

**APPROACHING A CHRISTIAN RE-READING OF *ESTHER* AFTER ESTHER
RABBAH:**

AN EXPERIMENT IN COMPARATIVE THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exercise in comparative theology inspired by Brueggemann's call for Jewish-Christian 'co-reading' of the Old Testament/*Tanakh*. It re-reads the Book of *Esther* from a Christian perspective after interreligious engagement with the rabbinic midrash, *Esther Rabbah*. Using an approach exemplified by Clooney and Moyaert, this thesis engages the midrash through a hermeneutic reader-text conversation where the text 'speaks' not only through its academic critical interrogation but also through the reader's empathy and vulnerability.

I suggest that *Esther Rabbah* interprets *Esther* through two key themes: exile and redemption which are utilised to bring the biblical text into the rabbis' experience of life in extended exile, awaiting redemption. Intrinsic to this interpretation are two concepts: election and God. That is, even while living in protracted exile, the Jewish covenantal relationship with God provides them with the necessary hope that God will remain with them until the World to Come when the divine presence will be fully revealed. In the meantime, God is to be sought in the Scriptures, with the great divine acts, primarily the Exodus, remembered, so that, by faithful observance, the final redemption may be ushered in.

This study uses *Esther Rabbah* to re-read *Esther* in the light of recent discussion of what Beach has called 'the Church in exile'. I suggest that, after Christendom, contemporary Christians who are in a state of spiritual 'exile', would do well to follow the example of the rabbis in searching for the presence of God even in times when humanity seems loveless and the divine seems hidden. *Esther Rabbah* helps the Christian reader to remember God's acts in Scripture and live in accordance with the divine commandment of love of God and neighbour, in anticipation of the future redemption when people may be truly restored to the eternal presence of God.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of the University of Gloucestershire and is original except where indicated by specific reference in the text. No part of the thesis has been submitted as part of any other academic award. The thesis has not been presented to any other education institution in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Any views expressed in the thesis are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University.

Signed

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‘It pleases God a great deal if the soul never ceases to search...’
(Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*)

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INTRODUCTION

As a Protestant Christian, until recently I had little experience or interest in Judaism beyond those issues which pertained to the biblical 'Israel' or 'the Jews'.¹ Now engaged in this study which involves the close reading of an ancient rabbinic midrash, such a position of ignorance from a Christian appears unfortunate, if not inexcusable. Unfortunate, because I now believe there is much to be gained from interreligious engagement, there being expressions of truth across different religious traditions from which others can learn. Inexcusable, due to the close relationship between Christian and Jewish traditions: Both have their origins in the Hebrew Scriptures, what Christians call the Old Testament and the Jewish community, *Tanakh*. The traditions have developed alongside one another since the early centuries CE. And both claim to worship the same God.²

Early in 2016 I was struck by a passage in Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament* proposing '[Christian] attendance to the Jewish community as co-reader, co-hearer and co-practitioner' of the Old Testament/*Tanakh* (1997, p. 745), taking into account the continued nourishment and summoning of rabbinic, Talmudic teaching for contemporary Judaism (Ibid, p. 734). I can only describe this as an instance of Gadamer's notion of being addressed by the topic (2004, p. 298). The 'address of the topic' is an important part of hermeneutic understanding. The idea is discussed by Moules *et al.* in this way: 'when topics address us... they call on us to remember why it is that certain things matter, and they ask us to bring these things

¹ The problematic issue of terminology is discussed below, pp. xiii-xv.

² See for example the first point of 'A Jewish Statement on Christians and Christianity' in Frymer-Kensky *et al.* 2000b, pp. xv-xvi.

alive in the here and now' (2015, p. 77). Thus, on reading the passage in Brueggemann's *Theology* I was called upon and challenged to re-examine my entire religious perspective. That experience has led me to the point of attempting this project utilising a model of comparative theology to engage with a Jewish text.

The current study is thus, subtitled 'an experiment in comparative theology'. This interreligious approach to theology 'rereads one's home theological tradition... after a serious engagement in the reading of another tradition' (Clooney, 1993, p. 3). Certain points are clear from this short citation: first, the comparative study starts from a position of affiliation to one religious tradition by the theologian. Second, the validity of the other tradition is implied by the theologian wishing to engage with it. And third, numerous references to reading in the citation suggest that comparative theology often deals with religious texts. These three points warrant a little further discussion.

I write as a Protestant Christian and this is a work of Christian comparative theology. Nevertheless, I do not subscribe to the notion that Christianity is more valid than other religious traditions (e.g. *exclusivist* or *inclusivist* perspectives) or that the individuality of Christianity can be reduced into one of many partial articulations of one ultimate reality (*pluralism*). Heim's (1995) application of Rescher's (1978) *Oriental Pluralism* articulates most clearly my religious perspective.

Oriental Pluralism is a philosophical position which acknowledges the validity of religious tradition in its various distinct forms of expression. That is, one can be firmly rooted in their own tradition whilst appreciating the validity and expression of truth in another.

Seeking to work with comparative theology demonstrates that I find much legitimacy in other religious traditions from which I, and perhaps Protestant Christianity, can learn. As is clear from the Clooney citation above, comparative theology is a process of developing understanding of an aspect of another tradition with the intent of rereading the home tradition based upon the fresh insights raised throughout the process. The assumption is that spending time, away from home, in the presence of an 'Other' may cause the theologian's home tradition to itself become 'an object of mystery and inquiry' (Willis, 2018, p. 126). Each time the theologian returns 'home' however, they will be in the process of being changed, and the relationship with the home tradition develops and expands through interreligious engagement.

In this study I engage with an ancient Jewish text from the rabbinic period. Christian engagement with Jewish texts in comparative theology is rare, and may be regarded as somewhat controversial (Joslyn-Siemiatkoski, 2010). A history of troubled interactions between Christian and Jewish communities has resulted in what Moyaert describes as a 'fragile hermeneutical and theological space' for interreligious encounter (2018, p. 165). Certainly, she is correct to note the concern among theologians over '[entering] into a minefield where misunderstanding and misrecognition are difficult to avoid, even with the best intentions' (Ibid, p. 167). In approaching my own study, I have indeed felt such anxiety over the potential for misunderstandings.

In the post-Holocaust age when Christian-Jewish relationships have been forcibly reconsidered, it seems imperative to boldly step into conversation despite the

potential for misunderstanding. I hope to make clear from the very start that the intention of this comparative theological study is not to dominate a Jewish text, or abuse it. Rather, recognising the differences between Christian and Jewish forms of religious expression, and appreciating the validity of both as articulations of truth, I seek to learn about rabbinic forms of biblical interpretation, the impact of rabbinic thought on later Jewish traditions, and finally reflect upon what insights might be gained for my own tradition. While my reading of a text from another tradition will be incomplete and unavoidably influenced by my own perspectives, my desire is to approach the 'Other' text with humility (Cornille, 2014) and vulnerability (Moyaert, 2012) according to the model of comparative theology that I will go on to describe in Chapter One.

The text that I am to engage with is the rabbinic midrash *Esther Rabbah*. This is a document consisting of material stretching over some five hundred years before its final compilation around the twelfth century CE. The choice of a rabbinic text can be traced back to my experience of being addressed by the topic when reading Brueggemann. In the passage cited above, Brueggemann refers to the continued relevance of rabbinic, Talmudic teaching (1997, p. 734). Further investigation revealed the import of rabbinic tradition, alongside the Bible, in contemporary Jewish religious experience (e.g. Levenson, 1993, p. 1; Neusner, 2000b, p. 19; Ochs, 2007, p. 113). Given this continued significance of the rabbinic tradition, albeit 'read variously' (Neusner, 2000b, p. 19), it seemed to me that focussing on a rabbinic midrash would be appropriate for this study.

Esther Rabbah interprets the biblical text *Esther*.³ This is a text shared in both Protestant Christian and Jewish Bibles in the Old Testament/*Tanakh*. The annual celebration of the Purim festival (the origins of which are central to the text) may have kept *Esther* popular in Jewish communities, while the book is often neglected in Christian circles. Bush (1998, p. 39) has correctly stated that in general the book has received a very 'cold embrace' from the Christian Church throughout its history. Although, in recent years much positive scholarly attention has been paid to *Esther*, it remains the case that most Church-going Christians will rarely, if ever hear a sermon or reading from the text (e.g. Bechtel, 2002, p. 17; Beckett, 2002, p. 2; Murphy, 2002, p. 122). It is for this reason that I am fascinated by *Esther* and have a desire to further understand its place in Christian thought. Below, I present a summary of how I will carry out this research which intends to closely engage with rabbinic interpretation of *Esther* in Esther Rabbah in search of fresh ways to understand the book.

In Chapter One I attempt to construct a theory of comparative theology upon which the project itself can be built. This is no easy task as the discipline is fairly new, and its early practitioners in the 1990s were concerned primarily with the task of *doing* comparative theology rather than focussing on *how* it may be done (e.g. Clooney, 2010, p. 196). In recent years however, comparative theologians have set about the task of theorising, and important connections have been made with the hermeneutics theory of Gadamer and Ricoeur to establish more fully the notion of a process of understanding in comparative theology. This understanding process takes place

³ In this study I will use italics when referring to the book of *Esther* in order to differentiate between the title of the book and the character Esther.

through a reader-text conversation in which the text from another religious tradition is allowed to speak for itself, bringing about deepening understanding in the reader.

Although they wish to understand another tradition's text with the ultimate purpose of bringing learned insights back to their home tradition, to 're-read' it in a way informed by interreligious engagement, the theologian must remain humble and vulnerable to the 'Other', and not seek to dominate it, so that the text retains its otherness and can still be recognisable to members of its tradition.

Chapter Two surveys the relevant literature to position this study in context. Here I summarise the history of Jewish and Christian interactions over the Bible and its interpretation, showing that as the two traditions developed, opportunities have consistently arisen for interaction. It will also be clear that Christians have at times overlooked Jewish post-biblical traditions as possible sources for understanding biblical texts, and have made assumptions about contemporary Jewish religious expression based solely upon biblical examples. I consider some recent examples of comparative efforts between rabbinic midrash and Christian texts, and then turn to look in some detail at issues pertaining to the biblical text *Esther*. In conclusion I briefly offer my own reading of *Esther* before embarking on the comparative theology process.

Chapter Three is the central chapter of this study. Here I examine Esther Rabbah and attempt to appreciate it within its rabbinic context. In this chapter I outline the structure of the document: an introductory *petiḥta* section, followed by ten chapters covering most of *Esther*. Then I draw out key themes and concepts from the midrash upon which I intend to base my Christian re-reading of *Esther*. The themes, exile and

redemption, are crucial to the interpretation of *Esther* offered by the rabbis as a means of bringing the text into their contemporary situation. Vital concepts, election and God, are also utilised throughout the document.

Finally, Chapter Four consists of the re-reading of *Esther* informed by engagement with Esther Rabbah. The re-reading is based around the two key interpretive themes drawn from the midrash, exile and redemption. First preparing the way by discussing some contemporary issues relating to canonical interpretation, election and God, I then go on to discuss *Esther* in the context of 'the Church in exile', that is, recent Christian experience of life in post-Christendom 'exile'. Following Esther Rabbah, I find the institution of Purim to be the central event of *Esther*, and I find there, in the establishment of the festival, connections with other biblical themes, instruction for contemporary spiritual exiles, and a looking ahead to the future redemption.

Concluding this introductory section then, a brief word about terminology is necessary.

The book *Esther* is one of the few occasions in the Old Testament when the people of Israel are termed as 'the Jews'. In 2.5 Mordecai is introduced as *ha-yehudi*, 'the Jew', in connection with the plural *ha-yehudim* (the Jews) used to refer to the people in general throughout the text (e.g. 4.13, 8.17). Oz and Oz-Salzberger (2012, p. 163) note that as they were in exile across Persia, and thus no longer Israelites geographically, a new name was necessary. In this new foreign context, and with a

new name, continuity is attempted between ‘the Jews’ and the Israelites through links with other biblical events, e.g. reference to the exile and King Jeconiah in *Esther* 2.6. In a similar manner of making biblical connections, the subject of this study, *Esther Rabbah*, always refers to ‘the Jews’ as Israel (e.g. ER1.11, 3.5, 5.3, 6.1, 7.13).

In this study, when referring to *Esther*, it seems appropriate to use the term ‘the Jews’, or ‘Israel/Israelites’ in reference to wider biblical texts. When directly discussing portions of *Esther Rabbah* I will endeavour to use ‘Israel/Israelites’ as preferred by the rabbis. Occasionally however it is necessary to refer to issues relating to Jewish experience in a general sense. The most natural term here is Judaism which, though widespread, has been noted as problematic due to the complex interplay between religious, national and ethnic factors affecting the Jewish people (Segal, 2008, p. xii). That is, for instance, while Judaism denotes the Jewish religion, not all Jews practice Judaism (Neusner, 2000b, p. 5).

As this study is concerned with religious texts and interpretation, it is important to be clear about my use of the term Judaism as referring to Jewish religion, not as a catch-all term for all things Jewish. In *Jews and Words* Oz and Oz-Salzberger (2012, pp. 167-168) stress this point eloquently: ‘the stories we are telling here are not about “Judaism” but about Israelites and Jews, a march of individuals, deeply interconnected by texts, striving with God and with each other, kaleidoscopic’. Thus, when thinking about Jewish religion specifically, perhaps a better term, as proposed by Neusner (2000b, p. 7), is *Judaisms*. This acknowledges the various expressions of religious Jewish experience, for instance ‘rabbinic Judaism’, by which, in this

study, I mean the forms of religious expression articulated by the rabbis in roughly the first ten centuries CE through Mishnah, Talmud and the various midrashim.

Unless otherwise noted, all Scriptural references are taken from *New International Version* (1984) London: Hodder & Stoughton.

Unless otherwise noted, all references from Midrash Esther Rabbah are taken from Elan, Y. *et al.* (2013) *Kleinman Edition Midrash Rabbah: The Five Megillos – Esther*. Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications.

CHAPTER ONE

Approaching a Theory of Comparative Theology

This study involves analysis of a religious text from a different tradition to my own. I plan to work according to a model of comparative theology as such an approach encourages deep engagement with aspects of another tradition with the overall purpose of reinterpreting his/her home tradition in light of the new understanding gained.

In what follows I will outline a theory of comparative theology. I will then explain how these concepts will assist in engaging analytically with my two research questions. Firstly, how might a comparative theology approach to reading Midrash Esther Rabbah help to develop my understanding as a Christian reader of the biblical text *Esther*? And secondly, what implications might such understanding have for *Esther's* contribution to Old Testament theology?

1.1 New Comparative Theology

Comparative theology is concerned with interpretation of religion. In my understanding its concepts can be viewed as emerging out of an interpretivist position in which religion is seen as a human expression of divinity, truth and meaning. As with any human societal constructs, religion is formed both historically and culturally, and as such, develops in hugely varying ways. Such vast differences in expression of religion may suggest that finding connections between religious groups is impossible. In contrast however, perhaps finding such connections is possible *precisely when* religion is understood as humanly constructed expression of

truth and meaning. Exploring another religious tradition can be thought of in a similar way to approaching another culture. It will be foreign – an ‘Other’ - but because of the human origin behind its forms and structures of expression, it will be at least, approachable.

Towards the end of the twentieth century Francis X. Clooney (1993), James L. Fredericks (1999) and a small number of others began looking at interreligious theology in a fresh way. The movement is sometimes known as new comparative theology, in order that it should be distanced from nineteenth century comparative religion/theology.⁴ This was generally, non-confessional study of religion purporting to be ‘scientific’ in line with other Enlightenment thought of the time. Here, an apologetic theological approach was set aside and religions could be considered in terms of their merits as ‘world’ or ‘national’ religions. However, as Nicholson (2010, p. 51) observes, often it was Christianity alone that proved to be a ‘world religion’: ‘the one religion which, by virtue of its inherent qualities, [met] the religious needs of all humanity’.

By contrast, new comparative theology (from here just, comparative theology) is an interreligious approach which ‘rereads one’s home theological tradition... after a serious engagement in the reading of another tradition’ (Clooney, 1993, p. 3). The practice of close co-reading of the texts, symbols, or doctrines of two religions is intended to provide a new context for understanding one’s home tradition – and in the process, further understand the other also. An important assumption for working

⁴ The following discussion is based upon Nicholson (2010), pp. 49-51.

comparatively is that the study of another tradition can ‘trigger renewed interest in... [aspects of] one’s own tradition’ (Cornille, 2014, p. 12). Willis (2018, p. 126) suggests this is because ‘in the process of exploring another tradition... the theologian’s own tradition is made strange, renewed as an object of mystery and inquiry’ which produces ‘new insight and curiosity’. It is clear then, from these references to ‘one’s own/home tradition’, that comparative theology is a confessional way of working – that is, the epistemological position of the comparative theologian will arise from their own religious identity.

As a confessional approach to interreligious *understanding*, comparative theology should also be viewed as a hermeneutic enterprise from which theory can be developed. Clooney and Fredericks as early comparative theologians, initially shied away from theorising, and rather, desired to get on with the act of interreligious reading. Clooney (2010, p. 196) states for example that, ‘comparative theology has to be *done*... questions about what [it] is or what its presuppositions are, are best taken up *after* comparative theological practice’. In recent years however, comparative theologians have sought to articulate the theoretical positions of comparative work. For instance, in order to develop the ‘philosophical rationale’ of comparative theology, Paul Hedges (2016, pp. 9-16) sets out hermeneutic principles specifically from the work of Hans Georg Gadamer. As a relatively new field in theology, there is no long established theoretical framework for comparative theology. In what follows I will attempt to piece together a theory of comparative theology as explored in the recent literature.

1.2 Approaching a Theory of Comparative Theology

All understanding is contextual. Each person is historically positioned by factors such as culture and language. Every undertaking will be met through a combination of expectations and perspectives built up from this historical-cultural positioning. This is certainly the case when a person holding one set of religious perspectives engages with a different religious tradition. Such engagement will initially at least, be affected by an individual's deeply held beliefs regarding the validity of another religion, and knowledge of the (possibly troubled) history of interactions between the two traditions. For understanding to take place, there has to be a degree of openness to the possibility of these perspectives readjusting. Understanding is thus to be described as a process.

As already stated comparative theology seeks to study and understand a separate religion as part of a process towards re-interpreting the theologian's own religious tradition. As such, it is often framed as a 'conversation' between a reader from one tradition and a religious text from another (Clooney, 1993, p. 170-1; Moyaert, 2012, p. 1154). The concept of a reader-text conversation is explored within hermeneutics theory. Gadamer (2004, pp. 389, 398-399) for instance writes of a 'hermeneutical conversation' where a text is made to speak through its interpreter finding the right language with which to connect it with one's present situation.

Before connecting conversation with understanding texts, Gadamer (2004, p. 387) points to such 'conversation' as a 'process of coming to an understanding' where 'each person opens himself to the other [and] truly accepts [the other's] point of view as valid'. He later comments on the 'abstract alienness of all texts' (2004, p. 391),

the 'signs [of which] need to be transformed back into speech and meaning' (2004, p. 394). Thus, the notion of 'conversation' involving an 'Other' which must be somehow accepted is linked to the idea of the reader/interpreter in 'conversation' with a text. In order to accept the text's point of view as it were, the reader must be open to the 'Otherness' of the text.

Clearly this relates to the earlier point regarding the perspectives that an individual brings to any situation. Both participants in a conversation speak out of tradition and history – if one partner is a text, such history will be that of the author – but Thiselton (2009, p. 222) suggests that conversation 'bridges a gulf' between this cultured history and the present situation, 'allow[ing] fresh points to arise'. If this is the case it surely requires a commitment to an ideal of 'conversation' as a transformative procedure. This ideal in comparative conversation between reader and text is described as an 'imaginative process... [requiring] a genuine openness to unforeseen possibilities' (Clooney, 1993, p. 171).

This accepts, with Thiselton above, that the outcome of any conversation is unknown and supposes that, in a text-reader situation, conversation can only proceed if the reader listens to what the text – the 'Other' - has to say and enables it to speak. Further, this view suggests that, in being open to 'unforeseen possibilities', the reader has put him/her-self allowed themselves the opportunity of being changed. In other words, one's initial perspectives and historical-cultural positioning need not hinder the possibility of arriving at fresh understanding. Rather, through the process of 'conversation' certain initially held ideas might just reveal themselves as needing reshaping, others as expanding.

With this in mind it is crucial to consider issues of *religious perspective*. Comparative theologians work from a commitment to their own religious tradition and it is these ideas associated with that perspective which may indeed be reshaped through the process of the comparative reader-text ‘conversation’. As comparative theology has been primarily, although not exclusively, attempted within the Christian tradition, I will concentrate on that here. Within Christian theology there are three recognised categories, one of which most Christians could fit themselves into: *exclusivist* – only my religious tradition can legitimately make truth claims, *inclusivist* – all religious traditions can make truth claims but others to a lesser degree than my own, or *pluralist* – all religions can make valid claims to truth, they are differing and partial expressions of one ultimate divine reality.

In practice it would seem unlikely that an individual holding a religious *exclusivist* position would pursue a comparative theology study. The foundations of comparative theology suppose that another religion has a distinct value which, through exploration, may bring about some level of reinterpretation of one’s home tradition. *Exclusivism* would not appear to allow that. It may be the case then after all, that some perspectives are indeed limiting to fresh understanding and seeking to ‘close off dialogue’ (Moules *et al.* 2015, p. 43).

With this last point in mind Drew (2012, p. 1045) asks whether even an *inclusivist* perspective such as that of Comparative Theology’s founding-father Francis Clooney, is fertile ground for earnest comparative theological work. An *inclusivist* position places the value and truth claims of a home tradition – in Clooney’s case

Catholic Christianity – above that of other religions. Others have value and may partially reveal truths about the divine-human relationship, yet it remains for the *inclusivist*, that the home tradition ‘most fully provides an understanding of the Transcendent’ (Runzo, 2001, p. 38). Drew’s question regarding Clooney’s position, then, is valid, and she notes how a worldview entailing superiority of one religion may be ‘incapable of *fully* affirming [another’s] truth and efficacy’ (Drew, 2012, p. 1045 [my italics]).

