Chapter Seventeen

The Babylonian Esther Midrash: An Overview

Literary Structure

The primary objective of this study has been to explain the contents of the Babylonian Esther-Midrash in a manner that would approximate the understanding, literary appreciation and emotional impact that it would have had for its original audiences during the talmudic era. In order to achieve this aim it was necessary to maintain distinctions between the individual comments and dicta of the rabbis, and the broader literary contexts into which they were subsequently embedded by the redactors of the Talmud. The Esther-Midrash, like almost all rabbinic documents, presents itself to us as a collage of materials that were assembled and rearranged in accordance with the concerns and requirements of the broader literary contexts into which they were incorporated. The task of the modern critical commentator is therefore a twofold one: to clarify the meaning of the final product as it was perceived by the redactor, as well as to reconstruct the original intentions of the dictum’s author. Both of these objectives demand that we pay careful attention to minutiae of philological research, including the linguistic usages, literary standards and editorial conventions to which the authors and editors were trying to conform, as well as whatever other information, assumptions and realia might contribute to a fuller appreciation of the text. The above objectives had to be based on the accumulation and evaluation of the textual evidence, and assisted by the efforts of previous traditional and modern commentators.

The main body of this commentary is made up of my interpretations of the individual pericopes of the Esther-Midrash. I have endeavored in each case to propose the most reasonable and straightforward explanations that can account for the evidence at hand. Much of this evidence was problematic and susceptible to multiple possibilities of interpretation, and it is inevitable that the reader will find occasions to
disagree with my own judgment. I have attempted throughout to be as
comprehensive as possible in presenting the data and the considerations
that guided my decisions.

Each one of my exegetical efforts in this monograph relates to a
specific passage and must be studied in its unique context. It is however
natural that a study of this sort will shed light on some comprehensive
and seminal issues related to the nature of rabbinic Judaism, midrashic
exegesis, the redaction of the Talmud, and other broader questions. The
mutual relationships between generalizations and specific interpretations
raise sensitive procedural difficulties, since the methodological
theories must serve at one and the same time as the assumptions upon
which the individual comments are built, and as the conclusions that are
deduced or suggested by the totality of those individual comments.
There is no escaping the scholarly obligation to constantly subject our
working assumptions and hypotheses to critical scrutiny at each stage of
the commentary in order to determine as honestly as possible how suc-
cessfully they are able to account for the specific textual data.

The literary and philological questions that had to be dealt with in
my study included:

• The social settings of aggadic midrash—did it originate in the
preaching of the synagogue (as I had initially assumed), in the academic
studies of the yeshivah, or in some other context? In the former case,
how are we to imagine the actual make-up of the congregation? Were
the rabbis preaching to their own colleagues whose learnedness
would allow for very sophisticated levels of complexity and erudition, or
did they have to tailor their words to the limited comprehension of less
knowledgeable congregants?

• To what extent was aggadic midrash viewed by its creators as
legitimate exegesis, and to what extent did it serve as a literary device,
one of several such devices that were used to ornament well-crafted lit-
erary homilies?

• Does the evidence of the Esther-Midrash support the widely held
view that the “setama di-gemara” constitutes the latest, redactional or
“Savoraitic” stratum of the Talmud, and is not of Amoraic origin?

• Are there unique features which distinguish the Babylonian
midrash from its Palestinian counterparts. If so, do they reflect reli-
gious and ideological differences, divergent literary sensibilities, or some other underlying reason?

**General Structure**

The location of the Esther-Midrash within the Tractate *Megillah* in itself raises some intriguing questions. As I noted at the beginning of Chapter One of this study,¹ a formal connection to the final halakhic pericope in the opening chapter of *TB Megillah* was probably suggested by the resemblance between the wording of the introductory formula of R. Levi’s dictum concerning the use of the biblical “vayhi”—“this matter is a tradition in our hands from the Men of the Great Assembly...”—and a similar expression that appeared in the preceding talmudic section. R. Levi’s dictum is included in a brief sequence of three dicta whose grouping is justified by purely formal parallels. There is no denying that loose associative affinities often determine the grouping of disparate literary units in the Babylonian Talmud. It is nevertheless difficult to accept that this sort of redactional pattern would have furnished powerful enough grounds for the inclusion of a text of the magnitude of the Esther-Midrash. Moreover it strikes me as too great a coincidence that the midrash should have happened to find itself in the only tractate in the Talmud that is devoted to the laws of Purim and the reading of the Megillah. A more likely scenario is that the redactors, in their determination to find a place for the Esther-Midrash within the suitable talmudic tractate, felt that the appropriateness of the subject-matter did not furnish a sufficient reason for its inclusion, and therefore sought an additional formal connection, contrived as it may appear to us. Analogous instances, in which technical and formalized literary connections are regarded as subordinated to

¹ In addition to the sources cited in my commentary to *Megillah* 10b see now Shamma Friedman, “La-’aggadah ha-historit ba-talmud ha-bavli,” in *Saul Lieberman Memorial Volume*, ed. Shamma Friedman, 119-64 (New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1993), 120, n. 2.
more meaningful contextual ones for the insertion of extraneous literary sources, will be adduced below. If I am correct in my reconstruction of the editorial process, then it might provide us with useful insights that can be applied to analogous phenomena elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud and talmudic literature in general.

In the Babylonian Esther Midrash the three dicta of R. Levi (Jonathan) were followed by a separate series of proems. Assuming the normal modes of organizing talmudic materials, we are expected to understand that the inclusion of the proem-series was inspired by the citation of Esther 1:1 in R. Levi’s first dictum and at the commencement of the proem-sequence. This would imply that the two literary units were originally distinct and independent, and that their juxtaposition was effected by the Talmud’s redactors. This impression finds support in the equivalent passages at the beginning of Esther rabbah where much of the same or similar material is also found. In Esther rabbah however the proem-section is structured in such a manner that the individual proems are all embedded into symmetrical units based on the midrashic tradition “‘Vayhi’—it was ‘vay’ (woe!) in the days of Ahasuerus.” The precise character of the relationship between the two works—and it seems futile to deny that some relationship did exist—is difficult to reconstruct with certainty. Initially it would appear that the Esther rabbah version presents us with a better-integrated and more finely crafted literary product, and hence reflects a later stage in the evolution of the pericope. However with respect to the Esther-Midrash we must take into account its powerful opposite tendency to distill the exegetical content out of more expansive literary homilies. This aspect of Babylonian aggadah is one that we shall be discussing at length below, and could open up some alternative ways of accounting for the evidence.

Although the Esther-Midrash expounds a greater proportion of the Book of Esther than any of the other midrash collections with which I am familiar, it is possible to discern a particular concentration around verses that marked the beginnings of lectionary units in the Masoretic division of the Bible. This is of course true of Esther 1:1, in which almost every word is expounded in minute detail, in addition to the long series of proems that would normally have served as introductions to it. It is also true of Esther 2:5 and 3:8 which open further
Masoretic divisions. This situation undoubtedly reflects the Palestinian sources of the Esther-Midrash where these divisions defined units for the public reading of the Megillah (though we remain uncertain how these divisions reflected actual synagogue practice).

The attributed materials that are cited in the Esther-Midrash cover the full range of source-types that are normally found in the Babylonian Talmud, including baraitot and dicta by a representative sampling of Palestinian and Babylonian Amora'im. Although corresponding versions of several of the traditions can be found in other talmudic collections, the attributions there are usually to different rabbis. There is a special relationship to Seder olam which will be discussed in a separate section below. The Esther-Midrash contains many citations of, and allusions to, passages from other tractates in the Babylonian Talmud; most of these references seem to have been incorporated here during the more advanced stages of the redaction. (On this phenomenon see below.) As several scholars have noted, the imprint of the fourth-century Babylonian Amora Rava is very noticeable throughout, and it is probable that the initial redaction of the Esther-Midrash took place in his academy at Maḥoza. Several traditions by Rav and Samuel, particularly disputes that follow the model "one said... the other said..." are found in the early sections of the midrash.

Digressions

Like many rabbinic works, the Esther-Midrash departs on several occasions from its principal role as a commentary and introduces digressions of varying lengths. Thus a reference to the virtues of adopting orphans that was inspired by Esther 2:5 led to the presentation of a Palestinian pericope based on R. Simon ben Pazi's homiletical exposition 1 Chronicles 4:18 (13a) which makes reference to Pharaoh's daughter and Moses. A long pericope (14a-15a) about the total number of biblical prophets, and especially the seven prophetesses, is inserted in connection with R. Abba bar Kahana's mention of forty-eight male prophets and seven prophetesses in his comment to Esther 3:10. A sequence of seven dicta by R. Eleazar in the name of R. Ḥanina is found on 15a-b, ignited by an allusion to Esther 5:1 in the first item. Seven dicta by R. Benjamin ben Japheth, all of which comment on the conclusion of the Joseph story in the latter chapters of Genesis, are incorpo-
rated into *Megillah* 16a-b by virtue of a comparison that is drawn with Esther 8:15 in one of the comments. A reference to the competing religious demands that were made on Mordecai leads the Talmud (16b-17a) to introduce a series of dicta dealing with the priorities between different halakhic obligations, which leads in turn to a complex chronological pericope about Jacob’s sojourn in the *yeshivah* of Shem and Eber.

As is readily apparent from the above examples, most of these digressions conform to a familiar organizational pattern in the Talmud, of inserting lists of traditions, often composed of seven items, into the local pericope by virtue of one item in the list that bears a direct relevance or similarity to the present context. In the Esther-Midrash the link is often created when a biblical verse from outside the Book of Esther is quoted.

Further reflection suggests that in deciding to inject extensive foreign bodies into the Esther-Midrash the redactors were guided by something other than mere formal principles of associative juxtaposition. Thus, a long pericope about the female prophets of the Bible naturally suits an exposition of Esther, inasmuch as she was herself counted among the prophetesses, even though the formal connection to the pericope does not actually hinge on that particular point of thematic affinity. The same might be argued for the incorporation of a sequence of comments to the stories of Joseph and Benjamin, seeing that the Midrash repeatedly posits an archetypal continuity that extends from them through to Mordecai.

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2 The connecting item is standardly placed at the head of the list even when it is clear that it was not originally the first item (e.g., where it involves altering the sequence of biblical verses).

3 The passage also makes mention of the fate of the Temple, a topic that is central to the midrashic retelling of Esther.
Ultimately this characterization holds true for the very inclusion of the Esther-Midrash in the talmudic tractate *Megillah*. As we have noted above, its presence can be justified on far stronger thematic grounds than the feeble formulary similarities that make up the technical occasion for its incorporation. It therefore appears possible that the technical and formal connections between the passages were adduced only after the fact, as a kind of literary ornament, but that thematic appropriateness was the primary consideration that impelled the talmudic editors to place these sources where they are. In light of these phenomena we might with profit rethink some of our cherished notions about the nature of "associative principles of arrangement" throughout the Babylonian Talmud.

