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The Archetype of Hero, Hidden Hero and Anti-Hero in *the Book of Esther* in the Light of Mesopotamian Myths

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This paper explores the presence of certain archetypes, specifically the hero, the hidden hero and the anti-hero in the Book of Esther and analyses them within the context of Mesopotamian myths. The Book of Esther has a complex narrative where characters such as Esther, Mordecai, Haman embody the distinct archetypal roles that resonate (or not) with traditional literary models. Esther emerges as a hidden hero who seems passive, but eventually uses the royal influence to save her people from destruction. This interference seems similar to the figure of Ishtar in Eastern mythology; she often intervened in the course of events or, on the contrary, determined a chain of events. Mordecai, on the other hand, reflects both the archetype of the wise counsellor and the hero (or, more likely, the hidden hero). His loyalty and strategic thinking drastically contribute to the reversal of power. His role can be compared to that of Marduk in the Enuma Elish, where strategic actions lead to the triumph of order over chaos. Meanwhile, Haman serves as the anti-hero (or villain) and his evil ambition ultimately brings about his downfall. This theme is mirrored in Mesopotamian literature through characters like Qingu, whose aspirations threaten the divine order. However, those are thwarted in the end. This study aims at revealing a deeper understanding concerning the story and the character development. The comparisons highlight the common literary motifs shared between Esther and Ancient Near Eastern literature, particularly the roles of heroism, destiny and reversal of fortune.

Keywords: *Esther*, *hero*, *archetype*, *myths*, *Mesopotamia*

Introduction

The study of archetypes in literature requires, first and foremost, a symbolic[1] and at the same time methodical approach to texts. Characters do not remain mere fictional creations, but become the expression of universal patterns of behaviour, mentality or destiny. The notions of "hero", "anti-hero" and "hidden hero" align with this hermeneutic approach applicable to *Esther*. The emphasis shifts from historical verisimilitude, more precisely, from the treatment of the characters in terms of their historical plausibility[2], to their narrative and symbolic configuration. In other words, the focus moves to how these textual actors are constructed within the story and what role they play in the unfolding events.

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[1]Northrop Frye noted that we usually speak of "symbolism" when we think of learned cultural archetypes or of conventional associations, "as of white with purity or green with jealousy" – N. Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957, 102.
[2]In other terms, treating the characters as real figures from the past.

The hero archetype[3] is omnipresent in world literature. Broadly speaking, it is defined by a central figure who undergoes a transformative path, frequently transitioning from anonymity to glory, from weakness to power, and ultimately making a decisive contribution to the restoration of order within the narrative. Joseph Campbell systematized[4] this journey in the context of his famous theory, "the hero's journey" ("monomyth"), which has been adopted and subsequently disseminated throughout the scholarly literature; according to this theory, the monomyth is an "amplification of the formula represented in the rites of passage: *separation – initiation – return*"[5]. In essence, the hero either embarks deliberately or is driven by necessity or external forces in search of adventure, encountering hostile presences along the way that must be overcome or appeased in order to proceed. This threshold into the unfamiliar leads the hero on a path where he encounters resistance, thus being tested and possibly receiving some help in key situations. In the climax, the moment of confrontation and the peak of the ordeal, from which he emerges victorious, the hero receives his reward. The triumph may be represented by marriage ("holy union"), recognition by the father-creator, or it may be his own apotheosis. His return (somehow from the transcendent plane) to his own world brings a kind of salvation (the elixir) or resurrection[6].

In "Campbellian" terms, if we consider the case of Queen Esther, she follows a different kind of heroic path: she is not summoned to the unknown, but rather to the centre of power (*i.e.* in plain sight), and her trials are strategic rather than initiatory. However, her journey somewhat follows the pattern of separation, confrontation and transformative return, including going through the initiation of court life, offering salvation not to herself, but to her people.

At the same time, Carl Jung proposed a symbolic understanding of archetypes, which he interpreted as manifestations of the collective unconscious. Among these, the concept of the hero has played an essential role in the history of Jungian psychology[7]. This perspective, even if derived from another area of study, offers additional meanings to literary interpretation. It enables the identification of recurrent phrases or structures that no longer relate exclusively to the author's intention or the cultural specificity of the period, but rather to a universal symbolic background that transcends these concepts. Thus, archetypes act as guiding structures around which the story's conflicts and resolutions take form. They are, in a way, landmarks in the construction of a literary text. In *Esther*, this approach allows for a deeper exploration of the characters' symbolic functions, not only within the narrative itself, but also in relation to universal patterns that extend even beyond the myths of the ancient world. For instance, the elevation of Esther from marginal figure to saviour

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[3]*The archetype* can be defined as a concept that explores the fundamental human traits; to be more precise, it studies the universal commonalities inherited by all human beings, regardless of their colour, race, cultural practices and belief system – V. Francis, "Literary Archetypes: The Notion and Application", *Journal of Ecohumanism* 4, no. 1 (2025): 5030.

