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## *Megillat Esther* (Book of Esther)

In Hebrew, manuscript scroll on parchment

Italy, c. 1475(?)–1550, probably 1500–1550

6 parchment membranes, of varying thicknesses – the first two are stiff, the next three are of medium stiffness, and the last one is very stiff, written in ink on 18 text columns, 23 lines per column (except for column no. 15 with 11 lines), the text including open and closed sections is ruled with a stylus, including horizontal and vertical lines, faintly visible on the parchments, whose hair and flesh sides are distinguishable, the majority of the megillah penned by the same scribe, except for the last sheet which reveals the hand of another scribe, both copyists employing a Sephardi square script of 6 mm. height with crownlets (Heb. pl. tagim), triple tagim appear on the letters א, ה, ט, ז, י, ע, צ, ק, ש, and the first scribe marked them as long thin lines ending with dots, while single ones lack dots at their ends, and the lines are shorter; the crownlets added by the second scribe are shorter, and only some end with tiny dots; the section listing the names of Haman's sons (Es. 9:6–10) follows the most popular layout used by copyists, occupying a separate column (no. 15) with 11 lines divided into two parts with a blank space between them; in two verses of this passage (Es. 9:7 and 9:9), as was usually practiced by Jewish scribes, atypical letters – larger or smaller than all others in the body of the scroll – appear; as diminished are penned letters ת in the name פֶּרְשֵׁינֶזְרַת, ש in the name פֶּרְמִשְׁתָּא, and י in אֶזְרָיִי; in addition, the last of the names starts with an enlarged letter ה; the scribe also highlighted the letters ה in Es. 1:6 and ת in Es. 9:29 that are enlarged and bolded; for the first scribe, typical are letters פ whose upper component ends with a "thorn" on the left-hand side, very good condition, with a few minor losses in the parchments, some damage to their edges, and occasional stains. Dimensions 360 × 3440 mm. (the length of each membranes: 670, 560, 560, 570, 530, 550 mm.).

Previously unrecorded, this manuscript joins an extremely small group of no more than thirty early Esther scrolls that date between the late fourteenth- and mid-sixteenth centuries. Carbon-14 analysis helps fix a date somewhere between 1475 and 1600. Paleographic and codicological analysis (Sephardic script and Italianate parchment) point to an Italian origin probably between 1500 to 1550. As an early *megillat Esther* (=scroll of Esther), the present manuscript emerges as valuable witness, allowing us to trace the changes in scribal practices and to examine the faithfulness of its contents with the Masoretic text of the Book of Esther.

## PROVENANCE

1. Written in Italy, most likely c. 1500–1550. Carbon-14 analysis helps fix a date somewhere between 1475 and 1600. Paleographic and codicological analysis (Sephardic script and Italianate parchment) point to an Italian origin probably between 1500 to 1550.
2. Private Collection.

## TEXT

The scroll comprises the complete text of the Book of Esther written in Hebrew copied on the flesh side of 6 parchment membranes, three columns per each.

The membranes include the following passages from the book:

1. Es. 1:1–2:10 [incipit: "Now it came to pass in the days of Ahasuerus ..."];
2. Es. 2:10–3:15 [incipit: "Esther had not shewed her people nor her kindred ..."];
3. Es. 3:15–6:1 [incipit: "The posts went out, being hastened by the king's commandment ..."];
4. Es. 6:1–8:7 [incipit: "On that night could not the king sleep ..."];
5. Es. 8:7–9:10 [incipit: "Then the king Ahasuerus said unto Esther the queen ..."];
6. Es. 9:10–10:3 [incipit: "The ten sons of Haman the son of Hammaedatha, the enemy of the Jews, slew they ..."].

The Book of Esther, copied in the present manuscript, recounts the ancient story of the miraculous salvation of the Jewish people in the Persian Empire from extermination at the hands of Haman, King Ahasuerus's adviser. Esther, a Jew who becomes queen of Persia, together with her cousin, Mordechai, foils a plot of the evil Haman to destroy the Jews. It is one of only two books in the Bible named for a woman.

It is mandatory to read the Book of Esther aloud at Purim, the Festival of Lots, established to commemorate these events and celebrated annually in the month of Adar (February/March). Purim is Hebrew for "lots," a reference to the lots cast by Haman to determine the day when the Jews of Persia would be killed. For this purpose, professional, religious scribes (Heb. pl. *soferim*) copy the book on parchment or leather scrolls (Heb. pl. *megillot Esther*) following the strict rules of the Jewish religious law. By rabbinic law, one cannot observe the holiday of Purim properly unless the book of Esther is read from a scroll - it cannot be read from a codex. According to many Rabbinic authorities, no additional text could be added to the Esther scroll, and therefore these manuscripts rarely bear colophons or ownership notes. Consequently, it is difficult to date and localize Esther scrolls (particularly the undecorated examples).

