

The Function of the מִשְׁתָּחָה מִשְׁתָּחָה in the Book of Esther

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ABSTRACT

What was the purpose of Queen Esther’s first banquet? Did it serve any purpose at all? Why did Esther not tell King Ahasuerus her request the first time she held a banquet, but instead deferred that conversation to the following day when she would re-create the exact same atmosphere with the intent of saying the exact same thing? Popular opinion assumes Esther’s reaction the first night was one of fear, panic, and timidity, thus skirting the issue to be dealt with at a later time. But, was Esther really a meek and weak-willed woman? It is contended in this paper that, instead, Esther was a cunning and crafty woman who understood how to turn the king’s favour by exploiting his convivial disposition. Esther did not accost the king with her entreaty until she had gauged that the king was at the precise point of intoxication in order to react the way in which Esther devised; this state was not achieved on the first night, that is, he did not drink enough then, but was sagaciously accomplished on the second night hence acquiring her desired result.

A INTRODUCTION

In the story of the existence and survival of the Jewish community, as depicted in the book of Esther, one synchronic query (of many) that surfaces concerns the purpose of Queen Esther’s first banquet. Did it serve any purpose at all? Why did Esther not tell King Ahasuerus her request the first time she held a banquet for both he and Haman, but instead deferred that conversation to the following day when she would re-create the exact same setting, with the same limited guests, and with the intent of saying the same thing? One might opine that Esther’s reaction in the original banquet was an amalgamation of her fear, panic, and timidity while possessing little confidence, thus skirting the issue to be dealt with at another time.¹ However is this interpretation accurate? Was Esther truly a meek and weak-willed woman?²

¹ E.g. Lewis B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Book of Esther* (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1976), 236. Alternatively, see the survey in Kevin McGeough, “Esther the Hero: Going beyond ‘Wisdom’ in Heroic Narratives,” *CBQ* 70/1 (2008): 51–57.

² This position is birthed out of the corpus of LXX supplementary material which does insinuate Esther having such thoughts of trepidation (Esth 5:1[1–6], 2[1–2]); however, the MT does not supply Esther’s emotional state—which means she certainly could have been crafty and calculating. See further Linda Day, *Three Faces of a*

Concerning Esther’s petition, it may be said that her increasing niceties and formalities are an indication of her ever–burgeoning confidence, for one need only to observe what Esther said at the king’s throne: “‘If it please the king. . . .’” (Esth 5:4);³ at her first banquet: “‘If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king to grant my petition and fulfill my request’” (5:8); at her second banquet: “‘If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be given me at my petition, and my people at my request’” (7:3).⁴

The king’s response, similarly, does not alter by way of invitation—the limit is fixed; whether at the throne (Esth 5:3), the first banquet (5:6), or the second banquet (7:2) Ahasuerus’ acquiescence and offer of up to half the kingdom is the same every time.⁵ With the offer as grand as it was from the outset, Esther could have plausibly made her plea as early as when in the inner court; yet, Esther neither made her entreaty there nor at her first banquet. Why?

It will be argued, by means of a close reading of the MT,⁶ that Esther did not panic nor was she timid when faced with voicing a plea bargain before King Ahasuerus; for, since Esther resolved that death would not prevent her from advocating for her people (Esth 4:16), she must have had other reasons for deferring her intended conversation and thus requested an additional evening, a second banquet. Esther, instead, was a cunning and crafty woman who understood how to turn the king’s favour by exploiting his convivial disposition. It will be contended, in short, that Esther did not accost the king with her

Queen: Characterizations in the Books of Esther (JSOTSup 186; Sheffield: Academic Press, 1995).

³ All biblical citations in this essay are from the RSV, unless otherwise indicated.

⁴ However, despite the increased diplomatic verbiage before Esther’s confrontation, there are even more niceties stated later in the book for less substantive issues; in other words, after Esther finally does plea for her life and the lives of her people, her next entreaty, which is the specific means by which her people could preserve their lives (namely retaliation), is hedged with more formalities than the prior instances. In this case Esther approached the king, who again extended his gold scepter to her, and implored, “‘If it pleases the king, if I have found favor before him, and if the matter is proper before the king, and if I am pleasing in his eyes. . . .’” (Esth 8:5). It would seem that if Esther’s general request for the Jews to retaliate against the threat of annihilation was granted then certainly the methodology of said destruction would not be an overstepping imploration, rather a secondary issue. See further, Patricia K. Tull, *Esther and Ruth* (IBSt; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 26–27.

⁵ Though this expression is likely hyperbolic. See Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (NAC; Nashville, Tenn.: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 340, it nevertheless shows eager compliance.

⁶ The methodology of close reading, a technique which analyses lexemes, grammar and syntax, is a facet of New Criticism; see Robert Alter and Frank Kermode, eds., *The Literary Guide to the Bible* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987).

entreaty until she had gauged that the king was under the influence of wine—that he was at the precise point of intoxication in order to have reacted the way in which Esther devised; this state was not achieved on the first night, for he had not drunk enough, but was sagaciously accomplished on the second night hence acquiring her desired result. This thesis will be realised by: [1] defining **מִשְׁתָּחָה יִין** as “drinking–bout”; [2] associating the events of **יִין** with the king’s emotional susceptibility to **חַמָּה/קָצֶר** (anger/rage), which led him to make epic and rash decisions; [3] understanding the correlation of the above variables, Esther contrived that very setting in order for her scheme to succeed: saving the Jews by causing the fate of Haman to be like that of Vashti’s; [4] Jewish celebrations in the month of Adar, consequently, encapsulates the **מִשְׁתָּחָה** concept demonstrated in the Persian empire, thus further indicating the intoxicated nature of **מִשְׁתָּחָה (יִין)**.

