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The Many Costumes of Esther

Sigma F. Coran

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for Ordination

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Referee, Professor Alan Cooper

My sincere appreciation goes to Dr. Alan Cooper. Without his guidance, this work would have been impossible. Through my work with Dr. Cooper, I have come to appreciate his wealth of knowledge, whether it be of Bible, grammar, or even music. I feel that he has encouraged me to strive for academic excellence.

I dedicate my work to my family. I cannot imagine this endeavor without the help and support of my husband, Matthew. He has been helpmate and editor and most of all, he continued to love me through it all. I love him all the more for it. Ani l'dodi, v'dodi li.

To my little one: I thank my son Jacob for keeping me company in a most unique way. His kicks prodded me along to the end. I pray that he also finds such satisfaction from his work when he grows up.

Digest

This thesis is a survey of the interpretive history of the Book of Esther. Specifically, I compare other Jewish retellings to the Story of Esther found in Sefer Yosippon, a tenth century work, written in Byzantine Italy. The introduction includes a background material about the literature surveyed, as well as information about the specific context in which the Sefer Yosippon was written. I address three main topics in the body of the thesis. The second chapter deals with the historiographical perspective of the authors of the retellings. The Yosippon's version contains combines a linear and cyclical conception of history. The author paid special attention to genealogy, and thus linked the story to other biblical books. Causation of the story is attributed to this ancient link, and to a providential God. The third chapter addresses the moral problems associated with the character of Esther in the biblical story. The Yosippon does not emphasize her piety as do the Rabbis, but seems to consider Esther a forerunner of the "court Jew," who did "amoral" things in order to attain a place in the court, and thus save her people. She did this equipped with Mordecai's prophetic knowledge. Chapter four is a survey of the theological viewpoints attached to the Story of Esther. The author of the Yosippon is shown to believe in a providential God, who listens and reacts to prayer. Clearly, the author of the Yosippon was influenced by his own milieu and personal situation.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1-- Introduction	1
Chapter 2-- Historiographical Implications	23
Chapter 3-- Making Esther a Role Model	61
Chapter 4-- Theological Viewpoint	84
Chapter 5-- Conclusion	115
Bibliography	122

Chapter 1-- Introduction

The Book of Esther, like all biblical books, is open to interpretation. There are gaps for commentators to fill and questions for them to answer. In addition, there are historical, moral and religious problems that perplex the devout reader of the biblical text. Carey A. Moore has written:

No other book of the Old Testament has received such mixed reviews by good God-fearing men as the Book of Esther. It has had the dubious distinction of frequently being praised by many Jews and ignored and disliked by even more Christians.¹

The reteller of the Story of Esther has to answer many complex issues, and to clear up controversies which may surround the sacred text.

The Book of Esther is considered a late addition to the canon.² In fact, some Church Fathers opposed its inclusion in the Christian Canon. There are several problems which call the text into question for the devout. Some people have doubted the historicity of the book. The plot, moreover, seems weak in that causation for the events is not fully spelled out.

Secondly, there are several moral questions which are brought up by the biblical Book of Esther. The reader is

¹Carey A. Moore, "Introduction," in Esther, Anchor Bible Series, Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971, p.XVI.

²Ibid, p.XXI-XXIV.

left to wonder why a pious heroine would be deceitful and hide her identity. Furthermore, the supposedly devout Esther marries a gentile king, presumably has sexual relations with him before marriage, and uses her sexuality in order to persuade the king to act as she desires. Because of these points, many continue to hold the book in contempt. To exemplify this contempt I will share a personal story. I once met a woman named Esther Bible who told me that a woman had once said to her, "You know, Esther was only a whore." This interchange shows that even people of our "modern" world find the morality of the book to be questionable. One must assume that past interpreters of the book had no less trouble coming to terms with the character of Esther.

Lastly, the Book of Esther has a paucity of religious elements. The name of God is not mentioned. The Law and covenant of Israel play no part in the biblical story. There is an absence of direct or indirect divine intervention. The characters of the Megillah do not pray to God. Because of the lack of explicit religious elements, many have called the story a secular one, devoid of religious elements. Talmon has called the book "a historicized wisdom tale...an enactment of standard 'Wisdom' motifs."³ Nevertheless, for those who hold the canon's

³Shemaryahu Talmon, "'Wisdom' in the Book of Esther," Vetus Testamentum 13 (1963), p.426.

purpose to be wholly religious, the problem of the lack of pietistic elements must be solved. Later retellers have sought to add the figure of God to the story. They have named God's providence as the cause for events in the story. As well, interpreters have added the elements of the Law and prayer into the narratives. For these retellers, God is implored to act by Mordecai and Esther, and their prayers are answered.

The retellers of the Story of Esther have tried to solve the problems that face them in the biblical book. They have, for example, introduced clear principles of causation into the story, narrating it as if the events were brought upon by divine providence, personal enmity, imperial struggles, or ancient feuds. In addition, they have tended to assert that Esther's piety is beyond question, using several techniques to brush over the moral questions.

The retellers often use similar tactics, or repeat earlier solutions. Sometimes a solution is particular to a certain text. Likewise, the absence of certain types of exegesis and interpretation characterizes other texts. All of these factors give the reader a window into the religious and historical mindset of the writers and/or redactors of the interpretative retellings of Esther. It is my purpose to compare other texts with one specific work, the "Deeds of Mordecai and Esther" found in Sefer Yosippon. By comparing the Yosippon with other Jewish interpretations, I have come

to understand the historical, moral and theological viewpoint of its author.

Following is a list of works cited, and general information about the texts:

I. Sifrei d'Aggadatha Al Esther

Sifrei d'Aggadatha al Esther is a collection of midrashim on Esther which was edited by Solomon Buber, published in Vilna in 1886, containing critical editions of the following works:

A. Midrash Abba Gorion (AG)⁴: a lengthy exegesis to Esther in verse by verse fashion. It contains additions to the story within its interpretation. Rashi refers to Abba Gorion. As well, it appears to be used by the redactor of Esther Rabbah.⁵ It has been conventionally dated to the eleventh or twelfth century, but the date should be revised to an earlier date due to discovery of fragments found in the Cairo Genizah.⁶

B. Midrash Panim Aherim Nusach Aleph (PA1): a rather short interpretation of Esther, which contains exegesis to certain verses, but does not cover the whole story. In addition, the copyist of Buber's manuscript did not copy the entirety of many pericopes.⁷ Of the subjects in which I was interested, Panim Aherim Aleph seemed most concerned with a historical link to the past and adding theological elements. This retelling does not touch upon the moral issues of the biblical text. Panim Aherim Aleph has many parallels to the Babylonian

⁴This and all subsequent abbreviations listed in this chapter will be used throughout the thesis.

⁵Solomon Buber, Sifrei d'Aggadatha Al Esther Vilna: Romm, 1886, p.III.

⁶H.L. Strack and G. Stemberger, Introduction au Talmud et au Midrash translated into French by Maurice-Ruben Hayoun, Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1986, p.365.

⁷Buber, Sifrei d'Aggadatha, p.VI.

Talmud.⁸ Its probable date of redaction is the eleventh century.⁹

C. Midrash Panim Aherim Nusach Bet (PA2): although originally connected to Nusach Aleph, Buber determined that they were indeed different midrashim. Nusach Bet is much longer than Nusach Aleph and contains exegesis to Esther in a verse by verse fashion, from the beginning of the story through 2:5. After this point, very few verses are interpreted. Like Nusach Aleph, Nusach Bet is a major source for the Yalkut.¹⁰ Fragments of Panim Aherim Bet have been found in the Genizah. These fragments provide a more complex text than that found in Buber's manuscript.¹¹ It was compiled by the twelfth century from earlier midrashim, some of which are no longer extant.¹²

D. Midrash Lekach Tov Al Esther (LT): is part of a larger collection compiled by Tobias ben Eliezer of Kastoria (now Greece), containing exegesis to the Pentateuch and to the five scrolls. It was probably written in the eleventh century, as it does contain a reference to the Crusades of 1096.¹³ The Midrash Lekach Tov on Esther begins with an introduction which is a synopsis of Jewish history in exile, and the kings who have tried to dominate the Jews. Then there is a verse by verse exegesis of the story, which gets more sparse towards the end of the narrative. This retelling is concerned with all of the issues surveyed, but is particularly ripe in the area of relations with gentiles and anti-semitic charges. Midrash Lekach Tov relies upon Abba Gorion as a source, but does not appear to use Esther Rabbah.¹⁴

II. Aggadat Esther (AE)

⁸Ibid.

⁹Strack and Stemberger, p.365.

¹⁰Buber, Sifrei d'Aggadatha, p.VI.

¹¹Strack and Stemberger, p.365.

¹²Moshe David Herr, "Midrashim, Smaller" in Encyclopedia Judaica 16, Jerusalem: Keter, 1971, p.1515.

¹³Jacob Elbaum, "Midrash Lekach Tov" in Encyclopedia Judaica 11, Jerusalem: Keter, 1971, p.1516.

¹⁴Buber, Sifrei d'Aggadatha, p.IV.

Aggadat Esther was also edited by Solomon Buber and was published in Cracow in 1897. Buber used two Yemenite manuscripts. It is believed to be written by the author of Midrash Ha'Gadol.¹⁵ The author is thought to be David ben Abraham of Aden, who lived in the thirteenth century.¹⁶ Aggadat Esther is quite lengthy and consists of exegesis to the Megillah in a verse by verse fashion. It is more complete in its exegesis than the midrashim found in Sifrei d'Aggadatha. It is, however, less concerned with theological issues than are the other midrashim.

III. Esther Rabbah (ER)

Esther Rabbah, also called Midrash Esther, Haggadat Megillah or Midrash Ahasueros consists of ten sections. The work probably was originally two collections. The first six sections are considered to comprise one work. This work is characterized by classical proems, placing its composition in Eretz Yisrael around 500.¹⁷ The second section mixes older material with more recent material (such as material in the Sefer Yosippon), and might be dated to the eleventh century.¹⁸ The works may have been combined in the twelfth or thirteenth century.¹⁹ Much of the retelling of Esther

¹⁵Strack and Stemberger, p.348.

¹⁶Strack and Stemberger, p.398.

¹⁷Strack and Stemberger, p.363.

¹⁸Ibid.

¹⁹Ibid.

in this work changes its historical context; the rabbis transfer it to a Roman milieu with Roman customs and practices in the place of Persian ones.²⁰ The extensive work is concerned with myriad other topics as well.

IV. Targum Rishon (TR)

The First Targum to Esther was composed between 500 and 700 in the Lower Galilee area.²¹ The work is sometimes a literal translation, being quite faithful to the biblical text. At other points, new material is introduced, making the work more interpretive. Says Grossfeld:

Usually, these additions consist of a few words in order to clarify the sense and to explain the Hebrew idiom. Other insertions are more casuistical interpretations of words and phrases reflected in the Midrash and in the Talmud, by which far more is deduced from the Hebrew text than a literal interpretation would warrant. Besides these, there are other long insertions that are pure *haggada*--legendary recountings of incidents to supply gaps in the canonical history.²²

Thus, in certain respects, the name "targum" is a misnomer, and the function of this work is much the same as midrash--to re-tell the story of Esther in a new light. Many pericopes find parallels in Midrash Abba Gorion, Esther

²⁰Maurice Simon, "Introduction," in Midrash Rabbah--Esther, translated into English by Maurice Simon, London: Soncino Press, 1939, p.vii.

²¹Bernard Grossfeld, "Introduction," in The First Targum to Esther according to the MS Paris Hebrew 110 translated and annotated by Bernard Grossfeld, New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1983, p.iv.

²²Ibid.

Rabbah, and the Babylonian Talmud.²³ Targum Rishon is deeply concerned with the topics of historiography, morality, and theology.

V. Targum Sheni (TS)

The Second Targum to Esther is more lengthy than the first. However, there are many aggadot which are found in the first targum and not in the second. Targum Sheni is much less a translation than Targum Rishon. It contains many legendary elements, including a collection of Eastern romances.²⁴ The Second Targum is quite poetic in points, with several long speeches.²⁵ It draws heavily on the past in the form of biblical events and verses. Targum Sheni is an independent composition from Targum Rishon, despite many similarities in the 75 verses that are translated literally. This Palestinian work dates to the end of the seventh or beginning of the eighth century.²⁶ Its final redaction occurred in the eleventh century.²⁷

VI. The Apocryphal Additions to Esther (apoc.)

There seem to have been several Greek versions of the

²³Bernard Grossfeld, "Introduction," in The Targum to the Five Megilloth edited by Bernard Grossfeld, New York: Hermon Press, 1973, p.ix.

²⁴Grossfeld, The First Targum, p.v.

²⁵Yehuda Komlosh, "Targum Sheni," in Encyclopedia Judaica 15, Jerusalem: Keter, 1971, p.813.

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷Grossfeld, Targum to the Five Megilloth, p.ix.

Book of Esther circulating in the Near East during the last few centuries before the Common Era.²⁸ From these different stories, it is generally concluded that a more or less authoritative text was written by Lysimachus, an Alexandrian Jew who lived in Jerusalem about 114 BC.²⁹ There are six main additions to the Hebrew text in this Greek version. When Jerome subsequently translated the text into Latin, these six additions were placed at the end of the story. Chapter and verse numbers follow this placement.

The first addition to the story is Mordecai's dream, which foreshadows the story. The dream is subsequently interpreted in the sixth addition. The dream and interpretation add theological material to the story.

Both the second and fifth additions are royal letters. The second addition is a letter from Ahasueros to the Persians announcing the upcoming massacre of the Jews, with reasons given for the slaughter. This letter gives much information concerning the causation of the story, according to the author of the Greek version. The fifth addition is an edict which revokes the former one and publicly condemns Haman. This letter, like the other one, sheds light on the conceptions of relations between Jews and the gentile court.

²⁸Elias J. Bickerman, "Notes on the Greek Book of Esther," in Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research, 20 (1951), pp.101-133.

²⁹Bruce M. Metzger, "Esther, Additions to the Book of," in Encyclopedia Judaica 6, Jerusalem: Keter, 1971, p.914.

The third addition--the respective prayers of Mordecai and Esther--is where most of the theological elaboration occurs. According to Moore, this addition:

...increases the story's interest and drama by making both Mordecai and Esther more flesh and blood characters, and it strengthens the religious elements of the Greek Esther by allowing its author to give full expression to his own theological beliefs.³⁰

The fourth addition in the Greek version of Esther tells of Esther's uninvited visit to the king's chamber, in which God miraculously changes Ahasueros' mind so that he is kindly disposed to Esther. Thus, two major functions of the Greek additions to Esther are to spell out the relationship between Jews and a gentile world and to add religious elements to the story.

VII. Josephus (Ant.)

Flavius Josephus, Jewish historian of the first century, wrote his Jewish Antiquities in Rome. The first eleven books of this work constitute a paraphrase of the Bible, of which Josephus says,

The precise details of our Scripture records will, then, be set forth, each in its place, as my narrative proceeds, that being the procedure that I have promised to follow throughout this work, neither adding nor omitting anything. (Ant. I:17)

In the eleventh book of the Antiquities, Josephus narrates the Story of Esther, adding and omitting numerous details. The story that Josephus tells is a hellenized version of

³⁰Carey A. Moore, "LXX Additions to the Book of Esther," Journal of Biblical Literature 92 (1973), p.391.

Esther.³¹ Feldman asserts that although Josephus was working from a Greek version of Esther, that the version was not identical with the one found in the Septuagint.³² It is possible that he had an additional Hebrew source as well.

Josephus adds a sense of drama to the biblical story which is characteristic of the hellenistic novel. He makes the story more romantic, and emphasizes the nobility of the characters. In addition, Josephus is more sympathetic than the Greek additions are to the gentiles in his story.³³

Feldman writes that Josephus' purpose was to popularize the story for a Roman audience:

In his retelling of the biblical book of Esther, Josephus made a number of changes which would render his work more attractive to his Greek readers and would defend the Jewish people against anti-semitic propaganda.³⁴

Furthermore, Josephus adds his own theological viewpoint to the story. The Esther story exemplifies Josephus' own statement of his religious view. In Book I, Josephus writes:

³¹Louis H. Feldman, "Hellenizations in Josephus' Version of Esther," in Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association, 101 (1970), pp.143-170.

³²Ibid.

³³Ibid, p.165.

³⁴Ibid, p.143.

But, speaking generally, the main lesson to be learnt from this history by any who care to peruse it is that men who conform to the will of God, and do not venture to transgress laws that have been excellently laid down prosper in all things beyond belief, and for their reward are offered by God felicity. (Ant. I:14)

In the story of Esther, the hero and heroine are granted providence for their good deeds, while the evil Haman is condemned by God. Josephus shows this story to be evidence of his theological outlook.

Sefer Yosippon (Yos.)

The importance of the Sefer Yosippon lies in the fact that it is the only Jewish history writing that was written in the early medieval period, that is, after Josephus and before the Expulsion from Spain. Salo Baron had once said that the Yosippon was "but an abridged semi-folkloristic paraphrase of Josephus."³⁵ More recently, scholars have realized the value of the book as true history writing that emerges out of an author's particular viewpoint. In his review of David Flusser's work, Steven Bowman has written that there are few medieval authors who treat their sources in a "modern" way by citing them and that therefore the author of the Yosippon is "in a class by himself."³⁶

In fact, the author of the Sefer Yosippon tells his

³⁵Salo Baron, History and Jewish Historians, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1964, 205.

³⁶Steven Bowman, "A Tenth Century Byzantine-Jewish Historian?: A Review of David Flusser's Studies on the Josippon and its Authors" in Byzantine Studies 10 (1983), p.134.

reader exactly how he used his sources when, in his own introduction, he says, "I excerpted facts from the book of Joseph ben Gorion (Flavius Josephus) and from the books of other authors who wrote about the deeds of our ancestors and I collected them in one treatise" (Yos. p.144:7,8).³⁷

Besides merely collecting, "he also on occasion commented on the historical meaning of his sources and thus, as Flusser emphasized, 'was the first Jewish historian of the Second Commonwealth period and also one who sought to take seriously his self-appointed task as historian.'³⁸

The perspective of the author of the Yosippon may be quite different than that of other Jews of his time. Although he was a believing Jew, he had much secular knowledge. He was not one of the learned Jewish scholars of his time but he was the recipient of a wealth of Latin wisdom.³⁹ However, it is clear that he knew certain things from the Midrash and Talmud, and used them. Flusser writes that the author was a secular person, and speculates that perhaps he had a job in the gentile court, possibly as a doctor for one of the Byzantine dukes.⁴⁰ Being a

³⁷Joseph ben Gorion is the name falsely ascribed to Joseph ben Mattathias, or Flavius Josephus, in the Hegesippus.

