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What Goes Up: Tracing Vertical Directionality in Esther and its Reception Exegesis

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1. Preface: Spatial Analysis and Biblical Narrative

My first visit to the inspiring Land of the Rising Sun, and the transformative impressions of space and proximity that brought with it, further sensitized me to space and directionality as cognitive landscapes, and to their importance in understanding biblical literature.[1] In this article, I wish to spotlight the role of spatial dimensions in the characterization of Esther, the main protagonist of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (HB/OT) book that carries her name, and sample how these dimensions reflect her inner-life and how they persist in the Book of Esther's interpretive history. In my view, the reception exegesis of these elements (including in visual art) can bring out dormant aspects of Esther's biblical characterization.

In this article I use several terms which are worthy of preliminary clarification: the term "reception exegesis" is applied in the distinctive sense coined and generated by Diana Lipton and Paul Joyce, who differentiate it from the more common

1 I am grateful to Prof. Shuichi Hasegawa for inviting me to lecture at the seminar of the Graduate School of Christian Studies, Rikkyo University, on a topic related to this article (Sept 29, 2023), and for his gentle generosity and kindness in hosting me and my family in Tokyo. My discussions with Prof. Hasegawa and the seminar participants, as well as the wider learning process awakened by the encounter with the Far East have left me enduringly enriched.

terms "reception history" and "reception criticism". It refers to a fresh method in the study of the history of biblical interpretation (from pre-modern to post-modern times) which acknowledges the value of how people understood the Bible over the generations in the widest sense of "reception", namely, in traditional modes of biblical interpretation but also in literature and art (painting, music, media) for the close reading of biblical materials (in the specific sense of "exegesis"), and especially for the recovery of meanings, which have their origins in the actual biblical text, but have gone undetected or become lost:

> Such study of how the Bible has been received may provide assistance in the exegetical task ... Reception exegesis can shine a spotlight on biblical verses that have been dulled by familiarity; it can foreground concepts and concerns that have faded over time into the background; and it can give rise to radical new readings of difficult Hebrew terms and texts.[2]

I also use the terms "space/spatial" and "direction/directionality" in the cognitive-linguistic sense to indicate space dimensions and topographic relations between various elements in the biblical text which shape its meaning/s. Two dimensions, the horizontal (left-right; side-to-side) and the vertical (up-down; top-bottom; high-low), and the expressions relating to them, are applied in cognitive-linguistic analysis of textual meaning.[3]

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2 P. M. Joyce and D. Lipton, *Lamentations Throughout the Centuries* (New York, NY: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 17–18. I am deeply grateful to Dr. Diana Lipton for her careful reading of this article, her important comments and our longstanding and inspiring conversations on biblical literature.

3 Cognitive linguistics studies the understanding of human language (and texts) in connection to the ways in which human cognition functions. A tangible example is "binary thinking", namely, the way our mind creates sets of "oppositions" (male/female; insider/outsider etc.) which in turn effect meaning in reading and wider communication. These oppositions can express themselves in clusters of conceptual metaphors as well. See,

Scholars have argued that topographic relations between places or elements in a text constitute literary structures that are critical to its interpretation: "while the horizontal usually represents a defined and substantive place, the vertical mostly represents a world whose ontological existence is vague."[4]

As a general cognitive-linguistic rule, the higher part of the vertical axis designates celestial, divine, good, and positive notions and sensations, while the lower part designates the human (mundane) including, often, negative aspects, such as death and the underworld. It helps to think of the human body when visualizing this polarization: the head, eyes and the chest (heart) are higher up and relate to phenomena such as thinking and seeing (cognition in general) while the lower parts of the body pertain to more immediate physical functions and urges. This

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for example, R. Langacker, *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar* [Volume I: Theoretical prerequisites], (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987); M. Johnson, *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). For its application to biblical studies, see R. De Blois, *Toward a New Dictionary of Biblical Hebrew Based on Semantic Domains* (United Bible Societies: New York, NY, 2000). For cognitive studies of biblical texts see, for example: J. W. Flanagan *et al*., *Imagining Biblical Worlds: Studies in Spatial, Social, and Historical Constructs in Honor of James W. Flanagan* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002); E. Van Wolde, "Cognitive Linguistics and its Application to Genesis 28:10–22" in *One Text, A Thousand Methods: Studies in Memory of Sjef van Tilborg*, eds. P. Chatelion Counet and U. Berge (Leiden: Brill, 2005); W. R. Millar, "A Bakhtinian Reading Of Narrative Space And Its Relationship To Social Space," *Library Of Hebrew Bible Old Testament Studies* 481 (2007, 129–140); J. De Joode, "The Body and its Boundaries: The Coherence of Conceptual Metaphors for Job's Distress and Lack of Control," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 126/4 (2014, 554–567); K. Seung Il, "The Garden of Eden as an Israelite Sacred Place," *Theology Today* (Ephrata, Pa.), 77:1 (2020, 89–99); A. Lamprecht, "The Journey of Jephthah's Daughter: On Spatial Cognition, Body and Language in Judges 11:37," *HTS Teologiese Studies/ Theological Studies* 77:1 (2021, 1-9) and cf. note 5 below.

4 H. Shait, "Horizontal or Vertical: Rereading the Space Scheme in Only Yesterday by S. Y. Agnon," *AJS Review* 39:2 (2015, 393-406), 395–396, based on Gabriel Zoran, *Tekst, 'olam, merhav* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz Ha-me'uhad, 1997), 310–313.

illustration does not necessarily reflect the relative importance to our survival of each of our organs or of all of them together, nor is it universal, since some cultures afford more or special importance to the hands or feet (consider their prominence in flamenco dancing, for instance), yet it brings across the general point. This vertical axis is therefore real and imaginary (or metaphorical), at the same time, and as such it draws more literary focus or gravitas than the horizontal axis.

In addition, scholars point out the importance of the relationship between the vertical (up/down) axis and the horizontal (left/right) axis in narrative junctures. In other words, places of transition in which the text moves from a vertical to a horizontal direction and/or vice versa are especially significant in the plot build-up and character portrayal.

Two studies inspired me to explore this aspect in Esther. The first is Talia Sutskover's analysis of directionality in the Book of Jonah, tracing the vertical axis in the depiction of Jonah's outer life and its relevance to the portrayal of his inner life:

> Jonah is described going down into the lowest point inside the ship (Jonah 1:5); his movement downward on the vertical axis continues in the description of his lying down and falling asleep. This suggests that Jonah's psychological state continues to decline, and this is due to God throwing down a great wind.[5]

5 T. Sutskover, "Directionality and Space in Jonah," in *Discourse, Dialogue and Debate in the Bible*, ed. A. Brenner-Idan*, Essays in Honour of Frank H. Polak* (Atlanta: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014, 203-217), 208. Sutskover further highlights how spatial dimensions underline Jonah's emotional change. I am grateful to Dr. Talia Sutskover for encouraging me to explore this topic in a conference she organized at Tel Aviv University, and for sending me reading materials. Also cf. her important studies on: "Space and its Meaning in the Narrative of Naboth's Vineyard," *Beit Mikra* 60 (2015, 65-91, in Hebrew); "The Symbolism of the Spatial-Temporal Concepts 'in front of, before' (לפני) and 'behind, after' (אחרי), with a Special Focus on the Jacob Narrative," in *Where Is the Way to the*

The second is Heddy Shait's study of the modern Hebrew novel *Temol Shilshom* (*Only Yesterday*) by Nobel Laureate Shemuel Yosef Agnon.[6] Shait traces how Agnon fashions the inner life of the novel's main character, Itzhak Kumer, a lonely Jewish immigrant in Palestine of the 1920's, by his movements in space. Kumer's geographical move from Jaffa to Jerusalem, in a horizontal axis, transforms into a metaphorical vertical move, in the sense that the physical quest for an earthly Jerusalem is but a prelude to the character's spiritual search for identity, in a heavenly Jerusalem:

> Agnon's spaces of the vertical axis are not physical, but solely metaphorical — two spaces of spiritual concepts of Jewish religious life. His protagonist's quest is to find a new life and new self in the Land of Israel … his trajectory does not continue only in the obvious horizontal dimension, rather it is transferred to the vertical dimension. This changes the nature of the quest … He gives up the goal of a new life for a New Jew, the journey that he set out on in the first place.[7]

2. Horizontal and Vertical Aspects of Esther

As I will try to show, the Book of Esther offers a subtle interplay between horizontal and vertical dimensions. The opening and the ending chapters of the book (1-2 and 8-10), situate our heroine's conflict in the horizontal dimension,

Dwelling of Light? Studies in Genesis, Job and Linguistics in Honor of Ellen van Wolde (Leiden: Brill, 2022, 89-100), and the rich bibliography in all three articles.

6 Shait, "Horizontal or Vertical," 393-406.

7 Shait, "Horizontal or Vertical," 405. On p. 397, Shait further underscores that "transformations in the horizontal dimension are normal — taking a job, falling in love, moving from one place to another, while the transitions in the vertical dimension are anomalous — mysterious happenings always related to catastrophe and death."

while the core of the narrative (chapters 3-7) situates her conflict in the vertical dimension. The transitions from horizontal to vertical (and vice versa), particularly in chapters 3-7, are pivotal moments in the plot in which Esther's character transforms.[8]

2.1. Horizontal directionality (Esther 1-2; 8-10)

In the exposition to the book (chaps. 1-2), and its epilogue (chaps. 8-10), the horizontal axis is prevalent, underscoring mundane, day-to-day, earthly affairs of men and women, state matters, political strife, and Esther's forced involvement in the commonplace social routine. This axis also relates to her small and marginalized immediate entourage (her only living family member, Mordecai) in striking opposition to the king's multitude of representatives from 127 cities throughout

8 Esther's complex redaction history and thematic study lies beyond the scope of this article, in which I refer to specific articles, particularly on psychological and artistic dimensions of Esther, of more immediate relevance to my discussion. Naturally, I could only provide a limited selection from the plethora of publications (interestingly, especially abounding in the last decade) and I regret what has escaped my attention in this respect. Nonetheless, for the benefit of a wider readership I suggest some general (and mostly recent) reading materials that I hope will enrich those wishing to further explore Esther's reception (see Postscript at the end of this article). As to my methodology in this article, I focus on the Hebrew Masoretic text as it has come down to us, in the "end process" of its redaction, employing linguistic and literary tools of analysis. I do not engage in comparison with other ancient versions or in reconstructing the Hebrew Ur-text. For further reading on Esther's redaction, see M. V. Fox, *The Redaction of the Books of Esther: On Reading Composite Texts* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1991); K.H. Jobes, *The Alpha-Text of Esther: Its Character and Relationship to the Masoretic Text* (Atlanta: Scholars, 1996); E. Tov, "Textual Criticism and Biblical Interpretation: With Examples from Genesis, Joshua, and Esther," *Canon&Culture* 1:1 (2007, 125–55) and more recently, K. De Troyer and T. Smith, "The Additions of the Greek Book(s) of Esther," *Oxford Handbook of the Apocrypha*, ed. G. Oegema (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); T. Smith, "Artemidorus Interprets the Dream of Mordecai (Additions to Esther A and F)," *Vetus Testamentum* 73:4–5 (2023, 766–92).

his empire, and the endless servants, advisors and concubines who surround him, on a center versus periphery horizontal plane. This horizontal axis anchors the theme of gender and ethnic power struggles: the king's house, the queen's house, the harem, the inner and outer courts, gate, and palace structures all accentuate the interminable barriers, which stand in the way of Esther and Mordecai. They also highlight the Jews' liminal identity, for which "sitting at the king's gate"[9] becomes a palpable symbol of being in and out (horizontal directionality) at the same time. The messengers and eunuchs moving between the houses, bringing the king's edict, rushing back and forth, bearing letters, thicken the horizontal axis by their constant crisscrossing. These chapters abound with side-to-side structural movements. Moreover, the semantic frame 'house' (Heb. *bayit*) subsumes the various architectural structures mentioned above (gardens, gates and so forth) as well as detailed descriptions of their lavish inner furnishings. [10] From a cognitive perspective these expressions accentuate "Susa the citadel" (see, for instance, Esth. 1:5) as a horizontal space full of intermediary zones, hidden and exposed, inviting, and dangerous. It is the world of realpolitik in its most sinister and earthly expression, seething with a range of human urges and passions: conniving, aggression, jealousy, foolishness, vindictiveness, lust and more.