B DEFINING **מִשְׁתָּחָה** AND **מִשְׁתָּחָה יִין**

Many English versions translate **מִשְׁתָּחָה** generally as either “feast” (e.g., ESV, KJV, NKJV) or “banquet” (e.g., NASB, NIV, NRS, RSV, TNK)⁷ and understand **מִשְׁתָּחָה יִין** as functioning adverbially. The NASB, for example, understands this construct phrase as the act of drinking: “as they drank their wine at the banquet” (Esth 5:6; 7:2), and “drinking wine” (Esth 7:7, 8). This translation construes the noun as acting verbally, however the verb **שָׁתָה** is only employed thrice in Esther (3:15; 4:16; 7:1). Further, **מִשְׁתָּחָה** occurs neither in the participle form (**שָׁתִים**)⁸ nor in the infinitive construct form (**לְשָׁתֹות שָׁתָה**)⁹ which *does* more accurately connote the act of drinking. **מִשְׁתָּחָה**, therefore, is a noun every time throughout the book of Esther.

Some lexicographers understand **מִשְׁתָּחָה** to be a feast with overtones or specificity of liberality in drinking.¹⁰ When the noun **מִשְׁתָּחָה** stands alone it has flexibility in semantic range, but the lexical scope of **מִשְׁתָּחָה** is narrowed down when coupled with **יִין**, “wine” (as it is found in Esth 5:6; 7:2, 7, 8). While Koehler–Baumgartner translates **מִשְׁתָּחָה יִין** as “**banquet** with wine,” (bold by K-B) they deduce that the full construct, **מִשְׁתָּחָה יִין**, intensifies its adjectival meaning to denote a “bout of drinking.”¹¹ Brown–Driver–Briggs, similarly, defines **יִין** **מִשְׁתָּחָה** as an “occasion for drinking, drinking–bout.”¹² In this paper, then,

⁷ A few times RSV also renders the word in question as “dinner” (Esth 5:4, 5, 8, 14).

⁸ Cf. 1 Sam 30:16; 1 Kgs 1:25; 4:20; 1 Chron 12:39; Job 1:13, 18 (Aramaic equivalencies: Dan 5:1, 23).

⁹ Cf. Gen 24:19, 22; Exod 7:18; Ruth 3:3; 1 Sam 1:9; 1 Kgs 16:9; 20:12, 16; Isa 5:22; 22:13; 29:8.

¹⁰ Larry A. Mitchell, *A Student’s Vocabulary for Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1984), 24; *HALOT*, 653.

¹¹ *HALOT*, 653.

¹² *HALOT*, 1059. The TNK correctly aligns with the noun usage here rendering **מִשְׁתָּחָה** as a “wine feast” (Esth 5:6, 7:2, 7). In Esth 7:8, though, the JPS Tanakh translates

is defined as “drinking festival,” and **מִשְׁתָּחָה** **יִן** is referring to a “drinking-bout.” We turn now to notable biblical occurrences of **מִשְׁתָּחָה** **יִן**.

In the event that Abigail, with her copious gifts and negotiation, thwarted David’s intention of destroying her husband after the latter had wronged the former, the biblical account subsequently mentions

And Abigail came to Nabal; and, lo, he was holding a feast [**מִשְׁתָּחָה**] in his house, like the feast [**מִשְׁתָּחָה**] of a king. And Nabal’s heart was merry within him, for he was very drunk; so she told him nothing at all until the morning light. And in the morning, when the wine [**יִן**] had gone out of Nabal, his wife told him these things, and his heart died within him, and he became as a stone (1 Sam 25:36–37).

In this account **מִשְׁתָּחָה** and **יִן**, though not set in juxtaposition, are nevertheless in close semantic relationship; moreover, the liberality in which Nabal imbibed wine at his own personal drinking festival also was said to have resulted in drunkenness, **שָׁבֵר**. A synthetic parallelism is employed in 1 Sam 25:36:

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|---|---|
| <p>(A) He had a מִשְׁתָּחָה (A') like the feast מִשְׁתָּחָה of the king</p> <p>(B) Nabal’s heart was pleased in him (B') he was exceedingly drunk</p> | <p>(A) הָנָהָלָו מִשְׁתָּחָה (A') כִּמִשְׁתָּחָה הַמֶּלֶךְ</p> <p>(B) וְלֹבֶן טוֹב עַלְיוֹ (B') שָׁבֵר עַדְמָאֵד</p> |
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There is lucid connection between each correlating colon; A' and B', most specifically, are also comparable to the praxis of King Ahasuerus.