[4]J. Campbell, The Hero With a Thousand Faces, 2nd ed., Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968.

[5]Ibid, 30.

[6]Ibid, 245, 246.

[7]M.L. Byrne, "Heroes and Jungians", *The San Francisco Jung Institute Library Journal* 18, no. 3 (2000): 13.

of her people reflects a heroic path common to a universal scenario, where an unexpected individual rises to heroism in times of crisis.

In the literature of the ancient Near East, particularly within the Mesopotamian mythological corpus, one encounters a tremendous amount of such archetypal patterns. They are often invested with cosmic, universal dimensions. The hero is most often a demiurge (*e.g.* Marduk), a saviour deity (Enki), an embodiment of love, passion and war (Ishtar), while the antagonist, the anti-hero, is associated with chaos, disorder or even usurpation at the cosmic level (Tiamat, Qingu, etc.)[8]. The texts of oriental literature from South-West Asia not only encompass primordial myths, often referred to as "founding myths", but also metaphors with subtle meanings, of heroism, power, justice, etc.

Considering this background, a question arises: how does the *Book of Esther*, a text belonging to the corpus of biblical writings, with a complex narrative architecture, fit into the tradition of archetypal models? Far from being a simple historical or hagiographical narrative, the book is more akin to a court novel with dramatic nuances[9]; the manifestations of power, collective salvation and identity mechanisms unfold within the context of a latent conflict. To be more precise, a conflict that lies on the line between two incompatible worlds: the imperial Persian world, with its rigid hierarchies, its impersonal protocol and the absolutist logic of royal decrees, and on the other hand, the Jewish world, with its particular customs, which is permanently marginalized and only becomes visible in moments of crisis. The tensions are symbolic, through ambiguities of status (Esther is queen, but conceals her Jewish origin), through personal rivalries with historical and generational echoes[10] (Haman vs. Mordecai), but, above all, through the fact that identity is permanently hidden or revealed. Therefore, the conflict is between the visible and the invisible, between the periphery and the centre, between the minority and the dominant authority or its representatives. It is through this conflict that the entire structure of the story is shaped and the course of the action is determined.

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[8]In this sense, N. Frye, J. MacPherson, Biblical and Classical Myths: The Mythological Framework of Western Culture, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004, 277, 278. The authors argue that myth is the most ancient kind of story-telling, relying more on celestial and infernal settings than modern fiction. Its characters, as we have also suggested, are mainly either gods, or heroes with powers that are lesser, but nevertheless superhuman.

[9]However, given the complexity of the work, we would rather argue that *Esther* is an oriental story; in some respects, the book fits into biblical patterns: it borrows specific motifs and symbols, such as fasting, the destiny of the Jewish community, and there are also intertextual patterns (Esther and Mordecai's connection to Saul, in the Benjaminite line – *Esther* 2:5), and in others, into the literary tradition of the ancient Near East (the royal court topos, the motif of the monarch with absolute power, etc.). Yitzhak Berger refers to the genealogical line of Benjamin, from which Mordecai and Esther on the one hand, and Saul on the other, originated. *The Book of Esther* emphasizes the connection of Haman ("the Agagite" – *Esther* 3:1) with the Amalekites and, in a way, through Esther's actions, illustrates the rehabilitation of the Benjaminite line in relation to the disobedience and imperfections of Saul's actions – Y. Berger, "Esther and Benjaminite Royalty: A Study in Inner-Biblical Allusion", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 129, no. 4 (2010): 625, 628-630.

[10]Haman, being called an "Agagite" in *Esther* 3:1, is indicated to be of Amalekite origin, since Agag had been their king. The Amalekites had been in conflict with the Jews since the time of Samuel and Saul – J. Magonet, "The God who Hides: Some Jewish Responses to the Book of Esther", *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 47, no. 1 (2014): 113, 114.

The *Book of Esther*[11] does not, therefore, conform entirely to a traditional biblical model of "theological narrative", but neither does it entirely exclude this side of it[12]; rather, we can affirm that it reconfigures a certain type of oriental story in which motifs and symbols from Mesopotamian and Persian myths and epics are recognizable. In this already outlined framework, the characters seem to be deliberately, strategically constructed around literary functions, which can be considered, at the same time and to the same extent, archetypal models (the hero, the discreet hero, the anti-hero). Consequently, Esther can be seen in a double hypostasis: as a hidden heroine, considering the anonymization of her Jewish origin, and later as a revealed saviour, Mordecai as a wise hero and Haman as an anti-hero with a tragic ending. All these elements make *Esther* function as a text with archetypal value.

