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## THE RELIGIOUS POLICY OF XERXES AND THE *BOOK OF ESTHER*

By ROBERT J. LITTMAN, University of Hawaii

ACCORDING TO THE *Book of Esther* the festival of Purim which occurs on the 14th day of Adar <sup>1</sup> commemorates the escape of the Persian Jews from the death which the vizier Haman had planned for them. The Jews were saved by the intervention of Mordecai and his cousin Esther, the Jewish wife of King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I, 486-465 B.C.).<sup>2</sup> In recent years scholars have come to regard the *Book of Esther* as a romance or historical fiction rather than a factual account of events,

<sup>1</sup> For the date of the festival see E. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York 1967) 202-203.

<sup>2</sup> Linguistically Ahasuerus or rather *Achashwerosh* is the Hebrew rendering of the Persian *Khshayarsha*, which in Greek becomes Xerxes; [see V. Ryssel, *Zusätzen zum Buch Esther* (Tübingen 1900) and L. B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (New York 1908) 51-54]. Some of the Greek versions of Esther, particularly that of Lysimachus of Jerusalem (first century B.C.) from whose version the other Greek accounts probably derive, make Artaxerxes the king. Certain scholars argue, partially based on this, that therefore the events in Esther should be set historically during the reign of Artaxerxes; [see particularly J. Hoschander, *The Book of Esther in the Light of History* (Philadelphia 1923) 30-41, 77-79, 118-138]. However, since the Hebrew version is earlier (probably late fourth century B.C.) and more authoritative than the Greek version (early first century B.C.) and since the Greek Esther derives from the Hebrew rather than from independent sources (although it may contain material from other sources), the name Artaxerxes in the Greek version probably should be regarded as an interpolation. Whether Lysimachus had any historical sources or basis for this interpolation, we do not know. For the complicated problems of the Greek version of Esther, see E. Bickerman, "Notes on the Greek Book of Esther," *Proc. Amer. Acad. Jewish Research* 20 (1951) 101-133, and E. Bickerman, "The Colophon on the Greek Book of Esther," *JBL* 63 (1944) 339-362. For a summary of arguments and bibliography on the dating of the *Book of Esther*, see C. A. Moore, *Esther* (Anchor Bible) (New York 1971) lviii-lx.

particularly because of the obvious historical contradictions in the book. Xerxes could not have wed a Jewess because this was contrary to the practices of Persian monarchs who married only into one of the seven leading Persian families.<sup>3</sup> History records that Xerxes was married to Amestris,<sup>4</sup> not Vashti or Esther. There is no historical record of a personage known as Esther, or a queen called Vashti or a vizier Haman, or a high placed courtier Mordecai. Mordecai was said to have been among the exiles deported from Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar,<sup>5</sup> but that deportation occurred 112 years before Xerxes became king.

The general scholarly drift has been to see Purim as originally a non-Jewish spring renewal festival which was adopted by Jews and given a historical basis, much in the same way as Christmas has developed out of the Roman Saturnalia and pagan rites of renewal.<sup>6</sup> Theodore Gaster perhaps best summarized the present thought on the festival, "Purim may originally have been the Persian New Year festival held at the time of the vernal equinox and characterized by all the rites and ceremonies associated with that occasion in other parts of the ancient and modern worlds. When the Jews of Persia took it over, they did what people do everywhere in adapting borrowed institutions to their own need and outlooks. They fell back on a popular story which seemed to incorporate all the leading elements of the festival and proceeded to use it (with judicious alterations) as the explanation and justification of the festival's existence. It is in precisely the same way . . . that Easter and Yuletide became Christian festivals; and it is this process also which turned a primitive agricultural rite into the Israelite feast of Passover."<sup>7</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Herodotus 3.84.

<sup>4</sup> Herodotus 7.114, 9.108-113.

<sup>5</sup> *Esther* 2.6.

