The Folio

Bulletin of the Ancient Biblical Manuscript Center, a research center of the Claremont School of Theology

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The Many Versions of the Esther Story

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When reading a modern translation of the Book of Esther, it appears to be a seamless narrative about how Esther saved her people from certain destruction at the hands of the self-serving Haman. However, as so often is the case with biblical texts, still waters run deep.

The story of Esther that we read in our English translations is based on the Book of Esther as found in the Hebrew text of the Bible, called the Massoretic Text. In the ancient world, Greek readers, whether Jewish or Christian, had two Greek versions of Esther, both of which diverge from the Massoretic Text and from each other.

The Hebrew Text

The manuscript source for many modern translations is a manuscript familiar to longtime readers of *The Folio*: the Leningrad Codex. This codex, officially known by its Russian designation Firkovitch B19 A, is the oldest complete Hebrew Bible manuscript and dates to 1009 CE. The Hebrew text of Esther as preserved in the Leningrad Codex is relatively free of problems caused by differences among manuscripts or ambiguities from its transmission through time. An unusual feature of the story of Esther in its Hebrew version is the absence of any mention of God.

For the Leningrad Codex, scholars have a facsimile edition made from ABMC's Leningrad Project photographs and published by Eerdmans Publishing in 1998. *The Folio*, volume 10, issues 2 and 3, provide all the details of this photographic project.

The First Greek Text: the Septuagint

The Septuagint is a Greek version of the books of the Hebrew Bible, translated into Greek for Greek-speaking Jewish communities in Alexandria between 250 and 100 BCE. It is still the accepted text of the Old Testament for the Greek Orthodox Church. Currently, scholars have two major critical editions of the Septuagint: the Göttingen edition (*Esther*, Göttingen, 1966, 1983) and the Cambridge edition (*Esther-Judith-Tobit*, London, 1940). Both reconstruct a tentative "old Greek" text from many diverse manuscripts. A small pocket edition by Alfred Rahlfs also exists, but "confines itself to the three most important manuscripts (B, S, and A) and refers only incidentally and where it seems needful to other material" (Alfred Rahlfs, preface, p. LV).

What is very interesting about the Septuagint version of Esther is that it is longer than the Hebrew version, leading scholars to wonder if there was another longer Hebrew version of Esther that is now lost. However, it is also possible that the first translators of the Septuagint added to the text of Esther.

The Septuagint contains material not found in the Hebrew Massoretic text of Esther. First of all, there are six larger pieces of text added to the translated text. These added pieces are called "Additions," and are "numbered" A to F. Addition A is added at the beginning of the book. It offers a dream which is later on interpreted in Addition F. Addition B and E are both letters of the king, instructing his people how to deal with the Jews. Addition C contains two prayers, one from Mordecai and one from Esther. Addition D is an embellished version of the beginning of chapter 5.

Instead of just translating the Hebrew text of the book of Esther, the translator turned this text into a piece of theater. Esther no longer enters and asks the king a question, Esther faints and falls, while the king is reigning in full splendor. In most of the additions, the name of God is mentioned. These additions truly convert the book of Esther into a religious book. Yet, the additions are not the only differences between the Hebrew and the

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The Newsletter of
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Esther Story *cont.*

Greek text of Esther. Scattered in the translation, the translator has added religious elements or interpreted certain Hebrew words as referring to religious language. The translator also changed the characters of Esther and the king. Even the archenemy, Haman, looks a bit different in the Greek text. He is no longer an Agagite, but a Macedonian.

The Second Greek Text: the Alpha-Text

The second ancient Greek text of Esther is commonly called the Alpha-text . The existence of the Alpha-text introduces an entirely new set of questions. With the Septuagint, it shares the six major additions. However, setting these additions aside and considering only the text shared by all three editions of Esther, the Alpha-text seems to be a shorter, abbreviated version of the Book of Esther. This has provoked a host of questions among scholars about its origin.

It is, for instance, no longer Esther who asks the king to withdraw his letter. It is Mordekai. And Mordekai not only gets what he wants, he also adds his personal letter to his colleague Jews—a piece of text not found in the Septuagint, nor in the Hebrew text of Esther. While Mordekai is doing all the work, Esther no longer needs to fall on her knees and beg the king to change the letters that Haman wrote to kill the Jews.

