

READING ESTHER: CULTURAL IMPACT ON  
RESPONSES TO BIBLICAL HEROINES

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### **Reader Response to Megillat Esther**

Contemporary literary theorists have encouraged readers to expose socio-political agendas encoded in literary works. Feminist readers use these deconstructionist critical strategies effectively to unmask and confront problematic attitudes toward women in a broad range of religious, literary, scientific, and popular texts, including portrayals of women in the Bible. In this paper, I look at readers' responses to the biblical Book of Esther, specifically the version of the narrative found in the Hebrew Bible and its English translations.<sup>1</sup> My goal is to explore the way cultures shape diverging reactions to this text. I focus on suggestive ideas and parallels, and in no way intend this discussion to represent a comprehensive overview of any one group of readers. I begin with a review of four questions suggested by contemporary feminist readers who work to "deconstruct the dominant paradigms of biblical interpretation and reconstruct them," with the goal of understanding these texts in ways which do "not legitimate patriarchal oppression."<sup>2</sup> I suggest that, perhaps surprisingly, several questions that trouble feminist readers were anticipated by some medieval rabbinic commentators. I summarize the views and interpretations of these rabbinic readers, and explore their concerns. Finally I offer a selection of critical approaches suggested by scholars of the biblical period. Insights provided by biblical scholars, some of whom are themselves feminists, explore historicity, language, genre, and narrative techniques and bring a crucial dimension to our understanding of the text. I am especially interested in those scholarly approaches enabling readers to perceive the deeper social critique of the Persians and their rulers within the text of *Megillat Esther*.

Contemporary feminist readers raise important questions, including the following:

(1) Esther Fuchs emphasizes the fact that God's name is not mentioned in this book which has a woman as the hero, and asserts that the omission of God's name is evidence of a "comprehensive biblical policy which allows women characters to hold direct discourse with God (or his agent) only in a procreative context." (2) Fuchs castigates *Megillat Esther* for underscoring what she sees as a patriarchal ideology which rewards obedience and submissiveness in a woman, and which portrays women getting their way only when they are sly and deceptive.<sup>3</sup> (3) Susan Schnur proposes an unbroken link between the pagan, polytheistic source materials and the canonized texts and Judaized holidays which emerged as *Megillat Esther* and Purim.<sup>4</sup> (4) Readers such as Shulamit Reinharz note that when Ahasuerus rounds up all the virginal young women and sequesters them into the palace, the text does not appear to condemn the sexual enslavement of women. Reinharz wonders why even "Esther seems to have accepted or have been unable to question the king's practice of sexually enslaving women," since her request to the king said nothing about "other women in captivity already."<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps unexpectedly, rabbinical exegetes were troubled by many of the same questions. Rabbis living in Spain, Italy, France and Morocco from the eleventh through the fifteenth centuries identified very closely with Esther's situation. When these rabbis looked at Esther's plight in the Persian court they thought of Jews in the courts of Spain and other European countries. They were also reminded of the ways in which religious persecution impinged on their own families and lives. As Barry Dov Walfish demonstrates, these rabbis were appalled by the fact that Esther was seized and whisked off to the harem of a gentile potentate, without any recorded protest by Mordecai, the Jewish community, or indeed by Esther herself. Abraham Ibn Ezra [Spain, Italy, and

France, ca. 1089- ca. 1164] insists that the use of the passive verb, *va-tillikakh*, emphasizes the fact that Esther was taken against her will. Ibn Ezra was a brilliantly gifted and prolific “poet, grammarian, biblical commentator, philosopher, astronomer, and physician.” In 1140 he left Spain and wandered through Italy and France until he died; historians believe his “troubled spirit” and “the restless wandering that resulted from it was due to the real or alleged conversion to Islam of his only surviving son.”<sup>6</sup>

Abraham Saba [Spain and Morocco, mid-fifteenth-early sixteenth centuries] exiled from Spain to Morocco, is tormented by the fate of Esther, which hits close to home and reminds him of the martyrdom of many of his co-religionists:

