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B. Rabbinic Judaism

The status of the book of Esther in early rabbinic thought and religion is subject to diverse interpretations. The annual festival of Purim, whose central observance is the liturgical reading of Esther, appears to have been a well-established institution during the Second Commonwealth era (known to *Megillat Taʿanit* and Josephus) and had already undergone considerable evolution by the time of the early strata of the Mishnah. An expanded version of Esther was included in the scriptures used by Alexandrian Jews and Josephus, whereas the Qumran library contained no copies of Esther. Rabbinic literature, especially from the Yavneh generation, employed a number of different terms and concepts to designate the liturgical or prophetic status of Esther and other biblical books. Notably, *mYad* 3:5 (see also *mEd* 5:3) declares that "all sacred scriptures defile the hands" and then proceeds to record diverse opinions regarding the application of this principle to various books from the Hagiographa – but without mentioning Esther. It is not entirely clear whether the disputing opinions were denying the sanctity or "canonical" status of the respective books, or challenging the equation of sanctity with defilement of hands. At any rate, it is only in the Talmud (*bMeg* 7a) that we find a possible questioning of Esther's sacred status, principally in the dictum by the 3rd-century Babylonian sage Samuel that "Esther does not defile the hands," a position that the Talmud strives to harmonize with Samuel's own explicit assertion that "Esther was uttered through the holy spirit." The same talmudic passage quotes numerous tannaitic and amoraic traditions to the effect that Esther was divinely inspired, adducing proofs based on the narrator's omniscience of the characters' thoughts, etc. However we might choose to assess the credibility and significance of those Babylonian sources that deny Esther's "hand-defiling" status, it is clear that the overwhelming majority of rabbinic traditions regarded the book as a full-fledged part of the HB. It is the only book other than the Torah whose liturgical reading is mandatory under rabbinic law (having the status of a "rabbinic commandment"). The Jerusalem Talmud (*yMeg* 1:1) noted that Esther is worthy of midrashic exposition in a manner comparable to the Torah itself, and this perspective is confirmed by the extraordinary number of midrashic compendia (including two extensive "Targums") that were composed on it, more than for any biblical book besides the Torah (Stemberger: 318–21). Because the villain Haman is identified as an "Agagite," a descendant of the king of Israel's ancient foe the Amalekites (Exod 17:8–10; 1 Sam 15) – and hence of Esau (Gen 36:12), the archetype of their contemporary enemy, Rome – the rabbis regarded the reading of Esther as fulfillment of the Torah's command to "remember what Amalek did to you… blot out the remembrance of the Amalek from under heaven" (Deut 25:17–19). Similarly, Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman (Esth 3:2) is depicted as resistance to idolatry (*Abba Guryon* 22; *EstR* 7:8; etc.)

Much of the rabbinic exposition of Esther follows the generic rhetorical norms of haggadic midrash, such as verbal associations, proems, perorations, fanciful name-etymologies, extreme contrasts between the heroes and villains, etc. However, several midrashic interpretations of Esther were grappling with the distinctive difficulties posed by a book conspicuous for the absence of God's name or of fundamental Jewish religious values, whose narrative seems to be removed from the trajectory of Jewish history and whose protagonists ignore the norms of religious law. The rabbis' responses to these challenges led to an extensive rewriting of the story such that, for example, divine intervention is often portrayed through the actions of angels (especially Gabriel). Most notably, the rabbis situated the Esther story within the context of the events described in Ezra 4, where Ahasuerus/Artaxerxes delays the rebuilding of Jerusalem. Similarly, the Talmud (*bMeg* 11b) ascribed Ahasuerus' banquets to his mistaken calculation that the prophecies about the temple's rebuilding had expired so that he could now profane the sacred vessels with impunity (ibid.; *EstR* 1:3:15; 2:1; *Panim Aḥerim* B p. 58, 60; etc.). The Jewish sages were acutely aware that several of Esther's actions were halakhically problematic, e.g., her marriage to the heathen Ahasuerus and the likelihood that she was not observing the Sabbath or dietary laws while living in the royal court. They responded to these challenges by extensively rewriting the story so that Esther does take measures to observe the precepts, e.g., by rotating the workdays of her "seven chosen maids" (Esth 2:9) to remind her of the Sabbath day (*bMeg* 13a; First Targum), or by purifying herself after having sexual relations with the king (*bMeg* 13b), relations that the rabbis excused as virtual rape (*bSan* 74b). The Second Targum to Esth 4:16–5:1 inserts an elaborate prayer recited by Esther before approaching the king, reminiscent of the prayer in the Greek Additions.

