

The Silent Redemption

The Secret of the Scroll of Esther

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Is the Scroll of *Esther* a religious book? This question may appear absurd as *Esther* belongs to the canon of the bible and its reading is an integral part of the liturgical cycle of the synagogue. And yet, certain present day biblical scholars have put the forth the hypothesis that the inspiration of the text is non-religious or profane. Profane does not mean blasphemous. God's existence is not denied, but simply ignored or at least it is kept out of the plot. Contrary to certain exegetical interpretations, these biblical scholars maintain there is no religious message in the story. They assert that the author of the text has no other intention than to tell of an attempted extermination of the Jews and its failure through a formidable unraveling of the extermination plot. The author only wanted to underline that it was the determination of Mordecai and the ingenuity of Esther, coupled with a lucky circumstances that allowed them to save their kinsmen, and nothing else. Whether this analysis of the text is correct or not, the fact that one can even envisage such an explanation requires a serious explanation. Our text is thus atypical of biblical literature. How can a text so clearly non-religious or at least ambiguous in that regard, be edified in the Jewish tradition?

The arguments of such a thesis merit serious consideration. The book of *Esther* does not contain any explicit miracle or form of divine intervention. No reference is made to the temple and the its sacrifices nor the land of Israel, except for the fact that the Jewish people in exile. The author neither evokes nor disapproves the non-observance of the Jewish food rules (presumably because of the numerous banquets in which they participated) nor is he indignant at the idea of a marriage between Esther and a pagan king. Esther is certainly kidnapped and taken by force to the king's palace, but she does not appear to be particularly afflicted or have any scruples about this. On the contrary she appears quite docile, almost complacent, as she consents to the tedious cosmetic preparations for the royal bed. Now the rules, values, customs and Jewish institutions called into question here, existed in one form or another at the time the events were said to have occurred, that is, the 4 or 5th BC. In addition, the main characters do not pray even once to invoke the help of God, in contrast to similar biblical stories. An even more unique a characteristic of this narrative, compared to the typical biblical story, is that no sin is referred to as a cause of the predicament now confronting the Jewish people. And to top it off, God himself is never mentioned, not even once. Clearly there is undeniably confusing.

Given this discussion, it is not surprising that the canonization of the massoretic biblical text of the book of *Esther* did not occur without reticence. In fact, it is the only biblical book for which no trace has been found among the Dead Sea scrolls¹. *Lamentations*, chapters 44-49, written around the 2nd century, describes the principal heroes of Israel during biblical times until Nehemiah, but does not mention either Esther or Mordecai. Flavius Josephus's Jewish Antiquities however does refer to the story of Esther (with some variation), but specifies, in his *Against Apion* (1st century), that the Holy Scriptures cover the historical period up to the time of Artaxerxes (in the rabbinical bible, Artashasta, a Persian king during the time of Daniel), that is before the episode of Esther and that those following their quality of 'antiquity and literary credibility. Meliton of Sardes, a Father of the Church from the 2nd century, who carried out an inventory of the canonized books of the Old Testament, does not

¹ Cf. Hershel Shanks, *L'aventure des manuscrits de la mer morte*, Paris, Seuil, 1996, p.13.

mention Esther in his chronicles. Thus, should we not ask if the book of *Esther* was not originally a profane book, and considered as such, written long after the events that it is supposed to narrate and canonized even later.

Even if the story of *Esther* is more literary than historical, the terminology borrowed, from the Persian, and the precise description of court customs attests that the author had knowledge of the royal – environment of Suse around the IV-Vth century BCE. Flavius Joseph and the Greek translations preserved in the corpus of the Septuagint testify to its popularity and its antiquity. Debates concerning the rules governing the public reading of the *mishna Megillah*, prove that the scroll of *Esther* was part of the historical patrimony of the Jewish people and that it was canonized no later than the first century of the common era. The talmudic tradition² tells us that it was the decision of the Great Assembly to date it at the end of the Persian period, that is around the IVth century BCE. But this has not been confirmed by outside sources and the indications, as noted above, would question such a dating. In any case, we do not have any reason to think that the sages of the Talmud judged this work as unorthodox. The explicit considerations brought to bear in the debate by the Sages, which supposedly recorded the reticence of the Great Assembly, appear to focus on the opportunity that such a testimony would only refuel anti-Semitism, rather than to the theological difficulties which the text presented. Recall that the text generated specific commandments, having a force of law, normally thought to be the unique prerogative of the Pentateuch attributed to Moses. The only troubling Talmudic testimony is that of Rabbi. Samuel (IIIrd century, Babylonia), who believed that the book of *Esther* did not have the sacred stature as other works of the Bible³. The Talmud (*ibid.*) does not give precise reasons for his reservations or objections. But it is likely that his objection was tied to its uniqueness: Its content-profane in appearance, and its dating-being on the chronological edge of the biblical corpus in the conscience of the Sages. It marks a passage⁴. To understand the modalities of the transition is to elucidate the secret of that singularity.

