

For Such a Time as This

The Significance of the Biblical Book of *Esther* and Reformed Theology for Contemporary Culture, as Exemplified by *Esther's* Intertextual Relations with the Historical Novels of *'t Hooge Nest* (2022) and *Queen Esther* (2025)

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Chapter 1 Setting the scene

1.1 Introduction

During a series of classes on Old Testament (OT) research since the sixteenth century, I was rather pleased to discover that since the latter part of the twentieth century OT research has opened up to a variety of interdisciplinary approaches, which Hardy and Carroll Rodas call 'interpretive approaches', including literary approaches.[1] This provides me with the opportunity to combine my knowledge of my earlier studies in English Language & Literature and Theoretical Linguistics (resulting in a PhD in 1998) with my current OT research for my Master's degree in Theology.

When I was preparing two sermons on the biblical story of Esther in the autumn of 2025, I was intrigued by the fact that not only is there a canonical version based on the Hebrew Bible (HB) and commonly used in the Protestant Churches and Reformed Traditions, but also a deuterocanonical version based on the Greek Septuagint (LXX) and commonly used in the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. Apparently, already in ancient times, the book of Esther inspired others to tell related stories. This aroused my interest in the later reception of the book of Esther.

As I love reading books in my spare time, I recently read the historical novels of *'t Hooge Nest* (non-fictional)[2] and *Queen Esther* (fictional).[3] Both books reminded me of the biblical story of *Esther*. Reading these books made me curious to find out in what ways each book

[1] H. H. Hardy II and M. Daniel Carroll Rodas, *The State Of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research* (Baker Academic, 2024).

[2] Roxane van Iperen, *'t Hooge Nest*, 2nd ed. (Lebowski Publishers, 2022 [2018]); For the translation of various quotes I used Roxane Van Iperen, translated by Joni Zwart, *The Sisters of Auschwitz, The True Story of Two Jewish Sisters' Resistance in the Heart of Nazi Territory* (Seven Dials, 2019).

[3] John Irving, *Queen Esther* (Scribner, 2025).

can be related to the biblical book of *Esther* and to what extent such a comparison can contribute to the study of how the biblical story of *Esther* is relevant for our present day lives and Reformed Theology.

To my knowledge no research has yet been conducted into the relationship between the biblical book of *Esther* (BE) and the two twenty-first century novels of *'t Hooge Nest* (HN) and *Queen Esther* (QE). Therefore, this investigation focuses on the intertextual relationships between the BE and the two books of HN and QE. In doing so, I want to find out how HN and QE promote the relevance of BE for our own age and culture and what this means for Reformed Theology today. This results in the following main research question: What does the analysis of intertextual relationships between the BE on the one hand and HN and QE on the other contribute to the significance of a Reformed reading of BE for contemporary culture?

1.2 Research questions and definitions

1.2.1 Research questions

As this main research question is rather complex, it needs to be parsed into smaller sub-questions, so that it can be operationalized for detailed analysis. Below six sub-questions have been formulated.

1. What is the traditional twentieth century Reformed theological analysis of BE and how does it relate to other Christian and Jewish analyses?
2. What is intertextuality theory and how does this relate to inner-biblical exegesis?
3. Which intertextual methodology is best for the comparative analyses of BE on the one hand and HN and QE on the other?
4. What literary criteria are key to the textual analysis of BE and how do these compare to HN and QE?

5. What does the intertextual comparison of BE on the one hand and HN and QE on the other contribute to the contemporary theological significance of BE?
6. How can Reformed Theology (RT) fruitfully explain and apply the BE in times like ours?

1.2.2. Definitions of terms

In order to find answers to these questions it is important to define the key terms used in the main research question. By 'intertextual relationship' I mean the relationship between texts based on similarities and dissimilarities in the use of words, phrases, structure, plots, themes, imagery, and the like, as recognised by the reader in the texts under analysis, including authorial intent. This follows the definition by Gérard Genette 'as a relationship of copresence between two texts or among several texts',[4] such as quotes or allusions. Although strict application of intertextuality theory disregards authorial intent,[5] I follow Nicholas Woltertorff who argues that the Bible is at least an instrument in Divine discourse, therefore has authorial intent.[6] Similarly, I assume any author has certain intentions with their work that they want to convey to their readership.

By 'Reformed Theology' I mean the theological view that everything in creation falls under Christ's sovereignty[7] and that all of creation needs to be redeemed through Christ's

[4] Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, vol. 8, Stages (University of Nebraska Press, 1997), translated by Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky, 1.

[5] Manfred Pfister, 'Konzepte der Intertextualität', in *Intertextualität: Formen, Funktionen, anglistische Fallstudien*, ed. Ulrich Broich and Manfred Pfister (De Gruyter, 1985), https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111712420.1, 7. Here Pfister follows J. Kristeva, *Sémeiotiké: Recherches pour une sémanalyse* (Paris,1969), S. 143-173.

[6] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 184.

[7] Abraham Kuyper, 'Souvereiniteit in Eigen Kring', J.H. Kruyt, 1880, 35.

sacrifice on the cross from the consequences of the fall and human sin.[8] A valuable term is *semper reformanda* which means that reformation is continual through the times.[9]

By 'theological significance' I understand the consequences for Reformed Theology in relating BE to our daily lives in the twenty-first century. BE has its own normative meaning within the biblical canon, but a biblical story needs to be interpreted over and over again for an ever new audience. The speech acts of the ultimate author of the Bible, i.e. God, need to be 'count-generated',[10] i.e. made meaningful and relevant with ever new contexts as input. Just as this happens with other literature, and all other acts of communication, because the context of the receiver partly defines the meaning a receiver attaches to the communicated message. Thus the Reformed Theology (RT) worldview can provide meaning even in seemingly secular contexts. For an introductory discussion of RT and the interpretation of BE, see chapter 2.

1.3 Relevance of the research

1.3.1 Academic relevance

Biblical Theology benefits from research in other academic disciplines, such as literary studies and linguistics. These disciplines contribute to constructing an interdisciplinary methodological approach to the analysis of the OT text of BE to be used for comparing this biblical book to the twenty-first century novels of HN and QE in order to prove the relevance of the Reformed Theological view on OT exegesis for contemporary culture. This research fills a research gap with respect to the topic of intertextuality applied to the BE on

[8] Herman Bavinck, *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek*, 2nd edition, vol. 3 (J.H. Kok, 1910).

[9] Brian D. McLaren, *A Generous Orthodoxy* (Zondervan, 2004), 189-190.

[10] Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse,* 183.

the one hand and the contemporary novels HN and QE on the other. For an interdisciplinary discussion of intertextuality see chapter 3.

1.3.2 Sociocultural relevance

A comparison of the world views that speak from each of the books from the angle of intertextual relations is meant to enrich the understanding of the BE in the context of Reformed Theology (RT). For instance, a key topic of RT, salvation history, can contribute to the discourse on the role of the Jewish people and especially the role of Jesus Christ in world history, and on themes like antisemitism, assimilation, diversity, and the search for individual and collective identity. These themes are central to the BE as well as to HN and QE, as is explored in chapters 4-6.

1.3.3 Structure of the thesis

The structure of the present thesis is related to the research questions above. Chapter 2 discusses the traditional RT analysis of the BE in relation to other, more literary approaches. Chapter 3 looks into intertextuality theory from a communicative perspective and adopts this as the methodology for the further chapters. Chapter 4 applies the literary methodological criteria to the BE in order to prepare for a comparison with the two twenty-first century novels in the two subsequent chapters. Chapter 5 discusses the intertextuality relations of BE and HN and chapter 6 does the same for BE and QE. And finally Chapter 7 discusses the relevance of RT for the intertextual readings of the two twenty-first century novels and the significance of RT for understanding the BE in our contemporary times.

Chapter 2 Reformed interpretation of *Esther*

2.1 Introduction

Reformed Theology (RT) has two main dimensions on which it capitalizes in its doctrine. Firstly, this is the belief that God as Creator of heaven and earth is also the sustainer of all that is.[11] Secondly, God is the ultimate author of the Bible, which is the true story in which He reveals himself in his association with people.[12] Moreover, the Bible relates an ongoing story of salvation history since the fall as described in Genesis 3. The Old Testament (OT) explains that God elected Abraham through whom all the peoples of the earth would be blessed (Gen 12:3). From his lineage, Israel is God's chosen people (Exod 19:4-6). God promised that the Messiah, the Saviour, was to be generated from the offspring of King David (1 Sam 7:12). All through the OT God preserves a rest of Israel, so that this promise can be fulfilled. RT also believes that the New Testament (NT) witnesses to the fact that Jesus Christ is the fulfilment of that promise for the salvation of the entire world and that this message should be made known to all peoples. To that end, all scripture is educational and inspires people to be transformed into children of God.[13] In this sense, also the Book of Esther (BE) has that transformative power.

The Practical Theology branch of Reformed Theology adopts the two doctrinal statements above and capitalizes on transforming practice which is 'embodied in concrete practices in communal life'[14] and comes about through reflection on theological authority and

[11] Marinus de Jong, *Wij belijden: Belijdenissen van de Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerken* (Vuurbaak, 2025), 27. See article 2 of the Belgic Confession (NGB).

[12] De Jong, *Wij belijden: Belijdenissen van de Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerken,* 28-32. See articles 3-9 of the NGB.

[13] Hans Burger, *Jesus Christ, Hermeneutics, and Scripture, from Epistemology to Soteriology* (Cascade Books, 2024), 272.

[14] Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church* (Baker, 2017), 84.

normativity over against contemporary culture and 'in response to cultural change'.[15] Thus, it may be expected that the BE as part of the Scriptures continues to remain relevant and may also serve as an underlying script for later texts.

RT has traditionally assumed the BE to be historical, in the sense that it is historically reliable, as there is no extra biblical proof for every detail. In this RT tradition, the BE shows God's faithfulness by his hidden providence, as he has control over the events and guides Mordecai and Esther into their leading roles. The literary value of BE has long been acknowledged and has received increasingly more emphasis in Reformed circles. This chapter focuses on the Reformed Christian view on BE to provide a basis for the comparative discussion about its relevance for contemporary times in chapters 5 and 6.

The main source text of Esther for this study is the canonical Protestant version based on the Hebrew Bible (HB) and the Masoretic Text (MT). This chapter makes use of the commentaries by Reformed theologians Gerhard Aalders and Frans van Deursen,[16] complemented by material from other directions, such as Adele Berlin, Jopie Siebert-Hommes, Michael Fox, and Isaac Kalimi.[17]

2.2 Historicity and literary value

Reformed theologian and biblical commentator Gerhard Charles Aalders regards the canonical story of BE as fully historically reliable and places it during the reign of Xerxes

[15] Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church,* 141.

[16] Gerhard Charles Aalders, *Het boek Esther*, Korte Verklaring der Heilige Schrift (Kok, 1947), https://archive.org/details/hetboekesther0000aald/mode/1up; Frans Van Deursen, *Ruth-Klaagliederen-Esther*, vols. 1-O, De Voorzeide Leer - De Heilige Schrift (Buijten en Schipperheijn, 1991).

[17] Adele Berlin, 'The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling', *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, nr. 1 (2001): 3-14; Jopie C. Siebert-Hommes, *Ester*, Verklaring van de Hebreeuwse Bijbel (Callenbach, 1997); Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, second edition (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001); Isaac Kalimi, *The Book of Esther Between Judaism and Christianity: The Biblical Story, Self-identification, and Antisemitic Interpretation* (Cambridge (UK): Cambridge University Press, 2023).

who reigned from 485-465 BCE.[18] He acknowledges that others disagree in the sense that they view BE at least as partly fictional, but he deems the archaeological findings sufficient to maintain a fully historical interpretation, because no extra-biblical sources have been found about the exact period of time in which Esther would have been queen.[19]

Frans van Deursen follows in his footsteps and provides an overview of the historical precedence of the biblical books in the direct context of Esther, aligning them with the successive kings of Persia.[20] He argues, based on both inner-biblical references and extra-biblical information from the historian Herodotus, that the prophets Haggai and Zechariah lived under Darius I, a generation before Esther. The priest Ezra, the prophet Malachi, and the leader Nehemiah were part of a later generation under the rule of Arthaxerxes. The name for the Persian king at the time of Esther was Xshayarsha, in Greek Xerxes, and in Hebrew Ahasuerus.

Geert W. Lorein and Wolter H. Rose argue on the basis of author intention emphasised by formulations typical for historical texts that BE is a reliable story based on historical facts.[21]

Concerning the historicity of the book, however, Adele Berlin refers to Lewis Bayles Paton as early as 1908, and others over that century, who went to great lengths to prove that the book of Esther is a fictional story.[22] Michael V. Fox is convinced of the arguments against historicity of the BE outweighing the arguments for historicity, for the latter are only circumstantial and could apply to any historical novel.[23] Yet, Fox also admits that 'every

[18] Gerhard Charles Aalders, *Het boek Esther*, Korte Verklaring der Heilige Schrift (Kok, 1947), 5-7.
[19] Aalders, *Het boek Esther*, 10-11.
[20] Frans van Deursen, *Ruth-Klaagliederen-Esther*, Vol. 1-O, De Voorzeide Leer - De Heilige Schrift (Buijten en Schipperheijn, 1991), 207-209.
[21] Geert Wouter Lorein and Wolter Hendrik Rose, *Geschriften over de Perzische tijd: Daniël, Ezra-Nehemia, Esther, Haggai, Zacharia, Maleachi*, De Brug, XI (Groen, 2010), 194-195.
[22] Berlin, 'The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling'.
[23] Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 131-139.

year at Purim, when I hear the Scroll read in the synagogue, I know that it is true, whatever the historical accuracy of its details.[24] He concludes that '[a]s critical readers, viewing the text as an object from a deliberate distance, we can recognize the book as fiction, while as immediate readers, giving ourselves over to the book's own terms, we can respond to its realities [..] as if they were our own'.[25] Similarly, the Jewish commentator Isaac Kalimi classifies the story as non-historical, yet reliable, because 'it combines historical and nonhistorical elements in a way that can best be described as a novelistic history'.[26] Timothy Beal argues that there is a history-likeness to the story of BE which blends with literary embellishments[27]. Beate Ego says that the Esther story does fit with the period of the reign of Xerxes I, but there are no records of revolts during that time, although there was one under Artaxerxes III.[28]

Furthermore, it seems more likely that certain historical events gave rise to the establishment of the Purim festival,[29] than that there would be some festival that needed a fictitious motivation, reasoning backwards in history. Following David Clines,[30] Sidney White Crawford argues that Purim was originally a secular, probably Persian feast and possibly a New Year festival.[31] But the adoption by the Jewish people must be based on

[24] Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 11.

[25] Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther,* 138.

[26] Isaac Kalimi, *The Book of Esther Between Judaism and Christianity*, 93.

[27] Timothy K. Beal, 'Esther', in *Berit Olam Ruth Esther*, Studies in Hebrew and Narrative Poetry, ed. David W. Cotter (The Liturgical Press, 1999), xiv-xvii.

[28] Beate Ego, *Ester*, Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament, band XXI (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 56-58.

[29] See also Bush, Frederic, *Ruth/Esther*, vol. 9, World Biblical Commentary (Word Books Publishers, 1996), 329-231.

[30] David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, JSOT Supplement Series 30 (JSOT Press, 1984).

[31] Sidnie White Crawford, 'The Book of Esther', in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume III (Abingdon Press, 1999), 860.

some specific event that needed to be remembered. It is very well possible that minority clashes, such as these between Jews and Haman-followers did happen, even motivated by genocidal intention and involving people in senior government positions.[32] This brief discussion on historicity shows that the short story of Esther and Mordechai is at least based on historical possibilities, but the added value is its literary quality, which is discussed in more detail in chapter 4.

2.3 Authorship

Regarding the authorship of BE, Aalders assumes one anonymous author, different from Mordecai, arguing that if he were the author Esth 9:20-32 would have to be a later addition. Clines, however, argues extensively that there is a clear stylistic break between the harmonious and peaceful chapters up to and including chapter 8 and the violence occurring in chapter 9:1-19, suggesting that chapters 9 and 10 are a later addition by a different author or scribe.[33] However, this is not undisputed. Tsaurayi Mapfeka argues convincingly that such violent events as in chapter 9 are very well imaginable, considering the textual relationship of diaspora and violence, via the Hebrew זעוה (*za'avah)* meaning 'horror', that the Septuagint translates as 'diaspora' in Deut 28:25.[34] He further develops his argument by analogy with the experiences of global migration since the mid twentieth century which also show that it is more often than not accompanied by serious violence. He concludes that it is an appropriate continuation of the story, even if the style seems different. Van Deursen also assumes one anonymous author, although he does not

[32] See Alexiana Fry, 'The Myth of Multiculturalism in MT Esther: Comparing Western and Persian Hegemonic Tolerance', *Religions* 16, nr. 746 (2025): 1-20, https://doi.org/%2010.3390/rel16060746. On the issue of a seemingly tolerant and peaceful Persian Empire.

[33] David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, 31-40.

[34] Tsaurayi K. Mapfeka, 'Esther 9 through the Lens of Diaspora: the Exegetical and Ethical Dilemmas of the Massacres in Susa and Beyond', in *Violence in the Hebrew Bible, Between Text and Reception,* ed. Jaques van Ruiten and Koert van Bekkum (Brill, 2020), 405-410.

explicitly argue for this. However, he occasionally refers to the one author in phrases like 'Here the author pauses for a brief intermezzo.' and 'Now the author tells us some more.'[35] Other scholars prefer the term 'narrator' for the source of commentary inside the biblical history/story.

2.4 Dating

As for the dating of the story of BE, Aalders rejects a later dating than the reign of Xerxes I of BE, partly because of Esth 2:5-6, arguing that the phrase 'who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captives carried away with Jeconiah, king of Judah' has been wrongly applied to Mordecai himself, whereas it should have been applied to his ancestor Kish.[36] Van Deursen works this out in more detail, as mentioned above. For a more detailed timeline of the events withing the BE, see Geert W. Lorein and Wolter H. Rose.[37]

However, another Dutch commentator, Jopie Siebert-Hommes, indicates that there are a lot of problems with dating the story of Esther before the second century BCE. One of these is that the book is not mentioned in the survey of Jewish history in the *Wisdom of Jesus Son of Sirach*, written around 190 BCE.[38] This argument is shared by Paul Re'emi,[39] but he adds that it must have been written before 2 Maccabees, because the Feast of Purim and 'the day of Mordecai' are referred to in this book. He also adds that the names of Vashti and Esther are not found in other record, but only the name Hutaossa/Atossa. Siebert-Hommes agrees with this and claims it would be more likely that BE was written in the Hellenistic era around 150 BCE during the same period when Antiochus IV and the

[35] Van Deursen, *Ruth-Klaagliederen-Esther*, Vol. 1-O, 243 and 347.

[36] Aalders, *Het boek Esther,* 12.

[37] Lorein and Rose, *Geschriften over de Perzische tijd*, 193-194.

[38] Jopie C. Siebert-Hommes, *Ester*, 19-20.

[39] Richard J. Coggins and S. Paul Re'emi, *Israel Among the Nations, A Commentary on the books of Nahum, Obediah, Esther*, International Theological Commentary (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 105-108.

Maccabees lived, because then there were many armed conflicts and restricting measures taken against the Jews. The literary value can be traced in the overall structure, the motives of reversal, honouring and feasting.[40] Although the assumption that BE is fictional cannot be excluded, these arguments are rather weak, for absence of reference to something at a certain time does not prove it did not exist. And literariness of a text is no proof either that the events described in the text are not historical, for history can be and has been related in any literary format, for instance the poetic Dutch national anthem *Wilhelmus* and the historical novel *'t Hooge Nest*. The latter is to be discussed in chapter 5.

John Screnock and Robert Holmstedt do not venture an opinion on the historical facts. Instead, they focus on linguistic data and conclude that the story shares features with both early and later Hebrew dialects, with Persian and Aramaic loanwords to create a realistic setting. [41] This leaves open the possibility for a relatively early first version of the story that may have undergone redactions over time up until the Second Temple Period.

Later research has indeed made it more likely again that Esther was produced in the Persian era and still shares some literary features by early Greek authors, because the two cultures influenced each other even as early as the fifth century BCE.[42] This supports the earlier view of the Reformed theologians that BE is reliable history in beautiful literary form.

2.5 Secularism and God's hidden presence

Aalders furthermore argues against the idea that BE is an entirely secular story without any reference to religion, God, or morality.[43] He denies that the absence of God's name is

[40] Siebert-Hommes, *Ester,* 8-18.

[41] John Screnock and Robert D. Holmstedt, *Esther, a Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Baylor University Press, 2015), 32.

[42] Anton M. Holzer, 'Esther, Empire and the Emergence of Jewish Ethnicity', *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 56 (2025): 371-95, 387; Berlin, 'The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling', 10.

[43] Aalders, *Het boek Esther, 17-21.*

a valid argument for maintaining this view, because there are several allusions in the story, such as Esth 4:14 about 'relief and deliverance [..] from another place', where God can be assumed to be actively present behind the scenes. Van Deursen actually fills these allusions with references to various verses from Proverbs and his repeatedly faithful commentary in words like these: 'But let's pay particular attention to the hand of God in these events, for "Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand" (Prov. 19:21 ESV).'[44] He applies this among other things to the fall of Queen Vashti (Esth 1:19) and the feelings of King Ahasuerus for Esther (2:17).[45] He also argues that the motivation for the actions of Mordecai and Esther are based on their religious identity as children of the people of Israel who are faithful to Yahweh's commands and siding with Him in the battle against his enemies. This includes their efforts to oppose and destroy Haman, his law and his followers, because they went in the footsteps of Amalek, the archenemy of God and his people since Exod 17, Deut 25, and 1 Sam 15.[46] The fact that they did not plunder their enemies' possessions proves their moral character.

According to Fox many modern scholars 'assert that the book is "secular", meaning that God plays no role in the events'.[47] In contrast, he notes that 'the great majority of commentators consider the book "religious", meaning that it teaches, or at least assumes, that God is active in the events it narrates'.[48] Aalders and Van Deursen are examples of the latter. Fox mentions four types of evidence, i.e. allusions, coincidences, reversals, and certain themes, that contribute to a religious meaning.

[44] Van Deursen, *Ruth-Klaagliederen-Esther*, Vol. 1-O, 232.
[45] Van Deursen, *Ruth-Klaagliederen-Esther*, Vol. 1-O, 228.
[46] Van Deursen, *Ruth-Klaagliederen-Esther*, Vol. 1-O, 329.
[47] Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther,* 235.
[48] Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther,* 237.