What about *pluralism* then? Here all religions are treated as equally valid. However, this equality stems from a particular notion expressed by well-known pluralist John Hick (1983, pp. 84-85, cited in McGrath, 2007, p. 461 [my italics]): ‘the concept of deity is concretized as a *range of divine personae*’. In other words, regardless of what a religious group believes about itself and its deity, it is ‘really talking about the same transcendent Absolute’ (Fredericks, 1999, p. 109). Such a position appears to diminish the distinctive validity of each religious tradition in a way that is unacceptable to comparative theology. Indeed, it is the notion that there is value *in the distinctiveness* of this ‘Other’ perspective that prompts the comparative theological reader-text conversation.

The nature of comparative theology as I have attempted to portray it so far seems to warrant a further religious perspective enabling one to be committed to his/her own tradition whilst at the same time acknowledging the validity and truths of another without assimilation or diminishing individuality. The legitimacy of the other tradition in its own right, seems to me to be implied by embarking on the comparative process – why else would there be anything to be learnt from it? Such a position may appear

impossible, although Rescher (1978, p. 229-231) has explored the philosophical possibilities of holding incompatible ideas simultaneously which he refers to as *Oriental Pluralism*. This has been applied to religion by Heim (1995) who observes that while 'only one position is rationally appropriate from a given perspective... we must recognise that there is a diversity of perspectives... [which] allows us to say that contradictory statements can both be true at the same time, of different persons with different perspectives' (Ibid, p. 134).

This places each religious tradition as *one among many* and encourages an appreciation of the doctrines/beliefs which are indeed real in the perspective of those adhering to a particular religion. Such appreciation is crucial, I think, as it concerns the search for truth. For Heim, the philosophy of Rescher seeks to develop 'the fullest understanding of the truth possible' (1995, p. 139). He goes on to explain how, 'differing visions of truth are the primary allies in this process and communication with and about them its primary medium' (Ibid). This, in my view, articulates well the nature of the reader-text conversation in comparative theology which I have attempted to describe. As Clooney (1993, p. 5) puts it, comparative theology involves a 'vulnerability to truth as one might find it and be affected by it in the materials studied, and loyalty to truth as one has already found it'. Through the reader-text conversation, the comparative theologian attempts to balance the tension between, and communicate with, differing visions of truth, essentially attempting to develop 'the fullest understanding of truth'.

In all of this it should be recalled that comparative theology is a confessional approach to theology. Cornille (2014) has pointed out that there can be no general

comparative theology but always e.g. 'Buddhist' or 'Christian' comparative theology because the process always starts from the perspective of a particular 'home' tradition (2014, p. 11). From this starting point, it is possible to look outward: 'it is only by venturing into a world of religious difference that one may hope to gain new insight and understanding' (Ibid, p. 14). Judging there to be expressions of truth in another tradition which will be helpful for deepening understanding of one's home religious tradition is fundamental to the comparative reader-text conversation as described. Here, listening to what the 'Other' religious text says, engaging in the process of developing understanding, the appropriate result, for Fredericks (2010, p. xv), is an on-going 'tension established by fidelity to a home tradition and vulnerability to the other'.

Moyaert (2012) has recently examined this 'vulnerability to the other', noting its import for comparative theology: 'the project aims at a cultivation of vulnerability as the crux of doing theology' (2012, p. 1152). Doing theology vulnerably, she says, involves a certain reticence, a holding back from reaching conclusions, letting the 'Other' 'become a subject with a proper voice' (Ibid, p. 1156). This is reminiscent of Gadamer's hermeneutical conversation discussed above as essential for fruitful comparative theological work. Indeed, Moyaert points to ways in which the textual 'Other' 'resists, interrupts and questions', revealing and challenging our 'natural inclination to control and domination' (Ibid, p. 1155). Such vulnerability is in fact crucial to the comparative process *because* the intention is not domination of the other tradition, integration of both traditions, but re-reading of the home tradition.

It may be said then, that the 'Other' must remain other in order for it to be instructive. For Cornille (2014) a certain humility is necessary to remember the original meaning of the other text/tradition which the comparative theologian, studying it from the outside, can never fully understand. The 'vulnerability to the other' sought in the comparative approach is found in this humility to let another tradition *be* and learn from it. Again Cornille (2014) is worth citing at length:

What characterises comparative theology is an attempt to recognise or pay homage to the source of this [interreligious] borrowing and remain mindful of the difference between the original meaning of particular texts and teachings and their meaning and importance for one's own tradition. (Cornille, 2014, p. 14).

So, to conclude this section, I can summarise that, in pursuit of the 'fullest understanding of truth', the comparative theologian seeks to appreciate an aspect of another distinct tradition and allow its truth to highlight points of interest and mystery within the theologian's home tradition which, when explored through a reader-text conversation, can lead to developed understanding.

1.3 The role of Comparative Theology in the analysis of my research questions.

I have two research questions: How might a comparative theology approach to reading Midrash Esther Rabbah help to develop my understanding as a Christian reader of the biblical text *Esther*? And, what implications might such understanding have for Old Testament Theology?

I will engage with Esther Rabbah by means of a comparative reader-text conversation, as described above, thereby entering a process with a necessarily

unknown outcome. It is clear, to me at least, that the details of the comparison cannot be set out until the 'Other' text has been studied. My starting assumption is that, as the midrash is a work of exegesis of the biblical *Esther*, certain interpretive themes will be able to be drawn out of studying the document and then looked at comparatively alongside similar ideas within contemporary Christian theology. As discussed above, through such a conversational process, the reader must strive to allow the text to speak, acknowledging that it has something to say (Thiselton, 2009, p. 221). In this way I intend to retain a certain 'vulnerability to the other', that is, not imposing upon the text my assumptions but letting it enlighten and challenge my perspectives.

I wonder how this might be achieved. I could read this unusual text and have only questions. Questions may be seen as crucial for widening understanding (see e.g. Gadamer, 2004, p. 368). However, it seems to me that one's reading the text *alone* may not provide productive solutions. This is due to the text itself, certainly in the case of an ancient text, being unable to provide an adequate portal into the world in which it was created. It seems clear that while the text may speak to the reader, what it says may not prompt further understanding without some wider reading to illuminate 'issues surrounding original meaning and context' (Hedges, 2016, p. 12).

This search for original meaning and context is common to all critical interpretation of texts, referred to by Tate (2013, p. 73) as reading *behind the text*, and a necessary stage in the process of understanding. Here, the hermeneutics theory of Paul Ricoeur can complement that of Gadamer already introduced. Acknowledging with Gadamer, the existence of pre-judgements in the initial stage of reading, Ricoeur

then seeks to articulate the development of understanding with a stage of 'explanation'. This may come in the form of utilising certain 'relevant explanatory methods' (Tracy, 2010, p. 11) to discover contextual and critical issues vital for understanding the parts making up the whole text. Thus, the use of critical methods relating to the form, structure and historical context can be necessary tools moving the hermeneutic process forwards.

Such 'explanation' helps to widen understanding by asking relevant questions of the text. In the case of *Esther Rabbah*, an initial look through the pages reveals it to be completely foreign to me in terms of its format of presentation and its content.

However, once I can begin to recognise the different forms of exegesis – in this instance, meaning drawn out of the biblical text of *Esther* by the rabbinic authors, I can start to ask questions. For example, 'Why has this technique been used here?' 'In what historical context did the authors make this claim?' Such critical questions lead out of the text and into its wider world, enabling investigation of the historical situation the authors may have been responding to.

A brief but informative example can be offered in terms of a motif known as the 'Four Empires'. Throughout *Esther Rabbah* (e.g. ER *petiḥta* 2, 4 and 5) there are references in various forms to Babylon-Persia-Greece-Rome (also see Daniel 8.20-22). At first this may appear as a simple manner of summarising history. On closer examination however, it becomes clear that such references form a key interpretive motif utilised in rabbinic literature to connect biblical experience with that of the rabbis' contemporaries, but also as a means of articulating Jewish experience of continued exile and subjugation from biblical times when Israel were exiled by

Nebuchadnezzar (2 Kings 24.10-16) to their current existence under the Christian Roman Empire (see e.g. Milikowsky, 1997, p. 295). The 'Four Empires' motif is one of the key ways in which *Esther* is interpreted as an exilic text in which the experiences of the narrative's characters under the Persian Empire have significant relevance for the rabbis' contemporary age.

I think that it is clear from this brief example how 'explanation' is important for developing understanding of historical-contextual issues in the 'Other' text. However, it is not sufficient to remain in the world of original meaning and context, and such understanding having been gained, must then be carried forward from *behind* the text to *in front of it*. I must now demand of myself how such an insight might affect my understanding in my context of comparative conversation. It may be that initially it means little to me. In that case I would record those feelings and move back to the text seeking to learn more. This back and forth motion within the comparative conversation has been described by Knitter (2009, p. xiii) as 'passing over' to the 'Other' religion and 'passing back' to one's own tradition. This is also reminiscent of the hermeneutic circle, or spiral (Thiselton, 2009, p. 14), where understanding is gained by a circular process of review and correction of earlier pre-understanding.

The idea here is that one's pre-judgements and 'explanatory' reading serve to bring about fresh understanding where, in Gadamer's terms the reader discovers the right language with which to connect the 'Other' text with one's present situation (2004, pp. 389, 398-399). What then, I may need to ask, is the significance (in my context) of Esther Rabbah's interpreting *Esther* as a work speaking of continued Jewish exile and subjugation over many centuries? Further 'explanatory' reading may be required

to further understand the various Jewish perceptions of exile in later times such as the Medieval and Modern periods. Can I in fact risk re-reading *Esther* from my twenty-first century Christian perspective in the light of Esther Rabbah knowing that much of its interpretive perspective stems from exile and subjugation at the hands of the Church?⁵

This last point is of particular significance in relation to my second research question, concerned with Old Testament Theology. Largely a Christian discipline with its roots in the historical-critical dominated era of the eighteenth to early-twentieth centuries, Old Testament Theology too often disregarded the contributions of post-biblical Judaism (rather than 'Judaism', acknowledging that numerous forms of Jewish religious expression have existed, see further discussion in the Introduction, pp. xiii-xv). While recent efforts by, for instance, Brueggemann (1997) and Moberly (2013) address these issues directly, I believe there is more to suggest in terms of actual 'vulnerable' engagement with Jewish post-biblical contributions as a source of insight for Old Testament Theology.

1.4 Concluding Comments: Why Comparative Theology?

Comparative theology provides an opportunity to work interreligiously in way that is attentive to the process of understanding. Its theoretical concepts of 'conversation' and 'vulnerability to the other' enable the theologian to responsibly converse with the texts of another religion and then reinterpret his/her home religious tradition in the

⁵ This seems apparent from the recurrent use of the 'Four Empires' motif where Rome (often identified as Edom/Esau) represents the most recent stage of Jewish exilic existence. As Rome became the dominant Christian state, it is not surprising to learn that Edom/Esau was also used directly to refer to Christendom (Horowitz, 2006, p. 125). Thus, when ER interprets *Esther* in terms of contemporary experience of exile, it is reflecting on life within Christendom.

light of the new understanding gained. The hermeneutic process described relates not simply to the 'Other' engaged with, but also to one's own tradition. In this instance, the process of examining Esther Rabbah and engaging with the theological considerations of the rabbis informing their interpretation of *Esther* will, in response, force me to examine my own Christian understanding of certain issues which may be highlighted (– such as exile).⁶ Without this personal re-examination, the comparative nature of the study, and the sought after fresh understanding is lost.

⁶ Highlighted above, pp. 12-13. This theme, drawn out of ER (see, pp. 65-68), will also form a significant part of the 're-reading' of Esther, see Chapter Four.

CHAPTER TWO

Engaging with Jewish and Christian Interactions Over Biblical Interpretation

In this chapter I will conduct a survey of the relevant literature to gain an understanding of the issues surrounding *Esther* and rabbinic midrash Esther Rabbah before attempting the comparative study in the following chapters. However, before turning to *Esther*, it is important to summarise a general history of Christian-Jewish interaction over biblical interpretation.

2.1 Christian-Jewish Relations

From the first centuries CE Christian and Jewish religious traditions have developed alongside one another, both basing their origins on the experience of Israel as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. Because of these shared origins there has been much ground for debate and discussion, often on the subject of the interpretation of Scripture. What the Jewish tradition calls *Tanakh* (an acronym of *Torah*, *Nevi'im*, and *Kethuvim* that is, Law, Prophets, Writings), Christianity knows as the Old Testament. And while Christians also have the New Testament through which the Old is somehow to be understood, the early rabbinic Jewish community advanced the Oral Torah, compiled around 200CE as the Mishnah, with subsequent explanations arising between the third and sixth centuries in the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds (Elman, 2014, p. 1862).

In the first centuries of the Christian church much attention was given to establishing the 'true' meaning of these shared Scriptures (Old Testament/*Tanakh*). Real

interactions between Jewish and Christian interpreters may have taken place alongside concocted literary situations. For example:

Second century work *Dialogue with Trypho* by Justin Martyr is framed as a two day-long dialogue with a Jewish philosopher intended to prove Christian claims about Jesus Christ as the Messiah promised in the Old Testament. Cohick (2010) suggests that this 'dialogue' framework was most probably based on real, if sporadic, interactions over a long period of time as a good level of knowledge and understanding is shown of Jewish exegesis and practice within the document (Ibid, p. 74).

Unusually for Christians of the time, third century theologian Origen read Hebrew and further, may have made use of Jewish interpretation in his biblical commentaries (Norris, 2002, p. 12). Noting the differences between the *Septuagint* (Greek translation of the Old Testament) used by Christians and the Hebrew Scriptures used by Jews, he apparently spent time in conversation with Jews for the purposes of ensuring that both communities could debate on the same version of a biblical text (Chadwick, 1993, pp. 101-102).

Abulafia (2013) has shown how in the Medieval period, interpretive ideas were sometimes shared between Christian and Jewish theologians, with some Christians becoming more aware, and more interested in Jewish exegesis. Nicholas of Lyra's whole Bible commentary *Postilla Literalis Super Totam Bibliam* (fourteenth century) for instance makes significant use of Rashi and other Jewish exegetes. The dominant form of Christian Old Testament interpretation at this time was allegory. As

such there was a lack of Christian commentary on certain texts using the more literal *Peshat* form of exegesis popular with Medieval Jewish theologians. Geiger (2010) notes that, as Nicholas of Lyra worked in this literal style, it was necessary to seek insights from his Jewish contemporaries. Further, Geiger also comments that Nicholas understood that the Jews had a certain interpretive advantage in being able to draw meaning from the original Hebrew rather than Greek or Latin translations (2010, p. 6).

Goodwin (2009) observes how Christians wishing to learn Hebrew would require assistance from Jewish instructors until the late fourteenth century, and discusses the various reasons for this interaction, for instance, preparing accurate translations of the Bible, to understand Old Testament issues, or to assert Christian superiority over its rival religion (2009, p. 43). Conflicting motivations for Christian interaction with Jewish contemporaries are clear then. For example, despite Nicholas of Lyra's extensive use of Jewish sources in his Bible commentary, he also authored two anti-Jewish polemics (Geiger, 2010, p. 7).

In a general sense the shift from Medieval to Reformation periods saw Christian attitudes towards Judaism deteriorate significantly. The use of 'Judaism' is perhaps appropriate here, as it was during this period when the term began to be most commonly used descriptively for the Jewish people and tradition, although not by the people themselves. And in line with the general downturn in relations between the communities, 'Judaism' (and other variants) began to be used by Christians to denounce that which was Jewish (Oz and Oz-Salzberger, 2012, p. 166). Hence, regarding *Esther* (which this study is concerned), Martin Luther's infamous

comments that the text '*Judaizes too much*' sit comfortably in this context (Carruthers, 2008, p. 28). The general situation has been well summarised by Lindberg (1996):

By the eve of the Reformations the Jews were not only seen as rejected by God for denying Jesus and crucifying him, but were also blamed for the plague, accused of ritual murder of Christian youths and profanation of the Eucharistic host, suspected of plots to destroy Christendom, and widely resented for economic reasons. (Lindberg, 1996, pp. 367-368).

Reformers John Calvin and Martin Luther may be said to have followed on from prior Christian-Jewish interactions, but developments in societal perspective of Jewish people and thought (e.g. in the above citation) augmented their negative portrayal. Pak (2017, p. 5) describes how, in contrast to earlier real opportunities for Christian-Jewish engagement, Calvin and Luther had limited or no access to Jewish communities because of their expulsion from various locations across Europe. Also, the Bible began to be exalted as the ultimate source of divine revelation, with Christ as its 'content and goal'. Jewish failure to recognise Christ was understood as leading to their inability to read Scripture correctly (Ibid, p. 8). But the exaltation of Scripture as divine revelation regarding Christ, coupled with limited opportunities to interact with Jewish communities, also resulted in biblical references to 'Israel' becoming an authoritative teaching tool about all things Jewish. For Luther, this was the vast difference between the Old and New Covenants (Ibid, p. 7), and for Calvin, biblical 'Israel' revealed the 'unity of the covenant across time' (Ibid, p. 9).

The modern critical period appears to have maintained the separation between Christian and Jewish interpretive communities. Levenson (1993, pp. 82-105) has noted how historical-critical biblical interpretation dominating the eighteenth to

twentieth centuries, despite purporting to be neutral, was in fact essentially Christian. This is mostly due to its largely being Christians engaged in such critical enquiry. Breuer (2014, p. 1967) notes the Christian dominance, through the universities, of critical Bible study in the nineteenth century. Jewish scholars were active however in translating the *Tanakh* into various European languages (e.g. Reggio's Italian translation). Scholars such as Pappenheim and Cahen also analysed rabbinic and Medieval interpretive methods (Ibid, pp. 1966-1967). It does seem clear that there was significant separation between Christian and Jewish critical efforts until the twentieth century when biblical scholarship between the two groups began to integrate (Brettler, 2014; Breuer, 2014).

Considering this separation between Jewish and Christian academic communities, it is possible to imagine how the idea of 'Judaism' in modern critical parlance came to be understood in terms of its biblical identity as ancient Israel. In their seeming absence from the modern critical learning environment, the contemporary Jewish communities with their rich interpretive traditions could easily be replaced by a historical construction of a single Judaism as simply 'Israel', *the religion of the Bible*, and as such have little to offer contemporary biblical scholarship. In this way, a continuation from the context of Luther and Calvin discussed above is clear.

This is regrettable considering the engagement between communities in the past, and it appears to have resulted, at a popular level, in Christians often being unaware of basic aspects of Jewish religion and experience: 'indeed the majority of Christians probably have not even heard of [the oral Torah]' (El-Alami, Sherbok, and Chryssides, 2014, p. 57). Further, there is a danger that these popular Christian

perspectives, such as they are, may be based upon what Levenson (1993, p. 19) describes as 'New Testament caricatures, stereotypes and outright perversions of Judaism', most notably the negative charge that the Jewish religion (as that of the Bible) is unavoidably legalistic.⁷

With the widening of critical scholarship to incorporate an important variety of previously suppressed interpretive voices such as liberation, feminist, and post-colonial approaches, and the recognition of a need for both *theological* and *academic* enquiry into the biblical study, in recent years there have been positive movements forward for Jewish-Christian interaction. For example, the integration in academic circles of Jewish and Christian scholars is clearly positive although Brettler (2014, p. 1977) notes the increasing difficulty in identifying 'a clear set of distinguishing characteristics of Jewish biblical scholarship'. While Brettler's observation is important to consider, it seems that the 'distinguishing characteristics' may be clearly seen through Jewish scholars' grounding in their religious tradition and apparent desire to draw on rabbinic and Medieval wisdom alongside critical comments (such as in *The Jewish Study Bible* and *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*). But further, contemporary critical Jewish scholarship seems often to have a key role in making public past issues with Christianity and looking for ways to move forward.⁸

Brief comment should also be given to Scriptural Reasoning, a recent initiative which 'is a fresh approach to inter-faith dialogue which puts scripture at the heart of the

⁷ There is a helpful discussion of this issue in Klawans (2011, p. 515).

⁸ I am thinking here particularly of Levenson (1993), and Levine (2006), among many other examples.

conversation' (ScripturalReasoning.org). Here members of different religious traditions (primarily Christian, Jewish, Muslim) meet to read and discuss each other's sacred texts. The intention is 'learning to disagree better', that is, acknowledging difference between groups and finding areas for discussion through such acknowledgement. This face-to-face interaction is extremely positive, meeting theological and (where appropriate) critical concerns across religious communities.

Christians and Jews have often interacted over interpretation of the Bible. It seems apparent that from the Reformation period, face-to-face engagement significantly reduced and for Christian scholars 'the Jews' became increasingly a literary/theological construct, particularly in the modern critical period when fascination with origins and sources may have led to Judaism being identified as the Israelite religion of the Bible. As such Levenson (1993, pp. 19-23) and Joslyn-Siemiatkoski (2010, pp. 89-108) describe Christian interpreters in the modern critical period often overlooking Jewish post-biblical traditions as a means of gaining insight into biblical, particularly Old Testament, texts. I have noted above some recent developments encouraging fresh Jewish-Christian interaction on academic and popular levels, however there is more to be said. Walter Brueggemann has articulated the challenge well.

