

HAMAN IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER

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1. *Haman in Esther Novelle*

The Book of Esther, it has often been asserted, is the least “religious” book of the whole Bible. There is here no mention of God, of Israel’s history, of the Land, or for that matter, of anything sacred, including the Law, prayer, or sacrifice. At the core of the plot, however, is the conflict between the Jew Mordecai and the “Agagite” Haman, and it becomes increasingly clear in that Masoretic Text and even more so in the Greek version of Esther that the clash between the two is not just because of their incompatible temperaments but because of their conflicting world-views. In particular, their respective conceptions of the Law are vastly different. To spell out this problem is already suggesting an ideological basis to the rivalry between Mordecai and Haman, and if so, chances are that the central position of the Torah in postexilic Judaism is not alien to Esther’s texture. I mean that a level deeper than the anecdotal is to be suspected here.

Furthermore, the book of Esther is fond of reversals of fortune that strike parity between the Jews and their neighbors or foes, and eventually reveal the Jews’ appointed destiny. Esther starts by being an insignificant individual in the Persian empire, but Queen Vashti’s demotion is Esther’s promotion to the throne. This principle of sudden change of fortune (*peripeteia* as said Aristotle) is constant in Esther and becomes a veritable although implicit theology (see M. Fox, 1983). It culminates with the hanging of Haman instead of Mordecai, and the decimation of the pogrom organizers instead of the Jews. *Peripeteia* allows the story to be entirely constructed upon the unpredictability of history, so that, in the ironclad determinism of causes and effects, one must always count with the possibility (or is it with the faith?) or deliverance coming “from some other place” (4:14, *mimmāqôm ʿahēr*). As Esther 9:1 expresses it so pointedly, “the opposite happened” (*wēnahāphōk hū*) from what was planned by the oppressor.¹

1. Also when the Persian king decides something, “the opposite happens”!

We must first deal with some features that are, it is true, repeated in nearly all the introductions and commentaries to Esther, but which deserve mention here for our purpose. Ostensibly set in the days of Xerxes I, i.e., in the fifth century B.C.E., the story, whatever its remote origins, was composed during the second century B.C.E. in the eastern Jewish diaspora. Its geographical cradle is pointed to by an accumulation of "Persianisms" in the text (see C. A. Moore, 1971: XLI). Even the names of the characters, for that matter, take us to the region of the Tigris. In the 1890s already Heinrich Zimmern and Peter Jensen equated Mordecai and Esther with Marduk and Ishtar, and Haman and Vashti with the Elamite gods Humman and Mashti, respectively. These German scholars concluded that the story of Esther is an historicized myth or ritual.² In 1950, Theodor H. Gaster suggested that the prototype of Purim was the Persian New Year Festival, and he saw in Esther "simply a Jewish adaptation of a popular Persian novella" (p. 35; see also H. Ringgren, 1955).

A most intriguing theory has been put forward by Robert Gordis. In a 1981 article titled "Religion, Wisdom and History in the Book of Esther—A New Solution to an Ancient Crux," the Jewish scholar insists on the uniqueness of Esther in the whole Bible, as it purports to be composed "in the form of a chronicle of the Persian court, written by a Gentile scribe." Such a literary device was used by the author to "buttress [Jewish] confidence in the veracity of his narrative" (p. 375). Gordis recalls the famous case of the *Letter of Aristeas* allegedly written by a non-Jew as an *apologia Judearum*.

I do not accept Gordis' theory per se, but it is crystal clear that the tale of Esther is perfectly fitting a diaspora milieu. Not only does the story occur at the Persian court with Jewish characters who are Jews of the dispersion, but the literary genre of the tale is what German critics have called a "Diasporanovelle." The following summary written by E. K. Bennett on the nature of the novelle is particularly illuminating.

