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Esther as Novella

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Author

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Publication Date

2025-09-15

Peer reviewed

Esther as Novella

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Published online (2025) in Kristen Joachimsen and Helge Bezold, eds., *Esther: Themes and Issues* (Themes and Issues in Biblical Studies)

Abstract: More than simply being shorter than a novel and longer than a short story, a novella is a kind of story literature that represents something new in its literary and historical context, that is independently preserved, and that tells a complex story with a clear beginning, middle, and end. This chapter argues that Esther fits this definition in every way.

Additionally, building on scholarly discussions which read ancient Jewish novellas as part of contemporary literary trends, this chapter puts Esther into conversation with novellas written in Demotic by Egyptians, a comparison that has been overlooked until recently. This comparison has revealed the ways in which the form of the novella was a potent vehicle for entertainment and creativity, and thus a major kind of cultural expression within indigenous literary circles in the later first millennium Eastern Mediterranean.

Keywords: Esther, novella, genre, Demotic, storytelling, Persian, Hellenistic

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Introduction

In this chapter, I argue that Esther should be identified as a novella, an identification of genre that itself is not new, but which I will nevertheless put in a new light.ⁱ “Genre” is a technical word (borrowed from French) for a kind of literature. Identifying the genre of a literary work is a complex endeavor drawing on numerous characteristics and structural features (Frow 2006, 9–12). This is always done while still on the road toward meaning. With the study of ancient literature, this is especially the case, since we constantly improve our readings and interpretations, and gradually increase our understanding of the place of literature in society. Genre identification in ancient literature is thus an act of historical reconstruction. If this identification then sanctions the use of a specific name for a kind of literature, as I am arguing with Esther and the name novella, this name can serve as a codeword for a complex engagement, locating a particular text in a larger movement or culture.

The name novella is used for a genre of literary storytelling in prose that is something new in its literary and historical context, that is independently preserved, and that tells a complex story with a clear beginning, middle, and end. As I will show in §1, these three essential features of the genre—newness, independence, and complexity—correspond precisely to Esther, and, from a wider perspective, describe a distinct kind of literary storytelling recurrent both within the Hebrew Bible and without, one which was particularly popular in the Persian and Hellenistic periods. In §2, I will thus turn to Esther’s wider context in international storytelling literature in these periods, and bring relatively new comparative evidence to the table: Demotic Egyptian literature. Like Second Temple literature, this is a well-attested indigenous literary corpus written in the shadow of empire. It represents not only a contemporary and structurally parallel literary phenomenon to early Jewish literature in this

period, but features literary works which are similar in fundamental ways to Esther, and thus should also be called novellas too. Calling Esther a novella, then, engages it as part of an international literary trend.

Esther's genre is clear at least in a broad sense: it is a story, its discourse entirely narrative, and its language, prose. Finding a more specific name has been more difficult, however, and it could even be argued that such a quest is counterproductive to understanding the work on its own terms (cf. Ego 2017, 34). My interest in arguing for Esther's genre is not to pigeonhole it (cf. Newsom 2005, 439), but to finetune our understanding of the basic kind of story that it was, both in its own right and as part of wider literary trends. Esther indeed was one of many different kinds of literary storytelling happening in its time, both in Jewish literary culture and beyond. The evidence for this, inside the Bible and out, shows a number of potential trajectories for the creation of story literature. Stories were composed on their own and as part of collections; were augmented and rewritten; were edited together, or were combined with other genres. In this chapter, I will argue that Esther was part of one major trajectory for the composition of story literature, the output of which should be called novellas.

1. Esther as Novella: New, Independent, Complex

1.1. Esther as Novella in Biblical Studies

The novella, along with the short story and the novel, is one of the most general and widely used names for a kind of literary storytelling. These three kinds are differentiated in everyday usage according to length, with the novella standing in the middle: shorter than a novel, but longer than a short story (*OED*, s.v.; Gillespie 1967). Esther matches this basic definition well: it is longer than short stories found in the Hebrew Bible (think those of Daniel 1-6), but shorter than works, both ancient and modern, that usually go by the name of novel.

