Introduction

Ever since the inclusion of the book of Esther in the biblical canon two thousand years ago, there have been those who have asked what place such a work can have in the Bible at all. Their question must be well taken, for at first glance Esther appears to be something very different from what we usually consider to be "biblical." Esther is a tale of kings and queens and evil grand viziers that cannot help but strike one as a romance or a fairy story. Nowhere in its ten terse chapters can one find the cascading moral imperatives of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and even less in evidence are the sober laws of Moses. The term "God" appears nowhere, and one is hard-pressed to find any trace of theology amid the hairpin turns of the tale. Moreover, the Jewish heroes of the story seem to display little piety and negligible concern for Jewish law: Mordechai the Jew guides and advises his cousin, Hadasa, as she hides her heritage, marries a non-Jewish potentate, and, in a realm apparently rife with anti-Semitism, presumably gives up on any aspect of Jewish observance that would betray her past so that she may remain in the royal palace. The book even refers to the young Jewish heroine by the Persian name of Esther, meaning "star" – and the stars were themselves part of the cult of idolatry in Persia – a fact that cannot but suggest assimilation and capitulation to the surrounding civilization.

Yet for all this, when the rabbis of the Talmudic period looked back across Jewish history, seeking to grant it coherence and permanence by assembling its teachings into a canon, they ascribed great significance to Esther as a work concerned with themes relevant to the conclusion of the Bible. Indeed, when the rabbis spoke of the giving of the *tora* to the Jewish people, they argued that it had been accepted not once but twice: Once at Sinai at the beginning of the Bible, and then again at the end, in the time of Esther.[1] And when they considered the eternity of the Bible's teachings, they asserted that there were

two portions of Scripture that could never be abolished, the books of Moses and the book of Esther.[2] And while they taught that the other parts of the Bible could bring an understanding of piety, wisdom, consolation, and greatness, it was only the book of Esther that they thought offered the key to the miraculous.[3] To the rabbis, this little story of persecution and court intrigue was something precious, powerful, and exceedingly important.[4] It was a writing thought worthy of being the Bible's closing words to man – in a sense, God's last words to man.[5]

To begin unraveling the riddle of Esther's meaning, we must first recognize that Esther is a book about exile. That is, unlike most of the other works of the Bible, which depict the Jews in their efforts to come to the land of Israel and build a Jewish nation there, Esther describes a world in which the Jews are distant from their land, their tradition, and their God. When sovereign in the land of Israel, the Jews are confronted directly with questions of national morality: how to govern justly, how to obtain security and peace, how to establish the pious and good society in the face of the terrible obstacles encountered by any realistic appraisal of the proclivities and aptitudes of men. But in Israel, the Jews at least have the advantage of sovereign authority: The government may muster vast material resources and promulgate laws in the service of the public interest; the intellectual leaders may freely study, teach, and write in the pursuit of truth; and the leaders of the spirit may go about inculcating a love of justice and peace among the people. In sum, when sovereign in their own land, the Jews at least possess the power needed to determine and implement an ideal according to their own lights, whether they choose to make appropriate use of this power or not. And it is no coincidence, either, that it was when the Jews possessed this power, living on the land and fighting for it, that they also found themselves directly confronted by their God.

In exile, whether in ancient Persia or in a more contemporary one, Jewish life must somehow persist without the immense resources made available by independent, sovereign power. In exile, the Jews must live in dispersion, their institutions weak, their concerns wandering far from Jewish things, and their politics alienated from every obvious source of cohesiveness, direction, and strength. It is clear at the outset that under such conditions, there is no possibility of freely seeking and implementing any Jewish ideal. To live in a society ruled by others means that the government and the laws are not the product of a Jewish concern for the general public interest, and that they are certainly not the result of an interest in the well-being of the Jews as a nation; that Jewish intellectual endeavors are under constant pressure, whether overt or implicit, to conform to alien norms; and that Jewish leadership, if it is capable and effective, is perpetually viewed with a certain measure of suspicion and even fear – both by the community of non-Jews,

and by members of the Jewish community concerned that Jewish success may be interpreted by the gentiles as a challenge to their authority. Thus exile, while never precluding entirely the possibility of Jewish power, nevertheless establishes a formidable presumption against it – a presumption that has ominous theological echoes in the fact that even the most devout come to feel that the way has been lost, and begin to speak, as though in winter, of God having "hidden his face" from his people.[6]

