



THE GOD WHO HIDES SOME JEWISH RESPONSES TO THE BOOK OF ESTHER

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There are few Biblical books that disturb our modern conscience as much as *megillat ester*, the Book of Esther, despite the fact that it has a secure place in the Biblical canon. True, there was some debate in the Talmud about its inclusion, but nothing as serious as the rabbinic doubts about Ecclesiastes. True, it is the only Biblical book not to be found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. But this absence may simply be the result of an archaeological accident and one day it will be found. Alternatively, some suggest that this absence reflects certain ideological concerns of the Qumran community about the contents of the scroll, for example, the absence of God, but this can only be speculation. Despite such questions the Book of Esther sits comfortably in the Hebrew Bible amongst the five *megillot*, the five scrolls that belong to particular festival and fast days in the Jewish calendar. Moreover this particular *megillah* was important enough to have an entire tractate of the Mishnah devoted to it, addressing the laws regulating the writing of the Scroll itself and how it is to be read in public worship.

Most obviously the prominence of the book for Jews derives from our obligation to hear its public recitation during the Festival of Purim on two occasions, once in the evening and once in the morning of the festival. This alone would make it one of the best known Biblical books. Or better said, it is one of the books listened to with the greatest attentiveness by the congregation so as not to miss an opportunity to make a loud noise with graggers and rattles at the mention of the name of the wicked Haman – though the detailed content of the rest of the book may become rather lost in the fun and chaos of the occasion. If that were not enough to secure its popularity, the characters of Esther and Mordechai, King Ahasuerus and Haman, offer endless opportunities for children’s party costumes, but also for adults to dress up, and even cross-dress, during the festival day, and to parody their respected teachers in the carnival atmosphere that surrounds Purim. A somewhat straitlaced British Liberal Judaism of the early twentieth century tried to abolish Purim, disapproving of the violence of the Book, and probably also the frivolity associated with its reading, clearly not appropriate for the solemnity and seriousness they assumed should characterise religious ritual. But even they have long since yielded to popular demand for carnival and reinstated the festival. The Book of Esther is firmly part of canonical respectability and licensed liturgical mayhem. So what is it about the book that disturbs?

First of all, for a Biblical book, the absence of God must raise a few theological eyebrows. This was clearly such a problem from the earliest history of the book, that the Septuagint provided a preface and postscript in the form of a dream of Mordechai, and inserted prayers so as to transform its mixture of good luck and useful coincidences into a textbook example of piety answered by divine providence. Whether God is entirely absent from the Book depends on how one considers a number of scribal features. There are phrases where the initial letters of the words, as a form of

acrostic, actually spell out divine names. For example in 5:4 the initial letters of the four-word phrase: 'may the king and Haman come today', *yavo ha-melech v'haman ha-yom*, are the letters of the tetragramaton, God's special name: 'yod – hey – vav – hey'. Once this kind of possibility has been spotted, a similar occurrence, though this time with the divine name spelled backwards can be found in a phrase in 1:20 (*hee v'chol ha-nashim yit'nu*) or by utilising the final letters of the phrase in 5:13 *zeh einenu shoveh lee*. To these can be added the phrase in 7:5 (*mi hu zeh v'ei zeh hu*, whose final letters whether forwards or backwards spell 'ehyeh', the famous 'I am' or 'I will be', the divine 'name' expressed by God to Moses at the burning bush. If this seems too farfetched, it is nevertheless worth noting that the word for 'king', 'ha-melech', referring to the Persian king, occurs 190 times in 167 verses, and in well-written scrolls this word will head each new column. To mention 'kingship' so often, without once mentioning the divine king, shows at the very least a remarkable constraint on the part of the author.

In the light of the absence of God it is not surprising that the rabbis, and later commentators, sought to find a reference to God in Mordechai's words of admonition to Esther when she was reluctant to approach King Ahasuerus on behalf of her people – that relief and rescue will come to the Jews 'from another place' (4:14), 'makom', 'place', being a rabbinic designation for God. But the rabbis were also prepared to accept that the time of Esther was a period when God was indeed absent. They expressed this through a question addressed to the very name of Esther. 'Where is there an allusion to Esther in the Torah?' In Deuteronomy 31:18, 'v'anochi haster aster panai, 'I will surely hide My face'. (Chullin 139b)

