Whither Esther? A Linguistic Profile of the Book of Esther

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Abstract
The book of Esther is linguistically challenging, not due to any specific difficulty in reading or interpretation, but due to its elusive grammatical profile. Much of the text feels like one is reading Genesis or 2 Kings, yet strange features poke through in every chapter. It is due to these strange features—which can often be found in other books among the Ketuvim as well as the Mishnah—that the book has been characterized as “archaizing” (Polzin 1976). Much water has passed under the bridge since Polzin’s work, culminating in the last five years’ heated debate about the historical stages of Hebrew and even the use of linguistic evidence in dating biblical texts. In this essay, we will provide a grammatical profile of the book of Esther, building upon and updating the valuable thesis by Robert Bergey (1983), and in the process offer a few methodological suggestions.

1. Introduction
To paraphrase a well-known musical number,

♫ How do you solve a problem like Esther?

The problem with Esther is the book’s language: is it clearly “late” biblical Hebrew like that of Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah (e.g., Moore 1971)?, or is it more like the later language of the Mishnah (e.g., Rabin 1970; Sáenz-Badillos 1993: 126-127)?; and on top of that, is the language also intentionally archaizing in an attempt to mimic the earlier “standard” biblical Hebrew of the Torah (e.g., Polzin 1976)?— and if so, why? The questions go on.

Categorizing the language of the book of Esther is both provocative and elusive. The questions we asked a moment ago hint at how the phonological, morphological, syntactic, semantic, and lexical features challenge our ability to classify the book. And yet, that is precisely what we offer in this study, an initial linguistic profile of this odd book. To do this, we offer an explicitly methodological investigation, taking our cues from two sources: the discussions of Hebrew diachrony in recent years (see, e.g., Holmstedt & Screnock, Linguistic Profile: Esther (SBL 2013))
Miller-Naudé and Zevit 2012) and an insightful doctoral thesis on the language of Esther which Ronald Bergey complete thirty years ago (Bergey 1983).

2. Previous Research: Bergey 1983

In his 1983 doctoral thesis on the language of Esther, Bergey based his analysis of the linguistic data upon the four criteria most often associated with Avi Hurvitz (1995, 2000): opposition, distribution, extra-biblical attestation, and accumulation. He determined that, while the book exhibited affinities with both earlier and later biblical Hebrew works, it also showed significant affinities with Mishnaic Hebrew. Saénz-Badillos’ assertion that Esther is “one of the latest biblical writings” (1993: 125-26) attests to the influence of Bergey’s study.

Bergey’s impressive thesis notwithstanding, the elephant in the room is the distinction between cause and effect. Bergey focuses entirely on describing the effects of the supposed linguistic changes, with no attempt to explain if they are linguistically and historically plausible as changes and, if so, what the causes and mechanisms might have been. A second elephant, which Bergey introduces but does not dwell on, is the relative paucity of data; he admits that his analysis is “restricted to a narrow spectrum of linguistic potential,” but provides no criteria by which to evaluate this potential (1983: 169). And a third elephant, if you will, are other possible explanations for the variation that are not specifically diachronic, such as dialect and style. It is time to face the herd of elephants in the room.

3. A Better Methodology

An explicit methodology is critical for any study carried out in the spirit of scientific inquiry. Hebrew studies have not been short on articulated methodology. However, for ancient language analysis, it is not enough to detail the criteria by which data are categorized and the steps by which the analysis proceeds. To avoid creating ad hoc, and potentially irrelevant procedures, it is essential that we use the established principles of historical-comparative linguistic investigation. Above all, this requires that we isolate the salient linguistic variation and then determine if the pattern of distribution matches known patterns outside Hebrew studies, whether diachronic or otherwise.
3.1. Diachronic Change

Any study of linguistic variation that proposes diachronic change as the explanation must address three core issues: cause, mechanism, and effect. Identifying the effect is typically the easiest task, since it concerns the resulting sound, shape, sequence, or word that arises from the induced change. Cause and mechanism are more challenging to isolate, particularly since they are closely related. The cause of a given change falls into one of two categories that identify the source of the motivation: external and internal. The mechanisms by which changes occur fit into three broad categories: borrowing (externally-motivated), reanalysis (internally-motivated), and extension (internally-motivated).

