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**THE BIBLE AND REVOLUTION:
SOME OBSERVATIONS ON EXODUS, PSALM 37,
ESTHER, AND PHILO**

*(К СТОЛЕТИЮ ВЕЛИКОЙ ОКТЯБРЬСКОЙ
СОЦИАЛИСТИЧЕСКОЙ РЕВОЛЮЦИИ)*

Abstract: Human ideas and events develop and unfold in the context of inherited culture and tradition. The idea of revolution in the modern world, even in atheist ideology, partakes of necessity of religious beliefs and imagery, where the natural order is miraculously and apocalyptically overturned and the poor and downtrodden are vindicated. The foundational text is Exodus; Psalm 37 with its overt reference to the poor inheriting the earth develops the theme; and Esther translates it into a romanticized narrative of political history. It is proposed that Philo encodes Esther into his *In Flaccum*.

Keywords: Revolution, Lenin, apocalypse, Exodus, Psalm 37, Jesus Christ, Esther, Philo of Alexandria, *In Flaccum*, dreams.

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**БИБЛИЯ И РЕВОЛЮЦИЯ:
НЕСКОЛЬКО ЗАМЕЧАНИЙ ОБ ИСХОДЕ, ПСАЛМЕ 37,
ЕСФИРЕ И ФИЛОНЕ АЛЕКСАНДРИЙСКОМ**

Резюме: Идеи и события в истории человечества развиваются и разворачиваются в контексте религиозной идеологии и иконологии: естественный и общественный порядок божественным чудом перевернуты, униженные и угнетен-

ные сего мира приобретают богатство и власть. Основной текст: книга Исхода; Иисус Христос применял и Псалом 37, где подчеркивается спасение бедноты. Книга Есфирь переводит тему в сферу романтизированной политики; автор статьи полагает, что Филон Александрийский в своем сочинении *In Flaccum* пользуется ключевыми темами и структурами Книги Есфирь, скрытых от римлян и обращенных к еврейскому читателю, знающему библейский текст.

Ключевые слова: революция, Ленин, апокалипсис, Книга Исхода, Псалом 37, Иисус Христос, Книга Есфирь, Филон Александрийский, *In Flaccum*, сны.

Товарищи!

Рабоче-крестьянская революция, о необходимости которой все время говорили большевики, совершилась!

В. И. Ленин (из к/ф «Ленин в Октябре», 1937)

You say you want a revolution, well, you know, we all want to change the world.

John Lennon (The Beatles, *White Album*, 1968)

1. RECENT REVOLUTIONS AND BIBLICAL ECHOES

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (μακάριοι οἱ πραεῖς, ὅτι αὐτοὶ κληρονομήσουσιν τὴν γῆν) declared Jesus Christ in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:5)¹. But the messianic Parousia still has not yet arrived; and the revolutionary prophecy of redemption attending that supernatural event can seem farther than ever from fulfillment. “Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change it*”, fumed a later Jewish prophet, Karl Marx, in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, 11. So suffering mankind, understandably impatient, has taken the business of revolutionary transformation into its own hands in the interim — and, given human nature, with predictably mixed results. In the lapidary words of Victor Stepanovich Chernomyrdin, delivered in the wake of the latest watershed events of Russian history, *Хотели как лучше, а получилось как всегда* (“We hoped for the best, but got the usual”).

¹ “Blessed” is the standard English and has conveyed the spirit of the sermon for many generations. It is still inaccurate, however; for Greek *makarios* translates Hebrew *āšrei*, “happy”. In a separate work in progress, the preliminary findings of which were presented as a plenary lecture at the conference on diaspora organized by the department of Jewish studies of St. Petersburg State University in September 2017, one proposes that a central prayer of the synagogue liturgy that bearing the latter name — it consists of Ps. 145, preceded by several verses from other Psalms beginning with the word *Āšrei* — developed as a response to the Beatitudes, whose original text might have been in a gospel in Hebrew or Aramaic used by Jewish Christians.

Hope, as the Russian saying goes, is the last to die. Many of the fond hopes that attended the previous watershed — the second, Bolshevik revolution of the year 1917 in the Russian Empire — wilted in the care of a bureaucratic establishment inherited from the *ancien régime*. Its sanguinary criminality, tragically, reached its nadir on the twentieth anniversary of Soviet rule: that year, 1937, saw the great terror, the Stalinist show trials, the decimation of the Red Army, and the liquidation of the old Bolsheviks. Yet revolution is a youthful passion and humans are nostalgic creatures, even if a sardonic voice whispers within that anyone under thirty who is not a communist has no heart, but anybody over thirty who is one has no head.

There is no denying how bitterly ironic the words of the actor Boris Shchukin playing Vladimir Ilyich that close the film “Lenin in October”, released in that dark year of 1937, must sound. Why is it, then, that the viewer, conscious of all he knows, and understanding all that he feels, can still be moved by that exulting proclamation — the first epigraph to this essay — just at the moment the curtain comes down and the word Конец, “The End”, appears on the screen: “Comrades! The revolution of the workers and peasants, about the necessity of which the Bolsheviks have been speaking all the time, *has been accomplished!*” Part of the reason Lenin’s cinematic valediction can resonate so strongly is that it has overt Scriptural overtones: the declaration of that “most human of men” (самый человечный человек) at the end of the movie echoes literally the last words as He died on the Cross of Jesus Christ, believed by much of the human race to be both the most human and the most divine of men. According to John 19:30: ὅτε οὖν ἔλαβε τὸ ὄξος ὁ Ἰησοῦς, εἶπε, τετέλεσται. καὶ κλίνας τὴν κεφαλὴν, παρέδωκε τὸ πνεῦμα (“When Jesus took the vinegar, then, He said, ‘It is accomplished!’ And, lowering His head, He gave up the spirit”)². The Old Church Slavonic for Greek *tetelestai*, “it is accomplished”, is *sovershishasia*; modern Russian *sovershilos*’ — the very word that concludes “Lenin in October”! Most Russians alive in 1937 were born and raised in the traditions of the Orthodox faith; and despite the terrible suppression of religion a decade earlier and the subsequent convulsions of collectivization of the land, theirs was no subconscious memory. The lexical Christian-Communist correspondence, then, is exact: both the Soviet slogan “Ленин жил, Ленин жив, Ленин будет жить” (“Lenin lived, Lenin is alive, Lenin shall live”) and the popular song “Ленин всегда с тобой” (“Lenin is with you always”) echo the Christian belief in the Resurrection, as well. Death, or the end of a world-epoch, must happen for the resurrection to be possible: this is the chain of teleological thinking, and both the historical determinism of Marx and the dramatic title of Edmund Wilson’s famous history of European revolutionary thought *To The Finland Station* display a crypto-religious, apocalyptic teleology. The sociological

² The film adaptation of the novel of the modern Greek writer Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Last Temptation of Christ*, closes with these words as the crucified Savior gives up His spirit on the Cross, and the movie ends with an ensuing joyful thunder of bells.

historical method of Giambattista Vico begins to gather steam and turn its wheels, and Lenin alights at the final stop³. It seems that even with down-to-earth, avowedly atheistic revolutions we still cannot do without apocalypticism and teleology, cannot get away from postponed *Parousiai*: Communism, one was always assured, is on the horizon (which, as one wry Soviet anecdote used to add, is defined as an imaginary line that vanishes as you approach it). The paradigm of religion is as inescapable today in modern revolutionary ideology as it was over two millennia ago in the Servile rebellion of Spartacus, which took Dionysus, the dying and rising god, as its patron.

None of this is news, but such a recollection of recent, lived events and familiar slogans and turns of phrase is still useful to a discussion of the concept of revolution, when one returns to parse the details. There has always been a recognizably eschatological, religious fervor, and a passion for martyrology, in revolutionary upheavals; and the arts of Communism, from phrases and iconic banners to the usages of the more recent medium of cinematography, are much indebted to their Christian precursors, to the Hebrew Bible, and at least to some degree, to the notable pagan exemplar already mentioned — Spartacus⁴. The intervening gulf of time between the turbulent first century CE and the convulsions of the twentieth was not, to be sure, a void over which such inspirations leapt. It was replete with movements of social protest, with primitive and inchoate rebellions. The last days of the Sasanian dynasty in Iran saw the proto-communist Mazdakites (who served as a precedent rooted in pre-Islamic tradition for Iranian secular revolutionaries in the 20th century)⁵;

³ “Fly forward, our locomotive: in the commune is our destination. We have no other path — we hold a rifle in our hands!” runs the famous early Komsomol song *Паровоз*.

