Esther's Family:
Ethnicity, Politics and Religion

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1. Introduction

The choice to focus on the Book of Esther derives from the fact that, for various reasons, this book presents itself to as a problematic and interesting *unicum* within the spectrum of biblical books. Because of this it constitutes a kind of exegetical 'laboratory' in which some questions are still waiting for perhaps unexpected answers: "Die Problematik des Buches ist so reich und noch so wenig gelöst, daß die Beschäftigung sich lohnt."[1] One of these questions concerns family and parental links, and their relationship with ethnicity, politics and religion.

Within the confines of this present essay,[2] I intend to consider this subject, taking into account the textual pluriformity of the book of Esther, above all between the Masoretic Text (henceforth Esth[MT])[3] and the LXX (henceforth Esth[LXX]).[4] Even with regard to the subject of the family, considering chiefly the profile of the principal characters, one can detect different nuances in the two texts. In particular, it is possible to observe the contribution of the so-called *Additions* (henceforth *Adds*) or *Deutero-Canonical sections* of the LXX version of the Book of Esther.

2. The textual and canonical question

That the textual question regarding the Book of Esther cannot now be ignored, not only at the level of scientific studies,[5] is demonstrated by the

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1   Bardtke, Das Buch Esther, 243.
2   For a comprehensive survey of the bibliography on Esth, see Lubetski – Lubetski, The Book of Esther.
3   Sæbø, Esther (my biblical quotations for Esth[MT] follow this edition).
4   Hanhart, Esther (my biblical quotations for Esth[LXX] follow this edition).
5   Cf. Motzo, La storia del testo di Ester; Clines, The Esther Scroll; Fox, The Redaction of the Book of Esther; Dorothy, The Books of Esther; De Troyer, The End of the Alpha Text; Kossmann, Die Esthernovelle.

state of the modern translations.[6] To give only some examples, the Bible of the Italian Episcopal Conference (CEI) of 1971 and the *Einheitsübersetzung* of 1980 recount a unique narrative, concocted by blending the Hebrew as a base text with the *Adds* of the LXX. On the other hand, the *Traduction Oecumenique de la Bible*, appearing first in 1975 and then reissued in a second edition in 1987, chooses to translate and distinguish clearly the two books of Esther: the Hebrew one placed among the historical books, and the Greek one located among the deutero-canonical books. Finally, the most recent CEI Bible of 2008, goes for putting the two texts on the same page: the Hebrew on the higher part, the Greek on the lower.[7]

If from the point view of textual criticism and redaction history the question of the relationship between these two texts and other witnesses (such as the so-called 'Alpha text,'[8] the Vetus Latina[9] and the Vulgate) remains an open one, it is clear that a scientific investigation of the Book of Esther requires making a decision on the textual problem.

Moreover, the Book of Esther cannot be understood fully without its insertion into the biblical canons, Hebrew and Greek. When one is speaking of the Book of Esther, therefore, one cannot pass over its *Sitz im Kanon*.[10] If one considers the Hebrew canon, the Book of Esther is placed among the Writings, more precisely among the so-called *Meghillot*. Jewish biblical sensitivity thus perceives it as a canonical book, but one belonging to the ultimate stage of revelation. This is confirmed by its liturgical position, dependent on its link with the feast of *Purim*, the institution of which is related at the end of the book (cf. Esth 9).

If one shifts from the Hebrew tradition to that of the Greek, there appear some differences worthy of note beginning with six sections which are found only in the Greek text, known as *Adds*.[11] In fact, the ten chapters

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6   Cf., for instance, Jahn, Das Buch Esther nach der Septuaginta; Harrelson, Textual and Translation Problems; Omanson – Noss, The Book of Esther.

7   To go even beyond, it has been proposed to put the two texts in a synoptic way in the same printed page of the modern translations; Candido, I testi del libro di Ester, 363.

