

# The Place of the Book of Esther in Judaism and Jewish Theology

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Theologische Zeitschrift**

Band (Jahr): **59 (2003)**

Heft 3

PDF erstellt am: **08.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-877920>

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# Theologische Zeitschrift

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Jahrgang 59

2003

Heft 3

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## The Place of the Book of Esther in Judaism and Jewish Theology\*

### *1. The Place of Esther in Judaism*

In spite of the forethought of some rabbis towards the book of Esther,<sup>1</sup> it has canonized and achieved a respectful place among the hagiographical books of the Hebrew Bible. According to a *beraita* in the Babylonian Talmud (*Baba Bathra* 14b), most of the oldest codices, and the printed editions of the Hebrew Bible, the book of Esther appears before the late historical books, Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles,<sup>2</sup> and in many cases even before the book of Daniel.<sup>3</sup> Esther was translated into Greek (most probably at the end of the second century BCE), and six legendary additions (altogether 107 verses) were attached to it. Certainly, these testify to the popularity of the book in the late Commonwealth era, at least among the Jewish Hellenistic communities.<sup>4</sup> Mo-

\* This study is based on a guest lecture that was delivered at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Department of Hebrew and Semitic Languages, on March 24, 2003. I would like to thank Professor Michael V. Fox for his kind invitation and hospitality.

<sup>1</sup> See Babylonian Talmud, *Meggilah* 7a: «Rabbi Samuel ben Judah said: Esther sent to the Sages saying, Commemorate me for future generations. They replied, «you will incite the ill will of the nations against us». She sent back reply: «I am already recorded in the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia». For the absence of the book of Esther from among the Dead Sea scrolls, see I. Kalimi, *The Book of Esther and the Dead Sea Scrolls' Community*, forthcoming.

<sup>2</sup> This is contrary to the Christian Bible in which Esther is located after Ezra, Nehemiah and Chronicles. See I. Kalimi, *The Book of Esther in Christian Tradition*, forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> For the comparison of the codices, see L.B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (ICC), Edinburgh 1908, 1-3.

<sup>4</sup> For the brief description of the additions, their secondary feature, original language, date and authorship, see C.A. Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions – A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 44), Garden City, NY 1977, 153-172; I. Kottsieper, *Zusätze zu Ester* (ATDA 5), Göttingen 1998, 109-207; S. White Crawford, *The Additions to Esther – Introduction, Commentary and Reflections* (NIB 3), Nashville, TN 1999, 945-972.

reover, in his *Antiquitates Judaicae*, Josephus Flavius devoted an extensive section recounting Esther's narrative (*AJ* 11,184-296). Various Rabbinic writings – *halachic* as well as *haggadic* – flourished around Esther. In the Mishnah, the Jerusalem Talmud, and Babylonian Talmud a special tractate was dedicated to it – *Masechet Megillah*. The place of the book is not lacking also from the Tosefta. This tiny book gained also a special homiletical collection – *Midrash Esther Rabbah*, two major Targums, and a central place in the Purim liturgy.

Furthermore, several sages expressed the view that «Esther was composed under the inspiration of the holy spirit» (Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 7a).<sup>5</sup> Other rabbis are even of the opinion that «this scroll was given (literally: stated) to Moses at Sinai», and they bridged the hundreds of years that separate the age of Moses from that of Esther by saying, «There are no considerations of early or later in the Torah» (Jerusalem Talmud, *Megillah* 1,5 [7a]). Rabbi Simeon ben Lakish (ca. 300) considered the holiness of Esther to be at the same level as the holiness of the Torah, that is, higher than the books of the Prophets and any other book in the Hagiographa. He maintained that in time to come all the books of the Bible would be annulled except the Five Books of Moses and the book of Esther (Jerusalem Talmud, *Megillah* 1,5 [7b]). Even in the Messianic era, hatred of Jews and the miraculous existence of the Jewish people should be remembered!

