



*The lot (puru) of Iahali.*

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# The First **PURIM**

by William W. Hallo

**P**icture this: a new administration comes to town. It is headed by a man in whom the entire country places great confidence, for he promises not only to introduce vigorous new policies but also to appoint energetic, effective lieutenants. He selects these assistants from among the leading military, financial and religious figures of the country, thus both pleasing his constituents and securing his base of support. Am I alluding to Washington, D.C., in 1981 A.D.? Hardly! I am referring to Kalah, capital of Assyria, in 858 B.C.! At that time, some 2840 years ago, a new king became the third in the long succession of Assyrian monarchs to adopt the resounding throne-name of Salmaneser. Salmaneser III was destined for greatness: He reigned an almost unprece-

dentented thirty-five years (among his 100-odd predecessors, only seven are recorded as ruling longer than this); he extended the Assyrian borders by dint of nearly continuous conquests, carrying out a kind of manifest destiny that saw Assyrian arms push ever further westward; and he brought Assyria into its first direct conflict with the army of Israel at the battle of Qarqar in 853 B.C. (Hallo 1960: 37-41).

Yet before he could undertake all these great steps Salmaneser had to attend to some domestic business. Since its beginnings, Assyria used a peculiar calendar in which the years were designated, not by the number of a continuous era as in our own present system, nor by the regnal year of the current king, as in ancient Israel, nor even by an outstanding event of the

preceding year, as in early Babylonia, but rather by personal names. The roster began with the king himself, followed by the grandees he had selected to serve in his cabinet, and then by the governors of all the far-flung provinces of the empire (Pritchard 1969: 274).

The order in which the individual ministers and governors succeeded each other was determined (at least originally) by lot, and if a king lived long enough, each official could anticipate having his name immortalized in the calendar. Salmaneser III did even better. In the thirtieth year of his reign, he observed a kind of jubilee and, having run through the roster of his assistants, he started over again. The famous Black Obelisk with the latest edition of his annals indicates this process. The inscrip-

tion includes the records not only of his further military encounters with the western alliance (in the years 849, 848 and 845 B.C.), but also of the submission of Israel in 841 B.C. along with what is generally regarded as a relief of King Jehu prostrating himself before the Assyrian monarch—the first portrait of a historical figure from the Bible.<sup>1</sup> The text concludes: “In my thirty-first year (i.e., 828 B.C.), I cast the lot for the second time in front of the gods Ashur and Adad.” And at the same time his ministers cast lots to determine the order in which they would serve to name the years remaining to the long-lived king. (Schramm 1973: 95f. thinks the order was already fixed, but that the officials went through the motions anyway.)

By one of those rare chances that characterize archaeology the lot of one minister has survived. And not only has it survived, but it has been secured by the Yale Babylonian Collection, one of the world’s great repositories of cuneiform inscriptions. Because I have the privilege of caring for this Collection, I am able to show you this lot (or rather a cast of it) and to read it to you.

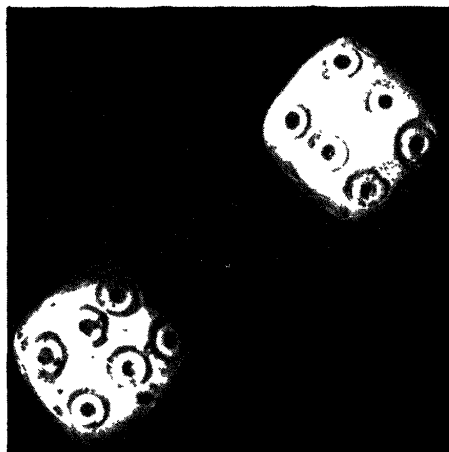
The lot is a simple little cube, inscribed on four sides. In the native Akkadian the text reads: *Ashshur bēlu rabū, Adad bēlu rabū, pūru sha Iahili abarakku rabū sha Shulmānu-asharid shar mat Ashshur, shakin mati al Kibshūni, mat Qumēni, mat Mehriani, mat Uqu, mat erinni, rabī kāri—inā limeshu pūrishu ebūr mat Ashshur lishir lidmiq, ina pan Ashshur Adad pūrushu liddā.* This may be translated: “Oh Assur the great lord, oh Adad the great lord, the lot of Iahali the grand vizier of Salmaneser king of Assyria, governor-of-the-land (for) the city of Kibshuni (in) the land of Qumeni, the land of Mehriani, Uqu and the Cedar Mountain, and minister of trade—in his year assigned to him by lot may the harvest of the land of Assyria prosper and thrive, in front of the gods Assur and Adad may his lot fall.” (Cf. Michel 1949: 261–64; for the latest transliteration and transla-