³⁸Bowman, "A Tenth Century....," p.135.

³⁹David Flusser, Sefer Yosippon, Vol.2, Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, p.111.

⁴⁰Ibid, pp. 117-119.

forerunner to the medieval court-Jew would place the author of the Yosippon in a position to learn about the world around him. This position would also put him in a peculiar spot, vis a vis his Jewish identity. Therefore, his perspective on and interpretation of the Book of Esther, a story of court intrigue, is particularly interesting.

Date and Sources

The Sefer Yosippon was written in southern Italy in the tenth century.⁴¹ The date has been determined by political and geographical situations described as contemporary with the author. As well, one manuscript specifies the date as 953. Southern Italy was at that time part of the Byzantine Empire. The language of the region was Greek, but Flusser argues that the author of the Yosippon could not read Greek, only Latin.

Several sources for the Yosippon have been identified.⁴² These include a Latin manuscript of Josephus' Jewish Antiquities and a Latin adaption of the Jewish War, called the Hegesippus. The Yosippon also uses the Latin version of the Apocrypha and various medieval chronicles of a more secular nature. It is generally believed that the author of the Yosippon was also familiar with rabbinic sources.

⁴¹David Flusser, "Josippon," in Encyclopedia Judaica 10, Jerusalem: Keter, 1971, p.296.

⁴²Ibid.

The major source for the Story of Esther found in the Sefer Yosippon is the apocryphal additions to Esther, which the author may have read in Latin. The chapters are loosely tied together with the author's own interpretations and connecting sentences which hold the story together. Nevertheless, since little else exists besides what is contained in the apocryphal additions, one must assume that part of the purpose in telling the Story of Esther was to make known this additional material to the reader of Hebrew.

There are some major and minor changes in material gleaned from the apocrypha, which may be influenced by the biblical tale and by those Jewish interpretive traditions that were familiar to the author. For example, the two apocryphal royal letters do not appear in the Yosippon version of Esther, an omission that may be significant. As Neuman has written in connection with the Yosippon's use of the apocryphal additions to Daniel,

A comparison of these sections of the apocrypha with the Josippon narrative will reveal omissions, parallels and divergences from which pertinent deductions may be made....A position midway between the Bible and the apocrypha is presented in the Josippon version of the story of Daniel in the lions' den.⁴³

Those conclusions apply, in general, to the Yosippon's use of the apocryphal Esther material as well.

The Sefer Yosippon is written in a style of Hebrew that is meant to imitate biblical Hebrew. The author seems to

⁴³See Abraham A. Neuman, "Josippon and the Apocrypha," in Jewish Quarterly Review 43, pp.1-26.

have been an excellent Hebraist, as the flow of the work is natural and artistic. The choice of language shows that the author of the Yosippon intended the book for a Jewish readership, and meant to give the history some amount of authority. In later medieval times, the Yosippon did serve as an authoritative history for the Second Temple Period. The book was translated into several languages and was quoted by many Bible and Talmud commentators. Most of those who quoted this volume believed that they were quoting Flavius Josephus himself. In fact, though, it was an anonymous Byzantine Jew who wrote one of the most influential Jewish histories of pre-modern times.

The World of the Byzantine Jew in the Tenth Century

The Byzantine Empire occupied a precarious position, both geographically and culturally. Writes Andrew Sharf, "Byzantium was either a bridge or barrier between Islam and Europe."⁴⁴ Spheres of cultural influence flowed back and forth over Byzantine borders, which were constantly shifting. Greek culture was dominant in Byzantium in the form of philosophy and language. As well, religious conformity was important to the rulers for political unity. The kingship and priesthood were closely linked.

Sharf speculates that Jews may have been two percent of

⁴⁴Andrew Sharf, Byzantine Jewry from Justinian to the Fourth Crusade, New York: Schocken Books, 1971, p.2.

the population of Byzantium.⁴⁵ The Jews of Byzantium were somewhat cut off from the rest of the Jewish world when the empire began to lose territory to the Arabs starting in the sixth century. Sharf says:

The losses of territory left the rest of the empire enjoying a closer cohesion, but the Jews of South Italy, of Greece and of Asia Minor found it more difficult to make contact with the Jews of Egypt of Palestine or of Syria when one state no longer ruled them all.⁴⁶

In addition, the shrinking Empire sought cohesion in the form of religious and cultural homogeneity. The Jews were not part of this "final crystallization of Christian Rome."⁴⁷

Part of the effort to unify the Christian Empire was the inception of periodic forced conversions. In 632 Heraclitus ordered conversion of all of the Jews. Leo III ordered forced baptisms in 721 and 722, while Basil I ordered them in 877. The author of the Yosippon was probably aware that Romanus I ordered conversion of the Jews in 932. The worst effects of the government's attacks on Jews were felt in Italy, and sometimes consisted of book burning, torture, and murder.⁴⁸ In addition, other

⁴⁵Ibid, p.3.

⁴⁶Ibid, p.43.

⁴⁷Ibid, p.43.

⁴⁸Ibid, p.99.

restrictions were put upon the Jews from time to time.⁴⁹ For example, they could not hold military office, nor marry Christians, nor own Christian slaves.

Some of these actions may have been brought upon the Jews themselves. Jews had a history of participation in some general movement against the authorities.⁵⁰ In the unstable Empire, forcing the Jews to convert was the government's way of checking insurgencies, whether imagined or real. Sharf writes that even though the Jews were natural intermediaries between the Byzantine and Muslim officials, "their loyalty in Byzantine eyes was no more than doubtful, particularly if they had lived for some time under the Muslims."⁵¹

Because of the geographical position that Byzantium occupied, the Byzantine Jews were in the position to be great recipients of Jewish knowledge. Many Talmud scholars and writers of piyyutim lived in the southern Italian centers of Oria, Bari, and Oranto. The Jews of Byzantine Italy were the major channel through which traditional Jewish learning was transmitted to Europe.⁵² Therefore, it would be logical to assume that even if the author of the

⁴⁹See documents 19 and 83 in Joshua Starr, The Jews in the Byzantine Empire 641-1204, Westmead, England: Gregg International Publishers, 1969.

⁵⁰Sharf, p.48.

⁵¹Ibid, p.91.

⁵²Ibid, p.179.

Yosippon was not a particularly learned scholar of Judaic knowledge, that by his membership in this community, he must have known quite a bit of Jewish traditional interpretation. Indeed, the Yosippon itself became known and transmitted to European Jewry along the same route as traditional Jewish learning.

Finally, Flusser's theory that the author of the Yosippon did not know much Greek is supported by the decline of Greek among the Byzantine Italian Jews. Sharf notes that by the beginning of the eighth century, tomb inscriptions were made only in Hebrew, rather than in Hebrew and Greek.⁵³ Thus, the Jews became culturally estranged from their neighbors as well as religiously separated.

Methodology

I intend to understand the interpretation of Esther in the Yosippon's narrative within the exegetical context of other Jewish retellings of Megillath Esther. By comparing the retelling of Esther in Sefer Yosippon with other versions of the story, I can shed some light on the religious-historical view of its author. Particularly since the Sefer Yosippon is written in the same language as the biblical book, the Yosippon's intent must be to rearrange, elaborate or introduce new material and original interpretations of the Story of Esther.

Geza Vermes stated that the student of haggadic history

⁵³Ibid, p.178.

ought to have four issues in mind:

1. the origin and development of exegetical symbolism;
2. the structure and purpose of rewriting of the Bible;
3. the historical bond between the Bible and its interpretation;
4. the impact of theology on exegesis and vice versa.⁵⁴

It is my intention in this study of the Sefer Yosippon on Esther to consider the last three of these problems. By examining the historiography, morality and theology of the various texts, I hope to elucidate the perspective of the author of the Yosippon, showing how the Sefer Yosippon represents its author's historical milieu and personality.

In this thesis, I have undertaken a survey of relevant Hebrew and Aramaic interpretations of the Scroll of Esther. In addition, I have considered the Story of Esther in Flavius Josephus' Jewish Antiquities and the six apocryphal additions to the biblical story. What is notably similar about all of these retellings of Esther is that they were all written by believing Jews. Furthermore, most of these interpretations were penned in the Diaspora. The position of the Jew in a larger society necessarily will have an effect upon each interpretation.

In surveying each piece of literature, I paid special attention to particular subjects which I thought were relevant to understanding the perspective of the author of the Yosippon. These topics were major themes in his

⁵⁴Geza Vermes, "Introduction," in Scripture and Tradition in Judaism, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1961, p.10.

rendition of the story. I tried to pay particular attention to the historical perspective of the interpretations, and to the moral and theological viewpoint of each retelling. Naturally, there are topics of interest upon which I do not touch, primarily because they were not relevant to the concerns of the Sefer Yosippon.

It is obvious from the previous description of the texts which I surveyed that the midrashim on Esther, as well as one of the targumim, were actually redacted after the Sefer Yosippon was written, as opposed to the Greek literature, which is known to have been written before the Yosippon. It is my contention, however, that it is still relevant to consider these Hebrew and Aramaic works in comparison to the Yosippon. First, although they may have been redacted late, they might well contain earlier traditions that predate the composition of the Yosippon.

Whether or not the author of the Yosippon was familiar with all of the interpretations surveyed is difficult to ascertain, although he was undoubtedly familiar with some of them. It is certain that the author of the Yosippon had access to all of the apocryphal material, probably from a Latin text.

It is also important to realize that whether or not the author of the Yosippon knew of certain interpretations, these interpretations embody natural solutions to problems in the texts. Some texts show similar solutions, although

couched in completely different terms. This phenomenon shows that similar interpretations may well have been arrived at independently by different commentators. Therefore, the author of the Yosippon could have made similar exegetical moves as did other retellers of Esther without being aware that his interpretation was part of a larger tradition. Assuming this point, I have chosen to note both similarities to and significant departures from the interpretive traditions as found in the Yosippon.

Through this analysis of the Yosippon's retelling of the Story of Esther in its exegetical context, I intend to show that the author did indeed have his own perspective. He sought to stick closely to the biblical story, but also to elaborate it by using material from other Jewish sources. In addition, it appears that he consciously chose not to include certain traditions. Finally, the author of the Sefer Yosippon added his own material to the interpretive tradition of Esther. Through his version of the story of Esther, I will argue, one can grasp the historical, moral and theological vision of the author of the Yosippon.

Chapter 2-- Historiographical Implications

In considering the historiographical implications of the Book of Esther and the subsequent retellings of the story in early medieval Jewish documents, one must be aware of two main factors. The most basic of these considerations is diachronic, or how the documents fit the story into larger Jewish history. That is, how is the story related to the history that came before it and how does the story relate to the future of the Jewish people? For instance, is the story linked to other events that are to be found in the torah or writings? Do characters in the story tend to transcend the Persian milieu in which the biblical story takes place? Is the story made to fit another time and place within the continuum of Jewish history?¹

The second consideration in the examination of historiography is synchronic. Here one must look at the conception of causation within each retelling of the story. That is, one must examine why things occur in a story. For a story to have a place within the field of history writing, causation must play a part in the telling of the event. Whether or not the document is actually written with

¹ A related area would be to look into the accuracy of the re-telling. That is, does it fit in with the time period it is supposed to portray or are the terms and setting of another time and place? For instance, Esther Rabbah sets the Story of Esther into a more Roman rather than the Persian setting. For the most part, this subject will not be addressed.

historiographic intent, this can hold true (i.e. the Midrash). Causality has special import in specifically Jewish history writing. Michael Meyer writes that while other epistemological concerns do not play a role in a conception of the particular Jewish past:

This is not true of the issue of causality. The authors... have variously and to varying extents tried to understand their people's history as the working out of a transcendent or immanent Divine plan; as the product of the will of powerful individuals; as the result of impersonal social and economic forces; or as a combination of some or all of these.²

In addition, God can play a constant role in history or Divine intervention may come into play only at specific points of Jewish or general history, whether arbitrarily or in direct response to some human action.³ As Yerushalmi has written, Jewish history writers are ultimately concerned with finding meaning in history in this way. This memory of the past is crucial to the faith of the Jewish people.⁴

The Book of Esther is particularly ripe for re-interpretation and retelling in the area of historiography. First, the setting of the story is outside of Israel, and therefore already linked to life in the Diaspora (as is the story of Joseph and the Book of Daniel). Therefore life is beset with the same troubles that face the interpreters who

²Michael Meyer, Ideas of Jewish History, New York: Behrman House, 1974, p.2.

³Ibid., pp.2,3.

⁴Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Zakhor, Seattle, University of Washington Press, 1983, pp.7-9.

live in the Diaspora. Inherent within this Megillah are words and customs peculiar to the Persian experience. Yet, the story is linked to previous events in the Bible. For instance, the Exile is mentioned specifically in 2:5. Of Mordecai it is said, "he had been taken into exile from Jerusalem among those whom King Nebudchadnezzar of Babylon had carried away with King Jeconiah of Judah." In addition, Haman is called an Agagite, a descendant of the biblical king Agag. As well the biblical story is linked to future custom among the Jews. There would be a celebration of the festival of Purim which "should never lapse among the Jews, and the commemoration of them [the customs of the Purim festival] should never cease among their descendants."

(9:28)

With regard to causation for the events in the story, Megillath Esther is very vague. There is no mention of Divine intervention and the events of the story seem to be the result of the wills of the human characters in the story. Much of the action is initiated by the powerful and evil Haman, who is consumed with hatred for Mordecai, and thus the Jewish people. In this chapter, I will show the different ways that causation has been conceived of by interpreters of the Story of Esther; many of these conceptions are different than those in the biblical book.

Many have argued that Sefer Yosippon contains no original history writing. Salo Baron calls the Yosippon "an

abridged semi-folkloristic paraphrase of Josephus."⁵ I will show this to be untrue in the case of the Story of Esther. Much of the Yosippon appears to be derived from the Latin Hegissipus, but the Story of Esther does not appear there. Although there are many sources for the Yosippon's version of the Esther Story, the conceptions of history found in this story in the Yosippon may be those of early medieval Jewish history writing. The paraphrase of the Book of Esther may provide exciting information to the student of Jewish history writing as there is no other Jewish history book of this period between Josephus and the Expulsion from Spain. Although the author of the Yosippon:

claimed to have done no more than to excerpt and translate his sources: 'I have collected stories from the book of Joseph b. Gorion and from the books of other authors who wrote down the deeds of our ancestors and I compiled them in one scroll.' Yet in the process, the author did inject his own variations;...

In order to ascertain accurately what the author of the Yosippon did indeed inject into his own history writing, it is necessary to survey the relevant Jewish sources from the early medieval period, including the Midrash, Targum, Apocrypha, and Josephus. Where the Yosippon story agrees

⁵ Salo Baron, History and Jewish Historians, compiled with a foreword by Arthur Hertzberg and Leon A. Feldman, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1964, p. 205.

⁶Meyer, p.15. Italics mine. In addition, this claim is similar to Josephus' own claim that he adds nothing new when he paraphrases the Bible.

with other renditions, such agreement shows the importance of tradition in the author's historical perspective. Where the Yosippon embellishes the story or tells it differently from other versions, such difference shows the author's own perspective.

First, it is important to see how the Story of Esther fits into the Sefer Yosippon as a whole, if one assumes that there is an overall conception of history in the entire work. The author tells very few biblical stories.⁷ He includes in his history the Creation Story, some stories of Daniel and The Story of Esther. That Daniel and Esther are included show that the author wished to link the later history of the Diaspora with the earlier biblical history, especially with the ancient relationship which God had begun by the act creation. These Diaspora biblical stories serve as a bridge between primordial and patriarchal times and the author's own milieu in Exile.⁸ These two narratives link the biblical world with the Diaspora, namely Babylon and Persia, and through them to the Greek and Roman Empires. Thus, the historical perspective found in the Esther story will have significance for further Jewish history in the

⁷ One reason might be that the book is written in a pseudo-Biblical style of Hebrew, and therefore, the author would assume that those who would read his book would have access to the Bible. However, those Biblical stories that are included would then have significance beyond the mere telling of history in a certain order.

⁸ These are also the only two canonical books for which there are additions in the Greek Apocrypha.

world at large.

The modern conception of history writing is based on ancient Greek history writing, beginning with Herodotus, who is commonly known as the "father of history." In this type of history writing, a logos is fit into a chronology, with things happening first, second, third, etc. There is a certain order which is imposed on the events, and is assumed to be their correct order. Flavius Josephus imposes this type of chronology in his history writing. In particular, when writing the story of Esther, Josephus links the event to past and future events. This chronography is not within the telling, but at the beginning and end of the story. At the beginning of the Story of Esther, Josephus writes, "On the death of Xerxes, the kingdom passed to his son Ahasuerus, whom the Greeks call Artaxerxes. During the time he ruled the Persian empire, the entire nation of the Jews, with their wives and children, was in danger of being destroyed" (Ant. XI: 184). Josephus ends the account by saying, "Such, then, were the things that befell them in the reign of Artaxerxes" (Ant. XI:296). Josephus sees the order of events, and history as taking place within reigns of kings, in the order of these kings.⁹

The apocryphal additions to the biblical account also conceive of historical order in a similar way, with a more

⁹The biblical books of Kings marks time with the reigns of kings, as well.

detailed conception of the actual date. Chapter 11 (the beginning) begins, "In the second year of the reign of Artaxerxes the Great King, on the first day of the month of Nisan..." (11:2). The Esther story then ends, "In the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra..." (11:1). This ordering seems to be one mark of a document which finds its historiographic perspective in Greek-type history writing.

Although the Yosippon contains a collection of stories within a chronological continuum in Jewish history, and is also history writing, the author does not employ detailed ordering as found in the Greek accounts. However, the author does use the method of recalling the reigns of the kings under whom each event occurred. In the story of Esther, he begins, "In the days of Ahasuerus," and he ends with the succession of King Darius the Second to the throne (Yos. p.48:1, p.54:112). It is worth noting that the markers for history in the Greek accounts and in the Yosippon are non-Jewish kings. Therefore, one would assume that these authors sought to understand Jewish history with regard to events that transcend the Jewish milieu.

The Targum does try to fit the story into a continuum of Jewish history. The first five chapters of Targum Sheni are devoted to setting the stage for the Esther story. The fifth chapter tells the story of Nebuchadnezzar, thus showing how Israel was destroyed and dispersed.