In his *Theology of the Old Testament*, Brueggemann argues that 'the Church has no interpretive monopoly on the Old Testament' (1997, p. 733) and demands the recognition of other interpretive communities, primarily the Jewish community which, he notes, is neither 'shrivelled according to Christian dismissiveness' nor confined to legalism 'according to Christian stereotype' (Ibid.). Thus, he proposes, '[Christian]

attendance to the Jewish community as co-reader, co-hearer and co-practitioner' of the Old Testament (Ibid, p. 745), taking into account the continued nourishment and summoning of rabbinic, Talmudic teaching for contemporary Judaism (Ibid, p. 734).

This is a position of the utmost importance. Christian acknowledgement that the Old Testament is 'ours... but...not ours alone' (Ibid, p. 735) will by necessity consider engagement with the theological contribution of Jewish tradition as a legitimate way of widening understanding of the Scriptures. It will recognise that there is no exclusive reading, that the unique circumstances existing around the (almost parallel) formation and development of Jewish and Christian traditions, including their use of the Hebrew Scripture, have resulted in riches of interpretive activity on both sides. Such acknowledgement also demands that Christians examine themselves and their history, coming to terms with unsatisfactory attitudes causing action or inaction against fellow readers, hearers and practitioners of the Old Testament.

It has been assumed so far, in agreement with Brueggemann (Ibid, p. 108), that Jews and Christians share the texts of the Old Testament/*Tanakh*. Before moving on to discuss a way forward for considering a 'co-reading' of the Old Testament text *Esther* through Comparative Theology, it is necessary to address an important suggestion from Levenson (2003) that Jews and Christians do not, in fact, share the Hebrew Scriptures. He argues that the ordering of Old Testament books and the inclusion of certain Scriptural texts in Catholic and Orthodox Christian traditions (known as the Apocrypha) unknown to the *Tanakh* undermines the claim of the two

religions sharing a sacred text (2003, p. 170). Further, Levenson states that the Old Testament/*Tanakh* is 'read through a lens that the other community lacks' (Ibid.).

However, a different ordering of books need not result in a different text altogether. The Christian Old Testament presents the 'history' of Israel in sequence from Genesis to *Esther* followed by the Wisdom books and then the Prophets. The Jewish *Tanakh* by contrast is divided into Law, Prophets, and Writings, *Esther* featuring in the latter.⁹ Perhaps there is further comment to be made on the inclusion of Apocryphal books in certain Christian traditions, however for the purposes of this study which considers the Protestant Old Testament consisting of books shared by the *Tanakh* (albeit in a different order), I will not dwell on the issue here. Levenson's final point cited above however is crucial to this study. It is exactly the 'lens that the other community lacks' that I am seeking to address. By studying *Esther Rabbah* I hope to learn something of the rabbinic approach to Scriptural interpretation with which to helpfully apply to a contemporary Christian reading of the book of *Esther*. I will now move on to discuss a possible way of approaching the other 'lens' through which to read the Hebrew Scripture, Comparative Theology, which is an interreligious approach where the theologian 're-reads one's home theological tradition... after a serious engagement in the reading of another tradition' (Clooney, 1993, p. 3).

⁹ There is, of course, more to be said about the ordering of the biblical books. However, I am not convinced that reading *Esther*, for instance, within the 'five scrolls' or as part of Israelite 'history' truly affects the way the book is understood as much as its subsequent interpretation which takes place outside of the Bible, in community. I find Dunne's (2014, p. 121) comment that 'the canonical shape affects our reading of individual books and conditions us to read them in a certain way' overstated.

2.2 Comparative Theology

I have already discussed comparative theology at length in Chapter One. Here, following the summary statement from Clooney just cited, a few brief comments can be made. The intention of working comparatively is that, in the study of an 'Other' text (in this case, an ancient text from a religious tradition distinct from my own), a process of widening understanding is embarked upon through the way the reader engages 'vulnerably'. This means reading in such a way that allows this 'Other' text to speak, with however a challenging voice, without being trampled on by the reader's prejudices (Moyaert, 2012). Thus, as this study moves to comparative discussion of ancient Jewish and contemporary Christian interpretation of *Esther*, the way that I have attempted to read *Esther Rabbah* 'vulnerably' will become apparent by how I am prompted to reflect honestly on issues coming out of my initial study of the midrash having hopefully not jumped to making conclusions based upon my own presuppositions (Ibid, p. 1156). The intended outcome of engaging in the comparative theology process is a re-reading of one's home tradition. That is, looking at the 'Other' text and tradition forces reflection on issues from the home tradition. Here, this will take the form of a re-reading of *Esther*, informed by engagement with *Esther Rabbah*.

I will now briefly explore work that has been achieved comparing and connecting certain rabbinic texts with Christian literature, though not necessarily utilising a model of Comparative Theology as described above that results in a re-reading of one's original position. Firstly, connections have been made between rabbinic midrash and the Christian writings of the New Testament. Stern (2011) for example notes similarities in the use of a 'fulfilment narrative' motif in Matthew's Gospel and

the rabbinic midrash Lamentations Rabbah (2011, p. 566). Boyarin (2011) has considered the prologue to John's Gospel (1.1-5) as 'a midrash, that is, it is not poem but a homily on Genesis 1.1-5' (2011, p. 549). The purpose of these studies is to highlight that the roots of Christianity and rabbinic Judaism are roughly contemporary to each other and that there are areas of correlation: 'even when they disagreed, they did so in remarkably similar ways' (Stern, 2011, p. 569). It is shown, for instance by Brettler (2011), how certain features of the New Testament considered 'new' to the Scriptural perspective are also found in Jewish texts from around the same period. The common rabbinic citation formula: 'it is written' is found in Mark 1.2 for example (2011, p. 505).

In a useful discussion, Neusner (1989a) describes the process of 'comparative midrash' (1989a, pp. 163-185). Here he establishes three main areas of comparison: 1) comparing hermeneutics, that is, 'one mode of exegesis with another' (Ibid, p. 166). 2) comparing the definitive traits of an entire midrash document with another. And 3) comparing exegesis of one Scriptural verse with another. Neusner argues that the starting point must be 2). This is because, 'comparison begins with the definition of things to be compared' and 'when we can define the traits distinctive to one documentary context we may ask about traits of an item that occur in other documentary contexts' (Ibid, p. 167). This seems like good advice. In the case of this project I cannot begin to understand what Esther Rabbah says to a contemporary Christian reading of *Esther* without first attempting to define what is distinctive about that midrash document.

Addressing the issue of Jewish-Christian dialogue, Levenson (2003) provides a focussed study in comparative midrash on the subject 'Did God Forgive Adam?' (2003, pp. 148-170). Here Levenson considers 'two midrashim that employ the fate of Adam to propound a vision of how sin might be repaired' (Ibid, p. 166). The first of these is New Testament text Romans 5.12-21, treated as a midrash of the two Adams: the first who disobeyed causing sin and death, the second who obeyed and brought life. The second text, from Midrash Leviticus Rabbah 29.1, explores the way that Adam received divine forgiveness through his repentance. Levenson observes how both texts explore the 'possibility of a happy conclusion to a relationship defaced by human evil-doing' (Ibid, p. 166), but notes a difference in how this conclusion is seen to be brought about. In Romans, Jesus Christ brings about the change, while for the rabbis in Leviticus Rabbah it is the on-going narrative of human repentance and divine forgiveness played out as it always has been. Levenson concludes by stating the importance for 'authentic' Jewish-Christian dialogue of appreciating both the 'commonalities... and the... oppositions' (Ibid, p. 170).

Joslyn-Siemiatkoski (2010) provides a rare example of an exercise between Jewish and Christian texts that I have found using the model of comparative theology described above. In contrast to Levenson's work, this example seeks a re-reading of Christian tradition after sustained encounters with Jewish texts (2010, p. 102). The focus is a rabbinic text (*Mishnah Avot* 1.1) which explains the transmission of the Torah from Moses to Joshua to the elders to the Prophets and finally to the Great Assembly. The significance of this is that 'Jewish practice and identity' was preserved and passed on through the generations. The notion of 'mak[ing] a fence around the Torah' in the text is explored as a movable structure, allowing for

interpretation according to the needs of the generations, and an 'expression of piety and love for the gift of the Torah given at Sinai' (Ibid, p. 105).

Joslyn-Siemiatkoski observes the difference in the positive view of Torah in Judaism and the negativity towards it as 'the Law' in Christianity (Ibid, pp. 105-106). He argues that the claim of Jesus that he has come not to abolish but fulfil the law (Matthew 5.17-19) undermines such disjoint as this teaching 'echoes the emphasis on the value of Torah in *Avot*' but also 'expresses the intention of upholding Torah even in the process of forming new communities' (Ibid, p. 106). In keeping with the notion of making a fence around Torah discussed above, Jesus' interpretation of Torah is similar to the manner in which Torah was interpreted by the rabbis and their predecessors. Such understanding of Torah as the 'ground and inspiration of Jesus' own life and ministry' would cause a re-reading of Christian beliefs about, for instance, Jesus as the Word incarnate and his relationship with God's word in Torah (Ibid, p. 107).

Most recently, Moyaert (2018) has engaged in a short comparative exercise which looks at Jewish and Christian interpretive approaches to the story of Jacob's acceptance by God and Esau's rejection in Genesis. Moyaert examines traditional Christian typological interpretation of the story, noting the 'violent potential' of such reading (2018, p. 169) when the Jews are taken to represent Esau, the rejected, and the Church represents Jacob, 'the new people of God' (Ibid, p. 170). By contrast, in rabbinic readings of the story, the Jewish people are Jacob, while Esau is represented by Imperial Rome, and increasingly by Christianity (Ibid, pp. 180-181). She then comments on a 'recent reconciliatory reading' by Jonathan Sacks where

Jacob desires Esau's blessing but comes to realise after wrestling with God he was not meant to receive it and has in fact, received his own blessing from his father (Ibid, pp. 182-185). This prompts Moyaert's *re-reading*, and she reflects on the need for the Church, particularly after the Shoah, to 'pass through a nocturnal struggle... and ask anew who she really is', that is, 'should [the Church] really define herself by taking the blessing God has given to Israel – or does God have more than one blessing?' (Ibid, p. 186).

These brief examples show comparative efforts between rabbinic midrash and Christian biblical texts. While useful to consider; this study, more in line with Moyaert's comparative work, intends to re-read the shared Old Testament/*Tanakh* text *Esther* from a contemporary Christian position in light of engagement with a rabbinic midrash on that same biblical text. Here the comparative work is in relation to two approaches to biblical interpretation, rabbinic midrash and contemporary criticism.

2.3 Rabbinic Biblical Interpretation and Midrash

From the first century CE a form of Judaism developed which proved to be dominant for many centuries and highly influential for Jewish religious understanding even up to the present day. This is known as rabbinic Judaism, loosely defined by its understanding of the two Torahs (written and oral), both given to Moses at Sinai. The Mishnah is an important early compilation of the oral Torah, and the main centres of rabbinic activity, Jerusalem and Babylonia, both produced a Talmud – primarily understood to be an elaboration of the Mishnah. Beside these major works, the

rabbis also expounded on biblical texts in a form known as midrash which this study is primarily concerned.

Rabbinic midrash can be understood most simply as exegesis – explaining meaning found within a text. Gruenwald (1991, p. 9) notes, however, that midrash is not concerned with exegesis as such, but rather, ‘with the creation of meaning’ (see also Bruns, 1987, pp. 628-629). The term is also used as a title for written compilations such as Midrash Rabbah. For simplicity, Holtz (1984, p. 178), and Neusner (1989b, pp. 4-5) have proposed a three-fold summary of midrash as: a particular form of exegesis, a process of interpretation, and a written compilation of works.

The Hebrew root *drsh* meaning to search/seek/investigate goes a long way in articulating the foundational idea behind midrash. Such investigation within classical rabbinic midrash usually involves biblical verses rather than entire books (Kugel, 1986, p. 93). Unpicking peculiarities within a verse or even a single word is apparently a crucial way of the rabbis’ creating new meaning out the biblical text. However, it appears that as the form developed in time, interest moved away from unpicking words and verses towards the retelling of entire narratives (Atzmon, 2009, p. 184).

As the work of God, the Bible contained no mistakes or contradictions, but plenty of opportunities for interpretation (Stern, 2014, p. 1882). God, the perfect author, had foreseen the need for new interpretation and had, in a sense, hidden meanings within the text so that they could be continually ‘unlocked’ in each generation. The rabbis’ interpretive work was merely ‘uncovering what is already there’ (Holtz, 1984,

p. 185). An obvious tension was apparent in that God no longer spoke directly as had been the case in biblical times. However, by 'unlocking the Bible's secret mystery' (Ibid) the rabbis could bring the words of God into the present. Neusner (1989c, pp. 131-145) has used the term 'writing with Scripture' to describe this process of journeying back and forth between the world of Scripture and the rabbis' contemporary age. A third dimension should also be noted here, that of the future Age to Come. By assuming authority as interpreters for their current context, the rabbis bring those three worlds together, ignoring 'ordinary barriers of time' and instead, moving fluidly across the ages presenting contemporary application and future redemption as part of an on-going biblical narrative-experience (Yerushalmi, 1996, p. 17).

2.4 Modern Biblical Interpretation

Since the eighteenth century biblical interpretation has been shaped by historical-critical methods. Interpreters have either embraced historical-criticism, or more recently, developed and/or reacted against it, widening the scope of biblical meaning to cover for instance, literary, feminist and liberationist concerns.

Barton (1998) has provided a useful summary of the historical-critical method in which he proposes four central features. First, 'genetic questions' regarding when and by whom were books written, and what were the stages of a book's composition, e.g. identifying older sources (1998, pp.9-10). Second, the text's 'original meaning', that is, by establishing what the text meant to the first readers scholars can understand the 'true meaning' (Ibid, pp.10-11). Third, 'historical reconstructions', seeking what really happened rather than relying on the view of the biblical writers

and what they wanted their readers to believe (Ibid, p. 11). Finally, 'disinterested scholarship'; approaching the text without prejudice in a way that is 'value-neutral' (Ibid, p. 12). Barton argues that these central features of historical-criticism were intended to lead interpreters to a position of 'objective truth', something which is seen as crucial to the Enlightenment era through which historical-critical methods were born (Ibid, p. 12).

More recently the pursuit of 'objective truth' has been viewed as misguided. It is not seen as possible for an interpreter to be 'value-neutral' any more than it is possible for a writer to present historical facts objectively. The perspective of postmodernity acknowledges that each reader of a text brings their own values and prejudgments to what they read. As a result, the text will mean different things to different readers. The challenge is to welcome the range of readings: to read in the presence of others (Brueggemann, 2005, pp. 138-139). The questioning of 'objective truth' and development of postmodern perspectives has coincided with the appearance of many different voices being heard in biblical interpretation. Narrative, Deconstructionist, Feminist, African, Social-Scientific, Political, Post-Colonial readings of the Bible are just a few of the approaches now contributing widely to the postmodern context of biblical interpretation which seeks to distance itself from its traditional associations of white male domination. Many of these approaches look *in front of* the text, that is, to consider the world of readers and their contexts. Historical-criticism by contrast, looks *behind* to establish where the text came from and its original meaning.¹⁰

¹⁰ See full and helpful discussion of *behind*, *within* and *in front of* a text in Tate (2013).

Nonetheless, that historical-criticism is not perfect, cannot be reason to throw it out completely and in fact, many contemporary biblical commentators employ historical methods alongside others approaches, attempting to interpret most fully by looking *behind, within* and *in front of* the text in question. Indeed, as Barton (1998, p. 17) notes, 'the underlying motivation of "historical" criticism is to free the text to speak'. Identification of sources and their redaction, the pursuit of original contexts, are incredibly valuable when engaged with alongside all manner of other interpretive possibilities.

Although the critical methods described are traditionally associated with Christian scholarship, this is due to Christian dominance in the academic context in eighteenth to early twentieth centuries. The critical methods as such, are not particularly 'Christian' or 'Jewish'. In fact, Levenson (1993, p. 105) states that the 'historical-critical method' for example, 'compels its practitioners to bracket their traditional identities'. As this study concerns a Christian re-reading of *Esther*, it is necessary to examine what may constitute a 'Christian' interpretation of the Bible.

Speaking generally, Christians may agree with this comment by Morgan (1998, p. 116) that 'the Bible as a whole witnesses to the knowledge of God in Christ' or perhaps more traditionally, these words by Augustine: 'the New Testament is hidden in the Old; the Old is made accessible by the New' (cited in McGrath, 2007, p. 131). It is apparent from these statements that interpretation of the Bible claiming to be 'Christian' in character generally and unavoidably reads in light of the New Testament. Even when the Old Testament is interpreted on its own terms, this is usually done as a stage in a longer interpretive journey towards the fullest revelation

in Christ. For example, while Goldingay (2008) seeks an Old Testament theology that does not interpret Old Testament texts in light of the New Testament (2008, p. 17), he stresses that ‘the two parts of the [scriptural] canon illuminate each other’ (Ibid, p. 21).

One important attempt to express Christian biblical theology is canonical criticism which works from the perspective that interpretation of biblical texts should always take place in relation to their wider context within the canon of Scripture. Here, the historical-critical search for original meaning and sources is understood as causing fragmentation, as it separates the texts from their canonical setting. Importantly, canonical criticism seeks to bring academic/historical and theological approaches together, recognising that ‘canon itself incorporates a historical process and theological judgment at the same time’ (Lockett, 2016, p. 105).

Here then, the Church tradition, in establishing the shape of the canon, is crucial to interpretation of the Bible theologically as a work of Christian Scripture. To examine a biblical text in its final form is to look at it as having passed through the canonisation process through which it has been found, ultimately, as pointing to Jesus Christ. It is clear then, as Provan notes, the canonical approach ‘insists on the primacy of the *text* rather than the *reader*’ (1998, p. 207 my italics). The meaning of the text is already derived from the canonisation process embarked upon by Church tradition, and therefore the role of the interpreter is to attend to that established meaning (Hafemann, 2016, pp. 111-112). For example, Childs (1979) suggests that *Esther’s* meaning is derived from the way that Purim (in 9.20-32) is celebrated as rest from enemies and is to be recalled through fasting and lamentation (1979, pp.

603-607).¹¹ As these factors are evident throughout the Old Testament, *Esther* may be seen as standing firmly within the canon.

A canonical approach is important and useful as a means of articulating a Christian reading of biblical texts, especially those of the Old Testament, as different parts of one unified set of Scriptures. To read as a Christian, one must acknowledge that reading is taking place in the context of a two Testament Bible through which the Old somehow looks to the New. However, it is too simplistic to state with Lockett (2016, p. 106) that both Testaments are 'a single witness to Jesus Christ'. To say so is to diminish the many theological strands collected together in the Old Testament which do not 'obviously, cleanly, or directly point to Jesus Christ or to the New Testament' (Brueggemann, 1997, p. 731). One must attempt to appreciate the voices of the Old Testament as part of a careful and imaginative exploration into exactly how the Bible may/may not speak of Christ.

It must be remembered that interpretation, even in the context of examining the Christian canon of Scripture as Old and New Testaments, does not take place in a vacuum. To claim authority for the Christian canon in which the Old Testament somehow points to the New, cannot ignore the fact that those same Hebrew Scriptures, known as the *Tanakh*, are authoritative for the Jewish community. One's claims for a Christian reading must somehow be able to incorporate, or at least acknowledge, the authority of one's own Scriptures for another distinct religious tradition. Such acknowledgement, however, cannot be merely academic curiosity,

¹¹ I consider factors such as these in more detail later in the study, in Chapter Four: 4.2 and 4.3, pp. 89-106.

but an appreciation of the theological value of the same scriptural texts in the lives of Jewish and Christian communities.

As the proposed Christian re-reading of *Esther* in this study combines both Jewish-Christian and ancient- modern interpretive approaches it is perhaps necessary to employ a post-critical approach. This is where critical methods of interpreting the Bible are valued and utilised, but the interpreter seeks to move beyond what Moberly (2016, p. 655) calls 'typical modern scholarly concerns' by seeking a living engagement with what is being critically examined (Ibid, p. 656). The notion of a 'living... engagement' suggests that to be post-critical is to seek the unification of academic and confessional concerns.

Two brief points can be made for the purposes of this study. A post-critical approach values the Bible as *Scripture*, that is, in the way that it functions as 'the source and norm of the worshipping community's knowledge of, and communion with, God' (Soulén, 2003, p. 183). Hans Frei, for example, taught that believers need to dwell in the world of the biblical narrative (Fodor, 2005, pp. 234-235). Recently, Serene Jones (2007) has attempted to articulate this, stating '[the Bible] pulls us into its world at the very moment our lived reality meets its living truth' (2007, p. 78). This being the case, traditional understanding of believers being somehow located within and instructed by the overarching biblical narrative (Fodor, 2005, p. 235), can be revisited by contemporary interpreters seeking, not to deny critical methods, but move beyond them, finding new ways of theological expression. This is important for this study as it has some similarity with ancient rabbinic midrash in which, as noted

above, the rabbis 'write with Scripture', positioning themselves within an on-going biblical narrative.

The second point to make here is that post-critical interpretation is theological, and thus, concerned with the 'living relationship that binds God, text and people' (Ochs, 1995). That is, there is a recognition that 'the word of God is alive and active' (Hebrews 4.12), shaping the various ways that communities of people live their lives. As such, a post-critical approach may be able to appreciate the theological relationship that Jewish communities have with the Bible alongside that of Christians without seeking to superficially join the two. Again Ochs (2011) observes that this 'relationality... invites Jews to be Jewish in their way, Christians to be Christian in their way, and both to discover complementary purpose in this relationality itself' (2011, pp. 4-5).

In terms of this study and its focus on *Esther*, this would mean, recognising that, read theologically, the text as *Scripture* is important in the living experience of two distinct religious communities with interpretive traditions dating back centuries. The proposed re-reading of *Esther* approached post-critically would seek to explore ancient rabbinic and contemporary Christian interpretation as equally valid perspectives on the biblical text, but more crucially, it would attempt to show how journeying between Jewish-Christian and traditional-critical worlds might enable believers to be pulled into the world of biblical narrative afresh.

