

“BUT MORDECAI BOWED NOT, NOR DID HIM REVERENCE”: THE BOOK OF ESTHER’S CHALLENGE TO ‘SECULAR’ AND TO ‘RELIGIOUS’ JEWISH IDENTITIES

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In her essay “A D’var Torah for Beha’alotcha: The Search for an Evocative History,” Blaire French puts forth the provocative proposal that Jews today might fruitfully reengage the Hebrew Bible as an “evocative ground for secular Jewish history.” Such a proposal might appear strange to many: while it might seem natural to turn to the Bible as a basis for religious Jewish identity, how would the Holy Scriptures serve as a signpost for those who, for various reasons, do not identify with a ‘religious’ form of Jewish life? In detailing ways in which this cultural *ressourcement* might take place, French points to two different biblical books – Chronicles and Esther – as good starting points. In this response, I will build on French’s proposal by exploring the possibility of a ‘non-religious’ reading of the latter book, but before delving into its textual details, I first want to reflect briefly on the nature of the conceptual binary of secular/religious.

French addresses the question of how “secular Jews [may] remain Jewish” if traditional forms of religious belief and practice no longer hold sway. This ‘secular’ or ‘cultural’ mode is subject to the dangers of “assimilation,” and the posited goal is to find a means of establishing a form of “Jewish unity and identity” that can be passed on to successive generations. While the terms ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ can mean various things in various different social and cultural contexts, I will take them here to mean something like the following: in the American Jewish context from which French is writing, ‘religious’ Jews would be those whose lives are marked by distinctively Jewish daily practices. Such practices might include keeping kosher, observing shabbat, attending synagogue, and endogamous marriage. By contrast, the daily life of ‘secular’ Jews might have very little that marks them as distinctively Jewish or as different from the daily life of other, non-Jewish Americans. These Jews might not worry about avoiding non-kosher food, might not observe traditional shabbat restrictions, might attend synagogue rarely if at all, and might be likely to marry a non-Jew. At the same time, however, these ‘secular’ Jews might still consciously think of themselves as Jewish and might assign importance to that identification. The question then remains: in the absence of the ‘religious’ factors, can such a form of Jewish identity be viable in the long-term?¹

Here, I will argue that the Book of Esther can be read as presenting its audience with a portrayal of Jewish life and identity that does not match up with the ‘religious’ mode described above. Indeed, the book can even be read as deliberately rejecting such a presentation of Jewishness. At first glance, this would appear to provide a ‘sound biblical basis’ for the project of a ‘non-religious’ form of Jewish identity, in accord with French’s suggestion. However, this picture is complicated by the fact that the Book of Esther’s portrayal of Jewish identity, while not aligning with contemporary ‘religious’ forms of Jewishness, also does not fully coincide

¹ While French casts the secular/religious difference primarily in terms of belief (particularly belief in revelation), I focus here largely on questions of secular/religious differentiation via practice. However, I also look at ways in which the practices of differentiation displayed in the Book of Esther correspond implicitly to certain aspects of theological commitment.

with contemporary 'secular' forms of Jewish life. While seeming less concerned with special food practices or avoiding intermarriage as essential elements of being Jewish, I maintain that the Book of Esther puts forth a distinctively *political* criterion for Jewish identity that differentiates Jews from others in their surrounding culture. In the Book of Esther, although Jews are presented as living lives quite similar, in many ways, to their fellow residents of Persia, we will see that Mordecai's status as a Jew/*yehudi* stands in tension with a full identification with the sovereign power of the land. Accordingly, Jewish identity seems to require an element of resistance and opposition to certain political premises that are accepted as normal by non-Jewish society. Thus, after examining the ways the Book of Esther can be understood as presenting this type of dynamic, I will return to the question of contemporary culture and ask whether an analogous neither-religious-nor-secular form of Jewish identity might be possible today.

Methodologically, my approach will be as follows: I first examine actions and orientation of the character Esther within the book's narrative. In doing so, I will draw upon existing academic scholarship on the Book of Esther in order to establish, on a plain sense-level, some notable ways in which the titular character's words and actions are presented differently from norms emphasized in other ancient Jewish texts. Given this data, I will then put forth one possible way of construing an understanding of 'Jewish identity' that could fit with the text's presentation. This latter construal, while attempting to incorporate the plain-sense details of the text, is not posited as a strictly text-historical claim; rather, it attempts to think about the text's portrayal of Esther in conjunction with more contemporary concepts and concerns. At the same time, as a thought experiment that seeks to take account of the available textual data, it may also prove useful for historical investigations of Jewish identity in antiquity.