In addition, the rabbis portrayed Queen Esther very positively. Contrary to the Essenes of Qumran, they did not rebuke her for intermarriage with a non-Jewish man and her decree to fast on Passover;<sup>6</sup> rather they attempted to find some excuses for her behavior (Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 74b; *Megillah* 15a). The Sages glorified her righteousness and modesty (Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 10b; 13b), and she was counted among the seven prophetesses who prophesied to Israel: Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Aevigail, Huldah and Esther (Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 14a). Accordingly, Esth 5,1: «And it was the third day, and Esther clothed herself in royalty», was expounded by Rabbi Elazar in the name of Rabbi Hanina: «This teaches that Esther was clothed in the divine spirit» (Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 15a). Moreover, the Sages praised Mordecai no less than Esther: «Mordecai in his generation was equal to Moses in his... Just as Moses stood in the breach... so did Mordecai, as it is written, «Seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his seed» (Esth 10,3)... Some say he was equal to Abraham in his generation. Just as our father Abraham allowed himself to be cast into a fiery furnace and converted his fellowmen and made them acknowledge the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He... so in the days of Mordecai men ack-

<sup>5</sup> For the English translation, see M. Simon, *Megillah – Translated into English with Notes, Glossary and Indices*, London 1938, 35-36.

<sup>6</sup> See in detail, Kalimi, *The Book of Esther and the Dead Sea Scrolls' Community*.

nowledged the greatness of the Holy One, blessed be He, as it says (Esth 8,17): «and many of the people of the land became Jews», and he proclaimed the unity of God's name and sanctified it» (Esther Rabbah 6,2).<sup>7</sup>

In medieval times, several commentaries were dedicated to the Book of Esther, such as those of Rashi (1040-1105), Rabbi Samuel ben Meir (1080-1160), Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra (1089-1164), and Rabbi Levi ben Gershom (1288-1344).<sup>8</sup> It should be emphasized that Maimonides (Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon, 1135-1204) composed a commentary only on one Biblical book: the book of Esther.<sup>9</sup> He reinforced the above-mentioned statement of Resh Lakish concerning the everlasting existence of the *Megillah*.<sup>10</sup> In forthcoming generations the book of Esther was not neglected at all. It should be mentioned, just for example, the important commentary of Rabbi Abraham Saba, who was among the Jews expelled from Spain (1492) and Portugal (1497),<sup>11</sup> and the triple commentary (*Peshat*, *Remez* and *Sod*) of Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna (the Vilna Gaon, 1720-1797).<sup>12</sup> The latter stresses that the miracle related in the book of Esther (Purim) is ranked much greater than that of Hanukah, though the last one was an extremely great wonder.<sup>13</sup> It is noteworthy to mention, that very same opinion was already stated by Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel (the Prague Maharal, 1520[?]-1609)<sup>14</sup> in introduction to his book *Or Hadash* dedicated to Megillat Esther.<sup>15</sup>

Scenes from the book of Esther were recurrent subjects in Jewish poetry and art. For instance, Rabbi Jehudah Halevi (1086-1142) composed a lengthy and beautiful ballad on the book of Esther (*Mi Kamochah*, «Who is like You»), which became a part of the Shabbat's liturgy prior to Purim in the Sefardic synagogues.<sup>16</sup> Scenes from Esther's narrative have been painted as ear-

<sup>7</sup> For the English translation, compare M. Simon, *Midrash Rabbah Esther* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn.), London & New York 1983, 73-74.

<sup>8</sup> On this issue see B.D. Walfish, *Esther in Medieval Garb – Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages*, Albany, NY. 1993.

<sup>9</sup> See J.J. Revlin, *The Commentary on the Book of Esther by Maimonides*, Jerusalem 1950 (Hebrew). The commentary was written originally in Arabic, and printed for the first time in Livorno: Antonio Santini, 1759.

<sup>10</sup> See Maimonides, *Mishneh-Torah*, Hilchot Megillah, chapter 2, Halacha 18.

<sup>11</sup> See Rabbi Abraham Saba, *Commentary on Esther*, published in Eshkol Hakofer, Derhobitch 1903 (Hebrew).

<sup>12</sup> See *Megillat Esther with Commentaries of Rabbi Eliyahu of Vilna* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.), Jerusalem 1991 (Hebrew).

