Hulisani Ramantswana[1]

Subversion or Infiltration of the Empire: Decolonial Reading of the Esther Narrative

Subversión o Infiltración del Imperio: Una Lectura Decolonial de la narrativa de Ester

Subversão ou Infiltração do Império: Uma Leitura Decolonial da narrativa de Ester

Resumo

O artigo faz uma leitura da narrativa de Ester a partir de uma perspectiva decolonial. Nessa leitura, o livro de Ester é visto como um livro que surgiu no contexto da luta pela sobrevivência, poder e autoridade diante da dominação imperial. O artigo argumenta que o livro reflete várias estratégias para minar o império diante de circunstâncias que negam a vida; no entanto, na análise final, os subjugados/impotentes permanecem presos dentro do sistema imperial. Nesta leitura, também levo em consideração o sofrimento do povo (sul)africano na chamada dispensa democrática e o sofrimento do povo palestino na guerra em curso de Israel em Gaza.

Palavras-chave: Ester; Decolonialidade; Império; Resistência; Infiltração; Gaza; África do Sul.

Resumen

El artículo realiza una lectura de la narrativa de Ester desde una perspectiva decolonial. En dicha lectura, el libro de Ester es visto como un libro que surgió en el contexto de la lucha por la supervivencia, el poder y la autoridad frente a la dominación imperial. El artículo sostiene que el libro refleja varias estrategias para socavar el imperio en circunstancias que niegan la vida; sin embargo, en el análisis final, los subyugados/impotentes permanecen atrapados dentro del sistema imperial. En esta lectura, también tomo en consideración el sufrimiento del pueblo (sud)africano en la llamada dispensación democrática y el sufrimiento del pueblo palestino en la guerra en curso de Israel en Gaza.

Palabras clave: Ester; Decolonialidad; Imperio; Resistencia; Infiltración; Gaza; Sudáfrica.

[1] Hulisani Ramantswana has a PhD in hermeneutics and biblical interpretation from Westminster Theological Seminary, Pennsylvania, USA. He is a professor of Old Testament and the chair of the department of biblical and ancient studies at the University of South of Africa. He also serves as a pastor of The Light Reformed Community Church, based in Pretoria, Sunnyside.

Abstract
The paper reads the Esther narrative from a decolonial perspective. In such a reading, the book of Esther is viewed as a book that emerged in the context of the struggle for survival, power and authority in the face of imperial domination. The paper argues that the book reflects various strategies for undermining the empire in the face of life-denying circumstances; however, in the final analysis, the subdued/powerless remain entrapped within the imperial system. In this reading, I also take cognisance of the suffering of the (South) African people in the so-called democratic dispensation, and the suffering of the Palestinian people in the ongoing Israeli War on Gaza.

Keywords: Esther; Decoloniality; Empire; Resistance; Infiltration; Gaza; South Africa.

Introduction

In the Tshivenḓa culture, there is a saying that *lusunzi lu wisa ndou* (literally rendered, *an ant can bring down an elephant*). The tenor of this saying is that even the weak or powerless can devise means to bring down the strong or powerful. In the context of a struggle between the powerless and the powerful, this saying is intended to inspire confidence in the powerless not to look down on themselves and give up without a fight. To bring down an elephant, as we were taught in childhood, an ant would have to do it from the inside by tearing it from within and not by going toe-to-toe with the elephant.

In this paper, the book of Esther is read through a decolonial lens enthused by the struggle for survival in the South African context and the struggle for survival of the Palestinian people in Gaza (and the West Bank). As I finalise this paper, it is now over a year since the Israel-Gaza war broke out, and it has spread over to Lebanon[2]. It has been just over a year of hellish experience for the Palestinian people in Gaza---with around 90% of the 2.3 million people displaced, over 40,000 people killed, with the majority being children and women, and the infrastructure being continually reduced to rubbles. The Palestinian people are marked for death in the name of Israel's right to defend herself and her vow to fight Hamas until it is destroyed. What the Palestinian people in Gaza are experiencing is not a war on terror but rather a war of terror. For the rest of us outside Gaza and the West Bank, it is becoming a sight of terror. Gaza has gone beyond being an "open-air prison" or "being under siege" to be a mass grave of the many Palestinians perishing through Israel's genocidal acts encouraged by Israel's supporters who have blocked measures to end the war and failed to

[2] The war is framed differently depending on where one stands. Others prefer to refer to these wars as Israel's war against terrorist organizations: Israel-Hamas War and Israel-Hezbollah War. When crafted in this way, it is meant project Israel's actions as those targeted against terrorists whereas the infrastructure destruction and the mass killings of citizens can simply be accounted for as collateral damage.

call for a ceasefire. As Mbembe (2003) in his "Necropolitics" highlights the necropower at play over Palestinian bodies in Gaza and the West Bank, giving "the colonial power an absolute power over the inhabitants of the occupied territory". Thus, Israel, as a settler colonial power, is targeting the entire population with impunity and engaging in "infrastructural warfare", destroying residential buildings, roads, water infrastructure, schools, hospitals, office buildings, etc. The calls for a ceasefire have fallen on deaf ears, and we continue to witness Gaza reduced to rubble.

