

Women, Gender, and Religion

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The Taming of the Two

Queen Esther and Queen Vashti in Midrash

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Introduction

[1] The book of Esther is one of two books in the Hebrew Bible that takes its name from a prominent female character (an up-to-date bibliography on the book of Esther appears in Lubetski and Lubetski; a wide-ranging collections of studies on this book can be found in Crawford and Greenspoon). In addition to Esther, there are two other women who play a role in this narrative: Esther's predecessor Vashti and Haman's wife Zeresh. This article will focus on the two royal females as they were interpreted, re-interpreted, and even re-invented in the vast Jewish exegetical enterprise known as midrash. Although the strands of the midrashic project are at points mutually exclusive and contradictory, we can nonetheless chart a process, especially visible with respect to Esther, of domesticating or "taming" a woman whose biblical story is artfully ambiguous and intentionally indeterminate (on this and related issues in the book of Esther, see Beal; Beal et al.; Clines; Fox; Frymer-Kensky; Laniak). Additionally, we will see that this process is likely connected with the fact that Esther is a woman.

Midrash

[2] A satisfactory definition or description of the term “midrash” is as elusive as any within the study of Judaism (see, for example, the influential studies of Boyarin; Hammer; Herr 2007b; Neusner 2004; and Stern). This is so because the term is at once a process and the results of that process; limited by some to a particular period and medium, but expanded by others to embrace a wide array of phenomena; and both dismissed as fanciful and lauded as insightful by respected scholars. Rather than rehearse or recite the arguments on all sides, I prefer to affirm five aspects of midrash that I find invaluable when exploring this topic.

[3] First, midrash is a form of exegesis; it follows the biblical text. Etymologically, the term “exegesis” refers to the process of drawing out from the biblical text what might otherwise remain just below the surface; its opposite number, “eisegesis” (to my knowledge, used only in a negative sense), denotes the process of writing into the text what the interpreter wishes, for whatever reason, to find there. As we shall see, many points of midrashic interpretation seem, at best, far-fetched to us and connected only slightly, if at all, to a given biblical passage. That, however, is our perspective. As valid as it is from our viewpoint, it should not be connected with the motives or inclinations of those responsible for the classical Midrashim of the early centuries of the Common Era. It is up to us to look for the connections that might otherwise elude us.

[4] Second, midrash appears to have been (and, for some, continues to be) prompted or precipitated by what are perceived as gaps, inconsistencies, or other difficulties in the Hebrew text. For the practitioner of midrash, the biblical text was purposefully composed in such a way that the careful reader would on occasion stop in his or her tracks and seek to answer questions that the text poses. The sources for such a response are varied, but nothing is considered more valuable than the biblical text itself: in any of a variety of ways, one or more other passages can be called upon to fill a gap, explain an apparent inconsistency, or solve any of a myriad of other problems. What distinguishes the adept practitioner of midrash is the ability to detect the often-elusive thread that connects one passage with another.

[5] Third, for the most part, midrashic exegesis or elaboration centers on narrative passages. Thus, it may be called haggadic rather than halachic (the latter referring to material with legal import). To put it another way, although a good deal of midrash relates to issues of ethics and morality, it is not typically formulated as a legal pronouncement.

[6] As a result, fourth, there is rarely a “correct” midrash of a given passage over against a “wrong” one. In other words, the connective thread can lead in many directions to and from a given passage, and the import of such connections is almost always multivalent. Midrashic exegesis of a particular word or phrase needs to be explored within the confines of a larger midrashic enterprise (when this can be identified and is extant) as well as within the context of the Hebrew Bible. Thus, it is generally not helpful or accurate to depict a given portrayal of, for example Esther, as *the* midrashic view (studies that center on Esther in midrash include Bonchek; Ginsberg: 1129-80; Grossfeld; Herr 2007a; Neusner 2001; *Midrash Rabbah*; Lembariski). In practice, certain views have predominated and captured the popular imagination, but they are rarely the only view promulgated or preserved.

[7] Finally, fifth, those responsible for classical midrash (as is true for those producing midrash today) kept at least one eye on the world contemporary with them, even as they cast their other eye on a world that was earlier than and different from their own. As is the case with other rabbinic productions of the early centuries of the Common Era, classical midrash is notoriously difficult to date or to place in a specific social, cultural, or geographical context. Such difficulty should not, however, blind us to the undoubted contemporizing or updating that influenced, both consciously and subconsciously, the work of those who produced midrash. Thus, we should look at such texts as multi-layered. It is this vertical dimension of the text that is most elusive when we view the written, and flattened, page. But it is also this very dimension that can lead us to pose, and answer, questions that we would otherwise overlook.

