

TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN

ESTHER AND HER ROYAL PREDECESSORS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY

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K. G. F.

*For my mother, Kathy.*

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# Introduction

## **The Evolution of a Thesis<sup>1</sup>**

When I first arrived at Trinity my proposed project was to analyse women in the Deuteronomistic History (DH) who either committed or contributed to acts of violence. This encompassed a list of seven characters: Deborah and Jael (Judg 4-5), the nameless woman who dropped a millstone on Abimelech (Judg 9), Delilah (Judg 14-15), Bathsheba (2 Sam 11-12 and 1 Kgs 1-2), Jezebel (1 Kgs 19, 21, and 9) and Athaliah (2 Kgs 11) . After spending my first term investigating this topic, my research was not proving particularly fruitful. I discovered that scholars have been intrigued by these women for many years now, especially the women who feature in the book of Judges. I did not believe I had anything new or interesting to contribute to this conversation and I was struggling to find a way in.

Even so, I noticed there was one topic that consistently appeared in my research notes: issues concerning power dynamics. I felt that an act of violence from someone trying to survive in the midst of a war, like Jael, who is also doubly marginalized by her status as a woman and a foreigner, could not really be compared to an act of violence from a woman in a seat of power, such as Jezebel. I found it difficult to reconcile these characters, all of whom were from various walks of life. Furthermore, the number of women in the DH who fit into this category, and the secondary literature through which I would need to read, seemed like it might be too great for the time granted a doctoral thesis. As such, I decided to shift the scope of the project slightly.

Given that there is relatively little literature written about the royal women of the HB, changing the focus of my project from looking at women in the DH to looking

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<sup>1</sup> The purpose of the first section of the introduction is to help readers understand how this project came to be. I will not cite any works here in order to maintain the flow of the introduction. I will discuss all these topics in the pages that follow at which point I will show my work.



specifically at royal women seemed like a more promising avenue. The motif of violence would stay; the only change to the project would be the texts I would analyse. This adjustment meant I not only had a better possibility of contributing to current research, but also that I had fewer texts to analyse, making the project more realistic for the task at hand. Thus, I narrowed my research down to the four royal women who commit or contribute to violent acts in the Hebrew Bible (HB): Bathsheba, Jezebel, Athaliah, and Esther. Though the project at its outset was intended to focus on the DH, it seemed odd to exclude Esther, even though she sits in a collection of books outside of the DH. After all, her character fulfils the necessary requirements: she is a royal woman and the book of Esther itself concludes with a massive battle in which Esther plays a significant role. To include Esther, then, seemed logical considering the new scope of my project.

Before I could begin to research each individual character, though, I needed to build a foundation of the existing work on royal women and queenship in the HB. Most of the work done on this topic singles out the royal women in the DH. Esther is consistently left out of these discussions because her character reigns in the land to which she was exiled rather than in ancient Israel itself. Yet, Esther is the tale of a Jewish royal woman, told from a Jewish perspective. So, it seems she should be eligible for this conversation as she is another image of a queen in the tradition of Israelite queens. I made note of this inconsistency and moved on to the next phase of my research.

After reading about royal women in general I turned my attention to the individual women themselves, beginning with Bathsheba, and followed by Jezebel and Athaliah. There is relatively little written on all three of these women, especially Athaliah, who is often understood as a type of extension of Jezebel. The most prominent scholarly interest regarding Bathsheba is exactly how much she is to blame for David's and, later, Solomon's behaviour. Even feminist scholarship plays into this, feeling the need to come to Bathsheba's defence, often arguing that she is either a

helpless victim or some sort of manipulative mastermind. Jezebel receives a similar treatment in that it often hinges on the question of her influence upon Ahab and her level of responsibility regarding both the Naboth incident and Ahab's kingship as a whole. As I read these various interpretations of Bathsheba and Jezebel, I wondered if my time and effort would be better spent exploring other avenues to help me analyse their roles and characters.

I then turned my attention to Esther, with the royal women of ancient Israel's past hovering in the back of mind. As I was reading through various commentaries, articles, and books about Esther I was struck by how similar her story seemed at times to that of Bathsheba's. Both women are brought into their respective kingdoms in similar ways: at the behest of a king who is taking from what is not his, and then forced into an encounter with said king. Both women grow in agency as their narratives progress, going from passive to active. They ultimately become key players in pivotal moments where they must convince their kings to act for their respective kingdoms.

Bathsheba and Esther each have their own "guides." Bathsheba is guided by the prophet Nathan while Esther has her uncle Mordecai. Later, however, the women grow out of the need for their mentors and begin to make decisions on their own; decisions that would affect their kingdoms. Both Bathsheba and Esther seem to resemble Jezebel in this way toward the end of their narratives. While Jezebel, herself the daughter of a king, clearly understands how to wield her power from the time readers meet her, both Esther and Bathsheba must learn how to rule effectively as neither of them have the royal background that Jezebel has. It seems they are able to achieve Jezebel's level of expertise by the end of their narratives, as men begin to come to them either for help or for further instruction.

These connections seemed obvious to me and I was surprised no other scholars had noticed them. After giving it some thought, I realized no one had noticed these connections because Esther is excluded from the wider conversation of royal women

in the HB. How could these connections be made if scholars fail to see the most basic connection between Esther, Bathsheba, and Jezebel: that they are all royal women in the tradition of Israelite royal women? At this point my project began to shift from looking at royal women and violence to a narrative analysis of Esther alongside Bathsheba and Jezebel. However, before I could once again change the parameters of my project, I had to be sure that these connections were there and that I was not reading them into the text. To do so, I first had to establish if the text of Esther itself made any references to the DH, the body of literature in which Bathsheba and Jezebel reside.

The first two and most obvious connections I discovered are direct ones. In the beginning of the second chapter of the book of Esther readers find out that the two heroes of the story, Esther and Mordecai, are from the tribe of Benjamin, specifically the house of Saul – the first king of the Israelite monarchy. Many have noted this connection, and some have argued for similarities between Esther and Saul, as well as Mordecai and Saul. The second direct connection appears in the beginning of chapter three when we meet Haman, the enemy of Mordecai and the Jews. Readers are told he is the descendent of King Agag, with whom Saul had waged war at God’s command. In an act of mercy, King Saul spared King Agag’s life in direct opposition to God’s command. For this disobedience, and for keeping some of the spoils of the war, Saul is removed from his position as king. These are two strong connections to the DH and, interestingly, to a king. More allusions to 1 Sam 15 appear as the book of Esther continues, specifically near the end of each battle scene, which is punctuated by the refrain, “But they did not lay hands on the spoil” (9:10, 15). This recalls the command Saul disobeyed by taking some of the spoils from the war with King Agag (1 Sam 15: 20-21).

As I read on I noticed another connection to the DH, which most scholars note but do not analyse at length (if at all): the narrative ends with a regnal summary, a particular literary trope found only in the books of Kings and Chronicles. The language

and style of the regnal summary at the end of Esther models those found in the book of Kings. Thus, this regnal summary serves as another connection to the DH. Furthermore, much like the connection to Saul is a connection to royalty, the regnal summary is a connection to a body of literature that deals specifically with the monarchy and those ruling within it. This is important because the book of Esther also shares with the DH this great concern for and interest in monarchy, especially with the roles of Kings and Queens. A final, and perhaps the most important, similarity is that both the DH and the book of Esther are the only texts in the HB that deal at length with royal women. While a royal woman may occasionally emerge elsewhere in the HB (such as in the book of Daniel or Genesis) there are no other texts that are interested in their station and role within a monarchy. All these connections further encouraged me to consider Esther alongside Bathsheba and Jezebel and ensured me that the connections I noticed between the characters might be worth investigating.

Once I began the project, I noticed that reading Bathsheba and Jezebel alongside Esther also opened my eyes to insights on Bathsheba and Jezebel that I had never considered before. Bringing Esther into this conversation about royal women in the HB also helped me to see the significance of the characters of Abigail and Athaliah. So much so that my project took on final, though small, turn. While much of the focus remains on Esther, I ended up writing about all of these women and the connections I saw between them all. Esther, Bathsheba, Jezebel, and Abigail play the largest roles in the project, while Athaliah plays a smaller, but still significant, role. As no human is an island, neither is any human character in a text. All the characters come together to create a story. As such, I included discussions of other characters important to each respective narrative (such as Nathan, Nabal, and King Ahasuerus, to name a few).

I hoped to accomplish several things with this project. Firstly, I hoped that an analysis of these royal women could provide more insight into their characters. While the character of Esther is sometimes granted a full and interesting reading, many of the scholarly contributions regarding Jezebel and Bathsheba tend to be dichotomous:

they are either good or bad or, in the case of Bathsheba, simply naive. I wanted to show that there is a way to think more deeply about these characters and perhaps inspire others to take on similar tasks with other biblical characters, especially those characters who might not seem so significant.

Secondly, I hoped to gain some more insight on the role of biblical queens. Much of literature on this topic focuses on the inconsistent uses of the various Hebrew terms used to describe these royal women and tries to draw hard and fast lines around these terms. As a result, there are few attempts to sift out any type of understanding on queenship from these narratives. While the results of a narrative study of these women is by no means sufficient to answer this question, I hope it encourages others to investigate the question more or to think about it differently.

Lastly, I hope this project makes a small contribution toward honouring women throughout history, whose lives and work are often erased, neglected, belittled and whose characters are frequently dichotomized into the “whore/Madonna” paradigm. While the stories of the women I write about in this project are likely fictional, the way in which they have often been treated and presented can colour the way people think of women in general – both women throughout history and in the present day. Much has changed on this front since the advent of feminist scholarship within the field of biblical studies, and it has and will continue to grow. I hope my project can play a small part in this growth.

### **Primary Texts**

This study will focus on the intertextual connections between the characters of Abigail, Bathsheba, Jezebel, Athaliah, and Esther as found in the Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia (BHS). The scope of this project does not allow for a lengthy investigation of all versions of Esther with these women from the DH, though a study encompassing the LXX and the other Greek texts of Esther would be fascinating and

valuable.<sup>2</sup> I will refer to the LXX when helpful, especially regarding vocabulary or other linguistic concerns. Greek biblical interpretations can provide invaluable insights into the Hebrew texts as they are often its earliest interpretations. However, due to space constraints and the significant differences between the texts, forays into the LXX will be limited and only undertaken if a contrast found in the LXX illuminates something significant about the Hebrew text.

## **Methodology**

### *Intertextuality*

The notion of intertextuality is crucial for this project. Generally speaking, the idea of intertextuality affirms not only that no text was created in a vacuum, but that every text has multiple potential conversation partners, all of which can yield multiple insights and understandings of any given text.<sup>3</sup> An intertextual reading, then, focuses on a text's allusions to other works, whether direct or subtle, and attempts to understand how these allusions affect the meaning of the texts.<sup>4</sup> The seeds of the theory of intertextuality were sown in the 1920s by the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin, who suggested that texts could be connected with other texts as well as with the real world outside of literary texts.<sup>5</sup> In the 1960s Julia Kristeva would introduce the actual term 'intertextuality,' inspired by Bakhtin's work, but with a focus purely on the relation of texts to other texts rather than the relation of texts to each other and the wider culture, as Bakhtin proposed.<sup>6</sup> In an article reflecting on approaches to

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<sup>2</sup> Day's illuminating book *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterisation in the Books of Esther* does such a study between three Greek versions of Esther. The door remains open on a study of these representations of Esther along with her MT counterpart and Bathsheba and Jezebel. Josephus's version of Esther, which is rarely mentioned, is also an opportunity lying in wait.

<sup>3</sup> Danna Nolan Fewell, ed., *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Gale A. Yee, ed., *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Formal Method in Literary Scholarship*, trans. A. Wehrle (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978); Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. M Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. and trans. C. Emerson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

<sup>6</sup> J. Kristeva, *Semeiotike Recherches pour une semanalyse* (Paris: Du Seuil, 1969), 89.

intertextuality in biblical studies, Ellen Van Wolde observes that as more literary critics engaged with intertextuality, the definition of it became broader and broader, moving from a direct relation between certain texts to merely elements "...incorporated in a text like drops of water in a river."<sup>7</sup> Another common observation among literary critics is the recognition that intertextuality has as much as, or possibly even more, to do with the readers of texts and their own life experiences than with the authors themselves.<sup>8</sup>

Van Wolde is highly critical of what she sees as a definition of intertextuality that has become so broad it is now almost meaningless. She argues for a more restricted understanding of intertextuality, which she splits into two types: intertextuality arising from text production or that arising from text reception.<sup>9</sup> The former is the result of the author's intentional inclusion of allusions, dialogue, or language from one text into another, while the latter is the result of the reader's perception rather than the intentional work of an author or editor. She challenges this latter form of intertextual analysis and argues for a more 'scientific' strategy, which first looks for actual written connections, such as repetitions of words, structure, similar motifs and genres, similar character descriptions/representations, and similar actions.<sup>10</sup> In Van Wolde's view, only when these conditions are met can one attempt an intertextual analysis of a text, with an eye to understanding the new meaning of the texts when interpreted together.

Kirsten Nielsen, on the other hand, argues for a more holistic approach to intertextuality. Her method incorporates the two types of intertextuality that Van Wolde distinguished above, which means that Nielsen seeks to explore both the connections intended by the author as well as the more subtle connections that

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<sup>7</sup> Ellen Van Wolde, "Texts in Dialogue with Texts: Intertextuality in the Ruth and Tamar Narratives," *BibInt* 5 (1997): 5.

<sup>8</sup> James W. Voelz, "Multiple Signs and Double Texts: Elements of Intertextuality," in *Intertextuality in Biblical Writings: Essays in Honour of Bas van Iersel*, ed. Sipke Draisma (Kampen: Uitgeversmaatschappij J.H. Kok, 1989), 32.

<sup>9</sup> The following is summarized from Van Wolde, "Texts in Dialogue with Texts," 4–7.

<sup>10</sup> Van Wolde, "Texts in Dialogue with Texts," 7.

readers might discover when reading two texts in conjunction with each other.<sup>11</sup> While Nielsen and Van Wolde begin with the similar first step (identifying written markers of authorly intent [in Nielsen's case, where present]), the final steps of Nielsen's method are much more flexible than Van Wolde's. Nielsen suggests widening the scope to include other texts within the biblical canon based upon similar themes or even phrases, whether or not the author has established an obvious connection. Her final step is to turn to the New Testament for possible connections which may provide insight into the text in the HB. For example, in her intertextual study of Ruth, Nielsen notices that the Gospel of Matthew is the only other biblical text to mention Ruth. The latter is included in Jesus' genealogy alongside three other women from the HB and Mary, a connection that Nielsen would encourage one to analyse to gain possible insight into the texts which include these women in the HB.<sup>12</sup> Nielsen is also far more open to the "readerly baggage" that all readers bring to a text thanks to life experiences,<sup>13</sup> whereas Van Wolde is careful to guard against this for fear of readers imagining connections that simply are not there.<sup>14</sup>

The present study will adopt an approach which draws upon both Van Wolde and Nielsen's intertextual methods but is not identical to either. Firstly, I will identify markers of authorial intent, as noted above when looking at the connections to 1 Samuel and the book of Kings. While actual written evidence of intentional textual connections is suggestive of an allusive intertextuality, I do not agree that it is always necessary to place as strict a limitation as Van Wolde does. Though an author may have certain aspects of a source text in mind while writing, this does not exclude the possibility that he/she was also influenced by other aspects of that same text, whether consciously or subconsciously, and it is certainly possible that these influences can be detected by the reader in the final product. There is no reason to exclude these types

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<sup>11</sup> Kirsten Nielsen, "Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible," in *Congress Volume: Oslo 1998*, ed. A. Lemaire and M. Sæbø, VTSup 80 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 17–31; Nielsen, "Intertextuality and Biblical Scholarship," *SJOT* 2 (1990), 89–95.

<sup>12</sup> Nielsen, *Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible*, 20–22.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Van Wolde, "Texts in Dialogue with Texts," 8.



of connections provided that the obvious intentional connections are evident as well. Secondly, I will collect other intertextual connections I have perceived from reading the book of Esther with the royal women in Samuel and Kings in mind. Finally, I will read the texts together to see in what ways they mutually illuminate each other. Thus, this project assumes that the book of Esther has clear allusions that lead readers to the books of 1 Samuel and Kings and, with these texts in mind, the reader is able and indeed is invited to detect more intertextual connections which may not be explicit or even intended by the author but are there nonetheless. With this in mind, I will read Esther alongside the two most prominent royal women of the DH, Bathsheba and Jezebel.

There are certainly other royal women in the DH, such as Michal, Nehushta, or Ma'acah. Most of these royal women do not appear in any extensive narratives and many of them do not even speak. Unfortunately, the lack of extensive narratives around these earlier women as 'royal women' makes it difficult or impossible to compare Esther with them. However, the fuller representation of Bathsheba and Jezebel makes possible the observation of similarities and parallels. As a result of examining their narratives together, I will note the similarities and parallels among these three women that simply do not appear with most of the other royal women mentioned in the HB.

When necessary, I will refer to other books such as Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah and Judith in order to illuminate unique aspects of the book of Esther as a Jewish post exilic text. I may also reference other biblical texts in which themes regarding the monarchy are important, such as Chronicles and the Psalms, because these themes are very important for the book of Esther, and much of the HB. The focus of my analysis, however, will be the stories of Bathsheba and Jezebel in relation to the Hebrew text of Esther. While this study thus has Esther as its focus, I also see this work as mutually illuminating. Through reading these women together, this study offers the opportunity to gain insight into all three of their characters and their roles as royal women.

## Characterisation

Characterisation is part of the work done within a narrative critique of a text, thus its development as a methodological form is bound up with that of narrative criticism within biblical studies. Narrative criticism emerged in biblical studies in the early 1980s thanks to the release of three books: *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Robert Alter) in 1981, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (Meir Sternberg) in 1983, and *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Adele Berlin) in 1985.<sup>15</sup> Though discussions calling for a new way of reading scripture other than the traditional historical-critical methods (source criticism, form criticism and redaction criticism) had begun in the late 1960s,<sup>16</sup> it was the publication of these three books that helped to legitimate narrative criticism as a methodology with which to analyse biblical texts.<sup>17</sup> Narrative critics approach biblical texts just as a literary critic would approach any piece of literature, meaning they analyse the parts of the given biblical text (structure, plot, characters, setting, etc.) as they are presented in its final form.<sup>18</sup> This means narrative criticism approaches a biblical text as one coherent narrative, not seeking to identify its sources, redactions, or *Sitz im Leben*, as the various historical-critical methods do. Rather, narrative critics assume the text is a unified whole and seek to understand what message the present story offers.<sup>19</sup>

A focus on characterisation seeks to understand the characters not merely within their own right, but necessarily within a story; a particular character is, of course, inextricably tied to various aspects of a narrative.<sup>20</sup> Thus action becomes the most important lens through which one can analyse a character, as characters are

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<sup>15</sup> John Dekker, "Characterization in the Hebrew Bible: Nabal as Test Case," in *BBR* 26 (2016): 312.

<sup>16</sup> Mark Allen Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism? A New Approach to the Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 2–3.

<sup>17</sup> Dekker, "Characterization in the Hebrew Bible," 312.

<sup>18</sup> Powell, *What is Narrative Criticism?*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> David Rhoads, "Narrative Criticism: Practices and Prospects," in *Characterization in the Gospel: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism*, eds. David Rhoads and Kari Syreeni (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 267.

<sup>20</sup> Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 19.

known to readers by their actions.<sup>21</sup> A character's actions also encompasses dialogue, both direct and inner, as well as what a character does not say or do. An important aspect of a character's actions are her/his interactions with other characters in a story. Readers also learn about the characters of a story through descriptions, most often offered either by the narrator or another character, though occasionally a character may describe his or herself either during a conversation with another character (Jonah 1:9), an inner-dialogue (rare in the HB) or, as with the woman in the Song of Songs, as part of a monologue (Song 1:5–6).<sup>22</sup>

What makes character analysis challenging is that no text tells the reader absolutely everything about each character. Readers are necessarily given only pieces of information about characters, some explicit and some merely implicit, which the reader must gather together and make sense of.<sup>23</sup> For example, a reader must decipher whether a character's word is trustworthy or not. Haman describes the Jews as a people with different laws who do not obey the laws of the king, insinuating that they could cause problems for King Ahasuerus (3:8). However, readers should know not to take this description of the Jews at face value because what Haman seeks is revenge upon Mordecai (3:5–6). Thus, Haman must make the Jews seem as unseemly as he can in order to gain the king's permission to "do as he sees fit" (3:11). By contrast, readers know Esther's description of Haman is trustworthy, regardless of her desire to convince the king to reverse Haman's edict, because readers know Haman has behaved as Esther describes (7:6).

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<sup>21</sup> Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," in *The Art of Fiction and Other Essays*, ed. M. Roberts (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948), 13.

<sup>22</sup> These aspects of character are summarized from Robert Alter's discussions in his book *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011).

<sup>23</sup> M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 323; Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 21: "Narrative and especially biblical narrative, does not comprehensively and exhaustively describe its characters from the beginning, but their personalities and motives emerge gradually throughout their appearances in the story and within the interaction between the text and its readers."

It is common to see discussion regarding Forster's descriptions of "round" and "flat" characters in order to help readers analyse the characters within a narrative.<sup>24</sup> Forster defines a round character as one that is multi-layered. He or she experiences a range of emotions, is capable of growth, and may even surprise a reader with his or her actions. A flat character, on the other hand, exhibits less depth but is consistent and predictable. Northrop Frye offers a term for another type of character, a "stock" character, which is a type of character used repeatedly in a particular literary genre.<sup>25</sup> A modern example of two stock characters would be the mastermind villain with his/her dim-witted side kick or the wicked stepmother often found in fairy tales.

However, these simple delineations of character types have been met with various criticisms. Rimmon-Kenan believes the term "flat" indicates a character is not interesting or lively, and ignores the fact that these characters can be lively and may even develop throughout the course of a story.<sup>26</sup> Bal argues that these terms are taken from psychology and, thus, can only be used of psychological narratives.<sup>27</sup> Skinner correctly notes that adhering to these strict categories ignores the complexities that one may find in minor characters.<sup>28</sup> Though Skinner here refers specifically to characters within Gospel narratives, I agree with his hesitation in placing such firm boundaries around characters. This project will use these different types merely as helpful guidelines when thinking about the various characters within these narratives.

## Description of Chapters

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<sup>24</sup> E.M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1955), 67–78.

<sup>25</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 39–43 and 171–77.

<sup>26</sup> S. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1988), 40.

<sup>27</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 81. A psychological narrative being a character centred story rather than a plot centred narrative, cf. Outi Lehitpuu, "Characterization and Persuasion: The Rich Man and the Poor Man in Luke 16.1–31," in *Characterization in the Gospel: Reconceiving Narrative Criticism*, eds. David Rhoads and Kari Syreeni (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 79.

<sup>28</sup> Christopher W. Skinner, "Introduction," in *Characters and Characterization in the Gospel of John*, ed. Christopher W. Skinner (New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), xxiv.

This project contains a total of five chapters. Of these five chapters, one is a literature review, three are subject chapters and the final chapter is a shorter, conclusive chapter. Each of the three subject chapter focuses on a specific theme, which serves as the guide for my analysis. The themes I have chosen are beauty, the roles of the women in the court, and violence. There are other possible themes that could be addressed, but I have chosen these three primarily because they seemed to be the most fruitful and productive. The purpose of this project is to consider Queen Esther seriously as a royal woman of the HB alongside Bathsheba and Jezebel. In order to understand how I view a reflection of Esther in conjunction with Bathsheba and Jezebel, I must also present my readings of the Bathsheba and Jezebel narratives. As such, each subject chapter will address the characters in successive order according to where each book is found in the HB.

There are two other biblical characters who I view as especially important for understanding the presentation of royal women in the HB, namely, Abigail and Athaliah (the reasons for which will be discussed in due course). To that end, discussion of their characters and respective narratives will also be a feature in the subject chapters. The narratives in which Bathsheba, Jezebel, and Esther appear also contain many other characters, such as David, Ahab, King Ahasuerus, to name a few. All characters (primary, secondary, or even tertiary) interact with each other, and much of what can be learned about any given character is gleaned from their interactions with the other characters in the narrative. Thus, it is impossible to complete a narrative analysis of these women without also discussing the other characters in their narratives. As part of this project, then, discussions of secondary and even tertiary characters will take place when necessary.

I have one final note regarding the style in which this thesis is written. I view these women, and all those who appear alongside them, as characters in a narrative. I do not understand these narratives to be accurate representations of historical events. Rather, I understand them to be something more akin to historical fiction. I do not

make this understanding explicit every time I reference a character or their actions, because to do so quickly becomes cumbersome. However, at all times I speak of these characters, I do so with the understanding that they are characters in a narrative who are being presented in a specific way by the author(s) of each respective narrative.

# Chapter One: Literature Review

## Introduction

Much ink has been spilled on the topic of the royal court in the Hebrew Bible (HB) and often this literature focuses largely on kings and kingship.<sup>29</sup> This is understandable. Kings feature prominently throughout the HB and kingship is an important aspect of the theological and historiographic imagination of ancient Israel.<sup>30</sup> However, when one looks more closely at these stories, one finds that a monarchy is

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<sup>29</sup> Walter Dietrich, *The Early Monarchy in Israel: The Tenth Century B.C.E.* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2007); Mark W. Hamilton, *The Body Royal: The Social Poetics of Kingship in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 2005); Jamie A. Grant, *The King as Exemplar: The Function of Deuteronomy's Kingship Law in the Shaping of the Book of Psalms* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2004); Baruch Halpern, *David's Secret Demons: Messiah, Murderer, Traitor, King*, The Bible in Its World Series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), Halpern, *The Constitution of the Monarchy in Israel*, HSM 25 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981); George E. Mendenhall, "The Monarchy," *Int* 29 (1975): 155–70; Keith W. Whitelam, *The Just King: Monarchical Judicial Authority in Ancient Israel*, JSOTSup (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1979); Gregory Goswell, "David Their King: Kingship in the Prophecy of Hosea," *JSOT* 42 (2017): 213–31; A.G. Herbert, "Idea of Kingship in the Old Testament," *RTR* 18 (1959): 34–45; David M. Howard Jr., "The Case for Kingship in the Old Testament Narrative Books and the Psalms," *TJ* 9 (1988): 29–35; Rüdiger Jungbluth, *Im Himmel und auf Erden: Dimensionen von Königsherrschaft im Alten Testament* (Kohlhammer: Stuttgart, 2011); Tomoo Ishida, *The Royal Dynasties in Ancient Israel: A Study on the Formation and Development of Royal-Dynastic Ideology* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1977); Bernard M. Levinson, "The Reconceptualization of Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic History's Transformation of Torah," *VT* 51 (2001): 511–34; Christophe Nihan, "Rewriting Kingship in Samuel: 1 Samuel 8 and 12 and the Law of the King (Deuteronomy 17)," *HBAI* 2 (2013): 315–50; Jerome T. Walsh, *Ahab: The Construction of a King* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2006); Diana Edelman, "Hezekiah's Alleged Cultic Centralization," *JSOT* 32 (2008): 395–434; Lester Grabbe, ed., *Good and Bad Kings: The Kingdom of Judah in the Seventh Century BCE* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005); Marvin A. Sweeney, *King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001); Marty E. Stevens, *Leadership Roles of the Old Testament: King, Prophet, Priest, and Sage* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012); George Athas, "'A Man after God's Own Heart': David and the Rhetoric of Election to Kingship," *JESOT* 2 (2013): 191–97; Todd Linafelt, Claudia V. Camp and Timothy Beal, eds., *The Fate of King David: The Past and Present of a Biblical Icon* (New York: T&T Clark, 2010); Keith W. Whitelam, "King and Kingship," *ABD* 4:40–48; Jerry Hwang, "YHWH's Poetic *Mishpat* in Israel's Kingship: A Reassessment of 1 Samuel 8: 1–12," *WTJ* 73 (2011): 341–61; Alison L. Joseph, "Who is Like David? Was David Like David? Good Kings in the Book of Kings" *CBQ* 77 (2015): 20–41; Garrett Galvin, *David's Successors: Kingship in the Old Testament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016). These works, of course, are in addition to the numerous commentaries written on the books of Kings, Samuel, and Chronicles, which focus on the royal court and kings.

<sup>30</sup> Ringgren, Seybold, and Fabry, "מֶלֶךְ," *TDOT* 8:347–75; J.J. M. Roberts, "The Enthronement of YHWH and David: The Abiding Theological Significance of the Kingship Language of the Psalms," *CBQ* 64 (2002): 675–86; Jason S. Derouche, "The Heart of YHWH and His Chosen One in 1 Samuel 13:14," in *BBR* 24 (2014): 467–89; Karl Deenick, "Priest and King or Priest-King in 1 Samuel 2:35," *WTJ* 73 (2011): 325–39; William D. Barrick, "The Kingdom of God in the Old Testament," *MSJ* 23/2 (2012): 173–92; Walter Brueggemann, "Kingship and Chaos: A Study in 10<sup>th</sup> Century Theology," *CBQ* 33 (1971): 317–32; Gregory Goswell, "Isaiah 1:26: A Neglected Text on Kingship," *TB* 62 (2011): 233–46; Erhard S. Gersteneberger, "World Dominion in Yahweh Kingship Psalms: Down to the Roots of Globalising Concepts and Strategics," *HBT* 23 (2001): 192–210; Kathryn L. Roberts, "'Our Eyes Will See the Beauty of the King': The Esthetics of Kingship," *W&W* 19 (1999):117–24.

not the work of a king by himself; it is a system.<sup>31</sup> Kings are surrounded by advisors, administrators, and generals. In the midst of this court activity there is also a group of key players whose roles in the court are often overlooked, downplayed, or dismissed altogether: royal women.

When considering the roles of royal women in the HB, it is commonplace for scholars to focus on the royal women in the Deuteronomistic History (DH), such as Bathsheba, Jezebel, Ma'acah, Nehushta, Athaliah, and Hamutal.<sup>32</sup> However, the DH is not the only place in the HB where one can find royal women. The book of Esther provides a substantial depiction of a royal woman, yet she is most often intentionally set aside in these discussions, dismissed as a "foreign queen."<sup>33</sup> In at least one case her existence as a biblical character is forgotten altogether.<sup>34</sup>

The book of Esther, however, is as interested in the monarchy as the DH is. Thus, bringing Esther into the fold of biblical royal women may offer new insights and perspectives on royal women in the HB. The following section will provide a brief overview of the basic information about the book of Esther. Then I will demonstrate the importance of monarchy for the book of Esther. Next, I will turn to the intertextual work done with Esther thus far to demonstrate in what ways these studies are lacking. Lastly, I will argue for Esther's role as queen in the royal court. I will show how the book of Esther itself points readers back to the DH, providing readers with an invitation to read her alongside such characters as Bathsheba and Jezebel.

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<sup>31</sup> Elna K. Solvang, *A Woman's Place is in the House: Royal Women and their Involvement in the House of David* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 17. Galvin, *David's Successors*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> Zafrira Ben-Barak, "The Status and Right of the *gebira*," in *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 170–85; Solvang, *A Woman's Place*; Ktziah Spanier, "The Queen Mother in the Judaeen Royal Court: Maacah – A Case Study," in Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Samuel and Kings*, 186–95; Susan Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen: Women in Judges and Biblical Israel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998); P.J. Berlyn, "The Great Ladies," *JBQ* 24 (1996): 26–35.

<sup>33</sup> Solvang, *A Woman's Place*, 18; Berlyn, "The Great Ladies," 26; Linda Scheearing, "Queen," *ABD* 5:584.

<sup>34</sup> In "The Great Ladies," Berlyn states, "Among biblical personalities, only the Queen of Sheba has a rightful claim to this dignity (I Kg. 10:1–10). (26)." Both Vashti and Esther are referred to with the term *מלכה*, but Berlyn does not mention them here.



## The Book of Esther

The Hebrew book of Esther is unique among the many narrative books of the HB. For one, it is comical and wholly over the top in a ways not seen with other biblical narratives. It is also the only narrative in the HB that does not make any references to God or the religious life of ancient Israel. Most importantly for our purposes, there is no other narrative in the HB that offers so extensive a portrait of a royal woman. It is widely agreed that the book of Esther is a post-exilic work, written either in the Late Persian or Early Hellenistic period, likely somewhere between 400–200 B.C.E.<sup>35</sup> Questions remain, however, regarding its genre. Some see Esther as a wisdom tale,<sup>36</sup> others as a romance<sup>37</sup> or a Persian chronicle,<sup>38</sup> while others notice aspects of a satire.<sup>39</sup> Still others emphasize its comedic or carnivalesque tone.<sup>40</sup> While the book of Esther may demonstrate some aspects of these genres, it does not fit fully into any of them. As Fox and Bush demonstrate, the Book of Esther likely cannot be placed into one genre alone.<sup>41</sup> Yet there are some common ways of reading the narrative that are especially important for the purposes of this study.

The first of these is reading the book of Esther as a Diaspora Story or Novella. These types of narratives typically tackle important concerns for those living in diaspora and provide role models, as well as suggestions regarding how to successfully

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<sup>35</sup> Carey A. Moore, *Esther* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), lix; Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 139–40.

<sup>36</sup> Shemaryahu Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther," *VT* 13: 419–55; Timothy S. Laniak, "Esther's Volkcentrism and the Reframing of Post-Exilic Judaism," in *Esther in Modern Research*, eds. Sidnie White Crawford & Leonard Greenspoon (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 85–87.

<sup>37</sup> Moore, *Esther*, lii.

<sup>38</sup> Robert Gordis, "Religion, Wisdom and History in the Book of Esther," *JBL* 100: 375–82.

<sup>39</sup> Seymore Epstein, *The Esther Scroll: The Author's Tale* (Ontario, Canada: Mosaic Books, 2019).

Rasmussen, Angela Parchen. "Forms of Esther: Hebrew Satire and Greek Novella," *Biblica* 99: 373–392.

<sup>40</sup> K. M. Craig, "Reading Esther: A Case for Literary Carnavalesque," in *Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1995); Adele Berlin, *Esther* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), xvi–xxii; Andre LaCocque, *Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008); Francisco-Javier Ruiz-Ortiz, *The Dynamics of Violence and Revenge in the Hebrew Book of Esther* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 42–43.

<sup>41</sup> Timothy Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*, SBLDS 165 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 169; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 142–52; Frederic R. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, WBC 9 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1996), 300–309.

navigate life under these circumstances.<sup>42</sup> One thing the book of Esther seeks to do is to present to Jews living in diaspora a way to survive as foreigners in a foreign land, living under foreign rule. The second important thing to remember about Esther is that it is presented to readers as an historical chronicle.<sup>43</sup> This may be hard to see at first, because the narrative itself is absurd at some points. However, there are aspects of it in its final form that invite readers to consider its events in a more serious and thoughtful manner. The opening verses of the story (1:1–3) set the narrative during the time of a specific king (King Ahasuerus) and ensures readers understand that this is the great Ahasuerus who ruled over a large portion of Persia and India.<sup>44</sup> The authors wanted readers to have a firm place and time in mind as the events of the narrative unfold. Then, the story concludes with a summary of Ahasuerus' reign and a promise that all the details of this story can be found in the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia (10:2). This is a literary characteristic with which the original audience would have been familiar from the books of Kings and Chronicles.<sup>45</sup> This type of detail attempts to lend credibility to the author and to the story that has just been told.

These minor details alone hardly suffice as proof that the author wanted this narrative to be understood as “historical”. They could easily be nothing more than literary artistry – a simple way to build the world of the story and draw readers more fully into it. However, there is another, far less subtle, hint that this was the author's intention, namely, the references to the festival of Purim. The narrative told in the book of Esther is an etiology for the festival of Purim, explaining how Purim came to be.<sup>46</sup> It is debatable whether readers are supposed to believe that the birth of Purim happened exactly as described by the author(s). And there are no historical documents from other nations that corroborate what would have certainly been a newsworthy

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<sup>42</sup> W. Lee Humphreys, “A Lifestyle for the Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel,” *JBL* 92 (1973): 211–23; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 145–48; Berlin, *Esther*, xxxiv–xxxvi.

<sup>43</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 148–50.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 131, cf. note 1.

<sup>45</sup> Berlin, *Esther*, xxxix.

<sup>46</sup> Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 306 *Esther*, 151–52, Berlin, *Esther*, xlv.

event.<sup>47</sup> However, it seems that readers are encouraged to believe that the story is at the very least *inspired* by true events.

Despite the book of Esther's unique characteristics that might otherwise lead readers in a different direction, understanding these aspects of Esther's genre pave the way for readers to consider it alongside historical oriented narratives from the DH.

### **The Book of Esther and Monarchy**

It is clear that the king and monarchy are significant foci of the book of Esther. The story begins with the king (1:1) and ends with the king, praising his great works and his collaboration with Mordecai (10:1–3). Throughout the narrative readers witness a king dealing with conflicts, advisors, and struggling to make decisions on his own. Although Esther and Mordecai are the heroes of the story and provide the impetus for the decree that saves the Jews, nothing could have happened without the participation of King Ahasuerus or the power of the royal court.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the word מֶלֶךְ (king) is used over two hundred and fifty times within the ten short chapters of the book of Esther.<sup>49</sup> However, as I noted earlier, the monarchy is not simply the work of the king but also of advisors and royal women, such as the מְלִכָּה. The book of Esther's frequent use of the noun מְלִכָּה emphasizes this important role. In fact, the book of Esther contains the most uses of the noun מְלִכָּה in the entire HB. It appears twenty-five times (1:9, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17 [twice], 18, 2:22; 4:4; 5:2, 3, 12, 7:1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 8:1, 7; 9: 12, 29, 31) and the verb that derives from the same noun appears twice at 2:4 and 2:17.<sup>50</sup> The frequency of this vocabulary alone demonstrates the importance of the royal court, especially the roles of kings and queens, for the book of Esther.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>48</sup> Galvin, *David's Successors*, 12; Davidson, "Diversity, Difference," 285.

<sup>49</sup> Ringgerin, Seybold, and Fabry, *TDOT* 8:354.

<sup>50</sup> The verb at 2:4 is a third feminine, singular Qal imperfect and the verb at 2:17 is a third masculine, singular Hiphil perfect with a 3<sup>rd</sup> feminine, singular pronominal suffix.

Steed Vernyl Davidson notes that the royal court plays an important role within post-exilic texts because of the fear of monarchical power to annihilate or force assimilation upon its citizens.<sup>51</sup> While I believe this may be true in part, his statement is too generalized. It leaves one with the misleading impression that the treatment of monarchy in all post-exilic texts is the same. For example, another post-exilic work, Ezra-Nehemiah, does not seem to express fear of the monarchy at all, which is not to say it is looked upon favourably. Gregory Goswell notes that Ezra-Nehemiah rejects the idea of monarchy by emphasizing the importance of God's law over any royal law.<sup>52</sup> Ezra-Nehemiah instead emphasizes the public community and the Mosaic and Abrahamic covenants (Ezra 9; Neh 1:9), so much so that David and the Davidic covenant are not even mentioned in the historical review found in the prayer at Nehemiah 9.<sup>53</sup> The specificities regarding the differences between the monarchy in Joseph, Daniel, and Esther will be discussed further below. For now, it is enough to say that, while the monarchy is often a theme in post-exilic texts, there is a variety of perspectives found among them.

What perspective, then, does the book of Esther offer? Helena Zlotnick argues that the book of Esther has a negative view, not only of monarchy generally but specifically of the Jewish/Israelite monarchy.<sup>54</sup> However, this argument cannot be sustained when one considers that the hero of the story is a Jewish queen, who rules with the help of her cousin, who is also of a royal Jewish heritage. While there are certainly comical and disparaging images of the king and his advisors throughout the narrative, by the end of the tale the monarchy is still intact. Both our heroes, including a Jewish queen, are still working with and for the king who is praised in the end for his mighty works, further evidence of which can purportedly be found in the annals of the kings of Media and Persia (10:1). Ultimately, the monarchy comes to the aide of the

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<sup>51</sup> Davidson, "Diversity, Difference," 284.

<sup>52</sup> Gregory Goswell, *A Study Commentary on Ezra-Nehemiah*, EP Study Commentary (Darlington: EP Books, 2013), 52.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>54</sup> Helena Zlotnick, "From Jezebel to Esther: Fashioning Images of Queenship in the Hebrew Bible," *Biblica* 82, 495.

Jews, thanks to a few key players within the royal court.<sup>55</sup> The book of Esther, then, does not encourage an anti-monarchic attitude (be it anti-Jewish monarchy or anti-Persian monarchy) so much as it encourages exiles to work within the system and, most importantly, become a part of it.<sup>56</sup> Only in this way can the exiles be sure there is someone on the inside to protect them from abuse. The book of Esther does not view monarchy as wholly negative or positive but as an inevitable reality that needs to be monitored carefully from within.

That the queen enjoys a specifically royal status within the monarchy as portrayed in Esther is made clear by the consistent use of royal titles for not only the king but Esther herself. This focus on Esther's role as a royal woman makes her absence in the wider conversation about royal women within the HB even more surprising. What is less surprising, though, is that Esther is often read with other texts associated with the diaspora, including especially Daniel and the Joseph narrative from the book of Genesis.

### **Intertextual Studies: Esther, The Book of Daniel, and the Joseph Story**

Much of the scholarly intertextual work on Esther focuses on the story of Joseph in the book of Genesis (Gen 37–50) and the post-exilic book of Daniel.<sup>57</sup> There are good reasons to look at both texts alongside Esther. Much like Esther, Daniel and Joseph are both Jews (a Hebrew in Joseph's case; Gen 39:14, 17; 41:12) trying to survive in a foreign court within which they are compelled to work. The Joseph story, however, is primarily

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<sup>55</sup> Davidson, "Diversity, Difference," 285.

<sup>56</sup> Susan Niditch, "Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism, and Authority," in *A Feminist Companion to the Bible: Esther, Judith and Susanna*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 41; Davidson, "Diversity, Difference," 286.

<sup>57</sup> Timothy S. Laniak, "Esther's Volkcentrism and the Reframing of Post-Exilic Judaism," 77–90; Davidson, "Diversity, Difference," 280–87; Klara Butting, "Esther: A New Interpretation of the Joseph Story in the Fight Against Anti-Semitism and Sexism," in *A Feminist Companion to the Bible: Ruth and Esther*, ed. Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 239–238; Mary E. Mills, "Household and Table: Diasporic Boundaries in Daniel and Esther," *CBQ* 68 (2006): 408–20; Linda Day, "Book of Esther," *NIDB*.

a story about familial discord,<sup>58</sup> with underlying themes of a Hebrew finding success and in a foreign court with help from God and through his own initiative.<sup>59</sup> In both Daniel and Esther issues of ethnicity, persecution, and of being stranded in a foreign land come to the fore in a different way in the Joseph narrative. While Joseph is an exile on his own, Daniel is part of an entire people who have been exiled. Daniel and his friends distinguish themselves from others in the court by adhering very strictly to the laws of the Torah (Dan 1:8, 3:16–18; 6:11). These zealous acts garner attention for Daniel and his associates and result in punishments from which their God consistently protects them (1:9, 17; 3:21–28; 6:20–24).

This is very different from what occurs in the Joseph story. Admittedly, like Daniel, Joseph never denies his ethnic/religious heritage; it is the primary characteristic by which he is identified (39:14, 17; 41: 12). Joseph’s Hebrew identity does not become a problem for him, however, as it does for Daniel, where the Babylonians seek to attack the Jews (3:8, 12) or insist on forcing Daniel to stop worshipping his god (3:9).<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, Joseph does not intentionally risk his life to adhere to religious practices as Daniel does. The book of Daniel, in fact, elevates commitment to Jewish law and sees it as the means by which the exiled Jews will survive in a foreign land.<sup>61</sup>

The book of Esther also reflects some of these same themes. As with Daniel, the book of Esther is set in exile. Both Esther and Mordecai are presented as either descendants of those exiled by Nebuchadnezzar or victims of this exile themselves (2:6).<sup>62</sup> The ‘us vs them’ theme is set firmly established within the first few chapters of

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<sup>58</sup> George W. Coats, “Joseph, Son of Jacob,” *ABD* 3:977.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:978.

<sup>60</sup> Though it is possible Potiphar’s wife intends her declaration of Joseph’s ethnicity to be an insult (39:14, 17). Bill T. Arnold, *Genesis* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 333. E.A. Speiser views it less antagonistically, as merely a form of identification used by those who are not Israelites. E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1946), 303.

<sup>61</sup> John J. Collins, “Daniel, Book of,” *ABD* 2:34–35.

<sup>62</sup> The Hebrew is a bit ambiguous on the matter. The relative particle *אֲנִי* in v. 6 could refer either to Kish or Mordecai, making the referent of the particle unclear. The narratives of Samuel and Kings place Kish’s death and Jeconiah’s exile very far apart, making it impossible for Kish to have been exiled alongside him. Likewise, if Mordecai had been exiled with Jeconiah both he and Esther would have been

the story, pitting the Jews against their age-old nemeses, the Amalekites (2:5; 3:1; 7:3–4). When it comes to handling one’s Jewish identity, Esther is situated in a sort of middle ground between Joseph and Daniel. Esther keeps her ethnicity a secret, accepting the norms and mores of her rulers until it becomes necessary for her to reveal her identity (2:10, 20; 7:3–4). Once she publicly accepts her heritage, she exercises her power as queen fully and is able to help the Jewish people. Thus, the book of Esther does not demonstrate an outright rejection of foreign cultures as the book of Daniel does. Nor is there a message that one can embrace one’s heritage and still participate and succeed as an individual in a foreign environment, as in the Joseph story. The book of Esther contends that hiding one’s heritage risks leaving oneself and one’s community vulnerable to harm but embracing it openly and actively can lead to deliverance.<sup>63</sup>

Comparing and contrasting shared themes between these three texts can help readers better understand how similar themes function within the stories. However, not all aspects of Esther are illuminated by these intertexts. First, monarchy and kingship are not interests in these other stories to the same degree that they are in the book of Esther. While Joseph and Daniel both share an interest in the court, as both stories take place in a foreign court, their concerns with the court are not as concentrated as they are in Esther. Daniel focuses on individual action while the Joseph narrative places Joseph and his family at its centre. Neither texts consider the monarchy and how its actions affect the wider kingdom. Concern and interest for the monarchy sits in the background of these stories, while individual actions and situations come to the fore.

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impossibly old by the time King Ahasuerus sought to replace Vashti. Regardless of whom the particle references, either interpretation yields an impossible outcome.

<sup>63</sup>Joshua J. Adler, “The Hidden Message in the Book of Esther: Assimilation is Not the Way to Salvation,” *JBQ* 43 (2015): 246–48, 287.

Davidson sees both Joseph and Esther as representative of post-exilic texts that demonstrate a fear of annihilation at the hands of monarchy.<sup>64</sup> This is certainly true of Esther because Haman's decree explicitly calls for the annihilation of the Jewish people (3:13). However, this same fear of annihilation is not evident in the same way in the Joseph narrative. The dangers Joseph encounters are to his own person: from his brothers, from Potiphar's wife, and from Potiphar himself. The only threat posed to the Hebrew people in the Joseph story is the same one posed to "every land," including Joseph's captors: the famine (41:56–57; 47:13). In the end, it is the Egyptian royal court which opens its granaries to the famine plagued lands. While Joseph is responsible for Egypt's bounty, it is the royal court which agrees to feed the peoples. It seems the Joseph narrative does not share the suspicion of the royal court found in Esther or Daniel.

The concern with the royal court in the Book of Daniel seems to relate to 'forced assimilation,' as Davidson notes.<sup>65</sup> Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah frequently face situations in which their dedication to YHWH and the Torah are challenged (1:5–6; 3:17; 6:8–9) and their resolve is rewarded either through kind treatment from certain court authorities (1:8–9), the divine gift of intellectual abilities (1:17), or physical protection from harm (3:24–28; 6:20–24). The Book of Daniel also plays on fears of persecution when a group of Babylonians seek to trap Daniel's compatriots simply because they are Jews (3:8). This persecution, however, does not result in a kingdom-wide call for genocide. Though its effects are felt outside the court eventually (6:8–10), Daniel's response to this threat does not involve any plea made to the court. Instead, Daniel seeks out solitude and prays to YHWH (6:11). It is Daniel's consistent acts of piety that protect him from harm, including when he is thrown into the lion's den for breaking the law against praying to any god other than the king (6:8–

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<sup>64</sup> Davidson, "Diversity, Difference," 284. There is also debate surrounding Joseph's status as a post-exilic work or a "diaspora story" (as Davidson calls it). It seems the Joseph narrative does not share many of the same concerns as Esther, Daniel, or Ezra-Nehemiah upon further comparison.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.



10). The main concern for the Book of Daniel, then, is the importance of individual piety as a tool of resistance and survival in a hostile land.<sup>66</sup>

However, in neither Joseph nor Daniel is there a concern for how the royal court's actions affect the wider community of Hebrews/Jews as we see in Esther.<sup>67</sup> Joseph's success enables him to help his immediate family only and Daniel and his immediate circle are the only beneficiaries in their story, as well. There is no move to extend this protection to the wider Jewish (or Hebrew) community. The situation in Esther is reversed: the primary concern is the larger community of Jews and how their lives are at risk because of a volatile royal court.<sup>68</sup> The stories of Joseph and Daniel may take place in a foreign court, but they do not consider the significance of that court to Jewish exiles as a whole like the book of Esther does.

Secondly, the Joseph story and the book of Daniel demonstrate virtually no interest in women. The only woman readers encounter in the Joseph story is Potiphar's wife, who is instrumental in Joseph's incarceration (Gen 39:7–19).<sup>69</sup> How present women are in the book of Daniel differs depending upon the text one reads. There is a brief mention of the queen, who informs King Belshazzar of Daniel's abilities (5:10–12). However, the mere presence of a woman in a text does not signify that women in general are a concern or a topic for the story itself.<sup>70</sup> In both Joseph and

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<sup>66</sup> Mills, "Household and Table," 411.

<sup>67</sup> Linda Day, *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press England, 1995), 44.

<sup>68</sup> Debra Reid, *Esther*, TOTC 13 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 84; Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 150; Mills, "Household and Table," 411; Gregory R. Goswell, "Keeping God out of the Book of Esther," *EvQ* 82 (2010): 105.

<sup>69</sup> Shimon Bakon, "Subtleties in the Story of Joseph and Potiphar's Wife," in *JBQ* 41 (2013): 171–74; Shalom Goldman, *The Wives of Women/The Wives of Men: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife in Ancient Near Eastern, Jewish, and Islamic Folklore* (Albany: University of New York Press, 1995); Joan E. Cook, "Four Marginalized Foils – Tamar, Judah, Joseph and Potiphar's Wife: A Literary Study of Genesis 38–39," *Proceedings EGL & MWBS* 21 (2001): 115–28; Ron Pirson, "The Twofold Message of Potiphar's Wife," *SJOT* 18 (2004): 248–59; Joshua Levinson, "An-Other Woman: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife: Staging the Body Politic," *JQR* 87 (1997): 269–301; Judith McKinlay, "Potiphar's Wife in Conversation," *Feminist Theology* 10 (1995): 69–80.

<sup>70</sup> Jennifer A. Glancy, "The Accused: Susanna and her Readers," in Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, 288–302; Amy Jill-Levine, "'Hemmed in on Every Side': Jews and Women in the Book of Susanna," in Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, 303–23; Jennie Grillo, "Showing Seeing in Susanna: The Virtue of the Text," *Proof* 35 (2015): 250–70; D. M. Kanonge, "Thematic Irony in the Story of Susanna," *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 69 (2013): 1–6; D.