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9 Hebrew: יוֹשֵׁב בְּשַׁעַר הַמֶּלֶךְ appears 3 times, describing Mordecai (Esth 2;19, 5:13; 6:10). Altogether there are 10 occurrences of "gate" in the book: Mordecai and Esther are often standing by some gate or entrance, near the palace. This may symbolize their liminal position (namely, belonging yet not belonging). On the English translations used in this article see note 12 below.

10 The lexeme "house" (Hebrew *bayit*) occurs many times in Esther, especially in the construct state בֵּית־הַמֶּלֶךְ (the palace, literally: the king's house). See further on this semantic frame in biblical literature: Ch. Meredith, "A Case of Open and Shut: The Five Thresholds in 1 Samuel 1:1-7:2," *Biblical Interpretation* 18:2 (2010, 137–57); F. H. Polak, "David's 'Bayit' in the Light of Frame Semantics: Theme and Central Ideas of the David Tales and Beyond" in *The Books of Samuel: Stories, History, Reception History*, eds. W. Dietrich et al. (Leuven/Paris /Bristol 2016), 317–331.

Figure 1

Semantic markers of the horizontal axis: Verbs - going back and forth; running; sending, coming and the like

Ester 1-2	**Ester 8-10**
• לְהָבִיא אֶת־וַשְׁתִּי הַמַּלְכָּה לְפָנָיו וְלֹא־בָאָה • וַיִּשְׁלַח סְפָרִים • אֲשֶׁר הָגְלָה מִירוּשָׁלַיִם • לְקָחָהּ; וַתִּלָּקַח • וּבְהַגִּיעַ תֹּר נַעֲרָה וְנַעֲרָה לָבוֹא בָּאָה אֶל־הַמֶּלֶךְ .. יִנָּתֵן לָהּ, לָבוֹא עִמָּה • בָּעֶרֶב הִיא בָאָה, וּבַבֹּקֶר הִיא שָׁבָה	• וַיִּשְׁלַח סִפָרִים בְּיַד הָרָצִים בַּסּוּסִים • בָּא מִסְפַּר הַהֲרוּגִים בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירָה – לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ • הַקְּרוֹבִים, וְהָרְחוֹקִים • וּבְבֹאָהּ לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ

Nouns - palace, harem; courtyard; gate; gatekeepers,
בית המלך/המלכות; חצר גינת בית המלך; (חצר) בית הנשים; שמרי הסף; שער המלך

2.2. Vertical directionality (Esther 3-7)

The horizontal oppositions between Esther's out-of-the-way Judean background and the royal palace gradually faze into vertical oppositions in chapter 3-4, first, when Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman (an up-down movement), and when he breaks the code of conduct and bursts into the forbidden royal space (a side-to-side movement), to call Esther's attention to Haman's decree. As noted above (1), meeting points of the horizontal and vertical axes suggest that a transition is about to take place in the inner life of the characters. Esther's transformation occurs when she braves entering the king's presence despite not having been called, that is, on her own initiative as an empowered agent, instead of another bead in the string of Ahasuerus's subjugated wives and concubines:[11]

"On the third day, Esther put on royal apparel and **stood** in the inner

11 Esther's initiative recalls Vashti's independence and deepens the sense of danger, since Esther (and the readers) know Vashti paid dearly for "standing her ground".

> court of the king's palace, **facing** the king's palace, while the king was **sitting on his royal throne** in the throne room **facing** the entrance of the palace; As soon as the king saw Queen Esther **standing** in the court, she won his favor. **The king extended to Esther the golden scepter, which he had in his hand**, and Esther approached and touched **the tip of the scepter**" (Esther 5:1-2).[12]

In these verses, Esther's horizontal passage (by which the Jews too, in effect, become part of the inner court, physically proximate to the king), is met by three vertical movements. Firstly, by her standing before the seated king, secondly, by the king's hand extending the scepter, thus motioning Esther to come forward, and thirdly by her touching the scepter's tip/head (Heb. וַתִּקְרַב אֶסְתֵּר וַתִּגַּע בְּרֹאשׁ הַשַּׁרְבִיט). The text does not designate where Esther's body came into contact with the scepter, but exegetes and artists have invariably suggested the scepter reached her hand, shoulder, or neck, namely, upper body parts that were in the king's reach while retaining his relative elevation (when seated on his throne). Yet it is possible that he touched her lips, head, heart or crown. Whatever the body-part our imagination supplies, we cannot miss in the vertical directionality in this charged moment in Esther's inner-life, when she is "to be or not to be" in the sense of overcoming her innermost fears. For these reasons, the scene is amongst the most widely depicted in Esther's artistic reception.

12 The English translation used here is NIV (New International Version). Elsewhere in this article I use JPS (Jewish Publication Society) 1985, 2006 and 2023 invariably according to my personal preference. Words in bold represent the various axes in the passage, most notably, the vertical (up-down) axis.

Figure 2

Hebrew Miscellany of biblical and other texts ('The Northern French Miscellany' or earlier 'the British Museum Miscellany'), British Library MS 11639 f.260v (13th century) https://picryl.com/media/esther-and-ahasverus-from-bl-add-11639-f-260v-6da4ac/ (public domain). [13]

Figure 3

Unknown artist - Speculum Humane Salvationis (10c 23, f. 43r): Ahasuerus' scepter Color illustration National Library of the Netherlands, The Hague; Date: 1400 – 1500. https://manuscripts.kb.nl/zoom/BYVANCKB%3Amimi_mmw_10c23%3A043r_min_2/ (public domain).

2.3. The unreliable vertical axis in Esther

The above artistic portrayals bring out Esther's transition between earthly and celestial cognitive spheres. She can transform reality, not only by entering the royal zone unsummoned (a zone from which Haman wished to bar her and her

13 For a discussion of figure 2, see B.D. Walfish, "Images of Esther in modern Jewish art," in *The Bible Retold by Jewish Artists, Writers, Composers and Filmmakers*, eds. H. Leneman and B. D. Walfish (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2015, 186-211), 187: "In a way, she (Esther) is like a Jewish Mona Lisa. One could speculate endlessly on the meaning of that smile." Also cf. *The North French Hebrew Miscellany: British Library Add. MS 11639* (2 vols.; London: Facsimile Editions, 2003). For further images, see: https://www.sefaria.org/sheets/480171.

kind), but also because she is literally pulled up (certainly stretched upwards) by the king's gesture. In a symbolic sense, therefore, Esther can break the hermetic isolation of her people, and so the ethnic and political conflict has potential for resolution.[14] Furthermore, the vertical axis also underscores the contrast between the earth, its low surface (the affairs of men), and the high, or celestial plain of divine will. If Ahasuerus is God's mirror image on earth, then Esther's upward movement represents her coming closer to God.

Yet, in Esther's case, unlike that of other biblical characters (for instance, Jonah) the oppositional pairing between human and divine remains, I believe, unresolved. The vertical axis turns out to be shaky and unstable, flipping constantly in a two directional manner (see further below). This unreliable vertical axis implies, in my view, that God's word and divine will are also shaky and unreliable.

At the end of the Book of Jonah, God offers an answer of sorts to the disillusioned prophet, claiming the last word in their closing dialogue:

> And should not I care about Nineveh, that great city, in which there are more than a hundred and twenty thousand persons who do not yet know their right hand from their left and many animals as well!" (Jonah 4: 11).

In the Book of Esther, however, there is no mention of God, and turning to him in prayer, fasting and lamentation is a tricky matter that cannot guarantee positive results. One cannot depend on it. Whoever leans on such a notion may find themselves falling (literally and metaphorically), along a vertical axis.[15]

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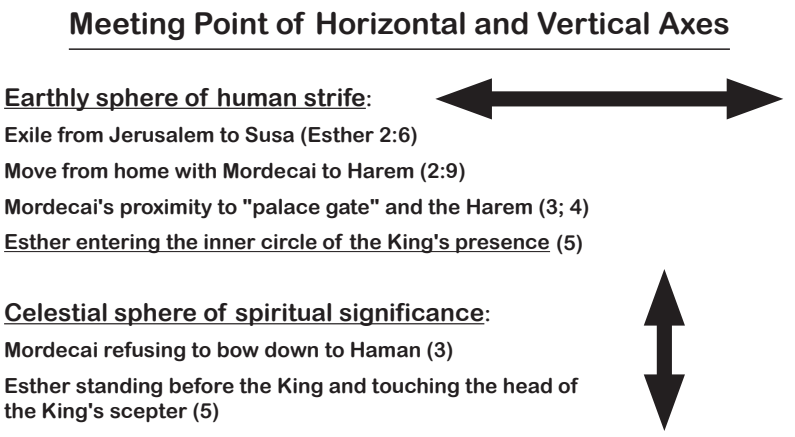
14 Her actions are mirrored by Mordecai's parallel upward moves on the vertical axis in chapter 6, when mounted on the horse instead of Haman. On the semantic frames of the vertical axis see further below (section 4).

15 Mordecai only vaguely insinuates the possibility of God's help (Esther 4:14), see section 3.1 and note 22 below. On the intimation of God through the vertical axis in Jonah cf. Sutskover, "Directionality and Space," 271: "Jonah has gone through emotional change in the course of the book: his movements up and down (vertical)… his one-day walk into

Figure 4



2.4. Vertical versus horizontal echoes in art

Artistic reception of Esther accentuates pivotal moments in the vertical axis. The most ancient depiction consists of three scenes found on the western wall (panel W C2) of the Dura Europos Synagogue in Syria.

The unknown artist of the "Purim Fresco" seems to have identified these three scenes as pivotal moments in the plot. In my view, with no claim to expertise in art history, the mural is a fine illustration of the dominance of the vertical axis in the Esther narrative. On the viewer's right, Queen Esther sits beside and slightly behind King Ahasuerus, adorned by her crown, in a blue bodice and crimson skirt, which match the colors of the king's crown and garments (scene 1: enthronement). Next, to the left, the king gives a messenger the order to annihilate the Jews, while

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Nineveh (horizontal) all symbolize this… This may indicate that Jonah's movements in space have influenced God, much more than God was willing to admit, and that it requires an active and sensitive prophet to remind him of his virtues, and to influence the course of events."

Figure 5

Gill/Gillerman slide collection. https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=2358082/ (public domain).[16]

Haman looks on from behind (scene 2: Haman's edict). Last of all, Mordecai, mounted on the king's horse, is led through the streets of Susa by Haman (scene 3), while in the center of the piece, four toga-clad citizens applaud Mordecai.

The artist builds the pictorial narrative on an accentuated vertical axis, emphasizing the heads in contrast to the feet of all characters, and the highly situated Esther and Mordecai in comparison to the lower situated King and his servants (including Haman). Esther and Mordecai wear taller head objects which extend them still further vertically, combined with the added height provided by the royal chair (throne) and beautiful white horse. Thus, they align at the top of the fresco and stand out, not only because they frame each end of the scene, but also as the highest characters on the vertical axis. Since visual depictions tend to maximize the physical space and impending relationships of horizontal and vertical lines, as

16 Further on this fresco see B. D. Walfish, "Images," 186; C. H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1956), 156-164; For illustrations of the synagogue murals see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dura-Europos_synagogue and the literature cited therein; https://www.sefaria.org.il/sheets/482197.70?lang=en&with=all&lang2=en; https://talivisualmidrash.org.il/en/creations/dura-europos-synagogue-purim/.

Figure 6

https://www.ub.uni-leipzig.de/en/about-us/exhibitions/permanent-exhibition/leipzig-mahzor/.[17]

well as their real and virtual meeting points, the pictorial narrative of the Purim fresco works in both directions too. While the eye follows the level progression of the painting from chapter 4 to 6 of the book, it also follows the perpendicular line of the characters stationed along the horizontal line of the plot's development, and thus literally brings out the parallel ascent of Esther and Mordecai above their surroundings in the book's most triumphant moments.

Another pictorial narrative of Esther also focuses on pivotal moments along a vertical axis. Created about a millennium later, and with no apparent knowledge of the Purim Fresco, is this beautifully illustrated Leipzig Mahzor (Jewish prayer book) illumination (Figure 6).