That **מִשְׁתָּחָה** **יִן** results in an intoxicated state is buttressed with evidence from Late Biblical Hebrew specifically.¹³ While it is said, in the book’s introduction, that Job was a man who was “blameless and upright who feared God and turned from evil,” Job’s offspring, on the other hand, were not quite as upright as he (Job 1:1). Habitually,

His sons used to go and hold a feast [**מִשְׁתָּחָה**] in the house of each on his day; and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them. And when the days of the feast [**מִשְׁתָּחָה**] had run

מִשְׁתָּחָה **הַיִּן** as “banquet room” in this one case; yet, since the king did not return inside to continue drinking this translation decision was made in order to differentiate the room wherein they were drinking to the garden, the locale to which the king had retreated momentarily.

¹³ So Angel Sáenz-Badillo, *A History of the Hebrew Language* (trans. J. Elwolde; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 115, 123–126. Contra Ian Young, *Diversity in Pre-Exilic Hebrew* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1993), 134, 137. Cf. also Robert Pulzin, *Late Biblical Hebrew: Toward an Historical Typology of Biblical Hebrew Prose* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1976), 11.

their course, Job would send and sanctify them, and he would rise early in the morning and offer burnt offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, “It may be that my sons have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.” Thus Job did continually (Job 1:4–5).

Both these verses—of whose aspect is iterative—explicate certain details: (1) Job’s sons and daughters assembled together; (2) eating and drinking; (3) **מִשְׁתָּחָה**. Following this description, a specific occasion—whose aspect is (precise) present time—crops up in the narrative demonstrating how said custom once turned tragic:

Now there was a day when his sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine [יִין] in their eldest brother’s house. . . . While he was yet speaking, there came another, and said, “Your sons and daughters were eating and drinking wine [יִין] in their eldest brother’s house” (Job 1:13, 18).

Though the full (con)text communicates the point of the passage, both these verses elucidate the following: (1) Job’s sons and daughters assembled together; (2) eating and drinking; (3) **יִין**.

Both sets of couplets (1:4, 5 and 1:13, 18) tell of (1) all the siblings gathering together (2) to eat and drink, (3) drinking **יִין** (vv. 13, 18) at their **מִשְׁתָּחָה** (vv. 4, 5). Based on the thorough parallelism and symmetry of these couplets, **מִשְׁתָּחָה** and **יִין** are intentionally woven together; therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that a **יִין** **מִשְׁתָּחָה** occurred in the book of Job when his sons and daughters congregated together.

Job’s reaction to a **מִשְׁתָּחָה** **יִין** is a valuable litmus in order to gage the happenings in Esther (though **מִשְׁתָּחָה** **יִין** was natural and commonly permissible in Persia it seems to be frowned upon and discouraged by a Yahwist [in Job]). It neither seems likely nor logical that Job would offer a *consecration* sacrifice on behalf of his children because they ate a plethora of food, and after they had eaten food they drank just enough wine to clear their palates and to quench their thirst; rather, it is more probable for Job to fear that his children would be more susceptible to curse God if a **מִשְׁתָּחָה** **יִין** communicated excessive drinking, intoxication, and/or even a drunken state—within this mentally impeding disposition one would be more apt to haphazardly (or intentionally) curse God. This latter interpretation is more congruous with Job’s extreme concern which resulted in his offering of consecration sacrifices.

While some conceptual context of **מִשְׁתָּחָה** **יִין** has been gained through the above examinations, over one-third (16/46) of the occurrences of **מִשְׁתָּחָה** in the HB are found in Esther, which makes that book’s contribution to said concept

dominant.¹⁴

C WINE (יין) AND WRATH (חמה/קצף) מִשְׁתָּה יְיָ

1 King Ahasuerus' מִשְׁתָּה יְיָ

The initial festivities depicted in Esth 1 tell of the impressive expanse of King Ahasuerus' kingdom (from India to Ethiopia), his great opulence, and the liberality of his libations for merrymaking (Esth 1:1-8). King Ahasuerus held a "banquet [מִשְׁתָּה] for all his princes and servants, the army chiefs of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces... for many days, a hundred and eighty days" (Esth 1:3-4). Next, "when these days were completed, the king gave for all the people present in Susa the capital, both great and small, a banquet [מִשְׁתָּה]¹⁵ lasting for seven days, in the court of the garden of the king's palace" (Esth 1:5).¹⁶ Supplied was "royal wine [יין]...lavished according to the bounty of the king. And drinking¹⁷ was according to the law, no one was compelled" (Esth 1:7b-8a).¹⁸ And eventually, "the heart of the king was merry with wine [יין]" (Esth 1:10).¹⁹

At this point in the introduction of Esther, there are similarities already with the two previously observed texts which contain יין and מִשְׁתָּה. Like Nabal, king Ahasuerus' heart was merry with יין at his own grand מִשְׁתָּה. Also,

¹⁴ Indeed, the banquet is one of the most prominent motifs in the book of Esther; see e.g., Sandra B. Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure* (SBLDS 44; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1979).

¹⁵ Up to this point in our scope, the LXX reads πότος, as opposed to δοχή (which will be later seen and examined) to depict the particular nature of the festivities (e.g., Nabal [2 Sam 25]; Job's sons [Job 1]; and King Ahasuerus' seven day party [Esth 1:5] [albeit, the 180 day party is distinguished in the Septuagint as a δοχή]). BDAG, 857, defines πότος as "**a social gathering at which wine was served, drinking party,**" while LSJ, 1164, says it is "*a drinking-bout, carousal*" (bold and italics original).

