



Exploring the characterization of Esther and Mordecai in the book of Esther (Masoretic Text MT): A Social Identity and Biblical Narrative Criticism Theory perspective and its implications for contemporary interpretation

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Supervised by

Prof Charlene van der Walt

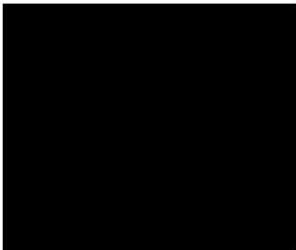
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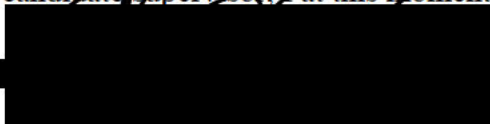
Declaration

I, Belinda Crawford, declare that this dissertation is my original work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been acknowledged. I submit this work to the programme of Sociology of Religion, which is under the School of Religion, Philosophy and Classics in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. No parts of this presentation have been submitted to another University or higher education institution for degree or examination purposes. Unless stated within the text, this is wholly my work.



Belinda Crawford

As candidate supervisor, I at this moment approve this dissertation for submission.



Professor Charlene Van Der Walt

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Declaration	iii
Abstract	5
Chapter 1: Introduction	6
1.1. Introduction.....	6
1.2. Overview of the study	7
1.3. Introduction to Contemporary Identity Issues.....	10
1.4. Background of the Narrative of Esther	14
1.5. Literature Overview and Theoretical Frameworks	17
1.6. The Development and Use of Narrative Criticism in Biblical Studies	18
1.7. Theoretical Frameworks Biblical Narrative Criticism and Social Identity Theory	24
1.8. Research Methodology as Characterization.....	26
1.9. Identified Gap in the Literature.....	28
1.10. Conclusion	28
Chapter 2 Theory and Method	30
2.1. Introduction.....	30
2.2. The Tripolar Exegetical Model.....	32
2.2.1 Distantiation: The World Behind the Text.....	32
2.2.2 Contextualization: The World of the Text	32
2.2.3 Appropriation: The World in Front of the Text	32
2.3. Integrating Biblical Narrative Criticism and Social Identity Theory within the Tripolar Model	32
2.3.1 Definition of Biblical Narrative Criticism	32
2.3.2 Narrative Analysis	35
2.3.3 Plot.....	36
2.3.4 Characterization (Round vs. Flat).....	36
2.3.5 Time	37

2.3.6 Point of view	38
2.4. Definition of Social Identity Theory	39
2.5 Characterization as Methodology	41
2.5.1 Introduction.....	41
2.6. Conclusion	43
Chapter 3: The World Behind the Text	44
3.1. Introduction.....	44
3.2. History of the Masoretes.....	44
3.2.1 Historical background of the Persian Empire in the Esther (MT) narrative	45
3.2.2 Distantiation of text (The World Behind the Text).....	45
3.2.3 Textual analysis	46
3.2.3.1 The Inner Texture of Esther	46
3.4. Social and Cultural Texture	52
3.5. Conclusion	55
Chapter 4 Narrative Analysis	57
4.1. Introduction.....	57
4.2. Contextualization: The World of the Text.....	57
4.2.1 Definition of Biblical Narrative Criticism	57
4.3. Plot.....	60
4.3.1 Plot Structure	60
4.4. Time	65
4.5. Conclusion	70
Chapter 5: Integration of Narrative Analysis and Social Identity Theory	71
5.1 Introduction.....	72
5.2 Characterization	72
5.2.1 Esther as a Fully-Fledged Character	84
5.2.2 Esther as a Round Character	84
5.2.3 Esther's Character Arc.....	85

5.2.4 Mordecai	86
5.2.5 Mordecai as a Fully-Fledged Character	86
5.2.6 Mordecai as a Round Character	87
5.2.7 Mordecai's Character Arc	87
5.3 Social Identity in Biblical Interpretation.....	88
5.4 Application of Social Identity Theory of the Characters of Esther and Mordechai.....	91
5.4.1 Social Categorization of Esther and Mordecai.....	93
5.4.2. Social Identification of Esther and Mordecai.....	96
5.4.3. Social Comparison of Esther and Mordecai.....	98
5.4.4. Complex Character Dynamics	99
5.4.5 In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics	100
5.4.6 Interdisciplinary Synthesis of Biblical Narrative Criticism and Social Identity Theory	108
5.5. Limitations	109
5.6. Conclusion	110
Chapter 6: Relating Textual Analysis to Contemporary Realities of Contested Identities.....	111
6.1. Introduction.....	111
6.2. Historical context for Jewish diasporic identities	111
6.3. Connecting Jewish Diasporic Identities to Contemporary Realities.....	115
6.4. Examples of Similar Contemporary Identity Challenges.....	118
6.5. Implications for Modern Interpreters.....	119
6.6. Conclusion	124
Chapter 7 Conclusion and Recommendations	125
7.1 Introduction.....	125
7.2 Summary of Research and Conclusions.....	125
7.3 My Experiences Carrying Out the Research	128
7.4 Research Limitations	130
7.5 Research Recommendations	131

Bibliography 133

Abbreviations

MT - Masoretic Text

SIT - Social Identity Theory

Figure 1: Plot mountain diagram

Table 1: Temporal Structure

Table 2: Chronological Order

Figure 2: Character concepts

Table 3: Character analysis of Esther and Mordecai juxtaposing Biblical narrative criticism
and Social identity theory

Abstract

In an age where identity is multifaceted and often disputed, my dissertation explores the intricacies of social identity in ancient and modern contexts by delving into the narrative of Esther and Mordecai from the Book of Esther Masoretic Text (MT). This study employs Biblical narrative criticism and Social identity theory to reveal how these historical figures navigated their complex identities, mirroring contemporary struggles faced by many, including myself as a mixed-race South African. Drawing from my journey of identity negotiation in post-apartheid South Africa, I find resonances with Esther's concealment and eventual revelation of her Jewish identity and Mordecai's steadfastness amidst systemic discrimination. These Biblical characters' experiences of duality and resilience offer valuable perspectives on the ongoing challenges of maintaining cultural heritage while assimilating into new social environments. For example, Esther's hidden identity in the Persian court parallels the modern immigrant experience, where individuals often balance dual cultural expectations. My research questions focus on character analysis through Biblical narrative criticism and (SIT) lenses and aim to understand how Esther and Mordecai's identities were shaped and expressed within their narrative. By examining their portrayal in the Masoretic Text (MT), I seek to uncover broader themes of power dynamics, assimilation, and resistance that are equally relevant today. This intersection of ancient text and modern identity issues enriches Biblical studies and provides a nuanced framework for interpreting contemporary social identities. The study aims to contribute to Biblical studies by integrating social scientific methods, offering a multidimensional approach that bridges historical and literary contexts with modern identity exploration, encouraging a more comprehensive engagement with the complexities of self in a multicultural world.

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

In an era where identity is increasingly complex and contested, our sense of self is constantly under negotiation, from online personas to cultural diasporas. This study draws parallels between contemporary struggles of contested social identities and the ancient narrative of Esther to unravel the timeless patterns of identity formation. By exploring the characteristics of Esther and Mordecai in the Book of Esther Masoretic Text (henceforth MT), I will analyse how the characters of Esther and Mordecai handle their conflicting identities to provide a valuable understanding of our life challenges. Being a mixed-race individual in South Africa, I have personally encountered the complex process of negotiating my identity, constantly juggling multiple cultural narratives daily. My difficulties mentioned here mirror the experiences of Esther and Mordechai, whose identities were also disputed and reshaped during the complicated circumstances of their era. This intersection of the ancient and the modern is the central intrigue of my research. To illuminate the contemporary complexities of identity, Castles (2010:2-23) addresses issues on immigration, including the restructuring of labour markets, segmentation based on ethnicity, race, gender, and legal status, as well as the broader social transformations that are interconnected with migratory processes as well as the social integration and inter-group relations, indicating that the complex dynamics of migration extend to the difficulties that immigrants face in navigating between maintaining their cultural identity and adjusting to their new social environments. These individuals often find themselves in a tug-of-war between preserving their cultural heritage and assimilating into a new society, much as Esther conceals her Jewish identity to survive and thrive in the Persian court.

In contemporary society, this might manifest in a young immigrant student navigating dual cultural expectations or professionals altering their names and behaviours to fit into the corporate landscape. During my honours project, I employed Social Identity Theory (henceforth (SIT) as a heuristic framework to scrutinise the complexities of my contested biracial identity and sense of belonging within South Africa. Drawing upon an analysis of Genesis 2-3, I explored the nuances of my lived experience as a liminal individual amidst the rich tapestry of diversity and multiculturalism prevalent in the country. The struggle for LGBTQ+ rights represents a broader reality of identity negotiation that extends beyond race, finding parallels in issues of class, gender, and sexuality. While my primary focus in this study is on race, I recognise this as an intersectional challenge, similar to the advocacy embodied by

Mordecai, who unwaveringly stands by his Jewish identity despite the mortal risks posed by Haman. Van Klinken (2017) elucidates the pervasive challenges inherent in narratives concerning Christian-influenced homophobia within the African context. Ms Harris, being the first black woman of Indian descent, states the following in her attempt to change government from the inside states: “When we want to reform systems, it shouldn’t, and it cannot only be from the outside on bended knee or trying to break down the door,” she told The Times early in her campaign.

In essence, these contemporary groups, much like Mordecai, refuse to bow to systemic discrimination and instead rise boldly to affirm their identity and demand equitable treatment. Throughout my research, the complex dialogue between the temporal milieu of Esther and Mordecai and our contemporary era is enriched by introspective considerations of my encounters resonating with the discourse of contested identities. Within these intersecting parallels, the profound efficacy of the Book of Esther is unveiled, transcending its conventional categorisation as a historical or religious text to emerge as a dynamic testament speaking directly to the pressures of modern societal complexities that I aim to demonstrate in this research.

1.2. Overview of the study

This exploration is rooted in the growing utilization of (SIT) in Biblical studies. This study addresses the challenges encountered in modern society by examining the portrayal of Esther and Mordecai in the Book of Esther (MT) from the perspective of Biblical narrative criticism and (SIT). It also aims to explore the implications of this analysis for contemporary interpretation, using ancient narratives to understand the complex problems associated with contested social identities. To establish a connection between different periods, I first focus on the experiences described in the Book of Esther (MT) and then examine the prevailing discussions about identity, particularly those arising from changes in immigration patterns. This ancient text, although it originates from a distant time, can still provide valuable insights into human nature and society aiming at my central research question: What can the characterization of Esther and Mordecai, read through (SIT), reveal about contested diasporic Jewish identities as seen in the Book of Esther (MT), and what does this imply for contemporary interpreters who face challenges with contested identities?

I begin by acknowledging my own social identity as a liminal South African female who, through the results of apartheid, grew up in a government institution without my parents’

culture, creeds or traditions. I also acknowledge my own social identity shaped by my government experiences of the pre-apartheid era.

In attempting to answer this question, I identified the following sub-questions. Each sub-question is addressed in a chapter of this dissertation. These sub-questions are:

1. In what ways are Esther and Mordecai characterized in Esther (MT)?
2. How can (SIT) enhance a character exploration of Mordecai and Esther as they are embedded within Jewish identity?
3. What do the suggested analyses—as viewed through the prism of (SIT)—disclose about contested Jewish diasporic identities and how they relate to contemporary interpreters facing challenges with contested identities?

Below is a concise overview of the leading research question and sub-questions and an introductory discussion of the two frameworks used in this study. The two frameworks in question are Biblical narrative criticism and (SIT). For Biblical narrative criticism, this study adopts Jonathan Draper's (2015: 1-18) tripolar exegetical model, a method of Biblical interpretation involving three main poles or steps, distantiation, contextualization, and appropriation, which play a crucial role in reading the Bible.

Step 1. Distantiation involves setting the text in its specific historical context, which is essential in understanding its original meaning and allowing fresh insights to emerge.

Step 2. Contextualization involves acknowledging the reader's pre-understanding and the context they bring to the text. It emphasises the reader's role in the interpretation process and the necessity to avoid claiming universality of meaning for any reading. This step helps recognise the reader's hegemonic position and encourages a "willing suspension of disbelief", promoting openness to the text's message.

Step 3. Appropriation focuses on the transformative potential of the interaction between the reader and the text, aiming for the production of the "othered self" through conversation with the text. The goal of this conversation is liberating praxis, seeking transformation and challenging any interpretations that may legitimize oppressive systems or ideologies. In an African context, the tripolar model provides a theoretical framework for reading the Bible that emphasizes the cultural specificity of African experiences and encourages a critical engagement with the text, promoting dialogue between the reader and the text to construct meaning that affirms liberation and justice. The tripolar exegetical model and Biblical narrative

criticism in Biblical studies interplay in the following steps. Biblical narrative criticism integrates with step one of the tripolar model as a method of interpretation, as this focuses on analyzing the narratives found within the Bible, paying attention to their structure, plot, characters, themes, and literary techniques used by the authors, which are utilized in this research, as this approach seeks to understand the meaning and message conveyed through the narratives and how they function within the larger context of the Biblical text. Within Biblical narrative criticism, the literary aspect needs to be considered notably. Sternberg (1999:1), known for his seminal work, analyzes the Bible's narrative structure, plot development, and the use of literary devices and suggests the following considerations when reading the text:

What goals does the Biblical narrator set himself? What is it that he wants to communicate in this or that story, cycle, or book? What kind of text is the Bible, and what roles does it perform in context? These are all variations on a fundamental question that students of the Bible would do well to pose loudly and sharply: the question of the narrative as a functional structure, a means to a communicative end, a transaction between the narrator and the audience on whom he wishes to produce a particular effect by way of specific strategies.

Therefore, this research notes the literary aspect as it includes studying the structure of the narratives, identifying recurring motifs or patterns, and analyzing literary devices such as textuality, plot and characterization. However, the study focuses primarily on characterization. Therefore, incorporating the tripolar exegetical model into Biblical narrative criticism provides a comprehensive framework for interpreting and understanding the Biblical text in its historical and literary contexts. This approach allows engagement and interpretation of the narrative in a rich and multifaceted manner, uncovering layers of meaning and significance that may not be apparent through a single-dimensional approach. This study uses characterisation methodology to examine the portrayal of Esther and Mordecai in the MT. This analysis is conducted through Biblical narrative criticism and social identity theory perspectives. The fusion of Biblical narrative criticism and social identity theory is fundamental to this research since the former identifies and dissects the narrative techniques of identity portrayal in Esther. At the same time, the latter contextualizes these findings within the framework of social group interactions and identity formation, creating a rich dialogue between the text and modern conceptions of self by also utilizing the tripolar exegetical model; this study positions itself within the multifaceted discipline of Biblical Studies as this aims to contribute to the evolving conversation on identity in ancient texts, as well as their continued relevance in contemporary discourse, offering a new

incorporation of literary insight and social identity theory. The themes considered include identity, power dynamics, assimilation, and resistance that reflect contemporary societal struggles with identity by analysing the nuanced portrayal of contested Jewish identities in the Book of Esther (MT). This work contributes a refined scholarly perspective to Biblical studies through the lens of social identity theory.

This chapter has established the foundation for a comprehensive examination of the Book of Esther (MT), locating the research at the intersection of ancient text and contemporary contested social identity narratives. These linked narratives are explored throughout the main body of the study, thereby elucidating the intricacies of contested social identity in both ancient and contemporary times.

1.3. Introduction to Contemporary Identity Issues

This in-depth study is pertinent, as I have already referred to my lived experience in South Africa post-apartheid and how I have utilized social identity theory as a heuristic tool for analysing my biracial social identity through reading Genesis 2-3. Moreover, I have previously read Esther as part of my undergraduate Biblical study focus, where I could relate to Esther being taken care of by her uncle Mordecai and not her parents, as well as her going to the harem due to her political crisis. I also relate to her hiding her identity until she was able to reveal it. Although I was in an institution, I could not identify with a racial group in the institution; therefore, I ubiquitously assimilated into the institutional system and hid my social identity up to a time when I was able to express my contested identity as a female South African liminal. The Coloured community in South Africa is still contending with the Coloured identity. Nilsson (2016) addresses how Coloured identities are socially contested in present-day South African society and provides insights into how individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds within the Coloured community interact with and perceive their racial identity, illustrating a range of experiences and perspectives that reflect the complex and often contested nature of Coloured identity. Nilsson (2016) further indicates how some informants, particularly those from more privileged backgrounds, distanced themselves from a Coloured identity or chose to define themselves through class identities rather than race, aligning with non-racialism and individualism. This contrasts with informants from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as those from the Cape Flats, who embrace and assert their racial identity despite facing stereotypes and marginalization. This divergence in attitudes and how informants relate to their Coloured identity reflects its contested nature in contemporary South African society.

Lagardien (2023) attests to the continued contestation by noting,

The evidence is clear that the Coloured community has, for most of the period since 1652, been ‘given’ an identity and a history. Put another way, the Coloured community constantly attempt to “make their history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under existing circumstances, given and transmitted from the past.

Nilsson argues that the historical stigmatization and shame tied to the Coloured population’s mixed ancestry persist in some measure to the present day. There has been reluctance among some members of the Coloured community to acknowledge their historical connection to the indigenous Khoi and San peoples due to these groups being viewed in the past as “backward and uncivilized”, and the fear that this association might impact their social standing continues to notes a shift in recent decades, where more Coloured people are beginning to take an interest in their indigenous history and are using it as a means of political mobilization and forging a collective identity (2016:28-41).

Brenner, Stets and Serpe (2021) indicate that “Identity is an important concept in the social sciences and humanities” and go on further to say that part of how we think of ourselves and others:

It identifies those with whom we see ourselves as similar and those with whom we see ourselves as different. The conceptualizations of identity often differ because there is no agreement on how to think about identities (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000). Political scientists see identities regarding political affiliations and orientations (e.g., Egan, 2020; Green et al., 2002). Many sociologists use identity when studying race/ethnicity, class, and gender and their intersections as classifications, distinctions, or labels (e.g., Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Telles & Paschel, 2014). Although these different conceptualizations vary in scope, each needs a clearer, systematic, and thorough understanding of what an identity is, how it operates within and in situations, and what implications it has for the self and society over time.

Nilsson (2016:47-57) posits that being Coloured is not just about being born into it but also about actively performing and embodying this identity through everyday interactions, constituting the very notion of Coloured identity, turning stigmatized aspects into symbols of unity and solidarity. In our global community, there are ethnic and racial contested social identities as well as in the diaspora, including the African diaspora. For the significance of this

research, I am not focusing on a particular geographical or demographical area. However, I am attempting to address contemporary contested social identities. I mentioned my experience as a South African liminal; however, this may be different from the same sentiment for all biracial South Africans. I particularly identified and made use of the Coloured race in South Africa due to the historicity and how it can significantly relate to the historical and social context of Esther and Mordecai, illustrating several points of comparison in terms of identity negotiation, social positioning, and historical experiences of marginalization and adaptation.

Colonial and Diasporic Histories

Hendricks (2004) examines the complexities of Coloured identity in post-apartheid South Africa, arguing that the historical legacy of colonialism and apartheid has deeply influenced the Coloured community's social positioning. Coloured populations in South Africa emerged during the colonial period, particularly under Dutch and British rule, from mixed ancestry, including Khoisan, African, European, and Asian heritage. Their identity was shaped by a history of colonialism, apartheid, and social stratification that placed them in an ambiguous position between black and white communities. Hendricks (2004) continues the discussion of how the community struggles to find a cohesive identity within the framework of the "Rainbow Nation," highlighting issues of marginalization, cultural identity, and the ongoing impact of historical burdens on contemporary societal dynamics.

Diasporic Jewish Identity of Esther and Mordecai

Mills (2006), Witter (2011) and Davidson (2009) indicate that the Jewish community in the Persian Empire, as depicted in the Book of Esther, represents a diaspora living under foreign rule. Jews had to navigate their identity and loyalty within a dominant culture that often viewed them with suspicion or as outsiders.

Identity Negotiation

Nilsson (2016:47-64) states that the Coloured population, often perceived as a "mixed" group, faced challenges in defining their identity within a binary racial structure imposed by apartheid. They had to navigate multiple heritages and the socio-political implications of their categorization. Esther and Mordecai, as Jews in Persia, had to balance their Jewish identity with their roles in Persian society. Esther, in particular, concealed her Jewish identity to become queen, highlighting the fluidity and strategic negotiation of identity within a potentially hostile environment.

Marginalization and Empowerment

Nilsson (2016:47-57) goes on to say that the Coloured population under apartheid were subjected to discriminatory laws and social exclusion yet were also granted slightly more privileges than black Africans, placing them in a complex socio-political limbo. The similarity can also be observed with the Jews in Persia, where the Jewish community faced potential extermination under Haman's decree, reflecting their precarious position in the empire. Esther and Mordecai's story illustrates the vulnerability and resilience of a marginalized group striving for survival and justice.

Strategies of Adaptation and Resistance

Nilsson (2016) touched on the development of unique cultural practices and languages, such as Afrikaans. A distinct example is how the Coloured community's use of Afrikaans differs from that of the Afrikaners. At the same time, many Coloureds in the Western Cape speak Afrikaans as their first language, they have infused the language with unique expressions and slang, resulting in a specific jargon that can be difficult for some Afrikaners to understand. This is cited as an example of how the Coloured community has transformed the Afrikaans language, incorporating their own identity into it. Additionally, Nilsson (2016) discusses cultural practices such as the Coon Carnival, which is a celebratory event that holds significant meaning within the Coloured community beyond festivity. It serves as an essential reminder of the history of the Coloured community and is an expression of their culture and identity. This celebration and specific linguistic traits demonstrate how the community has developed practices that reflect their adaptation to and resistance against colonial and apartheid structures while communicating their mixed heritage and sense of community. Esther and Mordecai employed strategies of integration and influence within the Persian court. Esther's marriage to King Ahasuerus and Mordecai's rise to a position of power exemplify how they adapted to and navigated the dominant culture to protect their community (2016:28-41).

Acts of Resistance and Assertion

According to Tewolde (2024), Coloured individuals in post-apartheid South Africa have been participating in socio-political reforms to assert their rights and identity. In the post-apartheid era, there has been a reclassification of racial categories, allowing more agency for individuals to self-identify. This has led to various forms of self-identification amongst Coloured people. Some identify with new identities, such as Khoisan or Creole. In contrast, others may firmly attach to the South African national identity or continue to embrace their Colouredness as part

of their primary identity. These diverse forms of self-identification reflect their participation in the socio-political discourse as they navigate and assert their place in a changing social and political landscape. Their resistance includes cultural, political, and social dimensions. Similarly, by Esther revealing her Jewish identity and leveraging her influence, she played a crucial role in overturning Haman's plot. Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman and subsequent political manoeuvres were acts of resistance that ultimately led to the Jews' salvation. With these illustrations, both the Coloured population in South Africa and the diasporic Jewish community of Esther and Mordecai illustrate the complexities of living as marginalized groups within dominant societies. Their experiences highlight themes of identity negotiation, adaptation, and resistance. Understanding these parallels can provide deeper insights into how hybrid and diasporic identities are constructed and maintained in the face of socio-political challenges.

1.4. Background of the Narrative of Esther

According to Macchi (2015:1), the Book of Esther (MT) is a fictional story from Antiquity about a young Jewish woman who saves her people from a pogrom at the court of the Persian king Xerxes. It is considered a "diaspora novel" due to its use of literary techniques and themes of anti-Judaism and identity disclosure. The text also explores the challenges faced by the groups that produced it in a Hellenistic world. Macchi (2015:2) continues, highlighting identity's importance in ancient Jewish circles. Esther, a Persian queen, is first asked by her adoptive father to conceal her identity due to socio-political challenges. Later in the plot, she is asked to reveal her identity and risk her life to save the Jews from extermination. The Hebrew writers of Esther aimed to promote a strong identity, contrasting it with the Hellenistic culture of some Jewish groups. Against the backdrop of the Persian Empire, the characters' identities are nuanced, reflecting a delicate equilibrium between their Jewish heritage and the assimilative pressures of the Persian court.

Despite extensive scholarly work on the Masoretic Text (MT), a notable research gap exists in applying social identity theory to characterising Biblical figures, particularly Esther and Mordecai.¹ This gap is significant because social identity theory, which examines how

¹ Much scholarly attention has been devoted to various aspects of the Book of Esther, written by, among others, Moore, Carey A. *Esther: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*. Anchor Bible Series, Doubleday, 1971, Michael V. *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther: A Second Temple Story*. University of South Carolina Press, 1991, Berlin, Adele. *Esther: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation*. Jewish Publication Society, 2001. Levenson, Jon D. *Esther: A Commentary*. Westminster John Knox Press, 1997. Crawford, Sidnie White. "Esther." In *Women's Bible Commentary*, edited by Carol A. Newsom, Sharon H. Ringe, and Jacqueline

individuals and groups derive identity and belonging from their social memberships, can offer fresh insights into the narrative's depth. Analyzing Esther's dual identity as a Jew and a queen and Mordecai's role within the Jewish community and the Persian court through this lens reveals the complexities of identity formation, group dynamics, and resistance strategies. Bridging this gap enriches Biblical scholarship by integrating contemporary social science theories, making the ancient text more relevant and accessible to modern readers who face similar issues of identity and belonging.

Central to the narrative are the themes of contested identities, where individuals or groups grapple with conflicting cultural, religious, and political affiliations. Esther and Mordecai embody such contested identities as Jews navigating the Persian Empire, a minority within a broader society. My connection with the Book of Esther didn't start with ancient texts but with my life experiences. As a South African caught between different cultures, I've always questioned my identity and where I belong. Esther and Mordecai's story strikes a chord in this personal journey, reflecting my daily complex identity struggles. The themes of contested identity in Esther and Mordechai's narrative are not simply leftovers of an ancient past; they are vibrant, pulsating realities that recur in modern life, manifesting in the experiences of anyone who has ever stood at the crossroads of cultural, religious, or societal expectations. To explore the layers of this captivating narrative, I aim to examine how the knowledge gained from the experiences of Esther and Mordecai can provide insight and guidance for individuals and groups confronting comparable difficulties. Their challenges and successes act as a beacon—a guiding light for navigating the complex and frequently tumultuous process of shaping one's identity. Through my analysis, I want to connect the ancient world with our modern lives, showing how lessons from the past can guide us today. I'm especially interested in how figures like Esther and Mordecai's survival and authenticity strategies can help those

E. Lapsley, 130-136. Westminster John Knox Press, 2012. Nadar, Sarojini. "Contextual Bible Study with Women in Poor and Marginalized Communities in South Africa: Reflections on the Book of Esther." In *The Bible and Feminism: Remapping the Field*, edited by Yvonne Sherwood, Oxford University Press, 2017. Helen Efthimiadis-Keith, *The Man Who Would Be King: Reading Haman's Edict (LXX Esther Addition B) through the Lens of Social Identity Theory*. In *The Septuagint South of Alexandria* (pp. 93-113). Brill. and Juliana Claassens, *From Esther to Kwezi: Sexual Violence in South Africa after Twenty Years of Democracy*. *International Journal of Public Theology*, 8(4), pp.471-487. namely on historical and critical analysis, additions to the Book of Esther, character and ideology, literary analysis, textual criticism and post-colonial feminism.

facing similar challenges now. How do we stay true to ourselves while adapting to change? What can their stories teach us about crafting our own identities in the societies we live in?

Therefore, this study is not merely an objective academic endeavour but deeply rooted in my identity. This study is both a pursuit of educational knowledge and a quest to comprehend my role in the world. I intend to foster an environment in academia that fully embraces the multifaceted nature of human existence, where both emotional and intellectual faculties play an equal role in comprehending one's identity, inviting you to explore the history and the present reality with me as I navigate the complex web of identities that influence our shared humanity. As a woman, Esther faces the additional challenge of negotiating societal expectations in a patriarchal context. At the same time, Mordechai, serving in the Persian court, must reconcile his loyalty to his Jewish community with obligations to the king. These multifaceted identities create tension and conflict, propelling the narrative forward.

The Book of Esther (MT) offers a unique opportunity to apply Biblical narrative criticism and Social Identity Theory (SIT) in exploring diasporic Jewish contested identities. Biblical narrative criticism allows for an in-depth analysis of the plot, characters, themes, and motifs, providing insights into the meaning and significance of the narrative. At the same time (SIT) posits that individuals define themselves through social groups, a concept particularly relevant for diasporic Jews immersed in different cultures and identities. The application of these frameworks helps unravel complex dynamics, such as Mordechai's defiance of Haman, reinforcing his Jewish identity, and Esther's concealed identity, reflecting the necessity for diasporic Jews to navigate a hostile environment. Social identity theory aids in understanding how social groups shape individual identity, while narrative criticism elucidates the story's role in reinforcing or challenging diasporic Jewish identities. This study addresses the research gap by comprehensively analyzing Esther and Mordecai within the Masoretic Text, offering nuanced insights into contested diasporic Jewish identities. Through the lenses of (SIT) and narrative criticism, it seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of how individuals and groups construct and maintain their identities in the face of adversity, with potential implications for interpreting contested identities in the present day.

The central focus of this research seeks to understand the following: What can the characterization of Esther and Mordechai, read through Social Identity Theory, reveal about contested diasporic Jewish identities as seen in the book of Esther (MT) imply for contemporary interpreters who face challenges with contested identities? Furthermore, what

profound and accurate insights do these descriptions offer contemporary interpreters struggling with their disputed diasporic identities? The portrayal of Esther and Mordecai in the (MT) provides insight into the complex nature of Jewish diaspora identity in ancient times. This portrayal also serves as a reflection of the current complexities we face in our globalised world.

1.5. Literature Overview and Theoretical Frameworks

The literature overview establishes the foundation of this investigation by delineating the research at the intersection of Biblical narrative criticism and social identity theory. This review explores the characterization of Esther and Mordecai in the Book of Esther (MT) through Biblical narrative criticism and (SIT) and discusses its implications for contemporary interpretation. It critically engages with the critical academic contributions to these fields, framing the conversation within which this research is situated. In analysing the Book of Esther (MT), a narrative filled with themes of identity, survival, and social dynamics, this study is particularly interested in examining the convergence of these theoretical frameworks. Consequently, this study aims to evaluate how prior scholarship has addressed the portrayal and development of Biblical characters and the portrayal of group identities in these texts. This literature review elucidates how Biblical narrative criticism and (SIT) can enlighten our comprehension of Esther and Mordecai as characters who negotiate their Jewish identities within a foreign Persian court. In addition to bridging the gap between Biblical narrative criticism and social scientific theories, this also illuminates the potential of this interdisciplinary approach to provide a perspective on the complex and nuanced narrative in the Hebrew Bible. The intersection of Biblical narrative criticism and SIT has significant potential for exploring contested identities in Biblical narratives. While Biblical narrative criticism provides a framework for examining literary elements, SIT complements this by addressing the dynamics of identity formation, social categorization, and group interaction. Scholars such as Tajfel and Turner (1979) have underscored the importance of in-group and out-group dynamics, evident in Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman and Esther's calculated reveal of her identity. However, previous studies have not fully explored how these dynamics function within the diasporic Jewish context of the Persian Empire, particularly in the MT version of Esther. This research addresses this gap by integrating SIT into the characterization of Esther and Mordecai, revealing how their actions reflect broader strategies of group survival and resilience.

By identifying this gap, the study highlights the potential of combining these frameworks to offer a fresh perspective on the negotiation of identity and survival in Biblical narratives. This chapter will further explore the contributions of existing scholarship and demonstrate how this interdisciplinary approach provides a nuanced understanding of Esther and Mordecai's identities within their socio-political context.

1.6. The Development and Use of Narrative Criticism in Biblical Studies

The roots of narrative criticism can be traced back to the broader field of literary criticism, which began to gain prominence in the early 20th century. However, it was only in the latter half of the 20th century that narrative criticism began to be applied systematically to Biblical texts. Pioneering works by scholars such as Robert Alter and Meir Sternberg in the 1980s played a crucial role in this development. Alter's *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981) and Sternberg's *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* (1985) demonstrated how literary techniques could uncover deeper meanings in Biblical stories. The approach analyses the structure, characters, plot, and themes of the stories in the Bible as coherent literary units. I conduct a focused literature review to investigate the socio-historical analysis of Esther (MT), the portrayal and social identity theory of the characters Esther and Mordecai, and the recurring themes associated with disputed diasporic Jewish identities in the Book of Esther (MT).

