

## Esther's Power Play: Negotiating Power and Violence in Ancient Esther Traditions

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*Abstract: The Hebrew and the two Greek Esther narratives are important witnesses to how ancient Jewish scribes in the Hellenistic and Roman periods used fictional storytelling to negotiate the necessity of violent action to assert Jewish power in the face of imperial domination and existential threats. While previous scholarship has most often focused on moral issues concerning the drastic depiction of the battle scenes, this study aims to demonstrate that the passages describing how the Jews violently fought back against their Persian enemies illustrate the interest in reflecting on questions of Jewish power and superiority. In offering an analysis of the concluding chapters of the three oldest Esther narratives, this paper also brings to light previously unnoticed variations in the depiction of violence which show that questions of power and violence were a point of continuous discussion. Furthermore, close attention to these variants allows for important conclusions about the socio-political and historical contexts in which these texts were likely produced.*

### I Introduction

Despite Hanna Arendt's well-known dictum that "power and violence are opposites,"<sup>1</sup> the two concepts were difficult to distinguish from another in ancient thought. The biblical book of Esther is a good example of this. The Esther tradition illustrates how ancient Jewish scribes used fictional storytelling to negotiate the necessity of violent action for asserting Jewish agency in the face of imperial domination and existential threats. In the Esther narrative, the Jewish people living under Achaemenid rule in ancient Persia is threatened with total annihilation. By interacting with the court, but also by killing tens of thousands of their enemies, the Jews are able to prevail.

While a variety of narrative features in the book of Esther address questions of power,<sup>2</sup> I think that the book's depiction of violence is one of the most undervalued aspects in this regard. This can arguably be explained by the religious or moral discomfort that Jewish and Christian exegetes felt in dealing with the book of Esther's drastic depiction of violence, especially in chapters 8–9 of the Hebrew narrative. It is therefore not surprising that many scholars went to great lengths to propose alternative interpretations for these

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<sup>1</sup> Arendt, *Violence*, 56.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., Vialle, "La problématique;" Wacker, "Violence;" or the intriguing essay on the relationship of power, clothing, and gender by Lyell and Quick in this issue.

passages, such as reading them as a legitimate and successful act of Jewish self-defense or as a subversive and anti-imperial or even as an ironic and self-critical account.<sup>3</sup>

The following analysis will depart radically from such proposals. In taking into account the positive evaluation of the depiction of Jewish violent actions in the Masoretic Esther narrative (EsthMT), I argue in this study that violence fulfills an important narrative function and is depicted as an integral part of exerting power. To this end, I will first offer a close reading of certain passages of EsthMT 8–9 and elaborate on the ways in which issues of control and power are reflected in the portrayal of Jewish violence. In a second step, I will take into account the depiction of the battle between Jews and their enemies in the Septuagint version of Esther (EsthLXX). This will help both to verify the preceding interpretation of the Hebrew text as well as to bring to light interesting modifications in the relationship between violence and power in the earliest Jewish reception of the book.

While EsthLXX seems to confirm EsthMT's correlation between the concepts of power and violence, things begin to change in the second (and probably younger) Greek version of the Esther narrative, the so-called Alpha text (EsthAT). The third analytical section will thus explore the significant transformations in the EsthAT tradition, which offers new and in part even conflicting perspectives on the interdependence of power and violence. A set of concluding remarks will reflect on the implications of these textual observations, also addressing the question of the possible socio-political and historical contexts of these traditions.

## 2 Hebrew Esther (EsthMT)

As is widely known, the main conflict of the Hebrew Ester narrative emerges when the Jew Mordecai refuses to bow down before the Persian courtier Haman (EsthMT 3:1–4). In an irrational emotional response to the Jew's refusal, the courtier decides not just to punish Mordecai, but to have his entire people killed. Haman convinces the Persian king of the intolerable danger that the Jewish people allegedly poses to the empire. He publishes an edict that commands his subjects “to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, from young and old, women and children, in one day” (להשמיד להרג ולאבד את כל) (להשמיד להרג ולאבד את כל) (in 3:13).

