

## RELIGION, WISDOM AND HISTORY IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER — A NEW SOLUTION TO AN ANCIENT CRUX

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VIRTUALLY from the time of its composition, the book of Esther has posed many problems for its readers, who have been disturbed by its place in the canon and consequently by its presumed sacred character. In modern times, readers have been troubled primarily, though not exclusively, by moral issues, and the book has been stigmatized by many readers as “vengeful, bloodthirsty and chauvinistic in spirit.”<sup>1</sup> The principal basis for this accusation has been the cruelty exhibited by the Jews after the execution of Haman in the presumed slaughter of thousands of their enemies, including women and children (8:11). The subject has been discussed in a wide spectrum of views ranging from violent denunciation to apologetics.<sup>2</sup> I have presented my own approach to this problem by an analysis of the crucial text in an earlier paper,<sup>3</sup> and to which I shall have occasion to refer briefly later.

<sup>1</sup> A composite view cited by C. A. Moore, *Esther* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1971) xxx, 80. L. B. Paton, *Book of Esther* (ICC; New York: Scribners, 1908) 96, declares, “There is not one noble character in the book.” Esther is “relentless toward a fallen enemy, secures not merely that the Jews escape from danger but that they fall upon their enemies, slay their wives and children and plunder their property . . . (but is) not satisfied with this slaughter,” etc. Other scholars who condemn the book are R. H. Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper, 1941) 747; Otto Eissfeldt, *The Old Testament, An Introduction* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 511-12; Samuel Sandmel, *The Enjoyment of Scripture* (New York: Oxford University, 1972) 44.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. B. W. Anderson, *IB* 3. 866, who explains the alleged massacre of the Persians by the Jews as “truly measure-for-measure retaliation, patterned after the sanguinary terms of Haman’s original decree.” Moore offers another explanation: “Actually, the central issue here is not historicity but theology, for it is the Wisdom doctrine of retributive justice which best explains the parallel between the phrase under discussion here and in iii 13, that is, Haman and his supporters are to receive what they had intended to give. Mordecai’s letter confirms the adage ‘as a man sows, so shall he reap’” (*Esther*, 81). B. W. Jones, “Two Misconceptions About the Book of Esther,” *CBQ* 39 (1977) 171-81, argues that those who object to Esther on the grounds of its cruelty and chauvinism fail to understand the humorous nature of the book.

<sup>3</sup> “Studies in the Esther Narrative,” *JBL* 95 (1976) 49-53.

The textual and exegetical analysis makes it clear, I believe, that because of a failure to recognize its literary form the passage has been woefully misunderstood.

In ancient times, the principal difficulty felt with the book lay in the religious area—the all-but-total absence of any religious motif in the book.<sup>4</sup> Thus there is no reference to such basic aspects of postexilic Judaism as intermarriage, the dietary laws, the sabbath or the festivals. Haman's edict of extermination is promulgated on the 13th day of Nisan (3:12). Though this is the day before Pesah, the festival of redemption, the holiday is not mentioned.<sup>5</sup> The silence regarding the temple and sacrifices might be explained away on the ground that the locale of the book is the diaspora, but such prime elements of postexilic Judaism as the belief in angels, Satan and the resurrection of the dead are also passed over in silence.

The problem is sharpened when Esther is compared with the book of Judith. Both narratives deal with an implacable enemy of the Jewish people, whose designs are put to nought through the courage and resourcefulness of a woman. In both cases, victory is achieved by human effort without supernatural intervention. But here the resemblance ends. While the religious motif is all but totally absent in Esther, it permeates the book of Judith. Judith is greatly concerned for the sancta of Judaism, the temple, the sacred vessels and the altar (4:3). The practice of prayer, whether of supplication or of thanksgiving, runs like a thread throughout the book (4:9; 6:18; 7:19; 13:4; 16). Fasting is a basic rite employed in an hour of crisis (4:9; 8:6). The sabbath, the festivals and the new month are part of the regimen of observance (8:6), as are the dietary laws which Judith scrupulously observes. The first fruits and the tithe are sacred (11:13).

While basically a narrative of confrontation and victory, Judith has a strong climate of theological reflection. God must not be tested by man (8:9). God brings suffering upon men as a discipline (8:2). The wicked will be punished after death by destruction through fire (16:17). Important as ritual is, sacrifice is not enough to win the favor of God (16:16). In sum, while it is Judith's heroic activity which brings succor to her people, the role of God as the ultimate source of salvation is not passed over in silence.

By all odds, the major religious difficulty with Esther is the total absence of the name of God, or any reference to Him.<sup>6</sup> Esther is the

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Paton, *Esther*, 93–96; Moore, *Esther*, xxxii–xxxiv.

<sup>5</sup> That this silence is a subtle form of irony is not likely, especially in view of the explicitness with which the contrast between peril and deliverance is spelled out in 9:1 and 9:22.

<sup>6</sup> That there is no reference to God even in Mordecai's eloquent appeal to the queen to intervene for her people is all but universally recognized. The phrase *rewah wēhaṣṣālā*

only book in the OT where this situation prevails. In the Song of Songs, the erotic content and form of which raised obvious questions for religious believers, the absence of the Divine name is comprehensible, yet even here the noun *šalhebetyāh* occurs (8:6).<sup>7</sup> The final syllable or vocable, even if interpreted merely as an intensive, has its origin in the name JHVH. The absence of the name of God or, for that matter, a reference to Him in Esther is all the more striking in view of the basic theme of the book, which is the salvation of God's people.

For centuries after its composition, opposition to the inclusion of Esther in the canon made itself felt. Esther is the only OT book that has not been found among the texts and fragments of Qumran. Its absence is hardly an archaeological accident. As late as the third century C.E., long after the biblical canon was fixed beyond the possibility of change, the Babylonian Amora Samuel declared that "Esther does not defile the hands, i.e., is not sacred."<sup>8</sup> The Talmud had great difficulty in reconciling this view with the widespread popularity and general acceptance of the book in the Jewish community.<sup>9</sup>

Opposition to the book, or at least indifference to its claim to sanctity, was even more pronounced in Christian circles, where the Jewish nationalist emphasis of the book would appear as a defect rather than as a quality.<sup>10</sup> There are no allusions to *Esther* in the NT and few references among the Church Fathers. The first Christian commentary was written by Rhabanus Maurus in 831. Luther's condemnation of the book is well known: "I am so hostile to the book and to Esther that I wish they simply did not exist, for they Judaize too much and have (and reveal) much pagan bad behavior (*Unart*)."<sup>11</sup>

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*ya'āmōd layyēhūdīm mimmāqōm 'aḥēr*, "Relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place" (4:14) cannot be invoked as an early instance of the common rabbinic use of *hammqom*, "the Place," as a surrogate for God (*m. Yoma* 8:9; *Abot* 2:1, 9, 13; *Tosefta Peah* 1:4). Ibn Ezra pointed correctly to the adjective "other" and interpreted it "in some other manner."

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gordis, *The Song of Songs and Lamentations* (Revised and augmented edition; New York: Ktav, 1974) 43–45; M. H. Pope, *The Song of Songs* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1977) 18.

<sup>8</sup> *B. Megillah* 7a.

<sup>9</sup> The solution proposed is that Samuel believed that the Megillah "was indeed spoken (*ne'ēmrāh*) by the Holy Spirit, but that it was spoken (again *ne'ēmrāh*) to be read and not to be written (*liqerot velo lehikkatebh*)." This seems to imply that Esther is to be regarded as an element of the Oral Law, like *Megillat Ta'anit*, but not Scripture (so A. Haham, *Commentary on Esther* (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kuk, 1973) 20. A catena of distinguished Mishnaic teachers is then cited in the Gemara who testify to the canonical character of Esther in order to rebut Samuel's disturbing statement.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Paton, *Esther*, 96–97; Moore, *Esther*, xxx–xxxii.

<sup>11</sup> *Tischrede* in Luther's *Werke* (Weimar: Hermann Böhlau, 1914) vol. 3, 3391. In the preface to his German translation, Luther concedes that Esther contains "much that is good."

Nonetheless, the book exerted an undeniable fascination in many quarters. Hence efforts to remedy this "religious deficiency" are almost as old as the book itself. The Greek translation supplied extensive additions which are accepted as canonical in the Roman Catholic tradition, though relegated to the Apocrypha in the Protestant Bible.<sup>12</sup> Of the six Additions, two are designed to buttress the "historical" character of the book, Addition B presenting the text of the king's first letter justifying Haman's edict of extermination, and the other, Addition E, offering the text of the king's second letter justifying the hanging of Haman and the virtual rescinding of the original edict. Addition C is purely literary, designed to heighten the dramatic impact of Esther's appearance unsummoned before the king. The other three Additions supply the "religious" motif. Addition A narrates a dream of Mordecai's which leads him to uncover the conspiracy; C presents Mordecai's prayer in the hour of crisis, and F offers the interpretation of Mordecai's dream, the spirit of which is clear from the opening phrase, "This is God's doing." In its ten verses, Addition F refers to God seven times. While scholarly opinion is divided with regard to the limits of the original Book of Esther, scholars are virtually unanimous that these passages in the Greek version do not represent part of the original text of the book.<sup>13</sup>

The same problem confronted Aramaic-speaking Jewry and similar solutions were adopted. The first Targum to Esther is relatively restrained in the Aggadic material that it adds to its rendering of the text. However, *Targum Šēni* is an extended Aramaic Midrash on Esther. The process of amplifying and rectifying the biblical text is carried on both in the special *Midrashim* like *Esther Rabbah*, *Aggadat Esther* and *Leqaḥ Tōbh*, as well as in smaller Midrashic texts, in addition to copious verse quotations and comments on the book scattered throughout rabbinic literature.<sup>14</sup>

Manifestly this midrashic method could not satisfy modern scholars concerned with understanding rather than with apologetics. Various attempts to explain the phenomenon have been made. H. Steinthal held

<sup>12</sup> The additions are discussed in Paton, *Esther*, 41-47, and more briefly by Moore, *Esther*, lxiii, who includes the additions with comments as an Appendix, 103-11. A full treatment is to be found in C. H. Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah—The Additions* (AB; Garden City: Doubleday, 1977) 153-254.