The theme is philologically fertile. The title of the article already reflects a well-defined triple thematic axis: the hero, the hidden hero and the anti-hero in the *Book of Esther*, all analysed in parallel with Mesopotamian writings and myths. The aim of the study is to identify the narrative function of these archetypes and to reveal common motifs between the biblical text and the literary tradition of the ancient Near East. It is important to note that archetypal patterns are not only confined to the ancient literary imaginary; their presence transcends time and culture, offering insights into identity, morality, and social values. Also, the analysis of these archetypes is relevant for contemporary or future studies[13], as it helps to understand the construction of characters from the point of view of an ancient literary continuum.

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[11]We can affirm that *Esther* participates in a mythical, archetypal tradition, but also that it transposes these models into its own register, using dramatic tensions and certain motifs from Mesopotamian myths in a literary complex manner.

[12]It should be pointed out that the style of *Esther* is not entirely unique in the biblical tradition, in the sense that some of its peculiarities are found in other biblical writings. As for the rich descriptive style specific to *Esther*, it has been said in the scholarly literature that it is unmatched, with one possible exception, the *Book of Daniel* – see D.J. Zucker, "The Importance of Being Esther: Rabbis, Canonicity, Problems and Possibilities", *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 47, no. 1 (2014): 103. Adele Berlin mentions the same work as a text comparable to *Esther*, to which she adds other books, such as *Judith* or *Tobit* – A. Berlin, "The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, no. 1 (2001): 8. Even in terms of their genre, *Esther* and *Daniel* are sometimes considered together, even though there is no clear consensus that *Esther* fits entirely – or exclusively – into the genre known as the *diasporic novella*. Nevertheless, both have been referred to in some scholarship studies as belonging to this literary category. In this regard, see M.L Mills, "Household and Table: Diasporic Boundaries in Daniel and Esther", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 68, no. 3 (2006): 408. Likewise, when the structure of the Old Testament is discussed in the scholarly literature, it has been said that the books of the Old Testament fall into two great cycles, with the exception of "the two very late independent books, *Esther* and *Daniel*" – M.L. West, The East Face of Helicon, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 95. In this case as well the two books are considered together, standing out as a distinct pair. This aspect does not entirely detract from the unique elements of the *Book of Esther*, but the common traits with the biblical tradition in which it is included must also be considered.

[13]In support of this idea, see also El-S. El-Aswad, Creation Myth: Cosmogony and Cosmology. Motifs A600–A899. In J. Garry, H.M. El-Shamy (eds.), 24-31. *Archetypes and Motifs in Folklore and Literature: A Handbook*, London: M. E. Sharpe, 2005, 28 (a reference is also made to B.L. Knapp, A Jungian Approach to Literature, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University, 1984). The author suggests that archetypal patterns implicit in creation myths are not restricted to archaic or

Methodology

From a methodological point of view, the present study distances itself from classical interpretations or exegeses. We adopted a philological comparative perspective, focusing primarily on archetypes and, secondarily, on motifs, tropes, and functions of characters in the *Book of Esther*[14] and Mesopotamian literature. This method aligns with the recent directions in comparative literature and intertextuality studies, which emphasize the fluidity of motifs across civilizations.

I firstly addressed the concepts used in the paper, I talked about the "Campbellian" theory of the "monomyth", but I also considered the Jungian view of archetypes. I explained why the *Book of Esther* functions as a work of archetypal value and how it integrates both biblical and Ancient Near Eastern elements or nuances. In all this endeavour I used sources from the Mesopotamian literary tradition to make parallels between the characters and their functions specific to this corpus, in relation to the main characters in the *Book of Esther*.

The aim is not to demonstrate a direct influence between the ancient Near Eastern corpus and the *Book of Esther*, but rather to highlight literary and cultural continuity in the way certain typologies and situations are thematised. Archetypes are, hence, instruments for illustrating the deep complexity of the text and its echoes from the literary tradition of the region.

In other words, they connect the reader to a vast literary imaginary, in which the hero, the hidden hero and the anti-hero are not merely characters, but expressions of recurrent narrative (and cultural, more generally) patterns, charged with cultural memory, which go beyond the immediate context of the writing and subtly reactivate remnants of a myth-poetic tradition common to the ancient world. In this sense, the study not only examines several philological aspects of the book, but also contributes to contemporary academic understandings concerning the transcultural mobility of mythic patterns, with particular attention to the heroic traits.

