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DENIAL, DECEPTION, OR FORCE: HOW TO DEAL WITH POWERFUL OTHERS IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER*

Jean-Daniel Macchi

Introduction

Since people live in societies, the question of the exercise of power arises. One cannot fail to ask whether power is necessary, and if it is, who has the right to impose decisions on others. As power generally establishes a relationship of alterity between those who exercise power and those who perceive power as a constraint imposed on them, the exercise of power necessarily raises the question of limits. How much power is necessary to achieve one's goal, and where is the boundary between the necessary use of power and a tyrannical use of power? In complex societies that rule large territories, power may seem distant and uncontrollable to those who live at the periphery.

Beneath some humorous or even carnivalesque traits,[1] the book of Esther problematizes the issues and challenges faced by people confronted by a complex power that seems out of control. The Hebrew

* This is an adapted translation with a few new added paragraphs dealing with Othering more specifically of my article, 'Le refus, la ruse ou la force: le rapport au pouvoir dans le livre d'Esther', in *Le Pouvoir. Enquêtes dans l'un et l'autre Testament* (ed. Didier Luciani and André Wénin; Lectio Divina, 248; Paris: Cerf, 2012), pp. 195-206. Since the French original dealt with the question of imperial power, the matter of gender is hardly discussed, though I recognize its importance for the current focus on Others. I thank Diana Edelman, who helped me adapt this article to fit the framework of the present volume more closely.

1. See Erich S. Gruen, *Diaspora: Jews Amidst Greeks and Romans* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), pp. 135-48; Kathleen M. O'Connor, 'Humour, Turnabouts and Survival in the Book of Esther', in *Are We Amused? Humour About Women in the Biblical Worlds* (ed. Athalya Brenner; JSOTSup, 383; Bible in the 21st Century Series, 2; London: T&T Clark International, 2003), pp. 54-64; Carolyn J. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), pp. 65-83; André LaCocque, *Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading* (Rethinking Theory; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008).

version as we know it sets the story within the vast Persian Empire. In this short fictional story,[2] Esther is presented as a young Jewish girl who becomes queen at the court of King Ahasuerus. Thanks to her personal plea before the king, she is able to save her people, preventing the execution of a decree to exterminate all Jews. Prime Minister Haman issues the decree after a conflict with Mordecai, Esther's adoptive father. The story ends with the massacre of all the enemies of the Jews and the establishment of the festival of Purim. Through this narrative, which revolves around a situation of Us vs. Them, Jews are able to participate vicariously in an Othering process that temporarily distances them from the abusive side of royal and imperial power that many of them encountered on a regular basis in their daily lives under subsequent imperial regimes.

The Poorly Controlled Power of a Vast Empire

The governmental system of the Persian Empire is depicted ambiguously in the book of Esther.[3] The story opens with a presentation of an extensive empire of 127 provinces stretching from India to Nubia (Black Africa). The initial verses describe a luxurious banquet King Ahasuerus gives for all his officials, a banquet lasting 187 days. The supply of wine is unlimited. Further on in the narrative, one encounters the administrative apparatus of the sprawling Persian Empire. The king rules through a complex system of multilingual decrees published throughout the Empire (Est. 1.22; 3.13; 8.8-10). The government is virtually omnipotent; it can organize huge banquets and collect all the beautiful women of the kingdom for the royal harem (Est. 2.3).

2. See Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther: A Decade of Esther Scholarship* (Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament; Durham, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 131-52; Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM, 1997); Adele Berlin, 'The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling', *JBL* 120 (2001), pp. 3-14; Harald-Martin Wahl, *Das Buch Esther. Übersetzung und Kommentar* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009), pp. 23-31.

3. See Hans-Peter Mathys, 'Der Achämenidenhof im Alten Testament', in *Der Achämenidenhof / The Achaemenid Court. Akten des 2. Internationalen Kolloquiums zum Thema 'Vorderasien im Spannungsfeld klassischer und altorientalischer Überlieferungen' Landgut Castelen bei Basel, 23.–25. Mai 2007* (ed. Bruno Jacobs and Robert Rollinger; Classica et Orientalia, 2; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2010), pp. 231-308 (244-65); Jean-Daniel Macchi, 'Le livre d'Esther: regard hellénistique sur le pouvoir et le monde perses', *Transeuphratène* 30 (2005), pp. 97-135.