<sup>13</sup> C. C. Torrey ("The Older Book of Esther," *HTR* 37 [1944], 33-38) argued for the originality of the LXX of Esther. Moore (*Esther*, 162-64) maintains that there were different Hebrew texts originally extant and that the additions reflect a different Hebrew *Vorlage*, but he regards them as "additions" (166-67).

<sup>14</sup> The Targumim and the Midrashim are surveyed in Paton, 101-6. For the Midrashim see H. L. Strack, *Introduction to Talmud and Midrash* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1931) 221-22. The vast Aggadic content and the variegated sources are presented in the magisterial work of Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1909-38) 4. 363-448; 6. 451-81.

that the avoidance of the Divine name was due to the fact that the author was a skeptic.<sup>15</sup> Paton rightly remarks that there is no evidence of such an attitude in the book and that a faith in God is at least implied in the narrative. It may be added that if such a faith is not clearly articulated, it is surely not explicitly denied or doubted.

Paton therefore explains the absence of the name of God by reference to the Talmudic apothegm, which declares: "A man is obligated to drink on Purim until he is unable to distinguish between 'Blessed is Mordecai' and 'cursed is Haman.'"<sup>16</sup> God's name was therefore omitted from the text to avoid having it desecrated by an inebriated Jew celebrating the festival.

While Moore is disposed to grant a measure of truth to the theory, I find it unconvincing. In the first instance, it presupposes the observance of Purim as a Jewish holiday before the composition of the book. Second, it treats an aggadic statement by a fourth century C.E. Talmudic sage, Raba, as though it were binding law and operative in the composition of the biblical book six centuries earlier. Third, it is contradicted by twenty centuries of Purim observance, during which Jews might imbibe liquor and be merry on Purim but never to the point of blasphemy.

Virtually all the other explanations that have been advanced are based on one approach, the view that a religious viewpoint, while not made explicit, is implicit in Esther. A. Haham maintains that King Ahasuerus is frequently named in Esther<sup>17</sup> while the God of Israel is not referred to even once, in order to demonstrate that while the earthly king of Persia stands in the center of the tale, the reader understands that it is the hidden King of Kings who determines all the events of the narrative.<sup>18</sup>

In essence, he is restating the view of E. Kaufmann, who declares, "Biblical writers like to stamp their narratives with the imprint of a double causality—the plan of Divine Providence. The heroes of the stories are human creatures who operate out of their human impulses. Nevertheless, they fulfill the Divine intention."<sup>19</sup>

More simply, Moore suggests that the book presupposes and therefore takes for granted certain religious concepts, such as Providence, the hand of God in history, and faith in the efficacy of fasting and, by implication, prayer.<sup>20</sup> This true observation mitigates but does not

<sup>15</sup>Cf. *Zu Bibel und Religionsphilosophie* (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1890) 53–77.

<sup>16</sup>*B. Megillah* 7b. Each phrase adds up to the same numerical value: 502.

<sup>17</sup>In 167 verses, King of Persia is named 190 times, Ahasuerus 29 (Paton, *Esther*, 95).

<sup>18</sup>A. Haham, *Esther (Da'at Miqra)*; Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kuk, 1973) 18.

<sup>19</sup>See Y. Kaufmann, *Töledöt Ha'emünah Hayisre'elit* (Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialik, 1937–48), Part VII, 445–47; idem, *History of the Religion of Israel* (New York: Ktav—Hebrew University, 1977) 515–27. The passage quoted is on p. 524.

<sup>20</sup>Moore, *Esther*, xxxiii–xxxiv.

obviate the difficulty of explaining why only this book leaves the religious motif completely to implication.

The same criticism may be leveled also against the view I presented earlier.<sup>21</sup> Arguing, like Moore, that certain fundamental religious insights are implicit rather than explicit, I proceeded to point out that the Second Temple Jew did not live in a spiritual vacuum. When Esther was composed, his world-view and his faith had been moulded by long exposure to the teachings of the Torah and the Prophets. He had been taught that God operates in human affairs through human agents, both worthy and unworthy. Thus, the prophet Isaiah calls the cruel and arrogant Assyrians, who destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel and looted the southern kingdom of Judah, "the rod of God's anger" (Isa 10:5). He sees in Assyria the evil instrument God uses to destroy evil and fulfill His purposes. After the destruction of Judah, Jeremiah does not hesitate to call Nebuchadnezzar "My servant" (43:10). On the other hand, the farsighted and magnanimous King Cyrus of Persia is called "the anointed of God" by the prophet of the exile (Isa 45:1). In sum, the miracle of God's deliverance of His people did not need to be spelled out for the reader or take the form of interference with the normal processes of nature or of history. Even without any direct reference to God, the lesson is clear—the Guardian of Israel does not let His people perish.

In all fairness, these valiant efforts to explain the absence of religious motifs in Esther must be judged inadequate. Undoubtedly, the basic concepts of postbiblical Judaism had become part of the spiritual world of Jews. Nevertheless, the Apocryphal and the Pseudepigraphal writers, all of whom presupposed a readership familiar with the Scriptures, were not the least bit chary about invoking God's name or referring to basic Jewish ideas and practices. The problem, it must be confessed, is not solved by any of these explanations.

A new dimension was added to the discussion of the problem with the growth of interest in Wisdom literature during recent years and the recognition of an affinity between *Hokhmah* and the Book of Esther. I had briefly called attention to this relationship in 1949 and several times thereafter.<sup>22</sup> On the basis of a detailed analysis of the concrete—and earlier—use of *hakham* and *hokhmah* in biblical sources and their striking analogues in the Greek usages of *sophos* and *sophistes* in the Greek culture-sphere,<sup>23</sup> *hokhmah* is to be defined as "encompassing all the

<sup>21</sup> In my *Megillat Esther, Text, Introduction, Translation and Commentary* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1972) 1–13.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Gordis, "The Bible As A Cultural Monument," in L. Finkelstein (ed.), *The Jews* (New York: Harper, 1949) 482–83 and *Koheleth, The Man and His World* (New York: Schocken, 1953) 18–20.

<sup>23</sup> The parallels between the Greek and the Hebrew wise men are explored in R. Gordis, "The Social Background of Wisdom Literature," *HUCA* 18 (1944) 77–118; reprinted in

practical skills and technical arts of civilization, as well as the inculcation of the personal qualities required for success and well-being in society.” The material phases of Hebrew civilization, its governmental structure, its temple, shrines and altars, its arts and crafts, its architecture and dress, its art and music, disappeared with the destruction of the ancient Hebrew polity, leaving only the literary manifestations of *hokhmah* expressed in poetry with the *māšāl* as its basic genre.

An examination of each book in the Hagiographa demonstrates that they all belong to the genre of Wisdom literature.<sup>24</sup> The Hagiographa is not a miscellaneous collection of books written too late for inclusion in the other two sections of the Hebrew Bible, but, basically, the corpus of Wisdom literature, paralleling that of Torah and Prophets.<sup>25</sup>

In this perspective, both Ruth and Esther are included because they show *hokhmah* in action, revealing practical sagacity, Esther in saving her people from destruction and Ruth (and Naomi) in securing a desirable husband! Alternatively, Ruth may also have been regarded as a supplement to the Psalms, since it concludes with the genealogy of David, the traditional author of the Psalter. Esther may be an appendix to Ezra–Nehemiah–Chronicles, which goes down to the Persian period.

These links may appear tenuous to the Western mind, moulded by the Greek principles of relevance and logical coherence. They will not

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my *Poets, Prophets and Sages, Essays in Biblical Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1971) 160–197.

<sup>24</sup> The three books, Proverbs, Job and Ecclesiastes, obviously belong in a Wisdom collection on the basis of their subject matter. So does Ben Sira or Ecclesiasticus which was not included in the canon of Scripture, primarily because it clearly betrayed its late origin by the reference to the High Priest Simon; perhaps also because of its affinities with proto-Sadducean thought.

Psalms, Song of Songs and Lamentations are collections of poetry, religious, erotic and elegiac. Moreover, they were chanted in the ritual or elsewhere with musical accompaniment and therefore are embodiments of the technique of *hokhmah* on two counts. In addition, the Song of Songs is ascribed to King Solomon, the traditional *fons et origo* of Hebrew Wisdom. It has also been suggested that the Song of Songs entered the Wisdom collection because it was regarded as an allegory of the relationship of love subsisting between God and Israel. From this point of view, it would be a *māšāl*, which means “allegory,” “parable” and “fable,” as well as “proverb.” The book of Daniel, the wise interpreter of dreams, obviously is in place among the Wisdom books.

The three closing books of the Bible, which survey history from Adam to the Persian period, were originally parts of one larger work, Chronicles–Ezra–Nehemiah. They may have been included in the Wisdom section merely because they were placed at the end as an appendix to the Bible as a whole.

The place of these last-named books in *Ketubim* has also been explained differently. It has been suggested that Chronicles (with its adjuncts) is really an appendix to Psalms, since one of its principal concerns is to describe in detail the establishment of the temple ritual.

<sup>25</sup> For the demarcation of these three principal strands in biblical religion and thought, and their respective practitioners, see Jer 18:18; Ezek 7:26.

seem far-fetched to anyone familiar with the Semitic logic of association, evidence for which is plentiful in the redaction of the Bible and in the organization of the material in the Mishnah and the Talmud.

