

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE NATURE AND PROVENANCE OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

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The book of Esther must be reckoned as one of the strangest books of the Hebrew Bible. There are several books currently included in the Bible which generated controversy in those ancient Jewish circles debating their sacred status, especially Kohelet (Ecclesiastes) and the Song of Songs (Mishna *Yadayim* 3:5). These two did make the cut, while a few others we know about did not. Some of the books excluded from the Hebrew Bible were nevertheless included in collections of Scripture maintained by Christians. These included the first two books of the Maccabees and Ecclesiasticus (the Wisdom of Ben Sirah). We do not have anything resembling the minutes of the meetings where the inclusion or exclusion of the Hebrew books were discussed. It is likely that the canon of the Hebrew Bible was secure by the time of the publication of the Mishnah, about 250 CE. The Christian canon was not sealed until the late 4th century CE at various councils such as Rome (382) and Carthage (397). Although Christians continued the debate for many centuries, with some groups including or excluding books counted as Scripture by others, the Hebrew Bible seems to have been stable from the mid-third century forward. Therefore, we can say of a certainty that Esther was regarded as a sacred text from at least that date, albeit with some discussion in TB *Megilla* 7a on whether it has the same holiness as other Scripture. But how much earlier might it have been written?¹

There is one reference which is often cited as an indicator of the antiquity of Esther, 2 Maccabees 15:36, “And they all decreed by public vote never to let this day go unobserved, but to celebrate the thirteenth day of the twelfth month – which is called Adar in the Aramaic language – the day before Mordecai’s day.” [NRSV] “Mordecai’s Day” can only be a reference to a celebration of some Persian festival such as Purim and Mordecai must be the Mordecai of the book of Esther. But this evidence is less compelling than it might seem at first glance. 2 Maccabees is itself a rather strange book. The author tells us that he is abridging another work, a five-volume history composed by

Jason of Cyrene. Therefore 2 Maccabees had to have been written not just later than the final episode of the Maccabean revolt, but after Jason had created his five-volume history. Many historians put this at around 100 BCE without any evidence to support such a dating. But we can say that another prolific Hellenistic Jew, Philo, seems to know nothing of Esther in his era – early to mid-first century CE. 2 Maccabees is absent from the two oldest collections of the Septuagint, and its first appearance in that collection is Codex Alexandrinus, a manuscript dated to the 5th century CE. There is some fragmentary evidence that the book was known to Lucian of Antioch who lived around 200 CE.

Note that even if we accept 100 BCE as the earliest possible date, 2 Maccabees says nothing of a book of Esther, but knows only of the character Mordecai and that there is some sort of day dedicated to him by a community in the Land of Israel since he is speaking of Judeans in Judea. Some sort of Purim holiday might very well have been celebrated in the large community of *Yehudim* (the usual term for Israelites in Esther) in Persia, but then the book of Esther could easily have been written much later to explain and promote the celebration. There is no necessity to imagine that Esther as it was eventually canonized was known to the author of 2 Maccabees.

Since we have discussed the Septuagint, we should also note here that Esther is represented in Septuagint manuscripts with a number of sections which are not found in the Hebrew version of the book. These sections are usually referred to as the “Additions to Esther.” The Additions contains a reference to the mention of the book by one Lysimachus who is named as the translator of Esther into Greek.² The cast of characters named in this section (Cleopatra, two Ptolemies, one Dosetheus) belong to the era of the mid-first century BCE, so it would not be unreasonable to say that Esther (the original, Hebrew version) would have had to exist some time before that. But that presumes that anything about the Additions is authentic to the era represented. These “Additional” sections are part of a corpus of quasi-biblical literature found in what we now call Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, and one of the clear purposes of pseudepigraphal literature is the attribution of the content to authors long past, probably with the intent of conveying credibility to the content that would not appertain if the true author or era was known.

In 2021, Nikolaos Domazakis demonstrated that the Additions are linguistically dependent on the language and idiom of Philo and may reflect some of the political controversies of Philo's era.³ That would suggest a date for the Additions of about 50 CE – or later. Philo himself seems to know nothing about Esther, neither the original main text, nor the version found in the Septuagint. And for that matter, when Josephus recapitulates the Esther story in his *Antiquities*, he does not seem to be aware of the additional content.³

One of the earliest works included in the corpora of rabbinic Judaism is a brief, somewhat enigmatic text known as *Megillat Ta'anit*, a list of days on which joyous things occurred, and therefore public fasts may not be observed. Not only is Nicanor's Day listed as Adar 13, but Purim, Adar 14 and 15 as well.⁴ Many modern authors suggest a date for *Megillat Ta'anit* in the range of 40 – 70 CE, but this is peculiar given that one of the days in the list is "Trajan's Day,"⁵ a Roman emperor who reigned from 98 to 117 CE. And celebrating Trajan would be very strange for Judeans given that among his military exploits, Trajan crushed a rebellion of Judeans leading to death and destruction across North Africa and the Near East. But for the early part of his reign, Trajan earned all sorts of accolades and is included in a group known as the "Five Good Emperors." I would propose that this helps us date *Megillat Ta'anit* more precisely, to the period 98 to 113 CE before Trajan became one of the greatest enemies of Israel. And if my suggestion has merit, it also means that *Megillat Ta'anit*, like all the writings of Josephus, post-dates the destruction of the Temple. Whether or not this is the case, *Megillat Ta'anit* can only be used to establish knowledge of a holiday of Purim, not the existence of the book of Esther.