Daniel, the women serve as foils, creating tension or moving the plot along. By contrast, in the book of Esther women are at the forefront of the text from its opening verses. The problem which sets the story in motion is male fear of female power; that Vashti's refusal will set an example for all the women of the kingdom, who will then refuse to obey their husbands (1:16–18).<sup>71</sup> Eventually, the solution to the ultimate problem of the story (genocide) is provided by a woman and a man working together (Esther and Mordecai).

The book of Esther, then, is not simply about an individual Jew (or Hebrew) trying to survive in a foreign court as an exile, nor is it simply a story about an ethnic battle. Neither is it a story about kings seeking help from their foreign male advisors, as one sees with Joseph and Daniel. It is about a woman, specifically a Jewish queen, trying to reign alongside a king. Yet despite the book of Esther's evident preoccupation with the monarchy and her consistent designation as "Queen Esther", the tendency to dismiss Esther in conversations of biblical royal women remains. This is further exacerbated by the divide within Esther scholarship itself regarding her role as queen.<sup>72</sup>

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M. Kanonge, "Gender and Jewishness: A Greimassian Analysis of Susanna," *AcT* 34 (2014) 68–90; Catherine Brown Tkacz, "Susanna and the Pre-Christian Book of Daniel: Structure and Meaning," *HeyJ* 49 (2008): 181–96; Dan W. Clanton Jr., "(Re)Dating the Story of Susanna: A Proposal," *JSJ* 34 (2013): 121–40.

<sup>71</sup> Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London: Routledge, 1997), 22; Butting, "Esther: A New Interpretation of the Joseph Story," 241.

<sup>72</sup> Moore, *Esther*; Scheering, "Queen," 5:583–86; Zefira Gitay, "Esther and the Queen's Throne," in Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to the Bible: Esther, Judith and Susanna*, 136–48; Bea Wylter, "Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen," in Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to the Bible: Esther, Judith and Susanna*, 111–135; Lillian R. Klein, "Honor and Shame in the Book of Esther," in *From Debra to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 95–117; Tal Davidovich, *Esther, Queen of the Jews: The Status and Position of Esther in the Old Testament*, ConBOT 59 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013). Beal, *The Book of Hiding*; Butting, "Esther: A New Interpretation of the Joseph Story," 139–48; Joshua A. Berman, "Hadassah Bat Abihail: The Evolution from Object to Subject in the Character of Esther," *JBL* 120 (2001): 647–69; Debra Reid, *Esther*, TOTC (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008); Linda Day, *Esther*, AOTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005); Davidson, "Diversity, Difference," 280–87; Kay A. Fountain, "Canonical Messages in the Book of Esther," *JBPR* 2 (2010): 3–17; Goswell, "Keeping God out of Esther," 99–110.

## Esther's Status in the Royal Court

There are various opinions within Esther scholarship regarding Esther's royal status.<sup>73</sup> Many confidently accept her title מְלִכָּה (queen) at face value.<sup>74</sup> Linda Day, for example, contends that Esther's identity as queen takes precedence over her Jewish identity.<sup>75</sup> For others it is not enough for the text to call her מְלִכָּה.<sup>76</sup> Klein suggests that the mention of a woman ruling instead of Vashti (2:4) could mean ruling the harem but not the kingdom.<sup>77</sup> Others have viewed her simply as the king's wife<sup>78</sup> or as a "play mate" possessing no political role or authority.<sup>79</sup> Tal Davidovich wonders if Esther was not a queen but the leader of the Jewish diaspora.<sup>80</sup> Lastly, Schearing views both Esther and Vashti as "consorts in whom little power resided."<sup>81</sup> In this respect, scholarship on Esther differs significantly from scholarship on royal women in the DH. Those who focus on the DH struggle with the roles of royal women largely because of the uneven application of the term גְּבִיּוֹרָה (as I will demonstrate further below). By contrast, Esther's status as queen is disputed *despite* her consistent association with the word מְלִכָּה.

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<sup>73</sup> Moore, *Esther*; Schearing, "Queen," 5:583–86; Gitay, "Esther and the Queen's Throne," 136–48; Wyler, "Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen;" Klein, "Honor and Shame in the Book of Esther;" Davidovich, *Esther, Queen of the Jews*.

<sup>74</sup> Beal, *The Book of Hiding*; Butting, "Esther: A New Interpretation of the Joseph Story," 139–48; Berman, "Hadassah Bat Abihail," 647–69; Reid, *Esther*; Day, *Esther*; Davidson, "Diversity, Difference," 280–87; Fountain, "Canonical Messages," 3–17; Goswell, "Keeping God out of Esther," 99–110.

<sup>75</sup> Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 173; Day, *Esther*, 134.

<sup>76</sup> C.A. Moore, *Esther*; Wyler, "Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen;" Klein, "Honor and Shame;" Davidovich, *Esther, Queen of the Jews*.

<sup>77</sup> Klein, "Honor and Shame," 100–101.

<sup>78</sup> Moore, *Esther*, 18.

<sup>79</sup> Wyler, "Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen," 111–35. This is an interesting statement from Wyler. She spends the majority of her monograph calling Esther "queen" and referencing how she was chosen to be queen. She ultimately decides these things are meaningless because Esther works together with the other men in the kingdom (mainly Mordecai and Ahasuerus), which she views as a sign of subjugation.

<sup>80</sup> Davidovich, *Esther, Queen of the Jews*, 123.

<sup>81</sup> Schearing, "Queen," 5:584.

## Queen Esther

מֶלֶכָה and מְלִכָּה

While for some Esther is not a true queen but simply the wife of a king,<sup>82</sup> Solvang makes an interesting observation regarding the use of royal titles and women throughout the ANE. She notices that royal titles such as “queen” are not used evenly or consistently with women, even though the titles themselves existed. Instead, it is much more common to see royal women named in relation to powerful men (wife of king, mother of king, daughter of king, etc). She argues that the royal court was modelled upon the familial structure.<sup>83</sup> Thus, to refer to a woman as “wife of the king” does not imply that wives of kings had no official roles in the royal court. On the contrary, “wife of the king” was an official role associated with particular duties within the royal court. As Solvang observes, “Women's roles within the family were the bases for their political activity. To be a mother, wife or daughter was not only to be related to a man, but also to be responsible for the functions of that position within the work and symbols of the royal house.”<sup>84</sup> Thus, even if a woman is not always given a title, such as מֶלֶכָּה, this does not mean she does not function in this role or that the role itself simply does not exist. To dismiss Esther as nothing more than the king's wife, then, may be hasty because the role “wife of king,” may very well be synonymous with the term מְלִכָּה. While not all wives of kings may necessarily enjoy equal status within a

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<sup>82</sup> Moore, *Esther*, 18; Athalyah Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite Woman: Social Role and Literary Type in Biblical Narrative* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 32.

<sup>83</sup> Solvang, *A Woman's Place*, 17. “The use of relational titles, applied to men as well as women, reveals the ancient conception of a familial foundation to various social groupings and relationships. The government was an extension of the organizations of the chief royal household and involved assent to the authority of ‘father’ and ‘mother.’”

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 21. “It was not merely by force of personality that royal women played significant roles in the monarchies of the ancient Near East; they were expected to take part in shaping the monarchy through personal relations and activities. While some women achieved prominence in meeting those expectations or by chance survival of documentation appear to contemporary readers as ‘exceptional’, nevertheless, all royal women, regardless of rank, were participants in an institution that depended on and was affected by their involvement....Their involvement was not limited to the king himself or even the royal home, but extended to contacts with royal parents in other kingdoms, with nobles of the royal court, with industries and properties of the royal house, and with matters of diplomatic, economic and cultic concerns.”

given royal court,<sup>85</sup> there is nothing in the text to imply that Esther was not the king's pre-eminent wife. Indeed, no other wives are ever mentioned in the text after Esther appears. From everything we see in the Esther story, the use of title מְלִכָּה seems to reflect Esther's royal role and authority in the court.

Esther 2:4 and 2:17 further support this claim by showing that Esther was chosen specifically to reign as queen. In both verses (2:4, 17) the verb מָלַךְ refers to Esther (2:4 refers to Vashti and Esther simultaneously).<sup>86</sup> Esther takes the place of Queen Vashti, as the text reads in v. 2:4: וְהַנְעִרָה אֲשֶׁר תִּיטֵב בְּעֵינָי הַמֶּלֶךְ תִּמְלֹךְ תַּחַת וְשִׁתִּי: *(And let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti)*.<sup>87</sup> The verbal form of מָלַךְ (to reign) used in v. 2:4 serves two purposes. It refers both to what Vashti had done in the past and to what the woman who replaces her (Esther) will do in the future.<sup>88</sup> The Hiphil form of the verb מָלַךְ (to cause to reign, to make king/queen) is used when King Ahasuerus crowns Esther at 2:17; he makes Esther queen (causes her to reign) instead of Vashti. The explicit mention 'instead of Vashti' indicates not only that Esther is replacing Vashti's physical presence, but also assuming her duties as Queen.<sup>89</sup>

Lillian Klein contests this understanding of the verb מָלַךְ here, arguing that an ambiguity attends the use of this the verb and Esther's actions later in the text. She suggests that מָלַךְ might not mean rule in the royal sense (reign) but that its use here could simply mean Esther rules over the harem, though she provides no argument as to why this is likely or even possible.<sup>90</sup> This argument seems quite unlikely given that the verb מָלַךְ derives from the noun,<sup>91</sup> which is used specifically to describe

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<sup>85</sup> One can look at Bathsheba and Haggith (1 Kgs 1), or Maacah and Rehoboam's other wives (2 Ch 11:21–22), for examples.

<sup>86</sup> The use of מָלַךְ at 2:4 does not refer to Esther by name but refers to the woman who will reign instead of Vashti. Readers will discover shortly later that Esther will be this woman.

<sup>87</sup> All translations taken from the NRSV unless otherwise noted.

<sup>88</sup> Gitay, "Esther and the Queen's Throne," 140.

<sup>89</sup> Reid, *Esther*, 80; Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*; 45, 212–13.

<sup>90</sup> Klein, "Honor and Shame," 100–101.

<sup>91</sup> Ringgren, Seybold, and Fabry, "מָלַךְ," 8:357. Though the noun was used to describe various forms of monarchies, it is still only used to describe a ruler of a monarchy.

monarchical rule.<sup>92</sup> The verb itself originates in and is meant for use in the context of a monarchy, for those who reign from a royal throne.

Further exploration of the verb מָלַךְ supports this argument. The verb מָלַךְ in the HB only appears in a context where one (a king or queen) reigns (is reigning, has reigned, will reign) in a monarchical system. The LXX's translators recognized this unique aspect of the Hebrew verb and translated it with the appropriate form of the Greek verb βασιλεύω (to be king, to reign).<sup>93</sup> YHWH is the only other character in the HB who can reign (מָלַךְ) from something other than an earthly throne.<sup>94</sup> The belief that YHWH is king is well established throughout the HB.<sup>95</sup> Thus, this use of מָלַךְ to describe YHWH's ruling does not depart from the meaning of מָלַךְ. Furthermore, when a text in the HB wants to indicate a form of rule other than a monarchical one, it may use a host of other verbs, such as: הָדַר (Gen 1:26, 28; Lev 25:43, 46, Jer 5:31, Ps 72:8), מָשַׁל (Gen 1:18; 3:16; Judg 8:22; 9:2; 15:11; Prov 16:32; 19:10; Dan 11:4, 5; Ps 105:20). This demonstrates that the use of the verb מָלַךְ is clearly reserved for one who reigns from the throne of a monarchical system.

There are three women in the HB whose actions are described with this verb: Athaliah (2 Kgs 11:3), Vashti (Esth 2:4), and Esther (2:4, 17). Since the verb מָלַךְ originated from the noun, which was only used to describe monarchical rule, and the verb continues to be used only of monarchical rule, it seems clear that Esther is made queen as one who will exercise authority/reign and not simply as chief concubine or as a "playmate" for the king, as Moore describes her.<sup>96</sup> The verb מָלַךְ would not be present if Esther was simply made a chief concubine or as the leader of the diaspora. Paton also views the use of מָלַךְ as an indication that Esther was made reigning queen

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 8:354.

<sup>93</sup> Ringgren, Seybold, and Fabry, "מָלַךְ," 8:353.

<sup>94</sup> Pss 9:8; 11:4; 47:9; 89:15; 93:2; 103:19; Job 26:9; Lam 5:19; 2 Chr 9:8.

<sup>95</sup> Exod 15:18; Isa 24:23; 43:15; 49:6; 52:7, 9; Mic 4:7; Zech 14:9, 16, 17; Pss 10:16; 89:19; 93:1; 96:10; 98:6; 146:10 (this list is not exhaustive).

<sup>96</sup> Moore, *Esther*, 18.

at 2:17.<sup>97</sup> This argument becomes even more compelling when combined with the fact that Esther is explicitly given the title מְלִכָּה (5:2, 3, 12; 7:1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8; 8:1, 7; 9:12, 29, 31). While Athaliah, for example, is said to have reigned for six years (2 Kgs 11:3; 2 Chr 22:12), but is never called מְלִכָּה, in Esther the text makes it very clear that Esther reigns as Queen.

### *Esther's Royal Heritage*

Indeed, the first thing readers learn about Esther is that she is of royal lineage, specifically through the tribe of Benjamin's king: Saul.<sup>98</sup> The text makes this known by noting Mordecai's descent from Kish, Saul's father (2:5). This strong connection between Mordecai's and Esther's introduction (2:5–7) and that of Saul (1 Sam 9:1–2) has long been noted and is too obvious to be dismissed (I will speak more about this in due course.). It is clear, then, that the authors of Esther wanted readers to have Saul in mind. This connection is further elucidated and strengthened when the great enemy of the Jews, Haman, is introduced at the beginning of Chapter 3. Haman is an Agagite, the son of Hammethada (3:1) and he is a descendent of King Agag, whom Saul infamously spared from being slaughtered, a "mercy" for which he was punished greatly (1 Sam 15). Many see this connection as a way for the book of Esther to establish an ethnic rivalry.<sup>99</sup> Another similar assertion is that the Saul/Agag allusion is not simply meant to establish a general ethnic rivalry, but that it intentionally hearkens back to one of the most deeply rooted rivalries in the HB: the Amalekites vs.

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<sup>97</sup> Lewis B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1976), 165. He also believes there are difficulties seeing Esther as a queen as she does not measure up according to Persian regulations. However, this text is not a Persian text, from a Persian perspective, with the intent to accurately report Persian traditions. It is a Jewish text, from a Jewish perspective, which uses actual and imagined Persian customs. Thus, the fact that Esther becomes a queen in a way not succinct with Persian tradition creates no conflict. The Jewish authors offer Esther as an image of a queen according to their standards and perspective.

<sup>98</sup> Laniak states that Mordecai is the only character who has pedigree by blood and that Esther does not. This argument seems strange, though, as it is in direct contradiction to the text (2:5, 7). He offers no explanation as to why Esther does not have the same pedigree as her blood relative, Mordecai. Laniak, "Esther's Volkcentrism and the Reframing of Post-Exilic Judaism," 87.

<sup>99</sup> Day, "The Book of Esther," 371–320, 317; Reid, *Esther*, 79; Carol Bechtel, *Esther*, Interpretation (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press), 275.

the Israelites, and intensifies this rivalry by making it more personal.<sup>100</sup> Both suggestions are entirely plausible, however, neither of them explain why this specific lineage was chosen. If the only purpose of stating the characters' heritages was to indicate an ethnic rivalry, there would be no need to choose such a specific lineage for either Esther or Haman. The text could simply state that Esther and Mordecai are Jews and Haman is not, as is the case in the book of Daniel (3:8, 9, 12). Likewise, if the intention was to emphasize the intensity of a long-standing rivalry between the Israelites and the Amalekites any Israelite and any Amalekite would suffice to establish this.

Miles and others suggest that Saul and King Agag are the backdrop for the Haman/Mordecai rivalry so Esther (along with Mordecai) can redeem the "tarnished house of Saul."<sup>101</sup> One must wonder why this would be necessary. Correcting Saul's error or "redeeming his house" would serve no real purpose for the book of Esther. Beal, on the other hand, contends that the connection to Saul makes Mordecai an ambiguous character, stating that Saul connects Mordecai to "a disenfranchised genealogy [Benjaminite], including an ousted dynasty, and a raving anti-Davidean executed as a political criminal [Shimei]...."<sup>102</sup> This ambiguous or disenfranchised aspect of the Benjaminite line could be one reason for the identification of Esther and Mordecai with this lineage. Yet there seems to be no need for the disenfranchisement offered by association with the Benjaminite line, given that Mordecai and Esther are already sufficiently disenfranchised by their status as exiles and oppressed foreigners in another land, along with Esther's status as an orphan.

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<sup>100</sup> Reid, *Esther*, 90; Butting, "Esther: A New Interpretation of the Joseph Story," 243; Bechtel, *Esther*, 78; Goswell, "Keeping God out of Esther," 105.

<sup>101</sup> Johnny Miles, "Reading Esther as Heroine: Persian Banquets, Ethnic Cleansing, and Identity Crisis," *BTB* 5: 139.

<sup>102</sup> Beal, "The Book of Hiding," 33. The character of Saul himself even asserts the lowly status of his tribe before he is anointed king (1 Sam 9:21).



However, Miles' perspective points toward an important aspect of the connection, namely, the royal aspect. Mordecai's heritage is announced after Ahasuerus agrees on the plan to search for a new queen:

...And let the girl who pleases the king be queen instead of Vashti." This pleased the king, and he did so. Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name was Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite. (Esth 2:5)

Immediately after Ahasuerus decides to search for a queen (for one who will reign) a Jewish character of royal lineage is introduced. Hadassah appears after Mordecai's background is fully detailed (2:7) and they are both connected to the royal house of Saul. The Saul and Agag/ Israelite and Amalekite background does not have a place in the story yet; Haman does not appear until chapter three. While Mordecai is introduced here, the true purpose of the introduction is to present Esther not Mordecai.<sup>103</sup> The focus here is the king's desire for a queen and the knowledge that a Jewish woman of royal blood lives in his kingdom. Some, however, seek to connect only Mordecai to King Saul, the basis of which seems to be largely because of his gender and his conflict with Haman.<sup>104</sup> However, if one looks at the structure of the introductions, it is clearly Esther's connection to Saul that matters at this point in the narrative.<sup>105</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Within Esther scholarship, however, Esth 2:5 is often referred to as "Mordecai's introduction" while Esther is seen as a secondary person who is also introduced alongside Mordecai. Meanwhile, in discussions regarding the similarities between 1 Sam 9:1 and Esth 2:5, 1 Sam 9:1 is referred to as Saul's introduction and not "Kish's introduction." If one is to understand 1 Sam 9:1 as the start of Saul's introduction and not Kish's introduction, then it stands to reason one should understand 2:5 as the start of Esther's introduction and not solely Mordecai's introduction. Just as it is not Kish who fulfills the role of King in 1 Sam 9, it is not Mordecai who fulfills the role of queen. Grossman argues that Esther cannot be seen as the protagonist of these passages (2: 8–23) because Esther is largely passive throughout them [Jonathan Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Meaning*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 29]. While her character is largely passive in these verses (2:8–23), she is not entirely passive (as I will show in due course) and she remains the subject of most of the narrative.

<sup>104</sup> Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative*, 83.

<sup>105</sup> Gitay, "Esther and the Queen's Throne," 140; Yitzak Berker, "Esther and Benjaminite Royalty: A Study in Inner-Biblical Allusion," *JBL* 129 (2010): 628–631; Miles, "Reading Esther as Heroine," 134–35.

There was a man of Benjamin whose name was Kish son of Abiel son of Zeror son of Becorath son of Aphiah, a Benjaminite, a man of substance. He had a son whose name was Saul, an excellent young man; no one among the Israelites was handsomer than he; he was a head taller than any of the people. (1 Sam 9:1–2)

In the fortress Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite. *Kish* had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. He was foster father to Hadassah -- that is, Esther -- his uncle's daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was shapely and beautiful; and when her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter. (Esth 2:5–7)

First, both introductions are situated within a similar context, namely, a call for a royal role to be filled. The people at the end of 1 Sam 8 demand that Samuel set a king over them (1 Sam 8:19–22) and King Ahasuerus launches a search for a woman to replace Vashti as queen (Esth 2:4). The purpose of both introductions, then, is to present the one who will answer the question of who will fulfill the desired royal role.<sup>106</sup> This leads to the second similarity, which is the way in which both characters are introduced through their father figures. In 1 Sam 9:1, readers are briefly introduced to an important man (גִּבּוֹר הָיִל) happens to have a handsome and strong son. Likewise, in Esth 2:5–6, the text introduces an important man who happens to have a beautiful (adopted) daughter of marriable age. There is no statement calling Mordecai a גִּבּוֹר הָיִל as there is with Kish, but the text informs readers in other ways that Mordecai is an important man. Verse 6 places Mordecai as part of the exilic community, but also reminds readers of Kish's (and thus, Mordecai's) important status within the tribe of

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<sup>106</sup> Grossman uses the Midrashic interpretation of Mordecai's introduction (Esth. Rab. 5:4) to demonstrate how Esther 2 takes from a common biblical literary technique, what he calls "delayed exposition", wherein the introduction of a hero-type character "dissipates" the immediate drama (who will become the hero?) so that readers can focus on character at hand. The introduction of the character at this moment is an answer to the question itself and thus "...the character's very appearance begins to resolve the reader's anxiety, allowing him or her to turn his/her attention to the character's actions and behavior, to observe how they meet the expectations." Grossman, however, believes that Mordecai is presented as the hero-type character who answers the question posed by the narrative. This ignores several things, however. First, Grossman (and the Midrashic authors) fail to note the significant way in which Esth 2:4–7 and 1 Sam 9:1–2 differ from the other examples provided (Exod 2:25–26 and 1 Sam 17:11–12). Both Exod 2:25 and 1 Sam 17:11 end a pending drama (who will save the Israelite from the Egyptians or the Philistines). The verses that follow immediately move on to the character who will become the answer to the question (Moses and David). This does not happen with 1 Sam 8:23 or Esth 2:4. After the question is raised in 1 Sam 8:23 the text does not immediately jump to Saul, the one who will become king. Rather, it moves to Kish. Likewise, in Esth 2, the text does not immediately move to Esther, the one who will become queen, but it begins with Mordecai. The character on which readers are supposed to focus is not Mordecai but Esther (Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative*, 70–71).

Benjamin.<sup>107</sup> Most of those exiled in this deportation were of the wealthier classes, thus, this connection to those deported with King Jeconiah also emphasizes Mordecai's standing.<sup>108</sup> Thus, Mordecai's connection to those exiled, specifically Kish, is essentially a way of presenting him as a powerful and important person within the community. Lastly, after both Saul and Esther are introduced through their respective fathers, the men fade out of the narrative, allowing readers to focus on the way in which each character comes into their royal role.

This is not to say that every aspect of Saul's and Esther's introductions are the same. On the contrary, there is one important difference I must note. Kish eventually fades completely out of 1 Sam 9–10, and out of the remaining Saul narratives, whereas Mordecai does not disappear from Esth 2 nor from the book of Esther. On the contrary, he becomes a significant character. There are reasons for this that will be discussed in Chapter 3 below. What is important now, and what seems very clear, is that Esther's introduction through Mordecai connects her to a royal character (Saul), which validates her ascent to the throne and signals to readers that she will be the one Ahasuerus chooses to reign instead of Vashti (2:4).

It is important to note that no other post-exilic narratives specify a royal lineage for their character as the book of Esther does.<sup>109</sup> Ezra is not given a royal lineage, and neither is Judith. Though the Joseph narrative's status as a post- or pre-exilic is debated, Joseph does not have a royal lineage (the story takes place in narrative terms

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<sup>107</sup> In the fortress Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite. Kish had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon (Esth 2:5). There is a slight ambiguity in the Hebrew regarding who is intended to be understood as the character exiled with the king. I maintain that Kish is the referent. Regardless of whether readers understand it as Mordecai or Kish, the plausibility that either of the two were actually present during the exile is questionable, to say the least. What seems to be important here is Mordecai's connection to Kish, not the historicity. His connection to a *גִּבּוֹר הַיֵּל* presents him as an important person within the exilic community and that this *גִּבּוֹר הַיֵּל* is the father of Saul provides a royal background to lend credibility to Esther's assumption of the throne.

<sup>108</sup> Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 363.

<sup>109</sup> For an example of a post-exilic prophetic text that shows interest in royalty and the monarchy cf. Zech 6:12

before the establishment of the Israelite monarchy, after all).<sup>110</sup> While it has been suggested by some that the Ezra-Nehemiah may allude to Nehemiah having royal lineage, it is unclear,<sup>111</sup> and any possible royal lineage is not presented as an important aspect of his character, as it is with Esther. The book of Daniel also provides an ambiguous lineage for its title character. The king requests that several Jews of royal lineage and from the nobility are brought to him (Dan 1:3). Daniel and his friends are said to be of Judahite lineage (1:6), but no royal lineage is explicitly associated with them. This makes the issue of their blood line rather ambiguous. They can either be royal or simply of a wealthy class, it is not possible to know for sure and the text is not overly concerned with the detail. In any case, while Daniel does achieve a position of leadership in the Babylonian court, he never reigns as Esther does. Indeed, Daniel's lineage (royal or not) is not what matters to the text so much as his pious behaviour. Thus, the book of Esther is unique among biblical post-exilic texts in this respect. Esther's connection to a specific royal house emphasizes her royal heritage, which will become important later in the story.<sup>112</sup>

### *Esther's Reign*

The text makes it clear that Esther exerts a considerable amount of influence on the court and the kingdom. She commands servants, her people, and Mordecai (4:5, 16, 17; 9:29, 31). The king listens to and trusts her words as readers see throughout chapters seven and eight. Haman is honoured by and even boasts about his dinner invitation from the queen (5:10–12). Day, however, notes that Esther's influence is exerted only over the Jews and, thus, her authority as queen is

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<sup>110</sup> Bruce K. Waltke and Cathi J. Fredricks, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001); Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, IBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1982); Martin Kessler and Karel Deruloo, *A Commentary on Genesis: The Book of Beginnings* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004); Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1996).

<sup>111</sup> Ulrich Kellerman, *Nehemia, Quellen, Überlieferung und Geschichte* (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1967), 156–59; 179–82; Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah: A Commentary* (Nashville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1988), 209, 269; Goswell, *Ezra-Nehemiah*, 213, 259.

<sup>112</sup> The connection to Saul may also raise some questions regarding the book of Esther's position in the HB's battle between the Saulide and Davidic kingdoms. This particular issue is outside the scope of this project and will not be considered here.

compromised.<sup>113</sup> True, Esther's final decree is issued only to the Jews (9:29), however, her first and second decrees, which save the Jews, reveal that her authority does extend to the whole kingdom and is not exercised over the Jews alone. The first decree sent out at Esther's request (though dictated by Mordecai) does not go out only to the Jews, but:

... to the Jews and to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, one hundred twenty-seven provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language. (Esth 8:9)

Later in v. 13 readers are informed that this decree was "to be issued as a decree" (פְּתִישְׁגֻּה־כְּתָב לְהַגִּתוֹ דָּת) in all provinces and displayed publicly so all could see and read it. It is not a law meant only for the Jews but for the entire kingdom. It may be better to say that Esther's authority has a special concern for the Jews rather than to say her authority is restricted only to them.

### **The Book of Esther or The Book of Ahasuerus?**

It seems then, that are very good reasons for Esther to be read as a queen, but does the book invite the reader to consider/compare her as queen with other royal women of the HB? The fact that the book goes out of its way to associate Esther and Mordecai with Benjaminites, specifically characters from 1 and 2 Samuel, at its outset offers a first and most obvious encouragement to read Esther in light of the DH. She is a descendant of the house of Saul, the first king of the Israelite monarchy. This connection has been explored above and, I argue, is primarily an indicator of royal status as far as the character of Esther is concerned.

There is, however, another subtle, yet important, link that connects the story of Esther back to the royal court of the DH. The book of Esther has an interesting ending, which few note at any length: it ends with a regnal summary (10:2).<sup>114</sup> A regnal

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<sup>113</sup> Day, *The Three Faces of a Queen*, 173 and even more forcefully at 213.

<sup>114</sup> Goswell, "Keeping God out of Esther," 99–110; Reid, *Esther*, 153; Berlin, *Esther*, 94.

summary contains a summary of a king's reign and ends with the proclamation that the rest of his deeds can be found in other sources (Media and Persia in the case of Ahasuerus).<sup>115</sup> Regnal summaries within the HB are specifically found in the books of Kings and Chronicles, so it is striking to see a regnal summary in the book of Esther, a text so different from both Kings and Chronicles in various ways, because it clearly associates the book of Esther with the genre of a royal chronicle.<sup>116</sup>

Yet most do not make anything of the phrase at 10:2. Bechtel, for instance, focuses on the present ending of the book of Esther and surmises that 9:24–10:3 is a late addition, intended to draw the reader's attention away from Esther and toward the king and Mordecai.<sup>117</sup> Day also passes over the regnal summary and characterizes the entire final closing section as an attempt to glorify the men (Mordecai) at the expense of the women (Esther).<sup>118</sup> Moore suggests that 10:2 may refer to a "popular historical account of the Persian kings, possibly written from a Jewish point of view, something like the midrashic source cited by the Chronicler in II Chr xxiv 77....", but he leaves his observation at that.<sup>119</sup> While Berlin and Reid do both recognize the similarity of the regnal summary here to those in Kings, Reid leaves the similarity unanalysed and Berlin views it simply as a literary device used to signify the conclusion of the story and prove its authenticity.<sup>120</sup> Gregory Goswell suggests the regnal summary is generic and merely marks the book of Esther's genre as a chronicle of a foreign king, whose story is told from a Jewish perspective.<sup>121</sup> However, when one considers the book of Esther's clear preoccupation with the monarchy, it is not surprising that closer scrutiny

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<sup>115</sup> See, for example 1 Kgs 11:41, 14:29, 2 Kgs 16:19, 21:25.

<sup>116</sup> Goswell, "Keeping God out of Esther," 105: "The reference implies that the extant book of Esther is designed to conform to this genre, namely that it chronicles the reign of the Persian king."

<sup>117</sup> Bechtel, *Esther*, 81–83.

<sup>118</sup> Day, *Esther*, 165.

<sup>119</sup> Moore, *Esther*, liii, 99.

<sup>120</sup> Reid, *Esther*, 153; Berlin, *Esther*, 94.

<sup>121</sup> Goswell, "Keeping God out of Esther," 106. Goswell also discovered that the Book of Esther has been called by an alternate title, "A little-known alternative title, found in the treatise *Adath Deborim* by Joseph of Constantinople (AD 1207), is that of 'Ahasuerus', which is presumably an excerpt from the opening words of the book: 'In the days of Ahasuerus' (1:1a). This is in accord with a generic classification of the book as a chronicle of a foreign reign (see above)" (107). While this document was written long after the book of Esther itself, it supports the possibility of also viewing Esther as a chronicle about a king.

of this regnal summary suggests that it serves as a specific encouragement to readers to understand the story of Esther as part of the story of a king's reign.<sup>122</sup>

Regnal summaries in general are fairly standardized, almost formulaic. In the book of Kings, they generally consist of a statement assuring readers that the full details of a king's reign can be found in another external source. These summaries often close with a statement regarding the king's death and burial and the name of the son who succeeded him.<sup>123</sup> Departures from this formula vary<sup>124</sup> but may include the mention of a king's important contributions, be they positive or negative.<sup>125</sup> To illustrate how such a summary might look, I will turn to Hezekiah's regnal summary from 2 Kgs 20:20–21:

The rest of the deeds of Hezekiah, all his power (גְּבוּרָתוֹ), how he made the pool and the conduit and brought water into the city, are they not written in the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah? Hezekiah slept with his ancestors; and his son Manasseh succeeded him.

While other regnal summaries (e.g. Baasha's in 1 Kgs 16:5–6) provide vague statements regarding a king's accomplishments, Hezekiah's summary, by contrast, provides readers not only with the mention of his deeds and power, but with some actual examples of them, specifically his work with waterways.

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<sup>122</sup> Marvin A. Sweeney, *I and II Kings: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007); John Jarick, *1 Chronicles* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007); Ehud Ben Zvi, *History, Literature and Theology in the Book of Chronicles* (London: Equinox, 2006); Volkmar Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); D. Glatt-Gilad, "Regnal Formulae as a Historiographic Device in the Book of Chronicles," *RB* 108 (2001): 184–209; Gary N. Knoppers, *1 Chronicles 1–9*, AB 12 (New York: Doubleday, 2003); William Johnstone, *1 and 2 Chronicles, Volume 1: 1 Chronicles 1–2 Chronicles 9: Israel's Place Among the Nations*, JSOTSup (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); Jerome T. Walsh, *1 Kings*, Berit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative and Poetry (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996).

<sup>123</sup> Baasha's regnal summary (1 Kgs 16:5–6) provides a good example of a standard summary: Now the rest of the acts of Baasha, what he did, and his power, are they not written in the Book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel? Baasha slept with his ancestors and was buried at Tirzah; and his son Elah succeeded him.

<sup>124</sup> Other variances include: lack of mention of the king's might, choosing only to say, "and what he did" or "and all he did" (1 Kgs 16:14, 1:18), omission of the king's death, burial, and son's succession (1 Kgs 15:31, 16:14, 2 Kgs 1:18), inclusion of the length of the king's reign (1 Kgs 14:20), or a description of unique circumstances regarding a king's death (1 Kgs 15:23, 2 Kgs 12:20).

<sup>125</sup> For more examples of regnal summaries that mention a king's contributions/achievements see: 1 Kgs 15:23, 22:39, 2 Kgs 14:28.

The regnal summaries in Chronicles are a bit less formulaic, though not consistently so. For instance, a unique aspect of the summaries in Chronicles is the mention of the king's deeds, "from first to last." While this does not appear in every regnal summary in Chronicles it does appear frequently, and the same phrase never appears in a regnal summary within the book of Kings. The Chronicler also does not specify kings' personal contributions and there is no mention of Asa's building activities (2 Chr 16:11–14) or of Hezekiah's waterways (2 Chr 32:32–33). Whereas the regnal summaries in Kings often refer to a king's "power," this is never included in the summaries found in Chronicles. Lastly, the book of Chronicles is fairly consistent in citing some type of prophetic work as their alternate source material.<sup>126</sup>

There are clear similarities to these summaries found in Kings in the Book of Esther. The summary at the end of Esther states (10:2):

All the acts of his power and might (גְבוּרָתוֹ), and the full account of the high honor of Mordecai, to which the king advanced him, are they not written in the annals of the kings of Media and Persia?

There are several aspects of the summary which call to mind those from the book of Kings. The first is the mention of the king's power. This is a phrase only seen in regnal summaries in the book of Kings, as noted above. The second aspect is the lack of the phrase "from first to last." If this regnal summary were modelled after those in Chronicles, it is likely this phrase would have been included as it is found in the majority of the summaries within the book of Chronicles and never occurs within the book of Kings. Its inclusion would be an obvious nod to the book of Chronicles. However, the reference in the book of Esther to "all the acts of his power and might (גְבוּרָתוֹ)" is much more consistent with the style of summaries in 1 and 2 Kings.

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<sup>126</sup> Rehoboam's summary (2 Chr 12:15–16) is a good example of a standard regnal summary in Chronicles: Now the acts of Rehoboam, from first to last, are they not written in the records of the prophet Shemaiah and of the seer Iddo, recorded by genealogy? There were continual wars between Rehoboam and Jeroboam. Rehoboam slept with his ancestors and was buried in the city of David; and his son Abijah succeeded him.



The emphasis on Mordecai is probably the most curious aspect of Ahasuerus' regnal summary. The only other persons mentioned in regnal summaries in Kings are other kings with whom the king being summarized spent his reign warring. This certainly is not the case with Ahasuerus and Mordecai. Here in Esther, the summary might seem to be a statement praising Mordecai for rising in position, however this may not be the case. The Hebrew verb used here is גָּדַל in the Piel stem, meaning 'to cause to grow/ to make great.' It is accompanied by the third masculine singular pronominal suffix, denoting Mordecai as the one whom Ahasuerus has made great/magnified. Thus, Mordecai became great not because of any personal characteristic or ambition on his part but because of the action of the king.

Few comment on the statement regarding Mordecai in 10:2 on its own, but instead read it together with 10:3 as nothing more than an affirmation of male power.<sup>127</sup> While Day comments on verse 10:2 alone in these same terms, she also believes that the text's recognition of Mordecai's greatness as the king's doing and not Mordecai's own achievement, makes a general statement regarding how palace government operates.<sup>128</sup> However, because this information is given in King Ahasuerus' regnal summary, it seems more plausible that Mordecai is mentioned here because Mordecai and his advancement is being presented as the king's greatest achievement. As Asa and Ahab are credited with building cities, Jeroboam is lauded for bringing back Damascus and Hamath, and Hezekiah is celebrated for his waterways, King Ahasuerus' greatest achievement is promoting Mordecai and, thus, finally finding a worthy advisor. This is a very important achievement for King Ahasuerus as one of his biggest problems is that he has surrounded himself with poor advisors who often direct him down the wrong path (1:19–21; 3:9–11). The mention of the king's power, the description of his great achievement in promoting Mordecai, and the reference to

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<sup>127</sup> Wyler, "Incomplete Emancipation," 98; Day, *Esther*, 165.

<sup>128</sup> Day, *Esther*, 165.

a secondary source material, which is royal rather than prophetic, are all reminiscent of the summaries found in the book of Kings.

### *A Chronicle Within a Chronicle*

The regnal summary's allusion to royal annals and its invitation to consider Esther in light of accounts of Israelite kings offers an encouragement to reflect on an interesting scene featuring King Ahasuerus (6:1), which appears in the middle of Esther. In this scene, King Ahasuerus orders that the royal chronicles be read to him to help him pass a sleepless night.<sup>129</sup> As they are read King Ahasuerus discovers there had been an assassination plot against him and that Mordecai had warned him of it, thus, saving the king's life (6:2). This scene comes at an odd place in the narrative and slows down the flow of the story. Prior to this, Esther, newly alerted to the danger awaiting the Jews, makes her first approach to the king. Rather than immediately beg the king to reverse or countermand the decree, as readers may have expected, Esther invites King Ahasuerus and Haman to a dinner party instead (5:7–8). Haman returns home to boast about his invitation from the queen and to complain about Mordecai (5:12–13). The chapter closes with Zeresh, Haman's wife, instructing him to build a stake to impale Mordecai on in the morning (5:14). Readers may expect the next scene to begin with Haman approaching the king about Mordecai, or perhaps even with Esther preparing the evening's banquet, but it does not. The following chapter brings us to the king instead, who is having trouble sleeping.

Most pass over King Ahasuerus' request that the chronicles be read to him and move quickly to the second half of the chapter, where Haman is forced to give Mordecai the honour he deeply desires to receive (6:10–11). Commentators show little interest in explaining the scene beyond its preparation for the honouring of Mordecai, though a few remark on the coincidental nature of the moment.<sup>130</sup> In her

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<sup>129</sup> These chronicles seem to be the same ones that were mentioned at 2:23, immediately after the event itself had occurred.

<sup>130</sup> Berlin, *Esther*, 57; Bechtel, *Esther*, 57–58.

interesting study on writing in the book of Esther, though, Mieke Bal focuses on King Ahasuerus' power as the reader of the chronicle and on the self-reflective nature of the scene.<sup>131</sup> The self-reflection on which Bal focuses pertains to the King's forgetful personality and the place of writing in collective memory loss.<sup>132</sup> However, it is worth considering whether this brief note also offers another encouragement to read Esther in light of earlier accounts of kings (and queens) in the HB.

If within the chronicles read to him the Persian king learns about the actions of a Jew which saved the king's life, then this may be a subtle invitation to read the story of Esther in this way as well. In other words, this scene in Esther may suggest to readers that chronicles about kings do not only tell of the acts of the king himself, but also of other events and other key players, in (and outside of) the royal court. Within the book of Esther these key players will include Vashti, the eunuchs, Haman, Esther's maidservants, Mordecai and, most importantly for our purposes, Queen Esther herself. The book of Esther encourages readers to think of Queen Esther as an Israelite royal woman by connecting her heritage back to the house of Saul and framing the book of Esther as a chronicle similar to those offered in the book of Kings.

Indeed, the book of Esther and the DH share many similar concerns in relation to the monarchy: the abuse of power, the importance of trustworthy advisors, ambition and greed, and material excesses to name a few. Moreover, while monarchy and kingship are important themes elsewhere in the HB (including Chronicles and the book of Psalms), only in the DH and Esther do is there a significant focus on royal women. Thus, the presence of royal women, Esther's connection to Saul, and the narrative's structure as a story about a king, invites readers to consider Esther alongside the royal women of the DH.

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<sup>131</sup> Mieke Bal, "Lots of Writing," in Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to the Bible: Ruth and Esther*, 212–38.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

## Esther and Royal Women of the DH

While most studies regarding royal women remain within the boundaries of the DH, there are a few who have noticed the fruitful possibilities of reading Esther alongside other royal women of the DH.<sup>133</sup> Cameron B.R. Howard and Helena Zlotnick both consider Esther alongside Jezebel. Howard's article considers the importance of writing in the stories of Naboth's Vineyard and the book of Esther. Zlotnick's article suggests a very strong connection between Esther and Ahasuerus and Jezebel and Ahab. Lastly, Davidovich provides the only study of Esther which compares her to multiple royal women from the DH rather than just one. She adopts a different approach and attempts to prove that Esther is not a royal woman as Jezebel, Bathsheba, Abigail, and Michal are but, rather, she is the leader of the Jewish diaspora.

Howard's article is the least focused on the queens and their stories. His study aims to understand the function of writing within the royal court, and he insinuates that his choice of Esther and Jezebel is simply due to their unique similarity; they are the only women shown writing in the HB.<sup>134</sup> Through looking at the use of writing in both the book of Esther and the Naboth narrative (1 Kgs 21), Howard surmises that power lies not with the writers but with the readers, who can interpret a text however they wish and can choose to either follow its instructions/ ideas or not.<sup>135</sup> He notes some similarities between Esther and Jezebel, namely that they are both royal women who write, that this writing is expected of them, that it falls within their royal authority, and that they are both foreigners in their respective courts.<sup>136</sup> The purpose of his study is not to draw any conclusions about the characters themselves, but about the function of their writing. He says little about the characters or their stories, and, as one would expect, Howard does not bring Bathsheba into the conversation.

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<sup>133</sup> Helena Zlotnick, "From Jezebel to Esther;" Davidovich, *Esther, Queen of the Jews*; Cameron B.R. Howard, "When Esther and Jezebel Write: A Feminist Biblical Theology of Authority," in *After Exegesis: Feminist Biblical Theology Essays in Honor of Carol A. Newsom*, eds. Patricia K. Tull and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015), 109–122.

<sup>134</sup> Howard, "What Esther and Jezebel Write," 111.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

Zlotnick provides an interesting and much fuller comparison of Esther and Jezebel. She views the story of Esther and Ahasuerus as a “rehabilitative narrative” for Jezebel and Ahab. She argues that the story of Esther presents an Israelite queen the way she is supposed to behave in the court; submissive to the king and other men.<sup>137</sup> While Zlotnick’s work offers some interesting insights, her overall argument is self-contradictory. She views both the book of Esther and the Naboth account as anti-monarchical tales, specifically attacking the Jewish monarchy.<sup>138</sup> She even goes so far as to conclude that the authors of Esther saw the very existence of the Israelite/Jewish monarchy as “evil.”<sup>139</sup> However, she also argues that Esther rehabilitates the role of the Jewish queen as seen in Jezebel. It seems that if the authors of the book of Esther (whom Zlotnick describes as Deuteronomists) despised the Jewish monarchy as vehemently as she contends, then there would be no way to rehabilitate the role of a Jewish queen because this role (and the monarchy itself) would be irredeemable in their eyes. Zlotnick also does not consider any possible connections to other royal women in the HB, such as Bathsheba. Thus, while her reading offers some useful insights and observes some interesting similarities (as well as differences) between Esther and Jezebel, it is worth exploring whether Esther may be doing more than merely rehabilitating Jezebel.

Davidovich aims to demonstrate that Esther is not a queen but the head of the Jewish Diaspora, the *Resh Gulata*.<sup>140</sup> She argues that Esther’s status can be discovered by comparing her with other royal women in the OT, and seeks to prove this by beginning with the character of Abishag.<sup>141</sup> If Davidovich used the comparison to demonstrate some kind of similarity between Esther and Abishag’s roles and, through that comparison, to deny Esther her status as queen, this decision would make more sense. However, Davidovich emphasizes the differences in the stories not the

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<sup>137</sup> Zlotnick, “From Jezebel to Esther,” 477, 493.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 477.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 495.

<sup>140</sup> Davidovich, *Esther, Queen of the Jews*, 123.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

similarities. In fact, Abishag, whom readers meet in 1 Kgs 1, was merely a servant assigned to care for the elderly King David (1 Kgs 1:4). She was not a royal woman, nor was she intended to be, whereas Esther is clearly a queen, as has been demonstrated above. Thus, Abishag's role logically cannot disprove Esther's status as queen because Abishag herself was not a queen, having only the status of a servant (1 Kgs 1:4). All this merely proves that Esther and Abishag did not have the same status or role in the court, a fact that is not only obvious from the texts but does nothing to disprove Esther's status as queen. The comparison with Abishag thus provides no insight into Esther's character or her role within the court. Indeed, Davidovich does not even offer an argument or conclusion to her textual analysis.<sup>142</sup>

Davidovich's comparisons of Esther with Bathsheba and Jezebel are also problematic in some respects. She does not address the first half of Bathsheba's story, the scenes which lead to David bringing Bathsheba into the court in the first place (2 Sam 11–12). As I will show in the present study, this text can be read fruitfully alongside the beginning of Esther's story, in which she is brought into King Ahasuerus' court. However, Davidovich neglects Bathsheba's introductory narrative altogether. Instead, she focuses on the moments in which Bathsheba approaches David in 1 Kgs 1 and Solomon, on behalf of Adonijah, in 1 Kgs 2. Again, if one's intention is to disprove Esther's status as queen by comparing her with other queens, Bathsheba's interaction with Solomon is also misleading as Bathsheba is no longer the queen but, rather, the king's mother. Davidovich also passes over potentially interesting aspects of the Jezebel/Esther comparison. While she compares Jezebel's approach to Ahab during the Naboth episode (1 Kgs 21) with Esther's approaches to King Ahasuerus, she neglects Jezebel's death, the only other scene in the HB where a royal woman is seen dressing herself up prior to a life changing (and possibly life ending) event.

Unfortunately, Davidovich's reading is unconvincing on the whole. She concedes that there are many similarities between these women's stories, but admits herself that such similarities are general, such as both David and Ahasuerus searching

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<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

for a woman out of distress.<sup>143</sup> Davidovich emphasizes the differences found within the stories, but offers no strong arguments (or often any arguments at all) for what the significance of these differences might be.<sup>144</sup> The fact that Davidovich does not address what the text of Esther itself says about Esther's role, that she was from the house of Saul, chosen to reign instead of Vashti, and that she is consistently referred to as מְלִכָּה, also weakens Davidovich's overall argument, indeed fatally so. While Davidovich's attempt to read Esther alongside other royal women points toward the possibility of comparison, her effort to do so leaves much to be desired.

### **Excursus: Female Royal Titles in the Hebrew Bible**

While there is little reasonable doubt that Esther is presented as a queen, there are many who doubt that Jezebel and Bathsheba, or any Israelite royal woman, should be considered a queen. It is true that neither Jezebel nor Bathsheba are ever called מְלִכָּה. Though Jezebel is granted a title, גְּבִירָה (discussed below), it is unclear what precisely this title means.<sup>145</sup> As a result, many argue that the Israelite royal women found in the DH do not have official roles in the governance of ancient Israel or the administration of the royal court like Esther is presented as having in her court.<sup>146</sup> Others concede that some royal women in the ANE may have attained status and power based upon their strong personalities, but that there was no official role for royal women in ancient Israel beyond being mothers to a potential or reigning king.<sup>147</sup> Finally, there are those who believe these women did have roles which involved governing, administrative, or cultic duties, though the specifics regarding these roles vary.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 108. For example, she states that Bathsheba's position as chief wife is clear, while Esther's role is unclear, but she does not explain how either of these statements are true.

<sup>145</sup> 2 Kgs 10:13

<sup>146</sup> Ben-Barak, "The Status and Right of the *gebira*," 170–85. Berlyn "The Great Ladies," 26–35.

<sup>147</sup> Ben-Barak, "The Status and Right of the *gebira*."

<sup>148</sup> Solvang, *A Woman's Place*; Spanier, "The Queen Mother in the Judaeen Royal Court," 186–95; Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*; Howard, "When Esther and Jezebel Write," 109–122.

Undoubtedly, one of the challenges in understanding the roles/status of royal women in the HB is posed by the varied terminology used to describe these women. The two most common Hebrew words used to describe royal women in the HB are *גְּבִירָה* and *מְלִכָּה*. *גְּבִירָה* is used a total of fifteen times in the HB.<sup>149</sup> *מְלִכָּה*, the feminine form of *מֶלֶךְ* (king), is used more often and most of these instances appear in the book of Esther, as I have shown.<sup>150</sup> *מְלִכָּה* is only used in royal contexts, and seemingly restricted to women from a foreign court, whereas *גְּבִירָה* is often used in royal contexts referring to the mother of the king, but not exclusively so. This lack of consistency makes the meaning of the latter particularly difficult to pin down, nevertheless many see this word as having very specific denotations. To better understand why these terms are so problematic, I will briefly review the terms themselves.

#### *גְּבִירָה*

The role of the *גְּבִירָה* is vigorously debated within the scholarly discussion of royal women in the HB. The most commonly accepted translation of the term *גְּבִירָה* is “queen mother.”<sup>151</sup> This translation of the word is misleading, however. The word *גְּבִירָה* comes from the root *גבר*, which relates to power or strength.<sup>152</sup> It is also the feminine form of the word with *גִּבּוֹר*, meaning “lord” or “master.”<sup>153</sup> A better understanding of this word, then, might be something like “mistress,” the feminine equivalent of “lord” in English. If one takes their interpretation from the basic meaning of the root, one could also translate it “strong/mighty woman” or even “great lady.”<sup>154</sup>

<sup>149</sup> Gen 16:4, 8, 9; 1 Kgs 11:19, 15:13; 2 Kgs 5:3, 10:13; 2 Chr 15:16; Ps 123:2; Prov 30:23; Isa 24:2, 47:5, 7; Jer 13:18.

<sup>150</sup> 1 Kgs 10:1, 4, 13; 2 Chr 9:1, 3, 9, 12; Song 6:8; Jer 7:18, 44:17, 18, 19, 25; Esth 1:9, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17 (two times), 18; 2:22; 4:4; 5:2, 3, 12; 7:1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 8; 8:1, 7; 9:12, 29, 31.

<sup>151</sup> Spanier, “The Queen Mother in the Judaeen Royal Court,” 186–95; Ben-Barak, “The Status and Right of the *gebira*,” Berlyn, “The Great Ladies;” Walsh, *1 Kings*, 7; Ackerman, *Warrior, Dancer, Seductress, Queen*; Mordechai Cogan, *1 Kings: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 10 (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 176; Sweeney, *I and II Kings*, 68; Galvin, *David’s Successors*, 71.

<sup>152</sup> Kosmala, “גִּבּוֹר,” *TDOT* 2:374.

