

**THE MULTIPLE FACES OF ESTHER:
AN IDEOLOGICAL APPRECIATION**

BY

LOUISA GAUL

A mini-dissertation presented in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the
degree of

MASTER OF ARTS



BIBLICAL AND RELIGIOUS STUDIES

in the

FACULTY OF ARTS

at the

RAND AFRIKAANS UNIVERSITY

Johannesburg

SUPERVISOR: PROF. H. VIVIERS

October 2000

CONTENTS

	Page
Acknowledgements	i
Abstract	ii
Abbreviations	iii
CHAPTER ONE	
PREAMBLE: ON READING ESTHER	1
1.1 Motivation	1
1.1.1 Problem	1
1.1.2 Purpose	3
1.1.3 Hypothesis	4
1.1.4 Methodological approach	4
1.1.5 Outline of study	7
CHAPTER TWO	
THE PATRIARCHAL SYSTEM	8
2.1 An overview: the current situation	8
2.2 Patriarchy in Ancient Israel	10
CHAPTER THREE	
THE ROLE OF THE WOMAN IN ANCIENT ISRAEL	12
3.1 Introduction	12
3.2 The virgin	13
3.3 The wife	17
3.3.1 The midwife	22
3.3.2 Motherhood	24
3.3.3 The widow	26
3.4 Foreign women	26
CHAPTER FOUR	
THE BOOK ESTHER	28
4.1 Type of book	28
4.1.1 Setting	32

4.2	The theme	35
4.2.1	General viewpoints on themes	35
4.2.2	Brief overview of specific viewpoints on the themes	37
4.3	Summary of the story-line of the book of Esther	39

CHAPTER FIVE

ESTHER IN CONTEXT	43
--------------------------	-----------

5.1	Vashti: predecessor to Esther	43
5.2	The feminine roles played by Esther	47
5.2.1	Esther as adopted daughter	47
5.2.2	Esther as concubine	49
5.2.3	Esther as queen	50
5.2.4	Esther as femme fatale	52
5.2.5	Esther as avenger	55
5.3	Esther: an emancipated woman?	56
5.4	In conclusion	58

CHAPTER SIX

THE MULTIPLE FACES OF ESTHER: AN IDEOLOGICAL APPRECIATION	61
--	-----------



SOURCES CONSULTED	64
--------------------------	-----------

I hereby declare that this mini-dissertation is my own unaided work. No part of it has been previously submitted to, or is to be submitted to any other university for a degree, save to the one in which I am now a candidate.

The views expressed in this dissertation are of the student. They do not necessarily reflect the views and convictions of members of the Department of Biblical and Religious Studies at The Rand Afrikaans University.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my appreciation and sincere gratitude to:

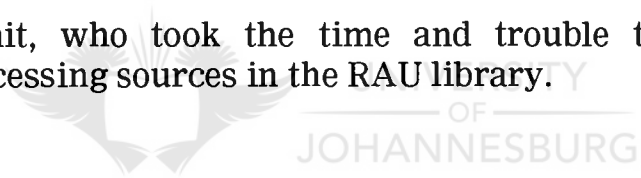
My husband William, for his support, encouragement and patience. Without him, this study would not have been completed.

Professor Hennie Viviers, whose abiding interest and support served as a major source of inspiration.

My colleague and friend, Bianca Fusco, and my daughter, Claire, who patiently undertook many of the chores involved in producing the drafts.

My mother, whose assistance and support at home, permitted me the freedom to pursue this work.

Miss Ronel Smit, who took the time and trouble to explain the intricacies of accessing sources in the RAU library.



ABSTRACT

This mini-dissertation focuses on women's roles in ancient Near Eastern societies, with special emphasis on a feminist view of the effects of patriarchal ideology on these roles. While there is no clear cut indication of the literary classification of the book of Esther, commentators generally view it either as wisdom literature or didactical literature. A critical-rhetorical analysis suggest that it warrants a classification as novella or short tale, specifically of the 'carnavalesque' genre. This dissertation highlights the various roles played by Esther during the reign of Persian King Xerxes, and how she adapts her persona in accordance with situations as they arise. It is argued that Esther adopts several personae in attempting to survive and overcome barriers, presented by a patriarchal society such as, inter alia, her femaleness and her Jewishness.

It is further suggested that, although she achieves emancipation as a Jewess, she fails as a woman to achieve complete freedom from discrimination and male domination.

ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
CBQ	Catholic Biblical Quarterly
JBL	Journal of Biblical Literature
JSOT	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
JSOT Suppl.Series	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplementary Series
KJV	King James Version
LOT	Literature of Old Testament
OTE	Old Testament Essays
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary



Unless otherwise indicated, all Biblical references are from the New International Version -
Copyright 1984 by New York International Bible Society. Fourth Impression 1981.

CHAPTER ONE

PREAMBLE : ON READING ESTHER

1.1 MOTIVATION

1.1.1 Problem

One of the major idiosyncrasies of the Book of Esther is that the reader finds it more than a little difficult, certainly on a first reading, to categorise, not only the protagonist herself, but also many of the female characters in the narrative. This is because she, and they, appear to adopt various personae: hence the "multiple faces" of Esther.

The reader is struck by the various roles played by the protagonist. Instances include the role of dependent orphan (2:7); that of obedient female in a patriarchal relationship (2:10); she plays, too, the role of submissive concubine (2:8); and that of regal queen (2:17). Another striking role she plays is that of saviour of her people, the Hebrews (Ringgren 1969:13).

It is immediately apparent that these roles are hugely divergent, involving, as they do, submissiveness, obedience, imperiousness and ruthlessness in her quest to save her people, and destroy their

enemies. It is striking too, that other feminine characters such as Vashti and the harem concubines also adopt various roles and personae. Vashti, for example, plays the role of queen subservient to King Xerxes; yet she is also capable of assuming an independent role as she declines to fall in with the king's whims, as will be discussed later (Collins 1975:5 & Stedman 1995a:4). Even the slaves are prepared to side with Esther against the powerful courtier, Haman, showing a certain degree of independence as opposed to the total submissiveness and docility expected of them.

This, then, is one of the major problems confronting the reader: how and why do the protagonist and the other female characters adopt so many widely varying roles? What function is served by this almost chameleon-like ability to assume various identities? Perhaps we have in this analogy from nature an indication of why these changes are necessary: they are a type of camouflage by which the women in this harsh patriarchal environment are able to survive, and more than this, assert themselves in ways beneficial to family and community.

A secondary problem which is not the immediate focus of this study, is the apparent absence of God in the book (Followwill 1995:1). However, an attempt to resolve the problem mentioned above, that is the divergent roles and why they are necessary, begins to suggest the presence and purpose of God. It becomes necessary then, to turn briefly to the sacred texture of the text.

According to Robbins (1996:130) the sacred texture of a text includes aspects concerning deity, holy persons, spirit beings, divine history, human redemption, human commitment, religious community and

ethics. Although God is not specifically mentioned in the book, His presence is discernible, especially in the lives of Esther and Mordecai, but also more indirectly in the lives of Vashti and the women with whom Esther comes into contact. Furthermore, providence, which may be defined as "...the beneficent care of God or nature" (Hawkins 1991:668), in conjunction with divine action in the lives of the protagonists, has the effect of shaping events according to the will of God. Even though God's name is never mentioned and there is no reference to faith or worship - or, indeed, anything of a religious nature - the book is a revelation of how God works through natural means and how He can assert His will through the free choices man makes (Stedman 1995a:1). It is only through His intervention and the gifts He bestows on the women, that they become capable of performing as major role players in the history of the chosen people. As Bush states: "The providence of God acts through the coincidences and the remarkable reversals that advance the plot" (1996:325).

1.1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this study is an attempt to fathom and disentangle the various roles played by Esther and her female cohorts, as well as to attempt to discern the hand of God in their assumption of various roles. In attempting to achieve this purpose, it becomes necessary to investigate fully the position and role of the woman in ancient Hebraic society, as well as the nature and function of the patriarchal society as it existed at the time of Esther.

1.1.3 Hypothesis

It is proposed in this study that it becomes necessary for women who conduct their lives under harsh patriarchal domination to employ as a strategy for survival, the tactic of assuming various guises or facades. These “multiple faces” range from humble submissiveness to provocative wiliness, and are adopted according to the situation in which the woman finds herself. Such adoption is, in other words, a form of alternative politics aimed, not so much at the accumulation of power, but rather at finding an acceptable means and quality of existence under a patriarchal system (Gunn & Fewell 1993:199). On a broader level it is proposed that the book of Esther serves a didactic purpose in suggesting, not only how women should adapt to survive under patriarchal ¹hegemony, but also how God’s chosen people may survive as an alien minority in a hostile world. — Even when God’s intervention is not apparent, His care is unceasing - His people are taught the subtle art of survival through recognition of, and reaction to, the temporal nature of human authority. This is the basis for the so-called ²“Carnavalesque” in terms of which the oppressed are able to overcome and survive.

1.1.4 Methodological approach

The methodological approach to be adopted in this study is one of socio-rhetorical criticism (Robbins:1996 & Trible:1994). Specifically, it is to involve an examination of the text of the book of Esther in the

¹ Hegemony: “leadership” (Hawkins 1991:379).

² Carnavalesque: “...the awareness of the people’s immortality is combined with the realisation that established authority and truth are relative.”

light of a critical overview of the commentaries of certain authorities in this field, with a special emphasis on the views of feminist writers. Thus the ideological stances of different readers come into focus.

It is necessary, however, to explain clearly what is meant by the term "socio-rhetorical criticism", and the method based on this approach. Socio-rhetorical criticism implies an interpretation of texts in terms, not solely of the values and mores of the interpreter, but also, importantly, an interpretation which gives cognisance and due respect to the values and standards of the society depicted in the text. The prefix "socio-" suggests an interdisciplinary bearing on the subject under discussion, bringing to the interpretation techniques, insights and understanding from various fields such as Sociology, Social Psychology and Gender Studies, to mention a few. This is not to say that each of these fields has necessarily to be considered or referred to at every point in the interpretation; such reference will be made only when it serves to enrich and enlighten our understanding of the text.

According to Robbins (1996:1), "The term 'rhetorical' refers to the way language in a text is (employed as) a means of communication among people. Rhetorical analysis and interpretation gives special attention to the subjects and topics a text uses to present thought, speech, stories, and arguments". Abrams (1971:148) points to the importance of the author's use of authorial presence or voice to inform and engage the interest and emotional response of the reader. The stance of this "voice" or authorial presence in relation to specifically the female characters in the book of Esther will be examined in an attempt to throw light on the ideology of the implied author and his characters. Secondary to this is what is referred to as the "tone", which Richards

defines as the implied author's "attitude" to his listener (quoted in Abrams: 1971:124).

Although the socio-rhetorical approach includes many textures (Robbins 1996:114), the focus in this study will facilitate an understanding of the implied author's ideological belief in the sense that an attempt will be made to gain an insight into the lives and conduct of men, and especially women, in ancient Near Eastern society. In other words, the focus will be upon the way men and women interacted with each other; how they conveyed their ideas, thoughts, concepts and values in their conversations and meetings; and, importantly, how they exercised influence and power over each other.

Robbins (1996:110) refers to ideology as "concerning people's relationship to other people" - that is, the discourse of people. He suggests three ways in which ideology may be analysed: firstly, the analysis could occur in terms of the social and cultural location of the implied author. This approach, he maintains, could provide a useful starting point, and involves an analysis of social and cultural data built by the implied author into the text.

