CHAPTER ONE

Hebrew Esther: Is it a Story of Jewish Aggression or Resistance to Attempted Genocide?

This chapter will answer the question of whether Hebrew Esther tells a story of Jewish aggression or one of Jewish resistance to attempted genocide. The debate over this issue among Esther scholars is remarkably similar to ongoing controversy over military actions taken by the State of Israel. In both cases, the argument is focused on whether Jews initiated an act of war, or whether they took defensive measures in response to enemy aggression. Therefore, the answer to this question is the first step in demonstrating the relevance of the story of Esther to the contemporary issue of the contested legitimacy of the State of Israel.

The question of Jewish aggression or resistance will be answered by establishing what the author of this text intended to say to the original audience. The identification of the message of the text will provide an essential foundation for the following chapters, because an understanding of the author's intent is a prerequisite for appreciating the significance of later interpretations of the story, as well as the applicability of the message to current events in relation to Israel. As has already been stated in the Introduction, the author of Esther purposefully presented the account of an attempted genocide of the Jews in a particular historical context within the Persian period, which is verifiable through analyses of semantic features and Persian elements in the story, as well as through the establishment of the date of composition of the text. The first part of this chapter will demonstrate the author's intent through discussions of these features, and the second part of the chapter will identify the message of Hebrew Esther and answer the crucial question of aggression versus resistance.

Before beginning discussions of the author's intent and identification of the message of this version of Esther, it will be informative to look at a brief overview of the history of interpretation of Esther since the time of Martin Luther. This survey will demonstrate why the question of aggression versus resistance has been pivotal in the interpretation of Esther ever since the time of Luther and how it has profound implications for what the story of Esther has to say in relation to the State of Israel today.

The History of Interpretation of Esther Since Martin Luther

Esther is the only book in the Hebrew Bible whose primary focus is the recording of an attempted annihilation of the Jews. However, in spite of the clear account it contains of Haman's intent to have all the Jews destroyed, historical interpretations of Esther have contributed to anti-Semitic critique of the book. While it has always been an important book in Jewish tradition, and "the great Jewish medieval scholar Maimonides (1135–1204) ranked Esther immediately after the Pentateuch in importance,"[1] it has had, at best, a marginal status in Christian tradition. It was hardly mentioned in the writings of the Early Church Fathers, but was one of the books Martin Luther despised and wished to exclude from the canon.[2]

In "On the Jews and Their Lies," Martin Luther commented on how much the Jews "love the book of Esther, which so well fits their bloodthirsty, vengeful, murderous greed and hope."[3] He condemned the book, stating that it didn't belong in the canon because it "Judaizes too much and has too much heathen corruption."[4] In his 1908 commentary on Esther, Lewis Bayles Paton wrote that Luther's verdict was "not too severe" and stated,

1. Carey A. Moore, "Archaeology and the Book of Esther," in *Studies in the Book of Esther* (ed. C.A. Moore; New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1982), 369-86.
2. Martin Luther, *Table Talk* XXIV, cited in Moore, "Archaeology and the Book of Esther," 369-86.
3. Martin Luther, "On the Jews and Their Lies," in *Luther's Works*: *Volume 47, The Christian in Society IV* (ed. F. Sherman; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1971).
4. Martin Luther, "Table Talk XXIV," in *Luther's Works: Volume 54, Table Talk* (ed. T.G. Tappert; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1967).

"there is not one noble character in this book."[1] More specifically, Paton interpreted the actions of the Jews in Esther 8:11, 9:2-10, and 9:13-15 as evidence of aggression rather than resistance. Paton's interpretation not only shows how influential Luther continues to be centuries after he lived, but also provides just one of many examples of how scholarship has interpreted the actions of the Jews of Persia as bloodthirsty and vengeful.

Following Luther, German scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries accused Esther of "insatiable vindictiveness," and the book of displaying a "blood-thirsty spirit of aggression and persecution," as well as a "very narrow minded and Jewish spirit of aggression."[2] Late in the nineteenth century, Heinrich Ewald commented that "in moving to Esther from the other books of the Hebrew Bible 'we fall as it were, from heaven to earth'."[3] By the end of the nineteenth century, German scholars ranted "against the arrogant nationalism of the book of Esther."[4] This was the same time period in which Otto von Bismarck was establishing the new German Reich, annexing territory, and establishing German colonies in Africa. The contrast between the nationalistic activities of the new German Reich and the book of Esther, in which Esther and Mordecai are portrayed as assimilated and loyal subjects of the king of Persia, with no mention of the nation of Israel or any desire to return to the Land of Israel, makes the German charge of nationalism concerning Esther seem absurd, to say the least. Indeed, there is nothing nationalistic about the book of Esther. Rather, "it is a defense of self-determination in a time of exile."[5]

By the late nineteenth century, anti-Semitic critiques of Esther also became prominent in British scholarship, and then in American scholarship by the beginning of the twentieth century.[6] However, because of the distinct similarities between the threat of

1. Lewis Bayles Paton, *The International Critical Commentary: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Book of Esther* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1908), 96.
2. Elliot Horowitz, *Reckless Rites: Purim and the Legacy of Jewish Violence* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 12-15.
3. Heinrich Ewald quoted in *ibid*., 15.
4. *ibid*., 33.
5. Jon D. Levenson, "The Scroll of Esther in Ecumenical Perspective," *JES* XIII (1976): 440-51.
6. For a detailed discussion of the last century of scholarly anti-Semitic interpretation of Esther, see Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 23-45.

attempted genocide in the book of Esther and the actual events of twentieth-century Germany, this discussion will remain focused on German scholars' interpretations of Esther. In the 1930s, Otto Eissfeldt saw a "close connection between Jewish religion and the Jewish national spirit,"[1] and Johannes Hempel referred to what he interpreted as vengeance in the book of Esther as "hate-inspired wish-fulfillment."[2] In 1937, Wilhelm Vischer stated that Esther "presents the Jewish question in the sharpest form,"[3] and while Vischer preferred for Jews to be converted rather than murdered, his solution for the "Jewish question" would still have resulted in the end of Judaism. Even in the midst of the Holocaust, "German biblical scholarship saw little reason to reconsider the harsh condemnation of Esther,"[4] as scholars continued to condemn what they saw as "the vengeful spirit of the book of Esther."[5]

While one might think that the events of the Holocaust would have softened scholarly interpretation of the story of Esther, this was not the case. In 1953, Curt Kuhl wrote that the book testified to the Jews' "narrow-minded and fanatical nationalism."[6] As has already been said above, to level a charge of nationalism against the book of Esther, in which there is no identification of Jews with any country except for their country of exile, is, at the very least, absurd. Indeed, "it is a strange nationalism which advocates cooperation with a foreign monarch rather than secession from his control."[7] However, more than just being absurd, a charge of nationalism ignores the facts of the story and betrays a bias on the part of the accuser. Such a bias is perhaps best illustrated by Hermann Gunkel, who said that Esther "cannot be read by a Christian or a non-Jew without great distaste, for it fires up intense Jewish nationalism, celebrates anti-Gentile Jewish vengeance, and

1. Otto Eissfeldt, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1964), 566-7.
2. Johannes Hempel, *Das Ethos des Alten Testaments*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Töpelmann, 1964), 30, 105.
3. Wilhelm Vischer, *Esther* (Munich: Kaiser, 1937), quoted in Levenson, "The Scroll of Esther," 441.
4. Horowitz, *Reckless Rites*, 15.
5. *ibid*., 37.
6. Curt Kuhl, *The Old Testament: Its Origins and Composition* (trans. C.T.M. Herriot; Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1961), 271.
7. Levenson, "The Scroll of Esther," 444.

promulgates Purim, a festival that means nothing to the church."[1] As a result, some Christian theologians, like Luther before them, "would drop the book from the scriptural canon."[2] Perhaps that is in effect what Walter Eichrodt and Gerhard von Rad did in their Old Testament theologies, which were written in the 1960s. Eichrodt only mentions Esther in footnotes, and then only "as an example of undesirable tendencies," and von Rad doesn't even mention the book in a work of theology that supposedly encompasses the entire Old Testament.[3]

Beginning with Martin Luther and his statement that the book of Esther "Judaizes too much," a common theme throughout all the comments surveyed thus far has been the "Jewishness" of the book. Whether it is reference to the Jewish spirit of revenge, a "close connection between Jewish religion and the Jewish national spirit,"[4] or "the Jewish question in the sharpest form,"[5] the feature that all these comments have in common is the fact that Esther is "Jewish." According to Carl Heinrich Cornill, it would seem that "all the worst and most unpleasing features of Judaism are here displayed without disguise."[6] It is not clear what "features of Judaism" Cornill finds so objectionable, because of all the books in the Hebrew Bible, Esther displays much less "Judaism" than all the rest of the canonical books.