It is to such a setting that we are introduced in the book of Esther. Never before have the Jews experienced anything like it, unless it was in Egypt, a thousand years earlier. Persia is an archetypal oriental tyranny in which the peoples live by grace of the despot's wishes, and in which the physical survival of the Jews implicitly remains an open question, even when, as at the beginning of the tale, the waters seem untroubled. Under these circumstances, the narrative of Esther is faithful to the tenor of the times, seeming to bypass issues of theology and religious observance to cope with the more burning issue of the actual physical survival of the Jews. For this reason, the book of Esther deals first and foremost with the problem of a Jewish politics in exile: how the Jews, deprived of every sovereign institution of power, may nevertheless participate in, and in the last resort make use of, the authority of an alien government to ensure their own vital interests, and in this case their lives. Esther offers its readers a choice between two antithetical conditions – the one being a nightmare of impotence, in which "it was written … in the name of Ahashverosh the king … to annihilate, to kill and to destroy all Jews, the young and the elderly, children and women, in one day," and there is nothing to be done; and the other, in which Mordechai the Jew rises to a position of great power with the ability to act in defense of the Jews, being, as it says in the closing chapter, "second to Ahashverosh the king, … seeking the good of his people and speaking peace to all his descendants." The nature of this utterly political choice – and how it is to be made in practice – is the principal concern and teaching of the book of Esther.

At the same time, Esther also moves to assert itself against another, more subtle opponent, one that had loomed over Persian Jewry for years before Haman had plotted against them. Persia in Esther's time is a cosmopolitan world empire, offering success and wealth to those among the Jewish exiles who will give up on the past and play by its rules. In Persia, as elsewhere, the Jews begin to disappear into the fabric of the empire, some of them changing their names and their attire, and arguing with self-confidence against the possibility and desirability of a continuation to Jewish history. What argument can be made as against these, to a defeated and dispirited Jewry, scattered to the corners of the world and no longer privy to the word of God? In making its political argument, the narrative of Esther consciously responds on these

historical, religious, and theological battlegrounds as well, offering answers that are among the most daring, and ultimately the most successful, in Jewish history.

Yet these deadly serious messages tend to be lost when the book is read today. Its association with the activities now surrounding the festival of Purim, the Feast of Esther, has rendered such themes obscure, since Esther is seldom read in a context in which it may be taken seriously on its own terms. As a consequence, many read the book only in a cursory fashion, believing that the plot pivots on "coincidence" or "luck." But a closer examination reveals that there are no coincidences in the tale: The political events leading to the salvation of the Jews of Persia are planned by Mordechai and Esther, and come to succeed by virtue of their shrewd understanding of the principles of politics, their courage, and their faith in the face of an apparently godless world. How these elements can work to produce the greatest of political events, in which "the enemies of the Jews hoped to rule them, but the situation reversed itself and it was the Jews who asserted rule over their enemies," is the true tale of Esther, whose teachings demand our attention and our interest so many centuries later.

PART I

ESTHER 1.1–1.22

It came to pass in the days of Ahashverosh, the same Ahashverosh who reigned from India to Ethiopia, over 127 provinces, [2]in the days when Ahashverosh the king sat on his royal throne, which was in Susa the capital. [3]In year 3 of his reign he made a feast for all his princes and his servants, the military power of Persia and Media, the nobles and princes of the provinces being before him, [4]during which he displayed the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honor of his excellent majesty for many days – 180 days.

[5]When these days had run their course, the king made a feast for all the people present in Susa the capital, from the highest to the most lowly, lasting seven days in the court, in the garden of the king's palace. [6]There were hangings of white, of fine cotton, and blue, suspended with cords of fine linen and purple from silver rods and marble columns, divans of gold and silver on a floor of alabaster, marble, pearl, and precious stone. [7]And drinks in vessels of gold, and vessels, each one differing from the others, and the royal wine aplenty, from the hand of the king. [8]And the drinking was in accord with the law that none should be compelled, for so the king had instructed all the officers of his house, that they should do according to each man's will.

[9]Vashti the queen made a feast for the women as well, in the royal house of Ahashverosh the king. [10]On the seventh day, when the heart of the king was merry with wine, he commanded Mehuman, Bizeta, Harvona, Bigta and Avagta, Zetar, and Karkas, the seven chamberlains who served in the presence of Ahashverosh the king, [11]to bring Vashti the queen before the king wearing the royal crown,

to show the peoples and the princes her beauty, for she was fair to look upon. [12]But Vashti the queen refused to come at the king's command as communicated by the chamberlains, and the king was exceedingly angered, and his rage burned within him.

[13]The king turned to his advisers, who understood the precedents, for such was the king's habit before all who knew law and judgment – [14]those who were close to him being Karshena, Shetar, Admata, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memuchan, the seven princes of Persia and Media, who saw the king's face, and who sat first in the kingdom –

[15]"According to the law, what should be done to Vashti the queen, who has not performed the word of the king as communicated by the chamberlains?"