Due to the deliberate destruction of Jewish books occurring throughout the ages, as well as their natural wear and tear from use (a scroll whose text is not legible is unfit for ritual use and should be hidden away in a genizah or buried), the corpus of early *megillot Esther* is very small. Thus, the current state of knowledge on those manuscripts is sadly insufficient, and the subject awaits further and broader study. Very few examples of Esther scrolls are extant from the early fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Those that have survived include single scrolls produced in pre-expulsion Spain, Italy, and Germany, and they reflect different scribal traditions.

Given these difficulties of dating, Carbon-14 analysis was conducted at the Keck Carbon Cycle AMS Facility of the Earth System Science Department at the University of California at Irvine in July 2022. The reported results based on two samples follow the Stuiver and Polach convention (a complete report available on request). The two samples indicated a date range beginning from 1471-1528 and ending 1550-1634, with median probabilities of 1564 and 1571.

Lacking data from Carbon-14 analysis, Dr. Shlomo Zucker localized the scroll in Spain or the Spanish diaspora and dated it c. 1475 to 1500 based on comparison with the Sephardic script of

two known scribes: Samuel ben Samuel ibn Musa in a British Library manuscript (MS Or. 2627) of 1482; and Moses Aqrish who copied Cod. Parm 1832 and British Library Add. MS 15251 and who was active in northern Italy in Pisa and Ferrara from 1496 to 1520.

More detailed analysis by Dr. Dagmara Budzioch, who had access to the Carbon-14 results and who has studied extensively the extant decorated and undecorated Esther scrolls, places our *megillat Esther* in Italy between 1500 and 1550. She excluded Spain and Portugal because of the expulsion of the Jews in 1492 and 1497 respectively but also because most early Iberian examples of Esther scrolls are copied on leather instead of on parchment. Of course, Germany is excluded because of the Sephardic script. The use of parchment prepared in the Italianate manner and the activity of Jewish scribes in Italy into the sixteenth century, as well as certain letter forms, supports an Italian origin (and one of the scribes Dr. Zucker identified was active in Italy and his career even coincides with our date range). To establish a context for the present scroll, the information that follows on early *megillot Esther* was supplied by Dr. Budzioch.

Early *megillot Esther* are held in diverse collections worldwide; and the collection of particular importance in this respect is in the Biblioteca Palatina in Parma (further as BP). This library also houses, among others, an extraordinary Italian *megillab* that is the earliest dated manuscript of this genre (Cod. Parm. 3318). This scroll was written by Abraham Farissol (c. 1451-c. 1525), a renowned commentator, geographer, cartographer, and scribe. He wrote it in brown ink in an Italian square script on 10 parchment membranes within 18 columns of text. In addition, the opening and final membranes include the benedictions recited before and after the *megillab* is read and an abbreviated festive poem for the holiday of Purim. Following these short texts, there is a colophon bearing the copyist's name and the date according to the Jewish calendar – 5240 (1479/80 in the Gregorian calendar). The Parma collection also includes another dated *megillab*, though several decades later from 1540 (Cod. Parm. 3349).

One of the oldest surviving *megillot Esther* in existence, datable to the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries, is housed in the Hebraic Section of the Library of Congress in Washington. It was created in Germany and consists of 15 parchment membranes, with three columns of text per each. The text is written with a quill in large square elegant Ashkenazi square script with *tagim* (the letters are c. 19 mm. high). The magnificent calligraphy of this scroll and its large size (the membranes are c. 810 mm. high, more than twice the height of those in the present scroll) make it an extraordinary example and a highly important testimony of the Ashkenazi scribal culture in the Middle Ages. At the same time, its dimensions suggest that it was used communally in a synagogue and not by an individual.

Both of the already mentioned manuscripts are composed of parchment sheets, however, in the Iberian Peninsula, scrolls (both Torah scrolls and Esther scrolls) were produced using leather membranes. The method of preparing animal skins to make parchment (Heb. *klaf*) and leather (Heb. *gvil*) differs significantly and results in different colors; leather membranes exhibit different hues of brown, while those made of parchment are brighter, ivory, *écru*, or light yellow. In the case of leather scrolls, only the hair side of their membranes is suitable for writing, while in the parchment scrolls, both sides can be used for writing, but – as a rule – the text is copied on the membranes' flesh side. Depending on the material, different writing tools were used – a quill for parchment and a reed for leather scrolls. Leather scrolls preserve the scribal culture of the Jewish communities in the pre-expulsion Iberian Peninsula. However, the

scribes who originated in this milieu but settled in other locations following the expulsions from the Iberian Peninsula often continued to maintain their distinctive script. Thus, it is difficult to determine their date and place of creation solely on a paleographic basis.