Among the Midrashim, little space is devoted to a

chronological conception of history. Says Yerushalmi, "unlike the biblical writers, the rabbis seem to play with Time as though with an accordion, expanding and collapsing it at will."¹⁰ One major exception is Aggadath Esther. On page 7, the midrash gives a synopsis of history up to the point of the Esther Story. This history is mainly genealogical, starting with Adam and Eve. After the line about Nebuchadnezzar, however, there is a promise for the redemption through the Esther Story. God says, "All of the time that the reign was in his (Nebuchadnezzar's) sons' hands, I was wandering with them... Now the reign will return to its Father's house forever."¹¹ What this interpretation seems to be saying is that the powerlessness of the Jewish people which began with the exile into Babylonia, will be ended by the events of the Esther story. Thus Esther also signifies the beginning of the return. Not only is the story of Esther tied to the beginning of time, but also to the end of time as well. Panim Aherim Nusach Bet also speculates about the date of the story by way of genealogy (PA2 pp.56, 57), but this is an unusual way for

¹⁰Yerushalmi, p.17.

¹¹ On page 37, there is another short history of the world, more event centered, rather than genealogy centered. This history begins with the Exodus from Egypt, especially emphasizing the role of Amalek. Sihon and Og are also mentioned, followed by the conquest of the land, the stories of Saul, Sisera, David and Solomon. The last line is about Nebudchadnezzar. The Midrash focusses on the utter destruction of the conquest of Jerusalem.

the midrashic literature to place the Story of Esther in a historical continuum.¹²

One way in which later retellings have linked the Story of Esther to earlier history is by drawing parallels between the characters in the Megillah and other biblical characters. The king in this story is, according to Targum Sheni, one of 10 kings who once ruled, or will rule the world. Those in the past include the pharaoh of Egypt and Nebuchadnezzar of biblical fame. The first king is God, but God will also rule in the future as well as the Messiah, Son of David (TS Ch1). A different story of kings who ruled the world is presented in Panim Aherim Nusach Bet. Here the four kings are Solomon, Ahab, Nebuchadnezzar and Ahasuerus (p.56, similar in AE p.8). The mention of the king in the Book of Esther reminds the reader of the story of both the past and future, and the retellers show how this story fits into Jewish history as a whole. The first five chapters of Targum Sheni particularly show the link between Ahasuerus and Nebuchadnezzar, thus showing that this story is ultimately tied to the tragedy of the exile.¹³

¹² There is also a discussion regarding the years since the exile when the story begins in Midrash Lekach Tov p.86. Aggadath Esther contains speculation concerning the number of years of the Babylonian and Persian kings' reigns (p.9).

¹³ This connection is pointed to by Midrash Lekach Tov, "R. Hasda said that the moon was full [when Esther was taken to the palace], as it was when Israel was exiled" (LT p.96).

Each of the kings that came up against Israel is linked to Ahasuerus. All had stolen the throne of Solomon in succession, and all were prevented from sitting on it, for only a descendant of David would be able to sit on this throne. The earthly kings who attacked the Jewish people were not permitted by the heavenly king to take this honor. The kings who tried to sit in the glorious throne were Shishak of Egypt, Sennacherib, Pharaoh Neco, Nebuchadnezzar, Darius (who did not attempt to sit on the throne), and Ahasuerus (AG, pp. 3-8, PA1, p.45, PA2 pp.57,58, LT p.89, similarly AE p.8, TS Ch.2, ER I:12).¹⁴ Each was prevented from sitting on the throne by the throne itself, usually because the lions carved into it struck the king, injuring him.

In these retellings there are detailed descriptions of Solomon's throne. The story of the throne shows a historical perspective in that each adversary is listed in succession, which eventually leads to the adversary at hand, Ahasuerus. Also, the story is shown to be part of a larger history in which the people of Israel had at one time had sovereignty, which is still maintained in a Divine way. The most glorious of the sovereigns of Israel's past is Solomon,

¹⁴The rabbinical re-interpretation can be observed in the painting of Esther and Ahasuerus found in Dura-Europos (dated 245 C.E.). Here, the king sits on the throne of Solomon. See Rachel Wischnitzer, "The Esther Story in Art," in Philip Goodman, ed., The Purim Anthology, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973, pp.222-224.

who is mentioned as the owner of the throne. Therefore this glory can still belong to the beleaguered, dispersed community of Israel. The throne cannot belong to the king who supposedly rules over them.

In addition, the character Ahasuerus, is said to be evil, like Nimrod, Esau, Dathan and Abiram and Ahab, as opposed to Abram, Moses, Aaron, David, Hezekiah and Ezra, although both evil and pious are noted in Scripture by the same locution as in 1:1, "and he was (in this case) Ahasuerus the King who..." (PA2 p.55, ER I:2, AE p.4). Aggadath Esther points out that Ahasuerus' downfall is like that of Ahab, in that both ruled by compulsion. In contrast is the rule of Solomon, who is venerated here as well (AE p. 7).

The character of Vashti finds parallels in previous stories as well. Vashti is linked to the destruction of the Temple and the Exile and Diaspora history of the Jews as she is referred to as the daughter of Belshazzar (ER III:3). In fact, this is what leads to Vashti's own downfall. In Esther Rabbah, the contempt of Vashti for her husband is parallel to the contempt shown by her father for the sanctuary vessels. Therefore, she merited the wrath that was visited upon her when she was slain, for this, in effect, was the wrath of God seeking retribution (ER IV:8). She is also called the granddaughter of Nebuchadnezzar (PA2, 60, TS Ch6, AE p.3). Targum Sheni writes that her refusal

to come forward to the king's banquet naked is related to her noble heritage--she must not dishonor her ancestors by showing her body to anyone except the king himself (TS Ch 6.). The midrashic link of Nebuchadnezzar with both Ahasuerus and Vashti shows that the historiographical perspective paralleled the events of the exile and the events of the Story of Esther. The original tragedies are found similar, yet the positive outcome in the Book of Esther seems to be in part a sort of "undoing" of the earlier event, and may lead to a rebuilding of the Temple.

Haman's character is also as evil as the villains of the Bible. He is said to be like Korach, in that he wanted to seize the treasures of the Jews (ER VII:5). Esther Rabbah also likens Haman to the serpent and Korach, because both use the Hebrew word *af* in their speech (Esther 5:12, Gen. 3:1, Num. 16:14) (ER IX:3, also LT p.105). Aggadath Esther says that he is like Esau, Balak, Balaam and Ahitofel (p.25). In the genealogy of Haman the Agagite in the Second Targum to Esther, along with ancestors Stench, Robbery, Refuse and Decay, Haman is descended from Pilate, Antipater, Herod, Amalek and Esau as well as other villains of Jewish history (TS Ch. 8). He is also referred to here as a descendent of Amalek, a subject which will be dealt with below. These parallels show that genealogy can be linked to character.

Haman is like the other villains who fought Israel, and

thought that he could kill all the Jews. He is aware of the history of those who tried to destroy Israel before him, starting with Pharaoh, but nevertheless, Haman thinks that he is different (AG 30,31). Haman says he won't make the mistakes that the others made. Pharaoh killed only the boys, Amalek, only the weak ones; Nebuchadnezzar and Sennacherib made similar mistakes. Haman argues that all the Jews must be killed (PA1 p.47), bringing the evil to new heights. Thus, Haman is the wickedest among the history of wicked people.

Other examples of diachronic history in the midrash are contained in Haman's conference with his wife Zeresh. She mentions all of the times that the Jews have prevailed over their adversaries. Since Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah survived fire, Joseph survived jail, Manasseh survived hot irons, the people multiplied in the desert, and Samson survived blinding, the only way that remains to kill a descendant of Israel, Zeresh reasons, is by hanging. Thus, a hanging is planned for Mordecai, based on Zeresh's historical reasoning, as concocted by the writers of this retelling of the Esther story (AG pp.36,37, PA2 p.72).¹⁵ The retellers are aware of past miracles and the irony which they point to is that this story, too, will have a miraculous ending.

¹⁵ Zeresh similarly says that Mordecai can't be beaten if he is of the line of Ephraim and Manasseh in Panim Aherim, Nusach aleph, p. 48. The prooftext here is Psalms 80:3.

Just as Haman's evil is embellished, so to are Mordecai's heroic proportions enlarged by the links made to previous biblical characters. The literature has called Mordecai, "equal to Moses in his generation." (ER VI:2) As well, because Mordecai is referred to as "a Jewish man" (Esther 2:5), he must be as good and pious as others who have been referred to by the word "man" with a similar modifier: Abraham, Noah, Joseph, Moses, and Job (ER VI:3).¹⁶ Abba Gorion (p.22) and Lekach Tov (p. 97) conclude that Mordecai is similar to Joseph.¹⁷ In addition, Mordecai will not bow down to Haman, in the same way that Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah had resisted idolatry (AE p.32). Mordecai is linked to more recent history in Panim Aherim Bet, which says that he learned 70 languages since he was a member of the Sanhedrin (PA p.65). Mordecai is a hero who is placed in the continuum of Jewish history through his similarity to other Jewish heroes.

As well, the text reinforces Esther's piety by likening her to the righteous in previous Jewish history. She is referred to as specifically a descendant of the matriarch Sarah. Because Sarah lived to be 127 years old, Esther will

¹⁶ In Aggadath Esther, Mordecai is similar to Abraham, Joshua, and David (AE p.70).

¹⁷ Many points of similarity can be found in the biblical tellings of Esther and the Joseph story. These similarities are picked up in later interpretation. Both narratives tell the story of success in a foreign court. See especially Sandra Beth Berg, The Book of Esther, Missoula Montana: Scholars Press, 1979.

eventually rule over 127 provinces. Thus the matriarch's life is linked with Esther's function in the future world, in the Diaspora (ER I:8, TS Ch.1). When explaining Esther's refusal to tell of her people, Esther Rabbah writes that she is like Rachel. Rachel also took a vow of silence, rather than embarrass her sister Leah when Leah was given to Jacob in her stead (ER VI:12). Esther is also like Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah because none of them ate of the food of the king (PA2 p.64). In addition, she is even prettier than another biblical character, Joseph (PA2 p.64, LT p.95, AE p.22). Midrash Lekach Tov asserts that this beauty comes from righteousness.¹⁸ Finally, Esther is considered a prophetess, like Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail and Hulda (AE p.47).¹⁹ Esther will profit from her link with her ancestors and shine as they did.

In many of the retellings, Esther's messenger, Hatach, is said to be Daniel, thus linking the providential aspects of the Daniel story, as well as its Diaspora setting, to this story.²⁰ Similarly, some of the literature refers to the king's advisor, Memukan, as Daniel (TS Ch. 6, PA2 p.61, AE p.15). The link to Daniel is also made in the course of Esther's prayers found in the ninth chapter of Targum Sheni.

¹⁸See note 17.

¹⁹ On page 50 of Aggadath Esther, Esther is said to be among the four most beautiful women: Sarah, Rahab, Abigail, and Esther.

²⁰ ER VIII:4, AE IV:5, 42, Meg 15a.

In addition, Esther is said to have suggested to the king that Mordecai should be kept near the palace gate, because every king needs a good Jewish advisor, as Daniel had been to Ahasuerus' predecessor (PA2 p.65, LT p.96, AE p.24). The repetition of the Daniel motif serves to show another Diaspora miracle and reminds the reader of the promise to rebuild the Temple.

A common interpretation that is played out throughout the Midrashic retellings of the Story of Esther is that Mordecai is from the tribe of Benjamin,²¹ and Haman is descended from Amalek.²² This interpretation shows the diachronic link between earlier times and the story at hand. The motif also proposes a cause for the events. Josephus, too, refers to Mordecai as "of the tribe of Benjamin" (Ant. 198) and says Haman is "of Amalekite descent" (Ant. 209). One exception to this exegetical tradition is Panim Aherim, Nusach Bet, which asserts (p.78) that Mordecai is actually from the tribe of Judah, since he is described by the text as a "Jewish man" (Esther 2:5). Aggadath Esther solves this conundrum by stating, "R. Yehoshuah ben Levi said that his mother was from the tribe of Judah and his father was from

²¹ This is based on the phrase in Esther 2:5, "ish yemini": PA1 p.51, PA2 p.62, AE p.17,19, TR II:5, TS Ch. 7, ER VII:8, as well as Meg 13a.

²² This is based on the fact that Haman is known as an "Agagite," thus his ancestor must be Agag, king of the Amalekites. AG p.5,36, PA2 p.70, LT p.100, AE p.26,42, TR III: 1, V:1, TS Ch.9.

the tribe of Benjamin" (p.18). The Apocryphal Additions do not carry the tradition that Haman is an Amalekite, as Haman is referred to as "Haman son of Hamadathus, a Bugaen" (Apoc. 12:6). Later, the Apocryphal retelling refers to Haman as a "Macedonian" (Apoc. 16:10).

There are two main themes which find their roots in the genealogy of these two men, and their respective connections to their biblical ancestry. The first deals with both men, but focuses on the character of Mordecai and his relationship with his ancestor Benjamin. In this tradition, the rabbinic and Aramaic literature remember the fact that Benjamin never bowed down to any human, but his brothers bowed down to Esau before his birth (Gen. 33:6f). It is therefore fitting that Benjamin's descendant Mordecai would not bow down to Haman (AE p.27, TS Ch.8). The account in Targum Sheni adds to this veneration of Benjamin that "an eternal covenant was thus made with him while he was yet in his mother's womb." Therefore Mordecai is subject to this covenant, which is why he will not prostrate himself before Haman. The Targum Sheni also adds that Benjamin was righteous in yet another way that relates to Mordecai. It says because Benjamin did not participate in selling Joseph into slavery, two of his descendants (Mordecai and Esther) were destined to be redeemers of Israel (TS Ch.8). The Targum seems to be saying that because Benjamin was not involved in slave trading, his descendants will be well-

suited to redeem people. Thus, the hero of this story is destined by his ancestry to be righteous, and therefore, to be able to save the Jewish people.

The second theme drawn from the ancestry of Mordecai concerns the ongoing war between the Benjaminites and the Amalekites. This ancient war finds its beginnings with the Exodus from Egypt, when Amalek attacked the Israelites (Ex. 17:8f). According to Aggadath Esther the story is specifically related to tribe of Benjamin. This midrash says with regard to Exodus 17:9 that "Moses would not do battle with Amalek until the sons of Rachel were joined with him" (AE p.65). The fray with Amalek is won by the Children of Israel, but an ominous verse warns that Amalek will be around in the future: "The Lord will be at war with Amalek throughout the ages" (Ex. 17:16). The cosmic war is then set up. This war is ripe for insertion into interpretation of other events with the enemy as Amalek and the defender as Benjamin.

Generations later, during Saul's time, Samuel tells Saul, who is of the tribe of Benjamin, that God has ordered, "Now, go attack Amalek and destroy everything that belongs to him. Spare no one, but kill alike men and women, infants and sucklings, oxen and sheep, camels and asses!" (I Sam. 15:3). However, Saul did not do this job completely. He captured King Agag alive, thus allowing him to leave descendants who would some day rise up against Israel again,

a theme which is picked up in the history of interpretation of Esther. In addition, after Saul does not kill all of the Amalekites, God does not favor him any longer (I Sam. 15:10f). This fact, too, becomes important in later interpretation of the Book of Esther.

The basis of the story of Esther for many of the interpretations lies in this ancient war. For Haman's hatred of Mordecai, and indeed all of the Jews, is because he is an Amalekite descendant.²³ Further, the Amalekites are said to be descended also from Esau. In Midrash Lekach Tov, it says:

The Agagite oppressed the Jews. For all time they have oppressed the Jews. "Now Esau harbored a grudge against Jacob..." (Gen. 27:41). Then, Amalek came and made war with Israel, and so too came Haman ben Hammadatha. (LT p.100)

Haman's Amalekite hatred is summed up by a letter found in Esther Rabbah. Here, along with other crimes of Israel, Haman gives a history of Amalek's defeat at the hands of Israel (ER VII:13).

Furthermore, Mordecai's duty to do away with Haman and his ultimate success are both due to his Benjaminite ancestry. In fact, it is up to Mordecai and Esther to complete the job that had been left undone by their ancestor, Saul. In the exegesis to Esther 2:5, Aggadath

²³ There is another story behind this hatred. In this tradition, Haman had previously sold himself to Mordecai as a field slave in return for a loaf of bread (TR III: 2, p.15, AE p.54).

Esther states:

Rabbah said the congregation of Israel said to one another: See what the Judahite has done for me, what the Benjaminite has completed for me. What did the Judahite do? David did not kill Shimei ben Gera. For if David had killed Shimei ben Gara, Mordecai would not have been born to kill Haman, and there would have been much trouble in Israel. What did the Benjaminite [referring to Mordecai] complete? Saul did not kill Agag. If Saul had killed Agag, Haman would not have been born to cause trouble in Israel. (AE p.18)

Another reference to Saul is found in Targum Sheni. Here, Mordecai is berating Esther for not wanting to defend her people (Esther 4:13). He tells Esther that if Saul had done his job, that there would not be a problem now, so she must do her job to save those of the future (TS Ch. 8).²⁴

Finally, when Esther does rescue her people she waits a second day to tell the king of her heritage. She says, "Tomorrow I shall do what the king wishes," which is to make her request of him (Esther 5:8). In Panim Aherim Nusach Aleph and Aggadath Esther, one finds that "tomorrow" has significance for Amalek throughout the centuries. For in both Exodus 17:9 and I Samuel 9:16, the word "tomorrow" comes before the defeat of Amalek (PA p.71, AE p.54).

Therefore, according to this Midrash, Esther intentionally uses the word "tomorrow," knowing that this Amalekite will also be defeated, if only she follows this ancient rule for destroying him. Esther Rabbah, too, links the redemption wrought by Esther to the Amalek story. It says that the

²⁴ PA2, p. 70 has a somewhat similar idea.

king's decree in Esther 1:20, asking all the single women to come forward is really the sovereign God's decree found in Exodus 17:14, "I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven!" The verse in Esther is meant to describe the action which God swore to undertake in Exodus.

Targum Sheni represents this theme in totality in its account of Haman's death by hanging. As Mordecai prepares to kill him, Haman pleads for his life:

O pity my nobility, and do not kill or destroy me in the same manner as my ancestor, Agag, was destroyed! O Mordecai! Show me kindness in not slaying me as a murderer does, for there are no murderers among you! Remember not the hatred of Agag and the envy of Amalek against me. Take no vengeance against me as an enemy, and do not have a rancorous feeling against me, as my ancestor Esau had [against Jacob]... I pray thee lord, righteous Mordecai, to have compassion upon my soul, and not to blot out my name so quickly as they blotted out that of my ancestor Amalek and do not hang my grey head upon the gallows... (Ch.10)

This Targum clearly knows that Amalek had not been completely blotted out, since Haman lived to carry on his evil deeds. The scene shows the necessity of completing the job left unfinished by Saul, as well as recalling the ancient grudge of Esau's descendants, the Amalekites. Targum Rishon ends this tale by saying that the slaughter took place among descendants of Amalek (TR IX:17, p.34).