<sup>6</sup> Theodore Gaster, *Purim and Hanukkah* (New York 1950), Julius Lewy, "The Feast of the 14th Day of Adar," *HUCA* 14 (1939) 127-151.

<sup>7</sup> Gaster, *op. cit.*, 18.

There are many theories as to the origin of the festival, that it dates from the period of Judah Maccabee, that the name of the festival derives from the Hebrew *purah* "wine press" and the festival is a Judaization of the Greek festival of *Pithoigia* ("opening the Wine Casks")<sup>8</sup> or that it was adopted by the Jews during the Babylonian Exile, based on the ritual of the Babylonian New Year at which there was a portrayal of the victory of Babylon's deities Marduk and Ishtar over those of neighboring Elam, Humman and Kiririsha, and that the Jews later adapted the story when they came under Babylonian rule, and made Mordecai and Esther triumph over Haman and his wife Zeresh. The name of the festival Purim could be connected with the Babylonian word *puru* "lot" since on New Year's Day the gods of Babylon were said to meet and cast lots to determine the destinies of man for the next year.<sup>9</sup> Another theory suggests that the word Purim is a corruption of *Phruraia* or *Phurdaia* and the original name derived from the Persian *Farwadigan*, a five day All Souls festival celebrated at the end of the year. However, this theory, based too heavily on textual errors of the Septuagint and Josephus, has been largely rejected,<sup>10</sup> though it is conceded that there are similarities between the Farwadigan festival and Purim, since both are celebrated in the month of Adar and both are spring renewal rites.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> For a summary of these theories and bibliography see Paton, *op. cit.*, 83-84.

<sup>9</sup> H. Zimmern, *Zur Frage nach dem Ursprunge des Purimfestes*, "ZAW 11 (1891) 157-69; P. Jensen, "Elamitische Eigennamen. Ein Beitrag zur Erklärung der elamitischen Inschriften," *WZKM* 6 (1892) 47-70, 209-226. This theory has many attractive elements in it, though it is not totally convincing. Gaster, *op. cit.*, 8, attacks the theory on the grounds that the Babylonian New Year was observed, not in March, but in Nisan (April) and lasted for a period of ten days, and that there is no evidence that the Babylonian New Year was ever called "Day of Lots". It is doubtful, Gaster further asserts, that there was a major Elamite god named Humman, only a minor Khumban or Khuba.

<sup>10</sup> Gaster, *op. cit.*, 9-10.

<sup>11</sup> Lewy, *op. cit.*, 137-8.

Whatever one's judgment about the origins of Purim, whether Esther and Mordecai are historical figures, or merely gods demoted to the human level, it is agreed that the *Book of Esther* has a historical setting in the reign of Xerxes, and it is replete with details of Persian court life. It is the purpose of this paper, while not denying the romantic and ritual elements and complicated amalgamation of history, religion and romance, to return to the search for historical material, particularly in the reign of Xerxes, which may be connected to the *Book of Esther*. I propose to suggest a historical seed for the *Book of Esther* in the religious policy of Xerxes, the king in whose reign the events of the book are set, and whose decree singles out a religious group for destruction, albeit at the instigation of Haman.

The first question to be answered is the Jewishness of Mordecai and Esther. Elias Bickerman remarks "We have here a typical tale of palace intrigue that could as well find a place in the Persian histories of Herodotus and Ctesias, or in the Arabian Nights. The only Jewish element of the tale is that, according to the author, Mordecai is a Jew... But the name... is not Jewish at all. We may wonder whether the hero of the original tale was a Jew."<sup>12</sup> Gaster says, "*the story of Esther, as we now have it, is simply a Jewish adaption of a popular Persian novella.*" The hero and heroine, and likewise the central motivation of the tale have been given a Jewish color."<sup>13</sup> It has long been observed that there is a close correspondence between the names Mordecai and Esther and the Babylonian deities Marduk and Ishtar.<sup>14</sup> This similarity is enhanced by the fact that Mordecai and Esther are cousins, as are Ishtar and Marduk. The name Mordecai has the meaning "man of Marduk" or "worshipper of Marduk", although on at least one occasion it is used as a Jewish name.<sup>15</sup> The name

<sup>12</sup> Bickerman, *op. cit.*, 181.

