Esther’s ‘coming out’ as costly redemption: living through and beyond the violence of ‘othering’

I am so hostile to this book and to Esther that I wish they did not exist at all, for they Judaize too much, and have too much heathen impropriety.

Why Esther?

In a volume devoted to biblical texts as sites or sources of ease and grace, the Book of Esther hardly springs to mind as an obvious candidate for discussion. Reflecting on Christian colonisation of the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible, commentator Timothy Beal concedes that Esther is often ‘treated as the most remote outpost . . . exotic, savage, difficult to reach, difficult to map, dangerous, perhaps irredeemable’. Martin Luther, whose frank assessment appears in the epigram above, clearly viewed it this way.

And yet it is precisely the danger in this narrative – even perhaps its savagery, and certainly its violence – that makes it of interest for our purposes here. It is in the very degree of difficulty it narrates in the mapping of identity that this text emerges as a source of grace (if never quite ease) for those for whom the mapping or disclosure of identity is problematic, or just plain dangerous, whether they be Jews or same-sex attracted persons.

Esther’s coming out as a Jew in an anti-Semitic political environment is not only or simply about the cartography of her own identity, however. The survival of her people depends on it. Her coming out, then, as the term implies, is not a private act, although a deeply personal one. What in her case is its especially public nature emphasizes the corporate aspect of such a move, such that the identity of all characters is redrawn, in ways that are at once redemptive and disturbing.

What sort of biblical literature is Esther?

The book of Esther is a short (and ‘tall’) story, in every sense a fantastic tale, which relates how a Jewish orphan became queen of the Persian Empire at a time when many of her people were living in exile in its provinces, and when Judah itself was under Persian control. Esther manages to avert the threatened extermination of her people at the whim of the arch villain, Haman. Haman casts lots – in
Hebrew, *purim* – to determine the date on which this genocide is to take place. Hence the name of the Jewish festival with which the story is so closely associated (and perhaps, on account of the popularity of which, Esther snuck into the canon of Scripture as ‘festal aetiology’), much against the better judgment of Luther, among many others).

In the process of avoiding disaster, the gross excesses and incompetence of the Persian court are mercilessly parodied, and the Jewish people enjoy a victory (of equally absurd proportions) over their enemies. Esther’s kinsman, Mordecai, replaces Haman as second in the kingdom, and he and Esther institute *Purim* as a celebration in perpetuity of this turning-of-the-tables.

Although not historical as such, Esther and *Purim* are poignant and cathartic responses to Israel’s historical experience of exile and persecution. Set in the early fifth-century BCE, in the region of modern-day Iran, Esther was probably written some time later – perhaps the third century BCE after the fall of the empire it lampoons. The character Ahasuerus is possibly intended to represent Xerxes I, but is more likely simply ‘the image of the Asiatic despot’. One of the ways a story like Esther meets the needs of its first audience is by satirising oppressive power structures, more on which below.

Like a number of stories from the Hebrew Bible and Apocrypha – Tobit, Daniel, Ruth, Judith – Esther explores the problem of Jewish identity once the crisis of exile has settled into the reality of Diaspora, that is, once Israel realizes that exile is ‘permanent’. Esther’s response is to promote assimilation as the means of survival. In the Hebrew version of Esther there is no mention of *kashrut* (dietary regulations) as in Judith; no prayer, such as on the lips of Tobit, or appeal to divine blessing as in Ruth; no religiously-motivated defiance of authority as in Daniel – despite there being every opportunity in the narrative for the inclusion of such practices. Indeed, there are a number of places where we would expect to read of them, and where commentators – both ancient and modern, Jewish and Christian – have felt obliged to assume or even supply them, such as in the Greek additions to Esther found in the Apocrypha, and in rabbinic literature.

Thus the whole story of Esther – whose name is a form of the Hebrew verb ‘to hide’ – hinges around the secrecy of her identity as
a Jew. She survives – and ensures the survival of her people – by successfully becoming her ‘other’: the Persian Queen.

**Parallel and scary universes: anti-Semitism and homophobia**

In response to 1928 proposals to reform paragraph 175 of the German criminal code, a sodomy statute, the Nazi party explicitly linked pacifism with male homosexuality:

> [The German people] can only live if they fight . . . and they can only fight if they maintain their masculinity . . . Anyone who even thinks of homosexual love is our enemy. We reject anything that emasculates our people and makes them a plaything for our enemies. vii

The parallels between the violence of anti-Semitism and the violence of homophobia have been well documented. We must restrict our focus here to just two common aspects: the Jew/gay as ‘other’, and the relative safety of the closet.

