Did the Jewish People Commit Genocide?

Esther 8:11 and the Ethics of the Jewish Defenders

by Paul A. Himes[1]

1. Introduction

In April 2026, during a somewhat controversial White House Easter luncheon, Franklin Graham referenced the story of Esther in a prayer, suggesting that God had "raised up President Trump . . . for such a time as this."[2] Graham's association of would-be perpetrators of genocide in the book of Esther with modern Iran on the one hand, and Esther with President Trump on the other, caused an even more problematic backlash from Tucker Carlson, who declared that Esther is "the story, among other things, of a genocide of Persians. Oh, yeah. Seventy-five thousand Persians. Not just people who committed crimes, but people who were Persian. And that's why they were killed."[3] Carlson's accusation that Esther depicts "a genocide of Persians" almost certainly refers to the events of Esther 9, as well as the decree in 8:11 that allowed for those events.

It seems that one's perspective on these verses, specifically how the Jewish people treated their enemies, is the linchpin for how one views the entire book (and Tucker's own questioning of Esther's canonical value can be seen in the broader discussion in the video).[4] Martin Luther decried Esther's theological usefulness and expressed the wish that it had never been written.[5] Heinrich Ewald set the tone for much of modern scholarship when he declared that when we transition into Esther from the previous books of Scripture, "We fall here as if from heaven to earth," since the story of Esther "knows nothing of high and pure truths, . . ."[6] The most

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[2] Although the White House apparently took down the video, the relevant clip can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zy5aDlsC46c.

[3] Tucker Carlson, "Trump Announces the End of Global American Empire. Here's What Comes Next," The Tucker Carlson Show podcast, online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GyYy-QmxttU, accessed 8/27/2026. The relevant statement comes from approximately 48 min. and 14 sec. into the video (for context, one should begin listening no later than the beginning of minute 48).

[4] Minute 49 of Tucker's monologue seems to imply a negative view of Esther in terms of the Christian canon, that Esther is somehow antithetical to Jesus. This should not be divorced from the broader context of Carlson's critique of Frankling Graham's prayer, of course (where he may have a valid point). I will simply state that Carlson should not have criticized Esther in order to criticize Graham.

[5] Martin Luther, *Table Talk*, trans. William Hazlitt (Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 27, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/l/luther/tabletalk/cache/tabletalk.pdf. For a helpful overview of Luther's perspective on the book of Esther, see Isaac Kalimi, *The Book of Esther between Judaism and Christianity: The Biblical Story, Self-identification, and Antisemitic Interpretation* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), 251–88.

[6] Heinrich Ewald, *The History of Israel*, 8 volumes, trans. and ed. by Russell Martineau, 4th ed. (London: Longmans, Green, and Company, 1883), 1:197. Cf. S. R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament*, International Theological Library (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1891), 457; Walther Eichrodt,

abominable expression of hatred towards Esther can be seen in the works of Nazi propagandist Julius Streicher, who, on the basis of the events in Esther 7–9, glorified Haman as an innocent victim and used the book of Esther as an excuse to incite violence against the Jews: "And in the same way, those who would sound a warning arose in Germany and proclaimed the struggle [*den Kampf*] against the Jews, just as it was formerly in Persia".[7]

Exceptions exist, of course, even among pre-WW2 German scholarship. C. F. Keil's commentary on Esther strongly defended the actions of the Jewish people. Speaking shortly before World War 1, Paul Haupt lamented the fact that unlike the Jewish defenders in Esther, Russian Jews had been denied the opportunity for self-defense.[8] Despite these exceptions, we must conclude that Rav Samuel bar Judah was somewhat prophetic when he anthropomorphically described the book of Esther's appeal for canonicity thus: "Esther sent to the sages: 'Establish me for [all] generations.' They sent to her: 'You are stirring up enmity against us among the nations of the world.'"[9]

For dispensationalists, our stance towards the Jewish people is *by default* positively oriented, since God has not abandoned His people (Rom 11:1–6), nor have they been replaced by the church in God's eyes.[10] Consequently, we assume that the Jewish protagonists in Esther, though perhaps flawed in some ways, are nonetheless meant to viewed sympathetically—providentially protected survivors of a satanic attempt at genocide. Indeed, a dispensational perspective necessitates understanding Esther through the lens of Genesis 12:1–3; as Forrest Weiland aptly declares, "Haman's plot struck at the heart of the Abrahamic Covenant."[11]

As for Esther 8:11, the point of contention stems from the uncertain reference of the expression "their little ones and women." The verse reads,

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Theology of the Old Testament, 2 vols., trans. by J. A. Baker, OTL (Westminster, 1967), 2:342–45; Gustav Friedrich Oehler, *Theology of the Old Testament*, rev. and trans. by George E. Day (Klock and Klock, 1978), 428; Lewis Bayles Paton, *The Book of Esther: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary*, ICC (T&T Clark 1908), 97. Indeed, the evidence is such that Thomas A. Wetzel, in his 2015 Harvard dissertation, can speak of "The Christian theological resistance to the Esther narrative . . . ." ("Violence and the Survival of Israel in the Book of Esther," PhD Diss, [Harvard Divinity School, 2015], 6).

[7] Julius Streicher, "Die Mordnacht: Das Geheimnis des jüdischen Purimfestes ist enthüllt," *Der Stürmer* 11 (March 1934), http://humanist.de/kriminalmuseum/st-t3411.htm, translation by this writer ("Und ebenso, wie in Deutschland Warner entstanden und den Juden den Kampf ansagten, ebenso war es ehedem im Perserreich"). For similar Nazi criticism of Esther, see also Streicher, "Speech after 'The Night of Broken Glass' [Kristallnacht, 11/9/1938]," in *Landmark Speeches of National Socialism*, edited and translated by Randall Bytwerk (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2008), 91. The reader should note that shortly after 1937, Wilhelm Vischer also used the book of Esther as an excuse to attack the Jewish people living in Germany (see the discussion in Trica Miller, *Jews and Anti-Judaism in Esther and the Church* [Cambridge, UK: James Clark & Co., 2015], 4).

[8] Paul Haupt, "Critical Notes on Esther," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literature* 24, no. 2 (1980): 158 ("If the Russian Jews had been permitted to organize themselves for self-defense, the majority of the *pogroms* [see *Pur*. 35, 11] would never have happened; . . ."). See also p. 160 for Haupt's positive perspective on the counter-decree.

[9] *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*, vol. 7, *Ta'anit, Megillah, Mo'ed Qatan, Hagigah* (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 2005), 31.

[10] Fortunately, even many non-dispensationalists recognize this truth. Brevard Childs states, "On the one hand, the book of Esther provides the strongest canonical warrant in the whole Old Testament for the religious significance of the Jewish people in an ethnic sense. The inclusion of Esther within the Christian canon serves as a check against all attempts to spiritualize the concept of Israel—usually by misinterpreting Paul—and thus removing the ultimate scandal of biblical particularity" (Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* [Philadelphia: PA: Fortress, 1979], 606).

[11] Forrest S. Weiland, "Literary Clues to God's Providence in the Book of Esther," *BibSac* 160, no. 637 (2003): 45–46.