Contested Jewish Identities in Esther, MT

These are three scholarly works on contested Jewish identities in the diaspora in the Book of Esther (MT). Firstly, Collins (2000) provides an understanding of the Hellenistic cultural milieu and its impact on Jewish identity, which is relevant to the study of the Book of Esther as it was written during this period and further highlights the challenges Jews faced in negotiating their Jewish identity in a non-Jewish society, a theme also presents in the book of Esther. Secondly, Millard's (1977) argument that the Persian names in Esther accurately reflect the historical context of the Persian Empire is vital for understanding the book's historical accuracy and portrayal of Jewish identity in the diaspora. Finally, Johnson (2005) provides a broader context for the study of contested Jewish identities in the Hellenistic period, examining how historical fiction played a role in shaping Jewish identity in this period and analyzing how literary devices and historical inaccuracies were used to reinforce Jewish identity in Third Maccabees, hence providing insights into how similar techniques were used in the Book of Esther to strengthen Jewish identity in the face of adversity. Current research has several gaps and limitations related to contested Jewish identities in the diaspora in the Book of Esther (MT).

Firstly, while there have been studies on the Hellenistic period and its impact on Jewish identity, there needs to be more research on the Book of Esther (MT) and its portrayal of contested Jewish identities. Secondly, while there have been studies on the reliability of the Hebrew text of Esther, there needs to be more research on how literary devices and historical inaccuracies in the text may have been used to reinforce Jewish identity. This research aims to contribute to the academic debate by addressing these gaps and limitations. Firstly, the study focuses on the Book of Esther (MT) and examines how it portrays contested Jewish identities in the diaspora. By analyzing the text this way, the study provides a more nuanced understanding of the challenges Jews faced in maintaining their Jewish identity in a non-Jewish society during the Hellenistic period. Secondly, the study examines how literary devices and historical inaccuracies in the text may have been used to reinforce Jewish identity. By analyzing the text in this way, the study provides insights into how the author of Esther may have used these techniques to create a story that reinforced Jewish identity in the face of adversity, finally contributing to the academic debate by providing a more nuanced understanding of contested Jewish identities in the diaspora in the Book of Esther MT and how literary devices and historical inaccuracies in the text may have been used to reinforce Jewish identity.

Socio-historical Interpretation of Esther

Given that this study focuses on social identity in a diaspora, it is essential first to establish the socio-historical context of both characters in the narrative. Arabzadeh (2023) argues that while many modern scholars do not believe the Book of Esther to be historically accurate, there are overlooked sources that suggest the author had access to reliable information. Therefore, his article aims to demonstrate that much of the historical material in Esther is consistent with evidence not found in classical sources but rather in Achaemenian royal inscriptions and financial and legal documents from the Persian Empire. Through a descriptive-analytical method based on library studies, Arabzadeh (2023) aims to prove that the author of the Masoretic Esther had access to these sources, which support the book's historical accuracy. Bechtel (2011) explores the themes and characters in the book of Esther, including the roles of Esther and Mordecai in the salvation of the Jewish people and the themes of identity, power, and justice. The commentary provides historical and cultural context for the book of Esther, including the political and social context of the Persian Empire. Bechtel (2011) also examines the book's literary features, such as its use of irony and humour and its portrayal of gender and power dynamics. Allen and Laniak (1995) provide insights into the Persian Empire and the role of Esther and Mordecai in the salvation of the Jewish people. Walfish (1993) investigates

the Jewish interpretation of the Biblical Book of Esther during the Middle Ages and examines how Jewish scholars and thinkers interpreted and applied the story of Esther and its themes to their own historical and cultural contexts. Walfish (1993) explores the different ways in which the Book of Esther was understood and used by medieval Jewish communities, including its role in shaping Jewish identity and the relationship between Jews and non-Jewish societies and examining the literary and artistic representations of Esther during this period. This section focuses on the historical and scholarly analysis of the Book of Esther and its characters. Still, it does not explicitly address the issue of social identity in a diaspora. Therefore, there is a gap in the literature examining social identity in the diaspora. My research contributes to this academic debate by exploring the social identity of Esther and Mordecai as Jewish diasporic figures within the socio-historical context of the Persian Empire. I examine their experiences of marginalization and assimilation and how they negotiate their cultural identity while living in a foreign land to provide a new perspective on the Book of Esther (MT), which has primarily been analyzed from a historical and literary standpoint. It also contributes to the broader discussion of diaspora studies and the negotiation of identity in a multicultural context.

Esther and Mordecai in the Diaspora

Gellis (2020) analyses the sociocultural background and rhetorical strategies of the Book of Esther in the Tanakh, or the Hebrew Bible, placing Esther as a cultural artefact within the larger context of Jewish history. Gellis (2020) argues that the text's inclusion in the canon speaks to the lived experiences of conquered and exiled people. As the centrepiece of the Purim holiday, the Book of Esther has played (and continues to play) an important role in shaping discourse around Jewish peoplehood as defined by the Diasporic community. Rather than focusing on a symbolic return to Jerusalem through spirituality or religious observance, Esther addresses the practical realities of survival and how Jewish people in the diaspora can be successful members of a larger society while maintaining their unique identity. Hacham (2007) explores how these two texts, which are both set in the diaspora and deal with issues of identity, use intertextuality to draw on and reference each other and examines the theme of intersexuality in these texts, which refers to the blending or crossing of gender roles or identities and that these themes and connections shed light on the complex and evolving identities of Jewish communities in the diaspora. Stern (2010) argues that the story of Esther is not just a tale of personal triumph but also a political commentary on the status of Jews in the diaspora and their relationship with the ruling powers. Stern (2010) also explores how the Book of Esther addresses power and powerlessness, assimilation, and resistance in the context of diaspora. Clines (1991) argues that

Mordecai is a historically based figure rather than a purely fictional character and explores the evidence for Mordechai's historical existence, drawing on various sources, including ancient Near Eastern and Persian texts. Clines (1991) further examines the portrayal of Mordecai in the Book of Esther and suggests that the character is presented as a symbol of Jewish resistance against Persian oppression. Clines (1991) argues that understanding the historical context of Mordecai is vital for understanding the meaning of the Book of Esther and its relevance to contemporary discussions of Jewish identity and diaspora politics. Gleicher (2001) discusses the character of Mordecai in the Book of Esther and his potential role as a leader of the Jewish exilarch community. Gleicher (2001) examines the portrayal of Mordecai in the Book of Esther and suggests that his character embodies the themes of Jewish survival and resistance against oppression and highlights the significance of Mordechai's potential role as an exilarch for understanding the social and political dynamics of Jewish life in the Persian period and for illuminating the Book of Esther's relevance to contemporary discussions of Jewish identity and diaspora politics. Seidler (2017) examines and argues that Mordecai's identity is multifaceted, and his actions in the story reflect the complexities of Jewish identity in the Persian period. Seidler (2017) explores Mordecai's relationship with the Persian court, his refusal to bow to Haman, and his role in saving the Jewish people from genocide, highlighting how Mordecai's Jewish identity shapes these actions. Seidler further analyzes the themes of assimilation and resistance in the book of Esther, arguing that the story reflects the tensions between Jews who sought to assimilate into Persian society and those who resisted assimilation to maintain their Jewish identity.

Characterization of Esther and Mordecai

Fox (2010) analyzes the central characters in the book of Esther, including Esther herself, Mordecai, Haman, and King Ahasuerus. He shows how each character embodies certain ideological positions and interacts with the other to create the overall message of the text by arguing that Esther's character represents a form of Jewish assimilation into Persian society. In contrast, Mordecai embodies a more traditional Jewish identity. Thambyrajah (2019) focuses on the dream that Mordecai, a Jewish official in the court of King Ahasuerus in the Biblical book of Esther, has in chapter 10. In the dream, Mordecai sees two great dragons fighting against each other, and the world's people are divided into two camps supporting each dragon. Thambyrajah (2019) argues that the dream is a powerful metaphor for the political and religious conflicts of the time and reflects the tensions between the Jewish community and the larger Persian society. It provides a fascinating interpretation of Mordecai's dream in the book of

Esther, showing how it reflects the political and religious tensions of the time and provides a powerful message of hope and resilience for the Jewish people. I chose this article to illustrate Mordecai's character in the narrative, although this version is not in the Masoretic text. Vulgan (2012) argues specifically from the Hebrew version that the characters in Esther, particularly Esther herself and Mordecai, represent different aspects of the Jewish diaspora experience, and uses a social, literary approach to analyze the characterizations in Esther, looking at how the characters interact with each other and with the larger social context of the story. As a Jewish woman living in the Persian court, Esther embodies the tension between Jewish identity and assimilation into a foreign culture. Mordecai, as a Jewish official in the Persian court, represents the struggle for Jewish survival in a hostile environment and goes on to argue that argues that the Hebrew version of Esther provides a nuanced portrayal of the Jewish diaspora experience, showing both the challenges and opportunities of living in a foreign land. Goswell (2021) explores the main character of the Book of Esther and how its textual divisions and assigned title contribute to uncovering its protagonists. Goswell (2021) argues that the Book of Esther has a complex structure, with multiple protagonists and shifting perspectives, making it challenging to identify the main character. However, it suggests that the book's textual divisions and assigned titles can be used to uncover its protagonists. The book is divided into two main sections, with the first focusing on Esther and the second focusing on Mordecai. The assigned title of the book also emphasizes Esther's role as the main character. Goswell (2021) uses literary analysis to examine the characterizations of Esther and Mordecai, looking at their actions, motivations, and relationships with other characters, asserting that Esther is the book's main character, with Mordecai serving as a secondary protagonist. Jacobs (2008) delves into the portrayal of Esther with a specific focus on her characterization from the story's onset. Jacobs's (2008) argument is centred around the pivotal nature of the book's initial chapters in comprehending Esther's persona and role within the narrative. The analysis explores the significance of Esther's name, which conveys the meaning of "hidden", indicating her lack of agency at the outset and her status as an outsider in the Persian court. Furthermore, Jacobs (2008) examines Esther's actions and motivations in the book's early chapters, highlighting her passive and obedient demeanour, which later transforms as she heeds Mordecai's counsel to advocate for her people. Jacobs (2008) indicates that Esther's courage through risk-taking and her unwavering dedication to her community are fundamental to her character. To sum up, a comprehensive grasp of the Book of Esther (MT) necessitates an exploration of themes such as contested Jewish identities, socio-historical interpretation, and character scrutiny (2008:2-3). Kneebone (2007) investigated the challenges Jews faced in maintaining their cultural

identity in a non-Jewish society during the Hellenistic era. Additionally, he investigated the historical integrity of the Book of Esther and the social identities of Esther and Mordecai as Jewish diasporic figures. Kneebone (2007) describes the complex challenges encountered by displaced Jews, emphasising the intricate social dynamics that necessitate compromising, assimilation, and the concealment of their true identities. Kneebone (2007) also provides a detailed understanding of the impact of dispersion and threats on identity and a nuanced perspective on the challenges faced by those living in the diaspora and how they navigate their identity in a foreign environment. Narrative criticism has been utilized to analyse and interpret different books of the Bible, encompassing both the Old and New Testaments. An exemplary instance is the utilisation of narrative criticism in analysing the Gospel of Mark by scholars Rhoads, Dewey and Michie (2012); in their work *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel*, they have shown how Mark's narrative structure, characterization, and use of irony contribute to its theological message. Rhoads, Dewey and Michie (2012) argue that Mark's depiction of Jesus and his disciples, secrecy and misinterpretation, and the intense conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities communicate the evangelist's understanding of Jesus' identity and purpose. However, narrative criticism is not without its criticisms. Barton (1996) examines narrative criticism and acknowledges the criticisms regarding its emphasis on literary elements while neglecting historical and cultural contexts. Powell (1990) examines the potential subjectivity in narrative criticism and critiques the balance between literary and historical approaches and subjective interpretations in Biblical studies. However, there are still gaps in the literature, such as insufficient data and the lack of resources on the Book of Esther (MT) through the lens of social identity theory, as well as a lack of research on social identity in the diaspora and the use of literary devices and historical inaccuracies to reinforce Jewish identity.

Biblical Interpretation and Social Identity in Ancient Texts

According to Baker (2012), (SIT) has been used as a heuristic device for Biblical interpretation as it examines how individuals derive their sense of identity from belonging to particular social groups and how this shapes their attitudes and behaviours.²Hence, this research aims to

²Baker (2012) highlights how Biblical scholars, namely Jokiranta, J. 2008. “*Social Identity Approach: Identity-Constructing Elements in the Psalms Peshet*.” Pp. 95–109 in *Defining Identities: We, You, and the Other in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Proceedings of the fifth meeting of the IOQS in Gröningen*, edited by F. G. Martínez & M. Popovic. Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, Hakola, R. 2009a. “*The Burden of Ambiguity: Nicodemus and the Social Identity of the Johannine Christians*.” *New Testament Studies* 55: 438–55 Bosman, J. P. 2008. *Social*

contribute to the academic debate by addressing these gaps and providing a more nuanced understanding of contested Jewish identities in the diaspora in the Book of Esther (MT). This section also functions as a project for developing new theoretical knowledge in Old Testament Biblical studies utilizing Biblical narrative criticism and social identity theory as theoretical frameworks, with characterization as the chosen methodology.

1.7. Theoretical Frameworks Biblical Narrative Criticism and Social Identity Theory

The Book of Esther (MT) is conducive to applying these frameworks, given its rich portrayal of diasporic Jewish identities that are complex and often contested. I have discussed how Biblical Narrative Criticism fits within the tripolar Biblical exegetical model. With this grounding, I provide a succinct overview of the critical theoretical pillars that inform the analysis. This framework synthesis guides the dissection of the Esther narrative. It helps draw out the nuanced experiences of diasporic Jewish identities that resonate profoundly with challenges faced by individuals and communities across cultures.

Firstly, narrative criticism, according to scholars such as Alter (1981), Sternberg (1985) and Berlin (1994), is an analytical approach that focuses on the narrative structure of a text, including its characters, plot, setting, themes, language, and imagery, to gain insights into the cultural, social, and historical context in which the text was produced and the messages and values it conveys, and emphasizes the importance of understanding the literary and rhetorical strategies of the text and its ethical and theological implications. Narrative criticism can be applied to various narrative forms, including literature, films, television shows, and social media posts; however, this research applies narrative criticism to Biblical literature. When using these frameworks to the book of Esther, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of how the story functions to shape diasporic Jewish identities. For example, social identity theory

Identity in Nahum: A Theological Ethical Enquiry. Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias. Finitis, A. 2011. “*The Other in Haggai and Zechariah 1–8.*” Pp. 116–31 in *The “Other” in Second Temple Judaism: Essays in Honor of John J. Collins*, edited by D. C. Harlow, K. M. Hogan, M. Goff & J. S. Kaminsky. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, Lau, P. H. W. 2011. *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth: A Social Identity Approach.* Berlin, Germany: have employed (SIT) to study issues of group identity formation in texts from the Hebrew Bible and Second Temple Judaism, as well as in the New Testament. Baker (2012), therefore, recommends that (SIT) is a helpful model for interpreting Biblical narratives and understanding the dynamics of intergroup relations and social boundaries among ancient Israelites.

suggests that the Jewish characters in the story would have defined themselves in opposition to the Persian court and its values. This is depicted in the character of Mordechai, who refuses to bow down to Haman. By standing up for his beliefs, Mordecai reinforces his identity as a Jew. Narrative criticism assists in understanding the complex themes and motifs in the story that contribute to forming his diasporic Jewish identity. Another example is the motif of Esther's hiddenness, as presented in the narrative; this motif reinforces the idea that diasporic Jews must hide their true identities to survive in a hostile environment. Secondly, Tajfel and Turner (1979:56-65) posit that social groups provide individuals with a sense of identity, pride, and self-esteem. Categorizing individuals into groups alone is sufficient to make them think of themselves and others in terms of group membership rather than separate individuals. (SIT) identifies three phases through which members establish their group identity: social categorization, social identification, and social comparison. In the social categorization phase, individuals categorize others to make sense of the social environment through social categories such as race, gender, nationality, etc. In the social identification phase, individuals adopt the identity of the group to which they belong. Membership in a group is not something foreign or artificial attached to the person, but it is a fundamental, accurate, and vital part of the members. Once individuals have categorized themselves as part of a group and identified with it, they move to the third phase, social comparison, where they compare their group with other groups. This comparison leads groups to boost and enhance their self-esteem by comparing favourably with different groups. An in-group will seek to find negative aspects of an out-group, thus improving its self-image. Stereotyping, discrimination, competition, and hostility between social groups should be viewed as a result of competing identities rather than simply competing for resources. (SIT) provides substantial insights into discrimination, racism, and social identity tensions between groups by defining these phenomena due to group categorization and self-improvement. Furthermore, the Book of Esther (MT) is a contested text within Jewish tradition, with some Jewish communities rejecting it as a valid part of the Hebrew Bible. The synergy of Biblical narrative criticism and (SIT) provides a robust framework for understanding the Book of Esther (MT) and its role in shaping diasporic Jewish identities. By analyzing the narrative and the social context in which it was produced, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of the complex identities and beliefs of diasporic Jews in the ancient world. As a contemporary interpreter of the book of Esther, the synergy of Biblical narrative criticism and social identity theory also equips me with a richer and more nuanced understanding of diasporic Jewish identities and their contested nature. By analyzing the story through these frameworks, I aim

to gain insights into how individuals view their social identity and the complexities of navigating identity in a multicultural and diverse world.

1.8. Research Methodology as Characterization

This dissertation utilizes characterization as its methodology, using a qualitative research approach within narrative criticism analysis. Garvey (1978:66-68) states that characterization, as a fundamental aspect of narrative criticism, examines how characters are portrayed, developed, and evolved within a narrative. It encompasses the exploration of their personalities, motivations, actions, relationships, and the significance of their roles within the story. In essence, characterization seeks to unravel the complexities of individuals or entities in the narrative, shedding light on their intricacies and contributing to a holistic understanding of the overarching storyline.

Within the context of this research, the qualitative nature of characterization allows for an in-depth exploration of the characters Esther and Mordecai in the Book of Esther (MT). Through this lens, the study delves into the intricacies of their identities, motivations, and interactions, providing valuable insights into the contested diasporic Jewish identities addressed in the narrative. This qualitative narrative criticism approach, centred on characterization, facilitates a comprehensive analysis beyond surface-level observations. It offers a richer understanding of the characters' roles in shaping the narrative's broader themes. A desktop study will be conducted by integrating Biblical narrative criticism and social identity theory, first exploring the theoretical underpinnings of Biblical narrative criticism. The data for Biblical narrative criticism has been gathered through literature relevant to narrative criticism. Key sources utilized include Jonker and Lawrie (2005), *Fishing for Jonah (anew): Various approaches to Biblical Interpretation*, and Louis Jean Ska (1990). *Our Fathers have told us: Introduction to the analysis of Hebrew Narratives*. The data for (SIT) has been gathered through literature relevant to social identity. The process of the second data collection was the same as the first. These sources are focused on and engaged in chapter 3 of the dissertation.

This dissertation begins by describing the two theoretical frameworks employed throughout the dissertation. Secondly, to test the possibility of the two integrated frameworks, these frameworks are applied to the characteristics in the narrative of Esther and Mordecai in the MT. Thirdly, this dissertation concludes by summarizing the analysis and application and its conclusions, reflecting on the experience of carrying out the research, noting the limitations of the research and offering my recommendations for further study. The conclusion is presented

in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. In the case of the research question and sub-questions provided, characterization as a methodology is used to explore the portrayal of Esther and Mordecai and how it relates to contested diasporic Jewish identities and a valuable tool for literary analysis that can provide insight into the themes and messages of the narrative. Readers can better understand the work's cultural and historical context and the author's intentions and messages by examining the characters in depth. Three Biblical scholars provide different perspectives on using characterization in the Bible. Alter (1981) emphasizes the complexity and ambiguity of the characters, while Sternberg (1987) argues that characterization provides symbolic figures that represent broader themes and ideas. Berlin's (1994) analysis of the Book of Esther highlights the careful crafting of characters to convey specific messages about Jewish identity and power. Together, their work underscores the importance of characterization in shaping our understanding of Biblical narratives and their meanings. To answer the key research question and sub-questions, the following step-by-step process was employed to identify sources of data:

Step 1. Literature review: identify relevant scholarly sources, such as journal articles, books, and other appropriate publications.

Step 2. Analyze the Book of Esther (MT) to identify how Esther and Mordecai are characterized by a close reading of the text, paying attention to how the characters are described and their actions.

Step 3. Apply Social Identity Theory (SIT) to Mordecai and Esther's character exploration to examine how their Jewish identity is portrayed in the text and how it relates to their actions.

Step 4. Conduct data analysis to identify patterns and themes related to contested Jewish diasporic identities.

Step 5. Based on the analysis, I conclude what the characterization of Esther and Mordechai, read through Social Identity Theory, reveals about contested diasporic Jewish identities as seen in the Book of Esther (MT) and what it implies for contemporary interpreters who face challenges with contested identities. Overall, my approach involves a combination of close reading, analysis of the text, and applying theoretical frameworks to the character exploration. Following this process, I provide a comprehensive and insightful answer to the research question and sub-questions.

1.9. Identified Gap in the Literature

The gaps in the literature that I have noted are as follows: Insufficient data and the lack of resources on the Book of Esther MT through the lens of social identity theory, as well as a lack of research on social identity in the diaspora and the use of literary devices and historical inaccuracies to reinforce Jewish identity; Limited exploration of the intersectionality of identities of how the characters' Jewish identity intersects with other aspects of their identity, such as gender, social status, and ethnicity; Lack of comparative analysis on the characterization of Esther and Mordecai with other Biblical or historical figures to identify common themes or unique aspects of their identities. The themes of contested Jewish identities, socio-historical interpretation, and character analysis are critical to understanding the Book of Esther MT. Scholars have explored the challenges Jews faced in maintaining their identity in a non-Jewish society during the Hellenistic period, the historical accuracy of the Book of Esther, and the social identity of Esther and Mordecai as Jewish diasporic figures and examined the characterizations of the main characters, including Esther's role as a symbol of Jewish assimilation and Mordecai's representation of traditional Jewish identity and resistance against oppression. However, with the above considerations, there still needs to be more in the literature. Hence, this research aims to contribute to the academic debate by addressing these gaps and providing a more nuanced understanding of contested Jewish identities in the diaspora in the Book of Esther (MT). Potential research gaps for the research on the characterization of Esther and Mordecai in the Book of Esther (MT) from a social identity and narrative criticism theory perspective and its implications for contemporary interpretation,

1.10. Conclusion

This chapter introduced the research problem, question, and sub-questions that guide this dissertation. A concise overview of the two theoretical frameworks was provided and explored, as well as how they are integrated within Biblical studies. After examining these frameworks, gaps in the literature were identified that this dissertation aims to address. Additionally, the methodology employed for this research was outlined, and the overall structure of the dissertation was explained.

After this introductory chapter, chapter 2 examines the theoretical principles of Biblical narrative criticism and social identity theory and employs characterization as a methodology. Chapter 3 concentrates on the world behind the text, using the tripolar exegetical model to

provide the requisite background and contextual information. This serves as the historical-critical aspect of the research.

Chapter 4 employs (SIT) to analyze the characters and conduct a comprehensive Biblical narrative critique. Chapter 5: The Synthesis of Biblical Narrative Criticism and Social Identity Theory synthesizes the findings through the conversation regarding the intersection of narrative criticism and the application of (SIT). Chapter 6: The Relevance of Narrative Criticism and the Application of (SIT) Analysis to Contemporary Complexes examines the implications of contested identities for contemporary realities. Chapter 7: Conclusion offers a comprehensive study overview and identifies areas for future research and gaps.

Chapter 2 Theory and Method

2.1. Introduction

This chapter explores the intricate interplay between theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches in Biblical studies. This chapter outlines the theoretical frameworks and methodologies underpinning the study. It integrates Biblical Narrative Criticism with Social Identity Theory to analyze the characterization of Esther and Mordecai in the Book of Esther (MT). These frameworks are applied using Jonathan Draper's Tripolar Exegetical Model, which includes the steps of Distantiation, Contextualization, and Appropriation. These combined approaches provide a structured lens for examining how the text portrays contested identities and their implications for modern readers in the ancient text. The study focuses mainly on characterization as a methodological tool within Biblical Narrative Criticism, examining how the text uses literary elements such as plot, character development, and narrative structure to portray identity dynamics. Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a pivotal theoretical framework in this study, enriching the analysis by exploring how individuals construct and navigate their social identities within group dynamics. As Tajfel and Turner (1979) outlined, SIT focuses on the processes of categorization, identification, and comparison, which shape how individuals perceive themselves and others within social contexts. This framework complements Biblical Narrative Criticism by offering a sociological lens through which the actions and transformations of characters like Esther and Mordecai can be understood. Their identity negotiations, as depicted in the narrative, are illuminated by SIT's emphasis on in-group solidarity, out-group dynamics, and the strategies individuals employ to maintain or challenge social boundaries. By integrating (SIT), I aim to provide a nuanced analysis of how social identities and narratives interact within Biblical texts, offering insights into the contemporary implications of these interactions. Methodologically, I focus on characterization within the Biblical narratives that involve a detailed examination of the characters, their development throughout the texts, and their roles in shaping the readers' interpretations. This methodological focus complements the theoretical frameworks by providing a concrete approach to answering the sub-questions of the study

1. *In what ways are Esther and Mordecai characterized in Esther (MT)?*
2. *How can (SIT) enhance a character exploration of Mordecai and Esther as they are embedded within Jewish identity?*

3. *What do the suggested analyses—as viewed through the prism of (SIT)—disclose about contested Jewish diasporic identities and how they relate to contemporary interpreters facing challenges with contested identities?*

This study offers a foundation for examining the interplay between Biblical narrative criticism (SIT) and implications for contemporary readers. This chapter establishes the fundamental concepts and approaches that will be used to analyze Biblical narratives. It combines Biblical narrative criticism, guided by the Tripolar exegetical model, with (SIT) and a focused methodological approach to characterization. The goal is to enhance our understanding of the Biblical narratives by examining them from multiple perspectives.

In section 1, the upcoming sections begin with an overview of the tripolar exegetical model and its components. In section 2, the exploration of integrating Biblical narrative criticism starts with the definition of Biblical narrative criticism and its relevance and importance in Biblical studies, followed by its application within the tripolar model. Section 3 provides the integration of social identity theory, beginning with its definition, relevance, and significance in understanding social identities. Section 4 applies (SIT) within the tripolar model, focusing on the world behind the text, the world of the text and the world in front of the text. Section 5, applying the methodological approach to characterization, begins with defining characterization in Biblical narratives and explains how characterization will be analysed using the tripolar model. It then summarizes this chapter with a conclusion.

2.2. The Tripolar Exegetical Model

Draper's Tripolar Exegetical Model (2001) is the foundational framework for interpreting the Book of Esther in this study. This model is particularly suited for integrating narrative and sociological analyses because it bridges the text's historical, literary, and reader-response dimensions.

2.2.1 Distantiation (The World Behind the Text): This step situates the text within its historical and cultural context. For instance, the Persian court's socio-political dynamics, as reflected in the Book of Esther, highlight the precarious position of diasporic Jews. This historical backdrop provides a critical lens for understanding Esther and Mordecai's actions.

2.2.2 Contextualization (The World of the Text): The text is analyzed as a standalone literary artefact in this step. Using Biblical narrative criticism, the study examines how narrative elements such as plot and characterization portray Esther's dual identity and Mordecai's defiance. The narrative structure, including Esther's concealment and eventual revelation of her identity, is explored in detail.

2.2.3 Appropriation (The World in Front of the Text): Here, the focus shifts to the transformative potential of the text for contemporary readers. SIT frames the analysis of how Esther and Mordecai's strategies of identity negotiation resonate with modern issues of assimilation, resistance, and in-group solidarity.

2.3. Integrating Biblical Narrative Criticism and Social Identity Theory within the Tripolar Model

Integrating Biblical narrative criticism and (SIT) provides a multidimensional approach to analyzing the Book of Esther examining the text's literary features, focusing on how narrative structure and characterization convey meaning. For instance, Esther's transformation from passivity to agency is a key narrative arc that reveals identity negotiation and empowerment themes. Sternberg's (1985) analysis of characterization as a narrative tool is particularly relevant here, emphasizing how Esther's hidden identity is portrayed through her actions and dialogue. SIT complements Biblical narrative criticism by contextualizing Esther and Mordecai's actions within the framework of social group dynamics. Tajfel and Turner's (1979) concepts of categorization, identification, and comparison provide a lens for understanding how Esther's concealment of her Jewish identity aligns with the need for in-group solidarity and survival in a hostile out-group environment.

By combining these perspectives, the study aims to uncover how the narrative structure of the Book of Esther reflects broader socio-cultural dynamics.

2.3.1 Definition of Biblical Narrative Criticism

Biblical Narrative Criticism is an approach that seeks to interpret the narratives found within the Bible by analyzing their literary and narrative elements. It focuses on understanding the characters, motivations, the plot structure, and the overall themes within the narrative. This approach aims to uncover the underlying literary techniques employed by the Biblical authors and the message they intended to convey to their original audience. As I delve into the characterization of Esther and Mordechai, I employ Biblical narrative criticism to analyze the textual elements that shape their characters. By examining their actions, speech, and roles within the narrative structure, I aim to uncover their motivations and agency.

Stories are important because they allow people to feel a part of something bigger than themselves by passing on religious and cultural traditions. According to Alter (2011), in his work titled "The Art of Biblical Narrative," there exists a closer connection between history and fiction than what has traditionally been assumed. Powell (1990) asserts that narrative criticism is "The study of Biblical texts as stories, emphasizing the authors' literary artistry and narrative techniques". Gunn (1993) defines narrative criticism as "A literary approach to the study of the Bible that examines the form, structure, and function of the narrative texts and their implications for interpretation. It focuses on the narrative elements such as plot, characterization, time, point of view, and the narrative world, as well as the rhetoric and narrative strategies employed in the text." Berlin (1982: 69) argues that the Bible should be treated as a literary composition and subjected to scholarly analysis and critique when examining framing narratives. Language, style, and significance are the building blocks of any writing, and this project aims to improve readers' grasp of these nuances.

Therefore, these definitions highlight the critical elements of narrative criticism, emphasizing the study of Biblical texts as stories and exploring their literary techniques, offering a valuable lens for examining the construction and interpretation of narratives. Narrative criticism analyses narratives' form, content, and structure to uncover underlying meanings and themes.

Robert Alter was a scholar during the 1970s and 1980s. Alter's scholarly contributions, notably his publication, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (1981), emphasized the literary dimensions inherent in the Bible. Alter examined various themes, characters, and narrative techniques,

facilitating the scholarly perception of the Bible as a literary composition. Phyllis Trible (1984), a feminist scholar, employed the methodology of narrative criticism in her pioneering research, an analysis of the Old Testament, exemplified by the publication *Texts of Terror*, which delves into the portrayal of women in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible, and critically analyses the theological ramifications associated with these depictions.

Meir Sternberg (1980s–1990s) made significant contributions to the field of narrative criticism by delving into the intricate narrative devices employed in the Bible, such as wordplay, irony, and repetition. Sternberg's methodology underscored the intricacy of the Biblical narrative. Robert W. Funk's (1970s–1990s) contributions to narrative criticism significantly impacted the field of New Testament studies with a specific focus on interpreting the Gospels as narratives rather than mere historical chronicles. David Gunn (1990s–2000s) conducted research that focused on applying narrative criticism to the Old Testament with a primary focus on the books of Genesis and Samuel, engaging in an in-depth exploration of how narrative patterns and themes influence the theological messages conveyed within these texts. Other Biblical scholars, such as Punt (2003), explore Biblical narrative criticism in postcolonial South Africa, particularly its political nature and ideological agenda. It delves into the criteria and elements of this criticism, highlighting its different focus and purpose compared to traditional Biblical interpretation. West (1991) focused on the socio-political and cultural aspects of the Biblical narrative, offering insights into reading and interpreting Biblical narratives in the African context. Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) (2015) emphasizes the importance of African scholars embracing their African heritage and context in their scholarship, particularly in African Biblical Hermeneutics. Chitando (2020) has also contributed to understanding Biblical narratives within the African context. Dube (2001) also explores feminist and postcolonial interpretations of Biblical texts. Her work examines Biblical narratives within the context of the HIV and AIDS pandemic in Africa, reflecting on the intersections of social identity, power, and health. Togarasei (2016) utilizes Biblical narrative criticism to explore the relationship between the African social identity and the reading of the New Testament. Olojede (2012) investigates the effect of Yoruba origin and migration narratives, which include a shared ancestor, ancestral home, and faith in a Supreme Deity, on their identity. Olojede (2012) argues that these narratives evoke memories comparable to the Exodus and Israel's remembrance of Yahweh as a fundamental aspect of their identity. The study emphasizes the significance of cosmogonic and migration elements in forming identity by comparing Yoruba myths and migration theories with Exodus 14-15:18. This combination emphasizes the importance of

Yahweh in the Sea event. Graybill (2021) offers a critical analysis of Phyllis Trible's approach to Biblical sexual violence, arguing that it falls short of acknowledging the intricate and chaotic nature of such violence. Instead, it promotes the idea of "unhappy reading", which involves embracing complexity and unhappiness, based on Sara Ahmed's concept of unhappiness. According to Graybill (2021), an in-depth examination of Judges 19 reveals that the act of "narrating tragic tales" does not effectively distinguish between rape and murder and unintentionally assumes the voice of the deceased woman. The lingering feeling of "unhappy reading" adds to the narrative's discomfort, creating an opportunity for feminist interpretation.