⁴ On the Soviet Armenian case see Russell 2012a: in the little Transcaucasian republic the enthusiasts of the new dispensation drew freely on both Christian and earlier Zoroastrian symbolism in the creation of a canon for the future. The anatomy and genealogy of these transformations can embarrass ideologues, who aver that they are rationalists overthrowing superstition (or *vice versa*). An illustrative incident is perhaps worth recording here for posterity. Some years ago this writer was invited to offer a paper on Russian revolutionary posters at a conference on the art of the Islamic Revolution that was to be held at Harvard, and had secured partial funding from the office of the university’s Provost. One was suddenly disinvented by the organizing committee, when after consultation amongst themselves, they determined that the paper I had been asked to write — and had not yet even been written — might conceivably give offense to the Iranian régime by implying that its propaganda could be compared to art made by atheists. The conference went ahead without one’s sage contribution; and the Provost’s office did not respond to several formal complaints, both before and after it. So much for the freedom, diversity, and so on that the American “liberal” academic and media establishments self-righteously preach to others, while practicing the opposite themselves. To return briefly to cinematography, the American movie epic “Spartacus” ends with our hero dying on, yes, a cross. But there will be a kind of resurrection — his wife holds up to him their baby son. In the Soviet Union, *Spartak* was, of course, a soccer (football) team!

⁵ Several Classical Armenian writers termed Zoroastrian heresy, presumably Mazdaism, *anbari barerarut’ivn*, “bad beneficence”, lit. “not-good good-doing”, the implication being that the reformers who promoted economic and social fairness and equality were mo-

and soon after, the Paulician and Tondrakite movements washed over Armenia, leaving their traces in the Bogomil and Albigensian “heresies” of the medieval west. Bandit-rebellions of the Robin Hood type, studied notably by the great Marxist scholar Eric Hobsbawm, have been so frequent and widespread, from the British Isles to the movement of Kōroghlu (Turkish, “Son of the Blind Man”) in 16th–17th-century Anatolia, that it is accurate to study them both as general social phenomena arising independently in diverse cultures and displaying functional parallels, and as lines of tradition that are transmitted as heterodox and dissident teachings, altering details in time and space. Their literary-epic expression becomes then a *topos* of folklore and romantic balladry, with a filiation in some cases of transmitted literary models — but only in some limited cases can one insist confidently upon a linked historical chronology of influences from one movement to the other⁶.

2. THE PROTOTYPICAL BIBLICAL REVOLUTION

Revolution is, literally, the overturning of something: making what was below stand on top, vertically and in society and economics; and, laterally or temporally, reversing the normal and expected course of events. The Hebrew root for overturning, *h-p-k*, which will be central to our discussion, serves as the base of the modern Hebrew word for revolution, *mahapekha*⁷; many other modern languages either borrow the Latin term directly or form calques upon its prefix and verbal root⁸. The idea of God’s overturning powerful and seemingly unchangeable human institutions, and reversing the inevitable course of human events, is absolutely central to Judaism. When it happens it is the stuff of miracle, the irruption of the wonder of the divine into the mundane. And when it does not happen, one prays for it to⁹. We shall examine presently how it suf-

ficiently by heterodox beliefs that negated their efforts, or placed them in the service of evil ends. The phrase is used in connection with the serpent-man who in Iranian mythology, with its strong ideological foundation of kingship, is presented as the paragon of misrule, Aždahak.

⁶ On the Paulicians, see Russell 1995–1996; on Kōroghlu see Russell 2017.

⁷ Less dramatically, the root produces also the name for the signature cappuccino of the Israeli café, *hafukh* (lit. “upside-down [coffee]”) — a calque on European usage. In both Biblical and modern Hebrew, v. t. *hafakh* with the preposition *le-* on its object means to turn or change into something, as from black to white in the laws on leprosy in Leviticus.

⁸ Thus Russian *revoliutsiia* but, for instance, Armenian *yela-p’oxut’iwn*. The popular Arabic *thawra* (as in the slogan ending *ḥatt’ al-mawt[i]*, “till death”, which may attract the *shāhid* “martyr” but is scarcely the point of a revolution) really means an uprising (cf. modern Greek *epanastasē*); the late Edward Said predictably accused philologists who dared to mention the association of this term in Classical Arabic with the behavior of rowdy or randy camels as “orientalist” conspirators in the service of imperialism, colonialism, and so on. Modern Persian *enghelāb* (and other “Islamicate” tongues, e. g., Hindustani, with the pleasant *Latin*-ate transcription *inquilab*) employs a seventh form of the verbal root *q-l-b*, “change, alter”.

⁹ Wanting better and winding up with “as ever” is the best case for such political and other disappointments of life. The worst is the truly impenetrable fog of human evil, such as

fuses alike the earliest foundational text of Israelite national and sacral history, the Biblical Book of Exodus in the Pentateuch, and one of the most recent texts of the canon of the Hebrew Bible, the Oriental romance we know as the Book of Esther. It is expressed often in various contexts, to various ends, and always with the assertion of Divine sanction. And it will be seen in conclusion how the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus, encoded the revolutionary plot of the Book of Esther into a chronicle of Roman oppression.

Christ himself, a Jew who never called Himself anything else, derived his ideas directly from His own tradition, specifically, in the case we are briefly to consider, from a Psalm. He kept company with at least one adherent of the “Fourth Philosophy”, that of the revolutionary *Sicarii* (“dagger men”, after their preferred method of assassinating collaborators with the Romans) or Zealots (Hebrew *Qana'im*). The Apostle Paul, who almost singlehandedly invented a de-Judaized gentile Christianity, a development that Jesus perhaps neither imagined nor intended, and which many of His earliest followers bitterly opposed and rejected, was still to echo this core idea. He does so with a somber, thrilling eloquence that must touch the very soul of any believer in the one God, whatever else one may think of Paul’s strategic abandonment of the Torah and the Commandments of normative Judaism in the propagation of his message: “For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called: but God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in His presence” (1 Cor. 1:26–29)¹⁰. It is a statement of Divine revolution, of the enfranchisement of the downtrodden, of the involution of mundane hierarchical values.

The motto “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God” would seem to combine active human initiative with an appeal to Biblical tradition and the hope of Divine assistance. During another revolution, Benjamin Franklin proposed those words for the Great Seal of the brand new American republic only a month after the Declaration of Independence: it was to surround an engraving, telling-

the Holocaust and genocide. At that point monotheists must take cover behind the mystery of theodicy. But those Zoroastrians who still believe in the original dualism of their tradition have a better answer, even if it is not necessarily true: they can produce an all good but not all powerful Ahura Mazda, locked in battle with the inferior but wholly independent archdemon Ahriman, who assures His steadfast worshippers, to paraphrase William S. Burroughs, “I’ll do what I can, but I’m hustling, too”.

¹⁰ This writer, whose early Jewish education precluded the reading of Christian scriptures, was first exposed to these verses of the New Testament through Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle In Time*. Like some other books meant for children, and books of science fiction, it is much better than much of the fiction written by *soi disant* sophisticates for adults.

ly, of Israel crossing the Red Sea; and of the pursuing Egyptians, drowning¹¹. The difference, of course, is that the Americans took up arms against the British colonial authorities and defeated them. The only instance of Israelite violence in the events of the Exodus itself is Moses' smiting the Egyptian taskmaster. God does all the heavy lifting, as it were.

Let us consider this revolutionary prototype, Exodus, following the use of the Hebrew root *hpk* through it as a sort of trace element. The overthrow of the Egyptians might be said to commence when God turns Moses' rod into (*nHPK*) a snake, defeating the machinations of the court magicians (Ex. 7:15)¹². Since Egypt is the land of sorcery par excellence, this defeat is of great symbolic importance, and not mere legerdemain. Immediately thereafter, God orders Moses to inform Pharaoh of the first of the ten plagues, in which the waters will be turned (*wnHPKW*) to blood (Ex. 7:17). The king releases the Hebrew slaves, but has a change of heart (*wyHPK*, Ex. 14:5) and sends his army after them, to his ultimate doom. Further reversals follow in swift succession: the oppressor who would kill the Israelite first-born loses his own; the thieves of the Jews' labor are themselves utterly despoiled; the sea becomes dry land; the slaves become free men; and the army pursuing unarmed women and children is destroyed, with Pharaoh alone left to tell the tale¹³. To the prophetic Messenger of the *Qur'an*, Exodus is, indeed, *the* tale of *all* tales — the chapter in which it is summarized is entitled *al-Qisas*. Though “The Story” is actually that of a particular people, it is regarded not so much as the foundational saga of one nation as an exemplary event that teaches a universal and perennial message to all monotheists: Pharaoh was a worker of corruption (*mufsid*) in the earth; his victims were

¹¹ The new country received instead the preposterously cryptic image reflecting the Masonic iconography popular with many of the founding fathers that now adorns its currency: a pyramid representing the Pythagorean *tetraktys* with a blazing, all-seeing Eye in a triangle floating above it, and a quotation from Virgil, the sycophantic epic poet of the Roman empire.