The Novelle is an epic form and as such deals with events rather than actions; it restricts itself to a single event (or situation or conflict), laying the stress primarily upon the event and showing the effect of this event upon a person or group of persons; by its concentration upon a single event it tends to present it as chance (*Zufall*) and it is its function to reveal that what is apparently chance, and may appear as such to the person concerned, is in reality fate. . . . It must present some aspect of life (event, situation, conflict) which arouses interest by its strangeness, remoteness

2. P. Jensen (1892), 47-70, 209-226; H. Zimmern (1891), 157-169.

from everyday happenings, but at the same time its action must take place in the world of reality and not that of pure imagination. . . . Characteristic of its construction is a certain turning point, at which the development of the narrative moves unexpectedly in a different direction from that which was anticipated, and arrives at a conclusion which surprises, but at the same time satisfies logically. . . . The effect of the impact of the event upon the person or group of persons is to reveal qualities which were latent and may have been unsuspectedly present in them . . . (p. 18–19).

In that respect, a parallel has often been drawn with the Joseph story in Genesis. The similarities between the two tales are ideological and even verbal (see M. Gan, 1961–62; A. Meinhold, 1975, 1976; J. G. Baldwin, 1984, p. 28). On the religious level, there is in the Joseph story an eclipse of sorts of the divine. André Neher in his book *The Exile of the Word* (1981, pp. 24ff.) has called attention to the absence of divine discourse in the narration from Genesis 37:1 to 46:2. Neher has correctly pointed out that the setting in Egypt of the Joseph story renders improper the direct involvement of God. The theophanic dialogue occurs only in the land of Israel. On a foreign soil the contact is only indirect, through dreams for instance, and through coincidental or serendipitous events.

The author of Esther goes further and avoids *any* mention of or even allusion to the deity in the Persian setting. In other words, there is a theology for the land of Israel and another for the dispersion; or, more accurately, there is a language for those within and another language for those without. This is all the more understandable as the problems are highly different according to their settings. Esther's problem is Jewish survival under the threat of genocide. To that problem Esther gives an answer inspired, not by the possible model of the exodus from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, but by the one of the safe management of the Egyptian affairs by Joseph who stayed in the foreign land and made his people *and* the Egyptians prosper. Esther similarly deals with a situation in which the danger of Jewish annihilation issues from the setting itself. The foreigners are dangerously ambivalent, their attitude ambiguous. They may one day command that all Jews be massacred in the whole empire, and the next day elevate one of them to quasi-kingship, promise half of the empire to another because she is attractive or sexy, and take side with those they first selected for annihilation.

Joseph was endowed with a wisdom far above the average. He had premonitory dreams, revelatory visions, and an unflinching certainty of his high destiny. Such is not the typical condition of diaspora Jews. They may have some of their own occupying envious positions of power—due sometimes to no better causes than being good-looking. But

the fact is that they hold their destiny in their own hands. Their survival is somehow a certainty that history has upheld, but not by supernatural means. Mordecai says to Esther that if she is unwilling to act on behalf of her people, help will come from another place, but that other place is certainly no *deus ex machina*. Put in a nutshell, the “theology” of the book of Esther is “Judeo-centered.”³ Human action—understood *Jewish* action—either assists or resists the ultimate causality beneath the surface of events. When there is conformity between the two, history appears as a serendipitous sequence of causes and effects. At the end, there is left to the Jews no other alternative but to celebrate and let their joy explode with thanksgiving.

The *Judeo-centricity* of the book is still more pointed when we realize that the story is not without a religious historical-traditional background. In fact, the story of Esther is the sequence and the redemption of the unfinished business reported in 1 Samuel 15 (see W. McKane, 1961). There we are told that King Saul spared the Amalekite Agag and plundered the Amalekite property, instead of fulfilling the divine command to kill the former and put the latter under “ban” (*herem*). This became the ground for Saul’s rejection as king and the beginning of his fall.

In Esther, Mordecai is introduced in 2:5 as a Benjamite descendant of Kish, the father of Saul. He refuses to bow before Haman, and rather than a display of arrogance in flagrant violation of the king’s orders, Mordecai’s refusal is “explained” in the text by the mention that he is a Jew. The witnesses to Mordecai’s insubordination, we are told, were waiting “to see whether Mordecai’s words would stand, as he had told them that he was a Jew” (3:4). This statement would remain cryptic, were it not for our happening to learn that Haman is “the son of Hamdatha the Agagite” (3:1), thus a descendant of Agag the Amalekite king spared by the ancestor of Mordecai! The two archenemies are face to face once more, Saul and Agag, Israel and Amalek. The later development of the tale may well be retrospectively indicative of the reason why Mordecai commanded his niece not to reveal her Jewishness in the first place. An untimely proclamation by Esther of her origins would short-circuit Haman’s plan, while Mordecai on the contrary wants Haman to devise his “final solution” to the Jewish problem. For a long while in the story, it seems that Haman disposes of the power of life and death on Mordecai and the Jewish people, but the truth of the matter may be that he is manipulated by his intended victim. Mordecai in that case would