Secondly, Robbins (1996:111) refers to Foucault's guidelines for analysing power relations in the text, and offers Castelli's (1991) summary for this purpose:

- define systems which differentiate people in terms of superior and subordinate
- describe objectives of those in a position of power, that is those who act on the actions of others

- show how these relationships occur
- identify types of institutionalized power described in the text
- examine the degree to which power relations are rationalized.

The third suggestion for analysis of ideology offered by Robbins (1996:114) involves an examination of the intellectual discourse both in the text as well as in the interpretation.

This study draws from all three of these suggestions in its approach to the analysis of ideology.

1.1.5 Outline of study

The outline of this study is as follows:

Chapter One consists of the preamble on reading Esther;

Chapter Two deals with the Patriarchal System;

Chapter three discusses the role of the woman in Ancient Israel;

Chapter Four examines the Book of Esther: the type, setting and theme;

Chapter Five focuses on Esther in context, and

Chapter Six discusses the multiple faces of Esther in an ideological overview.

CHAPTER TWO

THE PATRIARCHAL SYSTEM

2.1 An overview: the current situation

McLeish (1993:546) defines patriarchy as a "family or society dominated by men". According to Mitchell (McLeish 1993:546), the four main areas in which males exercise their power are production, reproduction, socialization and sexuality. It is asserted by certain feminists such as Jacqueline Rose, that the concept "femininity" is one which has been constructed from a male perspective and includes elements which males find attractive and acceptable, such as submissiveness, physical attractiveness, et cetera. Another aspect of patriarchy revolves around the authority exercised by the father, which is total. The male viewpoint is incorporated as an integral - and dominant - part in many fields of human endeavour such as politics, economics, religion, science and education. This is supported by Humm (1995:200) who in her definition states that patriarchy is a "system of male authority which oppresses women through its social, political and economical institutions". She goes on to suggest that the class "men" subjugates the class "women" through the exercise of sexual power.

The feminist viewpoint in Haralambos (1995:441), holds that patriarchal ideology promises women happiness and fulfilment through family life. Kate Millet in her book 'Sexual Politics' cited in Haralambos, argues that the basis of the relationship between men and women lies in what she refers to as patriarchy: "A system in which male shall dominate female". According to Millet, patriarchy

is fundamental to modern Western culture, even more unyielding than stratification by class (Haralambos 1995:602). Our initial response to others is usually on the basis of their gender rather than on the basis of the class to which they belong, illustrating the pervasiveness and rigidity of this gender-based approach. Socialization patterns have long produced boys who tend to be aggressive while girls are brought up to be submissive. Socialization reinforces perception of gender difference by teaching children to focus on biological differences and encouraging behaviour that the differences are thought to permit. Males are brought up to assume a dominant role in social matters leading to a situation in which males are able to assert their power over women (Figs 1970:50).

Dreyer (1999[b]:51) lends her voice to the above viewpoint in stating that in Western society "...patriarchy is still the dominant ideology". She makes the point that the male tendency to overwhelm and minimize contributions of women in many fields has the effect of impoverishing the human experience (i.e. that of both genders). Dreyer does, however, acknowledge a more positive development in sexual politics. She points out that within the last few decades women have been given access to most, if not all, social institutions; and that they have assumed (been granted?) control and responsibility over matters of procreation and choice of partners.

She refers to a socio-cultural narrative, a master-narrative (meester-narratief) which reflects and determines the dominant ideologies and values of society, and she maintains that the dominant values of Western society remain those which maintain and protect the interests of white males. In other societies, she points out, while the

males may not be white, they nevertheless continue to dominate society, and the roles played by women as mothers, labourers, nurturers, et cetera, are all devalued (Dreyer 1999:55).

2.2 Patriarchy in Ancient Israel

Early Israelite society was characterized by father-headed families: more often than not, these were extended families including perhaps two or three generations, and the patriarch was a venerated figure looked up to by spouse and descendants of both genders. This system of extended families also formed the basis of the Israelite political system of kinship: the idea that family members accepted responsibility for each other and each other's dependants (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:7). An example would be Mordecai's acceptance of responsibility for his orphaned cousin, Esther.

In modern times the term "kin", according to Takas, often includes "any relative by blood or marriage, or any person with close family ties to another" (Hegar & Scannapieco 1999:2). Billingsley in Matthews and Benjamin (1993:9), refers to this latter category as "relationships of appropriation, meaning unions without ties of blood or marriage". Interestingly, although the patriarch had absolute power over his female relatives, this power did not extend to male relatives in the form of his brothers, nephews, uncles or his grandsons. More than simply a father figure, the patriarch was perceived as a creator, giving him power over matters such as farming methods, fertility and the source of sustenance (Gen 1:26 - 9:6).

The power over life and death was exercised in part by his discretion as to whether or not to adopt into his family sons and daughters whom he had fathered. Where the patriarch refused to accept the child into his family, the infant was considered to be stillborn (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:11).

Political powers included his discretion in the matter of succession, the hosting of strangers, and in negotiating treaties and agreements, including marriages. The patriarch had the right to decide on marriage partners for his dependants, as well as the duty of ensuring the integrity and status of the men and women in his family. It is interesting to note that in this society, the relationship between uncles and nephews was as strong as between fathers and sons. There was a right on the part of first cousins to marry - this matter will be discussed later in respect of the relationship between Mordecai and Esther. Marriage was the cement that held early Israelite society together, as political and economic matters depended largely on the uniting of families by the marriage bond.

CHAPTER THREE

THE ROLE OF THE WOMAN IN ANCIENT ISRAEL

3.1 Introduction

In order for us to have a workable perspective on Esther and her achievements, it is essential to open a window on the world of women in Ancient Israel. According to Van der Toorn (1994:19) "a woman gets her first impressions of the world as a baby and for the ancient Near Eastern girl some events that took place in the nursing period had a lasting impact." Special reference is made to an important birth rite, known from Mesopotamian texts, which is referred to as "consecration". This ritual involved certain symbols: specifically in the case of a girl, a distaff, a spindle and a hair clasp, which the child was induced to clutch shortly after birth. These objects were regarded as symbolic of womanhood, confirming the role of the newly born girl, fixing her destiny at birth and for life.

Van der Toorn (1994:17) refers to five phases in the life of the woman in Near Eastern society. He points out that each phase of life is directly connected to what he terms: "religious moments". Important phases included the following:

- The nursing period which commenced soon after birth and ended when the child was weaned and received solid food.
- Youth which was from the fourth to the eleventh year.
- Puberty which began with the onset of menstruation.

³ consecration: "Dedicating a person or thing to a separate religious task or purpose (Deist 1986:35).

- Married life.
- Widowhood.

Matthews and Benjamin (1993:22, 67, 132, 176) tend to emphasize slightly different roles played by women in Ancient Israel. These roles include the virgin, marriage, motherhood, the midwife and the widow. I will also examine the role of the foreign women.

3.2 The virgin

In ancient Near Eastern society, the virgin was considered to be a nubile woman and her chaste status confirmed the political integrity of her father's household. By this is meant that a daughter's virginity was the legal guarantee of land and children for a household (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:178). The consequence of this was that the virginity of the daughters of a household was jealously guarded until marriage so as to ensure their economic status.

A father's status was assessed by his peers in terms of his ability to provide for and protect his dependants. A special emphasis here was on the degree to which he was able to care for and cherish the nubile women in his household. This was regarded as a yardstick by which to measure his ability to protect the integrity of the rest of his household. In cases where virgins were violated, the father of the household lost his status and another male would then assume responsibility for the household. Schlegel states that because virginity was regarded as the legal guarantee of property and

children, loss of virginity - by whatever cause - was a direct blow to the status, social and economic, of the affected household (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:181). The result would be that the household was barred from transacting further business.

A further symbolic significance of virginity was to be found in the maidenhood of a bride: this symbolized the security and stability of her father's household and augured well in the unification of the two families.

Where it was intended to challenge the political integrity of a household, this could be initiated by the attempted rape of one or more of the virgins in that household. Should the rape succeed, the honour of the head of the household would be seriously compromised. But at the same time, it should be recognized that the challenge itself was in fact an acknowledgement of the honour of the household: only households of honour would, ironically, be challenged in this way.

The prevailing attitude in the ancient Near East toward virginity is reflected in the Deuteronomic Laws: in the case of the slandered bride (Deut.22:13-21), the law provides a remedy for a bride whose husband claims that she was not in fact a virgin at marriage. Also, in the case of the rape of a virgin, Deuteronomy 22:28-29, prescribes the consequences for the guilty man.

Frymer-Kensky points to the linguistic reflection of the importance of virginity until marriage. She notes that where there is the need to emphasize the state of virginity, the text adds the phrase: "...who has

not known a man". Examples are to be found in Judges 19:39 and Genesis 24:16 (Matthews, Levinson & Frymer-Kensky 1998:79-96).

Frymer-Kensky goes on to discuss how virginity was a prized state of the people of the ancient Near East. For example, Lot, in order to increase the desire of the mob for his daughters, informs them that the girls are virgins (Gen 19:8). So prized is virginity that carnal knowledge of a bespoken girl is punishable by death.

Why, it may be asked, did this society place such emphasis on the value of virginity? The stock answer to this question has always been that men wished to be assured that any issue from the marriage was their own offspring. Further, it has been suggested by Frymer-Kensky that men wish to be assured that they are not entering into a contract for used goods. The feminist perspective on this is one of outraged puzzlement: women do not demand that the men they marry should be virgins.

The universality of this great store set by virginity is highlighted by Schlegel in Matthews, Levinson and Frymer-Kensky (1998:83). It is noted here that only insignificant societies - those characterized by subsistence technologies, small communities, simple structures without stratification, matrilineal marriage, absence of bride wealth and little or no property exchange at marriage - do not prize the state of virginity at marriage.

The violation of a man's female dependants has the effect of dishonouring him because it suggests that he - the supposed protector of the females - lacks manliness (Matthews, Levinson & Frymer-

Kensky 1998:84). In the case of elopement a girl's father was demonstrably unable to control his own daughter. In order to avoid this situation the men of a family often form coalitions so as to protect the chastity of female dependants.

In attempting to explain the importance of virginity, Frymer-Kensky refers to Freud's contention regarding the incestuous feelings, which he (Freud) regarded as common amongst fathers and their daughters. Frymer-Kensky further refers to the universality of the so-called primal law against incest, and draws the conclusion that these factors may be translated into the father's insistence that his daughter should be "possessed" by only him until he decides on a marriage partner for her. Further, it is suggested that virginity offers a tangible justification of the patriarch's right to dominate and control his female dependants; more than this the physical nature of virginity provides a means of actually measuring the patriarch's control (Matthews, Levinson & Frymer-Kensky 1998:85).

It would perhaps be useful at this point to raise an issue which I find perplexing: the fact that, despite the emphasis by the patriarch on the importance of chastity for the women for whom he was responsible, he apparently often had little compunction in marrying them off in the most expedient manner. This may have been in terms of economic or political gain - as may be seen in Mordecai's encouragement to Esther to compete for the position of queen, albeit that this involved marriage out of the faith. This issue is alluded to below.

3.3 The wife

In examining the role of the woman as wife in ancient Near Eastern society, I intend to focus particularly on the *status* of the married woman. An understanding of, and insight into, such status will shed light on the central figure of this study, namely Esther.

Christopher Wright (1990:183) has carefully traced the development in the thinking of 20th Century scholars on this matter. Two extremes are identified: early century scholars viewed the status of wives in a harshly negative light, seeing them as "chattels", purchased by their husbands, and consequently with the lowly status of slaves or ⁵concubines. By the latter quarter of the century, viewing perhaps from what may be termed a more feminist frame of reference, scholars were much more positive (if less accurate) in their assessment of the lot of ancient Hebrew wives.

