CHAPTER 8

POSTEXILIC PROSE
TRADITIONS IN THE
WRITINGS

Novella Writers, Storytellers, and History Writers

THOMAS M. BOLIN

To speak of prose traditions in the Writings at all raises a number of problems that I want to foreground in this chapter because they require me to reconfigure the texts in the Writings in order to speak about their different prose traditions. Such rearrangement is nothing new for anybody trying look at genre similarities among and between the books of the Hebrew Bible. The arrangers of the canon seem to have cared or known little about many of the things that we think about today. The category of “Writings” (*kethuvim*) is itself a sort of catch-all for those books of the Hebrew Bible that are neither Law (*torah*) nor Prophets (*nevi'im*). The books of the Writings are traditionally arranged into three subgroups, each of which doesn’t track ideally with an investigation of their prose traditions. Job is grouped with Psalms and Proverbs as poetry, these books being distinctive with their own cantillation and page layout in ancient manuscripts (Dobbs-Allsopp 2015). But this overlooks the prose story that frames the poetic portions of Job and gives the poems in Job 3–42 the book’s entire narrative rationale. Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Qohelet, and Esther are grouped together, apparently because of their liturgical use, each being read on a particular festival. This grouping also makes no distinction between prose texts (Esther, Ruth, and Qohelet) and poetry (Song of Songs, Lamentations). The remaining books in the writings, Daniel, Ezra–Nehemiah, and 1–2 Chronicles, are a mixture of genealogy, narrative, historical prose, and apocalyptic in Hebrew and Aramaic.

Added to this literary thicket are the historical obstacles at work in our knowledge of the Persian period in Judah, one of the two historical eras that constitute the biblical postexilic epoch. For decades, the Persian period was largely ignored in both textual and archaeological studies because the biblical narrative’s historical material was

erroneously believed to accurately reflect the history of Iron Age Israel (Bolin 1996). For textual scholars, that meant that the Persian period was the denouement to Israelite history, when biblical books largely composed long before were given their final editorial touches, or when a handful of “late” (and hence, “less important”) biblical books were written, such as the ones discussed in this essay. Archaeologists, driven by their own religious and ideological predilections (or those of their financial backers), systematically and consistently ignored or outright destroyed Persian period evidence at sites in their desire to reach occupation levels from the so-called Biblical period.

It has only been in the last twenty-five years that the Persian period has received sustained attention from biblical scholars and this is because of arguments that placed the composition of many biblical texts in the postexilic period (Davies 1992; Thompson 1992). Since then both biblical scholars (Grabbe 1992) and scholars of ancient Persia (Briant 2002; Kuhrt 2007) have written a great deal on the Achaemenids. Despite this increased scholarly attention, significant questions remain unanswered about much of Achaemenid rule, religion, and culture. To date, the longest Achaemenid text known is the Behistun inscription, and the overwhelming majority of extant official Persian documents (the Persepolis Fortification Tablets) are administrative. Answers to fundamental questions, such as when Zoroastrianism originated and the extent of its influence on Achaemenid religion, remain maddeningly opaque. Of necessity, scholars must rely on Greek sources for descriptions of Persian religion and culture. These texts must be read with great care, given that what they say about Persia is fraught with cultural and ideological bias. (See the essays by Harrison and Grabbe in Fitzpatrick-McKinley 2015).

With this in mind I will attempt in this chapter to navigate these shallows and obstacles in the hopes of saying something articulate and helpful about the prose traditions found in the Writings. While the bulk of my attention will be on those books that are mostly composed of prose (Ruth, Esther, Ezra-Nehemiah, 1–2 Chronicles), I will also mention briefly the prologue and epilogue of Job, which receives fuller treatment in Chapter 6 of this volume.

WRITING CLASSES IN THE POSTEXILIC PERIOD

As mentioned earlier, it was not until recently that archaeologists began sustained investigation into Persian-era remains in Palestine. For years it was thought that there were no sizable settlements or administrative centers in Persian-period Yehud, but the excavations at Ramat Raḥel have altered this once received opinion. What Oded Lipschits has called the “riddle” of Ramat Raḥel—the presence of monumental remains believed to be pre-exilic alongside many Persian-period seals and stamped jar handles—reveals in part some of the prior biases toward Persian-period archaeological remains. Put simply, earlier excavators of Ramat Raḥel could not consider

