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Has Every Book of the Bible Been Found Among the Dead Sea Scrolls?

by Sidnie White Crawford

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It is a commonplace that every book of the Hebrew Bible except Esther has been found among the Dead Sea Scrolls. Actually, this is true only if you count Ezra-Nehemiah as one book—as, indeed, it is so regarded in Jewish tradition—since only a fragment of Ezra, but not Nehemiah, has been identified.

But why not Esther? Some have suggested theological reasons: Esther is not a particularly religious book; it lacks any interest in Judah and its cultic institutions; and it has a sympathetic view toward the gentile King Ahasuerus. Moreover, it is the only book of the Hebrew Bible that does not mention the name of God.*

Others have suggested that it's a matter of happenstance. There may well have been a copy or copies of Esther among the scrolls, but they did not survive.

In 1992 the direction of the discussion drastically changed, for in that year J. T. Milik published a fragmentary (as usual) text he claimed was a model or source for the book of Esther. He denominated the text proto-Esther and tried to show that there was a relationship of direct dependency between the text from Qumran, where the scrolls were discovered, and the text found in the Hebrew Bible.

Is Milik right? We are going to look at the text quite carefully before deciding. But whatever the answer, our exploration of this text will tell us a lot about how Dead Sea Scroll scholars work. A translation of the four fragments of the Qumran text is printed in the boxes on pages 31-33. A glance will show that they are extremely fragmentary, with much more

*See Carey A. Moore, "Eight Questions Most Frequently Asked About the Book of Esther," BR, Spring 1987.

DISPLAYING A MONA LISA-LIKE GAZE, Queen Esther surveys her realm in this 15th-century painting by Andrea del Castagno. Esther, together with her guardian Mordechai, is a hero of the eponymous biblical book in which the Jews of the Persian Empire are saved from destruction.

Matching the enigmatic quality of Esther's expression here is a problem that has long vexed Bible scholars: Why were sections of every book in the Hebrew Bible found among the Dead Sea Scrolls except the Book of Esther? Some have suggested that Esther's absence is an indication of the theology of the group that compiled the scrolls. Others claim that the absence is mere happenstance. The question has recently taken a dramatic step towards resolution, thanks to the publication of four fragments that one leading scrolls scholar has dubbed "proto-Esther." Is the last piece of the puzzle in place? Author Sidnie White Crawford takes us line by line through these newly published fragments, noting the important similarities between them and the biblical text of Esther—and highlighting the equally important differences.

missing than preserved. If you read the text at this point, it is unlikely to make any sense. So our initial task will be to try to squeeze some meaning out of it. You may be surprised at how much we will find.

Of course we want to compare this fragmentary text with the text of the Book of Esther as we know it. But even "the text of the Book of Esther as we know it" is not so simple. Naturally, there is the Book of Esther as it appears in the Hebrew Bible, which scholars refer to as the Masoretic Text, or MT. But there is also the Book of Esther in Greek, as it appears in the Septuagint, or LXX, its scholarly designation. The Septuagint version appears to be a translation from the Hebrew, but it also includes six major additions to MT Esther, commonly referred to as Additions A-F, as well as other minor deviations throughout the text. In addition, there is another Greek version called the A text, or AT, which appears to be a translation of a Hebrew text that is slightly different from MT Esther. Finally, there is a Latin translation of Esther, the *Vetus Latina*, or OL.

The textual history of the Book of Esther has unfortunately been an unsolved crux. There is even a dispute as to whether the original was Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek. Is the Hebrew a translation from the Greek? Or is the Greek a translation of the Hebrew? Scholarly contenders for a variety of positions can easily be cited.

Even if the Dead Sea Scroll text that we are going to look at is not from the Book of Esther itself, we have to explore the tantalizing possibility that it is a source for the Book of Esther.

This Qumran text has been given the designation 4Q550, which simply means that the fragments come from Qumran Cave 4; the texts are numbered in arbitrary sequence, this one being number 550. There are four fragments to the text, lettered a, b, c and d, each of which contains a single column, except fragment d, which contains parts of three columns. According to Milik, fragment a comes from the beginning of the scroll. Fragments b and c come from the end of the scroll, c following immediately after b without a break. Fragment d, the longest of the fragments, follows somewhere, but since there is no join to the other fragments, it is not clear where. In fact, it is probable that fragment d comes from a separate manuscript.