It is significant to note at this point the hypocrisy demonstrated by scholars who gladly appropriate the rest of the Hebrew Bible for Christian use, while at the same time vilifying the book of Esther for being too "Jewish." As David Clines writes, "the undoubted 'Jewishness' of the book is something it shares with the whole of the Old Testament; if that is an 'offence' in Christian eyes, it is a stumbling block that must be surmounted before any part of the Old

1. Hermann Gunkel quoted in Edward L. Greenstein, "A Jewish Reading of Esther," in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel* (ed. Jacob Neusner, Baruch A. Levine, and Ernest S. Frerichs; Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1987), 225-43.
2. Greenstein, "A Jewish Reading of Esther," 225.
3. Levenson, "The Scroll of Esther," 440-41.
4. Otto Eissfeldt, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1964), 566-7.
5. Wilhelm Vischer, *Esther* (Munich: Kaiser, 1937), quoted in Levenson, "The Scroll of Esther," 441.
6. C.H. Cornill, *Introduction to the Canonical Books of the Old Testament* (trans. G.A. Box; New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1907), 257.

Testament is appropriated for Christian use."[1] Clines' observation is profound in relation to how Christians commandeer the Jewish Scriptures in order to legitimize anti-Judaism and replacement theology, which in turn feed the anti-Zionism to be addressed in Chapter Five. Indeed, the same charges of nationalism, aggression, and Jewishness leveled against the book of Esther are the same allegations made against the State of Israel today.

In contrast to the many theologians and scholars who continued to despise the book of Esther even after the Holocaust, there have been a few who have taken a different approach. Bernhard W. Anderson attempted to counter the position of theologians who would like to exclude Esther from the canon by writing "The Place of the Book of Esther in the Christian Bible."[2] While it is obvious that Anderson was attempting to overcome the well-entrenched heritage of anti-Semitic interpretation as he made his case in favor of Esther's place in the Bible, he still made a number of statements similar to those that fuel anti-Semitic diatribes against Esther. His statements illustrate the ongoing misinterpretation of the message of the text, and they demonstrate common anti-Semitic belief as well. Anderson states that "the book is inspired by fierce nationalism and an unblushing vindictiveness."[3] He also points out that "the barrier of the Law . . . was a wall of separation behind which Jews could maintain their historical identity," and that "by building a wall around its communal life, and thus sharpening the separateness of the Jew from his neighbors, Judaism excited against itself a suspicion and hatred."[4] This argument sounds strangely similar to Haman's justification for his planned annihilation of the Jews of Persia in Esther 3:8.[5] Haman argued that the Jews needed to be destroyed because their laws were different than those of other

1. David Clines, *The New Century Bible Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1984), 256.
2. Bernhard W. Anderson, "The Place of the Book of Esther in the Christian Bible," in *Studies in the Book of Esther* (ed. C.A. Moore; New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1982), 130-41.
3. *ibid*., 130.
4. *ibid*., 132-3.
5. In Esther 3:8, Haman tells the king that there is a certain people scattered throughout the kingdom who observe different laws than the rest of the people, and that because of this, it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them.

people, and Anderson concluded that the "barrier of the Law" results in "Judaism inciting persecution and persecution creating Judaism."[1] Anderson's argument is faulty in that it blames Jews for the persecution they receive, and, in so doing, actually offers support for Haman's rationale for genocide.

In answer to all the scholars surveyed above who interpret Esther as displaying "an intense nationalistic spirit and virulent hostility to Gentiles," Frederic Bush states that a careful reading of the book "demonstrates that these points of view are in error."[2] Bush identifies "the dangerous and uncertain character of life for Jews in the diaspora" as "a significant element" in the theme of the book, which is "the deliverance of the diaspora Jewish community from the terrible threat of annihilation."[3] According to Bush, this theme shows "that the book simply cannot be read as a nationalist diatribe."[4] Shemaryahu Talmon also concludes that nationalism does not appear in Esther, and that the message of the book is based on a "non-national wisdom ideology," which is applicable "to any human situation, irrespective of politico-national or religio-national allegiances."[5] In agreement with Bush and Talmon, and in opposition to the conclusions of other scholars, the following work will demonstrate that rather than being a bloodthirsty story of Jewish aggression that promotes a nationalistic spirit, Hebrew Esther presents an account of resistance to attempted genocide, with a message that speaks to the right and responsibility of humans to defend themselves against those who intend to murder.

The Intent of the Author

The Historical Context of Hebrew Esther

The Hebrew text of Esther presents the particulars of the story as events that took place during the reign of Ahashverosh of Persia, a king more commonly known as Xerxes I (486–465 BCE). Events

1. Anderson, "The Place of the Book of Esther in the Christian Bible," 133.
2. Frederic W. Bush, *Word Biblical Commentary: Ruth/Esther* (Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), 333.
3. *ibid*., 311, 333.
4. *ibid*., 333.
5. Shemaryahu Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther," *VT* 13 (1963): 419-55.

in the book are dated according to the year of the king's reign in which they occurred, and the first date is given in 1:3. After identifying Ahashverosh as the one who ruled over an empire that stretched from India to Ethiopia, it says that in the third year of his reign, the king gave a banquet for all his government officials that lasted for 180 days. According to fifth century BCE Greek historians – including Herodotus, Ctesias, and Photius – Xerxes was a decadent king, particularly known for his lavish banquets.[1] So, it is not surprising that the book of Esther begins with an account of an extensive banquet.

The text reports that the banquet occurred in the third year of the reign of the king. Since his reign began in 486, the third year of that reign would be 484 BCE. According to Herodotus, 484 BCE was the year in which Xerxes finished suppressing a rebellion in Egypt that began before the death of his father, Darius I.[2] However, the rebellion in Egypt was not the only problem facing Xerxes as he began his reign. The biblical book of Ezra testifies to unrest in Judea in the year that Xerxes took the throne when it records in 4:4 and 4:6 that the people of the land sent a letter to the king accusing the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem of rebellion against him. In order to deal with unrest and rebellion in both of these regions within his empire, Xerxes went on a military campaign through Judah on his way to Egypt. As a result, Persian power was solidified in Judah and the Egyptian rebellion was successfully extinguished. In light of what Greek historians have to say about Xerxes' fondness for banquets and the date of the banquet described in Esther, it is probable that the lavish banquet described in chapter 1 was a banquet given to celebrate the king's victory over the rebellion in Egypt.[3]

The fact that this feast was given in the third year of his reign also means that it occurred as Xerxes was beginning to prepare for his campaign against Greece. No sooner had he returned

1. Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 515-17.
2. *ibid*., 525.
3. It could also have been a celebration of the completion of the palace in Susa, the construction of which had been left uncompleted by Darius upon his death. "The first pious duty of the new king was to complete at Susa the palace of his father, where a few columns were still to be carved." A.T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 230.