The eloquence of the unspoken

We wish to suggest that if this book is an exception, it is not because it is a profane work but rather because it carries an innovative religious concept, specific to the context of the Diaspora. Let us begin with few indices which show the author's faith filtering through the text.

1. Though not explicitly stated, one notes that in the story there are a number of actions which resemble prayer. These are of typical religious reactions to the distress into which the people were plunged:

When Mordecai learned all that had happened, he tore off his clothes and put on sack cloth and ashes. He went through the city crying out loudly and bitterly (*Esther* 4:1).

² Cf. *Megillah* 7a and *Talmud* Jerusalem, *Megillah* I, hal. 5.

³ We read in the Talmud: “ Rabbi Yehouda, by the name of Samuel , teaches: the book of *Esther* does not render the hands impure (in contrast to other sacred texts for which the Sages decreed that they needed an absolution of the hands after their use, to solicit deference)”. For Samuel, because it fails to be fully sacred, it cannot be counted as a sacred text of the Bible. He recognizes that the text is inspired (thanks to the attribution of the holy spirit to Esther and Mordecai, who recognizes its capacity to describe the thoughts, words and acts of the characters) and accept its public reading which was already largely instituted during his time (cf. *Megillah* 7a).

⁴ If we refer to the saying of Flavius Joseph (cf. *supra*), the book belongs to the post-biblical narratives.

Such practices, like the fast ordered by *Esther*, evoking the repentance of Kippur, are mentioned a number of times in the Bible closely linked to supplications to God (cf. Isaiah 58:3-5, Daniel 9:3, Jonah 3:6).

2. The patronymic references to Mordecai, “son of Yair, son of Shimi, son of Kish of the tribe of Benjamin and of Haman, Son of Hamdetha, the Agagite, directly lead one to the story recorded in *1 Samuel* 15. The same is true for events, such as the retaliation of the Jews against their persecutors, for which they were ordered neither to reprieve nor pillage. In fact, the passage evoked in the book of Samuel refers to the war of Saul, king of Israel, son of Kish of the tribe of Benjamin against the Ameklites whose king was Agag. Saul transgresses the divine order because he saves the life of his adversary and authorizes the troops to take the spoils, though it were declared anathema. One can deduce that the story of the *Megillah* of *Esther* attempts to compensate for the imperfect behavior of their ancestor Saul. The descendants of the two enemies, by an odd turn of events, confront each other in a similar situation. But this time, in contrast to king Saul’s behavior, Mordecai obeys the divine injunction to undertake a war without mercy against the people of Amalek, the archetype sworn enemy, and does this with perfect respect for the anathema on the spoils. No amnesty will be given to Haman, the descendant of Agag, who dies, him and his sons, on the ‘gibbet’.

Mordecai looks throughout the story as having an unshakeable confidence in the salvation of Israel. He therefore admonishes Queen Esther, in a prophetic tone:

“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” (*Esther* 4:13-14a)

Even if salvation is attached to an undefined path ‘ממקום אחר’ elsewhere’ and not explicitly to God, it carries undeniably the religious resonance of the deliverance of Israel rooted in the traditional texts and for which God is the principal artisan, secretly at times and overtly at others, of the future.

4. The rest of the extract testifies to the Mordecai’s religious interpretation of the events:

“ And who knows you have attained to royal position for just such a crisis?” (*Esther* 4:14b)

That Providence traces the lines of future events is obvious , even when not explicitly mentioned.

