

The Book of Esther and the Dead Sea Scrolls' Community

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The Book of Esther and the Dead Sea Scrolls' Community*

I. Introduction

Among the bulk of about 800 manuscripts from the eleven caves of Qumran, which include approximately 200 Biblical manuscripts (the majority are partial copies), the book of Esther is completely missing.¹ There is not even one small fraction from 167 verses of the ten chapters of Esther to be found!² In contrast, the book of Ruth, comprised of only 85 verses, is almost half the length of Esther, yet six fragments from all four chapters of the book remain (2QRuth^a, 2QRuth^b, 4QRuth^a, 4QRuth^b).³ From the book of Lamentations, comprised of five chapters only, four fragments were discovered at Qumran (3QLam, 4QLam, 5QLam^a, 5QLam^b).

* This study is based on a lecture that was delivered at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Professors of Hebrew (Toronto, Ontario), on November 25, 2002; and at The Samuel Rosenthal Center for Judaic Studies at Case Western Reserve University, on October 29, 2003. I would like to thank Professors M.M. Caspi, Z. Garber and P.J. Haas for their kind invitations.

¹ This is also the case with the book of Nehemiah, unless we assume that this book was combined with the book of Ezra (as it was considered, indeed, by many other sources later on, see I. Kalimi, *Zur Geschichtsschreibung des Chronisten* [BZAW 226], Berlin / New York 1995, 7-8 note 26; idem, *The Book of Chronicles – Historical Writing and Literary Devices* [BEL 18], Jerusalem 2000, 9 note 28 [Hebrew]), from which three fragments have been found (see below).

² See S. White Crawford, *Has Esther been Found at Qumran? 4Qproto-Esther and the Esther Corpus*, RdQ 17 (1996) 307-325 esp. 307, 325; Esther, the Book of (idem), *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls* 1, Oxford 2000, 269-270.

³ The fragments that survived are: Ruth 1,1-12; 1,6.12-15; 2,13-23; 3,1-8.13-18; 4,3-4; altogether 48 verses, some of them duplicates.

II. Why the Book of Esther is Absent from the Dead Sea Scrolls?

Since a complete edition of texts from the Judean Desert is now available,⁴ the claim that a fragment of Esther may yet be found is no longer acceptable. It is also hard to suppose that the absence of Esther from among hundreds of Dead Sea Scrolls is simply circumstantial or accidental⁵ rather than a reflection of the Essenes' attitude towards the book. It seems, therefore, that in the Qumran community the book of Esther was not considered as a holy and authoritative Scripture. Thus, the book generally was neither studied nor used in the community's liturgy (though authors of some works from Qumran were presumably familiar with Esther's tale).⁶ Consequently, there was no necessity to copy the book at all, and therefore there are no archaeological remnants. Needless to say that the book of Esther was not a subject of *peshet* (i.e., commentary) by the Essene sectarians of Qumran, as were some other Biblical books.⁷ In contrast, for instance, 39 manuscripts with thousands of verses were found in Qumran from the book of Psalms,⁸ and it was a theme of *peshet* – both clear-cut evidence for the book's popularity in the Qumran community.

It is striking that in contrast to the absence of the book of Esther among the Dead Sea Scrolls, there have been found many fragments of it in the Cairo Genizah, more than any other Biblical composition, aside from the Torah. There is undisputable evidence for broad liturgical and educational usage of the book in the old Ben Ezra synagogue (built in 882 CE) of Fostat-Cairo's Jewish community.⁹

⁴ See E. Tov (with collaboration of S.J. Pfann), *The Dead Sea Scrolls on Microfiche, Companion Volume – A Comprehensive Facsimile Edition of the Texts from the Judean Desert*, Leiden 1993.

⁵ This possibility expressed recently, once again, by J. Magness, *The Archaeology of Qumran and the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Grand Rapids / Cambridge 2002, 34.

⁶ For this assumption, see S. Talmon, *Was the Book of Esther Known at Qumran?* *ErIs* 25 (J. Aviram Volume) 1996, 377-382 (Hebrew), and there references to earlier bibliography. See also White Crawford, *Has Esther been Found at Qumran?*, 307-325; idem, *Esther, the Book of*, 269-270.

⁷ Thus, Psalms (1Q16; 4Q171; and 4Q173), Isaiah (3Q4; 4Q161-165), and some books of the Minor Prophets such as Hosea (4Q166-167), Micah (1Q14), Nahum (4Q169), Habakkuk (1QpHab), and Zephaniah (1Q15; 4Q170).

