

A Purim Shpiel: “The Scroll of Esther Hoax”

Celebrating Purim in the sanctuaries of our synagogues we poke fun at ourselves and our tradition, we cheer and boo as the Purim story is read, all with a Mardi Gras flavor of *Laissez les bons temps rouler* “let the good times roll!” And of course, at the center of our Festival of Purim, is the Book of Esther, quietly tucked away in the back of our Bibles.

Unique in Hebrew Scriptures, the Book of Esther has generated more controversy than any other Biblical book. It has been praised and damned, it is loved and rejected. Even before it was selected as one of the canonical books of Scripture, our rabbis engaged in a hot and heavy debate over whether it ought to be even considered, much less included—which in the end, obviously, it was!

I hope this doesn’t disappoint you, but modern scholarship has concluded that the Book of Esther is not historical. While some claim that there was a Persian king with a name similar to Achashverose [Xerxes!—really?!], the problem is that the events as told in the story directly contradict what we do know about the Persian Empire and from Persian historical records. Among the most notable historical improbabilities are these:

- Vashti’s refusal to obey the king’s command;
- the king’s granting permission, a year ahead of time, to the slaughter of an entire people within his empire;
- the elevation of an ordinary Jewish girl to become queen of Persia;
- and the appointment of a non-Persian, Mordecai, to be Prime Minister.

The Book of Esther (*M’gillat Ester*, the “Scroll of Esther”) must be understood to be a fanciful legend which doesn’t even make an attempt to pretend it is history! Scholars agree that it was not written in the 5th C BCE, as it claims, but rather 200 years later during the time of the Maccabean Rebellion, in the 2nd C. BCE. And then 400 years after its first publication, when the Rabbis at Yavneh were deciding which texts ought to be included in the final edition of Hebrew Scripture, the Book of Esther was singled out for dismissal because, among other problems, it failed to make any reference, whatsoever, to God. Along with Song of Songs, Esther is the only book in which God does not once appear. And in fact, when one reads the Book of Esther, it becomes obvious that its author has bent over backward to avoid any Divine referent!

There seems to be universal wonderment that since Esther is not historical, and not spiritual or religiously uplifting-- why did it merit inclusion in Scripture?! And where did it come from? Why was it written? And for whom was it written? If we seek a scientific, scholarly analysis, then the place to begin is archaeology. In the late 1940’s a collection of writings was found at Qumran, a 1st C. CE settlement on the Dead Sea. These parchment and leather documents are commonly referred to as “The Dead Sea Scrolls.” This discovery has had enormous implications for Biblical scholarship. Not only did the Qumran community create its own partisan texts, but they preserved almost every Biblical book of our present-day canon. They’ve left us 2000 year old chapters and fragments from every Biblical book—except one! Nowhere in the Dead Sea Scroll collection has there been found even a piece of the Book of Esther. Every other book is represented, but there is no trace of “Esther” in the entire library of scrolls and fragments.

We know that the Book of Esther was already almost 200 years old and known in the early years of the 1st C.-- so it should have been at Qumran! It only makes sense then for us to presume that there was a reason for that community to have excluded Esther from its library. It may have had something to do with the unique character of the Qumran community. Often identified as “Essenes”, they were a separatist Jewish movement which believed that only they maintained absolute Jewish purity and authenticity. Qumran, some speculate, was a male community which lived a monastic existence. The men did have wives, but they lived some distance away, and the men visited their wives, on occasion, only in order to fulfill the mitzvah *p’ru ur-vu* “be fruitful and multiply”. Theirs was a Jewish life of study and mystical meditation, and they abstained from anything which might diminish their personal or collective purity.

For Qumran to have not included the Book of Esther in its collected writings can only mean that the text was ‘impure’ and would have contaminated their library. When I found out that Esther was not in the Qumran collection, I looked again at the book to see what might have made it inappropriate for that group. I believe that I have found what upset them, and I must say, I quite agree. I believe the Qumran scholars determined that the

Book of Esther was a hoax, a fraudulent deception by a particular segment of the Jewish people, an element which by its very composition was for the Essenes ritually and morally impure.

We know that the Qumranites regarded sexual contact as an immorality only tolerated so that children might be added to the Essene society. Women were ritually unclean, tainted. Their monthly periods rendered even the most innocent physical contact abhorrent and repulsive. They served the Qumran men only as vessels for the birth of children. I'm convinced that the reason for excluding the Book of Esther from the Qumran library was that they discovered, as I have, that the Book of Esther is a vile, venal and frankly dangerous hoax, perpetrated by a 1st C BCE feminist group who would not and could not tolerate the male-oriented literature and culture of Jewish society. This Jewish feminist group, so far unknown to historical observers, was dissatisfied with and so rebelled against, the sexist orientation of Jewish society, a system which of course is founded on Torah. So disgusted were they with the purposeful gender bias and male dominated rites and responsibilities, that this group decided to re-write Torah in their own feminist image.

The Book of Esther is nothing more than a thinly disguised and plagiarized feminist forgery of the Torah. That's what the men of Qumran knew, and that's why its presence in their community would have violated its purity. I know that you are thinking that this is preposterous, incredible, even absurd, but I'm about to show how true it is! Never again will you see this book as anything other than the hoax that it is!

This feminist forgery takes the heart of Torah, the Exodus narrative and the character of Moses our spiritual and communal leader, and re-writes the story with great imagination and *chutzpah*. From their point of view, if Judaism is to be transformed, then it would have to begin with this foundational narrative. My discoveries brought to light an incredible number of plagiarized parallels in the Book of Esther, copied directly from the Exodus/Moses Torah-text.