Scholars such as Michaelis and Robertson Smith, according to Wright (1990:184), propounded the idea of wives as mere chattels. Engert, writing in 1905, was even more extreme, asserting that the wife was purchased in the same way that a cow was bought, and with the same consequences: she was to be treated and disposed of entirely as her husband saw fit (Wright (1990:184). This harsh view of the wife's status evoked a reaction from authorities such as Lohr (1908), Eberharter (1914) and Holzinger (1914), who, while concurring with the idea of bridal "purchase", pointed out that, in fact, the wife's situation was often much more favourable than that of a mere chattel.

⁴ chattel: "A movable possession" (Hawkins 1991:130).

⁵ concubine: "A woman who cohabits with a man without being legally married to him. In certain ancient societies where polygamy was legal, a lesser wife of a man" (Deist 1986:33).

In 1923, Ryder Smith (Wright 1990:186) moved away from a position of seeing the lot of wives as uniformly grim; he chose to view the status of the wife as evolving during the Old Testament period from that of chattel to that of person in her own right. By 1931, McDonald (Wright 1990:186) had distanced herself from earlier writers to a point where she was constrained to deny the element of purchase in marriage. She saw nothing significant in the Tenth Commandment where wives are lumped together with manservant, maidservant, ox or donkey (Deut.5:21). Further, while prepared to concede that the status of a wife was below that of her husband, she argues that the woman nonetheless, as mother and participant in religious life, wielded a power which raised her status far above that of slave or concubine (Brenner 1994a:257).

By 1938, Millar Burrows (Wright 1990:157) had put forward the argument that the concept "purchase" should be replaced by that of "compensation gift" - that is the price paid by a husband should not be seen as a "purchase price" but as a gift to compensate the bride's family and to help form an alliance with them. Burrows proposes that, in marriage, we see not so much the transfer from father to husband of "ownership" of the bride, but rather a shift in authority over her.

Neutend in 1944 (Wright 1990:157) was perhaps a little closer to actuality when he suggested that ownership was indeed the concept underpinning marriage, but that it was a type of ownership severely constrained and limited, and that the position of the wife was, in fact, often not unfavourable.

The development in the status of the wife over time, I would argue, has striking parallels in the evolving position and status of Esther, as will be shown later in this study. An interesting counter argument to Neufeld's is that mooted by Mace in 1953. This is to the effect that the position of the wife in the society under discussion could be viewed in one of two ways: either the status was that of a chattel, occasionally upgraded to that of person, or the wife could be viewed as a person who was sometimes reduced in status to that of chattel. Mace favours this latter view, justifying it in terms of a lack in clarity of thought, firstly in the distinction between wife and concubine, and secondly, in differentiating authority and power. Again one is struck by the pertinence of Mace's position and argument in relation to the story of Esther.

Mace seems also to be developing the argument of Neufeld (and others) to the effect that ownership was indeed the underlying principle of the marriage contract, but that this was a limited type of ownership relating only to what have become known as "marital rights". The husband did not possess the wife's person, but rather the rights attaching to her, in terms of her sexuality and the service she could offer. He goes further, and places the question of the wife's status firmly in historical context: were a contemporary western wife to be accorded status similar to that of the Old Testament wife, society would be outraged at the limitations placed on her and the devaluing of her personhood. However, the Old Testament community, and community life, were very different to that experienced in contemporary Western society. The wife at that time could, and did, fulfil herself as a person quite adequately, exercising power, if not authority, within the home.

What seems to emerge from the foregoing overview of 20th Century analysis of the status of married women in ancient Near Eastern society, is that there did indeed occur a gradual improvement in the lot of wives during the Old Testament period. Whereas early in the period, wives were in fact purchased in a real sense by their husbands, and were totally subject to their authority, there came about over a period of centuries, a gradual development and improvement in their status to a point where they were free to exercise their individuality and even power. Examples of this may be found in the selection of family heirs, and in domestic arrangements (Fontaine 1995:31).

I have dwelt at some length on this development in the thinking of 20th Century biblical scholars on the evolving status of the wife in ancient Near Eastern society. This is because, as mentioned above, I believe it is possible to trace parallels between the evolution in the status of the two female protagonists in the book of Esther, namely Vashti and Esther herself, at a microcosmic level, and married women generally, during the Old Testament period.

I now turn to an examination of events leading up to marriage. As the girl progressed into adolescence, opportunities for meeting and interacting with young men were few and far between within the confines of the home, where she remained under the watchful eye of her mother. It was only at the celebration of religious festivals that she was able to meet young men and perhaps engage in flirtation without the supervision that characterized the home. The religious festival, which was usually marked by music, dance, food and drink, resulted in defences being lowered and necessary interaction between the sexes could then take place. Although some form of alliance may

have been entered into on these occasions, the ultimate decision as to whom the girl would marry, remained with the father.

The marriage ceremony itself was a religious event. It was instituted by God and could take the form of several phases. A bride may have been reserved from a very tender age by a father for his son. This could take the form of a purchase of the daughter-in-law by a father, in which case the girl would now be placed under his authority, and at the appropriate time, she would be given as a bride to a son. This would be marked by a celebration or reception at the home of the bridegroom on the day of the finalisation of the marriage contract.

A different format occurred where, again at an early age, a boy and girl were designated as marriage partners. Sometimes the festivities extended over a period of a week or even two, after which the groom would return to his home while the bride remained in the parental home until her husband fetched her to his residence. At that point the wedding was finally confirmed.

In her new home, the bride had to make her mark as wife and daughter-in-law (Dreyer 1999[b]:66). Her position in the household was enhanced and confirmed by her falling pregnant. As long as the young wife remained without child, she was in a state of limbo. At this juncture in the young woman's life, after she had severed ties with her parental home, and with her mother in particular, an important figure, who would play a major role in her life for many years, emerged. This was the midwife.

3.3.1 The midwife

At the outset of any attempt to understand the role of the woman as midwife in ancient Near Eastern society, it is important to realise that the modern concept of midwifery is not an appropriate frame of reference. This is because the contemporary midwife is a professional, with a very specific, circumscribed set of skills and practises, focusing on the perinatal care of mother and child. In Ancient Israel, however, the midwife had a very different role to play, with duties and responsibilities extending from even before conception to long after the birth of a child (Matthews & Benjamin 1993:67-74).

While the modern midwife's professionalism is based on a rigorous training, the midwife of Ancient Israel could be said to have followed a vocation in the real sense: she was obliged to be set apart from her community as she absorbed certain protocols over an extended period, and then joined a community as a "new being" - in much the same way that nuns withdraw from their communities, undergo long periods of training, and then, in some cases at least, go back into the community to perform their duties. The prospective midwife's "training" involved a type of protracted apprenticeship, during which she worked under a "qualified" midwife, gradually absorbing the knowledge, skills and lore she would require for the successful exercise of her vocation.

According to Matthews and Benjamin (1993:68), "...the protocol for midwives was a rite of passage which contained a separation terminating the candidates' relationships with the communities, and a transition marking the separated as taboo, holy, impure or unclean".

We see here the very specific status accorded midwives in this society - a status which granted these women authority to arrange marriages, as well as provide care to mother and child throughout pregnancy, at birth, and beyond.

Her role as marriage negotiator was initiated when a man in the community decided to father a child. The midwife was then called upon to enter into negotiations with the ⁶Divine Assembly in this regard, as well as to assist in selecting a woman who would bear the child. This involved ensuring the physical ability of the woman to carry and bear a child successfully.

The selected woman's menstrual cycle was carefully monitored, and the most propitious time for intercourse was determined. A chamber was especially set aside and prepared for this, and the midwife had the responsibility for ensuring that no unauthorised inhabitants, whether human or spirit, contaminated the chamber, using music and chanting for this cleansing purpose.

It was the midwife's duty to inspect the bedclothes of the bridal chamber. Traces of blood served two purposes: firstly, to confirm that the marriage had been consummated and secondly, to prove the virginity of the bride.

Throughout pregnancy, which was confirmed through a close monitoring of the menstrual cycle, or rather its cessation, the midwife had the responsibility for the care of the mother and her unborn child.

⁶ Divine Assembly: "Also referred to as Divine Council. In Canaanite mythology the council of gods gathered on mount Zaphon" (Deist 1986:47)

This was effected by palpation of the uterus, massaging of the foetus, and ensuring adequate nutrition for the mother.

Traumas such as miscarriage and still birth were very much the province of the midwife; but on a happier note, she was often able to form a bond, even with the as yet unborn child, through her continual ministrations - a bond which sometimes endured long after birth. Preparations for the birth were similar to that for the consummation of the marriage: a special room had to be prepared for the delivery, as the birth process was regarded as seriously impure. Immediately after delivery, the midwife would hold the child aloft, inviting his adoption. At the first cry of the child, the parent would respond with the singing of a hymn, or cry out joyfully, declaring that ".....a child is conceived" (Job 3:3). This would be acknowledged by the midwife with the statement that "The child is a boy (or girl)" (Job3:3; Matthews & Benjamin 1993:73).

The mother faced this event without the support of her spouse, and was, indeed, kept in seclusion even after the birth of her child until her impurity had receded. The mother and infant depended entirely, during this period, on the care of the midwife, who continued her ministrations as a paediatrician, coping with ailments of both mother and child and teaching the child's mother - either natural or adoptive - how to care for the infant.

3.3.2 Motherhood

Despite the intense focus on the maidens of the household, the father and mother were always paramount in ancient societies, each having

a distinctive role to play in what was, ultimately, a struggle for the family's - and society's - survival.

It is necessary, in attempting to understand the place of the mother in the household, to distinguish clearly the concepts power and authority: by power is meant, according to Matthews & Benjamin (1993:25), the ability to use and exploit resources - primarily land and children. Authority, on the other hand, refers to the approval of society for the *exercise* of power, in other words, the right to decide **when** and **how** these resources are to be used.

It may be stated that the mother of a household had great power, while she did not hold as much authority as did the father or patriarch. So the mother in her role as manager, had the power to decide on matters such as the manufacture of domestic necessities, including pottery, soap and utensils. The cultivation of crops was another area in which she could exercise power. Where this, however, involved co-operative action with other families in the community, the father's authority would be necessary; he could decide, for example, when and to what extent this co-operation would be forthcoming. Although one would expect that the possession of power to run parallel with the possession of authority, this was not always so. A prime example of this may be found in the matter of succession: while the patriarch had the authority to designate an heir, it was the mother who *de facto* selected this individual. Herein she was exercising power, if not authority. This is not to say, though, that mothers in this society did not possess both power **and** authority. She, for example, exercised both authority and power in matters relating to childbearing and rearing. It was her responsibility to see that she and the women in her household bore

children regularly and that they received proper care during their pregnancy and the perinatal period. A further instance of the mother of the household exercising authority as well as power is to be found in the manner in which she controlled food rations in the home. Even if a father were to demand extra food at a meal time and the mother was of the opinion that such food was not available in terms of the long-term welfare of the family, she was quite within her rights to refuse her husband.

3.3.3 The widow

The last phase in the life of many Israelite women, according to Van der Toorn (1993:134), was widowhood. Widows who had surviving children usually went to live with those whom they had mothered. Widows were not permitted to remarry in cases where their husbands had died without an heir, until they had conceived an heir with their legal guardian. The position of the widow, particularly the childless widow, was that she was marginalised by society, or to use Matthews and Benjamin's term, these women were "liminal" (1993:133).