French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas dedicated his 1981 work, *Otherwise than Being*, not only to the immediate victims of the Holocaust, but also to the ‘millions of all confessions and all nations, victims of that same hatred of the other man, the same anti-semitism’. viii Levinas here recognises that the formation of identity, which is as much about other as the self, can so easily become adversarial, contingent upon our capacity for ‘othering’. For example, Christian identity, much like modern Western European identity in general, ‘has tended to depend on the Jew even while defining itself over against the Jew’. ix

Luther’s hostility towards the book of Esther is instructive, for by its stubborn presence in the Christian canon of Scripture, Esther represents the ‘not-us within us’. x In wishing it ‘did not exist’, Luther illustrates the ‘problem’ of the other, as set out by Levinas:

> A calling into question of the Same . . . is brought about by the Other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics . . . his irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and possessions. xii
Typically, when faced with the irreducibility of the other to the same as oneself, the response is either to assimilate the other or to annihilate the other. When the stakes are this high – both for the ones othering, and those othered – and assimilation seems preferable to annihilation, then the hiding or the ambiguation of identity can be vital:

the possibilities of veiling, misrepresenting, masking, and closeting otherness; of being more than one appears when the ‘more’ is too much for the system to bear, and could explode the order of relations between us and them as it now stands.\textsuperscript{xii}

Suppression of difference – of the ‘more’ of Jewishness – was a matter of life and death for Polish Jews in the early 1940s, as is vividly described by Diane Armstrong in her biographical novel. At one point she relates how a Jewish family relocated to the town of Piszczac, feigning Catholicism in a bid to avoid detection, staving off suspicion by disguising everything from traditional recipes to the curliness of their daughter’s hair.\textsuperscript{xiii}

Within the narrative world of Esther, the stakes are commensurately high. As Beal puts it, ‘although the tone can be playful, the game is dead serious’.\textsuperscript{xiv}

Esther as ‘serious fun’

The reading of relevant sections of Esther to follow is drawn from a narrative-critical approach to the entire text undertaken in an earlier work.\textsuperscript{xv} Here we must restrict ourselves to considering those aspects of the story bearing upon Esther’s coming out, and its aftermath. Before we turn to the text itself, however, it is important to briefly consider a little further the book’s genre, and the impact of that on how we might receive it, both as literature and as Scripture.

Esther’s particular form of satire has been described as ‘carnivalesque’.\textsuperscript{xvi} Carnivals are celebrations of upheaval, renewal, and change, where official culture is subverted and alternative visions of reality (including chaos) can be explored in relative safety. Carnivals are to do with the wearing of masks – the blurring or crossing-over of identity markers: male/female, king/clown, us/them,
and so on. They permit, even invite participants to imagine, ‘what if the world were like this, instead of the way we experience it, day in, day out?’

Whatever formal literary classification scholars may settle on – carnivalesque, farce, folktale, or all of these and more – there can be no doubt that the book of Esther is essentially comic in outlook.\textsuperscript{xvii}

What has been less obvious to commentators, however, is the rhetorical (and consequentially the theological and ideological) impact of reading it as such.

As the licensed clown of Athenian democracy, the civic and religious duty of Greek comedy was ‘to release its audience from restraints and inhibitions’\textsuperscript{xviii} – a kind of fictive safety valve which helps people to survive the all-too-real pressures of their lives. Mikhail Bakhtin’s term ‘serio-comical’, derived from the Greek spoudogelios (‘serious-smiling’) seems apposite to Esther. Whilst offering some light relief, as ‘historicised fiction’ it also connects the reader/hearer in the present with the burdens experienced by the text’s first audience – with the ‘real world’ as construed and reconstructed in the narrative by and for that community.\textsuperscript{xix}

This is entirely consistent with Jewish reception of the text in the context of a Purimspiel, a quasi-liturgical dramatised reading of the text on the feast of Purim. A rabbinic rubric (\textit{b Meg 7b}) for the festival’s observance stipulates that participants drink wine until they can no longer distinguish between ‘blessed be Mordecai’ and ‘cursed be Haman’, thus encouraging them to blur or ambiguate identity.

