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QUEEN ESTHER AS A SERVANT LEADER IN ESTHER 5:1-8

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This paper explores the leadership of the literary figure of Queen Esther and the importance of the story in the institution of the Festival of Purim. Cultural intertexture analysis, honor, guilt, rights culture, and challenge-response/riposte place Esther within the domain of a servant leader demonstrating the leadership virtues Patterson identifies in her theoretical model of servant leadership. Although Esther's leadership fits within the framework of servant leadership, her self-sacrificial leadership goes beyond it. Additional research is needed to demonstrate how Esther's leadership model works within different socio-economic and multicultural contexts as well as how it fits within Bekker's proposed model of kenotic leadership.

This paper examines the leadership of the literary figure of Queen Esther in her approach to King Xerxes to plead for the life of the Jews. Hill and Walton indicate that the story of Esther was set during the Persian Empire of the early to mid-fifth century B.C. and conclude that it was written in the late fifth century B.C.¹ However, Gottwald suggests that 150-100 B.C.E. was the likely time frame when Esther was written.² He explains that Purim, referred to as "Mordecai's Day," is first mentioned in the period 100-50 B.C.E. and associated with Nicanor's Day, "when Jews celebrated a Maccabean

¹ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1991), 238.

² Norman K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible—A Socio-Literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 562.

victory over the Syrians.”³ Gottwald states that at the time, “relations between Jews and Hellenistic Gentiles were especially strained.”⁴ Bechtel surmises that the opening phrase “this is what happened in the days of Xerxes” (Est 1:1) implies “a perspective after that fact.”⁵ Berlin notes that it “provides the story of the origin of Purim, the blueprint for its celebration, and the authorization for its observance in perpetuity.”⁶ Although the more ancient festivals are historicized and their observance mandated by the Torah, Purim is historicized and its observance mandated by the book of Esther.⁷ One distinction of this mandate from those in the Torah is that God did not command it like the ones in the Torah.⁸ Berlin surmises that Purim is quasi-traditional, finding the intersection between an historical event, similar to those in the Torah, yet using the contemporary Persian practice. She indicates that the form in which the holiday was instituted imitated the legal practice of Persia—“by means of a document written by the king or his authorized agent circulated throughout the empire.”⁹ Berlin concludes that “the book of Esther, more than anything else, is responsible for the continued celebration of Purim.” She indicates that “it also made the way for the establishment of later holidays that, like Purim, could be instituted without divine command if they commemorated an event or served an important function in the life of the Jewish people.”¹⁰

The Festival of Purim, established as a celebration of the Jews’s lives being spared, is still celebrated in modern times. Gottwald indicates that the book of Esther “locates the origin of the Feast of Purim in a spectacular last-minute deliverance of all the Jews within the Persian Empire from a plot to annihilate them.”¹¹ Yet, the origins of the Feast of Purim remain speculative. It was the association of an older festival, also called Purim and may have previously existed, with deliverance from “anti-semitic programs in Maccabean-Hasmonean times that catapulted the Purim rites into prominence in Palestine and occasioned the Book of Esther.”¹² Carruthers asserts that Purim “celebrated Jewish deliverance in the Diaspora” and explains that “the symbols of reversals are interpreted theologically: the world turned upside down celebrates Jewish chosenness and the providential care of God over his chosen people.”¹³ Carruthers indicates that the “Purim synagogue service frames how the story of Esther is

³ Ibid., 562.

⁴ Ibid., 562.

⁵ Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2002), 3.

⁶ Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), xv.

⁷ Ibid., xv.

⁸ Ibid., xv.

⁹ Ibid., xvi.

¹⁰ Ibid., xvi.

¹¹ Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, 561.

¹² Ibid., 563.

¹³ Jo Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 11.

interpreted.”¹⁴ She points out that “Deut. 25:17-19 is read on the Sabbath before Purim, Shabbat Zakhor, in order to tie the story to God’s injunction to the Jews to ‘Remember (zakhor) what Amalek did’, attacking them on their journey from Egypt to Canaan (Ex 17).”¹⁵ Carruthers notes that “the story inspires a memorial, and even for some a provocation of hatred.”¹⁶ Carruthers further observes that “for Jews, the assertion of providence is key to the festival of Purim, at which God’s care and supervision of his chosen people are celebrated.”¹⁷

Berlin notes that the book of Esther is “a Jewish book reflecting Jewish experiences and aspirations.”¹⁸ She asserts that the main reason for the book of Esther is to “establish Purim as a Jewish holiday for all generations.”¹⁹ Berlin points out that the book of Esther establishes the Jewishness of the holiday by providing a “historical event of Jewish deliverance to be commemorated and an authorization, through the letter of Mordecai, for the continued commemoration of the event.”²⁰ Regarding Esther, White concludes:

She is a model for the successful conduct of life in the often uncertain world of the Diaspora. The fact that she is a woman emphasizes the plight of the Jew in the Diaspora: the once-powerful Jewish nation has become a subordinate minority within a foreign empire, just as Esther, a woman, is subject to the dominant male. However, by accepting the reality of a subordinate position and learning to gain power by working within the structure rather than against it, the Jew can build a successful and fulfilling life in the Diaspora, as Esther does in the court of Ahasuerus.²¹

Roop summarizes the Jewish historical struggle: “Living as a minority community, dependent on the attitude and actions of the majority, has kept Jews always in a precarious position.”²² Berlin emphasizes that Esther “strengthens the ethnic pride of Jews under foreign domination.”²³ Van Wijk-Bos indicates that the book of Esther is “about sexism, the ideology of patriarchy.”²⁴ She points out that the literary figure of Esther is a member of a vulnerable class in three ways: an orphan, a woman, and an alien who is a Jew.²⁵ Van Wijk-Bos states that “from Esther we learn also about the

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁵ Ibid., 11.

¹⁶ Ibid., 11.

¹⁷ Ibid., 32.

¹⁸ Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, ix.

¹⁹ Ibid., xv.

²⁰ Ibid., xv.

²¹ Alice O. Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 192.

²² Eugene F. Roop, *Believers Church Bible Commentary: Ruth, Jonah, Esther* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002), 161.

²³ Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, xxxv.

²⁴ Johanna W. H. Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 105.

²⁵ Ibid., 105.

possibilities of overcoming the constraints designed by a patriarchal world and may discern the design of a pattern to overcome such constraints.”²⁶ Roop discusses the importance of the story of Esther in addressing issues of gender: “The role of women and their options in social and political contexts.”²⁷ Roop points out that “action in the political arena is inevitable even by those who, like Esther, prefer to avoid it” and that “the success of women in the social and political realm is especially difficult in cultures where men have decided who has access to the political arena, and also what strategies are available and permissible.”²⁸ Van Wijk-Bos observes that the book of Esther demonstrates “the landscape of all systemic oppression and prejudice everywhere”²⁹ and shows “where race prejudice leads.”³⁰ Van Wijk-Bos further indicates that Esther “provides an example of liberation through solidarity with victims of oppression.”³¹ She points out that “her stand is all the more valiant because it is not taken heedlessly but after much hesitation and demurral.”³² Minorities in a larger society, such as African American women or immigrants in North America, have limitations placed on them in the social and political arenas. The story of Esther can be inspirational, helping to instill a sense of hope that, as minorities, they do not have to remain marginalized and can gain a measure of control over their own lives.

The story of Esther is an important illustration for contemporary culture because it demonstrates effective leadership in the midst of difficult circumstances. She is marginalized in a marriage she has been forced into and is asked to risk her life to lead when she has no power. Esther’s contribution as a leader is demonstrated in that she does not try to alter the patriarchal structure of her society but works within the system to achieve her goal of liberating her people. Furthermore, after her goal is achieved, rather than placing herself in the limelight, she relinquishes the power that comes with her effective leadership, and makes the choice to fade into the background. In doing so, she redefines the true value of leadership. Bellis notes that the book of Esther “calls its readers to reflect and presumably act in the challenges to human dignity that confront us today.”³³ The literary figure of Esther is a personification of leadership wisdom from an unlikely source. There are groups of people in contemporary culture, such as African American women, Native Americans, and immigrants, who are marginalized, disenfranchised, and powerless. Bellis concludes that the book of Esther “gives us much to ponder: the nature of law, the ways in which women achieve their goals, especially in situations when they have little power, and the use of humor and satire to make important points.”³⁴ The story of Esther demonstrates that there is hope for

²⁶ Ibid., 105.

²⁷ Roop, *Believers Church Bible*, 167.

²⁸ Ibid., 167.