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>154</sup> Carol Smith, “Queenship in Israel? The Cases of Bathsheba, Jezebel and Athaliah,” in *King and Messiah in Israel and the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the Oxford Old Testament Seminar*, ed. John (Day Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 144.



To brand גְּבִירָה solely as “queen mother” results in a very narrow and skewed understanding not only of the word, but also of the role of any woman who may be associated with it.

Indeed, Sarai in Gen 16 is our first encounter with the term גְּבִירָה in the HB and she certainly is not the mother of a king. This demonstrates that the term itself is not restricted to the mother of a king, as does the reference to the wife of an army general in 2 Kgs 5:3. The term גְּבִירָה used in Ps 123:2, Prov 30:23, and Isa 24:2 in reference to a maidservant’s superior; in these cases the common translation of גְּבִירָה is “mistress.”<sup>155</sup> In 1 Kgs 11:19 the wife of a pharaoh is called גְּבִירָה, which translators interpret to mean “queen” and not “queen mother.”<sup>156</sup> Lastly, in Isa 47:5 and 7 Babylon is referred to as the “גְּבִירָה of the nations,” which is either translated as “mistress” or “queen.”<sup>157</sup> The overly simplistic equation of גְּבִירָה with “queen mother” creates the appearance of a very clear and static terminology. However, this very brief overview of the term גְּבִירָה demonstrates that the term carries various meanings and cannot easily be attached to only one role. It may be more appropriate to understand גְּבִירָה as a title of respect and acknowledgement of a woman who carries a role of authority.<sup>158</sup>

## מַלְכָּה

The Hebrew word for queen, מַלְכָּה, is also an enigmatic term. here are only three female characters referred to as מַלְכָּה in the HB: The Queen of Sheba (1 Kgs 10;

<sup>155</sup> NAB, NIV, NRSV, NJB, TNK.

<sup>156</sup> NAB, NIV, JPS Tanakh, NRSV, and NIB. The NJB opts for a more literal translation of the term “Great Lady.” The LXX does the same, Θεκεμιννας τὴν μείζω (1Kgs 11:19 LXT).

<sup>157</sup> V. 5: NAB, JPS Tanakh, NJB, NRSV (mistress), NIV (queen). The LXX veers away from either of these translations by taking from the root meaning of *gbr*, strength/power (ἰσχύς) “οὐκέτι μὴ ἀληθῆς ἰσχύς βασιλείας (Isa 47:5 LXT).” V 7: NAB, NRSV, JPS Tanakh (mistress), NIV, NJB (queen). The LXX chooses to use a participle from the verb ἄρχω (to be first, to rule), “καὶ εἶπας εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα ἔσομαι ἄρχουσα (Isa 47:7 LXT)”. The changes in translations between the term *gebirah* in 1 Kgs 11:19 and Isa 47:5, 7 are interesting. The term in 1 Kgs is translated as “queen” across the board. Isaiah vv. 5 and 7 reads almost entirely as “mistress” among all of these translations. However, some translations change the interpretation of the term *gebirah* between vv. 5 and 7 of Isa 47. The NJB switches from “mistress” to “queen.” The LXX may be the most interesting of all, as it goes from “Great Lady” in 1 Kgs 11:19 to “strength” in Isa 47:5, and, lastly, a participle from the verb ἄρχω (to be first, or to rule). It seems even the earliest translators noticed the flexible nature of the term *gebirah*.

<sup>158</sup> Smith, “Queenship in Israel?,” 144.

2 Chr 9), Queen Vashti (Esth 1), and Queen Esther (Esth 5–9). Many dismiss the idea of a queenship in ancient Israel based on the fact that these three women are “foreign queens.” They argue the biblical authors recognized a role of queen in other cultures but did not have one of their own.<sup>159</sup> Another foreign queen is mentioned in the HB, the wife of a Pharaoh but she is not referred to as מַלְכָּה. She is called גְּבִירָה (1 Kgs 11:19) and most translations render it as “queen” instead of “queen mother,” which is curious considering the common scholarly assessment of the term noted above.<sup>160</sup> Likewise, the metaphorical reference to Babylon as גְּבִירָה in Isaiah (mentioned above) is often translated as “mistress” but some translations choose “queen.”<sup>161</sup> As Blenkinsopp demonstrates, this metaphor in Isaiah paints Babylon as a queen who is being dethroned.<sup>162</sup> Yet the term מַלְכָּה, which supposedly is expected for a foreign royal woman, is not used in this metaphor describing a foreign queen.

## Conclusion

This brief overview of the terms גְּבִירָה and מַלְכָּה demonstrate the importance of maintaining a nuanced approach to these terms. One is not able to draw hard and fast lines regarding the status of particular women based upon these terms alone. Nor can one assert that a גְּבִירָה is only the mother of a king. One also cannot state with confidence that the use of the word מַלְכָּה with foreign queens in the HB indicates that the role of queen did not exist in ancient Israel. It may be better to think of these titles as guides rather than reflecting set and inflexible rules. The existence of these terms, however, demonstrates that women in ancient Israel did hold positions of authority both in and out of the royal court and these roles were often tied to certain familial relationships (wife of king, mother of king, wife of army general, etc). Furthermore, infrequent use of royal titles for women was common throughout the ANE, yet these

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<sup>159</sup> Solvang, *A Woman's Place*, 18; Smith, “Queenship in Israel?,” 142.

<sup>160</sup> Cf. note 96.

<sup>161</sup> Cf. note 97.

<sup>162</sup> Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, AYB (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 280.

women still held positions of authority and were expected to carry out their duties whether they were called “queen” or “wife of king” or “mother of king,” etc.<sup>163</sup> Thus, whether or not Bathsheba, Jezebel, and Esther are called גְּבִירָה or מְלִכָּה they are all royal women, wives of kings who held positions of authority in the court and worked alongside kings and other court advisors to ensure their respective kingdoms and courts ran in the way they thought best. In this way one can consider Bathsheba and Jezebel as Esther’s royal ‘sisters’ and, in doing so, read them together as biblical queens.

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<sup>163</sup> Solvang, *A Woman’s Place*, 21.

## Chapter Two: Beauty

### Introduction

There has not been an extensive amount of scholarly work done on the theme of beauty in and of itself in the HB. Treatments of beauty in the HB typically tend to focus on beauty as it relates to a specific character, such as Bathsheba or Judith, or as it relates to a specific topic, such as fertility, gender, or as a motif in a specific book.<sup>164</sup> This section will begin with a brief overview of scholarship on beauty in the HB, followed by an analysis of beauty as it relates (or does not) to Bathsheba and Jezebel. Lastly, I will look at beauty in the book of Esther to see how the motif of beauty in the stories of Bathsheba and Jezebel can help to better understand beauty in the book of Esther.<sup>165</sup>

### Beauty in the Hebrew Bible

While beauty in the HB can be connected to sexuality or desire,<sup>166</sup> Athalya Brenner attempts to tease out other possible aspects or consequences of beauty for those characters who possess it.<sup>167</sup> She accurately demonstrates that beauty can

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<sup>164</sup> James G. Williams, "The Beautiful and the Barren: Conventions in Biblical Type Scenes," *JOT* 17 (1980): 107–119; Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985); Helmer Ringgren, "יָפָה" *TDOT* 6:218–20; David J. A. Clines, "David the Man: The Construction of Masculinity in the Hebrew Bible," *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 1995; Athalya Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge: On Gendering Desire and 'Sexuality' in the Hebrew Bible*, *BibInt* 26 (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Francis Landy, "Beauty and the Enigma: An Inquiry to Some Interrelated Episodes of the Song of Songs," in *Beauty and the Enigma and Other Essays on the Hebrew Bible*, *JSOTSup* 312 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 2001, 35–95; Michael Avioz, "The Motif of Beauty in the Books of Samuel and Kings," *VT* 59 (2009): 341–59; Stuart Macwilliam, "Ideologies of Male Beauty in the Hebrew Bible," *BibInt* 17 (2009): 265–87; Caryn Tamber-Rosenau, "Biblical Bathing Beauties and the Manipulation of the Male Gaze: What Judith Can Tell Us about Bathsheba and Susanna," *JFSR* 33 (2017): 55–72; Anne Létourneau, "Beauty, Bath and Beyond: Framing Bathsheba as a Royal Fantasy in 2 Sam 11.1–5," *SJOT* 32 (2018): 72–91.

<sup>165</sup> The Hebrew word for beauty (יָפָה) is most often associated with humans, both female and male (real and metaphorical), though not exclusively so. For example, the healthy cows in Pharaoh's dream are called beautiful (Gen 41:2). While Hebrew has its own word for 'beauty' it also has other ways of expressing the same idea, typically with some combination of the word good (טוֹב), form (תְּצַר), and/or appearance (מְרִאָה). Cf. Gen 24:16, 2 Sam 11:2, 1 Kgs 1:6, Esth 1:11.

<sup>166</sup> Macwilliam, "Ideologies of Male Beauty," 267; Ringgren, *TDOT* 6:219.

<sup>167</sup> Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge*, 43. Chapter three is dedicated to beauty.

function in other ways through an exploration of the differences between beauty as it is associated with female and male characters in the HB. To begin with, Brenner establishes that there is no obvious difference in the words and phrases chosen to describe beauty in women and men. The same terms and phrases are used equally across the spectrum of characters and there does not appear to be a specific logic behind which terms are assigned to which sex.<sup>168</sup> However she does reveal that there are differences in how beauty functions for male and female characters in the HB. She argues that beauty plays a role in further categorizing women and men into their own spaces in society, either domestic (female) or a form of public political leadership (male).<sup>169</sup> While there does seem to be a general pattern of beauty and private/women and public/men, it should be noted that there are some instances which deviate from this pattern. Esther's beauty, for example, leads to her taking on a leadership role, which will be discussed further in this chapter.

Some also notice that there seems to be a connection between beauty and vulnerability in the HB.<sup>170</sup> Both Brenner and Stuart Macwilliam note that there is a difference in what beauty means for women and men. Anne Létourneau suggests that beauty is a characteristic that renders women vulnerable to the whims of men in biblical narrative. She goes a step further, and argues that beauty is a tool intentionally used by biblical authors to frame beautiful biblical women as responsible for having brought "sexual intimacy" upon themselves, and she uses Bathsheba as an example of how this works.<sup>171</sup> Caryn Tamber-Rosenau's article convincingly presents the opposite argument, stating that the text in no way indicates that Bathsheba is blamed in any way for being beautiful and having been seen, comparing her with Judith, who she views as using her beauty to intentionally stir up desire in Holofernes and his men in order to better manipulate them.<sup>172</sup> Macwilliam, on the other hand, notes that beauty

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<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>170</sup> Macwilliam, "Ideologies of Male Beauty," 265 & 269. Létourneau, "Beauty, Bath and Beyond," 76.

<sup>171</sup> Létourneau, "Beauty, Bath and Beyond," 76.

<sup>172</sup> Tamber-Rosenau, "Biblical Bathing Beauties," 55–72.

in women signifies commodification and vulnerability, but argues against the common belief that female and male beauty form a distinct binary in the HB, where female beauty signifies powerlessness and male beauty signifies power.<sup>173</sup> He correctly notes this can be the case sometimes, but is not always. There are instances in which male beauty can make a man vulnerable, specifically Joseph, who is desired by Potiphar's wife and is later attacked by her.<sup>174</sup> He also notes that male beauty does not necessarily ensure a man will acquire or will be suitable for a position of power, a notion exemplified for him by the figure of Absalom who, though initially popular and a seemingly promising successor to David, is later revealed to be a less than ideal leader.<sup>175</sup> As such, the perspective of beauty as it relates to men in the HB needs to be more nuanced. Ryan Higgins likewise sees a connection between beauty and vulnerability for both women and men in his reading of Esther, Rachel, Abigail and Joseph through the lens of the law of the captive bride in Deut 21:10–14.<sup>176</sup>

Others posit that the mention of beauty demonstrates some type of blessing upon the one who is described as beautiful, that the ascription of beauty indicates that a character is specially favoured by God.<sup>177</sup> Indeed, James Williams argues very strongly for this, positing that only characters who are special to YHWH are called beautiful, and he specifies that they are called 'beautiful' with the word *יָפֵה*.<sup>178</sup> As I've noted above, *יָפֵה* is not the only way the HB indicates a character is beautiful, but Williams contends that it is the only type of beauty that indicates a character is favoured by God. He specifically notes Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, Joseph, David,

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<sup>173</sup> Macwilliam, "Ideologies of Male Beauty in the Hebrew Bible," 265–87.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 264; Ryan Higgins, "Captive Brides and Covetous Kings: Female Beauty and Male Possession in Biblical Narrative" (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Denver, CO, November 20, 2018), 11.

<sup>175</sup> I would also add Adonijah to this list, as he is described as very good looking (1 Kgs 1:6), but Solomon, who is never described physically in any way, takes the throne from him. Beauty does not guarantee power or good fortune.

<sup>176</sup> Ryan Higgins, "Captive Brides and Covetous Kings," Though he considers Abigail in his paper, he does not view beauty as an aspect of her character that makes her vulnerable but instead sees it as an offhand description that does not have any role for her character or the narrative.

<sup>177</sup> Williams, "The Beautiful and the Barren," 272; Sharon Pace Jeanson, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's Wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress), 1990.

<sup>178</sup> Williams, "The Beautiful and the Barren," 107–119.

Bathsheba, Judith, and Esther as characters whose beauty (with יָפָה) indicates that they are favoured by the God of Israel.

However, several aspects of this argument are problematic. The first is Williams' statement that only characters described with the root יָפָה are blessed with special favour from God. Three of the characters he highlights above (Rebecca, Bathsheba, and Judith) are not described with the root יָפָה. Rebecca is described as beautiful twice in the HB but neither time is the root יָפָה used,<sup>179</sup> whereas, regarding Bathsheba, 2 Sam 11:2 states, :וְהָאִשָּׁה טוֹבַת מְרֵאָה מְאֹד: (*And the woman was very pleasing to see*). Williams' inclusion of Judith as one called יָפָה is confusing for several reasons. The book of Judith in its final form is written in Greek and, thus, most certainly does not contain the Hebrew root יָפָה (Judith is called ὠραῖος in the Greek text). This is all the more relevant given that, while a scholarly consensus previously held that the original text of Judith was written in Hebrew or Aramaic, and the version in the LXX is a translation of a Semitic text,<sup>180</sup> some more recent studies convincingly argue that the original language of the LXX book of Judith was Greek.<sup>181</sup> Yet Williams makes no explicit statement as to what he believes the original language of the narrative to be. Thus, it is difficult to determine whether Williams bases his argument on either an imagined Hebrew source which may have referred to Judith as יָפָה, or on the assumption that the LXX regularly uses the term ὠραῖος to refer to the Hebrew root יָפָה and, thus, the author of Judith simply followed suit. If Williams believes the LXX text reflects a Hebrew translation in which the term יָפָה was used, this can neither be

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<sup>179</sup> The two references to Rebecca's beauty in the MT (Gen 24:16; 26:7) use another common Hebrew phrase to describe a person as beautiful: טובת מראה

<sup>180</sup> Robert H. Pfeiffer, *History of New Testament Times, with an Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Harper, 1949) 298–99; Carey A. Moore, *Judith*, AB 40 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985) 66–67; Frank

Zimmermann, "Aids for the Recovery of the Hebrew Original of Judith," *JBL* 57 (1938): 67–74; Morton S. Enslin and Solomon Zeitlin, *The Book of Judith*, JAL 8 (Leiden: Brill, 1972) 40–41.

<sup>181</sup> Toni Craven, *Artistry and Faith in the Book of Judith*, SBLDS 70 (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983), Jeremy Corley, "Septuagintalism, Semitic Interference, and the Original Language of the Book of Judith," in *Studies in the Greek Bible: Essays in Honor of Francis T. Gignac*, ed. Leonard Greenspoon, CBQMS 44 (Washington, DC: Catholic Biblical Association, 2008), 65–96; Corley, "Imitation of a Septuagintal Narrative and Greek Historiography in the Portrait of Holofernes," in *A Pious Seductress: Studies in the Book of Judith*, ed. Géza G. Xeravits. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2012), 22–54.

proven nor disproven as no Hebrew text has emerged thus far. If Williams views the Greek to be the original language of the LXX text, then there are no grounds to include Judith in a list of Old Testament women called יִפְּהָ.<sup>182</sup> This coupled with the fact that two of Williams' other supposedly 'favoured' characters are not described with the root יִפְּהָ (Rebecca and Bathsheba) casts doubt on this argument.<sup>183</sup>

Second, Williams' list of characters whose divine favour is marked by the use of יִפְּהָ does not include two other characters in the HB who are actually described with the root: Absalom (2 Sam 14:25) and Abishag (1 Kgs 1:4). Absalom infamously attempts to usurp his father and Abishag is summoned by David's servants solely to minister to the aged and ailing king (1 Kgs 1: 3, 15). Joab and his men kill Absalom (2 Sam 18:15) and Abishag disappears swiftly from 1 Kgs 1, returning peripherally when Adonijah requests to take her as a wife in 1 Kgs 2 (v. 17, 21, 22). It is difficult to see how one might interpret these two characters as especially blessed or favoured by God, as Williams' argument demands. This leads one to conclude that William's theory of a connection between יִפְּהָ and a special blessing or favour of YHWH cannot be sustained.

It is difficult to limit beauty to one simple function in biblical narratives, as this review of scholarship on beauty in the HB illustrates. More recent studies have proven that, while there are some general patterns regarding beauty and its function in

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<sup>182</sup> There is no consistency in the Greek word(s) used to translate יִפְּהָ throughout the various LXX texts. The word *ὠραῖος* does not appear to be a word that was specifically chosen by LXX authors to translate the Hebrew root יִפְּהָ. While it sometimes does, as in the cases of Rachel (Gen 29:17), Joseph (Gen 39:6), and the king in Ps 45 (45:3), it also serves as the translation for other Hebrew words or phrases used to express beauty (cf. Gen 2:9, 3:6; 1 Kgs 1:6, Song 2:14, 4:3, 6:7; Joel 1:20). Furthermore, both David and Esther are called יִפְּהָ, but the Greek word chosen to describe them in the LXX is not *ὠραῖος*. It appears, then, that there is no special connection between יִפְּהָ in HB and *ὠραῖος* in the LXX. Thus, there seems no reason to include Judith in a list of characters called יִפְּהָ in the MT even if one assumes that the original language of LXX Judith is Greek and that the author follows the common LXX Greek terminologies and translation traditions.

<sup>183</sup> The inclusion of Esther in this list of those specifically favoured by YHWH also seems problematic as YHWH is not mentioned in the MT version of Esther. While there are arguments that YHWH is meant to be seen working in the background of the MT narrative, YHWH is still not an actual character and there are no explicit connections between Esther and YHWH's possible special favour. That being said, it is difficult to know for sure to which version of Esther Williams refers (MT or LXX), as he also considers Judith who is part of the LXX.



various texts, there are also different nuances among these patterns as well as significant variations. Clearly, beauty operates in different ways in different texts and does not necessarily indicate that a character has some special blessing or favour from YHWH, as Williams suggests.

### **The Books of Samuel and Kings: Beauty and Royalty**

Beautiful men and women appear in various texts of the HB (Genesis, the Song of Songs, Esther), but the books of Samuel and Kings, as Michael Avioz suggests, may have a particular interest in beauty, as these texts have several beautiful characters and also offer the most detailed physical descriptions of them.<sup>184</sup> There seems to be a connection between beauty and royalty in the HB, which may explain, at least in part, why the majority of beautiful characters appear within Samuel and Kings.<sup>185</sup> Within these books the only men described in terms of beauty are men of royal families. While some of the beautiful women may not be from royal families themselves, they either end up married to a royal man or working within a royal context (Abishag).

Because beauty is frequently associated with royal characters in Samuel and Kings, it is necessary to think not only of beautiful royal women, but also of the beautiful women with whom royal characters interact. Thus, to satisfactorily understand Bathsheba and beauty, it is necessary to consider David's earlier encounter with another beautiful woman who also becomes his wife, Abigail. That comparisons have been drawn before in the past between Abigail and Bathsheba, offers even more encouragement to preface our reading of Bathsheba with a

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<sup>184</sup> Avioz, "The Motif of Beauty," Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*.

<sup>185</sup> Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge*; Avioz. "The Motif of Beauty in the Books of Samuel and Kings;" Macwilliam, "Ideologies of Male Beauty in the Hebrew Bible." There are a variety of leadership roles in the HB, such as prophets, priests and military leaders. However, beauty is an ideal that only seems to be connected with leaders who will lead from the royal court. Brenner puts this in other words, stating that beauty is a mark of a person possibly suited for political leadership. Avioz notes that all of the beautiful men in the books of Samuel and Kings are royal men. Macwilliam briefly discusses the connection between royalty and beauty as it pertains to male characters, suggesting that it does not refer to sexual attractiveness as it often does with female characters, but as a way to express male power, and therefore, participates in a type of male gender performativity.

discussion of Abigail.<sup>186</sup> Though David is not yet a king when Abigail negotiates with and subsequently marries him, he has already been involved with the royal court for some time and is on his way to the throne himself.<sup>187</sup>

### *Abigail*

In 1 Sam 25 David meets Abigail, the wife of Nabal, a wealthy and ill-tempered landowner. David sends his men to ask Nabal for provisions, but he refuses to assist them (1 Sam 25:6–11). When David is informed of this, he responds in anger, and decides to head back with his men to kill Nabal and his household (1 Sam 25:13, 22, 34). At this point, one of Nabal’s servants turns to Abigail for help, because Nabal’s behaviour has placed not only himself but his whole house in danger (1 Sam 25:17). She convinces David to spare Nabal and asks him not to forget the good she has done for him by stopping him from shedding innocent blood (1 Sam 25:31). When Nabal dies shortly thereafter, David sends for Abigail and proposes marriage to her, an offer she accepts (1 Sam 25:39–42). In 1 Sam 30:5 she and his other wife, Ahinoam, are held captive, and David comes to retrieve them. Later readers hear that she gave birth to a son named Chileab (2 Sam 30:3), who is listed as David’s second son born to him in Hebron.<sup>188</sup> This is the final appearance of Abigail in the books of Samuel. In 1 Chronicles she is also listed as the mother of David’s second son in Hebron, though his name is listed as Daniel rather than Chileab (3:1).

From the moment Abigail is introduced readers know exactly who she is: the insightful and beautiful wife of a wealthy and despised landowner. She seems to have

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<sup>186</sup> Jon D. Levenson, “1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History,” *CBQ* 40 (1978): 11–28.

<sup>187</sup>At this point in the narrative David has been anointed once (1 Sam 16:13), brought into the court to serve Saul (1 Sam 16:21, 18:2), and married to King Saul’s daughter, Michal (1 Sam 18:27). Saul knows that David will replace him as king (1 Sam 18:7; 19:7; 20:31) and now he is hunting David down to kill him so that he cannot take the throne.

<sup>188</sup> It is interesting to note that Abigail is always referred to as “the wife of Nabal the Carmelite” in the books of Samuel. Bathsheba is consistently referred to as ‘the wife of Uriah,’ sans her proper name until after Solomon is born, then she is called Bathsheba (with the only exception being the reference to her in Jesus’ lineage in the Gospel of Matthew). The book of Chronicles does not give an account of the Nabal narrative, though she is listed as one of David’s wives, and is referred to solely as Abigail the Carmelite (1 Chr 3:1).

the trust and confidence of her husband's servants as they go to her when they want to save themselves from David's wrath. She is the main actor of the narrative in 1 Sam 25, so much so that some have been prompted to read 1 Sam 25 as a narrative about Abigail rather than David.<sup>189</sup>

Though Abigail's beauty is mentioned, it does not seem to play a significant role in the narrative.<sup>190</sup> Readers are introduced to Abigail through her husband Nabal. The text states that, 'The woman was good of prudence/insight and beautiful of form' (הָאִשָּׁה טוֹבַת־שֵׁכֶל וְיֹפִית תְּאֵר). Abigail's prudence seems to be what matters most for her characterisation, second only to her relationship to Nabal. After her connection to Nabal is established readers are informed of her intellectual gifts and only then of her beauty. In 1 Sam 25 it seems that the most significant aspects of a character's characterization are introduced first, followed by their less important, though still relevant, aspects. Thus, Nabal is introduced first with a description of his great wealth and numerous possessions (25:2) and lastly with his sour disposition (25:3), which is contrasted directly with Abigail's insightfulness and beauty (25:3).

Jon Levenson notes two things about Nabal's introduction. First, it is Nabal's attachment to his possessions and refusal to share them that lies at the root of the conflict. His response to David's request is foreshadowed by this introduction, which places his possessions above everything else.<sup>191</sup> Second, this is a story about how Nabal lost his property and David ended up taking possession of it, so, this introduction not only provides insight into Nabal's character, but also the story as a whole. Though Nabal's behaviour certainly exacerbates the situation, it is his refusal to give aid to David's men that causes the conflict and angers David (25:21).

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<sup>189</sup> Alice Bach, "The Pleasure of Her Text," in *The Pleasure of Her Text: Feminist Readings of Biblical & Historical Texts*, ed. Alice Bach (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 42.

<sup>190</sup> Mark Biddle, "Ancestral Motifs in 1 Samuel 25: Intertextuality and Characterization," *JBL* 121 (2002): 629.

<sup>191</sup> Levenson, "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and History," 15.

With this in mind, I return to Abigail's introduction and how her characteristics unfold through the narrative. The way Abigail is contrasted with Nabal foreshadows Abigail's role as the remedy to Nabal's harshness, and it quickly becomes clear why Abigail's prudence and insight are important for her character and the story. At the first sign of trouble Nabal's servant does not go to Nabal or to the other servants for help, but he goes to Abigail (25:14–17). The use of the word שָׂכֵל to describe Abigail's intellectual gifts hint at her ability to counter Nabal's brashness, to come up with a plan to save her household, and also to recognize YHWH's will, as the derivatives from the root שָׂכֵל are often used to describe those who are able to recognize YHWH or YHWH's law.<sup>192</sup> This aspect of Abigail's insight comes into play when she declares that David is fighting the battles of YHWH for YHWH and that he will be the next ruler of Israel (25:28, 30).

Abigail's positive attributes are juxtaposed with Nabal's negative ones, but there is no correlation between Abigail's beauty and Nabal's physical appearance, which is not mentioned at all. Though there is no single Hebrew word meaning 'ugly' attested in the HB, there are a few instances of human characters being described in unappealing ways.<sup>193</sup> If the intent of Abigail's physical appearance was meant to be contrasted with Nabal's, then one must ask why Nabal's character is not described in a physically displeasing way. Levenson posits that Abigail's description will lead readers to suspect that Abigail will marry David because David is described similarly in 1 Sam 16:18.<sup>194</sup> However, though Abigail and David are both described as beautiful and intelligent in their own ways, their descriptions are not so similar that one automatically echoes the other. Abigail is called "good of insight" and David is called "skilled of speech." While both characteristics requires a level of intelligence, they are by no means the same and, by the end of the story, it is Abigail who displays these

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<sup>192</sup> Koener, שָׂכֵל TDOT 14: 116.

<sup>193</sup> Brenner, *The Intercourse of Knowledge*, 48–49.

<sup>194</sup> Levenson, "1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History," 17–18.

skills while David does not, or at least not until Abigail forces him to stop and see reason.

Their physical descriptions, however, are a bit closer. David is called אִישׁ תֹּאֲרָר (man of form) and Abigail is called יִפְתַּת תֹּאֲרָר (beautiful of form). When David is referred to as a man of form, it is listed at the end of a lengthy list of his positive qualities. The preceding qualities are his skills with music, his capabilities as a warrior, and his skill with speech. The primary skill mentioned is his ability with music, which is logical given that Saul is searching for someone who can play the lyre, but the remaining characteristics are all qualities that are befitting a king. Ideally, a king should be a strong warrior and military leader, able to fight alongside and for his people. The king is also a public figure who needs to be able to deal publicly with leaders either from other nations or leaders within his own kingdom (religious leaders, prophets, military leaders, etc), so a king should be able to speak and communicate well. A king should also look the part, that is, be physically attractive.

Abigail's description seems to be compatible with David's, not in their similarities but in their differences. David's description is fitting for a public leader, specifically the king, who needs to be able to manage the kingdom outside the palace. This requires a character suited to work that requires one to be in the public eye, namely, fighting and communicating effectively. Abigail's skill set, insight, is a gift that allows one to analyse a situation, fully understand it, and know the best way to approach it. In the narrative one can see how Abigail's skill complements David, who shows a lack of insight and understanding in his reaction to Nabal. Because of her insight, Abigail protects not only herself and her house, but also prevents David from committing a grave error. In so doing, she displays the types of skills that royal women in the future will utilize when helping their husbands rule their respective kingdoms.

David is not yet king when Abigail marries him, yet it is already clear he will take Saul's place on the throne, and the allusions to Saul found throughout 1 Sam 25

emphasize its royal undertones.<sup>195</sup> Some even suggest that David intentionally created conflict with Nabal so that he could marry Abigail, enhancing his status and consolidating his power in Hebron as he positioned himself to become an important figure.<sup>196</sup> If this is true, then Abigail is the first character who demonstrates what a royal woman should be. Apparently, she needs to have two characteristics: insight and beauty. Throughout the narrative Abigail engages in behaviours future royal women will: she takes requests from her husband's servants, she puts plans into motion to protect his house, and she is able to help him make better decisions. It is a royal woman's duty to not only help the king himself, but also to ensure that the people of the kingdom are protected and treated justly. Thus, Abigail's intervention not only saves David from incurring bloodguilt to the detriment of *his* house, but she also protects an entire household, ensuring that justice is done.<sup>197</sup> Not just any woman can sit at the right hand of the king (Ps 45:10), and Abigail serves as the first model of what a royal woman should be.

## **Bathsheba and Beauty**

### *Discussions of Bathsheba in 2 Samuel 11*

When one thinks of beautiful women in the HB, Bathsheba is likely to be one of the first women that comes to mind. Readers know Bathsheba is both a woman and beautiful before they even know her name or anything else about her (2 Sam 11:2). That she is beautiful seems to be the most important aspect of her character when she enters the narrative, because it is her beauty that catches David's attention and causes him to send for her, even after he ascertains her identity as the wife and daughter of

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<sup>195</sup> A. Graeme Auld, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 296–300; “A Leader Led by a Lady: David and Abigail in I Samuel 25,” *ZAW* 114 (2002): 355–75.

<sup>196</sup> Levenson, “1 Samuel 25 as Literature and as History,” 27; Daniel Bodi, “David as an ‘Apiru in 1 Samuel 25 and the Pattern of Seizing Power in the Ancient Near East,” in *Abigail, Wife of David, and Other Ancient Oriental Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 24–59.

<sup>197</sup> She is presented as a saving the lives of many or, as Doob-Sakenfeld notes, she is a peacemaker, preventing another useless battle. Katharine Doob-Sakenfeld, *Just Wives? Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

two of his soldiers (2 Sam 23:34, 39) and (possibly) the granddaughter of his greatest counsellor (2 Sam 16:23).<sup>198</sup> The events happen quickly, the urgency of which is especially felt in the Hebrew with its use of consecutive Qal verbs (2 Sam 11:4). All is said and done within the span of a single verse.

The bulk of the scholarly discussions regarding Bathsheba's character in 2 Sam 11 attempts to uncover who is truly to blame for the incident recounted in the narrative. The common trend in modern biblical scholarship has been to insist on finding ways to apportion some (if not all) of the blame to Bathsheba, with many viewing her beauty as her weapon of choice.<sup>199</sup> Tamber-Rosenau summarizes the core of these various arguments best, "...David gazed upon Bathsheba lustfully, but she was complicit in that gaze. Her behaviour, in bathing where she did, when she did—and perhaps in being beautiful—means that the gaze was inevitable and deserved."<sup>200</sup> Others seek to avoid the question altogether,<sup>201</sup> and within much feminist biblical scholarship there has been an effort to redeem Bathsheba, to correct misogynistic

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<sup>198</sup> In 2 Sam 11:3, Bathsheba's identity is either discovered or confirmed by the messengers David sent to enquire about her. Given that she is the wife of and family member of several of David's servants many scholars find it odd that he would not know who she is. However, the text is ambiguous, making it hard to discern whether David learns of her name and relatives at this moment or whether he already knew, and he is merely looking for confirmation.

<sup>199</sup> Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1964), 309; Randall C. Bailey, *David in Love and War: The Pursuit of Power in 2 Samuel 10–12*, JSOTSup 75 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), 89; Adele Berlin, "Characterization in Biblical Narrative: David's Wives," in *Beyond Form Criticism*, ed. Paul R. House, 219–33 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 225. Berlin argues Bathsheba cannot take any blame not necessarily because she is blameless but simply because she is a "non-person," she is not powerful enough to have been responsible for what took place. Berlin refers to David as "Bathsheba's lover," which would indicate that she does view Bathsheba as complicit, just not able to accept blame. George G. Nicol, "Bathsheba, A Clever Woman?," *ExpTim* 99 (1988): 360 and George G. Nicol, "The Alleged Rape of Bathsheba: Some Observations on Ambiguity in Biblical Narrative," *JSOT* 73 (1997): 50–51; Gösta Werner Ahlström, *The History of Ancient Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 486; Lillian R. Klein, "Bathsheba Revealed," in *Samuel and Kings*, FCB 2/7 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000), 52–53.

<sup>200</sup> Tamber-Rosenau, "Biblical Bathing Beauties," 60.

<sup>201</sup> P. Kyle McCarter Jr., *II Samuel*, AB 9 (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 288, McCarter views Bathsheba as entirely passive, which he contrasts directly with her character later in 1 Kgs, whom he refers to as "aggressive." A. A. Anderson, *2 Samuel*, WBC 11 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 153. Anderson very briefly states that there is no reason to assume Bathsheba intended for David to see her before he moves onto the question of her lineage. Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999), 250. Alter does not plainly weigh in on the argument regarding Bathsheba's role. However, his comment that David was able to see Bathsheba naked from his roof because his palace would be situated on high and that Bathsheba was "presumably on her own rooftop" as she bathed seems to indicate that Alter may suspect Bathsheba knew she would be seen.

interpretations that vilify her in favour of relieving David of responsibility, or to simply view her character from a different perspective.<sup>202</sup>

## 2 Samuel 11

As previously noted, Bathsheba's beauty seems to be the most important aspect of her character at the start of the narrative. It is the only thing readers know about her, which is unusual within biblical narratives, even for a woman. Most female characters, whether they are named or not, are immediately identified through their connections to either a male figure (husband, father, or brother), a people, or a location.<sup>203</sup> For example, Rebecca's lineage is listed twice before readers know anything of her great beauty (Gen 22:23, 24:25), and Rachel's familial connections, as well as her role as shepherdess (Gen 29:9), are established before readers know anything about her appearance.<sup>204</sup> As I showed earlier, Abigail is introduced to readers through her connection to Nabal (1 Sam 25: 3) and, as with both Rebecca and Rachel, readers first learn her name and that she is insightful before her beauty is revealed. In most instances, the information with which these women are introduced is not granted to the other characters in the narrative who will eventually interact with them, but only to the readers.<sup>205</sup> This is part of what makes Bathsheba's introduction so peculiar. With all other female characters in the HB, the woman's introduction gives

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<sup>202</sup> Alice Bach, *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 134–35; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 2002), 144–45; Antony F. Campbell SJ, *2 Samuel*, FOTL 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 114; Susanne Scholz, *Sacred Witness: Rape in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 83–103; Sara M. Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba? A Study in Characterization* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011); Alexander Izuchukwu Abasili, "Was it Rape? The David and Bathsheba Pericope Reexamined," *VT* 61 (2011): 1–15; Auld, *I and II Samuel*, 455 note 10; Tamber-Rosenau, "Biblical Bathing Beauties," 55–72; Létourneau, "Beauty, Bath and Beyond," 72–91.

<sup>203</sup>This is the standard pattern seen for both female and male characters in the HB. For more examples of female characters specifically, cf. Gen 34:1; Exod 15:20, 16, 21; Judg 4:4, 17, 13:2; 1 Sam 1–2, 14:49, 25:3; 2 Sam 3:7, 14:3–4, 1 Kgs 3.

<sup>204</sup> In the story of Tamar's rape (2 Sam 13), which comes immediately after the narrative involving David, Bathsheba, and Nathan (2 Sam 11–12) there seems to be a bit of confluence between the tactics. Tamar's relation to her father and brother are mentioned in the exact same sentence together, one after the other (though her beauty is the secondary characteristic).

<sup>205</sup> The woman of Tekoa (2 Sam 14:2–4) would be one exception as readers are told Joab sends to Tekoa specifically to summon her. Thus, one can safely presume he already knew who she was before meeting her.



readers some sense of who they might be dealing with or in what direction the story may go. Yet, when Bathsheba first appears, readers do not truly meet her at all. She is not a human with any connections, she is just an object at which David gazes, and, through him, the audience gazes upon her also.<sup>206</sup> This, in turn, creates a level of uncertainty for readers, because Bathsheba is just as much a stranger to them as she is to David.

It is commonly noted that David sends for Bathsheba only because she is beautiful, which may strike readers as rather odd from a man who in the past has been very careful about protecting his reputation and house. From his experience with Abigail, readers learned that David can be faced with a beautiful woman and behave rationally, even respectfully. He clearly was not so entranced by Abigail's beauty that he took her and then killed Nabal not only for his insolence but also for his wife. Instead, he thanked Abigail for her intervention and returned to his life, leaving Abigail and Nabal unharmed. Only after Nabal dies does David choose to send for Abigail, where he proposes marriage and Abigail chooses to accept. With Bathsheba, however, David makes a rash decision and takes a woman who is clearly married for no apparent reason other than to sleep with her and then immediately send her home. Clearly there is something more going on.

There is another aspect of the narrative that is rarely included in discussions of David's choice to summon Bathsheba. It has to do with the opening verse of the chapter:

At the turn of the year, the season when kings go out, David sent Joab with the servants of the king and all Israel with him, and they devastated Ammon and besieged Rabbah; David remained in Jerusalem. (2 Sam 11:1)<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Létourneau, "Beauty, Bath and Beyond," 77; Alice Bach, ed., "Signs of the Flesh: Observations on Characterization in the Bible," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 351–65.

<sup>207</sup> וַיְהִי לְתַשׁוּבַת הַשָּׁנָה לַעֲתוֹ צֵאת הַמְּלָאכִים וַיִּשְׁלַח דָּוִד אֶת־יֹאָב וְאֶת־עֲבָדָיו עִמּוֹ וְאֶת־כָּל־יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיַּשְׁחֲתוּ אֶת־בְּנֵי עַמּוֹן וַיִּצְרְוּ עַל־רַבְּבָה וְדָוִד יוֹשֵׁב בִּירוּשָׁלַם:

Most view this verse as very important for the story which follows, though opinions differ as to its exact significance. Some see it as either a sign of trouble ahead or a condemnation of David for not having gone out with his troops.<sup>208</sup> Others contend it does not indicate any upcoming trouble or judgement upon David.<sup>209</sup> It may be expected for a king to go to battle with his army, but there is nothing that specifically requires it, thus this may not necessarily be a condemnation of David, even if his choice is a bit odd.

Nevertheless, the information must be provided for some reason. I believe what the verse intends to highlight is that David is all alone at his palace: his right-hand man, Joab, his servants, and, curiously, “all of Israel” have been sent out while he remains alone. The mention of “all of Israel” going out probably is not meant to be taken literally but, rather, serves to emphasize that David is unobserved back in Jerusalem. With this in mind, I will turn my attention to 11:3, where readers and David alike discover exactly who Bathsheba is.<sup>210</sup>

It seems unfathomable that David would proceed with his (apparent) plan to take and sleep with Bathsheba after he learns who she is. Everything about her identity should be a red flag to the king: she is already married, her husband is one of David’s soldiers, as is her father. Many readily agree upon the risk inherent in David’s pursuit of Bathsheba, with a few outliers.<sup>211</sup> While the text absolutely intends for readers to view and understand that Bathsheba is off limits to David, the unique mention of both Bathsheba’s husband and father, who are both soldiers, not only

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<sup>208</sup> Auld, *I and II Samuel*, 454.

<sup>209</sup> McCarter, *II Samuel*, 285.

<sup>210</sup> It is often assumed that David should have recognized Bathsheba immediately simply because her father and her husband are in his employ, but I see no reason to make this assumption. It is Uriah and Eliam that serve David not Bathsheba and, while it is possible that David could hear the names of his various servants’ spouses, it seems less likely that he would see any of them at any point in time. Thus, it is not necessary to assume that he would have known who Bathsheba was either by name or by sight. Furthermore, when he speaks to Uriah of his wife, he does not use her name either. Perhaps using her name would betray the fact that he now knows full well who Uriah’s wife is. Using her name might raise Uriah’s suspicions even further than they may already have been when David summoned him, which is probably the last thing David wants.

<sup>211</sup> Létourneau, “Beauty, Bath and Beyond,” 78. She suggests that the mention of Bathsheba’s beauty and lineage puts in the same elite realm of David, which further encourages David to send for her.

explains why David decides to go ahead with his plan but also supplies the context for the urgency within which David acts.<sup>212</sup> As noted above, the text makes it abundantly clear that David, having sent everyone off to battle, remains alone in his palace. Upon learning that Bathsheba's father and husband are both soldiers, David learns that she, like him, is alone. With neither husband nor father to contend with, nor anyone of significance around the palace to intervene, and knowing that his time to act without being discovered is limited, David immediately sets his plan in motion.

It is perhaps, then, Bathsheba's apparent isolation and not just her beauty that render her especially enticing to David. With no one to intervene on Bathsheba's behalf, nor to hold David accountable for his actions, he has the opportunity to easily abuse his role as king (taking what he is not entitled to take) and get away with it, just as Samuel had warned the fledgling nation of Israel in 1 Sam 8 when they first demanded a king. After Bathsheba informs David of her pregnancy, she briefly fades out of the narrative while David searches for a way to cover up his sin.

Bathsheba's story is even more striking when it is considered in light of Abigail's. The situations these women find themselves in are similar, yet the arrival of this second beautiful woman does not lead to a positive outcome but, rather, a negative one. A woman is violated, an innocent man is murdered, and a baby loses its life as a result. Even so, the fates of Abigail and Bathsheba are largely the same: the beautiful woman ends up a widow and marries David. For one of these women (Abigail) the marriage is a choice (and possibly her own suggestion) for the other, it is not a choice (Bathsheba).

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<sup>212</sup> The question of Bathsheba's lineage usually draws speculation over why two men's names are given rather than just one man, namely, her husband, as the double lineage is a unique aspect of Bathsheba's introduction. Some assume this is to emphasize David's poor choice, that is, not only did David take another man's wife, but she is also the wife a daughter of two of David's soldiers and the granddaughter of his most trusted advisor (such as Campbell, *2 Samuel*, 114). Sara M. Koenig suggests that the author lists both husband and father to emphasize that she is not an unknown woman, but a woman who is cared for (*Isn't This Bathsheba?*, 44).

In both of these situations David stumbles upon the beautiful women. Abigail is looking for him specifically, but David is on his way to destroy Nabal's household. Abigail stops him in the middle of his journey, giving him little choice but to listen to her. Bathsheba, on the other hand, is having a private moment (or so she thinks) and David is wandering around his roof because he seems to have a bit of insomnia. In his wanderings he stumbles across Bathsheba. Whereas with Abigail, David is confronted directly in the middle of his mission to seek vengeance upon Nabal and is surrounded by both his men and Abigail's servants, in the situation with Bathsheba, both Bathsheba and David were alone. He could have easily chosen to walk away, but for some reason he did not.

David's station in these two narratives is another significant difference. In 1 Sam 25, David is a fugitive, constantly running from Saul who has set out to kill David, who will succeed him on the throne. Even though it is clear to all involved that David will be the next king, he is not king yet and does not have all the power associated with the title. In 2 Sam 25, though, David is king and is at the height of his power. This dramatic difference in his power at the time of 1 Sam 25 must play some role in his behaviour in 2 Sam 11. In 1 Sam 25 David is still waiting to take his place on the throne and, thus, is more cautious with his choices. Taking the wife of another man is not something he could simply do without suffering the consequences. As king, however, David clearly feels he can get away with it simply because no one is watching. Only after the fact, when Nathan comes to condemn him, does he realize that being king does not give him a license to do as he pleases and that his sinful actions have undesirable consequences.

David's interest in Bathsheba is purely sexual. The text gives no indication that David wants Bathsheba for anything other than a one-time sexual encounter; he sends her home immediately afterwards. Upon learning of her pregnancy, his first plan is to trick Uriah into going home and sleeping with his wife. When this fails, David orders for Uriah to be killed, making Bathsheba a widow. Unlike Abigail, there are no signs

that Bathsheba may have had an unhappy marriage. Uriah's personality is not described directly in any way (though it seems he is a man dedicated to YHWH) and, when he is murdered, Bathsheba wails and grieves for him for the proscribed amount of time. Abigail does not cry over Nabal as Bathsheba does for her husband, and she accepts David's marriage proposal with no hesitation, quickly mounting a donkey to ride away from her old life and into her new one.

Bathsheba, on the other hand, is brought into the court and David takes her as a wife presumably to tie up loose ends. In contrast to Abigail, there is no sign that this is what Bathsheba wants and readers already know that David had not sought to marry her. After Abigail is brought into David's house, he immediately takes another wife and the text tells readers no more of Abigail's legendary insight. In fact, Abigail's character disappears until she is kidnapped in 1 Sam 30:5 and she is mentioned one last time in 2 Sam 30:3 when her son is mentioned as David's second son born in Hebron. Bathsheba gives birth to two children: one son who is struck down by YHWH and another son who is especially loved by YHWH. She returns in 1 Kgs 1 to help her son Solomon become the next king of Israel and to ensure he has no challengers to the throne (1 Kgs 2).

There is a significant phenomenon apparent in the division of beautiful people in the book of Samuel. Abigail is the first woman in the book of Samuel to be described as beautiful, followed by Bathsheba, both of whom end up marrying David, the beautiful king. Furthermore, several of David's children (Tamar, Absalom, and Adonijah) will also be beautiful. Near the end of David's life, one more beautiful woman will appear to care for him as he is dying (Abishag). David's house has been called a "House of Beauty" as a result of all the beautiful characters associated with it.<sup>213</sup> Saul's house, on the other hand seems to be devoid of physically attractive characters, as none of them are explicitly described as such. The only possible exception is Saul (1 Sam 9:2). However, the meaning behind Saul's physical description

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<sup>213</sup> Létourneau, "Beauty, Bath and Beyond," 76.

is debated, and it is difficult to know if Saul is described as beautiful or if he is being described as a strong warrior and, thus, a good candidate for the role of king.<sup>214</sup> Furthermore, neither of Saul's daughters are described as beautiful, nor are any of Saul's wives (of which only one is mentioned, Ahinoam in 1 Sam 14:50) nor his concubine, Rizpah (2 Sam 3:7). Across the board David's house is associated with beautiful people and Saul's house is not. This suggests that beauty may be an indication of David's house being chosen by God, but not necessarily that beauty is equal to an expression of God's favour.

First, none of David's three beautiful children have favourable endings. Tamar is raped by Amnon (2 Sam 13:11–19), Absalom is later killed at the hands of Joab and his men (2 Sam 18:13–17), and Adonijah is killed at Solomon's command (1 Kgs 2:25). The son who ends up succeeding David as king is Solomon, whose physical attributes are never described. That being said, a beautiful woman at the side of a king (or an almost king in the case of 1 Sam 25) can be a powerful resource, as I will show throughout this thesis.

### 1 Kings 1

Bathsheba disappears from the remaining narrative of 2 Sam after she is brought into the court and gives birth to Solomon (2 Sam 12:24). Yet, she resurfaces once again when David is dying in 1 Kgs 1, where she is juxtaposed with Abishag, who is beautiful as Bathsheba had once been (1 Kgs 1:4, 15). The descriptions of their beauty are similar, with a few slight variations. In 2 Sam 11:2 the text states of Bathsheba: *וְהָאִשָּׁה טוֹבַת מְרֵאָה מְאֹד* (...and the woman was very beautiful), while 1 Kgs 1:4 reads: *וְהַנְּעִרָה יְפָה עַד־מְאֹד* (...and the young woman was very, very beautiful). The first variation is the use of *אִשָּׁה* to describe Bathsheba and *נְעִרָה* for Abishag. This does not radically differentiate the descriptions of their beauty, nor do the uses of *טוֹבַת מְרֵאָה* and *יְפָה*. However, the use of the preposition *עַד* combined with *מְאֹד* may

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<sup>214</sup> Avioz, "Motif of Beauty," 347; Macwilliam, "Ideologies of Male Beauty," 278.

establish a difference between Bathsheba and Abishag's beauty, which is obscured in most English translations, which often translate מְאֹד and עַד־מְאֹד similarly, if not the same.<sup>215</sup>

Given that עַד is a preposition, it serves various functions and suggests various translation possibilities according to the context in which it is found. The BDB's third definition of עַד defines it as a preposition "... of *degree*, to suggest a higher or the highest; as מְאֹד עַד *even to muchness*, i.e. exceedingly (v. מְאֹד)." Cline's definition of עַד also contains the prepositional phrase עַד־מְאֹד and gives more or less the same definition as the BDB: "...unto greatness, i.e. exceedingly, completely...."<sup>216</sup> It is admittedly difficult to know the best way to translate the phrase עַד־מְאֹד, especially given that its definitions suggest it is synonymous with the preposition מְאֹד itself and that it only appears sixteen times throughout the HB.<sup>217</sup> In most cases, the use of עַד־מְאֹד coincides with some sort of intense emotion or physical state, as a brief review of the examples demonstrates.<sup>218</sup> It can be used to express intensely positive emotions

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<sup>215</sup> For some examples, cf. 1 Kgs 3 in: NAB, NABRE, NIV, NJB, NRS, TNK.

<sup>216</sup> 31. BDB, s.v. "מְאֹד"; Clines, 261.

<sup>217</sup> Gen 27:33, 34; 1 Sam 11:15, 25:36; 2 Sam 2:17; 1 Kgs 1:4; Ps 38:7, 8; Ps 119:8, 43, 51, 107; Isa 64:8, 11; Lam 5:22, Dan 8:8; 11:25.

