Chapter Three

Ahasuerus

Etymologies

[11a] 1RShNY: a sign

"Ahashverosh" (Esther1:1):

Says Rav:3 The brother of the "Head" [ahiv shellarosh] and under the same sign as the "Head."

The brother of the "Head" — The brother of4 the wicked Nebuchadnezzar, who is called "Head";

as it is written: "Thou art this head of gold" (Daniel 2:38).

And of the same constellation as the "Head"—5 Nebuchadnezzar6 killed and he7 wished to kill. Nebuchadnezzar8 9 destroyed10 and he wished to destroy;

as it says:11 “And in the reign of Ahasuerus, in the beginning of his reign, wrote they unto him an accusation against the inhabitants of Judah and Jerusalem” (Ezra 4:6).12

1 Spanish Family adds: “And it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus.”
2 “RShNY: a sign” —only in MS Y and AgE. MS Mf: “Ahasuerus’ RShWN: a sign.”
3 “Says Rav” —EY: “R. Levi says.”
4 “The brother of” —MS G and HgT: “This is”; ~ in MSS B, V, YS.
5 MS L adds: “Of the same constellation as the wicked Nebuchadnezzar.”
6 “Nebuchadnezzar” — Printings: “He.”
7 “And he” —MS N: “(And this one) [And destroyed, and he wished].”
8 “Nebuchadnezzar” — Printings: “He.”
9 “killed...Nebuchadnezzar” — YS: “who destroyed the Temple.”
10 MS O adds: “the abode [regidato] of our God”; MS W adds: “the Temple.”
11 “as it says” — Some members of Spanish family: “And so it says.”
12 MS G adds: “And it is written: ‘Then ceased the work of the house of God’ (Ezra 4:24).”
And Samuel says: Because the faces of the faces of Israel were blackened [hosh-haru] in his days like the bottom of a pot.

And R. Hanina says: Because everyone who recalls him says “Ach” for his head [ah lerosho].

And R. Johanan says: Because all became poor [rashin] in his days;

as it says "And the king Ahasuerus laid a tribute upon the land, and upon the isles of the sea" (Esther 10:1).

The Esther-Midrash is replete with similar “etymologies” on the names of figures from the book of Esther. The use of fanciful interpretations of names is a well-known midrashic device. If we

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13 MSS G and N* add: “the enemies of.”
14 “the faces of Israel” — MSS O and R: “their faces.”
15 “in his days” — ~ in MSS G, Mf, YS.
16 MSS G and Mf add: “in his days.”
17 “And” — ~ in most witnesses.
19 MS B adds: “’Ahashverosh’ (and of the same constellation as the Head).”
21 “his” — MS N and HgT1: ~; HgT2: “my.”
22 “And” — ~ in some witnesses.
23 “in his days” — ~ in MS P.
24 “as it says” — Some texts: “for it is written.”
25 Matters related to taxation and customs duties are read into several details of the story, reflecting what were probably universal economic concerns. Note, e.g., 12a (where the king declares an exemption from taxes); 13a (where he offers exemptions in return for Esther’s revealing her origins); etc. On the possibility that the Babylonian rabbis enjoyed exemptions from certain taxes, see: Moshe Beer, The Babylonian Amoraim: Aspects of Economic Life (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1974), 225-41. On the commercial activities of the Babylonian rabbis see ibid., 156-221. Beer presents an exhaustive review of earlier literature on all the questions which he discusses.

26 A concise but penetrating discussion of the topic may be found in Isaac Heinemann’s Darkhei ha-‘aggadah, 110-2 (he cites our passage among his illustrations). Heinemann notes that analogous usages are found in the Bible, Philo and ancient literatures; and (to the extent that the names are both given at birth and describe the later deeds of their bearers) presuppose a belief in some divine guidance of the naming process. For an exhaustive survey of the use of “midrashic name derivations” Continued on next page...
were to take such explanations in full seriousness, the authors would have to be understood as implying that none of the names in question are really names at all, but epithets that were attached to their bearers for assorted reasons, whereas the real names were not revealed to us.\(^{27}\) It is doubtful however whether the etymologies were intended to be taken so seriously.\(^{28}\) In the present instance (as in most other examples in the literature), this is rendered obvious when we observe how forced the similarities are between the word שוראר and the various explanations which are supposedly derived from it, all of which involve (even after we have made allowance for the ephemeral status of Semitic vowels) the addition of extra consonants, or the metathesis of key radicals, etc.

Rav's comment, equating Ahasuerus with Nebuchadnezzar in their antagonism to the Temple, is based on the now familiar identification of the Ahasuerus of Esther with his namesake in Ezra Chapter 4. While there remain some dissenting opinions, most historians would agree that the monarch in both stories is Xerxes I, who reigned from 486-65 B.C.E.\(^{29}\) However, the Ezra passage tells us no more than that a complaint was issued to Ahasuerus, without recording the royal response. Verse 7 immediately moves along to a similar

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\(^{27}\) Variations on this approach can be discerned in the many instances where two Biblical figures are identified with one another, alongside the midrash's explanation that one of the names was a real name, whereas the other is intended as a description of some sort. Interpretations of this sort are very frequent in the Esther-Midrash, and we shall encounter several below.

\(^{28}\) See Ibn Ezra's inconsistent stand (in his two commentaries to Esther) on the etymologies, described by B. Walfish, "The Two Commentaries of Abraham Ibn Ezra on the Book of Esther," 342.

event in the time of Artahshasta (Artaxerxes I; 465-24). The midrashic tradition may have deduced that unless Ahasuerus had done something to intentionally sabotage the erection of the Temple it should have been completed during his reign, and lays a heavy emphasis on the king’s determination to foil its rebuilding. As we have already observed above, this theme is used to great advantage in order to inject traditional Jewish cultic values into the apparent secularism of Esther.

Alternative etymologies are brought in other midrashic works. \(^{32}\) \textit{Esther rabbah}, 1:1\(^{33}\) cites in the name of R. Joshua ben Qorḥah an explanation that is substantially identical to Samuel’s. In addition there is an interpretation by a R. Taḥlifa bar bar Ḥanah (?) that is a variation of Rav’s.\(^{34}\)

\(^{30}\) \textit{Seder olam} Ch. 30 [B. Ratner, ed., \textit{Midrash seder olam}., S.K. Mirsky ed. (New York: Moznaim, 1988), 136] seems to argue that Artahshasta is a generic title, given to Cyrus and Darius. Ratner assembles considerable medieval testimonies to the fact that this passage is a later interpolation copied from \textit{TB Rosh hash-shanah} 3b (where it is cited as a \textit{baraita}). It is however found in the best witnesses, as recorded by Chaim Milikowsky, “\textit{Seder Olam: A Rabbinic Chronology},” Ph. D., Yale University, 1981, 436, 544. According to the accepted chronology there was no king between Ahasuerus and the Darius who completed the construction, hence Ezra 4:23-24 (“\textit{Now when the copy of king Artaxerxes’ [Artahshasta’s] letter was read... Then ceased the work of the house of God... So it ceased until the second year of the reign of Darius...}” would also have been taken as a reference to Ahasuerus. See Shinan, \textit{Midrash Shemot Rabbah}, 213.

\(^{31}\) Cf. Myers, op. cit., 34-5. The identification is central to the presentation in \textit{Seder olam} Ch. 29. Ratner deals at great length with a textual tradition in the \textit{Seder olam} according to which Haman’s sons were responsible for instigating the protest against the building of the Temple.


\(^{33}\) See Jacob Neusner, \textit{The Midrashic Compilations of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries: An Introduction to the Rhetorical, Logical and Topical Program}, Vol. 2, 36-7.

\(^{34}\) \textit{Panim Aherim} A, p. 46, has a conflation of the Bavli texts: “Rav says: It was vay. And Samuel says: ‘Ahashverosh,’ because the faces of Israel became blackened like the bottom of a pot, and they all became poor in his days, as it says: ‘And the king Ahasuerus laid a tribute...’” See Buber’s notes.
And R. Tablifa bar bar Hanah says: Because he was the brother of the “head,” the brother of Nebuchadnezzar.35

And was he indeed his brother? Was not the one a Chaldean and the other a Median?

—Rather, the one abolished the service of the Temple, while the other destroyed it. For this reason, Scripture equated them.

This is what is written: “He also that is slothful in his work is brother to him that is a great waster” (Proverbs 18:9).

“He also that is slothful in his work” —This is Ahasuerus, who abolished the service of the Temple.

“Is brother to him that is a great waster” —This is Nebuchadnezzar, who destroyed the Temple.

The etymologies of Samuel and R. Hanina might both be viewed as analogous the following passage, which relates to the two motifs of headaches36 and fasting.37 If it is true that one tradition is copying from the other, there is no easy way to determine its direction.38

R. Berakhiah says: Because he weakened the head [shehikh-hish roshan] of Israel with fasts and afflictions.

The other etymologies proposed by Esther rabbah, while similar in their use of farfetched word-play, are new:

And Rabbi Levi says: Because he caused them to drink gall [rosh] and wormwood.

35 See also Panim Aherim B, p. 56. In addition to bringing the “brother of the Head” interpretation, it also explains: “The head of [reshehon] of all the Jews.”

36 On this topic see J. Preuss, J., Biblical and Talmudic Medicine, 305.

37 Cf. Exodus rabbah 1:17 (66) where a similar etymology is proposed for the name “Ash-hur” in 1 Chronicles 4:5: “And why was he [identified by the midrash as Caleb] called Ash-hur? —Because his face was blackened with fasting” (See Shinan’s notes, which include several examples of rabbinic references to blackening (normally of teeth) through fasting.