> "that the king had granted the Jews that were in every city to gather themselves together, and to stand for their life, to destroy, and to slay, and to cause to perish, all the forces of the people and province that would assault them, their little ones and women, and to take the spoil of them for a prey,"[12]

In a nutshell, the question is whether or not "their little ones and women" is (1.) appositional to "them," thus referring to the Jewish people, or (2.) appositional to part or all of "all the forces of the people and province that would assault," thus referring to the denizens of the empire. In other words, is the decree: (1.) giving permission to the Jewish people to protect themselves against those who would attack their, i.e., *Jewish*, women and children? Or is the decree (2.) giving permission to the Jewish people to kill *Gentile* women and children? The second viewpoint has been labeled the "traditional" perspective by Vjatscheslav Dreier, a label which is probably correct, though interestingly four centuries ago John Trapp had defended the first viewpoint.[13]

In 1976 Robert Gordis published an influential article that is probably the first technical and syntactical argument for the verse referring to option 1.[14] On the other hand, both Frederic Bush, in his Word Biblical Commentary, and Michael V. Fox, in his influential monograph on Esther, critiqued Gordis' arguments syntactically and defended option 2. Fox offers a helpful summary: "Verse 11aβb, 'together with children and women, with their property as spoil,' is a continuation of the first sentence and describes actions that are encompassed in the defensive action. Like the saturation bombing of Nuremburg and Dresden, this killing of noncombatants is part of an overall defensive strategy, and, like it, unnecessary and excessive."[15] More recently Dreier has also offered a technical critique of Gordis in favor of option 2, though Dreier also goes to great lengths to argue that the Jewish people did *not* slaughter women and children in ch. 9.[16]

Unfortunately, the studies by Gordis, Bush, and Fox have neither acknowledged nor adequately engaged with all the syntactical issues involved, though Dreier's recent article is a significant improvement. Furthermore, generally those studies that deal with Esth 8:11 have tended towards overly dogmatic statements without an acknowledgement of the unique and difficult nature of the text.

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[12] I am quoting here from the JPS translation, which preserves the syntactical debate by not committing to a specific interpretation. In the rest of the paper I provide my own translation for all Scripture passages.

[13] Vjatscheslav Dreier, "Kinder und Frauen in Est 8,11. Philologische und hermeneutische Erwägungen zu einer umstrittenen Opfergruppe," *Biblische Notizen* 47, no. 194 (2022): 72, 76; Trapp wrote, "This seemeth spoken in terrorem, that the enemy might forbear to meddle, if not for their own sakes, yet for their wives and children, whom many hold more dear to themselves than their own lives. But the text may be better read thus: To destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish all the power of the people and province that would assault them, their little ones and women" (Trapp, *A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments*, 5 volumes, ed. W. Webster and Hugh Martin [Eureka, CA: Tanski, 1997], 2.138).

[14] Robert Gordis, "Studies in the Esther Narrative," *JBL* 95, no. 1 (1976): 43–58.

[15] Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 223; cf. Frederic Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, WBC 9 (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1996), 446–447. For similar positions on the reference of "children and women," see also Adele Berlin, *Esther*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), 77; Sidnie White Crawford, "The Book of Esther," in *1 & 2 Kings–Judith*, The New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1999), 925; Kenneith Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque*, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995), 129–130; James Alfred Loader, "Das Buch Ester," in *Das Hohelied, Klagelieder, Das Buch Ester*, Das Alte Testament Deutsch, translated into German by Ilse v. Loewenclau (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), 267; Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, ABC (New York: Garden City, Doubleday, 1971), 81; Lewis Bayles Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, ICC (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1980), 274.

[16] Dreier, "Kinder und Frauen in Est 8,11," 71–88.

To be clear, the syntax of Esther 8:11 is difficult, and the following questions must be grappled with:

1. What is the significance of the parallelism of Esther 3:13 and 8:11–12?

2. What do we mean by appositional?

3. Is the expression אֶת־כָּל־חֵיל עַם וּמְדִינָה part of a construct chain ending with הַצָּרִים, or is it its own construct chain with הַצָּרִים functioning as an appositional noun to the entire phrase?

4. Are the nouns in the expression אֶת־כָּל־חֵיל עַם וּמְדִינָה indefinite or definite?

5. What would טַף וְנָשִׁים naturally gravitate appositionally to?

As we shall see, there are four possible interpretations of the evidence:

1. The decree in Esth 8:11 only gave the Jewish people permission to defend themselves against their attackers, but not to kill women and children.[17]

2. The decree gave the Jewish people permission to defend themselves and kill their attackers' women and children, but the Jewish people deliberately did *not* kill women and children.[18]

3. The decree is ambiguous.[19]

4. The decree gave the Jewish people permission to defend themselves against their attackers and to kill their women and children, and the Jewish people did so (apparently Tucker Carlson's view, given his use of the term "genocide").[20]

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[17] Scholars who specifically follow Gordis include F. B. Huey, Jr., "Esther," in *1, 2 Kings–Job*, Expositor's Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 831, n11; Isaac Kalimi, *The Book of Esther between Judaism and Christianity: The Biblical Story, Self-identification, and Antisemitic Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023), 314–315; Jonathan Magonet, "The Liberal and the Lady: Esther Revisited," *Judaism* 29, no. 114 (1980): 168; and John C. Whitcomb, *Esther: Triumph of God's Sovereignty*, Everyman's Bible Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1979), 105–107 (Whitcomb initially seems to support the idea that the Jewish defenders were allowed to kill women and children, but then seems to be highly sympathetic to Gordis' article). Robert D. Holmstedt and John Screnock, come to the same conclusion but disappointingly they simply state that ". . . presumably the reference to טף ונשים is to '*their*' (i.e., the attacked Jews') children and women," without any syntactical discussion (*Esther: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015], 221–222). Other sources that believe the reference of "children and women" refers to Jewish children and women include Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther*, TNTC (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), 98; Carol M. Bechtel, *Esther*, Interpretation (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2001), 75; Haim M. I. Gevaryahu, "Esther Is a Story of Jewish Defense, Not a Story of Jewish Revenge," *JBQ* 21, no. 1 (1993): 9; Elaine Phillips, "Esther," in *1 Chronicles–Job*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 656.

[18] Those with a position similar to Dreier include Craig, *Reading Esther*, 129–130); Jonathan Grossman, *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading*, Siphrut 6 (Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 191–192; and Karol Jackowski, "Holy Disobedience in Esther," *Theology Today* 45, no. 4 (1989): 412.

[19] This minority position has been ably defended by Maggie Low, "To Kill or Not to Kill the Enemies' Women and Children? The Irony of Esther 8:11," *Asia Journal of Theology* 30, no. 2 (2016): 145–159. She argues for a "polysemous reading" where "The interpretation of the text depends on the character of the interpreter: Persian antagonists may read their own violence into the text and are put to fear, while from their own legal, historical, and narrative contexts Jews will understand the decree as a call to self-defense and also to demonstrate the right attitude of restraint" (146). Low's thesis is worth considering, though in the end I feel that the principle of appositional proximity gives enough reason for "children and women" to unambiguously link back to "them."

[20] Others besides Tucker Carlson have held to this view throughout history. Timothy K Beal suggests that "the line which differentiates the Jews from their enemies in these passages remains difficult to draw . . . [T] fact that the text leaves any room whatsoever to ask whether or not the Jews did differently than their haters intended to do so is striking" (*The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther*, Biblical Limits [London: Routledge, 1997], 104). Even evangelical scholars such as Waltke and Yu can speak of how "The Jews slaughter their enemies at will in an unbridled blood bath without thought of being a light to the nations" (Bruce K. Waltke and Charles Yu, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical, and Thematic Approach* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007], 767–8. Interestingly, David J. A. Clines (*The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story*, JSOTSupp 30

The last perspective would be problematic because although conservative evangelical Christians would justify the Jewish people's annihilation of the Canaanites in the conquest in Joshua, since God Himself is the executer and the children of Israel are His sword, so to speak, in Esther we have no such divine mandate for killing women and children or even men beyond self-defense. One could argue that the Jewish people in Esther should be viewed in a similar light to modern Israel.[21]

This paper will tentatively argue for interpretation #1 while also asserting that the very evidence that could support #2 refutes the possibility of #4. In other words, interpretations 1–3 are all possible to various degrees, but interpretation #4 simply cannot be borne up by the evidence.[22]

As an aside, this paper acknowledges the complex discussion about intertextuality in Esther, specifically both the allusions to Amalek via Haman and possible allusions to Joseph.[23] Although these are important issues, I am not convinced that either of these points of intertextuality plays a decisive role in clarifying the nature of the counter-decree and Jewish resistance to the pogrom.