<sup>218</sup> The first עַד־מְאֹד readers encounter (canonically speaking) appears in Genesis 27:33 and 34, when Isaac and Esau realize that Jacob has stolen Esau's blessing from Isaac. Both Isaac and Esau experience intense emotions at this moment. Isaac "trembled a great tremble עַד־מְאֹד" (v. 33) upon realizing that he had not been talking with Esau as he had thought, which must be frightening and upsetting for an elderly man who can no longer see enough as he once could. Esau, in response, "...cried out a great, bitter cry עַד־מְאֹד" (v. 34) upon realizing that his blessing had been taken. When Saul defeats the Ammonites in 1 Sam 11, the Samuel and the Israelites make him king, make an offering to YHWH and, together with Saul, "they rejoiced עַד־מְאֹד" (11:15). Later in 1 Sam, Abigail returns home to find Nabal feasting like a king and "...drunk עַד־מְאֹד" (25:36). The combination of עַד־מְאֹד is also used to describe the battle Abner lost to David and his servants in 2 Sam 2:17. The one and only use of עַד־מְאֹד in both 1 and 2 Kings is used to describe Abishag's beauty. The remaining examples occur in poetic, prophetic, or apocalyptic literature. It appears twice in Psalm 38 to describe the extent of the psalmist's anguish and suffering (vv.7, 9). Psalm 119, though it is considered a wisdom psalm, is laden with the psalmist's intense pleas for God's continued presence and loyalty, and uses עַד־מְאֹד at various points to express the psalmist's desire for God's presence, the extent to which the psalmist has followed God's law, and to compare his or her loyalty to YHWH with those who have scorned YHWH "עַד־מְאֹד" (8, 43, 54, 107). The people of Israel address God in third Isaiah, pleading for mercy and forgiveness (Isa 64:8, 11). At this moment עַד־מְאֹד appears twice, nearly back to back, at the end of their address. The book of Lamentations is an intensely emotional cry over the destruction of Jerusalem and exile of its people. Given that the expression עַד־מְאֹד seems to function as a way to emphasis and/or express intense

(1 Sam 11:15) or negative ones (Gen 27:33, 34, Ps 38: 8, 11, Lam 5:22). It has been suggested that the emotions of characters in the books of Samuel are presented more dramatically or intensely.<sup>219</sup> However, the phrase עַד־מְאֹד only appears three times in 1 and 2 Samuel combined, which is odd considering the books' penchant for intense portrayals of characters' emotions. This is true also of the psalms where emotions often take centre stage, yet עַד־מְאֹד only appears six times across two psalms (Pss 38 and 119). That two separate portions of the HB that are flush with dramatic scenes and heightened emotional states use עַד־מְאֹד so sparingly might suggest that it is reserved for emotional or physical states of the highest degrees. In my translation of עַד־מְאֹד above, I chose to double the English adverb 'very' to try and capture the heightened meaning of מְאֹד when עַד is prefixed to it.

This leads to the example used in the narrative in question (1 Kgs 1:4) and the description of Abishag's beauty. While there may have been some emotions surrounding the inevitable death of King David in 1 Kgs 1, the text does not give any obvious signs that either David, his servants, or Abishag were experiencing any intense emotions. Thus, it is safe to assume that עַד־מְאֹד here does not express any intense or heightened emotional states. The case of Abishag seems akin to those relating to Abner, Daniel's visions, and possibly even Naboth. The fact that she is chosen among all the beautiful women in the kingdom certainly goes a long way in emphasizing her beauty, but the addition of עַד־מְאֹד confirms that David's servants truly found the most

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emotions, one might expect to see various examples of עַד־מְאֹד throughout the book. However, it only appears once in the book's short five chapters: in the very last verse, which intensifies the despair felt by the community by ending the lament on a very bleak note: "For truly you have rejected us, you have become angry with us עַד־מְאֹד" (5:22). The final two examples come to us from the book of Daniel during two of his visions, in both cases they describe the might of a battle or a warrior (8:8; 11:25).

<sup>219</sup> David Shepherd, "David's Anger was Greatly Kindled: Melodrama, the Silent Cinema, and the Books of Samuel," *Close Encounters Between Bible and Film: An Interdisciplinary Engagement*, eds. Laura Copier and Caroline Vander Sticheleesp (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature 2016), 148–49.



beautiful woman in the kingdom to minister to him and maybe the most beautiful person in the entire HB, with her only possible rival being Absalom.<sup>220</sup>

There are some who suggest a possible competition between Bathsheba and Abishag in this scene or who view Abishag as a sort of threat to Bathsheba, with some suggesting that Bathsheba may be jealous of Abishag because she is young and beautiful.<sup>221</sup> The most common threat suggested is that Abishag might create an heir with David, replacing Bathsheba in the court and, later, replacing Solomon on the throne. Sweeney suggests the potential seriousness of such a threat is underlined by the fact that Abishag is a Shunamite, and Shunem has been noted to have Saulide connections.<sup>222</sup> However, these concerns are erased when readers immediately learn that this outcome is impossible because David did not have sex with Abishag (1 Kgs 1:4). Though Bathsheba may not be aware that David and Abishag did not engage in intercourse, there is no hint in the text that she feels threatened by Abishag. If anything, this scene emphasizes the sharp differences between Abishag and Bathsheba's positions and, in doing so, dispels any belief that Abishag is a threat to this royal woman. Abishag is a young, beautiful woman, brought to minister to the king in his old age. While Bathsheba was once forced to serve the king in a different way (and at the summons of the king himself, rather than at the behest of his

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<sup>220</sup> Although the phrase *תָּמִיד* does not appear in the description of Absalom's beauty, his description is not only the most detailed and lengthy of anyone's in the HB, but he is also said to be more beautiful than anyone in all of Israel.

<sup>221</sup> Klein, *From Deborah to Esther*, 66; Cogan, *1 Kings*, 159–60; Joyce Willis, Andrew Pleffer and Stephen Llewelyn, "Conversation in the Succession Narrative of Solomon," *VT* 61 (2011): 142. Berlin, "Characterization in Biblical Narrative: David's Wives," 225.

<sup>222</sup> Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 53–54, "The question of David's relationship to the house of Saul underlies the concern for his ability to exercise the kingship in this narrative. David's claim to the throne is justified in part by his marriage to Michal and the inability of Saul's sons to assume the throne due to death... or incapacity.... His refusal to have relations with Michal ensures that she will not have children who would then have a greater claim to the throne by virtue of their descent from Saul. Abishag's hometown of Shunem is noted for its ties to the house of Saul. Shunem is identified with the modern village of Sulim, located about three miles east of the Afula in the Jezreel Valley (Josh 19:18) .... A union between David and Abishag, and later between Adonijah and Abishag, would tie the house of David more closely to a region known for Saulide connections and thereby provide further support for Davidic rule in the north. Sheba's revolt against David (2 Sam 20), which encompassed the northern tribes, and later the revolt of the north against Rehoboam (1 Kgs 12) underscores David's need for such support (2 Sam 20)."

servants), she is now a player in the court, with a son who could possibly sit on the throne.

The Bathsheba shown in 1 Kgs is not concerned with Abishag, but with stopping the king from making a grave error (to be discussed at greater length in Chapter 3). Her beauty is no longer an important aspect of her character as is evident from the emphasis on Abishag's beauty and the fact that Bathsheba's beauty is not directly mentioned.<sup>223</sup> She is not in the same position as she was in 2 Sam 11 and she is not the same woman readers met in 2 Sam 11. Koenig notes that in 1 Kgs 1–2 Bathsheba is not referred to as woman or wife as she had been in 2 Sam 11–12, but as mother, indicating that Bathsheba has grown and changed over the course of the years, despite readers not being privy to this development.<sup>224</sup>

Other aspects of Bathsheba's character come to the forefront in 1 Kgs 1–2. When readers first meet her all they know is that she is beautiful and, unlike Abigail, David did not want to marry her, nor did Bathsheba want to marry him. The text gives no sense of what Bathsheba might be like as a royal woman, whereas with Abigail readers know that she is insightful and capable of reasoning with David. Readers do not learn that Bathsheba also possesses these skills until she is called upon to use them in order to ensure David does not break an important oath. This remains another interesting difference between Abigail and Bathsheba. Abigail immediately shows herself to be a valuable royal woman: she is insightful, resourceful, able to manage servants, and understanding of the types of things that matter to a man who wants to become king. After witnessing her skills in action, David decides to propose marriage to her. One might expect her to become an important woman in his court, but she does not. Instead, she disappears from David's narrative, only appearing in the background a couple times, as mentioned previously. In contrast, Bathsheba starts off

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<sup>223</sup> Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba?*, 79, 84. Koenig also notes that Bathsheba's beauty is no longer important to her character as well but does not delve into the possible difference between *מְאֹד* and *עַד*.  
*מְאֹד*.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

as a mysterious stranger to readers; she is beautiful, silent, and passive. If she were to disappear entirely from the HB after giving birth to Solomon, it probably would not come as a complete surprise to readers. However, she does not disappear completely. Instead she returns twice: first as the seasoned wife of the old king (1 Kgs 1) and again as the mother of the king (1 Kgs 2).

Abigail's insight and ability to problem solve are clearly the most significant aspects of her character. However, like David before her, beauty is another positive quality that recommends her as a person fit for a place in the royal court. She serves as a model of what a royal woman should be: insightful and beautiful. When Bathsheba arrives in 1 Sam 11, readers only know that she possesses one of the qualities a royal woman should possess, namely, beauty. It appears her personal character did not matter to David, as he did not initially intend to take her as a wife. After the fact, when Bathsheba's son Solomon is already grown, readers learn that Bathsheba indeed has the skills required of a royal woman, possibly to an even greater extent than Abigail who does not appear to take on an important role in the court after David becomes king (unless this was a choice Abigail made). Abishag's appearance in 1 Kgs 1 demonstrates once again that there is a strong connection between beauty and women who are associated with King David. No attention is paid to her intellectual abilities as her role is not to work within the court, but to minister to the ailing king. These first few women working within David's court introduce readers to the idea that beauty is an important characteristic for a royal woman. There is no hint that beauty is a sign of blessing or a sign that a woman will automatically be suited to the court, as Williams suggested above, but there is a sense that beauty is seen as an important quality for a woman involved with a king.

## Beauty in the Book of Esther

This section will look at beauty in the book of Esther through the lens of beauty in 2 Sam 11 and 1 Kgs 1, the two narratives where the theme of beauty appears in connection with Bathsheba. I aim to see how the function of beauty in these narratives might shed light on the character of Esther herself and the wider narrative in which she is situated.

### *Esther 1*

The theme of beauty appears in the narrative almost immediately in the first chapter of Esther. The Book of Esther begins like many chronicles of a king: with the king himself. Upon meeting King Ahasuerus, readers learn that he is the type of ruler who seeks to glorify himself through abundant displays of his wealth (1:3–8). His first deed in the narrative is to throw a banquet of (supposedly) one hundred and eighty days for all his servants and the nobles of the provinces he rules. The purpose of this banquet is to flaunt his wealth and power, and the use of the Hiphil form of the verb *הִפְתִּיחַ* (to show or display) further confirms this fact (1:4). Readers are left in no doubt that Ahasuerus decides to throw this extravagant party for everyone in his kingdom so that he can show off his wealth and power as king.

Queen Vashti oversees the banquets for the women of the kingdom (1:9), which are held in tandem with Ahasuerus' feasts. On the final day of the festivities, King Ahasuerus, not feeling sufficiently glorified by these extravagant displays of wealth, decides to display one final commodity: Vashti's beauty (1:11). He sends all seven of his eunuchs to collect her, ordering that she present herself before the men in his banquet in her royal crown. This could lead one to believe that the King's thoughts regarding Vashti may have been sexual, as beauty in the HB is sometimes connected with sexual desire (as I discussed earlier).<sup>225</sup> Yet, given the context of this command, it seems that Vashti's beauty is important here not because of its

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<sup>225</sup> Macwilliam, "Ideologies of Male Beauty," 267; Ringgren, "הִפְתִּיחַ," *TDOT*, 6: 219.

connections to sexual desire, but because of its connection to the king's ego and his own sense of status and power.<sup>226</sup> The same Hiphil form of רָאָה used earlier in verse 1:4 also appears here to explain the king's purpose for commanding Vashti to come into the men's feast, so Ahasuerus' desire to display Vashti's beauty is connected to his desire to display his wealth earlier in the chapter. That Ahasuerus specifically commands that Vashti wear her royal crown also strengthens the connection between female beauty and royalty in Ahasuerus' court. Vashti's beauty, then, is but another possession indicating the king's royal status. He summons Vashti not out of a sexual desire but out of his desire to flaunt his power and, for him, the Queen's beauty is a further indication of his power as king (1:4, 11).

This summoning reminds one of King David in 2 Sam 11, who also summons a beautiful woman via his servants, and, in David's case, specifically by means of a message (11:4). There are striking similarities between Vashti and Bathsheba in 2 Sam 11. Indeed, Bathsheba and Vashti are described in almost the exact same way. In Esth 1:11 we see: כִּי־טוֹבַת מְרָאָה הִיא (...for she was beautiful) and in 2 Sam 11:2 we see: וְהָאִשָּׁה טוֹבַת מְרָאָה מְאֹד (...and the woman was very beautiful). The only real difference between these descriptions here is the addition of מְאֹד at the end of Bathsheba's description.

While the respective kings had different goals in mind for summoning the two women at hand, they chose to do so for the same reason: to use the women's beauty for their own personal benefit. The personal benefit that David sought was largely his own sexual pleasure, though it is not impossible that he sought to exert his power as king by summoning a woman he had no right to summon to display his power in the same way King Ahasuerus does with his parties. David saw a beautiful woman and, upon discovering she was alone without anyone to intervene on her behalf, he sent for her so that he could lie with her. By contrast, King Ahasuerus' personal benefit in summoning Vashti was to flaunt his wealth and power before all the people of his

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<sup>226</sup> Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 20.

kingdom. He was not interested in a sexual encounter the way David was with Bathsheba, but with further glorifying himself by demonstrating every single one of his possessions—including Vashti's beauty. That King Ahasuerus instructs Vashti to wear her royal crown further demonstrates that Vashti's beauty is seen as part of her royal persona. When one compares this scene with 2 Sam 11, one way in which beauty functions differently in Esther can be seen. In 2 Sam 11 it is purely a sexual motivator whereas in the book of Esther beauty is a symbol of female royalty and, thus, male royal power.

The public nature of Ahasuerus' request is seen to be even more outrageous when read in light of the secrecy in which David conducts his scheme. David moves quickly, first finding out who the woman is, then he sends messengers for her as soon as he finds out she is alone. He takes her, lies with her, and sends her back home. Ahasuerus, on the other hand, sends all seven of his eunuchs to collect Vashti from the women's banquet and bring her to himself and a room full of other men at the men's banquet. Ahasuerus has no fears about summoning Vashti. He is not concerned about breaking the honour code,<sup>227</sup> and he is not concerned with flaunting his wife before a room full of men who could very well seek to take her as David took Bathsheba. In contrast, the plan David devises after finding out Bathsheba is pregnant is thought out and calculated; he knows full well what he is doing is wrong and hopes to get away with it. Ahasuerus is either so drunk that he does not care he is breaking the honour code, or he sees himself as above the rules and, thus, does not care he is behaving inappropriately.

Unlike Vashti, Bathsheba does not know why she is being summoned. Even if she had, the significant gap in power between Bathsheba and David prevents her from being able to protect herself from him by denying his request or perhaps even negotiating with him. Perhaps she tried to but, as the events are hidden from the readers, one does not know what she may have done or said when she was face-to-

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<sup>227</sup> Klein, *From Deborah to Esther*, 99–100.

face with the king. When Ahasuerus summons Vashti, she had the full power of knowledge on her side. She had personal knowledge of the person summoning her, she knew what kind of state he was in (drunk at a party with other drunk men), and she knew exactly what he was asking of her. She had the privilege of knowing her choices, though neither of which were great choices. She could either refuse the king's command (a risky choice in the volatile Ahasuerus' court) or violate her culture's honour code by venturing into a party where men have already begun to drink (also placing herself in possible danger).<sup>228</sup> In the end, she decides to refuse the king, protecting herself both from shame as well as the threat of physical harm (1:12).

Though Bathsheba lacked Vashti's advantages when she was summoned, she was able to pressure David into a situation to try to help her when she found out she was pregnant. Tragically, this decision and attempt to protect herself would lead to the murder of her husband. At this point Bathsheba is brought into the court and is forced to marry David. Vashti's attempt at standing up for herself also backfires. As a result of her refusal to come when Ahasuerus summons her, she is stripped of her position as queen. Although Vashti did have a position of power, whereas Bathsheba did not, she was not able to protect herself from King Ahasuerus. Both women lose when forced to accede to unacceptable requests by their respective kings. Bathsheba is forced into a sexual encounter with a strange man, she loses her husband, her child, and is taken away from her former life to marry King David. Vashti is removed from her position as queen and is never seen or heard from again. These two women are far more alike than they initially seem.

Here one sees that beauty does not earn these women any better treatment than women who are not described as beautiful. Vashti's beauty may have helped her achieve a position in Ahasuerus' court but, at the end of the day she is still seen as expendable, easily replaced by another beautiful woman. Bathsheba's beauty also

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

brings her unsolicited attention and begins a chain of events that she is powerless to stop. After losing everything, Bathsheba essentially makes the best out of a bad situation and uses her new position to solidify herself as an important player in the court (1 Kgs 1 & 2).

## *Esther 2*

The beginning of chapter two might seem to suggest that beauty is connected to sexual desire in the book of Esther. However, a closer look confirms this is not the case for two reasons. First, chapter two begins with King Ahasuerus thinking about Vashti after his anger has finally waned. The second half of verse 2:1 reads: **זָכַר אֶת־ וַשְׁתִּי וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר־עָשְׂתָהּ וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר־נִגְזַר עָלֶיהָ:** (*He remembered Vashti and what she had done and what had been decided about her*). There is some debate as to exactly what Ahasuerus is thinking about Vashti here. Most interpret the entire verse as a reference to what occurred in chapter one, which makes sense given that the beginning of the chapter begins with the phrase “...and after these things” (**אַחֲרַיִם הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה**). This phrase clarifies that some time has passed since the previous events took place while simultaneously recalling those same events, ensuring that the reader will have “these things” in mind.<sup>229</sup> Susan Niditch suggests that the verb **עָשָׂה** here has a sexual connotation, insinuating what Vashti “used to do” for the king sexually.<sup>230</sup>

Niditch’s theory seems the least plausible of these suggestions and it is important for our purposes to understand why the verb **עָשָׂה** does not (and should not) be read with a sexual undertone in mind. Niditch argues that the Qal perfect form of **עָשָׂה** in v. 2:1 actually indicates habitual or repeated past action (what Vashti used to do) rather than a completed action (what Vashti did or had done), thus imbuing the

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<sup>229</sup> There is a theme in the book of Esther of personal grudges spreading to affect the kingdom. The king’s problem was with Vashti and Vashti alone, yet the punishment rendered was not just to her but to all women in the kingdom (and here the King does not even consider that, only the decision made regarding Vashti). Likewise, Haman’s conflict is with Mordecai alone, but the larger community of Jews gets wrapped up in it. One sees this with King David in 2 Sam 11, as well. His selfish desires have disastrous consequences for those serving him.

<sup>230</sup> Susan Niditch, “Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism, and Authority,” 34.



verb with a sexual undertone.<sup>231</sup> This interpretation is unlikely for two reasons. First, while the perfect tense can be used to express a past habitual action, it cannot do so on its own as it is here. The presence of an imperfect is required, which is lacking in this verse.<sup>232</sup> Indeed, all the verbs in the verse are perfects, except for the infinitive construct in the initial clause. When the book of Esther wishes to express a habitual activity in the past, it prefers to use the imperfect tense or a combination of a participle followed by an imperfect,<sup>233</sup> which readers will see in due course (2:11, 13, 14; 3:2).

Second, even if the grammar pointed to a past habitual aspect, there is little in the immediate context which might suggest the verb carries a sexual meaning here. The beginning of the chapter informs readers that enough time has passed since Vashti rejected the king and now his anger has passed. Thus, it is clear Ahasuerus is thinking specifically about the final night of the banquet, when Vashti was removed from her role as Queen and forbidden to come before the king again. This is further supported by the final clause of the verse which ends: **אֲשֶׁר־נִגְזַר עָלֶיהָ** (what had been decided about her). The context clearly refers to a specific moment rather than a habitual action in King Ahasuerus and Queen Vashti's shared past. Thus, there is nothing about the use of **עָשָׂה** here that implies a sexual undertone in the king's thoughts about Vashti. Both the Hebrew grammar and the context argue against this interpretation.

This is important precisely because of what comes in the next verse: the king's servants suggest that beautiful young women from across the kingdom be brought to the king so that he may choose one to reign instead of Vashti (2:2–4). If this suggestion were a response to the king wishing he had a woman to fulfil the sexual needs that Vashti used to fulfil for him, then it would make sense to argue that the servants offer to bring beautiful young virgins to the king so that the king can choose a beautiful

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<sup>231</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>232</sup> Jouon, 112D and f 1

<sup>233</sup> Jouon, 121f

woman to replace Vashti in performing whatever unique sexual acts she may have performed.<sup>234</sup> However, because נִשְׂאָה does not have a sexual connotation in the preceding verse, there is no reason to assume that the king's servants are trying to find Ahasuerus a new sexual partner. Indeed, when the servants suggest that the king choose from the women brought to him, they specify that it is for him to choose a woman *to reign* instead of Vashti (1:19, 2:4).<sup>235</sup>

This, however, does not answer the question as to why it is necessary for the young women to be beautiful if the king is only trying to choose a new queen to reign beside him. When looking at the first mention of beauty in Esther 1, I showed that, for King Ahasuerus, the woman who reigns beside him as queen must be beautiful, otherwise she will not properly represent his own royal power and wealth. Beauty, then, is the first requirement for the woman who will replace Vashti as queen. This may also explain why the women competing for the role of queen are required to spend a year beautifying themselves. For the king to be able to make a proper decision he must see how the young women look when fully “beautified.”

The way in which Esther was chosen to become queen has been likened to a “beauty contest.”<sup>236</sup> While some have correctly noted that this comparison trivializes the situation at hand (i.e., these young women are taken from their homes and families and forced to compete for something they may not even want), it is easy to understand why some may be tempted by this comparison.<sup>237</sup> The women are brought

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<sup>234</sup> I specify ‘unique sexual acts’ because it is likely the king had other women in the palace with whom he could engage in sexual activities so, if a certain woman needed to be picked to replace Vashti purely for sexual purposes, then it stands to reason that the role of Queen came with specific sexual duties that other women did not perform.

<sup>235</sup> Our previous discussion on the verb נִשְׂאָה, used here to describe the purpose of Ahasuerus choosing a new wife, clarifies that this indicates activities limited to ruling from a throne.

<sup>236</sup> Klein, *From Deborah to Esther*, 102.

<sup>237</sup> Bechtel, *Esther*, 31; Grossman offers an analysis of how this situation may look from the perspective of the women and actually views the description of the selection process as a sharp critique of Ahasuerus’ treatment of women (*Esther: The Outer Narrative*, 59–67); Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 27–28. Fox correctly notes that it is not a beauty contest, and notes that the girls are taken against their will. However, he goes on to argue that it is not a beauty contest because the girls were chosen for their beauty before they began competing and, thus, it is actually a sex contest, an argument I will contend in due course.

to the king because they are beautiful, they are subjected to further beautification treatments, and then they are sent to the king one by one, after which he chooses Vashti's replacement from among the women selected by his servants. Yet, as I will show presently, there is some evidence in the text that the king may not have chosen Esther based on her beauty alone, which complicates the idea that Esther simply won a beauty contest. This would also further suggest that, though beauty is a requirement for royal woman, it is only a minimum requirement.

At this juncture, it may be helpful to recall Bathsheba's narrative in 1 Kgs 1, where the young and beautiful Abishag is brought into David's court. Abishag is not a royal woman, but, at this point in the story, Esther is not a royal woman yet, either. Michael Fox explains that the motif of a king or a king's servants searching the kingdom for a beautiful woman is a common trope in literature throughout the ANE.<sup>238</sup> He also posits that Esth 2:2b is verbally dependent upon the Abishag passage in 1 Kgs 1:2.<sup>239</sup> Though the situations differ, the general context is certainly similar: the king has a need, the servants suggest that the need is for a beautiful woman, a search is conducted to find said beautiful woman who is then found. The most important point of comparison for our purposes, however, is the description of Abishag's beauty and the description of Esther's beauty.

Abishag's beauty is described in a very simple way, as I mentioned above: *וְהַנְּעִרָה יָפָה עַד־מְאֹד* (...and the woman was very, very beautiful). While Abishag's description is simple, it does, as I've noted, have the unique addition of the combined prepositional phrase *עַד־מְאֹד*, which tells readers not only that Abishag was very beautiful, but that she was the most beautiful woman they could find. The description of Esther's beauty is a bit lengthier: *וְהַנְּעִרָה יָפֶת־תְּאֵר וְטוֹבַת מְרֵאָה* (*The young woman had a beautiful figure and was beautiful*). Though Esther's description is more complete, informing readers that she was beautiful all around, there is nothing in this

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<sup>238</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 28.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*; Grossman, *The Outer Narrative*, 58.

description that insinuates her beauty is out of the ordinary. She was apparently beautiful enough to be brought to the king, but so were all the other women who were chosen. Abishag, on the other hand, was chosen only because she was the most beautiful, and the text makes this exceedingly clear with the use of עֲדָמָאֵד. Furthermore 1 Kgs 1 suggests a direct connection between beauty and sexual desire in a way that the text in Esther does not. Once Abishag is brought to minister to David the text clearly states that David did not have sex with Abishag. Even though the text of 1 Kgs 1 has a reason for making this clear (emphasizing that Abishag could not produce an heir), it still demonstrates that for the text of 1 Kgs 1 female beauty is directly connected to male sexual desire whereas, in the book of Esther, female beauty is connected to royal eligibility.

When Esther first arrives at the palace, she immediately finds the favour of everyone she encounters (2:9, 2:15). It has been suggested that the text presents Esther's beauty as the sole reason she does so well in the royal court.<sup>240</sup> While I agree her beauty is shown as valuable and promising for her character in the narrative, I believe the text also provides subtle hints that Esther is not simply a passive beauty who gets by on looks alone. Scholars often comment on the way in which the Hebrew text declares that Esther garners the favour of the eunuchs and the other people of the court, as it is unique. An example of the standard expression seen in the HB can be found in Genesis 39:4, which reads: וַיִּמְצָא יוֹסֵף חֵן בְּעֵינָיו (...and Joseph found favour in his eyes).<sup>241</sup> The book of Esther does not use this standard form, but uses several different (though similar) forms, which are only found in the book of Esther and appear in vv. 2:9, 15, 17, and 5:2. In all of these verses Esther does not find favour, rather, she "lifts" favour from those with whom she interacts. The verb used in Esther is נִשְׂפָּר rather than the standard verb מְצָא that seen in the example above from Genesis. Many note the use of נִשְׂפָּר here in Esther instead of the more common מְצָא. It

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<sup>240</sup> Esther Fuchs, "Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 81.

<sup>241</sup> Cf. Deut 24:1, Ruth 2:2; 2:10.

has been suggested that it insinuates that Esther does something to gain favour from the people of the palace and is therefore not merely a passive figure in the first half of the narrative.<sup>242</sup> Another difference is that Esther not only lifts חן from those around her, she also lifts חסד. Esther lifts חסד twice, once from Hegai at 2:9, who then goes out of his way to take special care of Esther and her servants, and then from King Ahasuerus at 2:17, who then chooses her to succeed Vashti as queen. In this same verse (17), the text also states that King Ahasuerus loved (אָהַב) Esther more than all the other women<sup>243</sup> and, I should note, Esther also lifted חן and חסד from Ahasuerus more than all the virgins.<sup>244</sup> The consistent use of this unique phrasing implies to readers that Esther does not gain the favour of all who see her simply because she is beautiful, but because there must be something more to her.

It is often assumed that the evening the women spend with the king is merely so that the king can have sexual relations with all the women, allowing him to then choose the woman with whom he most enjoyed having sex to reign in Vashti's place.<sup>245</sup> The two aspects of this assumption seem to come from the popular but misguided idea that beauty in the book of Esther is only significant for sexual reasons (physical attraction) and that the verb חָפַץ (delight, delight in) has a sexual meaning here. While חָפַץ can have a sexual connotation it most often does not,<sup>246</sup> and readers will see an example of this later on when Ahasuerus asks Haman what should be done for the man whom the king delights (חָפַץ) to honour (6:6, 7, 9, 11). There is nothing in

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<sup>242</sup> Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 35; Reid, *Esther*, 109; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 31; Miles, "Reading Esther as Heroine," 135.

<sup>243</sup> There is only one other woman in the HB who is said to have been loved by a king and that is Ma'acah in 2 Chr 22:21. The text states that Rehoboam loved Ma'acah more than all his wives and concubines, just as Ahasuerus loved Esther more than all the other women.

<sup>244</sup> The question arises, what do these words mean in the context of Esther, then? I do not seek to argue any specific meanings for אהב, חסד or חן, as the meanings of these words is not the aim of the argument and, whatever their meanings are do not change the overall argument, which is Esther's beauty is not the reason she was chosen above the other women. Rather, there was something else beyond beauty that made her, in Ahasuerus' opinion, fit to reign in Vashti's place.

<sup>245</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 27–28.

<sup>246</sup> Num 14:8, Judg 13:23, 1 Sam 18:22, 18:25, 2 Sam 20:11, 24:3, 1 Kgs 9:1, 10:9, Pss 5:5, 22:9, 109:17, Isa 42:21, 53:10, Mal 2:17. This is not an exhaustive list, but some examples to demonstrate the range of the verb חָפַץ.

the given context which requires the verb  $\text{לְהַפְּיֵא$  to have a sexual connotation, and this is further confirmed by the fact that the king chooses Esther because he loved her, and she lifted more  $\text{חַן}$  and  $\text{דְּקָדָה}$  from him than all the other women.

Given that beauty was the minimum requirement for a woman to have been chosen by the king's servants, all the women taken to the king were beautiful, not just Esther. Furthermore, it appears that King Ahasuerus will keep all the women brought to him, whether they are chosen to replace Vashti or not (2:14 insinuates that each girl will remain in a second house of women until they are called by the king again. It says nothing about them being dismissed from the court). King Ahasuerus did not choose the woman who was the most beautiful, as the text does not say that is why he chose her. He chose the woman whom he personally liked the most to reign alongside him instead of Vashti.

## **Conclusion**

It has commonly been understood that beauty for women signifies powerlessness and beauty for men signifies power. Macwilliam has noted that this understanding needs to be more nuanced when it comes to male beauty as there are occasions in the HB where male beauty does not preclude powerlessness and vulnerability. I would argue that this understanding needs to be more nuanced when it comes to female beauty as well. Abigail's narrative suggests that there are requirements for being a royal woman beyond simply being a woman who can bear a child and, thus, an heir. A royal woman needs to be able to think on her feet, to be able to deal with conflicts and work with others, as Abigail worked with her servants. I also demonstrated that beauty is a desirable trait for a royal woman, but within Abigail's narrative it is not so clear why. Her most important characteristic is her insight, which allows her to deal with David appropriately and stop the shedding of innocent blood and her beauty feels almost like a footnote.

Within Bathsheba's narrative we return to beauty as a signifier of powerlessness and vulnerability. Bathsheba's beauty catches David's attention and, because both David and Bathsheba are alone while "all of Israel" is at war, David puts a plan in motion that devastates Bathsheba's life. In the end she is brought into David's court where she gives birth to two sons, the second of which is Solomon. After Solomon is born, Bathsheba disappears from the books of Samuel just as Abigail does after she marries David. However, when Bathsheba returns in 1 Kgs 1, readers learn that she has a lot of the same capacities as Abigail. She is insightful, knowing just what to say to compel David keep his oath. In contrast to Abigail's narrative, beauty comes to the forefront in Bathsheba's story though it seems to have less import for her royal qualifications as it serves as the motivator for David's plan. However, it is not necessary to explain why David summoned her. The text could simply state that he saw a woman bathing and that moved him to summoning her. Yet, her beauty is mentioned, and she ends up being another model of what a royal woman should be in the HB. That the authors of these texts wanted it to be clear that both Abigail and Bathsheba are beautiful may have something to do with the king with whom they are dealing. As noted above there seems to be special connection between David's house and beauty. After David dies in 1 Kgs 2, royal characters in the HB cease to be described as beautiful until the Book of Esther.

In the book of Esther, beauty seems to be of the utmost importance for a woman. It is commonly assumed that beauty in the book of Esther, like beauty in general, is connected to sexual desire. However, upon looking more closely at the text itself, and in light of how beauty functions in Bathsheba's and Abigail's stories, one sees that beauty in Esther is not connected to sexual desire so much as it is connected to royalty. Beauty is important for a royal woman because it reflects the king's power and wealth; a woman's beauty is an outward symbol of the king's royal power. When Vashti is summoned to parade her beauty for the men at King Ahasuerus' feast, a feast he has thrown solely to display his power as king, she is commanded to do so in her

royal crown. When she refuses to do so, effectively challenging the king's power, she is stripped of her royal title and a search is conducted for beautiful women in the kingdom who will reign instead of Vashti.

However, this cannot be seen solely as a decision based upon beauty, as it was with Abishag, who was chosen only because she was the most beautiful woman available. In the book of Esther, beauty is merely the minimum requirement for a royal woman, which we learned from Abigail and Bathsheba. Readers do not know exactly which of Esther's characteristics inspired Ahasuerus had to choose her, but it is clear that he did not choose her simply because of her beauty. The text states he chose her because he loved her, and she won more *יָן* and *דָּקָה* than all the other beautiful women. Much later in the narrative readers learn that Esther does, indeed, possess the wisdom that both Abigail and Bathsheba demonstrated before her (which will be discussed later). Beauty, then, is important for a royal woman because it serves as an outward symbol of royal power.

### **Excursus: Jezebel and Beauty?**

This project seeks to read the character and book of Esther in light of the narratives of the royal Israelite women that came before her, namely, Bathsheba and Jezebel. This chapter has focused on beauty, a theme that appears in both Bathsheba and Esther's narratives. Jezebel, however, is unique among the royal women in our ensemble because she is the only one who is not called beautiful or described physically in any way. It is hard to gauge whether the absence of a positive physical description insinuates that Jezebel (or any character, for that matter) is not beautiful. As Brenner has noted, there are very few examples in the HB of negative physical descriptions, and one of those descriptions is applied to the cattle in Pharaoh's dream (Gen 41) and not humans.<sup>247</sup> In the books of Kings, the focal point of Jezebel's

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<sup>247</sup> Brenner, *Intercourse of Knowledge*, 48–49. The other examples Brenner gives do not actually describe an individual as ugly, as one sees with the cows in Genesis, but, rather, describe, suggests, the



characterization is her foreignness, specifically her devotion to the god Baal, and the violent ways in which she attempts to enforce devotion to Baal in the Northern Kingdom.<sup>248</sup> There is one scene towards the end of Jezebel's story, however, in which some have seen the themes of beauty and/or sexuality appear.

### *2 Kings 9:30–37*

In 2 Kgs 9:30–37, Jehu's campaign to put an end to the house of Ahab leads him to Jezreel, where Jezebel resides. When Jehu arrives, Jezebel is already awaiting his arrival from her window after having arranged her hair and lined her eyes with kohl (9:30). When Jehu arrives to kill Jezebel, she calls to him from the window, taunting him by referring to him as Zimri, a usurper whose reign Omri (Ahab's father) ended violently (1 Kgs 16:9–18). Some speculate that Jezebel attempts to make herself beautiful in this scene in order to seduce or manipulate Jehu to keep him from killing her and, possibly, to encourage him to keep her in the royal court when he takes over.<sup>249</sup>

Various suggestions have been offered attempting to explain why Jezebel is described arranging her hair and lining her eyes with kohl. A common understanding is that Jezebel is being portrayed as a goddess, not unlike the ones she might have worshipped, as it was common for a goddess to be portrayed looking out a window and adorned in the way Jezebel is described to have been.<sup>250</sup> Some do not see a cultic background to this scene, arguing that the woman at the window motif was common throughout the HB, as the window is the only place a woman could be seen publicly.<sup>251</sup>

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characters are "fat." Brenner suggests that, because these references seem to be pejorative, obesity may be viewed as "ugly." She refers specifically to Eglon in Judg 3 and the women whom Amos refers to as the "cows of Bashan" (Amos 4:1).

<sup>248</sup> Cf. 1 Kgs 16:31; 18:4, 13; 19:1–2.

<sup>249</sup> Herbert B. Huffman, "Jezebel – The 'Corrosive' Queen," in *From Babel to Babylon: Essays on Biblical History and Literature in Honour of Brian Peckham*, eds. Joyce Rilett Wood, John E. Harvey, and Mark Leuchter (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 282.

<sup>250</sup> Cat Quine, "On Dying in a City Gate: Implications in the Deaths of Eli, Abner and Jezebel," *JSOT* 40 (2016): 412.

<sup>251</sup> Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 286. Fritz references Judg 5:28, 2 Sam 6:16; Song 2:9.

The fact that Jezebel calls out to Jehu, taunting him by calling him Zimri, has encouraged some to view Jezebel's self-adornment as a statement of her identity as a royal woman and a challenge to Jehu's authority.<sup>252</sup> On this reading, it is clear she knows her final hour is near, so she dresses herself according to her royal status, a defiant gesture for her last moments alive. Alternatively, some see her taunt as an act of ignorance, that Jezebel feels free to taunt Jehu because she does not know what has happened.<sup>253</sup> Others have adopted a more psychological perspective and have seen in this scene a type of mental preparation for her confrontation with Jehu, comparing makeup to battle armour; as makeup and dress would be the only type of armour available to a woman at that time.

The text makes it very clear that Jezebel is aware of what is about to happen. Jehu is making his way to Jezebel, killing off the house of Ahab one by one. In her taunting call to Jehu, Jezebel makes it clear that she knows why Jehu has come.<sup>254</sup> Jezebel has always chosen to be aggressive, especially when faced with a challenge (1 Kgs 18:4; 19:2; 21:7–15), so it would be out of character for her to be coy or flirtatious. It is difficult to read this greeting in any way other than a sarcastic taunt. Jezebel standing at her window, dressed in her royal attire, reminds Jehu that her house brought down a usurper once before and comparing Jehu to Zimri suggests he might meet the same bloody end. This greeting is clearly not an attempt at flattery or flirtation. Furthermore, Jehu is on a mission specifically to end the royal house of Ahab and the image of Jezebel, made up in a way that displays her royal status drives that point home even further. When Jezebel falls from the window it is not just a woman falling, it is a royal woman. As Jezebel falls, so does the ruling house of Ahab. Though this scene has no relevance to royal women and beauty, it is important for a reading of Esther as a royal woman. Jezebel's sudden need to dress herself up to the full extent

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<sup>252</sup> Robert L. Cohn, *2 Kings*, Berit Olam (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2000), 70; Melissa Jackson, "Reading Jezebel From the 'Other' Side: Feminist Critique, Postcolonialism, and Comedy," *RevExp* 112 (2015) 247.

<sup>253</sup> Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 286.

<sup>254</sup> Sweeney, *I and II Kings*, 336.

of her royal office may provide some insight as to why Esther does something similar in Chapter 5.

### *Esther's מְלִבוֹת*

Esther begins negotiations with King Ahasuerus in order to save the Jews in Chapter 5. In the first verse, Esther is standing in the palace courtyard after having dressed in her *מְלִבוֹת*, which is often translated as royal garments.<sup>255</sup> This scene has not attracted much scholarly attention, though it is often mentioned as a turning point in Esther's characterisation because from this point on in the text she is only referred to as *אֶסְתֵּר הַמְּלִכָּה* (Queen Esther/ Esther the Queen) rather than simply *אֶסְתֵּר*.<sup>256</sup> Indeed, this scene is sometimes read with the idea that Esther had attempted to make herself look beautiful before approaching the King so that she could manipulate him with her beauty and sexuality.<sup>257</sup>

There are no other scenes in the HB where a woman is described as either dressing herself or arranging herself in the way Jezebel and Esther do.<sup>258</sup> Though Esther and Jezebel have been discussed together before, no one has considered these two scenes together.<sup>259</sup> Though I do not believe either of these scenes have anything to do with beauty, they have both been read this way, which is why I have decided to include a brief exploration of these passages at the end of this chapter.

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<sup>255</sup> The question at hand is the exact meaning of *מְלִבוֹת*, which is difficult to know as the word itself is used in a variety of contexts. It can mean kingdom, it can mean a royal item – such as clothing or dishware, or it can signify a specific role as we see in 1:19 when Memucan suggests that Vashti's *מְלִבוֹת* be given to another. None of these uses have any connection to beauty.

<sup>256</sup> Though she is called *אֶסְתֵּר הַמְּלִכָּה* before she approaches Ahasuerus in chapter 5, the title is not consistent throughout the earlier chapters of the narrative. Only after she approaches him is the title "Queen" always included after her name.

<sup>257</sup> Nicole Wilkinson, "Esther," *NIDB* 2:317; Klein, *From Deborah to Esther*, 107; Niditch, "Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism, and Authority," 39.

<sup>258</sup> Though at least one woman is described as changing out of and into her widow's attire (Gen 38:14, 19)

<sup>259</sup> Cf. Helena Zlotnick, "From Jezebel to Esther."

In chapter 4, Mordecai informs Esther of Haman's plot to exterminate the Jews and asks her to intervene (4:6–8). In this scene readers learn that there is a law which states that anyone who approaches the king without having been summoned first is likely to be put to death unless the king extends his golden sceptre to them, in which case their life would be spared (4:11). Out of fear, Esther initially refuses to help but, after some prodding from Mordecai, she agrees to approach King Ahasuerus in the hope that he will stop the genocide (4:13–16). In 5:1, Esther is shown standing outside in the palace court, awaiting what she suspects might be her execution (4:16) and in this moment Esther has decided to dress herself in her royal attire (מַלְכוּת).<sup>260</sup>

It might be helpful to think about what is to come in chapter six, when Mordecai is honoured by the king, so as to better understand what it means for Esther to be dressed in her מַלְכוּת. In chapter 6, Haman is on his way to see Ahasuerus to request that Mordecai be executed on the stake Haman had constructed at the end of chapter 5 (5:14). When Ahasuerus calls Haman in, he asks Haman what he thinks would be the best way to reward someone whom the king wishes to honour (6:6). Haman, assuming this reward would be his (6:6), details the way in which he would like to be honoured by the king (6:7–9). This reward involves wearing the king's royal garments, riding on the king's horse, and being paraded around the palace courtyard for all to see.

The royal garments (מַלְכוּת) are a very important aspect of Haman's fantasy and not just any royal garments, but the ones which the king has worn (6:8). This, coupled with sitting atop a horse which the king has ridden, completes Haman's ultimate fantasy: to be in the seat of kingly power himself (6:8). It is important to note that sitting atop a horse the king has already ridden is not enough – the royal

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<sup>260</sup> Reid, *Esther*, 107. "The Hebrew word *malkut* is used three times here. Esther literally 'puts on royalty' and Xerxes sits on 'his throne of royalty' in the 'house of royalty'. The verse also refers to Xerxes three times as 'the king' (melek)....' The king also directly refers to her as "Queen Esther" which no character has done at this point "The emphasis could not be clearer, Esther is entering her other world, the king's territory. As she does, she enters cautiously and dresses appropriately. There is no indication she goes through the beauty preparations described in chapter 2 for this audience with the king. She is no longer relying on her beauty or powers of seduction..."

garments, including a crown, are necessary to truly reflect the royal image, as they are a visual signifier of the king's role and power. Without the royal garments, the king would look like any other man.<sup>261</sup> The public nature of the act also seems to be important for Haman. It is not enough to wear the royal garments and ride the king's horse, he must be seen publicly for it to truly mean something (6:9).

Esther dressing in her *מְלִכוּת*, then, does not seem to imply she was trying to make herself beautiful for the king. Like Jezebel before her, Esther is dressing herself in the garments of her office. She is announcing that she is not just any subject coming to the king unsummoned; she is the queen and she is dressed accordingly. Though she is not seen in the plaza as Mordecai was (and as Haman had hoped to be), her royal attire is still seen by the rest of the court. She puts herself on full display not simply as a beautiful woman, but as the beautiful woman who is *queen* of Ahasuerus' kingdom. Esther dressing in her royal attire, then, is not an attempt to manipulate Ahasuerus with her beauty so much as it is an attempt to display her royal status to the king, the court, and possibly even to herself.<sup>262</sup>

In 5:1, readers see Esther in a different, but similar situation as Jezebel in 1 Kgs 9. Both women were facing what they believe may be their last moments alive and, to

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<sup>261</sup> Verse 1:19 states that Vashti's *מְלִכוּת* will be given to one better than her. If this use of *מְלִכוּת* refers to clothing, then this may mean that to have the *מְלִכוּת* means that the one wearing it has taken on the role of king/queen. It is difficult to be sure whether this use is a reference to clothing as *מְלִכוּת* can have various meanings but, given that the word is used elsewhere in the book of Esther to refer specifically to clothing, it may be possible.

<sup>262</sup> In comparison to both Greek versions of Esther (the LXX and the A text) take a sharp departure from the MT in this scene. These versions are infused with far more drama in general, with Esther fainting at the sight of the king because she was so afraid. They also emphasize Esther's appearance and beauty in a way not seen in the MT. She is described as "glowing in the prime of her beauty" and her gown is so heavy and large that she needs servants to help her walk in it. Josephus's version also pays mind to Esther's physical appearance but, in an interesting departure from the other Greek texts, he states that Esther dresses herself as is becoming for a queen (JOS 11:234). The MT text of Esther primarily emphasizes Esther's royal role, as Day correctly notes in her study on the characterization of Esther in the MT, LXX, and the A text (173). Esther's beauty in the MT only mattered because it ensures she would gain a powerful position in the kingdom. Her physical appearance is never mentioned again in the narrative and the reference to her standing in her *מְלִכוּת* does not seem like a reference to her beauty, especially when it is compared to other versions of the Esther story. Esther's beauty played its part and, when it comes to negotiating with the King, readers have already seen from Vashti's experience that beauty is not enough to sway an angry Ahasuerus.

do so, both women felt the need to arrange themselves in a way that represented their royal status. With Jezebel, of course, there is a more detailed description of what she does; she adjusts her hair and lines her eyes with kohl (2 Kgs 9:30). Esther's description is a little more ambiguous, requiring readers to imagine how she may have looked in her מְלָכוֹת (Esth 5:1). Though it is not exactly clear what Esther's מְלָכוֹת includes (if it is only clothing or are accessories and hair and makeup involved), it is clear that it at least involves royal clothing, as readers saw with Haman's fantasy in chapter 6. While neither Esther nor Jezebel display their royal attire in as public a setting as Mordecai does in Chapter 6, both women are in as public a place as they can possibly be. Esther goes to Ahasuerus in the inner court and Jezebel appears to Jehu from the window, which is believed to be the customary way in which a woman could appear to outsiders.<sup>263</sup>

It is striking that both Jezebel and Esther dress themselves in a way to emphasize their royal status before such similarly pivotal moments in their lives. Neither narrative discloses why these two royal women felt it was necessary to dress up before facing such dire moments. However, from this point on, Esther is transformed from a behind-the-scenes queen to a front-and-centre one, determined to save her people from Haman's evil scheme. As for Jezebel, after she is thrown out the window and trampled on by horses, it should be noted that Jehu still acknowledges her royal status and (perhaps grudgingly) commands she is given a proper burial (2 Kgs 9:34). These two women dressing themselves up in their royal attire, then, are not examples of women trying to manipulate a man with their beauty but, rather, are examples of royal women leaning on the one form of power they had at their disposal: their royal positions.

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<sup>263</sup> Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 286.

## Chapter Three: Royal Women – A Check and Balance to the King

### Introduction

Because it is often assumed that the wives of kings were not expected to play any role in the royal court beyond bearing sons, most scholars focus on the mothers of kings, arguments about the meaning of the Hebrew term *גְּבִירָה*, and/or the various possibilities as to what that role may or may not have been.<sup>264</sup> The work of royal wives is either neglected, interpreted negatively, or attributed to her familial status. For example, Bathsheba's interaction with her husband, David, in 1 Kgs 1 is often interpreted as either the act of a mother trying to secure a future for her son (and security for herself) or that of an unwitting pawn of Nathan's political machinations.<sup>265</sup> In a similar vein, Jezebel's intervention between Ahab and Naboth in 1 Kgs 21 is sometimes viewed as the actions of a woman simply trying to be a good wife or one who usurps the role of the king, and sometimes these interpretations are combined into one convoluted motivation (cf. Fritz below).<sup>266</sup> The way both Bathsheba and Jezebel confront their husbands is rarely understood to reflect the duties royal wives may have been expected to perform as a formal role.

Esther is almost never discussed when it comes to gaining a better understanding of royal women's roles, as I discussed in Chapter 1 of the present study. Perhaps the only exception to this is Zlotnick, who believes Esther's portrayal of a Jewish queen is intended to be understood as a type of correction to Jezebel's

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<sup>264</sup> Spanier, "The Queen Mother in the Judaeen Royal Court," 186–95; Ben-Barak, "The Status and Right of the *Gebira*;" P.J. Berlyn, "The Great Ladies;" Carol Smith, "Queenship in Israel?," 142–62; Ruiz-Ortiz, *The Dynamics of Violence and Revenge in the Hebrew Book of Esther*, 119. Ruiz-Ortiz notes that one could consider Esther a failure as a queen because she does not bear Ahasuerus any children.

<sup>265</sup> Sweeney, *I and II Kings* 56; Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 19; John A. Davies, *A Study Commentary on 1 Kings*, EP Study Commentary (Darlington: EP Books, 2012), 20, 21; Klein, *From Deborah to Esther*, 70; David J. Zucker and Moshe Reiss, "David's Wives: Love, Power, and Lust," *BTB* 46 (2016): 71, 77; Robert Whybray, *The Succession Narrative* (London: SCM Press, 1968), 40; Zlotnick, *From Jezebel to Esther*, 479.

<sup>266</sup> Walsh, *1 Kings*, 321; Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 212; Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 249–50; Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 211; Galvin, *David's Successors*, 71. Galvin does not limit Jezebel to being merely a wife here, but he does assert that there is a "domestic nature" to her act simply because it involves her husband. This interpretation perfectly demonstrates how difficult it is for many to view female monarchs beyond their familial role.

queenship (more specifically, a correction to Jezebel and Ahab's reign).<sup>267</sup> Within Esther scholarship itself, there are varying understandings of Esther's status as queen, with some seeing her as an actual queen with responsibilities, and some, again, viewing her as merely the wife of the king, a role which is assumed to include no formal responsibilities.<sup>268</sup>

However, one should be careful not to dismiss royal women's actions as merely the actions of wives and mothers. As I discussed earlier, Solvang clearly demonstrates that royal women in the ANE were expected to help the royal court function in various ways and, because the monarchical structure is based on a familial structure, these various responsibilities were tied to a woman's familial role.<sup>269</sup> This chapter will focus on the roles Bathsheba, Jezebel, and Esther play within their respective courts. I will pay special attention to their interactions with other characters in their narratives, namely their husbands and other characters who work with them in the royal court. After I explore both Bathsheba's and Jezebel's narratives, I will look at Esther to see in what ways she does or does not reflect the royal women who narratively precede her in the HB.

## **Bathsheba**

### *2 Samuel 11*

Before I examine Bathsheba and David's relationship as it is depicted in 1 Kgs 1, I will first look at the events which brought Bathsheba into David's court in 2 Sam 11. While the text does not provide a strong sense of what Bathsheba and Uriah's marriage was like, readers are given some small clues as to what type of wife she may have been. Just as Abigail's swift action in a time of distress showed her capable of being the wife of a future king, Bathsheba's actions in 2 Sam 11 demonstrate that she might also be capable of fulfilling that role.

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<sup>267</sup> Zlotnick, "From Jezebel to Esther: Fashioning Images of Queenship in the Hebrew Bible," 477–95.

<sup>268</sup> I reviewed these varying perspectives in Chapter 1 of this study.

<sup>269</sup> Solvang, *A Woman's Place is in the House*, 2, 16–50.