The approach to Esther as a Wisdom book was taken up and developed in depth by S. Talmon, who applied the thesis to explain the absence in the book of the religious motif in general and of the name of God in particular. In a wide-ranging paper,<sup>26</sup> he defines his thesis in these words: ". . . The Esther-narrative is a historicized wisdom-tale. It may be described as an *enactment* of standard 'wisdom' motifs which are present also in other biblical narratives of a similar nature and which biblical literature has in common with ancient Near Eastern Wisdom literature, as defined by the literary-type analysis. . . . On no account could it be suggested to define the book as a collection of wisdom sayings. What the Esther narrative in fact does is to portray *applied* wisdom. The outline of the plot and the presentation of the central characters show the wise man in action, with the covert, but nevertheless obvious, implication that his ultimate success derives from the proper execution of wisdom maxims, as set forth, e.g., in Proverbs and, to a certain degree, in Ecclesiastes. . . ."<sup>27</sup> One is led to assume that the absence of prayer from the book is original, as is the absence of the Divine name, and that it has its reasons in the ideological setting of the book, a setting which may be discerned also in other literary compositions of the Old Testament."<sup>28</sup>

He then finds a series of elements, the absence or presence of which in the book of Esther he regards as indicating affinities with Wisdom:

(1) The conception, attributed to Wisdom, that success or failure is to be attributed only to human actions in which God plays no role. "In this setting one cannot except (expect?) any attempt to relate the life of the individual and of the group to a divine source that judges and decrees their fate by a standard of moral behavior. The narrator of Esther's philosophy is anthropocentric. He never tries to probe into the underlying causes of woe or weal. They are the direct outcome of the immediate success of a formidable human antagonist, or alternatively of the latter's conquest by the superior performance of the protagonist of his story."<sup>29</sup>

(2) Talmon finds the concept of an unspecified and remote deity devoid of any individual character prevalent in the Esther narrative and in biblical Wisdom literature. As evidence, he cites the familiar fact that in the book of Ecclesiastes and especially in the Job dialogues, the non-specific divine appellations 'ēlōhîm, 'elōah, šaddai greatly outnumber

<sup>26</sup> "Wisdom in The Book of Esther," *VT* 13 (1963) 422-55.

<sup>27</sup> Talmon, "Wisdom," 427

<sup>28</sup> Talmon, "Wisdom," 430.

<sup>29</sup> Talmon, "Wisdom," 433.

the Tetragrammaton. This idea of an impersonal, supernatural power explains the absence of the Divine name in Esther.<sup>30</sup>

(3) The absence of any reference to Jewish history (the mention of Jeconiah's exile [Esther 2:6] being purely chronistic). This is characteristic of Wisdom, which is concerned with the here-and-now and which, unlike Torah and prophecy, does not invoke either the past or the future.<sup>31</sup>

(4) Closely related is the lack of any reference to contemporary Jewry either in Palestine or elsewhere in the Diaspora. In view of the author's detailed knowledge of Persian affairs and literary skill, the alleged absence of historical and national motifs in the book is attributed not to the author's inadequacy but to his "wisdom ideology."<sup>32</sup>

(5) Recent scholarship has called attention to the Joseph saga in Genesis as exemplifying Wisdom motifs.<sup>33</sup> Following the earlier studies of Rosenthal and Gan,<sup>34</sup> Talmon restates the resemblances between the Joseph narrative and Esther, notably in the theme of a Hebrew outsider rising to power and influence in the royal court.

(6) A valuable aspect of Talmon's study is his detailed comparison of the Mordecai-Esther-Ahasuerus court relationship with that of Ahiqar-Nadin-Esarhaddon in the Ahiqar texts.<sup>35</sup>

However, it is important to note the fundamental differences between Ahiqar on the one hand and the Joseph and Esther narratives on the other. In the Elephantine texts of Ahiqar, the first four papyri totalling five columns narrate the story of Ahiqar in the first person. The remaining papyri extending over nine columns contain the apothegms of Ahiqar. Since column five is very defective, the end of the tale, which described Nadin's punishment and Ahiqar's restoration to royal favor needs to be interpolated from later recensions of the popular Oriental book. It seems clear, however, that the narrative serves as the proem to the sayings of Ahiqar, which are the author's, or compiler's, primary concern. The literary structure of Ahiqar recalls that of Ecclesiastes. Following the proem in Eccl 1:1-11 comes the fictitious autobiography of Qoheleth as "king" (1:12-2:26), which leads imperceptibly into the collection of the author's comments and

<sup>30</sup>Talmon, "Wisdom," 430.

<sup>31</sup>Talmon, "Wisdom," 430-31.

<sup>32</sup>Talmon, "Wisdom," 431.

<sup>33</sup>G. von Rad, "Josephsgeschichte und ältere Chokma," VTSup 1 (1953). 120-217, reprinted in *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1958) 272-80.

<sup>34</sup>L. A. Rosenthal, "Die Josephsgeschichte mit den Büchern Ester und Daniel Verglichen," *ZAW* 15 (1895) 278-84 and "Nochmals der Vergleich Ester-Joseph-Daniel," *ZAW* 17 (1897) 126-28; M. Gan, "The Book of Esther in the Light of Joseph's Fate in Egypt," *Tarbiz* 31 (1962), 144-49 (Hebrew).

<sup>35</sup>Talmon, "Wisdom," 438-39.

reflections. On the other hand, in the two biblical tales of Joseph and Esther, Wisdom sayings are completely lacking and the dramatic narrative is everything.

With regard to the historicity of Esther, Talmon concludes: "We have no reason whatsoever to assume that in this matter the book truthfully puts on record actual historical facts." This denial of historical veracity to the book is apparently qualified by another passage in the paper which declares: "In its essence it is most probably a true description of an actual socio-historical situation, garnished with chronistic details of suspect accuracy. This analysis led to the definition of the book as a 'historical novel,' a definition which found favor with many scholars."<sup>36</sup> In sum, the non-historical character of Esther and the absence of specific religious coloration in it are the consequence of its character as a Wisdom book.

While some scholars have accepted Talmon's thesis,<sup>37</sup> particularly because no better explanation for the all-but-total muting of the religious motif in general and the absence of the name of God in particular has been proposed, I do not find this approach convincing. A reconsideration of the full scope and content of biblical Wisdom will make it clear that the striking characteristics of Esther are not to be attributed to its alleged Wisdom character. On the contrary, the solution is to be sought in an altogether different cause—Esther belongs to a special, one is tempted to say, a unique, literary genre not hitherto recognized. As for the element of historicity in Esther, some observations will be offered in a brief excursus at the end of this paper. We now turn to a reconsideration of the fundamental characteristics of biblical Wisdom.

### *The Three Faces of Wisdom*

As the remains of Oriental Wisdom, Egyptian, Babylonian and Sumerian, have come to light in increasing measure, modern scholarship has recognized two principal strands within it, or, more accurately, one dominant and one secondary element.<sup>38</sup> In Egyptian Wisdom, which

<sup>36</sup>Talmon, "Wisdom," 422.

<sup>37</sup>E.g., Moore, *Esther*, xxxiii, but see J. L. Crenshaw, "Methods in Determining Wisdom Influences Upon Historical Literature," *JBL* 88 (1969) 129-42, who vigorously denies any affinities between Esther and Wisdom.

<sup>38</sup>The recognition of these two strands of Oriental and Biblical Wisdom and the delineation of their fundamental differences, as well as the points of contact between them in form and in content, is basic to an understanding of the entire literary genre. They are discussed in my *Koheleth, The Man and His World* (New York: Bloch, 1951); *The Book of God and Man, A Study of Job* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1965); *The Song of Songs and Lamentations* (New York: Ktav, 1974); *Megillat Esther* (New York: Rabbinical Assembly, 1974); *The Book of Job: Commentary, New Translation and Special Studies* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1978); and in many papers, several of which are cited

bears the name *sboyet*, "instruction," the two literary genres have been categorized as "discourses on worldly prudence and wisdom intended merely for schools"; and "writings far exceeding the bounds of school philosophy."<sup>39</sup> Babylonian Wisdom exhibits the same division between "practical maxims" and "meditations on the meaning of life."<sup>40</sup>

The major category was cultivated by scribes at the royal court and by sages whose calling it was to educate the scions of the nobility, the rich merchants and the great landowners. The goal was to inculcate upper-class youth with what is conventionally, though mistakenly, denominated "the Protestant ethic"—the qualities needed to attain to success and avoid the pitfalls to which they would be exposed.<sup>41</sup> To achieve this goal, the Wisdom teachers extolled the virtues of hard work, reliability, honesty and prudence. They urged loyalty to the ruler and freedom from undue assertiveness in the presence of superiors, before whom a submissive spirit and a calm demeanor were highly desirable. They warned against the vices of drunkenness and gluttony and the perils of sexual entanglements, especially with married women or with harlots. They stressed the obligation of reverence for parents and for others in authority and called for firmness in dealing with children and slaves. Above all, excess was to be avoided. Charity to the poor in moderation was a virtue, but going surety for one's neighbor was a sure road to economic disaster.

These teachers of Wisdom derived the body of their teaching from their observations of human society, as well as from the world of plants and animals, to which they applied their reason and from which they derived practical lessons for life. They were certain that the qualities they urged upon their youthful charges would lead to personal well-being and success in life, because of their conviction that morality was the best policy in a world created and governed by a just God.

The second element in Wisdom derived from a few Wisdom teachers whose restless spirits refused to be satisfied with these practical goals. They, too, had been trained in the Wisdom schools and pursued careers as professional Wisdom teachers of the upper classes. But they insisted upon applying the same instruments of observation and reason

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in this article. The validity of this categorization is demonstrated by its clear existence in all branches of Oriental Wisdom.

<sup>39</sup>A. Erman, *The Literature of the Ancient Egyptians* (London: Methuen, 1927) 54. For a brief conspectus of Egyptian Wisdom in these two categories, see Gordis, *Kohleth, The Man and His World*, chap. 1.

