

Article

Seeking Subjectivity in/with/Through Esther's Mobility

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Abstract

The erasure of mobile female-identified bodies amongst both biblical and migration scholars is being redressed, to a certain point. Building upon the work of both disciplines, this article attempts to provide a thorough feminist analysis of the mobility of the Hebrew Bible character Esther. The article begins with a discussion on what feminist migration studies might include, along with a critical look at the framework of forced migrations. Thereafter, the article brings together multiple scholars of the ancient world in conversation, using the work that has rightly labeled her movement by the story world regime as trafficking, along with comparative analysis to captivity studies. The article argues, however, that a feminist hermeneutic of the Bible should not only speak to the world, but also practice and model active reflexivity. Thus, a holistic account of interpreting Esther's mobility in the Masoretic Text requires an interrogation of both the author of the biblical text and the author of the article itself.

Keywords: Esther; trafficking; captivity; feminist; migration; mobility

"An image can be polished. Polishing is an activity, a form of labor. To cover is to labor at an appearance. . . If we refuse to polish the surfaces, we encounter what is real, all that has been removed to create a certain impression". (Ahmed 2023, p. 76)

1. Decentering (Ancient) Male Movement and Movers

In biblical scholars' work on migration, analysis of gender and sexuality has been all but ignored (Scholz 2020, pp. 248–49, fn. 6);¹ as Carolyn Sharp notes—in an edited volume titled *Women and Exilic Identity in the Hebrew Bible*—"far too often in biblical studies, gender is still treated as a 'special interest,' a topic peripheral to the field" (Sharp 2017, p. 72). Some of this has to do with the specific viewpoint of the biblical texts themselves, which privilege the voices and perspectives of male movers, but this is a decidedly bad excuse. Not only has Uusimäki (2022) recently provided a remarkably helpful and intersectional overview of women's migration, as can be readily found in the Hebrew Bible, but it is also the task of the biblical scholar to interrogate the seemingly singular and narrow frames of the text that render some movers visible and others invisible. Still, Susanne Scholz argues that a feminist biblical hermeneutics must go beyond "a rehearsal of biblical women's migrating stories," in that a truly feminist enterprise must transform away from "a text-fetishized approach that excludes the world's purview" (Scholz 2020, pp. 261–62).

As a self-proclaimed feminist biblical scholar, I will be revisiting the movements of the biblical figure of Esther—as well as the many unnamed girls who are also trafficked alongside her (Dunbar 2021)—in the Masoretic Text that bears her name. I aim to undertake a truly interdisciplinary approach to this study by starting with a brief discussion of what feminist approaches to the study of migration look like among migration scholars



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themselves, which also necessitates a conversation about the terminology biblical scholars use to describe ancient movement and the need for reflexivity in this work. A lot of what is shared is not necessarily new research per se, nor is it exhaustive, but it is an offering that demonstrates what I hope the future of not only feminist biblical scholarship, but biblical scholarship broadly speaking, might aim to do when interpreting mobility in the past. In many ways, I may open more questions for continued research, rather than answer them. My goal in this article is not to close all the gaps—much of what is discussed is intentionally compact—but endeavors to model a critical analysis that maintains some level of subjectivity for both the literary characters in the biblical text and the *real* persons who might represent them, as well as for those included in the modern models used to understand the ancient world.

2. Framing Interdisciplinarity

The use of additional and modern disciplines to inform ancient text interpretation requires thoughtfulness and humility (Fry and Trinka 2025, pp. 104–5).² Interdisciplinarity necessitates recognizing the histories of those disciplines and the conceptual baggage that comes with what we are attempting to apply. Because of this, I begin with some definitions that guide my work.

I tend to use the words *movement*, *mobility*, and *migration* interchangeably, and while they are co-constitutive, they are also somewhat distinct. Movement is more of an ontological reality, of what it means for things or beings to kinetically shift in space. Mobility, however, explicitly recognizes that these movements occur in specific spaces imbued with power, which then characterizes certain movements and those undergoing them with different valuations, thereby constituting a culture of mobility (Trinka 2022, p. 15). Migration is often distinguished from mobility more generally as more long-term and re-locative (Trinka and Fry 2025, pp. 5–6); in modern contexts, movement is considered migration when longer distances are traveled, particularly if nation-state borders are crossed. I prefer not to limit the term migration as somehow totally different from mobility, as I believe the emphasis on a physical border as distinguishing these concepts is limiting. As migration scholar Johanna Leionen acknowledges in current discourse and scholarship, prioritizing these aspects “ignores the fact that, for example, most of the world’s displaced people move only short distances” (Johanna Leionen 2021, p. 48). Mobility as a corrective paradigm for migration studies involves making more visible “everyday mobilities.” Many in these disciplines are now seeking to move beyond the naturalizing “migrant/native” binary by recognizing the movements of all peoples (Foroutan 2019), thus “migrantizing” those regarded as immobile and “demigrantizing” those regarded as movers (Römhild 2017). The terms we use to discuss the ancient past and mobility matter. It is imperative that we use them as correctly as we can, including the use of forced migrations for the title of the Special Issue that this article is part of. As this article seeks to address gendered and gendering realities of movement in *Esther*, summaries of these concepts as found in their “home” discipline are of great importance.

2.1. Gender, Sexuality, Feminism, and Migration

Unfortunately, as remains the pattern for biblical studies, so too was it a significant problem in migration studies to blatantly ignore women as movers. Even current discussions on the “feminization” of migration imply “that female migration among these movements is a new phenomenon,” although “what is really new is that researchers and policymakers have come to acknowledge that a large proportion of migrants are women” (Amelina and Lutz 2018, p. 14). Redressing this misconception began in the late 1980s, ensuring women were made visible as actors and identifying key characteristics of women’s

experience in migration (Amelina and Lutz 2018, p. 21), an approach one could call “gender and sexuality as identity” (Mayblin and Turner 2021, p. 175). However, this approach, which others have called the “add women, mix and stir” approach (Boyd and Grieco 2003), was strongly criticized for lacking any analysis of power. One must question *how* these women were made visible, “on what basis and via what methods” (Palmary 2021, p. 75), as well as ask *how* these particular women became “stereotypical” figures in the study of migration (Palmary 2006). This is to say clearly that we should “avoid such a conflation of gender with feminist approaches as one does not presuppose the use of the other” (Christou and Kofman 2022, p. 24). Even some of the “pioneering work on women and migration” carried out by feminists themselves, seeking to answer whether migration was “emancipatory or subjugating for women” and if “migration promotes or hampers a feminist consciousness”, did so in a way that presupposed “consistency in women’s lives where no such consistency exists” and a certain kind of feminism (Pessar 1999, pp. 585–86).³

More truly feminist-coded approaches to the study of migration sought to analyze not only “how different people are subject to different experiences of mobility based upon gender and sexuality,” but also had more of an emphasis on “how structures work to subject people to systems of categorization and in turn make people into gendered and sexualized subjects”. This approach, “gender and sexuality as power” (Mayblin and Turner 2021, p. 176), understood “migration as a gendered and gendering process” (Christou and Kofman 2022, p. 14) and also recognized that “all migration politics is reproductive politics” (Carastathis and Tsilimpounidi 2018, p. 1120). Rightly, there have been many calls to adopt an intersectional perspective on migration, one that attends “to the multiple complex processes in which gender is constituted and constitutive of other power relations and hierarchies” (Al-Ali 2017, p. xi). However, even these have been rightly critiqued, as many start with the assumption that gender is a universal category rather than beginning with how gender and sexuality are colonial, rather, colonially inflected categories that have been imposed (Mayblin and Turner 2021, p. 177). Gender and sexuality themselves are not static and eternal categories but fluid, and historically as well as socially/spatially contingent (Amelina and Lutz 2018, pp. 52–53).