Esther is included in every post-rabbinic version of the Hebrew Bible, but intriguingly, it was not included in any known collections prior to the time of the Mishnah (ca. 250 CE). The Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) are a collection of documents, some biblical, and some which were never included in the Bible, but which were important to the Qumran community. These DSS can be dated by carbon dating as well as historical events. The collection had to be complete by about 73 CE, because the community was eliminated by the Roman conquest at that time. Among those scrolls, we find fragments ranging from as little as a verse to almost complete texts of every book that would

later be canonized as the Hebrew Bible – save one, there is not so much as a sentence from Esther.

Another collection of documents was discovered in what is now called Wadi Murabba'at and the date also sealed by known military action, this time the victory of the Romans over Judeans in 135CE. The 120 documents published contain parts of the Torah (Genesis, Deuteronomy), Isaiah and the Minor Prophets. It would have been remarkable to have some fragment of Esther among these scrolls, but obviously we can't say that the absence of Esther demonstrates anything given the sparse nature of the evidence from this collection.

In sum, Esther is the only book of the Bible which left no trace among the scrolls excavated from the Judean desert.⁶

One person living around the time of the destruction of the Temple who certainly did know the story of Esther was Josephus. In the 11th book of his *Antiquities*, he provides something of a synopsis of Esther. Once again, the chronology is significant. Everything Josephus wrote is post-73 CE, and *Antiquities* was almost certainly not completed before about 85 to 90 CE.⁷ Josephus never provides us with a listing of the books he considered Scripture, but he does tell us that they numbered 22, two short of the current listing of 24 books of the Hebrew Bible. Josephus never provides an itemization of his 22 books, and there are several reasonable candidates including Esther for omission. All we can say is that we have no dispositive evidence that Josephus considered Esther to be one of the biblical books.

The text Josephus used is very unlikely to have been the version of Esther found in the Hebrew Bible because there are numerous differences between his account and the Hebrew book. Both the Hebrew and Septuagint versions of Esther names her king as Artaxerxes,⁸ one of five by that name. Josephus confuses the matter by naming the king both Xerxes and Artaxerxes. Esther provides no explanation for Vashti's refusal to attend the king, but Josephus tells us it was because she was obeying the Persian law against appearing nude in front of strangers. One intriguing difference between Josephus and Esther is the nature of the gallows on which Haman and his sons were hung. Both the Septuagint and the Hebrew Esther call these "poles." The Hebrew is *etz* meaning "wood," "tree." The Greek in the Septuagint is ξύλον meaning the same as the Hebrew. But Josephus consistently uses the word σταυρός,

“cross,” and therefore renders the punishment as crucifixion, an execution which would have, of course, been familiar in Roman cultural circles. G.J. Goldberg catalogs about a dozen significant differences between Josephus and the Hebrew Esther and concludes that Josephus seems to have used a version of the book that became part of the Septuagint, perhaps including the sections labeled as “Additions.”⁹ We therefore have evidence that the story of Esther was known and circulating twenty years after the destruction of the Temple, what we lack is evidence that anyone regarded any version to be canonical at that date.

ESTHER IN TANAITIC SOURCES

Since there can be no question that the status of Esther as Scripture was acknowledged in the Mishnah (and its companion volume, the Tosefta), the dating of those volumes is critical in establishing when Esther became canonical. In most handbooks, students find the claim that the Mishnah was “published” or otherwise established by R. Yehudah haNasi in 212 CE. This and similar claims are based on a meticulous but difficult assessment of the life-times of the various sages quoted in these sources. Indeed, the date of 212 CE itself becomes impossible when we find various matters and personages in the Mishnah which post-date that mark. To the best of my knowledge, there is consensus that the Tannaitic corpora were complete by the early to middle of the third century.¹⁰

This provides the *terminus ante quem* for Esther – it must have been complete and close to the version now contained in the Hebrew Bible no later than 200 – 250 CE. But how much earlier than that could Esther have been written?

The Tannaitic sources are composed of statements attributed to sages and persons living before, and sometimes long before, the time of the final compilation of the works. Although the sources do occasionally reference people or events that are dateable externally to the corpora, it is usually impossible to date them with precision. Instead, scholars have relied on a system of assigning sages to various layers called “generations” and there is some authenticity provided by the consistency with which tradents (sages) are represented.

WHICH TRADENTS ARE MENTIONED IN MISHNAH/TOSEFTA MEGILLAH?

These oldest of the sources of rabbinic literature mention aspects of the observance of the Purim holiday and reference the reading of the biblical book in two tractates, one each in the Mishnah and its companion volume the Tosefta.