Narrative criticism has transformed from its initial focus on literature to a multidisciplinary approach incorporating various disciplines such as literary theory, linguistics, psychology, and theology. Scholars have increasingly acknowledged the significance of comprehending the cultural and historical circumstances in which Biblical narratives were formulated.

In this research, I use narrative criticism to explore the characterization of Esther and Mordecai and their development, uncover themes and messages conveyed through storytelling, and investigate the socio-historical context of the narrative to understand the contested identities of Esther and Mordecai in the diaspora. Within social identity, narrative criticism enables us to examine how individuals use storytelling to convey their social identities, highlight in-group affiliations, and negotiate intergroup dynamics. Through narrative criticism, I aim to understand individuals' narrative strategies to shape and present their identities to themselves and others.

2.3.2 Narrative Analysis

Other Biblical scholars have significantly contributed to Biblical studies by applying narrative analysis to understand better Biblical texts' storytelling techniques, themes, and character dynamics. Their work has shed light on the rich narrative aspects of the Bible and how these contribute to its interpretation and meaning. Alter (1981) provides a foundational discussion on narrative techniques, focusing on how characterization is shaped by plot structure, dialogue, and thematic development, complements Trible's (1978) feminist critique, which emphasizes the subversive use of narrative devices in the Book of Esther. Together, these perspectives illuminate the complexity of Esther's character, highlighting her agency and vulnerability. These combined insights will inform the analysis of Chapters 4 and 5. Walter Brueggemann's (1997) *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* utilized narrative analysis to explore the theological dimensions of the Old Testament, examining the narratives in the

Hebrew Bible to uncover theological themes, ethical implications, and the ongoing dialogue between different voices within the text.

The analysis in this study explores multiple text components, including plot structure, thematic elements, character development (precisely the distinction between round and flat characters), agency, temporal aspects, and spatial settings. By delving into these aspects, I aim to achieve a more profound comprehension of the text.

2.3.3 Plot

According to Jonker and Lawrie, “the plot/storyline in some literary critics (in the Anglo-Saxon sense of the term) believe this is the most important aspect of narrative texts. For any narrative to be a narrative, it has to have a storyline or plot. Without this, it would not be considered a narrative” (2005:97).

Analysis of the plot/storyline helps the interpreter in two essential ways. Firstly, it enables the interpreter of narratives to get a grip on the line of tension in the narrative. Secondly, and closely connected to this, it provides a way of identifying the changes the narrative wishes to bring about, whether these are changes in knowledge (that is, by the end of the story, the reader knows more in values (which concern the development of the characters' values and also the values of the reader) or changes in a situation (those concerning the events recounted in the narrative) (2005:98).

Therefore, narrative analysis examines the chronological order of events within a narrative. This analysis examines the narrative progression, the causal connections between events, and the resolution or lack thereof of conflicts. The study of the plot aids in the identification and examination of the narrative's comprehensive framework and how it unfolds over time.

2.3.4 Characterization (Round vs. Flat)

According to Jonker and Lawrie (2005),

The plot emerges precisely when characters are described in their relationships to themselves, other characters, and events. Biblical narratives are no exception. However, one must be forewarned that Biblical narratives show far less interest in the psychological aspects of characters than modern narratives do. In Biblical narratives, the characters serve the storyline; they are seldom employed in the narrative to find the characters' attention. Not all characters necessarily function in the same way in a

narrative; therefore, a distinction between different types of characters is commonly made (2005:94).

Furthermore,

There are different versions of this distinction. Some distinguish between sound characters (characters that are described in some detail, that undergo development during the narrative, of whom more than one dimension is revealed to the readers) and fat characters (characters that act in a purely functional way in the narrative, that do not undergo character development, of whom little is said). A variation on this bipartite distinction is the tripartite model that distinguishes between "fully-fledged characters", "types", and "agents". The "fully-fledged" character is a complex one of whom the narrative shows several traits and qualities. The "type" is described only in terms of one feature of her character, one of particular importance to the storyline" (2005:95).

According to Berlin (1983), the "Bible contains characters that are neither flat, static, nor opaque." Berlin continues by emphasizing "that it is dangerous to generalize about characters in the Bible because there is a large array of characters of various types and a repertoire of techniques for characterizing them; therefore, it suggests three main categories for classifying character types." According to Berlin,

these character types are flat and round characters; flat characters are built around a single quality or trait and do not stand out as individuals. Rounded characters are more complex, manifesting many traits and appearing as 'real people'...The round character is the fully-fledged character; the flat character is the type," and the functionary is the agent. All can be found in the Biblical narrative, and the same person may appear as a full-fledged character in one story and as a type or agent in another (1983:23-24).

2.3.5 Time

Bal (2017) introduces the theory of narrative as the concept of the fabula. For Bal (2017),

A fabula is a series of logically related events caused or experienced by actors. The fabula, for instance, contains elements such as events and actors. Within the fabula, those processes are distinct from the author's activity. The events are arranged in a sequence that can differ from the chronological sequence. Also, the amount of time

allotted in the story of the various elements is determined by the time these elements take (2017:34).

Genette (1980: 33-79) introduces the concept of narrative time as a crucial element in understanding storytelling by identifying three levels of narrative time: order, duration, and frequency. By examining the chronological sequence, temporal length, and repetition of events within a narrative, Genette's (1980) framework offers a comprehensive approach to analyzing time in narratives. The theoretical frameworks presented by Genette (1980) and Bal (2017) assist in my exploration of the essence of time in narrative analysis. By utilizing their concepts and analytical tools, I aim to uncover the intricate ways temporal structures influence the construction of meaning within stories; it enriches my understanding of how time shapes the narrative experience and provides a solid basis for my research.

2.3.6 Point of view

According to Jonker and Lawrie (2005), point of view has occasioned heated debate in the literature about narrative theory. Point of view (or perspective or focalization) concerns the question;

Who sees?" or "whose perspective is now, at this stage of the narrative, being presented?" Once more, the image of the eye of the camera explains the point: when the narrator selects what they want the reader of the story to "see", not only the choice of events is essential. Although the theoretical literature provides several models for classifying narrative points of view, the following will suffice here (to analyze Biblical narratives) (2005:101-102).

Hence, point of view encompasses fundamental ideas or concepts that permeate a narrative, surrounding the process of discerning and examining the essential issues present within a given text; delving into their progression and manifestation throughout the narrative can offer a valuable understanding of the intentions of the author or serve as a means of commenting on more significant social matters within the text. In the context of this study, narrative analysis involves a methodical examination of different components within the text, encompassing elements such as the plot, character progression, point of view and time. By analyzing these individual elements in the following chapters, I aim to gain a thorough understanding of how a narrative functions concerning the sub-question of how (SIT) can enhance the exploration of characters Mordecai and Esther within the context of Jewish identity while effectively

conveying its messages to readers in the present day. Firstly, I review the tri-polar model. Secondly, I delve into the concept of social identity and discuss characterization as a methodology. Finally, I examine the importance of these interdisciplinary approaches in understanding the characterization of Esther and Mordecai.

2.4. Definition of Social Identity Theory

According to Tajfel and Turner (1979)

much of the work on the social psychology of intergroup relations has focused on patterns of individuals' prejudices and discrimination and the motivational sequences of interpersonal interaction. Outstanding examples of these approaches can be found in the theory of authoritarian personality (Adorno et al., 1950) and in the various versions and modifications of the theory of frustration, aggression, and displacement (such as Berkowitz, 1962; 1969; 1974). The common denominator of most of this work has been the stress on intraindividual or interpersonal psychological processes leading to prejudiced attitudes or discriminatory behaviour (1979:7).

Social identity theory emphasizes the role of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison in shaping intergroup behaviour and constructing self-narratives.

(a) Social categorization is mentally classifying people into different social groups based on shared characteristics. It involves perceiving individuals as members of distinct categories, such as gender, race, age, or occupation, and examining how individuals categorize others, the factors that influence categorization, the effects of categorization on perception and judgment, and the role of stereotypes in shaping social categorization.

(b) Social identification refers to the part of an individual's self-concept derived from group memberships. It highlights the importance of identifying with and belonging to specific social groups. For example, the research investigates how individuals understand identity as members of particular ethnic, national, gender, or organizational groups and how this identity influences their attitudes, behaviours, and intergroup relations.

(c) Social comparison involves evaluating one's group and oneself concerning other groups or individuals. It is a fundamental aspect of social identity theory, as individuals often seek positive distinctiveness and self-esteem by comparing their group favourably to others. Tajfel and Turner (1979) are credited as the proponents of (SIT), which has been extensively discussed and disseminated in numerous influential publications within the field of psychology.

Social identity refers to an individual's affiliation with a particular social group, accompanied by favourable cognition and emotions towards that group. Membership in a collective entity plays a significant role in shaping our identity. By aligning themselves with particular groups, individuals acquire a sense of belonging, enhance their self-esteem, and develop a cognitive framework for comprehending their societal position. Social identity encompasses more than individual-level identification and extends to broader social categories. As an illustration, individuals may exhibit a strong sense of identification with their nationality or perceive themselves as integral members of a larger collective. Many factors, such as cultural background, familial upbringing, interpersonal engagements, and individual life experiences, shape social identity. The phenomenon under consideration notably influences the formation of individuals' attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, and social interactions. The theory emphasizes the role of social categorization, social identification, and social comparison in shaping intergroup behaviour and constructing self-narratives. Brown (2000) and other researchers have made notable contributions to the advancement of Social Identity Theory by conducting studies exploring intergroup processes' effects in real-world societal contexts. Brown (2000) broadened the theoretical framework to examine prejudice, discrimination, and social cohesion, especially group identities' role in fostering intergroup conflict or promoting intergroup harmony, depending on the perceived differences and similarities between various groups. Hogg's (2016) analysis of self-categorization theory elucidates the complex mechanism by which people classify themselves and others in multiple settings, including but not limited to leadership and group dynamics, to improve self-categorization theory by highlighting the role of leadership and group prototypes in the formation and development of social identity. The focus will shift to social identity and explore its significance in examining how identities shape the development of narratives in Biblical texts. Ndekha (2023) posits that (SIT) has been implemented in Biblical studies to comprehend social dynamics, group behaviour, and identity formation within Biblical narratives. This is illustrated by examining socio-economic relations in Luke's Gospel, which describes how (SIT) can clarify interactions and power dynamics within Biblical texts. Porter and Rosner (2021) analyze ethnic flexibility in 1 Corinthians through the lens of social identity theory, revealing insights into the construction and negotiation of identity in the early Christian community. In the context of social conflict, research on discipleship and identity demonstrates the importance of social identity theory in comprehending transformative processes and identity formation within Biblical contexts Ott, (2023). The study of Baker (2012) concentrates on applying Social Identity Theory in Biblical

interpretation, using it as a heuristic device to examine the construction, maintenance, and transformation of identities within the Biblical text.

Integrating (SIT) into Biblical narrative criticism offers a framework for analyzing ancient texts' group dynamics, social interactions, and identity complexities. Applying (SIT) principles to Biblical narratives, I aim to uncover layers of meaning associated with social categorization, in-group favouritism, intergroup relations, and identity negotiation. This process enhances comprehension of the socio-cultural contexts in which these texts were composed. The focus will now shift to the methodology employed in this study.

2.5 Characterization as Methodology

2.5.1 Introduction

This study will utilize characterization as a critical analytical tool within Biblical narrative criticism rather than a standalone methodology. According to Sternberg (1985), characterization involves portraying a character's psychological, moral, and social dimensions through actions, dialogue, and the narrator's perspective. By analyzing these characterizations, the study explores how the narrative uses individual portrayals to reflect broader identity dynamics within the Jewish diaspora. The investigation provides valuable insights into the contested diasporic Jewish identities addressed in the narrative by exploring the intricacies of their identities, motivations, and interactions through this lens. The characterization-centred qualitative narrative criticism approach enables a thorough examination beyond superficial observations, providing a more profound comprehension of the characters and their contributions to the narrative's overarching themes. A desktop study was conducted by first investigating the theoretical underpinnings of Biblical narrative criticism and integrating it with social identity theory. The data for Biblical narrative criticism has been gathered through literature relevant to narrative criticism. Key sources utilized include Jonker and Lawrie (2005) *Fishing for Jonah (anew)*, Various approaches to Biblical Interpretation Louis Jean Ska (1990) *Our Fathers have told us: Introduction to the analysis of Hebrew Narratives*. Characterization is employed as a methodology to investigate the portrayal of Esther and Mordecai and its relationship to contested diasporic Jewish identities in the context of the research question and sub-questions. This tool is also valuable for literary analysis, as it can offer insight into the themes and messages of the narrative. The authors' intentions and messages, as well as the cultural and historical context of the work, can be more effectively comprehended by readers

through an in-depth examination of the characters. In the Bible, three Biblical scholars offer distinct viewpoints on using characterization. Alter (1981) underscores the characters' ambiguity and complexity, while Sternberg (1985) contends that characterization represents symbolic figures that symbolize broader themes and ideas. In her analysis of the Book of Esther, Berlin (1994) emphasizes the meticulous use of characters to communicate precise messages regarding Jewish identity and power. In conjunction, these scholarly works emphasize the significance of characterization in forming our comprehension of Biblical narratives and their implications.

This research utilizes Alter's (1981) work to investigate the nuanced and complex nature of Biblical characters. The emphasis on the literary techniques employed to develop characters in the Hebrew Bible can offer valuable insights into how characters are depicted and their motivations and actions. The analysis of the Book of Esther by Berlin (1994) emphasizes the meticulous creation of characters to communicate messages regarding Jewish identity and power. To resolve the primary research question and its sub-questions, the subsequent sequential methodology will be implemented to identify data sources.

Step 1. Literature review: identify relevant scholarly sources, such as journal articles, books, and other appropriate publications.

Step 2. Analyze the book of Esther (MT) to identify how Esther and Mordechai are characterized by a close reading of the text, paying attention to how the characters are described and their actions.

Step 3. Apply (SIT) to Mordechai and Esther's character exploration to examine how their Jewish identity is portrayed in the text and how it relates to their actions.

Step 4. Conduct data analysis to identify patterns and themes related to contested Jewish diasporic identities.

Step 5. Based on the analysis, I conclude what the characterization of Esther and Mordecai, read through (SIT) reveals about contested diasporic Jewish identities as seen in the book of Esther (MT) and what it implies for contemporary interpreters who face challenges with contested identities. Overall, my approach involves a combination of close reading, analysis of the text, and applying theoretical frameworks to the character exploration. Following this process, comprehensive insights emerge in answer to the research question and sub-questions.

By integrating the multidisciplinary approaches of Biblical narrative criticism within the tripolar model and (SIT), as well as employing characterization as the methodological approach, this study seeks to provide a nuanced and comprehensive analysis of the Biblical narrative, offering new insights into the complex interplay of identity, narrative, and implications for contemporary readers. Chapter 3 begins to examine the historical, cultural, and social contexts that influenced the composition of the text with the intent to improve understanding of the origins and the factors that influenced its content and significance.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the theoretical and methodological frameworks that guide the study. Integrating Biblical Narrative Criticism with Social Identity Theory provides a comprehensive approach to analyzing the characterization of Esther and Mordecai. Draper's Tripolar Exegetical Model ensures that the analysis considers the text's historical, literary, and contemporary dimensions. The next chapter applies these frameworks to the socio-historical context of the Persian Empire, situating Esther and Mordecai's narrative within the broader realities of diasporic Jewish identity.

Chapter 3, the examination will focus on the historical, cultural, and social contexts that influenced the composition of the text, with the intent to improve understanding of the origins and the factors that influenced its content and significance.

Chapter 3: The World Behind the Text

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will apply the distantiation step of Draper's (2002) tripolar exegetical model to investigate the underlying aspects of the text, explicitly focusing on the historical-critical analysis that serves as the basis for comprehending the Biblical context, specifically the Masoretic Text (MT). This approach will reveal the diverse and intricate web of cultural, social, political, and religious factors influencing the Biblical narrative. An analysis of the historical context provides a valuable understanding of the individuals, events, and cultural norms that shaped the development and compilation of these ancient texts. I will apply two of Robbins' textures to analyze the narrative: social and artistic texture. I will begin by examining the historical periods in which the Masoretic texts were written, from the ancient Near Eastern civilizations, followed by the social and cultural dynamics of the time.

3.2 History of the Masoretes

Stern (2008) states that the Masoretes, a collective of Jewish scholars and scribes, had a vital role in safeguarding and transmitting the Hebrew Bible. They are acknowledged as the inaugural group of Jewish readers who possess extensive expertise in the Bible, gained through the visual act of reading its text on written materials. Khan (2017) further states that The Masoretes were operational during the early Islamic era until the 10th century and were located in Tiberias. It was in Tiberias that they devised the Tiberian vocalization system for Hebrew. Mitchell (2012) also mentions that their research involved meticulous scrutiny, including incorporating cantillation marks. Some scholars contend that these marks might have originated even before the Masoretes, potentially tracing back to ancient temple periods. Sipilä (2016) states that the Masoretes were significantly impacted by standardizing and vocalizing the Hebrew Bible text, now called the Masoretic Text (MT). This text has a lengthy historical background, and debates regarding its origins have been ongoing. Schorch (2003) argues that the Masoretes played a crucial role in guaranteeing the precise transmission of the Biblical text, as demonstrated by their meticulous annotations and vocalization marks. Samet (2016) acknowledges that some scholars propose the possibility that the Masoretes may have introduced anachronisms or misvocalizations into the text. This is particularly evident in the case of the Biblical root ḥ-b-q. Anava et al. (2020) conducted the study. The Masoretic Text is an essential resource for Biblical studies, serving as a foundation for comprehending the textual

evolution of the Hebrew Bible. Examining the Masoretic text about other versions, such as the Septuagint, uncovers discrepancies in the text of specific Biblical books, such as Jeremiah. These variations in the text provide a valuable understanding of how Biblical texts are conveyed and interpreted among diverse communities and throughout various historical eras. I will now focus on the military history that led to the Esther and Mordecai narrative, which will provide the social and cultural context for the narrative.

3.2.1 Historical background of the Persian Empire in the Esther (MT) narrative

A video, *Being a Disciple* (2023), offers a comprehensive account of the historical and Biblical context to help us understand the story of Esther. It starts by noting Xerxes' boast during the Second Battle that his arrows would block out the sun, to which the response was, "Then we will fight in the shade," highlighting the dramatic backdrop of Esther's story. It details the Babylonian captivity in 598 BC, where most Israelites were taken into exile, as described in Psalm 137. This set the stage for the rise of the Persian Empire under Cyrus the Great in 550 BC, who liberated the Jews from Babylonian captivity. The Persian Empire, unique for its diversity, saw Cyrus decree the rebuilding of the Jerusalem temple, though many Jews chose to remain in Persia. Subsequent rulers like Cambyses and Pseudo-Smerdis halted these efforts until Darius the Great revived them, as detailed in Ezra chapter 5, then goes on to describe the Ionian uprising supported by the Athenians, leading to the famous Battle of Marathon around 490 BC, where the Athenians triumphed despite being outnumbered. Pheidippides' legendary run to Sparta and back, followed by his run from Marathon to Athens to announce the victory, is highlighted as the origin of the modern marathon. Darius' death in 486 BC led to Xerxes' ascension. Facing a troubled empire, Xerxes hosted a 180-day banquet to demonstrate Persian strength and gather support, which set the stage for the Battle of Thermopylae and his subsequent defeat. This historical backdrop, including Xerxes' personal and political challenges, is crucial for understanding the events in Esther chapters one and two, highlighting the intersection of Biblical narratives with historical events.

3.2.2 Distantiation of text (The World Behind the Text)

The distantiation step of Jonathan Draper's (2001) tripolar exegetical model aims at understanding a text in its context. To this effect, I will apply Robbins' (1996) textures to analyze the narrative's social and cultural texture. These textures will help me understand and locate the text in its context. The analysis will help me interpret this passage using (SIT) as a

heuristic lens. The aim of the completed analysis and interpretation will enable me to appropriate my reading of the narrative. I begin with the inner textual analysis

3.2.3 Textual analysis

3.2.3.1 The Inner Texture of Esther

As stated in the introduction, Robins (1996) introduced five textures in textual analysis: *inner texture, inter-texture, social and cultural texture, ideological texture, and sacred texture*. I will conduct my analysis by examining Esther based on the inner texture principles outlined in section 3.1.1. The study of the inner texture is not inherently interpretative. The focus is on the textual structure as a medium, explicitly identifying six tools or sub-textures of communication: repetitive, progressive, narrational, opening-middle-closing, argumentative and sensory aesthetic texture. As Jonker and Lawrie (2005:59) state, the “interpreter who undertakes this aspect of textual analysis does not deal with meaning or interpretation but develops an intimate knowledge of words, word patterns, voices, structures, devices, and modes in the text.”

Repetition

The Repetition of words or phrases in the text reveals how the text structure shapes its themes and concerns.

Table 1: Repetitive Words or Phrases in the Esther Text.

Repetitive Texts	Examples
Threefold repetitions	
Size of the empire	
Esther 1:1:	This happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush.
Esther 8:9:	At once, the royal secretaries were summoned—on the twenty-third day of the third month, the month of Sivan. They wrote out all Mordecai's orders to the Jews, and the satraps, governors, and nobles of the 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush.
Esther 10:1:	King Xerxes imposed tribute throughout the empire to its distant shores.
Royal records	
Esther 2:23:	And when an inquiry was made into the matter, it was confirmed, and both were hanged on gallows; and it was

	written in the Book of the Chronicles in the presence of the king.
Esther 6:1:	That night the king could not sleep; so, he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him.
Esther 10:2:	And all the acts of his power and might, and the account of the greatness of Mordecai, to which the king had raised him, are they not written in the book of the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia?

Xerxes' Promise to Esther

Esther 5:3:	Then the king asked, 'What is it, Queen Esther? What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be given you'.
Esther 5:6:	As they were drinking wine, the king again asked Esther, 'Now what is your petition? It will be given you. And what is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted'.
Esther 7:2:	and as they were drinking wine on the second day, the king again asked, 'Queen Esther, what is your petition? It will be given you. What is your request? Even up to half the kingdom, it will be granted'.

The word pair usage

Esther 1:4	When he displayed the vast wealth of his kingdom and the splendor and glory of his majesty for many days, 180 days in all.
Esther 1:12	But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's command delivered by the eunuchs. Then the king became very angry, and his wrath burned within him.

The triplet word usage

Esther 3:13	Dispatches were sent by couriers to all the king's provinces with the order to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jews— young and old, women and children—on a single day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods.
Esther 7:4	For I and my people have been sold to be destroyed, killed, and annihilated. If we had merely been sold as male and female slaves, I would have kept quiet, because no such distress would justify disturbing the king.
Esther 8:11	The king's edict granted the Jews in every city the right to assemble and protect themselves; to destroy, kill, and annihilate the armed men of any nationality or province who

	might attack them and their women and children, and to plunder the property of their enemies.
The four-fold repeated idea	
Esther 8:16	For the Jews it was a time of happiness and joy, gladness and honor.
List of the 7 names	
Esther 1:10	Mehuman, Biztha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, Carcas
Esther 1:14	Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, Memucan
Esther 9:7-9 Account of Haman's sons	Parshandatha, Dalphon, Aspatha, Poratha, Adalia, Aridatha, Parmashta, Arisai, Aridai, Vaizatha
Esther found favour/grace in the eyes of	
Esther 2:15, Esther 5:2	<p>Esther 2:15: Now when the turn came for Esther the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her as his daughter, to go in to the king, she requested nothing but what Hegai the king's eunuch, the custodian of the women, advised. And Esther obtained favor in the sight of all who saw her.</p> <p>Esther 5:2: So, it was, when the king saw Queen Esther standing in the court, that she found favor in his sight, and the king held out to Esther the golden scepter that was in his hand. Then Esther went near and touched the top of the scepter.</p>
The king and Haman went to; or the king and Haman sat down to...	
Esther 3:15, Esther 5:4	<p>The king and Haman went to...or the king and Haman sat down to...</p> <p>Esther 3:15: The couriers went out, hastened by the king's command; and the decree was proclaimed in Shushan the citadel. So, the king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Shushan was perplexed.</p> <p>Esther 5:4: So, Esther answered, 'If it pleases the king, let the king and Haman come today to the banquet that I have prepared for him'.</p>

Who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Esther 4:14

For if you remain completely silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?

Fast/feast

Esther 4:16, Esther 9:17-19

Esther 4:16: "Go, gather all the Jews who are present in Shushan, and fast for me; neither eat nor drink for three days, night or day. My maids and I will fast likewise. And so, I will go to the king, which is against the law; and if I perish, I perish!"

Esther 9:17-19: This was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar. And on the fourteenth of the month they rested and made it a day of feasting and gladness. But the Jews who were at Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth day, as well as on the fourteenth and on the fifteenth of the month; they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness.

For such and such a day

Esther 3:13, Esther 9:18

Esther 3:13: "And the letters were sent by couriers into all the king's provinces, to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all the Jews, both young and old, little children and women, in one day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their possessions."

Esther 9:18: But the Jews who were at Shushan assembled together on the thirteenth day, as well as on the fourteenth; and on the fifteenth of the month they rested, and made it a day of feasting and gladness.

In summary, the most frequently occurring repetitions of words and phrases are as follows: Eslami et al. (2018) studied rhetorical preferences in Persian writing, explicitly examining the characteristics and styles present in Persian documents. The study examined the Persian writing style using models proposed by Chesterman (1998) and Monroy and Scheu (1997). The utilization of word pairs, the three-fold repetition, the idea of using triplet words, and the four-fold repeated idea, including the list of seven names, all exemplify the characteristic style of court records in the Persian Empire.

Esther discovered favour/grace in the eyes of the narrative, emphasizes Esther's favourable status with various characters, including King Xerxes and Hegai, the king's eunuch, by reiterating this phrase numerous times.

The king and Haman proceeded to, or the king and Haman sat down to this repetition is evident when King Xerxes and Haman attend events or make decisions together, emphasizing their close relationship and shared power.

Who knows whether you have arrived in the kingdom at this particular moment? Mordecai addresses Esther with this statement, urging her to act to save her people. It underscores the concept of divine providence or fate, implying that Esther's ascent to power was purposeful.

Fasting/eating: Esther's request for the Jews to fast before she approaches the king and subsequent feasting after their deliverance are the most frequent references to fasting and feasting in the narrative.

On such and such a day, the narrative employs this phrase to indicate specific dates or events, including the day of the Jews' deliverance or Haman's decree to destroy them.

These repetitions can offer a deeper understanding of the themes of power, fate, and deliverance in the Book of Esther by identifying and analyzing them. The progressive texture in Esther's narrative can be analyzed by examining how events and actions serve as stepping stones to further development in the story. Here's an outline of the progressive texture in the

Progressive texture

Progressive texture focuses on how phenomena in the text function as stepping stones to other phenomena in the text (Robbins, 1996:10).

Esther 2:17 establishes the basis for Esther's elevation to the role of queen. Esther's appointment as queen lays the groundwork for the subsequent events in the narrative. This initial event propels Esther into a position of power and control within the Persian court. Esther 2:21-23 recounts the account of Mordecai's revelation of a conspiracy. Mordecai eavesdrops on a conspiracy to murder King Xerxes, which he promptly informs Esther about. This discovery initiates a sequence of events that ultimately result in Mordecai being acknowledged by the king. Esther 3:1-2 describes the ascension of Haman to a position of authority and his subsequent scheme. Antisemitic Haman's elevation to the role of the king's chief official grants

him considerable sway. Driven by his deep-seated animosity towards Mordecai, he concocts a scheme to annihilate the entire Jewish population within the kingdom. Esther 4:11-16: Esther shows brave actions in her audacious choice to approach the king without invitation, thereby endangering her life, showcasing her remarkable courage and unwavering dedication to her people. Her persuasive appeal to the king results in the revelation of Haman's conspiracy. Esther 6:10-11, The story experiences a significant shift when Haman experiences a downfall, and Mordecai is elevated to his position. The situation has been reversed, allowing the Jews to exercise their right to protect themselves from their adversaries. Esther 9:16-19, The Jews triumph in their defence against their adversaries, resulting in widespread jubilation and merriment. The liberation of the Jewish people is celebrated each year as the festival of Purim. Each event is a precursor to the subsequent one, propelling the storyline and intensifying the anticipation and uncertainty until the conclusion is ultimately achieved. Esther's narrative has a progressive texture that emphasizes the interconnectedness of its different elements and the cause-and-effect relationships between them.

Narrational texture

Narrational texture and pattern focus on the narrator, narrational pattern, and the narrative point of view (Robbins, 1996: 15).

The narrative structure of the Book of Esther entails analyzing the narrator's writing style, point of view, and recurring narrative elements throughout the text. Below is an examination of the narrative structure in the Book of Esther:

The narrative of Esther 2:19-20 6:1-2 is presented from a third-person omniscient point of view, in which the narrator possesses knowledge of multiple characters' thoughts, emotions, and actions, enabling a thorough depiction of the events and characters in the story. In Esther 2:8 and 4:1-3, the narrator objectively presents the story's events, refraining from explicitly expressing personal opinions or judgements, enabling readers to analyze the actions and motivations of the characters independently. The Biblical verses referenced are Esther 3:8-9 and 9:1. The narrative unfolds in chronological order, commencing with Esther's ascent to the position of queen and culminating in the liberation of the Jewish people. The narrative exhibits a consistent pattern of tension and resolution, wherein conflicts emerge and are ultimately resolved by the characters' actions. The narrative also utilizes foreshadowing, exemplified by the early introduction of Haman's plot, creating anticipation for forthcoming events. The Bible verses referenced are Esther 4:15-16 and Esther 8:15-16. The book maintains a consistent

narrative point of view, offering readers a distinct perspective on the unfolding events. Although the narrator possesses insight into the thoughts and emotions of different characters, the primary emphasis is on propelling the storyline and cultivating the core themes of the narrative. Overall, the narrational texture of Esther's narrative is characterized by its objective presentation, chronological narrative pattern, and third-person omniscient perspective, which collectively contribute to the richness and depth of the storytelling. These verses demonstrate how the narrational patterns identified are reflected in Esther's text, supporting the analysis of the narrative texture, which will then lead to the argumentative texture.

Argumentative Texture

The argumentative texture involves the core reasoning present in the text, which leads to its central aim Robbins, (1996: 21, 23).

Jacob (2008) emphasises that the central aim of Esther's story is to highlight an exemplary character of virtue and consistency, positioning her as a model of strength and integrity in challenging circumstances (2008:13). Bejon (2019) argues that central in his reading of Esther is that the story is multifaceted, embodying various messages that resist a singular interpretative key. Bejon goes on further to say that Esther is a complex work that can be analyzed in numerous ways, each revealing different aspects of the message and further argues that the intricate undercurrents offer different lessons rather than a single definitive one, emphasizing that the richness of Esther lies in its depth and need for nuanced, attentive interpretation to uncover its various lessons (2019:1-9), which now lead to the social and cultural texture.