The field *still* has a “male migrant bias,” as significant ideological beliefs about gender freeze-frame men as the “risk takers and achievers,” thus the representative “mobile” and/or “migrant,” while women are “portrayed as guardians of community and stability,” the representative “immobile” (Pessar 1999, p. 578; Gedalof 2020; see also note 3). Until men are also seen as a gendered subject instead of the default “natural” subject, gender will remain “a mere variable rather than as a central theoretical concept” (Pessar 1999, p. 579). There is much to be said about the constructions of these gendered ideologies; however, as will be discussed in the next section in relation to the category “forced migrations,” it should be noted that mobility is “dialectically interwoven with immobility” (Amelina and Lutz 2018, p. 44; Büscher and Urry 2009).⁴

2.2. Troubling “Forced Migrations”

Although the title of this section is more specifically about the category of “forced migrations,” it should be known that broadly speaking, most categories and characteristics of different types of migration are not only “not as clear-cut as they might seem” (Amelina and Lutz 2018, p. 14) but also labels are “determined by states and international organizations, and often disseminated by the media” (Christou and Kofman 2022, pp. 6–7), *not* by those who migrate.

Forced migration studies emerged from refugee studies to become more inclusive of many forms of displacement, which is a laudable enterprise. However, because of this, “research and scholarship has a tendency to use the terms *refugee*, *forced migrant*,

and *forcibly displaced* interchangeably and without critique or reflection" (Bloch and Donà 2018, p. 3). It is the comment "without critique or reflection" that I am most concerned with in both fields of study I inhabit. To begin with, the term "forced migration" is often found in a binary juxtaposed with "voluntary migration." As most gender and sexuality scholars would readily state, binaries are often extremely unhelpful and occlude lived realities. Indeed, this concept has been repeatedly criticized by migration scholars as further dichotomizing the field, even if they might be "heuristically helpful" (King 2012, p. 137).⁵ As stated by Johanna Leionen (2021, pp. 47–48), "at the level of motives and within family systems over a migration trajectory sometimes lasting for several years, it is often difficult to draw a clear line between forced and free-will movements".⁶ Choice and agency are much more complicated, especially when we actually contextualize and historicize them.⁷ The categories created to describe movements of people do not often adequately reflect reality; rather than treating these labels as fixed, they should be understood as "entangled, articulated, and dynamic" (Christou and Kofman 2022, p. 6). Further, with respect to the topic at hand, this framework elides "differentiation of class, gender, and racial dimensions" (Vergara-Figueroa 2018, pp. 8–9).

Most importantly, the term "forced migration" is most often utilized by and for "the interests of powerful states"; "legal categories most often seek to 'discipline' life and knowledge to realize dominant interests in society" (Chimni 2009, pp. 12, 24).⁸ Lucy Mayblin and Joe Turner highlight that "the concept of forced migration is ahistorical." Although by the very nature of the adjective describing said movement, there is seemingly a conversation on the external force and cause of migration, it often decontextualizes "any consideration of the complexity of the historical, social, or economic processes that have preceded the precise events that precipitate it" (Mayblin and Turner 2021, p. 125). In fact, these two epistemological concerns are linked; as Aurora Vergara-Figueroa has aptly demonstrated, the conceptual framework of forced migration often erases causality, isolating violent events so as to "support civilizing missions" which have served "world-historical conjectures of capitalist expansion". It may, instead, "reinforce racialization, marginalization, and domination". She argues that the focus on migrants as victims also blatantly excludes those "left in locations of vulnerability" (Vergara-Figueroa 2018, pp. 8–16), thereby once again emphasizing the need to understand mobility and immobility as intertwined rather than opposing realities, neither of which is fixed. Given that "the contribution of Forced Migration Studies" has been part of and co-opted by "policy makers in the North to feed its strategy of *containment*" (Chimni 2009, pp. 18–20, *italics mine*), shifting the discussion on these movements to be more holistic is imperative. The ahistorical and decontextualized concept of forced migration thus contributes to what I am calling "methodological crises-ism," in which, often, when discussing migration, the framework of forced migration inadvertently and unintentionally places a disproportionate discursive focus on *migration* as the problem rather than on the underlying causes of the migration. Framing migration as a crisis in much of this discourse is undoubtedly racialized, erasing the fact that, in the *longue durée* of migration, "European populations moved in greater numbers and with a greater effect on the populations they encountered than is the case in the course of migration to Europe" (Bhambra and Holmwood 2021, p. ix; see also Mayblin 2017).⁹ Forced migration is itself "deeply shaped by colonial ways of dividing up the world and the people in it and has been conscientious in its silence on the legacies of colonialism" (Mayblin and Turner 2021, pp. 106–17).

This, then, is a call to be more specific and less general when using frameworks and categories, especially when translating and appropriating them across disciplines. There are many still in migration studies that continue to use "forced migrations" as their framework—and most of them, if doing so, take extensive time to explain *why* they are

continuing to do so, given much of what I have described. When one uses these labels uncritically, one reinforces their legitimacy—and all that goes with it.

2.3. Reflexivity

Reflecting upon the implications of the concepts one uses, as well as the epistemological locations of both these concepts and knowledge production, generally speaking (Kofman 2020), has been called “the reflexive turn in current migration research” (Amelina 2020; Christou and Kofman 2022, p. 23). Reflexivity also speaks to one’s own standpoint—as well as the persons, ideas, and materials’ standpoints one is researching—as vital to account for and reflect upon in the creation of knowledge. I would argue that while many in biblical studies—mainly those who work beyond the historical-critical paradigm—have no problem accounting for their own positionality, that reflexivity sometimes does not extend to what one uses to reinterpret the ancient past afresh.