3.1.1. Externally-Motivated Change: Borrowing

Languages borrow words from other languages for two primary reasons: need and prestige (Campbell 2004: 64-65). For Esther, the fact of borrowed words is not the question—everyone admits the presence of both Persian and Aramaic loanwords in the book. Rather, the questions concern the likely reasons and their implications. For example, it makes sense that the author needed to borrow words like אֲחַשְׁדַּרְפָּן and כַּרְפַּס, since the former refers to an administrative role specific to the Persian period, and the latter refers to a type of linen that did not exist in ancient Israel. Other borrowed words in Esther, however, stand for concepts that have perfectly good Hebrew manifestations, such as פַּרְתְּמִים [//שָׂרִים], דָּת [//חֹק, מִשְׁפָּט], or תּוֹרָה, פִּתְגָם [//מִשְׁפָּט or דָּבָר], and so on.

While both types of borrowing give insight into the source language and the general context of language contact, the prestige-based borrowings are a potential source of additional information about rhetorical design. Foreign words that are not need-based may as Berlin suggests, “lend authenticity” or be “for showing off, adding to the snobbery of the court” (2001: xxvii). Or such foreign items may signal political or social agendas.

Critically, borrowing, and the closely-related phenomenon of code-switching, presume a necessary level of “intensity of contact.” That is, if non-native items are identified and they are not need-based lexical items, they must reflect intense contact between the language in question and the other language that is the source of the borrowed feature. Notably, among the factors that contribute to this contact intensity is “a high level of bilingualism” (Thomason 2003: 689)—the use of prestige-based
borrowing or code-switching presumes that both the author and the audience understood such elements.¹

The use, or even avoidance, of features perceived to be non-native may serve as boundary-leveling or boundary-maintaining strategies, that is, to create “in groups” and “out groups,” based on religious, ethnic, or nationalistic concerns (Gordon and Williams 1998: 80-81). The book of Esther may reflect the use of borrowing in order to create a group boundary that effectively encompasses only a Jewish audience (defined by the primary use of Hebrew) that also spoke Persian and had some familiarity with life in the Persian capital and even the royal court (defined by the use of the Persian loanwords and customs).²

3.1.2. Internally-Motivated Change: Reanalysis and Extension

While borrowing has an external cause in language contact, internally-motivated changes are responses to some perceived internal pressure on the language and are associated with the mechanisms of reanalysis and extension. Although it is not a hard and fast division, borrowing mostly concerns lexical items while reanalysis and extension affect grammatical structure or meaning. For the linguistic changes we have identified as operative in the language of Esther, reanalysis is the primary mechanism.³

¹ For Hebrew texts in the Bible, this raises an important issue: unless some texts were aimed only at the highly educated, the increasing presence of Aramaic words or the use of any Persian words presupposes a multilingual environment for the Hebrew-speaking audience. If the audience were not actually multilingual, they would at least have had to be passively familiar with the source languages of the borrowed items (see Thomason 2003:699 on passive familiarity as a mechanism of “interference”). General contact, political or economic, would not necessarily create a sufficient level of intensity of contact for prestige-based borrowing. It is only when Jews were living in exile in Babylonia or Persia that a Hebrew speaking group would have experienced the sufficient intensity of contact for significant Persian borrowing to occur. For instance, we see from the Murashu and Al-Yahudu archives that the exilic communities in the Neo-Babylonian and Persian periods became sufficiently enculturated that they began adopting non-Hebrew names (see Pearce 2006; Zadok 2009; Abraham 2011, Beaulieu 2011).

² A likely example of resistance to borrowing, and the related phenomenon of code-switching, as a boundary creating strategy is the case of the sectarian Qumran scrolls. In the context of general bilingualism (Hebrew and Aramaic) and in the face of significant linguistic pressure, the majority of the sectarian Qumran scrolls as a whole (excepting, e.g., 4QMMT and the Copper Scroll) appear to reflect the avoidance of perceived non-native elements in a concerted effort to mimic the language of the texts they considered authoritative, or their “Scripture”.

