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The King's Sleep in *the Book of Esther*. Insomnia as a Turning Point in Ancient Texts

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The brief mention of the king's disturbed sleep in Esther 6:1 has sometimes been treated as a narrative device, one that simply sets the story's reversal in motion. This study revisits that moment by including it within the Near Eastern literary tradition. There, sleeplessness and troubled dreams often reveal a change from uncertainty to resolution. The sleep that "deserts" the king describes not necessarily an insomnia, but a state of unsettled consciousness, which is found between rest and awareness. That intermediate condition becomes the point of no return, where chance, memory and authority meet. The article advances by comparing this scene with similar motifs from other ancient texts, in which the sleep of gods and monarchs is disturbed on the eve of major events. In the Mesopotamian literary corpus, the interruption of sleep often illustrates the moment when disorder demands a rapid response. Esther reinterprets this ancient pattern in a more secular way. In this sense, no deity intervenes, yet the idea of miraculous coincidence remains. The Book of Esther reflects an ancient sense of the night, one in which darkness is seen as a time of transition and change. Ahasuerus' sleeplessness is not a simple narrative mechanism. More likely, it is a textual reminiscence of a Near Eastern view in which change arises from the stillness of the night.

Keywords: *Esther 6:1*, *Ahasuerus*, *sleepless night*, *insomnia*, *intertextuality*

Introduction

In many literary traditions of antiquity, episodes set at night, whether in the form of disturbing dreams or the inability to sleep, mark moments of transition, change, and the reconstruction of the narrative thread. In the *Book of Esther*[1], we find an eloquent example of this pattern: "That night, sleep deserted the king, and he ordered the book of records, the annals, to be brought; and it was read to the king" (*Esther* 6:1). This verse constitutes the narrative's turning point, as it sets in motion a series of events that lead to a reversal of the initial situation. More specifically, his sleeplessness prompts King Ahasuerus to consult the royal archives, requesting that the official records of his reign be read to him. In this nocturnal setting, marked by a restless conscience, the moment when Mordecai had foiled a plot against the king comes to light (*Esther* 2:21-23). The recollection of this act of loyalty is not without

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[1]The analysis focuses on the Hebrew version of the *Book of Esther* within the Masoretic textual tradition. Although several English translations were consulted during the research process, for the sake of coherence and philological accuracy all quotations are consistently taken from Jewish Publication Society (ed.), Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: The New JPS Translation according to the Traditional Hebrew Text, 1988.

consequences, as it leads to Mordecai's recognition and reward and triggers a series of changes that will overturn the balance of power at court, ultimately leading to the thwarting of Haman's plan and the salvation of the Jewish community. In other words, from a literary perspective, Ahasuerus's sleeplessness serves as the catalyst for a major plot twist that is decisive for the story's outcome.

Far from functioning solely as a simple literary device, the king's sleeplessness can be seen as an expression of a liminal state, a threshold situated between rest and active consciousness; in this intermediate state, marked by vulnerable trial but also by profound intuition, memory, chance, and royalty intersect. The concept of a "liminal state", or, rather, "liminality", originally formulated by Arnold van Gennep[2] and later developed by Victor Turner[3], refers to a transitional phase characterized by the temporary suspension of customary structures and an openness to transformation. In this sense, the troubled night of prolonged and restless vigil experienced by the king in the *Book of Esther* can be interpreted as a liminal moment in which his everyday reality no longer unfolds in the usual, recognizable way, and Ahasuerus is transported into a realm of his own memory, where the boundary between his nocturnal present and the earlier events of his reign becomes blurred, as if certain events from his reign still demand his attention.

It is important to emphasize that this transitional state should not be reduced to mere insomnia, as it involves a form of intermediate consciousness in which the king's nocturnal wakefulness opens access to the realm of memory and reflection on his personal past. However, the use of the term "insomnia" in the title of the article is deliberate, as it maintains a connection to the text's immediate literary level and to the way the scene is perceived at first glance, before being integrated into a much broader and considerably deeper interpretive framework. In this sense, "insomnia" serves as a descriptive point of departure, while the present analysis proposes moving beyond this strictly physiological reading in favor of an understanding of the king's condition as a transitory state of consciousness.

In this sense, the king's nocturnal state may also be interpreted through the notion of *anabasis*[4], understood here metaphorically as a movement of ascent in consciousness. His passage from disturbed rest to wakeful attention marks a gradual emergence into a heightened state of awareness. Situated at the threshold between dream and waking reality, the king becomes increasingly receptive to memory, recollection, and the unresolved moral obligation preserved in the royal chronicles. Within this framework, the nocturnal episode may be read as an inner elevation, from passive rest to awareness, from obscurity to recognition, and ultimately, from suspended consciousness to action. Such an interpretation complements the concept of „liminality" by emphasizing the dynamic character of the threshold state and its function as a transitional space through which the king moves toward a clearer apprehension of reality.

