

Esther

by David Daube

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Foreword

On March 19, 1989, at Yarnton Manor, Oxford, the David Patterson Jewish Law Fellowship of the Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies celebrated the eightieth birthday of David Daube, the first Honorary Fellow of the Centre. Lord Justice Woolf was in the Chair and a number of Daube's pupils participated in the event, Calum Carmichael of Cornell University, Bernard Jackson of the University of Liverpool, Lord Rodgers of Earlsferry, the Lord Advocate for Scotland, Peter Stein of the University of Cambridge, Alan Watson of the University of Georgia, and Reuven Yaron of the Hebrew University, Jerusalem. (See *Essays on Law and Religion, The Berkeley and Oxford Symposia in Honour of David Daube*, ed. Calum M. Carmichael [Robbins Collection, Berkeley: 1993].) David Daube spoke on the occasion, as it happened, the eve of Purim which celebrates the Esther saga. Appropriately, he chose the Book of Esther as his topic. ("To this day Jews find it a source of laughter, great amusement, even cause for drinking; they think of it as a comedy, but, to describe it in Greek terms, it is a tragedy"—as he put it to me in a recent conversation.) What follows is an extended version of his lecture.

Calum Carmichael, Cornell University, January, 1995.

Esther

To David and José Patterson.

To-morrow evening the Book of Esther will be read in the synagogues, a jolly, jubilant and, here and there, pretty fierce tale.¹ On the whole, it is appreciated more by the rank and file than by saints and scholars. Certainly, there has been much illuminating research. A perennial effort goes into identifying actual persons and occurrences behind those we hear of and sorting out the straight from the distorted: who was Ahasverus?, where and when was an antisemitic scheme crossed? Interest is taken, too, in borrowings from earlier parts of Scripture—I shall mention some myself²—as well as in layers of myth buried at a deeper level, for example, Mordecai and Esther recalling the Babylonian deities Marduk and Ishtar. Recently, a strong influence on the part of wisdom teaching has been brought out.³ Still, nearly always the focus is on a particular phase in the his-

¹ Here is a table of previous comments of mine. Naturally on a number of details my views have changed over the years, but I shall not bore the reader (and myself) by expatiating on minutiae. "The Last Chapter of Esther," in *JQR*, 37 (1946), pp. 139 ff.; *Gewaltloser Frauenwiderstand im Altertum* (1971); *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity* (1972); "'I believe' in Jewish Antiquities xi. 237," in *JJS*, 27 (1976), pp. 142 ff.; *Typologie im Werk des Flavius Josephus*, no. 6 of Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-Hist. Klasse (1977) (repr. in *Freiburger Rundbrief* 31, 1979, pp. 59 ff., Engl. transl. *Typology in Josephus*, in *JJS*, 31 (1980), pp. 18 ff.); "What Price Equality?," in *RJ*, 5 (1986), pp. 190 ff.; "A Scholium on E.B.I.'s Towards An Indigenous Church," in *RJ*, 9 (1990), pp. 159 ff.

² See below, pp. 3, 8–12.

³ See S. Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther," *VT*, 13 (1963), pp. 419 ff.

tory of the composition rather than on the totality handed down.

I think the instinct of the man on the street is right. The experts greatly underrate this work—in its final form, that is, as it has been transmitted, including the at first sight irrelevant chapter 1, the even odder chapter 10 and, indeed, a number of passages often simply dismissed as scribal lapses. It is precisely when we accept it on its terms that its earnest, desperately earnest, message and the magnificent, multifaceted artistry rendering it convincing and palatable are revealed. I shall draw attention to seven aspects: (I) the chief purpose of the document—and may I repeat, the document as it stands, not this or that portion in a previous context; (II) its religious spirit; (III) its craftsmanship and, above all, (IV) its recourse to a model scale the noticing of which will enable us to appreciate the unity of seemingly disparate sections; (V) a special frankness of communication; (VI) loose ends; and (VII) a pathetic link between three women. An epilogue will provide a glimpse of early opposition.

I.

What we have before us is a program for the non-Jewish authority to follow. More precisely, the story is meant to propagate a satisfactory solution of the problem of Jews in a non-Jewish, hostile world, a solution Jews should do their best to further but, far more importantly, gentiles, or rather, the gentile potentate, must be gotten to recognize as being to their advantage.

The starting-point is a characterisation of the Jews⁴ which, let us note, though articulated by Haman in a distinctly malevolent tone and with the most evil intention, is nowhere substantially disputed. They stand out—insufferably, according to him—in two respects: one, they are scattered, rootless, all over the place; two, they go their own way, contemptuous of the law of the land, unassimilable. As a corollary of this premise, throughout the succession of events, distrust and hatred of them are assumed to be widespread. When one of them offends, as Mordecai does in not prostrating himself before

⁴ Esth 3:8.

Haman, it tends to be held against all.⁵ Haman displays this inclination with shocking openness but we should not miss the hint that it already motivates those who report the slight to him.⁶ Again, once the state withdraws its protection, massive participation in organized excesses is forthcoming. The populace's response to Ahasverus's initial edict allowing every kind of violence⁷ is reminiscent of the Kristallnacht in 1938, following upon the murder of vom Rath by Grynspan at Paris, with simmering resentment given free rein. And yet the moral in which the account culminates is that harsh measures are worse than useless, scarcely less ruinous to the monarch than to the group. For a minister to recommend them is irresponsible, criminally irresponsible if he is pursuing his own aims.

The proper policy will enhance the welfare of both sides. To start with the sovereign—he had best put to use exactly those distinctive, odious attributes: ubiquity and separatism. Ubiquity is of enormous help in intelligence gathering, as exemplified by Mordecai's greatly highlighted detection of a conspiracy,⁸ as well as in trade, the imposts on which fill the royal coffers. Anyone asked to pinpoint the most dramatic moment in the whole narrative would surely reply, it is when Esther the second day she has Ahasverus and Haman to dinner reveals her identity.⁹ And what do we get at this climax? A coolly economic assessment, statesmanlike, businesslike. Had Haman proposed, she explains, that the Jews become slaves—to furnish a continuous income to the treasury, we must understand, on the model no doubt of the starving Egyptians turned into serfs of Pharaoh by Joseph¹⁰—she would not have intervened. She intervenes because the abandoning of them to wild slaughter and despoliation spells unconscionable loss to the crown. True, Haman offers the king some payment. (The latter's refusal—"the silver is given to thee"—is an

⁵ Esth 3:6.

⁶ Esth 3:4.

⁷ Esth 9:1ff.

⁸ Esth 2:21 ff., 6:1ff.

⁹ Esth 7:3 f.

¹⁰ Gen 47:18 ff.

empty remnant of long died-out gift commerce.¹¹ Already when Abraham buys the cave of Machpelah, the owner's "the cave I give to thee" is followed by Abraham "weighing out the silver to him."¹² Just so, as Mordecai informs Esther of the terrible deal, he specifies "the amount of silver Haman has undertaken to weigh out,"¹³ disregarding the promisee's polite gesture.) But though sounding impressive, in the circumstances this bid is a fraud—whichever of the various interpretations proposed we adopt. The, to me, likeliest one has him promise a lump sum for what he expects to make by the coup. That will indeed be a good deal since, however much license to loot the rabble might have, the lion's share—any immovables, for instance—will go to him. (Shades of the *Kristallnacht* again.) Josephus pointedly represents him as ready for the moment to spend his own money, looking ahead towards installing another king in the wake of the massacre.¹⁴ No need to expand: his was a plan utterly contemptuous of his master's interests, prompted by selfish vengefulness and ambition. What is near-equal in prominence to the central scene in such a presentation? The ending, obviously. And the ending, chapter 10, sums up the contrasting, reasonable course, has Ahasverus, by now relying on the Jewish pair, "lay a levy on the land and the isles." Economics once more, and glorious testimony to the capacity of that race to engender and collect revenue.

Most modern commentators routinely emend away Esther's warning against the threatened harm to the king's finances and throw out the taxation as a foolish postscript by a reader. Sawing off both prongs of the dominant argument: the negative, persecution of the Jews is counterproductive, and the positive, excellent results are obtained by letting them do their own thing. The root *nzq*, it may be added, which she uses of the cost of the villain's project to the king

¹¹ Esth 3:11. See B.W. Anderson, in B.W. Anderson and A.C. Lichtenberger, "The Book of Esther," in *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 3 (1954), pp. 850, 853. As may be expected, the misconstruction of the king's reply *au pied de la lettre* is old, found in Josephus, *Ant.* 11.6.5.215.

¹² Gen 23:11, 16.

¹³ Esth 4:7.

¹⁴ *Ant.* 11.6.5.214, 12.278, the latter passage being close to Add Esth E to 16:4.

is a key notion from Ezra on the public law concerning infringements on the state's interests. The Sages, in the last centuries B.C. laying the foundations of the law of torts, took it over and adapted it to their requirements: *nezigin* is the title of the fourth Order of the Mishnah.¹⁵

Separatism also has its value if prudently exploited. A Jewish counsellor can be trusted by the ruler more than any other. He certainly lacks the power base from which to stage a take-over. So to have a court-Jew in charge of the administration is best. (It was Josephus who, nineteen-hundred years ago, depicted Mordecai and Esther as court-Jews, along with Joseph, Daniel, Zerubbabel—and himself.¹⁶) Haman's reaction when Mordecai does not show him due reverence betrays excessive ambition; and significantly, in his speech before Ahasverus, he takes good care not to advert to his personal involvement, the real cause of his move.¹⁷ (I shall presently point out yet another reason for this reticence.¹⁸) Later on, the king, upset by what he learns from Esther as to his counsellor's true nature, storms out into the garden and Haman pleads with her for his life. By the time Ahasverus returns, Haman has sunk down on her couch,¹⁹ presumably by way of imploration. It can scarcely be anything else with the domestics around though, to be sure, that is no absolute safeguard. The enraged Ahasverus exclaims: "Are you indeed about to subjugate the queen with me in the house?"²⁰ Whether really assuming the worst or just biting sarcasm, he inquires if the culprit is already claiming the right his scheme would have conferred

¹⁵ See "*Damnum and Nezeq*," *Collected Works of David Daube*, vol. 1, *Talmudic Law*, ed. C.M. Carmichael (Robbins Collection: Berkeley, 1992), pp. 245 ff. More on it below, p. 37 f.

¹⁶ See *Typologie* and, as to Zerubbabel, below, p. 38.

¹⁷ In the Add Esth (A 17) he does indeed sympathize with the conspirators: it is their destruction which decides him to do away with Mordecai.

¹⁸ Below, p. 15.

¹⁹ "Fallen" in the Hebrew, which verb is put to ambiguous use in Judg 5.27, celebrating the sweet-grizzly death of the Canaanite general Sisera in Jael's tent; see "What Price Equality?," p. 191, and below, p. 67. I might have mentioned in this article that the Rabbis notice the possibility of double-entendre in that verse; e.g. *b. Yeb.* 103a.

²⁰ Esth 7:8.

on him—Esther belonging to the nation which the king had assured him “is given to you to do with it as is good in your eyes.”²¹ There may even be a hint at the practice of usurpers to appropriate the predecessor’s ladies. Abner, Absalom and Adonijah did so or took steps to do so, coveting the throne of Saul or David; they all came to a bad end.²² Anyhow, what settles Haman’s fate is a reminder by a chamberlain that he made all preparations for hanging Mordecai though, or even because, a report of his saved the monarch’s life.²³ Contrast with this the behaviour of Mordecai who never sought the least reward for that extraordinary service.

The main benefit to the Jews under the regime advocated is security, peace: *shalom* is proclaimed in the very last line of the tract. It alone enables the institution of annual, communal feast-days, exchange of delicacies among the well-to-do, alms to the poor²⁴—in sum, continuous mutual ties, national coherence. It is a modest requirement but absolutely essential, far more so than, say, equality. Esther’s remark that she would not have protested against an enslavement of her people is not entirely a hyperbole. A regulated degradation, permitting a low-level existence, may be painful but you can adjust to it. What is feared is incalculable terror. The second edict allowed the Jews to kill whoever attacked them, also to kill wives and children of the attackers, also to carry off their property. They did kill the attackers but we hear nothing about their killing wives and children and it is recorded not fewer than three times that they refrained from plundering.²⁵ Plundering would go beyond self-defence; it would hurt the fisc; and it would be just that species of mob action from which the program is out to protect them. They will not be guilty of it. Naturally, if things go well, with a court-Jew installed, extra favours can be expected. The same last line praises the viceroy Mordecai for “seeking the welfare of his people.”

It hardly needs pointing out that a high proportion of Biblical

²¹ Esth 3:11.

²² 2 Sam 3:7 ff., 16:21 ff., 1 Kgs 2:13 ff.

²³ Esth 7:9.

²⁴ Esth 9:22.

²⁵ Esth 8:11, 9:2, 5, 10, 15, 16. It might be interesting, but would lead too far afield, to study deviations in the Septuagint.

chronicling is meant to provide guidance. However, the weight and degree of specificity attaching to this goal vary greatly, so the narratives where it is a governing factor stand out. Not surprisingly, this occurs where the lesson to be conveyed is of exceptional importance: often it takes sides in a conflict or propagates a fresh departure. The account of Abraham and Isaac at mount Moriah urges the substitution of animal sacrifice for human;²⁶ that of Sarah with Abimelech, the recognition of an adulterer's *bona fide* error as to the married status of the woman;²⁷ that of the adoption of Ephraim and Manasseh by the dying Jacob the legitimacy of two Josephite tribes;²⁸ that of Ananias and Sapphira, the damnability of claiming membership of a saintly band while in secret breach of its ideals.²⁹ A parallel case to Esther, of an entire work serving to demonstrate the superiority of one way of doing things over another, is Susanna—perhaps not so much later than the final version of Esther.³⁰ Its moral: the two witnesses to a capital crime had better be interrogated each in the other's absence. The purpose pursued by the Book of Esther is evidently on a par with those presented in similar fashion, fully deserving its hold on the steering-wheel. At stake is the securing of a niche in the constitution of the host-country.

To prevent misunderstandings: a tale told in order to encourage—or, for that matter, deter from—a certain course need not be untrue. Of course it may be; and even if not completely made up, the facts are likely to be adjusted, consciously, half-consciously, unconsciously. Still, anyone inquiring into historicity—as I am not in this lecture—will have to assess each instance on its own merits. Five

²⁶ Gen 22.

²⁷ Gen 20.

²⁸ Gen 48:5.

²⁹ Acts 5:1 ff.

³⁰ It is earlier than Simeon ben Shetach's warning in *m. Ab.* 1.10—pace D.M. Kay, in *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, ed. R.H. Charles, vol. 1, (1913), p. 644. Simeon considerably and sophisticatedly extends the range of precaution. It is not only—such is his point—two false witnesses in cahoots who, interrogated together, may coordinate their testimony and bring about a miscarriage of justice. Even the most honest judge examining a witness singly—as the Book of Susanna advises—unless exercising extreme care may unwittingly give away what the other witness has said, thus rendering the separation useless.

thousand years from now, when they excavate a theatre in my neighbourhood at San Francisco, they will come upon a prospectus with a summary of *West Side Story*. The vast majority of historians will pronounce it a utopia without much ado; but, hopefully, a few will argue that it may celebrate an actual reconciliation of two warring gangs. Pity it does not.

My interpretation receives strong support from the fact that the scheme of Esther is far from novel by that time; in fact, an adumbration is traceable as early as in the Joseph legend. The three Jewish traits of use to the ruler, we saw, are fitness for intelligence work, business acumen and loyalty. As for intelligence, Joseph, imprisoned, knows which of two dignitaries who are brought in under a heavy charge is a scoundrel and which is all right.³¹ Actually, his feat bears fruit of much the same kind and in much the same way as Mordecai's.³² The latter's denouncement of the two plotters, long a neglected entry in the court-annals, ultimately finds its way into Ahasverus's consciousness, producing an enthusiastic response. Joseph, after a tedious interval of forgetfulness, comes to Pharaoh's attention through his correct assessment, after which his rise is rapid. Going on to economics, Joseph possesses the faculty of predicting cycles³³ and, what is more, managing them by means of long-term directive—laying in during prosperity against scarceness³⁴—as well as subtle manipulations at certain junctures within the lean years;³⁵ all of it adding to the sovereign's wealth and might. His reliability passes the test under three superiors. Potiphar, chief of the body-guard, buys him from the Ishmaelites to whom he was sold by his brothers³⁶ and soon leaves him the running of his house. He resists the advances of his wife, deeming it monstrous to be false to him. However, as she is trying to pull him down to her, his garment comes off, he flees without it and she charges him with attempted rape, producing the frock in evidence. A fake charge, but it succeeds and

³¹ Gen 40, 41:9 ff.

³² Esth 2:21 ff., 6.

³³ Gen 41:25ff.

³⁴ Gen 41:34ff.

³⁵ Gen 47:13ff.

³⁶ Gen 39:1ff.

he is sent to prison.³⁷ What the episode illustrates is that he will put up with the direst consequences and, indeed, such as are likely to go on for the rest of his life rather than abuse his master's confidence. Next he serves the head of the prison who takes to him, virtually transfers his job to him, goes as far as to place all inmates under his command. Joseph, he judges rightly, will not succumb even to the extraordinary temptations of this position. His fidelity to his third employer, Pharaoh, extends over many years until his death. None of the three patrons, it should be observed, is an ordinary citizen, even the first two are high up in officialdom: in charge of the guard, of the prison. It is the very incompatibility of the Jews with the bulk of the population which ensures their single-mindedness as agents of the government.

Foremost of the blessings the plan in Esther envisages for the Jews is security and this, too, is central already in Joseph's arrangements for his immigrant family. They will plainly not be equals of the Egyptians but a suitable district is reserved for them to live there in their own style.³⁸ In a subsequent period, as their numbers have grown, ruthless, murderous oppression supervenes,³⁹ from which they escape into the wilderness. Even then, when the going gets rough, they are apt to long for the minimal necessities they could more or less reckon on in Egypt.⁴⁰ Again, beyond security, we found Mordecai well placed "to seek the welfare of his people." The Joseph saga cites a concrete instance of a boon accruing to the brothers through their connection: Pharaoh tells Joseph to appoint any of them of the right calibre to be supervisors of the royal herds.⁴¹ This mode of filling posts is frowned on in present-day democratic

³⁷ We saw above, p. 5, that when Ahasverus accuses Haman of trying to rape Esther, this is probably sarcasm: he knows that it is not the case at this moment. It has nothing to do with a fake charge like that brought by Potiphar's wife. For one thing, the user of sarcasm has no intention to mislead. Ahasverus, if he speaks sarcastically, wants his audience to take it for what it is and not as strict reality.

³⁸ Gen 46:28 ff.

³⁹ Exod 1:8 ff.

⁴⁰ Exod 14:11 ff., 16:2 f. etc.

⁴¹ Gen 47:6.

America: there ought to be an advertisement in the Thebes Guardian. What matters here is that the half verse in question reflects a thorough understanding of the incidental opportunities of the set-up. (Its dangers, by the way, are equally seen. The sad recital of the ensuing ill-treatment opens:⁴² "And there arose a new king who did not know Joseph." Describing a reversal of the sort recurrent throughout the ages. A court-Jew, being the designer and, worse, direct enforcer of operations suiting his master but onerous on the subjects, on the former's death faces the latter's accumulated resentment. Their revenge on him and his protégés will be all the less restrained if the new sovereign himself is out of sympathy with his predecessor. The verse quoted very probably refers to a take-over by a different dynasty.)

The fundamental aspirations, then, of the Book of Esther are foreshadowed in the epos from Genesis. We can go further. Much detail appearing in both stories has been shown to be directly borrowed by the latter from the earlier; say, the initial lack of recognition when the hero—first Joseph, then Mordecai—displays his prowess in spotting high treason.⁴³ Indeed, not a few refined allusions still wait to be added to the list. For instance, Haman as a counter-Joseph. Both were able to "master themselves." But Joseph does it lest he prematurely reveal his affection, Haman his hatred.⁴⁴ Surely, the same goes for the overall picture—with a proviso. Whatever may be true in respect of detail, the adoption of the framework,

⁴² Exod 1:8.

