

NO HAPPY ENDING FOR ESTHER

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Jews often view the Book of Esther (to which I shall refer by the single Hebrew word *Megillah*, meaning "scroll") as a light, almost comical, biblical text. Its public reading takes place in the carnival atmosphere of the Purim holiday. Children, dressed in costumes, eagerly follow the reading in order not to miss any opportunity to drown out Haman's name with their noisemakers. Despite these frivolous trimmings, it is obvious that a story about a failed attempt at genocide must possess some darker aspects.

The *Megillah* may be read as a guide to the politics of Jewish life in the Diaspora. It tells us of the dangers of anti-Semitism and of how such dangers may be neutralized. It describes anti-Semitism's propaganda and real interests, but speaks also of the Jewish response and of Judaism's real concerns. In addition, it presents us with the background of a culture of government in terms of whose political discourse both anti-Semite and Jew must formulate their respective appeals. Perhaps most importantly, the *Megillah* has granted every new generation of Jews a textual foundation for further contemplation of these themes through the exegesis and supplementation of the biblical narrative.

The concerns I have mentioned are all addressed in a seemingly simple and straightforward way by the unadorned text of the *Megillah*. Haman's anti-Semitism is motivated by a personal rivalry with Mordecai, who happens to be Jewish. In Haman's speech to King Ahasuerus, political discourse shrinks to the single issue of demonstrating that '*it is not in Your Majesty's interest*' to tolerate the Jews (3:8). As if to underline the narrow scope of Ahasuerus' considerations, Haman adds a personal bribe to bolster the strength of his arguments: '*Let an edict be drawn for their destruction, and I will pay ten thousand talents of silver to the stewards for deposit in the royal treasury*' (3: 9). The implicit arguments for Jewish preservation (inasmuch as arguments may be said to be forwarded) are no less shallow. The Jews must be saved because, after all, the beautiful Queen Esther is a Jew and it would be a shame not to have her around. Furthermore, Mordecai must be treated well since he foiled an assassination plot against the King.

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The biblical text does present some surprising ironies. Haman complains to Ahasuerus that the Jews are a people '*whose laws are different from those of any other people and who do not obey the king's laws*' (3:8). Remarkably, the *Megillah* makes no attempt to disprove Haman's charge. We are explicitly told that the trouble begins when Mordecai the Jew refuses to obey the royal command that all must bow to Haman (3:2). For his own part, Haman is the very model of obedience; when ordered to do so by the King, he unquestioningly dresses Mordecai in royal garb and leads his horse through the city (6:11). Ironically, the penultimate section of the *Megillah* (9:20-32) tells of the institution of yet another set of peculiarly Jewish laws; i.e., the laws of the Festival of Purim. Could the evil Haman have a valid point against the Jews?

Notwithstanding the canonicity of the biblical text, the contradictions implicit in the *Megillah*'s story become clearer in the light of its treatment in the ancient Jewish translations (the Greek Septuagint and Aramaic *Targumim*) and in Midrash.¹ The Septuagint version of the *Megillah* includes several fascinating apocryphal additions to the Masoretic text, which are usually attributed, at least in part, to Lysimachus, an Alexandrian Jew who lived in Jerusalem in the second century B.C.E.² Among these is the text of the genocidal edict prepared by Haman to be published in the King's name:

Ruling over many nations, and having obtained dominion over the whole world, I was minded (not elated by the confidence of power, but ever conducting myself with great moderation and with gentleness) to make the lives of my subjects continually tranquil, desiring both to maintain the kingdom quiet and orderly to its utmost limits, and to restore the peace desired by men. But when I had enquired of my counselors how this should be brought to pass, Haman, who excels in soundness of judgment among us, and has been manifestly well inclined without wavering and with unshaken fidelity, and has obtained the second post in the kingdom, informed us that a certain ill-disposed people is mixed up with all the tribes throughout the world, opposed in their laws to every other nation, and continually neglecting the commands of the kings, so that the united government blamelessly administered by us is not quietly established. Having then conceived that this nation alone of all others is continually set

in opposition to every man, introducing as a change a foreign code of laws, and injuriously plotting to accomplish the worst of evils against our interests, and against the happy establishment of the monarchy (Addition 2).³

The Septuagint version of the edict supplies us with a more broadminded Persian political philosophy as well as with a more sophisticated attack on the Jews. Haman has Ahasuerus portray himself as trying to maintain a kind of *Pax Persiana* whose stability requires universal respect for the King's laws. Jews do not respect these laws and are furthermore "set in opposition to every man." The other anti-Semitic charges mentioned by later Jewish writers fall under these two main headings. Let us begin by examining the first of these.