Yet, the reader soon realizes that this impressive machinery is not free of inconsistencies. At the end of the magnificent banquet, an unexpected event occurs. Queen Vashti refuses to comply with the king's command (Est. 1.11). Immediately, the council of sages 'versed in law and custom' (1.13) meets to deliberate over how to deal with the act of disobedience (1.13-22). At first glance, the existence of such a council seems positive, since all power is not in the hands of the king. Several hints undermine this view, however. First, the process takes place when the king's heart is 'merry with wine' (1.10) and everyone else is also presumably intoxicated from the limitless wine on offer (1.8). Drunkenness may explain Memucan's rather absurd statement that if the queen does not obey Ahasuerus, women all over the Empire will follow suit and cease to respect their husbands.[4] His subsequent suggestion to publish a decree throughout the Empire that forbade Vashti to enter the king's presence and which removed her from her position of queen, implicitly as punishment for her disobedience, would likely aggravate the situation rather than resolve it in any satisfactory fashion. What if broadcasting the refractory queen's repudiation spurred all husbands throughout the realm to seek new wives to replace the existing ones who emulated the queen and disobeyed? Where would they find replacements, since ch. 2 notes that all the beautiful girls of marriageable age were to be taken to the palace for a beauty contest whose winner, chosen by the king, would become the new queen in place of Vashti?

The Empire's dysfunctional nature is underlined by the fact that the royal advisors systematically play an ambiguous role in the decision-making process. While the king always makes a decision only after consulting his advisers, these advisers are never depicted as neutral or objective. They carefully distil information at selected times to influence royal policy for their own benefit, to serve their personal interests. The most striking case is Haman, who obtains permission to proclaim a decree affecting all Jews (ch. 3). Driven by the desire to avenge a personal insult, he warns Ahasuerus that:

> There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree

4. See Levenson, *Esther*, p. 51; Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther* (Interpretation Bible Commentaries; Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2002), pp. 24-26; and Adele Berlin, *Esther* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), p. 17.

> be issued for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, so that they may put it into the king's treasuries. (Est. 3.8-9 NRSV)

Haman develops a strategy of Othering that discredits a particular people in the eyes of the sovereign. He insists that an anonymous group is threatening the Empire itself but is careful to remain silent about the people's identity; the reader has already learned that the Jew Mordecai had recently saved the king's life and that his act had been duly recorded in the royal annals (2.21-23). Haman provides targeted, partially accurate information[5] to win the king over to his cause, adding a tempting financial incentive to further his chance of success. Yet, in the Hellenistic period when the book was likely written, the Jews did not constitute a homogeneous group observing the same rules and the same way of life, contrary to Haman's description. In addition, even if the Jews of the Persian Empire had followed the rules of today's Orthodox Judaism, they would not have been obligated to reject all royal laws, so the implied ancient audience of the Esther Scroll, like modern ones, would instantly have recognized that Haman's half-truths were half-lies intended to deceive.

In the story world, however, the king falls into Haman's trap and a mighty administrative apparatus is set in motion to destroy the ethnic group of the man who had saved the king's life. The negative portrayal of Persian power becomes clear when the blatant injustice of the royal decree is presented as irrevocable. Since an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with his royal ring supposedly cannot be revoked (8.8), Ahasuerus cannot personally annul or overturn it when he realizes Haman's mischief. Even after having Haman sentenced to death, the king cannot accede to Esther's request to cancel the decree of extermination (8.5).

The book of Esther thus describes the deeply problematic nature of imperial power. The Persian Empire is huge, rich, and extremely well organized, but the king is portrayed as the plaything of his advisors, who is held hostage to their private interests. Royal decisions are depicted as subject to the vagaries of court life. This critique of imperial power creates an intentional distancing between the intended and actual Jewish

5. For Haman's speech, see André Wénin, 'Pourquoi le lecteur rit-il d'Haman en Esther 6 TM?', *VT* 60 (2010), pp. 465-73 (466-67); Fox, *Character and Ideology in Esther*, pp. 47-53; Linda M. Day, *Esther* (Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries; Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), pp. 70-73; Joseph Fleishman, 'Why Did Ahasuerus Consent to Annihilate the Jews?', *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 25 (1999), pp. 41-58.

audiences of the story and the imperial power in place at any given time, represented in the story as the Persian Empire. It reinforces those in power as Other and not to be trusted by insiders.

Strategies of Resistance

Against an inconsistent imperial power whose unpredictable decisions lead to tyranny, the book of Esther features three strategies of resistance: denial, deception, and force.