2.5 The book of *Esther*

The book of *Esther* is set in Persia, in the court of King Ahasuerus, who wishes to find a new bride to replace the recently banished Queen Vashti. A young Jewish beauty, Esther, is taken to join the other girls in the harem by Mordecai, her cousin-uncle. Esther becomes the new queen but keeps her Jewish heritage secret. Meanwhile, Haman, an important official in court, is having problems from Mordecai, who refuses to bow before him, prompting Haman to hatch a plot to destroy the whole Jewish people. Mordecai then advises Esther to make use of her royal status to save her people. Through a series of comic misunderstandings and twists, Esther succeeds and Haman's plot is foiled. With Esther and Mordecai in place as high status Jews in the Persian court, the Jewish people are given the opportunity to avenge themselves and gain respite from their enemies. This event is commemorated in the Purim festival.

A brief note should be made regarding the different versions of *Esther*. The basis of Jewish and Protestant Christian interpretation is the Masoretic Hebrew text which, as is commonly known, contains no explicit reference to God. A Greek translation of *Esther* in the *Septuagint* (Greek Old Testament) combined the Hebrew text with certain original additions seemingly intended to provide the element of religiosity judged as lacking in the Hebrew version, as well as offering many direct references to God (Additions C-F, Reid, 2008, pp. 162-168). Catholic and Orthodox traditions include the Greek version of *Esther* in their Old Testament. There is also another Greek version known as the 'A Text' apparently based upon a Hebrew text separate from the Masoretic with different features and characterisation (Ibid, pp. 46-47). The *Septuagint* version of *Esther* shares certain similarities with Esther Rabbah in the

sense that Esther and Mordecai are presented in both as being much more aware of their religious identity than in the Hebrew text (Ibid, p. 46). In fact, the prayers of the two characters in ER8.7 may indeed have originated in the Greek text (Addition C, Ibid, pp. 162-165) by way of tenth century chronicle Yosippon (Lerner, 2006, p. 179). Comparative study of Esther Rabbah and the Greek *Esther* would surely provide fruitful results but it would be a very different project to this which is concerned with the midrash and contemporary Protestant Christian interpretation of *Esther*. Thus, here it is necessary to focus on interpretation deriving from the Hebrew text.

In the *Tanakh*, *Esther* is positioned in the Writings (*Kethuvim*) as one of the Five Scrolls. A crucial issue for the ancient rabbis appears to have been how to respond to the absence of explicit mention of God in the text. Grappling with such an issue, whilst debating the book's place in the biblical canon means that, besides Genesis, *Esther* received the most attention of any biblical book (Koller, 2013, p. 170). It might be safe to say that *Esther* was saved by the institution of the Purim festival, the origins of which the narrative speaks. Attention to Purim observance in the Mishnah (*Megillah*) and subsequent commentary in the Talmuds of Jerusalem and Babylonia, not to mention a great number of midrashim seems to have secured *Esther's* place in the tradition.

One such midrash is the subject of this study, Esther Rabbah, a rabbinic midrash compilation made up of material which stretches over a period of some five hundred years before its final compiling in the twelfth century CE (Lerner, 2006, p. 187). Speaking generally, the midrash interprets the entire book of *Esther*, however it is clear that the early chapters of the biblical text are covered in much greater detail

than the latter. Modern critical methods have been employed to identify a final editor's use of a range of rabbinic sources to compile the document. The redaction of these sources has been examined producing fruitful suggestions about certain themes apparent in the document (for example, Atzmon, 2009). The midrash is sometimes understood as existing in two parts. Chapters 1-5 known as Esther Rabbah I consists of material from the Amoraic period (fifth/sixth century CE), while chapters 6-10 (Esther Rabbah II) combines Amoraic material with sources from seventh to tenth centuries CE. In this study I will be engaging with the entire document to draw out key themes on which to base my proposed re-reading of *Esther*.

The final compiling of Esther Rabbah takes us to the dawning of the Middle Ages when the popularity of *Esther* seems to have grown. During this period, interpreters found that the book's description of Jewish characters in a diaspora context, that is, settled outside of their homeland, provided an 'uncommon immediacy' to their own situation living far from the land of Israel (Walfish, 1993, p. 202). Thus, a great volume of work was produced on *Esther* during this period, for example commentaries by Rashi, Rashbam, and Abraham Ibn Ezra. In recent years Levenson (1997), Berlin (2001), and Fox (2001) have contributed substantial work on *Esther* bringing together Jewish traditions and modern critical methods. Interestingly, these authors are often cited by Christian commentators showing something, perhaps, of a step towards integration of Jewish-Christian popular biblical scholarship.

Esther is the last of the historical books in the Christian Old Testament. There was no significant Christian attention given to *Esther* until an allegorical commentary by Rhabanus Maurus in the ninth century. There was some increase in attention in the Medieval period often through whole Bible commentaries such as that of the *Postilla* by Nicholas de Lyra which, as noted above (p. 18), utilised the Jewish *Peshat* (that is, literal) interpretive methods of his contemporaries. Paton (1908, pp. 107-108) helpfully summarises the main works on *Esther* from the Medieval and Reformation periods and notes that although Luther and Calvin did not provide commentaries on the text, there was a great deal of attention given by other Reformation writers. The most important of these for Paton, showing 'solid knowledge of Hebrew' and 'interpretation of difficult passages... [that is] full of acumen', are commentaries by Münster (1546), Drusius (1586) and Grotius (1644) (Ibid. p. 108). Currently most commentary series on the Bible have a volume (often jointly with other smaller texts) on *Esther*.

Despite this attention it must be said, in agreement with Bush (1998, p. 39), that in general the book has received a very 'cold embrace' from the Christian Church throughout its history. In the modern age S. R. Driver wrote of *Esther* that it is a book 'without any redeeming feature... further removed from the spirit of the gospel than any other book of the Old Testament' (Driver, 1892, pp. 456-457 cited in Horowitz, 2006, p. 27). Sadly, varying degrees of such a view underpinned Christian commentary on *Esther* throughout the Reformation and modern periods until World War II where the horrors of the Holocaust have caused a massive sea-change in the way that Christians relate to Jews either in relation to biblical Israel or modern day Jewish experience. However, while in recent years much positive scholarly attention

has been paid to the book, it remains the case that most Church-going Christians will rarely, if ever hear a sermon or reading from *Esther* (Bechtel, 2002, p. 17; Beckett, 2002, p. 2; Murphy, 2002, p. 122).

Esther remains, for Christians, a confusing biblical text. This is perhaps why a particular form of interpretation, typology has been persistent in Christian understanding of the book. Typology is where events, such as those of the Old Testament, are interpreted in the light of what has later come to pass, for instance in the New Testament. In the early centuries of the Church, typological interpretation came to be one of the main methods by which Christians could 'retain the Hebrew Scriptures among [their] holy books' (Hanson, 2002, p. 35). The lack of explicit religious elements in *Esther* then, could be explained by the events of the narrative being understood as prefiguring the gospel. For example, in Rhabanus Maurus' commentary on *Esther*, Ahasuerus and his great feast (*Esther* 1) reveal the awesome riches of, not only his kingdom, but that of Christ. Subsequently, Esther, the wife of the king, represents the bride of Christ.

Despite steady typological attention over the years, it is noteworthy that Esther herself has rarely been viewed as a type of Christ. Brown-Tkacz (2006, pp. 710-714) points out that other biblical female characters were given Christological make-over in antiquity but not Esther. Recently however, Beckett (2002) has claimed that 'Esther is the type of Jesus' (2002, p. 7) and that in 'submission and service [Esther] most truly exemplifies the fullest of both the humanity and the divinity of Christ' (Ibid, p. 59). Here then the saving work of Esther for the Persian Jews foreshadows Christ's salvation. As such, Beckett (2002, p. 50 [*my italics*]) views himself as

'attempt[ing] to read the story of *Esther* through the *fullness of its revelation* - Jesus Christ'. Here I agree with Turner's (2016, p. 9) statement that this is a somewhat 'over-enthusiastic Christian appropriation'.

Turner goes on to question typological readings of *Esther* on the basis of a 'lack of consistent hermeneutic' where all four of the main characters have represented Christ (Ibid, p. 17). This is a fair point and seems in line with the cautious approach to typology practised in the early Church where only established types were utilised (Thiselton, 2009, p. 111). However, having already committed myself to a theological reading of *Esther* (see above, p. 37), I cannot agree with Turner's comments that typology is unsuitable because it is a 'secular' text. (2016, p. 17). Rather, I view reading *Esther* typologically problematic because of interpreters' tendency to weaken other possible readings by concentrating on a foreshadowing of the gospel story alone. For instance, Beckett's suggestion that without typology *Esther* has a 'limited message' (2002, p. 85) appears to pay no attention to the text's continued relevance outside of the Christian community. Ultimately, for this comparative study the possibility of differing readings must be acknowledged, if not, embraced.

2.6 Concluding Comments: my Christian reading of *Esther*

Having attempted to present a brief history of Jewish-Christian engagement based around biblical interpretation, as well as summarising issues related to *Esther*, all that remains is for me to set out my Christian reading of *Esther* as it stands at the start of this project.

My Protestant Christian reading of *Esther* considers the text within the Scriptural canon of Old and New Testaments. Crucial within this canonical context is the idea that, as the narrative concerns God's covenant people, divine involvement should be assumed even when God is not mentioned. I would agree with the scholarly consensus which dates *Esther's* composition between 400-300 BCE covering the late Persian and early Hellenistic (Greek) periods. It seems likely, on the lack of Greek features (Reid, 2008, p. 22; Dunne, 2014, p. 5) that composition took place late in the Persian period to speak of 'the days of Ahasuerus' (*Esther* 1.1) as the past, but not distant past.

Despite being presented as 'history' *Esther* should perhaps not be considered as relating detailed specific events. A lack of evidence concerning the book's characters from extra-biblical sources, and literary features such as a 180 day-long feast and a beauty contest lasting for a year, suggest that literary licence has been employed for telling a good story. However, the fact that *Esther* is itself presented as historical should give pause for reflection. As Jobes (1999, p. 31) notes, '*Esther* portrays history with all of the artistry of great literature' and she questions the 'false polarity' between literature and history (Ibid.). It may be most helpful then, with Levenson (1997, p. 25), to view the text as a historical novella; a story which may be in some sense based around historical events.

In my view, Purim is the climax and central feature of the text. From a Christian perspective, the import can be found in the salvation of God's people, commemorated in the festival. Clearly, this focus on Purim can be criticised by studying the redaction of *Esther* where it has been suggested that the association

with the festival (*Esther* 9-10) was attached to an earlier composite narrative (see Bush, 1996, p. 281). Nonetheless, here I am interested in the final form of the text which does provide an etiology of Purim, that is, an explanation of the festival's origins (Levenson, 1997, p. 22), and may also be seen as a 'festival lection' in which the retelling of the story of *Esther* is necessary to the commemoration of Purim (Bush, 1996, p. 306). Along these lines, Berlin (2001) has made a strong case for viewing the text as a 'burlesque', frivolous and boisterous in-fitting with the mood of the Purim festival (Berlin, 2001, p. xxii). Here, nothing is to be taken seriously; it is the world of comic archetypal villains and topsy-turvy excess (Ibid, p. xx-xxi). There are surely limits to such a reading, for instance, the ease with which the violence of *Esther* 8-9 may be side-stepped as being 'mock battles' which should 'not be taken seriously' (Berlin, 2014, pp. 1631-1632). However, Berlin may be the most helpful of recent commentators in placing the Purim festival at the very centre of the text, best understood overall as historical novella.

CHAPTER THREE

Midrash Esther Rabbah

Having established the wider context for this study, in this chapter I intend to closely examine Esther Rabbah (from here ER). I will consider the structure of the document and then examine the introductory *petiḥta* section in detail. Following this I will discuss the ways in which the characters of *Esther* are portrayed in the midrash before, finally, summarising what may constitute the key themes running through the entire work.

3.1 Midrash Esther Rabbah

ER is a rabbinic midrash compilation made up of material which stretches over a period of some five hundred years before its final compiling in the twelfth century CE (Lerner, 2006, p. 187). While ER has been considered as existing in two parts, an early and a late midrash (details below), in this study the work will be treated as a unified text. Before looking in detail at ER, I will briefly summarise the work to offer a general picture. Note that the section divisions are according to the Vilna edition from 1887.

Petiḥta – As is common to classical midrash such as that of the Amoraic period (third to fifth centuries CE) each *petiḥta* or ‘proem’ serves as an introduction, in this case to *Esther* 1.1. Many of the ‘proems’ are connected by pointing to the dire situation of Israel ‘in the days of Ahasuerus’.

Parashayyot (chapters) 1-6 - The first chapters continue the Amoraic midrash. This section concentrates on *Esther* 1-2 with great attention given to Ahasuerus and the running of his kingdom.

Parashayyot 6-10 – This section is known as ER II, the later midrash, which combines Amoraic material (such as that of the earlier chapters) with sources from seventh to tenth centuries CE.

These latter chapters concentrate on *Esther* 2-9. There is noticeably less attention given to specific verses, with many portions of *Esther* missed completely. Here Mordecai and Esther are represented as ideal Jewish characters, while Haman treated in great detail as the enemy of the Jews. Much of chapters 7 and 9 are considered late additions noticeably adopting a narrative approach rather than the earlier exegetical verse-centred methods. Chapter 10 sections 13-15 form a finale reflecting on the consequences of the Purim miracle: deliverance of the Jewish people, and peace.

ER can now be examined in some detail to present an overall picture of the work, beginning with the *petiḥta*, that is, the document's introduction which, in many ways sets the tone of the entire work. It has been divided into twelve sections in the Vilna edition. However, it does not consist of twelve individual 'proems' as some are incomplete or do not follow a recognised form. Lerner (2006, p. 178) suggests seven proems, while Neusner (1989b, pp. 15-39) divides his 'analytical translation' of the *petiḥta* into nine, noting the possibility of eight (Ibid, p. 23). Here it would be best to

be guided as much as possible by the classical proem form (discussed below) and therefore I propose:

First proem *Petiḥta section 1-3*

Second proem *Petiḥta section 4-5*

Third proem *Petiḥta section 6*

Fourth proem *Petiḥta section 7*

Fifth proem *Petiḥta section 8*

Sixth proem *Petiḥta section 9*

Seventh proem *Petiḥta section 10*

Eighth proem *Petiḥta section 12*¹²

Regarding the form of the proem, there is no reason to dispute Heinemann's (1971a) proposal that its roots can be found in introductory sermons in the synagogue. As a means of approaching the set text for that service, the speaker would begin with a seemingly unrelated verse of scripture before making use of a variety of artistic and rhetorical techniques to finally come around to the designated text, sometimes known as the 'base-verse'. The artistry of these speakers was such that their words were preserved and passed on. Thus, in the following form, the proem is a key feature of classical midrash: 'rabbi [name] opened his discussion of [base-verse] with [seemingly unrelated verse]' followed by a discussion that eventually connects to the base-verse.

¹² Note that *Petiḥta section 11* does not follow the form and appears to consist of material used elsewhere, e.g. in Genesis Rabbah, Leviticus Rabbah and Ruth Rabbah, see Neusner (1989b, p. 37).

When it came to the editing of the midrash compilations, the various proems to a particular text associated with an individual or group of rabbis were pieced together to form a literary discussion, roughly retaining the framework of the originally oral proem as just described. Heinemann (1971a, p. 111) notes that editors may well have composed new proems during the compiling of a midrash document.

In the case of ER, Neusner (1989c) proposes the editor engaged in a novel departure from the classical proem structure, exploring ‘possibilities not considered in earlier compositions’ (1989c, p. 49). Hence, he adopts the term ‘pseudo-*petiḥta* form’ for many of ER’s proems (Ibid.). The main concern for Neusner here is the seeming lack of connection between the starting verse and base-verse. In the classical form, such as in the proems beginning the principal sections of Genesis Rabbah (Freedman and Simon, 1939, pp. 1-6), the proems are often concise with quite a natural connection between the start and end verses. By contrast, several of ER’s proems, in Neusner’s view at least ‘[do] not revert to the base-verse at all’ (1989c, p. 49).

The highlighting of such a development towards a ‘pseudo-*petiḥta* form’ may well be correct and viewed as a positive display of the continuing relevance of the *petiḥta* throughout the progression of the rabbinic period (Neusner, 1989c, p. 53). Although it should be noted however, that others, for example Tabory (2011, p. 252) and Herr (2007b, p.183) maintain that ER’s proems are in the classical style. This is not something that can be stated with any certainty. What does seem clear is that in the joining together of individual proems, the authors of midrash documents engaged in

a certain degree of editing. In some cases, this editing process may have included developing the recognised form.

With a general picture of the *petiḥta* now established, it will be helpful to look in some detail at the first proem of ER which covers *petiḥta* section 1-3. As is standard, the first proem begins with a remote verse of scripture. Here, Rav (*rab*) 'opened/introduced' (*pātaḥ*) his discussion of *Esther* 1.1 with Deuteronomy 28.66: 'You will live in constant suspense, filled with dread both night and day, never sure of your life'.

It is important to consider the context of this Deuteronomy verse, which follows promises of blessing for the Israelites should they obey the LORD (Deut. 28.1-14). From 28.15 onwards – up to and including our verse – curses for the people's disobedience are covered in great detail (e.g. Deut. 28.58-59). Brueggemann (1997, p. 196) commenting on this section of Deuteronomy notes that Israel 'envisioned a precise symmetry of act and outcome': blessings for obedience but curses for disobedience. Such a context must be kept in mind when considering the rabbis' use of 28.66-68 here.

Over section 1-3 of *petiḥta* this portion of Deuteronomy is discussed by several rabbis. Allusions are made to the Four Empires (discussed below) under which Israel had suffered (*petiḥta* 2). A characteristic piece of creative rabbinic interpretation is offered on Deut. 28.68 based upon the similarity in the Hebrew spelling of 'in ships' (*ba'anyoth*) with that of (*ba'anyuth*) 'poverty of good deeds' (this translation in Simon, 1983, p. 2). The suggestion being that the people would be taken back to Egypt in

poverty – the shame of such a return is explained as that of a slave returning to his master (*petiḥta* 3).

In accordance with the form of classical proems, the discussion moves from its remote starting point (here Deut. 28.66-68) and concludes with the relevant base-verse, in this case *Esther* 1.1. The concluding comments around this base-verse are repeated throughout the *petiḥta* in sections 3, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, and 12. It is a good example of midrashic playfulness and creativity around similar sounding words for the purposes of bringing out new meaning. Recalling the ‘curses for disobedience’ context of the Deuteronomy verse expounded at length in this proem, here in their concluding remarks, the rabbis point to the sense in which the phrase ‘woe’ (Hebrew ‘*wai*’) can be brought out of the Hebrew letters making ‘it came to pass’ (*wayyehi*). Thus, the sense in the proems highlighted above is that there was ‘woe’ in the days of Ahasuerus.

This first proem has been examined in some detail in order to now highlight certain themes which are apparent throughout the *petiḥta* and, in fact, the remainder of the midrash which will be discussed in the following section. These themes may be termed as exile and redemption. There is firstly, the sense in which Israel may be responsible for its woeful situation of exile ‘in the days of Ahasuerus’. This is made clear in *petiḥta* 1-3 by the extended exposition of Deuteronomy 28.66-68 which as noted above is a ‘curses for disobedience’ text. In *petiḥta* 7 a warning about driving out the nations lest they become a thorn (Numbers 33.55) is cited. The verse is applied to the disobedience of Saul in 1 Samuel 15.2-3 in not striking down Amalek, and then connected to the appearance of Haman who sought to ‘destroy, slay and

exterminate' (*Esther* 3.13). Again, *petiḥta* 9 opens with Job 34.30a 'from the kingship of a *ḥānef* (hypocritical/godless) come the snares of the people'. The rabbis propose that such a hypocritical/godless king comes from the stubbornness of the people.

Closely connected, is the idea of the Four Empires (*petiḥta* 2, 4 and 5): Babylonia – Media/Persia – Greece – Edom (Rome) to which Israel had been subject since their exile at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar. Milikowsky (1997, p. 279) has noted that this idea serves as a 'recurring motif' in much rabbinic literature. It is also clear that the rabbis wrote from a position of continued exile or subjugation, as living under Rome was a contemporary concern (1997, p. 295). Association of Rome with the biblical antagonist Edom appears to have developed following the Roman destruction of the Temple in 70CE, and by the time ER was being composed, biblical ideas of Edom were strongly identified with the now Christian Rome as an 'eternal enemy of Israel' (Herr and Ehrlich 2007, p.158).

Such journeying back and forth between biblical and contemporary worlds is a key feature of rabbinic Scriptural interpretation. Neusner (1989c, pp. 131-145) has used the term 'writing with Scripture' to describe the rabbinic approach to addressing contemporary problems in midrash in which they were bold enough to claim Scripture as their own and restate its truths authoritatively for their contemporary world (1989c, p. 133). Further and crucially, because the world of Scripture was deemed so all-encompassing, the rabbis could ignore 'ordinary barriers of time' and instead move fluidly across the ages, reshaping an on-going 'biblical' narrative-experience (Yerushalmi, 1996, p. 17). As such, the characters and events from

Esther within ER are presented according to a fluid system connecting the biblical past, the present, and future Age to Come.

Important in this regard for ER (especially in *petiḥta* and early chapters) is the presentation of the Babylonian/Persian kings and the Temple. As the rabbis' presentation of the past is generally the biblical past, the kings referred to are those found in Scripture. This allows the rabbis to hold certain themes together in a way that would perhaps not be possible if consideration were given to all of the monarchs known to modern historians (see a helpful comparative Table in Koller, 2014, p. 178). Although there is a possible fifty years separating kings Cyrus and Ahasuerus (*ibid.*), the rabbis' biblical timeline places the latter directly following Cyrus. The significance is as follows: because Cyrus had decreed that the Temple be rebuilt, Ahasuerus following him, is held to be directly responsible for the future of the Temple (e.g. ER *petiḥta* 5). His subsequent disregard for the Temple is therefore more serious: 'The Holy Temple lies in ruins, and this evil one [Ahasuerus] is making drinking parties' (ER3.3).

