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Biblical Revolutions: Some Observations.

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К столетию Великой Октябрьской Социалистической Революции

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

—В.И. Ленин (в фильме «Ленин в Октябре», 1937 г.)

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" (*makarioi hoi praeis, hoti autoi klēronomēsousin tēn gēn*) declared Jesus Christ in His Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:5).[1] But the messianic *Parousia*— Christ's Second Coming— 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."

Hope, as the Russian expression goes, is the last to die. Many of the fond hopes that attended the previous watershed— the second, Bolshevik revolution of

[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 *ašrei*, "happy". In a separate study in progress 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 *Ašrei*— developed as a response to the Beatitudes, whose original text might have been in a gospel in Hebrew or Aramaic used by Jewish Christians. Profs. Michael Stone, David Sperling, and Ellen Birnbaum read parts of this essay and offered invaluable comments and suggestions, for which it is a pleasure here to record my gratitude. Any shortcomings are of course my own.

the year 1917 in the Russian Empire— died at the hands of a bureaucratic police state that came into being seemingly *ab initio*, but whose sanguinary criminality reached its peak 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. This writer takes no pleasure in the tragic dismemberment of the Soviet Union; there is much still to be proud of, and to be remembered, when one looks back over a century to October: the achievements like Magnitka, the victory in the Great Patriotic War that at terrible cost saved all mankind from the most horrible fate imaginable, the country's heroic recovery, the smiling face of Yuri Gagarin. Many people of this writer's generation will remember and love many and much in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics that we knew, till our dying day. That is partly because 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.

And even so there is no denying how bitterly ironic the scripted words of the actor Boris Shchukin playing Vladimir Ilyich that close the film classic "Lenin in October", released in that dark year of 1937, must sound. Why is it, then, that a viewer, knowing 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 does resonate so strongly for us is that it has overt Scriptural overtones: the declaration of that "most human of men" (самый человечный человек, as an iconic propaganda poster proclaims him) 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 the most divine of men. According to John 19:30: *hote oun elaben to oxos ho Iēsous, eipen, Tetelestai. Kai klinas tēn kephalēn, paredōken to pneuma*. "When Jesus took the vinegar, then, He said, 'It is accomplished!' And, lowering His head, He gave up the spirit."[2] The Old Church

[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 with an ensuing joyful thunder of bells. The latter anticipate the ringing in of the Resurrection on Easter Sundays of the future. Boris Pasternak had earlier amplified such echoes from the future in his poem *Рождественская звезда* ("The Star of the Nativity"): ... И странным виденьем грядущей поры/ Вставало вдали всё пришедшее после./ Все мысли веков, все мечты, все миры,/ Всё будущее галерей и музеев,/ Все шалости фей, все дела чародеев,/ Все ёлки на свете, все сны детворы... ("And as a strange vision of days to come/ Far away all was arising that later came./ All the thoughts of the ages, all the dreams, all the worlds,/ The future of all the museums and galleries,/ All the frolics and deeds of the fairies and villains,/ All the world's Christmas trees, all childhood dreams...")

Slavonic for Greek *tetelestai*, “it is accomplished,” is *sovershishasia*; modern Russian *sovershilos’*. Most Russians alive in 1937 were born and raised in the traditions of the Orthodox faith and many still clung to it, despite the monstrous suppression of the clergy a decade earlier and the subsequent convulsions of the Five-Year Plans and the collectivization of the land. Theirs was no subconscious memory. The lexical Christian-Communist correspondence, then, is exact; and both the Soviet slogan *Ленин жил, Ленин жив, Ленин будет жить* (“Lenin lived, Lenin lives, Lenin shall live”) and the popular song *Ленин всегда с тобой* (“Lenin is with you always”) echo the Christian belief in the Resurrection and Christ’s assurance that He is ever with us, as well. The death must happen for the resurrection to become possible: this is the chain of teleological thinking, and the determinism of Marx, echoed in the title of Edmund Wilson’s classic history of revolutionary thinkers and movements, *To The Finland Station*, displays a crypto-religious teleology. The sociological historical method of Giambattista Vico begins to gather steam and turn its wheels, and Lenin alights at the final stop.[3] 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 a wry, well-known Soviet anecdote adds, is defined as an imaginary line that vanishes as you approach it). The paradigm of religion for even the most avowedly atheistic of revolutionary movements is as inescapable today as it was in the Servile rebellion of Spartacus, which took Dionysus, the dying and rising god, as its patron.