⁴³ See, above all, M. Gan, "*Megillath 'ester be'aspaqlariyath qoroth yoseph be-miṣrayim* = The Book of Esther in the Light of the Story of Joseph in Egypt," *Tarbiz*, 31 (1961), pp. 164 ff., English summary I f. As may be expected, the Talmudic probers were alive to many parallels pointed out in modern literature—and some more. Benjamin ben Levi (third century A.D.), for example, remarks not only on the similar symbols of honour bestowed on Joseph and Mordecai in Gen 41:42 f. and Esth 6:9, 8:2, but also on the identical description of their resistance to temptation in Gen 39:10 and Esth 3:4: "and it was as she talked to Joseph day by day and he did not listen to her," "and it was as they spoke to him day by day and he did not listen to them"—*Gen. Rab.* on 39:10; see W. Bacher, *Die Agada der Palästinensischen Amoräer*, vol. 3 (1899), p. 665.

⁴⁴ Gen 43:31, 45:1, Esth 5:10. *Hith'appeq* is a rare term. Quite conceivably a wisdom input.

the major principles of co-existence, is more than a literary ploy. It is resorted to because, *au fond*, the situation has not changed, is no less precarious in Persia than in Egypt. Actually, these guidelines, little modified, have retained their place on the Jewish agenda to this day.

That Esther is not copying mechanically comes out in an audacious move I have so far passed over. Joseph's Pharaoh reigns over a less composite realm than Ahasverus and there is no mention of multilingual edicts. Certainly, he is never represented as issuing any in Hebrew, not even when he gives special permission to his chancellor's kin to settle in Goshen. In Esther, two decrees are promulgated "to each province in its script and each nation in its language"; one which, after Vashti's dismissal, declares the husband ruler of the home, and one which sanctions Haman's outrageous design.⁴⁵ Even were there no further data, it would be reasonable to infer that Jewry is not among the recipients thus scrupulously catered for. It becomes a certainty through the third decree, reversing gear and addressed "to each province in its script and each nation in its language, and to the Jews in their script and their language."⁴⁶ Ahasverus's new alliance has brought about an extension of the circle. (It is reported, significantly, without taking up the pair "province" and "nation": while the Jews are designated as "nation" throughout the Book—by the author,⁴⁷ by themselves,⁴⁸ by their enemies⁴⁹—a reference to province would be quite out of order, so the routine phraseology must be dropped.) Doubtless this promotion of theirs in the machinery of imperial legislation is yet another item on the *Wunschliste*.

Details we are left to fill in. As for script and language, is it Hebrew? Aramaic? A peculiar variety of Aramaic? I am convinced that, the Scroll itself being in Hebrew, this is it. As for scope—it is more speculative. Probably the request is confined to cases of direct concern to the community, like the present one. Anyhow, it has not

⁴⁵ Esth 1:22, 3:12.

⁴⁶ Esth 8:9.

⁴⁷ Esth 2:10, 20, 10:3.

⁴⁸ Esth 7:3 f, 8:67.

⁴⁹ Esth 3:6, 8, 11.

fared well over time. I can think of hardly any resurfacing of it in the past two thousand years or so. Maybe the Khasars tried something of the kind. In the 1930s, attempts at legislation in Yiddish were made in Birobidzhan. That passage in Esther stems from a blissful moment of hope: a guess as to what inspired it I reserve for later.⁵⁰

II.

I now come to my second heading, religion. It is the tailoring of the narrative to impress His Majesty, to function as a petition, which solves a long-standing riddle. This is the only opus in the Old Testament in which the Lord is not mentioned once; the Persian king is mentioned 190 times. Nothing is said about the Law, the Covenant, election, salvation, prayer, Jerusalem, Temple. In the Book of Daniel, much is made of his observing the dietary restrictions even when assigned quarters at the court;⁵¹ not a trace of it in Esther. Daniel is Belteshazzar only when the king addresses him, and Joseph, though Pharaoh names him Zaphnath-paaneah,⁵² remains Joseph throughout. Esther's Jewish name Hadassah occurs just one time, as she is introduced,⁵³ from then she is always Esther. (I bet that the larger part of you did not remember Zaphnat-paaneah and quite a few did not Hadassah.) A notable de-Judaization. Various explanations have been suggested, some of them—say, the impact of Wisdom ideology—quite likely hitting on contributory causes.⁵⁴ But none of them comes to grips with the picture as a whole. Wisdom, for example, does not dictate the shedding of Hadassah. Whereas it makes sense in a recommendation of the court-Jewess, yet another token of uniquely whole-hearted attachment.

A giant caveat, however, must be appended. This de-Judaization is resorted to for a purpose and no more than skin-deep. The preva-

⁵⁰ See below, p. 39.

⁵¹ Dan 1:8ff.

⁵² Gen 41:45.

⁵³ Esth 2:7. Missing from the Septuagint and other versions. I think it is genuine: this author excels in holding contradictory data together; see below, p. 46 f.

⁵⁴ See S. Talmon, above, p. 1 n. 3; and for further such factors, below, p. 13 f.

lent opinion⁵⁵ that the traditional Biblical fulcra are here abandoned is mistaken. Take a representative comment: "The usual elements of Jewish piety—faith in the transcendent God who answers prayers . . . the covenant and the like— . . . are completely ignored in Esther."⁵⁶ This is as if, in a Wagner opera, you took in only the text and its ornamental accompaniment, deaf to the *leitmotifs* telling where it is at; but you have probably never heard of Wagner. Actually, the narrative breathes a religious spirit of rare intensity—an extra stimulus, I suppose, coming precisely from the need for diplomatic restraint. Salvation from above is looked for by the Jews throughout the empire from the moment Haman's murderous scheme becomes known: they do communal penance, fast and cry out—spontaneously, well before Mordecai and Esther call for a special three 24-hour-days' fast as she prepares to intercede with Ahasverus.⁵⁷ She herself is indeed putting her life on the line by approaching him uninvited,⁵⁸ in the tradition of the holy leaders from early on. All of this, by the way, yet further evidence against some myth or wisdom allegory being the focus of the account before us.

Obviously, these religious passages are chiefly for the insider, their core being of little interest to the pagan, occasionally right beyond his ken. So subdued can the reporting be that it is easy to remain unaware. Thus perhaps religion at least partially motivates Mordecai's insistence,⁵⁹ for which we are offered no reason, that on Esther's entering the sultan's precincts, her provenance be suppressed. From the Pentateuch to the sermons of last Sabbath, a slighting of allegiance—and her becoming a heathen's bedfellow might certainly

⁵⁵ Among the dissidents is E.J. Crowley, in *The New English Bible*, Oxford Study Edition, ed. S. Sandmel (1976), The Old Testament, p. 520: "Although God's name is not mentioned, there is an obvious trust in his providence, as 4.13-17 makes clear."

⁵⁶ C.A. Moore, "Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah, The Additions," in *The Anchor Bible* (1977), p. 157. Even S. Zeitlin, in a superb essay, "The Books of Esther and Judith" (introducing M.S. Enslin, *The Book of Judith*, 1972), speaks of Esther as "definitely not a religious work," which "lacked spirituality," pp. 13, 21, 30.

⁵⁷ Esth 4:3, 16.

⁵⁸ Esth 4:11ff.

⁵⁹ Esth 2:10, 20, 22.

qualify as that—is aggravated immeasurably by publicity.⁶⁰ The Israelite stabbed to death by a grandson of Aaron flaunted his Midianite lady “in the sight of Moses and all the people.”⁶¹ Peter’s second and third betrayals were worse than the first since taking place in the hearing of bystanders.⁶² R. Ilai, around A.D. 100, advises that if a man cannot master his evil inclination, he should go to a place where he is not known so as not to profane the Name of Heaven.⁶³ In a succeeding chapter of Esther itself, the presence of a crowd surely reinforces Mordecai’s aversion to paying servile homage to Haman.⁶⁴

This scene in fact furnishes an illustration of the problem in three tiers: today’s inadequate perception and, within the text, the communication to the outside and the position inside. No. 1. On the whole, modern annotators cannot think of much of a reason for Mordecai’s conduct. This is unsatisfactory seeing that it is related so circumstantially and, above all, that by it is set in motion the entire near-catastrophic turmoil with the golden era in its wake. No. 2. On a closer look, indeed, it turns out that the ancient public, and the sovereign especially, would find it very meaningful. It reminded them of an incident at Susa in 480 B.C., with Xerxes I as hero—the very king commonly taken to be the Megillah’s Ahasverus. Years before, the Spartans murdered heralds sent by his father. Now sinister omens threaten Sparta with punishment, wherefore two of its nobles volunteer to go to Susa and offer themselves up for execution by way of atonement. Midway, they are entertained by a Persian general who tells them of their terrific careers if they will attach themselves to Xerxes. They are quite unmoved, however, preferring the freedom of a Greek to the serfdom of a Persian. Their genuineness is put to the test in no time. As they are admitted before His Majesty, the guards order them to prostrate themselves. They refuse and go on

⁶⁰ See my “Limitations on Self-Sacrifice in Jewish Law and Tradition,” in *Talmudic Law*, pp. 45–62, “Zukunftsmusik,” in *BJRULM*, 68, no. 1, (1985), pp. 57 f., and “Reflections on the Historicity of the New Testament,” in *Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs Annual* (1986), pp. 2 f.

⁶¹ Num 25:6.

⁶² Mark 14:66 ff.

⁶³ *b. M. Kat.* 17a, *m. Hag.* 16a, *m. Kidd.* 40a.

⁶⁴ *Esth* 3:2ff.

refusing even under the menace of brutal compulsion. Quite something: while prepared to suffer any death imposed by the king so as to lift the curse from off their city, they will not bow before him, before any ruler. And he responds with fitting generosity. He not only lets them off the ritual obeisance but also has them return untouched, the old crime being forgiven without any retribution. The episode, reported at length by Herodotus⁶⁵ and more briefly by Plutarch and others, was familiar to high and low in Hellas and the Near East; and anyone coming upon Esther was bound to associate Haman with the savage guards. Right away it becomes clear why, even apart from whatever disloyal aspirations he may entertain, he must not, when advocating the final solution, complain about Mordecai's affront—complain to one who rose above such a thing. More importantly, considering the overall aim of the Book, this *contretemps* unmistakably directs an earnest request to the monarch: for the same magnanimous concession to his Jewish right-hand-man that was made to the Spartan nobles. No. 3. The third layer is grasped only by the Jews: they do not need it verbalized and non-Jews would be put off if it were. In Jewish eyes, to fall down before Haman in public was a horror as going counter, not to the Greek ideal of freedom, but to their national religion. I shall spare you—and myself—particulars that would lead too far afield.⁶⁶

Instead, I shall expand on a sample of religious discourse absolutely impenetrable for the outsider: the interchange between Mordecai and Esther as she, at first, is understandably afraid to approach the king.⁶⁷ "Don't imagine within yourself," Mordecai's message begins, "that you will escape in the king's house alone of all Jews." A good, down-to-earth reminder the general soundness of which will be impugned by no one who has lived through the present century. The fact that he deems the warning necessary indicates that such disloyalty did occur: hardly surprising. However, his counsel does not end here. He goes on: "For if you keep silent at this time, enlargement and deliverance will arise to the Jews from another place and you and

⁶⁵ *Histories* 7.133ff. It is, of course, cited in the commentaries on Esther but without appreciation of its role.

⁶⁶ For a few aspects bearing on it, see below, p. 71 f.

⁶⁷ *Esth* 4:11ff.

your father's house will perish." These words, in this situation, with the date for extermination already posted in every province, clearly embody that boundless trust in God, a heritage ever since Abram—yes, before he became Abraham—who, childless and aging, was assured that his progeny would be more numerous than the stars and believed.⁶⁸ Practical morality receives its force from faith.

Two phrases deserve comment. "Another place" is found in the narrative of the diviner Balaam,⁶⁹ commissioned by the Moabite king to curse Israel. Instead, yielding to God, he blesses them. Twice the king takes him to "another place," reckoning that a different prospect will emerge, but both times it comes to a promise of glory. The expression recurs in Ezekiel, as the prophet is to pre-enact the forthcoming bitter exile, "from your place to another place"—with, none the less, a number saved in the end.⁷⁰ The threat that, if defaulting, "you and your father's house will perish" calls to mind the prostitute Rahab who courageously and piously averted this ill-fate. Joshua's spies lodged with her at Jericho and she, a believer in the Lord of whose miracles she had heard, at enormous risk helped them to get back. Before they left, she made them promise that at the capture of the city mercy would be shown to "her father's house."⁷¹ Accordingly, when a short time later the invaders did break in, Joshua, having doomed everything else to annihilation, despatched the spies to her house from which they brought out "Rahab, her father, her mother, her brothers and all she had."⁷² The episode terminates: "And Rahab the harlot and her father's house and all she had Joshua saved alive, and she dwells in the midst of Israel to this day."⁷³ This Canaanitess, trusting in God with the flimsiest outside

⁶⁸ Gen 15:1 ff.

⁶⁹ Num 23:13, 27.

⁷⁰ Ezek 12:3, 16. Peter's departure "to another place" in Acts 12:17 may belong to this chain. Such imprecision is unusual in Acts—a signal. Peter is moving into a higher sphere, after a deliverance approaching the final one; see my "Acts 23: Sadducees and Angels," *JBL*, 109 (1990), pp. 495 f. I shall not here go into the Rabbinic texts cited by H.L. Strack and P. Billerbeck, *Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch*, vol. 1 (1926), pp. 26 f.

⁷¹ Josh 2:12.

⁷² Josh 6:23.

⁷³ Josh 6:25.

support, ensured the survival of herself and those around her while a depraved multitude was slain.

Nor is this all. "And who knows," Mordecai concludes, "whether for a time like this you have attained royalty": a mystic reflection, inspired by an awesome moment in King David's life, 2 Samuel.⁷⁴ (May I remind you that the Books of Samuel indisputably play a role in Esther. Mordecai is a descendant of Kish, Saul's father,⁷⁵ and Haman of Agag, Saul's Amalekite foe.⁷⁶) Nathan has informed David that his adultery with Bathsheba and murder of her husband will be punished by the death of the son she has borne him. This child now falls ill and David prays, fasts, weeps, lies on the earth, despite all attempts of his entourage to cheer him up. At the end of a week, however, the boy dies whereupon he resumes his accustomed routine. Those around him are astonished but he points out that nothing he might do could any longer affect the outcome; whereas, before, "I said, Who knows, the Lord may be gracious to me and the child may live."

A more passionate embracing of hope against hope is not conceivable. It is noteworthy that we learn of his stand, not as he is embarking on his penitential regime, but as he explains himself when it is all over and, in a sense, Nathan proved right and he proved wrong: the boy is dead. He is not, however, shaken in the least. To be sure, heaven will not accept all that seek mercy. But that must not ever prevent you from seeking it: its quality is not strained, nobody can "know" that you are excluded. He would act the same way again in a similar plight. That he holds on to this conviction under the blow just suffered enormously adds to the weight of his example.

Besides Esther, three Biblical writings are under its spell. In Jonah, to a firm prediction of Nineveh's overthrow within forty days the king reacts by ordaining that everybody—man and beast—must fast and pray: "Who knows, God may return and change his mind."⁷⁷ Joel, amidst a famine-producing plague of locusts and threats of worse to come, represents the Lord himself as calling for a tearful fast and return to the Lord, who is gracious and compassionate; to

⁷⁴ 2 Sam 12:22.

⁷⁵ Esth 3:1.

⁷⁶ Esth 2:5.

⁷⁷ Jonah 3:9.

which the prophet adds, "Who knows, he may return and change his mind."⁷⁸ Finally, in 1 Corinthians,⁷⁹ Paul advises that a convert ought not to renounce a non-converting spouse willing to stay on: "For what do you know, wife, but you may save your husband, or what do you know, husband, but you may save your wife." I can think of no parallel in ancient literature Oriental or Greek. It stamps Esther as authentically, fervently Hebraic.

I have half-completed an essay on this "Who knows but the end may yet be joyful" and pick out a few observations. From a wider perspective, it is a milestone in the Old Testament's ceaseless, multilevelled battle against defeatism. Ideally, we ought to keep the whole of it in mind to understand the part before us. The rare *ya'ash*, "to give up," may serve as a quick illustration. It first occurs as David, hunted by Saul, decides to cross over with his band into Philistine territory—"and Saul will let go of me to search any longer for me." He proves right: on hearing of the move, Saul loses interest.⁸⁰ The verb has as yet no theological colouring. Even so, it does hint at a fatal weakness of Saul, a too ready acceptance of the less than perfect, coming out again and again right up to his last night at Endor. The remaining texts all bear the imprint of theology. Job reproves his interlocutors for faulting "one given up"; given up, that is, by those around him ("an orphan" in the following verse) though he himself soldiers on—"I know that my redeemer liveth."⁸¹ Shockingly, the negative side is upheld when the Preacher confesses that he "makes his heart give up" regarding any efforts he ever undertook.⁸² Most pertinent are three lines from Isaiah and Jeremiah, deploring the negative.⁸³ Isaiah: "In the excess of your [idolatrous and perverse]

⁷⁸ Joel 2:14.

⁷⁹ 1 Cor 7:16.

⁸⁰ 1 Sam 27:1, 4.

⁸¹ Job 6:26f., 19:25. The usual rendering is "one despairing": less likely, I think. Similarly, the noun *ye'usha'* in the Targum is commonly translated "despair," scil. of Job: I prefer "abandonment," scil. his abandonment by the rest.

⁸² Eccl 2:20. *Es ist die härteste Beschreibung der eigenen Verfassung, die in Kohelets Worten zu finden ist*: W. Zimmerli, in H. Ringgren and W. Zimmerli, *Sprüche/Prediger*, (1962), p. 163.

⁸³ Isa 57:10, Jer 2:25, 18:12.

way you sicken—No, you say, Given up [is hope].” Jeremiah: “Keep your foot from being unshod and your throat from thirst—and you say, Given up [is hope], no, for I have loved strangers and after them I must go”; and again, “Return everyone from his evil way and mend your ways and your doings, and they said, Given up [is hope], yea, we must walk after our devices and everyone act out the stubbornness of his heart.” The Ninevites, in worse plight, did “turn everyone from his evil way.”⁸⁴

To continue with the exclamation under review, it is a rhetorical question, the answer so obvious—the question insinuates—as to need no spelling out. At its initial appearance at least, in the mouth of David, it is much stronger than would be a flat declaration, “Nobody knows but God may be gracious to me.” He challenges the “knowers,” the prophet Nathan above all, denies their standing to herald irrevocable doom—such aggressiveness being needed to convince himself, conscience-stricken, in danger of sharing their view. “To convince himself”—literally: he discovers this ray of relief on his own, a tremendous experience. In Joel, Esther and I Corinthians it is mediated by a proven guide to those requiring support: to the sinning people by Joel, to Esther by her cousin-turned-father, to neophytes by Paul. Only in Jonah do we find the King of Nineveh take up the slogan spontaneously.

Jonah, indeed, furnishes profound elaborations of the scene in II Samuel, now meticulously following, now purposefully deviating.

⁸⁴ Jonah 3:8, 10. The Rabbis go on using “to give up” in the province of religion. Nittai (late second century B.C.) warns against “resigning yourself” to the absence of repayment, *scil.* of good and evil, *m. Ab.* 1.7; Simeon ben Johai (mid-second century A.D.), characteristically, sees in a verse from Psalms an exhortation, if the hands of the mass “resign themselves” seriously to doing without the Torah, to stand up for it and reap the reward of all, *y. Ber.* 14d. The verse is 119:126: “It is time to act for the Lord—they have voided your Law.” The Psalmist means “it is time for the Lord to act,” “beware, he is sure to act now.” Simeon substitutes “it is time to act in the Lord’s behalf,” “the faithful few or even the last of the just must step in.” However, far more frequent in our sources is the post-Biblical employment of the term in the field of civil law—where an owner gives up, or is presumed to give up, on property not in his possession. This quite pragmatic sense appears already in Tannaitic works, though the noun, *ye’ush*, may well not have come in long before the Amoraic period.