3.4 Social and Cultural Texture

This section explores the social and cultural characteristics of the individuals who inhabit the world or society described in the text by Robbins (1996:71). Furthermore, according to Jonker and Lawrie (2005:61), social and cultural texture refers to the text's ability to facilitate social change, retreat, or resistance, as well as to elicit cultural understandings of power dynamics, subordination, diversity, or exclusion. Analyzing a text's social and cultural texture examines how it portrays and connects different social orientations and locations within its discourse. The following distinctions are made in specific social topics, general social and cultural topics, and overall cultural categories.

Special Social Topics

According to Jonker and Lawrie (2005:60), these are themes or arguments within the text that may lead to a change in social practices, either by challenging and re-creating the social order or by allowing the reader to withdraw from present society to create an alternative social world, or by transforming their perceptions of society as a creative response to its challenges. Lebovitz (2024) focuses on how the narrative portrays and connects different social orientations and locations by examining how the character of Esther is adapted to fit the cultural and political contexts of the Jewish people in various versions of the narrative. In doing so, Lebovitz (2024) highlights these aspects of cultural adaptation and how the Greek versions of Esther incorporate Hellenistic elements, demonstrating the interplay between Jewish identity and the surrounding cultural environment. Lebovitz (2024) compares the Hebrew and Greek versions, illustrating how Esther's character is reshaped to resonate with different social orientations. In Hebrew, Esther is rooted in Jewish traditions, while in Greek, she is portrayed with added divine intervention and piety, aligning with Hellenistic ideals. In the historical context, Lebovitz (2024) demonstrates how Esther, under Greek rule, is a tool for negotiating social and cultural identities (2024:49-89). In response to Lebovitz's (2024) discussion, the aim of my study in chapters 4 and 5 is to explore how the analysis of the characterization of Esther in the Masoretic Text can be filtered into this broader argument that aligns with the notion that the story of Esther exemplifies how narratives can serve as a creative response to societal challenges, exploring how Esther, an orphaned Jewish woman, rises to a position of influence in the Persian court. Her actions challenge the prevailing power structures and social norms. This reflects a creative response to societal challenges, demonstrating the potential for marginalized individuals to enact significant change and recreate the social order. Secondly, I aim to illustrate how Esther navigates and withdraws from the dominant Persian society, creating a space where Jewish values and identity are preserved. This withdrawal into a Jewish identity within the Persian context highlights the possibility of an alternative social world that coexists with the dominant culture, emphasizing adaptation and resilience. Lastly, in chapter 6, I aim to demonstrate how Esther transforms perceptions by portraying a Jewish heroine who embodies cultural integrity and adaptive wisdom. For non-Jewish audiences, it presents a model of virtuous behaviour that can resonate across cultural boundaries. Therefore, by integrating the aim of my study with Lebovitz's (2024) analysis, it becomes clear that the story of Esther serves as a powerful example of how narratives can creatively respond to societal challenges, offering a platform to contest, adapt, and redefine social orders and identities. The social themes

explored in Esther's narrative not only mirror the historical and cultural backdrop of the Persian Empire but also encompass enduring concepts that resonate with present-day concerns surrounding power dynamics, personal identity, justice, and community. I now move to the common social and cultural topics.

Common social and cultural topics

According to Jonker and Lawrie (2005:60), “These topics in the discourse deepen the interpreter’s understanding of the range of customary practices, central values, modes of relationship and exchange, perception about resources for life and well-being, presuppositions about purity and taboo the text embodies.” Trojanowska (2023) explores intertextuality in the Book of Esther and 3 Maccabees narratives by identifying and analyzing these intertextual connections, and scholars can uncover more profound layers of meaning, thematic resonances, and narrative techniques employed by the authors align with Jonker and Lawrie (2005) Trojanowska's (2023) argues by exploring intertextuality, aims to deepen the understanding of customary practices, values, relationships, and other cultural elements reflected in the narratives of Esther and 3 Maccabees as this approach helps in uncovering how these texts engage with and reinterpret cultural norms and values through their intertextual engagements (2023:37-55). Cortea (2020) highlight that the Persian Empire, distinguished for its sophisticated administrative framework and multicultural society, encompassed a vast territory that included people from various ethnicities and religious backgrounds. Esther, a Jewish woman who rose to the rank of queen, skilfully navigated this diverse cultural environment, underscoring the mutual dependence of different social groups within the empire. Cortea (2020) continue that the Book of Esther, a significant literary work celebrated during the Jewish festival of Purim, offers insights into the interactions between the Jewish community and the Persian royal court, illustrating the cultural exchange and harmonious coexistence that characterized the empire. Gwyther (2021) examines the narrative of Esther in the Persian court, delving into themes of power, identity, and agency within a hierarchical society governed by royal decrees and courtly protocols. Esther's brave and ingenious efforts to save her people from persecution underscore the difficulties of navigating social hierarchies and political intrigue in the Persian Empire. Gwyther (2021) says that the Book of Esther blends Jewish and Persian cultures, emphasizing the dynamic nature of cultural interactions and the negotiation of identities in a diverse social setting.

According to Mahmoodi-Bakhtiari (2023), the portrayal of Esther and Persia in historical and literary records mirrors more comprehensive discussions on ethnicity, power relations, and cultural identities within the Persian Empire. The portrayal of Esther as a Jewish heroine and the contrasting depiction of Persian figures in narratives highlight the intricate nature of cultural representation and the formation of identities in historical texts. Alazraki (2022) highlights that the interactions among influential women from the East, like Esther, and their impact on political relationships in the early modern era emphasize the importance of gender and cultural diplomacy in shaping social structures and power dynamics. Drawing on Trojanowska's (2023) exploration of intertextuality, in the forthcoming chapter, I will analyze how Esther and Mordecai navigate the cultural and political landscapes of the Persian Empire by examining intertextual references and narrative techniques; I aim to uncover deeper layers of meaning and thematic resonances that will enrich my understanding of their characters. In Chapter 5, I will also apply the lens of social identity to dissect how Esther and Mordecai negotiate their Jewish identity amidst the Persian court's societal norms and power dynamics, revealing how their identities shape their decisions and interactions, offering insights into identity negotiation and empowerment in diverse social contexts. In Mahmoodi-Bakhtiari's (2023) study, which underscores the cultural representation of Esther and Persian figures within historical and literary contexts, I aim to explore how Biblical narratives reflect broader discussions on ethnicity, power relations and cultural identities, shedding light on the intricate formation of identities in ancient texts and their relevance today. I agree with Alazraki's (2022) analysis of influential women in political relationships, which parallels Esther's role as a female protagonist exercising cultural diplomacy, as it will allow me to examine Esther's impact on political dynamics and societal structures, highlighting the intersection of gender, power, and cultural negotiation in the narrative. These various perspectives of Esther and Mordecai are timeless figures whose experiences can resonate with contemporary issues of identity, power dynamics, and cultural exchange.

3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the distantiation step of the tripolar exegetical model was applied to investigating the underlying aspects of the text, focusing on the historical-critical analysis that serves as the basis for comprehending the Biblical context, specifically the Masoretic Text (MT), the historical and cultural context of the Book of Esther, to offer a comprehensive examination of the world behind the text. Understanding the background in which the narrative

is set provides critical insights into the characters' actions, the societal structures, and the underlying themes that shape the story. Chapter 4 focuses on a narrative analysis of the Book of Esther.

Chapter 4 Narrative Analysis

4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will begin by applying the second step of the tripolar exegetical model to the world of the text. I will then present an overview of narrative analysis, focusing on storytelling's fundamental structure and character development elements. I will look at how stories are built, paying close attention to the progression of character development throughout the narrative. Then, I will summarise the plot, setting the stage for examining narrative structure. This analysis will break down the story into its core parts: the exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Following this, I will examine the narrator's point of view, analyzing their role and perspective within the story. Understanding the narrator's position will help me gain insights into how the story is told and its impact on the audience. I will concisely summarise the main findings from the narrative analysis, highlighting their implications for comprehending the characters and the overall narrative.

4.2. Contextualization: The World of the Text

Contextualization: The World of the Text is the context in which all of the analysis conducted at this stage is centred on our understanding of ourselves as historical entities with a solid connection to a specific time and place. This process involves understanding the historical and cultural context in which the Text was written. To understand the Text's internal coherence and significance, the primary focus is analyzing its literary structure, themes, and narrative techniques Draper, (2001:156-157). Therefore, I will proceed to investigate the narrative analysis of the Text in this chapter, beginning with the definition of narrative analysis.

4.2.1 Definition of Biblical Narrative Criticism

Biblical narrative criticism is an approach that seeks to interpret the narratives found within the Bible by analysing their literary and narrative elements. It focuses on understanding the characters, motivations, the plot structure, and the overall themes within the narrative. This approach aims to uncover the underlying literary techniques employed by the Biblical authors and the message they intended to convey to their original audience. As I delve into the characterization of Esther and Mordechai, I will employ Biblical narrative criticism to analyse the textual elements that shape their characters. By examining their actions, speech, and roles within the narrative structure, I aim to uncover their motivations and agency. Stories are important because they allow people to feel a part of something bigger than themselves by

passing on religious and cultural traditions. Alter (2011) posits that a closer connection exists between history and fiction than traditionally assumed. Powell (1990) asserts that narrative criticism is "The study of Biblical texts as stories, emphasizing the authors' literary artistry and narrative techniques. Gunn (1993) defines narrative criticism as A literary approach to the study of the Bible that examines the form, structure, and function of the narrative texts and their implications for interpretation. It focuses on the narrative elements such as plot, characterization, time, point of view, and the narrative world, as well as the rhetoric and narrative strategies employed in the Text. Berlin (1982: 69) argues that the Bible should be treated as a literary composition and subjected to literary analysis and critique when examining framing narratives. Language, style, and significance are the building blocks of any writing, and this project aims to improve readers' grasp of these nuances.

Therefore, these definitions highlight the critical elements of narrative criticism, emphasizing the study of Biblical texts as stories and exploring their literary techniques, offering a valuable lens for examining the construction and interpretation of narratives. Narrative criticism analyses narratives' form, content, and structure to uncover underlying meanings and themes. The study builds on Alter's (1981) insights into the structural role of dialogue and Tribble's (1978) feminist interpretations by exploring how narrative devices such as speech and action frame Esther's identity. These perspectives are particularly relevant in analyzing Esther's moment of self-disclosure, where she strategically reveals her Jewish identity to save her people. This act demonstrates how dialogue functions as a literary device and a tool of agency and resistance. Meir Sternberg (1980s - 1990s) made significant contributions to the field of narrative criticism by delving into the intricate narrative devices employed in the Bible, such as wordplay, irony, and repetition. Sternberg's methodology underscored the intricacy of the Biblical narrative. Robert W. Funk's (1970s - 1990s) contributions to narrative criticism significantly impacted the field of New Testament studies with a specific focus on interpreting the Gospels as narratives rather than mere historical chronicles. David Gunn (1990s - 2000s) conducted research that focused on applying narrative criticism to the Old Testament with a primary focus on the books of Genesis and Samuel, engaging in an in-depth exploration of how narrative patterns and themes influence the theological messages conveyed within these texts. Other Biblical scholars, such as Punt (2003), explore Biblical narrative criticism in postcolonial South Africa, particularly its political nature and ideological agenda. It delves into the criteria and elements of this criticism, highlighting its different focus and purpose compared to traditional Biblical interpretation. West (1991) focused on the socio-political and cultural

aspects of the Biblical narrative, offering insights into reading and interpreting Biblical narratives in the African context. Madipoane Masenya (ngwan'a Mphahlele) (2015) emphasizes the importance of African scholars embracing their African heritage and context in their scholarship, particularly in African Biblical Hermeneutics. Chitando (2020) has also contributed to understanding Biblical narratives within the African context. Dube also explores feminist and postcolonial interpretations of Biblical texts. Her work examines Biblical narratives within the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa, reflecting on the intersections of social identity, power, and health. Togarasei (2016) utilizes Biblical narrative criticism to explore the relationship between the African social identity and the reading of the New Testament. Narrative criticism has transformed from its initial focus on literature to a multidisciplinary approach incorporating various disciplines such as literary theory, linguistics, psychology, and theology. Scholars have increasingly acknowledged the significance of comprehending the cultural and historical circumstances in which Biblical narratives were formulated.

Other Biblical scholars have made significant contributions to Biblical studies by applying narrative analysis to understand better Biblical texts' storytelling techniques, themes, and character dynamics. Their work has shed light on the rich narrative aspects of the Bible and how they contribute to its interpretation and meaning. Robert Alter (1981), in the book *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, employs narrative analysis to examine the narrative techniques, character development, and themes in Biblical stories, highlighting the unique literary qualities of the Hebrew Bible and its impact on storytelling. Phyllis Trible (1984). *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* applies narrative analysis from a feminist perspective to analyze stories of women in the Bible, such as Hagar, Tamar, and the daughter of Jephthah, highlighting the importance of considering gender and power dynamics within Biblical narratives. Walter Brueggemann's (1997) *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* utilized narrative analysis to explore the theological dimensions of the Old Testament, examining the narratives in the Hebrew Bible to uncover theological themes, ethical implications, and the ongoing dialogue between different voices within the Text. I intend to explore multiple text components in this analysis, including plot structure, thematic elements, agency, temporal aspects, and spatial settings, and I will continue with character development in Chapter 5. By delving into these aspects, I aim to achieve a more profound comprehension of the Text. This section will explore the narrative's plot, emphasizing the critical events and turning points that propel the narrative forward. By examining these vital moments, I intend to

reveal the fundamental structure and dynamics of the plot, thereby establishing a foundation for a more profound comprehension of the narrative as a whole.

4.3. Plot

4.3.1 Plot Structure

According to Jonker and Lawrie (2005), the presence of this element is essential for a text to be classified as a narrative. Moreover, examining the plot/storyline assists the interpreter in two significant ways. Firstly, it allows the interpreter of narratives to comprehend the central conflict or source of tension in the narrative. Furthermore, it is closely linked to this, as it serves as a means of discerning the desired transformations the narrative aims to achieve. These transformations can pertain to knowledge, where the reader gains new information by the end of the story; values, which involve the growth of the characters' values as well as the values of the reader; or the situation, which encompasses the events described in the narrative (2005:97-98).

However, Murphy (1981) states that

various scholars have offered different ways of dividing the Book of Esther into sections. “For instance, H. Striedl proposes a four-part division: (1) Setting-the-stage (Exposition): 1:1-3:1; (2) the main action (Haupthandlung): 3:2-9:15; (3) the etiology of the feast of Purim: 9:15-32; and (4) the conclusion: 10:1-3. Similarly, E. Wiirthwein presents a three-part structure, and other commentators prefer to divide the book into many smaller scenes” (1981:153).

I agree with Murphy (1981:153), who says, “It makes little difference whether one adopts the broad or narrow approach; the important thing is to recognize various scenes that succeed each other. In certain cases, there will be room for a legitimate difference of opinion” Therefore, to understand how the characters developed in the narrative, I broke down the structure into smaller parts. Jonker and Lawrie (2005) submit that the plot or storyline is considered by certain literary critics (in the Anglo-Saxon sense of the term) as the most crucial element in narrative texts. For a narrative to be considered a narrative, it must possess a coherent storyline or plot. Grossman's (2011) exploration of the Esther narrative notes how the plot elements are arranged in a mirror-like fashion, creating a balanced and symmetrical structure that enhances the thematic and dramatic impact of the story. Grossman (2011) further states that the chiasmic structure helps emphasize key moments and reversals in the narrative, such as the turning point

where Haman's plans are thwarted, and Esther and Mordecai's roles are elevated (2011:27-35). According to Frazee, the narrative structure of Dickens' "*Bleak House*" employs a dual narrative approach, avoiding a singular focus on the Esther narrative and extending the narrative's significance to society. It goes further to say that this bifurcation allows Dickens to critique societal corruption while maintaining suspense (1985:1-2). Jacobs (2008:2) asserts that

Scholars have written extensively on the character of Esther, her development over the course of the story, and the changes that she undergoes. However, their focus has been concentrated mainly on the transformation in chapters 4–7. Less attention has been paid to her character as described in the book's first part. This article focuses on Esther's character as portrayed in 2:1–20.

Therefore, with this assertion, Jacobs (2008) notes that the narrative structure contributing to the story of Esther in 2:1-20 introduces her as an exemplary character. A young orphan taken from her home and forced into a foreign environment further says she maintains her dignity and modesty, even after being chosen as queen. Esther's refusal to ask for anything initially (2:15) earns her the right to make significant requests of King Ahasuerus later, and this introduction sets the stage for her wisdom and the crucial role she will play in saving her people (2008:1-13). Weiland's (2002) analysis of the plot structure in the Book of Esther explains the exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, and falling action. Weiland indicates that the exposition introduces the setting and major characters, setting the stage for the conflict by discussing how the initial conflict between Queen Vashti and King Ahasuerus sets the stage for Esther's rise to queenship (2002:279). Weiland (2002) further explains how Esther, an orphan of Jewish descent, could become queen in the Persian Empire, thus preparing the ground for the main narrative (2002:286). Weiland (2002: 280) asserts that the central conflicts involve the antagonism between Haman and Mordecai and between the Jews and their enemies as well as Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman sets off a series of events leading to Haman's plot to annihilate the Jews, therefore arguing that the conflicts intensify as Haman seeks to destroy Mordecai and the Jews while Mordecai and Esther work to counter his plans. According to Weiland (2002), the rising action is steps taken by Esther and Mordecai to address the threat posed by Haman. Esther's resolve to approach the king despite the risk of death ("If I perish, I perish") and the delays and suspenseful moments leading up to her revealing her Jewish identity at the second banquet build tension (2002:284). Weiland (2002) asserts that the climax occurs when Esther reveals her Jewish identity to King Ahasuerus and exposes Haman's plot, leading to Haman's downfall. This pivotal moment turns the tide in favour of the Jews

(2002:286). Regarding the falling action, Weiland (2002) indicates that the resolution of the conflict is where Ahasuerus permits Esther and Mordecai to formulate a new law allowing the Jews to defend themselves. As a result, the Jews succeed The Jews leading in the celebration of Purim (2002:287). Lastly, Weiland (2002) indicates that the story concludes with the two significant conflicts pointing to the truth of Zeresh's prediction that Haman would fall (2002:287). In his narrative analysis, Ska (1990) presents a plot model that identifies the following structural components: exposition, inciting moment, complication, climax, turning point, falling action, resolution, last delay, and denouement (conclusion) (Ska, 1990, 21).

The plot mountain I provide below is to show the reader the character's progression. The representation effectively illustrates specific events and locations where the literary unit will be evaluated, namely (i) exposition, (ii) conflict, (iii) rising action, (iv) climax, and (v) falling action and resolution, play a crucial role in structuring the Text and comprehending the content of each section. In this analysis, I intend to thoroughly comprehend the plot and storyline of Esther to track the narrative's progression better, examine the challenges presented by the narrator, observe the climax where the plot becomes complex, and analyze how the story resolves itself. By closely reading the narrative, I aim to identify what modern readers can learn from it and draw conclusions about aspects of the Text that may be subject to debate based on the author's intentions and previous interpretations. Wink (1980:6) proposes that we concentrate on "the development of the ideas from the start to the conclusion of the text" when considering the methodology and relevant elements of the plot. Additionally, it is necessary to refer back to the outline. We combine the literary and semantic structures in this process. However, this research's primary emphasis is on the narrative structures.

The narrative analysis involves examining the story by considering the following guiding questions;

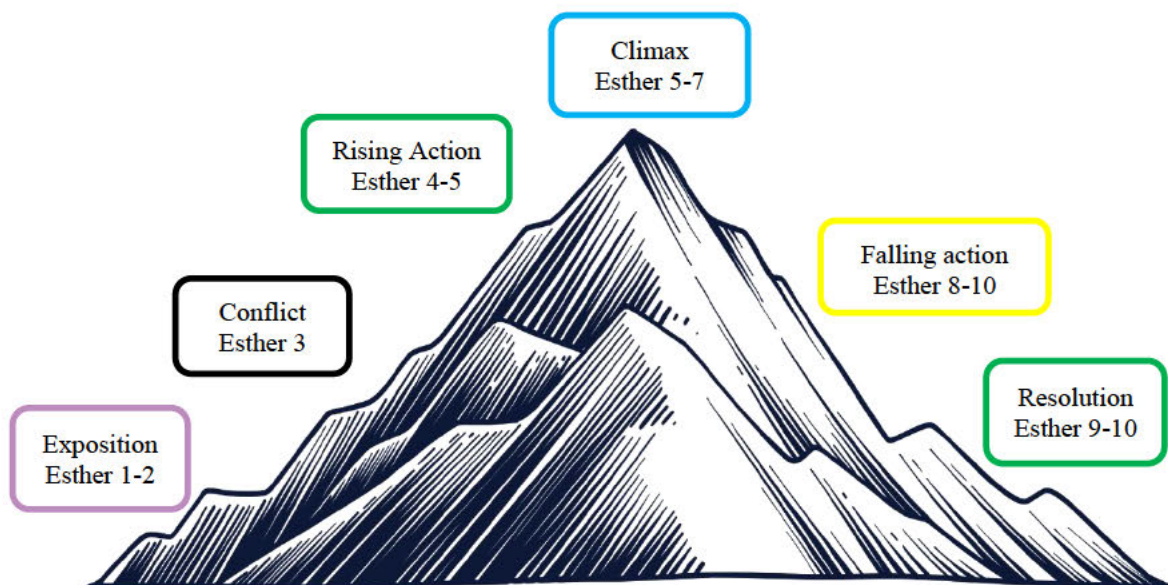
- a. How is the narrative structured?
- b. What are the characters' performances and their functions in the story?
- c. what are the contrasting ideas used to understand the dynamics in the narrative?

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- c. What are the contrasting ideas used to understand the dynamics in the narrative?

Wink's (1980) proposed approach directs this research towards Biblical hermeneutics, which primarily emphasizes the crucial elements necessary for achieving the most accurate interpretation of the Biblical text. I also reference Jonker and Lawrie (2005), who emphasize the significance of narrative frequency. The frequency of narration, closely linked to the chronological order of events, is an additional significant narrative aspect that must be considered when interpreting Biblical narratives. Regarding this matter, there are multiple possibilities, including (i) an event that happens once but is described multiple times, with each description occurring only once, and (ii) an event that is described the same number of times as it occurs. Jonker and Lawrie (2005:112) argue that a narrative approach should consider the reasons behind and consequences of the changes in frequency.

Figure 1: Plot mountain diagram



Source: of the mountain <https://templatelab.com/plot-diagram-templates/> not the content.

After examining various perspectives on narrative structures, including those proposed by Weiland (2002) and other scholars, I have closely analyzed Esther's text, and these are my findings. I have identified the elements of exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution through my reading. For instance, the exposition introduces Esther and Mordecai within the context of the Persian Empire, setting up the central conflict of their Jewish identity in a foreign court. The rising action builds as Esther navigates her dual identity,

culminating in the climax, where she bravely approaches the king to save her people. The falling action and resolution follow as the conflict is resolved with the defeat of Haman and the triumph of the Jewish community. Incorporating insights from scholars like Weiland (2002), who emphasizes the theological and narrative significance of these plot elements, I argue that the narrative of Esther not only follows a traditional plot arc but also serves as a creative response to societal challenges. This analysis reveals how the story uses structure to highlight identity, resistance, and transformation themes. Drawing on these diverse sources and approaches, my study aims to offer a comprehensive understanding of the narrative dynamics in Esther's text, demonstrating how it serves as a platform to contest, adapt, and redefine social orders and identities. Considering the information provided, the Book of Esther is about a Jewish orphan who ascends to the position of queen in Persia. In the face of a royal decree that endangers the Jewish people due to Haman's evil plot, Esther bravely discloses her true identity to King Xerxes, thwarts the scheme, and rescues her people. The story progresses through a sequence of occurrences centred around politically scheming individual acts of selflessness. It culminates in the Jews' victory over their adversaries and the subsequent establishment of the Purim festival to commemorate their rescue.

In this section, I examined the Text's narrative. The objective is to identify the narrative's fundamental themes, patterns, and insights to enhance our comprehension. Initially, I defined Biblical narrative criticism, followed by narrative analysis. This analysis began with the subsection of the narrative plot, followed by explaining the plot structure and applying Wink's (1980) Biblical hermeneutics approach, which emphasized the crucial elements necessary for achieving the most accurate interpretation of the Biblical Text. I also applied Jonker and Lawrie's (2005) narrative approach, which emphasized the significance of narrative frequency closely linked to the chronological order of events. Cremers (2019) emphasized that selecting a plot analysis method can substantially influence the insights and comprehension derived from the Text in the context of Biblical interpretation. It may be appropriate to employ linear analysis to investigate historical events or to trace a particular theme through the Bible. It may be advantageous to employ non-linear analysis to investigate intricate theological concepts interwoven throughout various text sections. The circular analysis provides a unique perspective by examining the cyclical nature of Biblical narratives or themes, thereby offering a comprehensive understanding of the Text's messaging and symbolism. Based on the diagram provided above, it is evident that the narrative is both cyclical and non-linear, as it is evenly

balanced from the exposition to the resolution, with numerous suspense episodes. In the forthcoming section of this narrative analysis, I examine the aspect of time.

4.4. Time

Allison (1994:108) argues that structuralist narratologists present the prevailing perspective on time within narratives. These narratologists assert that narrative is characterized by two distinct temporal dimensions: the time of the events (story) and the time of the narration (discourse). Furthermore, Bal (2017:34) introduces the concept of the fabula as a sequence of logically interconnected events caused or experienced by actors. Within the fabula, events and actors are essential components, distinct from the author's narrative activity. Events are arranged in a sequence that may deviate from chronological order. Bal (2017) distinguishes between the time allotted to events within the story and the actual time these events take. Genette (1972: 33-79), on the other hand, contributes to the understanding of narrative time by identifying three levels: order, duration, and frequency.

Genette (1972) provides a comprehensive method for analyzing time in narratives by examining the chronological sequence, temporal length, and repetition of events within a narrative. Genette's (1972) and Bal's (2017) methodology facilitates and, by employing their approach, investigation of the fundamental nature of time in narrative analysis. By using their approach, I elucidate the complex ways temporal structures influence the construction of meaning within stories to enhance my comprehension of how time influences the narrative experience and establish a solid foundation for my research. Additionally, the duration of the narrative for the various elements depends on the time it takes for them to occur. Allison's (1994) clarification of the concept of time is my primary focus in examining Esther's narrative. I closely follow the events chronologically and carefully consider the points the author highlights and restates. According to Brettler (2004), the study of Biblical time perception experienced a boom in the 1950s and 60s and is currently undergoing a comeback. Renowned academics debated in the middle of the 20th century the possibility that the Hebrew Bible authors understood time differently from us Westerners today—possibly narrower. Still, contributions to more recent research have raised the bar even higher. I shall focus on the idea of time as understood by the writers of the Biblical Books based on Brettler's (2004) study. As the authors contend that the perception of time varied for those who wrote these texts—a crucial component of this study—I mainly look at clear allusions to time or recurrent events. According to Bundvad (2014:281),

Time-talk is always tricky, but the Biblical near-absence of reflection on time as an independent subject raises additional questions: to what extent does the textual material enable us to discuss how the Biblical authors conceptualized time? It is time they discuss when time-related issues such as mortality, calendar, and history take to the stage.

Concerning the time analysis, I examine particular texts within the narrative. Allison (1994) has previously asserted that the narrative encompasses two separate temporal dimensions: the chronological sequence of events (story) and the chronological sequence of the narrative's presentation (discourse). On the contrary, Bal (2017) has introduced the notion of the fabula as a series of logically interconnected events that are either caused or experienced by actors. According to Jonker and Louis (2005), in narrative analysis, the temporal structure focuses on the sequence of events for the reader, which I demonstrate in the table below.

Table 1: Temporal Structure

Esther 1:3-4	In the third year of his reign, he made a feast unto all his princes and his servants; the army of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces, being before him, when he showed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honour of his excellent majesty, many days, even a hundred and fourscore days.
Esther 2:16	So Esther was taken unto King Ahasuerus into his house royal in the tenth month, Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign.
Esther 3:7	In the first month, which is the month Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, they cast Pur, that is, the lot, before Haman from day to day, and from month to month, to the twelfth month, which is the month Adar.
Esther 4:16	Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day; I also and my maidens will fast in like manner; and so will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish.
Esther 5:1	Now it came to pass on the third day that Esther put on her royal apparel and stood in the inner court of the king's house, over against the king's house, and the king sat upon his royal throne in the royal house, over against the entrance of the house.
Esther 6:1	On that night, he could not let the king sleep, and he commanded to bring the book of records of the chronicles, and they were read before the king.

Esther 9:17	On the thirteenth day of the month Adar and the fourteenth day of the same, they rested and made it a day of feasting and gladness.
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The previously mentioned verses offer a sequential record of events in the narrative of the Book of Esther, furnishing valuable insights into the sequence and duration of essential moments in the story. The table above presents recurring keywords associated with time that aid in establishing a chronological framework for the events in the Book of Esther. These keywords contribute to the narrative's temporal structure, essential for creating a coherent and understandable storyline. Furthermore, they assist in conveying the progression of events, cause-and-effect relationships, and the development of characters and themes over time.

Table 2: Chronological order

Year and Reign	These terms specify the timing of events concerning the reign of King Xerxes (Esther 1:3, Esther 2:16, Esther 3:7).
Month and Specific Months	References to months, such as Tebeth, Nisan, and Adar, pinpoint the timing of various events (Esther 2:16, Esther 3:7, Esther 9:17).
Day and Third Day	Specific days are mentioned, such as the third day when Esther put on her royal robes (Esther 5:1) and the thirteenth and fourteenth days of Adar during the events of Purim (Esther 9:17).
Night	The night concept is mentioned in Esther's request for the Jews to fast day and night (Esther 4:16).
Year of His Reign and Chronological Markers	Phrases like "in the third year of his reign" and "on the twelfth year of King Xerxes" provide chronological markers (Esther 1:3, Esther 3:7).
Rested and Feasting	The term "rested" concerns the day after the Jews' victory, which they made a day of feasting and joy (Esther 9:17). ³

Quick (2018), explores shifts and developments across diachronic perspectives rather than adhering strictly to narrative timelines. Brinks (2012), engaging with interdisciplinary scholarship between philosophy and theology, challenges the typical narrative timeline interpretations of Biblical texts, particularly in response to critiques of Historical Biblical

All of the above scriptures referenced to the Masoretic Text and throughout the study

³ Jewish Publication Society of America, 1917. *The holy scriptures according to the Masoretic text*. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America..

Criticism. I have adopted the narrative analysis of Jonker and Louis (2005) for the following. To begin with, I found that the narrative structures mentioned above established an organized structure that improved the clarity and organization of my analysis. While endeavouring to gain a more profound comprehension of how character development, plot progression, and thematic exploration unfold throughout a narrative, I could effectively dissect and interpret complex narratives by adhering to these timelines.

The Book of Esther (MT) is structured in a way that progresses through a series of events that reveal Esther's character in various (SIT) situations. I begin with the critical episodes. Depicted in chapter 2:7, the highlight is her vulnerability as an orphan and reliance on her cousin Mordecai. In verses 7-11, her selection as queen is emphasized, specifically by her beauty. In chapter 2, verses 19-23, her interaction with Mordecai displays her loyalty by her obedience to conceal her Jewish identity. This event demonstrates Esther's ability to hide and navigate her identity in a foreign court. In Chapter 5 vs 7, Esther's courage is a central theme as she risks her life to approach the king without being summoned. Suspense is built in chapters 5 vs 1-8 when she reveals her request over two banquets, intervening for the Jews in verse 7. In chapter 8, verse 10, Esther's strategic thinking is brought to the forefront as she and Mordecai devise a plan to save the Jewish people. Chapters 9-10 highlight her role in establishing the annual observance of Purim and shed light on her impact on matters of social justice.