None of this is really news, though it is useful to any discussion of the concept of revolution to return and parse the details. There has always been a recognizably eschatological, religious fervor, and a related passion for martyrology, in revolutionary upheavals; so the arts of Communism, from phrases and iconic banners to the usages in the more recent medium of cinematography, are much indebted to their Christian precursors, and to the Hebrew Bible and at least to some degree one pagan exemplar— Spartacus.[4] The intervening gulf of time between the

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[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 2012: 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 Provost. One was suddenly disinvited by the organizing committee, when after consultation amongst themselves, they determined that the paper I had been asked to write— and had not yet been written— might give

turbulent first century CE and the convulsions of the twentieth was not a void over which such inspirations leapt, though neither was it a teleological catena. 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] and soon afterward, 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 Köroghlu (Turkish, "Son of the Blind Man") in 16th-17th-century Anatolia, that it is accurate to study them as general social phenomena arising independently in diverse cultures and displaying functional parallels. 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 limited cases can one insist upon a linked historical chronology of influences from one movement to the other.[6]

2. The prototypical Biblical revolution.

Revolution is, literally, the overturning of something: making what was below stand on top, vertically; and, laterally, reversing the normal and expected course of events. The suddenness of the event is intrinsic to the idea as well— that distinguishes *re*volution, after all, from *e*volution. 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, *mahapekhah*;[7] many other modern languages either

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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.

[5] Several Classical Armenian writers termed Zoroastrian heresy, presumably Mazdakism, *anbari barerarut'iwn*, "bad beneficence", lit. "not-good good-doing", the implication being that the reformers who promoted economic and social fairness and equality were motivated by heterodox beliefs that negated their efforts, or placed them in the service of evil ends.

[6] On the Paulicians, see Russell 1995-1996; on Köroghlu 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]"). 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.

borrow the Latin term or form calques upon its prefix and verbal root.[8] The idea of God's overturning seemingly unchangeable human institutions, and reversing the seemingly 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 to.[9] We shall examine presently how it suffuses alike the earliest foundational text of Israelite national and sacral history, the Biblical Book of Exodus 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. I will argue that the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus, encoded the revolutionary plot of the Book of Esther into a commentary on 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*).[10] The Apostle Paul, who almost singlehandedly invented de-Judaized gentile Christianity, a development that Jesus had in all likelihood 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 thinks of Paul's strategic abandonment of the Torah and the

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[8] Thus Russian *revoliutsiia* but Armenian *yeła-p'oxut'iwn*. The popular Arabic *thawra* (as in the slogan ending *ḥatt' al-mawt[i]*, "till death", which may attract the *šahīd* "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 (Prof. Bernard Lewis wrote an early and condign response to *Orientalism* that is still worth reading). Modern Persian *enghelāb* (and other "Islamicate" tongues, e.g., Hindustani, with the pleasant Latinate 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 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] See Brandon 1967; Hengel 1989 remains the best comprehensive study of the movement.

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)[11] It is a statement of Divine revolution.

The motto "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God" would seem to combine human initiative with a justification in Biblical tradition and an appeal for Divine assistance. During another revolution, Benjamin Franklin proposed those words for the Great Seal of the brand new American republic a month after the Declaration of Independence: it was to surround an engraving, tellingly, of Israel crossing the Red Sea— liberated from the tyranny of Pharaoh so suddenly that bread did not have time to rise overnight crossing the Red Sea; and the pursuing Egyptians, drowning.[12] The difference, of course, is that the Americans took up arms against the British colonial authorities and defeated them. The ancient Israelites did not wage war against the Egyptians. The only instance of Israelite violence in the events of the Exodus is Moses' striking dead the Egyptian taskmaster who was beating a Jewish slave. It can be argued that Moses was still a prince of Egypt when he committed the act, so it need not be counted as attributable to Moses the leader of Israel. When in the desert that new Moses struck a rock instead of speaking to it as commanded by God, the act disqualified him from entering the Promised Land.