The scroll itself, Milik tells us, was quite small, not more than 12 lines to a column. He suggests that it was a sort of pocket edition, easily portable. It is written in Aramaic, a Semitic language closely related to Hebrew. Based on the shape and form of the letters, Milik dates it to between 50 B.C.E. and the turn of the era, a date with which I concur.

The story of Esther is exciting, suspenseful and

well told. It is a moral tale with a happy ending. Despite dangers and close calls, evil perishes and good triumphs. Scholars generally date the Book of Esther to the late fourth-early third centuries B.C.E., the late Persian-early Hellenistic periods.

The Book of Esther has sometimes been characterized as one of the "royal courtier tales," a genre that includes tales in the Book of Daniel, among others. A royal courtier tale is a kind of Wisdom story in which a wise courtier rises to prominence, is persecuted, suffers a fall and is finally vindicated.¹ The genre is not so clear in the story of Esther, however, since there are both parallels and differences. Nevertheless, Esther is clearly related to this genre.

The story begins with the downfall of Vashti, wife of the Persian king Ahasuerus, for refusing to answer the king's summons to a large banquet where he wishes her beauty to be displayed and admired. The king searches throughout his kingdom for someone to replace her and chooses Esther—a beautiful and gracious Jewess and the ward of Mordecai, a Jewish official of the court. Shortly afterward, Mordecai discovers a plot against the king and, through Esther, saves the king's life, a fact duly noted in the court records.

At Mordecai's prompting, Esther has kept her heritage secret, which is just as well, for the king's prime minister, Haman, is so offended by Mordecai's persistent refusal to bow down to him that he plots revenge not merely against Mordecai, but against his people as well. After casting lots to choose a date (*pur* in ancient Persian), Haman requests that the king issue an edict permitting all Jews to be slaughtered on the date cast, the 13th day of the month of Adar. The king grants the request, and Mordecai, hearing of the terrible fate in store for his people, urges Esther to intercede with the king on their behalf.

Esther risks death by appearing before the king unsummoned, but the king is so pleased with her that he not only allows her to live but offers to grant any request she should make. She asks only that he bring Haman to a banquet that she will host. At the banquet, the king again offers her anything, and again she merely requests that he and Haman come to another banquet.

Too restless to sleep that night, the king orders his court records read to him. Listening, he is reminded that Mordecai has gone unrewarded for saving his life. He asks Haman, who happens to be in court because he wants to ask the king's permission to hang Mordecai, what should be done for a man the king wants to honor. Thinking the king is referring to him, Haman suggests that the man be dressed in the king's robes and led around the city

on the king's horse to be honored by the populace. To Haman's chagrin, the king orders that he do just that for Mordecai.

At the second banquet, Esther tells the king that she is a Jew and asks that her life and those of her people be spared. Furious at the threat to Esther's life, the king orders Haman hung on the gallows that he himself had ordered built for Mordecai. However, the king cannot revoke his previous decree allowing the Jews to be slaughtered; he can only issue a new edict that allows the Jews to defend themselves. He appoints Mordecai as the new prime minister and authorizes Mordecai and Esther to do everything they can to help their people. Prepared through these efforts, the Jews triumph over their enemies on the day appointed for their destruction, a day still celebrated as Purim, named for the lots Haman used to choose the date.

Now that we have looked at the Book of Esther, let us look at the Qumran text. Fragment a immediately introduces us to two characters: (1) a man whose name has not survived and (2) Patireza, his father. Patireza was obeyed, perhaps by other courtiers, in the Persian court (the king is later identified as Darius). That they are high officials is indicated by the fact that they are "servants of the royal wardrobe ... (in) the service of the king."