Likewise, the subsequent section on Mordecai's actions and orientation will draw upon available scholarship concerning the text's presentation of 'Jewish distinctiveness.' In this regard, there are a number of places where scholars have highlighted ambiguous or unclear aspects

of the text as it stands; after noting those conspicuous ambiguities, I will again fill in the gaps with one possible way of construing the narrative, in ways prompted by reflection on the narrative details of the text and on contemporary questions of 'religious' and 'secular' Jewish practices and identity. In addition, the focus of my analysis will be the version of the Book of Esther found in the Masoretic Text; the version of Esther found in the Septuagint differs in notable ways with regard to a number of the topics discussed in this essay.²

The Non-religious Jewishness of the Book of Esther

French points out that the Book of Esther "famously bears no mention of God." While this might be a surprising absence from the point of view of 'religious belief,' the actions of the central Jewish characters can likewise appear surprising from what one might expect in terms of 'religious practice.' The central plot line of the Book of Esther involves the title character's marriage to the gentile, and presumably idolatrous, king of Persia (Est. 2:7). This clearly seems quite distant from the consistent theme of opposition to intermarriage in other books of the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Deut. 7:3, Ezra 9:12), in which a core part of Israelite identity is to be located in keeping separate from the other nations and their idolatrous ways. In addition to the basic fact of the intermarriage, no mention is made of Esther avoiding any problematic gentile practices: she appears simply to go along with the ways of the other maidens in the palace. In particular, she puts forth no explicit concerns about kosher food, and thus, on level of textual presentation, she appears indistinguishable from others in terms of her dietary habits.³ Indeed, the king even makes "a great feast for all his princes and servants – the feast of Esther (*mishteh esther*)" (Est. 2:18): here, we have a Persian royal feast that presumably contains any number of

² For a summary of differences between the versions in the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint, see Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 27-34.

³ Levenson points out that 'delicacies' (*manot*) in Est. 2:9 refers to food given to the candidates for queenship, but no mention is made of special arrangements regarding any culinary preferences on Esther's part (*Esther: A Commentary*, 60).

'religiously problematic' food items as well as non-kosher wine, made in the name of a Jewish woman, and with that Jewish woman presumably sitting in the seat of honor and receiving the best portions of all the meats and refreshments. Yet, there is no indication that Esther engages in anything other than full participation in the feast of Esther.

Moreover, Esther appears encouraged in all of this by her Jewish guardian Mordecai who, after the death of Esther's mother and father (Est. 2:7), is presumably tasked with the job of keeping her on the proper Jewish path and teaching her what it means to be a Jew. But instead, Mordecai appears simply to let her be taken away to the boudoir of the king with no words of admonition regarding any forbidden practices. Even if Esther did have to enter into the palace, one might have expected Mordecai to say something like, "Esther, remember that you are a Jew. If you must go to the palace, keep far away from pork and other such abominations. In fact, why don't you just stick to a vegetarian diet – that will be safer." Yet, no such warnings come from Mordecai's mouth. In Jon Levenson's formulation, "*Kashrut* in whatever stage of its development is nowhere to be found in Esther, neither when she is disguising her religious identity nor afterward. The realm of religious observance seems quite distant from the circles that produced the book of Esther."⁴ In addition to an absence of positive concern for actions that might highlight Esther's distinctive identity as a Jew, we even read that Mordecai commanded (*tzivah*) Esther not to disclose her people and her kindred (*et-'amah ve-et-moladtah*) (Est. 2:10, cf. 2:20). In this regard, not only is there no indication of 'religious commandments,' but the sole 'commandment' given to Esther is one of actively hiding and concealing even any verbal indication of her Jewishness.

In addition, in order better to appreciate Esther's 'non-distinctive' orientation, we can fruitfully draw comparisons with other Jewish texts composed around the same period and which put forth a decidedly different picture of how a Jew should relate to foreign rule and foreign

⁴ Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, 61.

culture. Within the Hebrew Bible itself, the Book of Daniel portrays a title character who, as one of the Judeans (Dan. 1:6: *b'nei yehudah* – cf. *yehudi* in Esther) taken into the gentile king's palace, explicitly and publicly refuses to eat the king's food (presumably involving meat) and to drink the king's wine (Dan. 1:8), and he insists on subsisting solely on legumes and water (Dan. 1:12). This dietary differentiation stands in sharp contrast to Esther's apparent nonchalance. Likewise, in the books of the Apocrypha, the Book of Judith presents the title character similarly refusing to eat the food of the gentile general Holofernes (Judith 10:5; 12:1-2). Moreover, just as Ahasuerus seeks to take Esther as his queen, Holofernes seeks to seduce Judith – but, far from 'going along with it', Judith takes advantage of the situation to cut off the head of Holofernes (Judith 12:16-13:8). Thus, Judith maintains her sexual separation from the gentile leader and in addition engages in an act of violent rebellion against him. By contrast, Esther appears to go through with the marriage with no indication of sexual refusal, and to enter into the bed of the gentile leader without any thought of violent rebellion against him. Thus, if we describe the books of Daniel and of Judith (with their various forms of Jewish cultural separation) as putting forth 'religious' presentations of Jewish identity in antiquity, Esther's 'non-religious' version of Jewish identity stands out all the more sharply. As Aaron Koller argues, the Book of Judith may even represent an attempt to deliberately 'correct' Esther in these regards.⁵ Since it is highly probable that the author of Esther was well aware that other orientations of 'Jewish distinctiveness' were a prominent option in the ancient world, the choice to present such a seemingly 'assimilatory' stance is quite notable.