Finally, one minor point must be clarified before we begin. Carlson and others have erroneously assumed that those killed in ch. 9 were *Persians*. First of all, the book of Esther itself is very selective in its use of ethnic labels, and they are absent in regards to those the Jewish people kill, except for Haman and his family. The Jews simply defend themselves against *those attacking*, regardless of ethnicity or nationality.[24] Second, the Achaemenid Persian empire was

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[Sheffield, UK: JSOT, 1984]), is notable for seeing a compositional break between chs. 8 and 9, in that the ethical character of ch. 9 is radically different from ch. 8. He states, "The narrator of ch. 9 [whom, he argues, is different from that of ch. 8], has presented a Jewish massacre of anti-Semites rather than Jewish self-defense against an imperially sponsored pogrom." I do not know, however, of any commentators who have followed Clines' perspective on the disunity of the Esther narrative.

[21] Jacob W. Reinhardt states, "Present Israel, being in unbelief, possesses no similar justification [compared to Israel at the conquest of Canaan]" (Reinhardt, "Evaluating Criticisms of the Nation-State of Israel for Antisemitism," paper presented at the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics national conference [Westville, NJ, 9/16/2026], 21 fn 98). Reinhardt makes this statement following a positive summary of Jordan P. Ballard's recent dissertation at Liberty University, 2022, entitled, "The Kindness and Severity of God: A Defense of the Conquest of Canaan").

[22] We must note here that the Septuagint is virtually useless as an interpretive commentary on this issue, simplifying the decree too much (8:11—. . . χρῆσθαι τοῖς νόμοις αὐτῶν ἐν πάσῃ πόλει βοηθῆσαί τε αὐτοῖς καὶ χρῆσθαι τοῖς ἀντιδίκοις αὐτῶν καὶ τοῖς ἀντικειμένοις αὐτῶν ὡς βούλονται, . . .). On the other hand, Rainer Kessler has suggested that the original Aramaic Targum, due to its repetition of the word for "people," implies that the Jewish defenders were allowed to kill women and children (though Kessler himself disagrees with this perspective; "Die Juden als Kindes- und Frauenmörder? Zu Ester 8,11," in *Die Hebräische Bibel und ihre weifache Nachgeschichte*, eds. Erhard Blum, Christian Macholz, and Ekkehard W. Stegemann [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1990], 341). Finally, Josephus, *J. A.* 11.6.12 [11.273–283] does not seem to contain a direct parallel to the Masoretic text of Esth 8:11 and thus is of little value.

[23] For the former, many commentaries and articles have discussed this topic, though this writer would especially recommend Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes, and Structure*, SBLDiss 44 (Atlanta, GA: Scholar's, 19079), 67–69. For the later, the amount of literature is a bit less, but the reader should note André Lacoque, "Haman in the Book of Esther," *Hebrew Annual Review* 11, no. 1 (1987): 209 and Gabriel F. Hornung, "The Theological Import of MT Esther's Relationship to the Joseph Story," *CBQ* 82 (2020): 207–222.

[24] See the discussion in Paul A. Himes, "Genocide in Esther: A Response to a Recent Attempt to Defend Hamn," *JSOT* 49, no. 1 (2024): 118–119. There I am specifically responding to the charge that the Jewish people committed "genocide." Cf. also Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 217–218.

very cosmopolitan.[25] Various ethnicities were distributed throughout the empire, and it is not without significance that the amount of men killed in Shushan pales in comparison to those killed throughout the empire. Third, the idea that a Persian emperor would allow a massacre targeting his own people is absurd.[26]

2. The Parallelism of Esther 3:13 and 8:11–12.

In figure 1, I have put the two decrees side by side along with some syntactical comments. Clearly the second decree is meant to mimic the first decree. Yet one must question Levenson's suggestion that "The killing of women and children, offensive to any decent moral sensibility today, is dictated by the symmetry of the two decrees . . ."[27] This is because (1.) a certain degree of symmetry exists regardless of whose "children and women" are being targeted (a case could be made that they are *Jewish* children and women in *both* decrees), and (2.) it is precisely due to specific elements of *non*-symmetry of the two decrees (e.g., the lack of "from young and to old") that one could allow for some differences.

To clarify: Parallelism for the role of "children and women" exists *regardless* of the reference, because if the reference is *Jewish* children and women, then that remains the same for both decrees (after all, "them" in 8:11 is referentially parallel to "all the Jews" in 3:13, and "those attacking" in 8:11 refers to the original attackers in 3:13), and if it is *Gentile* children and women, then the parallelism consists of "children and women" in both decrees being the objects of destruction. Parallelism exists either way, and neither view can claim an advantage.

Figure 1: The two decrees

Esther 3:13	Esther 8:11–12
Lacking in original decree	Double-command of self-defense לְהִקָּהֵל וְלַעֲמֹד עַל־נַפְשָׁם "to gathered themselves together [*lamed* + Niphil InfCon] and to stand for [*waw* + *lamed* + Qal InfCon] their lives"
Triple command of destruction: לְהַשְׁמִיד "to destroy" [*lamed* + Hiph InfCon] לַהֲרֹג "to slay" [*lamed* + Qal InfCon] וּלְאַבֵּד "to annihilate" [*waw*+*lamed*+ Piel InfCon]	Triple command of destruction: לְהַשְׁמִיד "to destroy" [*lamed* + Hiph InfCon] וְלַהֲרוֹג "and to slay" [*waw* + *lamed* + Qal InfCon] וּלְאַבֵּד "to annihilate" [*waw*+*lamed*+ Piel InfCon] One minor difference compared to 3:13.

[25] Indeed, Darius the Great designated his kingdom as "multicultural" (Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, *Persians: The Age of the Great Kings* [New York: Basic Books, 2022], 6; cf. also Llewellyn-Jones' helpful discussion on 2–3).

[26] See Moore, *Esther*, 80–81, and Hans Bardtke, "Das Buch Esther," in *Prediger, Esther*, Kommentar Zum Alten Testament (Stuttgart, Germany: Gerd Mohn, 1963), 372.

[27] Jon D. Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary*, OTL (Louisville, KY: Westminster Jon Knox, 1997), 110–111.

Main direct object of the infinitives אֶת־כָּל־הַיְּהוּדִים “all of the Jews”	Main direct object of the infinitives: אֶת־כָּל־חֵיל עַם וּמְדִינָה “every force of people and province”
Lacking direct parallel	Either absolute noun of the construct chain or noun appositional to “people and province” הַצָּרִים אֹתָם “those attacking them” (article + plural Qal participle, then direct object marker with mp pronominal suffix)
Appositional nouns of clarification מִנַּעַר וְעַד־זָקֵן טַף וְנָשִׁים “from young and to old, children and women”	Appositional nouns of clarification: טַף וְנָשִׁים “children and women” The reference to “young and old” is lacking.
Time frame: “in one day, on the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar”	Final Command (positioning swapped with time frame) וּשְׁלָלָם לָבוֹז “and their spoil to plunder” Identical wording
Final command: וּשְׁלָלָם לָבוֹז “and their spoil to plunder”	Time frame: “in one day, in all the provinces of the King, Ahasuerus, on the thirteenth of the twelve month, that is` the month of Adar.”