On the whole, the Temple is a crucial topic for the rabbis that relates biblical experience with their current situation of exile and also a view of the future. Its destruction in biblical times can be linked with the destruction of the second Temple by Rome in 70CE. Levenson (1985) notes that, following this latter event, an understanding of the 'cosmic significance' of the eternal Temple connected the survival of Israel both in the present and in the Age to Come (1985, pp. 179-184). The roots of this eschatological view of the Temple are indeed seen in ER largely through the Gentile royalty and their disregard for the House of God (e.g. *petiḥta* 5,

8, ER1.1, 2.11, 3.5, 5.2). Thus, through the fluidity of rabbinic time which brings the Bible and future worlds together, and in which the notion of the Temple stands as a constant reality, a picture emerges of the nations' ruling powers continually standing against the prosperity of the Jews. Then as now, the rabbis seem to say, they have kept us under subjugation, something most explicitly shown through the disregard for what is truly most important, the Temple.

Through the exploration of disobedience leading to exile in the *petiḥta*, God takes centre stage. As the rabbis understood their role as uncovering what had been placed in the Bible by divine foresight, in opening *Esther* to speak to the current generation, God must be represented as completely present. In light of the absence of any reference to God in *Esther*, the divine presence is crucial for the application of the biblical text to the rabbis' own experience of exile and belief that God has not abandoned Israel. Thus, in ER *petiḥta* 4 exposition is made of Leviticus 26.44, utilising the Four Empires motif, saying in summary: God will not reject them in Babylon... Media... Greece... Rome, 'for I am *Hashem* [the Name] their God in the Age to Come'. This is then developed, using the same pattern with Roman Emperors Vespasian, Trajan, and *Esther's* villain Haman, this time concluding: 'I am *Hashem* their God in the days of Gog and Magog'. This apocalyptic battle from Ezekiel 38-39 is an event which the rabbis understood as leading to the messiah's arrival (Cohn-Sherbok, 2003, p. 450). Thus, far from abandoning Israel in exile, God is understood as acting in history – through the Four Empires – towards the final purpose of redemption and restoration.

The *petih̄ta* section establishes the themes exile and redemption as key interpretive tools for highlighting *Esther*'s meaning for the rabbis' contemporary age. As I now turn to consider the remainder of ER (chapters 1-10), it will become apparent how these themes are utilised throughout the document. In what follows, I will present a summary discussion of chapters 1-10 around the main characters of *Esther* roughly following the flow of the document's chapters.

3.2 Ahasuerus and Vashti

Parashah 1 proposes kingship as belonging to God, established in Israel, but given to the nations as a result of Israel's disobedience (ER1.13). As a result, the Temple was destroyed and its rebuilding halted (ER1.1; 1.10; 1.15). Nevertheless, the kings of the nations have a temporal rule unlike the permanent seat of Israel (ER1.11). Therefore, a king such as Ahasuerus is presented as a lesser ruler than his Israelite predecessors. For example, in ER1.12 the glorious throne of Solomon is said to have been carried through the Four Empires, but in his day Ahasuerus was not allowed to sit upon it because he was not a *cosmocrator* – that is, in an imported Greek word, a world ruler.

This idea is the subject of one of the most interesting portions of *parashah* 1, stretching over three sections: ER1.5, 1.7, 1.9, and concerning Ahasuerus' ruling 127 provinces. In ER1.5 the rabbis reveal a tradition that there were 252 provinces in the entire world over which other biblical kings had ruled. The question is asked why Ahasuerus should only have ruled over 127. This type of scriptural mystery, as discussed earlier, is not a problem for the rabbis, but an opportunity for fresh interpretation.

Ahasuerus is something of a contradiction for the rabbis, leading to his actions and even the letters of his name being put under scrutiny. Described as *rāshā'* (wicked) (ER2.5) and a *tipesh* (fool) (ER3.13), there was great mourning under his rule but also gladness and joy (ER1.3). He blackened the faces of Israel (ER1.1) but is said to have recorded every time someone did him a good deed (ER1.15). At the same time as hating Israel more than Haman (ER7.20), Ahasuerus is shown as understanding the futility of Haman's plot because, he tells him, God never forsakes Israel (ER7.13).

Similar attention is given to Queen Vashti in chapters 3-5. Regarding the king's drunken request for his queen to appear before his guests, a tradition had arisen among the rabbis that she must appear naked (ER3.13; 4.1). ER mentions this extra-biblical detail in passing, so it is interesting to examine a portion of the Talmud which treats the issue more fully. In *b.megillah*¹³ 12b it is proposed that she was asked to appear naked - 'measure for measure' - because Vashti used to make the daughters of Israel strip naked and work on the Sabbath. Further, the rabbis state that she refused to appear before the king because she had leprosy and that '[the angel] Gabriel came and fixed a tail on her'. ER knows nothing of these Talmudic details and instead provides Vashti a voice that she does not have in *Esther* to attempt to reason with Ahasuerus, albeit to no avail (ER 3.14).

The rabbis are interested in the reasons for Vashti's death. Although *Esther* 1.19 has that Vashti must simply never again come before the king, the rabbis assume that

¹³ *b.megillah* that is, the Megillah section of the Babylonian Talmud rather than the Jerusalem Talmud

she was executed for her disobedience (ER4.11; 5.2). Assuming that she is the daughter of Babylonian king Belshazzar, in ER4.8 Vashti's execution is justified by the disregard her father showed to the Temple vessels (Daniel 5.2-4), and her refusal to have the Temple rebuilt (ER5.2) Further, the *Gezerah Shavah* principle – drawing an analogy between texts based on use of the same word (Elman, 2014, p. 1863) - is utilised in ER3.9, based upon the word *gām* (also) in *Esther* 1.9 'Queen Vashti *also* gave a banquet...' and Genesis 3.6 '[Eve] *also* gave some to her husband...'. As the events of the Genesis verse led to death, so concludes Rabbi Ḥuna, Vashti's time to die had also come through Ahasuerus' anger at her refusal to perform.

3.3 Esther and Mordecai

As *Esther* takes place in Persia with a mostly Gentile cast of main characters, it is significant that the rabbis find a great deal of opportunity for inserting Jewish features into their exposition (Lerner, 2006, pp. 182-183). I have already noted the repeated references to the Temple not found in *Esther*, as well as the contextual suggestion of Deuteronomic curses for Israel's disobedience which seemingly led to their exile in Persia. Jewish identities are also given to some minor characters. For instance, in ER4.1 the rabbis desire to know the identity of 'the wise men who understood the times' (*Esther* 1.13). Rabbi Simon answers, 'this is the tribe of Issachar' citing 1 Chronicles 12.32 '...from Issachar, men *who understood the times*' [my italics]. Here, the rabbinic method of closely reading Scripture and reading it into the context of the midrash is clearly seen. The purpose in this case is to provide extensive Jewish elements into a biblical narrative which offers very few.

It is also the case that the two main characters, Esther and Mordecai, have their Jewish identities significantly augmented in ER. Esther for example is given a Jewish history not made explicit in the biblical text, being said to be a descendent of Saul (ER4.9, 6.11) and Rachel (ER6.12). Intrinsic to the Jewish identity here, is the religiosity given to Esther through which she relates (in the substantial prayer of ER8.7) to '*Hashem*, God of Israel'. Despite the apparent absence of God in *Esther*, the presence of *Hashem* is so closely tied to the identity of the people Israel, the rabbis are merely required to bring it out in the open.¹⁴

Esther is actually treated sparingly in ER. This is enlightening in light of recent feminist writing on rabbinic attitudes to women. Raveh (2014, p. 14) states: 'Rabbinic literature was written by men, concerns itself mainly with men, and aims to advance men's objectives'. This seems to be borne out by the manner in which Esther is significantly overshadowed by her cousin Mordecai, who, as discussed below, is portrayed as the real hero of the tale. Raveh goes on to observe that 'in the world of the sages, feminine identity is awarded its fullest representation when a woman becomes a wife to her husband' (Ibid, p. 58). Although not really explored in ER, there is an enlightening passage in the Talmud suggesting that, not only was Esther Mordecai's wife (*b.megillah* 13a) but that she also alternated between the lap of Ahasuerus and Mordecai (*b.megillah* 13b). There is something disturbing in a passage such as this, revealing the rabbinic perspective of Esther in relation to the men around her.

¹⁴ I look at the covenant relationship between Israel and God on pp. 65-68, and God's central place in ER on pp. 70-71.

Nevertheless, Esther is not ignored or degraded in ER. On the contrary, the passages that do speak of her are complimentary (ER6.5, 6.9). A point of real interest in ER's portrayal of Esther comes when one of the document's sources is considered. The seventh century narrative Midrash Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer (PRE) appears to have been borrowed from and reshaped by the author of ER fairly regularly within chapters 7-10 (see Atzmon, 2009). When the appropriate passages are compared it is apparent how ER edits material from PRE, related to the character of Esther. An example of this is found in ER10.8-9 which borrows from PRE chapter 50 (Friedlander, 1916, pp.405-407). PRE seems concerned to highlight the ascent in authority of Esther. Hence in the retelling of *Esther* 6.14 'the pages of Esther' (Friedlander, 1916, p.405) bring Haman to the banquet rather than the biblical 'the king's eunuchs'. This alteration is restored in ER10.8 back to 'the king's chamberlains' (Simon, 1983, p. 118) in a section which otherwise follows PRE closely.

ER10.9 continues PRE's (Friedlander, 1916, pp.406-407) narrative again a little later into the tale with Ahasuerus now raging in the garden after learning of Haman's plot (*Esther* 7.7). However, seemingly in a further rejection of the exaltation of Esther shown in PRE, an intriguing addition by ER found neither in the Bible or PRE appears to make clear her weakness – perhaps wishing to bring out her femininity in the presence of the two powerful men. With the king out of the room, Haman begs Esther to save his life, Ahasuerus re-enters and his reaction brings about Haman's execution. Both PRE and ER have the angel Michael serving a divine purpose at this moment, in pushing Haman onto Esther, but only ER10.9 adds that Esther 'cried out, "my lord, the king, he is violating me in thy presence!"' (Simon, 1983, p. 119). This

type of redaction coupled with the limited attention given to Esther in ER strongly suggest that its authors certainly wish to present her as an ideal Jewish character and the liberator of her people (ER6.7), but one existing in the shadow of the great Mordecai.

Mordecai is praised as righteous for raising the orphan Esther in his home (ER6.1), compared with Moses (ER6.2) who stood in the breach, 'predestined for redemption' (ER6.3), and Joseph who stood firm and was eventually given Pharaoh's ring (ER7.7). He is a great teacher of Torah (ER10.4), leading 22,000 children in study (ER8.7 and 9.4). He is also 'a king over the Jews' (ER10.12) and a man of peace (ER6.2; 10.12). Importantly, characteristics such as these have been identified by Blidstein (2007, p. 112) as expectations of the messiah within rabbinic thought. It could be argued then with Neusner (1989c, pp.143-145) that Mordecai is presented as a type of 'sage-messiah'.

Furthermore, in an interesting section of ER7.13¹⁵ which links to the earlier theme of Israel's disobedience, here in terms of their engaging in the feast of Ahasuerus, Mordecai is seen to appeal to the people not to partake lest they become subject of divine judgment. Crucially, the prophet Elijah appears in the scene to intercede for the Jewish people. Elijah was increasingly understood in rabbinic thought as being both a precursor and partner to the messiah (Aberbach, 2007, p. 334). His appearance here in ER7.13, to intercede and also warn Mordecai of the threat

¹⁵ Note that this chapter division is according to the Vilna Edition where it jumps from an extended ER7.13 to 7.19. Other editions divide these sections differently, but Elan, *et al.* (2013) and Simon (1983) both follow Vilna.

against the people, lends significant support to the idea of Mordecai as a messiah figure.

It must be noted finally, and as an introduction to Haman below, that Mordecai is also portrayed as having sense of humour. In ER10.4 Haman is sent by the king to honour Mordecai. Whilst in *Esther* 6.10-11 this is a concise reversal, one of many in the narrative, here the rabbis exploit the occasion for all its comic potential. The situation becomes almost farcical as, before Mordecai will agree to wear the royal attire, he must first bathe, then have a haircut before wearing the crown. In both cases Haman finds himself having to serve Mordecai, crying, 'I... master of the courts, have now become a bathhouse attendant and a barber!'. Finally, when Mordecai requires assistance to mount his horse, Haman lowers himself (literally) still further so that he can be stepped upon. This comical content surely reflects the growth of a tradition celebrating the humbling of Haman as the villain in the Purim festivities.

3.4 Haman

Haman is the only character whose place within the wider biblical history is explicitly queried in ER. In ER9.2 the rabbis from 'over there', that is, Babylonia, ask: 'where is Haman in the Torah?' This is resolved with a neat discussion of Genesis 3.11: 'have you eaten from the tree?' Noting the Hebrew for 'tree' (*hā'ets*) is the same as 'gallows', the rabbis find that with a simple exchange of vowels, 'have you eaten' (*hamin*) becomes Haman (*hāmān*). Thus, Haman being hung on his own gallows (*Esther* 7.10) is indeed found within the Torah.

Ultimately, Haman has been used by God for the divine purpose. ER7.1-3 explores ways in which he has been raised up in order to be brought down and display God's glory. With reference to Psalm 106.23 where God would have destroyed the Israelites was it not for the intercession of Moses, in ER7.10 Haman is mocked as the 'fool of the world' for planning to eliminate them. And in fact, God would make a new holiday for the Jews commemorating Haman's downfall (ER7.12). For the rabbis, there is simply nothing good about the 'wicked' Haman. He advised Ahasuerus to halt the rebuilding of the Temple (ER7.2; *petihta* 5), and stole the treasures of Judah (ER7.5). Further he sewed an idol on his clothes and demanded the people bow to him/it (ER7.5; 6.2), making himself into a god (ER7.8; see also *b.megillah* 19a). Accordingly, as just noted, much attention is given to Haman's downfall and humiliation in honouring Mordecai (ER10.4-5).

Much of the material relating to Haman in chapters 7-10 of ER has been adapted from late rabbinic sources from seventh to tenth centuries CE. As such it differs from the exegetical verse-centred style seen in the *petihta* and early chapters. For example, ER7.11 has an extended narrative describing how Haman selected the appropriate time on which to carry out his plan. Lerner (2006, p.184) suggests this may originate in a narrative midrash on *Esther*. The same is said about ER9.2 where God is seen to call upon the trees of creation to volunteer to be used for Haman's gallows (Ibid). Connecting with *petihta* 7 which presents Haman as a 'thorn' for Israel, in ER9.2 it is the thorn bush that is used for the gallows.

A crucial aspect of the rabbis' examination of Haman is that he is an Agagite and thus represents an ancient feud between Israel and Amalek. As Mordecai is from the

tribe of Benjamin (*Esther* 2.5) and Haman, an Agagite (3.1), is a descendant of Amalek, an allusion is made in *Esther* to 1 Samuel 15 when King Saul (also a Benjamite) failed to obey God's command to slay Agag of the Amalekites. When Mordecai refuses to bow before Haman in *Esther* 3.2 it is perhaps because he will not honour a representative of this ancient enemy. Interestingly, when discussing this section of the text, the rabbis are more concerned with the idol Haman is said to have sewn on to his clothing (ER6.2, 7.5) and the suggestion that Haman has in fact made himself into a god! (ER7.8; also *b.megillah* 19a). To have bowed before Haman then would have been to have bowed to an idol. Mordecai even takes the opportunity to cite Deuteronomy on the construction of idols for those who question his actions (ER7.8). Haman's idol is used consistently throughout rabbinic and Medieval Jewish thought, viewed as a sufficient motivation for Mordecai's negative actions towards his superior (Walfish, 1993, p. 179; Carruthers, 2008, p. 139).

The link with Mordecai, Haman, Saul and Agag, and the roots of the ancient feud between Israel and Amalek is a clear backdrop to ER. This is demonstrated by a regular usage in ER of Exodus 17.14: 'I will completely blot out the name of Amalek from under heaven' (ER4.10, 6.6, 10.13). Further in ER7.13, Haman justifies his plot to destroy the Jews on the basis on the long and troubled history between his Amalekite descendants and Israel, who because God was with them, gained the victory. Now however, having rebelled against God, the Jews are in exile, therefore the time is right for their destruction. This is foolishness – as the rabbis' audience, and anyone up to the present day attending the Purim service where Exodus 17 is annually read, would know – because God wars with Amalek 'from generation to generation' (Ex. 17.16).

The notion of Haman, and thus, Amalek as an eternal enemy of the Jews forms a crucial background to rabbinic interpretation of *Esther*. In *b.megillah* 7a biblical references to Amalek are given as support for *Esther's* place in the canon of Scripture. Koller (2014) notes that as the Jewish Scriptures (*Tanakh*) are divided into three: Torah, Prophets, Writings, Amalek must feature in all three. This means that *Esther's* inclusion in the Writings is necessary 'to fulfil the triple prophecy of Exodus (17.14)' (2014, p. 171). The eternal fight against Amalek was given a contemporary relevance when some in the rabbinic period connected it with Christian Rome which, as already noted, had its own biblical archetype, Edom (Horowitz, 2006, pp. 114-115).

3.5 Finale ER10.13-15

All is brought together in the final section. In ER10.13, utilising Leviticus 25.47-49 the rabbis present a summary of the *Esther* story culminating in the redemption brought by God and Mordecai/Esther. Haman is the 'foreigner... who becomes rich', while Israel becomes poor and is sold to the 'foreigner' (25.47), its poverty reflected by an existence in exile. Redemption comes from the hand of God and also Mordecai, 'one of [Israel's] relatives' (25.48). Finally, Esther, related to Mordecai, is 'a cousin... [who] may redeem [Israel]' (25.49).

Key ideas covered throughout the midrash are then briefly revisited. The ancient rivalry between Amalekites and Benjamites is reflected upon with the observation that God caused Esther and Mordecai to stand against Haman because 'Benjamin is a ravenous wolf' (Genesis 49.27; ER10.13). The exaltation of Mordecai is repeated

in ER10.14, here connected with ‘the greatness of Israel’. And finally (ER10.15), in bringing about such a great reversal at the first Purim ‘when those slated to be killed slew their killers’, the awesome works of God are proclaimed. The midrash concludes with a focus on one of these abundant divine attributes, peace. Having earlier noted how Mordecai was ‘a man of peace and a seeker of peace’ (ER10.12), this concentration on God’s peace must surely reflect the rest brought about in the Purim miracle. It should be recalled that, in a similar fashion, *Esther* itself ends with Mordecai speaking peace to his people (*Esther* 10.3).

3.6 Key Themes and Concepts in Esther Rabbah

Following this close reading of ER, I will now go on to summarise two key themes apparent in the Midrash which will form the basis of my Christian re-reading in Chapter Four. These themes, exile and redemption,¹⁶ are used by the rabbis to interpret *Esther* for their contemporary situation. Two concepts, election and God, which, while of clear and crucial importance, are ideas threaded through the entire midrash document rather than interpretive themes. To clarify my meaning here: it is apparent that God’s action on behalf of Israel is in evidence throughout ER, but it is through the interpretive themes of exile and redemption that this divine activity is brought out. I will first discuss ER’s use of election.

That Israel are a covenant people is assumed throughout ER and, as such, their importance is treated in the highest terms: ‘the world is impossible without Israel’

¹⁶ While I have not found it explicitly stated anywhere in the literature that Esther Rabbah has exile and redemption as its key interpretive themes, it is clear from the general comments about the exilic roots of rabbinic midrashim cited here, e.g. p. 52 (Milikowsky, 1997, p. 295) and p. 68 (Idel, 1993, p. 49), that the two themes are crucial to the rabbis’ interpretation of *Esther*. It should be noted that Neusner (1989c) argues for the message of Esther Rabbah being ‘Israel among the nations’ (1989c, p. 137), a situation which requires redemption at the hands of a ‘sage-messiah’ like Mordecai (Ibid, pp. 143-145).

(ER7.12). The notion of election stems from the Old Testament and it is this biblical origin and authority that allows the rabbis never to systematically explain how or why they believe Israel are chosen but rather to have the concept infiltrate every aspect of ER (Schechter, 1909, pp. 57-58). Speaking generally, Neusner (2000c) notes how rabbinic Judaism (as he describes it) transformed the Jews of their own time into 'Israel' as defined in Scripture through the idea of family. All Jews are 'Israel' through a genealogical link back to Abraham and Sarah, something which stands in contrast to the Christian notion of themselves as a spiritual 'Israel' (Ibid, pp. 230-237).

An early reference comes in ER *petiḥta* 3, where the election of Israel is connected to the Torah.¹⁷ Cohn-Sherbok (2003) discusses this linkage of election and the Torah as a 'constant theme' in rabbinic thought and sees the roots of the idea in Exodus 19.5 (2003, p. 427). Here then, in *petiḥta* 3, God reveals that, although being offered the words of Torah, the nations of the world rejected them. Therefore, as the sole guardians of Torah, Israel has a special relationship with the giver of those words, God. Kaminsky (2007) discusses how this idea is crucial to rabbinic thought of election: by accepting the Torah, Israel establishes itself as deserving of its election as the people of God (2007, p. 183).

