin O'Kane (ed), (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), p.236.

²⁹³ Margarita Stocker, *On The Frontier: 'Judith And Esther In The Myth Of America'*, p.236.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.* p.236.

²⁹⁵ Mary Heidehues, 'Edith Stein Und Das Buch Esther: Eine Judische Oder Eine Katholische Esther?', *Edith Stein Jahrbuch*, 21, 2015, ed. by Ruth Meyer, p.82.

Virgin Mary positioned within the choir²⁹⁶. Further, Stein would have been familiar with the Marienkapelle in the Archabbey at Beuron where she used to spend her holidays²⁹⁷. The walls are decorated at window level with Old Testament female figures - Eve, Miriam, Jael, Shulamit (Song of Songs 7:1), Judith and Esther. These serve as typological models of Mary and the progenitors of the houses of Israel and David, from which Mary emerged. As Stein's awareness of Esther developed, she began to use her on a personal level to unify her Catholicism and Jewish heritage as well as to reconcile her ideals of womanhood be they Jewish, Christian or feminist²⁹⁸. Esther is therefore crucial in one's understanding of Edith Stein, in describing Esther, Stein is describing herself²⁹⁹. The figure of Esther enables Stein to develop a dual mission – firstly for the Jews, and secondly for the Christians³⁰⁰. The perceived strengths of Esther correlated closely to the Jewish ideals of Stein's time. In early twentieth century Germany, the proportion of college-educated women pursuing professional careers was higher amongst the Jewish community³⁰¹. On converting to Catholicism in 1922, Stein did not lose her ambition to become a professor of philosophy, her faith in the power of female intelligence and will seemingly bolstered by Esther's feats³⁰². After receiving her doctorate in 1916 Stein worked as an assistant to Edmund Husserl in Freiburg. Despite her brilliance she was not awarded a 'habilitation' necessary for becoming a university professor, due to her gender. She took a post as a teacher in Speyer followed by a post in 1932 at the *Deutschen Institut für wissenschaftliche Pädagogik* (German Institute for Scientific Pedagogy) in Münster. She was a member of the *Verein katholischer*

²⁹⁶ Mary Heidehues, 'Edith Stein Und Das Buch Esther: Eine Jüdische Oder Eine Katholische Esther?', p.82

²⁹⁷ Ibid. p.82

²⁹⁸ Joyce Avrech Berkman, 'Esther and Mary: The Uneasy Jewish/Catholic Dynamic in the Work and Life of Edith Stein', *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2016, 32.1: 55–73 <<https://doi.org/10.2979/jfemistudreli.32.1.05>>, p.56.

²⁹⁹ Joanne Mosley, *Edith Stein Modern Saint and Martyr* (New York/Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2004) [accessed 21 July 2023], Location 1784/3001.

³⁰⁰ Ibid. Location 1784/3001.

³⁰¹ Joyce Avrech Berkman, 'Esther and Mary', p.61.

³⁰² Ibid. p.61.

Deutscher Lehrerinnen (Association of Catholic German Women Teachers)³⁰³.

In a lecture given in 1932 Stein referred to Esther and Judith as 'prefigurements of Mary', women with a special mission³⁰⁴. Here it can be seen that although important Esther was but one figure among many, however, this 'special mission' may have prompted Stein to write to the Vatican in April 1933 in order to seek a private audience with Pope Pius XI with a view to encouraging him to write an encyclical to denounce antisemitism³⁰⁵. The denial of this request prompted a strongly worded response from Stein exhorting the pope to end the Church's passivity toward Hitler³⁰⁶.

In 1938 the political circumstances transformed Stein's position on Esther to symbolise Stein's own hopes and mission to save the Jewish people³⁰⁷. On 31st October 1938, in the quiet before the storm just days before the November Pogrom, she wrote to Petra Brüning, Mother Superior of the Ursuline convent in Dorsten:

And [I also trust] in the Lord's having accepted my life for all of them. I keep having to think of Queen Esther who was taken from among her people precisely that she might represent them before the king. I am a very poor and powerless little Esther but the king who chose me is infinitely great and merciful. That is such a great comfort.³⁰⁸

It is noteworthy that Stein pleads not with Hitler to save her people but with God³⁰⁹. These words express the centre of Stein's mission in Carmel, her burning desire to help the Jewish people through prayer and sacrifice³¹⁰. Each phrase of the passage in this letter reveals an element of her

³⁰³ Emmerich, Marilone, *Der Zeit Gestellt: 100 Jahre Verein Katholischer Deutscher Lehrerinnen*, (Essen: VKDL, 1985), < <https://www.vkdl.de/>>.