Despite the horrible content of this edict, it is important to note that within the narrative perspective, i.e. the perspective of Haman and the king, this violent plan is perceived as a legitimate act of imperial power: the annihilation of the Jews serves the purpose of securing stability in the empire. Haman's accusation of the Jews—charging them with lawlessness and separation (3:8)—portrays the Jewish people as enemies of the state. Like other rebellious groups, Haman sees their mere existence as an attack on the honor of the Persian king. He states that it is “not appropriate for the king to let them be” (אין שוה להניחם) (in 3:8bβ). In EsthMT 3, therefore, having power implies being able to employ deadly force legitimately against an entire group of people.

<sup>3</sup> Cf., e.g., Goldman, “Ironies;” Berlin, *Esther*; Sharp, *Irony*, 65–81; Macchi, “Le refus;” Achenbach, “Genocide.”

After Mordecai and Esther have successfully convicted Haman using smart rhetorical and political tactics, the latter is executed in yet another act of imperial power: He is hanged publicly on the tree that had originally been erected for the execution of Mordecai (7:10). Esther and Mordecai then negotiate with the Persian king, who allows them to publish an edict in response to Haman’s decree from EsthMT 3. In making full use of the imperial administrative system, Mordecai summons the royal scribes and has them publish an edict that grants the Jews the ability to take up arms, “to gather and to stand up for their lives” (להקהל ולעמד על נפשם) in 8:11) on the very day Haman had planned for their annihilation.

Notably, however, the Jews do not only adopt this legislative aspect of power. The content of Mordecai’s edict demonstrates that the Jews seek to exert violence on a similar scale to what had been planned against them. Just like in Haman’s edict, verse 8:11 also refers to the (Jewish) plan “to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate” (להשמיד ולהרג ולאבד) all of their opponents, including women and children. This verbal correspondence between the original threat and the narrative’s solution to the crisis is why one can speak of an imitation of power here: Just as Haman planned to annihilate all Jews, the Jews decide to fight back with the same degree of violence.<sup>4</sup>

This tendency reaches its climax in the depiction of the Jews’ battles against their enemies in EsthMT 9:1–16. In this passage, the Jews defeat, or more precisely, “kill” and “annihilate” all their enemies (והרג ואבדן) in Esth 9:5). They kill more than 75 000 people. Already the first verse of this chapter, however, points out that this report does not primarily aim to develop the idea of just defense or of a brutal and illegitimate act, but to elaborate on the question of who is in power.<sup>5</sup> In a conspicuous summary of the previous narrative, verse 1 explicitly mentions that the enemies of the Jews had hoped to “gain power” over them. Instead, the Jews “gain power” over their enemies. The Hebrew lexeme employed here is שלט. This rare expression denotes different aspects of the human capability to exert power.<sup>6</sup> For example, Joseph is said to have had “power over the land” of Egypt (השליט על הארץ) in Gen 42:6) when he was selling grain to all peoples in and around Egypt.

In EsthMT 9, the Jews have gained the ability to overcome their enemies by using deadly force, and no attacks on the part of the enemies are mentioned. While the Jews refrain from pillaging their opponents (and thereby act differently than what Haman’s and Mordecai’s edict commanded), the narrative makes clear that the Jews’ collective military actions are to be understood as reflecting their dominance and superiority. Verse 5 summarizes the glorious nature of the Jewish warring activities in the following way: “So the Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, killing and annihilating, and the Jews did with their enemies as they pleased” (ויכו היהודים בכל איביהם מכת חרב והרג) in 9:5).

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Bezold, “Violence,” 53–55.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Clines, *Esther*, 161.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Gen 42:6; Neh 5:15; Ps 119:133; Qoh 2:19; 5:18; 6:2; 7:19; 8:4; 8; 9; 10:5; Ezek 16:30.