### *Bathsheba, YHWH, and David*

As I discussed in the previous chapter, when David sends to inquire about the beautiful bathing woman, readers learn two things about her: her name is Bathsheba and her father and husband are both soldiers in David's army. These two pieces of information also establish Bathsheba's identity as an Israelite woman. Readers know this in part because she has a Hebrew name but, as is the case with her husband, Uriah, having a Hebrew name does not necessarily indicate Israelite heritage.<sup>270</sup> Readers are given her parentage along with her Hebrew name, which makes it possible to trace her lineage because readers know of her father, Eliam (2 Sam 23:34), and her grandfather, Ahithophel (2 Sam 15:12), from other texts in 2 Sam. From this information one can learn that she is a Judahite from the town of Giloh in the hill country north of Hebron. Many areas of the HB display great anxiety regarding foreign marriages, specifically Israelite men marrying foreign women, and this concern intensifies when the Israelite man in question is the King.<sup>271</sup> Thus, the detail of

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<sup>270</sup> Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, is known frequently throughout the narrative (and subsequent narratives in the HB) as "the Hittite." Thus, this is a Hebrew woman married to a foreign man. There are some who question whether Uriah should be considered a foreigner at all, despite his title "the Hittite." Some of this suspicion arises because of Uriah's name, which is a Hebrew name rather than a foreign name. In addition, the name itself is also highly Yahwistic, meaning "YHWH is my light." That this man, known as "the Hittite," has a Hebrew and clearly Yahwistic name encourages many to question Uriah's ethnicity, as this name suggests Uriah may come from a line of people who are devoted to the God of the Israelites and, therefore, must be an Israelite himself. Names are commonly used in Hebrew narratives to indicate something about a character that will be significant to the narrative in some way, as I noted in the brief discussion on Abigail and Nabal in 1 Sam 21. Uriah's name suggests he may be a character who is loyal and devoted to YHWH, but this does not necessarily mean he is an Israelite himself. A brief glance at the appearance of Hittites throughout the HB shows that the Israelites and the Hittites have a long history together. Interactions with the Hittites goes back to Abraham who lived as a foreigner among them (Gen 23:3–4). He purchased a burial plot from them in Hebron in Gen 23, the price of which was negotiated with Ephron the Hittite (son of Zohar the Hittite) before a crowd of Hittites. Readers later learn that Abraham's grandson, Esau, marries two Hittite women (Judith, daughter of Beeri the Hittite and Basemath, daughter of Elon the Hittite), much to the dismay of his parents, Rebecca and Isaac (Gen 26:34–35). The only other named Hittite in the HB is Ahimelek in 1 Sam 26, one of David's soldiers. Of the nine named Hittites in the HB, two have Hebrew names: Ahimelek, and Uriah. That Uriah is a Hittite with a Hebrew name, then, should not be entirely surprising as it seems the Hittites have a long history of intermingling with Israelites, intermarrying, and taking on their Israelite/Hebrew names. However, the addition of the title "Hittite" to their names indicates that this cultural affiliation is important enough that these characters were consistently marked by it. The concern with identifying Uriah as a Hittite betrays at the very least the authors' perception of Uriah as different from his Israelite wife and the Israelite king whom he serves. While there is little hint that Uriah is perceived negatively because of this marker, it was apparently a detail that set him apart from the rest of the characters in the story, otherwise it would not be mentioned.

<sup>271</sup> Nancy Nam Hoon Tan, *The Foreignness of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1–9: A Study of the Origin and Development of a Biblical Motif* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008). While Tan's central argument

Bathsheba's Israelite origins, though it may seem small, is not one to be overlooked or dismissed.

The text does not explicitly say anything about Bathsheba's character beyond her beauty and her familial connections. In v. 4, however, readers may be given a subtle hint that Bathsheba appears to be a woman who is devoted to YHWH. After her encounter with David, the narrator explains that she is currently in a state of purification, which would appear to indicate that she does attempt to adhere to some sort of purity law (11:4).<sup>272</sup> The exact meaning of Bathsheba's purification is one of the more hotly contested subjects when it comes to her actions in 2 Sam 11, specifically the question as to what she is purifying herself from. It seems most likely that Bathsheba was engaging in some type of purity ritual that involved purification from menses, given that it falls immediately before it is revealed that she is pregnant. It is neither possible nor essential for readers to be certain in what purification process Bathsheba was engaged.<sup>273</sup> What is significant about this verse is the mere fact that

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focuses on the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 9, she provides a good overview of the concern for foreign marriage throughout the HB.

<sup>272</sup> Lev 12:2–5; 15:19.

<sup>273</sup> Verse 4 of the narrative states: **וְהָיָה מִתְקַדְּשֶׁת מִטְמְאֹתָהּ** (Now, she was/had been purifying herself from her impurity). The most common understanding is that Bathsheba is in the process of purifying herself after her menses, with some connecting v. 4 to v. 2, reading it as an explanation as to why Bathsheba had been bathing in the first place. The inclusion of this in the text, then, could suggest that the author wanted to foreshadow Bathsheba's pregnancy by letting readers know she is at the time of her cycle when she is the most fertile. Others suggest that the clause describing Bathsheba's purification is not continuous (i.e. does not describe that Bathsheba has been purifying herself) but, rather, occurs directly after the encounter with David. If this were the case, then it could indicate that Bathsheba is purifying herself from semen contamination. Graeme Auld offers another suggestion based upon the choice of Hebrew verb at hand. He suggests that Bathsheba is not purifying herself from anything (be it semen contamination or sin) but, rather, she is using this ritual to declare herself pure – to say to God that she is not to blame for what David has done to her. All of these suggestions attempt to provide explanation for the sudden mention of Bathsheba's state of purification in v. 4, however, none of them hold up under scrutiny. Many of the arguments would require that the authors of 2 Sam 11 must have had knowledge of biblical purity laws as found in the book of Leviticus, which creates a difficult situation because there is no way to know whether this was the case. Dating the books of Samuel is notoriously difficult so there is no way to say with certainty that this could be a possibility. Furthermore, even if one knew for sure that the authors had access to or knowledge of the book of Leviticus as we have it now, what is written in 2 Sam 11:4 does not align with what is written about purity in Leviticus. What this means is that one cannot rely on the purity codes found within Leviticus to understand Bathsheba's behaviour. Little can be said for sure about what **מִתְקַדְּשֶׁת מִטְמְאֹתָהּ** meant to the authors and to original audience of the text. It seems the knowledge the authors of Samuel had regarding purity customs may very well have been non-textual. In other words, they may not have been aware of any text or prescriptions for purification rituals. Auld notes that it cannot be a reference to post-biblical purification

Bathsheba was engaged in a purification practice in the first place and that this purification appears to be connected to a divine purpose. The important factor here is the use of the root *שָׁדַק* to describe the behaviour(s) in which Bathsheba is shown to engage. The use of this root indicates to readers that it is an activity that is connected to the divine in some way, and specifically connected to YHWH as this root is only associated with YHWH (his cult, his people, his locations, etc) in the HB.<sup>274</sup> Furthermore, this purification does not simply provide readers with insight into Bathsheba's dedication to YHWH. The image of Bathsheba purifying herself or, more precisely "making herself holy" (*שָׁדַק*), stands in stark contrast with the image of King David who seems to have made it his mission to do the exact opposite.

Bathsheba's character is presented as being very passive in 2 Sam 11, and there are some who believe this passivity reflects negatively on Bathsheba as a character. Some view it as her tacit consent to adultery as part of a secret plan to rise in the ranks of society or become a mother, or as a political manoeuvre in which she is presented as a co-conspirator alongside David.<sup>275</sup> However, I do not believe this passivity says

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rites regarding menstruation because they were not known at the time. However, this does not rule out the possibility that some sort of purity customs did exist that had a role in people's daily lives and that this text may offer some insight into what people thought about purity and how they spoke about it. Post-biblical purity laws did not appear out of nowhere, they were a result of development over time and this text may possibly offer a small (albeit vague) insight into some stage of development. Many thanks to Dr. Yonatan Adler for discussing the issue of purity in this text with me.

<sup>274</sup> BDB, s.v. "שָׁדַק;" DCH 7, s.v. "שָׁדַק;" Ringgren, *TDOT* 12:521–45.

<sup>275</sup> Klein, *Bathsheba Revealed*, 56, 60; Nicol, "The Alleged Rape of Bathsheba," 53 and Nicol, "Bathsheba: A Clever Woman?," 360–63; Alter, *David Story*, 251; Bailey, *David in Love and War*, 88; Nehama Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window: Biblical Tales of Oppression and Escape* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press) 1998, 117. Aschkenasy's addition is interesting because she essentially offers three different interpretations of Bathsheba's character and actions. She initially presents a straightforward reading, in which she sees Bathsheba being presented as passive, timid, ignorant, and largely a pawn for men in all three narratives (David, Nathan, and Adonijah). In the second half of her reading, she offers two other interpretations through a technique she calls "backshadowing" (which is essentially intertextual reading, as I understand it) and by viewing Bathsheba as the prime mover in the narratives rather than a secondary character. She suggests that one can also see Bathsheba as a skilled manipulator who plays the "helpless" woman for the men so that she can use them to advance herself, or that Bathsheba grows into her role as Queen Mother, eventually learning the ins and outs of palace life enough to be able to manipulate things herself. Aschkenasy never explicitly states which interpretations she deems as the most accurate; rather, she believes that the ambiguities within the text are intentional and the biblical writer wanted readers to think about these various possibilities. As such, she seems to present all three of these interpretations as valid ways of understanding the texts, though she seems to prefer the last two options herself.

anything about *her* character, at all. That Bathsheba is consistently passive in this narrative is likely due to the fact that this is a story about David, not Bathsheba. This is not a story about a married woman who one day decides to have an affair with a king. It is the story of a king abusing his power, another warning of the potential dangers of kingship in general.<sup>276</sup>

YHWH's condemnation of David in 2 Sam 12, delivered by Nathan, reinforces this. Bathsheba is not condemned alongside David, instead, she is consistently the direct object of the things David has done (2 Kgs 9–10). Though she is mentioned throughout the condemnation, she is never referred to by name but by her connection to Uriah (12:10,15). She is merely an object in this narrative; a piece of property that David took away from Uriah before killing him and then claimed as his own (12:9). Nathan's condemnation focuses on the men in the situation: David and Uriah, and the child is presented as David's child alone (12:14). Then, in the next verse, after God afflicts the baby, Bathsheba ("the wife of Uriah") is there, but she is merely the tool through which the child comes to David (12:15). While one can infer that these events would have pained her, as well as David, the text offers no invitation to view her as punished alongside David. It is far more likely readers are to understand Bathsheba not as a consenting partner or accomplice but as one of the victims of an overreaching king, as her passive, objectified status throughout Nathan's condemnation emphasizes.<sup>277</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> McCarter, *II Samuel*, 289–90; Michael Avioz, "The Analogies Between the David-Bathsheba Affair and the Naboth Narrative," in *JNSL* 32 (2006): 123, Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 156, Solvang, *A Woman's Place*, 133.

<sup>277</sup> Considering Nathan's condemnation in 2 Sam 12 alongside Elijah's condemnation of Ahab in 1 Kgs 21 may also help to illustrate this point, as these two narratives have been compared in the past (cf. footnote 12 for such an example). In Nathan's condemnation, the responsibility for the adultery and the murder of Uriah is placed squarely on David's shoulders. At no point is Bathsheba singled out as a key player and at no point is any punishment assigned specifically to her. Almost the exact opposite happens in 1 Kgs 21:19–25. Most of the blame is directed toward Ahab (19–22, 24–25), but Jezebel is explicitly singled out in Elijah's condemnation (23,25). Elijah's condemnation presents Ahab and Jezebel as co-conspirators in the murder of Naboth, the taking of his vineyard, and in their various sins throughout Ahab's reign.

After Bathsheba returns home and finds herself pregnant, she sends David a message informing him of her pregnancy (11:5). This seems an odd move to make. Bathsheba would have no reason to believe that David, who is presented as seeing himself to be above the law, would care that he had impregnated a married woman or that he would have any interest in helping her.<sup>278</sup> After all, he seems to dismiss her as quickly as he summons her (2 Sam 11:4). Once one sees how easily David decides to kill Uriah after his first plan fails, one realizes that David could have done something similar with Bathsheba. There may have been other alternatives available to her, but for some reason Bathsheba decides to turn to David for help, and, by trying to send Uriah home to Bathsheba, it seems he might have initially tried to do so. Although things did not go how Bathsheba may have hoped, that she had the courage to confront David with the pregnancy demonstrates that there may be more to Bathsheba than readers initially suspected.

#### *Uriah and YHWH*

David learns of Bathsheba's pregnancy and summons Uriah away from the battle, apparently planning to send him home to have sex with his wife (Bathsheba), thereby avoiding the possibility of her pregnancy by David becoming known (11:8). Uriah, however, does not go down to his house as instructed, but chooses to remain with David's servants in the gate of the palace. Some suggest the reason Uriah disobeyed David's command to return home is David's use of a possible sexual innuendo. In telling Uriah to go home and wash his feet, it is possible that David was telling Uriah to go home and have sex with his wife, as the word רגל (feet or legs) might be a euphemism for male genitals or, as Alter suggests, the mention of "washing" here calls to mind Bathsheba's earlier bathing, and insinuates David's hope that one act (washing feet) might lead to the other (intercourse).<sup>279</sup> The Book of Deuteronomy records a command instructing soldiers to maintain ritual purity while at

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<sup>278</sup> Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 149, Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window*, 110.

<sup>279</sup> Auld, *I and II Samuel*, 457, Alter, *The David Story*, 251.

living in a camp at battle, lest they be sent home and unable to participate until they become pure again (Deut 23:10–15). Though this state of ritual purity refers specifically to contamination from nocturnal emissions of semen, and instructions on how to handle urination and defecation, it seems a logical progression to assume that a semen emission as a result of sexual intercourse would also disqualify one from returning to the camp.<sup>280</sup>

Uriah's response to David may indicate that he understood David's instruction as a form of sexual innuendo, as he states,

The ark and Israel, Judah, and my lord, Joab and the servants of my lord are dwelling in tents in the field, camping. Shall I go to my house to eat and to drink and to lie with my wife?" (2 Sam 11)

In the first part of his response, Uriah outlines those to whom he currently feels indebted: YHWH (represented by the Ark), his community (the people of Israel and Judah), and his fellow soldiers (Joab and Joab's servants).<sup>281</sup> These are the people to whom Uriah feels committed: Israel and its God. The second part of his response reveals how Uriah understood David's request, which was to turn his back on Israel and YHWH in order to go back to his everyday life at home: to eat, and drink, and have sex with his wife. The explicit mention of lying with his wife indicates that Uriah understood David's command to be a sexual innuendo and it seems to be the most offensive aspect of David's instruction for Uriah. Uriah makes his position clear when he ends his response with a curse formula, expressing just how deeply he disapproves of David's command.<sup>282</sup> Like readers see with Bathsheba's concern for maintaining purity, Uriah's loyalty to YHWH and the Israelites and his foreign status underline David's actions which are said to be evil in the eyes of YHWH (2 Sam 11:27).

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<sup>280</sup> In addition, there may be a reference to this concern sexual abstinence during times of battle elsewhere in Samuel, specifically 1 Sam 21:5–6.

<sup>281</sup> It has been commented that the mention of Israel and Judah seems strange here. Are readers to understand this reference as the people of Israel or as the soldiers? If readers understand this along with the first verse of the narrative, then it may very well mean we are to understand that all of Israel is out if not at battle then near the battle, as verse one informs that "all of Israel" went out with Joab and his servants.

<sup>282</sup> Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 457.

### *Bathsheba and Uriah*

Since the story is told from an Israelite perspective, and Bathsheba is an Israelite, the narrative demonstrates no anxiety regarding Bathsheba's possible influence over Uriah. There is also no concern for what influence Uriah (a foreign husband) might have had on his Israelite wife, as there is no hint in the text that Bathsheba and Uriah's marriage was a scandal or problematic in any way. This fits with most of what is seen in the HB, where concerns about foreign marriages primarily focus on the dangers of a man marrying a foreign woman.<sup>283</sup> There is far less concern for Israelite women marrying foreign husbands, and this relationship with Bathsheba and Uriah may demonstrate why.<sup>284</sup> Though she married a foreign man, she maintained her own loyalty and obedience to YHWH and seems to have encouraged Uriah's dedication to YHWH also. This may also serve as a subtle hint as to why Bathsheba will become an important wife for David. If she were able to influence a foreign husband to remain loyal to YHWH, perhaps she could do the same for the current King of Israel who has lost his moral compass and must get back on track not just for himself and his house but for the nation, as well.

### *1 Kings 1–2*

Readers are finally presented with an example of how Bathsheba operates as the wife of a king in 1 Kgs 1. In the beginning of this chapter, King David is ill, fading fast, and the kingdom is in flux. Adonijah, David's oldest son (and thus the heir apparent) has begun his ascent to the throne, even though his father has not yet died.

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<sup>283</sup> While a reference in Judges display some concern with intermarriage in general (3:5–6), the overwhelming fear demonstrated throughout the DH is with foreign women marrying Israelite men.

<sup>284</sup> Carol Meyers demonstrates that, while the public religious sphere was dominated by men, the private religious sphere was run by women. While it is commonly believed that the public religious sphere was more important than the private one, Meyers strongly argues that one should not assume this is the case. She reminds us that biblical narratives represent the idealistic concerns of a wealthy minority, rather than the majority of the Israelite people. Thus, the private religious sphere, which is owned and managed by women, is actually very important and powerful. (Carol Meyers, *Households and Holiness: The Religious Culture of Israelite Women* (Minneapolis: Fortress) 2005). This could mean that whomever a wife worshipped would become the focal god of the household, which would influence not only a woman's husband, but also their children. This may amount to the elevated concern of men taking on foreign wives, a fear which is reflected in a lot of biblical literature.

He has gathered his followers and has arranged for his own coronation feast and possibly even his own anointing (1 Kgs 1:5–7, 9). This is a strikingly different process than what readers have seen in the past where a king is chosen by YHWH and anointed by YHWH's prophet (1 Sam 9:17, 10:1, 24; 1 Sam 16: 12–13).<sup>285</sup> The immediate mention of David being too permissive with Adonijah and the comparison to Absalom (1: 5–6) hints that readers should view Adonijah's act in a negative light.<sup>286</sup> While Adonijah may not be presented as attempting to overthrow David as Absalom had, his actions are presented as premature and presumptuous at the very least.<sup>287</sup>

Nathan is shown here turning to Bathsheba for help to ensure that Solomon, not Adonijah, succeeds David as king. He advises (נְאֻם) her to confront David, providing her with specific words to say and encourages her to act ignorant of the situation (1 Kgs 1:13), at which point Nathan would enter the room and provide King David with the appropriate information regarding Adonijah's actions. Bathsheba says nothing to Nathan in response. She does not verbally accept or reject Nathan's request, nor does she ask any follow up questions. Readers also are not informed of Bathsheba's opinion or feelings on the matter, but the fact that she is immediately shown heading to David's chambers may indicate that she senses the importance of this situation and the need for her to intervene (1:15). Bathsheba and Nathan achieve their goal: David chooses to keep his oath and immediately has Solomon anointed as king (1 Kgs 1:30–40).

Many interpretations of this scene are largely negative, and it is often suggested that what transpires here in 1 Kgs 1 is primarily a product of a scheming prophet (Nathan) and that Bathsheba either knowingly plays the co-conspirator or she is the scheming prophet's naïve tool.<sup>288</sup> It is clear that Bathsheba and Nathan create a

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<sup>285</sup> Though David is anointed twice (the second mention is in 2 Sam 2:4), his first anointing takes place at YHWH's command and by the hand of a prophet, just as Saul's had.

<sup>286</sup> Alter, *The David Story*, 364.

<sup>287</sup> Cogan, *I Kings*, 157; Walsh, *1 Kings*, 7.

<sup>288</sup> Walsh, *1 Kings*, 10–11; Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 19; Alter, *The David Story*, 366; Sweeney, *1 and 2 Kings*, 56; Willis, Pleffer, and Llewelyn, "Conversation in the Succession Narrative of Solomon," 137; Bach, *Women, Seduction, and Betrayal in Biblical Narrative*, 144; Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window*, 110; 115–17;



plan to ensure that David does not allow Adonijah to succeed him. However, it is not clear that this plan should be understood as a nefarious or self-serving manipulation, either by Nathan or Bathsheba. Neither Nathan nor Bathsheba have been shown to lie to or to manipulate David obviously in the past. Nathan's use of the parable to help David understand how he had sinned in 2 Sam 12 may be interpreted as a bit of a trick, but it was not an outright lie or a manipulation. It was a rhetorical tool to help David understand the weight of what he had done. Likewise, Bathsheba's character has not been known to be deceitful, as I noted in the previous chapter. What transpired between them in 2 Sam 11 was a result of David abusing his power as king and turning his back on YHWH. I will now take a closer look at this scene to discover what else may be happening here between Nathan, the prophet, and Bathsheba, the wife of the king.

Much like the narrative in 2 Sam 11, the primary problem around Adonijah becoming king reveals itself gradually.<sup>289</sup> As I mentioned above, readers are clearly encouraged to view Adonijah's actions negatively, and the previous description of David's frail state also encourages readers to be concerned by Adonijah's pro-active preparation to take his father's place. However, readers do not know exactly why Adonijah becoming king after David is a problem. Being David's eldest son, it is likely he would have assumed the throne anyway, and, though his actions are premature, he has not actually usurped the throne.<sup>290</sup> However, readers are given no time to ponder this because Nathan immediately comes onto the scene.

Nathan sees that Adonijah is making a push for the throne and he likely knows that David will do nothing to stop it, so he steps in and enlists Bathsheba's help. David and Nathan possess the same statuses they held in 2 Sam 11–12 (king and prophet),

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David Marcus, "David the Deceiver and David the Dupe" in *Proof 6* (1986): 167; Vanessa Lovelace, "Intersections of Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation" in *The Hebrew Bible: Feminist and Intersectional Perspectives*, ed. Gale A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress), 98.

<sup>289</sup> 2 Sam 11 creates anticipation by slowly feeding readers information regarding the situation that will lead to David's condemnation by the prophet Nathan. First, readers learn that David did not go out to battle as he should have. Then that he is alone at his palace, and then he sees a mysterious, beautiful woman, who readers then learn is married.

<sup>290</sup> Walsh, *1 Kings*, 7.

but Bathsheba has a new status now: the wife of the king. Contrary to a common assumption, Bathsheba is not presented as a naïve pawn here, merely following commands.<sup>291</sup> It seems that her new status transforms her into a powerful ally for Nathan, and the first part of his approach (v. 12) provides readers with plenty of evidence that he is seeking Bathsheba's help.

The initial imperative of v. 12 is a word of incitement, used to arouse or encourage another character to action.<sup>292</sup> Nathan then moves to his request: **אֵלֶיךָ יְהוָה** (*Please, let me advise you*). When the enclitic particle **אֵלֶיךָ** appears, it indicates a plea or request of some kind, which has no precise equivalent in English.<sup>293</sup> Nathan is not presented as a clever, scheming puppeteer, here. Rather, he is shown approaching the woman whose role in court makes her a powerful ally. The **אֵלֶיךָ** particle is also commonly used when a character of inferior status is speaking to a character of superior status.<sup>294</sup> Nathan seems fully aware of his place in the court hierarchy and the best way to speak in order to gain Bathsheba's support. Just how seriously he feels about this situation is shown by his final comment before revealing his plan to Bathsheba, "Now, come, please let me advise you *so that you may save your life and the life of your son, Solomon.*" Some wonder why Nathan mentions that Bathsheba's and Solomon's lives would be at risk if Adonijah were to become king. Some assert that there is no real reason for Nathan or Bathsheba to suspect this and, thus, it is an embellishment added by Nathan to manipulate or encourage Bathsheba into helping him.<sup>295</sup> However, there is another possible reason for Nathan to be concerned that is

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<sup>291</sup> Brueggemann, *1 & 2 Kings* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2000), 20; Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window*, 111.

<sup>292</sup> Joüon §§105e, 177f

<sup>293</sup> BDB, s.v. "אֵלֶיךָ," Joüon §§105c, 322–23; *DCH* 5, s.v. "אֵלֶיךָ." Clines opines that the particle is used after an imperative primarily for the purpose of politeness, but Joüon demonstrate that politeness may not be the only purpose of the particle. The feeling אֵלֶיךָ denotes may be best captured through one's intonation when reading the text aloud, something which obviously cannot be accomplished in a written text. In my translation above, I have attempted to capture the feeling of the article with the English word "please", which at the very least indicates that Nathan is not commanding or skilfully manipulating here so much as he is seeking help.

<sup>294</sup> Joüon §§105c, 322–23; *DCH* 5, s.v. "אֵלֶיךָ."

<sup>295</sup> Walsh, *1 Kings*, 10–11; Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 19; Koenig, *Isn't This Bathsheba?*, 88; Aschkenasy, *Woman at the Window*, 110.

often not discussed, and it has to do with the promise he alludes to when he reveals his plan to Bathsheba.

### *David's Vow*

Readers learn from Nathan that David had vowed to Bathsheba that her son Solomon would become king (1:13). He suggests to Bathsheba that she go to David and accuse him of breaking this oath by allowing Adonijah to take the throne, at which point he himself will enter and fill in (אֲלֶמֶךְ) the rest of the details regarding Adonijah's premature effort to grasp the throne.<sup>296</sup> However, there is one detail of David's vow that Nathan leaves out, and it is the sole reason he may have cause for concern. Bathsheba's speech to David reveals why this vow is so important when she states, "My lord, *you swore by YHWH your God* to your maidservant that 'Solomon your son will reign after me and he will sit on my throne' (1:17). This new information, that David not only made an oath but that he swore it by YHWH, sheds light on why Nathan might conclude that Bathsheba and Solomon would be at risk if Adonijah becomes king.

It is no coincidence that David, Bathsheba, and Nathan are brought together here once again. The only other time these three characters appear in the same narrative is in 2 Sam 12. Thus, this situation could be seen as sort of *déjà vu* for the prophet himself, who was once charged with the task of informing David that his son by Bathsheba would die on account of his sin (2 Sam 12:14). Nathan has already witnessed the death of one of Bathsheba's and David's sons, along with whatever pain or trauma it may have caused them (2 Sam 12:24a), and Solomon's birth was well received by YHWH (2 Sam 12:24–25). When Nathan's actions in 1 Kgs 1 are read in this light, one can see that Nathan's comment on the possible danger of Adonijah assuming the throne over Solomon may not be an attempt to manipulate Bathsheba

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<sup>296</sup> Alter, *The David Story*, 366; Keith Bodner, "Nathan: Prophet, Politician and Novelist?" *JOT* 26 (2001): 51, note 21.

at all, but it could represent what he sees as a valid concern.<sup>297</sup> This information strengthens our understanding of Nathan not as a puppeteer with a steady hand, but as someone who needs help handling King David's shortcomings.

Some question the existence of the oath while others believe it should be understood as a lie, that David had not sworn any oath, and that he and Bathsheba are shown exploiting the elderly king's failing memory in order to manipulate him into putting Solomon on the throne.<sup>298</sup> Others suggest that the mention of YHWH in the oath was Bathsheba's personal touch because it seems that Nathan, a prophet of YHWH, would have known about it and included it in his own argument. It has also been suggested that Nathan chose not to include an oath by YHWH in his plot because he felt it too risky to involve his god in such a blatant lie.<sup>299</sup> It is entirely possible, though, that Nathan did know the oath was sworn by YHWH and merely did not mention it because Bathsheba already would have known, given that the oath was made to her. The subtext of this accusation as Nathan presents it (David is about to break his oath to YHWH) would have been clear to her.

This also may be why Bathsheba does not question or even respond to Nathan's plan, but immediately moves into action. Bathsheba understands how important it is to maintain one's loyalty to the God of the Israelites, as we saw earlier in 2 Sam 11 when she maintains purity customs (11:4) and possibly inspires or encourages her foreign husband's dedication to YHWH. Here she makes it clear that she understands how important it is to keep an oath sworn by YHWH.<sup>300</sup> Rather than merely calling to mind the oath David made to her, as Nathan suggested, she called to

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<sup>297</sup> It would not be the first time a prophet is shown to grow attached to or emotional over a person whom they've been charged to guide. Samuel mourns over Saul and God's decision to remove him as king (1 Sam 15:35).

<sup>298</sup> Sweeney, *I and II Kings: A Commentary*, 56; Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 19; Alter, *The David Story*, 366; Davies, *A Study Commentary on 1 Kings*, 21; Willis, Pleffer and Llewelyn, "Conversation in the Succession Narrative of Solomon," 137; Bodner, "Nathan: Prophet, Politician and Novelist?," 50, 52.

<sup>299</sup> Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 98–99.

<sup>300</sup> Both Lev 19:12 and Deut 5:11 include a law regarding the swearing of oaths by YHWH's name. Lev 19 refers to a false (שָׁקַר) oath as "profaning" or "polluting" (תְּחַלֵּל) the name of YHWH but does not indicate any sort of consequence for one who swears an oath falsely. Deut 5, however, states that YHWH will not "acquit" (נִקְּוָה) one who swears falsely by the name of YHWH.

mind the oath David swore to her by YHWH. There are no laws at all about swearing an oath simply to a person and, as such, there is no punishment or consequence described for someone who commits such an act. Thus, it seems that breaking an oath sworn by YHWH is a much more serious offense.

That it is Bathsheba accusing him of turning his back on an oath he made to YHWH may also serve as a reminder of another instance of the king turning his back on his God, which resulted in the death of David and Bathsheba's first-born son. Bathsheba drives this point home further by insinuating that his choice to allow Adonijah to take the throne instead of Solomon could lead to both her and their son, Solomon's, death (1:20). David turning his back on YHWH once again would lead to the death of another son. As I suggested earlier, it is also possible that Nathan senses this result coming a second time. Thus, the reader may imagine that Nathan entering the chamber as Bathsheba is confronting David may have caused those memories to come flooding back to the dying king. After Nathan speaks to David, he does not respond to the prophet at all. Instead, he immediately summons Bathsheba to tell her that he will keep his oath to YHWH (28–30). This is something he need not have done, as it has been the prophet's job to anoint a king. He could have communicated this to Nathan and then ordered for Solomon to be made king. However, the last time these three characters were involved in a situation together, Bathsheba's son died as a result of David's actions. It appears that this time around, the king wants to assure his wife that he would not be the cause of their son's death once again.

### *Bathsheba's Role in 1 Kings 1*

When readers first meet Bathsheba, they learn that she is an Israelite woman married to Uriah the Hittite, a foreign man who is one of King David's soldiers. Readers also come to learn something else important about them: they are a couple who are devoted to Israel's God and try to live their lives according to YHWH's law. Their various attempts at remaining dedicated to YHWH are contrasted with David's lack of

dedication, making his sin appear even more devastating. He is supposed to be the one after YHWH's own heart (1 Sam 13:14), not the one hardening his heart against YHWH. Instead, it is a woman and her foreign husband who are shown as the genuine followers of the God of Israel, made victims of an Israelite man (the king, no less) who has turned his back on his own God in order to save himself.

As the wife of the king, Bathsheba is now a powerful ally for Nathan in keeping the king in check, and this appears to be a duty she takes seriously. Here Bathsheba speaks for the first time since we have known her character, and it seems she has largely accepted Nathan's advice on how to approach David. However, while she generally follows his outline, she presents the argument from a different perspective than Nathan had suggested. She confronts David with the accusation that he has gone back on his oath to put Solomon on the throne, which is essentially what Nathan instructs her to do. Instead of acting surprised or confused by the situation, as Nathan encouraged, Bathsheba speaks to David as if *he* is ignorant of the situation and *she* needs to inform him of it. She tells him that Adonijah has become king, created his own following which excludes their son, Solomon, and has thrown a feast to celebrate his coronation (1:18–19). That this goes directly against what Nathan advised her to say may demonstrate that she feels it is her duty to make sure the king is fully aware of what is happening in his kingdom. Lastly, she reminds David that it is his obligation to lead Israel by declaring the next king (1:20) and suggests that there might be dire consequences for herself and their son if he does not declare Solomon king, as he had promised (1:21).

In 1 Kgs 1 readers also learn more about how Bathsheba's character understands her role in the royal court and begin to glimpse how the book of Kings presents the role of a royal wife. Nathan is portrayed as seeing her as someone who can sow the seeds for his success in directing the king down the proper path, but he may underestimate how important her role in the kingdom is, and how much impact she could have on King David. She is an Israelite, too, and would want the kingdom to

thrive just as much as either David or Nathan. Some believe her involvement presents her as self-serving, only wanting to secure the throne for Solomon so that she can retain her power and influence. While ensuring her son's place on the throne is important for her and her own status, it may not be her primary goal here. It seems she is equally (if not more) concerned with ensuring the king knows what is happening in his kingdom and is given wise advice regarding what to do about it.

Bathsheba evidently see it as her duty as the wife of the king to encourage the king down the right path. She reminds him first of his loyalty to YHWH, and second of his obligation to lead the nation actively, even in his old age. Lastly, she makes an emotional plea and possibly offers a sharp reminder of the things that can go wrong when David does not act in accordance with his role as king. With Bathsheba in 1 Kgs 1 one can see the subtle expansion of a theme I noted earlier with Abigail: the role of the royal woman in ensuring that a king behaves properly. In Abigail's case, it meant stopping the king from spilling innocent blood. For Bathsheba it means reminding David of his loyalty to YHWH and of his obligation to lead the people of Israel into the future.

## **Jezebel**

Jezebel is the Deuteronomistic archetype of the foreign wife, a warning of the dangers of cross-cultural marriage, specifically in royal circles.<sup>301</sup> Her introduction to the biblical narrative comes through Ahab's regnal introduction in 1 Kgs 16. It is a very brief description because this introduction is not about Jezebel at all; rather, it is about assessing Ahab's kingship and shaping what is to come in the story of his reign.<sup>302</sup> As such, all readers are told of Jezebel is that she is the daughter of the Phoenician King

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<sup>301</sup> Nancy Nam Hoon Tan, *The 'Foreignness' of the Foreign Woman in Proverbs 1–9: A Study of the Origin and Development of a Biblical Motif* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 65, 69; John J. Burns, "Solomon's Egyptian Horses and Exotic Wives," *Forum* 7 (1991): 29–44; Lovelace, "Intersections of Ethnicity, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation," 103.

<sup>302</sup> Patricia Dutcher-Walls, *Jezebel: Portraits of a Queen* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 23–24.

Ethbaal and that Ahab married her (16:31). The mention of her in Ahab's regnal summary, which is placed between a statement describing his sins as worse than those of Jeroboam and the detail of his worship of Baal, clearly leads readers to see a connection between the king's marriage to a foreign woman and his severe apostasy (16:31).<sup>303</sup> As I demonstrated with Bathsheba's example, it is part of Jezebel's role as Ahab's wife to make sure he acts as a proper king, and part of this means ensuring he remains loyal to YHWH. Jezebel's appearance in Ahab's regnal summary invites readers to evaluate how Jezebel fulfils her role as the wife of a king of Israel.<sup>304</sup>

Jezebel's character appears again in chapter 18, where readers learn that she has been persecuting and killing YHWH's prophets in Israel (18:4, 13). Her character finally appears and speaks in the narrative for the first time at 19:1–2, after Elijah competes with and kills her prophets, the prophets of Baal (18:19–40). Ahab relays the news to her, and in her outrage, she threatens to kill Elijah by way of message (19:2). From these brief scenes, readers learn a lot more about Jezebel. She is not only the daughter of a foreign king, but she is one who is zealous for the god Baal. It is not enough for her to worship Baal on her own – to maintain her own altar for herself and her prophets. Nor does it seem to be enough for her if the Israelites were to worship Baal alongside YHWH. It appears her goal is for worship of Baal to *replace* worship of YHWH and, to ensure this, Jezebel sets out to get rid of the prophets of YHWH, spilling innocent blood.<sup>305</sup> In contrast to the introductory portrayals of Abigail and Bathsheba, the initial portrayal of Jezebel demonstrates that she lacks the desirable qualities of the wife of an Israelite King. She is, in fact, presented as a danger to the royal court and, in turn, a danger to the nation of Israel.

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<sup>303</sup> Josey Bridges Snyder, "Jezebel and her Interpreters" in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, eds. Carol A. Newsome, Sharon H. Ringe and Jacqueline E. Lapsley (London: SPCK, 2014), 180; Dutcher-Walls, *Jezebel: Portraits of a Queen*, 24; Herbert B. Huffmon, "Jezebel – The 'Corrosive' Queen," in *From Babel to Babylon: Essays on Biblical History And Literature in Honor of Brian Peckham*, eds. Joyce Rilett Wood, John E. Harvey, Mark Leuchter (London: T&T Clark, 2006), 278; Smith, "Queenship in Israel?," 154.

<sup>304</sup> Dutcher-Walls, *Jezebel*, 25.

<sup>305</sup> All of this will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter of this project.



## *Jezebel and Ahab*

1 Kgs 21:5–7 is the only scene in which Jezebel and Ahab interact. The chapter opens with King Ahab eyeing a vineyard near his palace. He approaches Naboth, the man who owns the vineyard and makes him an offer: Naboth’s vineyard in exchange for either money or another vineyard. Naboth refuses the request, stating that he will not give up his inheritance, which he implies is forbidden to trade or sell by law.<sup>306</sup> Ahab returns to his palace and proceeds to mope in his room, which is where Jezebel finds her king, sullen and refusing to eat. Jezebel’s response to Ahab’s situation (or the situation as he explains it to her) is often interpreted as a challenge to Ahab or as a reprimand for his reaction to Naboth’s refusal.<sup>307</sup> This could be true; however, it is unclear as one cannot tell the tone of her response from the Hebrew, and it is interpreted in many different ways.<sup>308</sup> The text states, “And Jezebel, his wife, said to him, ‘You, now, are king over Israel. Get up, eat, and let your heart be happy. I will give you Naboth’s vineyard’ (21:7).” It is possible that Jezebel is snapping at or chiding him when she says “you, now, are king over Israel”, but it seems more likely that she is making a statement here, reminding him of his role as king rather than rebuking him.<sup>309</sup> As the wife of the king, it is both her prerogative and her duty to correct him when necessary, which I showed earlier with Bathsheba when she reminds David of his responsibilities as king in 1 Kgs 1.<sup>310</sup> Here, Jezebel chooses to do so with a clear, no-

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<sup>306</sup> Sweeney, *1 & 2 Kings*, 249; Walsh, *1 Kings*, 318; Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 210; Dutcher-Wallace, *Jezebel*, 47.

<sup>307</sup> Dutcher-Wallace, *Jezebel*, 51; Huffmon, “Jezebel – The ‘Corrosive’ Queen,” 279;

<sup>308</sup> The following are some examples of how the verse is commonly translated. The majority take Jezebel’s comment as a rhetorical question, sarcastic or otherwise (even though there is no interrogative present in the Hebrew), or as a reprimand. The JPS Tanak (the final example) interprets it as a statement that almost sounds as if she were educating the despondent king. “A fine ruler over Israel you are indeed!” his wife Jezebel said to him. “Get up. Eat and be cheerful. I will obtain the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite for you.” (1 Kgs 21:7 NAB); Jezebel his wife said, “Is this how you act as king over Israel? Get up and eat! Cheer up. I’ll get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.” (1 Kgs 21:7 NIV); Then his wife Jezebel said, ‘Some king of Israel you make! Get up, eat and take heart; I myself shall get you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.’ (1 Kgs 21:7 NJB), His wife Jezebel said to him, “Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.” (1 Kgs 21:7 NRS); His wife Jezebel said to him, “Now is the time to show yourself king over Israel. Rise and eat something and be cheerful; I will get the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite for you.” (1 Kgs 21:7 TNK).

<sup>309</sup> Walsh, *1 Kings*, 320; Francis I. Anderson, “The Socio-Juridical Background of the Naboth Incident,” *JBL* 85 (1966): 47.

<sup>310</sup> Huffmon, “Jezebel – The ‘Corrosive’ Queen,” 278. Huffmon suggests that Jezebel’s reaction in this scene, and the way she handled the entire Naboth situation was a subversive act that discredits Ahab

nonsense statement (you, now, are king over Israel), followed by words of encouragement (get up, eat, be happy) and a comforting assurance (I will give you Naboth's vineyard).

Jezebel is right to criticize Ahab for what he has done, but she does not criticize him for the right reason. Ahab should not have asked (or expected) Naboth to sell or trade his inheritance and his reaction to Naboth's refusal is not what one expects of a king.<sup>311</sup> It would be fitting for her to remind him of this and steer him toward a more appropriate response, but this is not what she does. Admittedly, Jezebel may not be aware of the status of the land, as Ahab leaves this information out of his retelling, painting Naboth as merely a subject who outright disobeyed his king (21:6).<sup>312</sup> Once Jezebel springs into action, though, one must wonder if having this information would have made a difference to her.<sup>313</sup> It soon becomes clear that Jezebel is not critical of what Ahab did to Naboth but, rather, what he did not do, that is, to assert his power and authority over his subversive subject.<sup>314</sup>

Unlike Bathsheba and Abigail, who tell David what he should do (or not do), Jezebel shows Ahab how a king should rule by doing it herself.<sup>315</sup> She does not attempt to reason with or convince Naboth to give Ahab his vineyard, instead, she arranges for

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and Jezebel, he states, "Jezebel undermines Ahab in a fashion worthy of Queen Gunnhild. As such, she is actively subversive... After all kings are not supposed to be indecisive, to be corrected by or subordinated to their wives. Note David's sharp response to Michal, Saul's daughter, when he 'leaped and danced before (the Ark of) the Lord' and she commented on his exposing himself in mixed company, behaviour judged by her as unsuitable to a king (2 Sam 6:16–20)." I'm not so sure the issue here is that Michal was out of line in correcting her husband simply because it is not her place. I think the issue here is that her perspective on the issue was askew. David's zealous dancing for YHWH was not the problem she thought it was, and David's retort (and her sudden barrenness at YHWH's hands) addresses this. While it may be one of a woman's duties as the wife of a king to help keep him in line, this does not mean that she will always be correct (as Jezebel demonstrates) and it certainly does not mean her husband will like it.

<sup>311</sup> Walsh, *1 Kings*, 318; Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 210; Dutcher-Wallace, *Jezebel*, 47.

<sup>312</sup> Zlotnick, *From Jezebel to Esther*, 479; Huffmon, "Jezebel – The 'Corrosive' Queen," 278.

<sup>313</sup> Dutcher-Wallace, *Jezebel*, 47.

<sup>314</sup> Smith, "Queenship in Israel?," 156; Claudia Camp, "1 & 2 Kings" in *The Women's Bible Commentary*, eds. Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 110.

<sup>315</sup> The irony of Jezebel telling Ahab that he is now "making kingship" over Israel and then turning around and "making kingship" herself is often noted. Walsh, *1 Kings*, 321; Huffmon, "Jezebel – The 'Corrosive' Queen," 279; Deborah A. Appler, "From Queen to Cuisine: Food Imagery in the Jezebel Narrative," Deborah A. Appler. "From Queen to Cuisine: Food Imagery in the Jezebel Narrative." *Semeia*, 86:62.

his murder at the hands of those living in his own community (21:8). She shows her husband that the way to rule is by abusing his power; killing and taking what is not his.<sup>316</sup> This lesson also encourages Ahab to play a passive role as king; to let others handle difficult situations for him instead of taking them on himself. Both Abigail and Bathsheba confront David and remind him to do what is right, but they do not act for him. It is still David who makes the choice and then handles the situation himself. Jezebel does not follow this pattern, instead of forcing Ahab to see where he erred and giving him a chance to redeem himself, she simply offers to solve the problem and Ahab accepts without hesitation. Ahab then briefly disappears from the narrative of 1 Kgs 21, apparently content to let his very capable wife deliver on her promise.

Some view this as the biggest problem with Jezebel in addition to her foreignness. They argue that Jezebel oversteps by sending out letters in Ahab's name and with his seal, something that she has no authority to do.<sup>317</sup> Some go far as to suggest that she is usurping his role as king and that she should be passive because she is a woman.<sup>318</sup> However, there is nothing in the text, or elsewhere in the HB, which suggests that Jezebel crossed any lines in using Ahab's seal.<sup>319</sup> Solvang has shown that it may have been common for the wives of kings in the ANE to send out documents using the royal seal as part of their role within the court (some royal women even had their own seals).<sup>320</sup> If this is implied here, then the problem with Jezebel is not that she acts when Ahab is not willing to. Indeed, Jezebel's willingness to act and take charge when necessary is a positive characteristic, as we saw with Abigail and Bathsheba. Both women step in and intervene in what seem like situations intended for men to handle, yet neither woman is presented as having crossed lines or usurped anyone's role. The problem with Jezebel is that, when she does act, she does so alone and only

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<sup>316</sup> Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 249; Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 211–12.

<sup>317</sup> Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 212.

<sup>318</sup> Zlotnick, *From Jezebel to Esther*, 482, 487; Walsh, *Ahab: The Construction of a King*, 51–52.

<sup>319</sup> Gale Yee, "Jezebel," *ABD* 3:849; Dutcher-Walls, *Jezebel*, 120.

<sup>320</sup> Solvang, *A Woman's Place*, 31–32.

in relation to issues that are important to her or that will gain her (or Ahab) more power.

One can see this clearly with Jezebel's persecution of YHWH's prophets, a mission she seems to have carried out by herself and one which did not benefit the people of Israel, but instead had them hiding in fear in their own kingdom (1 Kgs 18:13). At no point does the text inform readers about Jezebel working with Ahab to serve the people of Israel. The only time Jezebel is shown working with others to accomplish a task is when she contrives Naboth's death, but even this she does using the power of the throne. She does not gather together trusted aides (possibly because she does not have any), but instead sends out a letter in Ahab's name and seal, commanding that her will be done (1 Kgs 21:8–10). Again, the problem with Jezebel's action here is not that she is "usurping" the king's role. The problem is that she is ordering the death of an innocent man by command of the royal seal. In other words, she is abusing the power that is meant to be used to care for and serve the people of Israel.

Jezebel's desire is to have power over Israel, not to serve Israel, and she encourages Ahab to view his role as king in this way, as well. Whereas Bathsheba reminds David that Israel looks to him for leadership (1 Kgs 1:29), Jezebel reminds Ahab that he is the ruler over Israel (1 Kgs 21:7). One can see through these royal women's examples that being king over Israel does not mean the same thing to them. For Bathsheba, it means keeping one's word to YHWH and, indeed, keeping YHWH's word. It also means providing a just and righteous example for the people. Clearly, for Jezebel, worship of YHWH does not feature in her understanding of kingship of Israel. For her, it means expanding worship of Baal and Asherah and taking advantage of royal power.

If one looks back to Abigail and Bathsheba, one can see that there is a positive association with royal wives ensuring the king rules justly. In Abigail's case, she kept David from killing Nabal and his whole house, thus keeping him from spilling innocent

blood and protecting the members of her house. Bathsheba demonstrates this ability as well when she ensures David keeps the oath he swore by YHWH. She does her part to keep the king loyal to his God and to ensure that he remembers his obligation to lead the nation. From the start readers are encouraged to be suspicious of Jezebel because she is a foreign woman and is presented as playing a role in Ahab's worship of Baal. The more one reads about her as the narrative of Ahab's kingship progresses, the more one realizes how unfit she is to be the wife of an Israelite king. First and foremost, she worships Baal and, instead of making sure her husband, the king, stays loyal only to YHWH, she encourages him to turn to her gods as well (1 Kgs 21:25).<sup>321</sup> It is also part of her job to ensure that her husband does not abuse his power. Jezebel clearly cannot fulfill this obligation because she, herself, believes that to rule as king includes an entitlement to kill and take whatever a king wants from his subjects. Jezebel is presented as a failure in her role as a royal wife on all counts.

## **Esther**

Esther's character grows and changes in surprising ways throughout the Book of Esther. Before offering an in depth look at Esther's character, role, and her interactions with other characters in the narrative, I will first compare her character's introduction with those of Bathsheba and Jezebel. As I noted earlier, Bathsheba's introduction is mysterious. All readers know is that she is a beautiful, unidentified woman; she is a stranger to both David and readers. Readers may even be concerned when David spots her from upon his roof. That her name and familial connections are not established but are slowly revealed builds tension and suspense in the narrative. When readers learn who she is, any concern or suspicion on behalf of the reader is confirmed. The message is clear: David should not pursue this woman. However, while

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<sup>321</sup> Ahab appears to be presented as a true polytheist. Not only does he believe in other gods, but he apparently worships them as well (1 Kgs 16:31). The Deuteronomists emphasize Ahab's worship of Baal and Asherah, but he is also shown turning to, obeying, and believing the words of YHWH's prophets throughout 1 Kings (18:19–20, 41–42; 20; 21:27).

Bathsheba's introduction heightens the sense of danger in the narrative, it does not present Bathsheba's character as negative. Her introduction is rather ambiguous and vague, and readers must wait to see what type of character Bathsheba will turn out to be.

Indeed, the vagueness of Bathsheba's introduction is obvious when compared with Jezebel's introduction, which clearly sets her up as a negative character. Her initial description comes between two sentences which emphasize Ahab's poor performance as king (1 Kgs 16:31), and her marriage to him is presented as part of what made him such a problematic king (1 Kgs 16:30–33). While readers do not yet know how destructive Jezebel will be, there is no question left in their minds that she is going to be a problematic character.

Esther's introduction is very different from Bathsheba's and Jezebel's. Both the ambiguity and the negativity that are present in their respective introductions are completely missing from Esther's introduction. Readers know exactly who Esther is when they meet her and the context in which she is introduced suggests that she is going to be portrayed sympathetically, even if much of what is learned about her places her in a lower status in society. She is female, an exile and an orphan, raised by her cousin, Mordecai, of the tribe of Benjamin. Esther's connection to the tribe of Benjamin through the house of Saul does highlight a royal heritage, but this specific royal heritage is also clouded with uncertainty, because King Saul's reign was neither smooth nor successful. Much about Esther might lead one to believe that she has nothing to offer: no status, no power, no authority. Yet the reader is invited to view her sympathetically for two reasons. First, she is introduced as a beautiful, Jewish woman of royal heritage immediately after the search for a beautiful woman to replace Vashti as queen has been declared (Esth 2:2–4). Even though her connection to King Saul comes with its own ambiguous associations, as I discussed in Chapter 1, it still relates her directly to the house of a king, and, by extension, to an actual king.

Readers suspect she will be chosen to replace Vashti before any competition even takes place.

Second, Esther's background as an exile, an orphan, and a woman clearly place her in an almost powerless position in society. She is not the first character in the HB to be in such a position and then rise to be the hero of the narrative.<sup>322</sup> This trope of reversals appears in many ways in the book of Esther, and Esther's identity is but one of its manifestations.<sup>323</sup> For those familiar with this trope in other biblical narratives, Esther's status in Ahasuerus' kingdom serves to flag its appearance here.<sup>324</sup> While her beauty and royal heritage clearly suggest she will be chosen to replace Vashti as queen, her underdog status suggests she will become more than simply a queen. She is presented as the answer to a problem that readers have not even encountered yet.

## *Chapter 2*

As I noted in Chapter 1 of the present study, there are connections and similarities between the search for Ahasuerus' new queen and the search for a woman for the ailing King David in 1 Kgs 1. However, this connection does not mean one must restrict oneself to only thinking about Esther's introduction into the royal court along with 1 Kgs 1. Given that this project's focus is the wives of kings (which Abishag is not) one can also think about Esther's introduction to Ahasuerus' court in light of Bathsheba's entrance into David's court. Bathsheba and Esther are the only two royal

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<sup>322</sup>Joseph, for example, was imprisoned and made a slave, who later rises to a position of power and rescues Egypt and his family from famine. Moses was a slave who rose up to lead his people out of Egypt (with YHWH's aide, of course). Jacob was the youngest brother but ended up becoming a great patriarch. Jael was a foreign woman who killed the oppressive commander Sisera, thus saving the Israelite people from him. Her story is told in Judges 4 (17–22) and her praises are sung in Judges 5 (24–27). Rahab, a foreign woman and a prostitute, rescued two of Joshua's spies from the king of Jericho (Judg 2). Shiphrah and Puah, two Hebrew midwives and slaves, subvert Pharaoh's law of infanticide. These are just a few of the characters who fall into this trope along with Esther.