Although the Yosippon does not mention the other links between the characters of this story and other Biblical characters, the author does make special mention of the ancient hatred that Haman held for the Jews. Furthermore, there is much embellishment of this story by the author,

which appears to have no other source. As the apocrypha does not contain this theme, and it is only referred to in passing by Josephus,²⁵ one might assume that the theme of Haman's hatred comes to the author of the Yosippon through Midrash and Targum. In addition, its inclusion into his short account shows that this theme of the cosmic war between Amalek and Benjamin was significant to his historiographical outlook. The Yosippon telling of the Esther story starts with this account:

Now in the days of Ahasuerus, the memory of Judah (the Jewish people) was almost obliterated from the entire dominion of Persia because of the enmity of an Amalekite, whose name was Haman. For he stole the heart of King Ahasuerus, who gave him the power to do what he wanted in all of the kingdom, which was to wipe out the memory of the Jews from the entire dominion of Persia, because Mordecai the Jew, one of the Prefects of Benjamin, had not risen up before him. The Prefects were the nobles, the mighty men of Benjamin who had come up, with their king, Saul, in the Amalekite fields. They dealt a great and heavy blow to Amalek, from Havilla as one goes to Shur, a land of many days' journey. They threw to the earth more than 500,000 dead bodies from among the people of Amalek. King Saul destroyed all of those in battle against the Amalekites. Then, he killed people in all of the land of Amalek: men women and children, numbering over a million. Because of this, this man, Haman, of whom we write, harbored enmity for the Jews, and especially those of the Tribe of Benjamin. (Yos p.48,49:1-10)

Flusser notes that certain details, most notably the figure

²⁵ "for he [Haman] naturally hated the Jews because his own race, the Amalekites, had been destroyed by them" (Ant. XI:211). Feldman asserts that the insertion of the Amalekite ancestral enmity of the Jews adds dramatic suspense, which adds to the hellenization of the story in the Antiquities. Louis Feldman, "Hellenizations in Josephus' Version of Esther," in Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association, 101, 1970, pp.158,159.

of 500,000 has no other known source.²⁶ In addition, there are many other details in the story as a whole: the land in which the war was fought, the number of dead, etc. This detail is notable also in that this introduction takes up 10 out of 112 total lines of the account of the Esther story. Furthermore, the theme which is only alluded to in other Hebrew and Aramaic accounts is completely spelled out for the reader here.

The writer of the Yosippon must have been particularly interested in proving the cause of this story to be found in an ancient source. He found it plausible that the Esther Story could be tied to a cosmic war which spanned the centuries. He, too, found himself caught up into a similar war. We know that the writer lived in a time period in which Jews were intermittently persecuted. Perhaps the author felt it necessary to explain anti-semitism in terms of an ancient inborn trait, for some people just seem to hate Jews. Haman's hatred for the Jew Mordecai is not a petty hatred, but a deep-seated hatred, reaching back to biblical times, against the people who fought with God at their side. Furthermore, that hatred could find its basis in a biblical story would link the pain of persecution to the patriarchs and prophets, but also to a war for the sake of God and God's enmity for Amalek. There is a sense

²⁶ David Flusser, Yossipon, Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1978, I: 48, n.7.

although the Jews are persecuted, they are not alone. This type of persecution has happened before, and will happen again, until Amalek is completely destroyed. However, as long as the descendants of Benjamin remain, there exist "nobles and mighty men" who can save the Jewish people. Thus, the genealogy of Haman and Mordecai show that the story is diachronically linked to an ancient history. In fact the Yosippon sees this genealogy as part of the cause of the entire story of Esther.

The Midrash connects this story also to future lives of Jews. As the ninth chapter of the Scroll is devoted primarily to the custom of Purim, the rabbis feel compelled to relate this custom to the halacha that dictated the celebration in their own times (AE pp.73-82, LT pp.110,111). In addition, these authors note that this story is an indication of redemption in the future (PA2: p.82). The Yosippon does not specifically link this story to his present situation, nor to the future. However, as an historian, the author most certainly felt that the outcome of the story influenced his life and future redemption. Although the Yosippon is not written in a style that lends itself to applying the events of the Story of Esther to the contemporary situation, the author's conception of this historical event may have been influenced by and, in turn, influenced his conception of his own situation.

One final link to earlier times is found in the Hebrew

and Aramaic retellings of the Story of Esther. That is the connection between the story and the Temple in Jerusalem. The destruction of the Temple and the promise of its rebuilding underlie and even motivate some of the events of the story. Lekach Tov begins its narrative by stating that the story occurs two years before the building of the Temple, thus linking the setting with the Temple itself (LT p.88).

The Persian court's contempt for the Temple and its implements bring about their downfall. Because they flaunt the spoils from the Temple, they have sealed their fate with God.²⁷ For instance, at Ahasuerus' banquet, he serves drinks in cups taken from the Temple (AG p.5, PA2 p.59, LT p.90, ERII:1,11). According to Aggadath Esther, Ahasuerus even wears the priestly garments (AE p.10). The Children of Israel who are at the banquet cry and no longer feel like celebrating when they see the implements of the Temple at the palace (PA2 p.60). According to some traditions, they leave the banquet and form their own separate party (LT p.90, AE p.10, TS Ch.6). The Temple is present in this theme, as an object of contempt, and therefore the impetus of God's wrath and defeat of the Persian people.

The theme of the Temple is related specifically to Vashti's doom. According to the Rabbis, she is banished (or

²⁷This is parallel to the Daniel motif, which is alluded to above.

killed)/because she did not allow Ahasuerus to rebuild the Temple (AG p.17, LT p.93, TR p.5, ER V:2). She says, "You want to rebuild what my forefathers destroyed?" (PA2 p.60). This again links Vashti genetically to the tragedy of the exile. Here, too, the figure of Daniel is recalled, as it was to him that a promise was made to rebuild the Temple (PA2 p.60). Thus, the themes of the destruction and rebuilding of the Temple are linked to the punishment of another character in the story.

The midrash connects Ahasuerus to the Temple as well. He is shown to be stupid and pliable, when he allows his advisors to tell him not to allow the the Temple to be rebuilt (AG p.18, PA2 p.61, LT p.94, ER VII:1).²⁸ As well, Haman's wickedness is revealed when he advises against the building of the Temple. In regard to this evil advice, the first Targum wonders why Haman should be allowed to live at all:

The attribute of justice came up before the Master of the Whole World and said, 'Didn't the wicked Haman come down from Susa to Jerusalem in order to abolish the building of Your Holy Temple?' (TR p.14)

In fact, according to many retellings, God wishes to first exalt Haman before killing him. This way the deed-- this evil advice of not allowing the Temple to be rebuilt-- will be known and publicized (AG p.20, LT p.97, AE p.1).

²⁸ As exegesis to Esther 5:3, Targum Rishon says that this is the only request that Ahasuerus says he will not grant Esther when she approaches him to rescue her people (TR p.23).

Panim Aherim Nusach Bet begins its narrative by telling that what happened in "the days of Ahasuerus" was that Mordecai wanted to rebuild the Temple, but Haman, the king's ambassador, stood in his way (PA2 p.55,66). Mordecai also does not take a chance to kill the king, because he thinks that if he allows Ahasuerus to live, he will have the opportunity to rebuild the Temple (PA2 p.65). When Haman is defeated, according to Lekach Tov, the money from his household is then put into the building of the Temple (LT p.112). Thus, the entire story is said to be a struggle for the Temple: The victory bodes well for Israel's future redemption, too, as it says, "all good things will come to [Mordecai's] descendants, The Master of peace will spread peace over all Israel" (LT p.112).

The Esther Story also shows that God is behind the Children of Israel even though the Temple is not standing. Haman, when convincing Ahasuerus that they should wipe out the Jews, insists that they need not fear the God of Israel because all of the previous miracles happened when the Temple still stood (AE p.34).

The Hebrew and Aramaic retellings contain a wealth of material linking the Story of Esther to the destruction and future rebuilding of the Temple. The motif serves as an underlying theme for the Esther story, which depicts the struggle for the Temple and the awesome connection that the Temple bore to God. This tradition reveals the peristent

Jewish yearning for the restoration of the Temple, long after its destruction. The expression of this yearning was combined with the affirmation that God would still work miracles for the Jewish people although the Temple no longer stood. Obviously, the Greek writers of the Apocrypha and Josephus did not need to form the same relationship with the Temple through this story, since the Second Temple was standing during their lifetime. In addition, these writings may in fact be protecting the reputation of the king in not mentioning the desecration of the Temple and its utensils.²⁹ As writers in the Diaspora, they sought to venerate gentile royalty, rather than mock it.

The Yosippon does not deal with the historical link between the Temple and the Story of Esther. Perhaps the Temple was too far in the author's past to feel that it was an appropriate subject for this particular narrative. Also, he lived in a religious environment that had dealt with the loss of the Temple for many centuries and had come to terms with it as best as possible. Further, the author of the Yosippon seems more concerned with rewriting the tradition as found in Greek writings rather than in the Hebrew and Aramaic retellings. In a sense, he may have seen his history as a supplement to other Hebrew retellings. Along with his own embellishments, he made the Greek traditions accessible to Hebrew readers.

²⁹Feldman, p.162.

Having for the most part exhausted age-old causes for the events that occur in the Story of Esther, it is now necessary to delve into other motivating factors for the story.³⁰ These kinds of causes put the events in people's hands and are related to the present situation rather than the ancient past. Specifically, I will discuss the political situation of the Jewish people as it is reflected in the Book of Esther and in the later retellings. This historical outlook is related to the political situation and milieu of the tellers and retellers alike.

In the biblical Book of Esther, one of the main factors for Mordecai's and Esther's success is that Mordecai uncovers a plot to kill the king, and the king later finds himself in a position to reward Mordecai (Esther 2:21,22, 6:1-11). Mordecai and Esther are thus given honor and protection which will help to save the lives of the Jews. The biblical rendition thus sets up an environment of court intrigue which is taken one step further in later retellings. Haman's hatred is linked to the court intrigues and national power struggles, a subject which is untouched in Megillath Esther.

First, the history of the interpretation of Esther shows a tradition that Haman was involved with the plot to kill the king (PA2 p.77). In Targum Rishon, Esther says,

³⁰ With the exclusion of God's working in history, which will be the subject of Chapter 4.

when asked to identify the enemy of her people:

The enemy and the adversary who sought to slay you in the evening in your bed-chamber, and who even today asked to be clothed with a royal garment, and to ride upon your horse, and to place the golden crown upon his head, and to rebel against you, and to take away the kingdom from you; but the matter was arranged in heaven so that honor was rendered to the righteous Mordecai... (TR p.28)

This idea is elaborated upon in the apocrypha, which relates that Haman was a Macedonian who used his position to scheme against the kingdom, and "sought to bring about the destruction of Mardocheus, our constant benefactor who saved our life, and of Esther, our blameless consort, together with their whole nation" (apoc. 16:13). Here, the fate of the hero and heroine are shown to be closely tied with the fate of the kingdom as a whole. The Jewish leaders are the favored, and Haman is the foreigner who sought "to catch us without support and transfer to the Macedonians the sovereignty now held by the Persians" (apoc. 16:14). This passage is reported almost verbatim by Josephus, except that he labels Haman an Amalekite, rather than a Macedonian (Ant. XI:277,278). In other words, it is the Jews, in particular Mordecai and Esther, who will help protect the Persian nation, as opposed to Haman who seeks its destruction! It is because of this special relationship with the Jews that the edict to harm them is revoked by a counter-edict in both the apocrypha and Josephus, although the biblical story asserts that the edict of the king cannot be revoked (Esther 8:8). Thus the tradition sees Haman as a conspirator

against the king and the state.

In addition, the conspirators named by the Bible, Bigthan and Teresh, were disaffected because they were replaced as gatekeepers by Mordecai (PA2 p.65, AE p.25). Thus all of the conspirators had reason to hate Mordecai. Haman's special hatred for Mordecai, in this tradition, stems from the execution of his co-conspirators. This tradition is particularly clear in the Greek literature. In apocryphal additions, it says, "Haman son of Hamadathus, a Bugaeon, who enjoyed the royal favor, looked for a chance to harm Mardocheaus and his people because of the king's two eunuchs" (apoc. 12:6).

As well, the midrash says that the king himself later dreams during his near sleepless night that Haman wants to murder him, and wakes to find Haman "standing in the court" (Esther 6:4), thus proving to himself that his dream is true (AG p.39, PA2 p.75, LT p.106, AE p.59). Midrash Lekach Tov adds that Haman later tries on the king's crown (LT p.106). Because of this twist invented in later interpretation, Ahasuerus becomes wary enough of Haman to doubt his favored advisor.

The author of the Yosippon was clearly influenced by the telling found in the apocryphal additions:

When Mordecai was sitting in the gate of the king, he became aware of the whispering of two of the king's eunuchs, gatekeepers. They were plotting to raise a hand against the king in order to kill him in his bed and cut off his head. They wanted to place the head of King Ahasuerus before the king of Macedonia, because at that time the nation of Macedonia was stirred up against the kingdom of Persia. (Yos. p.49)

Here, Yosippon adopts the idea that the plot is related to the designs of Macedonia upon Persia. But the story here is more detailed, with the desire for the head of the king in the empire of Macedonia. Further, this telling is more aware of the stirring of war among the great empires at that time, and indeed at the time that the author of the Yosippon found himself. For he too was caught between two empires at war. The Yosippon relates this plot to Haman's hatred, and says that Haman became angry because the eunuchs were his "advisors" (Yos. p.49:18). Because the plot between the nations is thwarted, it is then that Haman seeks to destroy the Jews. Not only does the expanded version of the conspiracy theory that one finds in Sefer Yosippon link this story with the history of the Greek and Roman world, but the Yosippon also combats the prevalent myth that Jews cannot be loyal to a country that does not share their religious views. This would have been particularly important to the author of the Yosippon who lived in an unstable political situation, with the world powers of the Holy Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire and the Ottoman Empire all seeking to gain control of the region in which he lived. It is probable that during this time Jews were suspect of

belonging to secret cabals to overthrow the government.³¹

Political causality also plays a part in the last historiographical consideration to be addressed. That is, what is the apparent political situation within the Persian milieu as interpreted by later writings? What is the impression that gentiles have of Jews? When Haman asks the king if he can destroy the Jews, he derides them to Ahasuerus, so that their position will look bad and Ahasuerus will see that a continued relationship with the Jews will not be beneficial. In Esther 3:8, he calls them a lawless people by saying:

Dispersed in scattered groups among the peoples throughout the provinces of your realm, there is a certain people whose laws are different from those of every other people. They do not observe the king's laws, and it does not befit your majesty to tolerate them.

There is a hint in this verse that the Jews are dangerous and so foreign that they are harmful to the kingdom. This motif is elaborated upon by later retellings.

The Midrashim to Esther add to Haman's words other ways that the Jewish people are different, ranging from the innocuous to the dangerous. In Abba Gorion, Haman says that "the Jews do not allow us in their markets, and they make fun of us by introducing a different type of money. One in seven days is a Sabbath, every 30 days is a new month,..." In addition, the Jews have several other holidays (they seem

³¹See Chapter 1.

to always be on a holiday) (AG p.26). In addition to the different holidays, Panim Aherim Bet adds that the Jewish religion is different from all others. Here the ritual for Shabbat is included as well as the beginning of the "bizarre" prayer that they say, the Shema. In addition, "they say in their prayer 'curse the wicked ones' and they say that ~~we~~ are the wicked ones.... and after that they raise up the Sefer Torah and curse us upon it, and say, "may you destroy our enemies for us" (PA2 p.68). They are also different because they eat matzah, and they have prophets (PA2 p.68). To this heinous list, Lekach Tov adds that the Jewish people do not serve the king, and:

They will not eat, drink, nor sit with us, They do not participate in the king's religion, nor do they give the king's tax. If a fly falls in their drink, they would take it out and drink it, but if the king touches one of their cups, they would throw it to the ground and they would not drink it" (LT pp.99,100)

Aggadath Esther contains most of the crimes above and also adds that the Jews will not bow down to any graven images (AE pp. 30,31). The new twist found in Targum Sheni is, "when they see us they spit on the ground" and ironically for this story, "We do not marry their daughters and they do not marry ours" (TS Ch.8). Esther Rabbah lists some of the bizarre traits of the Jews (ER VII:12).

Josephus, too, contains a paraphrase of Haman's ominous speech against the Jews. His accusations here are more vague than the Midrashic accounts, but show more clearly the xenophobia on which he is playing:

He brought a charge, saying that there was a certain wicked nation scattered throughout the habitable land ruled by him, which was unfriendly and unsocial and neither had the same religion nor practiced the same laws as others, but both by its customs and practices it is the enemy of your people and of all mankind. (Ant. XI: 212)

Later, in the decree to kill the Jews which Haman sends out, he says that the Jews have peculiar laws and are insubordinate to kings. They hate monarchy and are disloyal to the government (Ant. XI:217). This line of Josephus is a paraphrase of the apocryphal Chapter 13, which had the added idea that with the Jews, "our perfected plans for the unified administration of the empire cannot be accomplished" (apoc. 13:4). Haman's charges against the Jews listed in Josephus' version can be seen as a "concise summary of the most frequently recurring charges against the Jews from the time of Hecateus of Abdera..." and many are listed in Tacitus' writings (which were written not many years after Josephus' death).³² Josephus was reacting against anti-semitic charges of his own era in his retelling of Esther, although he does this far more extensively in his Against Apion. In the edict that rescinds the massacre, both the apocrypha and Josephus are careful to note that Haman has been proven wrong; the Jews are loyal and supportive to the country and the king, as opposed to the evil Haman himself (apoc. 16:15,16, Ant. XI:279).

Throughout the history of the interpretation of Haman's

³²Feldman, pp. 163,164.

charges against the Jews, one finds the concerns that Jewish writers had about their own differences vis a vis the foreign culture in which they lived. The Midrash and Targum are specifically concerned with matters of religious concern, such as the festivals. One important worry, I believe, is the inclusion in the prayer service of the prayer against the wicked ones, which has been a point of contention throughout the ages. The anxiety shown by the Greek writers is that Jews might appear to be opposed to the government. This was a very real concern as Jews in the Greek world did rise up against the Roman Empire as a group in order to protect their autonomy and customs. For Josephus, this had occurred in his own lifetime, and he must have felt the need to prove his and his people's loyalty to the state. The charges and concerns are ones written by the Jews themselves, yet they are trying to put themselves in the shoes of those with whom they live. Most likely some of their worries are based on real accusations that they heard in the world about them.