<sup>13</sup> Gaster, *op. cit.*, 35.

<sup>14</sup> P. Jensen, *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 6 (1892) 47ff., 209 ff.

<sup>15</sup> The name Mordecai appears in a list of Jews who returned to

Esther is identical with Ishtar.<sup>16</sup> Esther's second name, Hadassah, has posed more of a problem. Usually it has been connected with the Hebrew word meaning myrtle. In fact the biblical commentators explained that she had a Jewish name Hadassah, and a secular name, Esther, much as Jews have adopted two names in other periods of history.<sup>17</sup> However, Lewy has proposed what must be the correct derivation of the name.<sup>18</sup> The Hebrew הדסה is not connected with myrtle, but rather with the Akkadian *hadašatu*, a synonym of the Assyrian *kallātu* "bride". Thus הדסה is an epithet of Esther. Further Esther the Queen (אסתר המלכה) is a literal translation of the Babylonian term *Ištar šarratum*, Ishtar the Queen.

If the *Book of Esther* is originally a non-Jewish story, and Esther and Mordecai non-Jews, it remains for us to identify the persecuted. Julius Lewy<sup>19</sup> suggests that when Artaxerxes II officially instituted the cult of Mithra and the goddess Anahita in Susa, their followers threatened those of Marduk with destruction, but the latter were saved by "Ishtar". Lewy sees the *Book of Esther* as a confused amalgam of this historical event and a Judaization of the story. He makes a persuasive argument that the original persecution mentioned in the *Book*

Jerusalem with Zerubbabel (*Ezra* 2.2). It is attested in Aramaic; see G. R. Driver, *Aramaic Documents of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford 1957) 20 n. 2. It also occurs in the Treasury Tablets from Persepolis; see G. G. Cameron, *The Persepolis Treasury Tablets* (Chicago 1948) 85; and it is also found in an undated text, probably from the end of the reign of Darius or beginning of Xerxes as the name of an official, perhaps a scribe or accountant, on tour from Susa; see A. Ungnad, *Keilschriftliche Beiträge zum Buch Esra und Ester*, *ZAW* 58 (1940-41) 240-244 and addenda in *ZAW* 59 (1942-43) 219.

<sup>16</sup> Lewy, *op. cit.*, 128 n. 14.

<sup>17</sup> Although many biblical critics and scholars from antiquity have argued that Esther and Mordecai are merely theophoros names and represent secular names, much as Jews in Daniel 1.6-7 had a Jewish and Babylonian name [see Moore, *op. cit.*, 19], the collocation of the names Esther and Mordecai, the names of a Babylonian god and goddess, closely allied in the Babylonian pantheon, makes one very suspicious of this interpretation.

<sup>18</sup> Lewy, *op. cit.*, 128.

<sup>19</sup> Lewy, *op. cit.*

of *Esther* was of the followers of Marduk, not Jews. Once he has concurred in the identification of Mordecai with "man of Marduk" and Esther with Ishtar, he examines the text to determine which people originally were persecuted. Lewy found in *Esther* 3.6 a passage where Haman decides to destroy Mordecai and all the Jews in the kingdom of Ahasuerus, that is "the people of Mordecai". The phrase **עם מרדכי** is usually translated as "people of Mordecai", but it can also be translated simply as "Mardukians". As Lewy says,<sup>20</sup> the absence of the name of Jahweh in the book, the praise of the goddess *Ištar šarrat* (**אסתר המלכה**), the reference to **עם מרדכי**, the fact that it is the race of Esther and Mordecai who are to be persecuted, indicates that it is the followers of Marduk, not the Jews who were persecuted in the original story. There were worshippers of Ishtar and undoubtedly of Marduk in Susa. Nebuchadnezzar rebuilt a temple of "Ishtar who dwells in Susa",<sup>21</sup> and there is further evidence that this Babylonian cult was well established in Susa.