³ Extension is the opposite of reanalysis: it is a change to the surface pattern without any underlying modification (Harris and Campbell 1995: 51). Paradigm leveling (or analogical change) is a classic example of extension. For example, there is no good evidence that the second vowel of the Hiphil was a long /i/ before Hebrew, which suggests that Hebrew did not inherit the long /i/, but developed it. A likely source for this long vowel is the II-w/y verb class, in which the middle glide (w or y)
Reanalysis is the change of the underlying structure or meaning of a linguistic phenomenon without any structural change to the surface manifestation (Harris and Campbell 1995:50). An example of reanalysis in Hebrew involves the conditional אִם in the oath formula. In the full formula, the אִם introduces a conditional clause, as it often does: “Thus shall God to you and thus shall he add, if (אִם) you do/do not ...” (see 1 Sam 3.17). In many cases, though, the oath formula was abbreviated, with the initial threat omitted, leaving only the אִם clause. In the abbreviated examples, the אִם takes on a negative connotation, i.e., “(you will be cursed) if you do it” > “don’t do it!”; and אִם הִשְׁמִיד is interpreted positively, i.e., “(you will be cursed), if you do not do it” > “do it!”.

The negative אִם and positive הִשְׁמִיד were then used in non-oath contexts (e.g., Isa 22.14 and 1 Kgs 20.23, respectively; see JM 2006: §165).

3.1.3. The Diffusion of Linguistic Change

One of the significant advances in Hebrew historical linguistics in the last five years is a more robust understanding of the process by which change spreads through time within a speech community. Critically, while the process unfolds, both the old and the new forms coexist, often for hundreds of years (Wolfram and Schilling-Estes 2003: 715-16). Linguists have observed that the diachronic spread of a given change follows a Sigmoid, or “S”-shaped, curve, an idealized example of which is provided in Figure 1:

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assimilated to the adjacent vowel, producing a “long vowel” (e.g., *yaqwim ⇒ *yaqyim ⇒ *yaqiim = *yaqîm). This long vowel was then extended throughout the Hiphil paradigm, resulting in the pattern with which all Hebrew students are familiar, הִשְׁמִיד.
As a new linguistic entity (e.g., lexeme, syntactic pattern) enters usage, it is a minority form alongside the previously existing entity; over time, the usage of the new entity gains ground on the older entity, with increasing speed; as the new entity becomes dominant, the speed by which it pushes the older entity out of usage slows and the older entity never entirely disappears (Bailey 1973: 77; Kroch 1989, 2001; Pintzuk 2003).  

3.2. Change versus Style or Dialect

We do not doubt that some variation in the Hebrew Bible is due to either dialectal differences or style rather than diachrony. The challenge is determining which is the likeliest answer. As a basic methodological principle to use in moving carefully forward, we follow the linguist David Crystal. In his discussion of stylistics, Crystal asserts that before “style” can be discussed, all historical and dialectal factors must be eliminated (1970: 100-101; 1987: 201, 205-6). We thus begin with a diachronic analysis, assuming that if the variation between two features aligns with the S-curve of diffusion, it is unlikely to be coincidental. We move beyond diachrony only if the tokens are too few for statistically-valid analysis or if the pattern of variation does not

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4 This S-curve model effectively replaces Hurvitz’ principles of opposition and distribution. Though few real language variations match the idealized S-curve in Figure 1, this model provides us with a statistically-grounded pattern to use as a baseline for comparison in discerning whether a given variant pair likely reflects a diachronic change or not.
3.3. Statistical Analysis and Ancient Language Data

As a final methodological point, we submit that the cogency of any explanation is directly related to the size of the data set. First, to study a change and its chronological diffusion requires a clear variant pair—an “older” form and a “newer” form. Second, both features must be well attested in the identified corpus: one, two, or even a dozen examples of a given lexical or grammatical feature are not nearly enough from which to draw statistically valid conclusions about the nature of the variation being studied. Dozens, preferably hundreds, of “tokens” are required to approach a statistically valid analysis (on statistical analysis applied to biblical Hebrew, see Forbes 2012a, b). This methodological principle casts a dark shadow over a great deal of the data previously used in historical Hebrew studies and guides our filtering of potential variant pairs from Esther.