3. In terms of the Jewishness of characters being so central to the plot.

have counted on the hostile and murderous instinct of the Amalekite, knowing that Haman's thirst for Jewish blood will push him to extremes and at one point or another drive him out in the open where he will be exposed. This way, both elements of secrecy and civil disobedience on the part of Mordecai belong to a master plan that consists in risking an enormous wager, namely the very lives of the Diaspora Jews including Esther and himself, in order to triumphantly overcome the enemy. The Jew is waiting with a sling of his own, capable of killing another Goliath.

Haman must feel free to vent his rage against the Jews and thus meet his fatal destiny, lest he beget another generation of "Amalekites" that will further torment and slay Israel. That the Jewish fortune was reversed (*nehpak*, 9:22) and Haman and his nest of serpents were destroyed by Mordecai's scheme, deserved to be celebrated "by every single generation" (9:28). For, as the story of Esther demonstrates, Amalek is the symbol of the perennial presence of Evil in the world, of the enemy wherever Israel moves.⁴

Besides, all the characters of the plot are, in the words of C. A. Moore (1971, p. LIII), "superficially drawn." Haman in particular is less an individual than the stereotype of his nation, Amalek. Through him, it is the whole of his race that is scorned in Esther 6 and destroyed in Esther 7; he is "hanged on the same gallows that he had erected for Mordecai!" (7:10).⁵

Haman is repeatedly called "the enemy of the Jews." This again is another way to typify the personage. Characteristically, he directs his attacks against the Jews to the most sensitive spot: their being a people with strange laws. Because of their difference, says Haman with an astounding superficiality, they should not be tolerated (3:8). Their laws make them unruly. The only way to control them (as they already are scattered in the whole empire and thus cannot be transplanted to another region, for example) is to "destroy, slay, and exterminate all of them, young and old, children and women, in a single day . . . and their possessions plundered" (3:13). Beside the bloodthirsty rage in Haman indicated by the accumulation of those terms, their descriptive quality does not fail to evoke a reliable image of the predicament of those

4. According to D. J. A. Clines (1984), it may well be that the story of Mordecai and Haman constitutes the original version of the Esther story.

5. Sandra B. Berg (1979) has stressed the comic paradox of Haman's "elevation" by the king until he is "elevated" physically on the huge gallows of his own doing (7:9-10)!

deprived of royal protection. They are stripped of all rights and become nonentities. They may be abused, plundered, and slain with impunity.⁶

2. *Haman the Amalekite*

The Greek versions of Esther began to be composed shortly after the Hebrew text. The textual history of the book seems to be the following. According to C. A. Moore (1971), a first version of the Esther story came to existence in the 4th century B.C.E. or during the Persian period. The final version in Hebrew as it is transmitted in the Masoretic Text dates of the Hellenistic period. As 2 Maccabees knows of Esther and Mordecai—there is here reference to a “Day of Nicanor” at the eve of a “Day of Mordecai” (2 Macc 15:36; 1 Macc 7:49)—the *terminus ad quem* for the Hebrew text of Esther is the turn of the 1st century B.C.E. As to the Greek text, a colophon indicates a date of composition around 78–77 B.C.E. (see E. Bickerman, 1944, p. 362; on the Greek text of Esther, see C. A. Moore, 1977).

At any rate, the Septuagint shows that the story of Esther was right away understood or reinterpreted as conveying a religious message. The allusions to the historic confrontation of Israel and Amalek in the book were readily picked up and amplified. But with a twist. In the Greek of 9:24, as well as in the Addition to 8:12 (= 16:10), Haman is called a *Makedon*. He was “a Macedonian, an alien in fact” who, says v. 14, plotted “to transfer to the Macedonians the sovereignty now held by the Persians.” On the other hand, the Jews are called by the king, “our loyal Persians” (v. 23).