<sup>323</sup> Laniak, "Esther's Volkcentrism," 87; Day, *Esther*, 11; Miles, "Reading Esther as Heroine," 134; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 158–63; Berlin, *Esther*, xxiv.

<sup>324</sup> Laniak might express this best when he says, "Had not the 'biblical' tradition trained its hearers to expect the unexpected and the unorthodox?" (Laniak, "Esther's Volkcentrism," 87.)

women in the HB whose stories of how they came to marry a king are told.<sup>325</sup> Beauty was a key factor for both of these women. As I discussed earlier, it was Bathsheba's beauty that caught David's attention, and it was Esther's beauty that fulfilled the minimum requirement for her consideration as the new queen. Both women are taken from their homes and brought to the king. Much like Bathsheba, Esther is described mostly in passive terms. She is taken (2:8) with the other women, taken to the king (2:16) commanded by Mordecai (2:10) and told by Hegai (2:15). Also, like Bathsheba, there are small clues that there may be more to Esther than her passivity reveals. Bathsheba is largely silent until she finds out she is pregnant, at which point she confronts David with the news. Esther's actions, on the other hand, are very subtle. Readers do not see her speak or act, per se, but she does seem to have a powerful effect on the people around her, and this is the reason she is chosen by King Ahasuerus.

As I discussed in the previous chapter, Esther gains (אֲשֶׁר) the admiration of everyone she comes across when she is brought in the palace (2:9, 15, 17). Though the hints are subtle, it paints a picture of Esther as someone who is good with people, and this is an important quality for the wife of a king to have. I have already noted how a royal woman must be able to work with courtiers and the king, and I showed how important this skill is for Bathsheba in 1 Kgs 1. Nathan comes to Bathsheba, seemingly without hesitation, to gain her help in ensuring David does not break his vow and names Solomon the next king. Bathsheba needs to have a level of approachability and a level of trust for Nathan to feel he could turn to her for help. Later, in 1 Kgs 2, even Adonijah feels secure in bringing a request to Solomon through Bathsheba. Through Jezebel readers see what can happen when a royal woman lacks this openness/approachability. Elijah is never seen approaching Jezebel for any reason, and one would not expect him to, either. It is very clear where Jezebel stands with Elijah, so he is alienated from the court and, as such, is lacking a very powerful ally as

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<sup>325</sup> While readers also know how Abigail came to marry David, he was not yet the king when she came to marry him.



prophet. With no royal woman to turn to, Elijah is on his own in trying to monitor and correct the king. That the people of the court not only accept Esther, but *like* her, is a promising sign of her ability to work with others and fulfill the role of queen in a royal court.

Shortly after Esther is chosen queen, Mordecai discovers a plot to kill Ahasuerus. He informs the new queen of the scheme, and she passes the information onto the king. It is a curious scene, and there are many questions as to what exactly is happening here. Many of these questions are about Mordecai's presence and role at the king's gate (or about the second mention of the gathering of the virgins). The palace gates were a significant place in the ancient world. It is where palace administrative offices resided, where elders held councils and judgements were made. Some believe the mention of Mordecai sitting in the king's gate is meant to indicate he has some sort of official role in the royal court, though the exact nature of his possible role is debated.<sup>326</sup> This is certainly a possibility, as he is scolded by the other courtiers in the gate for refusing to bow to Haman, as the king has commanded them to do (3:2–4).<sup>327</sup> If readers are meant to understand Mordecai as one of the king's servants, he would be the only named servant in the narrative whose role as a servant of the king is not explicitly stated (1:10 14; 2:3, 14, 21; 3:1; 4:5; 7:9). It is hard to believe that Mordecai is presented as an official servant of the king here when the text never specifies his role, especially given that status (especially obsession with status) is an

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<sup>326</sup> Berlin believes Mordecai's official role is that of a spy; that it is his duty to root out any possible uprisings or disloyal servants (Berlin, *Esther*, 31), Fox notes that mention of Mordecai in the king's gate, where the king's servants were known to reside, suggests that Mordecai was one of the king's servants but does not offer any suggestions as to what that actual role might be (*Character and Ideology*, 38–39); Bechtel mostly glosses over it, mentioning that Mordecai "may" have a position at the king's gate (Bechtel, *Esther*, 35); Beal emphasizes that Mordecai being at the king's gate identifies him as a threshold character in the narrative, at least at this point. Like the eunuchs, who witness to court life but are kept on the margins of it. Mordecai here, too, is on the margins, outside looking in (Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 51–52). Day notes that the mention of Mordecai sitting in the king's gate is ambiguous and the interactions with others at the gate do not clarify the matter for readers. Are they speaking to a fellow servant or a citizen who just hangs around, creating problems for them? (Day, *Esther*, 63).

<sup>327</sup> Day, *Esther*, 63. Day also acknowledges the ambiguity of the exchange. It is possible they are scolding a fellow servant for breaking the king's rule, but it is also possible that this law also applies to commoners and the servants at the gate could have been scolding Mordecai as a commoner.

important theme for the book of Esther.<sup>328</sup> Many note how peculiar it is that Mordecai would not inform the king of the nefarious plot himself, or have another servant do so if he is a servant himself. At the same time, it seems Mordecai would not have had the access to the harem (as he clearly does) if he were not indeed one of the king's servants (2:11). Other ancient sources seemed to sense this ambiguity, with some staying close to the MT, others seeking to clarify what the MT expresses, and some leaving this detail out entirely.<sup>329</sup> That Mordecai is never expressly specified as a servant could be a result of the narrator's view of Mordecai's true (and most important) role in the narrative. Mordecai's most important role is that of "the Jew", and this is his only official title in the entire book of Esther, even after he is given Haman's house and role (8:2).<sup>330</sup> Whether or not Mordecai is an official servant of the king at this point is irrelevant, however, and is not intended to be the focus of this brief scene.<sup>331</sup>

As one can see, a lot of attention has been devoted to Mordecai's role in this scene. Esther's presence, by contrast, is altogether ignored or viewed as a plot point that establishes Esther as a worthy informant for the king in anticipation of the conflict to come in Chapter 7.<sup>332</sup> Playing a role in saving the king's life could certainly earn Esther a certain amount of trust from Ahasuerus but establishing Esther's trustworthiness may not be the significant aspect of her role here. If this were the primary reason for including Esther in this pericope, then one would expect that all the courtiers with whom Ahasuerus deals would need to earn his trust throughout the text. A closer look at some of Ahasuerus' interactions with his other trusted advisors does not suggest that this is the case.

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<sup>328</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 249.

<sup>329</sup> The LXX and Targum Sheni maintain the mention of Mordecai sitting at the king's gate. Targum Rishon asserts that Mordecai was part of the Sanhedrin, which Esther had installed in the palace gates. Josephus, on the other hand, does not mention that Mordecai was ever sitting in the palace gates at all, and he learns about the plot from one of the eunuch's servants, who is also a Jew.

<sup>330</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 185–86.

<sup>331</sup> I will discuss Mordecai's role and the possible reason for this ambiguity surrounding below.

<sup>332</sup> Berlin, *Esther*, 32; Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 374.

Many have noted that Ahasuerus' promotion of Haman in Chapter 3 (v. 1) might be presented as out of place or in contrast with Mordecai, whose role in saving the king's life goes unacknowledged and is quickly forgotten until Chapter 6.<sup>333</sup> Then Haman is suddenly promoted, and readers immediately learn that he is not a trustworthy advisor for any king. When Haman approaches the king about a troublesome people in his kingdom (3:8–9), the king accepts his words at face value and immediately grants him permission to draw up an edict calling for their extermination (3:10). This appears to be King Ahasuerus' *modus operandi* and a similar pattern takes place with his advisors in Chapters 1 and 2. Ahasuerus blindly assumes that those in his employ only desire to please him and will do what he wants, when he wants, and how he wants. Readers see with Queen Vashti in Chapter 1 that Ahasuerus does not have a keen understanding of those he has chosen to help him run the kingdom. Vashti's rightful rejection of Ahasuerus' request seems to shake the king to his core, sending him on a rage-fuelled mission to take back the power he feels he has lost. Readers see him repeat the same mistake with Haman in Chapter 3, and he reacts and seeks to correct the problem in a similar way in Chapter 7.

Thus, Ahasuerus is portrayed as someone who trusts (too) easily. He seems to give his trust (and the use of his royal power) to anyone who is willing to decide for him. The only prerequisite that appears to exist is that the king has chosen the one(s) on whom he relies, and the king has chosen Esther. She has already secured his trust and there is no need for the text to go to extra lengths to ensure readers will expect or believe that the king will trust her. Furthermore, it is unlikely readers would doubt the king's trust in Esther as readers know full well why the king chose her (2:17). Readers never know why Ahasuerus chooses who he chooses to serve in his court and Esther is the only exception to this rule. That the text makes it clear why the king chose Esther, and that he did so because he loved her, assures readers that she will have a special place in the king's mind.

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<sup>333</sup> Moore, *Esther*, 35–36; Reid, *Esther*, 90; Bechtel, *Esther*, 36.

This scene is important for Esther's character because it demonstrates to readers that she truly has a new role now. She is no longer a powerless, orphaned exile in a foreign land: she is the queen and she has direct access to the king.<sup>334</sup> This is emphasized for readers by the fact that it is the first time she is called by her royal title: Queen Esther (2:22). Ahasuerus crowned Esther as queen at v. 17, and her name is mentioned three times in between v. 17 and v.22, but her royal title is not used until v. 22, when Mordecai approaches her. This new title stands out especially because it is contrasted with Mordecai, who was once her superior. While he is still the man who raised her, and she is still willing to obey his word (2:20), one can see that a new dynamic is beginning to emerge between and for both Esther and Mordecai. It is in its early stages here, and the text does not linger over it, but a small seed is planted in readers minds now. Like Bathsheba before her, Esther will become a key player in the royal court.

After Esther is established as Vashti's replacement at the end of Chapter 2, Chapter 3 moves on to introducing the conflict between Haman and Mordecai, which will become the main conflict of the narrative. Haman's hatred of Mordecai quickly evolves from a personal issue to a national concern when Haman decides to use the royal court's resources to exact his revenge (3:11–14). The chapter ends with the Jews and all of Susa standing dumbfounded as they receive Haman's decree calling for the extermination of the Jews (3:15). Esther returns to the narrative after this brief interlude in Chapter 4, where Mordecai turns to her for help.

## **Chapter 4**

### *Mordecai's Role*

Prophets are closely tied to kings and the royal court within the HB and as such they play an essential role throughout the books of Samuel and Kings. So, if one is

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<sup>334</sup> She also could have reported this to any one of his eunuchs or had anyone of her eunuchs deliver the message to either the king's eunuchs or the king, but readers are told that she reports it directly to the king herself.

going to read the book of Esther as a tale about a king, it stands to reason that at some point in the narrative a prophetic character might arise. The prophets seen earlier in the DH (such as Samuel, Nathan, Ahija, and Jehu) anointed kings, but prophets also appear as counselors or advisors to kings (readers see Nathan begin to work in this way, Elijah, Micaiah, Isaiah, etc.). The events of the book of Esther are set long after the days of the Israelite monarchy, but the Hebrew characters in this narrative find themselves embroiled in another monarchy without the watchful eye of a prophet to intervene when a king is veering off course. It is not until Haman's decree is sent out that a prophetic-type character arises in the kingdom of Shushan and this prophet comes in the form of Mordecai.

Mordecai, of course, is not considered an actual prophet within the HB, and I do not intend to argue that he should be considered as such. However, connections between Esther and some prophetic books have been made before and at least one commentator has suggested that the book of Esther itself has a prophetic quality to it.<sup>335</sup> Mordecai's leadership role in the book of Esther is often noted, even if the extent and purpose of his role may be debated.<sup>336</sup> But it is not commonly noted that the leadership role Mordecai plays and the support he offers Queen Esther is reminiscent

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<sup>335</sup> Ayelet Seidler, "'Fasting,' 'Sackcloth,' and 'Ashes' – From Nineveh to Shushan," in *VT* 69 (2019): 117–34; Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative*, 44–45 and 113–14; Kandy Queen-Sutherland, "Naming the Enemy: Esther and the Prophets" in *PRSt* 35 (2008): 179–83. Queen-Sutherland does not draw direct connections with any specific prophetic text, but suggests that the book of Esther "picks up where the prophets left off" by providing an example of what it looks like when the people choose to trust YHWH, "Time and again, the prophets voice the nation's choice, when faced with foreign aggression, to trust their God. Living under a foreign power and facing annihilation, Esther once again plays out this age-old scene. Only this time, God will not be mentioned. Yet the message could not be louder" (181–82).

<sup>336</sup> Fox sees him as a diaspora leader, similar to Ezra (Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 187–88; Reid, *Esther*, 39; Klein sees Mordecai's primary leadership role as connected to his position as Esther's father figure though she asserts that he later becomes the 'symbolic leader and representative' for the Jews (Klein, "Honor and Shame," 102, 114); Grossman views Mordecai as the primary hero of the narrative, the one who saves the Jews from Haman's decree (Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative*); Pierce views Mordecai as presented in parallel with the king and, thus, believes he is presented as the Jewish counterpart to the Persian royalty. He also notes the shifting role of authority throughout the narrative between Esther and Mordecai (Ronald W. Pierce, "The Politics of Esther and Mordecai: Courage or Compromise?" *BBR* 2 (1992): 80, 88 note 27);

of what readers see with prophets and royal figures in the books of Samuel and Kings.<sup>337</sup>

As discussed previously in this project, the book of Esther connects both Mordecai and Esther to the house of Benjamin and specifically to Saul through his father Kish. The clear textual connection between Mordecai's and Esther's introductions and that of Saul has long been noted (as I noted above) and is too obvious to be dismissed, removing any doubt in reader's minds that the authors intended to make this connection. I have already shown that this lineage initially connects Esther to Saul's royal status, thus suggesting her suitability for the throne. Later in Chapter 3, it serves to set up the conflict between Mordecai and Haman. Yet if it is only Saul's royal status which is relevant, why is it not simply Saul's name which appears here? Some have suggested that the authors did not want to mention Saul directly because they were uneasy about connecting Mordecai and Esther to a character with such a fraught history in the biblical literature. However, if this were the case, then the authors likely would not have included any references to Saul, yet they did, and they chose very clear references. Most, however, fail to note the peculiarity of Saul's absence in the genealogy here given the clear references to him, not only through the names chosen in the genealogy but throughout the narrative of Esther. No one has offered a reasonable explanation regarding the author's choice to only use "son of Kish."

The phrase "son of Kish" only occurs five times in the HB: 1 Sam 10:11 and 10:21, 1 Chr 12:1 and 26:28, and our current passage, Esth 2:5. The appearances of "son of Kish" in Chronicles are not particularly meaningful or unique due to the

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<sup>337</sup> Orlando E. Costas, "The Subversiveness of Faith: Esther as a Paradigm for a Liberating Theology," *The Ecumenical Review* 40 (1988): 74. He describes Mordecai's role as "prophetic" but does not expand upon his statement. I suspect his prophetic lens is specifically that of the latter prophets rather than the former prophets. He only sites two prophetic texts in his article, both from the latter prophets (which is expected for an essay considering Esther in the context of liberation theology). The first is, of course, Mic 6:8 and the second is Jer 22:15–16. The text of the latter prophets would provide him a different lens than that of the former prophets as they are prophetic texts written *by* prophets (or their disciples) rather than prophetic texts written *about* prophets, such as those in Samuel and Kings.

Chronicler's interest with lineages/genealogies in general and they follow the usual pattern of "X son of X". The phrase "son of Kish" also appears in this common form in 1 Sam 10:21 when Samuel intends to present Saul as YHWH's anointed before the entire tribe of Benjamin. As with the verses in 1 Chronicles, there is nothing unique or meaningful here, either. It serves to identify Saul as the chosen one to the tribe, who would know him primarily by his connection to his father. Of the five appearances of "son of Kish" there are only two times it appears without "Saul" preceding it: Esth 2:5 and 1 Sam 10:11. What is most interesting about this reference is the scene in which it appears, which is possibly one of the more bewildering moments in Saul's narrative. In v. 11 Saul has been spotted speaking in ecstasy with a group of prophets, upon seeing this, all who knew him, "...said to one another, "What's happened to the son of Kish? Is Saul too among the prophets?"

The context in which Mordecai and Esther are introduced makes it clear that readers are to connect Esther with the royal aspect of Saul's character, as I have already shown. The emphasis on royalty is further strengthened by the mention of Shimei in the genealogy, a staunch supporter of Saul's reign (2 Sam 16:5–8). What is unclear is why this lineage is important in relation to Mordecai. He does not achieve the royal position in question, and he fades quickly to the periphery of the narrative while readers learn how Esther obtains her position as Queen. Yet this use of "son of Kish" in and of itself may explain why Saul is absent from the genealogy and what this connection to Saul may mean for Mordecai. To simply refer to "Saul" would immediately conjure up the image of the first king of Israel and risk overshadowing any other aspects of his character within the context of a royal court and the search for new royal consort. It could be, then, that the authors wanted to signal another aspect of Saul's character; one that may not have come to mind as readily if they were to use Saul's name in the genealogy. This reference to "son of Kish" draws our

attention to the moment in which Saul behaved as one of the prophets and suggest that Mordecai, too, may fulfill a prophetic role later in the narrative.<sup>338</sup>

Mordecai is clearly presented as a character of importance within the exilic community and possibly also within Ahasuerus' court. As I discussed above, Mordecai's status in the kingdom is ambiguous. He is never given an official royal title, but he sits in the king's gate, and has access to the harem. When one considers his activity in the royal court alongside his status as "the Jew" and the allusion to Saul's prophetic behaviour, one can begin to understand what Mordecai's role is within the book of Esther. The Israelites no longer have a king or a kingdom, but now that there is a Jew on the throne, someone needs to fulfill the role of prophet; someone who will work with the King and Queen to provide guidance, correction, and to speak the truths that no one really wants to hear.

Mordecai's first prophetic act appears in the beginning of Chapter 3 when he refuses to bow to Haman (3:2). This act is reminiscent of the public prophetic gestures or "symbolic acts" prophets commonly performed to send a message to either an individual or a community.<sup>339</sup> Some examples of these acts include Ahijah tearing apart his robe (1 Kgs 11:30), Jeremiah wearing a yoke (Jer 27), or Isaiah going around naked (Isa 20: 2–4). These acts were usually public, and they usually were not well-received or appreciated. The subversive nature of Mordecai's act and the attention it draws harkens back to the prophets, whose outlandish behaviours garnered the attention and speculation of the people. The only explanation Mordecai offers for his symbolic act is that he is a Jew (3:4), an explanation which has led to many different interpretations.<sup>340</sup> By refusing to bow to Haman and choosing instead to stand before

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<sup>338</sup> Saul repeats this prophetic behaviour in 1 Sam 19:24. Though "son of Kish" does not appear here, this second mention of his prophetic abilities strengthens the idea that this aspect of Saul's character may have been more well-known than the biblical text presents it throughout 1 Samuel.

<sup>339</sup> Paul L. Reddit, *Introduction to the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 61; Alexander Rofe, *Introduction to the Prophetic Literature* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 71–72; Johannes Lindholm, *Prophecy in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), 171–72.

<sup>340</sup> Grossman, *The Outer Narrative*, 88–90. Grossman provides a simple but excellent overview of the common perspectives on Mordecai's behaviour here.



him, Mordecai foreshadows what will happen to the Jews later in the narrative. They will not fall (נָפַל) before Haman or anyone who seeks to destroy them (6:13). Instead they will stand (עָמַד) victorious over them (8:11). This is but one way Mordecai fulfills a prophetic role in the book of Esther. The next scene in which one sees Mordecai play the prophet is reminiscent of what readers see with Bathsheba and Nathan in 1 Kgs 1.

### *Queen Esther and Mordecai*

When Esther appears in Chapter 4, it seems she has become accustomed to some of the basic ways of court life. Instead of dealing directly with Mordecai as she had when she was newly royal (2:22), she sends a eunuch to relay messages back and forth between them (4:5).<sup>341</sup> Readers also see that she is aware of some of the more basic or general laws of the kingdom when Mordecai approaches the gate dressed in sackcloth and ashes. Mordecai comes dangerously close to breaking the prohibition against entering the palace gate in sackcloth and ashes when he approaches the gate at 4:2. Esther's reaction to Mordecai approaching the gate is often painted negatively, as a desperate attempt to save face by hiding his (or her) Jewishness or to improve his appearance for purely superficial reasons.<sup>342</sup> Others view this act as nurturing or even motherly.<sup>343</sup> But these types of interpretations ignore the text's mention of the law forbidding anyone from entering the gate while in sackcloth, of which readers learn shortly before Esther sends out garments for Mordecai (4:2). This helps readers understand why Esther sends Mordecai clothes to change into (i.e. to protect him

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<sup>341</sup> The sending of messengers/messages is a common form of communication within the royal court. Jezebel sends and receives messages (either verbally or handwritten) at various times (19:2; 21:8,14), and, of course, the narrative in 2 Sam 11 is replete with the sending of messages, including one message sent to David by Bathsheba (11:5).

<sup>342</sup> Fox suspects that Esther is trying to improve Mordecai's appearance, a behaviour he believes is to be expected because Esther is a young woman who is beautiful and focuses on her outer appearance (Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 198); Bechtel posits that Esther is trying to hide Mordecai's Jewish identity in order to protect him and herself by having him remove the sackcloth (Bechtel, *Esther*, 45); Beal shares in Bechtel's assumption that Esther is trying to hide Mordecai's Jewish identity (Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 70); Grossman also views her reaction as a superficial "Marie Antoinette-like" action that demonstrates how Esther is now a royal Persian – more concerned with looks and riches (Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative*, 112–13);

<sup>343</sup> Sidnie Ann White, "Esther: A Feminine Model for the Jewish Diaspora" in *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel*, ed. Peggy L. Day (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 169; Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 61.

from any possible charge of misconduct, 4:3).<sup>344</sup> Neither readers nor Esther know if Mordecai intends to enter the gate, but Esther's fear of Mordecai breaking the law spurs her to act preemptively. By sending a eunuch to find out what has happened, Esther is presented as being unaware of any issue that could cause Mordecai to lament publicly and, thus, she is obviously ignorant of the decree Ahasuerus carelessly allowed to be sent out (4:5).

Some interpret Esther's ignorance as a sign that she is self-involved or even apathetic in her new life in the court; that she has forgotten her people and who she truly is (a Jew).<sup>345</sup> However, Esther's ignorance of the world beyond the court is not unlike that of Bathsheba's ignorance about Adonijah's very public actions in 1 Kgs. Bathsheba relies upon a man with access to the outside world (Nathan) to inform her of what is happening in the kingdom. Readers never see Jezebel receive information about the kingdom from a prophet of YHWH (for reasons I discussed above) but readers do see that Ahab informs her that Elijah killed her prophets (1 Kgs 19:1). Later, when Jehu is on his mission to eradicate the house of Ahab, Jezebel waits for him at a window (2 Kgs 9:31). It is commonly acknowledged that this is likely because, as a royal woman, she is confined to the palace grounds and must rely on servants (eunuchs, messengers, prophets) to interact with the world beyond the palace walls.<sup>346</sup> If this is true for Bathsheba and Jezebel, then perhaps readers are invited to see Esther in a similar situation. With this in mind, one can understand that her ignorance may be a result of her new role as queen and not evidence that she has become apathetic. She is no longer part of the world outside of the court and, like Bathsheba and Jezebel before her, she must rely on men who can come and go from

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<sup>344</sup> Both Berlin and Day also recognize that Esther sends Mordecai clothes because of the law forbidding entrance to those wearing sackcloth. They posit that Esther does so because she wants Mordecai to enter so that she can find out why he is so distraught (Berlin, *Esther*, 46; Day, *Esther*, 80).

<sup>345</sup> Fuchs, "Status and Role of Female Heroines," 80; Jon D. Levenson, *Esther*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 78–79.

<sup>346</sup> Berlin, *Esther*, 46; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 66.

the palace as they please to provide her with information about what is happening in the kingdom.<sup>347</sup>

### *Esther's Fear*

Esther's reply to the news of the decree, and to Mordecai's plea for help, is surprising to some. She does not immediately acquiesce to Mordecai's request that she confront King Ahasuerus, as readers possibly expect (Esth 2:20). Some see her response as either cowardly, self-involved, or apathetic.<sup>348</sup> Others suggest viewing her reaction in a more generous light by considering her situation and what she has been through as well.<sup>349</sup> Esther's answer to Mordecai is riddled with fear and uncertainty, but it is not fear of the decree that she has just been shown. It is fear of Ahasuerus that Esther expresses here. Her response to Mordecai indicates to readers that she is afraid of her husband and, as a result, has become obsessed with following the laws of his kingdom, and that her obsession has clouded her ability to think clearly.<sup>350</sup> One can

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<sup>347</sup> Many note that a clear separation is emphasized here between Esther and Mordecai and between the oblivion in the palace and the chaos outside the kings' gate. But it is seen as a larger problem of the royal realm and not a personal defect on Esther's part. I think this is a far more accurate way of understanding Esther's ignorance. While Haman's decree was written within the walls of the palace gate, this does not mean every person living within those walls would be made known of it, and there is no mention of the decree being displayed within palace gates, only outside and throughout the kingdom (3:14–15). Day, *Esther*, 80 and *Three Faces of a Queen*, 62; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 58; Berlin and Fox both note that Esther lives secluded in the harem and must rely on her servants for information on and interaction with the outside world (Berlin, *Esther*, 46; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 66); Reid, *Esther*, 100; Bechtel, *Esther*, 45–46; Berman, "Hadassah Bat Abihail," 651.

<sup>348</sup> Levenson, *Esther*, 80 (Levenson does not explicitly state why he believes Esther hesitates in the narrative, but he insinuates that it may be for selfish reasons, stating that she "must not allow her queenship to go to her head" and that she surely is worrying about losing her position as queen in this moment); Ronald W. Pierce, "The Politics of Esther and Mordecai," 87; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 61 (Fox slightly softens this perspective on pg. 199, calling her reaction "natural but self-centered").

<sup>349</sup> Day understands Esther's response as part of an informational exchange between Mordecai and herself. In her view, Mordecai has informed Esther of the situation outside of the palace and now Esther is informing Mordecai of the situation inside the palace (Day, *Esther*, 83); Bechtel views Esther's response as logical under the circumstances and sees it as a development in her character. She believes it shows that Esther has become more self-sufficient and educated in the ways of the Persian court (Bechtel, *Esther*, 47–48);

<sup>350</sup> Butting notes the way Esther describes the world of the palace as "...absolutely dependent on the king's laws, laws authorized by the power to kill. She is formed by Vashti's failed resistance and moulded by her own experience of being dependent and handled..." (Butting, "Esther: A New Interpretation of the Joseph Story," 245).

see a bit of this fear in Esther's reflexive reaction to Mordecai approaching the palace gates in sackcloth.

This is the first and only time in the HB where a queen is portrayed as being afraid of her husband. Bathsheba, who may well have cause to be afraid of David, exhibits no fear or hesitancy when she is asked to approach him. One could possibly argue that Bathsheba would not be afraid of David at this point because of his advanced age and illness. However, if one looks back to 2 Sam 11, one remembers that Uriah was not killed by David's hand, but by David's command (11:14–15). Just one chapter later, readers see the dying monarch order one last set of killings before he goes to sleep with his ancestors (2:5–6, 8–9). David's willingness to kill by proxy when he deems it necessary clearly has not diminished in his old age, and it is possible that Bathsheba's character might have shown some hesitation in approaching the king. However, David is not presented as a completely unreasonable man in the way Ahasuerus is. His ego is not bound up with being obeyed and readers know that he can be reasoned with when he is overreacting; his encounter with Abigail proves this. Though he has proven that he is capable and perfectly happy to kill, he only does so when he feels the situation truly calls for it. So, Bathsheba has little cause for concern or fear in approaching her husband, and she does so calmly and with ease and authority.

Likewise, Jezebel who, like Esther, is a foreign woman in her respective court, approaches her husband without a hint of fear. As discussed earlier, Jezebel goes to Ahab of her own accord, speaks to him in a very direct manner, and then fulfills his desire (getting Naboth's vineyard). From what readers are shown of Ahab, Jezebel has very little to fear from him. The only sense readers get that Ahab's character might have a vengeful or violent streak comes from Obadiah, who is afraid Ahab will kill him on account of his protection YHWH's prophets from Jezebel (1 Kgs 18:12–14). This could suggest that Ahab may have supported Jezebel in her pursuit of the prophets of YHWH, but this does not seem to fit with everything else seen of Ahab's character. The

only violence Ahab personally engages in is against the Arameans (1 Kgs 20; 22). So, Obadiah's fearful reaction might be better interpreted as fear of Jezebel and an assumption that Ahab might share the same violent streak as his wife.

Ahab and Ahasuerus do share at least one similar characteristic, and that is their tendency to let their emotions get the better of them. This is best illustrated in 1 Kgs 21 where Ahab is shown moping in his room and refusing to eat because he is disappointed. However, Ahab does not attempt to pacify his wounded ego by immediately lashing out as Ahasuerus does repeatedly. In Ahab and Jezebel's relationship, it is clearly Jezebel who rules with an iron fist, while Ahab sits back and reaps whatever benefits may come. When one looks at Esther with the previous queens in mind, her reaction to Mordecai's request becomes much clearer. In contrast to David and Ahab, Ahasuerus has been presented as an unreasonable and volatile man. Vashti is removed from her position simply for refusing to obey the command of the king, which is not portrayed as a law but simply as a demand the king requested her to fulfill. If Ahasuerus reacts so strongly to such a small offense, one can understand why Esther would become so fearful of breaking even the smallest of her husband's actual laws.

The prohibition against approaching Ahasuerus without having been summoned is not as clear cut as Esther seems to understand it. The text states:

...if any person, man or woman, enters the king's presence in the inner court without having been summoned, there is but one law for him -- that he be put to death. Only if the king extends the golden scepter to him may he live. (4:11)

Esther initially presents execution for approaching the king as an immediate and final ruling over whoever approaches him without being called. She explains that, "...there is but *one* law...that he be put to death," which suggests that there are no other possible outcomes. Then she immediately contradicts this, revealing that it is not an absolute law at all. The king himself decides whether a person who approaches him

lives or dies, which means that being put to death is not an immediate or incontrovertible outcome of approaching the king *sans* summons. This situation is indeed far from optimal, especially given that one's life is on the line, but this law of immediate execution is not set in stone as Esther presents it to be. This is also the only law in the book of Esther that the narrator does not confirm for readers. All readers see here is Esther's interpretation of that law, which is strongly influenced by her fear of Ahasuerus and of breaking one of his laws.<sup>351</sup>

After detailing the king's law, Esther divulges that she has not been summoned by him in thirty days (4:12). She places this information at the very end of her response to Mordecai, presumably to suggest that she would be killed if she were to approach the king. However, readers do not know why the king has not summoned her in thirty days. Esther does not explain this, nor does the narrator provide any details as to why she has not been called to see him. Likewise, readers do not know if Esther is necessarily interpreting this as sign that the king is upset with her or has grown bored of her. It is also likely that she merely wants to impress upon Mordecai that her approach would seem extremely subversive given that she has not been summoned within the past month. Whatever the reason, readers should be able to understand why Esther would automatically assume the worst possible outcome if she were to confront him as Bathsheba and Jezebel had confronted their husbands. Given everything readers have seen from Ahasuerus so far, Esther has no guarantee of knowing how he will react if she were to approach him unsummoned.

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<sup>351</sup> Other texts of Esther encourage readers to wonder whether this may be the case. The LXX attributes Esther's survival upon approaching the king to Ahasuerus' change of heart (brought on by God) when he sees her stumble with fear. He then rushes to Esther's side, assuring her that she will not die because of this "common decree" (LXX 4:4–6). Josephus has a two-fold perspective on the matter, which begins in a very similar way to the text in the LXX. He explains that the king ran to Esther's side because he has a change of heart (attributed to the will of God) because he was concerned over how afraid she was. However, upon reaching her, the king explains that Esther has nothing to fear because neither the queen nor king are subject to this law (JOE 11:237–38). Josephus' presentation is an interesting combination of events. On one hand, Ahasuerus becomes angry when he sees Esther approaching, but then changes his mind when he sees how afraid she is. This would suggest that perhaps Esther did have something to fear because the king is initially angry when she enters the room. But Josephus seems to suspect, though, that there may have been more going on than a change of heart because he adds additional information explaining that the law does not apply to Esther, anyway.

### *Mordecai Encourages Queen Esther*

Mordecai's response to Esther has drawn just about as much attention as Esther's response to Mordecai has, with scholars divided regarding how to understand it. Many interpret it negatively, as either a frustrated outburst or condemnation, or as a threat against Esther.<sup>352</sup> There are varying suggestions as to what the threat might mean (if it is indeed a threat); whether it means the people of the court will turn on her when her identity is discovered, or the Jews will come for her for turning her back to them, or some other form of justice will arise to punish her for her disloyalty to the Jews. Then there are those who do not view Mordecai's words as a type of threat at all, but either as a form of encouragement or as a warning.<sup>353</sup> Reid posits that Mordecai's words are not meant to be threatening at all but, rather, they are to be understood as advice given by Esther's adoptive father.<sup>354</sup> This is a more plausible way to understand Mordecai's answer. However, the relationship dynamic between Esther and Mordecai has long since changed. He is not simply talking to his adopted daughter now. He is talking to his queen.

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<sup>352</sup> Beal views Mordecai's statement that Esther will not be safe from the Jews if she does not stop the king's genocide and makes the threat even more personal by declaring that her father's house will be destroyed (Beal, *The Book of Hiding*, 72); Bechtel also suggests that Esther would have understood Mordecai's response to be a veiled threat, though she admits that one cannot know for sure if this is what Mordecai would have intended (Bechtel, *Esther*, 49); Klein views Mordecai's response as ruthless and betraying an "element of disdain for women" (Klein, *From Deborah to Esther*, 106); Wyler also suggest there is a hint of disdain in Mordecai's response. She views it as an aggressive male response to Esther's "feminine non-compliance." She sees it as an intense threat, saying that he "pronounces nothing less than a ban" if Esther does not cooperate with his demand (Wyler, "The Incomplete Emancipation," 126), Fuchs describes Mordecai's response as a "peremptory" and "ominous" threat and that Esther may even have acted out of fear of Mordecai (Fuchs, *Status and Role of Female Heroines*, 80), Pierce reads Mordecai's statement as a direct threat to her life, which he sees as further evidence of the secular tone of the narrative. There is no God to punish Esther, so Mordecai must be suggesting that he will kill her himself if she does nothing. (Pierce, "The Politics of Esther and Mordecai," 87).

<sup>353</sup> Berlin sees his response as a calculated way to convince Esther that the risk is worth taking because, even if she does not approach the king, she will certainly die (Berlin, *Esther*, 49); Linda Day shares a similar interpretation, but understands Mordecai's response as slightly selfish – that he is concerned for his own life and is willing to put Esther at risk to save himself (Day, *Esther*, 84); White understands it as encouragement and an affirmation of how much power Esther actually has (White, "Esther: A Feminine Model," 170); Clines does not view it as either a threat or a reproach, but as a simple statement laying out the "other pan of the balance in which Esther's fate is being weighed" (David J.A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984) 35); Fox sees it as a warning of what is to come if she does not act (Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 62); Miles presents Mordecai's speech as an "incentive" (Miles, "Reading Esther as Heroine," 136). While most of the interpretations here are not particularly positive, they still do not view Mordecai as actively threatening or lashing out at Esther.

<sup>354</sup> Reid, *Esther*, 103.

Esther has a job to do, just as she did in Chapter 2 when she informed King Ahasuerus of his servants' plot to kill him (2:22). The situation here is far more precarious, though, and it seems Esther's fear has conquered all that her role as queen entails. So, Mordecai steps up and lays everything out for her as Nathan did with Bathsheba in 1 Kgs 1. In a move reminiscent of a prophet, Mordecai informs Esther that the Jews will be safe no matter what, but if she does nothing, she will die, taking her father's house with her, as she is its sole survivor. Mordecai is not wondering about the possibilities out loud or threatening her, he is reporting that events will transpire this way if she does not act. He does not explain how this will come to pass, or how he knows this, likely because that is not his purpose.<sup>355</sup> His purpose is to push her to fully embrace her role as queen which, in this scenario, means intervening with the king.<sup>356</sup> The reader is left to assume that just as Nathan was confident that Bathsheba could handle the job, so Mordecai is confident in Esther.

Indeed, Mordecai appears to be more confident in Esther than Nathan was in Bathsheba. I demonstrated earlier in this chapter that Nathan laid out a plan for Bathsheba of what she should say to David, which might indicate that he did not fully trust her to be able to say the right things. If the reader has that narrative in mind, they might come to the conclusion that here Mordecai does not appear to have this concern with Esther. He does not tell her what to say, or how to say it, nor does he offer any suggestions. All he offers her is a small seed of hope when he tells her, "Who knows, perhaps you have attained a royal position for this moment" (4:14). With this final statement Mordecai not only offers Esther the encouragement she needs, but he also reminds her that she is the queen now and with this comes the responsibility to act. She has not obtained this position so that she can hide away with her servants in

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<sup>355</sup> McGeough notes that Mordecai demonstrates a keen understanding of how people will behave. Though McGeough notes this in order to suggest that Mordecai acts on this knowledge in a deceitful way, it is interesting that he notes this "knowing" aspect of his character in this way. (Kevin McGeough, "Esther the Hero: Going Beyond 'Wisdom' in Heroic Narratives," *CBQ* 70 (2008): 60.

<sup>356</sup> White, "Esther: A Feminine Model," 170.



the palace, but so that she can serve the people of the kingdom by keeping the king on a righteous path.

Esther's final response sent immediately after she has seen Mordecai's message (4:15). There is no description of the eunuch carrying the message back as with the two prior messages (4: 9–10, 12–13). The next verse jumps directly to Esther's response, and Mordecai's response seems to have had the desired effect. Her response is a string of commands, as befits a queen, ordering Mordecai to gather the Jews and arrange a fast on her behalf (4:16). Mordecai does not hesitate to follow the orders of his queen. Once it was Esther who obeyed the words of Mordecai (2:20), now it is Mordecai who obeys the words of Esther (4:17). This turn of events is often noted within Esther scholarship.<sup>357</sup> Some view it as a turning point in Esther's relationship with Mordecai and some see it as a turning point in Esther's character, either in accepting her role as queen or in embracing her Jewish identity. Indeed, these need not be mutually exclusive and may all capture aspects of Esther's development in this chapter. Both Esther and Mordecai are Jews, which is a central concern in the narrative, and are exercising new roles here. One sees that Esther's capacity to not only accept but to integrate new aspects of her role changes the dynamic of their relationship. While Mordecai still offers Esther guidance and support, and Esther still listens to him, it is no longer a one-sided relationship. Esther, too, must offer guidance and support for Mordecai and Mordecai must also listen (and he does).

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<sup>357</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 63; Berlin, *Esther*, 50; Bechtel, *Esther*, 50; Reid, *Esther*, 105; Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative*, 119; Klein notes this shift too, but argues that Esther's commands to Mordecai are more deferential than his because they are prefaced with the Hebrew verb *אמר*. She posits that Esther maintains "feminine shame" by transferring authority from Mordecai to God (another male figure) and in this way she can give commands while remaining respectful. Klein states that Mordecai who recognizes her power even though she remains deferential (Klein, "Honor and Shame," 107).

## Chapter 5

In this chapter readers witness Esther and Ahasuerus interact for the first time. In Chapter 1 of this thesis, I showed how Esther dressing in her royal attire is a sign of her embracing her role as queen, and this is even clearer now that Esther has given her first command as queen at the end of the previous chapter. It appears she is starting to grow comfortable in her royal position. Readers immediately see that this is going to be a unique interaction that ends well for Esther because she instantly gains Ahasuerus' favor (5:2). He offers her the golden scepter, which she approaches and touches without hesitation. Ahasuerus begins the conversation with Esther the same way David did with Bathsheba in 1 Kgs 1: מַה־לָּךְ (what is it? / what troubles you? / what is the matter?), and he assures her that she will be granted anything she wishes (5:3). However, she does not bring up the matter she wishes to discuss at this point; rather, she uses this hard-won opportunity to invite the king and Haman to a banquet later in the evening (5:4). Then she uses the second banquet to request that the king and Haman join her for another banquet the following day, where she will do the king's bidding and finally answer his question (5:8).

This a very strange sequence of events for readers, who know that Esther has a specific goal in mind, and it is certainly an urgent matter. There are various suggestions as to why the events take place in this way. Some suggest that Esther is making up the plan as she goes and is stalling because she is either afraid or unsure how to proceed.<sup>358</sup> Most agree that Esther is trying to get the upper hand through intoxication, flattery, providing a false sense of security (namely for Haman) or by placing Ahasuerus in a situation in which he feels he has to acquiesce to her request.<sup>359</sup> However, the key to understanding why Esther is presented as approaching the king in this manner seems likely to be found in the first two chapters of the book.

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<sup>358</sup> Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, 236.

<sup>359</sup> Joshua Joel Spoelstra, "The Function of the מַשְׁתַּחֲוִיָּה in the Book of Esther," *O TE* 27 (2014): 285–301; White, "Esther: A Feminine Model," 171–72; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 73; Bechtel, *Esther*, 52–53; It

Readers already know that King Ahasuerus loves banquets. The entire first chapter of the book is dedicated to two sets of banquets, the first of which lasted an impossible amount of time (1:3–4, 5). However, one of the banquets turned sour when Vashti refused the king, unintentionally causing a public scene where King Ahasuerus is left looking like a fool in front of his guests (1:10–12). After Esther is chosen to replace Vashti, Ahasuerus throws yet another banquet to celebrate (2:18). Because Esther is shown to have a special way with people, as I discussed earlier, she would likely be aware of all these things and know how to use them to her advantage. That she decides to have a two-day banquet for the king and Haman is not an attempt to flatter or stall while she comes up with a plan. Esther is trying to arrange things in the way the king might do them himself. The one who throws the banquet is the one who has the power, and Esther is trying to gain the upper hand here. However, she is wise enough not to make these banquets public. This is not a celebration and she is about to confront the king about something that might not sit well with him. She is likely aware that a public confrontation could somehow lead to her dismissal from the court.<sup>360</sup> So, she keeps the banquets small, only inviting Haman, the one responsible for the decree in the first place.

## Chapter 7

In Chapter 7, readers finally get to witness Esther interact with her husband, the king, as Bathsheba and Jezebel do earlier. Unlike her predecessors, though, Esther has a barrier in her ability to approach the king: law. There is no similar concern with either Bathsheba or Jezebel. There is no mention of a law, rule, or any type of etiquette required for one who wishes to approach the king in either 1 Kgs 1 or 1 Kgs 21. There is no mention of Nathan (or anyone else) expressly granting Bathsheba permission and readers know Nathan has not accompanied Bathsheba because she

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has also commonly noted that this serves as a literary ploy, building the suspense for the reader by slowing down the plot just before a critical moment in the narrative.

<sup>360</sup> Day, *Esther*, 101.

alone goes to the king's quarters and speaks to David while Nathan arrives later (1 Kgs 1:15). It could be possible readers are to assume Bathsheba acted with such urgency that she brusquely approaches David without following proper etiquette. However, David's reaction to her sudden appearance does not support such an assumption. He does not respond with surprise, confusion, or anger, nor does he reprove her. He simply asks her what she wants (1:16). While this scene does not present readers with any specific rules or etiquette for approaching the king, it seems that Bathsheba is not presented as doing anything inappropriate or out of place.

The same seems true of Jezebel in 1 Kgs 21, whose exchange with Ahab is far more informal than that of Bathsheba's conversation with David. She does not bow or speak to the king formally (in the third person), as Bathsheba did, and as many do when addressing a king in the HB. It may be tempting to assume that Jezebel speaks this way to Ahab because she is not overly concerned with the "proper" way to do things (at least not proper according to the Deuteronomists). A more generous interpretation may see this as a result of a private conversation between husband and wife, and outside of the public eye. But when one looks through the book of 1 Kgs, one discovers that there are only two instances in which someone speaks to Ahab in the formal manner readers might expect to see.<sup>361</sup> The rest of the time he is addressed in an informal manner. This leads one to wonder if this is intentional on the part of the authors and editors. Perhaps it is a subtle judgement upon Ahab and his house's reign over the Northern Kingdom. However, if one looks at David after he becomes king in 2 Sam to his death in 1 Kings, one finds that he is not consistently addressed formally, either. The story of David's reign is much longer than that of Ahab's, so readers are provided with far more examples of how he is spoken to, and there is a good deal of variety.<sup>362</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> An unnamed prophet who is trying to trap Ahab in 1 Kgs 20:38–40 and King Jehoshaphat of Judah in 1 Kg 22:4–8c (The first two parts of v. 8 he speaks informally, and the final line of verse 8 he switches to a formal address).

<sup>362</sup> Sometimes characters speak to him in mixed speech, often beginning informally and then ending on a formal note. Other times he spoken to entirely informally, regardless of social status (household

Characters in the books of Samuel and Kings appear to have more flexibility in how/when they can approach the king and how they can speak to him, even if they still must be discerning about it. Even David's servants and officers address him informally on occasions (2 Sam 12:21, 18:3), and Joab, one of David's highest-ranking officers, is permitted to sharply reproach his king as he mourns his son, Absalom (2 Sam 19:7–8). The characters in the book of Esther exhibit no such flexibility in their interactions with their king. Every character from the eunuchs, to Haman and Esther speak to him in the same the formal speech, characteristic of the book of Esther (1:19–20, 3:8–9, 5:4). Ahasuerus's court and kingdom are presented as much more regulated and regularly subject to new laws (as readers see in Chapter 1). Readers know that these laws are sometimes the result of scheming courtiers and may not necessarily represent the desires or attitude of the king (as with Haman's decree at 3:12), but readers do not know to what extent this is known by the citizens of Susa, both inside and outside of the palace. All decrees go out stamped under the king's name and sealed with his signet ring, meaning that those receiving a decree do not know who the actual author might be. This may give the people of Susa the impression that Ahasuerus is even more controlling and brutal than he is, encouraging all who interact with him to be very careful with their words.<sup>363</sup>

Esther seems to have picked up on this during her time in the palace so far, and she is very careful to ingratiate herself to Ahasuerus with everything she says.<sup>364</sup> Her ability to read people is demonstrated as she plays on Ahasuerus' weakness, just as Bathsheba does with David in 1 Kgs 1. She provides him with an image of what is already happening in the kingdom and pushes him to do his duty as king and keep his oath to her before YHWH. By contrast, Esther's approach is to make a highly emotional

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servants, his soldiers, Joab, prophets, etc). The most common moments when David is spoken to formally is when someone has a request (such as the woman of Tekoa) or wishes to show gratitude.

<sup>363</sup> Indeed, with the amount of laws floating around Ahasuerus' kingdom, one wonders if there may even be a law ordering all to speak to Ahasuerus in a specific way. After all, there is a law demanding that all people bow down to Haman (3:2, though it is highly likely this law is one of Haman's own creation but stamped with Ahasuerus's seal).

<sup>364</sup> Day, *Esther*, 119.

plea, because Ahasuerus' emotions are his weakness. She begins her discourse with a flood of shocking statements:

If Your Majesty will do me the favor, and if it pleases Your Majesty, let my life be granted me as my wish, and my people as my request. For we have been sold, my people and I, to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated. (7:3)

Given that King Ahasuerus knows nothing about the details of the decree Haman sent out, this information comes as quite a surprise to him. This sudden knowledge is a shock to his pride, because Ahasuerus clearly likes to think of himself as all powerful and in charge, yet he does not know that a decree has gone out threatening his wife's life.<sup>365</sup> Esther seems very aware of how sensitive the king's ego is, and thus avoids accusing the king of anything outrightly.<sup>366</sup> As mentioned earlier, she set up private banquets to avoid publicly humiliating the king, and here she speaks in purely passive language and does not name names. It seems clear that Ahasuerus does not want to lose Esther, whom he purportedly loves.<sup>367</sup> Although Ahasuerus is presented as volatile and hot-headed, he is consistently kind and accommodating toward Esther. It is also possible he might not want to lose another queen as he lost with Vashti, as readers hear he spent time thinking about her in chapter 2 (v.1).<sup>368</sup> Readers do not know if Esther is aware that Ahasuerus pined for Vashti after she was gone, or that Ahasuerus loves her (2:17), but it seems she might have a sense of these things, because she starts her plea with what is a shocking revelation for Ahasuerus: *her* life is at stake. That she mentions the lives of her people after *her* life the (in the Hebrew the first common singular pronoun comes before Esther mentions "my people") should not be taken as a sign that she does not care about them, but rather that Esther knows Ahasuerus.<sup>369</sup> He has no emotional attachment or investment in an unknown group of people. One knows this from how easily he agreed to let Haman

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<sup>365</sup> Bechtel, *Esther*, 63.

<sup>366</sup> Day, *Esther*, 120

<sup>367</sup> Berlin, *Esther*, 66.

<sup>368</sup> *Ibid.*, 66. Josephus even goes so far as to conclude that King Ahasuerus loved Vashti and was heartbroken over what happened to her.

<sup>369</sup> Berlin, *Esther*, 66.

deal with them in whatever way he wanted. However, once these people are connected to Esther, for whom Ahasuerus appears to care, then the fate of these people suddenly matters to him.<sup>370</sup>

## **Conclusion**

When one examines the different ways Bathsheba and Jezebel operate in their kingdoms an image of a royal wife's role in the HB begins to emerge. These women are expected to assist the king in running the kingdom in several ways. They help keep them informed of crucial situations in the kingdom by passing along information they learn from outside sources, such as prophets and messengers. These royal women are also supposed to serve as an important check and balance to the king to help make sure he remains a just ruler. In order to do this, they must be able to work with other members of the royal court, especially prophets who are also tasked with keeping kings in line. The wife of the king must have the courage to confront the king in difficult situations as well as the intelligence to reason with him if he is losing sight of his royal responsibilities. Abigail gives readers a hint of what this looks like in 1 Sam 25. One gets a better idea of how this works within the royal court with Bathsheba as she works alongside Nathan to ensure that David does not break his oath to YHWH in 1 Kgs 1.

Jezebel, on the other hand, fails to fulfill this unique aspect of a royal wife's duty. She has the stewards of the kingdom working against her and Ahab in secret (like Obadiah in 1 Kgs 18). In a significant break from Bathsheba, she alienates the most significant prophet of YHWH in her kingdom (Elijah), preferring to work on her own and only on issues that personally concern and benefit her and/or Ahab. She is incapable of ensuring that Ahab remains faithful to YHWH because her main priority seems to be establishing sole worship of Baal (and Asherah) in Israel. She certainly

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<sup>370</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 83; Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative*, 160.

does not do her part to ensure that Ahab serves as a just king. She seems to do the opposite, encouraging him to view the role of king as one of dominance over subjects. She educates him on how to rule over Israel by killing Naboth so that Ahab can have his vineyard.