Campbell (1990:12-22) argues that the narrative revolves around the king's third, seventh, and twelfth years, and temporal indicators assist readers in comprehending the sequence of events, thereby establishing the king's timeline as the fundamental structure of Esther's narrative as moulded by the events involving King Ahasuerus. Campbell (1990:36-101) adds that structural narrative analysis of Esther in the Masoretic Text (MT) asserts that the narrative contains contrasting voices, in outlining the following: (a) The Royal or Persian Voice serves as the leading narrative voice in the story, introducing the chronology, style, and rhythmic patterns. The narrative commences with the chronicle of the king's reign, starting from the moment Esther is chosen as queen and progressing towards the circumstances that culminate in the confrontation with Haman; (b) The Jewish Protagonists' Voice presents the Jewish characters, Esther and Mordecai, and their experiences and actions within the Persian court. Their narrative is intricately intertwined with the chronology of the king, yet it generates a distinct sequence of events crucial for the Jewish community's survival; (c) The voice of the Jews' antagonists focuses on Haman and his scheme to annihilate the Jewish people, catalyzing the conflict and tension that drives the narrative. The crucial junctures in these voices involve the utilization of

chance to determine the date for the destruction of the Jewish people and the subsequent overturning of Haman's intentions. Campbell (1990:36-101) continues to argue how several narrative devices contribute to the temporal structure of the narrative of Esther by highlighting the following: (a) Successive Annual Points: The story unfolds through specific yearly markers, such as those as mentioned above third and seventh years leading to the twelfth-year crisis; (b) Repetitions, Retrogressions, Anticipations, and; (c) Synchronic Events: These devices accentuate and complicate the time frame initiated by the king's voice. They allow for reflection on past events, set expectations for future events, and connect simultaneous occurrences; (d) Pattern of Reversals: A structural underpinning where roles and situations are inverted, such as Haman's rise and fall and the Jewish people's impending doom turning into their triumph; (e) Use of the Word "Day": The term is used both literally and figuratively throughout the narrative to denote various points in time, such as "the days of Ahasuerus," the day of the planned extermination, and the days of banquets and fasting undefined. Campbell (1990) asserts that the narrative elements mentioned create a detailed timeline that enables readers to follow the plot's development in time. Additionally, these elements allow for examining the complex interaction between character motivations, decisions, and the resulting changes in the story's course. These devices contribute to a sophisticated temporal structure that enhances the narrative, giving it a sense of chronological progression, thematic depth, and more significant meaning for its original and future audiences. I will now look at the nuanced interplay of the symbolism and motifs in the narrative.

(d) Symbolism and Motifs: The repeated mention of Esther's physical beauty is mentioned in chapter 2 vs 7, symbolizing her external charm that plays a pivotal role in the narrative. Her charm is evident in her ability to strategically think, plan, and execute ways of saving her people's lives, even to the peril of losing hers in collaboration with Mordecai, as depicted in chapter 5 vs 1-8.

According to Wood (2021), the motif of Esther and Mordecai carefully explores the complex relationship between writing, power, and gender. Wood (2021) claims that Esther's depiction as a writer is a preliminary poststructuralist critique of the postponement of meaning in a society that values textual involvement, which provides additional support for this argument (2021). Wood (2021) argues that writing plays a crucial role for Esther and Mordecai, allowing them to establish their narrative position and assert authority over their own story (2021:23). In addition, Wood (2021) explores the intertextual aspect of Esther's role as a writer, making connections with other female writing figures in the Hebrew Bible, such as Jezebel. Wood

(2021) further argues that this intertextual allusion highlights Esther's identity as a writer and provides insight into the complex power dynamics between Esther and Mordecai in the story (2021). Wood's (2021) argument posits that analysing Esther and Mordecai's motif in the Book of Esther is crucial for comprehending the complex interplay between writing, power dynamics, and gender norms. In addition, Wood's (2021) analysis encompasses the linguistic subtleties in the narrative, explicitly emphasizing the simultaneous reference to Esther and Mordecai in the act of composing the Purim edict in chapter 9 vs 29. Wood (2021) highlights the atypical grammatical structure in which the verb "to write" is conjugated in the feminine singular form despite Esther and Mordecai being mentioned as the subjects. The grammatical peculiarity highlights Esther's prominence in the narrative, prompting a more thorough analysis of her role in writing (2021).

Furthermore, Wood (2021) explores the formation of Esther's authorial identity, highlighting that it is not solely based on physical writing but on the ascription of authority accompanying the written decree. Although it is uncertain whether Esther physically wrote the document, Wood (2021) argues that the bestowed authorial authority to Esther is the central aspect of its importance. This attribution is situated within the era's more significant cultural and textual frameworks, signifying an early expression of feminist ideals by asserting female autonomy in creating written works despite the predominantly male-dominated ancient Near Eastern society (2021:35-59).

In addition to enriching my analysis, this method facilitated a more methodical examination of the author's narrative techniques to captivate and engage their audiences. My objective was to render a comprehensive study that elucidated the intricacies of Esther and offered a thorough examination of narratives that transcended a mere plot summary, thereby fostering a nuanced, rigorous, and insightful interpretation. The narrative of Esther, with its dramatic twists and character changes, not only captivates the reader but also offers a profound commentary on the social and political realities of the Jewish diaspora in ancient Persia, which I aim to illustrate in the next subsequent section through the application of the social identity theory.

4.5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I explained and analyzed the fundamental elements, including the defining Biblical narrative analysis and its structure, in the plot. I employed a conventional narrative structure, including exposition, rising action, conflict, and resolution, to elucidate the ancient text's complex storytelling techniques and thematic developments. Through this structural approach, I demonstrated how the narrative effectively depicts the intricacies of identity, power dynamics, and cultural survival. In the next chapter, I continue with narrative analysis focusing only on the characterization of Esther and Mordecai with the application of (SIT) in the attempt to demonstrate how Biblical narrative criticism and (SIT) can enhance the exploration of characters Mordecai and Esther within the context of Jewish identity within the diaspora.

Chapter 5: Integration of Narrative Analysis and Social Identity Theory

5.1 Introduction

In chapter 4, I began analysing the Esther narrative, focusing on the plot, structure, point of view and time. This chapter synthesizes the insights gained from Biblical narrative criticism and (SIT) to analyze the characterization of Esther and Mordecai. It aims to demonstrate how these theoretical frameworks reveal the complexities of identity negotiation, power dynamics, and group interactions within the narrative of the Book of Esther. The synergy between Biblical narrative criticism and SIT is most evident in Esther's hidden identity analysis, which allows the ability to deconstruct how the narrative's structure emphasizes concealment as a survival strategy. SIT deepens this understanding by framing it within the process of social categorization, where Esther strategically positions herself within and outside different social groups to navigate power dynamics. This dual approach enhances textual analysis and provides insights into the social mechanisms that drive identity negotiation. Following this synthesis, the chapter delves into specific examples of characterization, focusing on how Esther and Mordecai embody themes of resilience, identity concealment, and resistance. Applying Biblical narrative criticism and SIT in tandem, this analysis uncovers the narrative's broader implications for understanding contested identities in ancient and contemporary contexts to answer the following sub-questions:

1. *In what ways are Esther and Mordecai characterized in Esther (MT)?*
2. *How can (SIT) enhance a character exploration of Mordecai and Esther as they are embedded within Jewish identity?*

To achieve this integration, I apply characterization from narrative analysis as a methodology and social identity theory as a dual approach to the characters in an attempt to answer these questions and explore the multifaceted nature of identity, revealing the complex interplay between the characters and the broader social context in which they exist. I also do a synthesis, discussion and, lastly, the conclusion.

5.2 Characterization

According to Jonker and Lawrie (2005), The plot emerges precisely when characters are described in their relationships to themselves, other characters, and events. Biblical narratives are no exception. However, one must be forewarned that Biblical narratives show far less interest in the psychological aspects of characters than modern narratives do. Jonker and Lawrie

(2005:94) argue that in Biblical narratives, the characters serve the storyline; they are seldom employed to find the characters' attention. Not all characters necessarily function in the same way in a narrative, so a distinction between different types of characters is commonly made. Furthermore, Jonker and Lawrie (2005:95) state

that this distinction has different versions. Some distinguish between sound characters (characters that are described in some detail, that undergo development during the narrative, of whom more than one dimension is revealed to the readers) and fat characters (characters that act in a purely functional way in the narrative, that do not undergo character development, of whom little is said). A variation on this bipartite distinction is the tripartite model that distinguishes between "fully-fledged characters", "types", and "agents". The "fully-fledged" character is complex, and the narrative shows several traits and qualities. The "type" is described only in terms of one feature of her character, one of particular importance to the storyline (2005:95).

Berlin (1983:23) states that the "Bible contains characters that are neither flat, static, nor opaque." Berlin continues by emphasizing "that it is dangerous to generalize about characters in the Bible because there is a large array of characters of various types and a repertoire of techniques for characterizing them; therefore, it suggests three main categories for classifying character types".

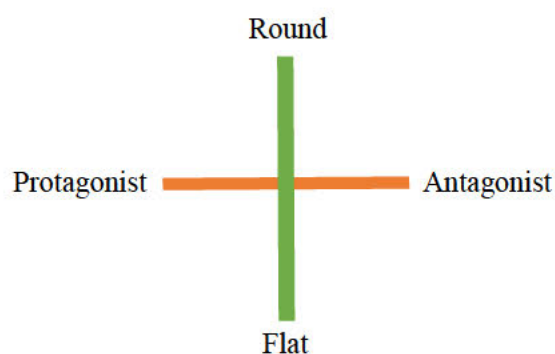
Berlin (1983) further indicates that these character types are flat and round characters; flat characters are built around a single quality or trait and do not stand out as individuals. Rounded characters are more complex, manifesting many traits and appearing as 'real people'...The round character is the fully-fledged character; the flat character is the type, and the functionary is the agent. All can be found in the Biblical narrative, and the same person may appear as a full-fledged character in one story and as a type or agent in another (1983:23-24).

The characterization of Esther has been a subject of extensive debate within Biblical scholarship, particularly regarding additions, canonization, and validity. This study exclusively concentrates on characterizing Esther and Mordecai as depicted in the M.T. version. Jonker and Lawrie (2005) assert that narratives typically include characters. The plot unfolds precisely as characters are delineated in their relationships with themselves, other characters, and events. Biblical narratives are no different in this regard. It is important to note that Biblical narratives are less concerned with characters' psychological aspects than modern narratives. In Biblical

narratives, characters are primarily used to advance the storyline rather than to draw attention to themselves. Characters in a narrative do not always have the same role, so they are expected to be categorized into different types (2005:94).

Moreover, various iterations of this differentiation exist. Some people categorize characters into two groups: sound characters, who are described in detail, undergo development, and have multiple dimensions revealed to the readers; and fat characters, who serve a functional role in the narrative, do not undergo character development, and have little information provided about them. A modification of this bipartite differentiation is the tripartite framework that differentiates among "fully-developed characters", "archetypes", and "actors". The character portrayed in the narrative is multifaceted, exhibiting various traits and qualities. The type is solely characterized by one notable aspect of her character, which holds significant significance to the plot, as highlighted by Jonker and Lawrie (2005:95).

Dekker (2016:81) asserts that characters play a crucial role in almost every narrative, including the stories in the Hebrew Bible. Fox (2001) analyzes the central characters in the book of Esther, including Esther herself, Mordecai, Haman, and King Ahasuerus. He shows how each character embodies certain ideological positions and interacts with each other to create the overall message of the Text, arguing that Esther's character represents a form of Jewish assimilation into Persian society. In contrast, Mordecai embodies a more traditional Jewish identity. LaBreche (1992:3) posits that characters in a narrative can be categorized according to two criteria: their significance to the storyline and the extent to which they are portrayed with lifelike qualities and details, and can be diagrammed as follows:



Demonstrating both classifications acknowledges that characters are employed or cultivated to varying degrees based on the narrator's intentions; classification serves as a means to determine the narrator's focus. LaBreche (1992:3) further mentions that the extent to which any character is developed depends upon the narrator's intent for the narrative. If it is to reveal human nature

through the life of one individual or a group, the primary characters will be more fully developed. However, if the narrator wishes to focus on the plot, the characters may be developed sparingly (Perrine with Arp, as cited by LaBreche et al., 1992).

LaBreche (1992:3-5) further asserts that round or complex characters possess a greater sense of realism due to their multifaceted personalities, encompassing various character traits that occasionally conflict. These characters exhibit greater relatability and proximity to actual human beings as they possess multidimensional qualities and are not confined to a limited set of traits. They have a broader comprehension and first-hand experience of the world as they engage with various aspects of life. Well-crafted characters typically have a crucial impact on the narrative, as most narratives only accommodate one or two fully developed characterizations. The Hebrew Bible contains extensive narratives that depict various individuals, such as Abraham, Joseph, and David, who are portrayed in detailed and recurring storylines.

Nevertheless, in any given narrative, only the traits of one or two characters may be relevant. (Goodman, as cited by LaBreche et al., 1992) says, “Closely related to the concept of roundness is the idea of development: the complication of the plot produces complexity in the characterization, in imitation of the process of life. The imagined person need not grow or change outstandingly, but our knowledge of him increases with acquaintance, and the portrait rounds out and fills in”. Sternberg (1999) argues that in most Biblical stories, at least one character goes through a drama of discovery, and none ends up as unchanged as they began. A reversal rather than permanent change often follows Change within a character. Biblical discovery is portrayed as a momentary illumination, and a return to darkness can follow (as cited by LaBreche et al., 1992).

According to LaBreche (1992:7), a flat character is a character who possesses only one or two traits and does not undergo any significant development throughout the narrative. Minor characters typically lack depth, although external characteristics can distinguish them. Flat characters, in contrast to round characters, remain static and do not experience any form of development. Flat characters possess the primary benefit of being readily identifiable and memorable to the reader, necessitating little interpretation. Consequently, the writer can concentrate on the storyline or create more intricately crafted characters. In the Biblical narrative, major characters seldom remain one-dimensional, as the introduction of unexpected elements is frequently observed. A distinct classification of flat characters is the archetype. These characters embody specific social roles and possess characteristics associated with those

roles, such as the antagonist, sage, government representative, or seer. Typecasting depersonalizes the characters and diminishes their role to a mere plot device. In general, comprehending the dynamics of characterization in Biblical narratives can provide insight into how characters change, remain unchanged, or fulfil specific roles within the plot.

LaBreche (1992:6-10) continues by highlighting the following:

Protagonist: the central character in the story and can be sympathetic or unsympathetic. Biblical narratives often have multiple protagonists. Examples include Ruth, Naomi and Boaz in the book of Ruth. The importance of significant characters concerning one another can vary throughout the narrative, leading to different interpretations of their classification as protagonists.

Antagonist: a character who opposes the protagonist. For example, they can be significant characters in the Hebrew Bible, such as David and Saul or David and Absalom, or they can serve essential plot functions while being characterized enough to fulfil their roles.

Agent: is the flattest character type, functioning primarily as a plot device or prop. Agents are usually anonymous and passive, acted upon rather than being active characters.

Minor Character: Minor characters serve specific functions within the narrative and are characterized only enough to fulfil those functions. They can be flat or round but are subordinate to the main character(s). Their individual stories may not receive closure, and they never remain the centre of attention for more than an episode or two. Minor characters can define the social or cultural context, advance the plot, or provide depth and meaning to the narrative. Occasionally, a minor character may serve as a foil to set off or heighten another character, usually by being a contrast.

Full-Fledged Character: Full-fledged characters, often considered major characters or protagonists, have their motivations and history fully established. They conflict and change as the story progresses, evoking strong responses from the audience. These characters are typically portrayed with strengths and weaknesses, and their complexity develops gradually through progressive revelation in successive episodes. Full-fledged characters are realistic and dynamic individuals developed more extensively than necessary for plot advancement.

Combined Character: A combined classification of characters acknowledges that no categories are neat and considerable overlap exists among different character types. This classification recognizes that character importance and development can vary based on the narrator's purposes. For example, the more important a character is to the plot, the more fully developed and complex they will likely be. Viewing character labels as points on a spectrum rather than discrete categories is essential.

In Goswell (2021:1-13), an analysis of the characters of Esther, Mordecai and King Ahasuerus examines how the traditional textual divisions and titles in the Hebrew and Latin versions of the Book of Esther influence the perception of the main character in the narrative and how ancient readers perceived the main characters. Goswell's (2021) examination considers who the early readers of the text thought were the protagonists and to whom the Jews owe their deliverance in the narrative. It notes that different textual schemes emphasize other characters, suggesting there needed to be a consensus among ancient readers on who the main character was. However, regarding the analyses of how the structure and organization of the Book of Esther in ancient manuscripts contribute to the understanding of its main characters and the story's interpretation, evidence shows that each character—Mordecai, Esther, and Ahasuerus—plays a vital role in the story. Ahasuerus' role is significant enough that he could be seen as the main character. Berlin (1983:23) mentions that “it is difficult and dangerous to generalize about characters in the Bible because there is an array of characters of various types and repertoire of techniques for characterizing them”. Berlin (1983) further suggests three main classification types and examinations by which characterizations are achieved. In literary criticism, Berlin (1983) asserts that it is customary to distinguish between flat and round characters. Flat characters, or types, are built around single qualities or traits and do not stand out as individuals. Round characters, on the other hand, are much more complex, manifesting many traits and appearing as "real people." Berlin (1983) outlines several techniques for characterization within these classifications (1983:23-33). Below, characterization techniques are employed to characterize Esther and Mordecai in this study.

(a) Description - According to Berlin (1983:34), it "is often said that the Bible rarely describes its characters due to several factors: the ratio of description in general to action and dialogue is relatively low, and the character tends to be subordinate to the plot. Thus, when we are given details about a character's appearance or dress, it is usually because this information is needed for the plot".

(b) Inner Life - Berlin (1983:37) indicates that

there is no character description in the Bible, which is the notion that the Bible does not convey the inner life of its characters. The inward life is assumed but not presented in primitive narrative literature, whether Hebraic or Hellenic. To make the thoughts of characters even more concrete, they may be presented in the form of interior monologue showing the inner life of its characters, and what the reader knows of the inner life adds to the total Characterization of an individual.

(c) Speech and actions – Berlin (1983:38) “Description and inner life are usually covered in the discourse by the narrator's words and sometimes by other characters' words. In the English critical tradition, they are considered forms of 'telling'. A character is 'shown' through his own words - his speech - and his actions (these are in the narrator's words, of course). Biblical narrative extensively uses the speech and actions of characters to further the plot and create characterization”.

(d) Point of view - Berlin (1983:42) argues that

it is impossible to discuss character without reference to the point of view, for, after all, a character is not perceived by the reader directly but rather mediated or filtered through the telling of the (implied) author, the narrator, or another character. The reader is shown what the author wishes to show. The purpose of a discussion of points of view is to understand who is telling or showing what we are receiving and how these types of presentations are made. Point of view is a modern concept associated with the criticism of contemporary fiction, but it is possible to speak of point of view in ancient and contemporary texts.

Berlin (1983:53-55) mentions that in Biblical narrative analysis, the disparity between two characters refers to the differences, conflicts, or contrasts in the characteristics, perspectives, actions, or roles of two individuals within the narrative. This disparity often contributes to the complexity and depth of the narrative, and understanding the discrepancy between characters involves examining how their distinct traits, motivations, and roles interact or clash within the narrative framework. Further, the disparity between characters and the narrator/reader consists of the distinction or disconnection between the characters' perspectives, knowledge, or understanding and that of the narrator or the implied reader. It can encompass differences in information, beliefs, emotions, or insights, creating a layer of complexity in the narrative. This disparity can manifest in various ways, such as dramatic irony, where the reader knows

something that the characters do not, or unreliable narration, where the narrator's perspective may be biased or limited.

(e) Narrator's voice - Berlin, (1983:57-58) states

the narrator's voice can be heard throughout the text in many phrases ranging from the simple "he said," which introduces direct discourse to long passages of summary or description; often, a story opens with a narrated summary or background and then proceeds to the scenic section, generally marked by the beginning of the dialogue. In the Biblical narrative, the narrator constantly moves between external and internal presentation, sometimes stepping back from panoramic view and then moving close to a character to view things through his eyes, even getting into his mind to explain his actions and reactions.

(f) Characters' point of view - Berlin (1983: 59) indicates that "a character's point of view may be conveyed either through his own words – direct discourse – through the narrator's words. However, it is not always easy to discern whether the narrator expresses his view or, if a character's exactly, which character's. There are several textual features, however, which may serve as indicators of characters' point of view."

According to Roth (2020), Biblical studies' characterization is a multifaceted field that necessitates an in-depth understanding of how traits are revealed, developed, and interact with the plot to contribute to the thematic essence of the narrative. The comparative method in Biblical studies has been expanded by scholars who have investigated the interplay between myth and history in Biblical literature, according to Amihay and Li (2020). Furthermore, linguistic research by Ononye and Ezugwu (2022) and Sylvester et al. (2022) has underscored the importance of understanding the nuances of character interactions in Biblical writings. In illustrated books, particular Biblical figures, such as David and Goliath, have been closely examined to comprehend the consequences of modifying Biblical stories for educational purposes. Hagan (2019) argues that scholars have criticized conventional methods of analyzing Biblical narratives, highlighting the importance of recognizing diverse patterns instead of strictly following predetermined literary conventions. According to West (2018), the study of interpretive resilience in Biblical narratives highlights how marginalized communities find strength by interacting with Biblical texts. According to Sharon (2024), the ethical and moral values associated with coercive actions in the narratives of the Hebrew Bible have been a topic of investigation. This inquiry raises questions about the theological importance of judgements

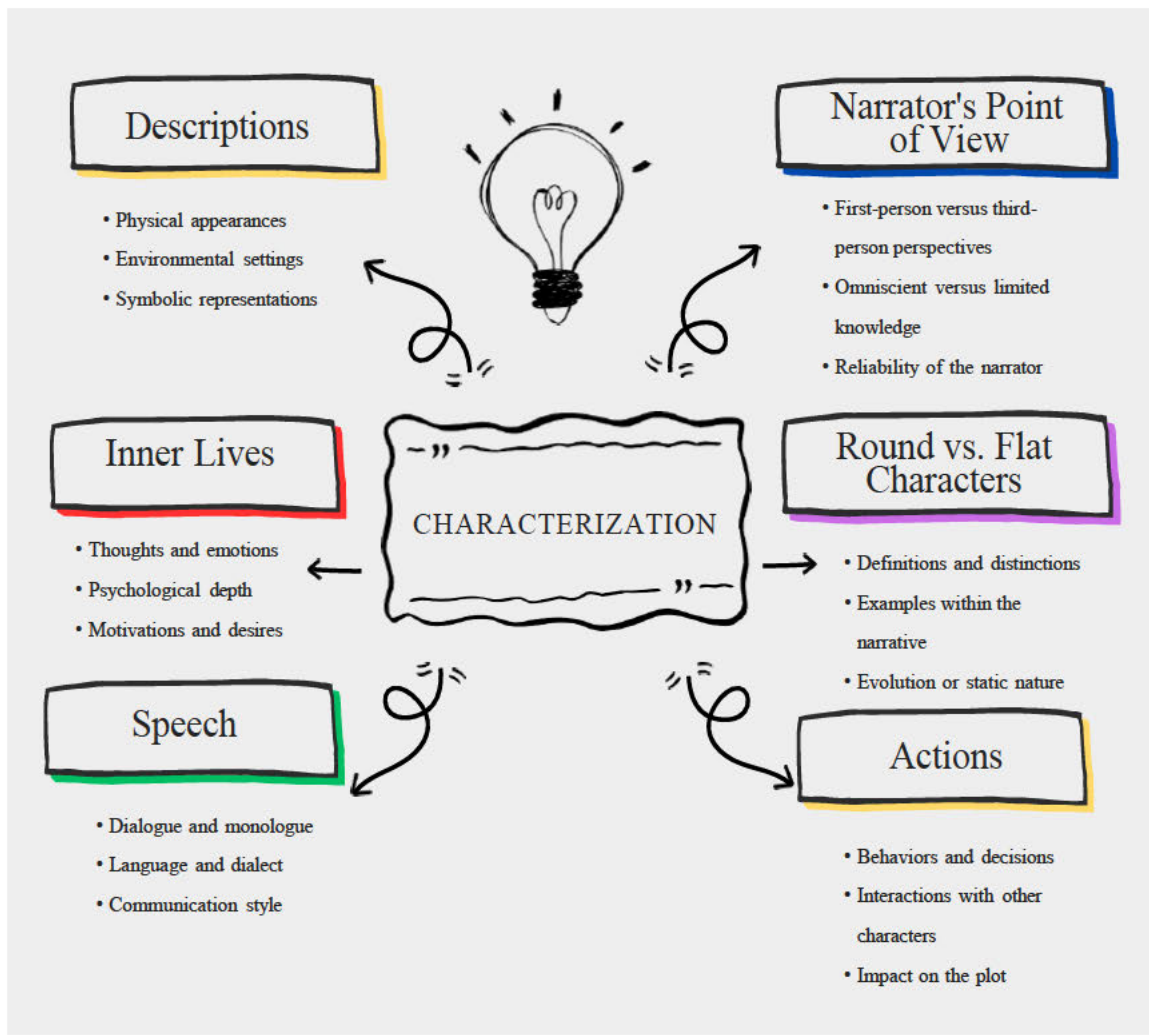
related to coercion in Biblical stories. Kraut (2018) analyses the literary functions of characters such as Reuben and Judah in the narratives of Genesis to reveal hidden psychological patterns that serve specific literary objectives. According to Ye (2022), scholars have examined the connection between Biblical characters and archetypes to understand better how Biblical stories reflect ancient concepts of sin, redemption, and human imperfections. According to Vercauteren (2016), the term "round characters" was first introduced by E.M. Forster in 1927 to describe well-developed characters in literature. Forster distinguished a notable differentiation between flat and round characters, with round characters showing more incredible intricacy and comprehensive development in literary compositions. This distinction has profoundly impacted the examination of characters and understanding their complexity in storytelling. Round characters exhibit intricate qualities and experience growth or transformation throughout the narrative. These individuals are distinguished by their profoundness, frequently undergoing development, metamorphosis, or inner turmoil through diverse characteristics, emotions, and thoughts. They often exhibit unpredictability and authenticity, mirroring the intricacy of actual individuals. Thus, they enhance the story's emotional profundity and thematic complexity. Round characters are characterized by their intricate nature and progression. They frequently encounter internal and external conflicts resulting in personal development or transformation.

According to LaBreche (1992: 6-10), "full-fledged characters are realistic and dynamic individuals who are developed in greater detail than required for advancing the plot". Both fully-fledged characters and round characters are literary terms that refer to well-developed characters, although they emphasize slightly different aspects of characterization. Fully-fledged and round characters are used in literature to describe well-developed characters, but they emphasize somewhat different aspects of Characterization. Therefore, the author carefully emphasizes these characters in the advancement of the plot, assigning them important roles and offering detailed depictions of their actions and choices, which are essential for the story's development. Although well-developed, fully-fledged characters may or may not display substantial internal conflict or undergo transformation. The focus lies on their comprehensive description rather than their dynamic characteristics.

According to Veale (2014: 1-8), character arcs focus on the transformation and inner development of characters, the path of their change, and the significance of these elements in crafting emotionally captivating narratives. Consequently, examining characterization in Biblical studies necessitates a multifaceted approach that analyses the complexities of

characters within Biblical narratives by considering literary dimensions to have a broader understanding, even for the modern reader. I provide a diagram below to demonstrate this concept, as referenced by Ye (2022), focusing on Descriptions, Inner Lives, Speech, Actions, the Narrator's Point of View and Round vs. Flat Characters.

Figure 2: Characterization Concepts.



Source: the design was by Canva <https://www.canva.com>, not the content

Esther

Nadar (2007), in her characterisation reading, provides a fresh perspective on Esther by examining her role through a feminist lens, challenging traditional interpretations and highlighting Esther's potential as a subversive role model. Millar's (2022) reading of Esther explores the intertextual relationship between Esther and the Book of Proverbs. Millar (2022) argues that the character of Esther is enriched and complicated when read alongside the wisdom literature of Proverbs, highlighting Esther's virtue and moral complexities and offering a nuanced view of her character as more than a passive figure in the narrative. Song's (2010) reading of the character of Esther presents a provoking examination of Esther's character through a narrative and self-critical lens, challenging traditional interpretations that either vilify or idealize Esther, instead portraying her as a multifaceted character navigating a patriarchal society. Song's (2021) compelling use of narrative criticism explored Esther's actions and motivations within the story, arguing that Esther's strategic use of her beauty and position does

not diminish her agency but enhances her subversive role. Therefore, it emphasizes the complexity of Esther's character, positioning her as a product of and a challenger to her societal context. In Esther's reading, Crawford and Greenspoon (2009) offer only a comprehensive overview of historical, literary, and feminist readings. Ki (2023) examines the narrative's themes of power and control. Ki's focus is primarily on the socio-political implications and the governance dynamics in the text rather than the intricate development of Esther. Miles (2015) examines the Esther narrative through the lens of Persian banquet scenes, which are portrayed as more than mere critiques of Persian decadence. Miles (2015) argues that these banquets serve a crucial literary function that aligns with the hero myth motif. Claassens and Gouws (2014) analyze the character of Esther by drawing parallels between the Biblical narrative and contemporary issues of sexual violence in South Africa, viewing Esther not just as a passive character but rather as an active agent who navigates and negotiates her identity and power within a patriarchal society. Claassens and Gouws (2014) highlight her resilience and strategic actions to protect her people, emphasizing the themes of survival, resistance, and agency against systemic oppression. Claassens and Gouws (2014) explore how Esther's narrative can be a source of inspiration and reflection for addressing modern social justice issues, particularly the ongoing struggles against gender-based violence, underlining the enduring relevance of Esther's character in advocating for justice and change. Holt (2021), in the reading of Esther, employed a combination of narrative criticism and intertextual analysis of the plot and character with other text traditions of Esther and, through the study, discovers the multifaceted narrative addresses issues of power, identity and survival. Holt (2021:31-46) concludes that the text can speak to different contexts and audiences, and it is deliberately designed for alternative interpretations and remains relevant across different eras and cultural settings. I agree with Holt (2021) as this assertion responds to my primary focus of study.

The following sub-section highlights the characterization of Esther, specifically her character development and the depiction of Esther and Mordecai as round, fully-fledged characters with distinct character arcs. Scholars such as Carruthers (2020) and Firth and Melton (2002), who read Esther, look at how the narrative has been read from ancient times to present times. Carruthers (2002) argues that the book's versatility offers a range of meanings over centuries and posits that the text is rich with themes of identity, power and survival, which resonates across diverse contexts. Firth and Melton (2002) suggest that the intertextuality reading of Esther opens up new avenues for understanding the Book of Esther and enriches our interpretation through its connection to other Biblical and non-biblical texts to gain deeper

insights into the themes, motifs and narrative strategies. I agree with Berlin (1983:23), who mentions that “it is difficult and dangerous to generalize about characters in the Bible because there is an array of characters of various types and repertoire of techniques for characterizing them” Therefore, my study highlights how their actions and growth. Within the narrative, they reveal their complexities and depth. By integrating my findings, I provide a comprehensive understanding of their character development, enriching the existing scholarly conversation on the characters of Esther and Mordecai.

5.2.1 Esther as a Fully-Fledged Character

As proposed by Ye (2022), Veale (2014) and LaBreche (1992), I focus on Esther as a fully-fledged character. In Esther 2:7, she is thoroughly developed with a transparent background, motivations, and significant actions that impact the story. In 2:10, 20, she is introduced as an orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai. Her Jewish identity is initially kept secret, according to Mordecai's advice. In 2:17, King Ahasuerus selects her as queen due to her beauty and grace. In 3:13 and 4:8, her position as queen becomes crucial when Haman's decree to annihilate the Jews is issued, as she is in a unique position to influence the king. In 4:11-16, Esther bravely approaches the king without being summoned at Mordecai's urging, risking her life to plead for her people. In 5:1-8 and 7:3-6, she strategically invites the king and Haman to banquets, where she ultimately reveals her Jewish identity and Haman's plot. In 8:3-6, after Haman's downfall, she continues to use her influence to secure the safety of the Jews. Esther is depicted as a fully developed character, with a comprehensive portrayal that encompasses her personal history, her ascent to the position of queen, and her pivotal role in rescuing the Jewish people. Her character is integral to the narrative's progression and resolution.

5.2.2 Esther as a Round Character

Nkhonjera (2015:44) quotes

Forster (1974:46-54) states that Esther is perceived as a "flat" character. This description has been strongly disputed, with arguments that prioritizing the plot over her characterization is a neglect of reader interest (Day 1995:11). Scholars like Moore (1990:90) and Anderson (1954:831) also agree with Forster, suggesting Esther lacks depth, making it difficult for readers to identify with

her. However, I aim to demonstrate otherwise, revealing a more complex and dynamic character in Esther.

