

Scroll of Esther: Catharsis on Vellum—A Triumph Celebrated

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1ST PRIZE
DUNHAM BIBLE MUSEUM

“I am a poure dyvel and my name ys Tytyvillus.”¹

Elaborately ornate, the Dunham Bible Museum’s vellum Scroll of Esther from the seventeenth century embodies the playful, vivacious expression characteristic of copies of the text presumably illuminated by Jewish scribes working in northern Italy.² Describing an incredible act of God’s deliverance of the Jews in exile, imaginative copyists surrounded the text of the thirteen foot scroll with rich embellishment and illustrative figures.³ Referred to as the *Megillah* (“scroll”) in Jewish circles, Esther is unique among the books of the Hebrew *Tanakh* in that it fails to explicitly mention the Tetragrammaton⁴ or any other form of God’s name. Barring the assumption that copies of the text were merely lost to the forces of time, experts also speculate as to why Esther is the only book of the Old Testament missing from the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁵ After all, the Jewish people considered *Esther* to have been “written through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit,”⁶ and their practice of reading from the scroll annually in celebration of Purim—a holiday inaugurated in Esther’s ninth chapter—helped cement its significance to Jewish culture.

Scroll Creation

Sources differ regarding the origin of Jewish scroll illumination, some attributing it to the lack of the appearance of God’s name in the book.⁷ Founded largely

¹ Marc Drogin, *Medieval Calligraphy in History and Technique* (Montclair: Allanheld & Schram, 1980), 17. “Born in the minds of medieval monks,” Titivillus served to recall to monk minds “the sin of inattentiveness” from about 1285 to the beginning of the Renaissance (17, 19). It was mythologized that Titivillus kept record of scribal errors to be read at the coming judgment (18).

² Eva Frojmovic, “The Perfect Scribe and an Early Engraved Ester Scroll” (*British Library Journal*, 23:1, 1997, 68-80), 10, note 1. Though the author of the scroll remains anonymous, “Some of the best-known engraved Dutch megillot were produced by the Jewish engraver Shalom Italia (1619–1664?), born and raised in Italy” (Shalom Sabar in *Encyclopedia Judaica*).

³ Many Esther scrolls consist of eighteen panels, correlative to the number of the Hebrew word חַי (chai), meaning “life” (“Megillat Esther,” Facsimile Editions, accessed February 16, 2014, <http://www.facsimile-editions.com/en/me/>). HBU’s *Megillah*, on the other hand, consists of seven connected vellum segments, folded in twenty-seven places.

⁴ A Greek term (τετραγράμματον) referring to the four consonants that spell God’s quadriliteral name (יהוה) as first revealed in Exodus 3:14, corresponding to the English “YHWH” occurring 5,410 times in the Old Testament.

⁵ Some critics also write off the book as mere “historical fiction.” See, for example, the introduction to *Scribal Culture and the Making of the Hebrew Bible* by Karel van der Toorn, published by Oxford University Press (2007).

⁶ “Megillah,” *Dictionary of Jewish Lore and Legend* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991). As the author continues, “Jewish mystics claimed [Esther] was received by Moses with the revelation of the torah.”

⁷ As the article entitled “Megillah” in the *Dictionary of Jewish Lore and Legend* states, “A Megillah does not have the same sanctity as a sefer torah, and because of this, in the Middle Ages, it was often illustrated.”

