Bernard Tola

CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT IN MT ESTHER



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Bernard Tola



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Abbreviations

BDB	Francis Brown, S.R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907)
Bib	*Biblica*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
GKC	*Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (ed. E. Kautzsch, revised and trans. A.E. Cowley; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910).
HALOT	Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994–2000)
HAR	*Hebrew Annual Review*
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JJS	*Journal of Jewish Studies*
JNSL	*Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages*
JPSV	*Jewish Publication Society Version*
JQR	*Jewish Quarterly Review*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
NETS	New English Translation of the Septuagint
RSV	Revised Standard Version
TDOT	G.J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (trans. John T. Willis et al.; 8 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974–2006)
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*

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Introduction

In the Masoretic Text's Esther, Persia is an extremely hierarchical empire in which Law is all-important, strictly codified and inflexible. The purpose of the Law is to provide order, peace and stability throughout an empire that includes a large gathering of various conquered peoples. Yet the Persian empire seems, at the same time, to be riddled with ambiguities, conflicting interests and ironic reversals that are profoundly destabilising, leading to outbursts of extreme violence. Indeed, the book itself provides words that encapsulate much of the turmoil of the narrative, 'but it was overturned' (9.1).

Esther is an imaginative historical narrative that does not describe historical events but simply adds many realistic and convincing details for the sake of verisimilitude, aiming to entertain audiences. Such works of fiction are subject to two tests, historical accuracy not being one of them: their aesthetic merit and their verisimilitude.[1] Deborah Tannen notes that imaginative literature seeks not to convince the reader by the use of rational arguments, but to engage the reader emotionally 'through a sense of involvement with its point of view'.[2] This point-of-view is communicated by characterization and character development in the book. The psychology of the characters, their interior life and their growth, become important in the development of the plot, as does their worldview.[3]

1. W. Lee Humphreys, 'Novella', in *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature* (ed. George W. Coats; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), pp. 82-96 (83); Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jewish Novel in the Ancient World* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015), p. 6.

2. Deborah Tannen, 'Oral and Literate Strategies in Spoken and Written Narratives', *Language* 58 (1982), pp. 1-21 (18).

3. Sara Johnson, 'Novelistic Elements in Esther: Persian or Hellenistic, Jewish or Greek?', *CBQ* 67 (2005), pp. 571-89 (575); Wills, *Jewish Novel*, p. 3; W. Lee Humphreys, 'The Story of Esther and Mordecai: An Early Jewish Novella', in Coats (ed.), *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable*, pp. 97-113 (105).

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The concepts of character, characterization and character development and the tools used to analyse them need to be defined and explained in the context of the study of characters in the Bible. The representation of character in the Bible may appear sparse to modern readers. Largely absent are physical descriptions and analyses of the psychology and emotions of characters.[4] Readers need to use the limited information provided to understand characters and their motives through inference, weighing of claims and what is often less than certain evidence. In contrast to the fixed concept of character in Greek narratives, it is typical of the presentation of characters in the Bible to be more equivocal, mysterious, ambiguous, the result of the monotheism of the Bible that sees each human being as a creation of God, endowed with freedom. This means that humans are able to change and are somewhat unpredictable.[5] This 'unpredictable, in some ways impenetrable' representation of biblical characters is closer to modern notions of character than is the Greek representation.[6] Arguably, then, characters in biblical narratives lend themselves more comfortably to investigation and analyses using modern tools.

A character in a narrative is a construct, assembled by the reader from the information provided in the text.[7] In this sense, characters are the joint constructions of the author and the reader. Readers imagine characters in narratives 'as a form of *human life*'.[8] Unless readers are able to engage with characters that resemble them, they are unlikely to engage deeply with the narrative.[9] The changes that can be perceived in a character and which changes amount to character development depend upon the analytical framework adopted.[10] The approach adopted in the present study to

4. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), p. 143.

5. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), p. 325; Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, pp. 144, 146, 158. Alter's view, as stated on p. 159, is that 'the Bible's strategies of narrative exposition reflect a sense of the unknowable in human nature'.

6. Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, p. 162.

7. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 38.

8. John Frow, 'Character', in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory* (ed. Matthew Garrett; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 105-19 (107). (The italics are Frow's.)

9. Frow, 'Character', p. 109.

10. Uri Margolin, 'Introducing and Sustaining Characters in Literary Narrative: A Set of Conditions', *Style* 21 (1987), pp. 107-24 (107).

analyse the properties of characters, the effects of their characterization and the presence of character development is the approach developed by Uri Margolin in a number of publications. It is here supported by several practices, including Cultural Theory and Conversation Analysis.