Returning to my own South African context, what is now called South Africa has a dark history of colonization, which went hand in hand with the dispossession of land from the indigenous people and many other forms of dehumanization which went along with it, internal struggles of the colonizers between the English and the Boers fighting for power and finally reconciling and forming the Union of South Africa on 31 May 1910, an achievement that they symbolized by erecting the Union Buildings in Pretoria, and eventually on 31 May 1961 the Union became the Republic of South Africa. The Union and eventually the Republic was a "white state" which excluded "blacks"/"Africans", the indigenous people. Out of the black/African struggle against colonialism and apartheid, in 1994, the Republic of South Africa transitioned to a non-racial and non-sexist constitutional democracy, hailed a "rainbow nation" that embraces diversity and multiplicity. Nonetheless, the new nation born out of the struggle was an offspring of the Western form of government (Youé, 2018; Veracini, 2010). Lindiwe Sisulu (2022), a member of the African National Congress National Executive Committee and the then Minister of Tourism of South Africa, in her reflection on South Africa's constitutional democracy twenty-eight years later, decries:

In our beloved South Africa, a Constitution in 1994 and the rule of law took on a new lofty meaning after the deck had been heavily stacked against the victims of the "rule of law". It was a new dispensation of justice after centuries of vicious oppression of the indigenes of the land by invaders. But what has this beautiful Constitution done for the victims except as a palliative? If we look around, we see a sea of African poverty.

Sisulu's comments could be interpreted as part of the campaigning for the 2022 African National Congress Elective Conference. However, they also reflect frustration with working within a system that does not enable the implementation of meaningful change to benefit most of the people.

The Esther narrative may be viewed following Humphrey's (1973) as about "lifestyle for diaspora" reassuring the Jews in the diaspora that despite the life-denying realities in the diaspora, they can still participate within the structures of the empire without necessarily compromising their identity. While participation in empire structures does play an important role in the narrative, the narrative may also be viewed as projecting a counter-narrative to imperial

ideology (Briant, 2002, pp. 172–181). However, in the end, one wonders if the Esther narrative remains entrapped in imperial ideology.

In my view, the Esther narrative draws from the epic and court tales genre, which, on the one hand, sets this narrative as a formative narration for a people or nation in the post-exilic period. In this regard, it shares some elements with the exodus narrative. On the other hand, Esther's narrative may be considered a court tale. In this regard, there is a sense of hybridity as it was drawing from tales of heroism attested within the Assyrian empire, examples of which include the *Ordeal of Marduk*, *Cultic commentaries*, the *Epic of Erra and Ishumu*, the *Ahiqar story* and also reflected in Egyptian tales such as *The Contest for the Breastplate of Inaros* and also the *Egyptians and Amazons* (Dalley, 2008). The court tales generally have in their basic plot a court conflict between the hero/heroine who is close to the king and an evil courtier, which is resolved when the evil courtier is defeated and the king and the hero(es) are reconciled. The court tales were also for entertainment purposes -- making fun of the king and the empire. In addition, court tales have as their ideological commitment the legitimation of the empire (Newsom, 2017, p. 170). However, the Esther narrative, like Daniel 1–6 court narrative, reflects a mixture of resistance and accommodation (see Newsom, 2017; Portier-Young & Collins, 2014; Fewell, 1991).

In the logic of the Esther narrative, as I will highlight the hope of survival lies in the infiltration of the empire to subvert from within, that is to say, using the master's tool to dismantle the master's system. First, I will highlight that the beginning of Esther's narrative reflects an epic with elements of resistance. Second, we look at the elements of infiltration into the imperial system, and finally, we look at some of the aspects of subversion in the story.

The beginning of Israel's epics: an element of resistance

The Esther narrative begins with a powerful act of resistance, in which a woman, Queen Vashti turns an imperial celebration upside down. This act of subversion against the empire starts from within, undermining imperial authority by someone whose identity is closely linked to the empire itself. As such, the Esther narrative can be compared to the Exodus narrative, which serves as Israel's foundational national epic (Matthews, 2018, pp. 55–58; Cornell, 2000; Redmount, 1998). As Cornell argues regarding the exodus, "it should be viewed as is, ancient Israel's national epic, retold throughout its history, with each new narration reflecting the context in which it was rendered" (Cornell, 2000, p. 44). The exodus as narrated in the Book of Exodus has several parallels with the Esther narrative, particularly taking note of some of the parallels between Exodus 1:15-22 and Esther 1 relating to narratives begin pattern highlighted in Table A below:

	Exodus 1:15-22	Esther 1
Instruction of the king	Pharaoh instructs the midviwes to kill the boys at birth, and let the girls live (vv. 15-17)	The king instructs the eunuchs to bring Vashti wearing her royal crown (vv. 10-11)
Defiance or subversion by woman/women	The midwives, Shiphrah and Puah, defy Pharaoh by letting Hebrew infant boys live. • Motivation for not fulfilling Pharaoh's command. "They feared God" (v. 17)	The subversion of the king's command by queen Vashti (v. 12a) • Motivation for subverting the king's command: Not provided. The narrator does not "tell" why Vashti defied the king.
Consultation	*Consultation*: Pharaoh summons and questions the midwives and the midwives provide reason for not being able to fulfil the king's instruction (vv. 18-19)	*Consultation: Xerxes consults with experts in matters of law and justice. Vashti is not consulted. (vv. 13-). Vashti is not consulted.*
Blessing	God blesses the midwives (vv. 20-21)	*No blessings for Vashti.* (However, in the context of whole Esther narrative, Vashti's defiance was a blessing to the Jews.)
Second instruction or law, which is encompassing	The king issues another order to all his people: the boys should be thrown into the Nile, but the girls should live.	The king issues a royal decree: each man should be ruler over his own household.
Resistance from within the court	Pharaoh's daughter adopts a Hebrew infant boy marked for death.	