So understood, comedy is nothing less than a means of survival. The term ‘survival literature’\textsuperscript{xx} applies doubly to Esther: not only does it narrate a story of the survival of Jewish exiles in the face of the threat of annihilation, but its genre allows communities receiving that story to handle its deadly serious themes more lightly and safely.\textsuperscript{xxi} As Friedrich Nietzsche put it: ‘I know of no other method of dealing with great tasks but play.’\textsuperscript{xxii}

The weighty task addressed by this playful text is coming to grips with the reality of Diaspora; with the loss of connection with land and Temple; with a sense of God’s absence – even abandonment; in a word, theodicy.\textsuperscript{xxiii} Indeed, to read Esther in our own generation – especially in the wake of the Holocaust – is to sense the gravity that is carried by its burlesque flavour and comedic charms. Terrence Des Pres argues,
One of the strongest themes in the literature of survival is that pain is senseless; that suffering so vast is completely without value as suffering. The survivor, then, is a disturber of the peace. As we shall see, Esther’s portrayal of suffering as ridiculously arbitrary, together with its exaggerated presentation of the survivors as disturbers of the peace, exemplify Des Pres’ observations. Again, what has all this to do with ease and grace? If survival turns both on hiding and on a strategic coming out, then those who successfully negotiate such a treacherous, capricious, and fickle polity cannot survive as those who say “Peace, peace,” when there is no peace (Jer 6:14). Only as disturbers of a false peace, can survivors overcome – sur-vive, ‘over live’, live beyond – the ‘problem’ of their otherness, the limits of their identity so mapped, such that identity formation begins to carry less fear of, and hostility towards, ‘the not-us within us’ all.

Public and private transcripts

Honoré de Balzac might well have had Esther in mind when he counseled,

Mes enfants, you mustn’t go at things head-on, you are too weak; take it from me and take it on an angle . . . Play dead, play the sleeping dog.

James C Scott’s typology of public and private transcripts is a helpful lens through which to view the salient narrative passages in chapters 4, and 7-9 of Esther. Scott makes a study of power relations in situations ‘where the powerless are often obliged to adopt a strategic pose in the presence of the powerful, and when the powerful may have an interest in overdramatizing their reputation’. His thesis is that each ‘subordinate group creates, out of its ordeal, a “hidden transcript” that represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant’. This hidden transcript can be expressed openly, but only in disguised form, so as not to disrupt the public transcript of power relations, which the powerless
have some interest (often their own survival) in preserving. It may take the form of

rumours, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes and theater . . . vehicles by which, among other things, [the powerless] insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct.\textsuperscript{xxix}

Gerrie Snyman applies this theory to the Esther narrative, setting Esther’s public playing out of a deferential queenly and Persian role in contrast to the private, hidden, offstage, but more accurate transcript of self-preservatory Jewish resistance to the authority of Ahasuerus and Haman.\textsuperscript{xxx} Conversely, King Ahasuerus’ show of honour (see 1:1-11; 2:1-4, 12-14) forms part of the public transcript by which ‘structures of domination can be demonstrated’, generating ‘a hegemonic public conduct’.\textsuperscript{xxxi}

Living in a right royal closet

Part of the king’s extant stockpile of honour consists of his beautiful queen, Vashti, who he decides to show off to his guests at a lavish feast, wearing her royal crown and perhaps not much else. Vashti doesn’t much go for this idea, and refuses to come. A farcical scene follows, which immediately undermines all the opening images of the king’s power. Furious at having his authority challenged, Ahasuerus summons all his wise men and – like the powerful autocrat he is – asks them what to do next. Their advice is that Vashti should never be allowed to come before the king again, and that her position be given to another, more worthy (compliant) than she.

Whilst it’s hard to see Vashti being too devastated about being ordered not to do the very thing she’s just refused to do, this ruler seems incapable of saying ‘no’ to any hair-brained scheme presented to him – be it Haman’s genocidal urge (3:8-11), or Esther’s drastic approach to self-defense (8:5-11) – all of which he delights to turn into law. This is no exception. Whoever has the king’s ear in this story and utters the magic words ‘if it pleases the king’ usually discovers that pretty much everything does.
The search for a new queen begins, with the reader having noted that it is in this vacuous political system that Esther will have to negotiate her way. And not only Esther, of course, but – if rulers like Ahasuerus are a fact of life in the Diaspora – then the same is true for all Jews who read and celebrate this story after exile.