Now when Mordecai heard the king’s herald announcing that whoever had a daughter or a sister should bring her to the king to have intercourse with an uncircumcised heathen, why did he not risk his life to take her to some deserted place to hide until the danger would pass, or even to take her to another kingdom? And if he could do neither of these things, have we not seen with our own eyes during the expulsion from Portugal, when sons and daughters were taken by force and converted, that Jews strangled and slaughtered themselves and their wives...so why did Mordecai not do one of those things that the simplest Jews in Portugal did?...Why was he not more careful? Where was his righteousness, his piety, and his valor...he surrendered to the enemy all that was dear to him.<sup>7</sup>

Saba’s frustration with Mordecai is also informed by his own personal suffering. In 1497 when the forced conversion of the Jews was declared in Portugal, Saba’s two sons were baptized. He fled to Lisbon, where he was imprisoned with other scholars.<sup>8</sup>

Contemporary readers may challenge Abraham Saba that Mordecai should have strangled Esther rather than allowing her to be taken into the King’s harem. However we learn about the power of milieu to shape a reader’s understanding of a text, as we observe

this medieval commentator's pain. The exiled Jews of Persia remind him of the suffering of the Iberian Jews on a very immediate and poignant level.

Medieval exegetes valorized Esther not as a "proper Jewish woman," but as a model for all Jews, including Jewish men. The rabbis of medieval Europe often saw the Book of Esther as a how-to book or self-help manual for Jewish survival among the elite classes in Diaspora communities. Esther was interpreted as the epitome of the clever courtier who understands how a subject should approach a ruler in order to accomplish difficult goals. Skill in this regard was especially critical for aristocratic Diaspora Jews, who were always in a potentially vulnerable position as they navigated their way as outsiders through the courts. Especially striking is the gender-neutral mode in which these medieval rabbis praise Esther's skills as a courtier. The rabbis assess Esther as a consummate politician.

For example, Zecharia ben Sarukh [fifteenth century, Spain and Morocco] calls Esther *medinit*, a good statesperson. Isaac Arama [1420-1494, Spain] similarly, credits Esther for bringing her endeavor to successful fruition by taking into consideration five important factors: (1) timing--bringing the plight of the Jews to the king's attention only after three encounters; (2) location--she brought the King and Haman into her own home, where no one could speak out against her; (3) means--the wine-banquets so loved by Ahasueros, which would make him feel well-disposed toward her request; (4) rhetoric--the order and phrasing of her request; and (5) flattery--tailoring her request to the person of whom she is requesting the favor. Along the same lines, Isaac ben Joseph ha-Kohen [late fourteenth-early fifteenth century, Spain] speaks of Esther as a model for courtiers by having in mind that all motivations for the request must appear to be beneficial to the

person from whom the request is made. According to ha-Kohen, Esther's request to Ahasueros made it clear that the King would benefit from Esther's request, that her request was for a proper and fitting action, that she herself had previously "found favor" in the King's eyes, and that since the King owed the Jews a favor he was bound to reciprocate. A third variation of this theme is found in the commentary of Joseph Hayyun [fifteenth century, Portugal]. He claims that Esther's language supplied the King with four rationales for accepting her request: First, "if it please the King," indicating that the action will be for the King's own benefit. Then, "if I have found favor in the King's eyes," reminding him that he likes her. Next, "if the thing seem right before the King," underscoring that the request is fitting for someone of the King's stature. And, finally, she refers with quiet self confidence to her own intrinsic quality as a person, "I be pleasing," and thus an appropriate recipient of the King's consideration.\*

In 1873 Harriet Beecher Stowe commented on the *Book of Esther* to discuss slavery in the United States: "the Jews were scattered up and down through the provinces, captives and slaves, with no rights but what their conquerors might choose to give them." Stowe continues, "It is fashionable in our times to speak of the contempt and disregard shown to women in this period of the world among Oriental races, but this one incident shows that...*human beings* were cheap. The massacre of hundreds of thousands was negotiated in an easy, off-hand way...." [Stowe's emphasis]<sup>10</sup>

Unlike Stowe, contemporary readers of the Bible are likely to have little experience with and even less patience for hierarchies of power. Citizens of democratic countries often assume that straightforward, direct communication of political positions is possible. When individuals are free to speak out, silence is a mark of cowardice. Thus,

contemporary feminist readers define female heroism as behavior devoid of compliance or submissiveness. When feminist readers condemn what they see as Esther's initial passiveness and later deceptiveness, they are evaluating her character based on modern cultural assumptions inapplicable during the time period represented in the text.

