Chapter Two

The Proems¹

In addition to furnishing us with a unique opportunity to investigate the functions of the petihot² as they were perceived in Babylonia, the current passage also allows us to conduct comparisons with parallel material in the Palestinian aggadic midrashic collections. As we shall see, what we encounter here is not primarily native Babylonian aggadah (since most of the material that appears here is attributed to Palestinian

¹ Much of the material in the current chapter was originally published in Hebrew, in somewhat different form, as Eliezer Segal, "The Petihta (Proem) in Babylonia," Tarbiz 54 (2 1985), 177-204.

The Babylonian Esther Midrash

sages), so much as the reworking of aggadic sources at the hands of Babylonian Talmud.

The midrash apparently contains fourteen proems, as indicated in a mnemonic siman found in MS Columbia, Aggadat Esther and Genizah fragment.3


3 The full text of the mnemonic is found in MS Y and AgE, which usually represent virtually identical textual traditions (i.e., “Yemenite family”). MSS L, Mf, and Genizah fragment extend only as far as the words תמן זכרו. However fragment Vatican 49/2 (MS V) contains a separate siman before Proem #4:

שעם מיכה, ויכי ?דועי מלוק

which I am unable to decipher. MS Mf inserts before Proem #5:

שמר כמא ברב עבדים ומן זכרו

which covers Proems #5–#8; and before Proem #9 it reads:

שהמט אריא אולטור עשת נחתת לולו רב עזריך מיט ויאשך יוס או

for the conclusion of the collection. These facts raise the possibility that what we have here is really a series of units of four proems a piece. It is possible that the scribes were unable to finish copying the unit owing to the difficulties in determining the reading of the name Afdon–Efron (see below). A complete listing of all the simanim in the known textual witnesses to TB Megillah may be found in: E. Segal, “The Textual Traditions of Ms. Columbia University to TB Megillah,” Tarbiz 53 (1983), 41–69.

5 “Jonathan...priest”—found only in some MSS.
6 “He Redeemed...a Sign”—only in Y, AgE.
The Proems

Reference in Siman | Name of Rabbi | Verse
--- | --- | ---
1. ינותן נפש | R. Jonathan | Isaiah 14:22: *And I will rise up against them...*

Jonathan rose

2. זוחל שםואל | R. Samuel bar Nahmani | Isaiah 55:13: *Instead of the thorn...*

Instead of Samuel

3. ירושה נפש | R. Joshua ben Hananiah⁷ | Deuteronomy 28:63: *...as the Lord rejoiced over you...*

Joshua rejoiced

4. בכון חפצ | R. Abba bar Kahana | Ecclesiastes 2:26: *...For the man that is good in his sight...*

In the good priest

5. מרה כסא | Rabbah bar Afdon⁸ | Jeremiah 49:38: *And I will set my throne...*

He redeemed his throne

---

⁷ See variant readings discussed below.

⁸ See variant readings below. This is the reading in MS Y and AgE and it is supported by the reading הדר in these Yemenite texts as well as the Spanish tradition of HgT (and MS P). The Ashkenazic MSS L, R and Mf read בר הפרור, as do MSS B, G and a Genizah fragment; this was also the reading in the texts of the Tosafot who emended it to יבנוני — *for 'the name of the wicked shall rot,'* (Proverbs 10:7 [See Genesis rabbah, 49:1 (496-7); Midrash Samuel, 1:2]) and their names should not be used,” an emendation which was introduced, as usual, into the printed Talmuds and EY. In the Geonic responsum about the names Rava and Rabbah (Shraga, Abramson, ed., *Tractate ‘Abodah Zarah of the Babylonian Talmud, Ms. Jewish Theological Seminary of America.* (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1957), 128 and 117 (Heb.) ff., which also contains a résumé of previous research) it reads: "רavaו בר הפרר דהשל רבעי.“ (see the editor’s notes) p. 121. However it is not altogether certain that the Ga’on is referring to our proem, seeing as Rabbah bar Efron appears again below on 15a. The reading "Efron" is also attested in J. L. Maimon, ed., *Yihusei tanna’im ve’amora’im me’et rabbi yehudah berabbi galonimos mishpeira* (Mosad Harav Kook, Jerusalem, 1963), 220. However, in Z. Fillipowsky, ed., *Yuhasin (Hashalem) by R. Abraham Zakut* (Frankfurt a/M, 1925), 186b the reading is שומרא. Note also the Arabic commentary to Esther attributed to Maimonides (Livorno, 1800), 48. On the wickedness of the Biblical Ephron see L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews,* 5:257 and n. 267; S. Buber, ed., *Midrash sekhel tov by R. Menahem b. Solomon* (Berlin, 1900-01), Exodus 326.
| 6. בדםם Hữu | Rav Dimi bar Isaac | Ezra 9:9: For we are bondmen… |
| In the blood of his servants | |  |
| 7. הונח והרבח | Rav Hanina bar Pappa | Psalms 66:12: Thou hast caused men to ride over our heads… |
| He waved. He caused to ride | |  |
| 8. יוחנן זכר | R. Johanan | Psalms 98:3: He hath remembered his mercy and his faithfulness… |
| Johanan remembered | |  |
| 9. سمך ארוי | R. Simeon b. Laqish | Proverbs 28:15: As a roaring lion and a ravenous bear… |
| He heard a lion | |  |
| 10. חור עטל | R. Eleazar | Ecclesiastes 10:18: By slothfulness he that lays rafters sinks… |
| A slothful one helped | |  |
| 11. הנפשים שליל | R. Nahman bar Isaac | Psalms 124:2: If it had not been for the Lord… |
| Nahman. If it had not. | |  |
| 12. רבא צירך | Rava | Proverbs 29:2: When the righteous are increased… |
| Rava. Righteous. | |  |
| 13. מוסק גי | Rav Mattanah | Deuteronomy 4:7: For what great nation… |
| Gift. Nation. | |  |
| 14. איש אלקים | Rav Ashi | Deuteronomy 4:34: Or hath God assayed… |
| Man of God | |  |

The last two proems in the collection differ in their formats from the rest, because of their abbreviated introductory formulas: “R. X said: From here,” instead of “R. X opened a proem to this lection from here.” If this is interpreted as a sign that they derive from a different literary source, then we should regard the main collection as containing twelve units. A rough division could be made between Proems #1-#10

---

9 Abraham Weiss, *Studies in the Literature of the Amoraim*, p. 280 n. 24, does not enumerate these last two as proems at all. Apparently he is placing emphasis on the fact that the wording “R. X said: From here” does not strictly speaking reflect an actual public sermon, but only a suggestion of a verse that could serve as the text for the
and #11-#14, the former being attributed to sages from the Land of Israel, while the latter are cited in the names of Babylonian rabbis. As regards Rabbah bar Afdon, who is presumably to be identified with the Rabbah bar Efron who transmits a dictum of R. Eleazar in TB Megillah 15b, it is probable that he is also a Palestinian scholar. This may be true as well of Rav Dimi bar Isaac, who is mentioned nowhere else in talmudic literature; this in spite of the fact that the title “Rav” (supported by all witnesses) should normally serve as an identifier for Babylonian sages.10

...Continued from previous page

proem. On the phenomena of seven- or fourteen-unit collections in rabbinic literature, see: Shamma Friedman, “Some Structural Patterns of Talmudic Sugiot,” in Sixth World Congress of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem, edited by A. Shinan, World Union of Jewish Studies, 389-402, 1977, especially pp. 396 ff. The combination אָבֶּדֶּת אָחִים, with its feminine noun and masculine adjective, is attested in all textual witnesses, except for the early printed editions, which read אַלְד from Proem #5 onwards. The Genizah fragment consistently uses the abbreviations ‘ד or ‘אַד.

10 Regarding Rabbah bar Afdon, see Ch. Albeck, Introduction to the Talmud, 378: “He was apparently a Babylonian”; however cf. A. Weiss, op. cit. nn. 21, 23. R. Dimi bar Isaac is also enumerated by Albeck (ibid. 280) among the Babylonian Amora’im of the third generation, though Albeck is unable to cite other instances where this scholar appears. He is apparently identifying him with the Rav Dimi bar Joseph whose name appears in his stead in the printed editions of TB Hullin 55b (so too in MS Hamburg 169 to Hullin). Other biographers relied on the printed readings in Hullin and state simply that Rav Dimi lived during the third Amoraic generation. See: Raphael Halperin, Atlas ‘ets-hayyim, Vol. 4 (Tel-Aviv: 1980), 166; Yuhasin Hashalem 123; Jehiel Halperin, Seder hadorot (Jerusalem: reprint: 1956), ad loc; cf. Aaron Hyman, Toledot tanna’im we’ amora’im (reprint: Jerusalem: 1964), 332. Cf. R. N. N. Rabbinowicz, Diqduqé Soferim, Variae Lectiones in Mishnam et in Talmud Babylonicum (New York: M.P. Press, reprint: 1976) to Hullin 45b n. 1. MS Munich reads here: Rav Avdimi bar Joseph. Under the circumstances, we should seriously consider the suggestion of the Seder hadorot (s.v. “R. Dimi”) that the scholar normally referred to as “Rav Dimi” without patronymic is identical with Rav Dimi bar Joseph; note however the objections raised against this view by Z. W. Rabinowitz, Sha’are torath babel: Notes and Comments on the Babylonian Talmud, ed. E. Z. Melamed (Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1961), 374. Basing ourselves on the evidence from our passage, there are grounds for arguing that Rav Dimi bar Isaac is Rav Dimi nahota who standardly conveys Palestinian traditions to Babylonia. Accordingly, he might be responsible for transmitting the original collection of proems (including, presumably, the Palestinian kernel of the Esther Midrash) from the land of Israel to Babylonia, where it was subsequently incorporated into the talmud of Rava and R. Nahman b. Isaac.
The Babylonian Esther Midrash

In the following pages we shall attempt an examination of each of the proems in the Babylonian Esther Midrash, with a view to obtaining an understanding of the ways in which they were fashioned, their use of verses and motifs, and how they compare to parallel traditions in the Palestinian midrashic literature.

Proem #1

[10b] R. Jonathan opened a proem to this lection from here:

“And I will rise up against them, saith the Lord, and cut off from Babylon name and remnant, and offshoot and offspring, saith the Lord” (Isaiah 14:22).

“Name”—This refers to script

11 Rashi interprets: “This refers to script”—Their only script derived from another nation.” This explanation follows from the characterization of the Romans found in TB ‘Avodah zarah 10b (“Thou art greatly despised” (Obadiah 1:2)—because they have neither language nor script); and Gittin 80a (“What is an unworthy empire?—The Roman empire. And for what reason does he refer to it as an unworthy empire?—Because they possess neither a script nor a language”). Rashi to ‘Avodah zarah explains: “The script and the language of the Romans came to them from another people (Others established all their scriptures for them).” The words in parentheses are missing from MS Parma; however in the version of Rashī cited in the editio princeps of the EY (cf. D.S.) we read the following continuation: “Others established for them all the books of their error: John, Paul, Peter; and they were all Jews. ‘Language’ means ‘grammatica,’ the language spoken by the monks. They altered and twisted [emending from נֶשֶׁט —E.S.] the language and fashioned for themselves an absurdity so that they would be considered apart, and in order to remove them from Israel. Not that they were heretics; for they had in mind the welfare of Israel. Rather, it was because they observed that Israel was in trouble and difficulty because of Jesus’ deceptions, that they presented themselves as if they supported him in his whoredom, they therefore ordered all these things, as related in the book of the Crucifixion of Jesus...” The reference is probably to a tradition like the following: “And [Elijah] said: The main thing that Jesus requires of you is that you separate yourselves from the Jews with respect to the Torah, language and society... And they asked his name, and he said it was St. Paul. So the disciples separated from each other, and the wicked separated themselves from being Jews, and the world was at peace...” (Jellinek’s Bet ha-Midrasch 6:9-14; see also ibid. 5:60 ff.; Samuel Krauss, Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen (Berlin: 1902); Joseph Dan, The Hebrew Story in the Middle Ages, Sifriyyat Keter (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974), 122 ff., and bibliographical references on p. 274). If this addition is an authentic part of Rashī’s commentary, then it demonstrates that he regarded the statement about the language of the Romans having been “derived

Continued on next page...
The Proems

"And remnant"—This refers to language.

"And offshoot"—This refers to coinage.\textsuperscript{12}

"And offspring"—This refers to Vashti.

The various interpretations given here to the expressions in Isaiah's prophecy do not reflect a consistent exegetical approach. Whereas "name," "remnant" and "offshoot" are explained as aspects of royalty, "offspring" is identified with a historical figure. Furthermore, the logical connection between "offshoot" and coinage not explained adequately.\textsuperscript{13}

A comparison with Proem #12 of Esther rabbah reveals a different arrangement of the material:

Rav said: Everything which the Holy One said was with reference to him.\textsuperscript{14} This is what is written: "And cut off from Babylon name and remnant, and offshoot and offspring, saith the Lord."

