

For David & Shama
אמין אב'3'3'7
Ed



A New Translation by Edward L. Greenstein

On the Story and the Translation

The story of Esther finds a home in the first part of the Christian Bible, the "Old Testament," among the so-called historical books, where it is treated as: what happened to the Jews in the Persian diaspora. The Jews, doomed for destruction by an arch anti-Semite, requited their enemies in a display of faith and courage. Protestants such as Martin Luther did not care for what he characterized as the "bloodthirsty" conduct of Jews, who, presumably, should have turned the other cheek and died martyrs.¹ In the Jewish Bible, the story of Esther is gathered with four other "scrolls," each of which is chanted in the synagogue on a particular sacred occasion. The story of Esther may express an earnest theology, hinting at the hidden hand of God redeeming the Jews in the eleventh hour—or in this case, on the thirteenth day in the twelfth month. But its place in Jewish scripture is established by the late-winter/early-spring holiday whose *raison d'être* it is: Purim.² As the story's denouement makes plain, the narrative was disseminated by the Jewish heroes to persuade Jews everywhere, in every generation, to celebrate every year the happy ending they enjoyed. The context for hearing the tale, then, is not a history lesson but the Purim festivities. The

Babylonian Talmud would have it that Jews drink to inebriation on this day, until one can no longer discriminate between blessing the Jewish hero and cursing the Persian villain.

As the story says, everything flips over: the crazed anti-Semite is impaled on the stake he constructed for executing the Jewish hero, the Jews destroy their enemies, some of them attain great political power, and—most fantastic of all—Persians, fearful of Jewish reprisals, pretend desperately to be Jews!

Such a complete reversal of roles seems historically improbable in the cool perspective of many critics. An attempt to document the events in an authentic fifth-century B. C. E. Persia produces more problems than it solves. It would seem to many that the story of Esther was composed as a mock-serious fiction celebrating Jewish survival in spite of the vicissitudes of diaspora life. The high incidence of coincidence in the plot smacks of contrivance. Mordekhai the Jew, whose lovely ward Esther is chosen queen, is the one person to overhear the conspiracy to assassinate the king. It is precisely at the moment that the generally oblivious king overcomes his insomnia by deciding to honor Mordekhai that the nemesis Haman happens into the court seeking Mordekhai's execution. The degree of hyperbole, too, implies that the tale is tall. The exaggerated height of the stake Haman erects—fifty cubits, or seventy-five feet—is not the only example. Although the Greek historian Herodotus accredits his virtual contemporary the fifth-century B. C. E. Persian king Xerxes I with twenty satrapies, the Esther Scroll gives supposedly the same monarch no fewer than 127. The villain Haman puts up 100,000 silver talents of his own wealth for annihilating the Jews. The girls preparing for the king's pleasure spend no less than twelve months in perfume and oils. The king throws a banquet for half a year.

The cardboard characters pop right out of the *Arabian Nights* genre: the buffoon king, the evil councillor, the noble (Jewish) courtier, the sweet orphan who Cinderella-like turns queen, the fawning eunuch. Indeed, scholars have enumerated the parallels between Esther and other Oriental tales.³ Even more striking are typological parallels of Esther with other biblical narratives, especially the story of Joseph, another Hebrew who made good in a foreign palace. The Esther tale indicates its typology by pitting Mordekhai against Haman. Mordekhai is identified as a scion of Kish

and a Benjaminite, evoking the first Israelite king, Saul, whose father was Kish of the Benjamin tribe. Haman is called an Agagite. Agag, an enemy of King Saul, ruled the abominated Amalekites. The Book of Deuteronomy commands every Israelite to “remember what Amalek had done to you on the way, when you left Egypt. . . . You shall blot out any remembrance of Amalek from under the sky—do not forget!” (25:17–19). The Scroll of Esther therefore recycles the Amalek myth, setting it in the Persian diaspora: Haman the latter-day Amalek will be undone by a Jew from the house of Saul. The impression that the characters perform two-dimensional functions is reinforced by the Bible’s uncharacteristic repetition of epithets, such as Mordekhai “the Jew,” Haman “tormentor of the Jews,” Esther “the king’s-wife,” and Heigai “keeper of the women.”

The Esther narrative appears to have originated in the Hellenistic period. (Its Persianisms are sufficiently technical to have been tossed in anachronistically for authentic color.) In any case, it shares in terms of ethos and plot a number of elements with indisputably Hellenistic Jewish fictions such as the apocryphal tales of Susanna and Judith. A similar story occurs in the Third Book of Maccabees: Jews are denounced for their different laws and are accused of dual loyalty; their deliverance from extermination is festively celebrated.⁴ The Book of Judith, a Maccabean creation, reveals its fiction at the outset by speaking of when Nebuchadnezzar—the infamous Babylonian king who destroyed Solomon’s Temple—ruled over (no longer extant) Assyria in (the ruined Assyrian capital) Nineveh. What serious student of Hebrew scripture could take such a story as history? The Scroll of Esther would have it that Mordekhai went into exile with King Jeconiah (Jehoiachin), that is, in 598 B. C. E., over a century earlier than Xerxes I of Persia (see Esther 2:6). Is the narrator tipping his hand? Is the tale to be read as serious fun? Although Jews have generally accepted the story as historical, and although the classical Greeks may have believed their epic sagas,⁵ we might recapture a historical understanding of the Esther Scroll by catching the storyteller’s wink.

Even if the narrative is fiction, it attests to reality: a historical Jewish need to imagine the world upside down, Jews empowered instead of victimized. Purim and its story allow an exiled people to release some of the tensions they develop living under suspicion at best.