At this point in his argument Lewy seems to go astray by his identification of Haman as a follower of Mithra, from which he extrapolates that the most likely time a conflict between the Mardukians and Mithraites might have occurred in Susa was in the reign of Artaxerxes II when the cult was officially introduced into the cities and Anahita images were erected,<sup>22</sup> although there is no historical evidence for a conflict between the worshippers of Marduk and Mithra at this period. Lewy bases his identification on a Greek translation (LXX) of *Esther* 3.1 where Haman in the Hebrew **האגגי** (the Agagite) is named **βουγαῖος**. Although Agagite could originally have been a Persian family or place name, or a *nomen dignitatis*, or an allegorical nickname, the Jewish readers of *Esther*, as evidenced by Josephus, the Talmud and the Targums, took

<sup>20</sup> Lewy, *op. cit.*, 133.

<sup>21</sup> Col. III of Nabonidus stela from Hillah (in St. Langdon, *Die Neubabylonischen Königsinschriften*, 277ff.

<sup>22</sup> Berossos f. 16 (in Clement of Alexandria, *Protrepticus* 4.65). Cf. E. Herzfeld, *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 8 (1936) 76.

Agagite to mean descendent of Agag, king of the Amalekites, who were implacable enemies of Israel.<sup>23</sup> Lewy maintains that βουγαῖος derives from the Persian word *baga* (god). While this derivation is not outside the realm of possibility, it seems much more likely that βουγαῖος derives from βοῦς (bull) and γάίω (to exult) and means a bully, braggart or monster. It is used almost exclusively as a term of reproach (Cf. *Iliad* 13.824 and *Odyssey* 18.79 and Plutarch *Quaes. Gr.* 299B). In ix 24 and E 10 instead of βουγαῖος we find the word "Macedonian" which for the Greek reader would have the same connotation as Agagite for the Hebrew. Thus the Greek translator of Esther modernized the arcane term Agagite into βουγαῖος, a form which would have meaning for the Greek speaking Jew. If, however, Lewy is correct in deriving βουγαῖος from *baga*, the case for the identification of βουγαῖος with a worshipper of Mithra is tenuous at best. There are no other passages where the word has this meaning. As Lewy points out,<sup>24</sup> the term *baga* in the inscription of Darius denotes 1. Ahuramazda "the greatest of the *bagas*" 2. deities of the Persian clans 3. non-Persian gods. Lewy continues that in other usages it can mean "god par excellence" that is Mithra. Given this range of possibilities, Lewy rejects the fact that *baga* can refer to Ahuramazda on the grounds that both in the Elephantine papyri and in an inscription from Persepolis, a worshipper of Ahuramazda is referred to as מזדיין "worshipper of Mazda". Given our general ignorance of old Persian and the fact that the Greek versions of Esther are many hundreds of years later than the Elephantine papyri and the inscription from Persepolis, it seems illogical to reject the possibility that βουγαῖος refers to a follower of Ahuramazda because a follower of Ahuramazda in two instances is referred to as מזדיין in favor of a connection with Mithra, when there is no attestation of its meaning "worshipper of Mithra" and very little evidence that *baga* can regularly refer to Mithra. I do not mean here

<sup>23</sup> Moore, *op. cit.*, 35-36.

<sup>24</sup> Lewy, *op. cit.*, 134-5.



to assert from this that Haman was a follower of Ahuramazda, but only to show, based on Lewy's own line of reasoning that there is at least as strong a case for βουγγαῖος to refer to Ahuramazda as to Mithra. Even if we should grant that βουγγαῖος refers to a worshipper of Mithra, this only indicates that the Greek redactor, hundreds of years after any possible historical event, found this interpretation plausible.