Identifying Esther as a novella has a good precedent, since the word has been a popular choice for Esther's genre since the early 20th century. Length alone is a tricky feature to use as a benchmark for genre identification, though, especially when there are no standards against which to measure. It is no surprise, then, that Esther has also been called a short story and a novel, as well as different variations of these (see Bush 1996, 297–309).

Many biblical scholars today would closely associate the word “novella” with the Joseph Story (Genesis 37–50), following the influential Genesis commentary of Hermann Gunkel (1997, 382, first ed. 1901). Gunkel compared the Joseph Story to the other series of patriarchal narratives in Genesis, such as those about Jacob (chs. 25-35) which, he argued, were more loosely organized collections of legendary material, and which he called story cycles. This contrast between a loosely organized story cycle and a more tightly woven novella that has a clear beginning, middle, and end, and which allows space for more development of plot, character, and theme, is the essence of the biblical novella in Gunkel's conception and that of his followers (Humphreys 1989). Gunkel also identified other stories in Genesis as novellas when he perceived them to be a new reworking of an older legend, such as the story of Isaac's wooing of Rebecca in ch. 24 (1997, 246–47). Esther too he identified as a novella (as well as a novel; 1916, 76). At the same time, Gunkel expressed a negative perspective on Esther's value, believing it to be a late and inferior work in the Hebrew Bible, relatively uninspired when compared with so-called classic works of biblical storytelling like the Joseph Story, and reflecting the weakened position of Jews living under foreign

domination (see e.g. Gunkel 2003, 73, originally published in 1906). This echoes Martin Luther's sentiment that Esther is an inferior, "judaizing" work under the influence of paganism (Kalimi 2019). The "lateness" of works like Esther, written in the shadow of empire in the Persian and Hellenistic periods, is thankfully no longer considered to be a cultural defect. Instead of lateness, this quality is now seen as newness, part of the creative essence of novellas cross-culturally (which even Gunkel recognized).

This re-assessment of what it means to be a biblical novella has taken two influential shapes in past decades, with both grounding the genre's essence in its historical context. One approach identifies a number of works from the Persian and Hellenistic periods as "diaspora novellas," retaining Gunkel's term and adhering to his artistic definition of the genre, but emphasizing their rhetorical purpose in context, which was to depict a meaningful life for Jews living amidst foreign domination (Humphreys 1973; Meinhold 1975; Römer 2021). Today, the Joseph Story, Esther, and Daniel 1–6 are often called this. As a new experience for a people who traced their origins to ancient Israelite culture and religion, diaspora created the conditions for a new kind of literary storytelling.

If the diaspora novella approach sees Esther as part of a relatively restricted corpus that only makes sense as expressions of diaspora, a second trend connects Esther and its genre to a broader experience across the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern world in the Hellenistic period. In this case, the newness is not that of a single culture's experience, but a feature of a world which was changing and growing ever larger in the final centuries BCE—a feature, not a bug of late first millennium society. This approach has been pioneered by Lawrence Wills, who calls Esther, Daniel 1–6, Tobit, Judith, and Joseph and Aseneth Jewish novellas or, alternatively, novels, and has compared them with numerous other prose narratives authored by Jews and others, a kind of literature that he calls "novelistic" (Wills 1995; 2002; 2011; 2021). Wills construes this trend of composing novelistic literature as a "response to empire" both from within Hellenism as well as from indigenous cultures impacted by it (2011, 164; see also Whitmarsh 2010). This is evidenced not only in Second Temple Jewish literature, including historiography (from the books of Maccabees to Josephus), but in Hellenistic literature itself (in particular the Graeco-Roman novel), as well as in Egyptian literature, something which I will return to in §2. For Wills and for others, Esther is an example of the worldwide interest in the Hellenistic period in all things Persian, for example in its effort to portray some of the court and imperial practices with a degree of realism (including the use of Persian loanwords), as well as in its caricature of these practices, especially the figure of Ahasuerus (Macchi 2009; Ego 2010; Bezold 2022, 12–17).