I believe that many who utilize the framework of forced migration in biblical and ancient world studies, even uncritically, do so with a rightfully urgent conviction that redressing ancient yet parallel injustices may be a way to address and resist current injustices. Many are explicit about this; however, others are implicit, which, ironically, leaves considerable room for critique (Fry and Trinka 2025, pp. 117–18, 122–23). As rightly observed by Maia Kotrosits (2023, p. 25), “much (though not all) of what historical work that is informed by politicized critique does is mute politicized critique in the transfer, mostly under the rubric of updating our pictures of those pasts.” What I am trying to articulate clearly, before attempting to demonstrate how this might be implemented with a feminist analysis of Esther’s mobility, is that our institutionally funded research bolsters other powerful institutions that too often cement those we are attempting to “save” into their frozen and eternal preordained boxes (Hartmann et al. 2025, pp. 153–55). Instead of dynamic, past *and* present migrants are domesticated;¹⁰ some migrants are rendered exceptional while others remain invisible.

3. A Feminist Analysis of Esther’s Mobility

I am in full agreement that a feminist biblical scholar should, necessarily, do their work not just to understand the past, but also to change the present (Dube 2002, p. 23). It is true that most “biblical scholarship has been largely complicit with the ethos of empire,” often boldly silent “about injustice in the world” (Scholz 2020, p. 257).¹¹ First, it should be stated clearly that many minoritized scholars have long been speaking, so perhaps it might be better to center Scholz’s factual claim towards those who have, more or less, participated in the supremacy of the detached posture Fernando Segovia characterized as “reading-of” (Segovia 2000, pp. 61–63). One of my main concerns with this and the topic of migration amongst biblical scholars, however, is that what I have above called “methodological crises-ism,” which frames almost every article or book pertaining to migration and the Bible. Even Scholz’s chapter, which has a beautiful section using Nicolas Bourriad’s *The Radicant* as an excellent model for methodology—although, once more, does seem to ignore that this kind of methodological approach already has founding amongst many postcolonial scholars, including the aforementioned Segovia’s “diaspora hermeneutics” (Segovia 1995, pp. 58–59; see also Segovia 2000, pp. 67–68)¹²—begins with data on migration, couching information on international migrants (who move for various reasons) alongside those forcibly displaced in the world, including climate migrants. She then states that we must “address the global migration and refugee crisis as an exegetical problem in the neoliberal era that has put so many people on the move” (Scholz 2020, pp. 247–48). Certainly, many migrants experience injustice (Scholz 2020, p. 258), and attention to these injustices deserves redress. Still, I fear that putting the data of *all* international migrants worldwide as one

and the same as those displaced for varying purposes contributes to a perspective that views movement as a problem, period. I do not think this is what Scholz intended, but if we are truly going to exegete in a way that is “against any kind of fundamentalist and right-wing agenda” (Scholz 2020, p. 260), what is needed is more nuance, not less, on the topic of migration and migrants. There are events that are absolutely crises, but we have to “approach migration as more than crisis and avoid construing migrants primarily as victims” (Trinka 2025, p. 20; Trinka and Fry 2025, pp. 8–9). The last thing migrants need, particularly if they are in crisis, is paternalism.

With this in mind, I aim to reevaluate Esther’s character and her movements from the perspective of a feminist, interdisciplinary biblical scholar. The integration of what has just been discussed from migration studies in Section 2 of this article largely guides my analytical questions and is not necessarily explicit or somehow appropriated into a step-by-step guide. Although concise, I consider Esther’s genealogical ties and ancestral memories of exile and “adoption” in the first part, followed by an overview of *Esther* chapter 2, which is significantly bolstered by Ericka Dunbar’s monograph, *Trafficking Hadassah* (Dunbar 2021), and captivity studies. However, as will be hinted at in both of these portions, there must also be a critical stance of the text’s perspective as it pertains to and portrays these movements. To close, I offer my own reflections on how these portions of text are appropriated for deviant ends, as well as attempt to model personal reflexivity.

3.1. Framed by Exile

Although the specific character of Esther is not introduced until chapter two of the Masoretic Text of *Esther*, the first chapter of the book begins with a lavish description of the massive number of provinces that this King Ahasuerus rules over (1:1) as well as the wealth that marks every part and parcel of the palace (1:3–8). While it may seem as if this depicts a static, immobile reality for the Persian regime, we should be reminded that conquering and maintaining power over land and peoples involved and involves constant movement of beings and things to and from the center.¹³ Even some of the allusions to color and material featured in the description of the palace could remind readers of the first temple, destroyed by Babylon (Day 2005, p. 27), and perhaps stolen once more by Persia to bolster the trappings of power. The world of the Bible, as it is today, is inherently and constantly in motion.

When we meet the main Jewish characters in *Esther*, we first meet the male Mordecai along with his ancestral ties to Jair, Shimei, and Kish, all Benjaminites (2:5). The grammar is not ideal in verse 5, but verse 6 makes explicit mention of Mordecai’s connection to what many biblical scholars understand to be the dominant portrait of *thee* crisis above all crises (Mapfeka 2019, pp. 143–44), the first wave of deracinated Judeans along with King Jeconiah (2 Kings 24:8–17). However, the inclusion of this traumatic memory raises more questions than answers pertaining to migration, even if (likely) the person who moved was not Mordecai but Kish: “How the family that traced back to a Benjamite man ended up in Susa remains untold. Did they subsequently move from the Babylonian heartland to Susa, or were they settled in this city from the beginning” (Poulsen and Uusimäki 2025)? Even with texts that are explicit about relating to “exile”, it is imperative not to add a totalizing and exclusive picture of forced migration, as it immediately forecloses other potential realities. Furthermore, what is fascinating about the image presented of this movement is how it explicitly contributes to a portrayal of the lone male mover, as if these exilic movements did not include households. Certainly, biblical scholars know that genealogical recitations often mention only the male figure, even as they encapsulate whole kinship systems, but scholarship on the Bible and migration regularly takes the text at face value.¹⁴

The stereotypically gendered image is potentially complicated in the next verse, as verse 7 includes details on Esther: “Mordecai had brought up Hadassah (she is Esther), daughter of his beloved, for she had no father or mother. The girl had a beautiful form/figure, and was pleasing in appearance. When her father and her mother died, Mordecai took her to him as a daughter.”¹⁵ We must ask more questions about migration: other than residing in her father’s house before moving to Mordecai’s, *where* was that home located? Was she born in Susa, or elsewhere? Apart from moving homes, did she also relocate geographically in this “adoption”? How, and when? Instead of answering these questions, this verse specifically speaks of Esther’s movement/adoption as something happening to her, something that Mordecai actively makes happen. This may not be entirely false, but that Esther is not the subject, but the object, of the movement verb, even as the previous verse repeatedly has the male figures as both, suggests that gendered ideologies underscore the author’s assumed culture of mobility.