Just prior to this, Esther has been introduced to the reader by her Jewish name, ‘Hadassah,’ an exile, the orphaned cousin of Mordecai. Hadassah is immediately renamed in the story as ‘Esther,’ as if to hide her ethnic identity. Conscripted for the royal beauty contest, she pleases the king, but Mordecai has instructed her not to let on that she’s Jewish. Her identity is emblematic: elect of God but orphaned, of the noble tribe of Benjamin, but exiled – a personification of Israel’s historical experience. And, with two different names, her identity is also ambiguous and problematic from the outset. Once made Persian Queen in place of Vashti, a further complicating identity marker is added.

Mordecai’s injunction to silence on the matter of Esther’s Jewishness is consistent with Scott’s observation that ‘prudence ensures that subordinate groups rarely blurt out their hidden transcript directly’. Moreover, they ‘might make use of disguise, deception, and indirection while maintaining an outward impression, in power-laden situations, of willing, even enthusiastic consent’. This is precisely what Vashti did not do by refusing to be paraded.

When, like Vashti, Mordecai refuses a direct command of the king by failing to bow down to Haman – who, bizarrely (2:21-3:1), has become a sort of extension of the royal honour – Esther, in contrast to Vashti, is presented as conducting a tactically superior subterfuge. As the pleasing woman, she must speak the pleasing word of the public transcript, while learning the discourse of the hidden one.

Upon learning of Mordecai’s Jewishness, Haman decides to apply a generic ‘solution’ to this particular ‘problem’ by destroying all Jews in the Empire. In two of the most chilling verses in the Bible for the modern reader – Jew or Gentile – Haman dresses up his personal insecurity in terms of the offence of ‘difference’, of ‘otherness’ (3:8-9). His proposal pleases the king (of course), and they sit down to toast their latest piece of legislation, unaware that they have just decreed the death of the Queen. It is a dangerous and
uncertain world indeed, when the fate of individuals and peoples hangs in the balance – or, rather, the imbalance – of such frail egos.

The Jews of the capital, Shushan (Susa), engage in some ritual (although not specifically Jewish or religious) mourning, which, with Mordecai’s prompting, precipitates a sort of identity crisis in Esther, whose immediate reaction to this potentially conspicuous behaviour is to hide it, to cover it up, by sending clothes to Mordecai so that he might remove his sackcloth (4:4). Again, Mordecai is non-compliant, instead urging Esther (via one of the king’s eunuchs, Hathach) to intervene by appearing before the king. Mordecai is here the subject of key verbs ‘to tell’ (4:8, 9) and ‘to see’ or (in the causative form, as here) ‘to show’ (4:8; compare 1:4), foreshadowing the crucial questions of disclosure around which so much of the action to follow will hinge.

In turn, Esther instructs Hathach concerning Mordecai, deploying some of her own inside knowledge to parry his demand. In this, her first piece of direct speech in the narrative (4:11), she outlines the delicate, yet typically pompous protocol involved in making supplication to the king. Joshua Berman is right to point out Esther’s personal investment in this structure and that, in her response to Mordecai, her first ‘showing’ in the narrative is as a Persian, indicative perhaps of both how adept Esther has become at speaking the public transcript, and how reluctant or afraid she is to risk the success of her role-playing thus far. He illustrates the multiplicity of Esther’s identity through a series of questions both she and the reader may well be asking at this point in the narrative:

Is she Jew or Persian? Is she marked to be annihilated, or by extension through Ahasuerus an accomplice to the act of annihilation? Is she wife of Ahasuerus or adopted daughter of Mordecai? Is she the king’s wife or is she an orphan in exile?xxxv

The content of Mordecai’s counsel to her (4:13-14) is as forceful as it is cryptic, although attention to genre may again be helpful here. One of the functions of carnival according to Bakhtin is that it ‘affirms the people’s immortal, indestructible character’.xxxvi This is what Mordecai achieves by suggesting to Esther that, despite its apparent urgency (4:8), her self-disclosure is ultimately not integral
to ‘relief and deliverance’ arising for the Jews. On the back of his own more defiant coming out at the king’s gate (3:2-4), however, and the revocation of his demand that Esther not reveal her people or her kindred in the royal precinct (2:10, 20), Mordecai’s warning (or is it a threat?) brings the dis-integration of her identity, and the associated quandary, into its sharpest narrative focus.