This tradition proved very popular among the Jews. In the 10th century Hebrew paraphrase called the *Yosippôn*,⁷ Haman is “the friend of the Greeks.” So are also Bigtan and Teresh, the plotters against the king’s life in Esther 6:2. They all connive to deliver Persia to the Greeks.

One finds other indications in Esther LXX that Haman was a stranger in Persia. In 3:1, 8:3 and 5, and 9:10 and 24, he is an Agagite (i.e., Amalekite) or, by a possible play of words with Agag, he is a Gogite (i.e., coming from the cursed city of Gog). More puzzling is the Codex Sinaiticus revised by its Corrector at Esther 9:24. There Haman is an *Ebugaios*, a term that remains unexplained but is assonant with another

6. Modern examples of this dehumanization process are too evident to be spelled out here.

7. For the *Yosippôn*, see Israel Levy (1933, pp. 166–171); *Ency. Jud.*, s.v. “Josippon,” vol. 10, cols. 296–298.

term in Additions to Esther 12:6 where Haman is a "Bugaeon." In any case, Haman is presented as a spy for the Greeks, a parasite in Persia, a man whose claim of fidelity to the king is a coverup for his ill intentions. Those he accuses of his own crimes, the Jews, are in reality "loyal Persians." They even save the king's life without being at first rewarded for such a token of their law-abiding dedication to their land of adoption.

It is clear that Haman may ostensibly belong to any nation or group which happens to be inimical to the Jews at a given time. It is probably what "Ebugaios" means; "Gogite," on the other hand, is certainly symbolic and goes beyond a mere updating. It eschatologizes the notion. This decisive step was first taken by the translator in Greek of Esther. It is the first evidence we have of a well-established tradition that sees the presence of "Amalek" in every generation, until the eschatological "Gogite" is destroyed and the Kingdom of God is set. For the Rabbis of old, Amalek is the epitome of evil on earth. It has remained so until today; the commandment to blot out their memory is still read annually in all Jewish congregations on the Sabbath before Purim (see *Sanhedrin* 20b). Amalek is the last roadblock before the triumph of God (Midrash *Shoher Tob* 9:10).

The very repetition in the Scriptures of the curse against Amalek (Exod 17:8-16; Num 24:7; Deut 25:17-19; 1 Sam 15; 1 Chr 4:42f.) demonstrates that the Midrash is the result of an enduring tradition. We are consequently invited by the Greek text of Esther to read the book as the record of the fulfillment of the commandment against Amalek by the Jews of the Persian diaspora. If so, the Esther story would report with a remarkable sense of the understatement a historic breakthrough in the stalemate of Israel's struggle with evil in the world. The concealed claim of the book would be eschatological.

As R. M. Hals (1969, p. 4, n. 7) writes in reference to the book of Ruth and to 1 Samuel 17, "... a story can be eminently theological in its intent even though the writer himself speaks not at all of God directly, but chooses to let his characters [let us add: or the events themselves] speak for him. . . ."

3. *Haman Destroyed*

To many readers of the book of Esther its accents of vengeance and bloodthirst are embarrassing. Also the animosity against Amalek so many generations after the events of the Exodus appears to run counter to the biblical virtues of forgiveness and magnanimity. Because of this

and other reasons, especially the book's non-religious language,⁸ Esther is not particularly appreciated by Christians. It often stirs "righteous" protests against the complacency displayed in relating the Jewish massacre of 75,000 people in Persia and the hanging of Haman with his ten sons.

Beside the fact that such negative reaction is the manifestation of a misplaced mercy, as it badly misunderstands what Amalek represents and "flattens" the symbol to the immediacy of the literal, the very plot of Esther is an anticipative reply to humanitarian protests. The "Amalekite" Haman is not killed in cold blood and just because he happens to be "son of Hamdatha the Agagite." Haman's evil dispositions and designs express themselves without provocation. His unjust rage against one individual is so inflated that it become genocidal.