8   Cf. Jobes, The Alpha-Text of Esther; Tov, The 'Lucianic' Text.

9   Haelewick, Esther.

10   Cf. Wahl, Das Buch Esther als methodisches Problem, 39-40.

11   These are: a) *Add A* 1-17: the premonitory dream of Mordecai (1-11) and the foiling of the plot (12-17); b) *Add B* 1-13: the decree of extermination published throughout the empire; c) *Add C* 1-30: the prayers of Mordecai (1-11) and Esther (12-30); d) *Add D* 1-16: Esther in the presence of King Ahasuerus; e) *Add E* 1-24: the decree of rescue for the Jews; f) *Add F* 1-10: the interpretation of the dream of Mordecai. The colophon records: "In the fourth year of Ptolemy and Cleopatra, Dositheus, who claimed to be a priest and Levite, and Ptolemy his son, brought into Egypt the present letter about *Purim*, declaring that it was an authentic letter translated by Lysimachus, son of Ptolemy, one of the residents in Jerusalem" (*Add F* 11).

common to Esth[MT] and Esth[LXX] show significant differences. The Christian biblical canon has received the Book of Esther in its Greek form in the section of Historical Books, but sometimes the *Adds* are qualified precisely as *Deutero-Canonical sections*.

This is not the place to mention the motives and also the theological fall-out of this interesting process.[12] However, in the broader perspective, it seems advisable to devote equal attention to the MT and the LXX, because each reveals its own narrative coherence, and because both texts are authoritative whether from the text-critical or from the canonical point of view. In fact, they have been well preserved and have been read and received as sacred by the respective communities of faith, which have inserted them into the Hebrew and Greek Bibles.

3. The Dating

The question of dating the text of a book that presents itself in two textual forms can be particularly interesting. One can, in fact, ask if, and then how, the way of understanding the ethnicity, politics and religion was changed along with the change in the *milieu* of the text. Have the so-called *Adds* or *Deutero-Canonical sections* of the text modified its perspective? Do they have also influenced among Jews and Christians the attitude toward this biblical book?[13]

The Hebrew text of Esther was probably written in the Persian or at the beginning of the Hellenistic period: the *terminus a quo* is the reign of Xerxes (486-465 BCE), while the *terminus ad quem* remains imprecise, although it has to be placed in the time and place of the Persian Diaspora. On the other hand, it is difficult to date the LXX text of Esther, although the *terminis ad quem* of the *Adds* can be put at the end of the first century CE.[14]

There remains the idea of a biblical book (the Hebrew one) decisively hailing from the Diaspora. One shall see that this datum is particularly relevant in understanding the view of family bonds, which the Book of Esther proposes.

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12   Cf. CANDIDO, I testi del libro di Ester, 293-359.
13   Cf. MOORE, Esther, xxi-xxxiv.
14   Cf. MOORE, Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions, 165-166.

4. The Characters in the Plot

Against the background of these questions, one can go forward into the two texts of the Book of Esther in order to grasp at least some emblematic elements concerning family bonds. Naturally, there is no question of investigating the term 'family' in the Book of Esther; the term, as is well-known, does not exist in the Old Testament. However, one can enquire what is the web of inter-personal relationships between the protagonists in the narrative: Esther, Mordecai, the Persian king, Haman, the Jews.

4.1 Esther

4.1.1 *The Name, the Origin and the Kinship*

With regard to the question of ethnicity, politics and religion, the complexity of the character of Esther, the figure who gives her name to the book, is evinced from the point when Esth[MT] explains her double name: "Hadassah, that is Esther" (2:7). The name הדסה can be traced back to הדס, 'myrtle,' the plant which in the Old Testament constitutes one of the signs of the return from the exile (Isa 41:19-20; 55:13; Zech 1:8-11; Neh 8:15).[15] On the other hand, the name אסתר Esther seems to be able to be linked with the Hebrew root סתר, 'to hide.'[16] To what hiding is this meant to be an allusion? Be that as it may, Esther shows here a double identity: Persian and Jewish.

In Esth[LXX], two differences appear immediately with reference to the name, and they are not to be passed over: the absence of the Hebrew word 'Hadassah,' which involves a more nuanced Hebrew connotation than Esther; and the name 'Esther' which, in Greek, loses all evocation of the Hebrew root 'to hide' and so remains quite neutral.

Within the overall economy of the Hebrew and Greek narrative, it is important to note how much is said in 2:10: "Esther had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had charged her not to make it known." In reality, it seems to be able to be understood as a prudential attitude, by reason of the fact that the Jews had their enemies in the Persian

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15   Cf. Vialle, Une analyse comparée, 84.
16   Commenting Deut 31:18, Talmud claims: "From where does the Torah bring the name Esther? From the verse 'But I [God] will surely conceal (*'str*) my face on that day'" (Order *Kodashim* of Mishna, Tractate *Hullin* 139b). So, according to the Rabbis, the name Esther can be read as an allusion to the concealing of God.

empire (9:1, 5-6, 15, 16, 22). This would not be a historical datum because the Persian empire consistently showed itself tolerant of minorities.

