The Hidden Face of God: *The Theology of the Aggadah on Megillat Esther*

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The Hidden Face of God: The Theology of The Aggadah on Megillat Esther

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Summary

Number of Chapters: Five Chapters

Contribution of the Thesis: The thesis demonstrates that *midrashim* on Megillat Esther up through the medieval period assimilated the book of Esther to the Rabbinic worldview and theology. Some of these *midrashim* were polemical: directed at host cultures in which minority Jewish communities found themselves, while others served to embolden or comfort Jews living outside the land of Israel.

Goal of the Thesis: The goal of the thesis was a hermeneutic critique of how interpreters of Megillat Esther read their Rabbinic worldview – and God – into the Masoretic Text of Megillat Esther.

Division of the Thesis: The thesis contains an introduction explaining the form and content of the thesis. Chapter One begins by discussing Esther's historicity, and moves on to a consideration of the theologizing and Judaizing *midrashim* on Esther organized by theme, and to a lesser extent, chronology. The same is true of the following four chapters. The thesis ends with a conclusion summarizing its findings, and a reflection on questions raised by the thesis that might be further pursued.

Types of Material Used: This thesis made use of *midrashim* in Hebrew and English, scholarly secondary sources on rabbinic readings of Esther and the historical context Esther emerged from, the Septuagint and Apocryphal versions of Esther, and secondary sources on the Greek sources.

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And for making this thesis and the past seven years possible I thank my parents, whose tolerance, support, love and humor have made this journey possible. They are my teachers, my role models, and I offer them my sincerest apologies for years of complaining about my middle name, which may be, ultimately, responsible for everything that follows.

Table of Contents

Introduction

The reason I chose to spend a year with The Scroll of Esther is not because it is exceptional either in form or content; though it is. And it's not because Esther is known by readers and commentators to be a satire largely concerned with mocking the vanity and excess of non-Jewish power, though that is true as well. And it's not even because ultimately, Esther's irreverence hides a deeper message. It's not because of Esther's silences: the refusal to acknowledge or even mention God, the grim insistence on the vulnerabilities of an exilic people and the focus on a seemingly powerless heroine, which raise as many questions as they answer. I do love questions, but none of these account for why I wrote my thesis on Megillat Esther. I chose Esther because it felt – of all the Biblical stories I've spent time with over the past seven years – real.

It felt like something that could actually happen.

Though we don't often speak of ourselves this way, we as American Jews live in exile. Whether we quite like it (as I do), is, in some sense, entirely beside the point. We live outside the land, at the mercies of a host culture which does not believe what or practice as we do, and though we may have risen to great heights outside of the Land of Israel, we are always, in some senses, whether due to our collective unconscious or the repetition of certain myths, strangers in a strange land. We speak in Christian idioms – we say "he walks on water", we say, "knock on wood", we say, "water into wine" and as we do, we forget that this is not our language and these are not our myths; it's Jesus who did these things, who, though he may have started out as a Jew, ended up the progenitor of a religion that thinks him divine. We don't believe people walk on water, that they turn water into wine, and we should know better than to knock on wood (meant to represent

the crucifixion – a travesty with which we, as a people, have been repeatedly charged.) In any case, we use this language unthinkingly. We marry non-Jews. We eat non-kosher food. And, since the Holocaust, we live in a world largely bereft of God. The most recent Pew poll shows that only 27% of American Jews believe in God – a number that is lower than any other religious group – *including Buddhists* – who, at least according to Buddhist doctrine, don't believe in God at all.

Some believe that all of this is a sign of our imminent demise, small scale tragedies that, someday, will result in a far larger one – a slow and steady slide into obsolescence, we, the 'ever-dying' people. But I think they're wrong. I think, quite frankly, "How do we *possibly* think it could be otherwise?" We have been through too much, and, in the case of American Jews, been too lucky, for any other eventuality.

Which is why I love Esther, and always have. The implicit questions in the text that the Rabbis struggled with: how to survive in diaspora and navigate its halls of power, how to retain Jewishness in exile, and what it means to live in a world where God appears to be hidden – these are *our* questions. This is *our* world. Esther might have been meant as satire, but, as the fool in King Lear shows, it is often our folly that holds the deepest wisdom.

We are a people who feel, I believe, profoundly and desperately ontologically alone. We (or at least our grandparents) looked into the abyss and, some 60 years later, continue to struggle mightily with what we found there; a knowledge of the worst of human potential, and a thundering silence from the heavens. And yet we persist as a people, our atheists attend High Holiday services at Reform Synagogues with stunning regularity, and we insist, really, insist, on hoping that our ancestors were right:

redemption is possible, and God is with us, even, especially, in exile. Most of us don't believe it – but that doesn't stop us from praying for it anyway.

Which is why, I think, Esther is our book, and this is our story.

Esther is constructed entirely around essential absences, a story *despite;* Redemption despite God's absence, Judaism's continuity despite powerlessness, and Jewish survival despite those who would have it otherwise. And so I believe that Esther is not, as many contemporary commentators suggest, a solely satirical book. Esther, like most carnival tales, is also existential, a commentary on the unique and torturous challenges of Jewish history, a fantasy for a people without a land, an interrogation of power and its discontents, and, most of all, a reconsideration of the role and presence of the Jewish God in history. Therefore Esther, despite being canonical, is, I believe, anti-Biblical. It denies God Her traditionally salvific role, going so far as to ignore Her completely and valorize human agency. And in the doing, it becomes, for the Jews who will follow, an opportunity to reflect on this Absence in their own lives and times, and their own tenuous existence in exile; in Esther the Jewish people are in exile from their God and homeland and at the whim of hostile leaders who would see them dead.

The challenges of this kind of existence were steep and serious - requiring both political and psychological savvy. Particularly troubling was the everpresent threat of idolatry, and the implicit suggestion, that, in the halls of power, hiding one's Jewishness was the healthiest option. And so it is perhaps not surprising to find that the midrashic interpretations of Esther turned these challenges into opportunities: The conditions faced in the Persia of Queen Esther were used as occasions for the Rabbis to comment on their

own condition in foreign lands and courts, and God's absence used to reconsider the efficacy and meaning of their own religious lives and practices in a world where God often appeared absent. These 'problems' became, in the retelling, opportunities: opportunities to polemicize, embolden, philosophize and encourage Jews living under similar (and similarly fraught) circumstances. In the doing, Esther ultimately becomes - for the Rabbis in the Midrash and Talmud and the authors of the Septuagint and Apocrypha - an opportunity to convince Jewish communities of the promise of ultimate redemption, the merit of and reward for observance and fidelity to the tradition, the possibility of a happy and free life under foreign rule, and, above all, the presence of God's hand in every part of history - particularly when it seems most absent.

Methodology

A. The Biblical Text

Before the Midrash, though, comes the text, and the Scroll of Esther is remarkable both for its distinctive literary features, as well as its construction: a close reading reveals Esther to be a shockingly intricate, almost painstakingly constructed story, crammed with intentionally repetitive structures and elements, rife with tropes unique to the historical context out of which it emerged, and rich with multivalent language that repeats itself as often as Esther's wine-soaked feasts.[1] It is also a departure from the texts that surround it

1. The term feast appears 10 times in the *Megillah*, and a total of seven separate feasts take place, which validates both Berlin and Levenson's conviction that the book of Esther is not a narrative set in a world where conspicuous consumption or excess was par for the course but that all of these qualities are illustrative of the story's genre; a narrative that is intentionally satirical, farcical and excessive. In 1:3, Ahashverus gives a feast for all of his officials and courtiers which lasts 180 days. Following this, he gives another, shorter feast in 1:5 (a mere 7 days) , Vashti then gives her own, womens feast, in 1:9. In Chapter

in the canon: Esther, written using Greek tropes and Persian literary conventions, is best characterized as Jewish historical fiction-cum-romance – part of a proud tradition that contains stories like Judith and Tobit and Joseph and Asenath. In this sense, Esther is a good deal more than mere satire: it is also romance, tragedy and "history" and perhaps most importantly for its Jewish readers, is the aetiology for the festival of Purim.

Woven into this history are several important themes, and a few notable gaps. In the earliest stages of this thesis, it was these that helped me to clarify the most critical theological and Judaic issues and questions in the scroll, and figure out which might later be taken up by the Rabbis. The repetition of certain words helped elucidate some issues, as did moments when the text seemed to dwell on the protagonists Jewishness[2] or hiddenness because of their identity as Jews. Quite often, these moments exemplified the questions that would be taken up by later commentators.

I began with questions of origin. I was struck, in repeated readings of the Biblical Esther, by the attempts made by the author to claim some degree of historicity.[3] Also

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2:18, Ahashverus gives yet another feast for Esther's coronation, and may be another example of his conspicuous consumption. In 5:4, 5:5, Esther prepares a feast for Haman and Ahashverus after the decree against the Jews has been made and then, at the feast, invites them to another feast, the following day. And in 8:17, the last and final feast, the Jews celebrate their narrow escape from extermination.

[2] The adjective Jewish and the term the Jews appears a total of ***fifty-eight*** times in the story. This is a staggering number, and is the adjective most frequently used to describe *any* character in the book of Esther

[3] This is evident in the preponderance of dates given in the text - in Esther 1:3, "It happened...in the third year of [Ahashverus'] reign...for no fewer than a hundred and eighty days..." and again Esther 3:7, where it says exactly when Haman gave the decree against the Jews: "In the first month, that is, the month of Nisan, in twelfth year of King Ahashverus, pur...was cast before Haman...[until it fell on] the twelfth month, that is, the month of Adar..." Likewise, dates are given again in 3:11, 3:13, and in 5:1, 8:9, 8:12, 9:1, and 9:17-18. It seems likely that this attention to dating and attempts at historicity are the result of the text's attempt to serve as an aetiology for Purim's establishment as a holiday. Another attempt at historicity may be seen in the language used to describe the

notable, was the reiteration of the term 'exile' in reference to Mordecai and the Jews,[4] as well as the statement that the people of Israel were scattered and dispersed among the nations. Though exile is never explicitly discussed or acknowledged outside of Esther 2:6, this reference to Mordecai being in exile sets the tone for the rest of the narrative early on by making it clear that the Jewish people are living outside the land. It is therefore notable to scholars and historians alike that Esther is distinctive in this sense: a story written by and constructed for people for whom life in exile was an unremitting fact and survival a constant and unfortunate preoccupation. There was no rebuilt temple looming on the horizon, nor had there been a sovereign Jewish king in many hundreds of years. Exile is simply a fact of life in the Scroll of Esther, and as such, not much discussed. Likewise, I thought the text's seeming preoccupation with Mordecai's lineage, and Esther's place in it was also notable for what it *did* suggest about the importance of one's roots, even in exile.

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decree calling for the massacre of the Jews: The word *patshegen* in 4:8, refers "to the written text of the law that had been proclaimed in Shushan for the [destruction] of the Jews.' and does not reappear elsewhere in the text, although the text frequently refers to written documents. In any case, the fact that this is not merely described as *dat* suggests that the more flowery description may be an attempt to lend an air of historicity and authority to the story, and give a sense of the very serious 'official nature ' of the decree.

[4] The use of the term *galut* to describe Mordecai is notable: "And Mordecai was in the *exile* from Jerusalem with the *exile* which was *exiled* with King Jeconiah of Judah." (Esther 2:5-6) For theological purposes, especially, it is fascinating that (in the Hebrew) Mordecai is referred to as being in exile, or as exiled, *four* times, in rapid succession. Adele Berlin notes that "[Jon] Levenson offers an attractive interpretation, comparing the power and luxury of the Persian court with the powerlessness of and looming danger to the exiled Jews. I would add that for the Diaspora Jewish audience for whom this book was presumably written, the emphasis on the fact that the main characters were also diaspora Jews would make it easy for them to identify with them." Berlin, *Esther,* p. 25. I would also suggest that the idea that the exile is not just a physical exile from the land of Israel, but also a spiritual exile from a God who is not immediately apparent.

B. Thesis Description

As far as the general format of the chapters that follow, I began my research with a close rereading of Esther, noting key words and repetitive themes in the text. I looked especially for places in the text that exemplified the questions I was most interested in: God's absence, and the apparent lack of "Jewishness" in the story as a whole. I then chose the verses that I thought were most notable in this regard (approximately 15), and looked at every interpretation that had been written on these verses, beginning with the Septuagint, moving on to the Talmud, and ending with an investigation of early and late classical midrashim. After noting which of these were useful for the purposes of the thesis, I grouped my midrashim by theme, and, to a lesser extent, era. I had hoped to present my sources entirely chronologically, but the desire was often trumped by the rhetorical and structural needs of a thesis organized primarily by theme.

Overall, a large number of the sources I found contained the kinds of theological and Judaizing assertions I had anticipated – the Rabbis are nothing if not consistent in their attempts to Judaize, theologize and biblicize texts contained in the canon. However, I also encountered many texts that felt surprisingly 'modern', that were politically fraught (the texts that serve as veiled polemics against Christianity particularly so) and that were psychologically savvy in ways that were very moving. Ultimately, these voices from the past served to illuminate for me – and I hope – my readers, the challenges of belief in a world that makes it difficult, and a way to uncover God's Presence in a world where it is easier to believe that She is, like Esther, hidden.

Because of the aforementioned preoccupation with lineage, I chose to devote Chapter One to discussing how the Rabbis dealt with the implied historicity asserted by the dates given in the text and the inclusion of Mordecai's lineage – and what they read into it. Names like *Benjaminite* jumped out at me for their connection with Joseph, and so I was not surprised to find that the Rabbis made much of Mordecai's ancestry, ascribing to it not merely connections to Benjamin and Saul, but to the Davidic line and Messianic lineage as a whole, going so far as to make a connection between lineage and messianic destiny. Mordecai's lineage, for later commentators, was not just a rote invocation of names, but served also as a sign of his special promise. Esther's beginnings were similarly significant, as is her status as an orphan. Both of these lowly states were used, perhaps not surprisingly, as opportunities for the Rabbis to emphasize how, in a world where those in power are seemingly in control of everything, a humble start may actually serve as a precursor for redemption.

My next concern was with the silences in the text regarding prayer and ritual observance, which I dealt with in Chapter Two. In the Masoretic Text of Esther, the Jews do not pray to God when their lives are in peril, nor do they (as far as we know) keep kosher, follow Jewish law, or keep themselves from fraternizing with their gentile neighbors. All of this stands in stark contrast to the rest of the books in the canon, where, each time Jews mourn to ward off calamity (as they do in Esther 4:16), they pray. In the Scroll of Esther, they do not, even when we would most expect it. When Esther approaches Ahashverus without his permission, at the risk of her life, she is utterly silent (Esther 5:1). And yet for the commentators that came later, this silence was simply unthinkable, as was Esther's apparent departure from living an observant Jewish life.

They simply could not imagine Jewish heroes living in a manner inconsistent with how they lived their *own* Jewish lives. For this reason, I chose to explore the Judaization of the text by the Greek authors and the Rabbis, particularly those scenes where Esther and Mordecai pray to a God not once acknowledged in the MT.

A refusal to commit idolatry was another great concern. And, as it was the only thing Esther's heroes did that was in keeping with Jewish law, it was of particular interest to the midrashic interpreters, who jumped at the chance to provide rationales for Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman. Often, there is a sense that these explications are not merely opportunities to strengthen the community's faith and bolster their willingness to take risks for it, but may have been polemics against Christianity written by Jews living among idolatrous neighbors.

Chapter Three, like Chapter Two, is largely concerned with the silences and gaps in the text. Chapter Three is, however, the heart of the thesis, as it attempts to wrestle with God's hiddenness at the text's center. In Esther, God is apparently absent, both in name and action, but for the Rabbis, the idea that Jews might be alone in the world was unacceptable and the lack of religious language simply baffling. As such, they sought to read God's presence back into the story of Esther, reading God (and God's agents on earth – angels) into the most fraught moments of the story. Most frequently, these theologizations are applied to Esther 5:1, where Esther approaches the king without his permission. Esther, the commentators take pains to note, did not act alone at this time; God was with her. What is most striking about this assertion is that ultimately, *all* the midrashists – Greek and Mizrachi, Ashkenazic or Amoraic, reached this conclusion. God

(or God's emissary) was not merely present with Esther, but with the people in exile, and often had a hand in history, shielding the Jews from those who would seek to harm them.

Chapter Four takes up this question of God's hand in history, asking and answering the other central question raised by the Scroll of Esther: in a world without God, whence salvation? The answer, for all the commentators, is simple. Salvation comes, as it always has, from God, and in some cases, it is God who has decreed the conflict in Esther such that the stage has been set for salvation before the story of Esther even begins – there is some conversation about Haman being God's pawn who sets in motion the events that will bring deliverance. Salvation in the Esther story is reframed by these commentators with Biblical motifs and Biblical language. The Exodus is invoked, as is the importance of Mordecai's lineage in ensuring salvation. The question of divine providence vs. free will comes up a good deal in these interpretations, which struggle mightily with the balance between human agency and heroics, and God's plan for the people Israel. Esther 4:13 ("Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther: Do not imagine that you, out of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter.") is most frequently cited in these discussions, as it deals directly with the question of deliverance's provenance.

Chapter Five attempts to tie all of these findings together, by placing the traditions that have been cited in the previous four chapters in a broader context: that of the Rabbinic worldview. It explores the ways in which the Rabbis assimilated a largely secular story to their own religious views. Though it would be impossible to cover all the perspectives that characterized their worldview through the commentaries on Esther, I

chose to tease out a few critical themes that were recurrent in the reimagining of the story. First was the issue of lineage. For the Rabbis, ancestry and inherited merit was thought to have a hand in determining destiny (*zechuth avot*). Idolatry was also of great concern – living as they did in largely non-Jewish milieus, and the treatment of it important in any consideration of the midrash on Esther and Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman. The centrality of observance and halacha was likewise important, as the Rabbis could not conceive of Jewish heroes who did not live as Jews. Rabbinic perspectives on providence were similarly important – as was striking a balance between human agency and divine destiny, chance and the promise of redemption. Overall, a closer consideration of all of these facets of Rabbinic theology helped to shed light on Rabbinic reconstructions of Esther.

Chapter One

Lineage, Redemption and Exile

A. Esther's Historicity

According to Biblical scholars, Megillat Esther is both patently ahistorical and a story true to its time. Esther, a Jewish historical fiction/romance, is part of the broader literary tradition of the myths of Judith and Tobit and Joseph and Asenath. And yet it seems likely that Esther's author, though given to exaggerations and excess, was nonetheless preoccupied with creating a book that would have the ring of authenticity. The reasons for this may be debated at length, but regardless, the historical context of the story itself was likely "the time of the ancient Persian Empire, which rose to eminence with its defeat in Babylonia in 539 BCE and fell to Alexander the Great of Macedon in 333 BCE." [1] Nonetheless,

> There are grave chronological problems in the Book of Esther. A man who was born at least ten years before the Babylonians razed Jerusalem figures as a principal protagonist in a story that takes place a generation or two after the Babylonians have, in turn, been overthrown by the Persians. If one brings those extrabiblical synchronisms to bear, Mordecai is a minimum of 114 years old when the action of the book of Esther begins in Xerxes first year...(Esther 1:3) [In other words] the historical problems with Esther are so massive as to persuade anyone who is not already obligated by religious dogma to believe in the historicity of biblical narrative to doubt the veracity of the narrative. [2]

And yet the attempt to make Megillat Esther historical is evident in the very earliest verses of the story itself, where it says, 'It happened in the days of Ahashverus the king...in these days...in the 3rd year of his reign'. This format, which is atypical for Biblical Narratives[3], seems related to the fact that more dates are given in Esther 3:7,

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[1] Jon D. Levenson, *Esther, A Commentary.* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997.) p. 23.

[2] Ibid.

[3] "Biblical narratives commonly begin with 'it happened' but omit 'in the days of'. On the other hand, prophetic writings are often introduced as having occurred 'in the days of King X'. Actually, the opening is more like the opening of a folktale, with the aura of 'Once upon a time, in the days of the great and glorious Ahasheurus, King of the vast

where it says exactly when Haman gave the decree against the Jews: "In the first month, the month of Nisan, in the twelfth year of King Ahashverus..." This ongoing attention to dating may be part of an attempt for the text to serve as an aetiology for Purim's establishment as a holiday and may help to explain why the Book of Esther is, in fact, littered with dates like the introductory one: the date for the massacre of the Jews, the date of Haman's decrees against them, etc.

