

## **The Book of Esther - Foreword by Nathan Zach**

The book or Scroll of Esther (Megillat Esther) is one of the Five Scrolls, the five shortest books of the Hagiographa (Ketuvim). Its reading is the central rite of the Purim Festival in both evening and morning services. A deceptively simple book, it purports to be historical account of events that actually took place in the Persian fortress of Shushan or Susa during the reign of a king named Akhshverosh (Ahasuerus). Some of it appears corroborated by the facts we know them from historical sources.

Thus, it is known that there was a Persian king named Akhasherosh, which is the Hebrew form for Xerxes. Xerxes 1, who must have be the king intended (the reign of the successor Xerxes 2 being short lived) reigned from 486 to 465 B.C. A tablet found at Borisppa speaks of a royal official named Marduka, or Mordekhai, at about that time. Finally, the author of Esther is well acquainted with Persian customs and court practices.

Nevertheless, accepting Esther as straightforward history involves many chronological and historical difficulties. To name but a few: if Mordekhai was exiled from Judea with king Jehoiakhin (589 B.C.), as the book suggests, he would have been over 100 years old at the time of Xerxes 1. Herodotus reports that Xerxes' wife and queen was neither Esther nor Vashti but a Persian general's daughter named Ametris. The celebrated Greek historian also says that the Persian king could only choose a queen from among seven Persian noble families. There are many more improbabilities in the plot. One significant group of scholars therefore considers the Book of Esther a pseudo epigraph, in which the narrative sets in Persia is merely a stage setting for the true meaning. Another school bases its interpretation on the fact that the names of Mordekhai and Esther are derived from the names of Babylonian deities Marduk and Ishtar. According to these scholars, the story is based on mythological account of the conflict between these gods or between their worshippers. Purim suggests the Persian Festival of Favardigan which was celebrated from the 11<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> of Adar. Thus, these scholars maintain, the Jews had adopted a Babylonian version of this feast, at the same time accepting the Babylonian legends associated with it.

Modern research of the scroll and issues related to it has elucidated many hitherto unknown aspects of it. Interpreters now clearly recognize that the book contains two originally independent plots derived from Oriental romance, which are combined effectively: one plot of harem intrigue of which Esther is the heroine, and another of court intrigue of which Mordekhai is the hero.

The book is certainly unique among all the books of the Bible in that prayers are never addressed to God in the hour of danger and need, nor is any mention of thanksgiving to God after the salvation of the Jews. One direct result of such non-Jewish characteristics was the refusal of some of the rabbis of the Talmud to admit it into Jewish canon. The Talmud preserves debates on whether Esther was written in the proper divine inspiration. Once admitted, however, this story of national danger and salvation appealed immensely to generation of Jews in their long centuries of Diaspora, and Mordekhai triumph over Haman came to represent the unshakeable faith the Jews will always triumph against their oppressors. Haman similarly became the symbol of THE ENEMY, and the festival of Purim an occasion of joy and

merriment in which Jews still eat Hamantaschen – pastries filled with raisins, and send gifts of food to each other and to the poor of the community.

## Esther

The book of Esther is the only part of the Bible which, according to Jewish tradition, may be adorned with artistic illustrations – although not when it appears as part of the Torah scroll itself. Megillat Esther was always a favorite subject for illumination and illustration. After the invention of the printing press it became the main field wherein the *sophrim* (scribes) could express themselves artistically. For the ceremonial reading by the *hazan* in the synagogue on the feast of Purim, only scrolls written according to ritual prescriptions may be employed.

For private use, however, illuminated manuscripts were in great fashion all over Europe throughout the ages. Extant specimen of the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, both from Central and Southern Europe, indicate a long antecedent tradition. Some superb Megillot are preserved in the Library of the Athenaeum in Liverpool, the Library of the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the Bibliotheca Casanatense in Rome and the Jewish Museum in London. Decorated (but not illuminated) scrolls of Esther were found also, though less frequently in the Orient. The continued vitality of the art of the synagogal scribe and the emergence in the eighteenth century of a new circle of wealthy Court Jews in the Germanic countries led to a great revival of the art of illumination in these countries, in which Jews artists played a central role. The miniaturists of the Jewish book in the Century of Enlightenment are the forerunners of the painters, who in the following centuries play a role of considerable importance in European art.

## The Portfolio

With such an inspiring tradition in mind, the challenge of producing a modern illustrated Megilla could not have been taken up lightly. Maty Grunberg proceeded from a careful study of the specimens on view at London's Jewish Museum, which showed that each generation of artists had interpreted its task in accordance with its own sensibility, mores and aesthetic values; there is no sense in duplication the achievements of another age. The medium coined by young Israeli artist, after a period of exploration and experiment is decidedly contemporary. At first sight abstract, a closer look reveals the relatedness of Grunberg's serigraphs to the text, a relatedness often lacking in earlier works. The simplified figures of the main personages recur at intervals, interwoven in intricate harmonies of bright, poster – like colours. The serigraphs capture the essence of the Megilla as an Oriental drama of power, with the emphasis shifting to the ultimate triumph and merriment. With an integrating rhythm pervading, the colourful illustrations assume the character of an artistic commentary akin to the textual interpretations which each generation has added to the vast Esther opus.