Towards the beginning, the heathen sailors in a terrible storm implore their deities while Jonah persists in his withdrawal, asleep. The captain wakes him up and bids him entreat his god: "Perhaps God will think of us and we shall not perish."⁸⁵ Nothing here—whether affirmative or by way of rhetorical question—against any who "know" that escape is impossible. After all, no one has forecast inescapable disaster. "Perhaps God will think of us" just expresses genuine, naive belief; and indeed they are saved, saved, moreover, via a route so extraordinary—by throwing Jonah overboard at his request—as to fully vindicate their confidence. By contrast, the King of Nineveh, like David, does find himself condemned by the Lord's ambassador. Like David, he has recourse to "Who knows but" and does penance. Unlike David, he wins and the prophet loses. Well, there is a twist here. The latter from the outset foresaw the ending; that is precisely why he undertook a wild attempt to rid himself of the mission. When he, under duress, foretold the proud, profligate Nineveh's fall within forty days, far from being a "knower" in inverted commas, he was sure that on showing remorse it would be spared just like the simple mariners—because he knew, truly knew, his master. With his oracle come to naught and his reputation shattered, this is how he complains to him: "I fled [from your bidding] for I knew that you are a gracious God."⁸⁶

Altogether, there is amazing variety between the five cases. Here is a selection.

(1) Paradoxically, we saw, David, originator of the motto, proves unable to turn the scale with its help. Nineveh, Joel and his flock and Mordecai and Esther do succeed. Of the spouses taking their cue from Paul, some would and some would not.

(2) In 2 Samuel, Jonah, Joel and Esther, what is feared is physical extinction, in 1 Corinthians spiritual. Yet it must not be overlooked that Jonah's sailors end up by sacrificing to the Lord and the Ninevites by renouncing evil⁸⁷—a new path is initiated. Not, it is

⁸⁵ Jonah 1:6. The root here employed for "to think of," *'sht*, recurs in Ps 146.4. To rely on a mortal is futile, on death "his thoughts, plans, perish." Not so with God.

⁸⁶ Jonah 4:21.

⁸⁷ Jonah 1:16, 3:10.

true, conversion: this work has a universalist outlook.

(3) In 2 Samuel and 1 Corinthians, it is an individual that is to be extinguished, in Jonah, Joel and Esther a community. Still, as for 2 Samuel, the conscious sufferer is David, not his son; and as for 1 Corinthians, dismissal of the non-converting spouse would hurt the community's missionary aspirations.

(4) In 2 Samuel, Jonah and Joel a fatal verdict has been communicated from heaven, and in 1 Corinthians perdition of one continuing in the power of Satan⁸⁸ is taken for granted. In Esther, the verdict emanates from the government but is brought close to the main pattern by being characterized as irreversible since issued in the name and with the seal of the king.⁸⁹

(5) In 2 Samuel, Jonah and Joel, the blow expected constitutes punishment, though in the first case punishment of the victim's father.⁹⁰ The deadly edict in Esther purporting to punish the Jews is the result of vicious misrepresentation. In reality it dooms an innocent people. Were it to take effect, it would be punishment only inasmuch as there is no perfect innocence—and this is indeed why the Jews fast and put on sackcloth.⁹¹ Similarly, punishment is not in the foreground in 1 Corinthians though, in strictness, anyone persisting in his or her heathen folly deserve what they get.

(6) In 2 Samuel, Jonah, Joel and Esther, we hear of demonstrations of contrition—not in 1 Corinthians: in the Old Testament cases, a critical situation is to culminate presently in either disaster or rescue, whereas 1 Corinthians contemplates a long-term effort. The penitential acts in Esther are rather conventional: as already noted, the people are not guilty of any extraordinary misdeeds. David is far more intense, humbling himself in front of his servants. The Ninevites, led by the king, admit to having been no better than their dumb cattle. In Joel, emphasis is laid on genuineness. "Rend your hearts and not your garments," God enjoins, and the full text of Joel's corroboration is: "Who knows, he may return and change his

⁸⁸ To use the language of Acts 26:18.

⁸⁹ Esth 8:8.

⁹⁰ "Ruler punishment": see my *Studies in Biblical Law*, (1947) (repr. 1969), pp. 163 f.

⁹¹ Esth 4:3.

mind and leave a blessing behind, a meat offering or a drink offering."⁹² So what the starving ones should most crave for is not sufficient food but the restoration of "blessing," the sacrifices in the Temple which had to be given up.⁹³

(7) In 2 Samuel, Jonah and Joel, by what means relief is to be effected is left entirely to the Lord. More specifically, the situation is such that one cannot think of any helpful human intervention. In Esther, the queen is called on to try and get the sentence annulled; and in 1 Corinthians, the convert to try and guide the partner out of darkness.

(8) In both cases, extreme self-abnegation is demanded. The queen on sober reckoning is not endangered by Haman's plot—though Mordecai puts it to her that she would not outlast her correlative long.⁹⁴ At any rate, she is to approach the king despite a regulation under which anyone doing so uninvited will be put to death unless specially reprieved;⁹⁵ and, that hurdle taken, to engage in a life-or-death struggle with his near-plenipotentiary. Just so, the convert who has reached the light may not stand by idly as the closest companion lags behind. So long as the latter consents, he or she must forego the new-born's prized freedom and retie the knot for the sake of two pairs of values, peace and love the one, the beneficial to oneself and the upbuilding of the church the other.⁹⁶

(9) A formal difference results from this involvement of a human as God's instrument. Whereas in 2 Samuel, Jonah and Joel, the slogan proclaims the never-to-be-despaired-of mercy of God, "the Lord may be gracious," "God may return," "he may return," in Esther and 1 Corinthians it directs the instrument, in the second person, to the openings before him or her on this basis: "for a time like this you may have attained royalty," "you may save your spouse."

(10) A unique deviation in Esther is that, formally, what is de-

⁹² Joel 2:13 f.

⁹³ Joel 1:9, 13, 16.

⁹⁴ Esth 4:5.

⁹⁵ Esth 4:11.

⁹⁶ For details, see my "Pauline Contributions to a Pluralistic Culture: Re-Creation and Beyond," in *Jesus and Man's Hope*, ed. D.G. Miller and D.Y. Hadidian, vol. 2, (1971), pp. 232 ff.

clared possible regardless of the “knowledge” of the fainthearted is not a glorious event in the future but the meaning of one in the past. Mordecai says not “Who knows, you may persuade the king” but “Who knows whether for a time like this you attained royalty.” That rise was so miraculous it refutes any negative attitude. In substance, of course, the argument looks forward, is a stirring call to heroic duty. 1 Corinthians, too, goes its own way, right at the start of the slogan. It is not “Who knows” but “What do you know, wife” and “What do you know, husband.” Paul, deeply engaged teacher, pastor, even when framing general instructions, envisages the concrete situation, addresses any of his charges in this dilemma directly, heart to heart, *eindringlich*.⁹⁷ Significantly, this concrete immediacy accounts, too, for his putting the wife first: at the time, the vast majority of converts are still female.

Two excerpts from Epictetus now and then cited in commentaries on 1 Corinthians⁹⁸ are out of place. In one he shows how to make fun of a skeptic who admits no certainty. If he wants gruel, give him vinegar and when he complains, ask him: “Whence do you know it is vinegar if the senses deceive us?” In the other, challenged by a despiser of logic to demonstrate the usefulness of this study, he asks: “Whence will you know if I dupe you?” *Dialectics in excelsis*. Admittedly, rhetorical questions, in fact, sharp-witted applications of *reductio ad absurdum*, an argument prone to be shaped as rhetorical question.⁹⁹ But the milieu is philosophical discourse, concerned—as much of it is to this day—with how we arrive at valid information. The position that the entire quest is vain is summarized, for instance,

⁹⁷ In “A Scholium on E.B.I.,” I note that Jesus’s “Be not afraid, only believe” in Mark 5:36 has become impersonal in *The New English Bible* (1970): “Fear is useless, what is needed is trust.” In 1 Corinthians we find “Think of it: as a wife you may be your husband’s salvation” etc. The personal address is kept. The lineage of the exclamation, however, is erased: no rhetorical question, no allusion to miracle of grace versus calculation, “knowing.” There emerges a sober reminder to pay attention to the desirable and hopefully resulting from patient stick-to-it-ness. I might have passed it—with a pang of regret—had I been on the committee.

⁹⁸ *Discourses* 2.20.28–31, 2.25.2; see C.K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (1968), p. 167.

⁹⁹ See my *Roman Law* (1969), pp. 181 f.

in an explication by Sextus Empiricus¹⁰⁰ of the maxim “Nothing rather [than anything else]”: “I do not know to which of two alternatives to assent, to which not to assent.” The guy in Epictetus served vinegar displays more knowledge than his school holds attainable; the ignoramus in logic is an easy prey to sham deductions. The scholarly background comes out in details of form. It would not be easy to replace “whence do you know?” by “who knows?” In the first quote, it could just be done—“who knows it is vinegar if the senses deceive us?”—though it would sound artificial. In the second, I cannot manage it.¹⁰¹ However, it is the disparity in substance which should be respected. Nothing in Epictetus against the pseudo-knowing of the weak in faith and in praise of the real knowing of a Jonah. Nothing future-oriented and purposeful in the face of overwhelming odds, redemptive by going the road of penance and service.¹⁰² And, conversely, in the five Biblical passages, not a trace of

¹⁰⁰ *Pyrrhonism* 1.19.191.

¹⁰¹ Even the rhetorical “who knows?,” it goes without saying, more often than not has little affinity with the series here presented. Standing by itself, it may be optimistic, pessimistic, resigned, angry and so forth. Similarly, with some precision added, it may be jubilant, as in Hopkins’s *Pied Beauty*: “All things counter, original, spare, strange, Whatever is fickle, freckled; who knows how?... He fathers-forth, Praise him.” Or resigned and resolute, as in Countess Aemilia Juliana’s hymn: “*Wer weiss, wie nahe mir mein Ende.*” Or menacingly apprehensive, as in Schiller’s *Don Karlos*: “*O wer weiss, was in der Zeiten Hintergrunde schlummert.*” If Browning, in *Easter Day*, had written “who knows?” instead of “who can say?,” he would approximate my Biblical sample: “Condemned to earth for ever, shut from heaven. But... mercy every way is infinite—and who can say?” Maybe the everyday, non-rhetorical “who knows?” itself is not quite incapable of inspiriting force. A fifteenth-century recital towards the end of the Passover-eve celebration opens: “One who knows? One I know. One is God.” It goes on: “Two who knows? Two I know. Two are the tablets of the Law.” And so on up to “Thirteen who knows? Thirteen I know. Thirteen are the Attributes of God.” A sort of school exam (and remember, in the celebration, it has the function of keeping the children awake at a late hour) has here acquired a special aura.

¹⁰² The same goes for a multitude of Rabbinic “whences.” Take even Raba’s famous rhetorical question (*b. Pes.* 25b, *b. Sanh.* 74a) when consulted by one whom the governor had ordered to kill a certain man, otherwise he would be killed himself: “Let him kill you but you shall not kill; what have you seen [to hold] that your blood is redder? Perhaps the blood of that man is redder?” (“What have you

an engagement in theory of knowledge. Worlds apart.

In fact, from David to Paul, “Who knows but the end may yet be joyful” is, among other things, a prayer. Primarily designed to cause the desolate to lift up the eyes to the hills, it also reminds the Lord of the need and the hope.¹⁰³ To sum up, at the beginning of this chapter I noted that “Nothing is said in Esther about the Law, the Covenant, election, salvation, prayer, Jerusalem, Temple.” It emerges that the Covenant, election, salvation and prayer are just below the surface in Mordecai’s summons to his daughter—and she

seen?” is near enough to “whence do you know?” for my purpose. The Soncino translator of Sanhedrin actually gives “who knows that your blood is redder?” The one of *Pesahim* is meticulous: “What <reason> do you see <for thinking> that his blood is redder?”) At least, unlike the Epictetus bits, this is one not about theory of knowledge but about a mighty moral dilemma. None the less the setting of the phraseology is sober: evidence, in this case, the problem of proving a special circumstance that suspends the fifth commandment. Here is the briefest history behind the *responsum*. From Deut 22:24, where rape of a betrothed woman is likened to murder, the Sages infer that if ordered to rape, otherwise you will be killed, you must choose the latter. (These discussions largely stem from times of revolt and persecution. They sound less far-fetched at the end of this century than they did at the opening.) This leads to the query whence we learn of the duty of self-immolation if the order is for murder itself. To which the answer is that, here, the duty rests on cogent reflection (the Soncino’s “common sense” is too light), in no need of a Scriptural base. At this point, the Raba episode is adduced, where he enunciates what appears to him the gist of this reflection: the utter impossibility, impropriety, of putting oneself above a fellow being in this situation. A tremendous thought, proclaimed rhetorically as beyond any doubt—yet, I repeat, far removed from the fate-challenging élan of “who knows but....”

¹⁰³ The Rabbis from early on are alive to multiple genres of prayer. The first three of the Eighteen Benedictions, “the prayer” *par excellence*, are classed as praise, there follow petitions and the last three rank as thanksgivings. Discernible, too, among the Sages is an inkling that praise offered by the servant to the master inevitably has at least a tinge of request. Simlai, third century, invokes Moses’s example in support of his advice always to commence prayer with praise (*b. Ber.* 32a, *b. A. Zar.* 7b): “For it is written [Deut 3:23], And I besought the Lord at that time”—here we are told of a forthcoming request by Moses—“and it is written [3:24], O Lord, you have begun to show your servant your greatness”—here, prior to requesting he praises—“and it is written consecutively [3:25], Let me go over and see the land”—here, then, comes the request. Certainly, praise is accorded pride of place, but its function as promoting the wish is unmistakable. P.S. Thanks, too, often comprises a request—for more.

has ears to hear, an ideal disciple. She determines to go down fighting if need be rather than seek shelter: "and if I perish I perish."¹⁰⁴ At this moment she has grown to full stature. Even her guardian, a paternal relative,¹⁰⁵ belongs to "her father's house" she is called on to rescue; and significantly, whereas up to now he "orders" her,¹⁰⁶ now she "orders" him:¹⁰⁷ "Go, gather all Jews" and so forth. In the end, she will succeed in making her heathen husband appreciate the impossibility for her to survive otherwise: "How could I look on when my kindred are perishing?"¹⁰⁸

III.

The literary craftsmanship enabling such intense evocation of pronouncedly Jewish beliefs without offence to the heathen addressee cannot but be of the highest order. There is ample corroboration.

Take the handling of a problem facing any narrator of an intrigue: how to distribute knowledge and ignorance of secrets among the *dramatis personae*. (1) Esther. At Mordecai's behest,¹⁰⁹ she informs Ahasverus neither of her Jewishness nor of her kinship with Mordecai; it would be impossible, of course, to declare the latter without the former. She does not let on, it is specially added,¹¹⁰ even after being crowned nor, the dry reporting style indicates, when she alerts the king to a plot brought to light by Mordecai.¹¹¹ The king's unawareness of these essential data till much later comes out explicitly in a text I shall cite in a moment.¹¹² I hold it possible, you will remember, that in Mordecai's judgment publicity would be an affront to her original community and its God.¹¹³ This by no means excludes

¹⁰⁴ Esth 4:16.

¹⁰⁵ Esth 2:7.

¹⁰⁶ Esth 2:10, 20, 4:8

¹⁰⁷ Esth 4:17.

¹⁰⁸ Esth 8:6.

¹⁰⁹ Esth 2:10.

¹¹⁰ Esth 2:20.

¹¹¹ Esth 2:22.

¹¹² See footnote 116.

¹¹³ See above, pp. 14 f.

practical considerations in playing a dangerous game. It will definitely turn out of advantage to have an ally at court whose thorough commitment no outsider surmises. No ulterior motive can be suspected when the detector of the conspiracy is entered into the annals as "Mordecai the Jew."¹¹⁴ Above all, Haman would never have gone into the net had he guessed at her personalia. He finds out at the fateful second dinner, too late to obtain her pardon.¹¹⁵ It is only at that dinner that Ahasverus hears of her nationality, soon to be enlightened, too, as to the link—a double one, by blood and adoption—to Mordecai.¹¹⁶

A joined tightrope-walk by counsellor and disciple. Obviously, that there is some connection between them cannot be hidden. She lived in his household when recruited and even afterwards they keep in touch through personnel employed at the palace.¹¹⁷ True, this may be relatively easy to handle since unlikely to be of much interest to her husband. Susa is more like the Paris or Berlin of my young days than like Freiburg, and in any case the virgins collected so he may replace Vashti are chosen not for nobility of descent or otherworldliness but for charm.¹¹⁸ However, tricky situations are bound to occur. He must wonder momentarily at least about the exposure of those would-be regicides: Mordecai who came upon them invisible in the background, the queen his messenger....

(2) Mordecai. He, by contrast, does profess himself a Jew before non-Jews.¹¹⁹ But, obviously, he must not divulge to them their bond which he has enjoined Esther to keep secret. So he never calls on her: to go through a visit without raising suspicion would exceed the humanly feasible. To begin with, he has to find out about her progress from asking around,¹²⁰ as I have to about Diane Feinstein's election campaign. Once she is installed, a few among her entourage are trustworthy enough to be initiated—to all intents and purposes at

¹¹⁴ Esth 6:10.

¹¹⁵ Esth 7:7 f.

¹¹⁶ Esth 8:1.

¹¹⁷ Esth 2:11, 4:4 ff.

¹¹⁸ Esth 2:2 ff.

¹¹⁹ Esth 3:4.

¹²⁰ Esth 2:11.

least. At critical junctures they convey vital messages to and fro¹²¹ and even fast with her.¹²²

(3) Ahasverus. He is deceived by both sides. Not only does Esther tell him nothing but—equally important—he has no idea that the death-dealing decree Haman recommends is directed against the Jews. Haman carefully speaks of “one people”—unnamed, some miserable group—at odds with the rest; whereupon Ahasverus compliantly entrusts him with his ring, allowing him to draft and seal the document, “to do with them as is good in your eyes.”¹²³ Evidently, he never sees it; and even the despair it causes among his Jewish subjects is too remote to reach him. (The Septuagint “corrects” this. In the Hebrew original, he hands the ring to Haman, “enemy of the Jews.” The phrase tells us nothing about what goes on in his mind: it is a standard attribute of the villain.¹²⁴ In the Septuagint, he hands him the ring “to seal in accordance with the proposed writs against the Jews”—which does represent him as informed about the victims. The deviation is all the more striking as the opposite trend shows up in Addition to Esther B and Josephus,¹²⁵ reporting by what scheme Haman hopes to make quite sure Ahasverus will remain in the dark. We are treated to the full text of the proclamation and, lo and behold, there is no reason the king should not see it: even this call to action makes no mention of the Jews. He tells the princes of the empire of Haman’s discovery of “an evilly-disposed people” and instructs them to put to the sword “those that will be indicated in letters by Haman.” So the danger—from Haman’s point of view—of Ahasverus finding out is removed by one stage: he would have to go on beyond the edict to the letters. While the Septuagint loses sight of Haman’s trickery, in Addition B and Josephus it becomes overe-

¹²¹ Esth 4:4 ff.

¹²² Esth 4:16.

¹²³ Esth 3:9 ff. I am in the same camp as Anderson *op. cit.*, pp. 850, 859, 861. When he extends the king’s ignorance beyond 7:6, however, I cannot follow. That is the peripety.

¹²⁴ Add to this verse Esth 7:4, 8:1, 9:10, 24.

¹²⁵ *Ant.* 11.6.6.216ff.

laborate.¹²⁶⁾

This blindness of the sovereign comes out in, explains, his indifference to his benefactor's designation in the records read to him as sleep eludes him after the first dinner: when it turns out that the saviour of his life has as yet gone unrewarded, he blithely orders Haman to accord "Mordecai the Jew" the highest public honours conceivable.¹²⁷ His extreme rage when the former's scheme is fully unravelled¹²⁸ is thus less irrational than often supposed. He feels greatly abused. There is yet another aspect to his innocence *vis-à-vis* Jewry, maybe the most significant in a work which never, for the sake of entertainment, loses sight of its cause. This account is intended to win the ruler's goodwill. It is wise, then, to suggest that he would never knowingly consent to so hostile a measure. *Au fond*, left alone, he is on our side.

