

# Introduction

*If it pleases the king, let a royal order go out from him, and let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered, that Vashti is never again to come before King Ahasuerus; and let the king give her royal position to another who is better than she. So when the decree made by the king is proclaimed throughout all his kingdom, vast as it is, all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike.”*

*This advice pleased the king and the officials, and the king did as Memucan proposed; he sent letters to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, declaring that every man should be master in his own house.*

—ESTHER 1:19–22

The book of Esther introduces the problem of gender relationships in the first chapter. The private dynamics between the king and the queen, who refuses to do as her husband asks, quickly become a matter for which the royal sages are consulted. Immediately, the counselors express their fear that this minor dispute will set a national precedent, impacting the relationships between men and women throughout the kingdom.

In the past several decades, a great deal of scholarship has focused on the implications of patriarchy for women. Scholarly assessments of the book of Esther that focus on the category of gender tend to evaluate the story with regard to the degree to which it conforms to, or deviates from, a fixed set of gendered expectations. Biblical scholars have often argued that during periods of centralized authority, women are most often relegated to the domestic or private sphere, whereas men occupy the public. This viewpoint, however, is problematic; although patriarchy may in fact limit women’s roles in a variety of

different ways, it is far too simplistic to describe either women or men in these terms. Individuals gain and lose access to power and status through a variety of means over the course of their lifetime that are not determined along rigid gender lines. Furthermore, the notion of a separate and distinct public arena that can be clearly distinguished from the private is anachronistic to the biblical world.<sup>1</sup>

If discussing the terms *public* and *private* in relationship to male and female roles has served as a useful heuristic device to describe the limitations of patriarchy, it has also served to obscure the nuanced picture presented to us by the textual evidence that we have. One of the problems of focusing on separate spheres as a way of explaining gender dynamics is that the logic and the results of this work become self-perpetuating. Inasmuch as scholars have seen separate spheres for men and women as the essential interpretive framework for understanding patriarchy, and women's role within it, they have then all too often applied their discussions of social phenomena to either men or women exclusively.

The presumption of gendered dichotomies can be questioned for a variety of important reasons. For biblical scholars who have employed this language, there is a commonly held assumption that the increased centralization of political power that came with monarchy brought a sharper divide between public and private spaces, a move that impacted women in a negative way. This understanding is based primarily on anthropological analogy. There is more recent work from across a variety of scholarly disciplines that questions the use of these categories and their usefulness in describing women's lives.

The focus of this investigation is twofold. In the first place, I demonstrate the reliance on the categories of public and private in scholarship and the problems with applying these to the book of Esther. Furthermore, I suggest that Esther, when evaluated without the lens of the public/private discourse, may suggest the historical possibility of women's participation in the life of politics, especially as political negotiators and counselors to royalty. Esther's literary portrayal as a woman who continues in Israelite political traditions of women who counsel royalty has implications for how we understand postexilic life. On the one hand, the connection between Esther and other biblical women militates against the portrayal that Esther is in some way "exceptional": she is not unique in biblical narratives in her ability to participate in and affect change in the political arena. On the other hand, portraying her as entirely

1. My argument does not deny gender disparity, nor do I wish to dismiss patriarchy out of hand. Rather, it is my goal to find a more nuanced way to talk about gender dynamics, specifically as they relate to a variety of other social factors.

conventional (that is, in close conformity to gendered expectations) is an overly simple description. Unlike the laws that are described in the book of Esther, there is no one fixed, unalterable way in which gender is configured throughout the entire Bible.

It is my intention not to idealize gender relationships within the biblical text but, rather, to demonstrate the need for a new paradigm with which to evaluate the complex social phenomenon of gender, one that looks at more complicated dynamics of power. In almost every case, power is contingent, relational, and variable. Power depends not only on the fact of gender but also on a number of other social realities, such as occupation, location, family identity, and marital partner, among many others. To discuss gender in general terms without embedding that social factor within a larger framework or connecting it to other types of social relationships in a given culture is false, and thus obscures more complicated social and political realities. Fluctuating power relationships within the royal households allowed the ongoing possibility of women's access to the particular political role of royal counselor throughout Israel's history. The character of Esther is portrayed as a woman who is, in many ways, the consummate expression of earlier iterations of various wise women, royal courtiers, and personified wisdom. Access to monarchs and important political figures was born out of familial relationships, allowing certain men and women the opportunity to act in the capacity of royal counselor at times. Because the political system of Israel is modeled on and shaped by familial relationships, it cannot be reduced to dualistic categories of public versus private (male versus female).