3.4 Foreign women

Alien women are treated in the Old Testament, especially in Genesis, as being of inferior status and less desirable as wives than the women of a man's clan or ethnic group. In Proverbs 1-9 it is stated quite clearly where the peril of association with foreign women lies. It was believed that alien women preferred to adhere to their own religion

rather than embracing that of Israelite men. Ultimately, the result of marriage with aliens was that the husbands generally deviated from their own religion and tended to adopt that of their foreign wives (Wyler 1994:117; Gordis 1976:53).

While Esther was an alien wife - she as a Jewess married a Persian - her circumstances were somewhat different, as she deliberately concealed her Jewishness from her husband (Johnson 1988:236). She did not convert to her husband's religion, nor did she appear to share his value system, beliefs and culture. It could be argued that this concealment served a specific purpose: although she was not aware of her future role as deliverer of her people, God's hand is discernible in her decision to conceal her religion as He knew that she was to be His instrument in saving the Jewish people in Persia.

We see here, then, the truth contained in the writings in Proverbs: she as a wife adhered to her religion even though it was unlikely that her husband, the king, would deviate from his own.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE BOOK ESTHER

"This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 12 provinces stretching from India to Cush. At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials. The military leaders of Persia and Media, the princes, and the nobles of the provinces were present (Est.1:1-3).

4.1 Type of book

Chronologically, the book of Esther falls between the 6th and 7th chapters of Ezra. It deals indirectly with the history of the Hebrews who had remained in Persia following the captivity (Eskenazi 1997:349-350). The book focuses on a period during the reign of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes), which lasted from 475BC to 465BC (Collins 1975:46).

According to Talmon (Bush 1996: 299), the book constitutes an "historical wisdom tale", which may be defined as a story presented within the paradigm of the ancient Near Eastern philosophy (wisdom) of a practical or speculative nature (Deist 1986:186). This philosophy, encapsulated in a number of tales or histories, constitutes what has come to be known as "Wisdom Literature", and includes, inter alia, the books of Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes.

A different stance is adopted by Gerleman (Bush 1996:199), who suggests that the book is an adaptation of the Exodus story: the tale is presented as profane rather than sacred, with the removal of God as a central figure, so as to serve as a vehicle for the teaching of the salvation tradition. Gerleman points out that all the elements of this

tradition are present in the story: Jews in a position of subservience in a foreign country; their position becoming one of extreme jeopardy; delivery from the threat; revenge on those who plotted against them; and, finally, the establishing of a triumphal festival (purim) (Larkin 1996:88).

Humphreys ([1985[a]:85) tends to view the book of Esther as didactic: he sees it as a type of “diaspora novella”, designed specifically to provide Jews under foreign rule with a guide, showing how best to conduct their lives under difficult, sometimes dangerous, alien conditions - that is the Diaspora. The book, he suggests, is a “novella” (defined in Abrams 1971:110 as a “short tale in prose”), not only because of its length, but also because of the relative complexity of the plot and development of the characters. This is in contradistinction to a short story, which does not always allow for development of character or description of social milieu (Abrams 1971:155). Humphreys also points to an element in common with other stories such as those of Daniel and Joseph: that of the wise courtier in a foreign country, acting on behalf of his compatriots. In Esther, this is the role of Mordecai, as well, perhaps, of Esther herself (1985[a]:85).

In reading the book of Esther, it becomes apparent that the aim of the implied author is not so much to record accurately and objectively a sequence of events (i.e. historiography), but rather the purpose is didactic: “a problem-based plot” is presented, consisting of a setting, the problem, a complicating incident, the resolving incident, resolution, denouement and conclusion, which is designed as a teaching tool. This view is supported by Clines et al (1990:149), who

holds that Esther offers a paradigm for Jewish life in the Diaspora. This didactic approach is referred to again below.

Similarly, Larkin states that, while it is not impossible that the story of Esther is a faithful record of historical events, this is highly unlikely. The historical detail and colour characteristic of the book, he suggests, are no more than one would expect to find in any sound historical novel. Larkin (1996) and Keil and Delitsch [s a]) are of the opinion that the book serves a specific purpose: that of exemplifying anti-Semitic behaviour.

While the strict definition of folklore and folk tales demands an oral tradition - and Esther is a written narrative - Niditch's contention that the book is "folklore" has merit (Niditch:1995:28). The various motifs and symbols in the story, such as the foolish king and banished wife, the crown, the sceptre and the gallows, are typical of this genre.

Moreover, it is abundantly clear that the book as folk tale fits very neatly into Bakhtin's (1968) notion of the "carnavalesque", which he defines as an "...awareness of the people's immortality (being) combined with the realisation that established authority and truth are relative" (Stallybrass & White 1986:6). According to this notion, there exists in conflict an official culture - that of the king, court and church - and an unofficial culture, that of the people and the marketplace. These two cultures are always in opposition, with the official culture oppressing and suppressing the common folk, and the unofficial culture inevitably responding with subversive gaiety and laughter - hence the "immortality" (irrepressibility) of the people, and the

relativity of authority and truth. Who, then, is Jack, and who his master?

Carnavalesque refers to a world of topsy-turvy, in which king becomes fool, hangman is hanged and concubine crowned queen. Obviously all of these occurrences, as well as many other of the hallmarks of carnivalesque, appear in Esther: despite his much vaunted power, for example, Xerxes is revealed as an almost mindless buffoon, unable to make even the most limited decisions for himself. Haman's carefully prepared gallows is where he himself meets his end, and the alien-orphan-concubine Esther becomes queen. Parody, especially of religious ritual, is highly characteristic of the carnival; we see an example of this type of parody in Xerxes, as demigod, waving his sceptre as a magic wand to indicate his acceptance or rejection of those who appear before him (Moore 1971:14). Craig (1995) points out that, in true carnivalesque fashion, this sceptre, which starts off being most significant, loses its potency as the story progresses. Perhaps the most graphic example of the carnivalesque nature of the tale is to be found in that the common people (the Jews) are able to engage in a joyous festival celebrating life during the very month earmarked for their extermination.

I would argue that the book - atypical, frowned upon by particularly the Establishment, and so very different from its counterparts, is itself an example of the carnivalesque. In its essential secularity, it is, in its own way, liberating: the book has in my opinion a very specific function, that of didactic instrument. It is not too far-fetched to argue that the carnival with its irrepressible gaiety and refusal to succumb, is suggested by the book as a means of survival for its readers,

specifically the Jews. It is precisely thus that Jews down the ages have overcome in the pogrom, the ghetto and even the concentration camp.

I would tend to disagree with Bush's categorization of the book as a "short story", especially as he maintains that the book merely reveals the quality of a situation, without allowing for much development of plot or character (Bush 1996:309). I would argue that Esther's character at least is developed - from dependent orphan through concubine, femme-fatale and queen to avenger. The plot, too, seems to me to develop considerably - from a situation fraught with danger and apparently hopeless, to a triumphant conclusion. I suggest therefore that the appropriate label for the book is, as Humphreys suggests, "novella or short tale" ([s a]b:104). Abrams (1971:158) defines a tale as "a story of incident", which the book certainly is, where the focus of interest is on the course and outcome of events.

Yet a different position is adopted by Gordis (1995 1974:409), who suggests that the book of Esther, while serving a didactic purpose, was aimed specifically at the incorporation of a pagan festival into Jewish culture and tradition. In so doing it expounds on the aetiology of the festival, Purim.

4.1.1 Setting

The land of the Bible known as Canaan, Israel or Palestine bordered on the Mediterranean Sea. The ancient Near East covered Southwest Asia and the parts of Northeast Africa and Southeast Europe, where

three continental land masses met in contours shaped by the Red, Mediterranean, Black and Caspian Seas, and the Persian Gulf (Gottwald 1987:36).

In the 6th century, Judahites were taken into captivity by the Babylonians and deported to Babylon where they remained until King Cyrus, a Persian, conquered Babylon and set the people from Judah free. The Persians then stood at the pinnacle of their power, and those Jews who had been captured by the Babylonians found themselves in the Persian orbit for two eventful centuries (Dimont 1962: 67, 68). When King Cyrus gave the Jews permission to return to their homeland, only a quarter returned to Jerusalem. In 468 BC, Ezra, a scribe at the Persian court, headed the second mass exodus of Jews from Babylonia to Jerusalem. Cyrus became king of the whole region north and east of Babylonia and this new empire became known as Persia (Gottwald 1987:428).

The author of the book is unstated and unknown. Malick (1996:1) suggests two possibilities: Mordecai or Nehemia, with the former being more likely, as this is affirmed by Josephus and certain Rabbinic circles. Nehemia is suggested as a possibility as he served the successor of Ahaseurus, Artaxerxes, and quite possibly knew Mordecai (Harrison 1969:1086).

Whoever the author, many details in the book of Esther point to his knowledge of Persian life and institutions, according to Gordis (1975:5). These include details of the vast extent of the Persian empire extending from India to Ethiopia, the royal council of seven, and intimate knowledge of the king's palace at Susa. The author also

displays his familiarity with Persian life such as hanging as a form of capital punishment, the observance of “lucky days” (3:7), the adornment of royal horses with crowns (6:8) and the practice of reclining on couches at banquets (7:8) (Larue 1970:383).

Every scene in the book of Esther, except the two brief episodes which occur in Haman's home (5:9-14, 6:12-14) and the brief account of the final Jewish victory (9:15), takes place in the royal court of Persia (Larkin 1996:79). Some take place in the throne room and some in the king's private quarters (Bush 1996:311). The main figure is the Persian king, Ahaseurus, known also as Xerxes. He was the fifth king of Persia and reigned from 486-465 BC (Vosloo 1999:549).

In favour of a setting in the Persian period, it has been suggested by Heltzer that the book of Esther was composed shortly after the suppression of a revolt in Judaea under Artaxerxes in 340 BC (Larkin 1996:79). The story is set in the centres of power that control and dominate the world. The narrower world focused on in the book is that of the Jews of the ⁷Diaspora.

Mordecai is introduced as the “Jew of the tribe of Benjamin” (2:5) and throughout the book he is referred to as “Mordecai the Jew”. In the book of Esther, “Jew” specifically identifies Mordecai as a member of the Diaspora; the book is specifically and narrowly concerned with the life and concerns of Jews in the Diaspora. The narrator characterizes this world as dangerous and uncertain (Bush 1996:314). Stedman (1996(b):1) suggests that the events in the Esther story took

⁷ Diaspora: “The dispersion of the Jews among foreign nations of the ancient Near East after the Babylonian exile” (Deist 1986:45)

place in the days of Israel's captivity when as a nation it was under bondage to Babylon.

4.2 The theme

4.2.1 General viewpoints on themes

Venter (1999: 547-548) mentions the following main themes in the book of Esther:

- **God is in control**

Although God's name is never mentioned in the book of Esther, there are just too many inexplicable incidents and events which may only be attributed to the intervention of a Divine hand. God is in control and he places the right people at the right time in the right place. He chooses what should occur and when it should do so.

- **The power of the people as opposed to that of the Sovereign**

The king had enormous power and could annihilate large numbers of people through one simple edict. The king is depicted as someone who is easily manipulated and as one who is unable to make his own decisions. He allows Haman to hold sway over the Jews and then again later, Esther and Mordecai are given positions of power by the king.

God protects his people

The Jews were a minority group in the Persian kingdom, threatened with annihilation. Yet the Persians secretly feared the Jews. God is the Protector, especially when His people are an oppressed minority.