The theme of reversal that dominates the tale is not only worked out in the broad strokes of the plot but also etched in the fine lines of the style. For example, upon the triumph of the Jewish hero Mordekhai, “the city Shushan—is jubilant and cheered” (8:15). The syntax of this sentence echoes that of 3:15, where the situation of panic brought on by news of the anti-Semitic decree is related as follows: “and the city Shushan—is staggered.” The syntax is the same, but the sentiment is antithetical. It has been noted, too, that 9:1, which explains that on doomsday the Jews turned things around, not only tells of a turnabout—but reverses the terms:⁶

on the day that they anticipated, *the enemies of the Jews* did, to overpower them,
reversed it was,
in that they *overpowered*, *the Jews* did, they over those *hating them*.

The story of this miraculous turn of events, as narrated in chapters 8 and 9, in general recapitulates phrases and characterizations of the first three chapters. Few modern English translations will lend themselves to discovering them, because they will render the parallel language of the original Hebrew in divergent English expressions. For example, “and the wrath of the king abated” in 7:10 recalls to the Hebrew reader/hearer 2:1: “as the wrath of the king Ahashveirosh abated.” The relatively recent translation of the Jewish Publication Society *Tanakh*,⁷ a philologically excellent version, renders “anger . . . subsided” in 2:1 and “fury abated” in 7:10. The echo in the original, preserved in my “concordant” type of translation, is charged with more significance than style alone. The repetition serves to juxtapose parallel circumstances. In each instance an ethnic Persian had disappointed the king—first his wife, Vashti, then his viceroy Haman. When the king overcame his exaggerated rage—as related in the parallel verses—he elevated Jewish counterparts who pleased him, Esther and Mordekhai. This dynamic is not marginal but cuts straight to the core meaning of the story: Jews are not bad but good for Persia.

Linguistic subtleties can be crucial to a literary reading of this, or any other, work. For this and other reasons I have chosen to translate the Book, or Scroll, of Esther in a manner that accentuates the syntax of the original Hebrew, the structural and verbal

repetitions in the source, and its imagery and basic connotations. I operate in a mode similar to the one developed several decades ago by Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber in their "Germanization" of the Hebrew Bible⁸ and its adaptation in English by Everett Fox.⁹ Rosenzweig and Buber sought to capture certain aspects of the Hebrew, as they understood it, in their German. On the one hand, they wanted their German to smack of Hebrew. No translation, they felt, should supplant the source. A translation should represent itself as such and sound like a translation. On the other hand, they wanted their rendering to be declaimable, an oral experience. For that reason, they divided their text into what Buber called "breath units"—not the breathless lines of Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, which test the limits of breath, but natural pauses, allowing the sense to punctuate the voice. They were influenced too by the rhythm of traditional Hebrew chant, a factor that has often affected my own divisions in Esther. Jewish law would have every Jew, male and female alike, hear the Scroll of Esther—the Megillah—read aloud in public.

Rosenzweig, like Walter Benjamin, whose "The Task of the Translator" is a modern classic,¹⁰ and who himself wrote trenchantly on the subject of translation,¹¹ shared the common Romantic philosophy that each language has its own genius. In order to convey something of the unique perspectives of a language and its native culture in translation, the translator would have to reshape the target language according to the idiosyncracies of the source. Buber and Rosenzweig plied German in a variety of ways. The purist might balk at the apparent barbarism of such tampering, but the idealist or poet might appreciate the enhanced expressiveness that issues from linguistic flexibility. Poets create by overreaching rules and conventions.

I do not claim to have made poetry in my translation of Esther. Much of the sound of the Hebrew has been filtered out in my rendering. Nor do I apologize for violating English usage. I have tried to present the notions in the sequence in which the Hebraist hears them, the idioms in the images of their Semitic *Weltanschauung*. I would like my translation to sound as though one were listening to the music of a foreign but recognizable civilization. After a while, I hope, the patient reader will feel the rhythm of the Hebrew syntax, and most of all grasp the connections and allusions

within the story. Occasionally I have added notes to guide the reader through the thicket.

Before presenting the new translation, I would say a word about the tone of the story. The tale is a comedy. The sharpest humor lashes Haman. The ironic scene in which he advises the king on how to celebrate a national hero, thinking all the while that it is he who is to be hailed, and then learns he is to honor his nemesis, Mordechai, is topped only by the farce of Esther's second party. Haman, exposed as the villain, throws himself on Esther's mercy—indeed, he throws himself on Esther, fatefully adding injury to insult.

The comedy also aims a cynical Jewish eye at the overblown royal court of Persia. It lampoons the king and all that is kingly. The king's chief concerns would seem to be showing off, maintaining protocol—and drinking. The words for "king" and "drink" pepper the text.¹² Where others have sought to vary the English vocabulary when the Hebrew is consistent, I have preserved that consistency. Not only the person of the king, who from one day to the next can't remember that he banished his wife, comes in for ridicule. Life at court is, as in the *Arabian Nights*, portrayed as preoccupied with intrigue and posturing. The obsequious eunuch Harvona, for example, is the one to propose impaling Haman, his former colleague, on the stake that was built for Mordechai the Jew.

The story of persecution and fortuitous escape from attempted genocide is not funny. But when the tale is told by survivors in a context of celebrating victory, as it is here, humor prevails.





The Translation

[1:1–4] It was, in the days of Ahashveirosh,
 he is Ahashveirosh who is-king from Hodu/India to Cush/Ethiopia,
 seven and twenty and a hundred provinces,
 in the days, those,
 when sits the king Ahashveirosh on his kingly throne,
 which is in Shushan the fortress,
 in the third year of his being-king,
 he made a drink-feast for all his officers and servants,
 the might of Paras/Persia and Madai/Media—the noblesse, the lords
 of the provinces [who stand] before him,
 when he had them see the rich wealth of his kingdom and the
 glorious honor of his greatness,
 for days, many—eighty and a hundred days.

