Antonianum XC (2015) 319-342

"THEIR FAME CONTINUES TO GROW" (cf. Esth 9:4). THE BOOK OF ESTHER AND ITS RECEPTION

> 'All of the books of the Prophets and the Writings will be rendered irrelevant in the Messianic Era with the exception of the Scroll of Esther, which will continue and be fulfilled just as the five books of the Torah and like the laws of the Oral tradition which will never be rendered irrelevant. And even though all recollection of pain and trauma will eventually become irrelevant, the days of Purim will never cease to be relevant'.
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> M. Maimonides, Laws of the Scroll, II,18

1. Introduction[1]

Reception history[2] is a hermeneutical approach to literature that moves the manner in which one reads and understands texts from a two-way dialogue to a three-way. Thus the relationship between the text and the reader is expanded by the addition of a third element, namely, the

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[1] A word of thanks is owed to all those who made this article possible, especially Dr. Francisco Javier Perea Siller (University of Cordoba, Spain), Prof. John Sawyer (Durham University, UK), Prof. Ruth Fine (the Hebrew University of Jerusalem), Mr. Alberto Gallego and Dr. Gabrile Finaldi (Museo del Prado, Madrid), Prof Julio Alonso (University of Valencia, Spain), Prof Ignacio Arellano (University of Navarra, Spain) and Prof. Gregorio del Olmo Lete (University of Barcelona, Spain).

[2] There is a difference between *Rezeptionsgeschichte* (reception History) which deals with how a given biblical story has been interpreted by plastic arts and *Wirkungsgeschichte* (the re-working of tradition) that studies how the given work of art influences the viewer, cf. M. O'Kane, 'Interpreting the Bible through the Visual Arts', *HeBAI* 1 (2012), p. 388-409 (390-391). These concepts can be put together under the definition of Reception History, cf. D.P. Parris, *Reception Theory and Biblical Hermeneutics*, (PTMS 107; Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2009), p. 117-118.

manner in which any given text has been interpreted down the ages[3]. In this way reception history makes it possible for the past to come into the present so as to read texts not as antiquities but as living entities. Applied to classical studies at first[4], it has subsequently been employed in biblical literature. It has been asserted that reception history was common-place in the history of interpretation and was practiced even by those biblical authors who reinterpreted previous traditions[5]. Once the canon was established, the work of re-writing the biblical text was undertaken by the rabbis in the Jewish tradition and the Church Fathers in the Christian world.

The contemporary interest in reception history among biblical scholars develops from exegetical work undertaken in the past two centuries. Modern methods of interpretation have transformed themselves into reception history in order to complete the work and insights of the historical-critical methods which originated in Germany in the nineteenth century[6]. New approaches to the Scriptures with special emphasis on the social and literary history of the text have developed in Anglo-American circles during the twentieth century. These approaches together with the development of different social sciences have given birth to new ways of interpreting the scriptures, such as feminist interpretations, liberationist approaches or the reader-response method, among others. Thus attention has been shifted from the original meaning of a given passage to its effect on those who read it[7].

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[3] D.P. Parris, *Reading the Bible with Giants. How 2000 Years of Biblical Interpretation can Shed New Light on Old Texts*, (London – Atlanta – Hyderabad: Paternoster, 2006), p. xii-xiv.

[4] See the collection of essays edited by Charles Martindale and Richard F. Thomas for a view of how reception history can be applied to the classical texts, C. Martindale – R.F. Thomas, eds., *Classics and the Uses of Reception,* (Classical Reception; Cambridge: Blackwell, 2006). Also the *Classical Receptions Journal* published by Oxford University Press.

[5] For example the authors of Sirach (44:1–50:29), Wisdom (10:1–19:21) and the Letter to the Hebrews (11:1-40) reinterpreted other biblical stories and characters.

[6] Cf. H. Spieckermann, 'From Biblical Exegesis to Reception History', *HeBAI* 1 (2012) p. 327-350 (328-350); N. Klancher, 'A Genealogy of Reception History', *BibInt* 21 (2013), p. 99-129 (101-107).

[7] A.C. Swindell, *Reworking the Bible. The Literary Reception-History of Fourteen Biblical Stories*, (The Bible in the Modern World 30; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2010), p. 7: 'A central feature of literary reception-history is the accumulation of

Some tried to apply the reception history method to the Scriptures in the twentieth century but it was not until the 1990s that there were systematic works of the reception history about the Bible[8], a production which extends vastly into the twenty-first century[9]. The reception theorists[10] have published the results of their research in monographs, collected essays, dictionaries, commentaries and other publications in both online magazines and paper journals[11]. This kind of approach makes use of disciplines other than biblical exegesis and ensures that the afterlife of a given text or story is guaranteed[12]. By identifying and describing the context of each interpretation, reception history enhances the careful exegetical analysis of how the text has been understood down the ages and how it has been used and interpreted in each context.

The philosophical background to reception history is found in the work of Gadamer[13] and his disciples, such as Jauss[14] or Berdini[15]. The concept of learning from the past as a hermeneutical key is important for the above mentioned authors, who link the experience of the viewer to what is re-presented in a given work of art. Gadamer makes a philosophical reflection on what the author can abstract from the given work and the relationship between the subjective perception of a viewer and the intention of the author when he or she depicts a scene. Whenever one is confronted with such a work of art, he or she engages in a double act of interpretation which brings together the painter's understanding of the subject and the viewer's impressions.

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rewriting features such as plot-changes and embellishments, as writers build with varying degrees of deliberateness on each other's work'.

[8] For a comprehensive review of publications, see J.F.A. Sawyer, 'A Critical Review of Recent Projects and Publications', *HeBAI* 1 (2012), p. 298-326 (299-304).

[9] J.F.A. Sawyer, 'A Critical Review', p. 304-321.

[10] There are several research centres dedicated to reception history, cf. H. Spieckermann, 'From Biblical Exegesis', p. 327 n 2.

[11] J.F.A. Sawyer, 'A Critical Review', p. 299-321. Some of the journals are *Relegere: Studies in Religion and Reception* and *Biblical Reception*.

[12] J.F.A. Sawyer, 'A Critical Review', p. 322-324.

[13] H.-G. Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode: grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, (Tübingen: Mohr, 1965[2]).

[14] For a study on Gadamer's and Jauss' thought see D.P. Parris, *Reading the Bible with Giants.*

[15] M. O'Kane, 'Interpreting the Bible', p. 392-398.