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 begins when Moses' rod is turned into (*nhpk*) a snake, defeating the machinations of the court magicians (Ex. 7:15).[13] Immediately thereafter, God

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[11] This writer, whose early Jewish education precluded the reading of Christian scriptures for some time, was first exposed to these verses of the New Testament through Madeleine L'Engle's *A Wrinkle In Time*. Like some other books written for children, and many works of science fiction, it is better than much written by *soi disant* literary sophisticates for adults, in some measure because it gives free rein to imagination rather than restraining it.

[12] The new country was soon to be detached from its Biblical roots and flung into a roiling congeries of pagan iconography. For it received instead the 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.

[13] Jews and Christians felt the need to give names to the Pharaonic magicians, and came up with a rhyming pair, Jannes and Jambres. They 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

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. 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 tale.[14] To the prophetic Messenger of the *Qur'an*, Exodus is, indeed, *the* tale— *al-Qiṣaṣ*. Though it is the story of a particular people, it is not so much the foundational saga of one nation as an exemplary event that teaches a universal and perennial messsage: Pharaoh was a worker of corruption (*mufsid*) in the earth; his victims were the oppressed (*mustaḍaf*); and God made them the inheritors (*wārith*; the root is the same as Hebrew *y-r-š*, to be considered presently in the discussion of Ps. 37). 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 as well (Sura 28:3-6). It is no coincidence that such theological terms as "workers of corruption in the earth" and "the oppressed" were to become watchwords of modern Iranian Islamic revolutionary rhetoric, which drew upon earlier religious foundations even as was done in the West.[15]

3. Revolution prophesied: 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 is made to recapitulate 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,

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an antitype of Eden. A late Armenian poem accuses them of having cultivated there a noxious weed from hell, tobacco: see Russell 2009, 2013, and 2014-2015. Care for a smoke, Miss Rappaccini?

[14] Jewish pietistic tradition makes the Egyptian tyrant the sole survivor of the rout of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea and installs him as the (much) 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: 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.

[15] One prominent 20th-century Shiʿi theoretician of revolutionary Islam, Ali Shariati, even suggested that the Quranic address, *Yā eyyuhā 'l-insāna*, "O ye people," is an appeal to the masses as understood in Marxist terms.

the Roman census that was the first step in the tightening of direct imperial rule.[16] After this symbolic Exodus, and His correspondingly symbolic sojourn 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. I would like to 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 the *'ayin*-verse and then to notice the line by its very absence:[17] *swr m-r' w-'śh ṭwb w-škn l-'wlm*, "*Turn* from evil and do good,[18] and dwell

[16] Herod was by ancestry an Idumaean, 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 platform and edifice of the Second Temple to its magnificent and final degree of 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, pp. 49, 66.

[17] It is important to understand that the order and length of the 22-letter Phoenician and Hebrew alphabet is arbitrary and not based on phonetic correspondences; and generally has not been altered in scripts derived therefrom. The order of letters locally, in Middle Eastern alphabets, has not changed either except in Arabic, which follows a scribal order of shapes but still preserves the ancillary *abjad* (i.e., A, B, C, D) list that follows the old 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 symbolic and 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.

for ever." (Ps. 37:27, "do good" echoing the third verse.[19]) A more subtle reversal may foreshadow this literal *turn*ing point. The third verse, which verse 27 echoes

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There is no "actually" in *Pale Fire*: parallel realities impinge on each other, no point of view, including the narrator's, is provably factual, and that is part of the strategy whereby Nabokov infuses the experience of the good re-reader of 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: ***n****āflāh*, "**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 ***n****e'eman* "faithful". *Swmk H l-kl h-nplym w-zwqp l-kl h-kpwpym*, "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 act of falling in the presumed but nonexistent *nun*-line. The parallel second half of the *samekh*-verse seems to allude serendipitously 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 *a*llusion, mystically and eschatologically replete with meaning, is also a temporal and historical *i*llusion, 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.

[18] *Sur me-ra' ve-'aseh tov* is also a part of the Psalmodic *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.

