

Helge Bezold

## **Violence and Empire: Hasmonean Perspectives on Imperial Power and Collective Violence in the Book of Esther<sup>1</sup>**

Scholars have often thought that the book of Esther adopts an anti-imperial outlook through its depiction of the (Persian) Empire as allowing the total annihilation of the Judean people. This paper will provide a more nuanced interpretation. By deconstructing the idea that Esther is characterized by imperial anti-Judean hostility, this article sheds light on the sophisticated ideological reflection in the book on the potential for fruitful interactions between Judean elites and the imperial court. In particular, an analysis of Esther 8–10 shows how Judean elites can be integrated into the imperial court and thereby co-opt and imitate aspects of imperial power, including mechanisms of collective violence. Building on recent scholarship on the influence of Hasmonean ideology on the book of Esther, this paper argues that there are striking similarities with the book of 1 Maccabees in regard to its conceptualization of collective violence and imperial power.

*Keywords:* Judean elites, imperial power, collective violence, Hasmonean ideology, Esther 8–10, 1 Maccabees

### **1. Imperial Power and Collective Violence in Esther**

Imperial power and collective violence are central themes in the book of Esther. As in the case of other biblical traditions, Judean individuals make a career in the court of a foreign king. However, only in the fictional world

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of the book of Esther do the Judeans face the threat of total annihilation and fight back by killing thousands of their attackers. Thus, the book is an ideal test case for studying narrative perceptions and constructions of imperial power and its link to collective violence. The narrative's stance towards imperial power is a point of scholarly debate.<sup>2</sup> Interpretations range from ascribing a harmonious, critical, or even satirical perspective to the book. With its reference to the planned mass killing of the Judean people in an imperial context, a majority of scholars still seems to prefer an empire-critical interpretation.<sup>3</sup> This study seeks to move beyond this assumption. It proposes that the ambiguous depiction of imperial power and its representatives is an integral feature of the literary negotiation of the concept. Behind the entertaining style of the narrative stands a sophisticated ideological reflection on the different ways in which Judean individuals can *interact with* and *make use of* imperial power. Only through the integration of Judean elites at the imperial court can the dispersed Judean people act as a collective and fight back against the violence that has been planned. Following this line of interpretation, the Judean battles in Esth 9:1–16 cannot simply be explained as an anti-imperial struggle. Representatives of imperial power – royal officials and the Persian king – are even perceived as supportive factors for ensuring the Judeans' success. The narrative thus negotiates between the poles of rejection, cooperation, and imitation of aspects of imperial power in its depiction of collective violence.

This study consists of two main parts. The first part (sections 3–5) analyzes the conceptualization of imperial power in the Esther narrative. It will consider to what extent representatives of imperial power show hostility

2 On the Hellenistic background of the scroll, see B. Ego, "The Book of Esther: A Hellenistic Book," *JAJ* 1 (2010): 279–302; J.-D. Macchi, "The Book of Esther: A Persian Story in Greek Style," in *A Palimpsest: Rhetoric, Ideology, Stylistics, and Language Relating to Persian Israel* (ed. E. Ben Zvi et al.; Perspectives on Hebrew Scriptures and its Contexts 5; Piscataway: Gorgias, 2009), 109–128; J. Middlemas, "Dating Esther: Historicity and the Provenance of Masoretic Esther," in *On Dating Biblical Texts to the Persian Period: Discerning Criteria and Establishing Epochs* (ed. R. J. Bault and M. Lackowski; FAT II 101; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2019), 149–168.

3 Cf., e.g., A. Berlin, *Esther: The Traditional Hebrew Text With the New JPS Translation* (JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001); K. M. Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995); A. Green, "Power, Deception, and Comedy: The Politics of Exile in the Book of Esther," *JPSR* 23 (2011): 61–78; J.-D. Macchi, "Denial, Deception, or Force: How to Deal With Powerful Others in the Book of Esther," in *Imagining the Other and Constructing Israelite Identity in the Early Second Temple Period* (ed. E. Ben Zvi and D. V. Edelman; LHBOTS 456; London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2014), 219–229, here 220–223; C. J. Sharp, *Irony and Meaning in the Hebrew Bible* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 65–81.

toward the Judeans and to what extent the Judeans interact *with* and exert aspects of imperial power. The second part (sections 6–8) reflects upon the implications of these textual observations for how we understand the assumed historical and ideological context of the book of Esther in the late Hellenistic period. As the book of 1 Maccabees is a prominent example of how Judean scribes engaged with imperial power and collective violence in this period, we will compare our observations with this literary tradition. As we will see, there are striking conceptual similarities between the two works that go beyond the common assumption of being anti-imperial narratives.

## 2. Esther 8–10 and the Composition of the Esther Scroll

The literary history of the book of Esther cannot be discussed in detail within the limits of this study. Recent work on the book of Esther tends to agree that redactional material can be found especially in Esther 8–10.<sup>4</sup> After Haman's execution in chapter 7, chapter 8 refers to the events at the imperial court that lead to the Judean battles against their enemies in chapter 9. After the institution of Purim, chapter 10 serves as an epilogue. In his 2016 commentary on Esther, Jean-Daniel Macchi made the compelling case that the book's Hebrew form is the result of a dynamic reworking of an earlier version of the story. Like other scholars before him, Macchi concludes that especially the final chapters of the Hebrew text of Esther 8–10 have been heavily edited in light of the events of the Maccabean revolt.<sup>5</sup> Following this line of interpretation, we will treat the material in these chapters as reflecting the historical conditions of the Hasmonean period. These chapters in particular shed light on how Judean scribes in the Hellenistic period engaged with the conceptual interdependence of imperial power and collective violence.