\textit{Continued from previous page}

from another nation” as referring not to the Latin tongue as such, but to the Latin Christian writings that had been translated into that language in order to maintain a separation between Christians and Jews. On the attitudes of the ancient Jewish sages to Latin see, e.g., \textit{Genesis Rabbah}, 16:4 (p. 148); \textit{TP Megillah} 1:11 (71c); \textit{Esther rabbah}, 4:12 [and the comments of Issachar Ber ben Naftali Hakohen. "Mattenot kehunnah," in \textit{Midrash rabbah} (Vilna: Romm, 1878)]; Samuel Krauss, \textit{Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter}, Introduction, 14-19; M. D. Herr, \textit{Ha-shilton ha-romi besifrut ha-tanna'im}, Ph. D., Hebrew University, 1970, 90 n. 4. In light of all the above, it is not clear on what basis Rashi applied these traditions, which speak explicitly about Latin, to a Babylonian context, especially when the context makes reference to a script that was in the possession of the Babylonians, but was afterwards cut off from them in fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophesy. See also \textit{Tosafot ad loc.}, s.v.

\textsuperscript{12} "coinage"—Printings and EY: "royalty." The reading "royalty" is probably influenced by Rashi’s interpretation of \textit{Nin}: "referring to dominion, etc.,” though it is difficult to reconstruct Rashi’s precise reading in the Talmud. On the importance of coinage as a political symbol see: Samuel Krauss, \textit{Paras veromi batalmud uvamidrashim} (Jerusalem: 1948), 65.

\textsuperscript{13} Cf. Rashi, and previous note.

\textsuperscript{14} \textit{Mattenot kehunnah}: "concerning the King of Media”; cf. Samuel Jaffe, \textit{Yefeh 'anaf}, in: \textit{Midrash rabbah} (Vilna: Romm, 1878). Note also the observations of Ze'ev Wolf Einhorn ("Maharzu") in \textit{Midrash rabbah} (Vilna: Romm, 1878) regarding the structure

\textit{Continued on next page...}
The Babylonian Esther Midrash

"Name" — This refers to Nebuchadnezzar.

"And remnant" — This refers to Evil-medoradach.

"And offshoot" — This refers to Belshazzar.

"And offspring" — This refers to Vashti.

An alternate explanation:

"Name" — This refers to their script.

"And remnant" — This refers to the language.

"And offshoot and offspring" — son and grandson.

The relationship between these two sources is difficult to define with precision. At any rate, we can note that Esther rabbah contains two separate and alternative lists; one of them applies the verse to individuals, whereas the second one proposes a more general interpretation, relating the items to various royal and national symbols. The significance of the expression "son and grandson," cited from the Aramaic, is particularly perplexing. It is possible that the homilist or redactor, having no original material to add here, merely copied the Targum in order to fill in the exposition of the verse, a common practice in midrashic works. A similar midrash is found in Aggadat bereshit:

"Name" — This refers to its coinage.

"Remnant" — "And there shall not be any remaining [of the house of Esau]" (Obadiah 1:18).

"And offshoot" — This refers to dominion.

...Continued from previous page

and text of the proem. It is conceivable that "to him" refers to Ahasuerus, and that the unit is attached to Esther 1:1.

15 Nor can we rule out entirely the possibility that the text of the Esther rabbah passage as we have it has been influenced by the Bavli.

16 There may be a word-play between the words of the Targum "bar bera" and the concept of "barbarian." The Yefeh 'anaf explains that the author's intention was to reject the previous identification with Vashti, emphasizing the masculine forms of the Aramaic rendering. Cf. the other traditional commentators.
"And offspring"—This refers to a prince [יהלום ?].\(^{17}\)

*Midrash Panim aherim* B\(^{18}\) cites the same verse in connection with Vashti: "...And the Holy One said 'And [I shall] cut off from Babylon name and remnant, and offshoot and offspring.' For this reason this befell her, in order to fulfill the word of the Holy One. And when he commanded her to enter, she said: I shall not enter. 'But the queen Vashti refused...' (Esther 1:12)."

In the Bavli the verse from Isaiah does not connect to the opening verse of Esther; at most we might argue that it relates to the first chapter, which is concerned principally with the Vashti episode. This structural flaw does not apply to the parallel in *Esther rabbah*, since there Rav's dictum was not really intended to be an independent proem, but rather it was embedded within a complex proem that goes on to cite a dictum by Samuel, and then concludes as follows:

R. Samuel bar Nahman said: "The Lord shall bring you and your king" (Deuteronomy 28:36) —If you should say "to Babylonia," were they not already in Babylonia! If so, then why does it say "unto a nation which neither you nor your fathers have known"?

—Rather, this refers to Media. Hence: "And it came to pass..."\(^{19}\)

From a thematic perspective, this proem performs a vital function in liberating the Esther narrative from historical isolation, inserting it into the process of the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning the fall of Babylonia and the restoration of Judæa. Thereby it underscores the conviction that the events of the Megillah are the continu-

---

\(^{17}\) Solomon Buber, ed., *Aggadat Bereshit* (Cracow: Fischer, 1902). The biblical Hebrew word "'aluf" is not a normal part of the rabbinic vocabulary and its significance here is unclear [but cf. *Genesis rabbah*, 70:15 (814), and Albeck's notes]. It is most likely a scribal error of some sort.

\(^{18}\) In: Solomon Buber, ed., *Sifre de-agгадeta al megillat ester* (Vilna: Romm, 1886), 60-1.

\(^{19}\) It is possible that the author of the Babylonian pericope was not cognizant with the convention current in Palestinian midrashic collections, of expounding a verse according to alternative interpretations. Hence he combined the two units into a single one.
tion of the story of the destruction of the Temple at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar\(^{20}\) and the first stage in the unfolding of the redemption of the Return to Zion.

**Proem #2**

[10b] R. Samuel bar Nahman opened a proem to this lection from here: "Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress {and instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle, [hadas] and it shall be to the Lord for a name" (Isaiah 55:13).

"Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress" —Instead of the wicked Haman who made himself into an idol —as it is written: "and upon all thorns and upon all brambles" (Isaiah 7:19)—

"Shall come up the cypress" —Shall come up the righteous\(^{21}\) Mordecai, who was called the chief of the spices; as it is written: "And do thou take to thee the chief spices, flowing myrrh" (Exodus 30:23), and we render it in the Targum as "mor daki"\(^{22}\) [=pure myrrh].

"And instead of the brier [ha-sirpad] shall come up the myrtle" —Instead of\(^{23}\) the wicked Vashti, the daughter of the son of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar, who burned\(^{24}\) the house of the throne \([repidato]\)^{25} of the Holy One;\(^{26}\) as it is written: "its top [repidato] was gold" (Song of Songs 3:10)—

\(^{20}\) This motif is an important one, which finds expression in the narrative sections of the midrash, in such episodes as the messianic speculations attributed to Belshazzar, Ahasuerus and Daniel (11b-12a below); the removal of the Temple vessels at Ahasuerus' feast; and in the tradition that identifies Vashti as Belshazzar's daughter (this last tradition was widespread in the midrashim to Esther; cf. Ginzberg, *Legends*, 6:455, n. 3).

\(^{21}\) "the righteous"— ~ in MS M and Printings.

\(^{22}\) "mor daki" —All witnesses except MSS Y, B, Printings and Genizah fragments: "mera dakia."

\(^{23}\) "Instead of"—MSS M, R, P, EY, YS: "This is."

\(^{24}\) MS M adds: "with fire."

\(^{25}\) “house ...throne”—Printings: “throne of the house of God”; MSS G and Mf: “throne.”

\(^{26}\) “of the...One” —Only in MS Y and Genizah fragment; Printings: “of the Lord”; other witnesses: “of our God.”
"Shall come up"—the righteous Esther, who is called Hadassah; as it says: "And he brought up Hadassah" (Esther 2:7).

"And it shall be to the Lord for a sign"—these are Purim.

"For an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off"—This is the reading of the Megillah

This proem, for which there is no parallel in any of the other known works of aggadic midrash, turns out to be one of the most successful in the present collection. Its structure is simple: The verse from Isaiah (55:13) provides the darshan with an opportunity to emphasize the victory of the righteous over the wicked in the Esther narrative, and to mention the feast of Purim which was established in commemoration of that miracle. In this instance, as in the others, the proem is not connected explicitly to the opening verse of Esther.

It seems likely that this passage evolved in two stages and that R. Samuel bar Nahmani himself is not to be credited with the citation of the various verses brought in support of his identifications; nor did he posit verbal midrashic connections or word-plays between Haman and the thorn, Mordecai and the cypress, or Vashti and the brier, other than devising the pairs of righteous and wicked figures. The attempt to invent specific verbal connections between the items in the verse and the figures in the Megillah likely belongs to a later stage in the evolution of the material.

The above hypothesis is supported by several facts. For example, the connection between Mordecai and the cypress is founded, so it

---

27 MSS G, O, L, M, EY, Printings and Genizah fragment add: "the myrtle"—shall come up"

28 "says"—MSS G, B, O, Mf, HgT, L, AgE: "is written."

29 Spanish family adds: "And it is written: 'and he stood among the myrtle-trees that were in the bottom' (Zechariah 1:8)."

30 "these are Purim"—Ashkenazic family: "This is the reading of the Megillah";
MS P, EY and AgE: "These are the days of Purim."

31 "This...Megillah"—MSS N, B, HgT, L, M, R*, Mf, V, Printings, YS: "These are [the days of—MS N, HgT, M, R*, Mf, V, Printings] Purim."

32 MSS R*, Mf, V, HgT add: "As it is written [concerning them—HgT: 'And that these days of Purim should not fail from among the Jews etc.'](Esther 9:28)."
appears, upon a conversation between Rav Mattanah and the Papponeans whose source is in *TB Hullin* 139b. The remark about Haman “who made himself into an idol” may also be a quotation from the talmudic passage on 19a below. Such quotations from other places in the Talmud are generally considered a sign of late redactional strata. The selection of the proof-texts also seems forced. R. Solomon Edels (the Maharsha) has clearly described the difficulty implicit in the citation from Isaiah:7:19: “According to its simple meaning, this verse also is speaking about thorns and briers, and I have no idea why it is perceived as a more explicit reference to idolatry.” A similar objection could probably be directed against the reference to “regidato” in Song of Songs, whose literal meaning has nothing to do with the Temple, though this particular interpretation is firmly entrenched in the traditions of the midrash and targums. It would therefore appear that we are justified in positing two stages in the development of this proem:

---

33 The midrash makes sense only according to the Onkelos Targum, but not according to the Palestinian versions (e.g., MS Neofiti).

34 Though this is more doubtful: The clause appears there in Aramaic, and it is just as likely to be paraphrasing this proem. Cf. *TB Sanhedrin* 61b (“worshipped like Haman”). On the motif of Haman’s making himself into an idol, see Ginzeberg, 6:463, n. 100; Ibn Ezra’s (first) commentary to Esther 3:2 [cited by Barry Walfish, “The Two Commentaries of Ibn Ezra on the Book of Esther,” *JQR* 79 (4 1989), 337].

35 It is likely however that the interpretation presupposes the explanation of Targum Jonathan to the verse: “And in all the wastelands of thorns and in all their houses of praise” (Cf. *Tanhumot* (Buber) *Huqqat*, 1 [50b]: “...And in future times the Holy One...will exact punishment from the idolatrous nations by means of trivial things, as it says: ‘And it shall come to pass in that day...’”). The interpretation in Targum Jonathan is of course based on a reading of הגרבים יבש in the verse as deriving from בלש, praise; cf. Rashī and Qimḥi on the verse. The idea of interpreting Isaiah 55:13 with respect to the righteous and the wicked is in itself consistent with Targum Jonathan there: “Instead of the wicked shall arise the righteous...”; cf. Rashī to the verse. In *Song of Songs rabbah*, 1:1:6 the verse is cited as evidence that “a wicked person begets a righteous one”.

36 The interpretation [see variants listed above; note that most texts read “of our God” (Eloheinu), rather than the more conventional “Holy One Blessed Be He”] also follows the Targum to Song of Songs: “King Solomon erected a Holy Temple,” as well as many midrashic traditions, e.g. *Song of Songs rabbah*, 3:15-17 (where the verse is applied to the Tabernacle and the ark); *Numbers rabbah*, 12:4 (about the Temple); *Baraita dimelokhet hammishkan* Ch. 6; *Pesiqta derav kahana*, 1 (ed. Mandelbaum, 3

Continued on next page...
1. Initially, the original Palestinian petiha consisted of the selection of an appropriate verse, each element of which was identified with a personality or precept associated with the Book of Esther.

2. Subsequently, basing himself on these identifications, the Babylonian redactor appended several verses according to his own ingenious and intricate methods, with the aim of demonstrating specific connections between the items mentioned in the petiha verse and the references to Esther.

It is probable that the association between “myrtle” (hadas) and Esther (=Hadassah) [and perhaps even that between “shall not be cut off” and “so as it should not fail” (Esther 9:27)] were in the mind of the original author, and underlay his selection of the proem verse.

Proem #3

[10b] R. Joshua son of Hananiah opened a proem to this lection from here: “And it shall come to pass that as the Lord rejoiced over you to do you good, so the Lord will rejoice [yasis] over you to cause you to perish, etc.” (Deuteronomy 28:63).

And does the Holy One indeed rejoice over the downfall of the wicked? And is it not written: “As they went out before the army, and say, Give thanks unto the Lord, for his mercy endureth for ever” (2 Chronicles 20:212)—

And said R. Johanan: For what reason does it not say “for He is good” in this thanksgiving?—Because the Holy One does not rejoice over the downfall of the wicked.