While we have seen that, on a basic plain-sense narrative level, the text does not give any indication of Esther engaging in distinctive Jewish

⁵ See Aaron Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 136-138. Additionally, in the Greek version of Esther contained in the Septuagint, Jewish dietary restrictions, refusal of sexual intercourse with non-Jews, as well as mentioning of the name of God, are part of the story, further casting the Masoretic Text version's absence of these elements as even more notable. See discussion in Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, 84-86.

practices and even encourages Esther to hide her Jewish identity, we must now ask how we are to *understand* this absence. It is, to be sure, possible in principle to interpret the book with the assumption that Esther did fully maintained Jewish dietary practices and refrained from sleeping with the Gentile king – particularly since we are never told explicitly that Esther does otherwise.⁶ This is indeed how many subsequent Jewish interpreters have interpreted the book, ‘filling back in’ the potentially worrisome outward textual absence of Jewish religious observance. But, as biblical scholars have highlighted, it remains notable that the author of the Masoretic version of the Book of Esther chose *not* to include any explicit indication of such practices. As such, I posit here that, in light of this presentation (or non-presentation) of distinctive Jewish practice, one might also understand the ‘normative message’ of the book as one of affirming the legitimacy or even desirability of Jewish non-distinctiveness in interaction with broader (non-Jewish) society. The message that Mordecai conveys to Esther can be taken as follows: don’t do, or even *say*, anything as a Jew or differentiate yourself from others – rather, your goal should be to blend in. While Esther’s circumstances are admittedly unique—not all Jews are in a position to take up the office of queenship—the picture that comes across to the audience is that ‘being Jewish’ not only does not *require* special acts of daily differentiation from the rest of the culture, but that it may even be fully acceptable consciously to *avoid* any cultural differentiation. While Mordecai clearly intends Esther herself to remember that she is a Jew, there is seemingly no need for that difference to come across outwardly to others in the context of daily life. Thus, the Book of Esther can be read as advocating a distinctively ‘non-religious’

⁶ Jon Levenson notes, for instance, that Esther 2:17 never explicitly states that Esther marries Ahashuerus (*Esther: A Commentary*, 62). And, within subsequent rabbinic readings of Esther, one also finds attempts to present a more conventionally observant Esther; see, for instance, Barry Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 122-126; and also Barry Walfish, “Kosher Adultery? The Mordecai-Esther-Ahasuerus Triangle in Midrash and Exegesis,” *Prooftexts* 22, no. 3 (Fall 2002), 305-333.

form of Jewish identity, which might appear to parallel the shape of the 'secular' Jewish identity discussed by French.

Distinctiveness Found in Political Refusal Rather Than in Daily Practice

The descriptions above might, at first glance, make the contemporary possibility of 'secular' Jewish identity vis-à-vis the Bible seem quite attainable: "If it worked for Esther, then why not for us?" However, despite the absence of daily religious practice in the Book of Esther, I argue that the text nevertheless does put forth a significant criterion for Jewish identity that challenges an easy equation with contemporary 'secular' modes. While Esther's 'assimilatory' practices are presented as unproblematic, a simultaneous plot line involves a sharply 'countercultural' stance taken by Mordecai. At the start of chapter three, the king has promoted Haman to his second-in-command, above all the other princes of the kingdom (Est. 3:1). The king has issued a command that all his servants are to bow down and prostrate themselves before Haman. They all do so, with the exception of Mordecai who refuses to bow and to prostrate himself (*lo' yikhra 've-lo' yishtachaveh*) before Haman (Est. 3:2).⁷ Notably, at this point in the narrative, there has been no apparent indication of any preexisting antagonism between Haman and Mordecai. That is, there is no indication that Mordecai refuses to bow and prostrate because of any personal grudge against Haman, or because Haman has any animosity towards Jews.⁸ Indeed, there does not seem to be anything

⁷ The phrasal combination of "bowing and prostrating" (as discussed below) may carry a significance beyond an everyday act of bowing as a social greeting or indication of general respect.

⁸ The fact that Haman is described as an Agagite in Est. 3:1 could potentially be taken as an allusion to the conflict between Saul/Samuel and Agag in 1 Sam. 15. Yet, while this may set the tone for the conflicts that do eventually arise, it is again notable that the text of Esther itself gives no explicit indication that Mordecai's initial refusal is linked to this family background, nor does it indicate that Haman himself starts off with any 'Agagitic' anti-Jewish animus. However, despite the lack of explicit textual indication, many modern scholarly commentaries tend to link Mordecai's refusal precisely with such a posited pre-existing 'ethnic' hostility. In this regard, see, for example, Michael V. Fox's argument in

individually distinctive about Haman per se. As such, in Levenson's assessment, despite various interpretive solutions that have been posited over the centuries and in modern scholarship, "Why Mordecai refuses to kneel before Haman is unknown."⁹

Here, however, while agreeing that no clear or obvious reason is given, I want to suggest that one can read the text as presenting Mordecai's action as an alternative form of 'Jewish distinctiveness,' where such distinctiveness is found not in religious observance but in certain forms of refusal and refraining in the political sphere. Mordecai's refusal to bow and prostrate is not something taken lightly by those who witness it. The king's servants say to Mordecai, "Why do you transgress the king's commandment?" (Est. 3:3) This is not simply a matter of mere cultural difference: it is an explicit violation of the sovereign law of the kingdom and, moreover, a violation that potentially touches on the essence of sovereignty itself. In addition, it is not a one-time occurrence, which might retain a degree of ambiguity. Instead, Mordecai repeats his refusal daily (*yom va-yom*), and consistently refuses to listen to the warnings of the king's servants (Est. 3:4). It is almost as though he *does* have a 'daily Jewish practice' – but it precisely one of political refusal! After repeated attempts at dissuading Mordecai, the king's servants eventually decide to tell Haman about it.