The parallels outlined in the table require some justification. The instructions given by the kings, Pharaoh and Xerxes, set the stage for the development of the respective narratives. Pharaoh's instruction aims to control the population by targeting Hebrew infant boys for death. This control can only be realized if

the midwives obey his command. In the story of Esther, Vashti is commanded to appear before the king in her royal gown. At first glance, this instruction does not seem life-threatening; however, the implication lies in whether Vashti complies[3]. Once the instructions are issued, the narrative creates suspense for the reader: What will happen? Will the midwives follow Pharaoh's orders? Will Vashti appear as instructed?

In both narratives, there is defiance of the instruction of the king. In the exodus narrative, the two midwives, Shiphrah and Puah defied the instruction of Pharaoh. The identity of Shiphrah and Puah, although unclear from the Masoretic Text may be understood as Egyptian in line with ancient interpreters (see Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 2.206–207). Furthermore, Pharaoh›s own daughter also defied the authority of the empire by adopting a Hebrew boy, thus, saving those that the empire intended to kill. If the identity of Shiphrah and Puah is understood to be Egyptian, the implication is that the story of Israel›s deliverance from the Egyptian empire is birthed in the internal havoc wreaked by women of the empire (Egyptian women) who deliberately undermined the order of Pharaoh thereby undermining the empire. In his *Let My People Live: An African Reading of Exodus*, Kenneth Ngwa (2022, p. 75) argues that the exodus story is not just a story movement from one locus to another, it is also "about bringing liberation to those places." In Ngwa terms the beginning of the Exodus story as "a badass woman", the key characters in the story work to transform life-denying systems which threaten erasure, alienation, and singularity (Ngwa, 2022, p. 75).

In Römer's view (2015, pp. 237–240), Exod 1:15-22 is part of the discourse in which foreigners act (Egyptian women) based on the "fear of God" as in Gen 20 narrative and Jonah 1. However, in the Esther narrative, God does not feature and therefore, no "fear of God" is attributed to Vashti nor is there a blessing from God towards Vashti. Hence, the reader is left to wonder if Vashti's subversion of the king's order was based on her "fear of God" or not[4]. As Römer (2015, p. 242) states that Exod 1:15–22 is set at the beginning of Israel's national epic of origins, thereby stripping it "of any form of triumphalism or self-absorption. The liberation of Israel can only begin because of the effort of the foreign women." Although there may be differing opinions, I tend to agree with Römer that Exodus 1:15–22 marks the beginning of Israel's national origins sto-

[3] In the logic of the Esther narrative, appearing before the king without being summoned can lead to death (Esth 4:11); therefore, how much more the king has summoned someone to appear in the presence of all essential people in the kingdom and that the person disobeys.

[4] The identity of the midwives in the story is unclear. If the Masoretic Text is followed, their identity of the midwives is Hebrew: הָעִבְרִיֹּת לַמְיַלֶּדֹת (to the Hebrew midwives), in which case may הָעִבְרִיֹּת be understood as apposition to לַמְיַלֶּדֹת. However, in the LXX translated the phrase is translated ταῖς μαίαις τῶν Εβραίων, which may be rendered: "midwives of the Hebrews", which can imply that their identity was not Hebrew but they were serving the Hebrews. Furthermore, the text itself also suggests an Egyptian identity considering the motivation that they provided: "Hebrew women are not like Egyptian women; they are vigorous and give birth before the midwives" (Römer 2015: 240).

ry. This perspective removes any sense of triumphalism or self-absorption. The liberation of Israel can only commence thanks to the efforts of foreign women.

Similarly, the Esther story begins with a Persian queen defying the authority of the king or the empire, just as the midwives and the princess, daughter of Pharaoh, defied the empire. Vashti's defiance was a public defiance of the empire in its grandeur—a resistance to a patriarchal empire that objectified women as objects of men's pleasure. Following Ngwa's badass womanist hermeneutical framework, the Vashti character embodies resistance to erasure, alienation, and singularization. Thus, in the logic of Esther's narrative, the story of Israel's survival in the post-exilic period begins within the post-exilic period. Esther 1 participates in crafting Israel's national epic, culminating in the celebration of Purim. Thus, the Esther narrative becomes a Jewish national epic in the post-exilic period or in the context of diaspora. The liberation of the Jews begins with the effort of a foreign woman, Queen Vashti. Thus, the survival of the Jewish nation can only begin from the belly of the empire, with the efforts of those whose identity is linked to the empire—the badass woman, Vashti.

In terms of Ngwa's badass womanism, Vashti's talkback was an act of resistance not simply to patriarchy but to the imperial dictates over people's bodies (Sawyer, 2017). Unlike the midwives in the Exodus story, Vashti does not try to manipulate her way through matters. Instead, she confronts the empire head-on—the king, princes, nobles, officials, and military leaders—by challenging the "law and justice" system of the empire. Vashti's "no" was a refusal of the imperial privileges which come at the cost of human dignity and lawlessness over people's bodies. Vashti's deposition as the queen does not have to be viewed as the choice of the empire but rather as her own choice—a choice for an "outside" of the empire. A refusal to continue playing the game under the oppressive rules of the empire. In Vashti's "No", we find a search for an alternative outside of the empire and its dictates.