See variant readings.

“son of Hananiah” — ~ in MS M; Printings: “son of Levi.”

“Joahan” — MS R*: “Nathan.”

“thanksgiving”—In MhG and AgE: “passage.”

“rejoice over” — MhG: “desire.”
And said R. Samuel bar Nahmani: Said R. Jonathan: What is it that is written “And one came not near the other all the night” (Exodus 14:20)?

—At that moment the ministering angels wished to recite song before the Holy One. The Holy One said to them: The work of my hands are drowning in the sea and you are reciting song before me!

Said R. Yose b. R. Haninah: He Himself does not rejoice; however he causes others to rejoice.

Note carefully as well, that it is written: “yasis” [=normally: He shall cause to rejoice], and it is not written “yisos” [Usual form for “He shall rejoice”].

Hear from this.

This proem raises a number of fundamental questions which must be addressed before we can properly evaluate it.

Firstly, what is the precise extent of the proem? In addition to the verse itself, the Talmud raises an objection (“And does the Holy One indeed rejoice over the downfall of the wicked, etc.”) along with its solution (“Said R. Yose b. R. Haninah, etc.”), neither of which connects very neatly to the topic of Purim. True, we could view the entire

Continued on next page...
passage as a single unit, which comes to make a statement about God's feelings when he has to punish the wicked; however, it is also possible that the original proem consisted of no more than the citation of Deuteronomy 28:63, and that the additional discussion was attached tangentially through the association with the verse, in spite of the fact that it has no intrinsic connection to the verse's function within the proem. There exists a parallel to this discussion in *TB Sanhedrin* 39b, only there the question "And does the Holy One indeed rejoice over the downfall of the wicked?" is directed at 1 Kings 22:36: "And there went out a proclamation throughout the host," referring to the death of Ahab. The question therefore arises: Is this discussion an integral part of R. Joshua ben Ḥananiah's proem, or was it transferred from another context, such as that of *TB Sanhedrin*?

It would appear at first that this question can be solved through a careful reading of the wording of R. Yose b. R. Ḥaninah's dictum, which is undoubtedly crucial to the pericope: "He Himself does not rejoice; however He causes others to rejoice." Now these words allude to the words of the verse "so the Lord will rejoice," and yet the verse is not cited at all in the *Sanhedrin* passage! This would seem to lead us to the conclusion that the discussion originated in *Megillah* and was subsequently transferred to *Sanhedrin*, where the redactors neglected to adapt it completely to the context of 1 Kings 22:36. This argument however is not to be regarded as conclusive. The received text of *Sanhedrin* may represent no more than an accidental deletion of the verse at some later stage in its textual transmission, and R. Yose b. R. Ḥaninah himself might very well have used the Deuteronomy verse in order to resolve the difficulty from 1 Kings. At any rate, it would be unfair to base a complete reconstruction of the two pericopes on this single detail.

---Continued from previous page---

producing a more optimistic proem than the one preserved in the Babylonian tradition. See also *Lamentations rabbah*, 2:17 [Salomon Buber, ed., *Midrasch Echa Rabbati* (Vilna: Wittwe & Gebrüder Romm, 1899), 120, and n. 212]; *Tanhuma* (Buber), *Devarim*, 1.

51 This chapter describes the evils of exile, and was expounded in *Esther rabbah* with respect to the events of the Purim story. See below.
On the other hand, there are a number of phenomena which favor the view that the passage originated in *TB Sanhedrin*:

1. In the parallel pericope in *TP Sanhedrin* (end of Ch. 4), we encounter the identical motifs: “It is written ‘And there went out a proclamation throughout the host.’ And what is ‘the proclamation (harinnah)’? —Peace (?)"\(^52\) And so it says: ‘As they went out before the army, etc.’ This comes to teach you that even the downfall of the wicked is not an occasion for joy before the Holy One” —And none of this is connected to Deuteronomy 28:63.

2. According to the wording in *TB Megillah* the objection does not correspond to the context of the verse. The expression “downfall of the wicked” is hardly an appropriate characterization of the fate of the Jews in the days of Haman, whom aggadic tradition does not regard as wicked.\(^53\) Consequently it would appear more likely that the redactors have transposed to *Megillah* a phraseology that originated elsewhere; namely, in *TB Sanhedrin*, in connection with the death of Ahab.

For these reasons, it seems that the discussion about God’s lack of joy at the downfall of the wicked is not an original constituent of the

---


\(^{53}\) There is a reference on 11a to “laziness that inhered in Israel because they did not occupy themselves in the Torah”; similarly, on 12a, in the conversation between R. Simeon b. Yoḥai and his disciples, a number of suggestions are proposed as to why the Jews of that generation should have deserved destruction (see our discussion of the pericope in Chapter 5 below). However none of these explanations would warrant the use of the epithet “wicked.” See further discussion of this below.
proem in *TB Megillah*, but was transferred from *TB Sanhedrin*, presumably by virtue of R. Yose b. R. Haninah's use of the proof-text from Deuteronomy in order to resolve the objection to the verse from 1 Kings.

Scholars have already noted an additional difficulty in this passage. According to the context of the Bavli—where the dictum "The work of my hands are drowning in the sea and you are reciting song before me!" is used to illustrate the claim that "the Holy One does not rejoice in the downfall of the wicked"—we are forced to understand that "the work of my hands" refers to the wicked; i.e., the Egyptians. This reading stands in opposition to all the Palestinian versions of the midrash, in every one of which God's concern is for the fate of the Israelites, not the Egyptians.

---

54 Joseph Heinemann, *Aggadah and Its Development*, 241, n. 35, determines that "in Sanhedrin the beginning of the homily is truncated; from its conclusion it is evident that it also was based originally on Deuteronomy 28:63, in spite of the fact that the verse was omitted from the beginning." It is clear at any rate that the proem preached by R. Joshua b. Ḥananiah (in the generation of Jamnia) could not have contained the remarks of R. Yose b. R. Ḥananah, nor those of R. Johanan or R. Jonathan. See also: B. Moran, "Le'arikhatah shel masekhet megillah," Ph. D., Bar-Ilan University, 1971, 81 ff.

55 Heinemann, *op. cit.*, 175-9; Menahem Kasher, *Torah shelemah* (Jerusalem: 1927-81), Beshallah, p. 63, n. 126; note especially his citation from Shabazi's *Hemdat Yamim*.

56 *Exodus rabbah*, 23:8: "My legions are in peril..."; H. S. Horovitz and I. A. Rabin, ed. *Mechilta d'rabbi ismael*, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1970), *Wayhi beshallah* #3 (p. 97): "My beloved ones are drowning in the waters"; *Tanhuma* (Buber) Beshallah, 13: "My children are in peril" (Heinemann, *op. cit.* 178, n. 40). It is equally evident that the verse (Exodus 14:20) "the one came not near the other all the night" cannot refer to the drowning of the Egyptians, since it appears before the account of the parting of the Red Sea (Heinemann, *ibid.*, and n. 41). Kasher attempted to force the meaning of the Palestinian parallels into the text of the Bavli: "...And accordingly, we ought to say that when the Gemara states here 'And said R. Johanan, etc.' [following the reading of the printed editions —E.S.] ...it does not mean to say that here too it is expounding that the Holy One has no joy in the downfall of the wicked. Rather, it is merely bringing by way of association [derekh agav] another similar exposition in the name of R. Johanan. And furthermore, it deals with the same theme, for if he does not rejoice in the downfall of the wicked, all the more so when his own children are in danger." However, all but two of the witnesses to the text of the Gemara read "R. Jonathan" rather than "Johanan" as the author of the tradition (See text-critical notes to the passage). It is therefore clear that Kasher's ingenious

Continued on next page...
Joseph Heinemann argued that the Babylonian version of R. Jonathan’s dictum came about "...as a result of ...a mistaken understanding of the statement’s content and language—albeit a mistake that also resulted, as it appears, from an attitude that is peculiar to Babylonian Jewry." Later in his discussion Heinemann deals with this question at greater length.

And furthermore, this sermon for Purim, which is brought in the Babylonian Talmud, appears to express a distinctly Babylonian attitude. The feast of Purim was undoubtedly a problematic and embarrassing festival for the Jews of the Babylonian Diaspora. How was it possible for Jews living in the Persian empire to express unqualified joy at the killing, at their hands, of thousands of subjects of the King of Persia? The derashah before us testifies to hesitations and to mixed feelings regarding the joy of Purim, and it gives expression to a pronounced ambivalence... There can be no doubt that the sage who preached this sermon on Purim was a Babylonian Rabbi, and even if he was making use of Palestinian aggadot that were available to him, he gave to them, by combining them in this particular manner and assembling them into a different context, a significance that was radically new when compared with what had, presumably, been their original meanings...

It seems that Heinemann himself was not altogether certain whether what we have here is an unconscious misunderstanding of the source, or an intentional act of editorial manipulation in which the redactor, motivated by apologetic considerations, reworked the

---Continued from previous page---

reconstruction is unacceptable, as was noted already by Heinemann (ibid., 241, n. 47). The reading quoted by Kashr in the name of R. Solomon ben Hayatom [Z. P. Chajes, ed., Perush masekhet mashqin lerabbi shelomo ben hayyatom. 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: 1910), 120, and Introduction, 30] is not supported by any of the witnesses to the text of the Bavli.

57 Op. cit., 175
59 Heinemann’s words give the impression that in the original (Palestinian?) version of the proem the verse “so shall he rejoice, etc.” had been applied to Israel’s enemies, including the Persians. If this was truly his intention, then the claim is quite astonishing, since the simple sense of the verse speaks so unambiguously of Israel. I have found no other commentator who suggests a similar interpretation (cf. Rashi to the Talmud and the biblical verse; Maharsha, and the commentators to the EY).
Palestinian sources that stood before him. He astutely observed that if the redactor was utilizing the same versions of R. Jonathan / Johanan's words that have come down to us in assorted midrashic works, speaking as they do of "my beloved ones," "my sons," or "my legions" that stand in danger, then there is no escaping the conclusion that this was an intentional change. There can at any rate be no doubt that the verse "the one came not near the other all the night" has been removed from its original sequence, which speaks of the eve of the parting of the Red Sea, prior to the drowning of the Egyptians.

Heinemann's analysis presupposes that the entire unit in the Bavli, including the verse and the discussion about the question "does the Holy One rejoice, etc.," was originally formulated in order to serve as a proem. Our own view, as we have already stated, tends towards the opposite conclusion, that the discussion is a secondary transposition of a pericope that originated in TB Sanhedrin. Nor has it been confirmed from other evidence that the Babylonian Jews held more "universalistic" opinions about their gentile neighbors.

It seems more likely that the editor of our pericope was led astray because he understood the expression "drowning in the sea" in an overly literal manner. This could not be perceived as a reference to the Israelites, since they did not actually drown in the sea! Once the redactor had determined that the reference was to the Egyptians (who were ultimately drowned), he overlooked the fact that Exodus 14:20 speaks of the night before the miracle of the Red Sea.

Proem #4

[10b] R. Abba bar Kahana opened a proem to this lection from here: "For to the man that is good in his sight he giveth wisdom

60 However, he also suggests the possibility that "my beloved ones" (רֵדִידָה) became transformed in the course of oral transmission to "מַשְׁפִּיא גֵרָה." This solution seems most unlikely. Even allowing that the Babylonian redactor was familiar with a Palestinian source that read "מַשְׁפִּיא גֵרָה" or some such neutral wording, we have still not resolved the difficulty of the use of "the one came not near the other all the night" in an inappropriate context.

61 "bar Kahana"— ~ in MS R.

62 "a proem...here"—MS O: "this proem."
and knowledge and joy {but to the sinner he giveth the task, to gather and heap up, that he may leave it to him that is good in the sight of God” (Ecclesiastes 2:26).

“For to the man that is good in His sight He giveth wisdom and knowledge and joy” — This is Mordecai.

“But to the sinner he giveth the task, to gather and heap up” — This is Haman.

“That he may leave it to him that is good in the sight of God” — This is Mordecai; as it is written: “And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman” (Esther 8:2).

The structure of this poem is neat and symmetrical. To each item in the “generic” verse from Ecclesiastes the darshan has added a set of specific identifications.

A parallel version of this homily found in Ecclesiastes rabbah (2:26) is virtually identical to R. Abba bar Kahana’s poem. In Ecclesiastes rabbah the verse is expounded with reference to assorted pairs of righteous and sinful figures from the Bible: Abraham and Nimrod, Isaac and Abimelech, Jacob and Laban, the Israelites in Egypt and the Canaanites, Hezekiah and Sennacherib, and finally Mordecai and Haman:

Another explanation: “For to the man that is good in his sight” — This is Mordecai. “He giveth wisdom and knowledge and joy.”

“But to the sinner he giveth the task, to gather and heap up” — This is Haman.

And to whom does it say “that he may leave it to him that is good in the sight of God?” — This is Mordecai, as it says (Esther 8:1): “On that day did the king Ahasuerus give the house of Haman .. unto Esther the queen.”

