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Justification of Violence in Esther 8–9? The Book of Esther: Between Fiction and History

Usprawiedliwienie przemocy w Est 8–9? Księga Estery między fikcją a historią

Abstract. This article examines the portrayal of violence in Esther 8–9 as a literary and ideological construction rather than a historical record. It focuses on the close symmetry between Haman's decree (Esth 3) and Mordecai's counter-decree (Esth 8), where identical formulae of destruction are reframed through legal language of self-defense and vengeance. A comparison with the Septuagint highlights an early interpretive reworking of the Hebrew text, especially in its attenuation of exterminatory language. Situating Esther within wider scholarly discussions of diaspora literature and Persian literary conventions, the article argues that its depiction of violence reflects ideological concerns about identity, survival, and collective memory rather than historiographical reporting.

Streszczenie. W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano sposób przedstawienia przemocy w rozdziałach 8–9 Księgi Estery jako konstrukcję literacką i ideologiczną, a nie jako zapis historyczny. Skupiono się na ścisłej symetrii między dekretem Hamana (Est 3) a kontrdekretem Mordocheusza (Est 8), gdzie identyczne sformułowania dotyczące zagłady zostały przeformułowane za pomocą języka prawnego, odwołującego się do samoobrony i zemsty. Porównanie z Septuagintą podkreśla wczesną interpretacyjną przeróbkę tekstu hebrajskiego, zwłaszcza w zakresie złagodzenia języka eksterminacyjnego. Umieszczając Księgę Estery w szerszym kontekście naukowych dyskusji na temat literatury diaspory i perskich konwencji literackich, artykuł dowodzi, że przedstawienie przemocy w tej księdze odzwierciedla ideologiczne obawy dotyczące tożsamości, przetrwania i pamięci zbiorowej, a nie relację historyczną.

Keywords: Book of Esther, violence, self-defense, Purim, annihilation.

Słowa kluczowe: Księga Estery, przemoc, samoobrona, Purim, eksterminacja.

Introduction

The portrayal of violence in the Bible remains one of the most challenging issues for modern readers, particularly when violence appears to be divinely sanctioned or left without explicit condemnation. The Book of Esther is a striking example.¹ Images of execution, revenge, and death permeate the narrative, culminating in the large-scale bloodshed of Esther 8–9. Consequently, Esther has long posed an interpretive challenge for both Jewish and Christian readers (Calduch-Benages 2010, 122).

The present study focuses on the violence of Esther 8–9 and the ways in which it is justified within the narrative.² Can the massacre described in these chapters be understood as legitimate self-defense, or does the text seek to legitimize collective violence for ideological purposes? Rather than attempting to excuse or condemn the violence, this article examines the literary, ideological, and historical functions of its portrayal, asking what purpose such a disturbing narrative may have served in its original context.

1. The Origins of Violence in Esther 8–9: Violence Reversed, Violence Reproduced

The violence of Esther 8–9 is rooted in Haman's decree of annihilation recounted in Esther 3. Triggered by Mordecai's refusal to bow before him (Esth 3:2–6), a personal conflict is transformed into a collective threat against the entire Jewish population of the empire. The royal edict orders the destruction of all Jews

¹ Violence is present throughout the entire narrative. The motif of execution appears as early as the account of the two eunuchs who are hanged after their conspiracy against the king is uncovered (Esth 2:23). Subsequently, it reappears in the preparation of the gallows intended for Mordecai (Esth 5:14), in the execution of Haman himself (Esth 7:10), and finally in the hanging of Haman's ten sons (Esth 9:13–14, 25). The final chapters culminate in the killing of hundreds in Susa and seventy-five thousand throughout the provinces of the empire (Esth 9:6, 15–16), making violence a pervasive feature of the book's narrative world. This topic is the main focus of the book: Ruiz-Ortiz 2017.

² Unless otherwise stated, references to the biblical text (including Esther) are given according to the Hebrew text in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*, quoted after Elliger et al. 1997. The Greek text of Esther is quoted after Rahlfs and Hanhart 2006. All translations into English are mine.

through the well-known formula “to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate” (לְהַשְׁמִיד וּלְהָרֹג וּלְאַבֵּד), explicitly including “young and old, children and women” and authorizing the seizure of their property (Esth 3:13). Because Persian law rendered royal decrees irrevocable (Esth 8:8), Esther’s intervention could not cancel the edict. Instead, Mordecai issued a counter-decree (Esth 8:11–13) authorizing the Jews to assemble and “stand for their lives” (וּלְעֹמֵד עַל-נַפְשָׁם; Esth 8:11).