<sup>13</sup> See the Vilna Gaon's commentary (*Peshat*) on Esther 1,2 (*ibid.*, 16-18); and his commentary on Babylonian Talmud, *Hulin* 139b.

<sup>14</sup> On the birth date of Maharal, see B.L. Sherwin, *Mystical Theology and Social Dissent – The Life and Works of Judah Loew of Prague*, London and Toronto 1982, 187-189.

<sup>15</sup> For the paragraph from *Or Hadash*, see A. Karib (ed.), *Selected Writings of Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel*, Jerusalem 1960, vol. 1, 186-191 esp. 189-190 (Hebrew).

<sup>16</sup> See I. Zemorah (ed.), *Complete Poems of Rabbi Jehudah Halevi*, Tel Aviv 1955, 176-180 (Hebrew).

ly as mid third century in Dura Europos' synagogue. Continuous interest in the theme of Esther is still being expressed artistically as of today.<sup>17</sup>

It appears, therefore, that alongside the Pentateuch and Psalms, Esther – the «Torah of Purim» – is one of the most popular of Biblical compositions among the Jews, nearly at the level of *micro-Biblia*.

## 2. The Place of Esther in Jewish Theology

What accounts for the great popularity of the book of Esther among the Jews, for its highly valued position and much admired figures? Was its appeal only due to its dramatic story, lively descriptions, sharp irony, clear and beautiful style (themes that are commonly shared with several other Biblical compositions) that attracted Jewish audiences through the generations, or is there some other explanation for this? Indeed, one can interpret the words of Resh-Lakish and Maimonides against the background of the verse: «and these days of Purim shall not fail from among of the Jews, nor the memorial of them perish from their seed» (Esth 9,28). However, something far beyond a *halachic* expounding of a scripture has made the book of Esther so popular. The book of Esther has an important and unique message for the Jewish people at all times and all places, a message that places the book in a central position of Jewish theology, thought and self-definition. Let us turn our attention to this point in some detail.

### (a) The Fright of Total Annihilation

Several scriptures in the Hebrew Bible reflect the fact that the Israelites embraced a traumatic fear of their complete extermination. Generations were terrified for their very existence and feared that complete annihilation would befall the nation. This inner hidden fear is exemplified in several accounts. It is rooted, presumably, in the horrific story of the *Aqedah* (the binding of Isaac) in Gen 22,1-14. After several promises and long awaited hope, the hundred-year old Abraham and ninety-year old Sarah had only one son. Yet, God commanded Abraham to take the beloved one and «offer him... as a burnt offering<sup>18</sup> upon one of the mountains» (verse 2). Only at the last moment before Abraham's knife slaughtered Isaac, the angel of the Lord ordered: «Do not lay your hand on the lad» (verse 12). The very founders of the Israelite nation are portrayed as near victims of extermination. Later on, the fear of annihilation is reflected in Jacob's prayer: «O save me from the power

<sup>17</sup> For Esther's story in poetry, art, music, songs, etc., see Ph. Goodman, *The Purim Anthology*, Philadelphia 1960.

<sup>18</sup> It is striking that some old English versions translated here «holocaust» in place of «a burnt offering», see *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford 1933, vol. 5, 344.

of my brother, from Esau! *I am afraid of him attacking me and overpowering me, slaying and slay us all, the mother with the children*» (Gen 32,12). It emerges also in Jacob's reaction to Simeon and Levi's devastation of Shechem: «You have undone me, you have brought me into bad odor among the natives, the Canaanites and Perizzites; my numbers are few, and *they will muster to attack me, till I am destroyed, I and my family!*» (Gen 34,30). Indeed, the author of the story stresses that only God's interference saved Jacob's family from annihilation: «As they rode off, a panic fell upon the surrounding towns, and no one pursued the sons of Jacob» (Gen 35,5). Later on, Pharaoh could not tolerate the Israelites, while they are «too many and too mighty» (Exod 1,8). He put them «under captains of the labor gangs, to crush them with heavy loads» and had executed the newborn male Israelite children already on the birth-stool (Exod 1,16). He ordered all his people «to throw every son born to the Hebrews into the Nile» (Exod 1,22). Once again, only direct interference by God saved the Israelite children from death, and redeemed them from Egyptian slavery and oppression «by a series of tests, by signal acts, by war, by sheer strength and main force, with awful terrors» (Exod 1,17.20; 2-15; Deut 4,34).