Each of these approaches (medieval rabbis, abolitionists, contemporary feminists) illustrate the impact of cultural milieu on the reader's interpretive framework---and understanding of the text. As feminist literary theory has shown, each author and each reader comes to a text with something at stake.<sup>11</sup> But researchers of biblical texts (who may also have personal issues at stake) approach their literary detective work with specialized expertise in understanding ancient cultures and texts. Biblical scholarship by both women and men provides powerful tools to place the narrative in social and literary historical perspective. This expanded perspective illuminates textual subtleties often missed when reading exclusively within the intellectual framework of a contemporary culture. Especially helpful are scholarly writings by Leila Bronner,<sup>12</sup> Jon Levenson,<sup>13</sup> Adele Reinhartz,<sup>14</sup> Michael Fox,<sup>15</sup> Susan Niditch,<sup>16</sup> Kenneth Craig,<sup>17</sup> Sidnie Ann White,<sup>18</sup> and Lawrence W. Wills,<sup>19</sup> among others.

### **Esther as a Subversive, Satiric Novella on Persian Culture**

Wills and other biblical scholars<sup>20</sup> suggest that *The Book of Esther* may be seen as a "novella" of a particular type, a harsh, near-ribald satire on the excesses, brutality, arbitrariness and shallowness of the rulers of the great Persian empire. This novella incorporates startlingly strong and subversive societal critiques just below the descriptive surface of the told tale. The authorial viewpoint is articulated not so much through the omniscient narrator, whose tone can be taken to be deceptively flat, but rather through

story elements such as plot, character development, setting, dialogue, and rhetoric and literary techniques. This approach suggests that *Megillat Esther*, like other stories of its type, would have appealed to Persian Jews struggling to learn how to make their way as exiled Diaspora Jews subject to alien rules and rulers.

Wills explores in detail the hypothesis that *The Book of Esther* was one of several Jewish-authored narratives which emerged during a time period when the influence of Hellenism had brought about a wide increase of literacy (beginning around fifth century B.C.E. and lasting until the second century, C.E., with the fall of the Roman Empire). Wills notes that scholars differ on dating the writing and editing of Esther. Some place its appearance at the fourth or fifth century B.C.E. and others in a somewhat later period, 135-140 B.C.E.<sup>21</sup> He elaborates that these Jewish “novellas” were often marked by fanciful settings, an adventurous tone, happy endings, and important women characters. Frequently materials of considerable historical interest---real places and pseudo-historical character names---are interwoven with a cavalier approach to actual dates and persons.<sup>22</sup>

The intermixing of famous, historical names with ahistorical characters was a typical literary strategy of these narratives. Thus, although Ahasueros’s name is a Hebraicization of the Persian monarch Artaxerxes, other sources reveal that this dynasty was only allowed to take its queens from within seven noble families. Scholars differ as to whether contemporaneous readers would have recognized the “plastic art,” the “playful counterpart to fact,” which includes a Jewish queen and a Jewish vizier, second in command to the Persian throne. Later readers learned to recognize that within imagined worlds “historical blunders do not result from gaps in the authors’ knowledge but are an expected part of the experience of reading, fiction.” During the earlier period, however,

fiction was not a clearly understood genre. Thus, it is difficult to know exactly what the *Book of Esther* might have meant to its ancient readers.<sup>23</sup> Whatever the fundamental, informing myth of the Hebrew *Megillat Esther* may have been to its contemporaneous readers, Wills is surely correct that it was an explication of the “deep distinction between Jew and Other.” As he elaborates:

Although a kind of co-existence is possible and Jews may even succeed in the larger society, a threat of violence hangs over them, and the newly discovered individual person must reclothe her or himself in Jewish identity to protect the interests of the family and the people.<sup>24</sup>

The position of the Jews in the Diaspora was, to use Jean Baker Miller’s term, that of a subordinate group. Esther, the orphaned female gathered up in a kind of government-sanctioned rape, is the quintessential Jew. Sidnie Ann White summarizes the way in which Esther herself becomes symbolic of the Jewish people, in a text which depicts, among other things, what the Jews must do in order to survive and thrive in the Diaspora:

The fact that she is a woman emphasizes the plight of the Jew in the Diaspora: the once-powerful Jewish nation has become a subordinate minority within a foreign empire, just as Esther, as a woman, is subject to the dominant male. However, by accepting the reality of a subordinate position and learning to gain power by working within the structure rather than against it, the Jew can build a successful and fulfilling life in the Diaspora, as Esther does in the court of Ahasueros.<sup>25</sup>