¹⁶ Also, Queen Vashti is said to have hosted a מִשְׁתָּה for the women (Esth 1:9).

¹⁷ The word here is וּמִשְׁתָּה, a *hapax legomenon* derived from מִשְׁתָּה which communicates the act of drinking.

¹⁸ Targum Sheni of Esther recalls the drinking customs: "*they would bring to the Persian men a large cup... and they would give everyman one (of them) to drink and not let go of him until he drank it in one gulp. Now the butler... would pour for the man, and since no one could be found who would drink, they would indicate to the butler: 'Take it away from me and a certain amount of Zuz are yours.'* Now, since no one could be found able to drink except for Xerxes, these cups would not be brought in for drinking, except for that which each man could drink; therefore it is written: '*and the drinking was according to custom.*'" (Bernard Grossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther* [ArBib 18; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991], 127; bold and italics original).

¹⁹ Cf. Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther* (BL; New York: Routledge, 2002), 15.

the same funnel-like methodology in storytelling is crafted in Esther as in Job, in that it starts from a wide, general practice and then narrows down to a specific occasion. The broad narrative brush stroke (Esth 1:3, 5) applies the general term מִשְׁתָּחָה while the precise case (Esth 1:7, 10) supplies יִנְחַת; furthermore, the same aspectual tenses in Job (1:4, 5 & 1:13, 18) are used in Esther:²⁰ the iterative aspect (Esth 1:3–5) employs מִשְׁתָּחָה and the specific aspect (Esth 1:7–10) supplies יִנְחַת (twice each).²¹

Thence, in the Esther narrative, a turn of events takes place. The king became readily provoked to anger and rage in his intoxicated state, the by-product of his drinking-bout. This happened when he ordered “to bring Queen Vashti before the king with her royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the princes her beauty; for she was fair to behold” (Esth 1:11).²² “But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king’s command conveyed by the eunuchs. At this the king was enraged [נִצְחָק], and his anger [חַמְתָּה] burned within him” (Esth 1:12). A Talmudic exegete vocalises Vashti’s response to the king when beckoned; she relayed to the eunuchs that Ahasuerus “has become senseless with his wine” (Megillah 12b).

Consequently and subsequently, a vengeful edict was drafted in order to chastise any woman of Ahasuerus’ kingdom who should behave in a similar fashion, and it is implied (from later arrangements for a new queen) that Vashti underwent some semblance of divorce, banishment, and perhaps even death.²³ It was only “[a]fter these things [namely, the affects and effects of מִשְׁתָּחָה יִנְחַת], when the anger [חַמְתָּה] of King Ahasuerus had abated...” (Esth 2:1a).²⁴ This summary statement of Esth 2:1 demonstrates the cogent cause–effect correlation between a drinking-bout (מִשְׁתָּחָה יִנְחַת) and wrath (נִצְחָק/חַמְתָּה)—once the

²⁰ I am not insinuating, however, that the author(s)/redactor(s) of Esther necessarily drew upon Job.

²¹ Esther 1:7 could still be iterative aspect since Esth 1:10 is the point at which a specific day is mentioned.

²² Cf. Stan Goldman, “Narrative and Ethical Ironies in Esther,” *JSOT* 47/2 (1990), 17.

²³ So killed: *Tg. Esth. II.1* (Grossfeld, *Two Targums*, 40).

²⁴ Herodotus (I.133) states: “Moreover, it is their custom to deliberate about the gravest matters when they are drunk; and what they approve in their counsels is proposed to them the next day by the master of the house where they deliberate, when they are now sober and if being sober they still approve it, they act thereupon, but if not, they cast it aside” (A.D. Godley, trans. [LCL 117; Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996], 173, 175). However, in the case with Vashti it seems all events transpired the previous night (cf. Esth 2:1).

The Aramaic account intimates the king’s admittance of the aforementioned correlation more saliently: “It was not against Queen Vashti that I was angry [רָגַנְתִּי], rather against you [i.e. the chiefs] was I angry [רָגַנְתִּיךְ] because I myself spoke when I was filled with wine” (Esth 2:1; author’s translation).

king’s intoxication wore off the next morning so also did his anger and rage.²⁵ Therefore, the king’s conduct throughout his party “suggests one who was neither cold sober nor dead drunk; rather he was ‘feeling good.’”²⁶

2 **מִשְׁתָּחָה** יְיַיְמָה

Though circumstances looked positive to implore the king in his throne room, Esther was likely reluctant to do so because present also were “two attendants. . . One holds over his master’s head the royal parasol with curving ribs and pomegranate top...the other, the chamberlain, bears napkin and fly-flapper.”²⁷ But regardless, Esther nevertheless wanted the alternate venue of **מִשְׁתָּחָה** to ask King Ahasuerus her request.²⁸ Henceforth,

Esther said, “If it please the king, let the king and Haman come this day to a dinner [**מִשְׁתָּחָה**] that I have prepared for the king.” Then said the king, “Bring Haman quickly, that we may do as Esther desires.” So the king and Haman came to the dinner [**מִשְׁתָּחָה**] that Esther had prepared (Esth 5:4–5).