The results of this method can also be consulted in two series of commentaries which apply this method to biblical texts, *The Ancient Christian Commentary* and the *Blackwell Bible Commentaries*. The former pays special attention to the interpretation of the Fathers and might be considered a development from *Sources Chrétiennes* and the work of the Oxford movement in translating the Fathers into modern languages. The latter series emphasises the influence of the Bible on literature, art, music and film, its role in the evolution of religious beliefs and practices, and its impact on social and political developments.

De Gruyter has begun the project of the *Encyclopaedia of the Bible and its Reception* collecting interpretations down the centuries as well as how each biblical text has been interpreted by art and other religions[16]. Thus there is a twofold intention in this Encyclopaedia, the first being to comprehensively attest the current knowledge of the origin and development of the Bible in its Jewish and Christian matrix. The second intention is to record the reception of the biblical material in exegetical literature, theological and philosophical writings of different genre, literature, liturgy, music, the visual arts, dance and film as well as Islam and other religious traditions or contemporary movements.

2. The Book of Esther

Whilst there are a number of studies on the artistic interpretations of several biblical stories[17], only a few have ventured to apply this kind

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[16] For a full description of this commentary and other historical approaches to the Patristic writings in German and English, see N. Klancher, 'A Genealogy', p. 107-124.

[17] For example, the collected essays in the following volumes, T. Verdon, ed., *L'arte e la bibbia. Immagine come esegesi biblica*, (Settimello [FI]: Biblia, 1992); J.C. Exum, ed., *Plotted, Shot and Painted. Cultural Representations of Biblical Women,* (JSOT.S 215, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996); J.C. Exum – E. Nutu, eds., *Between the Text and the Canvas. The Bible and Art in Dialogue* (The Bible in the Modern World, Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007); M. O'Kane, *Painting the Text. The Artist as Biblical Interpreter*, (The Bible and the Modern World, Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007); J.C. Exum, *Retellings: The Bible in Literature, Music, Art and Film*, (Leiden – Boston: Brill, 2007) which contains a collection of essays published in the journal *Biblical Interpretation* during 2007; A.C. Swindell, *Reworking the Bible*; just to mention a few.

of explanation on the Meghillah[18]. Among their work I draw attention to Elisabetta Limardo Daturi's monograph on the interpretations of Esther in literature and images[19], Carmen Yebra Rovira's analysis of some paintings of Esther[20] and Jo Carruthers' commentary within the Blackwell Bible Commentary series[21]. Moreover, as part of collective works, Judith S. Neulander, Anthony C. Swindell and Deborah W. Rooke have dedicated chapters to the reception of the Meghillah in popular piety[22], literature[23] and music[24] respectively. Before exploring how the story of Esther has been interpreted by art, I shall review what the story is and how it has been treated in the different versions.

Basic story

Set among the *Meghillot* in the Hebrew bible and associated with the feast of Purim, the Scroll of Esther recounts in a comical manner[25]

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[18] Meghillah is Hebrew for Scroll. I will use this as synonymous with the 'book of Esther'.

[19] E. Limardo Daturi, *Représentation d'Esther entre écritures et images*, (LEIA 3, Bern: Lang, 2004); especially pages 7-29 in which the author gives the *status questionis* and lists studies and monographs dedicated to this topic.

[20] C. Yebra Rovira, 'La figura de Ester: plasmación y trasmisión', *ResB* 56 (2007), p. 53-60.

[21] J. Carruthers, *Esther through the Centuries*, (Series Information Blackwell Bible Commentaries, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).

[22] Both Christian and Jewish piety, cf. J.S. Neulander, 'The Ecumenical Esther: Queen and Saint in Three Western Belief System', in S. White Crawford – L.J. Greenspoon, eds., *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, (JSOT.S 380, London – New York: T & T Clark, 2003), p. 176-199.

[23] Cf. A.C. Swindell, *Reworking the Bible*, p. 160-175.

[24] Cf. D.W. Rooke, *Handel's Israelite Oratorio Libretti: Sacred Drama and Biblical Exegesis*, (Oxford: OUP, 2012), p. 1-31. Also, Ibidem, 'From London to Amsterdam: Handel's *Esther* Reincarnated', in J.K. Aitken – J.M.S. Clines – C.M. Maier, eds., *Interested Readers. Essays on the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David J. A. Clines*, (Atlanta: SBL, 2013), p. 459-473.

[25] Several authors argue that the key to understand the book of Esther is irony (B.W. Jones, 'Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther', *CBQ* 39 (1977) p. 171-181; Y.T. Radday, 'Esther with Humour', in Y.T. Radday – A. Brenner, eds., *On Humour and the Comic in the Hebrew Bible*, (JSOT.S 92, Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1990), p. 295-313; F.B. Huey, 'Irony as a Key to Understanding the Book of Esther',

the story of the Jews in the Persia of king Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) during the time of the Jewish Diaspora. The riches of the imperial court are described in detail in the context of a banquet in which there is an abundance of wine and extravaganza. From the outset, the king meets with rebellions and shows himself weak and in need of constant advice. During one of the banquets he requires Vashti the queen to come into his presence but she refuses and the king dethrones her. A beauty contest is arranged in order to find a suitable replacement, and in the context of this event, the Jewish protagonists of our story are introduced.

Mordecai is a Jew with a high ranking post in the imperial court who is described as fostering his orphaned cousin, Esther. He takes her to the royal palace and since she is 'beautiful and lovely', it comes as no surprise that the king falls in love with her and chooses her to become queen after Vashti. Mordecai uncovers a *coup d'état* against the king and, through Esther, passes on the information to the king who surprisingly does not reward the Jew. Instead a new character, Haman, is exalted and becomes Ahasuerus' vizier. Because of an apparent inter-personal dispute[26], Mordecai does not honour Haman when they meet and, as a consequence, the latter wants to kill Mordecai. Moreover the vizier

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SWJT 32 (1990) p. 36-39.) or the genre of farce (A. Berlin, *Esther*, (The JPS Bible Commentary, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), p. xvi-xxii.), comedy or carnivalesque literature (K.M. Craig, *Reading Esther: A Case for the Literary Carnivalesque*, (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1995).

[26] There is no clear explanation as to why Mordecai refused to bow before Haman. The most plausible explanation can be found in the genealogies of both characters (Cf. W. McKane, 'A Note on Esther IX and 1 Samuel XV', *JTS* 12 (1961) p. 260-261; E. Haag, «Das Esterbuch und die Tradition von Jahwes Krieg gegen Amalek (Ex 17,16)», *TTZ* 112 (2003) p. 19-41; D.G. Firth, «When Samuel Met Esther: Narrative Focalisation, Intertextuality, and Theology», *STR* 1 (2011) p. 15-28, p. 22-27). Mordecai is presented as «the son of Jair, son of Shimei, son of Kish, a Benjaminite» (Esth 2:5). Among the different options for such lineage, the most reasonable choice is to make Mordecai a descendant of king Saul. On the other hand Haman is introduced as «son of Hammedatha the Agagite» (Esth 3:1). Agag was a king of Amalek against whom Saul fought (1 Samuel 15). Hence, the reader can trace the enmity between Mordecai and Haman to Saul and Agag whereas Haman's hostility against the Israelites dates back to the beginnings of Israel's history when the Israelites fought against the Amalekites (Exod 17:8-16; cf. Num 14:43-45; Deut 25:17-19).

decides to eliminate the Jews as well, thus writing an edict decreeing the annihilation of the entire race on a given date. The king signs the decree and the salvation of the Jews is hanging on a fine thread.