Esther in the Book of Esther and in Midrash

[8] We turn from these general remarks to the book of Esther as preserved in the Hebrew Bible (among the most valuable commentaries on the book of Esther, each exemplifying a somewhat different approach, are Berlin; Bush; Gordis; Halevy; Jobs 1999; Moore 1971; Levenson; Zlotowitz). Esther appears somewhat abruptly in chapter 2. In the first part of this chapter, we are told that the King initiated a search for a “young virgin” to replace Vashti as queen. Without any explicit connection between the search and what follows, vv. 5-6 introduce us to Mordecai:

In the fortress Shushan lived a Jew by the name of Mordecai, son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjamin. Kish had been exiled from Jerusalem in the group that was carried into exile along with King Jeconiah of Judah, which had been driven into exile by King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.¹

This Mordecai was “foster father to Hadassah – that is, Esther – his uncle’s daughter, for she had neither father nor mother. The maiden was shapely and beautiful; and when her father and mother died, Mordecai adopted her as his own daughter” (2:7). The following verse joins together these two threads – the search for a replacement for Vashti and the story of Esther – by noting: “When many girls were assembled in the fortress Shushan under the supervision of Hegai, Esther too was taken into the king’s palace under the supervision of Hegai, guardian of the women.”

[9] The genealogy of Mordecai and Esther, their relationship, as well as the description of Esther’s physical attributes, were rich sources of midrashic elaboration. The first information we learn about Esther at the story’s beginning is that she is an orphan, and Mordecai her foster father. According to several midrashim, Esther’s father had died before her birth, while her mother died in childbirth. Mordecai and his wife brought her into their home (among other sources, see *Megillah* 13a and *Esther Rabbah* 2.7).² Mordecai’s unnamed wife quietly drops from the narrative early on; perhaps as a consequence, his breasts are said to

¹ This and all following translations of the Hebrew are taken from the New Jewish Version.

² For a traditional understanding of Jewish sources containing midrashic elaboration relating to Esther, see Zlotowitz: 138-46. Critical discussion of some of these sources can be found in Herr 2007a. Most of the midrashic references have been drawn from Ginsberg.

have provided milk for baby Esther (see Ginsberg: 1144 n. 66). While such a miracle is not unique, in this case it is undoubtedly intended to point to the extremely close relationship that developed between Esther and Mordecai.

[10] What was the nature of that relationship? The biblical text is very clear: they were first cousins. In spite of this seeming lack of ambiguity, within the Jewish tradition Mordecai is almost always described as her uncle and she his niece. I suspect that this alteration served to counter any picture of two unmarried people, one male and one female, of approximately the same age (as first cousins likely would be) occupying the same household. Substantial difference in age is also assumed in the elaborations concerning Mordecai and his (first?) wife. This also allows for the development of a tradition, preserved in both Hebrew and in Greek (see, respectively, *Megillah* 13a and the Septuagint version of Esther 2:7), that Mordecai and Esther married – an occurrence for which it would otherwise seem difficult to account. Although in this instance it is biblical clarity rather than ambiguity that the Jewish exegetes encountered, the result here is replicated frequently in midrashic retellings of later portions of the narrative: everything related to Esther transpires according to the legal traditions or presuppositions of the period during which the midrashim developed.

[11] Which name came first, “Hadassah” or “Esther”? The biblical text is not clear nor is the midrashic tradition (see, for example, *Esther Rabbah*, 1 and 2 *Targum Esther* 2:7).³ The latter is far more interested, however, in teasing out appropriate meanings from both of these names. Hadassah is Hebrew for “myrtle,” known for its pervasive fragrance and tenacity – characteristics that Hadassah/Esther ultimately reveals. The name “Esther” points to another, perhaps even more distinctive feature, for it comes from the root meaning “to conceal.” Within the unfolding story, Esther must keep concealed her relationship with Mordecai (however that be described) and especially her Jewish origins until just the right moment. “Revealing” and “concealing” are then as integral to the story as a whole as they are to Esther as a character within the story. But they also foreshadow another point, namely, that Esther’s actions come as a result of the commands of a male, in this case Mordecai.