However, the exile itself does not necessarily continue to feature explicitly in *Esther* beyond what interpreters may attribute to it on the basis of their own assumptions about Jewish mobility;¹⁶ it does not *remain* a crisis for all who experienced it, even if, rightly, it is remembered as such. Significant judgments occur based on the fact that, beyond this passage, there are no other mentions of this ascribed point of origin, that of Yehud (Mapfeka 2019, p. 193, as one example). Yet for *Esther*, living in diaspora is not a problem that needs to be fixed.¹⁷ Even the main crisis of the story, which is not about migration, would include those living in Yehud, which would have been part of the fictional 127 provinces under the Persian regime; the Jews living in the “homeland” would also be subject to the same genocidal decree as they were in Susa.¹⁸ The text *is* concerned with survival as a people (*am*), not a nation as we would understand it today (Holt 2021, p. 108). *Esther* portrays a very “mobile, multicultural, and socio-economically complex world” (Poulsen and Uusimäki 2025) in which differences can be, but need not be, exploited for regressive and violent purposes (Fry 2025; Davidson 2009). The text *is* concerned with oppression and (access to) power, but not entirely for the same reasons a feminist interpreter would be concerned.

Although much should be stated about the interconnectivity of diaspora and exile, especially as *Esther* has been deemed “the most diasporic of diasporic literature” (Martien Halvorson-Taylor 2015, p. 499), for the sake of the more narrow purposes of the article, I am only intentionally looking at the explicit moments of *movement* that Esther undergoes. This means that many other dynamic aspects of negotiation and survival that are arguably the point of the book are not the focus of investigation, although potential diasporic realities are featured in Section 3.2.2. Nevertheless, from this gendered picture of exile and the invisibility of Esther’s movement as it pertains to her “adoption”, the article shifts to a discussion of Esther’s repeated displacement and resettlement in 2:6–19, which will further highlight and complicate these entangled elements. Ironically, while exile may not be explicitly present, it may be implicitly re-enacted in and through Esther.

3.2. Unpacking Trafficking: Modern and Ancient Comparative Work

One of the most significant pieces that recognizes the processual nature of migration as it pertains to Esther in Chapter Two is that of scholar Ericka Dunbar. Dunbar reads what occurs to not only Esther, but also numerous girls from all over the provinces Persia rules over, as trafficking. The process of trafficking involves “recruitment, transportation, harboring (captivity), transferring, and/or receiving”, accomplished through means like “threat, force, fraud, coercion, abduction, deceit, or deception,” for the purposes of “physically embodied outcomes” (Dunbar 2021 p. 4). All of these elements are operative in 2:2–4. It also involves multiple parties, such as “the perpetrator, the vendor, the facilitator, and the victim” (Dunbar 2021, p. 5); this process requires partnerships and organization, carried out

for the purpose of “empire building” (Dunbar 2021, pp. 5, 22). Dunbar recognizes that there are distinctions in how these modern frameworks address past worlds, but there are significant resonances that help make sense of what the text—and many interpreters—quickly pass over in a matter of verses.

When the edict is proclaimed and acted on, *many young girls* are “gathered”, including Esther, who is “taken” (2:8). These girls are the subject of these verbs, verbs rendered in the nifal form, which is a passive/reflexive stem. This movement is, indeed, happening *to* them. As Fox (1991, p. 34) rightly perceives, “what is significant—and most oppressive—is that their will, whatever it may have been, is of no interest to anyone in the story. They are handed around. . . their bodies belong to others, so much so that they are not even pictured as being forced.” Fascinating here is the verb “taken” in relationship to Esther, which is also how her movement was described when Mordecai “takes” her in verse 7. Given that this verb can often describe being “taken” in marriage—which the Old Greek version of *Esther* makes explicit in rendering daughter as wife—there may be an implicit connotation of sexual activity from the very beginning of her story (see Kugler 2024 and Walfish 2003).

Dunbar demonstrates how the transgression of *spatial* borders and boundaries initiates the transgression of *sexual* boundaries. The culture of mobility in *Esther* makes clear that men in power determine boundaries and regulate how they are crossed, as well as who can cross them (Dunbar 2021, pp. 59–62). Esther is being moved, “taken,” from not just one house, but three (Father’s house, Mordecai’s house, Hegai’s house), and, as the parenthetical demonstrates, from “the control of one man after another” (Day 2005, p. 53). She also moves in status. She begins in the text as an orphan, becomes adopted/married (?) (2:7), then shifts as property of the King, *na’arah* and/or *betulah* (2:2–4, 8), prepped and raped so as to become official *pilegish* to the King, then residing in the house of Shaashgaz (2:12–14), and finally, coronated as Queen (2:17). These statuses so quickly moved through in the span of a literary chapter quickly pass-over the significant liminality of Esther in multiple phases of her life (Holt 2021, p. 68).

But Dunbar’s emphasis on highlighting trafficking is not solely executed to shed further light on the horrors that are involved in this multifaceted process, but also to redress the intersectional realities at play. As the text outlines that Persia ruled from India to Ethiopia (1:1), Dunbar rightly argues that “by failing to address the experiences, abuse, and traumatization of African girls in the book of Esther, interpreters (albeit often inadvertently) uphold ideologies that either African(a) girls and women cannot be violated, or that their violation is irrelevant” (Dunbar 2021 p. 10). A sole focus on the character of Esther as a victim of trafficking is not enough; there is much to say about the trauma of this experience as bypassed by both text and scholar alike, but Dunbar’s focus makes evident that there are particular embodied realities that make certain girls and women more vulnerable to exploitation and erasure (Dunbar 2021, p. 31). Although this edict goes out to everyone under the thumb of the Persian regime, this does not mean that all experience its effects equally. We consider here how there is not only a “gendering of geo-political space” (Dunbar 2021, p. 118), but that, based on subjective conceptions of beauty, these girls and women are *gendered* and *sexualized* according to “colonial” categories. These “beautiful” girls, a status imposed as beauty is not an objective category, render them as rapeable. The interconnection between conquering, dominating, and exploiting (ethnically “Other”) feminized land and the female body, as well as the role of reproduction in the history of colonization and empire, cannot be overstated. Although Dunbar makes this point clear in her analysis, it is essential to acknowledge that the forced migration paradigm overlooks much of what has already been stated about Esther’s movement and disregards the impact on the families of these girls who are not made mobile. Dunbar points out how the taking of these girls from their families and communities is a destabilizing

and disenfranchising act. If we are to see what Esther undergoes as sex work, there are some in modern studies who see that there is a layer of wealth and seeming stability that can occur due to sex work, which could even benefit their families back home. However, this is not something we can infer from *Esther*. Any “capital potential” is a gain for the King alone (Dunbar 2021, p. 62).¹⁹ Esther, having been trafficked, does cause Mordecai to become mobile (2:11), and there is a theory that Esther’s position in the kingdom may have facilitated Mordecai’s employment at the King’s Gate, given that we are unaware of his work situation until after Esther is crowned, although it is conjecture.²⁰ It should be known that trafficking itself has been used as a category in the discourse on the “feminization” of migration, and sex work is thus linked to gendered labor or “care work.” Although the text belies a different reality, it is still imperative to heed the above warnings, especially as they pertain to essentializing women into a narrow image of vulnerable victims (Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women 2010). Comparative analysis of this portion of text with other biblical passages and anthropological research with texts that similarly portray the capture and captivity of beautiful foreign females might illuminate this topic further.