Mordecai pleas with Esther and convinces her to intercede for the Jewish people before the king. After a delay of two chapters in the book and as many banquets prepared by the queen for the king and Haman, Esther unmasks the vizier's conspiracy and his role in the plot of destruction of all the Jews. Immediately the king decrees the death penalty against Haman who is hanged together with his sons. However, due to the immutability of Persian law, the Jews are not automatically saved and Haman's edict is counteracted by a decree written by Mordecai and sanctioned by the king in which the Jews are given free range to take revenge on their persecutors. The story ends with the establishment of the feast of Purim to celebrate the day on which mourning was turned into joy and sorrow into gladness.

This basic story is found in the Hebrew bible and might have been inserted to encourage the Jews[27]. However Esther's textual history is long and twisted and attests to the process of formation of the canon of Scriptures. Other than the Masoretic text (MT) there are two Greek versions, i.e. the Septuagint (LXX)[28] and the Alpha text (A-text)[29], two Latin translations (the Vetus Latina and the Vulgate), Josephus' text (*Antiquitates Judaicae* 11, 184-296) and two Targumim, namely Tar-

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[27] S. Goldman, 'Narrative and Ethical Ironies in Esther', 16: 'The ironies in Esther represent a tenable model for survival in the Diaspora and offer insight into how irony functions as both a narrative device and as an ethical value in the story'. cf. B.W. Jones, «Two Misconceptions», p. 171.

[28] LXX is also called the B-text, since its best witness is the Codex Vaticanus and *o'*- text because of the Gottingen Septuagint edition.

[29] The A-text is also known as the *L*-text because it was believed to be the Lucianic recension of the LXX. Carey A. Moore has, however, proved that this view is mistaken, cf. C.A. Moore, 'A Greek Witness to a Different Hebrew Text of Esther', *ZAW* 79 (1969), p. 351-358 (358); Id., *Esther. Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, (AB 7; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971), p. LXII; D.J.A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll. The Story of the Story*, (JSOT.S 30; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), p. 72; M.V. Fox, *The Redaction of the Book of Esther. On Reading Composite Texts*, (SBL.MS 40; Atlanta, GA: Scholars, 1991) p. 14-17.

gum Rishon and Targum Sheni[30]. All these numerous versions of Esther, with their variant readings, make scholars hypothesise the existence of other forms of the text in a Semitic language that have since been lost[31].

The Story of Esther in the Different Versions

As I have described, MT Esther is a tale of salvation which is achieved through the intervention of two Jews. The story is set in a despotic court ruled by a monarch whose will changes depending on who provides him with advice. The Meghillah is not a religious tale and God is not the main actor in the drama of liberation. The deity is not mentioned neither is Jerusalem, nor Jewish religious practices, such as prayer, sacrifice or dietary regulations. Salvation and deliverance are the sole responsibility of Esther and Mordecai, who achieved them by the slaughter of the enemies of the Jews which happens once the crisis has passed (Esth 9:14-15.16). Thus Mordecai becomes a model of Jewish conduct in the court of a tyrant.

The Meghillah's 'secular' characteristics, coupled with the book's violence have made its acceptance difficult. Some authors postulate that the name of God was present and then was edited out by the final redactor of MT[32]. Whether this was the case or not, there was a conscious decision not to mention God, even though God's presence is felt through the series of coincidences and reversals of fortunes which appear in this book[33].

The Septuagint follows the MT, even though at places the Hebrew text is translated freely or paraphrased. At a first reading there are two major differences between MT and LXX: first God is explicitly

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[30] B. Grossfeld, ed., *Two Targum of Esther Translated, with Apparatus and Notes*, (ArBib 18; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991).

[31] J. Vílchez, *Rut y Ester*, (NBE; Narraciones II, Estella: Verbo Divino, 1998), p. 166.

[32] M.V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, [2]2001), p. 264: 'R-MT [the redactor of MT] did not expand the religious dimensions of the drama. If the references to God in the proto AT were present in proto Esther, R-MT pushed God farther into the background'. According to L.S. Fried, 'Towards the *Ur*-Text of Esther', *JSOT* 88 (2000), p. 49-57 (56), there is no logical explanation as to why a redactor would have deleted the mentions of God and all the other religious experiences in order to create a text.

[33] Cf. F.J. Ruiz Ortiz, 'Cuando Dios esconde su rostro. Estudio de la ausencia de Dios en el libro masorético de Ester', *Estudia Cordobensia* 6 (2013), p. 213-230.

named and invoked and second the Masoretic text is enlarged by the so called 'addition. Even though this terminology is not utterly exact, we will adopt it. These 'additions' are integral to the text and, since there is no textual witness in which the additions are not present, they must be considered as part of an original narrative[34]. There are six additions which are named A, B, C, D, E and F and second. In this way, the text is changed quantitatively by the addition of 106 verses and qualitatively by the mention of God and the inclusion of several prayers.

Addition A is inserted as the prologue to the Meghillah and consists of two parts, Mordecai's dream involving two dragons which fight until one is defeated and an account of Mordecai's uncovering of a plot against the king devised by two eunuchs. Addition B reports the text of Haman's decree against the Jewish people while addition E gives the details of Mordecai's decree of salvation. The prayers of Mordecai and Esther are reported in addition C and Esther's appearance in the presence of Ahasuerus is largely described and embellished in addition D. The final addition provides the interpretation of Mordecai's dream from the first addition.