from Egypt than he "instituted a military draft throughout the Empire."[1] Therefore, the gathering of all of his government officials in Susa for the feast described in Esther could also have been for the purpose of planning for the Greek campaign. In fact, we know from Herodotus that upon his return from Egypt, Xerxes convened the highest Persian officials to announce his plans to move against the Greeks.[2] In addition to Xerxes' love of banquets, the length of the feast described by the author of Esther is not unreasonable in light of the fact that armies in the ancient world tended to stay at home during the winter months, and not go to war until the spring. To conclude that Xerxes and his officials may have spent the six months from fall to spring planning for war is also plausible because Herodotus wrote that the preparation for war against the Greeks took four years.[3] In fact, a planning period of six months from the fall of 484 to the spring of 483 is short considering that "to prepare for the final invasion of Greece, Xerxes took temporary residence in Sardis in 481 BCE."[4]

Following the description of the banquet in chapter 1, we read an account of how Queen Vashti was vanquished and was no longer queen because of her refusal to be put on display in front of all the drunken men at the king's feast. As a result of Xerxes being without a queen, a search for a new queen commenced. Chapter 2 details the process for choosing a new queen, a process that culminated with Esther being chosen as the replacement for Vashti. It is significant to note that the time period given in the book between the feast that resulted in the vanquishing of Vashti and the installation of Esther as queen was the third to the seventh year of the reign of Ahashverosh – the same time period as that between the beginning of Xerxes' preparation for war against Greece in 484 and the end of that war in 479.[5] In other words, as the search for the new queen was being undertaken, Xerxes was at war with the Greeks. Following his disastrous

1. Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 526.
2. Herodotus, *The Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), VII.8.
3. *ibid*., VII.20.
4. Jon L. Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 91.
5. According to David Clines, "the four years between the deposition of Vashti and the installation of Esther as queen coincide with the four years Xerxes was absent from Persia on the expedition against the Greeks." Clines, *The New Century Bible Commentary*, 261.

defeat at the hands of the Greeks in the summer of 479, he went to his palace at Susa, which he had made "his principal winter residence."[1] According to the biblical account, Esther was taken to the king in the month of Tebeth, or the tenth month, in the seventh year of his reign, or 479. The month of Tebeth falls in the midst of winter, which is consistent with historical accounts that place Xerxes in Susa for the winter. This fact, combined with the fact that the biblical account dates this event in the same year as Xerxes' return from war, indicates that the author's intent to present the account of an attempted genocide of the Jews in a particular historical context within the Persian period was done with an obvious knowledge of events in the reign of King Xerxes. This intent, which is demonstrated through the historical setting of the story, is validated in part through the presence of particular semantic features and Persian elements in the story.

Semantic Features and Persian Elements in the Story

The author's abundant use of ancient Near Eastern names and loan words, as well as accurate descriptions of various aspects of government and life in the Persian court, provides significant support for the accuracy of the historical setting portrayed in the text. The author's historical knowledge is further evidenced by the fact that all of the semantic features and Persian elements in Hebrew Esther are attested by historical and archaeological evidence.[2] This evidence is extensive, as there are a total of fifty-

1. Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 301.
2. For historical and archaeological evidence pertinent to the Persian elements that appear in Hebrew Esther, see Berquist, *Judaism in Persia's Shadow*, 87-104; Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 515-68; John E. Curtis and Nigel Tallis, eds., *Forgotten Empire: The World of Ancient Persia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), chapters 1, 2, 4, 5, 9, 10; W.D. Davies and Louis Finkelstein, eds., *The Cambridge History of Judaism, Volume One: The Persian Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 326-58; Prudence O. Harper, Joan Aruz and Francoise Tallon, eds., *The Royal City of Susa: Ancient Near Eastern Treasures in the Louvre* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992), 215-18, 242-3, 253-7; Amelie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000–330 BC, Volume Two* (London: Routledge, 1995), 647-701; Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire*, 214-301; and Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible*, 187-240, 279-304.

five semantic features that testify to a historical setting within the Persian period. Of these fifty-five features, thirty-eight of them are Persian and Akkadian names for the characters in the story, and seventeen are ancient Near Eastern loan words that describe various aspects of Persian government and life in the Achaemenian court.

The conspicuous number of Persian and other ancient Near Eastern names and loan words used in the Hebrew text makes the presence of these words the most prominent category of Persian elements in the story. Because of the significant number of names and words under consideration, the following discussion will divide these elements into three parts. The first section will discuss the names of the principal characters in the story; the second, the names of the rest of the characters in the story; and the third, the ancient Near Eastern loan words used to tell the story.

Ancient Near Eastern Names of the Principal Characters of the Story

The names of the principal characters in Hebrew Esther are all of ancient Near Eastern origin. The Hebrew name of the king, Ahashverosh, is identified with the Persian name Khshayarsha.[1] Khshayarsha is found in the Persian column of a trilingual inscription from Persepolis and is equivalent to the Babylonian Khishi'arshu. In addition, "in Babylonian tablets such forms occur as *Akhshiyarshu* . . . *Akhshiyawarshu* . . . and *Akhshiwarshu*. These forms are evidently the etymological equivalents of the Hebrew, *`-kh-sh-w-r-sh*, which is the form that appears in Est. 1:16, 2:21, 3:12 and 8:10."[2]

The names of Mordecai, Esther, and Haman are also of ancient Near Eastern origin. Mordechai is of Mesopotamian origin,[3] as evidenced by the many names that incorporate the name of Marduk found in cuneiform documents from the Persian

1. See Paton, *The International Critical Commentary*, 53-4; and Ida Fröhlich, *Time and Times and Half a Time: Historical Consciousness in the Jewish Literature of the Persian and Hellenistic Eras* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 132, for the equivalence of Ahashverosh and Khshayarsha, as well as the identification of Ahashverosh with Xerxes.
2. Paton, *The International Critical Commentary*, 53-4.
3. Fröhlich, *Time and Times and Half a Time*, 134.

period.[1] Tablets from Persepolis present variations on the name such as Mar-duk-ka, Mar-du-uka, and Mar-du-kana-sir, and a fifth-century Aramaic inscription contains the name M-r-d-k.[2] Marduka, a government official in Susa, is mentioned in a Persian text from the Persepolis Archives dating from the last years of Darius I or the early years of Xerxes.[3] The mention of a Marduka who was a Persian official is consistent with references to Mordecai in Esther 2:19, 2:21, 5:13, and 6:10, which describe him as "sitting in the gate of the king." In fact, Mordecai's daily presence in the gate of the king indicates his role as an ancient Near Eastern judge as in Ruth 4:11, Job 31:21, and Proverbs 31:23.[4]

Esther's name is from the Persian *stri* for "young woman," or the Persian *stara* for "star." Her name is also related to a Hebrew verb, *str*, which means "to hide." Various forms of this verb are used throughout the Hebrew Bible in connection with the hiding of the face of God. This interpretation of Esther's name is completely appropriate in a book in which Esther's identity was hidden and the presence of God was hidden as well.[5] The Hebrew text also identifies Esther by the name Hadassah, which is from the Akkadian word *hadassatu*, or "bride." Haman's name is from the Persian name Humayun, and according to Hebrew Esther, Haman is the son of Hammedatha, also referred to as "the Agagite." The name of Haman's father is derived from the Elamite name Hamaddadda, and is attested in Persepolis Fortification Tablet 1459.[6] The Old Persian form of this name is amadata.[7]

1. Ronald Sack, *Cuneiform Documents from the Chaldean and Persian Periods* (London: Associated University Presses, 1994), 72-3.
2. Robert Gordis, "Religion, Wisdom, and History in the Book of Esther – A New Solution to an Ancient Crux," *JBL* 100/3 (1981): 384.
3. *ibid*.
4. Fröhlich, *Time and Times and Half a Time*, 134, n. 93, 94.
5. Abraham Even-Shoshan, ed., *A New Concordance of the Bible* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer Publishing House, 1996), 816.
6. The Persepolis Fortification Tablets are part of a collection of thousands of clay tablets found in Persepolis (in modern day Iran) that contain administrative archives from the Persian Achaemenid Empire.
7. See A.R. Millard, "The Persian Names in Esther and the Reliability of the Hebrew Text," *JBL* 96/4 (1977): 484; and Fröhlich, *Time and Times and Half a Time*, 134.