- **Jewish nationalism**

Some commentators are of the opinion that Jewish nationalism is one of the main themes of the book, while others contend that anti-Semitism is also at issue.

- **Every man reaps what he sows**

The story deals with the strange twists of fate where the main characters seem to exchange positions: Haman is evil and wishes to destroy others, but ends his life on the gallows of his own making. Mordecai, an alien in Persia, finds himself in the position of a wealthy courtier advising the king.

- **Citizenship under foreign domination**

It is possible for a law abiding Jew to live in a foreign country and be a model citizen whilst being loyal to God.

- **The power of words**

The king's written edicts carry great authority; and Esther's powers of persuasion prove far more effective than the arms of Haman. The pen proves mightier than the sword.

- **Human initiative and action**

Even pious believers, who recognize God's power and omniscience, are aware at the same time that they, and indeed all people, remain responsible for their own actions.

- **The role of the woman**

Esther is depicted as a girl who ripens into mature womanhood, and as one who is then able to take her rightful place in a patriarchal world.

- **The Purim festival**

The story offers an explanation of how the Purim festival was established.

4.2.2 Brief overview of specific viewpoints on the themes

Firth (1997:19) suggests that the main purpose of the book is to provide the historical background for the feast of Purim, as well as providing a model as to how one might live according to one's faith in an alien or even oppressive context. He concludes his essay by pointing out that the book provides a "paradigm for political engagements which refuse to treat the state naturally" (1997:26). Berg, on the other hand, states that inherent to the themes of power and loyalty in the book of Esther, is a subsidiary theme, that of the "inviolability" of the Jewish people. This is indicated very early in the book, where the long genealogy of Mordecai is mentioned, suggesting that the Jews are protected, even in this hostile environment (1979:103). In Esther 4:14, Mordecai asserts that assistance to the Jews would derive from another source if Esther failed to intercede with the king, demonstrating his confidence in the existence of some form of (presumably Divine) assistance for the Jewish people.

Berg also mentions a theme of reversal that is prevalent throughout the book, referred to above as “carnavalesque”. The Jews have a lowly status at the beginning of the narrative which changes towards the end of the story when they, initially powerless, attain great power. Jewish fasts become Jewish feasts. Esther’s unsummoned appearance before the king - normally warranting severe punishment - is, instead, rewarded (Berg 1979:105).

Niditch (1995:41) refers to “⁸underdog tales” and social ethics in the book of Esther while Klein (1995:171) writes about the honour and shame motifs in the narrative.

Bruce William Jones writes that liberated women have found reason to dislike the book of Esther because of the chauvinistic attitude toward women which they see in it. However, Jones argues that this view about the status of women is misguided. He also objects to a reading which highlights cruelty and nationalism in the book: this, too, he sees as misguided. He suggests that humour (see the reference to “carnavalesque” above) is integral to the author’s intention and that one of the purposes of the book is to reconcile Jewish readers to their status as a minority among Gentiles, whose attitudes toward Jews may vary unpredictably from wishing to honour them to a desire to persecute (Jones 1977:437).

As has been pointed out above, it could be argued that the book was written for Jews to show them how to survive in hostile and alien situations; but its purpose could possibly also be to illustrate God’s

⁸ underdog: “A person etc. losing a fight or in a state of inferiority or subjection” (Hawkins 1991:893)

deliverance of His people in times of need (Bosman & Loader 1988:118-121).

4.3 Summary of the story-line of the book of Esther

The book of Esther may be divided into three parts: the introduction (1:1-2:18); the core (2:19-9:19) and the conclusion (9:20-10:3). In the introduction we are introduced to the king of Persia, Ahasuerus, better known by his Greek name, Xerxes, who becomes Esther's husband after the banishment of Vashti (the king's former wife). The introduction to the book of Esther sets the scene in which the story is to unravel. We read of the king's palace and enormous wealth. The king's lifestyle, we are told, is a lavish one and filled with revelling, dining and drinking. It is one such banquet, used as a show-case of political power, that provides the impetus for a crisis which ultimately draws Esther into the story.

The king requests that his wife, Vashti, display herself at his drinking party. Her brave refusal to do so, presumably on moral grounds, leads ironically to a reaffirmation of the subservience of women to men, as the king issues an edict which declares the deposition of Vashti, and he begins a search for a new wife. It is significant that we are told that the decree was published in "...each people's tongue" (1:22). Ostensibly this was aimed at making the decree as accessible to as many people as possible, so as to obviate any perceived threat of resistance to their husbands' power by wives. However, it may be suggested that the language of the decree was accessible primarily to men: this could be because many women were not able to read; or

because many Persian men were married to foreigners who could not read Persian. A written decree, in either of these instances, would constitute a type of encoding of the message, restricting its contents to Persian men. Whatever the case, Beal (1995:99) points out that “the spoken word that could undo the androcentric social and symbolic order must be followed by a written word that would wipe out the threat and, quite literally, reinscribe that order”.

If it is accepted that knowledge is at least the basis of power, any denial to women of accessibility to the message of the decree would constitute a restriction on whatever power they possessed; the patriarchal system relies largely on the use of language as an instrument of subjugation. Evident here is a prime example of the “othering” of women.

The king arranges for all the nubile women of Persia to compete for the position of queen, and it is at this point that Esther enters the story. We are told that she is the adopted daughter of Mordecai, the Jew, from the tribe of Benjamin, the descendant of Kish. Despite her ethnic origin, Esther enters the competition and wins the title of queen. Prior to her entering the competition, Mordecai, her cousin and guardian, had instructed her not to reveal her Jewishness and, significantly, she obeys this injunction (Johnson 1988:236).

We now move into the core of the story: Mordecai overhears plans for the king’s assassination by two court officers. He sends a message so that Esther may inform the king of this plot, and these events are recorded in detail. This knowledge saves the king’s life, but the king remains unaware that it is Mordecai who is responsible for his

salvation. At this point, Haman, a courtier who plays an important advisory role in the king's court, is introduced. He was an Agagite, the son of Hammedatha, the descendant of Agag, the Amalekite king who had been a bitter enemy of the Jews in Saul's reign (1 Sam:15). The king, under the impression that his life has been saved by Haman, elevates him to a position "...higher than that of all the other nobles" (3:1). The king commands all the people to bow before Haman - a command obeyed by all, except Mordecai.

The story reaches a crisis point when Mordecai refuses to bow before Haman, ultimately resulting in the courtier's desire to exterminate the Jewish people in Persia. This refusal to show homage to the king and his representatives leads to another edict being issued - at the behest of Haman - according to which all Jews are to be annihilated at a certain time. As Esther had not revealed her ethnic origin to the king, it was impossible for Mordecai - known universally as "Mordecai the Jew" - to visit her in person. He therefore sends another message to her, begging her to intercede on behalf of the Jews.

This request brings about a conflict within Esther, as on the one hand she feels a loyalty towards her husband, which, if breached, could lead to her death, and on the other hand, she is not without a sense of loyalty to her people, the Jews. She decides to make the request through the expedient of arranging a banquet, to which she invites the king and Haman. Her husband is thus put in a receptive mood, and Haman's ego is boosted by being entertained by the queen. Despite the thorn in his flesh - Mordecai - refusing to bow before him, he boasts to his wife and friends of the royal recognition that he has been granted,

mentioning that he is to be received at a second banquet to be given by Queen Esther.

Acting on the advice of his wife and friends, Haman makes arrangements to rid himself of Mordecai. Gallows are prepared to this end, and he is able to attend the second banquet in high spirits (5:14).

Prior to Esther's second banquet, the king suffers a bout of insomnia; in an attempt to alleviate this he undertakes a reading of the chronicles of his reign where he discovers the identity of his true saviour, Mordecai. In an act of uncharacteristic subtlety (perhaps "cunning" would be a better term), he summons Haman and asks him: "What should be done for the man the king delights to honour?" (6:6). The egotistical Haman, believing that the king is referring to him, requests certain honours. In true carnivalesque fashion, the king turns the tables on his vizier and orders him to bestow these honours on Mordecai the Jew, the same Mordecai for whom Haman had prepared the gallows. (Crenshaw [s a] :358).

By acceding to Mordecai's request and through her intercession, the Jews are allowed to defend themselves. To show their gratitude (to God) for this deliverance, the feast of Purim is established.

CHAPTER FIVE

ESTHER IN CONTEXT

5.1 Vashti: predecessor to Esther

Vashti is one of the characters in the book of Esther who may be described as adopting various facades. Little is known of her history other than that she was a Persian queen who lived a luxurious life in the court of her husband. Her relationship to King Xerxes appears to have been based, as described earlier, on the principle of possession: the king appeared to have regarded his wife as a mere chattel with very little or nothing in the way of rights, despite her position as queen (Collins 1975:50). This lack of status may be discerned even in the midst of the luxury and wealth surrounding Queen Vashti: in Esther 1:9, Vashti gives a banquet for the women of the court totally segregated from that of her - and their - husbands. The lack of status is to be seen in the fact that the venue and the victuals belong to the king. Queen Vashti merely has the use of them. We see here, then, one aspect of Vashti: that of a woman of lowly status, despite her position as queen, with little or no property which she could call her own. And yet she is, nonetheless, a beautiful queen, accustomed to a rich and pampered lifestyle.

We are told that on the last day of the protracted banquet, the King commands his eunuchs to bring Queen Vashti to him, wearing her royal diadem. His intention, presumably, was to flaunt her beauty before his guests. This was in contravention of the custom that demanded that women should not show their faces in public. In her

refusal to obey this royal command, we see yet another facet to Vashti's character; that of a woman with an independent mind who was prepared to risk the wrath of the king for what she believed was the correct response. There were of course, no rights, for women at that time, not even for a queen: women were totally subject to men (Collins 1995:50). During this period, no man saw the face of a woman in public, and certainly no ordinary person had seen the queen's face. Yet Ahasuerus wanted his queen to display herself totally (it has even been suggested that she was required to appear naked) to the king's guests. The first and second banquets are displays of the king's wealth and magnificence (1:1-4, 5-8). The third is Vashti's all-female counterpart to the king's all-male banquet (Clines 1990:37).

It was due to Queen Vashti's public disobedience that the king issued an edict that deposed her and ordained that another, more "worthy" woman should be found to take her place (Bush 1996:354). However, the patriarchy now faced a threat: Vashti's refusal to appear at the king's command could cause "all women" throughout the kingdom to look with contempt at their husbands (Craig 1995:82). The punishment Vashti receives was designed to induce all women to honour their husbands.

As might be expected, King Xerxes was angered by her reaction: as Beal states in Brenner (1995:95), the king's response was typical of a situation in which the prevailing climate of male dominance and control is threatened: "It is her refusal to come, her willful absence that throws a wrench into the machinery and leads to her dishonourable discharge." This refusal on Vashti's part to comply with a command of her lord and master should not be underestimated.

She was probably, as she well knew, putting her very life in danger. We are uncertain as to her fate, but we may assume it was not a pleasant one. So, to the apparently contradictory traits of hedonism, self-indulgence, and morality, we must add that of bravery.

In order to maintain the integrity of the patriarchy, it becomes imperative that an example be made of the disobedient queen or, it was feared, that women throughout the kingdom would follow her example and defy their husbands (Craig 1995:42). On the advice of his counselors the king issues an edict to the effect that the Queen is to be deposed and another woman, more worthy (or compliant), be selected as consort (Bush 1996:354). The purpose was to try to ensure that women throughout the kingdom would continue to honour their husbands. It has been pointed out that the King's action and reaction are examples of blatant, crude male chauvinism (Jones 1977:439). Vashti was nothing more to her husband than an **object** - an object with which he wished to impress his equally chauvinistic guests. In his view, he had purchased this "object", and it was his prerogative to deal with it (her) as he wished. "There is a monotonous repetition of '...pleasing of appearance' (1:11, 2:2, 3:7). The pleasure of the king is important. Examples of this are '...the king's heart is glad with wine' (1:10); 'If it pleases the king (1:19) and '...the maiden who pleases the king' (2:4, 2:9)."