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[2]A. Van Gennep, The Rites of Passage, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960 (Original French Version: Les Rites de Passage, Paris: Émile Nourry, 1909).

[3]V. Turner, The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure, Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969, 94 *et seqq*.

[4]For the notion of *anabasis* (ἀνάβασις), denoting a "going up" or "ascent", see H.G. Liddell, R. Scott, H.S. Jones, A Greek-English Lexicon, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996, s.v. ἀνάβασις.

A brief psychoanalytic parallel may also be considered. Approaches associated with Freud and Jung assign particular significance to nocturnal mental activity and its relation to unconscious processes. Although Ahasuerus does not experience an actual dream, his position at the boundary between sleep and wakefulness may be approached, by analogy, as a state in which previously overlooked information and obligations return to the centre of conscious attention.

From a comparative perspective, such episodes are not isolated. Other biblical texts, such as the *Book of Daniel*, along with traditions from the ancient Near East and Greek literature (for example, the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, fragments from the works of Herodotus or Aeschylus), attest to a recurring association between a restless night and moments of decision or crisis. Without implying a direct connection, these parallels suggest the existence of a broader cultural pattern, in which sleep disturbance signifies the approach of a transformation that can no longer be prevented. This pattern can also be traced in later literary traditions, which presumably preserve an older conceptual core, such as *One Thousand and One Nights*. Taken together, these parallels go beyond the level of a literary motif and instead point to the *recurrence of a cultural image with archetypal connotations*: the restless night of a sovereign or a god as a precursor to a revelation or a plot twist.

The episode of Ahasuerus's sleeplessness has often been analyzed in the exegetical tradition[5] as more than a mere literary coincidence, being linked to the idea of a providence that uses seemingly mundane events to direct the course of history. In this light, the motif of the king's sleepless night has layers and underlying meanings, some of them more subtle, with everyday events carrying significance beyond the intentions of the human characters.

From a literary perspective, but also in terms of ethical and symbolic interpretations, this moment serves as a point of convergence between memory, chance, and action[6]. The vigil of the king sets in motion a whole chain of recollections and acknowledgments that brings to the forefront the theme of loyalty and delayed reward, embodied in the recognition of Mordecai's merits. In this sense, the narrative suggests the importance of paying attention to the continuity of events and of trusting in the coherence, even if sometimes hidden, of the unfolding of events.

The aim of this study is to conduct a literary analysis of verse 6:1 in the *Book of Esther* and to highlight its structural and symbolic role in the architecture of the story. At the same time, the research places this passage within a comprehensive comparative framework, drawing on literary traditions from the ancient Near East, in which the disruption of sleep, in the form of insomnia, dreams, or nocturnal restlessness, signifies moments of crisis and transition. Such an exegesis allows for the identification of recurring patterns in which night is portrayed as a space of

[5]E. Segal, "Human Anger and Divine Intervention in Esther", *Prooftexts* 9, no. 3 (1989): 247-256. The author notes that the perception of divine intervention in cases of insomnia has ancient roots; both modern and traditional commentators have identified this providential pattern in the plot of the story.
[6]This three-part framework can also be interpreted as a point of convergence between the past (Mordecai's actions prior to the moment of speaking, which had an impact on the king's life), the present (the king's current state of sleeplessness and active consciousness in relation to a missing element from the past), and the future (the king's firm intention to reward Mordecai's past actions).

transformation, without necessarily implying a direct relationship of dependence between the texts.

This approach is relevant because it facilitates both the identification of correspondences between texts and the grasping of a specific way of constructing change in ancient literature, through moments of slowing down, of vigilance, and of reflection on the past. Moreover, this approach can serve as a useful tool for contemporary research, as it directs the analysis toward those literary forms in which inner experience and the processes of memory play a decisive role in the construction of turning points. The model of textual construction can be traced diachronically, a process that, in itself, offers a clearer perspective on continuities and variations within ancient literary traditions.

Methodology

The study begins with a philological examination of the Hebrew text of the *Book of Esther*, exploring the various literary nuances of the expression commonly translated as "sleep deserted the king". It then analyzes the verse from the perspective of its structural function within the narrative framework, interpreting it as a possible "chiastic pivot" and as a decisive moment in the plot twist that reorganizes the subsequent unfolding of the action. This approach highlights its role as a literary turning point in the architecture of the text. Everything that exists before this point is about to change, to become something else, to assume new forms and directions.