Comparative Studies. Literature Review

The figure of Esther and Mordecai reinterprets, in a specific key, the heroic models established in Mesopotamian literature, such as Gilgamesh, Ishtar or Atrahasis. The latter are built on traits such as physical strength, a spirit of adventure and a tendency to defy the cosmic and social order; for example, Gilgamesh, in the

folk cultures. These patterns appear in modern elite literature and science fiction. All forms of literature display recurrent themes or archetypes, showing how contemporary writers have reimagined ancient myths to reflect the values and aspirations of modern culture. However, the assertion can be extended not only to creation myths, but to myths in general. Thus, it is important not to overlook this dimension of archetypal patterns, as scholars can employ it in their studies. This approach may reveal underlying layers in literary analysis.

[14]In this study, we opted to analyse and contextualize the Hebrew version of the *Book of Esther*. While preparing the article, we consulted several English translations of the Masoretic text; however, due to its precision, the primary source, including for the reproduced quotations, remains the Jewish Publication Society (ed.), Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text, 1988.

epic that bears his name, is presented as a king of extraordinary power, through his desire to transcend his human condition and his tyrannical behaviour, which is particularly evident in the exposition. He breaks the rules set by the gods and the community. This reflects a tension between individual aspiration and the balance imposed at cosmic and, consequently, terrestrial level.

> "In those days, there reigned in Uruk, girded with walls,/a despot named Gilgamesh, famous for his strength,/who terrorized his subjects, none of whom could confront him (…)"[15].

In relation to Mesopotamian heroines (such as Ishtar/Inanna), Esther behaves, at least initially, as a "civil" heroic character, since her actions throughout the course of events are nonviolent, relying on diplomacy, subtle persuasion and, at the same time, discretion. Unlike Inanna, whose descent into the Netherworld involves a violent confrontation with Ereshkigal and the forces of the world led by her[16], Esther practices a strategy of inner resilience and discreet intervention. Esther does not defy a particular order of the world, of the universe, but works within it in order to achieve justice. Moreover, whereas Mesopotamian heroines have a divine or semi-divine status, Esther is deeply rooted in the human condition. She does not have the status of a deity. This hypothesis remains nuanced, however, since her self-control, fasting and recourse to a certain type of ritual humility indicate *a spiritual dimension of her own*, and different from that associated with Mesopotamian heroines.

Despite the absence of an obvious divine nature, as in the case of the goddess Ishtar, Esther possesses an incredible spiritual power; it is not one that manifests itself outwardly, not a colossal power, as depicted in Mesopotamian mythology, but a subtle and intrinsic one, which expresses itself through self-control, discreet interventions, and political strategies[17]. In "The Descent of the Goddess Ishtar/ Inanna into the Underworld" we observe how the goddess Ishtar/Inanna must pass through several gates, each time relinquishing an ornament or a piece of clothing[18]. This act of surrender seems to symbolise the renunciation of certain divine attributes. In other words, this implies a (forced) humiliation of the goddess. Similarly, in the *Book of Esther*, Queen Esther is forced by circumstances to fast and humble herself. From the interpretation of chapter 5, verse 1, where it is stated that she appears before Ahasuerus in royal apparel, it is suggested that, on fasting days prior to this, she had refrained from wearing her royal garments:

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[15]Translated from French. La Légende de Gilgamesh (présentée et retranscrite par Gérard Chaliand), Paris: Pocket, 2021, 18.

[16]R.M. van Dijk-Coombes, "Lady of battle, his beloved spouse: The relationship between the body of Inana/Ištar and her spheres of war and love from the Jemdet Nasr to the old Babylonian period", *Die Welt Des Orients* 50, no. 1 (2020): 146, 147, 172.

[17]D. Oren, "Esther – The Jewish Queen of Persia", *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 18 (2009): 140.

[18]A. Pinker, "Descent of the Goddess Ishtar to the Netherworld and Nahum II 8", *Vetus Testamentum* 55, no. 1 (2005): 96-98. The author notes that the degradation and fall of the goddess are closely linked to the crisis and the collapse of Nineveh.

> "*On the third day, Esther put on royal apparel* and stood in the inner court of the king's palace, facing the king's palace, while the king was sitting on his royal throne room facing the entrance of the palace" (*Esther* 5:1).

In both situations we encounter the idea of a relinquishment of status, a progressive loss of power and the growth of a certain vulnerability. Ishtar, having reached the last gate, completely naked, suggests the loss of any form of authority or strength. Both figures are, hence, facing a process of humbling, but in different ways: Esther adopts an inner spiritual discipline, while Ishtar/Inanna is subjected to a symbolic "fall", given the underworld context. But the transformation they undergo leads to a different outcome.