On the other hand, the omission of “from young to old” in Mordecai’s counter-decree raises the possibility that it was omitted precisely because, unlike “children and women,” it could describe those capable of violent, aggressive behavior (cf. Gen 19:4 for the exact expression); it may be that the second decree was meant to emphasize those most vulnerable to the violence of the original decree. Conversely, as Low points out, if “children and women” describes the sort of people that the Jewish defenders are encouraged to kill in light of “the principle of strict retributive justice,” then the omission of “from young to old” is odd and unnecessary.[28]

On the other hand, Gordis’ argument that the final command to plunder is merely a quote of the original edict by Haman remains unconvincing, since as an infinitive construct it would naturally be parallel to the earlier infinitive constructs (to destroy, etc.).[29] Dreier also reasonably points out that since 9:10 and 9:15–16 mentions the spoil, then it was most likely “explicitly” allowed in the “counter-edict.”[30]

The parallelism of the Tiberian Masoretic accent marks may also indicate that the Jews were allowed to spoil, specifically the way the *Athnach* in 8:11 perfectly mimics the one in 3:13,

[28] Low, “To Kill or Not to Kill the Enemies’ Women and Children?”, 154. Low further suggests that *if* the author of the decree had intended “children and women” to refer to Jewish “children and women,” then including the entire original prepositional phrase would have made it sound as if the Jewish defenders could “only defend themselves against enemies who attack both young and old, rather than to defend themselves against any antagonists who may kill any Jewish man, child, or woman” (154). I am not convinced by her argument here, however, since surely “from young and to old” could be a rather all-encompassing term.

[29] See Gordis, “Studies in the Esther Narrative,” 52, and Dreier’s rebuttal, “Kinder und Frauen in Est 8,11,” 77–78.

[30] Dreier, “Kinder und Frauen in Est 8,11,” 77.

stopping right before "and to plunder their goods."[31] This may imply that the infinitive "to plunder" in 8:11 should be taken in the same way as 3:13, parallel to the other infinitive constructs, in that permission to destroy implies permission to perform the plundering, too.

On the other hand, the parallelism of the Masoretic markings between 3:13 and 8:11 seems to raise an objection to Dreier's contention that the placement of the *Tiphcha* (*Tifcha*, ֙) with אֹתָם in the phrase "those attacking them" (8:11) creates a strong disjunctive between "them" and the following phrase "children and women."[32] If the intent of the *Tiphcha* is to create an ontological disjunction with the following phrase (so that "them" is a completely distinct group from "women and children"), then it becomes difficult to explain why, in Esther 3:13, a similar pattern exists in the two phrases before "and to loot their goods." In 3:13 the *Tiphcha* is attached to עָשָׂר in the phrase לְחֹדֶשׁ שְׁנֵים־עָשָׂר ("to the twelfth month")[33] followed by הוּא־חֹדֶשׁ אֲדָר ("that is the month of Adar") where אֲדָר is governed by the Athnach (֛), in a manner that is directly parallel to "women" in Esther 8:11. In other words, if Dreier were correct about the role of the *Tiphcha* and *Athnach* in Esther 8:11, should not the same principle apply to 3:13? Would that not then imply that in Esther 3:13, the expression "that is the month of Adar" was meant to be distinguished from "the twelfth month," when in fact obviously "Adar" is *naming* (and thus appositional) to the twelfth month? In light of that, the significance of the Masoretic accent marks in reference to interpreting Esther 8:11b has not yet been adequately explored, and one should avoid being too dogmatic.

3. What do we mean by "appositional"?

The reference of an appositional phrase lies at the center of the debate on Esther 8:11. Consequently, care must be taken to define apposition, all the more since it has been described as "rather broadly understood and fuzzily-delineated."[34] We start with Brill's *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics*:

> Apposition is a syntactic relation distinct from both *coordination* and *subordination* (Burton-Roberts 1994; Livnat and Sela 1995), usually consisting of a sequence of two (or more) expressions that share the same syntactic function and definition. The elements of

[31] The Masoretic markings of 3:13 and 8:11–12 may be conveniently compared via the TanakhML Project (online: https://www.tanakhml.org/). My observations in this paragraph and the next paragraph stem from my own use of this resource. I am indebted to Dr. Mark McGinnis for directly me to this resource and for his interaction with me on this topic.

[32] See "Kinder und Frauen in Est 8,11," 79–80. That some kind of disjunctive occurs here seems to be a reasonably enough assertion. James D. Price writes, "The name *Tiphcha* means 'disturbance.' . . . *Tiphcha* evokes a pausal form when it marks the main syntactic division of a verse. A *Tiphcha* segment serves as the near subordinate segment in the domain of *Silluq* and *Athnach*" (*The Syntax of the Masoretic Accents in the Hebrew Bible*, 2nd ed., online: https://www.jamesdprice.com/images/21_Full_Text.pdf). What I am suggesting here, however, is that it is probably overstating the matter to suggest that the *Tiphcha* necessarily implies ontological distinction, or distinction of reference, from the subsequent phrase.

[33] I.e., "of the twelfth month," following the statement that it was the thirteenth day.

[34] Robert D. Holmstedt and Andrew R. Jones, "Apposition in Biblical Hebrew: Structure and Function," in *Proceedings of the Twelfth Mainz International Colloquium on Ancient Hebrew and Cognate Languages*, Kleine Untersuchungen zur Sprache des Alten Testaments und seiner Umwelt [KUSATU] 22 (Kamen, Germany: Hartmut Spenner, 2017), 24.

such a sequence can be identical in reference ("full apposition") or the reference of one may be included in the reference of the other ("partial apposition").[35]

It is assumed, in addition, that in an appositional sequence, the first noun is not a construct noun.[36] Indeed, the two nouns in apposition are lacking "any morphological or syntactic signal" at all.[37]

Basic examples in both English and Biblical Hebrew are easy to come by. In the English sentence, "My professor, Dr. Jones, completely shredded my thesis," the nouns "professor" and "Dr. Jones" stand in apposition to each other. Similarly, in the sentence "I talked to the couple, Mr. and Mrs. Jones," the word "couple" is appositionally clarified by "Mr. and Mrs. Jones." Some examples of basic appositional phrases in Biblical Hebrew would include 1 Kings 21:10, "Now, there sat two men, sons of Belial [שְׁנַיִם אֲנָשִׁים בְּנֵי־בְלִיַּעַל], opposite him," or the very next verse, 1 Kgs 21:11, "Then the men of his city, the elders and the nobles who lived in his city, . . ." [אַנְשֵׁי עִירוֹ הַזְּקֵנִים וְהַחֹרִים אֲשֶׁר הַיּוֹשְׁבִים בְּעִירוֹ], where "the elders and the nobles" actually qualifies the initial noun phrase, "the men of his city" by narrowing it down more specifically.[38] This second example, where there is a referential inequality between the first noun phrase and the appositional second noun phrase, seems to be more common in Hebrew than in English and is very relevant to our study of Esth 8:11.[39]

In Esth 8:11 we almost certainly have an appositional phrase, rather than nouns in sequence. Granted, a *waw* between the first two elements of a sequence are not necessary for a noun sequence to exist (see, for example, Deut 3:6, "men, women, and children," where only one *waw* exists for the three elements).[40] Yet in such cases there is no degree of disjunction to the

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[35] Zohar Livnat, "Apposition," in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics Online*, ed. G. Khan (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2013), n.p.