The analysis is further expanded through a comparative perspective, drawing parallels between the royal sleeplessness in *Esther* and similar passages in the *Book of Daniel*, where the figure of the sovereign is also associated with states of nocturnal restlessness caused by insomnia or other inner turmoil. This network of correspondences is complemented by references to literary traditions outside the biblical corpus, ranging from the accounts with prominent historical significance in the works of Herodotus, which nonetheless include philological elements, to the queen's dream in Aeschylus's tragedy, *The Persians*[7], and even the literary cycle in *One Thousand and One Nights*, where the act of storytelling itself unfolds in the form of a continuous night vigil[8].

We also consider a section devoted to the role of the "royal chronicle" as a literary device employed in this passage. In *Esther* 6, the reading of the archives takes on an intrusive and revelatory dimension, in the sense that the act of recollection from an institutionalized perspective has direct effects on the unfolding of events and opens up the possibility of reshaping the court hierarchies. The approach is, thus, not entirely administrative.

[7]The considerations regarding Aeschylus's tragedy *The Persians* is based on the edition and translation by Christopher Collard, which served as the primary source for the present analysis (Aeschylus, The Persians and Other Plays, translated and edited by Christopher Collard, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). For the royal dream, see in particular pages 7-9 of the cited work.

[8]In all cases, sleeplessness, disturbing dreams, and staying awake at night are different expressions of the same cultural nuance, which links the night to transformative processes, revelations, and the reversal of fate.

Throughout the analysis, the observations are integrated into a transdisciplinary theoretical framework with anthropological, narratological and intertextual dimensions, drawing on concepts such as the liminal state or liminality in consciousness, narrative functions and hermeneutic codes, the temporal structure of the story, and the relationship between time and narrative. This conceptual framework makes it possible to interpret the verse both as an element of the plot and as a mechanism for producing meaning.

Overall, the study proposes a reading of verse 6:1 as the result of a subtle literary technique that suggests a discreet providential causality, specific to *Esther* in its entirety: an implicit, unstated, yet active in the unfolding of events, characteristic of a text in which transcendence is suggested structurally rather than explicitly from a theological standpoint. Concurrently, the same mechanism can be interpreted in a secular light, as an effect of literary coherence constructed through the depiction of significant coincidences, in which the sense of necessity emerges from the internal organization of the text, without presupposing a transcendent principle external to it. The relevance of this dual interpretation lies in the fact that the same text can produce distinct meanings depending on the framework through which it is interpreted, thus revealing the internal flexibility of ancient literary structure.

Consequently, the methodology is interdisciplinary, layered and integrative, combining philological analysis, structural-narratological interpretation and intertextual comparison in an interpretive approach aimed at identifying how minor literary details function as points where meaning emerges in ancient literature.

Comparative Studies. Literature Review

The Hebrew phrasing, translated and adapted into English, is concise and rich in nuance, warranting careful and in-depth examination. Starting with the key phrase: "sleep deserted the king"[9], we observe that, rather than stating directly that "the king could not sleep", this rendering personifies sleep as an entity that departs from the Achaemenid sovereign. This personification lends the phrase a distinctive stylistic value, since insomnia is not something the king desires but, on the contrary, something that happens to him: sleep mysteriously abandons him. The structure has biblical echoes; for example, a parallel passage appears both in *Daniel* 6:18 regarding King Darius and in *Daniel* 2:1, which expresses the idea in a similar way (in this case, King Nebuchadnezzar has dreams/nightmares that drive away his sleep). These approaches suggest multiple linguistic variations for the same literary motif: the loss of royal sleep as a symptom of a "divine intervention" or a literary

[9]Even though some translations render the expression using a personified formulation, such as "sleep abandoned the king" (the version adopted in the present study), while others simply state that "that night the king could not sleep", the difference is stylistic, not structural or narrative. In both cases, the king's insomnia serves the same function as a literary motif that triggers the plot's turning point; in other words, the difference is not essential.

tension. According to Joshua Joel Spoelstra[10], the court stories in the Hebrew biblical canon can be subdivided into several categories, including "bedchamber tales". Within this group of texts, verse 6:1 of the *Book of Esther* can be associated with a subcategory, that of the sleepless foreign monarch, alongside the corresponding verses in the *Book of Daniel*, Chapter 6; in both cases, the reference is to Chapter 6 of the book and to an Achaemenid ruler (Darius and Ahasuerus/ Xerxes, respectively).

In terms of syntax and sentence structure, placing the temporal phrase "that night" at the beginning of the verse creates a sense of suspense. The narrative suddenly focuses on a specific moment, linking it closely to the preceding events. The moment in question refers to the night immediately following the first banquet hosted by Esther in Chapter 5 of the book, that is, the banquet at which she postpones revealing her request, and precedes the second banquet in *Esther* 7, during which Haman is unmasked. Therefore, the phrase ensures dramatic continuity, since it is precisely on the night between the two banquets that this crucial event takes place.