The resistance of Vashti, as Hatzaw (2021) notes does not have to be viewed simply as individual resistance; instead as signifying "collective resistance". Therefore, it is not just Vashti who is punished by the empire; there is also collective punishment, which "is a clear attempt by those in power to maintain control over their bodies" (Hatzaw, 2021, p. 9). In the logic of the story, as Wyler (1995, p. 122) notes, "Executive power in this empire wants to be respected [...] When individuals practice resistance, the punishment is extended to the whole of their -- innocent -- identity groups".

While no "Israelite" or "Jew" features in the first chapter of the book of Esther, it is Vashti's resistance that opened the way for the Jews to infiltrate the empire. It is in Vashti's "No", where there is a blessing for the Jews.

Infiltration of the empire through the law: Esther becoming queen

In the Esther narrative, the deposal of Vashti, through the empire's laws, set the scene for Esther to emerge. It is, so to speak, Queen Vashti who ushers Esther to the royal center. Esther's story, as already noted above, follows a similar pattern to the Exodus narrative. The Vashti's story functions as a prologue to Esther's emergence in the narrative, just as the foreign women in the Exodus narrative function as a prologue to Moses' birth narrative and emphasizes the role of foreign women in rescuing the Hebrew people. Concerning the Exodus narrative, Römer suggests that a later redactor added Ex 1:15-19, 21 into the Priestly Exodus narrative to serve two purposes: first, to create a prologue for Moses' birth narrative and second, to emphasize the role of foreign women in the rescuing of the Hebrew people (2015, p. 240). However, in the Exodus narrative, women's actions are further emboldened from the royal center by the defiant actions of the daughter of Pharaoh when she adopted the baby Moses, shifting him from the margins to the center of power. Thus, Moses' birth story may be read as a court narrative, in which, to paraphrase Guillen, the author(s) or redactor(s) inject the genre with antibodies[5]. In the case of the Esther story the antibody injected is that of rescue Jews, which begins with the role of foreign women. However, the role of the foreign women, in the final analysis, is preliminary, as the ultimate knights in shining armor are those that they usher to the royal center.

The narratives of Exodus and Esther share a common basic plot of a shift from the margins to the royal center following the empire's decrees. In both narratives, the empire's strength and weakness is its laws. In the Esther narrative, the decree against Vashti allowed an orphan girl to move from the margins to the royal center.

So, when the king's order and his edict were proclaimed, and when many young women were gathered in the citadel of Susa in custody of Hegai, Esther also was taken into the king's palace and put in custody of Hegai, who had charge of the women (Esther 2:8 NRS).

In Exodus (or the Moses narrative), the decree to eliminate the Hebrews provided an opening for the Hebrews to infiltrate the Egyptian royal center. The Hebrew boy Moses was born in the margins and yet grew up in royal privilege, yet he did not forget his own identity.

However, there are some contrasts between the Moses narrative and Esther narrative regarding the issue of identity. In the case of Moses, when he infiltrated the palace, his identity was not hidden, unlike in Esther's case. When she adopted Moses as her own, the Egyptian princess was fully aware of his identity: "This is one of the Hebrew babies" (Ex 2:6). Even when he had grown,

[5] The empire in the Exodus narrative is presented as conflicted in its operations—on the one hand, it seeks to eliminate, and yet on the other, to accommodate—let live.

Moses also wanted to identify with his own people, the Hebrews. Yet, the Egyptian identity was forever written on his identity as the name Moses is given to him by the Egyptian princess. The Exodus narrative does not highlight the name of Moses at birth; therefore, if his parents had given him a name, it is forever hidden by the narrative.

In the Esther narrative, for Esther to penetrate the heart of the empire, the royal house, she hid her family background and identity as a Jew (Est 2:20). In the narrative, she is first introduced by the name Hadassah (Est 2:7); however, it is also noted in the story that she was also known as Esther.The name "Esther" is the one which is also found in the lips of other characters in the story (Est 5:3, 12; 7:2; 8:1), and if such is the case, then the name Esther would not have been a giveaway of her Jewish identity. When Esther was at the center, she maintained ties with the Jews, particularly his uncle Mordecai (Est 2:21-23).

The shift of the characters from the margins to the center of the story seems coincidental. However, in both Exodus and Esther, the imperial decrees opened room for those on the margins to penetrate the empires at their core—the royal house, which, in ancient context, was the seat of power. The Persian empire that we encounter in the world of the narrative is one which gave its king the power to declare irrevocable decrees. This is irrespective of whether the historical Persian empire, the Persian empire in history and not as narrated in the book of Esther, may not have given such powers to its king. The very decrees of the empire opened rooms for infiltration in Esther. However, Esther was not the only one who had infiltrated the empire.