[19] 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, Vol. 1, pp. 423-424. It may be that just recompense never arrives for an individual in his lifetime: Kirkpatrick 1902, pp. 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

strongly, reads: *bṭḥ b-H w-ʿśh ṭwb škn ʾrṣ w-rʿh ʾmwnh*, "Trust in the Lord and do good, dwell upon the earth and cultivate faith" (the word *rəʿēh*, "cultivate, shepherd, cherish", here differs scribally from *raʿ* ,"evil", in 37:27 by only one letter). Verse 14 reads: *ḥrb ptḥw ršʿym wdrkw qštm l-hpyl ʿny w-ʾbywn l-ṭbwḥ 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 *bəṭaḥ* "trust!" of 37:27 seem here to be **transposed** to *(lə-)ṭbōaḥ*, "(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. *tḥr*, used thrice, in lines 1, 7, and 8; Robert Alter prefers to render this on etymological grounds as "do not be incensed"), and not to envy evil men (*ršʿym*) for their apparent success. Indeed, the words "evil man" and "evil" (*rʿ*) are so frequent that one editor has subtitled the Psalm "The Problem of Evil".[20] 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 to vice. But this situation, in which the good may be tempted to envy the wicked, will be overturned, the author protests five times, spread evenly through the text— for the good, variously characterized, will inherit the earth.

37:9 *ky mrʿym ykrtwn w-qwy H hmh yyršw ʾrṣ* "For the doers of evil will be cut off and those who hope in the Lord will inherit the earth."

37:11 *w-ʿnwym yyršw ʾrṣ w-htʿngw ʿl rb šlwm* "And the meek shall inherit the earth and take pleasure in great peace."

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

37:29 *ṣdyqym yyršw ʾrṣ w-yšknw l-ʿd ʿlyh* "The righteous shall inherit the earth and shall dwell for ever upon it."

37:34 *qwh ʾl H w-šmr drkw w-yrwmmk l-ršt ʾrṣ b-hkrt ršʿym trʾh* "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 not a metaphorical and otherworldly image, 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

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key reference to progeny) that this writer noted in a Pahlavi didactic poem (Russell 1987, repr. in Russell 2004).

[20] See Cohen 1945, p. 111.

lends, gives generously, and enjoys peace (*šlwm*): a nice verbal figure.[21] The righteous and the pious (*ṣdyq*, *ḥsyd*) moreover, are constantly associated with the poor and the needy (*ʻny*, *ʼbywn*— common terms but still cf. the Ebionites!). The eldest son of the family is in the way of the world the heir; but God overturns the way 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 bkwry Yśrʼl*, "Israel is My first-born!"[22] One recalls that God did not just free the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. He slew their first-born and ordered us to despoil our oppressors: our ancestors departed with all their gold and silver, making Israel not only free men, but first-born heirs as well, one and all. So inheritance is not defined automatically by pedigree, as in civil law. It is a matter of Divine election, as stated in Psalm 2 and echoed at Christ's Baptism.[23] "He who sits in the heavens will laugh— the Lord will mock them. 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 (*ʼḥwzh*).'"[24]

No discussion of Ps. 37 would be complete without consideration of the *pesher* ("commentary") from Qumran. It is eschatological and apocalyptic: those

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[21] 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 him.

[22] The passage in which Esau hugs Jacob affectionately upon their reunion has points written above it in Masoretic Hebrew Torah manuscripts, as though either to mark the strangeness of Esau's reconciliation or to cast doubt upon it. Esau and Edom become emblematic of Israel's enemies, Rome in particular, from one generation to the next; but Jewish messianic hopes include the penitence of the wicked.

[23] 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, before the victorious strain(s) of the new faith marked it a heresy— and it was to become the Christology of the Qur'an. Medieval Jewish scholars, including David Qimḥi, were aware of Christian claims concerning Psalm 2 and refuted them: see Sperling 2011 with refs.

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

who wait upon God, who shall possess (*yršw*) the earth, are the congregation of the chosen one, who do his will (*hmh ʻdt bḥyrw ʻwśy rṣwnw*). The righteous are the ʻdt h'bywnym, "the congregation of the poor"— Pardee notes that although references to the poor are common in the texts from Qumran, a congregation of them is unique to this *pesher*.[25] So in the sectarian understanding of the Psalm, there is a defined holy group of the poor, united and led by a Divinely chosen leader, who are to benefit from a reversal of the present earthly order of things. It is not clear what the fate of others outside this presumably small and resentful "revolutionary vanguard" will be.