B. The Meaning of Mordecai's Lineage

It is therefore not surprising that Mordecai is provided with a lineage which suggests not merely historicity, but a genealogy rife with heroism and a long legacy of redemption. Seen in this context, Mordecai is not just a hero but is a redeemer whose credibility as savior is, in fact, genetic and inherited; part of his legacy as a Jew:[4] Levenson writes regarding Mordecai's lineage:

> *It is not that the narrator has simply reused two traditional Benjaminite names, Kish and Shimei, nor that he wishes us to think that Saul was Mordecai's ancestor. Rather, he uses names from the story of Saul to highlight the significance of Mordecai and Esther's deeds within the larger history of redemption.* Mordecai rises on the very point on which Saul fell. His becoming prime minister of the Persian empire (10:2) recaptures some of the glory of monarchy that Saul lost for sparing the first Agagite and that the house of David, Saul's successor "worthier than [he]" (I Sam 15:28) finally lost ten years after Jeconiah went into exile. In the Hebrew Bible, *Yehudi*, "Jew", applied to Mordecai in 2:5 (and often in Esther), usually denotes a member of the tribe of Judah. In the Talmud there appear to be several engaging midrashim purporting to explain how Mordecai could have been both a Judahite and a Benjaminite. For example, it is said that he had one parent from each tribe, or that the term 'Judahite' refers to one who repudiates idolatry, regardless of ethnicity. At the level of plain sense, however, these harmonistic and homiletical explanations fail. What has actually happened is that in the wake of the exile of the only tribal unit

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Persian empire..." Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary on Esther.* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001). p. 5

[4]Levenson, *Esther,* 56 [emphases mine]

> still intact, Judah, the ethnic term *yehudi* comes to refer to *any* Israelite; hence our translation 'Jew' rather than 'Judahite'. Mordecai is a Jew because he comes from Judah, the last commonwealth of the people of Israel before the exile, and lives in the community of Jewish/Judahite exiles in Susa. He is a Benjaminite because Benjamin is his ancestral tribal affiliation. In this more general meaning, *yehudi* is a postexilic innovation. Ironically, it is not one with a large resonance in the ongoing Jewish tradition. Though the term 'Jew' need not be derogatory and is regularly applied by Jews to themselves, it has never supplanted the older, more scriptural term 'Israelite'....[5] [6][emphases mine]

It is perhaps for this very reason that the rabbis who comment on Esther are preoccupied with Mordecai's lineage. Two simple lines, Esther 2:5 and 2:6, are discussed and debated over and over again and ample attention is given to each element of Mordecai's lineage, and its possible significance. The earliest of these discussions appears in the BT *Megillah 12b*, and unlike the midrashim that take up these same questions, it discusses not one element of, but all of Mordecai's lineage in one fell swoop.

> The Megillah continues, THERE WAS A JEWISH MAN IN SHUSHAN THE CAPITOL, ETC....A BENJAMINITE. The Gemara asks: What does the verse mean [to teach by mentioning all these names?] If [that verse] comes to trace [Mordecai's] lineage, let it continue to trace his lineage [back] to Benjamin. Why are these [three names] different [in that they are mentioned in the verse, whereas Mordecai's other ancestors are not?] [Therefore], a Baraita explained, 'All the names [in the verse]. (Yair, Shimi and Kish) are designations of Mordecai [himself]. [He is] son of Yair, [because] he was a 'Son who brightened'the eyes of the Jews through his prayer. [Mordecai is called] son of Shimi [because he was] a son whose prayers God 'heeded/listened to' (the play here is on *shma*). [And he is called] son of Kish, for 'he knocked' on the gates of mercy [begging for the Jews salvation] and they were opened for him.

This is the first midrashic expansion of Mordecai's lineage in existence, and its discussion of God is a departure from the plain sense of the Book of Esther. Mordecai's lineage in the MT, though an indicator of his redemptive legacy and an attempt at authenticity and historicity, seems to be no more than that. But for the Amoraim,

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[5] Levenson, *Esther,* 56

[6] A nearly identical version of this Midrash also appears in Exodus Rabbah 2:4

Mordecai's genealogy explains both historically and theologically that though we know Mordecai to be a hero in this story, he does not act alone. He is, instead, aided and abetted by God in his redemptive role. God acts through Mordecai even when God is not mentioned, though salvation is not attributed to God. Therefore, the Hebrew wordplay of *Megillah* 12b – where Mordecai 'brightens' the eyes of the Jews and 'knocks' on the gates of mercy – is really an attempt to emphasize that human agency is, on its own, insufficient: Mordecai did not act alone in saving the Jewish people. Ultimately, the redemption he wrought was divine in nature and origin, and though it may have been Mordecai who knocked on the doors of mercy, it was God who answered.

And yet even before this lineage is explained, we learn that, from the very first *word* when he appears in the text, Mordecai is destined for redemption. The term היה (was) gives the Rabbis all they need to make the case for this preordained role. See Genesis Rabbah 30:8 in this regard:

> "היה (*was*)...How was היה to be understood in this case? Abraham was destined to lead the whole world to repentance. [Similarly] 'Behold, the man was'[designated]" (Genesis 3:22) means: destined to die. 'The serpent was' (Ibid): destined for punishment, 'Cain was' (Genesis 4:2) predestined to exile. 'Job was'(Job 1:1) destined to suffer. 'Noah was': destined for a miracle. 'Moses was' (Exodus 3:1) destined to be a redeemer; 'MORDECAI WAS'[7] (Esther 2:5) destined for redemption. Genesis Rabbah 30:8 [emphases mine]

[7] A nearly identical version of this Midrash also appears in Exodus Rabbah 2:4 "Concerning Mordecai it says: THERE WAS A CERTAIN JEW (Esther 2:5) – he was destined for deliverance" (Soncino Ed, p 50) and a somewhat similar version appears in Esther Rabbah 6:3 (Soncino, p. 75), "היה. R. Johanan said: Wherever the word היה is used in connection with anyone, it implies that such was his character from beginning to end...Also Mordecai; yesterday, HE PUT ON SACKCLOTH WITH ASHES (Esther 4:1) and now, HE WENT FORTH FROM THE PRESENCE OF THE KING IN ROYAL APPAREL (Esther 8:15). WHOSE NAME WAS MORDECAI, Just as myrrh is the foremost of spices, so Mordecai was the foremost of his generation.

Similarly, Esther Rabbah uses seemingly unremarkable language in the same verse to establish Mordecai's special status as redeemer and imagine him on a par with and in the company of Biblical heroes:

> 'THERE WAS A MAN, A JEW IN SHUSHAN THE CASTLE.' (Esther 2:5) The word MAN here tells us that Mordecai in his generation was equal to Moses in his; for of Moses too it is written, 'NOW' the man Moses was very meek. (Numbers 12:3). Just as Moses stood in the breach, as it is written, 'Therefore he said that He would destroy them, had not Moses, his chosen, stood before Him in the breach' (Psalm 106: 23), so did Mordecai, as it is written, 'Seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his nation' (Esther 10:3). Just as Moses taught Israel Torah, as it is written, 'Look, I have taught you statutes and ordinances' (Deut 4:5) so did Mordecai, as it is written, 'AND HE SENT LETTERS, WITH WORDS OF PEACE AND TRUTH.; (Esther 9:30) [and truth means Torah], as it is written, 'Buy the truth, and sell it not' (Proverbs 23:23) WHOSE NAME WAS MORDECAI. The righteous [figures in the Tanach] are preceded by the word name[8] as it says, 'And his name was Manoah, And his name was Kish, And his name was Elkanah, And his name was Boaz, AND HIS NAME WAS MORDECAI. The reason is that they resemble their creator, of whom it is written, 'God spoke to Moses and said to him, 'I am the Lord'. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make myself known to them *by my name*. (Exodus 6:3)' Esther Rabbah 6:2

Again, the language used to describe Mordecai in Esther 2:5 is unremarkable – there is nothing particularly notable or meaningful about the term *ish yehudi* – Jewish man. Rather, what we find here is an attempt to establish Mordecai's special role in the redemption of Israel, and insert him into an even more impressive lineage than the one provided by the text. It is especially meaningful that this 'created' lineage includes not just other Biblical characters, but the greatest of them all – Moses, and then, the ultimate redeemer - God.[9] By drawing this analogy, the midrashist frames Mordecai's efforts on

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[8] A nearly identical version of this Midrash also appears in Yalkut Shimoni Vol II, *remez* 77.

[9] Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer 50:1 is explicit about the desire to place Mordecai in the Biblical lineage: "THERE WAS A CERTAIN JEW IN SHUSHAN, THE CAPITAL, WHOSE NAME WAS MORDECAI .(Esther 2:5). Rabbi Shema'iah said: Was there no other Jew

behalf of the Jewish people as not merely salvific, but divine in nature and effect. Mordecai's role as redeemer makes him not only like Moses – which is no small thing – but, in fact, like God.

And so we see that in the minds of the Rabbis, Mordecai is never *merely* Mordecai. Instead, Mordecai and Mordecai's redemptive role in Jewish history is representative, at various times, in various ways, of different key figures in Jewish history and the Jews salvation: the patriarchs, God, Moses, and the people themselves. As Jon Levenson has written,

> [Esther and Mordecai's] transformations from refugee to prime minister and from orphan to queen recall prophetic visions of restoration after exile (e.g.-Isaiah 54) and suggest that *Mordecai and Esther, for all their particular character, are also allegorizations of Israel's national destiny*. Given their eminence, they cannot be representative Jews, but they are representative of the Jewish people collectively, at least according to the hopes and fantasies of the author of the book.[10] [emphases mine]

In the case of Mordecai specifically, the author of Pirke d'Rabbi Eliezer imagines that Mordecai's heroism is not just the product of the idealized Biblical lineage of Esther Rabbah, but it is also a direct result of the precise lineage described in Esther 2:5:

> Rabbi Phineas said: The Holy One, blessed be He, saw that in the future there would arise from Agag a man, a great enemy and adversary of the Jews[11] Who

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in Shushan, the capital, except Mordecai alone? It is written, 'AND THE JEWS THAT WERE IN SHUSHAN' (Esther 9:15). But because he was a Jew, and a direct descendant of the patriarchs and also of the royal seed, and he was engaged in (the study of) the Torah all his days, and he was not defiled by any forbidden food in his mouth, therefore his name was called, 'A Jew'.

[10] Levenson, *Esther,* 16

[11] Different versions of this midrash appear in Exodus Rabbah 38:4: " 'And he drove out the enemy before You' (Deut 33:27); this refers to Haman, as it says 'AN ADVERSARY AND AN ENEMY, EVEN THIS WICKED HAMAN' (Esther 7:6). Why does it say, 'AN ADVERSARY AND AN ENEMY?' Because [Haman] was an adversary of God, and an enemy of Israel; he was the adversary of their ancestors, and an enemy of their offspring; he is an adversary to me and an enemy to me. (Spoken by Esther to Ahasheurus)" See also BT *Megillah* 12a and 19a.

> was this? This was Haman, as it is said, 'Because Haman, the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews (Esther 9:24). From the seed of Saul [arose] an avenger and a redeemer for Israel (who delivered them) out of the hand of Haman.[12] Who was this? This was Mordecai, as it is said, THERE WAS A CERTAIN JEW IN SHUSHAN, THE CAPITAL, WHOSE NAME WAS MORDECAI...THE SON OF KISH, A BENJAMINITE. (Esther 2:5) Pirke DeRabbi Eliezer 49:1

What is important here (as indicated in footnote #10) is Mordecai's lineage as a descendant of Saul, and especially Mordecai's lineage as it relates to Haman's lineage. And while Levenson suggests that the contrast of Mordecai with Saul is what matters here, the Midrash suggests perhaps, as Clines suggests,

> [that] the [genealogical] reference [in Megillat Esther] may be to the conflict between Saul (son of Kish) and Agag the Amalekite in 1 Samuel 15, but it is more probably to the Balaam oracles of the downfall of Amalek: 'Amalek was the first of the nations/but in the end he shall come to destruction' (Numbers 24:20) and 'His (Jacob's/Israel's) king shall be higher than Agag/and his kingdom shall be exalted'. Of course it is impossible that Haman's family and friends should have known Jewish literature so well...the important point is that [Haman] is the real enemy of the Jews, their one and only. Haman's problem is not that he is a Persian....they are not evil. It is Haman the Agagite who is the genocidal maniac

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[12] "Mordecai's genealogy is...reminiscent of the introduction of Saul in I Sam 9:1, more so than coincidence allows. Saul's father and Mordecai's great-grandfather bear the identical name, Kish; both heroes are from the tribe of Benjamin. Shimei is the name not only of Mordecai's grandfather, but also of a member of Saul's clan who curses David for supposedly usurping their throne. (2. Sam. 16:5-8) Ibn Ezra, a Jewish commentator of the twelfth century, counters these associations of Mordecai with Saul, of which the midrash makes so much, by arguing that if the text wants us to see Mordecai as descended from Saul, surely it would mention the ancient king himself, as Mordecai's most distinguished ancestor. (Ibn Ezra to Esther 2:5) This objection has some weight. Even on Biblical chronology, Mordecai would have to be more than two generations later than Saul, who in fact lived more than half a millennium before Xerxes. We should not assume that Mordecai is a *descendant* of Saul, only that the two are to be thought of together. The relationship is principally contrastive. Whereas Saul lost his throne for sparing Agag, the king of the Amalekites, the archetypical enemy of the Israelites and their God (I Samuel 15), Mordecai gains the premiership by defeating Haman the Agagite (3:1)." Levenson, *Esther,* 56-57

– and the king, though morally responsible for what is done in his name, has nothing against the Jews.[13]

In other words, while, as Clines suggests, it would have been impossible for Haman's family to 'know Jewish literature so well', the same was not true of the midrashists, who did know the literature well, and who used their familiarity with it to imagine the clash of Mordecai and Haman in frankly messianic (and on occasion, eschatological) terms that extended far beyond the Book of Esther and into the larger sweep of Jewish history.

The importance of the appellation 'Benjaminite' is similarly discussed by the Rabbis in Pesikta Rabbati, who imagine the Benjaminites (and their descendants) as a lineage engaged in an inherited and perpetual conflict with the Amalekites. From this vantage point, Haman, as a descendent of the Amalekites, is doomed to "be crushed by" a descendant of the Benjaminites, in this case Mordecai, whose role as redeemer of the Benjaminites precedes him.[14] The idea of inherited conflict is expanded upon by the

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[13] David Clines, *The Esther Scroll, The Story of The Story.* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1984). P. 44.

[14] "Another comment, 'Out of Ephraim' (Judges 5:14 - "From Ephraim came they whose roots are in Amalek. After you, Benjamin...') What is meant by 'After you, Benjamin?' The Holy One, Blessed be He, said: Forever, after you [O Joshua it is to be a man of] Benjamin who will demand satisfaction from the seed of Amalek. You can see so for yourself: A man of the seed of Amalek rose up and waged war against Israel; and against him there rose up one [of the seed of] Benjamin. And who was this man of the seed of Amalek? The wicked Haman, as it is said, 'King Ahashverus promoted Haman, the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite' (Esther 3:1), to whom the Holy One, Blessed be He, said, 'As you live, a man of the seed of Benjamin is held in readiness to come against you and crush your roots.' And who was this man? Mordecai, of whom it is said, THERE WAS A CERTAIN JEW IN SHUSHAN, THE CASTLE, WHOSE NAME WAS MORDECAI, THE SON OF YAIR, THE SON OF SHIMI, THE SON OF KISH, A MAN OF BENJAMIN.' (Esther 2:5)" Pesikta Rabbati 13:4

author of Bereshit Rabbati, who uses colorful language to describe the conflict between Haman and Mordecai:

> And Jacob saw Esau coming and put Joseph and Rachel last" (Genesis 33:2) 'From Ephraim came they whose roots are in Amalek' (Judges 5:14), [i.e., God said that already from the time of Moses there would be someone coming from Ephraim who will be collecting from the seed of Esau. [For example], 'And Moses said to Joshua, pick some men for us and go out and do battle with Amalek.' (Exodus 17:8) and did Moses say this from himself? No, he said it because it was a divine imperative from the mouth of God (it was preordained). "From Ephraim came they whose roots are in Amalek." [That is], it was preordained that Joshua would come from the seed of Ephraim and destroy the seed of Amalek. Who paired up with Israel, Haman the evil? He said to him, By your life, you swear that Benjamin is ready for [you]...from the mouth of God. The evil Haman is coming to cause trouble for the Jewish people and [this is why] it was said to Haman [by his family], 'By your life, Haman, don't think that you're going to succeed [against Mordecai] because a (descendant of) Benjamin is going to come crack your eggs. This man is Mordecai, as it is said, 'HE WAS A JEW FROM THE TRIBE OF BENJAMIN.' (Esther 2:5) Bereshit Rabbati on Genesis 33:2

In other words, Mordecai's role as redeemer of the Jewish people – and enemy of Haman – was both preordained by God and foretold in the time of Moses. This is a conflict, in other words, with deep roots, roots in the ancient Biblical clash with between two peoples, the Amalekites and Israelites,[15] roots in the Biblical clash between Jacob and

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[15] See Esther Rabbah 10:13: "R. Berekiah said: The Holy One, blessed be He, had already recorded the deliverance of Israel in the Torah, as it is written, 'And if a stranger who is a settler with you becomes wealthy' (Lev 25:14). *'A stranger who is a settler' refers to Haman...because he was the seed of Amalek and he was a stranger in Media and Persia. 'And thy brother who has become poor beside him' (Ibid), this refers to Israel who were poor and needy. 'After he is sold he may be redeemed' (Lev 25:48): because the Holy One, Blessed be He, redeemed them from his hand, delivered them from the decree and ransomed them. 'One of his people shall redeem him' (Ibid): this refers to Mordecai, of whom we read that, 'He was accepted by his people' (Esther 10:3)*...The patriarch Jacob also hinted at all this in the blessing of the tribes, as it says, 'Benjamin is a ravenous wolf. In the morning he consumes his enemy.' (Gen 49:27): this refers to Saul who was the morning of Israel, being the first of the kings, and who was from the tribe of Benjamin and who smote Amalek and spoiled all their possessions. 'And in the evening he divides the spoils. (Ibid) This refers to Mordecai and Esther who championed Israel in

Esau, roots in Benjamin and by extension David, and so on. As Elise Glickman points out:

> "[For the Rabbis] the book of Esther is specifically regarded as a chronicle of God's ongoing war with Amalek...By linking Amalek and Haman, our Rabbis demonstrate that, like Amalek, Haman was a tremendously powerful paradigm of evil. Unlike Amalek, however, Haman is soundly defeated both in the Bible and in Rabbinic literature. Our Rabbis have the joy of building up Haman's might and wickedness until his stature approaches that of the feared Amalek, then recounting in glorious detail how God brings him low. The defeat of Haman thus foreshadows God's eventual triumph over Amalek – a triumph that will bring messianic deliverance and the World to Come."[16]

This eventual triumph is both foreseen and engineered by God in Judges 5:14, who warns that there would be someone coming from Ephraim who would 'collect from the seed of Esau'; ultimately, that someone would be Mordecai, the inheritor of this ancient conflict.

C. Mordecai as Divine Redeemer sent by God because of His Lineage

Other late midrashim refrain from seeing Mordecai's lineage as a sign of a historical conflict, but are still concerned with the provenance of the affiliations described in the lineage – insofar as they suggest something about Mordecai's ultimate role as redeemer and as an inheritor of and descendant from, the Davidic line. The appellation 'Benjaminite' is the most frequently discussed of these terms,[17] as it is [the most?]