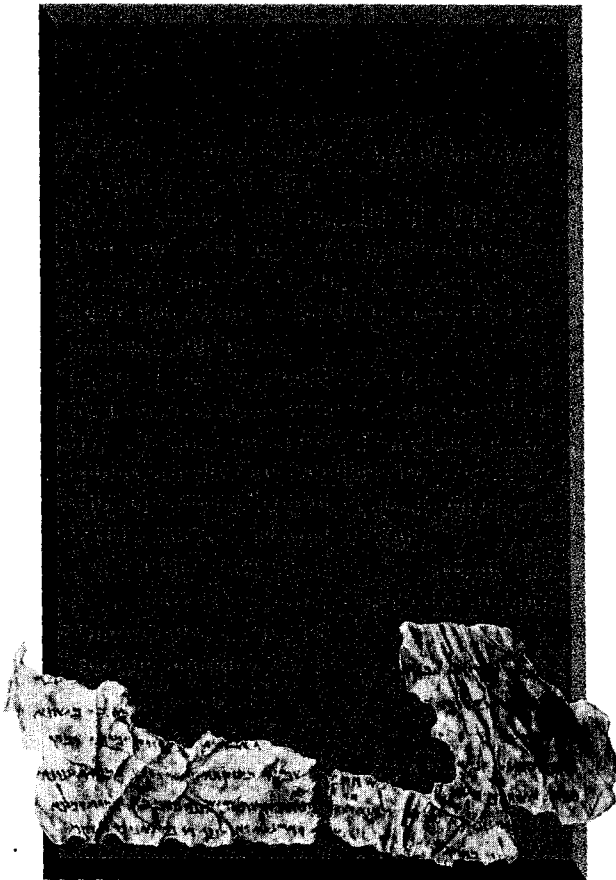
Lines 3-6 of this fragment introduce us to the first close parallel to Esther:

at the same hour the temper of the king was stretched [... the bo]joks of his father should be read to him and among the books was found a scroll [...] sealed with seven seals of Darius his father ... On being opened and read, it was found written...

This is an obvious parallel to Esther 6:1: "On that night the king could not sleep, and he gave orders to bring the book of records, the annals, and they were read to the king."

On the other hand, fragment a reads on line 4 that "the temper of the king was stretched"; this contrasts with Esther 6:1, where the king is unable to sleep. Further, in Esther 6:1 it is simply "the book of records, the annals" that are read to the king, while in fragment a it is "the books of his father" that are read. So whatever is about to be recounted in the Qumran text took place not in the reign of the present king but in that of his father. The identification of the father as Darius in line 5 makes it clear that the present king is his son Xerxes, who reigned from 486-465 B.C.E.; this agrees with MT Esther, in which most commentators identify king Ahasuerus with Xerxes.²

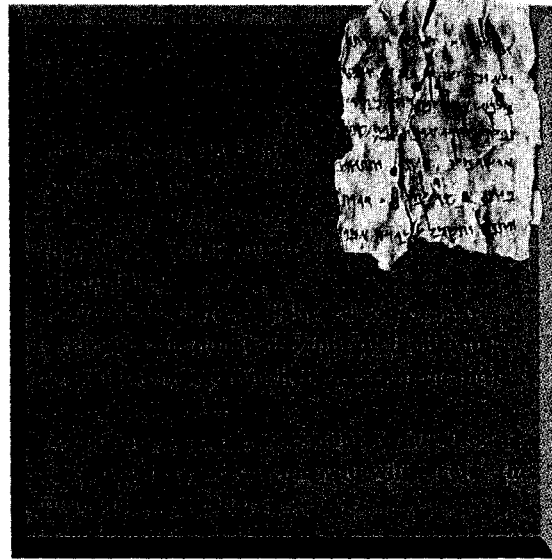
The scroll is sealed with seven seals, which of



THE TEXT OF ESTHER? Four fragments of 4Qproto-Esther appear here and on the following page. The designation 4Q indicates that these pieces came from Cave 4 at Qumran, the site where the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered.

course reminds us of the seven seals of Revelation 5:1.

In fragment b, line 2 mentions the “good name” and “faithfulness” of a male character, possibly Patireza. Patireza is again mentioned in line 3; this time he is identified as the son of Jair—or at least Milik reconstructs “Jair” (only one letter of the name is completely extant). If Milik is correct, this would be another direct connection to the Esther writings: Mordecai is the son of Jair in both MT Esther 2:5 and LXX Add. A verse 1. Milik suggests that Patireza and Mordecai are one and the same, Mordecai being the Hebrew name of the Esther protagonist and Patireza his Persian name. Dual names do appear in the Esther narrative. Esther has two names: Hadassah (Hebrew) and Esther (Persian; Esther 2:7). Elsewhere, Daniel and his companions have both Hebrew and Babylonian names (for example, Daniel 1:7). However, the name Mordecai is not a proper Hebrew name but a Babylonian name containing the element Marduk, the god of the city of Babylon. It is a little strange, then, that Mordecai, who already has a foreign name, should have a second, Persian name! We would expect him to have a