The plot of the Book is well known. The Persian king Ahasuerus at one of his banquets summons his wife Queen Vashti to attend. On her refusal she is sent away, perhaps even to her death, and some years later, guided by his many advisers, the king agrees to a beauty contest to select her successor. The winner is Esther, a Jewish girl, ward of a courtier called Mordechai. On Mordechai's instructions she conceals her identity. Meanwhile the king elevates Haman to a high rank in the court. When Mordechai refuses to bow down to him, Haman decides to take revenge not only on Mordechai but on the entire Jewish people. He offers the king a substantial sum of money and sets a date for their destruction a year later. Mordechai persuades the reluctant Esther to intercede with the king and she invites the king and Haman to a pair of special banquets. After the first one the king cannot sleep and finds recorded in the Chronicles that Mordechai had once saved his life. Seeking to reward him he asks Haman, who just happens to be in the court, for advice. Thinking he himself is the one to be honoured, Haman describes a royal procession with himself at the head, only to have to arrange it for Mordechai. With this ill omen still affecting him, he attends the second banquet where Esther denounces him. The king leaves briefly in anger and returns to find Haman seemingly molesting the queen, which now seals his fate. An important element in the plot is the strange idea that a law once promulgated cannot be changed, so now it is up to Mordechai to offer a solution, one of the wisdom themes that underpin the book – the Jews may now defend themselves with royal approval against the proposed attack upon them. This second law, together with Mordechai's new status in the palace, puts the fear of the Jews on the population, and many even pretend to be Jews. In the fighting that follows many of the enemies of the Jews are killed, including the ten sons of Haman. With the king's approval the fighting continues for another day. Mordechai then instructs the Jewish people to celebrate the fourteenth and fifteenth days of Adar, as days when they had rest from their enemies, thus instituting the Festival of Purim, and indeed justifying the creation of the *megillah* itself. Perhaps inevitably the final chapter notes that the king imposes a new tax on his entire population, and records that Mordechai, ranking next to king Ahasuerus, was highly regarded by the majority of his brethren for whom he did much good.

What are we to make of the Book? Throughout Jewish tradition it has been regarded as a true historical account of events. However in modern times that certainty has been eroded. It is true that certain details of the Persian court and language are accurate, but they provide more of a colourful background to a story that seems historically to be without foundation. Today we would

consider it more as a historical novella. Nevertheless in some Orthodox Jewish circles today its historicity is defended. In the first volume of a remarkably successful series of books of Biblical commentary published by ArtScroll Studio Press the introductory essay affirms:

It must be made clear that this is not a so-called 'scientific' or 'apologetic' commentary on the Megillah. That area has, unfortunately, been too well-covered, resulting in violence to the Jewish faith as well as to correct interpretation. It is in no way the intention of this book to demonstrate the legitimacy or historicity of Esther or Mordechai to non-believers or doubters. Belief in the authenticity of every book of the Torah is basic to Jewish faith, and we proceed from there. It comes as no surprise to me – nor should it to any Orthodox Jew – that the palace in Shushan, as unearthed by archeologists (sic), bears out the description of the palace in the Megillah in every detail; nor do we deem it necessary to prove, by means of the 'Persian borrow-words,' nor by whatever means, that the Book was, indeed, written in that contemporary period.¹

For someone who claims to be totally uninterested in the archaeological findings, it is interesting that the writer feels the need to show that they actually support the Biblical version! But if we are willing to explore other interpretations of the Book, one scholarly debate today centres around deciding to what genre the Book belongs as a literary work. That the work is essentially comic, at least on one level, seems clear – though how should one classify it? Adele Berlin², reflecting a contemporary Jewish scholarly approach to the Hebrew Bible, offers two terms which she feels are appropriate: The first is 'farce' –

a type of comedy designed to provoke the audience to simple, hearty laughter ... To do so it employs highly exaggerated or caricatured character types, puts them into impossible and ludicrous situations, and makes free use of broad verbal humour and physical horseplay.³

Moreover her second classification as 'burlesque', also seems appropriate:

'an artistic composition ... that, for the sake of laughter, vulgarizes lofty material or treats ordinary material with mock dignity'⁴

Clearly the humour is there: in the drunken behaviour of the King and his courtiers; in the absurd solemnity with which the king decrees that every man should wield authority in his own home; in the dramatic reversal when Haman is forced to perform for Mordechai the honours he had thought were due to him. But funny though these are, they are acted out against the dark background of the threat of genocide against the Jewish people. Thus the Book speaks uniquely and directly to the reality of Jewish life in exile, in the Diaspora. The story tells of a Jewish community comfortably settled and assimilated in the land of Persia. Even the names of Mordechai and Esther are probably popular local names related to the god Marduk and the goddess Astarte. But in this world of exile, their fate is in the hands of forces over which they have seemingly no control. King Ahasuerus can appoint as a minister, a man like Haman. It just takes the refusal of Mordechai to bow down to Haman, to honour him in public, for Haman to unleash a murderous attack on the entire Jewish population. In charge of 'homeland security' Haman reports to the king that there is a people scattered throughout his empire who are a threat to the king, and so they must be destroyed. He even offers to pay a large sum of money to offset any budget deficit caused by the potential loss of revenue from the Jews. Seemingly without a second thought the king agrees. In this world of exile, life or death, success or catastrophe, are dependent on the arbitrary moods of those in power. The text may be composed with humour, but the laughter it evokes is hollow.