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their exile which is like the shadows of evening and divided the spoil of Haman who is compared to a wolf...God raised up Mordecai and Esther from the tribe of Benjamin to confront [the kings of Media and Persia]." [emphases mine]

[16] Elaine Rose Glickman, *Haman and The Jews.* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc.,1999). pg. 25

[17] See also Bereshit Rabbati 44:33 which states, "And now please let your servant remain as a slave to my Lord" (Judah to Joseph). THERE WAS A JEWISH MAN IN SHUSHAN, etc. (Esther 2:5). Is it really that he's from the tribe of Judah as it says, *Ish Yehudi*? Isn't it that he's a Benjaminite? As it is written, A BENJAMINITE. Rather in the time that the tribes [of Jews] went down to Egypt and Joseph put the goblet in

explicit connection to the Davidic line (and by extension, the inheritance of a salvific lineage) and the author of Bereshit Rabbati 34 takes pains to explains its origin in relation to Mordecai. It is explained therein that Benjamin was given two names by his parents: one by Rachel and one by Jacob and that the fulfillment of both Benjamin (Jacob's choice) and *ben oni* (Rachel's choice) became real in the time of Shushan, because the people suffered then, but were saved by Mordecai – a Benjaminite – (*ben yamin*) – who knocked on the door of God's mercy with his right hand. Bereshit Rabbati 34 states: [18]

Benjamin's sack he searched through all the sacks and found it in his hand. And he said to him, the man in whose possession the goblet is found, etc. (Gen 44:17), And Judah said to Joseph, "Please, I'm asking of you, I already have one evil deed in my hands, because I sold my brother [Joseph into slavery]" As it is said, "Judah said, 'Let us go and sell'" (Genesis 37:27). And now you want that I should allow you to take Benjamin as a slave? I sold my brother as a slave and I took this son from my father with the intention of bringing him back and you want to take him as a slave. I won't be able to stand before my father and before God. I am obligated to be the slave because I sold Joseph my brother. According to the letter of the law, I should be your slave and that's why it says, Please let me be your slave. God said, Judah you're willing to give yourself as a slave in the place of Benjamin. *Therefore, the redeemer of Israel that will one day come from him* - I will call him by your name. As it says, 'A JUDEAN MAN'. " [emphases mine]

[18] The full version of Bereshit Rabbati 34 states, "And Rachel called [him] 'son of my pain/suffering'." And Jacob [didn't like the name that Rachel called Benjamin and] called him 'Benjamin' - a name from the holy tongue. When were the words of his father fulfilled? (i.e., When did the name Benjamin become his official name?) In the times of Saul. "They were armed with the bow and could use their left hands and right hands to sling arrows with the bow" (Chron 1: 12:2) [This is referring to when David was running away from Saul in Samuel 1 and he's holed up in the city called Tzitlag - and he has a group of people who are with him and these people also could use their right and left hands and they were kinsmen of Saul from Benjamin...so they were - like Mordecai - from the tribe of Benjamin]. When was [Benjamin's] mother's [name for him] fulfilled? In the story of the concubine of Giva'ah. The verse says, 'From all of the people, seven hundred young men, they were left-handed'. (Judges 20:16). And when were the names which both [his parents] gave him fulfilled? In the city of Shushan. 'THERE WAS A JEWISH MAN...A SON OF KISH, A SON OF BENJAMIN'. In the beginning there was pain and suffering and they had to knock down (Kish - like Mordecai's ancestry, from the root *kuf-yod-shin*) the doors of mercy and in the end the right hand was lifted. [The Midrash is referring to his right hand - she called Benjamin 'the son of my pain', but Jacob called him 'the son of my right hand' – i.e., *ben-yamin*. And Jacob's words came

> And Rachel called [him] 'son of my pain/suffering'." And Jacob [didn't like the name that Rachel called Benjamin and] called him 'Benjamin' - a name from the holy tongue. When were the words of his father fulfilled? (i.e., When did the name Benjamin become his official name?) In the times of Saul. "They were armed with the bow and could use their left hands and right hands to sling arrows with the bow" (Chron 1: 12:2).... And Jacob's words came true in the time of Saul when people were referred to as 'sons of the right hand'.] And Rachel's words came true in the time of Giva'ah when the people were referred to as 'left-handed'. And both of the[se names] came true in the time of Shushan when originally things were bad, but the right hand came up and knocked on God's doors of mercy and the people were saved and in the end the right hand of Benjamin is the side that won out.

In other words, Mordecai's lineage plays an integral role in the ultimate redemption of the Jews; ancestry is as critical in the coming of salvation as agency.

D. The Meaning of Esther's Lineage

Mordecai's origins are not the only ones that are of interest to the midrashists, however. Esther's beginnings are for them as significant as those of her uncle, as is discussed in Lamentations Rabbah 5:3:

> 'We have become orphans, fatherless' (Lam 5:3). R. Berekiah said in the name of R. Levi: 'The Holy One, Blessed be He, said to Israel: You weep and say before Me, "We have become orphans, fatherless" (Ibid, above); I swear by your lives, the deliverer whom I will raise up from among you in Media will likewise be fatherless and motherless.' That is what is written, 'AND HE WAS FOSTER FATHER TO HADASSAH, THAT IS, ESTHER, HIS UNCLE'S DAUGHTER; FOR SHE HAD NEITHER FATHER NOR MOTHER.' (Esther 2:7)

In other words, it is Esther's status as a powerless and unprotected orphan that prepares her for her role as God's redeemer on earth. This is in keeping with the satiric nature of

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true in the time of Saul when people were referred to as 'sons of the right hand'.] And Rachel's words came true in the time of Giva'ah when the people were referred to as 'left-handed'. And both of the[se names] came true in the time of Shushan when originally things were bad, but the right hand came up and knocked on God's doors of mercy and the people were saved and in the end the right hand of Benjamin is the side that won out."

the book, in which the weak rise to great heights, and with Biblical eschatology in general, in which the Messiah emerges from the lowliest and weakest of the people. Furthermore, as a text in Esther Rabbah points out, this unfortunate situation as an orphan means that Esther's role as divine redeemer is inseparable from her 'parent by proxy' relationship with her uncle, Mordecai, and by extension, her own inherited rivalry with the Amalekites, enemies of her ancestors as well:

> "'After he is sold, he may be redeemed [by his kinsmen]' (Lev 25:48): because the Holy One, Blessed be He, redeemed the [Israelites] from [Haman's] hand, delivered them from the decree and ransomed them. 'One of his people shall redeem him' (Ibid): this refers to Mordecai, of whom we read that, 'HE WAS ACCEPTED BY HIS PEOPLE [THE JEWS] (Esther 10:3)... 'Or his uncle, or his uncle's son shall redeem him' (Lev. 25:49): this refers to Esther who was the daughter of his uncle and through whom Israel was redeemed. 'For I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek' (Ex 17:14), blotting out in this world, I will blot it out in the next. 'The memory of Amalek', this refers to Haman." Esther Rabbah 10:13

The Medieval Commentator Abraham Saba, author of *Eshkol hakofer on Megillat Esther*, and a Jewish exile from 1492 Spain, goes so far as to suggest that the Jews of Persia were themselves orphans because of their sins.[19]

> "Therefore, it fulfilled a certain mystical requirement for symmetry that Esther who had no father or mother should save Israel who were without father and mother, from the hands of Amalek who also had no known mother or father (all of Esau's children were of dubious parentage)..."[20]

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[19] Abraham Saba, *Eshkol hakofer al Megillat Esther*, ed. Eliezer Segal (Drohobycz, 1903), p. 38.

[20] Barry Dov Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1993), P. 38

For the most part, the Rabbis appear to be unconcerned with Esther's lineage (relative to their interest in and lengthy discussions of Mordecai's[21]), but when it does come up, it is Mordecai who instigates the discussion. In Targum Sheni to Esther, it is Mordecai who makes the legacy of conflict noted in Esther 10:13 explicit, as he explains to Esther her (and by extension, his own) storied relationship with Amalek/Haman, and the long and troubled history that has served to make her, in this very moment, an inheritor of Saul's mistake. It is, therefore, up to Esther, by virtue of her inheritance, to take on her preordained role and storied as redeemer of the Jewish people, and enemy of Haman:

> "Mordecai responded to Esther, saying: "...Remember that you come from the descendants of King Saul of Israel; and it was told to the king of Israel to destroy the memory of the dynasty of Amalek from beneath the heavens. But he had pity on Agag, their king, and kept him by his side. That very night a woman became pregnant from him, and Haman arose from his descendants who has been seeking to buy all of the Jews and to uproot them completely. As a consequence of *your ancestor* having had pity on their king Agag, he became a stumbling block for Israel." [emphases mine] Targum Sheni 4:13

E. The Meaning of Mordecai and Esther's Exile and Esther's Role as an Orphan

It is not only Esther's lowly and lonely status that was of interest to the Rabbis, however. The significance of Mordecai's status as an exile is, for both the Rabbis and the

[21] Whether this is because the Book of Esther itself is more concerned with Mordecai's lineage, or because the Rabbis were uncomfortable with the idea of a female heroine, is not entirely clear. However, Walfish has noted that for many medieval commentators like Abraham Saba, "Esther is more a spiritual reality than a physical one...it would seem that Saba considers Mordecai to be the active character in the process of saving the Jews. True, he could not have done so without Esther's help, but it is by her very nature, by virtue of her modesty and her hiddenness, not by any active role that she herself plays in the drama, that Esther helps save the Jews. The power that having Esther under his care brings him enables Mordecai to prevail over his enemy." Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb,* p. 38

author of Megillat Esther, "[likely] intended to give this late book a 'biblical connection' and to set its narrative into the larger framework of the history of redemption of the people Israel."[22] In the text, the word 'exile' (*galut*) occurs a notable (and repetitive) four times, in rapid succession. For theological purposes, this is particularly notable, suggesting as it does that the people are not merely distant from God, but also from the land, that exile in the Scroll of Esther is both physical and spiritual. In any case, the recurrence of the term *galut* was perhaps most meaningful for the midrashists and commentators, for whom Mordecai's position in the diaspora was an uncomfortably familiar one – most of them had never lived in the land, or had been recently exiled from it. It is, therefore, particularly fascinating that the Amoraim, who were themselves the survivors of a recent and extremely painful exile, read into exile the promise of redemption:

> "WHO HAD BEEN EXILED FROM JERUSALEM. Rava said, [This teaches that Mordecai] went into exile of his own will [and was not forced as were the other exiles.] BT *Megillah* 13a

The author of the *Tiferet Shlomo*, a 19th century Polish Rabbi named Rabbi Shlomo Hakohen, who lived out his 63 years completely in exile, suggested that the Amoraim were saying that Mordecai's exile was a self-imposed one – he chose to live in the diaspora so that he might prepare Persia for his brethren:

> "Mordecai went into self-exile before the rest of his people to establish a holy atmosphere in Persia so the Jews could survive the exile there. He followed the example of Jacob, who went down to Egypt before the enslavement of his children, to sow the seeds of holiness which sustained them in their exile." Tiferet Shlomo to Esther

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[22] Levenson, *Esther,* p. 58.

If such a claim is true, it suggests that an exilic state may, like Esther's loss of her parents, serve as a kind of criteria/precursor for Israel's redemption, a conceit that is traditional insofar as it imagines that ultimate deliverance, when wrought by God, is enacted by those least likely to carry it out. As Jon Levenson has pointed out,

> "Though we cannot be certain of either its date or its place of composition, it would seem reasonable to assume that the book of Esther is a legacy of Persian Jewry and reflects a stratum of society with a very different understanding from that of comparable literature [like Ezra and Nehemia]. This is a stratus that has come to terms with diaspora, and, indeed, the book of Esther can be read as the story of the transformation of the *exile* into the *Diaspora*...Mordecai is an exile from Judah who, by adhering to his ancestral traditions in defiance of the kings command and at the risk of life itself, saves the lives of his people and becomes both second to the king and the beloved advocate of the Jews (2:5-6, 3:1-6, 10:3). Esther is not only an exile, but an orphan and a person who must disguise her ethnicity...Those transformations from refugee to prime minster and from orphan to queen recall prophetic visions of restoration after exile (e.g.-Isaiah 54) and suggest that Mordecai and Esther, for all their particular character, are also allegorizations of Israel's national identity."[23]

[23] Levenson, *Esther,* p. 16

Chapter Two:

The Role of Prayer and Observance

A. Prayer in the Greek Versions of Esther

If the Book of Esther is most striking for what it does not say: the apparent absence of God and God's hand in history, the silences in Chapter Four are the most conspicuous, because it is the point in the narrative when ancient (and contemporary) readers would most expect to see traditional religious conceits noted. That is, at a time of acute crisis, we would expect the Jewish people to pray. In the MT, however, they do not.

Scholars like Levenson and Clines have suggested that the reason Chapter Four seems to be such a natural fit *for* prayer is not just circumstantial (that the Jews have just learned of Haman's deadly decree), but because it contains a traditional mourning scene, a scene in which prayer is ordinarily a central element. And yet the people do not pray. They merely mourn, and do so in grand Biblical fashion, fasting and clothing themselves in sackcloth and ashes.[24] Similar mourning scenes (all of which mention God and include some form of prayer) may be found in Jonah 3:6 and Nehemiah 9:1. Even in the apocryphal literature, we find the same:

> Compare another case of public mourning to ward off a threat of calamity: Judith 4:9-12, "And every man of Israel cried out to God with great fervor and they humbled themselves with much fasting. They and their wives and their children and their cattle...they all put sackcloth around their waists. And all the Israelite men, women, and children living at Jerusalem prostrated themselves before the temple and put ashes on their heads and spread sackcloth before the Lord. They even draped the altar with sackcloth and cried out in unison, praying fervently to the God of Israel.[25]

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[24] These are "typical signs of grief, which also serve [in Esther] as a form of public protest." Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary on Esther.* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), p. 1631.

[25] Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary on Esther* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), P. 46

The only thing missing from the MT version, is, of course, God. In fact, the predominance of prayer in nearly every other text of this genre and time period makes the fact that the people do not pray especially conspicuous, which, according to Adele Berlin, may have been intentional:

> In its omission of God and religion, the Hebrew text is highly unusual, so much so that in the Greek version of Esther there are prayers, the name of God occurs, and Esther desists from eating forbidden food and drinking forbidden wine...It is not clear whether these religious items were part of the original story and then removed, or added to an original story that lacked them. The best explanation for their absence, especially the absence of God's name, is that, given that the story is so comic, at times bordering on lewd, such reticence about things religious is preferable, lest religion be debauched.[26]

Of the Greek versions mentioned by Berlin, two are still in existence. One is the Septuagint, and a shorter Greek version known as the alpha or A-text exists as well. What is most striking about these versions, as well as the Additions to Esther in the Apocrypha, is that, as noted above, they not only "include the religious elements so obviously absent in the Masoretic Text – the name of God and prayer,"[27] but that scholars like David Clines believe that these additions have an agenda of their own: to attribute the salvation within to God. He wrote:

> The Septuagint added the religious dimension in order to 'assimilate the book of Esther to a scriptural norm' – that is, the Septuagint sought to make the book sound more biblical...where God's presence is felt in the events that unfold and where the characters engage in religious activities (praying and invoking God's name)...but the Septuagint also is more likely to highlight religious aspects of Esther.[28]

These are, it should be noted, no small adjustments. The Septuagint takes great liberties with the MT, such that, when all is said and done, "Of the 270 verses in the Septuagint,

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[26] Ibid, p. 1624
[27] Ibid, pg.1
[28] Ibid, pg. 1

107 find no parallel in the masoretic text."[29] It is therefore of great value to explore the theological arguments contained in these verses for what they might tell us about their authors, and the religious and historical context of their time. Additionally, because the Septuagint predated the midrash, and some additions from the Septuagint appear in their entirety in later midrash, we can surmise that later commentators used the Septuagint as a model for their own Judaizing and theologizing of the Book of Esther. As will become evident, the key difference was that:

> The rabbis, like the author of the Septuagint, molded Esther to their own needs...[but] they had a fixed text from which they could not depart. Their 'rewriting' was done in the form of midrashic exegesis on the text of the Masoretic text...Rabbinic interpretation made the story more Biblical and more Rabbinic.[30]

We know more about the Greek additions than we do about the story of Esther itself. We know that they were most likely a product of 1st century Alexandrian Egypt – itself a diaspora community, and as a result, were written self-consciously, with a desire to reaffirm Jewish identity and religiosity over and against that of the host culture:

> Originally the 'additions' to the Esther...can probably be dated to sometime in the 1st century, contemporaneous with the book of Wisdom...The additions to Esther may be accounted for [insofar as] the relations between the domiciled Jews of the diaspora and the natives of the country were at times far from cordial, and in periods of trial and oppression, when the Jews were driven in upon themselves, it was natural for them to take refuge in the study of their sacred books, and of those especially, such as Esther, which told of the subjection of the heathen to the chosen people...The practical purpose with which the additions were composed would cause their author to eschew the introduction of all foreign elements...Accordingly, the additions might be expected to be strictly orthodox and conservative in tone, and this is exactly what we find. The spirit of simple prayer breathes in them, and remembrance of God's mercies to Israel are

[29] Berlin, *Esther,* pg. 1
[30] Berlin, *Esther,* pp. lii & liii,

> especially emphasized...It has been thought that the object of the additions was 'to remove the uneasiness arising from the secular tone of the original story'...[31]

B. Mordecai praying

It is, therefore, not surprising that the first extracanonical mention of prayer, and of Jews praying, appears in Addition A, and also in the early part of the Septuagint itself. Addition A contains the text of Mordechaues' dream, which is the most dramatic departure from the canonical text. The dream itself is most notable – because not only is Mordecai's dream prescient insofar as he sees,

> Every nation made itself ready for war, to make war upon a nation of righteous men (Addition A, 1:6),

but because when the righteous nation is troubled and "fears the evils that threaten them" (Addition A, 1:8), they "cry unto God" (1:10) and "a light and the sun rose, and the humble were exalted and consumed the glorious." (1:11)

An appeal to God next appears in the text of the Septuagint itself (though not in one of the formal 'Additions'). Mordechaeus sends Esther's eunuch back to her with news of the Jews impending destruction and rather than merely instructing Esther to approach the King and ask for mercy (as happens in the canonical version in verses 4:13-14), Mordechaues says the following:

> "Haman who holds the next place to the King has spoken against us for death. *Do thou call upon the Lord*, and speak to the king concerning us, to deliver us from death." (Septuagint Esther 4:8)

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[31] *The Apocrypha and The Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English,* trans. and ed. R. H. Charles, D. Litt., D.D. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1913), 665-6.

This instruction to pray is then followed by Esther 4:13-14 as it appears in Megillat Esther, which keeps to the text of the original manuscript, but is then immediately supplemented by two additions which drastically alter the theological and religious import of the Book of Esther.

Addition C is a dramatic departure from a world without God. Instead of merely fasting (as Mordecai and Esther do in the book of Esther), Mordechaeus prays. His prayer is neither brief nor simple, but is an elaborate form of *shevach* – praising God's power and creation:

> And Mordechaeus sought the Lord, mentioning all of the works of the Lord, and said, 'Lord, Lord, King that rules over all, for the whole world is in your power, and there is no one that will oppose you when you will save Israel: for you did make the heaven and the earth, and every wondrous thing in the world under heaven. And you are Lord of all, and there is no one that shall resist you, the Lord. (Addition C, *The Prayer of Mordecai)*

Mordechaeus is functioning, therefore, under an assumption of God's Presence. This is a Presence that can be called on with prayer, and asked for help in a time of crisis, which is a bold departure from the world of Esther, a world without God. Even more striking, however, is the sense that though the Jews may be living in a foreign land under foreign rule, the king to whom they ultimately answer is both more powerful and more lasting than any on earth, a statement that, when read in the diaspora, can be imagined as one which intended to boost Jewish morale and observance under foreign rule. It is also notable that the above excerpt is followed by a defense of Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman, a topic that will be addressed later in this chapter.

BT *Megillah* 12b[32] is the first Rabbinic text to imagine prayer in the Esther story, but the reference is brief and succinct and largely interested in prayer as it relates to Mordecai's lineage. It is notable, however, that the Amoraim took pains to stress not merely that Mordecai prayed, but that his prayers were, in fact, heard:

> *[Mordecai is called] son of Shimi [because he was] a son whose prayers God 'heeded/listened to' (the play here is on shin-mem-ayin).* [And he is called] son of Kish, for 'he knocked' on the gates of mercy [begging for the Jews salvation] and they were opened for him. (The play here is on *nun-kuf-shin* [emphases mine]

Esther Rabbah, like the Septuagint, imagines Mordecai praying after he hears Haman's decree, but in the Midrash, we're able to see the details of the prayer itself:

> 'SO MORDECAI WENT HIS WAY AND DID ACCORDING TO ALL THAT ESTHER HAD COMMANDED HIM' (Esther 4:17). In Babylon they say that this means that he spent the festival of Passover in fasting and on account of that calamity Mordecai prayed to the Lord and said... 'Now, therefore, our God, deliver us we pray Thee, from his hand and let him fall into the pit which he has digged and let him be caught in the snare which he has hidden for the feet of Thy saints, and let this sinner know that You have not forgiven the promise which you made to us, 'Yet for all that when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break My covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God. (Leviticus 26:44)' Esther Rabbah 8:6[33]

The language here is Biblical, as is the formula, which asks for deliverance and the punishment of the enemy. The precise wording found here is also particularly notable, as it is found often in prayers of request *(bakashot)* in the psalms – the recurrence of words like "pit" and "snare" as well as the mention of Babylon, a land known for being the place of exile, are all Biblical tropes. Also interesting is the language of sin: Mordecai

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[32] Used in Chapter One to discuss lineage, see p. 3

[33] This Midrash from Esther Rabbah 8:6, like Addition C, contains an explanation of Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman followed by a more general prayer to God. I have excerpted the general prayer here, and will take up Mordecai's discussion of his devotion to God in the later part of this chapter.

here refers to himself as a sinner, a Biblical conceit (sin leads to suffering) that would go a long way in helping to explain the suffering of the Jews.