Persian Names of the Rest of the Characters in the Story

The names of the rest of the characters in the Hebrew version of Esther are also entirely of ancient Near Eastern origin, and almost all of them are specifically of Persian descent.[1] These names include those of the seven eunuchs who attended the king (1:10);[2] the names of the seven princes of Persia and Media (1:14);[3] Hegai, the keeper of the first house of women (2:8, 2:15); Bigthan and Teresh, the two eunuchs who plotted to kill Ahashverosh (2:21, 6:2); Hathach, the eunuch who attended Esther (4:5, 4:19); Zeresh, the wife of Haman (5:10); and the names of all of Haman's ten sons (9:7-10).[4] The sheer number of Persian names used by the author of Hebrew Esther provides overwhelming evidence that this text

1. In the next three footnotes, all names from the Persepolis Fortification Tablets (PF) that are parallel to names in the Hebrew text are from Edwin Yamauchi, "Mordecai, the Persepolis Tablets and the Susa Excavations," *Vetus Testamentum* XLII, 2 (1992): 272-5. All other identifications of names are from Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (*HALOT*) (Leiden: Brill, 2001); and Jeremy Black, Andrew George, and Nicholas Postgate, eds., *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2000).
2. The names of the seven eunuchs are Mehuman, from the Persian Vahuman and attested in Persepolis Fortification (PF) Tablet 455 as Mihimana; Bizzetha, a corrupted form of Old Persian Mazdana; Harbona, the name of a known Persian courtier; Bigtha, a parallel to Bakatanna (PF 1793); Abagtha, the name of a Persian courtier; Zethar, which is related to the name Shethar in 1:14, from the Old Persian *hsatra*; and Carcas, from the Persian *karkās* and attested as Karkis in PF 10.
3. The names of the seven princes of Persia and Media are Carshena, from the Persian *karsna*; Shethar, from the Old Persian *hsatra*; Admatha, from the Persian *adamayita*; Tarshish, related to the neo-Assyrian place name, Tarsisi, as well as *tarsta*, the title of a Persian official; Meres, a Persian name attested as Maraza (PF 522); Marsena, a Persian name attested as Marsena in PF 522; and Memucan, a Persian name attested as Mamakka in PF 1344.
4. The names of Haman's ten sons are Parshandatha, from the Persian *prsndt*; Dalphon, derived from the Babylonian name Dullupu; Aspatha, an attested Persian name; Poratha, an attested Persian name; Adalia, an attested Persian name; Aridatha, a Persian name attested by Hardadda (PF 390); Parmashta, from Old Persian *fara-maistha*; Arisai, an attested Persian name; Aridai, a Persian name attested by Irdaya (PF 1475); and Vaizatha, an attested Persian name.

is a reliable source of information concerning the Persian context it seeks to portray. Furthermore, the preservation of authentic Persian names demonstrates the extreme care and accuracy of the Jewish scribes entrusted with the copying of the biblical text. As Millard says, it may be concluded that "the Hebrew text of Esther can be trusted to give non-Hebrew names accurately."[1]

Ancient Near Eastern Loan Words Used to Tell the Story

As with the names of the characters of the story, Hebrew Esther also accurately preserved ancient Near Eastern loan words used to describe various aspects of Persian government and life in the Achaemenian court.[2] Seventeen such terms are used throughout the book, all of which are of Akkadian, Aramaic, or Persian origin. In 1:1, the word that is translated as "province" is *medinah*, which is an Aramaic loan word whose basic meaning is "administrative district." The term used in 1:2 for a fortified city is *birah*, which is a loan word from the Akkadian *birtu*, meaning "fort" or "castle." In 1:3, the Persian word *partemim* is translated as "nobles." The inner part of the palace is called the "bitan" in 1:5, a word that is derived from the Akkadian word *bitanu,* which means "interior of the palace."

These examples are followed by the Persian *karpas* for "cotton" in 1:6; the Aramaic loan word, *dat*, for "law" in 1:8; and the Persian words *keter* for "turban" and *pitgam* for "announcement" found in 1:11, 1:20, 2:17, and 6:8. Other words of Akkadian, Aramaic, or Persian descent are the name of the tenth month, Tebeth (2:16); *ginazim* for "treasuries" (3:9); *ahashdarpenim* for "satraps" and *pachot* for "governors" (3:12, 8:9, 9:3); *haratzim* for "runners" (3:13, 15); *patshegen* for "copy" (3:14, 4:8, 8:13); *ahashteranim* for "royal horses;" *haratzim basusim* for "runners on horses" (8:10, 8:14); and *purim* for "lot" (9:26-32). The use of this many ancient Near Eastern words in the description of various aspects of Persian government and life in the Achaemenian court not only demonstrates that the author of Hebrew Esther could use ancient Near Eastern loan words accurately, but also suggests a familiarity with the historical setting portrayed in the story

1. Millard, "The Persian Names in Esther," 485.
2. All identification of ancient Near Eastern loan words is from Koehler and Baumgartner, *HALOT,* and Black, George and Postgate, *A Concise Dictionary of Akkadian*.

on the part of the author. The combination of the use of these seventeen loan words and thirty-eight Persian and Akkadian names for the characters in the story provides significant evidence in support of the author's informed intent to present an attempted genocide of the Jews in the particular historical context of the Persian period.

However, the fact that the author appears to have been familiar with the historical setting portrayed in the story is not completely conclusive evidence on its own, because it may have been possible for the author to be knowledgeable of Persian names and loan words simply by being a student of history. In order to make a more conclusive case in favor of the proposed intent of the author, it is necessary to determine the date of composition of Hebrew Esther. Not only will a determination of this date contribute to the verification of the author's intent, but it will also serve as an essential foundation for demonstrating the textual relationship of the three versions of Esther in the following Excursus, and for understanding the significance of the literary changes in the Greek versions discussed in Chapter Four.

The Date of Composition of Hebrew Esther

Scholarly consensus regarding the date of composition of Hebrew Esther has changed dramatically in the last one hundred years. An older view was that this version was a product of Hellenistic or Maccabean times in the third or second centuries BCE. However, a consensus of current scholarship now dates the composition of the book to the late Persian period, between the end of the fifth century and the fourth century BCE. Indeed, Hebrew Esther could have been written anytime beginning with the fifth century BCE, based on the dates of the events represented in the story. While the earliest date of composition of the Hebrew version is subject to debate, the latest possible date for its composition is more certain. This is due to a date provided by the colophon[1] at the end of Old Greek (OG) Esther that indicates when this version was written. The date of OG Esther is relevant to this discussion because, as the Excursus on the textual relationships of the three books of Esther will show, OG Esther is dependent on the Hebrew version. Therefore, Hebrew Esther must have been written before OG Esther.

