

## Article

# Surviving Persia: Esther's Scroll, Anti-Black Racism and the Propaganda of Peace and Progress

Janice P. De-Whyte

School of Religion, Loma Linda University, Loma Linda, CA 92350, USA; jdewhyte@llu.edu

**Abstract:** Esther, Mordecai and the Jewish People's survival in ancient Persia alert readers that anti-Semitism can exist even in professedly peaceful and progressive settings. Esther's scroll is not only designed to be read, but it too reads contemporary circumstances of trauma and oppression. This Hebrew Bible narrative offers a critique and a challenge to present interpreters, especially those belonging to professed progressive and peaceful societies. Esther's scroll exposes how the propaganda of peace and progress, foundational to various imperial and institutional contexts, can veneer structures and events of violence and trauma. Informed by the death-dealing realities of anti-Black racism, a reading of Esther's key scenes and themes provides insight into the destructive and deadly ways that injustices such as anti-Black racism are supported and sustained by institutional policies and practices. Inherent within this Jewish survival account is an indictment of complicit and culpable individuals and institutions that enable, fund and sanction violence against marginalized members. Although there are numerous sites of oppression and violence throughout society, this essay highlights the institution of academia, which is often upheld as a paragon of progress and peace but which is frequently a prime site of racism and its attendant inequities. As a piece of trauma and survival literature, Esther's scroll makes a valuable contribution to the repertoire of resilience and resistance curated by many Black individuals and communities to counter anti-Black racism.

**Keywords:** Esther; Mordecai; Hebrew Bible; lament; anti-Black racism; antiracism; empire; institutional racism; systemic racism; academia



**Citation:** De-Whyte, Janice P. 2022. Surviving Persia: Esther's Scroll, Anti-Black Racism and the Propaganda of Peace and Progress. *Religions* 13: 829. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090829>

Academic Editor: Joel Baden

Received: 28 June 2022

Accepted: 26 August 2022

Published: 6 September 2022

**Publisher's Note:** MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



**Copyright:** © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

## 1. Introduction

Racist and colonial ideologies have been entrenched through the standardization, even veneration, of white superiority. Hermeneutical conventions that promoted the political and economic interests of empires, such as Great Britain and the United States of America, indeed influenced significant work produced by academics. In the field of biblical studies, some interpretations of selected biblical texts may serve as case studies of Eurocentric priorities that either ignored or legitimized injustice against other racial and ethnic groups. Long-held interpretations of Esther's narrative often portray the eponymous character as the fortunate winner of a beauty pageant that leads to a great romance, yet this obscures the death-dealing realities of violence and human suffering woven throughout the scroll. In contrast, Jewish interpretations of Esther foreground the reality of "Jew hatred" in past and contemporary diasporic contexts (Adler 2015, p. 248). Additionally, Jewish readings of Esther have elucidated how power, gender and politics meld to compound oppression. For instance, seeing beyond the magnanimous feasts and beauty contests, Oren highlights the feasts as "a strategy of control" utilized for the purposes of subjugation (Oren 2009, p. 143). Furthermore, the extensive preparation of the young women for the king underscores the priority of power in the Persian empire. The "ritual of refinement and beautification" contributes to the theme of collective identity in that individual women's bodies are purified and perfumed not only to satisfy the King's desire, but also to please the male leadership of Persia (Oren 2009, pp. 149–50). Jewish commentaries on Esther show how these communities could "lift the biblical story out of its original context and apply it to another context" in order to process and navigate difficult diasporic experiences (Berlin 2003, p. 15).

The reception history of Esther in white evangelical Christianity, on the other hand, has largely highlighted the story as a blueprint for femininity and modern-day romances. In such cases audiences miss the fact that “Esther is in the court not because she wants to be . . . there is a remarkable lack of romance in this entire story” (Duran 2003, p. 77). Such interpretations have not originated in a vacuum; many emanate from the priorities of past biblical scholarship, funnelled from the academy to some faith communities. These interpretations, disseminated in academic and religious circles, have been more oppressive than emancipatory in consequence. A focus on the projected romance of Esther and Ahasuerus, and a minimization of the vilification and violence sustained by the Jewish diaspora, fails to take seriously the deadly ramifications of ethnicity and race for a marginalized minority within a professed progressive and peaceful society.

## 2. Esther’s Scroll and Anti-Black Racism

Often, discussions concerning racism are limited to implicit bias. Such a limited view fails to concede that racism functions as a caste system that “uses rigid, often arbitrary boundaries to keep the ranked groupings apart, distinct from one another and in their assigned places” (Wilkerson 2020, p. 17). Racism persists as part and parcel of the nation and its institutions, including academia. In these institutional contexts, racism is about which groups wield power and can gain and control resources. “It is about respect, authority, and assumptions of competence—who is accorded these and who is not” (Wilkerson 2020, pp. 17–18).

It is essential to acknowledge the reality of racism as the “marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities” (Kendi 2019, pp. 17–18). Racist policies, which pervade many institutions, are “any measure that produces or sustains racial inequity between racial groups” and are “written and unwritten laws, rules, procedures, processes, regulations, and guidelines that govern people” (Kendi 2019, pp. 17–18). Furthermore, many institutions propagate anti-Black racism in a myriad of ways, all of which cannot be exhaustively detailed here. However, we may highlight just a few examples to show the ubiquity of anti-Black racism. First, discriminatory and violent policing plays a significant role in the disproportionate incarceration experienced by Black people as they navigate the criminal justice system. Bryan Stevenson, lawyer and founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, shows that this reality of the disproportionate incarceration of Black people continues due to “Presumptions of guilt, poverty, racial bias, and a host of other social, structural, and political dynamics” (Stevenson 2014, p. 16). Second, educational inequities greatly diminish the vocational opportunities and choices of Black children, youth and adults. Inequities in employment, which are evident from the recruitment stage, substantially reduce accessible resources and impact the retention of Black people in various positions. These examples of anti-Black racism contribute to the widening racial wealth gap and impede economic security and wealth building in Black communities. Although these various experiences, and the inequitable realities they generate, may at first glance seem unconnected, a deeper analysis reveals their interconnectedness, and their compound effects on those experiencing the myriad manifestations of racism. For instance, inequities in employment are connected to housing insecurity, which also intertwines with realities such as food insecurity, vulnerability to violence and so on.

Conversations about the roots and manifestations of racism are essential. Instances of racial injustice are not isolated incidents or exceptional circumstances. On the contrary, they are more manifestations of widespread historic and contemporary injustice. Anti-Black racism is perpetuated by institutions that validate and benefit from racial inequity and injustice. The manifestation of racism springs from the endemic reality of antiblackness.

*“Antiblackness is an antisocial logic that not only dehumanizes Black people but also renders abject all that is associated with Blackness . . . Antiblackness suggests that rather than with a set of social and institutional practices, the problem lies with the very notions of the Social and the Human underlying these practices and their constitutive rejection of Blackness and Black people”.* (Jung and Varga 2021, p. 8)

We must come to grips with antiblackness, “the singularity of Black people’s dehumanization, antihumanization” (Jung and Varga 2021, p. 9). The truth is that many people and institutions who identify as progressive and liberal have “failed to contend, unflinchingly, with *antiblackness*— its enduring depth, breadth, and violence” (Jung and Varga 2021, p. 2). We must also foster a robust understanding of the imperial and institutional factors that continue to perpetuate this death-dealing phenomenon. Anti-racist policies and practices are needed in all institutions, including academia.