Esther is queen at a different time and in a different place, and there are many differences between her situation and that of Bathsheba and Jezebel. Even so, readers see Esther faced with similar obstacles and tasked with a similar duty as Bathsheba and Jezebel. From the beginning, readers see that Esther may be able to work with other members of Ahasuerus' court as all who encounter her in Chapter 2 immediately like her. As I showed with Bathsheba and Jezebel, it is important for a royal woman to be approachable if she is going to work alongside the various servants of a royal court. In the beginning of Esther's reign, readers see her demonstrating just such a quality. She delivers important information to the king that was brought to her by one of the kingdom's citizens (Mordecai). After some time passes, King Ahasuerus mindlessly grants Haman permission to call for the destruction of an entire people in his kingdom. Mordecai comes again to Queen Esther and, playing the role of the prophet, asks her to intervene and reason with Ahasuerus in order that innocent lives are spared.

Esther does not take on this responsibility with the same amount of certainty and confidence that her predecessors did, however. She appears to display an emotion that neither Bathsheba nor Jezebel do: fear. Esther fears her husband in a way not seen with the other royal women in this study. Thus, when Mordecai approaches Esther, she requires a little more help for her to work up the courage to accept her responsibility as the wife of a king. Once she does, though, she manages to put together a plan that opens Ahasuerus' eyes to the chaos he has allowed to take place in his kingdom. Esther knows Ahasuerus will not right this wrong on his own as he is far too reliant on others, so she makes one final stand and, together with Mordecai, orchestrates a plan that will save the Jews.



## Excursus: The King and His Advisors

When Haman approaches Ahasuerus seeking permission to deal with the “certain people” one might expect the king to consult the many legal advisers he has at his disposal (1:13). However, he chooses not to and blindly gives Haman permission to do as he pleases regarding this “certain people” (3:8, 11). This is shocking considering how much thought and concern was put into Vashti’s punishment in Chapter 1 of Esther. However, knowing when and whom to consult regarding issues in his kingdom has proven to be a problem for King Ahasuerus, so it should not be a surprise to readers that he agrees to Haman’s plan without any further consultation.

In Chapter 1, a raging King Ahasuerus consults his most knowledgeable advisors (the ‘wise men’) to see what should be done about Vashti’s disobedience according to the law (1:13, 15). At first glance, this may seem like a sign of weakness in a king. One might imagine that a good king should be intelligent and confident enough to make his own decisions regarding issues in his court. However, that King Ahasuerus consults his wise men is actually presented as a very positive sign. Not only is he following the proper protocol of his kingdom (11:13) but consulting with others before making decisions is considered a characteristic trait of a wise ruler (and human being).<sup>371</sup> He seems to have learned from his first mistake of summoning Vashti without consulting the wise men, a request which may have been in conflict with the honour/shame code of his culture.<sup>372</sup> Perhaps this whole conflict could have been avoided had Ahasuerus simply asked for an opinion before acting.

One can compare King Ahasuerus to King David in 2 Sam 11–12 to help gain a better understanding as to why consulting with others may be important for a king. David also has advisors available to him for consultation (2 Sam 16:23), however, he does not always use them as one sees in 2 Sam 11. Though David is seemingly alone in the palace, readers know there was at least one other person there as he sends to find

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<sup>371</sup> Klein, *From Deborah to Esther*, 100.

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid*, 99.

out information about Bathsheba (11:3) then sends a messenger to retrieve her (11:4), and then sends another to Joab (11:6). He does not, however, consult anyone before he decides to send for Bathsheba. He simply sends for her and takes her, even though it is clearly not a wise decision, as the text clarifies by informing readers not only who Bathsheba's husband is but also who her father is (2 Sam 11:3). When David learns she is pregnant he, again, does not consult anyone else for wisdom regarding the situation. Instead he formulates his own plan. He attempts to trick Uriah into sleeping with his wife and, when this plan fails, he decides to have Uriah killed. YHWH then sends the prophet Nathan to condemn David and kills the son Bathsheba bears in David's place (2 Sam 12:13–14) as a result of these actions. The situation in which David finds himself is one he created and for which he alone bears the responsibility. The death of the child may save David from the bloodguilt resulting from Uriah's murder, but his actions are never forgotten (1 Kgs 15:5).

King Ahasuerus' motivation for consulting his sages is anger toward Vashti and shame over not being able to control his wife and Queen. He could take matters into his own hands, as King David does in 2 Sam 11, but he chooses to seek the opinions and knowledge of others before acting. King Ahasuerus, unfortunately, has not surrounded himself with good advisors, whom he seeks initially because they are knowledgeable in all matters of the law (1:13). Their decision seems driven more by fear than adherence to pre-existing law, however, and they advise him to create a new law in response to Vashti's actions (1:19). The law they create prevents Vashti from appearing before the king<sup>373</sup> and requires all women to be subservient to their husbands because they fear Vashti's example will lead to women hating their husbands *en masse* and disobeying them as a result.

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<sup>373</sup> Readers do not know exactly what happens to Vashti. All it says is that she will not come before the king anymore and her position will be given to another. Some suggest she is expelled from the court, others wonder if she is simply demoted but still living in the court with the other women, and others still suggest she may have been executed. The Esther Rabbah imagines Vashti to have been executed as her head is brought to King Ahasuerus upon a platter.

Two common themes emerge in the stories of David in 2 Sam 11 and Ahasuerus in Esth 1. The first is the concern over the king's power and abuse of that power.<sup>374</sup> Both David and Ahasuerus act not out of justice and righteousness as a king should but, rather, out of their own desires. David seeks sexual gratification when he summons Bathsheba and afterwards, when he attempts to cover up his sin, his plans go terribly awry. Ahasuerus, having sought to glorify himself by showing off Vashti's beauty, seeks to soothe his own wounded pride after she rejects him. The second theme visible here is the importance of advisors in a kingdom. King David's unmonitored behaviour leads to a possible rape (another common scholarly debate regarding Bathsheba<sup>375</sup>), adultery, and the murder of an innocent man. It is not until Nathan condemns David that he acknowledges the extent of his wrongdoing (2 Sam 12:13). Meanwhile Ahasuerus, who attempts to address his situation by consulting the proper authorities, receives poor advice from advisors who allow their fear rather than their dedication to the law drive their decision. As his story continues to unfold, readers will learn that King Ahasuerus' true enemy was not Vashti, but his temper and his poor advisors. Prophets and other advisors exist as checks and balances to the king's power. But if the king chooses to ignore them or surrounds himself with poor advisors, the results can be disastrous for the people of the kingdom, as the book of Esther beautifully demonstrates.

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<sup>374</sup> A concern that is summarized in 1 Sam 8:10–18.

<sup>375</sup> Cherul J. Exum, *Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 2008) 170–200; Nicol, "The Alleged Rape of Bathsheba," 43–54.

## Chapter Four: Violence

### Introduction

Throughout its various books, the HB frequently depicts episodes of violence, many of which arise from conflicts between individuals, rape, or war.<sup>376</sup> Women often appear in stories of violence, sometimes as participants (i.e., Jael in Judg 4, the wise woman of Abel in 2 Sam 20) and sometimes as victims (i.e., Dinah in Gen 34, the Levite's concubine in Judg 19). The narratives upon which this project focuses are no exception.

In Chapter 2 of this project I noted that Abigail can be read as a sort of prototype for future royal wives of a king. I demonstrated how she foreshadows the ways in which a royal wife can serve as a sort of check and balance to the king's power when he is going astray or has lost sight of a situation. Thus, it seems significant that her story, one of the first stories in the HB of a woman who will become the wife of a king, is steeped in a conflict that could have ended in violence. This hints at the important role royal wives play in conflicts and royal violence. As such, I will begin my exploration of royal women and violence with the narrative of 1 Sam 25. After I analyze Abigail's role in 1 Sam 25, I will move on to Jezebel, followed by an analysis of Esther's role in the violent scenes depicted in her narrative.

### 1 Samuel 25

#### *Conflict Arises*

David and his men are fleeing from Saul when David learns that Nabal has come to oversee the shearing of his sheep (25:4). He sends his men to Nabal to request provisions, instructing them to address him warmly and to cite their care for Nabal's servants as justification for this request (25:5–8). Nabal, however, addresses them harshly and refuses to provide them with provisions (25:10-11). Many have

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<sup>376</sup> For a recent study on violence in the HB, cf. Matthew J. Lynch, *Portraying Violence in the Hebrew Bible: A Cultural and Literary Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

questions about David's intentions in seeking material reward from Nabal. They wonder if his intentions are presented as pure or if he is trying to manipulate, bully, or threaten to take control of Nabal's land, which could account for Nabal's sharp response.<sup>377</sup> However, David's request does not appear to be received this way by Nabal's servant, whose report to Abigail confirms David's account of how his men had protected Nabal's servants and treated them well (25:7–9 and 25:15–16).<sup>378</sup> This affirms for readers that David's original request is not to be understood as a threat to Nabal. To further underline this point, the honorable behavior of David's men and the civility of their request is juxtaposed with the uncivility of Nabal's response (25:14)<sup>379</sup> and his poor treatment of others (25:17). It may be that Nabal does not owe David anything for the service he and his men provided, but this does not necessarily mean he cannot ask Nabal for supplies or any other kind of help.<sup>380</sup>

Furthermore, the text clearly demonstrates that David knows he had been protecting Nabal's shepherds (25:4–5). Bodner notes that David approaches Nabal as if he expected him to say no, which he sees as a sign that David may have had nefarious intentions.<sup>381</sup> I agree that David approaches Nabal expecting negative results, but I do not inherently think this is a sign that David had malicious intentions. Nabal is evidently a powerful and significant figure in the region. Thus, his reputation for being difficult may precede him, along with the knowledge of his great wealth (25:3,17). If David knows he is dealing with Nabal, then one can expect that he will have the good sense to tread lightly with him and to construct an argument based on logic rather

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<sup>377</sup> David M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 96; Moshe Garsiel, "The Story of David, Nabal, and Abigail (1 Samuel 25): A Literary Study of Wordplay on Names, Analogies and Socially Structured Opposites," in *Abigail, Wife of David, and Other Ancient Oriental Women* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2013), 79; Keith Bodner, *1 Samuel: A Narrative Commentary* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 259; Biddle, "Ancestral Motifs in 1 Samuel 25," 617–38.

<sup>378</sup> Garsiel notes that shepherds are often vulnerable to outlaws or marauders but David, once a shepherd and now an outlaw, has protected Nabal's servants from these threats ("The Story of David, Nabal and Abigail," 69).

<sup>379</sup> At 25:14 the narrator tells readers that the servant describes Nabal as yelling (עֵיט) at David, which emphasizes the harshness of Nabal's response.

<sup>380</sup> Contra Biddle, "Ancestral Motifs in 1 Samuel 25," 637.

<sup>381</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 261.

than attempt to appeal to his humanity, as his reputation for cruelty leaves little hope for compassion or mercy.

David attempts to present himself in a non-threatening manner by bestowing blessings on Nabal, his house, and all his belongings (25:6).<sup>382</sup> He assures Nabal that he wishes nothing but the best for him, his household, and his wealth. Then he fashions his request as a sort of business deal; he is not asking Nabal to give him something for nothing and assures him that his own shepherds can confirm this (25:7–8). Nabal’s reaction is not negative because he senses David as a threat. He shows no concern for David as a threat, but instead is indignant that David asks he share the goods that he (or rather, his servants) worked to gain.<sup>383</sup> That Nabal is later found feasting alone like a king supports this view of Nabal (25:36). Furthermore, as I mentioned above, Nabal’s servant sensed no threat from David’s request itself and, as the servant sees it, Nabal is in the wrong for his refusal to provide for David, thus provoking his anger.<sup>384</sup>

When these events are reported to David, his anger flares up and he sets out to attack Nabal’s home with a group of his men (25:13). Though he never lays out a specific plan, his comments on the matter make it clear that he only seeks to kill the males of Nabal’s household (25:21–22, 34). He does not say that he will kill *all* Nabal’s household, which would include women (and possibly children) but solely the males of

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<sup>382</sup> David’s greeting to Nabal has been interpreted negatively by Garsiel, who suggests that David’s quadruple use of שלום should be understood as a subtle threat and not a warm greeting of well wishes. He argues that שלום should be understood as a reference to Salmon, the father of Bethlehem (1 Chr 2:51, 54), thus making David’s greeting a threat indicating that he, who is from the land of Salmon, is now coming to take Nabal’s land. This is an interesting idea, but it does not hold up when one looks at the rest of the narrative. First, one should remember that Nabal’s introduction emphasizes his great wealth, putting his land and possessions before even his name (25:2–3). This not only informs readers of his significance in the region, but it also suggests Nabal’s own attachment to this wealth. Second, David has yet to annex Nabal’s land by the end of the narrative. If David’s actions with Nabal are to be understood as a land or power grab, then one would expect the narrative to end with Nabal losing his land to David. However, this is not the case. Nabal does lose his land, though not to David but rather as a result of his treatment of David and his men (25:37–39). (Garsiel, “The Story of David, Nabal and Abigail,” 71).

<sup>383</sup> Levenson, “1 Samuel 25 as Literature,” 13, 15.

<sup>384</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 263.

his house or, those who “piss against the wall” (25:22).<sup>385</sup> Nabal’s servant seems to suspect that the entire household is at risk from David and his men (25:17) though he is likely unaware of David’s actual thoughts on the matter. Indeed, David’s plan is not reported to readers until several verses later and David appears to be talking to himself (25:21–22). One wonders, then, if David has a plan for the women of Nabal’s household that he has not yet announced.

If he were to encourage his men to take Abigail and any other women of the household might, then they might not be in danger of death, necessarily. This is not to say that they would not be vulnerable or in any danger at all. Like the hundreds of women forcibly taken from their homes in Judg 21 or the women taken from Shechem in Gen 34:29, they could be handed over to the mercy of men they do not know.<sup>386</sup> On the other hand, if the women were untouched and abandoned, they would be left vulnerable with no husbands or sons to provide for them. Thus, any women of Nabal’s household, including Abigail, are vulnerable, no matter what David has (or has not) explicitly planned for them.

### *Abigail’s Intervention*

When Abigail approaches David, she pays him a similarly excessive respect just as David’s men had payed Nabal. She prostrates herself at his feet, calls him “lord” and refers to herself as his “handmaid”, even though she arguably occupies a higher social stratum than he does (25:24).<sup>387</sup> Then she immediately switches David’s attention

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<sup>385</sup> This is an idiom for “men”, specifically used to degrade the men to whom it refers by comparing them to dogs, a common insult throughout the Ancient Near East. The idiom only appears in the HB in 1 Sam and 1&2 Kings, where it refers to Jeroboam’s, Baasha’s and Ahab’s lines. *DCH* 8, s.v. “שין”; Garsiel, “The Story of David, Nabal and Abigail,” 75. Cf. 1 Sam 25:22, 34; 1 Kgs 14:10, 16:11, 21:21, 2 Kgs 9:8.

<sup>386</sup> Gale A. Yee, “Judges 17–21 and the Dismembered Body” in *Judges and Method: New Approaches in Biblical Studies*, ed. Gale. A. Yee (Minneapolis: Fortress), 157.

<sup>387</sup> Levenson, “1 Samuel 25 as Literature,” 26; and contra Coquet et de Robert, who understand this as the customary self-deprecation a woman must demonstrate before a man (André Caquot and Philippe de Robert *Les Livres De Samuel* (Geneve: Labor et Fides, 1994), 310). This perspective does not hold up when one looks at other interactions of women and men in the HB where who do not follow this assumed custom (So Deborah and Barak in Judg 4, Rahab in Josh 2, The Witch of Endor and Saul in 1 Sam 28, The Wise Woman of Abel and Joab in 2 Sam 20 [who refers to herself as Joab’s “handmaid” but without the accoutrements Abigail utilizes], Bathsheba and Adonijah in 1 Kgs 2, Huldah and Hilkiah in 2

away from Nabal and places the blame for this situation squarely upon herself (v. 25). She dismisses Nabal as too stupid for David to waste his energy on and urges him to blame *her* instead (1 Sam 25:25). This is commonly understood either as social custom or mere rhetoric; a strategy Abigail employs to ingratiate herself to David and ensure he allows her the opportunity to speak.<sup>388</sup> However, one may have reason to suspect that this is more than mere rhetoric. Shepherd suggests that Abigail's apology is, indeed, just that, a sincere apology and a plea for forgiveness.<sup>389</sup> He notes that her statement cannot be a simple nicety because she does not stop at that, as would be the case if she were engaging in a social custom. Instead she goes on to explain precisely what she has done wrong, namely, that she is to blame because she did not know David's men had arrived (1:25).<sup>390</sup>

If one were to take Abigail's confession at face value, one would need to assess why she sees herself as the responsible party in this conflict. Shepherd suggests that the primary reason for which Abigail apologizes is because she has failed to control her erratic husband.<sup>391</sup> However, Abigail does not identify this as the issue. On the contrary, she maintains that Nabal's poor behaviour is his own – that it is part of who he is and, thus, cannot be changed or reasoned with.<sup>392</sup> She instead describes her failing as not having seen David's servants (1:25).<sup>393</sup> Perhaps readers are to understand that dealing with these types of negotiations is part of her responsibilities in managing Nabal's estate. If she had been dutifully paying attention, she could have ensured the

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Kgs 22). Abigail's grovelling before David must be the result of something other than her sex, as I will demonstrate above.

<sup>388</sup> McCarter, *I Samuel*, 398; David Jobling, *I Samuel*, Berit Olam. Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1998), 153; Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of The Bible*, 319. Frymer-Kensky suggests that this is merely the rhetoric of "persuading women."

<sup>389</sup> David Shepherd, "The Trespass of Your Servant': Finding Forgiveness in the Story of David, Abigail, and Nabal," (paper presented at the Trinity College Dublin International Symposium "Remember Their Sin No More? Forgiveness and the Hebrew Bible", Dublin, Ireland, 12 of May, 2018).

<sup>390</sup> Contra Frymer-Kensky who contradicts the text when she states that Abigail, "...does not specify what guilt she offers to bear..." (319). As I mentioned above, Abigail very clearly states what guilt she offers to bear (1:25).

<sup>391</sup> Shepherd, "The Trespass of Your Servant," 5.

<sup>392</sup> "For he is just what his name says: His name means 'boor' and he is a boor." (1Sam 25:25 TNK).

<sup>393</sup> Contra Levenson and others who view Abigail as apologizing for Nabal's actions. Levenson, *1 Samuel 25 as Literature*, 19



men dealt with her, as should have been the case. Her apology, then, is for this managerial failure, which she rectifies by delivering the requested provisions (v. 27). That she skilfully places this apology at the beginning of her discourse, thus disarming David and enabling her to negotiate with him, does not mean her apology is to be understood as a farce.<sup>394</sup> Rather, her ability to quickly create a coherent and persuasive argument is demonstrative of her character's aforementioned prudence (25:3).

The text presents David's anger over Nabal's refusal as justified, but his violent tactics in response are not. Abigail makes this very clear to him (and readers), as she presses him not to take vengeance into his own hands and "enter into bloods" (25:26, 28).<sup>395</sup> She does this by providing David with a different perspective on the situation, namely, YHWH's perspective. She reminds David that it is not *his* right to deal with Nabal in such a way; it is YHWH's right,<sup>396</sup> and David must trust that YHWH will handle the situation (25:28–29). This stops David in his tracks, and he praises YHWH and Abigail for keeping him from spilling the blood of Nabal and the males of his house (25:32–34). Readers have not known David to shy away from conflict when he feels he is in the right, as this narrative demonstrates. That he does not push back against Abigail's appraisal of the situation indicates that David understands his plan to be inappropriate. After Nabal dies, David praises YHWH once more for keeping him from doing evil (25:39).

It is striking how well Abigail handles the conflict between Nabal and David. She shows no signs of hesitation as she "quickly" creates a plan and delegates work to her servants (1 Sam 25: 18–19). She demonstrates a mastery of rhetoric in a delicate

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<sup>394</sup> Indeed, as Frymer-Kensky notes, Abigail does not have much time to act here and she is facing "...the sword-bearing leader of four hundred armed men. The time calls for a rhetoric of humility..." (Frymer-Kensky, *Reading Women*, 319). While I disagree with Frymer-Kensky's assertion that Abigail has lesser status than David, her general point that one's status means very little in the face of a sword is accurate. Abigail needs to act swiftly, and in a way that does not present her as a threat.

<sup>395</sup> David J. Shepherd, *Forever Guiltless? King David and the Problem of 'Innocent Blood'* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming), 10.

<sup>396</sup> Levenson, "1 Samuel 25 as Literature," 19; Van Wolde, "A Leader Led by a Lady," 374.

situation and she capably handles an enraged man whose ego has just been bruised and who is seeking vengeance. She reads him perfectly and tells him what he needs (or wants?) to hear in order to stop him and his men from killing Nabal and his household. One must wonder how she is able to do this last task without even knowing David personally. The key to understanding this lies in her marriage to Nabal, whose ego Abigail also must navigate for her plan to be successful. Readers are told how she does this on two occasions in the narrative.

First, after learning of the coming danger, she immediately tells her servants what to do but she does not tell Nabal anything (25:19). She does not tell him about the coming danger nor the way in which she will attempt to sway David from his plan to kill all the men of Nabal's household. After Abigail completes her task and saves her husband and his household from destruction, she comes home to a thoroughly inebriated Nabal. Once again, she does not tell Nabal anything that has happened, which is very different from other biblical narratives. Often a character's goal is to ply another party with food and alcohol (or wait for them to do so themselves) in order to either flatter or distract them to get what they want. This is done when one wishes to make a special request, deliver bad news, or to take advantage of them physically in their compromised state.<sup>397</sup> Abigail, however, chooses to wait until morning to tell Nabal all that had transpired instead of revealing everything to him while he is "merry with wine". Readers may wonder why she does not tell Nabal anything the first time around but, after her successful interaction with David, one trusts that she knows what she is doing by avoiding her drunken husband.

### *The Next Day and Nabal's Death*

Abigail approaches Nabal in the morning after he has "slept off the wine". His silent response to the news is quite surprising given what readers know of his

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<sup>397</sup> Gen 19:32–36; 2 Sam 11:12–13; 13:28–29; Ruth 3:3–7; Esth 5, 7. Judith also employs this strategy in the Deuterocanonical book of Judith (12:20–13:8).

character. Perhaps he does not feel well enough or have the energy to lash out in anger over the news as appears to be his custom. After all, Abigail kept the entire situation a secret from him and gave away a portion of his goods, the same goods he specifically refused to give. However, instead of becoming aggressively irrational and unreasonable, he becomes like a stone: silent and unmoving (25:37).<sup>398</sup> He is now unreasonable in another way. He does not overreact to the situation this time, now he *underreacts*. He does not thank Abigail for saving him and his household nor does he ask any questions regarding the situation, which one might expect. This contrast is made even more striking by the fact that David is so fulsome in his expression of gratitude to her. Instead, Nabal simply disconnects. This may be the best one can expect from him. It is certainly better that he sits silently and keeps to himself rather than cause a scene and put others at risk (again) with more brash and volatile behavior.

The text makes it clear that Nabal's behavior in this narrative is not a one-time failure on his part, but part of a larger pattern. Readers know he has a reputation as a cruel man (25:3), one who no one can stand to deal with (25:17). Abigail, however, does not have the luxury of avoiding Nabal, because she is his wife and has to learn to manage him for her own survival.<sup>399</sup> It is possible, then, that this is not the first time she has had to intervene in a conflict that Nabal has created. That Nabal's servant immediately seeks out Abigail for help also suggests that she has her own reputation as an expert in conflict resolution. It is clear from her interaction with David that Abigail has also learned how to navigate other men as well, as mediating conflicts requires one to navigate two opposing parties. Given that Nabal is a powerful man in

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<sup>398</sup> Various interpretations have been offered for the description of Nabal becoming like a stone at v. 37. Bodner views it as a foreshadowing of Nabal's death, which occurs immediately (25:38). In a similar vein, Levenson views the description as the first part of a two-stage death in which the stone-like Nabal appears as something akin to a living corpse for ten days leading up to his actual death. Others view it as the presentation of an actual stroke. Polzin sees it as a reference to David slaying Goliath with a stone, the indication here being that David has brought down Nabal (and will bring down Saul). Biddle sees a similarity between the mention of Laban's accusation that Jacob "has stolen his heart" (Gen 31:20, 26) by taking his daughters and Nabal's heart becoming stone and then David taking his widow.

<sup>399</sup> Bach, "The Pleasure of Her Text," 42. Bach is the only other commentator I have seen who also notes that this is likely not Abigail's first time navigating Nabal's anger.

his society, it stands to reason that he has had more than a few conflicts with other powerful men. One can easily suspect that Abigail would be familiar with powerful men and have a good sense of the ambitions they have and the things that could either set them off or calm them down.<sup>400</sup>

Her presumably tumultuous life with Nabal has also sharpened her powers of discernment and she uses these abilities to not only save his house, but to gain for herself a future with someone more stable or, at the very least, safer for her. She rightly judges David as someone who is looking to build something and collecting people who will not only be loyal to him but who may have something to offer him.<sup>401</sup> As a woman, Abigail may not be able to fulfill a military or other public role, but she can (and will) become a wife. She proves herself to be a valuable asset for a man who is on his way to the throne, not only because of her beauty (as I demonstrated earlier), but because of her ability to intervene in a conflict and keep David from committing a grave error by shedding innocent blood. For this David praises her (25:33) and praises YHWH for working through her (25:32).

### *Seeking Royalty*

Abigail's intervention is sometimes seen as nothing more than an attempt to ascend the social ladder.<sup>402</sup> This seems to be an overly cynical reading. First, as Bach notes, Abigail is already married to a man with status and exercises quite a bit of power herself.<sup>403</sup> In agrarian societies such as this, the wealthy lords of the land have a lot of influence and control, and at times may benefit from working together with the royal house.<sup>404</sup> Thus, in terms of power or wealth, Abigail may not gain all that much more by marrying David.<sup>405</sup> Second, if Abigail only cared for her life and for gaining

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<sup>400</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>401</sup> Doob-Sakenfeld, *Just Wives?*, 83; Bodi, "David as an 'Apiru in 1 Samuel 25,"

<sup>402</sup> Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 266; Garsiel, "The Story of David, Nabal and Abigail," 77.

<sup>403</sup> Bach, "The Pleasure of Her Text," 55.

<sup>404</sup> Dutcher-Wallace, *Jezebel*,

<sup>405</sup> Bach suggests that Abigail loses her power, influence, autonomy as a result of her marriage to David ("The Pleasure of her Text," 49 and 55).

status, she need not intervene on behalf of Nabal and the servants at all. She could gain David's favour by helping him destroy Nabal, thereby escaping whatever fate the other women of his household might suffer and securing a new, soon-to-be royal husband for herself.<sup>406</sup> Instead, she chooses to confront David – a choice that David himself affirms could have meant the end of her life if YHWH had not kept him from harming her (25:34).<sup>407</sup> There is no other character in the narrative willing to do what Abigail does. The only person who attempts to do anything does not even intend to face David himself. Instead, he places the responsibility upon Abigail (25:14–17), and she accepts it without hesitation (25:18).<sup>408</sup> The text does not present her as self-serving in any way but as the heroine who saves Nabal's household from certain destruction (and David from incurring bloodguilt). That she sees in David the possibility of a different life, and clearly reaches out for it (25:31), does not detract from this.<sup>409</sup>

Abigail disappears almost entirely from the biblical narrative after she agrees to marry David. She never appears again as a major character, nor does she become a powerful woman in David's court. This challenges the idea that Abigail is shown as a woman who seeks wealth and power and encourages one to think of her actions

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<sup>406</sup> Rahab uses a similar tactic in the book of Joshua. She gains favour with Joshua's spies for helping them escape her king, and she asks that they spare her and her family in return for her help (Josh 2; 6:17, 23, 25).

<sup>407</sup> Contra Joyce G. Baldwin *1 and 2 Samuel*. TOTC. (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 2015), 161; and David Toshio Tsumura *The First Book of Samuel* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 588, who both assert that Abigail had nothing to fear from David essentially because of either a misguided belief in male chivalry or a failure to recognize that attractive and unattractive women are *equally* vulnerable to violence (sexual or otherwise).

<sup>408</sup> Auld notes that "speed" is characteristic of Abigail, and he states it is a rare characteristic among biblical women, noting that only Rebekah in Gen 27 and Samson's mother in Judg 13:10 are also presented in this way (Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 297–98). There are some problems with this interpretation of "hurrying" as a character trait in these examples. First, neither Rebekah's character nor her actions in Gen 27 are ever described with the verb מהר, like it is with Abigail (25:18) and Manoah's wife in Judg (13:10). The rapid nature of the dialogue between Rebekah and Jacob does indicate a sense of immediacy, but Rebekah is not explicitly described as acting in haste. Second, Manoah's wife hurries to get her husband so that he can meet the angel of YHWH (13:8–11). Lastly, Abigail also hurries because the situation, which is literally one of life and death, requires it. If "hurriedness" is merely a character trait for these women, then this would mean that they regularly go about their days in haste. However, it seems that the haste in which these women act better reflects their situations not their personalities. Furthermore, that they are presented as capable of acting quickly in these matters is better understood as a reflection of their intellectual capacities and wisdom. Simply viewing haste as a quirky personality trait in these characters diminishes them and their roles.

<sup>409</sup> Bach, "The Pleasure of Her Text," 43.

differently. Perhaps readers are to understand that she is not seeking royalty so much as looking for a way out of her situation, married to an awful man who has likely given her a stressful life. Auld rightly contests the common assumption that Abigail aspires to be a woman of high status by drawing attention to her statement at 25:41, where she tells David's servants, "Your handmaid is ready to be your maidservant, to wash the feet of my lord's servants".<sup>410</sup> If readers are to understand this statement as true, then it would seem Abigail is not looking for enhanced status but, rather, a safe place to land after her cantankerous husband dies. Likewise, one might also understand her response, one of offering service, as another valuable characteristic for a royal woman. A good royal wife does not seek power for herself but seeks to serve the royal court and the kingdom.

#### *Is Abigail also Among the Prophets?*

It has been suggested that Abigail is merely portrayed as the model good wife, doing everything she can to protect and help her husband.<sup>411</sup> I have already noted that Abigail is in as much danger from David and his men as is her husband and the rest of the household, so it cannot be that Abigail is only acting with her husband's well-being in mind. Bach and Bodner also note that Abigail's character is far more complex than that of the simple "good wife": she deceives her husband, calls him a "fool", and requests David "remember" her after her husband receives his punishment from YHWH.<sup>412</sup> There is another aspect of the text that may help shed more light on Abigail's role in this narrative, namely, the mention of Samuel's death (25:1). This report is largely viewed by commentators as a subtle recognition that Saul has finally accepted David as the one who will reign in his place.<sup>413</sup> While this might explain why

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<sup>410</sup> Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 302.

<sup>411</sup> Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983), 31–32; Levenson "1 Samuel 25 as Literature," 17–20.

<sup>412</sup> Bach, "The Pleasure of Her Text," 49; Bodner also sees Abigail's presentation as more complex than that of "the good wife", noting that she is working against her husband (Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 264, 267).

<sup>413</sup> As Bodner phrases it, "As soon as Saul gives voice to these words, Samuel expires, as though his work is now complete (Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 259) Also, Auld, *I & II Samuel*, 293; David M. Gunn, *The Fate of King Saul: An Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1980), 95.

the report of Samuel's death appears immediately after Saul's admission, it does nothing to account for its role in the narrative found in 1 Sam 25.<sup>414</sup> I, however, believe it is an important detail to note while reading the text.

Other prophets have made appearances in 1 Sam, such as Gad (22:5), but Samuel remains the primary prophet who interacts with King Saul and David. Now readers learn that Samuel is gone, leaving David (and Saul) to handle things without the aid of a prophetic mediator. That the story begins with the mention of Samuel's death and burial leaves readers to wonder what is to come and who might take Samuel's place. Immediately after this report, Abigail is introduced to readers much like with the introductions of Saul and Esther earlier. A "hole" is left in the story (the prophet is dead) and there is a role that needs to be filled (prophet). Then a character (Nabal) is introduced immediately after this vacancy is announced and this character, in turn, serves as an introduction for the character who will become the primary hero/heroine of the story (Abigail). Just like Esther's and Saul's introductions, the hero of the narrative is introduced via another character after the abrupt announcement of a significant need (a prophetic mediator, in this case). The use of this introductory trope here clearly introduces Abigail as the one meant to take the now vacant role of "prophet" (and, in this case, become the heroine of the narrative).

Van Wolde views Abigail's plea to David as taking place on two levels. At a literal level, she seeks to address the actual situation at hand with Nabal. At an allegorical level, her plea speaks to the struggle between Saul and David. Van Wolde correctly notes the importance of the mention of Samuel's passing and proposes that Abigail represents Samuel on the allegorical level.<sup>415</sup> Bach takes this a step further, viewing Abigail as not just the representation of a specific prophet (Samuel), but as a

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<sup>414</sup> Interestingly, Levenson asserts that this verse was intended to be the start of the Abigail/David/Nabal narrative, but he does not comment on what this means for the story beyond setting up David's place in the wilderness (Levenson, "1 Samuel 25 as Literature," 12).

<sup>415</sup> Van Wolde, "A Leader Led by a Lady," 367.

prophetess herself.<sup>416</sup> She also rightly notes how quickly this role of prophetess is stripped from her character when she marries David.<sup>417</sup> Van Wolde and Bach seem to sense the awkwardness present in Abigail's role. While Abigail certainly gives a prophetic speech here, she is not quite a prophet. She is not called a prophetess, like Deborah (Judg 4:4) and Huldah (2 Kgs 22:12; 2 Chr 34:22), and when she appears later in 1 & 2 Samuel (1 Sam 27:3, 30:5; 2 Sam 2:2, 3:3) and 1 Chronicles (3:1), she is either listed as a wife or as the mother of one of David's sons, with no nod to her role in protecting David's house from bloodguilt. Van Wolde understands the vague nature of Abigail's role here in terms of allegory, that Abigail is not actually acting as a prophet but is symbolizing a prophet. This would not be the only time in the HB where a character is not strictly or explicitly represented as a prophet but does fulfil a prophetic purpose, as I demonstrated earlier in this project with Mordecai, and Shepherd demonstrates with Nehemiah.<sup>418</sup> Bach views it as a result of patriarchal concerns regarding power and who can truly have it. Abigail is granted temporary authority and power in order to help the men of the narrative, but this authority is swiftly removed, and she fades away as just one more of David's wives.

I believe this awkwardness stems from the fact that Abigail is fulfilling Samuel's role as prophet, while also presaging the role of an ideal royal wife. That she all but disappears after she marries David indicates that her momentary role as prophet is not what is significant about her. It is rather her role in pre-empting David's violent attack that matters, and this is not the role of prophets, who most often interfere and condemn kings *after* they spill illegitimate blood (2 Sam 12, 1 Kgs 21). This pre-empting is the role of a royal wife.

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<sup>416</sup> Bach, "The Pleasure of Her Text," 44–45. Meanwhile, Levenson flatly denies that Abigail is presented as a prophetic in any way (Levenson, "1 Samuel 25 as Literature," 20) and Bodner seems to view Abigail's speech to David as a mere attempt at flattery (Bodner, *1 Samuel*, 267).

<sup>417</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>418</sup> David Shepherd, "Is the Governor Also Among the Prophets? Parsing the Purpose of Jeremiah in the Memory of Nehemiah," in *Prophets, Prophecy, and Ancient Israelite Historiography*, eds. Mark J. Boda and Lissa M. Wray Beal (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 209–227.



### *Abigail's Example for Future Royal Wives*

It seems significant that the conflict Abigail defuses is one that threatened violence. Not all conflicts or problems that a royal wife confronts revolve around violence, like the situation Bathsheba resolved in 1 Kgs 1. It is significant that the authors chose to prioritize the importance of avoiding illegitimate killing and to focus the narrative on Abigail's role in mediating the conflict.<sup>419</sup>

One can see that from David's perspective, Abigail's primary good deed is that she spared him from incurring bloodguilt, which he eventually comes to recognize would have had dire consequences for him and his household. Though one can see why David chooses to focus on this, it is not the only good thing Abigail did. She also spared an entire household from being killed, thus demonstrating why a royal wife's role can be so important. David is not king yet and does not have anything like the resources and power of the royal court, but when he does, he would be able to create far more destruction than he could now. A royal wife does not just protect her husband from bringing chaos into his own life, she can also intervene to protect the kingdom and the people he is supposed to serve. Just as prophets sometimes act as the king's conscience, a royal wife also must do her part to ensure that her husband rules justly. Abigail's example foreshadows the significant role a royal wife plays to ensure the king does not settle conflicts by shedding illegitimate blood.

### **Jezebel**

Readers are introduced to Jezebel through Ahab's regnal introduction at 1 Kgs 16:29–34 (Jezebel is referenced at v. 31). Then readers do not learn anything more about her until chapter 18, where readers hear that she has been killing YHWH's prophets (18:4,13). The biblical text presents this persecution as an act Jezebel carries out on her own.<sup>420</sup> The first way it does this is through the narrator, who informs

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<sup>419</sup> Because of this some even view Abigail's character as a peacemaker, cf. Doob-Sakenfeld "Just Wives?," 83–87.

<sup>420</sup> By this I mean that it is her will being done not that she is killing the prophets herself.

readers of this persecution as a side note in v.4 and explicitly names Jezebel as the sole perpetrator. Shortly thereafter, Obadiah affirms the narrator's statement in his conversation with Elijah (v. 13). Neither Obadiah nor the narrator implicate Ahab in the killings, nor does the text use a passive form to describe it (1 Kgs 18:4, 13). Readers also are not told if Ahab attempts to prevent it in any way, either. Thus, it appears Ahab simply allows Jezebel to carry out the killings and keeps her apprised of any pertinent information (1 Kgs 19:1).<sup>421</sup> Jezebel clearly wields the power of the throne without any oversight, which would not necessarily be a problem if she were fulfilling her role properly, like Abigail in 1 Sam 25.

Though Nabal is not a king as Ahab is, and Abigail is not a royal wife, one can gain some insight into Jezebel's use of the court's resources from comparing it to the situation in 1 Sam 25. As we have seen, Nabal is a wealthy and powerful man in his community and Abigail is his wife. He has servants, land, property, and wealth; all things he would need to manage and control. He would likely need help supervising the servants and his assets, and it appears Abigail takes on that task. Nabal's servants are clearly at Abigail's disposal, and one of them comes to her readily for help, which indicates that she plays a known role in supporting the management of Nabal's estate. I have already noted that the royal court is modeled on the family structure, so one may suspect that there are similarities between the way a king and queen manage their business and the way a wealthy landowner and his wife manage theirs.<sup>422</sup> The ease with which Jezebel makes use of Ahab's resources is not the sign, then, of a wife who does not know her place but rather, the sign of a wife who does.<sup>423</sup> The problem is how and when Jezebel uses her power, not the mere fact that she uses it. Abigail uses Nabal's resources to stop violence, while Jezebel uses Ahab's resources to create

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<sup>421</sup> Walsh, *Ahab: The Construction of a King*, 27; Huffmon, "Jezebel – The 'Corrosive' Queen," 277–78.

<sup>422</sup> Dutcher-Walls notes how the elite peoples of an agrarian society often worked with the royal house and managed their affairs and wielded power much in the same way as the royals would have (*Jezebel*, 119).

<sup>423</sup> Solvang, *A Woman's Place*, 31–32; Dutcher-Walls, *Jezebel*, 105.

violence. Jezebel's way of ruling makes her a danger to the royal court and, in turn, a danger to the nation of Israel.

### *1 Kings 18: Discord in the Royal Court*

The situation with Obadiah in 1 Kgs 18 fully displays the way Jezebel's ruling style creates discord between one of Ahab's important courtiers, Obadiah, and the king himself. Obadiah has an important role in the court, he is the steward of the palace, which likely means he was in charge of surveying the king's wealth and goods. This person would need to be someone whom the king trusts, and it seems Ahab trusts Obadiah, as he comes to him for help finding food to keep the horses and cattle alive during the famine (18:5–6). However, because of Jezebel's persecution of the prophets of YHWH, Obadiah is forced to choose between serving YHWH and serving the king, as he has been lying to and taking from the king in order to protect the prophets of YHWH (18:4).<sup>424</sup> Readers quickly learn that Obadiah, in fact, fears the king when Elijah requests he approach Ahab with news of the prophet's arrival (18:8–9).

Obadiah does not fear approaching Ahab because of the way he had intervened in Jezebel's persecution, which suggests to readers that he knows Ahab played little or no role in it. Instead, Obadiah fears that Elijah will disappear before he can bring him to Ahab, who has spent much time and countless resources trying to find the prophet himself (18:10). Obadiah imagines that Ahab's response to this would be to lash out at him and kill him (18:12). The text is not completely clear on why Obadiah thinks Ahab's response will be violent.<sup>425</sup> Perhaps readers are to suspect Ahab

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<sup>424</sup> Dutcher-Walls perfectly summarizes the difficult situation Obadiah has been placed in by the feud between Ahab and Jezebel and Elijah (*Jezebel*, 112–13).

<sup>425</sup> Sweeney (225–26) notes how Obadiah mentions that Ahab forced allied kings to swear oaths that Elijah was not in their kingdoms. He thus believes that Obadiah's life would be at risk for refusing to abide by the rules of these treaties, making him an enemy of the Israelite state and subject to punishment by death. However, these oaths do not apply to Obadiah, who is neither one of the aforementioned kings nor a person who has sworn an oath himself. This information certainly underlines the point that Ahab's search is serious, but it does not indicate that Obadiah believes he, too, is bound by these oaths. Walsh (*1 Kings*, 262) and Dutcher-Walls (*Jezebel*, 32) also make note of the oath but do not connect it to Obadiah's concern for his life.

may believe Obadiah had been hiding Elijah, or that Obadiah fears Ahab will lash out at him because he is the messenger.<sup>426</sup> If it is known that the man of god can appear and disappear at a moment's notice, as seems to be the case (18:12), then there is no reason to assume Ahab would suspect Obadiah played him for a fool. Though Ahab might certainly feel angry or frustrated to lose Elijah after having come so close to catching him, killing Obadiah seems like an overreaction that is not characteristic of what readers have seen from Ahab so far. One must wonder, then, why Obadiah suspects that Ahab would kill him.

The only reactive and violent character of Ahab's court seems to be Jezebel, and Obadiah knows this well (18:4). His suspicion of Ahab, then, likely comes as a result of the king's failure to prevent Jezebel's persecutions and possibly with the assumption of a strong connection between the king and queen.<sup>427</sup> Obadiah assumes, then, that if the wife of the king handles conflicts with violence, then the king himself might also behave in a similar way. Ahab's own courtiers fear serving him because Jezebel has garnered this reputation for herself and, in turn, for the royal court, including its king.<sup>428</sup>

### *The Motive for Massacre*

There is a slight variation between what the narrator tells readers about Jezebel's persecution of the prophets and how Obadiah describes it to Elijah. As I noted in the previous chapter the narrator describes Jezebel's activity here with the Hebrew root כָּרַת ("to cut (off)") which can be used to indicate the ending of a family line. The use of כָּרַת here indicates to readers that Jezebel's mission is not merely to kill the prophets who are within her immediate reach, or the ones she suspects will actively oppose her, but that she intends to rid Israel of all the prophets of YHWH – to

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<sup>426</sup> Walsh, *1 Kings*, 241; Dutcher-Walls, *Jezebel*, 31.

<sup>427</sup> Walsh, *Ahab: The Construction of a King*, 29.

<sup>428</sup> Sweeney also notes this discord within the royal court due to the threat of Jezebel (Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 224).

end the line of YHWH's prophets. However, when Obadiah describes the killings to Elijah, he uses the root הָרַג, essentially meaning "to kill" (18:13).<sup>429</sup> The choice of הָרַג might seem like an innocuous way to describe Jezebel's violent assault on YHWH's prophets, at least for modern readers. However, the verb הָרַג carries with it its own nuance. There seems to be some development in the use of the verb as seen in the HB.<sup>430</sup> In one of its earlier stages it was primarily used to indicate the killing of one's enemies, specifically in order to carry out the ban.<sup>431</sup> Later, however, the verb's meaning grows to include the killing of one's political opponents, which often includes the prophets of YHWH.<sup>432</sup> There is a prime example of the use of this aspect of הָרַג in 1 Kgs 18. It appears, then that Jezebel is not a zealous Baalist merely for the sake of being a zealous Baalist. Instead, her agenda is not so much religious as it is political. By this I mean that Jezebel's actions should not be understood as an expression of her devotion to Baal so much as a strategy to ensure Ahab's house maintains power by eliminating those who might pose a threat either in her time or in the future.

It makes sense that this announcement would be placed on Obadiah's lips, as he has been in the thick of the conflict by virtue of his position in the court. He can see clearly what Jezebel's immediate aims are: to ensure the throne remains secure for herself and her husband. However, the narrator can see what Obadiah cannot. Readers learn from the narrator that Jezebel is not merely thinking of the present but also of the future. She can secure the throne not only for her and her husband but also for their offspring by exterminating the line of YHWH's prophets, who she views as her strongest political competitors. Thus, with the two distinct perspectives the text provides (narrator and Obadiah) readers gain greater insight into what Jezebel is truly seeking to accomplish by completely exterminating (כָּרַת) YHWH's prophets.

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<sup>429</sup> HALOT, s.v. "הָרַג" DCH 2, s.v. "הָרַג"

<sup>430</sup> H.F. Fuhs, "הָרַג" Hebrew letters for consistency TDOT 3:447–57.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*, 451.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*

### *Jezebel and Elijah: A Failed Partnership*

Another sign of discord in the royal court is Jezebel's relationship with Elijah, which escalates into a threat on the prophet's life in 1 Kgs 19. Readers may be able to understand how Jezebel's threat to Elijah seems just to her, and she even swears upon her gods (1 Kgs 19:2) like David swears upon his god in 1 Sam 25 (v.22). After all, Elijah did make a mockery of and kill her prophets (1 Kgs 18). His actions, however, were not unprovoked but were in response to her having killed all of YHWH's prophets (except him according to 1 Kgs 18:22). Even so, Jezebel's own prophets were not responsible for her persecution of YHWH's prophets, she was. Thus, there seems to be a cycle of killing and in-fighting here.

As I have discussed earlier, a prophet of YHWH in the royal court is an important resource who can, at times, work with the wife of the king. Elijah's position as a "peripheral prophet", as Dutcher-Walls calls him, is unique in the HB and not necessarily perceived as the ideal.<sup>433</sup> Jezebel's fraught relationship with Elijah impedes his work, pushing him away from the court and away from Ahab, who both demonstrates knowledge of the authority of Elijah and YHWH's prophets and is aware of his own wrongdoing on several occasions (1 Kgs 18:19–20, 41–42; 20; 21:27). Both Elijah and Jezebel, the two courtiers charged with supervising the king, are so caught up in their personal battle that they are not attending to their other tasks of ensuring the just rule of the kingdom. While Elijah is certainly right to intervene, and is himself in a difficult situation, his way of doing so does not seem to help matters.<sup>434</sup> Unfortunately, he does not have an ally in Ahab's queen. Together Jezebel and Elijah turn the royal court into a realm of violence and vengeance.

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<sup>433</sup> Dutcher-Walls, *Jezebel*, 114. Jeremiah seems to be the only other prophet in the HB who is as exiled from the court as Elijah.

<sup>434</sup> In the following narrative Elijah escapes to Mt. Horeb and is commissioned by YHWH to anoint other kings, as well as his own successor, Elisha (19:15–16). YHWH assures Elijah that any necessary remaining violence will be handled by these three men (19:17). Thus, it seems even YHWH's character notices that Elijah needs help in charting a better course both for himself and for the nation.

## *1 Kings 21*

In 1 Kings 21 readers finally see how the negative effects of Jezebel's ruling style seeps out beyond the gates of the royal court. Here, Jezebel not only does wrong herself, but she leads an entire town to participate in the shedding of innocent blood (21:8–14).<sup>435</sup> As I noted above with Abigail, one reason it is so important for a king to rule justly is twofold: he has the power and the resources to do extensive damage *and* he has the reach and influence to manipulate or pressure the people of the kingdom to do wrong, too, whether that be by worshiping other gods or by spilling innocent blood. Jezebel perverts the laws that are there to keep communities living in harmony and to avoid unjust violence.<sup>436</sup> She is fully aware of what she is doing and views it as her royal right. As the wife of the king, she is entitled to use the resources of the royal court, including the king's seal, and to act on the king's behalf when engaging in court business. However, it is not her royal right to manipulate those resources to do evil, which is exactly how the Deuteronomistic historian presents her actions.

Even so, Ahab is primarily blamed for the role Jezebel played in Naboth's death. While Jezebel did no wrong in simply availing of the court's resources, Ahab should not have been so disconnected from the management of his own court. He should have provided oversight or played some role in the decision. The king is given advisors and other servants to help him rule, but at the end of the day he is the king. His involvement and oversight in court business is required. He should have known and prevented Jezebel's plans for Naboth just as he should have prevented the persecution of YHWH's prophets.<sup>437</sup> Jezebel is punished for the role she played in Ahab's downfall, for abusing her royal power (whereas Ahab refused to use his), and she is condemned to a shameful death (21:23, 25). However, Ahab's condemnation takes centre stage, and he is condemned to an equally shameful death (21:18–22, 24).

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<sup>435</sup> Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 212–13. Though I disagree with his stance on Jezebel's governmental authority, he thoroughly outlines the extent to which Jezebel used Israelite law to manipulate the townspeople and gain Naboth's land.

<sup>436</sup> Walsh, *1 Kings*, 236; Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 212; Frymer-Kensky, *Reading the Women of the Bible*, 212; Dutcher-Walls, *Jezebel*, 119; Galvin, *David's Successors*, 70–71.

<sup>437</sup> Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 230.

### *Foreignness and Violence?*

Jezebel is the prime example of what the wife of a king should not do and should not be. While Jezebel's foreignness is part of what is presented as problematic about her marriage to Ahab, readers learn that there is another problem with Jezebel, and that is her ruling style. That readers are to believe her ruling style comes solely as a result of her foreignness seems unlikely, as the text presents the worship of other gods as the primary problem with her foreignness.<sup>438</sup> Furthermore, when looking at the idealized understanding of what a ruler should be, it appears there was a good deal of consensus throughout the Ancient Near East that a king's primary duty was to rule justly and care for the vulnerable.<sup>439</sup> So there is little reason to assume that concerns around her oppressive and violent ruling style are connected to her worship of foreign gods. After all, Ahab and other Israelite kings and queens worshipped these gods and did not fall into the same violent ways as did Jezebel. The way Jezebel rules as Ahab's wife would be a problem even if she were not a foreign woman who worshipped foreign gods. Jezebel uses her position as the wife of the king to sew injustice in the kingdom by perpetrating illegitimate violence in order to maintain power.

### *Athaliah: 2 Kings 11*

Athaliah is sometimes viewed as an extension of or counterpart to Jezebel, and many assume that the locus of this connection has to do with foreign worship.<sup>440</sup> There are indeed clear connections made between Jezebel and Athaliah in the text. Her familial connection to the house of Ahab/Omri is the first and most obvious connection. There is some question about Athaliah's exact parentage (cf. 2 Kgs 8:16 and 8:26), but she is nevertheless from the house of Ahab, be that through Ahab

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<sup>438</sup> Fritz, *1 & 2 Kings*, 196.

<sup>439</sup> Ringgren, "אֲחַלְיָהּ", *TDOT* 8:349–353; Dutcher-Walls, *Narrative Art, Political Rhetoric: The Case of Athaliah and Joash* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 128.