63 Bracketed passage included according to MSS G, W and V.
64 Printings add: “and Esther.”
65 “is written” — MSS G, L, EY: “says.”
66 On the simple meaning of the Ecclesiastes rabbah passage, see the traditional commentators. In general, it does not seem that the midrashim have gone very far beyond the simple sense of the biblical text, which speaks of the sinner who spends his whole life amassing wealth, only to have to ultimately hand it all over to the

Continued on next page...
We cannot state with certainty whether the midrash in *Ecclesiastes rabbah* originated as a proem to Esther, especially when we keep in mind that both texts conclude with verses from the end of Esther, rather than the opening verse.

...Continued from previous page

Godfearing sage. There are however a number of factors that cast doubts on the originality of this passage to *Ecclesiastes rabbah*: In MS Vatican 291 of *Ecclesiastes rabbah* the reading of the final segment is:

Another explanation: “For to the man that is good in his sight’—This is Mordecai. “he giveth wisdom and knowledge and joy’”—“But to the sinner’—This is Haman. “That he may leave it to him that is good in the sight of God’”—This is Mordecai: “On that day did the king Ahasuerus give...unto Esther.”

This formulation deviates from the symmetry and uniformity that characterize the previous segments of the midrash. A similar version may have stood before the *Mattenot kehunnah* (though the Pesaro printing is the same as the standard editions). In *Kohelet zuza* (and in the Yalqut shim'oní) are found all the segments that are contained in *Ecclesiastes rabbah* (without the proof-texts), except for the last one dealing with Mordecai and Haman! All these factors give rise to the suspicion that the passage in *Ecclesiastes rabbah* was filled in later on the basis of the Bavli, and is not original to the Palestinian midrash.

It is a frequent occurrence that midrashim in *Ecclesiastes rabbah* that appear to be arranged around verses from Ecclesiastes actually originated as proems to other lections in the Bible. Of the verses quoted in the current passage, possible candidates for the role of *petihta* lection include Genesis 22:1, which begins a unit in the Palestinian cycle, as well as (apparently) Numbers 26:52-3 [cf. Menahem Zulay, ed., *Piyyute yannai*, Publications of the Research Institute for Hebrew Poetry (Berlin: Schocken, 1938), 225; Zvi Meir Rabinovitz, ed., *The Liturgical Poems of Rabbi Yannai According to the Triennial Cycle of the Pentateuch and the Holidays: Critical Edition with Introduction and Commentary* (Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik and Tel-Aviv University), 1985-7, 115; *Encyclopedia Judaica* 15:1388 (and the bibliographical references listed there)]. This is not however true of Genesis 31:11 or 2 Chronicles 32:23.

The concluding verse of the *Ecclesiastes rabbah* passage does not quite fit the context to which it is appended: “...This is Mordecai, as it says: ‘...did the king give...unto Esther the queen.’” The following verse, which is cited in the Bavli, would have been more appropriate: “And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman” (cf. Esther 8:17). Perhaps we are meant to take seriously the “etc.” (וָאֵל) in *Ecclesiastes rabbah* which points ahead to verse 2. See also R. Josiah Pinto’s commentary (“Rif”) to the EY: “...for first it says ‘For to the man that is good’ —This is Mordecai. And afterwards it says: ‘that he may leave it to him that is good in the sight of God’ —This is Mordecai and Esther...” See also *Tanhuma Lekh lekha*, 8, where the verse is expounded with reference to a slave who acquires property. Cf. *TB* Continued on next page...
The Babylonian Esther Midrash

Proem #5

[10b] Rava\(^69\) bar Afdon\(^70\) opened a proem\(^71\) to this lection from here: "And I will set my throne in Elam, and will destroy from thence king and princes, saith the Lord" (Jeremiah 49:38).

"King" —is Vashti.

"And princes" —this is Haman and his ten\(^72\) sons.

A parallel version of this proem is found among the petihtot to Esther rabbah (#12). The beginning of that proem has been cited in our discussion of Proem #1 above.

...and Samuel said: Everything which the Holy One said was with reference to him. This is what is written: "And I will set my throne in Elam, and will destroy from thence the king and the princes" (Jeremiah 49:38).

"The King" —This is Vashti.

"And the princes" —These are the seven princes of Media and Persia.

According to the Bavli, the verse from Jeremiah functions as a proem to the entire Megillah, with Haman’s defeat being grasped as the central event of the book.\(^73\) However Samuel’s remarks in Esther rab-

\(^69\) "Rava" — variants: MSS O, V, EY, Printings: "R. Abba"; MSS G, B, R, Mf, HgT\(^2\): "Rabbah"; HgT\(^1\): "{}Abba"


\(^71\) "a proem" — ~ in MS G.

\(^72\) "ten" — ~ in MS G and EY.

\(^73\) It is more difficult to understand how Vashti’s fall would also occupy such a central position in the narrative. However there is no other real "king" in the story aside from Ahasuerus, and he of course does not suffer any defeat in the course of the plot. We
The Proems

*bah* only relate to the events recounted in Esther Chapter One regarding Vashti, an episode which is perceived as the realization of Jeremiah’s prophesies about Elam.\(^{74}\) Samuel’s dictum is not presented in *Esther rabbah* as a separate proem, but as an interpretation to the verse in Jeremiah. It connects neither to the opening verse of Esther nor to the Megillah as a whole.

**Proem #6**

[10b] Rav Dimi\(^{75}\) bar Isaac opened a proem to this lection from here:

> “For we are bondmen; yet hath God not forsaken us in our bondage, but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia...” (Ezra 9:9).\(^{76}\)

Rav Dimi bar Isaac’s proem seems to consist only of the verse from Ezra, without any additional explanation or comments. Among the manuscript variants we find several glosses appended to the verse in order to create an explicit connection to the subject-matter of Esther.\(^{77}\) It would appear that this situation was necessitated by the fact that the verse, taken by itself, speaks of the narrowly defined historical context of the Return to Zion and the building of the Second Temple. It is clear...Continued from previous page

\(^{74}\) The reference to “the seven princes of Persia and Media” is to a tradition found in several aggadic sources; e.g.: “*After these things, when the wrath of king Ahasuerus was appeased*’ when he sobered up from his wine... ‘And who advised him to have her executed?’ They replied to him: The seven princes of Persia and Media. He immediately killed them, and for this reason they are not mentioned again” [Midrash *Abba gorion* 9:1, in: Salomon Buber, ed., *Sifre de-aggadeta al megillat ester* (Vilna: Romm, 1886); see the full passage there]; other sources are listed in Ginzberg, *Legends*, 6:457 ff., n. 52.

\(^{75}\) “Dimi”—MS M: “Avidimi.”

\(^{76}\) For the reading of MS G see below; MSS L, W add: “When *hath [he] extended mercy unto us*?’ —in the days of Mordecai and Esther”; MSS R, Mf, V, EY, HgT add: “When *hath [he] extended mercy unto us*?’ —in the days of Mordecai”; Printings add: “When? —In the days of Haman.”

\(^{77}\) See the variants listed above. MSS Y, M, B, P and AgE contain no additions to the verse.
that the “kings of Persia” mentioned in this verse are Cyrus and his court, such that it cannot readily be applied to other situations. This historical context is even more pronounced in the continuation of the verse, which is cited in full in several textual witnesses: “To give us a reviving, to set up the house of our God, and to repair the ruins thereof, and to give us a fence in Judah and in Jerusalem.” As we shall be observing in much of this study, much of the midrashic version of Esther is dominated by a historical perspective according to which Ahasuerus actively stalled the project that had been initiated by Cyrus.

Proem #7

[11a] R. Ḥanan bar Pappa opened a proem to this lection from here: “Thou hast caused men to ride over our heads, we went through fire and through water, but thou didst bring us out into abundance” (Psalms 66:12).

“We went through fire”—in the days of Nebuchadnezzar.

“And through water”—in the days of Pharaoh.

78 Note the explanation of Rabbi Jacob Ibn Ḥabib in his comments to the EY: “What it means is that we are still the slaves of Ahasuerus, and for this reason we do not recite Hallel on Purim...” (cf. TB Megillah 14a, ‘Arakhin 10b). MS G preserves a unique reading: “…‘For we are bondmen’ —in the days of Pharaoh; ‘yet our God hath not forsaken us in our bondage’ —in the days of Nebuchadnezzar; ‘but hath extended mercy unto us’ —in the days of Haman.” According to this reading, the verse is midrashically being broken up into several topics, as though Ezra himself were reviewing the nation’s history. We might complete the thought ourselves: “…and to give us a wall in Judah and Jerusalem”—in the days of Cyrus.” This version of the proem, which strongly resembles the next one in the collection, presents the fewest difficulties. Nonetheless, it seems most likely that the original text comprised only the Biblical citations without any interpretations.

79 “Ḥanan”—only in MS Y; MSS B, Spanish family, AgE, V: “Ḥanina”; MSS G, M, L, Mf, Printings, YS: “Ḥinena”; MS R: “Joḥanan.”

80 “in the days of”—MS M and R: “This is.”

81 “Nebuchadnezzar”—MSS M, W, Printings and YS: “the wicked Nebuchadnezzar”; AgE and Y*: “Chaldeans.”

82 MSS L, M and YS add: “the wicked.”
"But thou didst bring us out into abundance" — in the days of Mordecai and Esther.83

R. Hanan bar Pappa is expounding a verse from Psalms with reference to national redemption, such that “men” becomes translated into “nations.” The Psalm itself can be interpreted in terms of either national or individual redemption.84 The standard Targum to Psalms does not greatly enhance our understanding of the issue. However, Palestinian midrashic works cite a version of a targum85 that renders the verse in Aramaic as “You have caused the nations to ride over our heads.”86

83 "Mordecai and Esther"—Only in MS Y; in all other witnesses (including Y*): “[the wicked”—MS L] Haman.”

84 The first part of the Psalm contains expressions of national thanksgiving such as the following: “Make a joyful noise unto God, all ye lands. All the earth shall worship thee... He turned the sea into dry land; they went through the flood on foot; there did we rejoice in him: He ruleth by his power forever; his eyes behold the nations... O bless our God, ye people...” etc. However, from our verse onwards, the tone becomes one of personal thanksgiving, formulated in first-person-singular.

85 See Albeck’s notes to Genesis Rabbah, p. 444: “...It is rendered in some targum.” Cf. next note.

86 To the best of my knowledge there is no actual parallel to this proem in Palestinian midrashic literature. However, we do encounter an analogous use of this verse in some midrashic sources, also in connection with a dictum of R. Ḥanina bar Pappa. Owing to conflicting textual traditions in the transmission of the source, it remains unclear how we ought to interpret the data. In Genesis rabbah, 44:21 (444) we read as follows:

“Behold a smoking furnace and a burning lamp” (Genesis 15:17). Simeon bar Abba in the name of R. Johanan: Four things did {God} show {Abraham}: Gehenna, the empires, the giving of the Torah, and the Temple. He said to him: By which do you prefer that your children be oppressed, by Gehenna or by the empires? R. Ḥinena bar Pappa said: Abraham selected for himself the empires. R. Judan and R. Ḥama b. Ḥaninah: Abraham selected for himself Gehenna, and the Holy One selected for him the empires... We have come to the dispute of R. Ḥanina bar Pappa and R. Ḥama bar Ḥaninah. R. Ḥanina bar Pappa said: Abraham selected for himself the empires, and R. Judan and R. Ḥama b. Ḥaninah said in the name of a certain elder in the name of Rabbi: The Holy One selected for him the empires. This is what is written: “Thou hast caused men to ride over our heads” — {In Aramaic:} “Thou hast

Continued on next page...
The structure of this proem is simple and effective. The darshan chose a verse that dealt with a general topic, and then identified each item in the verse with a specific Biblical figure, culminating in a connection to the Book of Esther.

...Continued from previous page

caus ed the nations to ride over our heads as we come through fire and through water."

According to the text as cited here, Ps. 66:12 is being adduced in support of R. Judan and R. Idi, etc., as against the view of R. Ḥanina bar Pappa (stressing "Thou hast caused to ride"—i.e., it was God, not Abraham, who caused the nations to ride). The pericope is brought in roughly identical form in Exodus Rabbah, 51:7, and in Pesiqta derav kahana, 5:2 ("Hahodesh hazeh," ed. Mandelbaum, 81; trans. Braude-Kapstein, 91-3), Midrash on Psalms 40:4 (S. Buber, ed., Midrash tehillum (Vilna: 1891) [based on Pesiqta derav kahana]), etc.; see also the observations of M. Friedmann in his notes to Pesiqta rabbati [M. Friedmann, ed. Pesikta rabbati (Vienna: 1880)] "Hahodesh" #15 (67a, n. 14). However, an alternate tradition, preserved in the standard printings of Genesis rabbah as well as in MSS Vatican 30 and 60, etc., omits the sentence (at the end) "R. Judan and R. Idi and R. Hama...the Holy One selected for him the empires." From this version it seems that the verse is being brought in support of R. Ḥanina bar Pappa’s view, or of both views. According to this reading the verse should be understood as implying that the enslavement to the empires comes instead of the fire and waters of Gehenna. However, we are not expected to deduce from this whether it was God or Abraham who was responsible for the selection. A reading similar to this one is brought in Tanhuma Pequdei, 8. Indeed, were it not for the fact that the abbreviated version is attested by the most reliable witnesses to Genesis rabbah and supported by the Tanhuma, we would have written it off easily as a simple homoioteleuton, especially when we consider that without R. Judan’s opinion the pericope must at all events be considered textually defective [after stating “we have come to the dispute,” the midrash brings only a single position!]. Such was the determination of Theodor in his edition. However, in light of the structural complexity of the pericope, with its apparent joining of two separate sources one of which is quoting the other, there might still be room for a different reconstruction of its textual evolution. At any rate, aside from any outstanding textual questions, it remains possible (as we suggested above) that the verse from Psalms was not intended to connect to the issue of the dispute, but only to the idea that enslavement to the nations is a substitute for Gehenna. If so, then it is possible that it was R. Ḥanina who cited the verse in that context, and that the Bavli’s attribution of the proem to R. Ḥanina bar Pappa was based on the fact that it was he who introduced the rendering of “men” as “nations”; or at least, that they retained some recollection of R. Ḥanina’s having expounded that verse.
The Proems

Proem #8

[11a] R. Johanan opened a proem to this lection from here: "He hath remembered his mercy and his faithfulness to the house of Israel, all the ends of the earth have seen the salvation of our Lord" (Psalms 98:3).

