THE GREEK ESTHERS AND THE SEARCH FOR HISTORY: 
SOME PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

JILL MIDDLEMAS
Faculty of Theology, Århus University—Denmark

1. Introduction: Three Interpreters

The biblical book of Esther has long been recognized as a historical novel, that is, having the appearance of a history with folkloristic embellishments.1 As such, its claim to historicity has been the source of debate.2 On the one hand, its relation to actual historical events has been supported on the basis of a variety of arguments including that it contains details about Persia and Persian administration and customs known from other ancient sources, Aramaisms and other Persian loan words appear interspersed in the narrative, the names Artaxerxes and Mordecai are known from evidence external to the Hebrew Bible, Esther’s name is evocative of that of the Babylonian Goddess Ishtar, and the events that transpire could have happened during the reign of Xerxes (the Persian king most widely recognized as being Ahasuerus). In addition, the book of Esther is presented as history, beginning as it does with the chronological way hi ‘and it happened’, typical of other historical presentations in texts from biblical Israel and it was regarded as such by personages in antiquity as well as those who put together the canon. On the other hand, there are indications that suggest it is a very good story.3 Not only is there no

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1 F.S. Weiland, ‘Historicity, Genre, and Narrative Design in the of Esther’, Bibliotheca Sacra 159 (2002), 151–165, provides a helpful overview of the current state of the discussion, while arguing for the recognition of a new genre, that is heroic narrative literature.


3 See, for example, J.A. Loader, ‘Esther as a Novel with Different Levels of Meaning’, ZAW 90 (1978), 417–421.
outside confirmation of any of the events in actual Persian history, but there are exaggerations that make the story of Esther bigger than any one event in the Persian empire, that is itself magnified in its retelling (to 127 provinces).

Although the account retold in the biblical book of Esther tends no longer to be accepted as factual, the story nonetheless invites a historical reading. The invitation to read or understand the story historically was first accepted within the Greek versions of the Esther scroll. There are two Greek versions of Esther—the Septuagint text sometimes referred to as the B text and the Lucianic text, now more commonly regarded as the Alpha text, because Lucianic authorship is no longer accepted. I will refer to them as the Septuagint (LXX) and the Alpha text (AT). These two versions appear to stem from either the same Vorlage or two different Vorlage (the Alpha text from an otherwise unknown Proto-Alpha text and the LXX from the Masoretic text).

The AT and LXX depart from the MT in a number of ways. Most obviously they contain 6 Additions in the sense of large blocks of material included in, but for the most part not well integrated into the story (the exception being the so-called Addition D), where the scribe has intervened to provide details not found in the MT version. Two of these Additions clearly function to buttress the historical claims of the text. These

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5. I understand the story of Esther as a different entity to the Hebrew version found in the Masoretic Text, so there is neither an implicit claim here about the priority of the Hebrew version nor an implicit assumption that the scribes reworking the Esther story in Greek actively added material to a known Hebrew version.


7. The term ‘Additions’ as a designation for these 6 blocks of material is commonly used and reflects the general agreement that they are later than the stories in which they are embedded. See, Fox, *Redaction of the Books of Esther*, 17–30 and Jobes, *Alpha-Text of Esther*.

8. The terminology for the Additions employed in this paper (A-F) is adopted from the editors of the Cambridge critical edition of the Greek texts.