## By one of those rare chances that characterize archaeology, the lot of one minister has survived.

tion see Kessler 1980.<sup>2</sup>)

Quite a mouthful for this little object. But although the medium is unusual, the message is clear. The grand vizier Iahali appeals to two of the leading deities of the Assyrian pantheon as had his sovereign before him. And his prayer was granted—at least in part. We know that the fourth year of Salmaneser’s “second term” (like the 25th of his first) was named after Iahali. However, we cannot say that this fourth year was thriving or prosperous. In fact, Assyria was by then in revolt, and the great king died before the year was over. But Iahali himself survived, to serve the king’s son and successor as vizier or perhaps even as commander-in-chief (*tartānu rabū*; cf. KAV 75) and to give his name to yet another year, the new king’s third (821 B.C.).

While I do not want to turn this article into a lesson in Assyrian, two words or phrases from the little inscription are worth bearing in mind. The first is Iahali’s title,



Glass dice from Babylon.

*abarakku*, which I have loosely rendered by “(grand) vizier.” Of that more presently. The other is the concluding wish: “in front of the gods Assur and Adad may his lot fall.” Although the verb translated “to fall” is only partially preserved, its restoration is reasonably certain. The use of lots for a variety of legal and commercial purposes is well attested in every period of ancient Mesopotamian history, and the typical verb used in all these contexts, in Sumerian as well as in both dialects of Akkadian, is one of the many terms for “to fall” or “to throw.”

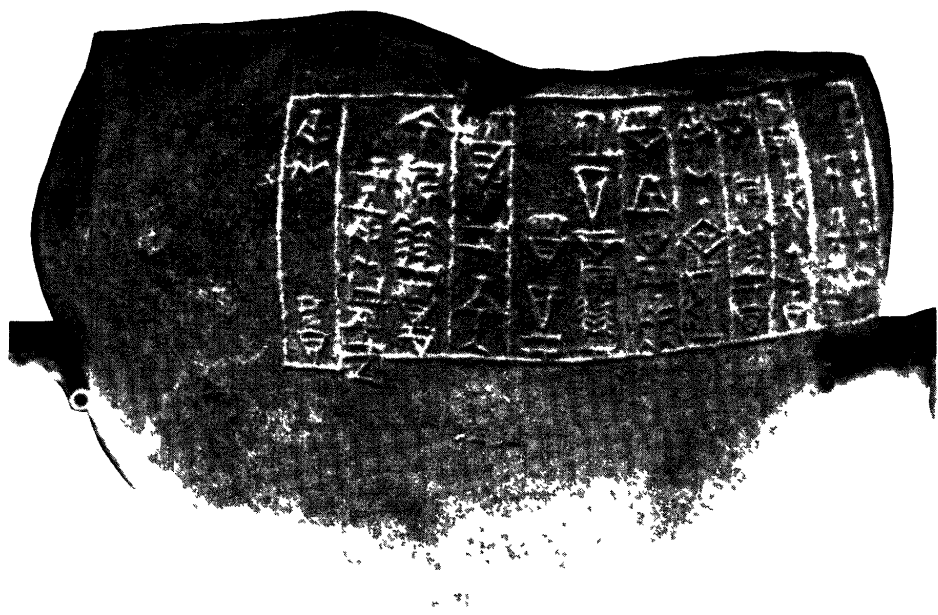
Thus, for example, it was customary in Babylonia, when a person died intestate, to divide the inheritance among the eligible heirs by lot. This was expressed in Sumerian as “they made the division (of the property) and cast lots (to distribute it)” (*i-ba-e-ne gishshub-ba i-shub-bu-ne*: CAD I 198d), and in the Babylonian dialect of Akkadian as either “they have cast lots, they have divided (the property)” (*isqa iddū zizū*: CAD I 199a and M 2:33b), or “the share that falls to him by lot” (*zittu isiqshu imaqqutu*: *ibid.*). One of the earliest Assyrian references, in the context of a commercial transaction, mentions that a salesman is instructed to “divide that merchandise into two (parts) and (thereafter) cause the lots to fall” (*pūri shashqitamma*; Lewy 1938). Finally, Salmaneser himself used still another synonym when he “cast the lot for the second time” (*shanūteshu pūru... akruru*: CAD K 209a).

All these parallels support the suggestion that our text too concluded with a form of the verb “to fall.” Moreover, these options offer a clue to the technique involved: Presumably the inscribed lots were thrown, either by their owners or by an impartial third party, and priority was established by the location in which they fell. In the case of Iahali, perhaps the lot which fell closest to the statues of the gods Assur and Adad took first place.