According to Leipzig University Library, the images that illustrate the story "begin with a representation of Esther before the Persian king. The sequence of the images follows the occidental reading direction of left to right, while the text

17 See the bottom of volume 1, 52r. This is a cropped strip from the bottom of the page, also containing the Esther poem by Eleazar, biblical verses and Hebrew prayers starting with the capitalized words: Crown and Kingdom (KETER MALKHUT). I am grateful to Leipzig University Library for granting me permission to use images from the Mahzor in this article.

itself – as in all Hebrew manuscripts – is written from right to left."[18] The first scene starts with Esther (as in the Dura Europos mural) yet focuses on the extending of the scepter as the pivotal moment (Esther 5:2 cf. above figs. 2-3). The second scene relates to Mordecai, describing what appears as the preparation of his horse for mounting (Esther 6). Last, the artist depicts a contemporary medieval learning room, where a Jewish teacher (wearing the hat of medieval European Jews) instructs three pupils in the scroll. They sit on benches similar in height to the king's throne. Most interesting in this case is the artist's decision to make Esther the character who parallels Ahasuerus who, though slightly higher than her, wears a similar crown and, unlike the Dura Europos fresco, to minimize Mordecai. In the Mahzor, the king and Esther clearly dominate the vertical axis, which connects in a straight horizontal line with the teacher's hat. In this way the picture intimates, as I see it, that the scroll is indeed Esther's story, and that the triumph (taught to Jewish children throughout the ages) is her triumph.

3. Themes and Semantic Frames of the Vertical Axis

3.1. Reversal and mirroring

There is even more to the vertical directionality than what we have seen so far. Opinions on the book vary considerably: some scholars and exegetes think that it reflects historical events or circumstances relating to the life of the Judean community in the Persian Diaspora, or, even in Judea, up to the Hellenistic period.

18 https://www.ub.uni-leipzig.de/en/about-us/exhibitions/permanent-exhibition/leipzig-mahzor/. Quoting further from the library website: "This two-volume Hebrew prayer book for the highest holidays is considered the most beautiful of its kind. Manufactured in southwest Germany around 1310, it was purchased for the university library by its director Christian Gottlieb Jöcher in 1746." For detailed discussion of this manuscript see K. Kogman-Appel, *A Mahzor from Worms: Art and Religion in a Medieval Jewish Community* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022). See further on this Mahzor in notes 50-52 below.

Others contend that it is essentially fictional, a literary text reflecting popular motifs. Yet others are somewhere in between, reading it as a historical novel, a free and sophisticated literary adaptation of authentic historical materials woven into a work of art.[19] Nevertheless, many scholars would concede that the theme of the reversal of fortune is central to the book of Esther.[20] In the spatial sense, such themes are played out, in fact, on a vertical axis, in the basic cognitive sense that what is up can come down, and vice versa. Hence, Esther's psychological portrayal through an up-down vertical axis is also central to the book.

Before tracing this trajectory more carefully, it is helpful to mention two seminal articles which profoundly illuminate the theme of reversal in Esther. The first article is Athalya Brenner's study of Esther in the light of Lewis Carrol's *Alice in Wonderland*, which suggests that just as Alice emerges into a world of matter and anti-matter, the absurd and the coherent, so Esther enters a world of reversals and inversions.[21] Brenner analyzes the subtle and sophisticated sets of mirroring in the book: Mordecai-Haman, Esther-Vashti and the wife husband team Haman-Zeresh reflecting Esther and Mordecai. King Ahasuerus alone, she argues, has no counterpart, thus underlining the absentee God.[22] The second article is Diana

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19 On Esther's dating to the early Persian period see, for instance, A. Berlin, *Esther*, The JPS commentary (Philadelphia, PA: The Jewish Publication Society 2001), xli-xlii. For later possibilities cf. E. R. Stern, "Esther and the Politics of Diaspora," *JQR* 100 (2010, 25-53, especially the survey on p.25 note 2). For mostly non-historical readings, cf. S.W. Crawford & L. J. Greenspoon (eds.), *The Book of Esther in modern research* (London: T & T Clark 2003). E. K. Holt's *Narrative and Other Readings of the Book of Esther* (London: T & T Clark 2021) is an example of the third approach.

20 See, for instance, A. J. Tomasino, "Interpreting Esther from the Inside Out: Hermeneutical Implications of the Chiastic Structure of the Book of Esther," *JBL* 138.1 (2019, 101–120).

21 A. Brenner, "Looking at Esther through the Looking Glass," in *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, ed. A. Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995, 71-80).

22 Mordecai's harsh words to Esther (4:14) are often explained as a reference to divine

Lipton's study of Esther. Alluding to Brenner's imagery, Lipton envisages the book as a "two way mirror", proposing that Esther is God's counterpart in the scroll:

> "In contrast to the accounts of women of action, such as Deborah and Jael (see Judg. 4, especially vv. 14 and 23), and the apocryphal Judith, in which God's contribution is subsequently emphasized, our text preserves the impression that the relevant partnership was between Esther and Mordecai, not Esther and God. Yet if God is not working through Esther, what is their relationship? It seems to me that there is a certain respect in which Esther may be understood as the face of God in *Megillat Esther*; she stands where God would have been had He been present".[23]

These viewpoints on mirroring in Esther are rare, since in much of the reception history of the book, Esther tends to merge automatically with Mordecai, when in fact Mordecai isn't her true counterpart in the story, especially when taking into account the book's subversive structure and other major themes, such

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intervention: "On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter (Hebr. מִמָּקוֹם אַחֵר) while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis." Brenner rejects this option, rightly, in my view (see Brenner, "Looking at Esther," 76). Hebrew term *maqom* (literally, place, quarter) is one of God's epithets in post biblical Hebrew sources. From a spatial perspective, such a reference to God is of course very potent, yet God's absence in Esther makes this singular possible reference insufficient (cf. Holt, *Narrative and Other Readings*, 8–14). For some further thoughts on God, see S. M. L. Van Den Eynde, "If Esther Had Not Been That Beautiful: Dealing with a Hidden God in the (Hebrew) Book of Esther," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 31.4 (2001, 145–50); Y. Berger, "Mordechai and Flowing Myrrh: On the Presence of God in the Book of Esther," *Tradition* 49.3 (2016): 20–24; and in my conclusions below.

23 D. Lipton, "The Woman's Lot in Esther," in *Bodies, Lives, Voices: Gender in Theology*, eds. K. O'Grady, A.L. Gilroy and J. Gray (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 133-151), 149.

as fear of breakdown, actual breakdown and fragmentation, which are discussed further below.

3.2. What goes up must come down: breaking down/breakdown

Disintegration and collapse (as well as the fear of these physical and mental processes) are potent themes in Esther's narrative plot and in the portrayal of the inner life of its protagonists, Esther's especially. The vertical axis underscores the cognitive sense of being down and coming up and then being up and coming down, as a continuous indefinite cycle of upheaval. Tracing how vertical directionality fashions Esther's character enables us to better understand these underlying themes. True, this may have implications for God's character in the book as well, because the divine sphere relates, cognitively, to the top (celestial) part of the vertical axis. If the vertical axis is shaky and uncontrollable, does this imply that God too is shaky (and perhaps inaccessible)? Yet since no clear textual markers are traceable in God's respect, it is best to set this question aside. My approach also steers away from exegetical and scholarly traditions which consider Esther an entertaining book, an educational comedy of sorts, or, at least, as a well-formed and sophisticated satire. I lean towards the more sinister reading tradition of Esther as a traumatized character, in my view, the most disturbing in Hebrew scripture.[24]

24 On humoristic and *carnivalesque* readings of Esther, see, for instance, K. M. Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995); Brenner, "Looking at Esther," 78-80; A. Lacocque, *Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2008); D. J. Zucker, "Esther: Subverting the 'Capable Wife'," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 48.4 (2018, 171–179); E. Brownsmith, "Queer Futures and Phallic Humour in the Book of Esther," *Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies*, 5.2 (2024, 54–80). For trauma-related readings of Esther, such as in relation to Vamik D. Volkan's theory of group identity and other theories of collective memory, see Holt, *Narrative and Other Readings*, 126-138 and additional bibliography therein. Also cf. B. D. Lerner, "No Happy Ending for Esther," *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* 29.1 (2001, 4–12); S. Emanuel, "Trauma and Counter-Trauma in the Book of Esther: Reading the Megillah in the Face of the Post-Shoah Sabra," *The*

Once sensitized to a cognitive-linguistic and spatial reading of Esther, it is hard not to notice the dominance of the vertical axis in the main chapters of the plot (namely 3-8).[25] Various semantic frames or clusters accentuate this axis in a down-up (and vice versa) directionality. It is helpful to divide these into verbal and nominal forms.

3.2.1 Verbal and nominal forms accentuating up/down scale

Verbal forms include expressions and figures of speech on the up/down scale, such as making (someone) great, or elevating (him), and raising above, as in Esther 3:1:

> After these things King Ahasuerus **promoted** Haman (Hebr. גִּדַּל הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ אֶת־הָמָן) … and advanced him, and **set** his seat **above** (Hebr. וַיָּשֶׂם אֶת כִּסְאוֹ מֵעַל) all the princes that were with him.

These figures of speech for "becoming famous" (in bold) are vertical in that they emphasize Mordecai's fame as an "essence" that "stretches" from him. In general, the book abounds with verbs related to bodily movement, such as "sit" (ישב); "stand" (עמד); "mount"/"ride a horse" (רכב). Especially prominent is

Bible & Critical Theory 31.1 (2017, 23-42); M. Ki, "Governmentality and Abuse in the Book of Esther," *Partial Answers* 21.2 (2023, 187–208). For a fine recent overview on trauma studies and biblical literature see S. Emanuel, "Trauma Theory, Trauma Story: A Narration of Biblical Studies and the World of Trauma," *Brill Research Perspectives. Biblical Interpretation* 4.4 (2021): 1–51. For a somber Jewish discussion of Esther as a text meant to cause reflection on dire realities, see Rabbi Joel Levy (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGUY25JchC0). Further on Esther's reception see in note 8 above and postscript below.

25 In the Masoretic text it seems the initial plot ends in the middle of verse 17 of chapter 8: וּבְכָל מְדִינָה וּמְדִינָה וּבְכָל עִיר וָעִיר מְקוֹם אֲשֶׁר דְּבַר הַמֶּלֶךְ וְדָתוֹ מַגִּיעַ שִׂמְחָה וְשָׂשׂוֹן לַיְּהוּדִים מִשְׁתֶּה וְיוֹם טוֹב, offering a circular closure with chapter 1:1 וַיְהִי בִּימֵי אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ הוּא אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ הַמֹּלֵךְ מֵהֹדּוּ וְעַד כּוּשׁ שֶׁבַע וְעֶשְׂרִים וּמֵאָה מְדִינָה.

"prostrate/bow" (כרע; השתחווה), essentially an up-down-down-up movement, as in Esther 3:2-5:

> All the king's courtiers in the palace gate **knelt and bowed low** to Haman, for such was the king's order concerning him; but Mordecai **would not kneel or bow low**… they told Haman, in order to see whether Mordecai's resolve **would prevail**[26]; for he had explained to them that he was a Jew. When Haman saw that Mordecai would not **kneel or bow low** to him, Haman was filled with rage.

Yet above all the verbal forms, "fall" (נפל) is the most loaded, and clearly functions as a leading word or leitmotif in Esther (see 3.2.2 below).

Nominal forms include expressions and figures of speech relating to the vertical sphere, as in Esther 1:4, 21: "from the grandest/highest to the lowest" (לְמִ֣גָּד֣וֹל וְעַד קָטָן), as well as nouns related to verticality. Among these "head" (ראש), is especially important when it functions in a literal and metaphorical sense. Examples include the "head" of the king's scepter (5:2), Haman hurrying home "with his head covered/cast down" (6:12; Hebr. אָבֵל וַחֲפוּי רֹאשׁ).

The eyes (a synecdoche of the head) are also significant, as in the repeated expression: "find favor in the eyes of (2:4 and elsewhere; Hebr. וְהַנַּעֲרָה אֲשֶׁר תִּיטַב בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ תִּמְלֹךְ תַּחַת וַשְׁתִּי וַיִּיטַב הַדָּבָר בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וַיַּעַשׂ כֵּן). Organs such as the hands (also meaning finger, 3:10; Hebr. וַיָּסַר הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת טַבַּעְתּוֹ מֵעַל יָדוֹ) also delineate verticality.