As both a diaspora and trauma narrative, Esther’s scroll contains episodes and elements that resonate with the experiences of various oppressed and marginalized communities. Hatzaw, for example, underlines the resonance of Esther’s marginalization and that of many Asian women’s experiences of navigating the model minority myth in the diaspora (Hatzaw 2021, p. 3). Asian postcolonial scholarship, and other global perspectives, have often derived inspiration from the work of Black scholars and practitioners. Esther’s narrative highlights incidences of oppression: the denial of women’s agency; human trafficking; families forced to relinquish their daughters to the will and whim of monarch and empire—to name a few. This biblical text, which bears witness to anti-Semitism, offers a resource for interpreting the personal and collective, present and transgenerational trauma sustained by many Black individuals in the diaspora.<sup>1</sup> The close connection between anti-Black racism and anti-Semitism does in fact have a long history. Tracing particular Eurocentric interpretations of the Hebrew Bible and their use in entrenching antiblackness, Parfitt shows how anti-Black racism has often gone hand in hand with anti-Semitic attitudes and actions (Parfitt 2021, p. 18). Esther’s narrative is a valuable tool in that it highlights the need to attend to issues of systemic racism that are so prevalent within various imperial and institutional contexts.

As survival literature, Esther’s scroll bears witness to the various ways in which professed “progressive” and “peaceful” empires and institutions may enable, fund and sign off on violence against its minority or marginalized communities. In this sense, Esther’s scroll aids us in reading and critiquing the violence of anti-Black racism perpetuated against African-descended individuals and communities, especially in “progressive” and “peaceful” Western societies. In addition to examining the manifestation of imperial oppression, we also glean insights concerning the role of institutions in the systemic oppression of marginalized people.<sup>2</sup>

The following reading of Esther’s scroll proposes that this narrative resonates with the realities of trauma and death that many Black individuals and communities *presently* face. This narrative about the near-annihilation of the Jewish people invites our society to reckon with the historic and contemporary imperial and institutional forces and factors which continue to perpetuate both anti-Semitism and also anti-Black racism. In our repertoire of resilience and resistance, members of the African diaspora may draw not only upon the Exodus narrative, but also on the scroll of Esther.<sup>3</sup> In particular, I will highlight the scene of Esther and Mordecai’s mourning as a mirror for the experiences of Black individuals and communities who have historically navigated violence, limited access and advancement due to their ethnic, racial and intersectional identities. Even in professed places of peace and progress, the message “this far, no further” is one with which many Black people are familiar. This reading is a contribution to the robust movement of antiracist scholarship within the guild.<sup>4</sup>

### 3. Ancient Persian Propaganda: Peace and Progress

The Ancient Persian empire’s propaganda may be encapsulated in the term “*Pax Persica*, Persian Peace” (Brosius 2012, p. 152). There were laudable things about Persia: reputed diplomacy, its infrastructure including an extensive network of roads, and a tolerance of diverse and ethnic communities within the empire. *Pax Persica* worked when communities in the empire submitted to a self-perception and way of life that was determined by imperial ideology. “In return, or as a result of this support, the king guaranteed peace in the Empire, i.e., stability for its people” (Brosius 2010, p. 33). This peace was what made

the progress of every citizen possible. It was an empire of which the infrastructure and institutions emanated power and advanced knowledge. Individuals and families from various ethnic and linguistic backgrounds could advance to prominent roles if they could prioritize the propaganda of the empire. The Persian dream was sold as one which every citizen could attain and enjoy.

Esther's scroll portrays Persia as a place of prosperity, where high-ranking officials and ordinary citizens alike had the opportunity to experience the generosity of the empire. One imperial indicator of prosperity was propagated through the *mišhte*, a feast or banquet which included copious amounts of wine, which was available to its citizens. In particular, the extent and expense of these Persian royal feasts is accentuated. Functionally, Persian royalty initiated these parties, public holidays and presents in order to advance its propaganda.<sup>5</sup> Early in his reign, Ahasuerus hosted a six-month feast for all his officials (1:3). Subsequently, a seven-day banquet was held for all the men in Susa while Queen Vashti did the same for the women of Susa (1:5, 9). Unlimited drinks, enjoyed in luxurious surroundings, were provided for all (1:8). Later, to commemorate Esther's coronation as queen, Ahasuerus hosted a great feast for all his officials and named it for his queen (2:18). Additionally, the king gave all his citizens a public holiday and generous gifts (2:18). The generous provision of food and drink, if even for a limited time, was yet another way for citizens to consume and imbibe imperial ideology.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, "when the guests at Ahashverosh's palace recline on colorful beds, drinking Ahashverosh's unrestricted wine from special goblets, laughing in victory and declaring their admiration for the king, they are in a vulnerable state. Like empty vessels waiting to be filled, these intoxicated bodies are subject to the manipulation that the provider of the wine will pour into them (Oren 2009, p. 143).

A suspicion is raised at the outset of this narrative; Persia may not be as peaceful and progressive as it first appears. Even in a progressive and peaceful empire such as Persia, Esther's scroll reveals the sinister events that can occur when ethical complacency and a sense of justice are relegated from rule. Empires can have a multifaceted identity that at times seems contradictory. Persia is a place of peace and progress—to an extent. The abundance of conspiracies, assassination attempts and genocide is testament to the dual nature of empire. If indeed Persia is so progressive and peaceful then why would a citizen like Mordecai, so well placed in society, feel the need to tell his daughter to conceal her Jewish heritage (2:10, 20)?<sup>7</sup> In fact, each day he would go by the women's quarters to seek after Esther's welfare (2:11). "That the situation of the women is a frightening one is emphasized by the concern of Mordecai, who rather than celebrating Esther's making it into the big leagues comes by the harem entrance every day to make sure she is alright" (Duran 2003, p. 77). Furthermore, even after she ascended to the powerful position of queen, there is no indication that Mordecai intended for Esther to eventually disclose her ethnicity.<sup>8</sup> So much for peace and progress; this is how dangerous life in the diaspora can be.

Indeed, Persia, in comparison to other ancient empires, is renowned for certain policies and infrastructure that benefitted various religious and ethnic groups. Yet, it is simultaneously the empire in which a woman's "no" results in her being stripped of the highest position only to be sent packing into obscurity (1:10–22). Queen Vashti's expulsion, Esther's abduction and Mordecai's muzzling prompt readers to think carefully about the ways in which certain spaces may at once be safe and hostile, peaceful and violent, progressive and regressive. Readers must also be mindful of the presence of the other unnamed girls and women who are trafficked from their homes, all throughout the empire, for the sake of Ahasuerus' search for a new queen. Interpreting from an intersectional framework, Dunbar notes the fact that "African girls and women continue to be rendered invisible in the reception history of Esther" (Dunbar 2021, p. 10). Neglecting to attend to the traumatic and abusive experiences of these African girls and women means that "interpreters (albeit often inadvertently) uphold ideologies that either African(a) girls and women cannot be violated, or that their violation is irrelevant" (Dunbar 2021, p. 10).

It is possible to have systems in which some thrive while others live in fear of their lives. Persia's propaganda of progress and peace is not a complete deception; there is *some* truth inherent in the puffery. The problem, however, is the silencing of this side of the story—and its characters—which testifies to the failures and faults of the empire. The reality of the double-edged face of empire existed not only in the ancient world but is also a reality of modern history. How many empires have proclaimed their tolerance and yet the realities of trauma exist and persist? How many empires have lauded their embrace of commonwealth collaboration, only to strip foreign communities of their indigenous resources?