## 3. Enmity and Planned Collective Violence in an Imperial Context

The Esther narrative undoubtedly develops an ambivalent perception of imperial power. A driving theme seems to be the question of how one can

4 Cf., e.g., B. Ego, *Ester* (BKAT 21; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2017), 40–49; R. Kossmann, *Die Esthernovelle: Vom Erzählten zur Erzählung. Studien zur Traditions- und Redaktionsgeschichte des Estherbuches* (VTSup 79; Leiden: Brill, 2000), 322–364; J.-D. Macchi, *Le livre d'Esther* (Commentaire de l'Ancien Testament; Geneva: Labor et Fides, 2016), 40–50.

5 Cf. Macchi, *Esther*, 64–75.

gain access to the imperial court. The most powerful representative of the court, the king, is described as a rather weak character who is susceptible to manipulation. Owing to his anger about his wife, Vashti, who refused to come before him and his guests, the king is convinced by his courtiers to publish a rather ridiculous decree that commands “that every man shall be master in his house” (Esth 1:22).<sup>6</sup> Here, the ruler is depicted as drunk, driven by emotions, and dependent on his advisors. In their first interaction with the court in chapter 2, Esther and Mordechai loyally protect the king from violence planned against him; namely, an assassination attempt. The king has the conspirators promptly executed (Esth 2:21–23). This episode foreshadows the idea that Judean interaction with the court is possible, mutually beneficial, and ultimately connoted with violence. The narrative characterization of the king as rather naive and ill-advised finds its climax in chapter 3, when he agrees to the plan that his courtier Haman should exterminate an unnamed people (עַם אֲחֻזָּה, Esth 3:8). Without knowing that it is the Judeans, he is manipulated by Haman (Esth 3:8–12). While the risk of manipulation makes imperial power a somewhat threatening force, it is important to note that the narrative reserves its greatest critique for those who manipulate it with the intent of harming the Judeans. Indeed, it is Haman, not the Persian king, who represents the idea of anti-Judean enmity. In his anger against Mordechai, Haman uses his access to the court and imperial resources to plan the extermination of the Judean people.<sup>7</sup> As the narrative repeatedly refers to Haman specifically as the “enemy” or as being of Agagite origin (e.g., Esth 3:1, 10), it is clear, however, that his plan is not rooted in any specifically Persian hostility. It is his hurt pride and – at least in the present form of the narrative – his genealogical background that leads to his genocidal plan (Esth 3:8–12, 14).<sup>8</sup> His edict is addressed to the imperial officials (Esth 3:12), and copies are sent out “to every people” (לְכָל הָעַמִּים, Esth 3:14). In this regard, imperial power is closely linked with

6 All English translations are my own.

7 As Tessa Rajak has shown, qualities such as cruelty, anger, pride, and luxury belong to the Hellenistic perception of tyrannical rule; see T. Rajak, “The Angry Tyrant,” in *Jewish Perspectives on Hellenistic Rulers* (ed. T. Rajak et al.; HCS 50; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 110–127.

8 The Septuagint of Esther does not (yet) know of Haman being of Agagite descent. Macchi’s observation that Haman is not referred to as an Agagite in earlier stages of the book’s formation is thus highly plausible; see J.-D. Macchi, “Haman l’orgueilleux dans les livres d’Esther,” in *L’Ecrit et l’Esprit. Etudes d’histoire du texte et de théologie biblique en hommage à Adrian Schenker* (ed. D. Böhler et al.; OBO 214; Fribourg: Fribourg Academic Press, 2005), 198–214. One could assume that this “Agagite-ization” reflects an effort by later scribes to explain Haman’s intentions.

collective violence, as it can be weaponized to instigate an act of mass killing against one particular group. In sending out copies “to every people,” the group of possible perpetrators of this attack is not limited to imperial forces, however. Rather, everyone in the empire is, by law, called upon “to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate” all Judeans (Esth 3:13). Furthermore, this edict has enduring validity. In the machinery of the imperial administration, it cannot be annulled (Esth 8:8).

Thus, the idea to harm the Judeans originates from Haman’s evil intentions, not from imperial hostility per se. The representatives of the Persian Empire take no offense in the identity of the Judean people. Nowhere in the narrative does the Persian king, for example, reflect any anti-Judean hostility. He seems well aware, at least, that Mordechai is a member of the Judean people in Esth 6:10 when he has him honored for uncovering the assassination attempt. When Esther eventually reveals to him that it was her people (Esth 7:3) that Haman planned to annihilate, the king is shocked (Esth 7:5–6). In the later chapters of the narrative (Esther 8–10), the king even appears as a supporter of the Judeans. This is most prominently elaborated in one of the Purim letters. Haman serves as a personification of anti-Judean enmity and is called “the enemy of all Judeans” (Esth 9:24). The Persian king, on the other hand, is remembered in a remarkably positive way.

ובבאה לפני המלך אמר עם הספר ישוב מחשבתו הרעה אשר חשב על היהודים על ראשו ותלו אתו ואת בניו על העץ:

But when she came before the king, he commanded in writing that his [i. e., Haman’s] wicked plan that he had devised against the Judeans should come upon his own head, and they hanged him and his sons on the tree. (Esth 9:25)

This verse condenses the plot in a peculiar fashion. Upon Esther’s initiative, the ruler is said to have delivered the Judeans himself.<sup>9</sup> Thus, access to the court appears to be crucial for securing Judean interests. Esther and Mordechai have successfully managed to win the imperial court’s full support, and in so doing, can reverse the threat of collective violence against them.