Sefer Yosippon contains no exegetical elaboration to Esther 3:8. In addition, one of the only apocryphal additions that is not paraphrased by Yosippon is Chapter 16, in which the order to kill the Jews is revoked.³³ In the case of the counter-edict, it is possible that the author of

³³ This is, incidentally, the only apocryphal chapter found in Josephus' narrative of Esther, which is generally close to the biblical telling.

Yosippon might not have wished to directly contradict the biblical story, in which the king tells Esther he can not countermand his own orders (Esther 9:29-32). Although we can assume that the author was familiar with all six apocryphal chapters, perhaps he felt it was important to end the story like the Megillah. Although he might elaborate in his history writing, he would not change the story. The question of exegesis to Esther 3:8 is perhaps more mysterious. By his elaboration of the conspiracy motif, the author of the Yosippon has shown that he sought to prove the loyalty of the Jewish people to their non-Jewish ruler, yet this is an opportunity to drive home this point even further. One could suggest that he did not wish to lend credence to any charges against the Jewish people for fear that they might be used against them.

This problem shows that there is still a lot to be learned about the purpose of the Yosippon's retelling of a biblical book. There is also much to be learned about his method of compiling and elaborating upon his source material. This chapter has shown that, in whatever language he may have read them, the author of Yosippon was aware of traditions found in Targum, Midrash, Josephus and Apocrypha. It is my contention that his personal situation dictated his selection of historiographical traditions upon which to elaborate. Historiographically, he was concerned with placing the Story of Esther in a chronological continuum, as

in the Greek type of history writing. He also wished to place the story in an ancient context, linking the story to more timeless influences. As well, he did not overlook personal hatred and court intrigue which most certainly were part of his own political situation. Delving further into other areas of Sefer Yosippon will lend more information as to the overall method of its author.

Chapter 3-- Making Esther a Role Model

The character of Esther in Megillath Esther brings up certain problems for the devout reader, and for the reteller of the story. The biblical text clearly means for Esther to be a role model for future Jews. Sidnie Ann White says that the text is "meant to teach Jews how to live a productive life in the Diaspora."¹ This traditional view of Esther has come down to our own day, as daughters are blessed, "May you be like Ruth and like Esther." Yet, there are many problems in the character of Esther when viewed as a role model for young Jewish women. Esther marries a Gentile man. She goes to his room, presumably for sexual relations before they are married. She lies about her heritage to her husband and uses her "feminine wiles" to win her way with him. The purpose of this chapter is to discover how the later retellers sought to keep Esther as role model and how they came to terms with her apparent immodesty and immorality. Compared to the history of interpretation, the Yosippon makes some familiar moves to solve the same problems. The author of Sefer Yosippon also embellishes prior retellings. By looking at these similarities and differences, one can get a better sense of what his moral outlook was in the context of his own milieu.

The rabbinic literature first seeks to establish that

¹Sidnie Ann White, p.164.

Esther is a model character. Her virtue is emphasized especially by comparing Esther with the evil Vashti. In Abba Gorion, R. Yehoshua ben Qarha asserts that Scripture emphasizes the frivolity of Vashti's banquet in order to illustrate more fully Esther's "tranquility" in her entering the king's presence, as opposed to Vashti's reckless and wild nature (AG p.13, LT p.91, Meg 12b, similarly AE p.13).² In Aggadath Esther, it says that Vashti had to send many emissaries to enter the presence of the king, while Esther entered his presence by herself with the help of God (AE p.52).

The contrast between Esther and Vashti is further drawn by showing that Esther completely replaces Vashti. Many of the midrashim make special mention of the fact that the icons of Vashti are removed and Esther's image is put on the palace walls in their stead (AG p.19, LT p.96, ER VI: 11). According to Aggadath Esther, the queens' differences can be proved from Proverbs 31:30, which says, "Grace is deceptive, Beauty is illusory, It is for her fear of Adonai that a woman is to be praised." This midrash interprets the deception and illusion to be Vashti, while the praise refers to Esther (AE p.23). The midrashim show Esther's piety in comparison to the evil Vashti. The Rabbis did not feel any pity towards Vashti but felt that she deserved what befell

²In Esther Rabbah, he is quoted as saying that the banquet shows the influence into which Esther was about to step (ER III:9).

her due to her lack of righteousness. Esther, in contrast, deserved the good that befell her. In addition, Esther was the appropriate person to work the redemption of the Jews of Persia.

Esther's virtue is continually compared to that of the other righteous in Israel's history. Esther's Hebrew name, *Hadassah*, is also a clue to her piety. Exegesis reveals that the righteous are compared to myrtle; As *hadas* (myrtle) has a good scent, so *Hadassah* does good deeds (PA2 p.63, AE p.20, ER VI: 5, TR p.11, TS Ch.8, Meg 13a). In addition, righteous people are called *hadasim* in Zechariah 1:8 and Isaiah 44:27 (PA2 p.63, LT p.94, AE p.20, TS Ch.8). As well, "myrtle does not dry up in any season, neither do the righteous in this world nor the next" (PA2 p.63, TS Ch.8). Rabbinic exegesis of Esther's Hebrew name thus places her among the righteous. She therefore joins the other pious women of Jewish tradition as a role model.

Esther also has a special affinity to the entire community of Israel. Abba Gorion states that just as Esther is an orphan, so is Israel which is exiled and also orphaned as a community (AG p.18). Not only is Esther a righteous Jew, but she symbolizes the entire Jewish Community by being orphaned. She can therefore have a special relationship with God. Esther is thus uniquely qualified to redeem her people, because she becomes the paradigm of the Jewish people.

Esther is also admirable for her beauty and grace (AG pp.18,19). In fact, midrashic tradition says that in the search for a queen, the king picks her from all of the women of the country, not just the unmarried women (AG p.19, PA2 p. 65, AE p.23). Esther does not need to ask for any extra makeup or ointments from the harem because her beauty is already so great (LT p.95). The biblical text refers to Esther as "beautiful and charming" (Esther 2:7). Presumably Josephus is paraphrasing, but also elaborating, this verse when he says:

Esther--this was her name--surpassed all women in beauty, and the grace of her countenance greatly attracted the eyes of all who beheld her. (Ant. XI:199)

When telling of Esther's approach to the king to save her people, the Greek sources again applaud her beauty. The apocrypha notes that "she was radiant and in the height of her beauty" (apoc. 15:5). Josephus calls this beauty "sweet and dignified" (Ant. XI:234). Her words, too, are graceful as she can speak "comforting words" such as those in Proverbs 25:13 (PA2 p.70). According to all the retellings of the Story of Esther, Esther's beauty is unsurpassed. Her outward beauty is to be admired, but her beauty is not merely skin deep. She also possesses an inner grace, represented by her outer beauty, which allows her to do her duty for her people.

Along with Esther's other virtues, the tradition extols her bravery, even asserting that Esther was willing to be a

martyr. In the Panim Aherim Bet to Esther 4:16, Esther is quoted as saying:

Then I will go to the king who is not of our faith and even though I might die for them, they are my people. It is worth it to be killed on their account in this world, for I will have a place in the world to come. (PA2 pp.70,71)

This tradition can be found also in Josephus, who says that Esther decided if "she must die, to bear this bravely" (Ant. XI: 228). Esther thus finds her place among the other martyrs of Jewish history. She is willing to die for *qiddush ha-shem*, which to the rabbis is not only a supreme sacrifice, but the act of a righteous Jew. The sages believed that the Jewish people's survival was in part dependent on those who were willing to die on behalf of their people and their faith. Esther is thus a model in the tradition of the martyrs of Israel.

Esther is also righteous and pious in her preservation of Jewish law. In the apocrypha Esther says that she has not "graced a banquet of the king nor touched the wine of his drink-offerings" (apoc. 14:17). The Hebrew and Aramaic tradition maintains that she continued to eat only Jewish food and did not partake of the non-kosher palace food (LT p.95, TR p.13, TS Ch. 8, Meg13a).³ She also is purported to have kept the Sabbath and Festivals, and to observe the laws of family purity. Lekach Tov adds that she was "joined to the Creator in that she believed in Him and followed the

³Such is the case with Daniel as well.

Jewish custom" (LT p.96).⁴ The tradition shows even in the court of the Gentile king that Esther was able to maintain her Jewish identity, and to observe the laws of her faith. The retellings thus hold Esther up as a model Jew. Even in difficult circumstances, Esther can remain a Jew.

Although the author of the Yosippon wrote his story with a righteous and beautiful Esther in mind, these are details that he does not choose to include or embellish in his retelling of the Story of Esther. Even in his retelling of Esther's approach to the king to save her people, which closely follows the other Greek versions of the story, he does not explicitly refer to Esther's beauty, nor does he elaborate on her rigorous adherence to Jewish practice.

There are several ways in which the interpreters of Megillath Esther solve the apparent moral dilemmas in the story. For some of the retellings, the problem is solved by skipping the morally problematic incidents. For instance, Abba Gorion makes no mention of the "beauty contest" part of the story, nor of Esther's visit to the king's bedroom before their marriage. As well, this midrash skips Esther's initial refusal to Mordecai when he asks her to save her people. Abba Gorion, however, refrains from asserting that she did not have intercourse with the heathen king. It

⁴Esther Rabbah says that she was helped in this endeavor by Mordecai. Mordecai would walk by the harem each day to see how Esther fared (2:11). The midrash says that he especially wanted to know that she was following the laws of niddah (ER VI:8).

tells that Esther is pregnant when she hears of the decree to kill all of the Jews and she becomes so upset that she miscarries, thus fulfilling the biblical verse Isaiah 21:3 (AG p.35, PA2 p.70, AE p.41). Obviously, her pregnancy must be the result of marital relations with the Gentile king. The text of Abba Gorion shows that even in a single text, there can be differing attitudes towards Esther's "immorality." There are also different ways of maintaining Esther as a role model.

The tradition reports that Esther did not willingly participate in the harem activities. Much of the literature asserts that Esther was actually hiding from the king's emissaries so that she would not have to go to the heathen court. The midrash says that this is why Esther is her name, for the root s-t-r means "to hide" (PA2 p.63, AE p.20, TR p.11). Panim Aherim Bet says that Esther hid herself and was not seen for four years. The king was angry that none of the women found favor with him, "until he found Esther in Shushan, hidden from the eunuchs" (PA2 p.64, AE p.20). However, she came out of hiding only because she was so directed by God, who said, "you are hiding yourself, but no one will become queen except for you. So 'Esther was taken to king Ahasuerus'" (PA2 p.64, exegesis to Esther 2:16). These midrashim take the fact that Esther is virtuous and even attempts to hide herself, to indicate that she is an unwilling participant in the Gentile court.

The retellings also assert that Esther was taken by force to the palace (AE p.20, TR p.11). In Midrash Lekach Tov this is echoed in the account of Esther's banquet for the king and Haman. Here it says that the king asked her what her request was, for "he saw that she was sitting there like a 'chained woman (agumah)'" (LT p.104). Therefore the tradition sees Esther as an unwilling participant in the beauty contest, and also in the marital relationship. This theme is expressed explicitly by Aggadath Esther:

Our Rabbis taught that of the transgressions in the Torah, if one is forced to transgress one of them or be killed, he should transgress and not be killed, except for idol worship, sexual indiscretion and killing. If they force him to transgress these, then he should be killed rather than transgress. Rav Dimi said in the name of R. Yohanan, that one should transgress any transgression from the Torah, so that he shouldn't be killed. They only taught this to hold for a time of no persecution! But at a time of persecution one should be killed and not transgress... R. Abin said in the name of R. Yohanan that this isn't taught in the case of a time of persecution nor in secret, but in public, one should be killed rather than transgress because it is for the sake of the sanctification of God's name (martyrdom)... And how many is "public"? R. Yaakov and R. Yohanon said that public must be more than ten people. So Esther must have been in public and she did not stop herself. Rabbi Abaye said that Esther was merely like natural ground (that is plowed); in submitting to the embraces of the heathen king she did not act on her part. (AE pp.20,21)

The Rabbis say further that Esther neither inclined towards this sexual act, nor did she enjoy it (AE p.21). Esther Rabbah also tries to reduce the "immorality" of the sexual act. This midrash says that Esther had intercourse with the king only when protected with a piece of gauze (ER VIII:3). This ancient condom reduces the contact between the heathen

king and the virtuous queen and also ensures that she will not have children by him. The midrashim show that Esther can still be seen as one of the righteous, because her sexual offenses are against her will. These midrashim thus retain Esther's virtuous image.

Several of the texts, rather than focusing on the apparent transgression of premarital intercourse, emphasize that because Esther and the other women went to the king's bedroom at night, that they were actually modest. The biblical text says that each woman would "enter the palace in the evening and return in the morning" (Esther 2:14). "R. Levi said that even though he was a Gentile, that he practiced the ways of modesty, that they did not go in during the daytime, but rather at night" (PA2 p.65, similarly LT p.95). Since the Rabbis believed that sexual intercourse was illicit during the day, this activity is held up as exemplary rather than sinful.⁵ Esther's modesty is implied by Aggadath Esther which says that "if a woman brings forth kings and prophets, she is modest" (AE p.2). Even in the face of apparent indiscretion, Esther is called modest by the sages, and can therefore still be a model.

In the Josephus telling of the Esther Story, Esther's pending marriage to Ahasuerus decreases her disgrace in having premarital intercourse. He says:

⁵However, Aggadath Esther does report that the women returned to a second harem because they were disgraced after their one night with the king (AE p.22).

he (the eunuch) sent one (woman) every day to lie with the king, who, after having intercourse with her, at once sent her back to the eunuch. But, when Esther came to him, he was pleased with her and then, having fallen in love with her, made her his lawful wife... (Ant. XI: 210,202)

Since their marriage becomes imminent, Esther's transgression goes barely over the line of decency.

Esther also did not disclose to the king her heritage, "obeying Mordecai in this as she used to do when she was his ward" (Esther 2:19). The literature has many ways of solving this problem, too. Panim Aherim Bet says that Mordecai didn't want her to tell the king because he did not want to be elevated to the position of prince (PA2 p.64, also AE p.21). In another interpretation of the same incident, it says that he feared for her life, and believed that if she told her heritage she would be killed (PA2 pp.64,65, AE p.21). Midrash Lekach Tov says that Mordecai told her that she might be spurned by the king, and should wait until "the right time" (LT p.95).

Some of the literature also reveals that Esther was able to get Mordecai placed well in the palace because she had not told of her people (LT p.96).

Aggadath Esther actually reports this incident as evidence of her "modesty" (AE p.24). Because Esther does not tell of her people, she is modest like her forebears,

Rachel and Saul.⁶

Many accounts say that there is a second gathering of the virgins, the purpose of which is to make Esther jealous so that she will reveal her people, but "Nevertheless, Esther did not tell concerning her people and her origin, but was doing just what Mordecai commanded her; for as she was modest in her youth, so she remained even when she became queen" (TS Ch.7). According to the literature, Esther is at the very least protecting her life when she refuses to tell of her heritage. In addition she might be in a better position to save her people by placing herself and Mordecai in the court. Finally, this is another way that the midrashim and targumim turn the text around so that apparent deceitfulness is shown to be the righteous trait of modesty.

Another tactic for exculpating Esther is to grant her and Mordecai prophetic powers. Anything that either of them had to do in order to save the people can be forgiven, for they knew ahead of time that such action was required to redeem the Jewish people. Esther knew that she could only save her people if she were in the court of the king, married to him. She can therefore be exonerated for marrying a heathen and sharing his bed before marriage. This tradition is found in Panim Aherim Bet. The exegesis

⁶The word used here for modesty is *tzniut*, which is generally used as a term for sexual modesty.

is to Esther 4:1, which says, "Then Mordecai knew everything that would be done..." The midrash says that Mordecai knew that "they would be punished by destruction from the day that they bowed down to the image of Nebuchadnezzar" (PA2 p.69). Mordecai passes this knowledge on to his ward, Esther.

Another way that the retellings show that Mordecai had previous knowledge of the events that would occur is through a dream. Basically the same dream can be found in the apocrypha, Aggadath Esther, Esther Rabbah and in the Sefer Yosippon itself (AE pp.42,43, ER VIII:5, apoc. Ch.11, Yos p.49).⁷ There are a few variations in the Hebrew retellings. These differences are more pronounced in the Esther Rabbah rendition. The Greek rendition appears to be based on the same tradition as well. In all of the versions, Mordecai is said to have had this dream in the second year of Ahasuerus' reign. Here follows the telling found in Sefer Yosippon. There are several small elaborations, when compared to the dream narrative found in the apocrypha. The most notable additions are indicated in bold print:

⁷In fact, some date Esther Rabbah based on the fact that the source of the midrash's dream narrative seems to be Yosippon. This would date Esther Rabbah beyond the tenth century. Maurice Simon, "Introduction" to Esther Rabbah in Midrash Rabbah translated into English with notes by Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman and Maurice Simon, London: Soncino Press, 1939, p.vii.

He saw this in the dream: There was a great din and very loud thunder, and the sound of alarm was upon all of the earth. All of its inhabitants were frightened and trembling. Two great dragons raised a cry against one another to meet in war and all the nations of the world ran from their roars. **And there, between them, was one small nation. All of the other nations rose up against this small nation in order to erase its memory from the earth.** This was a dark and cloudy day all over the world. The small nation was very troubled and cried out to the Lord God. The dragons fought with great fury, but neither was victorious, and no one could separate the two. Then Mordecai saw a small spring passing between those two dragons, and it separated them from each other during the battle that they were fighting. The spring grew and became a flowing river, which flowed to the Great Sea. It ran and flowed over all the earth. Then he saw that the sun had appeared over the earth, and there was light all over the world. That small nation was exalted, and the arrogant ones were brought low and there was peace and truth throughout the world. (Yos. pp.49,50:21-31)

This dream narrative shows that the whole story should be seen as a cosmic event, which takes place not only between characters in the story, but whole nations across the world.⁸ The nation of Israel, it would appear, is caught between the great empires and must appeal to their God for redemption. The Yosippon here refers to Israel as the small nation, whereas the apocrypha uses the term "righteous nation" (apoc. 11:9). The emphasis on size rather than piety, as well as the passage indicated in bold further points to the political nature of the story as it appears in Sefer Yosippon.

