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Genderizing Piety: The Prayers of Mordecai and Esther in Comparison

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1.Introduction

Throughout the last decades, gender-related research became an increasingly important part of Biblical exegesis. Although the search for female voices within the Old Testament and the quest for reconstructing ancient male and female gender concepts have reached many Biblical books and texts, the female protagonists of Biblical books and stories are a favorite subject of gender studies, and among them is naturally Esther, too. However, although there are a number of studies which provide analyses of texts from the Book of Esther from the perspective of gender studies,[1] it seems that Esther's prayer as one of the most important "female texts" in the Book of Esther has never been the subject of a detailed study following this approach.[2]

This is all the more astonishing, since this text is not only uttered by a woman—Esther—but it additionally contains some very striking cases of female imagery and repeatedly refers to specifically female issues, as for instance and most prominently, the menstrual cloth (C 27: ῥάκος καταμηνίων). Maybe, this neglectance has to do with the fact that the prayer appears only in the deutero-canonical Greek versions of the Book of Esther,[3] but not in the Masoretic text which is still in the main focus of Biblical scholars.[4]

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1 See, most prominently, BRENNER, A Feminist Companion, part I: "Esther: When Gender Politics Represent Power Politics."

2 Note, however, that a number of gender related studies has been published on the more general issue women and prayer in the Hebrew Bible, among them, most importantly in my eyes, BRETTLER, Women and Psalms.

3 Recently, a gender related study on LXX Esther was published by STEYN, Beautiful but Tough.

4 This is an opportunity to express gratitude to Géza Xeravits and József Zsengellér, who initiated and continue to organize a series of conferences devoted to the so-

Apart from being an important female text, Esther's prayer is a very promising subject from the perspective of gender studies yet due to another prominent feature: As is well known, the two Greek versions of the Book of Esther contain not only a prayer of Esther, but additionally a prayer of Mordecai which precedes it and which is closely related to it. Immediately following one after the other, the two prayers were inserted at a dramatic peak of the story, after the reader is told that Esther agreed to follow Mordecai's request to intervene to the Persian king Ahasveros/Artaxerxes in order to rescue the Jews, and just before the narrative continues with what is happening when she actually does so. Most obviously, the two prayers are parallel in several ways.[5] They appear in the same narrative context, they focus on the same situation, and they are uttered each by one of the two main protagonists of the book. It is especially this joint basis which favors the comparison between the two prayers and enables us to focus on the question whether the two texts, one of which is attributed to a man, while the other is attributed to a woman, indeed reflect specifically female versus male voices. Moreover, the social construction of gender is part of a communicating system, i.e. in a given culture the concept of "female" is always closely interrelated with the concept of "male." In many respects, the paradigmatic "man" is even defined in opposition to the paradigmatic "woman," the same as the paradigmatic "woman" is defined in opposition to the paradigmatic "man." Therefore, the fact that Esther's and Mordecai's prayer are parallel texts and as such are comparable one with the other to a large extend, enables us to explore both sides of the underlying gender construction in order to gain insides into the system as a whole.

My analysis deals with the Greek version which is called the LXX- or Old Greek text.[6] The Alpha-text has to be dealt with in an own analysis, although it seems me that the results of this research would not be so different from the results presented in this paper.[7]

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called deuterocanonical books of the Old Testament in Pápa, which will certainly help to fill some of the gaps in our knowledge of this literature.

5 The correspondence of Esther's prayer with that of Mordecai sets the former clearly apart from Judith's prayers, although otherwise Esther's and Judith's prayer display many similarities, see VAN DER WALT, The Prayers of Esther (LXX) and Judith.

6 For an overview of the different versions of the Book of Esther and a reconstruction of the mutual relation of these versions see CLINES, The Esther Scroll, and DOROTHY, The Books of Esther.

7 A comparison of the different images of Esther in the three extant versions was carried out by DAY, Three Faces of a Queen.

2. The Literary Structure of the Two Prayers

Before properly entering the analysis of the two texts, the problem of their literary structure must be clarified. Do the two texts exhibit a transparent diachronic dimension, being formed by subsequent literary strata, or should the two prayers rather be regarded as synchronically coherent literary compositions? The point of departure for approaching this problem is the observation that the two prayers of Mordecai and of Esther both consist of passages in the 1st person plural interchanging with passages in the 1st person singular. Moreover, the plural sections of both prayers are composed in poetic *parallelismus membrorum*, while the singular sections are written in prose.

