Esther Through the Centuries

Jo Carruthers

Esther
Through the Centuries

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For my Father
Bernard Ashton Smith
1928–2004

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Series Editors' Preface

The Blackwell Bible Commentaries series, the first to be devoted primarily to the reception history of the Bible, is based on the premise that how people have interpreted, and been influenced by, a sacred text like the Bible is often as interesting and historically important as what it originally meant. The series emphasizes the influence of the Bible on literature, art, music and film, its role in the evolution of religious beliefs and practices, and its impact on social and political developments. Drawing on work in a variety of disciplines, it is designed to provide a convenient and scholarly means of access to material until now hard to find, and a much-needed resource for all those interested in the influence of the Bible on Western culture.

Until quite recently this whole dimension was for the most part neglected by biblical scholars. The goal of a commentary was primarily, if not exclusively, to get behind the centuries of accumulated Christian and Jewish tradition to

one single meaning, normally identified with the author's original intention. The most important and distinctive feature of the Blackwell Commentaries is that they will present readers with many different interpretations of each text, in such a way as to heighten their awareness of what a text, especially a sacred text, can mean and what it can do, what it has meant and what it has done, in the many contexts in which it operates.

The Blackwell Bible Commentaries will consider patristic, rabbinic (where relevant), and medieval exegesis, as well as insights from various types of modern criticism, acquainting readers with a wide variety of interpretative techniques. As part of the history of interpretation, questions of source, date, authorship, and other historical-critical and archaeological issues will be discussed; but since these are covered extensively in existing commentaries, such references will be brief, serving to point readers in the direction of readily accessible literature where they can be followed up.

Original to this series is the consideration of the reception history of specific biblical books arranged in commentary format. The chapter-by-chapter arrangement ensures that the biblical text is always central to the discussion. Given the wide influence of the Bible and the richly varied appropriation of each biblical book, it is a difficult question which interpretations to include. While each volume will have its own distinctive point of view, the guiding principle for the series as a whole is that readers should be given a representative sampling of material from different ages, with emphasis on interpretations that have been especially influential or historically significant. Though commentators will have their preferences among the different interpretations, the material will be presented in such a way that readers can make up their own minds on the value, morality, and validity of particular interpretations.

The series encourages readers to consider how the biblical text has been interpreted down the ages and seeks to open their eyes to different uses of the Bible in contemporary culture. The aim is to write a series of scholarly commentaries that draw on all the insights of modern research to illustrate the rich interpretative potential of each biblical book.

John Sawyer
Christopher Rowland
Judith Kovacs
David M. Gunn

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Introduction

In 1988 Margaret Thatcher decided to read through the entire Old Testament and reported daily to her staff on her progress. Hugo Young in his biography, *One of Us*, explains that her attraction to the Book of Esther fitted with her propensity for 'vacuuming up the facts':

> What was the only book in the Bible that did not mention God? she challenged them one day, and beamed with pleasure when nobody else knew it was the Book of Esther. But her eye was caught mainly by the biblical accounts of vengeance. 'It is a very *gory* book', she noted. ([1989] 1991: 427)

Young's account here demonstrates the relative ignorance about Esther in British culture, or at least as far as Thatcher's staff can be taken as representative. Her own response is typical in its pub quiz appropriation of the fact of Esther's lack of religious content. People who struggle to recall the story (those few who may at

some time have read it, like Thatcher) can often recite this single detail. The 'facts' are simple to recite: it doesn't contain any mention of God or any explicit religious activity; it is one of only two books named after a woman; it is the only book not to be represented in the Dead Sea Scrolls; it is one of the books Luther expelled from the canon (Martin Luther, *Table Talk* XXIV, cited in Moore 1982: 370).

Such celebrity overshadows profound engagement with Esther's storyline. When it is alluded to, it is often in the following conveniently succinct terms: a Jewish girl becomes queen, and when her people's lives are under threat, she risks her own life by appearing before the king, who offers her anything she requests, even half the kingdom. Janet L. Larson, in her biblically informed analysis of *Bleak House*, dismisses the Book of Esther as a 'fairytale' narrative, 'on the level of Cinderella' (1983: 133), an ascription echoed by Esther Fuchs (1999: 77). Although Thatcher's response is shaped by her own blood-curdling preferences, her foregrounding of the 'gory' elements challenges this simple fairytale frame. In fact what attracts readers to Esther seems to be precisely the book's complexity, and one suspects that such a reductive summary would have been considered puzzling only a century ago.