In the apocryphal version, the dream sequence begins

⁸See the discussion in Chapter 2 concerning the political situation which faced the author of the Yossipon. The story of Amalek/Benjamin also is linked to the empires which swept over the world during his time.

the telling of the Esther story. At the end of the dream, Mordechaeus awakes and "ponders over the dream," but this rendition does not tell the interpretation of the dream, nor how it fits into the larger story until the end. In the apocryphal chapter 10, the interpretation of the dream is given within the context of the Story of Esther:

This is God's doing, for I have been reminded of the dream I had about these matters; every one of the visions I saw has been fulfilled. There was the little spring which became a river, and there was light and sun and abundant water: the river is Esther, whom the king married and made queen; the two dragons are Haman and myself; the nations are those who combined to blot out all memory of the Jews; my nation is Israel, which cried out to God and was delivered. The Lord has delivered His people, he has rescued us from all these evils. He prepared two lots, one for the people of God and one for all the nations; then came the hour and the time for these two lots to be cast, the judgement by God upon all the nations; He remembered His people and gave the verdict for his heritage. (apoc. 10:1-12)

Thus, in this Greek version, the dream signifies that the events are controlled by the power of God. The apocrypha does not use the dream story to indicate that Mordecai previously knew what would happen. In the apocryphal telling Mordecai was not able to inform Esther what her actions should be on the basis of his having foreseen the events. The apocrypha, therefore, does not solve any moral problems by the additions of the dream and its interpretation.

In the midrashim, the dream story is found in the exegesis to 4:7, "When Mordecai told him (Hatach) all that was to happen." This exegesis leads to 4:8 in which

Mordecai instructs Esther to go to the king and plead on the behalf of the Jews. The midrash takes the view that this dream tells what will happen, and that Mordecai is thus prepared, and has been prepared for what should be done to protect his people. The Yosippon and the midrashim make the prediction and preparation explicit. The dream sequence is preceded by the story of Haman's hatred for the Jews, and then Mordecai remembers the dream that he had. The Yosippon says that Mordecai "knew all of Haman's plans" (Yos. p.49:20). After the narration of the dream, the Yosippon continues by saying that Mordecai then approaches Esther saying:

The dream that I told you about in your youth is going to come true now. Go and ask compassion from the Master of Compassion and appear before Ahasuerus in all of your beauty and entreat him on behalf of your people and your heritage. (Yos. p.50:33-36)

The Yosippon, along with the midrash, shows that since Mordecai foresaw the events in his dream, he could adequately counsel Esther as to what her actions should be. Because Esther had known about the predestined events since she was a child, she also knew that she was destined to act and therefore needed to be placed high in the court as the king's wife. The "modest" and pious Esther can thus be excused for participating in illicit sexual behavior, and for having married a Gentile.

Finally, Esther is sometimes shown by the literature to use her sexuality in a devious and manipulative way.

Whereas twentieth century mores may frown upon Esther's use of her "feminine wiles," some later retellings of the Esther story and the Esther story itself seem to approve and encourage this way of acting within the court of Ahasuerus. According to Sidnie Ann White, the biblical text upholds Esther's apparent immorality because this is how one must function in the Diaspora.⁹ Esther, by the end of the Megillah, becomes a "seasoned courtier" whose "actions simply contain a sexual element."¹⁰ White asserts that because Esther is a woman, she can more fully represent the Jewish people as a whole in this situation. As Jews in the Diaspora are weak, so are women the disenfranchised. As Jews in the Diaspora must learn to work within the system, so Esther must learn the way to achieve her goals in the court of the Persian king.¹¹ In the end, Esther becomes powerful through her use of her "feminine wiles" and her adept actions in the court. This is the ultimate Diaspora success, not just for Esther herself, but also symbolically for the Jewish people as a whole.

White's view is upheld by Niditch, who includes Esther in her book, Underdogs and Tricksters. This scholar shows Esther's ultimate wisdom in how she acts, particularly in contrast to Vashti. Vashti acts rashly and her "foolishness

⁹Sidnie Ann White, p.164.

¹⁰Ibid., pp.167,168.

¹¹Ibid., p.167.

is the foil for Esther's wisdom."¹² From the point of view of the biblical text, Vashti is rightly dismissed and this event leads the way into the rest of the story. Esther's wisdom includes her choices of good wine, food and beautiful dress. Although this image is not meaningful to modern feminists, Niditch asserts that "she is an altogether appealing portrait of women's wisdom for the men of a ruling patriarchy."¹³ The biblical Esther "encourages attempts to work from within the system, to become an indispensable part of it."¹⁴ In some later retellings Esther's actions are sanctioned for presumably similar reasons.

Panim Aherim Bet best sums up the midrashic conception of Esther's working as a successful courtier. The midrash says that Esther is "waiting for Haman to trip up and rebel" (p.76). By inviting him to a banquet, she places him in a situation where his own evil inclinations will expose him before the king. Therefore when Haman pleads with Esther, and ends up throwing himself on Esther's couch, he only looks more guilty to the king, and appears as if he also wants to take the king's wife (Esther 7:8). Thus, Esther manipulates Haman into bringing about his own demise.

Midrash Lekach Tov draws this picture more clearly. This midrash asks the question, "why did Esther invite Haman

¹²Niditch, Underdogs and Tricksters, p.133.

¹³Ibid., p.139.

¹⁴Ibid., p.140.

to the banquet with the king?" (LT p.104). Among the ten reasons that the sages give is that she wanted to encourage the king to be jealous of an insinuated relationship between herself and Haman. This theme is also echoed in Aggadath Esther (p.66) and Targum Sheni (Ch.9). By playing on the jealousy of the king, and Haman's own deviousness, the clever Esther is able to save the day. Haman is in effect "hoisted by his own petard" because Esther has learned how to best use the court to her own advantage, and to the advantage of her people.

There are some inklings in the midrash that Esther is indeed a trickster, but for good reason. Because she can operate within the court in the devious ways that courtiers must, her people are saved. Like the biblical story, these retellings encourage the Diaspora Jew to work within the system. The Jewish woman's morality may be sacrificed to the principle, "when in Persia do as the Persians do." Yet the ends justify the means, and the people are saved. This explanation also helps one to understand the Rabbinic approval of Esther's hiding of her identity and the other moral problems discussed above.

The Greek writings, too, emphasize the apparent wisdom of Esther's decision to operate within the court. Naturally, these embellishments of the story are more hellenistic in nature. The apocrypha and Josephus emphasize Esther's dress and beauty. In addition, they add the extra

dramatic effect of a swooning woman. In chapter 15, the apocrypha notes that Esther approaches the king wearing her "robes of state" (apoc. 15:1). She takes two handmaids with her, and the text adds that this is because it "befitted a fine lady" (apoc. 15:3). Esther thus is adorned and accompanied in the manner of the court in which she operates. Upon approaching the king, "she swooned on the shoulder of the maid who went before her" (apoc. 15:7). Although the text does not imply that Esther faints purposefully, it gives no specific explanation as to why she does faint. Furthermore, when the distressed king comes to her aid, she sounds much like a femme fatale, who knows how to get her way:

She answered, "My lord, I saw you like an angel of God; I was awestruck at your glorious appearance. Your countenance is so full of grace, my lord, that I look in wonder." But while she was speaking she sank down fainting; the king was distressed, and his attendants all tried to reassure her. (apoc. 15:13-15)

Whether or not the fainting was planned, Esther makes the most of it. She compliments the king and makes him feel manly even as she lies on the ground. He is thus caught in her web and feels compelled to give her anything she wants.

Josephus tells much the same story as the apocrypha. However, he does not leave it to the reader to decide why Esther faints. He says that because she sees the king's terrible presence and "because he looked at her rather forbiddingly and with a countenance burning with anger," she suddenly faints (Ant. XI:235, 236). Her skill at

complimenting the king is not emphasized as greatly in Josephus' telling as in the apocryphal addition. Nevertheless, she uses her "feminine wiles" in this rendition as well:

she revived and said, "My Lord, it is not easy for me to tell you what suddenly came over me, for, so soon as I saw you looking so great and handsome and terrible, my spirit failed me and I was left without life."
(Ant. XI:240)

Esther's response to the king's alarm appears to be more honest here than in the apocryphal telling. She still appears to be massaging the king's ego, even as she tries to collect herself: The author of the *Yosippon* tells a story that is even more conservative than that of Josephus, although the events he relates find their source in the apocryphal telling as well. In Sefer Yosippon, Esther dresses in her nicest clothing and jewelry to approach the king. She also takes with her the two handmaids and she leans on one of them, "in the way of royalty" (Yos. p.52:87). The *Yosippon* adds some other details not found in the other tellings. Here, Esther wears many precious stones (Yos. p.53:91). Esther also makes a concerted effort to change her anxious appearance. Line 89 reads, "Then she brightened her face to hide her worry" (Yos. p.53). Thus the *Yosippon* adds an additional beauty secret to Esther's repertoire, that of her happy countenance.

The swooning woman motif is not emphasized in the Sefer Yosippon. In the *Yosippon* it is very clear that Esther

faints from fear:

The woman (Esther) recognized that the king was angry, and she became very alarmed. She fainted and put her head upon the maid upon whom she had leaned with her right hand. (Yos. p.53:93-96)

When the king comes to her aid and she revives, she does defer to the king's majesty, as in the Greek renditions, but also tells him honestly why she fainted:

Esther said, "I saw you, my lord, and I was alarmed because of your honor and your great glory." As she spoke she sank down again and put her head on the maid, because she was tired from fasting and worrying. (Yos. p.53:103-105)

The Yosippon version does not emphasize the femme fatale who manipulates the situation. The author gives an account which tells the story in which Esther is not so much the actress, but a passive character who is beneficiary of the king's worry over her fainting. She does not plan the swooning, nor does she capitalize on it. She becomes faint from the excitement and physical trauma which she has endured, but it is God who controls the events, not an experienced courtier.¹⁵

Whereas the author of the Yosippon does embellish parts of the story of Esther with regard to her uninvited approach to the king, he offers a drier, less detailed account, placing little emphasis on Esther's "feminine wiles." I would suggest that the author of the Yosippon tells the story in this way in order to emphasize the role of God, a

¹⁵This episode will be explained from the theological point of view in chapter four.

point which I will return to in chapter four. As well, he appears to be more prudish than his Greek counterparts, protecting the modest image of Esther more staunchly. This author is perhaps a more devout Jew, living in a more conservative society.

The actual character of Esther seems to be less important to the author of the Yosippon than it is to those who wrote the other retellings of Megillath Esther. He does not emphasize her piety in the way that the midrash and apocrypha do. The Yosippon does seem to clear Esther's name, but in a roundabout way. Whereas the midrashim and targumim explicitly assert Esther's observance and modesty, the Yosippon is silent. The midrashim and Josephus directly address themselves to Esther's sexual relations with the king, but the Yosippon does not. The Yosippon uses the tactic of showing that the story was previously known to Mordecai and Esther. Thus, Esther is cleared for her indecencies, but she is not shown to be an active player in the redemption of her people. Further, her "feminine wiles" are downplayed by Sefer Yosippon. She is not the clever courtier that she is in the biblical telling and in other retellings. All of these trends pave the way for another more important actor within the Yosippon telling of the Story of Esther. That is, Esther's actions are not nearly as important to the story as are the actions of her God. Theology, then, is the appropriate topic for the next

chapter.

Chapter 4-- Theological Viewpoint

One of the major problems for pious interpreters of the Book of Esther is the absence of explicit religious elements in the narrative. The tetragrammaton does not appear in the book, nor are there any other references to God. There is no mention of the Law or covenant, nor is there any evidence of God's providence affecting the story. Finally, the characters of the story never pray.

Because of the paucity of religious elements in the biblical text, retellers of the Story of Esther have sought to add theological elements to the narrative. These additions have taken many forms over the ages. Some of the literature interprets the book to show the evidence of God's working in history within the story. Providence is expressed directly or through the introduction of angels into the plot. In addition, the pious characters of the story pray to God in many retellings. Their religious actions are shown to have an effect on God's saving power.

These religious elements are found in all of the later interpretations of the Story of Esther, whether the literature is written in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. All of the retellers, including the Yosippon, sought to place the Story of Esther more firmly within the tradition of Judaism.

Midrash Lekach Tov asks the question directly, "why is God not mentioned in the Esther Scroll?" Of course, the

Rabbis have their own answer to this question:

Because the name of God would be injured by its proximity to the names of the kings of Media and Persia. They did not want to put the name of God, who is glorified and awesome, next to the others. So it is written here, "relief and deliverance for the Jews will appear from another quarter" (Esther 4:14). (LT p.103)

For the Rabbis of Midrash Lekach Tov, God's name would only be tarnished by its inclusion in the Book of Esther.

Nevertheless, the midrash asserts that God does act in the story, and is present within the workings of history.

Likewise, the events of the story are considered to be a miracle worked by God. In a gloss to "the entire scroll" Targum Rishon calls the story "the power of the miracle" (TR p.36). The book is therefore considered to be a testimony of divine providence. In Esther Rabbah, the miracle is again affirmed as exegesis to Esther 8:8:

"Now you may issue a writ in my name concerning the Jews in the name of the king": and send to all the provinces to destroy, to kill, and to cause to perish all the enemies of the Jews on the day on which the enemies of the Jews hoped to have rule over them, whereas it was turned opposite for them. "And it shall be to Adonai as a memorial" (Isaiah 60:13); this refers to the miracle which the Holy One Blessed be He performed on this occasion, the like of which never was before. Was there ever in history such a miracle that Israel should take vengeance on the other nations and do what they wished concerning their enemies? (ER X:10)

For Esther Rabbah, the fact that God is not mentioned as a player in the story seems to have no impact on the interpretation of the story as evidence of God's great works. The story can be seen as none other than a miracle of God.

God's special providence takes many forms within the history of interpretation of the Book of Esther. The midrashim constantly assert God's power to control history. Often this is asserted in the introductory parts of the midrash. Such is the case in Abba Gorion. In commenting on Esther 1:8, "all of the palace stewards should let each guest do as he wishes," the rabbis explain:

The Holy One Blessed Be He said to the evil one, you are able to do what you want? Two men want to marry the same woman. Can she marry both of them? And so with two boats sailing on the Great Sea. One needs a southerly wind, and one a northerly wind. Can there be one wind that can make both of them move? Two men will come to you tomorrow. One is a Jew, and the other is a foreigner and an enemy. Can you satisfy both of them at once? Rather, one must be exalted and the other hanged. And who is the one that can truly do as He wants? The Holy One Blessed Be He, as it is said of Him, "He fulfills the wishes of those who fear Him; He hears their cry and delivers them" (Psalms 145:19). (AG p.12)

Whereas the mortal kings and princes think that they can all do as they wish, they cannot. Only God can "do whatever he wants." The midrash asserts the ultimate power of God, and hints at the future outcome of this story, in which God's power will redeem the Jewish people, "those that fear Him." This same midrash completes the Story of Esther in saying, "Thus The Holy One Blessed Be He spoiled the plans of our enemies from harming us and there is peace for all of Israel, Amen" (AG p.42).

Furthermore, God's providence is special to the Jewish people. Abba Gorion says, in interpreting Haman's casting of the lots, that "The Holy One Blessed Be He is the lot and

fate of Israel" (AG p.24). Even Ahasuerus realizes Israel's special relationship with God. He has reservations about destroying the Jews, because he knows God has always saved them (AG p.27, PA2 p.68). This midrash shows that the rabbis felt that there was a special link between God and Israel. They also had the notion that Gentiles were aware of that link.

Other midrashim note that God's power is evident from beginning to end in the Story of Esther. Panim Aherim Aleph says that God does not afflict Israel, without first creating the cure for that affliction. In this case the cure is Mordecai (PA1 p.45, LT p.97). God has created Mordecai, and placed him in a position to save the Jews before punishing them for any wrongdoing.¹ Thus, God is present throughout the story. Furthermore, this is evidence that the Eternal intended to save the people from the beginning. The interpreters thus see God as providing for the Jews without fail.

God directly helps Mordecai as well. According to Panim Aherim Bet, some say that Mordecai found out about the plot against the king by way of "the holy spirit" (PA2 p.65). In another source Mordecai found out from Elijah (TR p.19). Whether Mordecai's communication is said to be directly with God or through a messenger, the Rabbis mean to

¹Specifically what the Jews may have done wrong will be discussed further on in this chapter.

show that God's help is present within the action.

According to these retellings, Mordecai needs God's help in order to save the people from destruction.

God also bestows special help upon Esther. When Esther goes to meet the king for the first time, she is aided by special divine beauty preparations. "Esther was prepared by the Holy One Blessed Be He so that miracles would happen for Israel by her hands" (PA2 p.62, AE pp.21,46,48, ER IX:1). A similar idea can be found in Midrash Lekach Tov. Here it says that Esther's royal garments were actually "the Holy Spirit" (LT p.103, PA2 p.71). Esther's beauty is not achieved by ancient unguents or formulas, rather it is God's providence that transforms her into the most beautiful maiden of the land.¹ Thus, it is God who puts Esther in the position of queen, which in turn will be the saving grace of the Jews.

When Esther goes uninvited to the king's chamber, according to many traditions, she faints.² Some of these stories say that Esther is then helped out by divine resources. In Midrash Lekach Tov, the narrative is as follows:

²See previous chapter.

Her three servants turned into three serving angels; One raised her neck, one attached the thread of Mercy to her, and one extended his (the king's) staff... Immediately The Holy One Blessed Be He had compassion and put the thread of Mercy on her, as it is said, "and when the king saw Esther the queen standing in the court, she obtained his favor (Esther 4:2). (LT p.104)³

In this midrash, the King is God, and the favor that the King bestows upon Esther is the divine attribute of *Hesed* or Mercy. This is God's special aid. God helps Esther in this way in her approach to the king. Further, the mortal king has no control over the events, for it is an angel who causes him to extend his scepter. The divine intermediaries, then, are what ultimately control the events and save Esther and her people.

God's intermediaries, the angels, also work other miracles on behalf of the Jewish people according to the retellings of the Story of Esther. The angel Michael testifies on behalf of the Jews in the heavens, as Haman testifies against them to Ahasuerus in gaining permission for their destruction (AG p.27, PA1 p.49). Michael's help is integral to the positive outcome of the story.