While the king and Haman are clearly associated with the empire, this is not so obvious in the case of the other possible groups of enemies. At least the inhabitants of Susa show empathic reactions when they hear about the fate of the Judeans (Esth 3:15; 8:15). Those who actually do rise up against

<sup>9</sup> In biblical tradition, it is most often God who brings evil actions “back on one’s head” (Judg 9:57; 1 Sam 25:39; 1 Kgs 2:32–33, 44; Joel 4:4, 7; Obad 15; Psa 7:17; Neh 3:36; 2 Chr 6:23).

the Judeans are nowhere identified as being imperial soldiers. They are referred to only in very general terms, such as “their enemies” (איביהם) and “their haters” (שנאיהם) (Esth 9:5).<sup>10</sup> The numerous enemies in Esther 9 thus seem to signify the hostility that Haman instigated *within* the empire. It is not possible to identify them as representatives *of* the empire. A close reading of Mordechai’s counter-edict in Esth 8:11 also confirms this.

אשר נתן המלך ליהודים אשר בכל עיר ועיר להקהל ולעמד על נפשם להשמיד ולהרג ולאבד את כל חיל עם ומדינה הצרים אתם טף ונשים ושללם לבו:

Wherein the king granted the Judeans who were in any city to assemble and stand for their lives, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of people or province that might attack them, children and women, and to plunder their goods. (Esth 8:11)

In this verse, it remains unclear whether the Judeans must fight imperial forces specifically. The Hebrew term used to describe the “armed force” is חיל. This noun can denote the imperial army (Esth 1:3). However, it is striking that the passage does not develop this idea any further. Furthermore, whereas in Esth 1:3 the text refers to the “army of Persia and Media,” the identification of the חיל עם ומדינה in Esth 8:11 remains open and does not seem to be particularly linked with the Persian Empire. Furthermore, it is notable that the king is referred to as one of the subjects of the action in Esth 8:11. He allows the Judeans to assemble for their defense. This is an important element that is not found in Haman’s edict, and which emphasizes the imperial involvement in delivering the Judeans. Thus, in the narrative context of Esther 8–9, imperial power does not appear to be inimical to the Judeans. Esther 9:3 even mentions that the Persian officials refrain from attacking them and describes them as having “supported the Judeans.” While the specific meaning of the “support” (נשא Piel) is not easy to determine,<sup>11</sup> in the narrative context it seems that the officials actively help the Judeans in their battles. Overall, the narrative carefully avoids ascribing the representatives of the empire any particular hostility towards the Judeans. The Persian ruler and his officials eventually support the Judeans in their collective battles against their enemies. It is this ambivalent perception of imperial power that allows Esther and Mordechai to step in as new imperial figures.

<sup>10</sup> On this stereotypical formula see, e.g., Lev 26:17; Num 10:35; Deut 30:7; 2 Sam 22:18; 41 and the references in the enemy Psalms (Psa 18:18, 41; 21:9; 25:19; 35:19; 38:20; 55:13; 68:2; 69:5; 83:3; 139:22).

<sup>11</sup> 1 Kgs 9:11 and Ezra 1:4, 8:36 use the verb to describe material/financial support.

#### 4. The Integration of Judean Elites into the Imperial Court

Already in the first seven chapters, Esther and Mordechai effortlessly interact with the court (cf. Esth 4:4–16; 5:4–8; 7:1–6). Chapters 8–10 even mention their successful integration into the imperial administration. In the opening passage (Esth 8:1–2), the king gives Esther the house of Haman (Esth 8:1a). The possession and status of the former high-ranking advisor is now in the hands of the Judeans. Esther informs the king about their Judean identity, which also enables Mordechai to enter the court. He receives the royal signet ring and takes Haman's former position (Esth 8:2). After Mordechai has published his counter-edict, he leaves the court as a quasi-royal figure wearing royal robes.<sup>12</sup>

ומרדכי יצא מלפני המלך בלבוש מלכות תכלת וחור ועטרת זהב גדולה ותכריך בוץ וארגמן והעיר שושן צהלה ושמחה:

And Mordechai went out from the presence of the king, wearing royal robes of blue and white, with a great golden crown and a mantle of linen and purple, and the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced. (Esth 8:15)

The narrative goes to great lengths to emphasize Mordechai's authority: The colors and materials of his garments match the description of the royal garden in Esther 1. This parallelism reflects his extraordinary position within the imperial system.<sup>13</sup> In the ancient world in general and in biblical traditions in particular (e.g., Ezek 23:6; 27:24; Dan 5:7, 16, 29), purple clothing signifies royal status and authority. The “great golden crown” (עטרת זהב גדולה) further emphasizes Mordechai's position.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that this piece of headwear is distinct from those of Vashti and Esther, who wear a different kind of hat.<sup>15</sup> As only a few biblical characters actually wore

12 On the symbolic function of clothing see S. B. Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (SBLDS 44; Ann Arbor: Scholars Press, 1979), 62–63; J. C. Siebert-Hommes, “On the third day Esther put on her queen's robes’ (Esther 5:1): The Symbolic Function of Clothing in the Book of Esther,” *Lectio difficilior* 1 (2002); [http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/02\\_1/siebert.pdf](http://www.lectio.unibe.ch/02_1/siebert.pdf) (accessed on September 12, 2019).

13 This is a similar literary technique to that found in Exodus 28, where Aaron's garments correspond to the materials of the sanctuary; cf. C. Nihan and J. Rhyder, “Aaron's Vestments in Exodus 28 and Priestly Leadership,” in *Debating Authority: Concepts of Leadership in the Pentateuch and the Former Prophets* (ed. K. Pyschny and S. Schulz; BZAW 507; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 45–67.

14 As the Septuagint does not know of a “great” crown (Esth LXX 8:15: καὶ στέφανον ἔχων χρυσεῖον), this motif could be explained as a later insertion.

15 Esth 1:11 and 2:17 refer to כתר מלכות .

an עטרָה, Mordechai's position seems to be exceptional.<sup>16</sup> In the narrative context, the verse expresses a political and military understanding of his role. He had just commanded an empire-wide edict that initiates Judean military action against possible aggressors.<sup>17</sup> The verse expresses the idea that Judean elites can be successfully integrated into the imperial power structure. This idea is developed further in the narrative's final chapter.