Pirke deRabbi Eliezer uses similar Biblical imagery to imagine Mordecai's response to Haman's decree, and, as in Esther Rabbah and the Septuagint, imagines Mordecai praying for salvation. Again, the language used by Mordecai has him addressing God as one would royalty, a conceit that may serve as a polemic against foreign rule. It also takes great care to put the story of Esther in a greater Biblical context and imagine Mordecai as a descendant of the patriarchs[34]. It is not surprising then that the prayer Mordecai composes invokes *zechut avot*, the merit of Mordecai's "fathers", as part of his plea for divine mercy. *Zechut Avot* is after all a Rabbinic concept couched in Biblical language and lineage:

> And Mordecai heard [the decree against the Jews] and rent his garments and put on sackcloth with ashes, and went forth into the midst of the city as it is said, 'AND MORDECAI KNEW ALL THAT WAS DONE' (Esther 4:1) and he cried before the Holy One, blessed be He, saying, 'King of all worlds! You swore to our forefathers to multiply their seed like the stars of the heaven, and now you have given them like sheep to the slaughter. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel...to whom you promised...I will multiply your seed like the stars of heaven.' (Exodus 32:13)' Pirke DeRabbi Eliezer 50:1[35]

C. Esther Praying

According to all the Greek texts and commentaries, however, Mordecai does not pray alone. In part, this may reflect the general order of the MT, in which Mordecai first instructs Esther to go speak to the king, and only later does Esther follow suit, instructing Mordecai to assemble the people and have them fast. So, too, here, where Mordecai

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[34] As in the excerpts from Pirke deRabbi Eliezer cited in Chapter One, p. 6

[35] Mordecai's prayer in the Targum II, and BT Megillah 11a are very similar to Pirke deRabbi Eliezer 50:1.

initiates prayer and Esther follows. Esther, presumably emboldened by Mordecai's prayer, now makes her own. She fasts, removes her glorious raiments, makeup and oils, and, garbed in a costume of ashes and dung – a costume just as dramatic as that of queen – launches immediately into a *bakashah* to The Lord of Israel, whom she refers to as "My Lord," that is the God of the Jews:

> And she besought the Lord, God of Israel, and said, 'My Lord, our King, Thou art *God* alone; help me who am destitute, and have no helper except for you: for my danger is close at hand. (Addition C)

Clearly, Esther is identifying herself not merely as a believer here, but as a Jewish believer and appealing to God's history of action for and engagement with the Jewish people. The God she seeks and speaks to is the God of Israel, a particularistic God, the God of her ancestors:

> I have heard since I was born in the tribe of my family that Thou, Lord, did take Israel out of all the nations and our fathers from their progenitors[36], for an everlasting inheritance, and that Thou did for them all that Thou did promise. (Addition C)

The people are, in other words, inheritors of a promise made in Egypt and heir to a covenant with God; the theology here is both classically Biblical and reflective of the writers' exilic experience. What comes next though, is a departure from what preceded: Esther creates a theodicy to explain the sorry state of her people. It is their sin of idolatry, she confesses, that has led to this desperate situation. She makes this claim despite the fact that in earlier verses of the Septuagint Mordechaeus has insisted that the Jews are suffering *despite* his refusal to engage in idolatry.

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[36] See Deut 4:20, 34, 26:5, and Joshua 24:3

This idea, that idolatry leads to punishment is Biblical insofar as the Jews are punished for the sin of idolatry in II Kings 17:10-16 & 29-41, but in those cases, the idolatry committed occurred before the exile, a possibly incidental but still meaningful difference. Nonetheless, it is a compelling theodicy, and lays the groundwork for increased theological orthodoxy among the Jewish readers (and writers) of the Septuagint, who were, history suggests, themselves living outside the land, among people for whom idolatry was largely a way of life. It is then also a revisitation of the Biblical Egyptian experience.

Esther's next appeal to God is, therefore, particularly poignant. Rather than ask for salvation on the basis of her (or her people's) own merit, Esther argues that saving the Jews of Persia is in God's best interest: doing so will serve as a form of mockery and humbling for those who are regular idolaters. "Surrender not, O Lord, Thy scepter unto them that be not gods, and let not them that are our enemies mock at our fall; but turn their counsel against themselves, and make an example of him that began to do this against us." (Addition C) Or, in the words of R.H. Charles, "Them that be not gods [can be understood as] those who have no being, in contrast to [Adonai], in whom being resides."[37] The counsel, in such a case, is Haman.

D. Prayer and Observance

Another explicit plea follows, which moves Esther from the communal – prayers on behalf of the people Israel - to the personal, a prayer for her own courage in the presence of the earthly king. This request for salvation is, (like Mordecai's prayer),

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[37] *The Apocrypha and The Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English,* trans. and ed. R. H. Charles, D. Litt., D.D. (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1913), p. 677.

predicated on a claim of religious observance: not only has Esther remained modest in her high office, and not taken its niceties seriously, but she in fact detests them, hates sleeping with an uncircumcised, non-Jewish husband, and has refrained from eating what is (presumably) non-kosher food and wine. She states in her own words:

> Thou know that I hate the glory of the wicked and I detest the bed of the uncircumcised and of any alien. Though know…that I abhor the sign of my proud estate, which is upon my head in the days when I show myself openly…And [I] have not eaten at the table of Haman, and I have not borrowed the king's feast, neither have I drunk the wine of the libations. And thy servant has known no joy since the day I was brought here… (Addition C)

These statements not only emphasize the importance of observance in a foreign land, but set clear boundaries for Jewish readers living in diaspora. Eating non-kosher food, drinking non-kosher wine and sleeping with gentiles is, even when done in the service of her people's salvation, abhorrent, and should not, presumably, be done for any other reasons. Do not try this at home.[38]

It is only after Esther reiterates the Biblical antecedents for deliverance and the importance of Jewish observance that her prayer ends. But by now, the message is clear: deliverance, when it arrives, does so at the will and whim of God. This redemption is the result of an exclusive and ancient covenant with the Jewish people, whose own

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[38] Midrash Tehillim 22:16 later makes the same argument. In the words of Esther: "'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Ps. 22:2), 'You are my God from my mother's womb' (Psalm 22:11). Why did Esther say 'My God' three times? Because Esther was implying to the Holy One, blessed be He: 'Master of the Universe, you gave me three laws - one concerning menstruation, one concerning the priests portion of bread, and one concerning the lighting of the Shabbat light. And even though I am in the house of this wicked person, have I in any way violated one of these laws?'" See also the Septuagint on Esther 2:10: "Now Esther had not discovered her kindred; for so Mordochaeus commanded her, to fear God, and perform his commandments, as when she was with him: and Esther changed not her manner of life."

responsibilities as bearers of said covenant have also been made clear: they should, whenever possible, retain Jewish practices, even in exile. As Levenson points out:

> The stirring and eloquent prayers in Chapter C lay to rest suspicions of unorthodox behavior to which the MT can give rise – for example, that Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman was not religiously motivated, or that Esther enjoyed being married to a Gentile and eating non-kosher food. In so doing, Chapter C assimilates Esther to the scriptural norm defined by Pentateuchal law, the observance of which is central to the Judaism of the Second Temple…In addition, as Clines points out, 'these prayers assist in remolding the book into the form of *an exemplary tale – which does not only record divine deliverance or divine-human cooperation, but also gives advice on how Jews should behave religiously in a foreign environment or a situation of crisis.*' As he notes, prayers of supplication of this sort are common in Second Temple Judaism (e.g., Ezra 9:6-15, Neh. 1:5-11, 9:6-37; Dan. 9:4-19, Judith 9).[39]

Accordingly, it is only after Esther's 'exemplary statements' have been made that she closes with a communal prayer on behalf of the whole community of Israel. "And save us from the hand of them that deal wickedly…"[40] before ending with a plea for bravery.

E. Esther's Prayer as Polemic

Some 500 years later, the Amoraim in BT *Megillah* also imagine Esther praying, but the prayer that they imagine for her is distinct from the one contained in the Greek texts, and bears the distinct mark of the encounter with Christianity. As Esther approaches the King's court, the Rabbis imagine Esther crying out to God in the language of the Psalms – language that is, interestingly enough, the precise language used by Jesus as he is dying on the cross:

> 'AND SHE [Esther] STOOD IN THE INNER COURT OF THE KING'S HOUSE.' R. Levi said As soon as she reached the chamber of idols [on her way through the palace to Ahashverus] the Divine Presence departed from her and she

[39] Levenson, *Esther,* p. 31
[40] Addition C

> exclaimed 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Psalms 22:2) BT *Megillah* 15b

It is also a profound theological departure from the theology that has preceded. Esther prays to God, but she prays to God as one would who believes they have been abandoned by God, as a Jew who lives in a world where God is not immediately apparent would, where God appears, at least for the moment, to be absent. This is both poignant and authentic, reflecting the true dilemma at the heart of the MT. How do we as Jews respond when history suggests that we are alone in the world? Whom do we call in our prayers and what do we express?

Esther, like Mordecai, prays in Esther Rabbah and her prayer begins in the same manner as it does in the Greek versions: Esther removes her royal raiments and covers herself in ashes, fasts and prays. However, the content of her prayer, like the content of Mordecai's in Esther Rabbah, is notable for the strength of its biblical imagery and it is striking for its insistence on her status as a poor orphan and the Jewish people as the "sheep of [God's] pasture":

> ...She afflicted herself with fasting and fell on her face before the Lord. And she prayed, saying: 'O Lord God of Israel who art Ruler from of old and did create the world, help now Thy handmaid who has been left an orphan without father or mother, and is like a poor woman begging from house to house. So I pray for Thy Ahashverus. And now, O Lord, grant success to your humble handmaid here and deliver the sheep of your pasture from these enemies who have risen against us, for none can hinder You from saving whether with many or with few. And you, father of orphans, stand at the right hand of this orphan and make this man mercifully disposed towards me, for I am afraid of him, and cast him down before me, for You bring the proud low. Esther Rabbah 8:6

The imagery here is native to the psalms: God as shepherd, the Jews as sheep, God as father, the Jews as orphaned children. This is hardly incidental, for by painting the Jews as vulnerable and in need of God's protection, Esther's plea becomes particularly

poignant. Theologically, too, the message is moving: The Jews, no matter what the story of Esther might suggest, are in constant need of God, a God with the power to save them from the whims of the powerful.

F. The Efficacy of Prayer

In some senses, then, the prayer in Esther Rabbah lays the groundwork for those in Midrash Tehillim. In Midrash Tehillim there are five instancesof Esther praying to God.[41] The most notable of these contains themes that already seen: Esther asks if God has forsaken her, and invokes *zechut avot*. Note, for example, Midrash Tehillim 22:6:

> 'My God, my God, why you have forsaken me?' (Psalm 22:2). On the first day of a fast, one says, 'My God'; on the second day one says, 'My God'; only on the third one may say, 'Why have you forsaken me?' So it was only after Esther cried out in a loud voice, 'Why have you forsaken me?' that her cry was heard.

The theological implication is that God responds to the cries of the downtrodden and suffering and suggests that it is the cry of the victim that prompts this response. As James Kugel notes:

> [Passages in the bible that contain *sa'aq* (cry out)] are not claiming that God heeds human prayers in general...What these passages say is that God is uniquely moved by human suffering. This claim is made despite its theological difficulties – for, as pointed out earlier, God ought rightly to be aware of everything going on in His universe and not just the cry of victim...Despite such difficulties, the cry of the victim is hardly an obscure or minor part of the very conceptualization of

[41] See also Midrash Tehillim 22:24, 'Do not be far from me,/for trouble is near/and there is none to help.' (Ps. 22:12). When did Esther speak these words? At the time when Ahashverus decreed TO DESTROY TO SLAY AND TO MASSACRE ALL THE JEWS (Esther 3:13)

> divine-human interaction in the Bible – it is, par excellence, the thing that humans do that makes God act.[42]

This midrash then continues at length, with Esther complaining that God did not treat the Israelites in Egypt so neglectfully. God therefore, she insists, has a responsibility to act similarly in saving the people now, a time when the threats against the Jewish people are even more real – and foreboding:

> 'O my God, I cry in the daytime, you don't answer...But you are the Holy One, enthroned, the praise of Israel. Our fathers...cried out to you and were delivered.' (Psalm 22:3-6) Esther said to the Holy One, blessed be He, Did you deal with our fathers in Egypt as now you deal with us? Indeed not. As soon as our fathers cried, You heard them, as it is said, 'The Lord said: I have...heard their cry...and I have come down to rescue them from the Egyptians.' (Exodus 3:7-8). Yet which is the greater trial, this one or the one in Egypt? Pharoah charged all his people, saying: Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live. (Exodus 1:22), but Haman sent letters TO DESTROY...BOTH YOUNG AND OLD, LITTLE CHILDREN AND WOMEN, IN ONE DAY. (Esther 3:13). Pharoah commanded that only when a man did not complete his work was he to be walled up alive; when a man did complete his work, nothing was done to him; but Haman decreed TO DESTROY, TO SLAY, AND TO MASSACRE ALL THE JEWS (Esther 3:13). Those who were in Egypt you heard at once when they cried out; but to us who have been fasting for these three days and praying and crying and calling, You do not reply: even if there are no good deeds in us, deal mercifully with us for the sanctification of your name. 'But you are the Holy One, enthroned, the Praise of Israel.' (Psalm 22:4) Midrash Tehillim 22:6

In this way, the authors of Midrash Tehillim transforms Megillat Esther, which is in the MT form stridently secular, into a legend on a par with the greatest Jewish redemption on record: the Exodus from Egypt. This analogy is made again in Midrash Tehillim 22:16, where Esther invokes not only the Passover story, but the matriarch Sarah's redemption as well:

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[42] James Kugel, *The God of Old: Inside the Lost World of The Bible* (New York: Free Press, 2003), pp. 119-120

> 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Psalm 22:2) Esther said, 'My God' you were at the Red Sea, 'My God', You were at Sinai. 'Why have you forsaken me?' Why should the order of things, even the story of Matriarchs, turn out differently for me? Our mother Sarah was taken for only a single night to Pharoah, and he and all the people of his house were smitten with great plagues, as it is said, 'The Lord afflicted Pharoah and his house with great plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram.' (Gen. 12:17); but I who have been forced all these years to endure the embrace of such a wicked person -for me, You work no miracles.'[43]

That these prayers will be efficacious is a foregone conclusion. The Rabbis knew, before reading the midrash, that they were doing what in their own lives was impossible: ensuring that prayers would be answered, and that God, committed to the covenant, would respond just as hoped. As we read in Apocrypha, Addition E, "And my nation, this is Israel, which cried unto God and were saved."

G. Idolatry

The human half of the covenant is critical. Prayer, the midrash and Greek texts suggest, is efficacious in large part because the Jews have shown God that they have kept Her commandments. Their adherence to Jewish law and ritual is their leverage, their unfailing monotheism the primary reason they believe they can make requests of God and expect that they will be granted. This is evident in Mordecai's (imagined) explanations for why he refused to commit idolatry. Such an explanation – whether provided by the commentators or Mordecai himself, also strengthens Mordecai's Jewish identity and conveniently turns his refusal to bow to Haman into a polemic against idolatry.

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[43] For more on connections to the Exodus story, see also Midrash Tehillim 22:27 on Esther 5:2, "'But you, O Lord, be not far off.' (Ps. 22:20) Esther said, O Lord, pity me and have compassion for me. The end of the verse 'my strength, hasten to my aid' (Ps 22:20) means, according to R. Johanan, that Esther said: 'As at the Red Sea, when [you were] my strength [and] hastened to help my ancestors, hurry also this day to help me.' Midrash Tehillim 22:16

From a historical perspective, however, this is simply untenable. Numerous scholars have suggested that it is actually quite possible that Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman actually has nothing to do with God, or Judaism. Rather, both Berlin and Levenson have suggested that Mordecai's refusal was merely resistance to according Haman exalted status. There is, after all, a long Biblical tradition of Jews (or Israelites) bowing to human beings, as in Gen 23:7, 43:28, Ex 18:7, I Kings 1:23 and it is never regarded as wrong.[44] Levenson argues similarly, but offers a few other theories as well:

> Why Mordecai refuses to kneel before Haman is unknown. That a Jew may bow down to another man is clear from the Bible itself...Some have speculated that Haman claimed divine honors (as Nebuchadnezzer does in Judith 3:8) and thus Mordecai refused to bow out of the traditional Jewish resistance to idolatry. In support of this, one may cite the usage of the verb *kara* ("kneel"), which occurs twice in v. 2. Though the word need not imply homage, when it does, the recipient is nearly always God...But if idolatry is the cause of Mordecai's noncompliance, the text is strangely silent about this. In addition, it is difficult to see why the king commands that an underling be treated as a god when he himself is not. Since v. 4 can be interpreted to mean that Mordecai's Jewishness was the cause of his refusal to kneel and bow to Haman, and since idolatry seems an unlikely factor here, some scholars have seen the issue as one of ethnicity. Agag's nation, the Amalekites, had long been conceived as the archetypical enemy of...the Jews...This theory seems possible, but without corroboration.[45]

Levenson's final theory, however, is literary, and may be the most meaningful. The literary symmetry, he says, between Vashti's refusal to come to Ahashverus' party and Mordecai's refusal to bow suggests premeditation on the part of the author:

> In each case, an irascible dignitary magnifies a personal slight (albeit one with political overtones) into an all-consuming political issue. A major part of the genius of the plot of Esther is the way the consequences of these two very similar

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[44] Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary on Esther* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), p. 34.
[45] Levenson, *Esther,* p. 67.

> but independent events come to intersect, with enormously positive results for both the Jews and the empire.[46]

But for Alexandrian authors who were deeply concerned with resisting idolatry and preserving the integrity of the tradition under foreign rule, Mordecai's refusal was an opportunity to polemicize. Mordecai, they argued, is a monotheist – a model Jew who will risk life and limb for God's glory. Addition C solves the "problem" of why Mordecai would not bow – he was motivated by his objection to bowing to anyone except God:[47]

> For I had been content to kiss the soles of [Haman's] feet for the salvation of Israel...But I did this so that I might not set human glory above the glory of God and I will not bow down to anyone but You, who are my Lord, and I will not do these things in pride. Addition C [48]

This argument also, suggests Levenson, "puts Mordecai's actions into the praiseworthy category of resistance to idolatry, a pressing issue in late Second Temple Literature...and always a problem for Jews living under an alien religious order."[49]

The Amoraim take up where the Apocrypha leaves off, drawing out the argument,

> "And one who says [that the Megillah should be read from] A JEWISH MAN (Esther 2:5) [explains the verse as follows], What did Mordecai see that [caused him to] provoke Haman [by refusing to bow down to him]? For this [reason] - because [Haman] made himself an object of worship. And what happened to them [as a result]? A miracle occurred." BT *Megillah* 19a

The Maharsha then points out that although Mordecai's refusal to bow to Haman isn't "expressly mentioned until Esther 3:1, the Megillah reading nevertheless commences

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[46] Levenson, *Esther,* p. 68.
[47] For other opinions, see Josephus and Targum Rishon, who argue that Haman had an image of God on his chest and Mordecai would not bow down to it. Targum Sheni, on the other hand, doesn't mention an image but, similar to the Greek texts, suggests that the reason is even more basic: Mordecai bows only to God.
[48] The same reasoning appears in the Septuagint's rendering of Mordecai's prayer.
[49] Levenson, *Esther,* p. 84.

with *ish yehudi* - a Jewish man – since that verse teaches that Mordecai repudiated idolatry." It is, in other words, not merely for the glory of God that Mordecai is noncompliant, but because of the refusal to worship Haman. Mordecai, initially a merely political hero, is recast as a religious one.