[36] Livnat, "Apposition," n.p.

[37] Holmstedt and Jones, "Apposition in Biblical Hebrew," 21. For other discussions on apposition, see also S. R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew and Some Other Syntactical Questions*, The Biblical Resource Series (a new edition with introduction by W. Randall Garr; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 248 ("From our point of view, the simplest test of a legitimate apposition will be (§ 186) its capability of being transposed into a proposition in which a relation of identity between subj. and pred. can be conceived . . ."); Wilhelm Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, 26th ed., edited and enlarged by E. Kautzsch, trans. by A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), 364 (§181, "Apposition in the stricter sense is the collocation of two substantives in the same case in order to define more exactly (or to complete) the one by the other, . . ."); H. H. Hardy II and Matthew McAffee, *Going Deeper with Biblical Hebrew: An Intermediate Study of the Grammar and Syntax of the Old Testament* (Brentwood, TN: B&H Academic, 2024), 304 ("Apposition describes two or more elements with the same constituent function and referent. The elements are typically contiguous. Syntactically, apposition can occur with any constituent function"); Toyozo W. Nakarai, *Biblical Hebrew* (Philadelphia, PA: Bookman Associates, 1951), 48 (§XXV.*a*.2; "When two nouns are placed in apposition, (a) the first of the two nouns may connote the principle idea, (b) the second of the two nouns may connote the principle idea, or (c) they may connote the same significance. In this last case the apposition may denote emphasis, abundance, or distribution"); Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*, Biblical Languages: Hebrew 3 (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 228 (§29—"An appositional relationship means that two elements in a particular clause have the same referent. The second element qualifies the first in some way").

[38] *Accordance Bible Software* version 13.4.2 was used for all syntactical and lexical searches.

[39] Paul Joüon helpfully notes, "Apposition is used in Hebrew in a much broader way than in our languages" (*A grammar of Biblical Hebrew*, volume 2 of 2, *Part Three: Syntax*, trans. and rev. by T. Muraoka, Subsidia Biblica 14.2 [Rome: Editrice Pontificio Instituto Biblico, 1993], 477.

[40] In the case of Deut 3:6, one could suggest that "all the city, men, women, and children" are all an equal sequence of nouns, with "city" referring to the physical city itself. In such case, however, it is clear that "men, women, and children" would *not* be included referentially in "the city" as a physical object. yet it seems more likely that "men, women, and children" are appositional to "all the city." Regardless, as Dreier notes, it is clear that

extent that we would see in Esth 8:11, since "children and women" must naturally be contained in "them" *or* "those attacking" *or* "province and people," regardless of what position one takes. What we have in Esth 8:11 is more analogous to Deut 31:12, where "the people" is the main direct object, followed by an appositional phrase that clarifies and emphasizes what is included in "the people," namely, "the men and the women and the children, and your stranger who is in your gates."[41]

One key point must be stressed before moving on. In Biblical Hebrew, a pronominal suffix can clearly be in an appositional relationship to two subsequent conjoined nouns. In 1 Chron 8:8, for example, "Hushim and Baara, his wives," immediately follow and are appositional to "them," specifically "them" as a pronominal suffix attached to the direct object marker, just like in Esth 8:11 (thus the sequence reads, מִן־שִׁלְּחוֹ אֹתָם חוּשִׁים וְאֶת־בַּעֲרָא נָשָׁיו). Similarly, in Gen 1:27, notwithstanding a word order difference, "male and female" clearly relates appositionally to אֹתָם, the pronominal suffix on the direct object marker. The same applies to a stand-alone personal pronoun, as well; in Exod 7:11, "they" (הֵם) is followed by the appositionally clarifying phrase, "the magicians of Egypt."

Consequently, no syntactical reason exists as to why "children and women" in Esther 8:11 could not relate appositionally to the "them" directly before. If one objects that there is an appositional mismatch (i.e., where are the men that "them" includes?), that objection fails precisely because the mismatch exists *no matter what* word "children and women" are related to (i.e., "those attacking" and "people and province" all surely include men!).[42] It would appear that in the Hebrew Bible an appositional noun can seemingly narrow down the previous noun it is linked to, e.g., 1 Kings 21:11 (where אַנְשֵׁי עִירוֹ, "the men of his city" is immediately qualified by "the elders and the leaders who were living in the city"). This seems to be what is happening here, regardless of one's position, but this would actually make more sense if "children and women" referred to "them" (because then the decree is focusing on those most vulnerable to the original decree). If some element of "every power of people and province" were appositionally narrowed down to "children and women," one might have to conclude that Mordecai or Ahasuerus were emphasizing killing children and women more than killing men, a rather bizarre suggestion regardless of what position one takes.

4. The construct phrase and the definiteness or indefiniteness of the expression אֶת־כָּל־חֵיל עַם וּמְדִינָה.

A key point of Bush's response to Gordis regards the indefiniteness of "children and women"—"The very fact that they are indefinite coordinates them with the equally indefinite 'all

"women and children" are linked "asyndetically" to "men," in that they all share the same fate (Dreier, "Kinder und Frauen in Est 8,11," 77). This solves nothing for Eth 8:11, of course, since the question is whether or not "children and women" are intended to be viewed as potentially sharing the same fate as "them" or with "those attacking" (or, alternatively, with "every power of people and province").

[41] In Deut 31:12, there is nothing separating the main noun, "the people," with the appositional phrase that follows. On the other hand, in Josh 8:35, assuming that "all the congregation of Israel" is meant to be a comprehensive term, we have a *waw* between it and the first element of apposition, "the women" [וְהַנָּשִׁים]. One could suggest, of course, that "all the congregation of Israel" is meant to refer just to the men, thus creating a noun sequence rather than one noun followed by appositional nouns, but his is unlikely.

[42] Such mismatches do occur elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Livnat ("Apposition") suggests Gen 44:3, where "they and their donkeys" is appositional to "the men." Cf. also the discussion in Holmstedt and Jones, "Apposition in Biblical Hebrew," 29.

power of people and province,' rather than the definite pronoun 'them,' which immediately precedes."[43] If Bush were correct, this would be the most decisive argument against seeing "children and women" as a reference to Jewish children and women.[44] Low, however, cites Gesenius to argue that "Collectives introduced by kol (all) are regarded as determinative," and also notes that the participle "attacking" is definite, thus indicating that the previous phrase is also definite.[45] Indeed, 2 Sam 12:29 is a parallel example ("all the people," אֶת־כָּל־הָעָם), where a specific group of people, not just any group of people, is in view. To this should be added the general point, assumed by grammars and syntaxes, that the direct object marker אֵת/אֶת generally introduces a *definite* direct object(s), which would include elements in a construct chain.[46]

Exceptions may exist, where both אֵת and כָּל can be followed by what should be considered an indefinite noun or noun phrase, e.g., Gen 1:21 (specifically, וְאֵת כָּל־עוֹף כָּנָף).[47] Even if this is granted, the normal classification of a noun phrase following אֵת and כָּל would usually be definite. The burden of proof lies on those who would wish to prove otherwise.

There is, however, a neglected possibility that needs to be explored, namely whether or not the construct phrase following אֵת actually consists of "every power of people and province of those attacking," where הַצָּרִים, "those attacking," is in the absolute state and "every power of people and province" is in the construct state. If the latter, then grammatically "every people and power" must be definite, because the definiteness or indefiniteness of a construct chain is governed by the absolute noun.[48] Since הַצָּרִים includes the article, words before it would be definite.