the possibility that the site would have contained large, finely crafted buildings in the Persian period. The most recent excavations reveal that late monarchical-era structures were expanded upon in the Persian period to create a large administrative center overseeing agriculture in the Rephaim Valley just southwest of Jerusalem. This administrative center was also a palace complex with a large royal garden (Lipschits, Gadot, and Langgut 2012). Pollen analysis revealed the presence of imported trees from Persia, which the excavators use to support their claim that Ramat Raḥel was the Persian governor's residence. If this is the case—and it likely is—it helps in part to explain the fact that Jerusalem itself was a relatively small site in the Persian period (Carter 1999), although later building in the city has most likely destroyed a good deal of Persian period remains (Lipschits 2009). With government administration only 4 kilometers away at Ramat Raḥel, Jerusalem would have only needed to function as a “religious” (I am aware of the anachronistic nature of this term) site. By this I mean that the scribes in Jerusalem would have been trained in writing texts that dealt specifically with temple functions. Some of these texts were certainly administrative because the temple functioned in part as a tribute site for the Achaemenids (Fried 2004; Knowles 2006). But other texts would have also have been written, read, and preserved in the Jerusalem temple, including ritual instructions and religious music. Here the heightened presence of the Levites in postexilic texts (Leuchter 2017) dovetails with the understanding of Jerusalem as a sacred city, an idea is emphasized in Ezra-Nehemiah and 1–2 Chronicles. The other postexilic prose texts under discussion in this chapter are more at home in the ambit of local cultural elites who both benefit from Persian economic policy yet also identify themselves as the cultural heirs of monarchic Judah. These cultural elites must be inferred from the presence of the Persian administrative structure found at Ramat Raḥel, the evidence of seals bearing the names of local governors, and analogous practice in other locales in the Persian Empire where more is known.

The Hellenistic period is characterized by the growth of internationalism among local elites throughout the Greek *oikoumene*. In Yehud, Greek culture was widespread and encompassed both the wholesale adoption of Greek cultural features (language, architecture, drama, exercise) and the practice of hybridity—the adoption of some aspects of a colonizing culture in order to resist it (Carr 2005). A parade example of the latter is the use of the Greek historiographical genre in 2 Maccabees to chronicle the revolt against Antiochus. David Carr describes the growth of textual culture and education among local elites in Jerusalem and environs in the Hellenistic period. The explosion of Jewish narrative writing in Greek is germane to this essay's topic, because alternative versions of several texts in the Writings (Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel) exist in Greek, alongside other texts that greatly resemble texts in the Writings (e.g., Susanna, Tobit). It is no exaggeration to speak of a literary explosion in Jewish literature during the Hellenistic period, which requires us to keep two related things in mind when discussing the Writings. First, this increase in literary activity is in large part due to the growth in elite classes and their adoption of Hellenistic educational models. Second, the texts now in the Writings were not yet canonized at this time. Indeed, the idea of canonization may

itself very well be the result of Jewish adoption of Hellenistic models of textual authority (Carr 2005). Consequently, while my discussion will be limited to the books now currently in the Writings, I must necessarily refer to other literary works that date from the same period and doubtless come from the same social group.

HISTORIOGRAPHY: 1–2 CHRONICLES, EZRA-NEHEMIAH

Insofar as ancient historiography is the use of the past to assert or reiterate views of the present, both Ezra-Nehemiah and 1–2 Chronicles qualify as history writing. Together they offer an extended, complex narrative covering an even longer temporal span (albeit shorter in written length) than the “epic” story recounted in Genesis through 2 Kings. Both books overlap directly in that 1–2 Chronicles ends with, and Ezra-Nehemiah begins with, the decree of Cyrus to send the exiles back to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. Whether both biblical books were written by the same author has been a matter of debate. While some still hold for a common author (Blenkinsopp 1988), the majority of scholarly opinions argue against it (Japhet 1993; Klein 2006). In this regard, Sara Japhet rightly notes that 1–2 Chronicles follows in the historiographical tradition of the Deuteronomistic History, while Ezra-Nehemiah is an attempt at a new kind of history writing in ancient Israel/Yehud (1993: 4).

1–2 Chronicles most likely draws on other biblical texts with the Pentateuch and 1–2 Kings being the most obvious, although some hold that the two books independently draw upon another source no longer extant (Person 2010). Discerning the motives behind the author’s retelling of these texts is an open question. It is not enough to assume that retelling means replacing (Klein 2012) or even that the retelling is a tacit critique of its source. 1–2 Chronicles does whitewash the accounts of David in Solomon found in 1–2 Kings. This appears to be the beginning of a larger cultural movement beginning in the postexilic period, which will eventually give to both David and Solomon mythical and legendary qualities. The promise of an eternal Davidic kingship in 2 Samuel 7/1 Chronicles 17 eventually morphs into the hopes of a heavenly king of the Davidic house in the Dead Sea Scrolls, New Testament, and Rabbinic literature. Solomon’s wisdom and wealth in 1–2 Kings/1–2 Chronicles inspire the writing of pseudonymous works, such as Qohelet and the Song of Songs, as well as the creation of new stories that extol Solomon’s magical and occult powers. The glorification of kings in the distant past while retaining the Deuteronomistic History’s placement of blame for the loss of native kingship on infidelity to Yahweh is also a politically shrewd stance for the Jerusalem elites living under Persian rule to take. 1–2 Chronicles does not soften the condemnation of false worship in 1–2 Kings. Sin and retribution are a major theme in them (Klein 2006). 1–2 Chronicles adds to the necessity of worshipping Yahweh alone found in the Deuteronomistic History the additional requirement of proper worship carried out by proper personnel. It’s not

enough to worship the one God in the one temple, as Josiah did. Now worship must be done by specialists—both priests and Levites—whose lineage is certain.

