

# THE HIDDEN MESSAGE OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER: ASSIMILATION IS NOT THE WAY TO SALVATION

JOSHUA J. ADLER

Classic Jewish tradition holds that the Book of Esther was authored by the Men of the Great Assembly (TB *Bava Batra* 14b). Since there were prophets in the Great Assembly, it was entitled to have the Esther scroll written down (TB *Shabbat* 104a; *Megillah* 2a; *Yoma* 80a; *Temurah* 15b). Chapter 20 of *Seder Olam* indicates that Esther herself was a prophetess. Yet the Book of Esther is strangely not very "religious": the name of God is not mentioned and nothing we hear about the Jewish community of Shushan reflects any Jewish observance, other than fasting in times of trouble and the new festival established there. Furthermore, the very names of the story's heroes are pagan: Mordecai and Esther are variants of the god Marduk and the goddess Ishtar. Nor does the author explicitly mention any attempt on the part of Mordecai to hide his cousin when officials came looking for beautiful women, so as to prevent her later violation by a Gentile king (2:8 and 15). Even when he learns of the decree enacted against his fellow Jews, Mordecai does not pray but wears sackcloth and openly laments (4:1). This is also true of Esther: instead of praying she fasts, even when she endangers her life by intruding on the king without being invited (4:11 and 16). Nor do the Jews under threat of death assemble for prayer. Likewise, after successfully defending themselves and triumphing over their enemies, the Jews offer no prayers of thanksgiving for their deliverance. They rejoice and celebrate the event, but no prayers are recorded (8:15-17). Indeed, it is evident from many sources (TB *Sanhedrin* 100a; TJ *Berakhot* 14:15; TB *Megillah* 19b) that the canonicity of the Book of Esther remained uncertain.

Even Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman (3:2), though interpreted by the Rabbis as a sign of disrespect for the idol that Haman wore (*Esther Rabbah* 7:5), is not explicitly framed as a religious act in the *Megillah*. It can also be seen as his refusal to accept Haman's political promotion.

Talmudic sources contribute the ritual aspects missing from the text. Thus, in TB *Megillah* 13a-b, Esther keeps kosher in the royal palace and visits the

*Joshua J. Adler, formerly Rabbi of Chizuk Emuna Congregation in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, has lived in Jerusalem since 1972, and serves as managing editor of The Jewish Bible Quarterly.*

*mikveh* (ritual bath), as required by Jewish law.

Even more striking is the fact that the Greek versions of the Book of Esther are far more "religious." Whereas the Hebrew Masoretic text (MT) nowhere mentions the name of God, it does appear in the Septuagint. Additionally, in the Septuagint and other versions, Mordecai and Esther pray fervently to God for deliverance, a detail absent from the MT. Whereas the MT states that Esther *still did not reveal her kindred or her people, as Mordecai had instructed her*, the Greek version reads: "for so Mordecai had commanded her, to fear God and obey His commandments, as when she was with him; thus Esther did not change her way of life" (2:20). Why, then, was the MT version canonized and what was its message?

I believe that the hidden message of the Book of Esther is that assimilation has never been the way of salvation for Jews, whether in the time of Esther or in generations to come.

That the Jewish community portrayed in the Book of Esther appears to have neglected its religious observances, and the very fact that Esther is not identifiably Jewish, indicates a widespread process of assimilation. Even so, Haman exhibits a deep-rooted hatred for Mordecai and his people (3:6). When Persian Gentiles receive government permission to kill the Jews, there is no shortage of volunteers for the planned mass slaughter of their Jewish fellow citizens. In Shushan alone, 500 Persians (not counting the ten sons of Haman) all armed for the massacre are killed by their intended victims (9:6-12).

The subtext of the Book of Esther raises the question of how Jews can survive and even thrive in the Diaspora. The message here is that concealing their identity, changing their name, and disregarding Jewish religious tradition, in short, trying to assimilate into Gentile society, will not save Jews from their enemies. This has been their experience almost everywhere, generation after generation. In 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe, particularly in Germany and Austria, those who abandoned their faith and converted in an effort to assimilate were hated no less (and often more) than loyal and observant Jews. Some historians even contend that modern anti-Semitism was galvanized by Gentile jealousy of assimilated Jews who rose to the top in business and the professions, whereas earlier hatred of Jews had a theological basis. Among the various ways of interpreting the Book of Esther there is, I