The midrashists follow suit. Esther Rabbah 8:6 serves as a reiteration and extension of the Septuagint, adding that Mordecai did not refuse to bow just for the glory of God, but for fear of God:

> 'SO MORDECAI WENT HIS WAY AND DID ACCORDING TO ALL THAT ESTHER HAD COMMANDED HIM (Esther 4:17)'. In Babylon they say that this means that he spent the Festival of Passover in fasting and on account of that calamity. Mordecai prayed to the Lord and said: 'It is fully known before the throne of Thy Glory, O Lord of all worlds, that it was not from pride or heart of vaingloriousness that I acted in not bowing down to Haman, but through fear of You that I did this, not to bow down to him, for I was in fear of you if I should give any honor to flesh and blood, and I was not willing to bow down to any beside the. For who am I that I should not bow down to Haman for the salvation of the people Israel? For that I would even kiss his shoe-lachet.

However, lest readers be misled, it is emphasized that fear was not the only motivating factor for Mordecai. Idolatry and lineage played a central role in his refusal. Note, in this regard, Esther Rabbah 7:8:

> "What did Mordecai say to those who asked him WHY DO YOU TRANSGRESS THE KING'S COMMANDMENTS? (Esther 3:3). R. Levi said: He said to them, 'Our master Moses admonished us in the Torah, saying, "Cursed be the man who makes a graven or molten image (Deut 27:15); and this wretch sets himself up as a deity. Isaiah the prophet admonished us, "Cease to glorify man, who has a breath in his nostrils! For by what does he merit esteem?" (Isaiah 2:22) What is more, I am the elect of the Holy One, Blessed be He, since all the tribes were born outside of the holy land, but my ancestor was born in the land of Israel (Benjamin)"

The Rabbis in Esther Rabbah argue that ultimately it is *both* awe and belief in monotheism that spur Mordecai's rebellion. He is a monotheist who sees it as his

obligation to sanctify and unify God's name, and resist the idolatry that would threaten these aims:

> 'BUT MORDECAI BOWED NOT DOWN NOR PROSTRATED HIMSELF BEFORE HIM' Was Mordecai then looking for quarrels or disobedient to the king's command? The fact is that when Ahashverus ordered that all should bow down to Haman, the latter fixed an idolatrous image on his breast for the purpose of making all bow down to an idol.[50] When Haman saw that Mordecai did not bow down to it, he was filled with wrath. Said Mordecai to him: 'There is a Lord who is exalted above all the exalted; how can I abandon him and bow down to an idol? And because he proclaimed the unity of God's name, he was called *Yehudi*, as much as to say *yehidi* (unique/one). Some say he was equal to Abraham in his generation. Just as our father Abraham allowed himself to be cast into the fiery furnace and converted his fellow men and made them acknowledge the greatness of the Holy One, Blessed be He, as it says, 'And the souls which they had gotten in Haran' (Genesis 12:5), so in the days of Mordecai men acknowledged the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it says, 'AND MANY FROM AMONG THE PEOPLE OF THE LANDS BECAME JEWS" (Esther 8:17), and he proclaimed the unity of God's name and sanctified it. Therefore he was called *Yehudi*, as it says, a Jew; read not *Yehudi* but *Yehidi*. Esther Rabbah 6:2

And yet this refusal, we learn, comes at a high price. Diaspora rabbis were, we can imagine, intimately familiar with the costs of such disobedience, and therefore took care to mention them, suggesting that Mordecai, like Esther, is not merely a religious hero, but a religious martyr:

> 'AND ALL THE KINGS SERVANTS THAT WERE IN THE KINGS GATE' (Esther 3:2) R. Jose b. Hanina opened with the text, 'The proud have hid a snare for me' (Psalm 140:6). Said the Community of Israel before the Holy One, Blessed be He, 'Sovereign of the Universe, the idolaters have spread a snare for me to overthrow me. They say to me: "Practice idolatry." If I listen to them, I am punished, and if I do not listen to them, they kill me.' She is in the position of a

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[50] Pirke deRabbi Eliezer 50:1 contains a nearly identical version of this: "Haman, the son of Hammedatha (Esther 3:1). The king commanded concerning him that all the people should bow down and show reverence to him. What did Haman do? He made for himself an image of an idol, and had it embroidered upon his dress, above his heart, so that everyone who bowed down to Haman also bowed down to the idol which he had made. Mordecai saw this, and did not consent to bow down to the idol, as it is said, 'But Mordecai bowed not down, nor did him reverence' (Esther 3:2)."

> wolf which is thirsting for water and finds a net spread over the mouth of the well. It says: 'If I go down to drink, I shall be caught in the net, and if I do not go down, I will die of thirst.' Esther Rabbah 7:6

The implication here is clear: maintaining the integrity of the tradition is never simple, and often dangerous. Judaism, however, requires the kind of obedience that shuns such risk.

While the stated theological implications of such a refusal have been, up to this point, fairly traditional, Bereshit Rabbati 33:6-7 explains Mordecai's refusal to bow differently. This new explanation is both beautiful and haunting, and casts Mordecai in an entirely new light – he is, we are told, God's home on earth:

> Rabbi Levi said, In the time that Ahashverus commanded everyone to bow down to Haman, everyone bowed down to him except for Mordecai, as it says, ALL THE SERVANTS OF THE KING IN THE GATES OF THE KING BOWED DOWN TO HAMAN (Esther 3:2) When Haman saw that Mordecai was not bowing down, they said, Perhaps it is because he is a foreigner and his customs are not normal in society. They started to say to Mordecai, It's a commandment of the king, as it says, 'Why have you violated the commandment of the king? (Esther 3:3)'. *He said to them, I am a dwelling place of God*, as it says, "And between [Benjamin's] shoulders I [God] dwell". And it's not proper for the messenger or the dwelling place of God to bow down to flesh and blood. So they said to him, 'What about your forefather Benjamin, who together with his father and his brothers, bowed down to Esau - didn't that happen? Don't we read that the maidservants approached and then Leah approached and everyone bowed down to Esau?' Mordecai answers, 'God forbid.' As it says, "And at the end Joseph and Rachel came forward and bowed down…' and Benjamin hadn't been born yet. [emphases mine]

For the commentators, this is no small thing. To be a "home" for God is at once a tremendous responsibility and a great blessing. It is the price of, and reward for, a heroic fidelity; a fidelity found most strongly in exile. The ongoing faith in a God who hears and responds to prayer, a God who appreciates and rewards observance, and a God who, though not always visible, is nonetheless present, even when history suggests otherwise:

> Another comment: The passage beginning 'Our fathers trusted in you' (Psalm 22:5) refers to Mordecai and Esther. Thus 'They cried out to you and were delivered' (Psalm 22:6) refers to the verse where it is said, THESE DAYS OF PURIM THEY ASSUMED FOR THEMSELVES AND FOR THEIR DESCENDANTS THE OBLIGATIONS OF THE FASTS WITH THEIR LAMENTATIONS' (Esther 9:31). 'They trusted in you' (Psalm 22:6) refers to the verse, 'THEN I SHALL GO TO THE KING, THOUGH IT IS CONTRARY TO THE LAW' (Esther 4:16). 'And were not disappointed.' (Psalm 22:6) refers to the verse where it is said, 'THE JEWS HAD LIGHT AND GLADNESS, AND JOY AND HONOR.' (Esther 8:16). Finally, 'All they who see me mock me/ they curl their lips/they shake their heads.' (Psalm 22:8) refers to Haman's sons who mocked the Jews, curled their lips and shook their heads, saying 'Tomorrow they will be killed, or hanged.' Midrash Tehillim 22:21

Prayer, for the Greek authors and the Rabbis, is predicated on trust – and faith. It is a faith with its' roots in the Bible; a faith which clings to observance, shuns idolatry, and shows itself to be, ultimately, rewarded. Though the world may be frightening and the times dire, ultimately, suggest the Rabbis, we will not be disappointed. The light of deliverance will rise, as it did in Egypt, and the people will be saved by the one they are loyal to.

Chapter Three

God's Presence among the Jewish People and His Protection

"Removal of explicitly religious language does not conceal the divine causality, not if the holes that are left are God-shaped. To the religious believer, 'chance' is a name for God." [51]

A. Jewish Survival Despite the Odds

Jewish history up to the present is a tale of near-misses. Even if we choose not to subscribe to a lachrymose view of our past, the truth is that the survival of the Jewish people outside of the Land of Israel cannot be described as anything other than miraculous, coming as it does at the end of a seemingly endless litany of expulsions, massacres, pogroms and disasters. These are, whether we like it or not, an integral part of our inheritance, and for much of Jewish history, survival in the face of such overwhelming odds has had one overriding implication (or, critics would argue, one rhetorical tautology): The Jewish people were chosen and protected, if for no other reason than that something, or someone, was making our survival – though perpetually threatened – possible. The Book of Esther, in its Masoretic form, is a document of this diasporic worldview, though it seemingly rejects its usual conclusion – that God is the everpresent source of this salvation. God is, in the plain sense of Esther, totally absent - the miracle of survival rests entirely on the shoulders of the Jews.

For later Rabbinic readers, however, this was impossible. Making sense of their lives and survival in the diaspora without slipping into fatalism required an extreme faith: the belief in God's presence and protection despite the odds. And so they, like many contemporary readers and scholars, read their beliefs back into Megillat Esther – using the story to prove that even when we cannot see or hear the voice of God, the miracle of

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[51] David Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1984), P.154

our survival serves as proof of Her presence, a sign that we are, even in the darkest times, even in Haman's Persia, not alone. As Jon Levenson has written:

> The idea that the seeming coincidences of the narrative have been arranged by some higher power – higher than the individual event itself and higher than the fates that Haman consulted by casting the lot (pur) – is explicit in the text itself...Consider Mordecai's reply when Esther hesitates to approach the king: *'Don't imagine that you alone of all the Jews will escape because you are in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you really do remain silent in such a time as this, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows? Perhaps it is just for such an occasion as this that you have attained to the royal estate! (4:13-14).* One need not see the term 'quarter' (makom) as a name of God (which it will become in the Rabbinic period) to suspect that the source of deliverance and retribution to which Mordecai alludes is indeed the deity, and not 'Jewry's inner strength and potential for self-help.[52]

B. God's Presence with the Jews Stated but not Shown

Levenson, I would argue, is wrong. God is *not* explicit in the text. In fact, the truth is precisely the opposite, which is why the commentators have to work so hard, and devote so much time to making God explicit. The first example on record is found in the Septuagint:

> If Mordochaeus be of the race of the Jews, and thou hast begun to be humbled before him...you will fall...and will not be able to withstand him for the living God is with him. (Septuagint on Esther 6:13)

Zeresh's message is clear: God is *with* Mordecai, even when She cannot be seen, or heard. Mordecai, like the Jews, cannot be vanquished because he is accompanied, at all times, and in all places, by the Presence of the living God. Likewise, the Amoraim, asserted this presence as fact. God is, in fact, not only with Mordecai, but also with Esther as seen in BT *Megillah* 15a:

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[52] Levenson, *Esther,* p. 19

> 'AND IT WAS ON THE THIRD DAY, AND ESTHER CLOTHED HERSELF IN ROYALTY.' [The Gemara asks, the text] should have said [that Esther clothed herself in] royal garments. [The Gemara answers], R. Elazar said in the name of R. Chanina: [This] teaches that [Esther] was clothed in the Divine Spirit. For it is written here, AND SHE CLOTHED, and elsewhere it is written, 'And the spirit clothed Amisai' (I Chron 12:19)

Pirke deRabbi Eliezer approaches the issue somewhat differently, though the conclusion is ultimately the same: God is with the Jews at times of crisis. And according to Eliezer ben Hyrcanus, God is in fact so present to the people that His heart is disturbed by their distress:

> ON THAT NIGHT THE KING'S SLEEP FLED (Esther 6:1). That night the throne of the King who is the King of Kings, the Holy one, blessed be He, became unsteady, because He saw that Israel was in great distress. The sleep of the king on earth fled, for he had seen in his dream Haman taking the sword to slay him, and he became agitated and arose from his sleep... Pirke deRabbi Eliezer 50:1

The personification of God is striking here, as is the repetition of "king" – and the sense that the demeanor of the "king above" has a direct bearing on the state of the earthly king below, and that, though he does not know it, Ahashverus himself may be an unwitting agent of God.[53] Also notable is how God is imagined as sensitive and responsive to Israel's plight ('He became unsteady') – that God suffers when Israel suffers.

The author of Exodus Rabbah 15:16 personifies God similarly. The Jewish God, though He is imagined as the God of history, is capable of great empathy and compassion. This is a God who has accompanied the Jewish people in multiple exiles: in

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[53] Esther Rabbah 10:1 contains a nearly identical version of this midrash: 'ON THAT NIGHT THE KING'S SLEEP WAS DISTURBED.' (Esther 6:1). The heavens, the throne of the Supreme King of Kings, the Holy One, blessed be He, were disturbed when He saw Israel in such distress. Is God then subject to sleep? Is it not said: 'Behold, the Guardian of Israel neither slumbers nor sleeps"? (Psalms 121:4) It can happen, however, when Israel is in distress and the other nations are at ease [that God appears to sleep]; therefore, as it says, 'Awake, why do you sleep, O Lord?' (Psalms 44:24)"

Egypt, in Babylon, and of course, in Media. In all these places, God's presence keeps the people from the blame of a tarnished reputation – a great liability for a minority people living under foreign rule in an unfamiliar land:

> God said, 'As long as I am with [Israel] they will not get an evil name...I was with them in Egypt and they were found to be blameless, for it says, 'A garden locked is my own bride' (S.S. 4:12). I was with them in Babylon and they were found perfect, for it says, 'If our God who we serve' (Dan 3:17). Because I was with them in Media they were found blameless, for it says, 'BUT MORDECAI WOULD NOT KNEEL OR BOW DOWN' (Esther 3:2).

C. God's Presence with the Jews is Shown: Change in the King's Countenance

In the case of Megillat Esther, however, God's presence makes itself felt most strongly at one specific moment in the story, which is commented on by many of the midrashists. It is the instant of greatest peril, when the Queen is about to put her life on the line by approaching Ahashverus and revealing her true identity. For Esther, the protagonist, it is a moment fraught with tension - the fate of the Jews hangs in the balance. But for Greek commentators, it is an opportunity – a chance to assert God's presence and power over the King of Persia:

> And lifting up his face that flamed with glory, [Ahashverus] looked upon Esther in fierce wrath. And [Esther] fell down and changed color and swooned and she bowed herself down upon the head of the maid who went before her. And God changed the spirit of the king into mildness, and in alarm he sprang up from his throne and raised her in his arms until she came to herself again, and comforted her with reassuring words, and said unto her, 'What is it, Esther?' I am thy brother...And she said unto him, 'I saw thee, my lord, as an angel of God, and my heart was dismayed for fear of your glory. For you are wonderful, my Lord, and your countenance is full of grace.' (Addition D)

The melodrama here is reminiscent of Judith and Tobit[54] and Joseph and Asenath where characters swoon and moon out of awe and love. But the true focus of this version is God's intervention, which saves Esther and inspires the king to great chivalry.

The theological significance of commentaries like the former cannot be overstated: the assertion by Hellenistic Jews that God has a hand in history is tremendous; they were living in exile and had ample reason to doubt God's agency in the world. Which makes it particularly poignant that Esther is at once described as a great heroine – a woman who acts with tremendous bravery and conviction, and yet *does not act alone*. It is God, in concert with a human protagonist, who saves the people. The message is clear: the covenant requires that Esther, like Moses, Joseph, and other great Jewish heroes, will act independently and courageously, though never (even though she may believe otherwise) alone. As to the impact of this addition on the MT itself, Jon Levenson notes:

> The effect of Chapter D is twofold. First, it again puts the *megillah* into an explicitly theistic framework, ascribing to God events that are therein never explicitly interpreted in theological fashion, though there are subtle suggestions that such an interpretation is indeed appropriate. Second, chap. D enhances the image of Esther herself by concentrating on the magnitude of the challenge she faces. Whereas the MT has Esther winning the king's grace as soon as he sees her (5:2), D:6-7 has rewritten the story to show him 'inspiring great fear' and 'ablaze with the most intense anger.' Yet Esther, though she staggers, does not retreat and, with God's crucial help, presses ahead in her mission of Jewish deliverance – all without further counsel from Mordecai.[55]

Esther Rabbah 9:1 contains a reiteration and expansion of what is above, taking care to describe Esther as an orphan and emphasize God's mercy:

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[54] See Judith 10:1-11:4.
[55] Levenson, *Esther,* pp. 87-88.

> ...The king was sitting on his royal throne in a robe adorned with gold and precious stones and when he lifted up his eyes and saw Esther standing in front of him he was furiously angry because she had broken his law and come before him without being called. Then Esther lifted up her eyes and saw the king's face...And when the queen perceived how angry the king was, she was overcome and her heart sank and she placed her head on the maiden who was supporting her right hand. But our God saw and had mercy on His people and he took note of the distress of the orphan who trusted in Him and He gave her grace in the eyes of the king and invested her with new beauty and new charm. Then the king rose in haste from his throne and ran to Esther and embraced her and kissed her....

As in the Apocrypha, it is Esther who must gather the courage to approach the King alone, and only once she has done so, will God's mercy and Presence protect her, and by extension, the entire Jewish people. The message is clear: God may be with us, but we have to have the courage and faith to take the first step. In the words of J.A. Loader, "The book of Esther should be read as a story of God's intervention on behalf of his people, but also as a story of human wisdom and initiative."[56] Or, as David Clines argues,

> ...There is in Esther no story of human actions leading to success that does not depend in large measure upon the divine 'chances'. For our storyteller there is no theological problem or narrative tension between the human and divine. For him, divine-human cooperation is the most natural thing in the world. And, since both God and the Jewish people have an equal stake in the preservation of the nation, divine and human interests coincide, and they each contribute their best talents towards accomplishing that end.[57]

D. God's Presence with the Jews is Enacted: The Intervention of Angels

The authors of Midrash Tehillim take God's imagined intervention in Ahashverus' court even further. As noted in Chapter Two, Esther prays to God for help,

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[56] J.A. Loader, *Esther as a Novel With Different Levels of Meaning,* Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 90 (1978): 417-21. p. 421

[57] David Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story.* (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1984). p. 157

but in Midrash Tehillim 22:27 God's response is more extreme than anything we have seen so far:

> 'But you, O Lord, be not far off.' (Ps. 22:20) Esther said, O Lord, pity me and have compassion for me. The end of the verse, 'My strength, hasten to my aid' (Ps 22:20) means, according to R. Johanan, that Esther said: 'As at the Red Sea, when [you were] my strength [and] hastened to help my ancestors, hurry also this day to help me. In that instant, an angel came down from heaven and struck Ahashverus in the face, saying: Wicked one, your lady stands outside, while you are seated here inside. Note that it is not written, 'When the king, etc.' but AFTER THE KING HAD SEEN ESTHER THE QUEEN STANDING IN THE COURT, SHE OBTAINED FAVOR IN HIS SIGHT (Esther 5:2). - that is, Esther obtained favor in the sight of Ahashverus against his will and not because of the goodness of his heart.

This is the first time that we see God's hand (literally!) in history in the commentaries. This is *literal* intervention – not merely a change in the king's countenance, but God's arm coming down on the enemy. God is not only present, but in command of divine messengers capable of carrying out Her will on earth.

The next two midrashim that imagine God's intervention in the Esther story likewise contain angels,[58][59] but in Esther Rabbah 7:12 and Pirke deRabbi Eliezer 50:1, the angel is given a very specific identity. The angel is Michael, from the

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[58] For more on angels in the aggada on Esther, see also BT *Megillah* 15b-16a where Shimsi is reading to Ahashverus from the Book of Chronicles and tries to erase the passage about Mordecai. The angel Gabriel sees this, and responds by filling in what has been erased so that Ahashverus will know the truth of Mordecai's heroics. Perhaps this is because Gabriel is serving as the vehicle for vengeance on Haman.