(4) The public. Whereas the Jews, an embattled minority, keep in touch with what goes on around them, non-Jews have little inside knowledge about Jewry: the anger and suspicion caused thereby are noticeable throughout Haman's indictment. An early example of this distance concerns Mordecai's position. Obviously, from the start he is somebody on his turf; not elsewhere. The very fact of his being a Jew would remain buried if he did not volunteer it:¹²⁹ there are many races populating Shushan between which the ordinary gentile is not ordinarily constrained to distinguish. The imbalance must be borne in mind when we ponder the community's fast in support of Esther ordained by Mordecai at her request.¹³⁰ A good many presumably had more than an inkling of their queen in the palace before. At any rate, at this stage, the situation is such that risks must be taken. Strikingly, nothing pertaining to her origin trickles through to her husband or the Prime Minister throughout the three days and nights of devotion and the following twenty-four hours of suspense. News is being

¹²⁶ One almost sympathizes with a reading of the Itala which, completely missing the point of Add Esth, affixes at the end the blatant: "But whoever shall hide the Jewish race shall be without a place to live," etc.

¹²⁷ Esth 6:10.

¹²⁸ Esth 7:7ff.

¹²⁹ Esth 3:4.

¹³⁰ Esth 4:15ff.

gathered one way only. To be sure, once the tables are turned, everything changes—for the moment at least. It starts with Haman's entourage, utterly confounded by his hasty report of his humiliation. Barely a day before, they had come up with the idea of hanging Mordecai.¹³¹ Now they exclaim: "If Mordecai is of the seed of the Jews before whom you have begun to fall"—they cannot yet quite believe that the hero of the king is the Jew Mordecai—"you will not prevail."¹³² In due course, a goodly number of folk, fearful of how far the Jews may go in their hour of triumph, associate with them (hence the memorial feast instituted soon after provides for non-Jews joining in).¹³³ Mordecai's fame spreads throughout the empire¹³⁴ and so forth.

This web may be criticized as containing crass improbabilities. To which there are three answers. (1) True, but the same could be said against the Tale of Moses who is picked up, an abandoned baby, by Pharaoh's daughter; the *Iliad*, which has Priam ransom his son's corpse without a hitch; the *Marriage of Figaro*, with Count Almaviva taking his wife for her maid; or, to add a naturalistic work, Gerhart Hauptmann's *The Weavers*, where a stray police bullet hits the decent opponent of the rebellion.

(2) True, but the crassly improbable does occur. A good many coincidences were needed for Esther to reach the palace as a candidate. To become the favourite there of the women's custodian who, acquainted with his master's intimate tastes, could give her effective advice¹³⁵ was near-miraculous. We accept it because we have heard of similar one-in-a-million chances materializing. At first sight, perhaps the most "impossible" happening with tremendous consequences is the selection of Mordecai's discovery of high treason for keeping the sleepless monarch entertained.¹³⁶ I say at first sight because I shall argue a bit further on¹³⁷ that it makes sense and that the author assumes us to spot it. In any case, though found problematic

¹³¹ Esth 5:14.

¹³² Esth 6:13.

¹³³ Esth 8:17, 9:27.

¹³⁴ Esth 9:4.

¹³⁵ Esth 2:9, 15.

¹³⁶ Esth 6:2.

¹³⁷ See p. 33.

from rather early, it has not proved fatal. In Josephus, two duly rewarded meritorious deeds by others come first, so the introduction of Mordecai's feat sounds less contrived and the king's enquiry what he got for it in fact quite natural.¹³⁸ What about the extraordinary circumstance occasioning a selection, His Majesty's insomnia? This, Septuagint and Josephus agree in singling out as the handiwork of God.¹³⁹ One can, of course, think up countless further details no less essential to the outcome. Ahasverus, unable to sleep, instead of calling for the records, could have asked for dancers, singers, dice-players or, if keen on being read to, a poem or a piece of meditation. Josephus¹⁴⁰ does explain his choice: it was a principle of his to use every waking hour for the benefit of his realm. Most likely, while the God-imposed insomnia derives from the Septuagint and the de-emphasizing of the selection of Mordecai's exploit from a lost elaboration of, Addition to, Esther, the praise of Ahasverus supremely devoted ruler is inserted by Josephus who, I have tried to show,¹⁴¹ sees himself mysteriously linked to Mordecai and Esther—and Vespasian to Ahasverus. The latter's conduct prefigures—hopefully—the former's.

(3) Not true. Much that we label as phantastic is not. As for closeness and distance between the segments of a state, the doings of Esther and Mordecai show that Jews are not instantly recognizable as such. At the same time, they are so separate that little of what goes on among them becomes public. Well, under Hitler, the Star of David was needed to mark them out and yet the gentile world had scant acquaintance with their internal affairs, next to none with the life of the sizable old-fashioned orthodoxy—centuries after the ghetto. I am sure that my *Jugendfreund* Ekke Guenther (a bit older

¹³⁸ *Ant.* 11.6.10.247; see R. Marcus, *Josephus with an English Translation*, in Loeb Classical Library, vol. 6 (1951), p. 434 n.a. A more radical revision might make the Praefector who chooses the reading a brother of Hatach, Esther's confidant among the chamberlains, *Esth* 4:5 ff.

¹³⁹ Septuagint *Esth* 6:10, Josephus, *Ant.* 11.6.10.247; see R. Marcus op. cit., p. 433 n. 2. In a modern thriller, Hatach's brother would administer a stimulant. Would that make it more ordinary, ultimately?

¹⁴⁰ *Ant.* 11.6.10.248.

¹⁴¹ See *Typologie*.

than me, President of the German Geological Society) is the only *Goy* at my native Freiburg who knows what an *Arbe-Kanpbes* is—worn day in day out by an observant Jewish male—or what the favoured shape and colour of the candle for *Havdole* on Saturday night, or what a strict fast-day means of which there are quite a few a year. (At the San Francisco of 1989, I can watch immigrant groups from different places of the same country settle in close proximity and remain complete strangers.) Going on to the factions around a government, the blindness of one to what the other is up to is a stock-theme in memoirs of modern grandees, under a presidential set-up no less than an imperial. It is still debated whether Hindenburg's advisers had warning of the anti-Jewish excesses of 1933 or the anti-Röhm ones of 34. I resist expanding on Camelot or Watergate or astrology. Lastly, Ahasverus. How can he fail to come upon Esther's background on his own? Simple. He is content with her and has no particular reason for probing. My predecessor but two as Regius of Civil Law at Oxford was just as easy-going, only he ended up less merrily.¹⁴²

With a storyteller so accomplished one feels justified in scrutinizing any apparent let-up—such as Esther giving two dinners when one might seem to do. Graciously allowed to address the sovereign on his throne, she does not come out with her substantial request: it would be madness to expect him to say “As you please” in these surroundings. Instead, she asks that he and Haman dine with her that very day—signalling her extreme anxiety. They do come, “in haste”;¹⁴³ yet as the king over wine encourages her to submit her plea, she proposes a second meal on the morrow, when she promises to open up. Why ever? The delay, it might be replied, besides increasing the tension for the recipients of the narrative, leaves room,¹⁴⁴ before the judgment scene, for the erection by Haman of gallows for Mordecai, the king's sleepless night and Mordecai's triumphal ride. But all this could be had simply by Esther from the outset inviting the two for the following day—altogether, in the absence

¹⁴² Alas, at Paddington railway station. *Sapienti sat.*

¹⁴³ Esth 5:5.

¹⁴⁴ The line taken by B.W. Anderson *op. cit.*, p. 856. At least he sees the problem.

of a special reason to the contrary, a more plausible procedure. None the less the writer knew what he was doing. If Esther were extending one invitation only for the next day, she would have had no time alone with Ahasverus prior to the decisive confrontation. No time alone for over one month: it was thirty days that he had not called for her, she reminded Mordecai when he first prompted her to intercede.¹⁴⁵ In these circumstances, to right-away send him into action—worse, into a fearful encounter to be followed up at once by a series of weighty, perilous measures—would be scarcely more promising than to petition him before the grandees in the throne room. We are told that Haman leaves the first dinner in a good mood.¹⁴⁶ That he leaves before the hostess's husband is taken for granted. Her standing the day after will be a good deal more secure.

Here, too, lies the key to the picking of the entry about Mordecai: it is Ahasverus who picks it. His hour or two alone with Esther put him in mind of that benefactor: a few words on her part would be enough. The absolutely extravagant honours he thinks up for him in the morning betray her influence. The right woman does not fare badly with him. Considering the purpose of the book, it is no wonder this portion involving the sovereign's most private moments should be couched with some discretion.

I shall make passing reference only to the more familiar feats of brilliant narration. We are treated to some dozen banquets, far from uniform;¹⁴⁷ and to meetings *tête-à-tête*,¹⁴⁸ between a few,¹⁴⁹ public,¹⁵⁰ spontaneous,¹⁵¹ formal.¹⁵² To stay for a minute with the series of encounters between the self-assured Mordecai and the ordinary run of hangers-on at the palace.¹⁵³ They pester him, yet without expressing

¹⁴⁵ Esth 4:11.

¹⁴⁶ Esth 5:9.

¹⁴⁷ (1) Esth 1:3-4; (2) 1:5-8; (3) 1:9-10; (4) a collision between (2) and (3) in 1:10-12; (5) 2:18; (6) 3:15; (7) 5:5-8; (8) 7:1-9; (9) 8:17; (10) 9:17-19; (11) 9:22.

¹⁴⁸ E.g. Esth 4:5.

¹⁴⁹ E.g. Esth 5:10-14.

¹⁵⁰ E.g. Esth 1:5.

¹⁵¹ E.g. Esth 3:3 f.

¹⁵² E.g. Esth 1:13-22.

¹⁵³ Esth 3:2 ff.

any admiration for Haman: really they envy him and resent his acting as they would like to but daren't. In keeping with this low motivation they bring no official charge but incite Haman personally; their aim is to create trouble for Mordecai, the exact outcome does not matter. A little masterpiece—and remember, on top of it all, the entire drama of dire peril and dazzling victory takes off from this intermezzo. Then there are the thriller-like nerve-racking tensions with their liberating dénouements, most of them veritable U-turns. Haman details to the monarch an extravagant mode of honouring a hero, confident he will be the honoree, only to be ordered to honour Mordecai in this fashion—so he must perform elaborate servile duty for the man who refused to bend the knee before him.¹⁵⁴ A bizarre mix of the gruesome and the burlesque. Similarly, Haman in his garden erects a gallows on which to string up Mordecai and, through a concatenation of causes, finishes up on it himself—the residence now the property of Esther.¹⁵⁵ Again, the very thirteenth of Adar which he had carefully, in advance of presenting his plan to Ahasverus, ascertained from the lots to be the right date for wiping out the Jews becomes the date of their triumph.¹⁵⁶ Today is the twelfth.

A remarkable achievement already touched on¹⁵⁷ is the invitation to Jewish readers—it would be lost on others but no insider could miss the nationalist innuendo—to see these events as a replay of the old war between Israel and Amalek, Mordecai and Esther being descended from Saul's family, Haman from Agag.¹⁵⁸ More precisely, we have before us an identification surviving in Tannaitic sources of those clusters of the non-Jewish world bent on Jewry's extinction with that archenemy. Hadrianic Rome is assigned this role; later on Edom tends to replace Amalek.¹⁵⁹ The unrelenting Amalek must not be let off if the Almighty delivers them into your power. Mordecai and Esther do better than Saul who lost his throne for shirking this harsh obligation; they emulate the stern Samuel and rise high indeed,

¹⁵⁴ Esth 6:4 ff.

¹⁵⁵ Esth 5:4, 7:10, 8:1, 7.

¹⁵⁶ Esth 2:7, 9:1.

¹⁵⁷ Above, p. 17.

¹⁵⁸ Esth 2:5, 3:1, 1 Sam 15.

¹⁵⁹ See W. Bacher, *Die Agada der Tannaiten*, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (1903), p. 146.

settle the score. The slaughter of Haman's ten sons, all of them named and only on this occasion, plus the hanging of their corpses by special decree, are reminiscent of the prophet's hewing Agag in pieces: "As thy sword has made women childless, so shall thy mother be childless among women."¹⁶⁰ Altogether this memorandum, primarily calculated to influence the heathen regime, never loses sight of the needs back home—but I must not linger.¹⁶¹

Where there is such rich interweaving and judicious assessing, open or veiled, within a fast-moving action, it cannot surprise to find irony playing a major role. Let me pick an example directly relevant to my treatment of Esther as a masterfully conceived unit, from the *éclat* and *débauche* in chapter 1 to the blessed order in 10. The *ukase* accompanying Vashti's dismissal which I mentioned before¹⁶² comprises two clauses: "every man to be master in his house" and, more particularly, "one should speak in the language of his people." Commentators find no fault with the first but, since there has been no quarrel with Vashti about language, they most of them strike out or emend the second¹⁶³—as they do the references to economics. They are wrong. To start with "every man to be master," this is not a dry report. It alludes, ironically, to what the bulk of the public knows already and a first-time reader or listener will know soon enough—the utter caving-in of this would-be male chauvinist as Esther appears on the scene. Which provides the key to the import of the following "speech should be in the man's language": ha-ha again—before two years are over, for the first time in Persian history Jewish speech, in deference to the wife of this edict's promulgator, will become an officially recognized medium of legislation. The proclamation saving the Jews from Haman's wrath was sent out, you will remember, in their tongue as well as the regular ones.¹⁶⁴ This verse, then, an imposing finale of the Vashti-section, at the same time points forward—if half-covertly—to the astonishing reversals taking up the

¹⁶⁰ Esth 9:7 ff., 13 f., 25, 1 Sam 15:32 f.

¹⁶¹ A few words below, in the second part of VI, on another problem with your public thus divided.

¹⁶² Esth 1:22; see above, p. 11.

¹⁶³ E.J. Crowley, p. 521, renders: "and control all his own womenfolk."

¹⁶⁴ Esth 8:9.

rest of the Book. A quip from the early Middle Ages¹⁶⁵ and still current among traditionalist Jews replaces irony by forthright ridicule: Ahasverus got rid of wife number 1 to please a counsellor¹⁶⁶ and of a counsellor to please wife number 2.

IV.

To turn, then, to the structure of the tale as a whole. The clue is furnished by 1 Esdras,¹⁶⁷ where three bodyguards of Darius—Ahasverus's predecessor—set out before him and a distinguished convocation their different opinions of what is the strongest thing in the world, a conundrum still occupying the Pol. Sci. Dept. of my university; the victor is to receive valuable prizes and high promotion. The first of them accords pre-eminence to wine, depriving even the king of his judgment and so forth. The second to the king, since men rule over sea and land and he rules over them. The third to women who give birth to the king as well as to the commoners and then by their beauty subjugate them both, the former no less than the latter. However, this third page, having made his case for women, goes on to praising truth as even mightier, forever directing earth and heaven righteously and steadfastly under God. He wins by unanimous acclamation.

It is this schema that is enacted in Esther—whereby, let me say at once, I intend no implication as to the relative dating. Chapter 1, *prima facie* an erratic bloc, illustrates the power of wine. A half-year's festivity arranged by Ahasverus for the princes of his realm was to culminate in a week during which a huge number of Shushanite courtiers were admitted. "Royal wine was abundant,"¹⁶⁸ and "on the seventh day, when the heart of the king felt good with wine,"¹⁶⁹ he issued the request his noble consort disdained: the end was defi-

¹⁶⁵ *Esth. Rab.*, proem 9.

¹⁶⁶ Memucan in 1:21.

¹⁶⁷ 1 Esdr 3 f., with a parallel in Josephus, *Ant.* 11.3.2.33 ff. In cases of divergence, I mostly follow 1 Esdras.

¹⁶⁸ Esth 1:7.

¹⁶⁹ Esth 1:10.

nately not as planned, anything but festive.¹⁷⁰ (In passing, His Majesty for that week has suspended any "constraint," 'ones, as to drinking.¹⁷¹ The term ought to be added to *nezeq* and *shawah* which I have suggested¹⁷² were borrowed from constitutional and administrative jargon by the pioneers of Talmudic jurisprudence. While in the whole of the Old Testament it occurs only here and once in Sirach,¹⁷³ already among Tannaites it is technical over a wide field for duress, *vis maior* and the like.¹⁷⁴) Now he is taking charge of things, sponsors male dominance,¹⁷⁵ goes in for the most methodical, authoritarian selection of a well-trained wife,¹⁷⁶ appoints an energetic vizier and approves his grandiose plan to rid him of a troublesome horde,¹⁷⁷ behaves like a real sovereign. It does not last, however; before long, he is wax in Esther's hands, does her every bidding, indeed, assures her that he is awaiting her orders.¹⁷⁸ Women's strength

¹⁷⁰ Esth 2:1.

¹⁷¹ Esth 1:8. Commonly held, in accordance with Josephus, *Ant.* 11.6.1.188, to grant relief from rigorous banquet regulations under which a guest might have to drink against his will. Sir 31:21 appears to have these in mind. A man of understanding, he reminds us, feeds moderately, hence sleeps well and is alert in the morning: "and even if you have been constrained, *ne'enasta*, with delicacies, arise and vomit and you will have ease." Perhaps the strongest support is furnished by Plato, *Symposium* 176E, where the boon companions manipulate the etiquette on their own, democratically. The phrasing is so similar. Esther: "the drinking was according to the decree of no constraint," and the staff were advised "to do according to each one's desire." Plato: "this has been resolved, there be drinking just as much as one desires, but there be no constraint." Still, I would not absolutely write off a once popular interpretation—adopted, it looks, by the Septuagint—that the king waived the limits on consumption normally imposed at mass entertainment.

¹⁷² See ["*Damnum* and *Nezeq*"] *Talmudic Law*, pp. 255–6.

¹⁷³ In its verbal form; see the last-but-one footnote.

¹⁷⁴ Rape falls under it, e.g. *m. Sanh.* 1:1; a paid guardian of a herd is liable if an animal falls victim to one wolf, but two wolves are 'ones, *m. B. M.* 7:9. Considering the origin of the usage, instances like *m. Kil.* 7:6, *m. Ned.* 3:4, *m. Sanh.* 3:3 are to be ranked among the more archaic specimens: *vis maior* here consists in government-sponsored interference, particularly by tax gatherers.

¹⁷⁵ Esth 1:9 ff.

¹⁷⁶ Esth 2:2 ff.

¹⁷⁷ Esth 3:1ff.

¹⁷⁸ Esth 9:12.

surpasses the king's—and yet, the final message by Esther and Mordecai “to all the Jews, to the 127 provinces of the kingdom” conveys “words of peace and truth.”¹⁷⁹ The meaning of “peace and truth” approximates that in Jeremiah,¹⁸⁰ with emphasis on wholeness and stability. I Esdras in extolling “truth” pays tribute to these ideals and, in addition, to the just.¹⁸¹ Considering the nature of the struggle in Esther, the just may well be envisaged too.

The analogy is underlined by the successful bodyguard's identity: he is a Jew, in fact, none other than Zerubbabel, initiator of the *Aliyah* from Babylon. Here I must qualify a statement just made. I said that in Esther is enacted the schema of 1 Esdras. Now I must add that, as far as the crowning part, truth, is concerned, we see it realized also in 1 Esdras. Whereas the two bodyguards declaiming on wine and on the king do nothing but declaim, the third, on women and on truth, turns into an actual participant in enthroning the latter. Already his final proof of women's might is a transition to enactment: he recalls an occasion when he watched the very king presiding over this gathering turn into a helpless babe *vis-à-vis* a clever concubine. Definitely, truth assumes a concrete shape. Darius takes to him much as Ahasverus does to Esther and Mordecai, confers exalted rank on him and undertakes to grant him any desire. Zerubbabel thereupon pleads for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and the Temple, and the king stands by his word.¹⁸² All as in Esther—with a tremendous difference which yet brings out the fundamental closeness the more impressively: while Mordecai and Esther strive for the Jews' survival in dispersion, Zerubbabel strives for their right to their own state.