Understanding of the Jew vs. Other myth-as-narrative is particularly useful when considering Susan Shnur’s assumption that the fable’s power is directly linked to primitive fertility rites and that Persian-Jewish readers would have perceived Esther and

Mordecai as the Hebrew version of the pagan deities Astarte and Marduk. The scholars analyzing *Megillat Esther* as a satiric proto-novella do not support this idea, and see Esther and Mordecai as Hebrew versions of popular names of the cultural period, not necessarily linked to deities---just as we seldom think of etymology when we call a girl Allison (Al's son) or Barbara (stranger).

Similarly, the insights of Wills and like-minded scholars are useful in considering Esther Fuch's concern about the omission of God's name in a book named for a woman. In Jewish works of this type and period it was common not to include God's name, even when the work seems to some readers to presuppose a form of divine providence. Indeed, considering the ribald nature of events punctuating the beginning and climax of the action, it may have been considered inappropriate to include directly sacred references. As Sandra Beth Berg suggests, in this narrative divine providence---including the reversal of powerful human intentions---is accomplished through the human agency of its endangered heroine.<sup>26</sup>

The enduring literary power of *Megillat Esther* comes not from its factual historicity, or its proximation of pagan deities, but from its deft portrayal of a threatened people. The exiled Jews are symbolized and championed by one quadrupally disadvantaged individual---a woman, an orphan, a Jew, and a captive in the king's court. Esther triumphs over the sheer evil of a genocidal enemy, Haman, by outwitting the facilitating evil of her own husband and monarch, Ahasueros. Mordecai is of course an important player in the drama. He calls Esther's attention to the plight of the Jews at a time when, imprisoned deep in the harem world, she has minimal contact with the outside. The text makes it clear that Mordecai can transmit messages to Esther only through

intermediaries. Mordecai memorably alerts Esther to the alarming events, to her responsibility and to the unseen but powerful destiny that links her inexorably to the fate of her own people. However, once Mordecai's message has been conveyed, Esther is completely and terrifyingly on her own. She is the one who must think, strategize, and implement her plan, and it is she who will suffer the first consequences if she fails. By "foregrounding" Esther and "marginalizing" Mordecai in our discussion, to use Ilana Pardes' useful strategy, we can highlight an important "countertradition" in the text of *Megillat Esther*.<sup>27</sup>

The deep corruption of the society in which events take place, presented in what Wills calls a "carnival atmosphere," underscores the "parodic intent,"<sup>28</sup> and is an intrinsic and critical aspect of the story and its power. The action described by the text reveals a drunken, power-hungry, grotesque ruling class that treats women and wives (even queens) as disposable objects. The monarch is presented to the reader either as a buffoon or something worse---an opportunistic ruler who is all too ready to go along with Haman's plan to kill the Jews, and then sits down with Haman for a few drinks once the papers are signed.

In the creation of this history-like, fable-like world, the setting is the first and most basic element conveying the story's viewpoint. Two lines especially bracket the story toward the beginning of the narrative and then at its dramatic climax. In the second chapter, close to the beginning of the story, we learn that Mordecai and his ward, Esther, were "among the exiles brought by King Nebuchadnezzar to captivity in the Persian Empire." In Hebrew the line is studded with linguistic references to the processes of the *galut*, the exile:

*Asher haglah miyerushalayim im-hagolah asher hagletah im yekhonnayah  
melekh-yehudah asher heglah nevukhadnezzar melekh bavel. (2.6)*

Significantly, in the liturgical chanting of the Megillah, this line of text is often read with the same cantorial melody as the *Book of Lamentations* on the ninth of Ab, to remind listeners of the captive status of the Jews.

The closing bracket to this reminder of Jewish vulnerability comes in the middle of Esther's impassioned plea for the lives of the Jewish people, who have been given over "to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated." Conscientious Esther in 7.4 quotes directly from the King's edict, written to "every people in its own language" and distributed throughout the empire, that they are to "destroy, massacre and exterminate all the Jews, young and old, children and women," in 3.13. I have always been startled and disturbed when Esther continues, "Had we only been sold as bondmen and bondwomen I would have kept silent." (7.4)<sup>29</sup> This line, more than any other, highlights the chasm between the status of the Jews in Persia and that of Jews in contemporary America and other Western countries. What could be more antithetical to our own assumptions about life than the statement that slavery alone would not have been reason enough to disturb the King? This line is important for several reasons. First, it underscores the vulnerable status of the Persian Jews. Second, it helps to answer Shulamit Reinharz's important question, as to why Esther says nothing to the king about "other women in captivity." The slavery of both men and women is raised as an issue and then set aside.