[12] Esther’s ancestry, we are to understand, is the same as Mordecai’s. In identifying them as Benjaminites, the biblical text seems to place particular emphasis on one individual, namely, Shimei. Within the midrashic tradition, such a prominent reference had to have a purpose (as found in *Megillah* 13a and elsewhere). As we re-read the story of Shimei in 2 Samuel, according to the tradition (see, e.g., 2 *Panim Acherim* 82), we learn of a rash, ill-tempered man, whose wife thankfully possessed all of the positive attributes her husband so notably lacked. Her quick thinking and valor saved several of David’s men during the rebellion of Absalom. As a reward for such piety, at least one of her descendants – Esther, a woman like herself – would also rise to the occasion and play a pivotal role in the salvation of her people, the Jews. But, whereas Shimei’s wife apparently initiated action on her own volition, Esther would need to be prodded.

³ There are two targumim preserved for the book of Esther, designated here 1 *Targum Esther* and 2 *Targum Esther*. The second, often called simply Targum Sheni, is a particularly rich source for midrashic embellishments.

[13] The biblical text itself makes explicit reference to only two of Esther's attributes, both seemingly confined to her external appearance: shapely and beautiful. It would be in accordance with a well-known rabbinic principle of exegesis – namely, that the text of the Hebrew Bible, containing as it does no extra or unnecessary words, should be minutely analyzed when two closely related terms appear in proximity – had the midrash teased out the nuances of these attributes. Or, as was the case with Sarah in the Genesis Apocryphon, these brief references could have served as the springboard for an elaboration of physical characteristics that would well serve even today's aspiring beauty contestant. But, in fact, the main line of midrashic interpretation goes in an entirely different direction at this point, arguing instead that Esther was really seventy-five years old. Her beauty, so we learn, was (as the expression goes) truly in the eye of the beholder, each of whom was captivated by a divinely concocted loveliness. The determination of her age is said to be in fulfillment of a prophecy received by Abraham, who was seventy-five years old when he left Ur (see Ginsberg: 1141-42).

[14] We may, nonetheless, wonder whether there was not something else, something deeper, at work among those who thus portrayed Esther. After all, there was a long tradition, going back to the book of Genesis that extolled feminine beauty and judged it to be far more than skin deep. The internal goodness of a number of biblical women was signaled by the attractiveness of their external appearance. And this was not limited to females; few biblical characters are extolled for their beauty more than Joseph. As noted above, some later writers took the biblical descriptions as but the starting points for ever more detailed, and sensuous, appraisals of beauty.

[15] I think that here we see something of a reaction against this tradition. Relying on physical appearance as a means of judging a person's true worth was, it could be argued, fraught with danger and misapprehension. Better, so this view goes, is to understand that a woman's (or, for that matter, a man's) attractiveness is solely in the hands of the Lord. Because she was divinely chosen (even if she did not yet recognize it), Esther was given beauty, as a soldier might be provided with armor. Victory, then, depends on how one wields his/her "weapons." But we should be careful not to judge this reaction against tradition as enhancing Esther's status, for she was still to rely on her beauty, however contrived.

[16] To return to the biblical account, the remaining narrative of chapter 2 carries with it elements of Cinderella or any of a dozen other accounts of rags-to-royal-riches:

The girl pleased him and won his favor, and he hastened to furnish her with her cosmetics and her rations, as well as with the seven maids who were her due from the king's palace . . . Esther did not reveal her people or her kindred, for Mordecai had told her not to reveal it . . . When each girl's turn came to go to King Ahasuerus at the end of the twelve months' treatment prescribed for women (for that was the period spent on beautifying them: six months with oil of myrrh and six months with perfumes and women's cosmetics, and it was after that that the girl would go to the king), whatever she asked for would be given her to take with her from the harem to the king's palace. She would go in the evening and leave in the morning for a second harem in charge of Shaashgaz, the king's eunuch, guardian of the

concubines. She would not go again to the king unless the king wanted her, when she would be summoned by name. When the turn came for Esther . . . to go to the king, she did not ask for anything but what Hegai, the king's eunuch, guardian of the women, advised. Yet Esther won the admiration of all who saw her. Esther was taken to King Ahasuerus, in his royal palace, in the tenth month, which is the month of Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she won his grace and favor more than all the virgins. So he set a royal diadem on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti (Esther 2:9-17).