#### 4. The Decree of Death and Destruction

Esther's scroll bears witness to the political and economic realities that imperil the lives of minoritized and marginalized individuals and groups. In particular, reading Esther's scroll informed by experiences of anti-Black racism sheds light on some uncanny similarities to the role that empire, and its institutions, play in perpetuating systemic violence, oppression and death among Black individuals and communities. While such a reading runs counter to dominant interpretations of Esther's scroll, it is imperative that contemporary scholarship continues to reckon with the realities of trauma, violence and racism in and outside of the biblical text.

Mordecai, a government official in the Persian empire, discovered that he and his people had been signed over to impending violence and death. The enemy, Haman, advanced his plan to annihilate all Jews by convincing King Ahasuerus of two things. First, Haman fed the king lies about this ethnic group (3:8). Second, Haman offered a financial incentive. "If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver into the hands of those who have charge of the king's business, so that they may put it into the king's treasuries" (3:9). Indeed, specific lies and real economic incentives often precede and propagate discrimination and violence. Systemic oppression and violence, such as anti-Black racism, are inextricably linked to the financial and economic benefit of one or more groups.<sup>9</sup>

Haman's hatred of Mordecai, and by extension his ethnic community, also shines a light on experiences of minoritized and marginalized individuals in professional contexts. Mordecai's position "at the King's Gate" meant that he was a high-ranking court official (2:19, 21; 3:2). The city gate was a place where important social, business and legal matters were deliberated and decided.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, the King's Gate was also the vicinity in which royal and state business were conducted. It is as Mordecai fastidiously discharged his professional duties that he discovered that Bigthan and Teresh, two royal guards, were plotting to assassinate the king (2:21–22). After Mordecai divulged this intelligence to his adoptive daughter, Queen Esther, she informed the king that it was Mordecai who uncovered the assassination plot (2:22). The allegation was investigated and the two officials were executed. The entire incident was documented in the royal annals "in the presence of the king" (2:23).

Mordecai's act of loyalty, however, earned him no additional access and advancement than he had before. Tellingly, the very next event recorded in the scroll shows how quickly Mordecai's work and actions were swept aside. "After these things King Ahasuerus promoted Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him and set his seat above all the officials who were with him" (3:1). If there were someone to be advanced and promoted, was it not Mordecai? He saved the king's life, after all. He demonstrated his commitment to the institution and empire for which he worked. In contrast, Haman's qualification and contribution is not noted. The question arises, what exactly did Haman do to earn this promotion? No answer is given.

To honor Haman's premier position, Ahasuerus commanded that all royal officials working in the vicinity of the King's Gate should kneel and bow facedown when in Haman's presence (3:2). The honor accorded Haman was not given to Mordecai. In many professional contexts, certainly including academia, Black professionals experience a similar phenomenon. Black scholars and practitioners toil through their teaching, research and in-

stitutional service. Many Black women and men discharge their duties with excellence and diligence and yet continue to go unrewarded, undercompensated and, on many occasions, are passed up for promotions and professional opportunities while other colleagues are advanced for reasons that are not always clear or noteworthy.

Mordecai disobeyed the royal command to pay obeisance to Haman (3:3).<sup>11</sup> Haman, occupied with all the pomp and ceremony attending his position, initially did not notice Mordecai's nonconformity. It was Mordecai's colleagues at the King's Gate who reported his resistance to Haman (3:4). Evidently behind their incessant questioning of Mordecai's defiance was hidden jealousy and outrage. Perhaps they asked themselves, "Who does Mordecai think he is?", "If the rest of us have to do this then what makes him think he's better than the rest of us?", "Oh, he thinks he's superior, does he?" Possibly, Mordecai saw behind his colleagues' persistent prompting to conform and that is why he paid them no attention (3:4). Once these colleagues brought this information to Haman's attention, he confirmed the report for himself (3:5). Since the informers had not only reported Mordecai's non-compliance but also his ethnicity, Haman's anger fuelled his murderous musings and machinations (3:6).

#### 4.1. Mourning Death

Once the death decree was issued in Susa, Mordecai discovered Haman's ultimate plan (4:1). The very king whose life Mordecai saved was the one who had signed the death decree. Mass murder. Genocide. The Jewish people made extinct. All this was too much for Mordecai, and indeed the larger Jewish community, to bear. Mordecai began mourning this death sentence (4:1). The dignified official tore his clothing—fine garments befitting someone of his station. In place of luxury fabric, Mordecai wore sackcloth and powdered himself with ashes. "Ashes to ashes, dust to dust," the soot aptly suggestive of death and destruction. Since there is only a brief description of Mordecai's mourning, it is easy not to pause and imagine what this scene *sounded* and *looked* like. Perhaps, Mordecai struggled to breathe deeply from his diaphragm as shock sent him into shallow breathing. His sounds of lament may have been extremely hoarse as his vocal cords vibrated and the sound waves travelled through his dry throat to escape his bitter mouth. He may have doubled over every so often as he wailed and cried, loudly and desperately. These sounds were neither cued nor contrived; they were instinctual responses.

It is not improbable that some who were not the targets of this impending ethnic cleansing found the official's protest to be too loud, unpeaceful, creating too much noise. Imaginably, those citizens, fully convinced by the propaganda of peace and progress, may have even been offended by Mordecai's dishevelled deportment and carriage. Why? Because Mordecai's very embodiment told a counter-story to the dominant imperial narrative.

Mordecai's mourning was not motionless; there was movement and momentum. Step after step confirmed that Mordecai had indeed understood the decree; this was *not* his imagination or a conspiracy theory. The shock and realization of this death sentence meant that "the city of Susa was thrown into confusion" (3:15). In contrast, while so many citizens were being traumatized, Haman and Ahasuerus enjoyed some drinks (3:15). The monarch and Haman privately imbibed their vintage while they had decreed violence. They raised a toast to the trauma that would ensue. This drinking stands in stark contrast to the thirst and parched throats of those who were crying and wailing. As Mordecai moved throughout the city, he encountered other Jews also bewailing their impending doom. Jews throughout the empire mourned by exchanging their normal garb, changing their eating habits, weeping and lying on the ground (4:3). Mordecai's walk through the city was an act of solidarity with those with whom he shared a similar experience and proposed fate (4:1).

The sounds and movement of Mordecai's mourning were also a protest. Grief in its own way is a rueing of reality. Something has gone terribly wrong. Someone is lost. A situation is unjust, not right. Sorrow may manifest silently, but it may also crescendo and overwhelm in other ways. The embodiment of pain and trauma is all too familiar for those who have faced the historic and current death decrees of anti-Black racism.

The sophistication with which these systemic kill-orders were designed, and have since evolved, is evident in their forms and varieties; the demise and destruction caused by health inequities, lack of access to adequate education and employment discrimination affecting minoritized and marginalized communities, just to name a few.

The perspective of both individual and collective mourning is central to the narrative's plot. Similarly, Black people's grieving of systemic oppression has never been limited to a personal and private experience. Indeed, lament has also been a collective affair shared by members of a marginalized group who understand beyond words—their glances, groans and gait all testifying to shared experiences. The movement of marches and walks has offered both the opportunity to experience solidarity, as well as to express protest.<sup>12</sup> Historical expressions of solidarity and protest are evident in spirituals sung in chorus, the collaboration of the underground railroad and the collective marches that kept bodies engaged in communal dance and movement. Moaning, humming, groaning and wailing, which are infused within Black musical expressions, kept people going when they needed to keen over their dead or bewail the living dead.