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[43] Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 447.

[44] To clarify what we mean by "definiteness," Hardy and McAffee are helpful here: "The semantic property of definiteness describes the degree to which a referent is identifiable or distinguishable" (*Going Deeper with Biblical Hebrew*, 307); having said that, they also acknowledge a "continuum" of definiteness, that it is not necessarily an "either-or" situation (p. 396, following the work of Van Wolde). Nonetheless, nouns in apposition "generally agree in gender, number, and definiteness" (Bill. T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 2nd ed. [Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018], 29), though my own survey of appositions in the Hebrew Bible indicates that "number" is the least likely of those three categories to be consistent between nouns of apposition.

[45] Low, "To Kill or Not to Kill the Enemies' Women and Children?", 153.

[46] See, for example, A. B. Davidson, *Hebrew Syntax* (Edinburgh, UK: T&T Clark, 1902), 102–103; Hardy and McAffee, *Going Deeper with Biblical Hebrew*, 508; Page H. Kelley, *Biblical Hebrew: An Introductory Grammar* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 12; Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew Grammar*, 3rd. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2019), 52 ("If the direct object of a verb is not definite, then the definite direct object marker is not used"); C. L. Seow, *A Grammar for Biblical Hebrew*, rev. ed. (Nashville, Abingdon, 1995), 98; Rivka Shemesh, "Object," in *Encyclopedia of Hebrew Language and Linguistics Online*, n.p. ("את *ʾet* functions as a direct object, i.e., accusative, marker. It appears at the head of direct objects in which the noun phrase is definite in one of the following ways: proper nouns, . . .; nouns preceded by the definitive article, . . .; nouns followed by a possessive pronoun, . . .; nouns followed by a demonstrative pronoun, . . .; and nouns in the construct state preceding a definite possessor noun, ..."); van der Merwe, Naudé, and Kroeze, *Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*, 246; Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Conner, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 179; J. Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1959), 53.

[47] Shemesh, "Object," (drawing from Joüon and Muraoka). See also Waltke and O'Conner, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 180 (mentioning Lev 26:5), as well as W. Randall Garr, who argues that "Since *ʾet* can accompany both definite and indefinite direct objects, the grammatical definiteness of the object does not fully account for *ʾet*" ("Affectedness, Aspect and Biblical *ʾet*," *ZAH* 4, no. 2 [1991]: 119, fn 3).

[48] See, for example, van der Merwe, Naudé, and Kroeze, *Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*, 196; Seow, *Grammar for Biblical Hebrew*, 116–7;

At first glance, one may object that עַם and מְדִינָה appear to be in the absolute form, not the construct form. Yet the former in the singular is identical in both the absolute and construct forms (e.g., Gen 23:12 and 13, where עַם is clearly construct). מְדִינָה, on the other hand, is more complicated.

In the Aramaic portions of Scripture, מְדִינָה takes the expected *tav* ending for the feminine singular construct state (e.g., Dan 3:12). In the Hebrew portions of Scripture, however, I could find only one case where a *singular* form מְדִינָה (not plural, as in Esth 3:13) was clearly in a construct chain without being the final word (i.e., it was construct and not absolute). This verse is Esther 9:30, and in this case the *heh* remains at the end and does not transform to *tav*: "to the 127 provinces [מְדִינָה] of the kingdom [מַלְכוּת, normal construct form] of Ahasuerus [absolute and definite proper noun]." It is likely that the proximity of the number "100" with a *heh* ending alters the expected ending, as in Esth 1:1 (not a construct chain), yet it still seems a reasonable possibility to suggest that מְדִינָה in Hebrew does not take a *tav* ending in the construct form. Other words exist that take a construct form ending with *heh* rather than *tav* (e.g., קָצֶה, Gen 23:9 and Gen 47:21).

If מְדִינָה can be either a construct form or an absolute form, it seems more reasonable that it is a construct form with "every power of people and province of those attacking" as all one definite construct chain, due to two reasons: (1.) If "people and province" are non-definite absolute nouns, then we have the odd situation where a definite participle, "the ones attacking," stands in immediate apposition to a non-definite construct phrase right before, and (2.), Although exceptions may exist, generally speaking אֶת־כָּל would be expected to introduce grammatical definite nouns as noted earlier.

Consequently, if one wishes to claim that the counter-decree allows the killing of Gentile children and women, a mismatch of definiteness occurs between "every power of people and province of those attacking" (definite) and "children and women" (indefinite). Yet this is equally a problem for the other side. If "children and women" is appositional to אֹתָם, "them" (which possesses the definite direct object marker) a mismatch of definiteness *still* occurs.[49]

The point is simply this: neither side can claim syntactical superiority in terms of definiteness. Even if one could prove that "every power of people and province" was a construct chain by itself, without "the ones attacking," and even if one could prove that "every power of people and province" was *indefinite*, one is *still* faced with a mismatch of definiteness, precisely because "the ones attacking" is definite and would stand appositionally related to the presumably indefinite "every power of people and province."

Again, neither side has a syntactical advantage regarding definiteness. If the indefinite "children and women" refers to Gentile children and women, we have the anomalous juxtaposition of the *definite* "the ones attacking" with the indefiniteness of either "children and women" or "people and province." Conversely, if the indefinite "children and women" refers to Jewish children and women, it is anomalously appositional to the definite "them." Either way, we have a syntactical oddity.

[49] Every syntactical rule has exceptions, of course, so occasionally in Biblical Hebrew a non-definite apposition follows a definite noun. Daniel 10:11 would be an example of this in vocative form (as discussed by Cynthia L. Miller-Naudé, "Mismatches of Definiteness within Appositional Expressions Used as Vocatives in Biblical Hebrew," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 40, no. 2 [2014]: 106).

5. What is טַף וְנָשִׁים most likely appositional to?

We have seen that Bush's argument regarding definiteness is inconclusive at best. Bush also argues, however, that for "children and women" to relate appositionally to "them," it would be necessary for "children and women" to possess both their own pronominal suffix and their own direct object marker אֶת.[50] The former point is also stated by Fox.[51]

Yet this writer has seen no clear indications that the presence or absence of either pronominal suffixes or the direct object maker are intended in Biblical Hebrew to tie together appositional nouns to the previous referent. For example, consider Deut 12:11—תָּבִיאוּ אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר אָנֹכִי מְצַוֶּה אֶתְכֶם עוֹלֹתֵיכֶם וְזִבְחֵיכֶם . . . etc. Here אֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר (with the relative clause) constitutes the direct object of what the people are supposed to bring. וְזִבְחֵיכֶם and עוֹלֹתֵיכֶם and the other subsequent words are appositional to "all that I am commanding you." Here the appositional nouns do *not* contain the direct object maker, though the direct object "all" does, and the appositional nouns *do* contain pronominal suffixes, where the direct object "all" does not (though the direct object in the relative clause, "you all," does contain a pronominal suffix, but obviously "burnt offerings" is not appositional to "you all," so this is irrelevant).

Deuteronomy 31:12 would be another example where the subsequent appositional nouns do not include the direct object marker that the original direct object does ("the people," אֶת־הָעָם), as well as Deut 2:34. In Gen 50:2, the direct object is "*his* servants," but the subsequent clarifying apposition is simply "the physicians" rather than "his physicians" without the pronominal suffix (though both the direct object and its appositional noun posses the אֶת).