[17] In addition to elements of the fairy tale, this biblical account carries with it a number of difficult and interrelated issues for anyone seeking to place Esther within a "traditional" framework. For example, what use would Esther have for cosmetics if hers was a God-given beauty? And what sort of "rations" was she being offered? Although some might suppose that her dietary requirements (religious and otherwise) would have been taken into account, we are explicitly told in the text that no one knew of her relationship with Mordecai or of her Jewish background. And what purpose was being served by the young women who attended her? Granted that they were "her due," nonetheless it might appear unseemly for her to partake so quickly of the luxury of court life. And last, but far from least, what services did Esther perform during her "audition" for the king? However we answer those questions, this much is certain, at least from the perspective of the biblical story: she won the king's heart (and head?) and was elevated to the position of queen in Vashti's stead. For whatever reasons, the biblical writer leaves unanswered these, as well as any number of other questions an attentive reader might pose. We are left to imagine what artifices and intrigues Esther constructed to get through this period of time. Or, perhaps, she simply went along with court protocol.

[18] Those responsible for the midrashic elaboration of Esther were not – in fact, could not – be satisfied with such ambiguities, even in a biblical narrative. First of all, they appear to fly in the face of two individuals whom we (or rather they) might have termed Esther's contemporaries: Daniel and Judith. A great deal of effort is made in the first chapter of the book of Daniel to show how he and his companions not only maintained their Jewishness, but (at least temporarily) thrived because of it. Although Esther, as her very name connotes, needed to be more circumspect – that is, to hide her background – nonetheless, at least some readers would wish to be assured that she maintained, albeit in a low-key manner, her traditions. Judith was certainly well known among Jews, in spite of the fact that the book of Judith was not included in the rabbinic canon. Again, great effort is taken to show how scrupulous she was in observing the dietary regulations in spite (or because) of her self-appointed task as killer of the enemy's general. In addition, the midrashic interpreters would have felt the need to "correct" the (from their respective, faulty) impression that Esther had slept her way to the top and enjoyed all of the pomp and luxury that attended the royal court.

[19] Certainly the best known and most familiar enterprise to "tame" Esther in this regard is found in the additions to the book of Esther that are part of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox canons, but not contained in the Protestant Old Testament or Hebrew Bible. Within our broad understanding of midrash, there is no difficulty in including this material,

even though it is not preserved in Hebrew or within any of the rabbinic traditions. However, even within a narrower accounting of what constitutes midrash, these “apocryphal” additions have their place, for many of the points made there have their parallels in sources transmitted within Judaism. One of the additions contains the words of Esther in prayer (in another addition, Mordecai is also portrayed as praying, something neither of them is recorded as having done in the Hebrew Bible), just before she goes to see the king in chapter 4. Although we might be accused of getting ahead of ourselves by citing portions of Esther’s prayer here, its obvious relevance comes from her reflections on her earlier days as queen:

Thou [the Lord] hast knowledge of all things; and thou knowest that I hate the splendor of the wicked and abhor the bed of the uncircumcised and of any alien. Thou knowest my necessity – that I abhor the sign of my proud position, which is upon my head on the days when I appear in public. I abhor it like a menstruous rag, and I do not wear it on the days when I am at leisure. And thy servant has not eaten at Haman’s table, and I have not honored the king’s feast or drunk the wine of the libations. Thy servant has had no joy since the day that I was brought here until now, except in thee, O Lord God of Abraham (Esther 14:15-18).⁴

In this way, Esther is shown to have positively abided by what became Jewish practice, e.g., in terms of eating and drinking and to have responded negatively to any untoward circumstances into which she was thrust.

[20] Other Jewish sources (as, for example, 1 and 2 *Targum Esther* 2.9, 2 *Midrash Panim Acherim L’Esther* 63 and 64) expand upon these points in several directions. For example, we are told that she gave to non-Jewish servants the food she did not permit herself to eat. Perhaps, this was to allay any suspicions about her diet. Moreover, we learn that her seven closest attendants were Jewish and that she gave each a (nick)name by which she could calculate the passage of time, so as to make sure that she observed the Sabbath each week. No Jewish female could have done more, we are assured.