Besides, Esther's kinship with Mordecai is an essential point for our question: here there is the description of her family. In 2:7 of Esth[MT] one reads: "[Mordecai] had brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, the daughter of his uncle, for she was an orphan and had neither father nor mother; the maiden was beautiful and lovely […] when her father and her mother died, Mordecai had adopted her as his own daughter." Now, as Gerleman noticed, "Esther als Adoptivtochter ist eine literarische Angleichung an Mose als Adoptivsohn."[17] In other words, her being an adoptive daughter draws her close to Moses, another adoptive son who was to contribute to the salvation of Israel. In fact, Mordecai is her family. But her relationship with him is that of subordinate to superior: Esther listens to Mordecai and carries out his orders (2:20).

The link between Esther and Mordecai is different in the same passage in Esth[LXX] (2:7): here, Mordecai is no longer the adoptive father of his cousin, but is a candidate for her hand in marriage! In this case, the Persian king ends up in assuming the characteristics of a rival in love. However, there are no traces in the narrative of tension, uneasiness or disquiet on the part of Mordecai on account of the relationship which Esther will enter into with the king of Persia.[18]

4.1.2 *Beautiful and Decisive: her Piety and Diplomacy*

Chapter 2 can be read as wholly constructed on the topic of feminine beauty and sensuality, as it is well known also in some works of ancient Greek and Latin literature:[19] Esther seems, in effect, to be chosen for queen on account of her attractiveness and certainly not for the sake of a successful political strategy. Nevertheless, she finds herself in the right place at the right time to come to the aid of her race.

In one of the decisive turning points of the book, according to the Hebrew text, she seems concerned only for herself and influenced by Mordecai (cf. 4:1-14). It is not clear whether her decision to intervene and intercede with the king is dictated by courage or resignation (cf. 4:15-16). What is relevant to the readers of Esth[MT] is that Esther is there: her dilemmas are the dilemmas of the one who has to assume important responsibilities and to make decisive choices.

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17   Gerleman, Esther, 15.
18   Cf. Vialle, Une analyse comparée, 201-202.
19   Cf. Berlin, Esther, 21-22.

But precisely here, Est^{LXX}, above all with *Add C* 12-30, presents a different face of Esther. In Esth^{MT}, the piety of Esther seems to be limited to the fast of 4:16: "Go, gather all the Jews to be found in Susa, and hold a fast on my behalf, and neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. I and my maids will also fast as you do." The fast (צוֹם) indicates here an act of penance, the aim of which would be to turn aside the anger of God (2 Sam 12:16, 22; Isa 58:1-12).[20] Although it is a religious act, there is no mention here of God. The same appears to be able to be said of 4:3, where the Jews were "fasting and weeping and lamenting, and most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes."

For Esth^{LXX}, however, Esther had already displayed, even before the royal court, "the fear of God and the observance of his commandments" (2:20). And now that the delicate moment requires it, Esther prays. Her prayer is the moment in which she shows herself speaking more as an integral part and representative of the people of God than as Queen of Persia. Nevertheless it is precisely her position that allows her to seek God's intervention and to make him carry it out through her. These are the two extremes of the piety of Esther, according to Esth^{LXX}: faith in the God of the fathers and the request that she be endowed with courage. On the one hand, *Add C* 16: "I have heard from my birth, in the bosom of my family, that you, O Lord, have taken Israel from among all the nations and our fathers from among all our ancestors as your eternal inheritance, and have done for them everything that you had promised." On the other hand, *Add C* 23b-24a: "Give me courage, O King of gods and ruler of every power. Put a discreet word into my mouth." And again after her prayer, a little before entering into the presence of the king, Esther says: "I call on the God who watches over all men and saves all men" (*Add D* 2).

Faith and courage, religion and politics are woven together in the person of Esther, who is fully involved in the lot of her people. This direct and decisive involvement is manifested by the motivation with which she seeks Haman's condemnation from the king: because Haman is a Macedonian and not a Persian (*Add E* 10), and, therefore, his ultimate aim is that of delivering the Persian empire into the hands of the Macedonians (*Add E* 14). This version is patently false, but that does not matter: the important thing is that Esther convinces her husband, and Haman is condemned. A lie in the service of the good: in one word, the end justifies the means. According to Est^{LXX}, Esther is not only explicitly religious, but also subtly and cynically diplomatic.