¹² Jews and Christians felt the need to give names to the Pharaonic magicians, and came up with a rhyming pair, Jannes and Jambres. The latter then came to be associated with legends about another demonized duo, Harut and Marut (originally the Zoroastrian *yazatas*, “divinities”, Haurvatat and Ameretat), and their garden became an antitype of Eden. An early modern Armenian poem decrying the latest vice of Ottoman society accuses them of having cultivated there a noxious weed from hell, tobacco (actually a product of the New World, of course): see Russell 2009; Russell 2013; Russell 2014–2015.

¹³ Jewish pietistic tradition makes the Egyptian tyrant the sole survivor of the rout of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea and the later king of the Assyrians, to whose court at Nineveh the Prophet Jonah is sent. Pharaoh's earlier humbling thus explains his strange alacrity in hearing out the warning of the reluctant Hebrew prophet and ordering immediate and general repentance. But another way of understanding this very short book of the Bible is to see Jonah as a late text whose sardonic irony is perhaps Hellenistic and certainly deliberate: though Rabbinic tradition discovers many ingenious justifications for his behavior, Jonah, the only Jew in the story, is also the only character who is angry, ill-intentioned, and disobedient to God: see Bickerman 1967. One is reminded of Jesus' admonition — probably not original even then but perennially good advice — to notice the plank in one's own eye before pointing out the splinter in another's.

the oppressed (*mustadaf*); and God made them the *inheritors* (*wārith*; the root is the same as Hebrew *y-r-š*, a crucial term to be considered presently in the discussion of Ps. 37, which we have already noted from the Sermon on the Mount). God makes of His great deed an example — to the Egyptian tyrant, and, looking ahead to the Esther story (or from the vantage point of the revelation of Islam in the seventh century CE, looking back), to Haman (the villain of the story) as well (Sura 28:3-6). It is unsurprising that such theological terms as “workers of corruption in the earth” and “the oppressed” were to become watchwords of modern Iranian Islamic revolutionary rhetoric¹⁴.

3. REVOLUTION PROPHESED: JESUS AND PSALM 37

In the Gospel narrative, the flight of the Holy Family with the infant Christ to Egypt and their return to the Land of Israel recapitulates the events of Genesis and particularly of Exodus: one is clearly intended to telescope Egyptian oppression into the narrative of Christ’s infancy, whether the parallel persecution be the supposed Herodian massacre of the innocents or, more likely in historical terms, the Roman census that was the first step in the tightening of direct imperial rule over the restive population of Judea.¹⁵ After this symbolic Exodus, and His correspondingly symbolic sojourn and temptation in the desert — these recapitulations of Biblical typology and fulfillments of prophecy are at the heart of the canonical biography of Jesus — comes His teaching itself. We may focus here just on Psalm 37 (according to the numeration of the Hebrew Bible) as one source for the declaration in the Beatitudes cited at the beginning of this essay. The Psalm is abecedarian — an alphabetic acrostic — with the first word of every second verse beginning with a letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The verse that would have begun with the letter *‘ayin* is absent — not unusual in such Psalms — but the letter is present in three of the six words of the *samekh*-verse that would have preceded it. One might suggest that the author might have been following a deliberate plan, and by pointing out the missing letter repeatedly beforehand wanted one to anticipate

¹⁴ One prominent Persian theoretician of revolutionary Islam, Ali Shariati, even suggested that the Quranic address, *Yā ‘ayyuhā ‘l-insāna*, “O ye people,” is an appeal to the masses as understood in Marxian terms.

¹⁵ Herod was by ancestry an Idumaeon, a convert to Judaism; and he had to tread a dangerous path, accommodating and entertaining the Romans on the one hand and satisfying the restive Jewish population, most of whom detested them, on the other. But there was a “Herodian” religious party, Herod was apparently kind to the sectarians at Qumran, and he enlarged the Second Temple to its magnificent and final splendor. The demonization of Herod may reflect nascent Christian anti-Semitism. The Roman census in Judaea might have been the actual political turning point of Jesus’ lifetime, as the first act of imposition of direct imperial rule; and taxation (without even the ghost of representation) was a factor in the uprising of 66 CE. See: Brandon 1967: 49, 66.

the 'ayin-verse and then to notice the line by its very absence¹⁶: *swr m-r' w-šh ṭwb w-škn l-'wlm*, “Turn from evil and do good¹⁷, and dwell for ever” (Ps. 37:27, “do good” echoing the third verse¹⁸). A more subtle reversal may

¹⁶ It is important to understand that the order and length of the 22-letter Phoenician and Hebrew alphabet is arbitrary and not phonetically based, and did not change at all over the centuries. An exception is Arabic, which follows a scribal order of shapes but still preserves the ancillary *abjad* (i. e., A, B, C, D) list that follows the Phoenician order. Some alphabets adapted from it in antiquity added letters at the end but still preserved the basic order. The number and placement of the letters would seem to have possessed from the start, or achieved soon, a sacral status. (See the interesting and thought provoking study of Bundgård 1965). A native reader of Hebrew would therefore be likely to notice and remark upon an absent letter in an abecedarian text, and it would affect his reception of the text in what computer geeks and mathematicians would call a non-trivial way. So the 'ayin-line is thus what I christen an example of the ghost verse, something that one sees out of the corner of one's eye as it were, and imagines to be there, a verse that exerts an influence on the poem around it, and can be written about and commented on, but still does not exist. *Yesterday upon the stair/I met a man who wasn't there/He wasn't there again today/Oh, how I wish he'd go away* wrote William Hughes Mearns (1875–1965) in his poem “Antigonish” (1899). The absent line 1000 of Vladimir Nabokov's “Pale Fire”, described by Kinbote (Botkin?) as a poem of 999 rhymed couplets (!), must be the same as line 1, for intricate and compelling reasons of rhyme and theme alike, but it is not there. There is no “actually” in *Pale Fire*: that is what infuses the experience of reading the novel with wonder. In the case of the Psalms, the *locus classicus* is the missing *nun*-verse in the Masoretic text of Psalm 145. Tractate *Berakhot* of the Babylonian Talmud declares it deliberately to have been omitted, lest one think of a gloomy pronouncement of the prophet Amos beginning with the letter: *nāflāh*, “Fallen is the maiden of Israel; and she shall not rise.” But the Psalm scroll of Qumran and the LXX — and the Christian Psalter, subsequently — have a wholly innocuous *nun*-verse beginning with *ne'eman* “faithful”. But *Swmk YQWQ l-kl h-nplym w-zwqp l-kl h-kpw-pym*, “The Lord upholds all the falling and straightens up all those who are bent over”, reads the *samekh*-verse that would have followed *nun*. The *fallen* are raised, as though to reassure readers distressed by the (nonexistent) *nun*-line. The parallel second half of the *samekh*-verse seems to allude even more cryptically to the ghost line, for in square-character Hebrew *nun* is the “bent” (*kafuf*) letter, symbolic of the Messiah, the man bent beneath his heavy burden of trouble and sorrow. But at the *end* of days in the Messianic era he will be straightened, crowned king, even as the scribal *final nun*. There is no such distinction between initial-medial and final letters in Paleo-Hebrew script, however; so this further *allusion*, mystically and eschatologically replete with meaning, is also a temporal and historical *illusion*, a ghost of a ghost. For the Psalm that gives the entire Psalter its Hebrew title, *Tehillim* (Ps. 145 alone begins with the word *tehillah*), is probably too early to have been composed when square-character script was current in Israel. For pietistic and exegetical purposes, though, these phantasms are still useful; cf. the play of ostensible misprints, “fountain” and “mountain”, again, of Nabokov's poem.

¹⁷ *Sur me-ra' ve-'aseh tov* is also a part of the Psalmic *niggun* (a short song based on one or several Scriptural passages) “Who is the man who desires life (*Mi ha-ish he-chofets chayyim*)” popular in Hasidic Judaism.