There are many traditions concerning Gabriel as well. Midrash Lekach Tov asserts that Gabriel gave Vashti a tail, which is why she would not appear nude in the court (LT p.90). It is said that Gabriel woke up the king the night that he couldn't sleep and read about Mordecai's deeds in

³AE p.71 and PA2 p.71 are somewhat similar.

the palace records (AG p.38, LT p.106).⁴ In addition, Mordecai's good deeds had been erased by his enemies, but Gabriel rewrote them in the book, on this fateful night (LT. p.106). Gabriel's almost impish deeds on the behalf of the hero and heroine are other divine influences in the Story of Esther, as interpreted by the midrashim.

Both Michael and Gabriel become holy messengers between Mordecai and Esther when Esther's servant, Hatach, is killed by Haman, according to Targum Rishon (TR p.21). Other traditions hold that God's aid was more direct, and that Mordecai and Esther communicated by way of the Holy Spirit, with God as the messenger (AG p. 36, PA2 p.70, AE p.43). Whether aided by an angel or directly by God, it was only through divine intervention that Esther and Mordecai were able to converse. Their conversation's subject was the impending destruction of their people, and how they could avert the disaster.

In addition, there are other unspecified angels who do God's work in helping the story of Esther to progress. One angel pushes Haman onto Esther's couch so that it appears as if Haman desires Esther when the king returns to the room, and finds Haman on his wife's bed (PA2 p.76, LT p.108, AE

⁴In Panim Aherim aleph the angel who wakes the king is Michael (PA1 p.48). Furthermore, Targum Sheni says that it is God who wills the pages of the Book of Deeds to open (TS Ch.10).

p.66, Meg 16a).⁵ The king becomes jealous, and orders Haman to be sentenced to death. Thus, the angel helps to bring about the evil enemy's demise.

Targum Rishon uses Elijah as an intermediary between God and Mordecai. It says, "The Master of the world sent Elijah the high priest to tell Mordecai that he should proceed to pray before the Lord of the World for his people" (TR p.20). Once again, it is a semi-divine figure who aids the hero, and affects the Story of Esther in a positive way. This divine intervention is the hallmark of the Hebrew and Aramaic retellings of the Book of Esther.

The Greek retellings, too, add the element of God's providence to the Story of Esther. However, in these accounts there are no intermediaries. God affects history directly. In the apocryphal additions, it is asserted that all of the events of the story are known and worked by God. This sentiment frames the entire story in the apocryphal narrative. In the beginning, Mordecai's dream is recounted and it says, "After this dream, in which he saw what God had resolved to do..." (apoc. 11:12). Similarly, at the end of the story, the apocrypha says, "Mardocheaus said, 'This is God's doing, for I have been reminded of the dream'" (apoc.10:4). Thus, the author of the apocrypha sees the story as the outcome of God's actions within history.

⁵This angel is sometimes specified as Gabriel (TR p.29) and sometimes Michael (ER X:10).

The apocryphal story also contains a more specific account of God's work in the Esther Story. This narrative puts God into the scene in which Esther appears uninvited in the king's chambers, as do the midrashic tellings. When Esther goes to the king, she is afraid and faints, as no one is to go to the king without permission. She is saved in that the king does not desire to punish her, as it says, "But the king's mood was changed by God to one of gentleness" (apoc. 15:8). Because God affected his mood, Ahasuerus reacts kindly to Esther and is concerned for her welfare. God's direct action causes the king to be kind and saves Esther and the people. The author of the apocryphal additions thus held a view of a providential God who worked miracles on the behalf of the Jews.

Josephus also adds providential elements to his history, although he does not present them as historical facts. In his account of Esther's narrow escape in the king's chambers, he writes, "But the king, by will of God, I **believe** [my emphasis], changed his feeling, and fearing that his wife might have suffered some serious injury, he leaped from his throne..." (Ant. XI:238) Thus Josephus also believes that God causes the king to treat his wife gently and to ask her of her wishes. He does not, however, present his personal view as fact.

After reporting that Haman is killed on the "cross" meant for Mordecai, Josephus writes:

Wherefore I am moved to marvel at the Deity and to recognize His wisdom and justice for not only did He punish Haman's wickedness but also caused the penalty which had been contrived against another to fall upon Haman himself, and thus He has given others an opportunity to learn and know that whatever mischief a man prepares against another he has, without knowing it, first stored up for himself. (Ant. XI:268)

Josephus reads his own values into the story in order to derive a teaching from it concerning the nature of divine justice.

The author of the Yosippon does not put himself and his values into the story in such an obvious way. However, it is clear from the Yosippon's account of Esther that the author did believe that events of the story were controlled by God. Again, the crucial passage is the account of Esther's visit to the king on behalf of her people. The Yosippon says that Esther fainted, and then:

Our God took notice, and had compassion on the burdens of His people and He had compassion for the travails of Israel and the troubles of the orphan who trusted in Him. So He made her pleasing before the king and added splendor to her beauty, majesty to her glory. Then, the king rose in alarm from his throne... (Yos. p.53:97-99)

Not only do the events in this account show that the God is working within the story, but also the language shows that God's help is integral to the outcome. The verbal cues in this passage hint at the biblical Exodus account, in which God remembered the people and was compassionate.⁶ Both

⁶Since the Exodus narrative is recited yearly at Passover, these cues would be evident to the intended readers of the Yosippon.

stories exemplify God's saving power, according to the Yosippon. The author of the Yosippon ends his account by re-emphasizing God's role in the story: "Now after these events, God gave great help to Esther, the queen, and to Mordecai, the Benjaminite, and they hanged Haman and his ten sons on the tree" (Yos. p.53:108,109).

One question remains concerning God's providence: why did God allow the tragedy to befall Israel, if God could control the outcome and rescue them anyway? Much of the tradition answers this question by showing that God was angry at Israel, and wished to punish them for sinning. In *Panim Aherim Aleph*, the sin that Israel committed was that they didn't sanctify God in the time of Nebuchadnezzar. Israel didn't believe that God would save them at this time (PA1 p.47).

Furthermore, Israel was being punished for eating non-kosher food among the gentiles. Mordecai knew how to fix this problem, and since all of the Jews looked to him, he washed his dishes (PA1 p.51). *Aggadath Esther* says, "because of the sins of Israel, the people were delivered up into the hand of Haman" (AE p.50). A similar rationale for divine punishment is also given by the apocrypha and the Sefer Yosippon, as will be shown later in an analysis of Esther's and Mordecai's prayers.

Some traditions hold that God wished to punish the Persians, Haman in particular, and therefore all of the

events had to occur. Targum Sheni says, "All of this happened that you may know that God never fails to punish measure for measure" (TS Ch. 8). When God is asked by the attribute of Justice why Haman is not stopped early on, God's response is that Haman first should be magnified and made famous to all people, and then "recompense shall be taken from him for all the sufferings he and his ancestors have inflicted upon the people of the House of Israel" (AG p. 20, PA2 p.66,80 ER VII:2, TR p.14).

As a corollary to the previous point, Israel can effect God's providence by following the Law and by praying. The Jews benefit from their merits, and the merits of Torah. The edict given in Esther 8:9 that allows the Jews to defend themselves on the day that they were to be destroyed is given in the month of Sivan. Sivan is also the month of the giving of the Torah, the Festival of Shavuot. Because of this the Rabbis infer that the Law is linked to the outcome of this story. They say "this teaches that the merit of Torah rests on Israel" (LT p.109). Therefore, the Torah and its laws ultimately save the Jewish people of Persia.⁷

The particular laws to which the Jews of the Story of Esther must adhere are the prohibition against idol worship and the laws of kashrut. The emphasis on the first of these

⁷Furthermore, it is asserted by some sources that the world only exists because Torah exists, and the Jews are those that keep Torah. Therefore, without the law, the world, too, would be destroyed (PA2 p.71).

laws finds its roots in the biblical text. Haman hates Mordecai for his refusal to pay him obeisance, and this hatred becomes the source for all the evil that Haman plots. However, Mordecai's obstinateness is not fully explained by Scripture. The text merely says that "Mordecai would not bow or do obeisance" (Esther 3:2), and later Haman becomes aware that Mordecai is a Jew. The Megillah does not explain why Mordecai does not bow down to Haman; such explanation is left up to the retellers.

Many of the midrashic interpretations assert that Mordecai does not bow down to Haman because Haman had attached an image to his breast, thus making the act of bowing to the man also an act of bowing to an idol (PA1 p.46, PA2 p.80, LT p.97, AE p.27, TR p.14, ER VII:6, Meg 19a).⁸ In fact, Mordecai says in some of these accounts that he will not bow down to this idol because "I am a Jew" (AE p.27). These interpretations thus link the act of not bowing down to Haman explicitly to the prohibition against idol worship.

The Greek versions of the story are not as emphatic about this prohibition, adding little to the biblical account. Josephus mentions that Mordecai did not prostrate himself to Haman. He is not as specific as the Rabbis about the reason that Mordecai refuses to bow down. However, he

⁸See Chapter 2 for discussion of Mordecai as descendant of Benjamin. This pedigree equips him to resist bowing to any man.

does say that Mordecai will not pay obeisance because of "his wisdom and his native law" (Ant. XI:210).

The Yosippon does contain a reference to the law against idol worship, but it is imbedded in Esther's prayer to God. She appeals to God's sense of justice, and shows her people's own merit and her enemy's guilt, when she says, "... They do not praise You for delivering us into their hands but rather they will praise and bow down to idols, saying, 'You have put the Jews into our hands'" (Yos. p.52:74,75). Like the Greek literature, the Yosippon does not overtly state that reticence to worship idols will save the people, but it does imply that the Jews are the only ones who can properly worship God, and that their redemption would thus benefit the Eternal.

In many retellings, the pious ones of the Story of Esther also exhibited restraint when it came to dining. Evidently a reference to some sort of kashrut,⁹ many of the interpretations say that Mordecai and Esther did not eat of the royal food (PA2 p.62,64,79, LT p.95, AE p.21, apoc. 14:17).¹⁰ They maintained their separateness and the separateness of their food. However, some traditions assert that tragedy might have befallen the Jews because "there was only one person in the entire generation that kept kosher,

⁹not necessarily kashrut in the strict sense although that is certainly not excluded; rather, abstinence, self-denial, moderation and like virtues.

¹⁰This motif seems to be derived from Daniel 1.

and that was Mordecai" (LT p.101, AE pp.38,39). These midrashim conclude that the punishment must then be revoked by repentance and good deeds by the people, especially fasting.

The fasting is required particularly by the Jews of Shushan, for they participated in the banquet at the beginning of the story, and ate from the gentile king's table (LT p. 103, AE p.44). The maintenance of the dietary laws can influence God to save the people. On the contrary, laxity in the area of kashrut must be ameliorated by the appropriate type of repentance. Neither Josephus nor the Yosippon contains any reference to abstaining from gentile food.

As noted above, angels testify on the behalf of the Jews to God, and show God that the Jews have followed the Law and therefore are deserving of redemption. This testimony is in response to Haman's levelling charges against the Jews so that he will be allowed to kill them. In Midrash Lekach Tov, Michael's plea and God's reply are as follows:

Michael stood before the Holy One Blessed be He and spoke on their behalf. He said, "Master of the World. It is well known to you that they do not have charges brought against them for idol worship, licentious behaviour, or the spilling of blood, but for keeping your Torah." The Holy One Blessed be He said to him, "They have not forsaken Me and I will not forsake them, as it is said, 'For the sake of His great name, the Lord will never abandon His people, seeing that the Lord undertook to make you His people'" (I Samuel 12:22). (LT p.100)

The angel argues that the Jews are worthy of being saved because they have followed God's Law. The idea that the Jews have done nothing to merit persecution and destruction by their deeds is not specifically stated in the same way by the Greek retellings nor by the Yosippon. However, the prayers of Mordecai and Esther found in these accounts do emphasize the merit of their deeds.

The history of interpretation of Esther adds much religious content to the original story by the addition of prayer. In contrast to the biblical book, every retelling of the story emphasizes the power of prayer along with the aforementioned fasting. Mordecai, Esther, and the whole Jewish people plead for God to rescue them; their prayers are answered, and the people are delivered from harm.

The Rabbinic interpreters expound on the merits of prayer, and assert that prayer is answered. Esther Rabbah sums up the general attitude toward prayer found in the retellings of the Story of Esther:

"On that day, King Ahasuerus gave Queen Esther the property of Haman, the enemy of the Jews..." (Esther 8:1). It is similarly written, "May the hungry devour his harvest, and take it out of the thorns; the snare longs for their wealth" (Job 5:5). "His harvest" refers to Haman; "May the hungry devour" refers to Mordecai and Esther; "and take it out of the thorns" (*mi-tzinim*): not with sword or buckler, but with prayer and supplication, the word *tzinah* being used as in "His truth is a shield (*tzinah*) and a buckler (Psalm 91:4); this refers to prayer which protects against trouble as a shield protects in battle. Through the merit of the prayer, which is designated a buckler, they took Haman. How do we know that they resorted to prayer? "Many lay down on beds of sackcloth and ashes" (Esther 4:3), and what can sackcloth and ashes accomplish without prayer? "The snare longs for their wealth": who pressed for Haman's wealth? Mordecai and Esther and their followers. (ER X:9)

This pericope shows that the Rabbis believed that prayer affected the outcome of the Story of Esther. Because Mordecai and Esther prayed, they were shielded from danger, and shielded their people with God's truth.

In *Panim Aherim Nusach Bet*, the Rabbis discuss how Mordecai prayed to God. They say that God responds to cries aloud, not to whispers, giving several examples from other biblical figures (PA2 p.70). Furthermore, *Panim Aherim Bet* says that because Israel was praying, King Ahasuerus awoke in the middle of the night to discover his obligation to repay Mordecai for his good deeds. The midrash says in exegesis to Esther 6:1:

"On that night sleep eluded the king": This is the same as when Scripture says "weeping may linger through the night; but at dawn there are shouts of joy" (Psalms 30:6). The Holy One Blessed Be He doesn't delay when Israel is troubled. Rather, at the time that they call out to Him, He answers them. Because Israel was revering Him, what did the Holy One Blessed Be He do? He disturbed the sleep of Ahasuerus. Because of this, he was able to do the good deed for Mordecai. Israel had been troubled in the evening, but when they rose in the morning, they sang to the Holy One Blessed Be He. Therefore it is said, "weeping may linger through the night; but at dawn there are shouts of joy." (PA2 p.73)

This Midrash shows that prayer is answered promptly by God. Prayer can turn a situation around and bring about redemption.

Esther works a miracle through her prayer, according to Aggadath Esther. Here, the Rabbis discuss why Esther is likened to the morning. "Just as the dawn is the end of the nighttime, so Esther is the end of all of the miracles."

They continue:

Another interpretation: Why is Esther compared to the dawn? Just as dawn, when it arises, illuminates the whole world at a time when it is not under the sway of the sun, the moon, the stars, or the planets, thus did Esther bring light like the dawn to Israel by her prayer at the time of trouble. (AE p.67)

By her prayer, Esther brings on the redemption of her people, thus bringing a new light to them.

The act of praying and studying with children is shown to be particularly meritorious and efficacious. In Abba Gorion, it says that Mordecai was studying with the children when he found out about the future destruction of his people. They cried out and the midrash claims that it was

the cries of the children that saved the people (AG p.38).¹¹ In other accounts, Mordecai collects all of the children together for prayer and fasting for he knows the power of children's voices (AE p.39, ER VII:6).

Fasting helps the prayers of those who are in distress. Some traditions say that the Jews of Persia fasted even during the Passover Festival (AE p.44). Thus, fasting is even more important than a prescribed holiday, according to these accounts.

Prayers are added to the narrative at various points in the retellings of the book of Esther. The Rabbinic tradition shows Esther (and sometimes Mordecai himself) praising God when Mordecai is shown honor by Haman (AG p.40, 42, AE p.64, TS p.158). In addition, Esther prays when she arrives at the king's chambers to invite him to a banquet (AE p.50). These prayers are typically short and derived from the Psalms, and they show that prayer is an integral part of the story. Further, they indicate to the reader something about the nature of spontaneous prayer.

Some of the retellings of the Story of Esther contain longer prayers. While Mordecai prays in some accounts, prayers of Esther are more common. The prayer narratives are generally related to Esther 4:16, when Esther says, "Go and assemble all the Jews that are in Susa, and fast on my

¹¹Mordecai is also studying with the children in Midrash Lekach Tov p.101.

behalf; for three days, night and day, take neither food nor drink, and I also will fast with my maids." The history of interpretation shows that not only did Mordecai and Esther fast, but that supplication accompanied their abstinence.

For the most part, the Hebrew accounts do not contain full prayers as exegeses to Esther 4:16, rather they merely state that Mordecai and Esther did pray, sometimes giving one or two lines of what they said. One prominent discussion of Esther's prayer is found in Aggadath Esther. Here, the Rabbis assert that Esther prayed, "My God, my God why have You abandoned me, why so far from delivering me and from my anguished roaring" (Psalm 22:2). She invokes other lines from the same Psalm: "Dogs surround me," and further, "Deliver me from the lion's mouth" (Psalm 22:17,22). This Psalm is one that has been invoked by Jews throughout the centuries in times of distress. The Rabbis discuss the Psalm, and why Esther would have said "why have You abandoned me" (AE pp.50,51). Among the ideas that the Rabbis' Esther expresses is that she feels forsaken because she is forced to live with a gentile king. She says:

Why should the order of things be different for me than for the matriarchs? Sarah only had to spend one night with Pharaoh, before he was taken away from her, as it is said, "The Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai" (Gen. 12:17). And I have spent all of these days with this uncircumcised one, and You have not taken him away from me, and You have not rescued me from him. (AE p.50)

Esther powerfully confronts God on behalf of herself and Israel. In the continuation, Esther reminds God of the

Exodus and she says, "To which people have you done this thing?" She challenges God not to treat Israel even more harshly than the Egyptians (AE p.50,51).

The prayers found in the Targumim are more liturgical in nature and contain more details from the story and from Jewish tradition. Targum Rishon has a personal prayer in which Esther asks for protection from possible harm inflicted by King Ahasuerus (TR p.22). She specifically refers to the tragedy that befell Vashti, and prays to the "Lord of the Universe" that such a thing will not happen to her. As in the Midrash, she refers to the king as a gentile and says, "Do not deliver me into the hand of this uncircumcised one." Further, she charges God to keep a promise that she felt was implied when she became queen. She says:

Since it was arranged by You for me to be married to him, render me now acceptable in his sight that he should not kill me, that he grant my desire and my petition which I am about to ask of him. (TR p.22)

Only then does she petition God on behalf of the whole people, when she says, "Have compassion on your people and do not deliver the descendants of Jacob into the hands of Haman." Included in this particular supplication is a genealogy of Haman which traces Haman's ancestry to Esau, thus emphasizing the historical basis for Esther's plea. In this account, the look of devotion on Esther's face is what changes the king and makes him soften to her. The very act of prayer transforms Esther, thus influencing Ahasuerus.