<sup>40</sup>W. G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature* (London: Oxford University, 1960) 1. Lambert's hesitation to apply the term "Wisdom" to the second category I believe to be unjustified, in view of the intimate relationship between the two types of Wisdom writings, as evidenced in their form and content in the various mid-Eastern literatures.

<sup>41</sup>See my "The Social Background of Wisdom Literature," cited in n. 23 above, for a presentation of the salient characteristics of Wisdom related to its socio-economic base.

not merely to the concrete problems of daily life, but to more fundamental issues, the goal and meaning of creation, the purpose of life, man's destiny after death, the basis of morality and, above all, the problem of evil—the triumph of injustice and the suffering of the righteous. When they weighed the conventional religious and moral teachings on these issues by these standards of observation and reason, they found some to be acceptable. But others they felt impelled to question as unproved or to reject as untrue.

The first aspect may be described as the *Lower Wisdom*, conventional, pragmatic, non-speculative and conformist. Originally oral in character, its material is to be found in the *mēšālīm*, the individual apothegms and proverbs scattered through the Pentateuch, the Historical Books and the Prophets. Its more elaborate literary monuments are in the books of Proverbs and Ben Sira.

The second aspect of *hokhmah* may be called the *Higher Wisdom*, unconventional, speculative, generally skeptical and often critical of the socio-economic order. The restless, questing spirit of the dissident Wisdom writers produced Qoheleth and Job. While by no means indifferent to the problem of evil (3:16–22; 4:1–3; 9:2), Qoheleth is less concerned with it than with a metaphysical *Angst*. He is basically obsessed with man's inability to discover the ultimate truth about the universe, the purpose of creation, the goal of human existence, and the nature of death. For Job, the agonizing riddle of life is the suffering of the righteous and the prosperity of the wicked, and the challenge it poses to faith in a God of righteousness and power. For the poet, the *Angst* is existential, not intellectual. Indeed, the mystery and the beauty of the cosmos constitute the response and the remedy expressed in "the Speeches of the Lord out of the Whirlwind."<sup>42</sup>

The section, "The Words of Agur ben Yaqeh" (Prov 30:1–14), probably belongs to the higher Wisdom, but its brief and enigmatic character makes it difficult to determine the basic thrust of the writer. Agur ben Yaqeh seems to ridicule the claim of the traditional teachers of religion that they had access to God's revelation and were therefore possessed of the truth, which they were teaching to their contemporaries.<sup>43</sup>

There was a third aspect of Wisdom, intimately related to both the pragmatic and the speculative, but conceptually distinct from either, the *cosmic* or *metaphysical*. The Wisdom teachers differed from their priestly

<sup>42</sup> For our approach to the central message of Job embodied in the God Speeches, see the books cited in n. 38, *The Book of God and Man: A Study of Job* (Chaps. 10–14); *The Book of Job: Commentary, New Translation and Special Studies*, chaps. 38–42 and pp. xxix–xxxiii, 556–66.

<sup>43</sup> See my "Social Background," 179–80.

and prophetic colleagues in one salient respect. While the priests in the sanctuary did not claim a direct revelation for themselves, the patent of their authority lay in the Torah of Moses, who had received God's word at first hand ("The Lord spoke to Moses, saying") and of which they were the custodians and interpreters. The prophets, on the other hand, did not fall back upon a holy book or a tradition from the past. They claimed that they were the recipients of direct, non-mediated communications from God ("Thus saith the Lord," "The word of the Lord"). Hence they often disputed bitterly the claim of rival prophets to the authentic revelation.<sup>44</sup>

On the other hand, the *hakhamim* usually made no claim to divine revelation, mediated or direct. The truth of their teaching was inherent in its content, being based on a realistic observation of life and on rational conclusions drawn from it. It was, of course, self-evident that the ultimate source of Hebrew *hokhmah*, as of every creative aspect of man's nature, was God. Basically, however, the pursuit of Wisdom was a human enterprise, and *hokhmah* the most secular element in Hebrew culture. Yet it must be kept in mind that the term "secular" in this context is relative, not absolute. In ancient Hebrew society, in which religion permeated every sphere of life, secularism was at a disadvantage; indeed, it was an impossibility. Hence the sages sought to claim for Wisdom a Divine source, equal to that of Torah and Prophecy, by endowing Wisdom with a cosmic role. Wisdom was the Divine plan utilized by the Creator in fashioning the world. In its transcendent aspect, it was beyond man's ken, lodged with God and known only to Him. Hence the ultimate mysteries of existence were veiled from humankind. But the Wisdom that the sages taught, the practical morality they sought to inculcate, was the lesser human counterpart of the Divine Wisdom which in its fullness is with God.

One Wisdom writer, the author of the "Hymn to Wisdom" (Job 28) emphasizes the vast difference between the cosmos and the practical aspects of Wisdom by using a different terminology. He employs *hahokhmah* (with the definite article) to refer to the former, and *hokhmah* (without the article) to indicate the latter. The poet describes the inaccessibility of the cosmic Wisdom to man and all other creatures, and its unavailability for purchase on any terms. After describing his fruitless efforts to discover it, the poet declares that the supernal

<sup>44</sup> The classic confrontations of Micaiah ben Imlah and Zedekiah ben Kena'anah in the eighth century B.C.E. (1 Kings 22), and of Jeremiah and Hananiah ben Azur (Jeremiah 28) in the sixth century were surely not the only instances of rivalries among prophets who spoke in JHVH's name. On the prophecy of Jonah ben Amittai of Gath Haḥepher (2 Kings 14:25-26) and Amos's parody of his optimistic forecast (Amos 6:14), see R. Gordis, "Nebū'at Yōnāh ben Amittai Miggat Haḥēpher," reprinted in *The Word and The Book: Studies in Biblical Language and Literature* (New York: Ktav, 1976) 1-9 (Hebrew section).

Wisdom was used by God in creation (vv 23, 27), but is not accessible to man. Only its lesser counterpart, the lower, practical Wisdom, "the fear of the Lord," and "turning aside from evil," faith in God and right conduct—these are the areas marked out for mankind and, indeed, enjoined upon them.

The author of Job 28 is the only Wisdom writer who is interested in emphasizing the gulf between cosmic and pragmatic Wisdom. The other Wisdom writers, on the contrary, are concerned with linking the Divine and the human aspects of *hokhmah* in order to buttress their claim to authority. Thus, they were provided with a religious counterpart to the Torahitic authority of the priests and the direct, non-mediated Word of God claimed by the prophets. They used the term *hokhmah* (without the article) to refer to both aspects which are treated cheek by jowl in the literature.

Thus the "Hymn to Wisdom" in Prov 8:21–32 depicts *hokhmah* as the first of God's works, present at the creation of the world (cf. also Prov 3:19) and now His delight and plaything eternally. This paean to cosmic Wisdom is placed between two sections extolling practical Wisdom. Before it comes a poem praising the role of Wisdom as the guide of just rulers who thus receive the rewards of virtue (8:1–21). It is followed by an injunction to pupils and readers to accept the teaching of practical Wisdom and avoid disaster (8:33).

The two aspects of Wisdom are undifferentiated in Ben Sira (chap. 1) as well. He praises cosmic Wisdom beyond man's grasp (1:1–10) and uses this panegyric as a springboard to urge "The fear of the Lord brings honor and pride, cheerfulness and a garland of joy" (1:11).

In "The Praise of Wisdom" (Sirach 24), the identification of both aspects is virtually complete. Passages dealing with cosmic Wisdom (vv 2–6, 9, 28–31) are commingled inextricably with the praise of practical Wisdom (vv 1, 7–8, 10–22, 32–34). Finally, both aspects are identified with the Torah of Moses (vv 23–27), a procedure which became standard in rabbinic Judaism.<sup>45</sup>

The Wisdom of Solomon also exhibits this linkage of practical Wisdom with its cosmic source, from which are derived "a knowledge of the structure of the world and the operation of the elements; the beginning and end of epochs and their middle course; the alternative solstices and changing seasons; the cycles of the year and the constellations; the nature of living creatures and behavior of wild beasts; the violent force of winds and the thoughts of men; the varieties of

<sup>45</sup> In the Jewish liturgy after the reading of the biblical portion, the return of the Scroll to the Ark is accompanied by the chanting of the verses Prov 3:19, 18 (in this order), which originally referred to *hokhmah*.

plants and the virtues of roots" (7:17–20). Here Wisdom becomes virtually the equivalent of all the natural sciences.<sup>46</sup>

In another passage, the Wisdom of Solomon follows a more traditional course. It extends the concept of Wisdom and refers to the saving power of God as revealed in the *Heilsgeschichte* of Israel (10:1–21).<sup>47</sup>

To revert to the biblical era, the relationship of this concept of cosmic Wisdom to the two schools of the lower and the higher Wisdom was ambivalent. On the one hand, the emphasis upon the inaccessibility of the cosmic Wisdom provided the conventional teachers of pragmatic *hokhmah* with a rationale for avoiding the complex of agonizing questions that troubled their heterodox colleagues and against whom they urged the cultivation of the practical virtues making for success.

In Ben Sira's words:

What is too wonderful for you do not seek,  
nor search after what is hidden from you.  
Try to understand what is permitted you,  
and have no concern with mysteries. (3:20–21).

On the other hand, devotees of the higher Wisdom saw in the inaccessibility of the cosmic Wisdom the essence of the tragic imperfections of the human condition. They could not make peace with man's inability to penetrate to the ultimate truth on the issues of life, suffering and death. Behind the quizzical tone of Qoheleth's comments, his anguished spirit cries out at this human limitation (3:11; 7:23–25; 8:16–17).