Margolin's approach is a synthesis of structuralist elements that focus on the role played by individuals in a narrative; of reception theory that focuses on the relationship between text, author and reader; and of the theory of fictional worlds that sees individuals in a narrative taking from, and contributing to, the fictional world of the narrative.[11] In comparison with other approaches, Margolin's offers greater 'conceptual comprehensiveness' and 'theoretical depth', and is useful with a wider range of text types.[12] Although schemes for the categorisation of characters often suffer from relying on mixed categories,[13] such typologies can, nevertheless, provide insights and useful terminology for the description of character.

The identification of a character occurs through the use of the character's name and of pronouns, as well as through the description of the character's face and voice, that is, through a range of means that establish the character as separate and different from other characters and contribute to maintaining its identity throughout the narrative.[14] The properties of characters in their given worlds can be known from direct statements in the text or by being inferred from the text.[15] Literary characters are different from actual human beings in that they are artificial constructs, totally dependent on the text and its description of them. They are thus limited and incomplete. They do not have an independent life away from the texts that they inhabit. Readers know them from their descriptions in these texts and from inferences based on these descriptions.[16]

11. Fotis Jannidis, 'Character', in *Handbook of Narratology* (ed. Peter Hühn, Jan Christoph Meister, John Pier and Wolf Schmid; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2014), pp. 30-45 (33).

12. Uri Margolin, 'Individuals in Narrative Worlds: An Ontological Perspective', *Poetics Today* 11 (1990), pp. 843-71 (845).

13. Jannidis, 'Character', p. 42.

14. Frow, 'Character', p. 111.

15. Margolin, 'Individuals in Narrative Worlds', p. 848.

16. Margolin, 'Introducing and Sustaining Characters', p. 108; Uri Margolin, 'Character', in Herman (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, pp. 66-79 (68); Margolin, 'Individuals in Narrative Worlds', p. 847.

Characterization is 'the ascription of individual mental traits' to a character in a narrative, and character building is 'the ascription of complexes of traits'.[17] Just as characters are a function of their narrative universe, so do a character's traits arise from the circumstances of the narrative.[18] As a result, the character belongs somewhere in the universe of its narrative, has a range of physical and mental characteristics that uniquely identify it from other characters in the narrative, and is endowed with 'an interiority or personhood'.[19] The distinction between 'flat' and 'round' characters originally proposed by E. M. Forster has proved to be intuitively valid and has endured, being used widely.[20] In defining these terms, Fotis Jannidis quotes Forster saying that 'Flat characters…are constructed round a single idea or quality' whereas round characters are 'more highly organised' and 'are capable of surprising in a convincing way'.[21] David Fishelov clarifies that flatness and roundness are to do with creating in the imagination of the reader a character that is able to stand lifelike as an individual. Some of the factors that affect the flatness or roundness of a character are the extent of its representation in the narrative; representation of the character's emotions, mental traits and consciousness; presentation of the character from a variety of viewpoints; participation in dialogues and in the action of the narrative.[22]

Meir Sternberg argues that characterization in the Bible is not so flat that its characters are allegorical nor so 'individual as to extend the bounds of human nature', with the various traits of characters being common enough to mark the characters as human but their combination unusual enough to make them individuals.[23] In view of the Bible's preference for limited characterization, it is remarkable, as Sternberg notes, how memorable biblical figures remain.[24]

17. Uri Margolin, 'The Doer and the Deed: Action as a Basis for Characterization in Narrative', *Poetics Today* 7, no. 2 (1986), pp. 205-25 (205). See also Jannidis, 'Character', p. 31.

18. Margolin, 'Doer and the Deed', p. 206.

19. Margolin, 'Individuals in Narrative Worlds', p. 844; Jannidis, 'Character', p. 37.

20. Jannidis, 'Character', p. 31; David Fishelov, 'Types of Character, Characteristics of Types', *Style* 24 (1990), pp. 422-39 (425).

21. Jannidis, 'Character', p. 41.

22. Fishelov, 'Types of Character', pp. 425-26.

23. Sternberg, *Poetics*, p. 347.

24. Sternberg, *Poetics*, p. 329.

The attribution of mental properties to characters is an activity of the reader.[25] The mental properties of characters cannot be directly observed.[26] Character in a narrative is constructed as a 'network of character traits' which are the result of 'assembling various character indicators distributed' throughout the text.[27] There are at least three possible sources for these indicators: explicit ascriptions of character in the text; information that can be inferred from the text; and historical and cultural conventions of the real world.[28] Readers have to take into account all of the information that the text provides in order to arrive at a characterization.[29] This process has limitations. Whereas an indefinite number of predicates can be assigned to actual human beings, literary characters are restricted in this respect.[30] The attributes of any character are limited by the world in which they live and by their role in the narrative.[31] Thus, it is possible for characters to lack consistency, display logically inconsistent traits and have gaps due to lack of information in the narrative.[32]

Biblical characterizations rely upon the reader's efforts to gain roundness for they usually provide only a partial picture.[33] Any trait assigned to a character in the Bible has two functions, one concerning the character and the other concerning the plot. It is typical of biblical characterization that there be a cause-and-effect link between traits and action. The mere mention of a trait means that, at some time, it will play a role in the plot, during which traits may be transformed. The mention of a trait may often give an indication of what is likely to happen but not of how it will happen.[34] Thus with Esther, whose beauty and docility result initially in her being crowned queen but, by the end of the narrative, give her control over the king, as her docility rapidly disappears.