³⁰⁴ Edith Stein, *The Collected Works Of Edith Stein: Self-Portrait In Letters*, ed. By L Gelber and Romaeus Leuven, O.C.D. (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 2017), p.201.

³⁰⁵ Joyce Avrech Berkman, 'Esther and Mary', p.59.

³⁰⁶ Ibid. p.59.

³⁰⁷ Joanne Mosley, *Edith Stein Modern Saint and Martyr*, Location 1812/3001.

³⁰⁸ Edith Stein, *The Collected Works Of Edith Stein: Self-Portrait In Letters*, ed. By L Gelber and Romaeus Leuven, O.C.D. (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 1993), p.281.

³⁰⁹ Joyce Avrech Berkman, 'Esther and Mary', p.59.

³¹⁰ Joanne Mosley, *Edith Stein Modern Saint and Martyr*, Location 1834/3001.

vocation³¹¹ and identifying herself with Esther, as well as the importance of the character coming to the fore, shows post-conversion ties to her Jewish heritage³¹². The comfort that Stein voices stemming from her faith in God shows her to be free of the Catholic and most Protestant belief of the time that Christians only could be saved and see God's face in the Kingdom of Heaven³¹³.

The authorities were made aware of Stein's Jewish heritage in April 1938 and following the November Pogrom Edith Stein moved to the Carmel in Echt in the Netherlands. The occupation of the Netherlands in Spring 1940 brought Edith Stein once more in danger and it is in this atmosphere that she wrote the dramatic dialogue 'Conversation at Night' for the birthday celebration on June 13, 1941, of Mother Antonia a Spiritu Sancto, then prioress of the Echt Carmel³¹⁴. This was not the first dramatic piece written by Stein, she had a feeling for the physicality of drama and brought this quality to her prayer making her ideas graphic and memorable³¹⁵. Intercession fits well into drama with Stein's desire to stand up and stand for others. Once again, the parallel with the Virgin Mary is drawn, as was customary from medieval times, in the context of Esther's willingness to stand for her people, 'and if I perish I perish' (Est. 4:17), and Mary's *fiat* (Luke 1:38)³¹⁶. Stein moves the feminism of her day forward in her treatments of Esther and Mary anticipating both Christian and Jewish feminist thought which was to emerge after the Second World War³¹⁷. The drama begins with the Mother Prioress alone in her cell, she is woken with a start by the bell, a female figure enters with the words 'Peace be with you! Oh, don't be afraid!' reminiscent of the words of the Angel Gabriel at the Annunciation (Luke 1:30). Similarly, the Mother's reaction also brings to mind Mary in noticing that the visitor speaks 'mildly' with a 'peaceful' expression;

³¹¹ Ibid. Location 1834/3001.

³¹² Joyce Avrech Berkman, 'Esther and Mary', p.59.

³¹³ Ibid. p.60.

³¹⁴ Ibid. p.56.

³¹⁵ Joanne Mosley, *Edith Stein Modern Saint and Martyr*, Location 1879/3001.

³¹⁶ Mary Heidehues, 'Edith Stein Und Das Buch Esther: Eine Jüdische Oder Eine Katholische Esther?', p.81.

³¹⁷ Joyce Avrech Berkman, 'Esther and Mary', p.52.

the Mother mentions a longing for heaven in her heart. On the stranger expressing:

I have travelled far
From land to land and from door to door.
I am seeking lodgings.³¹⁸

The Mother kneels in submission in thinking that the stranger is the Virgin Mary to which the stranger replies:

I am not she
I am of her people, her blood,
And once I risked my life for this people.
You recall her when you hear my name.
My life serves as an image of hers for you.³¹⁹

It is evident within these lines that the connection between Esther and Mary are assumed and it does not take long for the Mother to identify her as Esther. The language continues with the Mother explaining:

Like our dear Lady, and like her,
Suddenly an unforeseen fate befell you³²⁰.