Once we see that the evidence which indicates that Haman is a follower of Mithra is very weak at best, Lewy's whole structure falls, especially since no evidence exists of clashes between the followers of Mithra and Marduk in the reign of Artaxerxes II. What we are left with then, from Lewy's extensive and ingenious case is that there was some sort of persecution of the followers of Marduk and Ishtar, and, according to the *Book of Esther*, this occurred in the reign of Xerxes I.

At this point let us turn to the history of the Achaemenids and their religious policies. The Achaemenid rulers were Zoroastrian, but they were extremely tolerant of other religions in their Empire and even fostered the temple-worship of other gods, contributed to the building of temples and gave special privileges to priesthoods.<sup>25</sup> On a cylinder inscription Cyrus records "I gave daily care to his (Marduk's) work".<sup>26</sup> Cyrus rebuilt the temple of Marduk; Cyrus and Darius both allowed the Jews to deduct the cost of rebuilding the Temple at Jerusalem from their taxes. Cambyses was no less tolerant. In Egypt at Saïs "he restored the temple of Neith in person. He testified in every good way his reverence for the great, exalted, holy goddess Neith, the great mother, and for all the great gods in Saïs".<sup>27</sup> Cambyses and Darius both partook of the ceremony of "seizing the hands of Marduk" the statue of Bel Marduk at Esagila, which entitled them in the eyes of the Babylonians to bear the title King of Babylon.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Cambridge Ancient History* 4.187-8.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in *CAH* 4.188.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted in *CAH* 4.188.

<sup>28</sup> For details see E. Meyer, *Forschungen zur Alten Geschichte* II (1899) 476ff.

In contrast to his predecessors, Xerxes was intolerant. In an inscription from Persepolis called the Daeva inscription Xerxes says "A great god is Ahuramazda, who created this earth, who created man, who created peace for man, who made Xerxes king, one king of many, one lord of many . . . Says Xerxes the king: When I became king there was within these lands which are written above one which was restless. Afterward Ahuramazda brought me help. By the favor of Ahuramazda I smote that land and put it in its place . . . within these lands was a place where formerly the *daevas* were worshipped. Afterward by the favor of Ahuramazda I destroyed that community of *daevas* and proclaimed: The *daevas* you shall not worship. Where formerly the *daevas* were worshipped, there I worshipped Ahuramazda and the holy Artā."<sup>29</sup> We cannot identify with certainty the *daevas* or "false gods". They may include Mithra and other pre-Zoroastrian Aryan gods and they may also include local gods. Xerxes also stresses that he saw to it that Ahuramazda was worshipped "in accordance with Truth and using the proper rite". In this inscription Xerxes also emphasized the importance of Artā, who is roughly synonymous with Righteousness. Xerxes even gave his son Artā's name and called him Artā-Xerxes. One of Xerxes' first acts as king was the recovery of Egypt, which he accomplished by January 9, 484 B.C. Xerxes took two actions which may reflect religious intolerance. First he confiscated the property of many temples. His second step was a break in the tradition of previous Achaemenid rulers, who had followed the practice of assuming the local title of king in conquered lands. Xerxes refused to call himself Pharaoh, perhaps because of religious connotations of the office. The priests of Apis<sup>30</sup> on a sarcophagus

<sup>29</sup> Quoted from A. T. Olmstead, *History of the Persian Empire* (Chicago 1948) 231-32. For the full inscription see Roland Kent, *Old Persian Grammar, Texts, Lexicon* (New Haven 1953) 150-152. Olmstead, 231, thinks the rebellious land was Bactria. A. R. Burn, *Persia and the Greeks* (London 1968) 315, prefers Egypt.