[1:5–6] And at completing the days, these, he made, the king,
 for all the people to be found in Shushan the fortress, from great to
 small,
 a drink-feast—seven days,

in the court of the garden of the grand-house of the king.
 [Ribbon of] white-cotton and blue, held by cords of linen and purple
 to silver cylinders and alabaster pillars,
 couches of gold and silver on a floor of marble and alabaster, and
 mother-of-pearl and mosaic!
 [1:7–8] And serving drink in gold vessels, every vessel differing from
 every other vessel,
 and kingly wine, a vast-amount of it, a helping for a king!
 Now the drinking was according to law: No penalty!¹³
 Thus he has laid down, the king has, on every officer of his house,
 to do according to this man and that man's desire.
 [1:9–12] So, too, Vashti the king's-wife made a drink-feast for women
 at the kingly house of the king Ahashveirosh.
 On the seventh day, when the king's heart was good from wine,
 he said to Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harvona, Biggetha, and Avagtha,
 Zeitar, and Carcas, the seven eunuchs attending before the king
 Ahashveirosh,
 to have Vashti the king's-wife come before the king in the kingly
 turban,
 to have the people and the lords look at her beauty,
 for good to look at was she.
 She refused, the king's-wife Vashti, to come at the king's word that
 was [sent] by the hand of the eunuchs.
 He fumed very much, the king did, and the wrath burned inside
 him.
 [1:13–15] He said, the king, to the sages, those who know time,
 for the king's word was set before all those who know law and
 ordinance.
 Now those near to him were Carshena, Sheitar, Admatha, Tarshish,
 Meres, Marsana, Memukhan—
 the seven lords of Paras-and-Madai, those who see the king's
 face, those who sit at the head of the kingdom:
 "According to law, what should be done to the king's-wife Vashti,
 in that she has not done what the king Ahashveirosh has said by the
 hand of the eunuchs?"
 [1:16–18] He said, Memukhan, before the king and the lords:
 "It is not the king alone that she, Vashti the king's-wife, has wronged,
 but all the lords and all the people who are in all the provinces of the
 king Ahashveirosh.

For it will issue-forth, the matter of the king's-wife, to all women, making their masters seem vile in their eyes, when they say: 'The king Ahashveirosh said to have Vashti the king's-wife come before him, and she did not come.'
Even today, this one, they, the ladies of Paras-and-Madai who have heard of the matter of the king's-wife, are speaking of it to all the lords of the king.
And there is plenty of vilification and fuming!
[1:19-20] If to the king it [seems] good, let there issue-forth a kingly word from before him, let it be written in the laws of Paras-and-Madai, let it not be overturned,¹⁴ that she may not come, Vashti, before the king Ahashveirosh, and her king's-wifeship let the king give to a colleague of hers, one better than she.
Let it be heard, the decree of the king that he will make, in all his kingdom, as vast as it is, and let all women give honor to their masters, from great to small!"
[1:21-22] It was good, this word, in the eyes of the king and the lords.
He did, the king did, according to the word of Memukhan. He sent documents to all the king's provinces, to this province and that province according to its script, and to this people and that people according to its language, so that every man would be lord in his house, and speak in the language of his own people.¹⁵

[2:1-4] After these matters, as the wrath of the king Ahashveirosh abated, he recalled Vashti and what she did and what was decided against her.
They said, the boys¹⁶ of the king, his attendants: "Let them find for the king girls, virgins, good for looking at. And let him, the king, deputize deputies in all the provinces of his kingdom, that they may gather, every girl, virgin, good to look at, into Shushan the fortress into the house of women into the hand of Heigeh, the king's eunuch, keeper of the women, and let be given them—rubbing-oils.

Now the girl who is most good in the eyes of the king, let her be king's-wife instead of Vashti."
It was good, the word, in the eyes of the king, so he did it.
[2:5-7] A man, a Jew, was in Shushan the fortress, and his name: Mordekhai, son of Yair son of Shim'i son of Kish, a Benjaminite, who was exiled from Jerusalem with the exile that was exiled with Yekhonyah, king of Judah, whom he exiled, Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. He was guardian of Hadassah, she-is Esther/Venus,¹⁷ his uncle's daughter, for hers are neither father nor mother. The girl was beautiful of form and good to look at, and on the death of her father and her mother he took her, Mordekhai did, to himself as daughter.
[2:8-11] It was, when it was heard, the word of the king and his law, and when they were gathered, girls, many of them, into Shushan the fortress into the hand of Heigai, that she was taken, Esther, to the house of the king, into the hand of Heigai, keeper of the women. She was good, this girl, in his eyes; she won favor before him. He hurried that her rubbing-oils and allotments be given to her, and that seven girls, seemly ones, be given her from the house of the king.
He instructed that for her and her girls it be good in the house of the women.
She did not tell, Esther, her people or her origins, for Mordekhai had commanded her that she not tell.
Now this day and every day Mordekhai walks around before the court of the house of the women, to know if Esther is well and what is being done to her.
[2:12-14] Now when it reaches the turn of this girl and that girl to come before the king Ahashveirosh, at the limit of her having, according to the law for the women, twelve months— for thus are completed the days of their oil-rubbings, six months in oil of myrrh, and six months in spices and in rubbing-oils of women—

with this the girl comes to the king—
all that she says is given to her, to come with it,
from the house of the women to the house of the king.
At sundown she comes in and at daybreak she returns
to the house of the women, the other one,
into the hand of Sha'ashgaz, the king's eunuch, keeper of the
concubines.¹⁸

She does not come again to the king,
unless he wants her, the king does, and she is called upon by name.
[2:15–17] Now when it reaches the turn of Esther, daughter of
Avihayil / My Father Is Might, uncle of Mordekhai, whom he took to
himself as daughter, to come to the king,
she did not seek a thing
except what he said, Heigai the king's eunuch, keeper of the women.
She, Esther, wins grace in the eyes of all who look at her.
She was taken, Esther, to the king Ahashveirosh, to his kingly house,
in the tenth month, it is the month of Teveth,
in the seventh year of his kingship.