25. Uri Margolin, 'Characterization in Narrative: Some Theoretical Prolegomena', *Neophilologus* 67 (1983), pp. 1-14 (1).

26. Margolin, 'Characterization in Narrative', p. 11.

27. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, p. 61.

28. Jannidis, 'Character', pp. 37-38. See also Baruch Hochman, *Character in Literature* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 141; Uri Margolin, 'The What, the When, and the How of Being a Character in Literary Narrative', *Style* 24 (1990), pp. 453-68 (459); Margolin, 'Doer and the Deed', p. 208.

29. Margolin, 'Introducing and Sustaining Characters', p. 109.

30. Margolin, 'Introducing and Sustaining Characters', p. 108.

31. Margolin, 'Character', p. 73.

32. Margolin, 'Introducing and Sustaining Characters', p. 109; Jannidis, 'Character', p. 33.

33. Sternberg, *Poetics*, p. 327.

34. Sternberg, *Poetics*, pp. 337-40.

If, at a certain point in the narrative, the reader finds that a character trait is not compatible with the preceding generalisations about that character, it means that either earlier generalisations were incorrect or that there has been a change in the character.[35] A character develops or changes when a new trait appears or when a previously hidden trait is revealed.[36] The changes that may occur may be mental or physical and may well operate independently of each other.[37] The amount of change of any character trait is potentially unlimited and depends on the context of the narrative.[38] In addition, individuals in narratives can change in many more ways than can real life individuals in the actual world.[39] Narratives present characters through a series of stages, set in particular times within the narrative. The problem that arises is the maintaining of personal identity as the characters progress in the narrative.[40] There are two aspects that need to be considered when an individual changes in the course of the narrative. The first one is the cohesion of the individual from one stage to the next. The second one is the overall coherence of the individual from beginning to end as it undergoes change through its whole series of stages in the narrative.[41] The preservation of name is one important factor that helps to maintain an enduring identity.[42] Characters are termed dynamic or static depending on whether, over time, major changes to their personality attributes do or do not take place.[43] Esther is a work with a deep time perspective. The narrative goes all the way back to pre-exilic times to seek explanations for events and creates obligations that stretch into the very distant future—into eternity! The events of the narrative take place during a period of time within that considerable time span. Baruch Hochman remarks that time is essential for change to occur.[44] In view of this, lack of time is not a factor that prevents characters in Esther from developing.

35. Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, p. 41.
36. Hochman, *Character in Literature*, p. 135.
37. Margolin, 'Individuals in Narrative Worlds', p. 858.
38. Margolin, 'Character', p. 75.
39. Margolin, 'Individuals in Narrative Worlds', p. 857.
40. Margolin, 'Individuals in Narrative Worlds', pp. 857-58.
41. Margolin, 'Individuals in Narrative Worlds', p. 858.
42. Margolin, 'Character', p. 73; Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*, p. 41.
43. Margolin, 'Character', p. 73; Hochman, *Character in Literature*, p. 132.
44. Hochman, *Character in Literature*, p. 146.

Koen De Temmerman outlines some of the factors that need to be considered in the study of character in ancient literary works.[45] Writing about the ancient Greek and Latin novels in words that easily apply to Esther,[46] De Temmerman warns that ancient novels must not be judged by the standards of the modern novel. He remarks upon the prevalence of fixed character types in the ancient novel. These fixed character types are the object of 'experimentation and development', practices which 'the open format of the novel encourages'.[47] This does not mean that the characters are mere types for 'existing character types are complicated and enriched in function of narrative exigencies'. Many of the 'strands of characterization'[48] that can be seen in ancient Greek and Latin novelistic writings can also be discerned in Esther.

In the ancient novel, ambiguity of character can play an important role in characterization.[49] Characters are not simply good or bad and their ambiguity can lead to developments in the plot. While a dichotomy between good and bad characters does exist in Esther, with Haman being clearly an evil, although somewhat grotesque, individual, nevertheless the king, who is not particularly evil himself, although quite inept, regards him highly, promoting him to the second highest position in the empire and choosing him as a companion for his drinking and eating binges. There is some ambiguity among the other characters and this provides scope for their change and growth. Mordecai takes care of Esther. On the other hand, his persistent churlish behaviour provokes Haman's genocidal desires, causing great danger for all Jews. He, nevertheless, foils the eunuch's rebellion against Ahasuerus early in the piece, and ends up becoming a fine Prime Minister. He is also willing to risk Esther's life in an ambiguous

45. Koen De Temmerman, 'Characterization in the Ancient Novel', in *A Companion to the Ancient Novel* (ed. Edmund P. Cueva and Shannon N. Byrne; Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), pp. 231-43.