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20   Koehler – Baumgartner, The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon, 1012.

4.2 Mordecai

4.2.1 *The Genealogy*

Who is Mordecai? According to his ethnic profile, Mordecai is a rather peculiar Jew. From Esth[MT] one arrives at a knowledge of his genealogy: "Now there was a Jew in Susa the capital whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, 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, whom Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon had carried away" (2:5-6).

First of all, an ethnic introduction has given: he was יהודי אישׁ, "a Jew." The religious implication is clear: Mordecai belongs to the chosen people. Esth[LXX] will make it explicit, right from the beginning. In the inaugural dream, the Jewish people is qualified as δικαιος, 'just' (*Add A* 6, 8): this adjective is then reserved also solely for God (*Add C* 18) and for the Jewish laws (*Add E* 15).[21] Mordecai himself crosses the city crying out the innocence of the Jewish people: "A nation that has done no wrong is going to be destroyed" (Esth[LXX] 4:1). They are οι ταπεινοι, the 'humble ones' of the initial dream (*Add A* 10).

Leaving Jair on one side, the mention of Shimei,[22] son of Kish and his being of the tribe of Benjamin (2:5; cf. also *Add A* 1) is interesting. The historical literature knows a Shimei son of Kish of the family of King Saul: it was he who cursed David in flight on account of the revolt of Absalom (2 Sam 16:5-16), who was pardoned by David (2 Sam 19:16-24) and whom Solomon did not wish to leave unpunished in the end (1 Kgs 2:8-9, 36-40). In practice, Mordecai is of royal descent but according to a line that was, at the least, controversial: that of Saul, the one rejected by God.

The mention of the deportation of which Mordecai would have been part, leaves us perplexed from the historical point of view, but precisely for this reason increases our curiosity: why this historical telescoping? If he was deported in 597 BCE, then he was part of that upper class (Jer 27:20; 2 Kgs 24:14-16), which was responsible for the Exile and which was denounced by the prophets (cf. Isa 5:8-10; Jer 5:19; 7:1-15): but it is better simply to assume that these historical data are thought to bear Esther's tale out, providing a likely *liaison* with the biblical history.[23]

The presentation of Mordecai in Esth[LXX] is different and more complex:

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21 CANDIDO, I testi del libro di Ester, 139 note 173.
22 PATON, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary, 167-168.
23 LEVENSON, Esther, 58.

"In the second year of the reign of Artaxerxes the great king, on the first day of Nisan, Mordecai the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin saw a vision in a dream. He was [a Jew dwelling in the city of Susa], a notable man, serving in the king's palace. Now he was descended from the captivity which Nabuchodonosor king of Babylon had carried captive from Jerusalem, with Jechoniah the king of Judea" (1:1a-c). For Esth[LXX], Mordecai is not part of the group of the exiles, but one of those who live in the Diaspora: he remains a Jew, but he is more clearly integrated into the foreign society. Both his "deux appartenances,"[24] his Jewish origin and his new Persian citizenship are equally clear.

4.2.2 *Politics and Religion*

As far as his political profile is concerned, Mordecai is an official in the royal court as one is led to understand by the expression "he sat at the king's gate" (cf. 2:19, 21). In his relationship with king, he is undoubtedly trustworthy (2:21-23; cf. also *Add A* 12-16), but he is also disobedient when it is a question of conforming to the royal command of prostration before Haman (3:2). Esth[MT] does not go into the whys and wherefores of this attitude: that it is not *ipso facto* an act of faith is shown in the many cases of prostration recorded in the Old Testament.[25]

Mordecai's attitude of rigid disobedience in Chapter 3 echoes that of Vashti in Chapter 1:[26] the situation in Chapter 4 seems to confirm this idea.[27] Just as the consequence for Vashti had been her elimination (1:9-22; 2:1), so now the reader expects that something similar will happen: and in fact that expectation will not be disappointed. But this time, Mordecai, perhaps precisely because of his pride, endangers the existence of the entire Jewish people.

Esth[LXX] furnishes a different version of Mordecai's motivation. If in Esth[MT] it is not clear why Mordecai does not prostate himself before Haman, in Esth[LXX] it is clear that the reader is dealing here with an act of faith. Mordecai himself says this in his prayer: "I have done this, that I might not set the glory of man above the glory of God: and I will not worship anyone except thee, my Lord, and I will not do these things in haughtiness" (*Add C* 5).