He, the king, loved Esther more than all the women.
She won grace and favor with him more than all the virgins.
He put the kingly turban on her head and made her king's-wife
instead of Vashti.

[2:18–20] He made, the king, a drink-feast, a great one,
for all his lords and his servants—the drink-feast of Esther!
A relaxation [of taxes] for the provinces he made,
and he gave presents, a helping for a king.

Now at the gathering of virgins the second time,
Mordekhai was sitting in the gate of the king.
Esther does not tell her origins or her people,
as he commanded her, Mordekhai did;
what Mordekhai says, Esther performs,
as she has been under his guardianship.

[2:21–23] In the days, those, when Mordekhai was sitting in the gate
of the king,
there fumed Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs, of the
keepers of the doorway,¹⁹
and they sought to lay hands against the king Ahashveirosh.
It became known, the matter did, to Mordekhai, and he told Esther
the king's-wife.



She spoke of it, Esther, to the king in the name of Mordekhai.
It was sought out, the matter, and it was found to be so.
They were impaled, the two of them, on a stake.
It was written in the document of daily matters before the king.

[3:1–3] After these matters, he greatened, the king Ahashveirosh did,
Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite,
and he raised him up.²⁰

He put his throne above all who were lords with him,
and all the king's servants in the king's gate
kneel and bow down to Haman,
for thus he, the king, has commanded for him.

But Mordekhai will not kneel and will not bow down.
They said, the king's servants in the king's gate, to Mordekhai:
“Why do you overturn²¹ the command of the king?”

[3:4–6] It was, as they said to him this day and that day but he did
not listen²² to them,
they told Haman to see—

Would they stand, Mordekhai's manners?²³—

for he had told them that he is a Jew.

He saw, Haman, that Mordekhai does not kneel and does not bow to him;

he was filled, Haman, with wrath.

It was vile in his eyes to lay hands against Mordekhai alone,

for they had told him Mordekhai's people.

He sought, Haman, to destroy all the Jews in all the kingdom of Ahashveirosh—

the people of Mordekhai.

[3:7-9] In the first month, it is the month of Nisan,

in the twelfth year of the king Ahashveirosh,

he let fall the "pur"—it is the lot—before Haman,

from this day to that day and from this month to the twelfth month,

it is the month of Adar.

He said, Haman, to the king Ahashveirosh:

"There is a people, spread and dispersed among the peoples, in all provinces of your kingdom;

now their laws are different from every people,

and the king's laws they will not perform;

nor is it worth the king's while to allow them relief.

If it [seems] good to the king,

let it be written to destroy them;

and ten thousand talents of silver shall I weigh out by the hands of those doing the work

to bring into the treasury of the king."

[3:10-11] He, the king, removed his signet-ring from his hand,

and he gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, tormentor of the Jews.

He said, the king, to Haman:

"The silver is given over to you;

so is that people, to do with/against it as seems good in your eyes."

[3:12-14] They were called in, the king's scribes, in the first month,

on the thirteenth day in it,

and it was written, all that he, Haman, had commanded the satraps of the king,

and the governors over this province and that province,

and the lords of this people and that people,

for this province and that province in its own script,

and for this people and that people in its own language.

In the name of the king Ahashveirosh it was written,

and it was sealed with the king's ring.

Now they were sent, documents, by the hand of runners²⁴ to all the king's provinces,

to wipe out, to kill, and to destroy all the Jews,

from young to old, children and women, in one day,

on the thirteenth of the twelfth month, it is the month of Adar,

and as for their spoil—to loot it.

Each copy of the writ²⁵ was for the law to be given in this province and that province,

disclosed to all peoples,

that they be in readiness for the day, that one.

[3:15] The runners went out, rushed, at the word of the king,

and the law was given in Shushan the fortress;

and the king and Haman sat down to drink,

and the city Shushan—is staggered.

[4:1-3] Now Mordekhai knew all that was done;

he tore, Mordekhai did, his clothes,

and he dressed in sackcloth and ash.

He went forth in the midst of the city,

and he wailed a wail, a great and bitter one.

He came up to before the king's gate—

for there is no coming into the king's gate in a dress of sackcloth.

And in this province and that province,

every place that the king's word and his law reach,

a grieving, a great one, is the Jews'—

and fasting, and crying, and mourning,

sackcloth and ash are laid out in vast numbers.

[4:4-6] They came, Esther's girls and her eunuchs,

and they told her.

She shuddered, the king's-wife, very much.

She sent clothes to dress Mordekhai,

and to remove his sackcloth from upon him,

but he would not accept.

She called, Esther did, to Hatakh,

of the king's eunuchs that he had stand before her,

and she commanded of him to Mordekhai

to know what is this and for what is this.
He went forth, Hatakh, to Mordekhai,
to the city's plaza that is before the king's gate.
[4:7-8] He told him, Mordekhai did,
all that befell him,
and the story of the silver that he, Haman, had said to weigh out into
the king's treasury against the Jews—to destroy them;
and a copy of the writ of law that was given in Shushan to wipe them
out he gave him to have Esther see and to tell her,
and to command her to come in to the king,
to beg-him-for-favor and to make-request²⁶ before him
over her people.
[4:9-11] He came, Hatakh,
and he told Esther Mordekhai's words.
She said, Esther, to Hatakh,
and she commanded of him to Mordekhai:
"All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know
that every man and woman who would come in to the king,
to the court, the inner one,
who is not called—
the law is one, to put to death!
Him alone to whom he extends, the king does,
the scepter of gold may live.
But I, I have not been called to come in to the king now thirty days."
[4:12-14] They told Mordekhai Esther's words.
He said, Mordekhai did, to return to Esther:
"Do not imagine that with your life you can escape, of all the Jews,
in the king's house!²⁷
In truth, if you act-mute, yes, mute, at this moment,
comfort and rescue will arise for the Jews from Another Place,
and you and your father's house—you will be destroyed!²⁸
And who knows
if for a moment like this
you reached king's-wifeship?"
[4:15-17] She said, Esther did, to return to Mordekhai:
"Go, assemble all the Jews to be found in Shushan,
and fast over me;
and you shall not eat and you shall not drink,
three days, night and day.