In Esther 2:10 and 2:20, she is portrayed as an obedient and passive young woman, following Mordecai's instructions and hiding her Jewish identity. In 4:11, when faced with the crisis of Haman's decree, Esther initially hesitates, fearing for her life if she approaches the king unbidden. In 4:16, encouraged by Mordecai's words, she transforms into a courageous and proactive leader, deciding to risk her life for her people. In 5:1-8 and 7:3-6, Esther's strategic thinking is evident in her planning the banquets to gain the king's favour and reveal Haman's plot. In 8:3-6, she demonstrates emotional depth and a strong sense of justice by pleading for her people's safety even after Haman's downfall. Her complexity and development add depth to the story, highlighting themes of bravery, identity, and the importance of standing up for one's people. Esther's internal conflict, transformation from a passive to a proactive figure, and emotional journey make her a dynamic and realistic character. Her growth is central to the narrative and its themes.

5.2.3 Esther's Character Arc

Adelman's (2014) reading of Esther explores the character of Esther through the dual lenses of rabbinic midrash and feminist hermeneutics, focusing on themes of gender fluidity and identity. Adelman suggests that Esther's character embodies complex negotiations of identity, transcending traditional gender roles and expectations, providing a nuanced understanding of Esther's actions and decisions within the narrative, highlighting the fluidity and multiplicity of her identity. Veale (2014) proposes that character arcs serve as transformative journeys that characters undergo in a narrative, moving from a conceptual start-point to an end-point, representing inner change and growth. Esther's narrative is compelling and effectively portrays the significant transformation of its main character. In the initial stages of Esther 2:7, 2:10, and 2:20, she is portrayed as a docile and compliant young lady, concealed and safeguarded within the king's harem. Esther's transformation is initiated in Esther 3:13 and 4:8, as she becomes aware of the decree to exterminate the Jews. In Esther 4:11, Esther initially hesitates and fears approaching the king without being summoned. However, she later develops into a brave and tactful leader, motivated by Mordecai's encouragement to take decisive action, as seen in Esther 4:13-16. In Esther 7:3-6, the pinnacle of Esther's character development occurs as she fearlessly discloses her Jewish heritage and uncovers Haman's conspiracy during the banquet,

jeopardizing her own life to rescue her people. In Esther 8:3-6, Esther's continued advocacy ensures the safety of the Jewish people, further establishing her as a protective and influential leader. Throughout this narrative arc, Esther transforms from a passive character to a proactive protagonist, exemplifying courage, initiative, and selflessness themes. The portrayal of the character encompasses her personal history, ascent to the position of queen, and pivotal actions that propel the narrative forward.

5.2.4 Mordecai

Vulgan (2012) argues from a social, literary approach that Mordecai's character is influential in navigating and representing Jewish identity in a foreign land, emphasizing his adaptability and strategic thinking as critical aspects of his characterization. Spoelstra's (2019) narrative analysis focuses on the symbolism of Mordecai's royal vestments, exploring how these garments signify Mordecai's elevated status and a dual representation of princely and priestly roles. Therefore, suggesting this duality enriches the character of Mordecai, presenting him as a multifaceted figure who embodies both political and religious significance within the narrative. Thambyrajah (2023) explores the character of Mordecai through the lens of different textual traditions in Greek and Latin versions of the Book of Esther to demonstrate how these versions influence his character.

5.2.5 Mordecai as a Fully-Fledged Character

Seidler (2017) examines Mordecai's character development through the lens of Jewish identity in exile. He argues that Mordecai initially attempts to assimilate into Persian culture but experiences a reversal and reaffirms his Jewish identity from chapter 4 onwards. Seidler (2017) says that the development portrays him as an ideal Jewish leader, balancing his role in the Persian court with his commitment to his Jewish heritage. While I agree with Seidler (2017) and Murphy (1981), who provide valuable insights into Mordecai's identity transformation, the analysis does not profoundly explore his character as either round or fully-fledged. However, I offer a more detailed narrative analysis of Mordecai's character arc, considering his internal conflicts, motivations, and growth throughout the story. Mordecai is initially introduced in Esther's narrative through a comprehensive exposition in Esther 2:5-7. He is a Jewish resident of Susa, a direct descendant of Kish, and serves as the caretaker of his cousin Esther. From verses 2:21-23, he assumes a pivotal role in the narrative by actively influencing essential

developments in the plot; he discovers a conspiracy to murder King Ahasuerus and promptly informs him, thereby rescuing the king's life. His refusal to bow to Haman in 3:2-6 initiates the primary conflict of the narrative, as Haman devises a plan to annihilate all Jews in the kingdom. In verses 4:13-14, he encourages Esther to act to protect their people, emphasizing her distinct role and obligation. In verses 8:9-11, he proclaims a decree granting the Jews the right to defend themselves, resulting in their triumph over their adversaries.

5.2.6 Mordecai as a Round Character

In Esther 4:1-3 Mordecai's complexity is evident in his various roles and his emotional depth; he starts as a caring guardian and a concerned Jew, deeply affected. In 4:13-17 he shows resilience and strategic thinking, organizing the Jewish response to Haman's threat. In 2:10, 20, we see that Mordecai is not static. He evolves from a concerned guardian into a prominent leader initially; his primary role is to protect Esther and ensure her well-being, and as the story progresses, he steps into a leadership role, mobilizing the Jewish community and providing guidance to Esther in 4:1-8. His promotion to a high position in the king's court after Haman's downfall marks his transformation into a robust and influential leader in 8:2 and 10:3.

5.2.7 Mordecai's Character Arc

Mordecai's character development reflects a transformation from faithful insignificance to esteemed authority. He is introduced initially as a vigilant protector of Esther and a loyal Jew. Esther 2:5-7 depicts Mordecai's defiance in refusing to bow down to Haman, which triggers the story's central conflict in 3:2, 3:5-6. Mordecai's defiance leads to a decree that seriously threatens the Jewish people, prompting him to rally Esther to act in chapters 4:1-4 and 4:7-8. In passages 6:1-3 and 6:10-11, Mordecai transforms from grief to receiving acknowledgement and prestige, thanks to his brave deeds and astute decision-making. The culmination of his character development is characterized by the strategic manipulation of Haman's downfall and the Jewish people's deliverance 7:9-10. In the end, Mordecai achieves considerable power, persistently working for the well-being of his people in 8:2 and 10:2-3. The shift from a hidden guardian to a prominent figure highlights the story's central themes of belief, fairness, and collective obligation.

Summary

Esther exemplifies the attributes of both well-developed and complex characters. She possesses a comprehensive and intricate backstory, making a substantial contribution to the plot (fully-fledged). Simultaneously, she displays intricacy and development, transforming from a submissive young woman into a courageous and proactive figurehead, showcasing resilience and astute decision-making in reaction to the obstacles she encounters (round).

Mordecai's character exemplifies fully-fledged and round character traits. As a fully-fledged character, he is thoroughly developed and central to the narrative's progression. As a round character, he undergoes significant growth and exhibits a range of emotions and traits, contributing to the story's emotional and thematic richness. His dual roles highlight the depth and complexity of his character, making him integral to the story's impact. In the following sub-sections, I analyze the narrator's point of view, descriptions, speech and actions, and the inner lives of Esther and Mordecai. In the following sub-section, I focus on social identity theory in Biblical interpretation.

5.3 Social Identity in Biblical Interpretation

The application of (SIT) offers a fresh lens through which to view the characters and narratives of ancient texts. Scholars like Campbell (2014), Baker (2012), and Snyman (2005) have all contributed, providing insights into how identities are constructed and contested within Biblical narratives. Campbell (2014) highlights the importance of evaluating the contributions of (SIT) to Biblical studies, underscoring the need to understand how social identities are formed and maintained within the New Testament context. Campbell (2014) argues that (SIT) assists in seeing the early Christian communities not just as religious groups but as social entities grappling with issues of identity and belonging. Meanwhile, Baker (2012) explores how (SIT) can broadly apply to Biblical interpretation. Baker (2012) suggests that looking at Biblical texts through the lens of (SIT) allows us to uncover the social dynamics and power structures at play. By doing so, we can better appreciate the characters' complexities and the communities they represent. Snyman (2005) discusses how (SIT) intersects with South African Biblical hermeneutics in the view that understanding the social identities embedded in Biblical texts can enrich the struggle against prejudice and the quest for social justice. Snyman (2005) emphasizes the relevance of (SIT) in contemporary contexts, particularly in societies marked by historical divisions and ongoing struggles for equality.

Inspired by these scholars, I apply (SIT) framework to the characters of Esther and Mordecai; after the detailed Biblical characterization of Esther and Mordecai, I delve deeper into the social and psychological dynamics that shape the characterization of Esther and Mordecai and how they navigate their identity and actions within the narrative. Efthimiadis-Keith (2022), in her analysis of Haman's edict applied (SIT), sheds light on how social categorization, social identification, and social comparison processes inform his antagonistic behaviour towards Jews. By categorizing the Jews as an out-group, identifying with the Persian in-group, and fostering unfavourable comparisons between the two groups, Haman justifies his genocidal intentions. Efthimiadis-Keith's (2022) nuanced approach provides a deeper understanding of the narrative's interplay between individual identity and group dynamics.

Building upon Efthimiadis-Keith's (2022) application of (SIT) to Haman's edict, I apply (SIT) to the characters of Esther and Mordecai to highlight how their identities as Jews and their roles within the Persian Empire influence their actions and the unfolding of the plot. By examining social categorization, social identification, and social comparison in their contexts, I aim to uncover the complexities of their motivations and contributions to the narrative.

According to Islam (2013:1782), (SIT) offers valuable perspectives on discrimination, racism, and social identity tensions among different groups. This theory accomplishes this by elucidating these phenomena through group categorization and self-enhancement. McLeod (2019:2) posits that stereotyping, discrimination, competition, and hostility among social groups should not be exclusively ascribed to pursuing resources. Instead, it should be comprehended as an outcome of conflicting identities. In social psychology, it is observed that members of an in-group tend to engage in a cognitive process wherein they actively search for and highlight negative attributes or characteristics associated with an out-group. This behaviour serves the purpose of enhancing the in-group's self-image or self-esteem. To uphold the self-esteem of an in-group, its members must perceive their group as possessing greater social significance than the out-group.

According to Baker (2012),

There is a consensus among scholars regarding social comparison in ancient Mediterranean societies, with a significant amount of literature from that era focusing on comparing social classes. It is widely acknowledged among Biblical scholars that the ancient Mediterranean region predominantly exhibited a collectivist cultural orientation. The cultural context in which the Biblical texts were situated significantly emphasized prioritizing the collective interests and welfare of the community rather

than focusing solely on individual needs. The literature produced during the Hellenistic and Roman periods supports the notion that collectivism was the prevailing social orientation. Historical individuals commonly perceive their identity through their integration within social networks, encompassing factors such as ethnic affiliation, familial ties, geographical origins, and occupational associations. This perspective is exemplified in the works of Cicero, particularly in his treatise "On Duties" (1.53-58), where he delves into the practice of social comparison. According to contemporary Biblical scholars such as Lawrence and Burnett and social scientists like Triandis and Gelfand, it has been noted that collectivism and individualism should be understood as existing on a spectrum rather than as two completely separate and exclusive concepts. Hence, it can be observed that cultures generally exhibit a position between the extremes, as mentioned earlier, thereby indicating that the prevailing orientation of a culture is situated within a spectrum rather than a fixed binary opposition (2012:132-133).

Hakola (2007) and other Biblical scholars have utilized (SIT) framework to gain deeper insights into the intergroup dynamics among Judean subgroups during Second Temple Judaism. Bosman (2008) used (SIT) to demonstrate that Nahum's oracles concerning the nations establish a moral framework that fosters harmonious and accountable coexistence among diverse communities. Finitsis (2011) utilized (SIT) to analyze the texts of Haggai and Proto-Zechariah. These postexilic prophets aimed to establish and delineate the identity of the Judean community by employing distinct approaches in their interactions with the out-group. Lau (2011) employed (SIT) to analyze the ethical aspects of Ruth's narrative. Lau (2011) focused on interpreting the identities and behaviours of the primary characters using (SIT) while also considering the potential influence of the implied reader on the ethical choices made by these characters. King (2021) analyses the dynamics within groups and conflicts between different groups, both national and interpersonal, explicitly examining the portrayal of Israel's history and future in the book of Amos and how the rhetorical strategies employed by Amos influenced the self-perception of the audience across time. For this study, incorporating (SIT) examines the characters and their navigation of in-group and out-group dynamics about social identity within the narrative. Vulgan (2012) conducted a social literary study primarily on descriptions and interactions provided by the narrator, emphasizing reflexivity and self-recognition to avoid biased interpretations of Esther and Mordecai, to gain insights into the complexities of diasporic Jewish identity during the Persian/Second-Temple period, and

further suggests research on subsidiary characters and similar stories to enhance understanding of ancient dialogues on identity, gender, power dynamics, and evolving perceptions of Jewishness. While Vulgan's (2012) social, literary study provided essential insights into the broader social and cultural contexts of the Book of Esther, the application of (SIT) aims to offer a complementary perspective by focusing on the psychological processes and intergroup dynamics and (SIT) aims to understand better how Esther and Mordecai's group memberships shape their identities and actions. My aim is to enrich our understanding of the characters and connect ancient narratives to modern identity issues. Therefore, this study distinguishes itself by employing (SIT) to examine the characters in the MT since this approach has not been previously utilized in the book of Esther (MT). Consequently, this research contributes to the existing body of knowledge in Old Testament Biblical studies.

5.4 Application of Social Identity Theory of the Characters of Esther and Mordechai

I provide a brief overview of (SIT). McLeod (2019:2) states, "This psychological framework explores how individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups based on shared characteristics, thereby influencing perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours". (SIT) Therefore, it serves as a heuristic tool whereby, through examination, I can better understand the intricate dynamics of their behaviour within their social groups as depicted in the MT.

Developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1979), (SIT) posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups, forming distinct social identities. Efthimiadis-Keith (2022:1) mentions that in some respects, Biblical (and cognate) texts are about establishing and maintaining boundaries—not only between the Israelites (in-group) and the other members of the ancient Near Eastern Gentiles (out-groups) but also in terms of who faithful Israel is (the real in-group within the general in-group) (Sparks et al., 1998, cited in Efthimiadis-Keith, 2022).

Baker (2012:129-138) goes on further to indicate that "Identity formation is one of the central themes of the Bible. More specifically, group identity formation is a central concern of both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Testament" and that social identity theory is a helpful heuristic tool for examining social identity formation in the Biblical documents.

Tajfel and Turner (1979:56-65) posit that social groups give individuals a sense of identity, pride, and self-esteem. Categorizing individuals into groups alone is sufficient to make them think of themselves and others in terms of group membership rather than separate individuals.

(SIT) identifies three phases through which members establish their group identity: social categorization, identification, and comparison. In the social categorization phase, individuals categorize others to make sense of the social environment through social categories such as race, gender, and nationality. In the social identification phase, individuals adopt the identity of the group to which they belong. Membership in a group is not something foreign or artificial attached to the person, but it is a fundamental, accurate, and vital part of the members. Once individuals have categorized themselves as part of a group and identified with it, they move to the third phase, social comparison, where they compare their group with other groups. This comparison leads groups to boost and enhance their self-esteem by comparing favourably with different groups. An in-group will seek to find negative aspects of an out-group, thus improving its self-image. Stereotyping, discrimination, competition, and hostility between social groups should be viewed as a result of competing identities rather than simply competing for resources.

According to Baker (2012:129-138), ancient Israelite culture was essentially collectivist, meaning that it emphasized the group's needs over the needs of the individual. The literature of the Hellenistic and Roman periods supports this idea of collectivism as the primary social orientation in the ancient Mediterranean. However, Baker (2012) also notes that there was room for individual expression and that collectivism and individualism are not mutually exclusive alternatives. Cultures tend to fall between the two extremes, and the dominant cultural pattern in ancient Israel was generally on the collectivist end of the spectrum.

According to Hogg (1995:2-13), identity theory and social identity theory are two perspectives that offer different explanations regarding the social basis of self-concept and normative behaviour. Hogg (1995) further illustrates that the main difference between these two theories lies in their focus and disciplinary roots.

(a) Identity theory, rooted in sociology, primarily focuses on individuals' role-related behaviours and explains social behaviour regarding the reciprocal relations between the self and society. It emphasizes the concept of role identities, where individuals have distinct components of self for each position they occupy in society. Identity theory also recognizes the idea of "identity salience," which refers to the varying degrees of self-relevance of different identities individuals possess.

(b) Social identity theory, rooted in psychology, explains group processes and intergroup relations. It explores the generative role of identity in group and intergroup behaviour, such as conformity, collective action, stereotypes, and group solidarity.

Social identity theory places greater emphasis on large-scale category memberships, such as ethnicity, sex, race, and nationality, as significant sources of social identity and, therefore, considers social relations between these categories as contextual factors influencing self-perception and behaviour.

While both theories share similarities, such as acknowledging the socially constructed nature of self and the presence of multiple identities, they differ in terms of their disciplinary roots, focus, and contextual responsiveness. Hogg (1995:13), therefore, attests that identity theory primarily focuses on role identities and their influence on individual behaviour, while social identity theory focuses on intergroup relations and group behaviour.

Stets and Burke (2000:2-4) also agree that identity theory focuses on how individuals define themselves concerning the roles they play in society, and social identity theory emphasizes the role of intergroup relations, further highlighting that understanding the differences and similarities between identity theory and social identity theory can contribute to the development of comparative studies and facilitate dialogue between proponents of these two perspectives. In this study, I subscribe to Sneed (2008:6), who proposes that social scientific approaches to the Hebrew Bible are valuable in illuminating the social facets of the Biblical text. Sneed (2008) argues that these approaches help fill in gaps left behind by other interpretations of the Bible. I will read Esther and Mordecai's characterization through the lens of (SIT), focusing on the processes that influence the formation and maintenance of their identity, namely social categorization, social identification, and social comparison.

5.4.1 Social Categorization of Esther and Mordecai

(A) Esther

As previously indicated, the theory suggests that individuals categorize themselves and others into social groups based on shared characteristics, influencing our perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours towards those within and outside our group.

In Esther 2:7: "And he brought up Hadassah, that is Esther, his uncle's daughter; for she had neither father nor mother, and the maiden was of beautiful form and fair to look upon; and when her father and mother were dead, Mordecai took her for his daughter."

1. Esther's categorization as an orphan and a Jewish community member highlights her challenges in a foreign land.

2. As an orphan, she is marginalized and lacks the social networks and support that come with familial and societal connections. Her Jewish identity positions her as an outsider within the Persian society, which is dominated by a different culture and religion. This categorization raises questions of loyalty and the extent to which Esther can navigate between her Jewish identity and the societal norms and expectations of her new surroundings.

3. Esther is described as the niece of Mordecai; this categorizes Esther as belonging to a specific family lineage, and being devoid of the traditional family structure based on her familial background and orphan status may have influenced how Esther was perceived and treated within her society. Stets and Burke (2000) and Hogg (1995), recommend that identity theory is centred around how individuals define themselves about their societal roles, while social identity theory underscores the significance of intergroup dynamics. The narrative depicts Esther's self-perception wherein she does not identify as an orphan, and her societal role remains unspecified. Consequently, Esther's affiliation with a particular family lineage and her lack of a conventional family framework due to her orphan status and familial background could have impacted the perceptions and treatment she received within her community. Therefore, positioning her as an outsider or someone with a unique background may have affected her role and interactions within the larger social context of the story.

In Esther 2:10, Esther does not reveal her nationality and family background because Mordecai has forbidden her. Here, Mordecai instructs Esther not to reveal her nationality or family background when she is taken to the palace of King Xerxes (Ahasuerus). According to Leonardelli (2015:38-39), “Dual identity refers to the coexistence of multiple social identities within an individual”, and individuals can simultaneously identify with multiple social groups and categorize themselves based on different dimensions, such as intergroup categorization, in-group categorization, and out-group categorization. Leonardelli (2015: 39) further suggests “that dual identity can influence social behaviour and cognition” and mentions that individuals with a dual identity may experience psychological effects when perceiving uncategorized groups of people. Therefore, Esther concealing her Jewish identity can be interpreted as an illustration of dual identity within the intergroup context of social categorization since dual identity refers to individuals who identify with multiple social or cultural groups. In Esther's case, one can suggest that she grapples with her Jewish identity in the context of the Persian royal court. Regarding social categorization and in-group/out-group dynamics, Esther's obedience to conceal her Jewish identity reflects her society's intergroup dynamics and social categorization. The Persian culture represented the dominant or out-group, while her Jewish

identity represented an in-group. By hiding her Jewish background, Esther navigates the complexities of belonging to both groups simultaneously.

(B) Mordecai

In this verse, Esther 2:5-7 says, “Now in Shushan the castle there was a certain Jew, whose name was Mordecai, the son of Jair, the son of Shimei, the son of Kish, a Benjamite, who had been carried away from Jerusalem with the captivity which had been carried away with Jeconiah king of Judah, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away.”

The verse presents Mordecai as a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin who had been taken into captivity from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, categorizing Mordecai based on his ethnic and ancestral identity as a Jew. Being in exile and having a distinct ethnic and cultural background influenced Mordecai's social status and interactions within the Persian court. It positioned him as part of a minority group with a history of displacement, which could have shaped perceptions and expectations of him within the larger social context of the story. Esther 3:2, "And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman, for the king had so commanded concerning him. But Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage", is a pivotal moment that reflects his self-categorization as a Jew. Despite societal expectations and pressures, Mordecai prioritizes his identity and refuses to conform, underscoring the importance of his self-categorization and commitment to his Jewish heritage. The intergroup relations between Mordecai and Haman are a central theme in the narrative, as Haman's animosity toward Mordecai is rooted in personal and cultural differences. Esther 3:5-6, "And when Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down or pay homage to him, Haman was filled with fury. However, he disdained to lay hands on Mordecai alone. So, as they had made known to him the people of Mordecai, Haman sought to destroy all the Jews, the people of Mordecai, throughout the whole kingdom of Ahasuerus", highlights Haman's disdain for Mordecai and his people, leading to a broader plot against the Jews. These passages provide a foundation for understanding Mordecai's social categorization, self-categorization, and the dynamics of intergroup relations in the Biblical narrative. Mordecai's unwavering commitment to his identity as a Jew sets the stage for the unfolding events in the Book of Esther. In exploring these verses and incorporating the principles of social identity theory, we can begin to understand how the social categorization of Esther and Mordecai based on their family background, orphan status (in Esther's case), and ethnic and ancestral identity (in Mordecai's case) may have influenced their roles, relationships, and social dynamics within the narrative.

5.4.2. Social Identification of Esther and Mordecai

I move on to the second phase, social identification, which refers to an individual's sense of belonging to a group. These group affiliations contribute to a person's understanding of who they are, influencing their attitudes, behaviours, and perceptions to explore the Characterization of Esther and Mordecai.

(A) Esther

Initially, Esther conceals her Jewish identity at Mordecai's advice. In Esther 2:10, it is mentioned that Esther "had not made known her people or kindred, for Mordecai had commanded her not to make it known." This deliberate concealment is a strategic decision to assimilate into Persian society seamlessly, especially considering the potential prejudices that could arise due to her Jewish heritage. Throughout the early parts of the narrative, Esther complies with the cultural norms and expectations of the Persian court by following the instructions given by Hegai, the king's eunuch. Esther's behaviour aligns with the cultural norms of the Persian court, and her social identity is initially shaped by her role as a participant in the king's beauty contest. Roccas and Brewer (2002:92) define this behaviour as hyphenated identity: one form of bicultural adaptation is to locate one's cultural identity at the intersection of the ethnic and societal levels and thus form a blended bicultural identity (Birman, 1994; Phinney and Devich-Navarro, 1997; Roccas and Brewer, 2002).

Roccas and Brewer (2002:92) note that "the in-group is defined exclusively as those who share both ethnic heritage and residence in the host society" and explain another form of cultural dominance.

Another mode of coping with alternative cultural identities involves subordinating one identity to another. Assimilation into the host culture at the expense of ethnic and cultural identity is one form of cultural dominance (Berry, 1990); at the other extreme is an exclusive investment in one's ethnic and cultural identity with alienation from the culture of the host society separation strategy (Berry, 1990; Phinney & Devich-Navarro, 1997, Roccas and Brewer, 2002).

According to Lang (2005), hyphenated Jews are individuals who navigate multiple identities simultaneously, such as being both Jewish and another national or cultural identity, and further highlight the anxiety and complexity of maintaining these dual identities while facing societal pressures and prejudices. Raghunandan (2012), however, describes hyphenated identities as a

negotiation between cultural heritage and contemporary identity, meaning balancing their Indian ancestry with their Trinidadian nationality, leading to a dynamic interplay of traditions, values, and self-perception. Roccas and Brewer (2002) discuss the concepts of a hyphenated identity blended bicultural identity and the subordination of one identity to another therefore can be related to the identification of Esther, exemplifying a form of hyphenated identity, particularly during her time as the queen in the Persian court. She initially navigates a blended bicultural identity by assimilating into Persian society and concealing her Jewish heritage, evident in her participation in the beauty contest and compliance with Persian cultural norms. Esther's ability to function at the intersection of her ethnic and societal identities showcases a form of bicultural adaptation, aligning with the hyphenated identity concept. Esther's revelation of her Jewish identity in a critical moment represents a shift away from cultural dominance or assimilation. Her initial concealment of her Jewish identity was a strategy to assimilate into the host culture. However, when faced with the threat to her people, she subordinates her assimilated identity to her ethnic and cultural identity, aligning with the in-group that shares her ethnic heritage. Esther's social identity undergoes a significant shift when faced with a crisis. In Esther 4:13-16, Mordecai urges Esther to intercede with the king on behalf of her people, the Jews, who are under the threat of destruction. Esther initially hesitates, fearing the consequences of approaching the king without being summoned. However, Mordecai's words in Esther 4:14, "For if you keep silent at this time, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Moreover, who knows whether you have not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" encourage her to acknowledge and embrace her Jewish identity. Her decision to approach the king and her subsequent revelation of her Jewish identity demonstrate a shift in her social identity. In this critical moment, she embraces her connection to the Jewish people, revealing a layer of her identity that she had previously concealed. Esther's social identity evolves throughout the narrative, reflecting the complexity of navigating multiple roles and affiliations. Her initial concealment and subsequent revelation of her Jewish identity highlight social identity's contextual and situational nature, shaped by individual choices and external circumstances.

(B) Mordecai

Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman and his active advocacy for the Jewish people showcase a resistance to cultural dominance. He prioritizes his Jewish identity over complete assimilation into the Persian culture. The narrative does not present Mordecai as subordinating his identity to the host culture; instead, he emphasizes the importance of maintaining his ethnic and cultural

ties. Mordecai, too, exhibits aspects of a hyphenated identity. While maintaining a solid Jewish identity and refusing to bow to Haman, Mordecai is also involved in the Persian court, holding a position at the king's gate. His role suggests integrating into Persian society while retaining his ethnic identity that aligns with the idea of blended bicultural identity, locating one's cultural identity at the intersection of the ethnic and societal levels. In essence, the experiences of Esther and Mordecai in the Book of Esther resonate with the concepts discussed by Roccas and Brewer (2002). They navigate the complexities of their identities within a bicultural context, with Esther initially adopting a blended bicultural identity and Mordecai demonstrating resistance to cultural dominance. The characters' actions align with social identity dynamics, showcasing the negotiation of identities in response to the artistic and societal context in which they find themselves.

5.4.3. Social Comparison of Esther and Mordecai

In the third phase, applying social comparison theory to the characters of Esther and Mordecai involves examining how they evaluate themselves and others in the context of their social groups. Social comparison theory suggests that individuals determine their social and personal worth by comparing themselves to others.

(A) Esther

Esther's entry into the beauty contest provides a clear context for social comparison. She would have assessed her physical appearance, qualities, and attributes as a participant compared to other contestants. This comparison likely influenced her self-esteem and perceptions of her worth in the Persian court. As the queen, she engages in social comparison within the royal court. Her status as queen places her in a position of power, and her interactions with other courtiers involve comparisons of social standing and influence. The dynamics of the court and Esther's role contribute to ongoing social comparisons that shape her behaviour and relationships.

(B) Mordecai

Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman can be interpreted as a social comparison. He evaluates his principles and values in contrast to the expectations of Persian society. The act demonstrates the prioritization of his Jewish identity over conforming to societal norms, showcasing a distinct social comparison process.

As a court official, Mordecai may engage in social comparison regarding his standing within the Persian court. His role at the king's gate involves interactions with others in the court hierarchy, and he may assess his position concerning fellow officials, contributing to the dynamics of social comparison. Both Esther and Mordecai engage in shared social comparison within the Jewish community. The threat posed by Haman's plot against the Jews creates a common reference point for comparison. The community members evaluate their collective status, identity, and the potential outcomes of the impending danger, reinforcing social cohesion through shared comparisons. The response to the crisis created by Haman's plot involves a collective social comparison process within the Jewish community. Esther and Mordecai, as key figures, play roles in shaping the group's response. The narrative highlights how shared social comparison can influence group dynamics and decision-making.

Applying social comparison theory to Esther and Mordecai enhances our understanding of their motivations, self-perceptions, and interactions within their respective social contexts. The characters' engagement in individual and shared social comparisons contributes to the complexity of their identities and relationships portrayed in the Biblical narrative.

In conclusion, this exploration, grounded in Social Identity Theory, has enriched our understanding of Esther and Mordecai as characters within the Biblical narrative. The complexities of identity, the dynamics of group affiliations, and the interplay between personal and social connections all contribute to shaping the roles and decisions of these remarkable individuals. I now provide an overview of complex character dynamics in the narrative.

5.4.4. Complex Character Dynamics

Grishakova (2013) defines complex characters as those that emerge from blending diverse elements, creating multifaceted and paradoxical identities that challenge traditional dualistic thinking and contribute to the richness of literary narratives. Constable (2017) argues that the narrator's perspective in the Book of Esther can be analyzed through its literary characteristics. The narrator adopts a satirical tone when describing the Persian court, mocking its luxurious lifestyle and the king's inconsistent behaviour. This satirical approach exposes the potential dangers of a society governed by prideful individuals who misuse their power for insignificant purposes. The narrative perspective in Esther is a third-person omniscient point of view, which allows for a comprehensive understanding of the character's thoughts and emotions. Nevertheless, the story does not explicitly explore Esther's internal reflections. Alternatively, the reader is encouraged to deduce Esther's emotions and motivations based on her actions and

the reactions of those in her vicinity. The narrative does not explicitly reveal her thoughts when approaching the king without being called. Still, the reader can deduce her bravery and determination based on her actions and the following events. Esther's choices are portrayed as intentional and strategic, showcasing a character who possesses physical attractiveness, tactical intelligence, and bravery. These qualities play a crucial role in the narrative, offering a nuanced representation of her contribution to the Jewish people's deliverance.

I have explained complex character dynamics and explored their character development as portrayed in the narrative, applying (SIT) to comprehensively understand how these characters manage their identities within an intricate socio-cultural environment.

Although the Biblical text does not directly explore Esther's inner thoughts, the narrative viewpoint subtly demonstrates her unwavering strength and resolve. Gaining insight into this viewpoint is crucial for a nuanced understanding of Esther's autonomy in the developing circumstances. Shifting the attention to Mordecai, the analysis centres on his progression as a character throughout the narrative. The text identifies critical events that have influenced his identity and role, providing insights into his unwavering loyalty and dedication to the well-being of the Jewish people. I now move to in-group and out-group dynamics.

5.4.5 In-Group and Out-Group Dynamics

Neuberg and Schaller (2008) discuss how intergroup prejudices and conflicts arise from evolutionary processes that once aided human survival. Kurzban and Neuberg (2015) argue that these relationships are deeply influenced by evolved psychological mechanisms designed to enhance cooperation within groups and competitiveness between groups. The complex dynamics of in-group and out-group relationships become apparent as Esther navigates her identity as a Jewish woman within the Persian court; the aim is to demonstrate the socio-psychological dimensions that shape her decisions and actions. Trepte and Loy (2017:5) mention that individuals engage in self-categorization, where they classify themselves into different groups and assess their in-groups and out-groups. The evaluation entails positive and negative appraisals of the in-group and out-group, emphasizing the notion of positive distinctiveness, which pertains to the perception of favouring the in-group over the out-group. Furthermore, according to Trepte and Loy (2017:2-4), individuals engage in the ongoing process of categorizing themselves, evaluating both in-groups and out-groups and comparing their worth. This process has a significant impact on their social identity and self-esteem. The accentuation principle refers to the tendency of individuals to highlight the similarities among

members of their group and to emphasize the differences between their group and other groups. This principle sheds light on relationships between in-groups and out-groups based on social categorization and evaluation processes.