The close literary relationship between the two decrees is evident in their nearly identical Hebrew phraseology. Mordecai’s edict repeats the same triadic formula of violence (לְהַשְׁמִיד וּלְהָרֹג וּלְאַבֵּד), again refers to “children and women” (טַף וְנָשִׁים), permits the seizure of property (וּשְׁלָלָם לְבוֹז), and designates the same date—the thirteenth day of Adar. Although framed as self-defense, the decree culminates in the explicit authorization to take “vengeance” (נָקָם; Esth 8:13). The narrative therefore does not simply present the opposite of Haman’s violence but its reversal: the threatened victims become agents of a similarly sanctioned form of violence.

A comparison of the Masoretic Text (MT) and the Septuagint (LXX, Esth 8:12s Add. E) demonstrates that the Greek version substantially reinterprets Mordecai’s decree.³ Whereas the MT authorizes the Jews “to destroy, kill, and annihilate” their attackers, together with women and children, and to seize their property, the LXX omits the exterminatory formula and removes references to women, children, and plunder. Instead, it emphasizes the Jews’ right to observe their ancestral customs and presents their actions primarily in terms of defense, using the verb ἀμύνομαι (“to defend themselves”). Likewise, the MT’s language of vengeance (נָקָם) is replaced by the more neutral πολεμέω (“to engage in battle”; LXX Esth 8:13). The Greek text therefore functions not merely as a translation but as an exegetical reinterpretation that moderates the retaliatory and exterminatory dimensions of the Hebrew narrative.⁴

The narrative of Esther 9 further expands the scope of violence beyond the formal limits of Mordecai’s decree. While Esther 8:11–13 authorizes defensive

³ Helge Bezdol notes that a comparison of the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, and the Alpha Text (EsthAT) indicates that issues of power and violence remained a continuous subject of interpretation and debate (Bezold 2024).

⁴ The debate surrounding the Greek “translations” of the Book of Esther is well illustrated by C.C. Torrey’s (Torrey 1944, 1) observation that, unlike other books of the Old Testament, there is no evidence that a Greek translation of Esther based on the Hebrew text ever existed.

action against potential attackers on a single day, Esther 9:2–16 describes the killing of a broader category of people: “those who hated them” and “those who sought their destruction.” The narrator emphasizes that the Jews “did as they pleased” (9:5) and that, at Esther’s request, the violence in Susa was extended to a second day (9:13–15). Although the MT repeatedly stresses that the Jews did not seize the plunder (9:10, 15, 16), the scale of the killings remains striking: 800 deaths in Susa and 75,000 throughout the provinces, in addition to Haman and his ten sons (7:10; 9:7–14). Given that “no one could withstand them” (9:2) and that Persian officials actively supported them (9:3), the narrative moves beyond the minimal logic of self-defense and portrays an extensive act of collective retaliation. The LXX again follows a different interpretive trajectory, reducing the number of victims to 15,000 and stating that the Jews did take plunder (LXX Esth 9:10, 16), thereby reflecting an alternative reception and interpretation of the violence narrated in the Book of Esther.

2. Esther 8–9 as the *Crux Exegetarum*

The extent of the massacre in Esther 8–9 scandalized some authors, who considered the story as immoral (Calduch-Benages 2010, 138).⁵ One of them, D. J. A. Clines, called it “a Jewish massacre of anti-Semites rather than Jewish self-defence against an imperially sponsored pogrom” (Clines 1984, 40), revealing, incidentally, both his assessment of the Jewish attack (“massacre”) and the retrospective application of later terminology (“anti-Semites”) to the ancient context of biblical narratives.⁶

At the same time, the violence has frequently been justified, especially by modern authors, as “defensive and justified” (Ruiz-Ortiz 2017, 213). According to one influential interpretation, Mordecai’s decree (Esth 8:11–13) should be understood as a juridical “counter-decree” to Haman’s earlier edict (Esth 3:12–15). Since Persian law was considered irrevocable, the first decree could not simply be annulled; instead, Mordecai issued a parallel decree intended to

⁵ The author cites publications that condemn the Jewish attack on the Gentiles as immoral. The history of the interpretation of “good” and “evil” in Esther prior to and in the aftermath of the Second World War is presented in Lee 2020.