Though the account is laconic and perhaps even elliptic, the reader nonetheless perceives the rapidity of the narrative and the terseness of the speakers at the drinking festival. It seems that the three have only just sat down and commenced the **מִשְׁתָּחָה** when “the king said to Esther, ‘What is your petition? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled’” (Esth 5:6).²⁹ In Esther’s acumen, the king has prematurely reiterated his invitation which thereby had resulted in an environment not conducive for her intended plea bargain; in other words, “Queen

²⁵ Cf. Elliot B. Gertel, “Divine and Human Anger and Grace: Scroll of Esther and Exodus 32–34,” *JBQ* 40/3 (2012): 151–158.

²⁶ Carey A. Moore, *Esther* (AB; Garden City, N.Y: Doubleday, 1971), 13.

²⁷ Albert T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago, Ill.: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), 283. Cf. Plutarch, *Them.* 16.2; *idem, Reg. et imp. apophth.* 173E; Diodorus Siculus, XI 69.1.

²⁸ This motive is attested in the Talmud (*Meg. 15b*) with the explanation that it fulfilled Jer 51:39: “While they are inflamed [$\sqrt{\text{חַמְמָה}}$ ≈ **חַמְמָה**] I will prepare them a feast [**מִשְׁתָּחָה**] and make them drunk, till they swoon away and sleep a perpetual sleep and not wake, says the LORD.”

²⁹ A **מִשְׁתָּחָה** יְיַיְמָה is intentionally expressed by the author/redactor and specifically recorded as such; furthermore, these two terms are not loosely connected, nor even only in close proximity (like previous examples), yet whose correlation is insinuated, but rather sit in juxtaposition. The LXX, interestingly, does not record *πότος* here, as seen in every previous example, instead *δοχή*, a “*reception, banquet*” (BDAG, 260), or “*reception, entertaining*” (LSJ, 340]). The reason for this discrepancy is because the **מִשְׁתָּחָה** יְיַיְמָה did not percolate long enough to become a *πότος*, rather the king’s invitation came prematurely, in Esther’s judgment, which resulted in a *δοχή* only.

Esther wants to delay until such time as the king, under the influence of wine, is in a good mood and willing to comply with her wishes.”³⁰

There are a few underpinning factors which support the premature nature of the king’s question. First, it appears the king was curiously intrigued about Esther’s mysterious מִשְׁתָּחָה, for he had said, ““Bring Haman *quickly*, that we may do as Esther desires”” (Esth 5:5; emphasis added). Second, and similarly, it appears Ahasuerus’ inquisitiveness hastily led him to ask for an explanation of Esther’s party right at its outset (Esth 5:6). Third, and also correspondingly, the מִשְׁתָּחָה יְיִחְיָה with which King Ahasuerus was familiar comprised myriads of guests,³¹ and one which was gender segregated (at least judging from the example depicted in Esth 1:1–10); thus, by Esther proposing to host a מִשְׁתָּחָה יְיִחְיָה which only comprised of three members, two males and one female, was liable to be perplexing to Ahasuerus.³² These factors inadvertently prevented the king to fully participate in his customary imbibing thereby thwarting Esther’s plans.

Since Ahasuerus was not intoxicated enough for Esther to initiate her scheme, she consequently aborted it only for a later recapitulation of the מִשְׁתָּחָה יְיִחְיָה scenario; for, she was convinced that she could fabricate the desired ethos and bring the king to the desired convivial state if circumstances took their natural course.³³ Esther wanted the king to respond favourably to her petition to defend the Jews, to do this the king must be(come) infuriated with the Jews’ nemesis, and to evoke this emotion she must get him to drink much wine. A repeat would hopefully cause the king to be more at ease with, and less self-conscious or suspicious of, Esther’s מִשְׁתָּחָה יְיִחְיָה.³⁴ So “let the king and Haman come tomorrow to the dinner [מִשְׁתָּחָה] which I will prepare for them, and tomorrow I will do as the king has said” (Esth 5:8).

³⁰ Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminister John Knox Press, 1997), 90.

³¹ Olmstead, *History*, 182, estimates 15,000.

³² Customarily, “Throughout the dinner [the king] was entertained by concubines, who sang or played the lyre, one solo and the others in chorus.” See Olmstead, *History*, 183.

³³ Contra Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther* (IBC; Louisville, Ky.: Westminister John Knox Press, 2002), 53. Also, the theory that “she wished to make the king merry with wine before she offered her request. . . [is] unsatisfactory,” according to Paton, *Esther*, 234; instead, he offers “the true reason for Esther’s delay is purely literary; the author needs time for the humiliation of Haman and the exaltation of Mordecai before the final blow falls.” However, throughout his commentary Paton is authorial–intention driven and defaults to this motive in every situation (e.g., 244).

³⁴ The LXX returns to the use of πότος in this scene; the Greek translator saw the true nature of the מִשְׁתָּחָה יְיִחְיָה actualised and thus expressed it through the use of πότος.