From the center of the empire, Esther becomes the link between the Jews in the margins and the highest seat of power, the king. She acts as an informant of the Jews by transferring intelligent information. The plot to kill the king is foiled because of the intelligent information supplied by the Jew, Mordecai—a crucial event that is said to have gone into the annals (Esther 2:22-23). The information provided in Est 2:22-23 would later prove crucial in the narrative development as it serves to get a second Jew, Mordecai, to infiltrate the royal center. In Lehmann's reconstruction of the world to which the text refers, the Mordecai in the book of Esther should be viewed as the same Mordecai referred to in Ezra 2:2 and Nehemiah 9:10 (Lehmann, 1972). In relating the two figures, Lehmann argues that Mordecai was sent from Yehud, a province of the Persian empire, to deal with the anti-Jewish accusation that they disregarded the imperial laws and would no longer pay tribute. Lehmann draws parallels between accusations against the Jews in Ezra and those in the Book of Esther:

When the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the returned exiles were building a temple to the LORD, the God of Israel... In the reign of Ahasuerus, in his accession year, they wrote an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem... (then Rehum the royal deputy, Shimshai the scribe, and the rest of their associates, the judges, the envoys, the officials, the Persians, the

people of Erech, the Babylonians, the people of Susa, that is, the Elamites, and the rest of the nations whom the great and noble Osnappar deported and settled in the cities of Samaria and the rest of the province Beyond the River wrote—and now this is a copy of the letter that they sent): "To King Artaxerxes: Your servants, the people of the province Beyond the River, send greeting. And now may it be known to the king that the Jews who came up from you to us have gone to Jerusalem. They are rebuilding that rebellious and wicked city; they are finishing the walls and repairing the foundations. Now may it be known to the king that, if this city is rebuilt and the walls finished, *they will not pay tribute, custom, or toll, and the royal revenue will be reduced*" (Ezra 4:1, 6, 9-13 NRS).

Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, *and they do not keep the king's laws*, *so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them*. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, so that they may put it into the king's treasuries" (Est 3:8-9 NRS).

In Lehmann's view, the Haman figure, an enemy of the Jews or enemy of those in Yehud (הַיְּהוּדִים צֹרֵר) in the book of Esther represents the accusers from Yehud province, who in Ezra are referred to as "enemies of Yehuda and Benyamin" (וּבִנְיָמִן יְהוּדָה צָרֵי, Ezra 4:1). Therefore, in this view, Mordecai, the Benjamite, was sent by the Jews from the province of Yehud in order infiltrate the Persian royalty as part of a political strategy to undo the damage their enemies were inflicting on them in the Persian court. The annals to which the enemies of the Jews directed the Persian king in Ezra 4 were those which cast the Jews in a negative light. In this view, it is likely Haman's allegations against the Jews, which were supported by the annals, earned him a position of authority in the Persian royal court. Therefore, the Jews, as part of their political strategy to infiltrate the Persian empire, were to direct the empire to positive records about the Jews in the empire.

The picture that emerges in the book of Esther is not that of anti-empire or resistance to the empire but of infiltration of the empire to undo and avert further dangers from the enemies of the Jews. Therefore, in Esther's narrative logic, the infiltration of the empire at the royal centre is not to be equated with abandoning one's identity.

The Esther narrative reminds me of Oliver Mtukudzi's song "Ghetto Boy". The lyrics, which I won't quote in full, talk about being born and raised in the ghetto and how the ghetto shapes one's identity:

I was born in the ghetto
My mama is in the ghetto
My heart is in the ghetto
You can call me the ghetto boy

You can take me out of the ghetto
And can never take me back again
But you will never take the ghetto out of me

Esther's infiltration of the empire through hidden identity implies that she became a Persian queen. Esther's Jewish identity remained part of her even though veiled. The Persian identity is projected, on the one hand, as a matter of choice and yet, on the other hand, as an imposition of the empire. The attempt to annihilate the Jews within the Persian empire highlights the empire's indifference to maintaining one's own identity in addition to the imperial identity.

An infiltrated empire: closer to power and determining the laws

In Esther 1-2, the king initiates the law. However, in the rest of the book, especially from chapters 3-10, the laws are not at the king's behest; instead, the king is presented as one who endorses them. The court tale presents the king or the monarch as ignorant, foolish, easily manipulated, and not entirely in touch with the empire's affairs.

It is worth noting that this court tale also has its backdrop of ethnic diversity within the empire. The royal decrees, which emanated from Vashti's defiance, are proclaimed in "each people's tongue" (1:22). Furthermore, the two characters Mordecai and Haman are introduced with respect to their own ethnic background and family lineage: Mordecai is a Jew (יְהוּדִי), a son of Jair the son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjamite (Esth 2:5) and Haman is the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite (הָאֲגָגִי) (Esth 3:1). The ethnic backgrounds of these two characters, as Wetter (2015, p. 123) at face value, the terms Jew and Agagite embolden the idea of the Persian empire as one of many ethnic entities; however, the two represent the two opposed protagonists. Furthermore, as Wetter (2015, p. 123) notes:

The two terms do not describe (members of) 'real' group. They are literary emblems, meant to sum up forcefully particular character traits—implied for the informed reader—without having to explicate them. Both depend heavily on the reader's knowledge of a variety of intertexts. Without this knowledge, the actions and motivation of Mordecai the אגגי and Haman the אגגי are nothing less than unintelligible.

To be Jewish in the book of Esther, as Wetter and others note, is not just a matter of geography but has to do with the shared memory of exile as a formative experience (Wetter, 2011, p. 600). Haman on the other is linked to the Amalek or Agag, which sets him "as the personification of the innate fear of annihilation, of the ultimate loss of identity" (Wetter, 2011, p. 602).

It is important to note that the two main characters in the narrative, Mordecai and Haman, are not Persian. The Haman character is set in the royal court

and is promoted above all other officials, but the reasons for his promotion are not disclosed. Additionally, it is unclear what specific position he occupied. With the ascension of Haman to a position of power, the stage is set in the plot for a conflict to emerge. Mordecai's refusal to pay homage to Haman is at the heart of the conflict, and the reason for his refusal isn't in the narrative as to why he did so.