Even I and my girls, I will fast, then;
and when I come in to the king it being not by law,
it may be that I am destroyed, yes, destroyed."
He went-all-over, Mordekhai did;
he performed all that she had commanded of him, Esther had.

[5:1-2] It was, on the day, the third, she dressed, Esther, in kingly
[clothes],
and she stood in the court of the king's house, the inner one, in front
of the king's house.
Now the king, he was sitting on his kingly throne in the kingly
house, in front of the opening of the house.
It was, at the seeing by the king of Esther, the king's-wife, standing
in the court,
she won favor in his eyes.
He extended, the king, to Esther,
the scepter of gold that was in his hand.
She neared, Esther did, and she reached the head of the scepter.
[5:3-5] He said to her, the king, "What is it, Esther, the king's-wife?
And what is your request, up to half the kingdom, that it may be
given to you?"
She said, Esther, "If it [seems] to the king good,
let him come, the king, and Haman, today,
to the drink-feast that I have made for him."
He said, the king, "Have him speed, Haman, to perform²⁹ the word
of Esther!"
He came, the king, and Haman, to the drink-feast that she made,
Esther did.
[5:6-8] He said, the king, to Esther at the drink-feast of wine:
"What is your wish that it may be given to you?
And what is your request, up to half the kingdom, that it may be
performed?"
She answered, Esther, and she said,
"My wish and my request:
If I have found favor in the king's eyes,
and if it [seems] to the king good,
to grant my wish and to perform my request,
let him come, the king, and Haman, to the drink-feast that I shall
make for them,



and tomorrow I shall perform the word of the king.”

[5:9–11] He went forth, Haman, on the day, that one, cheered and good of heart.³⁰

But at the seeing by Haman of Mordekhai at the king’s gate, when he did not rise, and he did not stir before him, he filled, Haman over Mordekhai, with wrath.

He stifled himself, Haman did, and he came into his house.

He sent for and had come in his supporters³¹ and Zeresh, his woman.

He recounted to them, Haman did, the richness of his wealth and the vast-number of his sons,

and all in that he greatened him, the king did,

and all in that he raised him above the lords and the king’s servants.

[5:12–14] He said, Haman:

“Indeed, she did not have come in, Esther the king’s-wife, with the king to the drink-feast that she made, anyone but me.

Tomorrow, too, I am being called to her, with the king.

But all this is not worthwhile to me

at any moment that I see Mordekhai the Jew sitting at the king’s gate!”

She said to him, Zeresh his woman, and all his supporters:
 “Let them make a stake, a tall one, fifty cubits;
 and at daybreak say to the king
 that they impale Mordekhai on it!
 Then go with the king to the drink-feast cheered.”
 It [seemed] good, the word, before Haman.
 He made the stake.

[6:1–3] On that night it rambled, the king’s sleep.

He said to have come in the document of records,³² the daily matters, and they were called before the king.

It was found written, what he told, Mordekhai, about Bigthana and Teresh,

two of the king’s eunuchs, of the watchers of the doorway, who sought to lay hands against the king Ahashveirosh.

He said, the king:

“What was done, what honor and greatness, to Mordekhai over this?”

They said, the king’s boys, his attendants:

“It was not done for him, not a thing.”

[6:4–5] He said, the king: “Who is in the court?”

Now Haman had come into the court of the king’s house, the outer one,

to say to the king to impale Mordekhai on the stake he had set up for him.

They said, the king’s boys, to him:

“Here: Haman is standing in the court.”

He said, the king: “Let him come in.”

[6:6–9] He came in, Haman did.

He said to him, the king: “What is to be done with a man that the king wants to honor him?”

He said, Haman, in his heart:

“To whom would he, the king, want to do honor more than me?”

He said, Haman, to the king:

“A man that the king wants to honor him—

let them produce kingly dress that he has dressed in it, the king has,

and a horse that he has ridden on it, the king has,

and on whose head³³ the kingly turban has been given;

and let there be given the dress, and the horse,

by the hand of a man from the king’s lords, the noblesse;

let them dress the man that the king wants to honor him;
let them have him ride the horse in the plaza of the city;
and let them call out before him:
"Such shall be done to a man that the king wants to honor him!"
[6:10-11] He said, the king, to Haman:
"Speed, take the dress and the horse, as you have spoken,
and do thus to Mordekhai the Jew,
who is sitting at the king's gate!
Do not drop a thing from all that you have spoken!"³⁴
He took, Haman, the dress and the horse,
and he dressed Mordekhai;
he had him ride in the plaza of the city,
and he cried out before him:
"Such shall be done to a man the king wants to honor him!"
[6:12-14] He returned, Mordekhai did, to the king's gate,
while Haman rushed to his house,
grieving with ashen head.
He recounted, Haman, to Zeresh his woman, and to all his
supporters,
all that had befallen him.
They said to him, his advisors,³⁵ and Zeresh his woman:
"If from the seed of Jews is Mordekhai,
the one that you have begun to fall before him,
you will not prevail against him;
in fact, you will fall, yes, fall before him."
They are still speaking with him, and the king's eunuchs reached
[him];
they hurried to have him come, Haman, to the drink-feast that she
made, Esther did.