As we have seen, the *Megillah* itself mentions the charge that Jews respect only their own laws rather than those of the King. Like many other Jewish sources, the Aramaic *Targum Sheni*⁴ to the *Megillah* connects this complaint to the multiplicity of Jewish holidays, which interfere with the performance of public works ordered by King. After a lengthy and self-mocking description of the festivals of the Jewish calendar, the *Targum Sheni* places these words in Haman's mouth: '[The Jews] do not perform the service of the king; they say to us: Today it is forbidden. Thus they spend the year in idleness, in not performing the service of the king.'⁵

Interestingly, neither the Septuagint additions nor the *Targum Sheni* makes any attempt to quash these charges. In the Septuagint version of Ahasuerus' decree sparing the Jews we read:

But we find that the Jews, who have been consigned to destruction by the most abominable of men, are not malefactors, but living according to the justest laws, and being the sons of the living God, the most high and mighty, who maintains the kingdom, to us as well as to our forefathers, in the most excellent order (Addition 4).

The author of the Septuagint additions does not even pretend that the Jews actually live by the laws of the land. Rather, they live by their own laws, which are, however, just; perhaps even more just than the King's own laws. Jewish indifference to the King's laws does not invite anarchy because, in fact, it is the Jewish God who oversees the good maintenance of the monarchy. The *Targum Sheni*'s preoccupation with the Jewish festivals is itself a great bit of Purim hu-

mor. Haman despises the lazy Jews who are always celebrating some holiday when there is the work to be done. How are his accusations addressed? With the institution of yet another holiday in which the Jews will celebrate his downfall instead of performing the King's service! In the words of the medieval midrashic collection *Esther Rabbah* (7: 12):⁶

Said the Holy One, blessed be He, to him [Haman]: 'Wretch, you cast an evil eye on their festivals. Behold, I will overthrow you before them, and they will observe an additional festival for your downfall, namely, the days of Purim;' and so it says, *A fool's mouth is his ruin* (Prov. 18: 7).⁷

Since all of these texts were written by Jews and obviously present a pro-Jewish point of view, why do they not seek to refute the charges which they themselves bring up? Because such a refutation would contradict the very point of Jewish survival. The sages who produced these texts could hardly propose that Jews actually honor the gentile King's laws over those of God! Absolute commitment to God is Judaism's *raison d'être*. If Jewish survival in the Diaspora were genuinely dependent on absolute and sole commitment to the law of the land, the Diaspora community would be doomed from the start. No consideration, not even the physical safety of the Jewish people, comes before dedication to God. The Septuagint additions even have Mordecai making this existential calculation in his explanation of why he disobeyed the royal command to bow down to Haman:

Thou knowest all things: thou knowest, Lord, that it is not in insolence, nor haughtiness, nor love of glory that I have done this, to refuse obeisance to the haughty Haman. For I would gladly have kissed the soles of his feet for the safety of Israel. But I have done this, that I might not set the glory of man above the glory of God; and I will not worship any one except Thee, my Lord (Addition 3).

At the personal level, Mordecai's dilemma finds the happiest of solutions. Mordecai becomes vizier, and the command to honor Haman is rendered moot by his execution. Esther is less fortunate. It is her fate to live with the dilemmas implied by Haman's second accusation, that the Jews are "set in opposition to every man." This issue, like Mordecai's, is solved by Esther's rise to power, but at great personal cost. The *Megillah* tells us of Mordecai glorying in the trap-

pings of power, *Mordecai left the king's presence in royal robes of blue and white, with a magnificent crown of gold and a mantle of fine linen and purple wool. And the city of Shushan rang with joyous cries* (8: 15). The Septuagint additions have Esther disparaging her very crown:

"Thou knowest that I hate the symbol of my proud station, which is on my head in the days of my splendor: I abhor it as a menstruous cloth, and I wear it not in the days of my tranquility" (Addition 3).