At this juncture, the text notes that Mordecai "had told them that he was a Jew (*yehudi*)."⁹ (Est. 3:4). First of all, it is significant that in disclosing his communal identity, Mordecai does precisely what he had just told Esther *not* to do. How to account for this? It may be that in the sphere of

Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 42-46, as well as the previous scholarly opinions that he cites there in support of this view. Perhaps this scholarly trend may stem from a failure to imagine that a principled political stance could lie behind the refusal to bow and prostrate.

⁹ Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, 67. Levenson also highlights differences between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint in this regard; in the latter (specifically in Addition C), a more explicit account of Mordecai's refusal to bow and prostrate is given (67-68, 83-84). There, notably, Mordecai tells God that his refusal was "in order to avoid setting the glory of a man above the glory of God, and I shall bow to none but You, my Lord."

'personal' practices, such as those relating to food or marriage, distinctiveness is not an essential part of Jewish identity. However, when it comes to engaging with certain human claims to power and authority in the political sphere, Jewish identity involves a conspicuous form of public distinctiveness. In other words, although the text does not say so with full explicitness, a strongly plausible connection between verses three and four is that, in response to the servants' question of why he transgresses the king's command by not bowing down and prostrating, Mordecai tells them that the reason he transgresses and does not bow down and prostrate is specifically *because he is a Jew*.¹⁰ To be a Jew therefore means actively to refuse to bow down and prostrate before certain human claims of political authority.¹¹ Strikingly, there is no outward indication that any idolatrous statues or images are involved in this refusal to bow down and prostrate.¹² Rather, given the textual absence of typical 'ritual' concerns or of preexisting interpersonal hostility, Mordecai's Jewish refusal seems linked straightforwardly to the question of political power and authority.

¹⁰ While similar in some ways to my reading, Elsie R. Stern appears to reverse the text's presented narrative causality when she writes, "In Esther's Persia, Jews act no different from anyone else....Only when threatened by a man with a grudge does their Jewishness matter." By contrast, as I read the texts, it is Mordecai's principled enactment of Jewishness that precedes and brings about the "threatening grudge." Thus, when in many other ways Jews may 'act no different from anyone else,' the relation to bowing and prostrating constitutes a real and significant Jewish difference. See Stern, "Esther and the Politics of Diaspora," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 100, no. 1 (Winter 2010): 25-53, at 44.

¹¹ As Levenson points out, in Esther the term 'Jew' does not appear to be confined only to those who trace their ancestry back to Judea/Jerusalem (*Esther: A Commentary*, 57). As indicated by Esther 8:17, it appears possible for others to 'become Jews' (*mityahadim*), which would ostensibly involve taking on the normative practices of the Jewish community, most notably the distancing from human claims of power and political authority described here. See also b. Megillah 13a, which states, in relation to Mordecai and his actions, that "anyone who negates false worship is called a Jew" (*kol ha-qofer be-'avodah zarah niqra' yehudi*).

¹² Notably, while classical rabbinic texts such as Esther Rabbah 6:2 and Babylonian Talmud Megillah 19a link Mordecai's refusal with Haman's attempted enactment of rituals of idolatry (*'avodah zarah*), the text of Esther itself provides only a 'straight political' presentation of the refusal. For medieval Jewish understandings of Mordecai's refusal to bow and prostrate, see Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb*, 178ff.

To be sure, even on this reading, it is not obvious what specific *form* of claimed authority Mordecai is rejecting by his refusal to bow and prostrate. For instance, would he also refuse to bow and prostrate to Ahasuerus as well, were the latter to request it? Or does he refuse to bow and prostrate only to the king's vicegerent, whereas he would be willing to do so to the king himself?¹³ However, since no indication of the latter is given, and in light of the generally terse presentation of the text itself, it seems plausible to posit that an immediately obvious reason for Mordecai's refusal would simply be that he refuses to bow and prostrate before *any* human political leader or claimant of authority. Many modern commentators have tended to dismiss this possibility; Michael V. Fox is typical when he asserts in this regard that "nothing forbids a Jew to bow down to a mortal."¹⁴ My claim, however, is that what Mordecai refuses is not simply the physical act of bowing in an everyday social context, but rather specifically a form of politically charged 'bowing and prostrating' that would constitute a performance of subordinate allegiance and devotion to and active relational identification with the recipient of the gesture.¹⁵ As Jon Levenson notes in this regard, "the conjunction of

¹³ Yoram Hazony recognizes the political, and even theopolitical, character of Mordecai's refusal, but he assumes that this refusal would apply only to Haman and not to Ahasuerus. A key difference between his reading and my own is that, in his assessment, the main problem lies in the new development of elevating one adviser (Haman) above the others, and that it is *this* particular political structure that Mordecai rejects, whereas the previous political structure, with a range of equal advisers to the human sovereign, raised no such objections for him. See Hazony, *The Dawn: Political Teachings of the Book of Esther* (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 1995), 44-68, esp. 45-46, 67-68. By contrast, in my reading, a command to bow and prostrate before any human claimant to power, including Ahasuerus, would be just as problematic; at the very least, we certainly have no textual indication of Mordecai willingly "bowing and prostrating" before any human leaders. And, notably, the description of Esther's falling at the king's feet in Est. 8:3 does *not* employ these terms.