Esther continues the parallel referring to herself as a 'poor maidservant' and 'the poor maidservant of the Lord at the king's palace' and expresses that the salvation of her people was promised 'through Esther, his maidservant, from the hands of Haman.' Esther explains that she is travelling the world pleading for lodgings for her displaced people who are 'so scattered and trampled/That still cannot die', indicating that although historically often in exile her people momentarily are completely without a home. The chosen people remain alive in the middle of this dramatic world, central in the yet

³¹⁸ Edith Stein, 'Conversation At Night' in *The Collected Works of Edith Stein: The Hidden Life*, ed. by L Gelber and Michael Linssen, trans. by Waltraut Stein (Washington DC: ICS Publications, 2014), p.128.

³¹⁹ Edith Stein, 'Conversation At Night' in *The Collected Works Of Edith Stein: The Hidden Life*, p129.

³²⁰ Ibid. p.130.

incomplete salvation history, because God chose them and has not rejected them³²¹.

In the next section Catholic theology comes to the fore, with Esther explaining that after death she remained with Abraham, in a place of peace with the righteous, awaiting release to heaven which came with through the death and resurrection of Jesus; God proclaiming:

Come to me all you who have faithfully served
The Father and lived in hope
Of the redeemer; see, he is with you,
He fetches you home to his Father's
Kingdom.³²²

In this section, however, Stein also brings Judaism and Christianity together³²³ embracing their shared history; Stein's Catholic baptism did not end her Judaism but marked an ever-stronger relationship with her Jewish heritage and the seamless history that is evident between the two faith pathways³²⁴.

That Stein elevated Esther to be Mary's helpmate in saving her people demonstrates Stein's conviction that all holy people irrespective of religion have the ability to mediate between earthly and spiritual realms. Esther is thus a saint and, as has been shown, is revered as such in the Spanish-speaking world as well as in Eastern Orthodoxy³²⁵.

Esther then continues to describe how she saw the church growing out of her people and the Virgin Mary being crowned Queen of Heaven. From her position of grace 'the Mother ceaselessly pleads for her people/She seeks souls to help her pray' thus emphasising the intercessory power of Mary and also her heritage. There follow the lines:

Then only when Israel has found the Lord,

³²¹ Binggeli, Sophie. 2016. 'Edith Stein's Beitrage Zur Theologie Israels', in '*Alles Wesentliche Lässt Sich Nicht Schreiben*' *Leben Und Denken Edith Steins Im Spiegel Ihres Gesamtwerkes*, ed. by Andreas Speer and Stephen Regh (Deutschland: Verlag Herder), p.457.

³²² Edith Stein, 'Conversation At Night', p.129.

³²³ Joanne Mosley, *Edith Stein Modern Saint and Martyr*, Location 1944/3001.

³²⁴ Tonke Dennebaum < <https://www.edith-stein.eu/portfolio/ihr-judentum/> > [Accessed 11 August 2023].

³²⁵ Joyce Avrech Berkman, 'Esther and Mary', p.59.

Only then when he has received his own,
Will he come in manifest glory.
And we must pray for this second coming.³²⁶

Thus Stein continues with her dual mission of asking for help for her people but also educating Christian readers on the actual theological position of the Jews³²⁷. Stein, here, was ahead of her time given that on each Good Friday prior to the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) Catholics prayed for the conversion of the Jews to Christianity. The fact that both religions serve the same deity and both are waiting for the Messiah (one to arrive, the other to return), has since been recognised by the Catholic Church:

...the people of God of the Old and New Testament are tending towards a like end in the future: the coming or return of the Messiah ... the person of the Messiah is not only a point of division for the people of God but also a point of convergence.³²⁸

The Mother promises to take the intentions of the people of Israel to her heart, to pray and sacrifice secretly and in so doing find communion in 'my Saviour's heart'. Esther sees that the Mother has understood and is therefore able to take her leave; she promises that they will meet again:

When above the head of the Queen of Carmel
The crown of stars will gleam brilliantly,
Because the twelve tribes will have found their Lord.³²⁹

For Edith Stein it is clear that the chosen people of the old covenant will not simply be replaced by the church as the new healing community with the coming of the Messiah. The special relationship of Judaism to God will not be ended, God remains true to his covenant. And so she also interprets the post-new testament existence of the Jewish people against the background of their prominent role in salvation history. The old and the new covenant are in

³²⁶ Edith Stein, 'Conversation At Night', p.133.