Esther can be seen as the type of group saviour, and therefore possesses different traits from the goddess Ishtar or the male mythical heroes, some of them violent. Her actions focus on rescuing a large group of people, rather than on acquiring her own desires, as noted in the scholarly literature[19]. Esther is not defined by hostility or physical strength, but by characteristics such as diplomacy, humility and, above all, self-sacrifice. As a consequence, she seems to portray a new and distinct type of hero, one who works from the shadows, not seeking personal glory, but only the fulfilment of a higher purpose, the salvation of the people of her origin.

In contrast to the goddess Ishtar, who in Mesopotamian mythology often imposes herself through destruction, revenge and force, Esther uses "discreet" weapons. As the goddess of love and war, Ishtar descends into the Underworld in full force and symbolic violence, passing gate after gate[20]. Gradually, as indicated above, she loses the objects of divine status. She did not seek to save a group of people, but had a much more complex and personal relationship with both the other gods (Ereshkigal being her sister) and the forces of Underworld. Thus, Ishtar is a deity who oscillates between love and destruction, between power and vulnerability. Esther, on the other hand, does not follow such a path, her actions consisting of inner and outer forms of resilience. Fasting, humility are gestures by which she puts herself at the service of higher forces and submits to a divine plan involving personal sacrifice. Instead of being an impulsive or aggressive character, Esther is patient and silent. When she risks her life in front of King Ahasuerus, it is not out of bravery, but an act of courage. The balance on which Esther relies upon lies at the intersection of fragility and inner strength. She is a heroine who works with, through and for people, not against them. Her typology seems to be that of a community saviour, an alternative pattern to the models existing up to that time.

By the end of the book, however, the protagonist's apparent passivity disappears and the heroic role is progressively activated. Her actions become direct and involve a form of justice that is not altogether free from hostility. In *Esther* 7:6, she points directly at Haman, knowing that King Ahasuerus will punish him, and in *Esther* 9:12-14, she proposes the hanging of Haman's children. This act can be seen as one of retributive justice; it is not a violent physical action directed against someone in the sense of an attack, an exchange of force, but takes the form of condemnation. In

[19]In this regard, see K. McGeough, "Esther the Hero: Going beyond 'Wisdom' in Heroic Narratives", *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 70, no. 1 (2008): 45.
[20]Pinker, "Descent of the Goddess Ishtar to the Netherworld and Nahum II 8", 97.

the face of a major threat to her people, Esther is forced to resort to all she could in the name of restoring order and justice.

In this sense, however, another connection can be observed between Esther and Ishtar, even if the meanings of the actions of the two are different and the context is entirely different. Indeed, in Esther emerges, by the end of the book, a kind of "remnant" of the goddess Ishtar, namely, her dynamic, active, fearless character. Nevertheless, it should be noted that Esther's actions are motivated by needs that go beyond her own person, specifically to save an entire minority in the Persian Empire. This contrasts with the often capricious and sometimes destructive nature of the goddess. We can thus emphasize that there is a certain analogy between the roles that both Queen Esther and the goddess Ishtar play as agents of change and restoration of balance in their own universe.

From the perspective of her evolution throughout the narrative, and in light of the aforementioned considerations, Esther can be seen as the type of the hidden heroine, since a large part of her actions are characterized by discretion and prudence. Added to this, of course, is her subtle ability to influence those around her. Unlike traditional mythical heroes, who assert themselves through overt acts of bravery and strength, Esther exercises her heroism through strategic silence, concealing her identity and revealing it at the opportune moment. The heroic character, however, is on full display at the climax of the book: Esther publicly assumes her identity and the cause of her people, risks her life in front of King Ahasuerus, and orchestrates several banquets and the rescue of the Jewish community in the Persian diaspora. Her transition from covert to overt heroism reinforces the complexity of her character. It distances her from established heroic models and even from some conventional biblical patterns. However, there are certain shades of Mesopotamian heroic figures in her personality: her trenchant and punitive character towards Haman resonates to some extent with the vindictive dimension of the goddess Ishtar[21]; yet Esther does not exhaustively take up such traits, but adapts them into a completely different ethical and spiritual framework. Esther refuses the path of direct violence, and her actions are limited to rescuing the Jewish community within the vast expanse of the Achaemenid Empire. Therefore, typologically, Esther seems to be a subtle blend of a heroine with innovative actions, but in which echoes and reinterpretations of older models can be observed. Ultimately, the literary vision of the work is intended to be less confrontational and more spiritually profound. The idea of heroism is thus given these nuances of depth,