[7:1-4] He came, the king, and Haman, to drink with Esther the
king's-wife.
He said, the king, to Esther, on the day, the second one, at the
drink-feast of wine:
"What is your wish, Esther the king's-wife, that it may be given to
you?
And what is your request, up to half the kingdom, that it may be
performed?"
She answered, Esther the king's-wife, and she said:

"If I have found favor in your eyes, O king,
and if it [seems] good to the king,
may it be given to me—my life at my wish,
and my people at my request!
For we have been sold, I and my people,
to wipe out, to kill, and to destroy.
If only as man-servants and as woman-slaves had we been sold,
I would have kept-mute,
for the tormentor is not worth the king's trouble."
[7:5-7] He said, the king Ahashveirosh, he said to Esther the
king's-wife:
"Who is the-one and where is the-one,
that his heart filled him to do thus?"
She said, Esther:
"A man,³⁶ a tormentor and an enemy, Haman, the evil, is the-one!"
Now Haman, he cringed away from the king and the king's-wife.
Now the king, he rose in his wrath from the drink-feast of wine to the
garden of the grand-house;
and Haman, he stood, to make-request for his life from Esther the
king's-wife,
for he saw that it had been concluded for him—evil from the king.
[7:8-10] Now the king, he returned from the garden of the grand-
house to the house of the drink-feast of wine.
Now Haman, he was fallen on the divan that Esther was on it.
He said, the king:
"Is it indeed to conquer the king's-wife, with me in the house?"
The word issued forth from the king's mouth, and the face of Haman
ashened.
He said, Harvona, one of the eunuchs, before the king:
"Indeed, here: the stake that he made, Haman, for Mordekhai,
who spoke the good for the king,
is standing at the house of Haman, tall, fifty cubits.
Impale him on it!"
They impaled Haman on the stake that he had set up for Mordekhai;
and the wrath of the king abated.

[8:1-4] On the day, that one, he gave, the king Ahashveirosh, to
Esther the king's-wife,
the house of Haman, tormentor of the Jews.



Mordekhai had come before the king,
for she had told, Esther had, what he was to her.
He removed, the king did, his signet-ring that he had withdrawn
from Haman,
and he gave it to Mordekhai.
She put, Esther did, Mordekhai over the house of Haman.
She added, Esther did, and she spoke before the king,
and she fell before his feet.
She wept, and she begged-him-for-favor, to withdraw the evil of
Haman the Agagite,
and the plot that he plotted against the Jews.
He extended, the king, to Esther, the scepter of gold.
She rose, Esther, and she stood before the king.
[8:5-6] She said: "If it [seems] good to the king,
and if I have found favor before him,
and [if it seems] solid,³⁷ the word does, before the king,
and [if] good am I in his eyes,
let it be written to return³⁶ the documents—
the plot of Haman son of Hammedatha the Agagite,

who wrote to destroy the Jews that are in all the king's provinces.
For how is it that I shall prevail, that I shall see the evil that will find
my people?³⁹

How shall I prevail, that I shall see the destruction of my clan?
[8:7-8] He said, the king Ahashveirosh, to Esther the king's-wife,
and to Mordekhai the Jew:

"Here: the house of Haman have I given to Esther,
and him have they impaled on a stake in that he laid his hand against
the Jews.

Now you, write for the Jews as is good in your eyes in the name of
the king,
and seal [it] with the signet-ring of the king,
for a writ that has been written in the name of the king and has been
sealed with the signet-ring of the king—
it is not to return.⁴⁰

[8:9-11] They were called, the king's scribes, at the moment, that
one, in the month, the third one—it is the month of Sivan—on the
three-and-twentieth of it;

and it was written, all that he had commanded, Mordekhai had,
to' the Jews, and to the satraps and the governors and the lords of the
provinces, from Hodu / India to Cush / Ethiopia—
seven and twenty and a hundred provinces—

this province and that province according to its script,
and this people and that people according to its language,
and to the Jews according to their script and according to their
language.

He wrote in the name of the king Ahashveirosh, and he sealed with
the signet-ring of the king;

he sent the documents by hand of the runners, by horse—
riders of the saddle, the royal-cavalry,⁴¹ the forward-guard⁴²—
in that he has granted, the king has, to the Jews that are in this city
and in every city,

to assemble and to stand up for their lives,
to wipe out, to kill, and to destroy every mighty-force of a people or
province that is tormenting them, children and women [too],
and as for their spoil—to loot it.

[8:12-14] In one day, in all the provinces of the king Ahashveirosh,
on the thirteenth of the twelfth month—
it is the month of Adar—

a copy of the writ was to be given: law in this province and every province,
disclosed to all peoples,
that the Jews be in readiness, for the day, that one,
to retaliate their enemies.
The runners—riders of the saddle, the royal-cavalry—went forth hurried and rushed, at the word of the king.
Now the law, it was given in Shushan the fortress.
[8:15–17] Now Mordekhai, he went forth from before the king, in kingly dress—blue and white—
and a crown of gold, a great one, and a robe of linen and purple;
and the city Shushan—is jubilant and cheered.
For the Jews there was light, and cheer, and joy, and honor;
and in this province and every province, and in this city and in every city,
[every] place that the king's word and his law reach,
cheer and jubilation were the Jews',
drink-feast and holiday.
Now many of the people of the land were acting-Jewish,
for it fell, fear of the Jews, on them.

[9:1–2] And in the twelfth month—it is the month of Adar—
on the thirteenth day in it,
when it reached, the king's word, and his law, to be performed,
on the day that they anticipated, the enemies of the Jews did, to overpower them,
reversed it was,
in that they overpowered, the Jews did, they over those hating them.
They assembled, the Jews, in their cities, in all the king's provinces,
to lay hands against those seeking evil for them.
And a man did not stand before them,
for it fell, fear of them, on all peoples.
[9:3–4] Now all the lords of the provinces, and the satraps and the governors, and those doing the work of the king, are raising up the Jews,
for it fell, the fear of Mordekhai, on them.
For great is Mordekhai in the king's house, and hearing of him goes through all the provinces,
for the man Mordekhai goes on getting greater.