Besides the stark terminology, the reference to killing “as they pleased” (כרצונם) in particular can be interpreted as an expression of power. The Hebrew lexeme רצון already occurred at the very beginning of the narrative in the context of demonstrating imperial power through a royal banquet (cf. 1:8).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the term רצון is referred to several times in the visions of the book of Daniel, where it denotes the military power of a foreign ruler to subjugate his opponents (cf. Dan 8:4; 11:3, 16).

In EsthMT 8–9, the correlation between violence and power is also revealed by the idea that the Jews’ violent retaliation significantly affects the behavior of other people groups: According to 8:17, “many of the people of the land” (ורבים מעמי הארץ) began to behave like Jews (מתיהדים) after they fearfully realized that the Jews plan to fight back against any attacks. In 9:2, fear of the Jews is said to have fallen “upon all peoples” (על כל העמים ואיש לא עמד) (כלל העמים), which is why nobody can actually withstand the Jewish actions (לפניהם מנשאים). According to 9:3, the imperial Persian elites even “supported the Jews” (את היהודים גודלו) as they are said to have feared Mordecai, the “great” or “powerful” (גדול) Jewish leader (9:4).

Finally, the Persian king himself appears to be shocked when he approaches Esther after he has heard that the Jews killed more than 500 people in the empire’s capital (9:11–12). While it is normally the king’s advisors who approach him, in this short sequence it is the king who asks Esther if she has any requests. Under the impression of the collective Jewish military success, he insists that he will grant whatever Esther asks, and she requests that the sons of Haman also be hanged (9:12–14), probably implying that it is imperial soldiers who are to carry out this act of public disgrace. In this way, the Jewish-Persian queen—just like Haman in the narrative’s third chapter—delegates capital punishment for a particular group of people.

More importantly, however, Esther also asks for a second day of fighting for the Jews. This request is remarkable, because the entire narrative logic up to this point was based on the idea of two contradictory edicts leading to a conflict on just one day, Adar 13th. There is thus no real need for the Jews to continue killing their enemies on the following day, Adar 14th. Of course, there exist etiological reasons for the extension of the battle. A two-day battle corresponds to the two-day festival of Purim on Adar 14th and 15th. Nevertheless, this short episode expresses the narrative’s conviction that the Jews’ annihilation of their enemies is to be understood as a crucial aspect of the Jewish acquisition of power. Unlike recent proposals arguing that Esther “might well be accused of slaughtering innocent people for no good reason,”<sup>8</sup> EsthMT 9 is consistent with the larger narrative strategy of presenting the Jews as the true power-holders within the empire.

To summarize, violence is depicted as an important aspect of having power in the Hebrew Esther narrative. According to the book’s power fantasy, the Jewish rise to power is expressed through the ability to make use of imperial power by inflicting fear and influencing the behavior of non-Jews, gaining the support of important imperial figures,

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Macchi, *Esther*, 261.

<sup>8</sup> Dalley, *Revenge*, 196.

and using deadly force against a large group of enemies. Despite these observations, it is important to note that this depiction does not undermine the existing power structures within the narrative. The Jews do not fight imperial soldiers, but “enemies” and “haters.” As in other Jewish narratives, the Jewish rise implies a high degree of interaction with and appreciation by the imperial power-holders. This perspective is supported by the concluding verses of the book, which praise both the power of Mordecai and the power of the Persian king. Mordecai remains “second” (משנה) after the ruler (10:3). This concluding remark is just one of many aspects which are transformed in the Greek version of the Esther narrative: According to EsthLXX 10:3, Mordecai ultimately even “succeeds” (διεδέχεται) the Persian king. This alteration already indicates that the Septuagint text imagined the Jews in the narrative to have gained even more power. The following analysis of EsthLXX and its depiction of violence will provide further arguments for this assumption.

### 3 The Septuagint of Esther (EsthLXX)

Due to the six so-called “additions,” the Septuagint version of the Esther narrative is significantly longer than its Hebrew counterpart. These additions, however, do not seem to have led to major changes in the core text. The following analysis will focus on passages of EsthLXX 8–9. While the content of these chapters largely corresponds to the Hebrew narrative, one can observe some minor, yet significant variants in the depiction of violence. As many scholars have observed, the most striking difference between the Hebrew and the Greek version of chs. 8–9 is that the intensity of violence is significantly reduced in the Greek text.<sup>9</sup> Among other things, EsthLXX 8–9 refrain from using the drastic terminology of “killing, destroying, and annihilating,” they leave out the verse EsthMT 9:5 altogether, and they also reduce the number of enemies killed by the Jews by reporting only 15 000 instead of 75 000 fallen men in 9:16.