1. A colophon is a short statement that gives the name of the author and the year in which the book was written.

Chapter Two will answer the question of when OG Esther was written. Based on the work that will be presented there, and the fact that the Greek version is dependent on the Hebrew, it can be concluded that the latest date the Hebrew version could have been written is early second century BCE. It is also obvious that the earliest date the Hebrew version could have been written is immediately following the date of the events recorded in the story, which would be as early as mid-fifth century. This raises the question: Is it possible to determine a more specific date of composition for Hebrew Esther between the mid-fifth century and the early second century BCE? The answer is yes. A fairly specific date of composition can be determined by taking into account what scholarship has to say concerning the type of Hebrew used in Esther, the complete absence of any Greek vocabulary in Hebrew Esther in contrast to the prevalence of Persian words, the positive attitude Hebrew Esther exhibits towards the Gentile king as opposed to the attitudes displayed towards Gentile kings in the Jewish literature of the Hellenistic period, and the overall worldview of the book. The following survey of scholarship will reveal a very specific date of composition for Hebrew Esther.

The older view concerning the date of composition of Hebrew Esther – that it was a product of Hellenistic or Maccabean times in the third to second century BCE – is typified by Lewis Bayles Paton (1908), who concluded that the book was written in the late Greek period. He considers the use of the Old Greek version by Josephus in the first century CE to be the earliest evidence for Hebrew Esther. He also cites the reference to Purim in 2 Maccabees 15:36, where it is called "the day of Mordecai," as the first mention of Purim. Paton bases his conclusion of a date of composition in the late Greek period on these two points, as well as on his interpretation of data from the text itself.[1] While a detailed discussion of Paton's arguments in favor of this late date of composition is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is sufficient for the sake of discussion regarding the date of composition of Hebrew Esther to note that current scholarship differs significantly with the scholarship of Paton's day.

In contrast to Paton, Carey Moore (1971) suggests a range of dates from 400 to 114 BCE for the composition of Esther, stating that "the first edition probably goes back to the fourth century, or

1. Paton, *The International Critical Commentary*. See pages 60-63 for a detailed discussion of Paton's arguments in favor of a date of composition in the late Greek period.

Persian period."[1] The latest possible date of 114 BCE is dependent upon what Moore considers to be the probable date referred to by the colophon at the end of Septuagint Esther. He offers the Hebrew of Esther and the positive attitude towards the Gentile king as evidence in support of the early date of 400 BCE. In agreement with David Noel Freedman's observations regarding Esther's Hebrew, Moore concludes that "the Hebrew of Esther is most like that of the Chronicler, which is now being dated to ca. 400 BCE."[2] He also points out that there is a complete lack of any Greek vocabulary in Hebrew Esther, a point that is especially significant in light of the prevalence of Persian words discussed in the previous section.

Sandra Beth Berg (1979) says that many scholars agree that the book contains material that comes from the Persian period. She also summarizes recent studies as being in agreement that the latest possible date is pre-Maccabean, or pre-second century BCE. While Berg doesn't actually propose a date of composition, some of the factors she points out as important to the discussion of Esther's date of composition include the positive attitude toward the foreign king, the absence of Greek words in the story, and the abundance of Persian terms used.[3]

In contrast to Paton and in agreement with Moore, David Clines (1984) states that "the facts about the date of composition are few and simple."[4] He says that for obvious reasons the book cannot have been written earlier than the fifth century BCE, the time in which the story was set, and it cannot have been written later than the first century BCE due to the date he believes is provided in the colophon of OG Esther. Within this range of dates, Clines suggests that the best clue for the date of Hebrew Esther lies in the favorable attitude it displays towards the Persian king. This attitude indicates authorship during the Persian period, when the king was favorable towards the Jews, and before the Hellenistic period, when the relationship between Jews and their non-Jewish rulers was not as amicable.

1. Carey A. Moore, *The Anchor Bible: Esther* (New York: Doubleday, 1971), lviii.
2. *ibid.*, lvii.
3. Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (Society of Biblical Literature, 1979). For a more complete discussion of all the factors relevant to the discussion of Esther's date of composition, see pages 169-73.
4. Clines, *New Century Bible Commentary*, 271.

Frederic Bush (1996) is in agreement with Clines' and Moore's conclusion that the positive attitude towards the Persian king is indicative of an author who lived in the late Persian or early Hellenistic period (late fourth to early third centuries BCE), and emphasizes that this attitude makes it "highly improbable" that the book was written in the Maccabean period (second century BCE), when Jewish attitudes towards their Greek rulers were anything but positive.[1] Jon Levenson (1997) also concludes that Esther was probably written in the fourth or third century BCE for similar reasons. He then suggests that "the author's focus on Susa suggests that city as the locus of composition" and "if the book of Esther is of Persian origin, it may well be the sole surviving legacy of a Jewish culture very different from those of either Palestine or the rest of the Diaspora."[2]

Levenson is the only author surveyed here who actually suggests the city of Susa as the setting of the author of the text. However, this is not an unreasonable suggestion in light of the number of Persian terms that describe specific aspects of government and life in the court of Susa, as well as the stark contrast between the content of Hebrew Esther and that of every other piece of Second Temple Jewish literature written in either Judea or other places in the Diaspora.[3] At the very least, it is reasonable to propose that Hebrew Esther was written somewhere in the Persian Empire by an author who was quite familiar with verifiable elements particular to an administrative city within that empire, such as Susa.

Adele Berlin (2001) concludes that the date of composition was in the late Persian or early Greek period, and that the book definitely pre-dates the Hellenistic and Maccabean period. She bases this conclusion on linguistic analysis that shows the book to be late biblical Hebrew, like the books of Ezra/Nehemiah and Chronicles, and on the worldview of the book, which portrays the Jews as "ultimately safe and successful in the Diaspora."[4] This

1. Bush, *Word Biblical Commentary*, 296.
2. Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 26.
3. Hebrew Esther is unique in the corpus of Second Temple Jewish literature due to the lack of any mention of the God of Israel, the lack of mention of the Temple or the Holy Land, and the lack of mention of forms of piety such as prayer and dietary regulations.
4. Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther* (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001/5761), xlii.

differs greatly from the worldview of the Maccabean period, when the Jews of Judea were being persecuted by their Greek rulers. In addition, the book does not display any antagonism towards the current culture, in contrast to the antagonism prevalent in Jewish writings from Hellenistic times.

Unlike Bush, Levenson, and Berlin, who allow for the possibility of a date of composition as late as the early Greek period, Michael Heltzer (2008) is convinced that "the story is in fact considerably earlier, dating to sometime in the Achaemenid, i.e. Persian, period" due to "recent advances in the study of Old Persian language and history."[1] He cites examples of Old Persian terms – some of the same ones discussed in the previous section – that "must have gone out of use in the Hellenistic period. . . . [T]hese words were no longer used in the Hellenistic period; they are not found in the Hebrew texts of that time."[2] From this observation, he concludes that the book of Esther must have been written sometime between the reign of Xerxes and the conquest of Alexander, or between 465 and 325 BCE. Heltzer further supports his position that Hebrew Esther is a product of the Persian period by discussing details in the story that reflect a knowledge of Persian administration and life in the royal court. Some of these details include support for the possibility that a Jew could hold a high court office, explanations for why Mordecai would not have been required to bow to Haman, confirmation of the date and length of the banquet described in 1:3-5, historical information from Greek sources concerning the seven advisors of the king, and confirmation from Greek sources that a royal decree could not be revoked.[3]

Like Heltzer, T. Laniak (2003) states that in spite of some uncertainties over some of the events mentioned, the book of Esther "exhibits such a thorough knowledge of Persian names and the details of the Persian court and palace that the book can be dated in the late Persian period."[4] Following a thorough discussion of the potential historical problems in Esther, he enumerates many of the

1. Michael Heltzer, *The Province of Judah and Jews in Persian Times (Some Connected Questions of the Persian Empire)* (Tel Aviv: Archaeological Center Publication, 2008), 147.
2. *ibid*.
3. *ibid*., 148-51, 219-21.
4. L. Allen and T. Laniak, *New International Biblical Commentary: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003), 181.

verifiable particulars, concluding that the story "deserves merit as a historical source written close in time and space to the events it describes."[1] Therefore, it is not unreasonable to conclude that the author of Hebrew Esther may not only have had knowledge of the city of Susa, but may also have written the text shortly after the time period described in the story.