These additions, which are set in the body of the text[35], and the free rendering of the translation, change significantly the story of Esther. God is invoked and named in several instances, there are long prayers and the story begins with a prophetic-type dream and ends with the interpretation of that dream. God is the main actor and instigator of Israel's deliv-

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[34] K. De Troyer – M.-T. Wacker, 'Esther. Das Buch Ester (LXX und A-Text)', in M. Karrer – W. Kraus, eds, *Septuaginta Deutsch. Erläuterungen und Kommentare zum griechischen Alten Testament*, (Band I; Stuttgart: Deutsche Biblegesellschaft, 2011), p. 8; D. Candido, *I testi del libro di Ester. Il caso dell'Introitus TM 1,1-22 – LXX A1-17; 1,1-22 – Ta A1-18; 1,1-21*, (AnBib 160; Roma: Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 2005), p. 349: 'In realtà, grazie agli studi tesi a ricostruire il processo redazionale di Est ebraico e greco è possibile riconciliarsi con il fatto che Est^{LXX} non esiste se non nella sua integrità, cioè come narrazione composta anche delle sei *ssp* [sezioni di testo proprie di Est^{gr}]. Senza questa consapevolezza, si rischia anzitutto di interpretare la natura di questi testi fuori dal loro contesto, presumendone un'autonomia di cui, in concreto, non godono'.

[35] C.A. Moore, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, (AB 44; New York: Doubleday, 1977), p. 168: 'It is a serious mistake to read the Additions out of context, i.e., either *after* reading the canonical portion (as in the Vulgate) or *without* any canonical text at all (as in most 'Protestant' Bibles, e.g. KJ, RSV, NEB, *et alia*)'.

erance and changes the fortunes of the Jewish people in two instances. Further, the establishment of the festival of Purim is reduce in emphasis and the sense of vengeance and cruelty is less underlined. Therefore the Greek additions make the text of Esther more readable for a religious audience and also make it more appealing to a pagan readership which might be put off by the excess violence of MT. Furthermore, these additions follow the Jewish style of narrating as it is seen in Ezra, Nehemiah, Daniel and other parts of the Scriptures[36] thus inserting LXX Esther in the biblical tradition.

The A-text fascinates authors and has been the focus of many studies. It also contains the six additions but is slightly shorter than LXX. Despite its similarities to LXX, the A-text includes some material which is not present in either the LXX or MT and which attests to a different *Vorlage*: 1. A-text lacks the theme of the immutability of the Persian law; 2. The story of the conspiracy of the eunuchs in A-text is only told once, in Addition A; 3. A-text omits the expansion of the battle reports, the second day of fighting and celebration, the Purim aetiology and the epilogue in 10:1-3. 4. A-text magnifies the role of Mordecai over Esther's, emphasises the political dynamics of the Jews in relationship to the pagan empire and shows that the Jews who are in influential positions are beneficial not only to their kin but also to the king and the empire.

The Vetus Latina is a Latin translation of the LXX done around the second century C.E. whereas the Vulgate is a translation of the MT produced by Jerome around the fourth century C.E. In the Vulgate, Jerome puts the additions which are scattered in the Greek text all together at the end of his translation of the Hebrew text. However, in this way, the additions lose their meaning since they are removed from their natural context.

Each of these versions of Esther differs from the others and reflects different stages in the development of the text. Thus the book of Esther is a clear example of how the biblical text was composed, transmitted and interpreted even after the Masoretic text was established.

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[36] D.J.A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, p. 169-170. J.D. Levenson, *Esther. A Commentary*, (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1997), p. 30-31.

3. Reception History of the Book of Esther

Other than the above mentioned interpretations of the Meghillah by the different versions of the text there are two Targumim. As time passed some Christian Fathers used some sections of the book of Esther but no one commented on it entirely till the ninth century when Rhabanus Maurus produced a commentary of the whole Scroll[37]. His work thus became a reference point for solving the dispute among some of the Western and Eastern Fathers about the canonicity of Esther in the early years of Christianity[38]. At the time of the Reformation, Luther declared that he would not be sad if Esther and 2 Maccabees disappeared from the canon due to their nationalistic character[39]. In the modern age, Lewis Paton complained that 'there is no noble character in the book [....] Morally, Est. falls far below the general level of the OT, and even of the Apocrypha'[40]. However, both Jewish and Protestant commentators accepted the Meghillah as an inspired text.

Whereas no book of the Old Testament makes any reference to Esther, there is a question about whether or not the Megillah is quoted in the New Testament. The story of Herod's banquet and his promise to the daughter of Herodias has been questioned as a possible reference to the Meghillah by the gospel of Mark (6:14-29)[41]. It can be affirmed that its author was familiar with a version of the story of Esther but cannot say whether or not this was his sole inspiration. Modern commentators have given a Christian interpretation to the book of Esther connecting

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[37] J. Vílchez, *Rut y Ester*, p. 195: 'El recelo se manifiesta de forma clara al no aparecer comentario al libro de Ester hasta el siglo IX con Rabano Mauro (año 831)'. This commentary is published in *PL* 109, p. 635-670.

[38] R. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and its Background in Early Judaism*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 295-297. The Jews had also discussed whether or not the Meghillah 'defiled the hands' (cf. *Babylonian Talmud*, 7a).

[39] M. Luther, *Tischreden*, vol. I, p. 208.

[40] L.B. Paton, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther*, (ICC; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908), p. 96.

[41] So Myles Nolan defends by showing that Herod's saying to Herodias' daughter (Mark 6:23) is similar to Ahasuerus' promise to Esther (Esth 5:3), M. Nolan, 'Esther in the New Testament', *PIBA* 15(1992) p. 60-65.

it with New Testament passages[42] and Pino di Luccio believes that the concept of peripeteia, as expressed in the Meghillah, is at the basis of some gospel stories[43]. Further, the Catholic liturgy sets the book of Esther as a model of prayer and intercession and as such proclaims it in three occasions through the year[44].

By contrast the Meghillah was very popular among the Jews because of its connection to Purim[45] and it should be read as the most Jewish book of the Bible[46]. The early Jewish interpretation of the Meghillah resulted in the Greek versions of this book and the paraphrase that Josephus makes of it in his *Antiquities*. There is a tractate of the Mishna containing halakhic discussion on the place, time and length of the book that should be read on the feast of Purim. The oral discussion of the Mishnah on the Meghillah are gathered in the *Gemara* and assembled into the Talmud. The Jewish on-going interpretation resulted in two Targumim dating from the seventh century (Targum Rishon) and the ninth century (Targum Sheni) containing halakhic and haggadic materials as well as the Aramaic translation of the Hebrew text. The first Jewish exegetical commentary to the Meghillah is known as the *Esther*

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[42] B.G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments. Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther*, (NSBT 10; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), p. 128-133; A.M. Rodríguez, *Esther. A Theological Approach*, (Merrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1995).

[43] P. di Luccio, 'Il cambio delle sorti alla fine del processo di Gesù', *CivCatt* 3834 (2010), p. 544-556; Id., 'La *Megillá* de Ester y el *Magnificat* de María de Nazaret', *EE* 86 (2011), p. 39-55.