When did all the ends of the earth see the salvation of our Lord? — In the days of Mordecai and Esther.

This proem (for which there are no known parallels in the Palestinian midrashic literature) has a structure similar to the preceding one: It draws a thematic connection from a verse that speaks in a general way about redemption, to the specific redemption of the Jews of the Persian empire in the days of Mordecai and Esther. This verse could easily have served as a proem to any other scriptural lection involving a national salvation.

Proem #9

[11a] R. Simeon b. Laqish opened a proem to this lection from here: "As a roaring lion and a ravenous bear, so is a wicked ruler over a poor people" (Proverbs 28:15).

"As a roaring lion" — This is Nebuchadnezzar; concerning whom it is written: "A lion is gone up from his thicket" (Jeremiah 4:7).

"And a ravenous bear" — This is Ahasuerus; concerning whom it is written regarding the kingdom of Persia: "And behold another beast, a second, like to a bear" (Daniel 7:5).

And Rav Joseph taught [in a baraita]: These are the Persians who eat like a bear and drink like a bear and are enveloped in flesh.

---

87 "When did" — ~ in MSS O, R HgT'.
88 "did...Lord" — ~ in HgT. MSS O, P, EY add: "This is."
89 MS V adds: "Heard Eleazar Slothful Nahman Would Rava Righteous Dotan (?) Nation Which Miracle: Sign"; MS R: "Sign."
90 Spanish family and Printings add: "the wicked."
91 "regarding...Persia" — ~ in Printings.
92 YS (editio princeps, not in MS Oxford) adds: "flesh."
93 "like...bear" — ~ in MSS M, R, Mf, EY, Printings, YS.
94 "and drink like a bear" — ~ in MS L and YS.
95 "in flesh" — ~ in MSS G, B, O, R, W, Mf, P, V, EY, HgT.
like a bear, and grow their hair long\(^{96}\) like a bear, and they have no rest\(^{97}\) like a bear.\(^{98}\)

"A wicked ruler" — This is Haman.\(^{99}\)

"Over a poor people" — These are Israel, who became impoverished\(^{100}\) of the commandments.\(^{101}\)

This proem also follows the method of supplying specific interpretations to a general verse.\(^{102}\) Rav Joseph’s comment is not original to the proem, but was transferred in the later redaction from its original context in \(TB\) \(Qiddushin\) \(72a\) (perhaps via ‘\(Avodah\) \(Zarah\) \(2b\)).

**Proem #10**

[11a] R. Eleazar opened a proem to this lection from here: "By slothfulness he that lays rafters sinks [yimakh], and through idleness of the hands the house leaketh" (Ecclesiastes 10:18).

Through the slothfulness that inhered in Israel, that they did not occupy themselves in the Torah,\(^{103}\) as it were,\(^{104}\) he\(^{105}\) became the enemy\(^{106}\) of the Holy One.


\(^{97}\) "grow...rest" — MS B: "have no rest...grow their hair long."


\(^{99}\) "This is Haman" — ~ in MS B.

\(^{100}\) "became impoverished" — MSS G, B, R, Mf, V, Printings: "who are poor."

\(^{101}\) MSS R, Mf and V add: "in the days of Haman." AgE adds: "which are in the Torah."

\(^{102}\) The identification of the "poor people" with Israel may be influenced by the frequently cited dictum of R, Johanan: "Every place where it says dakh, 'ani or evion, Scripture is speaking of Israel, since poverty has inhered in them ever since the Temple was destroyed." See *Genesis rabbah*, 71:1, *Midrash on Psalms*, 9:19, etc.

\(^{103}\) "that they...Torah" — in Aramaic only in MS Y; all others, in Hebrew.

\(^{104}\) "as it were" — only in MS Y, EY: "in the days of Haman"; ~ in all other texts.

\(^{105}\) "he" — MS M and YS: "they."

\(^{106}\) "enemy" — YS: "enemies."
"Sinks"—the one who is called "He who lays the rafters."\textsuperscript{107}

And "makh" [sink] means nothing other than impoverished, as it says: "And if he is too poor [makh] for thy valuation" (Leviticus 27:8).

And the layer of rafters [ha-meqareh] is none other than the Holy One, as it says: "Who layest the rafters [ha-meqareh] of the upper chambers in the waters" (Psalms 104:3).

The interpretation "through the slothfulness that inhered in Israel, etc." is found verbatim in \textit{TB Ta'\'anit} 7b, where it is adduced as an explanation of Rav Qa\'tina's dictum: "Rain is withheld only on account of slothfulness [variant: neglect]\textsuperscript{108} of the Torah, as it says: 'By slothfulness, etc.'" Following this dictum, the passage continues: "Rav Joseph said: From here..." indicating\textsuperscript{109} that the pericope (or at least the citation from Ecclesiastes) was already known to him. The subject-matter of the verse, "Who layest the rafters of the upper chambers in the waters," also seems more appropriate to the context of \textit{Ta'\'anit}, which deals with the subjects of rainfall and drought. Taken together, all these facts indicate that the homily originated in \textit{Ta'\'anit}. It is however hard to imagine that at any stage in its evolution the proem had consisted of nothing more than the scriptural citation, without any explanatory transition to Esther. There appear to be two possible explanations for the current state of the pericope: (1) The verse might have been expounded independently by two separate preachers in two different contexts (one with reference to drought, and the other with reference to Purim), after which the later redaction correlated the wordings of the two traditions, creating the illusion of parallel traditions. Or alternatively: (2) It is conceivable that the very transposing of the dictum from \textit{Ta'\'anit} to \textit{Megillah} was the creative act that constituted the Esther proem; i.e., the darshan constructed his

\textsuperscript{107} MS R adds: "As it is written: 'Who layest the rafters of thy upper chambers in the waters' (Psalm 104:3)."


\textsuperscript{109} The connection is not proven however, and may be the result of editorial manipulation.
The Babylonian Esther Midrash

petihta around Ecclesiastes 10:18 as interpreted by Rav Qatina. It is also possible that R. Eleazar himself was making conscious use of Rav Qatina’s interpretation.110

Proem #11

[11a] Rav Nahman bar Isaac opened a proem to this lection from here:111 “A song of ascents: If it had not been for the Lord who was for us, let Israel now say, If it had not been for the Lord who was for us when man rose up against us” (Psalms 124:1-2).

“If it had not been for the Lord who was for us when man rose up against us” —a112 “man,” and not a king.

The intent of Rav Nahman bar Isaac’s comment is obscure. The traditional commentators understood “a man” to be an allusion to Haman. This would appear to imply that the homilist is trying either to deny any active role on Ahasuerus’s part in Haman’s plot or to assert that, had the initiative actually come from the king, then the Jews could not have been saved (thereby enhancing the miraculous dimensions of the story). It is however also possible to view the comment as a questioning of the legitimacy of Ahasuerus’ claim to the throne, in the same vein as the opinions brought on 11a below: “He was not fit [to be king]; It was that he gave more money, and was appointed.”

However we might choose to interpret R. Nahman bar Isaac’s comment, there is no doubt that Psalm 124 is by itself a perfectly appropriate text upon which to build a proem to Esther.

110 In Leviticus rabbah, 19:4 [Mordecai Margulies, ed., Midrash wayyikra rabbah (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1972, 424 ff.), the verse from Ecclesiastes is expounded in a variety of ways, but two of the interpretations follow the pattern “because Israel were slothful...‘he that lays rafters sinks.'” This fact gives further support to the likelihood that two homilists might have independently arrived at similar interpretation of the same verse, though applying it to different topics. It appears that the principal reading in both Ta'anit and Megillah is רָעַר מְשֵׁרָה, though I am not certain of its correct translation. Cf. the notes in Diqduqé Soferim to Megillah here.

111 “to this...here” — in MS O.

112 HgT adds: “wicked.”
The Proems

Proem #12

[11a] Rava\(^{113}\) opened a proem to this lection from here: "When the righteous are increased the people rejoice, {but when the wicked beareth rule the people sigh" (Proverbs 29:2).

"When the righteous are increased the people rejoice}"\(^{114}\) —This is\(^{115}\) Mordecai.\(^{116}\)

As it is written: "And Mordecai went forth from the presence of the king in royal apparel ...and the city of Shushan shouted and was glad" (Esther 8:15).\(^{117}\)

"But when the wicked beareth rule the people sigh" —This is Haman, as it is written: "[And the king and Haman sat down to drink], but the city of Shushan was perplexed" (Esther 3:15).

The same verse is expounded among the Proems to Esther rabbah (#6):

R. Isaac opened: "When the righteous are increased the people rejoice, but when the wicked beareth rule the people sigh" —When the righteous enjoy greatness, there is joy and happiness in the world: Vah vah\(^{118}\) in the world. But when the wicked enjoy greatness, there are vay and sighing and wrath in the world ... Among the nations of the world, as it says: "And it came to pass [vayhi] in the days of Ahasuerus" —Vay that Ahasuerus reigned!

The only feature common to these two proems is the verse that they cite. More significant are the differences between them: Rava’s proem elaborates the contrast between the righteous and the wicked, exemplified in Mordecai and Haman. The proof-texts are from Esther chapters 3 and 8, and the conclusion "but the city of Shushan was perplexed" (Esther 3:15) does not lead to a proper petihta. By contrast, R.

\(^{113}\) "Rava" —MSS B, V: "Rabbah"; MS P: "Rav"; AgE: "R. Abba."

\(^{114}\) Bracketed section added according to most witnesses; ~ in MSS Y, G and B.

\(^{115}\) MS Mf adds: "the righteous."

\(^{116}\) Most witnesses (other than MSS Y, L, Mf AgE) add: "and Esther."

\(^{117}\) Spanish family and MS R add: "And it is written: 'The Jews had light and gladness and joy and honor' (Esther 8:16)."

\(^{118}\) On "vah" as an expression of joy see Kohut, 3:254. He notes that, like its counterpart "vay," the term was in use in both Latin (vah) and Greek (oõó). See our discussion at the beginning of Chapter 1 above.
Isaac’s homily in *Esther rabbah* restricts the interpretation of the verse to righteous and wicked kings. The first part of the verse is interpreted with reference to David, Solomon and Asa among Israelite monarchs, and Cyrus among the Gentile rulers; the last part is applied to Ahab, Hosea son of Elah and Zedekiah among the Israelite monarchs, and Ahasuerus among the Gentile rulers. By means of this exegetical approach, the darshan is able to lead up to a conclusion that ties in with the verse “And it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus.”

**Proems #13-#14**

[11a] Rav Mattanah said: From here: “For what great nation is there that hath God so nigh to them [as the Lord our God is whensoever we call upon him?]” (Deuteronomy 4:7).

Rav Ashi said: From here: “Or hath God assayed to go and take him a nation from the midst of another nation [by trials, by signs, and by wonders]” (Deuteronomy 4:34).

---

119 See *Yefeh tanaf*: “He expounds ‘increased’ (ברכה) in the sense of ‘and the elder shall serve the younger’ (Genesis 25:23); i.e.: when the righteous become great and powerful.” Cf. Maharsha to the Bavli: “…Or maybe the word ‘increased’ implies importance…”

120 In *Aggadat bereshit* (Buber) end of Ch. 35, the same theme is developed from a different verse (in which a king is explicitly mentioned): “…Another interpretation: ‘Now king David was old and stricken in years’ (1 Kings 1:1). This is what Scripture has said: ‘A king that sitteth in the throne of judgment scattereth away all evil with his eyes’ (Proverbs 20:8). Come and see, when the wicked become great in the world, an evil beast comes to the world. But when the righteous become great in the world, all are joyous and glad. When Zedekiah was appointed king, all commenced saying ‘vay!’ — ‘And [Zedekiah] the son of Josiah reigned [vay-yimlokh]…’ (Jeremiah 37:1).” Cf. Ch. Albeck, ed., *Midrash bereshit rabbati* (Jerusalem: 1940), 165. Proverbs 29:2 is also expounded in *Midrash on Psalms* (47), but there the theme that is developed is that “when the wicked rule over the world everyone sighs, etc.,” and no illustrations are adduced.