1.2. The Newness of Esther

Newness, as shown in the different approaches to biblical novellas considered above, is a quality often associated with the novella. This reflects the original use of the word in the literature of the Italian Renaissance to describe short works of prose fiction that address readers with innovative, contemporary, newly written and non-traditional storytelling that was relevant to the present and which was not the mere re-presentation of a traditional story or myth (Clements and Gibaldi 1977, 4)—"novella" comes from the Italian word *novella*, meaning "a piece of news." Newness, such as in story and character, occurs in different ways within the Hebrew Bible and early Jewish literature. For example, Jonah as well as Joseph and Aseneth (two works which are generically similar to Esther in many ways) are both based on

“old” characters, but tell new stories about them. With Esther, both story and character are new. Besides the Persian king Ahasuerus, its protagonists and antagonists have been invented out of whole cloth. Though the question of the historicity of Esther has not been completely laid to rest in scholarship, this story, with its Jewish woman becoming queen of Persia and an empire-wide slaughter carried about by Jews against their enemies (at least in the MT), can rightly be called fantasy (cf. Reinhartz 2017).

Esther’s newness is formal as well. It is framed in the style and literary dialect of Standard Biblical Hebrew, used, not for historiography, or for a literary depiction of historical periods from Israelite history (whether legendary not), but for a fantastical story set in the relatively recent past. When compared to other stories in the Hebrew Bible, this itself was a new and unique act of literary creativity. In this way, Esther is similar to Ruth (a product of the Persian period), which invents a new story set in the time of Judges, and connects it to David. Unlike Ruth, however, which is written in the strictly classical dialect, Esther couches its story in a Late Biblical Hebrew suffused with aramaicisms and Persian loanwords, but with numerous features of Standard Biblical Hebrew as well; such a mixture is only found, outside of Esther, in the memoir portions of Nehemiah (Polzin 1976, 3, 7; Hurvitz 2007, 209).

Esther also rethinks the popular story type of the court tale, found across the wider Eastern Mediterranean starting in the Assyrian period (Niditch and Doran 1977; Wills 1990; Dalley 2001; Holm 2008). In its basic form, the court tale depicts a wise and honest courtier who, through the anger and caprice of a king or the machinations of another courtier, falls into disgrace, but is eventually justified and restored. Since the courtier was often depicted as a scribe, the popularity of the story type within circles of literati is understandable (J. Moore 2021, 135–68). Some view Esther as based on a kernel of a court tale focused on Mordecai that was expanded and transformed into the text we know today and linked with Purim (Humphreys 1973, 214). Without a doubt, its audience was familiar with court tale motifs and recognized them in the remarkably comedic and parodic depiction of Ahasuerus (Chan 2013). An audience likely would have also been struck by the unique combination of the traditional motifs of the male-dominated court tale with the contemporary literary trend of the brave woman protagonist, seen in Ruth, Judith, and Joseph and Aseneth, as well as in contemporary Egyptian compositions (Dalley 2007, 129–36).

Finally, Esther’s newness is also seen in Purim. Although many have asserted that the connection to the festival is secondary (Paton 1908, 57–60; Clines 1984, 39–49; Ego 2017, 40–42), caution should be taken in assuming that this was necessarily the case. A Jewish festival defined by diaspora, Purim is given an origin story couched in a traditional dialect and form evoking the literature, and thus also the era, of Ancient Israel. Esther, then, and the festival that it enshrines, is part of the identity-forming process of a community that, in virtue of its sense of its own history in its diasporic embedding, is by definition something new. This has led Daniel Boyarin to call the festival itself, and not just the book of Esther, the “text of diaspora par excellence” (1994, 4).

1.3. The Independence of Esther

The genre of the novella is also defined by independence, whether as discrete stories that are part of a collection (such as in Boccaccio’s *Decameron*), or, in a form that became dominant in European literature, as independently-preserved works of fiction. Here, we come up against a difficulty in the way in which “novella” has been used in biblical studies starting with

Gunkel. The approach of the diaspora novella, for example, is not concerned with the way in which the works are structured as stories, the basic threshold of encounter which gives a primary and definitive shape to their experience as a certain kind of literature.