Object nouns associated with body parts add to their semantic framing, in example: crown[27], scepter, ring, chair (i.e., throne). The vertical axis is also un-

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26 Note the metaphorical use of the verb הֵיעָמְדוּ (literally, will his words stand)."

27 The Hebrew lexeme foot (רגל) appears 285 times in the Hebrew Bible yet not once in Esther, which generally emphasizes the upper part of the human torso, possibly to stress (subversively) that what really interests the characters is the lower part. Crown

derscored by objects with a pronounced perpendicular structure such as: hanging pole, bed (Esther 7:8, combined with the verb "falling"), and horse (on all of which see further below). The following image may help us to visualize not only the grace of horses and riders in a Persian context but also the palpable verticality, which we tend to take for granted, they convey.

3.2.2. Fall (Hebrew NAFAL): demarcating the vertical axis

The Hebrew lexeme NAFAL "fall" (נפל) in its various verbal and nominal forms) clearly functions as a leading word or leitmotif in Esther, demarcating the up-down directionality of the vertical axis. Charged with additional meanings as the narrative progresses, NAFAL gains nuances throughout the plot. Falling is not only a physical act, as in prostrating, but metaphorical too, as when (9:4): "the fear of Mordecai fell on them" (כִּי נָפַל פַּחַד מָרְדֳּכַי עֲלֵיהֶם). Most potently "causing the lot to fall" (הִפִּיל פּוּר), is a literal and metaphorical figure of speech. NAFAL often appears in double sequences in the book, including various idiomatic combinations, such as "casting a lot", "falling before", "falling on bed", "falling to feet" and "fear of falling" (3:7; 6:13; 7:8; 8:3; 9:1;3, 4,24). The density and intensity of this vertical lexeme in the book is startling, and it finds a strong echo in Esther's reception exegesis (on which see further below).[28]

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and head are the same sematic field, as in expressions such as "the crown of the head" cf. the enigmatic request that Vashti to appear "with a royal crown" (1:11 לְהָבִיא אֶת וַשְׁתִּי הַמַּלְכָּה לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ בְּכֶתֶר מַלְכוּת).

28 Falling is a cognitive-linguistic sphere, which finds expression in many languages, in that it visualizes the vertical axis. Idiomatic English, for instance, uses "falling on your face" (in the sense of failure), "falling in love" (in the sense of loss of control), "it fell on me" (in the sense of lack of volition, similar to Modern Hebrew נפל עליי) and many other examples. Biblical expressions such as "the fall of Babylon" (Isa 21:9), נָפְלָה נָפְלָה בָּבֶל (cf. in other languages: "the rise and fall of empires"), or narratives such as the Tower of Babel (Gen 11), or Rebekah's falling off the camel upon seeing Isaac (Gen 23:64), whether due to love or shock, belong to this cognitive-linguistic sphere.נפל is also used in the biblical idiom for heroic death in battle (see 2 Sam 1:19) which has been adopted

Figure 7

Tile depicting Khusrau Happening upon Shirin Bathing (Iran, 1850-100), Lucy Maud Buckingham Collection. https://www.artic.edu/artworks/92286/tile-depicting-khusrau-happening-upon-shirin-bathing/ (public domain).

3.2.3. Overturn (Hebrew HAFAKH): flipping the vertical axis

The Hebrew lexeme HAFAKH "overturn" is less dominant than "fall". Nevertheless, it too is a verticality marker, in that the real or metaphorical direction of events is literally turned over from down to up or from up to down. In the Hebrew Bible, it denotes something like an earthquake, as in the "upturning" of Sodom and Gomora (Gen 19:25), but also mental and symbolic transitions such as turning sorrow into joy (Psalms 30:12), or the change of opinion, as in God's "turning the heart" of Saul (1 Sam 10:9). Its two appearances at the end of Esther signal, perhaps, what the book's redactors saw as its main theme, namely "the

in modern Hebrew and through biblical translation in many other languages. It thus has both negative and positive nuances.

turning of the tables", as it were, on Haman's plans:

> "And so, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month—that is, the month of Adar—when the king's command and decree were to be executed, the very day on which the enemies of the Jews had expected to get them in their power, **the opposite happened** (Hebrew: וְנַהֲפוֹךְ הוּא, literally, it was turned upside down) and the Jews got their enemies in their power" (9:1). "The same days on which the Jews enjoyed relief from their foes and the same month **which had been transformed for them** (Hebrew: אֲשֶׁר נָהְפַּךְ לָהֶם, literally: "it was turned upside down for them") from one of grief and mourning to one of festive joy. They were to observe them as days of feasting and merrymaking, and as an occasion for sending gifts to one another and presents to the poor" (9:22).

Though the Hebrew word for "overturn, turn round or transform" appears only at the ending of the book, the wider theme of the reversal of fortune (and subversion in general), as already noted above (3.1) is central to Esther's plot. The book illustrates this theme spatially through objects, such as the scepter, that can flip and do flip their direction (see 3.3 below). Cognitively, an unexpected change in direction is associated with surprising and unsettling sensations, such as "having the blanket pulled from beneath our feet". Thus, the modern Hebrew word for "revolution" (*mahapekhah*) is derived from the root HAFAKH (turn upside down) and in many languages, in fact, political and other upheavals are associated with "turning" and other vertical forms of movement, as in "revolution", derived from "revolve" (literally, turn around).[29]

29 According to the Oxford English Dictionary, derived from classical Latin *revolūt-*, past participial stem of *revolvere* revolve *v.* + *iō* ion, see https://www.oed.com/dictionary/revolution_n?tab=etymology.

Figure 8
NAFAL - TO FALL - AS LEADING VERB IN ESTHER

הִפִּיל פּוּר הוּא הַגּוֹרָל לִפְנֵי הָמָן מִיּוֹם ׀ לְיוֹם וּמֵחֹדֶשׁ לְחֹדֶשׁ שְׁנֵים־עָשָׂר הוּא־חֹדֶשׁ אֲדָר׃	3:7; 9:24: they cast pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, which is the month Adar
וְהַמֶּלֶךְ שָׁב מִגִּנַּת הַבִּיתָן אֶל־בֵּית ׀ מִשְׁתֵּה הַיָּיִן וְהָמָן נֹפֵל עַל־הַמִּטָּה אֲשֶׁר אֶסְתֵּר עָלֶיהָ וַיֹּאמֶר הַמֶּלֶךְ הֲגַם לִכְבּוֹשׁ אֶת־הַמַּלְכָּה עִמִּי בַּבָּיִת הַדָּבָר יָצָא מִפִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ וּפְנֵי הָמָן חָפּוּ׃	7:8 Then the king returned out of the palace garden into the place of the banquet of wine; and Haman was fallen upon the couch whereon Esther was. Then said the king: 'Will he even force the queen before me in the house?' As the word went out of the king's mouth, they covered Haman's face.
וַתּוֹסֶף אֶסְתֵּר וַתְּדַבֵּר לִפְנֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ וַתִּפֹּל לִפְנֵי רַגְלָיו וַתֵּבְךְּ וַתִּתְחַנֶּן־לוֹ לְהַעֲבִיר אֶת־רָעַת הָמָן הָאֲגָגִי וְאֶת מַחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ אֲשֶׁר חָשַׁב עַל־הַיְּהוּדִים׃	8:3 And Esther spoke yet again before the king, and fell down at his feet, and besought him with tears to put away the mischief of Haman the Agagite, and his device that he had devised against the Jews.
נִקָּהֲלוּ הַיְּהוּדִים בְּעָרֵיהֶם בְּכָל־מְדִינוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ לִשְׁלֹחַ יָד בִּמְבַקְשֵׁי רָעָתָם וְאִישׁ לֹא־עָמַד לִפְנֵיהֶם כִּי־נָפַל פַּחְדָּם עַל־כָּל־הָעַמִּים׃	9:2 the Jews gathered themselves together in their cities throughout all the provinces of the king Ahasuerus, to lay hand on such as sought their hurt; and no man could withstand them; for the fear of them was fallen upon all the peoples.
אִם מִזֶּרַע הַיְּהוּדִים מָרְדֳּכַי אֲשֶׁר הַחִלּוֹתָ לִנְפֹּל לְפָנָיו לֹא־תוּכַל לוֹ כִּי־נָפוֹל תִּפּוֹל לְפָנָיו׃	6:13 'If Mordecai, before whom thou hast begun to fall, be of the seed of the Jews, thou shalt not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him.'

3.3. Inner-biblical echoes of the flipping vertical axis

Wide analogies between the narratives of Esther and Joseph have long been recognized, most apparent in the linking of Esther's pedigree to the family of Kish (and Saul) in the tribe of Benjamin (Esther 2:5).[30] The theme of reversal underpins the intertextual relationship between the two heroes, and is highlighted by the vertical axis: Joseph is pulled up from the pit to which he was thrown by his brothers (Gen 37:28), eventually to stand before Pharaoh (Gen 40:46), who stresses he is only higher than Joseph "by a royal throne" (Gen 41:40), and "mounts" him on a chariot (Gen 41:43), after taking off his ring and giving it to Joseph, he adorns his neck with a golden jewel (41:42). The entire cluster of verses suggests an upward bodily movement. Most illustrative is the movement associated with the ring, which requires pulling it off Pharaoh's finger in an upward motion, and then fastening it onto Joseph's in a downward gesture.

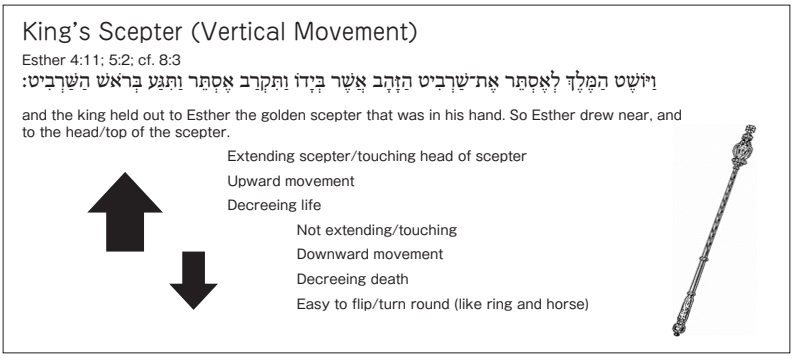
3.4. Flipping objects demarcating the vertical axis

Since both narratives are also interconnected by their setting in foreign courts, similar spatial objects to the Joseph narrative describe the eventual rise of Esther (and Mordecai) in Ahasuerus's court. Nonetheless, in Esther's case these royal markers or demarcations play an integrated part in the narrative's subversive twist. Corresponding to the theme of the flipping of fortune is the vertical directionality of flipping objects. Thus, the "head" of the sitting king's scepter, which the standing Esther approaches and touches (Esther 5:2), accentuates the dual directionality of the vertical axis, from down to up and from up to down (Figure 9).[31]

30 Further on intertextual aspects of Esther, see R. Gilmour, "Overturning Sovereignty: Esther in Dialogue with the Book of Samuel" in *Reading Esther Intertextually*, eds., D. Firth and B. N. Melton (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 57-58 and further articles in this volume relating to Torah, Prophets and Writings on pp. 1–101); Holt, *Narrative and Other Readings*, 51–69 (with comparison to *Tales of A Thousand and One Nights*).

31 Further on the function of costume in Esther (including crown and signet ring), see Holt, *Narrative and Other Readings*, 70-89 and additional literature therein. On high-ranking

Figure 9



Similarly, the "mounting" of Mordecai on the horse intended for Haman, while Haman walks (obviously lower) before him, and then returns to his home with a "lowered/covered head" (Esther 6:11–12 and cf. 7:8 "and his face was lowered/covered after being caught approaching the queen), underpins this two-way movement (Figure 10).

In addition, the "removal" of the king's signet ring "from above" his finger/hand and its "giving" to Haman, and subsequent transference to Mordecai and Esther (Esther 3:10; 8:2, 8) further thicken the theme of inversion. As a final point, the tree/hanging pole intended for Mordecai and then used for hanging Haman and impaling his sons is the most shocking expression of the revolving two-way directionality of the vertical axis (Figure 11; see further on this image in section 5 below).