Actually, it is the latter development which, I have little doubt, accounts for that extravagant item on the *Wunschliste*, the notice that Ahasverus's ultimate, saving decree included a Jewish version: for the many who did not return to the homeland this was a second-best to aspire to. The notice, we saw, is paradoxically foreshadowed by a resolution that in a bilingual establishment the husband's tongue

¹⁷⁹ Esth 9:30.

¹⁸⁰ Jer 14:13, 33:6.

¹⁸¹ So does Josephus; but see below, p. 43 f., for some reservations.

¹⁸² 1 Esdr 4:42 ff, Josephus, *Ant.* 11.3.7.5 f.

ought to prevail. This, too, reflects goings-on in the course of restoration. Nehemiah, Jewish cup-bearer of Artaxerxes, was horrified when, on a visit to Jerusalem, he came upon children from Ashdodite women “half of them speaking Ashdodite and in fact unable to speak Judaic.”¹⁸³ This did not chime with his phantasy of the new Jewish state—he himself living in Susa, in daily contact with pagan nobility. (I remember English visitors returning from a trip to Israel with bitter complaints about violations of dietary or Sabbath rules even though themselves completely non-observant.) Complications due to bilinguality of a union are mentioned extremely rarely in ancient sources, including the Bible; so this incident must have carried special weight—enough to contribute to Esther.¹⁸⁴

1 Esdras deserves a closer look. Basically, it is a speech contest. The genre originated in spontaneous debate, which spawned pre-arranged debate, first with a practical purpose, then also as a sport—and a good deal in-between. Moreover, each of these varieties might become material for fiction. The evidence from ancient Orient and Greece is plentiful. An early Biblical illustration is the conflicting advice tendered to Absalom and his war council by his genuine supporter Ahithophel and David’s agent Hushai.¹⁸⁵ Anything but sport; and the wrong man wins, God seeing to it that Ahithophel’s “sound proposal” is defeated.¹⁸⁶ Job is an—admittedly idiosyncratic—example of a later phase.¹⁸⁷ Three friends of his join to comfort him in

¹⁸³ Neh 13:24; see my *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity* (1972), p. 16.

¹⁸⁴ Curiously, among the few heathens referring to the problem is Herodotus, same century as Nehemiah: the Pelasgians kill Athenian concubines and their Greek-speaking offspring, *Histories* 6.138.

¹⁸⁵ 2 Sam 16:20–17:4.

¹⁸⁶ 2 Sam 17:14. Of extraordinary foresight (16:23), he is sure the rejection of his plan spells catastrophe and commits suicide at once. There is indeed good reason not to risk being alive when the revolt collapses: he would then hardly succeed in “setting his house in order and being buried in the sepulchre of his father,” 17:23. These two data are mentioned not as picturesque details but as achievements.

¹⁸⁷ See N.H. Tur-Sinai (Torczyner), *The Book of Job*, rev. ed. (1967), p. LVII. To agree with him in seeing here a contest does not mean to share all his other opinions.

his misfortunes and induce him to accept it.¹⁸⁸ Primarily, then, they are still concerned, not with theories, but with a practical problem, his unhappy state. All the same, we are a long way from the down-to-earth alternatives for action in Absalom's camp. A fourth speaker,¹⁸⁹ when the first three are at their wits' ends, attacks them as oldsters on behalf of youth and comes far nearer than they to the spirit of God's final response. Youth often carries the palm in speech contests, as in others. The three bodyguards in 1 Esdras are all "youngsters" and Zerubbabel is referred to as "the youngster" even when, alone after leaving the palace, he thanks God for his victory.¹⁹⁰

Plato's symposium is the most famous specimen from Athens.¹⁹¹ It, too, far from being a dialogue in the sense of a to and fro, portrays a competition: who can most worthily declaim in honour of Eros? And, as in 1 Esdras, the occasion is a banquet.¹⁹² No doubt a match of this kind did rank among the suitable entertainments at a feast. (It is not inconceivable that the scenery of Job—the friends "having every one rent his mantle and sprinkled dust upon their heads and sitting down with him on the ground seven days and seven nights and none spoke a word unto him"¹⁹³—represents a counter-banquet.) An alternative, to have a lady flutist perform, is declined. This company prefers self-engendered, serious stimulus, having contempt for the lighter sort.¹⁹⁴ After four discourses—of which that delivered by the youngest and with much emphasis on Love's youthfulness gets the

¹⁸⁸ Job 2:11 ff.

¹⁸⁹ Job 32 ff.

¹⁹⁰ 1 Esdr 3:4, 16, 4:56.

¹⁹¹ Aristophanes provides the most gloriously eccentric one, in *The Frogs* 784 ff.: the *agon* between Aeschylus and Euripides, ranging from argument to speaking each the lines he is proud of into a scale. It is decidedly the senior who triumphs.

¹⁹² Don't object that the theses in 1 Esdras are propounded after a night's rest. Those biblical drinking events (*mishte* in Hebrew, *Trinkgelage* in German) might be quite longish. Samson's was 8 days (Judg 14:12), Ahasverus's 180 plus 7 special ones (Esth 1:4 f.).

¹⁹³ Job 2:11 ff.

¹⁹⁴ "She may pipe to herself or to the women within," 176E; cp. *Protagoras* 347 f. However, she does come back in the end, with the half-drunk Alcibiades. He manages, up to a point, to bridge the two worlds, 212C ff.

most applause¹⁹⁵—Socrates, who had undertaken to contribute, declares¹⁹⁶ that he did not realize one had to produce an indiscriminate eulogy and that, unless allowed to substitute truth, he must opt out. On being told to proceed as he wishes, he begins by cross-examining the winner in his familiar, dissective fashion.¹⁹⁷ Soon, however, he does announce a proper speech—one he heard from his own teacher, the prophetess Diotima. He recounts how, at first, he himself was subjected to some deconstructive questioning,¹⁹⁸ then¹⁹⁹ she went on to a more positive, result-g geared interchange, her replies becoming longer and longer, till finally she delivered a full-scale oration “like the most accomplished masters.”²⁰⁰ The assessment of youth and age is here far from simple. Hardly has he concluded than Alcibiades drops in, pretty tipsy but capable of proposing a terrific laudation of Socrates.²⁰¹ In all this, much irony—I shall come back to it later on.²⁰²

What is the relation between Esther and these two chapters and six verses in 1 Esdras? A good deal of relevance has been seen:²⁰³ that the anecdote of Zerubbabel opens like Esther with a banquet for the empire’s leaders, indeed, from the same number of satrapies, 127;²⁰⁴ or that sleeping trouble experienced by Darius gets the competition between the pages going,²⁰⁵ recalling Mordecai’s miraculous rise through a sleepless night of Ahasverus. The general trend is to look on the 1 Esdras episode as taken over into Jewish history at a

¹⁹⁵ *Symposium* 195, 198A.

¹⁹⁶ *Symposium* 177D f., 198C ff. Cp. *Protagoras* 334 ff.

¹⁹⁷ *Symposium* 199B ff.

¹⁹⁸ *Symposium* 201A ff.

¹⁹⁹ *Symposium* 202E ff.

²⁰⁰ *Symposium* 208C ff. Other works of Plato show this diversity; see e.g. *Gorgias* 517B ff., with attention expressly drawn to it in 519d f.

²⁰¹ *Symposium* 212D ff.

²⁰² See Part V, below.

²⁰³ See S.A. Cook, 1 Esdras in *The Apocrypha etc.*, ed. R.H. Charles, vol. 1, p. 29, J.M. Myers, I and II Esdras in the *Anchor Bible* (1974), pp. 10f, 44ff., D. B. Weisberg, in *The English Bible, The Apocrypha*, p. 5, R. Marcus *op. cit.*, pp. 329 ff.

²⁰⁴ Esth 1:2, 8:9, 1 Esdr 3:2, Josephus, *Ant.* 11.3.2.38.

²⁰⁵ 1 Esdr 3:3 ff., Josephus, *Ant.* 11.3.2.34 ff. As for differences between these two accounts see below, p. 44.

late date.

Here are three arguments. (1) The third page is not at once identified as Zerubbabel but only when his turn comes to launch his address:²⁰⁶ proof that Zerubbabel did not figure in the original. But, for one thing, it does not prove it. The withholding of a vital detail till it can be revealed with greater effect is a hoary device. Nathan told David the name for the villain who disposed of the little ewe lamb only after David had pronounced him deserving of death.²⁰⁷ For another thing, even an interpolated Zerubbabel might be—though admittedly he need not be—contemporary with the real one. A *bon mot* of a dull Oxford don had a good chance of being ascribed to the witty Maurice Bowra already in the latter's lifetime. I know.²⁰⁸

(2) Truth reigning supreme, in the majority view is tacked on by the Jewish borrower to the pagan triad of wine, king, woman. Once again, suppose it were, that might have happened in a remote era. But can we be so certain? What leads to the thesis is its having to share an advocate with woman. But in Esther, where it crops up briefly in the final letter,²⁰⁹ it is even more pronouncedly an appendix, however stirring. 1 Esdras, then, may be explicable as moulded by a convention, allowing some freedom. It is at work when Job calls his three friends liars, whereas the young Elihu, whose criticism of them climaxes the human discourse before God takes over will not resort to lies.²¹⁰ To be sure, there is no laxity in Plato's *Symposium*. Socrates, we saw, to outdo the speakers preceding him, must be solemnly licensed to proclaim the truth. Nothing deflects from it, and in the very last sentence of Diotima's message the word occurs three times.²¹¹

(3) The opening of the—allegedly—tacked-on section on truth is

²⁰⁶ 1 Esdr 4:13.

²⁰⁷ 2 Sam 12:7; see my "Nathan's Parable" in *NT*, 24 (1982), pp. 275 ff.

²⁰⁸ One evening, during the battle about the road which would have finished the venerable Lamb and Flag, as I was leaving that pub I remarked that I would not "have one for the road." At lunchtime the following day, two lady dons I met in the High excitedly told me of Bowra's latest quip.

²⁰⁹ Esth 9:30.

²¹⁰ Job 13:4, 36:4.

²¹¹ *Symposium* 198D, 212A.

alleged to be a yet later, pious addition: it pays tribute to the master of the immense system of earth, sky and sun, guarantor of truth's supremacy. Even here, however, there is no need to postulate intrusion. Leaving aside possible Egyptian or Persian influence—in Job, Elihu, the speaker without falsehood, links the, for man, overwhelming phenomena of nature with God's justice and righteousness,²¹² as does the Almighty himself in his definitive answer.²¹³ (When seventeenth-century science introduced the fundamental concept "the laws of nature," it was attributing the regularities of Greek descent to a fiat of the Old Testament God; its main inspiration being "the ordinances of heaven and his writ on earth" in this very speech.²¹⁴) One can in fact think of a special reason, a diplomatic one, Zerubbabel would stress the far-above-us, utterly-beyond-our reach quality of the truth he has in mind. A moment later, he will assert that compared with it, everything else, including the king, is devoid of truth, unjust, destined to perish. Addressing—or, if you like, depicted as addressing—Darius, whom he badly wants to lend him extraordinary assistance. He must leave absolutely no room for the thought that this intrinsic shortcoming of humankind might imply any criticism of the sovereign. Notice that in the version of the event transmitted by Josephus, court-Jew at Rome, it is plainly this motive which leads to radical changes. The harsh statement "wine is unjust, the king is unjust" etc. is simply suppressed; so is the subsequent reference to bribes and the like.²¹⁵ And the dolling-up starts long before. While in 1 Esdras each page names what he deems strongest—Zerubbabel naming woman but, as even stronger, truth—in Josephus the king himself asks one bodyguard whether wine is strongest, one whether it is kings and one, Zerubbabel, whether it is women or indeed, superior to them, truth.²¹⁶ However much this may detract from Zerubbabel's merit—his course being mapped out for him—it will appeal to Josephus's imperial host, maybe even set him pondering his guest's religion. There are indica-

²¹² E.g. Job 37:23.

²¹³ E.g. Job 40:81.

²¹⁴ Job 38:33.

²¹⁵ 1 Esdr 4:37 ff., Josephus, *Ant.* 11.3.6.56.

²¹⁶ 1 Esdr 3:10 ff., Josephus, *Ant.* 11.3.2.36.

tions that Josephus feels a close link between himself and Zerubbabel. I did not realize this when writing on prefigurement and retrofigurement in his portraits of Joseph, Jeremiah, Daniel and Esther (yes, Esther);²¹⁷ and I shall not enlarge now.²¹⁸

The trouble is that to declare an item added to a previous narrative can have several meanings. Take "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." Conceivably, the idea that he created preceded the idea that in the beginning he created; and the idea that he created heaven or that he created earth the idea that he created both. But if so, surely that was long before our version was set down. By contrast, the eighty-three verses in 2 Chronicles about the opening of Hezekiah's reign over against the two in 2 Kings and nothing in Isaiah do throw light on the Chronicler's soaring theology.²¹⁹ On another occasion, it might be appropriate to look into the *Ur*-growth of the quartet—even beyond the fourth member. At the outset, we might speculate, man was the strongest. Then wine was nominated; it plays less of a role in a female environment—think of Vashti. Then, still in a pre-monarchic setting, came the competition between man and woman. Possible vestiges of this stage: in Esther, the deliberations of Ahasverus's committee *in re* Vashti's insubordination concentrating on danger to husbands in general, as does the resultant

²¹⁷ See the publications cited above, in the very first note.

²¹⁸ Well, I cannot refrain from a footnote. Otherwise by no means prone to underrate the wisdom of youngsters, he makes no mention of the competing trio's youth; in fact, as the curtain goes up, Zerubbabel had already held responsible office—he might be about the age Josephus was when settling at Rome. Zerubbabel's office was that of governor of the Jewish captives at Jerusalem. Josephus had been a Jewish general; when Jerusalem was sacked, he successfully pleaded with Titus for life and liberty of a number of prisoners (*Vita* 75.419); and he went on to do what he could for his brethren. Zerubbabel came from Jerusalem to Darius, relying on an old friendship, and his hopes were not deceived: Darius promoted him to be one of his three bodyguards. Josephus accompanied Titus from Jerusalem to Rome where Vespasian, who treasured him more and more ever since his wondrous prediction at a critical stage (*Bell.* 3.8.9.399 ff., 4.10.7.622 ff.), assigned to him the house he himself had occupied before becoming Emperor (*Vita* 76.423). Both were held in "honour" by their sovereigns (*Time* is the climax in *Ant.* 11.3.1.32 and *Vita* 76.423). N.B. This interpretation is quite reconcilable with R. Marcus's, p. 329 n.d., an addition, not a replacement.

²¹⁹ See my "Jehovah the Good," *S'vara*, 1 (1990), pp. 13 ff.

dictate “that each man be ruler in his house”;²²⁰ in 1 Esdras, the second speaker actually beginning by singling out man²²¹ and only then proceeding to the king.²²² He, ousting man, arrived last. All very hypothetical and not within the period here of relevance—except that it does suggest a literate public that would appreciate the configuration of Esther: they were used to such fare.

My impression is that both Esther and 1 Esdras are pretty early, and that their exact relationship is highly complicated. For more clarity, one would have to extend the quest. I will just draw attention to yet another work with the four rival powers, more precisely, with a hero who has experienced them all: the Testament of Judah, one of the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. It is rather late, say, 2nd century B.C.; certainly not under the direct influence of Esther or 1 Esdras; too different in theme, intent, background, execution; dour, without grace-notes, treasured by the Dead Sea penitents.²²³ Arguably, however, its very remoteness from those two sources indicates how large a readership would grasp the structure under discussion.

Judah, taking final leave of his sons, recalls being designated king by his father²²⁴ and performing brave deeds in his youth. Things went wrong when he was feasted by a Canaanite ruler and, intoxicated, accepted his daughter to wife. Lust contributed to the disaster; and once again, after her death, it was wine and beauty that got him to sleep with his widowed daughter-in-law Tamar.²²⁵ He warns his prog-

²²⁰ Esth 1:16 ff.

²²¹ 1 Esdr 4:2, Josephus, *Ant.* 11.3.4.44 first half.

²²² 1 Esdr 4.3ff., Josephus, *Ant.* from 44 second half on.

²²³ An apparent echo now and then does not change the overall picture. The pledges this Judah hands to the disguised Tamar include a diadem (Testament of Judah 12:4, 15:3), not among the pledges in Genesis (38.18) or in any Midrash. A diadem figures in 1 Esdr 4.30, Josephus, *Ant.* 11.3.5.54, to be quoted below (p. 51), where Zerubbabel makes fun of the king’s helplessness *vis-à-vis* his lady. However, while one can think of channels from 1 Esdras to the Testament, the latter need not have come by the diadem this way, and even if it did, it may be a special case. In fact, nothing illustrates better the gulf between the world of the Testament and that of 1 Esdras than the dead-serious, moralistic reference to the symbol in the former over against the humorous one in the latter.

²²⁴ Testament of Judah 1:6.

²²⁵ Testament of Judah 3:2, 11:2, 12:3, 16:4, 17:1, 5 f.

eny against these two pleasures which turn the mind from truth²²⁶ and, as was specifically revealed to him by an angel, enable women to lord it over king and beggar.²²⁷ By now he has long repented²²⁸ and, sure of his royal standing, commands his children to follow truth.²²⁹ As one might expect, truth ranks supreme also in some other Testaments, e.g. Reuben's.²³⁰ A significant, quite unromantic development is that the Testament of Judah here and there adds the lure of money to that of drink and fornication.²³¹ There are now five strongest forces—sounds like the *dernier cri* in physics. I shall leave it at that.

V.

How come, it will be asked, that the sovereign is bantered about in a tract intended to reach him, in fact, desperately trying to gain his sympathy? I shall not evade the issue by taking refuge in an unadjusted pre-redactional stratum but stick to my guns: this program was submitted as we have it. Actually, the feature under review is far too pronounced to be brushed aside as a remnant left by oversight. The answer lies in a style cultivated for many centuries in Oriental and Hellenistic life and letters. It links up with *parrhesia*, "outspokenness," "free speech," yet occupies a corner of its own.

For historians of constitution, the ideal *parrhesia* is the free, male Athenian's right to express his political opinion. What we have to do with here is a populist rather than legalistic variety: an inferior's liberty to poke fun at what appear to him shortcomings of his superior. It ranges over an enormous area. Think of the fool—free or slave, in

²²⁶ Testament of Judah 13 f.

²²⁷ Testament of Judah 15:5.

²²⁸ E.g. Testament of Judah 15:4 f.

²²⁹ Testament of Judah 20.

²³⁰ Testament of Reuben 3:9, 6:9.

²³¹ Testament of Judah 13:3 f., 16:1, 17:1 f., 18:2 f., 19:1 f. In quite a few MSS., it has made its way into the title: see R.H. Charles, *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs*, (1908), p. 68, and *The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs in the Apocrypha etc.*, ed. R.H. Charles, vol. 2, (1913), pp. 283, 315.

the streets or in the palace—with his license from hoary antiquity through the Shakespearean specimens down to the Emeritus of our day. Children enjoy a similar privilege, enabling the disconcerting questions of young Cyrus at his grandfather's court (“How much trouble your meal gives you if you are compelled to taste all these dishes,” “Why do you like your cupbearer who obviously poisoned the drink on your birthday, for you were all of you reeling”²³²), or of the late nineteenth-century *enfant terrible* (*Dîtes-moi donc qui est-ce qui a inventé la poudre? papa dit que ce n'est pas vous*²³³). The sharp observer who always knows better deserves mention. When Diogenes singles out *parrhesia* as the most precious thing,²³⁴ he means the opportunity to shoot his mouth off. He is boorish,²³⁵ does not mind abusing people.²³⁶ The mistresses of kings he calls queens: this is reality.²³⁷ All goods belong to the wise; *ergo* there is nothing improper in stealing from a temple.²³⁸ Reminded that his hometown Sinope sentenced him to exile for counterfeiting money, he replies that rather he sentenced them to staying back there.²³⁹ He will not visit Alexander, so Alexander visits him.²⁴⁰ “I am Alexander the Great—I am Diogenes the Cynic” (the Dog-man, not, like the oppor-

²³² Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 1.3. Cyrus “innocently” adds that on that occasion, when Astyages and his retainers, oblivious of their respective stations, kept shouting everybody at the same time without hearing a word, he learnt what they mean by *isegoria*, “equality of speech.”

