

Megillat Esther, Lesson 10:

The “Greek” version of Esther, and what it tells us about the book

[Note: this is a revised version of an article I wrote that is found online at <http://thetorah.com/a-more-religious-megillat-esther/>. Some illustrations can be found there, and as an alternative to this lesson, that can be assigned to students for a reading assignment.]

For readers familiar with the Hebrew book of Esther, encountering the Greek version of the book is a surprising experience. The most surprising parts are the large sections of the Greek text known as the “Additions to Esther”; these may be found in any Catholic Bible, in collections of Apocrypha, or on-line; see

<http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/17-esther-nets.pdf> or

<http://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Greek+Esther+1&version=CEB>, for example.

Historical and cultural backgrounds

The text includes a colophon – an addition to the manuscript, written at the end, in which the scribe provides information about the composition or copying of the text just completed. This colophon is unique in the Greek Bible, and informs us about where this version originated and where it circulated:

In the fourth year of the rule of Ptolemy and Cleopatra, Dositheus, who affirmed that he was a priest and Levite, and his son Ptolemy brought the preceding letter concerning Purim. They verified its genuineness.

Lysimachus, Ptolemy’s son, a resident of Jerusalem, translated the letter.

The Ptolemy involved must have been Ptolemy XII, who came to the throne of Egypt in 80 BCE, and thus this Greek book of Esther reached Alexandria in 77/76 BCE. So in 76 BCE, two men named Dositheos and Ptolemy, who said they were priests, arrived in Alexandria from Jerusalem. They brought with them the book of Esther, called “the letter about Purim (Phrouai),” and they explained that it had been translated by one Lysimachus in Jerusalem.

It is important to note that at this time, the Hasmoneans were ruling in Jerusalem; in particular, Alexander Yannai (Jannaeus) reigned from 103-76 BCE. The Hasmoneans, of course, could not have liked the original story of Esther, for they thought that intermarriage should be avoided on pain of death, and that in general it was better to die than to violate a law of the Torah. A hero who is intermarried and lived in apparent violation of Shabbat, kashrut, and so on, could not be accepted as a true hero, and of course a גאולה with no God or religion was not a true גאולה, and so this book had to be “corrected”.

The story of Purim was apparently a popular one in Alexandria. Here, too, there were Jews who were culturally integrated into the surrounding (in this case Hellenistic) society, who spoke only the common language of their neighbors (in this case Greek), and who were involved in the bureaucracy of the city and of the wider empire. Here, too, the Jews could be victims of vicious rulers, as they had been violently reminded in a massacre during the previous century. The dependence on the foreign power, and the unquestioned assumption that Jewish life would continue outside of Israel, would have made Purim an attractive festival and Esther an attractive book.

The colophon to Greek Esther may indicate that the Jews in Eretz Yisrael deemed it important that the Jews of Alexandria receive a “new and improved” version of Esther, which brought the book in line with “normative” Jewish ideology and practice: devotion to God, prayer, a rejection of intermarriage, and loyalty to Jewish law. In other words, this was probably a revised edition produced by Eretz Yisrael Jews and sent to Alexandria to correct the edition which the Jews there already had.

The text

There are two types of differences between the Hebrew text and the Greek text: (a) six large additional chunks of text in the Greek text, and (b) lots of smaller changes and additions throughout.

The Six Additions

These are six blocks of text, conventionally labeled A through F, found in all known Greek versions of Esther and without any parallel in the Hebrew text. These six passages can be grouped into three pairs, A-F, B-E, C-D:

A: Mordecai's dream

B: The text of Haman's letter to the provinces

C: The prayers of Mordecai and Esther

D: Esther's entrance into the king

E: The text of Esther and Mordecai's letter to the provinces

F: The interpretation of Mordecai's dream

In class, I recommend reading additions A and F, most of C and D. These pairs each have the effect of dramatically changing one of the main characters of the story.

Additions A & F: The character of Mordecai

In his dream, Mordecai sees two dragons fighting, threatening to destroy the world; peace is effected by a spring that bursts forth. At the end of the book, he realizes that the two dragons represented himself and Haman, and that their conflict would have wreaked havoc had it not been for Esther. (Addition A also contains another short narrative of an attempt on the king's life, foiled by Mordecai – just like the narrative in chapter 2.)

The Additions certainly create a more "religious atmosphere" than the Hebrew text. This starts with the idea of Mordecai as a dreamer. As a dreamer and a dream interpreter, Mordecai is brought in line with Daniel and, more importantly, with their predecessor Joseph. This not only established Mordecai as comparable to earlier biblical heroes, but also establishes him as a religious figure: he, like Joseph and Daniel, was the recipient of divine revelation and (by implication) divine approval.