121 “Mattanah”—EY: “Mottena”; ~ in MS M.

122 “Rav Ashi”—MS O: “Rav Mattanah”; MS R*: “And Rav Assi”; MS V: “And Rava”; MS L: “Rav.”

123 “From here”—~ in MSS G and B (before emendation).
Rav Mattanah and Rav Ashi bring two verses that could serve as proems to Esther. R. Mattanah's verse speaks of the special closeness between Israel and the God who hurries to respond to the prayers of his people. Rav Ashi's verse emphasizes (so, presumably, did he understand the text) God's power to deliver the Jews during their exile among the nations of the world, as well as his ability to gather them up from their dispersion as he did at the time of the Exodus. The two verses are quoted without any accompanying commentary. Possibly it is being assumed that these verses could be expounded. However in light of the preceding instances, it appears more likely that the Babylonian Amora'im really understood that the verse (provided that it comes from a different book of the Bible) can by itself constitute a proem. It would have been a simple procedure to attach the verses to the lection through the addition of a formula such as "When? —In the days of Ahasuerus."

These two verses seem to have held a special importance for Rav Ashi as expressions of the divine love for the Jewish people. In TB Berakhot 6a he identifies them as the passages inscribed in God's phylacteries.

124 Syntactically the expression has to be read elliptically, as: "[A proem can be constructed] from here" or something of the sort. The inconsistency in the terminology implies that the previous units were used as actual proems, whereas the present ones are only hypothetical. From a source-critical perspective it would appear that Rav Mattanah (?) and Rav Ashi (possibly in some sort of editorial capacity) were adding "appendices" or glosses to proem-lists which had been transmitted to them. I discern in this fact no suggestion on the part of the talmud's redactors that these two units could not have served as proper proems (e.g., because they contain only unexpounded biblical verses).

125 Maharsha: "He is comparing their redemption in the days of Mordecai and Esther to their redemption from Egypt... and this is the point of saying 'Or hath God assayed to go and take him a nation from the midst of another nation, etc.' —referring to a nation that is subject to another nation seeking to harm it."


...Immediately [Ahasuerus] sent and assembled all the wise men of the nations of the world. They all came before him. Ahasuerus said to
Rav’s “Proem”

[11a] 127 “And it came to pass [vayhi] in the days of Ahasuerus” (Esther 1:1)—

Says Rav:128 Vay hayah [Woe came to pass]!129 There was a fulfillment of130 what is written:131 “And there ye shall sell yourselves unto your enemies for bondmen and for bondwomen, and no man shall buy you” (Deuteronomy 28:68).

At the conclusion of the proem-collection we encounter a puzzling phenomenon. Following Rav Ashi’s proem is inserted a second pisqa to Esther 1:1: “And it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus,” in spite of the fact that the same pisqa has already appeared before the dicta of R. Levi / R. Jonathan on the previous leaf.132 Rav interprets the opening verse of Esther with reference to Deuteronomy 28:68 And yet immediately afterwards we read: “And Samuel said: From here:133 ‘And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies...’”

...Continued from previous page...

them: Is it your will that we cause this nation to perish from the world? They all said to him as one: ... And furthermore, all the nations are termed “strangers” before the Holy One...but Israel are termed “close”... And no nation is close to the Holy One except Israel, as it says: “as the Lord our God is whenever we call upon Him.”

This portion of Esther rabbah belongs to a later midrash, which already made use of the Babylonian Talmud; see Zunz–Albeck, Hadderashot beyisra’el, 129-30, and n. 35.

127 MSS M and Mf add: “Another matter.”
129 “Vay hayah”—MSS M and W: “Vay havah” (Aramaic); EY and Printings: “vay vehi”; MS O: “vay”; AgE: “Vayhi—vay hayah”; ~ in MS P and HgT.
130 “There...fulfillment”—~ in most texts (other than MS Y, Spanish family and AgE); MS B: “in his days”; Genizah fragment: “in the days of Ahasuerus.”
131 Most texts (other than MSS Y, B, W, V, Printings, AgE and Genizah fragment) add: “in the Torah.”
132 Note that two Ashkenazic manuscripts precede the second pisqa with the formula ריבא (“Another matter”), as if to introduce an alternative midrash to the first pericope. It is true that Rav’s dictum does follow naturally from the first pericope.
133 See variant readings listed above.
In other words, the Talmud is presenting Samuel's comment as a continuation of the sequence of proems, notwithstanding the fact that Rav's dictum has already taken us into the next phase of the midrash, the actual exposition of the first verse of Esther. The Vilna Ga'on in his glosses to the Talmud was sensitive to this incongruity, and concluded that Rav's words should be considered as part of the proem-list and that the pisqa was inserted here mistakenly. According to him, the pisqa should properly be moved forward to the end of the proem-list, where it ought to serve as an introduction to the various explanatory comments to Esther 1:1. Therefore, his version of Rav's dictum reads only "Said Rav: From here: 'And there ye shall sell yourselves unto your enemies for bondmen and for bondwomen, and no man shall buy you' (Deuteronomy 28:68)." Now this explanation would indeed seem very persuasive were it not for the fact that it finds no support in any extant textual witnesses, all of which read (with minor variations) "Says Rav: Vay hayah [Woe came to pass]! There was a fulfillment of what is written 'And there ye shall sell yourselves...'"). It would appear nonetheless (as we shall have occasion to observe below) that the Ga'on's explanation does reflect accurately the state of Rav's dictum as it existed at the time of the midrash's earliest redaction.

The verse cited by Rav (Deuteronomy 28:68) is not altogether appropriate to its current midrashic context, opening as it does with "And the Lord shall bring you into Egypt again with ships" —hardly the best choice for a homily about the days of Ahasuerus in Persia and

---

134 This is especially true when we consider the fact that the passage to which the Ga'on wants to attach Rav's dictum also begins with the words "Said Rav: [the brother of the 'Head'...]," increasing the likelihood that a scribe had confused the two instances.

135 An explanation similar to that of the Vilna Ga'on is suggested by H. D. Azulai, Petah 'einayim (Livorno: 1790). He proposes that Samuel's dictum be moved to the end of the proem-collection. He also notes difficulties in the chronological progression of the collection: "It requires serious consideration, why Samuel and his contemporaries are cited after Rav Ashi." See also the observations of Arieh b. Asher, Turei Even: "I do not know why the Gemara interrupted the proems with this homily, seeing that it continues afterwards to bring more proems by several Amora'im. Perhaps Rav's dictum is also a proem." Note that witnesses from the Spanish family insert a pisqa citing Esther 1:1 before the dictum about "brother of the Head," though most of the texts have only the single word "Ahasuerus."
Media. The selection of this verse does become somewhat more acceptable when we compare our text to the opening of Esther rabbah, which contains an exposition of the entire Deuteronomy passage, beginning with verse 66: "And your life shall hang in doubt before you." These curses, which can be understood to have been fulfilled in the Babylonian exile, speak of the tribulations of all exiles.136 In keeping with its scriptural context, the passage was expounded with reference to Egypt, but also with reference to other exiles. Accordingly we find the following passage at the beginning of Esther rabbah:

"And it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus"—

Rav opened: "And your life shall hang in doubt before you." Rav interpreted the verse with reference to Haman: "And your life shall hang in doubt before you" —from one moment to the next.137 "And you shall fear day and night" —at the time when the documents fly off.138 "And shall have no assurance of your life" —"[The copy of the writing, to be given out for a decree in every province, was to be published unto all the peoples] that they should be ready against thee that day" (Esther 3:14).139

"In the morning you shall say: Would that it were evening" —In the morning of Babylonia, you shall say: Would that it were its evening! In the morning of Media, you shall say: Would that it were its evening!...

An alternative interpretation: ...In the morning of Babylonia, you shall say: Would that it were the evening of Media! And in the morning of Media, you shall say: Would that it were the evening of Greece!...

136 E.g., verse 63: "...so the Lord will rejoice over you to destroy you...and you shall be plucked from off the land whither you go to possess it (64) ...And the Lord will scatter you among all the people, from the one end of the earth even unto the other...(65) And among these nations you shall find no ease, neither shall the sole of your foot have rest..."

137 Cf. Esther 3:9 and glosses of R. David Luria; Numbers rabbah, 14:12.


“And no man shall buy you.” Why will no man buy you? —Rav says: Because you did not transmit דִּבְרֵי הַתּוֹרָה the words of the covenant, for there is among you none who will “buy” the words of the five books of the Pentateuch, the numerical value of תְּרֵעָה.”

And says R. Judah: You are Imperial property (τοιχοκός), and is it not true that anyone who acquires a slave from the Imperial Treasury is liable to the death penalty! Even so did Ahasuerus say to his wife: “Behold, I have given Esther the house of Haman” (Esther 8:7), and R. Judah b. R. Simon said: Thus was the fate of anyone who laid his hand on the Imperial Treasury...

And Rabbi Isaac says: As slaves and maidservants you are not bought; however you are bought to destroy, to slay, and to cause to perish (cf. Esther 3:13; 7:4, etc.). For so does Esther address Ahasuerus: “But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen...” (Esther 7:4). For thus did Moses our Teacher write for us in the Torah: “And there ye shall sell yourselves unto your enemies for bondmen and for bondwomen, and no man shall buy you” (Deuteronomy 28:68). Perhaps “to be destroyed, to be slain, and to perish.” —As soon as they all observed this, they commenced crying “Vay vayl” —“Vayhi” —Woe that it was in the days of Ahasuerus!

The proem in Esther rabbah is a complex one, and we cannot be altogether certain of its original structure, nor about which of its segments were included in Rav’s original homily. At any rate, we may presume that Rav expounded verse 66 in connection with Esther; his derashah on verse 68, which does not allude directly to the Purim story, is also cited by the redactor of Esther rabbah. However, the central moment of the proem is contained in the words of R. Isaac at the conclusion of the passage, as he builds upon the verbal similarities between “And there ye shall sell yourselves unto your enemies for bondmen and for bondwomen, and no man shall buy you” and “But if we had been sold for bondmen and bondwomen I had held my peace”

---

140 Cf. the following verse (Deut. 28:69): “These are the words of the covenant which the Lord commanded Moses, etc.”

141 The meaning is very obscure; see the traditional commentators.

142 See Krauss, Griechische und lateinische Lehnwörter, 268.
A cursory comparison of the Palestinian and Babylonian traditions reveals that the former is at once more coherent and more elegantly crafted. There can be little doubt that the original version of the passage was founded upon the link to Esther 7:4—and yet this pivotal verse is not even mentioned in the Esther-Midrash. Furthermore, by moving the “vayhi–vay hayah” ahead to the beginning of the dictum rather than placing it at the conclusion, the Babylonian proem-collection has been divested of its unified petihita structure and its original symmetry has been destroyed. However it is precisely the anomalous placement of Rav’s exegetical dictum in the midst of a collection of proems that provides us with a strong indication (as the Vilna Ga’on recognized) that the dictum’s original form must have resembled that of Esther rabbah, where it constitutes a proem to the Book of Esther, not an explanation of its opening verse. The later redactors of the Babylonian sugya were no longer sensitive to how inappropriate the dictum had become in its new context. The transformation of Rav’s dictum from a proem into an explanatory gloss also affected the functions assigned to the subsequent dicta of Samuel, R. Levi and R. Hyya bar Abba. We shall return to this topic below when we discuss those dicta in detail.

This instance points to a weakening in the understanding of the function of the petihita among the Babylonian redactors of the Esther–Midrash, a phenomenon that becomes readily apparent when we examine the connection between the “proem verse” and the opening verse of Esther, a connection that should lie at the crux of a proper petihita. We have already observed that in Esther rabbah there is a uniform conclu-

---

143 The content of this passage is also incorporated into the Second Targum to Esther 1:1; see also L. B. Paton, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther, International Critical Commentary, ed. S. R. Driver, A. Plummer and C. A. Briggs (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1964), 122.

144 It is possible that the connection between Deuteronomy 28:68 and Esther 7:4 is being alluded to in Rashi’s remarks to the Talmud here; cf. Maharsha, and the “Hiddushim” section of the S. Y. editions. The fact that the original context of Rav’s dictum resembled that of Esther rabbah is further borne out by the fact that in both sources Samuel’s proem is cited immediately following it (in very similar wordings). R. Levi’s proem is also found in an expanded version among the proems to Esther rabbah.
sion to all the proems: "As soon as they all observed this, they commenced crying 'Vay vay!' —'Vayhi' —Woe that it was in the days of Ahasuerus!" This structure provides the homilist with considerable flexibility for the development of his various themes. In order to tie his derashah in with the first verse of Esther all he is required to do is to lead up to any topic that has something to do with the dangers and sufferings (Vay!) that befell or threatened the Jews during the reign of Ahasuerus.

This is of course radically different from the situation in our Babylonian midrash. There, not a single one of the proems actually creates a transition to the opening verse of Esther, or even concludes with the mention of the name "Ahasuerus." In many of the instances, such a connection could have been created with no difficulty, but the redactors felt no compulsion to do so.