[59] Barry Dov Walfish has this to say about the role of angels in Rabbinic commentaries on Esther: "The [Rabbinic era] sages never directly broach the subject of the absence of God's name from the book. However, from numerous statements they make with regard to the Esther story it is clear that they saw the divine hand guiding events, settling accounts, and assuring a favorable outcome for the Jews...In Midrashic account[s], God and his angels are present behind the scenes throughout, and the question of the absence of God's name is not at issue." Barry Dov Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages.* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1993). P. 79-80

contemporaneous book of Daniel, which is particularly meaningful because in Daniel 10:13, Michael, 'prince of the highest rank' and a warrior angel, opposes the Persian prince to save the mysterious figure in Daniel. Michael is also referred to in Daniel 10 as a great prince who will stand besides the Jewish people, and help to save them. Because of Michael's identity - the prince who miraculously appears in Daniel's visions during the reign of Cyrus of Persia to fight *against* the 'Prince of Persia', it is fitting that he is the angel chosen by the Rabbis to defend the Jews against the current 'Prince of Persia'. Also meaningful is the fact that Michael is considered the angel of mercy and compassion by the tradition. See, in this regard Esther Rabbah 7:12:

> For every charge which Haman brought against them below, Michael pleaded a defense for them above. He said, 'King of the universe, your sons are being accused not because they have worshipped idols nor because they have shed blood, but solely because they have kept your laws.' God replied to him, I swear to you that I have not abandoned you and that I will not abandon them, as it is written, 'For the sake of his great name, the Lord will never abandon His people.'(I Samuel 12:22); whether they be guilty or not guilty, it is impossible to abandon them, since the world cannot dispense with Israel. 'If a man offered all his wealth' (Song of Songs 8:7) - that is the wicked Haman who gave ten thousand talents of silver to destroy Israel - 'He would be laughed to scorn' (Song of Songs 8:7)

Michael, as imagined above, serves as both an advocate for and intermediary of the people, a symbol of God's ongoing relationship and presence with them.[6061] A mouthpiece for God to express His fidelity to the Jews, Michael is, in some senses, a go-

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[60] "The celestial messengers are often regarded as the mediators who bear human prayers to God." Roy A. Stewart, *Rabbinic Theology: An Introductory Study* (Edinborough and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1961.), P. 57

[61] Esther Rabbah 10:9 cites another instance of Michael's interference: "Ahashverus returned to the place of the banquet when Haman had risen to make request for his life. What did Michael do? He pushed Haman on to Esther, who cried out, 'My Lord, the king, behold he is violating me in your presence!' Then the king said, 'DOES HE MEAN TO RAVISH THE QUEEN IN MY PRESENCE?' (Esther 7:8). When Haman heard this, his face fell."

between whose main purpose is to facilitate communication between the Jewish people and *their* king without requiring a *peh-el-peh* (mouth-to-mouth) conversation.[62]

In Pirke deRabbi Eliezer, though, Michael's role is imagined as even more active:

> 'WHAT IS THY PETITION QUEEN ESTHER? AND IT SHALL BE GRANTED THEE; AND WHAT IS THY REQUEST?' (Esther 7:2). She said to him, MY LORD, O KING. I ASK NOTHING OF YOU EXCEPT MY LIFE AND MY PEOPLE, because one man has come and has bought us to destroy, to slay and to cause to perish. 'But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen, I had held my peace' (Esther 7:4). The king said to her, 'Who is this man?' She answered him, 'This is the wicked Haman,' as it is said, 'And Esther said, 'An adversary and an enemy, even this wicked Haman.' (Esther 7:6) 'The king arose in his wrath.' (Esther 7:7) What did the angel Michael do? He began to cut down the plants in his presence. Intense wrath was kindled within him and the king returned from the palace garden to the place of the banquet of wine. What did the angel Michael do? He lifted up Haman from Esther. Pirke DeRabbi Eliezer 50:1

Here, we see Michael in action. He is 'cutting down the plants' in the King's garden, in an effort to provoke Ahashverus' famous tripwire temper.[63] This is particularly meaningful because 'cutting down shoots' or destroying plants in Rabbinic Literature is equated with destroying life. He is, of course, successful, and the furious king takes his

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[62] "Certain angels are mentioned by name and characterized so often as to become familiar figures. Of the immense detail available, only a few typical references are given here...Michael is the defender of Israel...declared metaphorically to be made of snow – he cools God's anger against Israel." Stewart, *Rabbinic Theology,* P. 58

[63] "Why the king stomps out in a huff (Esther 7:7) has been the subject of much speculation...Whatever the reason, the image of Ahashverus, lord over 127 provinces from India to Ethiopia, absenting himself just at the climactic moment is comic touch that reinforces our sense of him as weak, malleable, and devoid of self-control...The 'rage' associated with [Ahashverus'] precipitous departure [in Esther 7:7] appears as a familiar trait of his character, having been mentioned twice before, both times in connection with Vashti's insubordination (1:12, 2:1). It is a trait that he shares with Haman, who has also been described twice as filled with 'rage', both times in connection with another act of insubordination, Mordecai's (3:5, 5:9). Esther 7:7 thus serves to remind us of Ahashverus and Haman's similarity, while at the same time telling of their separation and of the king's total animosity toward his prime minister." Levenson, *Esther,* p. 104.

wrath out on Haman, saving Esther and by extension the Jews, from the worst kind of fate.

For the Rabbis, Michael is the perfect vehicle – evidence of God's hand in history, but - not too much. Even if God is not Himself immediately and actively saving the Jews, He has the power to ensure that they are protected by a guardian angel who can advocate on their behalf. Again, this is an assurance of God's presence, but it is a measured Presence, wherein the people must keep up their end of the bargain – fidelity to the One God, and observance of His laws.

E. God's Presence with the Jews as a Positive Sign of Jewish Character

In part, the commentators suggest, this ongoing Presence is itself as sign of something greater: the special relationship between the Jewish people and their God, which is itself the result of something distinct in the Jewish character or destiny. Though the commentators refrain from calling it thus it might be described as chosenness. Note Addition E, in the Apocrypha, here:

> But we find that the Jews, who have been consigned to destruction by the most abominable of men, are not malefactors, but living according to the justest laws, and being sons of the living God, the most high and mighty, who maintains the kingdom to us as well as to our forefathers, in the most excellent order. Ye will therefore do well in refusing to obey the letters sent by Aman the son of Amadathes...For in the place of the destruction of the chosen race, Almighty God has granted them this time of gladness.

For both the authors of the Greek texts and the Rabbis, living as a minority in a host culture, the notion that foreign leaders might recognize the power of the Jewish God was likely comforting and seductive, at once a polemic on behalf of Jewish power and might, and a wish thrown up to the heavens: from their commentaries, to God's ears:

> The author of Chapter E follows a long tradition in which foreign dignitaries are made to acknowledge the God of Israel (e.g., Exod. 9:27; 18:10-11; Numbers 22-24; 2 Kings 5:15). In the Second Temple period itself, this tradition became more important, perhaps in compensation for the blows to the Jewish ego wrought by repeated defeat and subjugation to foreign emperors. The portrayal of Artaxerxes in Esther E as one who fears the God of Israel is reminiscent of the portrayal of his predecessor a generation or two earlier, Cyrus, who begins his own pro-Jewish decree by confessing that, 'The Lord, God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the world and enjoined me to build him a Temple in Jerusalem, which is in Judah' (Ezra 1:2)...[64]

The BT *Megillah* asserts something similar – suggesting that because of the particular relationship between the Jews and their God, they are accorded a certain level of protection as a people, protection so powerful that it is even recognized by their enemies.

> 'THERE IS A CERTAIN NATION.' Rava said: There was no one who knew how to slander [as skillfully] as Haman. [For] Haman said to [Ahashverus] 'Come, Let us destroy [the Jews]' [He replied] to him, 'I am afraid of their God, that He should not do to me as He did to my predecessors.' BT *Megillah* 13b

God's ongoing presence with the people is therefore not just a fact known and appreciated by the Jews, but also by those would hope to defeat them. This is true, suggest the Rabbis, no matter where the Jews are, or what challenges they face in exile. God is, ultimately, always with them; they are Her people and She is their God, a relationship that remains in force whether in Babylon, Greece, Rome or Persia.

> Samuel opened with the text: 'And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I did not reject them, neither did I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, to break My covenant with them; for I am the Lord their God.' (Leviticus 36:44) 'I did not reject them' in Babylon; 'Neither did I abhor them' in Media. 'To destroy them utterly' when subject to Greece. 'To break My covenant with them' when subject to the kingdom of wickedness. [i.e.-Rome]. 'For I am the Lord their God' in the Messianic era. R. Hiya taught: 'I did not reject them' - in the days of Vespasian; 'Nor did I abhor them' - in the days of Trajan. 'To destroy them utterly' - in the days of Haman. 'To break my covenant with them' - in the

[64] Levenson, *Esther,* p. 114.

days of the Romans. 'For I am the Lord their God' in the days of Gog and Magog. Esther Rabbah Proem 4

Chapter Four

God's Salvation

"The presence of Esther in the Bible leads us (usually more subtly than we recognize) to identify the power that brings about its happy conclusion with the God of Israel. Read in this fashion, Esther is a variety of the familiar tale of God's chosen cast into desperate straits and then rescued by their divine savior. This is how Jewish tradition has historically understood the book."[65]

A. God's Absence/Presence in Esther

Salvation in a world where God does not act in history was, for Jews throughout the ages, impossible. Salvation with God, however, was considered miraculous. The story of Esther, therefore, left later Jewish commentators in a bind: it does not mention God, but without God, whence salvation? For the Rabbis, and even modern scholars, this created a deeply troubling dilemma, a dilemma that required reading God back into Esther's story of salvation.

Perhaps afraid of defaming God's name, the Greek commentators and the midrashists who came later never mentioned or even acknowledged the absence of God in the Book of Esther. It is as if they believed that by ignoring the God-shaped hole in the text, they could deny its very existence and the possibility of a world without providence. As Barry Dov Walfish has noted,

> ...If God is assumed to be involved in the events of the Esther story, it is through His providence that His involvement is made manifest and miracles provide the mechanism for this involvement. The sages never directly broach the subject of the absence of God's name from the book. However, from numerous statements they make with regard to the Esther story, it is clear that they saw the divine hand guiding events, settling accounts, and assuring a favorable outcome for the Jews.[66]

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[65] Levenson, *Esther,* p. 17.
[66] Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb*, p. 79.

B. Greek Sources on God's Salvation

The first sources to discuss this intervention of the divine hand explicitly came not from the sages, however, but from the authors of the Septuagint and Apocrypha, who used Mordecai's oracular dream to make the case for God in strong, particularistic language:

> And Mordachaeus said, 'These things are from God...The nations [I dreamt of] are those nations that combined to destroy the name of the Jews. But as for my nation, this is Israel, which cried unto God and were saved: for the Lord delivered his people and the Lord rescued us out of all these evils and God has wrought such signs and great wonders as have not been done among the nations. Therefore did he ordain two lots, one for the people of God, and one for all the other nations. And these two lots came for an appointed season, and for a day of judgment, before God, and for all the nations. And God remembered his people, and vindicated his inheritance. And they shall observe these days, in the month Adar...with an assembly and joy and gladness before God, throughout the generations... (Addition F)

This is a blatant rejection of Esther in its original, Masoretic form,[67] and a reiteration of one of the most common themes of Biblical literature: God's ability to free and redeem the people from imminent death, destruction and oppression:

> In the Greek Esther, the initial dream and its interpretation readjusts the conception of God as a saviour who intervenes in Jewish history at the moment when the survival of the people is suddenly cast into doubt into an all-seeing designer of history who has already determined the salvation of the Jews before the thought of genocide has even occurred to Haman. It is a matter of a 'great god mak[ing] known what shall be hereafter. The dream is certain, and its interpretation is sure'. (Daniel 2:45)"[68]

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[67] "[The portion of the Septuagint noted here] displays the theological interpretation of the book that is characteristic of the Greek versions, but constrasts markedly with the Hebrew rescension." Levenson, *Esther*, p. 135.
[68] Clines, *The Esther Scroll,* p. 172.

The Septuagint's version of this deliverance is distinctively similar to salvation as it is imagined in the Book of Daniel[69] and the Septuagint's casting of salvation as particularly related to the role and destiny of Jewish people living in a non-Jewish milieu. The Jewish people, the Greek versions emphasize, are not merely the lucky recipients of a unique and powerful form of divine providence, but insofar as they are blessed by the Jewish God's miraculous salvation, serve as an ongoing symbol of their faith's power and veracity:

> Finally, the presence of the...material in Additions B and E, the edicts of Haman and Mordecai, is to be explained in the same way as an assimilation of the Esther scroll to a characteristic feature of the post-exilic 'Persian histories' of Ezra and Daniel...the effect of the incorporation of apparently authentic Persian documents is to give the book the air of closer engagement with Persian official records (such as we note in the MT Esther's reference to the Book of Chronicles of the Kings of Media and Persia, 10:2). Such insertions...create a greater correspondence with the Biblical 'Persian' books. And the significance of the citation of Persian documents, religiously speaking, is not to add an air of greater authenticity to the Biblical books – for why should a Persian document be supposed...to be able to add anything to a Biblical narrative? – but as a testimony to the impact of the truth of the Jewish religion upon outsiders, neighbors and overlords.[70]

In short, the Greek version's assertion that salvation comes to the Jewish people especially through the Jewish God is not intended merely to increase morale among

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[69] "...The effect of [Mordecai's dream and its interpretation in the Septuagint] is to set the narrative of the Esther scroll in a broader interpretative framework in which the role of God and the nature of the threat to the Jewish people have been hugely magnified. From an early phase in the history of the Esther story, the world-wide dimension of the threat to the Jews had been explicit – and the divine act of deliverance had been, as I have argued, implicit. The Septuagintal Esther makes its distinctive contribution by drawing the book within the orbit in which the book of Daniel moves, incorporating the story into a grand 'plan of the ages' in which 'two lots' – for Jews and for Gentiles – 'came to the hour and the moment'...and portraying a God who does more than merely deliver distressed Israel: like Daniel's God who 'delivers and rescues' and 'works signs and wonders in heaven and on earth' (Dan 6:27), Esther and Mordecai's God deals in cosmic coinage, with an eschaton-like day of gloom and darkness and every nation readied for battle..., 'saving' his people and 'rescuing' them indeed, but equally 'working great signs and wonders such as have not occurred among the nations'" Clines, *The Esther Scroll,* p. 172.

[70] Ibid, p. 173.

Jewish readers, but to serve as a polemic about the benefits of Judaism for non-Jewish neighbors and countrymen. Membership has its privileges.

C. *Midrashim* on God's Salvation

As for the author of the Septuagint, so, too, for the author of Esther Rabbah. In Esther Rabbah we are told that the deliverance of the Jewish people was assured even before the time of the Esther and Haman; and although Mordecai and Esther are the agents of this preordained redemption, it is God who enacts ultimate salvation for the powerless Israelites:

> R. Berekiah said: The Holy One, blessed be He, had already recorded the deliverance of Israel in the Torah, as it is written, 'And if resident alien among you has prospered, etc.' (Leviticus 25:47). 'A stranger who is a settler' refers to Haman, who became great and rich and could afford to pay ten thousand shekels of silver. He was called ' a resident alien' because he was of the seed of Amalek and he was an alien/stranger in Media and Persia. 'And your kinsman being in straits' (Ibid): this refers to Israel who were poor and needy. 'And be sold unto the stranger' (Ibid): because Ahashverus sold them to Haman to destroy, to slay and to cause to perish. 'Or to the offshoot of an alien's family' (Ibid): because he set himself up as a deity, as it says, 'Bowed down and prostrated themselves before Haman' (Esther 3:2). 'After that he is sold he may be redeemed' (Ibid 25:48): *because the Holy one, blessed be He, redeemed them from his hand and delivered them from his decree and ransomed them. 'One of his kinsmen shall redeem him' (ibid): This is Mordecai,* of whom we read that 'He was popular with most of his kinsmen/brothers' (Esther 10:3). *'Or his uncle, or his uncle's son shall redeem him' (Leviticus 25:49): this refers to Esther* who was the daughter of his uncle and through whom Israel were redeemed. [emphases mine] Esther Rabbah 10:13

In part, the inevitability of this deliverance is tied to the lineage of the protagonists: The triumph of the Israelites (as represented by Mordecai) over the Amalekites (as represented by Haman) has been 'predicted' in Exodus.[71] But it is not, as the MT

[71] See Chapter One for more on the importance of Mordecai's lineage, pp. 2-10

suggests, merely through our protagonists that salvation is granted; it is God who ensures it, in concert with Haman and Mordecai. Esther Rabbah 10:13 continues:

> 'For I will utterly blot out the remembrance of Amalek' (Exodus 17:14): blotting out in this world, I will blot it out in the next. 'The remembrance of Amalek' this refers to Haman, this passage having been [incorrectly] read, 'The males of Amalek'. The patriarch Jacob also hinted at all this in the blessing of the tribes, as it says, 'Benjamin is a ravenous wolf; in the morning he consumes the foe.' (Genesis 49:27): this refers to Saul who was the morning of Israel, being the first of the kings, and who was from the tribe of Benjamin and smote Amalek and spoiled all their possessions. 'And in the evening he divides the spoils (Ibid): This refers to Mordecai and Esther who championed Israel in their exile which is like the shadows of evening and divided the spoil of Haman who is compared to a wolf. *For God raised him up to oppose the wolf, namely, the kings of Persia and Media who are compared to a wolf, as it is written,* "And behold another beast, a second, like to a wolf.' (Dan 7:5). In Babylon, however, they say: This refers to the kings of Media and Persia who eat like a bear and are restless like a bear and are shaggy like a bear. *God raised them up to confront them Mordecai and Esther from the tribe of Benjamin, who is called, 'A ravenous wolf'* (Ibid, Genesis 49:27) [emphases mine]

In other words, it is not merely that God preordained the Jews' deliverance in Esther, but also, we find that it is God who determined the conflict at the very heart of the story. If deliverance is inevitable, so, too, is the oppression and suffering that require being saved in the first place. We see this echoed in the BT *Megillah*:

> 'AFTER THESE THINGS' (Esther 3:1). After what things? Rava said: After God had created a healing for the affliction [that was about to befall Israel]. For Resh Lakish has said: The Holy One, blessed be He, does not afflict Israel unless He has created a healing for them beforehand, as it is said, 'When I healed Israel' (Hosea 7:1). Not so, however, with the other nations: He afflicts them first, and then creates a healing, as it says, 'And the Lord shall smite Egypt; he shall smite and [then] heal.' (Isaiah 19:22)[72]

This theology of divine providence and salvation is felt most keenly in Esther 4:13-14, where Mordecai pleads with Esther to speak up on behalf of her people, at the risk of her life. "Mordecai had this message delivered to Esther: Do not imagine that you,

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[72] BT *Megillah* 13b.

of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, *relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish. And who knows (mi yodea), perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis.*" [emphases mine] This is as close as the MT comes to using the language of destiny, or providence, and though it merely opens up the possibility that an intelligent design has shaped Esther's life up to this point[73] (as suggested by the Septuagint and Apocrypha), for the Rabbis, it was an opportunity to assert precisely who and what the 'other quarter' was:

> 'FOR IF YOU KEEP SILENT.' If you keep silent now and refrain from pleading for your nation, in the end you will be silent in the time to come and you will not able to justify yourself, because you had the opportunity of doing good in your lifetime and you did not do it. And do you imagine that the Holy One, blessed be He, will abandon Israel? In any case, He will raise up a deliverer for them, as it says, 'THEN WILL RELIEF AND DELIVERANCE COME TO THE JEWS FROM ANOTHER PLACE.' Esther Rabbah 8:6

Deliverance, the Rabbis stress, will ultimately come to the Jews from God, but in the form of a deliverer. That is, it is not God alone who will save the Jewish people, but God and a deliverer acting out God's will. Clines argues that, ironically, it is precisely the

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[73] "The identity of 'another quarter' from which 'relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews' if Esther is silent is unclear. (Esther 4:14). It is conceivable that all Mordecai means is that he will in that case devise another stratagem to rescue the Jews, with the exception of his high-placed and uncooperative cousin. The end of v. 14, however, suggests a different and deeper interpretation: Esther's astonishing rise to the queenship may reflect a providential plan for Jewish succor, and it would be folly to imagine that one person's noncompliance could derail the entire plan. In support of this more theological reading, the expression 'who knows' (*mi yodea*) is suggestive. In several other passages in the Hebrew Bible, these words preface a guarded hope that penitential practice may induce God to relent from his harsh decree, granting deliverance where destruction had been expected (cf. 2 Sam 12:22, Joel 2:14 and Jonah 3:9). If this is the background to the usage in Esther 4:14, then we have here another echo of the rites of lamentation with which the chapter began. And if 'another quarter' is God, then we have in this verse the strongest approximation in the Masoretic Esther to an explicit theological affirmation." Levenson, *Esther,* p. 81.

ambiguity of 'opportunities' like 4:13 and 4:14 in the MT that best illustrate the providential nature of the story. The fact that Esther is a Jewish girl is the first of these, as is her unsummoned – yet ultimately acceptable audience with King Ahashverus:

> Is there a theme of chance or providence in the Esther tale, as we have noted for the Mordecai tale? The more the outcome hangs on the character's own resources, the less opportunity might be thought to be available for providence to act. But as it is, there are...points at which the plot encounters unpredictability...[And] there is the most important coincidence of them all: the Jewish girl is a Persian Queen. Without that timely coincidence there would be no Esther story at all; and Mordecai draws attention to it (4:14): 'Who knows whether it was for such an opportunity as this that you came to the throne?' This is not the language of chance, but a restrained affirmation of the providential nature of Esther's position. The Esther tale...is a blend of success story, in which the heroine wins her way by her own qualities and initiatives, and a deliverance story, in which a happy outcome is determined by providential and unpredictable occurrences. This tale was built upon the same synergistic assumptions that we will find to lie behind every future version of the story: both the providential coincidences and the contributions of human courage and ingenuity cooperate in the salvation of the Jewish people.[74]

In other words, true salvation is both human and divine in origin.