¹⁸ The Midrashic discussion of the admonition to do good in the Psalm introduces, to explain David's plight, the parable of a man who is not paid. The king — his employer — then hires another laborer and rewards him richly. How much more, the first man muses, will the king give me in the end, since I have served him longer. The implication is that one's faith demands patience. See: Braude 1959: 1, 423–424. It may be that just recompense never

foreshadow this literal *turning* point. The third verse, which verse 27 echoes strongly, reads: *bṯh b-H w- 'šh ṯwb škn 'rš w-r 'h 'mwnh*, “Trust in the Lord and do good, dwell upon the earth and cultivate faith” (the word *ra'ēh*, “cultivate, shepherd, cherish”, here differs scribally from *ra'*, “evil”, in 37:27 by only one letter). Verse 14 reads: *hrb pṯhw rš 'ym wdrkw qštm l-hpyl 'ny w-'bywn l-ṯwbh yšry drk*, “The wicked have sharpened the sword and strung their bow, to cause the destitute and the poor to fall; to slaughter those who are upright on the way.” The letters of *bəṯah* “trust!” of 37:27 seem here to be *transposed* to *(lā-)ṯbōah*, “(to) slaughter”. But this transposition is a sign of the unlikely reversal of fortune, and in a direction the wicked are least expecting; for verse 15 assures us that their sword shall be turned upon their own hearts, and their bows shall be shattered. The image of sword drawn and bow bent will instantly remind the pious reader of the vivid word-pictures of Psalm 7, the song of reversals *par excellence* in the Psalter, where the unrepentant man has sharpened his sword and bent his bow — but he will fall into the pit he dug, and his mischief will return upon his own head.

Psalm 37 repeatedly admonishes one not to fret (Heb. *ṯhr*, used thrice, in lines 1, 7, 8), and not to envy evil men (*rš 'ym*) for their apparent success. Indeed, the words “evil man” and “evil” (*r'*) are so frequent that one editor has subtitled the Psalm “The Problem of Evil”¹⁹. The attendant issue is envy of the wicked, who should not prosper but still do; Philo, whose *In Flaccum* we shall consider presently, constantly cites envy, Gk. *phthonos*, as the great temptation and pitfall that bedeviled his own life and that turns men generally to vice. But this situation will be overturned, the author protests five times, his assurance spread evenly through the text — the good, variously characterized, will inherit the earth:

arrives for an individual in his lifetime: Kirkpatrick 1902: 187–188, who rightly considers the issues the Psalm addresses much the same as those in Job, suggests that the ancients, who were more family-minded than humans of the latter day, would have taken solace in the firm belief that compensation was sure to come to their progeny and descendants, if not to themselves. This idea of recompense delayed by a generation seems to be adumbrated in Psalm 37:25: “I was a youth; I also grew old, and I never saw a righteous man abandoned, or his progeny begging bread”. Because of the reference to food, the verse is chanted also towards the end of the Hebrew blessing after meals. There is a Zoroastrian parallel to the first part of the verse (but without the key reference to progeny) that this writer noted in a Pahlavi didactic poem (Russell 1987, repr. in Russell 2004). One thinks here also of Jesus’ deliberately provocative parable with the conclusion, The last shall be first. The issue of reward and payment is a vital one in the religious literature of antiquity, as it is today. Antigonus of Soho in Mishnah Pirquei Avot (The Ethics of the Fathers) enjoins the pious not to labor for God as one might for a human master, expecting a *peras* — which, the Renaissance scholar Casaubon first saw, to be followed by Bickerman latterly, is not payment by right but a bonus the owner/employer is not required to bestow. That is, expect nothing. The Sadducees and followers of Boethus deduced that there is no heavenly reward: later Rabbinic Judaism, with its canonical belief in heavenly reward, was to brand them *minim*, heretics.

¹⁹ See Cohen 1945: 111.

37:9 *ky mr 'ym ykrtwn w-qwy H hmh yyršw 'rš* “For the doers of evil will be cut off and those who hope in the Lord will inherit the earth”.

37:11 *w- 'nwym yyršw 'rš w-ht 'ngw 'l rb šlwm* “And the meek shall inherit the earth and take pleasure in great peace”.

37:22 *ky mbrkyw yyršw 'rš w-mqllyw ykrtw* “For those who bless Him shall inherit the earth and those who curse Him shall be cut off”.

37:29 *šdyqym yyršw 'rš w-yšknw l- 'd 'lyh* “The righteous shall inherit the earth and shall dwell for ever upon it”.

37:34 *qwh 'l H w-šmr drkw w-yrwmmk l-ršt 'rš b-hkrt rš 'ym tr 'h* “Hope in the Lord and preserve His way and He will raise you up to inherit the earth and you will see the cutting off of the wicked”.

The author of the Psalm takes pains to indicate, through the imagery of borrowing, lending, and repaying, that this inheritance is neither an otherworldly promise nor a metaphorical figure, but a concrete and down to earth matter of land and cash. The evil man borrows but does not repay (*šlm*), in contrast to the righteous man, who lends, gives generously, and enjoys peace (*šlwm*): a nice verbal figure²⁰. The righteous and the pious (*šdyq*, *šsyd*) moreover, are constantly associated with the poor and the needy (*'ny*, *'bywn* — cf. the Ebionites, whose name means “the Poor”!). The eldest son of the family is in the way of the world the heir; but God overturns the ways of the world. The younger Jacob, not the elder Esau, receives the inheritance from Isaac; and to God it is Jacob, with his new name, who becomes the first-born: *bny bkwy Ysr 'l*, “Israel is My first-born!” One recalls that God did not just free the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. He slew their first-born and ordered them to despoil their oppressors: our ancestors departed with all the former masters’ gold and silver, making Israel not only free men, but rich ones (the precious spoils went to the casting of the implements of the Tabernacle), and first-born heirs as well, one and all.

So inheritance is not defined here automatically by pedigree, as in civil law. It is a matter of Divine election, as stated in Psalm 2 and echoed at Christ’s Baptism²¹. “He who sits in the heavens will laugh — the Lord will mock them.

²⁰ In a written communication of 6 May 2017 Prof. David Sperling of Hebrew Union College, who meticulously read the draft of this article and offered several important corrections, notes that I. L. Seeligmann has argued convincingly that Ps. 37:21 does not describe an attribute of the wicked man but his fate: in the days to come he will be unable to pay back a loan, while the righteous will be rich enough that they will be in a position to afford to be generous. The generosity of Prof. Sperling, my friend and colleague, over many years is but one facet of his righteousness: it is a pleasure here to thank this good man and Torah sage.

²¹ Those who focused on the words from Heaven at the Baptism and reckoned them as the starting point of his Divine career, but refused to accept His virgin birth or divinity, considering these a blasphemy against monotheism, were later to be anathematized as adherents of a heresy, Adoptionism. This was a legitimate early Christian point of view in its time, though, and it became the Christology, also, of normative Islam. Medieval Jewish scholars,

Then he will speak to them in His anger, and terrify them in His wrath: And it is I who have anointed My king on Zion, My holy mountain. I will speak of the ordinance that God commanded me: ‘You are My son. I have begotten you this day. Ask of Me and I will give the nations as your inheritance (*nḥlh*); the very ends of the earth, as your possession (*’ḥwzh*)’²².

4. A PRELUDE TO REVOLUTIONARY ROMANCES: THE DREAM OF ILL OMEN

Jesus offers the prophecy of a just future; but what if one has a premonition of evil instead? The Jews of the Talmudic era, like other peoples at other times, believed that dreams are prophetic. So there is an extensive discussion of them, including instructions on how to avert such a dire future in Tractate *Berakhot* 55a–b of the Babylonian Talmud. R. Huna ben Ami transmits these: he received them from R. Pedat, who got them in turn from R. Yoḥanan: *hrw’h ḥlwm w-npšw ’gwmh ylk w-yptrnw b-pny šlšh* “One who sees a dream and is anguished in himself, let him go and have it interpreted before three (men)”. They should assure him that all will be well, and then *w-l-ymrw iii hpwkwt w-iii pdwywt w-šlš šlwmwt. Šlš hpwkwt hpkt mspdy l-mḥwl ly, ptḥt šqy yt’zrny šmḥh ’z tsmḥ btwlh bmḥwl w-bḥwrym w-zqnym yḥdyw w-hpkty ’blm l-ššwn... w-l’ ’bh H ’lhyk l-šmw’ ’l bl’m w-yhpwk...* “And they should recite three [verses of] ‘overturning’ [*ḥāfūkhōt*], three of ‘redemption’ [*pedūyōt*], and three of ‘peace’ [*šelōmōt*]. The three ‘overturnings’ are: ‘You turned my lament into dancing and girded me with joy’ [Ps. 30:12]; ‘Then shall the maiden delight in the dance, and youths and old men together — I will turn their mourning into rejoicing’ [Jer. 31:13]; “And the Lord your God refused to listen Balaam — instead, the Lord turned the curse into a blessing for you, for the Lord your God loves you” [Deut. 23:6]. We are to discuss the Book of Esther presently: it evokes the remembered life and customs of the Achaemenid royal court, not very distant or different from the Parthian and Sasanian world of the Babylonian Talmud — the *Bavli*. One of the fixtures of the pre-Islamic court, and of stories told about it, was the *topos* of a monarch waking from a nightmare and summoning his advisers to interpret it²³. At the begin-

including David Qimhi, were aware of Christian claims concerning Psalm 2 and refuted them: see Sperling 2011 with refs.