The point is not that appositional nouns would never match in terms of the presence or absence of pronominal suffixes or אֶת. They frequently do. For example, the appositional nouns at the beginning of Jer 43:6 possess their own אֶת, hearkening back to אֶת כָּל־שְׁאֵרִית in v. 5, while the appositional nouns in Deut 29:9 ("your leaders, your tribes, your elders . . ." etc.) all possess pronominal suffixes as does the original subject they are appositional to, כֻּלְּכֶם ("all of you"). The point is simply that it is not necessary.

Now, it may be that Bush intended to indicate that *in order to remove ambiguity*, the pronominal suffix and אֶת would be necessary (though he does not state this). I could not, however, find any syntactical construction analogous to Esth 8:11 where this was the case. As such, it cannot be proven, to this writer's knowledge, nor is it clear why אֶת would remove the ambiguity when "all power of every people and province" also begins with אֶת anyways.

Having said that, I would grant that the addition of the pronominal suffix to "children and women" *may* have helped clarify matters, since "every power of people and province of those attacking" does *not* contain a pronominal suffix.[52] Again, though, it is not clear why this would be *necessary* to remove ambiguity if another means of removing ambiguity, namely proximity, exists.

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[50] Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 447.

[51] Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 284–5.

[52] I am not convinced by Low's argument here contra Bush, that ". . . the addition of the pronominal suffixes would disrupt the parallelism with 3:13 in which 'children and women' are used without pronominal suffixes. Without their pronominal suffixes, 'children and women' would then be indefinite nouns and would not require the use of the direct object marker ʾēt" (p. 151) Yet since Bush argues that the parallelism with 3:13 is precisely what supports the idea that "children and women" refer to Gentiles, I do not see how this refutes Bush's point. As to Low's point about "children and women" being indefinite, as noted, this is a problem no matter what position one takes.

This brings us to the first of two positive arguments why "children and women" probably refers to "them," i.e., the Jewish people. All things being equal, appositional nouns should generally refer to the nearest referent that makes sense.

Granted, a significant number of words can exist between appositional nouns and their referent; Jer 41:16 is a helpful example where the direct object "all the remnant of the people" is separated by 14 words from the subsequent appositional phrase that expands on it. One of Gordis' arguments, then, was somewhat overstated.[53] However, the general truism that appositional nouns generally refer to the closest referent can be demonstrated with a *reducto absurdum*. If we were to say, "All things being equal, appositional nouns should generally refer to the *farthest* referent that makes sense," then we would end up looking farther and farther away for the referent of an appositional noun, *ad infinitum*.

Consider a simple illustration in English: "As a team, they took their stand against their opponents, those who would seek to seize the World Cup." Here the appositional expression "those who would seek to seize the World Cup" would naturally be assumed to refer to "opponents," by virtue of proximity, even though hypothetically it could refer to the original "they." Since the closest noun makes sense as an appositional partner, surely "opponents" and "those who would seize . . ." can reasonably be assumed to have the same referent. This simple example does not begin to match the syntactical complexity of Esth 8:11, of course, but it reinforces the common sense principle that an appositional phrase would generally be assumed to link to the closest reasonable noun or pronoun.

Naturally, as with virtually any syntactical principle, exceptions exist. Hypothetically, even if "them" in Esth 8:11 would be the nearest potential appositional partner to "children and women," Mordecai and/or Ahasuerus may still have meant "those attacking" or "people." This does not invalidate the general principle, however.

This brings us to our second point: "children and women" makes more sense appositional to "them" because, as Low argues, drawing from the work of J. G. McConville, "To say that 'children and women' is an appositive of 'all power of people and province,' while syntactically legitimate, is conceptually absurd, . . .", since "armed forces should not include women and children."[54] Indeed, nowhere in scripture does the expression even remotely indicate entities capable of aggressive action; to the contrary, Josh 1:14 clearly distinguishes between נְשֵׁיכֶם טַפְּכֶם and those expected to wage warfare.

If one wishes to counter that "children and women" would be appositional specifically to "people" rather than "power" or "those attacking," this runs the risk of special pleading: why that word and not the others? In addition, one must still grapple with why, if "people" is indefinite and thus naturally linked to "children and women," "people" is appositional to the definite participle "those attacking."

To conclude, none of the syntactical arguments raised by Bush and Fox can be proven from the biblical data (though this writer concedes that pronominal suffixes on the nouns *may* have helped to remove some ambiguity), and two reasons exist for seeing "children and women"

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[53] See Gordis, "Studies in the Esther Narrative," 51, and the responses by Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, 284–5, and Dreier, "Kinder und Frauen in Est 8,11," 79, who points out that if "children and women" is appositional to the entire phrase "all the power of people and province," then only two words separates "children and women" from "provinces."

[54] Low, "To Kill or Not to Kill," 151. As Elaine Phillips well states, "Because the direct focus of the Jewish self-defense is armed adversaries, it is illogical to think that the governmental mandate is being issued against those least likely to be in that category" ("Esther," in *1 Chronicles—Job*, The Expositor's Bible Commentary, rev. ed., [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010], 656).

as referring back to "them" (i.e., the Jewish people): 1. proximity, and 2. the oddity of including "children and women" amongst those exhibiting aggressive behavior.

6. Women and children as part of plunder?

Even though this writer prefers view #1, this paper will now present some evidence that has the potential to support view #2 against view #1 while simultaneously arguing against view #4. Dreier has provided the most sustained defense of view #2, that although the counter-edict allowed the Jewish people to kill the women and children of those attacking, they deliberately did not do so. Dreier, in his article, emphasizes the fact that the emphasis is on self-defense and that the subsequent chapters detailing the Jewish reaction to their oppressors de-emphasizes violence.[55] Furthermore, the counter-edict was not directed against Agagites *per se* (nor any race specifically, contra what Haman did), but only against those attacking the Jews.[56] Dreier also brings out the generally neglected point that the focus on Purim at the end of the book makes it clear that the festival is about *rest*, not about *killing*.[57]

More significantly, Dreier argues that since the text explicitly states three times that the Jewish people refrained from taking plunder (9:10, 15–16) while never mentioning any attacks upon Gentile women and children, it is reasonable to conclude the latter never happened.[58]

If the counter-decree did allow for the killing of women and children, however, and if the text goes to great lengths to mention that the Jewish defenders did not take the plunder, it may be that the children and women are assumed to be part of the "plunder." Of course this would not be the case in Esth 8:11 itself if טַף וְנָשִׁים refers to Gentiles, since "children and women" are in a clause distinct from the command to "plunder their goods." However, the absence of any reference to "children and women" in ch. 9 may indicate that the innocent civilians are folded up into the category of "plunder."

This may be supported lexically in a couple ways. First, occasionally "children and women" are metaphorically considered part of "goods" (שָׁלָל) to be plundered (e.g., Isa 10:2, Jer 21:9, 38:2, 39:18, and 45:5, though in the Jeremiah passages being part of plunder is considered a better alternative to being dead). This raises the possibility that even if "children and women" in the counter-decree were referring to Jewish children and women, the expression "plunder their goods" could include the enemy children and women. Second, the verb בזז does on one occasion have humans as an object, e.g., Deut 20:14, where "women and children," הַנָּשִׁים וְהַטַּף, are included along with animals, etc., as objects of plunder, rather than the people being plundered (it is worth noting, though, that usually בזז is specifically in reference to non-human objects; e.g., Gen 34:29; Num 31:9; etc.).