[21] But what of conjugal relations between Esther and her royal spouse, to say nothing of their prenuptial activities? That Esther and Ahasuerus engaged in “actual” sexual activities seems to be presupposed in Esther’s prayer quoted above: she “abhorred the bed of the uncircumcised and of any alien [that is, non-Jew],” but necessity required her to lay in that bed. That Ahasuerus fathered children with Esther is explicitly stated in some midrashic stories (as seen at *Sanbedrin* 74a).⁵ But this explanation did not sit well with other interpreters, who detected that the real Esther would never have soiled herself in this way. Rather, God selected a female spirit who, for the purposes of sex (and perhaps some other distasteful

⁴ This and all following translations of the Apocrypha are taken from the Revised Standard Version, whose numbering of chapters I have adopted in this paper. Readers may find this material, also known as Addition C, in one of several places in the full version of the book of Esther contained in the Apocrypha (on the Greek texts of Esther, see especially de Troyer; Jobes 1996; Metzger; Moore 1977).

⁵ Less explicitly stated, there is a midrashic tradition (see *Megillah* 13b) that rebellious officials, one of whose major responsibilities was providing for the king’s food and drink, were distressed by Ahasuerus’ frequent nocturnal requests for something to drink after his marriage to Esther – the more sex, so it went, the more thirst!

functions), became Esther (reflected in sources such as *Tikkune Zohar* 20). Such a substitution, well known in other circumstances from many ancient sources, would satisfy the needs of both the pious reader and the voracious Jewish woman that the midrashim construct.

[22] Chapter 3 of Esther is pivotal for the story: Haman's personal hatred of Mordecai grows into a vendetta against all of the Jewish people in the Persian Empire, whom he seeks to slaughter with royal approval. Ahasuerus, completely indifferent to the fate of the "certain people" whom Haman indicts (the king does not even bother to ask who they are), gives Haman full authority to carry out this annihilation. A huge bribe by Haman, consisting according to one Jewish tradition (see, for example, *Panim Acherim* 46, *Esther Rabbah* 3.1) of the Jerusalem Temple's treasures earlier plundered by the Babylonians, serves to facilitate royal approbation. We hear nothing about Esther, or Esther and Ahasuerus, during this crucial period. They are, presumably, in the romantic bliss of an extended honeymoon. Or, in the opinion of many Jewish exegetes, at least the king is!

[23] Esther was also, so it seems, in blissful ignorance of the plot Haman had been fomenting. Only when she learned that Mordecai was clothed as if in mourning did she recognize the existence – although not yet the source or gravity – of impending danger. An intermediary, named Hathach in the biblical account of chapter 4, provided a means of communication between Esther and Mordecai at this time. In some exegetical traditions, this intermediary is identified as none other than Daniel.

[24] Mordecai's insistence that Esther intervene with the king – and her initial demurrer – takes up the remainder of chapter 4, which is considerably expanded in midrash. First of all, Mordecai reminds Esther of a dream he had had and of his understanding that it presaged an exceptional role for her (see *Esther Rabbah* 4.7, among other sources). As recorded in Greek in the Apocrypha (in chapter 11 or Addition A), the dream is extensive, taking eleven verses to unfold. Similar accounts, probably all proceeding from the same (oral or written) source, appear in Hebrew. Among other purposes, this dream, and its interpretation, served to force Esther, hesitating still, to action.

[25] But before that, Esther countered that it was a capital offense for anyone, even a member of the king's family, to appear in the royal court without having first been summoned. One midrash (reflected in 2 *Targum Esther* 4.11) holds that this was a new regulation, only recently introduced by Haman, almost as if it were put in place to thwart Esther at this very moment. Mordecai responded very sharply, with this pointed warning (admittedly delivered by an intermediary): "Do not imagine that you, of all the Jews, will escape with your life by being in the king's palace. On the contrary, if you keep silent in this crisis, relief and deliverance will come to the Jews from another quarter, while you and your father's house will perish" (4:13-14). The phrase "from another quarter" (literally, "from another place") is universally understood in the Jewish tradition as a reference to God.