²⁹ Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 105.

³⁰ Ibid., 105.

³¹ Ibid., 105.

³² Ibid., 105.

³³ Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, 194.

³⁴ Ibid., 195.

people without power to become effective leaders within their societies, in spite of the limitations imposed on them. They may not be able to change the structure of their various societies, but like Esther, they can exert influence within it.

Hill and Walton note that the Persian Empire ruled more territory than any of its predecessors.³⁵ Although Xerxes I is identified with the literary figure Xerxes/Ahasuerus in the story of Esther, many have drawn the conclusion that the book “is not intended as an accurate chronicling of events.”³⁶ Hill and Walton observe that the book of Esther “possesses many of the characteristics of the modern short story with fast-paced action, narrative tension, irony, and reversal.”³⁷ They suggest that “the genre of the book of Esther is unique to itself.”³⁸ Laniak observes that the book of Esther follows the challenge and honor pattern: honor is granted, challenged during a crisis, there is vindication which leads to reversal, and this causes a new status of honor.³⁹ Whitcomb asserts that “the book of Esther is a divine message of hope for Israel.”⁴⁰ Although the accuracy of the historical events depicted in the book of Esther is questioned, the demonstrated impact of the literary figure of Esther’s leadership is not.

During the time the book of Esther was written, the Jews were in exile. Van Wijk-Bos notes that “although the Jews were not actively persecuted during this entire period, Jewish identity and survival were major concerns at this time.”⁴¹ According to Carruthers, exile signifies a “dispersed community in which identity is centered on a homeland.”⁴² Bell explains that “Diaspora Jews were descendants of those driven into exile when Jerusalem fell in 586 B.C.”⁴³ He explains that some had gone to Babylon and others to Egypt, however, after 538 B.C. some Jews returned to Judea and started the rebuilding process while others stayed in their newly established homes.⁴⁴ Bell observes that Greeks and Romans accused Jews of “being aloof, separatist, priding themselves on maintaining their identity.”⁴⁵ Berlin explains that Esther is “a story about Jews living in the Diaspora”⁴⁶ and that it “resembles several other books from the late biblical and early post biblical period.”⁴⁷ Berlin indicates that the books written during that time, including Esther, “present models of successful behavior for Jews living in the Diaspora,” designed to “promote pride in Jewish identity and solidarity within the Jewish

³⁵ Hill and Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 239.

³⁶ Ibid., 239.

³⁷ Ibid., 240.

³⁸ Ibid., 240.

³⁹ Timothy S. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 10-13.

⁴⁰ John C. Whitcomb, *Esther: Triumph of God’s Sovereignty* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 27.

⁴¹ Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 103.

⁴² Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries*, 33.

⁴³ Albert A. Bell, *Exploring the New Testament World: An Illustrated Guide to the World of Jesus and the First Christians* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 21.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁶ Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, xxxiv.

⁴⁷ Ibid., xxxiv.

community and with Jewish tradition.”⁴⁸ Furthermore, they “reflect a situation in which Jews were a minority in a larger society and where it fell to the individual Jew, not the state, to ensure Jewish continuity.”⁴⁹ Holmes observes that exilic living is being “unmoored from the common rhythms of daily life.”⁵⁰ She indicates that this can include living in the middle of a Western city if one is homeless, attending a rich suburban school if one is poor, struggling to survive as an undocumented worker in a sweatshop, and living in alienation from the embrace of a nonresidential parent.⁵¹ Holmes asserts that an exile’s sense of awareness is “more acute.”⁵² Exiles generally do not have a choice and are helpless in the situations they find themselves in. Van Wijk-Bos points out that Esther is an alien, who has to hide her particular Jewish identity, and is confined to a Xerxes’s harem, which keeps her outside of the information loop.⁵³ The literary figure of Esther, a Jew in Gentile surroundings, is an exile that is not exempt from the powerless existence that personifies an exile’s experience in a foreign land.

Walfish maintains that Jews were “often prey to persecutions and expulsions in the various countries of their exile.”⁵⁴ Their focus, necessarily, was on survival and the preservation of their communities. A friend in the royal court is often found indispensable in maintaining the welfare of their communities.⁵⁵ White stresses that “oppressed people often must use whatever means are available for them to survive.”⁵⁶ Holmes suggests that “Esther is in survival mode when her life begins to unfold along unexpected paths.”⁵⁷ She has no choice in participation in the beauty pageant held in Xerxes’s court. Mordecai, a Jew, who worked in the palace, takes advantage of the opportunity that Vashti has inadvertently presented. Perhaps he has a plot against Haman the Agagite based on long standing cultural rivalries. As Carruthers states, Haman is “understood to be a descendant of the last Amalekite king, Agag.”⁵⁸ According to Walfish, “already in Midrash, Amalek is depicted as the eternal nemesis of the Jewish people, pursuing them relentlessly from the time both nations stepped onto the stage of history.”⁵⁹ Berlin explains that the story of Esther implies that Mordecai and Haman are “continuing an ancient rivalry between Saul and Agag, and an ancient enmity between Israel and Amalek.”⁶⁰ As a descendant of Saul, Mordecai may have perceived it as his responsibility to destroy Haman, completing Saul’s assignment in 1

⁴⁸ Ibid., xxxiv.

⁴⁹ Ibid., xxxiv.

⁵⁰ Barbara A. Holmes, “Joy Unspeakable,” *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 2 (2006): 136-45.

⁵¹ Ibid., 139.

⁵² Ibid., 139.

⁵³ Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 105.

⁵⁴ Barry D. Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 1.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 1.

⁵⁶ Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, 192.

⁵⁷ Holmes, “Joy Unspeakable,” 139.

⁵⁸ Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries*, 11.

⁵⁹ Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb*, 89.

⁶⁰ Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, xxxviii.

Samuel 15 to completely destroy the Amalekites. Van Wijk-Bos indicates that “throughout the story, Mordecai shows singleness of purpose—opposition to Haman and all that he stands for.”⁶¹ White points out that although “Mordecai is often hailed as the hero of the story, he initiates the crisis by his refusal to bow down to Haman.”⁶² Omanson and Noss imply that Mordecai refuses to bow or kneel before Haman, who is referred to as “the enemy of the Jews” (Est 3:1), because of this generational rivalry.⁶³ Walfish points out that the literary figure of Esther, an orphan by virtue of her parents’ death, saves the Jews—orphans because of their sins—from the hands of the Amalekites, who are of dubious parentage.⁶⁴ The Jews are powerless against the Amalekites, who symbolize all the enemies of the Jews. Similarly, in the palace where she finds herself, Esther is portrayed as powerless against her enemies. Yet, she chooses to make the best of it. She emerges as an unlikely leader in difficult circumstances. This paper aims to explore the leadership of the literary figure of Esther, using the framework of cultural intertexture, honor, shame, and rights cultures, and challenge-response within the sphere of socio-rhetorical criticism. This study is limited to a literary rather than historical focus.

Cultural intertexture analysis portrays the literary figure of Queen Esther as a servant leader. A good descriptor for a servant leader is someone who looks out for others as well as himself or herself. Greenleaf posits that a servant leader is one who strives to meet others’ needs, while pursuing personal growth. Greenleaf asserts that the servant leader “is servant first,”⁶⁵ then “conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead.”⁶⁶ Esther is initially reluctant to put herself at risk (Est 4:10) but eventually makes the choice to place the welfare of her people above that of her own (Est 4:16). Esther is a woman caught between two worlds. She is a Jewish woman who marries a Persian, breaks a lot of dietary laws, and assimilates into Persian society.⁶⁷ She masters the art of enculturation by learning the appropriate behavior of her own culture and acculturation by learning the appropriate behavior of her host culture.⁶⁸ She is loyal to her Jewish heritage but also lives obediently in the role of a model Persian queen. Gottwald observes that “one can be both a good Persian queen and a good Jew.”⁶⁹ Malina notes that an honorable person of such enculturation “would never expose his or

⁶¹ Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 106.

⁶² Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, 192.

⁶³ Roger L. Omanson and Phillip A. Noss, *A Handbook on the Book of Esther: The Hebrew and Greek Texts* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1997), 89, 93.

⁶⁴ Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb*, 38.

⁶⁵ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey Into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1977), 13.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁶⁷ Carruthers, *Esther Through the Centuries*, 10.

⁶⁸ Stephen A. Grunlan and Marvin K. Mayers, *Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 80.

⁶⁹ Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible*, 563.

her distinct individuality”⁷⁰ but would be a person of “careful calculation and discretion.”⁷¹ Esther displays this strategic planning in her interaction with Xerxes on behalf of the Jews. She does not expose her individuality but acts with calculation and discretion.