Nevertheless, the bond between God and Israel is not simply a case of deservedness in ER but an eternal and unbreakable covenant. ER chapter 7 which covers the hatching of Haman's plot (*Esther* 3) provides the context for extensive exploration of God's everlasting covenant with Israel. For instance, ER7.10 offers a

¹⁷ It should be noted that this example cited is one of several answers offered by the rabbis in ER *pet.* 3 to the question: 'why was there no buyer of Israel?' which itself forms part of a longer examination of Deuteronomy 28.66-68 in ER *pet.* 1-3.

remarkable exposition of *Esther* 3.6 ('Haman sought to destroy all the Jews...') in which Israel are compared to stone and rock and a purple cloak through which the 'Holy One glorifies himself'. The section ends when God tells Haman how Moses's intercessory prayers once saved Israel. Attempting to destroy Israel then, is futile God declares, as 'they [Israel] are for salvation and you [Haman] are for hanging'. Significant in this passage, is the idea that even when Israel is disobedient towards God they will not be abandoned (see also ER7.12).

This is particularly important considering the context of exile through which *Esther* has been interpreted by the rabbis in ER. Israel's continued existence in exile is viewed as being a result of the people's disobedience to God's commands in the Bible. To stress that God remains with Israel, even through their disobedience, is of crucial import. As Schechter (1909, pp. 51-52) notes, 'Israel will be chastised for its sins, even more harshly than other nations for theirs; but this is only another proof of God's fatherly love'. This is certainly reassuring for the Jewish readers and hearers of the midrash in their self-understanding as elected, but for a contemporary reader the reference just cited to the 'other nations' may lead to reflection of a troubling aspect of Israel's election in ER, that is, the negative portrayal of the nations.

While Kaminsky (2007, p. 176) comments that dominant streams of rabbinic teaching affirmed Gentiles could be righteous before God (see also Neusner, 2000a, p. 230), and Schechter (1909, p. 62) who notes a general privileging of Israel as the covenant people in rabbinic thought but not an exclusion of others, the negative view of Gentiles in ER seems clearly put and cannot be ignored. I have already discussed the critical treatment of Ahasuerus, Vashti, and Gentile rulers in general, in the early

sections of the midrash above. In ER7.13 the nations are called 'strangers' before God and ER1.6 discusses various instances of a future destruction of the nations. Further, in the final chapter of the midrash the way Israel were permitted to unleash their vengeance on their 'enemies' (in *Esther* 9) is described as 'a monument to *Hashem*' (ER10.10). Here Israel is disconcertedly compared to a 'lion attacking sheep' (ER10.11).

That the nations are portrayed so negatively in ER may relate to *Esther's* setting outside of Israel and the rabbis' context in on-going exile. That is, a significant aspect of finding hope in such difficult circumstances is the idea of retribution for oppressors as part of future redemption in the Age to Come. The 'hard circumstances of exile' through which 'talmudic-midrashic thought evolved' (Idel, 1993, p. 49) reveals a key example of how the rabbis' method of 'writing with Scripture' can be seen as addressing contemporary problems. The threat of exile hangs over Israel for most of Hebrew Scripture. God is shown to warn Israel repeatedly that should the people turn away from their God, they would eventually be removed from their homeland. This came to pass around 586BCE following Josiah's reign (see 2 Kings 24-25). The book of *Esther* is set within this exilic context (*Esther* 2.6) showing events concerning the Jewish community in the Persian kingdom. The rabbis make interpretive connections between this biblical exile and their own perception of Jewish continued experience of exile and subjugation expressed in the common rabbinic motif of the Four Empires (Babylonia, Media/Persia, Greece and Rome). Thus, by 'writing with Scripture' the rabbis can continue the narrative of Israel's existence in exile from the time of *Esther* to their own day.

However, the rabbis do not accept that God has abandoned Israel in exile. As De Lange (2000, p. 201) notes, rabbinic writing came increasingly to explore the notion of a messianic age when the exile would end, and the people would be restored into God's presence and rest. The rabbis' utilised a certain typological approach with regards to this Age to Come. Yerushalmi (1996, p. 21) notes that 'for the rabbis the Bible... [displayed] a revealed pattern of the whole of history'. This 'pattern' meant that past acts of redemption like the exodus from Egypt formed a model of what lay ahead (Neusner, 1989c, p. 140). Interpreted typologically, these salvation events foreshadowed the blessings of the Age to Come. Hanson (2002, p. 13) has referred to this as 'fulfilled typology', that is, 'recurrence in the future of an event connected with a crisis of redemption in the past' (Ibid, p. 14). It follows then that the Purim miracle, 'that [God] performed, the likes of which had never previously occurred' (ER10.10), is indeed one such past act of redemption deserving of future eschatological significance in ER. In ER, an exposition of Leviticus 25.47-48 concludes that God had foreseen Purim in the Torah (ER10.13), and that it would stand as a 'monument to *Hashem* [the Name]' (ER10.10). The idea that Haman's attempt to destroy the Jews is pure foolishness is clearly put: 'uproot heaven and earth first, and afterwards annihilate [the Jewish people]!' (ER7.11). Thus, I suggest that, in line with the rabbis' interpretation of *Esther* for their contemporary situation, it is understood that, just as God brought rest and redemption to Israel in the Purim miracle, God will do the same in the Age to Come.

A messianic age, of course requires a messiah, that is, an anointed servant of God. Blidstein (2007, p. 112) summarises the rabbinic presentation of the messiah as 'prophet, warrior, judge, king, and teacher of Torah'. As discussed above (pp. 60-61),

Mordecai fulfils many of these roles in ER and it would appear clear that he is presented as a type of the messiah. A crucial aspect of ER's portrayal of Mordecai is that he works alongside, and not in any sense in place of, God in bringing about the salvation of the people: '[God] will perform a salvation for Israel through Mordecai and Esther' (ER6.1). This is indeed important considering the absence of any explicit reference to God in the text of *Esther*.

It should be clear from the discussion so far that there is no space in ER for a comment such as this from Dunne (2014, p. 95) that 'finding God in *Esther* is more difficult than any Where's Waldo puzzle'. For the rabbis, God is over all and, while not directly active in personal affairs as in the majority of biblical events, remains involved from on-high. The way the rabbis 'write with Scripture' to interpret *Esther* provides ample opportunity with which to articulate how God remains active in the lives of the covenant people, albeit from a distance, hidden from view. The claim that God is not simply hidden but absent is put in the mouth of Haman (ER7.13) who asks: 'where is [God's] strength and might? He has already become old!' The ludicrous nature of such a claim is clear from these words given to Mordecai in ER8.6: 'Do you think that the Holy One, blessed is He, will abandon Israel?'. The necessary response to God who is active, yet hidden, is a devotion to Torah as exemplified by Mordecai, and advocated by the rabbis: 'Who cries alas! Who cries woe?... One who does not toil in the Torah' (ER5.1).

In order to relate to God, hidden from view in exile, God's covenant people must seek *Hashem* in Scripture. Revealing the ultimate example of this searching that encapsulates midrash, ER is itself immersed in Scripture. When Scripture is

understood as the holy work of a perfect author, the midrash is thus also immersed in God. In fact, it may be possible to claim that not one event from *Esther* is considered without the involvement of God. The plumbing of the deep riches of Scripture to continue the biblical narrative into a contemporary situation would not allow it.

3.7 Concluding Comments

In this chapter I have attempted to closely examine and summarise the main points of *Esther Rabbah*. Through examination of the introductory *petiḥta* section and ways in which the characters are portrayed through chapters 1-10 I have tried to draw out the essence of the document. Finally, I have highlighted two key interpretive themes, exile and redemption, which are used by the rabbis to give *Esther* contemporary significance, and two concepts running through the work, election and God. These will form the basis of my Christian re-reading of *Esther* in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Re-reading *Esther* after *Esther Rabbah*

In this chapter I will attempt a Christian re-reading of *Esther* in light of my engagement with *Esther Rabbah* (ER). In accordance with the model of comparative theology I described in Chapter One, engagement with this ‘Other’ text is intended to have deepened my understanding of my own Christian tradition as well as challenged my prejudgements of post-biblical Jewish traditions. It is important to note that the proposed re-reading is not an interreligious attempt to assimilate traditions, rather it will be a Christian re-reading that has been informed by interreligious engagement. My re-reading of *Esther* will be based around the themes of ER highlighted in a previous chapter: exile and redemption. Further concepts election and God, while of clear and crucial importance, are, in my view, ideas threaded through the entire midrash document rather than interpretive themes used to bring *Esther* into a contemporary situation. Therefore, my re-reading of *Esther* will be based around exile and redemption, with issues of election and God, as in ER, threaded throughout.

4.1 Preparing the way for a re-reading of *Esther*

In Chapter Two I discussed certain contemporary approaches to interpreting Scripture. As such it is not necessary to cover that ground again here. It will be helpful however to briefly summarise the key points of the discussion.

Contemporary biblical interpretation is built upon the foundations of the historical-critical methods most dominant in the nineteenth/early-twentieth centuries. Here, as

discussed more fully above (pp. 31-32), the concern is to establish the original meaning behind biblical texts by establishing, for instance, the intended message of an author through the redaction of certain source material. Critical methods are neither 'Christian' or 'Jewish' by nature and to some extent may be said to seek neutrality by avoiding theological insights connected to the life of those in a religious tradition. Although the recent postmodern context questions such neutrality, recognising that each reader brings their own pre-judgements to what they read, historical-critical methods are still widely used by scholars alongside e.g. literary, feminist, and reader-response criticisms as means of interpreting biblical texts.

Modern scholars generally seek to interpret a biblical text based on aspects known as: *behind*, *within*, and *in front of* the text. Tate (2013, p. 6) has argued that 'interpretation is impaired when any [of these three approaches] is given pre-eminence at the expense of neglecting the other two'. Indeed, it is the failure of historical-methods to fully connect historical and cultural issues of biblical texts with the 'peculiar dynamics of Israel's *religious* literature' (Childs, 1979, p. 40 [my italics]), that prompted Brevard Childs to develop an important Christian interpretive whole Bible approach,¹⁸ often referred to as canonical criticism.

As introduced on pp. 34-36, canonical criticism is a contemporary approach to interpretation which seeks to consider each text within its canonical context. The place of a text within the Scriptural canon is where and how it is to be interpreted. Here, there is a crucial question of which canon is being referred to, as this study concerns interpretation of a biblical text from Jewish and Christian perspectives, and

¹⁸ I discuss what might constitute a 'Christian' reading of the Bible above on pp. 33-34.

clearly the two traditions each have different biblical canons. Nonetheless, as argued on pp. 23-24, in terms of the Old Testament/*Tanakh*, this is shared by Jewish and Christians traditions and I would maintain that, in this study, I am dealing with one shared biblical text but differing interpretative traditions.

As a work of *Christian* comparative theology, the proposed re-reading of *Esther* in this study must take place in the context of the Christian biblical canon which of course, includes the New Testament, not shared by Jewish communities. A key aspect of the canonical approach is that Old and New Testaments are not separated but are treated as two distinct witnesses to the same divine story. In something of a similar way, within Jewish traditions, the *Tanakh* is not considered alone but alongside works such as the Mishnah and Talmud. Childs (1985) is correct to state that following the closing of the Old Testament canon, 'a different canonical process began for both faiths in the growth of the rabbinic and evangelical traditions' (Ibid, p. 7). The helpful point here (also noted by Jenson, 2003, p. 3, Brettler, 2011, p. 506 and Klawans, 2011, p. 518), is that, while the Old Testament/*Tanakh* is the text which forms the basis of both Jewish and Christian traditions, it was necessary for the communities' development as distinct religious traditions that further canonical writings were added.

As part of the Jewish rabbinic tradition, ER treats *Esther* as part of the whole story of the *Tanakh*, asking what can be brought out of Scripture by using *Esther* as a window to see out onto a contemporary situation. There is no concept of separating the individual text from its wider canonical setting. Here, rabbinic midrash is similar to the contemporary canonical approach which locates the meaning of the biblical text

within the larger themes of the canonical context. Although very different in many ways, neither interpretive form will separate a biblical text from its immediate Scriptural context. When re-reading *Esther* after ER then, it is of the upmost importance to consider the text as Scripture. To isolate it from its place in the canon would be to disregard a fundamental aspect of the rabbinic approach that is extremely constructive for contemporary biblical interpretation.

It is interesting to note that it is the anomaly of the apparent absence of God in *Esther* that often focusses the mind of interpreters towards its canonical context. Teuffel (2009, p. 29) states that '*Esther* drives us to a proper canonical reading', '...which relates the *blank spaces* of texts to Scripture as a whole' (2009, p. 30 [my italics]). These 'blank spaces' may relate to the theological allusions found throughout the narrative in place of direct reference to God such as the Joseph narrative, the Passover, and Saul and Agag where God is explicitly involved.¹⁹ These, Firth (2010, pp. 33-34) suggests, lead *Esther* to 'ask' to be read in the light of the Old Testament. Reading *Esther* canonically establishes God in the text despite being absent from the words on the page. With God now assumed, it provides the opportunity for a fuller comprehension of the Persian Jews' salvation, now seen as being in line with other Scriptural instances of God's saving action. A key consideration in understanding the deliverance of the Jews in *Esther* is the notion of election, that is, they are saved according to promises of an everlasting covenant made with their ancestors throughout the Bible. As already noted (pp. 65-68), this is an important thread running through ER and it is necessary to consider in more detail some of the issues around election in a canonical context.

¹⁹ See the helpful summary in Berlin (2001), pp. xxxvi-xl.

The systematic linkage of one key concept such as election in both Old and New Testaments is significant for the canonical approach as a Christian method of interpretation. From this perspective, Jewish deliverance in *Esther* might directly impact Christian believers: God's covenant people were saved in *Esther*, enabling the genealogy of Jesus, which includes Jeconiah and his descendants in 'the exile' (Matthew 1.11-12, *Esther* 2.6), to continue. Following Christ's death and resurrection, Christian believers are adopted, themselves becoming part of the covenant people (e.g. Romans 8.15). Thus, 'if Haman's decree had not been overcome it would have meant no Christianity' (Wells, 2013, p. 90). This argument may have something to it, however engagement with ER suggests that election is also a crucial concept for rabbinic reading of *Esther*, but in a very different way to that of Christian understanding.

Election finds its roots in the Old Testament/*Tanakh* and is fundamental to Jewish and Christian understanding. It is useful to follow Kaminsky (2007) here who notes that both traditions 'emphasise certain aspects of the Hebrew Bible's election theology while de-emphasising others' (2007, p. 191). He notes that tensions between issues of conditional or non-conditional covenants, or the relationship between God's imperative and human action in election are apparent within the Bible, and that the distinct Jewish and Christian theologies of election have grown out of struggles and engagement with 'certain parts of the biblical heritage' (Ibid, p. 181).

Kaminsky examines ways in which Christianity has developed the notion of ‘God’s mysterious and inscrutable choice’ (Ibid, p. 181), that is, how election cannot be earned by human action. For instance, he cites Romans 9.3-16 which uses portions of Genesis, Malachi 1.2-3, and Exodus 33.19 to conclude that ‘[election] depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy’ (Romans 9.16 NRSV). Such use of the Old Testament for Christian theology might be contrasted to that of rabbinic thought where Scripture is employed in various midrashim to develop ideas of Israel’s deservedness of their election (Ibid, pp. 182-183). In Chapter Three (p. 66) I gave the example of ER *petihta* 3 where, by accepting the words of Torah where other nations rejected them, Israel shows itself worthy of its election as the people of God. These examples from Christianity and the rabbinic midrash reveal something of the rich witness to election evident in the Old Testament/*Tanakh* which enables significant diverging traditions to arise.

The notion of Israel as the covenant people as drawn out of the Bible is crucial to understanding the interpretive decisions made in ER. It is because of Israel’s election that God remains with them through their on-going exile and will redeem them in the Age to Come. Similarly, the election of God’s people can be a useful lens for viewing *Esther* by Christians following the story in its canonical context. The employment of election with relation to *Esther* by the two communities is not straightforward. For instance, the problematic view of ‘the nations’ in ER and the notion of judgment on such outsiders related, in this case to the Purim miracle when Israel ‘like a lion attacking sheep’ (ER10.11) took vengeance on their enemies.²⁰

²⁰ Noted on p. 68 above.

This unsettling aspect of outsiders in the concept of election is evident in aspects of Jewish and Christian history. Those identified as 'Other', as unchosen, may be excluded and even treated with violence (Moberly, 2013, p. 54), if they are perceived as challenging the 'elected community's status by making their own claims to election'. After reviewing the turbulent relationship between the two traditions (and Islam), Sacks (2015, p. 98) states, 'their relationship is sibling rivalry, fraught with mimetic desire: the desire for the same thing, Abraham's promise'. Here then, through the biblical narrative of God's choosing Abraham and promising an 'everlasting covenant' between him and his descendants, the concept of election is central. The problem, as Sacks notes, is that 'there is one privileged position... for which more than one candidate competes... what is at stake is the most precious gift of all: God's paternal love' (Ibid, p. 99).

Out of this difficult relationship between religious traditions and their self-understanding as the covenant people comes the potential for exclusivist attitudes and violent confrontations. Sometimes this violent action is carried out in God's name against outsiders, known as 'holy war'. Here, one's being in a covenantal relationship with God may demand certain behaviours to protect the sanctity of the relationship (Moberly, 2013, p. 72). This is worth mentioning here because of the way in which the vengeance on Israel's enemies at the Purim miracle (*Esther* 9.1-16) seems associated with ideas of 'holy war' in ER. Just as the rabbis place the act of salvation commemorated at Purim clearly in the hands of God, so also do they portray Israel's taking vengeance over their enemies as 'a monument to *Hashem*' (ER10.10).

Relishing in the triumph over Israel's enemies is also to be found in *Esther* 9.1-16 where it states that '[the Jews] did what they pleased to those who hated them' (9.5). While this has troubled some commentators,²¹ Berlin's (2001, 2014) reading of *Esther* as being framed around the carnival atmosphere of the Purim festival allows her to view the violence as a 'mock battle [which] serves as a safety-valve for the release of feelings of endangerment' (2014, p. 1632). Might there be an element of the rabbis, in a manner of speaking, entering into the spirit of the story through their hyperbolic descriptions e.g. of Israel as a lion attacking sheep? Berlin (2014, p. 1619) again, comments how the rabbinic midrashim seem to have intuited the comedy of *Esther*, '[adding] to the fun by their preposterous embellishments of the story and its characters'. This may be a helpful way of looking at the issue of the violence in *Esther*, however a perspective such as that of Berlin is in danger of reducing the seriousness of the salvation awarded to the people. In fact, importantly, it is this salvation, or 'rest' (*nuah*), rather than the violent triumph which is commemorated through the Purim festival in *Esther* (9.22). This seems to be the case also in the closing sections of ER where the focus rests on the abundant peace of God (ER10.15). It is crucial to recall that this salvation, and subsequent rest/peace, such as provided at Purim, is given because the Jews are the covenant people whose very existence is under significant threat in *Esther*.

The notion of election stems largely from the promises found in the Old Testament/*Tanakh* where God invites a people into an eternal covenant. For instance, in Genesis 17.7 God says to Abram: 'I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants...'. Clearly an

²¹ Bush (1996, pp. 332-333) provides a helpful summary.

‘everlasting covenant’ is to be understood as one which stands for all time. Were a threat against God’s chosen, such as that of Haman who sought to ‘destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews’ (*Esther* 3.13) allowed to be carried out, the ‘everlasting covenant’ would be invalidated and thus the faithfulness of the giver of the covenant promises, God, would be called into question. Trust in the faithfulness of God is key to positively understanding the shared election of both Jewish and Christian communities. It follows, as Novak (2003, pp. 98-99) argues, if one community somehow ceases to be elected, then God’s promises of an ‘everlasting covenant’ are proved to be false. As both communities base their position as God’s chosen on interpretations of the same set of biblical promises, if those promises are proved false by the cessation of one community’s election, then the other can either align itself with a God now shown to be unfaithful, or confess that its own election may also be in question. Neither position being desirable, it is better then, to trust in the promises of an ‘everlasting covenant’ that in different ways reaches to Jewish *and* Christian communities.

This shows the great error of supersessionism, a position that has featured in Christian thought throughout its history. Joslyn-Siemiatkoski (2010, p. 90) describes how a supersessionist position qualifies its notion that the Church replaces the Jews as God’s chosen people, with two further ideas. First, supposed Jewish responsibility for the death of Jesus Christ led to God ending the covenant with them, demonstrated by the Temple’s destruction in 70CE. Second, as the death and resurrection of Christ enables humanity to enter fully into a relationship with God, the Jewish role in God’s salvation for the world, is annulled. Such ideas, now widely rejected by Christian theologians (Jenson, 2003, p. 5), are clearly based upon a

negative view of Jewish tradition that has no regard for its on-going religious expression. But crucially, a supersessionist position also fails to consider the 'everlasting covenant'. The ease with which God apparently dispenses with the promise to biblical Israel, should seriously undermine Christian supersessionist confidence. In this light, it is easier to accept the eternal election of Christians as promised by God if the election of the Jews is equally everlasting. Surely then, the rabbis of ER are right to mock as futile Haman's desire to destroy the Jews (ER7.10), but then Christians are also correct when they ask in a more general sense, 'who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen?... who shall separate us from the love of Christ?' (Romans 8.33/35).

Summarising the discussion so far, it is important for Christians to appreciate *Esther* within the Scriptural canon of Old and New Testaments with the fundamental notion of election at the centre. However, Christian election as Israel should not necessitate the Jewish community ceasing to identify themselves as such. Recognising that *Esther* also exists within the distinct Jewish Scriptural canon and has been interpreted for a Jewish context with election crucial to its interpretation, suggests that reflection upon *Esther* as Scripture must surely strive to appreciate the importance of the text in the living experience of two religious traditions and attempt to imaginatively incorporate insights from both, but without seeking to assimilate the traditions' interpretive contributions into one indistinct interreligious reading.