Another topic that might merit re-evaluation in the wake of our examination of the Esther-Midrash is the status of "lists of dicta" as a genre of talmudic source-material. It has been customary to regard these collections as being linked by purely formal criteria, particularly the identities of their authors and tradents. Our analysis of the series by R. Eleazar in the name of R. Yose bar Hanina, augmented by the testimony of new discoveries from the Cairo Genizah, suggested that there existed a more substantial connection between the units, and that they might have all originated as part of a single homily, now lost, to the Book of Esther. This model for reconstructing the genesis of "lists of dicta" pericopes might easily hold true for the Joseph and Benjamin traditions, and for kindred collections elsewhere in the Talmud.

**The Esther-Midrash as Literature: Hermeneutics and Homiletics**

In keeping with the above observations our analysis of the Babylonian Esther-Midrash has focused on two central dimensions, which may be termed the Hermeneutic and the Homiletic.
By the "Hermeneutical" element I am referring to the mechanics of how the rabbinic comments relate to their scriptural texts. Most of the "interpretations" preserved in midrashic literature involve some departure from the surface or contextual meaning of the verses. The conventions of midrashic rhetoric provide the darshan with a variegated choice of tropes that can be applied to a given scriptural unit in order to generate a connection between the text and the homily, whether the trope belongs to one of the formally enumerated catalogues of "middot for interpretation of the Torah" or to other accepted hermeneutical modes. It is a common feature of the Esther-Midrash and other aggadic collections that many of these exegetical links tend to be obscured in their final formulation, and we often found ourselves speculating (usually with the astute assistance of the traditional commentators) about how the darshan had derived his comments from the verse.

Following from our hypothesis that the rabbis did not always indulge in aggadic exegesis for its own sake, but used their textual observations for some further purpose, usually in the context of a homiletical discourse, we tried to confront each unit of midrashic exe-

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4 The virtual absence of "peshat" interpretations from rabbinic literature may appear more pronounced than it actually was in the original dicta and homilies of the talmudic rabbis. It is natural that the tradition should have taken particular care to transmit and anthologize novel and unusual interpretations, rather than simple and contextual ones that hardly count as interpretations at all. Cf. Raphael Loewe, "The 'Plain' Meaning of Scripture in Early Jewish Exegesis," in Papers of the Institute of Jewish Studies, London, ed. J. G. Weiss, 140-185, Vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964); S. Rosenblatt, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Mishnah (Baltimore: 1935).


gesis with such question as: What point is being made here? or: How would this comment be employed in a sermon? In many instances it turned out that there was room for more than one plausible explanation, and these explanations would not necessarily be mutually exclusive. Thus, while focusing upon the literary structures of the homily, we could ask whether a given interpretation might have originally functioned as part of a proem or a messianic peroration. Alternatively, with an eye to ideological concerns, we would ask about how this midrash addressed a theological or eschatological topic. Alternatively we could consider how it might have fit into the social or political life of the congregation, perhaps as part of a diatribe aimed at eradicating perceived religious and moral shortcomings in the community. All such questions were posed hypothetically, and should not be treated as factual assertions or demonstrations that a given comment originated in a homiletical context. Nevertheless, in several of the instances the primacy of the homiletical factors did seem very likely.

The darshan was thus regarded as occupying a position midway between the biblical text and his congregation. While some of my preceding assertions might appear to suggest a model according to which the preachers were routinely forcing their biblical texts to conform to pre-selected sermon topics, this crude understanding of how exegesis functions in a homily is of course not the way things are likely to have happened. In general, the distinction between the homiletical and exegetical stimuli operates better as a theoretical model than as a psychological one, since—recognizing what Heinemann and Kadushin have termed their "organic" relationship to divine words—the homilists would normally be unaware that they were imposing any ulterior meaning upon the biblical text. The nature of the extant evidence cer-

7 We of course allowed for the possibility of negative answers to such questions; i.e., that a given rabbinic interpretation arose out of a desire to account for some redundancy or contradiction in the verse, rather than from homiletical needs.

8 See Bruns, "The Hermeneutics of Midrash," 195.
tainly makes it futile, in most cases, to try to determine a consistent or precise sequence of the thought processes.\(^9\)

**Disregard for Literary Forms**

A striking phenomenon that was encountered repeatedly in the course of my comparisons between the Babylonian and Palestinian versions of otherwise similar material was the fact that the Babylonian traditions tended to omit features that enhanced the rhetorical and literary structures of the respective pericopes, but which did not advance in any obvious manner the exegesis of the biblical texts. The Palestinian literary sermons often used exegesis in a playful manner as one of several elements that could be drawn upon in the artistic fashioning of a proper *derashah*. The authors and redactors of the Esther-Midrash often treated such comments as they found in received midrashic traditions, no matter how farfetched and hyperbolic they might strike us, as if they were earnest attempts at eliciting the literal meaning of the biblical text. An interesting example of this phenomenon emerged from my analysis of the pericope on folio 11a, where an *ad hoc* rule of "pseudo-exegesis" that was probably invented in connection with a homily about Solomon (originally attached to 1 Kings 4:24) was afterwards applied to Esther 1:1 as if it were an actual principle governing biblical Hebrew syntax.

To focus on a different aspect of this phenomenon: When we compared the Babylonian pericope (11a-b) about the kings who "ruled in the vault" with the scattered discussions in Palestinian sources about the "cosmocrators" of history, we observed that every single one of those passages utilized the historical observation as part of a homiletical or theological argument (e.g., the inevitable fall that will follow great-

ness, how all mortal rulers are merely serving as temporary agents for the original and final king of the universe, or how people's deeds contain the seeds of their own punishments, etc.). The unique exception to this characterization was the Esther-Midrash which restricted itself to an examination of the factual and historical accuracy of the claims.

These marked differences between the Babylonian and Palestinian attitudes to aggadic exegesis can be explained in a number of different ways. We could just resign ourselves to the acknowledgment that the communities evolved diverse cultural and aesthetic sensibilities. Nevertheless, taking all the factors into account, it seems clear that the differing approaches to midrashic activity were influenced, at least in part, by the institutional venues in which they were created and studied. No one familiar with the poetics and rhetorical structures of classic Palestinian aggadah can fail to appreciate that the derashot were consciously crafted as literary creations, designed to be delivered orally at a synagogue service of which formal readings from the Bible were a central part. Successfully composed homilies are therefore aesthetically attractive, entertaining and religiously edifying. These objectives do not seem to have been crucial to the authors of the Esther-Midrash, whether we are examining the native Babylonian dicta or the transmission and interpretation of originally Palestinian traditions. The focus is almost exclusively on content, especially on the interpretation of the biblical texts, and if any elements in the received source do not contribute towards that end then they are likely to be omitted. Conversely, patently rhetorical and whimsical comments, if they make use of biblical verses, are scrutinized with the utmost seriousness and treated as contributions to the correct understanding of sacred scriptures, and subjected to the rigid standards of logic and consistency that would be applied to halakhic dicta.

To put it succinctly, the homilist makes use of Scripture, whereas the scholarly exegete interprets it. Although the two tasks will frequently overlap, the difference is generally unmistakable. The Babylonian Esther-Midrash appears to have blurred the distinction.

Complexity and Calculations

The academic scholarly provenance of much of the material in the Esther-Midrash finds further confirmation in the sheer complexity
of several of the discussions. The most conspicuous examples of this phenomenon are probably the chronological discussions on 11b-12a (about Jeremiah’s prophecy concerning the “seventy years” that would precede the restoration of Jerusalem), and 16b-17a (proving that Jacob spent fourteen years studying Torah prior to his departure for Aram-naharaim) whose difficult arithmetic computations would have sorely taxed the comprehension of a casual audience of synagogue-goers. The intellectual demands posed by this kind of material are not dissimilar to those confronted in many of the halakhic passages in the Talmud, and would be appropriate to the setting of a rabbinic academy. Significantly, there are no real equivalents to these pericopes in any of the Palestinian midrashic collections, which generally draw upon material that originated in synagogue preaching and was probably addressed to a more general audience.

Several other aggadic passages in the Esther-Midrash (see, e.g., the pericope on 14b dealing with Joshua’s descendants) are stamped with the imprint of halakhic argumentation, including the posing of objections and refutations, solutions, proof-texts, etc.

Proems

My analysis (above, Chapter Two) of the “Proems” section (10b-11a) pointed out how the Babylonian redactors of the passage, in revising an original Palestinian collection of homiletical petihot, proved unable or unwilling to preserve their original literary function as introductions to the scriptural lection, and satisfied themselves in most instances with the mere citation and exposition of the verses from outside the Book of Esther, rather than striving to create a tangible connection between them and the opening words of the biblical reading. In my discussion of that passage I suggested that this situation might owe, at least in part, to the fact that the petihata structure (as distinct from structures such as the “halakhic proem” that forms the basis of the She’iltot) was not commonly employed in the sermons that were delivered in Babylonian synagogues. This circumstance could have been dictated in turn by a possible preference for scheduling the sermon after the scriptural lection, rather than before it. As Joseph Heinemann has ar-
argued persuasively, the classic Palestinian *petihta* served ideally as a preamble to the biblical reading of the day.

As happens commonly in the critical study of midrashic traditions, virtually every passage which makes use of "external" verses, especially from books like Psalms, Proverbs, Job or Ecclesiastes, can give rise to a suspicion that the passage in question originated as a proem. A possibility of this sort existed, for example, with regard to the pericope to Esther 1:15 on 12b, or the use of Job 36:7 in connection with Esther 2:22-3 on 13b. Likewise, Rav's exposition on 12b linking Proverbs 13:16 to 1 Kings 1:2 and Esther 2:3 was evidently a proem. When a pericope did not attach directly to Esther, as in the presentation of Rabbi Simon ben Pazi's discourse on 1 Chronicles 4:18, then it often proved difficult or impossible to reconstruct the original occasion for the proem.

Viewed from a broader perspective, the treatment of proems in the Esther-Midrash would seem to converge with other phenomena discussed in this section, all of which attest to the aforementioned disregard for those structural features of the midrashic *oeuvre* that do not enrich our comprehension of the content or exegesis of the biblical text. Whatever literary forms and tropes might have been in use among the Babylonian preachers, they are not in evidence in the Esther-Midrash, and what confronts us there shows all the indications of being a product of the *yeshivah*, not the synagogue.

**"Messianic Perorations"**

Another salient example of this recurrent pattern is the treatment of "messianic perorations" or "happy endings." As is well known, it was the frequent practice of Palestinian preachers to conclude their discourses on an optimistic note, usually by quoting a prophetic verse that confirms God's assurances of consolation and redemption for the suffering people of Israel. In several instances in the Esther-Midrash we had occasion to note how the inspiring conclusions that appeared at the culmination of the Palestinian midrashic parallels were missing from their Babylonian counterparts.

Thus, to mention a few typical examples of this trend, the Palestinian pericope that parallels *TB Megillah* 10b, dealing with the
various implications of “vayhi” verses,\textsuperscript{10} is carefully crafted so as to culminate in words that would have held out profound hope to Jews living under the weight of a foreign yoke:

...For R. Samuel bar Nahman says: Israel received a complete pardon for their sins on the day when the Temple was destroyed. This is what is written: “The punishment of thine iniquity is accomplished, O daughter of Zion; he will no more carry thee away into captivity” (Lamentations 4:22).