Recent scholarship has often explained this tendency with the assumption that later audiences found the violent depiction of EsthMT 8–9 to be problematic for moral reasons. For example, Juha Pakkala states that the translators of EsthLXX 8–9 “may have been offended by the brutality that the Hebrew *Vorlage* implies.”<sup>10</sup> While it is impossible to rule out that questions of morality played a role in the process of rewriting and translating, another explanation seems more plausible: At the climax of EsthLXX, the Jews seem to have gained more power than in EsthMT, which is why “less” violence suffices to overcome their enemies. Thus, several features of the Greek narrative reflect an even closer relationship between Jewish power and their exertion of violence. This is supported by important, but often overlooked details within chs. 8–9 in the Greek text which run against the assumed tendency of the Septuagint to tone down the depiction of Jewish violence.

<sup>9</sup> Cf., for example, Wacker, “Gewalt,” 617–19, who speaks of a tendency of minimizing violence in EsthLXX (the relevant chapter is labeled “Gewaltminimierung – LXX Est 8–9”).

<sup>10</sup> Pakkala, *God's Word*, 339–40.

A first indication that calls into question the assumption of a moral problematization of violence in the Greek text is the fact that the Septuagint quite closely follows its *Vorlage* in referring to a Jewish counter-edict, the idea of a total annihilation of the Jews' enemies, a second day of fighting, as well as the motif of the fear of the Jews that befalls groups of non-Jews. The counter-edict, for example, also contains the idea of the necessity that Jews actively engage in battle. In explicitly labeling these actions as warfare, deploying the Greek verb *πολεμέω* (8:13), the Septuagint text confirms the idea that the Jews seek to engage in a military confrontation. Unlike in the Hebrew text, however, there is no mention of the existential threat the Jews' enemies pose. In the Greek text, there is no mention of the need for the Jews "to gather" or to "stand up for their lives."<sup>11</sup>

These features seem to indicate that—already before any battles—we are to understand the Jews in the Septuagint narrative to be more powerful than their opponents. Secondly, the counter-edict in 8:11 frames the Jews' violent actions as royal permission to live according to their own laws and it allows them to deal with their enemies "as they please" (*ὡς βούλονται*). By this variation of its *Vorlage*, the Greek text gives the impression that the Jewish response to the planned annihilation is not just a reversal of the violent means of imperial power. It actually emphasizes an increase in the Jews' power, as they now have permission to punish their enemies somewhat independently from imperial regulations, linking the motif of treating the enemies as they please with the Jewish laws. Thirdly, a tendency to focus on the Jews' increase in power could also stand behind the notable shift in dating the counterattack: Unlike in the Hebrew version, where Haman's and Mordecai's edicts are both valid on Adar 13, the Septuagint mentions that Haman's plan is to be put into action on the 14th of Adar. The Jews, however, already seek to fight their opponents on the 13th, i.e. the day before the actual attack. Thereby, the Greek text gives the impression that the Jews do not retaliate or defend themselves on Adar 13th, but rather conduct a preemptive military attack.<sup>12</sup>

This perspective helps to explain the distinctive form of the actual battle report. Within 9:1–16, one can observe two subtle but significant changes which show that—despite the narrative tendency to somewhat reduce the quantity of violence—the Jews seem to act even more assertive. The first aspect concerns a note about plundering. In the Hebrew text, the Jews do not take any booty when killing their enemies (EsthMT 9:10, 15, 16). In contrast, the Septuagint mentions that the Jews did in fact plunder after they killed 500 men and the sons of Haman in Susa. As this notion stands in contrast to the assumed interest of EsthLXX to minimize the depiction of Jewish violence, a majority of scholars suggest a scribal error here.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> This note is also absent from the report in ch. 9, where the Hebrew narrative repeats these motifs (cf. EsthMT 9:2; 15–16).