The Rabbis in Midrash Tehillim 22:5 argued for a similar partnership, using the figure of Esther as an opportunity to assert God's active and ongoing role in Jewish history in exile:

> In saying, 'As the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram and a great dark dread descended upon him.' (Genesis 15:12) Scripture is referring to the several exiles, during which the Holy One, blessed be He, will be a light in the midst of the darkness for the children of Israel. 'Dread' refers to Babylon, described in Daniel's vision as 'dreadful and terrible' (Dan 7:7); 'darkness' refers to Media, which darkened the light in the eyes of Israel, until in the days of Mordecai and Esther when the Holy One, Blessed be He, restored the light, for it is said, THE JEWS HAD LIGHT AND GLADNESS....Note that it is also written of Esther: 'Then called Esther for Hathach' (Esther 4:5), etc. up to the verse in which Mordecai sends word to Esther: 'DO NOT IMAGINE THAT YOU, OF ALL THE JEWS, WILL ESCAPE.' (Esther 4:13), that is, 'Do not think to yourself: Because I am queen I will not die!' 'FOR IF YOU STAY SILENT AT

[74] Clines, *The Esther Scroll,* p. 145-6.

> THIS TIME' (Esther 4:14), 'It is a time of trouble for Jacob/But he shall be delivered from it' (Jer. 30:7). For RELIEF AND DELIVERANCE WILL ARISE TO THE JEWS FROM ANOTHER PLACE. (Esther 4:14) -- that is, from Him, of whom it is written, 'Israel shall be saved by the Lord with everlasting deliverance.' (Isa. 45:17) BUT YOU AND YOUR FATHER'S HOUSE WILL PERISH. AND WHO KNOWS, PERHAPS YOU HAVE ATTAINED TO ROYAL POSITION FOR JUST SUCH A CRISIS.' (Esther 4:14).

According to the Midrash, then, God, Mordecai and Esther are partners in Israel's salvation, a salvation which is theologically meaningful – it is evidence of God's light and presence in the darkness of exile, no matter which empire is in power. The repetition of the term light is also meaningful here, as is the association of God with the light, as it says in Esther 8:16, "And the Jews had light and gladness, happiness and honor."[75] Also notable is the fact that '*makom*' here is equated with God's presence – which will, in the Rabbinic period, become another name for God. [76] Finally, by drawing the comparison between Persia and Babylon the author of Midrash Tehillim is taking pains to place Media among the four paradigmatic kingdoms of exile (Babylon, Persia, Greece and Rome).

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[75] "Sometimes the sources speak of the 'light' [*or*] of God, without using the term Shekhina. The verse, 'In the light of the king's countenance is light' (Proverbs 16:15) the Sages expounded as referring to 'the light of the Holy One, blessed be He', and to the 'fire from on high'; and when they declared that 'the Holy One, blessed be He, is all light', or spoke of 'this people whose God is light', they did not mean to say that He was a substance of light, but that the light was His own, and that He had no need of any other light..." Ephraim E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press of Hebrew University, 1979.) pp. 46-47

[76] "As stated above, 'Heaven' is also used vis-à-vis the outer world, while Makom which is not found either in the Apocryphal literature, in Aramaic, or in the New Testament, is an epithet that came into being in the world of the early Sages out of a desire to emphasize the immanence of God, namely that the world is His place." Urbach, *The Sages,* p. 75.

Haman's role in God's deliverance, though alluded to earlier[77] is likewise critical for its theological implications. Haman, the midrashists note, attempted to mastermind the destruction of the Jews, but God's providence trumps his premeditation every time:

> Another interpretation, 'Many designs are in a man's mind' (Prov. 19:21) - this refers to the wicked Haman, who thought to himself, 'Tomorrow I will rise early and inform the king of Mordecai's deeds, and the king will hand him over to me.' He did not know that God's designs would take precedence over his, as it is said, 'Many designs are in a man's mind, but it is the Lord's plan that is accomplished.' Midrash on Proverbs 19

It is God's plan of deliverance that ultimately triumphs. The author of Lamentations Rabbah echoed this sentiment, arguing that though humans may make earthly plans, it is God who ultimately decides the fate of the Jewish people in exile. In the case of the story of Esther, this is especially true, as Haman's evil plot not only fails, but is turned back against him. See Lamentations Rabbah 3:37 in this regard:

> Whose decree was ever fulfilled unless the Lord wished it? Who commanded? Haman commanded, but the Holy One, blessed be He, did not command. Haman commanded 'To destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish, all the Jews.' (Esther 3:13); whereas the Holy One, blessed be He, did not so command, but 'let the evil plot, which he devised against the Jews, recoil (return) on his own head' (Esther 9:25) [78]

Haman's failure to triumph over the Jews, the author of Peskita Rabbati will note some 250 years later, is a failure foretold in biblical times, at the time of the Exodus, when the Amalekites, the prototypical enemy of the Jews, fought with the Israelites. The equation of Amalek with Haman is intended as a discussion about redemption writ large,

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[77] See Chapter One, on Haman's role in Mordecai's downfall, pp. 9-10

[78] This midrash is part of a longer narrative thread. In the midrash that preceded it, the discussion is not about Esther, but the discussion of God's ability to preordain in the opening verse of Lamentations 3:37 links "the story of Haman with the destruction of the Temple and the exile to Babylonia. [The midrash cited above] then underlines whatever happens, bad or good, happens because God has made it so..." *Lamentations Rabbah: An Analytical Translation*, trans. and ed. Jacob Neusner (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1989), P. 277.

the ultimate deliverance of the Jews at the hand of their enemies, in the time of Esther, and beyond.[79]

> By linking Amalek and Haman, our rabbis demonstrate that like Amalek, Haman was a tremendously powerful paradigm of evil. Unlike Amalek, however, Haman is soundly defeated both in the Bible and in Rabbinic literature. Our rabbis have the joy of building up Haman's might and wickedness until his stature approaches that of the feared Amalek, then recounting in glorious detail how God brings him low. The defeat of Haman thus foreshadows God's eventual triumph over Amalek – a triumph that will bring messianic deliverance and the World to Come.[80]

The author of Pesikta Rabbati therefore connects Amalek to Haman,[81] but the meaning of the connection is about more than mere lineage:

> Let our master teach us, What [blessing] shall a man say before reading the scroll of Esther? ...after finishing the Scroll, so R. Zechariah Tabbaha taught in the name of R. Johanan, He is required to say: 'Blessed are You, O Lord our God, King of the Universe, O God who pleads our cause and avenges our wrongs, Redeemer from the hand of tyrants. Blessed are You, O Lord, O God, the Savior.' Why 'tyrants' rather than 'tyrant'? Because the plural is a remembrance of the salvation which the Holy One, blessed be He, wrought through Mordecai and Esther in the days of Haman, for when Haman sought to exterminate Israel, TO DESTROY, TO SLAY AND TO CAUSE TO PERISH (Esther 3:13), he was not alone in joining battle against Israel. Indeed Amalek, who was his ancestor, was the very first to set upon Israel when they went out of Egypt, as it is said, 'Then came Amalek, and fought with Israel at Rephidim.' (Exodus 17:8) Pesikta Rabbati 13:1

The Exodus from Egypt is the symbolic backdrop for this deliverance, a backdrop that allowed Rabbinic commentators to place the Esther story into the broader context of the ultimate Jewish salvation – the Messianic era:

> The narrative of the Esther scroll (whether in its proto-Masoretic or Masoretic form) recounts the gravest threat to the survival of the Jewish people since the Pharaoh gave orders for the slaughter of the Israelites male children. No Jewish

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[79] Pesikta Rabbati 13:7 and Esther Rabbah 4:10 and 7:11 connect Haman's defeat to God's 'blotting out the remembrance of Amalek' (Exodus 17:14)

[80] Elaine Rose Glickman, *Haman and the Jews: A Portrait from Rabbinic Literature* (Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, Inc., 1999.), P. 25.

[81] See Chapter One, pp. 9-10 for more on this.

> author could have told the exodus story without a consciousness that the exodus story lay in the background as a prototype. The exodus story too had Israelites in a foreign land, threatened by a royal decree, represented at court by one from their own nation, and ultimately safely delivered. In the exodus story the causality of the deliverance is entirely explicit: the Israelites are 'brought out' (Exodus 12:51) by the 'strong hand' (13:9) of God, the 'man of war' (15:3)...the Esther story belongs firmly within a religious context, partly because of its subject matter (the deliverance of Israel), partly because of its prototype (the exodus story) and partly because of its literary setting (the Hebrew Bible). In such a context, it is yet another exemplification of the old belief that: 'God makes poor and makes rich/he brings low and also exalts/He raises up the poor from the dust/he lifts the needy from the ash heap. (I Sam 2:7-8)...the ultimate act of faith is to take the protective providence for granted.[82]

Mordecai's lineage is an important piece in this messianic reframing of Esther. Though the importance of Mordecai's lineage to the Rabbis was discussed earlier,[83] it is the association of Mordecai with the Davidic line that is the key to understanding what the Rabbis meant when they discussed deliverance. The redemption of the Jewish people at the hand Mordecai, a descendant of the Davidic line, thus serves as a taste of God's ultimate deliverance – the Messianic age:

> 'Be mindful of me, O Lord, when You favor Your people.' (Psalm 106:4). David said: Master of the Universe, when You bring deliverance through Mordecai and Esther, remember me. The Holy One, blessed be He, replied: 'As you live, I will remember you by my saying, THERE WAS A CERTAIN JUDEAN (Esther 2:5), a man of David's tribe, Judah, and only after that shall I say that the man's name was Mordecai. Midrash Tehillim 106:4

Yalkut Shimoni II, *remez* 864 makes the assertion in Midrash Tehillim even more explicit. In it, the Rabbis stress that Mordecai is God's agent of redemption because of this Davidic ancestry, a redeemer certified, sent and foreseen by God Himself. The man from the tribe of Judah represents the progenitor of the Messianic – it is no coincidence that he, as part of the Messianic line, is going to help bring redemption:

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[82] Clines, *The Esther Scroll,* p.155
[83] See Chapter One, pp. 2-10

> David said to God "Remember me O God" What does this mean? David is saying to God, "When you perform redemption through the hands of Mordecai, don't forget about me." And God responds, "Don't forget about you? By your life, I am going to use your name first. *Ish Yehudi* who was from the tribe of Judah and after that, his name is Mordecai.

The theological implication is clear: God is ultimately responsible for redemption, but Mordecai and Esther are its agents. For Levenson, this is a theology of hiddenness:

> If...theology deals with the character of ultimate reality and its manifestation in human history, then Mordecai, Haman's advisors, and Zeresh have articulated the theology of the book of Esther fairly completely: A hidden force arranges events in such a way that even against the most daunting of odds the Jews are protected and delivered. The hiddenness of this force is an essential part of its theology...If influenced by the scriptural status Esther has attained, we call that 'hidden causality' God, we must be all the more careful to differentiate God as he appears in this narrative from the God of so much of Biblical tradition, whose presence is visible, audible and dramatic. Esther's God is one who works behind the scenes, carefully arranging events so that a justice based on the principle of 'measure for measure' will triumph and the Jews will survive and flourish. There is an intriguing parallel between this description of God and the figure of Mordecai, who speaks only two verses (4:13-14) but carefully...sets things up so that Haman will be disgraced, the Jews rescued and Mordecai himself elevated...In Fox's eloquent words, 'the willingness to face history with an openness to the possibility of providence – even when history seems to weigh against its likelihood, as it did in the dark days after the issuance of Haman's decree – this is a stance of profound faith.' It is, I submit, a profounder and more realistic stance of faith than that of most of the Biblical tradition.[84]

The theology of hiddenness subscribed to by Levenson is also the theology of the Greek authors, the Rabbis and the medieval commentators. It is a theology dependent on a committed and preexisting faith, the kind of faith that subscribes to the truism that 'a coincidence is a miracle in which God prefers to remain anonymous.' Because, ultimately, God is not obvious in the book of Esther – or in the deliverance it records. If God was more obvious, why would generations of commentators (and Levenson himself)

[84] Levenson, *Esther,* p. 20-21

go to such great lengths to militate on behalf of Her Presence? One could argue that the existence of so many theologizing commentaries are in fact *greater* evidence for the possibility of God's absence. Why else would the midrashists be so strident about advocating for God's hand in history? For the commentators, living outside the land of Israel, under foreign rule, and quite often in peril, the possibility of God's absence was not just theologically discomfiting, but truly terrifying. Could it be, we can imagine them thinking, that we are only dependent on human agency for redemption? The possibility must have been unthinkable, suggesting a level of ontological loneliness that was chilling at best, nihilistic at worst, meaning that the suffering of the Jewish people was neither preordained nor meaningful. Their response – to read God back into the text, to find hope in a time of crisis, light in the darkness, and the promise of ultimate deliverance for the Jewish people – provided not just self-comfort, but a profound religious imperative. We, like Esther, must be God's agents in bringing redemption. It is us, nurtured and strengthened by our faith in God's Presence and the promise of ultimate redemption, who must be God's partners in bringing "relief and deliverance" to the Jews, and it is, therefore, our prayers as God's partner, that will invoke its arrival:[85]

> Another comment. The passage beginning 'Our fathers trusted in You'. (Psalm 22:5) refers to Mordecai and to Esther. Thus, 'To you they cried out and were delivered' (Psalm 22:6) refers to the verse where it is said, 'THESE DAYS OF PURIM...THEY ASSUMED FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR DESCENDANTS THE OBLIGATIONS OF THE FASTS WITH THEIR

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[85] As David Clines has written: "It is not so much the absence of the name of God from the book as the presence in it of critical coincidences working for the good of the Jewish people that defines its theological position. I would identify two primary elements in the book's theological statement: (i) the providence of God is to be relied on to reverse the ill-fortunes of Israel; (ii) divine action and human initiatives are complementary and both indispensable for success or 'salvation'." Clines, *The Esther Scroll,* p. 154.

LAMENTATIONS' (Esther 9:31) 'They trusted in you' refers to the verse AND SO I WILL GO IN TO THE KING, THOUGH IT IS CONTRARY TO THE LAW. (Esther 4:16) 'And were not disappointed.' (Psalm 22:6) refers to the verse where it is said, 'THE JEWS HAD LIGHT AND GLADNESS AND JOY AND HONOR.' (Esther 8:16) Midrash Tehillim 22:21

Chapter Five

The Rabbinic View of the Book of Esther

A. Assimilating Esther to A Rabbinic Worldview

The Book of Esther is the only story in the canon that fails to mention God's name, never mentions or alludes to the land of Israel and is, by in large, unconcerned with the trappings of observant Jewish life. As a result, Esther was the most problematic of the canonical texts for the Rabbis; its secular agenda presented them with an intractable dilemma. The story of Esther – canonized before their time and considered part of the sacred corpus of Jewish narratives - simply did not reflect their values. Halacha was irrevelant, the land of Israel not mentioned, and God, whether as character or effect, went unnamed. And yet later commentators could not simply ignore Megillat Esther's presence because it accounted for Purim, a festival they themselves were bound to observe. The only solution was to assimilate the Book of Esther to their own beliefs and values, to impose on a largely secular tale a level of religiosity found nowhere in the original and to theologize and Judaize the text nearly beyond recognition. They used this reimagining as an opportunity to embolden, polemicize, sermonize and legitimize their own presence in the diaspora; in so doing they used every rhetorical tool in their arsenal to invest Esther with a religious significance and meaning likely not intended by its original author.

B. Concern Over Megillat Esther's Origins

The Amoraim were, as a result, preoccupied with Esther's status in the canon. They were particularly concerned with the rules regarding the public reading of the Megillah, the blessings that preceded it, and its status compared to other canonical books.

The following excerpt from BT *Megillah* 10b gives a sense of the depth and tenor of these discussions:

> 'And it shall be to God for a name'; this refers to the reading of Megillah." (*Maharsha*; cf. *Or Gedalyahu Moadim, p. 94*, 'God's name, though absent from the Megillah itself, is mentioned in the blessings that are recited over the reading of the Megillah.')

In other words, though the Book of Esther itself does not contain God's name, the blessings over it do and this may itself serve as a signifier of the Rabbis' perception of Megillat Esther and its 'silent theology'. The prayers that precede Esther's reading serve to affirm the Rabbinic attempt at another kind of reading: reading God back into the text. For even if the text does not itself contain the name of God, by blessing its reading with prayers that do, the message of the story is profoundly altered: the miracle of the story of Esther, framed by theological statements, place the tale firmly in the theological orbit.

The Rabbis were also concerned about whether or not the Megillah was divinely inspired:

> "Rav Yehuda said in the name of Samuel, '[The Scroll of] Esther does not render the hands unclean (like the scrolls of the other books - see BT *Shabbat* 14a).[86]

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[86] "At issue is the meaning of the term 'defiles the hands'. Some scholars, notably S. Z. Leiman, R. Beckwith, and M. Broyde, argue that this term does not refer to the canonical status of the book, but rather to whether it was divinely inspired. These scholars conclude that Esther was canonized by the middle of the Second Century BCE and that the entire canon of the Hebrew Bible was closed at this time. Most recently, Menahem Haran has added his voice to this group advocating an early date for canonization. Haran's interpretation of 'defiles the hands' is, however, somewhat different; he concludes it has to do with the ability of the physical scrolls to acquire and transmit impurity, rather than with their inspired status. A scroll could be defiled by a person with unclean hands, and anyone who read from it on a public occasion might have unclean hands (there was no way to check.) Hence, deduces Haran, when the School of Shammai says that certain books do not defile the hands, this implies that they did not acquire impurity because they were not read publicly on the Sabbath or holidays. These rabbinic passages, then, have no bearing on the date of canonization." Berlin, *Esther,* p. xliii and xliv.

> [The Gemara assumes that Samuel excludes the Book of Esther from the Holy Scriptures because he holds that it was not written under the influence of the Divine Spirit. On the basis of this assumption, the Gemara asks (from Schottenstein commentary)], '[Are we] to say that Samuel holds that Esther was not composed with the Divine Spirit?' But Samuel [himself] said, [Esther was] indeed composed with the Divine Spirit. [The Gemara answers, Esther] was composed [with the Divine Spirit] for [the purpose] of reading. It was not composed [for the purpose] of being written [down and included in the Holy Scriptures.]...It has been taught, R Eliezer said: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as it says, 'AND HAMAN SAID IN HIS HEART. R Akiva says: Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit, as it says, AND ESTHER OBTAINED FAVOR IN THE EYES OF ALL WHO LOOKED UPON HER. R. Meir says: Esther obtained favor in the eyes of all who looked upon her." BT *Megillah* 7a

A few points are critical here. To begin with, it is unclear why the distinction between the Written and the Oral Torah is important – perhaps to emphasize the preeminence of the Oral Law, as this would lend credence to the Rabbis' own explication of Esther. The second is the tacit point made by the mention of Haman's heart – the author of the Megillah could not *possibly* have known what was in Haman's heart unless she was divinely inspired; the same is true of Esther's obtaining favor in the eyes of all who saw her. These commentaries, combined with the Amoraim's repeated assertion that Esther was composed under the influence of the Divine Spirit, can shed significant light on how the Rabbis projected their own worldview onto Megillat Esther. If Esther was divinely inspired, then their reimagining of the text was not only legitimate, but may in fact, have been intended (though not verbalized) by the author.