As can be seen in this survey of scholarship, it is generally agreed upon that the Hebrew of Esther is like that of Ezra/Nehemiah and Chronicles; there is a complete lack of any Greek vocabulary in Hebrew Esther in contrast to the prevalence of Persian words; Hebrew Esther exhibits a positive attitude towards the Gentile king contrary to the attitudes displayed towards Gentile kings in the Jewish literature of the Hellenistic period; and the worldview of the book portrays Diaspora Jews as "ultimately safe and successful" as opposed to the worldview of the Maccabean period. Therefore, it seems reasonable to conclude that Hebrew Esther was written in the Persian period around 400 BCE, if not a bit earlier.

This conclusion is not only indicated by the facts summarized above, but is suggested by the historical setting of the story discussed previously. Furthermore, the presence of historically verifiable Persian elements in the story – many of which are particular to an administrative city within the Persian Empire – suggests that Hebrew Esther was written in one of the administrative centers of the empire, if not Susa itself. Levenson comments that "the author's focus on Susa suggests that city as the locus of composition,"[2] and Fox notes that the author may have been a resident of Susa due to the demonstrated knowledge of "Susan geography and his special interest in the date of the holiday in Susa."[3] Indeed, archaeological excavation in Susa has corroborated the descriptions of the palace, the gate of the palace, the throne room, and the palace garden given in the book of Esther.[4] Therefore, the combination of the author's focus on Susa and his/her knowledge of the city's geography and descriptions of various features of the palace not only indicates

1. *ibid*., 182.
2. Levenson, *Esther*, 26.
3. Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina, 1991), 140.
4. Haim M.I. Gevaryahu, "Esther is a Story of Jewish Defense Not a Story of Jewish Revenge," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 21/1 (1993): 3-12.

a composition date of 400 BCE at the latest for Hebrew Esther, but suggests that the author could have been physically located in the city of Susa itself.

The combination of all these factors makes a rather strong case in favor of the validity of the intent of the author of Hebrew Esther to present the account of an attempted genocide of the Jews in a particular historical context, which was the Persian Empire during the reign of Ahashverosh, otherwise known in history as Xerxes I. The establishment of the author's intent provides the necessary foundation for the following discussion of the message of Hebrew Esther – a message that was germane to its original audience precisely because of its historical context, and a message that is just as pertinent today because of current events in Israel.

The Message of Hebrew Esther

The identification of the message of Hebrew Esther is foundational for the purpose of this book, which is to demonstrate the relevance of the story of Esther to historic anti-Judaism/Semitism and the contested legitimacy of the State of Israel in the context of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict. In light of this purpose, it is essential to answer the aforementioned question: Is Hebrew Esther an account of Jewish aggression or Jewish resistance to attempted genocide? The answer to this question will not only reflect an understanding of the message of Hebrew Esther, but will provide the basis for a subsequent discussion of the history of interpretation of the story – a history that is based on changes made in the Greek versions.

While it is evident that the author of Hebrew Esther intentionally presented the account of an attempted genocide of the Jews in a particular historical context, a careful reading of this text reveals that it "is about more than past history. It calls its readers to reflect and presumably act in the challenges to human dignity that confront us today."[1] In light of Esther's call to reflect and act, the following discussion will reveal that the message of this text expresses a timeless issue of justice, which is "the fundamental responsibility and universal right of self-protection against those who would murder."[2]

1. Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 216.
2. Marvin A. Sweeney, "Absence of G-d and Human Responsibility in the Book of Esther," in *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millennium*

We can begin to construct a responsible answer to the question of Jewish aggression or Jewish resistance to attempted genocide by carefully comparing the content of Haman's decree calling for annihilation of the Jews found in 3:13 with the content of Esther's decree found in 8:11. Esther's decree in 8:11, which is followed by a description of the subsequent actions of the Jews of Persia, has been a principal proof-text for those who interpret this book as a bloodthirsty story of Jewish aggression. However, a close study of this counter-decree and the actions of the Jews will reveal that the Jews were only allowed to take the same actions against their enemies as those decreed against them in Haman's decree in 3:13. More specifically, the Jews were only allowed to take these actions in self-defense; they were not allowed to initiate them. The following study will demonstrate that the actions of the Jews of Persia were in fact acts of resistance, or self-defense, and that if their enemies had not tried to kill them, the Jews would have had no cause to kill anyone. This study will be divided into three sections: a comparison of the content of the two decrees, a study of four additional statements found in chapters 8 and 9, and a discussion of five features of the story that refute anti-Semitic charges concerning the actions of the Jews.

A Comparison of the Content of the Two Decrees

Esther 3:13 says:

> And letters were sent by the hand of the runners to all the provinces of the king *to exterminate*, *to kill*, and *to destroy* all the Jews, from young to old, children and women in one day, on the thirteenth of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and *to plunder* their possessions.

Esther 8:11 says:

> Which the king gave to the Jews who were in every city to assemble and to stand for their lives, *to exterminate* and *to kill* and *to destroy* all the army of the people or province, their adversaries, children and women, and *to plunder* their possessions.

(ed. Wonil Kim, Deborah Ellens, Michael Floyd, and Marvin A. Sweeney; Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2000), 264-75.

As can be seen, Haman's decree of 3:13 calls for all the people of Persia "*to exterminate*, *to kill*, and *to destroy* the Jews . . . and *to plunder* their possessions." Esther's counter-decree of 8:11 says that the king *gave*, or "allowed the Jews to assemble and stand for their lives," and "*to exterminate*, *to kill*, and *to destroy*" anyone who came against them, and "*to plunder* their possessions." Four different verbs used in both of these decrees are in italics because they are identical. Not only are they identical in meaning, but in the Hebrew, they appear in the exact same form as an infinitive construct. The infinitive construct serves to express the idea of purpose, intention, and action in a definite direction. The concentrated use of four infinitives places a significant emphasis on the extent of the actions Haman intended to be taken against the Jews in 3:13, as well as on the reciprocal actions the king allowed the Jews to take against their attackers in 8:11. These four verbs all describe hostile actions taken against an enemy. The use of three different verbs that all bring about the same intended result – the annihilation of the objects of those verbs – emphasizes the severity of the intended actions.

In addition to the use of the same four verbs found in 3:13, the decree of 8:11 allows the Jews "to assemble and to stand for their lives." The form of the verb "to assemble" is a passive infinitive, which also appears in Esther 9:2, 9:15-16, and 9:18, as well as in 2 Samuel 20:14. In each of these cases, the use of this form refers to an act of assembling for conflict or war. The verb "to assemble" is connected to the next verb, "to stand," by a conjunction, which indicates that these two actions are to be done together. Therefore, the purpose of the Jews in assembling for war was "to stand for their lives", which is "to take a position of defense and resistance."[1] In this position of defense and resistance, the Jews were then allowed to exterminate, to kill, and to destroy "all the army of the people and province" who took offensive actions against them, in accordance with the decree of 3:13. "The idea of the king is not that the Jews may attack anyone who is supposed to be unfriendly disposed toward the Jews; they only receive permission to resist any attack."[2] The action taken by the Jews in assembling "to stand for their lives" "is that of a body forming for defense, not a mob hunting down individuals it considers

1. Paul Haupt, "Critical Notes on Esther," in *Studies in the Book of Esther* (ed. Carey A. Moore; New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1982), 1-79.
2. *ibid*., 62.

hostile."[1] In other words, the counter-decree of 8:11 only allowed for acts of self-defense against aggressors, while the decree of 3:13 ordered the annihilation of the whole Jewish population, including women and children.