[16]Memuchan said to the king and the princes: "It is not the king alone who has been wronged by Vashti the queen, but all the princes, and all the peoples in all the provinces of Ahashverosh the king. [17]For this deed of the queen will become known to all the women, and their husbands will become contemptible in their eyes, when they tell: Ahashverosh the king commanded that Vashti the queen be brought before him but she came not. [18]And this day, the princesses of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's deed will be telling it to all the king's princes, and there will be much contempt and anger. [19]If it please the king, let a royal decree be issued, and let it be written among the laws of Persia and Media, so that it should not fail, that Vashti come no more before Ahashverosh the king, and let the king give her royal estate to someone better than she. [20]And when the king's edict, which he will issue, is heard throughout his entire kingdom, vast though it be, all the wives will give honor to their husbands, from the highest to the most lowly."

[21]The idea pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memuchan advised. [22]He sent letters to all the king's provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language, that every man should rule in his own house and speak in the language of his own people.

I

Submission and Rule

Esther begins with a party in which Ahashverosh, king of Persia,[1] entertains his princes and legions, drinks himself into a tantrum, fights with his wife the queen, consults with his advisers, and then has his consort humiliated and deposed. The whole sordid scene takes place without mention of the Jews or of their enemies, the subject of the book of Esther, so that one has to ask why the narrative should not have begun with the second chapter or even with the third, when the plot against the Jews breaks into the open. It was this question that moved the rabbis of the Talmud to argue that the Jews of the capital must have been present at the feast, and that something that took place there – either the misbehavior of the king toward the Jews, or their own misbehavior – must have served as the provocation that triggers their subsequent persecution.[2] But the purpose of the party in the book of Esther is not to add to an otherwise dense plot. It is to acquaint us with its host and with the manner in which he rules his empire. It is this empire that inherited those who destroyed the kingdom of the Jews. Dispersed in its midst live their remnant. And one cannot understand what has become of them there, nor whom they will have to fight and why, nor the dangers before them, nor the greatness of their triumph, without first understanding Ahashverosh and his party, and the appetite for rule that throbs there drunk among the revelers from a hundred lands, so that the rabbis said that the Satan danced there himself.[3]

Ahashverosh is the ruler of most of civilization, from Ethiopia to India, and one might think that his time would be taken up with the responsibilities of governing more than a hundred provinces, or of securing them against external threats. Nevertheless, Esther begins by informing us that by the third year of his reign, the principal concern to which he dedicates himself is an ongoing carnival of drinking, which occupies the attention of the political, military, and administrative elite of the empire for no less than six months. Moreover, even

the lowest of commoners is given the run of the palace for a week of popular merrymaking, in which they have the chance of a lifetime to drink "royal wine aplenty, from the hand of the king," out of gold vessels, in surroundings of marble and pearl, no less (1.6–7).

The point of this venture is hardly altruism. Ahashverosh pointedly seeks to display "the riches of his glorious kingdom and the honor of his excellent majesty" (1.4) – that is, to create a setting in which the entire empire can see the immense financial and administrative power that he, the king, can muster and dissipate at whim. This is a setting in which gratitude and flattery are lavished upon him from every corner of the empire, a show calculated to heap honor on him, and to create the impression, in the eyes of his subjects, as well as his own, that he is in control of the world.[4]

When we try to understand this Ahashverosh, we have no choice but to suspect that the empire has not yet been suitably impressed with his virtues as a leader – for if he had governed well, there would be little need for such grotesquerie to ensure the people's affections.[5] Yet in the absence of genuine rule, and of actual control over his millions of subjects, he is immensely concerned with the appearance of such rule and of such control. To be more precise, it is the *feeling* of control that he desires. For rule is an appetite, and power is a hunger, which the rabbis compared to a crocodile that would consume the world, and into which one could throw country after country and yet not sate it.[6] Ahashverosh is a glutton for power in an empire that is sick with the yearning to extend itself, to swallow others, to control everything. Lacking the talents to secure such power through political prowess and actual leadership, Ahashverosh believes he can move toward the same end by bribing his empire with profligacy and drink. In holding this belief, he is, of course, neither the first nor the last.

The contemporary reader, immersed in the materialism and in the exaggerated estimation of the capacities of human reason that characterize our age, has a difficult time recognizing who and what this Ahashverosh is. We now tend to assume that men are motivated by self-interest, and that reason for the most part suffices to get along with our neighbors and to feed the small stable of our occasionally unruly physical appetites. Absent, on this theory, is any motive for wanting to rule others. And good men, or even most men, are therefore supposed to have no such desire for rule, while the few who are undeniably preoccupied with such things are conveniently considered abnormal. Behavior such as that displayed by Ahashverosh is usually interpreted as a "mistaken" pursuit of "rational self-interest" – as though he and his advisers had reasoned it through and concluded that spending the taxes of the empire in this way would be more prudent than the pursuit of other policy options – without the possibility arising that there might be nothing rational in his motives whatsoever.