The question of lineage leads me to arguably the most distinctive feature of 1–2 Chronicles: the genealogies that span 1 Chronicles 1–9 and recount the lineages of the Twelve Tribes from Adam, the first person, to the return from Exile. Much scholarly attention is devoted to these genealogies, including an entire commentary in a major series (Knoppers 2003). Whether the emphasis of the genealogies is on cultic personnel (Sparks 2008) or the postexilic community (Japhet 1993) is perhaps too fine of a distinction to make, given the prevalence of both in the material. Focus on the genealogies introduces the reader to prominent features in the scholarship of the remainder of the book. The chiasmic structure of the genealogy in the layout of the tribes, with Levi in the middle, clearly indicates the importance of the Levites in the remainder of the book. The presence of chiasm in the genealogies of 1 Chronicles 1–9 is not distinctive to 1–2 Chronicles. It is found in several other places and seem to be one of the major organizing structures in the book (Berger 2014). Attempts to date 1–2 Chronicles on the basis of historical information focuses on the genealogies, with one reconstruction arguing for a Hasmonean date based on the correlation of place names in 1 Chronicles 1–9 and known site settlement history (Finkelstein 2012).

As is the case with 1–2 Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah is an amalgamation of numerous subgenres—genealogy, folktale, archival documents in Aramaic, first-person narrative, prayer—arranged in a complex way so as to pair Ezra and Nehemiah as parallel figures of reform in postexilic Jerusalem. In both books, the protagonists come to Jerusalem as Persian imperial functionaries who face local opposition upon their arrival. Combined, the two men recreate Jerusalem as a holy city according to the standards of the Jerusalem temple priesthood. In the Book of Ezra, Zerubbabel—a mysterious figure who simply disappears from the narrative halfway through the Book of Ezra—rebuilds the temple and Ezra removes non-Israelites from the Jerusalem citizenry in a “purifying” measure. Nehemiah, in the book that bears his name, is the Persian-appointed governor who rebuilds the city wall, repopulates the city, and “purifies” economic relationships by the removal of debt slavery and time in the enforcement of the commercial bans on the Sabbath. In the same way as the rules in the Holiness Code of Leviticus 17–26, holiness in Ezra-Nehemiah is understood as a series of ever-widening arenas in which spatial, temporal, and relational categories are defined and regulated (Douglas 1966). The temple makes the city holy. The city wall keeps out those who are not part of the community. The people who dwell in the holy city are to be themselves holy—no intermarriage with outsiders, no commercial work on the Sabbath, no appropriation of ancestral lands from their coreligionists.

These are not the only parallels between Ezra and Nehemiah. Each book is divided into two roughly equal parts. Ezra 1–6 recounts the return of the exiles under Zerubbabel. Conflict with local elites leads to appeal to the Persian king, where archival searches reveal Cyrus’s endorsement of the Jerusalem temple. This first half of Ezra culminates in the dedication of the rebuilt temple and the celebration of Passover in Ezra 6. The remainder of the book, Ezra 7–10, introduces Ezra, who is both “a priest and

scribe” and “learned in the words of the commandments of Yahweh and his ordinances for Israel” (Ezra 7:11). Ezra is not an appointed governor, but rather an official Persian functionary sent to enact indigenous religious laws for the returned exiles. In this respect Ezra resembles the Egyptian Udjahorresnet, who was physician to the Persian king Cambyses in the late sixth century BCE but was sent back to Egypt by Cambyses to restore the “houses of life,” the scribal centers connected to temples in Egypt. Starting in Ezra 7:27, the narrative is in the first person, as Ezra recounts the preparations for the journey from Babylon. This return begins with a genealogy, imitating the genealogy in Ezra 1 that recounts the first return from Babylon under Zerubbabel. The remainder of the Book of Ezra deals with Ezra’s identification and banishment of all foreign spouses and their offspring from the city. This banishment is performed on a day of cold winter rain, and the book ends with a list of the men who had to send away their wives and children. The book of Nehemiah begins with the widely used tale type of the faithful Jew in the court of a foreign king (more on this later). Nehemiah, the Persian king’s cupbearer, is named regional governor and sent to Jerusalem to rebuild the city wall. The first part of the book, Nehemiah 1–7, deals with the rebuilding of the wall in the face of potentially violent local opposition. As is the case in Ezra 1–6 and the rebuilding of the temple, in Nehemiah the wall is successfully rebuilt and its completion marked with a liturgical procession.