3.2.1. The Beautiful (Foreign Female) Captive

Included in Uusimäki’s summary article on the many female-identified bodies in the Hebrew Bible is a section that rightly points out that “slavery constituted a major reason for mobility in the ancient world” (Uusimäki 2022, p. 750). In this section, she includes Hagar, the *pilegesh* in Judges 19, as well as the “forced displacement of women acquired during military campaigns” (Numbers 31:17–18; Judges 1:12–13, 5:30, 21:22; 2 Kings 5:2) and the laws surrounding “foreign women as trophies” (Deuteronomy 21:10–14).

The law code offers a ritual process for when an Israelite man sees, among the captives of war, a beautiful woman desired for “taking” (v. 11) as a woman, or, as some attempt to add benevolence, as a “wife.” She is first brought (the object, not subject in Hebrew) to the captor’s home; her head is shaved, nails trimmed (v. 12), clothing discarded, and there is then a month’s period that she is allotted to mourn for her father and mother *before* the captor is allowed to rape her (v. 13). The law code has been extensively discussed by scholar Mónica Rey, who argues against traditional interpretations that make this passage sound much more benevolent than it is. For starters, her most recent work, through comparative analysis, demonstrates that contrary to those who see the head shaving as part of the mourning process, “head shaving. . . signals a person’s descent into enslavement” (Rey 2025, p. 2). Further, the month-long period could be translated as “a lunar period of days”, which conveys “a recognition of the relationship between the reproductive cycle and the lunar cycle.” In other words, this has less to do with a generous period of time granted to mourn the loss of one’s family, and more to do with ensuring the womb was empty (Rey 2025, pp. 8–9). This text begins with “natal alienation” as well as ends with it. Furthermore, the law code’s prohibition on selling this woman is due to her having been brutally harmed; this is not a protection for the woman, but a protection of the Israelite man who might have purchased her—she is literally deemed “damaged goods” (Rey 2016, p. 42). To be clear: even if the woman is regarded as a foreign *wife* of sorts, *because* of her ethnic difference, she is “marginalized under one of the most oppressive marriage regulations” (Rey 2016, p. 53).

Catherine Cameron, an archeologist who has studied ancient migration in the American Southwest, has long researched the quite common but often ignored mobility of captives in “small-scale” societies. She argues that the movement of captives “does not align with many of the carefully considered models and theories developed for other types of human movement”, especially since even the “forced migration” model assumes “some level of agency on the part of migrants.” She argues that “unlike other types of migrants”, captives “have no choice in their movement or where they will go” (Cameron 2025, pp. 12–14). Even

Dunbar notes that trafficking as a model is not necessarily “straightforward,” as consent and recruitment aspects are complex (Dunbar 2021, p. 31).²¹ Cameron’s discussion on what captivity entailed in the ethnographic accounts she studied is telling and has numerous parallels to this current discussion. She noticed that “many of the captives taken into small-scale societies became enslaved,” and because of this, she uses “the terms *captive* and *slave* somewhat interchangeably” (Cameron 2025, p. 19). The taking of a captive increased the status of the captor, and the ability to control those they take, as well as the ability to produce children with these captives, added to this prestige (Cameron 2025, pp. 21–22, 27–28). Additionally, “moving captives away from their homelands lessened the chance that they would try to escape or that their kin would attempt a rescue” (Cameron 2025, p. 25). These societies, with kinship as their “basic organizing principle,” in which captives now had no kin, allowed the captors to “determine what social position they would occupy.” Cameron notes that “social locations ranged from complete exclusion through rigid systems of slavery to inclusion through adoption or marriage. . . still, few captives, even those adopted or incorporated through marriage, ever achieved full group membership but remained liminal members of the society” (Cameron 2025, pp. 28–29). Maintaining these low statuses help to maintain “the boundaries of captor culture” (Cameron 2025, p. 32). Children seemed to be desired “because they could be easily enculturated, eventually forgetting their origin” (Cameron 2025, p. 28). Although in some cases, different cultural practices introduced by the captive may have been useful, even their captivity facilitated new connections and networks between rival groups. However, “captives, especially low-status people, may have been particularly subject to coercive efforts by their captors to change or modify their cultural knowledge and practices” (Cameron 2025, pp. 35–36).

What these scholars all highlight is not only that these girls and women are mobile, but also that age and ethnicity are key factors in this experience (Fry and Trinka 2025, p. 199, fn. 52). There is simultaneously an ethnicizing aspect that makes these captives vulnerable, as well as an aspect where ethnic erasure is desired. Notably, what happens to Esther and the many young girls taken to Hegai’s house of girls is also a kind of ritual process, as Rey discusses. Kristin De Troyer (1995, p. 50) points out that in 2:8, once these girls are passed over to the hands of Hegai, they move from *na’arah* to *ish*, from girl to woman. The process for each girl (*na’arah*) before going in to the King and transitioning into a *pilegish* is described in 2:12–14. Although these are notably different rituals from Deuteronomy 21, while still yet regulations for the women/captives made by the men/captors, these rituals still change the girls’ status in a myriad of ways. There are treatments undergone for twelve months—six months with oil of myrrh and six months with fragrances and washing—which have often been understood as “cosmetic” and “beautifying” treatments, adding to interpretations about Esther in chapter four that render her as “comfortable” as Queen. However, Anne-Marieke Wetter has noted that this *rites-de-passage* may be “designed to cut off all prior social ties” (a kind of natal alienation), which might also include ethnic and religious roots (Wetter 2012, pp. 324–26), creating “cookie-cutter concubines” (Fry 2025, p. 10).²² Even though the only one, at first, who seems to emphasize that Esther’s ethnicity could be an issue is Mordecai (2:10, 20), the implicit potential of the ritual may undergird Mordecai’s suspicions. Even as she becomes Queen after her “turn” with the King (2:15–17), one might not have been able to become not only *pilegish*, but also “Persian”, unless this ritual has been carried out.²³ The length of these treatments may also be observed, in part, to confirm that these girls are not already with child, and thus is a matter of reproductive justice. We should recognize the treatments occurring as a ritual process that changes these trafficked girls’ status in myriad ways, not necessarily for the better.