This is in line with Aalders who sees in the many coincidences in the story 'a telling witness of protecting care that God provides for His chosen people in the midst of the danger of total destruction'.[49] Van Deursen considers among other events, that the sleepless night of King Ahasuerus is used by God, although his name is not mentioned, to save Mordecai's life and by extension prevent the genocide of the Jewish people, so that salvation history is secured. He says 'The book of Esther is *the* exercise book of God's providence'.[50] Similarly, from a Jewish point of view, Kalimi notes that the 'fear of complete annihilation' is a motive that runs through the entire Hebrew Bible (HB) and to which BE is a response, in that the central theological theme is 'God will save his people at any time and place, directly and indirectly, by extraordinary miracles or by acting "behind the story" [..] where the particulars of his acts are hidden and invisible'.[51] Van Deursen also emphasizes that the reference to fasting in the Jewish context always also means weeping and praying, the latter of which is of course a religious activity.[52]

2.6 Nationalism and canonical interpretation

Along with the idea that BE is a secular book of fiction, came the accusations of BE inciting Jewish nationalism and feelings of revenge, which was even expressed by Luther in his *Tischreden*: 'Ich bin dem Buch [= 2.Makkabäer] und Esther so feind, das ich wollte, sie wären gar nicht vorhanden; denn die judenzen zu sehr, und haben viel heidnische Unart'[53]

[49] Aalders, *Het boek Esther, 18*.

[50] Van Deursen, *Ruth-Klaagliederen-Esther*, Vol. 1-O, 292.

[51] Kalimi, *The Book of Esther Between Judaism and Christianity*, 66-72.

[52] van Deursen, *Ruth-Klaagliederen-Esther*, Vol. 1-O, 344.

[53] Martin D. Luther, *Tischreden*, vol. 1, D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimarer Ausgabe, WA, 1967).

('I'm so hostile to this book [i.e. 2 Maccabees] and Esther, that I wish they did not exist at all, for they show too much Jewishness and contain a lot of pagan impropriety').[54]

Aalders analyses the joy of the Jews and their defensive actions as normal responses to suppression, comparing it to the joy of the Dutch people at their liberation of Nazi suppression, and their welcoming of the allied forces and their military actions defeating the enemies.[55] Van Deursen supports this view and indicates all Jewish violence was only directed towards their enemies, not other people, stayed within the limits of the law issued in the name of Ahasuerus, and was only used in self-defence and not for personal gain, while the number of casualties was relatively restricted considering the spread of the Jews over the entire then-known world.[56]

Aalders' and Van Deursen's view of the BE are clear examples of the Reformed tradition, for they follow articles 4, 5, and 13 of the Belgic Confession (NGB)[57] and Sunday 10 of the Heidelberger Catechism (HC)[58] in accepting the entire Biblical Canon including the BE as continual revelation of God's salvation in Christ, while also reading BE through a neo-Calvinist, redemptive-historical lens. The history of Esther proclaims the government and providence of God preventing an atrocious crime of genocide against an entire people that were destined to bring forth the Christ.[59]

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[54] Kalimi, *The Book of Esther Between Judaism and Christianity*, 256; Cf. Aalders, *Het boek Esther*, 20; Ds. D. Grutter, *Ester, een boek vol van de naam van God*, Bijbel en Kerk (Vuurbaak, 2015), 9,13.

[55] Aalders, *Het boek Esther*, 21.

[56] Van Deursen, *Ruth-Klaagliederen-Esther*, Vol. 1-O, 330-333.

[57] De Jong, *Wij belijden: Belijdenissen van de Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerken,* 28-29.

[58] De Jong, *Wij belijden: Belijdenissen van de Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerken,* 74-75.

[59] Aalders, *Het boek Esther,* 23; Grutter, *Ester, een boek vol van de naam van God,* 16.

2.7 Conclusion

From the above discussion the conclusion can be drawn that the RT assumption that the book of Esther goes back to historical memories is not contradictory to its literary characteristics. The fact that BE is part of the larger canon of the HB suggests at least that the events related in the book are significant for the history of the Jewish people, as well as for Christians who have adopted the HB as part of their Holy Scriptures. As the historicity remains unresolved, the literary aspects of BE become all the more important for its interpretation in its own context and in the context of the reader. These aspects have been shown to emphasize the overall theme of God's providence in salvation history, as is worked out in more detail in Chapter 4.

These literary features also help clarify the relevance for BE for our own times when we apply an intertextual comparison of BE with the two contemporary novels of HN and QE (chapter 5 and 6, respectively). Before going into that topic, chapter 3 first discusses the theory of intertextuality, including inner-biblical exegesis, within literary and linguistic theory.

Chapter 3 Literature discussion of intertextuality

3.1 Introduction

The present research has its place at the interdisciplinary intersection of biblical theological, literary, and linguistic theories. This chapter describes its theoretical background and accordingly, the adopted methodology.

3.2 Inner-biblical exegesis, allusion, and intertextuality

It has long been common practice for biblical scholars to compare texts from the Bible with each other, as exemplified in the discussion of Aalders, Van Deursen, and Siebert-Hommes in chapter 2 above. Their analyses are to a large part based on interconnections found at structural level, word level, with rhetorical and other narrative techniques. Such comparisons help interpreting and comparing the texts under analysis. If this concerns 'comparing Scripture with Scripture' beyond the boundaries of a single biblical book yet within the canon, it is generally referred to as 'inner-biblical exegesis'.[60]

Other terms used to indicate the interconnectedness between passages in the canon are 'inner-biblical allusion' for connections that are not literal echoes or citations, or 'inner-biblical intertextuality', but 'this assumes that biblical intertextuality is always synchronic, a conclusion that is challenged in most circles today'.[61] John Barton explains that intertextuality comes in two versions: a 'soft' version that is 'a *method* or an *approach* to the *interpretations* of texts' and a 'hard' version that is a *theory* rooted in post-structuralism and that considers *all* texts to be interrelated, and focuses purely on the text, disregarding

[60] Katherine J. Dell, 'Inner-Biblical Exegesis', in *The State of Old Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research* (Baker Academic, 2024), 357.

[61] Dell, 'Inner-Biblical Exegesis', 366.

authorial intent.[62] It is the soft version that is used for interpretation, and it also has two variants, a diachronic and a synchronic one. Diachronic intertextuality assumes conscious usage of earlier texts and takes into account the historical context. Synchronic intertextuality does not consider the history of texts, but compares them horizontally for influence of meaning. Thus, although a biblical text is older, it can be read, compared, and interpreted without taking its historical setting into account.

3.3 Origins of intertextuality

The literary term 'intertextuality' was first used by Julia Kristeva, when she wrote an essay entitled '*Bakhtin, le mot, le dialogue et le roman*'.[63] She commented on Mikhail Bakhtin who indicated that certain specific texts make use of specific other texts like pieces of a mosaic. However, Kristeva extended this idea to claiming that a text is not only a collection of written words, but rather a 'network of traces', consisting of all kinds of media expressions and even of any object, event, or person.[64] According to Manfred Pfister this makes Bakhtin's theory *intra*textual, as opposed to Kristeva's *inter*textual theory (my italics).[65]

Both terms, however, might lead to interpretational complications. Firstly, because the term 'intratextual' can, strictly speaking, also refer to the relations within one single text. Thus the term becomes ambiguous between a dialogue within one text or between two or more texts. Secondly, the term 'intertextual' literally suggests relations between two or more texts, where 'text' according to Cambridge Dictionary Online is 'the written words in

[62] John Barton, 'Déjà lu: Intertextuality. Method or Theory?', in *Reading Job Intertextually,* ed. Katherine Dell and Will Kynes, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 574 (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2013), 7-9.

[63] Pfister, 'Konzepte der Intertextualität'.

[64] Russel L. Meek, 'Intertextuality, Inner-Biblical Exegesis, and Inner-Biblical Allusion: The Ethics of a Methodology', *Biblica* 95, nr. 1 (2014): 290-91, 282.

[65] Pfister, 'Konzepte der Intertextualität', 4.

a book, magazine, etc., not the pictures'. If this is the basic meaning of text, why complicate matters by extending the meaning to objects in reality? A text can *refer* to objects in reality, as was formulated in the first decades of the twentieth century by the well-known French structuralist, Ferdinand de Saussure. This is what a text does, what it *denotes*, not what it *is*. If a text can be anything, the material becomes too vast to conduct proper research on. For the sake of analysis the material needs to be limited. For the purposes of the present research the dictionary definition for 'text' is used. All other material of the wider view then becomes 'context'.

Another problematic aspect of Kristeva's theory is that, where Bakhtin still sees diachronic relations between one or more preexisting texts and later texts that contain elements of the preexisting texts, Kristeva's definition of intertextuality does away with any 'diachronic trajectory',[66] meaning that the direction of influence, or any authorial intention is deemed irrelevant. This may be so for a very small niche of artistic literature that is merely concerned with *l'art pour l'art.* But reality shows that most texts have a communicative value, as they are an intended and encoded message from a sender to be interpreted by an audience. This is at least what entire faith communities believe for their sacred writings and what journalists make use of for their news features and opinion articles.

3.4 Relevance Theory and intertextuality

Based on observations like these, pragmatic linguists Wilson and Sperber state that 'an essential feature of most human communication is the expression and recognition of intentions'.[67] They have developed their Relevance Theory for communication in which 'the

[66] Meek, 'Intertextuality, Inner-Biblical Exegesis, and Inner-Biblical Allusion: The Ethics of a Methodology', 283.

[67] Deidre Wilson and Dan Sperber, 'Relevance Theory', in *The Handbook of Pragmatics*, ed. L. R. Horn and G. Ward, (Blackwell, 2004), 607-632, 607.

most important type of cognitive effect is a CONTEXTUAL IMPLICATION, a conclusion deducible from input and context together, but from neither input nor context alone'.[68] To arrive at such an effect, a communicator uses the most appropriate stimuli at their disposal, such as choice of words, gestures, visual aids, and facial expressions, to achieve the optimal relevant interpretation on the part of the audience. Although the theory has been developed for oral communication between individuals in dialogue, I believe it is applicable to written texts as well, because authors are generally motivated by a particular intention to produce a text, which may be as diverse as a technical manual, a political statement, or an expression of love or faith. A written text is thus an expression of the inner motivation, or message, that an author wants to convey.

Therefore, the present study takes intertextuality to include author intent, thus including a diachronic direction of influence by which an author may intentionally make use of earlier texts and readership can detect this. However, it also accepts the synchronicity of textual interpretation in the sense that later texts may also influence the interpretation of earlier texts, as is made use of in reception theory.[69] An example of this diachronic influence in inner-biblical exegesis is the analysis of 'rest' (נוח) in 'Hearing Esther after Joshua'.[70] The main conclusion there is that while in both books the people fought to attain rest from their enemies, for Joshua this was connected to the land, but in Esther this was landless and valid everywhere in the diaspora. Thus, the precise interpretation various with context

[68] Wilson and Sperber, 'Relevance Theory', 608.

[69] Cf. The editors' preface to the entire series of IECOT in Jean-Daniel Macchi, *Esther*, International Exegetical Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. Walter Dietrich, David M. Carr et al. (Verlag W. Kohlhammer, 2018), 11-12.

[70] Arie C. Leder, 'Hearing Esther after Joshua: Rest in the Exile and the Diaspora', in *The Book of Joshua*, ed. Ed Noort (Uitgeverij Peeters, 2012), 273-279.

and intention of the author, but activates an echo to both works in the mind of the knowledgeable reader who interprets it also in his/her own context.

When this method of intertextuality is applied to the present research material, this results in three authors[71] and three narratives, each of which constitutes a communicative activity between an author and an audience. The author has a number of stimuli—such as the narrative genre, the narrator perspective, the structure of the narrative, the characters, the plot, themes, the actual wording, the title, citations, and allusions—that the audience, or the individual reader, has to recognize and interpret within their own context and with the assessed intention of the author. For the audience to understand the author's intentions, '[t]here may be ambiguities and referential ambivalences to resolve, ellipses to interpret, and other underdeterminacies of explicit content to deal with. There may be implicatures to identify, illocutionary indeterminacies to resolve, metaphors and ironies to interpret'.[72]

The stimuli and ambiguities to be resolved for achieving optimal relevant interpretation mentioned above are also mentioned by Gérard Genette and Manfred Pfister. In the first chapter of his famous work *Palimpsests* Genette works out five types of intertextuality.[73] In the remainder of the book he discusses how various kinds of literary devices, such as citations, metaphor, irony, and allusions may constitute an intertextual relationship between specific literary works. He also indicates that paratextual elements, such as titles, and architextual elements, such as genre, may establish intertextual relationships. Both he

[71] Although in biblical studies it is convention to use the term scribe(s) for the unknown author(s) of a Bible book, from here on I will use the term author inclusively to also refer to the scribe(s) of BE.

[72] Wilson and Sperber, 'Relevance Theory', 613.

[73] Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, vol. 8, 1-7.

and Pfister assume, as John Barton above, that the intertextual relationships may be intended and have a high communicative relevance for the interpretation of the text.[74]

Moreover, not only does intertextuality contribute to the interpretation of a single text, but it also shows evidence of a meaningful unity among a particular set of texts, such as the books in the biblical canon.[75] Inclusion in the canon also influences the interpretation of the books, as we saw in chapter 2 on the Reformed interpretation of the book of Esther. Apart from inner-biblical relations and interpretations of each biblical text, according to RT the Bible also has an intended message for all mankind, crossing over the boundaries of time and space, based on the belief that God is the ultimate author of the Bible and, what is more, of all creation. Thus in Kristeva's sense, from a theological perspective, any biblical text is intertextually related to later texts, whether intended by the later authors or not, and whether recognised by the audience or not.

3.5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has defined intertextuality as the diachronic and synchronic influences of one text on another with or without author intention and with implications for the interpretation of the text, depending on a variety of contextual factors. This study intends to discover some of the intertextual relationships between BE, on the one hand, and HN and QE on the other. It is investigated what these contribute to the relevance of a Reformed reading of BE today. In the process, it first presents a literary analysis based on textual, paratextual and contextual information of the BE to provide a foundation (chapter 4).

[74] Pfister, 'Konzepte der Intertextualität', 29.

[75] Koert van Bekkum, 'Hermeneutiek en de uitleg van de Bijbel, de ene tekst en de vele mogelijkheden', *Radix* 46, nr. 4 (2020): 287-97, 290.

Chapter 4 Literary analysis of BE

4.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a literary analysis of the Biblical book of Esther (BE) focusing on the version of the Hebrew Bible, since this version is most relevant to the later intertextual comparison with the two contemporary secular novels. It discusses a variety of topics, but is not meant to be exhaustive. As the previous chapters have shown that BE might refer to historical events and people, but also that this cannot be proven, this chapter focuses on the literary and linguistic features of the narrative, for these are primary to its interpretation. This analysis intends to uncover some of the authorial intent of the BE and to help develop the interpretation by the audience. The focus here is on the paratextual, textual, and contextual aspects as listed above.

In order to enhance the understanding of the book of Esther, the literary analysis includes occasional instances of inner-biblical exegesis. However, the analysis is not meant to achieve a definite and fixed meaning, for the BE is involved in an ongoing conversation with Jewish and Christian, as well as secular readers, as its reception through the ages shows.[76]

4.2 Author

The actual author is unknown, but it is generally assumed that one or more Jewish scribes constructed the story. These scribes were very well informed about the socio-cultural customs and tradition of the Achaemenid Persian Empire and the position of the Jews in the diaspora at the time.[77] As the story relates the victory of the Jews over their enemies,

[76]For an extensive overview see Jo Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries* (John Wiley & Sons, 2008).

[77] Isaac Kalimi, *The Book of Esther Between Judaism and Christianity*, 92-129.

the scribes were likely of Jewish descent. As the BE is included in the biblical canon I assume that God is the ultimate author and his intention speaks from the narrative.

Compared to other exilic and post-exilic biblical books, the BE stands out in that it does not concentrate on Jerusalem, but has a specific 'diaspora agenda'.[78] The focus in BE is on God's salvation in the diaspora as part of 'the great pattern of redemption history'.[79] Whereas the books of Isaiah, Haggai, Zechariah, Obediah, Ezra, Nehemia and Daniel focus on the return of the exiles to the ancient land of Israel, the BE focuses on how to live a good and faithful life when remaining in the situation of a foreign culture, as God instructs them to do in Jer 29:4-7.

4.3 Title

The title obviously refers to the main character Esther. Her Persian name /*stara*/ means 'star' and could well be a reference to Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess, showing how she as a Jewish girl was assimilated in Persian culture.

The Hebrew spelling of Esther is אסתר (or with Masoretic vowels אֶסְתֵר /esteer/). This is associated with a derived form of the verb stem סתר /satar/'hide, conceal'.[80] Samuel Balentine and Joel Burnett show that elsewhere in the OT it appears several times in the fixed combination of אסתר + פנים, *Hester panim*, meaning 'hidden/hiding face' and referring to God being hidden or hiding from some individual, or from his people.[81] The

[78] Bush, Frederic, *Ruth/Esther*, vol. 9, 312-314.

[79] Levenson (1976: 448-449), cited in Bush, Frederic, *Ruth/Esther*, vol. 9, 312.

[80] Jopie C. Siebert-Hommes, *Ester*, 17-18. She also notes, following Weinreb (1967: 45), that the noun 'hiddenness' derived from this same stem is opposed to the Hebrew word for 'exile', which also means 'revelation'. So the hidden God is revealed in the exile. God reveals himself in the diaspora story of Esther by organizing all kinds of coincidences.

[81] See Samuel E. Balentine, *The Hidden God: The Hiding of the Face of God in the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983); Joel S. Burnett, *Where is God? Divine Absence in the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010).

story of Esther seems an example of this. Although the expression is not literally present in BE, still as David Wolpe says, '[w]hen we read the biblical tales of Joseph or Esther, we are acutely conscious of searching for God in a story where He is not immediately apparent'.[82]

Another example of a derived form is found in Gen. 4:14, the first instance of this verb in the 1st person singular *Nif'al yiqtol* is אֶסָּתֵר '*I shall be hidden* from your face'. Cain says this after he has killed his brother and is cursed by God. He then utters his fear of being forsaken by God and left vulnerable and prone to be killed by anyone. But God asserts him that he will revenge him seven times over should that happen and God marked him with a visible sign. A further example is found in Deut. 31:17-18, which presents an intensified combination of infinitive and first person singular *yiqtol* in the *Hif'il* form הַסְתֵּר אַסְתִּיר '*I shall surely hide* my face in that day because of all the evil that they have done, because they have turned to other gods'. According to Siebert-Hommes, a rabbinic tradition links this quote to the Esther scroll,[83] thus connecting the threat of extinction with the predicted 'many evils and troubles', even being 'devoured'.

The exile was experienced by many Jews as the time when this became reality. This is also testified by Lam 1:3,5:

> 'Judah has gone into exile because of affliction and hard servitude;
> she dwells now among the nations, but finds no resting place;
> her pursuers have all overtaken her in the midst of her distress. [..]
> Her foes have become the head; her enemies prosper,
> because the LORD has afflicted her for the multitude of her transgressions'.

[82] David Wolpe, 'Hester Panim in Modern Jewish Thought', *Modern Judaism* 17, nr. 1 (1997): 25-46, 45, https://www.jstor.org/stable/1396573.

[83] Siebert-Hommes, *Ester,* 17.

And the book of Esther offers proof and hope that times can and will change and God preserves his people. Even when they cannot observe the Torah in their diaspora circumstances.

This 'hiding of God's face' fits well with the situation in the BE, which does not mention God once in the entire book, despite being part of the biblical canon that reveals God's ways with his people and his plan for the salvation of the world. Therefore, readers would expect God to be present somehow. As David Firth has it, the book 'invites us to reflect on what it is to know God within this world—a world where the miraculous is rare and yet in which the faithful continue to experience the reality of God's presence'.[84] He and Frans van Deursen note numerous inner biblical allusions, some of which are discussed below.

The action of hiding can also be related to Esther herself, because she keeps her Jewish identity hidden for the greater part of the story up until chapter 7:3.

Although the actual pronunciation of the name of Esther and the verbal forms are different, the book of Esther is so engaged with written language via edicts, that it does not seem too far-fetched to consider the title a kind of assignment for the reader to go and search for clues that might reveal God's hidden actions. Many commentaries and preachers have taken up this challenge, as did Firth and Van Deursen.

4.4 Genre

As discussed in chapter 3, some commentaries take the narrative as fully historical, some scholars regard it as fully fictional, others consider the BE to be a mix of historical facts and literary embellishments, both serving to paint a realistic picture of Jewish life in the diaspora during the rule of the Persian king Xerxes I. I tend to agree with the third group,

[84] David Firth, *The Message of Esther. God present but unseen*, The Bible Speaks Today (InterVarsity Press, 2010) 20.

but am hesitant to call it a novelistic history.[85] Fox discusses various options given in the literature, for instance that BE might be an instance of Wisdom Literature, a (fictitious) Persian Chronicle, an historical novella, a diaspora story, a history, or a festival etiology.[86] The most likely genre seems to be that of an *historical short story*, since it resembles the historical novel, but does not even fit the description of a novella for its sheer brevity, in most Bibles no more than ten pages. As it contains aspects of all the genres mentioned by Fox, I had rather take these aspects as a variety of themes and motifs that the narrator wants to touch upon. Thus, the narrative is significant for the message that it communicates. That it also qualifies as a piece of art is illustrated by the analyses below.

4.5 Narrator and narrative style

The short story has an omniscient narrator. In his portrayal of king Ahasuerus, he is critical of the Persian king, mocking his character in the various events. He is also on the side of Esther and Mordecai, and disapproves of the character of Haman.

The narrative style of BE is that of a satire, mockery, and parody, making use of hyperbole and exaggeration when describing the setting of the story as a place of enormous grandeur and riches,[87] with a king throwing a party of six months, extravagant beauty treatments of a full year for candidates for the position of queen, and an undermining grand vizier who puts up a pole of twenty-five metres for his opponent to be impaled upon.

Furthermore, the story is full of irony, showing that expectations often turn out in the opposite direction: kings are not always wise but whimsical, power can be abused, trust betrayed, and human planning can easily be interrupted, perturbed, and have the reverse

[85] Isaac Kalimi, *The Book of Esther Between Judaism and Christianity*, 93.
[86] Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 142-152.
[87] Bush, Frederic, *Ruth/Esther*, vol. 9, 314-315.

effect, especially if the motivation is one of pride, self-conceit, and lack of prudence. A clear example is that Haman the grand vizier ends up on the very pole he had intended for Mordecai.

In addition, considerable influence is given to the many coincidences that occur in the story. All to prevent the annihilation of the suppressed minority of Jews through genocide. Eventually the new grand vizier Mordecai together with his cousin Queen Esther become the ultimate advisors to King Ahasuerus, to the benefit of not only the Jews, but his entire Empire. As such, the story has sometimes been characterized and also reworked as a comedy play.

4.6 Narrative structure

4.6.1 Introduction

The book has a clear tripartite structure with a beginning, a middle and a conclusion.[88] It also fits the classical five-part structure of ancient Greek drama and Shakesperean plays as graphically represented by Freytag's pyramid, after the 19th century German dramatist and novelist Gustav Freytag.[89]

[88] David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, JSOT Supplement Series 30 (JSOT Press, 1984), 1-20; Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 154-156.