Biblical scholars both in Israel<sup>30</sup> and in North America<sup>31</sup> have suggested that by reading *Megillat Esther* intertextually, looking at the language and events in conjunction with biblical descriptions of Joseph and Moses in Egypt, the reader can see Esther's

statement as a subversive comment about the power of Oriental potentates. The *Book of Esther* can be understood along side the parallel but different situations of Joseph, in the book of *Genesis*, who is sold into slavery and becomes a foreigner in Pharaoh's court. Later Moses, having been raised as a family member in Pharaoh's court, discovers himself to be a foreigner. Judy David-Rosenthal points out that intertextual echoes enable us to hear the ironic implications of Ahasueros's behavior, bringing to mind the situation of the Jews in Egypt:

The *Megillah's* author gives expression to reservations about the manner in which the King chooses a wife in a style and register reminiscent of the collections in the Egypt of Joseph's days: Genesis Ch. XLI, 34-37, which reads: 'Let Pharaoh...appoint officers in the land...and take up...in the seven years of plenty...against the seven years of famine...And the thing was good in the eyes of Pharaoh....' And in Esther Ch II, 3-4, we read: 'Let fair young virgins be sought...and let the king appoint officers in all the provinces...to gather together all the fair young virgins to Shushan...And the thing was good in the eyes of the king.' Women are treated as a negotiable commodity--preferably esthetic, like food. The *Megillah* repeatedly brings to the fore, through the literary conventions at its disposal, a lack of personal and emotional relationship towards women, and how much it is an external, functional one.

Similarly, the beauty treatments in the harem are modeled ironically on the descriptions for embalming the dead in Egypt:

[The *Megillah* says] 'for so were fulfilled the days of their anointing: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with sweet fragrances....' The choice of phrasing recalls a parallel in the Book of Genesis L,3: '...for so are fulfilled the days of those who are embalmed....'<sup>32</sup>

Keeping in mind the satiric voice in the text of *Megillat Esther*, and remembering the resonance of the sustained hatred of slavery (at least for Jews) in Israelite tradition which

culminates in and is celebrated through the exodus from Egypt, we can hear Esther's voice singing in two different keys as she makes her case to the King. To his ears, she sounds sweet and plaintive--clearly the way he likes his women. But to the reader, Esther speaks in a voice that may be dripping with sarcasm when she says that the slavery of the Jews is of no account.

Esther's words create their own counterpoint that turns their meaning inside out. From a literary perspective, one of the major motifs of the text is the reversal of fortune for individuals and for the Jewish people and those who hate them. These constant reversals, as many contemporary scholars have commented, are a primary dynamic of plot and language in *Megillat Esther*. *Ve-hahafokh hu*--and things got turned around, or the opposite happened--could be the subtitle of the book, instead of just the punch line, as it is at the beginning of chapter 9:

And so, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month--that is, the month of Adar--when the King's command and decree were to be executed, the very day on which the enemies of the Jews had expected to get them in their power, the opposite happened and the Jews got their enemies in their power. (9.1)

The motif of standing things on their heads, *al rosho*, is repeated again later in the chapter:

But when Esther came before the King, he commanded: 'With the promulgation of this decree, let the evil plot, which he [Haman] devised against the Jews, recoil on his own head!' So they impaled him and his sons on the stake.(9.25)