Furthermore, the impersonal construction "sleep deserted the king" (where the grammatical subject is "sleep") intentionally leaves the cause of the insomnia unspecified. The text does not attribute an explicit cause; we are not told, for example, that the king was worried or that he had a nightmare; the insomnia appears without direct explanation, suddenly and seemingly inexplicably. This deliberate omission of any visible cause is an example of a "hermeneutic hiatus". The text shifts the task of identifying the cause of the insomnia to the reader, insinuating a providential causality. Although phrased in the active voice, "sleep deserted (...)", the construction functions semantically as a philological-theological passive; the king is deprived of sleep by an unseen force.

In modern translations, the expression "sleep left the king" retains the personification found in the Hebrew text, where sleep appears as an almost autonomous reality, capable of coming and going. Structurally, the verse consists of two complementary sequences. The first depicts the waking state of the king and his decision to request that the royal chronicles be brought to him, while the second records their reading to him. The choice of the passive voice ("and it was read to the king") highlights the fact that the sovereign does not personally consult the archives but receives the information through others. This role as a listener lends the episode a certain dramatic tension, as the reading of the document transforms the past into an active presence within the narrative present. In this context, the scene takes on the characteristics of a belated realization. It is not a matter of identifying an unknown character, but of becoming aware of an unfulfilled obligation. Through the chronicles, the king learns that Mordecai's loyalty had not been rewarded, and this recollection has an immediate impact on the unfolding of the plot. The royal archive thus ceases to be a mere repository of the past and becomes an instrument that directly intervenes in the present of the story.

Therefore, from a philological perspective, *Esther* 6:1 is a verse whose lexemes, phrases and style collectively create tension and, consequently, bring about a profound shift in the narrative. In a single sentence, the author succeeds in conveying, simultaneously, the unexpected nature of the loss of sleep, the close temporal

[10]J.J. Spoelstra, "Courts, Banquets, and Bedchambers: Mapping (Sub-)Genre Distinctions in Biblical Narratives Set in Foreign Imperia", *Religions* 17, no. 2 (2026): 243 *et seqq*.

connection to the context through the significance of this decisive night, and a subtle philological-theological subtext, the absence of sleep as a sign of God's mysterious presence. Such a starting point sets the stage most effectively for the plot twist that follows.

Thus, within the narrative structure, verse 6:1 fulfills several essential structural functions: it marks a moment of recognition, serves as a potential chiastic pivot, and sets the stage for the *peripeteia* that will reshape the course of events[11]. The *Book of Esther* has a carefully composed structure, featuring symmetries, inversions, and a strong mirroring effect between the first and second parts of the book. Within this textual architecture, chapter 6, and verse 6:1 in particular, occupies a central position both structurally and dramatically.

One of the main themes of *Esther* is the reversal of fate through an unexpected turn of events. This turn, the *peripeteia*, occurs roughly in the middle of the story, during the king's restless night. The structural importance of this narrative pivot lies, from one perspective, in the culmination of chiastic symmetry. A widely held interpretation in contemporary exegesis holds that *Esther* is organized chiastically, following the structure A-B-C … C'-B'-A', with chapter 6 marking the center. For example, the parallelism between the beginning of the book (Chapters 1-2) and the end (Chapters 9-10) has been noted; in both sections, a royal banquet takes place followed by the exaltation of a Jewish character (Esther at the beginning, Mordecai at the end), or between Haman's decree (Chapter 3) and Mordecai's counter-decree (Chapter 8)[12]. In this arrangement, the scene in Chapter 6, Haman's honoring of Mordecai, stands at the center, foreshadowed by the episode of the king's insomnia. Jon Levenson clearly emphasizes the pivotal nature of Chapter 6 within the book as a whole[13]; up to 6:1, all events seem to be heading in a „grim direction": Haman's plot escalates, the Jews are condemned to death, and Esther hesitates. Immediately after this passage, the direction gradually reverses, beginning with Haman's public humiliation, continuing with Esther's strategic actions, and culminating in the reversal of the decree. Consequently, the king's lack of sleep serves as a bridge in the chiastic structure, as it connects the symmetrical parts and propels the narrative from the crisis toward its resolution.

The turning point is triggered, specifically, by the events of the night described in verses 6:1-3. Prior to that point, Haman seemed certain of victory; he had just

[11]In the Aristotelian sense, *anagnorisis* denotes the transition from ignorance to knowledge and is frequently associated with *peripeteia* (see Aristotle, *Poetics*, XI). Chapter 6 of the *Book of Esther* exhibits only certain affinities with this narrative mechanism, and even then, in an atypical form. Here, the recognition concerns the existence of an unfulfilled political and moral obligation owed to Mordecai, arising from the king's confrontation with his own royal records. The reading of the chronicles thus functions as an act of recollection that reshapes the narrative present. At the same time, the chapter marks the beginning of Haman's gradual realization that the course of events has shifted irrevocably against him, as his expectations of personal advancement are overturned by unfolding circumstances. From this perspective, the episode may be understood as an extended form of *anagnorisis*, one associated with memory, the recovery of the past, and the reassessment of realities that had long existed but had not previously been fully recognized. For a discussion of the Aristotelian concept of *anagnorisis*, see J. MacFarlane, "Aristotle's Definition of 'Anagnorisis'", *The American Journal of Philology* 121, no. 3 (2000): 367-383.