38 In light of the general unreliability of the attributions, and the ambiguities as regards their significance (i.e., do they indicate the original author, or the last link in the transmission, etc.?), I am not attaching much weight to the names of the rabbis as indicators of the ages of the traditions.
And Rabbi Judah b. R. Simon says: Because he wished to uproot the “egg” of Israel. 39

“This is Ahasuerus...”

The Babylonian Esther Midrash continues its meticulous reading of the opening verse of Esther:

[11a] “This is Ahasuerus.” —He continued in his evil from his beginning until his end.

“This is that Dathan and Abiram” (Numbers 26:9). —They continued in their evil from their beginning until their end.

“...This is that king Ahaz” (2 Chronicles 28:22). —He continued in his evil from his beginning until his end.

“He is Esau the father of the Edomites” (Genesis 36:43). —He continued in his evil from his beginning until his end. 40 41

“Abram, the same is Abraham” (1 Chronicles 1:27). —He continued in his righteousness from his beginning until his end. 42

“These are that Moses and Aaron” (Exodus 6:27) —They continued in their righteousness from their beginning until their end. 43

“And David was the smallest” (1 Samuel 17:14) —He persisted in his smallness 44 [=humility] from his beginning until his end. Just as when he was small he humbled 45 himself before one who was

39 While the Hebrew text does not explicitly indicate any verbal similarity with the name Ahasuerus, the traditional commentators are obviously correct in positing an allusion [!] to the word “shoresh” (root); see the commentaries of Luria, Maharzu, Matenot kehunnah, etc.

40 “This is that Dathan...Esau” —The order varies in the witnesses: “Dathan...Esau...Ahaz” —MS G, Printings, Genizah fragment; “Dathan...[Esau...Ahaz]” —MS N; “Esau...Ahaz...Dathan...” —EY; “Esau...Dathan...” —MSS M, P; “Dathan...Esau” —HgT1; “Ahaz...” —HgT2.

41 MSS G*, B*, P, EY add: “And so too with respect to the righteous.”

42 On the relevance of this comparison see Ibn Ezra’s commentaries to Esther 1:1 [discussed by Barry Walfish, “The Two Commentaries of Abraham Ibn Ezra on the Book of Esther,” JQR 79 (4 1989), 329].

43 “Abram...Moses” MbG: “...Moses...Abraham.”

44 “smallness” —MS O and EY: “righteousness”; MbG and AgE: “faith.”

45 “humbled” — Pesaro Printing: “humbles.”
greater than himself\textsuperscript{46} in order to learn Torah,\textsuperscript{47} so when he was king\textsuperscript{48} he humbled\textsuperscript{49} himself before one who was greater than himself\textsuperscript{50} in order to learn Torah.\textsuperscript{51} \textsuperscript{52}

Another explanation: "This is Ahasuerus" — This is the head of all the Jews.\textsuperscript{53}

In spite of the variations in order, the witnesses to the Bavli seem to be relatively consistent in citing a total of seven examples of figures who continued from their beginnings to their ends, four of them wicked and three righteous.\textsuperscript{54} The criteria for entry into the list consist

\textsuperscript{46} Spanish family adds: "in wisdom"; MS \textit{W} and Printings add: "in the Torah."

\textsuperscript{47} "in...Torah" — ~ in MSS \textit{G} (before emendation) and \textit{R}; MS \textit{Mf}: "(in the) [in order to learn] Torah."

\textsuperscript{48} "when he was king" — MSS \textit{B} and \textit{O}: "in his greatness."

\textsuperscript{49} "humbled" — Pesaro Printing: "humbles."

A similar tradition about David's humility is recorded in \textit{TP Sanhedrin} 2 (20b-c). See also the sources listed by Ginzberg, \textit{Legends}, 6:263, n. 86. Cf. \textit{Exodus rabbah}, 15:20: "What is the meaning of 'The sluggard is wiser in his own conceit than seven men that can render a reason' (Proverbs 26:16)? — That Solomon would control his mouth so as not to speak before one who was greater than he."

\textsuperscript{50} Spanish family, Printings add: "in wisdom."

\textsuperscript{51} "before ... Torah" — MS \textit{B}: "in order to learn Torah (from) [before] one who is lesser than himself in all things."

\textsuperscript{52} "in...Torah" — MS \textit{N} and \textit{EY} add: "from him." ~ — MS \textit{W}, Printings.

\textsuperscript{53} "Another ... Jews" — found only in MS \textit{Y}. The addition originates in \textit{Panim Aherim} B, p. 56, from which it was included in \textit{AgE}. See Buber's notes to \textit{AgE} p. 6 n. 41. On the tendency of MS \textit{Y} to insert such additions, see: E. Segal, "The Textual Traditions of Ms. Columbia University to \textit{TB Megillah}." \textit{Tarbiz} 53 (1983), 45-6, and n. 6 (to which the current instance should be added).

\textsuperscript{54} Note also \textit{Sifre Deuteronomy} par. 334 (ed. Finkelstein, 384), where similar exegesis is applied to Joshua (on the basis of Deuteronomy 32:44), Joseph (Exodus 1:5) and David: "And do we not know that David was the youngest! It is to inform you of the righteousness of David who used to shepherd his father's sheep. Now even though he was granted the position of King over Israel, he was still David in respect to his 'youngest' types of behavior" (I have used the translation of Herbert Basser, \textit{Midrashic Interpretations of the Song of Moses}, Vol. 2, American University Studies: Series 7, Theology and Religion (New York, Frankfort on the Main, Berne: Peter Lang, 1984). See his comments on 262, n. E3. In \textit{Exodus rabbah}, 1:7 the rule is brought with reference to Joseph only; see Shinan's notes to the passage (p. 43).
of a proper name immediately preceded or followed by a copulative

A similar list can be found in a variety of Palestinian sources,\(^5^6\) only there the numbers are unambiguously defined in the introductory

The individuals included are:

Evil: Nimrod (based on Genesis 10:9), Esau, Dathan and Abiram, Ahaz, Ahasuerus.

Righteous: Abra(ha)m, Moses [and Aaron] (Exodus 6:27), Aaron [and Moses] (Exodus 26:6);\(^5^8\) Hezekiah (2 Chronicles 32:30), Ezra (Ezra 7:6).\(^5^9\)

In these texts, unlike the Bavli, the passages are developed so as
to lead up to a homiletic conclusion with an optimistic and rhetorical
flourish:

Rabbi Berakhiah in the name of the Rabbis there [i.e. in Babylonia]:
They have an additional one which is the best of all: "He is the Lord
our God" (Psalms 105:7).

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\(^5^6\) The significance of the Esther rabbah parallel was completely misconstrued by Jacob Neusner, Esther Rabbah: An Analytical Translation, Vol. I, Brown Judaic Studies (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 50, who summarizes that the passage "means to designate two distinct figures or two distinct reigns." He has obviously misunderstood both the text of the midrash and the notes from M. Simon's translation (cited by Neusner on p. 46) upon which his own comments claim to be founded. In his The Midrashic Compilations of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries, 2:38, he uses the same explanation.

\(^5^7\) The passage is found in Genesis rabbah, 37:3; Esther rabbah, 1:2; Midrash on Psalms, 105:2; Panim Aherim B; Second Targum to Esther here, as well as in several medieval midrashic anthologies, such as YS to Genesis and Esther, Makiri and AgE. See detailed discussions in Theodor's commentary to Genesis rabbah (p. 345) and Buber's notes to AgE, 55-6; D. Heimann, I. Lehrer and I. Shiloni, ed., Yalqut shim'onai lerabbenu shim'on hadarshan (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1973-), (Genesis 1), 225. Cf. the citation from the Mas'et Moshe commentary cited in the Hiddushei ge'onim section of the EY.

\(^5^8\) Theodor observes that the midrash departs from the scriptural verse order because of Moses' greater importance.

\(^5^9\) See Theodor's notes. He refers to texts that replace the seemingly redundant Aaron and Moses reference (cf. Yehe to'ar) with David.
The Bavli simply states the exegetical principle and some examples, without exploiting it for the fashioning of a literary homily.

All the above passages should be regarded as variations on the basic *gezerah shavah* format, and are probably intended to imitate interpretations like that of R. Samuel bar Nahman above, which claim to discern consistent patterns in the occurrences of common forms of the Hebrew verb "to be." In the present case, the emphasis is on the pattern "this is X" as an indication of permanence or sameness.

"Which Reigned..."

[11a] "...Which reigned..."

Says Rava: (This implies) that he reigned by himself.

Some say this as praise; and some say this derogatorily.

Some say this as praise: That there was no one who was as worthy as he.

And some say this derogatorily: He was not fit. It was that he gave more money, and was appointed.

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60 AgE alone introduces the lists with: "Said R. Samuel." This fact underscores the structural similarity to R. Samuel bar Nahman's famous list of *vayhi bimei* verses discussed above. See also: E. L. Segal, "The Same from Beginning to End' — On the Development of a Midrashic Homily," *JJS* 32.2 (1981), 158-65.


62 MS Mf inserts: "A sign: Reigned, (?) And sat. Despised, and Rested, in Months (?), Was Exiled in Seven Women After The Next (?) Hallel, Break of Rabbah." The text is difficult to read or interpret.

63 "Rava" — MS B, VS and Printings: "Rav."

64 "as praise...derogatorily" — MS B: "derogatorily...as praise."

65 "who was as worthy"—Thus in MSS Y and R; other witnesses add: "as [MS G: "to be"] king"; MS M: "who was like him"; AgE: "no one who was as plentiful as he."