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24   Vialle, Une analyse comparée, 257-258.
25   Cf. Berlin, Esther, 35 where Gen 23:47; 43:28; Exod 18:7; 1 Sam 14:4; 1 Kgs 1:23 are quoted.
26   Linafelt – Beal, Ruth and Esther, xiv.
27   Beal, The Book of Hiding, x-xi, 69-74.

4.3 The King

Esther's family is completed by the figure of the King: Xerxes (according to Esth[MT]) or Artaxerxes (according to Esth[LXX]). Throughout the novel, the motif of kingship appears dominant.[28] In fact, even from the statistical point of view, the root מלך occurs about 250 times in Esth[MT].[29] Substantially, much of the political situation comes from this character.

Already from Chapter 1, the true hermeneutical key of the book, it is understood that the king has an invasive presence: he is a matter of fact to acknowledge and to deal with.[30] But the same first chapter of the tale also draws a delicate veil of satire over his figure, portraying a ridiculous image of the sovereign, victim of his exaggerations and of his wrath, more a simpleton than terrible, to the point of being too voluble and able to be manipulated. From then on, his authority can be viewed from an ironical standpoint, and he quickly and definitively loses his authoritativeness.

A suspicion begins to emerge on the horizon: if problems bound up with the king have to arise, it will be necessary once again to reckon more with stupidity and human superficiality than with conscious wickedness.[31]

4.4 Haman

The gallery of characters is enriched by another, extremely significant, figure: Haman. He is introduced as "the son of Amadathes, the Bugaean" (*Add A* 17). This last word, perhaps adjective or perhaps substantive, exclusive to the Book of Esther in the LXX,[32] does not indicate any people known to us: here it is presumably used as a term of reproach.[33] Later, Esther will say of Haman that he is a 'Macedonian' (Esth[LXX] 9:24), suggesting there a linking of the two terms. Various proposals have been advanced,[34] and the hypothesis of translating here 'Bugean' as 'proud'

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28 Berg, The Book of Esther, 59-72.

29 Moore, Esther, liv.

30 Cf. Fox, Character and Ideology, 176-177.

31 Portnoy, Ahasuerus, 189; "It is not Haman – symbol of evil – but Ahasuerus – symbol of the uncaring apathetic government who is the more dangerous character. This was true in the Purim story and true also in the history of the Jews in the Diaspora."

32 Hatch – Redpath, A Concordance to the Septuagint, I, 41. For a synoptic analysis, taking into account also Esth[MT] and the 'Alpha text', see Candido, I testi del libro di Ester, 195 note 353.

33 Cf. Moore, Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions, 178.

34 See the survey on this topic in Vialle, Une analyse comparée, 286-289.

seems to be valid on account of its simplicity. This pride would be – according to Est^{LXX} – the origin of the rage of Haman against Mordecai and the Jews.

Seeing that Mordecai does not prostrate himself before him, Haman is filled with anger (3:5): he is a choleric character (but also vain, cf. 5:12; 6:6), and so equally dangerous as the king, albeit in a different way. The Jews are surrounded by perilous powers. Furthermore, he shows himself as superstitious: in 3:7, he casts lots (פּוּר) for the choice of the day of extermination. This too is an aspect with which the Jews must reckon; but those Persian lots (פּוּר) will become a Jewish feast (פּוּרִים).

In 3:10, one reads: "Then the king took of the ring from his hand and gave it to Haman son of Hammadatha the Agagite, an enemy of the Jews."[35] If these characters are not known to the Old Testament, the substantive אֲגָגִי, 'Agagite,' evokes the Amalekite אֲגָג, 'Agag.' The episode in 1 Sam 15 is well-known in which Saul, through Samuel, receives the divine order to put to the ban that people which had been opposed to the passage of the children of Israel when they were coming out of Egypt (cf. 1 Sam 15:1). However, Saul did not obey God: "But Saul and the people spared Agag, and the best of the sheep and of the oxen and of the fatlings, and the lambs, and all that was good, and would not utterly destroy them" (1 Sam 15:9). It was for this reason that Saul fell into disgrace.

In this sense, the circle seems to close itself: Mordecai stands for Saul, just as Haman stands for Agag. Then, the Book of Esther would be recalling the ancient rivalry with the Amalekites. Furthermore, the marginal annotation of the narrator in 3:10 places the Jews, with Esther and Mordecai at their head, in the state of potential victims. Moreover, Mordecai had just revealed to his colleagues that he was a Jew (4:4) and his attitude of non-prostration angers Haman. He then goes beyond this to conceiving a hatred for the entire Jewish race: "But he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus" (3:6).