3 **Queen Esther’s Second **מִשְׁתָּה** יְיַן**

Esther called both of her gatherings **מִשְׁתָּה** (Esth 5:4, 8), the term also used by Haman whenever he related the exclusive events (Esth 5:12, 14); additionally, the narrator refers to both gatherings as **מִשְׁתָּה** יְיַן as they were transpiring (Esth 5:6; 7:2). Likewise, on the consecutive special evening, during the **מִשְׁתָּה** יְיַן, “the king again said to Esther, ‘What is your petition, Queen Esther? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled’” (Esth 7:2).

The difference between the two drinking festivals is that more drinking must have taken place in the latter one than the former. The verbiage of the narrative explicates: “the king and Haman came to drink [**לִשְׁתּוֹת**] *wine* with Esther the queen” (Esth 7:1 NASB).³⁵ Here, **לִשְׁתּוֹת**, “to drink,” is recorded which is then immediately followed by—and consequently compounded with—the **מִשְׁתָּה** יְיַן reference in the next verse (Esth 7:2). Again the invitation was given by the king, and this time the queen finally does make her entreaty; Esther must have sagaciously gauged that the king had partaken of enough wine in order for her request and entreaty to fall upon his ear in such a way that it would transform his inebriation into wrath.³⁶ The intended reaction was achieved: “The king arose in his anger [**מִתְּמָרָה**] from drinking wine [**מִשְׁתָּה** יְיַן] *and went* into the palace garden; but Haman stayed to beg for his life from Queen Esther, for he saw that harm had been determined against him by the king” (Esth 7:7 NASB).

Here again, as before, it is lucid that wrath (**חַמָּה/קָצֵחַ**) is the product of the king’s drinking-bout (**מִשְׁתָּה**)—which Esther craftily manufactured.³⁷ The king did indeed have enough wine because he was provoked to anger and rage. Haman’s fears materialised; “just as the [king’s] arising was in wrath, so the returning was in wrath” (Megillah 16b). Also,

[T]he king returned from the palace garden to the place where they were drinking wine [**מִשְׁתָּה**], as Haman was falling on the couch where Esther was; and the king said, “Will he even assault the queen in my presence, in my own house?” As the words left the mouth of the king, they covered Haman’s face (Esth 7:8).

³⁵ Jonathan Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading* (Siphrut 6; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 129, in comparing Esth 5:5 and 7:1, notes: “Esther limited her participation in the first party to serving, while by the second night, she allowed herself to drink with the men. This discrepancy may allude to the reason she postponed her request.”

³⁶ While expounding most of our correlations, Linda Day, *Esther* (AOTC; Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2005), 114 (eBook page numbering), still accredits Esther’s achievements to “flawless” “manipulat[ion].”

³⁷ The LXX supplementation clarifies that Esther, on the other hand, had **οὐδὲ** **ἔπιον** **οἶνον σπονδῶν**, “not even drunk wine of libations” (4:17 [24]).

At that moment, whether or not Ahasuerus fully realised Haman’s villainy,³⁸ the infuriated king swiftly pronounced execution upon the scoundrel. Once Harbonah, a serving eunuch, informed his king of Haman’s latest construction project, Ahasuerus pounced on the opportunity for an expeditious death sentence by use of Haman’s own gallows.³⁹ When “they hanged Haman on the gallows which he had prepared for Mordecai. Then the anger [מִשְׁתָּחָה] of the king abated” (Esth 7:9 [MT]).⁴⁰ Esther’s scheme worked. When King Ahasuerus was in the precisely desired intoxicated disposition, she exposed Haman’s nefarious plot of annihilating the Jews and pled for her life as well as the lives of her people (Esth 7:3–4).

D HAMAN VIS-À-VIS AHASUERUS, VASHTI

The events between Esther’s two banquets, Esther 5:9–15 and 6, form the peripety of the book of Esther.⁴¹ In this reversal not only is Haman’s downfall begun and Mordecai’s ascendency foreshadowed, but Haman furthermore is portrayed as correlating to both Ahasuerus and Vashti. In both cases, and from different angles, the hypothesis of wine–wrath–execution interrelation is bore out.

Whereas the king, after Esther’s first banquet, was not at the precise point of intoxication to incite a murderous reaction, Haman was. “Haman went out that day joyful and glad of heart” (Esth 5:9a). So, Haman was intoxicated (טוֹב לְבָב) with wine, just as King Ahasuerus in Esther 1:10 (cf. Ps 104:15; Eccl

³⁸ Adele Berlin, “The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling,” *JBL* 120/1 (2001): 14, describes, “Ahasuerus has identified the right crime for the wrong reason. As is fitting for a comic face, the villain gets the punishment he deserves for something he did not do. . . . Haman’s own destruction is based on false accusation, just as his attempt to destroy the Jews was based on a false accusation. Haman had accused the Jews for treason, and now he himself is accused of treason.” Goldman “Narrative,” sees this episode as rhetorical irony (p.18) as well as irony of narrative perspectives (p.19). Cf. Grossmann, *Esther*, 162.

³⁹ Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 87–88.

⁴⁰ “At the beginning of the story [2:1], the king’s fury led to the dismissal of his queen, and when his fury abated he needed a new queen. Now, his fury leads to the impalement of his highest official, and when his fury abates he will need a replacement for his official.” See Berlin, *Book of Esther*, 71.