In another instance, when we compare the discussion about the extents of Ahasuerus’ and Solomon’s dominions that is contained in the midrashic pericope on Esther 1:1 (Megillah 11a) with the parallel passage in \textit{Esther rabbah}, 1:4, we observe immediately how the latter—but not the former—was constructed so as to lead to an inspiring conclusion (citing Psalms 68:30, 72:11, 72:19) about the splendor of the restored Jerusalem and the tributes that will one day be brought to the Messiah.

Likewise, \textit{Esther rabbah}, 1:14, which contains material analogous to the exposition of Esther 1:8 in \textit{Megillah} 12a, concludes with a citation of Isaiah 43:6 and a discourse about the ingathering of the Jewish exiles in the messianic future, an element that is absent from its Babylonian counterpart. Palestinian homilies about the proliferation of prophets and prophetesses in biblical Israel, which parallel the passage on that topic in \textit{TB Megillah} 14a, are constructed so as to end with the consoling conclusion

...But in the future times the Holy One will publicly reveal their prophecy. That is what is written: “And the Lord my God shall come, and all the holy ones with thee” (Zechariah 14:15).

The Babylonian pericope focuses on the authority and precise numbers of the Hebrew prophets and prophetesses, but does not incorporate them into a homiletical peroration.

\textsuperscript{10} \textit{Genesis rabbah}, 41 (42):3 (399-407); \textit{Leviticus rabbah}, 9:1 (228-37); \textit{Ruth rabbah}, Proems: 1; \textit{Esther rabbah}, Proems: 11; etc.
Redactional Omissions and Misunderstandings

On several occasions it appeared that the redactors of the Esther-Midrash misunderstood the intent of the earlier sources that they were utilizing, especially material that originated in Palestinian midrashic traditions. One of the most flagrant examples was the treatment of the proems, discussed above, where the situation should probably be ascribed to Babylonian unfamiliarity with, or disinterest in, Palestinian literary conventions.

A likely instance of this tendency is the Esther-Midrash's presentation of the dictum of R. Samuel bar Nahman in the name of R. Jonathan imagining God's words to the Ministering Angels at the Red Sea: "The work of my hands are drowning in the sea and you are reciting song before me!" (Proem #3 on 10b). Our analysis of the complex pericope provided strong support for the view that in the original version of the Babylonian pericope, as in its many Palestinian parallels, God was expressing distress about the endangered Israelites, not the perishing Egyptians. There are a number of possible ways to explain how the existing Babylonian pericope came to apply the statement to the imperiled Hebrews, but it is most likely that the change, which was evidently introduced only in the latest redactional stages and takes the form of an assumption that is never stated explicitly, resulted from a simple misunderstanding of the source material.

Similarly, comparison of Megillah 12a with an otherwise similar passage in Esther rabbah suggested that the Talmud's interpretation of Esther 1:8, according to which the measures of food and drink served at Ahasuerus' banquet were in conformity with the prescriptions of the Torah, had not originally been intended as praise for the king's behavior, but as a contrast between the dissolute behavior of the Persians and the restraint that would characterize Jews in analogous circumstances. A similar conclusion suggested itself with regard to the Talmud's observation that Ahasuerus' feast succeeded in satisfying the opposing desires of Mordecai and Haman. In Esther rabbah, 2:14 and other Palestinian parallels this claim is presented as a vain boast by the proud king, to which God retorts that he alone, and not any mortal, is capable of satisfying conflicting and mutually antagonistic wishes. Here too there exists a strong probability that the Palestinian tradition accurately
preserves the original intent of the passage, which was subsequently garbled in the course of its Babylonian redaction. With reference to Esther 1:14, for example, the midrash juxtaposes interpretations that follow contradictory ways of reading the passage: One tradition treats the names of Ahasuerus’ counselors as a series of allegorical references to the Temple service, whereas another one regards the names as those of actual persons, including Haman. The redactors make no effort either to resolve the inconsistency or to indicate that the sources express different approaches.

In some cases the Esther-Midrash fails to mention facts or premises which appear to be crucial for a coherent understanding of a dictum. Frequently this phenomenon takes the form of omitting the biblical allusions that underlie a comment. Thus the Talmud’s exegesis of Esther 1:13 (12b), identifying the verse’s “wise men” with the Jewish rabbis, presupposes the similar phraseology that is applied to the tribe of Issachar in 1 Chronicles 12:32, yet the pericope is rendered incoherent by the omission of the Chronicles quote. The verse is cited in all the Palestinian versions of the midrash. A similar omission of a scriptural citation (to Joshua 10:24, as expounded in Sifré on Deuteronomy, 356) obscures the meaning of the midrashic exposition of Esther 16:11 (16a). The references to the meal-offering on 16a have no clear relevance to the context. It is only when we note that the original tradition spoke of the omer offering, which would have been brought on that day, and which is mentioned in the Palestinian versions of the midrash, that the passage makes sense. This is also true of the Esther-Midrash’s portrayal of the demeaning acts which Haman must perform in honoring Mordecai. The choice of actions seems arbitrary and lacking an exegetical justification because they are not attached to the biblical verses from which they were derived.

In some cases the inadequacies of the redaction do not find expression in any specific difficulty, so much as in a general lack of clarity. Only with the assiduous assistance of the traditional commentators can we obtain some idea of what the authors had in mind—and at times even they do not succeed in satisfactorily elucidating the text.
References to Current Issues

My views about the non-homiletical character of the Esther-Midrash also find support in some other features, such as the failure to apply biblical precedents to issues that would have been of relevance to the local congregation. Thus, in the Palestinian pericope that expounds the “vayhi” verses in the Bible, various scriptural stories are interpreted so as to relate to questions like the conflict with a pagan environment, the need to support Jewish religious schools, the proper honor due to judges, etc. None of these features are included in the equivalent Babylonian pericope on TB Megillah 10b.

Although the question demands further investigation based on a more representative textual sampling, my initial impression is that the range of “current” topics that find their way into the Esther-Midrash, especially in its Babylonian component, is narrower than in the Palestinian Talmud and midrashic collections. If this impression is a correct one, then it should probably be understood as an additional indication that the Esther-Midrash was the product of the rabbinic academy, gravitating naturally towards issues that are of concern to rabbis as a vocation, such as the study of the Torah and its dissemination among the Jewish populace, potential competition between its demands and those of other religious imperatives (e.g., the passage on 16b which declares that the study of Torah takes precedence over immigration to the Land of Israel, citing in evidence Ezra’s conduct), issues related to the rabbi’s functions as judge and communal leader, etc.\textsuperscript{11} All this might conceivably evince a sociological reality, namely

\textsuperscript{11} As an instructive example of the rabbis’ tendency to read the Bible in terms of their contemporary concerns, I will note the frequent allusions to matters related to taxation and customs duties. Most of the instances do not have any overt religious or moral significance, though they might plausibly have held particular relevance to the rabbis, whose office might have entitled them to some sort of exemptions.
that the Babylonian rabbis as a group were less involved in the day-to-day concerns of their constituencies than were their Palestinian colleagues.\textsuperscript{12} There is however a greater likelihood that the phenomenon is merely another consequence of the midrash's having been created and compiled within the "four ells" of the talmudic yeshivah.

**Comparative Perspectives**

**Other Midrashim on Esther**

The limited scope of the evidence forces us to confine our discussion of this important topic to a small number of specific questions. Ultimately, all we can hope to do is to try to sort out the relationships between the Esther-Midrash and comparable rabbinic collections that have survived from the same period. The inquiry must encompass the several midrashic collections dedicated to the Book of Esther—including *Esther rabbah, Abba gorion, Panim aherim A and B*, Chapters 49 and 50 of *Pirqei derabbi eliezer*, and the two Targums\textsuperscript{13}—in addition to other volumes from the midrashic corpus, especially *Genesis rabbah, Leviticus rabbah, Pesiqta derav kahana* and *Ruth rabbah*, etc. All of the works in question are of composite and collective authorship and probably underwent protracted processes of oral embellishment and/or editorial reworking. Several of them are of uncertain provenance. It will therefore be impossible to suggest more than some general patterns. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that the following impressions

\textsuperscript{12} Similar observations were made, in connection with a different subject, by David Levine, "The Talmudic Traditions on Public Fasts: Palestinian and Babylonian Contexts," a lecture delivered at the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, June 1993 (Section #C/6; see p. 59 of the Program).

\textsuperscript{13} It is generally acknowledged that both Targums were composed later than the Esther-Midrash, and both drew upon material contained in it. There are enough Persian elements in them to strongly support the claim that they were composed in Babylonia, and at a fairly early date.
are the result of a careful study of the Esther-Midrash and exhaustive comparison with all the available parallel materials.

In anticipation of potential misunderstandings of my aims in conducting these comparisons, I wish to state categorically that I am not assuming thereby that these works ought to be treated as a unified or consistent corpus in which any passage can be interpreted on the basis of every other—though there were undeniably many instances in which the study of parallel versions did help appreciably to clarify terse and cryptic comments in the Esther-Midrash. Quite the contrary, my chief concern has been to try to delineate differences between traditions that might help define the distinctiveness of the Esther-Midrash vis à vis other contemporary documents. At times this task required meticulous analysis of the other versions to a degree that appeared disproportionate to the immediate needs of a commentary. I regarded such investigations as crucial to the stated purposes of this project, which encompassed the evolution of exegetical traditions and the comparison of the Esther-Midrash with other rabbinic compendia.

The comparison of talmudic parallel texts is subject to well-known methodological hazards. A similarity between texts A and B can, in theory, be accounted for on several different grounds. A might have copied from B, B from A or both from a common source. In the latter case, both versions might have undergone substantial alteration in the course of their subsequent transmission. A consideration that carries especial weight in talmudic and midrashic texts is that similar or virtually identical conclusions could have been arrived at independently by two expositors who were applying the same conceptual and hermeneutical approaches to a common scriptural text.

While all the above possibilities, as well as some other hypothetical constructions, might be theoretically arguable, the individual circumstances of each case make some of them more probable than others. It many instances it was much easier to account for how A might have evolved into B than vice versa. One powerful impression that emerged from the study of the many specific examples was that it was usually far easier to explain how the Babylonian version of a tradition had evolved out of one preserved in a Palestinian collection than the reverse. I recognize however that these conclusions are founded upon many delicate
variables and debatable methodological assumptions, and are therefore open to legitimate disagreement.

It seems evident that there exists a substantial affinity between the Esther-Midrash and the literature of "classical Palestinian midrash" (notably Genesis, Leviticus Esther and Ruth rabbah, and to a lesser extent Pesiqta derav kahana, Song of Songs rabbah and Midrash on Samuel). The structural framework of proems and "vayhi" verses was certainly based upon Palestinian originals, a claim which requires no stronger verification than a reminder of the extent to which the proems were unfamiliar to the Babylonian sages. In several instances it seemed reasonable to suppose that the editors of the Esther-Midrash had before them versions of the Palestinian pericopes that were virtually identical to those which have been preserved in the existing midrashic collections. These sources were of course reworked and adapted in accordance with the exegetical and literary concerns of the Babylonian rabbis. In other cases it appeared that what was preserved in the Palestinian compendia was not the original text that was known to the Bavli, but that the Palestinian material had also undergone subsequent modification through the course of its oral transmission.