The logic is the same as in Chapter 1: from a private matter to a question of state. This is the danger inherent in a king who is instinctive, unreflecting and malleable.[36]

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35   Est^{LXX} is soberer as lacking to say that Haman was "enemy of the Jews."
36   A thorough analysis shows that, at the end of Chapter 1, the 'Alpha text' lives purposely Aman alone as the protagonist of the scene; cf. CANDIDO, I testi del libro di Ester, 219.

4.5 The Jews

In Esther's tale something particular concerns the Jews, the race of Esther and Mordecai. The truth about the Jews of Persia becomes a defect in the mouth of Haman: "There is a certain people scattered abroad and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws, so that it is not for the king's profit to tolerate them" (3:8).

In Esth^{LXX}, that qualified Haman as ὁ διάβολος, 'the slanderer' (7:4; 8:1), this ethnic datum seems yet more evident and traumatic: in Haman's speech, the same term ἔθνος[37] is employed to counterpose the nation of the righteous to the rest of the other nations who live in the kingdom of Persia (3:8). In this sense, there is now recycled what was announced before in the initial dream, where the word was of a δικαιων εθνος, a "nation of the righteous", who will fight against the other nations (cf. *Add A* 6). That this people is the people of God, that saved in Egypt, is confirmed by some lexical data. In Est^{LXX}, one reads: "All Israel cried with all their might, for their death was before their eyes" (*Add C* 11). It sounds as the same cry heard by God in Exod 3:7.

In Esth^{MT} 8:17, after the letter recalling Haman's decree of extermination, one reads: "Many from the peoples of the country declared themselves Jews, for the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them." Still today it is not perfectly clear the meaning of מתיהדים (Hithpael of the verb יהד): "they declared themselves Jews," "they recognized themselves Jews," or "they converted to Judaism." At least it can be held that many came on to the side of the Jews: some examples of this are known through other tales in the Old Testament (cf. Exod 12:37-39; Ruth 1:15-17; Jdt 14:6-10).[38]

In Esth^{LXX} the ambiguity remains with the use of the verb ιουδάιζον (*hapax legomenon* not only in Esth, but also in the entire LXX)[39]. But to this there is previously added the verb περιετέμοντο, that can be understood as "an amplification or an exegesis"[40] of Esth^{MT}: "they were *or* they had themselves circumcised." In this case, the Greek text shows itself committed to make clearer the identification of those who adhered to Judaism.

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37   THOMPSON, A Critical Concordance to the Septuagint, 78.
38   Cf. WAHL, Das Buch Esther, 171.
39   HATCH – REDPATH, A Concordance to the Septuagint, II, 687.
40   KAHANA, Esther. Juxtaposition of the Septuagint Translation, 356.

5. Ethnicity and Politics

In an overview, one could ask what is the vision of the book of Esther (in the two textual forms that have been considered) on the relations between ethnicity and politics, and on religion.

5.1 The Women in the Middle of Ethnicity and Politics

Starting with Esther, it is useful to begin by considering the role of the women in the spheres of ethnicity and politics. There have been feminist and liberationist approaches pointing out how the Book of Esther shows a particularly positive tendency in the comparisons of the female figures such as Esther and Queen Vashti, something that is not encountered in the Greek literature of the same period.[41]

The basic question becomes that concerning power, whether it is the hands of the man or the woman: so, power and sexuality are intertwined in the narrative. For some scholars, the true mordant protester against the *status quo* and so the true 'feminist' is Vashti.[42] Thus, for example, Laffey[43] understands in Vashti the signs of a courageous opposition (cf. 1:12) to the dominant patriarchal regime by not yielding to become a sexual object for her husband. The point of the story would not be to be sought so much in disobedience in itself as in the consequences of this emancipatory behaviour for the whole kingdom. So also Kirk-Duggan[44] emphasises more decisively the revolutionary effects of such disobedience.

More disillusioned is the summary of Fuchs:[45] the female figures, even in the biblical books which, like the Book of Esther, bear their names, remain confined within a masculine horizon. In fact, this androcentric, misogynistic and patriarchal perspective unites the biblical women in the same discriminatory destiny. The central question is, therefore, political: that is, it would be a question of the management of the relationship with authority and, more precisely, with an unjust political power.[46] So, the appearance of the narratives notwithstanding, there emerges at the end a substantial maintenance of the male/female roles.