Unquestionably, one of the oldest *megillot Esther* worldwide is a leather scroll of c. 1465 recently donated to the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem (Ms. Heb. 197/110=4). This large manuscript (450 × 5050 mm.) consists of 7 dark brown membranes containing 20 columns of text written in the Sephardi square script with *tagim*. The first column includes benedictions recited before and after the *megillah* reading. At the same time, this is one of the very few manuscripts of this genre whose dating is based on paleographic and codicological evidence supported by the Carbon-14 method (the scroll offered here is another example). Another leather scroll, dated to the 14<sup>th</sup> century and written in Sephardi script, belongs to the collection of the Bologna University Library (Ms. 2950). Another example in the same type of script with crownlets assigned to the 14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries is housed in the BP (Cod. Parm. 3602). Other leather *megillot* from the 15<sup>th</sup> century are held in the Laurentian Library in Florence (MS Acq.e.Doni.802), in the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem (MS Heb. 197/32=4), and the British Library in London (Or. 2086). The London collection also houses a parchment manuscript (Or. 1087) created originally as a scroll that is bound as a codex with a single column per page. It is copied in very elegant Sephardi handwriting with *tagim* from the 15<sup>th</sup> century; however, the place of its creation is difficult to determine. In addition, the British Library houses another undated leather Esther Scroll (Or. 4224).

Scrolls from fifteenth-century Italy, another important center of the Jewish book culture, are more numerous. The *megillot* from this location feature different types of Hebrew square script – Italian, Sephardi-Italian, and Ashkenazi-Italian. They are Cod. Parm. 3303, Cod. Parm. 3304 (discussed further), Cod. Parm. 3309, Cod. Parm. 3310, Cod. Parm. 3317, Cod. Parm. 3319, Cod. Parm. 3324, Cod. Parm. 3332, Cod. Parm. 3351, and Cod. Parm. 3603. Another 15<sup>th</sup>-century scroll, auctioned in 2009, became a starting point for an analysis of medieval Esther scrolls and codices containing the Book of Esther that was published in an article Jordan Penkower (Penkower, 2016). It describes and analyzes the scribal habits preserved in these manuscripts, such as variants of spelling of particular words in the text, the layout of the section listing the names of Haman's sons, and open and closed passages. One scroll, Harley 7620 from the British Library in London is dated to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. An interesting example is the Ashkenazi-Italian *megillah* from the BP (Cod. Parm. 3304) that starts with a decorative opening word panel with the word **ויהי** embellished with gold. This is apparently an early example of a decorated Esther scroll (the earliest fully decorated exemplars of Esther scrolls emerge only in the second half of the sixteenth century). Other parchment scrolls are Codice 1423B from the National Historical Archive in Madrid (14<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> centuries), Inv. Res/235 bis and Inv. Res/237 bis from the National Library of Spain in Madrid (15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> centuries), but they all require further research regarding their date and origin. From the medieval period are also extant some short fragments of the Book of Esther used as waste material for bindings of non-Jewish codices (for example, the Austrian National Library in Vienna houses Fragm. hebr. B 19b and Cod. 4039 D2, 2a).

The current state of research allows us to assume that there are only approximately 30 *megillot Esther* written before the year 1500. The manuscripts of this genre produced in the following century are more numerous, but this number is still difficult to establish. According to the

catalog by Beit-Arié, the Parma library stores 26 exemplars possibly making it the largest collection of this kind. The corpus includes 20 Italian manuscripts (copied in different scripts), 5 Sephardi, and 1 Ashkenazi exemplar. One of them, made of leather sheets, is in the form of a codex (Cod. Parm. 2049). None of these early examples is illustrated, while decoration of Esther scrolls begins in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the illustration of Esther scrolls begins only in the early seventeenth century.

The present manuscript, as an example of a rare early megillah, is an important witness that allows us to trace the changes in scribal practices and examine the faithfulness of its content with the Masoretic text of the Book of Esther in the age of print. Created primarily for individual users, and read publicly during the Purim ceremony, these fascinating manuscripts lie at the intersection of personal ritual and synagogue life in the late Medieval and Early Modern era.

## LITERATURE

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## ONLINE RESOURCES

*One of the World's Oldest Esther Scrolls Comes Home*

<https://blog.nli.org.il/en/one-of-the-worlds-oldest-esther-scrolls-comes-home/>

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