We begin with the obvious: Esther is look-alike Moses.

- Both stories tell us about a Jew who rises to royal rank in a foreign court.
- Both heroes begin as adopted children, separated from their natural parents,
- Both become part of the king's family because their Jewishness was a secret! Moses only becomes a prince, but Esther-- she becomes a queen!
- Both Esther and Moses attain royalty in the midst of a national, mortal threat to their people. In Exodus the first born male children are to be thrown into the Nile as a quick short-term solution to the "Hebrew Problem." Later, Pharaoh tries to do it the slow way with harsh slavery. In Esther, Haman plans a one-day genocide of the Jews.
- Both stories tell us that the hero is at first reluctant to intercede. Neither Moses nor Esther are immediately threatened! Esther is safe within the walls of the palace, Moses is secure in the wilderness of the desert. Moses at first refuses to return to Egypt. He says that no one would listen to him and Pharaoh would never give him an audience. Not to be outdone, Esther also at first refuses. She tells her cousin Mordecai that there is nothing she can do. She, like Moses is meek and self-effacing. And besides, she says, (like Moses!) the king would never see her. Unless requested, no one can just appear before the king!
- Both Moses and Esther are told that if they will not take-on leadership responsibilities, their people will never be saved. So Moses, fearful for his life, approaches Pharaoh, and Esther equally fearful, approaches Ahashueras.
- Moses is successful, he wins the freedom of his people, and in the process, delivers a frightful revenge upon the host country. 10 plagues he brings upon Egypt: death and destruction to the innocent as well as the guilty.
- The feminist Moses, Esther also engineers a devastating revenge upon Shushan. When Haman is exposed, Esther requests that the Jews be allowed to attack the Persians on the day Haman had arranged the Jewish genocide. This feminist version far supercedes the revenge upon Egypt --85,000 Persians die as the Jews are redeemed!
- Haman, of course, is introduced at the beginning of the story as Haman the Agagite. We know from I Samuel 15:8 that the Agagites were direct descendants of the Amalakites. So it should come as no surprise to anyone that the most vicious enemy of Moses and the Israelites were the Amalakites!

And if all of these similarities were not enough, there are three final clinching arguments. The Exodus story with Moses becomes the impetus for the three major Pilgrimage Festivals of Pesach/Passover, Shavuot/Weeks and Sukkot/Booths. Knowing that this fraudulent feminist forgery would never rise to any prominence without its own festival, the Book of Esther has the *chutzpah* to proclaim in its final verses that this Persian victory is so important and significant a salvation for the Jews, that Purim is to be a mandated festival, formally decreed by Esther The Queen.

Secondly, Moses we know is a foreign name, Egyptian in origin, not Hebrew or Israelite. I am aware of only one other Jewish person, in all of Scripture who does not have a Hebrew name. In fact, we are told specifically that her real Hebrew name is Haddasah, and that “Esther” is Persian.

And finally, Jewish tradition has preserved the sanctity and the uniqueness of the Moses/Exodus narratives in its own very distinct and distinctive form. Torah stands by itself as its own specialized scroll. A Torah Scroll can only be just that. So identified with that specific physical form, we have only to use the word “scroll” and it is understood to be “Torah”. Wanting nothing less than that same absolute and unique kind of identification, the Book of Esther declared that it too be known as a “scroll.” But since the “Torah Scroll” already had established its prominence, Esther would be a *m’gillah*, another kind of scroll! And so still today, we only have to use the word *M’gillah* and there is a universal understanding that it can only refer to “The” *M’gillah*, the “scroll” of Esther!

I mentioned above, that Esther is troublesome as a Biblical text because of the absence of any reference to God. Perhaps this, as well, is attributed to its fabrication as a feminist forgery. Jewish tradition of course always uses male language to identify God. Different from English, Hebrew has no “it”, and all nouns are either masculine or feminine. So all pronouns, adjectives and verb forms must follow the gender of the subject or object noun. The authors of Esther knew that they could never get away with God described in the feminine. The book would have been rejected out-of-hand by the people. And since male language was equally unacceptable to them, they chose the smart, and only, alternative-- leaving out altogether any reference to God!

For some time I’ve been bothered by the question of how this book ever made it into Scripture. If before that was a good question, now—after revealing the true origin and purpose of the book, it’s an even better question! I’m convinced that the rabbinic authorities at Yavneh in the late years of the 2nd C would have liked nothing better than to dispense with this atrocity altogether. There can only be one reason that they allowed the unthinkable to happen. By the 2nd C. this militant, heretical, anti-religious feminist group must have still been making headlines and disrupting the flow of rabbinic deliberations. The Council at Yavneh must have accepted the Book of Esther, hoax though it was, into the canon with the promise that the feminists ‘cease and desist.’

Such a compromise would have been satisfactory to the rabbis because it would have been the end of those distasteful, rabble-rousing reformers. The rabbis could hide the Book of Esther between Ecclesiastes and Daniel, at the back of the Bible where no one would ever read it. The feminists would have taken its inclusion in Scripture as a moral victory, assured now of the immortality of their cause. And they must have fulfilled their promise to the rabbis because historical records from the end of the 2nd C on show no evidence whatsoever of a heretical feminist group!

And so, had it not been for the purity of the Qumran community, we never would have been led to the startling conclusion that this Book of Esther is a magnificent hoax.

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