Despite the importance of a canonical reading of *Esther*, this study cannot be tied to the type of canonical criticism, such as that associated with Childs, where meaning is already derived from the canonisation process embarked upon by Church tradition,

and the role of the interpreter is to attend to that established meaning (Hafemann, 2016, pp. 111-112). Rather, the re-reading of *Esther* must be able to consider approaches that are both ancient and modern, from Jewish and Christian traditions, allowing for some sort of 'moving beyond' (Moberly, 2016, p. 655) which is necessary for *Esther* to be read in a way that might be described as post-critical. That is, moving beyond an established meaning derived from Church tradition; moving beyond the historical-critical approach's desire to locate original meaning. Indeed, working post-critically enables a connection with the relationship that exists between the biblical text of *Esther*; the Jewish and Christian faith communities that read, learn from, and are challenged by the text in their distinct ways; and God, the inspiration behind the biblical text (Ochs, 1995).

Above all, a post-critical re-reading of *Esther* must be a *theological* reading. Because the approach seeks to value relationship as part of its interpretive perspective, God's involvement with the people in the Scriptural text is assumed, just as God's involvement with the people in the world is assumed. It is crucial for the rabbis of ER that God is active in *Esther* and remains so for their contemporary context. Similarly, God must be sought in a Christian reading of *Esther* so that it may be brought into a twenty-first century context. And here it should be said that, despite the lack of references to God and religious observance, contemporary Christian commentators generally find God active within the events of *Esther*.

As God may be considered hidden or 'veiled' in *Esther*, causing a state of 'theological ambiguity' (Day, 2005, p.18), Reid (2008) has suggested the reader is being prompted to 'do theology' (2008, p. 55), that is, to search and inquire as a

means for creating and building faith (Ibid, p. 49). This needs further comment as it can be related to the concept of *hester panim* (the hidden face of God). Devine (2016) discusses how the rabbis understood the divine presence (*Shekhinah*) going with Israel into exile and also returning from exile with them in the future redemption (here he cites *b. megillah* 29a), but that they sense that for now God is somehow present from a distance (2016, p. 66). This is even connected to *Esther* in the Talmud through the similarity in sound of *‘ester* (Esther) and *hester* (hide): ‘Where is Esther indicated in the Torah? — (in the verse) “And I will surely hide [*hester*] my face”’ (*b. hullin* 139b). The context of the cited verse (Deuteronomy 31.18) is important as it concerns Israel’s disobedience, something which, as already noted (e.g. p. 50), is viewed in ER as the cause of their existence in exile.

Although rabbinic use of *hester panim* is largely focussed on divine punishment for Israel’s disobedience, particularly in the form of ‘foreign domination’ (Balentine, 1983, p. 111), it is unwise to jump to the conclusion that the face of God is hidden due to human disobedience alone. Balentine observes that hiddenness is ‘an integral part of the nature of God’ (1983, pp. 175-176, cited in Shimon, 2016, p. 196). It follows then that God’s hiddenness in the Old Testament, ‘did not stop Israel pondering the character, purpose and implications of Yahweh’ (Brueggemann, 1997, p. 334), but rather, the experience was used to ‘magnify [Israel’s] claims for the generous, creative and faithful governance of Yahweh’ (Ibid, p. 357). Here, the *Shekhinah* mentioned above is important. God’s hiddenness seems intrinsic to the discomfoting experience of exile, and yet, within such experiences, somehow God also remains present in the life of the covenant people. Raphael (2003) is helpful here in exploring how it is perhaps the dominant perception of the patriarchal God

that is most problematic to understanding the divine presence as remaining with the people in the most difficult of circumstances (2003, p. 52). Observing that ‘the *Shekhinah* is a manifestation of God defined by her presentness’ (Ibid, p. 54), Raphael goes on to describe ways in which this particular presence is always among the covenant people collectively in a divine-human partnership (Ibid, pp. 54-55).

This idea of partnership is helpful when considering *Esther* in further revealing the inadequacy of understanding God’s hiddenness purely as punishment for disobedience. In ER, while reminding readers of the causes of their exilic circumstances, the rabbis are keen to portray the instances of divine intervention on Israel’s behalf (e.g. ER7.12, 10.1), alongside a presentation of Mordecai and Esther as faithful and expectant as they act for the good of their people (e.g. ER8.7, 10.13). It is clear the redemption in the Purim miracle came through a combination of divine *and human* activity, as ‘[God] will perform a salvation for Israel through Mordecai and Esther’ (ER6.1). Further, in ER4.2, God is shown listing various titles for Israel, one of which is *re’a-i* (my companions). This suggests that partnering together as ‘companions’ is intrinsic to the relationship between God and Israel in exile. For Steinsaltz (2011) God’s unexpected presence ‘amidst the persecution, the difficulties, and the uncertainty’ of exile is the source of the extraordinary joy experienced at Purim: ‘there too, God is present’ (2011, p. 181).

The mystery of God’s covenant love then is shown through God’s being at the same time eternally present yet hard to find. Perhaps by withdrawing, God desires to draw people into a divine-human partnership by inviting consideration of whether such a relationship is worth pursuing. In response, consider the parables of the lost sheep

and lost coin in Luke 15.1-10 and the joy expressed when what was lost and searched for is found. Or Steinsaltz again, who observes in Purim an 'outburst of joy' which stems from seeking God: 'one searches – and suddenly, one finds' (Ibid, p. 181). Perhaps searching and finding God in exile is to also realise that the divine presence was there all along. But it appears God must be actively sought out: 'one who hides wants others to search for him' (Ibid, p. 180).

Here then, it is important to recall the nature of rabbinic interpretation of Scripture in midrash as *drsh* (searching, seeking). In their on-going exilic situation, the rabbis urge a devotion to Torah, such as in the example of Mordecai (e.g. ER8.7, 9.4, 10.4) as well as through their own practice of *drsh*, to find God's presence and understand their situation. There may be a connection between this approach and Reid's (2008, p. 49) proposal for a seeking out 'the mystery of the veiled presence of God' in order to create and build faith. Here, the most appropriate way to engage in theological inquiry over the possible hiddenness of God in *Esther* and in one's own life experience is to actively search the Scriptures, even to the point of somehow inhabiting their world. This is a post-critical idea, where traditional understanding of believers being somehow located within and instructed by the overarching biblical narrative (Fodor, 2005, p. 235), can be revisited by contemporary interpreters seriously considering the relationship existing between the Bible (and its interpretation), and the religious communities who 'seek its meaning in order *to live in the presence of God*' (Signer, 2000, p. 97 [my italics]). In this, it would certainly be a mistake to dismiss the great benefits of critical research over recent centuries, but in 'doing theology' in the spirit of *drsh*, critical methods can be imaginatively incorporated into the overall inquisitive theological perspective.

A post-critical approach which has *drsh* at its core will be crucial to the re-reading of *Esther*. Seeking out God's presence in *Esther* and its implications for the contemporary age will involve some form of inhabiting the world of Scripture, looking back at the biblical story itself as well as looking forward to the promised redemption in the future to correctly position oneself within the on-going narrative. Again, a return to a pre-critical perspective such as that of ER is not being proposed, nor is a kind of contemporary midrash on *Esther*. Rather, in exploring how a re-reading of *Esther* might be *informed* by ER, the connections relating to theological inquiry between midrashic and post-critical approaches to biblical interpretation are considered. Reading post-critically can indeed build upon rabbinic *drsh*, in terms of seeking God in the Scriptures and the world, as well as incorporating the notion of inhabiting the world of the Bible to the extent that the contemporary context is positioned as part of a longer narrative.

With that said, it is necessary, before moving on to re-read *Esther*, to briefly comment on the context of exile. Given the import of exile in ER,²² my re-reading will be framed around this theme (and redemption). This brief section is intended to prepare the ground for the re-reading by looking at recent Christian discussion on 'the Church in exile'. Initially it can be stated, with Evans (1997), that the teaching and actions of Jesus Christ may be underscored by 'exile theology' (1997, p. 281). Jesus's use of Old Testament Scripture such as Daniel, Zechariah and Second Isaiah is connected to ideas of exile (Ibid, pp. 292-293). Further, Evans describes actions such as appointing twelve apostles as a symbol of the 'reconstitution of the

²² As is discussed throughout this study, e.g. pp. 12, 68, 90.

twelve tribes of Israel' and that this 'twelve' would naturally suggest restoration from exile (Ibid, p. 282). Similarly, the New Testament often connects Jesus's followers with exile. 1 Peter for example begins: 'to God's elect, exiles scattered throughout the provinces...' (1.1). This notion has been in evidence to varying degrees throughout the history of the Church and found expression recently in a statement of Evangelical preacher Billy Graham who, perhaps alluding to ideas by St Augustine (Mohler, 2016, p. 481), is quoted as saying: 'The Bible says that as long as we are here on Earth, we are *strangers in a foreign land*. There are enemies to be conquered before we *return home*. This world is not our home; our citizenship is in heaven' (cited in Grossman, 2018, [my italics]).

Out of this context arises the recent discussion in Christian theology about 'the Church in exile'. This understands that Christianity in the West enjoyed for many centuries a privileged position of authority within society often referred to as Christendom. Throughout recent decades this position has diminished and now the Church is one-among-many expressions of religion or no religion known as post-Christendom. Such a situation requires significant repentance (Greek: *metanoia*) that is, rethinking, from Christians about how to operate from the margins of society rather than the privileged centre. It is argued by Beach (2015), that the metaphor of exile, and particularly the lessons learned from Israel's experiences of exile in Scripture, through which they 'learned much about faithful survival in hostile societies' (Lindbeck, 2000b, p. 365), might be of significant import to Christians in articulating contemporary experience of geographical, cultural or spiritual dislocation in a post-Christendom context (Beach, 2015, pp. 20-21).

This seems appropriate, although I would add that there may also be helpful lessons for Christians to learn from Jewish post-biblical perceptions of exile, such as in the interpretation of *Esther* in ER that this study is engaged with. Brueggemann (1997, p. 77) is helpful here in stating that ‘exile [is] a paradigmatic event for the Jewish community and ... homecoming... a profound anticipation...for [the Old Testament] text and its on-going community’. He goes on to say that ‘in its paradigmatic focus on crucifixion and resurrection, the Christian community seeks roughly to speak about the same experienced and anticipated reality as do Jews’ (Ibid). Both communities, in their different forms of expression, have an awareness that this current age is not all that there is, but rather, they are waiting for a full, final redemption. The use of metaphorical language such as ‘exile-homecoming’ or ‘crucifixion-resurrection’ can be helpful to aid the articulation of this experience if not applied too rigidly.

This point about ‘metaphorical language’ is crucial. Early Christian notions of exile developed at a time when Jesus’s followers were experiencing persecution and expulsion. From the fourth to the early twentieth centuries however, the Church, now dominant, often found itself as persecutor. In the Middle Ages for instance, ‘ousting Jews through persecution and death became a broad undercurrent of European Christian society’ (Norris, 2002, p. 110). Thus, considering the actual and extended experience of Jewish exile often (but not always) at the hands of the Christendom Church, it is vital that any Christian use of metaphorical exilic language is approached with humility. It must be noted here that the usefulness of exile in terms of post-Christendom British Christianity is found in what may be termed as a ‘spiritual’ sense. That is, the term’s appropriateness is related to the loss of comfort, of being at ‘home’, and of the Church now having to seek a new way of being, as a

‘creative minority, who live in the world but experience it in a profoundly different way’ (Sayers, 2017, p. 166).

Such a new way of being can indeed be informed by ER where time spent in exile is not to be in withdrawal from society, but in faithful devotion to Scripture in search of the hidden face of God and understanding of one’s circumstances – which of course, has practical implications regarding one’s attitudes and actions towards one’s neighbour. Similarly, for Sayers, it is asking questions of how a disciple of Christ should engage with different aspects of culture that ‘sends one to the Scriptures’ (Ibid, pp. 167-168). Both the rabbinic *drsh* approach and contemporary post-Christendom context necessitate a certain entering into the world of Scripture.²³ Beach (2015) argues for a ‘narrative holiness’: ‘living within the story of Scripture and dynamically interacting with that story in order to faithfully embody it in a contemporary context’ (2015, p. 178). It is important to consider the latter half of this citation. An attempted replication of the biblical story is not what is sought here but rather a form of, what Wells (2013, p. 18) refers to as ‘improvisation’, the ability to ‘apply old wisdom and familiar practices in new settings’. Concluding this section then, I find use of the term exile in reference to a contemporary post-Christendom Western Christian context appropriate for the forthcoming re-reading of *Esther*. However, such metaphorical use of exile must be approached sensitively, always aware of the vast differences in understanding of exile between Jewish and Christian communities.

²³ I have discussed rabbinic *drsh* and entering the world of Scripture above on pp. 85-86.

4.2 Re-Reading *Esther*: Exile and Redemption

The events of *Esther* take place entirely outside of Israel. *Esther* 2.5-6 provides the context, where Mordecai (or, more likely, his ancestors listed in 2.5) had been ‘exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into *exile* [or more literally, ‘with the *exiles* who were *exiled*’, Bush, 1996, p. 358] along with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into *exile* by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon’ (2.6 JPS). The repeated use of the root *glh* (exile) brings emphasis to this crucial backdrop to the *Esther* narrative. The fate of God’s people now rests among the nations as they exist in exile. However, the events of the text suggest how ‘God’s power extends beyond the land of Israel’ (Berlin, 2001, p. 25), something clearly important for the rabbis of ER, when, centuries later, they interpreted *Esther* for their own context of extended exile. The recent discussion of ‘the Church in exile’ highlighted on pp. 87-89, puts Christians existing in the post-Christendom West in a similar position of being able to identify with *Esther* through metaphorical use of ‘exile’. Indeed, if Steinsaltz’s (2011, p. 178) observation that *Esther* provides, ‘the basic pattern of the Jewish people’s life in exile’ is correct, might there also be ways in which the text also guides a post-Christendom Christian life in ‘exile’?²⁴

ER interprets *Esther* in the light of the Purim miracle. In fact, the salvation delivered through the establishment of Purim may even foreshadow the full redemption that will come in the Age to Come. It might be said that, with Steinsaltz (2011, p. 184), that for the rabbis, ‘Purim’s greatness exceeds initial and superficial appearances’. This is correct, and it is examining the institution of Purim in *Esther* 9.20-32 that will

²⁴ As above (pp. 88-89) this is understanding ‘exile’ in a metaphorical sense, referring to a kind of spiritual exile of Western Christians in the aftermath of the privileged position of Christendom. Use of the term is not to undermine the very real exilic existence of Jewish communities historically, and many groups to the present day.

provide the most helpful way to approach this re-reading of the text. As I have stated the import of reading *Esther* canonically, I should note my agreement with Childs' (1979, p. 603) comment that 'a major key to the canonical shaping of the book is to be found in 9.20-32'. That is, as the Purim festival became an annual feature within Jewish traditions, the import of explaining its origins was made clear. Alongside providing this 'etiology' of Purim, *Esther* may also be seen as a 'festival lection' in which the retelling of the story is necessary to the commemoration of Purim (Bush, 1996, p. 306). As such, what comes before the institution of Purim in *Esther* is meant to be read as leading the way to the festival.

It will now be helpful to consider the institution of the festival as described in *Esther* 9.20-32. Following the battles of 9.1-17 where the Jews were able to 'protect themselves and get relief from their enemies' (9.16), Mordecai and Esther both confirm and legitimize the celebrations as an everlasting commemoration for the Jewish people (9.28) by writing letters. Throughout the book, the written word has been emphasised as carrying high authority in the Persian kingdom (e.g. 1.19, 3.12-14, 8.8). Making use of this Persian mode of authority, Mordecai and Esther institute the festival of Purim 'for themselves and their descendants' (9.31), with the people in great support (9.23, 27). Interestingly, in ER, while clearly perceiving God's presence in all aspects of the *Esther* story, the rabbis do not seek to take away from this human establishment of Purim but rather, alluding to the divine-human partnership described above, the authoritative work of Mordecai and Esther is given divine support when God speaks to Haman: '...they will *add for themselves* a holiday commemorating your downfall' (ER7.12 [my italics]).

A crucial aspect of the establishment of Purim is that:

These days should be remembered and observed in every generation by every family, and in every province and in every city. And these days of Purim should never fail to be celebrated by the Jews—nor should the memory of these days die out among their descendants (*Esther* 9.28).

The eternal dimensions of Purim are clearly set out here, something emphasised in later Jewish thought. The Talmud (*b.megillah* 10b) speaks of Purim as an ‘everlasting sign which shall not be cut off’. Rabinowitz (pp. 87-88) cites several rabbinic and Medieval sources which express how in the messianic age all festivals will be nullified except Purim, and similarly, only *Esther* will stand alongside the Torah eternally. Harris (1977, p. 170) observes that the eternal significance of Purim will become evident in the ‘order’ of the messianic age. To appreciate that new order, he says, the former ‘dis-order’ of the world, such as the people’s existence in exile, will need to have been known. Importantly, what makes Purim unique among the festivals, is that it is through this dis-order, what Steinsaltz (2011, p. 188) calls ‘the ordinary forces of the world’, associated with the hiding of God’s face, that the festival takes place. In contrast to the ‘supernatural’ events of the Exodus where God’s hand was clearly seen, the deliverance from Haman is given a special eternal quality because it was brought about in the midst of dis-order, where God is hidden. Hence, the seemingly earthly, dis-ordered experience of Purim in exile, prompts the expectation of the heavenly, ordered future of redemption.

It seems that the uniqueness of Purim as an exilic festival contributes to its eternal commemoration. But this should not take away from its state as a biblical festival and links have been made in Jewish traditions between Purim and Passover and Yom

Kippur.²⁵ Further, Purim can be placed squarely within the scriptural context by consideration of the Hebrew root *zkr* (remember), utilised twice in 9.28: ‘these days should be *remembered* and observed... nor should the *memory* of these days die out...’. In the Old Testament, the call to remember God’s acts, and the people’s response, is crucial to the continuation of the Jewish traditions, through acts of *ritual* and *recital* (Yerushalmi, 1996, p. 11). So, like other biblical calls to remember (such as the Passover, ‘...commemorate... celebrate’ in Exodus 12.14, and the Sabbath, ‘Remember... by keeping it holy’ in Exodus 20.8), here, in 9.28, it is through *ritual*, the observance of the festival, that the salvation is remembered. Further, as with a biblical example such as the instruction in Deuteronomy 6.7 to ‘impress [the commandments] on your children. Talk about them... at home... along the road... when you lie down and when you get up’; there is also a sense in which *recital* may be important in the commemoration of Purim. This is certainly the case in later Jewish observance of the festival where the scroll of *Esther* is read in its entirety (e.g. *Mishnah Berurah* 687-689). And, in the book itself, the importance of recalling the events leading to the Purim miracle is stressed in 9.26-27, ‘because of everything written in this letter... the Jews took it on themselves to establish a custom...’ and 9.31 ‘in regard to their times of fasting and lamentation’ under the threat of Haman. Here, Bush’s (1996, p. 306) proposal of *Esther* as festival lection should be recalled: ‘it is an essential part... of the celebration of Purim to hear the story’. It seems to me then, that in line with other biblical remembrances, Purim is to be commemorated by *ritual* and *recital*.

²⁵ Koller (2013, pp. 198-203) discusses rabbinic attempts to incorporate *Esther* into ‘the paradigm of salvation provided by the Exodus’ (Ibid, pp. 198-199). Connections are also suggested in the way in which Yom Kippur is the most spiritual festival while Purim is the earthliest. By celebrating in both extremes, a happy medium can be found (Simmons, 2003; Safran, 2010; Strauss, 2017).

What is being remembered and celebrated in the establishment of Purim in *Esther* 9 is 'the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies' (9.22) rather than a celebration of military victory. This emphasis on rest/relief is noted by recent commentators who see the connections with God's people enjoying rest from enemies throughout the Bible (e.g. Deuteronomy 3.20, Joshua 1.13). These connections are important for theological consideration of *Esther* in its canonical setting. For instance, Firth (2010, p. 127) notes that the rest given at the first Purim is 'not an isolated moment of deliverance but stands instead within the pattern of God's activity'. That the people should naturally celebrate their relief from danger as their scriptural ancestors had done when God was explicitly proclaimed suggests an implicit recognition of the divine hand behind their deliverance and rest (Reid, 2008, p. 145).

However, Purim is not a sombre act of remembrance but a time of 'feasting and joy' (*Esther* 9.18, 22), necessary for correct observance of the festival (*Mishnah Berurah* 695.1). There is much feasting in *Esther* and, as Berlin (2001, p. xxiv-xxv) points out, it is at feasts that the major events in the narrative take place. In a significant reversal framing the narrative, the great banquet of Ahasuerus (1.1-8) finds its counterpoint in the feast of Purim (9.18-22): the minority group at the beginning end the text (almost) triumphant.²⁶ In ER it is Ahasuerus's feast that most interests the rabbis, with the king asking the Jews whether God would provide better for them in the Age to Come (ER2.5). The rabbis also use the feast of Ahasuerus to further demonstrate his nature as *ḥānef* and *tipesh* by trying to cater for the pleasures of every person (*Esther* 1.8b), something even God does not attempt (ER2.14).

²⁶ However, see below p. 99 on ways in which triumph of the Jews in *Esther* might be only partial.

Interestingly, for all their examination of Ahasuerus's feast (ER1-2), in ER3 the rabbis reserve significant distaste for the feast of Vashti (*Esther* 1.9). Observe the consequence of your disobedience, God says to Israel, if the king's feast were not bad enough, there is even a feast for women! (ER3.4).²⁷

In Purim, the connection between joyful feasting in commemoration of the rest provided from enemies, the giving of gifts to one another (*Esther* 9.19) and to the poor (9.22) significantly demonstrates something of the divine-human partnership described above (pp. 84-85). Assuming God's presence behind the surface events of 9.19, Reid (2008, p.145) suggests that as the people have been given rest by God, they celebrate and give gifts to each other. This seems correct, and looks to the way in which commemoration of what God has achieved turns to faithful action representing the loving acts of God for humanity. This aspect of Purim sits alongside similar biblical instances such as the festivals of Weeks and Tabernacles in Deuteronomy 16.9-15 where, in remembrance of formerly being slaves in Egypt (16.12), the Israelites are to rejoice in the festivals, inviting all members of the community to share in the celebrations: 'you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, the Levites in your towns, and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows living among you' (16.11, 14). Through a divine-human partnership, the actions and attitudes forming the annual commemoration of the Purim miracle centred around feasting and giving gifts fit into those which form certain other biblical festivals and also *the way of life* described in both Old and New Testaments.