[12]*Cf.* J. Levenson, Esther: A Commentary, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, 6 *et seqq.*

[13]Ibid, 7.

erected gallows for Mordecai and secured an invitation to the queen's banquet, planning to demand his rival's execution at daybreak (*Esther* 5:14). But "that very night", unbeknownst to Haman, the king discovers, while reading the chronicles, Mordecai's long-forgotten merit. In a meticulously orchestrated narrative irony, Haman enters the king's presence in the morning, but before he can present his malicious request, the king asks him how a man whom the king wishes to honor should be celebrated (*Esther* 6:4-6). Haman, believing that he is the one destined for the honors, proposes a grand ceremony himself, after which he is commanded to carry it out in honor of Mordecai.

The sudden reversal of the *status quo*, the aggressor being forced to glorify the exact person he intended to kill, is the central *peripeteia* of the book. We can view the entire Chapter 6 as the scene of this reversal: *a)* insomnia leads to the discovery of Mordecai's good deed; *b)* Haman's pride turns into public humiliation; and *c)* Haman's hopes are dashed when his family foretells his inevitable downfall following this episode (*Esther* 6:12-14). We thus observe a chain of successive reversals, all set in motion by that initial detail, the fact that the king did not sleep and listened to the reading of a royal chronicle. Such a narrative structure may suggest more than a simple succession of coincidences; the king's seemingly random insomnia, the choice of the passage from the chronicles concerning Mordecai, and the timing of the events that follow create the impression of a subtle order underlying the unfolding of the action. From a literary perspective, this accumulation of coincidences contributes to the build-up of tension and the satisfaction derived from the plot twist. From a theological perspective, these same episodes can be interpreted as signs of a discreet providence, which manifests itself indirectly through ordinary and seemingly insignificant events.

In summary, verse 6:1, seemingly trivial, a note about a sleepless night, reveals its major significance when viewed through the lens of the entire literary structure, representing the narrative's center of gravity, the point from which the transformations that will lead, step by step, to the dénouement are set in motion. Like a finely tuned mechanism, the smallest part sets the wheels of destiny in motion. From a narratological perspective, the structural role of this verse is that of a *plot node*[14].

From the perspective of biblical parallels, the motif of the king's restless sleep is also found in other writings, such as *Daniel*. Two episodes are relevant: *Daniel* 2, where the enigmatic dream of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar robs him of sleep, and *Daniel* 6, where the Achaemenid king Darius cannot sleep because of Daniel's plight in the lions' den. Both texts share the motif of the monarch's forced sleepless night, a motif that serves as a prelude to the act of salvation.

In *Daniel* 2, the context revolves around a pagan king to whom God sends a symbolic dream. The text emphasizes that the king cannot sleep, and, like Ahasuerus, Nebuchadnezzar summons his courtiers in the middle of the night, but in his case, they are dream interpreters, magicians, sorcerers, and, finally, Daniel, to unravel the mystery of the disturbing dream. The parallel lies in the fact that

[14] *Esther* 6:1 may be interpreted as a *cardinal function* in Roland Barthes's sense, insofar as it marks a pivotal point in the narrative from which new possibilities for the development of the plot emerge and the direction of subsequent events is fundamentally altered. For the concept of the *cardinal function* as a narrative unit that opens up or redirects the possible development of the plot, see Roland Barthes, "An Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative", *New Literary History* 6, no. 2 (1975): 247-249.

insomnia serves as the literary driving force; if the king had slept peacefully, Daniel would not have had the opportunity to demonstrate his interpretive gift and be elevated, and his revelations would not have been made. Furthermore, in *Daniel* 2, as in *Esther* 6, the king's restless night serves as a bridge between condemnation and salvation. In *Esther*, the bridge leads from the danger posed by Haman's plot to Mordecai's salvation; in *Daniel* 2, it leads from the threat of death facing all the wise men of Babylon to their protection thanks to Daniel's intervention. Another common point is the emphasis on the divine mystery communicated at night: Nebuchadnezzar receives a coded message from God through a dream, while Ahasuerus does not receive a supernatural dream but is inspired to read the chronicles. In both cases, the story suggests that providence disrupts sleep to fulfill its plan, explicitly in *Daniel*, where he states that God revealed the king's dream to him, meaning God was the source of the king's initial disturbance, and implicitly in *Esther*, where the text remains deliberately ambiguous, yet readers attuned to its theological underpinnings may discern the same *hidden hand* at work.