³²⁷ Joanne Mosley, *Edith Stein Modern Saint and Martyr*, Location 1957/3001.

³²⁸ Joanne Mosley, *Edith Stein Modern Saint and Martyr*, Location 1972/3001. (Notes on the Correct Way to Present Jews and Judaism in Preaching and Catechesis in the Roman Catholic Church, < <http://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo/commissione-per-i-rapporti-religiosi-con-l-ebraismo-crre/documenti-della-commissione/en2.html>>.

³²⁹ Edith Stein, 'Conversation At Night', p.133.

continuity with one another - because of not in spite of the Christ event - the new covenant cannot be conceived without the old³³⁰. A Jewish reading would here be at odds as the idea of Stein/Esther/Mary interceding for the people or any form of self-sacrifice to take on the suffering of others is an anathema. Similarly, the thought that the people would be redeemed by Christ as saviour is also problematic. Esther's description of her encounter with Ahasuerus would appear to be taken from the Additions, described previously, extending the narrative from the Hebrew text. Heidehues argues, therefore, that Stein returns to her Jewish roots in this dialogue but in a way that reflects her Catholicism, she found an Esther present in her Bible but not the Jewish Bible³³¹.

The Catholic Church identifies Edith Stein with Esther and this is recognised in the Liturgy. During the Masses of both her beatification and canonisation, the Book of Esther provided the First Reading during the Liturgy of the Word. The Carmelite Missal also features readings from the Book of Esther on Edith Stein's Feast Day (9th August)³³². Saint Pope John Paul II referred to the Esther of the Additions in his homily and the prayer that is uttered by Esther in this section:

With Gods help and by sacrificing her own life Esther rendered a key contribution toward saving her people. Today's liturgy places this more than two-thousand-year-old prayer for help in the mouth of Edith Stein, a servant of God and a daughter of Israel in our century. This prayer became relevant again when here, in the heart of Europe, a new plan for the destruction of the Jews was laid out³³³.

Although canonising Edith Stein into the Catholic Church, Saint Pope John Paul II acknowledges the significance of Stein's heritage as she did so herself in her final years.

³³⁰ Tonke Dennebaum, *Freiheit, Glaube, Gemeinschaft* (Freiburg - Basel - Wien: Verlag Herder, 2018), p.296.

³³¹ Mary Heidehues, 'Edith Stein Und Das Buch Esther: Eine Judische Oder Eine Katholische Esther?', p.85.

³³² Joanne Mosley, *Edith Stein Modern Saint and Martyr*, Location 1858/3001.

³³³ John Sullivan, O.C.D., *Holiness Befits Your House* (Washington: ICS Publications, 2000), p.22.

5.6 21st Century CE - Deck of Esther – Beit Venezia



Queen Esther Playing Card, Re'ev Raban (c.1920)

Queen Esther previously made an appearance in a deck of cards designed by Re'ev Raban (1890-1970) a faculty member of the Bezalel School. The Bezalel School, an artistic movement as well as an Arts Academy, is characterised by a blend of Islamic and European design traditions³³⁴. This deck of cards, rich in visual language derived from Jewish iconography was produced in c.1920 in Palestine. Raban

³³⁵ employs symbols from Judaism in the place of suits, a pomegranate, a Star of David, a menorah and a fig leaf for hearts, diamonds, spades and clubs respectively. Raban, deeply invested in spirituality and myth, was interested in reviving Biblical stories as a way of strengthening Jewish identity³³⁶. His chosen queens were the Queen of Sheba, Bathsheba, Judith and Esther. The character cards of the fig-leaf suit in their initial iteration were Ahasuerus, Esther and Haman as the Jack. The Haman character would change in a more modern version with the Jack as Harbona, one of the king's eunuchs (Est. 7:9) and the suits the conventional symbols. Queen Esther is depicted sitting on a cushioned stool, clothed in highly decorative textiles and looking at herself in the mirror, a reference to her fabled beauty.