<sup>30</sup> Olmstead, *op. cit.*, 235-236.

prepared for Darius, which contained a space for Darius' successor, out of hostility to Xerxes, left the space blank. In his campaigns in Greece, Xerxes destroyed many temples, including the first Parthenon at Athens.<sup>31</sup>

We now come to Xerxes' policy toward Babylon. The first document of Xerxes' reign is dated December 1, 486 B.C.<sup>32</sup> In this and subsequent documents he is called "King of Babylon, King of Lands".<sup>33</sup> However, within a very short time of his accession Xerxes entered the "tomb of Belitanes" which is taken to refer to Esagila, the central temple of Marduk.<sup>34</sup> Something in the temple may have disturbed Xerxes, since on his return to Ecbatana he changed his title to "King of Parsa (Persia) and Mada (Media), King of Babylon, King of Lands".<sup>35</sup> By the autumn another pretender Shamash-eriba had seized control. Xerxes dispatched his brother-in-law, Megabazus, who quickly took Babylon. The fortifications of the city which had been built by Nebuchadnezzar were destroyed. Esagila along with its ziggurat (temple tower) were levelled. Other temples and sanctuaries were also destroyed.<sup>36</sup> Xerxes took the 18 foot solid gold statue of Bel Marduk, the chief idol of the god, whose hands monarchs seized to gain title as King of Babylon, and whose hands the pretenders had seized to gain legitimacy for their rule and revolt, and carried it off to be melted down for bullion. When the priest of Esagila protested, he was killed.<sup>37</sup> Without the idol of Marduk, no pretender could so easily legitimize and claim divine sanction for his position. Since the worship of Marduk was centered at Esagila, the destruction of this temple and the idol, as well as other temples, severely inhibited the

<sup>31</sup> Herodotus 8.51-55.

<sup>32</sup> R. A. Parker and W. H. Dubberstein, *Babylonian Chronology 626 B.C.-A.D. 45* (Chicago 1942) 14.

<sup>33</sup> Olmstead, *op. cit.*, 236.

<sup>34</sup> Ctesias, *Pers.* 13, Epit. 52 = 688FGrHist 13 (26); Aelian *Var. Hist.* 13.3.

<sup>35</sup> August 482 B.C.; see Olmstead, *op. cit.*, 236.

<sup>36</sup> Arrian 7.17.2; 3.16.4.

<sup>37</sup> Herodotus 1.183.

worship of Marduk. As Lewy notes,<sup>38</sup> the Jews were affected by this action against priests and temples and compared the acts of Xerxes to Nebuchadnezzar's destruction of their own temple. In the *Book of Tobit* Ἀσώηρος (Xerxes) was labelled a destroyer of Nineveh, while in *Daniel* 70 Bel's image is destroyed by the "King of Babylon".

Many unanswered questions remain about the *Book of Esther* in regard to its origins, composition and literary merits, but it is beyond the scope of this paper to delve into these aspects.<sup>39</sup> What has emerged from this paper is the following: The *Book of Esther* is set in the reign of Xerxes, who was heavily committed to Zoroastrianism of an orthodox variety and who reversed the practice of religious tolerance of his predecessors. He destroyed the main idol of Bel Marduk, the temple of Marduk, Esagila, and many other Mardukian temples. There was a temple of Ishtar and certainly worshippers of Marduk in Susa at this time. Xerxes' hostile policy toward Marduk and subsequent destruction of temples were motivated both by religious attitudes and policies and by political as well as financial expediency.<sup>40</sup> Thus there is a very strong probability that the religious persecution referred to in the *Book of Esther* originally was not Persian against Jews, but Persians against the worshippers of Marduk during the reign of Xerxes.

<sup>38</sup> Lewy, *op. cit.*, 149.

<sup>39</sup> For the best general treatment of the *Book of Esther* see Bickerman (note 1 above).

<sup>40</sup> H. Winckler, *Altorientalische Forschungen* III 1 (1902) 4, thinks the name Haman is identical to that of the Persian god 𐎠𐎡𐎴𐎧, mentioned by Strabo. Though this would support my thesis, I feel no identification of Haman's name thus far is anything more than speculation. Benfrey and Scheffelowitz (as quoted in Lewy, *op. cit.*, 136) take the name to mean "offerer of Haoma is the drink of Mithra worship (though it was drunk by Xerxes' court). This derivation seems little more than speculation with little linguistic justification.