On account of these different grammatical and stylistic voices, Ingo Kottsieper has tried to demonstrate that the interchange is the result of two diachronically subsequent literary strata having been merged: According to Kottsieper, an older communal lament (*Klagelied des Volkes*) was augmented and expanded with elements of a personal prayer (*persönliches Bittgebet*) in both cases.[8]

However, other scholars, like Johannes Marböck, have raised some scepticism with regard to Kottsieper's literary historical solution to the problem of prose passages in the 1st person singular interchanging with poetic sections in the 1st person plural. Marböck demonstrated that the interchange between the "We"- and the "I"-passages may be explained in the framework of the synchronic literary structure of the two prayers as well of the book as a whole.[9]

It seems to me, however, that the case for a synchronic approach to the two prayers may be put on a much more solid textual basis than seen so far, if we take the place and the function of the "I"-sections into consideration:

1. Our starting point is the observation that the "I"-sections of both prayers most obviously have very strong ties with the surrounding context of the book. Mordecai explains and justifies in front of God, why he didn't bow down to Haman, a fact that was told before in Est 3:2 (C 5-6) and which lead to the present situation of Mordecai's and the Jewish people's actual affliction, being the motivation for Mordecai's prayer. Esther, on the other hand, prays for her being able to find

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8 KOTTSIEPER, Zusätze zu Esther, 118. 160.

9 MARBÖCK, Das Gebet der Esther, 245-252, esp. 246 note 38: "Von der Bedeutung des persönlichen Einsatzes Esthers für ihr Volk bereits in der Erzählung 4,8-16 (sowohl im MT als auch in den griechischen Fassungen) ist die im Gebet begegnende mehrmalige Verschränkung von Ich und Wir eigentlich selbstverständlich und eine literarkritische Scheidung alles andere als zwingend."

the right and effective words in front of the Persian king (C 24), a wish which is well connected with both the preceding narrative, where Mordecai asks Esther to intervene to the king (Est 4:8) and its continuation in chapter 5, when Esther approaches him. Therefore, as is generally acknowledged, the "I"-sections are written and composed with close reference to the story of the book. The "We"-sections, on the other hand, are lacking such specific links.

2. However, the "I"-passages are not only closely connected with the story of the book, but equally well with their immediately neighboring "We"-passages:

In the case of Mordecai's prayer, its first section, a "We"-voice, praises God as lord of the universe, against whom no one can stand (κύριος εἶ πάντων καὶ οὐκ ἔστιν ὃς ἀντιτάξεταί σοι, C 4), continuing with the justification why Mordecai could not bow down to Haman, written in the "I"-voice:[10]

> [Y]ou know, O Lord, that it was not in insolence nor pride nor for any love of glory that I did this, namely to refuse to do obeisance to this prideful Haman. […] I will not do obeisance to anyone but you (C 5-7).

Most obviously, the "I"-voice appears here as the actualization and application of the general theological statement as expressed by the "We"-voice.

In the case of Esther's prayer, the same scheme of a general statement ("We"-voice) and its following situational and personal application ("I"-voice) appears several times, e.g. in the parallelization of Esther's actual affliction and the affliction of her people (C 23).[11] Moreover, and even more specifically, Esther's "I"-voice prays: "Put eloquent speech into my mouth" (δὸς λόγον εὔρυθμον εἰς τὸ στόμα μου, C 24), taking up a key word of the immediately preceding "We"-section, where the word στόμα ("mouth") is used not less than three times:

> […] they have put their hands into the hands of their idols, to annul the stipulation of your mouth and to stop up the mouths of those who praise you […], to open the mouth of the nations for the mighty deeds of vain things (C 19-21).

3. The observation that the "I"-sections of the two prayers have close ties with both the story of the book and the "We"-sections, while the

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10 The English translation of the Septuagint text follows Karen H. Jobes' translation in NETS.

11 Further cases: C 24-25.30. See KOTTSIEPER, Zusätze zu Esther, 169.

links of the latter with the story are much less specific and of a more general nature, allows, it seems to me, for only one conclusion: Although the author of the two prayers may have used older textual sources or traditions, the wording as well as the arrangement of the "We"-passages are clearly dependent upon the "I"-passages to a very high degree, making it rather improbable that an older source text is still preserved in the present text.[12] Thus, both prayers as a whole should be regarded as original and synchronically coherent literary compositions.

Thus, although Kottsieper's observation of a communal lament as the literary basis structure of the two texts seems well justified, this should not be explained in terms of literary history, but in terms of literary genre: Both prayers are shaped in accordance with the basis structure of a communal lament, but this basis structure is contaminated with elements of a personal prayer, the latter appearing very prominently. The specific combination of the two literary components is the result of a deliberate and auctorial act, carried out with the intention to create two texts which exhibit the scheme "general lament vs. personal and situational application."