Another theory concerning the manner in which lots were cast

has been proposed by the dean of German Assyriologists, W. von Soden. He notes a revealing passage near the beginning of the Epic of Atrahasis, the earliest Babylonian story of the flood, which when put into English from his original German translation, reads approximately as follows: "The gods seized the lot-bottle by its neck, cast the lot, and divided (the universe)" (*kūtam ihuzu lētisha/isqam iddū ulū izzūzu*; Soden 1978: 55; 1971: 100 and 1969: 421). In other words, the lots were placed in a jug with a long neck or a spout (which, in another context<sup>3</sup> has even been compared to the trunk of an elephant!) and then shaken out one by one, so that the first place went to the lot that fell out first. (Cf. already Michel 1949: 263f., n. 8 for which von Soden 1969: 421, n. 1, claims credit.)

And one more theory for your consideration. The word for "lot" in the oldest cuneiform sources, that is, in Sumerian, has a transparent etymology. It is called "wood that is thrown" (*gish-shub-ba*), and is equated in standard Akkadian with a term whose etymology suggests "allotment," "assignment," or even "tally-stick" (*isqu*) which is "notched" (*ussuqu*) when apportioning lots.<sup>4</sup> But twice in our little cube, and elsewhere in the Assyrian dialect, the word for lot is *pūru*—and this term has no such clear etymology. (A derivation from Hittite *pul*—"lot"—is unlikely, since that is not attested until later; cf. Friedrich 1954–56.) One theory that has some merit is to derive this specific Assyrian term from an old Sumerian word for bowl (*bur*; cf. Hallo 1962: 12, n. 94; Salonen 1966: 79). We have a good idea of what such bowls looked like because surviving examples are identified by precisely this designation in their votive inscriptions. They are either round, deep bowls (Hallo 1962: 41 *sub* Anonymous 8) or wide, shallow platters (Sollberger and Kupper 1971 *sub* III B 2a, as far as they are not so fragmentary as to preclude a reconstruction cf. YOS 9: 11: RA 41: 27: AO 15393 and 16651, or simply unavailable in photograph



An inscribed bowl (*puru*) found at Lagash.

form cf. Hallo 1961 *sub* Rim-Sin 20). If *this* etymology is correct, we may state that the lots took their (Assyrian) name from such a "fishbowl," and that they were thrown from it one by one, perhaps by the king or by a person blindfolded for the purpose.

Regardless of the theory that may eventually carry the day, one thing is certain: The technique of casting lots was equally well known in biblical Israel (Lindblom 1962). The Bible has numerous idioms for the use of lots, and most of them employ one of the several verbs meaning "to throw" (YDD, NPL, SHLK, YRH; but cf. also 'LH for the scapegoat and YS<sup>5</sup> for the assignment of tribal lands). And the Bible records many different uses for such casting of lots, from the division of the Promised Land among the twelve tribes by Joshua, to the finding of the culprit in the tale of Jonah, to the gambling for the garment of the condemned man in Psalm 22—an image taken over by the Gospels in connection with the crucifixion (Matt. 27:35; Mark 15:24; Luke 23:34; John 19:24). The noun for "lot" in all these and numerous other passages is *gōral*, a word which originally meant sim-

ply "stone, pebble" and which ultimately came to signify "fate, destiny," much like the English equivalent (lot) or for that matter the Sumerian and Babylonian ones as well.

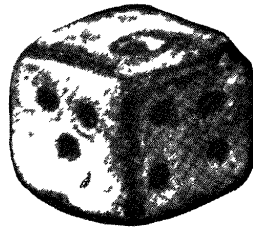
There is, however, one biblical book which employs, not this usual Hebrew noun for lot, but rather the Assyrian word *pūr(u)*. For in the Scroll of Esther 3:7 we read, following the text of the Septuagint: "In the twelfth year of King Ahasueros, in the first month, i.e., the month Nisan, one cast the *pūr*, i.e., the lot, in the presence of Haman, day by day and month by month (LXX: and the lot fell on the fourteenth<sup>5</sup> day of) the twelfth month, i.e., the month of Adar." Later in the same book (9:26) we read: "Therefore they called these days Purim, after the word (or: on account of the) *pūr*."

We have moved a good bit in time and space—from the ninth century and Kalah, one of the capital cities of Assyria, to the fifth century and Susa, one of the capital cities of Persia. And the purpose of the lottery has changed—from fixing the calendar of the Assyrians to fixing a date for the destruction of the Jews of the Persian

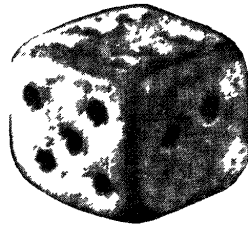
## The purpose of the lottery has changed—from fixing the calendar of the Assyrians to fixing a date for the destruction of the Jews of the Persian Empire.