The deep hatred towards Israelites and strong will to see their complete devastation is reflected not only in the Biblical descriptions of «Pharaoh the enslaver» (Ramses II?), but also in some extra-Biblical sources. In Hymn of Victory, the so called «Israel Stela», from the fifth year of Pharaoh Merneptah II (1224-1114 BCE), the first mention of «Israel» outside of the Bible is accompanied by deep abhorrence: «*Israel is laid waste, his seed is not.*»<sup>19</sup> Several hundred years later, Mesha, king of Moab (ca. mid 9<sup>th</sup> century BCE), recounts his rebellious actions against the Kingdom of Israel, and states: «As for Omri king of Israel, he humbled Moab many years, for Chemosh was angry at his land... but I have triumphed over him and over his house, while *Israel has perished for ever!*» (The Moabite Stone, lines 4-7).<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See J.B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Related to the Old Testament* (= ANET; 3rd edn. with Supplement), Princeton, NJ 1969, 378a. Most probably, «Israel» in this inscription refers to a group of people or some tribe(s), since the word is written with the determinative of people rather than land. See J.A. Wilson, in: Pritchard, ANET, 378 note 18. See also A.F. Rainey, *Israel in Merneptah's Inscription and Reliefs*, IEJ 51 (2001) 57-75. Rainey concludes: «this expression is clearly meant to indicate that Israel has been annihilated like a plant whose seed/fruit has been destroyed... Israel was evidently one group among many *Shasu* who were moving out of the steppe land to find their livelihood...» (*ibid.*, 74-75).

<sup>20</sup> See H. Donner, W. Röllig, *Kanaanäische und aramäische Inschriften. Volume I: Texte* (3rd edn.), Wiesbaden 1971, 33, no. 181. For the English translation, cf. W.F. Albright, in: Pritchard, ANET, 320a; J.C.L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions, Volume 1: Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions*, Oxford 1973, 75-76.



The horrible, deep fear of complete destruction lingered among Israelites a long time, and one of its clearest expressions is reflected in Psalms 83:

«Do not keep silent, O God; do not hold your peace and be still, O God. For, behold, your enemies make a tumult; and those who hate you have lifted up the head. They have taken crafty counsel against your people, and consulted against your hidden ones. *They have said, Come, and let us cut them off from being a nation; that the name of Israel may no longer be remembered.* For they conspire together with one accord, they make an alliance against you... They said, let us take possession for ourselves of the pastures of God» (verses 1-6,13).

Some scholars have attempted to expound this psalm against a special event in the history of Israel in the Biblical period. Briggs, for example, dated it to the time of Nehemiah, «for deliverance from the conspiracy made against Israel by the neighboring nations with purpose of exterminating him.»<sup>21</sup> Others suggested that the psalm refers to the story about the attack of Jehoshaphat by the Moabites, Ammonites, and Meunites (2 Chr 20), or of Uzziah by Philistines and Arabs (2 Chr 26,6-8), or even of Judas Maccabeus by neighboring peoples (1 Macc 5).<sup>22</sup> However, since we do not know any war-like circumstances in which all the nations mentioned here were allied against Israel; and «since it is more doubtful whether the specified nations existed at all at one and the same time, and since, moreover, neither an actual campaign is discussed nor any concrete measures of defense are envisaged, but mention is made only of enemies plots against God and his people, we shall have to refrain from any purely historical explanation of the psalm.»<sup>23</sup> It looks, as already assumed by Friedrich Nötscher, that the account of the nations and alliances is «poetically and freely composed.»<sup>24</sup> This psalm expresses, therefore, the Israelites' fear of national annihilation by the surrounding pagan nations, a fear that emerges from other Biblical texts as well. Here the psalmist leaves it up to God to destroy all Israel's foes.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> See C.A. Briggs and E.G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms (ICC)*, Edinburgh 1907, vol. II, 217. See Neh 2,19; 4,1-2; 6,1-9.