Persian women and their artistic depictions, see J. A. Lerner, "An Achaemenid Cylinder Seal of a Woman Enthroned," in *The World of Achaemenid Persia*, eds., J. Curtis and St. J. Simpson (London: Tauris, 2010, 153–164); E. Soteriou, "Did Women Have Real Power in the Achaemenid Court?" *Retrospect Journal* (27. 11. 2021). https://retrospectjournal.com/2022/11/27/did-women-have-real-power-in-the-achaemenid-court/.

Figure 10

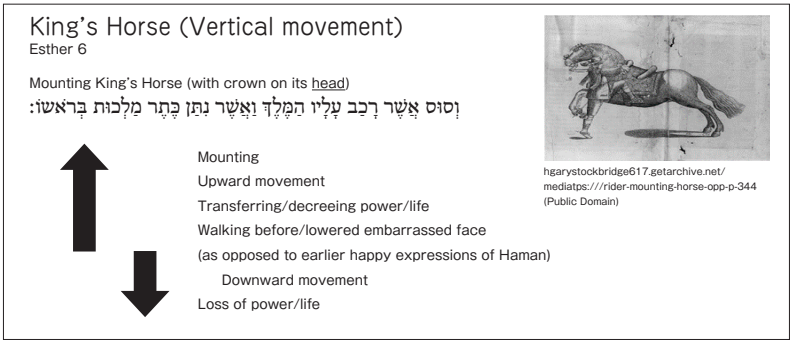
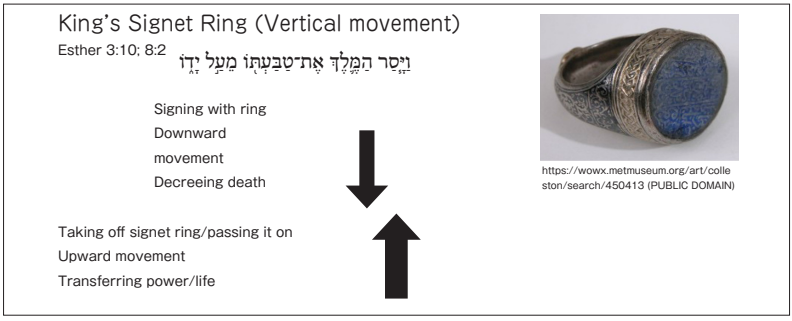


Figure 11



4. Mental Verticality: Unstableness and Breakdown

There is still more to the vertical directionality than we have seen so far. Mental breakdown and disintegration are potent themes in Esther's plot and in the portrayal of the inner life of its protagonists. These themes have a cognitive-linguistic connection to verticality: "to flip" may also signify mental instability and collapse (i.e., sinking downward, mental decline), which is often connected to the sensation of falling (as in "falling apart"). Psychological deterioration can result from extreme and surprising changes in personal circumstances, in other words, from the flipping of fortune. Thus, the vertical directionality in Esther

generates and underpins such themes as well.

4.1. Ascending and descending: a two-way double-edge axis

Esther's ascent (and through her that of Mordecai and the Jews) finds a disturbing shadow in the social and physical descent, or falling down of their competitor, Haman, a palpable evil human force. This downward movement is nonetheless bound to upward movement, as in the flipping of the scepter in the king's hand, or the transfer of his signet ring. It stresses the haphazard and unreliable nature of life, emphasizing the rise-and-fall reality of the human condition at large. Foreshadowing Haman's removal is Queen Vashti's earlier dismissal (after refusing to appear before the king wearing her crown! Esther 1:11), stressing the downward vertical pull of our story, as its backdrop. The more we marvel at the miraculous rise of Esther the more we fear that she too might fall. Though chapter 8 ends on the positive circular note of the Jews' return to the bosom of the 127-state empire, the double-edge of the vertical axis remains a potent theme. In chapters 9-10, this theme is realized through Esther's portrayal as a cruel queen. Her re-subjugation to Mordecai in these chapters, and the loss of her own independent voice also suggest a mental and moral downfall is set in place. Above all, this change comes to the fore in Esther's insistence on the hanging of Haman's dead children, as further elaborated below.

4.2. The hanging tree/pole: a double-edged vertical image

No other image in this book better captures the dual directionality of the vertical axis (down-up/up-down) than the tree or pole (Hebrew עֵץ). Haman, at the suggestion of his wife Zeresh and close entourage, first plans to hang (Hebrew תָּלָה) Mordecai on the pole (5:14) yet is ultimately hanged from it himself, as underlined at the end of chapter 7 (verse 10): "So they hanged Haman on the tree/pole which he had put up for Mordecai, and the king's fury abated." The consistent biblical expression for hanging to death (or after death) on a tree/pole/gallows is

תָּלָה עַל עֵץ. Of the 14 times it appears in the HB/OT no fewer than 8 are in Esther.[32] The extreme height of the pole set up by Haman – fifty *amah*/arm-lengths – mentioned twice in the book (Esther 5:14; 7:9)[33] further underscores its down-up verticality.

Exegetes and scholars have long debated the meaning of the biblical term תָּלָה עַל עֵץ, and it has been interpreted in the context of Ancient Near Eastern, Persian, Greek and Roman practices both of execution and of displaying dead bodies.[34] Ancient and modern biblical versions too differ over its translation,

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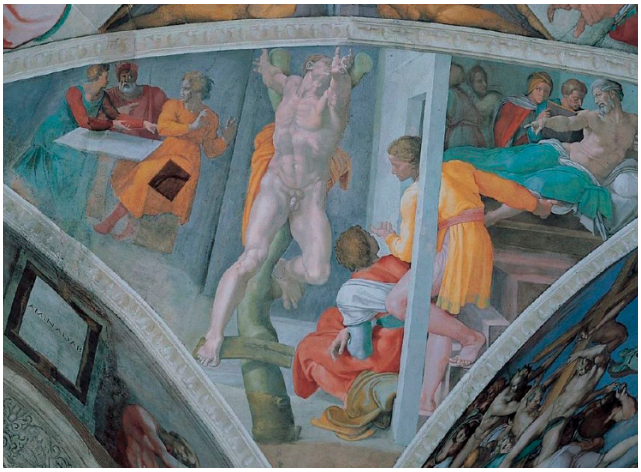
32 Four times in the Hebrew Bible (Num 25:4; 2 Sam 21:6, 9, 13) the more specific term הוֹקַע (root יקע IV verb pattern) is used to denote the demonstrative and humiliating impalement of a dead body. It is likely that both יק״ע and תק״ע relate to the same semantic frame. Cf. further in note 44 below.

33 Equivalent to the width of Noah's ark (Gen 6:15).

34 Cf. G. R. Kotzé, "Interpreting and translating "hanging" in Lamentations 5:12 as an image of impalement" in *Ancient Texts and Modern Readers; Studies in Ancient Hebrew Linguistics and Bible Translation*, eds. G. R. Kotzé, C. S. Locatell, J. A. Messarra (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019), 319-341 and further bibliography therein; A. J. Berkovitz, "Was Haman Hanged, Impaled or Crucified" (https://www.thetorah.com/article/was-haman-hanged-impaled-or-crucified). Interestingly, the same phrase for "hanging on a tree/pole" is used in the Joseph narrative, regarding the execution of Pharaoh's chief baker (Gen 40:13, 19–20). Especially relevant to directionality is the ambivalent expression: "Within three days Pharaoh will lift up your head" (NIV v. 13) Hebr. יִשָּׂא פַרְעֹה אֶת רֹאשְׁךָ מֵעָלֶיךָ which can be mistaken by the hearer for "lifting the head" in the sense of "respect", yet here is followed by תָּלָה אוֹתְךָ עַל עֵץ וְאָכַל הָעוֹף אֶת בְּשָׂרְךָ מֵעָלֶיךָ. In this case Joseph's foreknowledge is helpful mostly to Joseph himself, less so to the chief baker, who is left to ponder the terrorizing image of his dream and it's interpretation for three days (cf. M. Polliack, "Joseph and his dreamscapes: from trauma to discovery" in *Discourse, Dialogue, and Debate in the Bible: Essays in Honour of Frank H. Polak,* ed., A. Brenner-Idan (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2014), 136–159). Similarly, we are left to ponder Mordecai's prospective hanging in Esther, emphasizing it's all a matter of luck who will hang in the end, or in other words, the motif of what goes up comes down, and its visual illustration of the precariousness of life and death at any given moment.

Figure 12



Michelangelo, The Punishment of Haman, detail from the Sistine Chapel ceiling (between 1508 and 1512). https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haman#/media/File:The_Punishment_of_Haman.png/ (public domain).

whether hanging, crucifixion or impalement. Whatever it technically meant, the verb תָּלָה implies suspension (in contrast to תָּקַע, see 1 Samuel 31.10).[35]

Suspension of the body from a pole or a tree is certainly the way artists understood this expression in the Esther narrative. A stunning example is Michelangelo's depiction of the scene, in which Haman is suspended from what appears as a partly live, actual tree, only hinting at the cross, typically accentuated in medieval Christian art.[36]

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35 וְאֶת גְּוִיָּתוֹ תָּקְעוּ בְּחוֹמַת בֵּית שָׁן (= and they impaled his body on the wall of Beth-shan). תָּקַע is used specifically to denote "driving in" of a sharp edged tool or weapon (see Judg 3:21; 16:14).

36 LXX, Vulgate, Aramaic and Arabic versions tend to translate the hanging as crucifixion (also a potent vertical image), yet in older Aramaic צלב can mean "hang", see A. Shemesh, *Punishments and Sins: From Scripture to the Rabbis* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2003; Hebr.), 27–34. Examples of medieval Christian depictions of Haman on the cross see in

Gruesome to imagine, yet crucial in a cognitive sense, is the image of the body dangling from the tree/pole, in an up-down direction, perhaps sparking a visual association with rotting fruit sagging from a tree which grows in the opposite, down-up direction (from roots and trunk to treetop). This crisscrossing of down-up-down and the truism of "what goes up must come down" is thus implied in a strikingly shocking image.[37]

While Haman's hanging can be seen as a morally appropriate ending to the story, applying the biblical notion of a punishment that fits the crime to the hanging of Haman's ten children is another matter. Haman's death is part of a stable world in which God makes villains pay for their deeds in just and measured sentencing. Didactic expressions of this ethic appear in biblical wisdom literature, as in Psalms 7:16–17:

> "He has dug a **pit** and deepened it, and will **fall** into the trap he made; His mischief will **recoil upon his own head**. His lawlessness will come **down upon his skull**."[38]

The vertical axis is difficult to miss here, particularly since the Hebrew phrases open and close with a downward direction (pit; come down). The down (pit/ditch) – up (head) advance is also emphasized by the dual sense of head here. On the one hand, this highest body-part is responsible for scheming and wider knowledge,

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Berkovitz, "Was Haman hanged." Assyrian reliefs depict the impaling of enemies upon stakes (some clearly edged in a vertical direction), a practice used in Persia as well (see examples in Berkowitz), yet in Esther the "tree" is not necessarily a stake, and can also allude to a hanging pole or an actual tree.

37 See example of possible association to fruit in figure 13 below.

38 בּוֹר כָּרָה וַיְחַפְּרֵהוּ; וַיִּפֹּל בְּשַׁחַת יִפְעָל יָשׁוּב עֲמָלוֹ בראֹשׁוֹ וְעַל קָדְקָדוֹ, חֲמָסוֹ יֵרֵד. For similar sayings, see Proverbs 26:27: "He who digs a pit will fall in it, And whoever rolls a stone, it will roll back on him."

yet it is also the organ most vulnerable to being struck down as a cause of death.[39] Esther 9:25 drives this message home regarding Haman:

> "Let the evil plot, which he devised against the Jews, **recoil on his own head**."[40]

There is a sense of fair closure in respect of Haman. The vertical axis breaks down however in that Haman, alas, is not the only one to pay for his deeds. The Jews kill his ten sons alongside others during the enactment of the king's second edict, which allowed them to fend for themselves (Esther 9:1–10). The fact that their names appear one by one in an ancient poetic parsing of the Masoretic text suggests that their death has unique significance in the structuring, canonization and reception of the scroll (9:7–9, see Figure 13 and 14).[41]

Yet the sons' saga doesn't end here. After noting the death toll in Susa, the king turns to Esther on his own initiative, asking what should be done further at her request. Esther's answer, which is in fact the last time she speaks in the book, is startling (9:13):

> "If it please Your Majesty," Esther replied, "let the Jews in Shushan be permitted to act tomorrow also as they did today; and let Haman's ten sons be hanged on the tree/pole."