Empire. But the terminology and the underlying technique remain the same: one *casts* the lots called *pūr* or, in the plural, *pūrīm*. And the festival of the fourteenth of Adar (originally the fifteenth, observed today as Shushan Purim) takes its name, we are told, from this very word for lots.

That explanation will have to do for us too, for none of the many alternatives offered during a century of the most ingenious scholarly detective work is more convincing. (For surveys of these theories see, e.g., Gaster 1969: 831f. and 874f. notes 11–13; Besser 1969, esp. 38f.) Such alternatives include various far-fetched comparisons as those with the Greek festival of Pithoigía (Paton 1908: 77–94), with the Hittite festival of *purulli* (Del Medico 1965: 255f.), and with the Roman festival of Feralia (Greek *phournikália*; *ibid.*), as well as the inherently more plausible theory of Julius Lewy, described as “probably the most skillful” of these constructions (Besser 1969: 39), which derives the festival from the Persian festival of Farwadigan (Lewy 1939). The problem is that each of these alleged precedents rests on little more than a dubious assonance, and none of them has anything in the least to do with the casting of lots. There is, it is true, one further candidate that I am tempted to put forward with all due reserve, namely the Hittite “festival of the lot” (EZEN pulash; Friedrich 1954–56), but we know nothing more about this relatively minor holiday than that it was listed among other festivals celebrated both in autumn and in spring, in the Hittite capital (Hattushash) and also in the provinces (Nerik).<sup>6</sup> And even this candidate can find no



A



B

*Dice recovered at Tepe Gawra.*

support in the text of Esther—on the contrary, that text is robbed of its *raison d'être* if it is not seen as the necessary and sufficient justification for the institution of the festival. The only solid evidence (outside the Scroll of Esther) for the observance of a festival having anything in common with Purim is the allusion in II Maccabees (15:36) to “Mordecai’s Day” which is celebrated on the fourteenth of Adar. Thus the biblical derivation of the name of the festival from the lots called *pūr* remains the best available, and what I hold in my hands are (in replica) the oldest—indeed the only—lots of this name yet recovered by archaeology, the first Purim.

They are not, it is true, the oldest lots ever turned up by excavation. The cube as a device for playing games of chance has been traced back to the Indus Valley culture of prehistoric Pakistan, and it was borrowed from there by Mesopotamia before the end of the third

millennium. Such cubes look exactly like modern dice, except that their dots are not (normally) arranged in the modern fashion where opposite sides always add up to seven (Dales 1968<sup>7</sup>; this becomes normative at least as early as Islamic times; Rosenthal 1975: 35). Similar discoveries have been made in Palestinian excavations as well, for example at Gaza by Sir Flinders Petrie (1931 pl. xxiii; 1933 pl. xxviii; 1934 pls. xxiv and xxxvi) and at Tell Beit Mirsim by W. F. Albright, in connection with nine other gaming pieces that almost certainly called for a gameboard.<sup>8</sup> Albright calls his piece a “teetotum” rather than a die, because like those from Gaza it is shaped like a truncated four-sided pyramid and is numbered with from one to four dots only (on the four sides), and one dot on the top face. (He derives this form from Egypt whence, he says, it was presumably borrowed also into Greece.)

In any case, such finds occur in Palestinian excavations only in early second millennium strata, that is, long before the Israelite conquest and settlement. Instead of dice with dots on them, the later excavations in Israel have turned up potsherds with names. These so-called ostraca have been discovered at such locations as Arad and Masada. Those from Arad are thought by the excavator, the late Yohanan Aharoni, to have “served as lots for the priestly terms such as indicated in the Bible for the Jerusalem sanctuary” (Aharoni 1968: 11 and 29 fig. 17; cf. 1969: 32 and figs. 53f.; note that the captions are inadvertently reversed).<sup>9</sup> At Masada, Yigael Yadin argued that some ostraca served to establish the order in which the desperate defenders agreed to carry out their suicide pact (Yadin 1966), a view vigorously challenged in other quarters (Weiss-Rosmarin 1967, esp. p. 7).<sup>10</sup> In classical Greece, such ostraca were used to vote unpopular leaders into exile—hence our term “to ostracize.”