[89] Wilfred L. Guerin et al., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*, 6th ed. (Oxford University Press, 2011 [1992]), 7-8.

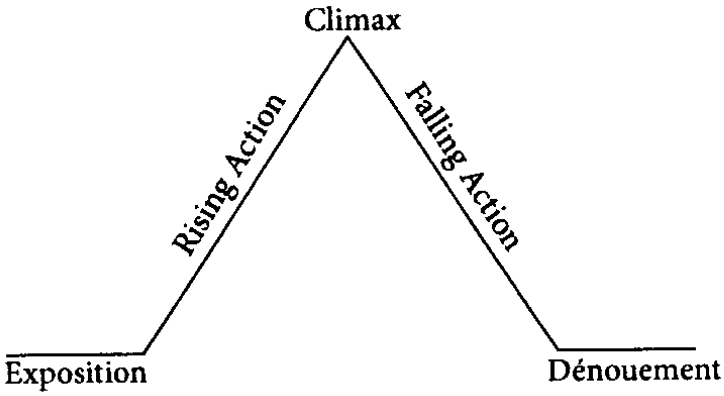


Fig. 1 Freytag's pyramid of narrative development

Each of these stages are subdivided into smaller episodes, resembling acts and scenes. The whole storyline serves a major theme of reversal of roles, which is both serious and ironic. In the light of the hidden presence of God, another major theme is God's providence for the survival of the Jewish people.[90] The various stages of development are marked by a leading motif of ten different banqueting and drinking feasts.

4.6.2 Exposition

The beginning, Act I, is an exposition of the historical setting at the court of King Ahasuerus in the citadel of Susa (1:1-22). Scene 1 describes a banqueting feast of six months for all the international officials, followed by King Ahasuerus organising another party for a week for the local men of the citadel, while Queen Vashti celebrates her own party with the women. When Vashti refuses to be shown as a beauty model to all the local men, she is deposed by decree, the unchangeable law of Persians and Medes, due to an overreaction of the king's advisors and to the weakness of a drunken king.

In scene 2, the advisors of the king propose to find a new queen and Esther is among the young virgins recruited from all over the Empire and to be tested by the king (2:1-23).

[90] Bush, Frederic, *Ruth/Esther*, vol. 9, 323.

Esther, an insignificant girl, obedient to her cousin and foster parent Mordecai, becomes queen, which is a reason for another banquet. Mordechai is introduced and he discovers a plot to kill the king and informs the palace. This event is written down in the chronicles of Persia. All this prepares for the rising action of Acts II, III and IV which make out the middle section that constitutes the main plot (3:1-9:19).[91]

4.6.3 Rising action

The middle part consists of three acts which can be divided into eight scenes. The suspense builds through rising action towards a climax and subsequently declines into the dénouement. The rising action in Act II contains an important reversal, starting with the rise of Haman, when his plans are approved of and decree signed by the king, they celebrated by the two of them with a drinking feast. (Scene 1; 3:1-15).

Immediately after Mordecai convinces Esther to go and see the king (Scene 2; 4: 1-17). Here some of the suspense is released, hope glimmers, and roles are starting to turn when Esther takes the lead by asking Mordecai to organize a fast among all the Jews. Yet, all depends on the will of the king, so suspense is still intense. Nearing the climax of the story, Esther ventures a visit to the king, is handed the sceptre, and invites the king and Haman for a first banquet (Scene 3; 5:1-8). The suspense is elongated by the small subplot of the sleeplessness of the king and Mordecai being honoured (Scene 4; 5:9-6:14).

4.6.4 Climax and downfall

The follow-up in Act III constitutes the real climax of Haman's downfall: exposal, humiliation, defeat, and death by impalement during and immediately after Esther's second banquet, all in just one scene (7:1-10).

[91] See Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, 1-20.

Act IV shows a further release of suspense when the reversal of roles is completed by Mordecai's exultation. This is where the tables are turned completely. The king grants full authority to Esther and Mordecai (Scene 1; 8:1-8). Mordecai and Esther write a counter decree. This leads to the Jews celebrating the permission to defend themselves (Scene 2; 8:9-17). This is followed by the battles of 13 and 14 Adar and the two separate celebrations of Purim for the Empire at large on 14 and for the city of Susa on 15 Adar, respectively (scene 3; 9:1-19).

4.6.5 Dénouement

In the final episode (Act V) Purim is officially established as an annually returning festival (scene 1; 9:20-32). And the epilogue about king Ahasuerus's mighty deeds and Mordecai's esteem among his people closes the narrative (scene 2; 10:1-3). With chapters 9 and 10, the BE is structurally a nicely round story, coming back to Ahasuerus and the entire empire mentioned in Esth 1:1, but slightly different, because in Esth 10:3 Mordecai is the subject of the final verse, as he has become great among the Jews and second only to King Ahasuerus, seeking the good and peace for his people, including all those that had joined them.

It is also in the line of expectations that the author of the BE would come back to the date of 13 Adar, as this was the date set by Haman's decree for destruction of the Jews. It was to be expected that some of their enemies would still proceed to attack the Jews throughout the empire, since Haman's law was never undone. As the defence of the Jews was successful, there was reason to celebrate and to make this an annual festival. Thus, the BE also explains the origins of the Purim festival.

Moreover, in a society like the Persian described in Esther, everything depended on written laws and communication by letters, so it seems no more than natural that Mordecai would

write an edict to make the annual celebration of Purim official, and sent this to all Jewish communities throughout the empire with accompanying letters.[92] The issue of an additional day for the defence and subsequent celebrations for Susa and other urban areas is a minor issue, and the reason given in the text, self-defence, is not implausible.

Thus, the way the BE as presented in its Masoretic form, can be analysed as following the classical Greek format and can be filled in as in figure 2 below:

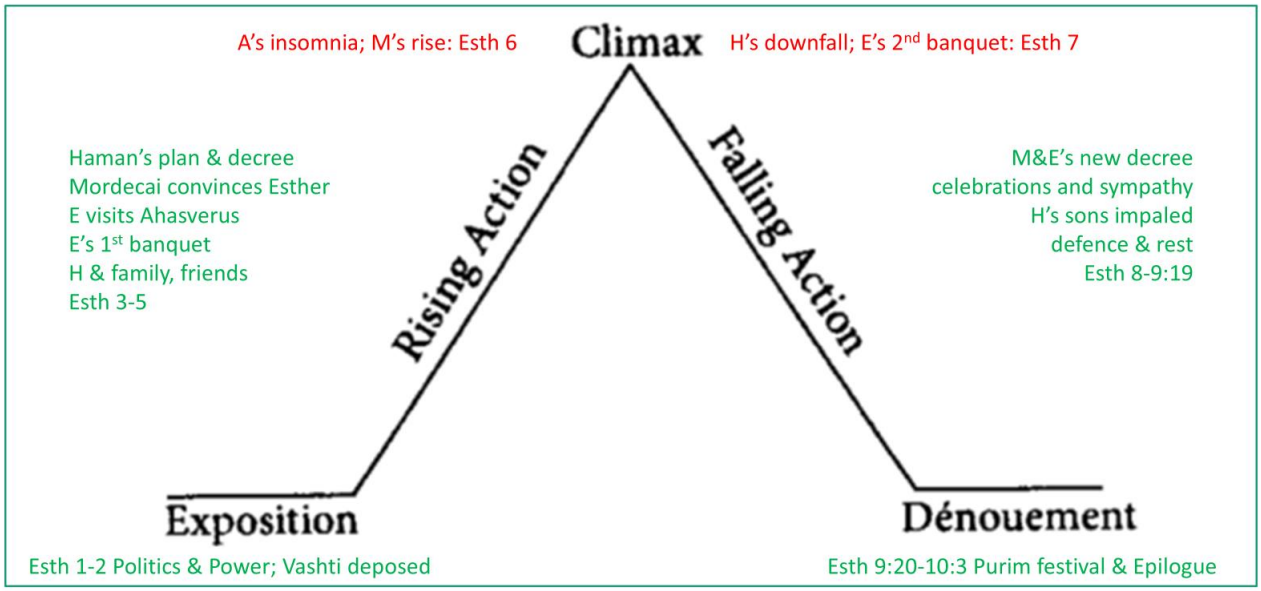


Figure 2 The book of Esther in Freytag's pyramid

4.6.6 Interpretation

In a sense, the Esther story is a general description of how it is to live as a member of the people of God in the context of a turbulent society in which all are tempted to turn their attention away from God and strive for personal gain: the highest position, the highest

[92] Cf. Kalimi, *The Book of Esther Between Judaism and Christianity*, 116-121. Kalimi mentions ancient sources like Ctesias, Plutarch and Herodotus, as well as Ezra and Daniel as confirmation of the descriptions in Esther.

degree of wealth, the most beautiful appearance, the highest success, or any other superlative in achievements. Sooner or later, envy, and jealousy are incited and hatred is kindled towards one or more groups that stand out for some reason. History has shown, even until today, that Jews in the diaspora are targets for antisemitism. Not because they personally do anything to harm others, but because there is an irrational and evil hatred that incites people to use violence against the people of God.

This is not, however, where the story ends. It shows that God is in control and works together with people in such a way that seemingly inevitable events can be reversed, prevented, or even turned into their opposites. God provides so that his people will find rest in a peaceful land, and he requires his people to cooperate. Next, a description of the characters in the BE is given to clarify what their roles are in the narrative.

4.7 Characters

This section focuses on the main characters and some of the minor characters in the book of Esther. Most of the court officials and servants are not discussed.

4.7.1 Vashti

Queen Vashti is a minor character that only occurs in Esth 1. She gets no space in the short story for any development of character. She belongs to the original setting of the narrative and fulfils a task that is soon to be taken over by Esther. She is the granddaughter of King Nebuchadnezzar.[93] As wife to King Ahasuerus, she is the queen when the book starts, but after her refusal to appear before the company of a drunken king and his officials, she is deposed, to make way for Esther, who will fill this position in due time. Her role is interesting from the viewpoint of gender. Vashti has harmed Ahasuerus in his masculinity,

[93] Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther,* 165.

which he ironically can only seem to remedy by law, for lack of natural authority.[94] She seems emancipated in a modern way, as her royal background has probably formed her in her independent attitude. Yet, she lives in a system where women, even royal women, must accept the authority of men. Therefore, her rebellion leads to her downfall. Where she refuses to show her beauty to the king and his drunken companions, Esther uses her beauty to move the King into listening to her.[95]

4.7.2 Ahasuerus

King Ahasuerus is the High King of Persia, married to Queen Vashti. He is a whimsical and weak character with the only goals in life being having fun and being flattered. He does not seem to have a will of his own, which is a sign he lacks masculinity. He needs his advisors for every small decision, even a domestic quarrel, such as Vashti's refusal to be shown for her beauty during a men only drinking party. In his drunken state he makes a decision he later regrets, but cannot revoke (Esth 1). Once Vashti is dismissed, he misses her and relies on his servants to find a solution (Esth 2).

He is emotional and leans on others to make decisions, and is only half-heartedly interested, not even in the state of affairs of the politics his own empire. Therefore, he is not aware of any conspiracies and has no clue what is behind Haman's advice to get rid of a certain tribe scattered throughout his realm, that is supposedly disloyal to the king and his Persian laws (Esth 3). He wants to be honoured and is easily influenced by flatterers. He does not feel inclined to do any research into their motivation, unless he is made restless by coincidental external factors, such as his incidental insomnia (Esth 6).

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[94] Anne-Mareike Schol-Wetter, 'Gender', in *Wetenschapsbijbel,* ed. Koert van Bekkum et al. (Nederlands Bijbelgenootschap, 2022), https://www.debijbel.nl/wereld-van-de-bijbel/wetenschapsbijbel/themas/gender.

[95] Anne-Mareike Wetter, *On Her Account, Reconfiguring Israel in Ruth, Esther, and Judith* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), 142.

In his unease following Esther's complaint that his favourite official, Haman, threatens his favourite wife and her people, he finds it hard to reach a decision. Returning from a stroll in the garden and seeing Haman falling down before Esther, he (intentionally?) misinterprets this posture of begging for his life as a sexually compromising posture, that might even signify Haman wanting to usurp the throne via the Queen. In his rage he sends Haman away to be impaled on the pole in his own front garden. And overnight he replaces Haman by Mordecai in his position as grand vizier (Esth 7).

In the end, he is just as happy letting Mordecai make the decisions, once he has found him a loyal servant who saved his life by disclosing a plan of two courtiers to murder the king. He gives him all possessions and authority that Haman used to have (Esth 8).

4.7.3 Mordecai

Mordecai is a main character: from beginning to end he is a wise government official and a caring parent for his younger cousin Esther, but whereas he starts out as an observer and informant in the background, he later becomes a skilful advisor and a fear inspiring Prime Minister. However, he is not without flaws, for unlike all the other officials, he refuses to bow to Haman, who is the higher official. That Mordechai does not obey the king's wishes (Esth 3:2) in this seems to indicate that he also has some character traits of pride and arrogance.

His ancestry is given as the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah under king Nebuchadnezzar (2:5-6). He is loyal to the Persian king and system, as is exemplified by his reporting the plot that was conspired against the life of the king (Esth 2:19-23). But he is also faithful to his people living in exile, as shown by his openly mourning at the entrance of the court and his urging Esther to take her responsibility in

trying to undo the genocidal plan of Haman (Esth 4). He takes up his responsibility as grand vizier in a way that is pleasing to everyone (Esth 8-10).

As a distant descendant and mirror image of the infamous King Saul, Mordecai sees it as his task to remain faithful and obedient. He aims to save the lives of his people, even if this means putting his and his cousin's lives at risk. This also means he needs to kill all their enemies, because these are determined to exterminate the entire Jewish people, thus showing they are—metaphorically speaking—(spiritual) descendants of Agag.

4.7.4 Esther

Esther is the main figure of the story and as such a round character. In the course of the narrative her character develops from an ignorant and obedient girl, operating in the background and being only concerned with beauty and courtly life (Esth 2), into a wise and prudent woman, who takes responsibility in times of crisis and makes sure she is well-informed in matters of state (Esth 4-5, 7). She wins favour in the eyes of all she meets. After she also wins the king's favour, she becomes his queen (Esth 2:15-18) in the seventh year of his reign. She is courageous and self-sacrificing in her approaching the king, which is actually against the law (Esth 5). She knows how to gain his favour during the meals and moves him to grant her what she wishes by prudently going forward step by step. She even befriends Haman for the purpose of finally exposing him as a monstrous murderer (Esth 7). She intensifies her cooperation with Mordecai when he has become grand vizier (Esth 8-10).

Together with Mordecai she represents the sacrificial love for their people and ultimately for their God, because they believed they may have been put in their position just for these times and were prepared to be obedient until death. Instead, they lived and their faithful and courageous attitudes were instrumental in saving the lives of an entire people.

Her Jewish name is Hadassah, which is a white flower, 'myrtle'.[96] The whiteness may be symbolic for her purity and faithfulness, which is applicable to her dedication to her people, but somewhat ironic considering her position as wife to a pagan king.

4.7.5 Haman

Haman is a main, but flat character, of the type of the villain. He is given the highest position under the king by Ahasuerus himself (Esth 3). Up until his downfall, he is the villain, overtaken by feelings of hatred towards Mordecai, because the latter has hurt his ego. He extends this hatred to the entire people of the Jews. He is introduced with his family ancestry, as an Agagite and son of Hammedatha. Agag is the king of the Amalekites, the people that have continually opposed God's plan for the Israelites, ever since the Exodus (Ex. 17:8-16). King Saul failed to execute God's command to kill all Amalekites including King Agag (1 Sam. 15). Haman is the representative of the opponent of God and the people of God. He is the personification of evil and the adversary of Mordecai.

Haman brags about his riches, his large number of sons, and his position. He is the typical egocentric person living for his own honour and praise, but also consumed by hatred (Esth 5:10-14). Yet, as a character, he also remains human, and when threatened for his life, he becomes a whining beggar, grovelling before the feet of the queen. The story does not say whether he felt any remorse, but self-pity seems more appropriate for his character type.

4.7.6 God

In the BE God is not overtly present as a character. Yet, he needs to be mentioned, if only because the BE is part of the biblical canon, which makes the reader expect him to be there. The textual absence of God is a distinctive feature of this canonical bible book, but need not rule out God's agentive presence. It has been argued that the frequent use of the passive

[96] Lorein and Rose, *Geschriften over de Perzische tijd,* 192.

voice leaves ample room for interpreting God as the agent in the background.[97] Similarly, the many coincidences can be assigned to the directing agency of God.[98] This topic of the hidden agency of God is discussed below in the section 4.8.2.

4.8 Major themes

The themes of a narrative are related to the social and philosophical values that the author want to communicate to his readers. There are many themes to be distilled from the BE, such as gender roles, loyalty, egocentrism, honour, obedience, responsibility, identity, religion. These themes are all aspects of two major themes that appear prominently the BE. These themes are 'survival' and 'hidden divine providence'.

4.8.1 Survival

The theme of survival can also be phrased as 'the struggle for life' of 'fighting for the right to live'. This is the commission of the main character the book is named for, Esther. She is a member of the Jewish community and in an influential position. The threat against her life and the life of her people is written down in an irreversible decree copied in as many letters as there are languages and peoples. Their fate seems inevitable. This places Esther and her fellow Jews for the choice: do I conform to the status quo, denying my true identity and enjoying a brief moment in my luxurious bubble, sure to end in certain death, or do I believe it is worth taking the risk of revealing my true identity that inspires a transformation and may postpone or even reverse fate?

4.8.2 Hidden divine providence

As the explanation of the title and the name Esther has shown, hiddenness plays an important role in the BE. According to Clines, the Esther story can be compared to the

[97] Firth, *The Message of Esther*, 48-58.

[98] Bush, Frederic, *Ruth/Esther*, vol. 9, 323.

Exodus story, in the sense that the latter shows explicit causality of deliverance by the hand of the LORD, while the former shows a 'causality that is indicated by the coincidences of the plot and by the overall shape of the plot'.[99] These coincidences of the plot may also be interpreted as emphasizing God's reliability through his hidden presence, but the seizing of these coincidences as opportunities still depends on the people being willing to act in a god-fearing way, as Esther and Mordechai.

The next section shows how the various motifs work out the two main themes indicated in this section.

4.9 Motifs

4.9.1 Coincidences

Coincidences that may be explained as divine providence are the dismissal of Vashti, which opens an opportunity for Esther (Esth 1); the fact that Esther is among the beautiful girls and the king fancies her most of all (Esth 2:1-18); the coincidence that Mordechai overhears a conspiracy against the king and somehow manages to get his name in the annals (Esth 2:19-23)). A major coincidence is that Esther is handed the sceptre that saves her life and the lives of her people (Esth 4). And another major coincidence is that exactly at the right time the king suffers from insomnia and requests to be read about the as yet unrewarded actions of Mordechai having saved his life (Esth 6). Another coincidence is that the Pur falls on the last month of the year, giving the Jews ample time to prepare (Esth 3 and 8).

These coincidences or instances of divine providence have the opposite effect for Haman and consorts: the rewarding of Mordecai sets the downfall of Haman in motion, as

[99] Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story,* 145-146.

recognised and prophesied by his wife and friends (Esth 6:13). This might have been a turning point for Haman, if he had not been absorbed with his own greatness and honour and hatred of the Jews. Or if Esther had shown him mercy (Esth 7).

Once the roles have been reversed, the human leaders, i.e. Esther and Mordecai, must fulfil their responsibilities to continue the safeguarding of their people (Esth 8). And this is what happens within the boundaries of the laws of the land (Esth 9 and 10).

As the main characters that are favoured by the narrator are Jews, the point of view of the entire story is that of Jewish tradition. And Jewish tradition involves the belief that the LORD is their God. What is more, that the LORD is the creator of heaven and earth, and therefore also the God of all. The exiles in Persia would have been aware of their history and their calling as the people of God. In Exod 19:5-6 they are explicitly given the task to be a priestly nation among the nations that all belong to the LORD God. In this sense and in the ancient world cultures, it is almost impossible not to assume divine providential presence.

4.9.2 Reversal

As the discussion of the plot above already indicates, the BE describes a reversal of roles full of mirror images for the major characters,[100] in such a way that the rebellious Vashti is deposed as queen by the end of Esth 1 and the obedient Esther is installed as queen by the end of Esth 2.

Similarly, the villain Haman, who is first appointed to a high position in Esth 3 is meeting his downfall gradually in Esth 6, where he has to accompany Mordechai on his round of

[100] Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther,* 158-163; De Troyer, *Ester,* 9-10, 41-122; Alter, Robert, 'The Writings/Ketuvim', in *The Hebrew Bible,* Volume III (New York/London: Norton & Company, 2015), 214.

honour through the streets of Susa. His downfall culminates in his exposure as a genocidal schemer of the king's beloved and her loyal people and his subsequent death penalty in Esth 7. Mordecai, by contrast, starts out at a literally low position, sitting at the king's gate, in Esth 2:19, and moves via his mounting the royal horse in Esth 6, the gift of the signet ring that had earlier been given to and taken from Haman and all Haman's possessions (Esth 8:2), the gift of royal robes (Esth 9:15) to the position of second to the King in Esth 10:3.

As a consequence, the subdued powerless people of the Jews, became feared and respected among the other people. Many joined the Jewish people (Esth8:17), and even the governors and higher officials supported the Jews out of fear and respect for Mordecai (Esth 9:3). The violence is described in Esth 9:5 'The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, *killing and destroying* them, *and did as they pleased* to those who hated them'. This is the reverse (Esth 9:1), the mirror image of the king's permission of Haman's law in Esth3:11, 13 'And the king said to Haman, "The money is given to you, the people also, *to do with them as it seems good to you.*" [..] Letters were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with instruction to *destroy, to kill*, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods'. However, the Jewish 'revenge' was only directed towards their enemies, i.e. those who hated them, not to their possessions, so that they did not plunder those.

וַיַּכּוּ הַיְהוּדִים בְּכָל־אֹיְבֵיהֶם מַכַּת־חֶרֶב וְהֶרֶג וְאַבְדָן וַיַּעֲשׂוּ בְשֹׂנְאֵיהֶם כִּרְצוֹנָם׃	The Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, *killing and destroying* them, *and did as they pleased* to those who hated them' (9:5)
לַעֲשׂוֹת בָּהּ כַּטּוֹב בְּעֵינֶיךָ׃	*to do with it as it seems good in your eyes* (3:11)
לְהַשְׁמִיד לַהֲרֹג וּלְאַבֵּד אֶת־כָּל־הַיְהוּדִים	to annihilate, *to kill and to destroy*, all Jews (3:13)

Table 1

The table above, presenting MT and its translation of key verses, shows that two of the three violent verbs are repeated, whereas the first is different in the two verses. Esth 9:5 has as the first verb 'blow/wound/slaughter with the sword', instead of Esth 3:13 'to exterminate'[101]. This might mean that the first goal of the defence of the Jews might not be 'complete extermination' of their enemies, but wounding them, so that they could still change their minds and join the Jews, as in Esth 8:17. The author/narrator's choice for the one different term may also signify that the motivation for the defenders is different from the motivation of the attackers.