In the Mishnah, references to named sages are sparse. The most frequently quoted sage is R. Yehuda bar Illai, a Tanna of the 5th generation, 135 to 170 CE. Other sages mentioned in the Mishnah include R. Meir and R. Yose ben Halafta, also dating after 135 CE. The only two tradents mentioned who pre-date the Bar Kokhba War (135 CE) are R. Shimon ben Gamliel (40 – 80 CE) and Eliezer ben Hyrcanus (ca 80 – 110 CE), but both quotations regard matters that have nothing to do with the book of Esther.¹¹

The Tosefta on Esther has three chapters and each of those chapters mentions various tradents more often than does the Mishnah. But much of the text has nothing to do with Esther or Purim. Of the sections that do, the sages named date at the earliest to 110 CE—these include Rabbi Akiva, R. Meir, and R. Yehuda.¹²

What we can conclude from this discussion is that Esther was regarded as canonical no later than 250 CE. The Tannaitic sources contain no evidence that the book of Esther was known earlier than 110 CE. As it happens, that date coincides well with our knowledge of the Greek version of Esther, which was known in some form to Josephus, mentioned earlier.

THE PROVENANCE OF ESTHER

What else makes Esther remarkable and even peculiar? First, it is among just a few biblical books set entirely outside the Land of Israel. Of course, much of the Torah is also theoretically set outside Israel, but the entire narrative of the Torah is the prolegomenon to the Israelite conquest and settlement of that land. Ezekiel's prophesy takes place in Babylonia, but as part of an exile which foretells a return to the Promised Land. What makes Esther unique in this regard is that there is not a hint in the book of any need to live in or return to Israel.

But although Esther is set in Persia, that does not necessarily mean that it was written in Persia, any more than the story of, say, Exodus, in Egypt means that Exodus was written in Egypt. As we have noted, the various versions of Esther seem to be confused about such critical facts as which Persian king Esther married and Mordecai served, and we should note that there is not a shred of evidence in Persian sources mentioning an Israelite wife for any of the Persian kings, nor the authority of a vizier named Mordecai.

Esther is one of two books of the Bible which, in its Hebrew version, never calls God by the Tetragrammaton, YHWH.¹³ In Esther, uniquely, not only is there no Tetragrammaton, there is no mention of God at all! Not even when describing the salvation provided to the people, not even when describing how the festival should be honored. Not only is a term for the deity used in every other biblical book, those terms, including the Tetragrammaton, are common in other writings of the late biblical period.¹⁴ It can be tricky to assert this since we have most of those books in Greek and have to presume that the word *kyrios* (“Lord”) would have been represented by the Tetragrammaton in the original, but we have a large part of ben Sirah in Hebrew – including manuscripts found at Qumran, Masada as well as the Cairo Geniza and therefore reliably dateable to pre-73 CE, and those Hebrew manuscripts do include the Tetragrammaton. Sectarian books such as the Temple Scroll, Manual of Discipline and others from Qumran seem to have no reluctance about using the Tetragrammaton. But we should note at this point that there is one Judean work of Late Antiquity which likewise demonstrates a reluctance to invoke the Tetragrammaton, namely, the Mishnah, completed by 250 CE.

¹⁵

A LANGUAGE CONNECTION OF ESTHER TO PERSIA?

Esther is a book about the experience of Israelites living in Persia, and it is therefore unsurprising that we find several Persian words and Persian names in the text. It is somewhat of a reflection of Exodus, a book about the Israelite experience in Egypt, where we find various Egyptian words and names. But do we find enough evidence to claim that Esther was composed in Persia? There are some troubling questions to answer about that. To begin with the names, the two heroes of the book are Esther and Mordecai. Both names are Babylonian, and in fact Babylonian gods, and the author even tries to miti-

gate that fact by providing an alternate Hebrew name, Hadassah, for Esther, although having introduced that name, the book always refers to her as Esther throughout.¹⁶ That additional name is absent from the Septuagint version of Esther. It must be considered very peculiar that a book which would studiously avoid using the name YHWH would not shy away from using the names of Babylonian gods as the names of its principal characters.¹⁷

The primary language of Israelites living in Persia was Aramaic rather than Persian, but we need to keep in mind that Aramaic was an important language in the Land of Israel as well. In a book which seems to want to be read as biblical Hebrew, what deserves note is the replacement of Hebrew words with Aramaic or Persian vocabulary where perfectly good biblical Hebrew terms existed. For example, Biblical Hebrew has the word *mamlkhah* (*kingdom*) but in Esther we find only *malikut* from the Aramaic. Eventually, the *-ut* suffix replaced the biblical form of many nouns and by the time of the Mishnah, became a standard for abstract nouns. Esther also employs the Persian/Aramaic term *dat* for “edict” as well as another Persian loan word, *pitgam* for rule or custom. The word *dat* appears a dozen times in Esther, and otherwise just once elsewhere – in the late Hebrew Ezra (8:36) which has a clear Persian context.¹⁸ Some would say that the use of Persian loan words and Aramaisms lends authenticity to the text as one originating in Persia. But it also suggests a problem: the author of Esther clearly went to great trouble to make the work one of biblical Hebrew. It is obvious why such an author would use the Persian names of kings and nobles, but why not use biblical Hebrew words and grammatical structures when those are perfectly reasonable?

Almost all commentators believe that the inclusion of Persian loan words in Esther is a natural outcome of a text written about Persia and demonstrates that the author had substantial contact with Persian culture. But that knowledge could have been obtained from contacts with Persian culture long after the Achaemenid rulers, so it proves nothing about the antiquity of the text, nor does it prove it was written in Persia.