By way of contrast, once we have made allowances for the anticipated similarities that arise from their being attached to the same biblical book and their inevitable familiarity with the same pool of earlier rabbinic traditions, there seemed to be relatively few literary parallels to the later Palestinian midrashim on Esther. A number of narrative themes that were central to these later compilations—such as the elaborate legends about King Solomon's throne and the intricate processes that were involved in selecting the date for the execution of Haman's plot or choosing the tree upon which the villain would be impaled—are either totally absent from the Esther-Midrash, or only vaguely and cryptically hinted at.

The Centrality of Seder Olam

Some of the unique qualities of the Esther-Midrash derive from the central role it assigned to the tannaitic chronological midrash Seder Olam. This singular work of talmudic literature does not fit naturally into the standard classifications of halakhah, aggadah, midrash and mishnah and, as is the case with respect to just about all of early rab-
binic literature except for the Mishnah, we know very little about the place that it occupied in the curricula of the Amoraic academies, whether in Babylonia or in the Land of Israel. It is therefore of particular interest to observe just how pivotal and ubiquitous is Seder ʻolam to the Esther-Midrash. This importance is not restricted to incidental citations. It actually influences the fundamental redactional structure of the midrash, particularly with respect to those lengthy passages that interrupt the running commentary to the Book of Esther. I am unable to offer a satisfactory theoretical explanation for this fact, and limit myself to the bare observation that the redactors of the Esther-Midrash perceived an integral connection between the chronological calculations of Seder ʻolam—not restricted to the historical periods that directly surrounded the events of Esther—and their own hermeneutical concerns in expounding the Purim story.

Thus, the second of the three “ancestral” traditions cited by R. Levi [or: R. Jonathan] which furnish the formal framework for the “prologue” to the midrash—“Amoz and Amaziah were brothers”—originates in Seder ʻolam Chapter 20.

Of crucial significance in determining the thematic content of the Esther-Midrash was the pericope on 11b-12a which interpreted Ahasuerus’ banquet in terms of his computation of the seventy-year period that was to elapse from the fall of Jerusalem until its restoration. The chronology that underlay that discussion was based in its entirety on conclusions that had been established by Seder ʻolam. The Talmud makes explicit references to baraitot which originate in Seder ʻolam Chapters 24-5 and 27-8, for which it provides a precise analysis that includes the identification and resolution of apparent discrepancies. That chronological scheme, which differs greatly from that of secular historians, had been arrived at by means of a selective and creative synthesis of the biblical evidence, placing a heavy emphasis on the sometimes problematic historical framework of the Book of Daniel. It was this chronology that formed the basis for Rava’s understanding of the roles of Ahasuerus and his feast, and which was presupposed in many other interpretations in the Esther-Midrash.

The long and complex pericope (14a-15a) that commences with a discussion about the number of biblical prophets and then goes on to focus on a list of seven female prophets is based entirely upon traditions
that originated in *Seder ʿolam*. A comparison between the original Tannaitic text and its treatment in the Esther-Midrash brings to light some significant and instructive differences, which were dealt with at length in my commentary. Two points that are worth noting are:

(a) The numbers forty-eight (male prophets) and seven (female prophets) which are central to the Babylonian pericope are not found in the original *Seder ʿolam* version. An early post-talmudic Babylonian tradition provides a precise enumeration of the forty-eight, based on information contained in *Seder ʿolam*, though the count is not provided in the Talmud itself. As regards the seven prophetesses, it is clear that the author of *Seder ʿolam*, as well as a number of Palestinian midrashic sources that make use of it, could not have regarded this as the total number, since the proof-text adduced for Sarah should apply equally to all the Matriarchs.

(b) The verses cited as proof-texts in order to identify the respective women as prophetesses are not always the same in *Seder ʿolam* and in the Talmud. There are a number of reasons that might account for the divergences, however a clear and recurring difference lies in the fact that the two works held different views about what constitutes prophecy. For *Seder ʿolam* any form of divinely revealed utterance qualifies as prophecy, whereas the Esther-Midrash makes an effort to find verses which (usually with the help of aggadic expansions) make predictions about future events.

These significant dissimilarities between the *baraitas* of the Esther-Midrash and the original text of *Seder ʿolam* resemble the kind of creative exegesis to which the rabbis often subjected earlier documents, and can be taken as evidence for a similarly long and concerted process of study and interpretation of *Seder ʿolam* in the Babylonian academies prior to its incorporation into the talmudic midrash.

A *baraita* from *Seder ʿolam* (Ch. 20) is also adduced on 15a to refute the claim that Mordecai and Malachi were not the same person.

A long pericope on 16b-17a strives to demonstrate that Torah study takes priority even over the obligation to honor one's parents, basing itself on the precedent of the patriarch Jacob who was not penalized for tarrying fourteen years in the academy of Shem and Eber. The chronological framework for this exposition, key elements of which
cannot be proven from the unexpounded testimony of the scriptural texts, was based entirely on material contained in Seder ʿolam Chapter 2, which is quoted extensively in the pericope.

**Intra-Talmudic Citation: The Role of the Anonymous Talmud**

Whatever special features might distinguish the Esther-Midrash from other rabbinic texts, it is after all a section of the Babylonian Talmud. As such, we should attempt to establish whether the scholarly methodologies that have been applied to the study of the halakhic portions of the Talmud are also valid with respect to the aggadic sections of which the Esther-Midrash is the most complete representative. Of pivotal interest is the issue of the “anonymous Talmud”: Does the evidence of the Esther-Midrash bear out the widely held theory that the unattributed Aramaic comments and discussions constitute the latest stratum of the Babylonian Talmud, the redactional or post-redactional stages which did not produce original teachings, but rather were devoted to organizing, comparing and harmonizing the teachings of the earlier Tanna'īm and Amora'īm into the complex literary dialectic that typifies the Talmud as we know it?

In almost all cases, the data supplied by the Esther-Midrash proved to be consistent with the above theories. The imprint of the anonymous redactors was not discernible in the fashioning of long and complex pericopes or in the radical altering of the original meanings of talmudic dicta, as is often the case in halakhic passages. For the most part their activity made itself felt in the adding of simple connectives and in the insertion of kindred materials from other locations in the Talmud, usually on the basis of a simple associative affinity such as the citation of the same verse or rabbinic dictum. In some cases the redactional activity took the form of pointing out contradictions and proposing ways in which they might be resolved and harmonized. In at least one instance—and it was, significantly, a passage that dealt largely with halakhic topics—the pericope proved to be interwoven from two separate discussions that had originated in different tractates (i.e., the passage about the recitation of Hallel on 14a, which was combined from material native to Megillah and from ʿArakhin 10b).

We did however encounter a number of instances in which anonymous passages did not merely serve the standard connective func-
tions, but actually contained new and original narrative materials. Several such passages appeared in the latter sections of the Esther-Midrash (especially on 16a; see the expositions attached to Esther 6:10-4, 7:4 and 7:8). It appears that the pericopes in question were copied from an earlier source, though it is impossible at this stage to determine with confidence what precisely that source was. The most likely possibilities were that the compilers were making use of a Palestinian midrash, or that the material was taken from an Aramaic Targum that contained extensive midrashic elaborations. Both alternatives are plausible.

**Narrative and Exegetical Themes**

Although the Esther-Midrash, like most works of rabbinic literature, consists of a collection of diverse comments ascribed to different sages, and does not necessarily express a systematic exegetical approach, there are elements which recur with some consistency throughout the midrash and which contain readings of Esther that were widespread among the midrashic commentators and homilists. These elements indicate that there existed early narrative traditions that accompanied and embellished the retelling of Esther in synagogue sermons and as it was expounded in the talmudic schools. It is especially intriguing to try to determine whether any of these traditions set the Babylonian Esther-Midrash apart from the contemporary Palestinian aggadic compendia on Esther.

As might have been anticipated, the events and personalities of the Book of Esther emerge from the midrashic retelling in a strikingly different light from that of the original biblical text. In many instances, this situation can be easily accounted for on the basis of the standard hermeneutical assumptions of midrash; e.g., the tendencies to superim-

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14 There is likely some significance to the fact that these are sections of Esther which would not normally have been expounded in homiletical derashot to Esther, whose usual focus would be on the beginning of the book or the other lectionary divisions.
pose the values of rabbinic Judaism, especially the study and observance of the Torah, upon the biblical personalities; the homiletical predilection towards depicting individuals as instances of historical or theological archetypes, and of portraying them as absolutely righteous or evil; the need to discern God’s control over the outcome of all the events, etc.

On the other hand, several of the important features that were added by the rabbinic narration were specific to the facts of the Esther story. Taken by itself the Book of Esther is a story of political intrigues without much religious content. Haman’s irrational hatred of Mordecai drives him to plot the murder of all the Jews of the Persian empire. The plot is fended off through a combination of agile maneuvering on the part of the Jewish protagonists and a chain of opportune coincidences. Even if we allow that the author is assuming a divine guidance behind those coincidences, there remains little in the story that relates to the central religious ideals of biblical or rabbinic Judaism, such as Torah, religious observance, uncompromising monotheism, the Temple or Messianism.

Ahasuerus, Vashti and the Fate of the Temple

There are two notable and closely interconnected themes that appear repeatedly throughout the midrashic versions of Esther: (1) a chronological determination of the time-frame of the story, and (2) a thematic understanding of the religious issues that are at stake.

As regards the chronological determination, the author of Esther supplies us with only those facts that are absolutely essential for the narration of a plot that is largely self-contained. We are informed that the story takes place during the time of Ahasuerus, a monarch whose dates and genealogy are not spelled out and are not particularly relevant to the story-line. Just as the biblical author does not demonstrate any concern for placing his story within the context of Persian history, so is his interest in the broader currents of Jewish history limited to the fact that the episode occurred sometime after the destruction of Jerusalem and the exile of Jeconiah (Esther 2:6). In most respects the story of Esther can be understood without reference to anything outside itself.
The rabbinic sages made every effort to identify Ahasuerus and to locate his reign within a precise historical sequence. The systematic work of constructing a Jewish chronology based entirely on the biblical evidence, was accomplished in the Tannaitic Seder 'olam. Although the Babylonian Esther-Midrash appears to be the only midrashic work on Esther to include a detailed analysis of Seder 'olam's computations, the basic historical scheme seems to have been shared by all the Palestinian aggadic compendia and the Aramaic versions.

A number of considerations converged to determine that the foremost religious issue to be confronted in Esther should be the fate of the Temple, rather than any of the more obvious alternatives. Chief among these was undoubtedly the association with Ezra 4:7-24 in which Ahasuerus (identified in Jewish historiography with "Artaxerxes") king of Persia receives a petition from the adversaries of Zerubbabel and the returning Judean exiles, urging him to put a halt to the construction of the Second Temple. The result was that

*Then sent the king an answer...: Give ye now commandment to cause these men to cease, and that this city be not builded... Then ceased the work of the house of God which is at Jerusalem. So it ceased unto the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia* (Ezra 3:17-24).