The epilogue of Esth 10:1–3 depicts a remarkable fusion of Judean agency and imperial power. In this passage, Mordechai is praised alongside the king (Esth 10:2).<sup>18</sup> In the end, Mordechai is described as “second to King Ahasuerus” (10:3) and is thus “formally integrated into the imperial power structure.”<sup>19</sup> While Esther's role is not mentioned in the final verses, her title “Queen Esther” and her actions constantly underscore her relevance within the imperial system.<sup>20</sup> While other biblical court narratives also refer to the high positions that Judeans can attain in the imperial court, the book of Esther is exceptional in how it describes the means by which Judeans can be integrated into the imperial system. In the cases of Daniel and his friends or Joseph the integration into the court is a reward for the God-given abilities of the individuals at hand. By contrast, Esther and Mordechai actively seek to interact with the court. The survival of the Judean people therefore depends not on divine gifts or heavenly intervention, but on the active and strategic interaction of Judean elites with the court.

16 David (2 Sam 12:30; 1 Chr 20:2), Solomon (Song 3:11), and Joshua (Zech 6:11). Cf. also the royal (Davidic) figure in Ps 21:4, personified Jerusalem in Ezek 16:12, and Aaron in Sir 45:12 (עטרָת פּוֹז).

17 Cf. J. D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1997), 116; K. Trehuedic, “Une mémoire de Maccabées dans le livre d'Esther? Occultation de la propagandae hasmonéenne,” in *La mémoire des Persécutions. Autour des livres des Maccabées (Collection de la Revue des Études Juives)* (ed. M.-F. Baslez and O. Munnich; Paris: Peeters, 2014), 133–154, here 149. For the biblical texts, see Exod 28:5–8 (on the garments) and 28:36–38 (on the golden headwear). The symbolism of Esth 8:15 also resembles the investiture of priests in biblical literature (cf. Exodus 28). As Hasmonean leadership combined both military and priestly aspects, this might be a further argument for a Hasmonean dating of this passage.

18 Since the Septuagint tradition refers to the king only in Esth 10:2, it is likely that the insertion of Mordechai and his greatness occurred after the translation of the text into Greek; cf. Macchi, *Esther*, 485; J. Pakkala, *God's Word Omitted: Omissions in the Transmission of the Hebrew Bible* (FRLANT 251; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 341. However, since the Septuagint also refers to Mordechai as “following” (διαδέχομαι) the Persian king in 10:3, an intentional “reduction of Mordechai's role in the LXX” (Pakkala, *God's Word*, 341) seems rather unlikely.

19 See Ego, “Hellenistic Book,” 297.

20 Cf. Esth 2:22; 5:2–3, 12; 7:1–7; 8:1, 7; 9:12, 27, 31.



## 5. The Exertion of Imperial Power

Esther and Mordechai also exert imperial agency. Since Mordechai has received the royal signet ring (Esth 8:2a), he owns the symbol of imperial legislative power. From then on, the Judeans take over, and they first deal with Haman's edict. When Esther asks the king to revoke it, the king answers:

See, I have given Esther the house of Haman, and they have hanged him on the tree, because he stretched out his hand against the Judeans. You may write as it is good in your eyes with regard to the Judeans, in the name of the king, and seal it with the king's ring; for there is no abrogation (אין להשיב) of a decree written in the name of the king and sealed with the king's ring. (Esth 8:7b–8)

While many scholars have focused on the king's inability to revoke the edict and interpreted this as a sign of the narrative's critical outlook on imperial power, two aspects in the passage in fact allow for a more nuanced interpretation.<sup>21</sup> In his summary of Haman's former actions, the king mentions that Haman was hanged "because he stretched out his hand against the Judeans." This statement differs from the preceding chapter, in which the king commanded Haman's execution because he assumed Haman had violently assaulted Esther in his palace (Esth 7:8). While this arguably hints that Esth 8:7–8 belongs to a later stage of composition, from a synchronic standpoint the king seems to have adopted the Judean perspective: Haman had to be killed because he posed a threat to all Judeans. In the second part of his answer, the king transfers his authority to Esther and Mordechai. As he allows them to write "in the name of the king" and to make use of his signet ring, he in fact enables them to make use of imperial power themselves.<sup>22</sup> In other words, the king's statement about the inalterability of sealed writings could refer to both Haman's and Mordechai's decree.<sup>23</sup> It allows the Judeans to make full use of the imperial system to reverse the violence threatened against them. The passage that follows develops this idea further. Mordechai

21 Cf., e.g. Macchi, *Esther*, 423: "Une fois de plus, ce système dysfonctionne profondément [...]"

22 Thus, the imperial court guarantees Judean interests. Cf. R. Achenbach, "'Genocide' in the Book of Esther: Cultural Integration and the Right of Resistance against Pogroms," in *Between Cooperation and Hostility: Multiple Identities in Ancient Judaism and the Interaction with Foreign Powers* (ed. R. Albertz and J. Wöhrle; JAJSup 11; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 89–114, here 104; R.G. Kratz, *Translatio imperii: Untersuchungen zu den aramäischen Danielerzählungen und ihrem theologiegeschichtlichen Umfeld* (WMANT 63; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlagshaus, 1991), 241–243.