But here we are getting ahead of ourselves. Before considering Esther's plight, we must be clear what is meant by the claim that the Jews set themselves "in opposition to every man." As I understand it, this charge refers to Jewish insularity and in particular to those Jewish laws prohibiting the sharing of food, drink or beds with the gentiles. As the Talmud points out, the prohibitions apply even to the gentile King, and thus constitute an affront to his honor:

Raba said: There was never a traducer so skillful as Haman. He said to Ahasuerus . . . *Their laws are diverse from those of every other people*: they do not eat our food, nor do they marry our women nor give us theirs in marriage . . . Therefore it profiteth not the king to suffer them, because they eat and drink and despise the throne. For if a fly falls into the cup of one of them, he throws it out and drinks the wine, but if my lord the king were to touch his cup, he would dash it on the ground and not drink from it" (Tractate Megillah 13b).⁸

Here, then, is a dangerous challenge to Jewish claims of good citizenship. On the one hand, Jewish survival in the Diaspora depends on the tolerance and liberality of the powers that be. On the other hand, the demands of Jewish law and the threat of assimilation require that Jews remain somewhat illiberal towards their gentile neighbors and rulers. *Esther Rabbah* goes so far as to suggest that God had the Jews be threatened with destruction as punishment for their participation in Ahasuerus' banquets. These were originally instigated by Haman in an attempt to entice the Jews to lewdness, and thus incur God's wrath (*Esther Rabbah* 7:13). If Jews are forbidden to feast and sleep with gentiles, what are we to make of Esther, who clearly did both?

Unsurprisingly, the author of the additions to the Septuagint found it difficult to accept the idea of a Jewish heroine married to a gentile King. He has her ex-

claim: 'I hate the glory of transgressors, and that I abhor the couch of the uncircumcised, and of every stranger' (Addition 3).

Such are the innermost thoughts of Esther, for the sake of whose *apparently* pure love Ahasuerus was willing to spare the Jewish people. For, as the additions to the Septuagint have it, Ahasuerus explains the rescinding of Haman's edict with the consideration that Haman had betrayed the King, "having by various and subtle artifices demanded destruction of both Mordecai his deliverer and perpetual benefactor, and Esther the blameless consort of his kingdom" (Addition 4).

What would Ahasuerus have thought if he had known that his beloved Queen "abhorred the couch of the uncircumcised"? Yet, how could our heroine remain true to her Judaism while genuinely loving the gentile Ahasuerus? Rather than downplaying this aspect of Esther's relationship with the King, some Jewish sources aggravate the problem. Esther's sexual allegiance to the Jewish people is maintained at all costs. Rabbi Meir is cited in the Talmud (Megillah 13a) as saying that Esther was not merely Mordecai's adopted daughter, but also his wife. If, according to the *Megillah*, Ahasuerus became incensed at what comically appeared to be Haman's attempt to rape Esther (7:8), what would he say of this talmudic comment: "Raba said in the name of Rab: She [Esther] used to rise from the lap of Ahasuerus and bathe and sit in the lap of Mordecai" (Megillah 13b).

In any case, even if Ahasuerus gained access to Esther's body, he never really won her erotic interest. Esther is said to have remained completely passive in her relations with Ahasuerus, or in the memorable words of the talmudic sage, Abbaye, "*Ester karka olam*," [Esther was like the everlasting ground] (Sanh. 74b). One still might ask how Esther became entangled in her predicament to begin with. Why did she allow herself to be taken to the King's harem? Where was Mordecai in her hour of need? The *Targum Sheni* offers an interesting version of these events:

When Mordecai heard that virgins were being sought, he took and hid Esther from the officers of King Ahasuerus, who went out to seek the virgins so that they should not come and lead her away. He enclosed one room within another room so that the messengers of the king should not see her. Now when his messengers used to pass

by, the gentile girls would dance and show off their beauty through the windows. Thereupon the messengers of the king would go out and bring many virgins from the provinces. Moreover, the messengers of the king knew of Esther, so when they observed that Esther was not among these virgins, they said to one another: 'We are wasting our energy in the provinces. There is here in our province a girl beautiful in looks and pleasing as well as amiable in appearance, more so than all of the virgins which we have brought.' So when Esther was sought but not found, they informed King Ahasuerus. When he heard [of it], he wrote an order that every virgin who shall hide herself from before his messengers, there is only one decree for her -- that she be executed. So when Mordecai heard of the order, he panicked and brought out Esther, his father's brother's daughter, into the street (*Targum Sheni* 2: 8).