Thus, however ambivalently he might be portrayed in Esther, in Ezra Ahasuerus is shown to be an enemy of Jewish religious worship, and responsible for a long delay in the construction of the Temple. Once it has been established that this was the guiding motive for the king's policies, it is ingeniously read into his actions in Esther as well.

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15 In both Ezra and Esther the king functions more as a passive pawn whose power is easily influenced by malevolent advisers and interested parties. The midrash generally prefers to see him as actively sympathetic to the Jews' enemies.

16 The midrash contains other allusions to the Ezra episode. For example, Shimshai the secretary of the Samaritan governor Rehum, who participated in the protest against
The Babylonian Esther Midrash: An Overview

The stylistic parallels between the descriptions of the respective feasts of Ahasuerus and Belshazzar (as described in Daniel Chapter 5) at which the priestly vessels were profaned, strengthened the conviction that the two events had a similar purpose. The chronology was given a solid exegetical foundation in the pericope on 11b-12a in which Rava provided meticulous calculations for the dating of the final years of the Judean kingdom, and of the sequence of Babylonian, Median and Persian kings who reigned from then until the rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple. Thus, even at the moment of grace when Ahasuerus (in 5:3) is receiving Esther and offering to extend favors “to the half of the kingdom,” the rabbis discern here (15b) a stubborn insistence that the rebuilding of the Temple be explicitly excluded from the scope of his magnanimity.

As might be expected, the historical determination was for the rabbis not of mere antiquarian interest (for the rabbis were never concerned with historical fact for its own sake), but was crucial for setting the Esther story within a religious thematic context.

An important outgrowth of this redefinition of the thematic content of Esther is that the center of moral gravity is thereby shifted away from the stories of the heroes Mordecai and Esther and the villain...Continued from previous page

the building of the Temple, is the person who reads the royal records before the wakeful Ahasuerus, attempting to expurgate the mention of Mordecai (15b, to Esther 6:2).

17 See especially Daniel 5:23.

18 Notwithstanding the fact that no verses from Daniel are employed in our midrash as “proem verses,” the frequency of citations from Daniel is so great as to create the impression that it was read as a sort of thematic “countertext,” to be used for elucidating Esther, in a manner analogous to the use of Song of Songs as a key to the exposition of the Pentateuch [see Daniel Boyarin, “The Song of Songs: Lock or Key? Intertextuality, Allegory and Midrash,” in The Book and the Text: The Bible and Literary Theory, ed. Regina M. Schwartz, 214–30 (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990)],

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Haman, towards the personalities of Ahasuerus and Vashti, whose moral positions were not clearly defined in the biblical narrative. In all this we may discern a tacit message to the Jews of the post-Destruction era that their own historical situation was identical to the "days of Ahasuerus." They too were living through a temporary and anomalous period between the Second and Third Temples. Although the redemption seems to be indefinitely delayed and the supremacy of the Temple's destroyers appears unchallenged, was this not precisely how matters would have appeared to the contemporaries of Esther and Mordecai? And yet just as Jeremiah's prophecy about the imminent rebuilding of the Temple\(^{19}\) would inevitably find fulfillment in spite of the scoffing of the heathens and the despair of the Jews, so too would the current exile be ended and the Wicked Empire meet its ultimate punishment according to the equally inexorable workings of the divine historical plan.

In spite of the rabbis' generally negative estimation of Ahasuerus, who is often referred to simply as oto rasha, "that wicked one," we do encounter a surprising number of passages in which the potentate is represented in more favorable terms. Thus, the rabbis do not begrudge him praise for his sexual restraint (13a, commenting on Esther 2:14), and Esther is said to regret speaking of him in disparaging terms (15b, to Esther 5:1). A recurrent debate between Rav and Samuel hinges on the question of whether he was a wise or foolish ruler, and other pericopes discuss the geographical extent of his dominion, etc. To be sure, the disputes in question do not relate to his moral rectitude so much as

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or Job Chapter 24 as an exposition of the wicked generations of the Deluge and the Tower of Babel, etc.

\(^{19}\) What defines the redemption for the midrashic rabbis is the actual construction of the Temple, not the return from exile. The Purim story takes place after Cyrus' proclamation, after Jews have returned to the Holy Land—even as in the rabbis' own

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to his cleverness and political wiles. One issue which crops up in a number of guises is the question of the legitimacy of Ahasuerus' succession. Several passages in the Esther-Midrash emphasize that he did not inherit the throne, but that he rose from a humble station (e.g., as a royal stable-keeper [12b]) and acquired his dominion through nepotism, bribery, gradual conquests or other means, a detail that can be interpreted to his credit or his detriment. This ambivalence might well reflect his enigmatic portrayal in the biblical story, where he acts both as Haman's accomplice and as the faithful executor of Esther's wishes. There might also be a measure of local-patriotism at play as the Babylonian sages reveal something of their attitudes towards their current Persian monarchs. On the other hand it is possible that at least some of the favorable representations of Ahasuerus originated in Palestinian sources, where the Persians empire was frequently idealized as a foil to the oppressive and despised Roman regime.

Similar considerations might have governed the descriptions of Ahasuerus' feast as related in Esther 1:5-8 and expounded in Megillah 12a. Most of the rabbinic dicta that deal with this event assume that not only were its physical trappings of unequaled grandeur and splendor, but that the protocol and organization of the banquet were also devised with exemplary wisdom and justice in order to produce fair and harmonious relations among the different classes of participants. It is difficult to accommodate this attitude with the generally negative appraisals of Ahasuerus's moral and intellectual stature, and the impression was created that the authors of these expositions had become caught up in the spirit of the biblical descriptions which emphasized the magnificence of the proceedings without subjecting them to moral or religious judgments.20

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The biblical Vashti is an "unknown quantity" about whom the narrator only supplies minimal scraps of information. Accordingly we are told nothing about her nationality or ancestry, her motive for refusing the royal command or her subsequent fate. The midrashic rabbis entertain no doubt that Vashti’s fate is not merely her own, but constitutes God’s final judgment upon the wicked Babylonian dynasty that was responsible for the destruction of the first Temple. Although there is no particular fact in the biblical story that would warrant this identification, it does serve the broader thematic and homiletic “subtext” of the midrash, reinforcing the centrality of the Temple and its fate as the major religious issues of Esther. Once the destiny of the Temple had been chosen as a theme for midrashic discourses, then all suitable scriptural details were reinterpreted in accordance with that idea. (A similar train of developments implicated Haman and his sons in the postponement of the Temple’s construction.)

The identification of Vashti as the last survivor of the royal house of Babylon most likely was the result of two unrelated processes: (a) the need to assert divine justice by demonstrating the completeness of the retribution that was inflicted on Nebuchadnezzar in fulfillment of prophetic oracles (e.g., Isaiah 14:22, Jeremiah 49:38) that there would remain no surviving remnant of Babylon; (b) the assumption that Vashti would not have been made to suffer unless she had done something to deserve her fate. While each of these exegetical questions could have been—and was—resolved separately, the tradition about Vashti’s being executed for the crimes of her infamous ancestor provided a con-

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Israel.

20 On one occasion, on the basis of a comparison with a parallel passage in a Palestinian collection, I suggested that the adulatory tone was originally intended as a description of Ahasuerus’ hubris-driven thoughts, and not as the author’s own assessment of the situation.
venient solution to both problems at once. Ancestral guilt does not however free the rabbinic homilists from finding individual sins that would justify her punishment at the hands of Ahasuerus. The Esther-Midrash records several such charges, including her licentious sexual behavior (12b), her abuse of her Jewish maidservants (ibid.), and others.

In all these respects the Babylonian Esther-Midrash does not seem to be essentially different from its contemporary Palestinian “cousins.” The assumptions that Vashti was descended from Nebuchadnezzar and that Ahasuerus was determined to halt the restoration of the Temple are common to all these works.21

The concern for the Temple and the sacrificial worship that took place within its precincts is ingeniously introduced at several unexpected points (e.g., in Megillah 12b where the names of the royal advisors who were consulted in Esther 1:14 were taken as symbolic allusions to the sacrificial offerings that should be credited to the Jews’ favor).

Mordecai

In most respects the rabbinic depiction of Mordecai does not differ greatly from those of many other biblical protagonists. He is of course portrayed as a virtuous man whose righteousness expresses itself in a devotion to the study and observance of the Torah. Like Moses, David and others Mordecai is transformed by the midrash into an idealized rabbi who fulfills the same educational, religious and administrative duties that were performed by the sages of the talmudic era (e.g., he appears on 16a as a schoolteacher expounding the laws of the ‘omer or meal offering). The rabbis did not ignore Mordecai’s biblical office.

as a royal courtier and invented new occasions for him to appear as an advisor to the king (e.g., 13a). It is nonetheless emphasized (see 16a, to Esther 6:12) that his personal victories and successes did not distract him from his duty to his people.

There appears to be a disproportionate emphasis on Mordecai’s functioning as a member of the Sanhedrin. There are several exegetical factors which might have given rise to this tradition, such as the identification with “Mordecai Bilshan” (i.e., “the polyglot”) which evoked associations with the linguistic erudition that was considered a qualification for members of the Jewish High Court (see 13b). To my mind it appears more likely that the rabbis were sensitive to the special place of Mordecai’s generation in the evolution of the halakhic tradition, standing as it did at the transitional period between Prophetic and Rabbinic authority. Purim, unlike every other biblical festival, derived its authority not from the revelation at Mount Sinai, but from a decree of the Jewish spiritual leadership at the time of the events. According to rabbinic historiographic conceptions, the legislative authority that operated at that time was the “Great Assembly,” and the talmudic expositors seem to have taken a particular interest in these earliest manifestations of the institutions to which they themselves were the successors. The rabbis’ reading of Esther 9:12 to imply that Mordecai forfeited the support of some of his colleagues on the Sanhedrin when he attained a political office probably echoes the rabbis’ hesitations about their own conflicting priorities.

In addition, the Esther-Midrash treats Mordecai the Benjaminite as the final link in an ancient struggle between Israel and Amalek, a struggle in which the mantle of Hebrew leadership had usually fallen upon the shoulders of figures from the tribes descended from Rachel (Joshua, Saul, etc.). Several passages in the Esther-Midrash and elsewhere identify Mordecai’s special strength as lying in his gift for prayer. Some of the comments about Mordecai are surprisingly critical or equivocal, such as the assertion on 12b that he was inferior to the Amora Rava bar Rav Huna.