Therefore, the episodes in *Daniel* help us contextualize *Esther* 6:1 within the broader framework of biblical motifs, even if we cannot assume a direct connection between the texts. The recurrence of this motif confirms that the king's insomnia is not a singular literary device, but rather a *topos*. The fact that the name of God is absent in the *Book of Esther*, whereas in *Daniel* the divine is the central figure, reveals two different styles of telling the same story; however, the comparative light shed by the texts in *Daniel* allows us to analyze *Esther* 6:1[15] with greater certainty as a literary device, not as an accident. In both books, the withdrawal of sleep heralds the approach of salvation.

The motif of the restless night that becomes decisive is not exclusively Judeo-Christian; it appears in various forms in both the writings of the ancient Near East and those of the Greco-Roman world. Through a comparative approach, we will highlight, below, several relevant examples.

Herodotus ("Histories" VII)

In his "Histories" (Book VII, Chapters 12-18), Herodotus describes an episode in which Xerxes, the king of Persia, is influenced by an enigmatic nocturnal apparition. Xerxes, generally identified with King Ahasuerus in the *Book of Esther*, initially hesitated to go to war against the Greeks, at the urging of his uncle, Artabanus. According to Herodotus, when Xerxes fell asleep, a tall, handsome man appeared to him in a dream and told him to carry out his plan, or else he would lose

[15]From a narratological perspective, *Esther* 6:1 illustrates how information is managed and strategically distributed within the narrative in order to maximize its effect on the development of the plot. The episode in which Mordecai saves the king's life has already been disclosed to the reader in the preceding chapters, yet its consequences remain suspended until the royal chronicles are read. By reintroducing this event into the narrative present, the text transforms what had appeared to be a completed piece of information into a decisive catalyst for the subsequent course of events. In this way, the past is reactivated at the moment of greatest dramatic tension, and memory becomes one of the principal narrative mechanisms through which the reversal of fortune is brought about.

his greatness. Upon waking, the king ignored the nightmare and decided to abandon the expedition. But the following night, the same figure appeared to him again in a dream, rebuking him harshly. Moreover, when Xerxes had Artabanus sleep in his bed, the ghostly figure appeared to him as well. Faced with this persistent nightmare, Xerxes changed his mind and decided to continue the invasion[16].

In this case, as in *Esther* 6:1, the same Persian ruler fundamentally changes the course of events as a result of an inexplicable nocturnal experience. There is, therefore, a structural parallel, given that the night is established as a mysterious advisor to the king. The difference lies in the descriptive tone, since Herodotus presents the dream as a sign from the gods, in other words, in a supernatural manner; the biblical author of *Esther* makes no mention of anything supernatural, but the context may suggest to certain readers, as we have indicated, a manifestation beyond simple coincidence. Furthermore, in Herodotus, the dream leads Xerxes to make a wrong choice, the devastating war that will end in the defeat of the Persians, a possible expression of royal *hybris* manipulated by the gods to ensure his loss in the military confrontation. In *Esther*, insomnia compels Ahasuerus to do what is right, to save an innocent people, which means that, in this case, the monarch becomes an instrument of divine justice. Therefore, in a comparative reading, the gods of the pagan tradition send a deceptive dream that leads the king to ruin, whereas in the *Book of Esther*, the absence of sleep, implicitly suggested as the result of divine action or as a mere accident, leads the sovereign to an act with salvific consequences. In summary, the "Herodotean" episode of Xerxes's dreams serves as an intertextual contrast to *Esther* 6:1; both highlight the ancient belief that kings' major decisions are often influenced by nocturnal messages, whether they be troubled dreams or providential sleepless nights.

Aeschylus (*The Persians*)

Greek literature likewise contains examples of revelatory nights. Aeschylus' *Persians* presents, from the Persian perspective, the disaster at Salamis. In the absence of her son Xerxes, who has departed for war, Queen Atossa recounts to the chorus an ominous dream that has deeply disturbed her. She dreams of two women of extraordinary beauty, one dressed in Persian attire and the other in Greek garments, engaged in conflict. Xerxes then attempts to yoke them to his chariot: the Persian woman submits, whereas the Greek woman resists, breaks the yoke, and causes Xerxes to fall. At that moment, the shade of his father, Darius, appears and gazes upon him with pity. Distressed upon awakening, Atossa seeks the counsel of the Persian elders[17]. The dream symbolically foreshadows the defeat of the Persian fleet: the two women, representing Persia and Greece, cannot be subjected to the same rule; Greece secures its freedom, while Xerxes suffers complete failure. The dream thus exemplifies the recurring tragic motif of the dream as a prophetic announcement of the outcome.