67 "It was...money"—MSS O, P, HgT: "And he gave more money"; MS N: "[The reason why he was considered worthy of royalty was on account of] the extra money"
Rava is paying close attention to the Hebrew phraseology of the verse, noting that the unusual use of the participle "יָלָד" seems to indicate a more dynamic and willful activity of reigning or becoming king, not merely a factual identification of the name of the monarch. The implication seems to be that Ahasuerus did not accede to the throne in the natural manner, but had to take active measures in order to install himself in power. The anonymous talmudic traditions observe that this exegesis can be interpreted in two opposite directions. On the one hand it can be understood that, but for his act of bribery, Ahasuerus would not have been considered a legitimate claimant to the throne. Alternatively, the scriptural author might be suggesting that,
even had he not been the favored candidate in the normal order of succession, Ahasuerus’ qualifications and abilities would have gained him the position.

This dispute over whether Ahasuerus was a wise or stupid king is a recurrent one in our midrash. It is difficult to surmise whether this is a purely exegetical problem brought about by the text’s silence on the issue, or whether there is some ideological consideration at play.\textsuperscript{71}

\textit{“From India Even Unto Ethiopia...”}

[11a] \textit{“From India even unto Ethiopia (Esther 1:1)”}

Rav and Samuel:

One says: India is at \{one\} end\textsuperscript{72} of the world, and Ethiopia is at \{the other\} end of the world\textsuperscript{73}.

And the other says: India and Ethiopia stand\textsuperscript{74} next to each other.\textsuperscript{75}
And just as he reigned over India and Ethiopia, so did he reign over the entire world. In a similar vein it says: “For he had dominion over all the region on this side of the river, from Tiphsah even to Gaza” (1 Kings 4:24).

Rav and Samuel:

One says: Tiphsah is at {one} end of the world, and Gaza is at {the other} end of the world.

And the other says: Tiphsah and Gaza stand next to each other.

And just as he reigned over Tiphsah and Gaza, so did he reign over the entire world.

Rav and Samuel disagree here over the significance of the biblical narrator’s mention of India and Ethiopia when defining the

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76 “And” —Thus in Yemenite family and Ashkenazic family; MS B; “Those who interpret it as praise say”; Spanish family: “Rather”; MSS N, W: ~
77 MSS B, M, R*, Mf, W, HgT1, YS add: “over.”
78 “over India and” —HgT2: “from India to.”
79 “India and Ethiopia” — MS O: “these.”
80 “over the entire world” —Printings: “From {one} end of the world until its {other} end”; MS Mf: “over one hundred and seven and twenty provinces, or over the entire world.”
81 MS B adds: “And some interpret it derogatorily: He reigned only over India and over Ethiopia.”
82 “Rav and Samuel” — ~ in MSS R* and P.
83 “end” —EY: “beginning.”
84 “Rav...of the world” — ~ in MS O.
85 “Tiphsah and Gaza” — ~ in MSS O, P.
86 “stand” —Thus in MSS P, Mf, EY, Printings; MSS O, W, L, R*, AgE, HgT, YS, Printings: “used to stand”; MS G: “used to sit”; ~ in MS M.
87 “Tiphsah is at {one} end ... next to each other” —MS B: “Tiphsah and Gaza lie next to each other. And one said: Tiphsah is at {one} end of the world and Ethiopia at the {other} end.”
88 “And” —Thus in MS Y and Ashkenazic family; MS B: “Those who interpret it as praise say”; Spanish family: “Rather”; ~ in MSS G, W, EY, Printings.
89 MSS B, R*, W, Printings add: “over.”
90 “over Tiphsah and” —MS P and HgT2: “from Tiphsah until.”
91 “Tiphsah and Gaza” —MS O: “these.”
extent of Ahasuerus' dominions. According to one view, the purpose of this detail is to show the vastness of the empire, extending as it does from one end of the world to the other. According to the second view, the verse is describing the power of the king. It has chosen to name two neighboring provinces as a way of indicating that just as Ahasuerus was in absolute control over these two nearby regions, such was his hold over the (undefined) farthest reaches of his domains. An identical dispute is recorded concerning a verse in 1 Kings that describes the territories ruled by King Solomon.

It is relatively easy to reconstruct a hypothetical chain of reasoning which would have given rise to this exegesis: The darshan was stimulated by the question of what importance there is in knowing the precise borders of this pagan monarch, especially when we are also informed explicitly the total number of his provinces. Hence the respective rabbis try to discover an additional purpose for the inclusion of these superfluous details.

While the above reconstruction adequately accounts for the hermeneutical process at work here, at this point it seem more difficult to trace a convincing homiletical purpose for the interpretations. It appears that some insight on this question is supplied by a reading of the unique version of our text contained in MS Munich 140 (B).

Rav and Samuel: One says: India and Ethiopia stood next to each other, and one says: India stands at one end of the world and Ethiopia at the other end.

Those who interpret it as praise say: Just as he ruled over India and Ethiopia, so did he reign over the entire world.

And some interpret it derogatorily: He reigned only over India and Ethiopia.

As distinct from the standard printed texts, this version states that the second position, which holds that India and Ethiopia are neighboring provinces, is open to a negative interpretation as well, that Ahasuerus ruled only over the two provinces. The presumable implication is that the king ruled over the rest of the 127 provinces in name only, but exerted effective control only over the two closest.

I doubt that this reading is an authentic one. Not only is it virtually neutralized by the unanimous testimony of the other witnesses, but it would destroy the symmetrical parallelism with the Tiphsah and
Gaza clause, for which no such negative interpretation is supplied. Nevertheless, I believe that we can learn something from a consideration of why someone would have invented such a text. The simplest explanation seems to be that he was bothered precisely by the fact that the existing version expressed such an unambiguously favorable attitude towards Ahasuerus. In order to overcome this difficulty our “scribe” prefers to read the dictum as if it were susceptible to either approving or disapproving interpretations, along the lines of analogous disputes between Rav and Samuel that are scattered through the Esther-Midrash, where various details about Ahasuerus are read as indications of both of his wisdom and his folly, his virtue and his wickedness. Accordingly the author of the emendation is quite correct in perceiving that an unambiguously favorable assessment of Ahasuerus’ statecraft runs headlong against the prevailing approach of the Esther-Midrash.

I believe that in this perception lies one of the keys to reconstructing the evolution of our pericope.

As the next step in our investigation, let us focus on the geographical assertions in our passage:

The basic geographical premise of this midrash seems factually untenable. By ancient standards India and Ethiopia cannot be viewed as neighboring states, 92 nor for that matter was the distance between Gaza and Tiphsah a trivial one. 93 While we need not expect too much

92 Moore in the Anchor Bible Commentary to Esther (p. 4): “‘India’ refers to the north-western part of the Indus River, which Darius had conquered... the [Kush] here is Ethiopia...”; see also Paton, The Book of Esther, 123-4 and 132–3. The text of Xerxes’ “foundation table” is cited in Moore’s commentary. See Ibn Ezra’s commentaries. As noted by B. Walfish, “The Two Commentaries of Abraham Ibn Ezra on the Book of Esther,” 336, 339, Ibn Ezra seems to accept the rabbinic view in his first commentary, but rejects it in his second [published in vol. 5 of the Jerusalem 1972 edition of Kol kitvei r. avraham ibn ‘ezra].

93 See C. H. Kraeling, The Rand-McNally Bible Atlas, 2nd ed. (New York: Rand McNally, 1962), 214, who presents the scholarly consensus that Tiphsah is the place known to later geographers as Thapsacus, which probably lay “on the left bank of the Euphrates near the point where the Balikh River enters it from the north. ... ‘From Tiphsah to Gaza’ comprises the sphere of the whole caravan route from the Euphrates to the border of Egypt.”
precision in the geographical knowledge of the midrashic rabbis, it nevertheless strikes us as unlikely that they would not have had some familiarity with the locations of such well-known places as India, Ethiopia and Gaza. The weak link in this respect is the obscure Tiphsah, which, from its context in the biblical passage, might easily have been presumed to lie somewhere west of the Jordan. This consideration increases the likelihood that the midrash originated as a comment on 1 Kings, and was only secondarily applied to the context of Esther. This impression receives further confirmation from the fact that, contrary to our expectations and to the general pattern of the exegesis in this section, the biblical text is interpreted only as a glorification of the respective kings' conquests and is not turned into a belittling or minimizing of their achievements. This makes better

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94 Cf. the comments of the Rabbi Josiah Pinto to EY “…They are not arguing about the facts, that these are neighboring places…” His solution, that it is a question of how one measures along the earth’s spherical surface, is of course not to be taken seriously; it is a variation on the explanation brought in S. Buber, ed., Midrash mishlei (Vilna: 1893), 20:9 [=Song of Songs zuta 1:1, in: S. Buber, ed., Midrash zuta ‘al shir ha-shirim rut eikhah veqohelet (Vilna: 1925)], that “Just as a man departs from Tiphsah and travels to the east, and from the east to the north, and from the north to the south, he keeps circling as he ascends until he goes up to Gaza—so did Solomon progressively attain dominion as he encompassed the whole world from beginning to end.”

95 Rashi appears to have understood that the midrash was built around a contradiction between the Tiphsah-Gaza axis and the claim (in the same verse) that Solomon also ruled beyond the Jordan. According to the Talmud’s solution, “what it is saying is that he ruled over the entire region beyond the Jordan just as he did from Tiphsah to Gaza.” This explanation appears to fit the text in our midrash far better than that of the Midrash mishlei and Song of Songs zuta cited above about Solomon’s wandering around the world until he came back to Gaza.

96 In the absence of other exegetical or homiletical considerations, the syntactic structure of “Place #1 in Place #2” is too common to justify the specific association with Esther 1:1.

97 The strangeness of this fact underlies the unique reading of MS B (see the above discussion). Cf. Neusner, The Midrashic Compilations of the Sixth and Seventh Centuries 2:43.

98 As suggested by Maharsha, in light of the explicit mention of the one hundred and twenty-seven provinces it is not a simple matter to limit Ahasuerus’ dominions to India and Ethiopia. The implication therefore is that his control over the remainder of the
sense if we assume that it was applied originally to Solomon\textsuperscript{99} than if it was said about Ahasuerus.