Communities, cities and towns have been thrown into confusion due to the systemic policies, programs and laws that have dealt death blows. As some mourn, others sit around for a drink just as Ahasuerus and Haman did. As some mourn, others enjoy lives of revelry at others' expense. As some mourn, leaders and authorities who should protect are hiding behind the guise of peace and progress. Black communities walk the highways and byways, the roads and paths as they lament, wail, cry, in shock, aghast . . . and others put in their proverbial earplugs to drown out the sound of lament.

Black people in the diaspora have found ways to embody collective mourning. Public protests, working groups and taskforces perform liberative work on behalf of other marginalized groups. These are just a few of the ways that Black individuals and communities, and allies, have mourned and protested injustice. In communal mourning, many people find ways to bear witness to the wrongs and evils proliferated by white supremacy and anti-Black racism.

The harsh reality is that the mourning of Black communities about the systemic violence against Black bodies is negatively viewed by many people. First, how dare Black people mourn the death decrees? Second, how dare they seek to advance into spaces and places of power in order to do so? From the vitriol faced by those who choose to take the knee during sports events, to the scathing commentary aimed at people who choose to wear black clothing with logos such as "Black lives matter" or other life-affirming messages, it is clear that Black people's mourning is often interpreted as an affront to imperial and institutional propaganda.

Individuals and communities who have historically endured the toxicity and trauma of oppression sustain an existential and trans-generational grief. People may lament this trauma through various practices and rituals involving clothing, music, storytelling, food, spirituality, proverbs and so on. Black people have a legacy of embodiments which bear witness to histories and bequests of oppression. These expressions in turn indict the individuals and communities who have benefitted and bequeathed these benefits to subsequent generations.

#### *4.2. At the King's Gate: Barriers Enforced by Institutions*

Mordecai's moving mourning eventually came to a halt. Mordecai stopped at the entrance of the King's Gate, "for no one might enter the King's Gate clothed with sackcloth" (4:2). The King's Gate was familiar territory for Mordecai, it was the vicinity in which he worked (2:21). However, now his identity and disposition of mourning meant that passing beyond this place was no longer possible. Mordecai's professional history, his acts of loyalty to the institution and empire still did not qualify him to enter certain spaces, especially not with a demeanour of mourning. Mordecai's mourning was a posture of protest. Although he was protesting the genocide decree, the empire interpreted mourning as protest against its propaganda; "You are saying that we are not who we say we are and we don't like that."

Mordecai's approach was only permissible if his disposition was favorable. A royal servant was expected to be cheerful in the presence of the king.<sup>13</sup> What does a person or a community do when their experiences contradict the propaganda of the empire in which they live? What does a person or a community do when they are mourning for their lives and this grieving is discouraged and prohibited by the very institutions they serve? Jewish custom had mourning rituals that could be performed in times of crisis. Yet Persian royal policy dictated that such practices should not be enacted within the royal vicinity.

The limited access that Mordecai faced mirrors the experiences of many Black individuals and communities. The message has long been "This far, no further." It is not a stretch to substitute the "King's Gate" with "Academia's Gate." The academic spaces through which one passes for education, employment, promotion, publication and tenure are sadly saturated with anti-lament sentiments and policies. Black people in the diaspora have consistently received the explicit and implicit communication that they must choose between their lived experience and the customs of the institutions and nations in which they live. "This far, but no further." What policies and practices are preventing people from embodying their grief in the very spaces where it should be seen and heard? Let us hasten to add that we are also not suggesting observation for voyeuristic purposes. Rather, grief observed should lead to action addressing the systemic evils enacted historically and currently. What institutional customs, spoken and unspoken, mandate that in certain spaces people should muzzle their moans, fight back their tears, suppress their cries, dress up their grief? Many of these institutional policies and customs grant unlimited access and advancement, not to those who wear mourning clothes, but to those who have the luxury of never having to remove their finery or forgo their festivities.

#### 4.3. *The Danger of Embodied Lament*

Mordecai's mourning is dangerous. To express all that he did in the vicinity of power was risky. Yet it is not only *where* he mourned, but also the garb that Mordecai donned, that endangered him. Esther's distress about her adoptive father's disposition stemmed from her understanding of the consequences of expressing protest in certain places. This is why the queen promptly sent her father new clothes so that he could remove his mourning garments (4:4). Esther's rush to re-clothe Mordecai is telling; she was acutely aware of the danger of breaking protocol and policy.

Mordecai rejected the change of clothes; he chose to keep his mourning clothes on (4:4). Mordecai's refusal to mask his mourning was not a rebuke of Esther's instinct to protect her father. Rather, Mordecai's refusal to change his clothes was part and parcel of his resistance against the complicity of the empire. Vestments and posture may be as much a protest against injustice as words. Mordecai's life, and the lives of his community, were in danger and he could not stifle this murder.

Father and daughter communicated through the eunuch Hathach to exchange information on "what was happening and why" (4:5). This caution was necessitated by the fact that Esther's identity was still a secret. Esther had not disclosed her Jewish ethnicity and heritage because of Mordecai's advice (2:10, 20). Although some Black guardians have not socialized their wards to hide their ethnic or racial identity, they may encourage forms of acculturation for fear of violence and victimization. When the royal decree of annihilation was issued, Mordecai reversed the previous counsel he had given to his daughter. To be placed in a situation where you must choose between the protection of a loved one who is in a precarious position and the salvation of a community is an experience that numerous Black individuals repeatedly face.

Mordecai's mourning is prophetic not only because it portends the looming genocide, but also because it speaks out against it, refuses to be silenced by it, and its embodiment activates others' advocacy. However, empire does not welcome the language of prophetic lament; in fact, it often seeks to silence it. Prophetic lament and imperial propaganda are often at odds because the latter is confronted and challenged by the former. In these contexts, vocalized and embodied lament are interpreted as dangerous speech and movement which

must be stopped. An integral part of prophetic performative lament is the wearing of mourning clothes.<sup>14</sup> Mordecai dons mourning garments to bewail the death decree.

#### 4.4. *Sent to the Slaughter or Saved by the Scepter?*

Mordecai, mourning the impending mass murder of the Jewish people, was locked out by a law preventing him from passing beyond the King's Gate (4:2). However, Esther too cites a barrier she has encountered. The queen of Persia articulates her own limited access, "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that if any man or woman goes to the king inside the inner court without being called, there is but one law—all alike are to be put to death. Only if the king holds out the golden scepter to someone, may that person live. I myself have not been called to come in to the king for thirty days" (4:11). The question arises; why hasn't Esther been able to see the king for the last thirty days? What was it like to live in a world in which, despite the prominent position of queenship, one must wait to be called in?

Esther's limited access is reminiscent of the limited access that many Black women face today. Furthermore, the insufficient redress of injustices toward Black women persists due to a failure to recognise that "the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism" (Crenshaw 1989, p. 140). When intersecting identities converge the injustices faced are further compounded and intensified. In the academic context, many Black women biblical scholars live the intersectional experience of navigating a profession which is predominantly white and male. As in Esther's narrative, Black women are familiar not only with various forms of exploitation,<sup>15</sup> but also with that exploitation being reframed as a beauty pageant of sorts—a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity which brings limelight and a position that should engender nothing but gratitude. Black women are queens, according to this thinking, not because of their proven contributions and value, but simply due to a number of external favours and factors. Yet reality is no beauty pageant fairy tale. Black women know what it is to work hard, to earn each position and promotion in all their various pursuits, only to have these contributions and experiences negated and their access controlled.