It is that blind rage in Haman that allows Esther, or her substitute Mordecai, as we have seen earlier, to take control of the situation almost from the beginning and to progressively bring the beast to bay. Indeed, the Jewish reading of the story as seen in the Midrashes emphasizes the irony so evident in the tale by not only stressing the corresponding guile of Esther (in chap. 5 for instance), but in amplifying Esther 6 to mean that during his insomnia, the king realized that Haman was out to kill him as well as Mordecai his loyal subject. He therefore decided to have Haman honor Mordecai his archenemy (see Rav Shlomo Henoch, *Eben Šōham*, *ad loc.*). In the same vein, the king affected to be mad against Haman when he saw him bent over the couch where Esther laid (Solomon Halevi, *Midraš Mēgillāh Esther*). Furthermore, *Megillāh* 16a sees irony in the last term of Esther 6:4, "for him." The context demands that we understand, "for Mordecai," but, as indeed Haman will be hanged on the gallows he had prepared, "for him" must mean "for himself"!

Be that as it may, it so happens that, without divine intervention, without prodigy or external hardening of anyone's heart or other such heavenly push or shove,⁹ Haman provokes his own destruction. His wife and friends had predicted that much to him (6:13). The story speaks of manipulation, but not by a *deus ex machina*. Mordecai and Esther display mastery in bringing the enemy to bay but, by so doing, they do not take advantage of any kind of immunity; it is precisely the main ideological contribution of Esther to put Jews in the presence of an insurmountable obstacle. As the background of Judith's story is con-

8. Should it not rather be seen as a great achievement in a time such as ours that is more and more suspicious of religious jargon?

9. Cf. Exodus 4:21; 7:3; 10:17; 11:10; (Romans 9:18). . . .

stituted by the immensity of the Assyrian army, reflection of the huge power of Nebuchadnezzar, that a widow must singlehandedly defeat, in Esther similarly the background is the unlimited wealth and the omnipotence of Ahasuerus, that a Jewess at the risk of her life must neutralize. The dramatic effect is as impactful as in folkloric tales of "St. George and the Dragon."

As a matter of fact, Haman in the book of Esther is not far from being stereotyped as a monster "who utters monstrous words."¹⁰ That he is, however, an historical figure in the tale, belonging to a genealogical line that identifies him as an "Agagite" and an Amalekite, contributes powerfully to making of the book "a consciously consequent desacralization and detheologization of a central salvation history tradition," as says pointedly Gillis Gerleman (1973, p. 23).

That tradition is the watermark of the Esther story. It is never lost sight of. So, for example, Haman defiantly casts lots on the 13th of Nisan, immediately before Passover that falls on the 14–15th Nisan, i.e., the first month of the year. The lots are cast and designate the 13th of the last month, Adar, for the fateful massacre of the Jew, just one month before the following Passover, but in all this, the Jewish celebration is not mentioned. Clearly, that strange absence is not accidental. Does it mean a diaspora rejection of the old festival and its being replaced by Purim, as Gerleman believes? Rather, Esther's silence about Passover is to be put on the same level as the order of Mordecai to Esther not to reveal her Jewish origins. Salvation for the Jewish community comes from the Jews themselves. But the problem is the same as in Exodus, one of redemption. The pattern of events resembles the one recurrent in the book of Judges: life threat, deliverance, vengeance on the enemy, triumph. Here there is added a commemorative festival. Much ought to be said about the latter that, however, would be out of place in this study. I have already mentioned in part Gerleman's stance. Be that as it may, it is evident that Purim of the 14th and 15th of Adar (the last month) corresponds to Passover of the 15th of Nisan (the first month). Both are to be kept "forever" (Exod 12:24–27; Esth 9:19). Furthermore, both celebrate a slaying of the people's enemy and Israel's liberation from their oppression.

When these parallels (and others) to salvation history are missed, one is doomed to misunderstand the book of Esther. An example of this is provided by David J. A. Clines (1984), especially with regard to the events of 14–15 Adar. Granted, they are reported with great soberness

10. Cf. Daniel 7:8, 11.

by the tale and much is left unexpressed. But there is no excuse in positing, as Clines does,¹¹ that the turn of fortune of Mordecai has converted everyone in Persia into a “philosemite!” According to that premise, the Jews have no enemy left who would attack them in taking advantage of the license given them by the first royal edict to slaughter the Jews and—an especially luring permission—to plunder their goods and properties. So the plot that started with the development of the self-defense motif becomes one of sheer massacre of an unprovoking and peaceful population branded by Jewish intelligence service as Jew-haters or Jew-enemies (Esth 9:1, 5, 16)! One must then attribute to the book of Esther feelings of ultra nationalism pushed to the extreme of considering the Jews as superior to all other human beings (see W. McKane, 1961, p. 261).