Esther as she is portrayed narratively is not a static but, rather, a dynamic character who changes over the course of the story. Emphasis on the fluidity of the portrayal of Esther in the literary representation points in the direction of the contingent, unstable nature of power relationships. Women's involvement in the politics of negotiation is not a given, nor do women have any type of unequivocal status in abstract terms. Rather, influence and political power were available at times because of a specific set of circumstances through which a woman might gain authority, often in her own family or community, by virtue of the various relationships to which she was connected.

Thus, I hope to shift the question from an essentialist one (To what extent are women different from or similar to men? To what extent can women achieve power in a patriarchal society?) to a more historically inflected one: How does the portrayal of Esther reflect on earlier narratives about the role or position of counselors, and what does this tell us about the author of Esther's views about postexilic realities? To dwell on the question of difference is to ask

the entirely wrong question of Esther. Investigation of the extent to which she is an embodiment of patriarchal values or a subversion of them obscures the more significant political realities that are at stake in this narrative.

This study focuses primarily on the Hebrew text of Esther, referred to as the Masoretic Text (hereafter referred to as MT), but also considers the Greek versions as well, including both the six Septuagint (hereafter referred to as LXX) additions to Esther, as well as the Alpha Text (AT). At various points in this work, the Greek LXX or AT is compared to the MT, but, despite the very different concerns present in the Greek text of Esther from those of the Hebrew version,<sup>2</sup> the additions and changes in the LXX and AT do not significantly change my argument regarding the inadequacy of using dichotomous gendered categories for evaluating either Esther or women more generally. Although several scholars have made arguments about one or another version offering a more positive or negative view of women, there is no clear consensus about which version has a more positive view. This discussion will be taken up in chapter 1 as suggestive of ways that ideas about gender and gender roles may not be as fixed as some have claimed. I do not find any evidence, however, that any one of these versions of Esther provides sufficient evidence that women were ordinarily confined to the private sphere and that deviation from that realm represents an exception to normal behavior.

## METHODOLOGY

This study is a social history, examining both literary and historical sources for evidence that might suggest new possibilities for how women's participation in politics might be understood. This work draws on feminist scholarship both from within the field of biblical studies and from other scholarly disciplines. Yet, although I have drawn on feminist Bible scholars and rely heavily on their work, I also challenge the application of anthropological models about public and private spaces both on the basis of theoretical problems and on the grounds that they do not apply either to the specific situation of the ancient Near East or to the narrative representation of Esther. Even if the language that a culture uses to describe itself and its social structures in written texts

2. The LXX additions of Esther demonstrate a number of concerns that are entirely absent in the MT. Most notably, the LXX includes a number of explicit references to God that are nowhere found in the Hebrew. This includes several long prayers on the part of individuals, including Esther, intended to demonstrate the piety of the Jews in Persia and the divine role in deliverance from enemies, giving the text a more religious emphasis. There are other elements added as well. For example, Adele Berlin notes the shift to a "Hellenistic worldview," including certain stylistic literary conventions. See Adele Berlin, *Esther* (The JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001) 1.

represents a certain amount of political rhetoric, it also refers to certain social realities within the culture in order for the rhetoric to be intelligible. The use of a narrative text for a historical examination cannot prove conclusively what the social realities for women were, or whether they were involved in political negotiations. Yet the complexity and variety of ways that women are represented suggest far more nuance than previous paradigms have assumed, indicating that gender and power are contingent and negotiable. Thus, there is likely a great deal of diversity in the kinds of experiences that women had, particularly in relationship to the degree of power to which they may have had access.

There is a great deal of debate as to how to date the book of Esther. We have already seen that most scholars agree that the text is not historical, although there has been some debate about whether it was intended to be read as such. Scholars have tried to date the text on a variety of grounds, including internal linguistic evidence,<sup>3</sup> the subject matter treated,<sup>4</sup> the names of months in the book,<sup>5</sup> literary motifs, and literary style, among others.<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that for each of these categories, the same type of evidence has been used to make exactly opposite arguments. What we know is that the book must have been composed sometime during or after Xerxes I's rule and prior to the translation of the text into Greek, that is to say, sometime between c. 486 bce and 78 bce. The text demonstrates a concern with the topic of living under foreign rule, which makes either a date late in the Persian period or early in the period of Greek rule plausible. But whenever the text of Esther was written, it continued to undergo revisions, as the existence of various other versions

3. One factor that scholars have focused on in terms of linguistic evidence is the presence of Persian loan words and the absence of any Greek terms, which would seem to argue for Esther as a Persian text. For a discussion of Persian loan words, see, Henry S. Gehman, "Notes on the Persian Words in the Book of Esther," *JBL* 43 (1924): 321–8.

