Allusive Keywords: From Literary Flourish to Meaningful Comparisons – Four Examples Regarding the Book of Esther

An author may deploy a rare phrase or expression, which is meant to ineluctably draw the reader's mind to a different text; the phrase or expression is not the point in and of itself, however, but is rather meant to encourage the readers to think of broader and deeper parallels – similarities or differences – between the two texts, the one at hand and the one called to mind.

See Also: *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2014).

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Intertextual allusions are a feature of ancient literature, including biblical literature, that have long been recognized and that have gotten increasingly sophisticated attention in recent decades. One text may allude to another for various reasons. Some potential reasons are non-literary; an author may wish to display her or his erudition or to build camaraderie with readers through deployment of shared knowledge, for example. The more interesting, literary, reasons for the use of allusions include a desire to draw on the authority of the earlier text, or to subvert the authority of the earlier text, to build on the legacy of the earlier text or to interpret the legacy of earlier text, to situate the current text in a literary or cultural tradition, to suggest the "proper" way of reading the new text, and more.[1]

A question that has received less attention is how to identify allusions. In an article that did try to formalize criteria for identifying allusions, Robert Klapper, Gavy Posner, and Mordy Friedman focused on two considerations: "distinctiveness" and "clustering." As they note, "an unusually large number of allusive words or phrases can compensate for lack of distinctiveness,

[1] For a full and sophisticated discussion in the context of biblical studies, see Benjamin D. Sommer, *A Prophet Reads Scripture: Allusion in Isaiah 40-66* (Contraversions; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 5-31.

and vice versa."[2] I would like to explore one side of this: how a particularly distinctive, but singular, allusion, can be used by an author to contribute substantively to the plot or themes of a narrative.

In this article I will be looking at one specific way in which ancient authors may have deployed allusions. I have called this technique an "allusive keyword," and the claim is simple: an author may deploy a rare phrase or expression, which is meant to ineluctably draw the reader's mind to a different text; the phrase or expression is not the point in and of itself, however, but is rather meant to encourage the readers to think of broader and deeper parallels – similarities or differences – between the two texts, the one at hand and the one called to mind.

My own thinking about these "allusive keywords" came out of my work on the book of Esther, and how it both responded to earlier and contemporary literature and was, in turn, responded to by later literature.[3] In surveying a wide range of literature, I encountered a number of examples where a phrase was used in common in two texts, and further reflection revealed that there were much deeper connections between the texts. The purpose of this short article is to detail these examples in an attempt to "crowd-source" for further examples. My assumption is that besides the few examples discussed here, there are many more examples of this phenomenon scattered throughout ancient literature. A more systematic collection can perhaps be made collectively.

1. Esther < 1 Kings 1: "What would you like, O Queen?"

At the beginning of Esther 5, the Queen enters the palace complex. "On the third day, Esther donned royalty and stood in the inner courtyard of the palace. … When the king saw Queen Esther standing in the courtyard, she found favor in his eyes…. The king said to her, 'What would you like (*mah lākh*), Queen Esther?" Amos Frisch pointed out that there is an earlier biblical story in which a king greets his wife in just this way: King David asked Bathsheba the same question (1 Kings 1:16), "What would you like?" (*mah lākh*).[4]

The point of the comparison seems to be that Xerxes in his prime is like David in his teetering old age. At the beginning of the book of Kings, David occupies a strange position. All acknowledge that his word is law, but everyone knows that he is incompetent to actually make

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[2] Robert Klapper, Mordy Friedman, and Gavy Posner, "Amnon and Tamar : A Case Study in Allusions," *Nachalah: Yeshiva University Journal for the Study of Bible* 1 (1999), 23-33; the quotation is from 23 n. 1.
[3] See Aaron Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).
[4] Amos Frisch, "Between the Book of Esther and the Book of Kings," *Mehqere Hag* 3 (1992), 28 (Hebrew).

decisions, so the court devolves into a game of manipulation. The author of Esther may be suggesting that this is *always* the reality in Susa. Early in the text (chapter 3), Haman will play this game most successfully, but later he will be bested at his own game by Mordecai and Esther.[5]

It appears that the use of this key phrase by the author of Esther was meant to call attention to the whole suite of allusions discussed above. By deploying the question "What would you like?" in the mouth of a king, said to his wife, the author is urging us to think harder about the other story in which the phrase appears in similar usage. This is how an "allusive keyword" works.