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 *B. Berakhot* 55a-b. 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 ʻgwmh 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 śmḥh 'z tśmḥ btwlh bmḥwl w-bḥwrym w-zqnym yḥdyw w-hpkty 'blm l-śśwn... w-l' 'bh H 'lhyk l-šmwʻ 'l blʻm w-yhpwk...* "And they should recite three [verses of] 'overturning' [*hāfūkhōt*], 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 Achaemenian royal court, not very distant or different from the Parthian and Sasanian world of 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 it.[26] At the start 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) and he has

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[25] Pardee 1973, pp. 167, 175.

[26] For the use of the *topos* of dire dream vision, wakeful king, and seer in Armenian and Iranian epic narrative, see Russell 2012a. 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*.

the *spr zkrwnwt*, the “book of memorials” (i.e., the royal annals)[27] 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 would historically have had to transpire in the fifth century BCE or thereabouts, during the reign of Xerxes, of the Achaemenian dynasty founded by Cyrus the Great less than a century earlier. The book, which is typical of the Hellenistic genre of the “Oriental romance”, describes the plot of Haman, the ambitious and hate-filled prime minister of an easily swayed and foolish king, Ahasuerus (not Artaxerxes but Old Persian Xšayarša, i.e., Xerxes), 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 his 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 the genocidal decree Haman puts in front of him although it does not name the nation to be destroyed. He even lends his royal signet ring to Haman. Haman cannot of course reveal his real motivation— personal malice— to the king, so his pretext for the pogrom is that the Jews are different from others; his own name, tellingly, may be derived from Old Persian **ham-manah*-, “of the same mind”! (It has been proposed also that his name is Elamite, corresponding to that of the god Humban; Mordechai’s name is Akkadian, from that of the god Marduk, while Esther’s is either that of the goddess Astarte or Persian for “star”. She has a Hebrew name, Hadassah [“Myrtle”]; if Mordechai had one too, we are not told what it was.) Once the 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 murder. She protests that she risks death to come before the king without being summoned. But perhaps, Mordechai reasons, it is for this very moment that she has attained her position at court. The implication is of Divine providence. The queen follows his advice and fasts, only then presenting herself unsummoned (a capital offense unless the monarch extend his staff to the petitioner) and revealing her identity to the king. Fortunately, he loves her and will do anything she asks. But that is not all. 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 being

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

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. The Book of Esther's ten chapters mention ten feasts, one of which lasts fully half a year; and on Purim night, after reading the text 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 sacralized spring festivals of pagan origin like Mardi Gras or Russian Масленница. Most every such holiday has its special food: for Mardi Gras celebrants in Louisiana it is gumbo, and for Ashkenazic Jews, on Purim it is *homentashen*, a pastry shaped like the ear of a jackass— the shape has its origins in antiquity, for the ancient Persians once ripped the ears off Gaumata, an illegitimate pretender to the throne.[28]

If Ahasuerus has a historical counterpart it is, as suggested above, 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, son of Hammedatha. The father's name is pure Persian for "having the same law" (**hama-dāta*-); and as noted above 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 point.[29]

Why does Haman hate Jews? His ancestors were Amalekites, an ancient and peculiarly ruthless enemy (and Arabs moreover, not Persians) whom God Himself swears in the Book of Exodus to wipe out utterly. 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

[28] The Armenian Mardi Gras food is a hearty porridge called *herisa* or (by Armenians from Turkey) *keshkek*: for an account of the riotous celebrations, in which traditional social and sacerdotal roles are mocked and overturned, see Russell 2003.
[29] 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.

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. And it has been suggested by clever exegetes that there were images of false gods embroidered on Haman's clothes: one thinks of the figural roundels of Sasanian silk brocade, of the scene of worship of a goddess (apparently) on the Pazyryk carpet, etc. Some of the commentators lived in Parthian and Sasanian Mesopotamia and could easily have seen such fabrics in daily use amongst their Iranian neighbors (and overlords).