on reverence for the third of the Ten Commandments,¹ the Jewish people imbibed such a weighty respect for the name that they likely stopped pronouncing it around the time of the Babylonian exile.² Some scholars argue that because Esther omits the Tetragrammaton the book was considered less sacred than other members of the Hebrew canon. On the other hand, the erudite Dr. Eva Frojmovic of the University of Leeds argues, “The rabbinical prohibition against the printing of Biblical scrolls to be used in synagogue services also applied to Megillot, just as it applied and still applies to Torah (Pentateuch) scrolls, Mezuzot... and Tefillin.”³ So strict was the prohibition that a rabbi once commanded that a copy of Esther be destroyed “to prevent a printed scroll being used in synagogue by mistake,” though the ban did not apply to private ownership or reading.⁴ Indeed, Frojmovic confirms that “a decorated Esther scroll would not have been used for the communal reading of the Megillah in synagogue and certainly not by the cantor. Rather, such a decorated scroll would have been intended for private use, possibly in the home, while also representing a status symbol.”⁵ Liturgical scrolls used during synagogue worship including Megillot “remained the exclusive domain of the *sofer*, the Hebrew scribe with his rigorous technical and religious training.”⁶ Because synagogues traditionally read from a folded Megillah (remembering that “the original was sent out by Mordecai and Esther as a letter”) during the festival of Purim, many traditional assemblies keep a copy of the Megillah beside their Sefer Torah.⁷ During public reading, audiences commonly “boo” when hearing Haman’s name “so ‘the name of wicked people should be blotted out’.”⁸

Illustrations

With scrollwork of this beauty a considerable luxury, the author of the Bible Museum’s Scroll of Esther was undoubtedly commissioned by a figure of considerable

¹ “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain,” Exodus 20:3.

² Jewish Encyclopedia, “Tetragrammaton”, accessed February 17, 2014, <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/14346-tetragrammaton>. The Septuagint serves as evidence that they stopped pronouncing the divine name prior to the third century BC, as it uses the word “Lord” instead of transliterating “YHWH” (Dr. Michael Brown, “Is Jehovah God’s True Name?”, accessed February 17, 2014, <http://askdrbrown.org/portfolio/is-jehovah-gods-true-name/>).

³ Frojmovic, 7.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Frojmovic, 8. In fact, Frojmovic indicates regarding a similar scroll that the text may not have even been produced by a Jewish printer because “there were no Jewish printers in Rome at the time” (8).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ “Megillah”. The source continues that earlier in history copies of “Ruth, Song of Songs, Lamentations, [and] Ecclesiastes” would also have been kept for reading, but today *Esther* remains the only one still read uniquely as a scroll. The *sefer torah*, housed within the “ark,” was the most precious possession of a synagogue—of central focus even to the architecture of the building, indicating the centrality of God’s word—much in the same way that Catholic’s hang the crucifix at the focal point of Cathedrals and smaller parish churches. In fact, “Maimonides notes that ‘it is positive commandment for every Jew to write for themselves a Sefer Torah’. Nowadays this mitzvah is sometimes fulfilled by Jews as at a siyyum by writing a letter (guided by the scribe) to help complete the Torah, but more often than not most Jews will never get the opportunity to participate in this holy task” (Mordechai Pinchas Sofer Stam, “The Sefer Torah (Book of the Law)”, accessed February 18, 2014, http://www.sofer.co.uk/html/sefer_torah.html).

⁸ “Megillah”. The quote references Exodus 32:33.

means.¹ Mesmerizingly painted, garlanded, adorned, and illuminated, the Megillah features numerous miniatures that guide the reader through the text by depicting King Ahausueras banqueting, Mordecai's procession on a white horse, Haman's sons hanging from a gallows, Vashti, and Esther at appropriate points, and other decorative figures such as lions, cherubs, unicorns, a peacock, an elephant, and more. Even the list of the names of Haman's sons who were hanged is distinctively set off from the rest of the text. Indeed, these features are not uncommon considering that scrolls of Italian origin oftentimes display "allegorical representations, nude putti, the signs of the zodiac and the twelve tribes, heavenly Jerusalem, and scenes depicting the daily life of the Jews of the time," including those "related to the celebration of Purim, such as sending friends and family gifts of food or drink in a basket... merrymaking, and masquerades."² As the *Jewish Virtual Library* continues, "Examples of decorated *megillot* are extant from Turkey, Greece and the Balkans, and Morocco, where they were mainly decorated with floral, architectural, or other decorative designs."³