2. Esther > 2 Maccabees: "fifty cubits high"

In 2 Maccabees 13:5, we read that the tower on which Antiochus executed Menelaus was fifty cubits tall.[6] This should immediately remind the reader of Esther, where the tower erected by Haman on which to execute Mordecai, and on which Haman himself was later executed, was fifty cubits high. Elsewhere in 2 Maccabees there are other echoes of Esther; there is also a reference to a three-day fast later in the same chapter (13:12), reminiscent of Esther 4:16.[7] These allusions culminate, so to speak, in 2 Maccabees 15:36, which states that "they ordained…to celebrate the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which in the Syrian tongue is called Adar, the day before Mordecai's day." This is the first clear reference to the celebration of Purim, on 14 Adar, in history, and its inclusion indicates that the author of 2 Maccabees wanted to draw attention to the book of Esther, and the festival of Purim.

These parallels point to deeper connections between the stories. The execution of Menelaus reminds us of the execution of Haman in ways that go beyond the height of the tower on which they are executed. In both cases, the foreign king, who has been turned against the Jews by a rogue loyalist, realizes that he has been duped, and has the "scoundrel" is then executed. The height of the execution tower thus serves as an allusive keyword. The three-day fast, too, is more significant than it may appear to be at first. Judah Maccabee declared the three-

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[5] On Xerxes' abdication of the responsibilities of decision-making, nominally the job of the king, see Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001 [1st edition: 1991]), 173.

[6] See Daniel R. Schwartz, *2 Maccabees* (Commentaries on Early Jewish Literature; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2008), 450.

[7] See Schwartz, *2 Maccabees*, 452.

day fast in preparation for meeting the king, just as Esther declared her fast in preparation for meeting the king.

The similarities between the narratives highlight the deep differences between them, as well, though. The heroes are vastly different. Esther meets the king as submissive and seductive; Judah meets the king on the battlefield, "to stand up even to death for the laws, the temple, the city, their country, and citizens."[8]

3. Esther > Genesis Apocryphon: "fine linen and purple"

The retelling of Genesis 12:10-20, the story of Abram and Sarai in Egypt, in the Genesis Apocryphon seems to draw, among other sources, on the book of Esther. Again, there is an allusive keyword meant to draw our attention to this, and connections turn out to go far deeper than that literary allusion.

The story, within the Apocryphon, goes as follows. Soon after Abram and Sarai's arrival in Canaan, there was a famine in the entire land. They decided to journey to Egypt, and on the night they entered Egypt, Abram had a terrifying dream which warned him of a danger to his life and that Sarai would have to save him. After five years in Egypt, Sarai impressed some Egyptians who had come to study wisdom from Abram with her beauty and wisdom. When Pharaoh heard of her, he immediately sent for Sarai, and tried to kill Abram. Sarai saved him by claiming that he was her brother, and instead Pharaoh simply married Sarai. Abram and Lot spent many nights thereafter crying and praying. In response to Abram's prayers, God sent afflictions to the palace, which tortured Pharaoh and his entire household for two years. After two years, an Egyptian accidentally learned from Lot, Abram's nephew, that Abram and Sarai were actually married. The Egyptian put the puzzle pieces together and advised Pharaoh to return Sarai to her husband immediately. Pharaoh angrily summoned Abram, who prayed that Pharaoh be healed. The plague was removed, and the king gave Sarai many gifts, including Hagar and "much silver and gold, many garments of fine linen and purple."[9]

The expression "much clothing of fine linen and purple" is drawn from Esther 8:15, which reports that "Mordecai left the presence of the king in royal clothing of blue and white, with a large gold crown and a mantle of fine linen and purple." The fact that Genesis

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[8] 2 Maccabees 13:14.

[9] The text, with translation and full commentary, can be found in Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave 1 (1Q20): A Commentary* (3rd ed.; Biblica et Orientalia 18/B; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2004), 98-102.