Now both of our themes join together in a single episode. Mordecai, anxious to preserve Esther's Jewish sexual purity, actively interferes with the fulfillment of a royal decree. Yet salvation for the community of the pious may only be gained through the sacrifice of the piety of an individual. In his own hour of truth, Mordecai feels free to risk all, including endangerment of the community, in order to avoid idolatrous prostration before Haman. Esther enjoys no such luxuries of conscience. She simply *must* sleep with the gentile Ahasuerus and drink his wine, lest the Jewish people be destroyed. And if such behavior is unthinkable, the *Targum Sheni* and Midrash will apologize that she did these things on pain of death. The tragic heart of the *Megillah* is revealed. As *Esther Rabbah* has Mordecai ask:

'How is it possible that this righteous maiden should be married to an uncircumcised man? It must be because some great calamity is going to befall Israel and they will be delivered through her (*Esther Rabbah* 6: 6).

Esther struggles under the crushing weight of the Diaspora's paradoxes. Impossibly, she must show herself and her people deserving of the King's love and protection, while her faith leaves her incapable of genuinely seeking such love. Somehow, Esther must remain a proper Jewish heroine while also serving as living proof that Jewish women are not beyond gentile reach. She is neither

courtesan nor prostitute, but rather a victim whose rape is necessary for the precarious survival of her people.

For many years, I have found the *Megillah*'s conclusion, its happy ending, chilling for its omissions:

King Ahasuerus imposed tribute upon the mainland and the islands. All his mighty and powerful acts, and a full account of the greatness to which the king advanced Mordecai, are recorded in the Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia. For Mordecai the Jew ranked next to King Ahasuerus and was highly regarded by the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brethren; he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his kindred (10: 1-3).

The evil Haman, we already know, is dead. Ahasuerus is busy exploiting his subjects, and Mordecai basks in the glory of his political success. One wonders: What became of Esther? Does she not live happily ever after? No; Esther's happiness and even her personal piety are expendable. She remains trapped in the palace and bedroom of a drunken Persian King. It is her part to absorb the story's shocks and tensions, to bear physically and be worn away by the inherent political contradictions of Jewish survival in the Diaspora. There is no happy ending for Esther.

NOTES

1. For a feminist analysis of the post-biblical Jewish treatment of the *Megillah*, see Leila Leah Bronner, "Esther Revisited: An Aggadic Approach" in Athalya Brenner, ed. *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) pp. 176-197. See also Barry Walfish's *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).
2. See Bruce Metzger, "Esther, Additions to the Book of," *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem: Keter, 1972) Vol. 6, pp. 913-14.
3. All Septuagint quotations are from Sir Lancelot Brenton, *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English* (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1851). Personal names and punctuation have been standardized to preserve consistency with the present essay.
4. Scholars disagree on the dating of *Targum Sheni*, placing it anywhere between the 4th and 11th centuries C.E. *Targum* means, literally, "translation." *Targum Sheni* is more of a midrashic collection than an Aramaic rendering of the Masoretic text. See Yehuda Komlosh, "Targum Sheni," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 15, pp. 811-13.
5. *Targum Sheni* quotations from Bernard Gossfeld, *The Two Targums of Esther* (Collegeville, MI: The Liturgical Press, 1991).

6. *Esther Rabbah* found its final form in the 12th or 13th century, but its first two chapters were apparently composed no later than the beginning of the 6th. See Moshe David Herr, "Esther Rabbah," *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Vol. 6, pp. 915-6.

7. *Esther Rabbah* translations from Maurice Simon's *Midrash Rabbah: Esther* (London: Soncino Press, 1939).

8. I. Epstein, trans., *The Babylonian Talmud* (London: Soncino Press, 1938).

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