5. It is also suggested that Providence is a latent element in the framework of the story. We can in fact add other rhetorical questions to Mordecai’s questioning: Is it only by chance that the descendants of Saul and Agag find themselves like their fathers of old confronting each other in a duel? Is it only by chance that at the moment that Haman contrives to hang Mordecai, the sleep of the king is disturbed, leading him to consult the book of Chronicles up to the point that he remembers that Mordecai thwarted a plot against him without receiving any reward. The famous biblical scholar, Ezechiel Kauffman expressed himself on the nature of the story in these terms:

Certainly, to the eyes of the lay reader, the well built intrigue of history can seem like a deliberate creation of a writer. But for the author himself, it constitutes a real, though underlying, plan of Providence, as Judaism has always perceived it: the rebellion of Vashti, the failed plot of Mordecai, the insomnia of the king before the decisive celebration. All these events occur at the most propitious moment according to a programmed order so that, finally the deliverance of Israel is manifest. The book of *Esther* is without doubt a unique novel for the Bible but it is a “religious

novel" (*History of Israelite Faith*, in Hebrew, Tel Aviv, ed. Bialik 1976 (first publication 1956) Volume VIII, p. 447.)

Attempts to lift the veil

Given these indications, the question posed with even more acuity is : why is the manuscript of Esther is so devoid of explicit religious signs? It may be possible to account for this through two types of considerations that need to be carefully distinguished. The first is that the events depicted in the *Megillah* indicate that the context is the one of Diaspora under the Persian regime. From what we know of the history of Judaism, the Jewish people were not at all prepared to lead a ritual life in Diaspora given that the vast majority of the rituals prescribed by the Torah of Moses made sense only for those living in the land of Israel: the rituals were mainly obligations linked to agrarian life and to the Temple service⁵. Indeed, as mentioned by Haman, it does not mean that the Jews did not undertake any specific religious practices: "The people have laws that differ from all other people" (*Esther* 3:8). But no one can really say which rituals were kept or considered as obligatory, nor the form they took at that time. Participating in a Persian feast, drinking their wine, or other libations, Esther's wedding with king Ahasuerus were probably not perceived by the author, at least at that time and place, as transgressions. This explains why the author of the *Megillah* does not invoke the sin of that generation of the Jewish people during that era, which would have permitted Haman to obtain from the king the decree of his annihilation. What awakens Haman's anger - an evil person seeking power - are Mordecai's provocative and audacious insubordination. It is when Haman identifies Mordecai as being a Jew that Haman feels compelled by the ancestral aversion of his people towards Israel⁶, to decide to annihilate the all Jews. If the author thought that this generation of Jews was guilty of any kind of perversion that would have provoked such suffering, then he would have mentioned it, as is the case in all other biblical books. Indeed, after the victory of the Jews against the Amalekites and all those who wanted to annihilate them, the author neither formulates any negative judgement towards Esther's wedding, nor does he recount any change of attitude towards the moral or ritual practices⁷.

⁵ Even though Talmud belongs to a much later period, it underlines the close link between obeying the commandments and the presence of the people in Israel according to various biblical verses (*Leviticus* 25:38, *I Samuel* 26:19). It describes exile as a place where the service to God loses its substance to such a degree that it is presented as a type of idolatry (*Ketubot* 100b). It is only following the destruction of the two Temples (587 bce and 70 ce) and afterwards, that the Scribes and the Sages decreed its observance in Diaspora to overcome disaster and secure the survival of Judaism. This may also explain why we found tribes identifying themselves as being of Jewish origins and whose practice is totally different from the one instituted by the rabbis. Similarly, the "salvation that will come from another place" as expressed by Mordecai is probably an allusion to the God whose primary is in the land of Israel (cf. *Esther* 4:14). Similarly, for the liturgy, the Talmud (*Megillah* 14a) excludes the reciting of the Hallel, glorifying the divine miracles, during Purim by arguing that the miracle took place in Diaspora. Only miracles that occurred in exile prior to the conquest of the land of Canaan deserve to be treated differently. Later on, Nahmanides (Spain, XIII century) goes as far as to defend that idea that some commandments have been essentially maintained in Diaspora simply not to forget them in the perspective of the day the people will return to its land (cf. Commentary on *Numbers* 33:53 and *Deuteronomy* 4:5).

⁶ Cf. *Esther* 3:6 : "For they told him from which nation he was".