⁶ The same incongruence can be found in many contemporary sources—for example, Levenson 1997, 25.

neutralize its consequences and legally authorize Jewish self-defense (Calduch-Benages 2010, 137) through nearly identical formulae of destruction (“to destroy, kill, and annihilate”). Violence, therefore, is framed not as unprovoked aggression but as a reverse application of the same legal mechanism.

Other approaches emphasize the literary and ideological logic of inversion structuring the book, in which Esther operates as a “counter-history” (Assmann 2007, 83–84) governed by reversal (בְּהִפּוּךְ הַיּוֹא, Esth 9:1),⁷ transforming Jewish vulnerability into triumph and persecutors into victims (Levenson 1997, 8; Grys 2015, 16). The second day of fighting in Susa (Esth 9:15–18) appears to have an essentially etiological function: the violence is expanded in order to justify the two-day celebration of Purim (Fox 2001, 115; Chalupa 2015, 134). From a literary perspective, this produces a striking inversion in which the narrative of killing serves to legitimize a festival rather than the festival commemorating an independently significant military event. The additional bloodshed is therefore best understood as a narrative construction whose primary purpose is to provide an origin story for Purim (Ruiz-Ortiz 2017, 225–26).

Importantly, the passage must be read within the broader framework of festal irony and reversal; otherwise, its peculiar narrative logic remains difficult to explain (Ruiz-Ortiz 2017, 226). This is why some scholars interpret the exaggerated scale of violence as an element of a “literary” or even “carnavalesque” war, where hyperbole is central to the narrative strategy rather than historical realism (Craig 1995, 136, cited in Calduch-Benages 2010, 140). Others argue that the text functions as a preventive memory: its aim is not to glorify violence but to warn against future attempts at collective extermination (Day 2005, 156, cited in Chalupa 2015, 134). Despite these explanations, the violence of Esther 8–9 remains a major interpretive problem, one strikingly underrepresented even in broad surveys such as *The Book of Esther in Modern Research* (Crawford and Greenspoon 2003). At the same time, others have tried to justify and explain the Jewish attack from Esther 9:1–16, not only assessing it as legal self-defense only, decreed in writing by the king (Calduch-Benages 2010, 142), but also presenting Jews as “good citizens who do only what is necessary to defend themselves and survive. They are not in the war to benefit materially; they do not wish to wage war” (Niditch 1993, 122).

⁷ This phrase is considered the central theme of the entire book (Levenson 1997, 8) and the very center of Esther 9:1–19 (Ruiz-Ortiz 2017, 225).

The Jews' refusal to accept the spoils (Esth 9:10, 15, 16) has also been used to justify the attack and, in light of Saul's actions in 1 Samuel 15, to interpret it as "morally righteous" (Ruiz-Ortiz 2017, 217 with further references) or even necessary in this context. During the war between the Israelites and the Amalekites, Saul took the spoils and blamed the people (1 Sam. 15:15); now, the Jews surpass their leader's conduct by refusing to take the booty.⁸ This refusal is a form of voluntary sacrifice through which the Jews wash away the stain of the Israelites' greed. In light of Esther 9, "the Jews are undoing their ancestors failure: the ancestors took spoil, their descendants now refrain from it" (Fox 2001, 115), thereby correcting and making amends for the actions of their ancestors.

Contemporary attempts to justify the violence of Esther 8–9 as self-defense are rooted in medieval Jewish exegesis, particularly in the works of Ibn Ezra and Joseph Ibn Kaspi (to mention just a few),⁹ which consistently frame Jewish violence not as retaliation but as a necessary response to an existential threat.

Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (ca. 1089–1164) interprets Mordecai's decree (Esth 8:11–13) as a legal necessity made unavoidable by the irrevocability of Persian law, presenting it as the only means to prevent Jewish destruction rather than an act of vengeance (Walfish 1993, 128; Frankel 2023). In a similar but more radical interpretive move, Joseph ibn Kaspi (1280–1340) redefines the phrase *לְהִנָּקֵם* ("to avenge"; Esth 8:13) as a defensive counterattack rather than retaliation, drawing on Joshua 8:20 to support the idea that "avenging" can mean turning against aggressors: "For someone who turns against an aggressor is called an avenger (*noqem*)" (Kaspi 1902, 35, cited in Walfish 1993, 24).