In fact, if there is in the story a possible discrepancy between part one (the threat) and part two (the deliverance), it is not due to a change in the plot at midcourse, but to the necessities imposed by the parallel, central to the whole story, between the Persian events and the Saul vs. Agag episode. As the latter had armies clashing, so here Haman must have an army of his own that Israel defeats as she did under Saul. As the confrontation reported in 1 Samuel 15 was between two kings, so it is necessary that Haman and Mordecai be invested with royal authority. The Persian king gives his signet ring, first to Haman (3:10), then to Mordecai (8:8). Similarly, after Haman is elevated to a position of personal representative of the king (3:1–2), Mordecai appears as kingly in 6:8–11 (proleptically) and 8:15 (definitively). Clines’ theory of Esther as an evolving story/text condemns him to miss this point. He wonders why Esther does “set Mordecai over the house of Haman” (8:2) and comments, “nothing comes of it. . . . The sentence in the Masoretic Text is gratuitous . . .” (p. 104, *sic*).

There is certainly no need to imagine that a sick mind produced at this juncture the description of a gang-like slaying of innocent people uniquely because they were not Jews. So much of the reverse has happened in actual history that the very conjuring of such a reading of Esther is fraught with a suspect attempt at exonerating antisemites by charging the victims of the same crime in other circumstances. The author of Esther had not to disguise any innocent bystander into Jew-hater or Jew-enemy. Esth 9:15–16 indicates, to the contrary, that there were enough Persians who tried their luck in slaughtering Jews accord-

11. On that, Clines is following the lead of L. B. Patton (1908, p. 280: “so completely were the tables turned, that it was now dangerous not to be a Jew.”). For a contrary opinion, see Moore, 1971, p. 82.

ing to the terms of the first royal decree. It is those irredentists that are called "Jew-haters." They were routed by their intended victims, not because they were peaceful and disarmed, but because the fear of the Jews (indeed a religious awe; see Clines, p. 41) had fallen upon them. The "miracle" is indicated by such slight strokes throughout the story.

Now, that the whole scene be ascribable to wishful thinking on the part of perennial victims, there is no doubt about it. Esther is a tale, not a historical record. Wishful thinking is here not only a poetic license; it belongs to the compensatory imagination of the powerless. The oppressed never miss the recourse of imagining the oppressors seized by a more or less supernatural fear of the victims, or by what the victims represent, be it innocence or justice, or again a divinely appointed destiny. Then, of course, "no one can stand before them, for the fear of them fell upon all people" (9:2; contra Clines, p. 42).

But wishful thinking does not mean that imagination is given absolutely free rein. In a traditional society, more so than in an uprooted one, collective memory shapes imagination. The little Jewess becomes Queen of Persia, like the Hebrew slave had become the alter ego of Pharaoh; Mordecai is a descendant of King Saul and Haman a descendant of Agag. So all the characters are set aside for the fulfillment of their respective roles. When the drama eventually unfolds, "Agag" is killed by "Saul"¹² and history at long last after being disoriented, is reoriented. Each one has received his lot. Everyone has met his destiny. The celebration can begin.

Some critics have stumbled over the point that the Jews of Persia refrained from spoiling the goods of their foes (Esther 9:10, 15–16). Indeed this mention repeated in the text raises problems. King Ahasuerus had given the Jews permission to plunder (8:11). Furthermore, if the parallel with 1 Samuel 15 holds, the Jewish restraint in the time of Esther seems to be at odds with the divine command to Saul to put the Amalekite property under ban, i.e., to destroy it utterly. McKane (1961) is gravely mistaken when he interprets the Jewish constraint at the time of Esther as disinterest for the concept of the "ban." He also consistently sees the extermination of Haman's house as an "uncomplicated and un-theological [motif] of revenge," on the ground that the author of Esther believed in the "intrinsic superiority of the Jews over the Gentiles."¹³

12. Agag, to be sure, was slain by Samuel (1 Samuel 15:33), but several Jewish sources say that Agag had time to beget a child: *Megillāh* 13a; *Tg. Sheni* on Esth 4:13; the *Siddūr* (ed. Singer, p. 277).