genuine Hebrew name, as Daniel does.³

Fragment c seems to follow immediately after b (in line 1 the messenger of the king is still speaking). In this column two new characters are introduced, both with possible connections to the Esther story. The first is Srt' or Srh', a woman. If this is a proper name, that is, Sharaha, it is similar to the name Zeresh (wife of Haman; Esther 5:10), especially in its Greek forms: Zosara, Sosara and (in Josephus) Zaraea.

In fragment c, line 2, the male character Ḥama' appears, a name that obviously resembles Haman in the Esther story. Milik uses the name Ḥama' to show that MT Esther (in Hebrew) is a late transla-



tion of the Greek Esther, which in turn was constructed from an Aramaic proto-Esther. The name Ḥama' begins with ḥet. The name Haman, however, begins with a heh. When a name is translated from Aramaic to Hebrew, a ḥet remains a ḥet, since the same letter is used in both Aramaic and Hebrew. But when it is translated into Greek⁴, the ḥet is lost

because there is no equivalent guttural in Greek. On this basis, Milik argues that the original story was in Aramaic. When it was translated into Greek, the *het* was lost; when the Greek was translated into Hebrew, the lost *het* returned as a *heh*. If the names are the same, there seems no other way to account for the shift from *het* in the Aramaic Qumran text to the Hebrew *heh* in MT Esther. But it is notoriously difficult to draw conclusions from the transference of names from language to language.

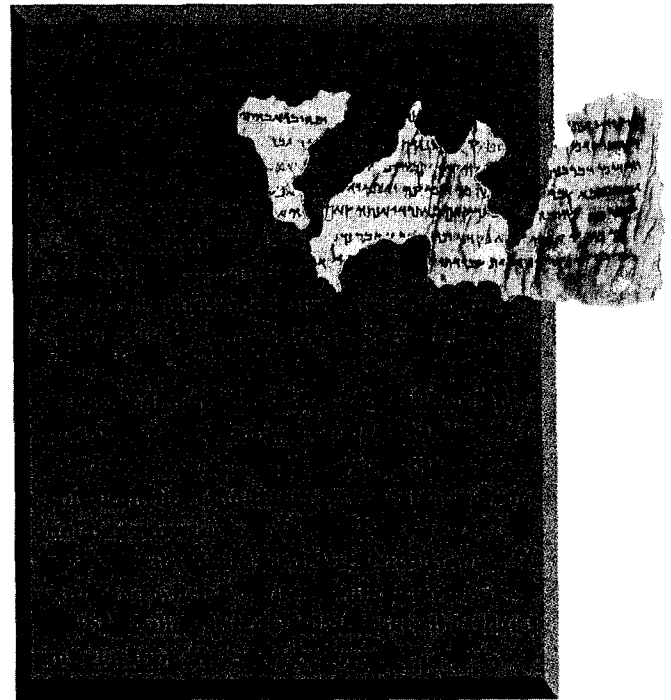
The name *Srh'* (or *Srt'*), in fragment c, line 1, may be connected with banishment, which is mentioned at the end of line 1. *Vashti*, you will recall, was banished for her refusal to appear before the king. The connection is strengthened if we accept the reading of the Spanish scholar Florentino Garcia Martinez, who identifies *Srh'* as a "princess"; *Vashti*, of course, was a queen. Both would then be royalty. Unfortunately, however, it is completely unclear who is being banished in line 1. It may be the princess, but it could also be *Patireza*.

To summarize the contents of fragments a-c: *Patireza*, possibly the son of *Jair*, a servant of the royal wardrobe, is the father of an unnamed protagonist. One day king *Xerxes* has the annals of his father, *Darius*, read to him. The scroll seems to be about the faithfulness of *Patireza*, for which *Patireza's* son is rewarded by *Xerxes* with his father's office. The princess, or someone, is banished. *Hama'* is introduced as a high court official, and someone, probably *Patireza*, is praised as a faithful and trusty servant to (perhaps) the princess or the queen. The royal purple is mentioned in line 5.

