

Mordecai the Jew and Esther the Greek

The Changing Politics of the Book of Esther in Antiquity and Our Times

Aaron Koller



Tenets of early Second Temple “common Judaism”

- Dynasty of King David
- Endogamy
- A new Exodus
- Who is a Jew?
- Centrality of Jerusalem
- God

...compared with Esther
Heroes from Benjamin
Esther is intermarried
Redemption on Passover
Mordecai “the Judean”
Shushan at the center
No god: “fear of the Jews”

Comparison of Esther with King Saul

	Esther	Saul
Introduction of the main character	ה איש יהודי היה בשושן הבירה ושמו מרדכי בן יאיר בן-שמעי בן-קיש איש ימיני. ו אשר הגלה מירושלים עם-הגלה אשר הגלתה עם יכניה מלך-יהודה אשר הגלה נבוכדנצר מלך בבל. ז ויהי אמן את-הדסה היא אסתר	ויהי איש מבנימין ושמו קיש בן-אביאל בן-צרוך בן-בכורת בן-אפיח בן-איש ימיני גבור חיל. ולו-היה בן ושמו שאול בחור וטוב.
Does not reveal	“Esther did not tell her origin and her people” (2:20)	“the matter of the kingship he did not tell him” (1 Samuel 10:16)
Agag/Amalek	Mordecai and Esther succeed by defeating Haman “the Agagite.”	Saul loses his kingship for failing to destroy Agag, king of the Amalekites (1 Samuel 15).
Remaining silent?	Esther “must not remain silent (תחרישי) (4:14).	Saul “remained silent (מחריש).”
The banquets	Esther hosts two banquets, on successive days; the first passes uneventfully, while at the second, the king rises angrily and leaves, and Haman observes that “the king definitely intends evil against him” (Esther 7:7).	Saul hosts two banquets on successive days; the first passes uneventfully, while at the second, the king gets angry at Jonathan for betraying him. Jonathan observes that “[Saul] definitely intends evil” (1 Sam 20).
Spoils of war	Finally, in the battles at the end the Jews “do not touch the spoils” (9:15). This is despite the fact that in 8:11, they were explicitly given permission to plunder their enemies.	In 1 Samuel 15, the Israelites, in direct violation of religious orders, brought back spoils of war from Amalek.

Expectations for a “New Exodus”

Ezekiel 20:30-42

I will take you out of the nations, and gather you from the lands in which you are scattered, with a strong hand, with an outstretched arm, with outpoured fury. ... *Just as I entered into judgment with your ancestors in the desert of the land of Egypt, so will I enter into judgment with you!* – thus speaks the Lord God.

Isaiah 51:9-11

Awake, awake, garb yourself in strength, O arm of the Lord! ... Was it not You who dried up the sea, the waters of the Great Deep, who made the depths of the sea a path for redeemed ones to pass through? So let those liberated by the Lord return, and come to Zion with shouting, eternal joy on their head. Let them attain happiness and joy, since agony and groaning have fled.

יחזקאל כ, ל-מב

לג חי-אני נאם אדני ה' אם-לא ביד חזקה ובזרוע נטויה ובחמה שפוכה אמלוד עליכם. לד והוצאתי אתכם מן-העמים וקבצתי אתכם מן-הארצות אשר נפוצתם גם ביד חזקה ובזרוע נטויה ובחמה שפוכה. לה והבאתי אתכם אל-מדבר העמים ונשפטתי אתכם שם פנים אל-פנים. לו כאשר נשפטתי את-אבותיכם במדבר ארץ מצרים כן אשפט אתכם נאם אדני ה'.

ישעיהו נא, ט-יא

ט עורי עורי לבשי-עז זרוע ה' עורי כימי קדם דרות עולמים הלוא את-היא המחצבת רהב מחוללת תנין. י הלוא את-היא המחרבת ים מי תהום רבה השמה מעמקי-ים דרך לעבר גאולים. יא ופדויי ה' ישובו ויבאו ציון ברנה ושמחת עולם על-ראשם ששון ושמחה ישיגו נסו יגון ואנחה.

The dates of the events in Esther

The royal scribes were called in the first month, on the thirteenth day (3:12).

Esther commands a three-day fast (4:15-17).

On the third day, Esther approached the king (5:1).

The biblical “fear of the Lord”

“The fear of the Lord fell on the nation” (1 Samuel 11:7)

“The fear of the Lord was upon all the kingdoms of the lands around Judah” (2 Chr 17:1)

But in Esther...