[26] This initial reluctance on the part of Esther, which plays no role in the popular Purim accounts of Esther, is rather unremarkable within the context of the Hebrew Bible. After all, many males – Moses, Isaiah, and Jeremiah, among others – were openly resistant to the "divine call" when they first received it; and these same males gave in, eventually, to the inevitability of the task God had assigned them. However, some midrashic sources sought to

locate the most persuasive arguments for action on Esther's part within the particularities of her family background. As noted earlier, Mordecai and Esther were Benjaminites; as such, they were viewed as descendants of Saul. In this regard, Mordecai reminds Esther that it was precisely because of this royal ancestor of hers (temporarily and strategically leaving himself out) that Haman was alive: Saul had disobeyed God's command to kill all of the Amalekites by allowing their king, Agag, to remain alive (1 Samuel 15), and it was this very Agag from whom Haman was descended.⁶ With her choices thus constrained, Esther could do no more, or less, than accept the position into which she had been cast. Prior to her fateful encounter with Ahasuerus, she requested that all the Jews join a fast of three days (this length occasioned questions, and varying responses, regarding the [im]possibility of a fast lasting for seventy-two hours – see *2 Panim Acherim* 70, *Yebamot* 121a, among several discussions of these issues).

[27] Without any further buildup, the Hebrew Bible rather tersely describes Esther's putting on royal garb, attracting her husband's attention, being granted an audience, and making her request that he and Haman come to a dinner party (5:1-4). This is clearly Esther's shining moment. Yet the biblical narrative (which is contained in a mere four verses) leaves us wanting more, and this is just what the midrashic tradition provides in the Apocrypha:

On the third day, when she ended her prayer, she took off the garments in which she had worshiped, and arrayed herself in splendid attire. Then, majestically adorned, after invoking the aid of the all-seeing God and Savior, she took her two maids with her, leaning daintily on one, while the other followed carrying her train. She was radiant with perfect beauty, and she looked happy, as if beloved, but her heart was frozen with fear. When she had gone through all the doors, she stood before the king. He was seated on his royal throne, clothed in the full array of his majesty, all covered with gold and precious stones. And he was most terrifying. Lifting his face, flushed with splendor, he looked at her in fierce anger. And the queen faltered, and turned pale and faint, and collapsed upon the head of the maid who went before her. Then God changed the spirit of the king to gentleness, and in alarm he sprang from his throne and took her in his arms until she came to herself. And he comforted her with soothing words, and said to her, "What is it, Esther? I am your brother. Take courage; you shall not die, for our law applies only to the people. Come near." Then he raised the golden scepter and he embraced her, and said, "Speak to me." And she said to him, "I saw you, my lord, like an angel of God and my heart was shaken with fear at your glory. For you are wonderful, my lord, and your countenance is full of grace." But as she was speaking, she fell fainting. And the king was agitated, and all his servants sought to comfort her (Esther 15:1-16; also Addition D).

⁶ Although Saul spares Agag in the biblical story, Samuel does kill him, as God had required. The midrashic tradition, however, expands on this event. Between the time that Saul spared Agag and Samuel killed him, Agag managed to impregnate another woman, who bore a stone whom Samuel did not kill. Because of Saul's failure to kill Agag, the continuation of his line through his son was also blamed on him.

[28] Other midrashic sources, those preserved in Hebrew or Aramaic, are similar. According to some, the circumstances were so intimidating that that Esther twice cried out to God in the opening words of Psalm 22 (on this, see *Megillah* 15a-15b and *2 Panim Acherim* 71, among other sources). All of these highlight an important emphasis of this entire midrashic section, namely, Esther's utter dependence on God (who is not directly named in the Hebrew Bible version of Esther). It is to God whom Esther turned in prayer, it is God who provides her with strength, and it is God who turns Ahasuerus' "spirit . . . to gentleness" (an action described as miraculous in several sources).

[29] Modern commentators, in analyzing this passage, are prone to highlight the dramatic, even melodramatic, effects these expansions produce, very much in keeping with other literature from the Hellenistic period (as in the Jewish novella *Joseph and Athenath* or the plays of Plautus). In so doing, these commentators tend not to pay sufficient attention to the manner in which these embellishments "tame" or "normalize" Esther and her actions. Whereas the biblical account is silent as to her feelings and any self-reflection she may have experienced, the midrashic elaborations show a woman whose every action is a response to what is pictured as her divinely appointed role.

[30] An interesting addition in the midrashic traditions on this section of the book relates to Esther's motivation for the request that the king agree to a dinner at which only the two of them, plus Haman, would be present (Esther makes a similar request after the first banquet, for another). Her reasoning, so we are told, was twofold: she wanted to put Haman at ease so that he would not suspect that Esther was aware of his plotting, and she wanted to plant a seed of jealousy in her husband's mind about Haman – no doubt this seed was at first tiny, but within the right soil it would quickly thrive. Here Esther seems to be acting on her own initiative. And yet, when we carefully consider the strategy she adopts, it is fully in keeping with the devious ways in which other biblical wives sought to manipulate their spouses.