²² The typical parallel figure, with the somewhat assonant *nahālāh* and *aḥūzāh*, may be rhetorical and nothing more. But it might also be read so as to embrace both monetary and real property.

²³ For the use of the *topos* of dire dream vision, wakeful king, and seer in Armenian and Iranian epic narrative, see Russell 2012b. One Armenian word for a dream, *eraz*, derives from Iranian *rāz*, cf. the loan word *rz*’ in the Aramaic of Daniel in connection with yet more royal dreams: see Russell 1992. In the language of the Jewish texts of mystical ascent to the Divine palaces (*Hekhalot*), Heb. *raz* becomes a general term for the praxis in general of the presumably dream-like *Himmelsreise*.

ning of the sixth chapter of Esther — that is, at its exact center — when the prospects for the Jews are bleakest, the sleep of king Ahasuerus is disturbed (by a *bad dream*, explain Jewish exegetes, from which he wakes — the issue is not insomnia) and he has the *spr zkrwnwt*, the “book of memorials” (i. e., the royal annals)²⁴ read to him. This is how he learns of Mordechai’s report of the plot of two courtiers to assassinate the king, and from this moment the fortunes of Israel begin to turn for the better.

5. REVOLUTION AS ORIENTAL ROMANCE: THE BOOK OF ESTHER

The holiday of Purim has its origins in the Persian Empire — pre-Islamic Iran — and is based on events described in the Biblical Book of Esther that if they did occur would historically have to have transpired in the fifth century BCE or thereabouts, during the reign of the Achaemenid dynasty founded by Cyrus the Great. The book, probably composed in the Hellenistic period, describes the plot of Haman, the ambitious and hate-filled prime minister of an easily swayed and foolish king, Ahasuerus, to murder all the Jews of the vast Empire because of his malice towards a single man, Mordechai — who, as it happens, has saved the king from the plot of two assassins. Mordechai is also the guardian of an orphaned cousin, Esther, a beautiful woman whom Ahasuerus has chosen as the queen of Persia. At first, the king does not know of Esther’s background; and he does not know of Mordechai’s good deed, either. He also approves without question the genocidal decree Haman puts in front of him although it does not even name the nation to be destroyed. He goes so far as to lend the royal signet ring — the instrument of his autocracy — to Haman. It is a cloud, a fog, of ignorance and vagueness.

Once the dread decree is published, Mordechai urges Esther to come out to the king and reveal to him she belongs to the very people Haman wishes to massacre. She protests that she risks death to come before Ahasuerus without being summoned. But perhaps, Mordechai reasons, it is for the sake of this moment that she has attained her position at court. She fasts, and reveals herself to the king, who, fortunately, loves her and will do anything she asks. But wait, there’s more! Ahasuerus, who has not been sleeping well lately — as we have seen above — has the royal annals read to him and learns from them of Mordechai and his good deed. Truth is emerging from the fog — people and things are beginning to be called by their proper names.

And as this happens, the course of events reverses. Instead of Haman, Mordechai is honored: he is fitted out in royal robes and rides through Shushan on the king’s horse, with Haman walking before him to proclaim why he is be-

²⁴ Heb. *zīkārōn*, it might be noted, translates precisely the appropriate Middle Iranian term for some of these texts, *ayādgār*, “memorial”.

ing rewarded. Finally he is seated on the king's throne. Instead of Mordechai being executed by impalement on a stake fifty cubits high, Haman is, along with all his ten sons. Instead of Jews being the victims, they take up arms, go out, and kill thousands of their enemies in a preemptive attack. Anti-Semites cower in fear, and many gentiles convert to Judaism. The feast of Purim is established to commemorate the miraculous turn of events; and Mordechai becomes viceregent. Feasting is a notable aspect of both the text and the occasion on which it is read: the Book of Esther's ten chapters mention ten feasts, one of which lasts fully half a year; and on Purim night, after reading *Megillat Esther* from a special handwritten scroll, often in an ornate case — no other holiday merits such an object — and drowning out Haman's name with noise — again, unlike any other Scriptural public reading — Jews are bidden to drink and make merry till they cannot tell the exclamations “Blessed is Mordechai” and “Cursed be Haman” apart from each other. But Purim is strange in its excesses of sanctioned behavior, and has clear parallels in other early spring festivals like Mardi Gras. Most every holiday has its special food; for Mardi Gras celebrants in Louisiana it is gumbo, and for Ashkenazic Jews, on Purim it is *homentashen*, a three-cornered pastry stuffed with jam or poppy seed that is meant to look like the ear of a jackass — the shape may have its origins in antiquity, for the ancient Persians once ripped the ears off Gaumata, an illegitimate pretender to the throne, and there is a Greek mythological topos as well about donkey's ears²⁵.

If Ahasuerus has a historical counterpart it is most likely the early fifth-century king Xerxes, whose name, *Xšayarša*, means in Old Persian “Ruling like a man”, and who in his famous “Daiva” inscription at Persepolis boasts of having suppressed other religions and establishing Zoroastrian rites in their place. One can compare in spirit Haman the Agagite, son of Hammedatha. The father's name is pure Persian for “having the same law” (**hama-dāta-*); and Haman's name, if it is also Persian (it could have been from Elamite, a local language, but still can have sounded Persian enough to Jews that they interpreted it so), would mean “of the same mind/opinion” (**ham-manah-*) and thus the names of father and son underscore the point²⁶. And the point is that everybody in the 127 satrapies of Persia has the same law, except the Jews.

Why does Haman hate Jews? If there is any historical basis for the story, the reason would probably be that Israel as the Chosen People sets itself apart from all other nations: pagan anti-Semites called the Jews misanthropes for this. But the exegetes explain that his ancestors were the Amalekites, that ancient and peculiarly ruthless enemy whom God Himself swears in the Book

²⁵ The Armenian Mardi Gras food is *herisa*: for an account of the riotous celebrations, in which traditional social and sacerdotal roles are mocked and overturned, see: Russell 2003.

²⁶ See Russell 1990. Similarly, in the Book of Tobit, which is also steeped in ancient Iranian lore, both the name of the hero and his son Tobias mean “God is good”: see Russell 2001.

of Exodus to wipe out utterly²⁷. But the proximal cause is that Mordechai twice refuses to bow to Haman. The Hebrew text does not explain why; but the Greek version does. If it had been merely a gesture of respect that would have mollified the king's minister, that is one thing, but the kind of bow Haman demanded would have been tantamount to idolatry. This episode may reflect a real concern of Jews in ancient Iran: it was customary fully to prostrate oneself before the king (or other high official), and when Alexander the Great conquered Iran and took a fancy to local ways, even his Macedonian generals, idolaters to a man, balked at the *proskynesis* — full prostration — that he now demanded of them. Would such obeisance be halakhically idolatrous? And it has been suggested that there were images of false gods embroidered on Haman's clothes: one thinks of the figural roundels of Sasanian silk brocade — so by bowing to him one would be bowing to them.