⁷ All these facts are as eloquent as they contrast with the various legendary interpolations and commentaries that have been added to the text. They are the result of later religious concerns aiming at perpetuating Judaism under the precarious conditions of the Diaspora. This is the case for versions of "Esther" which are not part of the Jewish biblical canon and the *Midrachim* in which the prayers and the religious concerns have been introduced in the speech of the characters. In the Talmud, as cause of their misfortune, Jews are suspected of having participated in the worshiping of idols (*Megillah* 12a). Rav (III century, Babylonia) and thus it interprets the words of Haman ("this people has laws that differ from all other people" *Esther* 3:8) as a denunciation of false integration: Jews do not drink the wine of other people, nor do they marry them (*Megillah* 13b). The interpolation of a Greek translation of the *Megillah* of Esther (a deuterocanonical text dating back to the Hasmonean Hellenistic period) put a prayer into Esther's mouth: "Save us and give us the salvation for I am left alone and has no other savior than Yourself, Eternal". As you know everything, You know how much I hate honors and I am filled with repugnance to lay near the uncircumcised, the foreigner. And You know how much I am afflicted et I abhor being obliged to wear the sign of glory on my head when I have to show up. I hate this pagan custom to the point that I remove it as soon as I am at peace. Your servant applies herself even not to eat from Haman's table nor to honour the king's banquet. I do not drink the wine of the idolatrous. Your

What has just been said only partially explains the problems posed by this work. Late interpretations introduce standards and notions which are indeed anachronistic, but they also underline the absence of elements which, far from being anachronistic, should logically have taken place. With respect to the religious element noted previously, the author believed in a providential intervention of some sort. But what prevented him from placing prayers, calling for divine help, in the mouths of his characters? Why is the presence of God not explicitly mentioned? Why this silencing of the presence of God? It seems obvious that these are deliberate omissions that need to be explained.

Throughout the ages, some have tried to solve this enigma. Let us start by recalling the explanations linked to the particular circumstances. Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra (Spain, XI century) writes in the introduction of his commentary of the book of Esther:

“Having to do with missives evoked in the verse, “And (Mordecai) sent the letters” (*Esther* 9:20), all were the same copy, the scroll of Esther, and the Persians recopied it in turn, to incorporate into the Chronicles of their kings. Now they were pagans and wrote in the place of the venerated and grand Name (of our God) their ignomies, as the Samaritans did when they transcribed the beginning of Genesis by replacing the name of the Creator by “Achima”. It was thus through prudence that Mordecai did not mention the name of God in the scroll of *Esther*.”

Moreover, in the introduction to his study on the book of Esther, Amos Hakham (contemporary commentator) evokes the interpretation according to which the occultation of the name of God was due to the custom of getting drunk during the feast of Purim:

In fact, men would get drunk on this occasion. Now this state of drunkenness could lead one to profane the name of God, if during the reading of the scroll, if one deformed or misread his name” (cf. *Daat Mikra*, edit. Rav Kook, Jerusalem, 1973, p.17)

These explanations are far from being convincing, as they are not based on any truly reliable data. First, the historicity of the facts as they are quoted is far from being proven, given the novelistic aspect of the book (for example, think of the intimate conversations between the characters). Nothing permits us to prove that the Persian scribes have simply taken over a work written in Hebrew, intended for a Jewish audience. In *Esther* (10:2), the consignment of the facts in the chronicles of the kings of Media and Persia is indeed mentioned but nothing indicates that it is the *Megullah* itself. The same applies to the missives sent by Mordecai and Esther ordering them to commemorate the event (*Esther* 9:20-32). Even though the manuscript of Esther was rewritten as an archive document, the risk of substituting the name of God in a Jewish writing seems anachronical. Why were not such reservations evoked and why was such a self-censure not applied to other biblical books such as *Daniel* (partly written under the Persian regime)? No information allows us to establish this idea. As regards the hypothesis of the risks due to the state of inebriation, it assumes that the question was of importance for the author. But what allows us to assert this? Nothing allows thinking that drinking bouts were a common practice during

servant has not have any joy since the day she has been captured until now, but in you Etemal, God of Abraham. Etemal, who reigns over everything, listen to the voice of those who are in despair and save us from the hands of those who are buried in evil, take us out of our anxiety " (*Esther greek* 4:15-20). It is also striking to compare the content of the book of Esther, so devoid of religious expression with the first chapters of Daniel. Here the characters in Persian Diaspora express a true discipline regards their eating habits, a resolve in daily prayer and a determined resistance against idolatry, often risking their lives. The miracle is obvious. So big is the contrast that it seems deliberate. The book of Daniel is, for the Jewish tradition, prior to the one of Esther. The events it refers to are obviously prior. But very diverse versions of this book have been found, especially in Qumran. Historical considerations lead us to believe that the writing of this book, in its Massoretic version, dates back to the Hasmonean time (II century BCE). Daniel's actions of devotion may come from a late interpolation; or, as indicated in the Massoretic text, they may be the proof of the exceptional devotion of some heroes. All that does not prejudice the least of the religious norms of the Diaspora at that time. All that can be said is that the religious conception of the book of Daniel, as we know it, is antithetical to the one of the book of Esther.

public lectures (which is not even the case in the Jewish law defined by the late decision-makers, for the feast banquet can only start after the lecture). All these customs having been elaborated afterwards, thus it would surely be an anachronism to say that they are the cause of the removing of the name of God.