²³³ See M.P.E. Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, vol. 2, (ed. 1889), p. 1385, bottom of first column.

²³⁴ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Philosophers* 6.2, Diogenes 69. The declaration is alluded to in Lucian, *Sale of Philosophical Lives*, where Diogenes identifies himself as one who aims to be “a prophet of truth and *parrhesia*.”

²³⁵ Pseudo-Dio Chrysostom, Sixty-Fourth Discourse 18.

²³⁶ Lucian, *loc. cit.* In *The Dead Come Back* 22 f., to Plato, with all conceivable refinements, “irony” among them, Diogenes is opposed as *sphodroteros*, “more vehement,” “direct”—which does not mean, we are reminded, that the former is incapable of occasionally slipping in the wrath of great Zeus.

²³⁷ Diogenes Laertius, Diogenes 63.

²³⁸ Diogenes Laertius, Diogenes 72 f.

²³⁹ Diogenes Laertius, Diogenes 20 f., 49, 56, 71.

²⁴⁰ Diogenes Laertius, Diogenes 38, 60, Plutarch, *Parallel Lives*, Alexander 14.1 ff.

tunist Aristippus, a king's dog²⁴¹). On Alexander offering him any boon, he asks him to "get a bit out of the sun." His caller decides that if he were not Alexander, he would choose to be Diogenes. Writers of satire and comedy play a tremendous role in letting their betters know, many of them of lasting fame—Aristophanes, Erasmus, Molière, Gogol. Lucian cheekily elevates the broader *parrhesia* to the level of the more narrowly defined one in his *The Dead Come Back*. He reports having been nearly lynched because a previous tract, *The Sale of Lives*, was understood to pour scorn on revered philosophers like Socrates, Diogenes, Chrysippus. Fortunately he obtained a proper trial, introduced himself as "Parrhesiades, son of Alethios," "Free-Speecher, son of Truthist," and convinced the court that he had aimed only at the fake-followers of those sages. Of course, he has right away to make light of the fact which, in a real situation, would put paid to the entire proceedings: his being a Syrian. In this farce, he gets away with the argument that what matters is a man's mindset, not his language—prefixing it by the warning that he knows some of his enemies to be of equally tainted ancestry.²⁴²

From the start to our day, the liberty is precarious, things can go wrong. Stratonicus, the musical genius with a sharp, punning tongue, was consigned to death for a feat of "laughing *parrhesia*" by the King of Cyprus.²⁴³ In a way, Socrates belongs here; he exceeded the tolerable. The list of martyrs or such as were prepared to be martyrs is long.

In the present context, what is of direct significance is the role

²⁴¹ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives* 2.8, Aristippus 66.

²⁴² A fellow-countryman is the target of his *Diatribes Against the Unlettered One who buys Many Books*: 19.

²⁴³ Athenaeus, *Deipn.* 8.349e f., 352d. According to 349e f., the Queen went out to a carousal in the course of which she "sounded off behind (*apopsopheo*) and smashed an almond by treading on it with her elegant shoe." When Stratonicus heard of this, he remarked: "The sound (*psophos*)—*scil.* of these two actions—is not equal." Gross, but redeemed by its wit. Stratonicus, we learn in 352e f., "was the first to introduce polychordia in harp-playing unaccompanied by voice and to take pupils in harmonics." The controversial aspect of this venture at the time is noticed by the Loeb translator, C.B. Gulick, vol. 4 (1930), pp. 96 f. Surely, then, the quip refers to a requirement necessitated or abolished by the innovation. A bit as if Arnold Schoenberg had commented: "Not truly atonal."

of benevolent or even loving ridicule. Here is an example from criticism of parents. The fable of a mother-toad competing with a quadruped is traceable in two versions.²⁴⁴ In one, as she returns from an outing, the children tell her that a huge ox walked over one of them, killing him; she makes repeated efforts to inflate herself and get them to find her just as big, but they are unimpressed and in the end she bursts asunder. In the other, they dissuade her from going too far. The former represents the youth rebellion in fifth-century B.C. Athens at its height: the parent is seen as incapable of protecting the offspring, yet claiming to rank with the mightiest—she justly perishes in a futile attempt to prove it. By the time of the latter, the children are tolerant of her fancy, become her instructors, save her. We may assume that youth has made gains, is better off. Generally in social conflict—whether between children and parents or farmhands and landowners—a friendlier trend among the oppressed comes to the fore when the worst grievances are removed. In Schiller's *Die Räuber*, it has been pointed out by a writer on changes in the father-figure in the course of *Sturm und Drang*,²⁴⁵ the stodgy, helpless head of family already evokes pity rather than hatred. Anyhow, Aristophanes's *Wasps* accords with the saving version. The father, one of 6000 jurors, an underpaid tool who cannot buy figs for the family, thinks he is "lord of all,"²⁴⁶ "ruling an empire not inferior to that of Zeus."²⁴⁷ His son urges him to retire, offers him lodging, food, a girl. Finally, the old boy consents, on condition that he may sit as judge in domestic affairs (one dog carrying off another's cheese²⁴⁸): supreme among his own, as the toad would wish to be. By no mere coincidence, in the same author's *Lysistrata* true caring inspires the most scathing accusations by women against men, made palatable to the male audience by their bawdy presentation. The resolve to save, *sozo*, the culprits if need be against their will has a religious aura

²⁴⁴ *Babrius* 28, *Phaedrus* 1.24. I say traceable because as they have reached us they are somewhat mixed up.

²⁴⁵ F. Martin, "Die feindlichen Brüder," *Jahrbuch der Schillergesellschaft*, 16 (1972), pp. 211 ff.

²⁴⁶ Aristophanes, *The Wasps* 518.

²⁴⁷ *The Wasps* 620.

²⁴⁸ *The Wasps* 835 ff.

about it.²⁴⁹

As for the smile bestowed on a teacher's weakness by his pupils, Plato contains a rich selection. His *Symposium* is a mine. Taking a further look at it from this point of view, we cannot miss the fun that is had—very fondly—with the element of addiction in Socrates's stance. Already when Agathon, who is to precede him, is about to start, he attempts to deflect him into question-and-answer and has to be stopped by Phaedrus;²⁵⁰ and as we saw, with his turn arrived, he takes time off to put Agathon through a fresh cross-examination revealing the gaps in his argument.²⁵¹ Diotima herself must prove her mastery in his preferred method before her declamation.²⁵² Right at the end of the night, with just himself and three others left and he the only one in possession of his faculties, he is still dialecticizing them into admitting that he who can write comedy can also write tragedy and vice versa.²⁵³ Fundamentally the same world is represented in a recent publication to do with the Freiburg of my youth: a devoted pupil of Husserl's reminisces about a seminar where the master held forth for two-and-a-half hours, with no one able to get in a word edgeways, and concluded with a beatific "Now we have had a really good discussion."²⁵⁴ "To criticize" is hardly an appropriate term in such cases; it is a "stroking" rather than a "striking."

Xenophon, man of the world, offers a yet nearer comparison. His Cyrus is enlightened, cultured and alive to irony's constructive potential in conversation, negotiation, instruction. At his parties for his staff, there is room for "laughter and earnestness"²⁵⁵ or the two in one: "jesting in earnest."²⁵⁶ (Of course, his Socrates, too, is singled

²⁴⁹ See my *Gewaltloser Frauenwiderstand im Altertum* (1971), p. 4, and *Civil Disobedience in Antiquity*, (1972), pp. 17 f.

²⁵⁰ Plato, *Symposium* 194.

²⁵¹ *Symposium* 199B ff.

²⁵² *Symposium* 201Aff.

²⁵³ *Symposium* 223D.

²⁵⁴ The anecdote came to me by word of mouth. Now that I have tracked it down, with the help of Bert Dreyfus, to H.-G. Gadamer, *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, trsl. R.S. Sullivan (1985), p. 36, it turns out that if I adjusted it to what I found, it would not fit so well; so I let it stand.

²⁵⁵ Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 2.8.1.

²⁵⁶ Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 6.1.6.

out for being “no less profitable jesting than earnest,”²⁵⁷ and Agesilaos, while enjoying “jesting talk,” would always “be earnest together” with friends in need.²⁵⁸) And this goes for both sides. So long as the solid respect for the leader is upheld, he too may be teased—even in pretty personal matters. One evening after dinner, he suggests that a punch-bellied guy had better find himself a flat-bellied girl. He himself is as yet unmarried, and the general whom he has been addressing comes back with the enquiry what sort of wife would be suitable for a frigid king.²⁵⁹ Actually, a little judicious cheekiness, one has the impression, by enhancing camaraderie and trust, will promote the inferior’s standing, fully incorporate him in the inner circle.

This, surely, is just the atmosphere of Zerubbabel’s fling which I touched on before.²⁶⁰ Addressing Darius and his grandees in solemn assembly, he reminisces:²⁶¹ “Yet did I see him—His Majesty—and Apame, his concubine, sitting at his right hand and taking the crown from his head and setting it upon her own; yea, she struck him with her left hand and therewithal he gaped and gazed upon her with open mouth. If she laughed on him, he laughed also; but if she took any displeasure at him, he was fain to flatter that she might be reconciled again. Oh sirs, are not women strong?” There follows the notice that “the king and the nobles looked at one another”²⁶²—maybe to tell us that the speaker has been sailing somewhat near the wind; at any rate, he quickly passes on to his hymn on truth.

In selected regimes, then, pulling the sovereign’s leg has its recognized place—or, to give skepsis its due, is supposed to have it. We need not, however, overdo distrust: there is good evidence of

²⁵⁷ Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.1.1.

²⁵⁸ Xenophon, *Agesilaos* 8.2.

²⁵⁹ Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* 8.4.22. In point of fact, he is far from frigid, avoids attractive women precisely because he knows he might lose his head and rue it. It pays off: in the end he marries the right one, a beautiful cousin, at the right time, 5.1.7ff., 6.1.36, 8.5.28.

²⁶⁰ Above, p. 45.

²⁶¹ 1 Esdr 4:29ff.

²⁶² 1 Esdr 4:33. Josephus, *Ant.* 11.2.6.55 has “the satraps and governors” look at one another, suppressing the king. This chimes with other changes by him referred to above, p. 43, made in order to keep his Roman “kings” happy.

the practice; indeed, most of us will have come across it in some form or other in our lives. At any rate, note that the failing of Ahasverus made most of in Esther, submissiveness to the weaker sex, is the point of the dig at Darius in 1 Esdras. That parallel also precludes the argument that frivolity would not be admitted into Esther if it were in the nature of a petition concerning the very existence of Persian Jewry. Zerubbabel is in a situation fully analogous in its gravity to that in which the Book of Esther is composed. The latter seeks the king's protection for a troubled remnant in exile, Zerubbabel strains to have the king sponsor the return, the ultimate hope. The maxim that there is a time to weep and a time to laugh has its limitations. In the Book of Jonah, with thousands of lives at stake, there is a wealth of irony—true, on the part of the superior—both in speech and in action. The banter in the Book of Esther is well within what one may expect.

A warning (to myself): we must not find teasing where there is not any. Ahasverus, you will recall, persuaded by Haman's report, lends him his seal and does not check the proclamation—thus nearly helping on an immense catastrophe. Yet he applies the same procedure to the countermand, "written according to all that Mordecai ordained," he by now armed with the seal.²⁶³ It is tempting to see him represented with a smile as careless once again though, fortunately, this time it will not be exploited. The temptation must be resisted. There is nothing wrong with the procedure. On the contrary, ideally, the potentate should be able to place absolute trust in his chief servant—only, for the ideal to be workable, the right servant must be chosen, one of absolute devotion. Haman was a villain, the Jewish couple fill the bill. No irony here. The ideal is articulated twice in the Genesis precedent, first, when "Potiphar left all he had in Joseph's hand and knew not ought that he had save the bread which he ate," and again, when Pharaoh affirmed "you shall be over my house and according to your word shall all my people be ruled, only in the throne will I be greater."²⁶⁴ Of course, there are ancient pictures of

²⁶³ Esth 8:2, 8 ff.

²⁶⁴ Gen 39:6, 41:40. In passing—surely, there is much to be said for a Rabbinic interpretation taking "the bread he ate" to stand for his wife. "To know" often refers to intercourse; "to eat" does so in Proverbs 30:20 (with the woman as sub-

rulers seeing everything of importance through themselves—and of countless in-between stages. The Caliph Harun Al-Rashid in *A Thousand-and-One Nights* goes out *incognito* in the dark to wander through the city and see for himself. He does not want to depend on others' advice, however loyal, is plainly dissatisfied with customary seclusion on-high.

VI.

Before proceeding to my last topic, I would outline two problems I shall not tackle. One is the half dozen sections of Esther peculiar to the Septuagint, nowadays styled "The Apocryphal Additions." They are unanimously, and perhaps rightly, treated as offshoots of the canonical Esther. However, with the latter turning out to serve a special mission, it is advisable to re-examine the relationship. The result may indeed be chequered since they are not all of one piece. Just one illustration, or the beginning of one.

Absent throughout the Additions is the humorous touch; some stretches remind one of the atmosphere of The Testament of Judah. Present throughout—a long-standing riddle—is ardently professed Jewish religion. God occurs an extraordinary number of times, the Jews are his people and Mordecai and Esther offer him lengthy prayers. In Addition C, "she hates the glory of the wicked, detests the bed of the uncircumcised and of any alien, abhors her crown like a menstruous rag, abstains from his and Haman's heathen food and

ject), "to drink" in 5:15 (with man). *Nahama*', "bread," means "intercourse" in *b. Nidd.* 17a towards the end. Above all, as Potiphar's wife keeps pressing Joseph, he pleads: "My master has withheld nothing from me but you because you are his wife" (39:9), echoing the declaration quoted. One could say a great deal about the difference between the high official who, appointing a plenipotentiary, reserves his wife and the monarch who reserves his throne. Lastly, the Rabbinic opinion adduced consists in just two words: "clean language" (*Gen. Rab.* on 39:6). That is to say, Potiphar, or Scripture citing him, substitutes food, innocuous, for sexual commerce, not for unreserved mention.

wine."²⁶⁵ But even in Addition D, where she feels genuine reverence for her husband, this comes out in her seeing in him "an angel of God,"²⁶⁶ and God is openly spoken of as in charge from beginning to end. No doubt all this is reasonably attributable to an impulse to make up for the official text's enforced shortcoming. Still, it just might survive from recitals not yet thoroughly geared towards a political effort in the highest circles outside. So might the presentation in Addition E²⁶⁷ of Haman as even more of an alien than the Jews, enshrining the sad, old experience: underdog eat underdog—what we found Lucian complaining about, and doing himself.²⁶⁸ But I say might, not does. Further probing is required.

Problem no. 2 is the paradox of a saga in Hebrew to be shared with *Goyyim*—indeed, with their top-notch crew. True, there may have been a translation or, more wildly, the Hebrew may be one itself. But it would be rash to base on this in the absence of any evidence. Apparently it was assumed that once such an ideal scenario was held out to those inside, it would spread to the outside somehow. Not so absurd a notion. This casual process does go on between neighbouring groups from time immemorial world-wide, deserving more exploration than it has received.²⁶⁹ And, by the way, it embraces warnings and condemnations as well as amiable prospects: quite likely, a secondary aim of the Esther paradigm itself was to deter the Jew-hating mob.

To give the briefest indication of the Biblical material relevant—already the Joseph epos may have been in part addressed to Egyptian overlords. Even before, Noah's execration of Canaan and appreciation of Japheth²⁷⁰ were surely intended to come to the ears of

²⁶⁵ Add Esth 26 ff. or 14:15 ff. In the Codex Alexandrinus, her loathing of such intercourse is missing—"through a simple oversight," according to J.A.F. Gregg (in *The Apocrypha etc.*, ed. R.H. Charles, vol. 1, p. 678). This is naive.

²⁶⁶ Add Esth D 13 f. or 15:16 f.

²⁶⁷ Add Esth E 10 f. or 16:10 f.

²⁶⁸ Above, p. 48.

²⁶⁹ Somebody like Walter Weyrauch, who has thought deeply about methods of intelligence gathering and planting might take it up. I am not, of course, thinking of acausal connection—beyond my competence. For a few observations loosely to do with the matter see "A Scholium on E.B.I.," pp. 163 ff.

²⁷⁰ Gen 9:25ff.

their descendants, the former affirming an ongoing state of hostility, the latter one of closeness. Abraham's welcome by Melchizedek,²⁷¹ the role of Jael, wife of a Kenite, praised in the Song of Deborah and Barak,²⁷² Joshua's arrangement with the Gibeonites,²⁷³ all imply messages to abroad. Later than Esther and not part of the canon, none the less worth listing here, is Josephus. He wrote *The Jewish War* in Aramaic though we have only his Greek translation of a few years afterwards. His patrons Vespasian and Titus could not read a word of Aramaic. Yet, of course, even the original was produced with a view to pleasing them while breaking a lance in behalf of his people. In this case, the direct friendly contact made it easy to convey the drift of the exposition. Interestingly, the Book of Esther is for him the last revelatory historical account from the past.²⁷⁴

VII.

A talk on Esther should end on an up-beat note. But it would be wrong to look away from a grievous suffering that goes on from the first moment to the last. All the three women evoke awe and pity even though one of them also triumphs.

The first is Queen Vashti, superbly regal, self-respecting, refusing to show herself to that inebriated crowd even though the order is conveyed by the seven highest ministers of His Majesty in person. She is dismissed, we hear nothing about what happened to her. We do hear of Ahasverus longing for her which, in a way, makes it worse, confirming that, but for her admirable rebellion, she was a lovable lady. Yet she simply disappears. Some Rabbis speak of execution.²⁷⁵ The utter silence of the original story is worse.

Notwithstanding the enormous differences, one is reminded of the standoffish and self-willed younger Aspasia (younger by comparison with Pericles's). Born free and well educated in a Greek city of

²⁷¹ Gen 14:18ff.

²⁷² Judges 5. A female chauvinist convention omits Barak in citing this poem.

²⁷³ Joshua 9.

²⁷⁴ *Contra Apionem* 1.8.40.

²⁷⁵ *Targum Sheni* 1:18 ff., b. *Meg.* 12a.

Asia Minor, she was carried off and delivered into the harem of the Cyrus whose campaign against his reigning brother Artaxerxes II Xenophon joined—i.e. Cyrus the Younger of Xenophon's *Anabasis*, not the Great of his *Cyropaedia*. Early on, one evening, she was picked with a bunch of colleagues to help him enjoy his dinner. The others, as soon as he started sporting with them, moved to his couch and responded to his advances. She stood by hers, mute. He called her, but she did not obey. When the chamberlains moved to get her, she declared: "He will be sorry whoever lays his hands on me." While her fellow-inmates thought her rude, Cyrus was delighted, laughed and exclaimed to the guy who had brought in the women ("the keeper" in the Book of Esther²⁷⁶): "Don't you see at once that this one alone, free and uncorrupted, you are bringing me as a prize?" She was his favourite thenceforth and he addressed her as "the Wise." (He was around twenty then, it seems. I am eighty but still sympathize with him.²⁷⁷) Yet, eventually, her forthrightness led to disaster. Cyrus was killed in the revolt against his brother, who very gladly took her over. Time went by, he deemed it prudent to appoint his successor and chose his eldest son Darius (none of the Biblical Dariuses). Under Persian law, the new king-designate could ask for any boon. Darius asked for Aspasia. His father was upset. Being debarred from an outright No, he said that she was a free woman so he could pass her on only if she consented—hoping she would not. Well, she did. He stood by his bargain—ah, but promptly created her a priestess of Anaitis, bound to the strictest chastity.²⁷⁸ Darius now entered into a conspiracy with other malcontents to murder him. They were betrayed and he was put to death. Of what became of Aspasia we have no record.

²⁷⁶ Esth 2:8, 14.