Apocryphon uses this phrase is particularly striking because, other than Esther, it appears nowhere else in the Bible or in other ancient Semitic texts.[10]

The author of this section of the Apocryphon was probably not using the phrase from Esther as a mere literary flourish. Rather, he was drawing attention to the commonalities between the story he just told and the story in Esther; in other words, we have here another allusive keyword. In both Genesis 12 and Esther, a woman is taken to the king's palace for the purpose of marriage; she has a male relative who should be her caretaker and protector; as a result of what befalls the woman, her male relative is rewarded with riches. By deploying an allusive keyword, the author of the Apocryphon is drawing the readers' attention to the connections between the two *biblical* stories. Such comparisons have been explored by modern scholars, especially Jonathan Grossman in his recent and highly perceptive book on Esther.[11]

Rather than constructing an elaborate chart to explain these connections, he deploys the most subtle of tactics, the allusive keyword, to indicate that he sees the relationship between the stories. This one key phrase is meant to conjure up a whole network of associations in the minds of his readers.

The important question, of course, is what purpose these comparison may serve. Juxtaposition of the two stories seems to be a way of extolling Abram and castigating Mordecai. Indeed, when the two characters are juxtaposed, and their stories are seen to be parallel in so many ways, their behaviors are seen to be vastly different. Abram is, firstly, warned by God in a dream that his life will be put at risk and saved only by the intervention of Sarai. When his wife is taken, he describes how he wept and prayed all night, beseeching God to protect Sarai in the palace. Sarai is indeed miraculously protected from the advances of Pharaoh, and eventually is returned to Abram. Mordecai, on the other hand, has no particular reason to fear the king, yet when Esther is taken we hear nothing of his reaction. He coolly goes on with his life, only

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[10] Joshua Finkel, "The Author of the Genesis Apocryphon knew the Book of Esther," in *Studies in the Dead Sea Scrolls: Eliezer Sukenik Memorial Volume* (ed. Yigael Yadin and Chaim Rabin; Jerusalem: Hekhal ha-Sefer, 1961), 178-179 (Hebrew). Even in later Jewish literature, the phrase appears only in discussions of the verse in Esther. The phrase "fine linen and purple" does appears in an Aramaic poem from Byzantine Palestine describing the décor at Xerxes' banquet. This attestation is particularly telling, since the phrase had apparently become deeply associated with the book of Esther, but its location within the story was malleable. See Joseph Yahalom and Michael Sokoloff, *Shirat Bene Ma'arava: Aramaic Poems of the Jews of the Land of Israel in the Byzantine Age* (Hebrew; Jerusalem: Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, 1999), 192 (line 24).

[11] See Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 66-67.

regularly checking on Sarai's wellbeing in the palace. Furthermore, whereas Abram went to great lengths to prevent Sarai from being taken in the first place, and successfully hid her for five years, Mordecai seems to make no such effort. Instead, Esther is simply taken from his home, with no objection, no fight, and no opposition. Not surprisingly, and perhaps (one might claim) as a result of Mordecai's failure to pray on her behalf, Esther is not protected from the king's advances, and engages in sexual relations with the gentile. Perhaps – as another result? – Esther is never returned to Mordecai, but is damned to live the rest of her days as the unwilling consort of a heathen king.

These similarities are differences can be summarized in a chart. The commonalities are bolded; those differences which seem to be judgmental are in *italics*.

	Esther	Apocryphon
Woman	Esther	Sarai
Male protector	Mordecai	Abram
King	Xerxes	Pharaoh Zoan
Divine guidance	*None*	*Warning of imminent danger*
Attempts to provide security	*None*	*Sarai is hidden for five years*
Her fate	Taken to the king's palace as a wife	Taken to the king's palace as a wife
Protector's reaction	*Calm*	*Weeping and prayer*
Result for her	*She is married to the king*	*She is protected from the king*
Result for him	fine linen and purple wool	fine linen and purple wool
Final result	*Lives in the foreign palace forever*	*Is returned to her Israelite family*

Esther and the story of Abram in the Genesis Apocryphon

It appears that the story of Abram in the Apocryphon has been composed as a "corrective reflection" on the Esther story. This was not necessarily the primary goal of the story, or the motivation for its composition, but the Esther connection clearly provided the author with some of the material for his narrative. The plot lines are similar enough to demand comparison, but the comparison highlights the claim that Mordecai did not act properly and therefore condemned

his female ward to a lifetime of alienation from her people (an issue that bothered other ancient readers, as well).[12] Abram, on the other hand, models perfect behavior in his response when Sarai is taken, and thus earns the same riches and power that Mordecai earns, exemplified by the "fine linen and purple wool," but he earns his wife, back, as well.