Also, the formulations with respect to 'doing what you please' are presented in different phrases, although they seem to imply the same actions. For instance, the expression 'do with them as they pleased' (9:5) is also used once before, in Esth 1:8, where it refers to the seven-day feast for the locals during which there were no limitations to drinking. Elsewhere it occurs four times in Daniel (8:4; 11:3, 16, 36) and two times in Nehemiah (9:24, 37), all in the context of receiving or giving punishment for sinful lives. Here, it is also used as punishment and limited to those who take up the sword against the Jews.

[101] Gesenius, William; tr. Robinson, Edward; ed. Brown, Francis; Driver, Samuel Roles; Briggs, Charles Augustus, *The Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs, Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Clarendon Press, 1977).

Another diversion from previous use is the expression 'do as it seems good (טוב עשׂה) in your eyes', uttered by king Ahasuerus to Haman (Esth 3:11). This also occurs elsewhere in the Bible, as in 1 Sam 14:36,40 and 2 Kings 10:5, where Saul and Jehu act without consulting the LORD, which resulted in them being judged and punished by the LORD. Similarly, the defence against 'those who hated them' in Esth 9:5 can be seen as God's judgment for those who attacked the Jews, the people of the LORD.

Here, not only the roles of the Jews versus their haters are reversed, but also the motivation for killing: It is no genocide along ethnic lines, but limited to those, regardless of ethnicity, who continue to hate the Jews.

4.9.3 Impact of migration

Another motif in Esther is that of migration, the Jews have been forcefully displaced to the various countries of their foreign rulers, and the family of Mordecai and Esther were among those that migrated to Susa. As noted in chapter 2 above, Clines argues that there is a real break between the end of chapter 8 and the beginning of chapter 9, because, among other things, the picture in the earlier chapters is less violent.[102] However, Mapfeka showed that this need not be a problem if we consider the impact of migration and the close relation of diaspora with violence.[103] Moreover, Alexiana Fry points out that the positive, neoliberal view that postmodern society has of multiculturalism may not be the experience that the migrants themselves have, nor the experience that minorities in ancient Persia had.[104] She argues that the tolerance and peaceful co-existence in the Persian empire was partly propaganda, partly beneficiary for their tax system, and also due to subjugation. And the

[102] Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, 30-33.

[103] Mapfeka, 'Esther 9 through the Lens of Diaspora: the Exegetical and Ethical Dilemmas of the Massacres in Susa and Beyond'.

[104] Fry, 'The Myth of Multiculturalism in MT Esther: Comparing Western and Persian Hegemonic Tolerance'.

fact that Ahasuerus signs Haman's decree in Esth 3:13, shows that the king allows genocide as a solution to problems of state disorder.

4.9.4 Anti-Jewish sentiment

In the same vein it is striking that the king's servants in BE explicitly mentioned to Haman that Mordecai was a Jew (Esth 3:6). The narrator is likely to have added this to emphasize the presence of simmering anti-Jewish feelings among some of the king's servants, suggesting that this is representative for all of society. The revelation by the king's men that Mordecai is a Jew incites a more general hatred in Haman towards the entire community to which Mordecai belongs. And his plan to destroy the Jewish people, he could never have accomplished alone. Moreover Esth 9 shows that there was a general sentiment among certain groups, for his law is put in practice even though he himself is no longer there to lead the battles. Therefore, although Haman is the only explicitly evil actor mentioned, realism urges to allow for the existence of various small groups with anti-Jewish or antiminority sentiments in a multicultural society as Susa and the rest of Persia, although the majority of Persians would not sympathise, of course. It is this majority that is happy with the new decree permitting the Jews to defend themselves, because they hope that it will scare off the enemies of the Jews and prevent them from taking up arms, so that all may live in peace.

The description in Esth 9, however, shows that the hardcore enemies are not put off by the possibility of a real fight. Possibly anticipating a prolongation of such a fight for Susa, Esther asks permission for a (limited) second day of defensive action in the city of the citadel. This is in line with her prudent performance ever since she stepped out to meet the king.

4.9.5 Joy, fear, and rest

The recurrent feasts (Esth 1:3,5,9; 2:18; 5:4; 6:14-7:1; 8:17; 9:18-19, 22) and drinking parties (Esth 3:15; 5:6; 7:2) also form an important motif in the BE. The co-occurrence of joy and fear significant in Esth 8:17 reminds of other occurrences in the OT. Elsewhere in the OT the word for 'joy' שמחה /simchah/ often occurs in collocations like 'in the LORD' or 'in a holy festival'. [105] Thus joy in the Jewish tradition is not purely an expression of human enjoyment, but it also expresses honour and gratitude towards the LORD God.

The word for 'fear', פחד /*pachaad*/ occurs three times in Esth 8:17 and 9:2,3, and forty-five times in the rest of the HB.[106] In the latter instances, it is almost always associated with the fear of the LORD. The word may also be translated as 'respect', which is applied to Mordecai (Esth 9:4) as it was assigned by God to Moses, Joshua, and David in former times.[107] So, Esth 8 seems to have a double function: one as a reminder of God's great deeds in the past, and the other as a vision of the future of what God's promised empire of peace will look like. For it paints a picture of a situation with the LORD in the midst of his people, feared and revered by all, Jews and Gentiles alike. The focus is not on the fear of the Jews as a powerful people, for they had thus far only received permission to prepare for defence. The fact that the term is used two more times in Esth 9 emphasises its importance for the dénouement of the story: the non-Jewish inhabitants of the empire felt fear for and offered respect to the people of God and Esther and Mordecai as their leaders, for an unchangeable law was suddenly open for change.

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[105] Anne-Mareike Wetter, *On Her Account, Reconfiguring Israel in Ruth, Esther, and Judith*, 109-110. She mentions Num 10:10; Deut 12:7; 14:26; 16:11; 26:11; 27:7; Isa 30:29; Jer 15:16; Ezra 6:22; 2 Chr 20:27; 30:21.
[106] Wetter, *On Her Account, Reconfiguring Israel in Ruth, Esther, and Judith,* 112. E.g. Exod 15:16; 23:27; Deut 2:25; 11:25; Josh 2:9; Isa 19:16; Ps 105:38; 2 Chr 17:10; 20:29.
[107] Frans van Deursen, *Ruth-Klaagliederen-Esther*, Vol. 1-O, 327.

Esth 9:17-18 relates that the Jews had 'rest' from their enemies and celebrated for 'joy'. This 'rest' is the rest that was also given by the LORD when the Israelites had won victory over their enemies, as God also did in Joshua.[108] Esth 9:22 explains the reason for the annual celebration of the Purim feast, because 'their sadness was changed into joy'. This verse in the passive construction reminds of Jer 31:13, where the LORD promises his people that he will turn their sadness into joy. In the passive construction the agent is suppressed, but by association with the active construction from Jer 31:13, the Jewish and Christian reader will interpret the agent to be the LORD God. Esther and Mordecai maintained this joyful rest through their faithful leadership.

4.10 Conclusion

The above discussion has shown that the unknown author(s) are concerned with the survival of the Jewish people. The BE employs sophisticated literary techniques to bring a message of hope. Hope for a good and protected life for the Jewish people, the people of God, which others may join. The above analysis shows that the BE is written in the Jewish tradition about a situation set in the diaspora in secular Persian times and echoes all kinds of references to earlier biblical books from the OT canon.[109] This canon provides clues, such as allusions, lexical terminology used, and related verbal stems, for the interpretation of this seemingly secular work, making it more than likely that God is actively involved in this historical short story. This may, however, not be immediately apparent to the characters in the story, but becomes clear to the reader when surveying the entire story.

The next chapter places the BE in dialogue with modern literature and discusses the intertextual relations between Esther and *'t Hooge Nest (*HN; tr. *The Sisters of Auschwitz)*

[108]See Arie C. Leder, 'Hearing Esther after Joshua: Rest in the Exile and the Diaspora', in *The Book of Joshua,* ed. Ed Noort (Uitgeverij Peeters, 2012); Siebert-Hommes, *Ester,* 162.

[109] Firth, *The Message of Esther, God Present but Unseen,* 33-35.

in order to find out more about the relevance of the Book of Esther and Reformed theology for contemporary literature and culture.

Chapter 5 Intertextual relations between HN and BE

5.1 Introduction

The story of Esther, although originally situated during the reign of Xerxes I or Ahasuerus of Persia, is timeless. The interpretation of the book is not easy, and commentaries like the ones used in previous chapters are a great necessity. According to Jo Carruthers, 'Esther is enriched by its reception in many ways'.[110] Therefore she undertook the effort of unearthing Esther's reception history through various forms, from sermons and commentaries, to paintings, novels, drama, and poems. She feels that the Book of Esther (BE) and her character have both been underestimated, especially if it is only read as a fairy tale of the quality of another Cinderella. She argues that Esther is much more than a model of female submission. She also represents 'the sexually problematic woman, the heterodox woman and even the warrior woman'. Carruthers hopes to persuade the modern reader that the popular American impression of Esther as a lacklustre character does not do credit to the book.

In line with the idea of intertextuality mentioned in chapter 3 above, Carruthers shows, that even in the BE itself a text, such as Haman's edict, does not have but one meaning, because its meaning depends on the context. Whereas the first interpretation was intended to mean the annihilation of a defenceless Jewish people, Esther and Mordecai changed the context by their new law permitting Jewish defence, so that 'the result is no longer the slaughter of defenceless Jews', but becomes a risky business of attacking a lawfully armed enemy.[111]

[110] Jo Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries*, 21.

[111] Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries,* 23.

Similarly, the context of the readers also partly determine the way in which they interpret the story, depending on their biblical knowledge, historical knowledge, and life experiences.

Thus, Marvin Sweeney argues that the BE is an inherently theological book, especially in the aftermath of the Shoah.[112] He shows there is a long recognised and clear intertextual relationship of BE with 1 Sam 15, where Saul fails to kill Agag the king of Amalek, and Exod 17 and Deut 25, where Amalek attacked Israel on their way through the desert. Israel won the battle with the help of the LORD, but did not destroy Amalek, meaning that they keep coming back, witness 1 Sam 15 and the BE.

Sweeney also points towards a dialogue of BE with the Former Prophets and Chronicles. He notes a significant contrast in that the latter describe the events as instigated by YHWH, while the former focuses on human action due to the absence of an acting God.[113]

He believes the BE is a fictional narrative 'that was ready to address the problem of divine absence and human responsibility to act at a time of paramount national crisis [..] and teaches that everyone, even a nonobservant Jewish girl [..] must act in the face of existential crisis for her people, particularly if they are in an exclusive position to do so'.[114] But even if the BE were based on historical facts, as argued in chapter 2 above, then the exemplifying value of the characters would still, and possibly even more so, inspire readers to follow in their footsteps. Thus, BE's theological viewpoint is that 'in a time of crisis when G-d does not appear to act, those in a position to do so must rise to the occasion, whether they are

[112] Marvin A. Sweeney, 'Reading Esther Intertextually After the Shoah', in *Reading Esther Intertextually*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 725 (London, New York: T&T Clark, 2022), 196.
[113] Sweeney, 'Reading Esther Intertextually After the Shoah', 200.
[114] Sweeney, 'Reading Esther Intertextually After the Shoah', 197.

observant or not, to save the Jewish people from attempted genocide'.[115] Sweeney concludes that the situation in the BE is comparable to that during the Second World War, although he does not further illustrate this with concrete examples.

This chapter argues that the historical novel *'t Hooge Nest* (HN) is such a concrete example of an Esther story, in that it describes actual historical events in a similarly literary way, so that it is intertextually related to the BE, whether or not this is intended by the author. The quote introducing the first part of the tripartite main body of the novel is an adequate illustration of this, because it was written by the non-observing Jewish woman who is also the main character of HN:

> *Wanneer er gevochten moet worden, moet er maar gevochten worden. Je kunt jezelf niet ontrouw worden. Je kunt jezelf ook niets wijsmaken. We stonden ervoor. We hebben gedaan wat we moesten doen, wat we konden doen. Niet meer en niet minder.*
> [When we have to fight, so be it. One cannot become untrue to oneself. This is what we believed in. We did what we had to do, what we could do. No more and no less].[116]
>
> Janny Brandes-Brilleslijper[117]

This quote reminds of the mediated conversation between Esther and Mordecai in which he concluded that she might have been placed in this position just 'for such a time as this' (Esth 4:14) and Esther accepts her commission with the famous words 'I will go to the king [..] and if I perish, I perish' (Esth 4:16). They acted true to their identity.

The analysis below shows that both for its content and for its literary quality BE and HN are intertextually closely related. This chapter highlights features of intertextual relations

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[115] Sweeney, 'Reading Esther Intertextually After the Shoah', 204.

[116] Roxane Van Iperen, translated by Joni Zwart, *The Sisters of Auschwitz, The True Story of Two Jewish Sisters' Resistance in the Heart of Nazi Territory* (Seven Dials, 2019), 10. This and all subsequent translations are taken from this English edition.

[117] Roxane van Iperen, *'t Hooge Nest*, 18, 223. The quote is referred to in the middle part of the story, adding that 'not only would their families survive, they would also help as many others a possible'.

between the BE and HN, using a similar format as chapter 4. In order to help the reader understand the flow of the story, first a summary of the novel is given.

5.2 Structure and summary of *'t Hooge Nest*

5.2.1 Structure

The main narrative is structured in three parts: I *Oorlog* (War) p. 15-136 (tr. 10-103); II *'t Hooge Nest* (The High Nest) p. 137-269 (tr. 106-216); III *Overleven* (Surviving) p. 273-357 (tr. 219-289). Each of these three parts starts with a quote from the memoirs of Janny Brandes-Brilleslijper. The main narrative is embraced by the frame of a prologue (p.7-14)[118] and an epilogue (p. 359-364, tr. 290-295) about Dirk Witte the songwriter artist who bought the house in 1920 and who died and was buried at the Old Cemetery of Naarden in 1932. Embracing these again are a personal preface (p. 5-6, tr. 7) about how Van Iperen came to write the story and an afterword (p.356-373, tr. 296-302) summing up all the names with personal data of all the people playing a part in the history described by this novel.

The reader is taken back to the Amsterdam of 1912, relating how Janny's parents met. They spent their life as a family first in the Jewish quarter, but later moved to a bigger house elsewhere in Amsterdam. Eldest daughter Lien became a dancer and Janny was more interested in politics, supporting the Dutch communist party and being involved in underground activities in support of the communists in the Spanish Civil war. Lien formed a couple with Eberhard Rebling from Berlin, who deserted the German army; and Janny marries Bob in spite of his parents opposing his relationship with a Jewish girl. The reader

[118] NB: This Prologue and chapter one are in the second edition (2022) that I used for my research. The translation (2019) used is based on the first edition (2018) and lacks the Prologue about Dirk Witte. It also misses out on the first chapter ('A fatal fall at the Binnenhof') and has 'The Battle of Nieuwmarkt' as the first chapter, which is the second chapter in the (2022) edition. As the BE, HN has different versions.

is placed at the beginning of the Second World War with the bombardment of Rotterdam and the invasion of the German troops.

There are growing tensions between the nazis and the resistance movement, but also within the Jewish community between the Jewish Council being willing to cooperate with the German authorities in exchange for protection and the Jewish Coordination Committee that disagrees on that. Janny remains alert and warns Lien not to be naïve. Janny refuses to have a large J stamped on her identity card, nor does she mark her clothes with the yellow star. Her sister Lien sees no harm in obeying the authorities and complies with both measures.

Despite the danger, Janny and Bob live in The Hague and run an underground printing press for the communist party. Janny is also involved in stealing personal identity cards in order to produce and disperse false ones, which is done in Amsterdam. In spite of the threats, the sisters try to live as normally as possible including extending their families with their own babies. Life must be lived.

When the location of the underground printing press is betrayed, Bob needs to go into hiding. Lien is now also getting involved in asking for and stealing personal ID-cards. Their younger brother Jaap is inspired by them to also join the resistance. Then Eberhard is called to report with the German army. He has to go into hiding as well. Janny's brother-in-law has connections in Bergen, and that is where they are all going by the summer of 1942.

As the entire western coastal strip will have to be evacuated by 1 February 1943 to make room for the Atlantic Wall, they have to find alternative housing. Janny's brother-in-law has found a country house in the woods of Naarden: *'t Hooge Nest*. In February 1943 the entire family of the Brilleslijpers move there. It feels like 'the perfect place to hide' (p. 143, tr. 108). Only Janny and Bob and their two kids have moved legally. All the others are

illegal. And in March 1943 a new law is instigated to find all missing Jews with the Henneicke Column in charge. The High Nest becomes well known among the resistance movement in Amsterdam and many find their refuge there.

Meanwhile they continue their resistance work. Then the Henneicke Column finds them out. They experience a few scary hours in the house. In the end all present are arrested. However, they manage to bring the children to a safe address and to warn Bob who is still at work.

All are soon moved to Westerbork, apart from Eberhard and Janny. They are held in Amsterdam a little longer. When Eberhard en Janny are being moved in a Dutch police van and they need to pick up another prisoner, the backdoor is left unlocked and Janny distracts the driver, so that Eberhard can escape in the crowd. Janny is tortured until she is unconscious. The other prisoners help her care for her wounds. She receives a note that Eberhard and Bob are safe.

Eventually, Janny is also transported to Westerbork and rejoins her family and friends. They meet the Frank family. All except father Joseph are optimistic. He is right: they will be on the last train to Auschwitz-Birkenau.

Janny and Lien encourage each other in their struggle to survive, while others (so-called *Muselmänner*) sink away in apathy that hastens their journey to the fatal gas chambers. After a while, Janny and Lien are transported to Bergen-Belsen, the 'Star Camp'.

The lice have become a plague and cause typhus fever of which many people die. Lien is very ill and Janny feels she is ill as well, but she keeps going, trying to save other people's lives by keeping them clean and feeding them. Janny steals aspirins for Lien and herself in an attempt to stay alive. Then suddenly all the guards have fled. They return with white

bands on their upper arms. The English liberate the camp on 15 April 1945 and Janny faints.

Janny remains unconscious for about two weeks. When she is ready, they travel to Enschede. She and Lien do not feel welcomed when they arrive in Enschede. The difference with the welcoming of the allied forces is great. A dentist from Enschede brings Janny and Lien home to their families in Amsterdam and Oegstgeest.

5.3 Author

Contrary to the BE, the author of HN is known. Roxane van Iperen (1976) is a Dutch writer, lawyer, and journalist. She won two literary prizes for HN. She is an advocate for justice and delivered an impressive lecture in Amsterdam at the national commemoration of the Second World War on 4 May 2021.[119] She also wrote the 2021 Book Week essay *De Genocidefax* about the genocide in Rwanda in 1994 about the questions whether and how an individual dares to follow his own moral compass, when this means going against the group. More biographical information is to be found on her website.[120]

Although some scholars say that the author is not essential for interpreting intertextuality, I believe the author's intent is important, since a book is a means of communication, and communication always involves intent from the communicator, as explained in chapter 3. The above brief biography shows that Van Iperen has a similar view on life as the author(s) of the BE, in that she is an advocate for justice and against genocide. She has written more often about individual action against injustice. In HN she actually also hints several times

[119] This lecture has been published in Roxane Van Iperen, *Brieven aan 't Hooge Nest* (Lebowski Publishers, 2021), 13-20.

[120] Roxane Van Iperen, *Biography*, n.d., https://www.roxanevaniperen.nl/over-roxane-van-iperen, consulted 16 June 2026.

at a possibly hidden divine presence, which is discussed below in the subsections of 'Religion and divine providence'.

5.4 Title

The Dutch title *'t Hooge Nest* (litt. *The High Nest*) is the name of a robust country house in the woods near Naarden, a fortified town in the centre of Netherlands. It is the setting for chapter 1 of part one and chapters 1-9 of part two of the novel. The place is rented by Bob Brandes and Eberhard Rebling under his false name Jean Jaques Bos on 30 January 1943.[121] The house is used not only as secret hiding place for the families of the Jewish sisters Rebekka 'Lien' Rebling-Brilleslijper and Marianne 'Janny' Brandes-Brilleslijper, but also functions as a refuge for as many Jewish and resistance people as possible. However, seventeen months later, briefly after D-day (6 June 1944), they are betrayed and all but one resident are arrested.

The prologue relates that the house was also the residence of a singer-songwriter Dirk Witte, who moved there with his wife in 1920. He wrote the song '*Mensch, durf te leven*!' ('Remember: Life is for living!'),[122] which is also a major theme in this novel, as it is for the BE. More about this in the section about themes.

And finally, in her preface, Roxane van Iperen explains that she and her family moved into the house in 2012, and discovered some old paperwork and hiding places. This triggered her research and resulted in the historical novel.

[121] van Iperen, *'t Hooge Nest*, 134.

[122] Van Iperen, translated by Joni Zwart, *The Sisters of Auschwitz,* 295.

Thus, The High Nest was a refuge and a resting place for Jews and resistance people alike, where they celebrated many a party, just as people in the BE 'got relief [or rest] from their enemies' (Esth 9:22), which they marked by annual celebrations of Purim, henceforth.

5.5 Genre and narrative style

HN is an historical novel based on a true story centring on the lives of the Jewish sisters Janny and Lien Brilleslijper; how they and their husbands were active in the resistance movement during World War II; and how the sisters survived three concentration camps. The story is a well-composed literary report of real people and actual events, based on various sources, such as personal documentation and interviews, archives and websites, magazines, newspapers and articles, and books.[123]

The narrative style is a combination of serious historical research and journalistic accuracy on the one hand and literary artistry on the other. The story is interspersed with humorous paragraphs, but unlike the BE, it is not to be qualified as a satire, mockery, or parody. A humorous example is the passage on pages 65-66 (tr. 43), where Eberhard and Lien make jokes about how his father would be abhorred to see him living together with a Jewish girl expecting his child. For he had raised Eberhard to become a proud Prussian officer like himself. Instead his son is a Marxist, a pianist, and musicologist. This is one of those twists of irony that happen in real life and are reflected in the novel.

Another example of irony is mentioned on page 78 (tr. 53), which mentions the fact that Janny now hides 'part of the underground newspapers at Lien's place, in the body of Eberhard's Bechstein grand piano, [... while] Helene Bechstein is a well-known friend and sponsor of Hitler'.

[123] Van Iperen, *'t Hooge Nest,* 5-6, 374-381.