Similar situations to those of the book of Esther should be said concerning the book of Chronicles from which has been found in Qumran one tiny fragment only! See, in detail, I. Kalimi, *History of Interpretation: The Book of Chronicles in Jewish Tradition – From Daniel to Spinoza*, RB 105 (1998) 5-41 esp. 19-22.

⁸ See P.W. Flint, *The Dead Sea Psalms Scrolls and the Book of Psalms* (StTDJ 17), Leiden / New York / Köln 1997. For the index of the passages from the book of Psalms, see E.C. Ulrich, *An Index of the Passages in the Biblical Manuscripts from the Judean Desert. Part 2: Isaiah-Chronicles*, *Dead Sea Discoveries* 2 (1995) 86-107 esp. 98-104.

There is no positive evidence that expresses the position of any member of Qumran community towards Esther. Yet, several assumptions have been made about the absence of Esther at Qumran.¹⁰ For example, the community may have rejected the book because of lack of any religious features, particularly since the Hebrew Text ignores God's name altogether. However, this assumption is seriously challenged by the fact that the Song of Songs also does not mention God's name anywhere;¹¹ yet there were four fragments of Canticles uncovered at Qumran (6QCant, 6QCant^a, 6QCant^b, 6QCant^c).¹² Other scholars presumed that the Qumran sect refrained from using the book of Esther in their liturgy since they had already established a calendar of 364 days, divided accordingly by weeks. Thus, the same date always fell on the same day of the week, so that the Feast of Purim always fell on Sabbath.¹³ Since Purim was excluded from their liturgical calendar there was no need for a book. More likely, however, the Essenes rejected the book of Esther because they objected to a young beautiful Jewess (Esther) who was a concubine and later on a wife/queen of a non-Jewish king (Ahasuerus). This was considered a violation of the Pentateuchal law concerning intermarriages with the Canaanites (as well as with the Ammonites and Moabites),¹⁴ which was extended during the Second Commonwealth to include non-Jews in general. The Qumranic community strictly followed the commandment of the Torah as it

⁹ See S.C. Reif, *A Jewish Archive from Old Cairo – The History of Cambridge University's Genizah Collection*, Richmond 2000, 190.225; idem (ed.), *The Cambridge Genizah Collections – Their Contents and Significances* (Cambridge University Library Genizah Series 1), Cambridge 2002, 24.34.155.

¹⁰ For a brief survey of the various opinions, see C.A. Moore, *Esther – Translated with an Introduction and Notes* (AncB 7b), Garden City NY 1971, xxi-xxii; White Crawford, *Esther, the Book of*, 269.

¹¹ Thus, Meinhold's statement that Esther is the only Biblical book that does not mention God's name יהוה is inaccurate. See *Esther/Estherbuch* (A. Meinhold). RGG 2, Tübingen 41999, 1594-1597 esp. 1596.

¹² The ending יי of the hapax legomenon שלֵהבתִּיה in The Song of Songs 8,6 is not an abbreviated form of God's name (contra W. Rudolph, *Das Buch Ruth. Das Hohe Lied. Die Klagelieder* [KAT 17,1-3] Gütersloh 1962, 179-180: «Jahweflammen»; New Jerusalem Bible, Garden City, NY 1985, 1040: «a flame of Yahweh himself»). Rather it is a third feminine singular pronominal suffix (referring to אֶהְבֶּהָ), or a sort of superlative (see D. Winton Thomas, *A Consideration of Some Unusual Ways of Expressing the Superlative in Hebrew*, VT 3 [1953] 209-224 esp. 221), and should be translated as: «a blazing flame» (Jewish Publication Society Hebrew-English Tanakh, Philadelphia 31999, 1739), or «a raging flame» (New Revised Standard Version, Oxford 1989, 697). G. Gerleman, *Ruth. Das Hohelied* (BKAT 1), Neukirchen-Vluyn 1965, 216, translated it as: «eine gewaltige Flamme». On p. 217, Gerleman expounds: «sehr wahrscheinlich [יִי, I.K.] ein Intensivsuffix ist. מְאֻפֵּלִיָּה <tiefes Dunkel> (Intensivform von מְאֻפֵּל) ... In ähnlicher Weise scheint שלֵהבתִּיה eine Intensivform von שִׁלְהֶבֶת zu sein, also <eine mächtige Flamme>».