These attempted 'circumstantial explanations' have this in common: they allude to the theological question of the "eclipse" (overshadowing) of God". Thus we have all the reasons to believe, as mentioned above, that such a silence is deliberate and revealing. Besides, it is odd that the literature (Talmudic or midrashic writings) of the Sages does not offer any explicit solution to this problem. Amos Hakham nevertheless believed that he discovered some evidence in the Talmud (*Hulin* 139b) which, according to him, constitutes an allusive answer:

« [Concerning the Megillah of] *Esther* where is the reference in the Torah? In the following verse :
“And then I will hide My Face [this bringing together is based on the homonym between ‘Esther’ and ‘הסתר אסתיר’ : “Yet I will keep My countenance Hidden on that day because of all the evil they have done in turning to other gods” (*Deuteronomy* 31:18)

Amos Hakham explains that:

It is probable that the bringing together of these notions, the hiding of the Shekhinah as it is perceived in the Scroll of Esther – the name of God is not mentioned – is an integral part of the punishment of exile which is discussed in this portion of Deuteronomy. The hiding of the name would then be an allusion to the exile of the people of Israel and its sufferings in the Diaspora to the hiding of the countenance (*ibid.* p. 17).

The canceling of any kind of theophany is – we must admit – common to both texts. But two notable differences forbid one to subscribe to the conclusions drawn by Amos Hakham from this analogy. First, the "eclipse of the face" which is mentioned in the *Deuteronomy* constitutes greatly a threat for the people which is still in the land of Israel. It is not in the least assigned exclusively to the exile condition. Exile is only the consequence! For the Jews who are now living in Diaspora, the "eclipse of the face of God" is a matter of fact. If they still feel the effects, it is only as a continuation of it. Second, in the Deuteronomy, the eclipse announces not only the absence of the unveiling but also the Providence; it submits the people to the mercy of various calamities which may strike him⁸. The context of this passage does not allow any ambiguity. But this situation is exactly the reverse of the providential ending that prevails in Diaspora, in the story of the *Megillah*.

A key to the enigma

On the contrary, it is useful to show that it is precisely the contrast between the two texts that constitutes the best evidence to solving the enigma. Indeed, when one examines the contextual meaning of Chapter 31 of *Deuteronomy*, one senses that purpose of God's concealing/hiding himself is to test the Jews, that is to test the strength of their faithfulness. The text specifies that subjecting them to a test could be followed by disillusionment or distress: their trial would be heightened as the people would come to doubt the effectiveness of the divine Presence and thus their need to respect the Covenant.

Then my anger will flare up against them, and I will abandon them and I will hide my countenance from them. They shall be ready prey; and many evils and troubles shall befall them. And they shall say on that day, “Surely it is because our God is not in our midst that these evils have befallen us.

⁸ Cf. See also the commentary of Rashi, there : “I will hide my Face : like someone who will not see their distress”.

Yet I will keep my countenance hidden on that day, because of the evil they have in turning to other gods (*Deuteronomy* 31:17-18).

The hiding/concealment of God's Countenance/Face occurs in two phases. The first one is the test itself. The second consists in its entrenchment, thus confirming the (Israelites) people's failure. This distinction is fundamental because the second phase is precisely the one that is ongoing for the people of the Diaspora. Our hypothesis is that the homiletic intention of the author of the *Megillah* is to persuade the auditors that the exiled population is offered the possibility to vindicate its past actions. It is up to them to deal with the trial of God's hiding or concealment, but this time they must prove their faithfulness to him. God's hiding is not only a 'fait accompli' but it is also a call to stand up to the challenge. Mordecai becomes the providential man. God's hiding or concealment is born out of their loss of confidence in God. But it is precisely this confidence that Mordecai embodies and asks for. He wishes to prove that the God's hiding is but a form camouflage, a divine stratagem, a test. It does not translate into irreversible abandonment except for those that do not have confidence in God. Mordecai wishes to make amends for the failings of his ancestors. Contrary to what Amos Hakham states, it is the vicissitudes tied to the hiding of the Face (of God) in the land of Israel that the author of the *Megillah* uses as his first reference. These are the defeat of Saul before Agag and then that of the entire Hebrew people in the land of Israel as they turned to idolatry. These are both objects of the different textual allusions. For the author there has been a sin. But it is that of his ancestors. It is precisely this culpability from long ago that Mordecai attempts to convert into present merit. A complete turnaround in the situation is the *ultima ratio* that is developed as a thread in the text of the *Megillah*, until it emerges in daylight.