23 This is also how the Septuagint of 8:8 seems to understand this passage.

commands the content of a new edict to the *royal* scribes, writes in the *name of the king*, seals the edict with the *royal* signet ring, and sends it out using the *royal* postal horses (Esth 8:9–14). The repetition of these elements makes it clear that he acts in accordance with the imperial system. This is all the more interesting considering that his edict initiates collective military actions by the Judean people rather than by imperial soldiers. In Esth 8:11, Mordechai mentions that the king allows the Judeans to fight their attackers and to plunder their goods.<sup>24</sup> In the context of the narrative, these actions reverse the commands of Haman (Esth 3:13–14).<sup>25</sup> Upon an ideological level, this edict commands military actions wielded by a nation going to war.

The actions carried out in Esth 9:1–16 have troubled exegetes for centuries, and many have interpreted the scene as a brutal massacre. However, the measures taken by the Judeans against their enemies are described as just and legitimate. The battles follow “the word of the king and his law” (Esth 9:1a). In smiting all of their attackers in the provinces (Esth 9:5) and in killing the ten sons of Haman (Esth 9:7–10), the Judean collective acts instead of the imperial government to fight the injustice inflicted on them and to punish the family of the initial evildoer. The fact that no one can withstand the Judeans (וְאִישׁ לֹא עִמָּד לְפָנֵיהֶם, Esth 9:2), as well as the notion that the Judeans did “as they pleased” (כְּרִצּוֹנָם, Esth 9:5) with their attackers, supports such an interpretation. The latter term (רִצּוֹן) can also bear connotations of imperial power (e.g., Esth 1:3; Neh 9:24, 37). This is also the case in Esth 9:5.

A close parallel to this idea can be found in the book of Daniel, where the expression occurs three times in visions about a future ruler (Dan 8:4; 11:3, 16). In Dan 8:4, the ruler appears in the guise of a powerful ram that can exert military power “as it pleases.” Hence, there is no one who could withstand the ram (לֹא יַעֲמִדוּ לְפָנָיו). In Dan 11:3, similar things are said of the great “warrior king” who can rule “as he pleases.” Finally, Dan 11:16 also uses this terminology in announcing the opponent of “the king of the north,” who can act “as he pleases, and no one can withstand him” (כְּרִצּוֹנוֹ וְאִין עֹמֵד לְפָנָיו). Even though the Danielic visions develop a critical perspective on the rule of these imperial figures, Esther 9 shares distinctive aspects of this terminology.

<sup>24</sup> The verb קהל often bears a military connotation (cf. Esth 9:2, 15, 15, 18; cf. also Num 22:4; Josh 22:12; Judg 20:1–2; 21:5, 8; 22:12; 1 Sam 17:47; 2 Sam 20:14; 1 Kgs 12:21; Jer 50:9; Ezek 17:17; 23:24; 32:3; 38:7, 13, 15; 2 Chr 11:1).

<sup>25</sup> The actions are perceived as military retribution. נקם On the military dimension of (Esth 8:13), see, e.g., Josh 10:13; 1 Sam 14:24; 18:25; Jer 46:10. Cf. also S. F. Kató, “Rache als glühende Gerechtigkeit: Die Semantik der Wurzel נקם,” *BN* 167 (2015): 113–129, here 116–117; H. G. L. Peels, *The Vengeance of God: The Meaning of the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM-Texts in the Context of Divine Revelation in the Old Testament* (OtSt 31; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 97.

To “do as one pleases” is seen as an aspect of imperial, military power that no opponent can withstand.<sup>26</sup> A crucial difference when compared to the use of this language in Daniel, however, is that Esther ascribes this power to the collective of the fighting Judean people as a whole.

## 6. The Book of Esther and Power Relations in 2nd Century Judea

What do these observations mean for reconstructing the composition-historical context of the book of Esther, and Esther 8–10 in particular? While we know of themes such as the interaction with the court from other biblical narratives, especially the idea of Judean military agency and of the Judeans’ exertion of collective violence is a unique feature of the Esther narrative. This focus does not fit well with earlier biblical traditions about Persia that reflect the idea that Judeans can live peacefully under Persian rule. It does, however, seem to evoke memories from a much later time, namely, the Hasmonean period. This is one reason for the assumption that the received form of the Hebrew book of Esther should be dated to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. Its focus on imperial power and collective violence is an important starting point for the historical contextualization of the book. As we will see in what follows, the book of Esther’s distinctive focus on elite interactions with the imperial court fits well with recent insights about the Hasmonean period.<sup>27</sup>

A brief look at the power relations in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C.E. in the ancient Near East and ancient Mediterranean may illustrate the general political situation. The instability of the Seleucid Empire with its involvement in different military conflicts, but also with its continuing inner-dynastic quarrels, spelled unstable times for Judea and the Levant. In this context, local elites and political groups faced often-changing imperial overlords, who were involved in multiple military and political conflicts. This instability presented

26 D. J. A. Clines, “Reading Esther from Left to Right: Contemporary Strategies for Reading a Biblical Text,” in *The Bible in Three Dimensions: Essays in Celebration of Forty Years of Biblical Studies in the University of Sheffield* (ed. D. J. A. Clines; JSOTSup 87; Sheffield: Almond Press, 1990), 31–52, here 46 interprets the parallel with Dan 8:4 as an intentional (self-)critique within the Esther narrative.