When applied to Solomon the interpretation makes a superior homiletical device. Extolling the greatness of a religious hero is in itself a sufficient, if not ideal, subject for a sermon. As we shall see below, a commonly elaborated theme in homilies on books ascribed to Solomon, especially Ecclesiastes, was the legend of how Solomon, at the peak of his earthly power, was so overcome by pride that God punished him by having him deposed from his throne, and he was compelled to wander in the guise of an unrecognized beggar. Our midrash of course would fit neatly into such a sermon that dwelled on the unfortunate consequences of human pride by dramatically contrasting the situations before and after Solomon’s fall from greatness.

Some further indirect support for this hypothesis may be found in the fact that when we compare our passage with parallel materials in Palestinian midrashic literature it becomes evident that it is the 1 Kings passages that attracted the exegetical attentions of the rabbis.\textsuperscript{100} Thus, in *Song of Songs* zuta and *Midrash mishlei*, 20:9\textsuperscript{101} the 1 Kings verse is expounded without any reference to Esther. Each of these midrashim includes some additional exegetical material about Solomon that is not found in our passage. In contrast, the midrashim on Esther [*Esther rabbah* (1:4) and *Panim aherim B*] both include discussions of the 1 Kings verse, and yet neither adds any exegesis to the Esther verse beyond what is found in our passage in the Babylonian Esther-Midrash.

To put it another way: What the Babylonian Esther-Midrash has done is to take a piece of “pseudo-exegesis” that was originally composed with reference to King Solomon, and applied it as a real

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empire was in name only. Cf. Samuel Krauss, *Paras veromi batalmud uvamidrashim*, 5-6.

\textsuperscript{99} It is not improbable that the exegesis was originally formulated in the context of the legends which describe Solomon’s absolute fall from absolute power, where it indeed appears in several of the midrashic collections; cf. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews* 4:165-72; 6:299-302.

\textsuperscript{100} See also *TB Sanhedrin* 20b.

\textsuperscript{101} See previous notes. The passages links up to the subject of Solomon’s authorship of the respective biblical works.
exegetical rule to Ahasuerus. In its new context the interpretation has
lost the homiletical thrust that it had in the original sermon.  

As a closing observation to our discussion of this pericope, we
shall note a further instance of a phenomenon that appears to typify the
relationship between the Esther-Midrash and its Palestinian relations.
We refer to the fact that, while the Bavli limits its exposition here to an
exegetical explanation of the scriptural text, Esther rabbah goes a step
farther and incorporates the material into a more elaborately literary
homiletical framework. Thus we find, following the interpretations of
the same verses from Esther and 1 Kings, the following continuation:

In a similar vein it says: "From the temple to Jerusalem shall kings
bring presents unto thee" (Psalms 68:30).

But is not from the temple to Jerusalem a negligible matter?

Rather, just as the offerings are common from the temple to
Jerusalem, so will there be a procession of messengers bringing
gifts for King Messiah.

This is what is written: "Yea, all kings shall prostrate themselves
before him" (Psalms 72:11).

R. Kohen the brother of R. Hiyya bar Abba said: Just as the divine
presence [Shekhinah] is found between the Temple and Jerusalem, so
shall the divine presence fill up the earth from one end to the other.

This is what is written: "And let the whole earth be filled with his
glory, Amen and Amen" (Psalms 72:19).

Unlike the Esther and 1 Kings verses, the last two verses from
Psalms, direct us towards the future messianic epoch, thereby supplying

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102 For a discussion of a similar phenomenon, see: E. L. Segal, "The Same from
Beginning to End" — On the Development of a Midrashic Homily.

103 ARV: "Because of thy temple at Jerusalem."

104 On διαδοχή see J. Levy, Neuhebräisches und chaldaisches Wörterbuch über die
Targumim und Midrashim (Leipzig: 1876-89), 2:340; J. Perles, Etymologische
Studien (Breslau: 1871), 115; Kohut, Aruch Completum, 3:25-6; and the standard
talmudic dictionaries.

105 Cf. Jacob Neusner, The Midrashic Compilations of the Sixth and Seventh
Centuries 2:39.
a suitable and climactic conclusion for a public discourse. Now it is not clear what would be the liturgical occasion for such a reading, seeing as the Book of Psalms is not read formally in the synagogue, and 1 Kings 4 is not known to comprise a haftarah in the triennial cycle. It would appear most likely that what has the appearance of a homiletical discourse was in reality fashioned by the redactor of Esther rabbah as an artificial structure, following the standard literary convention, but not necessarily with a view to its oral delivery as a sermon in the synagogue.

"...Over Seven and Twenty and a Hundred Provinces"

[11a] "...Over seven and twenty and a hundred provinces."

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In general the literary study of midrashic perorations has yet to attract the scholarly attention that has attended the proems. I note here one particular issue that demands consideration: In light of Heinemann's view (which I find persuasive) that the proem was a self-contained homily culminating in the opening verse of the lection, what place was there for the perorations at all. If they were restricted to alternate sermon structures (e.g., Yelammedenu homilies), then this fact would seem to have far-reaching implications on form-critical attempts to reconstruct the *Sitz im Leben* of homiletic fragments which include messianic perorations. Alternatively, it can be argued that two (separate or related) sermons were normally preached, one (the petihah) before the Torah reading and one following it. On this question note the incisive observations of Marc Bregman, "Circular Peroms and Proems Beginning with the Formula 'Zo hi shene emra beruah haq-qodesh,'" in *Studies in Aggadah, Targum and Jewish Liturgy in Memory of Joseph Heinemann*, ed. J. Petuchowski and E. Fleischer, 34-51 [Hebrew section] (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, Hebrew Union College Press, 1981), 50-51.

107 Psalm 72 is however "A Psalm of Solomon," and connects naturally to a lection concerning Solomon.

108 The connection to Esther is too tenuous, in my judgment, to indicate that this was a derashah on Esther or Purim.
Says Rav Hisda: At first he reigned over seven, and in the end he reigned over twenty; and in the end he reigned over one hundred.

But according to this, what is written “And the years of the life of Amram were seven and thirty and a hundred years” (Exodus 6:20) —How do you expound this?

—Here it is different, because the verse is redundant: Seeing as it is written “From India to Ethiopia,” why do I need “seven and twenty and a hundred provinces”? Learn from this: For the exposition.

The exegetical foundation of Rav Hisda’s comment is far from obvious. Our first inclination would be to explain it as another reaction to a change in Hebrew usage between the biblical and rabbinic sources. In the present instance, the change would involve the order of compound numerals, which the Bible normally lists from smaller to larger units, whereas rabbinic texts follow the reverse order. Hence Rav Hisda explains that the “seven and twenty and a hundred” is not merely the number of Ahasuerus’ provinces, but a description of the order of their acquisition.

The above reconstruction, while it is probably correct in its essentials, nonetheless requires some modification: While it is probably correct to say that the hundred-tens-units order is universal in rabbinic

109 “he reigned” — ~ in MSS G, R*, YS.
110 “in the end...over” — ~ in MS M.
111 “he reigned” — ~ in MSS G, O, M, R*, YS, Mf.
112 “but...this” — ~ in HgT.
113 “what is written” — ~ in MSS G, N, W, HgT, Ashkenazic Family, Mf; “that which is written” — AgE, P.
115 “Learn” — MSS O, B*: “Rather: Learn.”
116 MSS O, B add: “as we have said.”
117 But by no means inevitably; see the discussion in Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar, §134 h-i (p. 434).
Hebrew, there is no equivalent uniformity in biblical syntax. This flaw in the hermeneutical logic likely underlies the Talmud’s insistence on seeking a further justification in the supposed redundancy of the numbers.

Rav Ḥisda’s comment does not have an explicit homiletical point. One is tempted to supply it with a continuation, in the spirit of “Some interpret it as praise, while some interpret it derogatorily.” As praise, the midrash would be pointing out that the king himself was responsible for creating his empire rather than merely inheriting it. Derogatorily, it questions his legitimacy: the empire had to be acquired [perhaps by questionable means, such as bribes] piece by piece.

Similar interpretations, understanding the components of the number as denoting a progression, are recorded in *Esther rabbah*, 1:1:

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119 See S. Herner, *Syntax der Zahlwörter im Alten Testamentum* (Lund: 1893), 73. Cf. Ibn Ezra to Genesis 23:1: “It is the grammatical norm for the larger unit to precede the smaller; but one finds the opposite as well, as in Genesis 47:28.” See also his second commentary here, cited by B. Walfish, “The Two Commentaries of Abraham Ibn Ezra on the Book of Esther,” 339. Maharsha (in his second explanation) suggests that Rav Ḥisda attached significance to the fact that, whatever inconsistencies may exist with regard to the placement of the hundreds, tens normally follow units in the Bible. Gesenius, *ibid.*, notes that this is not always the case.

120 An instructive exegetical literature has accumulated around Genesis 23:1 “And Sarah was a hundred years and twenty years and seven years,” which was expounded in the midrash in a manner similar to Rav Ḥisda’s interpretation here [see *Genesis rabbah* 58:1 (ed. Theodor-Albeck p. 618) and parallels cited in notes]. The verse was midrashically linked to Esther 1:1 [see *Genesis rabbah*, 58:3 (621) and parallels cited by Theodor, relating a public discourse by Rabbi Akivah; E. L. Segal, “‘The Same from Beginning to End,’” 65]. Rashi to Genesis observes that “it is because ‘years’ is inserted after each number that each unit is able to be expounded individually.” Nahmanides raises an objection from Genesis 25:17 where the same pattern is employed (“And these are the years of the life of Ishmael, a hundred years and thirty years and seven years”), and concludes that the repetition of the noun between the numerical units is actually the norm in biblical Hebrew, and therefore the pattern cannot serve as a basis for midrashic interpretation (like our Talmud passage, he ascribes the midrashic exegesis of Genesis 23:1 to a redundancy in the structure of the verse). Maharsha applies this approach to our passage in *TB Megillah*. He argues that what the Talmud finds unusual in Esther 1:1 (as well as in Exodus 6:20) is the fact that Scripture does not repeat the noun between the numerical units. See also the remarks of the *Yefeh ‘anaf* commentary to *Esther rabbah*, 1:7.
Another interpretation: "Seven and twenty and a hundred provinces."—

R. Judah and R. Nehemiah:

R. Judah said: He conquered seven that were as difficult as twenty. He conquered twenty that were as difficult as a hundred.