²⁷ The general negative view of the rabbis regarding Vashti has already been discussed in Chapter Three, pp. 56-57.

Morrison (2017) observes how the imagery of feasting can express the kingdom of God (2017, p. 131), noting that 'feasting celebrates what is so central to human life, namely compassion, goodness and love' (Ibid, p. 128). Through celebrating together and with those in need, God's people practice salvation 'in ways that testify to the generous abundance of God... and [their] imitation of it' (Ford, 1999, p. 269). In other words, feasting is a display of divine-human partnership, where God's people imitate the generous character of God based upon the belief that the divine presence is with them, and whose image is to be seen in 'the least of these brothers and sisters of mine' (Matthew 25.40) (Morrison, 2017, p. 132). The feasting at Purim, and the more general 'theology of feasting' advocated by Morrison (2017) and Ford (1999), offer opportunities for the people of God to enact salvation through celebratory forming of community in the most natural of human activities, eating and drinking. However, the fact of there being poor requiring assistance reminds that all is not well in Shushan or the contemporary world at large.

Purim's celebration of rest/relief is contrasted by a reference to 'times of fasting and lamentation' in 9.31. The cause of lamentation is Haman's decree to 'destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews' (3.13). Although the Persian Empire was known to be tolerant of ethnic diversity, it is with considerable ease that Haman persuades King Ahasuerus to hand over his signet ring, saying 'do with the people as you please' (3.10-11). Indeed, this demonstrates the precariousness of life in exile, as the actions of one person prompts near destruction of an entire people. In 3.2 Mordecai refuses to bow before Haman and in doing so, '[represents] all Jewish people in standing against him' (Reid, 2008, p. 92). Mordecai's refusal has been both

applauded and criticised,²⁸ and recently, Beckett (2002), who is quite open about his dislike for the character (2002, p. 15), suggests 'male pride' (Ibid, p. 25) as Mordecai's motivation.

Despite the idealised portrayal of Mordecai in ER, some rabbinic texts also question his refusal to bow, for instance, the suggestion in *b.megillah* 13a that 'Mordecai provoked Haman'. Further, Walfish (1993) cites eleventh century Jewish scholar Joseph Kara who proposes that some Jews abused Mordecai by saying: 'Look what Mordecai did to us, for he baited Haman at whose hand we were sold to be destroyed, slain, and annihilated which would have happened were it not for God' (1993, p. 178). Nonetheless, in ER, and consistently within rabbinic and Medieval Jewish thought, sufficient justification is found in that Haman had attached an idol to his clothes (ER6.2, 7.5).²⁹ To bow before him would have been to worship an idol, obviously forbidden in Torah. While this imaginatively provides the perfect justification for Mordecai, the motivation behind his refusal to bow most likely stems from the allusion within *Esther* to the ancient ethnic feud between Israel and Amalek (2.5, 3.1, 1 Samuel 15). This reading connects *Esther* with other biblical teaching on Amalek, something at the centre of ER, as already described in Chapter Three (pp. 62-64). Perhaps this feud contributes to Haman's outrageous response to Mordecai in planning to kill all the Jews (*Esther* 3.6).

Haman's appeal to King Ahasuerus is worth looking at:

²⁸ See helpful discussions in Horowitz (2006, pp. 70-74) and Carruthers (2008, pp. 140-143).

²⁹ See helpful discussions in Walfish (1993, p. 179) and Carruthers (2008, p. 139).

There is a certain people dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom who keep themselves separate. Their customs are different from those of all other people, and they do not obey the king's laws; it is not in the king's best interest to tolerate them. If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued to destroy them, and I will give ten thousand talents of silver to the king's administrators for the royal treasury (*Esther* 3.8-9).

Here, as has been noted by Berlin (2001, p. 38), Haman begins with truth – ‘people dispersed among... the kingdom’ – and progresses to insinuation and falsehood – ‘they do not obey the king's laws’. In this way he introduces the idea of the Jews as an undesirable ‘Other’ worthy of being destroyed. Again, the danger of exile is clear: Haman achieves an instant result and his plan is accepted by, what the rabbis (in *ER pet* 9) call a *ḥānef* king who simply hands the people over to him, not even requiring the offered ten thousand talents of silver (*Esther* 3.11). Interestingly, in *ER pet* 10, even this transaction is put under the control of God who, ‘arranged for each generation that which is appropriate for it’. Thus, Ahasuerus has been chosen as ‘the first of the sellers’ and Haman, ‘the first of the buyers’. Although no money changed hands, the idea here refers to the intention - the way in which the people are treated as a commodity.

The cause of the people's ‘times of fasting and lament’ is thus clear. In hearing about Haman's decree, there was ‘great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing...’ (4.3). Esther also called her people to fast for three days in preparation for her going before the king (4.16). Reading *Esther* canonically would suggest that the Persian Jews' display of mourning and fasting may be understood in terms of religious expression as, in the Bible fasting is often connected with lament and petitioning God (e.g. 2 Samuel 12.16, Jonah 3.5). Post-Purim miracle then, a crucial part of commemorating their deliverance is to recall the magnitude of the

threat against the Jewish people at the hands of Haman. And this is exactly the type of remembering the rabbis of ER are engaged in as they read *Esther* after Purim.

A further point here is that throughout the presentation of the Purim celebrations in *Esther* 9.20-32 runs the undercurrent of ‘the Jews’ retaining their minority status as exiles. Mordecai and Esther may have risen to power in Persia but they are still subject to Ahasuerus (Duguid, 2005, p. 121), who remains a *ḥanef* king and is therefore a danger to the people. Indeed, the rabbis state that, ‘Ahasuerus hated Israel more than the wicked Haman did’ (ER7.20). Wells (2013, pp.90-91) notes the similarity in language between the king’s exaltation of Mordecai in 10.2-3 and Haman in 3.1, (Hebrew root *gd/* – greatness, promote, advance). He wonders how secure is the Jewish position in Persia. This is an important consideration in the contemporary context of the ‘Church in exile’ as it reveals a warning to always remain alert as to where the power resides in any situation (Firth, 2010, p. 89), and to reflect upon how far that power is actually ‘for’ the exiles within its society. But, as with references to the ‘danger’ of exile above (p. 98), in a post-Christendom spiritual ‘exile’ problems may be related more to Christians having to adapt to their new uncomfortable situation as a minority rather than the significant threats to safety and security experienced in *Esther* or a people in e.g. political exile.

Nevertheless, however the ‘times of fasting and lament’ may manifest themselves, it remains the case that God’s presence can be hard to decipher, and it is necessary for God’s people to respond to life in exile by seeking the Lord and stepping into the divine-human partnership by taking initiative and building upon what they know of the Lord from Scripture, developing a proactive attitude which carries out the love of

other people shown by God in a way that reflects one's own commitment to the Lord. This is, of course, exactly what has been drawn out of the character of Esther in ER and elsewhere. Beach (2015, p. 78) argues that Esther displays an 'embodied holiness' by acting on behalf of her people and her God. In addition, it might be said that the impetus behind seeing her action in this way comes from reading *Esther* canonically. From the Scriptures, it is clear that Israel's existence in exile did not diminish their self-understanding as God's covenant people. Thus, it can be surmised that, for Esther living in exile where God may have appeared hidden from view, the understanding of her people's election would surely have prompted her actions. Esther, enacted the ways of the Lord towards her people as revealed in Scripture.

Unusual exilic circumstances for Israel in Persia demanded a perhaps unexpected approach from Esther who, 'finds ways to work within her [adopted] culture and advance the cause of her people' (Beach, 2015, p. 76) who are in grave danger and in need of salvation. The strength and wisdom she shows are examples of an ability to adjust to her marginalised status as a Jewish woman in exile, and 'use anything that enhances one's advantage including beauty, sex appeal, and men's susceptibility to women's emotion' (Niditch, 1995, p. 201). These unorthodox methods successfully employed by Esther to contribute to the rest/relief of the Purim miracle indeed point to the unique situation in which she existed and prompt reflection on types of unorthodox methods that may be necessary for God's people in a contemporary context to act for the good of the people.

There is a further point to be made here regarding the way that Esther ‘takes upon herself the plight of her people’ (Wells, 2013, p. 16). It is this aspect of the character that has led Wells (Ibid) and Beckett (2002) to find a Christological interpretation, something I do not find particularly helpful for this study as the approach can undermine the validity of any other readings.³⁰ Here, I refer to Beckett’s (2002, p. 85) comment on the text’s ‘limited message’ in the absence of the Christological interpretation which he is attempting through ‘the fullness of its revelation – Jesus Christ’ (Ibid, p. 50). However, there is certainly something inspiring to be found in the example of Esther, e.g. going into a dangerous situation before Ahasuerus for the sake of her people (*Esther* 5.1-8), which points to the individual acting selflessly considering the ‘the bigger picture’ of contributing to the salvation God is actively bringing to the situation behind the scenes.

Considering *Esther* canonically, Esther’s willingness to act for the good of her people in accordance with what was believed about the character of God and the covenant with Israel, reveals something of the divine-human partnership that seems appropriate for the exile context (pp. 84-85). When God appears hidden, it is for God’s people to act on the belief that God is present. This action is characterised by the biblical idea of *zkr*, remembering through *ritual* and *recital* discussed above (p. 93). The notion of remembering what God has done and living life in accordance with such commemoration is seen in the Bible (e.g. Deuteronomy 6). This is also connected with the further instruction to somehow reflect the character of God in life: ‘Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy’ (Leviticus 19.2). Mirroring such holiness encompasses all aspects of life with particular reference to the care of other

³⁰ I discuss typological and Christological readings of *Esther* more fully in Chapter Two pp. 42-43.

people (e.g. the remainder of Leviticus 19). There is also the idea of kindness to outsiders, recalling that Israel were once outsiders in Egypt (Exodus 22.21). In the New Testament these ideas seem best expressed in the core Christian teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) where a life lived in the kingdom of God involves developing attitudes and actions of righteousness in line with the character of the 'Father in heaven' (Matthew 5.16).

In the Sermon on the Mount, as in the institution of Purim, I find the recognition that 'times of fasting and lamentation' exist as an undercurrent to life as God's people in exile. As Pennington (2017, p. 153) comments on the Beatitudes (Matthew 5.1-16), 'they present true human flourishing as entailing suffering as Jesus' disciples await God's coming kingdom'. I think this is important in terms of Christian reflection upon *Esther*. The idea of recalling the 'fasting and lamentation' that preceded the celebration of rest/relief in *Esther* can be developed to incorporate the cycle of trials and redemptions experienced by God's people throughout history. The endeavour to live as a loving, holy people will, it seems, incur a certain degree of coming against opposition and trial, the accusation of observing 'customs [that] are different' (*Esther* 3.8). This is clear in ER where, in interpreting *Esther* for a fresh context of exilic subjugation under Rome, the rabbis seem to acknowledge and anticipate potential suffering until the Age to Come when full redemption, rest and relief will be given. In the contemporary context, opposition may come from the make-up of the culture itself with its dominating message of 'radical individualism' expressed for instance in the illusion of digital communities which may, in the absence of real interactions, nurture loneliness and anxiety (Sayers, 2017, p. 17).

Perhaps God's people are always in some sense to understand themselves as exiles, in a spiritual sense or otherwise. If so, the rest/relief given by God may be celebrated but it will not yet be complete. This is clear from the continued precarious nature of life for 'the Jews' under Ahasuerus after the Purim miracle as well as the fact that there are the poor needing gifts in *Esther* 9.22. Similarly, the important Christian teaching in Matthew 5-7 is given under the shadow of persecution and trials whilst also considering the most perfect way of relating to the poor (Matthew 6.1-4). In interpreting *Esther*, and its centrepiece Purim, either through rabbinic midrash as in ER, or with a Christian perspective, there must be a recognition that the fullest redemption is still to come when the rest given by God is complete, the threat of danger is gone, and the poor will no longer be as such. In looking ahead to such a reality, and seeing Purim as in some sense foreshadowing it, I believe the rabbis are correct.

Although aware that God is always present with the covenant people wherever they are, contemporary Christians navigating their way through an uncomfortable post-Christendom context may still not expect the divine presence. This seems significant in terms of future redemption where God may again – as in Purim - take people by surprise and meet them where they are. The idea of eschatological restoration, or homecoming, from exile then, might be best viewed in terms of people being restored into the full presence of God rather than going to a specific location. This fits into imagery of God's kingdom being established on earth, found in the Bible. In Isaiah 65.17-25 for instance, the 'new heavens and new earth' resemble an earthly city where people are active, enjoying the fruits of their labour, and all creation living in peace. Similarly, in the New Testament, God's eventual dwelling place is said to

be among people (Revelation 21.3) in the new Jerusalem that has come down out of heaven (21.2). Not able to discuss the specifics of Revelation's imagery in any detail, the general point I wish to make here, is that, in the vision of the city, which is also like a bride (21.2, 9-10) and a garden (22.1-2), God has finally and fully come to dwell among humanity.

In these biblical pictures of future redemption, the ideas standing behind Purim can also be seen. Here though, the elements such as rest, feasting and joy will not be temporal but eternal: 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away' (Rev. 21.4, also Isaiah 65.19). Further there will be no need to wonder about God's presence as was necessary in exile, because the relationship will be fully restored: 'before they call I will answer; while they are still speaking I will hear' (Isaiah 65.24). Finally, returning briefly to feasting, so important for Purim observation, it should be remembered that this is also a key feature of future redemption. Although mentioned sparingly, in ER the feast of the Age to Come is assumed (ER2.4-5). Similar ideas are found in the New Testament for instance the parable in Luke 14.15-23 where, significantly, it is the poor who are guests of honour. Celebrating with others around the table then, may be seen as a crucial way of inviting future redemption into the present. Considering this wider biblical context of future redemption, the elements making up Purim in *Esther* 9.20-32 do indeed appear to foreshadow what is to come. In this canonical sense, contemporary Christians can take a lot from *Esther*. However, it must be said that this does not perhaps present itself clearly from a reading of the text itself and it is engagement with ER that has enabled a reading of

Esther in its canonical setting and further, the appreciation of ways that Purim may represent future redemption in line with other biblical passages.

4.3 Concluding Comments

In drawing this re-reading to a close, I must now try to bridge the gap between looking ahead to the promised redemption and the current existence in exile. I have argued that the institution of Purim in *Esther* 9.20-32 reflects something of the *way of life* endorsed in the Bible, as well as looking ahead to the future when God will come to meet with humanity. In order to find the best way of engaging with one's current context, I have expressed the importance of searching for God and that, following the example of the rabbis (and their portrayal of Mordecai) in ER, the best place to locate the Lord is in Scripture. A helpful idea here, is that of *zkr* (remembering), which in the Old Testament always involves some form of action around what is being remembered (Moberly, 2013, p. 22).

Remembering the great works of God from Scripture and one's own life, then seeking to enact them in ways refreshing and creative may serve as a crucial display of God's presence among contemporary Christians experiencing the disjoint of post-Christendom 'exile'. It is important that such creative expression of religion is guided by sincere and determined reading of the Bible in the hope that it 'pulls us into its world at the very moment our lived reality meets its living truth' (Jones, 2007, p. 78). This means that the Christian attempt to articulate religious life as experienced in the post-Christendom situation (Jones's 'lived reality') will be shaped and moved forwards by immersion in the world of Scripture.

Crucial here, is the divine-human partnership. With God seeming hidden from view, partners must do all they can to prepare for the future time when the connotations of exile (trials, lament, God's hiddenness) will cease, and God will meet people where they are in a renewed creation. Such preparatory work takes the shape of loving God and neighbour, being holy as the LORD is holy, and sometimes saying, 'if I perish, I perish' (*Esther* 4.16). As with Esther, who spoke those words, this attitude is vital for contemporary people in terms of enacting, and preparing for, redemption. Enacting redemption may be achieved by reflecting the character of God based upon remembering divine works. In doing this, God's people are also preparing the way for the rest/relief, feasting and joy that will take place when God comes to a renewed earth to dwell.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, I would like to reflect upon three ways in which I believe this study has been significant. Firstly, regarding my personal understanding. Secondly, in pointing to ways in which *Esther* may contribute to Old Testament theology. And thirdly, by responding, in a very small way, to the great need for communication between religious communities in contemporary British society.

This study has attempted an experiment in comparative theology in which I engage with Esther Rabbah (ER), a rabbinic midrash, as a means of furthering my understanding of rabbinic forms of biblical interpretation and ultimately, developing a deeper appreciation of the book of *Esther* through a Christian re-reading of the text. A close engagement with the midrash led to my highlighting two key themes, exile and redemption (pp. 67-70), through which the rabbis interpret *Esther*. Writing with Scripture, the rabbis journey back and forth between the worlds of the Bible, their contemporary age, and the future Age to Come, thus bringing out of *Esther* an on-going relevance for their experience of continued exile whilst looking ahead to future redemption. Intrinsic to this interpretation of *Esther* are two concepts, election and God: it is the election of Israel as God's covenant people that provides reassurance during the hard times of exilic existence. Because of the everlasting covenant between the two parties, the rabbis understand that God has not abandoned Israel in exile, but is rather, working for their good from a position hidden from view until the time when all will be redeemed and the divine presence fully restored. In the meantime, the faithful example of Mordecai (and the rabbis themselves) should be

followed, seeking God in Scripture and acting for the good of the people in accordance with the commandments.

Following the themes and concepts drawn out of ER I have been led to more fully appreciate *Esther* canonically. Here, the most fruitful connections with the rest of the Bible are apparent through the institution of Purim (9.20-32), where commemoration of the rest from enemies (e.g. Joshua 1.13) is enacted by celebration with all members of the covenant community (e.g. Deuteronomy 16.9-15). The observance of Purim can be linked with the biblical concept of *zkr*, remembering through ritual and recital (see above p. 93). However, it must be said that such biblical connections are not easily found within *Esther* itself and engaging with ER has significantly developed my appreciation of the text canonically which, is also to approach it theologically. Here, as discussed on pp. 85-86, reading post-critically is helpful. A first 'naïve' reading of *Esther* may suggest clearly that God is present – simply *because* it is a biblical text. Moving from there to consider the critical issues around the text draws out much that is useful, but it may also lead the reader away from their initial theological acceptance of the biblical text by causing fragmentation from whole to parts e.g. earlier/later sections of the narrative. Perhaps unsatisfied, the reader cannot retreat from the critical explanations they have engaged with, but they can move beyond them towards a post-critical 'second naiveté', a 're-understanding' of the text (Wallace, 1990, p. 69). This is where the reader approaches the text humbly, allowing it to speak by entering its world, willing to have their presuppositions challenged. This type of hermeneutical process, being similar to the theory of comparative theology set out in Chapter One, is that which has led to my

re-reading *Esther* in such a way that I can view it as thematically standing alongside other biblical texts and thus, forming a valid part of an Old Testament theology.

Biblical themes of joy, rest and remembrance highlighted in Purim and discussed in Chapter Four (pp. 92-96), feature also when it comes to considering the great need for communication between religious communities in Britain. Jewish and Christian interaction takes place on delicate ground due to troubled, sometimes tragic, history. There remains a lot of ignorance about Jewish post-biblical religious traditions within Christianity, and a wariness from the Jewish side about engaging. I wonder whether the notion of remembering as described here, would be important for future interreligious engagement. That is, recalling our 'times of lamentation and fasting' (*Esther* 9.31) as a means of moving forward together.

I see this as crucial, not only for the good of the religious communities, but as a public response to the continuing acts of aggression motivated by religion and/or ethnicity affecting society. For instance, in the months prior to my writing these words, events involving the Labour Party in Britain have led Rabbi Jonathan Sacks (2018) to begin a radio broadcast, '...I never thought that in 2018 I'd still have to speak about anti-Semitism'.³¹ Tragically, religious/ethnic aggression (verbal and physical) continues, and while ever this is so, there is an urgent need for religious communities to stand together, to be seen as dealing with their past issues, and say it is because we remember, because we now acknowledge our differences, that we come together against those who would use religion as a tool for abusing people of

³¹ I acknowledge that the issues here are extremely complex. Nonetheless, I believe that this example sits within the context of religiously motivated aggression in its various forms. If however, the issue is more closely related to ethnicity, in my view the point about communities coming together to enact rest and remembrance remains valid.

any religion or none. Might one substantial manner of standing together be *meeting together* around the table of fellowship?

I highlighted the importance of feasting on pp. 94-96 in relation to how sharing and celebrating enables community to form and provides the opportunities to witness the image of God in others. This has a vital application for attempts at interreligious togetherness. Moyaert (2011) has described the importance of making room for the 'Other' in hospitality: 'the feast shows us a reality that is not yet but can be seen' (2011, p. 305). This suggests that, although meeting with differing perspectives, the power of 'everyone around the same table, face to face' (Ford, 1999, p. 269), sharing food and drink, is surely a powerful vision of the rich and varied celebration of the feast in the Age to Come/Kingdom of God. Such meeting together as different communities of God's people in unity against aggression; realising that we are all exiles of one kind or another who, in the spirit of *drsh*, might just learn from each other's experiences as we seek God, life and truth; expresses something of the divine joy and rest which is seen temporally throughout the Bible, even unexpectedly in the Purim miracle, whilst always looking ahead to the time when all will fully celebrate and rest together in God's presence.

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