Haman's name is symbolic; so is that of his wicked wife, Zereš. It derives from the Iranian name of a demon Zairičā, meaning “jaundice”, and forms a rhyming pair with another imp of hell, Tairičā, meaning “harm”. The two of them, a kind of infernal recipe for a bad harvest, are the opponents of the two archangels, Haurvatāt (“Health”) and Amərətāt (“Immortality”) (Middle Persian Xurdād and Amurdād), who are the guardians of fertility — of waters and plants. Tairičā appears in Esther as Tereš — one of the pair of would-be assassins of Ahasuerus whose plot Mordechai discovers. The other is Bigthan, which may be from Bagadāna, “God-given”. So Esther and Mordechai represent the forces of goodness and life, a kind of Khordad-Amurdad rhyming pair; their opponents, Teresh and Zeresh, the powers of evil and death. The term Purim itself means “lots”, and there is an old Zoroastrian game, preserved by Armenian girls, of casting lots (*vičak*) in the springtime (on Ascension Eve) to see who will fall in love and be married. They throw a flower into water under the *stars*. The flower is called *horot-morot*, a form of the names Khordad and Amurdad just mentioned. And as for the star, we have Esther, whose name probably means that. Did the author of the Book of Esther know the ancient key words encoded into his story, that make it into an allegory of cosmic war as well as a game of love and marriage? There can be little doubt of his knowledge of Per-

²⁷ In some Jewish tradition, the Armenians are said to be the descendants of Amalek (and there is a legend that the people of Amasia, a Pontic city that once had a large Armenian population, were Amalekites); and the Yiddish name for them, Timkhe, is a Cockney rhyming slang-style reduction of the Biblical injunction against Amalek, *Yemakh timkhe*, “May he be utterly blotted out!” Anti-Semitism exists in Armenian life and culture: the two Diaspora peoples, so similar in their energy and aspirations — and, later, in their misfortunes — evidently could be bitter rivals at times. But happily there is also friendship and mutual respect: the Jew Franz Werfel's novel *The Forty Days of Musa Dagh*, about the Armenian genocide, inspired resistance during the Holocaust; and the Armenian-American anti-fascist writer Avedis Derounian (a.k.a. John Roy Carlson), whom this writer had the pleasure and honor to know, combatted anti-Semitism and saw in the nascent State of Israel the model for a future Armenia.

sian: he uses the correct Persian term, *aḥašdarpana*, which is also, incidentally, the longest word in the Hebrew language, for a governor (English uses the same Persian word, *via* Greek, as “satrap”). When Mordechai becomes *mišneh*, “second”, to Ahasuerus on the throne, at the end of the book, the author is rendering into Hebrew a historical Persian rank, **bitya-xšaya-*, “second-ruling” (cf. Greek *pitiaxēs*; Armenian l-w *bdeašx*). And numerous other details of the story and setting are authentically Iranian. The use of gentile names and the intimate knowledge of Iranian language and ways suggest that the writer of Esther was not merely attuned to the dangers and insecurities of life in diaspora, but belonged to a well established and deeply rooted, viable diaspora community.

There seems to be a kind of very specific, supernatural event taking place, then, beneath the fog of vagueness, of identities concealed and people not named, in the Book of Esther. And where names are given in lists, they are suspiciously symmetrical. Seven noble families served the Persian throne, and these “sages” are named in the book in order as: Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memucan. The king’s eunuchs are also seven in number, also listed, and the name of the first eunuch rhymes with that of the last of the sages; the names of the last three eunuchs, with those of the first three of the sages: Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha, Abagtha, Zethar, and Careas. (Note that some pairs in these lists rhyme, in inverse order; cf. the diptych structure of the book itself.) Lists mattered to the ancient reader, as mnemonic tools and demonstrations of erudition (the classic example is the list of ships in the *Iliad* of Homer), and he was alive to this aspect of the story in a way a modern reader might not be. The Book of Esther provides the names of all ten of Haman’s sons, all of them authentically Persian. There are ten feasts and ten chapters, and the key reversal occurs right at the midpoint of the book. Everything is as symmetrical — and reversed! — as the two covers of a book, the two wings of a butterfly, the two panels of a diptych. Clearly, the author wants the reader of this romance to figure out puzzles, to pay attention when something is named, and also to notice the contrast between naming and not naming, between precision and vagueness — between truth and deception. Deception rules the first half of Esther; in the second half everything is overturned, inverted, made to run backward, and truth wins the day. So the parallel between the two name lists is in *inverted* order; and ironic *reversal* is the great thematic strategy of the story. Haman plans to kill all the Jews, but in the end by counter-edict the Jews slay all the anti-Semites. Haman hopes to be honored by the king; but it is Mordechai instead who receives honor, while Haman is humiliated. Mordechai is to be impaled; but instead Haman and his whole family suffer this gruesome form of execution. The reversal is as complete in its way as in Exodus. There, the very laws of nature are inverted; here, the seemingly inevitable course of history is reversed. Chiasmus is one of the more important stylistic features of Biblical composition, and the author of Esther uses it to the hilt.

The triumph of Mordechai — his reward for having unmasked Bigthan and Teresh, the would-be killers of the king — is worth mention, for it is portrayed in the Purim scene, one of the frescoes of the third-century synagogue at Dura-Europos. All four walls of this unique structure teem with portrayals of Biblical figures and episodes, painted by an artist whose “frontal” style, studied famously by the great Russian scholar and archaeologist Mikhail Ivanovich Rostovtsev, indicates he might have been an Iranian Jew, or at the very least a local from Syria with the strong cultural ties to Parthia characteristic of the place and time (one recalls that Edessa, the “blessed city” of early Syriac Christians, bore also the moniker “daughter of the Parthians”). We can imagine that if this were the case, the story of Esther, with its Iranian locus and flavor, would have had special resonance for him and his audience, who would have been attuned to the fine details of his portrayal of the scenes and characters. Events are shown in sequential order: Haman, attired as a slave to increase his abasement, leads Mordechai, who sits astride the white royal steed. Then Mordechai is enthroned — there are animals on each step of the platform of the throne in the painting. That is a kind of iconographic shorthand intended either to recall, or, overtly, to represent the Persian throne as that of Solomon, who, according to tradition, knew the languages of the animals. But the stories that accreted around the complex figure of Solomon suggest that he was weak in some respects, too. One recalls the legend that Solomon, who according to apocryphal legend had enlisted the help of the demon Ašmedai (English Asmodeus; this is the Zoroastrian demon of wrath, Aēšma daēva, *xāšm* in New Persian) in the construction of the Temple, foolishly lent his signet ring to the demon; and Ahasuerus gives his own signet ring to Haman! This would seem to suggest that even the greatest monarch, Solomon, could be thoughtlessly impulsive; and Ahasuerus is far from the wisest of kings. Solomon loved women immoderately; and so does Ahasuerus. He marries Esther because of the disrespectful behavior of his previous queen, Vashti (whose name, I have argued, may be related to an Iranian word for lust). The image of Solomon’s throne may suggest to the attentive observer that Ahasuerus/Xerxes, for all his greatness and power, is a man with flawed and impulsive judgment, ruled by his passions. As the Biblical scholar Prof. Jon Levenson has observed in his witty and learned study of the Book of Esther, Ahasuerus is a king “who never says no”.

Given these strange data and *data* (Persian law, if the gentle reader will forgive the etymological pun), this mixture of comedy and high seriousness, of the profane and the profound, of important, even perennial themes lightly treated, what is one to conclude about the Book of Esther? Perhaps one way to approach the question is to address the question of the literary genre to which it may be assigned. Although it is a part of canonical Scripture and draws on Biblical precedents and parallels (there are a number to the story of Joseph, for instance), it is also the basis for an early spring holiday, a carnivalesque

celebration with analogues elsewhere in the Near East and beyond. It is likely to have been the work of an Iranian Jewish author addressing the anxieties (and evoking the life ways) of a deeply rooted Diaspora community. The book has very little to say of the Land of Israel, save that Mordechai's forebears had been exiled from Jerusalem — but it does not intimate or hope for a return there. All this is clear. But what *kind* of a book is it? The Bible presents many different styles of narrative. Pious believers accept the Bible as a single, normative, Divine scripture. It is the history of God's interaction and successive covenants with Israel. But it is still extremely diverse in genre: it has songs, carefully and tautly crafted stories, homilies. The Psalms are a compilation of prayerful poems, some connected with the Temple, others with private devotions and personal emotions. Ecclesiastes and Proverbs are wisdom-literature. The Song of Songs is an allegorical love poem with an antecedent in ancient Egyptian literature. And so on.

Esther, without doubt, belongs to the category called the Oriental romance. It is a genre that is most abundantly attested in the Greek of the Hellenistic age, and thereafter in both Greek and Latin: one of the longest and finest works of this type is the *Transformations of Lucius* of Apuleius of Madaura, a North African writer in Latin of the second century CE. The ancient romance typically has an exotic and sumptuous setting: often Persia, but also India or Ethiopia, or Phoenicia. The plot partakes abundantly of love triangles, situations of peril, and ironic reversals. The characters are generally a virtuous couple pitted against villains who are wicked, stupid, lustful, and base, in varying proportions. There is very often a religious subtext: Apuleius' narrative concludes with the praises of the cult of Isis, and the story of Rhodanes and Sinonis in the *Babyloniaka* of Iamblichus is covertly Mithraic²⁸. The end of the romance ties all the threads neatly together: virtue is always rewarded, lovers and sundered families are happily reunited, and the heroes, vindicated and delivered from peril, triumph over their enemies. The latter receive their just deserts, often in ways a modern reader might find gratuitously vindictive, even sadistic. Tragic heroes are larger than life; in romances the heroes are not, and the villains are sometimes comical and pathetic. By all these criteria, Esther is just such a romance.