The parallel stories of Ezra and Nehemiah are tenuously linked by the author in just three places where mention is made of the two men being together. Each of these instances is most likely an editorial gloss. In Nehemiah 8:9, Nehemiah is added in the list of those being present when Ezra reads the Torah to the assembled citizens in Jerusalem. Ezra’s reading of the Torah in Nehemiah 8 has been displaced from the Ezra narrative and inserted as Nehemiah 8–10 for this purpose. Conversely, Ezra’s name is inserted in Nehemiah 12:36 as leader of one of the liturgical groups during the rededication of the wall. That rededication narrative is itself a resumption of the story in Nehemiah 7 that is interrupted by the insertion of Ezra’s reading of the Torah in Nehemiah 8–10 (Bolin 2012).

This deliberate chronological rearrangement of two originally separate stories so as to make their protagonists parallel figures is part of the reason some of the more intractable historical puzzlers of the Bible surround Ezra-Nehemiah and is the root of the “Who came first?” question that scholars have pondered for decades. Partial solutions involve assuming that multiple references to Artaxerxes in Ezra 7:7 and Nehemiah 2:1 are to two different Persian kings of that name, thus reversing the order in which Ezra and Nehemiah came to Jerusalem or in emending the text of Ezra 7:7 to read “the [thirty]-seventh year of King Artaxerxes.” I call these solutions “partial” because they do not take into account the further problems introduced by the list of priests (especially high priests) in Nehemiah 12.

To add to these issues of what lies behind the Hebrew version of Ezra-Nehemiah currently in the Writings are alternative and later traditions about Ezra and Nehemiah that seem to show a desire to separate the two figures. Nehemiah is mentioned in Ben Sira’s praise of the ancestors (Sirach 49:13) which omits Ezra. On the other hand, the Greek 1

Esdras contains parts of 2 Chronicles, all of the Book of Ezra, and only the Ezra portions of the Book of Nehemiah. There are also the apocalyptic visions attributed to Ezra in 4 Ezra, which makes him a figure similar to Daniel, another exile who is both the hero of stories and an apocalyptic visionary.

NOVELLA AND SHORT STORY: DANIEL, ESTHER, AND RUTH

The fictional narratives of the postexilic era, including those in the Writings, reflect the international world of the Persian Empire and Hellenistic *oikumene*. Legends, historical memories, and folk motifs are recast with a polemical edge in these stories for Diaspora readers. Before I discuss these narrative works, the term *novella* needs some explanation. As used by biblical scholars, *novella* was long a rather ill-fitting generic designation for narratives that were longer and more tightly structured than texts that fit standard form-critical designations. For example, exegetes disassembled the patriarchal stories in Genesis 12–36 into a group of component parts believed to have an oral or folkloristic background: place-naming etiologies, birth announcements, trickster stories (e.g., wife-sister tales). By contrast, the Joseph story of Genesis 37–50 resisted being taken apart, given its long story arc of the hero lost far from home and its complex scenes of threat, rescue, deception, hidden identity, and revelation. It resembles Homer's *Odyssey* more than the patriarchal tales that precede it in the book of Genesis, although there are significant differences between Genesis 37–50 and the *Odyssey* (Louden 2011). Consequently, by at least the middle of the twentieth century, scholars began to refer to the Joseph story as a novella (Fox 2001a). With the postexilic texts under discussion here, the designation “novella” fits a bit better because, first, there are a number of texts to place in this category (Esther, Tobit, Susanna, *Joseph and Aseneth*, among others) and, second, there are Greek and Latin novels that date from the Hellenistic period and later with which these postexilic Jewish narratives may be fruitfully compared. These Greco-Roman texts use the larger cultural world of the Mediterranean *oikumene* as their backdrop and showcase as their heroes elites who are unwillingly thrust into the world of their Others. They are kidnapped and transferred great distances, and threatened by things that are usually beyond their social orbit: rape, murder, slavery. Gender inversion is also prevalent insofar as the protagonists are often female. In the Jewish variant of the novella, the “Other” is the larger non-Jewish world which threatens the protagonist, also often a female (Wills 2011). Many of these Jewish novellas are set in the court of a non-Jewish king, where the protagonist must defend oneself and one's Jewish identity from evil courtiers or the monarch (analysis in Willis 1990). This tale type is older than the Jewish novella. The Aramaic tale of Ahiqar recounts the tale of a wise counselor to the Assyrian king, Sennacherib, who is falsely slandered by his nephew and nearly dies after being condemned by another Assyrian king, Esharhaddon. Ahiqar's tale is similar to

the Joseph story in Genesis 37–50, in that both heroes gain the trust of their jailer while imprisoned. Joseph too is a foreigner in the court of a powerful king. This trope gets heavy rotation in later Jewish storytelling, appearing in Daniel, Esther, Tobit, Job, and two otherwise unknown narratives partially preserved at Qumran (4Q550; Wechsler 2000). I will discuss these connections more later as I deal with Daniel, Esther, and Ruth, individually.

