

Megillat Esther, Lesson 11:

Esther Imaged, Esther Illustrated, Part 1

Megillat Esther, like most of the narratives in Tanakh, is very spare in its details. The palace is never described; the בגדי מלכות and the crowns are left to our imagination; we get no information about what the characters look like or even how old they are.

For hundreds of years, artists have been filling in this information by illustrating the megilla. The illustrations are highly interpretive, because there is so little information in the text itself.

In this unit, we will look at three groups of illustrations:

1. An ancient painting from the synagogue in Dura Europos
2. Illustrations, Jewish and Christian, from seventeenth-century Europe, including the earliest illustrated megillot that we have,
3. Two contemporary illustrated editions with very different styles and interpretations.

There is no comprehensive collection of Esther-related art that I know of. More examples of European paintings can be found online; some collections are:

http://www.womeninthebible.net/paintings_esther.htm

<http://www.jewishmag.com/121mag/rembrandt-purim-art/rembrandt-purim-art.htm>

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Esther>

Section 1: Dura Europos

Drawings of Esther exist from at least the third century, at Dura Europos.

Dura Europos is a site above the right bank of the Euphrates river, today in far eastern Syria, near the Iraqi border. It was captured in 165 CE by the Romans, who then built it up as a border town to protect against the Sasanians (Persians). It was destroyed by the Sasanians in 256. Nothing was ever built over the ruins, so when it was uncovered in the 1920s, they found many of the buildings – including the synagogue – basically intact. The synagogue walls were covered with paintings, including biblical scenes. The synagogue is now in the Damascus Museum, but not on view, and the site was recently destroyed by ISIS.

Image 1: Esther panel at Dura

Image 2: The front of the synagogue, with the Esther panel visible on the left

Some questions for thought:

- What might it have meant to the Jews of Dura to have a painting of Esther in front of the בית כנסת?
- Did the fact that they were in a city that was protecting against Persians matter?
- Why do you think the Esther story got such a prominent spot in the בית כנסת?
- What do you make of the clothes worn by the characters in the painting?

Section 2: the 17th century

The next few slides will look at four illustrations from the 17th century, two from northern Europe (Rembrandt and his student Gelder, both Dutch) and two from southern Europe (two illustrated megillot from Italy).

Image 3: Rembrandt, The Banquet

Image 4: Rembrandt, Haman begging for his life

Image 5: Gelder, Mordecai and Esther writing the letter of Purim

Some questions for thought:

- In these Dutch paintings, how are the characters drawn?
- What do they wear?
- What emotions can be seen on their faces?
- What is the mood in the various scenes?
- The earliest known illustrated Esther was written and illustrated by Moshe ben Avraham Peshkarol in Ferrara, 1616, and is now in the collections of the National Library in Jerusalem.
- See more at http://web.nli.org.il/sites/NLI/English/gallery/of-israel/Pages/Illust-Megillat_Esther.aspx

Image 6: The first five panels of Peshkarol's megilla

Image 7: Close-up of panel 5, with the illustration on top labeled להביא את ושתי המלכה

Image 8: Close-up of the illustration from the top of panel 4, labeled גם ושתי עשתה משתה נשים

The students can be asked to look and comment on whatever catches their attention here. Again, some specific things to look for include:

- Mode of dress
- Emotions on faces
- The illustrations other than the people (designs in the margins, etc.)
- The man-like figure on top between every column

Image 9: A related early-17th century megilla from Italy

Image 10: Close-up of one illustration, showing Mordecai leading תפילה in the בית כנסת, presumably in between פרק ה and פרק ד

- Besides the usual questions, here the students should also be asked whether they imagined Mordecai going to בית כנסת, and if so, what the בית כנסת in their imaginations looked like. What does that do to the image of Mordecai in the story?