Since such a reading lacks clear linguistic or midrashic support, it is often seen as a deliberate exegetical construction aimed at portraying Jewish violence in purely defensive terms, with no bloodshed occurring had the Jews not been attacked. It was their (i.e., the enemies') own wickedness—or, perhaps more accurately, God's will to punish them—that led them to attack the Jews, resulting in their massacre (Walfish 1993, 24, 132). This interpretive strategy corresponds to Isaac Heinemann's notion of "creative philology," namely the redefinition

⁸ F.-J. Ruiz-Ortiz notes that the reversal is not complete: the Persians are not direct descendants of the Amalekites, and the booty is not destroyed as required by the tradition of *herem*. Nevertheless, the narrative presents a reversal of Israel's earlier failure in principle (Ruiz-Ortiz 2017, 217, n. 126).

⁹ For more examples of medieval Jewish interpretations of Esther, see Walfish 1993, esp. 13–44; 121–42 (including references to the relevant works).

of difficult expressions according to one's theological or ideological needs (Heinemann 1954, 96–164, cited in Walfish 1993, 23–24). Within the same trajectory, Levi ben Gershom, known as Gersonides (1288–1344), identifies the enemies with the Amalekites, thereby framing the violence as a continuation of Israel's archetypal struggle (Walfish 1993, 132), while Abraham Saba (mid-fifteenth to early sixteenth century) similarly stresses that the Jews were authorized only to defend themselves (Walfish 1993, 132).

3. Esther: Between History and Fiction

Increasingly, the Book of Esther is read not as a historical chronicle but as a literary and ideological narrative that reworks themes of existential threat, violence, and communal survival. Scholars note the lack of external evidence for a Persian policy of Jewish extermination or for the large-scale massacres reported in Esther 9, and therefore interpret the narrative as a literary construction rather than a historical report (Bezold 2023, 72, 73). Elements such as irrevocable royal decrees (Esth 1:19; 8:8) are likewise seen as lacking historical corroboration and as belonging to the book's narrative design rather than Persian legal practice (Levenson 1997, 25). Accordingly, Esther is often described as a historical novella, whose truth is expressed through literary and theological aims rather than empirical historiography, with exaggerated details and internal tensions further reinforcing its literary character (Levenson 1997, 25; Moore 1974, li; Greenstein 1987, 227).

Within this perspective, Persia functions primarily as a literary setting that universalizes the Jewish experience of danger across the diaspora. The narrative draws on conventional and stylized representations of Achaemenid imperial power, familiar from broader Greek literary traditions, in order to construct an image of globalized threat and survival. As Adele Berlin (2001, xxx) notes, the portrayal of Persia is “not realistic, but conventional,” shaped by the same motifs as those used by Greek historiographers in describing the empire. The book's hyperbolic features—such as inflated numbers and dramatic reversals—further underscore its ideological rather than historiographical function (Berlin 2001, xxvii).

In this respect, Esther is often compared with other Jewish diaspora narratives such as Daniel, Judith, and Tobit, which construct models of successful Jewish life under foreign rule, emphasizing identity, solidarity, and continuity

within minority existence (Berlin 2001, xxxiv–xxxv). The Persian framework may thus be understood as a retrospective literary medium through which later communities reflected on violence and deliverance in collective memory and festival tradition (Greenstein 1987, 226). Some scholars further suggest that the depiction of Mordecai and Esther as effective court figures may have also served to reinforce confidence in Jewish leadership and potentially resonated with later political aspirations, including those of the Hasmonean period (Bezold 2023, 86).

4. The Hasmonean Context as an Interpretive Framework of Esther 8–9

The violence of Esther 8–9 may also be read against a broader Hellenistic background. Haman's plan to annihilate the Jews originates in wounded honor caused by Mordecai's refusal to bow before him, a motif unparalleled in the Hebrew Bible but characteristic of Greek literary and political traditions, where challenges to authority could justify collective retaliation (Bezold 2023, 71, 74). Mordecai's rejection of *proskynesis* likewise resembles the Greek ideal of refusing submission to human rulers, especially Persians (Macchi 2009, 117–19 with references). Within this framework, the narrative's logic of large-scale violence in Esther 3 reflects patterns familiar from Hellenistic discourse concerning honor, power, and the restoration of social order through force.