[44] Esther's prayer (Esth 4:17k-t) is read at Mass on Thursday of week I of Lent; Esther is read at the feast of St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (9th August) and some chosen passages are read at the Office of Readings on Monday to Thursday of the twenty-ninth week of Ordinary Time. In this instance the book of Esther is coupled with the letter of St. Augustine to Proba, a treatise on Christian entreaty and prayer.

[45] J. Carruthers, *Esther*, p. 10-12.

[46] R. Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics. How to Read the Bible Politically*, (London: SPCK, 1989), p. 130: 'Esther's relevance for Christians ought to derive, in the first place, from the fact that, while becoming less of a Christian book than almost any other book of the Old Testament, Esther has remained a Jewish book, whose annual reading at Purim, throughout the centuries of persecution, needed no interpretation to make it relevant to contemporary experience. In the light of this history, Christians would do well to read Esther precisely as a Jewish book whose presence in the Christian Bible claims Christian attention'.

Rabbah 1 and dates from the sixth century and consists of a midrash and collection of different materials. A second midrash on Esther, *Esther Rabbah 2*, was composed by the tenth century and contained some of the Greek parts of the Meghillah. The medieval Jewish scholarship of Ibn Ezra produced a lexical and grammatical commentary on Esther following the ideas of Rashi[47].

Visual images

The first images interpreting the Meghillah are the illustrations of the Jewish scrolls[48] or Christian codices and *Biblia Pauperum*[49]. It is worth noting the frescos of the Dura Europos synagogue (Syria) preserved in the Damascus museum representing the Triumph of Mordecai and the feast of Purim and which date from the third C.E.[50]. Christians represented biblical cycles in the stained glass windows of medieval cathedrals produced with a didactic aim. These reproduced the allegorical interpretation of the Fathers and hence coupled Esther with the Virgin

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47 Cf. C.A. Moore, 'Esther, Book of (and Additions)', in J.H. Hayes, ed., *Dictionary of Biblical Interpretation, Volume I: A-J*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009, p. 349-353, (349-350).

48 Cf. M. Metzger, 'The John Rylands Megillah and Some Other Illustrated Megilloth of the XVth to XVth Centuries', *BJRL* 45 (1962) p. 148-184 (149-182); O.Z. Soltes, 'Images and the Book of Esther: From Manuscript Illumination to Midrah', in S. White Crawford – L.J. Greenspoon, eds., *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*, (JSOT.S 380; London – New York: T & T Clark International, 2003), p. 137-175. (159-175). This work includes pictures of the frescoes of the Dura Europos synagogue; I. Carbajosa, *El rollo de Ester de la catedral de Madrid. Edición facsímil*, (Madrid: Universidad San Dámaso, 2012).

49 For example the Bible of Alba (1433), cf. E. Limardo Daturi, *Représentations d'Esther*, p. 152-153. For other picture, see J. Carruthers, *Esther*, 63.70.248.

50 A. Luzzatto, «L'aniconismo ebraico tra immagine e simbolo», in T. Verdon, ed., *L'arte e la bibbia. Immagine come esegesi biblica*, (Settimello [FI]: Biblia, 1992), p. 87-101 (98): «[...] le pareti [della sinagoga di Dura Europos] sono abbondantemente ricoperte di disegni con ricche raffigurazioni umane. Queste figure sono una autentica narrazione animata di storia sacra. Potremmo addirittura parlare di una scrittura per immagini, che alle volte sconfina nella esegerica, quasi fosse una traduzione commentata».

Mary[51], and passages of the story of Esther with the life of Christ. Thus, Medieval Christian readings of Esther understood 'by Ahasuerus Christ reigning far and wide, by Vashti the Jewish Synagogue, by Esther, the Church of the Gentiles, by Haman, the Devil, and by Mordecai, Paul and the other Apostles'[52].These interpretations were developed during the Renaissance when the cycle of paintings were substituted by individual representations interpreting the current political, social and religious situation.

Limardo Daturi reviews the representation of different episodes of the Meghillah and how they are represented by different artists from the illuminated manuscripts to Renaissance art. Her research takes place within the Jewish and Christian worlds and she organises the material into seven categories, each chosen for the considerable frequency of works depicting the given scene, such as 'The vanishing of Vashti', 'Esther before Ahasuerus', 'The triumph of Mordecai' or 'Esther's second banquet'[53]. At the end of her dissertation, she provides an interesting index of paintings divided up by period, region and author[54].

Some of the paintings described are given a theological interpretation. For example the Veronese cycle of "Esther being crowned by Ahasuerus"; "Vashti Banished" and "The triumph of Mordecai" in the Church of San Sebastiano in Venice (1556)[55]. These images are interpreted as the triumph of faith over heresy commenting on the then current situation due to the Protestant crisis and the workings of the council of Trent[56]. Another example is Vasari's 'Marriage of Ahasuerus to Esther' (1561-62) painted following Rhabanus Maurus' allegorical interpretation of the scene. According to the medieval commentator Vashti represented

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[51] As shown in Chartres sculptures and the stained windows of the St Chapele; cf. J. Carruthers, *Esther through the Centuries*, 15. For literary work, see Ib., 28.

[52] Rhabanus Maurus as quoted in J. Carruthers, *Esther through the Centuries*, 28; cf. also C.A. Moore, 'Esther, book of', p. 350.

[53] E. Limardo Daturi, *Représentations d'Esther*; p. 146-207.

[54] E. Limardo Daturi, *Représentations d'Esther*; p. 271-289.

[55] M. Kahr, 'The Meaning of Veronese's Paintings in the Church of San Sebastiano in Venice', *JWCI* 33 (1970) p. 235-247 (239-242). Cf. E. Limardo Daturi, *Représentations d'Esther*, p. 162-164.

[56] M. Kahr, 'The Meaning of Veronese's Paintings', p. 239. E. Limardo Daturi, *Représentations d'Esther,* p. 164.

the synagogue which is rejected while Esther is an image of the Church which takes the place of the old order[57].

Yet another example can be found in the Sistine Chapel. In 1511-1513 while the Protestant crisis was hitting Europe, Michelangelo painted the death of Haman alongside the stories of the Bronze serpent, David and Goliath and Judith and Holofernes on the ceiling of the Sistine chapel. In all four stories there is a divine intervention to save God's people through the hands of two men and two women, two of whom are young, while the other two are old[58].

In the Sistine chapel Haman is no longer hanged but nailed to a cross in the shape of St Andrew's cross. Michelangelo thus departs from the traditional depiction of Haman's punishment upon the scaffold. He seems to be influence by both the Vulgate in which *crux* is the translation in 5:14 and the description of this scene portrayed by Dante. Painting Haman in such a painful manner is an image of the anti-hero and is clearly set in contrast with Christ. This representation is interpreted by a commentator as: «Whatever the artist's precise narrative intentions, this is essentially a painting about wickedness judged, and punished»[59]. The scene is completed by the depiction of the insomnia of Ahasuerus and Esther's second banquet.