[9:5–10] They struck, the Jews did, at all their enemies, the strike of a sword, and killing, and destruction;
they did against those hating them according to their desire.
Now in Shushan the fortress they killed, the Jews did, and destroyed, five hundreds of man.⁴³
And Parshandatha,
and Dalfon,
and Aspatha,
and Poratha,
and Adalya,
and Aridatha,
and Parmashtha,
and Arisai,
and Aridai,
and Raizatha—
the ten sons of Haman son of Hammedatha, the tormentor of the Jews—
they killed.
And on the lootable they did not lay their hands.
[9:11–12] On the day, that one, it came, the count of those killed in Shushan the fortress, before the king.
He said, the king, to Esther the king's-wife:
“In Shushan the fortress they killed, the Jews did, and destroyed five hundreds of man and the ten sons of Haman.
In the remainder of the king's provinces what they [must have] done!
Now what is your wish that it may granted to you?
And what is your request still, that it may be performed?”
[9:13–14] She said, Esther: “If it [seems] to the king good, let it be granted also tomorrow to the Jews that are in Shushan to perform according to the law today,
and the ten sons of Haman let them impale on the stake.”
He said, the king, for it to be performed thus.
It was granted, the law, in Shushan,
and the ten sons of Haman they impaled.
[9:15–16] They assembled, the Jews that were in Shushan, also on the fourteenth day of the month of Adar.
They killed in Shushan three hundreds of man,
but on the lootable they did not lay their hands.
And the remainder of the Jews that were in the king's provinces,

they assembled and stood up for their lives,⁴⁴
and they got-relief from their enemies and killed those hating
them—five and seventy thousand—
and on the lootable they did not lay their hands.
[9:17–19] On the thirteenth day of the month of Adar—⁴⁵
and they had-relief on the fourteenth of it,
and they made it a day of drink-feast and cheer.
Now the Jews that were in Shushan, they assembled on the
thirteenth of it and on the fourteenth of it,
and they had-relief on the fifteenth of it,
and they made it a day of drink-feast and cheer,
Because it was so, the Jews, villagers, who dwell in cities that are
villages,⁴⁶
make the day, the fourteenth of the month of Adar, one of cheer, and
drink-feast, and holiday,
and of sending parcels, a man to his colleague.
[9:20–22] He wrote, Mordekhai, the words, these,
and he sent documents to all the Jews that were in all the provinces
of the king Ahashveirosh—
the near ones and the far ones—
to uphold for themselves to be making the day, the fourteenth of the
month of Adar,
and the day, the fifteenth of it,
in this year and in every year,
according to the days that they got-relief on them, the Jews did,
from their enemies,
and the month that it was reversed for them,
from anxiety to cheer, and from grieving to holiday;
to make them days of drink-feast and cheer,
and of sending parcels, a man to his colleague,
and gifts to the indigent.
[9:23–26] Now they undertook,⁴⁷ the Jews, that which they had
begun to perform,⁴⁸
and that which he wrote, Mordekhai, to them.
For Haman / The Stunner,⁴⁹ the son of Hammedatha, the Agagite,
tormentor of all the Jews, had plotted for the Jews—to destroy them;
and he had let fall the “pur”—it is the lot—
to stun them and to destroy them.
But when she⁵⁰ came in before the king, he said:

“With this document let it turn back, the plot, the evil one, that he
plotted against the Jews, on his head!
Let them impale him and his sons on the stake!”⁵¹
[9:26–28] Because it was so, they called the days, these ones, Purim,
by the name of the “pur.”
Because it was so, because of all the words of the letter, this one,
and what they had seen about such, and what had reached⁵² them,
they upheld and they undertook, the Jews, for themselves and for
their seed,⁵³ and for all joining their company⁵⁴—
and let it never be overturned—
that they be making the two days, these ones, according to their writ
and according to their time,
in this year and every year.
And the days, these, are to be recalled and made in this generation
and in every generation,
[by] this family and that family, this province and that province, and
this city and that city.
And the days of Purim, these, will not be overturned in the midst of
the Jews,
and their recall will not end among their seed.
[9:29–32] Now she wrote, Esther the king’s wife, daughter of Avihayil /
My Father Is Might, and Mordekhai the Jew, with all
power, to uphold the letter of Purim, this the second one.⁵⁵
He⁵⁶ sent documents to all the Jews, to the seven and twenty and a
hundred provinces—the kingdom of Ahashveirosh—
words of well-being and trust,
to uphold the days of Purim, these, in their times,
as he upheld for them,⁵⁷ Mordekhai the Jew did, and Esther the
king’s-wife,
and as they upheld for themselves and for their seed: the fasts and
their wails-of-prayer.
Now what Esther said upheld the words of Purim, these,
and it was written in a document.

[10:1–3] He put, the king Ahashveirosh, a tax on the land and the
isles of the sea.
And every act of his power and his heroism,
and the story of the greatness of Mordekhai, that he greatened him,
the king did—



are they not written on the document of daily matters of the kings of Madai-and-Paras?⁵⁸

For Mordekhai the Jew is second to the king Ahashveirosh and great to the Jews, and desirable for the vast-number of his brothers—

soliciting good for his people,
and speaking for well-being for all its seed.⁵⁹



1. Not all Christian readers have read the book severely and taken offense; see, e.g., W. Ernest Beet, "The Humorist Element in the Old Testament," *The Expositor* 22 (1921), pp. 59–64 which is almost entirely devoted to Esther.