R. Nehemiah said: He took the inhabitants from seven and [with them] conquered twenty. He took the inhabitants of twenty and conquered a hundred.

Both of these interpretations seem to present Ahasuerus' progressive expansion in a favorable light, as indicators of his tenacity and strategic skills. There might be some implied topical allusion to the contemporary Roman practice of conscripting colonials into the army in order to serve as the basis for subsequent conquests.121

"Three Reigned in the Vault"


Ahab the son of Omri125 and Nebuchadnezzar and Ahasuerus.126

This list of three kings who ruled over the whole world127 appears to be based on purely exegetical foundations, without any

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122 EY and HGTL add: "kings."

123 "Three...reigned" — EY: "There were three kings who reigned."

124 Spanish family, MSS N, L, P, M, Printings, AgE add: "And they are:".

125 "the son of Omri" — ~ in MS M, Printings, AgE.

126 "Nebuchadnezzar and Ahasuerus"—Printings: "Ahasuerus and Nebuchadnezzar."

127 The metaphor of "ruling over the vault" (of the heavens) is, as far as I know, not found elsewhere in rabbinic literature, though the commentators all seem to in agreement about its meaning (see Rashi here, Aruch Completum 4:289, etc.). The notion that the heavens constitute a vault or arch (купת רבדים) is attested [e.g. Genesis Rabbah, 4:5 (28-9); 48:12 (432), 48:6 (p. 481); Tanhuma Shofetim, 11; etc.]. MS M reads: בקופת (normally: basket); for a similar variant see Tosefta Eruvin

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obvious homiletical point, nor will the subsequent talmudic discussion of the respective monarchs make any effort to set them in a uniform homiletical context. The *baraita*\(^{128}\) has assembled a number of apparently unrelated texts which, through midrashic interpretation, are taken to refer to universal dominion. The selection of these particular three does not follow any obvious pattern. If we accept that Ahasuerus is being classified as a wicked king, then it is probably safe to presume that the author of the *baraita* was restricting his list to such evil monarchs, which might be the real reason for the exclusion of some of the other candidates mentioned by the Talmud and in parallel passages discussed below. Such an interpretation might lend additional homiletical significance to the metaphor of “ruling in the vault” or “arc,” as we are given assurances that their respective ascents to success will inevitably be followed by resounding falls from power.\(^{129}\)

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7(5):3 [The Tosefta: Mo'ed, ed. S. Lieberman (New York, 1962), 111], noted by Kohut, *Aruch Complectum*, loc. cit., n. 7. This interpretation is further supported by the wording in parallel sources (see below) where the expression used is “from one end of the world to the other.” The Greek ἄψιν is sometimes used in this sense (also as the orbit of a heavenly body; see the entry in Liddell and Scott's Lexicon). Note also *TP Avodah zarah* 3:1 (42c): “Says R. Jonah: When Alexander of Macedon wished to ascend upwards he would rise up above until he could view the world as a ball and the sea as a bowl...” It is not unlikely that “ruling in the vault” originated as a Hebrew translation of שׁוֹפָר (see below). Cf. Samuel Krauss, *Paras vero mi batalmud uvamidrashim*, 87.

We should nevertheless seriously consider the possibility that the reference in this passage is architectural rather than cosmological, referring to the dome at the top of a standard basilica (e.g., *Mishnah Avodah zarah* 1:7), in which case the meaning would be roughly that they ruled at the highest level. Several talmudic sources suggest that domes were regarded as common features of buildings; e.g., *Mishnah Sanhedrin* 9:5 [On its interpretation see: Saul Lieberman, “Interpretations in Mishna,” *Tarbiz* 40 (1970), 10-13].


\(^{129}\) According to a tradition preserved in the Second Targum to Esther, “There were four who ruled from one end of the world to the other, two from the nations of the

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While our tradition about the three kings is not attested elsewhere in rabbinic literature,\textsuperscript{130} there is a similar tradition which is brought in the Second Targum to Esther,\textsuperscript{131} as well as in \textit{Pirqei derabbi eli‘ezer} and some related texts,\textsuperscript{132} which speaks of \textit{ten} kings who ruled from one end of the world to the other.\textsuperscript{133} The identities of the ten kings vary in the different traditions, which are summarized in the following list:\textsuperscript{134}

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world and two from Israel, Solomon and Ahab from Israel...and from the nations of the world Nebuchadnezzar and Ahasuerus...” The Targum is translating a dictum of R. Levi that is cited in \textit{Panim aherim} B (p. 56) [which adds: And some say: Cyrus etc.]. There can be little doubt that both these traditions are elaborations of our text from \textit{TB Megillah}.

\textsuperscript{130} Cf. \textit{Pesiqta derav kahana}, 2:5 (ed. Mandelbaum, 24; transl. Braude and Kapstein, 29), \textit{Esther rabbah}, 1 (Proems to Esther 1:9) and \textit{Song of Songs rabbah}, 3:3, where God promises Merodach-baladan that he will beget three “world-conquerors” (κοσμοκράτωρ): Nebuchadnezzar, Evil-merodach and Belshazzar, all of whom will rule “from one end of the world to the other.” Note also the various texts which speak about “four kings who were too proud” and which enumerate Pharaoh, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar and Hiram [assembled by H. M. Horowitz in \textit{Beit ‘eqed ha-’aggadot} 3:Appendix 2; Eisenstein’s \textit{Ozar Midrashim} 69].


\textsuperscript{132} Ch. 11; G. Friedlander, ed., \textit{Pirke de rabbi eliezer}, 4th ed. (New York: Sepher-Hermon Press, 1981), 80-83. The \textit{Midrash ‘aseret melakhim} is a late text, based primarily on \textit{Pirqei derabbi eliezer}. It was first published from a De Rossi manuscript by H. M. Horowitz in his \textit{Beit ‘eqed ha-’aggadot} 1 (Frankfort a/M., 1881), 16-33, 38-55, and subsequently reprinted by J. D. Eisenstein, ed., \textit{Ozar Midrashim}, 461-6. On the basis of historical references contained in the work Horowitz judges that the \textit{Midrash ‘aseret melakhim} was composed in the mid-8th century. See also: M. Gaster, ed., \textit{The Exempla of the Rabbis} (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1934), beginning.

\textsuperscript{133} See also: Mordecai Margulies, ed., \textit{Midrash haggadol on the Pentateuch: Genesis} (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1967), 194-5 (to Genesis 10:8) and the parallel sources cited in the notes; Paton, \textit{The Book of Esther}, 121.

\textsuperscript{134} See the overview of the traditions in L. Ginzberg, \textit{Legends}, 5:199-200, n. 82. His attempt to read the list of ten kings into the text of Esther rabbah is not persuasive.
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<sup>135</sup> With respect to Pharaoh, cf. Exodus rabbah, 5:14 (2) [ed. Shinan, p. 168] Tanhuma Va’era, 5: “...and all the kings would come and crown him, so that he would be a κοσμοκράτωρ.” See also the sources cited by Shinan in his notes. The same title is given to Joseph in Pesiqta rabbati, 3 (ed. Friedmann p. 10b).

<sup>136</sup> The reading “Augustus Caesar” instead of Alexander is found only in Midrash Bereshit rabbati of R. Moses Hadarshan [Ch. Albeck, Midrash bereshit rabbati (Jerusalem: 1940)], cited by Horowitz, p. 19.
Note that none of these traditions includes all three of the monarchs mentioned in our baraita. Ahab is missing from the Targum’s list, and Ahasuerus from the Pirquei derabbi eliezer. Of the additional kings mentioned by the Talmud, Sennacherib and Darius are missing in both the Targum and the Pirquei derabbi eliezer traditions, and Solomon and Cyrus from the Targum. It is therefore unlikely that what we have here is a mere copying from one source to the next.

As regards both its context and its content the Pirquei derabbi eliezer tradition bears a striking resemblance to a passage in Leviticus rabbah, 18:2 which consists of a composite proem to Leviticus 15:2 based on Habakkuk 1:7: “They are terrible and dreadful; their judgment and their dignity shall proceed of themselves.” The midrash offers a list of alternate expositions of the verse, most of which reiterate the theme that the respective subjects, all sinners, ultimately proved to be the sources of their own “judgment” (i.e., punishment). The examples mentioned are: Adam (whose punishment was caused through his wife); Esau (berated in the prophesies of the Edomite convert)

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137 Not mentioned explicitly in Midrash ’aseret melakhim.
138 He is however classified as a κοσμοκράτωρ in Esther rabbah, 1 (to Esther 1:2).
139 Ed. Margulies 400-4; see the editor’s notes. Parallels are found in Tanhuma (standard [#8] and Buber [#10] editions) to the same section of Leviticus (Tazria) Cf. Zvi Meir Rabinovitz, ed., The Liturgical Poems of Rabbi Yannai, etc., 420 (#88, 1. 8). See also David Stern, “Midrash and Indeterminacy,” Critical Inquiry 15 (1988), 132-61, who comments on the heterogeneity of the figures in the Leviticus rabbah list.
140 The context of the verse clearly refers to the Chaldean armies (see verse 6), a fact which is stubbornly ignored by most of the midrashic exegetes. It is thus an excellent example of the atomism noted by James Kugel, (“Two Introductions to Midrash”), who observes that “midrash is an exegesis of biblical verses, not of books. The basic unit of the Bible, for the midrashist, is the verse: this is what he seeks to expound, and it might be said that there simply is no boundary encountered beyond that of the verse until one comes to the borders of the canon itself”; see especially pp. 93-100; and cf. I. Heinemann, Darkhei ha-’aggadah, 131-6. See my comments above in the Introductory Remarks chapter.
141 “She caused his death” (Tanhuma).
142 The Tanhumas derive this detail from Daniel 7:7, in which the “fourth beast” is depicted as “dreadful and terrible.” The treatment is thus exclusively of a national

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Obadiah); Sennacherib (punished through his sons); King Hiram of Tyre (punished through Nebuchadnezzar); Nebuchadnezzar (punished through Evil-merodach); Israel (punished for slander through fluxes and plagues).