¹⁴ Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 44.

¹⁵ It is true that some other biblical passages present acts of prostrating (*hishtachavah*) before human beings (for instance, Gen. 23:7, Gen. 33:3-7, 1 Kings 1:31). However, the existence of such passages need not rule out the present reading of Est. 3:2. First of all, the phrasings in those passages does not contain the specific combined phrase of "bowing and prostrating" found in Esther. Secondly, the sensitivity of the political form of "bowing and prostrating

kneeling (*kara*) and bowing down (*histachava*) that we see in Esth. 3:2 is otherwise reserved for homage to God.”¹⁶ Thus, although no explicit mention of God appears here, such refusal to bow and prostrate before ‘flesh and blood’ may correspond structurally to a broader stream of Jewish theological and theopolitical thought in which Jews are called to bow and prostrate before none but YHWH, the God and King of Israel.¹⁷

before human beings” may be a subsequent theological development within the span of biblical tradition, and so could potentially be present in the book of Esther, even if other biblical books appeared less concerned about it. Evidence for the development of such a concern can be found in the Septuagint’s version of Mordecai’s refusal, as noted above. Likewise, the version of Esther ch. 3 found in Targum Sheni displays repeated instances of a similar Jewish attitude toward human sovereigns; see Bernard Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991), 140149. In addition, within rabbinic interpretations, similar concerns are expressed in Esther Rabbah 7:8, 12, 13. Thus, given this broader trend in antiquity, there is no inherent reason why the Masoretic Text of Esther could not also be grouped within it. For further useful background on elements of “bowing and prostrating to human beings” in the context of antiquity, see Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 34-37. Berlin herself, however, still sides with the ‘ethnic enmity’ explanation for Mordecai’s refusal (35).

¹⁶ Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, 67.

¹⁷ It is notable that the language of Est. 3:2 for “bow and prostrate” – *kor'im u'mishtachavim* – is also found in the later rabbinic *Alenu* prayer: “we bow and prostrate (*kor'im u'mishtachavim*) and acknowledge before the king of kings of kings, the Holy One Blessed be He.” Here, the implication is that those who constitute the congregation of Israel – i.e. ‘Jews’ – bow and prostrate themselves only before the unique God, as their unique king – but *not* before anyone else, including any human claimants of such subordinate allegiance. In other words, even though the text of Esther does not mention bowing to God alone, it does display the practical negative correlate of this idea, namely, refusing to bow and prostrate to a human king. Within the biblical context itself, Ps. 99:5 calls upon its listeners to “Exalt the Lord and prostrate yourselves (*hishtachavu*) at His footstool; Holy is he.” Here, prostrating is linked to ascribing holiness, which is generally understood as applicable only to God. Likewise, Ex. 34:14 states, “For you shall prostrate yourself (*tishtachaveh*) before no other god; for the Lord, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God” – and it would seem that this commandment could also make prostrating before human beings (who are not even gods) problematic, particularly in a context of indicating political submission and ‘faith and allegiance.’ (Even if Israelite kings, anointed in the name of YHWH, might potentially constitute a border-case, this would not be the case for other, ‘foreign’ claimants to power.) Thus, while different construals of Mordecai’s refusal remain theoretically possible, the one given here finds definite resonance in other prominent streams of biblical and rabbinic thought. On broader theopolitical understandings of God’s unique kingship in the context of the Hebrew Bible,

Thus, the Book of Esther can be understood as asserting: differentiation by daily 'religious' practice is not crucial for Jewish identity. Instead, what is crucial to Jewish identity is a conscious distancing of oneself from identification with the power-structures of sovereignty in the country in which you are living. It is *this* specific aspect of life that will differentiate a Jew from the rest of the people of the surrounding culture.¹⁸ Haman's response to the situation further draws out this element of Jewish differentiation. After hearing of Mordecai's refusal, Haman is not amused. He decides to destroy not only Mordecai, but all the Jews. In seeking to justify this desire, Haman tells the king, "There is a certain people scattered and dispersed among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom. And, their laws (*dateihem*) are different from those of every people. And, they do not keep the king's laws (*datei ha-melek*). Therefore it does not profit the king to let them remain" (Est. 3:8). This statement is ironic in relation to the events of the previous chapter. If we looked at Haman's statement in isolation, we might think that "their laws are different" would mean that Jews have different daily 'religious' practices that would make them stand out from among the other residents of the kingdom.¹⁹ However, in chapter two, we saw that Esther's Jewishness does *not* outwardly differentiate her in any apparent manner. Her daily practices do not appear noticeably different from the other young women who had also been brought to the palace and who

see Martin Buber, *Kingship of God*, trans. Richard Scheimann, (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

¹⁸ At the same time, this particular form of distancing does not prevent Mordecai from being involved in various aspects of palace life (Est. 2:21-22) and from accepting various forms of royal honors (Est. 8:2, 8:15, 9:4, 10:3). Likewise, Esther is willing to approach the king and to touch the top of his scepter (Est. 5:2). Thus, the refusal to bow and prostrate before a human claim of sovereignty may still leave space for other forms of Jewish involvement in the political life of a country, and the precise differentiation between prohibited and permissible relations to human sovereigns would require further specification.