Certain elements of this worldview are expressed repeatedly in the aggadic material on Esther, and with enough close readings, notable themes emerge, creating a comprehensive (though not exhaustive) sense of the Rabbis general perspective on issues like prayer, God, messianism and observance.

C. Lineage

The first is the issue of lineage. For the Rabbis, one's ancestry was intricately tied to one's destiny, as decreed by God.[87] Mordecai's lineage was of great interest to later commentators for this very reason. By stressing Mordecai's connection to the Davidic line, and ultimately, all the way back to Benjamin, it could be argued that Mordecai was heir to a legacy of redemption. That he would be the one to save the Jews then, is not mere coincidence, but continuing evidence of God's plan for the Jewish people and those who would act on their behalf. This emphasis on the importance of lineage is likely the result of the Rabbis interest in and reverence for the notion of *zechut avot*[88], the notion that one's ancestry and one's ancestors good deeds could serve as merit for later generations:

> It is because of the *zachuth* of the Fathers, or the covenant with the Fathers, that Israel was redeemed from Egypt. That Moses was permitted to ascend Mount Sinai...and receive the Torah was also for the *zachuth* of the fathers...One Rabbi gets so exalted at the thought of the *zachuth* of the Fathers that he exclaims to the

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[87] "R Akiva does not negate the value of the influence of ancestral merit; on the contrary, he is of the opinion that the father dowers his son with wisdom, beauty and wealth and he declared 'Happy is the man who has a peg to hang on!'. But even ancestral merit merely helps; it does not affect man's [free will], nor diminish the extent of his responsibility. This responsibility is the great principle that R. Akiva inculcates in the Mishna in 'Avot with which we are concerned. There is not to be found in it the belief in predestination nor foreknowledge (Praescientia). On the contrary, it is not inconceivable that it is actually directed against those who profess this belief." Urbach, *The Sages,* p. 258

[88] "We have...in Judaism...the notion of imputed righteousness...In the Rabbinic literature, the verb *zakkah* is sometimes used as a legal term meaning to be acquitted, to be in the right, to have a valid claim; whilst the noun *zachuth* means acquittal. Occasionally, it also means to be worthy of a thing, or to be privileged. In the *pi'el* it means to argue, to plead for acquittal. Further, in a theological sense, to lead to righteousness, to cause one or to give one the opportunity to acquire a merit...The *zachuth* of the pious ancestry may generally be described as *zechut avot*..." Solomon Shechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology* (Jewish Lights Publishing: Woodstock, Vermont, 1993), pp. 170-171.

> effect: Blessed are the children whose fathers have a *zachuth*, because they profit by their *zachuth*; blessed are Israel who can rely upon the *zachuth* of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, it is their *zachuth* which saved them...in every generation. Besides the *zachuth* of the Fathers...there is also apparently the *zachuth* of every man's ancestry...*Zachuth* served mostly to establish...the consciousness of the historic continuity, and to increase the reverence for the past which has become both the foundation and inspiration.[89]

For the Rabbis, then, ancestry was, in part, destiny. It did not absolve the actor of responsibility; later generations still had free will and the obligation to choose righteousness, but they knew that they were preceded and buttressed by a covenant with God that had long preceded them and would outlast them. In the case of Esther, the weight given to Mordecai's ancestry, and the time spent on dissecting it, can be explained by understanding the weight and importance of *zachuth* in the mind of the commentators.[90]

D. Idolatry

Mordecai's actions were just as meaningful as his breeding, however, and his refusal to bow to Haman was of great concern to commentators, for whom idolatry was a constant threat, living as they did among gentile populations who often observed idolatrous practices, worshipping multiple Gods. They were especially disturbed by the worship of humans:

> "What the Rabbis strongly objected to was the deification of man. Thus with reference to Exodus 6 & 7, God is represented by the Rabbis as having said to Moses, 'Though I made you a god to Pharoah, you must not become overbearing (and think yourself God); I am the Lord.' To Hiram, the Prince of Tyre, who said,

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[89] Ibid, pp. 174-5, 184.
[90] For a more comprehensive discussion of the history of Rabbinic views on *zachuth avot,* see Urbach, *The Sages,* pp. 497-511.

> 'I am God; I sit in the seat of God' (Ezek 28:2), God is supposed by the Rabbis to have answered, 'Did Elijah, notwithstanding his reviving the dead, bringing rain, and making the fire to come down from heaven, ever make the claim to be a God?' Both Pharoah and the Prince of Tyre are, of course, only prototypes of persons deified in the times of the Rabbis, be it Roman emperors or Jewish Messiahs. And it was, we may imagine, under the pressure of this controversy that the Rabbis availed themselves of any appellatives for God, as well as of any allegorical interpretation that served as a check against this deification tendency...[Throughout the Rabbinic period] the great principle of the Synagogue, that worship is due only to God, remained untouched."[91]

We see this polemic in the aggadic material on Esther, particularly as it relates to Mordecai's refusal to bow. Bowing, for the Rabbis, constituted idolatry. To kneel before Haman was the first step on the slippery slope toward the deification of man (as they imagined was practiced by their Christian neighbors in their worship of Jesus as the Messiah). Hence the midrashists repeatedly describe Mordecai insisting that he and Esther be saved from the evil Haman, who punishes them for having observed a critical Biblical and Rabbinic injunction: the refusal to deify, and by extension worship, a human being, no matter the consequences.

E. Halacha and Observance

Likewise, the Rabbinic fidelity to religious observance and the keeping of halacha is a recurring theme in the Midrash on Esther, particularly those which try to explain the possibility of Esther's having eaten (or not eaten) and drank (or not drank) kosher food and wine, and slept with a gentile while serving as Queen of Persia. References to dietary laws, sexual intercourse and prayer appear nowhere in the MT version of Megillat Esther and are a dramatic departure from the text as we have it, but for the Rabbis, it was simply unthinkable that self-identified Jewish heroes could have lived outside the law –and a text

[91] Solomon Shechter, *Aspects of Rabbinic Theology*, pp. 38-39 and 44.

which might lead their co-religionists to believe that such a thing was possible was in great need of explication, hence their efforts to Judaize Esther's choices to the greatest extent possible. Because for them, living in the harsh climes of exile, mitzvot were the central tool used to demonstrate faithfulness to Judaism:

> R. Simlai, a well-known Aggadic teacher and controversialist of the third century, said as follows: 'Six hundred and thirteen commandments were delivered unto Moses on Mount Sinai; three hundred and sixty-five of which are prohibitive laws...' (Makkoth 23b)...This is one of the earlier comments on the number of the six hundred and thirteen laws, which are brought forward in many of our theological works, with the purpose of proving what burden the scrupulous Jew must have laboured, who considered himself under the duty of performing all these enactments. The number is...bewildering....and the Pharisee....lay under the curse of its mere quantity...The lesson these numbers were intended to convey was, first, that each day brings its new temptation only to be resisted by a firm Do not; and, on the other hand, that the whole man stands in the service of God, each limb or member of his body being entrusted with the execution of its respective functions.[92]

We see the importance of *mitzvot* stressed when the Rabbis put words into Esther's mouth: "For you know that I hate the bed of the uncircumcised...". According to Shechter, sentiments like this are a result of the fact that they saw the law as not just a yoke to be carried under duress, but that:

> The law...was [considered] a source of joy and blessing to the Rabbis....it is certain that those [Rabbinic period sages] who lived and died for it considered it a blessing. To them, it was an effluence of God's mercy and love...And it is on account of this that Israel considered themselves blessed in the city and in the field. It is the very light sown for the righteous, God not having loved anything in the world which is connected with a law.[93]

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[92] Ibid, pp. 138-139.
[93] Ibid, pp. 146-147.

F. Providence

Despite the role of human agency in keeping and observing the law, providence was an issue of great concern to the Rabbis, who struggled mightily with the tension between human free will and providence:

> Since the days of Maimonides, R. Akiva's aphorism in Mishna Avot (3:15), 'Everything is seen and freedom of choice is given', has been interpreted as treating the contradiction between God's omniscience and human free will...[According to this view] freedom of choice is given to all Israel. God looks upon the wicked and the good and judges the world by goodness, for He is the God of grace and compassion, but it is not 'only through his goodness that a man shall be right' (Psalms of Thanksgiving, folk. 13, 1.17), nor 'Those whom He called He also justified (Romans 8:30), but 'all is according to the amount of work'...R Akiva does not seek to resolve, nor even to present, the problem of the contradiction between God's foreknowledge and man's freedom of choice, but to underscore the latter...[94]

This tension is beautifully and poignantly exemplified by Esther 4:13-14, except that for the Rabbis, who believed God to be a critical part of the equation, the absence of God in any discussion of fate was troubling, suggesting as it did that human agency alone might be sufficient to save the people. In their cosmology, the balance between free will and providence was critical; both God and humans have a hand in determining their destiny (and by extension, their redemption, and the redemption of the people Israel). As Ephraim Urbach writes:

> The belief in Providence is essentially different from that in fate, for it posits the Free Will of God as a basic and fundamental verity...But this will and its decisions perforce determine man's fate and the ways of circumstances of his life. On the other hand, they are also determined by the free choice of man.[95]

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[94] Urbach, *The Sages,* pp. 257-260.
[95] Ibid, p. 264.

Divine providence, in other words, is an essential element of our lives, but only one element. A compromise must be struck between free will and fate ('and *who knows*, perhaps you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis'), a compromise in which God's role in man's destiny is made clear. [emphases mine] Although the balance shifted throughout the Rabbinic period, and the Rabbis never came to a consensus on the role of providence vs. free will, ultimately what remained evident in their works was a willingness – and devotion – to living in the apparent tension, to ask *mi yodea* (who knows) even more strongly, by suggesting the possibility of providence at each and every moment of our lives:

> The [Rabbis] did not retreat from contradiction, for their aim was not to find a smooth philosophical solution, but to activate all man's powers - both the potency inherent in the consciousness of freedom and the will to do good and that which flamed from the feeling of the nullity of man and his complete dependence on Divine Providence, for their religious thought was directed, in equal measure, towards God and towards the world and society.[96]

The Rabbis adherence to a belief in Providence was also evidence of something more: a belief that in some way, the Presence of God was with the people at all times, in all places, particularly in exile. In fact, for the Sages, God's presence was felt especially strongly outside the land, after the destruction of the Temple. This would explain the preponderance of midrashim that imagine God as present with the Jewish people in Persia, and more specifically, with Mordecai and Esther, in their most difficult moments:

> The paradoxical concept that the specific presence of the Deity in a particular place not only does not contradict His presence throughout the world, but actually makes it possible, helped to solve a concrete, historical problem, namely the presence of God among His people and the singling out of this people as His dwelling place even after the destruction of the temple and the nation's banishment from its land. Commenting on the verse, '[In driving out] from before

[96] Ibid, p. 285.

> Your people, whom You did redeem to Yourself out of Egypt, the nations and their gods?' (II Sam 7:23)...R Akiva stated: 'Were it not so written in Scripture, it would be impossible to voice such a thought. The Israelites said, as it were, to the Holy One, blessed be He: 'You did redeem yourself.' So too, it found that whenever Israel went into exile, the Shekhina, as it were, was exiled with them. When they were exiled to Egypt, the Shekhina was with them, as it is said, 'Did I reveal Myself unto the house of Thy father, when they were in Egypt?' (I Sam 2:27); when they were exiled to Babylon, the Shekhina was with them...and when they are destined to return, the Shekhina will return, so to speak, with them...[97]

The point here is implicit – God's Presence is most keenly sought after and felt at times of great crisis such that when the people are in exile they are more likely to both seek God and be aware of God's presence with them. The Midrash on Esther is shot through with this presumption, and goes a long way toward explaining why every reconstruction of Esther approaching the king imagines God's presence accompanying her at that moment (Esther 5:2). Perhaps most notable is the language used by certain of these texts which refer to God's *Presence* with Esther specifically,[98] suggesting that the word choice here is hardly accidental, but reflects the Rabbinic worldview as discussed by Urbach.[99]

G. Redemption

For the Rabbis, this Divine Presence contained within it a promise: the promise of redemption, that in the time of Esther and beyond, God's presence and power would help – in concert with Jews themselves - to redeem the Jewish people. This is a view expressed repeatedly in the Midrash[100] and was a view that imagined God as redeemer, and the Jewish people as His redeemed:

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[97] Ibid, p. 54.
[98] See BT *Megillah* 14b, for example
[99] See p. 77, above.
[100] See Chapter Four

> As far as the redeemer's image [in Rabbinic literature], there are many possibilities. One is that God Himself will redeem the people, and the redeemed people will be His servant.[101]

In this role, God would act out the promise made at Sinai – and in the Exodus from Egypt, that the Jewish people would be freed from oppression in a foreign land, and that slowly, slowly, someday, the light mentioned in Esther 8:16, "The Jews had light and gladness, joy and honor," would be known by all Jews, in all places. As Midrash Tehillim 22:13 states:

> "Another interpretation of 'Who is this who shines through like the dawn' (Song 6:10). R. Hiyya bar Abba and R. Simeon ben Halafta walking at dawn in the valley of Arbel saw the hind of the morning, its light raying out as it rose. R. Hiyya remarked: The redemption of Israel will be like this! R. Simeon replied, Yes, for it is written 'When I sit in the darkness, the Lord is my light' (Micah 7:8). At the beginning, light comes little by little; then spreads wider and wider; grows and increases, and at last bursts into shining glory. Likewise at the beginning, WHILE MORDECAI WAS SITTING IN THE PALACE GATE, TWO OF THE KINGS EUNUCHS...PLOTTED TO DO AWAY WITH KING AHASHVERUS (Esther 2:21); then, WHEN THE KING SAW ESTHER, THE QUEEN, STANDING IN THE COURT, SHE WON HIS FAVOR. (Esther 5:2); then HAMAN TOOK THE GARB AND THE HORSE AND ARRAYED MORDECAI (Esther 6:11); then THEY HANGED HAMAN ON THE GALLOWS THAT HE HAD PREPARED FOR MORDECAI (Esther 7:10); then Ahashverus said to Esther and Mordecai, WRITE IT IN THE KINGS NAME AND SEAL IT WITH THE KINGS SIGNET (Esther 8:8); then MORDECAI LEFT THE KING'S PRESENCE IN ROYAL ROBES (Esther 8:15); and at last, THE JEWS HAD LIGHT AND GLADNESS (Esther 8:16)[102]

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[101] Urbach, *The Sages,* p. 650.

[102] Song of Songs Rabbah 6:6 contains a nearly identical version of this Midrash: Song "'Who is she that shines through like the dawn?' It is related that R. Hiyya and R. Simeon b. Halafta were once walking in the valley of Arbel in the early morning and as they saw the dawn coming up R. Hiyya Rabbah said to R. Simeon b Halafta: 'Even so shall the deliverance of Israel shine through, as it is written, Though I sit in darkness, the Lord is a light unto me, (Micah 7:8). At first it comes on little by little, then it begins to sparkle, then it gathers strength, then it spreads over the sky. So at first, IN THOSE DAYS, WHILE MORDECAI SAT IN THE KING'S GATE. (Esther 2:21), then, MORDECAI WENT FORTH FROM THE PRESENCE OF THE KING IN ROYAL APPAREL. (ibid 8:15); and finally, THE JEWS HAD LIGHT AND GLADNESS, ETC. (ibid 8:16)

Some combination of belief in *zachuth avot*, a willingness to find a balance between divine and human agency and fidelity to Jewish worship, observance and monotheism defined how the Rabbis read – and reread – the Scroll of Esther. And though their methodologies in doing so were not the same, nor were the historical and cultural milieus out of which their explications emerged identical (quite often these commentators were separated by many centuries, and continents), what is clear is that their ultimate conclusion was. For the Rabbis, the miracles contained in Megillat Esther could not be anything other than proof of God, a God who was the God of Jewish history, who demanded fidelity to rite and ritual, and the worship of none other. And ultimately, this belief would be proof of providence, and its role – however great or small – in the redemption of the exiled Jewish people, which, though it might not arrive as quickly as they – or the Jews of Persia – might have liked, would certainly arrive nonetheless.

Conclusion

The highest drama in the book of Esther is described by BT *Megillah* 15a:

> 'AND IT WAS ON THE THIRD DAY, AND ESTHER CLOTHED HERSELF IN ROYALTY.' [The Gemara asks, 'The text] should have said [that Esther clothed herself in] royal garments.' [The Gemara answers], R. Elazar said in the name of R. Chanina: [This] teaches that [Esther] was clothed in the Divine Spirit. For it is written here,'AND SHE CLOTHED', and elsewhere it is written, 'And the spirit clothed Amisai'. (I Chron 12:19)

In the single most frightening and vulnerable moment of her life, in a world teeming with those who sought to kill her and her people, Esther was accompanied by the Divine Presence. It is never clear whether Esther was aware of this Presence, but the implication is that, whether she is or isn't, it is somewhat irrelevant. Knowing that God is with you is less important than being accompanied by Her presence. And so it is for so many of the interpretive traditions on Esther, which, with some notable exceptions, seem more intent on making a case for God's presence with the Jews, and the Jews redemption in Esther, than discussing how Esther and Mordecai felt (or didn't) about God.

Which begs the question: does it matter? Does it matter if we think that we're alone, if we live in a precarious world without knowledge of God in our lives? For the rabbinic interpreters I used in this thesis, what seemed to matter more was making the claim for God's presence – a claim that runs like a bright golden thread through all the texts that I used, arguing for God's hand in Israel's redemption. Faith is important insofar as it proves or challenges God's presence. Because, as even the most cursory glance at this thesis will show, God is, in the minds of the commentators, was always with the Jewish people. In fact, so pervasive has this perspective become, that last week I was catching up with an Orthodox friend, who, when he found out what I was writing my thesis on, was perplexed: "I was taught," he said, "That God is everywhere in the book of Esther. You know, every time the text says, 'king', referring to Ahashverus, it's really

referring to God. I didn't know," he mused, "that there was any question about God. I thought God was obvious everywhere in Megillat Esther."

Would that that were true, both in Esther and in our own lives. But for the texts with which I've spent the past 8 months, God was not so obvious that She didn't need to be inserted back into the commentaries, commentaries which are only one small portion of how Esther has been interpreted through the ages. And so God's Presence is read back into the text relentlessly; in the Apocrypha, God changes Ahashverus' countenance toward Esther when she approaches the royal court without an invitation; in Midrash Tehillim, God sends an angel to slap Ahashverus across the face so that he will be more receptive to Esther's pleas; and in Esther Rabbah, the ultimate salvation of the people is attributed not to Esther and Mordecai, but to God.

If I had more time, and more resources, I would have devoted more hours to exploring how later commentators read God back into Esther. I would have done an exhaustive reading of texts like Esther Rabbah and *Masechet Megillah*, mining them for every bit of theology I could find. I would have moved forward chronologically, comparing later Medieval and contemporary commentaries to those that preceded them and exploring how historical events impacted the commentaries of those who came later. Therefore, were I to someday expand on this thesis, I would devote greater time and research to the historical context out of which all the commentaries emerged, hoping it would provide me with a sense of what political or historical realities certain midrashists may have been responding to in crafting their own versions of Esther – and how and why they read God back into Esther in the ways that they did.

I would do this because the question that they struggled with is perennial; it is our question as well. I would do it because for those of us who didn't grow up in my friends yeshiva, those of us who struggle mightily with the question of God in our lives and in the lives of the Jewish people, the question remains, a question that may be the central question of our lives, "Is God, even when hidden, Present?" And is it possible for us, like those who came before, to make meaning in a world where, far too often, we do not know ourselves to be clothed, like Esther, in God's presence? I don't have the answer, and a more comprehensive reading of The Midrash and Aggadah would likely yield only more questions. For now, these will have to be enough.

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