⁴¹ See Kenneth Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 83–84, 122–123. Timothy S. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther* (SBLDS, 165; Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1998), 100: “While the peripety of chapter 6 serves distinct literary purposes, it also hints at divine intervention.”

2:3).⁴² Next, like Ahasuerus, Haman's wine merriment when provoked converted into wrath: "But when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate, that he neither rose nor trembled before him, he was filled with wrath [חָמָת] against Mordecai" (Esth 5:9b).

Subsequently, Haman, like Ahasuerus, must materialise his wrath into murder. Though the date for the destruction of the Jews was set, Haman was compelled to hasten the death of the Jew Mordecai, at the very least. As a result, a plan is afoot for Mordecai to be impaled on a beam (Esth 5:14); interestingly, intoxication verbiage is imbedded in this scheme: Zeresh tells Haman to impale Mordecai before the feast (חַתְּמָה), where Haman would again be(come) merry (חַמְשָׁה) with wine—and it was a good (טוֹב) plan (Esth 5:14; cf. Esth 5:9a). This ploy is postponed, however, and in the end does not transpire. Nevertheless, Haman's state (inebriation) and reaction (rage) mirrors Ahasuerus' in Esth 1, though not in Esth 5;⁴³ and, consequently, Haman's portrayal in Esth 5*-6, in this regard, anticipates Ahasuerus' in Esth 7.⁴⁴ Further, just as Ahasuerus was provoked by Vashti and Haman, so was Haman provoked by Mordecai; in each case the recipient of the wine-turned-to-wrath is executed.⁴⁵

While Haman mimicked Ahasuerus' wrathful proclivities induced by wine imbibing, Haman is also the object of the king's wine induced wrath—the result of which resembles Vashti's demise. Once the peripety had come to fruition, the king responded toward Haman exactly as Esther had wished him, the same way, in fact, that he had toward Vashti. The parallels between Ahasuerus' party and Esther's second party in this regard are clear:⁴⁶

Esth 1:12 But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's word. . . so the king became exceedingly angry [בָּקָרָה]. **Esth 7:7** Then the king arose in his anger [בָּקָרָה] from the drinking-bout [יְיָ] to go to the garden house.

⁴² Ironically, and by use of paronomasia, Ahasuerus, at Esther's second party, asks: **הַוָּא אֲשֶׁר-מָלָא לְבָוּ לְעַשְׂוֹת בָּן וְאִזְזָה**. See further, Day, *Esther*, 117 (eBook page numbering).

⁴³ Additionally, "Like Ahasuerus in chapter 1, Haman brags about his wealth to his friends." See Adele Berlin, *Esther* אֲשֶׁר-מָלָא (JPSBC; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 55.

⁴⁴ Grossman, *Esther*, 129, envisages "Esther sitting near Haman, frequently offering him food or refills his goblet, and generally flirting with Haman throughout the meal." This hidden reading, according to Grossman, is bore out in the fact that Haman left happy and glad of heart (Esth 5:9) and the insomnia of the king, which stemmed from the aforesaid events (129–130).

⁴⁵ See Trisha M. Gambaiana Wheelock, "Drunk and Disorderly: A Bakhtinian Reading of the Banquet Scenes in the Book of Esther" (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 2008), 141–142, 144; Day, *Esther*, 120 (eBook page numbering).

⁴⁶ Author's translation follows.

his rage [מִמְּרָא] burned in him.

Esth 2:1 After these things, King Ahasuerus' rage [מִמְּרָא] was abated.

Esth 7:10 So they hanged Haman on the tree . . . and then the king's anger [מִרְאָה] was abated.

Esther, realising the cause–effect relationship of wine and wrath, used her מִשְׁתָּחָה as a means–end stratagem for Haman's demise. Vashti, when the object of the king's wrath, was divorced/banished/killed and a decree, תְּדָר (Esth 1:19), was issued throughout the entire kingdom chastising any woman who might act as the former queen had. Haman, when colliding with the kings' wrath, was similarly condemned to death and an edict, תְּדָר (Esth 9:1), was later drafted issuing the destruction of the enemies of the Jews (i.e., Agagites/Amalekites).⁴⁷ Both experienced the king's provoked wrath which stemmed from his convivial, inebriated state.⁴⁸

E PURIM AS (מִשְׁתָּחָה)

The biblical account states (by a twofold repetition, 9:17–19 and 9:20–23) while the urban Jews (those residing in Susa) battled their enemies on the thirteenth day of Adar, the rural Jews (those dwelling in the villages) were avenging themselves on the fourteenth day. On the following days, the fourteenth and fifteenth day respectively, the Jews were charged to observe a day of rest. This rest was for the purpose of remembering Adar "as the month that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday" (Esth 9:22).⁴⁹ The chiastic structure of Esth 9 accentuates the significance of Purim (the name adopted by the Jews to term these aforesaid days, as coined by Haman):

⁴⁷ Regarding drinking *vis-à-vis* lawmaking, see Anne–Mareike Wetter, "In Unexpected Places: Ritual and Religious Belonging in the Book of Esther," *JSOT* 36/3 (2012): 330.