At this pivotal point of the narrative, his verbal shoulder-shrug, ‘Who knows?’ (4:14) also serves as a warning to the reader/hearer: to resile from knowing the unknowable, from presuming to read such an unreadable world definitively. Mordecai, the character who has already rivalled the king’s sages in terms of being ‘in the know’ (2:22), exhibits a kind of knowing in the story that is partly a knowledge of his own ignorance; unlike Haman, who remains blind to his limitations until it is too late (6:6-10; 7:9-10).

As though in direct conversation with Mordecai now, Esther agrees to act. The fragile bridge between inside and outside, private and public, constructed over the course of this most agonistic exchange is maintained by the shared discipline of a fast. Thus the people Haman described as ‘scattered’ (3:8), will be ‘gathered’ (4:16), in solidarity.

In continuing to speak the public transcript, however, Esther’s solidarity is necessarily hidden: as one of ‘us’ (the Jews) Esther remains inside the palace; her fasting will merge with feasting; and her sackcloth will be the robes of royal office. Nevertheless, while contriving to appear loyal (5:1), she prepares herself to break the law under which she has managed to forge an identity, and according to which, ‘if I perish, I perish’ (4:16).

Esther’s coming out party, and its hangover

Risking her life by appearing before the king unbidden, Esther – with similar initiative to Ruth and Judith in their respective stories – puts on her best tiara, and hopes to raise up not only favour, but also the royal ‘sceptre’ – as a sign that her life will be spared, the sexual overtones tempering the tension with humour. Granted a hearing, Esther doesn’t come straight out with her problem, but continues to ‘play it slant,’ buttering up the king and Haman by inviting them to consecutive banquets – literally, ‘drinking parties’.

Things come to a head at the second of these, where Esther times her disclosure – her ‘coming-out’ – to perfection, revealing herself as
one of those marked and sold for destruction, whilst cleverly diverting responsibility for this away from the king. At 7:2, Ahasuerus repeats word for word his double-barreled question of 5:6 (see also 5:3), “What is your petition? It shall be granted you. And what is your request?” Whereas her first response (5:7-9) is somewhat dissembling, building both the drama of the narrative and the curiosity of the king, this time she addresses the presenting issue. Tellingly, her ‘petition’ is for her life and her ‘request’ is for her people (7:3). The latter is usually read as a plea that the lives of her people be spared – and, at one level, it is that – but the rather terse Hebrew syntax also suggests a desire on Esther’s part to be reconnected with her people, and thus to claim or reclaim the fullness of her identity by coming out as a Jew.

Beginning with the royal edict published in 3:13 and shown to Esther in 4:8, she rehearses events for Ahasuerus, as though prodding his memory and diplomatically leading him to make the connection between his consort and the people he so blithely consigned to destruction (7:4; compare 3:9, 13; 4:7). Choosing her words deliberately, Esther mirrors Haman’s language, using the same image of ‘weighing up’ (compare 3:8) in seeking to assure the king that she has his best interests in view by revealing her ethnicity. So portraying herself and her people as Ahasuerus’ loyal servants, Esther implies that the enemy of the Jews is also the enemy of the throne. Haman thus immediately becomes the common other, over against whom the king and his queen now align and identify themselves, once again in the act of drinking. It is significant that as her discourse gathers momentum it becomes reminiscent of earlier rhetoric of othering in the narrative, both with respect to Vashti (1:16-17) and the Jews.

The supposedly immutable laws of the Persians are soon countermanded (8:7-8), such that – in the last of a series of narrative reversals – on the very day when the Jews were to have been exterminated according to Haman’s plan, they wreak havoc on their enemies (8:11-13; compare 9:5). The ending of Esther has troubled many readers, Jewish and Christian alike, but the story’s darker aspects are also to be interpreted within its broadly comedic form.