A Study of Four Additional Statements Found in Chapters 8 and 9

Esther's decree of 8:11 is quite clear concerning the provision of resistance, or self-defense, that the king gave to the Jews. However, this is not the only verse in the book that counters the erroneous charge of Jewish aggression made by critics of the story. There are four statements found in chapters 8 and 9 that provide additional insight into the content and intent of the decree of 8:11, and into the kind of action the Jews took in response to that decree. Therefore, it will be quite informative to take a look at what Esther 8:13b, 9:2a, 9:5, and 9:16a have to say.

In 8:13b, it says, "and the Jews were to be ready on that day to avenge themselves against their enemies." This verse is often interpreted as evidence in favor of the alleged theme of bloodthirsty vengeance demonstrated in the story. However, this is a faulty interpretation due to an inaccurate translation of the form of the word whose root means "to take aggression," or "to avenge." The word that appears in this verse is most often translated into English as "to take aggression."[2] "To take aggression" implies an active act of aggression or vengeance. However, in the case of 8:13b, the word appears in a passive form, which indicates an act done by the Jews for themselves in response to aggressive acts from their enemies. In other words, the sense communicated through the use of the passive form of the word is one of inflicting punishment on those who attacked first. This interpretation is certainly consistent with the context in which the verse appears. Just two verses earlier, the counter-decree allowed the Jews "to assemble" and "to stand for their lives," an action defined as taking a position of resistance or defense.

Esther 9:2a reports that the Jews throughout all the provinces "gathered themselves together, to send – or to stretch out a hand – against those who sought their evil, injury or calamity." It is

1. Michael V. Fox, *The Redaction of the Books of Esther* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1991), 111.
2. For example, see the New Revised Standard Version translation.

quite clear from the form of the words in the Hebrew that the Jews are only taking action against those who seek to do them harm. The actions of the Jews in this verse are again in keeping with an act of resistance to acts of aggression against them, rather than an initiation of an act of aggression.

A summary of the action in all the provinces is provided in 9:5a, which reports that the Jews "smote" all their enemies with the sword and "killed and destroyed them." This action on the part of the Jews is described by the use of two of the same verbs that were used in both decrees found in 3:13 and 8:11. The actions "to kill" and "to destroy," which the original decree intended to be taken against the Jews, have now been carried out by the Jews against their enemies according to the provisions allowed by the king in the counter-decree of 8:11.

However, the second part of 9:5 includes some additional information. It says that the Jews did to those who hated them "as they pleased." In the context of the first part of the verse, which makes the connection to both of the decrees by the use of the verbs, "to kill" and "to destroy," "the Jews were now following the king's law to do *as they pleased* with their enemies."[1] Gerleman interprets this to mean that the Jews "had free hand without being hindered by the Persian bureaucracy,"[2] meaning that the government would not prevent the Jews from taking action against those who sought to do them harm. In 1:8, the same form of the word meaning to do "as they pleased" is used in the context of each man drinking "as he pleased," according to orders given by the king. In both cases, the use of the term "as they/he pleased" was a sign of imperial favor. As such, the ability to do as one pleased was a freedom that was restricted by limits established by the king. Therefore, in 9:5b, the Jews were not free to do whatever they wanted to their hearts' content,[3] but rather were free to defend themselves against their enemies within the confines of the king's law as stated in the decree written by Esther in 8:11.

9:16a states that the Jews "gathered themselves together and stood for their lives and then rested from their enemies." The rest

1. Allen and Laniak, *New International Biblical Commentary*, 256.
2. Gillis Gerleman, *Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament: Esther* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag Des Erziehungsvereins GMBH, 1973), 132.
3. Gerleman states specifically that the word used here does not mean "nach Herzenslust," or "to one's heart's content." *ibid*.

they had from their enemies was a direct result of the fact that they had killed a rather large number of "those who hated them." The following verse reports that on the next day the Jews "rested" and made that day "a day of feasting and rejoicing." The fact that the Jews had a day of celebration after they killed their enemies has been used to support the accusation that the story of Esther is a bloodthirsty story of Jewish aggression. However, the celebration was "not to the memory of the victory" but "to the memory of the day of silence after the victory."[1] Contrary to the accusation that 9:17 is an account of a celebration of the bloodshed in 9:16a, "the celebration was for the deliverance of the Jewish people from destruction, not for the opportunity to destroy others."[2]

The fact that the celebration was to "the memory of the day of silence" is evidenced by the use of the word meaning "to rest" in 9:17 to describe what followed the day of fighting in the provinces, in 9:18 to describe what followed the two days of fighting in Susa, and in 9:22 in which the celebration of two days of Purim is instituted as the days on which the Jews "rested, or gained rest, from their enemies." What is being stressed here is the rest that followed the fighting, not the opportunity to kill. As its literature shows, "to be allowed to live in peace" is "the ultimate dream of diaspora Judaism."[3] In the case of the Persian Jews, rest was only possible when their enemies were defeated, and the celebration of Purim celebrates "the month which was turned for them from grief to joy and from mourning to a good day [or holiday]."

Five Features of the Story that Refute Anti-Semitic Charges

Critics of the story of Esther use the account of bloodshed that follows the counter-decree of 8:11 to support the charge that Esther in particular and the Jews in general were bloodthirsty killers of Gentiles motivated by a nationalistic spirit. However, this conclusion can only be reached by ignoring the significance of the two additional verbs found in 8:11 that were discussed above, and by ignoring five features of the story that clearly refute anti-Semitic charges concerning the actions of the Jews. The first

1. *ibid*., 134.
2. Sweeney, "Absence of G-d and Human Responsibility in the Book of Esther," 267.
3. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 324.

feature of the story that is often ignored has to do with *what it was* that Esther requested when she went before the king for the purpose of saving her people. It is frequently charged that Esther asked the king for permission to attack and kill the enemies of the Jews. However, in the Hebrew version of the story, she did not request bloodshed or permission for aggression.

According to 8:5, what Esther did request was that the decree written by Haman ordering the annihilation of the Jews be revoked. While this appeal is an excellent example of a human taking personal responsibility to act in response to evil, Esther's knowledge of the difficulty of this request is reflected in the fact that she prefaced her request with four conditional clauses. Before telling the king what it was that she wanted, she said "if it is good to the king," "if I have found favor before him," "if the proposal is right before the king," and "if I am pleasing in his eyes." This excessive use of conditional clauses indicates an awareness of the fact that it was quite unusual to suggest that a decree be revoked. However, this was the extent of Esther's request – that the original decree be revoked. She did not ask permission to kill the enemies of the Jews. The counter-decree, which the king authorized Esther and Mordecai to write, allowed the Jews to stand for their lives and kill those who attacked them. Permission for the Jews to defend themselves was the king's solution for the situation, not Esther's.