Esther cited the law; the way things were done. *Everyone* knew that showing up uninvited was certain death—unless the royal golden scepter was extended. Furthermore, who knows what motivates the holding out of the scepter? This was a subjective and spontaneous action with no explicit rhyme or reason. The inherent message of this law? Certain spaces of power and privilege were for invitees only. Furthermore, a person who sought access and advancement did so at their own risk; one could be sent to the slaughter or saved by the scepter.

Both Mordecai and Esther had limited access. The father could not go past the King's Gate while mourning the looming mass murder. His daughter too, while queen of Persia, was also only to be approached; she was not to do the approaching. Unfettered access to the king was reserved only for certain men.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the hypocrisy of the peace and progress propaganda was glaring; Haman could advance past the King's Gate to engage in murderous machinations, but Mordecai could not advance through the gate to seek remedy and recourse.

Many are familiar with Mordecai's entreaty that Esther use her position to save their ethnic community (4:13–14). Esther's characterization has developed from her primary identification as Mordecai's daughter to her role as "a mother to her daughter Israel" (Kirk-Duggan 1999, p. 206). From this point on, interpreters of this story are tempted to declare the triumphant turning point within the story. Yet, we must not quickly gloss over the reality that this is a further complication given the context. Esther's approach must be read with the background of Vashti, Persia's former queen, in view. What happens to a woman, even a queen, who does not comply with the way things are done? Vashti's prior actions are integral to Esther's subsequent action and treatment.<sup>17</sup> In fact, "Vashti's story becomes a living source from which Esther draws themes and plans for her own resistance" (Butting 2012, p. 214). In the absence of an invitation, Esther took the initiative;

yet this initiative was enshrined in policy as death-deserving.<sup>18</sup> By physically advancing beyond erected barriers and closed doors, Esther risked her own life—and that of her people—daring to go beyond. Rabbinic tradition ascribed the status of prophetess to Queen Esther due to her pursuit of justice even in the face of death (Adler 2015, p. 246).

Comparably, the institutions perpetuating anti-Black racism have made it so that, for many Black people, moving beyond barriers is a matter of life and death. Anti-Black racism has manifested death decrees and consequences for those who would advance to seek help and remedy. Therefore, certain responses to the historic oppression and injustice endured by Black people such as “let’s move on, let’s put the past behind us” are not only inadequate but ill-informed. There are legitimate reasons why all Black people can’t just “move on.” We can’t actually “move on” because the places where our protests need to be heard are often still inaccessible, and we advance through the barriers at the stake of death. There are those who fail, or refuse, to acknowledge that “moving on” is often the prerogative of white privilege, access and power. At times this is how antiracism is hijacked and co-opted, all in the name of moving forward to peace and progress. How can we embody and experience true peace and progress when there are still so many like Esther and Mordecai who face barriers in telling the truth? Within our various institutional contexts, who and what determines whether a Black person or group will be sent to the slaughter or saved by the scepter?

### 5. Anti-Black Racism at Work

Scenes from Esther and Mordecai’s experience evoke thoughts about the manifestations of racial and ethnic discrimination at work. In particular, the following points are meaningful for anti-Black racism in professional life. Mordecai continued his duties at the King’s Gate despite the death notice (6:10, 12). Does it not seem unimaginable that someone would have to go to work, carrying on with “normal” life, while a death decree is hanging over her/his head? Mordecai’s reality resonates with the experience of countless Black women and men today. Ask the Black professionals who deal with the workplace discrimination and stress as they work twice as hard for half the recognition as their white colleagues. Ask the Black students who cannot access the educational experiences which will empower them to build wealth like their white counterparts. It is not only that Black people are disproportionately affected by adverse experiences of racism, such as barriers to quality health care and education, etc., but that having navigated all this racism to the employment stage, professionals are then burdened by the allostatic load of anti-Black racism in the workplace.<sup>19</sup> We must examine work and the ways in which systemic racism is perpetuated in various professions and vocations.

Throughout history, one of the chief instruments of imperial propaganda has been the academy. Academia is portrayed as advancing the best knowledge and research for the next generation, but it has also carried on the legacy of systemic racism. In particular, anti-Black racism is one of the blights of academia. Professor Nikole Hannah-Jones, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist responsible for the *1619 Project*, was denied tenure at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s journalism school. A significant portion of Professor Hannah-Jones’ work is dedicated to educating others about the transatlantic slavery and its far-reaching and manifold consequences. Although receiving support from many faculty colleagues, when Hannah-Jones’ tenure package was submitted to the university’s Board of Trustees they did not vote on it. The Chancellor and Provost also refused to explain why Hannah-Jones’ tenure application had not been put to a vote. Due to the negative attention and the public outrage garnered by the university’s abysmal and unjust actions, the university subsequently made an offer of tenure. However, Professor Hannah-Jones declined this offer and subsequently accepted the Knight Chair in Race and Journalism at Howard University, a tenured role.

In a statement published by the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, Nikole Hannah-Jones expounds on this racial injustice perpetuated by this academic institution. “These last few weeks have been very dark. To be treated so shabbily by my alma mater,

by a university that has given me so much and which I only sought to give back to, has been deeply painful. The only bright light has been all of the people who spoke up and fought back against the dangerous attack on academic freedom that sought to punish me for the nature of my work, *attacks that Black and marginalized faculty face all across the country.*"<sup>20</sup> Indeed, Professor Hannah-Jones is correct; Black faculty have a long history of facing such injustices. Despite the backlash that she experiences, Hannah-Jones continues to share her expertise with diverse audiences. Recently, in her keynote address to the UN General Assembly, Hannah-Jones self-identified as "a recipient of that tradition of resistance" and urged people to remember "the stories of Black resistance that would, more than any other force, lead to slavery's collapse in our hemisphere" (Hannah-Jones 2022, p. 1). Concluding with an appeal, Hannah-Jones declared, "This is our global truth, the truth we as human beings understand with stark clarity: there can be no atonement if there is no repair. It is time, it is long past time, for reparations for the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and all the devastation that it has wrought, and all the devastation that it continues to reap" (Hannah-Jones 2022, p. 3).