But the Greeks also were well acquainted with the technique of casting or rolling dice. Though they attributed the invention of dice

(along with the alphabet) variously to the Egyptian god Toth or to the Phoenician Palamedes son of Naupolis, they themselves have left us the first discussion of loaded dice (in the *Problemata* of Hero; Brumbaugh 1966: 24f., 73f). And they furnished post-biblical Hebrew with its various words for dice (*qūbiā* from Greek *kubeia*; *pispās* or *psīpās* from *psēphos*—strictly a round pebble; *tīpas* or *tīpūs* from *tupos*),<sup>11</sup> suggesting that the Hebrew word *gōrāl* had become too sacred to use for gambling in the language of Mishna and Gemara. If therefore the late biblical text of Esther already availed itself of another foreign word for lot, and even explained the origin of the festival of Purim by it, this was quite in line with later usage.

I am not, of course, suggesting that the use of pebbles or dice was totally unknown in Israel, whether for divination or for gambling. The use of the Urim and Thummim has long been recognized as a form of divination by means of a pair of stones distinguished by their marking (Hallo 1972) and hence comparable to the Babylonian technique of psephomancy (Reiner 1960, esp. p. 25). As for gambling, the combination of evidence already adduced indicates that, at least in its pervasive form of rolling dice for money or other valuables, it was typically regarded as a *foreign vice* (Cohn 1971, with bibliography). Biblical law did not bother to proscribe it or to list it among the many other alien abominations catalogued in Leviticus or Deuteronomy. Talmudic law also tolerated it, although the rabbis condemned such gambling in general and even found a Psalm passage to back them up (Braudé 1959: 363f. to Psalm 26:9<sup>12</sup>).

Certainly one form of dice has a legitimate place in Jewish life to this day. I am referring to the *dreidel*, that four-sided spinning top associated with the innocent games of another popular holiday, perhaps related to Purim in origin, namely Hannuka. (For the possible connection, see Del Medico 1965.) Its four sides are inscribed with the Hebrew letters N, G, H, SH, and

these are interpreted as an acronym for *nēs gadōl hāyā shām*, "a great miracle happened there," i.e., in Israel at the time of the Macabees. (Modern Israelis emend this to "a great miracle happened here.") But the real significance of the letters is in Yiddish where they stand for *nichts, ganz* or *gib, halb* and *shtell* or *shenk*, i.e., "nothing, all (or pay), half, pay up," that is, instructions for a game of chance.

That this device too was borrowed from the outside world, in this case Christian Europe, is clear to me from a fact never before (to

earlier. So even that most Jewish of dice, the dreidel, has a foreign origin. But let us leave Hannuka aside and return to Purim.

Does the physical recovery of the oldest *pūr*, the first Purim, somehow help to establish the historical authenticity of the story of Mordecai? Does it solve or at least ease what George Mendenhall has called the "prodigious...difficulties in the Book of Esther" (1973: 101)? My answer is an emphatic no! Along with Jonah, Daniel and Ecclesiastes, Esther remains what the late Elias J. Bickerman (1967)

*Dice and gaming pieces found at Gaza by Sir Flinders Petrie. Courtesy of the Petrie Museum, Department of Egyptology, University College, London.*



my knowledge) noted by authorities on such matters,<sup>12a</sup> namely the prior existence of the identical game in Latin guise. The *Oxford Universal Dictionary* (1955 edition) defines what Albright referred to as the "teetotum" as "A small four-sided disk or die having an initial letter inscribed on each of its sides, and a spindle passing down through it by which it could be twirled or spun with the fingers like a small top, the letter which lay uppermost, when it fell, deciding the fortune of the player... The letters were originally the initials of Latin words, viz. T *totum*, A *aufer*, D *depone*, N *nihil*."<sup>13</sup> Later they were the initials of English words, T take-all, H half, N nothing, P put down." Describing the game, the English word is traced back to 1753 and, in the sense of the device with which it was played, to 1720; but the Latin *totum* had both meanings much

called one of "four strange books of the Bible." Recent research has removed some of the mystery surrounding it, but at the same time it has tended to confirm what has always been intuitively sensed: that the Scroll of Esther is not history but romance, a kind of historical novel or novella. It is full of authentic historical memories of the Persian period and the Persian setting of Jewish life after the Babylonian exile, and thus conforms in interesting details with archaeological evidence (Moore 1975), but it is not to be read as the authentic record of actual events.<sup>14</sup>

Thus it is unreasonable to expect archaeology to unearth the royal gardens and pavillion of Ahasueros, even after nearly a century of excavations at the acropolis and royal court of Susa, and even though Assyriology has a good deal to tell us about the royal garden (*ginnā*)

and pavillion (*bītan*) that figure so prominently at crucial points in the story—at the opening festivities (1:5) and again when Esther invites Haman and the king to her own banquet (7:7f.; Oppenheim 1965). And it is equally pointless to look for the names Mordecai or Esther among the thousands of cuneiform tablets excavated at Susa, even though a certain Marduk has been found there, and even though an interpreter-scribe (*amel sepiru* = *lū-a-bal*) of that name has been identified with him (but this official probably did not serve during the reign of Xerxes I; Zadok 1979: 70 based on Stigers 1976: 36). And the recovery of a cosmetic burner at fifth century Lachish contributes no more than a welcome touch of reality to the elaborate descriptions of Esther's beauty treatments (2:12; cf. Albright 1974b).