Limardo Daturi's work does not extend the Renaissance period, thus leaving a vacuum for subsequent periods[60]. Even though no monograph has been published dealing with this period, my survey of different artists and their creations keeps the topics more or less already separated. A study of the images of Esther attests to the changing models of beauty as well as the different approaches to the scenes depicted. In principle, Protestants made their painting simpler and more austere while Catho-

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[57] Vasari adds an explanatory inscription to the painting: 'Desponsata Ecclesia et Reiecta Synagoga', cf. E.Limardo Daturi, *Représentations d'Esther*; p. 74.160.

[58] J. Dupu, 'Esther: Bible et poésie dramatique', *FrRev* 64 (1991), p. 607-620 (609-610).

[59] A. Graham-Dixon, *Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel*, (London: Phoenix, 2009), p. 126.

[60] Limardo Daturi mentions Madlyn Kahr's doctoral thesis on the relationship between Rembrandt, his painting and the book of Esther, cf. E. Limardo Daturi, *Représentations d'Esther*, p. 15-16.

lics interpreted the meeting between Esther and the king as a meeting of God with Mary and her crowning after she was assumed into heaven.

Literature

There are several lists of poems, plays, *autos de fe* and novels written on the basis of the Esther story dating from the sixteenth century to the present day[61]. Some of the works are archetypal because of their unprecedented innovations and should be added to the classical Jewish *Purimshpil*[62]. Other than the eponymous texts bearing the name of one or several of the characters of the Meghillah, some scholars mention other titles inspired by our biblical story[63]. reading through them, we discover that Esther is the story which has better adapted to the challenges of the ages[64]. For example Dante sets Haman's punishment as an example of the chastisement produced in the angry people. As mentioned in the precious section, Dante described Haman's punishment as crucifixion under the influence of the Jewish celebration of Purim in which there was the staging of a mock crucifixion of a puppet who represented the Agagite[65]. Haman

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[61] These listings consist of more than 100 titles in over 12 languages. Cf. F. Doglio, 'Catalogo di titoli d'opere drammatiche ispirate alla bibbia' in Id., ed., *Il teatro e la bibbia*, (Il Grande Codice 3; Roma: Garamond, 1995), p. 217-260 (221. 229-230. 242); G. del Olmo Lete, *La biblia hebrea en la literature. Guía temática y bibliográfica*, (Textos Docents 357; Barcelona: Publicacions I Edicions UB, 2010), p.161-164; E. Limardo Daturi, *Représentations d'Esther*, 83-101; J. Carruthers, *Esther*, p. 13-21.

[62] Cf. G. del Olmo Lete, *La biblia hebrea*, 27-28. *Purimshpil* is 'monologue or group performances given at the traditional festive family meal held on the festival of Purim', C. Shmeruk, 'Purim-Shpil', *EJ* XVI, p. 744-746 (744).

[63] For example Cervantes' *La gran sultana* [cf. R. Fine, 'Los rostros de Ester. Tres versiones dramáticas auriseculares del libro de Ester: *La hermosa Ester* de Lope de Vega, *La reina Ester* de Godínez y *La gran sultana* de Cervantes', *Hispania Judaica* 7 (2010), p. 233-259. (251-258)] or other more recent titles such as Dickens' *Bleak House* (1852) or Rebecca Kohn's *The Gilded Chamber* (2004); for a short summary of contemporary novels inspired by the book of Esther, see A.C. Swindell, *Reworking the Bible*, 163-175.

[64] R. Fine, '«Siendo yo hebrea, señor»: una lectura de *la reina Ester* de Felipe Godinez en clave conversa', in A. Azaustre Galiana – S. Fernández Mosquera, *Compostella Aurea. Actas del VIII Congreso dela AISO (Santiago DE Compostela, 7-11 julio de 2008)*, (Santiago de Compostela: Universidade, 2011), p. 1495-1503 (p. 1495-1503).

[65] A. Graham-Dixon, *Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel*, 127.

is surrounded by Ahasuerus, Esther and Mordecai who is described as the repository of all virtue (*Purgatorio*, XVII, 25-30):

> In my raised fantasy, one crucified
> Rained down thereafterward, of scornful mood
> And rancorous in mien, and so he died.
> Around him great Ahasuerus stood
> Esther his wife, just Mordecai, he who
> In word and deed was of such rectitude[66].

The literary production of biblical inspiration increased in the sixteenth century after the Jews were expelled from Spain in 1492 and from Portugal four years later. The "new Christians" emigrated following two main routes and settled in present day Holland and in Venice[67]. People like Pinto Delgado in 1627[68] or Godinez produced influential works interpreting the present political situation in the light of the events recounted in the Meghillah[69]. Holland was a particularly fertile soil for political interpretations of biblical stories in general and of the story of Esther in particular by which the Dutch were God's chosen people in conflict with the adversaries and liberated by the divine will[70]. Given the limitations of space I have chosen to focus on two literary works as rep-

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[66] 'Poi piove dentro all' alta fantasia un crocifisso dispettoso e fero ne la sua vista, e cotal si moria. Intorno ad esso era il grande Assuero, Ester sua sposa e il giusto Mardocheo che fu al dire ed al far così intero' (trans. M.B. Anderson, *The Divine Comedy. Purgatory*, (OUP: London, 1929), p.162-163.

[67] Esther becomes the example of the *marranismo* since she hid her identity in order to save her people. Among the literary works produced by the *marranos*, see *La reina Ester* by Salomón Usque (1558) or *La comedia famosa de Amán y Mordochay* by David Cohen de Lara (1699) published in Italy and Holland respectively (cf. R. Fine, 'Los rostros de Ester', p. 240-241).

[68] Cf. for a comparative study of Pinto's work with Lope de Vega's, see A.D.H. Fishlock, 'Lope de Vega's *La hermosa Ester* and Pinto Delgado's *Poema de la Reyna Ester*: a comparative study', *BHispSt* 32 (1955), p. 81-97. Fishlock shows how Pinto based his work not only on Lope de Vega's and rabbinical sources but also on other biblical texts. In this way Pinto appears as an outstanding example of poetic creation.

[69] Godínez wrote two plays on the Meghillah *La reina Ester* (1613) y *Amán y Mardoqueo* (1653), cf. R. Fine, 'Los rostros de Ester', 244-251. For a more detailed study of *La reina Ester*, See R. Fine, '«Siendo yo hebrea, señor»', 1497-1502.