If Haman's name is symbolic; then so is that of his wicked wife, Zeresh. It derives from the name of a Zoroastrian demon Zairičā, meaning "jaundice", and forms a rhyming pair with another imp of hell, Tairičā (Teresh in *Esther*) meaning "harm". The two of them, a kind of infernal recipe for a bad harvest and its aftermath, are the opponents of the two archangels, Haurvatāṭ ("Health") and Amərətāṭ ("Immortality") (Middle Persian Xurdād and Amurdād), who are the guardians of fertility— of waters and plants. Tairičā appears in Esther not as a partner of Mrs. Jaundice, but as Tereš— one of the pair of would-be assassins of Ahasuerus whose plot Mordechai discovers. The other is Bigthan, which may be from Iranian *Bagadāna*, "God-given" (the name of a demon in an inscription in a magic bowl of the Sasanian period). So Esther and Mordechai represent the forces of goodness and life, a kind of Khordad-Amurdad rhyming pair; their differently distributed 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 (Arm. *vičak*) in the springtime (on Ascension Eve, Arm. *Hambardzum*) 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 Persian: 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.

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

rhyme, in inverse order; cf. the diptych structure of the book itself.) There are other numbers games going on. The Book of Esther provides the names of all ten of Haman's sons, all of them authentic Persian. There are ten feasts and ten chapters, and a reversal right at the midpoint. 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. Chiasmus is at the heart of Biblical literary style, and the author of Esther has played it to the hilt. Clearly, he wants to engage the reader of this romance to look below the romantic and sanguinary derring-do of the surface narrative, 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 Divine truth and demonic deception. In short, to see the invisible hand of Divine providence behind mundane events, overturning the manipulations of the forces of evil. 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.

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 one of the frescoes of the third-century synagogue at Dura-Europos. All four walls of this unique structure teem with portrayals of Biblical scenes, painted by an artist whose "frontal" style, studied famously by the great Russian scholar and archaeologist Prof. Mikhail Rostovtsev, indicates he might have been an Iranian Jew, or at least a local from Syria with strong cultural ties to Parthia. 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. The events are portrayed 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 throne in the painting. That is a kind of iconographic shorthand intended either to recall, or, overtly, to represent the throne of Solomon, who, according to tradition, knew the languages of the animals. But Solomon 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, *xašm* in New Persian) in the construction of the Temple, lent his signet ring to the demon; Ahasuerus gives his own signet ring to Haman. This would seem to suggest that even the greatest monarch can be foolishly impulsive; and Ahasuerus is far from the wisest of kings. Solomon loved women immoderately; Ahasuerus marries Esther because of the *lèse majesté* of his previous queen, Vashti. So even 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 judgment, ruled by his passions. As the Biblical scholar Prof. Jon Levenson has observed in his witty and learned study of Esther, Ahasuerus is a king "who never says no".

Given these strange data and *data*, 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 problem 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 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 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— and does not consider 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 that literary category called the ancient Oriental romance. It is a genre that is most abundantly attested in Greek, and somewhat in Latin: one of the longest and finest works of this type is the *Transformations of Lucius* (in Robert Graves' translation, *The Golden Ass*) 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. 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 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 Mithraic.[30] The end 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.

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[30] See Russell 2001-2002 and 2002-2003.

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

And this seems one key to Esther: the book addresses an important issue of common anxiety and the perennial problem of the contest between good and evil, and assuages it with a denouement that, although fantastic, still underscores the virtues of love, commitment, and faith. Prof. Levenson cites a sage pupil of his, 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 book:[31] on 13 Adar when 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. 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 Greek fills 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. In Exodus, God works with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; here, though the revolution takes place, He 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, rather than a 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 if a work of antiquity not far removed from Esther, presented by a Greek-speaking Jewish philosopher as a historical narrative, might be found to be patterned very closely upon the Book of Esther. And perhaps indeed that was so because the author would have had good reasons to ensure that only a Jewish reader— one presumably familiar with Esther— would be able to discern the underlying armature and its

[31] Levenson 1997, p. 8.