Targum Sheni contains a much more extensive prayer of Esther. Esther prays to the "great God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, and the God of my father Benjamin" (TS Appendix I). She says that she does not come to pray for herself, but rather "for the sake of Israel." She appeals to God to save them, because they praise God three times a day. She asks that Israel be saved like Hananiah, Mishael, Azariah, and Daniel--heroes who were rescued while in exile in a foreign land. Esther says, "I beseech You, hear this prayer, harken to my supplication at this time, when we are banished and removed from our land."

In this prayer, Esther recognizes that the situation at hand is punishment for sins, but she asks God not to punish everyone for the sins of some. Finally she reminds God of "an everlasting covenant" which was established by the binding of Isaac. Esther concludes her prayer in Targum Sheni, "You have searched the heart and reins, remember at this hour the righteousness of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob, and do not turn away from my petition, nor delay an answer to my request!" This prayer specifically appeals to God to remember the Merit of the Fathers and to save the whole people of Israel from destruction.

The apocryphal prayer of Esther is also an appeal to the ancient covenant between God and Israel. Esther says in 14:5:

From my earliest days I have been taught by my father's family and tribe that You, Lord, chose Israel out of all the nations, and from all who went before them You chose our fathers as an everlasting possession, and You have performed for them whatever You promised.

In this prayer, however, Esther admits that the covenant had not been upheld by her people in Persia. She confesses that the Jews have sinned against God by worshipping foreign gods. Esther calls God a just god for punishing the people who had strayed. But Esther affirms that the destruction of the Jewish people would result in "silencing those who praise you, extinguishing the glory of your house and the flame on your altar" (apoc. 14:9). She declares that if the evil ones were successful in destroying the Jews, they would falsely believe their gods to be powerful and true. Esther pleads with God, "Do not yield your sceptre, Lord, to gods that have no real existence, let not our enemies mock at our ruin, but turn their plot against them, and make an example of the man who planned it" (apoc. 14:11).

This fourteenth chapter of the apocryphal version of the Story of Esther then shifts focus to a more personal prayer. Esther continues by praying for special help in her own endeavor to help her people. She asks God to empower her and guide her, saying "give me courage" and "put the right words into my mouth" (apoc. 14:12,13). There are also allusions to Daniel. Esther calls the palace of the king "this lion's den" (apoc. 14:13), an obvious reference to Daniel.

The last section of the apocryphal prayer of Esther is one that is more personal than the other two sections. Esther asks to be rescued from her miserable condition. She pleads that she be removed from the situation in which any moral and pious Jewess would find debasement. This section is parallel to that found in the midrashic version of Esther's prayer:

You know all things; You know that I hate the splendor of the heathen; I abhor the bed of the uncircumcised or of any gentile. You know in what straits I am: I loathe that symbol of pride, the headdress that I wear when I show myself in public, I loathe it as one loathes a filthy rag and in private never wear it. I, Your servant, have not eaten at Haman's table nor have I graced a banquet of the king nor touched the wine of his drink-offerings. From the day of my preferment until now I have known no joy except in You, Lord God of Abraham. O God, the all-prevailing, give heed to the cry of those driven to despair: deliver us from the power of the wicked, and rescue me from what I dread. (apoc. 14:15-19)

The apocryphal Esther prays for rescue from her own situation. In addition, the prayer informs the reader that it was not by her own choice that Esther found herself in the gentile court as queen. She has tried to behave as a Jew in spite of her situation, and petitions for rescue on this basis.

The Jewish Antiquities of Josephus also contains an account of a prayer of Esther. Josephus does not write the prayer as if verbatim, but rather paraphrases what he believed Esther said. His source appears to be the same tradition as found in the apocryphal addition. However, Josephus does not mention the admission of sin, or the

covenant between God and Israel. As in the apocrypha, Josephus' Esther asks for God's help in her own endeavors on behalf of her people, rather than a miracle in which God would act alone. Josephus writes:

and for three days she begged God to take pity on her and grant that, when she appeared before the king, her words might seem persuasive as she pleaded, and her person be more beautiful than ever before, in order that she might use both these means to turn aside the king's anger if he should be provoked by her in any way. (Ant. XI:232)

In addition to the apocryphal Esther's plea for the right words to speak to Ahasuerus, Josephus' Esther asks also for beauty to persuade the Persian king. Josephus adds that Esther's supplication is ultimately not for her own gain, but to help her people and "be an advocate for her countrymen who were tottering on the brink of disaster" (Ant. XI:233). Thus, the Josephus account is a prayer for Esther herself, but ultimately aimed at the redemption of all of the Jews.

The Yosippon version of Esther's prayer also shares much of its source material with the apocryphal addition to Esther. The author expands upon this tradition and thus infuses the text with his own religious viewpoint. Esther's address to God recalls the God of history, as in the apocryphal addition. She invokes the "Lord, God of Israel, whom You have ruled from ancient days, and Creator and Master of all the world" (Yos. p.51:60-61). She goes on to say (as in the apocrypha) that she has been taught by her

father of God's relationship with her people.

This version of the prayer is more specific about the miracles God has bestowed in the past. Esther mentions the Exodus from Egypt: "You took our fathers out from Egypt and killed all of the first born of Egypt" (Yos. p.52:67). Then she recalls the miracles of manna, water, and meat that were given to the children of Israel in the desert. Esther continues the history of her people by recounting their sin and subsequent banishment to exile.

Thus, the Yosippon emphasizes the role of God in history: God has saved Israel in the past, and will again in the story at hand. This recollection of God's saving acts, especially the juxtaposition of the Passover story with Esther, would remind Yosippon's contemporaries that God could work redemption for them as well.

The Yosippon account takes the same tactic as the apocrypha, having Esther plead to God not to give the Jews' enemies a victory, lest they praise their own gods for a miracle. The Yosippon states this more explicitly as the author writes, "They say that it is not You who has put us in their power; rather, they will praise their idols and bow down to them, saying, 'You have put the Jews in our power'" (Yos. 52:74-75). The Yosippon reiterates the apocryphal viewpoint that the Jews must be victorious in order to prove the omnipotence of the true God.

The prayer is both on behalf of Esther herself and the

whole community in the Yosippon. The author embellishes it for dramatic effect. In the beginning of her supplication, she says:

I sit alone here and I am alone in the king's palace without father or mother. Like a poor orphan who begs for charity from house to house, I have been begging for your compassion from each window of the palace of King Ahasuerus, from the day that I was taken here until today. (Yos. p.51:62-64)

This section ends with the words that are also found in the apocrypha, "my life is in Your hands" (Yos. p.51:65).

Esther ends her prayer in the Yosippon by confessing her great fear of facing the king coupled with her trust in God to save her. Again, the image of the lion appears. "So now, my God, father of orphans, right hand pillar of this orphan who trusts in You, give me compassion before this man, Ahasuerus, because I fear him as a kid fears the lion" (Yos. p.52:78-80). She concludes by asking God to humble the king and cause him to bestow favor upon the Jews, through her own attributes of grace and beauty. However, it is not empowerment she is asking for when she says, "Let him be bowed down and conquered before me by the grace and beauty that you will grant me" (Yos. p.52:81-82). Rather, the Yosippon's Esther is asking for a gift, in which her own power is not augmented, but God acts alone through her agency. The theological viewpoint here is of an all-powerful God, who "holds the hearts of kings" and saves the Jews and Esther with compassion and special providence (Yos. p.52:82,83).

The Hebrew and Aramaic retellings of the Book of Esther do not contain Mordecai's prayer. The apocrypha, Josephus, and the Yosippon, however, do relate extensive narratives of what Mordecai may have said to God in his petition. These prayers are similar in some respects, but also vary in significant ways. In addition, Mordecai's prayer differs greatly from the prayer of Esther.

Of the accounts of Mordecai's prayer, Chapter 13 of the apocrypha is the earliest version. Mordecai praises God by calling God the "Ruler of all...who made heaven and earth" (apoc.13:9). He praises God's omniscience, and says that surely God knows that his actions were on God's behalf. Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman was his way of praising God, and therefore God should want to rescue Mordecai and the Jews. He says, "I acted in this way so as not to hold a man in greater honor than God; I shall not bow before any but you, My Lord, and it is not from arrogance that I refuse this homage" (apoc. 13:14).

Mordecai's prayer in the apocrypha continues with appeals to the covenant with Abraham, and to the covenant established by the Exodus from Egypt. Mordecai calls upon God not to reject the faithful, and asserts that only by saving the Jews will God receive the praise due to the Almighty. Mordecai pleads, "Do not put to silence the lips that give you praise" (apoc. 13:17). Unlike Esther, Mordecai does not play diplomat with God by admitting the

sins of the people. Rather, he remarks on the positive aspects of the relationships between himself and God and between God and the Jews.

Josephus' version of the same prayer obviously finds its source in the apocryphal tradition. However, the account in the Antiquities is shorter than in the apocrypha. The common element is the reminder that the events in the story have been precipitated by Mordecai's refusal to pay obeisance to Haman only for the sake of God (Ant.XI:230). As in the apocrypha, Mordecai asks God to save the people in return for the honor that Mordecai had bestowed upon God.

The author of the Yosippon starts his prayer of Mordecai by following the same line of petition as in the Greek versions. He, too, relates that Mordecai prayed that God would understand his reason for not bowing down to Haman. The Yosippon account is much expanded from this point. One notable expansion is as follows:

And now, Our God, save us from his [Haman's] hand. Let him fall into the pit that he dug. Let him be caught in the snare that he has hidden at the feet of Your pious ones. Let everyone know that You have not forgotten the oath that You swore to our forefathers. You have not put us in exile because of Your weakness, because You were unable to redeem us. Rather, because of our sins we have been sold, and because of our transgressions we have been exiled. For we have sinned against You. (Yos. p.50:42-46)

This pericope shows a Mordecai who admits the sins of his people, as does the Esther of the apocrypha and the Yosippon.

Likewise, the prayers of both Esther and Mordecai in

the Yosippon emphasize the fact that the petitions are being made in exile. Mordecai's prayer in the Yosippon ends, as in the apocrypha, with a promise that all of Israel will continue to praise God if they are saved. Even in exile the prayers will have effect.

The religious elements that are found within the retelling of the Story of Esther in the Sefer Yosippon show how the author wove his theological viewpoint into the story. Like the Rabbis of the midrashim, the author of the Yosippon tells the story as if it were influenced by a providential God. It is to this God of history, who works in history, that the prayers of the Yosippon are addressed. The author of the Yosippon believed in a God who worked directly in history, bestowing providence even upon Jews in exile. The prayers of Mordecai and Esther find their roots in other sources, yet the author elaborates the prayers to reveal his own personal theology. He addresses the prayers to an omnipotent God. In addition the petitions are made both on behalf of the individual petitioner, and on behalf of all the Jews of Persia. Furthermore, the prayer language and imagery are consistent with traditional Jewish liturgy, as found in daily worship, and in the Passover Haggadah. The Yosippon's theology also shows a God who is influenced by the actions of pious Jews. The work shows that God punishes the Jews when they transgress, but that they can and must repent through fasting and prayer. Few other

Jewish practices are mentioned. The relatively great length of the prayer narratives in the Yosippon is remarkable. Perhaps the author wished to show his readers the efficacy of prayer in times of crisis. He must have believed that prayer would help them in their own time of trial.

Chapter 5-- Conclusion

This study of the interpretative history of Esther has revealed much of interest about the version of Esther found in the Yosippon. The Story of Esther found in Sefer Yosippon can tell the reader certain things about the sources and intentions of its author. Furthermore, the story gives a window into the historian's view of history, of morality and of God and religion.

The most important sources for the Yosippon's narrative of the Story of Esther are the apocryphal additions. As noted in the Introduction, the author probably read these additions in the Latin version. The Esther story in the Yosippon consists of the apocryphal additions which have been "sewn" together with certain added details and embellishments that allow one to read the story without the feeling that one is jumping around. However, most of what is contained in the biblical book is not included in the Yosippon's retelling. Therefore, one must infer that one reason for the Yosippon's version of the story is to make known the Latin version in Hebrew, as a companion to the Hebrew text.

There are two apocryphal additions which are not found in the Sefer Yosippon. Assuming that the author was familiar with all six additions, one might speculate as to why the royal letters are not found in the medieval

retelling. The first letter contains a list of charges that Haman makes against the Jews. This list and others like it can be found in all of the other literature surveyed, as well. The author of the Yosippon, most probably a member of the Byzantine court, would most likely want to protect his position, and also to make peace between Jew and non-Jew. His was a precarious position, as his loyalty to the court was suspect and his loyalty to the Jews may have been doubted as well. The accusations against the Jews in the apocryphal addition may have been too close for comfort.

The other addition from the apocrypha which is not included in the Sefer Yosippon is the edict which revokes the previous decree to kill all of the Jews. This addition changes the biblical story, and removes the need for the bloody reprisal in the biblical text. The result is a kinder, gentler story. The author of the Yosippon did not wish to change the story found in the Bible. He resisted any change that would contradict the biblical story. The Yosippon makes additions to the biblical story that embellish, but do not alter the story.

The author of the Yosippon was familiar with other Jewish traditions, as well. He knew of some rabbinic interpretations of the story. These interpretations were probably fairly well known in Southern Italy of the tenth century. Most notably, the Yosippon was familiar with the tradition that Haman was a descendent of the evil Amalek, a

theme found in the midrash, targum, and Josephus. This motif plays an important part in the Yosippon's retelling of Megillath Esther. That Haman was from the line of Amalek forms the introduction of the narrative in the Yosippon. Indeed, the author shows that the age-old feud between Amalek and Benjamin is the cause of the trouble in the story of Esther.

Although the author of the Yosippon found much of his material in earlier sources, he also added his own perspective. He used the sources discriminately, sometimes omitting material, sometimes adding detail. His version of the Story of Esther shows his ability as a true historian, who uses sources and adds details in the tradition of Herodotus and Josephus. In addition, the style of the Sefer Yosippon is matter of fact but elegant.

Like every historian, the author of the Yosippon naturally had his own biases and perspective which were influenced by his sources, his milieu and his own personality and personal experience. His inclusion or omission of certain material shows his viewpoint in the areas of historiography, morality, and theology.

The Yosippon's historiographical outlook in the story of Esther has its roots in both the Greek tradition of his secular milieu and in his Jewish tradition. He writes his history in the chronological style of the Greeks, marking time by the reign of kings. However, he draws parallels

between earlier biblical history and the story of Esther, showing an ancient cause for the events at hand. He thus writes in the style of the medieval historian, with neither the usual "linear" or "cyclical" category applying to his history.¹

The Yosippon also has his own viewpoint with regard to the cause of the evil in the story of Esther. He writes that the story is influenced by the ancient cosmic war between Amalek and Benjamin. Further, he connects this war with the wars between the empires of Persia and Macedonia. He, too, lived in a time of imperial conflict, and thus must have seen the story as relevant to his own time. As the Arabs encroached upon southern Italy, it was not uncommon for the medieval chronographer to see conflicts as though they were actually wars between Gog and Magog.² For the author of the Yosippon, the ancient cosmic war went back to Benjamin and Amalek, yet the hand of God played a part in this conflict, too.

As a court Jew himself, the author of the Yosippon must have been particularly intrigued by the character of Esther, a woman who hid her Jewish identity and engaged in immoral activities, ostensibly to aid her people. The Yosippon does not directly deal with Esther's transgressions, but he does

¹Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, Zachor, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1982, p.41.

²Ibid., p.37.

not call particular attention to her piety. However, he indirectly shows that Esther did what she did in order to save the Children of Israel in Persia. The Yosippon's account of Mordecai's dream and the subsequent interpretation of this dream (which varies from the apocryphal version) shows that Esther and Mordecai had prophetic insight. One might therefore justify Esther's apparently sinful acts.

That Esther's prophetic knowledge would exculpate her from her sins may find its roots in other biblical commentary. For example, in Sifrei Deuteronomy 175, prophetic knowledge is cited as the reason that Elijah and Gideon can offer acceptable sacrifices at forbidden high places. Since they knew the outcome, and were in a unique situation their "sins" are overlooked, "l'fi ha'sha'ah" (because of the occasion).³ Although there is no specific application of this principle to Esther, the notion may have occurred to the retellers, and may explain her transformation into a prophet in the rabbinic literature, and in the Yosippon itself. In the Yosippon, Esther's actions in the court were later excused because she worked the people's redemption. Esther became a member of the court and functioned in it in order to further the place of her people, and to protect them.

³See also Rashi to Deuteronomy 18:22. Here the principle is called "l'fi tzorekh sha'ah."

Lastly, one sees that the author of the Yosippon was indeed a believing Jew. He believed in a god who could and did control events directly. In, the Yosippon's account of Esther, God acts in the story, specifically influencing King Ahasuerus to act on Esther's behalf against Haman. Furthermore, the Yosippon includes renditions of the prayers of Esther and Mordecai. The author of the Yosippon thus believed prayer to be important and to influence the actions of God. The Yosippon's God hears the pleas of the people and answers by saving them.

The author of the Yosippon was very much a product of his time, Byzantine Italy of the tenth century. He was also the product of his own personal situation, that of a believing Jew with secular knowledge that may have outweighed his knowledge of Jewish tradition. He saw the story of Esther through the eyes of a court Jew. He saw the conflict in the story through the lenses of one who lived in a world of warring empires, with the Jew caught in the middle. Yet he also saw the story as confirmation of God's ancient promise to protect the Jewish people, even in exile.

The Story of Esther has also been comforting to other Jews in other places throughout the ages. Particularly because its setting is in the Diaspora, it has import for Jewish people who have not had political power in their societies. The Story of Esther has often become the ultimate paradigm for later events. The late middle ages

saw the inception of many local "purims." These holidays were commemorations of local persecutions and salvations, and each "purim" was modelled after the original in practice, including a reading of a "megillah," or narrative of the event.⁴ As well, the character of Esther became an important figure to crypto-Jews of Spain and Portugal, who came to terms with hiding their identity by seeing themselves as Esther.

The interpretation of Esther has continued to grow in depth and character. The modern Jew in the secular world also sees him or herself as a "court Jew" caught between two worlds. The fascination with Esther persists in the form of poetry, plays, and music. The author of the Yosippon thus finds himself in a continuum of those willing to challenge themselves with the issues that arise out of the biblical text of Esther.

⁴Philip Goodman, The Purim Anthology, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1973, pp.14-37.

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