²⁷⁷ Plutarch, Artaxerxes 26.3 ff. According to Xenophon (*Anabasis* 1.10.2) she is "spoken of as wise and beautiful." The two accounts are far from contradictory, but it would not be surprising if the surnaming by Cyrus were a later development.

²⁷⁸ One may find here elements of the ploy I discuss in "Fraud No. 3" (in *The Legal Mind, Essays for Tony Honoré*, ed. N. McCormick and P. Birks [1986], p. 2): "where a law attaches an advantage or disadvantage to a certain quality, this is indeed acquired or shed but in a fashion that drains the change of substance."

Then there is Zeresh, Haman's spouse, who goes along with him no matter how evil his designs, actually, thinks up fresh horrors against whoever gives him trouble. It is she and his friends who suggest that Mordecai be hanged.²⁷⁹ A little later, it is almost touching how the villain uses the few hours' grace between parading Mordecai through Shushan and his second, fateful evening at the palace for sharing his plight with Zeresh and their circle. She is a good wife, in a sense. And, like Vashti, she simply disappears. Her husband is hanged directly after the decisive meal, maybe the next morning, and his house is transferred to Esther simultaneously.²⁸⁰ Where is Zeresh? Of their sons we hear only when we come to the slaughter on the thirteenth of Adar. On this occasion, indeed, they are punctiliously introduced each by his name—to inform us, first, that they were all killed,²⁸¹ secondly—two extra verses—that, at the king's command, issued in response to an explicit request by Esther, they were all strung up.²⁸² Of Zeresh, not a word.

Esther is the most profoundly tragic of the three, delivering her nation at the price of her place in it; her this-worldly place I mean. An aura of solitariness envelops her from the start: both her parents died when she was young, and she was adopted by Mordecai, himself, one senses, parentless, wifeless and childless. (The institution of adoption is evidently not yet abolished, at least not among Persian Jewry.²⁸³) As for her end—while the Bible cites the offspring of far lesser figures, it cites none of hers. It is of no account. At the time children followed the father; the mother began replacing him only in the second century A.D. and was not fully established till the fifth.²⁸⁴ In fact, "tribal" succession—who is a Priest?, a Levite? an ordinary Israelite?—depends on the father to this day: the causes making for

²⁷⁹ Esth 5:14.

²⁸⁰ Esth 7:9f., 8:1.

²⁸¹ Esth 9:6-10, 12.

²⁸² Esth 9:13 f.

²⁸³ See my *Sons and Strangers* (1984), pp. 47 f.

²⁸⁴ See my *Ancient Jewish Law* (1981), pp. 22 ff.

the major switch did not here operate.²⁸⁵ Any progeny of hers would be Persian. What about in-between? By being taken into Ahasverus's harem she ceases counting as an honourable maiden and definitely, from the first night with him she is, in strictness, defiled, lost. So high do I rate the author's sophistication that I think here, just possibly, lies another reason, besides the major one pointed out above, for the persistent use of her outlandish name as also the avoidance of explicit mention of the sacred, God in particular. Beyond doubt the tardy spread of the work and its struggle for canonicity have to do with it.

Ever since canonisation—not before, as I hope to show—this fearful, painful blemish is consistently played down: minimal explanations, no sustained discussion. With the result that those of us who cannot help it now and then entering our consciousness never allow ourselves to dwell on it. Indeed, only a two-thousand-years-old conspiracy of discretion in behalf of her and Mordecai's picture can explain why no one—not the most detached modern exegete—ever asks what, aside from “all's well that ends well,”²⁸⁶ distinguishes her case from that of Dinah, daughter of Jacob, or of Tamar, daughter of David.²⁸⁷ Well, it can no longer be called a conspiracy seeing that, by now, the idea of her belonging with them will simply not occur to the reader.

Jacob resides at Shechem. The chieftain's son rapes?, seduces?, raptuces?—I daren't decide²⁸⁸—his daughter and, in consequence—that is how it is presented—is deeply in love with her.²⁸⁹ Supported by his father, he asks for her hand. They indeed propose free inter-marriage henceforth between natives and newcomers. Simeon and

²⁸⁵ Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Book of Holiness 19.15 f. These data, incidentally, help to understand why, to prove Jesus a son of David or Abraham, Matthew and Luke must rely on Joseph's genealogy.

²⁸⁶ Which, as will soon be seen, I am not underrating.

²⁸⁷ Genesis 34, 2 Samuel 13.

²⁸⁸ Ancient expositors consider even a further nuance: that she herself angled a little. Genesis Rabba finds “and Dinah went out” in 34:1 reminiscent of “and Leah went out” in 30:16. Of course, Leah was angling for her husband.

²⁸⁹ Kleist celebrates an “in consequence” miracle in *Die Marquise von O.*—a masterpiece. Nor should his cheeky couplet about this short-story be missed.

Levi, full-brothers of hers, agree on condition that the male Shechemites undergo circumcision. The condition is accepted but on the third day after the operation the brothers fall upon the men, too ill to offer resistance, massacre them, appropriate their goods including the women and recapture Dinah. Except for her bare—and barren—name in the catalogue of Jacob's family as they immigrate into Egypt,²⁹⁰ this is our last glimpse of her. So well has the burial alive of one "treated as a harlot"²⁹¹ done its work that an eminent authority can infer she does not go back to the proper Jacob-cycle. That was confined to twelve sons: the daughter, never staged again, is superimposed.²⁹²

Which overlooks Tamar who, an absolutely guiltless victim if ever there was one, must hide herself for ever.²⁹³ She was sent by David to her half-brother Amnon who pretended to be sick and asked to be given a meal by her. When his real intentions emerged, she, a virgin,²⁹⁴ did everything to dissuade him and even resisted physically to the last. Only "he was stronger than she."²⁹⁵ After the deed, he was revolted by her sight²⁹⁶ and got his servant to throw her out. She walked around crying and with ashes on her head till her full-brother Absalom took mercy on her, allowing her to stay in his house "and be desolate": end of her biography. There was indeed a murderous fall-out, just as in the Dinah-drama: Absalom managed to have his sister's destroyer killed. And a moving detail deserves mention: his only daughter is named after her unfortunate aunt and, like her, described as beautiful.²⁹⁷

To concentrate on Dinah, with the ravisher a gentile—by "civilized standards," whether resorting to force or beguilement, he certainly appears more ruthless than the monarch who avails himself of a prerogative widely conceded. Moreover, whereas the former

²⁹⁰ Gen 46:15.

²⁹¹ Gen 34:31.

²⁹² G. von Rad, *Das erste Buch Moses* (1961), p. 289.

²⁹³ 2 Samuel 13.

²⁹⁴ 2 Sam 13:2.

²⁹⁵ 2 Sam 13:4.

²⁹⁶ The opposite consequence to that in Genesis 34.

²⁹⁷ 2 Sam 13:1, 14:27.

takes no steps towards a legitimate bond till after the act, everyone of the latter's virgins²⁹⁸ are assured of at least the position of a secondary wife though only one will be queen. On the other hand, the entire manhood of Shechem, for Dinah's sake, heroically adopt her people's communal mark, than which nothing could be further from Ahasverus's mind.²⁹⁹ However, these valuations are far from universal. To most Jews in most ages, a pagan sovereign's exercise of that privilege is no better than rape; and, in truth, since disobedience might be answered by compulsion, the refinement is mainly façade.³⁰⁰ Actually, as noticed before,³⁰¹ a public installation of a Jewess in the palace may be deemed worse than a misdeed in the field or wood. By the simple test operating with regard to the treatment of Dinah and Tamar, "thus should not be done,"³⁰² that of Esther is damnable too.

The Book of Esther insists on this tension-laden reality. The heroine rescues "her father's house" like Rahab, but unlike Rahab, does not, may not, renounce the life of a harlot—that is what it is, even though or precisely because "in the king's house." You will remember the phrase from Mordecai's warning that she must not cut herself off there from her charge.³⁰³ The designation "Mordecai the Jew and Esther the Queen"³⁰⁴ proclaims triumph—at extremest cost. It is essential to distinguish the situation from the "all's well that ends well" in superficially similar ones. Throughout Jewish history, naturally, revulsion against one going over into the non-Jewish camp is much reduced if it happens high up and is of benefit to Jewry. Had

²⁹⁸ They all are: Esth 2:2 f., 17, 19.

²⁹⁹ In Add Esth E 16 or 16:16, at least he speaks like a "God-Fearer." Tuned down by Josephus, *Ant.* 11.6.12.279.

³⁰⁰ I am not pooh-poohing façade.

³⁰¹ Pp. 13 f.

³⁰² Gen 34.7, 2 Sam 13.12.

³⁰³ Esth 4:13. The other relevant texts are 2:8, 9, 13, 5:1, to which may be added 2:16, "house of kingship." N.B. In not one instance does the Septuagint put the Greek equivalent, *ho oikos tou basileos*. It is found elsewhere, e.g. 2 Sam 11:2, 19:19 (19:18 in the Septuagint), 1 Kgs 9:1, 10. As in some of the Esther cases the Septuagint's rendering sounds artificial, we may conclude that the translators did have *beth-hammelekh* before them but avoided it.

³⁰⁴ 8:7, 9:31; 8:7 has the opposite order.

Titus married Berenike, she might by obliging use of her influence have earned a *Misheberakh* at Bene-beraq. In the orthodox circles I lived among in England, not a few disgustedly shunned apostates and such as chose their partners outside the faith, at the same time proud of Disraeli or a Nobelprizewinner no matter to whom espoused: they brought honour to the Jewish name. But this would never enter into the serious, professed part of religion, would on reflection be denied or provided with makeshift excuses. The Purim events claim a place apart, will not be measured by ordinary standards. Heaven-directed, they must be accepted *in toto*. No wonder recognition was long in coming. Sirach does not cite them; so far they have not turned up among the Dead Sea material.

Paradoxically, my interpretation is confirmed by the Book of Judith, which is an Antiesther,³⁰⁵ and almost an Antiruth as well. It does not, like other writings critical of this or that in Esther, have recourse to gently revisionary exposition. It takes the narrative seriously, as it stands, and in radical disapproval opposes to the Persian odalisque a counter-model, "a Jewess," Judith. Hence, in a topsyturvy fashion, it is of help in the search for the original thrust of Esther. Even the most summary substantiation of this thesis, however, would be an unfair demand on your patience, so I shall relegate it to an epilogue.

Epilogue

Judith is, among other things, a sustained critique of Esther. Here is an outline of my case. Once again, I keep off the problem of historicity.

³⁰⁵ Seen by Zeitlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 14 f., however much our perspectives differ. I had not yet reached my present position when writing "What Price Equality?" [*RJ*, 5 (1986)], and the final two lines of p. 191 need adjustment. How P. Winter comes to say what he does in his article "Judith" (*The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* vol. 2, [1962], p. 1026) I am at a loss to understand. "From an aesthetic and literary viewpoint, the story of Judith is of better quality.... Both books are similar in aim and spirit. The eclipse of Judith may be due partly to the fact that the story is localized in a small place."

Not once does Judith indicate any sympathy with Esther.³⁰⁶ Instead, it emphasizes, over-emphasizes, “the Jewess’s” flawless purity from her debut through the most fearsome hazards right to her death. After the early loss of her husband, “the garments of widowhood were upon her, none brought against her an evil report because she feared God exceedingly”; back from the camp of Holofernes, she produces the severed head from her bag for her people to see, at once assuring them, “As the Lord lives, he committed no sin with me towards defilement or shame”; and thereafter, “many desired her but no man knew her all the days of her life from the day her husband died, and she reached the age of hundred and two years in the house of her husband.”³⁰⁷ While with Holofernes, she eats and drinks only what she and her slave-maid have brought with them³⁰⁸ and, above all, every morning towards sunrise she leaves her tent to cleanse herself in a fountain and in this state pray to the Lord. What is more, she does all this with the general’s approval, unlike Esther making no

³⁰⁶ Apparently in desperation A.E. Cowley (Judith, in *The Apocrypha etc.*, ed. R. H. Charles, vol. 2, p. 261) suggests a misreading of the lost Hebrew by the translator in 11:23: it had not “you are pretty in looks and good in speech” but “you are pretty in looks and good in appearance”—like Esth 2:7. But, first, a description very similar to this restored one is applied to Rachel in Gen 29:17; so it could come from there. Secondly, the praise of a woman as both beautiful and insightful is quite old, already bestowed on Abigail in 1 Sam 25:3, “good in understanding and pretty in looks”; so why withdraw it from Judith? Thirdly, after Judith’s long and involved argument—starting, very formally, in 11:5, “Receive the words of your slave and let your handmaid speak before you,” and ending only with 11:19—even I, old-fashioned male chauvinist, would not just say “I like your smile.” And fourthly, what would be the relevance of this borrowing?

³⁰⁷ Jdt 8:6, 8, 13:16, 16:22 f. The formulation of 13:16, by the way, indicates that the “primitive” reactions coming to the fore in the sagas of Dinah and Tamar (Gen 34, 2 Sam 13) must still be reckoned with: had Holofernes succeeded in violating her, then, even if it happened while she was momentarily unconscious through a lightning nearby, she could not be held up against Esther, or at least not as effectively.

³⁰⁸ Jdt 12:2 ff. According to Addition C 28 or 14:17, Esther too manages to keep the dietary laws, up to a point at least; of course, without notifying her husband. Nothing of this in the canonical Esther. On the relative dates of the two presentations there is no need here to pronounce: cp. above, pp. 53 f. In Rabbinic lore, as one would expect, her observance of Kashruth does appear here and there, e.g. *Targum Sheni* 2:7.

secret of her antecedents. The moment she arrives from beleaguered Bethulia, she professes herself “a daughter of the Hebrews,”³⁰⁹ getting him to count it an asset by announcing that her God has destined him to conquer both Bethulia and Jerusalem. The manoeuvring is reminiscent of Rahab’s³¹⁰—in a distorting mirror. Rahab genuinely abandoned the sinful Jericho, genuinely cooperated with its sackers. Judith pretends to follow in her footsteps, in reality by the grossest deception saving Bethulia and smashing the attackers.

Look at the I.D.s. We do not find “her father’s house,” coming down from Rahab and passed on to Esther.³¹¹ If this is deliberate omission, it is not because of Rahab’s original profession; that is wiped out by conversion, along with her and her family’s nationality, and we shall in fact before long meet an admirable Rahab *rediviva* (or rather, *redivivus*) in the Book of Judith. It is because of its attachment to Esther who turned into a foreign whore. Going on to “the king’s house,” prominent in Esther where it becomes the heroine’s residence,³¹² one might not expect it in Judith, such eminence not being reached. Yet it does occur, to be utterly rejected. Holofernes actually invites Judith to it. Taken in by her battle-plan, he declares that if she sees it through, “thy God shall be my God and you shall dwell in the house of King Nebuchadnezzar.”³¹³ By his standards, a welcome there à la Esther must be heaven to her whereas, in reality, it is abomination. She will grow old, we have seen already, “in the house of her husband”; and indeed, “they buried her,” the memoir goes on, “in the cave of her husband Manasseh.”³¹⁴ Foolishly, in order to reinforce his monstrous suggestion—to her a threat, not an invitation—he couches his contemplated acknowledgment of the Lord in the language of Ruth, as her mother-in-law was about to

³⁰⁹ Jdt 10:12.

³¹⁰ Joshua 2, 6:17ff.

³¹¹ Josh 2:12, 18, 6:22 f., Esth 4:14.

³¹² Esth 2:8 f., 13, 16, 4:13, 5.1.

³¹³ Jdt 11:23.

³¹⁴ Jdt 16.24.

move abroad: "thy God be my God."³¹⁵ With this affirmation, she resolved to leave behind her husband's grave and seek a new life. Contemptible in the eyes of Judith. Ruth's situation is no excuse: Judith is a childless widow too. She does not forsake the place where Manasseh is buried; and whereas Ruth took laborious steps—a dubious nocturnal meeting among them—finally bringing about remarriage,³¹⁶ she stays widowed even though "many desire her." Holofernes is invoking the wrong precedent. (Don't hold me responsible for this degradation of Ruth: I have written an ode to her.³¹⁷)

Her I.D. descends to her from the slaughter of the Canaanite general Sisera by Jael. She offered him safety in her tent when he was coming by, fleeing after a lost battle with the Israelites, and drove a tent-peg through his head while he was asleep³¹⁸—thus fulfilling Deborah's prophecy to the Israelite leader at the outbreak of hostilities:³¹⁹ that though he would be victorious, the prize would not be his, for "by the hand of a woman" will the Lord sell Sisera. This banner is unfolded six times. First, prior to any action, when the water shortage at Bethulia is such that it has been decided to resist only for five more days: many want to surrender at once. Judith now admonishes the elders to stand firm and tells them that she has a secret plan for bringing the siege to an end. Within the five days, the Lord will look upon Israel "by my hand."³²⁰ Then, really twice, in her prayer, in sackcloth and ashes, before she dresses up for her undertaking. She asks God to bestow "on her, a widow's, hand" the strength needed, so their height be shattered "by the hand of a

³¹⁵ Ruth 1:16. Hard to believe, but neither Cowley, p. 261, nor Enslin, p. 143, refers to this text. They so much see no connection that they finish up not seeing the identical wording. Enslin cites the ongoing discussion focusing on Naaman in 2 Kings 5. No doubt Naaman renders exclusive recognition to the God of Israel, 5.15, 17, and is altogether an important figure, but he just expresses himself quite differently.

³¹⁶ Ruth 3.

³¹⁷ *Ancient Jewish Law* (1981), pp. 33 ff.

³¹⁸ Judg 4:15 ff., 5:24 ff.

³¹⁹ Judg 4:9.

³²⁰ Jdt 8:33.

woman."³²¹ Thirdly, when, returned, she calls on them to praise God who has shattered the enemies "by my hand." Fourthly, immediately after, as she exhibits Holofernes's head: the Lord smote him "by the hand of a woman."³²² Fifthly, in the homage, paid her by the High Priest and his suite coming up from Jerusalem, as having wrought all this "by thy hand."³²³ And lastly, in her final *Shira*: the Almighty wasted them "by the hand of a woman."³²⁴ Manifestly, what Jael did to a fugitive granted—lured into—hospitality in her home violated the most universal and sacred taboos. Even the terrible Hunding of the Valkyrie, when the stranger who, hunted by deadly foes, took shelter in his hut turns out to be Siegmund, slayer of a near kinsman, allows him to stay on peacefully for the night.³²⁵ Judith emulates Jael: no fraud, no cruelty is barred in fighting an aggressor bent on subjecting the nation to a tyrannical regime. In her prayer already cited, she speaks of those she is about to battle as "planning to pollute your sanctuary and lay low the horn of your altar";³²⁶ and her fake prediction to Holofernes assures him, "you will drive them like sheep who have no shepherd"³²⁷—that is what he is after. So she unabashedly supplicates the Lord to bless the means to which she is

³²¹ Jdt 9:9f.

³²² Jdt 13:14f.

³²³ Jdt 15:10.

³²⁴ Jdt 16:5. In Judg 9:51 ff. Abimelech and his troops assault the tower in which the Thebezites have taken refuge. A millstone thrown by a woman breaks his skull and he has himself thrust through quickly by his armourbearer "lest they say, A woman slew him." A good illustration of the disgrace should you be killed by a woman. However, it plays no particular role in the tales of Jael and Judith. The phrasing is quite different from that which connects those two, not to speak of the difference in situation and character. By the way, his dodge did not help him. In 2 Sam 11:21 David angrily asks why Joab risked the lives of soldiers under the wall of Rabbah: "Who smote Abimelech? did not a woman cast a millstone on him from the wall and he died at Thebez?" Not a word about his adjutant's intervention. This would be exactly the commonsensical reaction today: the lady did it. What the lawyers think about it I shall not give away.

³²⁵ Before the night is over, Siegmund makes off with Hunding's wife.

³²⁶ Jdt 9:8.