There are both differences as well as similarities between the “small-scale” practices of captive-taking and what seems to take place on a more “large-scale” with the imperial

court. It was extremely common in many ancient societies, including Persia, to have women “presented to the monarch as a gift, as tribute or as chattel,” “regularly acquired as war booty or were captured from rebellious subjects” (Llewellyn-Jones 2023, pp. 127–29). For a man to have control/ownership over a significant number of women, as well as the potential for fathering a large number of children, ties “reproductive success” to the might and reach of the King’s power. Thus, similarly, it is about the captor’s status and protecting one’s place in the hierarchy. Yet there seems to be much more at stake in a large regime than in small tribes. For starters, Esther is ethnically different, and Queen would be a non-starter in the historic reality of the Achaemenids. Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones notes that these “kings only made marriage alliances with the daughters or sisters of great Persian nobles. . .there is no evidence that a Great King had a foreign woman, a non-Persian, as a consort; such women could only be allocated a concubine or slave status” (Llewellyn-Jones 2023, p. 153).²⁴ Ethnically non-Persian women and their offspring would likely remain in liminal, if not enslaved, status. The text may, inadvertently, demonstrate this as “her status as queen does not free her from the same constraints as the concubines” (Macchi 2018, p. 129). Once Esther rises to Queen status, we also do not hear from any of these other girls again, textually erased (Nadar 2025, p. 55). It could be that some of them become the enslaved handmaids to the Queen herself, but we do not know. These girls are “not even given the dignity of having political or familial significance, not even of having importance as potential mothers of the heir to the throne. They are merely diversions for the king, truly sex objects” (Fox 1991, p. 28).

Between the story of Vashti in Esther 1 and how Esther is pleasing to those around her, we are plainly aware of the fact that “the maidens’ future depends on their sexual [arguably, more than this] performance. What becomes of those who do not please the king remains untold” (Gur-Klein 2014, p. 74).²⁵ In fact, this mass trafficking event does not satisfy an unsatisfiable King, who seems to allow for a *second* gathering of girls after Esther is crowned (2:19). The insecurity of Esther’s position is stark. I have significant concerns about romanticizing this chapter, because even as Esther is able to “win” the crown, the “gains” she experiences are not long-term and should be seen alongside the “strains.” Adding a silver lining to Esther’s captivity due to the agency she is able to wield in the rest of the story without recognition of the reality that *she remains a captive as the story closes*, however, may be part of the text’s ideology. Interestingly, this may also make the potential realities of actual female Judean exiles more visible.

3.2.2. Representing Exilic Realities

Both biblical scholars *and* the biblical texts tend to focus solely on the male figures who experienced exile in their analyses of migration and mobility. However, some biblical texts do acknowledge the presence of women and children in these movements (i.e., Jeremiah 44:15–24; Ezekiel 13, 24). Data from Babylonian cuneiform archives, as interpreted by Tero Alstola, might illuminate a broader range of realities for women who experienced deracination.

Alstola notes that not all displaced “women shared the semi-free social status of the people in the land-for-service sector, as some of them were enslaved and others attached to temple households” (Alstola 2020, p. 264). While we do not have written documentation of Judean women who were enslaved, there is mention of a few who “were dependents of the Ebabbar temple in Sippar.” Granted, these documents place “the great majority of the population—women, peasants, children, and foreigners” on the margins (Alstola 2020, p. 38), making what we know of women’s experience entirely underwhelming. This brief note, alongside other representations of women in these sources, still remains useful. Although these texts, from a Babylonian perspective, never call Judeans “prisoners” or

“captives,” (Alstola 2020, p. 251), often, the word *golah* is translated as encapsulating captivity (NRSVUE 2 Kings 24:13–16), and although more prominent in later texts like Chronicles, *shava* or *shaviy* “captive”, are featured in a few texts that describe exile with this more emic term (2 Kings 8:46–50; Isaiah 14:2, 61:1; Jeremiah 13:17, 41:10–14, 50:33; Ezekiel 6:9, Obadiah 11; 1 Chronicles 6:36–38, 28:5, 11, 17, 30:9; Psalm 106:46, 137:3).

If we parallel the status of the elites who are taken captive in 2 Kings 24 to Esther, as she holds “pretty privilege”, and take into account the normative practices during that time as including captive taking, what Esther endures could allude to a reality that many Judean women experienced in their deracination. T.M. Lemos speculates on this as much in discussions on Ezekiel alongside other postcolonial theorists on gender and migration, though more along the lines of these women having the *choice* to become a *pilegesh* of Babylonian men to improve their situation (Lemos 2012, p. 101; see also Smith-Christopher 2017, 2018). While this is not off the table as a potential, there is something to say about how scholarly debate on choice and agency in Esther 2, especially as Esther is *pleasing*, raises questions as to her “purity”, that is, her participation in her exploitation. While I reject these claims to an extent, given that it would be “natural for people to manage their circumstances in life as best they can, even if these circumstances were neither desired nor chosen” (Macchi 2018, p. 130), one could consider that our own interpretive debates might also be present amongst Judean exiles whose kin might have been taken captive themselves.²⁶ The textual silence on the suffering the girls endured speaks more clearly to how taking girls captive is a normative, acceptable practice *that we only reject if we (men) do not benefit*. As briefly explored by Martien Halvorson-Taylor (2015, pp. 500–1), one might compare this with the male perspective on the sister-wife stories in foreign contexts as seen in Genesis 12, 20, and 26. Whenever men benefit from the sexual exploitation of the women in their lives, there seems to be little regard for the cost that those women pay. Although Daniel Smith-Christopher offers a more positivistic reading of this, in seeing Esther’s “collaboration” with the foreign hegemonic power as depicting one of the story’s goals in “exonerating ‘Esther’ and those real people that the legendary concubine perhaps symbolizes” (Smith-Christopher 2018, p. 223), there is something to be said about the male author’s standpoint on the mobile and diasporic reality of Jewish girls and women at the time of writing.

3.3. Challenging Textual Perspective

What occurs to Esther and the many other unnamed girls in chapter two is written as a matter of fact by the author. There is no moral judgment passed by the author over what transpires, that is, until the end of chapter three and into four—but these are for entirely different, although interconnected, issues. The text has no issue with fighting back when there is oppression that affects the ethnic group, but not so with gendered oppression; the capture of girls is bypassed, making it clear that, because captive taking was a practice carried out by many people groups, it was unremarkable. “*Anything that can be naturalized can be made to not matter*” (Enloe 2023, p. 84). The silence pertaining to the violent and abusive structures that affect both the (im)mobile trafficked girls and their kin may reflect a kind of authorial acceptance. Although it is a crisis, it is not presented as one.