A third humorous instance occurs when Eberhard goes looking for alternative housing in 't Gooi area, and sees a large building that seems uninhabited. He rings the bell, asks whether it is for rent and gets as only answer, 'Out of the question!' When he recounts this event to his relatives, they laugh in his face, but he still does not get it. It turns out the building was one of the royal palaces, *Paleis Soestdijk* (p. 130, tr. 98). The episode functions as an intermezzo of comic relief in the otherwise very serious, stressful, and dangerously threatening situation.

The novel is written in the third person and told by an omniscient narrator, relating the story of Janny and Lien and their families, but also providing relevant general historical information. The story does not always run chronologically, but is interspersed with flash backs, and pieces of historical information, sketching the atmosphere and political and social situation at the time. For instance, Chapter 1 of part one starts in the middle of the story in February 1943, when the families have just moved into the house *'t Hooge Nest*. But the message they receive, about one of their friends having been killed trying to escape the nazis, is followed by biographical information about him, the resistance movement and the activities of the Dutch national socialist party NSB. The overall story does run chronologically, but flashbacks and informative episodes support the reader in getting the full picture and also help to create suspense.

5.6 Main characters

5.6.1 Rebekka 'Lien' Brilleslijper alias Antje Sillevis

Lien is the eldest daughter of Joseph and Fietje. She starts out as a naïve, artistic young woman, but later develops into an active member of the resistance movement. As a young girl she expresses her aspirations to become 'a star' (p. 292, tr. 233). She resembles the

early, naïve Esther. Lien 'makes no fuss about [the new registration rules] and gets a J stamped in her identity card' (p. 46, tr. 25).

At one point when she meets her friend Ida Rosenheimer, she says she cannot imagine that the occupied countries will allow Hitler to execute his plans (p. 60, tr. 38). Like Esther she needs someone to tell her about impending the dangers. Only when Bob and Eberhard need to go into hiding, Lien realizes that the situation is serious, and then she actively joins the resistance, asking for and stealing ID-cards (p. 75, tr. 50). For security reasons, she also gets a false name based on her false identity card, Antje Sillevis (p. 107, tr. 78).

And like Esther, she uses a different first name 'Lien' than her parents gave her 'Rebekka', derived from her artist's name 'Lin Jaldati,' a reference to a Hebrew song text meaning 'my beautiful girl' (p. 153, tr. 116) which reminds of Esth 2:7 'The young woman had a beautiful figure and was lovely to look at'.

5.6.2 Marianne 'Janny' Brilleslijper

Janny is the younger sister of Lien, but more aware of and realistic about the political circumstances and threats. She is also more outspoken in her choice for work and political activism. She is an idealist and active member of the communist party. She has a strong sense of justice and moral responsibility and acts upon those. At nineteen, she actively supports the International Red Aid (p. 33, tr. 16), thus helping the anti-fascists during the Spanish Civil War. It is Janny who warns her sister Lien that it is dangerous for her to be in Janny's house: 'You have no idea what those Krauts are capable of' (p. 42, tr. 22). She runs the underground printing press, and is involved in distributing false ID-cards. In all this she resembles the more mature Esther. She also resembles Mordecai, in that she is politically alert, makes her sister aware of the impending dangers and the grim reality, and is creative in finding solutions for problems.

5.6.3 Joseph Brilleslijper

He is the father of the two sisters and their younger brother, Jaap. He owned a grocery shop and was focused on his business to thrive, even as this meant trading with Germany. During the war years his health deteriorates and his eye sight is bad. This runs parallel to his development from a busy tradesman who denies the seriousness of global political developments to an anxious and powerless victim with a pessimistic vision on the situation.

When in Westerbork, Joseph is unable to work and repeatedly cites Shylock's monologue from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* Act 3, scene 1 (ll.58-66) (p. 248, tr. 197):

> and what's his reason? I am a Jew. Hath not
> a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions,
> senses, affections, passions? Fed with the
> same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to
> the same diseases, healed by the same means,
> warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer
> as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not
> bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you
> poison us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, shall
> we not revenge?

This is obviously a reproach of the unfair and inhumane treatment the Jews have received thus far, denying any difference between the races, implying all are human. Moreover, it emphasizes the longing for revenge, in line with Esth 9 and the imprecatory psalms, yet contrary to Psalm 37. He cannot see why disaster is hitting them, nor that salvation is near, and he longs for revenge. Yet, he himself is 'paralyzed with powerlessness' (p. 276, tr. 219).

5.6.4 Fietje Brilleslijper-Gerritse

Fietje is married to Joseph and the mother of Lien, Janny, and Jaap. She is supportive of her husband, but in a more optimistic way. She does not share her husband's wish for revenge, as exemplified by her raising an eyebrow when he wishes Hitler a quick death (p. 89 – tr. 63). Although she sides with Joseph when they live with Janny in The Hague and

feels she should stop her resistance activities for fear of being betrayed, she later encourages her children to 'make the most of every last moment we have left. Make it as good as it can be. [..] And remember: this, too, shall pass' (p. 276-277, tr. 219-220).

5.6.5 Adolf Hitler and Anton Mussert

These two are the evil genies in the background of the narrative, instigating and promoting the annihilation of the Jews. They represent the Nazi system against which the resistance movement fought. They may and have been compared to Haman as issuing laws that lead to the exclusion and ultimate death of Jews and other *untermenschen*.

5.6.6 Eddy Moesbergen and Willi Lages

Two of the various Dutch representatives of Nazism that personally hunted and tortured the inhabitants of The High Nest. They resemble the attackers that still make their moves in Esth 9, following Haman's law.

5.7 Major themes

The two major themes of the HN touch upon social and philosophical persuasions and ethical issues that an author wants to bring to the attention of the reader. For HN these themes are related to social justice and in pleads in particular against antisemitism and for the right to live for any people, for any person, regardless of ancestral background. In this sense the HN is a twenty-first century continuation of the BE. According to Genette, a continuation is 'allographic', a follow-up 'of someone else's work' that is an 'imitation [which] must be absolutely faithful and serious', in such a way that 'the hypertext must constantly remain continuous with its hypotext'.[124] The historical novel HN extends the

[124] Gérard Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, vol. 8, 161-162.

themes of the BE to the situation of the Jewish people during the Second World War and uses many of the same motifs, as is discussed in section 5.8.

5.7.1 The right to live

Living life to the full is a major theme of the book as is signified by the embracing chapters about Dirk Witte who wrote the song *Mensch durf te leven!* ('Remember; life is for living!'). In Part one it is mentioned that a lot of people despair and commit suicide, when the Nazis have taken power in the Netherlands (p. 39, tr. 22). In this way they actually play into the hands of the Nazis, who planned the genocide of the Jewish people and the eradication of all who did not fit their ideal of a strong Arian race.

However, in line with most people at the time, the sisters Brilleslijper decided to live life to the full and also plan to have children, in spite of the circumstances (p.65, tr. 43). In the rest of the story, they and their fellow workers are constantly trying to save lives, by producing false ID-cards, finding hiding places for adults and children, and trying to organize food for all of these. This is continued in part two, when The High Nest becomes a safe haven, almost a paradise, forming the climax-period of the book; and during the decline in Part three, when the sisters are creative in finding ways to save people, sticking together, forming groups of support and encouraging each other, thus showing an unstoppable will to survive and regain life.

The preconditions for such living life to the full, however, cannot be arranged entirely by human efforts. They also depend on the circumstances, beyond human control, often interpreted as coincidence. But from a religious point of view, the events beyond human control can also be seen as providence. Therefore, the other major theme HN shares with the BE is 'Religion and divine providence'.

5.7.2 Religion and divine providence

As the BE, HN does not present religion and divine providence as an obvious theme, though it certainly gives hints. Also the fact that both stories have the struggle for survival of the Jewish people as their main topic suggests that religion and views of divine providence as functioning in the Jewish tradition are present at some level. HN subtly hints at the possibility of a divine presence that may influence the people and the course of events, by a repeated subtle reference to prayer.

This and other motifs, like fasting, mealtimes, festivities, and reversal of fate are addressed in the next section. These motifs provide support for the two major themes, as well as for the intertextual relationship with the BE.

5.8 Main motifs

The following motifs are recurrent elements in the story of HN. They support the main themes of (1) the right to live and (2) divine providence; and they give evidence of intertextual relations with the BE.

5.8.1 Mealtimes, food, and festivities

Mealtimes and festivities are a major motif for HN, just as for the BE. The novel depicts recurring events with meals and celebrations on both sides of the divide, the Nazi-rulers on the one hand and the suppressed population represented by the Brilleslijper family and friends on the other.

On the Nazi side, we see (in a flashback) Anton Mussert celebrating the capitulation of the Netherlands with a good Dutch 'meal of baked potato wedges, lettuce and fried egg (p. 167, tr. 128). Later he throws a party to celebrate the eleven year anniversary of the NSB with all his colleagues and friends (p. 131, tr. 98). We also see Gemmeker in Westerbork celebrating his achievements in sending so many Jewish lives off to Poland 'with a festive

meal' (p. 124, tr. 92). These all mimic the happy drinking hour of Ahasuerus and Haman in Esth 3:15, just after they decided to destroy the Jewish people.

On the Brilleslijper side, their first 'celebration' mentioned is a sad one. They celebrate New year's Eve of 1941 without paying any attention to food, but by holding hands, thus mockingly imitating a prayerful attitude, and wishing that the fascists and Hitler will soon be no more and that they themselves find sufficient courage and strength to endure the war until the final victory. They drink to that with a bittersweet toast (p. 89, tr. 62-63). This, too, reminds of Esth 3:15, because only the toasting with the raised glasses is mentioned and they mainly feel the potential danger. But it also refers to Esth 8:17, because they do express a glimpse of hope of surviving the war. Here, however, the fight would be unequal most means to defend themselves are taken from them. Those who dared to fight had to rely on their cunning and mutual trust.

The right to live is also taking shape in the various festivities that the sisters organise in The High Nest. On 1 May 1944 they celebrate the wedding anniversary of Joseph and Fietje (p. 28, tr. 12) and Labour Day with a modest seven-course meal, creatively providing each with a French name (p. 209, tr. 168). On D-day, 6 June, they celebrate with the bottles of wine that were stored in the house, promising to return replacements after the war (p. 214-15, tr. 172).

Food is a constant problem, because of the shortages. Once they have moved to The High Nest, and their hospitality invites ever more people, they have to be creative with where they buy their food (p. 179, tr. 136). People eat in shifts (p. 203, tr. 163). In Westerbork, Lien writes a letter in which she asks for food, among other things (p. 250-251, tr. 202). Food is essential to stay alive. In Auschwitz, they talk about fantasy meals to keep up hope (p. 308-309, tr. 247). One day, after lice control, they join a group of French women, they

sing a French song about wine (p. 310, tr. 249). And with a group of Hungarians in Bergen-Belsen, they celebrate a combination of Christmas, New Year's, and Hanukkah (p. 336, tr. 269) in an attempt to boost the atmosphere and stay alive.

In the final chapter the country celebrates for the allied forces have come to liberate them (p. 348, tr. 281-282). And finally the Brilleslijpers celebrate when the sisters each return to their families (p. 354-355, tr. 286-289).

5.8.2 Music, theatre, and other arts

The motif of music and other arts is implicitly present for all festivals in the BE, but is very prominent and explicitly mentioned in HN. As Lien, is an artist with a career in singing and dancing, this is a recurring motif throughout the book (e.g. p. 31, tr. 14; p. 172-173; tr. 132-133). Music often accompanies the celebrations and mealtimes discussed above, but their performances simply for enjoyment and for arts' sake during the paradise-like period in The High Nest also add a depth and a lightness to their lives. In Auschwitz, too, in the middle of great suffering, the Jewish women from different countries have their moments of singing together (p. 312-313, tr. 250-251). It is a way to honour life and to express awareness that the gift of life ought to be enjoyed together with all generations from all nations, even in the midst of misery. Thus it is a sign of hope. It serves the major theme of life together, or community life. It goes squarely against the Nazi policy of making life not only miserable, but even impossible for Jewish people. This reminds of the mourning and fasting of the Jews (Esth 4:1-3, while they should have been celebrating Pesach around the time when Haman cast his lot and had his law signed (Esth 3:7, 12-14).

5.8.3 Rules and laws

In HN new rules and laws become increasingly more stringent, excluding the Jews from ordinary society, ordering them to register, taking the pleasure of living away from them.

After the signs of 'no Jews allowed' (p. 48 tr. 22), on 6 August 1942 three new rules are added, preparing for the final solution of 'the Jewish problem'. Jews that have not responded to their call to report for work in Germany will be arrested. Jews that refuse to wear the yellow David star will be taken to Mauthausen concentration camp. And Jews that move houses without permission will also go to Mauthausen (p. 116, tr. 85). These progressively more stringent laws can be interpreted as the twentieth century filling in of the preparation time that the Persian Empire had until the day (Esth 3:14) that the single decree given by Haman in Esth 3:13 would be completely executed. The Nazi strategy was like a net being drawn closer over time, with detailed small steps, so that eventually there would be no escape. This was meant to be as irreversible as the Persian law of Haman. Yet, like the Jews in the BE, people kept hoping, and many gave their time and efforts and even their lives to avert the genocidal objective of Hitler and the Nazis.

5.8.4 Praying and fasting

The Brilleslijper family and their in-laws, however, are aware that there is more to life than what they themselves can organise. They do not dare to spell out what this 'more' can be. Is it coincidence or is it divine providence? They do not venture to answer that question and do not mention God at all. But their hope for help from outside is illustrated by the regularly recurring references to prayer. HN records seven instances of praying, which suggests they at least hope that there is a hidden divine providence that cares for their fate.

The first instance is when the location of the underground printing press is betrayed. Janny is in the final weeks of her second pregnancy when men of the SD invade her house. She uses her pregnancy to buy time and begs the men if she can go to the shop on the opposite side of the street to telephone the doctor first. She is allowed to do so and calls her friend who is a doctor. Meanwhile she prays (p. 70, tr. 47) that the men will not find the Dutch

Communist Party (CPN) archives hidden ‘in several pans and a bucket’ in the kitchen. Her friend the doctor arrives and announces a medical examination in private. The doctor gives her a prescription for the chemist, which gives her the opportunity to go outside and warn her husband Bob. This works out well, and the men leave without having noticed the archive materials in the pans.

The second instance is during Christmas Eve 1941, when as a family they express their wishes for the new yea. ‘With a nod to a prayer, they hold hands around the table allaying their fears with a curse and a spell’ (p. 89, tr. 63). Somehow, they felt encouraged by this ritual, hoping there might be someone out there that provides a future for them.

Thirdly, when Eberhard has to register his new address with the NSB-mayor in Naarden, he succeeds in his mission without raising suspicion, and afterwards he looks at the Great Church and nods, although he does not know to whom or what (p. 136, tr. 103) as if he says ‘thank you’ to some unknown divine addressee.

Fourthly, when Eberhard escorts his father-in-law to The High Nest, he prays that the old man’s behaviour will not arouse suspicion, because he knows there are under cover policemen underneath the stairs at Amsterdam Central Station (p. 149, tr. 113).

Fifthly, when the Sicherheitsdienst came to arrest all the residents of The High Nest, Eberhard was ‘praying everyone upstairs was awake and would do as they had so often practised (p. 224, tr. 179). This could just be a manner of saying, but instead of ‘praying’ a near synonym like ‘hoping’ could have sufficed. The author must have chosen this verb on purpose. Moreover, the ‘practising’ of their hiding strategy reminds of the time the Jews in Esther’s time had to prepare themselves for defence (Esth 8:9-10).

A sixth instance of prayer is when the rest of the family and friends have been transported to Westerbork, 'Bob and Eberhard pray' that they will not be deported until the end of the war (p. 269, tr. 216).

And a final instance is when Lien is singing despite their suffering in Auschwitz, Janny remembers in a flashback that the kestrel near The High Nest was hovering (Dutch: 'praying') in the air in search for prey (p. 310, tr. 248).

These are seven references to a possible divine presence in HN. Six of them are based on the verb 'to pray'. This is a verb that implies an agent, an addressee, and a request. Although the addressee is never mentioned, it is understood. Within Jewish and Christian communities this addressee is most naturally interpreted as God, who mostly operates as a hidden divine presence.

Although prayer is not explicitly mentioned in the BE, fasting in the Jewish culture is inextricably linked to prayer. In the BE the Jewish people fast two times, in Esth 4:1-3 the fasting is accompanied by mourning and lamenting. The Hebrew word there זָעַק 'cry, cry out, call' occurs very often in the OT and is often a cry for help, even if it is not specifically directed to someone. This echoes Exod 2:23-24, where 'the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.'

In a similar way, Eberhard fasts when he is summoned for military service in the German army. He tries in vain to escape this by minimizing his weight through starving himself and exercising excessively (p. 84, tr. 57-58). This reminds of the fasting by the Jews in Esth 4:1-3, 16. They fasted and probably prayed to find divine grace, whereas Eberhard starved himself in order to achieve a body weight below the critical minimum. It is unclear whether

he even considered the possibility of divine interference for his personal well-being, or relied purely on his human effort to achieve a longed for goal. However, the judgement of the military authorities is beyond his control. Contrary to the actions by Esther, Eberhard's starvation project was apparently not part of any divine plan. Yet his survival was, but via different ways, and only partly depending on his own actions.

5.8.5 Joy, fear, and rest

As the BE, HN is a story about people who long to enjoy life, which they express by celebrating their moments together, experiencing joy even in the midst of misery, as discussed above. Although they are continually challenged by their fear for their immediate future, for '[f]ear and mutual distrust are growing day by day' (p. 59 , tr. 37), yet acting for their underground activities, Janny and Lien fear no one and both realize that these are desperate times' (p. 74, tr. 50). Like the Jews in the OT, both fighting for their promised land and living diaspora, they long for a place of rest, see chapter 4.9.

In HN, they longed for 'a safe place to wait out the war', and The High Nest was 'the perfect place to hide' (p. 141, tr. 106). Janny and Lien, together with their husband and partner organised everything for The High Nest as a refuge. The High Nest was also the place where they could celebrate life again. And in The High Nest they celebrate meals, and they organise musical evenings.

Similarly, the final chapter of HN also bears witness to the fact that once more, the sadness of the Jewish people has turned into joy about the return of those who survived and the victory over an evil regime. Although this joy tastes bittersweet, because of the pain of the irreversible losses that have been incurred, in the end it engenders hope for the future, that one day all evil will be banned forever.

5.8.6 Reversal

As in the BE, the reversal motive plays an important role in HN. As this novel represents real events from World War II, this actually means that reversal is a lived reality. The Nazis had intended, like Haman, to eradicate the entire Jewish people. Their laws were devised in such a way that no escape seemed possible, and they seems irreversible. But as the story unfolds the actions of the main characters show that laws and rules can be flouted, and their hiding in various places buys them time and provides opportunities to find ways to postpone and sometimes even escape fate. Examples of this are the following.

When the sign of 'No Jews Allowed' were placed in front of the public swimming pool, Lien simply ignored the sign, taking advantage of the unguarded coats and drawing numerous identity cards from the pockets to reuse them for false identities and thus save Jewish lives (p. 75, tr. 50). Also, when Eberhard and Janny were arrested, the *Sturmbannführer* Willi Lages tells Eberhard, "Your fate is sealed anyway, death penalty for *Fahnenflucht, Landesverrat, Sabotage und Rassenschande*!" (p. 236, tr. 189). But in the ensuing moment, when Janny and Eberhard are transported through Amsterdam to pick up another prisoner, they take the one opportunity they have, when the car has stopped and the backdoor is left unlocked. Janny distracts the driver and shouts, "Out!" (p. 238, tr. 190). Eberhard jumps out of the car and escapes. This does not only turn his fate, but is key to the change of fate for their children, and eventually also aids the survival of Janny and Lien.

Thirdly, when Janny and Lien are in Westerbork, Auschwitz, and Bergen-Belsen, their food rations are continually reduced, for there is shortage of food. Against all odds, they prepare a party for a combined New Year's Eve, Christmas and Hanukkah celebration. They collect bits and pieces saved over a few days and accompany their celebration with singing cheerful

children's songs (p. 334-335, tr. 269-270). This bluntly contrasts the earlier remark by one of the female *Kapos*, "*Jetzt wird nicht gefressen, jetzt wird gestorben*!" (p. 309, tr. 247).

The end of the book that coincides with the end of the Second World War shows the ultimate reversal—not only for those in the story of HN, but for all who actually made it through the war—as the destructive forces, aiming at the extinction of the Jewish people and all who were not of the Arian race, were defeated and a new day dawned for life in liberty for all.

Each time the reversals emphasize the overall theme of HN, that people have the right to live, and going against the seemingly irreversible path on the way to death is an option that can be chosen by taken the opportunities provided.

5.9 Conclusion

The historical novel of HN can be read as a twentieth century Esther story with Lien and Janny as a modern version of the early and later Esther (and Jannie possibly also as the alert Mordecai). However, unlike Mordecai, but like Esther, Janny kept her identity as a Jew secret from the start, as she was aware at an early stage what dangers the growing powers of fascism entailed, and she acted appropriately to protect as many lives of her people as possible. Lien's awareness was aroused sometime later and she also served the lives of her people. They both cooperated with many that shared their vision that life is worth fighting for, even against all odds.

Although the setting of HN is a secular culture, the Jewish and Christian cultures play a subtle, but significant part. HN shows that people cannot survive on their own, as is exemplified by Eberhard trying to starve himself in order to escape military service. This is also exemplified by the people in the concentration camps that grow apathic and

withdraw from the others, the *Muselmänner* (p. 294, tr. 235). The story also shows that human cooperation is necessary, but not sufficient. Many coincidences remain unexplained, but leave the possibility that there is an often hidden divine presence that is all powerful in changing circumstances into their opposites. This idea is supported by the various instances where the main characters vaguely pray or address an unspecified higher power.

The next chapter analyses the dialogue between the BE and *Queen Esther (QE)* written by John Irving (2025).

Chapter 6 Intertextual relations between QE and BE

6.1 Introduction

This chapter compares John Irving's novel *Queen Esther* (QE, 2025)[125] to the biblical book of Esther (BE). It aims to show how the author John Irving intentionally plays with intertextuality in QE and how this is worked out with respect to the BE, in particular. The interpretive analysis below involves both probable author intention and reader perception.

The space in this chapter is too limited to discuss all instances of intertextuality in QE, for in the spirit of Julia Kristeva, not only did John Irving bring in cross references and allusions to various pieces of literature including the Bible, but also to other means of communication, such as film, paintings, and music. These all serve to recreate the atmosphere of the times and places in which the story is set; and they contribute to the message of the novel. Near the end of the book, p. 368, the term *intertextualité* is even explicitly used in relation to the novels published by two of the main characters, Jimmy and Mieke, in the 1960s.