Following the tensions between Haman and Mordecai, Haman turns to the empire's strength, the law (*dat*) to deal with those who have their laws. Haman approached the king with a charge against the Jews:

Then Haman said to King Ahasuerus, "There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; ***their laws*** [דָּתֵיהֶם] *are different from those of every other people*, and *they do not keep the **king's laws** * [דָּתֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ], so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them. (Esther 3:8 NRS)

The charge basically entails that Jews have their own laws and based on that, do not keep the laws of the empire. However, he does not stop there; he also proposes that the king issues a decree for which he is willing to pay—the decree to destroy the Jews, young and old, women and children, and to plunder their good on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar (see Esther 3:9-13). This sets Haman at the centre of the empire and determines its laws. The absurdity is that the king, who in Esth 1 is said to have surrounded himself with experts in matters of law and judgment, is not called in to advise the king regarding such a law.

In this narrative, Haman, a wealthy foreign official, is portrayed as someone who manipulates the laws of the empire, effectively using them as a weapon against the Jewish minority within that empire. As a high-ranking official at the centre of power, Haman gains significant control over the empire. According to the narrator, when the law was issued, the king and Haman celebrated with a feast, while the people of Shushan were left bewildered (Esther 3:15). Despite the decree's perplexing nature, it still represented the law of the empire. Although the decree was absurd—like the law established following Vashti's defiance—it was nonetheless to be executed. This decree caused anguish for the Jews in every province (Esther 4:3).

Haman's elevation prevented Esther from successfully having Mordecai recognized for his loyalty to the king, which included foiling a plot to assassinate him. As a result, Esther, who was within the royal palace, was in a better position to help the Jews. Mordecai's instructions and words to Esther were directed towards this purpose:

Mordecai also gave him [Hatach] a copy of the written decree issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show it to Esther, explain it to her, and charge her to go to the king to make supplication to him and entreat him for her people (Esther 4:8 NRS).

"Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (Esther 4:13-14 NRS).

Esther, the insider, had to risk her life by approaching the king in the "inner court" without being summoned. This law absurdly granted the king the power over life and death without knowing what the person had to say. As Esther pointed out, going to the king without being summoned would be breaking the law (Esther 4:16).

Chapters 5 to 7 of Esther narrate the events that unfolded when she entered the court, highlighting the growing tension between Haman and Esther. However, Esther was not the only saviour of the Jews; Mordecai also rose to a position of influence. The king experienced an awakening when he requested the records and annals to be read to him. It was at this moment that he realized he had not honoured Mordecai, a turning point that brought Mordecai closer to the king. From that point on, the effort to save the Jews became a joint endeavour between Esther and Mordecai, working together from the royal court. Mordecai, like Haman before him, is given the authority to craft the laws of the empire:

"...You may write as you please with regard to the Jews, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring; for an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring cannot be revoked." The king's secretaries were summoned at that time, in the third month, which is the month of Sivan, on the twenty-third day; and ***an edict was written, according to all that Mordecai commanded***, to the Jews and to the satraps and the governors and the officials of the provinces from India to Ethiopia, one hundred twenty-seven provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, and also to the Jews in their script and their language (Esther 8:8-9 NRS).

In this case, Mordecai is tasked with crafting a law that would benefit the Jews. However, the readers are not informed about the specific content of the law he created. The narrator provides limited information, stating that "the Jews were to be ready on that day to take revenge on their enemies" (Esth 8:13 NRS). This law appears to have brought significant relief to the Jews, as indicated by the fact that "many of the peoples of the country professed to be Jews, because the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them" (Esth 8:17 NRS).

However, Esther also gets an opportunity to add to the law issued: "If it pleases the king, let the Jews who are in Susa be allowed tomorrow also to do according to this day's edict, and let the ten sons of Haman be hanged on the gallows" (Esther 9:13 NRS).

In the Persian Empire, as depicted in Esther's narrative, it is those who are closer to the king—or to power—who hold the authority to determine the

empire's laws. Initially, Haman successfully exercised this power; later, Esther and Mordecai do the same and achieve success as well (Koller, 2014, p. 64).

Elements of subversion

In reading the Esther narrative, one may ponder: Did the ant bring down the elephant? Are there aspects of subversion against the empire? This court narrative does not deviate from the ideology that legitimizes the court. Commonly, court narratives are not anti-royal; rather, they affirm that kingship is divinely ordained to establish order in society (Dalley, 2008, p. 130).

In the Esther narrative, the empire's power is not denied, but its power is not regarded as absolute. Unlike in a court tale like Daniel 1-6, the limitation of the power of the empire is not set in the hands of the divine. However, the Jewish reliance on the hidden force is underscored through the call for fasting (Esth 4:16), but the divine character remains hidden in the story. The agency to act is set in the hands of the oppressed to negotiate their way within the empire. There is a hybridity in the engagement between the empire and the subjugated. Esther and Haman have a hybrid identity; they are presented as compliant to the empire, while at the same time resistant to the empire. Following Bhabha, "the effect of the hybridity" is mimicry in which case, mimicry becomes "the secret art of revenge" as the subjugated or the colonized subverts the hegemony of the empire in a kind of civil disobedience which makes mockery of the empire (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 56, 120–121).