A MORE DETAILED CONSIDERATION OF THE LANGUAGE OF ESTHER

In 1958, Chaim Rabin wrote, “In the somewhat later [in Hebrew development] Book of Esther, we find that MH [Mishnaic Hebrew] has affected

much more deeply the grammatical fabric, so much so that it is almost as correct to speak of a BH text with MH influence."¹⁹

Other scholars picked up on this theme, and in 1983 Ron Bergey wrote a Ph.D. thesis suggesting that Esther is written in a form of biblical Hebrew so late, it could be deemed MH (Mishnaic or Medieval Hebrew). He summarized his conclusions in article in *Jewish Quarterly Review* in 1984.²⁰ Bergey's conclusions were based on diachronic linguistic analysis focusing on syntax. In more recent studies, some scholars have retreated from Bergey's conclusions and found mechanisms to set Esther in a more ancient context. In 2013, Robert D. Holmstedt and John Srenock drafted what they termed a linguistic profile of Esther.²¹ They acknowledged the challenges in such an enterprise primarily owing to an insufficiency of data, but they found that by many measures, the Hebrew of Esther demonstrates that it belongs in the final stages of the development of biblical Hebrew.²²

As I review the evidence provided by Bergey, Holmstedt and Srenock, I think there is one aspect that they do not sufficiently consider and that is the issue of deliberate archaization. That is possibly also because it is difficult to prove, but nevertheless, I think we need to at least consider that the author of Esther might have deliberately set out to establish it as Scripture. Think, for example, of a modern author who might want you to think a new play by Shakespeare had been discovered and casts the text into Elizabethan English. It is not uncommon for people to create pretend biblical quotes by paraphrasing the King James flavor of English. It is always possible for a more modern author to mimic a more ancient author, but the reverse is obviously impossible. The author of Esther might have desired everyone to imagine that he was writing in the Persia of the fifth century BCE, but one of the ironies here is that that author was so unfamiliar with Persian history that no one can identify the *Ahashverosh* who was Esther's king. There are sufficient historical details in Esther to rule out all five rulers by that name. And none of the five had a wife named Esther (or Ishtar, or Hadassah), although admittedly not all the wives of these rulers are known by name. So, the question remains, was the Hebrew of Esther the product of biblical Hebrew where features such as *vav*-consecutive tenses dominated, or did perhaps the author of Esther deliberately convert the regular tense verb forms to the *vav*-consecutive to give the work a sense of authenticity?²³

One conclusion has been consistent across every linguistic study of Esther since Rabin's challenge in 1958: The Hebrew of Esther is a very late version of the language. Even those who dispute the more radical ideas of Bergey concede that the syntax and morphology place it among the last of the books written in biblical Hebrew, books which are otherwise dated to the Hellenistic period and perhaps as late as the Maccabean revolt.

PERSIAN JUDEANS IN JERUSALEM

Where else could Esther have been written other than Persia? We know that in the century before the destruction of the Temple there was a community of Persian Jews living in Jerusalem, and therefore the knowledge of Persian customs, names, and vocabulary would have been at hand. Josephus relates (*Antiquities* 20.2ff) the story of the conversion of Queen Helena of Adiabene and her decision to relocate from Adiabene, a province of Persia, to Jerusalem. Queen Helena and her community became sufficiently known that several tales about her are related in the Talmud. The Israel Antiquities Authority under the direction of Doron Ben-Ami has excavated a large structure immediately south of the current southern wall, in the City of David, which they suggest is likely the palace of Helena.²⁴

Another indication of the presence of a significant Babylonian community in pre-70 Jerusalem is the reputation of one of the most famous personages claimed by rabbinic Judaism, namely Hillel, who the Babylonian Talmud relates came from Babylonia.²⁵ While the historicity of Hillel cannot be proven, it is significant that the later tradition recognizes that one of the most important influences on rabbinic tradition is a person from Persia/Babylonia.

Postulating a Jerusalem origin for Esther rather than Persia might also explain the peculiarity of using names like Esther and Mordecai. In Persia, those names would have been redolent of pagan deities, but in *Eretz Yisrael*, the names might simply have conveyed a connection to the original homeland of the Persian Israelite community.

A THEOLOGICAL CONSIDERATION

One aspect of Esther that I do not think has received much attention is that it is a depiction of how to live and celebrate the religion of Israel without any connection to the Temple, to sacrifice, or even to a priesthood. The words

priest (kohen) and *sacrifice (zevah)* do not occur in book at all. Contrast that to Ezekiel, also set in Babylonia, where we find *kohen* and *zevah* twenty-five times each. And when the *Yehudim* of Esther are victorious, they celebrate. Such celebrations in many parts of the Bible would be accomplished by sacrifices and other offerings of thanksgiving in the Temple, but the celebration in Esther is described as:

“As on days on which the Yehudim were spared from their enemies, and the month where their fate we turned from despair to celebration, from mourning to holiday, to declare those days days of feasting and joy, and exchanging gifts, and providing for the poor.” (Esther 9:2).