4. Linguistic Change in Esther

Of the fifty-eight features that Bergey cited, all but fourteen must be excluded due to low attestation, resulting in an inability to draw statistically valid conclusions. (See the chart in Appendix A for Bergey’s list of features, modified to show which ones we consider salient.) On a more positive note, we can add four significant grammatical features to the list, which we will discuss in a moment.

4.1. Salient Lexical Features

The most obvious features in Esther that signal language contact are lexical—the Persian and Aramaic loanwords. The Persian and Aramaic items borrowed into the language of Esther are important for establishing a general time period (i.e., when the linguistic contact situation was appropriate) and cultural influence, if not setting. It is easy for modern readers, who have access to lexica and commentaries, to undervalue the use of Persian borrowings and therefore miss the implications for reconstructing the compositional setting of the book of Esther. However we label the book in terms of genre and relation to history, the fact remains that the amount and type of Persian loanwords require that the intended audience had to have known some Persian as well.
as some basic information about Persian administrative and court practices.

In Table 1 we list of Persian words in Esther, dividing them according to whether they reflect need or prestige borrowing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persian (need-borrowed)</th>
<th>Persian (prestige borrowed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>כַּרְפַּס, CN, “fine fabric; linen”; 1.6; not attested for Israel, HALOT, s.v.; borrowing of the Persian kirpās &lt; Sanskrit karpāsa.</td>
<td>חַרְבּוֹנָא, PN, “Karshena”; 1.14.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אֲחַשְׁדַּרְפָּן, CN, “satrap”; 3.12, 8.9, and 9.3, also once in Daniel 8:36 and 9 times in Aramaic Daniel; borrowing of Persian ḫšatra pāvan, “protector of the land”.</td>
<td>אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ, PN, “Ahashverosh”; 1.1.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>אֲחַשְׁוֵרוֹשׁ, PN, “Ahashverosh”; 1.1.</td>
<td>הֹדּוּ, PN, “India”; 1.1; borrowing of Old Persian and Avestan Hindu; Babylonian Indū suggests presence in Hebrew might have been a secondary borrowing through Babylonian.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>מְהוּמָן, PN, “Mehuman”; אֲדַלְיָא, PN, “Adalya”; בִּזְּתָא, PN, “Biztha”; מֶרֶס, PN, “Meres”; מַרְסְנָא, PN, “Marsena”; מְמוּכָן, PN, “Memucan”; 1.14.</td>
<td>פִּתְגָם, n.ms, “decision” or “announcement”; 1.20, also once in Qoh 8:11; borrowing of Persian patigāma. פִּתְגָם is used in fragmentary context in 4Q161 and 4Q420, and it is not found in the Mishnah or rabbinic texts. // BH מִצְוָה or דָּבָר (depending on nuance).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>פַּרְשַׁנְדָּתָא, PN, “Parshendatha”; מִשְׁפָּט, or תּוֹרָה; 1.20, also once in Qoh 8:11; borrowing of Persian patigāma. פִּתְגָם is used in fragmentary context in 4Q161 and 4Q420, and it is not found in the Mishnah or rabbinic texts. // BH מִצְוָה or דָּבָר (depending on nuance).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>פָּרָתָא, PN, “Poratha”; 9.7.</td>
<td>פִּתְגָם, n.ms, “decision” or “announcement”; 1.20, also once in Qoh 8:11; borrowing of Persian patigāma. פִּתְגָם is used in fragmentary context in 4Q161 and 4Q420, and it is not found in the Mishnah or rabbinic texts. // BH מִצְוָה or דָּבָר (depending on nuance).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>פַּרְמַשְׁתָּא, PN, “Parmashta”; אֲרִדַי, PN, “Ariday”; וַיְזָתָא, PN, “Vayzatha”; 9.9.</td>
<td>פַּרְשַׁנְדָּתָא, PN, “Parshendatha”; מִשְׁפָּט, or תּוֹרָה; 1.20, also once in Qoh 8:11; borrowing of Persian patigāma. פִּתְגָם is used in fragmentary context in 4Q161 and 4Q420, and it is not found in the Mishnah or rabbinic texts. // BH מִצְוָה or דָּבָר (depending on nuance).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1: Persian Loanwords in Esther**

Though the Persian loanwords provide some information about the setting of the intended audience, neither they nor the Aramaic loanwords (e.g., כְּתָב, יְקָר, זְמָן) allow us to situate Esther more precisely in the rather broad chronological window in which Persian and Aramaic borrowing would likely have occurred, that is, the entire second half of the first millennium B.C.E. The best that linguistic analysis can provide is to...
situate Esther relative to other books on the basis of the diffusion of the new form using data from well-attested loanwords that have “older” variants.