Perhaps we can add yet a further dimension to our portrait of Vashti: that of pride. We see her as a proud woman declining to dance to the tune of a man, even the king. According to Beal (1995:95), Vashti's pride has the effect of threatening to undermine the prevailing climate of male dominance.

Up to this point in the history of Persia, women had been in a position so subservient as to have no voice. Vashti's defiance of the king, it was feared by the patriarchy, could have the effect that women would now find a collective voice and assume a more prominent role in society. According to Beal, Vashti at this point becomes ⁹"abject": that which can be neither subject nor object within the social and symbolic order (1995:98). Vashti is placed beyond the pale, stripped of her title; she is now a non-person, even of lower status than that of her former position of chattel.

Bush (1996:354) makes the point that the character and integrity displayed by Vashti results in her treatment by the narrator being very different from that accorded the rest of the court. Her treatment is tinged with respect, whereas that meted out to the courtiers is mocking and contemptuous. This may be seen, for example, in the narrator's handling of the king's action after the event: instead of responding himself, Xerxes has to rely on the advice and direction of his counselors; he is weak and vacillating - in direct contradistinction to the decisive, brave Vashti.

Through political chicanery, the patriarchy attempts to re-establish its predominance as action is taken to ensure that women remain voiceless. The corrosive fear, not so much of women ruling over men, but rather of the idea that women should be regarded as the equals of their husbands, has been, for the moment, suppressed.

However, Esther now assumes the role from which Vashti had been banished. She shall, though, bring to the role even more complexity and determination, as she comes to realize that on the outcome of this

⁹ abject: "Lacking all pride, made humble, wretched without resources" (Hawkins 1991:2)

game depends the future of her people - *but not necessarily her emancipation as a woman.*

5.2 The feminine roles played by Esther

In this context I mean by the term “feminine” those characteristics which are culturally prescribed and valued in girls and women. Feminine roles played by Esther include those of adopted daughter; concubine; beauty contestant; queen and femme fatale. A further, well-hidden, side to Esther’s character is the more masculine aspect of ruthless avenger. The implied author, then, does not present Esther as a unidimensional character, but rather paints her as a well-rounded woman possessing mainly feminine traits, offset by a slight degree of masculinity - the balance of “¹⁰yin” and “yang” which makes for a fully developed personality.

5.2.1 Esther as adopted daughter

Hassassah, Esther’s Jewish name, comes from the word for “myrtle” - a lowly shrub - which means “fragrance” (Swindoll 1997:36). Her Persian name means “Star”. As an adopted daughter, Esther is presented as submissive and obedient to her guardian, Mordecai. Her position is a delicate one: not only is she an orphan, but she is also female; further, she is a member of a tiny minority, the political and social position of which is tenuous at best. Moreover, she has reason to hide an essential aspect of her personality - her Jewishness.

¹⁰ yin: “(In Chinese philosophy) the passive principle of the universe characterized as earth, female” and yang: “characterized as heaven, male” (Hawkins 1991:950 & 951).

As a female existing in a patriarchal system, she has little say over her destiny: when her cousin Mordecai suggests that she enter the king's harem, she does so without seeming to demur. It may be assumed that this apparent willingness on her part to become a concubine of the king is designed to gratify her cousin, rather than from any real desire or ambition on her part. As adopted daughter, she continues to submit to the will of her guardian, even after her marriage and elevation to the throne as queen consort - a graphic example of the power of the patriarchy, controlling the sexuality of its females (Matthew & Benjamin 1993:13).

In Mordecai's insistence on her concealing her ethnic origins, we are confronted by a number of questions: was Mordecai trying to protect *himself*? Was he using this as a strategy to further his own political ambitions or perhaps attempting to rid himself of a liability? Was he acting in Esther's best interests? Or are we to see Mordecai's action here as being guided by God? The answer or answers to these questions is or are not readily discernible. Reading the story from a Judaeo-Christian perspective, one would naturally see the hand of God guiding Mordecai in his manipulation of Esther. Feminists, on the other hand, would tend to view Mordecai's intentions as chauvinism at its worst.

Bearing in mind the right that existed for first cousins to marry, as well as the obvious attractiveness and suitability of Esther as a marriage partner, it may be questioned why Mordecai did not choose to marry her. Again the answer to this question may be found in God's greater plan for both Esther and Mordecai: that they would, as queen and courtier, be instrumental in delivering the Jews from annihilation.

5.2.2 Esther as concubine

Esther's behaviour in the harem is portrayed as gracious and demure. The king's eunuch, Hegai, immediately notices this woman of extraordinary beauty and becoming manner. He earmarks her as a concubine to be groomed for the king's special delectation and Esther cooperates fully as she participates in the various activities by which the concubines are prepared. Hegai reciprocates by granting Esther all the necessary adornments, cosmetics, perfumes and sustenance. His generosity extends to granting her the services of the best seven maids from the king's palace, as well as the most comfortable quarters in the harem.

Her sojourn in the harem is earmarked by regular enquiries from Mordecai, who appears to be more interested in her ultimate fate than in her present happiness and well-being, as he never neglects to ask how she is being prepared and what is to become of her (Gordis 1974:29).

In the harem, Esther completes the course prescribed for the preparation of concubines according to what De Troyer (1995:52) calls "the law of women" or the "manner of the women" (The Holy Bible: King James version). A question arises regarding this "law of women": was it a law *by* women, or was it a law imposed *upon* women? It is suggested by De Troyer that the term "the law of women" was used deliberately to pressurize young girls into fulfilling what was required of them in the harem. This, then, is perhaps yet a further example of the machinations of the patriarchal system.

Esther's grace is further demonstrated when, upon being summoned to the king, she, being permitted to take whatever she wanted from the

harem, chose to take only that which was advised by Hegai (Gordis 1974:29, 31). Again it may be assumed that other, less gracious women would have seen this as an opportunity to enrich themselves.

Esther's encounter with the king proves to be favourable in the sense that she meets with his great approval, to the extent that he crowns her as his queen in the place of Vashti (Gordis 1974:31).

5.2.3 Esther as queen

Esther's elevation to the throne as queen consort of Persia was not a glorious one. She is, rather, the winner of a "beauty competition", a woman who permitted her life's course to be chartered by others, even to the extent that she may at this point be considered to be prostituting herself. This continued even where she was in a position - under the king's protection - to determine, at least to some degree, her own actions (Wyler 1995:114).

Esther's obedience to the demands of Mordecai is particularly remarkable in the light of her relationship to the king: he is never imperious with her; indeed, his approach borders on the fawning, as he insists on giving her whatever she desires. He is even prepared to share his Empire with her (5:3, 7:2). The reader, however, is made aware indirectly of the king's power and the probable consequences of disobedience - this was common knowledge throughout the Empire, and Esther reminds her cousin of the inadvisability of approaching the king in his chamber uninvited when he requests her to do so.

As didactic text, the book of Esther has as one of its purposes the instructional aim of teaching Jews to behave according to the law of

the land in which they find themselves: "It is the law" (4:11). In Persia, where the king had absolute power, his courtiers had no hesitation in dealing summarily with those who, for whatever reason, acted contrary to the royal dictate (Wyler 1995:119).

Esther's difficult position as queen is exacerbated by the character and actions of her predecessor. Vashti had demonstrated her independence and sense of dignity by flatly refusing to comply with what she regarded as an inappropriate, even immoral, command by the king. This still rankled with him, and it may be assumed that he was in no mood to tolerate similar behaviour on the part of his new queen. Esther, wisely, decides to exercise discretion in her dealings with her husband.

And yet, strangely, the queen continues to entertain and obey the importuning of her cousin, even after assuming this role. How is this to be explained? It may be proposed that the didactic purpose of the implied author extends to an examination of the position of, particularly, Jewish women under foreign male domination. In the first place, in terms of the patriarchal community into which Esther was born, that is Hebrew society, women were expected to be submissive and act under the authority of their male guardians - this was the norm. But in Esther's case, as queen, further layers of male dominance control her actions: as an alien woman (although this fact was not known to the king), elevated to the role of consort to an autocratic Persian king, her situation as female was even more constrained. Her role is ostensibly a powerless one - a mere object possessed by the king, for his pleasure. However, in the king's manner towards Esther, we may discern the seeds of a power that she

was later to exercise in a noble cause: the redemption of the Jewish people in Persia.

When it becomes known that an edict has been issued whereby all Jewish people are to be annihilated, the reader is now confronted with a situation fraught with suspense and danger. Will Esther obey her cousin, and flout the law of Persia by confronting the king unbidden, risking her very life in the process? Or will she ignore the command of Mordecai and attempt to maintain her position of luxury and ease by remaining loyal to her husband, the king?

Her response to this situation, initially at least, is again less than heroic. She sees intervention on her part as highly dangerous, and points this out to Mordecai (Followwill 1995:1). Only in reaction to his aggression and threats does she finally concede to his demands. The male dominance which permeates this society is again made plain: Esther is caught on the horns of a dilemma as she has to choose between two equally unattractive options. Either she risks the wrath of her cousin and the debasement of her Jewishness, as her cousin warns her that "...if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another quarter" (God), or she faces the displeasure of the king as she flouts the law.

5.2.4 Esther as femme fatale

A striking detail ("The Virgins Appear before Ahasuerus") in a painting ascribed to the medieval artist, Filippino Lippi, entitled "La Derelitta" (Gitay 1995:138) (see addendum), provides a clue as to the subtle use to which Esther puts her femininity. The detail shows a

number of the candidates for the position of queen passing before the king, surrounded by several courtiers, as he sets about choosing a bride. Most of the girls flaunt themselves proudly before the king - but not Esther, who is shown to be demure and submissive in the royal presence. The submissiveness, I would argue, is part of her strategy to attract the attention of one she knows to be patriarchal and chauvinistic in the extreme - one who has but recently rid himself of a wife who was not as compliant as he would have liked. The wily Esther is thus shown in a posture of almost abject humility; but one cannot escape the impression that her attitude is nothing less than a political ploy in her maneuvering to attain the throne.

Esther was certainly not above employing feminine wiles in achieving her objectives. In the narrative we are told that a threat to exterminate the Jews, masterminded by Haman, has resulted in these people going into deep mourning. Mordecai, as a leading figure in the Jewish community, reveals his distress by his dressing in sackcloth and ashes as was the custom for those in mourning. On hearing of Mordecai's distress, but without being aware of its cause, Queen Esther attempts to relieve his anguish by sending him new clothing. When she is eventually informed - by one of the palace eunuchs - of the jeopardy into which the Jewish people have been thrust, she is reluctant to intercede on their behalf as she states:

“All the king's officials and the people of the royal provinces know that for any man or woman who approaches the king in the inner court without being summoned the king has but one law: that he be put to death. The only exception to this is for the king to extend the gold sceptre to him and spare his life. But thirty days have passed since I was called to go to the King “ (Est 4:11).

