B. Rabbinic Judaism

The status of the book of Esther in early rabbinic thought and religion is subject to diverse interpretations. The annual festival of Purim, whose central thought and religion is subject to diverse interpretations. The annual festival of Purim, whose central thought and religion is subject to diverse interpretations. The annual festival of Purim, whose central thought and religion is subject to diverse interpretations. The annual festival of Purim, whose central thought and religion is subject to diverse interpretations. The annual festival of Purim, whose central thought and religion is subject to diverse interpretations. The annual festival of Purim, whose central thought and religion is subject to diverse interpretations. The annual festival of Purim, whose central thought and religion is subject to diverse interpretations. The annual festival of Purim, whose central thought and religion is subject to diverse interpretations. 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Esther (Book and Person)

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

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


Eliezer Segal

C. Medieval Judaism: General

1. Esther – The Scroll. As already attested in the Mishnah (3rd cent. CE), Esther is the only book of the Five Scrolls which has been copied separately as a scroll and for which the halakah requires that it be read in public from a scroll written on parch- ment (nMBeg 2:2; cf. Maimonides, MishT, Hilhot Megillah wa-Hanukkah 2:8). (The Jerusalem communities of Perushim, followers of the teachings of the Vilna Gaon, read all five books from a parchment scroll, but this is a local custom.) Esther scrolls (meg- gilah) have survived from at least as far back as the 14th century. Illuminated scrolls began to be pro- duced in the 16th century, a tradition which contin- ues to this day (see below “VI. Visual Arts”; see “Five Scrolls [HaMish Megilloth”].

2. Esther – The Commentaries. Within the Jewish exegetical tradition Esther is one of the most com- mented upon biblical books, both during the Middle Ages (in marked contrast to the dearth of atten- tion given to it by Christian exegetes) and beyond. Identified medieval Esther commentaries in He- brew (from Judeo-Arabic see below) are by: Rashi (1040–1105), Tobias ben Eliezer (11th cent.), Joseph Qara (b. ca. 1060), Rashbam (ca. 1080–1174), Abra- ham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164), Isaiah of Trani (ca. 1200–ca. 1260), Moses ben Isaac Halayo, Bahya ben Asher (13th cent.), Immanuel of Rome (ca. 1261– after 1328), Shemariah ben Elijah of Ctesar (1275– 1355), Joseph Ibn Kaspi (1280–1340), Levi ben Ger- shom (1288–1344), Joseph ben Joseph Nahmias, Nathaniel ben Isaiah, Abraham ben Isaac ha-Levi, Solomon Astruc (14th cent.), Isaac ben Joseph ha- Kohen and Abraham Hadidah (14th–15th cents.), Isaac Arama (1420–1494), Judah ben Elijah Gibbor (Karaite), Joseph Haya Yyun, Abraham Saba, Zechariah ben Solomon ha-Rofe (Yahya b. Sulaymān al-Tahbīh), and Zechariah ben Suraq (15th cent.), along with dozens of anonymous commentaries. In the 16th century there was a veritable explosion of commen- tary activity, resulting in over 20 more commenta- ries being produced, including those of Solomon Alqabets, Eliezer ben Elijah Ashkenazi, Elisha Gal- lico, Joseph ibn Yahya, Moses ben Joseph al-Balīda, Moses Isserles, Judah Loew ben Bezalel, Samuel de Ucēda, and Joseph Taitzak.

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

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

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

The absence of God’s name from the book troubled many medieval exegetes and they tried to resolve this conundrum in various ways. Saadia (fol- lowed by Ibn Ezra) suggests that this was done inten- tionally to prevent God’s name from being dese- creted by heretics and idolaters. Isaac Arama rejects this view, arguing that God’s presence is mani- fested through hidden miracles, which may seem like natural events. Another explanation, appar- ently of kabbalistic origin, is that the events de-