27 On recent literature on 1 Maccabees and its pro-Hasmonean attitude, see B. Eckhardt, “The Hasmoneans and Their Rivals in Seleucid and Post-Seleucid Judea,” *JSJ* 47 (2016): 55–70. On 2 Maccabees and its perspective on imperial power, see, e.g., J. Schnocks, “From the ‘Master of the Elephants’ to the ‘Most Ungracious Wretch’: The Image of Foreign Commanders in the Second Book of Maccabees,” in *Between Cooperation and Hostility: Multiple Identities in Ancient Judaism and the Interaction with Foreign Powers* (ed. R. Albertz and J. Wöhrle; JAJSup 11; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 205–220.

elites with opportunities to garner influence, to seek support from imperial rulers, and to harness power through diplomatic or violent means. For several years, the followers of Judas Maccabee and his brothers fought their Seleucid overlords. Their battles eventually led to the establishment of the Hasmonean state, which could be regarded as an empire *en miniature* in the context of overarching Hellenistic hegemony.<sup>28</sup> While it might be assumed that the Hasmoneans gained true independence from imperial dominance, recent studies on the politics of the Seleucid Empire suggest that the power relations were more complex.<sup>29</sup> The Maccabean wars obviously served the purpose of securing the Hasmoneans' own power and their authority to exercise military violence within Judea. But as John Collins reflects, "that goal could be attained within the overarching framework of foreign rule."<sup>30</sup> This assumption is confirmed by analogies with other local kingdoms within the Seleucid Empire. For example, the studies of Boris Chrubasik show that the local rulers of the Attalid kingdom "could simultaneously be under Seleukid control and independent of the Seleukids."<sup>31</sup> Furthermore, the Seleucid kings and the various claimants to the throne also depended on local elites and groups to prop up their own power. The Hasmoneans were no exception in this regard.<sup>32</sup> In short, the power relations in 2<sup>nd</sup> century Judea were complex. Hellenistic hegemony was dominant and often provoked military resistance. But it also provided the opportunity for local rulers to exercise their own autonomy. Questions of local elites' diplomatic

28 Cf. T. Rajak, "The Hasmoneans and the Uses of Hellenism," in *A Tribute to Geza Vermes: Essays on Jewish and Christian Literature and History* (ed. P.R. Davies and R.T. White; JSOTSup 100; Sheffield: Sheffield University Press, 1990), 262–280, here 267.

29 See, e.g., E. Regev, "The Hellenization of the Hasmoneans Revisited: The Archaeological Evidence," in *Advances in Anthropology* 7 (2017): 175–196; and idem, *The Hasmoneans: Ideology, Archaeology, Identity* (JAJSup 10; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013).

30 J.J. Collins, "Temple or Taxes? What Sparked the Maccabean Revolt?," in *Revolt and Resistance in the Ancient Classical World and the Near East: In the Crucible of Empire* (ed. J.J. Collins and J.G. Manning; CHANE 85; Leiden: Brill, 2016), 188–201, here 200–201.

31 B. Chrubasik, "The Attalids and the Seleukid Kings, 281–175 BC," in *Attalid Asia Minor: Money, International Relations, and the State* (ed. P. Thonemann; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 83–119.

32 On the historical context, see J. Wilker, "Von Aufstandsführern zur lokalen Elite. Der Aufstieg der Makkabäer," in *Lokale Eliten und hellenistische Könige. Zwischen Kooperation und Konfrontation* (ed. B. Dreyer and P.F. Mittag; Oikumene 8; Berlin: Peter Franz Mittag, 2011), 216–252, here 241–243.

interactions with the imperial court were driving themes of that period.<sup>33</sup> The Esther narrative's fascination with the court and, in particular, the focus on how Judean leading figures could gain imperial agency – such as by initiating acts of collective violence – fits well within this historical scenario.

When we consider how Hasmonean literati conceptualized imperial power and collective violence in their literary traditions, striking resemblances with the book of Esther emerge. Several scholars have already pointed out the different ways in which the book of Esther's perception of collective violence, for example, reveals the influence of Hasmonean ideology.<sup>34</sup> Among other themes, the idea of a persecution of the Judean people, the mention of glorious counter-attacks, and the institution of a commemorative festival point towards this assumption. Even in regard to narrative details, one can observe interesting parallels. For example, it has long been noticed that the date of Haman's plan to annihilate the Judean people in the book of Esther, Adar 13 (Esth 3:7), matches the date that Hasmonean traditions refer to as the day the Maccabean army won the battle against the Seleucid general Nicanor (1 Macc 7:43, 49; 2 Macc 15:36).<sup>35</sup> These observations allow us to understand the book of Esther as “a ‘Persianized’ version of Hasmonean ideology.”<sup>36</sup> In line with this interpretation, we can ask how the book of Esther might relate to other aspects of Hasmonean ideology. As we have seen, the narrative reflects a strong interest in the question of how Judean elites can interact with the court. In what follows, we will therefore explore several aspects of this phenomenon in the book of 1 Maccabees, a tradition of more or less undisputed Hasmonean origin.<sup>37</sup> As we will see, military opposition is by no means the only way the Hasmonean leaders are described as having reacted to imperial dominance. They are depicted as military leaders and high priests, but also as masters of dip-

33 On the importance of the court in the Hellenistic period, see R. Strootman, *Courts and Elites in the Hellenistic Empires, The Near East after the Achaemenids, c. 330 to 30 BCE* (Edinburgh Studies in Ancient Persia; Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

34 See Trehuedic, “Mémoire,” 133 n. 132 for further proponents of Hasmonean influence on the book of Esther.

35 For further discussion of issues regarding Nicanor's day, see J. Rhyder, “The Commemoration of Violence in 1 and 2 Maccabees: Hanukkah and the Day of Nicanor” and S. Honigman, “Commemorative Fictions: Athens (480 B.C.E.), Jerusalem (168 B.C.E.), and Alexandria (38 C.E.)” in this issue.

36 B. Eckhardt, “Memories of Persian Rule: Constructing History and Ideology in Hasmonean Judea,” in *Persianism in Antiquity* (ed. R. Strootman and M. J. Versluys; *Oriens et Occidens* 25; Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2017), 249–265, here 262.