The language speaks for itself: all sorts of ways can be envisioned for celebration, but not those which are the customary for other holidays, namely offerings in the Temple, supervised by priests. In contrast, the festival of Hanukkah established approximately 150 BCE, focused almost entirely on the Temple and argued that the Hasmoneans were the rightful heirs of the lineage of David.²⁶

THE “YEHUDIM” OF ESTHER

Esther consistently uses the term “Yehudim” to describe the population of Israelites living in Persia. In Esther 2:5 we find Mordecai described as an *ish yehudi* and in Esther 3:4 we find Mordecai describing himself as a “*yehudi*”. The singular form is also found at 5:13, 6:10, 8:7, 9:29, 31, 10:3. The singular form “*yehudi*” is not found outside Esther in the Hebrew Bible save one occurrence in Zecharia (8:23).²⁷

The plural form *yehudim* presents us with a complication. The word is found outside of Esther, but often in contexts which demand the interpretation “Judean” or “Judahite” rather than “Jew.” Consider II Kings 16:6 which uses the term *yehudim*. The King James translation rendered this, “At that time Rezin king of Syria recovered Elath to Syria, and drave the **Jews** from Elath: and the Syrians came to Elath, and dwelt there unto this day.” Almost all subsequent translations have recognized that this rendering is impossible. The NAS rendered *yehudim* as “Judeans” which is the same term we find in the NJB, and the NRSV. The new JPS Tanakh translates the word as “Judites.” In other words, all major modern authorities agree that in this context,

the word “Yehudim” must refer to a territorial group marked by a connection to the place, Judah or Judea. This is also true of the word at II Kings 25:25.

Jeremiah provides at least six examples of the use of the plural form of the word, *yehudim*. The first of those examples, 32:12 is translated in the JPS Tanakh as “and gave the deed to Baruch son of Neriah son of Mahseiah in the presence of my kinsman Hanamel, of the witnesses who were named in the deed, and all the **Judeans** who were sitting in the prison compound.” The KJV had translated the term as “Jews” and the NAS which often follows the KJV kept that translation. But the NJB renders the word Judeans. Perhaps the most interesting translation case is that of the RSV which was revised to NRSV. The RSV reads “Jews” but that is changed to “Judeans” in the NRSV. What is going on here? Modern translators have become sensitive to the distinction between “Jew” and “Judean” and decided that the geographical term is more appropriate here than the religious/gentile.²⁸

Nehemiah 1:2 provides perhaps an even more interesting example which NRSV translates as “one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from **Judah**; and I asked them about the **Jews** that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem.”

And this time, most major translations agree – KJV, NAS, NJB, and JPS Tanakh all render the first term as “Judah” and the second as “Jews.” But why? My guess is that because the text is referring to people who lived in Persia (those who survived the Exile) the translators felt secure in using the term “Jew” which is less geocentric rather than Judean which more directly implies location. But aren’t all of them the offspring of Judeans? Is there any difference in the Hebrew term used? No, the Hebrew term is *hayehudim*, the same word we have been examining, and it has the “d” of Judah. The Septuagint translates “men of Judah” as ἄνδρες Ιουδα and simply ignores the *yehudim* of the Hebrew text saying that he asked “them.”²⁹

Having adopted this transition from people of Judea to “Jews,” most translators then continue to use the term Jew for the several verses in Nehemiah that refer to *Yehudim*.³⁰

But it is not simply that Esther uses the term *yehudi* to refer to the people, it is that the author seems to avoid using the terms commonly found for the people in all the rest of the Hebrew Bible. Obviously, the term “Israel” in Genesis is mostly used to identify the patriarch by that name and his family.

But from Exodus through the end of the Torah, the primary term for the people is *b'nei yisrael*, the Israelites, or sometimes just, Israel.

The book of Jonah is a late biblical Hebrew composition which features the following exchange. The captain and sailors confront Jonah and ask him, "...Tell us, you who have brought this misfortune upon us, what is your business? Where have you come from? What is your country, and of what people are you?" (Jonah 1:8) Jonah replies, "*I am a Hebrew he replied (anokhi ivri). 'I worship the LORD, the God of Heaven, who made both sea and land.'*" (Jonah 1:9) Given the opportunity to name the ethnic/geographic origin of his protagonist, the author of Jonah prefers the term "Hebrew" over Israelite or Judean.

Only in the book of Esther do we find the exclusive use of "Yehudi" to describe those who have the ancestral attachment to Judea.

AN EXPLANATION

I believe there is an explanation which covers all these peculiarities, and it is related to the explanation proposed by Ron Bergey in 1983. I suggest that Esther was composed within the community of Persian Jews living in Jerusalem, and it was composed late enough that no trace of it can be found in any of the collections of ancient biblical and pseudo-biblical scrolls excavated to-date. The community which composed it wished to create a literary work that celebrated the origins of their community, and so they used names, offices, and other vocabulary familiar to them from their history with their homeland. They knew that their ancestors celebrated some sort of victory and declared a celebratory holiday. But they were sufficiently distant in time and space from that homeland that they misreclected many of those details such as the name of the ruler of Persia at the time of the tale. Names like "Esther" (Ish-tar) and "Mordecai" (Marduk) might have raised concern about naming idolaters in Persia, but in Eretz Yisrael, they were just names redolent of Persia.