Part of the most influential book in Western culture, Esther is notably obscure. Modern commentaries are quick to trace its interpretative history and importance in Jewish tradition (as the source for the popular festival Purim) but simply skim over its significance in Christian contexts. Its interpretative history is little known, especially when compared to an equally problematic book such as Ecclesiastes – the bibliography in the recently published study in this series includes a whole section for studies of its reception history. This study, in contrast, is the first book dedicated to the interpretative history of Esther.

Why Reception?

Esther is enriched by its reception in many ways. Because it is such a difficult book, commentaries are central to its existence as religious communities depend upon secondary writings to make sense of it. The vast majority of writers and artists respond to Esther as 'an uninviting wilderness', as B. W. Anderson has named it (see Moore 1982: 130–41). On the one hand, they see the book as a challenge to solve or to tame, and they subject it to the norms and expectations of their own society. On the other hand, it is precisely Esther's strangeness that other readers appropriate for its subversive potential. For those on the margins of orthodoxy, there is something alluring about this wilderness text that promises an alternative perspective from the mainstream, a heterodoxy to be tapped into for seditious means.

Unearthing Esther's reception history is much more than an exercise in curiosity. Ignorance of how Esther has been appropriated in culture at large – how it has circulated and which debates and ideas it has informed – has led to critical ignorance of what the book may have signified to its readers. This has directly influenced naive readings of the biblical book itself as merely a fairytale, or as in the explanation given by the Oxford World Classics edition of *The Scarlet Letter*, which asserts that Esther 'was a homiletic exemplum of sorrow, duty, and love' ([1850] 1990: 275). As is apparent in later chapters, this tripartite description in no way represents what Esther *was* to the *Scarlet Letter*'s readers. Such narrow interpretations obfuscate more intriguing interpretative potentials and do not answer the question of why Esther is so attractive to so many artists and writers.

The gulf between contemporary responses to Esther and its past readings is remarkable. Esther is often overlooked in contemporary feminist scholarship, dismissed as a symbol of female submission (there are, of course, exceptions). Alice L. Laffey, for example, comments that 'buried in Esther's character is [. . .] full compliance with patriarchy' (cited in Fox [1991] 2000: 1). Esther would indeed be invoked as a model of female submission, but more often than not (and certainly outside theological contexts) she represented the sexually problematic woman, the heterodox woman and even the warrior woman. Contemporary negligence is challenged and undermined by such a colourful reception history, and this commentary hopes to inspire the modern, lacklustre Esther with its more stimulating historical readings.

Thatcher's staff's ignorance of Esther belies how popular the story is in Jewish cultures – and especially America – for whom Esther is made familiar through the annual, joyful celebration of the Purim festival. As Goldman has remarked, Esther is 'among the generality of Jews, the best known of all the Books of the Bible' (1952: 193). Indeed, references to Purim are replete in American popular culture – from *Sex and the City* to the 2006 film *For Your Consideration* – and make Esther a household story.

The meaning found 'in' the book in standard commentaries – which are interested in what Esther means and, more specifically, what it meant in its original context and to its original readers – is elusive in the case of Esther. The most commonly proposed interpretation, God's providential care for his people, is absent from the text itself because of its lack of divine reference. Although clearly an extraordinary biblical book, Esther only makes more obvious the dependence on reception common to readers' experience of all biblical books – and especially the religious reader who is guided by a theological framework for interpretation. For centuries devout readers have automatically turned to their commentaries and concordances to find out what the Bible 'means'. Although set apart in theological terms, in practice it has always been dependent upon explanations extraneous to it.

Reception studies have highlighted the tricky enterprise of working out exactly what happens when we read and what we purport when we talk about a text's *meaning*. It is a question of apparent concern to the Book of Esther, itself full of writings: an edict commanding female obedience, a death sentence, an *aide-mémoire*, an edict bringing reprieve from death (see pp. 244–9). And it has been a prominent question in academic subjects that deal with interpretation. In the field of Literary Studies, focus has moved from locating meaning in the author's intention to a formalism of locating meaning solely within the text, to identifying the reader as the locus of meaning (the most popular approach in theoretically explicit biblical reception studies to date such as Yvonne Sherwood's *A Biblical Text and its Afterlives: The Survival of Jonah in Western Culture*, 2000). The difficulties of this project are illustrated in Alice Bach's contention that the 'creation of meaning arises in the intersection between text and reader', an essentially dialogic relation. She nonetheless goes on to privilege one party: 'scholars have learned to focus on the reader rather than upon the author or the text itself to understand how meaning happens' (1999: xxiv). Although it is tempting to identify a single source for meaning (author, text or reader), it is important to keep the 'intersection' that Bach initially speaks of in an, albeit uncomfortable and inevitably blurred, focus. Ken Hirschkop insists on 'the intersubjective quality of all meaning', in relation to Bakhtin's notion of dialogism, an 'inter' that he asserts is 'not a limitation but the very condition of meaningful utterance' (1999: 4). Bakhtin's theories helpfully articulate language's and meaning's inherently social character; to understand how Esther has been *meaningful*, it is necessary to divorce meaning from a cold abstraction and instead to recognize the dynamic process of the performativity of the text.