Denial

Queen Vashti and Mordecai embody the refusal to submit to imperial orders. Vashti does not honour the invitation to the royal banquet. Mordecai refuses to bow at the feet of Haman. The reasons for these refusals are not explicit. We can assume that, for the authors and their original readers steeped in ancient culture, the reasons for such refusal were obvious. In Vashti's case, I have suggested elsewhere that she considered it below her status to appear at the end of a drunken banquet. In Mordecai's case, an unwillingness to bow before human power likely motivated his refusal.[6] Legitimate as their insubordination may have been in both instances, each refusal has disastrous consequences. Passive resistance is not an option against a power like the Persian Empire. Vashti loses her status as queen, and Mordecai sees his entire people threatened with extermination. The authors of the work present the reigning imperial power as a terribly repressive regime for those who refuse to comply.

Deception

Esther presents a second strategy of resistance: cunning. Mordecai charges his adoptive daughter to intercede with the king (ch. 4). While not indicating how to proceed, Mordecai stresses the absolute necessity of the appeal despite the rigid rules that prevail in the court, of which Esther is well aware:

6. Macchi, 'Livre d'Esther', pp. 116-17, 122-23 = Jean-Daniel Macchi, 'The Book of Esther: A Persian Story in Greek Style', in *A Palimpsest: Rhetoric, Ideology, Stylistics, and Language Relating to Persian Israel* (ed. Ehud Ben Zvi, Diana Edelman, and Frank Polak; Perspectives on Hebrew Scriptures and Its Contexts, 5; Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias, 2009), pp. 109-27 (114-19). I sought to show that the book of Esther shared with Hellenistic culture the idea that the last part of a banquet was reserved for concubines and that a free man could not worship men, however powerful they might be.

> All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden sceptre to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days. (Est. 4.11 NRSV)

From the moment Esther decides to risk her life (4.16), the story describes her as acting independently and becoming master of her own destiny, no longer receiving instruction from anyone. Previously, she had obeyed the eunuch Hegai (2.15) and Mordecai (2.10, 20), but now her conduct becomes unexpected and clever. She makes the most of the customs of the court to obtain a decision in her favour. Contrary to Vashti, who had refused to obey the royal summons to appear before the drunken king, Esther goes to the king uncalled. While Vashti had refused to put in an appearance at the end of a banquet that featured heavy drinking, Esther invites the king and Haman to a drinking banquet (5.4-6). As if to erase the affront of Vashti's twofold refusal, Esther only dares to formulate her query (7.2-4) during the course of the second banquet she has organized for the king and Haman. In so doing, she recognizes that, in antiquity, the banquet was an important place of power.

The formulation of the speech Esther addresses to the king uses subtle rhetoric that is similar to that used earlier by the royal advisers. She begins with the formula of deference, 'If I have won your favour, O king, and if it pleases the king...' (7.3).[7] With some exaggeration, she adds that if her people had been sold into slavery, she would not have had to disturb the king, but in this case, it is a question of life or death (7.4). Esther wisely avoids mentioning that the king himself is the author of the decree against her people, whose identity remains in limbo, as it did in Haman's discourse in ch. 3. For anyone who has read the previous chapters, it is logical to assume the method used by Queen Esther will succeed since she is employing the same strategy Haman used to convince the king. Having invited her nemesis as well as the king to the banquet, she denounces Haman's *hubris* and suggests that he sees himself the equal of her royal husband.[8] In so doing she sets Haman on a pedestal from which he can easily fall, as the story of Vashti's fall highlights. Esther's actions result in justice being rendered directly by

7. See also Est. 5.4, 8; 8.5; 9.13 (Esther), 1.19 (Memucan) and 3.9 (Haman).

8. The text suggests that this is how Haman understood the invitation. Indeed, the theme of honour plays a central role in the story of the two banquets held by the Queen. Upon his return from the first banquet, Haman brags about the great honour he received (5.11-12).

the Persian king. Haman is executed and his property and functions are turned over to Esther and Mordecai (8.1-2). With cunning and courage, Esther uses the system to resist the oppression of that same system, or at least of some of its officials.[9]

The success of the cunning strategy used against those in power in the story of Esther emphasizes the alterity of the king and Haman, who are outsiders from the viewpoint of the writer and his readers. Such a use of deception presupposes a lack of confidence in those who are duped in this way and is perceived to be a justified means to an end when dealing with Others who cannot be counted on to follow the customs and rules of one's own ethnic group. Had the ruse been used against another member of the community to which the writer and the readers belonged, however, it would have been perceived negatively, as a rupture of group harmony and a threat to group integrity.