³²⁷ Jdt 11:19.

resorting: "Turn my word and deceit to wound and bruise."³²⁸

Jael represents a fierceness inner and bodily definitely not Esther's, and so does the protagonist in a chapter from Genesis expressly appealed to by Judith in her supplication before her venture: her and her husband's ancestor Simeon, who took horrendous vengeance on the ruiner of Dinah and his whole clan.³²⁹ The two guides, however, are far from duplicates. Both support her unbending stand, discredit Esther's compromise—but from quite different angles. There was no affront to virtue in Judges. Sisera had nothing of a Don Juan about him; and the idea that Jael maybe pleased him in order to make him feel secure and drowsy³³⁰ would surely appear slanderous to Judith. Jael is looked up to for, though being a woman, at a crucial moment in the nation's struggle acting like a man, seizing the opportunity of annihilating the Canaanite commander. I ought to say like a man of the right calibre, not too common a species. In the Genesis case there is one, and Judith identifies with him, not the

³²⁸ Jdt 9:13. An aside about 13:18 where, just come back, she is congratulated by Bethulia's burgomaster: "The Lord directed you to the wound of the head of the prince of our enemies." Found fault with by commentators. Cowley, p. 263, objects to "the head of the prince" instead of simply "the prince." But that head is made a tremendous deal of in the story from 10:21 on, Holofernes resting on his canopy for Judith's arrival, through 13:6 ff, the cutting off and packing of it, with its canopy, 13:15 ff., the unpacking and demonstrating, 14:1 f., the advice to display it on the wall, 14:11, its display, 14:15 ff., the discovery of the corpse without it by the Chamberlain and the ensuing *débauche*, 16:9 f., its appearance in the hymn of thanks, 16:19, the dedication of the canopy. In any case, the burgomaster addresses her while she is holding up the ghostly object. Not exactly an everyday situation, is it?: he may be excused for not employing the stock-phrase substituted by emendation. (Painters throughout the centuries are on my side.) Enslin, p. 156, considers "wound" inadequate. But *trauma* can denote far worse than an ordinary wound—as "wound" can too. "Defeat," "disaster," for instance, as in Herodotus 1.18.6.132. *Traumatias*, which signifies "one wounded," e.g. in Herodotus 3.79, renders *ḥalal*, "one slain," in Deut 21:1, "If there be found one slain," and in Judg 16:24, where the Philistines rejoice in the discomfiture of Samson "who added many to our slain." In Jdt 6:6, Holofernes predicts to the disloyal (from his point of view) Achior that on the day he overwhelms the Jews, "you will fall among the slain." In 9:13, "to wound" is as yet vague but assuredly terrible; it is taken up in 13:18, terrible and no longer vague.

³²⁹ Genesis 34, Jdt 9:2 ff. Levi she passes over.

³³⁰ See above, p. 5 n. 19.

woman. What was at stake here was not national existence but a “thus shall not be done” to an Israelitess: Judith quotes this very phrase.³³¹ From a power-political standpoint, the accession of a flourishing settlement to Jacob’s migratory family might actually have been a gain. But Simeon deemed the price too high: his sister, no matter whether or how far she collaborated,³³² emerged as a living corpse. Judith, otherwise pretty expansive on the affair, does not give her name. Simeon risked the whole world’s rage³³³ rather than acquiesce. Judith’s mission is to combine both roles: to cut down, like Jael, the officer directing an assault on the nation, and to strike a blow, like Simeon, against abuse of a Hebrew woman.

There is, however, something very wrong here if we look at the tale in isolation. As already remarked, Judith offers her prayer in sackcloth and ashes, prior to setting out for Holofernes’s camp. At this stage, she has never even met him, let alone been molested. Yet she asks the Almighty for the sword he handed to her forebear so she may punish the polluter of the womb and so forth. He will certainly turn out conformable to her description, a cynical debauchee. But how can she be so specific at this stage? Prophetic foresight? Nothing in the text hints at it. Drawing on reports about philandering? Not a trace. Basing on the common experience that heathen militaries are given to rape? But, then, they are given to murder and other crimes.³³⁴ The explanation must be that the public of the time was aware of that recent, widely acclaimed villain Ahasverus being targeted in the person of Holofernes. In fact, the misplacement, on a literal basis, of the Shechemite’s intolerable deed is a major piece of evidence for this deeper intent.

Once it is grasped, quite a few features of the story gain in import. I have already adverted to the *prima facie* exaggerated stress

³³¹ Jdt 9:3 from Gen 34:7.

³³² Jdt 9:3 mentions “deceit” on the part of her paramour—what Holofernes hopes to practise too, 12:6. The precise scope of this notion is too dubious, however, to draw conclusions regarding her conduct.

³³³ Gen 34:30.

³³⁴ In Jdt 4:12, at the approach of the Assyrian Army, the Jerusalemites pray “not to give their babes for booty and their women for spoils and the cities for destruction and the sanctuary for profanation.”

on chastity. Makes sense as a counterblast against the foreign monarch's pet. It extends to such minutiae as Esther's confidants in the harem being males,³³⁵ whereas Judith has a female slave accompany her to the Assyrians.³³⁶ Nor is it relaxed even when Judith preens herself: unlike Esther who does it to gratify the king's lust, she turns it into a death-dealing weapon, all the while keeping the would-be exploiter at arm's length.³³⁷ Another detail meriting attention is the elaborate account of the despoliation of the demoralized invaders after their C. in C.'s exit. The emphasis on booty almost exceeds that in Genesis and is certainly in direct opposition to the threefold "on the spoil they laid not their hand" in Esther.³³⁸

A major occurrence moving into the centre is the conversion of Achior,³³⁹ hitherto dismissible as "a colourful addition."³⁴⁰ Captain of the Ammonite auxiliaries, he warned Holofernes who looked down on the Jews as of little account, not to take them on at this moment when they were serving their God faithfully and therefore, as their history proved, unbeatable. Holofernes, infuriated by this denial of the all-powerfulness of his Assyrian God-King, ordered him to be carried across to Bethulia where he would shortly find a shameful death when it was stormed. At Bethulia, not surprisingly, the outcast was admired and the Chief Magistrate, like Judith a descendant of Simeon,³⁴¹ had him stay in his house. About two months later, Judith brought Holofernes's head and advised the jubilant citizenry quickly gathered around her as to what to do next. Before they dispersed, however, she had them fetch Achior. In his position, of course, he did not automatically participate in public meetings though, as he

³³⁵ Hegai in Esth 2:8 f., 15, Hatach in 4:5 ff.

³³⁶ Jdt 10:5 ff.

³³⁷ Esth 2:9 ff., Jdt 10:3 f., 16:6 ff.

³³⁸ See above, p. 6. A tiny formal point may be worth a glance. What renders the phrase particularly memorable to a reader or audience (you can believe me: I took the Purim service for many years at the synagogue at Cambridge) is that two successive verses, 9:15 and 16, end with it. It may not be accidental that Jdt 15:6 and 7 come pretty near: 6 ending "they became wealthy indeed," *eploutesan sphodra*, 7 "the mass was plentiful indeed," *en plethos poly sphodra*.

³³⁹ Jdt 5:5-6:21, 14:1-10.

³⁴⁰ Enslin, p. 158.

³⁴¹ Jdt 6:15; see above 66.

resided with her kinsman, the two were bound to hear about each other. He would know that his host saw her off leaving for the enemy camp, sure of victory but refusing to disclose how it was to come about,³⁴² and the suspense must have been cruel. On seeing the tyrant's head he swooned. He was helped up, came to, prostrated himself before her and blessed her; then asked her for tidings she had to bring back (that is what *anaggelein* or *apaggelein* means, she had been to "his" camp so "brought back" news) about her doings during those days. She described it to him in detail—he would appreciate that, being acquainted with the set-up over there. The crowd's enthusiasm rose to new heights. Achior, become a firm believer in the God of Israel, went on forthwith to undergo circumcision.

A massive stroke against Esther where, if only in deference to the addressee, the host-government, the making of converts has no place in the Jewish program. True, earlier on, I adverted to a notice³⁴³ that, when the Jews were empowered to fight, many gentiles were so frightened that they *mithyahadhim*, "conducted themselves as Jews." But it was a fake, not conversion.³⁴⁴ The Septuagint has: "were circumcised and conducted themselves as Jews," *perietemonto kai ioudaizon*. Obviously an expansion: "were circumcised" renders "conducted themselves as Jews" *de trop*. Fortunately for me, even if it represented a superior Hebrew original or, let me add, even if one detected a hint at a possible eventual conversion in our shorter text, it would still be no good by the standard of Judith's extreme purism: a conversion from fear would be as worthless as one from, say, desire for advancement or love for a Jewish person.³⁴⁵ The entire romance is absolutely essential to the message of this Book, being the complement of the ferocious, anything but choosy belligerence towards ill-wishers. To treat it as irrelevant is like to fasten, in the Ten Commandments, on God visiting the iniquity of fathers, or in Revelation, on those who shall not be able to stand, and put mercy

³⁴² Jdt 10:8.

³⁴³ Esth 8:17; see above, at n. 133.

³⁴⁴ The Greek *ioudaizo* (best known from Gal 2:14) always has something disingenuous about it, however varied the particular manifestations of this quality.

³⁴⁵ See my *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (1956) (repr. 1973), p. 117.

unto thousands that love him or those that shall hunger no more into a footnote. It actually frames the war between Holofernes and Israel: Achior's exhortation and banishment take place on the eve of it—"on the morrow Holofernes gave orders to move against Bethulia"³⁴⁶—his conversion after Judith has explained to the Bethulians the measures to take in the new post-Holofernes situation—"but before you do these things, summon Achior."³⁴⁷ Already to the Vulgate the latter seems a gross interruption of the smooth flow of things—the martial ones!—and it gets rid of it by distributing the material of the section. Modern exegesis falls in with this condemnation of "But before . . ." "Looks as if it had been put in to introduce an episode which had somehow got misplaced."³⁴⁸ "By these words the concluding chapter of the story of Achior is not too felicitously introduced."³⁴⁹ Various solutions are offered. In reality, a signal of a fresh, ultimate departure is exactly what is needed if we are to do the "episode" justice. In a Wagner-opera, the "conversion-seeking" motif would accompany Achior while in Assyrian service, and "But before . . ." would introduce the "conversion-attaining" motif.

It is indeed a model conversion whose congruence with the early Tannaitic one is remarkable. In the ideal case, "it is the gentile who approaches the Jews, not the Jews who approach the gentile."³⁵⁰ That is certainly so here: Achior felt the pull well before he came to Bethulia. And how is it established that the attraction is of the right sort? "Before his proper initiation can begin, he must have grasped that Israel's humiliation in this age means exaltation."³⁵¹ Again, Achior passes the test: he had ample opportunity of experiencing the precariousness of Jewish existence down here. He was, then, in perfect condition to take in any teaching by the Chief Elder and, to crown it, Judith's report. A further detail. When he falls on his face

³⁴⁶ Jdt 7:15.

³⁴⁷ Jdt 14:5.

³⁴⁸ Cowley, p. 264.

³⁴⁹ Enslin, p. 158.

³⁵⁰ *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism*, p. 114. I wish I had paid attention to Achior in that book.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

and is bereft of his spirit, presently to recover and do obeisance to Judith, this is no doubt explained by his emotions, yet may also be an allusion to the soon-to-take-place act that constitutes "a passage from death to life."³⁵² One is reminded a little of Paul: "Suddenly there shone from heaven a great light and I fell to the ground."³⁵³ As for negative requirements—there are to be no "unworthy or inadequate motives: fear of enemies, desire for advancement, love of a Jewess As Josephus puts it,³⁵⁴ only that proselyte is welcome who takes the step from *prohairesis* and not *ek parergou*, from deliberate choice and not incidentally, while in reality pursuing a different object.³⁵⁵ Enemies: he has a safe rank, does not lean towards Judaism for fear of haters but, on the contrary, incurs hatred because of his leaning. Advancement: he is not led to conversion by material aspirations and, interestingly, we learn of no honours or enrichment accruing to him from it. Love—in the sense of sexual desire—is almost frighteningly absent. He prostrates himself before Judith: to embrace her would be sacrilege.

The *Ur*-design is Rahab, of which debt we are given an unmistakable reminder: her record ends "and she dwells in Israel to this day," Achior's "and he was added to the house of Israel to this day."³⁵⁶ She had been attracted to the Lord and his chosen through reports, before encountering the spies; she took upon herself enormous risks helping the alien swarm; and her motive was faith. Hebrew Scripture is as silent about subsequent benefits reaped by her as the Book of Judith with regard to Achior. (Matthew and Midrash do tell of marriage with a high-placed figure.³⁵⁷) To be sure, she does not fully come up to the postulates of seven-hundred-and-fifty years later. The author of Judith would no doubt have preferred it, for example, had she enabled the spies to escape without first exacting an oath that she and hers would be spared at the fall of the city. Achior is in a situation with no room for such a deal. Lest it be objected that it just

³⁵² *op. cit.*, p. 110.

³⁵³ Acts 22:6.

³⁵⁴ *Contra Apionem* 2.28.209 f.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.* Cp. *prohaireo* in Philo, *Embassy to Gaius* 16.115.

³⁵⁶ Josh 6:25, Jdt 14:17.

³⁵⁷ Matt 1.5, *b. Meg.* 14b etc.

comes out this way, unplanned, there is other evidence of the new Rahab being meticulously cleansed. The Jericho one gravely misled the authorities about her visitors. It was legitimate, indeed glorious, deception—still, a deception. Judith herself, for that matter, is an unscrupulous deceiver, must be, in battle with Satan. Even Esther and Mordecai, compromisers, for a while at least were less than honest with the king, treacherous—justly so—towards Haman; and Ruth was party to the tripping up of a relative with a better right than Boaz. Achior stands out as the soul of honesty. Unafraid of the consequences, he tells Holofernes the truth; nor does he rush into a quick, flattering naturalization on arrival at Bethulia. To widen the range of attributes—he never contemplates violence against his wrong-headed general, suffers in silence when rudely transported to the Hebrew side. The conclusion is inevitable that this work, ultra-radical in unrestricted warfare against Israel's foes, is equally ultra in its picture of the newcomer, setting out in midlife as a veritable babe, lily-white, invested with an innocence such as those born in the fold can never attain. The same radicalism accounts for the brushing aside of a Deuteronomic restriction on the acceptance of Ammonite and Moabite proselytes:³⁵⁸ so long as they are genuine, they bring no burden with them. Surely, this one's name, "Brother of Light," is meant to let us know what it is all about. I would add that the result bears out my contention above: the recital of the Brother of Light's journey carries at least equal weight with that of the bloody deed intervening between his first and second appearance on the stage.

Mordecai is represented by Ozias. Before saying a little about the latter, let me call attention to a staggering censure meted out to the former. His most momentous public step by far was his refusal, in defiance of a royal edict, to fall down before Haman.³⁵⁹ Here is what Judith does, unasked, directly on being taken into the presence: "When Judith came before him and his attendants, they all marvelled at the fairness of her face; and falling upon her face, she did obei-

³⁵⁸ Deut 23:3 f. I shall not go into the relation between the case of Achior, Ammonite, and that of Ruth, Moabite. Nor into the arguments by which harmonisation of their reception with Deuteronomy may be attempted.

³⁵⁹ Esth 3:2 ff.

sance to him, and his slaves raised her up."³⁶⁰ In flagrant contradiction to the precedent, she pays a form of homage to a pagan ruler, or representative of one, which normally counts as a severe infraction of religious fidelity. True, she can be sure that—except for her slave girl—no correligiousists are around whose presence would render the gesture far more problematic: it might undermine their staying power.³⁶¹ Even so, it is quite something—fully justified, however, since it serves to destroy the monster. Mordecai stood his ground in this matter with great courage—having procured Esther for Ahasverus and continuing to sponsor this despicable connection. A thoroughly reprehensible scale of values. Judith emulates Simeon in rejecting any bargaining, whatever the circumstances, about a Jewess's purity. She equally emulates him in admitting, even demanding, for the sake of that purity—as also, herein following Jael, for the sake of national existence—a daring disregard of a number of other barriers. She does fall down before the field marshal, perverting an otherwise holy ritual; and similarly, her false oracles to him in the name of God do pervert the genuine prophet-to-worldly-leader guidance. Where the intruder will ride rough-shod over a Hebrew woman's most precious possession or the Hebrew community's elementary needs, other concerns become secondary. Ample opportunity is provided by Simeon's unspeakable abuse of the perhaps holiest of all rituals, circumcision, and Jael's of a relation sacred from time immemorial, that of a host to a fugitive trusting his protection. Just to pick a few texts to remind you of the antiquity and vastness of the latter theme. As early as in chapter 4 of Genesis, the brother-murderer Cain pleads for and is granted a high measure of security. The man-slayer Moses may clearly feel very safe in his new home in Midian.³⁶² David on his difficult route to the top encounters both trustworthy and untrustworthy hosts³⁶³ and himself has occasion to prove faithful to the uprooted.³⁶⁴ Deuteronomic legislation debars Ammonites and Moabites

³⁶⁰ Jdt 10:23.

³⁶¹ Above, p. 14, I quote Num 25:6, Mark 14:66 ff. and *b. M. K.* 17a as illustrating the aggravation of defection by publicity.

³⁶² Exod 2:15 ff.

³⁶³ 1 Samuel 19 ff.

³⁶⁴ 1 Sam 22:23.

for ever from admission as converts because they were unfriendly to the Jews when, escapees from Egyptian slavery, they approached their territories; and it enjoins admission as a free resident-alien of a foreign slave who escapes onto Jewish soil.³⁶⁵ As for Greece, my brother Benni Daube has pertinent things to say when looking at Aeschylus's *Suppliant Maidens in Zu den Rechtsproblemen in Aischylos' Agamemnon*.³⁶⁶ It may be asked, in defense of Mordecai: what if mortal danger to the community can be averted only by sacrificing a woman? In a way, this consideration was advanced already against Simeon by his father Jacob who was greatly afraid, after the mass-mowing-down of the Shechemites, that all the heathens nearby would now "gather themselves against me and I shall be destroyed, I and my house."³⁶⁷ To which the Simonite rejoinder is that a Jewess's untouchability is simply not negotiable, *unabdingbar*: in the end, "to them that fear thee thou wilt be propitious."³⁶⁸ Jacob and his family did survive and so does Bethulia.

(As is well known,³⁶⁹ some of Judith's misleading statements are formulated in such fashion that artificial, second-sight interpretation may acquit her of falsehood. Take two sentences near the beginning of her first, long speech to her adversary.³⁷⁰ "If you listen to your handmaid, God will fully carry out a deed with you." He must take it for a promise of victory, but she would defend it as referring to her mission of which he is the victim. "As King Nebuchadnezzar lives . . ."—in his ears a solemn confirmation of what she is going to say, but she, despiser of, not believer in, Nebuchadnezzar, will claim it means "No one in his senses assumes the following." As if Bush were to make an assertion by the life of Saddam Hussein. Again, here

³⁶⁵ Deut 23:4 f., 16. On the background of these laws, see C.M. Carmichael, *The Laws of Deuteronomy* (1974), pp. 174 ff., 186 ff., and *Law and Narrative in the Bible* (1985), pp. 228 ff., 237 ff.

³⁶⁶ No date because Hitler was in power and the publisher would have been in danger had it been noticed that he still printed a book by a Jew.

³⁶⁷ Gen 34:30.

³⁶⁸ Jdt 16:16.

³⁶⁹ See Cowley, pp. 247, 260, Enslin, p. 136 notes on Jdt 11:6 f., p. 140 note on 11.16, p. 150 note on 12.18.

³⁷⁰ Jdt 11:6f.

is her reply as she is to dinner in the field marshal's tent and he urges her to drink:³⁷¹ "I will drink, certainly, my Lord, since my life is exalted in me today above all the days since my birth." While he cannot but think that her heart is afire for him, she may plead not guilty to the charge of deception: her reply can be understood to celebrate her triumph as his executioneress. I shall not pursue this aspect though one might find out a good deal about the literary, philosophical and legal schools behind the Book. Exactly where is recourse had to this ambiguity? Exactly what techniques are employed?³⁷² And so forth.)

³⁷¹ Jdt 12.18.

³⁷² For example, in the first and third of the instances cited, the main statement has two layers. In the second, it is the introduction, "By the life of the King," that produces the twist.