**Esther**

The personality of Esther is not delineated very clearly in the biblical story. Through the early sections her role is largely a passive
one. It is at Mordecai’s bidding that she enters the competition to be chosen queen of Persia, and she continues to obey his instructions with regard to concealing her nationality and interceding before the king. Once she has overcome her reluctance to take that frightening risk, she takes control of the events and by the end of the story her leadership seems to be at least as assertive as Mordecai’s. The Esther-Midrash displays little concern for these developments, and for the most part depicts the heroine in the garb of generic rabbinic virtue and piety, submissive to the authority of the sages. Following the assertion of Seder olam, Esther (14b) is designated a prophetess, a characterization that is not found explicitly in the biblical text and which has an important bearing on the halakhic status of Purim. Most of the details that are added by the midrash are introduced in order to further other exegetical concerns; e.g., the halakhic issues that arise from her living in a pagan palace, the insistence that she was perceived as beautiful in spite of her actual plainness, etc. These traditions are discussed in the appropriate sections elsewhere in this chapter.

A very problematic exegetical tradition is the one which identifies Esther as Mordecai’s wife. This detail is not attested, to the best of my knowledge, in any other rabbinic work, though the Esther-Midrash cites it in the name of the Tanna R. Meir and allusions to it might appear in the Greek Esther as well. It is difficult to understand what homiletical, theological or halakhic end is being served by the introduction of this detail which makes it only harder to justify her concurrent marriage to Ahasuerus.22

22 In the commentary I suggest that this tradition, like the one that identifies Sarah with Abraham’s niece Iscrah, originated in the Pharisees’ determination to find biblical precedents for the practice of niece-marriage. This does not fully explain why the Babylonian Amora’im should have elected to emphasize this tradition in the face of the halakhic difficulties that it poses. I am almost tempted to speculate that the rabbis were attracted by the challenge of justifying such an outrageous tradition.
In contrast to the approach of the biblical narrator who compresses the story of Esther's uninvited intrusion on Ahasuerus at the beginning of Chapter 5 to a few terse verses, the authors of the Esther-Midrash (15b) made every possible effort to stretch out that pivotal moment, surely the most suspenseful in the book. Predictably, she is described as uttering prayers on that occasion, as well as expressing doubts about her own worthiness.

**Haman**

The reasons underlying Haman's animosity towards Mordecai and the Jews are not spelled out clearly in the scriptural narrative, nor is Mordecai's motive in not showing the usual honors to the king's chief minister. The midrashic exegesis stepped in by suggesting a tantalizing variety of possible explanations involving personal animosities (e.g., Haman's daughter had failed in her bid to be elected queen; Haman had sold himself as a slave to Mordecai), an archetypal ancestral antagonism (a continuation of the ancient struggle between the sons of Rachel and the Amalek) or religious issues (Haman insisted upon being worshipped; he opposed the rebuilding of the Temple; etc.). In the Babylonian Esther-Midrash preference is generally given to explanations of the third type which depict the events of the Purim story as a struggle over religious principles. Several of the classic anti-Jewish accusations uttered by Haman in Esther 3:8 were still current in the talmudic era, and the rabbis (16a) found allusions to other familiar charges hiding between the words and lines of Haman's diatribe.

The midrashic depiction of Haman seems to focus more on his downfall than on the horror of his scheme or the villainy of his character. The rabbis missed no opportunity to emphasize the humiliation of Haman's defeat, so much so that he frequently comes across more as a comical buffoon than as a terrifying arch-foe. This type of portrayal, which must surely have held much appeal and emotional satisfaction for popular audiences, is found most prominently in the midrashic retelling of Esther 6:5-12 (16a) in which Haman, to his shock, is commanded to confer honors upon Mordecai. Although the main outline of this episode in the original biblical story is similar to that in the midrash, the rabbis introduce many novel elements into that account. We can vividly imagine Haman squirming as he pretends not to understand who
is to be the recipient of the royal largess and what will be included in the honors. The story adds many new insults to the injuries set down in the biblical story, including embarrassing references to Haman’s plebeian origins as a barber or barber’s son, his having to personally attend to Mordecai’s haircut and bath, and helplessly allowing Mordecai to kick him in the course of mounting the horse. The midrashic narrative takes on dimensions which hover between slapstick and sadistic cruelty when Haman’s daughter spills the contents of a chamber-pot on his head and then throws herself to her death before his eyes. In a way that is not spelled out in the biblical story, the humbled and broken Haman is made to acknowledge his ruin before Mordecai.

The Jews

By focusing on the intrigues of a small number of individuals, the Book of Esther fails to furnish us with a clear picture of how the masses of the Jews in the Persian empire were affected by the events. Invariably they appear in passive roles, whether as innocent victims of Haman’s rage, or as obedient followers of Mordecai and Esther’s commands. A number of midrashic passages attempt to assign them a more substantial role in the developments that overtake them. Most notable are the sources that apportion blame to the Jews for the dangers to which they were subjected. This conception contrasts with the plain sense of the biblical account which offers no suggestion whatsoever that the Jews had done anything to provoke Haman’s wrath.

The charges that the rabbis level against Esther’s contemporaries relate to halakhic violations involving varying degrees of gravity: the worship (under duress) of Nebuchadnezzar’s idol, participation in the feasts of Belshazzar and Ahasuerus (whether this is perceived as a ritual or ideological transgression), or a general negligence in the study of Torah or fulfillment of religious obligations (Haman accuses them of “slumbering from the commandments” according to 13b, derived from Esther 3:8). Although the basic determination to interpret adversity as a punishment for sin is a standard premise of Jewish exegesis, and some of the specific accusations can find support in the events of the biblical chronicles, it nonetheless appears likely that the exegetical traditions evolved from homiletical contexts, as preachers drew upon the events.
of the Purim story in order to chastise their own communities for sundry religious shortcomings, such as excessive fraternizing with heathen neighbors and inadequate devotion to the ideals of Torah.

As is common in aggadic literature, the Esther-Midrash exaggerates the differences between Jews and Gentiles beyond what is warranted in the biblical story. If pagans seem to be helpful or favorably disposed to Jews and their cause, there is usually another explanation for the fact; e.g., they are being compelled by God or angels, “Not because they love Mordecai, but rather because they despise Haman” (16a, to Esther 6:3), etc. This tendency is aptly exemplified in the curious treatment of Harbona whose apparent sympathies with the Jewish cause are dismissed by our midrash as a self-serving last-minute defection motivated by nothing more virtuous than an opportunistic realization of which side now held the upper hand (16a, to Esther 7:9). Similarly, Ahasuerus’ support for Esther in 9:12 (16b) is ascribed to supernatural coercion.

**Halakhah in Aggadah**

The piety of rabbinic Judaism was largely defined by its adherence to the carefully defined regulations of Jewish law, the halakhah. The task of translating Scriptural texts into the conceptual vocabulary of the talmudic era inevitably involved a reinterpretation of the ancient sources to accord with the halakhic norms and institutions with which they were familiar. This aspect of midrashic activity is common to all aggadic biblical interpretation, though it is probably more prominent in connection with Esther because this book is outwardly so removed from the familiar categories of Jewish law and often in apparent conflict with them.

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23 This is in acute contrast to the prevailing view of the Palestinian Talmud, refuting Joseph Heinemann’s thesis that the Babylonian rabbis, living amidst a gentile majority, were more universalistic in their attitudes.
The Esther-Midrash misses few opportunities to read into the narrative references to Jewish law. Thus, the mention in Esther 1:10 of the seventh day of Ahasuerus’ feast is taken by the rabbis (12b) as an allusion to the sabbath, justifying the introduction of an account of how Vashti compelled the daughters of Israel to labor on their day of rest. A similar approach to the story guides the midrash (13a) in asserting that the maidservants who were assigned to Esther’s entourage served as a sort of human calendar to remind her which day was the sabbath. The Midrash also raises the question of how Esther could have observed the Jewish dietary regulations without disclosing the secret of her Jewishness. She also took care to approach the sages with questions related to the laws of menstrual impurity (13b, to 2:20) and partook of purifying immersions before resuming relations with Mordecai. The unusual names of Ahasuerus’ counselors in Esther 1:14 are treated by the midrash (12b) as references to aspects of the sacrificial regulations that were invoked before God by the Jews’ angelic sponsors. An anachronistic thematic relationship is posited between the events of the Purim story and the bringing of the “sheqalim” contribution to the Temple and the biblical lection that commemorates it according to the rabbinic calendar (13b). Similarly, although the biblical author pays no attention to the fact that much of the story takes place during the season of Passover and the bringing of the ‘omer, these details, their halakhic implications (e.g., with respect to the permissibility of fasting) and symbolisms (e.g., the superiority of a handful of barley over ten thousand silver talents, 16a) are spelled out in the midrash to great homiletic advantage. Esther’s prayers for success as she approached the king (5:1) are equated (15b) with the words of Psalm 22, which appears to have been a prescribed liturgical reading for Purim. The synonyms for joy used to express the Jews’ deliverance in Esther 8:16 are equated with specific religious precepts (16b). The supremacy of Torah study over all competing religious obligations is proclaimed in the pericope on 16b-17a, in which support is adduced from the behavior of biblical personalities including Jacob, Ezra and Mordecai.

Most conspicuous are the repeated allusions to “the rabbis” as participants in the story. Thus, when Ahasuerus (Esther 1:13) is said to consult “wise men which knew the times” (12b), the midrash conveniently seizes the opportunity to find here a reference to the Jewish
sages, renowned for their expertise in the intricacies of the Hebrew calendar. The midrash (13b, to Esther 3:16) assumes that Haman had explicitly targeted “Mordecai’s people,” i.e., the rabbis as part of his plot, and that he was uneasy lest their merits overturn his plans even if the rest of the people should prove undeserving of redemption.

Because the Book of Esther also includes sections that are of halakhic significance, or which were perceived as such by the rabbis, the Esther-Midrash contains a number of pericopes which are devoted to halakhic rulings or discussions. This is particularly true of the verses in Esther chapters 8 and 9 (see Megillah 16b) which furnished the basis for the religious obligations of Purim, such as the reading of the Megillah, the feast, and the exchange of gifts. As was remarked in the ‘Ein ya‘qov, the talmudic pericope that is now located on folio 7a-b as a commentary to the Mishnah (1:4) dealing with the obligations of mishloah manot and mattanot la‘evionim, was probably once a portion of the Esther-Midrash expounding Esther 9:22.24 Another complex halakhic pericope, which draws partly upon material that originated in TB ‘Arakhin 10b, is incorporated into a discussion about the authority of prophets to institute new laws (Megillah 14a).

The Hand of God

In the traditional Jewish world-view there is nothing that happens in nature or in history that is not subject to God’s active scrutiny and guidance. This holds especially true for the saga of ancient Israel as recorded in the pages of the sacred scriptures. Even in normal biblical chronicles, where the relationships between human moral behavior and divine response are plainly spelled out, the midrashic homilists are likely to introduce more tangible expressions of God’s involvement in the outcome of the events. This kind of exegesis might appear more surprising when applied to the Book of Esther, the only biblical work

24 That pericope was not included in the present study.
in which God's name is never mentioned and one whose outcome can easily be ascribed to a combination of moral virtue, tactical acumen and coincidence. To the rabbis, of course, such naturalistic or secular explanations of the events would be unimaginable or downright blasphemous. Even conventional exegesis of Esther would legitimately allow for subtle and invisible modes of divine interference, particularly by means of the opportune timing of otherwise unrelated episodes like Vashti's rebellion and dismissal, Esther's selection as queen, Mordecai's uncovering of Bigthan and Teresh's conspiracy, Ahasuerus' being reminded of his debt during his bout of insomnia and Haman's intrusion in the courtyard at that precise moment. Ultimately, however, all this was achieved by natural means without spectacular miracles or obvious supernatural interference.