The Deck of Esther, an interpretation of the Book of Esther, is a collaborative artwork commissioned by Beit Venezia in 2018. The Beit Venezia is the home

³³⁴ Gould, Claudia, 'Playing Cards - the Jewish Museum', *Sound Cloud* <<https://soundcloud.com/thejewishmuseum/playing-cards>> [accessed 20 May 2023]

³³⁵ < <https://thejewishmuseum.org/collection/10011-playing-cards-artistic-palestine-play-cards>>

³³⁶ Gould, Claudia, 'Playing Cards - the Jewish Museum'.

of European culture situated in Venice which provides a gathering place for artists of all genres to be resident, engage with the history and heritage of Venice, and to create new works as a response. A planned residency for March 2020 was necessarily postponed, however, collaboration was made possible by modern technology and four artists worked together to produce the heart of the project, a deck of cards, as well as a book and an exhibition. The four artists are lead artist Jacqueline Nicholls with Tilla Crowne, Sophie Herxheimer and Mirta Kupferminc.

The four artists worked together to create a concept that would bridge the Book of Esther and the cultural entity that is Venice. A number of possibilities emerged, one being the importance of writing. Much of the dialogue in the Book of Esther is in actual fact correspondence; missives between Esther and Mordecai as well as messages across the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the Persian kingdom sent by horse. The bridge with Venice in this context is the importance of printing, by the late 15th century there were more than 400 printing presses in Venice, with printers arriving from Rome and Austria to practise their trade³³⁷. Jewish Venice was the heart of printing and the layout of the Talmud page, familiar to Talmud scholars internationally, was designed in Venice by Daniel Bomberg, a Christian Hebraist, based on the layout pioneered by the Soncino family printers³³⁸. A further bridge the artists considered between the Book of Esther and Venice was the Salon culture in the ghetto, the feasts and banquets in the Book of Esther mirroring this culturally very important element of Jewish society often hosted by women. An important hostess of the time was Sarra Copia Sullam (1592-1641), a writer and poet who famously developed a romantic correspondence with Ansaldo Cebà who himself had written an heroic poem on the sacred

³³⁷ Simmonds, Janet, 'Venice – A Traditional Printer At Work', *The Educated Traveller*, 24 July 2020. <<https://educated-traveller.com/2020/07/24/venice-a-traditional-printer-at-work/#:~:text=VENICE%20became%20a%20centre%20for,Venice%20supported%20business%20and%20trade.>> [Accessed 22 August 2023].

³³⁸ <<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/early-editions-judaic-treasures>>.

theme, *Ester*, which he considered 'lo pifi nobile parto dell'ingegno mio' ³³⁹. In the end, the artists decided to focus on the theme of Purim, the instructions of which Esther writes down at the end of the book, linking the idea of the casting of lots with the intermeshed history of Venice and gambling. Public gambling was made legal in Venice within specific parameters in 1172, literally between two war-looted pillars which had been rescued from the lagoon by the engineer Nicolò Barattieri. His reward was life-time licence for public gambling in this designated space³⁴⁰. By 1638, the Venice Casino was open – the oldest gaming house in the world. The choice of a deck of cards to present an interpretation of the Book of Esther, where God is not explicitly mentioned and everything appears to happen by chance, would thus seem apt.

The artists began with a close reading of the megillah itself over a period of six months, the text was then divided into four sections (one for each artist) and the character cards decided; Ahasuerus and Esther as the king and queen, Haman the Jack and Mordecai the ace. Minor characters, objects and significant points in the plot were depicted on the number cards. Although four distinct artistic languages are evident with each artist being assigned a suit, the colour palette used by each is limited and identical, black, shades of grey, white and red. The red used was a specified shade of cadmium sourced from the same company. The fifty-four cards tell the story of the entire megillah.

In approaching the work for the purposes of this study, the most relevant cards are the four depictions of Queen Esther which show her transfiguration during the course of the story. Artist and poet Sophie Herxheimer took the suit

³³⁹ the most noble child of my ingenuity (according to Google); Sarot, Eden, 'Ansaldo Ceba and Sara Copia Sullam', *Italica*, 31.3: 138, (Illinois: University of Illinois, 1954) <<https://doi.org/10.2307/476839>>, p.138.