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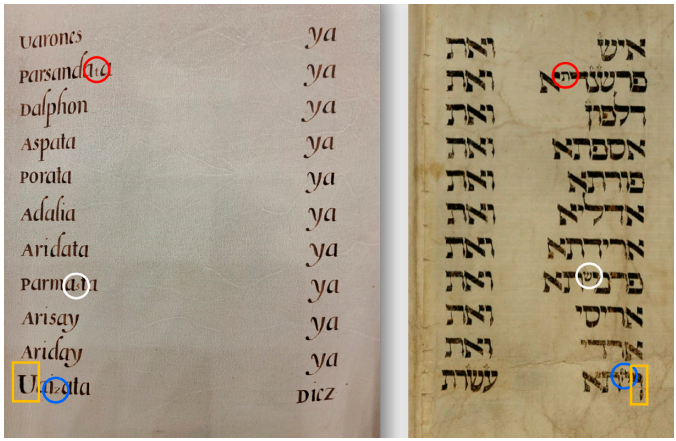
39 In biblical Hebrew, thoughts often come from the heart. A crime returning to one's own head may mean it returns (as a punishment) to oneself, as an individual. The idiom nonetheless brings across the cognitive and physical sensation of scheming plans "in the head" or "mind".

40 Hebrew: יָשׁוּב מַחֲשַׁבְתּוֹ הָרָעָה אֲשֶׁר חָשַׁב עַל-הַיְהוּדִים עַל רֹאשׁוֹ.

41 Ancient Jewish scribal rules required the names to be copied in this way, as they are to this very day. Since no examples from Qumran are available, the earliest examples of such copying are from the medieval period.

Figure 13



The names of Haman's sons in a regular Hebrew scroll (17th century) and their names in a Spanish scroll (1684, Amsterdam, National Library of Israel). The unique vertical structuring is kept in both languages in accordance with ritual copying laws. I am grateful to Daniel Lipson of the National Library of Israel for providing me with this image. Also cf. his illuminating blog: https://blog.nli.org.il/sodot-spanish-megilat-ester/.

Esther's Hebrew wording uses the same phrase applied earlier to the hanging of Mordecai and Haman.[42] The narrative further stresses the king fulfilled Esther's request to the letter, also using the verb "to hang" (9:14):

> "The king ordered that this should be done, and the decree was proclaimed in Shushan. Haman's ten sons were hanged."[43]

The consistent Hebrew phrasing underlines the cohesive link between the

42 Hebr. וְאֵת עֲשֶׂרֶת בְּנֵי הָמָן יִתְלוּ עַל הָעֵץ

43 Hebr. וְאֵת עֲשֶׂרֶת בְּנֵי הָמָן תָּלוּ The 8 occurrences of "hang on tree/pole" (תלה על עץ) in Esther, intensify its significance to the plot. At the end of chapter 2 (verse 23) Bigtan and Teresh, the king's gatekeepers, are hanged on a tree/pole after Mordecai exposes (via Esther) that they conspired to murder the king. Thus, the act of hanging envelopes the book's beginning and ending.

Figure 14

The names of Haman's sons in Parchment Esther Scroll - Large Format - Eastern Europe, Second half of 19th Century. https://www.kedem-auctions.com/en/esther-scroll-%E2%80%93-hamelech-custom-%E2%80%93-europe-ca-19th20th-century. By the courtesy of Kedem Auction House.

gallows intended for Mordecai and materialized in the cases of Haman, and his (no less than) ten sons. The number ten multiplies the imagery, again underscoring its importance to the plot, and the "ten score" retribution for his deeds. What age were Haman's sons (designated as *benei haman* in the text) is unclear, yet Esther's request they be hanged after their deaths, at least in the narrative sequencing of the Masoretic text, is conceived as further humiliation or punishment of their father and all he represents.

4.2. Intertextual echoes

The hanging (תלה) of Haman's dead sons evokes the narrative on the bodies of King Saul and his sons who were displayed (תקע) by the Philistines on the wall of Beith-shaan, after the battle on Mount Gilboa, and their subsequent reburial by

King David in the Kish Family tomb (1 Samuel 31:8–13 and 2 Samuel 21:1–14).[44]

Esther's genealogical connection to the tribe of Benjamin (Saul's tribe) and the Kish family (Esther 2:5) suggests that her role in eradicating Haman's line, as archenemy of the Jews, alludes to Saul's failure to fully eradicate King Agag of Amalek and his people in an earlier battle (see 1 Samuel 15:9).[45] In Esther 3:1 Haman is designated "Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite", namely, as the progeny of the Amalek King Agag (and cf. chapters 8:3 and 9:24, in which Haman is also labeled "Agagaite"). When read intertextually, the narrative underlines that Esther, Saul's descendant, finished the job her ancestor failed to fulfill at God's command.[46] The authors and/or redactors of the Book of Esther may have considered an ostensibly cruel request as the ultimate correction of earlier attempts that fell short of eradicating the Jews' archenemy. In their mind, had King Saul followed the instructions he was given, he would have killed King Agag along with the other Amalekites, and there would have been no Haman to threaten the Jews in the days of Esther. [47]

44 In 2 Samuel 21:12 only Saul and Jonathan are mentioned (not the plural "sons"), and the terms used are תלום and מקעים. Similarly to Esther, 2 Samuel also begins and ends with the humiliating act of displaying dead bodies (cf. notes 32–36 and 43 above). Also cf. Y. Berger, "Esther and Benjaminite Royalty: A Study in Inner-Biblical Allusion," *JBL* 129.4 (2010), 625–644, who points to the analogy between the killing of Haman's sons by Esther and that of Saul's sons by David (p. 635) and cf. R. Gilmour "Overturning Sovereignty" for additional insights.

45 It may also allude to David's failure to protect Saul's clan, thus underscoring (satirically or otherwise) inner tribal tensions amongst the Israelites/Jews. On intertextual aspects of Esther and Genesis see G. F. Hornung, "Foreign Ambivalence in the Scroll: Reading Esther's Court alongside Joseph and Daniel" in *Reading Esther Intertextually*, eds., D. Firth and B. N. Melton, 11–22, and cf. note 34 above.

46 This intertextual reading makes sense particularly if we consider chapters 8–9 as later additions to the book (probably from the latter half of chapter 8 verse 16).

47 Biblical law expressly forbids leaving a body "hanging on a tree" later than dusk on the day of execution (Deut. 21:22–23), see further Kotzé, "Interpreting and translating

Yet concerning the vertical axis, I would like to suggest that Esther's behavior towards Haman's dead sons is significant for the fashioning of her own inner life, and thus strikes a troubling psychological note in her characterization. Why should the display of Haman's ten dead sons, whose guilt has not been established in the narrative, be Esther's last wish? My suggestion is that the up-down directionality of the hanging ten bodies reflects Esther's shattered inner world at this point in her story. Her deep hatred of Haman and what he represents comes to the fore through this dramatic image. Is Esther engaged in a form of "acting out", through her final request to Ahasuerus, her own suffering in the Persian court, as a female captive, forced to marry the king?[48] Does this harrowing image in some way reflect her shattered inner self? Before turning to this question (4.4), let me address a powerful insight drawn from the artistic reception of the pole imagery.

4.3. Artistic reception of the tree/hanging pole

The equivocal meaning of Hebrew עֵץ (primarily: tree) in describing the hanging pole, gallows or stake has not escaped artistic depictions of the scene, which sensitize the viewer to the tree's duality: on the one hand, signifying the organic material from which stakes or gallows are made, and on the other hand a longstanding natural and biblical symbol of life, as in the phrase "tree of life" (עֵץ חַיִּים).[49] In an astounding presentation of the hanging of Haman and his ten sons,

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'hanging'." The interpretive trend seeking moral harmonization for the unjustified killing of Haman's sons is also found in Rabbinic and Medieval Jewish exegesis, see for instance Rashi's interpretation of Esth 9:10, which he bases on *Seder Olam*, suggesting Haman's sons were planning further evils (https://www.sefaria.org.il/Esther.9.10?lang=he&with=Rashi&lang2=he)

48 On the post-traumatic syndrome of "acting out" and further literature, see M. Polliack, "Joseph's trauma: memory and resolution," in *Performing Memory in Biblical Narrative and Beyond*, eds., A. Brenner and F. H. Polak (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009), 72–110. On Esther and trauma studies, see note 24 above.

49 Prov. 3:18, describes teachings/commandments (Heb. Tora): "a tree of life to those who

Figure 15

Leipzig Mahzor volume 1, 51v: The story of Esther II – Purim (Public Domain).[50]

grasp her, and whoever holds on to her is happy". Cf. Proverbs 11:30: "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life. A wise man captivates people." The first appearance of "the tree of life" is in the narrative of the Garden of Eden (Gen 2:9; 3:17, 22, 24) עֵץ הַחַיִּים. On the tree of life as an iconic visual symbol in Jewish, Christian and other canons, see D. Estes, ed., *The Tree of life* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

50 On this Mahzor (Jewish Prayer Book) see further in notes 17–18 above. The motif of Haman and his sons hanging from a live tree is also used in other European Jewish manuscripts. According to K. Kogman-Appel, "The Tree of Death and the Tree of Life: The Hanging of Haman in Medieval Jewish Manuscript Painting," in *Between*

the unknown artist of the medieval Leipzig Mahzor, decided to paint an image of a living green tree rather than a dead tree, that is, gallows or a stake (Figure 15).

The Hebrew verse in red at the top of the page states וַיִּתְלוּ אֶת הָמָן (literally: and they hung Haman) in reference to Esther 7:10.[51] On the bottom of the page, there is another vertical representation of a midrash pertaining to the gruesome death of Haman's daughter, who upon discovering she had thrown excrement on her father, mistaking him for Mordecai on the horse, falls off from the roof of Haman's house (cf. Babylonian Talmud, *Tractate Megillah* 16a).[52] The vertical

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the Image *and the Word*, ed., C. Hourihane (Princeton, N.J. 2005, 187–208), this is in polemic with the medieval Christian illumination trope of the Jesse tree of Jesus (pp. 188, 199 as in http://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/page/41/76977). For the Jewish illuminations see examples from "The Double Mahzor" (Saxony National Library, Dresden, dated 1290): https://talivisualmidrash.org.il/creations/%d7%94%d7%9e%d7%97%d7%96%d7%95%d7%a8-%d7%94%d7%9b%d7%a4%d7%95%d7%9c-a46a-f-82r-%d7%a2%d7%a5-%d7%94%d7%9e%d7%9f/ and in the Michlol Rothschild (dated 1475): https://talivisualmidrash.org.il/creations/%d7%9e%d7%9b%d7%9c%d7%95%d7%9c-%d7%a8%d7%95%d7%98%d7%a9%d7%99%d7%9c%d7%93-ms-180-051-fol-114-%d7%aa%d7%9c%d7%99%d7%99%d7%aa-%d7%94%d7%9e%d7%9f-%d7%95%d7%91%d7%a0%d7%99%d7%95/.

51 "So they impaled Haman on the stake (which he had put up for Mordecai)". Underneath the verse incipit there is a poem with the first letters of every second verse in red, which together spell the name of the poet 'Eleazar ben Killir'. See also Michelangelo's use of the tree motif in figure 12 above.