The romance, by comparison with some other kinds of writing, has proven to be a durable genre over the centuries, partly because it is more accessible and immediately entertaining to the average reader than more sophisticated forms; partly too, because even though it is overtly escapist, a relief from the everyday grind, it can elevate and enchant the reader and deliver a powerful message through its sumptuous magic. A good example of such a survival, from more recent times, is the opera of Mozart *Die Zauberflöte*, with its lovers Pamino and Tamina (and of course, as in Esther, they rhyme), the pathetic, evil eunuch of a monk, the sinister Queen of the Night, and the high-priest

²⁸ See Russell 2001–2002; Russell 2002–2003.

Sarastro, who is none other than Zoroaster, the Prophet of ancient Iran, albeit here with abundant Masonic images and themes, and some modish Egyptian trappings added on.

And this seems one key to Esther: the book addresses an important issue of common — and communal — anxiety as well as the perennial problem of the contest between good and evil, and solves the problems with a denouement that, for all its sumptuous Oriental fantasy, still delivers a sober, religious message that underscores the virtues of love, commitment, and faith. And through the book runs, like a trace element, also the key root *h-p-k* we noted above. Prof. Levenson cites a sage pupil, Brooks Schramm, who at a seminar in 1986 at the University of Chicago declared that one word in Esther 9:1 sums up the entire book²⁹: on 13 Adar the enemies of the Jews were to get them in their power *wnhpk hw'* — *və-nahafokh hū* “and it was overturned”, i. e., the opposite happened, and the Jews got their enemies in their own power instead. And in verse 22 of the same chapter, the holiday of Purim is ordained for 14 and 15 Adar, since a time of grief and mourning *nhpk, nehpakh* “was turned” into festivity and joy. Although these overturnings (or, to use the Latin, revolutions) suggest a Divine agent, rather than the mere operation of chance, the Hebrew text of Esther does not mention the name of God anywhere; and though Esther fasts, no prayer she might have uttered is recorded. The translator of the Greek version, in the Septuagint, hastens anxiously to fill in both lacunae, but the theological silence of the original may suggest — and this is literally an *argumentum ex silentio* — that the events of the narrative are so mundane, so much a part of the conditions of the exile, that the artful reversals and the verb *hpk* must suffice to suggest that the Almighty is still active in the world and a helper to His people Israel. In Exodus, God works with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; here in Esther, though the revolution takes place, the Lord is working, as it were, behind the scenes. Hence perhaps the crucial turning point and *deus ex machina* is made Ahasuerus' disturbed sleep, or mantic dream, triggering the reading of the royal annals, rather than a fully wakeful, daytime event.

6. THE *IN FLACCUM* OF PHILO: ESTHER AS CRYPTOGRAM

As we have seen, revolutionary ideas tend, paradoxically, to be rooted strongly in earlier prototypes of all kinds, from the theoretical to the artistic. The urge to break away into the new never fully achieves the escape velocity to overcome the gravitational pull of the past. So it should be even less surprising that a work of antiquity presented by a Platonist, Hellenophone Jewish philosopher as a historical narrative might have been patterned very closely upon the Book of Esther, though the author had good reasons to ensure that

²⁹ Levenson 1997: 8.

only a Jewish reader would discern the underlying armature and its message. This is the *In Flaccum* of Philo Judaeus of Alexandria. Philo was a leader of this diaspora community, which was large and well established but in many respects without political power or civil rights. Although Philo wrote in Greek, it is unlikely gentiles read his books: he had an exclusively Jewish audience in his own time³⁰.

The text, which differs strikingly in its dramatically narrative style from Philo's other works of philosophical exegesis of the Bible, deals with events of 38–40 CE that may be summarized thus in brief: the Roman emperor Tiberius appoints Flaccus prefect of Egypt, and at first he performs his duties properly; but upon the accession to power of Gaius Caligula, Flaccus finds his own position precarious. Two corrupt men, Isidorus and Lampo, persuade him to deflect from himself the adverse attention of the new emperor by using the Jews as scapegoats. In the meantime Herod Agrippa, scion of the royal house of Judaea, stops in Alexandria (the ancient equivalent of an airline hub) on his way home to the Land of Israel from Rome. Though he tries hard to avoid ostentation, even notice, the locals still behold his splendid bodyguard and retinue. They are consumed by *phthonos*, “envy”, a moral failing on which Philo focuses (he regarded it as a serious shortcoming in his own character). They are outraged, too, that the Jews should dare to claim a king of their own. The spiteful Alexandrian Greeks and Egyptian natives conceive a stratagem of provocation, what we would call nowadays a “set up”: they install statues of the emperor in the synagogues of the city knowing the Jews will regard them as idols and remove them. The second Commandment forbids idolatry — as the Seleucids had learnt nearly two centuries before, at the time of the Macabees, and as we have seen in Esther. God alone is to receive *proskynēsis*³¹.

This religious obduracy would guarantee a furious reaction from the mercurial and choleric Caligula, who already finds it offensive that Jews offered sacrifices *for* him but not *to* him. In this dedication exclusively to one God, the Jews differed from the other religio-national communities of the Roman Empire in the same way they had differed from the other peoples of Ahasuerus' domains³²; and ancient proto-anti-Semites further claimed that Jews were misanthropic in their refusal to share meals and intermarry with their pagan neighbors. In short, the Jews were different from everybody else — an echo of Haman's claim. A grisly pogrom ensues³³; and it seems certain Caligula

³⁰ See Birnbaum 2001.

³¹ Goodenough 1938: 27.

³² As Gibbon drily observed, to Roman pagans all gods were equally true; to philosophers, equally false; and to politicians, equally useful.

³³ Van der Horst 2003 notes how Philo takes pains to detail how prominent leaders of the Jewish community were flogged with scourges, a punishment much more demeaning than being beaten with the flat of a sword, as citizens were. He points out also (p. 214) the frequent use in the text of the term *hybris* — out of all proportion to its appearance else-

will introduce harsher measures still — for although the Jewish community had written a decree proclaiming their loyalty to the new emperor, Flaccus deliberately neglected to send it, “so that we alone of all people under the sun would be considered enemies” (*Flacc.* 101–102).

But the reversal, the *h-p-k* moment, comes just when Jewish fortunes look bleakest: Agrippa takes the document and has it delivered to its Roman addressee. This happens precisely at the mid-point of the narrative, and signals the dramatic reversal of the fortunes of the Jews for the better (and of Flaccus’ fortunes, for the worse). Philo calls the reversal “revolutionary” (*neōteron*, *Flacc.* 120) — one of the very rare instances in which the eirenic, conservative philosopher uses the term in a positive sense. He does so evidently because he considers the revolution a Divine act³⁴. Several scholars have noticed the general affinity of *In Flaccum* to Esther³⁵, but the points of comparison in both large structure and minute detail — the chiasmic reversal, for instance — are so striking that it seems all but certain the Philo intentionally patterned his work upon the Biblical book in order to deliver the Jewish reader this *coded* message³⁶: Caligula, like Ahasuerus, is a vile and ignoble buffoon; Flaccus is like Haman; Isidorus and Lampo play the roles of the petty villains Bigthan and Teresh; Mordecai will not bow to Haman and the Jews will not countenance a statue of Gaius in the synagogue; and God will intervene subtly in history to give protection (*epikouria*) to His people. In its overall structure, its thematic and narrative armature, *In Flaccum* is symmetrical, a near perfect diptych³⁷.

Prof. Peter Brown wrote eloquently in his *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity* of the utility of *paideia*: a shared background in Greek culture and learning and common values such as self-restraint and respect for freedom of speech and civility enabled the educated but powerless commoner to speak

where in the Philonic corpus. What the Jews experience, then, is a state peculiarly dreaded in antiquity (and not at all pleasant today, either): public humiliation, expressed in Greek by the passive verb *hybrizomai* — “to be hubris-ed against”, as it were. On this theme as a catalyst to the “bandit” epic see Russell 2017, and recall the humiliation of Haman in the Purim scene of the frescoes of the synagogue at Dura.

³⁴ See van der Horst 2003: 200.

³⁵ Notably Goodenough 1938: 7–10.

³⁶ van der Horst 2003: 16, quotes approvingly the astute judgment of the Philonic scholar Dr. Ellen Birnbaum: the book would have been addressed to the Jews as a consolation in adversity, and as a warning to the gentiles against harming them.