The Book of Esther is essentially belletristic, not historical, a fact which has long been recognized, and which is merely confirmed by the ongoing discoveries of Near Eastern archaeology in general and Assyriology in particular. (For the present state of the question, see e.g. the comprehensive surveys by Moore 1971 and Berg 1979.) But in other respects, these discoveries *are* forcing revisions of traditional conceptions, or shall we say of cherished misconceptions, about the scroll (Jones 1977). In the remaining pages, I can do no more than highlight two or three of them.

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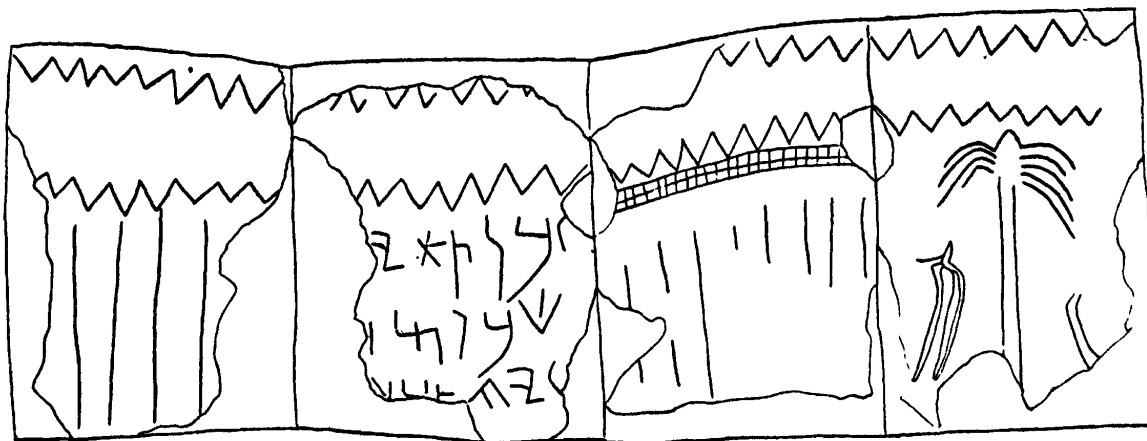
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For one thing the book has been described as misogynistic. It depicts Ahasueros as ready to display his queen's charms to the drunken courtiers and, when she refuses, as banishing her and replacing her with a new queen selected by an elaborate beauty contest. But a closer reading reveals on the contrary that it is not Vashti who comes off badly but the king, and all the husbands of the realm. Esther herself develops by stages from mere beauty queen to veritable sage in her own right, outwitting Haman and outstripping even Mordecai, until in the end it is she who dominates the story. And lest it be thought that giving so prominent a role to the female protagonist

brands the entire book as a late, Hellenistic creation, it is only necessary to recall the prominence of Ruth and Judith in the late biblical and Apocryphal books bearing their names, or of Miriam, Deborah and Hannah in the Pentateuchal and the Prophetic texts.

Further, there is much earlier testimony to the depiction of women as prominent heroines and even as authors of cuneiform narratives. On the eve of the Persian conquest, for example, the mother of the last king of Babylon reviews the history of the first 95 years of her eventful life in a remarkable autobiography. A postscript to this work made it a funerary stele when she finally died nine years later at the ripe old age of 104 (649–547 B.C.) (Pritchard 1969: 560–62). Over a millennium earlier, the daughter of the King of Uruk pleaded with the all-conquering King of Larsa to spare her city and to restore her to her priestly functions there. Her letter-prayer ranks with the best examples of this characteristic Sumerian literary genre (1800 B.C.). Earlier still, in the 21st century, some equally moving compositions were written by the "ladies of the Ur III Empire"; their works include laments, love-songs, and lullabies for their royal husbands and sons. The earliest and greatest of these priestly and princely poetesses, and the very first identifiable author in history—male or female—is Enheduanna, daughter of the great Sargon of



Cosmetic burner from Lachish.