[21]From another point of view, Esther is similar to Ishtar not only in the complexity of her feminine figure, but also in the ambiguity of her actions, of her strategy in the narrative. Her relationship with King Ahasuerus is not a romantic one in the classical sense, but rather a relationship of discreet political influence. Therefore, we are looking at a certain bargaining and symbolic appropriation of authority from within, which brings to mind certain destabilizing strategies of the goddess Ishtar (such as descending into the Underworld). In contrast, Queen Vashti, who explicitly disobeys without such a strategy, is removed from her position. Esther seems to follow a "hidden hero" trope, recognizable also in Mesopotamian literature. In this sense, gods and demigods sometimes masked their nature or intentions (a form of divine camouflage), a relevant example being the discreet appearances of the god Enki in the various epics, as well as his subtle insinuations in different contexts (*infra*).

of spirituality, even if the Masoretic text does not, in the most eloquent way, refer to the type of conventional biblical spirituality.

Esther's example of wisdom and action from the shadows is not a unique one, as it is also found in Mesopotamian mythology, for example in the figure of the god Enki. He is a character, a distinctive figure not necessarily in strength, but in wisdom, cunning and subtlety. The god Enki intervenes mainly indirectly, through messengers or under the guise of silence, avoiding overt exposure and preferring the strategy of discreet influence[22]. A similar trait can also be observed in the figure of Mordecai, whose position as a shadowy advisor places him in a specific heroic context: that of the hidden hero, whose loyalty and vision silently shape the course of collective destiny.

In general, looking at the whole narrative and his involvement in its events, Mordecai seems to assume a dual function: that of a wise counsellor and that of the "catalyst" in the salvation of the Jewish community within the Achaemenid Empire. If the god Enki in Mesopotamian myths sometimes acts through symbolic encodings and intermediary elements (such as the warning conveyed through the "reed wall" in the "Epic of Atrahasis"), Mordecai intervenes without directly taking control of events (by revealing the plot against King Ahasuerus – *Esther* 2:21-23, by insisting on Esther's involvement – *Esther* 4:13-14, and by behaving morally and with dignity towards Haman and humbly towards God).

His character does not fully conform to the classical Mesopotamian heroic pattern (warlike, violent, domineering), but neither does it fully conform to the traditional biblical, prophetic one. Mordecai combines within himself elements of the humble and principled sage, the courageous and providential counsellor. Similar to Enki, Mordecai seems to understand the dynamics of power, and when it is corrupted, he realizes how to appropriate it from within to restore the natural order. He need not confront it directly, aggressively, but at most demonstratively, as in the situation when he refused to bow to Haman – *Esther* 3:2. Even his refusal to bow to Haman can be interpreted as a form of silent resistance, despite the fact that it generates an explosive conflict. This approach creates a kind of "camouflage pattern", also found in the case of Esther; in other words, it outlines the idea of the hero who is unrevealed and at the same time delayed in dynamic actions. This type of behaviour seems similar to that of the god Enki, who insinuates himself through mental agility, cunning and wisdom, and not necessarily through brute force.

In the symbolic realm, Mordecai brings together the distinctive features of several Eastern mythical figures. These include the god Marduk, the triumphant deity of order in "Enuma Elish". Although Mordecai does not act through military or physical force of any kind, he can be seen as an architect behind the curtain, acting for the collective salvation of the Jews. He makes a decisive contribution to reversing the destiny of an entire people, like Marduk, who in the cosmogonic epic of creation, "Enuma Elish", succeeds in bringing order out of chaos through strategy

[22]For example, as indicated in the scholarly literature, in the "Epic of Atrahasis", the god Enki communicates to Atrahasis – from behind and through a reed wall – information to Atrahasis on how to save himself from the flood – M. Weinfeld, "Partition, Partition; Wall, Wall, Listen". "Leaking" the Divine Secret to Someone Behind the Curtain", *Archiv Für Orientforschung* 44/45 (1997): 222.

and wisdom. At the same time, and this cannot be easily overlooked, his name, Mordecai, phonetically and etymologically refers to Marduk[23]. This aspect may suggest a literary intention to transform the godly (divine) model into a character who is human in nature, but nevertheless in a relationship with the divine. Both are figures of leaders who become central only at the moment of crisis, assuming a role of saviour not immediately through an imposing and ceremonial presence, but through gradually obtained authority, skill, agility and perseverance.