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41 Cf. Pervo, Aseneth and Her Sisters, 145.
42 Clines, Reading Esther, 40-42.
43 Laffey, An Introduction to the Old Testament, 214-215.
44 Kirk-Duggan, Black Mother Woman and Daughters, 194.
45 Fuchs, Who is Hiding the Truth?
46 Cf. Niditch, Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism, and Authority.

White Crawford[47] goes so far as to recognise in the person of Esther a female model for Diaspora Judaism. In this way, one is brought into the debate on the moral judgement to be accorded to women, in relation also to their exercise of sexuality. White Crawford has defended the conduct of the most unscrupulous Esther, who in just that moment has known how to manipulate the king for the good of the people.

5.2 The Men in the Middle of Ethnicity and Politics

And how are the men to be placed in relation to the ethnic and political questions? Who is the true king? Who knows how to impose his own authority? Who commands the destinies of the subjects of the Persian realm? Who has the power to save life and to condemn to death?

A reading sympathetic to sociological pressures has allowed Laniak[48] to go through the Book of Esther following the thread of the relationship between honour and shame. Honour is first of all, closely connected with the social position of the king, dependent on material possession, external splendor and the perception that others have of this external state. But it is also connected with a rigid social structure: in Chapter 1 Vashti comes to damage precisely this *status quo*. Thus her disobedience sounds like a disregard for the authority of the king and dishonour brought to the established power: it is a question of lese-majesty and, consequently, of shame for the king himself. Politics in the Book of Esther is certainly not service of the common good: it is rather a question of honour for the strong and survival for the weak.

A key point in the plot is 8:7, where the king himself explains: "Haman has been hanged on the gallows because he raised his hand against the Jews." In 8:11, one reads: "The king allowed the Jews who were in every city to gather and defend their lives, to destroy, to slay, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, with their children and women, and to plunder their goods." This permission was given for the 13th of Adar. The fact that Ahasuerus finally puts his kingdom into the hand of Esther and Mordecai shows that he is not anti-Semitic. That he had allowed Haman had been dictated not for reasons of persecution, but from superficiality. In the Diaspora, the people of the righteous could be destroyed even for this: in fact, this is perhaps the greater risk.

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47   White Crawford, Esther: a Feminine Model for Jewish Diaspora.
48   Laniak, Shame and Honor.

6. Religion

6.1 The Piety of Esth[MT]

In Esth[MT] the piety of Esther and Mordecai seems to be a reflection of the socio-political condition in which the Jews could find themselves in a foreign land during the Diaspora. The God of Esth[MT] is therefore hidden within the folds of events, that are apparently only in the hands of human will, if not caprice, those of the powerful above all.

The question is 'where is God?' The Persian Diaspora is characterised by a social contest in which the religious institutions handed down by tradition – the promised land, the holy city, the temple – are absent. Even the Torah is lacking. The term דת, that is, 'norm,' 'decree,' law,' appears 20 times in the Book of Esther:[49] it recurs only in the late texts of Ezra 8:36 (the Persian laws) and in the Aramaic of Dan 2:13; 6:6, 9, 13, 16; Ezra 7:12, 25. In three cases (Ezra 7:12, 25; Dan 6:6), it is the law of God seen through the eyes of the pagan Persians.[50] The laws of which the Book of Esther speaks are, therefore, quite different from the traditional Torah.

Nevertheless, it is the same biblical God of the Exodus who seems to be now refashioned:[51] he dwells no longer in the institutions, but in history. God is present in history, although the novel do not need any *deus ex machina*.[52] Paradoxically, the theological truth is not in dispute: in any case, the aim of the narrative is that of rousing in the Jews of the Diaspora the responsibility for making themselves protagonists of their own salvation. Therefore salvation would take place more by means of the understated figure of Esther and the more invasive one of Mordecai.