While this discourse is not primarily concerned with the enumeration of kings who ruled the world, kings and other national archetypes (i.e., Esau who is treated here in his capacity as the ancestor of Rome) do figure prominently in the list, the only apparent exception being Adam. It is therefore of particular interest that the midrash goes on at considerable length to apply the "terrible and dreadful" phraseology of Habakkuk to Adam by citing traditions about the "Primordial Man" who filled the entire world. In "composite proems" of this sort, we need not always insist on finding a thematic unity between the different interpretations of the "proem verse"; 144 it is nonetheless understandable that a later darshan or redactor 145 would...Continued from previous page

symbol, not of Esau the individual. This differs from Leviticus rabbah's citation of Genesis 27:15, which relates [in a manner that is not entirely clear; see sources cited by Margulies] to the deeds of Esau the person. The theme of Nimrod's miraculous garments is elaborated in great detail in Midrash 'aseret melakhim. See Ginzberg, Legends, 1:177-8, 318-9; 2:139; 5:199, nn. 78-9; 5:276-7, nn. 38-9; 5:366, nn. 377-9. The sources for this legend all appear to be very late, and hence I consider it very unlikely that it is actually being alluded to in the Leviticus rabbah passage.

143 On this tradition, see Margulies' notes; Ginzberg, Legends, 5:31, n. 91; and especially 6:344, n. 6.


145 Typically, we can discern the beginnings of this process in the Tanhuma, which takes the trouble to spell out explicitly that "the verse speaks of the first man, Pharaoh, Edom, Sennacherib and Nebuchadnezzar." In describing Adam, it states that he "ruled over the entire world, as it says: 'and have dominion, etc.'... It seems likely that the differences in the Tanhuma's choice of examples are to be understood in connection with its desire to produce a more symmetrically arranged proem which would deal only with world-dominating [i.e., "terrible and dreadful"] kings [note, e.g., how it identifies Pharaoh as a κοσμοκράτωρ, a detail whose relevance to the story is not...Continued on next page...
have tried to uncover precisely such a unifying thread. In our case, Adam was treated as a paradigm of royal power in subsequent generations.\footnote{146}{The implication of the above discussion is that the \textit{Leviticus rabbah} list eventually evolved into the enumeration of “ten kings.” This is suggested in spite of the obvious fact that the actual list of monarchs in \textit{Pirqei de-rabbi eliezer} is completely different from that of \textit{Leviticus rabbah}, the only common element being Nebuchadnezzar.}

None of the above passages are from Tannaitic texts. There is however a tradition preserved in the \textit{Mekhila}t of Rabbi Ishmael which, though not manifestly an enumeration of kings, demonstrates significant affinities with our text. It is found in \textit{Mekhila}t \textit{Beshallah}, #1:\footnote{147}{Ed. Horowitz-Rabin, 87; ed. Lauterbach, 197 (Section \#2 in Lauterbach’s division). See also: J. N. Epstein and E. Z. Melamed, eds., \textit{Mekhilta d’rabi Sim’on b. jochai}, 50.} This midrash is attached to Exodus 14:5: “...and the heart of Pharaoh and of his servants was turned against the people, and they said, Why have we done this that we have let Israel go from serving us?” and explains that the Egyptians feared that the precedent of the Hebrew rebellion would invite rebellions of other subject peoples. The \textit{Mekhila}t concludes:

This comes to teach you\footnote{148}{The reasoning is less than satisfactory, being based on a midrashic embellishment of the story that is not justified on hermeneutical grounds. It is only the midrash that makes mention of the pivotal fact that “all the nations of the world” would challenge Egyptian rule. Aside from the possibility that the text suffers from a lacuna (a hypothesis for which there is, at any rate, no evidence in the apparatuses of Lauterbach}} that Pharaoh ruled from one end of the world to the other, and that he had governors from one end of the world to the other, for the sake of Israel’s honor...

\textit{Continued from previous page...}
And thus do you find, that each nation and tongue that subjugated Israel ruled from one end of the earth to the other, for the sake of Israel’s honor.

The *Mekhilta* goes on to cite additional instances of this general rule, supporting each with an appropriate verse: Assyria (Isaiah 10:14), Babylonia (i.e., Nebuchadnezzar, citing Jeremiah 27:8), the Medes (i.e., Darius, citing Daniel 6:26), Greece (Daniel 7:6), the “fourth kingdom” (=Rome,\(^{149}\) citing Daniel 7:23). In the end it restates the principle: “Thus you have learned that each nation and tongue that subjugated Israel ruled from one end of the earth to the other, for the sake of Israel’s honor.”

It is easy to discern that, while the midrash is couched in a terminology that speaks of nations and tongues rather than individual kings (a situation which is promoted by its heavy reliance on the apocalyptic vocabulary of Daniel), virtually all of its references to Biblical nations can easily be translated into specific monarchs. In fact, it is noteworthy that in the very first example reference is made only to “Pharaoh” and not to “Egypt.” It therefore seems very probable that this passage should be regarded as the earliest instance of the manifold lists of kings who ruled the world. As with the other traditions (other than that of the Babylonian Esther-Midrash), it has a clear homiletical purpose, namely to point out the correlation between the importance of

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\(^{149}\) Possibly an early censor’s gloss; cf. the reading of *Midrash hakhamim* recorded by Horovitz and Lauterbach: “the guilty kingdom.”
Israel and the magnitude of the world powers that have taken the trouble to conquer it.^\textsuperscript{150}

The most glaring contrast between the version in the Esther-Midrash and the others probably lies in the fact that, unlike our text, the other midrashim incorporate the theme of the ten kings into homiletical discourses. In the case of the Targum this is achieved by demonstrating that, just as Ahasuerus and his empire eventually fell, so shall be the fate of all other kingdoms that will subjugate Israel, until the dominion returns to its rightful Master, God. *Leviticus rabbah* and *Tanhuma* derive the lesson that people's actions contain the seeds of their own punishment. *Pirqei derabbi eliezer* attaches the “ten kings” passage to the legends about the Primordial Adam,\textsuperscript{151} who was appointed by God as His “agent” to rule the earth on his behalf. Here as well the implication is that the post-Messianic return to direct divine rule is to be viewed as a reversion to the original conditions of Creation, and that temporal empires rule in the interval either through usurpation or by partaking of the sovereignty originally vouchsafed to Adam. The *Midrash aseret melakhim* appears to have expanded the material in *Pirqei derabbi eliezer* so as to produce a work which is essentially a “messianic tract.”\textsuperscript{152} The Esther-Midrash, by contrast, seems to arbitrarily link together a few names of the kings who ruled the world, without applying this exegetical information to any edifying purpose.

We should however take note of the similar-sounding passage in *Esther rabbah*, 1:1 to our verse,\textsuperscript{153} where we read as follows:

"...Seven and twenty and a hundred"

\textsuperscript{150} Lauterbach (p. 196, n. 5): "It is less of a humiliation to be oppressed by a mighty empire."

\textsuperscript{151} See p. 79 n. 1 of Friedlander’s edition; cf. L. Ginzberg, *Legends*, 1:59, 5:79, etc.

\textsuperscript{152} On the genre, see Joseph Dan, *The Hebrew Story in the Middle Ages*, Sifriyyat Keter (Jerusalem: Keter, 1974). Horowitz speculated, on the basis of the midrash’s expansive treatment of the destructions of the two Temples and Betar, that the midrash originated as a discourse for “Shabbat Hazon,” the sabbath preceding the Ninth of Av, when Isaiah 1 is the Prophetic reading.

Rabbi Eleazar in the name of R. Haninah: But are there not two hundred and fifty hyparchies in the world?

And David reigned over all of them...

And Solomon reigned over all of them, as it is written: "And Solomon reigned over all the kingdoms, etc." (1 Kings 5:1).

And Ahab reigned over all of them, as it is written "As the Lord liveth..."; and is it possible for a man to impose an oath in a place where he does not hold power?

And further, from the following: "Then he numbered the young men of the princes of the provinces, and they were two hundred and thirty-two, etc." (1 Kings 20:15).

Where were the remainder? ...

While the names of the kings in the Esther rabbah passage are not identical with those in the baraita in the Babylonian Esther-Midrash, the similarity is certainly strong enough to arouse the suspicion that our passage in TB Megillah evolved out of a pericope that had a similar purpose to that of Esther rabbah, in which the number of Ahasuerus's provinces was contrasted with those of other monarchs who, in the eyes of the midrash, ruled over larger dominions. The above impression is strengthened by our analysis of the Talmud's discussion of Ahab, in the subsequent passage:

[11a] Ahab the son of Omri, as it is written: "As the Lord God liveth, there is no nation or kingdom whither my lord hath not sent to seek thee; and when they said, He is not there; he took an oath of the kingdom and nation, that they found thee not" (1 Kings 18:10).