To privilege the reader is to misunderstand the process of reading itself, a frustratingly fleeting and difficult-to-trace event. Jacques Derrida, referring to the take-up of a particular piece of writing in *Limited Inc*, describes it as performance, and more specifically as 'structure, event, context', a triad that keeps in tension the inextricable affect of text, the eventness of reading and the constraining context (1988: 43). For Walter J. Ong the understanding of language as an activity – as something that *does* – is inherent in Hebraic linguistics and conceptualization: 'The Hebrew *dabar* which means word, also means event' (1982: 74). The idea that texts are not dead things, brought alive by reading, but that they act and achieve effects, is therefore potentially suggested by the semantics of the biblical language itself. Implicit in the intersubjective nature of meaning is the text's productive role. As material objects, texts are imbued with differing degrees of authority, created within social contexts in which power relations are an inherent and essential element. Bakhtin describes texts as 'historically concrete and living things' (1981: 331), embedded within the world, imbued with power and effectivity.

No text can be considered apart from authority, because even its absence – marked by context, genre, format or status to give only a few examples – invites a particular way of reading. Writing is not an unproductive enterprise, but, as Edward Said has suggested, 'ideas, cultures, and histories cannot seriously be understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied' (1994: 5). The workings of texts within Esther illustrate this principle. The deathly edict, because of its proclamation by the king, is *represented* as monologic (with a singular significance), with alternative interpretations constrained by the authority of the empire (see Bakhtin 1981: 331). The Jews cannot contest the interpretation that will result in their annihilation. This monologism is possible because the writer of this specific text at this specific time can manipulate his knowledge of the cultural codes regarding language, determining interpretation. It also positions the entire Persian army in the 'open space' in front of the text: a rather impassable obstacle to free play of interpretation. Esther and Mordecai respond to the text's authority and meaning as a socially constructed condition and simply create a new context for the first edict to be read within. The activity authorized by the decree is no longer the slaughter of defenceless Jews, but becomes the authorization of a risky venture: attacking a lawfully military enemy. The enigma posed by the attempts of Esther and Mordecai to reverse this irreversible decree, and their success, reveals the mutual power of text and context: the subject of this study.

The interpretations analysed in this book are not offered as pure registers of their cultural and historical location, but approached as individual and uniquely motivated responses to this specific biblical text, grappling with its authority. Readings from shared historical and cultural contexts are shaped by a variety of identifiable as well as undetectable constraints that conform to, modify or contest mainstream or dominant cultural norms. Interpretations are therefore not necessarily completely locked within the dominant ideological framework from which they emerge. Patterns, trends and similarities are nevertheless often observable. Parallel interpretations and appropriations are, of course, often contradictory. Although Esther is cited as an exemplar of nationalist impulse, it has, as Jon Levenson points out, a 'complete lack of interest in the land of Israel' (1997: 14). Can such a divergence in readings be explained by polyvalence, that it can 'mean' – or be made to mean – anything? To insist that any piece of writing can be interpreted in an infinite number of ways may be a fact of linguistics; far more interesting are the limited ways in which a piece of writing has been meaningful in specific contexts. As such, a reception history confronts real readers and their contexts in relation to a story, and tries to grasp why and how it is read in certain ways, for certain purposes, at certain times.

Readers will inevitably be selective in whether they privilege the stabilities or instabilities of the text. Timothy K. Beal in his *The Book of Hiding: Gender,*

Ethnicity, Annihilation and Esther, is concerned with the 'ambiguities of ethnic and gender identity, and with the problematics of political orders based on those identities' (1997: ix). Such a destabilized taxonomy incurs anxiety in many of the book's readers, who desire clearer, dogmatic application. While Beal can assert that the characters 'exceed the identities that frame [them]' (2), other readers are simply blind to the blurring of identity. A major project of this study will be to dwell on those readers who desire clear messages and delineations of doctrine 'to improue' or 'to instruct' (2 Tim 3:16), and the textual acrobatics that readers have to perform to negotiate the text's instabilities.