The first half of the Book of Daniel is a collection of six stories recounting the trials and triumphs of Daniel and three other Jewish exiles in the court of various foreign kings, ostensibly during the Babylonian exile. To understand how this cycle of stories comes together, I need to offer a brief summary of each.

Chapter 1: Daniel, Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael are Judean exiles brought into the royal court. They are given Babylonian names: Belteshazzar, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. These four refuse the royal rations of Nebuchadnezzar—not wanting to violate Jewish dietary laws—yet they outperform all other courtiers in wisdom.

Chapter 2: Nebuchadnezzar challenges his courtiers to interpret a dream. Only Daniel succeeds, with the help of Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael, who pray and fast. The dream is similar to the series of empires described in the apocalypse of Daniel 7. Nebuchadnezzar acknowledges Daniel's god as the one high god, appoints Daniel chief of the courtiers and advances Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael.

Chapter 3: Nebuchadnezzar builds a giant golden statue of himself and commands all to worship it. Shadrach, Mesach, and Abednego (the Babylonian names of Hananiah, Azariah, and Mishael from Daniel 1) refuse to worship the statue. They are denounced by other courtiers and cast into the fiery furnace. There they are protected by an angel and Nebuchadnezzar publishes an edict decreeing death for anyone who blasphemes the Jewish god.

Chapter 4: In a first-person account, Nebuchadnezzar recounts a dream that is interpreted by Daniel (here called by his Babylonian name, Belteshazzar) in which the king is stricken mad for his pride. He repents and praises the god of Daniel.

Chapter 5: Nebuchadnezzar's son, Belshazzar is feasting and profanes the vessels of the Jerusalem temple which Nebuchadnezzar had taken. A hand appears and writes a riddle on the wall of his palace. Of all the courtiers summoned to interpret the riddle, only Daniel succeeds and chastises Belshazzar for his pride. That night the king is killed and Darius the Persian assumes the kingship.

Chapter 6: Darius's satraps, jealous of Daniel, convince the king to decree that no one may pray to anyone except the king for thirty days. Daniel continues to pray to his god and is cast into the lion's den. He is protected by God in the lion's den, and the evil satraps and their families are thrown in to their deaths. Darius publishes a decree acknowledging the supreme power of Daniel's god.

Each of these stories is an independent tale that has been edited to create this collection of stories in the first half of Daniel (Newsom 2014: 8), and they draw upon standard motifs and characters from other court stories. The tales of chapters, 2, 4, and 5 echo the Joseph novella in Genesis 37–50. There, Joseph successfully interprets dreams and is promoted to Pharaoh's second in command. The evil courtiers in Daniel 3 who scheme for the condemnation of

Shadrach, Mesach, and Abednego, as well as those satraps in Daniel 6 who conspire to have Daniel condemned to the lion's den, are parallel to the evil Haman in Esther. The stock character of the evil courtier who seeks to harm the protagonist is also at work in Ahiqar (where Ahiqar's evil nephew conspires to have his uncle killed), in the role of the Accuser in Job 1, and by the figure of Bagosi/Bagoas in 4Q450—a figure who also appears in Judith (Wechsler 2000: 146–152). Nebuchadnezzar in chapter 3 and Darius in chapter 6 are both kings who legislate apostasy and who are defied by the faithful Jewish courtiers. In chapters 2, 3, 4, and 6, the king acknowledges the supreme power of the Jewish god.

There are also oblique connections between the tales in Daniel 1–6 and Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid history. These connections lie beneath the surface of an untenable chronology in the stories—a similar phenomenon in Ezra-Nehemiah discussed earlier, despite the fact that Ezra-Nehemiah is most widely understood as historiography. It should be stressed that the line between biblical historiography and storytelling is fuzzy at best. Here is the list of monarchs in Daniel 1–6:

Nebuchadnezzar (Daniel 1–4)
 Belshazzar (Dan 5:1–30)
 Darius (Dan 5:31–6:27)
 Cyrus, (Dan 6:28)

Contrast that sequence with this historical reconstruction:

Babylonian

Nebuchadnezzar (604–562 BCE) *Nabû-kudurri-ušur*
 Evil-merodach (562–560 BCE)
 Nergal-sherezer (560–556 BCE)
 Labashi-marduk (556 BCE)
 Nabonidus (555–538 BCE) *Nabû-na'id* whose son *Bêl-šarra-ušur* (Belshazzar) was co-regent.