This chapter mostly limits itself to intertextuality relations between QE and BE and focuses on various literary aspects, as listed and discussed by Gérard Genette[126] and applied in chapters 4 and 5 above. First section 6.2 provides a summary of the novel, followed by three sections which are concerned with the paratextual aspects of QE, some biographical aspects of the author (6.3), the significance of the title (6.4), and the genre and narrative style of the book (6.5). These are followed by an overview of the most important themes (6.6) and motifs (6.7). Section 6.8 closes off with conclusions.

[125] Irving, *Queen Esther*.

[126] Genette, *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, vol. 8.

6.2 Summary of *Queen Esther* (QE)

The story of QE is told by an omniscient narrator who takes twenty-five chapters to unfold a family history of the Winslows, who live in Pennacook, New Hampshire. The first and the last chapters are set in the 1980s. In between the story develops from 1905 to 1981, with brief excursuses in the first two chapters providing information about the family lineage back to 1620, when the first Winslow and the first Bradford sailed to the United States on the *Mayflower*. They were Puritans.

Their offspring in the beginning of twentieth century, Thomas Winslow and Constance Bradford, are non-religious. Thomas is an English teacher and Constance is a librarian. They get married and have three daughters in six years' time, whom they call after the virtues: Faith, Hope, and Prudence. For each of them, they adopt teenage orphan girls as nannies, or *au pairs*. After eleven years, a fourth daughter is born, Honor. 'Honor' is more of an 'expectation' than a virtue (p. 13). This sets off the search for a new nanny. In 1908, they find her in an orphanage, St. Clouds in Maine, where she was delivered as a three-year-old orphan, who knew her name was Esther. She also knew she was Jewish and that she was named for Queen Esther of the biblical story. As she gets older, she wants to learn all about being Jewish. The director, dr. Larch, is the first to help her find out about her people's background.

When she is fourteen Esther comes to live with the Winslows. She devotes herself to taking care of Honor. Meanwhile she also trains to be a nurse and to be in military service. She is determined to travel back to her roots, to Vienna, where she was born, and to Palestine, to serve the cause of the Jewish people. Esther has communist and Zionist sympathies. Before she leaves, she makes a pact with Honor. Honor wants to be a mom, but she does not want

to have sexual intercourse, nor give birth. Esther promises to conceive of and bear a child for her. From that time on, around 1934, Esther disappears from view.

Honor regularly receives letters from Esther. She tells her that she has found a perfect father for her child, an Austrian wrestler, Moshe Kleinberg. On March 2, 1941 Esther gives birth to a boy. He is officially adopted by Honor and they name him James, 'Jimmy', Winslow. He is raised in the Winslow family, with his mom, aunts, and grandparents to care for him. From his grandfather he adopts the love for literature and develops the wish to become a writer. To establish a link with his biological father, he joins the wrestling team at Pennacook high school.

In 1963, he joins the study program of the Institute for European Studies (IES) in Vienna. He gets a German language tutor, who is recommended by Esther. She is an Israeli named Annelies Eissler and serves as an intermediary between Esther and Jimmy. He lives with two other students, Claude from Paris and Jolanda from Amsterdam. They live in digs with Frau Holzinger, her daughter Irmgard, and her five-year-old grandson Siegfried. The Holzingers are obviously antisemitic, and Siegfried has violent inclinations, hacking away at his toy soldiers and crushing them with a garlic press. Annelies suggests they should try to save him.

The students often visit a café called *Kaffeehaus Nachtmusik*, where they play both classical music and popular artists. Two songs by Bob Dylan are their favourites, *The Girl from the North Country* and *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*. The dishwasher's dog, a female German shepherd, is called Hard Rain. It turns out that the Holzinger family used to have a German shepherd and Siegfried would like one.

Around Christmas Jimmy takes up wrestling again at *Turnhalle* Leopold Spiegel, or 'Little Mirror', where he wrestles with two Israelis and two Russians. Honor had always been very

protective of Jimmy, trying to keep him away from anything to do with the army and war. That's why she has always supported his wrestling activities, hoping that he would suffer a knee injury serious enough to escape being drafted. As this did not seem to work, and drafting for the Vietnam war became a real possibility, she devised another plan. She writes Jimmy a letter about this plan, saying that she had talked it through with Chantal Beaudette, a friend of Jimmy's from Pennacook, who consented to having herself 'knocked up' by Jimmy, so that he could become father to a child, which was an escape route from being drafted.

Jimmy agrees with the basic idea, but he does not want Chantal to bear the burden, because he knows she wants to be married without children. He also talks this issue through with Jolanda, who is a lesbian. Her girlfriend Mieke, left in Amsterdam, agrees to carry Jimmy's child. They agree to do this in such a way that the child will always be able to see all three parents. When their daughter Vienna is born in 1965, Jimmy and Honor go to Amsterdam. After a while they take Vienna with them to be raised in Pennacook.

Jimmy becomes a teacher of English Literature at Pennacook high school, and coach of the wrestling team. He continues writing, and produces four books. In 1981, James and his European publishers are invited to the Jerusalem International Book Fair. Jimmy hopes to meet his birth mom Esther. First he meets with his Hebrew translator and his Palestinian housekeeper. He also meets Siegfried again. He tells Jimmy Annelies has recently died by a car bomb at the West Bank, after she saved some children by moving them away from the car.

At the final day of the book fair he meets 'the one-armed one', which is his birth mom Esther, who lost her right arm in action. The general public do not know her name. A German photojournalist asks for her name, because 'the resemblance between you and

your son is so striking' (p. 408), but Esther Nacht refuses to disclose who she is. She held James by is right wrist. And James felt closely connected to her.

6.3 Author

John Irving was born on 2 March 1942 as John Wallace Blunt, Jr. in Exeter, New Hampshire. 'He was renamed John Winslow Irving when his mother re-married in 1948, and he grew up without ever meeting his biological father'.[127] His middle name is derived from his mother's maiden name.[128] He was both a student athlete and an assistant coach for the Phillips Exeter wrestling program. In 1963 he travelled to Vienna with IES Abroad. Still a student, he married in 1964 and became a father at 23. He published his first novel in 1968, *Setting Free the Bears*. In 1978 he published his first international bestseller with *The World According to Garp*. In 1985 he published *The Cider House Rules*, in which dr. Larch plays an important role as director of the orphanage St. Clouds. A main theme of this novel was the right for abortion. Irving was well-informed about the pros and cons, because of his adopted grandfather's work as a prominent obstetrician and gynaecologist.[129] This same dr. Larch and the same theme return in QE, among other topics, such as identity, religion, morality, and randomness of fate. Irving combined teaching and writing. On December 13, 2019 Irving attained Canadian citizenship. He wants to retain his right to be outspoken about the United States and his dislike of Donald Trump.[130] His sixteenth novel, *Queen Esther*, was published in November 2025. According to the official website, 'Irving's

[127] John Irving, 'Wrestling Life into a Fable', American Academy of Achievement, 2026, https://achievement.org/achiever/john-irving/.

[128] 'John Irving', Wikipedia, 5 July 2026, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Irving.

[129] Irving, 'Wrestling Life into a Fable'.

[130] Deborah Dundas, '"Ending up here is a love story." American Writer John Irving becomes a Canadian citizen', *Toronto Star*, 13 December 2019, https://web.archive.org/web/20191214023600/https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/books/2019/12/17/american-writer-john-irving-becomes-a-canadian-citizen.html.

longtime commitment to themes of tolerance for sexual minorities has made him a bard of alternative families and a visionary voice on the subject of sexual freedom'.[131] These themes also abound in QE. As Terence Des Pres says, 'John Irving's fiction comes down to this: it serves our need for spiritual defense'.[132] And it does so by alternating serious issues with comic incidents, using exaggeration, humour, and intertextual references. In what follows, these elements find a place in the further discussion of textual and paratextual aspects.

6.4 Title

The intertextuality of the book's title *Queen Esther* cannot be missed. It is obviously linked to the biblical book of *Esther*, but in what ways? First of all, there is another direct reference to the BE, for after the title page, there is a quote from Esth 7:4, 'For we are sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish.' This refers to the financial contribution Haman makes to King Ahasuerus in Esth 3:9 and the law issues for the annihilation of the Jews (Esth 3:13). This reference highlights the theme of antisemitism, which is a recurrent theme in QE. This will be discussed below in section 6.6 about themes.

Secondly, on p. 51, Esther herself, age three, cites from the Bible when asked for her name. She says, "Esther, like the queen—Queen Esther." When she speaks to dr. Larch, he thinks she 'started speaking of herself in the third person' (p.52). But actually she explains about Queen Esther and cites the story from the Bible, "Esther has no mother and no father. [..] The king loves Esther more than all the other women" (Esth 2:7, 17). She continues, "Haman is the bad guy—he wants to kill all the Jews. [..] Esther and Mordecai save the

[131] John Irving, 'About the Author', Official Website, 2026, https://john-irving.com/john-irving-bio/.
[132] Terence Des Pres, 'An Introduction to John Irving', Official Website, 1980, https://john-irving.com/an-introduction-to-john-irving/.

Jews—they're Jews " (p. 52). When she grows up Esther wants to know all about her Jewish background and feels she has a task to fulfill for her people.

Thirdly, it turns out that the Winslows have researched the story of the biblical Esther and other Jewish history, for when Jimmy starts packing for his trip to Israel, they are talking about their Esther's 'hiddenness' (p. 348) and compare this to God's hiddenness throughout the BE. More on this under the section on the theme of religion, below.

Esther herself turns out to have an inner drive, or calling to serve her people, which are subsequently the orphans at St. Clouds, the Winslow family and Jimmy, but ultimately the Jewish people in Israel. She has attained a high position, for she even became an advisor to prime minister Menachem Begin (p. 379).

6.5 Genre and narrative style

On the official website of John Irving, QE is presented as 'a historical novel with a political theme'.[133] Furthermore, the narrator mentions that Jimmy 'was devoted to *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* as models of the Bildungsroman (p. 367). This is certainly a possible typology for the genre of QE, because it follows both Esther and Jimmy in their development into adulthood and the search for their identity. This is similar to the BE, for in chapter 4 above, it was noted that Esther develops from an ignorant and obedient girl into a wise and prudent woman with leadership qualities.

The narrator further explains about Jimmy's novel *Roommates in Vienna* (1977) being a '*roman à clef*' and an 'alternative family saga' (p. 370). A *roman à clef* deals with real life events overlaid with a fictional façade, with new names, and different places. This also applies to QE, because the author has interwoven many of his own experiences in the

[133] John Irving, 'Queen Esther', Official Website, 2026, https://john-irving.com/queen-esther/.

characters and events described, and he places them in international and political situations and developments that have been documented in history books, newspapers, and news programs. This genre typology is also applicable to BE, because BE includes a historical tradition in a beautifully shaped story, for which it is no longer possible to determine what is historical and what is fiction.

As for narrative style, QE has an omniscient narrator, like BE. And like BE, it makes extensive use of exaggeration and irony, in particular when the story of James (Jimmy) unfolds. His adventures are full of coincidences, peculiar events, and grotesque characters, which seems too much for the life of just one individual. At the same time the social and geopolitical background that is described, is historically reliable, as in the BE.

6.6 Themes

6.6.1 Identity and freedom to choose

In this section various themes in QE are discussed and related to BE. The overall complex theme of QE, from which many subthemes derive, is 'the search for identity and the freedom to choose'. The combination of these two themes into one complex main theme indicates that the novel expresses the idea that identity, though valuable, is not a fixed given, but may change in the course of time and due to experience. This search for identity is expressed in the Pennacook Academy's motto *Finis Origine Pendet,* "The End Depends Upon the Beginning" (p. 36-37 and 381). Each of two main characters, Esther and James, go back to their historical and biological roots to find their identity. The freedom to choose is introduced by a statement at the very beginning of the novel that

> "[t]he present-day James Winslow, who was called Jimmy as a child, was unimpressed by his Winslow ancestry—he'd learned not to care who his ancestors were" (p.1).

This statement becomes clearer in the course of the novel, when the reader learns that Jimmy's biological father and mother are not Winslows. He suffers from knowing that his biological father does not even want to know what he looks like (p. 132), and he is increasingly more curious for his birth mother. The statement about not being interested in his forebears is counter-balanced by the very last lines of the book, where Jimmy finally meets his birth mother,

> This was when the New Hampshire boy knew he had the heart of the Winslows' last orphan. The Jewish one was the best one. James Winslow would forever be an ally of Queen Esther. (p. 408)

Throughout the book this paradoxical tension remains between identity and choice. On the one hand Esther and Jimmy are searching for their roots, going back through their physical past, and the Pennacook townspeople and the Viennese alike, base their identity almost entirely on their past, categorizing people according to their ancestors and their lifestyles; but on the other hand, people like the Winslows and dr. Larch believe people are not determined by their past and free to choose their identity and create it as they move into the future. Moreover, Annelies shows that one's identity can be transformed, because it is ultimately formed by the choices that are made. Jimmy and Siegfried are examples in case.

6.6.2 Antisemitism, xenophobia, and foreignness

A major subtheme in QE shared with the BE is Jewish identity in relation to antisemitism. At the beginning of the book, Thomas Winslow organises a Town talk on comparative religion, but when his colleague Daniel Rosenthal speaks as an expert on Judaism, there are no questions, no response whatsoever from the audience. The Winslows interpret this as a sign of silent antisemitism (p.42).

Later on it is explained that the reason why Esther's parents Hanna Meyer and Simon Nacht fled from Vienna to Portland, Maine, in 1907 was the growing antisemitism in Europe (p. 61). Unfortunately, antisemitism is also present in the US, where the station master at St. Clouds is an example, because he voices his disapproval of the Winslows for choosing a Jewish orphan (p. 77).

In Germany and Austria of 1933, antisemitism affected Moshe Kleinberg, the future father of Jimmy: "Moshe's success as a wrestler led to his persecution" (p.104), which made him move to Haifa. About twenty years later, a school mate of Jimmy's, Jonah Feldstein gets into trouble with the Duval brothers, when he walks into 'their' territory, wearing a yarmulke (p. 148).

The novel by Arthur Schnitzler *Der Weg ins Freie* (*The Road into the Open*), which Jimmy reads, contains both silent and overt incidents of antisemitism (p. 164-168). The square in Vienna where the university buildings are is named after a former mayor of the town, Karl Lueger, he was an antisemitic Christian socialist and Annelies calls him the *Judenhasser* (p. 181). Also Jimmy's landlady Frau Holzinger and her daughter Irmgard are *Judenhasser* (p. 223-224) as is Hildegund, the dishwasher, who is actually against all foreigners (*Ausländer*) (p. 232).

This hatred of Jews culminates in the situation in Palestine/Israel. The Jews feel that they have historical claims to the country. But the Palestinians and Arabs who live there also feel it is their country. Even the non-religious French-Jewish publisher Gabrielle says, "We Jews just went back where we came from. [..] We are going *home*" (p. 293). And the non-religious Swedish publisher Matthias, who is in favour of peace and reconciliation says,

> "If the Palestinians insist on killing us—on eliminating us—we will have to kill more of them than they kill of us, or they will kill us all. [..] If we don't maintain some measure of control over them, they will kill us all." (p. 293)

What is striking is that Nour, the Hebrew translator's quietly serving Palestinian cleaning woman, who seemed 'saintly and holy' in her hijab, appears to be filled with this hatred. She and her five-year-old son Omar were walking Jimmy back to his hotel, after he had visited the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, when the following conversation took place,

> "And we *will*, " Nour said quietly.
> "And you will *what*?" Jimmy asked her.
> "We will drive them into the sea—we *will,*" Nour told him.
> "We *will*, "Omar repeated, beaming at Jimmy.
> *"*We will *annihilate* them," Nour said, hitting all four syllables.
> *This* is what Esther had been protecting him from, James Winslow realized—this eternal conflict, this everlasting hatred'. (p. 403)

This is almost near the end of the book, and suggests that anti-Jewish hatred will never stop, because one generation passes it on to the next. This is an allusion to the long standing hatred between Israel and Amalek as represented by Mordecai and Haman in BE.

In this way, QE portrays the anti-Jewish hatred as a special form of xenophobia and anti-immigration movements. "Fräulein Eissler told Jimmy that anti-Semitism in Austria was part of "a larger xenophobia" (p. 232).

This xenophobia is part of Frau Holzinger's view on life, as it is part of Hildegund's worldview. Hildegund calls foreign habits "*Typisch ausländisch*" and Frau Holzinger repeatedly says "*Das geht bei uns nicht*" (p. 232). The disapproval also extends to homosexual relationships and different ways of making out a household. Also in the US this view on life is common with the Pennacook townspeople.

A similar distrust is to be seen with Hildegund and her gang. They first harass Jolanda, because she is Dutch and lesbian (p. 280), before they attack the entire group (p. 289-294). They do not even know that Jimmy is Jewish, only that he associates with Jewish, Russian, French, and Dutch people. As Jimmy and his friends suspect that someday an attack be inevitable, they devise a plan, so that they will be prepared to defend themselves. Ultimately they are indeed attacked and they successfully defeat Hildegund's gang. This incident reminds of Esth 8 and 9 where the Jews have about nine months to prepare themselves for their defence against the attacks from those who hate them.

Thus, not only antisemitism, but any kind of foreignness, difference, and diversity is what makes certain people fearful, afraid, and even hateful of others. It feels safe to create boundaries for your identity, so that you can withdraw into your own shelter and protect your boundaries with violent measures, if necessary. But as a consequence others are excluded, which is ground for misunderstandings, distrust, tensions, and violence. It also makes people that feel excluded uncertain of themselves, as if they do not belong.

Irving, however shows that this foreignness does not necessarily lead to inspiring fear, distrust, tension, nor violence. It can also be something that makes curious of others and it may be celebrated and enjoyed. This is what inspires Thomas and Constance Winslow to read about other people's lives or fictional stories, it has helped them to find their identities. Thomas tells dr. Larch "those characters in literature told me who I was". (p. 37). This is also what inspires Jimmy and the other foreign students to study abroad for a year. This is why the multi-cultural city of Susa was 'in confusion' after the issuing of Haman's law (Esth 3:15b) and they joined in the celebration when the new law allowing the Jews to defend themselves was issued (Esth 8:17b).

This openness to others is also expressed in the novel by the interest it shows in the variety of languages that are used. The attention to language is a recurrent motif that QE has in common with BE, suggesting an awareness in both stories of good international relations and shared humanity on a global scale. The motif of language is further investigated in the next section on Motifs.

Annelies even emphasizes her concern with xenophobia by wanting to transform this into interest in or even love for foreign cultures. She

> 'exhorted the foreign students to "make an effort to save Siegfried." They could have "an international influence" on the isolated boy, she'd said. The xenophobic Judenhass of Siegfried's mother and grandmother would either stop with Siegfried or be continued by him, Annelies had told them. "You could inspire this kid to think globally," she had assured them. (p. 233)

This drive for transformation is also part of BE, where many people join the Jews (Esth 8:17). To see how this is linked to QE, the subtheme of religion is discussed in the next subsection.

6.6.3 Religion and salvation

Another subtheme related to identity is religion, which forms part of someone's identity. Religion may offer a protective bounded space within which people can safely develop themselves; but it may also become a narrow, restrictive space preventing people from developing themselves, creating distance, mistrust and opposition, even war. This is why many modern people have a distrust of religion, as exemplified by the Winslows. Religion seems to fade away out of the story, which starts with mentioning the Puritan ancestry of the Winslows (p. 1). But that was long ago, and on the same page ancestry—and by extension, religion—is judged unimportant. The twentieth century Winslows are nonreligious, secular people, although at first they seem to have retained some of the

ancestral religious traditions, as can be seen from the names of their first two daughters, Faith and Hope, and the kinds of nannies they subsequently select for their daughters.

Their first daughter Faith gets an *au pair* from an orphanage with Episcopalian connections (p. 26). They were glad she did not try to convert Faith. The first nanny's name, however, is never mentioned. The second daughter Hope gets *au pair* Lucie, a practising Roman Catholic from a French-Canadian orphanage (p. 28). The third daughter Prudence also gets an *au pair* from the same French-Canadian orphanage, but this Denise is not a believer (p. 28). And finally, for their fourth daughter Honor, they find the non-observant Jewish girl Esther a good nanny.

The Winslows are all for educating the masses, and in particular the church women of Pennacook. In one of his Town talks on nineteenth century novels in the library, Thomas starts with a quote from Charlotte Brontë's preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre,* "Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion," (p. 20).[134] In another Town talk Thomas advocates the right to abortion (p. 38-41). He shocks both doctors and church women, many of whom leave the talk. Mrs. Sweeney, however, remains and is steadfast in her opinion that "the child in the womb has a soul" (p. 39). Thomas grants her a context dependent answer, "Respectfully, Mrs. Sweeney, if you believe an unborn fetus has a soul, you shouldn't have an abortion—no one's making you have one", although he and Constance believe that no one has a soul. This indicates that the Winslows are pro-choice and against general legislation and conventionality, not only in this matter, but also in many more issues concerning morality, such as love and sexual relationships. On the one hand they advocate an open view on morality, but on the other hand Thomas at least respects well-motivated personal opinions like that of Mrs. Sweeney.

[134] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* vi .

However, the Winslows are not free from prejudice, either, because they too easily assume that moral choices that coincide with 'conventionality' are always taken without personal consideration. Later, they will come to respect Esther's favourite quote from Jane Eyre. It is when Esther is still under the care of dr. Larch care that she becomes determined to get a tattoo on her torso, citing a *Jane Eyre* quote,[135]

> I care for myself.
> The more solitary,
> the more friendless,
> the more unsustained
> I am,
> the more I will
> respect myself. (QE p. 71-73 and 384)

Where the *I am* will significantly be put just above her navel. And as a connoisseur of *Jane Eyre*, Thomas would have known that Esther's self-righteous quote has an immediate continuation:

> I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad—as I am now. Laws and principles are not for times when there is no temptation: they are for such moments as this: when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour; stringent they are; inviolate they shall be.[136]

Contrary to the Winslows, Jane did accept that each person has a soul and that in turbulent times 'laws and principles' are useful. Thus in an ironic way, the Winslows act against the spirit of their heroine Jane Eyre, who subdues her mutinous body and soul to the law given by God and sanctioned by man. In this sense they are like the biblical Esther, who disregards the Jewish law by marrying a non-Jew and eating non-kosher food; and who

[135] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, third edition (Penguin Books, 1956), 314.

[136] Brontë, *Jane Eyre,* 314.

tries to undo the Persian law for the defenceless slaughtering of the Jews. Both of these actions are instrumental to serving a larger purpose: the survival of the Jewish people.

This seems to say that the BE places the preservation of life above the observation of the law. Ironically, again, the Winslows propagate the abolishment of the anti-abortion law, which is meant to protect life. Their motivation is that they worry about the quality of life for both mother and child, but most of all about women's freedom to choose. Their battle seems a very theoretical one, however, for they have not personally experienced a situation in which they had to choose for or against abortion. What they do choose is adopting an orphan nanny for each of their own four daughters, thus offering a home to four teenagers without a family. Thus they show that there is an alternative to abortion. After all, they do care about the life of others.