13. Clines (1984, p. 30) sees in the Jewish restraint a sign of "the weakness of the plot's conception" (*sic*). The same critic is, however, right to state that there is a "downplay of the 'victory' idea" in the fact that the text qualifies the festival days of "rest."

Nothing is farther from the truth. First, a distinction must be made between Haman and his sons, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, those who attacked the Jews in Persia, thus taking advantage of the first royal edict. While Haman is “Amalek,” the 75,000 slaughtered by the Jews in defending themselves, according to the allowance of the second royal edict, are not. To mark that distinction, Haman is called by an Elamite name (see part 1 above) and the LXX, as we just saw, calls him a “Macedonian.”

Second, it is clear that the royal permission to plunder ran counter to the divine commandment to Saul in 1 Samuel 15. In Esther’s time the Jews did not repeat the sin of their forebears. They would not even touch their enemies’ property (Esth 9:10, 15–16). For now the enemies’ goods are of two provenances, they are Haman’s (Agag’s), and they are Persian. The “ban” on either one was not recommended. Indeed, it was much wiser to let the spoils go to the royal treasuries (so Rashi, Ibn Ezra, etc.). Greed, we may recall, had been an incentive for the earlier edict in the first place (see Esth 3:9) and of Saul’s blunder centuries earlier. It was expedient to demonstrate to the king that he did not lose any income by rescinding the effects of his first edict that allowed the massacre of the Jews in his empire (see 7:4), and to all concerned that they had no mercenary interest (Rav Valerio, *Yad Hammelek* on Esth 9:15 [16th century, quoted by *The Mëgillāh*, 1979; p. 123]) in contrast with those who attacked them. Although permitted by the king to enjoy the spoils, the Jews renounced them, a gesture that would belong to anecdote without the background of 1 Samuel 15.

Finally, McKane has overlooked a crucial point. 1 Samuel 15 reports events that occurred in Palestine. Esther 9 translates the reader to Persia, to the Jewish Diaspora in Susa. The “ban” in Saul’s time was ordered for spoils of war with Amalek. In Persia the property of the Jews’ enemies is no spoil of war and is not even “Amalekite.” As to the royal allowance, it intended the taking of spoil, not its annihilation in a “ban.” A separate case, of course, are Haman’s house and goods. But if Mordecai had the desire to destroy Haman’s former assets, he was not at liberty to do so. The only way to fulfill the spirit of 1 Samuel 15 at Susa was to turn the affair as the book of Esther did: the king gave Haman’s property to Esther (8:1, 7)—and who is the fool who would destroy the royal present? Esther was not a fool. She put Mordecai, the descendant of Saul, in charge of the estate of Haman the Agagite (see 8:2). The verisimilitude of the tale demanded that conclusion.

Nothing is more unfair—but also unfortunately more common—than to misrepresent the episode under consideration as “evidence of a kind

of diabolical purity of motive,"¹⁴ read: evidence of Pharisaic duplicity and hypocrisy; for those Susa Jews had scruples at plundering properties, but none at massacring 75,000 people! Conveniently, one feigns to forget that the slaughter ostensibly occurred in self-defense and as the sequel of an intended "final solution" to the Jewish problem in Persia.¹⁵

Thus the story of Esther presents us with a Diaspora interpretation of Scriptures adapted to new circumstances and new conditions. It is *in ovo* the kind of hermeneutics that more and more prevailed in a Judaism deprived of land, state, temple, institutions, ministerial officers, and so forth. A *Diasporanovelle*, the book of Esther was the harbinger of an astonishingly adaptive Judaism that lasts until this very day.