This is apparent when Esther and Daniel 1-6, the two paradigmatic diaspora novellas in modern research, are compared. With Esther, this threshold is equivalent to the physical act of opening a scroll and reading its first lines (cf. Genette 1997, 16), unlike Daniel 1-6, which has two such thresholds: the collection itself, which, like Esther, opens a scroll, as well the individual stories, which are kept resolutely distinct. Esther and Daniel 1-6 have much in common thematically and rhetorically, and that common aspect might best be called something like “diaspora storytelling.” Considered from the perspective of story structure and its literary embodiment, the two are rightly said to represent different genres. In the way in which it was encountered in literary media, Esther’s independence is shared with other works that have been called novellas as well, such as Ruth, Tobit, and Judith. This manner of independence is different in several ways from that of the Joseph Story, which may indeed have existed independently of Genesis, or if not, is at least presently characterized by a completeness and a self-sufficiency which sets it apart from the rest of that book (see Schipper 2018, 72-74).

1.4. The Complexity of Esther

A third and final aspect of novellas is their complexity (Leibowitz 1974). In this way, they nevertheless stand apart from novels, which can be quite complex in their use of multiple plots and subplots, in depicting interwoven chains of character motivation, or in introducing surprise twists or lengthy digressions (even novels in the ancient world do this, as in Heliodorus’s *Aethiopica* or Apuleius’s *Golden Ass*). Novellas typically limit complicating factors and are based around a plot with a straightforward beginning, middle, and end. Nevertheless, such factors are still found. Esther has two primary, distinct, yet well-integrated plot-lines: Haman’s hatred of Mordecai, and Esther’s precarious position in the court. Complicating things, there is misdirection (Ahasuerus is initially positioned as the main antagonist, only to be replaced by Haman), a series of action and reaction that builds up into the story’s central drama (Haman’s hatred for Mordecai), and coincidence (the king’s sleeplessness leads to Haman’s downfall), all making the plot non-linear. The plot also culminates in a reversal or peripety surrounding Haman, a factor that Aristotle believed to be essential to a complex plot (Belfiore 1992, 128-29) and which is an unexpected twist or deviation preventing a character from meeting their objectives that is not merely different but decisively and poetically so (Winitzer 2011). At the same time, the plot’s resolution comes swiftly in ch. 7 once Haman is found out. The restricted length of novellas brings factors like this out, making complexity despite length one of the most salient features of the genre.

Another aspect of the style of novellas that brings out their complexity, despite their relatively restricted length, is the use of continuous, and not episodic storytelling. Episodes are event clusters that stand apart from their surroundings, a discrete and easily-separable phase in the action of a story, useful also for digressions (Aristotle 1968, 180; Prince 2003, 27). Once again, Esther can be contrasted to the stories of Daniel 1-6, where episodes do not represent digressions, but story essence, cohering together as a series and not as phases of a definite arc of beginning, middle, and end. Admittedly, Esther does have a slightly episodic feel in its opening two chapters when its main characters are established: the Vashti affair (ch.

1, which for many is seen as extraneous to the story as a whole; Clines 1984, 31; Fox 2001, 24), the quick rise of Esther to the queenship (2:1–20), and the eunuchs' conspiracy (2:21–23). Beginning with ch. 3, however, the story continues through a dramatic middle with a protracted build of tension and no episodic breaks (chs. 3–7), followed by an extensive denouement and coda (chs. 8–10). With Esther, then, episodic storytelling is limited to a few discrete moves in the opening gambit which come across initially as relatively unattached, but serve the plot as a whole. Esther is thus a complex story of a relatively restricted length, as well as a unified whole with distinct parts not able to be detached (cf. the description in Ryan 1992, 373). In this way Esther's narrative style is not only distinct from that of Daniel 1–6, but from what is often found in novels ancient and modern, which feature occasional episodic storytelling due to their longer length, or which, in the case of the picaresque novel, can consist almost entirely of episodes linked in a story arc. In its non-episodic style, Esther also differs from collections of stories found in biblical books like Genesis, Judges, and Samuel.