¹⁹ In the context of contemporary Jewish culture, the use here of the term *dat* would call to mind 'religious' practice even more strongly, although in the historical context of biblical Hebrew, the term might also simply be translated as "law."

had been drawn precisely from “all the provinces of [the] kingdom” (Est. 2:3)! Thus, as far as daily life is concerned, the image presented by the text is one in which Jews blend in unobtrusively alongside others and are not at all known as flagrant violators of the king’s laws. Indeed, at this very moment, the Jewish queen herself, in the heart of the king’s palace, is doing just fine: although she is a Jew, her way of life does not appear to conflict at all with “the king’s laws.” On this level, then, Haman’s claims to the king about the Jews would seem simply to be false and ungrounded, motivated purely out of personal hatred for Mordecai.

Yet, on another level, Haman’s words may indeed have a basis in reality. As we have seen, Mordecai has deliberately transgressed the king’s command.²⁰ And, given that Mordecai links his act with the simple fact that he is a Jew, the implication seems to be that all other Jews might similarly refuse to bow and prostrate if placed in Mordecai’s situation. Thus, the Jews appear to follow and blend in with all the particular laws that govern the day-to-day affairs of the kingdom, but they distance themselves from affirming identification with the claim of human sovereignty itself. Moreover, in this way, their normative practices (*dateiheim*) are different from those of the other peoples, whose identities are *not* predicated on the practical negation of claims of human sovereignty. Importantly, in refusing to acknowledge human sovereignty in the context of bowing and prostrating to Haman, there is no indication that Mordecai wishes to rebel against the foreign sovereign. That is, while refusing to engage in a certain type of action, he does not seek to practically undermine or fight against the reality of the Persian sovereignty structure itself.²¹ He seems very happy to remain a resident subject of the king of Persia, and he does not appear interested in setting

²⁰ For this reason, Levenson’s assertion that Haman’s “full lies are that the Jews disobey the king’s laws and must therefore be annihilated” (*Esther: A Commentary*, 71) seems to me to be an inaccurate description.

²¹ Even the Jews’ violent actions in the latter part of the book take place under the king’s authorization (see Est. 8:11) and thus are not presented as acts of rebellion against the political authorities.

up any competing or independent 'Jewish' or 'Judean' sovereignty.²² Rather, he seems to put forth a stable Jewish identity that deliberately distances itself from active affirmative identification with *any* claim of human sovereignty, whether 'foreign' or not. Thus, his position in relation to the sovereign power under which he lives is neither one of violent rebellion nor one of full identification. He takes part comfortably in most aspects of daily cultural life, with the exception of a certain class of state-level activities linked to aspects of sovereignty.²³ Thus, while the Jews *are* 'different' in this way, they pose no direct material threat to the king, and so he would have no strong reason not to let them remain. In this manner, the last part of Haman's appeal in verse eight might seem to lack practical grounding. Yet, at the same time, the Book of Esther may be giving voice to an underlying anxiety in that the Jewish refusal to bow, while not representing a material threat, may potentially represent an ideological threat – what would happen if all of the king's subjects refused to bow and prostrate before his claims of sovereignty?²⁴ Accordingly, this form of

²² Though Mordecai's roots trace back to Jerusalem (Est. 2:5-6), he does not display any inclination to take up residency, let alone sovereignty, there. In this regard, Jon Levenson describes the Book of Esther as putting forth an "understanding of Jewishness" that presents "the transformation of *exile* into the *Diaspora*" (*Esther: A Commentary*, 15). However, in characterizing the attitude of the Book of Esther, it is important to emphasize that it still ascribes to Jews a type of 'resistance identity' that retains a measure of antagonism to Gentile rulers' claims of sovereignty, and in this sense has some elements in common with the idea of exile and is not fully identical to (at least certain notions of) 'disapora.'

²³ Note also that Esther's own departure from fitting in also involves a direct confrontation of the king himself, which Esther emphasizes is "not according to the law" (*lo ka-dat*) (Est. 4:16). In addition, while the subsequent rabbinic notion of *dina de-malkhuta dina* affirms that Jews should follow the laws of the country in which they live, this does not apply to the prohibitions on bloodshed, sexual immorality, and idolatry (*'avodah zarah*), which a Jew should die rather than transgress (see, e.g., b. Sanhedrin 74a). And, in connection with the prohibition of idolatry, Steven Schwarzschild argues that, for classical rabbinic conceptuality, "Political power and idolatry are, of course, ultimately identical." See Schwarzschild, "The Legal Foundation of Jewish Aesthetics," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 9, no. 1 (January 1975): 29-42, at 39.