The closest literary parallel to the justification of collective violence in Esther 8–9 is found in 1 Maccabees. Within the Hebrew Bible, Esther is unique in linking an existential threat against the entire Jewish people with a legitimized, large-scale Jewish retaliation in an imperial context (Bezold 2023, 80–81).¹⁰ Both narratives employ a similar strategy: a threat of annihilation serves to justify the mobilization of the Jewish community and its recourse to collective violence. In 1 Maccabees, attacks on the Jews and their customs prompt Judas Maccabaeus and his followers to call the nation to arms against the Seleucids; likewise, in Esther, the decree of destruction becomes the basis for a Jewish counteraction presented as both necessary and legitimate (Bezold 2023, 82–84).

Further similarities reinforce this connection. Scholars have noted that the date of Haman's decree and the Jewish retaliation—the thirteenth of Adar—coincides with the date of Judas's victory over Nicanor (1 Macc 7:43, 49;

¹⁰ Even the battle reports do not follow the Deuteronomistic, scriptural model found, for example, in the books of Kings (Ruiz-Ortiz 2017, 215).

cf. 2 Macc 15:36), and both works culminate in the establishment of commemorative festivals celebrating Jewish deliverance (Macchi 2013, 102–105, cited in Bezold 2023, 82). In both narratives, Jewish leaders emerge as agents of salvation who unite the people against an existential threat, while the ensuing violence is portrayed as a justified act of defense and retaliation that simultaneously affirms the military potential of the Jewish nation and legitimizes the authority of its leaders (Bezold 2023, 84).

The violence of Esther 8–9 is framed through a powerful rhetoric of legitimation. The Jews are portrayed simultaneously as potential victims of total annihilation and as the successful agents of large-scale violence (Bezold 2023, 71). By presenting the Jewish mobilization as a response to an existential threat, the narrative adopts a common strategy of justifying violence through self-preservation and retaliation. This logic is made explicit in Mordecai's decree, which states that the Jews are to be ready "to take revenge on their enemies" (Esth 8:13). The motif of threatened annihilation, a theme deeply embedded in Jewish collective memory and identity, functions as the narrative foundation upon which the legitimacy of the ensuing violence is constructed (Bezold 2023, 78–79). It was expressed by Gili Kugler, who argues that the "consciousness of the danger of annihilation" presents "one of the strongest components in Jewish myth and Jewish identity" (Kugler 2019, 11).

At the same time, the narrative moves beyond the defensive framework established in Esther 8. Although the decree is formulated in terms of self-defense, Esther 9 depicts an overwhelming and asymmetrical victory. The Jews kill more than 75,000 enemies, and the narrator emphasizes that they acted against those who hated them and that they "did as they pleased" with their enemies (Esth 9:5), language that exceeds the narrow boundaries of defensive action (Bezold 2023, 79–80). As a result, many modern interpreters have sought to understand the episode as a morally justified act of resistance, yet the text itself repeatedly underscores the retaliatory dimension of the violence (Bezold 2023, 78, n. 18 with references). In this respect, Esther demonstrates how Jewish authors could employ fictional narrative not only to counter accusations against their people but also to justify the collective use of violence as a proportionate response to the threat of annihilation (Bezold 2023, 71, 77).

5. Esther as a Narrative Legitimation of Hasmonean Authority

Recent scholarship has increasingly interpreted the violence of the Book of Esther not as a historical recollection but as an ideological construction serving specific political and communal purposes. The narrative transforms the threat of annihilation into a justification for large-scale Jewish retaliation, presenting the Jews simultaneously as potential victims of genocide and as victorious agents of collective violence (Bezold 2023, 71, 85). Since there is no historical evidence for either a Persian plan to exterminate the Jews or the killing of tens of thousands of enemies described in Esther 9, the account is best understood as a fictionalized and hyperbolic reworking of collective memory rather than a record of historical events (Bezold 2023, 85). In this perspective, Esther may reflect Hasmonean ideology, particularly its tendency to legitimize collective violence as a necessary response to existential threats (Bezold 2023, 84).