To be sure, anti-Black racism is a problem in many academic fields,<sup>21</sup> including religion, theology and biblical studies. These disciplines, taught in schools of divinity, religion, seminaries and humanities departments, are often envisioned as centers for robust discourse on ethics, morality and human culture. Yet, ironically, some of these institutions are complicit in perpetuating anti-Black racism and injustice. A case in point, and one which is representative of the discrimination experienced by countless Black women and men in academia, is the denial of tenure to Professor Cornel West by Harvard Divinity School. Dr West's work follows in the tradition of Dr Martin Luther King, Jr. Engaging the disciplines of philosophy, theology and African American critical thought, Professor West seeks to advance justice through scholarship and activism that garner participation from a wide audience. The critique of imperialism and racism found in much of Dr West's work calls for accountability and amends to be made. The denial of tenure received extensive coverage, not only due to West's already significant profile and media engagement, but also because he was experiencing this at an Ivy League educational institution. In his resignation letter dated 30 June 2021, publicly released on the 12 July 2021 through Twitter, Professor West highlighted the discrimination he had faced at the divinity school. West pointed to key manifestations of racial injustice, namely, financial exploitation and delaying or denial of tenure. In many institutions, tenure functions as a support of a professor's academic freedom and offers job protection. What does it say about an institution when it is willing to allow a professor to teach for years but does not deem it fit to confer tenure? West shares candidly, "When I arrived four years ago—with a salary less than what I received 15 years earlier and with no tenure status after being a University Professor at Harvard and Princeton—I hoped and prayed I could still end my career with some semblance of intellectual intensity and personal respect."<sup>22</sup> Instances of the financial and academic exploitation that many Black scholars suffer at the hands of institutions are rife. Sadly, neither Professor Hannah-Jones' or Professor West's experiences are isolated or unique events. Discriminatory precedents are set for non-tenured Black scholars who witness distinguished Black scholars denied tenure despite robust portfolios evidencing quality scholarship, as well as civic engagement and service. These discriminatory practices have a myriad of consequences for individuals, as well as the integrity of institutions. For example, non-tenured Black women scholars subjected to "gendered racism" may be coerced to leave academic posts while institutions continue to foster the "leaky pipeline" which describes the phenomenon of the dwindling number of women represented at higher levels of academia (Bourabain 2021, pp. 249–50). Academic institutions continue to benefit from the scholarship and service of many Black scholars while exploiting them and extending racial injustice.

How does the academy mirror the empire's propaganda of peace and progress? We tout the myth of an apolitical academia.<sup>23</sup> An apolitical approach to academia purports to engage in the project of knowledge and praxis—regardless of the field or discipline—without being influenced or impacted by perceived "contentious", "controversial" or

“divisive” issues. In truth, this theology of apoliticism functions as a veneer which conceals the violence, oppression and discrimination that Black people face due to their heritage and identity. Anti-Black racism in academic contexts is propagated through the recruitment and hiring processes,<sup>24</sup> the resourcing and retention of Black faculty, the failure to integrate discourse on racial justice into the curriculum<sup>25</sup> and the relinquishment of the responsibility to interact with the wider society about racial injustices. Often when these aforementioned strategies are critiqued or challenged, they are reframed as necessary actions to safeguard the peace and ensure the progress of the institution.

Esther’s scroll exposes the structural and sinister way that Persia communicated “this far and no further.” In consequential ways, academia continues the message of “this far but no further.” Black professionals can advance beyond erected barriers, past the “King’s Gate”, only if we are prepared to remove any garment or embodiment that would signal lament and mourning. Empire does not want to recognize the reality of the violence that some of its citizens and minority groups face. Many Black professionals within their guild sustain the exploitation perpetuated against them. Furthermore, the abiding devastation of anti-Black racism is the expectation that Black people keep quiet about it, grin and bear it.

Our guild must embody the collective courage to disrupt and dismantle the systemic anti-Black racism that has thrived for so long. We are accountable for our complicity in the death-dealing policies and practices perpetrated against minority and marginalized individuals and groups. We cannot hide behind a propaganda of peace and progress in an attempt to cover-up both historical and current cases of atrocious abuse and exploitation. Academia must have enough room, not only for finery and festivity, but also for mourning clothes and lament. Let us see and hear the mourning and lament for what it is; prophetic embodiment—a call to do justice. Before we rush to the end of Esther’s story, the survival of the Jewish people, let us recognise how many times we have regressed right back to the horrific middle of the story. The question that faces us is this: what will we do this time around? How will history record the end of this story, our story?

## 6. Conclusions

In the repertoire of resilience and resistance, Black individuals and communities possess tools and resources of survival. An affinity for the Hebrew Bible’s Exodus and Prophetic traditions has long existed in some Black communities. In this essay, I have underscored the valuable contribution that Esther’s scroll also adds to the repertoire of resilience and resistance. Esther’s narrative shines a light on the death-dealing realities of violence and suffering that lurk beneath the imperial and institutional propaganda of peace and progress. As survival literature, documenting the trauma of a people in diaspora, Esther contains episodes and elements that resonate with many experiences of oppressed and marginalized Black communities. In this narrative we find a resource for interpreting the personal and collective, present and transgenerational trauma sustained by many Black people.

Empires and institutions often have a multifaceted identity, elements of which may at times seem contradictory. Ancient Persia was a place of peace and progress—to an extent. America is a place of peace and progress—to an extent. Academia advances peace and progress—to an extent. Esther’s scroll bears witness to how professed progressive and peaceful empires and institutions continue to enable, fund and sign off on violence against its minority or marginalized communities. In this sense, Esther’s narrative aids us in reading and critiquing the violent injustice of anti-Black racism in various institutions, including academia.

Both Esther and Mordecai’s experiences address certain lived realities of Black individuals and communities. Not only did Esther have to cope with being commandeered to the royal harem, but even in her subsequent role as queen she still had to navigate limited access. To embody advocacy on behalf of her people was to risk her own expulsion or death and likely a swifter torrent of violence than the already imminent annihilation facing the Jewish people. Mordecai’s carriage was also a counter-story to the dominant

imperial narrative of peace and progress. Continuing his professional duties in the face of the genocide decree was exacerbated by the lack of recourse. Similarly, many Black professionals continue their vocations in traumatic and toxic circumstances. Even in professed progressive contexts, impassable gates and limited access with messages of “this far, but no further” are common for Black professionals. It is an abysmal reality that many Black professionals sustain the allostatic load of racism and then are still expected to offer excellent service for delayed or denied compensation and credit.

Esther’s scroll invites us to ponder the question, within our various institutional contexts, who and what determines whether someone will be sent to the slaughter or saved by the scepter? What entrenched policies and practices determine termination or survival? Esther, Mordecai and the Jewish people’s survival in Persia provides much food for thought concerning the necessity of antiracism. Still, this narrative does not only provide intellectual nourishment. Esther’s scroll urges us to action. Self-identified progressive individuals and institutions no longer have the luxury of resting on their laurels. Performative allyship is inadequate in the face of deep-rooted anti-Black racism. Too many lives are at stake. Are we so enamored, even obsessed, with the veneer of peace and progress that we are willing to ignore the death-dealing realities of anti-Black racism which lie beneath the apolitical surface? It is time to release the myth of the apolitical academia. Antiracism in academia, and other institutions, is crucial to the survival and thriving of our members and the fields of knowledge and praxis to which we are dedicated. In the aftermath of undeniable racist atrocities, we must reimagine and reform our professions and vocations. Academic institutions committed to the study of religion, theology and biblical studies are by no means exempt from this restitutive responsibility.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Data Availability Statement:** Not applicable.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Although particular attention is paid to North America, we see related oppression of Black individuals and communities in other Western countries and empires such as Britain.
- <sup>2</sup> It would be appropriate to examine the violence and oppression promoted and perpetuated by many institutions within the “empire” that is the West. Furthermore, there is a continual need for more studies regarding how these institutions intertwine and interdepend to create a compound effect on marginalized individuals and communities. This essay focuses on some of the manifestations of anti-Black racism within academia and in particular within the guild of religion, theology and biblical studies.
- <sup>3</sup> The Exodus narrative looms large in the life and liturgy of the Black church. This intuitive affinity for the Exodus story is influenced by historical experiences of African enslavement, colonization and plunder. Significantly, Jewish tradition has long emphasised the complementarity of Exodus and Esther (Hazony 2016, p. 165). The connection between these two survival scrolls can be beneficial for many African diasporans who utilize the Hebrew Scriptures.
- <sup>4</sup> Black feminist and womanist scholars are key contributors to antiracist scholarship and advocacy. Such scholarship was necessitated by the reality that, by and large, “feminism and feminist organizations focused too narrowly on the issues and concerns of white women” (Junior 2015, p. 17). The problematic and “disingenuous idea of objectivity that historically established white male subjects as the normative standard in scholarly discourse” is critiqued (Davis 2016, p. 23). A helpful caution is given by Wilda Gafney, womanist biblical scholar, that just as we may not reduce Black people to one “singular thing”, so also must we acknowledge that there is “no singular black interpretation” (Gafney 2017, p. 2). Academic work that values the lived experiences of minoritized and marginalized individuals and communities continues to be needed in the guild. Although the use of the phrases “antiracist” or “antiracism” may not appear in all womanist and Black feminist writings, these valued voices advance antiracism in manifold ways in that they disrupt white supremacy and racism.
- <sup>5</sup> Food provision was one significant way in which royals could engender the loyalty of their subjects. To memorialize his reinstatement of YHWH’s ark back to Jerusalem, King David provided all Israelites with bread and raisin cakes (2 Sam 6:19). By later taking responsibility for Mephibosheth’s daily nourishment, David sought to enshrine his continuing loyalty to his deceased friend Jonathan (2 Sam 9:7). Elijah noted the fact that the four hundred prophets of Asherah and the four hundred and fifty