The realization that the two prayers each follow the same literary structure of a communal lament leads to a further observation: Although in both cases the structure of a communal lament is contaminated with elements of a personal prayer, the location of the personal elements within the basic structure is significantly different. In both prayers, the respective main "I"-sections are introduced by the formula "You know all things […] you know that […]" (C 5/C 25-26). However, while in the case of Mordecai's prayer this personal expansion is added to the opening section of the literary structure, a hymnic commemoration of God's attributes and deeds, it is connected with the closing section in Esther's prayer, being part of the request for rescue. In this way, the two prayers mirror each other from the perspective of literary structure.[13]

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12 "Löst man die Volksklagelemente in beiden Gebeten heraus […], so erhält man zwei jeweils in sich geschlossene Volksklagen […]," KOTTSIEPER, Zusätze zu Esther, 161.

13 This is well in line with the conclusion reached by MITTMANN-RICHERT (Einführung, 98) und MARBÖCK regarding the "concentric structure" of the Greek Book of Esther, forming a frame to the two prayers: "Das griechische Estherbuch hat durch die Anordnung der großen Zusätze der ganzen Erzählung eindeutig eine konzentrische Struktur gegeben […] Diese beiden Gebete stellen sowohl die äußere als auch die innere Mitte der griechischen Version dar" (MARBÖCK, Das Gebet der Esther, 240). One should add, however, as was shown above, that the two prayers in themselves form a concentric structure, too.

It seems, therefore, that the two prayers not only form coherent and original literary compositions, but that additionally they were composed as two corresponding and complementary texts. They may, therefore, well be regarded as forming one literary unit: Each of the two prayers and each of their literary components was from its origin intended to be read in close correspondence with its respective counterpart in the second text. Of course, this observation attributes special importance to those elements of the two prayers which appear in only one of them, without having a corresponding element in the second.

3. "Male" and "Female" in the Prayers of Mordecai and Esther

It was already demonstrated that the "We"-sections of the two prayers are largely dependant on the "I"-sections. Most obviously, these literary links have to be taken into consideration when carrying out a literary analysis. However, for the sake of comparing the two prayers, the two kinds of passages, the "We"- versus the "I"-sections, should be separately compared due to their different stylistic character.

If we look at the "We"-sections, God is addressed as king (βασιλεύς) and lord (κύριος) in both prayers. Moreover, the "We"-sections of both prayers address God as the one who has chosen Israel as his inheritance (κληρονομία) and redeemed it from Egypt.

On the other hand, both "We"-sections contain features which have no counterpart: Mordecai's prayer addresses God as the creator: "you have made heaven and earth and every wonderful thing in it under heaven" (σὺ ἐποίησας τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γῆν καὶ πᾶν θαυμαζόμενον ἐν τῇ ὑπ᾽ οὐρανὸν, C 3), and this element is lacking in Esther's prayer. While, therefore, Mordecai's prayer proceeds from a common and universal theological and philosophical basis, Esther's prayer exhibits a more restricted and particular perspective, insofar she focuses on the salvation history of the Jewish people.

The most striking feature without correspondent in the other prayer, however, is the confession of sins which is contained in the "We"-section of Esther's prayer:

> And now we have sinned before you, and you have delivered us in the hand of our enemies, because we honored their gods. You are righteous, O Lord! (C 17-18).

In the context of the prayer as a whole, this communal confession of sins is confronted with the personal negative confession of Esther herself which follows in the subsequent "I"-sections:

> [Y]ou know that I hate the glory of the lawless and abhor the bed of the uncircumcised and of any foreigner. You know my predicament—that I abhor the sign of my proud position that is upon my head on days when I appear in public. I abhor it like a menstrual cloth, and I do not wear it on the days when I am in private. And your slave has not eaten at Haman's table, and I have not honored the king's banquet nor drunk the wine of libations. Your slave has not rejoiced since the day of my change until now, except in you, O Lord, God of Abraam (C 26-29).

The combination of these two confessional passages guides the reader towards the conclusion that Esther's somewhat delicate private situation as the Jewish wife of a foreign king, alluded to in the confessional "I"-passages, is the result of Israel's communal sin, expressed in the confessional "We"-passages. Therefore, Esther appears as a person whose actual situation is shaped by circumstances beyond her own power to a large extent, and even beyond her influence.