<sup>440</sup> Omer Sergi, "Foreign Women and the Early Kings of Judah: Shedding Light on the Historiographic Perception of the Author of Kings," *ZAW* 126 (2014): 202.



himself or his father, Omri.<sup>441</sup> This, then, inextricably links her to Ahab and his most prominent wife, Jezebel. The second connection between the two women is the way Athaliah is killed. This link is slightly more subtle but should be obvious enough given that Jezebel's death occurs just two chapters prior (2 Kgs 9). Athaliah is taken to the palace and killed near the court's horses, calling to mind how Jezebel's body had been trampled beyond recognition by the horses of her own palace (2 Kgs 9:33).<sup>442</sup> It seems clear that Jezebel is intended to be in the back of readers' minds. The reason for this, though, is less clear.

The common assumption is that the text presents Athaliah as a zealous idolater like Jezebel, whose primary crime is bringing foreign worship to the southern kingdom.<sup>443</sup> Athaliah's lineage does invite readers to imagine that she, too, followed in the footsteps of her Baalist relatives. However, worship of foreign gods is not her defining characteristic. In fact, she is never directly mentioned in reference to foreign worship in 2 Kgs. She is not even named as a primary influence in the apostasy of her son, whom readers are told follows the ways of the house of Ahab (8:27).<sup>444</sup> In contrast, both these things happen with Jezebel's character. She is directly connected to worship of foreign gods in several ways throughout 1 Kgs (18:19; 19:2), and her name itself may even be a nod (however parodic) toward her zealous worship of Baal.<sup>445</sup> Her husband's worship of Baal and his work constructing a temple and altar for Baal and an Asherah is also detailed for readers (1 Kgs: 16:32–33). Lastly, and unlike Athaliah, she is named as her son's primary religious influence (1 Kgs 22:53). If foreign

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<sup>441</sup> Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 323.

<sup>442</sup> Robert L. Cohn, *2 Kings* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 80.

<sup>443</sup> Nan Toon Ham, "The Foreignness of the Foreign Woman;" Omer Sergi, "Foreign Women and the Early Kings of Judah," 199. Sergi states that the text explicitly accuses her of introducing the foreign cult in Jerusalem. While the verse he uses in support of his argument (2 Kgs 11:18) indicates that there was a temple to Baal in Jerusalem, Athaliah is not explicitly mentioned as the one responsible for building it or for initiating the cult in Jerusalem, nor does the text appear to allude to this.

<sup>444</sup> This argument is even more compelling when we note that 2 Chronicles does accuse Athaliah of influencing her son's idolatrous ways (22:2). Furthermore, 2 Chronicles also includes a comment not found in 2 Kings, where the "wicked children of Athaliah" are said to have profaned the house of the Lord (24:7), and this is the reason provided for why King Jehoash's renovation is necessary. In contrast, 2 Kings reports that Jehoash wants the temple repaired where it has fallen apart (12:6–8).

<sup>445</sup> Sweeney, *I & II Kings*, 206.

worship were intended to be the most significant connection between Jezebel and Athaliah, one would expect to see this presented more explicitly in the text. On the contrary, Athaliah's foreign worship merely serves as background colour for the *coup d'état* that leads to her death.

This background colour demonstrates two concerns. The first and primary concern is that of proper kingship. It emphasizes that a male, Davidic ruler is the proper ruler for the throne in Judah.<sup>446</sup> This is underlined through the text's focus on Joash, who is consistently referred to as "the king" throughout the text even before he is officially anointed.<sup>447</sup> Readers see that the primary goal of the priest, Jehoiada, and his men is to anoint and install Joash as king. The entire center of the narrative is focused on protecting him ("the king") and performing the proper ritual before setting him upon the throne.

Brenner notes this concern for kingship as well, but she also states that the Temple priests were enraged and sought to dethrone Athaliah over the official status of the Baal cult.<sup>448</sup> However, I believe the emphasis of the Temple priests here is not intended to reflect upon Athaliah, at all. If it were, I suspect readers would see something more like what we see with Jezebel, whose conflict with Elijah (and the prophets of YHWH) represents a battle between YHWH and Baal in the Northern Kingdom. The text very clearly presents foreign worship and the attempted erasure of the cult of YHWH as one of the primary concerns regarding Jezebel's queenship, as I discussed earlier. The battle shown here between Athaliah and the Temple priests, then, is not a battle of gods like readers see with Elijah and Jezebel, but a battle for ownership of the throne. If the purpose of Athaliah's character is not merely to condemn a royal foreign worshipper or Jezebel's malevolent influence, it encourages reflection on another connection between the two women that has not received much attention: violence. While their extreme violent tendencies are often noted, the way in

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<sup>446</sup> Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite Woman*, ch. 3.

<sup>447</sup> 11:8 (2x), 11, 12, 14 (2x). He is also called "son of the king" twice (vv. 4 and 12).

<sup>448</sup> Brenner-Idan, *The Israelite Woman*, 30.

which they use violence has not really been explored. Both Jezebel and Athaliah seek to gain power through a violent massacre. Jezebel aims to end the line of YHWH's prophets, who are not just religious rivals but are also political rivals. Meanwhile Athaliah seeks to end the line of David – who threatens her self-appointed claim to the throne. Both Jezebel and Athaliah are nearly successful in their plans. Jezebel kills all the prophets of YHWH save for Elijah, and Athaliah kills all the line of David, save for Joash. The scene in which Joash is rescued is reminiscent of how the infant Moses is hidden while Hebrew babies are being killed (Exod 2:1–9), as some note.<sup>449</sup> But it is also reminiscent of Obadiah, who hides the prophets of YHWH from Jezebel and provides them with food (1 Kgs 18:3–4).

As I noted above, Jezebel's focus is on maintaining the power of the royal court over the people. To ensure their control, she lashes out against YHWH's prophets, who could potentially stir up the people against her and Ahab, and against any subjects who might make the king appear weak (Naboth). Her goal is to create a powerful house over the kingdom of Israel for her and Ahab together. This is where Jezebel and Athaliah differ. Athaliah has much more ambition than her mother/sister-in-law. She is not interested in sharing the throne with anyone. She seeks to rule alone, to be the singular font of power in Judah, and she will kill her own flesh and blood to accomplish this.<sup>450</sup> This appears to be the text's primary anxiety about Athaliah. That she worships foreign gods warrants a bit of attention, but not the bulk of it. The problem with Athaliah is that she is too ambitious. She usurps the role of king for herself rather than fulfilling the proper role of a royal woman, and she spills a great deal of illegitimate blood in the process.<sup>451</sup>

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<sup>449</sup> Cohn, *2 Kings*, 78.

<sup>450</sup> Though, I should note, she is not the first (nor the last) royal to do this. For example, Solomon kills his own brother to secure his seat on the throne.

<sup>451</sup> Whereas some argue that usurping the role of the king was Jezebel's grave error in 1 Kgs 21, it is Athaliah who actually usurps this role and not Jezebel.

## Esther

The theme of violence appears throughout the book of Esther and encompasses many aspects of the narrative.<sup>452</sup> Some of the violent moments readers encounter in the story are explicit, such as the various executions (2:22, 7:9–10) and the details given of the final battle in Chapter 9, while others can be more subtle or suggestive. For example, some have wondered if the women brought to Ahasuerus in Chapter 2 are victims of violence (i.e. if they are compelled to come to the palace and forced to engage sexually with the king).<sup>453</sup> This is but one example of the ways in which violence have been seen to haunt the book of Esther like a phantom, keeping readers in a constant state of uneasy suspense over the fate of its two heroes, Esther and Mordecai.

There are many possible ways one could choose to approach the theme of violence in the book of Esther. However, as Beal has observed, the primary focus of discussions about violence in the book of Esther, and about Esther general, has been to render some sort of moral judgement upon Esther as a character and the book as a whole.<sup>454</sup> This may be illustrated by considering how the violent conclusion to the book of Esther (Chapter 9) has been construed. One suggestion is that the violence in Chapter 9 is a form of retributive justice, that the Jews only attack those who threatened them in the first place.<sup>455</sup> Others point to the fact that the Jews are only permitted to stand against those who attack them and view what happens in Chapter 9 as self-defense.<sup>456</sup> Another view holds that the battles of Chapter 9 constitute a cruel

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<sup>452</sup> Ruiz-Ortiz, *Dynamics of Violence*, 96: “From a narrative point of view, the theme of violence is important since it appears in all different types of speech in the Megillah: narrative, speeches, and documents.”

<sup>453</sup> I argued previously that the text of Chapter 2 does not necessitate a reading which requires one to understand that the women engaged in a “sex contest” as Fox phrased it. I still believe this to be the case. However, for those who interpret it as such, wondering if the women can be thought of as victims of sexual violence is certainly valid.

<sup>454</sup> For which Christians are mostly responsible. Cf. Introduction (pp.5–12) and Chapter 3 of Beal, *The Book of Hiding*.

<sup>455</sup> Grossman, *Esther*, 191.

<sup>456</sup> Moore, *Esther*, 90; Beal, *Book of Hiding*, 104–5; Chalupa, Ks. Petr. “Przemoc w Księdze Estery jako problem hermeneutyczny,” *Ruch Biblijny i Liturgiczny* 68 (2015): 125–36; Bechtel, *Esther*, 80.

massacre, which cannot be justified because the text states that the Jews did as they pleased with their enemies.<sup>457</sup> Still another explanation is that the excessiveness of the violence seen in Chapter 9 is merely an aspect of Esther's carnivalesque literary genre, not to be taken seriously as a lesson about or in support of violence.<sup>458</sup>

Our goal, however, is to look at Esther's own role in relation to violence in the book. Given that Esther is our focus, I will look only at scenes in which Esther is associated with violence, namely, 2:21–23, Chapter 7, and Chapter 9. I will look at the ways she contributed to, intervened in, or handled violence as a royal woman throughout the narrative and how she compares to her royal predecessors.

## **Chapter 2**

At the end of Chapter 2 (vv. 21–23), Esther receives an important message about the events in the court from another (possible) courtier and delivers it to the king. This scene demonstrates to readers that Esther has a new role now, and that she can handle the new challenges and tasks expected of her, as I noted previously. Esther's intermediary role here (and later in the narrative) is not unique in biblical literature. It does not stand out as the lone example of a woman being called upon to mediate in a difficult or dangerous situation. Rather, as I have already discussed, Esther stands as one example in a line of biblical women who find themselves in the position of mediator, some of whom are royal wives. She acts in the same capacity as the royal wives of the past as she works with other members of the kingdom and the court to keep the king informed.

### *The Scene*

Bigthan and Teresh are two guards who sit at the palace gates (2:21). For reasons unknown to us, they become angry and plan to kill the king. That their anger is

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<sup>457</sup> Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 159.

<sup>458</sup> Berlin, *Esther*, 81.

given as the reason for which they want to kill the king leads us to believe that they are angry with the king, specifically. However, readers are not told why they are angry, with whom they are angry, or even if they are angry with a particular person. The text simply states that they become angry.<sup>459</sup> This is a major difference between violence as in the book of Esther and in the narratives including Abigail, Jezebel, and Athaliah. While David certainly seems angry in 1 Sam 25, readers are not, in fact *told* that he is (vv. 13, 21–22). It seems David perceives that an injustice has been perpetrated and for this reason he plans to attack Nabal’s household (v.21). Likewise, with Jezebel and Athaliah, no emotional motive is given to explain their violent tactics. With Bigthan and Teresh readers have the opposite situation. Simply emotion and nothing else is provided as the reason for their violent plot. This fundamental difference will be discussed further in due course. For now, I will simply note that readers do not know Bigthan’s and Teresh’s ultimate motivation for killing the king beyond the anger they feel.<sup>460</sup> The significance of emotion is not the only difference that emerges here.

Esther’s intervention is also of a different sort than I have shown previously with royal wives. Prior to this I have discussed one future royal wife stop the future king from destroying a household (Abigail) and two royal women who perpetrate violent conflicts rather than intervene in one (Jezebel and Athaliah). In this situation, the threat of violence is not coming from the future king or from the throne itself, but it is levelled against the king from two of his servants. Thus, Chapter 2 of Esther showcases another important role of a royal wife. Namely, that she plays a role in protecting the king himself.

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<sup>459</sup> This is a question that readers of the book of Esther have long been asking. Targum Rishon, reflected also in Esther Rabbah (VI:17), suggests that Bigthan and Teresh were angry because they believed Esther would replace them both with Mordecai. Many other ideas are suggested in various Rabbinic texts, including the suggestion that Bigthan and Teresh are furious because, ever since Esther moved into the palace, they can no longer sleep as the king is so thirsty from continuous sexual intercourse with her that he is constantly rousing his servants to bring him water in the night (b. Meg. 15b).

<sup>460</sup> Day also notes the peculiar ambiguity of their anger, especially when considering that the narrative consistently explains why other characters become angry (*Esther*, 64).

Thus far I have focused on the royal wife's role in safeguarding the people of the kingdom by ensuring the king rules justly. Esther demonstrates that the wife of a king also played a role in protecting the king from threats like these, which were common occurrences.<sup>461</sup> I noted earlier that some wonder why Mordecai does not bring this information to the king himself. Perhaps it was necessary for someone of a higher standing in the court to deliver this message to the king due to the grave and sensitive nature of the situation. Chapter 2 demonstrates, then, that not only is Esther capable of working with courtiers and keeping the king informed of the goings on in his kingdom, but that she can also do her part to protect the king when necessary. Abigail also protects her husband from 'bloods' by keeping him from killing Nabal and his house. By contrast, Jezebel fails to protect her husband from the violence which will be meted out against him in judgment for his responsibility for Naboth's death. Bathsheba in 1 Kgs 1 might also provide a more subtle example of a royal wife protecting the king.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, it is often suggested that Bathsheba's focus in 1 Kgs 1 is her son; that she is either attempting to steal the throne from Adonijah and secure it for her son or protecting her son and herself from whatever fate they might meet were Adonijah to become king. I discussed all of this in the previous chapter. I also demonstrated how Bathsheba's actions might be more focused on David than some have suggested. By ensuring David keep his oath to YHWH, Bathsheba made sure he remained loyal to YHWH, as the king is supposed to do if he is to rule properly. However, she also protected him from any harm that may come to him if he were to break his oath. This may not be the most important task from the Deuteronomists perspective, as loyalty to YHWH is certainly a much more significant concern in Kings. However, one can see how Bathsheba's action works on two levels, and the importance of protecting the king is reflected in Esther's actions in Chapter 2. The difference here is that Bathsheba is protecting the king from himself

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<sup>461</sup> Ruiz-Ortiz, *The Dynamics of Violence*, 137.

while Esther is protecting the king from his servants. Bathsheba is not the only royal wife who confronts multiple problems in one situation. Later in the book of Esther readers will see that she, in fact, does the same thing. I will discuss this in due course.

The scene at Chapter 2 is brief and lacks the characteristic over-the-top dramatization so common seen in the book of Esther. However, it perfectly foreshadows the role Esther will come to play later in the narrative, that of mediator and one who intervenes to prevent the spilling of illegitimate blood.

## **Chapter 7**

Chapter 7 contains an interesting scene in which Esther is embroiled in another violent plot. She has been called upon to intervene in the extermination of the Jews and in doing so she must face the two men responsible for the decree. As Esther's plan for confronting the king unfolds, she reveals that Haman is the one who has called for the exterminating of her people, infuriating King Ahasuerus, who calls for Haman's execution shortly thereafter. This situation (Haman's execution) is not of her own making nor is it clear to readers whether Esther intended for it to happen. Readers find Esther in the same place as Abigail in 1 Sam 25: caught between two men with violent tendencies. Before moving on to Esther's role in the Chapter 7, I must first examine how this situation comes about.

The seeds of this predicament are planted in Chapter 3 when Mordecai sparks Haman's rage by consistently challenging the law that commands everyone in the kingdom bow to Haman (Esth 3:2; 5:9). Later readers learn that the mere sight of Mordecai can ruin Haman's day (5:13). Even though Mordecai is the one who offended Haman, he does not single out Mordecai for punishment or revenge. Haman expands his punishment to the entire Jewish people and arranges for their complete destruction because of his anger toward Mordecai, and it is clear this is something he decides to do from the beginning (3:6). However, there is a certain ambiguity present



in this verse. Namely, it is hard to know if Haman wants to kill Mordecai because he refuses to bow to him *or* if he wants to kill Mordecai solely because he is a Jew (3:5–6). The text could either be understood as suggesting that Haman decides to kill all of the Jews because Mordecai is a Jew,<sup>462</sup> or it could suggest that he decides to use this feud with Mordecai as an excuse to kill all of the Jews, as if he is seizing an opportunity to exterminate a people he hates anyway.<sup>463</sup> Haman’s reaction or, more appropriately, *overreaction* to Mordecai’s offense is also reminiscent of Memucan’s overreaction to Vashti’s refusal to obey Ahasuerus’ request (1:16–22).<sup>464</sup> In reaction to Vashti’s refusal, a decree is sent out officially demanding the subjugation of all women in the kingdom to their husbands. Haman’s reaction to Mordecai’s slight echoes this in that an entire group of people are falling victim to a powerful man with a wounded ego.

This is not the first time this dynamic appears in the Hebrew Bible. It is very similar to what readers see with Jezebel’s persecution of the prophets of YHWH in 1 Kgs 18. She could have set her sights only on individual prophets who directly challenged her foreign worship, or on Elijah, the primary prophet who challenges Ahab’s house and reign. Instead she seeks to end the entire line of YHWH’s prophets. Unlike Haman, Jezebel’s motivation for killing does not seem to be anger. Though Jezebel possibly threatens to kill Elijah out of anger when she hears he killed her prophets on Mt. Carmel (1 Kgs 19:1–2), she never follows through on this threat.<sup>465</sup> This is because

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<sup>462</sup> Fox views Haman’s decision to kill all the Jews as a result of his wounded ego, pushing back against those who understand it as representing a tribal battle and instead suggesting that Haman *uses* genocide as the tool with which to kill his personal enemy (*Character and Ideology*, 180–81); Grossman shares a similar opinion (*The Outer Narrative*, 93); Day, *Esther*, 68–69; Berlin views Haman’s death sentence for the Jewish people out of fear that, because Mordecai the Jew does not bow to him, than most likely all the other Jews will behave accordingly (*Esther*, 37); Bechtel relates this to a pattern of extremism and overacting seen throughout the narrative (*Esther*, 38), Bush believes that tribal and ethnic hatred served as Haman’s motivation to kill Mordecai, but believes that the extreme nature of his response was a result of his wounded ego (*Esther*, 385).

<sup>463</sup> Moore, *Esther*, 42; Reid, *Esther*, 92; Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 44.

<sup>464</sup> Day, *Esther*, 69; Berlin, *Esther*, 37; Grossman, *The Outer Narrative*, 91–92.

<sup>465</sup> That Elijah flees from Jezebel (19:3) and tells YHWH that his life is on the line because of his zealous devotion (19: 10, 14) does not confirm that she truly intended to kill him, but only that Elijah believed she would do it. Readers certainly cannot blame Elijah for assuming her threat was true, as she has killed prophets before. However, if Jezebel truly intended to kill him, one would expect to see her at least try to follow through on her plan. Jezebel is a lot of things, but she is the type of character who would leave any box unchecked.

Jezebel does not kill out of spite, revenge, or anger, and herein lies the difference between Jezebel's use of violence and Ahasuerus and Haman's. Jezebel uses violence only as a tool to maintain power and control over the kingdom of Israel. Haman's violent outbursts, on the other hand, are results of anger. He may seek to save face and regain any perceived loss of power as a result of Mordecai's refusal to bow to him, but that is not why he seeks to kill Mordecai and the Jews. When Haman seeks to kill it is because of the rage he feels towards his opponent (3:5–6; 5:9).

In Chapter 7 Esther is finally in the position to speak to the king about the plot to destroy the Jews. Readers know that Esther is aware of Haman's role in the plot and the contents of the decree itself (4:6–8), but it is uncertain if Esther views the king as complicit in or even fully aware of Haman's decree. It is difficult to tell from the way she is shown interacting with Ahasuerus if she is merely following court protocol or if she is being extra careful not to inflame his volatile temper (5:4, 7–8; 7:3–4; 8:5, 9:13). Indeed, all the courtiers speak to Ahasuerus in a similarly ingratiating way (1:16–20; 2:3–4; 3:8–9). Furthermore, in Chapter 9, when Esther seems to be in charge and is no longer coming to the king, she still speaks to him in this way. So, it seems the text invites one to view this language as typical court protocol, though Esther may be layering it on thicker to encourage the king's good will.

Even though Esther is the Queen, she is possibly the most vulnerable person in the room.<sup>466</sup> After all, Vashti was the queen when she was disposed of by Ahasuerus and one of his advisors. Esther seems keenly aware of the delicate position she is in. She does not speak and act with the same confidence and security as Bathsheba and Jezebel appear to in the presence of their husbands. Readers can imagine her, vulnerable between two men at a feast who have been drinking, one of whom has a temper and a penchant for disposing of those who challenge him (like Vashti) and another who was willing to call for the destruction of an entire group of people. Much

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<sup>466</sup> Reid also notes this contradiction between the position of queen being both an honour and a risk (Reid, *Esther*, 83).

like Abigail in 1 Sam 25, Esther is caught in a difficult situation between two volatile men and she must find a way to present herself in the most harmless and favourable light possible in order to achieve her goal. She must handle Ahasuerus delicately and make herself seem as unthreatening and unchallenging as possible.

However, Esther does not mince words when she turns the king's attention to Haman (7:5–6). Haman's fate is not Esther's concern nor her mission. Her mission is to reason with the king in the hope that he will reverse the decree, and she seems to know that she cannot reason with him when he is this angry. This is just what she does as she points the finger at Haman and remains silent as Haman desperately pushes himself onto her as he begs for his life (7:7–8). Readers know nothing of what Esther may have felt or thought as Haman was begging her to intervene on his behalf, though she is often interpreted in a negative light here.<sup>467</sup> It is almost as if she is frozen in this moment, possibly just as afraid for her own life as Haman is for his.

### **Chapter 9:1–13**

Chapter 9 brings us to the conclusion of the book of Esther. In a surprise twist, the battle readers were anticipating is over quickly and told with minor, but gleeful, detail. The focus of the battle itself is on the might and triumph of the Jews, with Mordecai at its center. Meanwhile, Esther appears after the battle has finished and requests that the stipulations of the decree be extended for one more day.

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<sup>467</sup> B.W. Anderson calls her "callous and indifferent" [Anderson, *The Book of Esther: Introduction and Exegesis* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1954), 862]; Paton insist that Esther's character would be more "attractive" if she had shown mercy and saved Haman (Paton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, 264) Moore and Bush suggest that Esther's silence should be understood as an example of her prudence. As long as Haman is alive, he is a threat to both her and the Jews. If she were to intervene, then Haman could return to fulfil his plan to exterminate the Jews in another way (Moore, *Esther*, 74; Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, 434)

### *King Esther?*

At first it seems Esther may not even appear in Chapter 9. The narrative immediately turns from the Jews celebrating Mordecai's decree at the end of Chapter 8 (v. 17) to the day of the attack itself, centring Mordecai and the Jews in the battle for their lives (9:1). The battle, though, is only briefly described. Its events are summarized in one single verse (9:5), meanwhile the narrative lingers over the report of Haman's ten sons having been killed, even naming each one (9:7–10). It feels as if the story will end here, with the Jews having defeated their enemies and Haman's house having been thoroughly destroyed.<sup>468</sup> However, in a surprise twist, the king reappears to report this news to his queen and ask for further instruction (9:11–12). This is a surprise not only because it feels as if the story could very well end now, but also because the king has no reason to assume Esther has another request as her initial request has been fulfilled and she has not approached him for anything else.<sup>469</sup> It also represents a noticeable reversal in King Ahasuerus' and Queen Esther's roles. Now it is not Esther approaching Ahasuerus for something, but it is Ahasuerus approaching Esther.

Esther maintains the basic royal etiquette shown throughout the book when she responds to the king's offer with the customary "If it pleases your majesty" (v. 13) preamble. However, she leaves it with that statement alone. She does not ingratiate herself to him any further as she did early in the narrative.<sup>470</sup> She is no longer trying to persuade or convince the king of anything. She is giving an order, while still maintaining the façade that King Ahasuerus is the one in charge. This role reversal between Esther and Ahasuerus becomes even more apparent in the very next verse. For the first time in the narrative, the king directly sends a decree (v. 14). While he does order decrees through his servants in earlier chapters, here he seems to take it into his own hands this time. In this way, Esther has taken Ahasuerus' position as king,

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<sup>468</sup> Ruiz-Ortiz, *The Dynamics of Violence*, 216; Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 110; Bush, *Esther*, 475.

<sup>469</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 112; Bush, *Esther*, 488.

<sup>470</sup> Berlin also notes this change in Esther's speech (*Esther*, 87), suggesting that Esther no longer feels she must "butter up" the king up (*Esther*, 87). Reid notes this as well but believes it should be understood as Esther feeling more confident in front of the king (*Esther*, 142).

expecting *him* to send out a decree which enacts *her* desire. In contrast to Ahasuerus, though, Esther does not have (or need) anyone to suggest to her what should be done, she decides this herself. Here Esther is a bit reminiscent of Jezebel in 1 Kgs 21, who formulates and enacts the plan to secure the vineyard for Ahab herself. The primary difference here is that Jezebel sends out the decree herself, without informing her husband of its contents, whereas Esther dictates to Ahasuerus what the decree should say and has the king do it for her (9:13–14).

### *Esther and Violence*

Most discussions regarding Esther's role in the first half of Chapter 9 tend to focus on explicating the reason Esther requests for a repeat of the decree (9:13), and whether it was ethically correct or not. The primary explanations tend to follow the same trends with discussions on violence in the narrative in general, which I addressed above. To briefly summarize, these suggestions are that Esther is shown as a bloodthirsty queen who solely wants vengeance,<sup>471</sup> that she wants the Jews to be prepared to defend themselves in case a second attack occurs or to prevent future attacks.<sup>472</sup> There is likely no way to come to a consensus on this issue, as the text gives readers no explicit insight into Esther's thoughts. I do not pretend that I have the answer, either. But I do believe that reading Esther alongside one of our other royal women here is especially fruitful for understanding Esther's character. The particular royal woman I will focus on here is Jezebel, specifically, Jezebel as readers see her in 1 Kgs 21.

What readers see with Esther in Chapter 9 represents a very different presentation of a royal wife in relation to violence. Here, she is neither keeping the king from committing violence, as Abigail does, nor is she protecting the king from violence as she does in Chapter 2 and Bathsheba do in 1 Kgs 1 (though to a lesser

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<sup>471</sup> Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, 287.

<sup>472</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 112; Bechtel, *Esther*, 79–80; Petr Chalupa, "Violence in Esther as a Hermeneutic Problem," 10.

extent). Instead, Esther takes control of the situation and manages the violence herself, much like Jezebel does in 1 Kgs 21. Indeed, Zlotnik draws some interesting connections between Esther and Jezebel, as I noted in the first chapter of this project. Instead she focuses more on Esther's character in Chapters 7 and 8, as these are the chapters in which Esther and Ahasuerus have the most interaction, which is Zlotnik's primary interest.<sup>473</sup> However, she does not spend much time thinking about Jezebel in 1 Kgs 21 and Esther in Chapter 9.<sup>474</sup>

However, there are more connections between Esther and Jezebel if one looks at their characters as they are portrayed in 1 Kgs 21 and Esther 9, respectively. She and Jezebel are the only women who are said to write an order (1 Kgs 21:8 and Esth 9:26).<sup>475</sup> Both women play the primary role in a violent plot that takes place in their kingdom, and both are shown wielding an incredible amount of power, more so than any other royal woman in the HB. Even among these similarities, though, there are many important differences.

The first, and one of the most obvious differences, is the type of violence at hand. As I have discussed previously, Jezebel frames and executes an innocent man so that her husband can gain something from him (Naboth's vineyard). She enlists the help of some "scoundrels" as well as the nobles of the town to enact her plan. Esther, on the other hand, does not formulate a violent plan that frames an innocent person. It is quite the contrary. Esther must deal with a decree that is written by a man who wishes to frame and exterminate an entire group of people in the kingdom. When she takes over the situation, then, she is not creating a problem, she is trying to fix a problem. She also does not seek to gain or maintain royal power through violence, as Jezebel does, nor does she call for anyone to act with violence needlessly. Instead, she

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<sup>473</sup> Ibid., 477.

<sup>474</sup> Zlotnik, *From Jezebel to Esther*.

<sup>475</sup> As Howard notes in his article "When Esther and Jezebel Write: A Feminist Biblical Theology of Authority."

orders for a repetition of the original decree that Mordecai had dictated, which ordered the Jews to act with violence only against those who attack them.

In a way, Esther neither calls for violence, participates in violence, nor intervenes in it. Instead, she calls for her people to have the right to defend themselves from violence. While this is a type of intervention in the violence, it is not the same kind of intervention that seen with Abigail, who stops any blood from being shed. However, Esther's character functions in a world with very different and unique rules. In the world of the book of Esther, a decree written in the king's name and signed with his seal cannot be revoked (8:8). So, she cannot simply talk the king into rescinding his decree as Abigail talked David out of attacking Nabal's house. Instead a counter-decree is created (Esth 8:9–13). The way in which Mordecai structures his decree is intended to reverse Haman's decree. By "reverse" I do not mean that Mordecai's decree calls for the Jews to do the same thing the non-Jews of the kingdom have been instructed to do. It is a different reversal than the others in the narrative, like when Haman is impaled on the same stake he had built for Mordecai (7:9–10). Rather, Mordecai's decree reverses the *effects* of Haman's decree – which was to exterminate the Jews. The Jews are not exterminated by the end of the battle, but neither are all the people of the kingdom, only the enemies of the Jews (9:5). In this way, Esther and Mordecai are not able to prevent all the violence that Haman and the King created, but they do manage to minimize the spilling of innocent blood.

Another important difference between Esther and Jezebel is best emphasized if one looks back on Esther's portrayal in Chapter 8. In this chapter, Esther pleads with the king to save the Jews from destruction, as he has yet to make any statement on the fate of the Jews after he kills Haman. Ahasuerus needs to explain to Esther and Mordecai that they already have the right to decree whatever they want regarding the Jews, and he explains the process to them (to write it in his name and with his seal so that it cannot be revoked). He is not granting them permission here, as some

suggest.<sup>476</sup> Instead he is telling them that they are already permitted to do so by virtue of the fact that he has given Haman's house to Esther.<sup>477</sup> This is a direct contrast with Jezebel in 1 Kgs 21 (and every other scene in which she features), who immediately takes charge of the situation with Naboth and the vineyard. Jezebel demonstrates an already clear knowledge of the resources at her disposal, whereas readers are allowed to witness part of Esther's learning process in Chapter 8.

When King Ahasuerus approaches Esther to ask for further instruction, Esther is presented as a quick learner. Like Jezebel she immediately analyzes the situation, using the good sense of people and situations that she demonstrated early on to predict that the Jews will be attacked again. She then calls for an extension of Mordecai's decree to prepare them for a second day of attacks. Essentially, then, what readers see with Jezebel is a royal woman who fully knows her role in her court and is practiced and comfortable in it. With Esther, on the other hand, readers witness a royal woman as she grows into her role, until she becomes as comfortable and skilled as Jezebel. It is not until Chapter 9, when she and many of the people of her kingdom are faced with a violent threat, that she appears to have gained a full understanding of what that role is. Comparing her alongside such an experienced royal wife like Jezebel makes this growth that much clearer.

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<sup>476</sup> Reid, *Esther*, 114.

<sup>477</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 94–95.



## Chapter Five: Conclusion

### Introduction

At the start of this project I noted that previous scholarly conversations regarding royal women in the HB narratives focus solely on the women in the DH. Yet Queen Esther, one of the fullest portrayals of a royal woman in the HB, is intentionally left out of these discussions. Upon looking more closely at the narrative of Esther, I showed that there are several obvious links to the DH, primarily Saul (2 Sam 15) but also to the text of 1 Kgs 1. There are also more subtle similarities, such as its focus on the monarchy and the active presence of royal women. In light of all this, this project sought to demonstrate the ways in which bringing Esther into the conversation about royal wives can enrich the discussion of queens in biblical literature. I chose to do this by way of a narrative reading of the three most prominent royal wives in the HB: Bathsheba, Jezebel, and Esther, as well as Abigail and Athaliah, who often help illuminate some important aspects of all these women. Each narrative about these women comes from a different part of the HB (2 Sam, 1 and 2 Kgs, and the book of Esther, respectively) and they each offer readers a biblical image of a royal wife. Esther serves as the locus of this project, but Bathsheba and Jezebel are also seen with fresh eyes, as reading them alongside Esther inevitably encourages one to reflect upon their characters and narratives, as well.

### Chapter Summaries

#### *Chapter 2: Beauty*

The first theme I addressed is the significance of beauty for royal women. This theme appears with Abigail, whom I include in our discussion as she plays an important role in modelling for readers what a good royal wife should be like. While her beauty is mentioned, it is not particularly important for the narrative or for Abigail's character. Rather it is primarily her wisdom, courage, and quick-thinking that

prevent the illegitimate spilling of blood and secure Abigail a subsequent marriage proposal from David after the death of Nabal. Something similar happens with Bathsheba in 2 Sam 11, where her beauty is presented merely as the reason David noticed her. Even so, mention of Bathsheba's beauty could just have easily been left out and the narrative could continue without it. When readers meet Bathsheba again in 1 Kgs 1, they come to learn that she shares many of the qualities that Abigail demonstrated before her. Physical descriptions of characters are rare, for both male and female characters, so the mention of Abigail and Bathsheba's beauty suggest that their beauty may have some significance, though it is not explicitly clear what it is.

One learns the most about the significance of beauty for royal women from the book of Esther. It is commonly assumed that beauty in the book of Esther, like beauty in general, is connected to sexual desire. However, upon looking more closely at the text itself, and in light of how beauty functions in Bathsheba's and Abigail's stories, one sees that beauty in Esther is not connected to sexual desire so much as it is connected to royalty. Beauty is important for a royal woman because it reflects the king's power and wealth; a woman's beauty is an outward symbol of the king's royal power. In the book of Esther, beauty is merely the minimum requirement for a royal woman, which readers also learned from Abigail and Bathsheba. While the text does not specify exactly which of Esther's characteristics inspired Ahasuerus to choose her, it is clear that he did not choose her simply because of her beauty. The text states he chose her because he loved her, and she won more *יָן* and *דָּקָה* than all the other beautiful women. Much later in the narrative readers learn that Esther does, indeed, possess the wisdom that both Abigail and Bathsheba demonstrated before her (for which see below). Beauty, then, is important for a royal woman because it serves as an outward symbol of royal power. That Jezebel is not described as beautiful may serve to emphasize how unqualified she is for the role, as readers may be led to imagine that she did not even possess the minimum requirement necessary for one to be the wife of the king. And, as I explored above, Jezebel's supposed attempt to beautify

herself in 2 Kings 9 was no so much about trying to be beautiful and seductive but, rather, a way for her to present herself as the royal woman she was.

### *Chapter 3 – Royal Wives’ Roles*

When I examined the different ways Bathsheba and Jezebel operate in their kingdoms an image of a royal wife’s role in the HB begins to emerge. These women are expected to assist the king in running the kingdom in several ways. They help keep them informed of crucial situations in the kingdom by passing along information they learn from outside sources, such as prophets and messengers. They are also supposed to serve as another check and balance to the king to help make sure he remains a just ruler. In order to do this, they must be able to work with other members of the royal court, especially prophets who are also tasked with keeping kings in line. The wife of the king must have the courage to confront the king in difficult situations as well as the intelligence to reason with him if he is losing sight of his royal responsibilities. Abigail gives readers a hint of what this looks like in 1 Sam 25 and Bathsheba demonstrates how this works within the royal court as she works alongside Nathan to ensure that David does not break his oath to YHWH in 1 Kgs 1.

Jezebel, on the other hand, fails to fulfill this unique aspect of a royal wife’s duty. She has the stewards of the kingdom working against her and Ahab in secret ( like Obadiah in 1 Kgs 18). In a significant break from Bathsheba, she alienates the most significant prophet of YHWH in her kingdom (Elijah), preferring to work on her own and only on issues that personally concern and benefit her and/or Ahab. She is incapable of ensuring that Ahab remains faithful to YHWH because her main priority seems to be establishing sole worship of Baal (and Asherah) in Israel. She certainly does not do her part to ensure that Ahab serves as a just king. She seems to do the opposite, encouraging him to view the role of king as one of dominance over subjects.

She educates him on how to rule over Israel by killing Naboth so that Ahab can have his vineyard.

Esther is queen at a different time and in a different place, and there are many differences between her situation and that of Bathsheba's and Jezebel's. Even so, Esther is faced with similar obstacles and tasked with a similar duty as Bathsheba and Jezebel. From the beginning, readers see that Esther may be able to work with other members of Ahasuerus' court as all who encounter her in Chapter 2 immediately like her. As I demonstrated with Bathsheba and Jezebel, approachability is an important quality for a royal woman to have if she is going to work alongside the various servants of a royal court. In the beginning of Esther's reign, she does just that. She delivers important information to the king that was brought to her by one of the kingdom's citizens (Mordecai). After some time passes, King Ahasuerus mindlessly grants Haman permission to call for the destruction of an entire people in his kingdom. Mordecai comes again to Queen Esther and, fulfilling a prophet-like role, asks her to interfere and reason with Ahasuerus in order that innocent lives are spared. Esther knows Ahasuerus will not right this wrong on his own as he is far too reliant on others. She has come to learn that, as his queen, she must intervene to ensure he does not allow this happen. So, she makes one final stand and, together with Mordecai, orchestrates a plan that will save the Jews.

#### *Chapter 4: Violence*

Violence is common throughout the HB, and it is a common theme in royal narratives as well. As such, it appears in many of the narratives that feature in this project. Abigail appears once again as a prototypical model for a royal wife's role in the face of a king who seeks to spill illegitimate blood. As the narrative of 1 Kgs 1 demonstrates, not all conflicts or problems that a royal wife confronts revolve around violence. It is significant that the authors of 1 Sam 25 chose to prioritize the

importance of avoiding illegitimate killing and to focus the narrative on Abigail's role in mediating the conflict.<sup>478</sup>

Readers see that from David's perspective, Abigail's primary good deed is that she spared him from incurring bloodguilt, which he eventually comes to recognize would have had dire consequences for him and his household. However, she also spared an entire household from being killed, thus demonstrating why a royal wife's role can be so important. David is not king yet and does not have anything like the resources and power of the royal court, but when he does, he would be able to create far more destruction than he could now. Thus, a royal wife does not just protect her husband from bringing chaos into his own life, she can also intervene to protect the kingdom and the people he is supposed to serve. Just as prophets sometimes act as the king's conscience, a royal wife also must do her part to ensure that her husband rules justly. Abigail's example foreshadows the significant role a royal wife plays to ensure the king does not settle conflicts by shedding illegitimate blood.

As usual, Jezebel serves as the primary example of what a royal wife should not be. Instead of working with YHWH's prophets she seeks to exterminate them. She then helps Ahab take possession of Naboth's inheritance by arranging for Naboth's murder at the hands of the nobles in his own town. She abuses her royal power, using it to stain the land and the throne with illegitimate blood. If the example of Jezebel alone is not enough to demonstrate how important it is that a royal woman plays no part in illegitimate violence, the example of Athaliah further emphasizes this point. By relating her to Jezebel, readers witness another example of a royal woman who uses mass violence to gain power and erase any competition against that power. Together, these two characters demonstrate that a royal woman should not use violence to gain or secure power, whether it is power for her husband or power for herself.

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<sup>478</sup> Because of this some even view Abigail's character as a peacemaker, cf. Katherine Doob Sakenfeld "Just Wives", 117.

Esther encounters several situations that could lead to illegitimate violence. Early in the narrative she works with Mordecai to help protect the king from an assassination at the hands of two guards, Bigthan and Teresh. She then plays a pivotal role in reversing the fortune of the Jews when she confronts King Ahasuerus and reveals to him that Haman sent out a decree calling for the destruction of an entire people in his kingdom. Both of these moments in the narrative are reminiscent of Abigail and Bathsheba, who both intervene to protect either the king or to protect innocent people from the future king. Towards the end of the narrative Esther shows a great deal of authority, much like her predecessor Jezebel. She uses her royal power to protect her people from an unjust slaughter at the hands of the people of Susa, who have been commanded to do kill them via Haman's irrevocable decree.

### **Esther's Development**

In the past, Esther's character has been viewed as flat, static, or as one of many character types, meaning that she is not presented as a full character who develops, grows, or changes.<sup>479</sup> More and more though, it has been demonstrated that this interpretation is unsustainable with some suggesting that Esther is actually the only full character in the narrative.<sup>480</sup> There is, in fact, a marked change in Esther's character by the time readers arrive at the second to last chapter of the book. This change does not, however, emerge suddenly. It slowly develops throughout the narrative. One thing visible in her development is the way Queen Esther embodies all the prominent biblical royal women of the past in one way or another.

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<sup>479</sup> B.W. Anderson, 'Introduction and Exegesis to Esther', in G.A. Buttrick *et al.*(eds.), *The Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1954), III, p. 831; M. Gendler, 'The Restoration of Vashti', in E. Koltun (ed.), *The Jewish Woman* (New York: Schocken Press, 1976), p. 242. R. Gordis, 'Studies in the Esther Narrative', *JBL* 95 (1976), p. 45. L.B. Paton; Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, liv; S. Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther", *VT* 13 (1963) 418-455; 440.

<sup>480</sup> Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 197-204; Linda Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, especially pp. 199-202; Frederic W. Bush, *Esther*, 319; Debra Reid, *Esther*, 39-40; L.M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World: Myth and Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 115.

Esther is brought into Ahasuerus' court like Bathsheba is brought into David's: at the summons of the king, and with little power to decide otherwise. Both Bathsheba and Esther are beautiful women with immediate family members in the employ of the royal court. Bathsheba's husband and father are two of David's soldiers and her grandfather is one of his advisors. Although Esther is orphaned, her adoptive father, Mordecai, seems to hold some position at Ahasuerus' court that allows him easy access to the palace inside the gates. This suggests that there may be another concern for both Bathsheba and Esther. If they were to refuse to acquiesce to their king's command, the king could also lash out at their respective kin as punishment. When readers first meet Esther, she is a passive character like Bathsheba in 2 Sam 11. She is brought to the king, follows the instructions of others, and obeys Mordecai's command to keep her Jewish identity secret. While the text offers subtle hints that there is more to her than meets the eye (as I discussed earlier) she does not act or assert herself in any way when she is first introduced.

Most who view Esther as a complex, changing character will point to Chapter 4 as the first moment she changes from being passive to active.<sup>481</sup> However, I believe this shift occurs sooner in the narrative. The first time Esther acts – instead of being acted upon or simply doing as she is told – is at the end of Chapter 2 when she reports the news of the assassination plot to the king. This is sometimes dismissed as another example of Esther following orders,<sup>482</sup> but that assessment does not quite fit what is in the text. For much of Chapter 2, Esther is the object of a verb or the recipient of a command. Here, she is neither. While Mordecai reports the news to her, he does not command her to do anything. She appears to operate on her own accord here, informing the king of Mordecai's knowledge herself (2:22). The moment is brief,

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<sup>481</sup> Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 199; Frederic W. Bush, *Esther*, 320; 102; Debra Reid, *Esther*, 104-105.

<sup>482</sup> Linda Day, *Three Faces of a Queen*, 175; Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 40 (though Fox notes a shift in Mordecai and Esther's relationship here, he nonetheless maintains that Esther is presented as still obedient to her cousin). And some commentators, such as Carey A. Moore (*Esther*, 29-32) and Debra Reid (*Esther*, 85-87) do not even discuss Esther's involvement in this scene, instead focusing on Mordecai. Linda Day describes the cousins as working together but focuses on other aspects of the text (*Esther*, 61-65).

almost unnoticeable, but it is there, and it plants the seed for Esther's character development later in the narrative.

A similar scene plays out in Chapter 4, when Mordecai comes to Esther once more regarding an assassination plot. Here, Mordecai informs her of Haman's scheme to exterminate the Jews and he commands (צוה) her to negotiate with the king (4:8). One would expect Esther to immediately run to the king at Mordecai's command based on what was previously in the narrative (2:10, 20). But Esther surprises readers by pushing back against her uncle, who is now also her royal subject. Instead, she explains the impossibility of the task, exposing her fear to him in the process (4:11). In so doing she becomes more proactive, both as a woman and as a queen. She does not say no to intervening, she merely says no to the way in which Mordecai asks her to do so, which was to go to the king, appeal to him and plead for her people (4:8). She points out that his plan of a straightforward approach would only enflame the king further, leading to her death (4:12). Readers see Esther point out the problem in Mordecai's plan, but she seems to need a moment to construct a plan before agreeing to intervene. When a plan comes to her readers are not informed of its details (15-16), but her courage in the face of fear and doubt gives readers the confidence that she can accomplish the task. In the following chapters (primarily seven and eight) readers witness Esther's rhetorical abilities and knowledge of using the resources of the royal court to her advantage.

One can clearly see Esther falling into the same roles Bathsheba and Abigail, the royal wife prototype, play in 1 Sam 25 and 1 Kgs 1, respectively. Like Abigail, Esther must stop a plan that is already in motion (Haman's decree) which involves a delicate negotiation with two volatile and angry men (Ahasuerus and Haman). This requires her to quickly formulate a plan and to act with wisdom and prudence, just as Abigail before her. Bathsheba's situation in 1 Kgs 1 is similar, though without the clear threat of immediate violence that both Abigail and Esther faced. She is recruited to assist by the prophet Nathan, just as Mordecai, the book of Esther's prophetic figure, calls



Esther's character to act. Bathsheba must ensure that David keeps his promise to YHWH, and she constructs a rhetorical masterpiece that plays on his ego, his pride, and his emotions. Esther is shown to do the same thing when she is confronted with the task to confront King Ahasuerus. She is presented as having the same mastery of rhetoric as Abigail and Bathsheba demonstrate and the same knowledge of how to manipulate the king into doing what is just.

The final evolution of Esther's character occurs in Chapter 9, where she is shown at her most authoritative. This is noted by most, as I mentioned, but there is very little discussion about why this is the case or what it means for the narrative and for her character. Most discussion surrounding Esther's development and growth into her authority takes place in discussions about Esther's change of heart in Chapter 4 and her approach to the king in Chapter 5. This is understandable as these are presented as major events for Esther's character. Esther is also a prominent character in these scenes whereas her character seems to fade into the background in Chapter 9. I, too, initially focused on Esther's character in Chapters 4 and 5 when I began thinking about her development for this project. It was not until I thought about Esther alongside Jezebel that I saw striking similarities between these two women.

Jezebel in 1 Kgs is a depiction of a royal woman who fully knows her role in the court and is practiced and comfortable in it. She is shown as understanding that she has a responsibility to help the king run the court and the kingdom. The way she understands this job is clearly at odds with what the idealized biblical idea of the kingship, but she nonetheless is aware of her responsibilities and power. With Esther, on the other hand, readers witness a royal woman as she grows into her role, until she becomes as comfortable with it as Jezebel. In Chapter 9 the king comes to her for instruction and, like, Jezebel she immediately analyzes the situation, using the good sense of people and situations that she demonstrated early on to predict that the Jews will be attacked again. This demonstrates one final area of growth that readers do not get to see with Bathsheba or Abigail. While Abigail and Bathsheba are shown to have a

good sense of the people with whom they must immediately interact, it is only Jezebel and Esther who demonstrate the ability to predict the responses of the citizens in the wider kingdom. Jezebel demonstrates this when she effortlessly frames Naboth in a way in which she knows the people of Jezreel will not protest. Esther demonstrates this when she calls for an extension of Mordecai's decree to prepare the Jews for a second day of attacks from their enemies in the wider kingdom. Esther's suspicions are proven to be accurate as another day of attacks follows.

After Esther's plan is successful, Mordecai decrees the annual celebration of this event (9:20). Although Mordecai's decree is received and respected by the Jews in the kingdom, Esther knows that in Ahasuerus' kingdom, it is necessary for a decree to have more authority behind it than what Mordecai possesses. Esther sends out a decree without any prompting, confirming the events and Mordecai's celebration with the full authority of the royal court (9:29-32). Thus, it is not until Chapter 9 that Esther's character completes its evolution. Only at this point does she have a full understanding of what her role as a royal wife is. Comparing her alongside such an experienced royal wife like Jezebel makes this growth that much clearer.

### **Biblical Queenship**

While a narrative analysis of these narratives does little to prove anything concrete about the roles of actual queens in ancient Israel, it does offer significant insights. That these women are all presented in similar ways demonstrates that the authors had some understanding of the roles of a chief royal wife. Whether this understanding was based on assumptions or actual knowledge is not clear. But the fact that they are so consistent in various ways leads one to suspect that there was an understanding that these women were pivotal players in their respective courts.

Bathsheba and Esther are shown as offering an important check and balance to the king's power, much like prophets can do. In contrast to prophets, who advise on

war strategies and communicate divine punishments after grave errors have been committed, royal wives are shown intervening beforehand, not after the fact. They work alongside members of the court, especially prophets, to try to prevent their husbands from neglecting their responsibilities or abusing their power. When necessary, they have the authority to use the king's seal to send out decrees and messages to the citizens of the kingdom.

Jezebel's case differs in various ways but is no less important. Her character is clearly demonized and presented as evil incarnate, while Bathsheba and Esther are largely positive characters. This may lead some to wonder why one might include her in a comparative study with these women. However, it is precisely because Jezebel is presented as the example *par excellence* of a bad royal wife that she is so important. Jezebel does everything a royal wife should not do. She does not ensure her husband rules justly and at times encourages him not to do so. She does not work with the proper court operatives, namely, YHWH's prophets. She is heavily involved in violence and the spilling of illegitimate blood, and she abuses her royal authority by using the resources of the court for evil. That her behavior is the exact opposite of Bathsheba's and Esther's further demonstrates that biblical narratives do exhibit a clear idea of how a royal wife should operate. While the role of queen that is presented in these texts may not fit our modern idea of what a queen is, this does not mean that the role did not exist nor that it was not viewed as important.

### **For Further Study**

There are many opportunities for further work on this topic, as it is the first monograph length study which seeks to analyze Esther as a queen of the Hebrew Bible alongside Bathsheba and Jezebel. The themes and topics I have addressed (beauty, violence, and the general role of these women) were chosen because they generated

significant insights. However, these are merely a starting point. There are many more themes one might address, as well as many other approaches one might take.

For instance, while the narrative analysis offered here points toward a conceptual and cohesive ideal of royal wives, specifically the chief royal wife, questions remain as to the reasons behind or purpose of this representation. For example, is the way in which this role is presented a generally accurate portrayal of how royal wives operated? Does this presentation limit (intentionally or not) the ways in which royal wives actually participated in the court? In other words, could this presentation of royal wives as the primary guardians of their husbands' behavior be a way to diminish the power and authority these wives may have had? Sociological, anthropological, and a more thoroughly feminist approaches might yield useful fruit if deployed in a comparative study of these women.

Solvang notes that the way the royal court functioned in the Ancient Near East was modelled after the familial structure. If so, then royal and non-royal wives should fulfill largely analogous roles. Given that royal wives had a unique role in preventing violence that other biblical wives are not presented as fulfilling, it is clear there is much more to be explored in this arena. Indeed, the comparative study of royal wives and non-royal wives in the Hebrew Bible in these and other respects is an important desideratum.

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