Mordecai can be seen as a character situated at the crossroads between advisor, counsellor, and mythical hero – on the borderline between loyalty, wisdom, and destiny. Naturally, he demonstrates strategic thinking within the context of a constant tension between anonymity and recognition; it is Mordecai himself who advised Esther not to reveal her background and Jewish identity – *Esther* 2:10. This aspect is reiterated in *Esther* 2:20: "But Esther still did not reveal her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had instructed her (...)", precisely to emphasize the importance of this action. This precaution not only reveals Mordecai's wisdom, but also his lucid awareness of the tense atmosphere within the evidently cosmopolitan space of the ancient Iranian Empire. In such a setting, ethnic hierarchies and rivalries inevitably and invariably emerge – such as those between the Jews and the Amalekites, represented respectively by Mordecai and Haman. Beyond the apparent administrative neutrality at the level of the imperial court, one could discern the presence of potential enemies of the people of Israel, which justified the concealment of identity. The strategy was not only a matter of survival, but also a subtle political tactic – hiding one's origins in order to fulfil one's destiny at decisive moments.

In scholarly literature, it has been noted that Mordecai appears to be a secondary figure, but in actual fact, he represents a pivotal agent of salvation[24]; in the same way as the god Marduk, he carries out each action gradually, through wisdom and humility (for instance, he dresses in sackcloth and ashes – *Esther* 4:1 – to evoke compassion and attract the support of providence). The interpretation of *Esther* 6:3 ("'What honour or advancement has been conferred on Mordecai for this?' the king inquired. 'Nothing at all has been done for him', replied the king's attendants") reflects Mordecai's discreetly heroic attitude – specifically, his refusal of honours and his lack of any request for immediate reward after uncovering the plot against the Persian king. His silence regarding recognition can be seen both as a sign of loyalty and humility, and as part of a narrative construction. In the latter sense, it

[23]In the scholarly literature, the parallel between the "Enuma Elish" and the *Book of Esther* has also been analysed, along with the corresponding names "Mordecai - Marduk" and "Esther - Ishtar". Adam Silverstein highlights the influence of Babylonian writings – including the "Enuma Elish" – on the text of *Esther*. We agree that the impact of this literary tradition, and of this epic in particular, is significant; however, this does not affect the originality of the work, as it may simply reflect a subconscious anchoring in ancient literature – in this regard, see A. Silverstein, "The Book of Esther and the 'Enūma Elish'", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 69, no. 2 (2006): 223.

[24]A. Silverstein, "The Book of Esther and the 'Enūma Elish'", 212-214. The author emphasizes that Mordecai holds – or ought to hold – the primacy in the *Book of Esther*, presenting several arguments in support of this view. He also contends that the foundational influences on the narrative derive from an epic centred on the god Marduk. We do not fully concur with this perspective, as the decisive role in the salvation of the Jewish people ultimately belongs to Esther, even though it is Mordecai who encourages her to take action.

serves to amplify the significance of the King Ahasuerus's dream and revelation, while also marking the turning point in the dramatic reversal of fates – Mordecai ultimately receiving the honours and prestige instead of Haman.

The final triumph is less about physical confrontation and more about a reconfiguration of power, from which it follows that, within this framework, Mordecai emerges as an agent of restored justice and balance. At the same time, his close relationship with his cousin Esther implies a deliberate orchestration of events, one that almost assumes the role of a demiurge. Or rather, it could be said that their actions were prompted and sustained by providence. This careful orchestration, in which human agency appears to be guided by a higher force, resonates with the Mesopotamian tradition wherein gods such as Enki intervene subtly, through indirect means, on behalf of humankind.

In contrast to Mordecai and Queen Esther, Haman takes shape as an anti-hero – a negative character, an antagonist driven by ambition and pride, by the illusion of controlling destiny and by cruelty. He embodies the type of the failed hero: one who aspires to the highest honours (*Esther* 6:6), to recognition and glory, yet whose intentions are fundamentally tainted by arrogance and hatred. In this regard, Haman can be interpreted as a false hero, possessing authoritarian traits and holding high status and social rank, yet lacking any of the traditional heroic virtues. His narrative arc recalls myths such as that of Qingu, a character in the "Enuma Elish", who, endowed with the Tablets of Destiny[25], becomes a symbol of cosmic chaos. Ultimately, he is defeated by Marduk, the epic's hero and restorer of universal order. Like Qingu, Haman projects himself as an agent of imperial reordering, only to fall victim, in the end, to his own *hybris*.