Akkad who forged the first Mesopotamian empire in the 23rd century B.C. (Hallo 1976). Cuneiform literature thus provides both a succession of role models for female protagonists and a long tradition of respectful attitudes towards women. That tradition was part of the general cultural milieu and, so far from being a woman-hater, the author of Esther could, for all we know, have been a woman!

The author was not, at any rate, a male chauvinist; nor was he or she, as might at first appear, an uncompromising Jewish chauvinist. On the face of it, true, the Jews exacted bloodthirsty vengeance on Haman, his sons, and all who sided with them. But the sheer numbers of the victims, and the resignation with which they allegedly met their fate, are evidence enough of literary clichés intended to appeal to the reader's pleasure in encountering the traditional folkloristic reversal of fortunes, or even to his sense of humor, but certainly they are not intended to enhance the credibility of the narrative. In its essentials, that narrative is anything but xenophobic. The king, for all his bumbling and limited intelligence, is not an object of hatred; his empire represents the civilized world ("127 provinces from India to Ethiopia"), and his law ("the law of the Medes and Persians") is proverbial in its unalterability.

Thus, if we turn now from the story of Esther to the story of Mordecai, we find a formula for overcoming the disabilities of exile by using one's wits in the loyal service of a foreign monarch. This is the theme of "the success story of the wise courtier" (Niditch and Doran 1977). It is already present, outside the Bible, in the tale of the wise Ahiqar, an Aramaean who served under the Assyrian kings Sennacherib and Esarhaddon and who triumphed over adversity to

become the vizier under the name of Mannu-kima-Enlil-hatin (AbanINNU-dari) and to bequeath many wise sayings to posterity. These axioms are preserved on a papyrus found at Elephantine, a Jewish colony settled in Upper Egypt in Persian times, and so this tale could well have helped to inspire that of Mordecai. (On Ahiqar see Pritchard 1969: 427ff.)

But Mordecai achieves more than only a personal triumph. He also provides a model for the retaining of one's ethnic heritage while accommodating to foreign surroundings. He obeys and he serves — indeed, he saves — the king, but he will not bow down to the vizier, even though his whole people are threatened with having to pay the price for his obstinacy. In the end, his twin policies of loyalty to the king *and* to his faith are rewarded — he is able to save and enrich his people *and* to become vizier in his own right. Thus his narrative is a paradigm for a larger issue: It describes and prescribes for what has aptly been identified as "a life style for the diaspora" (Humphreys 1973). As such its closest analogy is found within the Bible, in the first half of the Book of Daniel (esp. Dan 2–6), whose hero likewise serves a foreign king (in this case Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon) without in the least surrendering his faith.

We have already characterized the form of the narrative as a "novella." If we now consider the content or theme we can narrow this classification even more. The text, whose setting is the diaspora, may be called a "diaspora-novella" (Meinhold 1975–76). And this type has its closest analogy in an unexpected quarter, the biblical tale of Joseph.<sup>15</sup> Numerous correspondences have frequently been pointed out between the tales of Joseph and of Mordecai, such as their roles at the courts of foreign kings. And it has generally been assumed

that the description of Mordecai's being paraded through the streets (6:11) was simply taken over from the story of Joseph's investiture (Gen 41:42f.).

This interpretation may well be true, but an alternative may be offered. That same story in Genesis contains a precious clue to its date of composition in the cry with which the Egyptians greeted Joseph. They call out "*Abrekh*," which has been a *crux interpretum* since antiquity. Onkelos "translates" "this is father to the King" and the LXX reads "herald." However, you may now perhaps recognize that this term is none other than the Assyrian word for vizier, *abarakku*, the title of the owner of our lot which I asked you to file in your memory earlier! If this explanation is correct, it helps date much of the Joseph story to the Assyrian period of Egypt's history, or even later. Moreover, it suggests that this story, at least secondarily, has a function similar to the tale of Mordecai. The story of Joseph is a novel of life in that other diaspora, in Egypt, which was the western counterpart of the Babylonian exile (Hallo *apud* Plaut 1981: 10 = Hallo *apud* Plaut 1974: xxxif.).

One final misconception needs still to be addressed, and that concerns the allegedly secular or even atheistic character of the text. Admittedly, the Book of Esther is alone among the books of the Hebrew Bible in failing to mention God by name even once;<sup>16</sup> alone, too, in its complete absence from the biblical manuscripts found in the ancient sectarian library of Qumran. And the rabbis debated at length whether to include it in the canon of Holy Scripture — though in this respect it was *not* unique, for similar debates raged also over three other scrolls or *megillot*, namely Ruth, Song of Songs, and Ecclesiastes; only the Scroll of Lamentations escaped this fate. The Scroll

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**That same story in Genesis contains a precious clue to its date of composition.**

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of Esther eventually passed muster, probably because it served both as an aetiology and as a libretto for the festival of Purim.