In most respects, the rabbis' depictions of Esther embody the standard virtues of piety that they ascribed to other Israelite heroes; she also inherits qualities associated with her ancestors Rachel, Benjamin, and Saul (*EstR* 6:12; *bMeg* 13a–b). According to some interpretations, Esther was by nature plain, average or even of "greenish" complexion, but with divine assistance her grace was able to captivate the

king and his diverse subjects (*bMeg* 13a; *Panim Aḥerim* 63). *Seder ʿOlam* designates her as a prophet (ch. 21; *bMeg* 14a). The Talmud (*bMeg* 13a) ascribes to Rabbi Meir the surprising view that Esther was married to Mordecai, a tradition that is also suggested in the Greek version of Esth 2:7 (see Walfish).

In all these ways, the book of Esther was transformed into a paradigmatic expression of rabbinic religious values.

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C. Medieval Judaism: General

1. Esther – The Scroll. As already attested in the Mishnah (3rd cent. CE), Esther is the only book of the Five Scrolls which has been copied separately as a scroll and for which the halakhah requires that it be read in public from a scroll written on parchment (*mMeg* 2:2; cf. Maimonides, *MishT*, *Hilkhot Megillah wa-Ḥanukkah* 2.8). (The Jerusalem communities of Perushim, followers of the teachings of the Vilna Gaon, read all five books from a parchment scroll, but this is a local custom.) Esther scrolls (*megillot*) have survived from at least as far back as the 14th century. Illuminated scrolls began to be produced in the 16th century, a tradition which continues to this day (see below "VI. Visual Arts"; see "Five Scrolls [Ḥamesh Megillot]").

2. Esther – The Commentaries. Within the Jewish exegetical tradition Esther is one of the most commented upon biblical books, both during the Middle Ages (in marked contrast to the dearth of attention given to it by Christian exegetes) and beyond. Identified medieval Esther commentaries in Hebrew (for Judeo-Arabic see below) are by: Rashi (1040–1105), Tobias ben Eliezer (11th cent.), Joseph Qara (b. ca. 1060), Rashbam (ca. 1080–1174), Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164), Isaiah of Trani (ca. 1200–ca. 1260), Moses ben Isaac Ḥalayo, Baḥya ben Asher (13th cent.), Immanuel of Rome (ca. 1261–after 1328), Shemariah ben Elijah of Crete (1275–1355), Joseph Ibn Kaspi (1280–1340), Levi ben Gershom (1288–1344), Joseph ben Joseph Naḥmias, Nathaniel ben Isaiah, Abraham ben Isaac ha-Levi, Solomon Astruc (14th cent.), Isaac ben Joseph ha-Kohen and Abraham Ḥadidah (14th–15th cents.), Isaac Arama (1420–1494), Judah ben Elijah Gibbor (Karaite), Joseph Ḥayyun, Abraham Saba, Zechariah ben Solomon ha-Rofe (Yaḥyā b. Sulaymān al-Ṭabīb), and Zechariah ben Saruq (15th cent.), along with dozens of anonymous commentaries. In the 16th century there was a veritable explosion of commentary activity, resulting in over 20 more commentaries being produced, including those of Solomon Alqabets, Eliezer ben Elijah Ashkenazi, Elisha Gallico, Joseph ibn Yaḥya, Moses ben Joseph al-Balīdā, Moses Isserles, Judah Loew ben Bezalel, Samuel de Uçeda, and Joseph Taitazak.

3. Esther – The Book. The book of Esther played a unique role in medieval Judaism. As a "historical" book set in the Diaspora it described a situation with which medieval Jews could readily identify. The Jewish communities of Western Europe were in a precarious situation for a good part of the Middle Ages, from the time of the First Crusade till 1492, facing a continuous tide of persecutions and expulsions. Thus, reading about a situation in which a Jewish community – indeed, the entire Jewish people – was saved from destruction, must have been a source of comfort and encouragement for Jews facing a seemingly endless exile and relentless persecutions.

The story must have been very familiar to most Jews, since it was read out loud twice each year on the holiday of Purim. It was further reinforced by the numerous *piyyutim* which summarized the story and were read in different communities as part of the liturgy on Shabbat Zakhor, the Sabbath preceding Purim.

The book allowed exegetes the opportunity to explore their own situation and comment on the Jewish condition in the Diaspora, relations with Gentile kings, the role of Jewish courtiers in royal courts, and Jewish-Gentile relations generally, including antisemitism (see, e.g., Haman's diatribe in Esth 3:8 and comments thereon; Walfish 1993: 143–55). In a recent study, O. Ramon shows how Judah Loew of Prague uses his Esther commentary to develop a political theory for the Habsburg Empire which involved a centralized absolute monarchy that allowed ethnic and religious diversity and would thus secure the existence of the Jewish people in its midst.

The absence of God's name from the book troubled many medieval exegetes and they tried to resolve this conundrum in various ways. Saadia (followed by Ibn Ezra) suggests that this was done intentionally to prevent God's name from being desecrated by heretics or idolaters. Isaac Arama rejects this view, arguing that God's presence is manifested through hidden miracles, which may seem like natural events. Another explanation, apparently of kabbalistic origin, is that the events de-