Secondly, Esther's request of the king in 9:13 for a second day of fighting in Susa and the public hanging of Haman's ten sons has been cited as evidence of bloodthirsty aggression on the part of Esther and the Jews. While it is often charged that what Esther requested was a second day of killing, what she actually requested was that the Jews in Susa be able "to do according to the law of this day." In other words, she was asking for a second day of self-defense in the city of Susa according to the "law of that day," implying that while the danger was over in the rest of the empire according to 9:16, she "saw a need for an additional day to win a clear victory for the Jews"[1] of Susa. The request for a second day of fighting did not mean that the Jews would be killing randomly; it simply meant that according to the provisions outlined in the counter-decree, the Jews would still be allowed to defend themselves against those who sought their destruction. The Jews' killing of those who were seeking

1. Gevaryahu, "Esther is a Story of Jewish Defense," 10.

to destroy them is "entirely in keeping with the Bible's various expressions of corporate punishment and salvation. . . . [T]he issue is not vengeance. . . . [I]t is a matter of justice, that is, the fundamental responsibility and universal right of self-protection against those who would murder."[1]

Just as the request for a second day of self-defense is not evidence of bloodthirsty aggression, neither is the public hanging of Haman's sons. In fact, Esther's request in 9:13 that Haman's sons be hung in public does not mean that they were executed in public. Rather, according to 9:5-10, these sons were killed in the context of Jews killing those who came against them, implying that Haman's sons were among the attackers. The hanging of the sons of Haman in 9:14 was therefore the hanging of dead bodies; the bodies of those who had sought to murder Jews. "The public display – and thus, disgrace – of an enemy's body was not all unusual in the ancient world. . . . [S]uch was the fate of Saul and his sons, for instance, in I Samuel 31:8-10."[2] The public display of the bodies of Haman's sons would not only demonstrate that the enemies of the Jews were defeated and disgraced, but would serve to discourage others from following the actions of those hung as well. Esther's request for the hanging of the sons of Haman is completely in line with her request for a second day of fighting in Susa, as both requests demonstrate her concern for the defense of the Jews and illustrate a particular principle of justice, which is the responsibility and right to resist attempted genocide.

The third feature in the text that negates the charge that Esther in particular and the Jews in general were aggressive killers of Gentiles motivated by a nationalistic spirit has to do with the fact that the Jews only received permission to resist armed people who came against them. Gillis Gerleman points out that the difference between the original decree in 3:13 and the counter-decree in 8:11 is that the decree of 3:13 contains the command to kill, whereas the counter-decree of 8:11 only contains permission for the Jews to defend themselves, as indicated by the phrase, "which the king gave [or allowed] to the Jews."[3] In other words, in 8:11, the

1. Sweeney, "Absence of G-d and Human Responsibility in the Book of Esther," 273.
2. Carol M. Bechtel, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Esther* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2002), 80.
3. Gerleman, *Esther*, 129.

Jews were not being commanded to kill, but were being given permission to resist being killed. As a result, "the killing was limited to those who sought to kill Jews."[1]

It is reported in 9:3 that all the princes of the provinces, the satraps, governors, and royal officials "supported" and "assisted" the Jews because the fear of Mordecai fell upon them following the counter-edict of 8:11. If all of the royal officials could figure out that it was not a good idea to attack the Jews once they had been given the right to resist, one has to wonder how much less bloodshed there might have been if more people had decided not to attack. One of the unanswerable questions in this story is "why so very many people dislike the Jews so much that they risk their own lives to attack them."[2] Perhaps the only answer to this question is the fact that "the explanation for anti-Semitism resides within the anti-Semite's soul, and the narrator's refraining from giving further motivation for this irrational behavior is realistic."[3]

A fourth feature in the story that negates the accusation of bloodthirstiness on the part of the Jews is revealed by what the text *doesn't* say concerning their actions. The permission given to the Jews in 8:11 "to assemble" and "to stand for their lives" allowed them to kill "all the army of the people and province," along with their "children and women." However, in spite of this allowance, the text does not record any killing of women and children by the Jews. In fact, when the text reports the number of casualties from the two days of fighting in 9:6, 9:12, 9:15, and 9:16, it uses the word "men" in the first three instances, and the phrases "their enemies" and "those who hated them" in the last instance. In other words, all who were killed were either "men," "enemies," or "those who hated them." Therefore, women and children were not targeted for killing and the only possible killing of women and children by the Jews would be those who may have been among the attacking "army of the people and province" in 8:11, or the "enemies" and "those who hated them" in 9:16. The condition of the counter-decree in 8:11, which only allowed the Jews to resist an armed force coming against them, stands in stark contrast therefore to the original decree of 3:13, which ordered armed, offensive actions against all Jews, from

1. Sweeney, "Absence of G-d and Human Responsibility in the Book of Esther," 267.
2. Day, *Esther*, 155.
3. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 111.

the young to the old, the children, and the women. The fact that women and children were not targeted for killing, and the fact that Jews only resisted those who came against them, is particularly poignant in relation to the precautions taken by the Israeli military to prevent civilian casualties as it takes necessary steps to eliminate rocket launching sites and weapons targeting Jewish civilians.

And finally, the fifth feature of the story that refutes common criticisms of the story of Esther is the fact that the Jews did not take any plunder from those they killed. Three times, in 9:10, 9:15, and 9:16, the text reports that the Jews "did not stretch out their hands on the plunder," in spite of the fact that they were allowed to do so according to 8:11. The report in 9:10 refers to the first day of fighting in Susa, 9:15 refers to the second day of fighting in Susa, and 9:16 refers to the fighting in the provinces. In other words, in every instance where they would have had occasion to take plunder, they did not. The repetition of this phrase after each occasion of fighting emphasizes that the Jews were not motivated by a desire to acquire goods, but were motivated solely by the need for self-preservation. In fact, "such self-restraint as the Jews expressed here is quite prudent in a situation where a minority is essentially defending itself from its enemies rather than initiating the conflict."[1] Not only is refraining from taking plunder an indication of self-restraint, but it is further evidence that the Jewish action stopped at self-defense and "never degenerated into aggression."[2]

A detailed study of the counter-decree in 8:11 has demonstrated that the Jews of Persia were given the right to assemble themselves together for the purpose of standing for their lives in resistance to those who would attack them according to the original decree of 3:13. The study of the statements made in 8:13b, 9:2a, 9:5, and 9:16a provides additional insight into the content and intent of the counter-decree in 8:11, and into the kind of action the Jews took in response to that decree as well. The preceding discussion of five features that appear in the context of the counter-decree clearly refutes the charge that Esther in particular and the Jews in general were aggressive killers of Gentiles motivated by a nationalistic spirit. In every case, it has been demonstrated that rather than being motivated by a nationalistic spirit or by a desire

1. Moore, *Esther*, 88.
2. Gevaryahu, "Esther is a Story of Jewish Defense," 3.

to kill, the Jews simply took actions that were necessary for self-defense due to a decree that called for their annihilation. As acts of self-defense, the military actions carried out by the Jews of Persia may be described as "acts of resistance . . . motivated by the intention to thwart, limit or end the exercise of power of the oppressor over the oppressed."[1] The obvious conclusion of this study is that if their enemies had not tried to kill them, the Jews would have had no cause to kill anyone.

Conclusions

After validating the author of Esther's intent to present the account of an attempted genocide of the Jews in the particular historical context of the Persian Empire during the reign of Ahashverosh, this chapter identified the message of Hebrew Esther and answered the question of whether it is a story of Jewish aggression or Jewish resistance to attempted genocide. It has been demonstrated that rather than being a story of Jewish aggression that promotes a nationalistic spirit, this text presents an account of resistance to attempted genocide, with a message that expresses a timeless issue of justice: "the fundamental responsibility and universal right of self-protection against those who would murder."[2] In light of this issue of justice, and of the fact that the story of Esther is "surprisingly prophetic about the anti-Judaism that would later come,"[3] the message of Hebrew Esther has serious implications in relation to how historic interpretations of Esther have contributed to Christian anti-Semitic interpretation of the story, and how they influence current Christian anti-Zionism as well. Ultimately, the timeless issue of responsibility and right in relation to self-defense has profound ramifications vis-à-vis ongoing critique of actions the State of Israel takes to protect its citizens against those who seek to kill Jews.

1. Nechama Tec, "Jewish Resistance: Facts, Omissions and Distortions," (Nechama Tec: Assigned to the United States Holocaust Memorial Council, 1997; Third Printing, September 2001), 4.
2. Sweeney, "Absence of G-d and Human Responsibility in the Book of Esther," 264-75.
3. Day, *Esther*, 75.