46. Adele Berlin, 'The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling', *JBL* 120 (2001), pp. 3-14 (9), points out that Esther and the early Greek novels belong to the same literary world. Marília P. Futre Pinheiro, 'The Genre of the Novel: A Theoretical Approach', in Cueva and Byrne (eds.), *A Companion to the Ancient Novel*, pp. 201-16 (209), sees three fundamental factors in the Greek novels of the early centuries AD: 'a narrative structure, the verisimilitude of the story, and the erotic motif'. All these factors are evident in various degrees in Esther. However, as noted earlier, there are also important ways in which Greek and Hebrew literary works differ.

47. De Temmerman, 'Characterization', p. 231.

48. De Temmerman, 'Characterization', p. 232.

49. De Temmerman, 'Characterization', pp. 233-34.

situation in which he has to balance salvation for the Jews with the huge risk to his *protégée*. Esther herself seems subservient and timorous to begin with and feels too powerless and overwhelmed to attempt intervening for the Jews. She does eventually pluck up the courage and saves the Jews, while triggering off a series of massacres, only to then bring about their end and institute a festival of good acts. Ahasuerus appears as a pompous drunk, unable to make decisions, who appoints, for no clear reason, the wicked Haman as his Prime Minister. Nevertheless, he allows Esther to break the rules of the court and approach him without a prior arrangement. He dispatches Haman, seeks to put an end to the massacres and appoints Mordecai as his new prime minister, replacing Haman. Any assessment of characterization and character development in Esther must identify, and account for, such ambiguities.

The ancient novel is also concerned with social control, which is conceived as both control over self and control over others. The theme of self-control is concerned with characters developing the ability to control their emotions and attain adult status. Control over others may encompass sexual, psychological and rhetorical forms of control.[50] Esther shows some self-control, although largely imposed by others, as, in accordance with Mordecai's order, she refrains from divulging her identity. To attain adult status, she needs to become less subservient to others. Eventually, she shows courage in taking the risk to approach the king. She is at that time able to exercise control over others when, through Mordecai, she requires all Jews to fast. This leads her to her momentous decision, one that completely changes the political landscape, when she divulges her Jewish identity (ch. 7). She then, as the queen, can exercise greater control by ordering and then terminating a series of massacres and establishing a perennial festival. Mordecai repeatedly commits impetuous acts, defying Haman, in spite of the potentially catastrophic consequences of his actions, thereby showing a lack of self-control. He is able, however, when he becomes prime minister, to unify the Jewish people into action and exercise control over others to bring about good results and lasting peace in the land. Ahasuerus, by virtue of his hierarchical position as king of Persia, has control over others but scant wisdom or self-control. He requires advice on trivial matters, tends to accept all the advice that he is given, often only to regret later having done so, allows Haman to bribe him and is prone to attacks of rage. Haman gives an impression of self-control when he does not overtly react to Mordecai's provocations but the reader is aware that this hides a barely controlled internal fury.

50. De Temmerman, 'Characterization', pp. 234-35.

He exercises rhetorical control over others, influencing them through persuasive speech, an extremely prevalent practice in the ancient novel.[51] He thus convinces a king who is easily persuaded, to approve a massacre of Jews throughout the Persian empire but eventually he comes undone because of his lack of self-control over his bitter anger towards Mordecai. The theme of social control is thus a factor in the characterization and development of characters in Esther.

Although scholars long held that there was no significant character development in ancient novels, particularly in the Greek ones, this is now disputed.[52] As will be seen, similar views are widely held about characters in Esther. Techniques of characterization may differ between ancient and modern novelistic writings, making it difficult for modern audiences to perceive character development in ancient writings. Important among these is the use of intertextuality 'in order to associate characters with or dissociate them from intertextual paradigms'. Equally important is the use of intratextuality, creating links between, or contrasting characters within the same work.[53] Instances of these will be discussed in this study of characterization and character development.