Grunlan defines kinship as “a ‘road map’ or structure of interpersonal relationships.”⁷² He explains that kinship “establishes social patterns of behavior, obligations and responsibilities, and patterns of authority.”⁷³ Malina points out that kinship norms “deal with the selection of marriage partners as well as with the quality and duration of the marriage bond.”⁷⁴ As a Jewish woman with strong kinship ties, Esther obeys Mordecai’s plan to make her queen and his instruction to keep her identity secret, even after she becomes queen. As a Persian queen, Esther obeys the law that keeps her isolated in a harem and requires Xerxes to summon her if he desires, rendering her powerless even though she is queen. Regardless of her thoughts, opinions, or desires, Esther humbly obeys the two men representing the authority that govern her life. Groves points out that “women belonged to the men who were in authority over them.”⁷⁵ White explains:

The Jews in the Diaspora . . . are in the position of the weak, as a subordinate population under the dominant Persian government. They must adjust to their lack of immediate political and economic power and learn to work within the system to gain what power they can. In the book of Esther, their role model for this adjustment is Esther. Not only is she a woman, a member of a perpetually subordinate population, but she is an orphan, a powerless member of Jewish society. Therefore, her position in society is constantly precarious, as was the position of the Jews in the Diaspora. With no native power of her own owing to her sex or position in society, Esther must learn to make her way among the powerful and to cooperate with others in order to make herself secure.⁷⁶

Esther is in a world where women are considered second class citizens, yet she manages, within an inherently powerless position, to exert influence over her designated authority to rescue the Jewish people in Susa from imminent annihilation. Ciulla asserts that “to have power is to possess the capacity to control or direct change.”⁷⁷ She states that “all forms of leadership must make use of power,” and that “the central issue of power in leadership is not will it be used, but rather will it be used

⁷⁰ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 59.

⁷¹ Ibid., 59.

⁷² Grunlan, *Cultural Anthropology*, 162.

⁷³ Ibid., 162.

⁷⁴ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 135.

⁷⁵ Sidnie W. Crawford and Leonard J. Greenspoon, eds., *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (New York: T&T Clark International, 2003), 100.

⁷⁶ Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, 191-192.

⁷⁷ Joanne B. Ciulla, ed., *Ethics, the Heart of Leadership*, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 36.

wisely and well.”⁷⁸ The literary figure of Esther exerts influence, does not seek fame, nor does she seek to hold on to the power inherent in her leadership.

I. EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS

Malina asserts that “meaning inevitably derives from the general social system of the speakers of a language.”⁷⁹ He further states that to understand the Bible “requires some understanding of the social system embodied in the words.”⁸⁰ When personal experience is used as a norm for human behavior, it is considered ethnocentrism. He indicates that ethnocentrism involves “imposing your own cultural interpretations of persons, things, and events on other people,” and when applied to history, it is referred to as anachronism—“imposing the cultural artifacts, meanings, and behavior of your own period on people of the past.”⁸¹ Malina maintains that the only way to avoid misinterpretations or “ethnocentric anachronisms is to understand the culture from which our foreign writings come.”⁸² He encourages us to understand our own cultural story and realize that the cultural stories of other people, including those depicted in biblical documents, are different from our own. I examine the story of the literary figure of Esther using cultural intertexture, honor, guilt, and rights cultures, and challenge-response/riposte within the framework of a larger exegetical approach known as socio-rhetorical criticism.

Cultural Intertexture

Cultural intertexture analysis is a type of intertexture analysis. Robbins notes that “cultural intertexture appears in a text either through reference or allusion and echo.”⁸³ He asserts that references “point to a personage, concept, or tradition,” and allusions “interact with cultural concepts or traditions.”⁸⁴ Grunlan and Mayers define culture as “the learned and shared attitudes, values, and ways of behaving of a people.”⁸⁵ In the book of Esther, there is a clear interaction of cross-cultures. There is an interaction of Jewish and Persian cultures, as well as an interaction of gender roles. Malina states that in the first-century Mediterranean society, there was collectivism rather than individualism.⁸⁶ He indicates that “persons always considered themselves in terms of the group(s) in which they experienced themselves as inextricably embedded.”⁸⁷ Honor,

⁷⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁷⁹ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 1.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 2.

⁸¹ Ibid., 10.

⁸² Ibid., 11.

⁸³ Vernon K. Robbins, *Exploring the Texture of Texts: A Guide to Socio-Rhetorical Interpretation* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1996), 58.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 59.

⁸⁵ Grunlan and Mayers, *Cultural Anthropology*, 278.

⁸⁶ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 62.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 62.

guilt, and rights, as well as challenge-response (riposte), are examined as part of cultural intertexture. Neyrey observes that honor is a pivotal value of the Mediterranean society.⁸⁸ Malina states that honor is “a claim to worth and the social acknowledgement of that worth.”⁸⁹ He indicates that honor could either be ascribed or acquired, that is, honor given simply by virtue of one’s identity, or honor obtained by excelling over others in the social interaction referred to as challenge and response.⁹⁰ Neyrey also acknowledges that honor is achieved by engaging in challenge and riposte.⁹¹

Cultural Echo within Cultural Intertexture

Robbins defines an echo as “a word or phrase that evokes, or potentially evokes, a concept from cultural tradition.”⁹² Cultural echo in Esther 5 alludes to the fact that as a Jewish woman Esther is expected to obey Mordecai even though she is married, as kinship ties are particularly strong. Malina indicates that kinship is “about naturing and nurturing human beings interpreted as family members.”⁹³ Grunlan and Mayers indicate that kinship is “more than a network of biological relationships, it is also a network of social relationships.”⁹⁴ Esther has obligations and responsibilities bestowed on her by her kinship ties with Mordecai. Van Wijk-Bos notes that in the beginning, Esther “represents beauty and charm.”⁹⁵ Roop echoes the thought and notes that prior to Haman’s decree of Jewish annihilation, Esther has been depicted as a beautiful and compliant woman.⁹⁶ Fountain echoes that Esther is initially presented as “a submissive, obedient, and loyal person.”⁹⁷ Jobes observes that “her Jewish character led her to obey Mordecai, which meant, paradoxically, that she must deny that character and live as a pagan.”⁹⁸ Mordecai is instrumental in her participation in the pageant that makes her queen (Est 2:5-7) and she does not reveal her Jewish identity secret “because Mordecai had forbidden her to do so” (Est 2:10). Roop reiterates that at first glance Esther is portrayed as obedient.⁹⁹ He indicates that the expectation was for Esther to be submissive.¹⁰⁰ Van Wijk-Bos explains that when Esther is selected as queen, “she is

⁸⁸ Jerome H. Neyrey, *Honor and Shame in the Gospel of Matthew* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 5.

⁸⁹ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 31.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹¹ Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 16.

⁹² Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 60.

⁹³ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 82.

⁹⁴ Grunlan and Mayers, *Cultural Anthropology*, 162.

⁹⁵ Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 106.

⁹⁶ Roop, *Believers Church Bible*, 211.

⁹⁷ A. Kay Fountain, *Literary and Empirical Readings of the Books of Esther: Studies in Biblical Literature* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002), 37.

⁹⁸ Karen H. Jobes, *Esther: The NIV Application Commentary, From Biblical Text . . . to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1999), 138.