³⁷ *In Flacc.* 36–40, the enemy Alexandrians take a hapless pauper named Karabas from the street, dress him up as a king of the Jews, surround him with a mock retinue, and call him jeeringly in Aramaic *Mārān* — “our Lord”. This is first of all a message to the Jews and their Agrippa. As a literary strategy it may be a reworking of the theme of the enthronement of Mordechai as well. One hears perhaps an echo of the “lord of misrule” of vernal customs analogous to the Purim festival; or, more chillingly, the echo of the mock enthronement, but a few years before of another *Rex Iudaeorum*, a certain Nazarene. One notes that Philo apparently wrote a book, now lost, on the persecution of the Jews by Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who condemned that King to death.

effectively to the ruler. But speaking truth to power safely is possible only when the powerful respect *paideia*, or when the rule of law constrains them. That was not the case with Gaius Caligula. So when one wishes in such conditions to give an audience a piece of one's mind the choice is either a highly visible martyrdom (perennially an effective if costly tool), following the advice of the old Armenian proverb to tell the truth only if you've got one foot in the stirrup (or, *mutatis mutandis*, Joseph Brodsky's Eleventh Commandment, "Scatter!"), or cryptography — encoding the message somehow. Leo Strauss in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* argues that Maimonides did this in the *Guide to the Perplexed*, a philosophical book that, Strauss believed, had to get past religious censorship. And even encoding a message to those who will understand it — Maimonides on divinity to fellow philosophers, Philo on Caligula to fellow Jews — only works if there are no informers in the house. In 1933 the Soviet Armenian poet Charents published his *Girk' chanaparhi*, "The Book of the Journey". The first printing was confiscated and burnt because the censors discerned a satirizing reference to Stalin as the buffoon Pierrot. Charents told a friend with glee that they had missed the subversive message spelled out by every second letter of the initial word of each line of the poem *Patgam*, "Message", in the book. It was: "Armenian nation, your only salvation is in your united strength." The friend informed on the poet, and the matter went from departmental level to the dean's office, as it were — from Erevan to Moscow. Charents was arrested in the summer of 1937 and died in prison in November of that year. *Совершилось*.

It seems Philo encoded his message with fair assurance he would not be turned in. But in his text the Jews offer a prayer of thanksgiving for their sudden and unexpected deliverance that begins with a curious, almost legal disclaimer (*Flacc.* 121): "O Lord, we are not delighted at the punishment of our enemy, for we have learned from our holy laws that we should sympathize with our fellow humans. But it is right to give thanks to you for having taken pity and compassion on us and for having relieved our constant and incessant oppression". Various scholars have considered this abjuration of *Schadenfreude* disingenuous. The ancients regarded hubris as a tragic flaw, to be sure, but the humiliation and ridicule of a defeated enemy was well within the acceptable terms of their politics and morals: the riotous, vengeful, joyous customs of the Purim holiday itself reflect these. Jewish tradition also stresses, though, that the Israelites were forbidden to rejoice over the drowning of Pharaoh's host in the Red Sea; and to this day at the Passover *Seder* Jews spill ten drops of wine for the ten plagues, plus three more drops at three acronyms of them, to subtract from the celebrants' joy — in compassionate memory of the suffering and death of God's creatures. On the one hand, the incipit of the prayer may be defensive, lest gentile readers think the Jews overweening in their pride. On the other, though, it may be an encoded message to the Jewish reader who knows the traditions of Passover, as if to say: all others indeed rejoice

in the spectacle of a defeated, downtrodden enemy, but we and our Laws are, precisely, different from (and better than!) all those other, barbarous nations³⁸. Or Philo might have been hedging his bets.

It is interesting to observe one way that Philo has brought up to date, as it were, a crucial detail of the Book of Esther. At the beginning of the sixth chapter of the latter, we recall, the sleepless king Ahasuerus has the *spr zkrwnwt*, the book of memorials, read to him. The book is the instrument of the reversal of the Jews' fate. That may be fitting for a people who, uniquely among ancient peoples, reposed their loyalty and identity in a single normative written canon of scripture believed to be the only true revelation of the only God. But ancient Iran was a culture that revered the oral tradition, not the written word; and Persian documents such as Ahasuerus' royal annals existed in at most a few copies. Even the Zoroastrian sacred scripture, the Avesta, was transmitted mainly by word of mouth: the Pahlavi texts assert that there were but a few written copies, so rare that they were kept in provincial treasuries³⁹. So the Persian book is more sacral than political. Philo, by contrast, lived in a far more literate world whose affairs were dependent upon written documents — officials were accordingly adept at manipulating them. Instead of an archive to be read to a sleepless king, in a scene drawn from the stock of epic and myth, we have a time-sensitive letter, the Alexandrian Jewish pledge of allegiance to Caligula, that Flaccus cunningly neglects to forward to its addressee. As if to direct our attention even more closely to such bureaucratic malfeasance of the written word, Philo uses an epithet of the villain Lampo *kalamosphaktēs* “one who murders by means of the pen” (*Flacc.* 132) that, van der Horst points out, is a *hapax* in Greek — a word found here and nowhere else.

7. CONCLUSIONS

One can only imagine how Philo's faith might have been shaken, had he been able to see the *kalamosphakteis*, the desk-murderers (*Schreibtischtäter*) of two millennia in the future, had he come to know how his *hapax* was to become a commonplace. Philo argued that for Jews, Jerusalem is the metropolis,

³⁸ Balaam's prophecy that Israel will dwell alone is double-edged indeed. But as to taking pleasure in another's misery, the American Jewish folk definition of a Jewish holiday treads a middle path, at once celebratory and gently humane: “They tried to kill us. We won. Let's eat!” As for *Schadenfreude*, one cannot help noting the language and culture that has supplied the word, along with *Blitzkrieg*, *Vergeltungswaffen*, *Endlösung*, *Beamtersprache*, and other terms the world could well have done without. Many are specific to what Victor Klemperer famously studied as the *Lingua Tertii Imperii* — George Orwell, shortly after the Second World War, conceived “Newspeak” in 1984 to warn humanity that no one is safe from the danger of the totalitarian perversion of language. I concur here with C. S. Lewis, *Qui Verbum Dei contempserunt, eis auferetur etiam verbum hominis*.

³⁹ See Bailey 1971, chapters *Patvand* (“transmission of the tradition”) and *Dēn dipīrīh* (“writing down of the Religion”).

the mother-city, but the foreign lands where diaspora communities reside are their patria, their father-land. He did not live to see the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, either — not two millennia, but a few short decades after the Alexandrian pogrom. It signaled the beginning of a precarious, powerless, imperilled diaspora, one with no mother-city left at all. “We had good reason to think that our hopes were *not* lost”, he writes of his fellow Alexandrian Jews, perhaps with reference to Ezekiel 37, *ybšw šmwtynw w-’bdh tqwtmw*, “Our bones are dry and our hope is lost” The Zionist movement, determined to end the condition of diaspora once and for all, was to adopt as its hymn, years before the Holocaust, a song called “The Hope”, with its poignant verse *’wd l’ ’bdh tqwtmw* (*’Od lo avda tikvatenu*), — “Our hope is *not* yet lost”. In the aftermath of the extermination of the Jews of Europe, David Ben Gurion and his comrades would not and could not wait for Divine intervention: “Our future depends, not on what the gentiles think, but on what the Jews do”, he declared, much as Lenin had left off an essay half written, preferring to make a revolution rather than write about one. But paradigms of Biblical redemption quickly accreted still around the modern, secular State of Israel, with Hatikvah as its national anthem, and Jewish worshippers around the world began to bless it as *r šyt šmyht g’wlnw*, “the beginning of the flowering of our redemption”⁴⁰. As we have seen, in ideology and intertextuality, in passion and hope, in the homeland and in diaspora, religion and revolution are, and have always been, inseparable. For the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic faiths — the Abrahamic world civilization — the Hebrew Bible is at the living heart of them all, from Moses and Jesus to Lenin and Marx, and beyond. And “we all want to change the world”.

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⁴⁰ Hasidim, even those extremely supportive of Israel, refuse to pronounce this blessing, because for all the importance of human agency redemption must still come from a supernatural source: the Messiah. Many Jews in the Diaspora who do pronounce the blessing, and who dutifully recite “Next year in Jerusalem” at their Seder tables, seem to reflect in their choice of domicile another sort of faith, that of Philo: Jerusalem is the mother, but the land of dispersion is the father, and God will protect His people everywhere.

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