Following is a list of the conclusions of the petihtot:

1. "...and offspring"—This refers to Vashti.
2. "...that shall not be cut off"—This is the reading of the Megillah.\(^\text{145}\)
3. "...so the Lord will rejoice [yasis] over you to cause you to perish, etc."\(^\text{146}\)
4. ...This is Mordecai;\(^\text{147}\) as it is written: "And Esther set Mordecai over the house of Haman."
5. "...and princes" —this is Haman and his ten sons.
6. "...but hath extended mercy unto us in the sight of the kings of Persia, etc." (Ezra 9:9).\(^\text{148}\)

\(^{145}\) Cf. the variant readings listed above, some of which are very significant. See also Heinemann, Derashot besibbur bitequfat ha-talmud, p. 43.

\(^{146}\) This is presumably the conclusion of the proem per se. See our discussion above.

\(^{147}\) Cf. variant readings.

\(^{148}\) Note the additions found in the various texts, as recorded in detail above: "When [hath he extended mercy unto us]? In the [days] [time] of [Haman] [Mordecai] [Mordecai and Esther].
7. "But thou didst bring us out into abundance"—in the days of Mordecai and Esther.\textsuperscript{149}

8. When did "all the ends of the earth see the salvation of our Lord"?—In the days of Mordecai and Esther.

9. "These are Israel, who became impoverished of the commandments".\textsuperscript{150}

10. "He became the enemy of the Holy One."\textsuperscript{151}

11. "A man, and not a king."

12. "This is Haman, as it is written: 'but the city of Shushan was perplexed.'"\textsuperscript{152}

As regards most of the conclusions in our list, it would have been easy to have added a passage like "When? In the days of Ahasuerus: And it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus," in order to transform the units into proems to the opening verse. In numbers #6, #7, #8, etc., the situation is even more surprising. In all of these instances the unit ends with the words "in the days of Haman / Mordecai /Mordecai and Esther"—precisely in places where the wording "in the days of Ahasuerus" would have supplied us with a satisfactory transition. In other instances (#4, #12, etc.) the darshan concluded with other verses from Esther. Taken together, all these phenomena furnish us with abundant evidence that, unlike their Palestinian colleagues, the redactors of our Babylonian pericope did not insist on the connection between the petihta and the first verse of the lection.

\textsuperscript{149} Or: "Haman." See critical apparatus.

\textsuperscript{150} Cf. the reading of MS R cited above.

\textsuperscript{151} This appears to be the conclusion of the proem proper. The complete unit concludes "And the layer of rafters is none other than the Holy One, as it says: ‘Who layest the rafters [hammeqareh] of thy upper chambers in the waters.’" Note EY's addition of "in the days of Haman."

\textsuperscript{152} The remaining examples consist only of verses, without any literary or exegetical embellishment. That of Samuel, concluding "in the days of Gog and Magog," (or: "For the future times, when no nation or language will hold power over you") obviously does not connect formally to Esther.
Samuel’s Proem

[11a] And\(^{153}\) Samuel said: From here:\(^{154}\) “And yet for all that, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject them, neither will I abhor them, to destroy them utterly, and to break my covenant with them” (Leviticus 26:44).\(^{155}\)

“I will not reject them”—in the days of the Greeks.

“Neither will I abhor them”—in the days of Vespasian Caesar.\(^{156}\)

“To destroy them utterly,\(^{157}\) and to break my covenant with them”—in the days of Haman.\(^{158}\)

“For I am the Lord their God”\(^{159}\)—in the days of Gog and Magog.

There follows a baraita on a theme similar to that of Samuel’s dictum.

YSMG: a sign\(^{160}\)

In a baraita it teaches:

KNMR: a sign\(^{161}\)

\(^{153}\) “And”—Thus in all direct witnesses; see our analysis of the significance of this fact to the literary structure of the pericope. Only in MhG to Leviticus [A. Steinsaltz, ed., Midrash haggadot al hamish-shah humshei torah sefer vayyiqra (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1975), 752]: “Said Samuel.”

\(^{154}\) “From here”—Thus in the MSS Y, M, Mf, AgE, as well as before Rashi; MS W: “from the verse;”: ~ in MSS G, L, R*, V, Printings, Spanish family and Genizah fragment.

\(^{155}\) MhG and AgE add: “YSM”G: a sign.”

\(^{156}\) “Caesar”—~ in MSS B, O, R*, P, V, HgT.

\(^{157}\) Thus in MSS Y, AgE and MhG; MSS G, B (before emendation) and R* add: “in the days of the Romans”; all other witnesses (including Ashkenazic and Spanish families, MS B after emendation and Genizah fragment) add: “in the days of Haman”.

\(^{158}\) “Haman”—Thus in Yemenite family, MSS B (before emendation), O, R*; all other witnesses [including MS B (after emendation) and Genizah fragment]: “the Romans.”

\(^{159}\) “God”—MS L adds: “in the days of the Messiah and”; MS M adds: “In the future to come and.”

\(^{160}\) “YSMG: a sign”—found only in MS Y.

\(^{161}\) “KNMR: a sign”—found only in Yemenite family.
"I will not reject them" — in the days of the Chaldeans, when I appointed for them Daniel "the man greatly beloved" (Daniel 11:12), Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah.

"Neither will I abhor them" — in the days of the Greeks, when I appointed for them Simeon the Righteous and Mattathias son of Johanan the High Priest and Hashmonai and his sons.

"To destroy them utterly" — in the days of Haman, when I appointed for them Mordecai and Esther.

"To break My covenant with them" — in the days of the Romans, when I appointed for them those of the House of Rabbi and the Sages of his generation.

"For I am the Lord their God" — For the future times, when no nation or language will hold power over you.

The Talmud continues:

R. Levi said: From here:

"But if you will not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, [then shall those that you let remain of them be as thorns in your eyes...]" (Numbers 33:55).

---

162 "appointed"—HgT2: "did not appoint."
163 "Daniel...‘...beloved’"—only in Yemenite family; MS M: "Simeon the Righteous"; MSS G, B (before emendation), O: ~; others: "Daniel."
164 "Simeon the Righteous" — ~ in MSS O, M.
165 "and Mattathias" — ~ in MS O and YS.
166 "son of Johanan" — ~ in MSS B, O, W, Printings, YS.
167 "the High Priest" — ~ in MSS B, O, HgT1.
168 "and" — ~ in MSS G, O.
169 "Greeks... Simeon the Righteous... Haman...Mordecai and Esther" — EY, YS reverse the order: "Haman [=EY; YS: Media] ...Mordecai and Esther ...Greeks ...Simeon the Righteous (and Mattathias son of Johanan the High Priest the Hasmonean and his sons — ~ in YS)."
170 "his generation" — thus in MS M, MhG; all other witnesses: "the generations."
171 MSS G, B, Mf, W, V, EY, Ashkenazi family, YS, Printings, Genizah fragment add: "be able to."
172 MSS B, M and Genizah fragment add: "any more."
173 "said" — EY and HgT add: "opened a proem to this lection [last three words ~ in HgT1]."
R. Hiyya bar Abba\textsuperscript{174} said: From here:

"Moreover it shall come to pass, that I shall do unto you, as I thought to do unto them" (Numbers 33:56).\textsuperscript{175}

There are two possible ways of understanding how the dicta of Samuel, R. Levi and R. Hiyya bar Abba were meant to fit into the structure of the pericope, and it seems as if the respective choices between these explanations influenced the wording of the talmudic textual traditions.

According to one possibility the comments are attached to Rav's statement: "There was a fulfillment of what is written: 'And there ye shall sell yourselves unto your enemies for bondmen and for bondwomen, and no man shall buy you.'" Each of these Amora'im is proposing a Pentateuchal verse of castigation that was fulfilled in the days of Mordecai and Esther. An interpretation along these lines is reflected in those textual witnesses that omit the expression "from here" (which does not connect to Rav's dictum) from Samuel's comment. It is evident that, unlike Rav, Samuel wished to underscore the idea of consolation, rather than the trouble and "vay."

However it appears that this reading, and its implied interpretation, are not original to the pericope. The words "from here" appear in all witnesses to the dicta of R. Levi and R. Hiyya bar Abba.\textsuperscript{176}

\textsuperscript{174} "bar Abba" — ~ in MSS B (before emendation), W, M, Printings. Spanish family (including MS B*) and MS V add: "said R. Johanan."

\textsuperscript{175} MhG to Numbers [Z. M. Rabinowitz, ed., Midrash haggadol on the Pentateuch: Numbers (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1973), 567] adds: "When did they seek to destroy them utterly? —In the days of Haman."

\textsuperscript{176} If Rav and Samuel were indeed explaining Esther 1:1, then it would be unlikely for the subsequent statements to revert back to the proem-sequence. This point was alluded to by Rashi, who seems to have had the reading "from here" in Samuel's dictum as well (cf. the glosses of R. Joel Sirkes, who tried to harmonize Rashi's comments with the text of the printed editions). The reading in Rashi's commentary is supported by MS New York-J.T.S. Rab. 382. However in MS Munich 216 (see D.S. n. q) of Rashi's commentary the word "proem" is omitted. According to this reading, Rashi may have read Samuel's comment as attached to Rav's. See W. Bacher, Die Agada der babylonischen Amoräer (Frankfurt a/M: 1913), 119, n. 26.
The second possibility is that the dicta of Samuel, R. Levi and R. Hiyya bar Abba all originated as proems to the Book of Esther.

A comparison with the parallel passages in Esther rabbah provides further evidence that all these Amoraic comments originated as proems. Samuel's dictum is brought there almost verbatim (Proem #4) immediately following the parallel to Rav's dictum (cited above). The introductory formulæ are: "Samuel opened ...R. Hiyya taught (יְדִיד) ..."¹⁷⁷ In Esther rabbah as well the unit does not connect to the opening verse, as is required by a "proper" petihta. Rather, Samuel's dictum appears to be the first segment of a complex proem which also includes #5, and which goes on to dwell on the theme of the historical progression of empires. This unit concludes "And when they saw this they all began to cry 'vay!' — 'And it came to pass [vay hayah] in the days of Ahasuerus.'"¹⁷⁸

A version of Levi's dictum is also included among the proems to Esther rabbah (#7):¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Jacob Neusner, From Literature to Theology in Formative Judaism: Three Preliminary Studies, Vol. 199, Brown Judaic Studies, ed. Jacob Neusner et al. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), comments on the Esther rabbah passage in the context of a study of "davar aher" pericopes in aggadic midrash, noting with respect to R. Hiyya's and Samuel's interpretations that "There is no way that the two davar aher can be read apart from one another, because only together do they make the point the compositor wanted to make. The two readings are of course complementary, the one invoking times of trouble in ages past, the other in the perceived present." The evaluation is a curious one: Both sources—neither of which is introduced as a davar aher!—speak of past and present [as well as future], overlapping more than they complement one another. The fact is that each of the traditions can exist perfectly well without the other.

¹⁷⁸ See our discussions in the previous chapter.

¹⁷⁹ A discussion of this passage is included in Jacob Neusner, The Midrashic Compilations of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries: An Introduction to the Rhetorical, Logical and Topical Program, Vol. 2, 19-24. The conclusions there are so trivially obvious as to be puzzling. They include: the fact that the midrashic passage employs a commentary-form; that some sections employ a proposition-form; that the conclusion of the proem is the basis for the connection to the base verse (Esther 1:1); and that the attributions are not integral to the content. As regards the last-mentioned item, Neusner seems to be using this fact as part of his general argument for the spuriousness of all attributions. While I share much of his skepticism regarding the reliability of attributions of dicta, it seems to me that, taken in isolation, the data adduced here

Continued on next page...
R. Levi opened: “But if you will not drive out the inhabitants of the land from before you, then shall those that you let remain of them be as thorns in your eyes” — This speaks of Saul. When Samuel said to him (1 Samuel 15:3) “Now go and smite Amalek” he said to him: You went out innocent and you returned guilty, and you took pity on him, as it says (verse 9): “But Saul and the people spared Agag.” And behold, a shoot survives from him who will do to you harsh things, “thorns in your eyes and goads in your sides.” And who is this? — This is Haman, who thought to destroy, to slay, to cause to perish. And when everyone saw this they began to cry “vay!” “And it came to pass [vayhi] in the days of Ahasuerus.”

There can be little doubt that R. Levi’s statement in the Bavli ought to be interpreted in the light of Esther rabbah, except that the Babylonian tradition has once again preserved only the verse, without the exegesis or formal structure of the petihta. The choice of verses in itself presents some problems. What we have here is two consecutive verses, conveying the identical message, namely that unless the Israelites drive out the inhabitants of the land (a category that can be extended to include Amalek), they are doomed to suffer at their hands. Why, then, should the verses be offered as two distinct (and perhaps contrasted) proems? It would appear rather that R. Hiyya bar Abba is actually reacting to R. Levi’s suggestion and adding to his message: not only will the nations themselves become “thorns in your eyes and goads in your sides, etc.” (as specified in verse 55), but God himself will

...Continued from previous page...
bring upon you the destruction that he had originally intended to bring upon those nations. It is further possible that beneath the surface of this innocent-looking difference in the selection of proem-verses lies a fundamental divergence over the theological dimensions of the Purim story: Should Haman be regarded as a villain acting on his own initiative or as an instrument employed by God to punish the Jews for their transgressions?  