<sup>22</sup> See, for instance, R. Kittel, *Die Psalmen übersetzt und erklärt (KAT 13; 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> edns.)*, Leipzig 1929, 277-278: «Das findet zumeist seine so gut wie sichere Erklärung durch die Beziehung auf 1 Mak 5».

<sup>23</sup> See A. Weiser, *The Psalms – A Commentary (OTL)*, Philadelphia 1962, 562.

<sup>24</sup> See F. Nötscher, *Die Psalmen, Die Heilige Schrift in deutscher Übersetzung (Echter-Bibel)*, Würzburg 1947, 168: «Der Dichter ist kein Historiker. So ist es wohl möglich, dass hier im Ps keine bestimmte Lage mit geschichtlicher Treue geschildert, sondern eine Anzahl von Völkern dichterisch frei zusammengestellt wird, deren Feindseligkeit in Geschichte und Gegenwart sich geäußert hatte oder typisch war. Zudem redet der Dichter nur von bösen Plänen der Gegner (4-6), ohne zu sagen, ob wirklich zur Ausführung gekommen sind». This assumption is adopted also by H.-J. Kraus, *Psalms 60-150 – A Commentary*, Augsburg/Minneapolis 1989, 161.

<sup>25</sup> This understanding is preferable to that of Weiser's who offered to interpret the psalm «in the light of a cultic situation». See Weiser, *Psalms*, 562-563.





tural identity the Jews become separatists who ignore the collective social laws is completely false, and his conclusion that, therefore, the Jews' existence is worthless is totally satanic. This accusation has been used as a prototype by many Jew haters through the ages. For instance, the advisers of Antiochus VII Sidetes (133 BCE), supported this view when they desired to exterminate the Jews of the Hasmonean Kingdom: «They (= the Jews) alone of all nations do not take part in social intercourse with other nations, and regard them all as enemies» (Diodorus 34,1; see also Josephus Flavius, *AJ* 13,245).<sup>30</sup>

In the earlier crises, God interacted directly on behalf of his beloved chosen people. Now, the book of Esther relates that even in those times when the direct interference of God is unseen (and clear and unusual miracles are extremely rare, in the ages of *hester panim*), God will still help his people and redeem them. This is, presumably, the central theological topic (*die Mitte*) of the book of Esther: God will save his people in any case at any time and place, directly and indirectly, by extraordinary miracles or by acting «behind the history» (or, if you wish, «behind the curtain»), while the particulars of his acts are hidden and invisible. To cite Mordecai, «relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another source» (Esth 4,14).

In order to present this main theological feature much more effectively, the author of Esther creates a «theology» without mentioning *Theos* or any theological theme: he never alludes to a religious law or cult, institution or custom (except the mention of fasting, Esth 4,15). On the other hand, he refers frequently to a variety of banquets and feasts (*mishtheh*, 20 times).<sup>31</sup> He neglects mentioning God's name in any form, either the general one such as «El»/«Elohim», or the national/Israelite one, «JHWH».<sup>32</sup> Again, this absence is highlighted particularly by the frequent mention of the «King (of Persia)» (190 times), «Ahasuerus» (29 times) as well as some 30 other figures' names.<sup>33</sup> Thus, the attention that the book's audience has given to God's silence shows,

<sup>30</sup> For the English version, see R. Klein, *Josephus with an English Translation* (LCL 7), Cambridge, MA/London 1966, 350-351 esp. note c.

It is worthwhile to mention, that the fear under review emerges also in the Babylonian Talmud, *Makkoth* 24a, where Rab (third century CE) expresses his fear that the prediction «And you shall perish among the nations, and the land of your enemies shall eat you up» (Lev 26,38) might yet be fulfilled.

<sup>31</sup> See Esth 1,2-9; 2,18; 3,15; 5,4-8; 7,1-9; 8,17; 9,17-19. On this motif in the book of Esther, see M.V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.), Grand Rapids, MI/Cambridge 2001, 156-158.