[70] E. Limardo Daturi, *Représentations d'Esther*, p. 99-100.

resentative of different approaches to the biblical text of Esther: Lope de Vega's *La Hermosa Esther* and Racine's *Esther*.

Felix Lope de Vega y Carpio (1562-1635) worked mainly at the court of Philip II in Madrid. In 1610 he produced *La Tragicomedia de la hermosa Ester* which was performed in Madrid and Seville that same year and finally published 11 years later[71]. *La hermosa Ester* became Lope de Vega's first biblical story to follow the pattern of a *comedia*[72]. The Spanish author is faithful to the text of the Vulgate and the changes made to the biblical plot can be traced back to the Talmud, Josephus, Lope's knowledge of the Scriptures or his own insights[73]. For example he plays down the wine consumption at the banquet while highlighting Vashti's responsibility for her dethronement. After the deliverance of the Israelites, the Jewish people burst into praise and the play finishes in this high note. There is no account of the execution of Haman's ten children or of the revenge taken on the Persians, in this way, '*La hermosa Ester* is a drama of deliverance and not revenge'[74] in which pride is conquered and humility rewarded[75].

From a theological point of view there are two important characteristics that Lope de Vega develops. First Esther is presented as a new Mary[76] and second Lope does not call Esther's people Jews but Hebrews

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[71] A. González, 'Mecanismos dramáticos de Lope de Vega: "La hermosa Ester" del texto bíblico al texto teatral', in F. Domínguez Matito – J.A. Martínez Berbel, eds., *La biblia en el teatro español*, (Lugo: Academia de Hispanismo, 2012), p. 377-386 (377).

[72] E. Glaser, 'Lope de Vega's "La hermosa Ester"', *Sefarad* 20 (1960) p. 110-135. (110). The Meghillah had been the subject of different *autos de fe* in the XVI century (R. Fine, 'Los rostros de Ester', p. 240).

[73] E. Glaser, 'Lope de Vega's "La Hermosa Ester"', 125: 'For Lope, fidelity to the source never means renouncing his creative freedom as the construction of the scenes and the development of their dramatic potentialities show'.

[74] E. Glaser, 'Lope de Vega's "La Hermosa Ester"', p. 129.

[75] F. Lope de Vega y Carpio, *La hermosa Ester*, (Barcelona: Linkgua, 2007) p. 120: '[Ahasuerus says] La casa y huertas de Amán, y sus tesoros, entrego a Mardoqueo y Ester, porque demos fin con esto a la soberbia de Amán y humildad de Mardoqueo'. With these words Lope finishes his tragicomedia, punishing pride, anger and envy and rewarding humility, generosity and kindness (cf. A. González, 'Mecanismos dramáticos de Lope de Vega', p. 384).

[76] E. Glaser, 'Lope de Vega's "La Hermosa Ester"', p. 131-134.

instead. This category has a theological foundation since Christians are the heir of the Hebrew people while the denomination Jew has a negative connotation linked with the Exile and God's punishment[77].

Jean Racine (1639-1699)[78] was a French playwright who was commissioned to compose a work to develop piety and morals among the young pupils of St Cyr's girls' school. In 1688 he produced the three-act biblical play of Esther which had Esther as its theme and which follows the Greek tragedy model[79]. Racine was a Catholic and used LXX in writing his play even though he changed the biblical story in order to meet his commission. In the first act Esther appears recounting how she became a queen. She is met by Mordecai who tells her of Haman's decree of extermination of the Jews and encourages her to plead on behalf of her people before the king. Act II begins with Haman revealing that, even though his race and Mordecai's are ancient enemies, the stubbornness of the Jew is the only reason for the vizier's desire to annihilate the Jewish people. The act continues with the insomnia of the king, his realisation that Mordecai had not been rewarded, the order given to Haman to parade Mordecai followed by Esther's visit to the king in order to invite him and Haman for a meal at her residence. In the third act, Esther reveals her identity during the meal at which both Ahasuerus and Haman are present. The vizier is condemned, Mordecai is rewarded and the Jews are free to return home and rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

There are two main changes when confronted with the biblical story: the location of the story and Esther's characterisation. The story as recounted by Racine happens at the end of the exile and finishes with the return of the Jews to Palestine where they rebuild the Temple in Jerusalem. In this way the French artist manages to shift the interest from an ethnic focus on the deported nation which was being punished for its sins to a more religious interpretation open to a Christian explanation[80].

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77 R. Fine, 'Los rostros de Ester', p. 242.

78 For a summary of some previous literary works in French and some of the political or other interpretations, see J. Dupu, 'Esther', p. 610-612.

79 The main characteristics of the Greek tragic genre were the division into three acts rather than five and the extensive use of choruses [cf. P Degott, 'De Racine à Haendel: les tribulations d'Esther', BSEAA 52 (2001), p. 35-50 (37-38)].

80 The awaiting of the Messiah is made clear when Esther prays before going to meet Ahasuerus: 'Ainsi donc un perfide, après tant de miracles, pourrait anéantir la foi

The story is described as a tragedy and underlines the melancholy and sadness of the fate of Jerusalem and its people. With the return to the Promised Land, Racine's account finished happily. The French author avoids thus the massacre of the Persians described in Esther 9 and the moral problem posed by the actions undertaken by the Jews.

Secondly Esther is not characterised by her external beauty but for her religiosity and piety[81]. Her trust in God is put to the test by the events of the decreed pogrom but her resoluteness is praised at the end of the *opus* by the Jewish choirs. In this way, Racine could set the Persian queen as a desirable example for the young aristocratic ladies of St. Cyr and an understandable story in his seventeenth-century context[82].

Music

A recent study on Handel's Israelite Oratorios devotes its first chapter to the composer's first Israelite Oratorio which is based on the story of Esther and Racine's interpretation of the biblical drama[83].

Georg Friedich Handel (1685-1759) was born in Germany but later moved to England where he worked from 1712. While working at the court of George I Handel started to compose oratorios, of which *Esther* was the first example. Nothing is known about who commissioned it or who was responsible for the libretto but it is certain that it was based on Racine's *Esther* and went through different transformations from its

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de tes oracles, ravirait aux mortels le plus cher de tes dons, le saint que tu promets et que nous attendons?' (*Esther*, 265-269).