Beyond the demonstrable Persian and Aramaic loans, we identify a handful of additional lexical items in Esther as suggestive indicators of change: לָשׁוֹן (“language”), שִׁנָּה (“to change”), כָּנַס (“to gather”), זוּעַ (“to tremble”), שְׁאָר (“remainder”), קִבֵּל (“to receive”), and מַלְכוּת (“kingdom”). Bergey discusses each of these and we have fundamentally nothing to add. However, we will demonstrate how the variation should be analyzed for each pair.

Consider the distribution of the well-known variant pair מַמְלָכָה and מַלְכוּת. Dresher (2012) performed the most recent, and linguistically sophisticated analysis of this variation. He admitted only books, biblical and extra-biblical, that had at least three occurrences of one or the other of the words and concluded that the distribution of the words, and therefore the diffusion of the newer form, fits “quite well the conventional division of books into [early, middle, and late] periods” (31). In Table 2, we present the occurrences of מַמְלָכָה and מַלְכוּת, with Dresher’s periodization and some further modification (i.e., the division of Isaiah and raising the minimum to 5 occurrences, though even that is undesirably low). Note where Esther lies in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>מַמְלָכָה</th>
<th>מַלְכוּת</th>
<th>% new (מַלְכוּת)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deut</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Sam</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isa 1-39</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Kgs</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Sam</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jer</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Chr</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pss</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qum</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Chr</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esth</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mish</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2: The Diffusion of מַלְכוּת**

Since Table 2 presents the diffusion of but one lexical item, the results are anything but

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Holmstedt & Screnock, *Linguistic Profile: Esther* (SBL 2013)
secure, since each word has its own diffusion history. Combining this word with as many other salient variations would provide a much more accurate picture. Critically, with the study of each of the words that occur with enough frequency to give us a statistical toehold, Esther patterns in the late period—towards the middle to end of the late period—in each case. Therefore, taking all the lexical evidence together situates Esther right where most biblical scholars would expect it.

4.2. Salient Grammatical Features

Grammatical variation is no less important than lexical variation, though the latter is simpler to identify and analyze. Because of this, though, grammatical variation has been under-utilized (and sometimes misconstrued) in analyzing diachronic development in ancient Hebrew. We have determined that two semantic features and two syntactic features occur with sufficient frequency and with a sufficiently clear variant pair to be good candidates for fuller analysis.

4.2.1. Semantics

Both semantic changes involve the verbal system and its manifestation in Esther. These changes suggest that the position of Esther’s language was well along in the multifaceted development of the Hebrew verbal system. The first change is an increase in the frequency of qatal instead of wayyiqtol in contexts in which wayyiqtol could have been used, such as following a fronted temporal clause (e.g., compare Gen 22:4 and Esth 1:3). In fact, though the decreasing use of the wayyiqtol in Hellenistic period texts has long been noted, when we consider this from a change-and-diffusion perspective, given in Table 3, the narrative text data are highly suggestive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>All verbs</th>
<th>wayyiqtol (= old)</th>
<th>qatal (= new)</th>
<th>%new-to-old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

Holmstedt & Scenock, *Linguistic Profile: Esther* (SBL 2013)
The second change is the replacement of *yiqtol* by the participle for generic expressions (gnomic and habitual statements) (see Cook 2013). We did an initial pass of the *yiqtol* and participle frequency in the Hebrew Bible and the results suggest that this may be another highly fruitful path for identifying a semantic change-and-diffusion that could be used to date texts relatively. Table 4 presents the data, with books that attest 166 or more occurrences of both verb types (i.e., using Esther as our minimum).
Table 4: yiqtol to participle

Both sets of verb data require refinement to get completely accurate contrastive pairs, i.e., wayyiqtol and realis qatal for Table 3 and generic yiqtol and generic participle for Table 4. However, even with the squish we have allowed for this study, it is highly unlikely that, for example, the 31.9% “new” participle over yiqtol frequency in Genesis versus the 61.1% of the “new” participle over yiqtol frequency in Nehemiah is random. We are confident that the refined analyses would confirm the conclusions we have drawn concerning these examples of change-and-diffusion.