Force

Force appears as a third strategy at the beginning of ch. 8. As the crisis is seemingly resolved with Haman's execution and Mordecai's assumption of his place, the inability to repeal the royal decree sent across Persia introduces a new complication: the Jews are still likely to be exterminated. Unable to revoke the decree made in his name, the king invites Esther and Mordecai to send a new royal decree to the Jews themselves, leaving its contents to their discretion. The new decree stipulates that Jews will be permitted to kill anyone who threatens their lives and to plunder that person's goods on 13 of Adar (8.11-13). Faced with a dysfunctional power that is unable to regulate itself, the book ends with the description of a bloodbath that allows Jews to triumph over their enemies (9.1-19) and with the institution of the commemorative feast celebrating these events (9.20-32).

The use of force has often been seen as a form of glorification of violence and of Jewish nationalism.[10] But in fact, the story is constructed

9. For an analysis of mirror Othering between Israel/Esther/Mordecai and Haman/Amalek in Esther in the present volume, see Ehud Ben Zvi, 'Othering, Selfing, "Boundarying" and "Cross-Boundarying" as Interwoven with Socially Shared Memories: Some Observations', pp. 20-40.

10. The debate over whether or not to include Esther in the canon and the failure of the Church Fathers to cite the work except rarely probably resulted from concern over its contents. See Jo Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries* (Blackwell Bible Commentaries; Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 7-13; Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (WBC, 9; Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1996), pp. 273-77. The book of Esther is also frequently discredited by Christian writers. Luther said: 'I am so great an enemy to the second book of the Maccabees, and to Esther, that I wish they had not come to us

in such as way as to prompt a reflection over the legitimacy of the use of force more than it glorifies violence. In Esther, violence is an act of defence made necessary because the empire is incapable of ensuring justice within its own realm. The act of war is a last resort.

Different Social Milieux Reflected in the Text

As resistance literature vis-à-vis an imperial power that is perceived to be Other than the group transmitting the work, the book of Esther presents different options for resistance. It might seem logical at first to assume that a single, homogenous group endorsed the sequential application of the three strategies outlined above when under threat by outsiders. If expressing a simple refusal does not achieve the desired results, then cunning should be used and ultimately, violence, if nothing else works. In fact, however, a careful reading of the text, which takes into account its redactional history, indicates that the attitudes toward imperial power and the three strategies employed to deal with it are too divergent to reflect the view of a coherent social and ethnic group. Rather, the various options for resistance reflect solutions envisaged by different Jewish groups as to what they deemed appropriate behaviour in a historical situation in which one finds oneself dominated in unjust ways by a foreign empire. The story of the Jewish wife of the Persian king serves as a vehicle for reflection over which attitude to adopt.

After Mordecai's refusal led to disaster, Esther used the imperial system to her advantage. Her approach suggests that the imperial system was not to be viewed as inherently corrupt. Jews could use its mechanisms judiciously for their own interests, which suggests in turn that the group that endorsed such a tactic was not opposed to participation in official circles. For them, then, the ruling imperial power was not to be seen as radically Other. In contrast, the terrible battle staged at the end of the work suggests that, eventually, some Jews considered the institutions of the empire too dysfunctional to be able to be relied upon and that recourse to arms was necessary. This group presents imperial power as completely different from what it should be and as a result, any participation by Jews in its proceedings would be counter-productive. For

at all' (*The Table-Talk of Martin Luther Translated and Edited by William Hazlitt* [London: H. G. Bohn, 1857], p. 11). However, throughout his work, Luther's attitude toward Esther is more nuanced than it appears; see Hans Bardtke, 'Neuere Arbeiten zum Estherbuch. Ein kritische Würdigung', *Ex Oriente Lux* 19 (1965–66), pp. 519-49 (545-46).

those holding this position, involvement in official circles of the empire is illegitimate; imperial power is depicted as Other in a more radical way.

As often is the case with ancient texts, different versions of the story of the adventures of Esther and Mordecai co-existed. The text was written and rewritten several times in different venues and circumstances before reaching the current forms we know.[11] We have a Greek version of the book, the Alpha text, which suggests that one form of the story ended with the punishment of Haman and the salvation of the Jews, omitting the final massacre of the Jews' enemies.[12] In this version, the theme of the irreversibility of Persian laws was absent and the imperial system was viewed with relatively little scepticism. This variant of the story, perhaps the oldest to have survived, was probably mediated by social groups for whom Jewish life within an empire ruled by foreign powers did not pose insurmountable problems, provided one had good knowledge of how the system worked and how to behave within it.[13] In my opinion, those who produced the first version of the story of Esther had encountered Hellenistic culture and could not have written the Alpha text earlier than the Ptolemaic period.[14]

11. It should be noted that the story of Esther has had a relatively complex textual history. It is known in three different forms, a Hebrew form (MT) and two Greek forms (LXX and AT) that contain six long additions. The text used here is the Hebrew text. For a comparison between the three texts of Esther, see David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (JSOTSup, 30; Sheffield: JSOT, 1984); Linda M. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther* (JSOTSup, 186; Sheffield: JSOT, 1995); Karen H. Jobes, *The Alpha Text of Esther: Its Character and Relationship to the Masoretic Text* (SBLDS, 153; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1996). For a comparison between the LXX and the MT, see Hanna Kahana, *Esther: Juxtaposition of the Septuagint Translation with the Hebrew Text* (CBET, 40; Leuven: Peeters, 2005); Catherine Vialle, *Une analyse comparée d'Esther TM et LXX: Regard sur deux récits d'une meme histoire* (BETL, 233; Leuven: Peeters, 2010).