¹³ See R. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church*, Grand Rapids 1985, 292.

¹⁴ See Ex 34,16; Deut 7,3; 23,4-5 and cf. also Josh 23,7-13; I Kgs 11,1-2.

is expounded and conceptualized in the books of Ezra and Jubilees (Ezra 9-10; Jub 30,7-10). These books strongly opposed any sort of intermarriage with gentiles. Jubilees 30,7-10, for instance, states:

«And if there is any man in Israel who wishes to give his daughter or his sister to any man who is from the seed of the gentiles, let him surely die, and let him be stoned because he has caused shame in Israel. And also the woman will be burned with fire because she has defiled the name of her father's house and so she will be uprooted from Israel. And do not let an adulteress or defilement be found in Israel all of the days of the generations of the earth because Israel is holy to the Lord. And let any man who causes defilement surely die, let him be stoned because thus it is decreed and written in the heavenly tablets concerning all of the seed of Israel: «Let anyone who causes defilement surely die. And let him be stoned». And there is no limit of days for this law. And there is no remission or forgiveness except that the man who caused defilement of his daughter will be rooted out from the midst of all Israel because he has given some of his seed to Molech and sinned so as to defile it.»¹⁵

Indeed, it is noteworthy to mention that alongside the Torah (and other scriptures), the books of Ezra and Jubilees were popular in Qumran. Three fragments from Ezra have been found in Qumran (4QEzra), and from Jubilees, no less than fourteen or fifteen manuscripts!¹⁶ Moreover, the book of Jubilees had a great influence on the Qumran community, and perhaps was accepted also as containing «divine, authoritative revelations».¹⁷

In the Dead Sea scrolls there is no evidence neither for a list of sacred authoritative inclusive holy books (which anachronistically could be called «canonical books»), or for a list of exclusive books. However, since the book of Jubilees is represented in Qumran with an impressive number of copies, and since it was quoted as a scripture (in the Damascus Document), may we be allowed to presume that it was included among the authoritative scriptures' collection of the community. On the other hand, since the book of Esther does not appear in the Qumranic library and is not cited as scripture and was not a theme for *peshet*, it was probably excluded from the sacred authoritative scriptures' collection of the community's library. In other words, did the

¹⁵ See O.S. Wintermute, Jubilees – A New Translation and Introduction, in: J.H. Charlesworth (ed.), *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, New York / London / Toronto / Sydney / Auckland 1985, vol. II, 112-113. Compare A. Rofé, *Introduction to the Historical Literature of the Hebrew Bible*, Jerusalem 2001, 111 (Hebrew).

¹⁶ For the index of the passages from the book of Ezra, see Ulrich, *An Index of the Passages in the Biblical Manuscripts*, 107. For the book of Jubilees, see J.C. VanderKam, *Jubilees, Book of*, *Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Oxford 2000, vol. 1, 435. In an earlier entry VanderKam speaks about twelve manuscripts only, see *Jubilees, Book of* (idem), *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 3, New York / London / Toronto / Sydney / Auckland 1992, 1030-1032 esp. 1030.

¹⁷ See, for instance, J.C. VanderKam, *The Jubilees Fragments from Qumran Cave 4*, in: J. Treballe Barrera and L. Vegas Montaner (eds.), *The Madrid Qumran Congress: Proceedings of the International Congress on the Dead Sea Scrolls*, Madrid 18-21 March, 1991, Leiden 1992, vol. 2, 635-648 esp. 648. For the citation, see J.C. VanderKam, *Authoritative Literature in the Dead Sea Scrolls*, *Dead Sea Discoveries* 5 (1998) 400-402.

Qumranic sectarians have simply a different sort of what we call «canon» than the later Hebrew canon, a «canon» which was guided by different norms and theological criteria?