Achaemenid/Persian

Cyrus (539–530 BCE)
 Cambyses (530–522 BCE)
 Darius I (522–486 BCE)

One solution to the muddled chronology in Daniel 1–6 is found in Papyrus 967, an Old Greek copy of Daniel, which rearranges chapters 1–6 in order to resolve some of these inconsistencies (Collins 1993: 4–5; McLay 2005). Modern scholarship argues convincingly that the Nebuchadnezzar in the stories of Daniel 3–5 originally had to do with Nabonidus. This is because Belshazzar, the son of Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 5, is *Bêl-šarra-ušur* the son of Nabonidus who was his co-regent. Also, the story of Nebuchadnezzar's commanding worship of a blasphemous statue in Daniel 3 tracks closely with *The Verse Account of Nabonidus*, an Akkadian text in which Babylonian

priests condemn as monstrous a temple and statue to the moon god, Šin, that Nabonidus had built in Teima. Finally, 4Q242, *The Prayer of Nabonidus*, is a fragmentary Aramaic text in which Nabonidus recounts being afflicted for seven years in Teima, driven from human society, and healed by a Jewish sage (summary and discussion in Beaulieu 2009). While the Babylonian names of Nebuchadnezzar (*Nabû-kudurri-ušur*) and Nabonidus (*Nabû-na'id*) both begin with the same theophoric element, namely the god of wisdom, Nabu, it is unlikely that stories about Nabonidus were mistakenly attributed to Nebuchadnezzar. This fluidity is further witnessed in the Old Greek of Daniel, which also contains the Prayer of Azariah, the Song of the Three Young Men, the story of Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon. Similar kinds of additions are found in the Greek text of Esther and do not only represent later “pious” attempts to make the heroes of these stories more overtly religious. They are first and foremost evidence of the irrepressible creativity of storytelling in early Judaism, a culture recycling, adapting, and creating stories about persecuted but faithful Jewish protagonists in foreign courts ruled over by a range of monarchs who fit into the role of an omnipotent ruler forced to submit to the true ruler of the universe, the god of Israel.

And what is the purpose of these variant tales of faithful Jewish protagonists threatened in a foreign setting? For some, they are “finely crafted novelistic satires of resistance” (Valeta 2005: 309), straightforward stories of defiance that encourage readers to imitate the heroes and resist cultural assimilation and dominance. Postcolonial studies have taught biblical scholars to see more complexity in the relationship between conquerors and the conquered than the dichotomy between resistance and assimilation—something that owes more to the rhetoric of 1–2 Maccabees, despite the fact that the Maccabean revolutionaries themselves adopt Greek language and historiography in their revolt against “Hellenism.” The stories never outright deny the validity of empire, only of kings who do not respect the Jewish god. Carol Newsom is correct to say that the tales are only partially resistant to empire, serving to “negotiate the ideological double bind of life under Persian rule” (Newsom 2014: 17).

Unlike Daniel, the remaining prose stories in the Writings do not have as complicated a prehistory. Esther is a long, complex narrative that uses and adapts the Jew in a foreign court tale type to create a compelling story with two protagonists which ends in an etiology for the Jewish festival of Purim, although some scholars think Esther 9–10 to be a later addition (Clines 1984). 3 Maccabees tells a similar story, set in Egypt under the rule of Ptolemy Philopator (late third century BCE), in which a royal decree to destroy Jews is thwarted by God and a religious festival enacted to commemorate the providential event (Hacham 2007). Later practice would place Esther and four of the other texts from the Writings—Song of Songs, Lamentations, Ruth, and Qohelet—in a group of liturgical texts. Of these five Festal Scrolls, however, only Esther mentions the religious festival with which it is later connected. This early grouping of scrolls is finally receiving attention from biblical scholars (Erickson and Andrews 2016).

On the one hand, the Book of Esther is another variant tale of the faithful Jew in the foreign court who is attacked by an evil courtier. This story focuses on Ahasuerus, Mordechai, and Haman. Evil Haman plots to wipe out the entire Jewish people out of

his jealousy for Mordechai. A chance reference in an archival text reveals Mordechai's value to the king, and Ahasuerus honors him over Haman. There are several points of contact between this plotline and those found in both Daniel 1–6 (the promotion of the Jewish courtier over an evil enemy) and Ezra–Nehemiah (the archival search for imperial vindication and endorsement). It is unlikely that the version of this story as it stands in Esther existed as a separate tale. If it did, it has been so wholly adapted to its setting in the Esther story as to resist reconstruction. This larger setting is the domain of a second faithful Jewish hero, Esther. There are other Jewish novellas with female heroes: Judith, Ruth (see later), and the shorter tale of the mother and her seven sons in 2 Maccabees 7. The Susanna story is more similar to Esther, insofar that it also has a male hero, Daniel. On the other hand, Esther is not as passive as Susanna, who is accused by the wicked men but saved by the wise young Daniel.