They almost certainly spoke Aramaic in their day-to-day lives, and more than likely knew Greek, which was, after all, the *lingua franca* of the eastern Roman Empire. They might have translated their story from an Aramaic original or composed it in the late Hebrew that was replacing the biblical language and would eventually become the written language of the Tannaim.

Their familiarity with Greek would also explain the availability of the tale in that language which allowed Josephus to include his version of what would eventually become the Septuagint and Christian forms of the story.

Their desire to justify the Persian Israelite experience as biblical might have inspired a member of their community to translate it into biblical Hebrew by converting many of the verbs to the biblical-only *vav*-consecutive tenses. But they were not sufficiently trained in biblical Hebrew to modify the syntax of the later Hebrew dialect, and they probably didn't realize they were using Aramaic words where biblical Hebrew synonyms could have been employed.

The story was composed late enough in Judean religious history that the author was unwilling to use any form of God's name. Not the Tetragrammaton, nor any of the others commonly found not only in biblical books, but in the literatures of the apocrypha and Qumran.

There is no specific evidence I can find that would allow me to assign Esther to a date earlier than 70 CE, but I think it likely that it was in circulation before the destruction of the Temple simply because the havoc that must have attended the aftermath of the Roman war to all the communities of Judeans living in and around Jerusalem would have made composing books difficult. But that war might also explain the need to solidify the text such that it would be recognized in the newly important Tannaitic circles and communities of Judeans living in places like Rome, Egypt and Antioch.

Some of the very things that make Esther a peculiar book well explain its appeal to the rise of the Tannaim. The religion of Esther is a religion without animal sacrifice or the priesthood necessary to maintain a sacrificial system. Holidays, according to Esther, can be celebrated with feasting and making donations to the poor. All these aspects must have had strong appeal to Judeans who were learning how to cope with a landscape devoid of the Temple which provided the necessary infrastructure of the priesthood. The religious authorities of Esther gained that authority from their station in society, not because of lineage; neither royal nor priestly.

Some of these same facts have been used in recent years to justify an almost anti-Semitic pseudo-scholarly literature purporting to "debunk" or otherwise deny the validity of rabbinic Judaism.³¹ But nothing could be further from the truth. Rabbinic Judaism is one logical extension of biblical religion into a period in which the descendants of the Second Temple Judeans came to

understand that it was impossible to follow large parts of the Torah in any literal sense. They came up with methods of interpretation that allowed them to honor the Torah while adjusting to the times in which they lived. Other groups which valued the Torah came up with other methods, but there is no reason to suggest that their methods are any more logical or valid than any others.

THE RELIGION OF ESTHER AND ITS *YEHUDIM*

A final note regarding terminology. Throughout the history of Second Temple Judaism, most translations and modern authors tend to refer to the people of Judea, as well as the inhabitants of the Diaspora, as “Jews.” But from the perspective of the anthropology of religion, there is a significant problem with using the same word “Jew” to refer to both the Judeans of the Temple era and those of the rabbinic era – not to mention medieval and modern times. If a cultural anthropologist were forming a description of the religion of Judea and the Diaspora during the Temple era, what would they conclude? It was a religion based heavily in the application of ancient tradition through the Torah to their own time, and that application included the necessity of sacrifice and offerings in the Temple. Those offerings could be made only with the assistance of the priesthood. Other authority figures included royals and prophets, people recognized as divinely inspired to transmit the word of God, whom they knew by the name YHWH (among other terms such as El, Eloha, and Elohim). Many people grew restless with these authority figures and began looking for other models, and so we find the beginnings of religious recognition of personages outside the priesthood. But as long as the Temple stood, it was the priests who wielded the religious authority of the community.

When the Temple fell, there would not likely have been any instantaneous transition of religious authority to those outside the priesthood. After all, the Temple had been destroyed before, and after a generation, had been restored with a corresponding restoration of priestly authority. But as the decades progressed, people increasingly began to look for religious authority outside the priesthood. Some found it among the followers of Jesus and Paul. Some looked to the Tannaim who were expertly versed in the Torah of Moses. Those Tannaim gained their authority from that knowledge of sacred texts.

They wrote expansively in a way which provided a rationale for observing the Torah without priests or sacrifices. They avoided the names of God found in the Torah because of their understanding of the sanctity of those names and instead found all sorts of workarounds for mentioning God's name. They devised ways to celebrate the holy days required by the Torah with symbols rather than sacrifice.

Among the most famous and celebrated discussions of this phenomenon of rabbinic supremacy are passages from a later rabbinic work known as *Avot D'Rabbi Natan*, a post-Talmudic review of *Pirkei Avot*, adding much material to the original. We therefore have a glimpse of how attitudes evolved from the third to the eighth centuries.

It would be erroneous to state that the sages quoted had completely forsaken the idea of the importance of Temple worship. As late as *Avot d'Rabbi Natan*, the sages agree that Israel is greatly troubled by its inability to follow the Torah's demands to sacrifice and worship there. But among those passages we also find in chapter four a set of remarkable comments which suggest an advocacy for religious observance outside of the realm of priests and sacrifice.