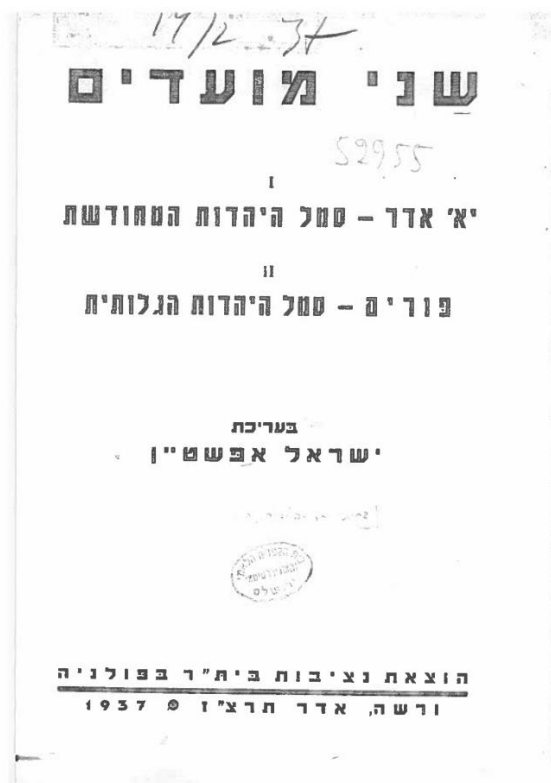
“Many of the people of the land were Judaizing because the fear of the Jews had fallen upon them” (8:10); “No one stood against them, for their fear fell upon all the nations.... For the fear of Mordecai fell upon them (9:2-3).

Greek Esther

The colophon: “In the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra, Dositheus – who said he was a priest and a Levite – and his son Ptolemy brought the above letter about Purim (*phrouai*), which they said was authentic. Lysimachus son of Ptolemy, of Jerusalem, translated it.”

The “fourth year” of Ptolemy (XII) and Cleopatra (V) was 77/76 BCE. What is happening in Jerusalem then? Right between two Hasmoneans monarchs:

- Alexander Jannaeus / ינאי: 103-76 BCE
- Salome Alexandra / שלומציון המלכה: 76-67 BCE



Revising Mordecai: Greek Additions A and F

Addition A

² In the second year of the reign of Ahasuerus the Great, on the first day of Nisan, Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, of the tribe of Benjamin, had a dream. ... ¹² Mordecai saw in this dream what God had determined to do, and after he awoke he had it on his mind.

Addition F

⁴ And Mordecai said, “These things have come from God; ⁵ for I remember the dream that I had concerning these matters, and none of them has failed to be fulfilled. ⁶ There was the little spring that became a river, and there was light and sun and abundant water—the river is Esther, whom the king married and made queen. ⁷ The two dragons are Haman and myself. ⁸

Revising Esther: Additions C and D

¹ Then Queen Esther, seized with deadly anxiety, fled to the Lord. ... ³ She prayed to the Lord God of Israel, and said: “O my Lord, you only are our king; help me, who am alone and have no helper but you...”

¹⁵ You have knowledge of all things, and you know that I hate the splendor of the wicked and abhor the bed of the uncircumcised and of any alien. ¹⁶ You know my necessity—that I abhor the sign of my proud position, which is upon my head on days when I appear in public. I abhor it like a filthy rag, and I do not wear it on the days when I am at leisure. ¹⁷ And your servant has not eaten at Haman’s table, and I have not honored the king’s feast or drunk the wine of libations.

D ¹ On the third day...she appeared in full view of the court. She took along with her two female servants, ³ delicately leaning on the one, ⁴ while the other followed behind, carrying her train.

⁵ She was blushing in the full bloom of her beauty, and her face was delightfully cheerful, but her heart was tense with fear. ⁶ When she had passed through all the doors, she stood in the presence of the king. He was seated on his royal throne, clothed in all his majesty—all in gold and precious stones—and was terrifying. ⁷ He lifted his face, which blazed gloriously, about to explode in anger, and looked at her.



Tintoretto (Venice, 1518-1594), Esther before Ahasuerus (1547-1548)

The queen collapsed. Her color turned pale, and she fell face forward onto the female servant who was walking ahead of her.

⁸ Then God changed the king’s spirit to tenderness. He leaped anxiously from his throne, and took her up in his arms until she was calm. He tried to comfort her with reassuring words, ⁹ saying to her: “What is it, Esther? I’m your brother. Take heart!

Esther 6:1 in the Hebrew and Greek versions

¹ But the Lord kept sleep from the king that night, and he told his teacher to bring the written daily annals, to read to him.

אג בלילה ההוא נדדה שנת המלך ויאמר
להביא את-ספר הזכרונות דברי הימים ויהיו
נקראים לפני המלך.

Esther 6:13 in the Hebrew and Greek versions

His ... wife said to him, “...If Mordecai belongs to the Judean people, ... you will never be able to hold your own against him, because the living God is with him.”

אג ויספר המן לזרש אשתו ולכל-אהביו את
כל-אשר קרהו ויאמרו לו חכמיו וזרש אשתו
אם מזרע היהודים מרדכי אשר החלות לנפל
לפניו לא-תוכל לו כי-נפול תפול לפניו.