The Book of Esther: A Persian Story in Greek Style

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This study has shown the striking similarities between the representation of the Persian world and its practices in the Greek literature and in the Book of Esther. Furthermore, it has also shown that most episodes described in Esther's story look like episodes concerning characters that Greek literature situates in the Persian world. The college of lawyers consulted by Ahashverosh to decide on the future of his wife Vashti looks like the college that legislated on the marriage of Cambyses with his sister (Herodotus). The story of the Esther's ascending to the kingship makes her an other Aspasia (Aelian). Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman can be compared with the attitude of the two Spartans in front of Xerxes (Herodotus – Plutarch). The risk that Esther accepts to run in order to go to the King makes her one other Phaedyme (Herodotus); furthermore, she acts in the very same way as Parysatis when she manipulates the King and Haman (Ctesias). Haman's hanging can be compared with the torturing to death of many enemies of the Queens Amestris and Parysatis (Ctesias); and Pourim is not without similarities with the Persian Magophonia (Herodotus). In addition to these numerous similarities, we can add that the book of Esther uses several historiographical techniques, which are distinctive of Hellenistic literature. For example, like Herodotus and others, the authors of Esther were concerned with explaining exotic customs (2,12-14 and 4,11); they also mentioned or quoted alleged archives (Est. 9,11-13), and used terms and names with Persian consonance (in particular Est. 1,11.14). The large number of parallels that can be drawn between the book of Esther and the Hellenistic literature has no equivalence elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. To be sure, as regards general conceptions of history and geography as well as historiographical literary techniques, some connections do exist with Hellenistic historiographical literature elsewhere in the biblical literature. However, those connections are nowhere as significant as in Esther. Furthermore, within the biblical literature, very few stories can be found, which are really similar to the stories found in Greek literature. Thus, as regards connections with Hellenistic literature, Esther comprises a distinct book in the Hebrew Bible. In order to explain the parallels between Esther and the Greek texts and to preserve a dating for the redaction of Esther as ancient as possible, scholars argued that the same literary conventions about Persian world existed in the Greek world and in the Near East. However, considering the large number of parallels identified above, this solution seems less likely than the assumption of a direct influence of Greek writings on the authors of Esther. Literary conventions about Persia similar to those of the book of Esther are not attested in any writings that were composed outside the Hellenistic cultural influence. Furthermore, the dating of the book of Esther does not contradict a priori the possibility that the Greek literature influenced the authors of Esther, quite to the contrary. In fact, most scholars argue for a dating of Esther between the last part of the Persian period (4th century BCE) and the Hasmonean period (2nd - 1st century BCE). In my opinion, all the parallels between the Hellenistic literature and the book of Esther highlighted above are best accounted for if the authors of Esther were familiar with the Greek culture and literature. Even if they wrote in Hebrew, the Hellenistic literature was clearly the intellectual background of such authors. They knew the Greek way of life, and had probably read the Greek writings or at least had heard about the Greek stories. Thus, the authors of Esther were able to write a text like the book of Esther, which is very much in agreement with the Greek way of writing a Persian story. In order to create a story involving Judeans living in the Persian Empire, they resorted to major aspects of the Hellenistic culture in which they lived. Furthermore, they did not hesitate to use most episodes of Esther's story on the base of well known Persian stories composed by the Greek writers. In a way, the book of Esther can be viewed as a Hebrew equivalent of the «persicae» of Greek literature: a Persian story in Greek style. If the results of our analysis are correct, the following conclusions should be drawn. Regarding the meaning of the text and its underlying problematics, the fundamental questions already identified concerning Judean identity should be situated in the context of the dialogue and of the confrontation between Judean identity and the Hellenistic culture. By writing a novel about Persia in a way very similar to what a Greek would have been able to write (and read), the authors of the book establish two things. On one hand, that Judeans living in the Persian Empire did not act differently than well-educated Greek men or women (refusal to act as a Persian concubine, refusal to bow down in front of Persian King, acceptance of risking one's life to save one's own people etc.). Thus, the text shows that the Judeans had many values in common with the Hellenistic world where they lived. On the other hand, however, the book of Esther shows that when Jews live in an oppressive foreign empire they have to resist strongly to their enemies and have to defend their own values. This part of the argumentation can probably be understood as a warning against the possible abuses of power of the Hellenistic dominators, particularly when they became tyrannical. Regarding the dating and the historical context of production, the book of Esther was certainly written within a Judean circle significantly influenced by the Hellenistic culture. This kind of circles, which had access to some of the masterpieces of Greek historical literature, and were able to produce a book at the frontier between Greek and Judean way of thinking, never existed before the middle of the 3rd century BCE. They probably first appeared in the Judean diaspora living in the great cities of Egypt and of Syria. Later, during the Seleucid period, such circles gradually developed in the city of Jerusalem, as the latter became more and more Hellenized.
The Story of Esther. Long ago, in a country called Persia (Babylon), there was a king named Achashveyrosh (as known in Jewish His Persian name was Xerxes) and a queen named Vashti. King Achashveyrosh ordered his wife the queen to appear before him at a party so he could show everyone how pretty she was. When she refused, the king was furious. That same night the king could not sleep; so he ordered the book of the chronicles, the record of his reign, to be brought in and read to him. The book was turned to the day Mordecai exposed a plot to assassinate the King. The King was reminded of this tale and asked what reward Mordecai had received. The king's attendants told him that nothing had been done for Mordecai. The book of Esther is one of only two books in the Bible named for women. The other is the book of Ruth. In the story of Esther, you'll meet a beautiful, young queen who risked her life to serve God and save her people. Key Takeaways: Book of Esther. Queen Esther used her position as queen to rescue the Jewish people from destruction. The story of Esther forms the origin of the Jewish festival of Purim. The story of Esther takes place during the reign of King Xerxes I of Persia, primarily in the king's palace in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire. By this time (486-465 B.C.), more than 100 years after the Babylonian captivity under Nebuchadnezzar, and just over 50 years after Zerubbabel led the first group of exiles back to Jerusalem, many Jews still remained in Persia.