"Regarding charitable acts (*g'milut hasadim*), how do we accomplish this? There is a text, Hosea 6:6, *For I desire goodness (hesed), not sacrifice; Obedience to God, rather than burnt offerings.*³² The world has been created for kindness as we find in Psalms (89:3) *I declare, "Your steadfast love (hesed), is confirmed forever; there in the heavens You establish Your faithfulness."* On one occasion, Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai left Jerusalem and Rabbi Joshua was following him. He saw the destroyed Temple and said, "Woe to us on account of what we have lost," "the place in which Israel was cleansed of its sins." He said to him, "My son, do not be troubled [over this] because we have as good an atonement [as those rituals]. And what are they? Acts of kindness (*g'milut hasadim*) as it is said, "*Kindness is what I seek, rather than sacrifices.*" As we have found that Daniel, that beloved person, used to occupy himself with kindly acts. And what were these kindly acts that Daniel performed? If you might imagine that he made sacrifices and offerings in Babylonia, do we not already find in Deuteronomy 12:13-14, *Take care not to sacrifice your burnt offerings in any place you like, but only in the place that the LORD will choose in one of your tribal territories. There you shall sacri-*

fice your burnt offerings and there you shall observe all that I enjoin upon you."

Note that this explanation that worship in Babylonia cannot have included offerings and sacrifices is precisely the circumstance of the Yehudim in Esther. "What are these acts of kindness that he performed? He would entertain brides; he would accompany funeral processions, he would donate to the poor. He would pray three times a day, prayers that were acceptable, as it says (Dan. 6:11), *When Daniel learned that it had been put in writing, he went to his house, in whose upper chamber he had had windows made facing Jerusalem, and three times a day he knelt down, prayed, and made confession to his God, as he had always done.*"

Rabban Yohanan ben Zakkai is cited about 100 times in the Tannaitic materials, but this quote is not found anywhere until a work of the 8th to 9th centuries. But other Tannaitic citations demonstrate that at least by the time of the Mishnah, ben Zakkai was recognized as having asserted religious authority that would previously been in the domain of the priesthood.³³ This demonstrates a fundamental truth of the Tannaitic period: it was the era in which Judean religious authorities strove to assert the dominant position of the rabbis and minimize the importance of performing the offerings and sacrifices demanded by the Torah. Esther goes even further than Hosea (who was making a rather different point) or Daniel. Daniel shows no reticence to mention God and specifically by the Tetragramaton.³⁴ And Esther never seems to imagine it is important to reference Jerusalem—and by extension—the Temple, in prayer.

What we have in Esther is an assertion that Israelites can observe their faith without priests, offerings or sacrifices. Celebrations and acts of charity can replace other holiday observances and need not be located in the Temple—or even in the Land of Israel. The institution of Purim as a holiday for all Judeans and descendants of Judeans establishes a national holiday, and the only holiday so recognized, entirely beyond the borders of the Holy Land.

If Esther is not a work written already in the rabbinic era, it could not be a more perfect book for that era.

NOTES

1. *The Canon Debate*, J. Sanders, I. McDonald, Ed. United States: Baker Publishing Group, 2001. There is a lengthy scholarly history and bibliography for the topic of canonization.

This volume, slightly dated now, contains a treasury of articles and citations on the topic through 2001. McDonald has since updated this research in two volumes published in 2024.

2. “In the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra, Dositheus, who said that he was a priest and a Levite, and his son Ptolemy brought to Egypt the preceding Letter about Purim, which they said was authentic and had been translated by Lysimachus son of Ptolemy, one of the residents of Jerusalem” (Esg. 11:1 NRS).

3. N. Domazakis, “On the Date of Composition of Additions B and E to LXX Esther,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 52 (2021) 330–358.

4. *B’arbaah asar beh uvhamishah asar ymei puria enun dla lmisped* (“On the fourteenth of it and fifteenth are the days of Purim, no mourning is permitted”).

5. Some versions vocalize the Aramaic as “Tyrian” rather than “Trajan.” But as far as I know, no one knows who this Tyrian might have been. The scholion to *Megillat Ta’anit*, which is much later, explains the day as relating to the executions of Julianus and Pappos. If there is some substance to this recollection, it reaffirms a date in the second rather than the first century CE.

6. Technically, that same distinction could be made for Nehemiah, but the DSS do contain verses from Ezra, and many scholars consider Ezra-Nehemiah to be a single book. There are two documents, tractates, one of the Mishnah, the other of the Tosefta, which demonstrate that Esther was known to the compilers of those corpora. But nothing earlier than that. Esther is included in the Septuagint as canonized by the Christian church, but that is no earlier than the fourth/fifth centuries CE. And so, yet again, we are chronologically thrust into a later time period than the destruction of the Temple – the third and fourth centuries CE.

7. Josephus first published the book we now call *The Jewish War* and which included events through 73 CE, and only then commenced working on *Antiquities*. Of course, we can’t know whether he wrote that book in time sequence, but the fact that his account of Esther occurs in Book 11 suggests that several years had passed before he reached that point. He wrote by a process of dictation to amanuenses, so I am suggesting a date of no earlier than 85 CE for the completion of his longest work, and likely later than that.

8. In a private communication, David Halperin pointed out to me that the Hebrew *Ahashverosh* could be Xerxes using a prosthetic aleph rather than the later kings named Artaxerxes.