Quick (2025) aptly reads Esther’s characterization as authored by men as “the text reflects and constructs a specific orientation towards gender.” Whenever Esther acts, “it is in the interest of the male Jewish elites who wish to find a way forward for Jews in the diaspora” (Tamber-Rosenau 2022, p. 117). Indeed, even as Esther is the heroine of the story who risks her life for her people multiple times—including the crossing of a kind of border, or, transgressing the story’s seeming culture of mobility by going to the King uninvited twice (5:1; 8:3)—“the book does not end with Esther; her role ended when she supports

Mordecai's initiative" (Fox 1991, p. 130). The heroine requests "overkill" in 9:13,²⁷ but the battlefield is *ish*, or male, space; chapter ten concludes the book, laden with imagery of men who are great, mighty, and dominant, now including Mordecai. This is, for all intents and purposes, a male fantasy. Many romanticized readings of Esther's captivity in the women's house and her changing statuses thus reinscribe the author's own misogynistic vantage point (Stefaniw 2020, p. 275; Pilarski 2018, p. 59). The author, therefore, seems to desire the King's power to take and consume bodies, holding the same beliefs of male entitlement themselves. "*The feminization of sacrifice, after all, is integral to patriarchal war waging*" (Enloe 2023, p. 85). The suffering of every single female body in *Esther* is made invisible, invalidated, for the purpose of a particular male Jewish elite agenda (Nadar 2025, p. 48). The only reason Esther is made visible at all is that she is exceptionalized and weaponized by the author. It is not only the narrative's Persian regime that commodifies her body.

4. Reflexivity and the "Real" World

Scholars like Dunbar and Sarojini Nadar have arguably created the most significant work to transform the "parameters of biblical exegesis" regarding *Esther* by including the realities of the world (Scholz 2020, p. 262), without paternalism or uncritical application of ethnography or concepts. Although I, arguably, committed one of the sins Scholz outlines by focusing on Esther as a female-identified character who migrates (Scholz 2020, p. 258), I want to end with my own connections between *Esther* and our long mobile "real world", as well as a note of reflexivity, which I believe is in line with Scholz's wishes, and my own, for moving beyond the status quo with a more "mobile" and "migratory form of scholarship" (Hartmann 2025, p. 12).

Scholz's call-out regarding the focus on the more visible, or "main," female biblical characters, who receive the bulk of attention, is entirely fair. As aforementioned, Esther is only somewhat visible because she serves a specific purpose for the male author's agenda; the discussion on captivity and mobility, if only to acknowledge *her* plight and not the multiple gatherings of girls like Esther as well as the Eunuchs in the story who have significant parallel to being gendered and sexualized in a particular way, feeds both the story's ideology and other sinister migratory rhetorics. That is: what do those made invisible have to do to become visible, and *why*? It is to ask: *which* migrants are human, and *why*, by *whom*? At a moment in time when certain bodies become *labeled* as migrant (regardless of actual status or history; mainly *because* of ethnic/racial difference to the white hegemony) and thus, according to those with the power to define said category, understood as inhuman, *taken* and *displaced* by handmaidens of the state, with no visibility on their situation to the point where it seems they are literally *disappearing* in *captivity*, it is imperative that we are clearer. Even with making a parallel to those stolen by the Trump regime, have I not, while good-intentioned, flattened entire groups of people, past and present, into homogenous, faceless blocs?²⁸ Is this not, in a way, a similar form of literary metonymy that the girls who are not Esther are subject to in *Esther* chapter 2, reducing individual and complex identities so as to serve *my* function (Nadar 2025, pp. 54–56)? Still, as *Esther* continues to be used in and for regressive purposes, such as The Heritage Foundation's "Project Esther" (The Heritage Foundation 2024), the irony of the politics of visibility and mobility in violent colonial projects is lost on the biblically illiterate.

Furthermore, we can rightly acknowledge that the story is not "real," and that Esther is not a "real girl."²⁹ So we might keep asking: what about those real girls that she might represent? Is it possible to peel away the fantasies that have created Esther and find any semblance of what could be reality, as I have tried? Is it even possible to tell a counter-narrative—to, in the words of Sara Ahmed, who opened the article, refuse to polish this

story and find what is real? What does it mean to do justice, both to the figures of the past and to those mobile in the present?

Is Esther human? *“Still, sometimes by revisiting the past we tell other stories”* (Ahmed 2023, p. 78).

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Notes

- ¹ Most recently the work of (Pilarski 2018) and (Ruiz 2018) edited volume are some excellent examples of the opposite of this statement.
- ² One reviewer added that what proceeds is not necessarily “humble,” which I agree with.
- ³ “The image of the female migrant as a canvas on which gender relations can be projected and addressed continues to be one of the unresolved issues within the feminist debate” (Amelina and Lutz 2018, p. 22). See also (Christou and Kofman 2022, pp. 79–89) for a conversation on how gender shifted representation of the refugee in a way that allowed for the Global North to play savior and consolidate more power through “humanitarian” intervention. Much more should be said on how, because the categories created to describe movement and movers are often done to *control* movement, people have to preform powerlessness and vulnerability in order to receive assistance (and given the current regime in the United States, who have recently announced that they are only admitting 7500 refugees, and those refugees will mostly be white South Africans [[https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/trump-limits-annual-refugees-to-u-s-to-7500-itll-be-mostly-white-south-africans#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20\(AP\)%20%E2%80%94%20The%20Trump,persecution%20from%20around%20the%20world](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/trump-limits-annual-refugees-to-u-s-to-7500-itll-be-mostly-white-south-africans#:~:text=WASHINGTON%20(AP)%20%E2%80%94%20The%20Trump,persecution%20from%20around%20the%20world) (accessed on 1 December 2025)], we need to recognize this for what it is: “Recognition of trauma, and hence the differentiation between victims, is largely determined by two elements: the extent to which politicians, aid workers, and mental health specialists are able to identify with the victims, in counter-point to the distance engendered by the otherness of the victims. Cultural, social, and perhaps even ontological proximity matter; as does the a priori valuation and validity of the cause, misfortune, or suffering, a valuation that obviously implies a political and often an ethical judgment” (Fassin and Rechtman 2009, p. 282), which strips people of their subjectivity; mobility is a social construct.
- ⁴ “We need to distinguish between the feminization of migration and the feminization of ‘migratory discourse’ in which women are conceptualized as actors of migration” (Christou and Kofman 2022, p. 4). This also is in tandem with current conversations on how “migration research is often understood merely as ‘research about migrants’, producing a ‘migrantology’ that is capable of little more than repeatedly illustrating and reproducing itself; a ‘migrantology’ that at the same time plays its part in constructing its supposed counterpart, the national society of immobile, white nonmigrants” (Römhild 2017, p. 69); this calls for a “demigrantizing” and “migrantizing” action.
- ⁵ To share what colleagues of mine have articulated about this: How many sins are we willing to commit in the name of using something as a “heuristic” lens?
- ⁶ Further, “different categories of migrants are often researched as if the categories were mutually exclusive,” although again, this is often *not* the lived reality.
- ⁷ “If the boundaries between refugees and IDPs are blurred at the existential level so are the borders between forced and voluntary migration. The difference between the two is only between types of movements and degrees of coercion involving the varied exercise of agency” (Chimni 2009, p. 12).
- ⁸ We need to reckon with the fact that the 1951 Refugee Convention *only allowed Europeans to be refugees* until 1967 (Mayblin and Turner 2021, p. 116). Not only is there a colonial history to gender and engendering, but a colonial history of the categories of “man” and “human.”