This same tendency is expressed throughout Esther's "I"-passages as well, and becomes here even more detailed: Undoubtedly, Esther's Jewish identity is severely challenged by the circumstances of her daily life. Although she lives, according to her confession, as obedient as possible to the basic principles of Jewish *halakhah*, observing especially the basic commandments of *kashrut* (C 28: E. took not part in banquets and did not drink the wine of libation), she has to fulfill the role of a non-Jewish official in public contexts (C 27), and she has to be the lover of her non-Jewish husband, a fact which the prayer is alluding to by saying that she abhors "the bed of the uncircumcised and of any foreigner" (C 26). Thus, Esther's behavior as a pious Jewess is restricted to the private moments of her live,[14] it is confined to the days of her ἡσυχία, her "quietness," as opposed to the days of her ὀπτασία "appearance" (C 27), when she has to live in conformity with foreign, non-Jewish laws and manners which often seem to contradict the Jewish law. Since Esther can put into practice her Jewish identity only in a private setting, she feels alone and without support. This is emphasized

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[14] This observations modifies McDowell's conclusion that the "statement of Esther's strong abhorrence of sharing the bed of a Gentile […] also serves as a corrective by the author/editor to the original text […] Here the author clearly portrays Esther as a pious Jew by showing her at prayer, on behalf of Israel, and underscores her uniqueness and holiness by declaring her distaste of her relations with a Gentile" (McDowell, Prayers of Jewish Women, 39).

two times in the "I"-sections of her prayer. In her present situation, God is Esther's only relief, e.g.: "I am alone and have no helper except you" (C 14; compare C 25). However, in its opening section, Esther's prayer creates a connection between her being alone and the monotheistic credo of Judaism, based on a wordplay on μόνος:

> Oh my Lord, you alone are our king (ὁ βασιλεὺς ἡμῶν σὺ εἶ μόνος), help me, I who am alone (μοι τῇ μόνῃ) and have no helper except you (C 14).[15]

According to the rhetoric strategy of the prayer, therefore, it is Esther's loneliness which provides her a personal and exclusive relationship with God! Her lonely attempt to uphold the basic principles of Judaism in her private daily life mirrors to some extend God's being the one and only God of Israel. Thus, Esther's monotheism is no dogma she can relate to one or the other way, but it is something she experiences in her everyday live.

Mordecai, on the other hand, unlike Esther, appears not as being dependent on or subdued under the circumstances. He acts independently and in public, and he is presented as being active, even when he is not acting:

> You know, O Lord, that it was not in insolence nor pride nor for any love of glory that I did this, namely to refuse to do obeisance (ἐποίησα τοῦτο τὸ μὴ προσκυνεῖν) to this prideful Haman (C 5).

Most obviously, Mordecai's observation of the Jewish law is entirely dependent on his own initiative, and he carries it out in the public sphere, and not in the private, as Esther feels compelled to. Thus, Mordecai may be called a public Jew, while Esther is a private Jewess.

This issue of the different spheres in which Mordecai and Esther live as Jews is to some extent related to the different fields in which the Jewish identity of the two protagonists manifests itself: Esther's observance of the Jewish law is focused on basic issues of daily life—she observes the laws of *kashrut* whenever possible, and she is aware of the laws of *tohorah*, of ritual purity, even though, as the wife of a non-Jew, she is not always able to observe them. Mordecai, on the other hand, upholds his Jewishness by relating to nothing less than the first commandment:

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15 BARDTKE (Zusätze, 42), DOMMERSHAUSEN (Esther, 28), Marböck (Das Gebet, 245 note 36) and further scholars suggested that the sentence should rather be understood as "Oh my Lord, our king, you are the only one." However, this opinion was refuted by KOTTSIEPER, Zusätze zu Esther, 172.

> I will not do obeisance to anyone but you, my Lord (καὶ οὐ προσκυνήσω οὖ ᾽δένα πλὴν σοῦ τοῦ κυρίου μου) […] (C 7).

We may thus conclude, preliminarily and in a somewhat provocative way, that while Mordecai's domain of Jewishness is the field of theology, Esther's Jewish identity becomes manifest primarily in kitchen and bed.

However, we should note that there are some elements in Esther's prayer which seem to disturb this pattern, possibly pointing to a religious activity beyond the every day practice of *kashrut* and *tohorah*:

1. In her prayer, Esther actually does refer to theological concepts, among them the concept of monotheism.

Esther is opening her prayer with the following words, as already quoted above:

> Oh my Lord, you alone are our king (ὁ βασιλεὺς ἡμῶν σὺ εἶ μόνος) (C 14).