4.2.2. Syntax

The first syntactic feature concerns the syntax of object marking. Bergey, following many others (e.g. Kropat 1909: 35-36, Polzin 1976: 28-31) notes the variation between the use of the direct object marker אֵת with a clitic pronoun and the attachment of the
clitic pronoun directly to a verb (1983: 85-89). In Table 5 we present the relevant data for the Bible, Ben Sira, Qumran, and the Mishnah.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>נָ+ Pron (old)</th>
<th>Verb + Pron (new)</th>
<th>%new-to-old</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lev</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>44.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Num</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>54.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exod</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>60.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Josh</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>319</td>
<td>71.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judg</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>166</td>
<td>74.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2Kgs</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>75.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1Sam</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>84.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deut</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>396</td>
<td>85.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1Kgs</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>85.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2Chr</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>86.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2Sam</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>86.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esth</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>94.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neh</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>94.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qoh</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>95.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1Chr</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>96.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra (Heb)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>96.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dan (Heb)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qumran</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>1272</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ben Sira</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>95.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mishnah</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>1763</td>
<td>98.1%</td>
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</table>

Table 5: נָ+ pronoun(obj) to verb + pronoun(obj)

The list of biblical books covered in Table 5 includes only narrative books, since the use of נָ in biblical poetic book is a well-known issue that is a complicating variable for this study (see Andersen and Forbes 1983). Additionally, we limited the verbs to finite verbs, since the clitic pronouns attached to participles and infinitives may represent non-direct object constituents. Finally, we limited the נָ data to cases in which the נָ+pronoun follows the verb, since pragmatic fronting of a pronominal object requires the use of נָ+pronoun instead of the pronoun attached directly to the verb. The resulting frequency of usage supports previous scholarship on the decreasing frequency of נָ+object pronoun. The cause of this change is not yet clear, nor is the mechanism (though reanalysis seems likely, given the development of נָ+pronoun into a proleptic demonstrative in early rabbinic Hebrew; Pérez Fernández 1997: 23). What is very clear, though, is Esther's position towards the end of this diffusion.
A second potential syntactic change relevant to Esther a general shift from Verb-Subject–to–Subject-Verb basic word order in ancient Hebrew (see Holmstedt 2013). The cause and mechanism for word order changes are often difficult to untangle, and this is the case for the proposed VS-to-SV shift in ancient Hebrew. It is conceivable that the shift to SV was due to language contact; however, since this shift occurred over hundreds of years, it is more likely that it reflects a long-term reanalysis. In particular, it is plausible and supported cross-linguistically that the Topic- and Focus-fronted Subjects in the earlier basic VS language were reanalyzed by successive generations of child learners as non-Topic and non-Focus constituents, resulting in an acquired basic SV pattern. As each generation reanalyzed the role of the Subject in SV clauses, Hebrew moved through a series of word order profiles: strong VS $\Rightarrow$ weak VS $\Rightarrow$ weak SV $\Rightarrow$ strong SV.

Although the study of this word order shift in ancient Hebrew is not yet complete—to be complete it must ultimately include all Hebrew syntactic data up to and including the Mishnah!—the preliminary data collection from the Hebrew Bible, which we present in Table 6, is suggestive.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Book</th>
<th>Verb-Subject</th>
<th>Subject-Verb</th>
<th>% new (SV)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amos</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Habakkuk</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joel</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haggai</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Samuel</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>56%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nahum</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genesis</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>54%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ecclesiastes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruth</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jonah</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obadiah</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Malachi</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Zephaniah</td>
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<td>6</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esther</td>
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<td>86%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nehemiah</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>94%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: ‘Basic’ SV versus VS

The data for Daniel in Tables 5 and 6 require comment. On the one hand, the unexpected position of Daniel in the tables reminds us that statistical research on ancient literature, with an equal emphasis on both ‘ancient’ and ‘literature’, is complicated and typically requires many times the number of examples we are left with in order to lower the confidence intervals in statistical analysis. On the
From the data and simple statistical analysis in Table 6 we may draw two conclusions: first, there is a noticeable increase in the preference for SV order in these texts; and, second, Esther patterns towards the end of the diffusion within the biblical corpus.