The theme of the reversal from glory to ridicule, or from the status of a high-ranking official to being hanged on the very gallows prepared for his rival – in other words, on the instrument of his own vengeance – works, in his case, as a paradigmatic illustration of mythical downfall. This entire decline is further intensified by the ironies employed by the author of the book, especially the irony of fate. In this case, chance or destiny seems to act as an autonomous narrative force. Indeed, it could be considered a discreet God, acting as a superior will over Haman, shattering his destructive aspirations. The imbalance caused by a genocide in the truest sense of the word could not be tolerated, thus reaffirming the natural order of things, with the Jews gaining the right to defend themselves – *Esther* 8:11. Haman, therefore, is an agent of imbalance, hatred, and division. Of course, the contrast between him and Mordecai (antithesis) and Esther is evident.

The image of the rope or, more precisely, the gallows prepared by Haman for Mordecai, which ultimately becomes fatal to him (*Esther* 7:10), constitutes the symbol of the reversal of destiny, as well as tragic irony. Moreover, it represents a literary trope that transcends mere physical punishment, as it visually marks the total downfall of a character whose image was entirely built on the idea of control, power, and domination. In the literature of the Ancient Near East, such instruments of

[25]Both the Tablets in the "Enuma Elish" and the lots (*purim*) in the *Book of Esther* function as symbols – more precisely, as instruments of fate and power. Adam Silverstein, on the other hand, draws a parallel between the Tablets and the king's ring in his examination of this motif – A. Silverstein, "The Book of Esther and the 'Enūma Elish'", 220.

punishment or triumph could become symbols of one's own downfall. In the case of Qingu, his possession of the Tablets of Destiny gives him the illusion of absolute sovereignty. However, they are eventually taken from him by Marduk, after which his blood is used to create humans – a degrading end for someone who sought to rule the world. Similarly, in the "Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld", the goddess experiences a moment of weakness and forced humiliation in the Netherworld, where she is stripped of all her objects and garments, and, consequently, her powers. All these are taken from her, one by one, in a symbolic process of power depletion that overturns her initial status. Ultimately, she is defeated and hung on a hook[26], reduced to silence until the eventual restoration of her initial situation. Such images of characters suspended in the air (even in the literal, visual sense) and of the reversal of glory to humiliation are recurrent in the ancient literature of the Near East. It is not known why exactly Ishtar set out to dethrone her sister from the Underworld, Ereshkigal, but her hostile intentions end in her own defeat, just as Haman, who intended to destroy his rival and his entire people, is ultimately defeated, ironically, by his own instrument of death.

Thus, for Haman, the gallows becomes a "metonym of his fall", as it undermines his ambition to reorder the world according to his own pride. It is, therefore, a symbolic lesson about the failure to reconfigure the world according to immoral, cruel, and inappropriate principles, a recurring motif, in fact, under various forms, in the literary tradition of the ancient Near East.

In conclusion, the three figures discussed – the hidden and revealed hero (Esther), the wise, dignified, and discreet hero (Mordecai), and the anti-hero (Haman) – can be understood as literary reinterpretations of archetypes found in Mesopotamian tradition (*e.g.* through the characters mentioned above: Ishtar, Marduk, Enki, Qingu, etc.). These archetypes are not merely repeated and exposed as such, but resized, reconstructed, and reintroduced in a human social context, rather than a divine one. They carry a more pronounced ethical charge and are incorporated into a narrative that has multiple shades (various motifs), not limited to a single providential spectrum.

Conclusions

The *Book of Esther* reinterprets traditional archetypes of the ancient Near East, transposing them into a profoundly humanized narrative framework, with political and strategic accents, as well as elements of courtly storytelling, carnival-like motifs and parody. Heroism is no longer associated with brute force or cosmic-scale conflagrations; instead, it is transferred to the sphere of discreet actions, diplomatic wisdom and loyalty. Thus, in a sense, the warrior becomes a wise counsellor and mediator, the exposed brave one becomes the hidden hero, and victory is one of reason and collective resistance.

The Mesopotamian archetypes of the ordering hero and the chaotic anti-hero are reinterpreted in the *Book of Esther* in the light of human salvation, rather than

[26]R.M. van Dijk-Coombes, "Lady of battle, his beloved spouse: The relationship between the body of Inana/Ištar and her spheres of war and love from the Jemdet Nasr to the old Babylonian period", 147.

cosmic salvation. The theme of fate's reversal and the inversion of roles and power remains a central mechanism, common to both traditions, although the outcomes are relatively different: one is mythological, while the other has a largely secular character.

Finally, it must be noted that the comparative study reveals a subtle continuity of literary motifs at the boundary between biblical tradition and that of the ancient Near East, a transition from the mythic representation of universal order to a nuanced symbolism of collective destiny, justice, and quiet providence.

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