prophets of Baal all ate “at Jezebel’s table” (1 Kgs 18:19). Babylonian monarch Awil-merodach released King Jehoiachin from prison and provided him with a daily ration of royal food for the remainder of his life (2 Kgs 25:27–30; Jeremiah 52:31–34). Daniel and other young noble men are also given royal rations of food and drink as part and parcel of their preparation for Babylonian service (Daniel 1:5).

- 6 It is ironic that when seeking a repeal of the death decree, Esther utilizes but subverts this imperial strategy by providing two such *mišhte* for Ahasuerus and Haman (5:4–8; 7:1–3). The extravagance and exclusivity of Esther’s first feast leaves such an impression on Haman that he calls his friends home to tell them and his wife about it (5:10–12). Later, the Jews in Susa, and throughout the empire’s provinces, have their own banquet/feast and holiday (8:16; 9:17–18). Esther and Mordecai enshrine this feasting as custom when they write to all Jews urging them to make these two days of feasting and joy, as well as sending gifts to others and also to the poor (9:20–23, 27–32).
- 7 Feminist scholars hold differing views on the meaning and impact of Mordecai’s counsel that Esther hide her identity. Brenner, for instance, argues that “Mordecai virtually pushes her into the foreign king’s bed by forbidding her to disclose her national origin” (Brenner 1995, p. 64).
- 8 At the time that Haman devises the genocide, in the twelfth year of King Ahasuerus, Esther had already been the queen of Persia for approximately five years (2:16; 3:6).
- 9 Economic analyses of racism, gender discrimination and other inequities within academia are appropriate. Racism and other systems of oppression are enabled by ideologies of power and superiority. This is one important reason why wage inequity and under-representation continue to persist within the guild.
- 10 Abraham conducted business at the city gate (Genesis 23:10–18); leaders held townhall meetings with citizens (Genesis 34:20–25); oaths and responsibilities, such as levirate duty, were witnessed at the city gate (Ruth 4:1, 11); and the gate was synonymous with judicial proceedings (2 Samuel 15:2; Amos 5:10, 15).
- 11 Mordecai’s refusal to bow down suggests that he knew more about Haman than the narrative records. It is unlikely that Mordecai’s resistance is because he equated the act of obeisance with the prohibition against worshiping other human beings. Rather, Mordecai may not have believed that Haman had the character or qualifications deserving of the position and honor that he commanded.
- 12 Mosala discusses the demonization of protests and civil unrest responding to grave injustices. Mosala is intrigued that thrice Esther’s scroll repeats that the Jews were not involved in looting (9:10, 15–16), and remarks that “This principle of upholding the sanctity of property over the life of people is well known as part of ruling-class ideology” (Mosala 1992, p. 136). These words take on fresh resonance in light of the current American national discourse. At times, recent discourse focused less on the horror and injustice of the murders of Black people such as George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, and more on the destruction of physical property which occurred in some places.
- 13 The account of Nehemiah records that he was afraid when the king noted his sad demeanor (2:2). Likely he had attempted to cover his emotions to an extent. The fear of the king discovering his despondency arose from the knowledge that servants were required to be cheerful in the presence of the king (2:1). Perhaps there were repercussions or penalties in place for those whose demeanour was interpreted as unfavorable.
- 14 Other elements of deportment also accompany clothing, such as hair. The styling of hair can be, but is not always, an embodiment which counters the propaganda of whiteness as the normative standard of beauty. The historical policing of Black women’s hair, particularly in educational and professional contexts, stems from this normativity of whiteness. The CROWN (Create a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair) Act was passed as legislation in California (July 2019). The law stipulates that “Professionalism was, and still is, closely linked to European features and mannerisms, which entails that those who do not naturally fall into Eurocentric norms must alter their appearances, sometimes drastically and permanently, in order to be deemed professional . . . In a society in which hair has historically been one of many determining factors of a person’s race, and whether they were a second-class citizen, hair today remains a proxy for race. Therefore, hair discrimination targeting hairstyles associated with race is racial discrimination” (Senate Bill 188).
- 15 Exploitation may manifest in inequitable pay, delayed or denied promotion, limited access, scarce professional resources and opportunities, as well as interactions and exchanges (e.g., microaggressions) that adversely impact mental and physical health over a period of time.
- 16 Haman was able to approach Ahasuerus when the need arose (3:8–11; 6:4–5).
- 17 Weems maintains that “the king’s second wife, Esther, had much for which to thank Vashti. King Ahasuerus might not have been so predisposed to forgive Queen Esther her brazen disobedience had not his first wife taught him that, like it or not, some women make their own decisions” (Weems 1988, p. 108). Butting agrees that, “This plan and this struggle of Esther’s would be unthinkable without Vashti’s act of refusal” (Butting 2012, p. 215).
- 18 Even after the scepter is held out to her, Esther enacts an elaborate ruse so as to eventually expose Haman. Esther’s trickster actions are “one of the survival strategies of the powerless—in this instance, of women in the world of men, and of exiles in the world of their captors” (Masenya 2001, p. 47).
- 19 Multisystemic approaches consider the compound effect of experiencing discrimination across various life phases and contexts. In contrast to their white counterparts, African Americans experience the allostatic load of racism “while shopping, at work,

and when seeking housing, employment, and health care, as well as in interactions with the criminal justice system. For African Americans in particular, the pervasiveness of discrimination in everyday life may be stressful, unavoidable, and ultimately detrimental to health" (Van Dyke et al. 2020, pp. 316–17).