³⁴⁰ Barbara Tasca, 'Venice City OF Gambling: Cards, Dice, And Unbridled Passion!', *Best Venice Guides.it*, 30 August 2021. <<https://bestveniceguides.it/en/2021/08/30/venice-city-of-gambling-cards-dice-and-unbridled-passion-you-can-learn-more-about-someone-in-one-hour-of-gambling-than-one-year-of-conversation-platone/?>> [Accessed 22 August 2023].



Queen Esther,
by Sophie Herxheimer*

of hearts and presented the introductory section of the narrative from the beginning of the text up to the beginning of chapter three luckily being spared a lot of the violence³⁴¹. The Esther we meet initially is a 'good girl', doing as she is told but also a woman of secrets³⁴². Herxheimer emphasises the aspect of Esther's hidden identity and there are many hidden aspects to Esther in the early stages of the narrative as she begins the journey from innocence to experience, poised to take ownership of her own power.

Esther is portrayed eyes down with fingers on her lips within a thicket of heart roses chosen for their duality: perfume and protection³⁴³. The roses are still in bud, yet to blossom, indicative of Esther's development at this point³⁴⁴, they also serve as an allusion to the secret courtyards of Venice³⁴⁵. The card has been created using a papercut method, the paper prepared by using the uniform red before cutting. This method is reminiscent of the decorative megillat from seventeenth century Italy, one of which is on display at the Jewish Museum, London³⁴⁶.

Papercut Scroll of Esther, Italy, 17th
Century (?)



Multidisciplinary artist, teacher and lecturer Mirta Kupferminc, based in Buenos Aires, created Esther, Queen of Clubs. This section of the narrative deals with crisis and episodes of conflict. Kupferminc focuses on the

³⁴¹ *The Deck of Esther* [Exhibition]. (JW3, London. 5 February 2023-2 April 2023).

³⁴² Jacqueline Nicholls, 'The Deck of Esther: The New Venice Megillah (Jacqueline Nicholls)', (YouTube, CSP Arie Katz, 2023), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MioefFgP_OY> [Accessed 1 May 2023].

³⁴³ *The Deck of Esther* [Exhibition].

³⁴⁴ Jacqueline Nicholls, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MioefFgP_OY>.

³⁴⁵ *The Deck of Esther* [Exhibition].

³⁴⁶ The Jewish Museum London, 129-131 Albert St, London NW1 7NB, (now closed).

psychology and personality of her Esther³⁴⁷ and an analogy is established between Queen Esther and Venice as “Queen of the Sea”. Queen Esther



Queen Esther, by Mirta Kupferminc*

stands peremptorily stepping into the treacherous waters. In Venice, the water can be treacherous, floods are a regular occurrence and even today there is a ceremony where they marry the Queen of the Sea to placate the waters³⁴⁸. Queen Esther is dressed in royal robes about to approach the king, taking the risky step into the unknown – will she live or will she not?³⁴⁹. Kupferminc includes, as a symbol of Eshter’s personality, the feet of *La Gradyva*, (a character from an

ancient Pompeian relief, which has been interpreted as “the woman who walks forward”, her feet outside the delimited space³⁵⁰, thus despite the risk she is taking, she is determined to enter the territory of the Palace³⁵¹ even without being called by the king³⁵². She is determined but also very vulnerable³⁵³. The artistic language, where doubles and hidden images have been drawn, transforms the ambiguity and sudden changes in the course of events in this section³⁵⁴.

The suit of diamonds fell to Tilla Crowne, a visual and installation artist whose work explores themes of identity, memory and brokenness³⁵⁵. The appeal of the motifs, symbolism and symmetry of traditional playing cards drew her to echo these in her illustrations³⁵⁶ with the use of brushes with black ink and red

³⁴⁷ Mirta Kupferminc, *The New Venice Esther* (Philadelphia: Print-O-Craft Press, 2023), p.116.

³⁴⁸ Jacqueline Nicholls, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MioeffgP_OY>.

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Mirta Kupferminc, *The New Venice Esther* (Philadelphia: Print-O-Craft Press, 2023), p.116.

³⁵¹ The Deck of Esther [Exhibition].

³⁵² Mirta Kupferminc, *The New Venice Esther*, p.116.

³⁵³ Jacqueline Nicholls, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MioeffgP_OY>.