<sup>12</sup> This shift also solves the "problem" of the logic of EsthMT 9, where the second day of fighting has no narrative necessity, given that Haman's edict was only valid on one particular day. In EsthLXX, the Jews have to fight on Adar 14th as well, since Haman's edict is still about to be executed.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Fox, *Redaction*, 84; Kahana, *Esther*, 375; and Macchi, *Esther*, 375 assume a scribal mistake or copyist error in EsthLXX 9:10, arguing that a negative particle was lost (*καὶ [οὐδὲν] διήρπασαν*).

However, I think this alteration could very well be intentional. It fits well with the narrative tendency to present the Jewish exertion of violence as a more assertive, powerful action. Furthermore, it goes along with the second variation concerning the hanging of the sons of Haman. The Hebrew text of EsthMT 9:13 uses a jussive in Esther's request: "let them be hanged/they shall hang" (יתלו). After the king has granted this, the narrative simply reports that "they hanged the ten sons of Haman" (ואת עשרת בני המן תלו) in EsthMT 9:14), not explicitly mentioning the Jews as subjects. Thus, the Hebrew text seems to imply that it is *not* the Jews, but probably imperial soldiers who hang these ten persons. The Septuagint text, however, mentions that the king "handed over" the dead bodies to the Jews of Susa so that they *themselves* could hang them (ἐξέθηκε τοῖς Ἰουδαίοις τῆς πόλεως τὰ σώματα τῶν υἱῶν Ἀμαν κρεμάσαι in EsthLXX 9:14b).<sup>14</sup>

These two variants emphasize the narrative's conviction that the Jews assertively punish their enemies, and in particular, the descendants of Haman. Despite the fact that more variations should be considered when studying power in EsthLXX, these examples already suggest that in the Septuagint, too, the Jews' ability to exert violence in punishing and killing their opponents serves as a crucial feature of the narrative conceptualization of power.

It is thus arguably true that the Septuagint narrative notably tones down the intensity of the violence compared to Hebrew Esther. Yet this needs not imply that later scribes felt morally "offended" by their allegedly brutal *Vorlage* and therefore felt the need to rewrite the passage. If the above-mentioned observations regarding EsthLXX 8–9 are correct, one could also argue that aspects such as the lower casualty numbers are the result of the narrative tendency to emphasize the Jews' increase in power even more strongly. As the annihilation of the Jews' enemies is depicted as an assertive, preemptive military action, there might simply be fewer adversaries left to fight.

#### 4 The Alpha Text (EsthAT)

The literary development of EsthAT and its place in the textual history of the ancient Esther tradition remains a point of intensive scholarly discussion. Since the work of David J. Clines, several scholars have proposed that EsthAT is a witness to an older Esther narrative that found its end before the Jews engage in battle. Nevertheless, most exegetes would probably agree that the received form of the text featuring a passage describing the capital punishment for the Jews' enemies is likely to post-date EsthMT and EsthLXX. More importantly, scholars such as Kristin De Troyer have convincingly demonstrated that differences to the longer text need not be explained with the assumption of an older, proto-Masoretic form of the narrative.<sup>15</sup> Instead, EsthAT can also be interpreted as a rewritten form of EsthLXX. Following this line of interpretation, I will treat EsthAT as

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Stone, *Empire*: "Esther's agency has indeed progressed, and with that progression the violence and body count have also increased" (290).

<sup>15</sup> See De Troyer, *End*, 400–403 and Miller, *Three Versions*, 165–171. For an even later contextualization of the Alpha text as a possibly Christian recension, see Jobes, *Alpha-text*, 231–232 and Kottsieper, *Zusätze*, 125–28.

the youngest of the three traditions, but I will still reflect on the possibility of textual growth.