Some of the *Book of Esther's* reversals are played out by more than one character. Thus, King Ahasueros, for all his power, which the text details in hyperbole, is repeatedly foiled and frustrated by women, who supposedly have no power.<sup>33</sup> As Sidnie Ann White

and Michael V. Fox demonstrate, the King and his courtiers are made to look like fools in their treatment of Vashti. Their drinking parties and banquets are described in exaggerated style, and the King's command to Vashti is obtuse. The text gives Vashti a quiet and dignified refusal--making the men look all the more ridiculous. Ludicrously, the King and seven men must meet to figure out what to do about the insubordinate Queen. Their ridiculous posture is further underscored by their banishing Vashti, and then passing a law that every man should rule in his own house. The King cannot even rule over his own temper, for he has flown into an uncontrollable and disproportionate rage over Vashti's refusal. Vashti's banishment is an important plot element, of course, because her absence creates a vacuum for Esther to fill. Vashti also sets the tone for the repetitive motif of women's unexpected power: Zeresh advising Haman, and later Esther outwitting Haman and the King. Although they are unaware of each other in the story, Vashti and Esther work as a kind of women's "team" that delivers a one-two punch to the stupid and/or evil men in this farcical tale.

As Michael V. Fox points out, Esther's eventual skill, courage and enterprise are all the more striking because she is first introduced in the story as a powerless/ orphan/ Jewish/ female. Fox writes:

The mother would normally be the primary authority, tutor and model for a girl, but as an orphan raised by her cousin, Esther is from the outset entirely dependent upon and governed by males. Esther is 'taken' (a key word in chap. 2) along with the other beautiful virgins to the seraglio (2.8), put into the control of a eunuch, processed through a twelve-month beauty treatment, then 'taken' for one night to the king, who tries her out in bed. Esther has been criticized for compliance and even opportunism in going along with all this, but of course she had no choice. Contrary to a common

notion, there was no beauty contest to choose a new queen. All comely virgins were gathered; there was no further selection before they were taken to the King. In any case, the Persians have already proved themselves intolerant of female freedom of choice.<sup>34</sup>

Given Esther's pronounced and society-imposed lack of agency in the first half of the story, her enterprise, success, and rise to power at the end of the story is striking. After the Jews fight back--an activity made possible because Esther follows up and entreats the King to allow them to do so, Mordecai "recorded these events" and sent "dispatches to all the Jews." (9.20) But this is not the end of the story. Esther has the last word:

Then Queen Esther daughter of Abihail wrote a second letter of Purim for the purpose of confirming with full authority the aforementioned one of Mordecai the Jew. Dispatches were sent to all the Jews in the hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the realm of Ahasueros with an ordinance of equity and honesty. These days of Purim shall be observed at their proper time, as Mordecai the Jew--and now Queen Esther--has obligated them to do, and just as they have assumed for themselves and their descendants the obligation of the fasts with their supplications. And Esther's ordinance validating these observances of Purim was recorded in a scroll.(9.29-32)

The young woman who began with no agency at all now has all the agency in the kingdom.

I believe it would be unfortunate indeed if contemporary readers adhered to a vision of Esther symbolized by Sunday school beauty pageants, trivializing the heroic image of Esther. Biblical scholarship lends insight into the book's satiric and sophisticated social critique. The text is rich, both disturbing and deeply compelling, as it has been for readers in many times and cultures. Readers today, including this author, of course bring our particular cultural vantage points to the text.

Because of the privileged situation in which we live, few would wish to view Esther as a role model. Unlike the Jews who struggled to stay afloat in dangerous European courts or fled from one country to the next, it is difficult for many of us to identify with a woman trapped in a political situation in which the only hope for personal and communal survival depends on long silence and patience--punctuated by a disciplined burst of carefully targeted action and advocacy. Nevertheless, knowing what contemporary scholarship reveals about the isolated Esther's courage, we can see that Esther is a hero.

Readers have long been able to distinguish between role models to be emulated, and heroes to be admired. Heroism, in fact, is often characterized by activities that most people would shudder to engage in. Women, like men, can display the kind of heroism that evokes wonder and admiration, rather than the desire to follow suit. I conclude that the character of Esther, as she is portrayed in *Megillat Esther*, is a woman of depth and substance, extraordinary inner resources, intelligence, patience and poise. One needn't wish to live in a seraglio in order to appreciate her as one of the diverse, and often undervalued, female heroes in the Hebrew Bible. Esther's courage and skill saves a nation. She helps to establish a holiday celebrating that nation's survival. Her pivotal role is commemorated in the name assigned to this evocative text.

<sup>1</sup>I do not deal with the somewhat different narrative contained in *the Greek Esther*, despite the fascinating comparisons between the two narratives, because I am dealing primarily with readers who would have been most likely to encounter the Hebrew version and its translations.

<sup>2</sup>Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *But She Said: Feminist Practices of Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p.5.