37 On recent literature on 1 Maccabees and its pro-Hasmonean attitude, see B. Eckhardt, “The Hasmoneans and Their Rivals in Seleucid and Post-Seleucid Judea,” *JSJ* 47 (2016): 55–70.

lomacy, representing the Hasmonean state as an important entity within the context of Seleucid hegemony. This ambivalent conceptualization allows us to observe a striking degree of similarity with how book of Esther imagines Judean existence in an imperial context.<sup>38</sup>

## 7. Hasmonean Leadership and Imperial Power

The prospect of interaction *with* and the co-opting *of* aspects of imperial power form crucial aspects of how the book of 1 Maccabees imagines Judean leadership. Hasmonean leading figures constantly seek to gain influence at the imperial court and to use this influence for their own benefit. Over the course of the narrative of 1 Maccabees, the brothers of Judas Maccabee frequently interact with several imperial representatives. The first successful interaction occurs between the Hasmonean Jonathan and Bacchides, a member of the court of the Seleucid king Demetrius (1 Macc 9:58–73).

And when Jonathan learned of this, he sent ambassadors to him to make peace with him and to give back the captives. And he agreed and did according to his words [...]. (1 Macc 9:70–71a)

After the Maccabean army won in battle, Bacchides “planned to go back to his land” (1 Macc 9:69b). Jonathan, however, actively seeks contact with the Seleucid general. In this depiction, a combination of military as well as diplomatic interaction with imperial power is seen as necessary for Judean security (cf. 1 Macc 9:73). Judean ambassadors, probably trained members of the Hasmonean court, play a crucial role in this process. However, it is not only diplomatic negotiations the Hasmonean seek in their interaction with imperial power. First Maccabees 11:44–51 mentions that Jonathan used military resources to protect the Seleucid king Demetrius II in a local revolt in Antioch. After the exchange of written documents (1 Macc 11:41–43), he sends 3000 men to help Demetrius. In battle, the Maccabean army allegedly defeated almost 100,000 enemies as they “saved the king” (καὶ ἔσωσαν τὸν βασιλέα, 1 Macc 11:48). This example reflects the idea

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<sup>38</sup> There are, of course, important differences between the book of 1 Maccabees and the book of Esther. For example, crucial features of 1 Maccabees such as the focus on the land, the temple, or cultic and religious dimensions do not have an equivalent in the book of Esther. Yet most of these differences can be explained by the books’ different genres and narrative contexts. In addition, the Hellenistic kings of 1 Maccabees and their interference with Judean traditions are often described in a more hostile way than is the case with regard to the Persian king in the Esther narrative. This, however, might be due to the overall positive role that the Persian Empire plays in biblical memory.

that the Hasmonean military actions were not necessarily directed against imperial forces. Even mutual military support was thought to be possible. The ultimate goal was obviously to secure their own political interests. The narrative of 1 Maccabees, therefore, constantly points out that the Hasmonean leaders had the ability to adapt their strategies by negotiating with imperial representatives. A similar literary pattern is present throughout the rest of the book, yet with different, mostly Seleucid, power holders.<sup>39</sup> The Hasmonean leaders appear as skillful and respected political and military agents of their time. This versatility of Judean interaction with the imperial court is an initial aspect that reminds us of the Esther narrative.

In the book of 1 Maccabees, the opportunity of interaction with imperial power holders also allows for the integration of Judean elites into the court. This idea is well attested in several passages and documents within the book.<sup>40</sup> The most prominent example of this is the imperial letter of 1 Macc 10:18–20, describing the installation of Jonathan as high priest.

King Alexander to his brother Jonathan, greetings. We have heard about you, that you are a mighty warrior and worthy to be our friend. And now we have appointed you today to be the high priest of your nation (ἀρχιερέα τοῦ ἔθνους σου); you are to be called the king's Friend (φίλον βασιλέως) – he also sent him a purple robe and a golden crown (πορφύραν καὶ στέφανον χρυσοῦν) – and you are to take our side and keep friendship with us. (1 Macc 10:18–20)

The Seleucid Alexander Balas installs Jonathan as high priest and calls him a “the king's Friend,” the official title of a Hellenistic ally. In this double role, Jonathan appears as both the legitimate leader of his own people as well as a member of the Seleucid court. The passage also refers to the exchange of gifts such as royal garments and insignia. This depiction shares several similarities with Mordechai's reception in Esther 8.<sup>41</sup> For example, both characters are leaders of their people, who are also installed as courtiers by the imperial ruler as a result of their loyalty. Just as Mordechai is described as a member of the Persian court, so has Jonathan “become an active part of Seleucid imperial administration.”<sup>42</sup> The integration of Judean elites at the imperial court thus seems to play a crucial role in the Hasmonean discourse

39 Cf., e.g., 1 Macc 10:46–66; 74–89; 11:6–7; 12; 13:36–40; 15:1–14.

40 Cf. T. Rajak, “Hasmonean Kingship and the Invention of Tradition,” in *The Jewish Dialogue with Greece and Rome: Studies in Cultural and Social Interaction* (ed. T. Rajak; AGAJU 48; Leiden: Brill, 2001), 39–60.

41 See J.-C. Lebram, “Purimfest und Estherbuch,” *VT* 22 (1972): 208–222, here 221 and more recently Ego, *Ester*, 67, 353; Levenson, *Esther*, 116; M. Tilly, *1 Makkabäer* (HThKAT; Freiburg: Herder, 2015), 214.