[16] *Cf.* Herodotus, Histories, VII.12-18.
[17] *Cf.* Aeschylus, Persians and Other Plays, translated and edited by Christopher Collard, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 8 *et seqq*.

Compared with Esther, Atossa bears an unexpected resemblance to King Ahasuerus. Both figures are troubled by the experiences of the night and, as a consequence, seek a means of interpretation. Atossa summons the spirit of Darius through ritual invocation in order to obtain counsel, whereas Ahasuerus orders the royal chronicles to be read in an attempt to relieve his insomnia. In both works, the night prepares the decisive events of the following day. It may therefore be argued that the biblical author and the Greek tragedians shared the literary conception of sleep and the night as privileged moments in which hidden truths emerge. Whether conveyed through supernatural dreams or through a providentially significant sleeplessness, these nocturnal experiences function as narrative devices that redirect the course of events.

Another noteworthy point is that both *Persians* and *Esther*, albeit in different ways, possess a patriotic subtext. Aeschylus' tragedy ultimately legitimizes the Greek victory by portraying the Persian defeat as divine retribution for Xerxes' *hybris*, whereas *Esther* presents the preservation of the Jewish people as the decisive outcome of the narrative. Atossa's dream validates the Greek triumph through the will of the gods; Ahasuerus' insomnia, by contrast, creates the circumstances, through what appears to be either providential coincidence or fortunate contingency, that make the survival of the Jewish community possible.

Mesopotamian Mythology (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*[18])

Throughout the epic, particularly before decisive confrontations, Gilgamesh experiences a series of recurring nocturnal dreams prior to his journey to the Cedar Forest and his encounter with Humbaba[19]. These dreams contain symbolic images (falling stars, collapsing mountains, and violent storms) that foreshadow danger but are consistently interpreted by Enkidu in a favorable light, as signs of eventual victory. The dreams both anticipate and structure the unfolding of the narrative, while at the same time functioning as points of contact between the human and the divine realms.

The abundance of such examples confirms the persistence of a recurring narrative pattern in which the night serves as a privileged setting for access to knowledge otherwise unavailable within the normal order of experience. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, this knowledge is communicated through symbolic dreams that require interpretation and foreshadow subsequent events. From a comparative perspective, the *Book of Esther* exhibits a functionally analogous narrative pattern, albeit through a considerably more restrained literary strategy. The king receives neither dreams nor divine revelations; instead, during a sleepless night, he rediscovers information already preserved in the royal archives. The narrative function nevertheless remains comparable, insofar as both the dreams of Mesopotamian literature and the king's insomnia in *Esther* provide access to

[18]For the purposes of this study, we have relied primarily on the French translation of the epic: *La Légende de Gilgamesh*, présentée et retranscrite par Gérard Chaliand (Paris: Pocket, 2021).

[19]See, *inter alia*, ibid, 54-55, where Enkidu explains to Gilgamesh that the mountain in his dream symbolizes the downfall of Humbaba and interprets its prophetic significance as favorable.

knowledge that decisively alters the course of the narrative. Whereas the Mesopotamian epic relies on oneiric symbolism and explicit divine intervention, *Esther* achieves a similar narrative effect through administrative memory and documentary recollection. It is precisely this economy of narrative means, the absence of overt supernatural intervention, that lends the episode much of its literary originality and sophistication.

The Islamic East (*The Thousand and One Nights*[20])

Although compiled many centuries later, *The Thousand and One Nights* deserves brief consideration because of its literary association with the night as the privileged setting of narration and essential transformation. In the celebrated frame narrative, Shahrazad, the vizier's daughter, volunteers to marry King Shahriyar, who, after being betrayed by his first wife, has adopted the practice of executing each new bride following the wedding night. Shahrazad preserves her life by telling the king a captivating story each night, deliberately suspending the narrative at dawn, thereby compelling him to postpone her execution in order to hear its continuation. After one thousand and one nights, the king is morally transformed and permanently spares her life.

The comparison with *Esther* is, of course, not genealogical but typological. In both works, the night becomes the privileged temporal setting in which royal decisions are suspended, reconsidered, and ultimately redirected. In *The Thousand and One Nights*, the king remains awake because he is captivated by Shahrazad's stories; the deliberate postponement of closure becomes the instrument through which both the heroine and the wider community of women are saved. In *Esther*, by contrast, the king's sleeplessness has a different cause, yet it likewise leads to the narration of a story, namely, the reading of the royal chronicles. Here, too, narrative intervenes at night to alter the course of events. The crucial difference lies in the means employed: Shahrazad creates a new narrative, whereas *Esther* reactivates one that already exists within the royal archives.