Whatever the arguments about the historicity of the Book, it is also at the same time firmly related to a number of Biblical characters and preceding events. The most obvious model for a Mordechai and Esther is the figure of Joseph, who also rose to great heights in the court of a foreign king and used the opportunity to save his people. (Both Joseph and Esther are praised for their beauty – compare Gen 39:6 and Esther 2:7.) But both Joseph and the combined figures of Esther and Mordechai, despite their rise to power remain vulnerable, like the Hofjuden of later periods. By virtue of their outsider status they are dispensable if the political situation changes. In that re-

1 *The Megillah: Translated and compiled by Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz* (ArtScroll Studios Press, Ltd 1976) p x.

2 Adele Berlin *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther* (The Jewish Publication Society, Philadelphia 2001) p xix.

3 M. H. Abrams *A Glossary of Literary Terms* 4th Ed (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York 1981) p 26.

4 *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, second edition, 1987.

spect they are susceptible to the whims of the king, to be elevated or rejected, indeed just as Haman himself. In fact if one reads the story politically the rivalry between Mordechai and Haman, and things like Mordechai's refusal to bow before Haman which sets off the struggle, become quite transparent as evidence of their vying for power in the court. However different their motivations and loyalties, they are effectively mirror images of one another. That adds another disturbing aspect to the rabbinic view that one should drink enough alcohol on Purim so that one can no longer distinguish between saying 'Blessed be Mordechai and cursed be Haman'!

But there is another thread in the story that has a deeper and darker element. Haman is described as an Agagite, and one is immediately drawn to another story, that of Samuel's public attack on King Saul in 1 Samuel 15. Tasked with destroying the Amalekites and their king called Agag, Saul spares the king and allows his own people to take the spoil. For this failure Samuel effectively removes the kingdom from Saul and places it instead on the shoulders of David. The phrase Samuel uses, that the kingdom will be given 'to your neighbour who is better than you' (1 Samuel 15:28) has its exact echo in Esther 1:19 where Vashti's role as queen 'will be given to her neighbour who is better than her.' Moreover in the case of Esther it is explicitly stated that the Jews did not take the spoil after their victory (Esther 9:16), a contrast with the Samuel episode. Thus in one sense Agag the Amalekite spared by Saul, is finally killed (and also his offspring) at the hand of Mordechai, a descendant of Kish, the father of Saul. The failure of the past has been 'corrected' in the present. One can feel the hand of history reaching across the generations.

But these links between the two stories go even deeper because of the presence of the Amalekites. One is reminded of the way the Amalekites attacked the weakest in the column of the Israelites on their journey from Egypt through the wilderness. The story is recounted in Exodus 17:8-16, and concludes with the warning that God will be at war with Amalek throughout the generations. When the story is picked up again in Deuteronomy 25:17-19 there is the command to Israel, when they are at rest on their land, to blot out the memory of Amalek from under the heavens. Just in case we miss these linkages in the text of the Book of Esther, Jewish tradition designates as the additional Torah reading in the synagogue on the Shabbat before Purim Deuteronomy 25:17-19 and the Haftarah, the prophetic reading, is 1 Samuel 15:1-34.

But even here we need to go back further into the patriarchal history, because Amalek is the grandson of Esau through his son Eliphaz and a concubine (Genesis 36:12). This, in turn, takes us back to Jacob's betrayal of Esau when he stole his twin brother's blessing. Why evoke that story? When Esau learnt that Jacob had stolen his blessing, 'he cried out a great and bitter cry', *vayitz'ak tz'akah g'dolah umarah ad me'od* (Genesis 27:34). Yet these are the identical words used to describe Mordechai's bitter cry when he learnt about Haman's plot to exterminate the Jews (Esther 4:1) '*vayiz'ak z'akah g'dolah umarah*', 'and he cried out a great and bitter cry'. It is as if the author has tried to link his narrative to the ongoing struggle with Amalek, and, moreover, demonstrate how a deep wound from the past can re-surface generations later. In one sense Mordechai's triumph over Haman seems to end the struggle against Amalek; but the echo of the Jacob/Esau betrayal suggests that the story is never really over.