And were it not that he reigned over them, would he have been able to take an oath of them?

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154 "the son of Omri" — ~ in MS W, Printings, YS, AgE.
155 "as it is written" — Spanish family: "This is what Obadiah says to Elijah."
156 "that ...them" — MS B: ~, and filled in in B*.
157 "would" — All other witnesses, except AgE and YS: "how could."
158 YS adds: "Ahasuerus, as it is written 'From India to Ethiopia.'"
This proof that Ahab reigned over the whole world is also brought in *Pirqei derabbi eli‘ezer* and its derivatives.\(^{159}\) Other than the exegetical stimulus of the verse itself, it is not clear what the practical homiletical point of the observation might be.\(^{160}\)

However a possible homiletical context for the tradition might be reconstructed in light of what we have observed in *Esther rabbah*, 1:1 and its parallels, where a contrast is drawn between the two hundred and thirty young men of the princes of the provinces slain by Ahab in his battle against Ben-hadad—taken as indicating the total number of countries in the world—and the “mere” one hundred and twenty-seven provinces ruled by Ahasuerus. It is thus possible that the midrashic interest in the extent of Ahab’s dominions originated as a by-product of a discussion of the size of Ahasuerus’s empire.\(^{161}\) When we take into account the fact that the discussion in *Esther rabbah* is attributed entirely to *Amora‘im*, this would suggest that the “*baraita*” should probably be considered a fictitious one.

The Esther-Midrash now continues its explication of the *baraita* about kings who “ruled in the vault”:

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\(^{159}\) In Friedlander’s edition of *Pirqei de rabbi eli‘ezer*, p. 81 n. 11 he discusses the differences between the readings of the first printed edition and the Vienna manuscript upon which his own translation is based. Though the Vienna MS omits explicit reference to Ahasuerus it is clear that the discrepancy between the two verses regarding the number of provinces is of concern to both traditions. So too in *Midrash ʿasaret melakhim*.

\(^{160}\) The following possibility deserves consideration: The darshan might be trying to enhance the absoluteness of Ahab’s evil by associating it with his absolute power. This would serve to underscore Elijah’s courage in opposing such a formidable antagonist, and to emphasize the miraculousness of his success in eluding such a mighty king. Cf. *Seder eliahu rabbah*, in: L. M. Friedmann, ed., *Seder Eliahu rabbah und Seder Elijahu zuta* [*Tanna d’be Eliahu*] (Vienna: Achiasaf, 1902), Ch. 9, p. 49. For a summary of midrashic perspectives on Ahab see Ginzberg, *Legends*, 4:186-9; and especially 6:310 n. 31, where he cites the Septuagint rendering of 1 Kings 18:10 as evidence of Ahab’s reputed absolute power.

\(^{161}\) See Ginzberg, ibid., 6:310-1, n. 32.

\(^{162}\) “as it is written” — EY: “about whom it is written.”
Nebuchadnezzar is included in virtually all the traditions about kings who ruled throughout the world, a claim for which there is ample scriptural support, and which serves to heighten the universal significance of the destruction of the Temple. The juxtaposition to Ahasuerus serves to underscore the midrashic affinity between the king who destroyed the Temple and the king who obstructed its reconstruction.

[11a] Ahasuerus — That which we have said

This usage of the formula “as we have said” has some unusual features. The expression is usually taken to be a redactional or scribal abbreviation for a full repetition of a previously cited talmudic passage. Rashi refers us in the present instance to the “from India to Ethiopia” pericope above. Now, if the “as we have said” is indeed an abbreviated citation of the “India to Ethiopia” pericope, then we would

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163 Maharsha astutely observes that the Talmud’s proof-text refers not only to Nebuchadnezzar himself, but also to his progeny.
165 “That which” — MS P: “As.”
166 “Ahasuerus...said” — ~ in YS. *Printings* add: “A sign: וּכְסָר.”
168 It might be argued the reference here should have been to the biblical verse by itself, since the interpretations of Rav and Samuel do not really strengthen the proof to any appreciable extent. The terminology indicates quite unambiguously however that the allusion is to a talmudic text.
find ourselves in a situation where the full text of the "baraita" contained a reference to an Amoraic discussion! In light of the above observations and difficulties, it seems more acceptable to modify our understanding of the use of "as we have said"; it is not intended to allude to a longer text of the baraita, but merely to introduce an explanatory gloss: The baraita itself did not contain a proof-text, so the Talmud is explaining its reasoning through a reference to a similar conclusion reached above.\footnote{Cf. Malachi b. Jacob Hakohen, Yad malakhi (reprint: Israel, no date), 1:80b:#346.}

Thus far the citation from the baraita. Now the anonymous Talmud subjects it to a series of objections, asking why various other kings were excluded from the list of monarchs who ruled "in the vault."

[11b] And are there no more?\footnote{MS M adds: "Is there not דוד; MS Mf adds: "דוד; Solomon, Sennacherib, Darius, Cyrus."}

Is there not Solomon?

—\footnote{Most texts (other than MSS Y, W, Printings) add: "Solomon." MS Mf adds: "Solomon is different because."} His reign did not last, because Ashmedai came and banished him.\footnote{"because...him" — Only in Yemenite family.}

Now this is fine for him who says that he was a king and a commoner and nothing more.\footnote{"and nothing more" — MS N: "These things and nothing more"; MSS G, O, W, EY, Printings, AgE: ~.} However, for him who says that he was a king and a commoner and a king, what is there to say?

—Solomon was different, because\footnote{"was...because" — ~ in MS L and Printings. "because" — ~ in MSS L, R, AgE.} he had an additional\footnote{"additional" —only in MS Y and AgE; in all other witnesses: "different."} quality, that he reigned over the upper and lower realms; as it says: "And Solomon sat upon the throne of the Lord as king instead of David his father, and prospered; and all Israel obeyed him" (1 Chronicles 29:23).

\footnote{MS M adds: "I s ther e no t -potD"; MS M f adds: "-pro©: Solomon, Sennacherib, Darius, Cyrus."}
The anonymous pericope resolves its own objection initially by alluding to an aggadic legend in *TB Giṭṭin* 68b. The legend relates how King Solomon, after capturing the demon Ashmedai in order to make use of his powers in building the Temple, was eventually tricked by the demon into releasing him and giving him the ring inscribed with God's name through which Solomon had hitherto been able to control the spirit world. Armed with the magical ring, Ashmedai was then able to hurl Solomon four hundred parsangs and depose him from his throne. Ashmedai then commenced impersonating the king while Solomon was forced to wander as a beggar. With reference to this tale the Talmud records the following dispute:

Rav and Samuel—One says: He was a king and a commoner. And one says: He was a king and a commoner and a king.

The reference to Solomon's dominion over the upper and lower realms is based on another passage in *TB*, this one in *Sanhedrin* 20b. The passage is based on a dictum of Resh Laqish:

Says Resh Laqish: In the beginning Solomon ruled over the upper realms and in the end over the lower realms.

"Over the upper realms," as it says: "And Solomon sat upon the throne of the Lord, etc."

"And in the end he ruled over the lower realms," as it says: "For he had dominion over all the region on this side of the river, from Tiphsah even to Gaza" (1 Kings 4:24).

And in the end he ruled only over Israel, as it says: "I Kohelet was king over Israel, etc." (Ecclesiastes 1:12).

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177 This longer reading, attested (with minor variations) by MS M, appears authentic; see *Diqduqé Soferim* ad loc., n. 8.

178 This awkward phraseology is supported by most witnesses, and has the advantage of being a lectio difficilior in comparison with the ostensibly smoother reading of MS M: "and afterwards."
And in the end he ruled only over Jerusalem, as it says: "The words of Kohelet the son of David, king in Jerusalem" (Ecclesiastes 1:1).

And in the end he ruled only over his bed, as it says: "Behold his bed, which is Solomon's, etc." (Song of Songs 3:7-8).

And in the end he ruled only over his staff, as it says: "and this was my portion of all my labor" (Ecclesiastes 2:10).

Rav and Samuel—One says: This refers to his staff, and one says: This refers to his flask (?)

Did he return or did he not return?

Rav and Samuel—One said: He returned, and one said he did not return.

The one who says that he did not return [is saying that] he was a king and a commoner.

The one who says that he did return [is saying that] he was a king and a commoner and a king.

This pericope, which was used by the redactor of the Gittin passage, is the Esther-Midrash’s source for the interpretation that the throne of God mentioned in 1 Chronicles 29:231 refers to Solomon’s dominion over the supernatural worlds, an interpretation of the verse that appears to be exclusive to Babylonian sources.

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179 Some traditions cite Ecclesiastes 1:3; see Diqduqê Soferim.

180 See dictionaries, especially Kohut, Aruch Completum 7:63-4 and 2:317. Several witnesses (see Diqduqê Soferim n. ר) have the reading "ס" or "ט". For a detailed philological analysis, see: J. N. Epstein, ed., The Gaonic Commentary on the Order Toharot Attributed to rav Hay Gaon (Jerusalem and Tel-Aviv: Dvir and Magnes Press, 1982), 42. Cf. S. Krauss, ed., Additamenta ad Librum Aruch Completum (Reprint ed., Jerusalem: Makor, 1969), 126, 357.

181 I.e., to the throne.

182 While many midrashic passages take note of the powerful expression “throne of God,” interpreting it as a sign of God’s readiness to share power with mortals or as an indication of the absoluteness of Solomon’s (earthly) dominion or judicial authority, few use it in the sense in which it is interpreted in the above passages from the Babylonian Talmud. See Song of Songs rabbah [S. Dunsky, ed., Midrash shir ha-shirim: midrash hazita (Jerusalem and Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1980), 8-9].
A similar tradition is brought in *Song of Songs rabbah* (1:1:10)\(^ {183}\) and *Ecclesiastes rabbah* 1:1:12:

"*I Kohelet was king over Israel in Jerusalem*" (*Ecclesiastes* 1:12)—

He saw three worlds in his days and in his life.

