

Seleukid Perspectives – Band 1

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## Seleukid Ideology



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## CHAPTER 13

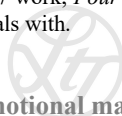
### ‘TO ALL PARTS OF THE KINGDOM’: THE *BOOK OF ESTHER* AS A SELEUKID TEXT

*Eran Almagor*

*Abstract:* The chapter argues that the *Book of Esther* was largely produced or edited, transmitted, and circulated in Hebrew in the east during the Seleukid age. The *Book of Esther* appears to reflect a response to a Greek background and was produced during the post-Achaemenid period, despite its Persian/Iranian colour. It is thus not grounded in any specific historical-political context, notwithstanding its ostensible content. The book alludes at once to Achaemenid reality, as was known from Greek texts or from the remains of the palaces, and to the Hellenistic period in which it was composed or edited, either in a deliberate allegorical way or inadvertently, being influenced by its immediate surroundings. This chapter adds several notes to this view with regard to the book’s possible relation with realia current in the Seleukid period, or indeed with items in the royal Seleukid propaganda or self-presentation. It also attempts to show that the *Book of Esther* is understandable only against the background of certain elements of Seleukid ideology, such as the nature of the king’s reign, the extent of the monarchy, and the changed emphasis in the role of the deity in establishing dynastic rule. The chapter will not address all the questions and debates concerning the textual development of the book but will focus mainly on its Hebrew variant (the *Masoretic version*).

The canonized *Book of Esther* is one of the ‘strangest’ biblical books by any standard.<sup>1</sup> Its origins, date and provenance have long fascinated scholars and exegetes, with no clear or definite answers. There is no scholarly consensus, and the questions are far from being settled. One of the proposals suggested in research is that the book is Hellenistic, i.e. post-Achaemenid. This approach is adopted in the present chapter, asserting that this work was largely produced or edited, transmitted, and circulated in Hebrew in the era after Alexander. In other words, the *Book of Esther* appears to reflect a response to a Greek background. This chapter has two aims: the first is to portray the arguments introduced in research for a Hellenistic dating of the work. Given the constraints of space, the chapter does not attempt to be comprehensive in its survey. Its scope is limited as it only deals with

1 To quote the title of Bickerman’s 1967 work, *Four Strange Books of the Bible*; it is certainly the ‘strangest’ of the four books he deals with.



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arguments for dating the work in the Greek period (and Seleukid at that) as against a Persian-era origin. It does not resort to addressing the studies arguing for a specific Hasmonean (i.e., late Greek period) context of the work, which will be my concern in a future paper. The second aim is to add several novel arguments to this Hellenistic dating of the work, which concern the book's possible relation with realia current in the Seleukid period, or indeed with items in the royal Seleukid self-presentation. Lastly, the chapter does not address all the questions and debates concerning the textual development of the book but focuses mainly on its Hebrew variant, thereby contributing to the ongoing debate on the Hellenistic reading of *Esther*.

### I. THE BOOK OF ESTHER: PERSIAN OR HELLENISTIC?

The biblical Hebrew *Masoretic Text* (henceforth *MT*) of the *Book of Esther* has always been read and heard in the context of Jewish communal festivity as the text associated with the carnivalesque festival of *Purim*.<sup>2</sup> Because of this fact, and the many hyperboles in the text, along with the comic effect of some of its depictions, it is easy to lose sight of the plot and the historical context(s) in which the *Book of Esther* was composed or edited.<sup>3</sup> The book is a fictional story, or a court story.<sup>4</sup> Yet, its form gives the impression of an actual story,<sup>5</sup> and therefore some scholars have attempted to display and prove its historicity.<sup>6</sup> Let us explore the scholarly debate in this regard.

Essentially, the book narrates the plan of the courtier Haman in the court of the Persian king Ahasueros in Susa to destroy another courtier, Mordecai the Jew, and to annihilate all the Jews within the Persian kingdom. Yet, Mordecai is shown to be the king's loyal benefactor and hence is honoured. Haman is killed and his plan to destroy the Jews is frustrated through the intervention of Esther, Mordecai's cousin, and the king's spouse as queen. In consequence, the deliverance of the Jews (which also includes acts of violence committed against their would-be-killers and the slaying of seventy-five thousand people in the empire) is ordered to be celebrated in the feast of *Purim*.

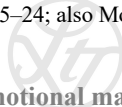
2 Babylonian Talmud *Megillah Tractate* 7b; See Harris 1977; Greenstein 1987, 226.

3 Cf. Gaster 1950; Talmon 1963, 451; Greenstein 1987, 227f.; Goldman 1990, 21; Radday 1990; Bush 1998, 47; Berlin 2001a, xvi–xxii, xxvii, 4, 6, 13, 55, 81; O'Connor 2003; Wénin 2010. Jones 1977, 174: 'The narrator is not praising the Persian court. He is laughing at it.' Cf. Macchi 2007b, 79. See Moore 1971, lvi and Gruen 2002, 143, 146 on irony.

4 Paton 1908, 73f.; 247; Torrey 1944, 21; Clines 1991, 131–136; Fox 1991a, 133f.; Wills 1995, 96; Berlin 2001a, 3f.; Johnson 2005.