[31] Between the first and the second banquets there was sufficient time for Haman to plan Mordecai's death and to be humiliated when Ahasuerus honored Mordecai in exactly the way Haman envisioned that he himself would be honored (these events are narrated in the second half of chapter 5 and in chapter 6). By the time that Haman is whisked off to the second dinner party, there is little if any doubt in the reader's mind that the gallows Haman had constructed for Mordecai would soon be used for Haman himself.

[32] In accordance with Esther's plan, the tranquility of the first eating and drinking party was not replicated at the second one; rather, she directly accuses Haman of being the enemy of her people and urges the king to save her and her people. As the biblical account explicitly states, this is the request or petition that she seeks from her husband. At this point in the Hebrew Bible, the king leaves the room and goes out to the gardens, though it is not clear why he did this. Since he was deeply involved and implicated in the very plot that Esther had just denounced – and uncertain whether Esther knew or suspected this – perhaps he just needed room (both physical and psychological) to think. It is left up to certain midrashic sources (for example, *Megillah* 16a, *2 Panim Acherim* 76-77, and *1 Targum Esther* 7.7) to provide a rationale for Ahasuerus' action, in which, not surprisingly, the hand of God could be detected. For it was just at that moment that the king observed ten angels, appearing in

the guise of Haman's ten sons, chopping down trees in the royal park. It appears that nothing so outraged this king as arboreal destruction in his private precinct.

[33] While the king had thus absented himself from the banquet hall, Haman took the opportunity to make one last-ditch attempt to save his life. What ensued constitutes a comedy – or tragedy – of errors:

When the king returned from the palace garden to the banquet room, Haman was lying prostrate on the couch on which Esther reclined. “Does he mean,” cried the king, “to ravish the queen in my own palace?” No sooner did these words leave the king's lips than Haman's face was covered (Esther 7:8).

Readers of the Hebrew Bible may, with some justice, wonder why the king jumped to this conclusion. Readers of the midrashic accounts know exactly why the king did: the actions of Haman's “sons” had infuriated him and Esther's efforts to rouse him to jealousy had their desired effect. Haman's fate, and that of his sons, was sealed.

[34] The book of Esther continues for three more chapters (8-10), but there was little in what remains for midrashic exegetes to expand upon in connection with Esther herself. Nonetheless, there are two fascinating additions, the first of which relates to the establishment of the festival of Purim. The biblical account allots a role in this to both Esther and Mordecai; in fact, the Hebrew Bible is a bit unclear as to exactly who is doing what. In a midrashic addition, it is left to Esther to convince the sages that this holiday should be instituted, inasmuch as its celebration might lead to renewed attacks against Jews by their enemies. So, we are told (see *Megillah* 71a), Esther pointed out to the sages that the events leading up to Purim were in fact public knowledge, recorded as they were in the annals of the Persians and the Medes.

[35] It was also Esther's task to persuade the sages to include Esther as part of the Hebrew Bible. Among her arguments, she pointed out that Moses had been commanded to write an account of the victory over the Amalekites (as recorded in Exodus 17). By analogy, she argued, this victory over the wicked descendants of the wicked Amalekites also deserves a place in Scripture. So convincing was Esther that some sources deem her book to be of equal value with the Torah and Purim, along with Yom Kippur, to be the sole holiday celebrated in messianic times. Thus, Esther's abilities to persuade, as seen in the expanded midrashic narrative of her book, appear to have continued to serve her in good stead.

Vashti in the Book of Esther and in Midrash

[36] Vashti appears in fewer than two dozen verses (chapter 1, vv 9-33) and is named in only half of these. Having hosted a six months' long banquet for his empire's highest officials, King Ahasuerus had sufficient energy and resources (according to some Jewish sources, he made use of the wealth taken from the Jerusalem Temple to provide such parties) to throw a party, lasting a mere seven days, for the people of Susa. Such affairs, we surmise, were for males only; the very first reference to Queen Vashti (1:9) speaks of her giving a party for the women. We are given no information about Vashti, nor are we provided with any reason why women needed to be separated from men at such events. Not surprisingly, the Jewish exegetic tradition provides answers, in one case multiple answers, for each question.