John Ussher first published the Alpha-text of the Book of Esther in London in 1655. He based his edition on Manuscript 93 of the British Museum in London, which contains both the Septuagint and the Alpha-text of the Book of Esther. As the Alpha-text comes first in Manuscript 93, its text became known as 93a.

The second Greek text can also be found in Manuscripts 19 and 108b of the Vatican Library and Manuscript 319 of Vatopedi monastery of Mount Athos. Dated to 1021 CE, the Vatopedi manuscript is the oldest complete manuscript for the Alpha-text of Esther. I have consulted the Manuscripts 19 and 108 in the Vatican Library of Vatican City, Rome. I was unable to read Manuscript 319, for it is located on Mount Athos, where women visitors are prohibited. There are ambiguities about the identification number of the manuscript. Manuscript 319 is also known as Vatopedi Manuscript 513—at least, that is what the scholarly literature says. A recent check revealed that Manuscript 513 at Vatopedi is a different manuscript entirely. ABMC staff and I are now working to locate and identify this manuscript properly. It might be that "Manuscript 513" is not "Manuscript 513," but "Manuscript 600." I know that some other scholars also are looking for this "lost" manuscript.

"Manuscript 319" (or "Manuscript 600") is the oldest complete witness we have for the second Greek text of Esther. It is dated 1021 CE. Resolving the problem of its identity and making Manuscript 319–or Manuscript 600–of Vatopedi monastery widely accessible for study will be a significant result of the *Mount Athos Digital Library and Preservation Project*. It will give the opportunity for scholars like me to consult manuscripts that are so far inaccessible.

Fragments of 4Q PrEsther^{d-e}. Courtesy, Israel Antiquities Authority

Editor's Note: Future issues of The Folio *will provide updates on our work to locate and identify this important manuscript.*

Other Texts

So far I have mentioned the Hebrew and two Greek texts of Esther. In text critical research these witnesses play a major role. Sometimes, one has also to turn to the other witnesses, such as: the Old Latin text, the Vulgate of Jerome, the Syriac, the Coptic, the Armenian, and the Slavonic text, as well as the Aramaic translations–the latter are also called Targumim. In the case of Esther, the text of the historian Josephus also offers interesting variants. The Vulgate and the Syriac text follow closely the Hebrew text, as do the Targumim, in places where they are not expanding the story. The Coptic, the Armenian and the Slavonic versions offer a Septuagint-like text. The Old Latin, which is an ancient Latin translation predating Jerome's Vulgate, sometimes agrees with the Septuagint text and sometimes differs from it. Moreover, it has some readings in common with the Alpha-text of Esther. These readings do have a "Hebrew" tone. Again, one wonders whether these readings do not stem from another Hebrew book of Esther?

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We also thank our donors who gave to the Mount Athos Digital Library and Preservation Project. Many of you are new to the ABMC, and we are pleased that you join us now to see this new, ground breaking project succeed.

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Mount Athos Digital Library: an update

Nicholas Zarkantzas,
Project Director

The beginning of the new millennium witnessed exciting progress for the Mount Athos Project. The project has established an office in Thessaloniki, Greece, on the premises of our project-partner, the Patriarchal Institute for Patristic Studies. Establishing this office represents an important milestone for ABMC as it advances its international presence and begins the first phase of the Project.

Nicholas Zarkantas, Project Director, devoted early 2001 to planning the creation of the first electronic database of all the Greek manuscripts of Mount Athos. A team of senior cataloguers in Thessaloniki will begin work in June 2001. We expect the first trial postings of the data on the web in spring 2002.

Development of adequate funds for the project is ongoing. The grant-writing process is in full swing with three major proposals submitted last year. We invite *Folio* readers to participate with us in supporting this innovative project.

We look forward to productive year of beginning the first digital record of the Greek manuscripts of Mount Athos!

Staff News

The ABMC regretfully said goodbye to Office Manager **Lupe Baca** in February. Lupe was a great asset to the ABMC, steamlining procedures, utilizing her development experience, and bringing a smiling face to work everyday. Lupe now works full time in medical billing. The ABMC wishes her well! **Dolly Bush** has assumed responsibilites as ABMC's new Office Manager, with assistance from Chona Bunaguen, who works with ABMC's database systems.