⁴⁸ Additional equilibrium is evident between Vashti and Haman in regards to their status. The possibility remains that Vashti was second in command, before being divorced/banished/killed; and, afterward Haman was elevated to be prince over princes (Esth 3:1), or as the Greek supplements refer to him: δευτέρου πατρὸς ἡμῶν, "our second father" (3:13 [6] LXX).

⁴⁹ Cf. Goldman, "Narrative," 17.

| | | |
|----|--|-----------|
| A | Edict to carry out destruction | [9:1] |
| B | Destruction: death of enemies (generally) | [9:2-6] |
| C | Death of Haman’s family (specifically) | [9:7-14] |
| D | Days and nature of Purim | [9:15-19] |
| D` | *Days and nature of Purim* | [9:20-23] |
| C` | ** because of destruction of Haman’s family | [9:24-26] |
| B` | ** in order to remember victory over enemies | [9:27-28] |
| A` | Edict to carry out celebration | [9:29-32] |

The centerpiece of the chiasm (D, D`) communicates Purim as a holiday entailing מִשְׁתָּחָה and rejoicing (Esth 9:17-19, 22), and giving gifts to the poor (Esth 9:19, 22). It is interesting to note מִשְׁתָּחָה is an integral expression of Purim.⁵⁰ Yet, how is this מִשְׁתָּחָה to be understood here? Were the (displaced/Hellenised) Jews’ experiences congruent to King Ahasuerus’ יְיָ מִשְׁתָּחָה activities?

Roland de Vaux notes, Purim “was an utterly profane feast, taken up with banquets and amusements, and considerable liberty was allowed.”⁵¹ Indeed, Purim, as Doniach states,

is a *mishteh*, drink the primary consideration and eating merely inci-

⁵⁰ There are numerous explanatory matrixes rooted in Babylonian, Persian, and Akkadian mythologies and etymologies which are offered to pinpoint the source of Purim’s orthography; such elucidations are: [1] “*puhru* was only one name of the Babylonian New Year feast which is also called by the Sumerian name *Zagmuk* (beginning of the year), when the gods assembled together and determined the fates of men for the ensuing year by means of tablets of fate or lots. . . thus the lots of Haman are traced to their ultimate source and the banqueting is a record of the fact that the gods became drunk at the feast of creation.” See Nakdimon S. Doniach, *Purim, or, the Feast of Esther: An Historical Study* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933), 42; [2] “it might also be an attempt to explain the Persian name for the first month of the year (Farvadian) by the Akkadian.” See Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel, Its Life and Institutions* (BRS; trans. J. McHugh; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1961), 517; [3] “Arabic lexicographers from the 10th century give *fuhr* as the name of «a certain day on which the Jews eat and drink»” See Helmer Ringgren, “Esther and Purim,” in *Studies in the Book of Esther* (ed. Harry M. Orlinsky; New York: KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1982), 189; [4] “Purim is essentially derived from a certain form of Persian New Year ceremonies,” one of which was *Sacaea* “the celebration of a festival featuring copious drinking.” See Ringgren, “Esther,” 204, 192; [5] “the name of the festival is to be derived from the Hebrew *purah* (wine press) in some *suh* phrase as that in Isaiah, chapter 63, where the word is used in a description of God vanquishing his enemies: ‘I trod down the wine press (*purah*) alone. . . and their (i.e. my enemies’) life-juice splashed forth.’” See Doniach, *Purim*, 28-29. See also Jona Schellenkens, “Accession Days and Holidays: The Origins of the Jewish Festival of Purim,” *JBL* 128/1 (2009): 115-134, esp. 130-134.

⁵¹ De Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, 515.

dental. Even the Talmud proclaims that at the festival meal one should drink till he cannot distinguish between “*arur Haman* (cursed be Haman!) and *baruk Mordekai* (blessed be Mordecai).”⁵²

Therefore, though Jewish Purim diverges from Ahasuerus’ practice in part (e.g., gifts for the poor), a drinking festival and rejoicing is harmonious to conduct as depicted in the book of Esther.⁵³

F CONCLUSION

Through the consideration of מִשְׁתָּה יִן and מִשְׁתָּה יִן and their semantic ranges and the comparison of King Ahasuerus’ מִשְׁתָּה יִן and Queen Esther’s second מִשְׁתָּה יִן (with the contrasting discrepancy between those two accounts and the event of Esther’s first מִשְׁתָּה יִן) substantial evidence has emerged to suggest that Esther’s reason for aborting the oration of her pressing request and entreaty was because the king was not at the desired point of intoxication that Esther had tried to fabricate. When said manipulated disposition was achieved by Esther on the second occasion, the king was consumed by wrath which led him to defend the Jewish race by first executing Haman (cf. Vashti) and then empowering the Jews to avenge themselves against the Amalekites. In the end, the Jews ironically celebrated Purim equivalent to the way in which Ahasuerus enjoyed his bouts of drinking in his drinking festivals.

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⁵² Doniach, *Purim*, 95. Cf. LXX supplement Esther 8:12[21] for nature and conduct of Purim.

⁵³ Jeffery M. Cohen, “Purim and Adloyada,” *JBQ* 29/4 (2001): 259–262; Wheelock, “Drunk and Disorderly,” 158–159.

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