# ESTHER 9:20: One Book and Two Stories

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We still have some time before Purim, and especially this year, 5779, that we have two months of Adar, and Purim is celebrated in the second. This year Purim falls on March 20 and 21.

But although it is still long before Purim I would like to start writing about Purim. More specifically about the book of Esther (Megillat Esther). I am fascinated by this book, because it has some unique elements. It was not written like virtually all the other books of the Tanakh, in the land of Israel, under a Jewish government, but as it explicitly says in the text, it was written in Shushan, the capital of the Persian Empire.

This text, although written in Hebrew, was not a private text “for Jews only”. It was “published” and sent to the Jewish communities of all the provinces of the Persian Empire. Therefore, the book had to be known also by non-Jews. Including Persian government officials. And for that reason we must assume that the text was written taking into account the imperial sensitivities and avoiding to offend the Persian ruler and Persian laws and traditions. When this simple point is taken into account we can better understand some particular aspects of this book.Two examples:

1. The preferential treatment of King Ahashverosh. On the surface, it seems that the main protagonist of the Purim story is King Ahashverosh. The book begins and ends with his praises. And his name, Ahashverosh, or more commonly “The King”, is the name that most appears in the Megilla. The text not only treats the King with utmost respect and honor. His actions, his character, his decisions, are never criticized; something very uncommon in the Bible, that always mentions the

faults of its heroes, so that we learn to avoid the same mistakes. And Ahashverosh did not lack defects. He was weak in character, and could not make one decision for himself. He made grotesque political mistakes. He was ostentatious and insatiable. Addicted to alcohol, women and parties. But in the text there is no explicit criticism of the King. The monarch is not blamed for any of the entanglements that he provoked. On the surface, the King is presented as a hero, who was carried away by the bad advice of the wicked Haman. And at the last moment had the wisdom to reverse his wrong decree and do justice. All this diplomatic effort is better understood if we assume that the author of Megillat Esther knew that this book will reach the hands of the officers of the emperor, or the enemies of the Jews.

2. The next element that sets Megillat Esther apart from all the other books of the Hebrew Bible (Tanakh) is that the name of God is NOT mentioned. How is it possible that the miraculous salvation of the Jewish people has not been explicitly attributed, as it always is, to Divine intervention? Identifying God behind the story, especially a miraculous salvation of the entire Jewish nation, is the unambiguous essence of the Torah! Moreover: if we look closely at the text we will see that not only God's name is absent. In fact, no miracle, no ritual or religious act, Jewish or Persian, is explicitly mentioned. Example: when Esther is about to risk her life and she asked all the Jews of Shushan to gather for her, she asks them to "fast"! And the expected, normal, natural action and verb "to pray", is conspicuously absent! It is as if the book of Esther had been written on a "secular" level, rather than on a Jewish level, avoiding very carefully to crossing the limits of what is called today, "the separation between church and state …"

All these mysteries, I think, are resolved if we assume that the book of Esther was written taking into account the sensitivity, and possible censorship, of the King, and for that same reason the religious aspects, which are the "Jewish nationals" elements of the story, could not be mentioned

explicitly.
Only once we understand these points we can move on to the next level.
3. The book of Esther has two narratives, a Persian, and a Jewish one. The Persian version is “the official story”. The one that is read superficially. The Jewish version is what the author really wants to convey. It is subliminal. You have to read between the lines. The text is full of allusions to other biblical events, easily recognizable by a reader who knows the Bible fairly well. And when the reader identifies these “allusions” the words of Megillat Esther become like hyperlinks, and a secular Persian story converts into a sacred Biblical text. This Jewish subtext shows us among other things, the sacrifice of Esther and the courage of Mordecai. It reveals with no censorship the vanity and the materialism of Ahashverosh, so that we learn to move away from those vices. And above all, it helps us to un-cover the Providential Divine Intervention, the main message of this, and of every Biblical book.
*To be continue*