Mordecai resorts to a patriarchal strategy of warning and using veiled threats to persuade Esther to engage the king. It is here that we see

how Esther could employ deception to achieve an ulterior motive. Fuchs writes: “Deceptiveness is a common characteristic of women in the Hebrew Bible. It is a motif that runs through most narratives involving women, both condemnatory and laudatory ones. From Eve to Esther...(it) is an almost inescapable feature of femininity” (Fuchs 1985:137). Because Esther’s motives are pure in this deception, it is clear that the implied author’s attitude towards such a feminine wife is laudatory.

Esther’s deception lay in the fact that she presented herself as alluringly as possible in the forecourt of the king’s palace. In so doing, she was risking her life - her bravery here must be credited. The king responds to her allure and offers her whatever she desires. She expresses a wish for the king and Haman to attend a banquet which she is to organise. At this banquet, she provocatively requests their attendance at a second banquet the following night. In so doing she creates suspense, and makes both men feel that their presence is indispensable to the success of the banquet. The subversive laughter so characteristic of the carnivalesque is apparent here: Esther has these two slavering chauvinists, both the leading figures in the “official culture”, eating out of her hand. She, the humble Jewess, leads them by the nose into the trap she has prepared - and the reader cannot but be amused at the way in which the common folk, represented by Esther, have turned the tables so neatly on the oppressors.

According to Klein (1995:165), Esther reinforces her “feminine shame by acting as ‘servant to the men’. She has manipulated the king by presenting herself as a submissive wife subjugated to her husband’s authority, and this adds to the king’s generosity towards his wife.

Gordis (1974:43) also suggests that Esther was laying the groundwork for the enemy's downfall when she planned the banquet. By postponing the unmasking of Haman, Esther has deliberately created a climate of suspense and anticipation, and when she finally denounces Haman, by revealing his plot to destroy her people, the king is in no mood to countenance the loss of this enchanting wife. Haman's life hangs in the balance and Esther reveals yet a further dimension to her character, a dimension which may be seen as a foil to the wily femininity - that of avenger.

5.2.4 Esther as avenger

After the enraged king leaves the banquet, Haman realises that his position is precarious and approaches Esther to beg for mercy. The king returns and interprets the situation as one of Haman attempting to molest his wife. Esther, again deceptively, does not correct this impression as she seeks to wreak revenge on Haman for his conspiracy. Haman is sentenced to death, but the peril of the Jews remains, as an edict issued by the king cannot be revoked.

Esther continues to manipulate the king by presenting herself as the submissive and compliant wife when she beseeches him:

"If it pleases the king, ...and if he regards me with favour and thinks it is the right thing to do, and if he is pleased with me, let an order be written overruling the dispatches that Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, devised and wrote to destroy the Jews in all the King's provinces" (Est. 8:5).

When the king points out that the edict cannot be revoked, Esther employs the feminine strategy of weeping and begging the king in his "superior" masculine position to take steps to end the proposed

massacre. He finally succumbs to these feminine wiles and permits her and Mordecai to write to the Jews in any vein they choose, under the royal seal. Esther and Mordecai thereupon instruct the Jews to retaliate to any attack. However, Esther is not satisfied merely with retaliation, but requires also of the Jewish people an offensive against the enemies. Her vengeful streak is further highlighted by her request to the king to have the bodies of Haman's sons, who had been slaughtered by the Jews, hanged on the gallows (9:13).

5.3 Esther: an emancipated woman?

From the perspective of the twenty-first century, it is probably fair to judge Esther as a woman whose emancipation - *as a woman* - is incomplete. Bearing in mind the status of the ancient Near Eastern married woman, who was often regarded by her spouse - and society in general - as little more than a chattel, we are struck by the vast need and scope for emancipation. We are similarly struck by the degree of success achieved by Esther in her use of masks and personae to give her room for manoeuvring against the patriarchal system which attempts to suppress her and her people. She was, after all, able to defeat and destroy her enemies and save her compatriots from annihilation. To this extent, she was able to shake off the shackles of patriarchal subjugation; to this extent, at least, she achieved emancipation. In her own time and milieu, she would no doubt have been regarded as - and would have regarded herself - as free as it was at all possible to be.

Wyler (1995:130) makes the important distinction that Esther has become an emancipated Jew - an emancipation begun initially in her

preparedness to approach the king unsummoned - but that she remains an incompletely emancipated woman. She (Wylter) believes that Esther, in her position as queen, was perhaps the most favourably placed woman in the kingdom to achieve emancipation as a woman; that she did not do so is “tragic”. The queen’s inability to free herself from discrimination may be seen against the background of Mordecai’s rise in status and power, despite the fact that it is Esther who is in personal contact with the king. It is Mordecai who directs affairs, with his ward acting as a mere go-between. Wylter (1995:131) points out that it is made clear in the final verse of the book that it is he, and not Esther, who is second to the king: “Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes...” (10:3).

Whereas Vashti’s opposition to the king and the patriarchal system arose out of the fact that she was a woman, Esther’s opposition was founded in her essential Jewishness. As a woman she remains firmly enmeshed in the toils of male domination. Is this because she is incapable of freeing herself - and other women - or is it because she is simply unaware of the nature of her bondage? I would argue that to pass judgement on Esther for her inability to achieve full emancipation represents a skewed view of history; it is an attempt to force the story unnaturally into a late twentieth century feminist paradigm.

From her perspective, although she continued to exist and act under ostensible male domination, she had effectively employed her various masks to achieve what many modern women, believing themselves to be fully emancipated, could never achieve. She was not prepared or able to overthrow the existing patriarchal order, but she nonetheless achieved her goals acting within the system as she found it.

A consideration of her position as an alien woman living precariously in ancient Persian society, predisposes against Esther ever becoming an early Boadicea, prepared to incite her sisters against their overlords - and die as a result. Rather for her, a more subtle approach is the key to survival.

5.4 In conclusion

I refer back to Chapter Three where I mentioned the perplexing contradiction to be found in the attitude of patriarchs to the “purity” of the women for whom they were responsible. Whereas on the one hand, they were determined that the girls and women under their charge should remain virgins until their marriage, on the other hand, they were apparently quite prepared to marry the girls off under the most expedient circumstances. In terms of contemporary western norms, such action would be construed as a form of prostitution - women are prostituted in the best financial or political interests of their (male) guardians.

Looking at the position of Esther, who, as a Jewess, was apparently quite willing to marry out of the faith - advantageously - at the behest of her guardian, it becomes difficult to escape the impression that she was, in a sense, prostituting herself. Contrasting her situation with that of Vashti, a Persian woman who was chosen as queen by a Persian king, Esther’s willingness to enter into this marriage, and her motives, no matter how noble the end result was to be, were less than pure. After all, at the time of her agreeing to the marriage, she was

not aware that she would as queen be in a position to deliver her people from the enemies.

Having said this, there are two caveats to be borne in mind: firstly, if Esther's role can indeed be seen as that of object-whore, then such a role is to be seen as the foil to the role of possessor-whoremaster played by the most powerful figures in her life: her husband and her guardian. "It was a male orientated and male dominated society. The (Old Testament) story revolves round the patriarchs, sons not daughters are important, religious ceremonies and even the law are largely geared to the male" (Evans 1983:31).

Secondly, we again encounter the problem here of imposing on Esther's behaviour a 21st Century, Western norm: arranged marriages, while unacceptable in contemporary Western society, were more the rule than the exception in ancient Near Eastern communities. As Gunn and Fewell (1993:193) state:

"Modern readers may find some of the social attitudes and practices encoded in (Biblical) text strange. More than that, those attuned to the injustice of racism, classism, and sexism may not find the Bible's dominant ideologies - as they reconstructed them - at all agreeable. The result is interpretation that expresses a conflict ... between modern and ancient contexts and values".

A further problem, which does not lie within the scope of this study, arises in attempting to discern the hand of God in Esther's actions. While *she* was unaware at the time of her marriage of the role she would play as queen in delivering the Jews, this was part of God's plan. However, the question must be asked, does God - **can** God - use "immoral" means to achieve His ends? The question is, of course, being asked from a human perspective: it springs from our limited knowledge and understanding, as we "...see through a glass, darkly"

(1 Cor 13:12); it does not take into account God's omniscience and perfect understanding. The question represents a grey area in our understanding and interpretation of God's purpose - in the same way that we may find it difficult that, for example, God chose to use Rahab, a prostitute, in executing his plan for the fall of Jericho (Joshua 2: 1-24).

Who, then, is the real Esther? Is she the rather insipid young woman, compliant and ready to act on the instructions of her male "superiors"; is she the provocative beauty able to manipulate her chauvinistic husband; or is she the wily strategist, shrewd and resourceful in striving to achieve her goal? I would argue that she is none yet all of these: a complex multi-dimensional character, impossible to categorize or to stereotype, a prime example of "non essentialism" - the ultimate refutation of patriarchy.

CHAPTER SIX

THE MULTIPLE FACES OF ESTHER: AN IDEOLOGICAL APPRECIATION

This study has undertaken an investigation of the hypothesis that Esther employs various personae in her quest to survive and achieve in the patriarchal Persian community.

It becomes apparent that any ideological investigation of a tale, as advocated by Robbins (1996), of the tale, opens a myriad of perspectives and vistas on life in the ancient Near East. As the reader grapples with one issue, a veritable Pandora's box of questions comes to the fore. The reader is, in other words, sensitized through this approach to the richness and variety of life as it was lived during Biblical times. The unidimensional stereotypes with which many readers, if not most, approach Biblical stories are thus swept away, and replaced with a new appreciation.

The patriarchal system, which, it is pointed out, still exists, has been examined in terms of Tribble's definition: "...the institutionalization of male dominance over women in home and society at large." (Tribble 1994: 449). The patriarchy of ancient Near Eastern Israel has been analysed.

Various roles played by women in ancient Israel, including those of virgin, wife, mother, midwife, widow and foreigner were focused upon with a view to illuminating the position of Esther. This study focused particularly on the role and position of the virgin in the ancient Near Eastern society and stressed the importance accorded by the patriarchal system to the state of virginity. It was shown that

virginity had political rather than moral implications. The development in the thinking of 20th Century Biblical scholars was traced; it was suggested that the change in status of the ancient Near Eastern wife was comparable to Esther's changing status.

In an examination of the book of Esther it was argued that this is a didactic instrument which Humphreys suggests is a short tale in prose (1985:19). It was suggested further that the book falls into the genre "Carnavalesque", which demonstrates a means of survival for the oppressed. Examples of the topsy turvy characteristic of carnivalesque include the hanging of Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai; the elevation of a Jewish orphan girl to queen, and the celebration by the Jews of a triumphal festival at a time that had been earmarked for their annihilation.

It was shown that the book is set in Susa, the capital of Persia during the reign of Ahasuerus (Xerxes). The general focus was shown to be on court life, while a narrower parallel focus was shown to be on the life of the Jews of the Diaspora. Various themes were touched upon such as God's control, God's protection, Jewish nationalism and citizenship under foreign domination.

A brief overview of the story-line of the book of Esther was presented and focussed on the main characters, including Esther, Mordecai, King Ahasuerus, Vashti and Haman,

In examining Esther in context, the position and role of Vashti was touched upon: the various roles played by Esther, including that of adopted daughter, concubine, queen and avenger were brought into focus.

The conclusion which was arrived at was that Esther, while achieving a degree of emancipation as a Jewess, achieved only a limited degree of emancipation as a woman through the use of various facades and personae. She remained, as Stocker describes her: "...a domesticated consort and trophy wife" (1998:12).



SOURCES CONSULTED

Abrams, M H 1971. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston Inc.

Beal, T K 1995. Tracing Esther's Beginnings, in Brenner, A (ed), *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, 87-110. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Berg, S B 1979. *The book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure*. Iowa: Scholars Press.