2. For a fuller presentation of my views on the rhetoric, setting, and meaning of Esther, see "A Jewish Reading of Esther," in *Judaic Perspectives on Ancient Israel*, ed. Jacob Neusner et al. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), pp. 225–43. See also Monford Harris, "Purim: The Celebration of Dis-Order," *Judaism* 26, 2 (Spring 1977), pp. 161–69.

3. See, e.g., Elias Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken Books, 1967), pp. 177–78.

4. See, e.g., George W. E. Nickelsburg, *Jewish Literature Between the Bible and the Mishnah* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), p. 172.

5. See Elias Bickerman, *The Jews in the Greek Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 222.

6. J. A. Loader, "Esther as a Novel with Different Levels of Meaning," *Zeitschrift für Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 90 (1978), p. 419.

7. First published in *The Five Megilloth and Jonah* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1969).

8. On this and an elaboration of my views on modern Bible translation, see "Theories: Modern Bible Translation" in my *Essays on Biblical Method and Translation* (Atlanta: Schola Press, 1989), pp. 85–118.

9. See especially his translations of Genesis and Exodus: *In the Beginning* (New York: Schocken Books, 1983) and *Now These Are the Names* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986); he summarizes his principles of translating in the introductions to these books.

10. An English translation by Harry Zohn is published in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), pp. 69–82.

11. See the essays by him in Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, *Die Schrift und Ihre Verdeutschung* (Berlin: Schocken, 1936).

12. On the major themes and motifs in Esther, see Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979).

13. I.e., no limits.

14. Cf. the use of the same verb stem, in the *hifil* conjugation, in 8:2, 3, in the sense of “to withdraw.” The gloss “overturn” is retained here in view of 3:3, where Mordekhai is upbraided for trespassing the king’s rules.

15. The idea, it would seem, is that men whose wives are of another nationality would no longer have to indulge their wives by speaking in their language.

16. The Hebrew term for “boy” (*na’ar*) commonly denotes a servant, as it does here. The feminine counterpart (*na’ara*) is rendered here “girl,” with the assumption that the reader will associate “boy” with “girl.” The pair “lad” and “lass” captures the relations better but sounds too quaint for the commonplace Hebrew.

17. The Talmud (Bavli, Megillah, 13a) interprets the name Esther as, among other things, Venus; modern scholars derive it from the name of the Babylonian goddess Ishtar, i.e., Venus.

18. I.e., harem girls. The term glossed here as “concubine” is the same used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to refer to the concubines of ordinary households.

19. Literally, “the threshold.”

20. The same verb, *nasa’*, refers above to Esther’s finding favor (literally, “bearing grace”) with all who sight her, including, of course, the king.

21. Cf. 1:19.

22. The same verb (*shama’*) is used above and below for “to hear.”

23. Cf. 1:18 and other passages, where “matter” is expressed by the same word, *davar*.

24. The reference may be to swift horses; cf. 8:11, 14.

25. The same Hebrew term is used for “script” (as in 1:22; 8:9).

26. Literally, “to seek,” as rendered in 2:21, 23.

27. The syntax is actually odder, even for Hebrew: “Do not imagine with your life there is escaping in the king’s house of all the Jews.”

28. The verb is active, though intransitive, in Hebrew, routinely rendered “you will perish.”

29. The Hebrew word rendered “to perform,” here as above, is the same as that for “to do” and “to make.”

30. Cf. 1:10, where the king’s heart was “good from wine.”

31. More literally, “those who love him.”

32. The word for “records” is from the same stem as the word for “to recall.”

33. The reference is ambiguous. Syntactically, it should refer to the horse.

34. Perhaps more precisely: “Do not fail to fulfill every word that you have spoken.”

35. Literally, “his wise-ones”: possibly a sarcastic putdown of his supportive friends.

36. Cf. introduction of Mordekhai in 2:5.

37. More literally, “strong,” “firm.” The term *kosher* is derived from the same stem.

38. I.e., rescind.

39. I.e., How shall I be able to see . . . ?

40. See note 38.

41. A Persian term meaning “belonging to lordship”; so Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), p. 80.

42. The meaning of the Hebrew phrase is unknown, but I suspect it refers to the first line of cavalry troops, the best and the fastest.

43. Hebrew uses the word for “man” as a generic term for people.

44. From this it seems clear that the Jews’ slaying of Persians was an act of self-defense, triumphalist though it was. The original decree dispatched by Haman months before could not, said the king, be revoked. The Jews’ refusal to appropriate loot, although such appropriation

was permitted to the Persians by Haman, would seem to underscore the Jews’ exclusively defensive purpose.

45. The Hebrew is as much a fragment as the English appears. Perhaps it should mean, as the New Jewish Version has it (without a note), “That was on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar.”

46. I.e., unprotected by a city wall.

47. Or “accepted,” the same verb rendered “accept” in 4:4.

48. Just a reminder that the Hebrew term for “to make,” used above of celebrating the two days of holiday, is the same as that rendered here “to perform.”

49. The name would seem to be interpreted here by the word play with *lehummam*, “to stun them,” which appears later in the verse.

50. Esther.

51. The stake referred to is the one Haman had erected for disposing of Mordekhai (5:14).

52. I.e., occurred to.

53. Their descendants.

54. More literally, “and for all accompanying them.”

55. The letter described in 9:20ff. An earlier letter had been sent by Mordekhai, as recounted in 8:9ff.

56. Mordekhai, and presumably Esther.

57. I.e., imposed on them.

58. Previously, always Paras-and-Madai. Has the reversal effected by the Jews transformed the entire kingdom?

59. Virtually all other translations interpret this as “his seed,” referring to Mordekhai, which makes little sense in context. “Seed,” however, is always paired in Esther with the Jewish people at large, and the pronominal suffix, as a rule, refers to the nearest grammatically appropriate antecedent, in this case, “his people,” not Mordekhai. (My research on pronominal reference in biblical Hebrew was supported by a summer stipend from the National Endowment of the Humanities.)

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