2. Esther and Demotic Egyptian Novellas

In its broad historical and literary context, Esther is part of a Jewish novella literature consisting of works sharing the features discussed above, emergent in literary circles starting in the Persian Period, and reaching full force in the Hellenistic. The surviving novellas include Jonah, Ruth, Tobit, Judith, and Joseph and Aseneth (if it is not a Christian text; see Standhartinger 2014, 367–71). Whether the Joseph Story should be numbered among this literature, or counted as a forerunner, depends in large part on its dating.

This novella literature was composed, not only by Jews, but by indigenous authors generally in the Persian and Hellenistic Eastern Mediterranean. The most important non-Jewish witness of this, which has been occasionally mentioned but widely neglected until recently (Honigman 2020; Cross 2022), is Egyptian literature written in Demotic. Demotic is both a name for a cursive Egyptian script which first appeared in the 7th century BCE, as well as for a phase of the indigenous Egyptian language which the script was normally used to write. Literature in Demotic began to be composed by Egyptians in the Persian Period, with the earliest surviving literary texts dating from the Ptolemaic Period, and the lion's share of surviving papyri stemming from Roman-period libraries (for overviews of Demotic literature, see Quack 2016; Hoffmann 2016; Jay 2016; Jasnow 2020). Anthologies of Demotic texts in translation can be found in Agut-Labordère and Chauveau (2011, in French) and Hoffmann and Quack (2018, in German); little Demotic literature has been translated into English (see the translations of Ritner in Simpson 2003, 445–529).

While all surviving Demotic texts are fragmentary to greater or lesser degrees, making the engagement of genre identification often challenging, several are well-enough preserved to be recognized as bearing the same fundamental characteristics of Esther. These include the two best-preserved stories about Setna Khaemwas (usually called First Setna and Second Setna; Simpson 2003, 453–89) as well as two works from the Inaros Cycle, usually called The Battle for the Armor of Inaros and The Battle for the Prebend of Amun (Hoffmann and Quack 2018, 71–120).

Besides all being written in prose and couched in anonymous, third-person narration, the Jewish and Egyptian novellas share a number of features:

1. The novellas all have **complex plots** in comparison to contemporaneously composed short stories (Cross 2022). These novellas are nevertheless simpler

and more straightforward in their plot than novels written by Graeco-Roman authors, which means their complexity is circumscribed. Telling is the fact that anthologized Demotic short stories always have simple plots, while stories which are preserved independently have complex plots.

2. All of the novellas are characterized by enduring **independent preservation** on their own scrolls, strongly suggesting they were deliberately cultivated and transmitted in this way. To read a novella is to read the story on its own. Jonah is a partial exception to this since, though kept independent, it is only found in the Twelve Prophets anthology (although it is possible it was also preserved independently; see Guillaume 2007) and well-embedded in this context (Mastnjak 2023, 118). The other novellas were inscribed on their own scrolls.
3. Without exception, all of the novellas are **historical fiction** set at a specific time in the past. These include during earlier eras of indigenous rule later taken to be definitive (Ruth, Jonah, Joseph and Aseneth), periods of the transition to exogenous domination (Tobit, Judith), and in the midst of the latter (Esther, uniquely). The Demotic novellas are similarly set: in the New Kingdom (the Setna stories), as well as in the Third Intermediate Period after the Assyrian invasion (Ryholt 2004), part of the worldwide transition out of the Iron Age.
4. Finally, all novellas show widespread **textual fluidity** (excepting the shorter novellas of Jonah and Ruth), both in local details on a passage-by-passage basis as well as in more extensive creative differences. Not only did they continue to be copied and transmitted independently, they were the subject of continual textual creativity which, nevertheless, did not see the stories become absorbed into larger narrative wholes. Related to this textual multiformity are the numerous creative translations (Tobit, Esther), and the possibility that some were composed in different languages in versions that are now lost (Judith; see Wills 2019, 339–62). There is some indirect evidence that Egyptian novellas were translated into Greek (Rutherford 2000).

All four characteristics touch on Esther in essential ways, but the first two have particular resonance with contemporaneous Demotic novellas.