⁹⁹ Roop, *Believers Church Bible*, 164.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

beautiful, is able to charm people, and does a very good job of following the instructions of the men in her surroundings.”¹⁰¹

Cultural echo alludes to the fact that Mordecai expects Esther to follow his instructions and to appeal to Xerxes on behalf the Jews in Susa (Est 4:8) based on his prior experience of her compliance with his instructions. Mordecai expects Esther to continue to obey and submit to his instructions. Van Wijk-Bos asserts that Mordecai is “banking on the old relationship still being in place where he charged and Esther did as he charged her.”¹⁰² Esther’s initial reluctance has a cultural echo of Mordecai’s disbelief and disappointment evident in his response. Bechtel observes that Mordecai seems to have interpreted Esther’s reluctance as “cowardice or selfishness.”¹⁰³ His response includes an implied threat (Est 4:12-14). Van Wijk-Bos notes that Mordecai presents Esther with a threat that she has little to lose in approaching the king as her life was also in jeopardy.¹⁰⁴ However, she observes that he also presents her with a possibility—perhaps “she is in the harem for a purpose, a greater purpose than that of pleasing the king.”¹⁰⁵ Jobes observes that “when the situation had come to a crisis, Esther was brought to a defining moment in her life by circumstances over which she had no control.”¹⁰⁶ Esther struggles between her sense of duty to her Jewish roots, and that of her Persian present and future. Jobes points out that Esther “seems caught between the Gentile world of the pagan court and the Jewish world in which she was raised”¹⁰⁷ and she is forced to choose between her Jewish and pagan identities. Jobes states that “in this moment, Esther has to decide who she really is.”¹⁰⁸ She has to choose who she is going to be, which group she is going to identify with, and what risks she is willing to take. Finally, she makes the choice to risk her life because of the potential to save the lives of her kin. White notes that “from this point on, she is in charge.”¹⁰⁹ Esther emerges as a leader, beginning with a role reversal with Mordecai. Previously he issues instructions which she obeys, now she issues instructions which he obeys (Est 4:17). Bechtel claims that Esther “has learned to think and act for herself, and is no longer content to take orders from Mordecai without carefully considering their wisdom first.”¹¹⁰ Fountain asserts that this appears to be the point at which Esther truly becomes queen in her own right.¹¹¹ Van Wijk-Bos points out Esther’s transformation in the story: “From a charmer who hides her true self, she comes out of the shadows to claim her identity and to intercede successfully for her community. By overcoming the limits of her existence,

¹⁰¹ Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 115.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 124.

¹⁰³ Bechtel, *Esther Interpretation*, 48-49.

¹⁰⁴ Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 129.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁰⁶ Jobes, *Esther*, 137.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁰⁹ Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, 192.

¹¹⁰ Bechtel, *Esther Interpretation*, 48.

¹¹¹ Fountain, *Literary and Empirical Readings*, 45.

she rises from power that is a sham to true power. She becomes someone when she is able to lay claim to who she is and in that capacity is able to save her people.”¹¹²

Levenson notes that “there has also been a concomitant transformation in Esther’s status.”¹¹³ White observes that the “powerless has become the powerful.”¹¹⁴ Levenson concludes that Esther “has moved from being the adopted daughter of an exile, to the winner of a beauty contest, to the queen of Persia and Media, to the pivotal figure in the crisis hanging over the Jews, able to issue effective commands to her foster father.”¹¹⁵ The young servile girl has become transformed into a queen, willing to lay her life down for her people.

At the point when Mordecai asks Esther to break the laws of land, there is a cultural echo that her influence over King Xerxes is tenuous at best. Although Xerxes is initially captivated by Esther’s beauty (Est 2:17), after she became his queen she loses the newness he appears to crave. Groves points out that there is an allusion in Esther 2:19a to a second gathering of virgins that takes place during the years between Esther’s coronation and the terrifying decision she faces in Esther 4.¹¹⁶ Given the history of her predecessor, Vashti, Esther realizes the precariousness of the situation she is in. The king appears to have forgotten about her—not having called for her in a month (Est 4:11)—which meant that any influence she thought she had was nebulous. Mordecai, whom Esther trusts as having her best interests at heart, instructs her to directly defy Persian law, essentially signing her death warrant. Xerxes could be looking for an opportunity to depose of Esther because he may have found a new virgin he is pleased with and wants to make his queen, as he did with Esther after the first pageant. Bechtel points out that Xerxes “may not *mean* to do wicked and destructive things, but he does them nevertheless.”¹¹⁷ She states that Xerxes “may be a buffoon . . . but he is a dangerous buffoon.”¹¹⁸ Yet, Esther makes the choice to take the risk of approaching Xerxes without being summoned as required by law.

The phrase “Esther put on her royal apparel” (Est 5:1), a cultural echo, implies that Esther had to remove her mourning clothes and dress appropriately for presenting herself to Xerxes. Neyrey observes that “people took pains to craft their appearance in public for maximum social effect.”¹¹⁹ According to Omanson and Noss, sackcloth, representing mourning and grief, is forbidden in the palace.¹²⁰ This law causes Mordecai to stop at the gates when he is in sackcloth (Est 4:2). Omanson and Noss also point out that fasting is an additional sign of sorrow.¹²¹ Moore explains that

¹¹² Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 106.

¹¹³ Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 82.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹¹⁶ Crawford and Greenspoon, *The Book of Esther*, 92.

¹¹⁷ Bechtel, *Esther Interpretation*, 26.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹¹⁹ Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 25.

¹²⁰ Omanson and Noss, *A Handbook*, 117.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 118.

“feminine strategy, as well as court etiquette, requires that Esther not appear before the king in sackcloth.”¹²² Esther has to make the transition from mourning as a Jew to appearing as a dignified Gentile queen. Berlin observes that Esther is “dressed in her best for this important occasion, and more to the point, she is dressed in her official garb as queen.”¹²³ Jobes notes that “at the same time she decides to identify with her people, she also claims her authority and power as the Queen of Persia in going before the king.”¹²⁴ Groves suggests that Esther uses either her sexual appeal or her royal position, perhaps both, to appeal to Xerxes’s sense of pride in possessing a splendid queen.¹²⁵ Knowing his weakness for beautiful women, she hopes that she will capture his attention, thus distracting him from the fact that she has broken the law. The phrase “stood in the inner court of the king’s palace” (Est 5:1) contains a cultural echo of the law that Esther is breaking by her uninvited presence, which carries the penalty of death. Van Wijk-Bos indicates that Xerxes’s “power is real and firm, represented by the building, seat, and staff . . . ready to dole out life and death.”¹²⁶ She points out that Esther “*stands* outside of the king’s hall,”¹²⁷ while Xerxes “*sits inside* the palace on his ‘royal throne’.”¹²⁸ Omanson and Noss note that Xerxes is holding court and performing his official duties at the time.¹²⁹ Berlin suggests that “Esther sees the king sitting on the throne, and the king sees her standing in the inner court.”¹³⁰ The king and queen are able to observe each other before Esther comes into the room where Xerxes is sitting.¹³¹ Omanson and Noss indicate that the inner court of the palace is where one could see the king on his throne.¹³² Berlin explains that in the Greek versions, Esther’s attire and beauty are described in detail and that “her heart is frozen with fear.”¹³³ In the moment before Xerxes sees Esther in the inner court, knowing the impulsivity and impetuosity of the king, “Esther must have been exceedingly nervous.”¹³⁴ Perhaps Esther waits with bated breath, perhaps her young life flashes before her eyes, or perhaps she wants to turn and run away. Instead, she stands with dignity in her royal apparel, awaiting her fate in the king’s hands. Van Wijk-Bos proposes that “the king must make the first move otherwise she will indeed perish.”¹³⁵ Bechtel states that Esther has “a certain degree of savvy in her decision to stand in the court rather than

¹²² Whitcomb, *Esther*, 81.

¹²³ Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, 51.

¹²⁴ Jobes, *Esther*, 144.

¹²⁵ Crawford and Greenspoon, *The Book of Esther*, 104.

¹²⁶ Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 130.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹²⁹ Omanson and Noss, *A Handbook*, 138.

¹³⁰ Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, 52.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹³² Omanson and Noss, *A Handbook*, 127.

¹³³ Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, 52.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹³⁵ Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 130.

barging directly into the throne room.”¹³⁶ Esther gives the Xerxes the illusion that it is his idea to invite her in,¹³⁷ which allows Xerxes to retain his honor.

When Xerxes sees Esther, he sees his queen and prized possession, so he calls her “Queen Esther” (Est 5:3). Berlin observes that “Esther immediately wins favor.”¹³⁸ Xerxes has not seen Esther in a month (Est 4:11). Berlin indicates that “Esther’s agitation is obvious to the king.”¹³⁹ Perhaps seeing her dazzling beauty arrayed in royal robes captivates his attention, which reminds him of how she had previously found grace and favor in his sight, pleasing him (Est 2:17). Neyrey suggests that finding favor in Xerxes’s eyes “translates as acknowledgment of worth and value”¹⁴⁰ in his sight. Weems offers an alternative view, saying that “the king’s experience with Vashti may have softened him up a bit,”¹⁴¹ making him “more open to listen to her.”¹⁴² Xerxes ascribes honor to Esther, which prompts him to hold out his golden scepter, a symbol of his authority as “a sign of clemency.”¹⁴³ Malina indicates that honor can be “ascribed to someone by a notable person of authority.”¹⁴⁴ By holding out his scepter, Xerxes ascribes honor to Esther who, probably with a sense of relief at the reprieve, “acknowledged his goodwill toward her by approaching the throne and touching the end of the scepter with her finger or hand.”¹⁴⁵ In one moment, Esther’s sentence is changed from condemned by law to being spared by grace. Furthermore, Xerxes appears to proffer the exact solution she needs for the problem that causes her to risk her life. He offers her anything she wants up to half his kingdom. The Jews in Susa at the time are less than half the kingdom and it appears that the issue is resolved. However, Esther chooses not to present her request immediately. Cultural echo alludes to the fact that she needs to woo him and his allegiance against his trusted adviser Haman.