Esther's story only partially resembles the standard court tale I have been describing. Like Daniel and the three young men, Esther is taken into the court and trained in the ways of the dominant empire. But unlike Daniel, Esther does not engage in defiant behavior, nor is her life directly threatened. Indeed, Mordechai points this out to Esther in what is almost a veiled threat: "Do not think that the king's house will spare your life apart from the other Jews" (4:13). This verse is a significant turning point in the narrative and the roles of Esther and Mordechai. Esther responds with giving orders to Mordechai and the Jewish community to fast and pray. And then she takes matters into her own hands to save her people. From this point on in the narrative, it is Esther, and not Mordechai, who acts. Here the story of Esther parallels that of Susanna, except that in this case it is the female hero who saves the endangered male (see McGeough 2008 for discussion of Esther's heroic qualities). Too much has been made by scholars over the fact that the Hebrew text of Esther does not mention the word "God." The absence of a word in a narrative does not immediately imply that the word's referent is unimportant to the storyteller. Several Hebrew novellas and stories have no direct action by God, including the Joseph Story in Genesis 37–50, Ruth, and Daniel 1. Other aspects of Esther, for example, both Mordechai's and Haman's genealogies, put the story comfortably in the traditions of the Hebrew Bible (Wetter 2011). Esther's plot is relatively complex, with multiple changes of scene and repetitions of banquets to move the plot forward. The overarching theme in the book is the reversal of fortune, from Haman to Mordechai and from the enemies of the Jews to the Jewish communities in the Diaspora. This reversal of fortune sits in tension with the idea of fate dictated by the lot (*pur*) that Haman casts in order to determine the best time to kill all of the Jews and functions as an unobvious critique of divination and affirmation of divine favor for Jews, similar to what is found in a more overt way in Daniel 1–6 (Winitzer 2011).

Thinking about the presence and absence of God in Esther and other early Jewish novellas allows me to transition to the Book of Ruth. As in Esther and Genesis 37–50, God does not act directly or speak in Ruth. Instead, God is referred to in the book as an indirect source of blessing and curse, with emphasis on the former. The narrator describes the cessation of the famine as the result of Yahweh having "visited" his people in Bethlehem (1:6) and attributes Ruth's conception of her son, Obed, to Yahweh's grace

(4:13). Characters in the story bless each other in the name of Yahweh: Naomi blesses her daughters-in-law (1:9); Boaz and his reapers exchange blessings (2:4); Boaz blesses Ruth for her kindness to Naomi (2:12); Naomi blesses Boaz when she finds out that he allowed Ruth to glean in his field (2:20); Boaz blesses Ruth for her kindness to him (3:10); Boaz swears by Yahweh that he will act as redeemer for Ruth (3:13); the people and elders of Bethlehem bless Ruth when she is given to Boaz as wife (4:11–12); the women of Bethlehem bless Yahweh in their praise of Naomi after Ruth has conceived (4:14). Only Ruth and Naomi use Yahweh's name in terms of cursing. Naomi repeats both to her daughters-in-law and the women of Bethlehem that Yahweh has struck her with his hand (1:13) and given her over to bitterness (1:20). Ruth calls down Yahweh's curse upon herself if she ever abandons Naomi (1:17). Naomi's two affirmations of Yahweh's curse includes two uses of the Hebrew verb "to be bitter" (*mrr*) in 1:13 and 1:20 which Naomi also famously tells the women of Bethlehem ought to also be her name. Naomi's laments and her calamity at losing her husband and sons make her a counterpart to Job in terms of unjust suffering and complaint (Fewell 2015: 85). Ruth calls on Yahweh only once, and for a curse, as part of her oath of fidelity to Naomi. An interesting pattern emerges here:

Yahweh as source of blessing only: the narrator, Boaz, the people of Bethlehem,
and the women of Bethlehem

Yahweh as source of both curse/punishment and blessing: Naomi

Yahweh as source of punishment: Ruth

The characters' different social identities are mapped onto their understandings of Yahweh as source of blessing or curse. The "insiders" of Bethlehem have a wholly positive understanding of divine activity. Naomi, as a transgressive character who leaves Bethlehem for Moab and then returns, sees Yahweh as author of both embittering curse and final blessing. At the opposite end from the insiders is Ruth, the Moabite, for whom Yahweh is the punishing witness she appeals to in promising her fidelity to Naomi. More importantly is the fact that Ruth does not, like Naomi, move into a place where she sees Yahweh as a source of blessing, despite the "happy ending" of the story. This implies, alongside other features of Ruth 4, that the Moabite woman remains as much an outsider at the end of the book as she was at the beginning (Yee 2009).