What relationship, if any, does this fragmentary material have with the Esther writings?

The three most obvious parallels are also the broadest: First, the story is set in the Persian court; second, it takes place during the reign of *Xerxes*; and third, it appears to resemble the royal courtier tale in genre. These facts alone would be enough for us to posit some sort of generic relationship between these fragments and the Esther writings. However, the connections are even more specific. In fragment a, the king has the royal annals read aloud to him, as in Esther 6:1. In fragment b, *Patireza*, one of the main characters in the Aramaic fragments, may be identified as the son of *Jair* (partially restored), as is *Mordecai* in Esther 2:5. Also in fragment b, *Patireza's* son is rewarded by the king, as *Mordecai* is in Esther 6. Finally, in fragment c, the name *Hama'* resembles the name *Haman* from the Esther writings.

Before we get carried away with the similarities, let's remember that the differences are also clear. The story in fragments a-c has no Jewish connection at all, except for what may be the name *Jair*. It



is *Patireza's* son who is the object of the king's favor rather than *Patireza* himself. The court conflict that is at the heart of the *Mordecai-Haman* story in Esther is not at all clear here. And finally, there is no direct linguistic connection between the fragments and any of the Esther versions, with the possible exception of the names in fragment c. Therefore, we are unable to suggest more than an indirect resemblance between 4Q550^{a-c} and any of the versions of the book of Esther.

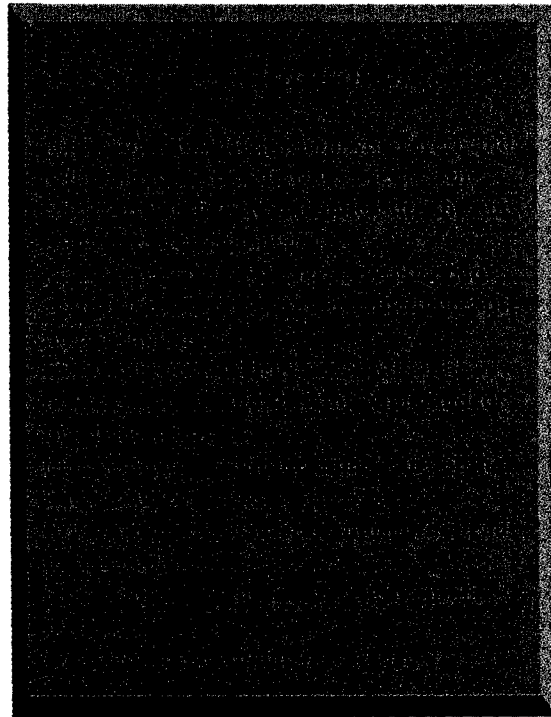
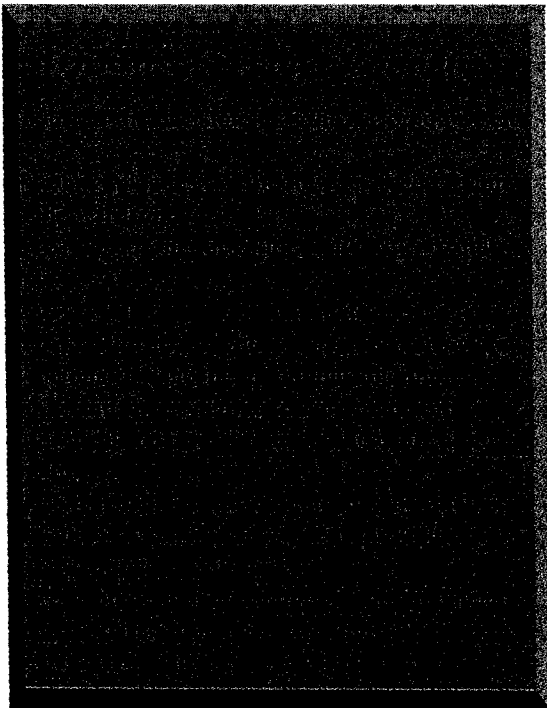
Now let's turn to fragment d, the longest piece of 4Q550, with three columns, two with seven lines and one with eight. Lines 1-2 of the first column appear to contain a prayer, addressed to God in the second person. The phrase "errors of my fathers who sinned before you" clearly recalls biblical phraseology as well as Add. C, verse 17 (the prayer of Esther), which reads "and now we have sinned before you." This is the first parallel we have found between 4Q550 and a Septuagint Addition to Esther. However, notice again the differences. Here, it is "my fathers" who have sinned, while in Add. C it is "we" (this makes perfect sense in that context since it is "we" who are in danger). In our fragment, the context of the prayer is missing. Once again, we have an intriguing parallel between the Qumran text and Esther, but once again, it is too vague to posit any kind of direct dependence.⁵