[81] For example: both Esther's first words and final utterance in the play are prayers (*Esther*, 1-10; 1198-1199) while she believes that God was involved in Ahasuerus choosing her as queen (*Esther*, 65-76) and is in distress because of the ruin of Jerusalem (*Esther*, 81-87). Religion is also evident when Mordecai encourages Esther to plead for the good of her people because God sends her even with the possibility of self-sacrifice on behalf of her people (*Esther*, 205-238). Further, the religious character of the work is sung in the final scene by the Jewish choirs: 'Dieu fait triompher l'innocence: Chantons, célébrons sa puissance [...] Que son nom soit béni, que son nom soit chanté! Que l'on célèbre ses ouvrages au delà des temps et des âges, au delà de l'éternité!' (*Esther*, 1200-1201. 1283-1286).

[82] D.W. Rooke, *Handel's Israelite Oratorio Libretti*, p. 7-15. For a political interpretation based on French society, see P Degott, 'De Racine à Haendel', p. 38-39.

[83] D.W. Rooke, *Handel's Israelite Oratorio Libretti*, p. 1-29.

first appearance in 1718 to its second edition in 1732. In studying the libretto, one should have in mind that Racine's work was translated into English by Thomas Brereton in 1715, a translation which influenced the musical opus.

The 1718 libretto has a three-act structure. In the first act Haman declares the annihilation of the Jews and Esther is presented as the new queen. In the second act Mordecai convinces Esther to plead on behalf of her people before the king. She goes to the throne room and, after fainting in the monarch's presence, invites the king and Haman to dinner. The final act sees the unveiling of Haman's plot, his condemnation and the raising of Mordecai. Haman laments his downfall while the choir of the Jews sing triumphant praises.

The setting is exilic rather than diasporic and the stress is on a religious conflict while undermining the violence present in the biblical account and omitting the celebration of Purim. The overall tone is more positive than Racine's but not as comical as the biblical account. The exilic setting develops trust in God in the knowledge that the appointment of Esther as queen would mean the salvation of the Jewish people. The main difference with Racine's work is the focus on the Israelite chorus rather than on Esther. The choruses are independent from the queen and form a 'character' in their own right. On the other hand, Esther's beauty is downplayed while her main characteristics are her spiritual qualities as a servant of God and as a righteous queen. Esther is presented in a new light when she offers herself as an expiatory victim on behalf of her people: 'Hear, O God, thy Servant's Prayer: is it blood that must atone, take, O take my life alone; and thy chosen people spare'[84]. In this way the focus is shifted from her actions to their effects on and for the people.

The thrust of this libretto is that God had chosen a pious representative to save his chosen people from the attacks of evil people. In eighteenth-century Protestant England, one possible interpretation of the story as recounted in this libretto is the exultation of the British

[84] Quoted in D.W. Rooke, *Handel's Israelite Oratorio Libretti*, 22. This idea appears in Brereton's English translation of Racine but applied to Mordecai who would accept annihilation on behalf of his people because of the sin committed (Ibid., 23).

monarch established by God to defend the English nation against the attacks of the Catholic powers[85].

Fourteen years later a new, longer libretto written by Samuel Humpheys was set to music by Handel. There are some variants from the original work such as the pre-eminence of the chorus' praise of God and the inclusion of two Coronation anthems previously composed by Handel. Some other changes bring this libretto closer to the biblical account, for example, the Israelites are in the Diaspora not desiring to go back to the promised land as long as they are free to worship God. The demeanour of the oratorio is extremely positive and encouraging in terms of God's faithfulness and love. The central role is divided into three parts: the queen; her people and Ahasuerus. The people take a role as a group to be saved. Esther acquires a more prominent role, appears from the first scene and her beauty is the reason why she is chosen as queen as Mordecai praises this in song. She is aware that the preservation of her people's lives depends on her own life as well. Ahasuerus is also described more positively and is transformed from an enemy into a friend[86].

This final transformation must be the result of a desire to flatter the royal family. The royal couple, George and Caroline, were to be understood as the instruments chosen by God to preserve the chosen English people. Thus Handel's *Esther* becomes an instrument of royal propaganda exalting the monarch appointed by God to defend the British people.

The changes to Handel's libretto continued during his life. In each of its fifty performances, the author made slight alterations to improve the final result. However he was not alone in this work and others were inspired by Handel's Oratorio. One of the most significant adaptations of Handel's work was produced by rabbi Jacob Saraval (1708-1782) who translated into Hebrew the English original. He did not render literally the libretto but made some adaptations which added some Jewish elements to the work. The main changes were in three areas: first he minimised the status of earthly kings, second he lessened the exilic context while exalting the diasporic and third he added biblical references. In this way, Saraval made

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[85] Cf. D.W. Rooke, *Handel's Israelite Oratorio Libretti*, p. 24-25.

[86] Cf. D.W. Rooke, *Handel's Israelite Oratorio Libretti*, p. 25-31.

the libretto more appealing to his kin by adapting it to the socio-political context of the Jews in eighteenth century Europe[87].

4. Conclusion

The spread of the story of Esther and its various interpretations owes to the exile that the *marranos* suffered after 1492. Their emigration together with the political understanding of the text in Protestant nations meant that the literary and pictorial explanations of the Meghillah spread throughout Europe[88]. Thus the artistic interpretations of the Meghillah are the result of a new reading of the canonical texts aided by the Jewish interpretative currents and the Christian vision of the Meghillah's main features.

The most influential interpretation of the Meghillah in the western world was given by Rhabanus and was transmitted into the different artistic manifestations in which the book of Esther was explained allegorically. In concluding this study of Esther's reception history I would like to make a final consideration regarding two features which have been left out by different artists. First, other than Theodore Chassereieu's 'The Toilette of Esther' (1841) in which Esther is depicted partially nude while preparing to meet Ahasuerus, there is no other depiction of Esther's nudity. This is striking because Esther's beauty is exalted in the Meghillah and because other biblical female characters are extensively depicted unclothed.

Second, apart from Haman's punishment in the Sistine chapel and some examples from illuminated Scrolls of Esther, the inherent violence of the Meghillah is not taken up by any of the artists dealing with this story. Neither the extreme cruelty of chapter 9 nor the death of the eunuchs nor the punishment of Haman and his children is represented in any artistic work I have consulted. Considering that the representation of Haman's punishment in the Sistine chapel was understood as an anti-type of Christ's own death, there is no painting of violence *per se*. This finding is rather perplexing above all when other biblical accounts signalled by violence such as the death of Holofernes and of Sisera are

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87 Cf. D.W. Rooke, 'From London to Amsterdam', p. 461-473.

88 E. Limardo Daturi, *Représentations d'Esther*, p. 100-101.

widely attested. I conclude therefore that the western sensibility, informed by the work of Rhabanus Maurus, has found this feature of Esther rather disturbing and has ignored it. Esther thus becomes a model of virtue, intercession, and submission to the divine will both in Protestant, Catholic and Jewish circles.

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