³⁵⁴ The Deck of Esther [Exhibition].

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

³⁵⁶ Ibid.

watercolour. The use of the dual image enables the transformation of the character to be seen encapsulated on one playing card³⁵⁷. This is doubly appropriate given that the section concerned contains the resolution of the



Queen Esther, by Tilla Crowe*

story³⁵⁸. In the 'before' image, Queen Esther holds a glass but does not drink, she is very restrained and does not reveal herself or her purpose³⁵⁹. The motifs and patterns on the card reflect this hiddenness. The flower motif of the myrtle, the Hadasah, Esther's Hebrew name which means 'hiddenness' is restricted to the fabric of her dress³⁶⁰. She has dyed blond hair, a characteristic of those Venetian Jewish ladies who enjoyed the salon culture of the ghetto³⁶¹. As well as diamonds, most significantly, her dress features the moretta mask worn by ladies

in the casinos of the seventeenth century, as can be seen in the painting *The Ridotto*, by Francesco Guardi, 1746. These black, unadorned masks needed to be held in place by biting a button or pin, thus rendering the wearer mute³⁶². The 'after' image presents the revelation. The Hadassah is no longer a hidden motif but grows freely form and around the image of Esther. Her hair too, is freely flowing and dark roots can be seen as her natural colour becomes established. The diamonds on her dress have been transformed into Stars of David and she drinks with free abandon from her glass³⁶³.

The final iteration of Queen Esther is as Queen of Spades created by Jacqueline Nicholls. She is drawn, as the other spade characters, with relevant texts from the Book of Esther in the background³⁶⁴. From her initial

³⁵⁷ Jacqueline Nicholls, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MioefFgP_OY>.

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ The Deck of Esther [Exhibition].

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Jacqueline Nicholls, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MioefFgP_OY>.

³⁶² Ibid.

³⁶³ The Deck of Esther [Exhibition].

³⁶⁴ Ibid.



Queen Esther, by Jacqueline Nicholls*

appearance as an obedient younger cousin, Esther emerges as the writer of the book³⁶⁵. The story of her book is how she overcame her adversary and saved her people, Esther finds her voice, transforming into a woman of agency³⁶⁶. Queen Esther is depicted seated on a throne, fully in her power³⁶⁷. The image is based on the figure of justice found in the Doge palace in Venice³⁶⁸. She holds a sword in one hand which is transformed into a quill, emphasising her powerful position as a writer and issuer of decrees³⁶⁹. At her feet are a

dog and a lion both tamed and both representing King Ahasuerus.

A final card relevant to this study is the joker. God does not make an appearance in the Book of Esther but in the Deck of Esther he appears as the joker. Drawn as a 'heh' (H) for HaShem, the name which is written when not wanting to write the tetragrammaton, the letter has the three-pointed hat of the jester suggestive of the decorative calligraphy used in Torah script. Everything seems to happen by chance in the narrative and everything ends up 'upside-down' (mirrored in the Purim festival), God steps back to allow creativity and all he can do is laugh, as it is written: 'He who sits in Heaven shall laugh' [Psalms 2: 4] (Avodah Zarah 2b-3b)³⁷⁰.



The Joker, by Jacqueline Nicholls*

³⁶⁵ Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Ibid.

³⁶⁷ Jacqueline Nicholls, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MioefFgP_OY>.

³⁶⁸ Jacqueline Nicholls, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MioefFgP_OY>.

³⁶⁹ Ibid.

³⁷⁰ Hershey H. Friedman, 'Mesmerizing Narratives of the Talmud: In Which God Laughs, Satan Sulks, Elijah Rebukes, and Jesters Go to Heaven', *SSRN*, 2022, p.35; Jacqueline Nicholls, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MioefFgP_OY>.

The deck of cards is subtitled 'a shuffled and wordless book' and the exhibition, staged at JW3 in London (February – April 2023), was conceived along the same lines. The cards were reproduced on a giant scale and hung from the ceiling, at eye-level, in a shuffled (dis)order. The visitor could then walk through the cards 'endlessly shuffling and gambling their way through the story'³⁷¹.



Deck of Esther Exhibition, JW3, 2023

³⁷¹ The Deck of Esther [Exhibition].