Within this framework, the Persian setting functions as a retrospective and universalized backdrop for concerns that more plausibly belong to the Hellenistic period. The annihilation motif of Esther 3 can be interpreted as a dramatized retrojection of the conflicts that took place in Judea in the second century BC, while the Jews' military success mirrors the conviction—also found in 1 Maccabees—that only a united and forceful response could ensure communal survival. Esther therefore universalizes the threat of annihilation and, like 1 Maccabees, legitimizes collective Jewish violence as the necessary response to existential danger, a perspective well suited to Hasmonean ideological interests (Bezold 2023, 87). At the same time, the narrative highlights the effectiveness of Jewish political and military leadership through the figures of Mordecai and Esther, whose success at the imperial court may have served to strengthen confidence in contemporary Jewish leaders and to reinforce communal solidarity in the face of external threats (Bezold 2023, 86). In this sense, Esther functions not only as a story of survival but also as a narrative legitimization of political authority and collective violence. Esther 8–9 presents a form of preemptive violence in which the mere threat of annihilation becomes sufficient justification for large-scale retaliation. A similar pattern appears in Judith 15:4, suggesting an ideology in which violence is portrayed as a necessary means of communal survival in the face of existential danger.

6. Voices of Opposition to Militarism

The ideology of collective violence reflected in the books of Esther and 1 Maccabees was not universally accepted within Second Temple Judaism. Contemporary Jewish sources preserve alternative perspectives that questioned the legitimacy of military resistance and the political program of the Hasmoneans. Even in 1 Maccabees, some Jews chose to flee into the wilderness rather than participate in armed conflict against the Seleucids (1 Macc 2:29). Likewise, the Book of Daniel adopts a markedly different theological perspective. Rather than glorifying military resistance, Daniel emphasizes divine intervention and characterizes the assistance provided by the Maccabean movement as only “a little help” (Dan 11:34), thereby relativizing the significance of armed struggle and placing ultimate hope in God’s eschatological deliverance (Bezold 2023, 87–88).

An even more explicit critique emerges in the literature of the *Yahad* community associated with Qumran. This movement functioned as a peaceful opposition group that rejected the legitimacy of the Hasmonean leadership and postponed the final defeat of evil until the eschatological future (Elgvin 2016, 329, 339). The Habakkuk Peshier (1QpHab 8:8–13; 12:2–6)¹¹ condemns the violent conduct of the “Wicked Priest,” a figure commonly identified with one or more Hasmonean rulers, criticizing his abuse of power, persecution of the Righteous Teacher, and disregard for proper religious observance (Elgvin 2016, 331). The anti-Hasmonean character of some Qumran texts becomes particularly visible in 4Q Testimonia (4Q175) and the *Apocryphon of Joshua* (4Q378–379). These works describe a “man of Belial” and his sons, commonly identified with members of the Hasmonean dynasty, who rebuild a city but simultaneously establish a “stronghold of evil,” shed innocent blood in Jerusalem, and bring corruption upon Israel (4Q175 1:21–30; 4Q379 22 ii 7–15; cf. Josh 6:26; Elgvin 2016, 332). Rather than presenting Hasmonean rule as a sign of messianic restoration, these texts reinterpret its political and military achievements as evidence of violence, illegitimate power, and divine judgment.

Together, these writings demonstrate that alongside narratives legitimizing collective violence and military leadership, there existed significant Jewish

¹¹ Translations of Qumran texts follow *Accordance: Qumran Non-biblical Manuscripts*, based on Wise, Abegg, and Cook 2005.

voices that viewed Hasmonean militarism with suspicion and advocated fidelity, communal separation, and divine intervention rather than armed resistance.

Conclusion

The evidence surveyed above suggests that Esther 8–9 is best read not as a historical account of events in the Persian period but as an ideologically charged narrative that reflects later Jewish debates about violence, survival, and political authority. The threat of annihilation and the subsequent large-scale retaliation of the Jews function as literary devices that legitimize collective violence by presenting it as a necessary response to an existential danger. In this respect, the Book of Esther shares important ideological and narrative features with 1 Maccabees and may preserve elements of a broader Hasmonean discourse that sought to justify military action and consolidate support for Jewish leadership (Bezold 2023, 71, 88). The book and the festival of Purim thus commemorate and reactivate the memory of a united Jewish people who responded to the threat of destruction through collective action and military success, a memory that could readily serve contemporary political purposes.

At the same time, Esther should not be reduced to a straightforward apology for violence. Contemporary Jewish literature preserves significant voices of opposition to militarism, including Daniel and the Qumran writings, which questioned the legitimacy of violent resistance and deferred ultimate judgment to God. Read against this wider literary background, Esther participates in an ongoing intra-Jewish debate concerning the use of force, revenge, and communal survival. Whether the book ultimately legitimizes violence or subtly exposes its ambiguities remains an open question; nevertheless, it clearly demonstrates how narratives of existential threat could be employed to justify, commemorate, and politically mobilize collective violence.

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