12. See my synthesis in Jean-Daniel Macchi, 'Les textes d'Esther et les tendances du Judaïsme entre les 3e et 1er siècles avant J.-Chr.', in *Un carrefour dans la Bible. Du texte à la théologie au IIe siècle avant J.-C.* (ed. Innocent Himbaza and Adrian Schenker; OBO, 233; Fribourg, Switzerland: Academic Press, 2007), pp. 75-92.

13. In the Hebrew Bible, a similar view is expressed in the story of Joseph; although Jewish, the character eventually integrates remarkably into the Egyptian court and claims to be a shrewd adviser of Pharaoh (see Gen. 37–46). A similar issue of how to be Jewish and serve at the imperial court is explored in Dan. 1–6.

14. Allusions and references to themes and motifs present in Hellenistic literature about Persia are widely present in the Alpha text of Esther. For this reason, I have situated the production of the first version of Esther in the Egyptian Diaspora of the Ptolemaic period (Macchi, 'Textes d'Esther', pp. 89-90).

With its bellicose ending, the Hebrew text shows an extensive rewriting of the story to express a virulent critique of imperial power. This version of the story of Esther probably reflects the opinion of Jews who considered life in a vast and tyrannical empire to be wrought with difficulties. For them, insurgency and self-defence were the only reasonable options against the policies of the vast empires that dominated most of the known ancient Near East and beyond, in succession. Among the ancient Jewish texts, the books of Maccabees are the most explicit in justifying recourse to arms to oppose the domination of a foreign empire. Hence, this rewriting of Esther probably presupposes the Hasmonean period.

The Masoretic book of Esther has been produced in two stages. A first version of the work was produced by a Jewish group that considered it possible to work with a Hellenistic imperial power. This text was later reworked by a group that viewed collaboration with much more scepticism. If the literary history of the book of Esther reflects the Hellenistic era, these different perceptions of the relationship with an imperial power neither began nor ended with the writing of the different phases of Esther.[15]

Thus, in the Hellenistic and Roman empires that dominated the ancient Near East, some Jewish groups made the most of the imperial structures that ruled their world by developing a working relationship with the bodies of imperial power. Other groups, like those living in the Holy Land during the domination of the Seleucid kings, had recourse to arms to resolve their differences with emperors and enemies. In its own way, the story of Esther bears traces of an important debate between different Jewish groups. Through the storyline of a Jewish queen who sought the support of her sovereign husband, the Hebrew text maintained a certain commitment to use the law of the empire to resolve conflicts, even if the final form of the text ends with the failure of this strategy.

The Othering process in the book of Esther is not homogeneous. When Esther acts with cunning to manipulate the king, the Other is a figure with whom it is possible to co-exist, communicate, and interact. When the story relates that the Jews eventually had to fight their enemies alone,

15. Textual diversity characterizes the book of Esther during the Roman period and reveals that the debate over the correct attitude to adopt in a world dominated by a foreign empire was not closed when the MT was reworked. Therefore, it is understandable that different versions of the pre-Masoretic text of Esther co-existed. The TA Greek, still in use in the Middle Ages in some circles, probably originated from a text that does not presuppose the final rewriting mentioned above, while the LXX presupposes a parent Hebrew text rather close to the Masoretic text of Esther.

collaborating with the imperial Other is perceived as impossible. In this case, an unbridgeable gap alienates the Jews from Persia in the story world as well as generations of Jews who experienced injustice or oppression under the successive Empires to Persia. These points of view, ultimately quite different but both responses to the power of Others, reflect the positions of different groups within Judaism in contexts where, in some ways, they are also quite different from each other. Thus, in the book of Esther, the different approaches to the power of imperial Others in the story reveal a form of diversity and otherness within the Jews, the We of the story.

IMAGINING THE OTHER AND CONSTRUCTING ISRAELITE IDENTITY IN THE EARLY SECOND TEMPLE PERIOD

Edited by

Ehud Ben Zvi and Diana V. Edelman

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