4. Adele Berlin, for example, argues that Esther employs Greek literary tropes about Persians, thus placing it sometime between 400 and 300 bce. *Esther*, xxx.

5. See Albert D. Friedberg, "A New Clue in the Dating of the Composition of the Book of Esther," *Vetus Testamentum* 50 (2000): 561–65, and Friedberg, "Dating the Composition of the Book of Esther: A Response to Larsson," *Vetus Testamentum* 53 (2003): 427–29. See also Gerhard Larsson, "Is the Book of Esther Older Than Has Been Believed?," *Vetus Testamentum* (2002): 130–31; and David Talshir and Zipora Talshir, "The Double Month Naming in Late Biblical Books: A New Clue for Dating Esther?," *Vetus Testamentum* 54 (2004): 549–55.

6. Beate Ego, for example, argues that the best approach to dating is to look at all the evidence comprehensively rather than to argue from a singular piece of evidence. In so doing, she concludes that the text should be dated to the Greek period. "The Book of Esther: A Hellenistic Book," *Journal of Ancient Judaism* 1 (2010): 279–302.

illustrates. For the purposes of this study, it is less important to determine the exact date of composition of Esther, but rather to demonstrate the ways in which the text reflects ambiguity about women's roles through a complex literary representation.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

Chapter 1 introduces the way that Esther has been discussed in biblical scholarship, particularly in assessments that pertain to her gender. Scholars have seen in Esther completely opposite representations: some have viewed her as a paradigm for liberation, whereas others have viewed her as the embodiment of patriarchal values. Esther, then, is viewed as positioned at one of two poles: she is either typical or exceptional. Both of these viewpoints are inherently problematic, because they assume that there is a fixed expectation across a variety of demographic variables for all women and men, and that behavior outside of this expectation must then be exceptional.

Chapter 2 examines the assumptions that undergird the dichotomous portrayals of Esther, in that both assessments of her (whether positive or negative) are grounded in an assumption of public and private spaces. Scholars who employ these categories start with the belief that the normal arena for female activity is the private sphere, whereas men normally inhabit the public. Some biblical scholars have argued that in times of political instability, there may have been more opportunity for women to occupy political roles but that this was severely limited in times of greater political centralization. Yet there is a variety of theoretical problems with this paradigm, and thus the history of the discourse and the problems that attend it are explored here. The picture that emerges from this examination is that the language of public and private is anachronistic and tends to obfuscate the understanding of women's lives rather than to clarify it, especially when specific situations are examined more closely. Even in instances when a particular culture employs this rhetoric, it seems to operate at a theoretical level only; when the specific cultural dynamics are examined more closely, the categories begin to collapse. Thus, the predominance of the language in scholarship indicates far more about the historiographic stance of those who employ the language than about the societies it attempts to describe.

In chapter 3, I look to the narrative world of Esther to consider the genre of the text and to examine how the story represents gender. Specifically, I evaluate the way the text depicts physical space, female authority, and Esther's character. The biblical text of Esther does not portray Esther as segregated in a

private sphere, either physically or metaphorically. Instead, the narratives about Esther, as represented in the MT as well as in the Alpha Text and LXX versions, intimate that gender is fluid, contingent, and variable, depending on a variety of factors.

Chapter 4 examines the portrayal of Persian women as represented in both Greek and Persian sources. Neither in the indigenous Persian sources nor the Greek accounts of Persian women can the reliance on categories of public and private be justified. The Greek and Persian sources on women, although they do not present identical pictures, both suggest the strong presence of Persian royal women in political and economic life. The book of Esther does seem to include a number of stereotypes found within Greek literature about Persians, but ultimately Esther is not the caricature of Persian royal women found in Greek sources who is vengeful and controlling. Rather, in drawing on biblical stories, Esther appears as a woman impelled under great duress to persuade the king to act because her life and the life of her people are at stake.

Chapter 5 addresses one aspect of the Esther scholarship presented in chapter 1, specifically, the viewpoint that Esther represents in some way an exception to standard portrayals of biblical women. Although Esther is one of only a few narratives in the Bible in which the title character is a woman, she also draws on a great deal of previous literature. Thus, one problem with viewing Esther as an exceptional figure who defies gender stereotypes is that she participates in a literary tradition with a number of other figures from both biblical and other ancient Near Eastern literary and historical sources. The relationship between Esther and other wise women who counsel royalty is examined in this chapter. These narratives, when read in conjunction with historical sources, allow for the possibility that one political role available to women was that of royal adviser, a literary tradition in which the story of Esther participates. The literary resonance between Esther and other women of the ancient Near East challenges the specific application of the public/private paradigm to the Esther story.