<sup>32</sup> Meinhold refers to the acrostichon JHWH in Esth 5,4bα: יבוא המלך והמן היום אל המשחה. See A. Meinhold, *Esther/Estherbuch, Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (4<sup>th</sup> edn.), Tübingen 1999, vol. 2, 1594-1597 esp. 1596. One can add also something similar in Esth 7,7: כי כלה אלו הרעה. The question is, however, if these features were used at all in the time of the composition of Esther. If the answer is positive, still the name appears in hidden form!

as stated by Michael V. Fox, «that the silence speaks louder than the whole string of pious prayers and protestations.»<sup>34</sup> Therefore, all the efforts the ancient translators and exegetes to insert the name of God into the book are missing this cardinal theological character of Esther. For example:

(a) Septuagint; the First and the Second Targums on Esth 4,14; as well as Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* 11,227; and Midrash Esther Rabbah 8,6 all insert the name of God in this verse, «For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter.»<sup>35</sup>

(b) Septuagint, *Vetus Latina*, the First and the Second Targums on Esth 6,1 write: «That night God took away the King's sleep», in place of Masoretic Text: «That night the King's sleep fled.»

These «corrections» should be considered as late theological misinterpretations of the scriptures. Furthermore, the Greek «additions» to the book of Esther should also be understood in the same way. These «additions», mainly intended «to strengthen the book's religious character (so additions A, C, and F), and... the absence of religious element... of the Hebrew version»,<sup>36</sup> also fail to foresee the ultimate goal of the book of Esther.<sup>37</sup>

The basic theological concept of Esther is not entirely innovative. It is most probably an outcome of similar theological lines, already expressed in the Pentateuch. Thus, for example, the idea of the «hidden face of God» at times in Israelite history, can be found in Deut 31:

<sup>33</sup> Generations of commentators and theologians attempted to explain this phenomenon, for example: Steinthal stated that the «author's avoidance of the name of God is due to the fact that he is a skeptic». Scholtz was of the opinion that the avoidance is due to the author's residence in Persia. Paton argued that the book of Esther was meant to be read at the annual merrymaking of Purim, an occasion when people drink a lot of wine. «On such occasions the name of God might be profaned, if it occurred in the reading; and, therefore, it was deemed best to omit it altogether». See Paton, *The Book of Esther*, 94-96, and there are references to the works of Steinthal and Scholtz. Recently, Berlin repeated the explanation of Paton (without mentioning him), see A. Berlin, *Esther – A Commentary* (Mikra Leyisra'el), Jerusalem/Tel Aviv 2001, 4 (Hebrew).

<sup>34</sup> Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 244.

<sup>35</sup> Indeed, *Vetus Latina*, the Vulgate and the Syraic version of the verse are not leading in this direction (see also Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra's commentary on Esth 4,14). See I. Kalimi, *The Task of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Theology – Between Judaism and Christianity*, in: idem, *Early Jewish Exegesis and Theological Controversy – Studies in Scriptures in the Shadow of Internal and External Controversies* (Jewish and Christian Heritage Series 2), Assen (NL) 2002, 142 note 20.

<sup>36</sup> The citation is from Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions*, 153. For this purpose of the «additions», see also his commentary, *Esther*, xxxii-xxxiii.

<sup>37</sup> The same should be said on Targum Sheni on Esther, which models Mordecai and Esther as faithful to the Torah. See B. Ego, *God as the Ruler of History: Main Thematic Motives of the Interpretation of Megillat Esther in Targum Sheni*, JAB 2 (2000) 189-201.

«And the Lord said to Moses, Behold, you shall sleep with your fathers; and this people will... break my covenant which I have made with them. Then my anger shall be kindled against them in that day, and I will forsake them, and I will hide my face from them, and they shall be devoured, and many evils and troubles shall befall them; so that they will say in that day, Are not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us? And I will surely hide my face in that day because of all the evils which they shall have done...» (verses 16-18).<sup>38</sup>

In the same book the ultimate divine redemption of Israel is also stated in the Song of *Haazinu* (Deut 32,1-43), which Moses was directed to compose (Deut 31,19):