In lines 2-3, the parallel to Esther is clear. Someone is described as "a man of Judah, one of the leaders of Benjamin, an exile"—precisely the same description given of *Mordecai* in Esther 2:5-6: "Now there was a Jew in the citadel of Susa whose name

was Mordecai son of Jair son of Shimei son of Kish, a Benjaminite who had been carried away from Jerusalem among the captives carried away with King Jeconiah of Judah, whom King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon had carried away." (Add. A, verses 2-4, contains the same description.) Is Mordecai meant here? Again, our text is too fragmentary to tell. There is no name mentioned, nor do we know why the Benjaminite wishes to be received in the court.

The phrase in line 4, "What may I do for you?" echoes Ahasuerus' question to Esther in Esther 5:3,6, 7:2 and in Add. D, verse 9. However, we do not know here who is speaking and who is being addressed, although the "you" is a female, and the "you" in the next speech (lines 4-7) is a male, so we have a dialogue between a female and a male, with the female doing most of the talking. There are no other scenes, to my knowledge, in biblical or Second Temple literature set at a court in which a powerful male, a king (see line 5), asks his female companion what he may do for her, except the Esther story!

Line 5 mentions a possible rival or adversary to the speaker, a "Cuthite man." In the Esther writings, Haman is variously described as an Agagite (according to the MT), a descendant of Agag, enemy of Saul; an Amalekite (according to Josephus), the hereditary enemies of Israel over whom Agag ruled; a Bougaion (in LXX); and a Macedonian (in LXX and AT). Notice that all these terms, with the exception of Bougaion, which may be a substitution for Agagite, are designations for enemies of Israel.



(The Macedonians were enemies of Israel in the second-first centuries B.C.E., when the LXX was translated.) Does "Cuthite" fit into this scheme? "Cuthite" refers to the Samaritans, inhabitants of northern Israel who became enemies of the Jews in the late Persian and early Hellenistic periods, with a rivalry stretching back to the time of Nehemiah. Thus, a Cuthite could very easily be considered an adversary of the Jews.

At the end of line 5, Milik restores the name Esther. If the reading is correct, we would indeed have proof positive that we are dealing here with sources for the Book of Esther. But as Milik himself admits, the reading is uncertain.⁶ In fact, only the first letter of her name, *aleph*, is extant on the leather; the second letter consists of a small trace of ink, and the surrounding context is missing. It seems best, therefore, not to restore anything, and so, unfortunately, Esther disappears from our text.

In column 2 of this fragment time has passed, probably years (see "and five years passed" in line 3). Five years is exactly the time lapse between Esther's being chosen queen and the crisis instigated by Haman.

Two new personages are introduced in column 2: Bagoshe (line 5) and Bagasraw (line 6). Bagoshe, who is eventually killed (line 7), appears to be an adversary of Bagasraw. The parallel to Haman and Mordecai is apparent. However, the name Bagoshe has other connections in Judaism outside of the Esther story. It

continues on page 56

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Esther

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resembles Bagohi (Bagoas in Josephus), the Persian governor of Jerusalem in the second half of the fourth century, who is mentioned in the Elephantine Papyri and Josephus (who confuses him with another Bagohi, a notorious eunuch of Artaxerxes III).⁷ This historical figure is clearly considered an enemy of the Jews (Josephus recounts that he invaded the Temple and demanded heavy tribute from the populace), and this may account for the very similar, if not identical, name of the adversary here. In fact, in the Book of Judith, written in the late second century B.C.E., the adjutant of Holofernes, the villain of the book, is named Bagoas (Judith 13:11).⁸