52 On this and other Rabbinic interpretations, see L. L. Bronner, "Esther Revisited: An Aggadic Approach," in *Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna,* ed., A. Brenner, 176–197; Walfish, "Kosher Adultery?"; T. Kadari, "Zeresh: Midrash and Aggadah," in *Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women* (27 February 2009). Jewish Women's Archive (https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/zeresh-midrash-and-aggadah); For medieval Jewish interpretations of Jewish-Gentile relations in the scroll, see Wailfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb*, 121–141. The image of Haman's daughter may also allude polemically to Mary who appears at the stem of various Jesse tree Christian illuminations (Kogman-Appel, "The Tree of Death"). See further E. Katz, *Machsor Lipsiae* (Vaduz 1964); R. Wischnitzer, "The Esther Story in Art," in *The Purim Anthology*, ed., P. Goodman (Philadelphia, Pa. 1964); B. D. Walfish, "Haman's Daughter"; "Haman's Sons," in

image of her fall to death converges in the pictorial representation with the vertical hanging of Haman and his sons, thus underscoring the completion of the biblical edict against Amalek, namely, its eradication. Yet this makes the "tree of life" turned "tree of death" symbol even more striking, not only because it echoes the vertical directionality of death as leading downward, as a falling of bodies,[53] but also because it creates a strong contrast with the upward turning green branches, from bottom to top. Do the branches point to the celestial sphere of Divine will? Possibly. Yet they also point to a deeper ambivalence, as I see it, namely to the duality or flipping essence of the tree symbol, in that life and death can issue from it, and appear on it as intertwined.[54]

4.4. The significance of the tree/pole for Esther's inner life

The astonishing imagery of a living tree turned into a tree of death (a hanging pole) is evident in other examples of artistic reception of Haman's fall. Once sensitized to the duality of the tree, we may see its recurring appearance in the

Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception, vol. 11 (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2015), 100–104.

53 The bright reddish clothes and symmetrical arrangement of the bodies brings to mind ripe fruit, and in this case, possibly hints at rotting fruit. The lyrics of the song "Strange Fruit", which protests the lynching of African Americans were drawn from a poem by the Jewish writer Abel Meeropol published in 1937 and recorded by Billie Holiday in 1939. The song compares the victims to the fruit of trees, and begins: "Southern trees bear a strange fruit / Blood on the leaves and blood at the root / Black bodies swinging in the Southern breeze / Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees" (https://genius.com/Billie-holiday-strange-fruit-lyrics). See further J. M. Carvalho, "'Strange Fruit': Music between Violence and Death: Strange Fruit," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 71.1 (2013), 111–119. I am grateful to Dr. Diana Lipton for drawing my attention to the song.

54 See note 34 above. From the perspective of cognitive linguistics, "to flip" may signify "go crazy" or "lose control unexpectedly". Mental "breakdown/collapse" (literally: falling, going down) are often linked to extreme changes in personal circumstances, such as economic and social "flipping of fortune".

Book of Esther as symbolizing her life's journey from a young innocent maiden to a grown woman of power. Her insistence on hanging Haman's dead sons, presumably innocent children/young men, may reflect her own early trauma: did she too feel like a suspended body on display, namely, abused (including in the sexual sense) and dehumanized in her past? Was her life (and all its promise, including of offspring) given over to the king, by her uncle or next of kin, Mordecai, in a betrayal of her trust in her guardian?[55] As a gruesome mental image Esther's last request may thus be interpreted as a form of "acting out", ten times over, as it were, her personal hidden trauma.[56] In this sense, setting aside the historical vendetta, Esther's last spoken appeal is an expression of her shattered self, and it characterizes her horrified and destabilized mindset.

Some artistic visualizations of Esther also sensed, and tried to capture, as I see it, her troubled inner self. This imaginary orientalist portrait (1878) by the British painter Edwin Longsden Long (1829–1891) is rare in its disturbing facial expression of Esther, perhaps evocative of the queen "on a bad day"[57]:

Three years earlier (1875) Long painted *The Babylonian Marriage Market*

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55 For recent studies on Esther in connection to sexual trafficking and abuse, see L. A. Kim, "Reframing the Book of Esther as a Case of Spiritual Mutism," *Practical Theology* 13.3 (2020, 246–258); E. S. Dunbar, *Trafficking Hadassah: Collective Trauma, Cultural Memory, and Identity in the Book of Esther and in the African Diaspora* (London: Routledge, 2022 ; Already the Babylonian Talmud *Tractate Sanhedrin* 74:B (and cf. *Megilla* 15:A) refers to Esther's sexual vulnerability, employing the phrase "the earth's ground" (קרקע עולם), on which see further R. Adelman, "'Passing Strange'– Reading Transgender across Genre: Rabbinic Midrash and Feminist Hermeneutics on Esther," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30.2 (2014, 81–97), 93. Further on Esther's verbalizing of trauma, see Polliack, "The Winnicottian 'False Self' in Esther's Traumatic Characterization" (forthcoming).

56 See also note 24 above.

57 Esther is portrayed as a sad and bewildered woman in several works of art, cf. Walfish, "Images of Esther," and illuminations in the Barginsky Collection (https://braginskycollection.com/esther-scrolls/), especially scrolls 58 and 113.

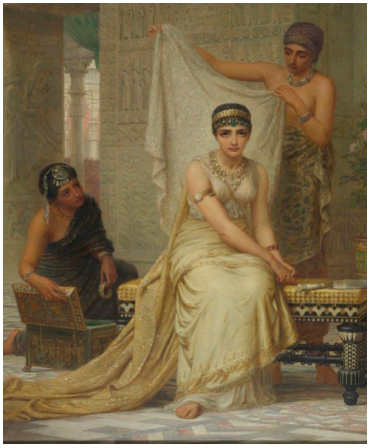

Figure 16

Queen Esther by Edwin Long, 1878; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/4147/ (Public Domain).

which depicts young women auctioned into marriage (based on a scene from Herodotus' *Histories*). The painting has been discussed in the context of the "alteration of women into commodity."[58]

The saddened and indifferent (mostly downcast) female expressions, as well as the white bridal clothes, suggest a connection between the paintings (especially the posture of the third woman from the viewer's left). It is possible that Long, who was a biblical painter as well, envisaged Queen Esther in the personal portrait as a woman who had experienced such a sale (cf. Esther chapter 2 and the above discussion), with all it might entail, regardless of his orientalist style.[59]

Though there is no mention of a living tree in the text of Esther, the frequent use of the lexeme "tree" (Hebrew עֵץ) in the context of hanging and death also conjures, to my mind, the tree of life, as its opposite image. Indeed, as the Leipzig

58 On orientalist painting see F.N. Bohrer, "Inventing Assyria: Exoticism and Reception in Nineteenth-Century England and France," *The Art Bulletin* 80.2 (1998), 336–356 (quotation and discussion of this painting on pp. 351–353).

59 Cf. K. De Troyer, "An Oriental Beauty Parlour: An Analysis of Esther 2.8–18 in the Hebrew, the Septuagint and the Second Greek Text" in *A Feminist Companion*, ed. Brenner, 47–70.

Figure 17

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Babylonian_Marriage_Market#/media/File:Babylonian_marriage_market.jpg/ (Public Domain).

Mahzor (figure 15) illustrates, Jewish and Christian artists used the trope of a living tree, as did Michelangelo (figure 14), in visualizations of Esther.[60] Dual symbolism is of course a vast psychological field, most notably in the study of dreams, and some biblical Hebrew expressions can mean one and the opposite.[61] Without going into this question at length, is it possible that the recurring mention of "tree", and especially in Esther's last request, is also intended to evoke Esther's understanding of herself as a dead or dried up tree?

In the well-known text of Isaiah 56:3, usually identified as post-exilic, the metaphor of the dried up tree is used to describe those who hold to God's covenant

60 On the tree of life see notes 48–49 above. Further on dual psychological and biblical symbols see Polliack, "Joseph and his dreamscapes" (additional bibliography therein) and cf. M. Polliack, "The Winnicottian 'False Self'" (forthcoming).

61 Biblical Hebrew may designate opposites by the same lexeme, as do some classical Arabic roots, see Y. Elitzur, "עֲדֵי אֹבֵד Double Meaning?" *Beit Mikra* 65.1 (2020, 5-16; Hebr.), who suggests the root AVAD can mean loss as well as eternity.

yet lack the ability to bear children: וְאַל־יֹאמַר הַסָּרִיס הֵן אֲנִי עֵץ יָבֵשׁ (And let not the eunuch say, "I am a withered tree"). God promises them an everlasting name, nonetheless, which is "better than sons or daughters." This spiritual prophetic promise sheds further light on Esther's personal plight. The fact that Esther, as well as Mordecai, have no direct descendants, can be deemed as deeply painful in the wider biblical and patriarchal context.[62] Moreover, it creates a striking and even grotesque analogy with Haman and his wife, who lost all their sons. In this light, Esther's request for the public display of Haman's dead sons, may intensify still more her inner torment over her life circumstances and lack of progeny. Perhaps it is viewed as similar to the torment of eunuchs whose bodies were deliberately and painfully damaged by kings, at a young age, so as to deny them any progeny of their own, and to whose self-image and external image as "dried up trees" the prophet directs his comforting immortal words.

Here too, reception exegesis comes to our aid. A midrash preserved in Leviticus Rabba (13:5) suggests that the Persian King Artashata (also known as Darius III), the last king of the Achaemenid Empire of Persia (336–330 BCE), was the descendant of Esther and King Ahasuerus:[63]

> R. Judah b. R. Simon said: The last Darius was the son of Esther, clean

62 Especially considering that it too is a postexilic text. Some Jewish commentators compare the wording of Rachel (Genesis 30) and Abraham (Gen 15:2) over their lack of offspring to Deutero-Isaiah's metaphor, among them Sforno on Gen 30:1 "I am dying מתה אנכי – a figure of speech, meaning the same as הן אני עץ יבש here I am a dried out tree (Isaiah 56:3)." Also cf. the commentary of Shlomo David Luzzato (1800-1865, Italy) on Isaiah 56:3: הן אני עץ יבש, כטעם מה תתן לי ואנכי הולך ערירי, כלומר כל הנאות שבעולם מה יועילו לי אם יאבד זכרי במותי. https://www.sefaria.org.il/ (I am a dried out tree, the meaning is the same as (Abraham's words) I have no offspring, that is, all the joys in the world will not benefit me if my memory be lost after my death).

63 Ahasuerus is generally identified with Xerxes I, circa 519–465 BCE.

from his mother's side and unclean from his father`s side.[64]

The midrash ingenuously reflects the reader's sensitivity towards Esther's (not Mordecai's!) lack of progeny. Moreover, it also incorporates Cyrus the Great, who decreed the return of the Jews to Judea, into Esther's wider pedigree through marriage.[65] It is tempting to wonder if the Rabbis sensed Esther's inner collapse at the end of her book, and wished to sweeten her bleak state of mind.[66]

5. Concluding Thoughts: Pivotal Scenes in Esther's Vertical Characterization and their Wider Significance

To conclude: Esther's character goes through a transformation, which is not necessarily for the better. There are three pivotal scenes in the narrative in which the vertical axis, from high (head) to low (falling, feet), serves to build the sense of a changing character.

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64 אמר רבי יהודה ברבי סימון דריוש האחרון בנה של אסתר היה, טהור מאמו וטמא מאביו. https://www.sefaria.org.il/ Clean and unclean refer to the marriage of a Jewess with a pagan. Leviticus Rabba is generally dated to the fifth century CE, see J. Heinemann, "Profile of a Midrash: The Art of Composition in Leviticus Rabba," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 39.2 (1971), 141–150.

65 Circa 538 BCE, see Ezra 1:1–4; 2 Chronicles 36: 22-23; Isaiah 44:28–45:1

66 The midrash provides Esther with an important son, king Darius (III), yet also stresses he was the "last" king of the Achaemenid Persian dynasty. Few are aware Judeo-Persian sources also afford Esther an important role as a Persian monarch, see V. B. Moreen, "The "Iranization" of biblical heroes in Judeo-Persian Epics: Shahin's Ardashir-Namah and Ezra-Namah" *Iranian Studies* 29.3–4 (1996, 321–338); V. B. Moreen, *Queen Esther's Garden: An Anthology of Judeo-Persian Literature,* Chapter 2 - Biblical Epics: "The Courtship and Marriage of Esther and Ardashir" (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2013), 90-119.

5.1. Up-down directionality: Esther's rise to power

In the first scene the king extends his scepter while Esther stretches herself (most likely her neck and head) to touch its head (5:2). Enhancing this upward movement is Mordecai's unexpected mounting of the horse initially intended for Haman, after which the gallows are constructed in anticipation of revenge (chapter 6). The upward direction turns downward on the vertical axis when Haman falls on the queen's bed (7:8), culminating with Haman's hanging on the very stake he intended for Mordecai (7:10). These moments interrelate in an up-down structuring of Esther's personal triumph, as she and Mordecai are saved, and Haman, at least, is out of the way, though the king's decree itself has not yet been turned. Chapters 5–7 underscore that Esther rises to the occasion as a courageous and insightful heroine, intent to act as savior of her people.