4. Esther > Bavli Qiddushin 66a – The story of Janneus

The final example of an allusive keyword we will examine here appears in a story in Bavli Qiddushin 66a. This is a short passage embedded within a longer text, and in this case the longer text is from centuries later. The short episode to be discussed is cited in its literary context for a legal nicety concerning the value of rumors and witnesses in establishing that a married woman has had a sexual affair with another man. In order to establish his legal claim that even a single witness, if he is credible, may be believed in such a case, the fourth-century Talmudic sage Abbaye quotes a story about Janneus.

Vered Noam has recently offered a sophisticated and thorough discussion of how this historical narrative draws on biblical antecedents. The part that interests us now is how the story alludes to, and takes much of its meaning from, the book of Esther.[13] In the story, the king, Janneus, throws a grand banquet to celebrate a military victory and to commemorate the construction of the Temple centuries earlier. At the banquet, a malicious advisor named El'azar ben Po'irah advises the king to provoke the Pharisees by making them swear by the frontlet on his forehead, emblem of the office of the high priest. Provoked, an elder, Judah ben Gudgeda,[14] arises and proclaims: "It is enough that you have the royal crown! Leave the crown of priesthood to the descendants of Aaron!" His demand, we are told, was based on a rumor (which turns out to be unfounded) that Janneus' mother had been a captive, and that Janneus himself was thus disqualified from priestly service. The king himself did not know how to respond, but the same wicked El'azar again comes up with advice: massacre all the Pharisees, on the grounds

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[12] For example, a Byzantine-era Aramaic poem from Palestine corrects this deficiency in Mordecai's (and Esther's) behavior: "when the royal decree was issued/ to ingather all the virgins/ she entered a room that she would not be seen/ that she would not be defiled by the laws of the heathen. / And angel sat in the window of the upper story/ appearing to passers-by how she looked. / The guards ran and told the king/ and soon thereafter were sent to Mordecai/ 'Old man, old man, why did you not say that you have a daughter?'…" The text is from Yahalom and Sokoloff, *Shirat Bene Ma'arava*, 188. See also the (approximately contemporary) Targum Sheni, in its translational paraphrase of Esther 2:8, with a similar story.

[13] See Vered Noam, "The Story of King Jannaeus (*b. Qiddushin* 66a): A Pharisaic Reply to Sectarian Polemic" *Harvard Theological Review* 107 (2014), 31-58.

[14] For the name, see Noam, "The Story of King Jannaeus," n. 12.

that the actions of Judah are representative of what they all think. After some deliberation, Janneus is convinced, and kills all the Pharisees.

There is, once again, an allusive keyword: when reporting the rumor about Janneus' mother, the texts says, "the matter was investigated (*va-yevuqqash ha-davar*) and was not found to be true (*ve-lo nimtza*)." This sentence closely resembles – in fact, reverses – the line from Esther 2:23, regarding the plot of Bigtan and Teresh: "the matter was investigated (*va-yevuqqash ha-davar*) and it was found to be true (*va-yimmatse*)." This was noted long ago; Salomon Stein already observed in 1888 that "the example … in the Baraita about King Janneus – Qiddushin 66a – …seems to have been chosen to allude to Esther 2:23,"[15] and this was discussed by Israel Levi in 1897.[16]

Furthermore, the two antagonists in the story, El'azar b. Po'irah and Judah b. Gudgeda, are introduced with clauses very similar to the introduction of Mordecai in Esther 2:5: "there was one wicked person there, evil and troublemaking, and his name was El'azar b. Po'irah," and "there was one elder there, and his name was Judah b. Gudgeda," compared to "there was a Jewish man in the fortress of Susa, and his name was Mordecai." Finally, the expression "royal crown," used in this story, is unique to the book of Esther within the Hebrew Bible.[17]