Complex plots. As already discussed (§1.4), Esther is characterized by its complexity as a story. If we were to characterize the complex plot of the novella, it would be one of conflict based on the reciprocal action of characters who create problems for each other and vie alternatively to bring an end to them. Such a plot has been described as “polemical” by Thomas Pavel (1985, 125–26). At the center of Esther’s polemical plot is the conflict between Mordecai and Haman, threatening all Jews across the empire. The plot advances at key interactions between them. Their first encounter (3:1–5) results in the central conflict of the novella instigated by the antagonist Haman (3:6–15), and the reaction of Mordecai who enlists Esther for help (4:1–17). The plot then unexpectedly advances towards its crisis when Haman reacts to Mordecai yet again and decides to have him hanged (5:9–14). This only happens because Esther has summoned Haman to the court to a banquet with the king (5:1–8). She is not able to make her case against him (5:6–8), something which, instead of taking care of Haman’s antagonism, has made it possible for him to put Mordecai at even more risk.

When Haman is about to carry out his definitive retribution at Esther's second banquet (5:14 and 6:4), he is the one who ends up being hanged once Esther reveals his plot against the Jews.

An important component of Esther's polemical plot is the force of coincidence: the king happening to be sleepless precisely when Haman is coming to the court to have Mordecai hanged, and choosing to have the annals read to him (6:1–2). Without the coincidence, Haman and Mordecai were bound to collide in a definitive way to the latter's detriment, a collision already underway and advanced to the point of Haman being on the verge of his masterstroke of asking Ahasuerus to hang him. Along with the central coincidence is the sense, in retrospect, of the predetermination of Haman's fall, the seed having been planted in Mordecai's good deed going unrewarded (3:21–23), commonly known as the principle of Chekhov's gun (see Ratcliffe 2017, s.v. no. 12).

Polemical plots which involve coincidence and retrospective predetermination are popular in the Demotic novellas. Like Esther, some come to resolution through external forces. In the case of *The Prebend of Amun*, a surprise twist hearkening back to a seed planted earlier in the story accomplishes this. Chekhov's gun in this case is the dishonor paid by the pharaoh Petubastis to two warriors on the side of Inaros by not inviting them to celebrate a festival in Thebes (Hoffmann and Quack 2018, 102–3). The celebration is interrupted by a band of renegades led by a priest who claims rightful possession of the office of high priesthood that Petubastis has just secured for his son. An oracular decree of the god Amun reveals that the two spurned warriors are in fact destined to defeat them. The spectacular humiliation of a main character like Petubastis who is not an antagonist, but a flawed and at best a neutral protagonist, is a popular feature of Demotic novellas (Petubastis undergoes something similar in *The Armor of Inaros*; see also the humiliation of Setna Khaemwas in *First Setna* in Simpson 2003, 422–26). While not a typical feature of Jewish protagonists (only antagonists: witness the downfalls of not only Haman but of Holofernes), the sorry state of Jonah by story's end can be compared.

Textual fluidity. While Tobit, and to a lesser extent Judith, show fluidity in their textual traditions, Esther presents perhaps the most fascinating case in its multiple ancient versions which differ strongly (the MT, the Greek versions of the Alpha Text and the Old Greek, and the Old Latin; for the relevance of the latter as witnessing a different tradition than the Septuagint, see Haelewyck 2006; Bellmann and Portier-Young 2019). These differences are well-known and are often described in the higher-critical exegetical terminology of redaction and growth (Fox 1991; Müller, Pakkala, and Bas ter Haar 2014, 193–204). It should not be lost, however, that this fluidity is not simply a biblical or even scribal phenomenon, but is part of the vitality (cf. Najman 2012) of indigenous storytelling literature in the Hellenistic Eastern Mediterranean. Bounded creativity and the freedom to reimagine a popular written story is indicative of ongoing creative engagement accompanying a continual period of recopying and circulating book-scrolls.