In a literary parallel with the freedom afforded to Haman by the king in 3:11, to do ‘as seems good’ with the Jews, and in keeping with the authorial license enjoyed by Esther and Mordecai in 8:8, the
Jews now treat their oppressors ‘according to their wishes’. The description of slaughter in 9:6-17 is as hyperbolic as that of luxurious excess in chapters 1-2, inviting a correspondingly detached or skeptical response from the reader. Certainly there is no attempt on the part of the narrator to evaluate the violence of these final chapters. Others in the text’s troubled history of reception have not been so reticent. Does the author expect the reader to grant moral validity to the actions narrated here, as Michael Fox suggests?3 Or does the ‘reiteration of the language of killing and the mathematics of death’ free – even oblige – the reader to respond quite differently to such violent shoring up of identity, as Stan Goldman surmises?3

Either way, this very indeterminacy supports the view that the text is so riddled with markers of identity which do not disappear into some neat and tidy resolution, but rather compound and complicate . . . [that] one must ask whether the Book of Esther is less about the definition and fixation of identity and more about its problematization.3xiii

Certainly the binary opposition of ‘us’ and ‘them’ is deconstructed by a double crossover at this point in the narrative: the Jews come to assume the Persian court’s role as aggressors (there are further echoes of the king and Haman sitting down to toast their grim business in 3:15 with the feasting of the Jews in 8:16-17), and the Persians adopt Queen Esther’s initial survival strategy of fudging their own ethno-religious identity by professing to be Jews (8:17). The notion that one’s life might actually be preserved by claiming Jewishness is indeed ‘serio-comical’ both for this story’s post-exilic first audience, and for its post-Holocaust later readers.

Notwithstanding its genre, therefore, this is neither a ‘neat and tidy’ nor a ‘happy’ ending. As the Persians have been tried by satire in chapter 1, so the Jews are tried by irony in chapter 9.3xiv Any salutary notes with respect to the nature of evil turning back on itself struck by the narrative with the hoisting of Haman (and, if the logic of honour and shame applies, perhaps even his ten sons) on his own petard (7:10; 9:7-10)3xv are quickly transposed into cautionary ones with the killing of more than 75,000 would-be enemies. The violence of othering is not, in fact, overcome; it rebounds, and is perpetuated.
Salutary, or cautionary, or both?

If, as a guide to life and survival in a Diaspora setting, Esther’s advice to its first readers is ‘you have to mutate into your former adversary’, then it is a form of pragmatism not wholly unfamiliar to many people who identify as same-sex attracted. To that extent, it highlights the seemingly irreconcilable demands of ‘coming out’ and of finding ‘relief’ (4:14; 9:16) of sorts in the closet: hiding in the uncomfortable identity of another – of one’s other, no less.

And yet Esther does come out: a risky move that quite probably saves her own life (4:13); which undoubtedly saves the lives of her (Jewish) people; and which has a profound and disturbing impact on her entire community, Jewish and Persian alike. Her actions are at once redemptive and costly; therapeutic and unsettling.

Fiction is the realm of the ‘as if’. We can think of Esther, then, as something of a limit-case document: pushing the boundaries of what is possible; asking how much the Diaspora community can bear, how far it must go in re-establishing identity. As an experimental textual site of endurance – a literary mardi gras – such a story addresses the collective psychological need to imagine the unthinkable in a safe (carnivalesque) setting, specifically in Esther’s case: what if God has abandoned us?

Robert Alter has reflected on both Jewish and non-Jewish writers of the modern period who ‘impelled by the keenest urgency of historical seriousness’, employ fantasy as a vehicle for exploring complex existential issues, often using the miniature scale of the short story. If this is true of narrative fiction generally, it is especially so of the genre to which Esther belongs, as literary critic Eric Bentley comments:

In farce, as in dreams, one is permitted the outrage but is spared the consequences . . . The function of ‘farcical’ fantasies, in dreams or in plays [such as Purimspiel] is not as provocation but as compensation. The provision of such non-consequential moments of violent release is part of the contribution of the private transcript to the survival of those in oppressive situations, where a more direct confrontation
would be catastrophic. Snyman puts it this way:

> The hidden transcript is an acting out in fantasy of the anger and the reciprocal aggression denied by the public transcript . . . It is a substitute for an act of aggression in the face of power.\textsuperscript{lix}

An excessively retributive ending such as we have here thus has its proper place in biblical literature, Luther’s scruples notwithstanding. Beyond its therapeu-cathartic qualities, however, he was surely right to treat the text with caution, for, at the point of Esther’s coming out, it exhibits what Scott calls one of ‘those rare moments of political electricity when . . . for the first time . . . the hidden transcript is spoken publicly and directly in the teeth of power’.\textsuperscript{lx} The way this unfolds in the Esther narrative bears out Scott’s further comment:

> The important thing to understand about this moment is the enormous impact it typically has on the person (or persons) who make this declaration and, often, on the audience witnessing it.\textsuperscript{lx}

In terms of the narrative, that audience is, of course, Ahasuerus and Haman, and – indirectly but with no dilution of impact – residents of the empire’s capital and its provinces. In terms of the reception of this story as biblical literature, as somehow ‘word of God’, that audience is also the reader(s) of this text, who must feel the force of its impact no less, albeit differently.