The most important feature of EsthAT regarding the correlation of power and violence is the existence of two distinctive perspectives in two different passages in the concluding chapter of the narrative.<sup>16</sup> The first one, mainly reflected in EsthAT 7:18–21, is fairly similar to that of EsthLXX. The Jews are portrayed as new power players in the empire. They have successfully convicted Haman and are ready to take next steps to avert his plans. Unlike in the longer Greek text of EsthLXX 8–9, however, EsthAT 7:18–21 significantly restricts the extent of the Jewish participation in the violent punishment of the enemies. For the first time in the ancient Esther tradition, in fact, it *avoids* the idea of an active Jewish exertion of violence. The second perspective, however, seems to be closer to the perspective of EsthMT/EsthLXX 8–9. In an episode which is found later in EsthAT 7:43–46, the Jews *do* engage in battle, and they kill more than 70 000 enemies and take booty.

The first passage, EsthAT 7:18–21, follows the tendency of EsthLXX 8–9. The Jews of EsthAT appear as powerful and loyal partners of the Persian empire. They have won the full support of the Persian king, whose power they can use for their own benefit. Instead of publishing a counter-edict, however, Esther approaches the king and asks: “Grant me to punish my enemies with death” (Δός μοι κολάσαι τοὺς ἐχθρούς μου φόνῳ in 7:18). Her character is strikingly proactive and confident, “powerful,” so to speak. Furthermore, she requests that the children of Haman “die with their father” (ὅπως ἀποθάνωσι καὶ αὐτοὶ μετὰ τοῦ πατρὸς αὐτῶν in 7:19). Readers familiar with the text of EsthLXX 9 will probably recognize the setting and tone of this scene.

In my opinion, it is very likely that this brief episode is the result of rewriting the passage of EsthLXX 9:13–14 in which Esther asks for a second day of fighting and for the execution of Haman’s sons. As EsthAT 7 has, up to this point, not explicitly mentioned the hanging of Haman, verse 7:19 additionally seems to synchronize the death of Haman and his sons.<sup>17</sup> What is more important, however, is that Esther does not ask for permission for the Jews to engage in battle, but delegates the punishment of the enemies to the ruler. In labeling the opponents “my enemies” (τοὺς ἐχθρούς μου), it is made clear that the enemies of the Jews are to be perceived as enemies of the (Persian) queen as well.

Thus, once again, one can observe a close correlation between imperial power and violence in this tradition. Yet, in this case, it is not collective Jewish military action that signifies the Jewish rise to power. It is only Esther’s ability to successfully make use of the existing power structures and to basically run the affairs of the empire on her own: Her husband simply approves her request (Γινέσθω in 7:19), and verse 20 very

<sup>16</sup> The verse numbering system of EsthAT varies from EsthMT and EsthLXX. While the second Greek text is generally much shorter than its Hebrew and (longer) Greek counterparts, EsthAT 7:14–52 largely corresponds to the material of EsthMT/EsthLXX 8–9.

<sup>17</sup> EsthAT 7:13 remains suspiciously vague. It only mentions that Haman’s “life was sealed” (καὶ ἐσφραγίσθη ἐν αὐτῷ ὁ βίος αὐτοῦ), after being convicted and stripped of the royal signet ring. Cf. rightly Fox, *Redaction*, 41.



briefly mentions that “he smote the enemies at large” (*καὶ ἐπάταξε τοὺς ἐχθροὺς εἰς πλῆθος* in 7:20). This phrase serves as a brief confirmation of the execution of the command fulfilling Esther’s request to kill the enemies by deploying imperial troops. In EsthAT 7:21, Esther and the king decide also to kill men in Susa and to hang them. This seems to be a condensed summary of the events of EsthLXX 9:11–15. In this scene, too, an active Jewish participation in the violent acts is not mentioned. In the following passage, Addition E (i.e. EsthAT 7:22–32), the king publishes a letter directing his subjects to disregard what Haman had previously commanded (cf. esp. verse 28). In line with that, Mordecai writes to his people, asking them to “each stay at their place and to celebrate a festival to God” (*μένειν τὸ ἔθνος αὐτοῦ κατὰ χώρας ἕκαστον αὐτῶν καὶ ἐορτάζειν τῷ θεῷ* in 7:34). Thus, in this perspective, the Jews use their authority and power within the imperial system, but it seems like the narrative eagerly tries to avoid the impression that the Jews would act violently themselves.<sup>18</sup>