Surprisingly enough, "Among Hebrew liturgical texts, the Megillah appears to be the only book which was not decorated or illustrated during the Middle Ages or, indeed, until after the mid-sixteenth century" due to the same "aniconism imposed on Torah scrolls" until that time because Esther was part of the canon.⁴ In Jewish culture, the *Encyclopedia Judaica* records that

The decoration and illustration of Esther scrolls, mostly by unknown Jewish artists, reached its height during the 17th and 18th centuries, in Italy and other countries in Europe, particularly Holland. The great demand for an illustrated megillah led the makers to produce engraved scrolls, printed from copper plates, while the text was still copied by hand, as required by Jewish law.⁵

In the Christian tradition, at least, as Paul Johnson records, "monasteries began, from the early seventh century, to produce illuminated manuscripts of great beauty and elaboration."⁶ In stark contrast with the quality of scribal output, the copyist's setting within the monastery's *scriptorium*⁷ was ascetic: "No candles or warming fires were allowed, for the safety of the manuscripts." The scribe "could not exchange labor with another, nor could he let his mind wander, because he might well be questioned later about the material he had copied."⁸

¹ See Frojmovic, 3.

² *Jewish Virtual Library*, "Scroll of Esther" (2008), accessed February 18, 2014, http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0018_0_17897.html.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Frojmovic, 1.

⁵ Shalom Sabar, "Megillah," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, accessed February 18, 2014, <http://www.magnes.org/collections/museum/jewish-life/synagogue-and-communal-life/esther-scroll-collection>.

⁶ Paul Johnson, *Art: A New History* (Italy: Harper Collins, 2003), 130.

⁷ Writing room.

⁸ Drogin, 8. The stress and patience required for the virtually uninterrupted task must have made the completion of various works quite a relief. As Drogin records, a fourteenth century scribe completing a copy of one of Aquinas' writings punctuated his work with the following: "Here ends the second part of the title work of Brother Thomas Aquinas of the Dominican Order; very long, very verbose, and very tedious; thank God, thank God, and again thank God" (12). Short messages punctuating the completion of a particular task reveal the intrapersonal reflections of the

Preservation

Thanks in part to the scroll's composition in vellum¹—animal hide from the skin of a kosher lamb or kid—the Scroll of Esther remains intact. In the past, the copies themselves were not the only elements to receive special treatment, for many were “housed in ornamental silver cases” or “exquisite gold-plated silver cases made in a delicate filigree technique.”²

While some scholars argue that the Essenes would have dismissed the content of Esther for various reasons—choosing not to keep it along with the Dead Sea Scrolls that remain today, it now appears that copies of Esther may have merely gone missing. Until recently, Esther and Nehemiah remained the only books not represented in whole or in part in the Dead Sea Scrolls collection, but in 2012, archaeologists revealed the discovery of a fragment of Nehemiah, suggesting that Esther may too remain to be discovered.³

Regardless of whether or not the Essenes valued Esther, Dunham Bible Museum's variegated edition of the Scroll of Esther speaks to a venerable tradition of passing down God's word not only with precision, but with vibrant beauty.

scribes. At times, “enthusiasm and religious feeling in furthering the word of God or in keeping the monastery's accounts in order, the desire for better materials, time for wine, a good meal, or a warm fire to restore feeling to their fingers. [They] were not above enjoying games involving the alphabet which occupied so much of their lives” (12).

¹ According to a 1519 definition, vellum was “That stouffe that we wrytte vpon: and is made of beestis skynnes: is somtyme called parchement, somtyme velem” (“Vellum,” *Oxford English Dictionary*, accessed February 14, 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/221992?redirectedFrom=vellum#eid>).

² *Jewish Virtual Library*, “Scroll of Esther”.

³ Biblical Archaeology Society Staff, “Book of Nehemiah Found Among the Scrolls,” *Bible History Daily* (2012), accessed February 16, 2014, <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/book-of-nehemiah-found-among-the-scrolls/?mqsc=E3163313>.

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