For the authors of the Esther-Midrash the hand of God was discernible throughout the story in the form of manifest miracles, which they take every opportunity to magnify and exaggerate (as in the debates on 15b over how far the angels stretched Ahasuerus' scepter, or how many of Haman's sons perished with him). As we have seen, the peril that threatened the Jews of the Persian empire was not only the result of Haman's nefarious plot, but reflected also (or even: primarily) a celestial desire to frighten the Jews into repentance for various sins of commission and omission. If Ahasuerus had trouble sleeping, this was surely a result of Heavenly prodding or a reflection of the discomfort that was disturbing the peace of the heavenly hosts (15b).

God's vigorous manipulation of the events is often portrayed as the activity of angelic agents, especially Gabriel. It is he who subjects Vashti to the disfigurement that prevents her, against her own inclination, from exhibiting her naked charms before Ahasuerus' guests, creating the vacuum that will allow Esther to enter the royal court. Three angels assure Esther a favorable reception by the king, against his own inclinations at the time (15b, to Esther 5:2). The Ministering Angels also serve as Israel's defenders before the heavenly tribunal. When Esther herself came close to upsetting the Jewish triumph by rashly accusing Ahasuerus, an angelic slap was needed to point the finger at Haman (16a, to 7:6). A troupe of angels impersonating Haman's agents further kindle the king's rage by pretending to fell trees in the royal garden. It is angels as well who are said to push Haman
onto Esther's bed (16a, to 7:8), and to slap Ahasuerus' mouth in order to secure his support for the Jewish cause (16b, interpreting Esther 9:12).

That the successful outcome of the story could not have been achieved without supernatural assistance is underscored by the otherwise surprising claim that Esther, in spite of the apparent impression created in the scriptural narrative, was not a beauty. Rather she was "greenish" (13a) and would not have found favor in the eyes of the king had God not manipulated the perceptions of her observers. Similar miracles allowed her to appear as either a virgin or a married woman, or as a countrywoman of each guest, in accordance with the preferences of her observers (to 2:14). It worked out opportunely that the date for Esther's selection fell in a cold winter month when the king was especially desirous of warm female companionship. As the royal chronicles were being read before Ahasuerus, Shimshai would have obliterated the mention of Mordecai's service to the king had not Gabriel magically rewritten it (15b). All this comes to show that the Jews could not have been delivered solely by means of mortal stratagems.

**Localizing the Story: Babylonian vs. Palestinian Elements**

A familiar feature of homiletical exegesis is that the preacher makes every effort to translate the scriptural text into terms that are vividly and immediately understandable to the audience. This will inevitably entail conscious or unconscious anachronisms as the homilist draws comparisons to current realia and mores.

In the Esther-Midrash this process is often less perceptible than it would otherwise have been, because the setting of the original story—in Achaemenid Persia and Media—was geographically and culturally close to that of the Babylonian rabbis who lived in Mesopotamia under the dominion of Sasanian Persian monarchs. Thus we are not always conscious when the midrash is depicting the layout of the palace of Shushan or the administrative position occupied by Haman in terms drawn from the contemporary royal courts. In several instances we are made aware of the process only when we compare the Babylonian pericope with its Palestinian equivalent, in which the background and
vocabulary reflect the life of the Roman Emperor and his entourage, rather than that of Sasanian Babylonia.\textsuperscript{25} Thus on 12b (interpreting Esther 1:12) Vashti defiantly reminds Ahasuerus that he was formerly her father Belshazzar’s \textit{ahuriar}, his stable-keeper; while in the Palestinian versions of the story he is referred to by the Roman title of κόμης στόβλου, and when similar statements are made about the menial services which Haman must perform for Mordecai (see 16a) the Palestinian versions make use of terminology taken from the Hellenistic and Roman environments (e.g., the bath-house), most of which is omitted in the Babylonian Esther-Midrash. In several of these cases it appears that the Palestinian version was the earlier one, and that the Babylonian one should be regarded as a subsequent adaptation.

It was not very difficult to discern the incidental differences that result from the need to tailor the material to the understanding of a local audience. It proved considerably more challenging to try to identify significant divergences in religious attitudes or exegetical approach between the Babylonian Esther-Midrash and its Palestinian counterparts. In this area I was repeatedly surprised at how much the authors of all the works in question demonstrated a basic consensus as regards their world-views, value-concepts and hermeneutical methods. There were nevertheless a few differences which deserve mention.

From the most ancient times, Jewish tradition has equated the celebration of Purim with the Torah’s command to blot out the name of Israel’s primeval adversary, Amalek (see Exodus 17:8-16; Deuteronomy 25:17-9).\textsuperscript{26} Haman is designated an “Agagite,” a descen-

\textsuperscript{25} Note however the interesting example on 16a, where the Palestinian sources depict Mordecai stepping on Haman’s neck to climb onto the royal horse in a manner reminiscent of the (historically questionable) story of the emperor Valerian’s humiliation at the hands of Shapur. The Babylonian version of this episode does not evoke the same associations.

\textsuperscript{26} In recognition of this connection, the Mishnah (\textit{Megillah} 3:4, 6) designates these passages as the mandatory lections for Purim and the preceding Sabbath.
dant of the Amalekite royal line, and the Jewish triumph over his machinations is construed as the culmination of an age-old struggle. Now, by the Talmudic era there was no longer any recognizable nationality that could be identified with the biblical Amalek, so that Amalek functions largely as a symbolic or historical concept, to be likened to Israel’s current foes and oppressors. Accordingly, in Palestinian texts there is an assumption, often tacit, that the “evil empire” of Rome, which has destroyed God’s sanctuary and continues to oppress his people, is the true successor of the treacherous Amalekites. This tradition is not merely typological, but is justified on exegetical grounds, since Genesis 36:12 explicitly states that Amalek was the grandson of Esau/Edom, who was universally regarded as the prototype and ancestor of the Romans.27 This theme is developed on a number of occasions in Palestinian aggadic collections, and it is fully consistent with the midrashic propensity for staging the Purim story in a Roman-like setting.

In the Babylonian Esther-Midrash we find almost no traces of this motif. In fact it is quite astonishing to discover that Haman’s “Agagite” descent plays almost no part in the midrashic version of the story in spite of the fact that it is so crucial in defining the halakhic status of Purim. The redactors preferred to link the events of Esther to a different biblical antagonist, namely the Babylonians whose king Nebuchadnezzar was responsible for the destruction of the first Temple. For purposes of this exegetical motif the decisive link is established through Vashti, whom the midrash identifies as a descendant of Nebuchadnezzar, rather than through Haman. There are a number of different factors which might have brought about this shift in emphasis, including the simple fact that the Vashti episode dominates the first chapter of Esther and therefore attracts a disproportionate amount of expository attention. We should not however disregard the geographi-

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cultural circumstances: A Jew living in Babylonia would have a natural affinity towards matters involving an ancient Babylonian monarch.

**Literary and Exegetical Methods**

The Esther-Midrash is typical in its use of a wide variety of midrashic and homiletical techniques for the crafting of its derashot. We have noted on several occasions that the goals which the compilers set before themselves were not overtly literary. They appear to have been concerned primarily with the content, with transmitting the traditions that had reached them from different sources, and especially with recording those rabbinic dicta which contained novel interpretations of the biblical texts. Nowhere was this more glaringly conspicuous than in the treatment of the proems. The Babylonian redactors had presumably inherited a collection of proems from their Palestinian source. When they incorporated them into the talmudic pericope they did not attempt to preserve their structural function as introductions to the opening verse of the lection, but rather satisfied themselves with recording the scriptural verses and whatever exegetical comments were attached to them. To the extent that the link between the verses was felt to shed new light upon the interpretation of opening words of Esther, the tendency in some instances was for the proem to be turned on its head and transformed into an explanatory comment on Esther.

Even in the absence of strictly defined proems, the Esther-Midrash did make good use of some of the characteristic exegetical patterns of that genre, such as the assignment of specific referents to the vague generalities of Wisdom or Prophetic “petihta-verses.”

The Esther-Midrash contains a rich collection of name-etymologies for several of the main characters, including Ahasuerus, Mordecai, Esther, the royal counselors and others, in which the given names are interpreted as epithets describing their characters or deeds, or even as allegorical allusions to Jewish religious concepts and institutions (e.g., the interpretation of Esther 1:14 on 12b). There is no uniqueness in this fact, and comparable word-plays are found in several of the other midrashic collections. The unusual-looking concentration of such explanations here was probably stimulated by the disproportionate number of exotic-sounding Persian names. Similar considerations guided the rabbis’ treatment of the many figures who are mentioned only once
in the book. Following standard midrashic procedure, the names are interpreted symbolically and identified with better-known biblical personalities.

Some of the standard modes of midrashic hermeneutics that are attested in the Esther-Midrash include: imaginative use of the *gezerah shavah* (interpreting an expression on the basis of its use elsewhere in the Bible); *notarikon* (the reading of words as abbreviations of longer expressions) and other forms of puns and word-plays; *gimatria* (calculating the numerological values of letters and words, as in 15b, to 5:11); creating novel conclusions by resolving contradictions, real or manufactured, between biblical or rabbinic texts; basing interpretations on changes that have taken place in word-usage and syntactical conventions between biblical and rabbinic Hebrew dialects; the assumption that everybody, including heathen arch-villains, possessed an intimate familiarity with all the words of the Hebrew Scriptures (thus in the pericope on 11b-12a Belshazzar and Ahasuerus take care to check the accuracy of the prophecies concerning the length of the Jewish exile in Jeremiah 29:10, even as Haman on 13b knew that Adar was the month in which Moses had died, as calculated in *Seder 'olam*, and on 16a cites Proverbs 24:17-8); taking bold liberties with the punctuation and syntax of biblical verses (e.g., the rewriting of Isaiah 4:1 on 12a), and the transforming of verses into dialogues by dividing them up and assigning the portions to two or more speakers (see 12a, to Esther 1:6); reading verses as answers to unstated questions (16a, to 3:8-9); illustrating ideas with the help of popular proverbs ("as people say") and parables (e.g., that of the ditch and the mound, on 13b). As we have noted already, there are rare forays into the realm of allegorical and symbolic interpretation, such as when the names of Ahasuerus' counselors were read as allusions to the sacrificial service.