Understanding the genre of the narrative is essential in order to understand characterization and character development. Adele Berlin is most helpful in this regard and her analysis and insights are important for the present study. Considering the kind of literature that Esther might be, Berlin[54] concludes that it is a burlesque that vulgarises the complex workings of the Persian empire and of the king's court. As a burlesque, it ascribes immense importance to trivial matters, such as Vashti's refusal (1.12) which is perceived as a threat to the very fabric of the Persian empire. Though the book is a satire of Persian court life, this satire is not the central purpose of the book.[55] Therefore, because the book's purpose

51. De Temmerman, 'Characterization', p. 235.

52. De Temmerman, 'Characterization', p. 235.

53. De Temmerman, 'Characterization', p. 238.

54. Adele Berlin, *Esther* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), pp. xix-xxviii.

55. Rebecca S. Hancock, *Esther and the Politics of Negotiation: Public and Private Spaces and the Figure of the Female Royal Counselor* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), p. 125, concurs that Esther is not just a 'satire on Persia'. Jon Douglas Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), p. 12, on the other hand, considers that Esther may superficially appear to be a farce, but, more deeply, often functions as a satire. Yehuda T. Radday, 'Esther with Humour', in *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible* (ed. Yehuda T. Radday and Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), pp. 295-313 (302),

is to create a comedy, rather than to provide a critique of the Persian empire and its customs, it is better understood as a burlesque rather than as a satire. Esther must thus be seen as a farce taking place within a 'burlesque of the Persian court'.[56] Typical of burlesques and farces are features that abound in Esther, such as 'exaggeration, caricature, ludicrous situations, coincidences, improbabilities and verbal humour'.[57] Thus, when seen as a farce, many of the features of the narrative that may seem problematic can be explained as farcical devices. For example, the ludicrous impasse between Haman and Mordecai, far from being a problem of verisimilitude, is typical of farces, pitting an extremely stubborn character against one with an execrable temper. Typical of farces are also repetitions, reversals and misunderstandings, all of which are produced to create humour. An example of this is the misunderstanding between Ahasuerus and Haman (ch. 6) and the repetition of the phrase 'the man with whom the king is pleased, in his honour' or variations of it. While Haman thinks that this refers to him, the audience knows that it is Mordecai that the king has in mind. The humour of the farce relies here upon what the audience knows that Haman does not. Repetition, reversal and misunderstanding are thus all present in this scene and contribute to its farcical features.

Berlin's analysis of the genre of Esther, then, brings to light important factors that will be considered in the present study of characterization and character development. However, this study will not follow Berlin when she concludes that, because Esther is a farce, there is no subtlety in characterization and the main characters appear to be caricatures, adding that, even if the protagonists develop and lend themselves to be analysed as the

points out that satire of the confused piety of the Jews can also be found in the narrative, together with the satire of the Persian empire.

56. Wills, *Jewish Novel*, p. 98, considers that the disproportionate number of those killed pushes the tale into farce. Anthony J. Tomasino, *Esther* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2016), p. 67, disputes Berlin's description of the narrative as a farce. He argues that much in the book is realistic rather than farcical. However, contra Tomasino, farce and realism are not incompatible and Berlin's assessment seems justified. Farce is one way of narrating reality.

57. Berlin, *Esther*, p. xix. From his analysis of sources of MT Esther, Lawrence M. Wills, *The Jew in the Court of the Foreign King: Ancient Jewish Court Legends* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1990), p. 171, concludes that the role of many expansions in MT Esther is to turn the narrative into a farce, not just a comedy. This would be the effect of incidents that 'reflect a total abandonment of…verisimilitude' such as Haman's plea to Esther in ch. 7, and Ahasuerus's response to it, as well as the consistent disrespect with which the Persian king is portrayed throughout the tale.

story progresses, their characters remain types and are not fully elaborated. Tomasino is closer to the view of the present study when, while conceding that the main characters may appear to be flat and not incurring any changes as the narrative progresses, he maintains that this impression is not sustained by careful reading.[58] Thus, the readers' impression is not that the characters of Mordecai, Esther and even Ahasuerus seem to be either distorted or caricatures, although Ahasuerus seems shallow and lacking development during the narrative. Because he is animated uniquely by his vanity, Haman appears one-dimensional. Esther, however, in Tomasino's view, is the only one of the main actors whose character develops, from ch. 2 to ch. 9, from being an obedient orphan to becoming a royal adviser. Nevertheless, the use of Cultural Theory will show changes occurring in characters other than Esther alone. Elements of exaggeration and caricature are certainly evident in the characterization of Ahasuerus and Haman but these should not conceal the possibility of 'rounder' characterizations. Being characters in a farce, one can suspect that the development of the main characters may take the form of a reversal.