From this perspective, both texts underscore the transformative power of narrative. In *The Thousand and One Nights*, storytelling postpones death and gradually reshapes the king's character; in *Esther*, the public reading of a forgotten episode from the royal chronicles interrupts the logic of destruction and initiates the reversal that culminates in the deliverance of the Jewish community. Despite the considerable chronological distance separating the two works, both illustrate a broader

[20] Among the earliest scholars to draw attention to the literary parallels between the *Book of Esther* and the frame narrative of *The Thousand and One Nights* were M. de Goeje and Emmanuel Cosquin, the latter identifying de Goeje as the scholar who first proposed this line of comparison. See E. Cosquin, "Le Prologue-Cadre des Mille et une Nuits, les Légendes Perses et le Livre d'Esther", *Revue Biblique* 6, no. 1 (1909): 7. The subject has by no means been exhausted and continues to attract scholarly interest, as demonstrated by more recent studies, including E. Kragelund Holt, Narrative and Other Readings in the Book of Esther (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2021), especially Chapter 4, "Now Esther Was Admired by All Who Saw Her – Or: How to Understand Esther 2/Too?", which revisits this comparative perspective.

literary intuition: the night provides a privileged narrative space in which memory, storytelling, and delayed decision-making become instruments of salvation.

With regard to the Book of the Royal Chronicles, it was customary in the monarchies of the Ancient Near East for the reigns of kings to be recorded in official chronicles. As noted above, the Bible itself contains references to such documents. *Esther* 6:1 confronts the reader directly with one such record, whose title may be translated approximately as "The Book of Remembrances, the Chronicles (of the Days)". The expression may refer to a register of recent events from the reign of Ahasuerus, a kind of royal court journal. Thus, within the narrative, the royal chronicle serves as the repository of an unfulfilled moral obligation. As an institution, the chronicles are intended to preserve the memory of significant events at court so that the king may reflect upon them and govern justly. In *Esther*, this function is activated dramatically in Chapter 6. The entire suspense of the narrative would have dissipated had the king consulted the chronicles earlier; from a literary perspective, however, the author deliberately postpones this moment until the narrative tension reaches its climax, namely, when Haman is about to request Mordecai's execution. The chronicle may therefore be viewed as a kind of textual *deus ex machina*, a physical object through which either chance or Providence operates[21]. From a comparative perspective, the Book of the Chronicles may be regarded as a secularized counterpart to the Tablets of Destiny in Mesopotamian mythology. In one sense, the royal chronicle substitutes for the voice of God; in another, it gives voice to the past. The king hears neither a prophet nor a divinely inspired dream; instead, he hears read aloud from the chronicle precisely what he needed to hear.

Conclusions

In the present study, we have approached the text from multiple perspectives – philological, structural, comparative, and theoretical – in order to demonstrate the centrality of *Esther* 6:1 within the overall architecture of the *Book of Esther*. The resulting picture is both complex and illuminating, revealing how the king's sleeplessness functions as the axis around which destinies revolve and deeper narrative layers are disclosed. From both a philological and an internal narratological perspective, the verse occupies a pivotal position within the structure of the narrative, as it prepares the gradual reversal of the relationships between the characters and reshapes the significance of previously narrated events.

The verse stands at the center of a carefully constructed symmetrical structure. Within the broader biblical context, the motif of the king's sleeplessness finds a

[21]The scene has the character of a "secular liturgy", insofar as the chronicles are read aloud solemnly before the king as though before a deity, and the spoken word becomes law, since the king's decision to honor Mordecai is immediately transformed into an imperial decree. At the same time, from the perspective of modern literary theory, *Esther* 6 may be said to highlight the meta-narrative role of storytelling, because the narrative itself, namely, the chronicle, saves lives. At a certain level, this constitutes a self-referential message: both the written text within the narrative of *Esther* and the story of *Esther* itself within the history of the Jewish people perform a salvific function.

number of literary parallels that confirm the existence of a recognizable narrative pattern. Comparison with other works of ancient literature further suggests that *Esther* 6:1 belongs to a wider literary tradition of fateful nights, that is, nights associated with decisive moments and transformative revelations. The distinctive contribution of *Esther* to this tradition lies in its emphasis on coincidence, contingency, and perhaps silent providence, rather than on the fantastic or the overtly miraculous. In this way, the *Book of Esther* appropriates a widespread literary motif while investing it with a distinctive literary character.

More broadly, recognizing insomnia as a narrative turning point in ancient literature moves beyond the identification of a recurring motif and offers instead a model for understanding how ancient texts construct decisive shifts in the development of the plot. The differences among these works lie primarily in the explanation they provide for such transformations, whether through divine revelation, dreams, omens, or meaningful coincidences. The contribution of the present analysis, therefore, lies in identifying a kind of "mapping of narrative change" across a range of ancient writings, in which seemingly insignificant events function, in reality, as genuine narrative kernels or engines that propel the action forward. Such an approach opens new avenues for the study of other recurrent literary mechanisms employed to mark turning points and profound transformations within ancient texts.

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