5. Conclusion: Finding Esther ...

In conclusion, we concur with Elias Bickerman (1967) that Esther appears to be a strange book, though our reasons are different than Bickerman’s. On first, and second, and even third glances, the language of the book presents a confusing profile: is it an earlier text, like Genesis, a slightly later text, like Nehemiah, or a much later text, like the Mishnah?

In our study, what has become clear is that Esther shares a number of features with both earlier and later biblical texts. The former is not surprising, since strong linguistic continuity is a prerequisite for identifying a later stage of a language as the same essential language as earlier forms. What precisely, then, do the “later” features tell us about the book? For instance, the Persian words tell us that the book was not composed before the Persian period, but these data do not exclude a Hellenistic period origin. Moreover, the use of Persian words appear to reflect the author’s intended audience and the creation of a realistic Persian court setting. Beyond the specific lexical items, though, there do not appear to be any further contact-induced changes, such as evidence of influence on the grammatical structure, or idioms that reflect a Persian linguistic origin. So, the book is firmly Hebrew but with a Persian “bouquet.”

Similarly, with regard to Aramaic, we see clear loanwords and so evidence of contact-induced change. But given the history of the Levant and the Aramean kingdoms to the north of Israel in addition to the status of Aramaic in the Neo-Babylonian and Persian empires, we expect to see some Aramaic loanwords. However, the number of

other hand, for Daniel the explanation is decidedly complicated: the Hebrew of the book is heavily influenced by Aramaic syntax, which in the Persian period was verb-final. In a careful study of the syntax of the Hebrew portions, Jones (2012) concluded that Daniel exhibits word order patterns that have no parallel anywhere else in ancient Hebrew. He concluded that the Hebrew has a basic SV order, but that can be obscured by “the overzealous avoidance of verb-final clauses that overrides this preference for SV order is a case where the author is writing in a style of Hebrew that can best be called ‘anti-Aramaic’” (2012: 22). From this, Jones also concluded that the author of the Hebrew portions was a native Aramaic speaker with non-native knowledge of Hebrew. This kind of complication with the Daniel data necessitates its marginalization as primary evidence in the study of word order patterns and change.

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Aramaic loanwords suggests a highly intense contact situation, which obliquely confirms the book’s origin in a diaspora setting.

The grammatical evidence for change, while much less than Bergey (1983) proposed, still points to a relative position of Esther as one of the later texts in the biblical corpus. The book is often situated near Nehemiah and the non-biblical books, Ben Sira, sometimes Qumran, and even the Mishnah. At the same time, the word order features suggest the grammar of Esther was not quite as developed as early rabbinic Hebrew and patterns not too much differently than a number of post-exilic biblical books. All in all, Esther simply stands in the natural linguistic sequence of Hebrew as it continued to change in the Second Temple period.

Ours is not a provocative conclusion, but when theoretically grounded and methodologically rigorous analysis refines but does not invalidate the conclusions of past scholarship, we increase our confidence that Hebrew studies has not totally been misguided as some recent challenges have suggested. And for Esther, we can look at the book and say,

🎶 Hello, Esther! Well, hello, Esther!
🎶 It’s so nice to have you back where you belong!
## Appendix A: Bergey 1983—Features Salient to Dating Esther (w/modification)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lexemes</th>
<th>Esth</th>
<th>Earlier Feature</th>
<th>Jer</th>
<th>Ezek</th>
<th>Dan</th>
<th>Ezra</th>
<th>Neh</th>
<th>Chr</th>
<th>DSS</th>
<th>MH</th>
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<td><strong>Morphology</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>g1</td>
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<td>x</td>
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Thomason, Sarah Grey.  

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