Third, and most significantly, the noun בִּזָּה (which only occurs 10x in the entire Hebrew Bible) can refer to what happens to humans, with implications of violence. In fact, outside of Esther, the only times the noun is preceded by the pronoun *beth*, it is specifically in reference to the fate of *humans*, not goods (Dan 11:33, וּבִזָּה; Ezra 9:7, וּלְבִזָּה; cf. Neh 4:4, לְבִזָּה, also in

[55] Dreier, "Kinder und Frauen in Est 8,11," 82 (". . . die Erzählung mehrere gewaltreduzierende Elemente enthält"). Cf. also M. l'abbé Gillet, who over 100 years ago stated, "Les Juifs ne voulurent, pas profiler do la concession qui leur était faite, vin, 44, do s'emparer des dépouilles de leurs ennemis. Ils prouvèrent par ce désintéressement que leur but était uniquement de défendre leur vie, mais non d'attaquer leurs adversaires pour piller leurs biens" (*Tobie, Judith et Esther*, 2nd ed., La sainte bible [Paris: P. Lethielleux, 1897], 204).

[56] Dreier, "Kinder und Frauen in Est 8,11," 82–83.

[57] Dreier, "Kinder und Frauen in Est 8,11," 82.

[58] Dreier, "Kinder und Frauen in Est 8,11," 83, cf. 77.

reference to the fate of humans). This opens the door for the possibility that וּבַבִּזָּה is also meant to include women and children, thus implying that the Jewish defenders deliberately spared innocent civilians. I, personally, am not yet convinced by that (and it is probable that the preposition *beth* is being used differently in Esther than in the Daniel and Ezra references), but it is a possibility worth considering.

If the cognate noun בַּז is also considered (though it does not occur in Esther), we find more examples of references to women and children, e.g., Num 14:3, 31; Deut 1:39; Isa 42:22; Jer 30:16. Again, these are cases where humans are themselves plunder, not merely cases where humans are being plundered. What is not clear, however, is whether or not in such cases "plunder" meant death or, more likely, slavery, which would limit their value as expressions analogous to those in Esther 9.

Yet if the preceding lexical points have any merit, and the category of "children and women" in Esth 8:11 becomes categorically subsumed under "plunder" in ch. 9, then Dreier's position that the Jewish defenders deliberately refrained from harming women and children, even when allowed to do so, becomes slightly stronger. For Dreier, this interpretation makes the character of the Jewish defenders even more admirable, especially when compared with the norms of conflict in the Ancient Near East.[59] Yet if that is so, we are still confronted with the mystery as to why, if Mordecai had a hand in writing the counter-edict, he allowed the killing of women and children if in fact he subsequently led the Jewish defenders to *not* kill women and children.

7. Conclusion

The syntax of Esther 8:11 is extremely complex, and previous studies have generally failed to lay out all the syntactical issues involved while often being overly dogmatic as to their conclusions. Out of four possibilities for interpreting Esth 8:11, this paper has argued for position #1 primarily on the basis of appositional proximity and the conceptual mismatch between "children and women" and the aggressors described earlier in the verse. On the other hand, position #2, especially as articulated by Dreier, has much to commend it and may be strengthened if "children and women" are considered part of "plunder" in ch. 9. Regardless, position #4 is eliminated from serious contention, though sadly too late to stem the tide of hostility against Esther emerging from an unreasonable and uninformed adherence to that position, as articulated recently by Tucker Carlson.

If this paper's interpretation is correct (or even that of Dreier's), this raises an interesting point for further study: can Jewish forbearance from vengeance in the midst of their fierce counterattack in self-defense serve as a model for modern just war theory? Indeed, Dreier himself speaks highly of the Jewish resistance in ch. 9, calling it "just war."[60] This is not a new discussion, as Jewish scholars themselves have debated the issue *vis-á-vis* Esther.[61]

Esther is a sad yet beautiful story about the consequences of ignoring the Abrahamic covenant—"And I will bless those blessing you, and those cursing you I will curse" (Gen

[59] Dreier, "Kinder und Frauen in Est 8,11," 85.

[60] Dreier, "Kinder und Frauen in Est 8,11," 85. Dreier is favorably quoting J. -D. Macchi's commentary here.

[61] See, especially, Yitzchak Blau, "Biblical Narratives and the Status of Enemy Civilians in Wartime," *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought* 39, no. 4 (2006): 8–28. Page 20 talks specifically about our issue.

12:3a)—and the foolishness of trying to destroy the Jewish race.[62] Furthermore, the Jewish people in Esther are arguably analogous to the Jewish race today (both in in Israel and abroad)—courageous and intelligent, devoted to survival, with the potential to benefit Gentile nations.[63] Sadly, though, many still lack a personal relationship with God.[64] The book of Esther consequently reminds us of the enduring value of Jewish people in the eyes of God while opening the way for us to point them to their own Jewish Messiah, our Lord Jesus Christ.[65]

[62] For further discussion of Esth 6:13 as the theological theme of the book, see Paul A. Himes, "A Touch of Wisdom: The Literary Role of Esther 6:13 in Bridging to a Biblical Theology of Scripture's Least 'Theological' Book," *JETS* 68, no. 3 (2025): 495–507.

[63] Speaking in the midst of the horrors of World War 2, T. E. N. Pennell well states, "Knowledge and appreciation of the contribution of Judaism to our present good must be made widespread. Jewish experience has been one of the major factors determining European history, civilization, and culture" (Pennell, "Esther and Antisemitism," *Expository Times* 55, no. 9 [1942], 240). From a different angle, note Robert Williamson, Jr., *The Forgotten Books of the Bible: Recovering the Five Scrolls for Today* (Minneapolis, Fortress, 2018), 170——"In its original writing, and in its long liturgical use in the Jewish tradition, the book of Esther is a call to resistance against anti-Semitism and a celebration of the resilience of the Jewish people against all who would do them harm. That core message of the book continues to resonate today—whether in the synagogue, in the church, or in society at large—that we must root out anti-Semitism in all its forms and celebrate God's faithfulness to the Jewish people in all times and places."

Consequently, we see that the book of Esther remains relevant in regards to the Jewish race today regardless of whether or not they are dwelling in the land, though I agree with Craig Blaising that "the modern nationalization of Israel" is "a preconsummate act of God" (Blaising, "Biblical Hermeneutics: How Are We to Interpret the Relation between the Tanak and the New Testament on This Question?," in *The New Christian Zionism: Fresh Perspectives on Israel and the Land*, ed. Gerald R. McDermott [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016], 99).

[64] In addition, our affirmation of the special nature of the Jewish race should not prevent us from inviting them to the Messiah. They are, in many ways, "'stranded,' knowing their identity and yet finding little positive satisfaction in it" (Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther*, TOTC [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984], 39–40). For a helpful though dated discussion of the secular nature of Jewish society in Israel, see Arthur W. Kac, *The Rebirth of the State of Israel: Is It of God or of Men?*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1976), 93.

[65] Mitch Glaser aptly reminds us of the incompatibility of anti-Semitism and evangelism: —"Why would the Jewish people embrace a faith that theologically excises any Jewish national future and affirms that the Jewish people are rejected by God? How will they accept that the church that had institutionally persecuted their ancestors for centuries was in fact the fulfillment of all covenantal promises? Supersessionism has and always will be the chief enemy of Jewish evangelism as it destroys the foundation of individual and national Jewish personhood and identity" (Mitch Glaser, "The Impact of Supersessionism on Jewish Evangelism," pages 378–396 in *The Future Restoration of Israel: A Response to Supersessionism*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and Alan E. Kurschner, McMaster Biblical Studies Series [Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2023], 392).