Note that Addition A draws on various parts of Tanakh, including the imagery of the dragon, fountain, battle, and the contrast between dark and light from Jeremiah 28.

The interpretation of the dream in Addition F adds to the connection to the Joseph story. The Bible, and even the Joseph story, contains different types of dreams. Unlike Pharaoh's dreams, which need interpretation, Joseph's own dreams are transparent. Their meaning is immediately clear, even if it is not clear how the reality foretold in the dream will come about. All that is needed is for history to unfold to discover how they come true. The same is true for Mordecai's dreams, as he discovers, and reveals to the readers, in Addition F.

Additions C & D: The character of Esther

Addition C contains prayers of Mordecai and Esther for the salvation of the Jews. Esther's in particular is worthy of notice in this context. The Queen here laments the Jews' existence in exile and blames their own sins for the lamentable situation: "we have sinned against You, and You have handed us over to our enemies" (C:17). Esther bemoans her own situation as queen. The position is abhorrent first of all because of her intermarriage: "You know that I...abhor the bed of the uncircumcised, and of any foreigner" (C:26). But it is also deplorable in its own right: "You know...that I abhor the symbol of my lofty position which is on my head when I am seen in public – I abhor it like a menstruous rag!" (C: 27). Certainly, Esther protests that she has kept the laws of the Torah to the extent possible: "Your servant has never dined at Haman's table, nor have I extolled the king's banquet or drunk the wine of libations" (C:28). (I do not know what the significance of "Haman's table" is precisely. Is his table worse than the king's table? Why?)

Addition D describes Esther's entry into the throne room. Anxious, she faints when the king looks at her, and her husband revives her and assures her that the prohibition against approaching the king uninvited does not apply to royalty. (This scene became one of the most famous scenes in medieval and early modern Christian paintings of the book of Esther since their artists knew Esther as a longer book, with the additions. Tintoretto's painting of the scene is included on the handout. For Jews familiar only with the Hebrew text, this scene would have been unfamiliar, since nothing similar appears there.)

This scene cannot be original to the story, as it undermines Esther's heroism: her bold resolve displayed in chapter 4 turns out to have been pointless, as the law simply didn't apply to her. The motivation for this addition was probably to bring the book more in line with Hellenistic romances, which usually included explicit soliloquies and confessions of emotions, and numerous protestations of piety. Fainting due to overwhelming emotion was a common theme, for both men and women.

Analysis

Addition D, then, does not appear to be due to religious motives. Additions A, C, and F, however, show that the book was important enough to be revised, and that some people wanted the protagonists of the Book of Esther to act in a more admirable fashion. Therefore, they improved and enhanced it in certain fundamental respects. In other words, the Greek Additions show us just what bothered ancient readers about the Hebrew book of Esther. Without these Additions, one could question Mordecai's religious stature; one could wonder about Esther's true piety; one could doubt whether the whole episode celebrated in the Megillah was really what God desired.

Adding God

It is not only the Additions which “correct” the Hebrew text, but the Greek version as a whole. Most strikingly, the Greek translator has “corrected” the “deficiency” of the lack of God’s name throughout, by inserting it at points where it seems natural!

For example, when Esther first becomes queen, the Hebrew text reports that she did not reveal her ancestry, in accord with Mordecai’s instructions to her. With this, the Greek agrees (“she did not reveal her ancestry, for so Mordecai had commanded her”), but the Greek version then continues: “for so Mordecai had commanded her, to fear God and to do his commandments, just as when she was with him; so Esther did not change her way of life” (2:20). Also, chapter 6 begins and ends very differently in the Greek than it does in the Hebrew (see handout).

Conclusions

This process of revision is a powerful example of the dialogues and discussions which must have taken place during the days of the Second Temple, as Jews struggled to define their identity, whether living as residents in Judea or in far-flung diaspora communities in Persia, Mesopotamia, or Egypt. The book of Esther threw down the gauntlet, challenging Jews to consider the limits of their tradition and how they could live as both faithful Jews and productive citizens in the broader empire. In the eyes of some, however, it went too far. It is no accident that the Additions were added in Hasmonean Jerusalem; the Hasmoneans had a very different attitude toward life under the empire than the intermarried Esther. And it is likely no accident that the book of Esther is the one book to not be preserved at all among the Dead Sea Scrolls: for the Qumran community, intermarriage was a capital crime, and a community that withdrew from the “impure” society of Jerusalem certainly could not tolerate a book where the heroes were so enmeshed in imperial culture.