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28 E.g., 12b (to Esther 1:10), to exemplify the equally lewd motives of Ahasuerus and Vashti; 16b (to illustrate Joseph's power over his brothers and father).
Some of the rabbinic comments might fairly be regarded as sincere philological activity, endeavoring to explain difficult expressions without any notable moral or religious bias. Several examples of this kind of exegesis can be found in the brief pericopes attached to Esther 1:5-8 (12a) where the biblical text contains an unusual concentration of difficult words related to the furnishings of Ahasuerus’ feast. This would also appear to be true of R. Nehemiah’s identification (13a) of Esther’s name with the Istahar, an approach that is accepted by many modern commentators. The authors of the midrashic commentaries to Esther were sensitive to the complex thematic connections between Esther and the Joseph saga in Genesis, which are now widely acknowledged by critical literary scholarship. Thus the rabbis call our attention (13b, to 2:21) to the parallel narrative functions of Bigthan and Teresh’s plot against Ahasuerus and Pharaoh’s anger at his butler and baker. In their speculations about the psychological and strategic factors that impelled Esther to invite Haman to the two banquets, or what prompted the sleepless king to check his chronicles for unrewarded favors (15b), the rabbis anticipated the theories of a number of modern commentators.

Images of Women in the Esther-Midrash

Because the Book of Esther is one of the few in the Jewish canon that places a woman at the center of its concerns it is reasonable to expect that midrashic compilations based on Esther could assist us in the challenging and important task of piecing together a coherent picture of how women figure within the intricate web of laws, interpretations, opinions and practices that we designate loosely as “rabbinic Judaism.” The framing of methodological questions on this topic is itself fraught with difficulties, and it is difficult to progress beyond the individual historical and literary details towards a coherent general picture.

Whatever abstractions and generalizations will appear in the present section will be carefully delimited by the observable data of history and text. The analysis will accept certain general assumptions regarding historical methodology; e.g., Jews did not live in isolation from the rest of the world, and hence their views and practices can only be appreciated when set in the appropriate social context. In pre-technological societies the traditional gender-role divisions between home and field
were determined more by the uncompromising facts of biology and economics than by religion or ideology. Nor can these roles be presumed, until proven otherwise, to exist in relationships of domination and inferiority. 29

When applied to midrashic exegesis, responsible historical method demands, among other things, that we remain conscious at all times of the delicate interrelationship between text and commentary. Does an attitude expressed in a dictum tell us about the views of the biblical author or of the commentator? At times the answer will be “both” (and we must not underestimate the importance of tracing patterns of continuity as well as innovations and revolutions), while at times the answer might even be “neither” (e.g., when the exegesis is mistaken but not observably biased). Since my commentary is not conceived as a study of the biblical Book of Esther itself, such instances will be of limited value to the framing of my conclusions. Of more substantive interest are those cases where the midrashic exegete, through the act of reading things into scripture that are plainly not there, signals to us his discomfort with the values contained in the plain sense of that scripture. It is on these occasions that we are likely to find ourselves on the track of useful and significant data. Yet even here the collective character of rabbinic literature poses additional difficulties, since it presents us with a selection of dicta that extend over a considerable geographic and chronological range without usually distinguishing between those that are idiosyncratic to particular individuals, those which expressly widely held views of the respective Jewish communities, and those which are to be regarded as “official” pronouncements of “Judaism.”

29 Esther of course does not fulfill any of the normal domestic roles of wife and mother that are presumed in halakhic discourse, a fact which does not seem to upset the rabbis of the Esther-Midrash to any discernible degree. Neither, apparently, did they regard it as an unnatural violation of Mordecai’s gender-role that he raised her by himself.
Keeping in mind all the above reservations, the overwhelming impression that emerges from the study of the Esther-Midrash is that the participating rabbis seem to have had very little interest in women as a distinct topic. Perhaps it is a consequence of their use of a fixed (though flexible) body of hermeneutical methods that the ways in which they apply the modes of midrashic interpretation to female personalities from the Bible do not differ perceptibly from their treatment of male figures. Just as midrash tends to obscure the individualities of biblical figures, preferring to regard them as instances of unchanging religious types, so apparently does it regard gender differences as irrelevant to its hermeneutic interests. Unlike the conventions that prevail in legal discourse, the Esther-Midrash, though undeniably a creation that was authored, compiled and redacted by males, does not dwell on women as “others,” as a class that is inherently outside the bounds of human “normalcy.”30 It might be argued that the uniformity created by the adoption of standardized techniques for midrashic interpretation served as a defense against the intrusion of personal prejudices in the rabbinic retelling of the Bible, even as the objective methods of halakhic discourse helped neutralize many of the biases that might have otherwise penetrated into normative Jewish law.

Thus, in most respects there is little in the midrashic depiction of Vashti that hinges directly upon her being a woman. Far more crucial is the tradition of her descent from Nebuchadnezzar and Belshazzar and the cruelty that she shares, in the rabbinic view, with most heathens and which constitutes the logical precondition for her eventual punishment. If she is guilty of lewdness then it is not as a woman, for she is portrayed as no more and no less than the moral equal of her husband.

It is against this exegetical background that we ought to appreciate Rava’s amazed reaction to the royal decree that followed Vashti’s

30 By giving the name “Women” (Nashim) to one order, the Mishnah is declaring that its normal concerns are limited to men.
disobedience: "that every man should bear rule in his own house" (Esther 1:22)—"This is obvious! Even a bald man in his own home is like a captain!" (Megillah 12b). The Babylonian sage clearly has no doubts about how power is assigned whether in hovel or palace. It remains unclear whether there is anything distinctive in the remark or, for that matter, whether a different attitude would have been imaginable under the circumstances.

We have already dealt above with several aspects of the midrashic rendering of Esther's personality, noting that she does not come across as a recognizable personality as much as she is an embodiment of standard talmudic ideals of piety. Indeed the rabbinic commentators do not wonder at her passive submission to Mordecai's command that she enter the royal harem, which might well have struck her at the time as inexplicably arbitrary; but neither do they express any amazement later in the story when she aggressively asserts her royal authority to rescue her coreligionists, avenge their enemies and proclaim Purim as an official Jewish religious celebration. The rabbinic imagination had no visible difficulty when describing (on 7a, not discussed in my commentary) how Esther persuaded her contemporary sages, whether by argument or compulsion, to overcome their own reluctance to accept the Book of Esther into the body of sacred scripture, and the festival of Purim into the Jewish calendar. So too, sages of the Tannaitic and Amoraic eras spoke admiringly of the brilliant, if inscrutable, strategy that Esther adopted by inviting Haman to two banquets before exposing his evil to the king (15b). The Babylonian conclusion of that pericope has no less a figure than the prophet Elijah confirm that in her choice of action Esther had adroitly accomplished a large number of simultaneous objectives. Even when Ahasuerus is advised that Esther's reticence about her nationality might be overcome by igniting her jealousy against another woman's "thigh" we are not entirely certain (though it does seem quite probable) that this reflects the author's own cynical stereotype of the envy that accompanies female romance. After all, the stratagem does ultimately fail, and the midrash is liberal in discerning jealousy in male figures as well (e.g., Haman). Apart from those factors which were dictated by the details of the biblical story, it is hard to imagine that the midrash would have portrayed Esther much differently if she had been a man.
And yet all of the above serves to set in more glaring contrast the truly shocking aspect of Esther's role in the story, that aspect which is the direct result of her being a woman. For what Mordecai has demanded of her is to sacrifice her chastity for a higher good. Esther's situation might have seemed less objectionable if it were understood in the context of biblical attitudes. The author of Esther does not seem to object strongly to intermarriage *per se*, so the union might have been regarded as a mutually advantageous "political alliance" (and after all, Ahasuerus was evidently sincere in his devotion to his queen). It is precisely when read in accordance with the values of rabbinic Judaism, where even the saving of lives cannot justify violations of sexual modesty, that Esther's situation becomes morally intolerable. Elsewhere in the Babylonian Talmud the rabbis try to justify the situation on halakhic grounds, though the justification—that Esther did not incur guilt because she was merely a passive victim throughout—can hardly satisfy our sensitivity to her psychological plight. Other midrashic collections proposed different solutions to the problem, but the Esther-Midrash exhibits little discomfort regarding the question. On the contrary, it exacerbates matters by stating that Esther was married at that time to Mordecai. However noble the motives, it is hard not to be disturbed by the image of the pious Mordecai delivering his own wife's body to an impure heathen, or by the rabbis themselves who fail to look at the events from Esther's perspective.

The rabbis' views of women can also be gauged from the pericope devoted to the seven female prophets of the Bible. What might be the most impressive feature of this passage is that the midrash does not appear to be at all surprised or troubled by the existence of prophetesses, and does not treat them much differently than it would their male counterparts. Some problems that we might have anticipated

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31 This view is implied in the comment that the midrash attributes to Esther on folio 15b (to Esther 5:1): "Perhaps you judge the unintentional like the deliberate and what was done under compulsion like that which was done intentionally."
do not arise. For example, Deborah’s roles as judge and warrior would have been unimaginable by talmudic standards, and yet the midrash does not seem to take the trouble to justify the fact (though other rabbinic traditions do so). The midrash wonders why Huldah should have been approached instead of Jeremiah, but it is not clear that the objection stems from the fact that she is a woman. One of the solutions, that Huldah, *as a woman*, was expected to be more compassionate, might be stereotypical, but it is at least complimentary.

It would thus appear that the authors and redactors of the Esther-Midrash, insofar as their attitudes find expression in their exegetical comments to the Book of Esther and other biblical texts, are typified by what we might anachronistically designate a relatively egalitarian approach in which there is little significant difference between what is expected from men and women in the moral and religious spheres that are of primary interest to the midrash.

Notable exceptions to the preceding characterization are contained in a series of dicta that express decidedly negative assessments of the personalities and social position of women. A certain ambivalence might have been read into Rav Naḥman’s cynical assessment of Abigail’s self-serving opportunism in securing David’s admiration while still married to Nabal. We could theoretically have regarded the criticism as directed towards Abigail as a person, and not as a cautionary example of the perfidy that taints even the most gifted of her sex. This same Rav Naḥman—spouse of the high-born and outspoken Yalta—is however the author of the dictum (14b) “Pride is not becoming for women.” His perspective is thus clear, though we cannot easily ascertain to what extent it was shared by his colleagues.

Also of relevance to the topic at hand are the pericopes on folio 15a based on two *baraitot* containing lists of biblical women who were (in the first *baraita*) distinguished for their beauty, and (in the second) able to arouse sexual desire. The fact that the sources single out these particular qualities in the women undoubtedly tells us something about their male authors’ views of women. It should however be recalled that both *baraitot* are exegetical by their nature, of the sort that assembles lists of related phenomena and phraseology from different places in the Bible. It was the biblical authors who had originally focused on the “goodly forms” of the various women. As regards their sexual attrac-
tion, this theme is not entirely surprising or inappropriate for a text that originated as a comment about Rahab the harlot (referring to Joshua 2:1), where the observations had probably been incorporated into a homily about the magnitude of her repentance. To be fair, it should be recalled that the rabbis were also accustomed to acknowledging the physical and sexual charms or men as well, in terms that might strike us as indelicate (see, e.g., TB Bava meši'a 84a-b).

We must of course exercise due caution in our use of the talmudic material and the conclusions that were derived from it. As interesting and instructive as the Esther-Midrash may be, it is only a small corner in the vast terrain of rabbinic literature and must be evaluated in comparison with detailed and cautious studies of the other texts in the corpus.