6.2 The Piety of Esth[LXX]

In Est[LXX] this picture is lightly but significantly different from that of Esth[MT], above all thanks to the so-called *Adds* or *Deutero-Canonical sections*. The piety of the account in Esth[LXX] is presented first of all within the frame of the narrative, thanks to *Adds A* and *F*, which circumscribe the story with a theological dream of Mordecai (*Add A* 1-11) and its interpretation (*Add F* 1-10). At first sight, the intention of Esth[LXX] is to make explicit

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49   Berg, The Book of Esther, 72, 88, note 51.
50   Cf. Vialle, Une analyse comparée, 142.
51   Cf. Gerleman, Esther, 11-23.
52   Loader, Esther as a Novel, 419-421.

the presence and intervention of God in the events narrated: this God is placed on the side of the Jews, an ethnic minority threatened with death in the foreign environment of the Persian kingdom.

But how does this God intervene in human affairs and, consequently, in the very politics of the Persian kingdom? However explicit his interventions, Esth^LXX too depicts a God who does not take away responsibility from Esther and Mordecai. This is confirmed by two circumstances. In *Add D* 8, Esth^LXX says that "God changed the spirit of the king to gentleness." God prepares the ground; it will, however, be necessary for Esther to play her cards to convince her husband to change his policy. Afterwards, Esth^LXX says that "that night the Lord withheld sleep from the king" (6:1). Once again, this intervention by God does not remain in isolation; it will be linked with the courage of Mordecai who had revealed the plot in 2:21-23, with the arrogance of Haman who believes himself to the beneficiary of the king's gratitude in 6:6b, and with the shrewdness of Esther, who convinces the king of the narrow-mindedness of Haman's plan in 7:3-4.

Therefore, both in the part of the text which Esth^LXX shares with Esth^MT and in its own so-called *Adds*, Esth^LXX allows a glimpse of the image of a God who operates clearly but in a discreet way. He is shown to be a facilitator, without being invasive. God does not replace nor suppress, then, the intelligent and courageous initiative of men and women of goodwill: if he also opens up unexpected paths, it is then the responsibility of the human protagonists to follow them, through to the end.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this recognition within the MT and the LXX of the Book of Esther shows how the narrative blends ethnicity, politics and religion wisely. The figure of Esther operates as catalyst of some family dynamics, which are bound up with the ethnic, political and religious questions.

Esther's family plunges its roots into the Jewish race (cf. *Add C* 16), but presents its best fruits in a pagan and foreign context. Esther is not only the cousin or promised spouse of Mordecai; she is principally the wife of the Persian monarch. Only in the *Deutero-Canonical* prayer of Esth^LXX, Esther does not hide her distaste for this link with an uncircumcised man (cf. *Add C* 26-29). And yet, from the narrative as a whole, it is shown that it is precisely this family bond which constitutes the providential condition that will allow her to intervene for the salvation of all the Jews resident in the kingdom.

In this sense, the Book of Esther is placed far from, if not directly as an alternative to, the narrowly ethnic paradigm present in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah (cf. Ezra 9-10): within the range of late biblical books, it shows itself to be a lightly counter-cultural work. It seems to be located in the track already signaled by Jer 29:1-23, the letter with which the great prophet invited the exiles to live and multiply in a foreign land. This does not mean to say that the Jews will forget their own identity, ethnic and religious, nor that God has forgotten his people.

In the context of the Diaspora, ethnicity, politics and religion are blended together in a new way: a new discernment is required. For the Book of Esther, although there are serious risks for the chosen people to survival, on account of a policy that is perverse or dangerously superficial, one cannot speak of a total war against the Jews, of a pagan policy hostile to them for racial reasons. The solution does not lie in the exclusiveness of the Jewish family or of the Jewish ethnic community. If anything, paradoxically, the Book of Esther seems to propose to find this solution in an ironical way of living.[53]

The Book of Esther shows itself willing to change the way of understanding membership of the people of God: from *Judaean* to *Jew*,[54] from "dweller in Judaea" to "Jew of the Diaspora." From henceforth, identity can definitively prescind from traditional spaces (not Jerusalem but Susa), even sacred ones (not the temple but the court of the king of Persia), and from the traditional family (from the prohibition of mixed marriages to the opportunity of being in the family of the pagan king).

The Book of Esther shows itself to be a 'political' book, which treads the narrow ridge between exclusiveness and openness to the nations: the ethnic and religious dimensions are mixed in an attempt to find a new balance. Life in the midst of the nations is not easy, even if the Exile is not felt as a punishment. Survival is achieved in an environment which is difficult but not impracticable by using irony, faith and the courage of responsibility.

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53   Cf. Huey, Irony as the Key; Goldman, Narrative and Ethical Ironies in Esther.
54   Levenson, The Scroll of Esther in Ecumenical Perspective, 450-451.

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