Berlin points out that “Esther’s language is very formal and proper—she addresses the king in the third person.”¹⁴⁶ Recognizing and using the language of the court, Esther says, “If it please the king, let the king and Haman come this day to a dinner that I have prepared for the king” (Est 5:4). Cultural echo implies that Esther is aware of the need to honor Xerxes, adding Haman to the invitation list almost as an after thought. Bechtel points out that the way Esther words the invitation makes it clear that it is an invitation for the king, which literally reads, “Let the king come—and Haman—today to the banquet that I have prepared for him.”¹⁴⁷ She explains that “the care with

¹³⁶ Bechtel, *Esther Interpretation*, 52.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹³⁸ Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, 53.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁴⁰ Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 24.

¹⁴¹ Bellis, 191.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 191.

¹⁴³ Omanson and Noss, *A Handbook*, 127.

¹⁴⁴ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 32.

¹⁴⁵ Omanson and Noss, *A Handbook*, 139.

¹⁴⁶ Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, 53.

¹⁴⁷ Bechtel, *Esther Interpretation*, 52.

which this invitation is crafted reveals that Esther is very much aware of the need to flatter and the risk of giving offense.”¹⁴⁸ Cultural echo implies that Esther cannot ascribe the same level of honor to Xerxes and Haman. Bechtel notes that “it must not seem as if she views Haman and the king as being on the same level.”¹⁴⁹ She espouses that perhaps Haman’s inclusion is “anything *but* an afterthought”¹⁵⁰ because an advantage to having Haman present at the dinner is to catch him “off guard”¹⁵¹ with no time lapse between the time Esther presents her case and the time Xerxes sees Haman.¹⁵² Xerxes’s immediately sends for Haman so they can go to the dinner Esther has prepared. Van Wijk-Bos observes that “the king who once banished a queen because she refused his invitation is ready to bestow largesse on one who comes uninvited into his presence.”¹⁵³ It is ironic that at the beginning of the story, worried about his image, Xerxes banishes Vashti for her presumptuousness, and now he scurries to obey Esther. Van Wijk-Bos notes that Esther, in a role traditional for a woman, will be a hostess.¹⁵⁴ She points out that “her designs are not traditional, but it is clear that she does everything to prevent suspicions from arising and to ward off one of the king’s mood swings, from extravagant generosity to outrageous anger.”¹⁵⁵ White notes that “Esther’s plan uses indirect methods of persuasion common among oppressed people, including women.”¹⁵⁶ She notes that Esther was not only heroic but served as a model of the Jews in the Diaspora.¹⁵⁷ Esther demonstrates how a powerless person can exert a measure of influence over the person in a position of authority over her.

Honor, Guilt, and Rights Cultures

Malina defines honor as “a claim to worth that is socially acknowledged.”¹⁵⁸ He asserts that it is the point where authority, gender status, or roles, and respect intersect. Malina defines authority, “a symbolic reality,” as “the ability to control the behavior of others.”¹⁵⁹ He defines gender status as “the sets of obligations and entitlements”¹⁶⁰ derived from “symboling biological gender differentiation.”¹⁶¹ Malina further defines respect as “the attitude one must have and the behavior one is expected to follow

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 52.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 52.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 130.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 130.

¹⁵² Ibid., 130.

¹⁵³ Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 131.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 131.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 131.

¹⁵⁶ Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, 192.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 193.

¹⁵⁸ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 29.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 30.

relative to those who control one's existence."¹⁶² In first-century Mediterranean society, honor is always negotiated in public. Neyrey notes that "a man's physical body served as the constant stage on which honor was displayed and claimed."¹⁶³ He explains that "it is one's standing 'in the eyes of others' which constitutes worth and reputation."¹⁶⁴ Neyrey points out that affronts occur "before the very eye of the insulted person, for them to constitute genuine challenges."¹⁶⁵ He acknowledges that first-century Mediterranean society is "fundamentally gender divided."¹⁶⁶ He indicates that the social construction of gender perceives that "male and female are two different species of human."¹⁶⁷ Neyrey notes that the "stereotype of a gender-divided world operated out of the pervasive cultural distinction between public and private."¹⁶⁸ He explains that this meant that male roles took them into the "public world outside the household," whereas female roles were confined to the "private world of the household."¹⁶⁹ First-century Mediterranean society was a patriarchal society, where people adhered to the defined roles and cultures of the time. Bellis summarizes patriarchal societies as "male dominated and oppressive of women."¹⁷⁰ Bird presents a picture of a woman in ancient Israel: "She was a legal non person, where she does become visible it is as dependent, and usually an inferior, in a male-centered and male-dominated society."¹⁷¹ Furthermore, Bird notes, where ranking was concerned, she was always inferior to the male and is only accorded status and honor as a mother, yet she is always subject to the authority of some male—father, husband, or brother—except when widowed or divorced.¹⁷² Vashti's refusal to appear at the king's drunken summons is a clear violation of the rules of honor. Vashti clearly defies Xerxes's authority, violates gender status, and displays a lack of respect for Xerxes, who is in authority over her. In order to reclaim his honor, Xerxes banishes Vashti. Esther, aware of the rules of honor has to work within the rules of honor to achieve her goal of saving her people from annihilation.

Neyrey indicates that "most things in the world could be conceptualized as either male or female, that is, as appropriate to the gender stereotype of maleness and femaleness, such as space, roles, tasks, and objects."¹⁷³ He notes that "the two genders should be separate and not mix or overlap."¹⁷⁴ He concludes that "to be a male

¹⁶² Ibid., 30.

¹⁶³ Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 24.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 24.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 29.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁷⁰ Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, 21.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 26.

¹⁷² Ibid., 26-27.

¹⁷³ Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 29.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 29.

meant *not* being female.”¹⁷⁵ Neyrey defines shame as “the reverse of honor, that is the loss of respect, regard, worth, and value in the eyes of others.”¹⁷⁶ Robbins points out that shame is the female version of honor and explains that shame “refers to a person’s sensitivity about what others think, say, and do with regard to his or her honor.”¹⁷⁷ Daube states that “shame has a decidedly negative meaning when it refers to the loss of respect and regard by some public.”¹⁷⁸ Mordecai, in refusing to bow before Haman (Est 3:5), did not ascribe the honor due to Haman. Mordecai’s negative challenge causes Haman shame and relegates him to the space, status, and role of a female, which Haman does not tolerate. Mordecai forces Haman to respond negatively. However, rather than respond solely to Mordecai, Haman decides to take his rage out on all the Jews and looks for a way to destroy them (Est 3:6).

Neyrey notes that shame had a positive connotation when applied to the social expectations for females in first-century Mediterranean cultures.¹⁷⁹ Neyrey asserts that females are “expected to display shyness, not concern for prestige; deference, not concern for precedence; submission, not aggressiveness; timidity, not daring; and restraint, not boldness.”¹⁸⁰ When females met the broad societal expectations, they “have honor when they have this kind of shame” and “are judged positively in the court of reputation.”¹⁸¹ As a woman who was cognizant of societal expectations, Esther achieves honor in her liberation of the Jews by male means in the public sphere yet she chooses to reassume her predefined gender role, rather than hold on to power, to maintain that honor.

In the literary figure of Xerxes’s court, once a decree is issued it is irrevocable. Although Xerxes indicates that he is willing to give Esther anything she wants when she initially approaches, it is doubtful whether he would have acquiesced to her request at the outset, or simply have granted her immunity while the other Jews were destroyed. Berlin points out that Esther “deflected the king’s magnanimous offer.”¹⁸² Esther could not risk failure and decides to wait until she can present her concerns in a way Xerxes will be honored. Groves asserts that Esther has to find a way for Xerxes to “extricate himself from culpability in the issuance of the decree and redeem his honor” in order to gain his sympathy and corresponding action.¹⁸³ Esther skillfully presents the issue of rescuing the Jews to Xerxes in terms of his honor being affronted.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 29.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 30.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 76.

¹⁷⁸ Neyrey, *Honor and Shame*, 30.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 32.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 32.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 32.

¹⁸² Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, 53.