It is not difficult to see, with Berlin, an element of the carnivalesque in Esther. Key targets of the carnivalesque are Ahasuerus, Haman and the excesses of the Persian empire. The result is that aspects of the character of these two individuals are highlighted, such as the king's ineptitude and Haman's narcissism. In Berlin's words, 'carnival permits the release of one's urge for violence and revenge in a way that channels the violence so that it is not actually destructive'.[59] Central themes of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque are ambiguity and the uncrowning of authorities.[60] Examples of this are the ambiguity of the powerful king Ahasuerus who can do little unless advised to do so and the ambiguity of the king's question to Haman in ch. 6, that eventuates in Haman's uncrowning and Mordecai's crowning. The author of Esther tells the tale as a carnival that provokes laughter at extravagant massacres, at excesses of consumption of food and drink and at sexual indecency.[61] A clear example of this can be seen in ch. 7, where all three elements are combined. Having yet again overindulged in food and drink, the king has to deal with a most prickly situation which he has immense difficulty in understanding, involving the queen

58. Tomasino, *Esther*, p. 87.

59. Berlin, *Esther*, p. xxii.

60. Anthony T. Edwards, 'Historicizing the Popular Grotesque: Bakhtin's "Rabelais and His World" and Attic Old Comedy', in *Bakhtin and the Classics* (ed. R. Bracht Branham; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002), pp. 27-55 (28).

61. Edwards, 'Historicizing', p. 33.

and his favourite courtier, Haman. By misunderstanding Haman's actions and incorrectly accusing him of making sexual advances on the queen, the king avoids getting into too much difficulty. The evil and manipulative Haman is not so successful in avoiding difficulties and, after the briefest dialogue between the king and one of his eunuchs, is quickly dispatched, executed on the monumental gallows that he had built with the intention of hanging upon it his sworn enemy, Mordecai. All of this is characteristic of the carnivalesque: grotesque, laughter-producing events. The correct response is laughter, not horror at Haman's summary execution or censure of Esther for failing to intervene.

Tomasino argues that the element of the carnivalesque in Esther can be exaggerated, some features of it seemingly absent or nearly so.[62] However, all elements of the carnivalesque do not need to be present for a narrative to belong to this genre. Furthermore, Esther, containing early examples of the carnivalesque, is more likely to vary from the features of the genre that became established later. However, Aristotelian theory, with the assumption of a list of features that are necessary and sufficient for a work to be deemed carnivalesque,[63] is not the best way to understand the carnivalesque. Carnivalesque elements are present in literature ranging from antiquity to the present day. Through such a span of time, the carnivalesque has evolved and continues to do so. Prototype theory becomes a better tool for understanding it. Prototype theory proposes that category membership be understood on the basis of proximity to a prototype of the category. The prototype is seen as 'the best, most typical, or most central' member of the category. Belonging to a category occurs on the basis of the features that are shared with the prototype.[64] Thus, the sixteenth century works of Rabelais, *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* can be considered prototypes of the carnivalesque, whereas other works, ranging from Esther in antiquity, to Albert Cohen's *Mangeclous*, a twentieth century work, can be judged to be members of the category of works that share with the works of Rabelais and with each other, to a greater or lesser degree, features of the carnivalesque. The author of Esther uses the carnivalesque to highlight changes in power relationships and

62. Anthony J. Tomasino, 'Interpreting Esther from the Inside Out: Hermeneutical Implications of the Chiastic Structure of the Book of Esther', *JBL* 138 (2019), pp. 101-20 (69).

63. John R. Taylor, 'Prototype Theory', in *Semantics—Theories* (ed. Claudia Maienborn, Klaus Heusinger and Paul Portner; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2019), pp. 29-56 (30).

64. Taylor, 'Prototype Theory', pp. 30, 36.

development of character. The carnivalesque is therefore a useful tool for the study of characterization in the narrative.

Fox's important work on character in Esther relies upon modern theories of character[65] and upon the centuries old history and traditions of interpretation of it. The result is a careful and detailed analysis of the main characters in the narrative, an analysis that includes Vashti, the Jews and God. The portrayal of Ahasuerus is one of a lazy king who does not live up to his responsibilities. He is an archetypal Gentile king and therefore a representation of the Gentile state and its power. The presentation of Haman differs from that of the other characters, his thoughts and emotions being revealed, reported and quoted. His characterization is driven by a desire to paint a dark picture of him as a Jew-hater and a narcissist. Mordecai, repeatedly identified as 'the Jew', is a model of a Jewish leader in diaspora. His actions display wisdom and knowledge. Paramount to him is his loyalty to the Jews. There is no evidence of piety in the characterization of Mordecai, who 'is the type of Jewish courtier in diaspora'. Being a type, he remains a 'flat' and unchanging character. Esther is characterized by change, providing surprises for readers as she grows, in contrast with the other characters who remain unchanging. Esther develops 'from passivity to activity to authority',[66] eventually rising to become the queen of Persia and leader of the Jews.