²⁴ Levenson notes an analogy between Mordecai's refusal of Haman and Vashti's earlier refusal of Ahasuerus (*Esther: A Commentary*, 48-49, 52-53). In this regard, just as Vashti's refusal raised explicit fears of 'what if all women refuse to submit to their husband's

Jewish identity, while socially and culturally ‘easy’ in certain aspects, may also prove socially and culturally challenging for Jews, depending on the extent to which their circumstances bring them into practical engagement with these aspects of the reigning government.

The Book of Esther and ‘Secular’ Jewish Identity?

Given this portrayal of cultural-political dynamics in the Book of Esther, in what ways might it serve as a resource for possible permutations of Jewish identity today? It does, notably, appear to indicate that the enactment of specifically Jewish ‘religious’ practices, and ‘religious’ discourse about God, are not treated as essential, and so the book could serve as a signpost for a form of Jewish life in which Jews are not marked out from others in the surrounding culture in terms of most aspects of daily life. (Importantly, there is no indication in the Book of Esther that Jews should *not* engage in ‘religious’ practice or discourse; such elements may play a significant role in Jewish life, but they are not presented in the text as *crucial* or *essential* for Jewish identity.) From this description alone, American Jews might think that no particular effort is necessary for maintaining Jewish identity – but as French’s essay has already indicated, this does not empirically appear to be the case, and without some form of Jewish difference, Jewish culture, as a minority group, is subject to gradual fading out over time.

When we examine Mordecai’s actions, however, we discover a factor that can provide this needed basis for Jewish difference, while simultaneously raising new and previously less-examined challenges and difficulties. It may be that Jews need not engage in distinctive ‘religious’ practice, but at the same time, Jewish identity demands an active

commands?’ (Est. 1:17-20), so too Mordecai’s refusal may prompt related fears of ‘what if all subjects refused, like Mordecai, to acknowledge the king’s commanding authority?’ See also Berlin *Esther*, 40, for ways in which refusal to do obeisance by bowing and prostrating could, in the context of antiquity, easily have been seen as treason and a threat to the king’s sovereignty.

distancing from structures of human sovereignty.²⁵ For American Jews – both ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ – such active distancing has not, however, typically been a prominent feature of Jewish life in recent decades. Yet, the specific developments of modernity would seem to make such a challenge even more pressing than in the days of Esther, Mordecai, Haman, and Ahasuerus. Whereas in premodern states, the sovereign was generally the singular human monarch, the past few centuries have seen a transfer of sovereign power from the king to ‘the people.’²⁶ Thus, in the contemporary American context, ‘the American people’ are the ones vested with sovereignty, and this ‘people’ is composed of and constituted by all American citizens. In the pre-modern context, a subject of the king was not himself or herself a direct participant in the power of sovereignty, and so such subjects could, for the most part, avoid the need to directly affirm the structures of sovereignty-claims in everyday life. By contrast, if in modern states each citizen is posited as existentially bound up with sovereignty, there is no luxury of such everyday distance.

We can therefore ask: what would be the contemporary equivalent of Mordecai’s ‘Jewish’ distancing from the structures of human sovereignty, of refusing to acknowledge anybody but God as worthy of bowing and prostrating? The core issue seems to lie not merely in the physical act of bowing and prostrating, but in the indication of willful affirmation of submissive fidelity and allegiance to a claimant to sovereignty.²⁷ In an

²⁵ Again, this should not be taken as a dismissal of the importance of ‘religious observance,’ but rather as a question of core prioritizations, along the lines of the R. Joshua ben Qorcha’s statement in m. Berachot 2:2 that one should “first take upon oneself the yoke of the Kingship of God (*malkhut shamayim*), and then afterwards take upon oneself the yoke of the commandments.” To take upon oneself the yoke of the commandments while failing to take on the yoke of God’s sovereignty would thus be a problematic reversal of priorities.

²⁶ For ways in which the notion of the sovereignty of the people may be problematic from the perspective of prominent streams of thought in the Hebrew Bible, see Tommy Givens, *We the People: Israel and the Catholicity of Jesus* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014).

²⁷ In this regard, it is notable that Babylonian Talmud Sanhedrin 61b indicates that the act of prostrating (*mishtachaveh*) to another human being is prohibited specifically when the recipient of the physical action is also someone who is “served/worshipped” (*ne’evad*). The question then becomes: what sorts of claims of authority structurally constitute such an act

extreme form, would American Jews need to renounce their citizenship, to the extent that the latter requires a commitment of “true faith and allegiance” to the sovereign body of the United States?²⁸ Or, in a lesser form, would Jews be obligated to distance themselves from actively reinforcing the structures of sovereignty by refraining from voting in national elections? Does standing for the American national anthem or the Pledge of Allegiance represent a Jewishly-problematic equivalent of bowing and prostrating to Haman? Do Jews need to deliberately reject participation in the core central elements of sovereign violence and authority, such as, most prominently, carrying out orders to kill or die in the activities of war? While the conceptual complexities of the transition from the notion of a sovereign monarch to the notion of a sovereign people may mean that precise answers to these questions would require further debate and discussion, there may, at the very least, be multiple ways in which an ‘Estherian’ form of Jewish identity would require profound reevaluation of what up to now have been taken for granted as normal forms of participation in contemporary society and politics.²⁹

French’s proposal for looking to the Bible for alternative forms of Jewish identity therefore opens up a can of worms – in an intellectually productive way. She is certainly right that biblical texts such as Esther put forth a form of identity that differs from contemporary ‘religious’ Jewish life, but we have seen that it also differs in important ways from contemporary ‘secular’ Jewish life. Indeed, the contemporary concepts of ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ Jewish life might *both* take for granted participation in and engagement with structures of human sovereignty,

of service, and which do not? Here, again, the disentangling of the ‘political’ from the ‘religious’ (as the terms are used today) may not be straightforward.