In sharp contrast to this perspective, EsthAT 7:43–46 recounts how the Jews collectively did fight their enemies. After 7:41 had mentioned that “nobody stood up against them” (*καὶ οὐδεὶς ἐπανέστη αὐτοῖς*), the belligerent confrontation presented here comes as a surprise to the reader. In the capital of Susa, the Jews kill 700 men, six persons mentioned by name (obviously a defective copy of the list of the Greek names of Haman’s sons in EsthLXX 9:7–9), ten (additional?) sons of Haman, “and they [i.e., the Jews] plundered everything that belonged to them” (*καὶ δῆρπασαν πάντα τὰ αὐτῶν* in 7:44). Esther then gets royal approval for a second day of fighting and plundering, and 7:46 mentions that another 70,100 men were killed by the Jews. The content (and style) of this passage is incompatible with the preceding narrative in which the Jews’ enemies and the sons of Haman had already been executed.

In my opinion, the simplest explanation for this contradiction is that later redactors sought to align EsthAT with perhaps more prevalent traditions like EsthMT and EsthLXX in inserting a report about the military success of the Jews. Irrespective of these literary-historical questions, however, it is obvious that in the received form of EsthAT, the Jews are portrayed as a people with great authority and influence at the imperial court. As in EsthLXX and in EsthMT, they are also depicted as a group able to defeat and kill tens of thousands of their enemies using large-scale violence.

## 5 Significance and Historical Contextualization

These observations on the Hebrew and the two Greek Esther narratives allow several conclusions for the study of how ancient Jewish scribes reflected on issues of power and violence. First, this essay has demonstrated that the three Esther narratives—each with a distinctive version of the book’s violent ending—are important witnesses for studying the development of the concepts of power and violence in ancient Jewish literature. The

<sup>18</sup> Additionally, in EsthAT the fear of the Jews does not (negatively) affect the behavior of non-Jews. According to 7:41, nobody attacks the Jews because of their fear, however, for it is only Jews who circumcise themselves (!). For this odd feature, see Eckhardt, *Ethnos*, 318.

received forms of these narratives make it clear that having power implies influencing political figures for one's own benefit and using existing imperial power structures, but it also involves changing the behavior of non-Jews, spreading fear and violently ending the life of those who still seek to harm them. Despite many differences in detail, the three narratives' battle scenes agree in their conviction that being able to use deadly force forms a crucial part of having power. While this does not imply that violence *is* power, the narratives show that there is an intrinsic relationship between the two concepts.

Interestingly, one can notice distinctive nuances and shifts in this relationship moving from the Hebrew to the Greek Esther narratives. In the Masoretic Esther text, a full reversal of power means that the Jews can fight back with the same degree of violence originally planned against them. The success in EsthMT is thus an unlikely yet glorious Jewish victory against their allegedly more powerful opponents. In EsthLXX, however, the Jews' superiority already seems obvious before the battle, which is why "less" violence suffices to overcome their enemies. Yet the two "pluses" in the Septuagint's depiction of violence—the motif of the Jewish pillaging and the Jews' public execution of the sons of Haman—show that this text, too, perceives Jewish violence as a legitimate expression of power. The later tradition of EsthAT bears witness to the ongoing and intensive scribal debate about questions of power and violence in the Esther tradition.

The Jewish scribes rewriting the Septuagint text subtly transformed the conclusion to the Esther narrative as they found a way to use the motif of Esther and Mordecai as quasi-imperial power-holders to omit the report about the military confrontation between the Jews and their enemies. Nevertheless, Jewish power still implies the use of violence: The Jewish queen Esther delegates the destruction of the Jews' enemies to the Persian king (and most likely, to the imperial army). And in what is probably a secondary addition, EsthAT 7:43–46 reports for the second time how the enemies of the Jews were killed. This time, it is (again) the collective of the Jews killing and also plundering their opponents.