“.. The very day on which the enemies of the Jews had expected to get them in their power, the opposite happened [« ונהפוך הוא »], and the Jews got their enemies in their power” (*Esther* 9:1)

This brilliant victory is nothing but a crowning of their profound inner transformation. One can best understand this by following the author's invitation to consider a thought provoking reference in Exodus. At the time of the flight from Egypt, after the miraculous crossing of the Red Sea, it is reported that the Israelites were tried by being deprived of water for three days (*Exodus* 15:22). They could not stop themselves from protesting against Moses, but God did not react, but rather provided them with a remedy. Later, in a similar situation, the people again lose confidence and test God by saying: “Is the Lord present among us or not?” [ה'יש ה' בקרבנו או אין] (*Exodus* 17:7). It is this same doubt, this same defiance that is expressed when they experience the trying conditions of their test. This is presented in chapter 31 of *Deuteronomy* as provoking the hiding of the face of God and subsequently the unleashing of Divine anger. The expressions utilized are the same, “ Surely it is because God is not in our midst [הלא על כן אין אלוהי בקרבנו] » (*Deuteronomy* 31:17b).” Now in Exodus, this moment of weakness is quickly sensed, and is followed by a second moment with the unexpected aggression of the people of Amalek, “Amalek came and fought with Israel” (*Exodus* 17:8). In the light of this isomorphism, one understands better the emblematic action of Mordecai. The Face of God is veiled, but this time, it is the Jew, Mordecai who arises and fights Amalek. He acts first in provoking the anger of Haman, the Amalekite.

“ But Mordecai neither kneels nor prostrates himself (before Haman)” (*Esther* 3:3)⁹

⁹ The expressions ‘to kneel and to prostrate oneself’ does not appear in the Bible except in the context of idolatry. This is constitutes additional evidence in support of the hypothesis that Mardocai carries the banner of reparation for the faults of the ancestors.

This revolution, begun by Mordecai, is fully accomplished at a critical moment of the story, where all can yet be overturned. Esther fearing for her life hesitates to intervene before the King. She is undergoing exactly the same test as the one the Israelites experienced in the passages cited from *Exodus* and *Deuteronomy* and appears to succumb to the same weaknesses. Mordecai opens her eyes and entreats her not to lull herself with the illusion that only she among the Jews will escape (*cf. supra, Esther* 4:13-14). Esther suddenly wakes up.

“Go and gather together all the Jews present at Suse and ‘order’ a fast for my intention: do not eat or drink for three days[...] and if I must perish, I will perish” (*Esther* 4:16)¹⁰

This fasting appears clearly as an antithetical reference to the test, noted above, concerning their lack of water. Esther tries correct it through inverting the roles and outcomes. Confidence in God is found again and the path to deliverance is begun. This change is such that the distribution of power among the different actors is now reversed. It is now a metamorphosed Esther, who gives orders to Mordecai.

“So Mordecai went about the city and did just as Esther commanded him” (*Esther* 4:17)

Esther, the revelation of the secret

The evidence necessary to resolve the enigma of the ‘concealment of the religious’ in the story is now available. The author is conscious that the situation of exile is a type of “*Hester panimö*, (the hiding of the Face), in reference to *Deuteronomy* 31. The name of Esther is an allusion to this, as has been noted in the Midrash, and it is likely that the author of the *Megillah* used this homonym as a piece of evidence. Let us not forget that the true name of Esther is according to the *Megila* itself, Hadassa. The name of Esther is thus a synonym. This name evokes, Istar, the the Pheonecian and Babyonian god of fertility (or as in the Greek pantheon, Astarte). It is also associated with Venus and the moon, and emphasizes the alienation of this hidden Jewishness. Even the attitude of Esther, at least in the beginning, is one of concealment since she does not unveil neither her origins nor her belonging to Israel, according to the advice of Mordecai¹¹.