It is clear that of the three aspects of Wisdom, the two that we have called the speculative and the cosmic are centrally concerned with God, His nature, His actions and His relationship to man. While lower, practical Wisdom sought to counsel its pupils against speculation that might be dangerous to faith and morals, it had no compunctions about invoking God as the judge and ruler, who guarantees the operation of the law of retribution that is the basis of practical morality. The proverbist sets forth his teaching in pragmatic terms, but he does not hesitate to relate it to God. Thus, to cite one chapter in Proverbs at random, chapter 10 clearly expresses this fundamental faith and invokes God's name four times (vv 3, 22, 27, 29). As for the traditional religious

<sup>46</sup> Thus the theoretic foundation is laid for the extensive development of medieval philosophy, Jewish, Christian and Moslem, based on the underlying conviction that the search for understanding the natural world is a religious duty of the highest priority, a view emphatically represented by Maimonides and his colleagues.

<sup>47</sup> These extensions of the biblical figure of Wisdom are far from exhausting its post-biblical development. It played a significant role in Philo's conception of the Logos, in the Word in the Gospel of John (1:1), in the theological elaboration of the Trinity in Christian theology and in a variety of expositions in medieval Jewish mysticism.

concept of right and wrong, pragmatic Wisdom operated with them continually. In chapter 12, the term *šaddîq* (and its cognates) occurs ten times, and *rāšā* eight times.<sup>48</sup>

In sum, all three aspects of Wisdom were directly concerned with God and made constant reference to Him, whether through the use of the proper name of the God of Israel, JHVH, which is preferred in Proverbs, or the more abstract and generic terms, 'Elohim, 'El, 'Eloah and *Šaddai*, of which the first is used exclusively in Ecclesiastes, while Job uses all four.

If Esther and Ruth have points of contact with Wisdom, it is obvious that the association lies with the conventional, accepted teaching that righteousness leads to well-being and wrong-doing to disaster. In both books, all the actors are human and no miracles take place. Yet the consciousness of the God of Israel looms large in Ruth and the name JHVH occurs 13 times and *Šaddai*, archaistically, twice.<sup>49</sup> In a work like Esther dealing with the destiny of the Jewish people, one would have an even greater expectation that the name of the God of Israel would appear, along with other aspects of Jewish faith and piety. This expectation is amply fulfilled in Judith, where the religious motif is omnipresent, as we have noted above. It is totally lacking in Esther.

The Joseph saga, increasingly viewed as a Wisdom narrative, offers the clearest evidence that Wisdom writers operating with human actions, motives and events, were strongly conscious of the Divine Mover behind them. *Ha'elohim* occurs repeatedly in Joseph's conversation with Pharaoh concerning the dreams (Genesis 41:25, 29, 32). He is invoked by Judah in confessing the theft of Joseph's cup (44:16, 38, 39). Joseph calls upon God in contemplating his past trials and tribulations and his present prosperity (41:51, 52; 45:9; 48:9). His name is called upon by the brothers in their extremity (42:29), by Joseph in his blessing of Benjamin (43:29), and by Jacob in blessing Joseph's sons (48:3, 9, 11, 20, 21). Most important, God is emphasized as the Mover behind human actions (45:5, 7; 50:20).

That there are points of contact between Esther and Wisdom literature may be granted. However, this thesis does not explain the absence of the Divine name and of virtually all other religious motifs, as well as of several other literary phenomena in the book. The cause must be sought elsewhere.

<sup>48</sup> The former in vv 3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 13, 17, 21, 26, 28; the latter in vv 3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 12, 21.

<sup>49</sup> The former in 1:6, 8, 9, 13, 17, 21; 2:4, 12; 3:13; 4:11, 12, 13, 14; the latter in 1:20, 21.

*Esther As a Persian Chronicle*

The unique characteristics of the book may be explained by recognizing that Esther belongs to a literary genre that is unique in the Bible. *A Jewish author undertook to write his book in the form of a chronicle of the Persian court, written by a Gentile scribe.*<sup>50</sup> A Jew of the eastern Diaspora, seeking to buttress confidence in the veracity of his narrative and thus help establish Purim as a universally observed Jewish holiday, the only one, incidentally, not associated with Palestine, writes the book as though it were an excerpt from the official chronicles of "the kings of Medea and Persia" (10:2). The writer found a model in the Hebrew historians, who composed the books of Kings and referred frequently to the "Chronicles of the Kings of Judah" and "The Chronicles of the Kings of Israel."<sup>51</sup>

(1) The author, a consummate literary artist, writes ostensibly as a Persian and a non-Jew. He, therefore, makes no reference to the God of Israel, to the practices and beliefs of Judaism, to the national history of the Jewish people, or to its ethnic concerns, except of course for their resistance to the proposed genocide planned by Haman.

The author's skill reaches its apogee in Mordecai's eloquent call to Esther, reminding her of her duty and underscoring God's unwaivering protection of His people. Even here, however, the phrase *mimmāqôm 'ahēr*; "from another place," is sufficient to make clear the basic message of the book without destroying the author's assumed role as a pagan chronicler.

(2) Several other features now receive a simple and unforced explanation. Some scholars have acutely noted the strange predilection in the book for the addition of the gentilic after Mordecai's name, *harryêhûdi* "the Jew" (5:13; 6:10; 8:7; 9:29, 31; 10:3). This usage is entirely appropriate as emanating from the vantage point of an assumed non-Jewish observer who identified Mordecai as a member of an ethnic minority.

(3) Elsewhere we have pointed out that the phrase *yōšēb bēša'ar hammelek*, "sitting in the king's gate," which is applied to Mordecai,

<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately, no historical chronicles, royal or otherwise, for the Achaemenid period (550–331 B.C.E. have survived, the only records being a few Persian inscriptions and proclamations. M. N. Dhalla, *Ancient Persian Literature* (Karachi, 1949) 119–23, cites Esther as evidence that the Persian kings had chronicles for recording important state ordinances, edicts and memorable achievements (34). Cf. also Otakar Klima in Jan Rypka, *History of Iranian Literature* (ed. Karl Jahn; Dordrecht, Holland; D. Reidel, 1968), who points out that "no books dating from the Achaemenid period are in existence today" (p. 19). For the content and form of the extant inscriptions, see Klima.

<sup>51</sup> The Judean chronicles are referred to in 1 Kgs 14:29; 15:7, 23; 22:46; 2 Kgs 8:23; 12:20; 14:18; 15:6, 36; 16:19, 20; 21:17, 25; 23:28; 24:5. The Israelite chronicles are mentioned in 1 Kgs 14:19; 15:31; 16:5, 14, 20, 27; 22:39; 2 Kgs 1:18; 10:34; 13:8, 12; 14:15; 28; 15:11, 15, 21, 26, 31.

indicates that he occupied a position as a judge or other official, having been appointed shortly after Esther's accession to the throne.<sup>52</sup> The recognition of the technical meaning of the phrase is the key to the solution of the problems scholars have noted with regard to the passage 2:19–21. Analysis of the pericope indicates that it is neither out of place nor a doublet of 2:10, but eminently appropriate in the context.

(4) The references to the Jews in third person throughout (e.g., 9:15) never betray a sense of identification by the author with the group. Thus it points in the same direction.

(5) The establishment of the Purim festival as a permanent Jewish holiday is, strictly speaking, beyond the purview of a Persian chronicler. Hence, the establishment of Purim is ordained in two appendices, one "Letter" attributed to Mordecai (9:22–28) and the other to Esther (9:29–31).<sup>53</sup>

Other special features of the style receive a clear-cut and unforced explanation when the unique literary genre of the book as a simulated royal chronicle is recognized.

(6) The high literary skill of the author has long been noted. The author concentrates on events rather than motives. The action is dramatic, one incident follows rapidly upon another, often in striking contrast to the preceding, every detail heightening the excitement and interest of the tale until the climax is reached. The author's primary concern is plot, not character. Whatever is not germane to his purpose is rigorously excluded. We are not told why Ahasuerus prepared the two banquets,<sup>54</sup> what was Vashti's reason for refusing to appear, what punishment was visited upon her, what motivated the conspiracy of Bigthan and Teresh, or even why Mordecai commanded Esther not to reveal her origin. What is all-important is that the action moves forward to its triumphant climax. Nothing in the book is superfluous; everything bears upon the central theme—Haman's vicious effort at genocide and the deliverance wrought for their people by Esther and Mordecai.

These qualities are a tribute to the author's talent. But they are precisely what one would expect in an official court chronicle, which would naturally record events rather than expatiate on motives or the delineation of character.

<sup>52</sup> See my "Studies in the Esther Narrative," 47–48.

<sup>53</sup> That the phrase *ûmordākay hayyêhûdî* in 9:29 is a later insertion is supported by several considerations: (a) the fem. sing. of the verb (as against the masc. form employed in 9:20); it is not necessarily a case of attraction; (b) the elaborate pedigree given for Esther is in contrast with the stark reference to Mordecai without any genealogy; (c) the reference to "the fasts and the prayers of supplication" in the summary of this letter (9:31) recalls Esther's original fast (4:16) and is highly appropriate in a letter emanating from her.

<sup>54</sup> That the social stratification of Persian society was the reason for the two banquets is suggested in my "Studies in the Esther Narrative," 46.

(7) A principal argument against the historicity of the book has been the explicit statement by Herodotus that the Persian kings were permitted to select their queens only from seven noble Persian families.<sup>55</sup> Hence the coronation of a Jewess would be effectively ruled out. The contention will be examined below.

However, it may be noted that the author of Esther, whose familiarity with Persian life is universally conceded, would be well aware of this limitation with regard to a royal marriage, the existence of which would throw doubt on the veracity of his story. The author, therefore, takes pains to emphasize twice that Esther did not reveal her origin,<sup>56</sup> thus letting the reader believe that there was no known legal impediment to Esther's ascension to the throne.