«He (= God) shall relent regarding His servants (= Israel), when He sees that enemy power progress, and none is saved or assisted... For I (= God) lift up my hand to heaven, and say, I live forever. If I whet my glittering sword, and my hand takes hold on judgment; I will render vengeance to my enemies, and will requite those who hate me... Rejoice, O you nations, with his people; for he will avenge the blood of his servants, and will render vengeance on his adversaries...» (Deut 32,35-36a.40-41.43).<sup>39</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

All in all, the absence of God's name from the book of Esther does not mean that the author has no interest in theological issues. On the contrary, his message is intended for Jews in general, and for those in the Diaspora in particular,<sup>40</sup> that God is devoted to Israel.<sup>41</sup> Every generation has its «Haman»,<sup>42</sup> but God is always there to keep his promise and help his people, directly (like the redemption from Egypt, by taking them *out* of the land) or indirectly while acting silently «behind the curtain» (like the redemption *in* the framework of the Persian Empire, without any «new exodus»). The author trusts, seemingly, that God's covenant with Israel is everlasting, for «the Lord... is God, the faithful God who maintains *covenant loyalty* (שומר הברית והחסד) with those

<sup>38</sup> Note, that already the Talmudic sages related the book of Esther to this passage in the book of Deuteronomy (specifically with verse 18), though in their own unique Midrashic approach, based on both the spelling and sound of the Hebrew words אסתיר – אסתיר. See Babylonian Talmud, *Culin* 139b: «Where is *Esther* indicated in the Torah? — [In the verse,] «and I will surely hide [*asthir*] my face» (Deut 31,18).

<sup>39</sup> See also Deut 4,25-31; 30,1-10; 1 Kgs 8,44-53.

<sup>40</sup> Contrary to Nehemiah, for instance (see Neh 1,1-2,6), the Land of Israel and Jerusalem do not receive any special attention in Esther. See in detail, J.D. Levenson, *Esther – A Commentary* (OTL), Louisville, KY 1997, 14-16.

<sup>41</sup> This concept is entirely different from that suggested by some scholars, that is, that the purpose of the Scroll is to provide Purim with an etiological-historical background in order to justify the festival (see, e.g., Berlin, *Esther – A Commentary*, 3-5). This is true for the present form of the Scroll. I am of the opinion, however, that the institution of Purim was not an original part of the salvation narrative. See Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 156 note 5, 255-261; R. Rendtorff, *The Old Testament – An Introduction*, Philadelphia 1991, 271.

who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations» (Deut 7,9).<sup>43</sup> He holds the prophetic promise such as: «For this is as the waters of Noah to me: for as I have sworn that the waters of Noah should I sworn that I would not be wroth with you, nor rebuke you. For the mountains shall depart, and the hills be removed; but my *loyalty* (וַחֲסָדַי) shall not depart from you, neither shall the *covenant* of my peace (וּבְרִית שְׁלוֹמִי) be removed, says the Lord that have mercy on you» (Isa 54,9-10), and «For just the new heavens and the new earth that I will make will endure before Me – the words of the Lord – so will your (= Israel's) offspring and your name endure» (Isa 66,22). Since the existence of the Jewish people is everlasting, he believes, therefore, the extermination of the Jews in any form, and at any time and place is unbearable to God. He is confident that «Israel is holy to the Lord,<sup>44</sup> the first fruits of his harvest, all that devour him shall offend: evil shall come upon them...» (Jer 2,3).<sup>45</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Indeed, the Jews actualize the Biblical story of Esther by identifying their own days' enemy with Haman. So, for instance, Targum Sheni identifies Haman as one who represents the entire pagan-Christian world who persecutes Jews, and the victory over Haman as a prototype of Jews' overcoming their enemies. See B. Ego, Targum Scheni zu Ester – Übersetzung, Kommentar und theologische Deutung (TSAJ 54), Tübingen 1996, 240-242, and there earlier bibliography. In his commentary on Megillat Esther, Rabbi Abraham Saba actualized all his personal and national terrible experience passed on Jews in Spain and Portugal expulsions. See Rabbi Abraham Saba, Commentary on Esther; and the essay of A. Gross, The Reflection of Spain and Portugal Expulsions in a Commentary on Megillat Esther, Proceedings of the Ninth World Congress of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem 1986, Division B, vol. I, 153-158 (Hebrew).