The name Bagasraw, however, has no parallels that I know. It appears to be a Persian name. Milik identifies Bagasraw as the son of Patireza, but there is no basis for this in the text. However, we can find certain parallels between Bagasraw and Mordecai. Bagasraw "goes up to the court of the king" (line 6); Mordecai is summoned to the king's court (Esther 8:1). We can also make a comparison between Bagasraw and Esther, especially in Add. D of the LXX. In Add. D, Esther goes to the court of the king; in fact, she goes through "all the doors" until she reaches the throne room itself. This is similar to Bagasraw going up to the seventh (or innermost) court of the king (line 6). After Esther faints, the king takes her in his arms, touches her neck with his sceptre, embraces her and speaks to her. In our Qumran text, someone (presumably the king) seizes Bagasraw's hand, does something to his head, kisses him and speaks to him (these are more appropriate male-to-male gestures). This is an intriguing sequence of events, with, however, a male protagonist. Is there an echo of the Esther story here?

The final column of fragment d again offers us parallels to one of the Additions to Esther and to the Book of Daniel.

In the first two lines, we have a gentile addressing a Jew, describing God as "the Most High ... who rules over [... the ea]rth." It seems reasonable to assume that the king is addressing Bagasraw, whom he had honored at the end of the preceding column. These lines are strongly reminiscent of similar passages in Daniel.⁹ Most important for our purposes is the similarity to Esther Add. E 16:16,18,21: "God most high, most mighty ... who rules over all things." Again, however, we do not have a case of

direct translation but a similarity of setting and phraseology.

In lines 2-3, it is clear that Bagasraw, who is identified as a worshiper of the Most High and thus a Jew, has triumphed, and his person has become sacrosanct. The analogy to Mordecai is clear. The king then commands that the events be recorded. In the Esther story too, the king commands that the events be recorded.

Milik claims a direct relationship between the Qumran text and the Esther story. There are enough parallels—in setting, plot and even specific details—to make some kind of connection seem plausible. I would propose, however, a more indirect relationship. These Aramaic fragments, which I prefer to call 4QTales of the Persian Court, may have formed part of a larger cycle of royal courtier tales set in the Persian or some other foreign court, a genre that included the Daniel cycle, upon which the author of proto-Esther drew when constructing his narrative. This would account for both the broader resemblances and the resemblances of detail as well as the obvious differences. The author of Esther, which now exists in several versions, clearly used sources when writing his well-constructed novella. 4QTales of the Persian Court may well have been one of his sources. BM

¹ For an excellent discussion of this type of tale, see Susan Niditch and Robert Doran, "The Success Story of the Wise Courtier," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96 (1977), pp. 179-193.

² In the Greek witnesses to Esther, however, the king is identified as Artaxerxes (either Artaxerxes I [465-423 B.C.E.] or Artaxerxes II [404-358 B.C.E.]).

³ Carey Moore, *Esther*, Anchor Bible Series, vol. 7B (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971).

⁴ Except for the presence of a rough "breathing" mark before the vowel, which would not appear in the uncial script; heh is likewise lost in spelling.

⁵ Importantly, verses 17-23 of Add. C, which contain the phrase in question, are missing in the *Vetus Latina* (OL) and Josephus, indicating that the Greek text used by both did not contain these verses.

⁶ J.T. Milik, "Les Modeles Arameens du Livre d'Esther dans la Grotte 4 de Qumran," *Revue de Qumran* 15 (1992), p. 364.

⁷ In fact, Bagohi or Bagoas may not be a name at all but a title for a eunuch, since it is so frequently used of eunuchs.

⁸ The name Bagoashe may also account for the strange form "Bougaion" as the gentile of Haman in the LXX, as Moore has previously suggested (Moore, *Esther*, p. 36). If "Bougaion" is indeed derived from "Bagoashe," it would be almost beyond doubt that the authors of the LXX, at least, knew the text of 4Q550.

⁹ Daniel 2:46-47, where Darius is speaking; 4:34-37, where Nebuchadnezzar is speaking; and 6:25-27, where Darius again is speaking (recall that these are all separate tales). There are also similarities to the proclamation of Nabonidus in 4QPrayer of Nabonidus and to the declaration of Ptolemy in 3 Maccabees 7.