Again, these verbal similarities alert us to deeper connections: the plot lines closely mirror those of the Esther story. Both stories open with elaborate royal banquets. There is a wicked advisor, who convinces the king to provoke "the Jews" (which, from the perspective of the story, was a term equivalent to "the Pharisees"). In Esther, Haman appears and says that the king had ordered everyone to bow down to him. Whether or not the king had in fact ordered this, clearly it was publicized by Haman himself. The provocation itself is related: in Esther, Mordecai refused to *get up* (*qam*) in front of Haman; Janneus provokes the Pharisees by abjuring them (*haqem*).[18]

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[15] Stein, *Das Verbum der Mischnahsprache* (Berlin: Itzkowski, 1888), 12 n. 7.
[16] Israel Levi, "Les sources talmudiques de l'histoire juive. I. Alexandre Jannee et Simon ben Schetah. II. La rupture de Jannee avec les Pharisiens," *REJ* 35 (1897), 222.
[17] Noam, "The Story of King Jannaeus," at n. 38.
[18] For this interpretation of the phrase *haqem lahem*, see Moshe J. Bernstein, "Oaths and vows in the Pentateuchal Targumim: Semantics and Exegesis," in *Sha'arei Lashon: Studies in Hebrew, Aramaic and Jewish Languages Presented to Moshe Bar-Asher* (ed. Aharon Maman, Steven E. Fassberg, and Yochanan Breuer; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 2007), 2.20-41, with earlier references, especially Saul Lieberman, *Tosefta ki-Fshutah* (New York and Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1995), 7.397 n. 14.

In both stories, a single individual resists: Judah stands up and protests verbally; Mordecai will not bow down. In both, the king does not react, but the wicked advisor – El'azar or Haman – persuades the king that such an offense to his honor cannot be tolerated. In both, the advisor's chosen means to dealing with the insurrection is to massacre the group to which the rebel belongs – the Pharisees in one story, the Jews as a whole in the other. Of course, the stories turn out very differently: Janneus is successful in killing the Pharisees, whereas Haman's plot is thwarted. Perhaps this is exemplified by the reversal of the phraseology, from Esther's "the matter was investigated and found to be true" "the matter was investigated and <u>not</u> found to be true" in the story of Janneus.[19]

Again, the similarities may be summarized in a chart:

	Esther	Janneus story
King	Xerxes	Janneus
Wicked advisor	Haman	El'azar ben Po'irah
Opening act	Elaborate royal banquet	Elaborate royal banquet
Noble protestor	Mordecai	Judah ben Gudgeda
Protest	Ignores king's decree	Questions king's legitimacy as priest
Advice of the advisor	Kill the protestor's group	Kill the protestor's group
Result	Jews are saved	Pharisees are massacred

Esther and the Janneus Story

More relevant for our inquiry is the light this sheds on the reading of the book of Esther presupposed in the Janneus story modeled on it. Again, the story reads like a not-very-hidden polemic against the type of politics practiced by Mordecai in the book of Esther. One may stand up to the royal authorities, as Mordecai did, and this may appear to be a heroic act. Certainly this is the impression one has of Judah b. Gudgeda when he arises to fearlessly criticize the king. The king, if he is a benign monarch, may even be willing to tolerate such criticism! But there is no accounting for the power behind the throne. Mordecai and Esther were fortunate to escape with their lives, and with the lives of their contemporaries. Do not emulate them! This is the

[19] This idiomatic allusion was noted by M. H. Segal, *Grammar of Mishnaic Hebrew* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1927), 62 n. 1.

message of the Judah b. Gudgeda story. He *did* play Mordecai to El‘azar b. Po‘irah’s Haman, but the results were catastrophic. The stakes are simply too high for such risks, and the behavior of Mordecai, though successful once, must not provide the model for future Jews.

Conclusion

Throughout this essay, we have seen examples of what I have called the allusive keyword. This technique of allusion seems to have been used by at least late biblical writers and Second Temple-era authors. It was a powerful but subtle technique useful for calling the readers’ attention to relevant earlier texts, and also indicates that readers were expected to work hard to tease out the meanings of such allusions and the significance of them for the text being read. Further collaborative work should uncover many more examples, and therefore contribute to a richer understanding of the ancient texts.