Arik Greenberg, who last fall served as Mt. Athos Project Associate, was hospitalized in February with bacterial meningococcemia. After a close call, Arik is recovering nicely and getting back to his New Testament studies at Claremont Graduate University.

Congratulations to **Blaine Hunt,** ABMC Research Assistant, for completing his Bachelor of Arts in Literature. Blaine will be leaving us in May to pursue his career in literature.

Creative Ways to Give

Gary Martin, a longtime friend of ABMC, has pledged his support to fund new acquisitions of microfilms for the ABMC's collection. Consistent with Gary's own studies and interests, these acquisitions will focus on early manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament. Gary's creative generosity provides new resources for the global community of scholars who make use of the ABMC's film collections.

Tony & Patricia Bush and Nancy & Clay Bush designated their gifts to purchase a new filing cabinet (motivated by a challenge from family member and ABMC staffer, Dolly Bush). Each couple donated ½ the purchase price of the cabinet. We still need three more.

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Upcoming Events

May

22-June 21: James Sanders serves as Visiting Prof. at Jewish Theological Seminary, New York.

1-June 19, Tuesday evenings, Michael Phelps teaches an introduction to the Dead Sea Scrolls at Univ. of Judaism in Los Angeles. For information, call 310-476-9777.

August

7-11: Michael Phelps introduces the Dead Sea Scrolls for an Elder Hostel at Univ. of Judaism in Los Angeles. For information, call 310-476-9777.

Publications by ABMC Board Members

Members of the ABMC Board of Trustees not only devote their energies to guiding the ABMC, but are also leaders in the field of biblical research. ABMC is proud to honor the publications of Board Members for the year 2000/2001.

James Sanders, ABMC President

"The Impact of the Judaean Desert Scrolls on Biblical Studies: Scripture in the First Century," *The Bible and the Dead Sea Scrolls, Vol. I: The Hebrew Bible at Qumran*, ed. J. H. Charlesworth (Bible, 2000) 29-42.

"Intertextuality and Dialogue: New Approaches to the Scriptural Canon," *Canon vs. Culture: Reflections on the Current Debate*, ed. Jan Gorak (New York: Garland, 2001) 175-190.

"Intertextuality and Canon," *On the Way to Nineveh: Studies in Honor of George Landes*, eds. Stephen L. Cook and Sara C. Winter (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 2000) 316-333.

"The Judaean Desert Scrolls and the History of the History of the Text of the Hebrew Bible," *Caves of Enlightenment: Proceedings of the American Schools of Oriental Research Dead Sea Scrolls Jubilee symposium*, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Bible Press, 1999) 1-17.

"The Hermeneutics of Translation," *Removing the Anti-Judaism from the New Testament*. Howard Kee and Irvin Borowsky, eds. (Philadelphia: American Interfaith Institute, 1998) 43-62.

"Spinning the Bible," *Bible Review* 14/3 (June 1998) 22-44.

"Keep Each Tradition Separate," *Bible Review* 16/4 (2000) 27-58.

"The Hebrew University Bible and Biblia Hebraica Quinta," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 118/3 (1999) 518-526.

Dominique Barthélemy Norbert Lohfink and James Sanders, eds. *Critique textuelle de l'Ancien Testament*, Vol. 4 (Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht).

Lee McDonald and James Sanders, eds. *The Canon Debate* (Hendrickson/Brill).

Lynne Kogel

Contributor, *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. Entries for "Hierapolis," "Hyrcanus," "Lydia (Place)," "Masada," "Menelaus." Eerdmans Publishing, Sept. 2000. Allen C. Myers, Astrid B. Beck, David Noel Freedman, eds.

Marvin Sweeney, ABMC Vice-President

Deborah Ellens, Michael Floyd, Wonil Kim, and Marvin Sweeney, eds., *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millenium: Form, Concept, and Theological Perspective*. Vol. 1, Theological and Hermeneutical Studies (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2000).

The Twelve Prophets, 2 vols. Berit Olam Commentary Series. (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2000).

James D. Nogalski, Marvin Sweeney, eds., *Reading and Hearing the Book of the Twelve*. Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000).

King Josiah of Judah: The Lost Messiah of Israel (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

Editor of *Review of Biblical Literature*, published online at bookreviews.org and in hard copy by the Society of Biblical Literature.