<sup>3</sup>Esther Fuchs, "Status and Role of Female Heroines in the Biblical Narrative," in *Women in the Hebrew Bible*, Alice Bach, ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 7.

<sup>4</sup>Susan Schnur, "Our [Meaning Women's] Book of Esther Problem," in *Lilith Magazine* (Spring 1998): 19-21; and "The Womantasch Triangle: Vashti, Esther, and Carol Gilligan," *Lilith*, *op. cit.*: 25-27.

<sup>5</sup>Shulamit Reinharz, "A Feminist Reinterpretation of Purim," (1994 paper, "Jewish Women Discovering Ourselves Seminar," reprinted in *Wexner Heritage Review*, Fall 1996).

<sup>6</sup>*Encyclopedia Judaica* 8 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, Ltd.), 1163-70, 1163.

<sup>7</sup>Barry Dov Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of Esther in the Middle Ages* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 3-9.

<sup>8</sup>Stripped of his voluminous library and imprisoned, Saba lived in Fez and attempted to rewrite all his books from memory when he recovered. Saba is believed to have eventually settled in Italy. *Encyclopedia Judaica* 14 (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House), 556.

<sup>9</sup>Walfish, pp. 52-54.

<sup>10</sup>Harriet Beecher Stowe, *Women in Sacred History* (New York: Fords, Howard, and Hulbert, 1873), rpt. New York: Portland House, 1990), p. 149, 153.

<sup>11</sup>Among many fine writers on this subject, a particularly lucid summary and critique of feminist literary theory is found in Myra Jehlen, "Archimedes and the Paradox of Feminist Criticism," in *Feminisms: an anthology of literary theory and criticism* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 191-211.

<sup>12</sup>Leila L. Bronner, "Esther Revisited: An Aggadic Approach," in Athalya Brenner, ed. *The Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 176-197.

<sup>13</sup>Jon Levenson, "The Scroll of Esther in Ecumenical Perspective," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 13 (1976): 440-52.

<sup>14</sup>Adele Reinhartz, “Why ask my name?” *Anonymity and Identity in Biblical Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

<sup>15</sup>Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: South Carolina Press, 1991).

<sup>16</sup>Susan Niditch, “Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism and Authority,” in Athalya Brenner, ed. *The Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); and Susan Niditch, *Underdogs and Tricksters: A Prelude to Biblical Folklore* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Press, 1987).

<sup>17</sup>Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for Literary Carnavalesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995).

<sup>18</sup>Sidnie Ann White, “Esther: A Feminine Model for Jewish Diaspora,” in Peggy L. Day, ed. *Gender and Difference in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 161-177.

<sup>19</sup>Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995).

<sup>20</sup>Notable is Andre LaCocque, who calls the *Book of Esther* a “Diasporanovelle,” which he defines as a satirical, subversive story describing a dangerous situation for Jews in a foreign country, in his essay, “Esther,” in *The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel’s Tradition* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 49-83.

<sup>21</sup>Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1995), pp.98-99.

<sup>22</sup>Wills, pp. 1-16.

<sup>23</sup>Wills, pp. 217-223.

<sup>24</sup>Wills, p. 239.

<sup>25</sup>White, “Esther: A Feminine Model,” *op. cit.*

<sup>26</sup>Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979), 173-187.

<sup>27</sup>Ilana Pardes, *Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1992), 11.

<sup>28</sup>Wills, p. 130.

<sup>29</sup>Translation of the *Book of Esther* 7.4 according to the Soncino edition of the books of

the Bible. This paper draws on *The Five Megillot and Jonah: A New Translation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1969).

<sup>30</sup>Moshe Gan, “*Megillat Esther beaspaklariat korot Yosef bemitsrayim*,” in *Tarbiz* 31 (1961-2): 144-49.

<sup>31</sup>On the use of intertextual readings see Danna Nolan Fewell, *Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knos Press, 1992), 11-20.

<sup>32</sup>Judy Davis-Rosenthal, March 12, 1998, H-Judaic Website. David-Rosenthal writes that her analysis is based on I.M. Rund, *Women and Judaism* (New York: 1988).

<sup>33</sup>Levenson, “Esther in Ecumenical Perspective,” *op. cit.*, 440-42.

<sup>34</sup>Fox, *Character & Ideology*, *op. cit.*, 852.