Modern sensitivities are concerned with the violence to be found in the concluding part of the Book, and the revenge taken by the Jews against their enemies. The most problematic phrase is the suggestion that the Jews massacred women and children as well (Esther 8:11), though Robert Gordis suggests that this verse is actually a quotation of the original decree of Haman (3:13) that the Jews were actually defending themselves against, and not a record of what they did. It should also be noted that Esther's desire to have a second day to fight their enemies comes as a direct response to a question of the King. Perhaps she is reading his intent in her request, for those people are still a threat to Ahasuerus himself and it is in his interest to have them removed. Nevertheless the violence remains a problem to be addressed by anyone concerned with the teachings and values of the Book.

Perhaps the most radical recent Jewish commentary on the Book comes from the philosopher and theologian Emil Fackenheim, z'l. In a series of lectures delivered at Manchester University in 1987 he addressed the subject of 'The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust'. They make for painful reading. But let us focus on one passage that deals in a radically different way with a text we have already noted;

In the book Mordecai tells a hesitant Esther that, in case she turns a deaf ear to his plea, deliverance will come to her people 'from another place'. (Esther 4:14.) Traditionally this is an allusion to the unmentioned God. But what if the Biblical Mordecai hoped for no more than some lucky coincidence? The British are said always to muddle through. What if the Mordecai of the 'naked text' means no more than this, that just as luck has always saved the Jewish people, so it will not fail in the present emergency? Esther is a literary masterpiece: what makes it so is the weaving together, with supreme economy, of a series of small coincidences into one large fortunate coincidence. What if Vashti had not been the first militant feminist in history? What if Ahasuerus had married a nice Gentile girl? What if Mordecai had not overheard the two who conspired to kill the king? What if the king had not been sleepless that particular night? If any of these 'what ifs' had occurred, Haman would not have failed.

Denuded of pious interpretations, then, the 'naked' Esther adds up to a lesson in monumental good luck – a lesson supremely relevant, supremely painful, for a Jewish 'generation' after a time of monumental bad luck. This is a theme so haunting that it will be necessary to return to it. For the present this must suffice: during the Holocaust there were thousands of nameless Esthers, less hesitant than the Biblical one to risk their lives for their people: not one had the chance. The much-maligned *Judenraete* included countless would-be Mordecais: to none came the help from another place that would have made him an actual Mordecai. A heroism dwarfing the Biblical – but, unlike the Biblical, doomed to be *unsung* – was shown by a people, itself doomed to extermination ...

Esther is strange no more. What if this once-strange book in the Jewish Bible had to be moved from the periphery to the centre, so as to provide the new principle uniting the whole?⁵

Fackenheim moved to Israel after the 1967 'Six Day War' with its extraordinary victory and the return of Jerusalem to Jewish hands after almost two thousand years. For him the seeming self-sufficiency of the State of Israel reflects an essential new stage in Jewish life, based on the need to confront political realities head on, no longer relying on the traditions and faith of the past. It is a bitter vision that would place the Book of Esther at its religious centre, because it offers only two options: One is to accept the Biblical and rabbinic view of a God who deliberately 'hides His face', even when most needed by His people. The other is to face a world without God, which is often the preferred option today for so many. Yet is God only to be vindicated when His people win military victories? Fackenheim is himself disturbed by elements of the Book, especially the death of Haman's sons whom he sees as innocent victims of their father's actions. Their death cannot simply be overlooked or ignored after the murder of a million Jewish children during the Holocaust. The violence of the Book of Esther remains a stumbling block however prominent a role one wishes to accord it. Paradoxically, these are some of the religious questions that arise from a Biblical book seemingly without a religious heart.

And yet Fackenheim would also have been aware of a very different traditional Jewish perception of the enduring nature of the Book of Esther. In his *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides writes about the messianic era.

All the books of the prophets and those in the section of the Hebrew Bible known as *ketuvim*, 'writings' will cease [to be recited in public] during the messianic era, except the Book of Esther. It will continue to exist just as the Five Books of the Torah and the laws of the Oral Torah that will never cease. Although ancient troubles will be remembered no longer, as it is written: 'The troubles of the past are forgotten and hidden from my eyes' (Isaiah 65:16), the days of Purim will not be abolished, as it is written: 'These days of Purim shall never be repealed among the Jews, and the memory of them shall never cease from their descendants' (Esther 9:28).⁶

It seems that, at least from this perspective, the Book of Esther will continue to enchant us and to disturb us till the end of time.

⁵ Emil L Fackenheim *The Jewish Bible after the Holocaust: A re-reading* (Sherman Studies of Judaism in Modern Times, Manchester University Press 1990) p 61-62.

⁶ *Mishneh Torah*, Sefer Z'manim, Hilkhhot Megillah v'Hanukah 2:18 Translation from *Maimonides' Mishneh Torah (Yad Hazakah)* Ed. Philip Birnbaum (Hebrew Publishing Company, New York 1944, 1967) p 110.