The Demotic evidence brings this out, where widespread textual fluidity is the norm (Jay 2016, 237–39; Quack 2023, 16–17). The kinds of variance seen in parallel passages of the same novella bespeak creative acts of performers who tweak personal copies used as scripts (Cross 2023). A typical example is the adjustment or addition of dialogue (ibid., 180–83), something which can have wider implications. In Esther, compare the small but fascinating differences in Ahasuerus's responses—verbal and non—to Mordecai being Esther's relative: in MT and Old Greek 8:1, Esther tells Ahasuerus, and in Old Latin 8:1, he

realizes on his own; yet in Alpha Text 7:14–15, the king speaks himself and declares that he already knew.

Another example particularly relevant for Esther is the existence of a different ending for one Demotic novella, *The Armor of Inaros* (P. Carlsberg 456+), compared to what is found in the best-preserved copy (P. Krall; see Ryholt 2012, 81–83). In the latter, the resolution of the contest to determine who will get possession of the breastplate of the deceased king Inaros is followed by an official ceremony commemorating the change and the dismissal of the parties back to their home cities. The former copy also includes a dialogue in the afterlife(!) between Inaros and the ancestor of the losing side. This ending does not change the story, but draws out its implications. Additionally intriguing is the way in which earlier parts of this (albeit quite fragmentary) papyrus containing this different ending are closely parallel to the better preserved copy (Ryholt 1998)—note how the variance in the versions of Esther is by far the strongest in the final chapters.

This last point has particular relevance to Esther. Each ancient version represents a distinct way to conclude the story (corresponding to MT chs. 7–10). In the Alpha Text, Mordecai annuls Haman's decree by fiat (7:16–17), and after the Jews in Susa, instigated by Esther, slay Haman's sons and many others as payback (7:18–21), Mordecai addresses them in a letter that informs them of what Haman tried to do, and how he was stopped (7:35–38). In the MT, there is no annulment by fiat, but a decree from Mordecai which tells the Jews to fight back against those who will carry out Haman's decree (8:9–12), leading to the deaths of many thousands. These are just some aspects of numerous differences. Argumentation in scholarship concerning them often hinges on whether they are explainable as editorial plusses or minuses, or revisions against one or another version (Fox 1991; Jobes 1996; De Troyer 2000; Bezold 2022, 39–60). Given the variation found in different papyri of the same Demotic novella—which, it should be emphasized, existed contemporaneously with each other—it is reasonable to hold that these differences come from living storytelling contexts, and not simply from a scribal workshop.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have attempted to finetune our understanding of the basic kind of story literature that Esther is, both in its own right and as part of wider literary trends. My argument has been that Esther should be called a novella, which is a genre of literary storytelling in prose that is something new in its literary and historical context, that is independently preserved, and that tells a complex story with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Not only do these three aspects describe Esther well in its essential features (see §1.2–4), Esther's overall shape as a story matches well the everyday use of the term: it is shorter than a novel and longer than a short story. Building on newer trends that use the term novella to connect Esther to its socio-historical context (§1.1), I showed that novellas with similar defining features are also found in Demotic Egyptian literature which, like Second Temple Jewish literature, was produced by indigenous authors under the shadow of the Persian and Hellenistic empires. Thus, calling Esther a novella allows us not only to describe its fundamental nature as story literature, but its participation in an international trend with a defined socio-cultural context. As the examples of the complexity as well as the textual fluidity of Esther and the Demotic novellas has shown, this literary form was a potent vehicle of learned entertainment and a nexus of creativity. Novellas were thus a major kind of cultural expression within indigenous

literary circles in the later first millennium Eastern Mediterranean. In this way, the genre identification outlined in this chapter provides a codeword for a complex engagement with the text in historical and literary contexts. Whether or not Esther is rightly held up as a strange *biblical* text, as has been sometimes asserted (Bickerman 1968, 169–240), considering it as a novella has revealed how typical of its time it is as a work of *literature* (Vayntrub 2021, 150).

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ⁱ This chapter results from research conducted within the project "From Texts to Literature: Demotic Egyptian Papyri and the Formation of the Hebrew Bible" (DEMBIB), funded by the European Research Council under the Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Program (ID: 101020304). My sincere thanks to the editors for their generous and extremely helpful engagement with my contribution.