5.2. Down-up directionality: managing to reenact the decree

The second scene flips the vertical structure from up-down to down-up. In order to enable the annulling of the decree Esther first falls at the feet of the king, and only then is the scepter extended and she stands up (8:3). The decree is fully turned round, not just cancelled but replaced by a second decree allowing the Jews to do unto others precisely what was intended for them, expressed in the very same repetitive annihilation phraseology (3:13; 8:11).[67] The saving of the

67 Hebr. לְהַשְׁמִיד לַהֲרֹג וּלְאַבֵּד. Further on the themes of political absurdity and violence in Esther see the recent studies: T. K. Mapfeka, "Esther 9 through the Lens of Diaspora: the Exegetical and Ethical Dilemmas of the Massacres in Susa and Beyond," in *Violence in the Hebrew Bible : Between Text and Reception*, eds., J. van Ruiten and K. van Bekkum (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 397–414; L. Lee, "Reflections on the Scholarly Imaginations of Good and Evil in the Book of Esther," *Biblical Interpretation* 28.3 (2020, 273–302); Kyong-Jin Lee, "Human Nature and Politics: A Modern Political-Theoretical Reading of Esther" in *Reading Esther Intertextually*, 183–193; T. Wetzel, *Violence and Divine Victory in the Book of Esther* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2022); M. Ki, "Governmentality and Abuse in the Book of Esther," *Partial Answers* 21.2 (2023, 187–208) and further

Jews means that others are or will be lost. This is the possibility for resolution, due to the absurd laws of a kingdom in which a decree, once issued, cannot be annulled (8:8). Maybe this explains the down-up movement of the vertical axis as a less potent, less jubilant moment than Esther's triumph over Haman in the previous up-down scene.

Esther's inner-life is less apparent in this scene, as she submerges with the Jews as a whole. From a cognitive and spatial perspective, this scene completes the previous scene in a subversive way that underscores the seesaw motion as the core or gist of our story: up and down, down and up is the essence of life. In this trajectory, no one is safe, no one can be counted upon, nothing is stable, and all humans find themselves caught on a playground seesaw, on an uncontrollable and mechanical vertical axis that determines their fate, whether up or down.

5.3. Strictly downward: Esther's fall and disintegration

In the third scene (9:12–15), interestingly, there is only a downward directionality. No scepter is extended, and there is no body motion on Esther's part. The vertical markers (scepter, head, feet), disappear, as words alone pass between the king and queen. Nonetheless, Esther's wording is loaded with verticality, as she demands the hanging of Haman's ten sons, a request the king fulfills to the letter. Esther's last request, her last opportunity for direct speech in the Book is a descending motion.

From a cognitive perspective, it signifies, as I see it, a sinking point in Esther's inner life. This is the moment of Esther's fall, as it were, in a moral and psychological sense. While in the two previous scenes her behavior is logical, in that she uses every device in her power to ensure a positive outcome for her people, even if the kingdom, overall, is run by an illogical set of rules, and a heartless and

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literature therein. For Illumination of Haman's hanging sons in a Judeo-Persian manuscript of Ardashir-namah (16th century), see: https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht?PPN=PPN663195462&PHYSID=PHYS_0189&DMDID=&view=overview-toc.

senseless king who won't change them. Yet in this last scene, Esther's sense of judgement is questionable, in the moral and human sense, for what can possibly be gained by the terrorizing image of the hanging of Haman's ten dead sons, when they have already been killed?

True, other explanations can explain Esther's request. Firstly, the need to ensure and demonstrate no offspring of Haman's may rise again to haunt her and the Jews, secondly, to fulfil God's edict on Amalek, which Saul left unfulfilled. Yet these and similar reasons offered by commentators over the ages do not suffice in elucidating Esther's severe characterization in this scene, nor its positioning in the vertical directionality of the book at large. Indeed the allusion to Amalek is potent in this scene (and in its reception history to this very day). Nonetheless, I argued that this scene also has compelling psychological implications for Esther's character portrayal. Esther's final request demonstrates her intention to "finish the job" with regard to the Agagaite descendants of Amalek, yet the ten hanging sons/children of Haman are a mirror image of her tortured soul, reflecting mental break-down and the splintering of Esther's inner world.

Psychologically and politically, Esther herself is broken, in fact, by her triumph. The remainder of the book minimizes her role in comparison to Mordecai who becomes the more dominant figure, yet again, as in the start of the book. The sour sense that the female has "done her part" and can now be cast aside, or thrown to the dogs, is reminiscent of Vashti's lot, and other female characters in the Hebrew Bible.[68]

As I have tried to argue, the fact that Esther and Mordecai have no offspring

68 Further on gender politics and the male gaze in Esther, see Brenner, *A Feminist Companion*, 11-21; R. S. Hancock, *Esther and the Politics of Negotiation: Public and Private Spaces and the Figure of the Female Royal Counselor* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press; 2013); D. Flanders, "Freeing Ahasuerus, Haman, and Mordechai: Liberating the Oppressor in the Book of Esther," *Journal of Theological Studies* 71.1 (2020: 36–61); Holt, *Narrative and Other Readings*, 54–68 and literature therein.

themselves is worked into the descending directionality of the book's ending. It is possible that the authors and redactors of Esther are asking whether this kind of seesaw reality justifies raising children, who could easily end up on the bottom rather than the top.

5.4. Esther and God

If we consider that the vertical structure also points to celestial (non-earthly) cognitive spheres, then Esther's moral failure, through her decree of the gratuitous hanging of Haman's dead sons, in a downward direction, might also be a sign of her distancing or severing from the Divine. She came close to it - especially when she touched the king's scepter, her most uplifting moment in more than one sense, the moment in which she overcame great fear and took an active role in her own life and that of her people, a potent moment of empowerment and self-trust. However, this moment has passed in terms of Esther's own life span. To her, at least as this ending suggests, it will never return. The final redactors of the Book of Esther and the Hebrew Bible canon may have been asking if such a moment of triumph will ever return to Esther's spiritual if not actual descendants, who could rise again? In any event, I see Esther's mental disintegration as central to the book's wider themes of fragmentation of the self and the other, the breakdown of identities (gender, ethnic), and the shattering of traditional systems of societal and religious control.

To close, I return to Esther's absentee pairing in the book, considering God's representation in a theoretical sense is at the very top of the vertical axis, occupying the celestial space. If God, whether absent or present, is Esther's mirror, namely, her hidden face, in play with her name, then when Esther falls and disintegrates, God falls and disintegrates through her or with her. In that case, the book's final redactors may have also wished to underscore a subversive note, linking the book's individual, communal and theological resonances: God is, at best, unreliable, and responsibility for our own actions lies "on our own heads", namely, our fate lies

solely in our own hands.

Postscript (selected further reading)

Esther's complex redaction history and thematic study lies beyond the scope of this article (cf. note 8 above). Below I have suggested a selection of reading materials (and especially from the mostly recent) that I hope will enrich those wishing to further explore Esther's background and especially its reception:

On structural aspects, general themes and ideology, see the seminal works of D. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1984); T. K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1997); M. V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther: Second Edition with a New Postscript on A Decade of Esther Scholarship* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2010); J. Grossman, *Esther : the Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011); J. Carruthers, *The Politics of Purim: Law, Sovereignty and Hospitality in the Aesthetic Afterlives of Esther* (London: T&T Clark, 2020); G. Goswell, "The Main Character of the Book of Esther: The Contribution of the Textual Divisions and the Assigned Titles of the Book of Esther to Uncovering Its Protagonist," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 46.2 (2021, 193–205).

Regarding reception history and reception exegesis, Esther's is among the more extensive of biblical books. For seminal overall studies see J. Carruthers, *Esther through the centuries* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008); A. J. Silverstein, *Veiling Esther, Unveiling her Story: the Reception of a Biblical Book in Islamic Lands* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); I. Kalimi, *The Book of Esther between Judaism and Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023). On the reception of many HB/OT and New Testament characters in Judaism, Christianity and Islam (including major characters in Esther), see the excellent tool of reference *Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception*, ed., B. D. Walfish et al. (since 2009; Boston/Berlin: De Gruyter).

More specifically, on ancient interpretations, see, B. N. Melton and D. G. Firth, eds., *Reading Esther Intertextually* (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 122-269; B. Brown-deVost, "What Has Esther to Do with Qumran?" *Dead Sea Discoveries: A Journal of Current Research on the Scrolls and Related Literature* 29.2 (2022, 183–98); B. Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther* (Collegeville, Minn: Liturgical Press, 1991); E. Segal*, The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary, Vols. 1-3* (Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1994-2022); B. D. Walfish,"Kosher Adultery? The Mordecai-Esther-Ahasuerus Triangle in Midrash and Exegesis," *Prooftexts* 22:3 (2002, 305–33); A. J. Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); G. A. Kiraz & J. Bali, eds., *The Syriac Peshiṭta Bible with English translation. Ruth, Susanna, Esther, and Judith/ The Book of Women*, D. M. Walter, G. Greenberg & E. J. Tully, Trans., (New Jersey: Gorgias Press, 2020).

On medieval Jewish interpretations, see the seminal comparative study: B. D. Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993). Also cf. B. D. Walfish, "The Two Commentaries of Abraham Ibn Ezra on the Book of Esther," *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 79:4 (1989, 323–43); M. G. Wechsler*, The Arabic Translation and Commentary of Yefet Ben 'Eli the Karaite on the Book of Esther: Edition, Translation, and Introduction* (Leiden: Brill, 2008); M. G. Wechsler, *Strangers in the Land: The Judeo-Arabic Exegesis of Tanhum Ha-Yerushalmi on the Books of Ruth and Esther* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2010); M. G. Wechsler, *The Book of Conviviality in Exile: The Judaeo-Arabic Translation and Commentary of Saadia Gaon on the Book of Esther* (Leiden/Boston: Brill 2015); "The Reception of Saadia Gaon's Commentary on Esther in the Karaite Tradition of Judaeo-Arabic Commentary on the Book," in *Perspectives sur l'histoire du karaïsme/ Perspectives on the History of Karaism,* ed., G. Dye (Brussels: Éditions de l'Université de Bruxelles, 2021, 39-67). M. G. Wechsler, *From Persia with Love: The Judaeo-Arabic Translation and Commentary*

of Salmon ben Yerōḥām on the Book of Esther (Leiden/Boston: Brill 2025).

For examples of modern and postmodern reception, see Melton and Firth, *Reading Esther*, 183-205; A. C. Silver, *The Book of Esther and the Typology of Female Transfiguration in American Literature* (Lanham, Mayland: Lexington Books, 2017); M. Czekanowska-Gutman, *Reclaiming Biblical Heroines: Portrayals of Judith, Esther and the Shulamite in Early Twentieth Century Jewish Art* (Leiden-Boston: Brill 2022); E. C. Cairns, "Esther among Crypto-Jews and Christians: Queen Esther and the Inquisition Manuscripts of Isabel de Carvajal and Lope de Vega's La Hermosa Ester" *Chasqui* 42.2 (2013, 98–109); E. C. Cairns, *Esther in Early Modern Iberia and the Sephardic Diaspora: Queen of the Conversas* (New York: Springer International Publishing, 2017); S. Offenberg, "Between Queen Esther and Marie-Antoinette: Courtly Influence on an Esther Scroll in the Braginsky Collection," *Arts (Basel)* 11.2 (2022) 40; J. E. Anderson, "Seriously Comic Vision: 'Hop-Frog' and the Book of Esther," *The Edgar Allan Poe Review* 23.2 (2022, 209–27); Ch. Damatov, "The Book of Esther in Daniel Deronda: Between Metaphorical and Literal Mapping," *Partial Answers* 19.2 (2021, 305–29); B. F. Kolia, "Hybridized Surviving: The Diaspora Narratives of Joseph, Esther, and Daniel," *Religions (Basel, Switzerland)* 13.4 (2022, 371–384 (in relation to the Australian-Samoan diaspora).