[37] Vashti, we are told (see *Panim Acherim* 56-60; 1 and 2 *Targum Esther* 1.9; *Esther Rabbah* 1.9, 10), was royalty even before she married the Persian Ahasuerus. She was, in fact, the daughter of none other than Belshazzar, who is presented as the last Babylonian monarch. In this scenario, the Vashti-Ahasuerus marriage owed more to political considerations than to romantic inclinations. As for the separation of the women, it could have been due to the coarseness of a bunch of drunken males, to the women's desire to see how the palace was decorated, or to a shrewd calculation by Vashti that her hosting of the women could become a holding of the women as hostages should their husbands (fathers, brothers) take this opportunity to rise up against their monarch (that is, her husband). Her activities thus become wifely and dutiful. That would appear to change very quickly.

[38] In the next scene (beginning at v. 10), the king, now more than a little drunk, ordered his attendants "to bring Queen Vashti before the king wearing a royal diadem, to display her beauty to the peoples and the officials; for she was a beautiful woman" (1:11). Her response was immediate – No! – and no further importuning could have convinced her to budge. Why? Beyond any general sense of impropriety with respect to her husband's proposal and even beyond her sense of humiliation at being treated this way when she was herself of royal birth – beyond all of this, the midrashic tradition is unanimous (as seen, for example, in *Midrash Abba Gorion* 13-15; *Megillah* 12b; 1 and 2 *Targum Esther* 1.10, 12) that what Ahasuerus commanded was that she appear wearing *only* the royal diadem! Indeed, this view is so ingrained within the sensibilities of Jews that I am sure that most assume the Hebrew Bible explicitly refers to Vashti's being ordered to appear, and to dance, while (virtually) naked.

[39] Various midrashic sources go further to explain at a deeper – that is, divine – level why this was happening to Vashti, against whom the writer of the book of Esther has leveled no charges. We find out, for example, that the "seventh day" of feasting was the Sabbath and that God chose this day because it was precisely on the Sabbath that Vashti forced her Jewish attendants to work all the harder. Moreover, it was at just this time that she was stricken by leprosy, thus rendering her unfit to appear in public even if she had wanted to (see *Megillah* 12b).

[40] A royal marital spat was bad enough, but this was in public. So, it was reasoned, an example must be made of Vashti, lest all women think that they could disobey their husbands with impunity (1:13-18). In order to arrive at this decision, the king consulted his "sages," the leader of whom is named Memucan. In some Jewish sources, Memucan is identified with Daniel (see 2 *Panim Acherim* 61; 2 *Targum Esther* 1.16); in others, Haman (so *Megillah* 12b; 1 *Targum Esther* 1.16). The point seems to be that, although Vashti had her supporters among women, she was friendless and defenseless in the realms of power governed by men.

[41] Like Esther, Vashti is an ambiguous figure in the Hebrew Bible. It is this ambiguity that has allowed some modern commentators to raise her to the ranks of (hitherto unheralded) heroism. What motivated her defiance of this particular command? Was it really so out of character with what the king had ordered in the past? The Jewish tradition, in seeking to erase any possible ambiguities, succeeds (in its own terms) in taming Vashti: there is nothing, so we are told, laudable or likeable about her. Her mistreatment of Jews brought upon her a deserved punishment. Her response to the king, and in fact the king's command itself, were

part of a divinely orchestrated drama, in which her character was to be seen as so base that she managed to alienate both Daniel and Haman.

Conclusion

[42] We do not know why the author of the book of Esther portrayed the Jewish queen in the way he did. It is possible that he had a clear vision of who and what Esther was. But that clarity, if indeed it ever existed, does not come through in the text of the narrative as we have it in the Hebrew Bible.

[43] Instead, we have an Esther whose every act can be understood variously with respect to her motivations. Although this does not make her an unfit woman or an evil woman, she appears to inhabit a world where women's space and women's roles are unclear. To an extent, this lack of clarity pertained to Vashti as well. This was, simply put, not acceptable to many of the Jewish commentators of the last centuries BCE or first centuries CE. In almost every conceivable circumstance, they sought to provide an explanation (or more than one explanation) that erased ambiguity and substituted the image of an observant, obedient, and rather one-dimensional female. Esther of the Hebrew Bible became Esther of midrash. It is this latter Esther, along with midrashic Vashti, who lives on in Jewish popular culture to this day. We do this Esther no dishonor by reminding readers that there is another Esther, one who should surely also be honored, in the Hebrew Bible.

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