Although ostensibly about readers, this study is nonetheless also always about Esther itself. The cacophony of voices that respond to Esther in sermon, commentary, painting, novel, drama and poem do not flatten out beside one another into a featureless landscape of noise. Instead, different voices are brought into tension – a tension that inevitably provokes our own judgement and discernment as to which voices resonate most harmoniously with the story itself. Esther is not lost in a sea of responses equally reasonable and resonant; instead, responses reveal misogyny, racism and parochial interests, and are at times genuinely thought-provoking. As already noted, engagement with biblical texts always occurs within a context of authority – the commentator quotes in order to back up an argument; the misogynist cites to demonstrate women's depravity; the novelist alludes in order to create webs of meaning. And as the Book of Esther's focus is the court – with its faithful and manipulative ministers, resolute and rebellious women, incompetent king, and threatened minorities – insular interpretation is perhaps inevitable. Edward Said has insisted that 'Culture [. . .] is a source of identity, and a rather combative one at that' (1994: xiii), an assertion pertinent to the readers of Esther.

It is easy to see the appeal of the story for creative response. Esther's potentially fatal approach to the king provides great drama. Its lack of psychological depth leaves tantalizing questions of motivation that invite speculation. Michael V. Fox comments that it is the writer's 'sharp and subtle craft' that makes the characters at least 'intriguing to adults' ([1991] 2000: 1). In the hands of artists the story's drama is heightened, and it easily becomes a story of the triumph of love (although love is never mentioned), or of female beauty over male brutality.

This study will work through the Esther story to give both an idea of the major trends of the reception of scenes and characters as well as dwelling on those specific interpretations and depictions that are of particular interest because they are either especially inventive, curious or clever. Those familiar with the Jewish tradition may be less aware of Esther's place in Christianity, and vice versa. Taking into consideration its marginal status in Christian and Western cultures, I have therefore assumed no prior knowledge of Esther beyond a reading of the story (itself not unproblematic because of its different ver-

sions). Esther's marginal status in the Christian tradition means that theological engagement with the book has been sporadic. It will be apparent that key periods of theological activity and major theologians are under-represented. As a marginal book, Esther was rarely commented on at length by Christians, Catholic or Protestant, and Jewish tradition is shaped by the dominant frame of Purim. It is therefore unavoidable that this study is full of theological writings that are as obscure as the biblical book itself. That it focuses more on literary writings undoubtedly stems from my own interest in this area, but it is also representative of the book's own cultural status as marginal: it seems to have had more popular, as opposed to institutional, take-up. My specific interest in the literary reception of Esther (in its widest sense to include writings such as sermons and commentaries) in the early modern and modern periods undoubtedly dominates the commentary. This study provides a summary of Esther's reception to inform further and more in-depth analysis, and also includes examples of detailed readings. It is necessarily selective, and it is in the nature of an ambitious project such as this that there will be plenty of areas for others to improve upon and delve more deeply into.

An Irredeemable Book?

Timothy Beal calls the Book of Esther 'exotic, savage, violent, difficult to reach, difficult to map, dangerous, perhaps irredeemable' (1997: 5). In many ways its reception can be seen as a catalogue of attempts to redeem this strange and difficult book. From the very beginnings of commentary, writers have sought above all to make this book make sense. Its problems, although conveniently ignored by some readers, are the seed from which its reception history springs. The book's lack of religious content, instead of thwarting religious readings, makes it a fascinating spur to theological creativity. Of course, obscurity and opacity have never presented any real challenge for the religious reader, who is always keen to identify, and thereby be the possessor of, a special key that will unlock the mysteries of faith. The Irish Baptist minister Alexander Carson claims in the early nineteenth century that to learn to read Esther provides the secret to reading the world, so that in it 'we have an alphabet, through the judicious use of which we may read all the events of every day, of every age and nation. This is a divine key, which will open all the mysteries of Providence' (1835: 7). As such, for many, Esther is merely a hurdle to be overcome in the effort to fit the Scriptures and the world into a neat, coherent whole.

Esther's status as the story of Purim makes it immediately meaningful for Jews, but Christianity has little rationale for the book's existence in the canon in

the first place. As Ann Sidnie White pithily puts it, its 'indifference to religious practices, its dubious sexual ethics, and its female heroine continued to baffle commentators, who wished to make the book conform to the expectations of a Western Christian audience' (1992: 126).