5 Cf. Paton 1908, 64; Moore 1971, 3; Berg 1979, 2; Fox 1991a, 138f.; 148–150; Berlin 2001a, xxvii–xxviii; Weiland 2002, 156–158. Middlemas 2019, 151 points out that *Esther* 10.2 purports to be based upon factual records.

6 See Paton 1908, 64f., and cf. the references pp. 111–118; Hoschander 1923, 11f. and *passim*; Talmon 1963, 422; Wright 1970; Shea 1976; Yamauchi 1980; 1990, 226–239; Gordis 1981, 382–388. See recently Miller 2014, 5–24; also Moore 1975; Fox 1991a, 134–138.



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The Persian/Iranian colour of the book is undeniable.<sup>7</sup> There are many names, words, and titles in the *MT* which go back to the Persian language (Old Persian or Old Iranian).<sup>8</sup> Most probably, these words entered through imperial Aramaic, the administrative *lingua franca* of the Achaemenid Empire.<sup>9</sup> Much more than Hebrew, Aramaic was the vernacular language among Jews.<sup>10</sup> These loan-words, which were presumably included to add credence to the Persian court setting of the story,<sup>11</sup> have been found to appear in sources contemporary with the Persian Empire.<sup>12</sup> One notes that these foreign words are employed without any need of explanation, that is, they were assumed to be known to the readers.<sup>13</sup>

The main events of the story are said to take place in the 12<sup>th</sup> year of the reign of the Persian king Ahasueros (אהשוורוש).<sup>14</sup> The monarch in question is usually taken to be Xerxes (486–465 BCE).<sup>15</sup> Yet, he is identified as Artaxerxes (I or II?) by the main Greek translation (so-called *B-Text*, part of the *Septuagint*, henceforth *LXX*) and consequently by Josephus.<sup>16</sup> There is another Greek translation, the so-called *Alpha Text* or *A-Text* (henceforth *AT*), which is preserved in four manuscripts, and was previously thought to be a recension of the *LXX* by Lukianos of Antioch, 240–312 CE,<sup>17</sup> but now seems to be a translation of a Semitic (Aramaic, or most probably, Hebrew) *Vorlage*, either different from or similar to the ancestor of the *MT*.<sup>18</sup> This *AT* text has the literal form Ἀσσύηρος. At one point in the

- 7 Cf. Moore 1971, xli–xliv; Clines 1984a, 10f.
- 8 See the studies of Scheftelowitz 1901; Tisdall 1911; Gehman 1924; Duchesne-Guillemin 1953; Mayer 1961; Ellenbogen 1962; Zadok 1976, 1986; Millard 1977; Seow 1996, 647f.; Wahl 1999, 24f.; Wright 2005, 113–120; Young and Rezetko 2008, 291–293; Hurvitz 2014, 82f., 102; Hutter 2015. See Paton 1908, 66–71.
- 9 See Greenfield 1985. Cf. Seow 1996, 646–650.
- 10 As Torrey 1944 demonstrated, the original text of *Esther* was most likely written in Aramaic. For Aramaisms in *Esther*, see Paton 1908, 62f.
- 11 Cf. Rabin 1962, 1079. This is different from several Akkadian loanwords which entered the Aramaic earlier; cf. Dalley, 2007, 167–180.
- 12 For instance, Persian *ʾhšdrpn* (satrap) is a word known to appear only in the Aramaic of *Daniel* (3.2f.; 3.27; 6.1–5, 7–8) and 6<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> BCE century documents. See Kitchen 1965, 42: ‘There is as yet no evidence that any of these 6 terms survived the Persian period (i.e. after c. 330 BC).’ Cf. Hasel 1981, 214; Eskhult 2003, 11.
- 13 Cf. Kitchen 1965, 35–44, 77 on the Persian words in *Daniel*, and the conclusion that they made their impact before 300 BCE, especially 43 where it is noted that the verses containing them are ‘preferably within memory of the Persian rule – i.e. c. 539 (max.) to c. 280 BC (allowing about fifty years’ lapse from the fall of Persia to Macedon).’
- 14 *Esther* 3.7. Henceforth, all references to *Esther* are to the *Masoretic version (MT)*, unless specified otherwise.
- 15 Cf. Paton 1908, 51–54.
- 16 Jos. *AJ* 11.6.1 (184)–11.6.13 (296). Cf. Hoschander 1923, 42–80, 118–138: Artaxerxes II. But this is contradicted by several considerations, like the mention of Persian control over Egypt in *Esther* 1.1. Pace Hoschander 1923, 52, n. 28.
- 17 See Lagarde 1883; Jacob 1890.
- 18 See Torrey 1944, 7; Moore 1967, 353–355; 1977: 164; Cook 1969, 370f.; Clines 1984a, 85–114, 146–151; Fox 1990; 1991b, 30–34, 97; 1991c; Jobes 1996, 14–16, 49–85, 95–138, 219f., 223–225. Others assume, however, that the *AT* is a revision or a reworking of the *LXX*; see Paton 1908, 38; Bickerman 1951, 106–108; De Troyer 2000, 343; 2002, 203, 207; 2003, 32f.,



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