¹⁸³ Crawford and Greenspoon, *The Book of Esther*, 105.

Challenge-Response (Riposte)

There are a series of challenge-responses in Esther 5 (see Table 1). Robbins indicates that challenge-response within the context of honor has at least three phases: (1) the challenge in terms of some action on the part of the challenger, (2) the perception of the message by both the individual to whom it is directed and the public at large, and (3) the reaction of the receiving individual and the evaluation of the reaction on the part of the public.¹⁸⁴ Esther initiates the first challenge—"a claim to enter the social space of another"¹⁸⁵—by appearing in the inner court of the king's house. Robbins notes that there could be a positive or negative reason for a challenger to approach.¹⁸⁶ Esther has a positive reason for approaching as she wants to gain the king's favorable audience in order to save the Jewish people in Susa. Robbins indicates that the receiver looks at the action from the viewpoint of its potential to dishonor his self-esteem and self-worth and has to determine whether the challenge falls within the range of socially acceptable behavior.¹⁸⁷ The receiver filters the message of the challenger through his or her lens of perception of the message, and then reacts to the message in a way that retains his or her honor status in society. Robbins observes that the challenge-response dance was designed to take place among equals. The receiver is either honored or dishonored by the challenger's status in society.¹⁸⁸ Esther's uninvited appearance could have been seen as an implied dishonor since she was not considered equal to Xerxes. Yet, instead of condemnation and death, he responds positively to her approach. Xerxes ascribes honor to Esther as one who has authority over her.¹⁸⁹ This gives her the confidence to issue the second challenge. Esther wisely issues another positive, rather than negative, challenge. Xerxes is implicated in the plot to annihilate the Jews and would have protected his honor at any cost, as evidenced by his previous actions with Vashti. An invitation to dinner is a different matter as he is being honored by his beautiful and charming queen. In her appearance and speech, Esther pays obeisance to Xerxes, thereby preserving his honor.

The second challenge is issued at the first dinner Esther has prepared. This time, Xerxes issues the challenge, which is positive, asking Esther what her petition and requests are. Although Xerxes is initially portrayed as largely uninvolved and dependent on Haman and his advisors, he knows that Esther did not risk her life simply to ask him to dinner. As one who is in a position of highest honor as the king, it indicates that he has elevated Esther to his level by issuing the positive challenge. In her response, Esther begins her speech by retaining the language of honor, saying, "If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request, let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the dinner which I will prepare for them and tomorrow I will do as the king has said" (Est 5:8). Esther understands that in

¹⁸⁴ Robbins, *Exploring the Texture*, 80.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹⁸⁹ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 32.

order to continue to receive a favorable response, she needs to continue to preserve Xerxes's honor. Groves points out that in first-century Mediterranean cultures, "what happened to women mattered only so far it honored and shamed the men to whom they belonged."¹⁹⁰ Esther presents her request as her obeying his instruction, while securing his commitment to give her what she wants. In Esther's approach to Xerxes, he ascribes honor to her (Est 5:2) and after the challenge and response, she has acquired honor (Est 5:8).

Cultural echo within the sphere of cultural intertexture analysis implies that the literary figure of Queen Esther is expected to obey Mordecai, following his instructions to appeal to the literary figure of Xerxes on behalf of the Jews in Susa. Cultural echo alludes to Mordecai's disappointment at Esther's initial reaction followed by her emergence as a leader and a reversal of their roles. Challenge and response in Esther 5:1-8, along with the underlying issues of honor and shame, demonstrate the positive challenges issued by the literary figure of Queen Esther, the positive responses by the literary figure of Xerxes, the preservation of Xerxes's honor, and the honor ascribed to and acquired by Esther leading to the salvation of the Jews from certain destruction. The literary figure of Esther, though initially reluctant to take leadership, displays wisdom in exerting influence from a position of powerlessness on the literary figure of Xerxes. She accomplishes her goal without striving to usurp his power, change the structure of the society, or lay claim to the inherent fame in her demonstrated leadership. Furthermore, after she achieves her goal of saving the Jews from annihilation, she does not seek fame or to hold on power but chooses to step out of the limelight and stay in her designated role as a woman.

II. QUEEN ESTHER'S UNLIKELY LEADERSHIP IN DIFFICULT CIRCUMSTANCES

Xerxes, Mordecai, and Esther all demonstrate some form of leadership. Roop notes that the designated leader, Xerxes, "fails at nearly every turn."¹⁹¹ He concludes that Xerxes fails because he is "so dependent and disconnected from the significance of events in the palace."¹⁹² Northouse explains that transactional leadership "focuses on the exchanges that occur between leaders and their followers."¹⁹³ Initially Xerxes is portrayed as a transactional leader, operating on the basis of rewards and punishment. Vashti's disobedience to Xerxes's command was dethronement and banishment (Est 1:19-21). Bass and Riggio explain that laissez-faire leadership is "the avoidance or absence of leadership."¹⁹⁴ Xerxes is portrayed as one who also demonstrates laissez-faire leadership. Van Wijk-Bos observes that Xerxes is a "manipulable and obtuse ruler, who is scared of losing control," which makes him "putty in the hands of his adviser."¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁰ Crawford and Greenspoon, *The Book of Esther*, 100.

¹⁹¹ Roop, *Believers Church Bible*, 166.

¹⁹² Ibid., 166.

¹⁹³ Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007), 176.

¹⁹⁴ Bernard M. Bass and Ronald E. Riggio, *Transformational Leadership: Industrial, Military, and Educational Impact*, 2nd ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2006), 8.

¹⁹⁵ Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 119.

Table 1. Challenge-response (riposte) in Esther 5

Verse	Challenger	Challenge	Type	Receiver	Perception by receiver	Response	Type	Evaluation by public
5v1	Esther	Stands in the inner court	Positive	Xerxes	Positive			Honor (ascribed)
5v2						Holds out scepter	Positive	Honor (ascribed)
5v2	Esther	Touches the golden scepter				Promises to grant Esther's request	Positive	Honor (acquired)
5v4	Esther	Invites Xerxes and Haman to dinner (already prepared)	Positive	Xerxes	Positive			
5v5						Xerxes summons Haman and attends dinner	Positive	Honor (acquired)
5v6	Xerxes	Inquires into Esther's request and promises to fulfill whatever it is	Positive	Esther	Positive			

Verse	Challenger	Challenge	Type	Receiver	Perception by receiver	Response	Type	Evaluation by public
5v8						Esther invites Xerxes and Haman to another dinner (to be prepared) and promises to reveal the request at the dinner	Positive	Honor (acquired)
5v9 5v10 5v11 5v12 5v13	Mordecai	Does not rise or tremble before Haman.	Negative	Haman	Negative	Haman is filled with wrath but restrains himself. Goes home, gathers wife and friends, boasts about status and complains about Mordecai	Negative	Shame
5v14						Haman has the gallows made	Negative	

Haman plans to annihilate the Jews (Est 3:6), indicates to Xerxes that they are a threat to Xerxes's kingdom (Est 3:8), and requests their destruction (Est 3:9). Van Wijk-Bos points out that "race prejudice addresses people at the point of their fear"¹⁹⁶ and Haman's speech combines elements that raise Xerxes's fears. The literary figure of Xerxes, knows that, as king the decrees he makes are irrevocable, Yet, he does not make any effort to get involved in obtaining details of the people in his kingdom that "do not obey the king's laws" (Est 3:8), giving Haman permission to issue a decree to annihilate them, with no requirement for Haman to surrender proof of his accusations. Bass and Riggio indicate that the laissez-faire leader "avoids getting involved when important issues arise."¹⁹⁷ Reluctant to get involved by verifying the truth of the allegations or seeking to discover what Haman's motives are, Xerxes cedes his leadership to Haman and gives his approval for the destruction of a people whose identity he is unaware of (Est 3:10-11). Van Wijk-Bos notes that although the literary figure of Xerxes represents the power in the Persian Empire, he "comes across as consistently weak, easy to manipulate, not too bright, at times completely bewildered and lacking in perspicacity."¹⁹⁸ Bechtel observes that Xerxes "seems largely out of touch with reality."¹⁹⁹ Van Wijk-Bos points out that "the real power in the kingdom is wielded by Haman, who represents every schemer that ever worked an administration to his advantage."²⁰⁰ She goes on to say that Haman is "full of evil intent and a sense of self-inflated worth."²⁰¹ Van Wijk-Bos notes that Xerxes "has become such a hands-off administrator that he lets his adviser wreak havoc in the realm."²⁰² Finally, Xerxes is portrayed as one who demonstrates participative leadership. Yukl asserts that "participative leadership involves the use of various decision procedures that allow other people some influence over the leader's decisions."²⁰³ He identifies four dimensions: (a) autocratic decision, where the leader makes a decision alone; (b) consultation, where the leader makes a decision after asking for input; (c) joint decision, where the leader makes a decision together with others; and (d) delegation, where the leader gives an individual or group the authority to make the decision.²⁰⁴ Xerxes makes an autocratic decision when Esther presents the problem of averting the destruction of the Jews and then delegates the details and execution to Queen Esther and Mordecai to avert impending annihilation of the Jews (Est 8:7-8). Xerxes is initially identified as a transactional leader, then as one demonstrating laissez-faire leadership, and finally as one using participative leadership. The figure of Xerxes is shown to change from using ineffective leadership styles to one more effective in leading his kingdom.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 119.