(8) Ahasuerus's name occurs 21 times, always prefixed by the title *hammelekh*, and twice (3:6; 9:30) in the phrase *malkût 'āhaswērōš*, and never without the designation of his royal office. A chronicler at court would be careful to observe the dignity of the king's estate.

(9) The detailed listing of the king's counsellors (1:10, 14) has been felt by some commentators to be an intrusion impeding the flow of the narrative. But the meticulous listing of the counsellors successfully captures the flavor of court protocol, which one would neglect at one's peril.

(10) The official character of the chronicle is also the key to the catalogue of the names of Haman's sons at their execution (7:7-10).

(11) Formulae like "to each province in its script and to each people in its language" (1:22; 3:12) and the heaping up of synonyms in Haman's edict (4:13) "to destroy, kill and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, their women and their children on one day," reflect the age-old predilection of officialdom for legalistic terminology that has survived through the ages, in present-day America no less than in ancient Persia.

(12) The writer's endeavor to give verisimilitude to his chronicle of events leads him to cite verbatim the salient section of Haman's edict at the time of its promulgation (3:13) and at its countermanding by Mordecai (8:10, 11). The citation of official prescripts was a widespread means of enhancing the credibility of historical narratives in the Persian period, as the book of Ezra demonstrates. For the Hellenistic age, the *Letter of Aristeas* (to be discussed below) reproduces the text of the

<sup>55</sup> Herodotus III, 84.

<sup>56</sup> In 2:10 and 2:17, the passages are not doublets, see "Studies in the Esther Narrative," 48. H. Cazelles argues that the book is a conflation of two independent texts basing himself upon a duplication he finds in the incidents narrated in the book ("Note sur la Composition du Rouleau d'Esther," in *Festschrift Hubert Junker* (ed. H. Gross and F. Mussner; Trier: Paulinus Verlag, 1961) 30. An examination of these alleged duplications makes it clear that they are not doublets but different from one another and are essential to the development of the plot.

decree by Ptolemy Philadelphus (Par. 22–25) by which he allegedly emancipated the enslaved Jews of Egypt.

(13) The moral difficulty mentioned early in this paper with regard to the presumed cruelty practiced by the Jews in exterminating their enemies together with their wives and their children is based upon the failure to comprehend the form and context of the passage.<sup>57</sup> A detailed analysis of the biblical usage involved makes it clear that Mordecai's order contains a literal citation from Haman's original edict in 3:13. Haman had ordained that letters be sent by couriers to all the provinces of the king, "to destroy, kill, and annihilate all the Jews, young and old, their women and their children, on one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, Adar, their goods to be taken as booty." In countermanning Haman's decree, Mordecai quotes the salient passage which should therefore be placed in quotation marks. Hence, 8:10, 11 is to be rendered:

He wrote, in the name of King Ahasuerus, sealing it with the royal signet, and he sent the dispatches through couriers riding on swift horses, royal steeds bred from the king's mares, that the king was permitting the Jews in every city to assemble to defend themselves, and "to destroy, kill, and annihilate the armed force of any people or province attacking them, their children and their women, their goods to be taken as booty."

In sum, the book of Esther represents a unique genre in the Hebrew Bible—ostensibly a royal chronicle by a Gentile scribe at the Persian court. It is not beyond the realm of possibility that some ancient readers were conscious of the objectivity and distance adopted by the author toward the events he described. They may therefore have felt doubts concerning its sacred character, which persisted long after the book had entered the canon and Purim was established in the calendar of festivals.

#### *Esther and Aristeas*

The book of Esther is unique within the Hebrew Bible, but an analogy, *mutatis mutandis*, is to be found, emanating from the same general period from another diaspora community. The *Letter of Aristeas* was written by an Alexandrian Jew in order to enhance the prestige of the Septuagint.

The *Letter of Aristeas* purports to be the work of an Egyptian courtier in the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus II (285–257 B.C.E.) written

<sup>57</sup> For a study of the syntax and style of the passage, see my "Studies in the Esther Narrative," 49–53. Werner Dommershausen (*Die Estherrolle* [SBM6; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 1968] 15–16) finds a similarity of wording in the two decrees. We believe that more than similarity is to be found here—a direct citation in the later edict from the earlier one.

about the year 270 B.C.E.<sup>58</sup> The *Letter* (more properly, *Aristeas to Philocrates*) presents an account of the translation of the Pentateuch into Greek during the reign of this monarch, as well as other tangential material. Since Humphrey Hody demonstrated that both the personality and the presumed date of the author are fictitious, it has been universally recognized that the work is a pseudepigraph.<sup>59</sup> The letter was actually written about 130 B.C.E., not by an Egyptian pagan, but by a Hellenistic Jew of Alexandria who may well have visited Palestine.<sup>60</sup>

Passionately committed to Judaism, the author seeks to glorify all aspects of his heritage. He describes the Holy Land in glowing terms (112–118), praises the beauty of Jerusalem (88–91, 102–104). He presents a glowing description of the construction, furnishings and ritual of the Temple (83–91) and extols the sanctity and wisdom of the High Priest (92–99, 130–36). While he avoids more blatant propaganda on behalf of Judaism, the basic issues in Jewish apologetics appear unmistakably if briefly, the scorn of idolatry (137, 322), the greatness of the Torah, and a rationale for the dietary laws (128–171). The author's principal concern is the glorification of the Greek translation of the Torah, a process carried further in later Alexandrian-Jewish literature.

<sup>58</sup>M. Hadas (*The Letter of Aristeas* [Philadelphia: Dropsie College, 1951] 3–54) offers a careful survey of all the evidence for the date. The Greek text of Aristeas, prepared by H. St. J. Thackeray, appears in H. B. Swete, *Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1905). The same scholar published an English translation in *JQR* 15 (1903) 337–91, revised in his book, *The Letter of Aristeas* (London: S.P.C.K., 1917). Another version with introduction and notes by H. T. Andrews appears in R. H. Charles, *APOT*, 2.83–122; and H. G. Meecham, *The Oldest Version of the Bible: 'Aristeas' on Its Traditional Origin* (London: Holborn, 1932); cf. also H. Graetz, "Die Abfassungszeit des Pseudo-Aristeas," *MGWJ* 25 (1876) 289–308, 337–49; P. Wendland, "Aristeas," *JE* 2.92–; J. G. Février, *La Date, la Composition, et les Sources de la Lettre d'Aristée à Philocrate* (Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études 242; Paris: Champion, 1925); E. Bickermann, "Zur Datierung des Pseudo-Aristeas," *ZNW* 29 (1930) 280–96; J. Gutmann, "Moza' ähu' Megamätah ha-Ikrit shel Iggeret Aristeas," *Ha-Goren* 10 (1936) 54 ff.

<sup>59</sup>The famous philologist, Richard Bentley (1662–1742) called the book "a clumsy Cheat," but this is much too harsh a judgment. The contention argues a failure to reckon with the ancient concept of authorship which was much less individualistic and more fluid than our own, and consequently has no understanding for the psychological motivation behind pseudepigraphic composition. A pious believer, completely convinced of the truth of his faith, would see nothing wrong in supporting it by outside testimony, which could have existed and should have been forthcoming.

<sup>60</sup>The date assigned to *Aristeas* varies from 200 B.C.E. (E. Schürer) to the reign of Tiberius, who ruled 14–37 C.E. (H. Graetz). P. Wendland's date in the latter Maccabean period, the reign of John Hyrcanus (135–104 B.C.E.) has been generally accepted (see his article in *JE*, 2.92–94).

To be sure, the *Letter* betrays its Jewish origin by its unmistakable bias, while its later date is clear from various anachronisms, instances of archaizing and several inaccuracies.<sup>61</sup>

In his lucid and comprehensive introduction to his edition of the *Letter*, Hadas points out justly that Aristeas has generally been successful in the role he has assumed as a sympathetic but definitely outside observer of Judaism: "He obtained his information concerning Judaism from Egyptian priests. The Jews are always 'they,' and even in the description of the Temple, enthusiastic as it is, an effort is made to preserve the tone of the outsider. . . . His interest in Temple and Law, similarly, is represented as mainly scholarly, aesthetic or ethical, but still objective. His own name and his brother's are Greek, and not of the theophoric sort which many Hellenized Jews adopted. . . . The literary form of his writing is itself calculated to imply that the author is an interested spectator rather than a pleader *pro domo sua*. The character our author assumes he maintains, on the whole, consistently."<sup>62</sup>

Notwithstanding the far-flung differences in the cultural environments which *Esther* and *Aristeas* reflect, there is a striking similarity in their objectives and the means they employ. Aristeas is interested in winning approbation or at least respect from the Gentile world for the Jewish Scriptures in their Greek dress. But his primary goal is to enhance the sacred status of the Septuagint among his co-religionists.

The author of *Esther* wishes to persuade his fellow Jews of the truth of the incident he is reporting and to win their adherence for the observance of Purim, a goal confronted by many obstacles.

Both *Aristeas* and *Esther* use the device of a non-Jewish writer whose lack of pro-Jewish bias may be taken for granted and thus add credibility to their narratives. The rhetorical forms utilized by *Aristeas* have their sources in Greek literature, while the author of *Esther* has no such literary tradition to draw upon. Nevertheless, we have noted the citation of official documents in both works designed to heighten the credibility of the reported incidents.

The acceptance of *Esther* and the adoption of the Purim festival were goals not easily achieved. In the first instance, unlike all other festivals, Purim was not ordained in the Torah. Second, it was related to an essentially local incident in the diaspora. The tendency of the religious leadership in Palestine to regard the diaspora communities as inferior and subordinate has been a constant in Jewish history for millennia. Third,

<sup>61</sup>These include a blunder with regard to the role of the librarian Demetrius of Phaleron, whose patron was Ptolemy Soter I, and not Ptolemy Philadelphus II. Actually the latter banished Demetrius for supporting a rival to the throne.