Content, date, authorship and genre are all the subject of intense debate. It is one of Bickerman's *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (1967), and Celina Spiegel has called it 'one of the strangest books in the biblical canon' (1994: 191). It is simply a book about which little is known, the lack of verifiable historical evidence for (or against) the story's events causing consternation to historicist commentators especially. D. P. Schötz regards the 'problems of lower criticism in Esther as the most complicated in the Bible' (Moore 1982: lxiii). Levenson is typical of religious readers who, despite its dubious historical status, claim that it 'need imply no impairment of the religious or literary worth of the book' (1997: 44).

Esther's problematic status is exemplified in the debates over its canonicity: it is the only text absent from the Dead Sea Scrolls, although this makes sense considering that the Qumran community did not include Purim in its liturgical calendar, illustrating how closely its canonicity is tied to its festival (see Abegg et al. 1999: 2). Esther appears in the earliest canonical list, a Talmudic work from the second century, and Carey Moore considers Josephus' paraphrase in his *Jewish Antiquities* to intimate canonical status ([1971] 1984: xxiii). Yet rabbinical writings reveal anxieties about its inclusion. The Talmud questions its inspiration – that the scroll does not 'make the hands unclean' is offered as evidence against it in *Megillah* 7b. When Esther asks for her book to be included, they argue that it will 'incite the ill will of the nations' (*Meg* 7a), recognizing the antagonistic potential of its representation of triumphant Jews. In the early church Athanasius includes it alongside Judith, Tobit and others as 'edifying reading' and the Greek MS58 in the Larger Cambridge Edition of the LXX has 'Esther: not canonical'. Those Church Fathers who did accept Esther invariably listed it last (see Moore [1971] 1984: xxv and Clines 1984a: 255). In general terms, Esther was canonical in the West, whilst often not in the East (see Moore [1971] 1984: xxvi for map). Its canonicity can only be considered unquestioned in the fourth century at the Council of Hippo in 393 and Carthage of 397. Its marginal status has not overwhelmed its appeal for readers, and even Luther's repulsion is questioned by H. Bardtke, who notes Luther's frequent allusion to it in his other writings (cited in Moore [1971] 1984: 117f).

Of particular relevance for a study of this book's reception is the question of *which* Esther is being appropriated. Jewish and Protestant communities use the ten chapters of the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT), but Catholic Bibles take as their source a Greek version of Esther, in the Septuagint (LXX), finished no later than 78 BCE (there is a second Greek version. For more on the Additions, see Moore 1977; Fox [1991] 2000: 9–10; Bush 1996: 9; *A New Catholic Commen-*

tary [1969] 1981: 407). Its textual variances have proved galling to those readers who equate authenticity with the identification of origins. The LXX more or less follows the MT story, but has six extra episodes: a prophetic dream that Mordecai has before the action begins (A) and its explanation at the end of the story (F), prayers by both Mordecai and Esther (C), the text of the genocidal edict (B) and that of the edict that saves the Jews (E), and Esther's 'highly dramatic appearance before the king' (D), an alternative version of Esther 5 (Moore 1982: lxiii). That the Additions fit uneasily into the MT text is reflected in the *New Catholic Commentary*'s ambivalent assertion that, even when read in chronological order, 'a coherent, if not always consistent, tale is unfolded' (407). Catholics consider them deutero-canonical (part of a secondary canon), whilst for Protestants they are apocryphal (literally 'hidden', outside the canon; on their status see Moore [1971] 1984: lxiv and Levenson 1997: 27).

The story exists in multiple – and even contradictory – versions, because Bibles present the canonical and apocryphal material differently. Most Protestant and Jewish Bibles contain only the canonical Esther, whilst Catholic and some Protestant Bibles contain a mixture of canon and Apocrypha. The relation between the 'Additions' and canon are best understood by analogy to DVD format, with its 'main feature' and 'extras'. These additional scenes or deleted scenes – whether you consider them supplementary or extricated – contain episodes that can be watched in isolation from the main feature but that ultimately transform the whole narrative. The rewriting of Esther's approach to the king might be thought of as the 'director's cut' of chapter 5. In it the queen faints when she enters the throne room, and events take an explicitly supernatural turn as God intervenes to make the king accept Esther's appeal.

Bibles edit the material in diverse ways. The Douai–Rheims Bible, for example, follows Jerome's Vulgate in placing all apocryphal material after the canonical material, obscuring chronological veracity. After the story's dénouement and celebration of Mordecai, the story jumps back to a dream that pre-empts the narrative's trajectory (its mystery dissolved and its later explanation unnecessary now that the story is known). What is interesting about these scenes for the purposes of this commentary – this is not, after all, the place for investigating the different versions' claims to authenticity – is when they are chosen above the canonical scenes and why. The frequency with which Protestants turn to these 'unauthoritative' (yet ironically more religious) Additions to support their spiritual readings is striking. These Additions also influence *Esther Rabbah,* which contains prayers by Mordecai and Esther as well as a rewriting of Esther's entrance scene, taken from Josippon, considered to be a Hebrew translation of the LXX (see Moore 1977: 215).