Ruth's status as a foreigner has attracted the most attention from readers. The book can be read as a kind of inverted version of the Jewish hero in the foreign court, with the main character here being a foreigner in the land of Israel. It has long been a scholarly commonplace that it is a postexilic plea for tolerance against the demand to expel foreign women found in Ezra-Nehemiah. Ruth is often placed alongside the book of Jonah as evidence for a group of postexilic intellectuals who represent a more tolerant, open understanding of Judaism than that represented in Ezra-Nehemiah. This kind of reading is particular to Christians and functions as a means to divide texts in the Hebrew Bible and pit them against each other in such a way that the more "open" texts are valorized and assumed into a theological supersessionism which subsequently contrasts itself with allegedly "narrow" postexilic Judaism (Bolin 1997).

The role of gender in Ruth has also commanded a good deal of scholarly attention. Along with Esther, Ruth is the only other book in the Tanakh named after a woman, with female main characters. This does not imply that either book has anything particularly positive to say about women, as feminist readings of both books have made clear. In Ruth, ambiguity about the female characters extends even to the grammar. Several times in the book, masculine pronouns are used to refer to feminine characters. While scholars have surmised that these are vestiges of archaic Northwest Semitic endings, their presence also serves to heighten the highly ambiguous portrayals of both Naomi and Ruth (Davis 2013). Concerning Naomi, is her desire to “seek relief” for Ruth (3:1) not really motivated by the need to secure her own future? At the end of the story, it is Naomi—and not Ruth—who nurses Ruth’s son and whom the women of Bethlehem acclaim as the baby’s mother (4:16–17). And while the people and elders at the gate of Bethlehem bless Ruth (4:11–12), the women of Bethlehem bless only Naomi, albeit while acknowledging that Ruth’s conception of a son is more valuable *to Naomi* than if she had seven of her own sons (4:15). Regarding the ambiguity surrounding Ruth, the most obvious example has to do with exactly what happens on the threshing floor in Ruth 3. The narrative is unclear because of the narrator’s likely deliberate choice to keep readers in the dark about whether or not the “feet” Ruth uncovers are Boaz’s genitals. “Feet” is a euphemism for genitals in Biblical Hebrew (e.g., Judges 3:24, 2 Kings 18:27), and some commentators read that meaning for Boaz’s feet in Ruth 3 (e.g., Nielsen 1997). This gives the character of Ruth a more overt sexual agency than the stories of Esther or Judith, in which the beauty of both women plays a role. However, it is unclear whether Ruth’s advances on Boaz are acts of her own doing or whether she is acting as a proxy for Naomi. It is, after all, Naomi who directs Ruth to go down to the threshing floor and tells her what to do once she is there (3:3–4), and it is Naomi whom the women of Bethlehem acclaim as the mother of the child Ruth bears with Boaz. This particular ambiguity was not lost on ancient readers, as another reading (the *kethiv*) of the Masoretic text in Ruth 3:3–4 has two first-person verbs instead of the expected second person. This makes the text read that Naomi herself will go down to the threshing floor and lie at Boaz’s “feet” (Irwin 2008) instead of her telling Ruth to do so. If Ruth is, in fact, Naomi’s sexual proxy, and the child she bears attributed to Naomi, then Ruth is as much an outsider at the end of the book as she is at the beginning.

CONCLUSION

This brief overview of the prose traditions in the Writings brings into relief two important points that I want to emphasize by way of conclusion. First is that these texts are but a fraction of an incredibly creative and active culture in early Judaism that generated numerous narrative texts with a variety of fictional characters and historical figures already present in the literary tradition. Figures such as Ezra, Daniel, David, and Solomon appear and reappear in texts as they are given cultural biographies in early Judaism

(Mroczek 2016). Second is that the modern genre distinction between historiography and storytelling is anachronistic and must be used with caution when discussing ancient Jewish literature. The hero in the foreign court is clearly a folkloristic tale type that is used in highly fictional settings, such as those in Daniel 1–6, but it is also used in the opening scene of Nehemiah 1–2 in order to set the most likely historical figure of Nehemiah off on his return from Persia as governor of Yehud. Far from being a coda or denouement to a putative golden age of ancient Israelite literary culture, the postexilic period—as the prose traditions in the Writings attest—gave rise to rich, varied, and complex literary output.

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