<sup>62</sup>*Letter*, 59-66.

any recollection of the origin of Purim as a non-Jewish pagan festival<sup>63</sup> would also have militated against its quick acceptance in traditional Judaism.

The actual narrative of the Haman-Mordecai-Esther confrontation ends at 9:19 (plus 10:1-3). But two appendices are added, one attributed to Mordecai and ordaining the establishment of the festival (9:20-28); the other attributed to Esther (9:29-32), and supporting its observance. It is noteworthy that while Mordecai's letter speaks of feasting, exchanging presents and making gifts to the poor (9:22), the letter of Esther introduces a quasi-religious note in speaking of "the subject of the fasts and their prayers of supplication" (9:31). The motive may have been to meet the objections which the non-religious character of the narrative had aroused. That these two sections emanate from the author of the rest of the book cannot be determined with certainty, but the similarities in style between them and the book as a whole would favor such a view. In order that the book may end on a triumphant note, and "the official source," the royal chronicler may be cited, these two letters are inserted before the close of the book (10:1-3), which describes Mordecai's power and glory.

Undoubtedly the festival made headway in the diaspora more rapidly than in Palestine. Anti-Semitic encounters with a dominant non-Jewish majority were recurring phenomena in the history of diaspora Jewry.<sup>64</sup> The first reference to Purim as "the day of Mordecai" occurs in 2 Maccabees (15:36) which is an abridgement of the larger work by a diaspora author, Jason of Cyrene. No such reference occurs in 1 Maccabees which is of Palestinian provenance. The absence of any fragments of Esther in the remains of the Qumran library suggests that, at least for these sectarians domiciled in Palestine, the holiday was not yet accepted in the first century C.E. As has been noted, these hesitations were expressed as late as the third century by the influential Babylonian Amora, Samuel of Nehardea. It is in large measure a tribute to the skill of the author of Esther that both the book and the festival ultimately gained acceptance in the Jewish community worldwide.

To achieve his purpose, the author adopted a role which is unique in the Hebrew Bible—that of a Persian chronicler.<sup>65</sup> It should, however, be

<sup>63</sup>For the various theories as to the precise pagan prototype of Purim, see Paton, *Esther*, 77-94 and Moore, *Esther*, xlvii-xlix and the literature there cited.

<sup>64</sup>The literary documents on ancient anti-Semitism include *inter alia* Philo, *In Flaccum* and *De Legatione ad Gaium* (preserved only in fragments); Josephus, *Contra Apionem* (and indeed all his historical works), as well as III Maccabees.

<sup>65</sup>Another parallel, more remote in character than the *Letter of Aristeas*, may be suggested as an analogue to Esther, which, we believe, is a work written by a Jew in Gentile guise to advance a Jewish goal. The *Sibylline Books* are a complex collection of ancient oracles that had its origin in the Greek belief that prophetesses at various shrines were able to foretell the future. These oracles were augmented and interpolated by Jewish and Christian writers

remembered that Job, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs are each unique in their respective genres. The recognition of individuality is a *sine qua non* for a true appreciation of personality, whether in life or in literature.

### *Some Observations On the Historicity of Esther*

It is fair to say that the present consensus of scholarly opinion subscribes to the view that Esther is not to be regarded as history. Even those who describe it as a "historical novel" do not always recognize the sage counsel of J. M. Myers that in the phrase the adjective may be more important than the noun.<sup>66</sup>

C. A. Moore, after presenting a judicious and balanced survey of archaeological and historical data bearing on the question, declares:

The familiarity of the author of Esther with Persian history, customs, government, personal names and vocabulary does not establish the essential historicity of the Esther story. After all, it is important to remember that the writings of the Persians and the ancient classical historians also contradict, or disagree with, various "details of fact" in Esther. According to Herodotus' *History*, for example, there were only twenty satrapies in Xerxes' empire (III. 89). Amestris was queen between the 7th and 12th years of Xerxes' reign (VII. 114; IX. 112). Persian queens could be picked from only one of seven noble Persian families (III. 84).<sup>67</sup>

The Book of Esther is an *historical* novel. Just as a beautiful pearl results from successive layers of a colorful, lustrous substance being added to a solid grain of sand, so the Book of Esther may very well have a solid, historical core—the story of Mordecai, and possibly even the story of Esther—to which have been added a number of legendary and fictional "historical" bases for what was once a non-Jewish festival, the festival we now call Purim.<sup>68</sup>

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over an extended period, from the 2nd cent. B.C.E. to the 5th cent. C.E. It is generally recognized that books III, IV and V are basically of Jewish provenance, having been written by Hellenistic Jews in Alexandria, who were eager to present the virtues of Judaism to the Greco-Roman world. They extol the truth of monotheism, present traditional Jewish history in glowing terms, urge obedience to the biblical code of personal morality and social ethics, and confidently announce the faith in the advent of the Messiah.

An English translation and commentary is published by H. C. O. Lanchester in R. H. Charles, *APOT*, 2. 368–406. Another translation of Books III–V was published by H. N. Bate (London, 1918). The complexities involved in identifying the Greek, Jewish and Christian elements are discussed by S. Krauss, *JE*, 11.319–23. See also C. C. Torrey, *The Apocryphal Literature* (New Haven: Yale University, 1945) 108–10. R. H. Pfeiffer, *History of N. T. Times* (New York: Harper, 1945) 226–30, properly discusses the Sibylline Books under the rubric, "Jewish Propaganda Works Attributed to Gentiles."

The Sibylline Books are written in Greek hexameter verse and are "prophetic" rather than "historical" in form. They resemble the *Letter of Aristeas* and, if our view is correct, the Book of Esther, not in their structure and content, but in their means and goal—to establish credibility and win adherents to Jewish practice and belief by adopting the guise of a non-Jewish writer who presumably would be unbiased and therefore prove more convincing to the readers.

<sup>66</sup>Cf. his *The World of the Restoration* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1968) 92.

<sup>67</sup>*Ibid.*, xlvi.

<sup>68</sup>*Ibid.*, liii.

It is undeniable that the dramatic succession of events, the rapid pace of the narrative, the rise and fall of tension among the characters, the role of coincidence, all testify to literary skill of a high order. By the same token, they raise legitimate doubts with regard to the historical character of the narrative, since the course of human events is never so artistically arranged.

There are, however, several specific details in the book which are often cited as being beyond the limits of credibility. Yet they may have more of a factual basis than has hitherto been assumed. They would tend to strengthen the historical basis of the narrative:

(1) Scholars denying the historicity of the events in Esther have called attention to the improbability of Haman's casting lots eleven months in advance of the execution of the decree of extermination. However, in February 193 B.C.E., Antiochus III of Syria issued an order which was forwarded by his viceroy in Persia four months later, on June 25th.<sup>69</sup> The Syrian kingdom was, of course, of considerably smaller compass than the Persian Empire in its heyday, so that a longer time might well have been allowed by Haman. At any event, the long time-lapse is not a decisive argument against the historicity of the report.

(2) It has been argued that the idea of the total extermination of an ethnic group, as described to Haman, is an impossible dream—or nightmare. This last objection, it must be conceded, has lost much of its force for our generation that has witnessed the all-but-successful Nazi attempt at genocide as “the final solution” to the Jewish problem. If we persist in regarding Esther as fiction, we have in Nazism a horrible instance of life (or death) imitating art.

However, the incident is not as improbable as has been thought. In 88 B.C.E., after he had conquered the Roman province of Asia Minor, Mithradates VI of Pontus ordered a general slaughter of “all who were of Italic race,” men, women and children of every age within the newly subjugated territory. Moreover, the massacre was to be carried out at the same time everywhere, namely on the 30th day after the date of the royal order. It is reported that 80,000 were killed on that day.<sup>70</sup> That Persian influence predominated in Pontus is well known. Is it possible that Mithradates was maintaining an older Iranian “tradition” for disposing of one's enemies? This speculation aside, it should be noted that

<sup>69</sup>L. Robert, *Hellenica* 7 (1949) 22; E. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books in the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 1967) 190. It is to this erudite and stimulating volume that I owe the references for these two events in Syria and Asia Minor. However, Bickerman is not concerned with the historicity of Esther, but with the literary motifs he finds in the book (see pp. 171–200). See note 85 below.

<sup>70</sup>Rostovtzeff in *CAH* 9. 242; *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th Edition (Chicago, 1974), *Macropedia*, 12, 288.

these last two historical incidents took place centuries after the Haman-Esther-Mordecai episode, so that they could not have served as models for a fictional narrative.

Some additional considerations with regard to the historicity of the personages of Mordecai and Esther may also be noted:

(3) Mordecai is well attested as a personal name during this period. A fifth-century Aramaic inscription contains the name *M-r-d-k*, while treasure tablets from Persepolis present variations on the name, *Mar-duk-ka*, *Mar-du-uka*, and *Mar-du-kana-sir*.<sup>71</sup>

There is epigraphic evidence even more germane to our theme. A Persian text dating either from the last years of Darius I or the early years of Xerxes I mentions a government official in Susa named Marduka, who served as an inspector on an official tour.<sup>72</sup> As we have already pointed out, the phrase *yōšēb bēša'ar hammelekh*, "sitting in the king's gate," which is applied to Mordecai repeatedly in the book, indicates his role as a judge or a minor official in the Persian court before his elevation to the viziership.<sup>73</sup> That there were two officials with the same name at the same time in the same place is scarcely likely.<sup>74</sup>

(4) With regard to Esther, the testimony of Herodotus has posed two major problems for scholars.<sup>75</sup> The first is that he gives the name of Xerxes' queen as Amestris. This difficulty may be less of an obstacle than has been generally believed. It is not impossible that "Esther" represented an apocopated form of the name "Amestris."<sup>76</sup> The tendency to shorten foreign names, particularly when their etymology is not known, is widespread. The Greek name "Alexander" was widely adopted as "Sander." The name *Mōšeh* undoubtedly possessed a theophoric element originally, like *Ahmoose*, *Tutmose*, *Rameses*, which was lost or consciously dropped.<sup>77</sup> The relationship between Marduk and Ištar in Mid-Eastern mythology would also encourage shortening the name of "Amestris" to "Esther."