(a) Esther is part of the Jewish in-group facing a clear and imminent threat from Haman's decree, making the entire Jewish community her in-group. The Persian court, with its laws and cultural norms, represents the out-group, as it poses a threat to Esther's identity as a Jew.

Esther 4:13 reads "Then Mordecai bade them to return answer unto Esther: 'Think not with thyself that thou shalt escape in the king's house, more than all the Jews.'"

In maintaining in-group solidarity, Esther's response involves reaching out to Mordecai and the Jewish community, seeking collective support through a communal fast. This communal fast serves as a symbolic act of solidarity, reinforcing the shared identity of the Jewish in-group by instructing the Jews to fast and gather their collective prayers. Esther is seeking divine intervention to strengthen the bonds within her in-group.

Esther 4:16: "Go, gather together all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast ye for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night or day; I also and my maidens will fast in like manner; and so, will I go in unto the king, which is not according to the law; and if I perish, I perish."

Trepte and Loy (2017:2-5) indicate that the fundamental tenets of (SIT) entail individuals classifying themselves into separate groups and assessing their groups and others. This process involves conducting positive and negative evaluations of both the in- and out-group. The notion of positive distinctiveness, emphasized by Trepte and Loy (2017:2-5), highlights the inclination to prioritize the in-group over the out-group. People regularly participate in self-categorization, evaluate their belonging to specific groups, and compare their values, thus impacting their social identity and self-esteem. Therefore, as outlined by Trepte and Loy (2017), it pertains to the tendency of individuals to highlight similarities within their group while accentuating distinctions between their group and others. By applying these concepts to Esther, specifically concerning out-group dynamics, I observe that the laws of the Persian court, particularly the rule against approaching the king without being summoned, represent external pressures from the out-group that endanger Esther's identity. Esther's bold choice to confront the king, in defiance of the law, demonstrates her determination to uphold her Jewish identity in the face of external influences (Esther 4:11). Esther adeptly manages the dynamics of both the Persian court (out-group) and her Jewish community (in-group), considering the

possible repercussions in the former while seeking support and resilience from the latter, demonstrated by fasting. This communal in-group activity strengthens a feeling of shared identity and unity, as depicted in Esther 4:16. I now focus on Mordecai and his group membership and social identity. Whilst there are limited resources or the lack thereof on the character of Mordecai, I aim to shed light on how his character is developed in the narrative based on the historical information provided. Struse (2019) indicates that Mordecai is a character mentioned in the Biblical book of Esther. His name is derived from the Sumerian and Babylonian god Marduk and can mean "worshipper of Mars" or "the Babylonian". In the Bible, there are two individuals named Mordecai. The first is a man who returned to Jerusalem with Joshua and Zerubbabel after the decree of Cyrus in 536 BC, and the second is Esther's cousin and guardian. The significance of Mordecai's name lies in its connection to a pagan god, which is unusual in the Bible. Typically, the use of such names is prohibited. However, in the case of Mordecai, it is believed that his Babylonian name was used because it was more well-known to the Jewish readers of the Book of Esther. The rarity of the name Mordecai in both Biblical and historical records adds to its intrigue, and there is evidence suggesting that the Biblical Mordecai and the Mordecai mentioned in Persian cuneiform records during the reign of Darius I could be the same person. Understanding the significance of Mordecai's name allows us to delve deeper into the story of Esther and its importance in Yahweh's redemptive plan for the Jewish people (2019:1-4).

Given this context, I explore Mordecai's important role in the Book of Esther. Regarding character development, he assumes the role of Esther's cousin and guardian, who serves as the primary protagonist of the narrative; his actions and influence play a vital role in rescuing the Jewish people from the malevolent schemes of Haman. His unwavering dedication to his religious beliefs and community is apparent through his refusal to submit to Haman. Mordecai's bravery, wisdom, and loyalty play a crucial role in the salvation of the Jewish community. The narrative highlights Mordecai's character as one of faith and loyalty. Through his guidance, Esther unveils the plot against the Jews and courageously approaches the king to intercede on their behalf. Mordecai's wisdom and insight help Esther navigate the complex political landscape and ensure the preservation of their people. Moreover, Mordecai's historical context and lineage provide additional significance to his character. Struse (2019) suggests that Mordecai may have been the same person mentioned in Persian cuneiform records during the reign of Darius I. This connection reinforces Mordecai's historical authenticity and importance in the events surrounding the Jewish people. Mordecai's faith, bravery, and strategic thinking

make him a central figure in the narrative. His actions and guidance contribute significantly to preserving the Jewish people, highlighting his significant role.

According to Evans (2011:9-10), Mordecai is portrayed as a central and influential character in the narrative. Evans (2011) suggests that the structure and symmetry of the text emphasize the movement of Mordecai and Esther from the periphery to the central position, with Mordecai ultimately placed in the very centre of power. Evans (2011:9-10) continues, arguing that the structural design establishes the importance of Mordecai in the reader's mind due to how names of characters are sequenced and how this impacts the narrative flow, alluding that the earlier translators were aware of this. By analyzing the symmetrical ordering of the proper names of the main characters in MT, Evans (2011:1-10) demonstrates that Mordecai, rather than Esther, occupies the central position in the narrative structure, which suggests that Mordecai is the primary figure. Therefore, Mordecai is depicted as a righteous Jew carrying out the will of God by saving his people, solidifying his role as a critical character in the narrative by shedding light on the following:

- (A) Mordecai's portrayal in the MT: (a) He is described as a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin, signifying his connection to Israel's royal and historical past. (b) He is the caregiver and protector of Esther, his younger cousin, highlighting his familial loyalty and sense of duty. (c) He demonstrates piety and integrity by refusing to bow to Haman, which suggests his adherence to his faith and sets the story's central conflict into motion. (d) He is a source of wise counsel, first to Esther, instructing her to keep her Jewish identity secret, and later as an advisor when she becomes queen.
- (B) Mordecai's role in the narrative, according to the MT: (a) He uncovers a plot to assassinate King Ahasuerus. He informs the king through Esther, which is recorded in the royal chronicles, saving the king's life and laying the groundwork for his later reward. (b) He becomes the antagonist of Haman, whose hatred of Mordecai leads to the planned genocide of the Jews. (c) He is a catalyst for the events that lead to the Jews' salvation as he prompts Esther to intercede with the king on behalf of her people. (d) By the end of the story, he ascends to a position of high authority in the Persian empire, portraying the elevation and vindication of the Jewish people.

Jones (2023:3-7) argues from a historical perspective that the Book of Esther is a genuine text from the Persian period, offering insights into court life at Susa and the perceptions of the Persians through the lens of the Jewish people. He suggests it is a historical novella that

blends historical details with storytelling. Further, Jones (2023) explores court life in Susa, highlighting the rise of Mordecai to an exalted position and the fall of Haman, the king's chief minister. Jones (2023:12) also mentions that the narrative involves a Mordecai-like character and a separate tale concerning an "Esther-like" character, which were successfully combined in the Pre-Masoretic Story. He believes these stories provided Jews living in the pagan environment of the Diaspora with models for their general lifestyle. Overall, Jones (2023) argues that the book's author intentionally blended historical details, fantasy, and novella-style storytelling to create a captivating historical romance. The following section, I focus on Mordecai's membership in the Jewish community and his interactions with other social groups. Additionally, I analyze situations where Mordecai's Jewish identity becomes prominent and impacts his behaviour, particularly concerning the political dynamics of the Persian court.

The section explores Mordecai's social identity and the dynamics of in-group and out-group relationships, examining his character from historical, biblical, and contextual perspectives. This analysis sheds light on the complexity of Mordecai's character and emphasizes his importance within the narrative and the broader historical context.

1. Historical Significance of Mordecai's Name: Struse (2019:4) Mordecai's name, originating from the deities Marduk of Sumerian and Babylonian civilizations, holds profound historical and cultural importance. The inclusion of a pagan god in a Biblical name, although not frequently observed, implies a purposeful decision to create a sense of familiarity among Jewish readers. This distinctiveness contributes an intriguing dimension to Mordecai's character.

2. Struse (2019:1), regarding Biblical character development, Mordecai's role as Esther's cousin and guardian establishes him as a critical protagonist. His actions, such as his refusal to submit to Haman, demonstrate a steadfast commitment to his religious convictions and his community. Mordecai's bravery, sagacity, and loyalty are crucial in ensuring the salvation of the Jewish people.

3. Evans (2011:9-10) highlights that Mordecai's significant role underscores the evolution of the narrative and suggests that this was intentionally designed to emphasize his importance. The symmetrical arrangement of the text positions Mordecai at the centre, highlighting his importance as a key figure. This architectural design enhances the portrayal of Mordecai as a pivotal and influential character.

4. Mordecai's Influence in Persian Court Dynamics: Jones (2023) illustrates the individual's strategic thinking and political influence by highlighting his actions in the court, such as exposing an assassination plot and motivating Esther to intervene. Mordecai's ascent to a position of significant power within the Persian empire demonstrates his impact on society and politics.

5. Group Membership and Identity Salience: Evans (2011) and Struse (2019) indicate that Mordecai's association with the Jewish community is apparent through his tribal affiliation with Benjamin and his responsibility as the carer and defender of Esther. His steadfastness in not submitting to Haman illustrates his unwavering dedication to his religious beliefs, highlighting his Jewish heritage amid external influences.

6. Jones (2023) argues that the Book of Esther accurately portrays court life in Susa and provides valuable insights into the perspectives of the Jewish people on the Persians. The book's distinctive allure and impact on the Jewish Diaspora are attributed to Mordecai's prominent status and the skilful integration of historical facts with narrative elements.

7. Impact on Jewish Lifestyle Paradigms: According to Jones (2023), the Book of Esther deliberately combines historical elements, fantastical elements, and a narrative style reminiscent of novellas. This fusion offers Jews outside their homeland exemplars of their overall way of life. Mordecai's character functions as a significant archetype, playing a role in forming Jewish identity and fortitude.

From the above review, it is evident that Mordecai's social identity and the dynamics of in-group and out-group are closely intertwined with the Book of Esther's historical, biblical, and contextual aspects. Mordecai's character embodies historical authenticity, strategic leadership, and unwavering commitment to his faith and community, making him a crucial figure in the narrative and a lasting example in Jewish tradition.

This interdisciplinary study seeks to analyze the characters of Esther and Mordecai by combining Biblical narrative criticism and (SIT) to understand the socio-cultural aspect of the text better. This study aims to provide a detailed depiction of these characters by combining the analysis of their literary aspects with socio-psychological viewpoints. In the following section, I integrate Biblical narrative criticism and (SIT) to understand Esther and Mordecai better, shedding light on how their identities intersect with their collective identity as Jews and where their characteristics align or conflict with the Jewish community's identity, and consider how their characterizations contribute to the more significant themes of the narrative, such as

providence, courage, and preservation of the Jewish people. I begin by juxtaposing the two characters' analyses in the table below. I then move to the findings and end with synthesising the two frameworks.

Table 3: Character Analysis of Esther and Mordecai juxtaposing Biblical Narrative Criticism and Social Identity Theory

CHARACTERS	
ESTHER	
Biblical Narrative Criticism	Social Identity Theory
Esther 2:7-11: Esther's Selection as Queen: Emphasizes Esther's vulnerability and reliance on Mordecai, highlighting her journey from an orphan to a queen	Explores how Esther's identity as a Jew intersects with her identity in the Persian court, revealing the complexity of managing multiple identities. Esther's Interaction with Mordecai: Esther 2:19-23
Demonstrates Esther's loyalty and ability to navigate her identity in a foreign court.	Examines how Esther maintains in-group solidarity by following Mordecai's advice, showcasing the importance of collective identity. Esther's Courage in Approaching the King: Esther 5-7
It focuses on Esther's central theme of courage as she risks her life to save her people.	Explores the tension between Esther's identity and her identity as a Jew in the Persian court, highlighting the risks she takes for her in-group. Esther's Intervention for the Jews: Esther 8-10
Highlights Esther's strategic thinking and lasting impact on the Jewish community.	Examines how Esther's actions contribute to positive distinctiveness for the Jewish in-group and how her leadership influences group dynamics.
MORDECAI	
Emphasizes Mordecai's importance in the narrative and his rise to authority.	Explores Mordecai's role as a leader within the Jewish community, considering how his actions contribute to positive distinctiveness.
Illustrates Mordecai's strategic thinking and political influence in the Persian court.	Examines how Mordecai manages his identity in the Persian court (out-group) and the Jewish community (in-group).
Explores Mordecai's association with the Jewish community and his commitment to preserving their identity.	Analyzes Mordecai's role in shaping the collective identity of the Jewish in-group and his impact on their self-esteem.
Highlights Mordecai's wisdom, faith, and pivotal role in the salvation of the Jewish people.	Examines how Mordecai's leadership contributes to the overall identity and resilience of the Jewish community.
The narrative emphasizes Esther's physical beauty as a key factor in her selection as queen. This highlights an individual trait that	Esther's beauty may contribute to her positive distinctiveness within the Persian court but also makes her vulnerable.

plays a role in the collective identity of the Jewish people, as she becomes a representative figure.	Social Identity Theory helps us understand how Esther navigates her identity while being conscious of her role in the Jewish in-group.
Esther's loyalty to Mordecai is evident in her adherence to his advice about concealing her identity. This loyalty reflects her commitment to her Jewish roots, influencing her actions in foreign court.	Esther's loyalty to Mordecai represents an in-group dynamic, emphasizing positive distinctiveness. Social Identity Theory helps analyze how this loyalty shapes her interactions with the Jewish community and the Persian court.
Esther's courageous approach to the king without being summoned is a central theme. This act demonstrates individual agency and bravery, contributing to the narrative's larger theme of providence.	Esther's decision to risk her life for her people aligns with the positive distinctiveness principle, as she prioritizes her in-group (Jews) over potential consequences from the out-group (Persian court).
Esther's strategic thinking and collaboration with Mordecai highlight her role in the collective survival of the Jewish people. This emphasizes the interconnectedness of individual and group identity.	Esther's strategic thinking aligns with the accentuation principle, as she uses her identity and relationships within the Persian court to benefit her in-group. The communal fast further reinforces the shared identity of the Jewish community.
Mordecai's actions in uncovering the plot against the king demonstrate his commitment to the well-being of the Persian kingdom, showcasing the complex dynamics of individual and collective identity.	Mordecai's role in exposing the plot aligns with positive distinctiveness, as his loyalty to the Persian king reflects well on the Jewish community. However, his refusal to bow to Haman emphasizes prioritising his Jewish identity over assimilation.
Mordecai's leadership within the Jewish community is evident in his guidance to Esther and his role in the salvation of the Jewish people.	Mordecai's leadership aligns with the social categorization process, where he assesses both in-groups and out-groups. His actions are influenced by the accentuation principle, emphasizing the positive distinctiveness of the Jewish community.

In juxtaposing Biblical Narrative Criticism and (SIT), I comprehensively understood how individual and collective identities intersect and influence the characters of Esther and Mordecai. This interdisciplinary approach aimed at deepening insights into the socio-cultural dimensions of their characters, enriching the overall interpretation of the narrative. I now provide the synthesis of the two frameworks.

5.4.6 Interdisciplinary Synthesis of Biblical Narrative Criticism and Social Identity Theory

This study aims to demonstrate what happens when (SIT) is brought to the narrative analysis. By integrating Narrative Criticism and (SIT), I aimed to explore the interplay between social identity processes and narrative construction, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of how individuals' social identities influence the narratives they create and how they present themselves within the context of specific social groups. I examined the motivations and underlying psychological processes that drive individuals to construct identity narratives. Biblical narrative criticism provides insights into the narrative strategies employed by the Biblical authors; simultaneously, (SIT) offers a lens to understand the social dynamics and identity processes depicted in these narratives while bridging literary analysis and social and psychological perspectives to deepen the understanding of Biblical texts. However, the potential challenges of integrating these frameworks require interpretive caution to avoid oversimplification or reductionism in interpreting complex Biblical narratives. Global scholars such as Robert Alter, Meir Sternberg, and Adele Berlin have contributed substantially to Biblical narrative criticism. In contrast, African scholars like Gerald West, Musa W. Dube, and Madipoane Masenya have enriched the field with their unique perspectives.

I aimed to offer a comprehensive analysis of the characterization of Esther and Mordecai and their significance in the narrative and shed light on their impact on both the ancient world and the implications of reading the narrative for the contemporary reader. (SIT) offers valuable insights into the construction and influence of social identities. Next, I will highlight the unique findings resulting from the combination.

Under the previously defined section of temporal structure proposed by Campbell (1990), the analysis of the narrative's temporal structure provides insights into the narrative's chronological progression and thematic depth. Successive annual points, repetitions, reversals, and using the term "day" contribute to a sophisticated timeline that enhances the narrative. In structural narrative, Campbell's (1990) identification of contrasting voices (Royal/Persian, Jewish Protagonists, Antagonists) and narrative devices contributes to understanding the multi-layered storytelling in the narrative.

In-group and out-group dynamics (SIT) illuminates in-group and out-group relationships, emphasizing positive distinctiveness and the accentuation principle. It helps analyze how Esther and Mordecai navigate their identities within a socio-cultural context. The interplay of identities (SIT) brings attention to the interplay of individual and collective identities, shedding

light on how personal traits contribute to or conflict with the more significant identity of the Jewish community. Regarding the differences in narrative structure, it focuses on the literary and structural elements of the Biblical text, emphasizing narrative devices, temporal indicators, and the overall storytelling technique. The historical and literary aspect engages with the text to uncover underlying themes and patterns.

The (SIT) approaches the narrative from a psychosocial perspective, emphasizing how individuals categorize themselves, evaluate groups, and navigate social identity in a cultural context. The two frameworks offer a more holistic understanding of the narrative; one provides insights into the literary and structural aspects of the text, and the other enhances the interpretation by exploring the psychological and sociocultural dimensions of character behaviours. A nuanced understanding of Esther and Mordecai through the combination of the frameworks symbolises resilience in adversity and impactful social leaders.

5.5. Limitations

Jin (2015) argues that an interpreter's subjectivity may impact the interpretation and application of Biblical criticism, that methodology alone does not determine Biblical interpretation and that individual or scholars' perspectives can lead to potential bias. Avi (2000) further mentions the need to consider both linguistic opposition and extra-Biblical sources to achieve accurate chronological perspectives of biblical Hebrew texts and criteria such as Extra-Biblical Sources, Aramaisms, and Mishnaisms are insufficient for accurately dating Biblical texts as, in some instances, Biblical texts often lack corroborative evidence. Accordingly, Vanbeselcaere (1994) advises that (SIT), when applied to ancient societies, may fall short in capturing the intricate socio-cultural nuances in those contexts and may oversimplify the complexities of these historical dynamics, which often had multifaceted structures where individuals may not prioritize distinctiveness as assumed by (SIT).

Baker (2012) claims that understanding the particular difficulties presented by combining Biblical Criticism and Social Identity Theory will help properly bridge the different philosophical bases of both fields. While (SIT) is rooted in psychology and sociology, Biblical narrative critique usually relies on literary and historical approaches to examine ancient books. Furthermore, Li (2023) says that the difficulty is translating a theory created for modern social settings—such as (SIT)—to fit the notion of identity in ancient writings when cultural standards and viewpoints are considerably different. Brewer (1991) offers an elaborate approach required to acknowledge both fields' methodologies and concepts while seeking a shared foundation for

integration. An essential element in integrating these intellectual frameworks is recognising the significance of identity in both the interpretation of the Bible and (SIT). (SIT) helps comprehend how individuals perceive themselves based on their unique group affiliations.

5.6. Conclusion

This chapter was the extension of the narrative analysis, specifically focusing on the characters Esther and Mordecai, to answer two of the research sub-questions.

I applied characterization from narrative analysis as a methodology and social identity theory as a dual approach to the characters. I explored the multifaceted nature of identity, revealing the complex interplay between the characters and the broader social context in which they existed, providing the nuanced understanding of Esther and Mordecai. The following chapter responds to the third sub-question of this study, focusing on what the textual work means for contemporary social identity complexities.

Chapter 6: Relating Textual Analysis to Contemporary Realities of Contested Identities

6.1. Introduction

This chapter explores how the narrative of Esther and Mordecai relates to contemporary realities of identity negotiation and contested identities. By examining the socio-political context of the Book of Esther alongside modern struggles, this chapter highlights the enduring relevance of ancient narratives in addressing assimilation, resistance, and cultural preservation. The challenges faced by Esther and Mordecai in navigating dual identities resonate profoundly with contemporary struggles of identity negotiation. For example, Esther's concealment of her Jewish identity mirrors the experiences of modern individuals from marginalized groups who navigate systemic oppression by selectively revealing aspects of their identity. In my South African context, I have experienced this tension first-hand. Growing up as a mixed-race woman in a society shaped by apartheid's legacy of racial categorization, I often felt the need to mask elements of my identity to assimilate into dominant cultural norms. Similarly, Esther's decision to conceal her Jewish heritage until a critical moment reflects individuals' strategic choices to navigate hostile environments while preserving their authentic selves. This connection underscores the enduring relevance of Esther and Mordecai's story, offering a framework for understanding how ancient narratives can illuminate contemporary discussions of identity, power, and resistance. To achieve this, I explore the historical context of Jewish diasporic identities as depicted in the Book of Esther (MT). I identify contemporary parallels, discussing the relevance of Esther and Mordecai's experiences to current identity issues. Based on the narrative, I delineate the implications for contemporary interpreters and offer practical applications. Lastly, I provide a concise summary of the most significant points.

6.2. Historical context for Jewish diasporic identities

Mills (2006) explored how Esther navigated her identity within the Persian Empire, where it was constantly tested by referring to the household and the table, where Esther spent much of her time, as a microcosm of the more extensive diaspora experience, a place where she constantly balanced her Jewish identity with her role as queen. The meals, the customs, and the interactions all reflect this tension and the boundaries she navigates, which are two critical spaces where these boundaries come into play. In these settings, Mills (2006) notes that Esther's actions and decisions and her ability to adapt to her surroundings while maintaining her cultural and religious identity highlight the tension between assimilation and preservation, reflecting

the complexities of living as a Jew in the diaspora. Wetter (2011) mentions that Esther's ethnic and religious identity is nuanced as well as multi-layered, highlighting that it is not only her actions but also how others perceive her in the diaspora and argues that the text plays with these themes showing her dual identity as both Persian and Jewish in moments where her faith and identity come to the forefront, where she decides to fast and ask for the Jewish community's support. These actions reaffirm her connection to her Jewish heritage, even as she operates within the Persian royal sphere. Wetter (2011) emphasizes that the narrative's ambiguity regarding Esther's Jewishness allows for multiple interpretations, reflecting the fluid nature of identity and underscoring the complexity and adaptability required in the diaspora. Davidson (2009) highlights the diversity and difference within the diaspora. He argues that it is not just about Esther's journey but also the broader Jewish community's access to power and survival strategies in a foreign land and how marginalized communities can access and exercise power in the diaspora. Davidson (2009) also indicates that Esther's narrative shows that even within a dominant culture, there is room for agency and influence and is a rich source for exploring these themes, showing that even in ancient texts, the struggles and triumphs of diasporic communities are relevant and insightful. Heller (2023) notes that the capture of Babylon by Cyrus the Great in 539 BCE was a pivotal moment in ancient history, symbolising the decline of the Neo-Babylonian Empire and the ascendance of Persian supremacy. Cyrus's arrival in Babylon was relatively tranquil, as numerous individuals embraced him as a liberator. This is further supported by the Cyrus Cylinder, which depicts Cyrus as a compassionate leader who freed the city from Nabonidus's oppressive reign, the Neo-Babylonian dynasty's final ruler (Heller, 2023). According to Thielman (2021), Cyrus's policies encompassed granting the Judahites permission to return to their homeland and reconstruct the Temple, as evidenced in Ezra 1:1-3. Waters (2022) highlights the extensive consequences of Cyrus's conquest, pointing out that it enabled him to govern a vast territory that exceeded the domains of all previous monarchs. Bryce and Carnegie (2013) highlight the importance of restoring the worship of gods, repatriating deported populations, and establishing fair governance in Babylon during the Persian era. Pearce's (2016) study focuses on Cyrus's assertions of revitalising abandoned sanctuaries and repatriating abducted deities, highlighting his reverence for indigenous religious customs. Luyaluka (2018) highlights that the Jews whom Nebuchadnezzar forcibly removed regarded Cyrus's conquest as a favourable event, as it allowed them to return to their native land and reconstruct the Temple in Jerusalem. According to Irannejad (2022), the Achaemenid Empire's emergence under Cyrus and its strengthening under Darius are crucial

elements in ancient Iranian historiography. This emphasises the shift from the Median state to the Persian Empire.

Jonker (2018) examines the Persian Empire's ability, under Cyrus, to assimilate various ethnic and cultural identities while preserving connections to previous imperial administrations. Heller (2023) supports this perspective by emphasising Cyrus's reverence for indigenous traditions and his depiction as a champion of freedom. Ultimately, the capture of Babylon by Cyrus the Great in 539 BCE was a crucial occurrence that signified the shift from the Neo-Babylonian Empire to Persian dominance under the Achaemenid Empire. The relatively peaceful conquest led by Cyrus and his portrayal as a liberator had significant consequences for the ancient world's political, religious, and social dynamics. Cyrus's adherence to local traditions, his reinstatement of religious rituals, and his acknowledgement of fundamental human rights established a model of governance that had a profound impact within the Persian Empire and beyond, solidifying his status as a consequential historical figure. Arabzadeh (2023:2-4) asserts that the Book of Esther (MT) holds historical value about Achaemenian history due to its inclusion of Persian realia, which is not found in classical sources. This suggests that the book's author had access to sources from the Persian state, either directly or indirectly. The presence of historical material in the Book of Esther (MT) that aligns with evidence from the Achaemenian Empire highlights the significance of considering it as a valuable historical source for Achaemenian studies. Arabzadeh (2023, 2-4) conducted a descriptive-analytical study by examining non-Greek sources, specifically Achaemenian royal inscriptions, economic documents, and legal documents from various regions of the Persian Empire. By comparing the contents of the Book of Esther (MT) with these sources, Arabzadeh (2023, 2-4) demonstrates the similarities between the book and Achaemenian evidence. This supports the argument that the author of the Masoretic version had access to sources from the Persian state.

According to Sanjek (2003), the history of Jews living outside their homeland in Persia, before the documentation in the Masoretic Text, involves a complex and diverse series of migrations, cultural interactions, and religious customs that have greatly influenced Jewish communities for centuries. Following the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus of Persia, the Jews were granted permission to return to Judah. However, instead of returning, many Jews decided to scatter in various regions such as Egypt, Syria, Turkey, and Persia. They established interconnected communities in these regions that persisted throughout the Hellenic and Roman eras. Mahmoodi-Bakhtiari (2023) asserts that the scattering of Jews across various territories

indicates the varied encounters and relationships of diasporic Jewish communities, emphasising the ability of Jewish populations to endure and adjust in unfamiliar settings. The Book of Esther, which is considered a canonical text in the Masoretic Text, is crucial for comprehending the experiences of Jews living in Persia during the rule of Xerxes I. Esther's story takes place in the Persian court and depicts the difficulties and successes of a Jewish woman as she manoeuvres through a foreign system of power to safeguard her people from a plot to commit genocide. The narrative of Esther serves as a representation of the bravery and autonomy exhibited by Jews living outside their homeland in safeguarding their cultural and religious heritage in the face of challenges, reflecting the themes of strength and resolve within the diaspora setting. According to Kneebone (2007), the Esther narrative, as portrayed in the Masoretic Text, represents the core of diaspora Judaism during the sixth century BCE. It serves as a fundamental text for comprehending the experiences of scattered Jewish communities. The Book of Esther celebrates the festival of Purim. It serves as an exemplar for diasporas around the globe, demonstrating the intricacies of upholding cultural and religious traditions in foreign territories. Including Esther's story in the Masoretic Text highlights the lasting importance of diasporic narratives in Jewish tradition and history. Mahmoodi-Bakhtiari (2023) asserts that the Book of Esther, composed by the Jewish diaspora in Persia, is a significant representation of a pivotal era in Jewish history. It sheds light on the cultural and religious complexities experienced by Jews residing in a foreign territory. According to Levites (2021), the Book of Esther explores the challenges of preserving Jewish customs and beliefs in a foreign land, emphasising the importance of ethnic and religious identity in a diasporic context. The translation and interpretation of pivotal terms in the Book of Esther, such as "yehudim," are essential for comprehending diaspora Judaism's religious and cultural subtleties as portrayed in the text. The Masoretic Text, which encompasses the Book of Esther, is a fundamental resource for examining Jewish history, culture, and religious customs. The demanding efforts of the Masoretes in safeguarding and conveying the Hebrew Bible guaranteed the uninterrupted preservation of Jewish textual customs, including narratives such as Esther's, which provide valuable understanding into the lives of Jewish communities dispersed in Persia. The presence of diacritical marks in the Masoretic Text demonstrates the meticulous effort made to preserve the precision and authenticity of the Biblical text within Jewish communities.

In conclusion, the history of diasporic Jews in Persia leading up to the documentation in the Masoretic Text is a testament to the enduring resilience, cultural richness, and religious heritage of Jewish communities dispersed across different lands. The Masoretic Text preserves these

narratives, providing valuable insights into the experiences of diasporic Jewish communities in Persia and their enduring legacy in Jewish tradition and history. In chapter 4 of this study, I have examined the characterization of Esther and Mordecai, specifically the development of their identities and the utilization of (SIT) to elucidate the interplay of identities in the narrative. In the next section, I connect the ancient Jewish diasporic identities to contemporary realities.

6.3. Connecting Jewish Diasporic Identities to Contemporary Realities

Draper (2001: 157-158), in the third pole of the tripolar exegetical model known as the world in front of the text, states that the last interpretation stage involves assessing the text's current significance and interpretation, examining how various communities have historically and presently understood and applied the text. It entails utilizing the knowledge acquired from distancing oneself and understanding the context to make a significant and applicable interpretation of the text within one's situation. Green and Appel (2024) discuss the concept of narrative transportation, referring to the immersive experience readers have when they become captivated by a story. They further assert that this immersion can shape how individuals perceive themselves and the world around them. Green and Appel (2024) argue that stories can influence social identity by providing new perspectives, fostering empathy, and altering self-concept. Mandia (2024) examines the themes of naming, social control, and identity crises in the novels of Jean Rhys. Mandia's (2024) dissertation explores how characters grapple with questions of belonging and identity, particularly in the context of social hierarchies and power dynamics. Mandia (2024) argues that names and labels assigned to characters significantly impact their social identity and sense of self.

The detailed characterization of Esther and Mordecai in the Masoretic Text offers profound insights into contemporary complexities, particularly in identity, leadership, and ethical decision-making. By examining these Biblical figures, modern readers can draw parallels to societal issues and personal challenges.

Below, I list contemporary parallels to the contested identities in the Book of Esther.

Identity and Assimilation

Palmer (2023) crystallizes the argument that assimilating into a foreign context by hiding one's Jewish identity is unacceptable, aligning with Esther's concealment and subsequent revelation, highlighting the conflict between assimilation and cultural identity. Yampolsky et al. (2013)

examine multicultural identity integration, highlighting the tensions between assimilation and cultural identity, a theme evident in Esther's narrative, which is particularly significant in modern multicultural societies where individuals frequently navigate intricate layers of identity. Aryeh and Wee (2021) analyse moral and ethical values applicable to the critical moment when embracing one's heritage becomes necessary, as seen in Esther's story, as the narrative implies that assimilating into a dominant culture can offer certain safeguards or benefits. Still, there may arise a crucial juncture when openly embracing one's heritage becomes essential for the sake of fairness and asserting oneself. In contemporary settings, this phenomenon is evident in the encounters of marginalised communities who strive to maintain their cultural identities while facing the demands of assimilation. Esther's narrative inspires individuals to draw strength from their heritage and acknowledge the potential influence of their cultural identity on broader societal matters.