- 20 NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, "Nikole Hannah-Jones Issues Statement on Decision to Decline Tenure Offer at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and to Accept Knight Chair Appointment at Howard University," Tuesday 6 July 2021. Emphasis added (Hannah-Jones 2021).
- 21 There is increased research concerning anti-Black racism across academic and professional fields within the USA, the UK and other parts of Europe. Some professionals within the fields of science, technology, engineering, mathematics and medicine (STEMM), as well as public health, geography, social sciences and the humanities, continue to urge for the dismantling of racism.
- 22 Professor West mentions other instances of financial exploitation that he experienced, "no possible summer salary alongside the lowest increase every year." Following this tenure fiasco by Harvard Divinity School, Professor West is now the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Professor of Philosophy & Christian Practice at Union Theological Seminary, New York.
- 23 The commitment to an apolitical academy is a derivative of the more widespread and insidious myth of racial progress. This way of thinking resists the integration of anti-racism in the academic project by promoting such views as "we have come so far" or "we have racial equality." Lawyer Michelle Alexander elucidates the myth of racial progress, and the related notion of colorblindness, as a prime factor in society's non-committal attitude toward tackling racism and its injustices (Alexander 2020, p. 18). Furthermore, "The imposed ideology of living in a post-racial and post-gender society creeps into the academic workplace suppressing issues and incidents from a discourse that equality is reached. This discourse allows the organization to act 'blind' for the racist and sexist practices occurring in the workplace, further perpetuating and making invisible these practices without holding the perpetrators accountable for their actions" (Bourabain 2021, p. 263).
- 24 Researchers highlight the reality of "aversive racism", which happens when "interviewers are more likely to remember the negative characteristic of candidates, especially when they are Black, and so are less likely to recommend them for the position. The research suggests that despite the existence of equality policies both in the UK and the USA, those from minority ethnic backgrounds continue to face disadvantages in the labour market" (Bhopal 2018, p. 8).
- 25 Some privileged scholars have fostered academic spaces which are unconcerned about the realities of trauma and violence that some of their colleagues, students, staff and other stakeholders regularly face. Our curricula are in danger of being so "peaceful" and "progressive" that it does not speak to the atrocities of human experience—historic and contemporary. The embrace of apoliticism is so widespread that any subject which makes students or stakeholders slightly uncomfortable is called into question. Academia has at times banned truth-telling activities within its spaces. Consequently, those who choose to disseminate knowledge and expertise in their field—while remaining faithful to the truths of historic and current trauma and oppression—are barred from advancement.

## References

- Adler, Joshua J. 2015. The Hidden Message of the Book of Esther: Assimilation Is Not the Way to Salvation. *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 43: 246–48.
- Alexander, Michelle. 2020. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, 10th Anniversary ed. New York: New Press.
- Berlin, Adele. 2003. The Book of Esther: Writing a Commentary for a Jewish Audience. In *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*. Edited by Sidnie White Crawford and Leonard Jay Greenspoon. New York: T&T Clark, pp. 9–16.
- Bhopal, Kalwant. 2018. *The Experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic Academics: A Comparative Study of the Unequal Academy*. London: Routledge.
- Bourabain, Dounia. 2021. Everyday Sexism and Racism in the Ivory Tower: The Experiences of Early Career Researchers on the Intersection of Gender and Ethnicity in the Academic Workplace. *Gender, Work & Organization* 28: 248–67.
- Brenner, Athalya, ed. 1995. Some Observations on the Figurations of Woman in Wisdom Literature. In *A Feminist Companion to Wisdom Literature*. Edited by Athalya Brenner. Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, pp. 50–66.
- Brosius, Maria. 2010. Pax Persica and the Peoples of the Black Sea Region: Extent and Limits of Achaemenid Imperial Ideology. In *Achaemenid Impact in the Black Sea: Communication of Powers*. Edited by Jens Nieling and Ellen Rehm. Santa Barbara: Aarhus University Press, pp. 29–40.
- Brosius, Maria. 2012. Persian Diplomacy Between 'Pax Persica' and 'Zero Tolerance'. In *Maintaining Peace and Interstate Stability in Archaic and Classical Greece*. Edited by Julia Wilker. Mainz: Verlag Antike, pp. 150–64.
- Butting, Klara. 2012. Esther: About Resistance against Anti-Semitism and Sexism. In *Feminist Biblical Interpretation: A Compendium of Critical Commentary on the Books of the Bible and Related Literature*. Edited by Luise Schottroff, Marie-Theres Wacker and Martin Rumscheidt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp. 207–20.
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989: 139–67.
- Davis, Stacy. 2016. The Invisible Women: Numbers 30 and the Politics of Singleness in Africana Communities. In *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*. Edited by Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, pp. 21–48.

- Dunbar, Ericka Shawndricka. 2021. *Trafficking Hadassah: Collective Trauma, Cultural Memory, and Identity in the Book of Esther and in the African Diaspora*. New York: Routledge.
- Duran, Nicole. 2003. Who Wants to Marry a Persian King? Gender Games and Wars and the Book of Esther. In *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible*. Edited by Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, pp. 71–84.
- Gafney, Wilda. 2017. *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Hannah-Jones, Nikole. 2021. *Nikole Hannah-Jones Issues Statement on Decision to Decline Tenure Offer at University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill and to Accept Knight Chair Appointment at Howard University*. New York: NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund. Available online: <https://www.naacpldf.org/press-release/nikole-hannah-jones-issues-statement-on-decision-to-decline-tenure-offer-at-university-of-north-carolina-chapel-hill-and-to-accept-knight-chair-appointment-at-howard-university/> (accessed on 6 July 2021).
- Hannah-Jones, Nikole. 2022. Keynote Address to the General Assembly's Meeting to Commemorate the International Day of Remembrance of the Victims of Slavery and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Available online: [https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/nikole\\_hannah-jones\\_-\\_speech\\_to\\_general\\_assembly\\_-\\_29\\_march\\_2022\\_1.pdf](https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/nikole_hannah-jones_-_speech_to_general_assembly_-_29_march_2022_1.pdf) (accessed on 29 March 2022).
- Hatzaw, Ciin Sian Siam. 2021. Reading Esther as a Postcolonial Feminist Icon for Asian Women in Diaspora. *Open Theology* 7: 1–34. [CrossRef]
- Hazon, Yoram. 2016. *God and Politics in Esther*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jung, Moon-Kie, and João H. Costa Varga. 2021. *Antiblackness*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Junior, Nyasha. 2015. *An Introduction to Womanist Biblical Interpretation*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Kendi, Ibram X. 2019. *How to Be an Antiracist*. New York: Penguin Random House.
- Kirk-Duggan, Cheryl A. 1999. Black Mother Women and Daughters: Signifying Female-Divine Relationships in the Hebrew Bible and African-American Mother–Daughter Short Stories. In *Ruth and Esther: A Feminist Companion to the Bible*. Edited by Athalya Brenner. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, pp. 192–210.
- Masanya, Mmadipoane. 2001. Esther and Northern Sotho Stories: An African–South African Woman's Commentary. In *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*. Edited by Musa W. Dube Shomanah. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, pp. 27–49.
- Mosala, Itumeleng J. 1992. The Implications of the Text of Esther for African Women's Struggle for Liberation in South Africa. *Semeia* 59: 129–37.
- Oren, Drora. 2009. Esther the Jewish Queen of Persia. *Nashim* 18: 140–65. [CrossRef]
- Parfitt, Tudor. 2021. *Hybrid Hate: Jews, Blacks, and the Question of Race*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stevenson, Bryan. 2014. *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*. New York: Spiegel & Grau.
- Van Dyke, Miriam E., N. Kau'I. Baumhofer, Natalie Slopen, Mahasin S. Mujahid, Cheryl R. Clark, David R. Williams, and Tené T. Lewis. 2020. Pervasive Discrimination and Allostatic Load in African American and White Adults. *Psychosomatic Medicine* 82: 316–23. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Weems, Renita J. 1988. *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible*. San Diego: Lura Media.
- Wilkerson, Isabel. 2020. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. New York: Penguin Random House.