The reversal which leads to the emergence of Providence is reflected in an inner conversion for Esther, who breaks out of her passive submissiveness to lead a strategy of resistance. She progressively awakens the suspicion of the king, until she ends up unveiling her true identity and confuses Haman. Through her, the lunar aspect of a woman who transfigures herself, pulls herself out of her condition of self-effacement and subordination¹².

¹⁰ The use of isomorphisms, as well as other antinomial references shows in an indubitable fashion that the author had not only a homogenous conception of the Pentateuch (this is a serious indication of its requisite canonization) but also sharp theological vision, combined with a highly refined literary talent).

¹¹ On this issue, Rabbi Yehouda comments in the Talmud, “Why does she call herself Esther? Because she conceals (מסתירה) her words” (*Megillah* 13a).

¹² The turnaround of the feminine figure evoked in the ancient *midrash* constitutes an eschatological theme, expanded by the Kabbalists (through the liturgy of the new moons). The cyclical waning of the moon until its face is hidden as well as its reduction in volume with respect to the sun(masculine figure) at the moment of Creation (see reference *Hulin* 60b), symbolizes exile, that is the concealment or hiding of the *Shekhinah* (feminine mode of God) in the world. The eschatological speculation anticipates its future transformation(reversal), or the “masculinisation” of the feminine symbolized by the transfiguration of the moon. Thus, as said in the Midrash on *Genesis Rabba* (12:6) on the basis of a verse of *Isaiah*(30:26). “The light of the moon shall become like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun shall become sevenfold, like the light of the seven days, the day when the Lord binds up His people’s wounds and heals the injuries it has suffered.” The analogy of the female to the moon is attested in certain mystical texts of the beginnings of the Kabbala,(Cf. The fragment of R. Abraham ben David de Posquières(XII century), edited by G. Scholem, *Rehit ha-Kabbala*, Jerusalem,

This phenomenon is underlined by the ironic contrast with the Council of Wisemen, which surround the king, when they advise him to depose the former queen, Vashti, in order to avoid her from setting a precedent of non-submission, which could serve as a model of rebellion for all the women of the kingdom. The ostentation and the show of royal power are but shoddy goods that poorly hide the precariousness of a kingdom under the incessant threat of the plots. The triumph of history in this scene is in the image of the sovereign's earthly reign: Ahasuerus is but a manipulated puppet, full of alcohol and of concupiscence, of a laxity that rare flames of fury awaken from his torpor. The true drama is played out in the wings (backstage). It is there that the divine presence withdraws itself when faced with the looks and boisterous festivities of history, while waiting for the consciences to be awakened. In this setting, the author of the *Megillah* offers his contemporary readers a striking direct theological response to the problem of the incommensurable difference between the diverse forms of praise described in the bible and the silent retreat of God. Those exiled from the kingdom of Juda endure the supreme test: God waits in secret for the human reply.

At first, the author describes the passive submission of the Jews as if they were, like their king, stuck in a sluggish torpor. If they had docilely prostrated themselves before Haman, it is because they are but shadows of themselves, exiles that God has abandoned. With the decree, announcing their programmed annihilation, they have as their only reply an expression of consternation. The alert is given by Mordecai, the rebel. In Esther's heart all shifts around and she falls apart, only to rebound with a determined jolt for her people, weakened and without a backbone.

The fact that neither Esther nor the people implore divine help is written into the writer's worry of reparation. The absence of prayers reveals a sort of religious modesty and expiatory restraint, that only fasting can express. It is as if the author breathed a new conscience into his characters, his exiled and oppressed brothers, saying "Halt to small talk, rumblings of defiance or scorching implorations. Remember the words that the Eternal one, who was tired of their talk, whispered to Moses before the obstacle of the Red Sea and behind the pressing menace of the Egyptian chariots at the heels of the Israelites in flight. They were caught in a bind and God said to Moses," why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward" (*Exodus* 14:15). How can we yet implore his aid, when even our fathers turned away from him and now he hides his Face?