Leadership and Gender

Esther's rise to power and intelligent use of it defy gender norms and demonstrate women's leadership potential. Esther's story shows women's power to change the world despite the ongoing gender equality struggle. Her story aligns with gender equality and women in leadership movements. Esther's ability to navigate and transform a male-dominated environment through her intellect, bravery, and strategic mindset inspires modern women facing similar challenges. This emphasises the importance of female input in decision-making. Mordecai and Esther demonstrate ethical decision-making under pressure. Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman shows his unwavering commitment to his principles, even at significant personal risk. Esther's nonchalance in approaching the king shows moral courage in confronting injustice. Leaders and individuals must balance personal risk and collective benefit in modern ethical dilemmas. The story of Mordecai and Esther illustrates the importance of standing up for one's beliefs and taking risks to protect and improve others.

Community and Advocacy

Mordecai's leadership in rallying the Jewish community and his communication with Esther illustrate the importance of collective action and advocacy. This is particularly relevant in contemporary social justice movements, where community organizing and advocacy are crucial in addressing systemic inequalities and injustices. The narrative emphasizes the power of solidarity and the need for proactive leadership in mobilizing communities towards common

goals. It underscores the value of strategic planning, effective communication, and collective effort in driving societal change.

The textual work on Esther and Mordecai in the MT reveals timeless themes that resonate with contemporary complexities. Identity, leadership, ethical decision-making, and community advocacy are as pertinent today as in ancient times. By reflecting on these characters' experiences and actions, modern readers can gain valuable insights into navigating the challenges of the modern day, advocating for justice, and embracing the power of their cultural identities and ethical convictions.

In examining the theological aspect of the book of Esther in the MT, various Biblical scholars have engaged in critical analysis and debate. Seidler (2019) suggests that the author of the Book of Esther may have incorporated theological and moral implications within the text through subtle connections between descriptions. This indicates that the theological depth of Esther may take time to be evident but necessitates a thorough examination to reveal. Mills (2023) explores the discourse surrounding the authenticity of the MT of the Hebrew Bible, highlighting how scholars have been involved in early modern theological disputes concerning the Masoretic text. This underscores the continuous scholarly discussion regarding the genuineness and theological significance of the Masoretic Text. Viezel (2017) also discusses the extensive work of scholars, including Jacob Reifmann, in textual criticism of the Bible, suggesting amendments to the traditional Masoretic text. I agree with Kneebone (2007), who critiques the Book of Esther for lacking profound theological truths. However, this perspective contrasts with the notion that the theological aspect of Esther may be nuanced and necessitates a more profound exploration to uncover its implications. Overall, these scholars contribute to the discussion about the theological aspect of the book of Esther in the MT, highlighting the need for a thorough and intricate interpretation to uncover the theological implications present in the text. Nevertheless, looking at the characterization of Esther and Mordecai from a Biblical narrative and social identity theory perspective provides a unique and valuable viewpoint, apart from the theological aspects. By examining how these characters navigate and express their identities within their social, political, and cultural environments, modern readers can better understand the text's significance and implications for identity, authority, and opposition. This method intensifies the examination of literature and connects ancient stories with contemporary conversations about social interactions and the development of personal identity. As a result, it enriches modern-day readers' understanding and practical aspects of the Book of Esther.

6.4. Examples of Similar Contemporary Identity Challenges

According to Wilson and Peters (2005), the Biblical text of Esther is significant and addresses contemporary identity challenges. One of these challenges is transnationalism, which refers to individuals navigating multiple social spaces and forming complex identities. Jones (2021) argues that Esther personifies this challenge as she wrestles with her Jewish identity while residing in the Persian court, highlighting the conflict between diverse cultural affiliations. In addition, the book emphasises the interconnectedness of identity struggles, specifically about gender and ethnicity. Gwyther (2021) further argues that Esther's dual identity as a woman and a member of a marginalised ethnic group highlights the intricate challenges individuals encounter when their identities converge, potentially resulting in discrimination or oppression. Thambyrajah (2022) also observes that the theme reflects the current difficulties individuals face as they navigate various cultural influences and grapple with reconciling conflicting aspects of their identities. The narrative also explores themes of unfounded allegations and the representation of Jewish identity in the context of Persian legislation, drawing parallels to contemporary battles against bias, discrimination, and the navigation of personal identity within legal and societal structures.

According to Homrighausen (2023), the narrative showcases a diverse range of minor characters whose stories are frequently overlooked but significantly impact the overall storyline. This reflects the current reality where marginalised voices and identities are often disregarded or marginalised in mainstream discussions. By illuminating these peripheral characters, the text encourages readers to contemplate society's many identities and experiences. Rugwiji (2021) emphasises that the narrative in the Book of Esther also explores the themes of lawlessness and community revolt. This narrative reflects on the adverse outcomes of societal injustices and the challenges experienced by diasporic communities. Goswell (2021) also highlights how these themes align with current issues surrounding social unrest, political turmoil, and the pursuit of justice within marginalised communities. Moreover, the Book of Esther is renowned for its textual divisions that provide insight into the narrative's main character. Sun (2017) argued that examining texts' structure and the characters' prominence reflects the continuous search for clear identity and acknowledgement amid intricate narratives and societal demands. The book of Esther can be seen as a diasporic novella, focusing on the challenges of being displaced, adapting, and surviving in foreign lands. Treloar (2001) states that the diasporic perspective provides a valuable understanding of the current

challenges faced by displaced populations, refugees, and migrants as they navigate issues of belonging and identity in unfamiliar surroundings. The narrative explores the themes of exile and identity-in-exile, highlighting the difficulties individuals face when dealing with cultural displacement and societal marginalisation.

According to Ioannides and Cohen (2013), the book of Esther has been examined in connection with storytelling traditions and translation practices. This emphasises the role of narrative in shaping cultural identities and preserving heritage. Additionally, the retelling of Esther's story during the Jewish festival of Purim highlights the lasting importance of narratives in maintaining and transmitting cultural identities over time. The focus on storytelling as a method of preserving identity aligns with current endeavours to reclaim and honour a variety of cultural narratives in response to the spread of globalisation and cultural uniformity.

6.5. Implications for Modern Interpreters

In this section, I begin with the implications of the reading of Esther (MT) for the Coloured community in South Africa, followed by the impact on modern interpreters. Contested social identities have been and still are a significant challenge in South Africa. For instance, Klaasen (2018) explores how the Khoisan's continuous struggle against dispossession, particularly noting the pivotal land seizures in 1657, which are relevant in current discussions on land and identity. Klaasen (2018) critiques the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) approach, advocating for a more open-ended narrative that allows ongoing dialogue and interaction, further arguing how their narrative with its focus on personhood, communication, power as reflected experience, and fluid community, can offer valuable insights for healing and reconciliation in South Africa today. Kukauka (2023) explores the importance of political recognition and cultural identity for minority groups, specifically the Khoisan, arguing that recognizing the Khoisan's unique cultural identity is crucial for their political empowerment and social inclusion. Kukauka (2023) examines how the lack of formal recognition has contributed to their marginalization and discusses the potential benefits of integrating Khoisan cultural identity, highlighting the complexities and challenges of achieving meaningful recognition for minority groups in a post-apartheid context. In the context of the coloured community in South Africa pre and post-apartheid, Martin (1998) examined the complexities and implications of the term "Coloured" in South Africa, arguing that it carries historical and social significance, shaping identity and community dynamics exploring how this label has evolved and been contested over time. Adhikari (2006), however, examines this racial

stereotyping of Coloured people during apartheid, illustrating how these stereotypes were perpetuated and their impact on the community's social and political status, arguing that such stereotypes reinforced racial hierarchies and contributed to the marginalization of the Coloured population. Hendricks (2004), however, discusses the Coloured community's struggle with identity in post-apartheid South Africa, highlighting how historical burdens and contemporary challenges intersect. Hendricks (2004) emphasizes the need for the Coloured identity to find its place within the "Rainbow Nation" while addressing issues of marginalization and recognition. Ruiter's (2009) examination of the evolving constructions of Coloured identity in post-apartheid South Africa highlights the dynamics of collaboration, assimilation, and contestation within this community and how these processes shape and redefine Coloured identity amidst changing socio-political landscapes. Petrus & Isaacs-Martin (2012) also argue that Coloured identity is not monolithic but encompasses various meanings influenced by historical, social, and political contexts. Baron (2022) engages with Biko's Black Consciousness thought to analyze the post-apartheid conditions of Coloured people in South Africa and further argues that Coloured identity remains marginalized and often overlooked, advocating for a renewed focus on Black Consciousness to address these issues. Oliver (2024) thoroughly examines the intersection between black theology and coloured identity within the South African context. Oliver (2024:4) argues that coloured identity in South Africa has been historically marginalized and inadequately addressed within the broader framework of black theology. Oliver (2024:4-7) contends that the historical and ongoing marginalization of coloured communities stems from their ambiguous racial classification, which has led to a sense of not fully belonging to either the black or white communities and advocates that black theology must be expanded to inclusively address the unique experiences and struggles of coloured individuals, who often find themselves in a liminal space between black and white identities. I fully agree with the arguments of Hendricks (2004) and Oliver (2024). Oliver (2024:2) states ... "from the onset, coloured identity is one of obscure understanding," which is valid in one sense; however, this statement may not be the case for all people classified as "Coloureds". I draw from this statement Oliver (2024)

With regards to coloured-rejectivism, an early example of this thinking was in the 1980s when the likes of Reverend Alan Hendrickse, leader of the Labour Party, got into a heated debate with the National Party to which he exclaimed, 'God made me a man, the National Party made me a coloured man' (Adhikari 2006a:163). Former Western Cape African National Congress (ANC)

spokesperson Lionel Adendorf offers a problematisation of coloured identity which leads him to the conclusion that there is no such thing as ‘coloured identity’. For Adendorf (2016), to call oneself ‘coloured’ is to affirm and even celebrate apartheid’s attempt to marginalise people by enforcing distorted labels upon them. He adds that the Population Registration Act of 1950 defined the ‘coloured person’ as a ‘person who is not a white person or a native’ (2024:3).

This statement reflects my daily experience, as I have previously shared my connection to the contested identities depicted in the Book of Esther. I, too, have navigated my own complex identity within a culturally diverse and deeply rooted society. Oliver (2024:3) states, “This marginality persists even in a post-1994 South Africa”. Until now, I have experienced stereotypical remarks in all spheres of society, in church, my relationships, academia, and even in local grassroots communities, seconding Oliva’s (2024) quote, “Marginality persists”. I often find myself experiencing a sense of ambiguity and marginalization, as mixed race does not fully belong to any racial group. This multifaceted identity landscape in South Africa parallels the narrative of Esther, who also navigated dual identities in a complex social environment. Esther, a Jewish woman who became queen of Persia, exemplifies these experienced tensions between assimilation and identity preservation; the only difference between myself and Esther is that I do not have a community that faced physical genocide that requires saving but a community that is experiencing no sense of belonging. South Africa's mixed-race communities and Esther's narrative demonstrate that social cohesion can emerge from recognising and integrating diverse identities. Esther’s actions lead to a newfound respect and safety for the Jewish people in Persia, fostering a sense of unity and acceptance. However, the narrative resolution signifies the potential for social harmony when diverse identities are acknowledged and valued, similar to South Africa's journey towards a "Rainbow Nation" that aims to embrace its multifaceted identity landscape, promoting inclusivity and cohesion. I now offer implications for modern interpreters from various social identity challenges. Picher (2016) proposes that the narrative of Esther and Mordecai offers valuable insights that can be applied to current challenges concerning identity, resilience, and societal dynamics. An essential lesson derived from the narrative is the significance of bravery and the ability to act when confronted with challenges. Claassens (2014) employed an interdisciplinary methodology, integrating insights from Gender Studies, Biblical analysis, and Political Science to examine the phenomenon of sexual violence in South Africa. Claassens (2014) utilized the story of Esther to illuminate how a male-dominated societal framework contributes to various

forms of victimization and underscores how Esther's narrative offers an understanding of the systemic challenges of sexual violence in South Africa, highlighting society's accountability in perpetrating such acts. By amalgamating viewpoints from diverse fields, the study presents a holistic comprehension of the intricate nature of sexual violence. Within the discourse, Claasens (2014) accentuates the significance of courage in confronting societal conventions, drawing comparisons to Esther's assertion of her agency in the face of inequity. Claasens (2014) further posits that displays of courage, akin to Esther's, can function as potent modes of advocacy that contest and dismantle detrimental societal frameworks; underscoring Esther's valour in speaking out against injustice, Claasens emphasizes the importance of individuals opposing oppressive establishments (2014:471-487).

Hagström and Gustafsson (2021) concur that Esther's courageous act of disclosing her Jewish identity to King Xerxes, despite the inherent hazards, serves as a compelling demonstration of the strength derived from defending one's convictions and cultural heritage in the presence of prejudice or oppression. This lesson is relevant for individuals dealing with complex identities in today's multicultural and diverse societies. It highlights the importance of self-empowerment and being true to oneself, even when faced with external pressures. Furthermore, the story of Esther and Mordecai highlights the theme of employing strategic communication and negotiation in difficult situations. Jones (2021) highlights Mordecai's strategic methods in persuading Esther to intervene on behalf of the Jewish people. This case exemplifies the significance of diplomacy, persuasion, and advocacy in addressing systemic injustices and safeguarding vulnerable communities. This lesson can be applied to current situations where people and groups experience unfair treatment or exclusion, emphasising the importance of using strategic involvement and advocacy to bring about beneficial transformations. Moreover, the narrative of Esther and Mordecai exemplifies the motif of fortitude and flexibility when confronted with unpredictability and peril. Esther and Mordecai exhibit resilience by skillfully manoeuvring through intricate political dynamics and utilising their positions to safeguard their community despite challenging circumstances. This lesson addresses the importance of resilience in contemporary society, where individuals frequently encounter difficulties that demand adaptability, determination, and innovative thinking to overcome. Stone (2018) argues that the story of Esther and Mordecai provides valuable insights into the significance of community solidarity and collective action during times of crisis. The Jewish community's response to Haman's decree demonstrates the power that can be harnessed through unity, support, and collective action to defend shared values and rights. This lesson aligns with current

social justice and equity movements, highlighting the significance of collective action in tackling systemic inequalities and fostering inclusiveness. Emmanuel (2017) interprets the Book of Esther as a narrative of trauma and recovery, relevant to modern Jewish readers grappling with the legacy of the Holocaust and post-Shoah identity, using the story to reflect on survival, resistance, and healing, particularly regarding the threat of annihilation faced by the Jewish people in the Persian Empire. Emmanuel (2017: 23) argues that the text reflects a collective trauma akin to the experiences of Jews during the Holocaust, where survival is intricately tied to resilience and the ability to adapt to oppressive circumstances. Emmanuel (2017: 30) further discusses the concept of counter-trauma as a response to past trauma, where Esther and Mordecai's actions symbolize survival and empowerment, offering a model for confronting and overcoming trauma. Emmanuel (2017: 35) also connects the Esther narrative with the identity of the Sabra (native-born Israelis), particularly those born after the Holocaust, and argues that the modern Sabra experience is shaped by trauma and strength, which echoes how Esther's story portrays the Jewish community's resilience in the face of destruction. What stands out is that Emmanuel's (2017:40) analysis focuses on the role of Esther as a female protagonist, suggesting that Esther's use of her position in the Persian court reflects a complex negotiation of gender, power, and survival. Esther's silence and subtlety in using her power can be seen as a form of resistance, paralleling how Jewish women in post-Holocaust societies navigate the intersection of gender, trauma, and cultural survival. Dunbar (2019) applies a modern feminist and trauma theory perspective to the Book of Esther, focusing on the themes of sexual violence, exploitation, and collective trauma. Her analysis makes connections between ancient and contemporary issues, specifically sexual trafficking and the #MeToo movement, and argues that the Book of Esther can be read as a narrative that addresses sexual exploitation and trafficking, primarily through the figure of Queen Esther, who is initially chosen as part of a royal harem. The text is examined as a representation of forced sexualization and power dynamics within a patriarchal society, paralleling modern issues like human trafficking. Dunbar (2019: 37) explores how the trauma of sexual exploitation in the story of Esther extends beyond the individual to the collective experience of the Jewish people, suggesting that the community's survival is intertwined with the experience of victimization and resilience linking trauma to the collective trauma experienced by marginalized groups, including the historical trauma of sexual violence and its impact on the community. Dunbar (2019:46) parallels the trauma depicted in Esther and the modern #MeToo movement. She argues that Esther's story provides a framework for understanding sexual violence and exploitation in the contemporary context, where survivors' voices are increasingly being

amplified. Similar to Emmanuel's (2017) and Dunbar's (2019) approach, both articles apply trauma theory to the Book of Esther, focusing on collective trauma and survival themes. However, Dunbar's article diverges by specifically highlighting the issue of sexual trafficking and violence. At the same time, Emmanuel focuses more on the general trauma faced by the Jewish people and the narrative's relevance to post-Shoah identity. Both use modern frameworks of trauma theory to reinterpret the ancient text in a way that resonates with contemporary concerns about gendered violence and trauma recovery. Finally, the narrative of Esther and Mordecai highlights the importance of maintaining one's identity and cultural heritage amid pressures to assimilate. Mordecai's unwavering commitment to upholding Jewish identity and customs, even in an unfamiliar and antagonistic setting, emphasises the significance of safeguarding one's cultural heritage and traditions in the face of external obstacles. This lesson is applicable in the contemporary globalised era, where individuals frequently struggle to preserve their cultural identities in diverse and occasionally assimilating societies.

6.6. Conclusion

This chapter connects the previously detailed textual analysis of Esther and Mordecai from the Book of Esther (MT) with contemporary issues of contested identities. The historical context of Jewish diasporic identities as depicted in the Book of Esther (MT) is examined, identifying contemporary parallels and discussing the relevance of Esther and Mordecai's experiences to current identity issues. The chapter outlines the implications for modern interpreters, providing practical applications based on the narrative. The Book of Esther presents diverse themes and narratives that mirror and evoke various modern identity struggles. Esther's story offers valuable insights into the complexities of identity formation, negotiation, and expression in a diverse and constantly evolving world, addressing issues of transnationalism, hybridity, gender, ethnicity, and justice. The narrative of Esther and Mordecai provides a wealth of lessons applicable to contemporary identity challenges, resilience-building, community solidarity, strategic communication, and cultural preservation. By drawing insights from their experiences and actions, individuals today can glean valuable guidance on navigating complex social landscapes, advocating for justice and equity, and embracing their identities with courage and resilience.

Chapter 7 Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Introduction

This study explores how the Book of Esther (MT) navigates themes of contested identity, resilience, and community survival. By employing Biblical narrative criticism, I have demonstrated how Esther and Mordecai's actions are not just personal choices but strategic responses to systemic oppression. SIT has further illuminated how these characters' identity negotiations reflect broader group dynamics, particularly the tensions between assimilation and resistance. These insights are not confined to the ancient world. They resonate deeply with contemporary realities, where marginalized groups face similar struggles of balancing authenticity with societal expectations. Reflecting on my own experiences as a South African, I see parallels between Esther's concealment and the strategies many employ to navigate environments shaped by inequality and prejudice. This synthesis of ancient text and modern experience reinforces the enduring value of Biblical studies, particularly in its ability to shed light on the universal human condition. In this final chapter of my dissertation, I provide a concise overview of the research conducted throughout the thesis. In addition, I give a succinct summary of the findings and outcomes discussed in each of the preceding chapters. In conclusion, I will now contemplate my research experiences, acknowledge the study's limitations, and propose recommendations for future research endeavours.

7.2 Summary of Research and Conclusions

Within this dissertation, my objective was to address the research question: What can the characterization of Esther and Mordechai, read through (SIT), reveal about contested diasporic Jewish identities as seen in the book of Esther (MT) and imply for contemporary interpreters who face challenges with contested identities?

When attempting to answer this question, I divided it into three sub-questions:

1. In what ways are Esther and Mordechai characterized in Esther (MT)?
2. How can (SIT) enhance a character exploration of Mordecai and Esther as they are embedded within Jewish identity?
3. What do the suggested analyses—as viewed through the prism of (SIT)—disclose about

contested Jewish diasporic identities and how they relate to contemporary interpreters facing challenges with contested identities?

Chapter 1, I introduced the research problem, the research question and sub-questions that guide this dissertation. I provided a concise overview of the two theoretical frameworks within Biblical studies. After examining these frameworks, I identified gaps in the literature this dissertation aimed to address. Additionally, I provided an outline of the methodology employed for this research and explained the overall structure of the dissertation.

Chapter 2 explored the intricate interplay between theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches in Biblical studies. The chapter was structured around applying Biblical narrative criticism, focusing on understanding the text in its literary form and uncovering the deeper motivations, character developments, and messages conveyed by the authors. The tripolar exegetical model was employed as a guiding framework for the analysis. This model, proposed by Jonathan Draper, consisted of three pivotal components: distantiation, contextualization, and appropriation. These components served as a structured approach to interpreting Biblical texts, allowing for a complete understanding that respected historical contexts while engaging with contemporary relevance.

Additionally, (SIT) was utilized as another significant theoretical lens. This theory examined how individuals' social identities influenced the narratives they constructed and their self-representation within specific social groups. By integrating SIT, the aim was to provide a nuanced analysis of how social identities and narratives interacted within Biblical texts, offering insights into the contemporary implications of these interactions. Methodologically, the focus was on characterization within the Biblical narratives, involving a detailed examination of the characters, their development throughout the texts, and their roles in shaping the readers' interpretations. This methodological focus complemented the theoretical frameworks by providing a concrete approach to answering the sub-questions of the study.

Chapter 3, I applied the distantiation step of Draper's (2002) tripolar exegetical model to investigate the underlying aspects of the text, explicitly focusing on the historical-critical analysis that served as the basis for comprehending the Biblical context, specifically the Masoretic Text (MT). This approach revealed the diverse and intricate web of cultural, social, political, and religious factors influencing the Biblical narrative. An analysis of the historical

context provided a valuable understanding of the individuals, events, and cultural norms that shaped the development and compilation of these ancient texts. I applied two of Robbins' textures to analyze the narrative: social and artistic texture. I began by examining the historical periods in which the Masoretic texts were written, from the ancient Near Eastern civilizations, followed by the social and cultural dynamics of the time.

Chapter 4, I began by applying the second step of the tripolar exegetical model to the world of the text. I then presented an overview of narrative analysis, focusing on the fundamental structure of storytelling and elements of character development. I examined how stories are built, paying close attention to the progression of character development throughout the narrative. Then, I summarized the plot, setting the stage for examining the narrative structure. This analysis broke down the story into its core parts: the exposition, conflict, rising action, climax, falling action, and resolution. Following this, I examined the narrator's point of view, analyzing their role and perspective within the story. Understanding the narrator's position helped me understand how the story was told and its impact on the audience. I concisely summarized the main findings from the narrative analysis, highlighting their implications for comprehending the characters and the overall narrative.

Chapter 5, to extend the narrative analysis, I continued with the analysis with a specific focus on the characters Esther and Mordecai to answer the following sub-questions:

1. In what ways were Esther and Mordecai characterized in Esther (MT)?
2. How could Social Identity Theory (SIT) enhance a character exploration of Mordecai and Esther as they were embedded within Jewish identity?

To achieve this integration, I applied characterization from narrative analysis as a methodology and social identity theory as a dual approach to the characters in an attempt to answer these questions and explore the multifaceted nature of identity, revealing the complex interplay between the characters and the broader social context in which they exist. I also conducted a synthesis, discussion, and, lastly, the conclusion.

Chapter 6 aimed to connect the previously detailed textual analysis of the characterization of Esther and Mordecai from the Book of Esther (MT) with contemporary issues of contested identities. This connection was explored by focusing on the third research sub-question: "What do the suggested analyses—as viewed through the prism of (SIT)—disclose about contested Jewish diasporic identities and how they relate to contemporary interpreters facing challenges

with contested identities?" To achieve this, I explored the historical context of Jewish diasporic identities as depicted in the Book of Esther (MT). I identified contemporary parallels, discussing the relevance of Esther and Mordecai's experiences to current identity issues. Based on the narrative, I delineated the implications for contemporary interpreters and offered practical applications. Lastly, I provided a concise summary of the most significant points.

7.3 My Experiences Carrying Out the Research

I want to begin by acknowledging that the utilization of social identity theory began in my honour's degree, where I had utilized the theory as a heuristic tool for my autobiographical reading of Genesis 2-3, where I was examining my biracial identity and belonging in the multicultural social identity of South Africa. The reading of the Biblical narrative went beyond the social-cultural norms that promote racial inequalities, injustices and segregation. Reading the text through this lens demonstrated that I, a social human being, can gracefully use this versatility to interact with others in society because the theory helped me understand myself and the world of liminality. It was based on reading the Biblical narrative through the lens of (SIT). I could interpret the narrative; however, within the reigns and terrains of advanced Biblical interpretation, I could appropriate the ancient text to my contemporary context. There, I was intrigued to pursue a master's degree in utilizing (SIT) as a heuristic tool to enhance Biblical interpretation.

I found carrying out the research of this dissertation to be fruitful but equally challenging. I found the research at an honours level to be transformative for me as an individual and a contributing member of a diverse social identity society, hence my choice to apply the theory to the Esther narrative in the Masoretic Text. When I discovered that it was uncharted grounds, it became more compelling for me to undertake this study to contribute to the growing body of knowledge in advanced Biblical interpretation and the current rise of the utilization and integration of social scientific methods to Biblical narrative criticism for the enhancement of gaining deeper insights and understanding of the texts; hence, my choice of frameworks and methodology, which I found was appropriate and helpful.

I have found myself growing in thinking about the complex issues I have explored, and I have opened myself to be transformed by the insights of social identities. I have found this research extremely helpful in my quest to acknowledge and understand how individuals choose to identify themselves in a diverse and, in most cases, contested social society. While at times it was challenging due to limited scholarship in my topic, it was a gift that the research did not

remain purely an intellectual task but a task that deepened my advanced Biblical interpretation to engage on critical issues such as contesting social identities locally and even diasporically. I often struggled with the research because it regularly revealed my scholarly limitations. I mainly found the integration process of the two frameworks challenging as it showed me the gift of being able to do a Master's degree and reminded me that the purpose of carrying out this research was both to try and demonstrate how a social scientific method could be a heuristic tool for the enhancement and interpretation for the contemporary Bible reader even outside of the Biblical study discipline and to be able to produce a structured approach that would be easy to follow for those familiar with Biblical studies and social identity theory. Many times, I wondered whether or not I could do the work. Nevertheless, I enjoyed embracing growing and learning as opposed to feeling like I needed to have already arrived at the place of being an excellent scholar.

The research has stirred me to be excited to keep looking, keep exploring, keep questioning and keep pursuing especially uncharted terrains; even though this dissertation has left me with plenty of questions, the research has further sharpened my desire to seek further questions and, perhaps from time to time, a few answers.

In embarking on this master's thesis, I must first acknowledge the foundational role of (SIT) in my academic journey. Originating from my honours degree, where I employed (SIT) as a heuristic tool for an autobiographical exploration of Genesis 2-3, the theory provided a lens through which I examined my biracial identity within the multicultural social context of South Africa. Beyond its application to Biblical narratives, (SIT) illuminated the social and cultural norms perpetuating racial inequalities, injustices, and segregation, empowering me to navigate the complexities of my own identity in the world of liminality.

This preliminary engagement with (SIT) not only deepened my self-understanding but also inspired me to pursue advanced Biblical interpretation within the framework of this influential theory. While my initial research during my honours year was transformative, the uncharted territory of applying (SIT) to the Esther narrative in the Masoretic Text fuelled my decision to undertake this Master's study. I aimed to contribute to the evolving field of advanced Biblical interpretation, particularly in light of the increasing integration of social-scientific methods into Biblical narrative criticism, seeking a richer and more nuanced understanding of the texts.

The journey of this dissertation has been both fruitful and challenging. Choosing the Esther narrative allowed me to delve into unexplored areas, adding to the growing body of knowledge

in advanced Biblical interpretation. Despite encountering challenges associated with limited scholarship in my chosen topic, the research became more than an intellectual pursuit; it transformed into a quest to understand how individuals identify themselves in diverse and often contested social contexts.

Integrating two frameworks—Biblical studies and social identity theory—was challenging. It reminded me of the privilege of pursuing a master's degree and prompted reflections on my scholarly limitations. However, this integration process also affirmed the purpose of the research: to demonstrate how a social scientific method, particularly (SIT), could serve as a heuristic tool for enhancing the interpretation of the contemporary Bible reader. The goal was not only to contribute to the discipline of Biblical studies but also to provide a structured approach accessible to those familiar with Biblical studies and social identity theory.

Despite moments of self-doubt and questioning my capacity to undertake this work, the research journey has been a valuable opportunity for growth and learning. It emphasized the importance of embracing becoming a more adept scholar rather than fixating on achieving scholarly excellence from the outset. While the dissertation has left me with numerous questions, it has fuelled my excitement to continue exploring uncharted territories, asking new questions, and occasionally discovering answers.

In conclusion, this research has stirred a profound enthusiasm to keep looking, exploring, questioning, and pursuing knowledge. Although it has generated more questions than answers, the experience has sharpened my commitment to scholarly inquiry and has left me eager to contribute further to the ever-evolving dialogue in Biblical studies and social identity theory.

7.4 Research Limitations

Several factors constrained the scope of this research. The research was strained due to my involvement in my church fellowship of vocation to prepare for full-time ministry. I was juggling work responsibilities and taking care of my family. Moreover, the demanding nature of church activities, family obligations, work commitments, and completing my Master's dissertation had affected my health. The research process was sometimes impeded due to doctors' instructions and prioritised treatment. I could not consistently allocate time and effort to the different research procedures.

7.5 Research Recommendations

The objective of my research was to reveal through the lens of social identity theory and Biblical narrative criticism the characterization of Esther and Mordecai as depicted in the Masoretic Text (MT).

Integrating the tripolar model in this dissertation is significant to situate my research within Biblical studies and, secondly, for Biblical scholarship as it bridges historical context, textual analysis, and contemporary relevance. By examining the world of the text (historical context), the world in the text (contextualization in its ancient world), and the world in front of the text (contemporary reader's appropriation), aiming to offer a comprehensive framework for understanding Biblical narratives. This approach can be particularly relevant for scholars or contemporary readers of the Bible, aiming to connect ancient texts with modern issues, demonstrating how ancient stories continue to resonate and offer insights today.

Combining Biblical narrative criticism for the world behind and of the text with ((SIT)) for the world in front of the text, I aimed to enrich the interpretative process through the dual application, allowing a deeper understanding of the characters' identities, within their historical and narrative contexts, and their implications for contemporary readers. This methodology can serve as a model for future studies exploring how ancient texts can inform modern identity struggles, providing a robust analytical framework that is historically grounded and relevant to contemporary social issues.

Nevertheless, specific constraints and potential areas of research that still need to be addressed have become apparent, indicating the need for further investigation. The lack of a comparative analysis, which could be a study comparing the portrayal of Esther and Mordecai in the Masoretic Text (MT) with other Biblical or historical figures, would uncover shared themes and unveil distinctive aspects of their identities. Although the study briefly mentioned these aspects, a more in-depth investigation into the socio-political atmosphere and the Jewish community's encounters within the Persian Empire would yield a more nuanced understanding of Esther and Mordecai's identities and motivations. Another area of research future research could employ the tripolar model and the integration of Biblical narrative criticism and (SIT) to study other Biblical characters who navigated complex identities. For example, a comparative analysis of Daniel and Joseph, who also dealt with identity negotiation in foreign courts, could yield rich insights into loyalty, cultural assimilation, and identity preservation. This comparative approach would deepen the understanding of how various Biblical figures

managed their identities in exile and occupation contexts, contributing to a broader comprehension of these themes in Biblical literature. Expanding the theoretical framework to include intersectionality or postcolonial theory alongside (SIT) could provide a more nuanced exploration of identity in Biblical narratives. This expanded framework would examine how various aspects of identity (e.g., ethnicity, gender, social status) intersect and influence each other within the Biblical text. Another example, applying these theories to the book of Ruth could reveal additional layers of complexity regarding Moabite and Israelite identities, gender roles, and social status, offering new perspectives on this well-known story.

Lastly, another study could trace the evolution of the interpretation of Esther and Mordecai's identities across different historical periods and cultural contexts. This longitudinal study would reveal how the understanding and significance of their characters have changed over time, reflecting shifts in societal attitudes towards identity, assimilation, and resistance. This study could explore how different communities have appropriated the Esther narrative to address their identity struggles, providing valuable insights into Biblical interpretation's dynamic and evolving nature.

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