Although relished by Thatcher, the book's 'gory' elements have troubled many readers. Violence, hardly a rare topic in the Hebrew Bible, is perhaps more

striking in Esther because of the book's ostensible femininity. Barry Walfish describes the violence as 'an embarrassment': 'Many Christian scholars and not a few Jews, even in our century, are offended by its particularistic, nationalist tone and especially by the bloody scenes of revenge and the joyful triumph of the Jews over their enemies' (1993: 75). S. L. Driver considered it to be 'further removed from the spirit of the gospel than any other Book of the OT [*sic*]', an opinion that Elliot Horowitz considers to be representative of a 'liberal-Anglican consensus' in the late nineteenth century (cited in Horowitz 2006: 27). L. E. Browne, in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, presents an extreme and perhaps the most fervently hostile reading of Esther. Esther is the biblical equivalent to the 'villainous rogue', and in it there is 'no noble character', all are 'actuated by the basest motives of pride, greed and cruelty'. It is 'a picture of unredeemed humanity' ([1962] 1975: 381). He explains its popularity by its secularism (ibid.), even blaming Jews for the genocidal hostility they experience, 'either for economic reasons, or because, owing to peculiar food laws, etc., they did not mix socially with others' (382). Stephen Sykes is rare in celebrating Esther's problematic character, arguing that it is 'precisely in such grubby contemporary circumstances that God is bringing about the work of redemption and liberation among us' (Foreword in Beckett 2002: vii).

Jewish Tradition

Whilst there is little reference to Esther in Christian writings until the medieval period, in Jewish circles Esther has been consistently popular. Philip Alexander explains that Purim's popularity with the rabbis (compared to the sparse attention given to Hannukah) is because they deemed it 'politically much less dangerous' as it celebrated Jewish deliverance in the Diaspora. Hanukkah, on the other hand, celebrated 'deliverance in *Eretz Israel*', linking it to 'Jewish nationalism and messianism' (2001: 336). Purim may have been viewed as innocuous by the rabbis, yet it has certainly become bound up with precisely those problematic qualities that Alexander cites.

Although the Talmud emphasizes the book's cosmic application (invoking Psalm 98 to read Esther as a story of the 'salvation of the Lord', *Meg* 11a), for many, Esther's breaking of dietary laws, her marriage to a Gentile and her seamless assimilation into Persian society caused uneasiness. The Talmud dedicates a whole book (*Megillah*) to the discussion of Esther and Purim, and it is the only biblical book to have two Targums (expansive Aramaic translations dating from no later than the sixth century). The intricate discussion concerning the observation of the Purim festival and mitzvot in *Megillah* show that many activities

now associated with the festival had already become established in the early centuries. It is celebrated in the Jewish calendar in the month of Adar, around springtime, and the story of Esther is read aloud in both the evening and morning synagogue services. Following the narrative detail of the story itself in 3:13 and 8:11, it is stipulated that young and old, men, women and children must listen. As such, the story bears an uncommon weight upon the celebrations and, mimicking Jewish midrashic interpretation, details of the story become elaborated and translated into specific observances. So, to illustrate, the tropes of reversal found within the story – the fall of the villain, Haman, and the rise of the good Jew, Mordecai, to prominence – are enacted in the topsy-turviness of the day. The festival has a carnival atmosphere, as students take the place of their teachers to mock and create anarchy; men dress as women (and less often vice versa), and Jews dress as non-Jews.

In both text and festival, these symbols of reversals are interpreted theologically: the world turned upside down celebrates Jewish chosenness and the providential care of God over his chosen people (as seen later in this introduction). For many Jewish communities it is simply an excuse for a party. Many Americans are familiar with its street parties, the giving of gifts, a time when Hamantaschen (three-cornered pastries) fill the bakeries, and children (and often adults) dress up.