It is therefore of the highest interest to situate the book of Esther in a hermeneutical trajectory connecting the hoariest past with the ultimate future. The story of Esther starts, in fact, with Genesis 36:12, 16; Amalek is born from the impure union of Esau (the one hated by God, Mal 1:2) with his concubine Timna (whose name means "forbidden"), sister of Lotan the Hurrite (i.e., a Canaanite, his name means perhaps "cleavage"(?)). So Amalek becomes "the prime of Nations," but "its future is ruin forever," says Balaam (Num 24:20). Not surprisingly, the descendants of Esau's historic blunder mount a vicious attack from behind against the children of Jacob in the desert, at Refidim (Exod 17:8-16; Deut 25:18-19). Then YHWH promises to blot out the memory of Amalek, and Moses comments, "As a hand was raised against the throne of the Lord, YHWH will have war with Amalek in all generations" (Exod 17:16).

When the time comes for God to liquidate that obstacle on the road to history fulfillment, He orders Saul to exterminate Amalek and to destroy all of their possessions (i.e., the traces of their presence in history). Saul, as we know, did not comply. David massacred them and freed all the prisoners and the booty that the Amalekites had made earlier (1 Sam 30). Strangely, the question of booty is again a bone of contention among the Israelites (see v. 22ff.) and the generosity of David towards the rear guard and the Elders of Judah (vv. 26-31) is echoed in Esther (9:19, 22). Esther 9 finally repairs Saul's mistake, Haman the Agagite is hanged on the gallows he erected for Mordecai the Jew. That event reorients history.

14. W. McKane (1961, p. 261) marks his agreement with M. Haller (1940) and H. Ringgren (1958).

15. The Jewish victory in Susa is a successful insurrection of the Warsaw ghetto with the result that 75,000 SS troops were slaughtered!

But this is not the end of the road, only a curve. The death of Haman, says Clines, “has solved nothing, relieved nothing. He himself may be dead but his evil is very much alive. And it lives on under the banner of unalterable Persian law.”¹⁶ There are still Hamans in history. After the events of 70 C.E., the Rabbis identified Rome with Amalek, or with his grandfather Esau, thus affirming again the symbolic character of those names. *Pēsīqtā Rabbāī* 47b invites to abstain from hating an Edomite or an Egyptian; but as to Amalek, “Remember what Amalek did to you.” In another Rabbinic text the distinction is based upon the fact that Edomites and Egyptians met Israel with the sword (Num 20:18), “but with regard to those who sought to make Israel sin [here, Moab and Ammon], it is said that they should never enter the congregation of the Lord (Deut 23:3)” (*Tanhûma B*, Pinehas 76a *in fine*). Origen did not miss that archetypal or metaphorical meaning of Amalek. He wrote, “It does not behoove us to spare that invisible Amalek, who withstands those wishing to ascend from Egypt and escape from the darkness of this world into the promised land, and who attacks us” (*Hom. in Num.*, xix, 1; Migne, col. 722, B). He added, “. . . Understand all this to refer to the battles of the saints who wage warfare against sin” (*In Lib. Jesu Nave*, viii, 7; Migne, col. 870, B). Origen’s introversion is echoed in the Talmud by a very interesting haggadah in *Sanhedrîn* 99b; Timna wanted to become a proselyte but was rebuked by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Then she became the concubine of Esau’s son Eliphaz, for she said, “Better to become a handmaid of this nation than a princess [that she was according to Genesis 36:10, 12, 29] of any other.” Her son Amalek “wrought great trouble to Israel. Why? Because they ought not to have repelled her.”¹⁷

But if Haman has historical avatars, so does also Mordecai. Esther 10:1–3 focuses upon the enduring good done to his people by Mordecai, “next to king Ahasuerus, great among the Jews, popular with the multitude of his brethren, seeking the welfare of his people and speaking peace to all his descendance” (10:3). This is the last word, a word of peace for all generations. This “again, projects the book beyond the narrated period,” so that the story has “inbuilt its own hermeneutical

16. Clines (1984, p. 18). For Clines, this motif was added later to an original story more or less represented by the A-text in Greek, and which ended with the simple revocation of the edict by the king.

17. The English translations of most of the Rabbinic texts quoted in this paper are by C. G. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (1974).

rules, specifying how it is to be read and thus what it really means" (Clines, p. 25). This is a real insight. In the perspective that I hold as fundamental for the reading of the book, Esther is invested in spite of its absence of religiosity, with a considerable theological task.

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