Another curious thing about the Winslows and dr. Larch is, that although they are fervently nonreligious, they do want to help Esther find out about her Jewish identity, which also leads them to find out about the Jewish religion. Like dr. Larch, who approaches both orthodox and liberal rabbis for Esther, to see where she could best attend some services (p. 60-65), Jimmy's mother Honor admits she talked to a rabbi and learned that "God does not even appear in the Esther of the Christian Old Testament or in the Esther of the Hebrew Bible—even God is hidden, Jimmy" (p. 384). And his aunt Faith adds, "In the holiday of Purim, when the Jews read the scroll of Esther, they wear masks to hide their faces—more hiding, Jimmy". Then his aunt Hope follows with, "Passover is the next big Jewish holiday after Purim. A symbolic piece of matzoh is hidden at the start of the Seder meal—you can't finish the Seder until the matzoh is revealed. Passover is like a bridge from hiddenness to revelation, Jimmy." And Prudence closes off with, "It's forty-nine days until

Shavuot—the Jewish holiday that celebrates the revelation of the Torah on Mt. Sinai, Jimmy."

This conversation foreshadows the expectation that the hidden or purposefully hiding Esther will reveal herself to her son Jimmy, which he longed for all his life, but she will not be revealed in the newspaper. However, the conversation about the Jewish feasts also indicates that Esther's story, as the BE, is part of a much greater story. That story involves liberation and redemption as symbolized by Passover and the Exodus, but also a covenant relationship of faith and obedience, as symbolized by Shavuot (or Pentecost). This is worked out in practice by Esther who has incessantly cared for the children in the orphanage, for Honor and her son Jimmy, but also for her Jewish people. 'She is an Old Testament girl' (title chapter 11), not 'a New Testament girl' (p. 120). But through her relationship with Annelies, she does open ways to bring completely assimilated Jews, like Jimmy, back, and also draw non-Jews in to her circle of influence, as exemplified by Siegfried, who has become Jewish.

In this way, Esther herself, symbolically stands for God himself, who is mostly hidden and who cares for his creation, Jews and pagans alike. When Esther has gone to Israel, she conceives of her child, but returns to New England to give birth to Jimmy (p. 116). Forty years later in Jerusalem, a German photojournalist concludes he is her mirror image (p. 407). Read against the Jewish and Christian background of the narrative, Jimmy could therefore symbolically be an image of Adam (Gen 1:26), but also of Jesus Christ, the second Adam (1 Cor 15:47). The way Jimmy kneels for Annelies to put his white socks on her, reminds of Jesus' feet washing in John 13, as an imitation of Christ. Moreover, Jimmy is also guided by Annelies, who is good at languages and mediating, and who wants to transform people from xenophobic antisemites into Jews and allies of Esther. Annelies

eventually dies in a saving action, around the same time when Esther loses her right arm. Taken symbolically, Annelies is the image of the Holy Spirit, guiding Jimmy, but she is also the image of Jesus, who dies to save the world and as Son of God is (at) his right arm. Annelies' death could be symbolized by the loss of Esther's right arm. In the OT God's right arm stands for his reigning power and might, and Esther is an OT girl.

Finally, the fact that Annelies pleads for 'saving Siegfried' and the group's (preparation for their) defence against the group of attackers has a similar effect as Esther's and Mordecai's laws permitting defence against attackers, namely that many were inspired to join them (Esth 8:17).

6.7 Motifs

Motifs are recurrent elements that structurally support the themes of the novel. The motifs discussed below are all subservient to the main theme of 'search for identity and freedom to choose'. The list of motifs is not necessarily exhaustive.

6.7.1 Names

Below, the most important names in QE are discussed for their meaning, but this list is not exhaustive, either.

As discussed in chapter 4 the name *Esther* refers first and foremost to Queen Esther from the BE, and to the aspects of star and hiddenness. The aspect of the goddess Ishtar is less relevant in a twentieth century Western context. Esther knows she is Jewish, but she is portrayed as if she also stems from the Benjaminite King Saul (1 Sam 9:2), 'She's fourteen, almost fifteen, but she seems much older—she's very mature for her age. [..] She is very tall, too—and she keeps growing", dr. Larch and nurse Angela note. Like the biblical Esther (Esth 2:9, 15, 17), she is liked by all people she meets. Dr. Larch says, "she is loved and looked up to by all the girls." And the nurse adds, "The boys look up to her, too" (p.

49.). They all cried when she said goodbye (p. 69). When she comes to live with the Winslows, 'the sisters highly esteemed Esther' (p. 80). And when Jimmy meets Esther in Israel, he notices 'No less than the girls, the boy soldiers were enthralled by Esther' and he thinks "Here is Queen Esther with her devotees" (p. 406).

In addition, the main character also has a last name, *Nacht*. This name is of course symbolic for the dark times in which Esther came to the US. It stands for the persecution of the Jews in Eastern Europe, the *Kristallnacht* in 1938 (p. 113), and the subsequent rule of national socialism and the Second World War with the horrible episode of the Holocaust, but also the restless search for a peaceful place to live for the Jewish people. In Esther's personal life, Nacht can also be applied to her first losing her father, then her mother, and having to live in an orphanage from the age of three. It also refers to her struggle, her groping around in the dark, to find her own identity with only little information and to work out her identity that she had chosen. Finally, it refers to her hiddenness, leaving other people in the dark about her identity.

A relevant connotation for *James/Jimmy* is to the Jewish leader of the first Christian community in Jerusalem, James, apostle and brother of Jesus Christ, who also wrote an NT letter concerned with putting faith in practice. Jimmy is also a fervent letter writer, and he is also concerned with doing the right thing, following the road that Honor, Esther, and Annelies are advising him.

In the original Greek the apostle James is called Ἰάκωβος (Yakobos), which is the same name as the patriarch Jacob in the OT, who was renamed Israel, after he wrestled with God (Gen 32:25-30). If Esther can be taken to represent God, this identification of James with Jacob fits with the final episode of the book, where Esther bruises James's right wrist, which reminds of the way God permanently impaired Jacob's hip (Gen 32:26). The name of his

Hebrew translator Yaakov Himmelman (p. 387-392, 401) seems point in this direction, too, as a minor alter ego of Jimmy.

Faith and *Hope* are two of the three Christian virtues (1 Cor 13:13) referring to the fact that the Winslow couple are of Christian descent. The third Christian virtue 'love' is not a girl's name in English, but it is certainly a virtue practised by all members of the Winslow family. *Prudence* is the third daughter. Her name refers to a classical virtue, meaning that life should be lived with care. She becomes a medical doctor. Despite the names, the family is entirely secular, just like the circles in which the biblical Esther moves.

Honor is not necessarily a virtue as such, it 'was an "expectation" name' (p. 13). On the one hand, Honor is a mirror image of Ahasuerus, who wanted to be honoured and flattered by everyone. Honour means obedience, and Esther obeys Honor's wish in such a way that it also serves her own purposes: a Jewish child raised as an ordinary, non-Jewish human being, in an attempt to safeguard him from antisemitism. On the other hand, Honor is the (feminist) image of God the Father, for as an asexual, she wants to have a child and adopts Jimmy, who is not genetically related to her, yet shares many of her values, as he is brought up in her family. Similarly, God has created human beings in his image, though they are not genetically related to him, and God has adopted human beings as his children.

Mieke (Koster) is the Dutch girlfriend of the lesbian Jolanda (Lammers). Although this character is not easily intertextually connected to the BE, it is worthwhile mentioning her here, for her name is symbolic of the field of intertextuality. The name Mieke might refer to a famous Dutch literary scholar and semiotician Mieke Bal. She is about the same age as the Mieke in QE and a married feminist. She is famous for her advocacy for women's

emancipation and her aversion to traditional gender roles.[137] She was the first woman to be appointed full professor by the Royal Dutch Academy of Sciences (KNAW), and the first female Academy professor for the University of Amsterdam UvA.[138] She also critiqued narratologist Gérard Genette about his notion of 'focalisation' which is similar what was formerly called 'point of view' or 'perspective'. And she wrote a book from a feminist point of view about the Bible, *Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories* (1987). As John Irving intentionally plays with different points of view, including feminism, and a wide range of literary techniques, the name of Mieke does not seem randomly chosen. QE certainly is influenced by a feminist perspective on the Biblical story of Esther, but it also moves the story on via an NT perspective into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Yehuda is Jimmy's Israeli publisher, but he does not like to appear in public, he remains a mysterious figure in the background. His name is an allusion to Mordecai in the BE, who is significantly referred to as HaYehuda (Esth 5:13; 6:10; 8:7; 9:3; 10:3).[139] Mordechai also remained in the background until he was honoured for saving King Ahasverus' life (Esth 6).

6.7.2 Languages

As Persia of the BE was a multi-cultural society, all decrees were issued in all the languages of the empire (1:22; 3:12; 8:9). Similarly, the twentieth century of QE witnesses a growing

[137] Romy Van der Houwen, 'De visie van feministe Mieke Bal op vrouwenemancipatie door de jaren heen', *Lover*, 7 mei 2025, https://www.tijdschriftlover.nl/interviews/de_visie_van_feministe_mieke_bal_op_vrouwenemancipatie_door_de_jaren_heen.

[138] 'Mieke Bal', Wikipedia, 1 december 2025, https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mieke_Bal.

[139] Bush, Frederic, *Ruth/Esther*, vol. 9, World Biblical Commentary (Word Books Publishers, 1996), 312-313.

internationalisation, of which the many languages in the novel give evidence, including Yiddish, German, Dutch, Russian, and Turkish. Some examples are given below.

Right at the start of QE, the *French*-Canadian *au pairs* of the Winslows are mentioned (p. 7-8). The second and third *au pairs*, Lucie and Denise, are taken from the same French Canadian orphanage. Both girls are native French speakers, which is to the advantage of the Winslow girls Hope and Prudence for their school education. Most French-Canadian families in Pennacook do not speak French, apart from some grandparents (p. 28). This relates to the first decree issued in Esth 1:22, which stated family should speak the language of the husband and father.

In connection with higher education, the *Latin* mottos are important for the story. The Pennacook Academy has as their motto *Finis Origine Pendet* meaning "The End Depends Upon the Beginning"; Constance's Alma Mater, Abbot Academy, had as her moto *Facem Praetendit Ardentem*, meaning 'She Holds Aloft a Burning Torch' (p. 37). Her old university at Wellesley College had a motto that inspired Esther, *Non Ministrari sed Ministrare*, meaning 'Not to Be Ministered unto, but to Minister' (p. 86). The first motto relates to the BE, since the ancestry of Mordecai and Esther is given in Esth 2:5-7, and leads to expect a period of struggle with a hopeful ending of the story. The second motto does not have direct links with the BE, but is meant to be inspiring, because of the burning light. And the third motto has both an OT and a NT bearing, since it is implied by Esther's serving her people by risking her life in the E, and a quote from Jesus in Matt 20:28 predicting his death to save his people.

6.7.3 Creativity with syntax and semantics

It is not, however, only the variety of languages that receives attention, but also the way words do or do not go together. When they talk about Esther's activities and the Zionist

paramilitary organization Haganah for Defense and their official policy Havlagah (meaning 'Restraint'), Thomas Winslow says, "Defense and restraint sound potentially contradictory to me" (p. 110) and the narrator adds, 'Everyone knew that restraint didn't come naturally to Esther'. This reminds of Esth 8-9, where the law for defense was formulated including the 'plundering of their goods' (Esth 8:11), but apart from defending themselves, 'they did not lay their hands on the plunder' (Esth 9:10).

The characters also create new expressions, such as 'to be Esther' (p. 163) and 'to do an Esther' (168-169). The Winslows and the Rosenthals all went to see the movie *High Noon* again, because Esther had said that Fred Zinnemann made a Jewish Western, but they had not recognized that the producer was Jewish. Now after a second time watching, the Winslows still did not get it, so Constance suggests that "May be you have to be Jewish to get what's Jewish about it". But the Rosenthals did not get it either, so Naomi said, "Maybe you have to be *Esther* to get what's Jewish about *High Noon"*. Thus indicating how personal the reception of a film (or any text) is, depending on one's own context as an audience.

'Doing an Esther', however, is different. It relates to Honor's proposal that Chantal would become pregnant of the child that Jimmy is going take care of as a single parent, just like Esther bore the child that Honor raised on her own. 'Doing an Esther' is imitating her actions; but 'being Esther' is something unique and cannot be copied. This difference between being (identity) and doing (acting, behaving) is relevant to the theme of religion, where actions reveal identity and belonging. In BE Esther's and Mordecai's actions show that they belong to the Jewish people, but also that they invite other people to join them; and in QE Esther's and Annelies' actions show that they share the common goal of bringing Jews and other people to safety. James and Siegfried are examples of two people thus 'saved', but also of people adopting a similar attitude.

6.7.4 Speaking many languages and mediation/translation

It is also important to note that, when Annelies tells Jimmy that she is going to Argentina to join the wrestlers Simon and Solomon, she says, "and I'm good at languages, Jimmy" (p. 327-328), indicating that she speaks many languages. This is emphasized again when, after she had been killed by the roadside car bomb, Siegfried tells Jimmy, "'It had happened in Hebron, in the West Bank, where Annelies was working as a mediator—what people who are good at languages do" (p. 400). The languages and the mediation are allusions to the role that Esther plays in BE, speaking Aramean and/or Hebrew and Persian, and mediating for her people. They might also be taken as allusions to the role of the Holy Spirit in the book of Acts and Paul's first letter to the Corinthians and to that of Christ in the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament (NT).

The attention to translations of Jimmy's works illustrate how important knowledge of languages is in finding a wider audience for worldviews and (religious) ideas. A bittersweet humoristic or ironic remark is that there were no Hebrew words for 'the often profane—or vulgar or sexually explicit' words in English, so the translator used Arabic word for "these unmentionable things" (p. 392).

6.7.5 Reading, writing, and tattoos

Reading and writing are an important motif in QE: it brought Thomas and Constance together, it helped Jimmy cope with dyslexia, it provides information about ancestry. Like the BE, QE assigns an important role to communication by letter writing. First the correspondence between the Winslows and dr. Larch and later the correspondence between Esther and Honor, the correspondence between Honor and Jimmy, and in the end also between Jimmy and Esther. A particular way of writing is the writing of a tattoo. This happens twice, with Annelies and Esther.

Annelies shows her tattoo to Jimmy, 'above her breast was Proposition 1 from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, "*Die Welt ist alles*"' (p. 313) without the continuation "*was der Fall ist*". "James Winslow decided he only half liked Wittgenstein, too" (p. 313). The interesting thing is that the word 'Fall' exists both in English and in German. The German word means '(grammatical) case', or 'incident', 'event', but can also mean 'the action or event of falling down'. English shares this meaning of 'Fall' as 'the action of falling down', but it can also be a noun meaning 'autumn', or 'the Fall', i.e. the act of original sin committed as a consequence of seduction. This is exactly what Esther in the BE had to recognize and overcome: she chose to risk the world in which she seemingly had everything, a queen in luxury. But she increasingly became aware that that would not last. She saw seduction and threat for what they were and grasped the one option for survival: appeal to the king and most likely trust in God.

Esther's tattoo was discussed in section 6.6 from the perspective of Thomas and Constance Winslow. One more interesting detail should be added here, that Esther wants the words ' "I am" 'just above her navel' (p. 73). This might be an allusion to the I AM, or the Jewish God JHWH, as the center of her body, her life. But as she had 'decided that she didn't believe in God' (p. 57), this might well mean that she considers herself the center of her own life.

6.7.6 Conventionality, diversity, and feminism

Another important motif is the increase in diversity in the novel. It is far more explicit than the gender issue in Esth 1. While the two eldest Winslow girls and their parents follow the conventional path of heterosexual marriage with children, the third daughter Prudence values work above marriage and the fourth daughter Honor is asexual (p. 96), yet becomes a single mum of Esther's son. Esther says, "It's my baby, but he or she will be Honor's

child" (p. 114). Thus, in practice Esther serves as a surrogate mother conceiving of and bearing the child, while biologically, Honor is the surrogate mother, because she takes all subsequent parental responsibility in practice. Chantal Beaudette is an exception in her family, in that she would like to marry, but does not want to have any children. As the main events in the novel are controlled by women, the novel can be categorised as being written from a feminist point of view.

6.7.7 Triangle relationships

The 'love triangle' or *Dreieckverhältniss* of Jimmy, Mieke, and Jolanda (p. 320) is not the only triangle relationship in the book. The triangle itself seems a recurrent motif. To name a few: As foreign students, Jimmy, Claude, and Jolanda form a triangle relationship. In his family lineage, Jimmy forms a triangle relationship with Honor and Esther on the one hand, but also as the child of his biological parents with Esther and Moshe. But as the object of care from his biological mother, he is in triangle relationship with Esther and Annelies. Similar triangle relationships can be detected in the BE: Esther with Hathach and Mordecai (Esth 4:10) and Esther with Mordecai and the king (Esth 8:1-2). And if one assumes the active hidden presence of God one could assume also a triangle relationship of Esther and Mordechai with God.

6.7.8 Hiding and vagueness

As explained in chapter 4, the name of Esther can be explained as hidden or hiding. This element is an important motif in QE. Thomas and Constance worry about both Honor's and Esther's vagueness and silence (p. 113-114) about Esther's activities abroad, while they were very clear about the baby Esther will give to Honor. When the sisters talk about their discoveries about the BE, they emphasise hiding an hiddenness (p. 384). When James is in Israel he wonders "wasn't Esther's hiddenness of Biblical proportions? [..] Didn't it suit the

one-armed one to be incognito?' (p. 404). Hiddenness plays an equally important role in the BE, as Esther hides her identity until her second dinner the king and Haman (Esth 7:3), and God remains hidden altogether, but glimpses of his working behind the scenes can be detected.

6.7.9 Wrestling

Wrestling is an autobiographical detail from the life of the author John Irving, but it also plays an important role in this book. Wrestling is a recurrent motif, because Jimmy's father Moshe was an important wrestler and Jimmy himself joins the wrestling team in Pennacook Academy and the wrestling program in Vienna. It does not only refer to the physical sport, but it is also a metaphor for the way people, and Esther and Jimmy in particular, struggle to find their origins and their destinies. The wrestling also has biblical connotations, as Esther in the BE also wrestles with hiding or revealing her identity (Esth 4 and 7), and Jacob wrestled with God and men (Gen 32:29), after which he is blessed and receives his new name Israel. This it is related to Jewish identity, in fact the whole Israeli history. Moreover the entire human history is a history of wrestling with men and God.

6.7.10 Planning

The motif of planning is recurrent throughout the book. Esther plans her tattoo and is determined to go to Jerusalem and Vienna (p. 72-73). 'Esther had her own timeline [..] Esther says her baby will be born in 1941' (p. 95) 'But Esther Nacht knew how to bide her time—she was planning ahead' (p. 110). Eventually, Thomas was born on 2 March that year, (p. 128). This reminds of the biblical Esther who also prudently planned her audience with the king, and the two banquets as preparation for her revelation and request (Esth 3:16; 5:4, 7; 7:3-6; 8:5). Honor has all kinds of plans for Jimmy to escape drafting, a knee injury during wrestling, but as this does not work, she devised the plan of surrogate

motherhood via Chantal, but Jimmy eventually realizes this with Mieke (p. 191-192; 223; 235-237; 318-322; 365).

Jolanda feels threatened by Hildegund and her thugs. The three students and the wrestlers devise a plan of defence by presenting themselves as weak and defenceless, more or less luring the Austrian friends of Hildegund. They practise and are attacked just after Easter (p. 283-294). This reminds of Esth 3:7, where Haman cast the Pur, in the first month Nissan, around Easter time, and the actual attack was in the twelfth month (Esth 9:1). In the third month (Esth 8:9) the decree permitting defence was distributed, so that there was ample time for the Jews to prepare their defence.

6.7.11 Repetition and reversal

As can be seen from the various motifs mentioned above, repetition itself is also a motif. Life is a variation of repetitive elements, often in the same way, but sometimes in reverse order or with reverse effect, contrary to expectation. As the very first Puritans, the Winslow ancestors, fled Europe because of religious persecution and to find freedom in the United States, so Esther Nacht's parents also fled Europe because of antisemitism and hoping to find a peaceful place in the US. They all lived in exile, like the biblical Esther.

Unlike the biblical Esther, Jimmy and Esther Nacht, however, voluntarily revisit the places where their ancestors came from. And whereas Esther Nacht is determined to stay in the land of Israel, Jimmy only visits this country for work and out of curiosity to meet his birth mother, intending to go back to the USA. He is one of the many assimilated Jews that feel at home in the diaspora, like the biblical Esther. While his birth mom Esther strives for a safe place for her people in Palestine, later Israel, and is forced to be involved in armed battles, Jimmy does his best to stay out of the Vietnam war, helped by his mother Honor and friends, especially Mieke. Their daughter Vienna is raised in the USA with her father

and regularly visits the Netherlands, to meet with her two mothers. As agreed there is no hiding of parents for her.

QE contains a structure similar to BE with the rise and downfall of Hildegund, first as the new girlfriend of Jolanda's (p. 214-216), which became a disappointment (p.230); and led to a later unmasking her as the enemy full of hatred for *Ausländer* (p. 231), who was finally defeated during the attack (p. 280-286). It illustrates the ever present hatred of foreigners and disapproval of that which is different. The main development works towards the climax in the final chapter of QE, which is the coming of age of both Esther and James, each in their own processes and each arriving at their own destinies.

6.8 Conclusion

This chapter has compared the characters and events in QE with the story of the BE. QE is definitely recognizable as a contemporary version of the BE, but it has a wider outlook, in that its narrative about twentieth century events presents a secular humanistic point of view, while also alluding to the biblical Esther and to Jewish and Christian worldviews and motifs. Although Esther and James share the same Jewish biological roots and partially the same upbringing with the Winslows, Esther chooses to join and stay with her people in Israel as a non-religious Jew, while James chooses to move back to the USA as an assimilated non-religious Jew. Esther's identity is specifically Jewish, while James's identity is clearly cosmopolitan. Both are non-religious, yet the overall impression is, that they both identify with an inner drive, a life-giving spirit, by trying to save people from destruction.

The next chapter discusses what the intertextual analyses of chapters 5 and 6 mean for a Reformed reading of the BE in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 7

Consequences for a contemporary Reformed reading of Biblical *Esther* (BE)

7.1 Introduction

The present study set out to answer the main research question: what does the analysis of intertextual relationships between the BE on the one hand and HN and QE on the other contribute to the significance of a Reformed reading of BE for contemporary culture? In the previous chapters all but one of the sub-questions have been answered. This chapter first relates the conclusions of the first five sub-questions, followed by the final question of how Reformed Theology (RT) can fruitfully explain and apply BE in times like ours.