The decree to annihilate the Jews, initiated by Haman, was not just Haman's decree; moreover, it was the empire's decree. Therefore, Esther and Mordecai's attempts to construct a passage for survival for the Jews when targeted by the very same empire through its laws was an act of resistance against the very same empire, which sought to eliminate them. Therefore, this narrative begs the question: Who was supposed to be hanged on the gallows? Whose decree was it? Who sat with Haman feasting while the city was perplexed? Is not the king, the representative of the empire?

A court tale may not want us to ask such questions because in such a tale, the king is still considered legitimate. The empire may be powerful and dangerous, but in the hands of this reader, it and Haman fall into the same category.

In resisting the empire, both Esther and Mordecai embraced their identity as Jews, thereby choosing to be identified with the marginalised—those targeted for death. The survival of Esther and Mordecai, as projected by the narrative, was intertwined with the survival of those at the margins. In resisting the empire, Esther and Mordecai had to work within the system to save themselves and the rest of the marginalised Jews.

The Esther narrative, in my view, mocks the empire. The empire is presented as in conflict with itself—the same king who issued a law to destroy the

Jews, which would have included his wife, also gives the Jews the right to stand against the same empire. In this way, the empire is presented as conflict-ridden, and to use the words of a later Rabbi, Yeshua: "Every kingdom divided against itself will be ruined, and every city or household divided against itself will not survive" (Matthew 12:25 CJB). The saying of the rabbi went further to state: "If Satan drives out Satan, he is divided against himself; so how can his kingdom survive?" (Matthew 12:26 CJB). Thus, it may be stated that both laws—the one initiated by Haman and the laws instituted by Mordecai and Esther—are made in the same pot—they are actions of an oppressive empire and, therefore, fail to produce a just society. The fall of the empire does not happen within the Esther narrative; however, it is not inconceivable that it is what the author imagined or what the final redactor(s) of the book had witnessed as power shifted from one empire to another—from the Persian empire to the Hellenistic empire or from the Hellenistic empire to the Roman empire.

In our South African context, our so-called national epic, a democratic South Africa, reduced our nation to 30 years. A democratic country that emerged through the struggle for freedom against colonialism and apartheid by negotiating for a legal-political constitutional structure that is non-racial and non-sexist, which was hailed as a "rainbow nation" that embraces diversity and multiplicity. However, the new nation born out of the struggle was an offspring of the Western form of government inherited from the colonial-apartheid era (see Youé, 2018; Veracini, 2010). Colonial landmarks are still evident even with attempts to erase them from memory by renaming streets, places, and buildings. The political game is played within the same fields in Cape Town and in the Union Buildings in Pretoria, a union that speaks nothing to the black bodies in South Africa.

Sisulu blames the failures on two things, among others: First, the politicians who dine at the table with colonial capital, which enriches the politicians at the expense of the masses. Second, the judicial system fails to rule in favor of its people and, therefore, embeds the colonial laws in the current dispensation. It may be as Sisulu claims that the parliamentary and judicial system has failed to improve the lives of South Africa significantly. Suppose politicians and the judiciary failed after 30 years. In that case, one is left to wonder if the ant can still subvert the elephant from within when the elephant is proving resistant to decolonization. Even more concerning is that the ants have been behaving like elephants by trampling over each other through failure to significantly improve the lives of the black masses, corruption and inability to deliver quality public services. This situation has led to a new political arrangement in South Africa, known as the Government of National Unity (GNU). However, this should not be mistaken for a change in the political system itself; the system remains the same, but now more parties are involved in sharing power. The hope is that

political leaders will hold each other accountable, striving for a larger share of power by effectively managing their respective areas of responsibility.

The Esther narrative is fraught by the absurdity of the laws promulgated by the empire: first, the law targeted to women as a means of suppressing their voices, second the genocidal law criminalizing the Jews for being different; and third, the genocidal law permitted the Jews to defend themselves and to engage in genocidal acts. In Wetzel's view (2022), the Book of Esther draws on the divine combat myth as expressed in the Hebrew Bible in terms of *ḥerem*. For Wetzel, Haman›s genocidal law was a form of *ḥerem* against God›s covenantal partners, which required a *ḥerem* response as a religious act of divine justice in which the divine warrior fought alongside his covenantal partners, the Jews. The two genocidal laws set in motion a chaotic situation in which those in conflict do not have to see themselves coexisting. In such a logic, Haman, an Agagite (Amalekite), is the paragon of the enemies of God›s covenantal people. The challenge with Wetzel›s thesis is that the book of Esther does not refer to the divine being—it is human actions through and through. Furthermore, in the same Hebrew Bible, the shadow of the Amalekite does not disappear no matter how many times they are conquered.

The actions currently unfolding in the Israeli war on Gaza can be described as genocidal. Early on, South Africa brought a case against the Israeli state to the International Court of Justice (ICJ), arguing that there was genocidal intent behind Israel's military offensive in Gaza. This offensive was a response to an attack launched by Hamas and other Palestinian armed groups, which resulted in the deaths of 1,200 people and the abduction of 252 individuals. [^8] The South African government argued that the actions of Israel in the Gaza Strip amounted to what should be considered Genocide under the 1948 Convention on the Prevention of the Crime of Genocide. South Africa, in making its case, also highlighted how the Israeli officials have equated their response in biblical phrasing as a struggle between "children of light and the children of darkness" or "sons of light and sons of darkness". The South African Government also cited the Prime Minister of Israel's words in which he said to the Israeli Defense Force, "[Y]ou must remember what Amalek has done to you, say our Holy Bible. And we do remember." The evocation of Amalek, as the South African Government argued, is one example of Israeli intention to commit genocide, which also went hand in hand with statements of Israeli officials who considered the entire Palestinian population in Gaza to be responsible. Since the attack on 7 October, the rhetoric of erasure of the Palestinian people simply intensified; however, it is not new. Francesca Albanese, Special Rapporteur on the Palestinian Territories Occupied Since 1967, presented a report titled "Genocide as colonial erasure", highlighting the fact that the genocide unfolding in Gaza is not a coincidental event; instead, it should be viewed as part "of a long-term intentional, State-organized forced displacement and replacement