¹⁹⁷ Bass and Riggio, *Transformational Leadership*, 9.

¹⁹⁸ Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 106.

¹⁹⁹ Bechtel, *Esther Interpretation*, 27.

²⁰⁰ Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 106.

²⁰¹ Ibid., 106.

²⁰² Ibid., 119.

²⁰³ Gary G. Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations*, 6th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006), 82.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 82-83.

Mordecai is initially portrayed as a transactional leader, where he is concerned about potential rewards of getting Esther into the harem and the punishment from the hands of Haman. Yukl describes a follower as “a person who acknowledges the focal leader as the primary source of guidance about the work, regardless of how much formal authority the leader has over the person.”²⁰⁵ Mordecai is shown to assume the position of a follower when Esther emerges as a leader. According to Northouse, transformational leadership is “a process that changes and transforms people.”²⁰⁶ He notes that a transformational leader “plays a pivotal role in precipitating change.”²⁰⁷ Transformational leadership has been defined as the ability to elicit support and participation from followers through personal qualities rather than through reward and punishment.²⁰⁸ After Esther’s successful intercession with Xerxes on behalf of the Jews, Mordecai is portrayed as a transformational leader. Transformational leadership consists of four interrelated factors: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration.²⁰⁹ The idea of idealized influence means that transformational leaders “behave in ways that result in their being role models for their followers”²¹⁰ Bass asserts that these leaders are “admired, respected, and trusted.”²¹¹ Mordecai is “held in high esteem by his fellow Jews, because he worked for the good of his people and spoke up for the welfare of all the Jews” (Est 10:3). This implies that he was admired, respected, and trusted. The idea of inspirational motivation means that transformational leaders “behave in ways that motivate and inspire those around them by providing meaning and challenge to their follower’s work.”²¹² Mordecai’s victory over Haman and his activeness in protecting the Jews are instrumental in motivating the Jews in Diaspora to protect themselves against potential annihilation. Intellectual stimulation means that transformational leaders “stimulate their followers’ efforts to be innovative and creative by questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations in new ways.”²¹³ Mordecai stimulates the Jews in Susa to defend themselves against Haman’s edict of destruction. Berlin explains that although both Esther and Mordecai are empowered by the king to write the edict (Est 8:8), “Mordecai is the one who supervises its preparation,” making sure that the message goes far and wide in different languages.²¹⁴ This reflects “the practical necessity of conveying official information in forms that would be legible and intelligible to the recipients.”²¹⁵ Berlin asserts that “language is a code for

²⁰⁵ Ibid., 9.

²⁰⁶ Northouse, *Leadership*, 175.

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 176.

²⁰⁸ Bernard M. Bass, *Transformational Leadership: Industrial, Military, and Educational Impact* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1998), 4.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 5.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 5.

²¹¹ Ibid., 5.

²¹² Ibid., 5.

²¹³ Ibid., 5.

²¹⁴ Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, 76.

²¹⁵ Ibid., 76.

ethnicity.”²¹⁶ Mordecai is astute in using language as leverage for communicating his message. Individualized consideration means that transformational leaders “pay special attention to each individual follower’s needs for achievement and growth by acting as coach or mentor.”²¹⁷ Berlin indicates that at the end of the book of Esther, Mordecai’s popularity in the Jewish community and his concern for his people are emphasized.²¹⁸ Berlin concludes that “Mordecai is a model of Jewish success in the Diaspora.”²¹⁹ Mordecai is initially portrayed as demonstrating transactional leadership with getting Esther in Xerxes’s harem and refusing to bow to Haman under the king’s authority. He then takes the position of a follower when Esther emerges as a leader and operates using transformational leadership when Xerxes elevates him to a position of authority.

Patterson indicates that “servant leadership theory provides a whole new understanding of leadership by defining the heart of leadership as a focus on the well-being of followers.”²²⁰ She points out that a servant leader is “one who leads an organization by focusing on their followers such that followers are the primary concern and the organizational concerns are peripheral.”²²¹ Patterson proposes a conceptual model of servant leadership and identifies the virtues of a servant leader: (a) demonstrates *agapao* love, (b) acts with humility, (c) is altruistic, (d) is visionary, (e) is trusting, (f) empowers followers, and (g) is serving.²²² Winston defines *agapao* as “moral love, doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason.”²²³ Stone, Russell, and Patterson note that servant leaders have “an unconditional concern for the well-being of those who form the entity.”²²⁴ The literary figure of Queen Esther demonstrates *agapao* love when she places the needs of the Jewish people above her own because it was the right thing to do (Est 4:10-16). She demonstrates humility by approaching the king in an honorable manner (Est 5:1) and by ceding authority to Mordecai, stepping back into her predefined background role as a woman (Est 8:2). Patterson sees altruism as the connection between good motivation and behavior. Scruton contends that altruism can range from unselfishly performing acts to selflessly sacrificing life.²²⁵ The literary figure of Esther, initially selfishly thinking of her own well-being (Est 4:11), demonstrates altruism by having a willingness to defy Persian laws, risking death, for the potential salvation of her people (Est 5:16b). Writers on leadership explain that

²¹⁶ Ibid., 76.

²¹⁷ Ibid., 6.

²¹⁸ Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, 95.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 95.

²²⁰ Kathleen A. Patterson, “Servant Leadership: A Theoretical Model” (doctoral dissertation, Regent University School of Leadership Studies, 2003), 3.

²²¹ Ibid., 5.

²²² Ibid., 8.

²²³ Bruce E. Winston, *Be a Leader for God’s Sake* (Virginia Beach, VA: School of Leadership Studies, 2002), 5.

²²⁴ A. Gregory Stone, Robert F. Russell, and Kathleen Patterson, “Transformational Versus Servant Leadership: A Difference in Leader Focus,” *The Leadership and Organization Development Journal* 25, no. 4 (2004): 355.

²²⁵ Roger Scruton, “Altruism and Selfishness,” *American Spectator* 40, no. 8 (2007): 38-40.

vision is essential to leadership in order to “inspire others, to motivate action, and to move with hope toward the future.”²²⁶ Esther helps to instill hope for deliverance in the Jews, motivating them to fast and pray along with her and her maidens (Est 5:16a). Banutu-Gomez asserts that “servant leaders elicit trust in followers because they respond to crisis by owning the problem.”²²⁷ Esther demonstrates trust in God and also instills trust in the Jews because she responds to the crisis and takes ownership of doing what was necessary to deliver the Jews.

Although Esther is initially reluctant, she emerges as a servant leader. She humbly and selflessly works within the confines of the laws of the land to effect change, driven by love for Mordecai and her people and a vision for deliverance for them. She risks her life, placing the needs of her people ahead of her own. Esther skillfully manages to preserve the king’s honor while rescuing the Jews. Putting the follower’s needs first is the essence of servant leadership. Esther goes beyond simply placing the needs of the Jews ahead of hers and is willing to risk her life for their deliverance.

Ciulla points out that “empowerment conjures up pictures of inspired and confident people or groups of people who are ready and able to take control of their lives and better their world.”²²⁸ She further indicates that “empowerment is about giving people the confidence, competence, freedom, and resources to act on their own judgments.”²²⁹ The celebration of the Feast of Purim serves as a reminder of the survival of the Jews. Berlin asserts that there is a type of psychological release embodied in Esther and Purim celebrating community survival.²³⁰ The literary figure of Esther empowers the Jews, giving them a sense of hope that in the midst of a seemingly hopeless situation there is the possibility of deliverance.