The present study will be in many ways a dialogue with Fox's seminal work, often agreeing with his conclusions, sometimes developing them further, and occasionally using different tools, such as Cultural Theory and Conversation Analysis, to arrive at different conclusions. In the present study, Cultural Theory shows that what stands out about Mordecai is that it is the same bloody-minded individual who, ignoring all dangers, went out of his way to slight Haman and drive him into a murderous rage, works relentlessly in ch. 9 to bring peace to Persia and to the Jews.

Prior to Fox's work, much scholarly writing on character in Esther occurred in the form of brief commentary within works focused on different aspects of the book. Shemarayahu Talmon proposes reading Esther as narrative that illustrates wisdom principles.[67] Characterization occurs along wisdom types, resulting in portrayals that lack depth, since the author is not interested in the characters themselves but in 'the values,

65. Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2nd edn, 2001), pp. 6-9.

66. Fox, *Character and Ideology,* p.196.

67. Shemarayahu Talmon, '"Wisdom" in the Book of Esther', *VT* 13 (1963), pp. 419-55.

virtues and vices which they represent'. This is a useful insight. Nevertheless, wisdom principles can be understood as one tool of characterization that interacts with other factors, creating complexity. Such is the case of Mordecai, the noble Jew, who, very unwisely, imperils all his people unnecessarily.

Carey A. Moore's assessment is that Esther is essentially an etiology of Purim.[68] He maintains that the main emphasis in the narrative is on constructing an engaging plot and narrating action that holds the attention of the reader. Consequently, characterization is superficial and does not encourage readers to identify deeply with any of the characters. In particular, he sees Esther herself as being 'almost two-dimensional, lacking in depth'. However, Moore's judgements need to be tested. It is difficult to see how superficial characters can result in an engaging plot. One of the delights for readers of Esther is to discover how and why characters change and the plot possibilities offered by these changes. Moreover, as an etiology of Purim, Esther seems most improbable, unconvincing and of little interest. This makes it difficult to consider this etiology the essential purpose of the narrative.

Kristin De Troyer builds a case to demonstrate that the MT Esther 'is written from a male perspective. It imposes a norm on women'.[69] Her analysis focuses on ch. 2, where the description of the arrangements for the women creates a scission between a male writer and the world of women. The book's hidden agenda is to transmit a code of behaviour for women, that is presented entirely from a male point-of-view. De Troyer's judgement is based upon a correct perception of Esther's lack of agency in ch. 2. However, her conclusion that Esther's character is the consequence of male-imposed norms and codes of behaviour upon women is not convincing. After all, there is little evidence that Hegai's, Hathach's and Harbona's codes of behaviour, all three being eunuchs, are any less imposed. Furthermore, it is not evident what might be a 'male perspective' at the time and place of writing Esther.

Referring specifically to De Troyer's considerations on gender, and while acknowledging Esther's passivity, Rebecca S. Hancock[70] rejects gendered characterizations of Esther that rely on distinctions between

68. Carey A. Moore, *Esther: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), pp. liii-liv.

69. Kristin 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 to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (ed. Athalya Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 47-70.

70. Hancock, *Esther*, pp. 1-2, 79-80.

a public and a private world. Some interpreters see Esther as a tool of a patriarchal author who uses her to 'reinforce a particular ideology of gender and power' because of her conforming attitudes. However, many of the behaviours seen in women that are used as evidence of their patriarchal oppression can also be observed in men. On the other hand, Esther is also seen as an exceptional, politically active woman who defies the gender stereotypes of her time. However, what is claimed to be exceptional for Esther as a woman is also exceptional for men. Hence, Hancock's view is that Esther's characterization in the narrative is not so much a representation of women in a patriarchal world but a representation of Jews in the diaspora. Esther is dynamic and her character evolves throughout the story, from being passive to being active, whereas the other characters are static. Hancock's call for a more sophisticated approach to understanding the characterization of women in the Bible is persuasively argued.

Frederic W. Bush believes that the main interest of the author is the situation of Jewish life in the diaspora, rather than the characters themselves.[71] Furthermore, Bush argues that the book is more concerned with revealing a situation, not with developing it. Thus, the effect of the characterization of Ahasuerus is a satire of the Persian empire and its court as dangerous places for Jews. Haman is 'portrayed as irrational evil personified', not only because of his characterization as 'the enemy of the Jews' but also through the reports of his inner thoughts, dominated by his exorbitant pride. Mordecai is the Jew *par excellence*, characterized essentially by his unabating commitment to his people. Esther stands out because among the four main characters she is the only one who changes or develops. Nevertheless, although a more 'round' character than the others, Esther is still 'an ideal, a model', who delivers the Jews from the threat of Haman's decree. Bush's work on Esther is a most comprehensive study. However, Berlin is convincing when she argues that, although there is in Esther a satire of the Persian empire, this is not the main thrust of the plot. In addition, various labels are used in the narrative as tools for characterization, such as 'Hadassah, that is Esther' (2.7), who eventually becomes 'Queen Esther' (2.22). These labels do change, thus pointing to character changes in response to developing situations.