- ⁹ In tandem with the conversation on the, ironically, forced dichotomy between “forced” and “voluntary,” see (Trinka and Fry 2025, pp. 8–10): “Failure to account for the full spectrum of movers and movement leads to a tidy yet false dichotomization of migrants as either victims of their circumstances or as victors that represent idealized types of movers or movement.”
- ¹⁰ See also note 3.
- ¹¹ As will be discussed (especially with Nadar 2025; Dunbar 2021), there are also many others in *Esther* scholarship who do not fit this description. For more examples, but not a totalizing list, see: (Yoo 2014; Masenya 2001; Ki 2023; Davidson 2009).
- ¹² Or, as Pilarski would call the paradigm shift into one that is “post-Occidental”—“A central epistemological feature of this paradigm, *which unveils the silences of Western epistemology*, is that it begins and ends in the life of our communities; in other words, the analysis does not end in the problematic issue at stake, but it is aimed at the betterment of the community’s context” (Pilarski 2018, p. 46; italics mine). R.S. Sugirtharajah argued that Segovia’s “hermeneutics of diaspora” should be standard practice, and I agree (Sugirtharajah 2002, p. 185–86).
- ¹³ Such as armies, who are noted to travel in the story for the purpose of attending a party 1:3, but in the story, this also includes horses, 3:13, 8:10, and forced labor, (arguably also 2:2–3) 10:1, taxes, parties, and letters/edicts, 1:22, 3:12–13, 8:10–14.
- ¹⁴ Pilarski offers a refreshing reading of the laws of the *ger* that ensures kinship systems, families, are also made visible, but similarly notes that “for the majority of the references like these, the inclusion of women is left to inference” (Pilarski 2018, p. 58).
- ¹⁵ My translation; the verb “took” is important, often translated as “adopted,” but given the immediately following verse as using the same verb form, this warrants further discussion.
- ¹⁶ There is quite a bit on how Esther’s name could be related to the verb “to hide” in Hebrew, and specifically, related to the curses made in Deuteronomy 31, that God will hide his face (v. 18). Given that the deity, or religiosity in general (arguable, unless one adds in the Amalekite mythos as religious), is not present in *Esther*, some believe that this absence could be “on account of diaspora living” (Beal 1999, p. 151).
- ¹⁷ This article has a bit of a narrow focus, focusing solely on the *movements* of Esther, her mobility and immobility as in dialectical relationship, including status migrations, should be something that is done in conversation with diaspora studies as well. Separating migration and diaspora studies from one another is a false dichotomy, even separating exile and diaspora as somehow distinctive is false. In my forthcoming work (Fry 2026), I go into more detail on diaspora mobilizations that occur amongst the community (3:17; 8:15–7; 9:2, 5–10, 14–8, 23), as well as conversations on identity negotiation that are often referenced in relationship to the concept of diaspora.
- ¹⁸ And not all Jews in Susa would have the same link to these exilic memories: “the link between Esther’s family and forced migrations in the Neo-Babylonian period does not mean that all members of Susa’s Jewish community should be imagined as descendants of those exiled in the sixth century BCE. Instead of a monolithic group consisting of Esther’s and Mordecai’s lineage, we should envision a diverse community with members who resided in Susa for various reasons. . .” (Poulsen and Uusimäki 2025).
- ¹⁹ “One can imagine the large cohorts of young women such a procedure implies, and the future shortage of marriageable girls it would generate in the empire” (Macchi 2018, p. 121).
- ²⁰ “. . . it is only in the aftermath of the illicit, preuptial or coerced sexuality that a ruler and landlord offers legitimization, rewards or multiple privileges to the woman or her underprivileged family” (Gur-Klein 2014, p. 78).
- ²¹ I am grateful to Eric Trinka for reminding me of this point. See also (International Organization for Migration 2024, pp. 165–95).
- ²² “In the palace, women are subject to disciplinary power that tames not only the body but also the mind, for they are conditioned to value ornamental femininity, appreciate the micro-management of the body, and normalize their abject state of existence. The whole point is less about beautification than the grooming of the mind and body in order to forget themselves and to welcome the king’s sexual exploitation” (Ki 2023, p. 196).
- ²³ “Both the king and other colonizers violently asserted superiority, repressed difference, enforced dependence, and, through practices of discrimination and physical and sexual exploitation, instituted social and cultural attitudes that have encouraged bias and caused significant and ongoing harm” (Dunbar 2021, p. 74). Forthcoming is another piece in which I argue for the potential that these treatments themselves might be better understood as medical.
- ²⁴ The next section in Uusimäki’s article includes how women were also mobile due to marriage arrangements, which includes the examples of Isaac and Rebekah (Genesis 24), as well as Jacob, Leah, and Rachel (as well as Bilhah and Zilpah; Genesis 29–31). This section also includes a footnote on the bride queen from Tyre in Psalm 45:11–13 (Uusimäki 2022, pp. 753–55, fn. 36), a marriage of a political alliance.
- ²⁵ “Sexualized gender-based violence is especially dishonorable and shaming in patriarchal societies that fetishize female sexual purity, such as the society represented in the book of Esther” (Dunbar 2021, p. 56).
- ²⁶ More should be said on the hospitality that Esther, as a captive, provides (5:4–8; 6:14–7:10); to use Jo Carruthers’ words via Derrida (Carruthers 2021, pp. 145–46), the “hostage” becomes “host.”
- ²⁷ Quick’s (2025) argument is that, akin to how women are presented in the modern manosphere, the author presents Esther as violent to justify “patriarchal power structures which subordinate women to men” and necessitate “male control over women.” “Although it is women who are more typically endangered by men, the book of Esther and the wider presentation of violent

women found in the Hebrew Bible reverses this image. It is not women who must fear from men, but rather men who must be hypervigilant against these dangerous women. These texts therefore promote an ideology in which women must be subject to male control, and this is harmful for both Esther as well as for women more generally in the world from which the book of Esther emerged. Consequently, the book of Esther presents Esther as the perpetrator of violence. But in so doing, Esther is also the victim of the patriarchal perspectives of the authors of the book of Esther, and the ideology of gender in which they participate and promote.”

²⁸ For reference, while trafficking could, actually, be occurring here—although this is conjecture—the displacements here are not trafficking, and vary depending on the status of the person that is being taken, and could be labeled differently per migration studies as being either a deportation, a refolement, and/or deracination. Further, their status as a captive of sorts also has varying degrees of agency and choice, often dependent on the power attributed to their current identificatory status and/or those they are in relationship to.

²⁹ “Erasing real women into the fantasy world of a male author is the most insidious epistemic trap laid by patriarchal methodologies” (Stefaniw 2020, p. 277); to add here, this also gets into the arguments about dating and provenance of the book, which are still decidedly contested and somewhat problematic (for example on these arguments, see Fry 2025), especially pertaining to if a story relates any actual realities or not. The point here is that this is something we still have to wrestle through.

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