²⁸ See “Naturalization Oath of Allegiance to the United States of America,” accessed January 25, 2016, <https://www.uscis.gov/us-citizenship/naturalization-test/naturalization-oath-allegiance-united-statesamerica>.

²⁹ For a modern example in a Christian theological context of an attempt to negotiate between a distancing from the structures of sovereignty, on the one hand, and continued engagement in the life of the surrounding society, on the other, see John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 2nd ed., (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002).

and thus both might represent specifically modern ('assimilated?') permutations that are called sharply into question by the Jewish orientation of the Book of Esther.³⁰

Furthermore, even if the Book of Esther does not display any outwardly 'religious' factors, the political distancing and refusing-to-bow-and-prostrate can be read as implicitly connected to broader biblical, as well as later rabbinic, notions of God as sovereign. That is to say, the positive notion of God as Israel's unique sovereign has as its negative practical correlate a distancing from any present human claimant to sovereignty.³¹ Thus, the Book of Esther may point to a practical political stance that corresponds to a 'monotheistic' orientation, without having to refer explicitly to God or to revelation. Along the lines of negative theology, we might therefore view the Book of Esther as putting forth a negative theopolitics, asserting a substantive and distinctive theopolitical stance by means of negative assertions about human sovereignty rather than by positive statements about God's sovereignty.³² Rather than trying to classify this stance as either 'secular' or as 'religious,' we can view it as an orientation that departs from both of these contemporary concepts and

³⁰ Benjamin R. Hertzberg provides some interesting reflections on ways in which the Book of Esther could contribute to contemporary Jewish political debates concerning diasporism and sovereignty. However, he presents Esther primarily in terms of accommodation and compromise (as indicated by the book's lack of insistence on traditional 'religious' observance), and does not highlight the dynamics of principled non-accommodation that may be found in Mordecai's refusal to bow and prostrate. See Hertzberg, "Daniel, Esther, and the Minority Politics of the Hebrew Bible," *Polity* 47, no. 3 (July 2015), 397-416, at 413-414.

³¹ Even if in rabbinic Judaism there is a notion of a future messianic king that is to come, the specifically future-eschatological locating of this coming corresponds to a distancing from all instances of human claims to sovereignty is this pre-messianic era.

³² In a related observation, Levenson argues that the Book of Esther may display a theology wherein God is understood as working behind the scenes to providentially bring about the deliverance of the Jews, even – or precisely – without God being explicitly mentioned (*Esther: A Commentary*, 21). As such, it may also display a normative theopolitics of "God alone is to be your sovereign," but via indirect showing, rather than direct assertion, of this norm.

cannot properly be grouped under either category.³³ Furthermore, if the ostensibly 'secular' Book of Esther turns out instead to be neither-secular-nor-religious, then perhaps it might likewise turn out that other biblical books that could outwardly seem more 'religious' (involving talk of God, divine commandments, etc.) might also be most fruitfully understood in a similarly neither/nor manner.

Thus, French's argument for turning to the Bible as a response to the weakening of contemporary 'religious' sensibilities seems to me to be based on a sound intuition that 'something else' may yet be drawn out from the pages of the sources of Judaism. Her examples of the books of Esther and of Chronicles serve to highlight the conceptual insufficiency of 'religious' categories for understanding or engaging the biblical corpus as a whole. Yet, if the Book of Esther is any indication, contemporary notions of 'secular' Jewish identity may also be insufficient. Instead, scriptural investigations along the lines of French's suggestions may yield an alternative third way in the search for "a common Jewish identity in the modern era." To be sure, this third way may entail a significant rethinking of prevalent contemporary assumptions about the relation of Jews to structures of human sovereignty. Rather than being a cause for despair or anxiety, however, this rethinking has the potential to produce a renewal of Jewish cultural vitality. Precisely by moving beyond the stale conceptual binary of secular/religious, new directions of thought in the realms of both Jewish and broader cultural, political, and philosophical thought may therefore be stimulated by the courage to update Mordecai's 'Jewish' refusal to bow and prostrate, in deliberate transgression of "the king's command."

³³ For further reflection on ways in which modern notions of secularity might stand in tension with the conceptuality found in prominent streams of previous Jewish tradition, see Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin, "Secularism, the Christian Ambivalence Towards the Jews, and the Notion of Exile," in *Secularism in Question: Jews and Judaism in Modern Times*, ed. Ari Joskowitz and Ethan B. Katz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 276-298.