Linda M. Day's first of two works is a comparative study of the portrayal of Esther in three early versions of the book, the MT, the LXX

71. Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (Word Biblical Commentary; Nashville, TN: Nelson, 1996), pp. 306-309.

and the A text.[72] This was followed ten years later by a commentary on the book. In her first work, Day comments that the narrative is artfully written by a subtle and skilful author. The author has created characters who, although 'simple and transparent', are able to hold the interest of readers. Esther stands as the book's main character, the only one who changes significantly during the narrative. Day has much to say about the power that Esther holds in the kingdom of Persia, going as far as to assess that 'authority and rule are shared by the king and queen'. This seems a step too far, although Esther's status as queen is important in her characterization. The relationship between Esther and Ahasuerus changes as the narrative proceeds, as does her obedience to Mordecai. Day's later study adds that Esther 'is the only character who approaches a rounded personality'.[73] In spite of this, Day's is a more positive assessment of characterization in Esther and of the artistry of the author.

André LaCocque's is an archetypal reading. The purpose of the characters is to fulfil their archetypal roles.[74] The result is that, taken individually, the characters in Esther show a lack of depth.[75] LaCocque thus agrees with Moore concerning the superficial nature of all characters, assessing that little more is known at the end of the narrative about the personalities of the main characters than was known at the beginning. Esther's and Mordecai's victory is one of good defeating evil. Amalek stands for the enduring evil in the world, that opposes Israel wherever it happens to be. According to LaCocque, Haman could have been cast as a member of any nation antagonistic to Israel at any particular moment and this would be made clear by his appellation 'the enemy of the Jews'. He is typical of the characters in the book, since 'as an individual he does not evolve in the story'. Haman does not appear as an individual but as a representative of Amalek, which itself stands for the enemies of Israel. LaCocque is right to point out that different characters can represent different archetypes. This study, however, shows that these archetypes do not amount to the sum total of characterization in Esther. LaCoque's identification of some of the ideological purposes of the book are important but not limiting and

72. Linda M. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 11-15, surveys other interpreters' views of the characterization of Esther herself and comments that a closer look at the two Greek texts is of benefit in a study of Esther's character.

73. Linda M. Day, *Esther* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005), p. 6.

74. André LaCocque, 'Haman in the Book of Esther', *HAR* 2 (1987), pp. 207-22 (217).

75. André LaCocque, *Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2008), p. 58.

a careful reading of Esther shows character development occurring until the end of ch. 9, with new aspects of Ahasuerus's, Esther's and Mordecai's characters becoming apparent.

Cultural Theory

Cultural Theory and its typology will be used in the present study to link culture and behaviour and to analyse the interplay of the worldviews of the different characters. Is it justified, in a study of characterization, to seek to understand the worldviews of characters in Esther, the cultural theory that fashions their character and guides their will, their mind, their understanding of the world, of other human beings and of human society? In Hebrew thought, the heart is 'a major anthropological term' that can be used in reference to individuals but also to groups of people.[76] The heart overlaps with the more modern concept of worldview and performs many of the same functions, encompassing 'all dimensions of human existence'.[77] The heart was thought of as the centre that rules personality, so much so that in Hebrew thought 'it is the heart (the core) which makes and identifies the person'.[78] The heart stands for the whole human being and 'functions as the driving force behind the voluntative endeavours of the individual',[79] ruling his emotions and his inner life as well as his intellect, his will and his purposes.[80] It is thus to the concept of the heart that king Ahasuerus turns to seek to discern the motivations behind the actions of the enemy whom Esther accuses:

Est. 7.5	מִי הוּא זֶה וְאַי־זֶה הוּא אֲשֶׁר־מְלָאוֹ לִבּוֹ לַעֲשׂוֹת כֵּן	Who is he and where, then, is he that he has filled his heart to act thus?[81]

LaCocque points out that the cause for the clash between Haman and Mordecai resides in their incompatible worldviews. In a previous incident, when Mordecai sought to sway the reluctant queen to appear before

76. *TDOT*, p. 640.

77. *TDOT*, p. 639.

78. Larry L. Walker, 'Heart', in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. D.N. Freedman, A.C. Myers and A.B. Beck; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), p. 563.

79. *TDOT*, p. 423.

80. Douglas R. Edwards, 'Heart', in *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (ed. P.J. Achtemeier; London: Harper & Row, 1985), p. 377; Walker, 'Heart', p. 563; B.O. Banwell, 'Heart', in *The IVP New Bible Dictionary* (ed. J.D. Douglas; Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1962), pp. 509-10 (509).

81. For a discussion of this text and its translation, see ch. 7.