<sup>43</sup> Compare 1 Kgs 8,23 and especially Neh 1,5; 9,36.

<sup>44</sup> Christian translators and commentators deliberately changed the original Hebrew text and write: «Israel was holy to the Lord, and the first fruits of his harvest...» (Jer 2,3). See, for example, KJV, RSV, Luther Bibel, and Züricher Bibel ad loc.; as well as J.A. Thompson, The Book of Jeremiah (NICOT), Grand Rapids, MI 1980, 159; R.P. Carroll, Jeremiah – A Commentary (OTL), Philadelphia 1986, 118; W. McKane, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah (ICC), Edinburgh 1986, vol. I, 26. These scholars are biased by the Christian anti-Jewish theology, which holds that the Christians – rather than the «heretical Jews» or «Talmudic Jews» – are the direct continuation of «Biblical Israel».

<sup>45</sup> Consequently, the book of Esther cannot be considered as «the most secular book of the Bible», as claimed, for instance, by Berlin (Esther – A Commentary, 3). Three decades earlier, Fohrer doubted the religious and theological value of Esther, considered the book even «less a sacred document than a secular book». He ends that «It is the produce of a nationalistic spirit, seeking revenge upon those that persecute the Jews, which has lost all understanding of the demands and obligations of Yahwism, especially in its prophetic form» (G. Fohrer, Introduction to the Old Testament, Nashville, TN 1968, 255). This is the conclusion of a leading German Biblical scholar/theologian on Esther after the Holocaust! For a detailed discussion on the Christian attitude towards Esther, see Kalimi, The Book of Esther in Christian Tradition.

This is the central theme emerging from the book of Esther for everyone, Jews and non-Jews. In other words, the story of Esther sends the message that is expressed later by the Sages in the Passover Haggadah:

«And it is this same promise which has been the support of our ancestors and of ourselves, for not one only has («Hamans») risen up against us, but in every generation some have arisen against us to annihilate us, but the Most Holy, blessed be He, has delivered us out of their hands.»<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Tragically «relief and deliverance» has not characterized the Jews' bitter and long Exile, as predicted by the author of the book of Esther. Thus, for example, in 1096 the crusades slaughtered thousands of the Rhineland's Jews and ruined their flourishing communities. In the expulsions from Spain (1492) and Portugal (1497) all the diplomatic efforts did not cancel the cruel acts of the «Hamans». Instead of «and many of the people of the land became Jews» (Esth 8,17), thousands of Jews were forced to be baptized, to become Christians. For the others, there were no «joy and gladness, a feast and a good day» (Esth, 8,17) as in Esther, rather humiliating death or expulsion. In 1648-1649 about one hundred thousand Jews were massacred in Poland and around three hundred Jewish communities destroyed totally. Furthermore, after the horrific devastation of the Jewish community in Tabriz (end of 18<sup>th</sup> century), as well as the forced converts and pogroms in Mashhad (1839), Barporosh (= Babol, Iran 1865) and Kishinev (1903, 1905), during the Second World War (1939-1945) all the worst fears of the Jews became a reality in the horrible tragedy, the *Sho'ah*. Once again, «relief and deliverance» did not emerge for the Jews from any source, and Esther's theological view did not turn into reality. To cite Rabbi Zera's expression, «a miracle does not take place on every occasion» ([Babylonian Talmud, *Megillah* 7a]. In the Babylonian Talmud, *Sanhedrin* 65b is related «Rabbah created a man, and sent him to Rabbi Zera. Rabbi Zera spoke to him, but received no answer. Thereupon he said unto him: «you are a creature of the magicians. Return to your dust»». In this way Rabbah tried, presumably, to demonstrate to Rabbi Zera that «a miracle *does* take place occasionally», since he can create a man! This in contrast to Rabbi Zera who had told Rabbah, «A miracle *does not* take place on every occasion»). It seems that God's presence was totally removed. Indeed, are we after the time of the Holocaust, still supportive of Esther's theological message? Or, in the words of Exod 17,7: «is the Lord among us, or not?» (cf. Deut 31,17b: «So that they will say on that day, are not these evils come upon us, because our God is not among us?»).