of the Palestinians." What Albanese highlights is not new nor unique; it is what writers have been pointing out as the longing of Zionism and the settler colonial state (Mor, 2024; Azem, 2019; Salamanca, Qato, Rabie & Samour, 2012; Wolfe, 2006; Habiby, 2002; Said, 1979, 1980), and the ICJ, while it has not declared Israel's actions in Gaza as genocidal, however, has ordered in several instances Israel to prevent acts of genocide and to halt its military operations in Gaza (ICJ, 2024c, 2024b, 2024a). However, the orders of the ICJ have fallen on deaf ears.

The Israeli State, on the other hand, has declared Hamas a "genocidal terrorist organization", a determination which made not just the Hamas fighters targets, but all Palestinian targets and the whole infrastructure in Gaza (State of Israel, 2024). Therefore, Israel, based on its determination, feels justified to engage in urban warfare as an act of self-defense. Therefore, the words "Israel has the right to defend itself" became a slogan as the Israel Defense Force went on an offensive in Gaza. In its defense, the Israeli State has repeatedly indicated that it regrets any harm to the civilians. The regret of the harm to civilians, however, has not stopped Israel from continuing with its offensive, which has resulted in the death of over 40,000 people and the Gaza Strip almost reduced to rubble in its entirety. It is not worth repeating here all the atrocities that Israel has been committing in Gaza following the fateful events of 7 October 2023. For a detailed picture, one simply needs to read Albanese's *Genocide as Colonial Erasure*. The Israeli State's genocidal actions in Gaza, just like the actions of Mordecai and Esther requesting extra time to go after their enemies, have acted with impunity with the support of the powers that be who have the veto powers in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), which has effectually led to the UNSC unable to take any action against Israel despite even arrest warrants issued by the International Criminal Court on 21 November 2024. More recently, the former Israeli defense minister, Moshe Yaalon, has categorized Israel's actions in Gaza as ethnic cleansing to settle Jews in the territory (Balmer, 2024). Mor (2024, p. 119) rightly notes:

"Disappearance" thus expresses the Zionist displacement, dispossession, and isolation of Palestinians. Yet, ethnic cleansing is perhaps the chief characteristic. An obvious case is the 1948 War, with its premeditated mass expulsion and overt massacres... These practices—along with their related, ongoing forms, such as the refugee camps or the Israeli refusal of the right of return—demonstrate that the Zionist disappearance of Palestinians entailed, and still entails, the elimination of Palestinians from Palestine.

In reading the Esther narrative, any equation of Haman with Hamas, and drawing inspiration from this story to do to Hamas and the Palestinians what Mordecai, Esther and the Jews did to Haman and the so-called 'enemies' of the Jews is an unethical use of this narrative. Haman (an Amalekite) and Mordecai and Esther (Jews), while they may have succeeded in infiltrating the empire; however, their actions towards one another fall short of being exemplary for

those who find themselves caught up under imperial dictates. The freedom of those who find themselves under imperial dictates is not in the reproduction of imperial patterns of oppressing and eliminating the other using imperial tools. Decolonial ethics requires the oppressed, poor, and colonized to learn to search for humanity together to defeat the structures imperial/colonial structures.

The narrative of Esther, despite its absurdities, can be interpreted as a commentary from the composers of the Masoretic Text on the tensions between the Amalekites and the Jews. It suggests that both groups lived under the same empire, which oppressed them. Instead of seeking to eliminate one another, they could learn to coexist. Ultimately, when the Amalekites attempt to make the Israelites/Jews disappear, they fail. Likewise, the Israelites/Jews, in their efforts to eliminate the Amalekites, also fail to make them vanish. What I discussed earlier as the infiltration of the empire should be viewed as attempts to erase the other legally or by manipulation. This is contrary to the rhetoric of celebrating or calling for the elimination of the enemy, which has infiltrated Israel's rhetoric in the ongoing Israel-Gaza war. In this unjust war of ethnic cleansing of the Palestinian people, maintaining a neutral position is fallacious. The subversion of the settler-colonial Israeli State, in the case of the Palestinian people, lies in their refusal to disappear from the face of Gaza.

Conclusion

The Esther narrative, while it may provide a glimmer of hope for those who are marginalised, oppressed, and subjugated, does not erase the reality of the empire that looms over them. Throughout the story, Esther, Mordecai, and their fellow Jews remain subject to the authority of their imperial rulers. As Newsom (2017, p. 171) insightfully observes, "The gentile kings may be powerful and dangerous, but in the world of the narrative, they are at the mercy of the author, and much of the pleasure in these stories comes from satirizing the pretensions of the monarchs." Perhaps we must learn to embrace humour in our plight as we navigate our suffering, clinging to the whimsical notion that even the smallest of creatures, like an ant, can take on and triumph over an elephant.

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Hulisani Ramantswana