Chapter 6 CONCLUSION

The foundational textual basis of major world religions, the bible is also a treasure trove of great stories, whose language and characters provide a cornerstone for Western cultural literacy³⁷²; our speech, literature and art are permeated by these stories, indeed, they work as 'an invisible glue that holds our diverse civilization together'³⁷³. This dissertation has used the example of the figure of Queen Esther to demonstrate how this legacy has been shared across cultures and centuries. It has been shown that the text has been read in different ways according to the differing lenses of Judaism and Christianity; these differences are reflected in the position of the Book of Esther in the Hebrew and Christian bibles³⁷⁴. The Hebrew Bible presents Esther in a group of five scrolls, each scroll associated with a festival, each serving as a stand-alone text relevant to their festival³⁷⁵. As a result, *Esther* is memorialised, as instructed (Est. 9:26-28), on an annual basis and provides a rich and joyful continuous cultural legacy. Kalimi suggests that there are further reasons for *Esther's* central position within Jewish reception history; firstly, as an example of the permanency of the covenant between Israel and God, secondly, the relevance to each generation irrespective of situation offering hope for redemption and salvation and finally, providing role models of leaders who always remember to whom they belong³⁷⁶. Indeed, Queen Esther is regarded as one of the seven prophetesses³⁷⁷. Jewish readings of Esther in this dissertation have been presented through evidence on the synagogue wall at Dura-Europos and in the New Venice Esther produced by Beit Venizia together with the accompanying exhibition in London. As part of the

³⁷² Patty Campbell, *Spirituality In Young Adult Literature: The Last Taboo*, (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), p.19.

³⁷³ Rivkah Walton, Contemporary Midrash: Living Sacred Text. *Sh'ma: A Journal of Jewish Ideas*. CLAL: the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership. Mar 21 1997: 3-5. <<https://www.bjpa.org/search-results/publication/8469>> [Accessed 24 August 2023], p.5.

³⁷⁴ Deborah W. Rooke, Handel's Israelite Oratorio Libretti, p.3.

³⁷⁵ Ibid. p.3.

³⁷⁶ Isaac Kalimi, *The Book Of Esther Between Judaism And Christianity*, p.339.

³⁷⁷ Ibid. p.339.

Christian tradition, the Book of Esther is placed as part of a continuous historical narrative³⁷⁸ appearing as an episode emphasising a historicising character. Thus, Esther's narrative moves from the parody of an isolated story to tragedy³⁷⁹. Further, Christianity neither adopted the festival of Purim, nor gave it a prominent place in the liturgy, therefore denying the call for annual remembrance or grappling with the significance of the narrative in contemporary settings³⁸⁰. Despite these misgivings Queen Esther has found a place in Christian reception history and these have been demonstrated through the typological lens of the 'Mirror of Salvation' and the commercial eyes of John Everett Millais' portrait 'Esther'. The collision of Jewish and Christian worlds has been presented via an examination of *Santa Ester's* place among the *conversos* of the Americas and Edith Stein's portrait of Esther in 'Conversation at Night'. Mary E. Mills suggests that different readers produce competing views and that characters thus provide a parallel to real life events³⁸¹, both of these portraits of Esther evolved or were produced under extreme circumstances and provide audiences with a complex intermingling of Jewish and Christian readings. The strength of the character of Esther is that her behaviour can be mirrored by the beholder, she presents noble courage and clever thinking, and her behaviour exemplifies loyalty and its rewards³⁸². These traits can be adopted by individuals irrespective of beliefs; thus, Esther has inspired individuals across disciplines giving hope and solace to the marginalised.

*Deck of Esther images printed with permission from Print-O-Craft Press

³⁷⁸ Deborah W. Rooke, *Handel's Israelite Oratorio Libretti*, p.3.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.* p.8.

³⁸⁰ Veronika Bachmann, 'The Esther Narratives As Reminders – For Jews And For Christians', *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe*, vol. 47, no. 1, 2014, pp. 117–26. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42751219>. [Accessed 22 Aug. 2023], p.119.

³⁸¹ Mary E. Mills, *Biblical Morality: Moral Perspectives In Old Testament Narratives*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p.78.

³⁸² Mary E. Mills, *Biblical Morality: Moral Perspectives In Old Testament Narratives*, p.75.

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