42 B. Eckhardt, “The Seleucid Administration of Judea, the High Priesthood and the Rise of the Hasmoneans,” *JAH* (2016): 57–87, here 76.

on imperial power. Additionally, both Esther 8 and 1 Maccabees 10 refer to purple garments and a golden crown as symbols of the new imperial agents. This rare parallel combination might indicate a close relationship between the two passages. It is at least notable that in 1 Macc 10:20, the sending of gifts interrupts the first person (plural) speech of Alexander. It can therefore be assumed that this note was not part of the original document.<sup>43</sup> In any case, the integration of this note was perceived as an important aspect in the composition of the passage. While this observation can be explained in different ways, it is at least possible to assume that the sending and the acceptance of these Hellenistic royal insignia was intended to form a link between the figures of Mordechai and Jonathan. As the narrative of 1 Maccabees continues, Jonathan's first actions as a high priest are the gathering of troops and the preparation of weapons (cf. 1 Macc 10:21b). After further diplomatic negotiations (1 Macc 10:46–64), Jonathan is installed as “general and provincial governor” (καὶ ἔθετο αὐτὸν στρατηγὸν καὶ μεριδάρχη, 1 Macc 10:65).<sup>44</sup> This passage also reminds us of Mordechai's first actions as a royal courtier; namely, the call to arms. On a conceptual level, then, both Mordechai's and Jonathan's installation attest to the idea that it is imperial permission that provides the legitimacy of the Judean military agency.

## 8. Implications: The Purpose of the Book of Esther

These conceptual similarities support the argument that the book of Esther has been influenced by Hasmonean ideology. As we have seen, the Esther narrative develops a sophisticated ideological reflection on Judean abilities to transform threats of collective violence through skilful negotiation with imperial powerholders. It integrates diverse perspectives on this topic and negotiates between various alternatives.<sup>45</sup> While collective violence can pose an existential threat to the Judean people in Esther's imperial context, the imitation and the reversal of these actions are described as a necessary response to such a threat. Overall, cunning interaction with the court is considered to be possible, if not even necessary, for mitigating the risk of

<sup>43</sup> Cf. J. A. Goldstein, *1 Maccabees* (AB 41; Garden City: Doubleday, 1976), 400.

<sup>44</sup> On the diplomatic contacts of the first Hasmoneans, see J. C. VanderKam, *From Joshua to Caiaphas: High Priests after the Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2004), 122–157; A. Hartmann, “Königtum und Priesterherrschaft: Alleinherrschaft im Judäa der Hasmoneerzeit,” in *Monarchische Herrschaft im Altertum* (ed. S. Rebenich and J. Wienand; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017), 341–361, here 344–345.

<sup>45</sup> Eckhardt, “Memories,” 261 rightly points out this ambivalence.



imperial violence. Esther and Mordechai can successfully negotiate with the king, and in writing edicts, conducting warfare, and instituting a commemorative festival, they exert aspects of imperial power themselves. Several aspects of this depiction are similar to the narrative perception of imperial power in 1 Maccabees. This narrative goes to great lengths to demonstrate the legitimacy of Hasmonean leadership. The ability of the Maccabees to interact with the imperial court and to exert imperial agency are important features of the narrative strategy of the book to lend credence to the Hasmonean dynasty. The use of collective violence as a reaction to threats against the Judean people is undoubtedly a central theme of Hasmonean ideology. However, this should not support an anti-imperial reading of the book, which overlooks the prospect of the Judean leaders' integration within the imperial power structure.<sup>46</sup> In reaching this conclusion, we can discount one core argument that has been made against the idea that the book of Esther is influenced by Hasmonean ideology; namely, that the focus in Esther on fruitful Judean interactions with the court would contradict Hasmonean ideology.<sup>47</sup> Far from creating a point of conflict with this ideology, it is consistent with a crucial part of its articulation in 1 Maccabees, a core Hasmonean work. In this regard, the books of Esther and 1 Maccabees reflect a very similar literary strategy.

These observations also bear implications for how we portray the purpose of the book of Esther. While previous scholarship has often interpreted the book as a moral or religious model or "lifestyle" for diaspora Judeans,<sup>48</sup> the strong focus on Judean interactions with the imperial court in Esther 8–10 suggests that the scroll also reflects a Judean scribal discourse on elite leader-

46 Cf. J. Ma, "Seleukids and Speech-Acts: Performative Utterances, Legitimacy and Negotiation in the World of the Maccabees," *Scripta Classica Israelica* 19 (2000): 71–112. In Ma's interpretation, the documents reflected in 1 Maccabees show "the ways in which the ruled can achieve agency in the face of domination" (108). See also the proposal of S. Weitzman, *Surviving Sacrilege: Cultural Persistence in Jewish Antiquity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 34–54.

47 Cf., e.g., F.W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (WBC 9; Dallas: Word Books, 1996), 296, 481; D.J.A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (NCB; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 272; Ego, *Ester*, 62–69; M. V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 140; Levenson, *Esther*, 113. For example, Aaron Koller argues that "The idea of peaceably integrating into the imperial network, even at the expense of religious fidelity, would not have found any audience under the Hasmoneans." A. J. Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 134.

48 Cf. W.L. Humphreys, "A Life-Style for the Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel," *JBL* 92 (1973): 211–223; Trehuedic, "Mémoire," 151–152; Eckhardt, "Memories," 261.

ship.<sup>49</sup> As we know that Hasmonean literati reworked older traditions and used biblical models to justify Hasmonean rule, an existing tradition about Judean individuals gaining influence at the Persian court could have served as the basis on which these scribes reflected on the interplay of local elites and imperial rulers in their contemporary situation. It can thus be argued that core elements of the Judean response to imperial dominance as described in the book of 1 Maccabees received a “traditional” precedent with the book of Esther. Both the encounters with imperial representatives as well as the call for collective military actions were crucial aspects of the “lifestyle” of the Hasmonean leaders.

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<sup>49</sup> On the issue of ancient Near Eastern local elites and their cooperation with imperial powers, see A. Fitzpatrick-McKinley, *Empire, Power, and Indigenous Elites: A Case Study of the Nehemiah Memoir* (JSJSup 169; Leiden: Brill, 2015), 1–38; J. M. Silverman, *Persian Royal-Judaean Elite Engagements in the Early Teispid and Achaemenid Empire: The King’s Acolytes* (LHBOTS 690; London: T&T Clark, 2020).