But on a more sublime level, the Book of Esther must also be seen as a reflective work, with a philosophic if not precisely a religious message to impart. More specifically, it can be read as a commentary on the element of chance in human life (Besser 1969). It symbolizes this chance through the fateful roll of the dice, the casting of lots, with all the accompanying dramatic reversals of fortune. And it celebrates this chance through encouraging feasting and revelry to match that of the Persian king himself, and so it breaks the solemn restraints of the rest of the liturgical year by granting the license to drink.

On the Sabbath of Remem-

brance that precedes the holiday of Purim, we read in the Maftir from Deuteronomy (25:17–19) the solemn injunction: “Remember what Amalek did to you on your journey, after you left Egypt—how, undeterred by fear of God, he surprised you on the march, when you were famished and weary, and cut down all the stragglers in your rear.

Therefore, when the Lord your God grants you safety from all your enemies around you, in the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a hereditary portion, you shall blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven. Do not forget!” And in the traditional Haftara (I Sam. 15) we read how Saul failed and Samuel notably succeeded in carrying out this harsh command against Agag, king of the Amalekites. But on Purim itself, when we

read the story of the reincarnation of Agag in the person of “Haman son of Hamdatha the Agagite,” or simply “Agagi son of Hamdatha” as he is called in the Maos Tsur, we are commanded not to remember, but to drink to the point where we forget the difference between “blessed Mordecai” and “accursed Haman.”

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1. Hallo 1960: 41 and n. 34. But P. Kyle McCarter (1974: 5–7) thinks the king depicted is Jehoram (cf. McCarter 1975: 32 and n. 11). Tadmor (lecture of 11–13–80) believes the picture is that of the messenger of the king, not of the king himself. Miller (1967: 285–87) and Green (1978: 355 n. 13; 1979) both support the identification of Jehu.

2. Kessler (1980: 170) thinks that the unique lot of Iahali is more likely a votive offering than an original lot. While I agree that a votive object is normally “an artistic replica of an object used in daily life in the domestic, commercial or military sphere” (Hallo 1962: 12), I see no indication that this lot or its inscription is votive in character. For an earlier translation of the inscription, see Oppenheim 1964: 100.

3. Specifically a catalogue of prodigies: CT 29:49:23; cf. CAD K 612ab; Salonen 1966: 222.

4. Also *ezēqu*, *eshēqu*. Von Soden, AHW s.v. (1965: 249) compares the Hebrew צִק, a hapax in Isaiah 5:2, where it is usually translated “to dig carefully about” or (NJV)

“to break the ground.” Cf. Cohen 1978.

5. *tessares-kai-dekātēn* or, with 8:12, the thirteenth?

6. Information courtesy of G. Beckman. The new study by Kellerman (1981) brings additional evidence in favor of this suggestion.

7. Cf. Klengel-Brandt 1980 and Borger 1975 No. 177 for some interesting later examples from Assur and Babylon respectively.

8. Albright 1930, 1933, 1974a. See the illustration in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* vol. 7 (1971) col. 304, fig. 1., based on Albright 1933. On gameboards, see for now Ellis and Buchanan 1966 and Brumbaugh 1975: 135–37.

9. For which see Rabinowitz 1976.

10. For an adjudication of all the conflicting views, see Feldman 1975.

11. For the last see Tosefta Sanhedrin 5:2.

12. “Gen. 7:10 proves that during the 7 days of mourning for the righteous Methusela, God held off his judgement of the generation of the flood that they might repent, but they did not repent. Hence Methusela

prayed (Ps. 26:9) “gather not my soul with sinners, nor my life with men-of-blood,” that is with the unrepentant men who were to perish in the flood. The phrase “in whose hands is craftiness and their right hand is full of bribes” (Ps. 26:10) refers to dice-players who reckon with the left hand, but add up with the right and thus rob and cheat one another.”

12a. But cf. Rivkind 1946: 217 and 51f. with n.18 citing Harkavy (1928: s.v. dreidel).

13. i.e. “all, take away, pay, nothing.”

14. For a recent defense of the historicity of the tale, see Gordis 1981.

15. Note the Midrashic awareness of the connection, e.g. Bereshit Rabbah to Gen. 12:3 where Mordecai, Joseph and Daniel each saved or served a foreign king. The editor comments “to show the Jewish attitude of loyalty to his country of domicile” (Freedman and Simon 1939: 323).

16. Song of Songs 8:6 is usually interpreted as containing a short form of the divine name in the expression *shalhebet-yah*.





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