<sup>71</sup>G. R. Driver, *Aramaic Documents of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1954) 20, n. 2; C. G. Cameron, *The Persepolis Treasury Tablets* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1948) 84.

<sup>72</sup>Arthur Ungnad, "Keilinschriftliche Beiträge zum Buch Ezra und Esther," *ZAW* 58 (1940-41) 240-44.

<sup>73</sup>See my "Studies in the Esther Narrative," 47-48.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup>Herodotus, *History*, VII. 114; IX. 112.

<sup>76</sup>When the substance of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature on November 29, 1979, a member of the audience informed me that this identification is also proposed by John Whitcomb in his *Esther: Triumph of God's Sovereignty* (Chicago: Moody, 1979).

<sup>77</sup>On the etymology of *Mōšeh* and the dropping of the theophoric element, see KB, 572b, and the literature there cited.

(5) The second problem is that Herodotus declares that Persian kings had to choose their queens from seven noble families.<sup>78</sup> This statement and its implications for Esther need to be subjected to critical analysis. Herodotus is not a modern historian. His indispensable work contains a great deal of factual data, but also much material of a legendary or traditional character, as well as hearsay reports he encountered on his travels. It is, therefore, not totally excluded that the marriage restrictions on Persian kings may have been a custom but not a law, or even an unsubstantiated report. But even if we accept Herodotus' testimony, there are at least three different ways of relating his report to the biblical account:

(A) Throughout history, strong-willed monarchs have been prone to disregard laws and customs that they found personally distasteful. Even if the law was in effect, Xerxes may have chosen to disregard it in the case of an attractive girl who won his fancy.

(B) The historical Esther may not have been Xerxes' principal queen, though clearly a wife and not a concubine. The statement that she had not been called to the king for thirty days (4:11) would support this possibility.

(C) Finally, it is possible that the historical queen Esther involved was not of Jewish birth but an accession to Jews and Judaism from without. I regard this as the least likely hypothesis, in view of the sense of authority that Mordecai displays in his attitude toward her (4:4, 6) and the identification of her destiny with that of the Jews both by him and by her (4:13, 14; 8:6). Nevertheless, the possibility that she was an accession to Jewish ranks from without cannot be totally ruled out.<sup>79</sup> There are several instances in the Greco-Roman period of royal figures attracted to Jews and Judaism in greater or lesser degree. Helena, queen of Adiabene, and her husband, Monobaz I, were converted to Judaism about the year 30 C.E.<sup>80</sup> Many acts of philanthropy for the temple in Jerusalem and her new co-religionists are reported about her.<sup>81</sup> Because of her piety she took upon herself the vow of a Nazirite.<sup>82</sup> Poppaea Sabina, the wife of Nero, is described by Josephus as "God-fearing," a

<sup>78</sup>Herodotus, III. 84.

<sup>79</sup>Thus in 1 Chron 4:18, Bithiah, the daughter of Pharaoh, is given Hebrew descendants. In Jewish legend, Bithiah is the Egyptian princess who adopted Moses and was herself converted to Judaism, on the basis of the phrase *'ištō hayyēhūdīyah*. On independent grounds, many scholars have postulated an Egyptian origin for Moses before he became the liberator of Israel.

<sup>80</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.2.1.

<sup>81</sup>Josephus, *ibid.*, par. 5; *b. Yoma* 37a, b; *p. Yoma* 3:187. The Talmud (*b. Baba Batra* 11a) attributes the act to her husband.

<sup>82</sup>*B. Nazir* 19b.

term similar to that used of Gentiles attracted to Judaism without undergoing full conversion. Together with a Jewish actor, Alityros, Josephus was able to obtain the liberation of some priests who had been taken captive for a minor offense and were sent home with rich gifts from the Empress.<sup>83</sup> When the procurator of Judea, Festus, attempted to pull down a wall in the temple in Jerusalem and the Jews vigorously protested, she intervened successfully with the Emperor and the order was countermanded.<sup>84</sup> The degree of her involvement in Judaism cannot be told because of the paucity of our sources.

It is therefore not beyond the realm of possibility that a queen sitting on the Persian throne might become involved in an effort to protect the Jews within the Persian Empire. The motive might be friendship for a Jewish courtier, or hostility to the power of the vizier, whose influence she may well have resented. Or she may have been attracted, like Helena and Poppaea, to the Jewish religion and way of life. Her original hesitation, when urged by Mordecai to appeal directly to the king, may reflect a lesser degree of involvement on her part in the threat Haman posed to the survival of the Jews.

The book narrates the effort made to carry out a massacre by an ambitious courtier who counted upon the latent prejudices and the ever-present greed of a plunder-hungry rabble to execute his plot. With great skill the writer elaborates the central events of a violent confrontation between the Jews and their enemies by incorporating several subplots, such as the fall of a queen from favor, the plot for a royal assassination, a contest between rival courtiers, and a queen's victory over a powerful vizier.

Clearly the Book of Esther is not a historical work in the modern sense of the term. It represents a traditional reworking of what may well have been a real historical incident.

(6) More general in character is the entirely credible picture drawn of the situation in the Jewish community, vis-à-vis their non-Jewish neighbors. That Esther could come to court, be at home in its precincts and successfully ascend the throne indicates a high degree of Jewish acculturation to Persian mores. The use of non-Jewish names by Jews points in the same direction and is validated for the Hellenistic era in Palestine as well as in the diaspora.

However, simultaneously, this acculturation was accompanied by a strong sense of the distinctiveness of the Jewish community and the recognition by the dominant group that the Jews were "different." This ambivalent relationship between the Jewish minority and the Gentile

<sup>83</sup>Josephus, *Life*, 3.

<sup>84</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities*, 20.8.9.

majority served as an ideal seed-bed for anti-Semitism, as the history of Alexandrian Jewry demonstrated time and again.

The passage in which Haman justifies his request for permission to annihilate the Jews (3:8) is a classical example of the technique of anti-Jewish propaganda. Haman presents to the king a skillful blending of some truths that are made to sound sinister, some half truths, and some downright falsehoods, a formula that has not been improved upon in the succeeding centuries.

The widespread extent of the hostility against the Jews may be gauged from the fact that even after Haman's downfall, the Jews must defend themselves (*la'amod 'al napsâm*) against the attack of the armed mobs (8:11; 9:2). Pointing in the same direction is the attitude of the Persian king. When Haman approaches him with a request to annihilate the Jews, he manifests a total lack of interest in the identity of the victims. At the third banquet, it is not so much Esther's tearful plea for her people as the king's mistaken notion that his minister is attacking the person of the queen that leads to Haman's downfall (7:8). The king declares that a Persian edict cannot be rescinded, so that the Jews have no alternative except to defend themselves against armed attack. Not only is such a rule unrecorded in any source, but no viable state could operate on such a principle. It reflects the king's basic unconcern for his Jewish subjects. The book is a superb example of tradition reworking history,<sup>85</sup> heightening the impact and endowing it with a deeper religious and national significance. In the process, the historical nucleus gains many accretions. The narrative of the exodus from Egypt in the Pentateuch is a major instance of the process, the retelling and reinterpretation of a historical event with all the expansions and elaborations characteristic of tradition. Indeed, the writers of the historical books, Joshua-Kings, subjected the entire history of their people to this traditional process, utilizing ancient sources and reinterpreting them in accordance with the "Deuteronomic philosophy of history."<sup>86</sup>

<sup>85</sup>The current interest among biblical scholars in analyzing literary motifs and verbal resonances has naturally left its mark on recent research on Esther. For Bickerman, see n. 69 above. Hans Bardtke, *Das Buch Esther* (KAT; Gütersloh: Gerd Mohn, 1963) 248-52, regards Esther as a combination of three original narratives, (1) the rejected queen (Vashti), (2) court intrigues (Mordecai and Haman), and (3) the king's favorite (Esther), a view which is largely adopted by Moore. That three independent tales could be woven into a narrative as unified as Esther and moreover that each episode should be indispensable to the next is not impossible but highly unlikely. See the cogent comment of Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (Missoula: Scholars, 1979) 9-10. In her meticulous and well-researched study, Berg presents a careful analysis of incidents and terms repeated through the book, which she classifies as "dominant motifs," "formulaic motifs," and "lesser themes."

<sup>86</sup>Following the prevalent view among scholars, Berg describes Esther, "as less historical than history-like" (p. 15). However, in a footnote, she indicates her awareness that "this

If the term "historical novel" is to be applied to Esther, it should be given a vastly different connotation from its use with regard to Judith. In the latter work, the noun predominates over the adjective, which supplies little factual basis. In Esther, the adjective is primary. It is true that we have no external sources corroborating the nucleus of the incident described in Esther. On the other hand, there is nothing intrinsically impossible or improbable in the central incident, when the accretions due to the storyteller's art are set aside. The high degree of familiarity of the author with Persian life and custom has long been noted. Several of the objections to the veracity of the book have been dealt with in this paper.

We therefore believe that the book is to be regarded as a basically historical account of an anti-Semitic attempt at genocide which was foiled during the reign of Xerxes. The book may be described as typological, because it is concerned with a phenomenon destined to remain a constant in Jewish experience for millennia.

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characterization perhaps extends to the entire narrative corpus of the Hebrew Bible" (29, n. 92). Actually, the distinction between "historical" and "history-like" is badly blurred, if not altogether non-existent, in all ancient and medieval historiography. Some iconoclasts, not necessarily Marxists, would argue that the same holds for all modern historical writing to the present day. The observation would, of course, apply to their own work as well!