Kristin De Troyer

The End of the Alpha Text of Esther. Translation and Narrative Technique in MT 8:1-17, LXX 8:1-17, and AT 7:14-41 (Septuagint and Cognate Studies, 48. Atlanta: SBL, 2000).

Jon Asgeirsson, Kristin De Troyer, and Marvin Meyer, eds., *From Quest to Q. Festschrift James M. Robinson* (Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 146. Leuven: Peeters and Leuven University Press, 2000).

"Once More, the So-Called Esther fragments of Cave 4," *Revue de Qumran* 75/19 (2000): 401-422.

Richard Weis

"General Introduction." *Biblia Hebraica quinta editio funditus renovata: General Introduction and Megillot*. Yohanan Goldman, Arie van der Kooij, Gerard Norton, Stephen Pisano, Adrian Schenker, Jan de Waard and Richard Weis, eds. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, forthcoming.

"A Conflicted Book for a Marginal People: Thematic Oppositions in MT Jeremiah." *Reading the Hebrew Bible for a New Millenium*, Vol. 2, Form, Concept and Theological Perspective, pp. 297-309. Wonil Kim, Deborah Ellens, Michael Floyd, and Marvin Sweeney, eds. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 2000.

Stories of Esther cont.

Current Scholarship

In 1944, Charles C. Torrey proposed that the Greek Alpha-text was a translation from an ancient Aramaic text of Esther, which would have been older than the Hebrew Massoretic text, but is now lost. Today, no one agrees with his arguments for an Aramaic underlying text. Most scholars, however, do accept that the Greek Alpha-text is probably a translation of an older Hebrew text, now lost.

The existence of two Hebrew editions of a biblical book would not be new. The Dead Sea Scrolls confirmed the ancient existence of shorter and longer editions of the Book of Jeremiah. Before the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, we knew the longer edition of Jeremiah from the Massoretic text, and the shorter version is preserved by the Septuagint translation. The Dead Sea Scrolls gave us our first Hebrew manuscripts of the short edition of Jeremiah. Therefore, scholars were encouraged to conjecture the existence of a shorter Hebrew text of Esther underlying the Greek Alpha-text.

Then in 1956, Jean Starcky, one of the editors of the Cave 4 Dead Sea Scrolls, announced "Esther-like material" in Qumran, and in 1992 Józef T. Milik published six Aramaic "proto-Esther" Dead Sea Scrolls fragments. Scholars were hopeful that we would discover evidence of the hypothetical short text of Esther among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Unfortunately, early assertions of any direct relationship of these fragments to an early version of the Book of Esther have proven inconclusive at best. The fragments come from ancient stories which like the Book of Esther are set in the Persian royal court, but they do not appear to be ancient editions of Esther.

The research on the Greek texts of Esther is continuing. The majority of scholars accepts that an older, now lost Hebrew text stands behind the Alpha-text of Esther. A minority group explains the Alpha-text as a rewritten and abridged Septuagint text. The question is whether the differences between the Alpha-text of Esther and the Hebrew and Septuagint versions of Esther can best be explained as intentional changes of a creative editor or as traces of a hitherto unknown Hebrew Esther story. This question is unresolved among biblical scholars. Its ultimate resolution may require the discovery of new manuscript evidence. (f)

Versions of Esther

Hebrew	Greek Septuagint
——	Addition A, 11:2-12:6
1:1-2:23	1:1-2:23
3:1-**3:15**	3:1-3:13
——	Addition B, 13:1-13:7
——	3:14-3:15
4:1-4:17	4:1-4:17
——	Addition C, 13:8-14:19
——	Addition D, 15:1-15:16
5:1-5:14*	5:3-5:14
6:1-7:10	6:1-7:10
8:1-**8:17**	8:1-8:12
——	Addition E, 16:1-16:24
——	8:13-8:17
9:1-10:3	9:1-10:3
10:1-10:3	10:1-10:3
——	Addition F, 10:4-11:1

The Greek additions can be read in most English Bibles which include the Apocrypha.

When Jerome translated Esther into latin for the Vulgate, he placed the Greek Additions at the end. The unusual chapter/verse numbers eventually resulted.

**Addition D replaces Hebrew 5:1-5:2.*

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