9. G.J. Goldberg, *Esther: Her Point of View: Josephus' Version with Commentary*, <https://josephus.org/Esther.htm>

10. For a recent review of the scholarship: Brandes, Yehuda. “The Canonization of the Mishnah.” *Journal of Ancient Judaism*, 15 Dec. 2019, pp. 145+. *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A613716298/AONE?u=tel_oweb&sid=googleScholar&xid=d9485d49 . Accessed 22 Feb. 2025.

11. In the case of R. Shimon ben Gamaliel: *Rabban Shimon ben Gamliel omer; af bsfarim lo hitiru shyikhtvu ela yvanit*. “Rabban Shimon ben Gamaliel says, the only language (other than Hebrew) that (the sages) permitted was Greek.” (Mishna *Megilla* 1:8) His statement referenced the Bible as a whole, not the book of Esther.

12. Tosefta 3:2 also mentions R. Shimon ben Gamaliel, but here the quote is about Passover, not Purim.

13. Ecclesiastes omits the Tetragrammaton, but includes other theophoric names.

14. One feature of the “Additions to Esther” mentioned earlier is that it names God approximately 50 times. This may represent some sort of attempt to correct what might its author had perceived as a fault in the original Hebrew text.

15. P. C. Beentjes *Book of Ben Sira in Hebrew: A Text Edition of All Extant Hebrew Manuscripts and a Synopsis of All Parallel Hebrew Ben Sira Texts*. Germany: Brill, 2014.

16. Esther 2:7.

17. There is another possible parallel with Exodus here, in that the name “Moses” is most likely from the Egyptian “son of” and a part of many Egyptian Pharonic names such as Tut-Mos and Ah-Mos. Exodus 2:10 tries to disguise this connection by saying the name is Hebrew, but the Hebrew verb they attribute it to is very rare and the etymology (*vatiqra shmo moshe vatomer ki min hamayim mshitihi*) is a long stretch. Just how would Pharaoh’s daughter know an obscure Hebrew verb?

18. There are perfectly good Biblical Hebrew terms that could be used to express the idea of *dat* and *pitgam* including *hoq* and *mishpat*.

19. C. Rabin, *The Historical Background of Qumran* (Hebrew), *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 4, 153.

20. R. Bergey, “Late Linguistic Features in Esther,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, July 1984, New Series, Vol. 75, No. 1 (Jul., 1984), pp. 66-78

21. R.. Holmstedt and J. Screnock, *Whither Esther? A Linguistic Profile of the Book of Esther* SBL 2013.

22. The most recent contribution to the scholarship of the historical linguistics of biblical Hebrew literature is A. Hornkohl, *Diachronic Diversity in Classical Biblical Hebrew*. He does not add much to this discussion other than confirming that Esther demonstrates the characteristics of later rather than earlier Biblical Hebrew.

23. In 1976, R. Polzin suggested that Esther’s Hebrew is archaized, *Late Biblical Hebrew: Toward an Historical Typology of Biblical Hebrew Prose*. Missoula: Scholars Press.

24. <https://www.jpost.com/israel/second-temple-palace-uncovered>

25. TB *Sukkah* 20a (end) *hazrah v’nishtakha alah hillel habavli v’yisdaḥ* : “(The Torah) was again forgotten, and Hillel the Babylonian rose and reestablished it.”

26. E. Regev, *The Original Meaning of Chanukah*

<https://thetorah.com/article/the-original-meaning-of-chanukah>

27. The plural form *yehudiim* or *yehudim* is found at 3:6, 10, 13, 4:3, 13, 16, 6:13, 7:14, 8:1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, 11, 13, 16, 17, 9:1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 19, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 27, 28, 30, 10:3. Note that Zechariah is universally acknowledged as late Biblical Hebrew.

28. The same pattern is found in Jeremiah 38:19, 40:11, 12, 41:3, and 44:1.

29. καὶ ἦλθεν Ἀνανι εἰς ἀπὸ ἀδελφῶν μου αὐτὸς καὶ ἄνδρες Ἰουδα καὶ ἡρώτησα αὐτοὺς περὶ τῶν σωθέντων οἱ κατελείφθησαν ἀπὸ τῆς αἰχμαλωσίας καὶ περὶ Ἱερουσαλὴμ (Rahlf’s).

30. Nehemiah 3:33, 34, 4:6, 5:1, 5:8, 13:23.

31. For example, E. Bar, *Rabbinic Judaism Debunked: Debunking the myth of Rabbinic Oral Law*. In my opinion, this book should be regarded as a Christian polemic tract rather than academic scholarship.

32. Translation of *Avot d’Rabbi Natan* is mine, biblical translations are NJPS unless otherwise indicated.

33. For example, in rulings about waving the lulav and etrog as part of the celebration of *Sukkot* (Tabernacles), M. *Sukkah* 3:12.

34. References to the God of Israel using various forms of Elohim are common, and the Tetragrammaton is found, for example, at Daniel 9:2.

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Ultimately, I am of course responsible for any errors which may have somehow survived the readings of these friends and scholars.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR
DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

January	I Samuel	25 – 31
	II Samuel	1 – 21
February	II Samuel	22 – 24
	I Kings	1 – 22
	II Kings	1– 3
March	II Kings	4 – 25
	Isaiah	1 – 6
April	Isaiah	7 – 34
May	Isaiah	35 – 62