R. Judan\(^ {184}\) and Rabbi [H]oniah:\(^ {185}\)

R. Judan said: He was a king and a commoner and a king; a wise man and a fool and a wise man; a rich man and a poor man and a rich man.

What is the reason? — "*All things have I seen in the days of my vanity*" (*Ecclesiastes* 7:15).

A person never relates his distress until the time of his relief, after he has reverted to his wealth.

And R. [H]oniah said: He was a commoner and a king and a commoner; a fool and a wise man and a fool; a poor man and a rich man and a poor man.

And what is the reason? — "*I Kohelet was king over Israel in Jerusalem.*" [I was once, but now I am nothing].\(^ {186}\)

The *TB Gittin* passage upon which our own text is based can be readily seen to be composed of several discrete traditions about Solomon that developed independently in connection with various

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\(^ {183}\) *Ibid.* In this collection, our passage is preceded by one which speaks of Solomon’s “ten falls,” as his kingdom was whittled away. The king, after ruling initially over the entire world (see above), came to rule only over Israel, then over Jerusalem, then merely over his house, and finally not even over his bed. Note that there is no reference to ruling over the upper or spirit world.

\(^ {184}\) Presumably the fourth-century Palestinian sage; see Ch. Albeck, *Introduction to the Talmud*, 332.

\(^ {185}\) Identity unclear. It is improbable that the reference would be to the first-generation Amora R. Ḥoniah Divrat Ḥawran (see Albeck, *op. cit.*, 164-5).

\(^ {186}\) The bracketed section appears at the beginning of the *Ecclesiastes rabbah* passage; see the detailed discussion in Maharzu’s commentary.
biblical verses, especially from Ecclesiastes [notably: 1:12;\(^{187}\) 2:7;\(^{188}\) 7:15; as well as Song of Songs 3:7]. Such narrative traditions may have developed in connection with the individual verses, or as parts of proems to the biblical books which were ascribed to Solomon. The sophisticated combining of the different elements in the Gitfin pericope—especially those of the dethroning of Solomon and the Ashmedai story—show signs of late and developed editorial activity; and hence the citation in our Esther-Midrash of both the Gitfin and Sanhedrin pericopes likely belongs to the advanced redactional ("Saboraitic") strata.\(^{190}\)

The Talmud now continues its discussion of the baraita.

\[11b\] But is there not Sennacherib, as it is written: "Who are they among all the gods of those countries that have delivered their country out of my hand" (Isaiah 36:20)?

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\(^{188}\) The association of Solomon with the demonic realm seems to date back to ancient legends, not necessarily in connection with this verse. See the extensive literature utilized by Ginzberg, Legends, 4:149-54,165-69; 6:291-9.

\(^{189}\) This feature of the legend is unique to the Babylonian versions. In the Palestinian traditions of the story [e.g. TP Sanhedrin 2, 20c; Pesiqta derav kahana, 26:2 (ed. B. Mandelbaum, 386, transl. W. Braude and I. Kapstein, 394-5); E. Grünhut and J. Ch. Wertheimer, eds., Midrash shir hashirim, 2nd ed. (Jerusalem: Ktav Yad Vasefer Institute, 1981), 3:7-8 (pp. 71-2); Tanhuma Aharei, 1; Tanhuma (Buber), Aharei, 2], Ashmedai does not play an active role in the story, but it is God who removes Solomon from the throne in punishment for excessive pride, whereupon an angel occupies the throne. In the Targum to Ecclesiastes and in E. Grünhut, ed., Midrash al yit-hallal [in Sefer ha-liqqutim (Jerusalem, 1898-1902), 20b-21a] we find a hybrid tradition, in which God directly appoints Ashmedai to replace Solomon, without any mention of Ashmedai’s capture or the Temple building episode. Cf. Lamentations rabbah, 19:2 (421). An extensive list of parallels, including references to a variety of medieval anthologies, may be found in Ginzberg, Legends, 6:299-300, n. 86.


\(^{191}\) "is" —Printings: "was."

\(^{192}\) "as" —EY: "concerning whom."
—There was Jerusalem which he did not conquer, as it is written: “that the Lord should deliver Jerusalem out of my hand” (ibid.).

As noted above, Sennacherib does not appear in the various midrashic lists of kings who ruled “from one end of the world to the other,” although Isaiah 36:20 is cited in several midrashic texts as evidence of Sennacherib’s universal dominion. Our anonymous passage does not appear to be quoting directly from any other talmudic or midrashic text; rather, it is alluding to the unmediated biblical verses.

[11b] But is there not Darius, as it is written: “Then king Darius wrote unto all the peoples, nations and languages that dwell in all the earth, Peace be multiplied unto you” (Daniel 6:26)?

—There were seven over which he did not reign, as it is written: “It pleased Darius to set over the kingdom a hundred and twenty satraps [which should be over the whole kingdom]” (Daniel 6:1).

Daniel 6:26 is cited as evidence for Darius’s ruling over the entire world in Mekhilta Beshallah, 1[2] (quoted above) and in Esther rabba, 1:1:4, where Darius’s empire is contrasted with that of Ahasuerus, which was incomplete by comparison. This reading is the

193 “which...conquer” — AgE: “over which he did not reign.”
194 “as...hand” — Only in Y and AgE.
195 For a composite of his portrayal in rabbinic literature, see Ginzberg, Legends, 4:267-70.
196 See Ginzberg, Legends, 6:361-2, n. 51. Isaiah 36:20 is cited as evidence of Sennacherib’s insolent power in Leviticus rabba, 7:6 (ed. Margulies, p. 162) and Ecclesiastes rabba, 5:1. In Leviticus rabba, 18:2 (p. 402) and Tanhuma Tazria 8 [=Tanhuma ed. Buber, Leviticus (Tazria 4), 10], p. 38] the verse is incorporated into an account of Sennacherib’s failed attack on Jerusalem, as part of a complex proem based on Habakkuk 1:7. See our discussion of this passage above.
197 The talmudic tradition that Sennacherib had confused “all the nations,” used to justify intermarriage with converts from biblically forbidden peoples, may have been based on exegesis of the same verse, though I am not aware of its being cited in that connection. Cf. Tosafot Sotah 9a s.v. מִפְּלִים.
198 “is” — MS G: “was.”
199 Or the Median empire.
200 As well as in Mekhilta derabbi shim'on ben yohai, 50.
reverse of our own passage. It is not clear whether the author of our passage was thinking of a midrashic parallel, or relating directly to the biblical verses.

[11b] And is there not Cyrus, as it is written: "Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdom of the earth hath the Lord given me" (Ezra 1:2)?

—There he is glorifying himself.

In spite of the Talmud's refutation Cyrus figures in the list of ten kings in Pirqei derabbi eliezer and Midrash astaret melakhim. The former confines itself to a citation of Ezra 1:2, while the latter fills in an aggadic tradition about how Nehemiah persuaded the king to permit the rebuilding of Jerusalem. The Talmud does not seem to be citing any other talmudic passage.

Concluding Remarks

When taken on its own terms, the structure of this brief passage was not found to demonstrate any unusual complexity. The biblical descriptions of the vastness of Ahasuerus empire raised associations with a baraita that listed him among kings who ruled throughout the world. The anonymous redactors challenged the coherence of that list by suggesting the names of some other kings who had been excluded from it in spite of the fact that they too ruled the world. In each of the cases the Talmud was able to produce a reason to justify the exclusion.

It was when we began to investigate some more critical issues that the passage was seen involve some more fundamental questions. Our own pericope displayed some of the features which typify the

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201 The enumeration of satrapies in Daniel 6:2 seems to invite comparison with the number of Ahasuerus' provinces, hence it is particularly surprising that the verse is apparently not cited elsewhere in rabbinic literature (as evidenced by Aaron Hyman and Arthur Hyman, Torah hakethubah vehamessurah, Second revised edition ed. (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1979), 3:226.


203 "as it is"—HgT and EY: "concerning whom."

204 "There" — ~ in MS O.

205 See Friedlander's edition, p. 82, n. 4.

redactional activity of the “anonymous Talmud,” the late strata of scholars who cement together the disparate units of the Babylonian Talmud. This process was discernible in the citation of developed pericopes about Solomon’s fall from greatness taken from Sanhedrin 20 and Gittin 68b. We noted also that rabbinic literature records a number of similar-looking discussions about the cosmocrators of history, which were used in a variety of homiletical contexts. With respect to our passage, it seemed most likely that the Babylonian “baraita” of the three kings is actually a reformulation of an Amoraic passage in Esther rabbah in which the extent of Ahasuerus’ dominions is contrasted with those of several kings who supposedly ruled over vaster empires. We observed in passing how various scattered talmudic discussions about great monarchs of history were gradually synthesized, embellished and systematized in later midrashic works like Pirqe derabbi eli’ezer and Midrash ʿaseret melakhim as they were incorporated into the detailed quasi-apocalyptic messianic scenarios of the medieval era. As in previous chapters, we were repeatedly faced with the fundamental difference between the Babylonian midrash and its Palestinian counterparts: the Bavli displays a repeated tendency to ignore or eliminate the homiletical contexts and literary structures that define Palestinian midrashic activity, and to treat the midrash as an academic exegetical enterprise.

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207 On the sources of the passages discussed in the present chapter see the summary by A. Weiss, Studies in the Literature of the Amoraim, 282, who observes that it is composed of: “…midrashic comments on almost every word in Esther 1:1. Most of these comments are by Rav and Samuel. Among them is relevant material, both Tannaitic and Amoraic... With regard to both its content and sources, this material bears the stamp of a distinct unit.”