In my opinion, these different perspectives are not just the result of scribal creativity, reworking older traditions for the purpose of producing smoother or "less violent" narratives. They can in fact fruitfully be interpreted as reflecting the ever-changing political power relations of the Hellenistic and Roman periods.<sup>19</sup> Following a long scholarly tradition of detaching the (Hebrew) book of Esther from its narrative Persian setting, EsthMT can plausibly be contextualized in the late Hellenistic period.<sup>20</sup> Its present form likely presupposes the events of the so-called Maccabean revolt (ca. 167–164 BCE). The idea that the entire Jewish people is threatened, and subsequently gathers and fights back against its enemies simply fits best with the assumption that the military success of the Maccabees does not lie too far in the past. The Persian Jews' rise to power in Hebrew Esther can be explained as a fictional reflection of the historical realities after

<sup>19</sup> For similar conclusions, see the Bellmann, *Politische Theologie*, 310–314.

<sup>20</sup> Cf., e.g., Paton, *Esther*, 61–83; Wahl, *Esther*, 45–47, 179–181; Ego, *Ester*, 67; Achenbach, "Genocide," 107–10; Macchi, *Esther*, 101–5.

the early Hasmoneans established their rule in Judea (ca. 130 BCE, possibly under John Hyrcanus).

The dating of the Septuagint of Esther is a bit more complex. While its final form—including all the additions—might already date to the first century CE, there is good reason to assume that at least a core of EsthLXX dates back to the Hasmonean period.<sup>21</sup> As scholars generally consider the colophon of the Septuagint to be authentic, a dating around 78 BCE seems to be realistic.<sup>22</sup> During that time, the Hasmonean empire reached its climax under Alexander Jannaeus (103–76 BCE), the first Hasmonean “king.” The narrative perspective of EsthLXX 8–9 makes good sense in this context. Under Jannaeus’ rule, the Hasmonean kingdom was at the apex of its power. Unlike in the early days of the Maccabean revolt, however, the later Hasmoneans’ battles and their expansionism could no longer be explained as a fight for survival. Their warfare—similar to the outlook of the Septuagint text of Esther 8–9—reflected their claim to power as a somewhat independent Hellenistic state.

Finally, the less violent ending of EsthAT (without the battle report of 7:43–46) can very plausibly be read as a Jewish literary reaction to the riots that occurred in Alexandria in 38–41 CE.<sup>23</sup> This violent event must have provoked intensive debates on the legitimacy of Jewish violence and the status of Jewish communities living under imperial rule. One well-known example of that is Philo, who for example in his *In Flaccum* and in his *Legatio* “systematically downplays the actions and reactions”<sup>24</sup> of Jewish groups in the outbreak of violence in Alexandria and instead emphasizes that the Jews are very loyal and peaceful imperial subjects. The second Greek version of the Esther narrative reflects a fairly similar apologetic interest: The Jewish people of the diaspora might be threatened with hostility and violence, yet they do not engage in violent conflict themselves. Rather, they seek to use their power to interact with the foreign rulers with the aim to punish those who seek to harm them.

Ultimately, however, the present form of EsthAT serves as an important reminder that one cannot assume a simplistic or linear tendency of textual transmission in continuously reducing the intensity in the depiction of Jewish violence. The case of EsthAT 7:43–46 shows that the textual development of the narrative and the transformation of its ideology was more complex. It illustrates that just as for the scribes and readers of EsthMT and EsthLXX, for later recipients, too, the correlation of the Jews’ rise to power in the Esther narrative and their active exertion of large-scale violence was perceived to be important.

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<sup>21</sup> For a late dating of the received form of EsthLXX cf. Wynn, *Contexts*, 238–39 and more recently Domazakis, “Date.”

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Bickerman, “Colophon,” 347.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. already De Troyer, *End*, 400–3.

<sup>24</sup> Honigman, “Fictions,” 84.

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