Yet this last is precisely the case. The key to the motives of the king lies in recognizing that he is neither rationally self-interested nor, as we see again and again, particularly concerned with the more material desires for money, food, or sexual gratification. The king appears in Esther as a representation of something else, something we are unaccustomed to recognizing in ourselves and others: the appetite for rule, the essential ingredient in the character of every ruler, in this case unenlightened, unchanneled, and unrestrained.

It is worth considering the appetite for rule and control more closely, the better to understand this king and all others. The desire for rule – which the philosophers called *thymos*, and the Jews knew as man's *ruah*, or "spirit" – is a primary aspect of man's nature, the first quality mentioned in the books of Moses with respect to mankind: "God said: Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and they will rule over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the skies, and over the cattle, and over all the earth."[7] Every person at all times strives to rule and control that which comprises his world: to find everything in its place as expected; to find his hungers soothed; to find that his friends are trustworthy, his wife faithful, his children obedient; to find others willing to do his bidding; to find those beliefs he holds confirmed and those causes to which he subscribes victorious; to find that his superiors are solicitous, and his opponents, if not utterly vanquished, at least held harmlessly at bay. Such a world is one in which he may move with unlimited freedom, unobstructed and unchallenged, a world of perfect stability and security, physical and emotional. Such a world is a fantasy, but it is one for which man strives from the day he is born, as surely as he strives for physical sustenance. As the appetite for food drives him toward his supper, so too does the appetite for control drive man to rule his world, or if he cannot, to find someone who can rule it in his place and provide him with the stability for which he yearns.[8]

Like all desires, the appetite for rule serves a crucial and life-sustaining purpose when it is held within bounds. It is the spirit that urges that the uncertain, threatening, and challenging be made certain, benign, and beneficial. Every healthy person experiences the tides of the spirit in some measure: self-confidence, dedication, enthusiasm, magnanimity, and a sense of purpose when control and rule are at hand; anger, fear, jealousy, guilt, and aimless depression when they are lost. Together, these feelings map the boundaries between that which has already been achieved and that which has not, allowing man to build his life from one achievement to the next, driving him to extend the frontiers of the controlled, of that which is as it "should" be: to invest in shelter for winter, to resolve a difficult problem, to uncover a lost object, to master an elusive skill, to invent a much-needed device, to excel in one's profession, to win a recalcitrant love, to save a drowning child, to defend against a threat to one's life, to right injustice.

And there are also men of exceptional spirit, in whose soul all of these passions and more appear not so much as events but as cataclysms, as eruptions of sensation, direction, and strength, and who are capable for this reason of achievements on a scale that others can hardly imagine. In this regard, the Bible speaks of "men of spirit" – administrators such as Joseph, warriors such as Caleb and Joshua, and artists such as Betzalel, to name a few[9] – the most outstanding of individuals, whose tremendous desire for rule is directed by reason or the command of higher authority toward tasks of which only they are capable.[10] For in all things, greatness requires two characteristics: an exceptional spirit, which provides a man with the power, dedication, intensity, and boldness needed to control, to order, to achieve, and to build; and reason – whether that of superiors or advisers, or his own – which provides man with right and consistent aims toward which he can divert the power of the spirit.

When it is not so directed, however, the exceptional spirit becomes a monstrous growth, whose eruptions drive the individual in arbitrary or ill-conceived directions, consuming all that stands in its way without being of profit to anyone: A man will be an overly spirited fool, given over to excessive excitements regarding the objects of his desire, to childish dependence on those who pander to these fetishes, to paranoid overreactions at the slightest hint of weakening in his rule, and, above all, to uncontrollable humiliations and rages when he feels that he has lost control – which in turn lead him to every kind of desperate action to restore it. Such a man is Ahashverosh, king of Persia, who, for want of the feeling of power over others, devotes half a year of his life to filling the nobles and commoners of his empire with drink, showering them with gifts, and boasting to them of his wife, that they might better recognize his greatness.

And being such a man, Ahashverosh is the archetype of the political ruler: All spirit, he will do anything to feel that he has control over others. But having little reason of his own, he has no positive conception of what to do with this rule, applying the full force of his authority in whatever direction will make him feel most in control at a given moment. The result is that despite having vast powers at his disposal, and occasionally making forceful use of these powers, Ahashverosh is at all times reacting to the pressures and manipulation of those around him – as is the state itself.[11]

With this in mind, let us return to the king's party. In the entire stew of ostentation, excess, and flattery that comprises the description of the feast, perhaps the most interesting detail is the liberty that the king accords the merrymakers: "And the drinking was in accord with the law that none should be compelled, for so the king had instructed all the officers of his house, that they should do according to each man's will" (1.8). That the king had seen fit to issue such an order itself indicates how unusual it was for his government to concern itself with the will of his subjects. The presumption, of course, was