The Purim synagogue service frames how the story of Esther is interpreted. Deut 25:17–19 is read on the Sabbath before Purim, *Shabbat Zakhor*, in order to tie the story to God's injunction to the Jews to 'Remember (*zakhor*) what Amalek did', attacking them on their journey from Egypt to Canaan (Ex 17). Because Haman is called the Agagite, he is understood to be a descendant of the last Amalekite king, Agag (see 1 Sam 15), the Amalekites functioning as a prototype of all enemies of the Jews (see Goodman [1949] 1988: 423–4; Horowitz 2006: ch. 6). The story inspires a memorial, and even for some a provocation to hatred. Rabbi Yitzchak Sender, head of a Yeshiva in Illinois, asserts that to remember Amalek is 'to make war upon him, admonishing them to hate him, to the end that the commandment may not be forgotten and our hatred for him may not be weakened or lessened with the passage of time' (2000: 24).

Esther is known as the *Megillah*, the scroll, and as such is pre-eminent amongst the five scrolls that are related to a festival: Canticle (Passover), Ruth (Shavuot, Feast of Weeks), Lamentations (9th Av) and Ecclesiastes (Sukhot, Tabernacles). The scroll, unusually, is well known for its elaborate decoration and illustration. Cecil Roth suggests that scrolls may have appeared as early as late antiquity (cited in Soltes 2003: 142), but extant scrolls date only from the early seventeenth century. As Ori Soltes explains, 'The issues that make it suspect as canon, most particularly the fact that the name of God is never mentioned [. . .], make its extensive visual decoration feasible' (2003: 142). Its popularity in Jewish communities was undoubtedly due to the folk nature of Purim that the book

narrates, but the commentaries themselves testify that extensive explanation was necessary in each generation for this exceptionally problematic book.

Barry Walfish argues that it was precisely Christian disinterest in the book that made it so attractive to Jewish medieval scholars, who could imbue it with their own significance (1993: 75). Esther became 'the prototype of all the many persecutors of the Jewish people', writes Goldman, 'a Book which exemplifies, vividly and concisely, the eternal miracle of Jewish survival' (1952: 193). Jewish interpretation is best known for its expansive and imaginative reworking in rabbinic literature, which has overshadowed the swathe of medieval Jewish exegesis on Esther, on which little work has been done beyond Walfish's impressive study. Yet Maimonides (1135–1204) even ranked it next after the Pentateuch in importance (Moore [1971] 1984: xvi). These commentaries differed from rabbinic writings because of their use of 'Peshat', a concern for contextual meaning and analysis of individual words, typical of the northern French commentators Rashi (1040–1105), Rashbam (Samuel b. Meir, *c.*1080–1174) and especially the Spanish Abraham Ibn Ezra (*c.*1089–*c.*1164) who also made use of parallel wordings in Arabic (see Walfish 1993: 14ff and Halivni 1991). Rabbinic sources were alluded to, but the medieval scholars' work was inevitably influenced by their philosophically dominated climate (see Walfish 1993: 27, 32). The late fifteenth century saw a proliferation of Esther commentaries linked, argues Walfish, to the increasing popularity of preaching in this period (ibid.: 5). In the sixteenth century as many commentaries were produced as in all the preceding centuries together (237, n. 14).

In modern Jewish exegesis Esther is as popular as its festival Purim, but it is notably important to Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox groups. Yosef Deutsch presents an example of modern Orthodox interpretation in his *Let My Nation Live: The Story of Jewish Deliverance in the Days of Mordecai and Esther*. He considers Esther and Mordecai in the context of the exile as 'two great Jewish people' who 'came forward to redeem the Jewish people and start the chain of events that would culminate in the reconstruction of the *Beis HaMikdash* and the return to Yerushalayim' (2002: xv–xvi). Deutsch explains that the threatened genocide spurred Jewish acceptance of the Oral Law. They had accepted the Oral Law at Sinai, he argues, only under duress. However, in the light of the Purim miracle, they accepted it willingly (334). Esther's story is therefore embraced because it underscores the importance of the Oral Law – the tradition of interpretation – passed on by scholars such as Deutsch.

Christian Tradition

The difficulties of the Book of Esther are only exacerbated for Christians. The Rev J. W. Niblock, Headmaster of London High School and occasional lecturer

at Pentonville Chapel, in 1837 gives a good catalogue of accusations against it: it contains no promise to the Church, makes no mention of the Gospel, has no type or prophecy of the Messiah, does not once introduce the name of God or recognize his providence, reveals none of 'those precious and fundamental doctrines' found elsewhere in the Old Testament and is not quoted in the New Testament (1837: 7).