message. This is the *In Flaccum* of Philo Judaeus of Alexandria. The text, which differs starkly from Philo's other works of philosophical exegesis of the Bible, deals with events of 38-40 CE that may be summarized in brief: the Roman emperor Tiberius appoints Flaccus prefect of Egypt, and at first the latter performs his duties properly; but upon the accession to power of Gaius Caligula, Flaccus finds his position precarious. Two corrupt local 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 Agrippa tries hard to avoid ostentation, even notice, malicious locals still behold his splendid bodyguard and retinue. Already disposed to be hostile to their Jewish neighbors, they are consumed by *phthonos*, "envy", a moral failing on which Philo focuses. How dare the Jews presume to claim a king of their own! This motley crew of 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 full well that the Jews, notorious for their abhorrence of images of the divine, will remove them. The second Commandment forbids idolatry— as the Seleucids had learnt nearly two centuries before— first to their annoyance, then at some cost— at the time of the Maccabees. God alone, not Haman or Caesar, is to receive *proskynēsis*.[32] This would be guaranteed to elicit a furious reaction from the mercurial and choleric Caligula, who already was offended that the Jews offered sacrifices *for* him but would not do so *to* him. In this dedication exclusively to one God, the Jews differed from the other religio-national communities of the Roman Empire;[33] and ancient proto-anti-Semites claimed that Jews were misanthropic besides, 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 that Israel's laws were different from everybody else's. A grisly pogrom ensues;[34] and it seems certain Caligula 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" (*Flac*. 101-102).

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[32] Goodenough 1938, p. 27.

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

[34] 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 *hubris*— out of all proportion to its appearance elsewhere in the Philonic corpus. What the Jews experience, then, is a state peculiarly dreaded in antiquity: 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.

But 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*, Flac. 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 act.[35] Several scholars have noticed the general affinity of *In Flaccum* to Esther,[36] but the points of comparison in both large structure and minute detail 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 a coded message:[37] 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 diptych.[38]

The Jews offer a prayer of thanksgiving for their sudden and unexpected deliverance that begins with a curious disclaimer (*Flac*. 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 public 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. But Jewish tradition also stresses 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 meal, the *Seder*, Jews spill ten drops of

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[35] See van der Horst 2003, p. 200.
[36] Notably Goodenough 1938, esp. pp. 7-10.
[37] van der Horst 2003, p. 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.
[38] In *Flac*. 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.

wine for the ten plagues, plus three more drops at three acronyms of them, thirteen in all, to subtract from the celebrants' cup of 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 nations.[39]

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 mid-point of the book, the beginning of the sixth chapter of the latter, we recall, the sleepless king Ahasuerus has the *spr zkrwnwt*, *sēfer zikhrōnōt*, 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 treasuries.[40] Philo, by contrast, lived in a more literate world whose affairs were more dependent upon written documents— officials were accordingly adept at manipulating them. So instead of the ponderous tome of an archive simply waiting to be read, we have a crucial papyrus communication delayed *en route*: the Alexandrian Jews' 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"(*Flac*. 132) that, van der Horst points out, is a *hapax* in Greek— a word found here and nowhere else.[41]

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[39] 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 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. One must always concur with C.S. Lewis, *Qui Verbum Dei contempserunt, eis auferetur etiam verbum hominis*.

[40] See Bailey 1971, chapters *Patvand* ("transmission of the tradition") and *Dēn dipīrīh* ("writing down of the Religion").

[41] The Greek compound epithet is grimly prophetic: the mass murders of Armenians by the Ottoman Turks, and the Holocaust a scant generation later, began and

7. Conclusions.

One can only imagine how Philo's faith might have been shaken, had he seen the desk-murderers of two millennia in the future, had he come to know how his *hapax* was to be a commonplace. Philo argued that for Jews, Jerusalem is the mother-city, but the foreign lands where diaspora communities reside are their father-land. As it is, he did not live to see the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem a few short decades after the Alexandrian pogrom, the growth of a precarious and powerless diaspora 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 'ṣmwtynw w-'bdh tqwtnw*, "Our bones are dry and our hope is lost." The Zionist movement adopted as its hymn, years before the Holocaust, a song called "The Hope", with its poignant verse *'wd l' 'bdh tqwtnw*, (*'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 ṣmyḥt g'wltnw*, "the beginning of the flowering of our redemption."[42] The encirclement of Israel in 1967 by murderous enemies who outnumbered and outgunned her, followed by the country's sudden deliverance in the Six-Day War and the liberation of Jerusalem, has been seen, perhaps justly, as a reversal of fortune quite as dramatic and revolutionary as Purim, if not the Exodus. As we have seen, in ideology and intertextuality, in passion and hope, 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, hopeful but impatient, "we all want to change the world."

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evolved at the desks of bureaucrats wielding pens. Between dinner and bedtime, Stalin enjoyed signing death warrants. At his trial, the Nazi criminal Adolf Eichmann professed to understand best *Beamtersprache*— bureaucratic language.

[42] 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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