Now, the marriage of Boaz and Ruth the Moabitess is not in accordance with the law in Deut 23,4-5 that forbade marriages with the Ammonites and Moabites. Ruth and Boaz's marriage is called into question by Ezra 9-10; Neh 13,23-27 and Jub 30,7-10.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the book of Ruth was accepted by the Qumranic sectarians while the book of Esther was not accepted. The acceptance of Ruth by the sect was, presumably, due to her «conversion into Judaism» (Ruth 1,16-18), while Ahasuerus remained gentile. Moreover, they probably interpreted the Deuteronomistic verses concerning the Moabites and Ammonites in reference to males only rather than to males and females, similarly to the rabbinic interpretation later on.¹⁹ Acceptance of the book of Ruth was needed since Ruth was considered the ancestress of King David (Ruth 4,18-22; I Chr 2,11-15). Indeed, David's portrait in the Dead Sea Scrolls developed even more than in the Hebrew Bible, «as Psalmist, and as a messianic figure whose throne and kingdom will last ever».²⁰

Esther's marriage to the gentile Ahasuerus was not the only transgression of this Jewess. When Mordecai urged her to act on behalf of her nation, she requested: «Go, gather all the Jews that are present in Shushan, and fast for me, and neither eat nor drink three days, night and day» (Esth 4,16). Now, since Haman's decree to persecute the Jews has been written on the thirteenth day of the first month (Esth 3,12), and assuming that Mordecai knew about the decree on the same day or even a day after, it means that Esther ordered the Jews of Shushan to fast on Passover. In other words, she ordered Jews to abstain from eating *mazot* (= unleavened bread) on the fifteenth day of the first month and celebrate the holiday in accordance with the Torah commandment (Ex 12,14-20; 34,18; Lev 23,5-8; Num 28,16-18; Deut 16,1-8). These obvious deliberate violations of Torah laws, though it was an urgent situation, could not be tolerated by the Essenes, as they could not tolerate her marriage with a gentile, although she was taken to the king's house against her will (Esth 2,8a). Presumably, this community believed that Esther should call Jews to fast after Passover, as she should have resisted marriage to the king,

¹⁸ For the purpose and time of the composition of the book of Ruth, see for example, Gerleman, Ruth. Das Hohelied, 7-8; R. Rendtorff, The Old Testament – An Introduction, Philadelphia 1991, 259-260; T. Linfelt, Ruth (Brit Olam), Collegeville 1999, xvii-xx.

¹⁹ See Babylonian Talmud, Yebamoth 76b: מואבית ולא מואבית, מואבית ולא מואבית, «An Ammonite, but not an Ammonitess; a Moabite, but not a Moabitess». See also Midrash Ruth Rabbah 2,9.

²⁰ See P.W. Flint, David, Encyclopedia of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Oxford 2000, vol. 1, 178-180 esp. 180.

even if she would have paid with her life for it. This attitude, however, is completely opposite to that of the rabbis.²¹

III. Conclusion

This study introduces one of the most aggravated problems in Qumran scholarship, namely the absence of the book of Esther among the manuscripts. It critically reviews variety of proposes by scholars and suggests that Esther (but not Ruth) was unacceptable since it included: (a) intermarriage between the Jewess Esther and the gentile Ahasuerus; (b) by asking the Jews to fast on the thirteenth day of the month Nisan for three days, Esther was asking Jews to fast on Passover and to abstain from eating the unleavened bread and celebrating the holiday. These clear cut transgressions of Esther means, as a matter of fact, that either Esther did not know about the existence of the Torah at all or she knew the Torah's laws but preferred to ignore its divine commandments. Both cases are far beyond the very fundamental theological principles of the members of the Qumran community who built their entire life around the Torah commandments.

Nevertheless, the absence of the book of Esther altogether from among the Dead Sea Scrolls cannot be a model representing the general attitude of the Jews towards the book. One must keep in mind that the whole community of Qumran was comprised of, most probably, no more than several hundred members!²² This small isolated Jewish community was, as a matter of fact, a marginal minority among the Jewish people at the late Commonwealth era. The majority of Jewish people, however, had a very different approach towards this fascinating book.²³

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²¹ See Babylonian Talmud, Megillah 15a; Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, 49 (M. Higger, Pirke Rabbi Eliezer, Horeb 10 [1948] 243 [Hebrew]; English translation: G. Friedlander, Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer, ²New York 1965, 401 [here it appears under chapter 50]).

²² This assumption is based generally on the archaeological remains at Qumran. As of today, the exact number in the Qumranic community is unknown. Yet, what is known is that the cemeteries of the community hold about eleven hundred tombs. These, however, served the community for over two hundred years. Unfortunately, Roland de Vaux, who excavated the site, never published the final report of the data. See J. C. VanderKam, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Today*, Grand Rapids 1994, 14-15.

²³ For the position of the book of Esther in Judaism, see I. Kalimi, *The Place of the Book of Esther in Judaism and Jewish Theology*, ThZ 59 (2003) 193-204.