The people had demanded providential help as something that was their due and were ready to renounce to all else, as the excerpt from *Deuteronomy* cited above notes. Likewise king Saul, whom Mordecai is now the incarnate and transformed figure, had called for divine help through sacrificial rituals until he usurped the prerogatives of the prophet Samuel at the expense of disobedience to God. Samuel says to Saul: "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obedience to the Lord's command?" (*I Samuel* 15:22)¹³. Mordecai wishes to treat evil at its roots. He goes back to the genesis of the degeneration of the situation to face the test, which his ancestors failed¹⁴. He wishes

1940, p. 70). This text is presented and analyzed by Charles Mopsik in his article: "Genèse 1:26-27, L'image de Dieu, le couple humain et le statut de la femme chez les premiers Cabalistes" in : *Rigueur et passion, hommage à Annie Kriegel*, Paris, Cerf 1993. The *Zohar* (cf. 20b-28a) associates the feminine to the moon and to the Shekhinah. There is even a question of a mystical union between Moses and the moon (*Zohar* I, 21b-22a). Cf. Also the extract from *Commentary on the Ma'areket ha Elohut of the kabbalist rabbi*, Reuben Tsarfati, Italy, XIVth century, translated and cited by Charles Mopsik in : *Cabale et Cabalistes*, Paris, Bayard, 1997, pp. 216-217.

¹³ This theme is found in the prophets: cf. *Isaiah* 1:11, *Jeremiah* 7: 9-10 ; and 7:22-23.

¹⁴ Mordecai is the double of Esther. Their relationship is not without reference to the person of Joseph, brother of Benjamin. Joseph as Mordecai, is both a visionary and attempting to repair the fault (that of his brothers). Like Joseph, Mordecai carries a name of exile (Mordecai refers to Marduk, the supreme divinity in the Babylonian pantheon) and becomes the second in command in a foreign country. The similarity is very marked when Mordecai like Joseph is brought to the city

to prove that *ōHester panimō*, the hidden face, is an opportunity for redemption and not the abandonment by Providence. God will accompany his people in the precarious conditions of exile, if they are able to at least to show their ability to transform themselves.

The Turn around in the Shekhina

One cannot properly finish the analysis without comparing it to that of the Sages of the Talmud who were sensitive to the sudden theological change that occurs in the story of *Esther*.

Rabbi Avdimi son of Hama, son of Hassa, teaches with respect to the verse, (that tells of the situation of the Hebrew people at the moment of the gift of the Torah: “they took their places at the foot of the mountain” (*Exodus* 9:17) This tells that the Holy One Blessed be He had raised a mountain like a cupola, saying : if you accept the Torah, better for you. If not, here will be your grave. Rabbi Aḥa son of Jacob said: There followed a protest of the validity (due to the forced character of the alliance contracted). Rabba then said: Without doubt but my generation (the Jews) of Ahasuerus finally received (the Torah) freely, thus it is written : “ the Jews undertook and obligated themselves[...] (*Esther* 9:7) (*Shabbat* 88a).

The ostentatious revelation on mount Sinai constitutes a radical antithesis to the situation that won in the *Megillah*. The paroxysm in the unveiling of God is contrasted to the total hiding of (His) Face. At Sinai the divine figure presents itself as a masculine coercive principle. In the story of *Esther*, the divine presence presents itself as a hidden and a passive femininity, which is not transfigured except through Esther’s awakening, with resolute and active femininity¹⁵. Now it is precisely in a situation of total concealment that the true desire to accept the Torah takes root and is manifest. The man who now takes charge of history, runs before the Shekhina, the fiancée and unveils her face¹⁶. With a clever play on words, based on the similarity of their roots, “ אסתר מגילת : *scroll of Esther* can be understood as “גלוי הנסתר”, the unveiling of the concealed or hidden”. This is the profound sense of the ritual lecture. In reading the *Megillah* the faithful decrypts it. He is called to unearth the hidden, to find the traces of the *Shekhinah* buried in the darkness of exile. In this approach of revealing God, it is man himself who reveals himself to Him, in the complicity of the Redemption.

bearing the pomp and show of the king, to be glorified (cf. *Genesis* 41: 41-45), compare to *Esther* 6:6-11). In this story, providence acts in the sidelines, by linking the events. If the metaphor of Esther is the moon, that of Mordecai is the sun. Like Joseph, an agent of Providence, he acts in the night of the exile, en preparing the transfiguration, the unveiling that occurs in Esther until the aurora of Salvation.

¹⁵ In *Megillah* 7a, the verse “The Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves...” (*Esther* 9:27) is interpreted by the rabbi Samuel as follows: “It was accepted on High (in the divine world) that which was adopted below (in the human world)”.

¹⁶ In *Yoma* 29a, Esther is compared to the aurora, figure of Salvation. But her story is also described as ‘the end of miracles’. The Talmud underlines the fact that God will no longer appear in history in such an ostentatious manner and thus, from now on a new type of relationship founded on the unveiling of God by man takes its place as the paradigm of redemption.