Concluding Remarks

1. Sources of the Proem-List:

It seems that the entire collection is based on Palestinian sources, including those that are cited in the Bavli in the names of Babylonian Amora'im. Several of the proems have parallels (full or partial) in Esther rabbah or other midrashic compilations. In general, the sources available to the Bavli were similar to those used by the redactors of Esther rabbah, though each of these works reworked the materials in its own distinctive manner. The resemblance to Esther rabbah is particularly notable when we take into consideration the relatively large number of midrashim that have survived to Esther, and observe that none of the others demonstrates such a consistent similarity to the Babylonian Esther Midrash.

---


184 These include those of R. Johanan, Rabbah bar Afdon, Rava, Rav, Samuel, R. Levi, as well as the tradition of R. Levi / R. Jonathan in the "Prologue." We have excluded from this count references to the second part of Esther rabbah, which is a separate and later work that makes use of the Babylonian Talmud; see, e.g.: Esther rabbah, 10:13; 7:13.

185 R. Abba bar Kahana's proem.
2. Ideological Themes:

The principal ideological motifs that are underscored in the proem collection include:

1. The incorporation of the Megillah narrative into the process of changing empires, as understood from prophetic tradition.\textsuperscript{186} This theme emphasizes Vashti’s role as Nebuchadnezzar’s granddaughter and Ahasuerus’s attempts to interfere with the erection of the Second Temple.\textsuperscript{187}

2. Disasters befall the Jews only because of their sins.\textsuperscript{188}

3. The righteous triumph over the wicked (and, by implication, Israel over the heathen nations).\textsuperscript{189}

4. The exile to Elam and the decrees of Haman are the fulfillment of admonitions that were addressed to Israel in the Torah.\textsuperscript{190}

The choices of these particular themes were dictated to some extent by the petihta form itself: The use of a verse from the Prophets will understandably lead the darshan to develop historical or eschatological ideas.\textsuperscript{191} Verses from the Wisdom Literature lend themselves to discourses on the contrasts between the righteous and the wicked (or the

\textsuperscript{186} This is true of the proems of R. Jonathan, R. Samuel bar Nahmani, Rabbah bar Afdon, Rav Dimi bar Isaac, R. Hanina bar Pappa, R. Simeon b. Laqish and Samuel.

\textsuperscript{187} Based on Ezra 4:6. This theme recurs in several places in the Esther Midrash; e.g., 11a ("Nebuchadnezzar destroyed and he wished to destroy; as it says ‘And in the reign of Ahasuerus...wrote they an accusation etc.’" (11a); 15b: "‘Even to the half of the kingdom it shall be performed’ —Half the kingdom, but not all the kingdom, and not something that drives a wedge in the kingdom. And what is this? —The building of the Temple’; etc. See Ginzberg, Legends, 6:457, nn. 47-8; 474, n. 150.

\textsuperscript{188} As in the proems of R. Joshua b. Ḥananiah, R. Simeon b. Laqish and R. Eleazar.

\textsuperscript{189} Proems of R. Samuel bar Nahmani, R. Abba bar Kahana, R. Nahman bar Isaac and Rava.

\textsuperscript{190} Proems of R. Joshua b. Ḥananiah, Rav, Samuel, R. Levi, R. Hiyya bar Abba.

\textsuperscript{191} The popularity of this subject probably owes to the fact that it lends itself to themes of consolation: Just as empires have risen and fallen in the past, according to an order that was predetermined by a divine plan, so will this last empire ultimately pass from the world.
By contrast, those midrashim which emphasize the transgressions of the Jews in the generation of Ahasuerus are usually based on patently non-literary readings of the scriptural texts. This fact suggests that it was the ideological factors, more than the literary conventions or exegetical considerations, which led to the development of this motif. As to the tendency towards viewing the Megillah story in the light of the Pentateuchal admonitions, it is more difficult to determine with certainty whether it was the ideological concerns which influenced the choice of proem-verses or vice versa; however there can be no doubt that the graphic descriptions of Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28-9, etc., do lend a distinctive perspective to the events that transpired in the days of Mordecai and Esther.

It should be emphasized that few of the motifs which we have enumerated among the Babylonian proems are in any way unique when compared with parallel passages in Palestinian midrashic works. A long passage in *Esther rabbah* contains discourses that were composed about the assorted empires and kings that ruled over Israel. Even the perception of the woes of exile as the fulfillment of the admonitions and warnings in the Torah is founded upon a motif which occupies a central place in *Esther rabbah*. This is also true about the drawing of contrasts between the wise and the righteous, as against the fools and the wicked, one of the most widespread themes in the *petihta* corpus, especially those built around verses from Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Psalms.

---

192 "The Aggadah ‘interprets’ the general philosophies of life of the Hagiographa in terms of historical protagonists, and thereby applies the sharp contrasts in the Wisdom Literature to the stories of the fathers, which are not dealt with explicitly by the Torah, etc." [from: Isaac Heinemann *Darkhei ha’aggadah*, 47; note carefully his full discussion there]; on the contrasts between Israel and the nations of the world in the Aggadah see *ibid.* 48 ff. See also Ch. Albeck, *Einleitung und Register zum Bereschit Rabba*, Second Printing, Vol. 1: Einleitung, Veröffentlichungen der Akademie für die Wissenschaft des Judentums (Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1965), 18.

193 Proems # 4-5; #12.

194 See our discussion above.

195 The first Proem is devoted to this theme.
Nonetheless, it appears possible to point to some element of novelty or originality in the thematic structures of the Babylonian Esther-Midrash; namely in the underscoring of the connection between the Jews’ observance of the commandments and their fate at the hands of the ruling empires. Accordingly, they were imperiled by Haman’s decrees because they became “impoverished of the commandments,” on account of “the slothfulness that inhered in Israel because they did not occupy themselves in the Torah.” This idea recurs in subsequent portions of the midrash.\(^\text{196}\) While it is true that we can find in the Palestinian sources parallels to the traditions which ascribe the threat facing the Jews of that generation to the fact that they participated in Ahasuerus’ feast, or that they had bowed down before the image in the time of Nebuchadnezzar,\(^\text{197}\) I am not familiar with other sources which

\textsuperscript{196} 13b: “They slumbered from the commandments” [the motif appears in midrashic interpretations of Song of Songs 5:2: “I sleep (עבד), but by heart waketh”; see Exodus rabbah, 2:5 (110), and parallels cited by Shinan]; 14a: “...The removal of the ring caused them to return to the right course”; etc. To some extent this may be viewed as a by-product of the widespread tendency to place the Esther story within halakhic parameters. An illustration of this tendency would be the important function assigned to the Sages in the midrashic retelling of the Megillah, to the point where Mordecai takes on the appearance of a talmudic rabbi. E.g., 12b: “Then the king said to the wise men —Who are the wise men (חקחמים)!— the rabbis. ‘Which knew the times’ —Who know how to calculate leap-years and to fix months etc.”; 13b: “...Because she used to show menstrual blood to the sages”; ibid.: “Mordecai would sit in the Chamber of Hewn Stone, and was proficient in seventy languages”; “...Initially to Mordecai alone, but in the end, to the people of Mordecai; and who are they? —The rabbis...”; “He went and found the rabbis sitting before him, and he was demonstrating for the rabbis the laws of ‘taking a fistful’ etc.”; 16b: “and accepted among the greater part of his brethren’ —among the greater part of his brethren, but not among all his brethren; this teaches that a part of the sanhedrin withdrew from him.” The authors of the midrash also employed other means in order to introduce halakhic categories into the story. We may note, for instance, the halakhic questions that are raised concerning aspects of Esther’s behavior; e.g.: sabbath observance (13a; cf. 12b); her relations with Ahasuerus and Mordecai (13b); her observance of dietary laws while in the royal court (13a), etc. These topics will be examined in greater detail in the following chapters of this commentary.

\textsuperscript{197} Song of Songs rabbah, 7:8: “...If so, then why did Israel become endangered in the days of Haman? The rabbis and R. Simeon b. Yohai: The rabbis say: Because Israel worshipped idols, and R. Simeon said: Because they ate food cooked by gentiles...” See also Esther rabbah, 7:18 and other sources listed by Ginzberg, Legends, 6:154, n. 17; 467 ff., n. 122.
link the dangers to a general laxity in the observance of the commandments. This departure might plausibly have been introduced by the Babylonian homilists, inspired by the Sitz im Leben of public preaching, in hopes of improving the quality of congregational religious observance.

3. Literary Perspectives:

The proems in the current collection did not impress us with the variety or imaginativeness of their literary construction. In several of them, particularly in those petihfas that were cited in the names of Babylonian Amora'im, the whole proem consisted of nothing more than the reference to a verse from elsewhere in Scripture which had some connection to the Book of Esther. At most, simple identifications were appended to the verses: “This is Mordecai,” “This is Haman,” or “...When? In the days of Mordecai and Esther,” etc. In the few proems that did merit more elaborate treatment, this was limited to the addition of proof-texts for the identifications. And though Proem #3 appears to have undergone more extensive literary crafting, our analysis of its construction suggests that what we have there is merely a mechanical copying of a pericope from TB Sanhedrin, with no direct connection to the proem structure. We did not encounter, for example, any “complex proems,” wherein a verse is expounded according to a variety of alternative methods until the final “davar aher” creates a connection to the beginning of the lection, or any systematic presentation of subjects or ideas that were learned from the verses.

198 As in Proem #2: “‘Shall come up’—the righteous Esther, who is called Hadassah; as it says: ‘And he brought up Hadassah.’” See also the other units in this proem, as well as Proems #9 and #10.

199 It is doubtful whether proems of this sort actually represent the preaching that took place in the synagogues during the talmudic era. More likely, most or all of them are the creation of the editors of literary midrashic compilations, who found in this method a convenient vehicle for combining several interpretations into a literary unit. For an overview of the methodological questions involved, with extensive references to previous studies, see: R. S. Sarason, “Toward a New Agendum for the Study of Rabbinic Midrashic Literature,” in Studies in Aggadah, Targum and Jewish Liturgy in Memory of Joseph Heinemann, ed. J. Petuchowski and E. Fleischer, 55-73.
Notwithstanding, the most conspicuous phenomenon to impress itself upon us at several points in our analysis was the fact that, of all the “petihtas” in the collection, there was not a single one that conformed to the standard definition of a petihta: “in which the preacher uses as his starting-point a verse taken from another place in the Bible ...and not from the lection that is to be read on the occasion of his current discourse... From this ‘far-off’ verse he leads his homily along its course until he creates a link to the beginning of today’s lection and concludes with its first verse...”200 As noted already, there is not a single instance among the eighteen or so in our collection about which we can truthfully say that it “creates a link to the beginning of today’s lection.”

We may speculate that what reached the Babylonian redactors of the Esther-Midrash was merely an abbreviated list of Palestinian proems, which included only the verses themselves, and perhaps some comments on the verses, but not complete proems. Everything that we have seen in our study of the collection points towards the conclusion that the Babylonian sages were not familiar with the function of the petihta, and therefore did not feel the need to rework the sources in order to restore their original structures as introductions to the opening verses of the lections. It appears that they had a different perception of the function of the petihta, defining it as a verse from another book which helps elucidate (even without being expounded) the current lection (not necessarily its opening verse).201 Possibly, this state of affairs

...Continued from previous page


200 Joseph Heinemann, Derashot bešibbur bietequfat ha-talmud, 12.

201 Ironically it is Rav’s proem, which presents the most successful connection to the opening verse, that was changed by the redactors into an explanatory comment. The fact that most of the proems relate to Esther as an integral unit, and not just to the first verse, recalls the “topical petihta” as identified by A. Goldberg, review of B. Mandelbaum’s edition of pesiqta derab kahana, Kiryat Sefer 43 (1967-8), 69-79, though I do not feel that the two phenomena are really related. The two petihtas to Deuteronomy 19 found in TB Makkot 10b do not conclude with the opening verse of the lection. This pericope deserves a separate detailed analysis which would take into account comparisons with parallel material. For the moment see: M. Friedmann, ed., Bavli masekhet makkot (Vienna: 1858), 26, nn. 6-9.
is the consequence of the fact that the classical petihta structure was not in active use among the Babylonian preachers, and was known to the Babylonian Talmud only via Palestinian sources. While the redactors of the Bavli included the proems that they received as part of the Babylonian Esther-Midrash, the manner of their treatment of these proems demonstrates that they were not very knowledgeable about the distinctive character of this midrashic form.

---

202 This might be because of their preference for the “Yelammedenu” form, as exemplified in a work like the She’iltot. Much material bearing on the structure of the “pirqa,” the public discourse in Babylonia during the Amoraic era, was collected by S. K. Mirsky, ed., Sheelot de rab ahai gaon (Jerusalem: Sura Research and Publication Foundation and Mosad Harav Kook, 1959-77), 1:2 ff. Basing himself on passages such as TB Berakhot 28b (about Rav Avia and Rav Joseph), Mirsky argues that the pirqa lesson was delivered after the reading from the Torah, prior to the Musaf service (ibid., 2-3 and n. 6). If this is correct, then it may provide us with a good reason for the neglect of the petihta by Babylonian preachers, since that form is appropriate only to a derashah before the Torah reading. See: Joseph Heinemann, “The Proem in the Aggadic Midrashim: A Form-Critical Study,” 100-22, who proves “that the proems were originally sermons delivered before the scriptural lesson itself” (p, 109).