Apparently, this comes very close to Mordecai's monotheistic principle ("I will not do obeisance to anyone but you"). Nevertheless, there is a clear cut distinction between the two: Esther's monotheism is a verbal statement, which is of almost no practical relevance. Mordecai's monotheism, to the contrary, manifests itself in his acts. Thus, although Esther is certainly aware of at least the basic theological issues of Judaism, she cannot put them into practice in her daily life outside her private context, which is well illustrated by the fact that the monotheistic statement in Esther's prayer is not applied to her difficult situation as an official person, which she calls a predicament (C 27: ἀνάγκη), but to her being alone, i.e., it is clearly applied to her inner, private world, and not to her public role as queen of Persia. This latter observation corresponds very well with an observation made in our comparison of the "We"-sections: Esther addresses God mainly with respect to his role in the salvation history of the Jewish people, i.e. according to the prayer of Esther, the perspective of theological thinking is confined to the inner world of Judaism. Mordecai's theology, on the other hand, addressing God as the creator of the world, opens towards a universal perspective.[16]

In C 16, Esther seems to refer to some kind of Jewish education she received in her childhood. Esther says as follows:

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16 A different view was expressed by McDowell: "[…] Esther does not address God differently because of her gender" (McDowell, Prayers of Jewish Women, 40). In light of my above analysis, just the opposite seems to be the case.

> I have heard from my birth in the tribe of my family that you, O Lord, took Israel out of all the nations and our fathers from among all their forbears, to be an everlasting inheritance, and you did for them all that you said.

With regard to this passage, the most astonishing thing seems to be that it is contained in the prayer! Why does Esther *expressis verbis* tell the source of her knowledge of the salvation history, while no other Biblical prayer I am aware of, including Mordecai's, does so? I would like to suggest that the answer to this question has to do with the function of quoting sources: Generally speaking, sources are mentioned in those cases where some degree of uncertainty is involved. While Mordecai confidently refers to different *theologumena* and applies them in his daily life, Esther appears as feeling not entirely at home on this field. Mordecai is himself part of the Jewish tradition, while Esther has some distance. She is, or rather: she was in contact with the Jewish tradition, but she herself is no part of it. Moreover, her relation to the Jewish tradition is not an active one, as for instance Ben Sira's, according to the picture drawn by his grandson in his prologue.[17] Esther heard what others told her, not what she herself explored. Esther is certainly the antitype of a Jewish scholar.

One further observation should be mentioned due to its relevance from the perspective of gender studies, although it seems to be less concerned with Jewish identity. Although Mordecai's image is obviously "male" insofar it is shaped in accordance with a certain social standard of what "male" means, it has no sexual overtones. From the perspective of his prayer, Mordecai can even be seen as asexual. Esther's image, on the other hand, is highly sexualized. The text openly refers to her sexual intercourse with the uncircumcised Persian king (C 26) and to her menstruation (C 27). This asymmetric distribution of sexual attributes within the system of two gender-concepts reflects a well known feature: "Maleness" is associated with culture, "Femaleness" with nature.[18] Since sexuality is a part of nature, it is attributed to women.

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17 Ben Sira is described by his grandson as the prototype of a Jewish scholar: "Iesous, my grandfather, since he had given himself increasingly both to the reading of the Law and the Prophets and the other ancestral books and since he had acquired considerable proficiency in them, he too was led to compose something pertaining to education and wisdom" (Prologue Ben Sira 7-12, translation: Benjamin G. Wright, NETS).

18 For a general evaluation see ORTNER, Is Female to Male, 71-83, and for this concept in Ancient Israel see SCHORCH, Du bist ein verschlossener Garten, 18-22.

Conclusion

The two parallel prayers of Esther and Mordecai are strongly influenced by the gender concepts of "female" versus "male,"[19] which are opposed one to the other in many respects. According to these concepts, "female" means being dependent and being restricted to the private sphere, and this relates to what women are expected to do, to think, and to hope for. Being "male," on the other hand, means acting in the public sphere by own initiative. One of the most important reasons for the attraction of stories like Esther's, Judith's, or Susanna's is that these women at a certain point of the narrative transgress the borders of the common concept of femaleness.

The two prayers of Mordecai and Esther are of special importance for Biblical gender studies, since they allow us to explore how the gender specific difference of private versus public is reflected in the conception of Jewish identity and of an observant way of life during the Late Second Temple period.

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[19] Thus, my view obviously contradicts that of McDowell: "[…] most of this prayer by Esther could be put in the mouth of any Israelite/Jew, male or female, in any similar situation […]" (McDowell, Prayers of Jewish Women, 39). Proceeding from the above analysis of Esther's and Mordecai's prayers, I even doubt McDowell's more general conclusion regarding prayers of Jewish women in the literature of the Second temple period: "[…] authors tend to portray women at prayer in much the same way as they portray men at prayer." (McDowell, Prayers of Jewish Women, 208).

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