In twenty-first-century Australia, as elsewhere, we find ourselves inhabiting one of those rare moments of political electricity when – if not exactly for the first time – the private transcript of the experience of same-sex attracted persons is being spoken more publicly and more directly than ever into the teeth of power: power that is held by the churches as much as by the state when it comes to an issue such as gay marriage.

Disturbing a false peace is never an easy task, as the exchange between Mordecai and Esther vividly narrates. The willingness of the community from which the Esther Scroll came, and which gathers around it still, to identify playfully its own capacity for the violence of othering – to name the seductiveness of speaking some
version of the public transcript, with all of its teeth – may show us how to make it a safer task.

To acknowledge the fragility of our human egos and the doomed repressions they visit upon and around us, along with the complexity and ambiguity of our own identity-mapping, collectively and individually; to risk crossing over into the lived experience of our others – these may be aspects of the grace required in order to prevent some of our less flattering fantasies with respect to identity-formation from becoming even more lamentable realities. To the extent that repression never works, survival dependent on the dis-integration of identity is not survival in any meaningful sense. The violence of othering is not overcome, absorbed, or transformed by such means, but rather rebounded, amplified, and perpetuated.

Perhaps Esther’s share of canonical wisdom, as both lamp and mirror to this toxic hostility towards the ‘not-us within us’, is to encourage a healthy dose of laughter – not least at ourselves. It may just help us all to live through and beyond this particular moment with greater integrity. Who knows?

**For further reading**


Weisman, Ze’ev, *Political Satire in the Bible*, Society of Biblical
This essay is dedicated to Nicholas Habibi Treloar, born during its final stages of gestation; may he know himself loved, on earth as in heaven, just as he is, and in his becoming.


Specifically the Masoretic (Hebrew) text of Esther is in view here, as distinct from the Greek version in the Apocrypha, which contains some additions.


A text which includes the origins and authority or mandate for a particular religious festival. In rabbinc literature (*b Meg 3b*) Esther is also regarded as a festal lection, that is, a text to be read publicly on said feast.


Richard Treloar, *Esther and the End of ‘Final Solutions’: Theodicy and Hebrew Biblical Narrative*, ATF Dissertation Series 3 (ATF Press: Adelaide, 2008), and see especially 127-246. For those unfamiliar with a narrative-critical approach, and the hermeneutical theory on which such text-centered reading strategies are based, please refer to *ibid.*, 47-93.


See Treloar, *Esther and the End of ‘Final Solutions’*, 110-11 and 123-25 for a fuller discussion of some of these terms, together with issues of Esther’s historicity and provenance.


The films *The Great Dictator* (Charlie Chaplin, 1940), *To Be or Not to Be* (Ernst Lubitsch, 1942), and more recently *La vita è bella* (*Life is Beautiful*, Roberto Benigni, 1997), drew criticism for treating such serious subject matter in some sense comically. See Andrew Gray, ‘Fighting the Nazis with Laughter: Making Fun of Nazis on Film’, <www.screened.com/fighting-the-nazis-with-laughter-making-fun-of-nazis-on-film/2613>, accessed 28 June 2012.


For a definition of theodicy, and a discussion of its relationship to the Hebrew biblical tradition, see Treloar, *Esther and the End of ‘Final Solutions’*, 249-91.


*Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, xii.

Ibid.

Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, xi, xii.


Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 17.
This is Danna Nolan Fewell’s description of Daniel’s survival tactics (with which she notes a number of similarities to Esther’s) in ‘Resisting Daniel’ (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Denver, Colo, November 2011).


As cited by Craig, Reading Esther, 90.


An idiomatic phrase (compare Gen 43:14; Dan 3:17-18), conveying acceptance of a course of action to which there seems no alternative; see Berlin, Esther, 50.


The Book of Hiding, 48, and see 58.


So Craig, Reading Esther, 81.


As cited by Berlin, Esther, 81-82.


Domination and the Arts of Resistance, xiii; see also 206-12.

Ibid., 206.
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