Brenner, A 1994(a). An Afterword: The Decalogue - Am I an addressee? in Brenner, A (ed), *A Feminist Companion to Exodus to Deuteronomy*, 255-258. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

_____. 1994(b). *The Israelite Woman. Social role and Literary Type in Biblical narrative*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. (JSOT Supplement Series 21.)

Bush, T K 1996. *Ruth, Esther*. Dallas: Word Books, Publisher. (WBC 9.)

Clines, D J A 1990. Reading Esther from left to right, in Clines, D J A, Fowl, S E & Porter, S E (eds). *The Bible in Three Dimensions*, 31-51. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. (JSOT Supplement Series 87.)

Collins, S 1975. *Courage and Submission. A study of Ruth and Esther*. Glendale: G/L Publications.

Collins, A Y 1985. *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*. Chico: Scholars Press.

Craig, K M 1995. *Reading Esther: A case for the Literary Carnavalesque*. Louisville: John Knox Press.

Crenshaw, J L 1985. *Story and Faith: A Guide to the Old Testament*. New York: McMillan Publish Co.

Deist, F 1986. *A Concise Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Pretoria: J.L. van Schaik.

De Troyer, K 1995. An Oriental Beauty Parlour, in Brenner, A (ed), *A Feminist companion to Esther, Ruth & Susanna*, 47-70. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Dimont, M 1962. *Jews, God and History*. New Jersey: The New American Library, Inc.

Dreyer, Y 1999a. Die personaliteit van vrou-wees binne die Mediterreense Kultuur. *HTS* 55, 48-65.

_____ 1999b. Vroue en die sosio-kulturele narratief. *Skrif en Kerk* 20(1), 51-65.

Eskenazi, T C 1997. Out from the Shadows: Biblical Women in the Post-Exilic Era, in Exum, J C (ed), *The Historical Books*. 349-366. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. (JSOT 54.)

Evans, M [1983] 1998. *Woman in the Bible*. Carlisle: Paternoster Publishing.

Exum, J C 1985. Feminist Criticism: whose interests are being served? in Yee, G A (ed), *Judges and Method. New approaches in Biblical Studies*. 65-89. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Figs, E 1970. *Patriarchal Attitudes: Women in Society*. London: Faber and Faber.

Firth, D G 1997. The book of Esther: A neglected paradigm for dealing with the state. *OTE* 10(1), 18-26.

Followwill, D 1995. 1-10. *What about when God seems silent?* (Peninsula Bible Church Catalogue 4444) [Online] Available: <http://pbc.org/dp/dorman/4444.html> [1999, February 19].

Fontaine, C R 1995. Women in the World of Wisdom in Brenner, A (ed), *A feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*, 22-25. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Frymer-Kensky, T 1998. Virginity in the Bible, in Matthews, V H, Levinson, B M, & Frymer-Kensky, T, (eds), *Gender and Law in the*

Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East, 79-96. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. (JSOT Supplement Series 262.)

Fuchs, E 1985. Who is hiding the truth? Deceptive women and Biblical Androcentrism, in Collins, A Y. (ed), *Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship*, 137-144. California: Scholars Press.

Gitay, Z 1995. Esther and the Queen's throne, in Brenner, A (ed), *A feminist companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, 136-148. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Gordis R 1974. *Megillat Esther. The Masoretic Text with Introduction, New Translation and Commentary*. New York: The Rabbinical Assembly.

Gordis R 1976. Studies in the Esther Narrative. *JBL* 39, 43-38.

Gottwald, N K 1987. *The Hebrew Bible. A socio-Literary Introduction*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press.

Gunn, D M & Fewell, D N 1993. *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Haralambous, M & Holborn, M 1995. *Sociology Themes and Perspectives*. London: Collins Educational.

Harrison, R K 1969. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. Michigan: W B Eerdmans.

Hawkins, J M 1991. *The Oxford Reference Dictionary*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Hegar, R L & Scampieco, M 1999. *Kinship Foster Care: Policy, Practice and Research*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Humm, M [1989] 1995. *The Dictionary of Feminist Theory*. Wheatsheaf: Prentice Hall.

Humphreys, W L 1985. Novella, in Coats, G W (ed), *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable*, 82-95. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press (JSOT Supplement Series 35.)

Humphreys, W L 1985. The story of Esther and Mordecai: an early Jewish novella, in Coats, G W (ed), *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable*, 96-113. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press (JSOT Supplement Series 35.)

Jansen, E 1997. 1-3. Ray Stedman Library through PBC Homepage. *The story of Esther*. <http://www.Surfshop.net/users/ejansen/weds.html> [1999, February 19].

Johnson, P [1987] 1988. *A History of the Jews*. London: George Weidenfeld & Nicolson Limited.

Jones, B W 1977. Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther, in *CBQ* 39 171-181.

Keil, C F & Delitzsch, D D [s a]. *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*. Michigan: W B Eerdmans.

Kilian, J 1989. *Form and Style in Theological Texts*. Pretoria: University of South Africa.

Klein, L R 1995. Honor and Shame in Esther, in Brenner, A (ed), *A feminist companion to Esther, Ruth and Susanna*, 149-175. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Larkin, K J A 1996. *Ruth and Esther*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Larue, G A [1968] 1970. *Old Testament Life and Literature*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon Inc.

Loader, J A 1988. Esther, in Bosman, H L & Loader, J A (eds), *Old Testament Story Tellers*, 114-121. Cape Town: Tafelberg Publishers Ltd. (LOT 2.)

Malick, D 1996. 1-4. *An Introduction to the Book of Esther*. (Dallas Theological Seminary) [Http://www.bible.org](http://www.bible.org) [2000, October 14].

Matthews, V H 1998. Honor and Shame in Gender-Related Legal Situations in the Hebrew Bible, in Matthews, V H, Levinson, B M, & Frymer-Kensky, T, (eds), *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East*, 97-112. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press. (JSOT Supplement Series 262.)

Matthews, V H & Benjamin, D C 1993. *Social World of Ancient Israel 1250-587 B.C.E.* Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers.

McLeish, K 1993. *Bloomsbury Guide to Human Thought.* London: Bloomsburg Publishing.

Moore, C A 1971. *Esther. Introduction, Translation and Notes.* New York: Doubleday & Co. Inc. (AB10.)

Niditch, S 1995. Esther, Folklore, Wisdom Feminism and Authority, in Brenner, A (ed), *A feminist companion to Esther, Ruth and Susanna*, 26-46. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Ringgren H 1969. *Israelite Religion:* London: SPCK.

Robbins, V K 1996. *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A guide to socio-rhetorical interpretation.* Valley Forge: Trinity Press.

Stallybrass, P & White, A 1986. *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression.* London: Methuen.

Stedman, R C. 1963[a]. 1-9. Ray Stedman Library through PBC Homepage. A Pair of Queens in Stedman, R (ed), *The Queen and I.* [Online] Available:[Http://pbc.org/dp/stedman/esther/oo32.html](http://pbc.org/dp/stedman/esther/oo32.html) [2000, October 14].

_____ 1963[b]. 1-9. Ray Stedman Library through PBC Homepage. The Struggle for Power, in Stedman, R (ed), *The Queen and I.* [Online] Available:[Http://pbc.org/dp/stedman/esther/oo33.html](http://pbc.org/dp/stedman/esther/oo33.html) [2000, October 14].

Stocker, M 1998. *Judith: Sexual Warrior: Women and Power in Western Culture.* London: Yale University Press.

Swindoll, C R 1997. *Esther, A woman of Strength and Dignity.* London: Word Publishing.

Trible, P 1994. *Rhetorical criticism: context, method and the book of Jonah.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Van der Toorn, K 1994. *From her Cradle to her Grave. The role of Religion in the life of the Israelite Woman.* Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Venter, P M 1999. Ester, in Vosloo W & Van Rensburg, F J (reds) 1999. *Die Bybellenium Eenvolumekommentaar*, 545-560. Vereeniging: Christelike Uitgewers-maatskappy.

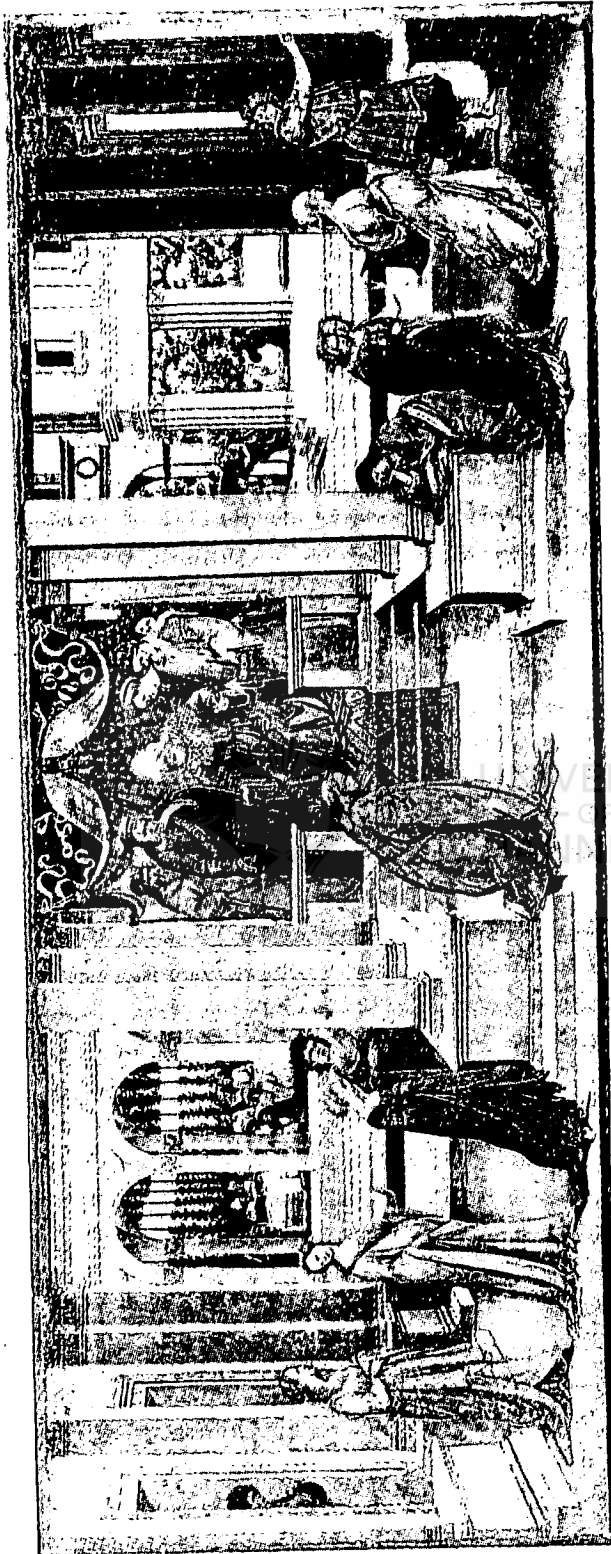
Wright, C J H 1990. *God's People in God's Land.* Michigan: The Paternoster Press.

Wyler, B 1995. Esther: The Incomplete Emancipation of a Queen, in Brenner, A (ed), *A feminist companion to Esther, Ruth and Susanna*, 111-135. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.

Zimmerli, W 1976. *The Old Testament and the World.* London: SPCK.



Addendum



Filippino Lippi, *The Virgins Appear before Alasuerus*, detail from *La Derelitta*
(Chantilly, Musée Condé, No. 19, France).