Yukl asserts that “influence is the essence of leadership.”²³¹ He further states that “to be effective as a leader, it is necessary to influence people to carry out requests, support proposals, and implement decisions.”²³² The literary figure of Esther demonstrates influence with Mordecai, the Jews, and Xerxes. When she decides to approach Xerxes, she alleviates Mordecai’s suffering and is able to influence him and the Jews, asking them to fast on her behalf. She then influences Xerxes to prevent the annihilation of the Jews. Yukl states that “power involves the capacity of one party (the agent) to influence another party (the target).”²³³ He further states that power “describes the absolute capacity of an individual agent to influence the behavior or attitudes of one or more designated target persons at a given point in time.”²³⁴ He explains that there

²²⁶ Myra L. Fairling, A. Gregory Stone, and Bruce E. Winston, “Servant Leadership: Setting the Stage for Empirical Research,” *Journal of Leadership Studies* 6, no. 1/2 (1999): 53.

²²⁷ Michael Banutu-Gomez, “Great Leaders Teach Exemplary Followership and Serve as Servant Leaders,” *Journal of American Academy of Business*, 4, no. 1/4 (2004): 149.

²²⁸ Ciulla, *Ethics*, 59.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*, 59.

²³⁰ Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, xlix.

²³¹ Yukl, 145.

²³² *Ibid.*, 145.

²³³ *Ibid.*, 146.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, 146.

are different types of power that can be broken down into two categories: (a) position power, which includes potential influence derived from legitimate authority, control over resources and rewards, punishments, information and physical work environment, and (b) personal power, which includes potential influence derived from task expertise and potential influence based on friendship and loyalty.²³⁵ Yukl asserts that authority “involves the rights, prerogatives, obligations, and duties associated with particular positions in an organization or social system.”²³⁶ He claims that authority is “an important basis for influence.”²³⁷ The literary figure of Esther does not have any position or personal power nor does she have any authority yet she manages to exert influence from an inherently powerless position as a woman and a Jew in Diaspora.

Yukl indicates that there are three possible outcomes of influence: (a) commitment, where the target person internally agrees with a decision or request from the agent and makes a great effort to carry out the request or implement the decision effectively; (b) compliance, where the target person is willing to do what the agent asks but is apathetic rather than enthusiastic about it and will make only minimal effort; and (c) resistance, where the target person is opposed to the proposal or request, rather than merely indifferent about it, and actively tries to avoid carrying it out.²³⁸ Yukl suggests that “for a complex, difficult task, commitment is usually the most successful outcome from the perspective of the agent who makes an influence attempt.”²³⁹ Esther, from an inherently powerless position with no authority, obtains commitment from Mordecai and the Jews to fast along with her for her safety and from Xerxes to carry out her request to prevent the annihilation of the Jews.

Tingley proposes that power and influence are inseparable. She indicates that “they are the essential assets for leaders to have and use when persuading people to do what they want them to do.”²⁴⁰ Tingley explains that there are two methods of influence—direct and indirect.²⁴¹ She points out that the most important difference between the two is that “indirect influence attempts are planned as intentional by the leader, but viewed as unintentional by the target person.”²⁴² Esther’s method of approaching Xerxes fits in with the concept of indirect influence. Tingley proposes a six step framework to help in using indirect influence communication techniques: (a) decide what you want as an outcome of the communication, (b) read the other person in the current situation, (c) select an influencing method and technique—direct or indirect, (d) implement the technique, (e) reward yourself, and (f) evaluate the results.²⁴³ Esther appears to follow all the steps in the given framework: She decides that she wants to

²³⁵ Ibid., 149.

²³⁶ Ibid., 146.

²³⁷ Ibid., 175.

²³⁸ Ibid., 147.

²³⁹ Ibid., 147.

²⁴⁰ Judith C. Tingley, *The Power of Indirect Influence* (New York: AMACOM, 2001), 10.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 11.

²⁴² Ibid., 13.

²⁴³ Ibid., 36.

prevent the annihilation of the Jews, she approaches Xerxes in a manner that honors him—placing him in a position where she had an advantage—and she decides to invite Xerxes and Haman to two banquets, where the unsuspecting Haman's plot is revealed. Her request for a second day of killing by the Jews in Susa (Est 9:13) could be interpreted as a form of reward for her victory, and the celebration of the Festival of Purim an annual evaluation of the method that works in influencing one's authority from a position of powerlessness.

Kouzes and Posner describe five practices of exemplary leadership: (a) model the way, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c) challenge the process, (d) enable others to act, and (e) encourage the heart.²⁴⁴ The literary figure of Esther effectively models the behavior she expects from all the Jews when she initiates the three day fast (Est 4:16a). She inspires and instills a vision of freedom and salvation in the Jews with her willingness to appeal to Xerxes (Est 4:16b). She ventures out and is willing to challenge existing Persian laws for the greater good of her people in spite of the potential personal danger (Est 5:1). Esther makes it possible for the Jewish people to collaborate and act to defend themselves (Est 8:3) and encourages the hearts of the Jewish people through the generations by instituting the Festival of Purim (Est 9:29), which is still celebrated today.

III. CONCLUSION

This exegetical analysis provides an important addition to the field of leadership studies in demonstrating the leadership effectiveness of the literary figure of Queen Esther in her approach to King Xerxes on behalf of the Diaspora Jews in Susa. Cultural intertexture analysis places Esther within the domain of servant leadership. Furthermore, she possesses an essential quality that is lacking in Patterson's servant leadership model. Kenotic leadership extends servant leadership by taking the lowest possible position, completely emptying the self of any privilege, no longer making the choice to serve but having the attitude of a servant, embracing one's humanity and that of others, and practicing radical humility and obedience to the call.²⁴⁵ Esther demonstrates a self-sacrificial love that fits within Bekker's model of kenotic leadership.

The story of Esther demonstrates that a good servant leader does not cease to be a follower even after becoming a leader. Esther does not seek to change the patriarchal structure of her society, even after she obtains influence with King Xerxes. She chooses to keep serving in her position as queen and allows Mordecai to step into the position of authority she could have claimed. She does not seek fame, does not seek to hold on to power, or take any credit for the impossible feat she was able to accomplish. The literary figure of Esther stepped into the leadership role and steps out. Furthermore, Esther helps empower her people in the institution of Purim, which serves

²⁴⁴ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*, 3rd ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 13.

²⁴⁵ Corné J. Bekker, "The Phillippians Hymn (2:5-11) as an Early Mimetic Christological Model of Christian Leadership" (paper presented at the Regent University PhD Residency, Virginia Beach, VA, May 14-23, 2008).

as a reminder to the Jews, and others, that no matter how powerless their situation may appear, there is the possibility of deliverance and empowerment.

Leadership is learned and it is possible for everyone to learn to lead.²⁴⁶ Esther's story is a reminder that effective leadership, which can happen given difficult circumstances, has the potential to save lives. Neulander concludes that even in the twenty-first century, Esther is a "timeless model of feminine strength, integrity and courage for members of diverse racial, religious and ethnic communities."²⁴⁷ Van Wijk-Bos states that "difference is the provoking element" and "such prejudices can be heard as easily today as they were in the day of Haman."²⁴⁸ Esther's story shows that there is hope for people without power to become effective leaders within their society in spite of the constraints or limitations imposed on them. Masenya, an African-South African biblical scholar expresses some concerns about Esther, stating it is more about Mordecai than Esther, the upper-class nature of the story is not helpful to most African women, and it connoted painful resonances in the context where the indigenous South Africans were brutalized by Christian Europeans, similar to how the Jews, foreigners and God's chosen people brutalized many innocent Persians in revenge for Haman's plan, which was never carried out.²⁴⁹

The literary figure of Esther does not attempt to alter the patriarchal structure of society but works within it to achieve her goal. She relinquishes power and fame, fading into the background, thereby redefining the true value of leadership as stepping into leadership for a specific time or to achieve a specific task. Her leadership shows that it is possible to lead from an inherently powerless position and work effectively within an oppressive system without attempting to change the structure of the system. An area for further research is to explore the applicability of Esther's leadership model with oppressed people in different socioeconomic classes. Other areas for further research include a deeper exploration of the fit between the literary figure of Esther's leadership and the kenotic model of leadership, inquiry into the effects of her gender and multicultural approach on her successful influence, and whether her leadership represents a model that can be taught or developed in other organizational leaders.

²⁴⁶ Kouzes and Posner, *The Leadership Challenge*.

²⁴⁷ Crawford and Greenspoon, *The Book of Esther*, 199.

²⁴⁸ Van Wijk-Bos, *Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther*, 119.

²⁴⁹ Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes*, 195.

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