Because Esther is rarely mentioned in the Church Fathers' writings, it has been hard to establish how seriously this book was taken in the early years of the Christian Church. Tertullian cites Esther as historical evidence of the extent of Nebuchadnezzar's kingdom ('from India to Ethiopia', Esth 1:1), but this says little about its sacred status for him. Catholic tradition embraces Esther as a prototype of Mary, and it is this emphasis that is found in the earliest Christian commentary by Rhabanus Maurus (for Middle Ages' commentary see Paton 1908: 104–18) and in material culture such as in the sculptures at Chartres Cathedral and the stained glass windows at St Chapelle, Paris (see Buchthal 1957 and Katzenellenbogen 1959). Perhaps the most celebrated reception of Esther is in Racine's 1689 play. He explains his choice of Esther when composing for the ladies of Saint Cyr because he thought it would be 'sufficiently easy' for him to dramatize without having to change even 'one of the circumstances however small of the Holy Scripture', something he would consider a sacrilege, but could 'fill up all my action with the scenes which God himself, so to say, has prepared' (Daril 1895: iv).

It is with the Reformation and the Protestant relegation of Mary that Esther becomes a puzzling member of the canon, and Protestant commentaries and sermons are rich sites for gleaning creative elaborations. In many instances Esther's significance is narrowed from any wide theological application to much narrower concerns: it becomes a site through which to comment upon monarchy, female nature or response to threat. It is also in the early modern period that Esther first becomes a significant subject for artistic appropriation. Rembrandt, Gentileschi, and Filippino Lippi, among others, are drawn to Esther, and depictions of Esther's approach to the king are extremely common and were the most popular image used in embroidery of the period (especially for use in marriage paraphernalia, see Frye 1999). It is in this Christian tradition that many of the creative works analysed in this study emerge.

Summary of Works

It will be helpful to provide a summary of the reception of Esther, with special attention to those works concentrated on in this study (I privilege selected pieces throughout the commentary in order to provide a sense of continuity

and comparison). I will be treating the Greek 'Additions' as the first responses to the MT Esther, focusing on the LXX because of its influence on the Vulgate and subsequent Catholic readers (which explains the dominance of the account of Esther fainting in her approach to the king). Carey Moore argues that they 'were created later to make Esther more "historical" (Additions B and E), more dramatic (D), or more "religious" (A, F, and C)'. White also sees them as attempts to 'compensate' for a 'lack of religiosity' (1992: 125).

The Additions' influence was not limited to Catholic reception. João Pinto Delgado, a Portuguese Marrano (crypto-Jew), includes Mordecai's dream in his Spanish long poem on Esther, published in Rouen in 1627, reflecting his familiarity with a Catholic, not Jewish, Bible ([1627] 1999: 43). Even Protestants are allured by the spiritual depictions of their biblical heroes, yet are rarely unambivalent. John Mayer, although he invokes Esther's prayer, explicitly argues that 'the adjections to *Ester* thus plainly contradicting the authenticall History, plainly shew the ignorance of him that made them' (1647: 64). Alexander Symington identifies overuse of God's name in the apocryphal Additions as 'significant proof' that they were written by a 'spurious writer' who, as such, would have taken care to 'avoid so marked an omission' (1878: 9).

Browne claims that the Additions 'add nothing to the understanding of the original book' ([1962] 1975: 381), an opinion with which White later concurs: 'the additions add nothing to the dramatic quality of the book and, in fact, lessen the impact of the heroine Esther' (1992: 127). Few Jewish or Protestant commentators give any explicit attention to the Greek versions, although Levenson includes them in full to serve an 'interfaith readership' (1997: 28) and values their historical witness to Second Temple Judaism (31, 135).

Talmudic and midrashic sources are cited consistently because of their ingenuity and their influence on nearly all later Jewish reception and many Protestant works as well. I refer mainly to *Megillah* in the Talmud (almost completely devoted to Esther) and the Midrash *Esther Rabbah*, two Targums (Rishon and Sheni), as well as the later, more popular collection of midrashic works, Ginzberg's *Legends of the Jews*. I rely on Barry Walfish's outstanding study of medieval Jewish commentary on Esther, *Esther in Medieval Garb* (1993).

Esther is hugely popular in Jewish communities. Philip Goodman's ubiquitous *Purim Anthology* (1949) and *Purim: The Face and the Mask*, published by the Yeshiva University Museum (1979) are rich sources for Purim objects and traditions for those interested in further study. At the Purim festivities, it became common to stage a play, a *purimshpil*, especially in Yiddish-speaking communities, many reworking the Esther story. *Megillot* (Esther Scrolls) that date from the seventeenth century, are also rich sources for rabinically influenced marginal images (see pp. 62–4). A fascinating source for how the story informed Jewish experience of exile is the poem by Delgado, who in 1627 publishes a