7.2 Traditional Reformed analysis of *Esther*

Chapter 2 answered the first sub-question: what is the traditional twentieth century Reformed theological analysis of the BE and how does it relate to other Christian and Jewish analyses? The conclusion was that RT takes the BE to be a historically reliable story with undeniable literary quality that plays a significant part in salvation history. The BE focuses on the hidden agency of God, working on the salvation of his people. He is in control of all events and invites people to cooperate, but is not dependent on their cooperation, for he can organise 'relief and deliverance [..] from another place' (Esth 4:14) as well. God's principal method of working on salvation is through reversal of situations that threaten his people: Queen Vashti and highest official to the king, Haman, each meet their downfall, so that Queen Esther and Mordecai can take their places and serve as

instruments in saving their people from defenceless massacre. In the light of ongoing salvation history, RT maintains that the Jewish people in Esther's time were saved because of God's promise that the Saviour would be from Jewish descent.

7.3 Intertextuality and literary analysis

Chapter 3 answered sub-questions 2 and 3: (2) what is intertextuality theory and how does this relate to inner-biblical exegesis? And (3) which intertextual methodology is best for the comparative analyses of BE on the one hand and HN and QE on the other? The conclusion was that intertextuality theory in its purest form is too extensive to apply to a comparative analysis of texts, since it takes not only written texts, but also any object or event as 'text' that interrelates with any other 'text'. Instead, this study limits intertextuality relations to relations between written texts. Whereas the original form of intertextuality disregards author intent, this study extends intertextuality to include author intention, since this study considers texts to be means of communication, by which an author sends an intended message to an audience. This connects with the way inner-biblical exegesis works, where the ultimate author is God, who inspires Scripture. The audience will try to discover the author's intent, and will also attach meaning via other intertextual relationships, depending on their personal contextual knowledge.

Intertextuality works in both diachronic and synchronic ways. Diachronic intertextuality refers to the influence of an older text on a newer text, so that the influence of BE can be found in HN and QE. This is the way in which inner-biblical exegesis and allusions has often been done. However, synchronic intertextuality means that knowledge of a newer text will also influence the interpretation of an older text. So through the intertextual relation of HN and QE with BE, the interpretation of BE will be enriched.

The best way for the comparison of intertextual relations between the BE on the one hand, and HN and QE on the other, is the comparison of their literary features, as all three works are recognised for their literary qualities.

7.4 Literary criteria and intertextual comparison of HN and QE with BE

The fourth sub-question is answered in chapters 4, 5, and 6: what literary criteria are key to the textual analysis of BE and how do these compare to HN and QE? It is concluded that the features are both textual and paratextual, including autobiographic elements of the author, the title, genre, narrative plot and narrative style, characters, themes, and motifs. It was concluded that whereas BE is a historical short story, HN is a historical novel, while QE is a fictional historical novel, also known as a *roman à clef* with features of a family saga and a *Bildungsroman*.

The main themes of survival and hidden (divine) providence that are prominently present in the BE, are also shared with HN and QE. The topic of anti-Jewish feelings and antisemitism is closely related to the theme of survival (BE), or right to live (HN) and is sometimes analysed as a motif (BE and HN) but seems an important subtheme in QE where it is part of a larger moral issue of xenophobia.

The following motifs also occur in all three stories, but differ in prominence: whereas BE focuses on the major motifs of reversal of fate, feasting, and fasting; HN shares these, but gives also more prominence to the motifs of rules and laws, and anti-Jewish feelings of hatred and antisemitism; and QE puts more emphasis on the motifs of language and reading, and wrestling. QE treats xenophobia and antisemitism more of a theme, and hiding and vagueness has become a motif, especially concerning the character of Esther.

The BE is a relatively simple story with few characters covering a few years in a local situation, whereas HN is already more complex, because it covers half a century of international developments, although it is focused on the five-year period of the Second World War in the Netherlands. It also has a wider outlook via the international contacts in the concentration camps in Nazi-Germany. And QE is even more complex, covering eighty years of the twentieth century and three continents with different foci on the USA (Pennsylvania), Austria (Vienna), and Palestine/Israel (Jerusalem). Therefore, it is not surprising that the range of themes and especially motifs are far greater for the novels of HN and QE. The effects of this on the contemporary interpretation of the story of the BE is the topic of the next section.

7.5 Contribution of intertextuality to contemporary theological significance of BE

The fifth question asked in the introductory chapter was: what does the intertextual comparison of BE on the one hand and HN and QE on the other contribute to the contemporary theological significance of BE? Essentially, I believe the intertextual relations of HN and QE with BE contribute to our contemporary culture the awareness that this world needs to be redeemed from evil. The same evil that is underlying the genocidal plans of Haman in BE, is also the basis for present day antisemitism and xenophobia. In essence, all people long for peace and quiet and a place to really live. The practical question is at the same time a theological question: how do we maintain a situation of peace? And where can we go for help? The BE and the contemporary historical novels all show that mere human efforts are insufficient, at most providing a temporal relief. The stories show that evil keeps coming back.

Even if the stories have a happy ending, we know history has moved on and evil has manifested itself repeatedly. The peace and quiet in *The High Nest* was disturbed by betrayal (HN p. 220), and even the liberation was an event of bittersweet joy, because so many loved ones had died. And the eighty years since have only proven that peace did not last. Similarly, the hoped for safe place in the USA that Esther's parents envisaged turned out to be just as antisemitic as the Austria that they had left in 1905 (QE p. 62-63), while the end of the Second World War and a hoped for safe country of Israel on Palestinian soil did not mean the end of antisemitism, nor the end of war in that region, either.

Today witnesses the sad climax in recent history since 7 October 2023, when Hamas brutally attacked Jewish people celebrating their Simchat Torah festival, the joy of the law. The response has been many times harsher than any OT law would permit, allowing an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, and much less restricted than the defence that Esther and Mordecai organised. They only considered those who took up their weapons against them as the enemies that should be slain, while refusing to lay hands on the plunder (Esth 9:10, 15). Today the Israeli forces do not take the effort of finding out who the actual enemy is, but are out to annihilate an entire neighbouring people, demolishing their possessions and taking their land.

And if there were no police in the Netherlands to protect the defenceless immigrants in our country, certain xenophobic groups would attack these foreigners, without even knowing why they are here in the first place. It is to be hoped that we do not get a situation as in the USA, where a government institution ICE perform razzias among illegal immigrants, treating them like dirt instead of people, made in the image of God.

Thus, the intertextual relations show that hatred inspired violence leads to a vicious circle of death and destruction. A situation no human mediator can ultimately solve. Therefore,

it is important to note that the BE brings its biblical context into the intertextual situation. The context of the biblical canon offers an explanation and application of BE that benefits contemporary culture, as is the topic of the final section of this study.

7.6 A fruitful Reformed reading of BE for contemporary times

The final sub-question is: how can Reformed Theology (RT) fruitfully explain and apply the BE in times like ours? I think that it is a fair starting point is that the BE shares the setting of a secular world with our times. A world in which, as the previous section showed, combating evil is the greatest problem. History has shown that we are in a vicious circle, if we do not find help from outside, because as the bible says evil is inside each of us (Ps 14:1-3; Rom 3:10-12).

The BE, interpreted in the context of the Biblical canon, shows that God is the helper of people in distress. And he helps from behind the scenes. No-one has ever seen God (John 1:18), even Moses, with whom God talked personally could not see God's face, God's glory (Exod 33:20-23), nor could Elijah see God, but he heard his voice in a whisper (1 Kings 19:12-13). In the story of Esther, however, God remains purposefully unmentioned. None of the events are overtly assigned to his power.

Yet, based on the entire biblical context, RT believes that God is omnipotent and omnipresent, always at work with his power sustaining and providing for his entire creation, including his people.[140] This does not mean that there will be no hardship, pain, or suffering, but that God will always provide for his people, even in difficult circumstances, which requires trust and faithfulness. The BE is an example of this from

[140] See article 13 of the Belgic Confession and Sunday 10 of the Heidelberger Catechism in Marinus de Jong, *Wij belijden,* 34-35, 74-75.

the late fifth century BCE, and the contemporary historical novel of HN is an example from the twentieth century. The fictional novel of QE illustrates the same kind of salvatory power, and can also inspire people more easily, because it describes even more recent times.[141]

The BE thus shows that God remains in the background, but works for the salvation of his people. He gives people the responsibility to care for each other and join in with him, but he is not dependent on their cooperation, as is indicated by Mordecai saying to Esther, 'if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. And who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?' (Esth 4:14). This means that people have to choose how to respond to that invitation. And the choice will determine one's destiny and reveal one's identity.

Before Esther takes up her responsibility, she has to decide about her identity: does she want to be associated with her new place, as an assimilated person, queen to a pagan king, and co-ruler of a pagan empire with all the present advantages? Or does she acknowledge her familial descent from the Jewish people, the people of God, and is she willing to risk her life for her people's sake? Here ancestry is important, but not decisive, for God leaves her a choice, and even non-Jews are welcomed to join the Jewish people in Esth 8:16.

Similarly, each person has to make these choices: where do I belong, where do I want to belong? As Lien in HN and Esther and Jimmy in QE are searching for their identity and the way of life that is the consequence of that choice, so contemporary people are encouraged by the BE to search for their true identity and make that choice like Esther. It

[141] See Bert de Leede en Ciska Stark, *Ontvouwen. Protestantse Prediking in de Praktijk* (Boekencentrum, 2017), 200. They advocate the use of contemporary stories for preaching.

is important to note that both BE and the two novels show that one's identity is not so much related to one's past, as it is to one's future, one's destiny. It is not one's genes, but one's heart, one's inner conviction that is leading.

The story of Esther is honest about the difficulties this choice may involve, but it also gives an indication of the ways in which one finds courage. Esther engages her servants and her people into fasting (Esth 4:16), a time of contemplation and supplication, which in the Jewish tradition always involves praying, as we saw in chapter 4 above. Praying to God means trusting that he will do what is good, that he is working on the salvation of creation.

And one of the steps in that ultimate salvation is that the Jewish people should be saved to bring forth the Messiah who would redeem his people and the entire world. Esther lived about five hundred years before Jesus. She was an instrument in God's saving his people. And her people were not only those who were part of the Jewish people, but also those people from the then known world that joined the Jews, because they feared or had respect for them (Esth 8:17), and possibly also for their God (4.9.5). In this respect it is interesting that John Irving has a rabbi say about Esther's mother who was afraid for her, that 'fear is love' (QE p. 66).

The fact that non-Jews feared/respected/loved the Jews shows that Esther and her fellow Jews had somehow spread the news about their God and were hospitable to those who sided with them. In this sense, Esther was obedient to God's law of love, although she did not follow the instructions for kosher food or not marrying foreign people, as she and her people did welcome good-willing non-Jews. This fits well with Gen 22:18 where God says to Abraham, 'and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice', as well as with Exod 19:5b where God says that all the peoples

and all the earth are his possession, while at the same time Israel was chosen for special mission. And that mission is to be priests, i.e. to be a blessing to the world.

This commission of being a blessing to others is also a responsibility for the contemporary reader of the BE today, whether Jew or Christian, for this is how God's Torah is fulfilled, as also advised by Paul in one of the many NT paraphrases of the law in Romans 12:1-21. This includes self-sacrifice, humble service, and even blessing and showing hospitality to your enemy, giving him food and drink (Prov 25:21-22). Esther did all this when she risked her life asking audience with the king and when she invited Haman to her dinners. At that time she did not repay evil with evil, nor did she take revenge (Esth 7), for she went to plea with the king for the lives of her people and she left revenge with him. If it had depended on her, she would have lived in peace with everyone. But there was one person representing ultimate evil, deep hatred, Haman. It was the king who decided on Haman's death on the pole.

As BE is also a literary story that is meant to teach us (cf. 2 Tim 3:16), I would say that King Ahasuerus here stands for the King of Kings, who ultimately annihilates evil, while Haman is the personification of that evil. Also, the story has to come back to Haman's decree (Esth 3:13) and its execution (Esth 9:1-2), as it does with Mordecai's decree (Esth 8:11) and its execution (Esth 9:1-2), while the officials supported Mordecai. The king allows judgement for the evildoers, which reminds of the final judgement that God is going to execute on the last day, to provide himself and his people rest from his and their enemy. But this is looking ahead of times. In the meantime, it seems relevant to connect the violent defence of Esth 9 with the advice Paul gives in Romans 13:4, that government authorities bear the sword for a reason, namely, to ensure the safety of the people. It is a warning for

individuals not to take the law into one's own hands, but also for governments to only use the sword against wrongdoing.

These violent clashes in Esth 9 and the peaceful rule of Mordecai in Esth 10, show that God has caused a significant reversal to save his people from destruction. In the same movement he saved the world at that time from a violent ruler filled with hatred. Haman's downfall starts in Esth 6, when Ahasuerus suffers from insomnia and reads about Mordecai's saving action, disclosing a conspiracy to kill the king.

It is this coincidence of the king's insomnia and his reading the annals that reveals the hidden presence and agency of God. This is preceded by the king's unexpected welcoming attitude to Esther, who presents herself without being summoned (Esth 5) and followed by the king's (often wavering) favour being for Esther and against Haman (Esth 7). Esther's plea for life in Esth 7:3 and her complaint in Esth 7:4 alert the king and bring about a full reversal in the situation and the roles.

This is all beyond the control of Esther and Mordecai, which proves that God has been in control all along. And this can only be recognised in hindsight, after the entire story has developed, it is impossible to see when one is in the middle of the situation. God's redeeming the people in the BE also keeps the way open for the coming of the Messiah who will redeem the world.

Now that Jesus Christ has fulfilled that role, earning forgiveness for all, and his disciples have evangelized the world, the Jewish people are called to also acknowledge him as their Messiah. Because of their role in salvation history, they are still a special people, for God had chosen them for a mission, 'if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Exod 19:5-6).

But when the people indicated that they were afraid to listen to God directly, Moses promised them before his death, that 'The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen' (Deut 18:15), which is quoted by Peter in Acts 3:22-23. And to King David God promised, 'I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son' (2 Sam 7:12-14). Christians believe that these prophesies all speak of Jesus Christ, and that those who listen to him become children of God. 'No one has ever seen God; God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known' (John 1:18) .

During Jesus' life God also controlled all events and showed his omnipotent power, without the people realizing it. Even though Jesus preached the Kingdom of God and emphasised his power by healing the sick and even raising the dead, most people did not see he was the long prophesied Messiah. He fought with the weapons of love and seemed destroyed by death. But then and there God caused the greatest reversal of all times, turning Jesus' death into life not only for himself, but for all those who believe in him. Only after his death and resurrection, some started to see and believe, and preach.

It is this power of God's love that overcomes the greatest enemy, but invites in all other people. And God's love will transform all those who come to him into loving children of God, because they will have experienced his forgiveness and will want to pass that on, inviting still others in the circle of God's love, regardless of racial or national background, sexual orientation, gender, or political preference. Such a community will be sustained by prayer and the Holy Spirit. The faithful will rejoice in the LORD and be aware of their own

weaknesses and therefore their dependence on God's faithfulness and creative power of love.

It will be good for them to realise that they still live in a secular world, where they only still see glimpses of God, and where they have a responsibility to shine like stars in a dark world (Phil 2:15). As did Esther in the Persian times of the BE, and Jannie and Lien and their husbands in the Second World War as described in HN. As is also exemplified by the imaginary characters of QE, where Esther worked in the background to help save the Jews, and Annelies cared for Jimmy, but also saved Siegfried from a xenophobic and antisemitic worldview, and finally died during a saving action of Palestinian children.

The problem remains that evil, though beaten on the cross at Calvary, still has time to seduce people and that some people are in its grip and just do not seem to want to be saved. If people are filled with hatred towards another person or group of people, it is the Christian task to win them over through kindness and prayer. But it is only God who can change hearts and who has the final judgement over all. He provides his grace to all those who accept his invitation and belong to Jesus Christ.

7.7 Conclusions

This study has investigated the contribution of intertextual relations between the BE on the one hand and HN and QE on the other for the significance of a Reformed reading of BE for contemporary culture. It has shown that the common literary themes and motifs against completely different socio-cultural backgrounds enrich our contemporary understanding of BE, making the more clear that human efforts cannot drive out evil, for it keeps coming back.

It has proven that BE is still relevant, if only by the fact that authors in the twenty-first century have taken-up the challenge to use BE as a source, and readers see parallels in the stories. The true story of HN can be used as an example to be followed, and the fictional story of QE can be used as illustration. Both novels bring the story of *Esther* closer to the experience of twenty-first century readers and inspire an application into their times.

The Reformed reading of Esther makes clear there is a way out of the vicious circle of hatred, violence, and revenge. This is by acknowledging that human efforts are not enough to eradicate evil. That we need help from outside: God is our helper. God who created the world is also the one who sustains it. He is in control behind the scenes and invites people to choose join him, to find our identity in him. God himself has conquered evil and death through his Son Jesus Christ, who gave his life in the greatest reversal of all time. So that all who believe in him receive eternal life and are transformed in his image, empowered to follow his footsteps, so that they are willing to share his love and forgiveness in order to also encourage others to honour the God of creation.

Summary

The present study focuses on intertextuality relations between, on the one hand, the Biblical book of Esther (BE) in the Hebrew Bible (HB) and two contemporary historical novels—*'t Hooge Nest* (HN) *Queen Esther* (QE)—on the other. The first chapter provides some key definitions, discusses the academic and sociocultural relevance, and presents the main research question: What does the analysis of intertextual relationships between the BE on the one hand and HN and QE on the other contribute to the significance a Reformed reading of BE for contemporary culture?

The second chapter discusses the Christian interpretation of the BE in the twentieth century Reformed tradition, and shows different views on its historicity, dating, and literary value, including themes like secularism, God's hidden presence, nationalism, and its place in the canon.

In chapter 3 the meaning and method of intertextuality are explained and defined within the interdisciplinary academic discussion of philosophy, cognitive linguistics, and literature. The position taken is that in the present research intertextuality is restricted to relationships between texts, as opposed to any objects, with significant importance placed on authorial intent, since a literary text is also a communicative medium conveying an intended message from an author to an audience.

Chapter 4 prepares for a later comparison of BE with HN and QE, respectively, by providing a literary analysis of the biblical story. This analysis shows that BE is a historical short story, fed by real historic events, but embellished by literary form. The narrative style of irony and the motif of reversal play an important role emphasising the message of the story that people may plan, but situational coincidences can turn human planning upside

down and reverse circumstances completely. The major themes are survival and hidden divine providence.

Chapters 5 and 6 perform a literary comparison with BE of HN and QE, respectively. The two novels share the main themes and motifs of BE, thus showing that the message of BE is still relevant for contemporary culture, whether it concerns factual history, as HN, or historical fiction, as QE.

Chapter 7 answers the sub-questions posed in the introductory chapter and proposes a fruitful Reformed reading of BE contemporary culture as implied by the intertextual relations discussed in chapters 5 and 6. It shows that for a fruitful contemporary reading of the BE, contemporary secular novels like HN and QE can be used as illustrations of the Biblical message: God remains hidden in a secular world, but has full control over all events and continues his plan of salvation, with or without cooperation of particular individuals. However, God invites people to join him in his redeeming work. This places a great responsibility on people to choose their identity with God and act accordingly.

Samenvatting

Deze masterscriptie spitst zich toe op relaties van intertekstualiteit tussen aan de ene kant het bijbelboek *Ester* (BE) uit de Hebreeuwse Bijbel (HB) en aan de andere kant twee hedendaagse historische romans, *'t Hooge Nest* (HN) en *Queen Esther* (QE). Het eerste hoofdstuk geeft een aantal belangrijke definities, bespreekt de academische en sociaal-culturele relevantie, en presenteert de hoofdvraag voor het onderzoek: Wat draagt de analyse van intertekstuele relaties tussen het BE aan de ene kant en de romans HN en QE aan de andere kant bij aan de betekenis van een gereformeerde lezing van het BE voor onze hedendaagse cultuur?

Het tweede hoofdstuk bespreekt de christelijke interpretatie van BE in de gereformeerde traditie van de twintigste eeuw en laat verschillende gezichtspunten langskomen met betrekking tot de historiciteit, de datering, en de literaire waarde van BE, inclusief de bespreking van thema's als secularisme, Gods verborgen aanwezigheid, nationalisme, en de plek in de canon.

In hoofdstuk 3 worden de betekenis en de methode van intertekstualiteit uitgelegd en gedefinieerd binnen de interdisciplinaire academische discussie van filosofie, cognitieve taalkunde, en literatuur. De positie die ingenomen wordt is dat intertekstualiteit voor dit onderzoek beperkt wordt tot relaties tussen teksten, dus niet ook tussen allerlei objecten, waarbij er met nadruk belang wordt gehecht aan de intentie van de schrijver, omdat een literaire tekst ook een communicatief medium is dat een bedoelde boodschap overbrengt van een auteur naar een lezerspubliek.

Hoofdstuk 4 is een voorbereiding op de latere vergelijkingen van BE met HN, respectievelijk QE. Het geeft een literaire analyse van het Bijbelverhaal. Deze analyse komt erop uit dat BE een historisch kort verhaal is, gevoed door echte historische gebeurtenissen,

maar dat het ook voor literaire doeleinden verfraaid is. De ironische narratieve stijl en het motief van omkering spelen een belangrijke rol bij het benadrukken van de boodschap van het verhaal, namelijk dat mensen wel plannen kunnen maken, maar dat situationele toevalligheden deze menselijke planning volledig onderuit kunnen halen en compleet kunnen veranderen in het tegenovergestelde. De belangrijkste thema's zijn overleving en verborgen goddelijke voorzienigheid.

De hoofdstukken 5 en 6 vergelijken HN en QE elk met BE met betrekking tot hun literaire aspecten. De twee romans delen de hoofdthema's en motieven met BE. Daarmee laten ze zien dat de boodschap van BE nog steeds relevant is voor de hedendaagse cultuur, of het nu een feitelijke geschiedenis, zoals HN, of historische fictie, zoals QE, betreft.

Hoofdstuk 7, tenslotte, beantwoordt de deelvragen die in het introductiehoofdstuk zijn gesteld en stelt een vruchtbare gereformeerde lezing voor van BE voor de hedendaagse cultuur. Het laat zien dat voor een vruchtbare hedendaagse lezing van BE de gereformeerde theologie dankbaar gebruik kan maken van hedendaagse seculiere romans als HN en QE, omdat die als historisch voorbeeld en fictieve illustratie kunnen worden gebruikt van de Bijbelse kernboodschap: God blijft verborgen in een seculiere wereld, maar heeft overal volledige controle over. Hij gaat door met zijn reddingsplan, onafhankelijk van menselijke medewerking, maar hij nodigt mensen wel uit om deel te hebben aanzijn reddingswerk. Dit plaatst een grote verantwoordelijkheid op mensen om voor hun identiteit in God te kiezen en vandaaruit te handelen.

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