

Unrolling the Megillah: The Esther Scroll as Jewish Scripture, Artifact, and Liturgical Prop

Joanna Homrighausen

College of William & Mary

March 21, 2025





Book of Esther – Hebrew Bible

Purim – Jewish festival



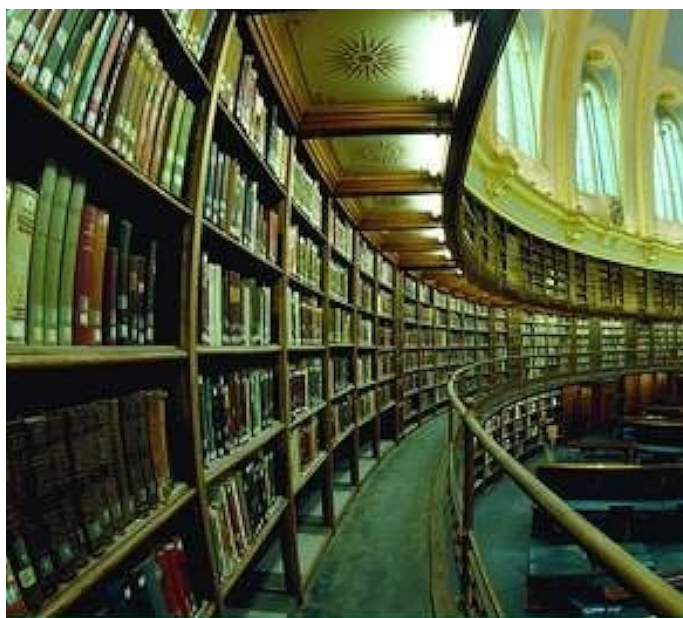
Esther as a Book of Writing

In view, then, of all the instructions in the said letter and of what they had experienced in that matter and what had befallen them, ²⁷the Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants, and all who might join them, to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year.

²⁸Consequently, **these days are recalled and observed** [נִזְכָּרִים וְנֶעֱשִׂים] **in every generation:** by every family, every province, and every city. **And these days of Purim shall never cease among the Jews, and the memory of them** [וְזִכְרָם] **shall never perish among their descendants.**

²⁹Then Queen Esther daughter of Abihail wrote a second letter of Purim for the purpose of confirming with full authority the aforementioned one of Mordecai the Jew. ³⁰Dispatches were sent to all the Jews in the hundred and twenty-seven provinces of the realm of Ahasuerus with an ordinance of “equity and honesty.” ³¹These days of Purim shall be observed at their proper time, as Mordecai the Jew—and now Queen Esther—has obligated them to do, and just as they have assumed for themselves and their descendants the **obligation of the fasts with their lamentations** [הַצְמֹת וְזַעֲקָתָם].

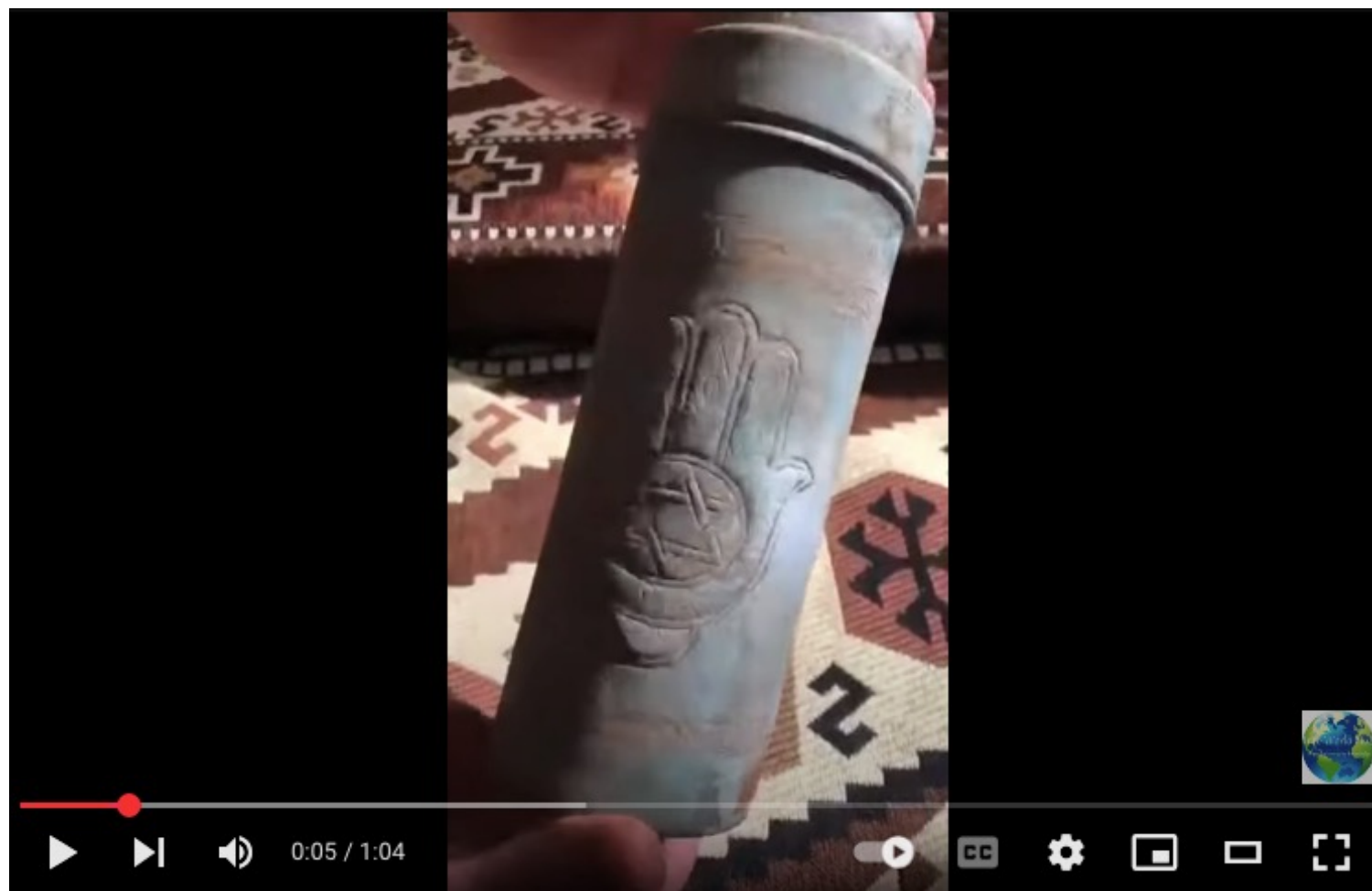
³²And Esther’s ordinance validating these observances of Purim **was recorded in a scroll.**



ICONIC

BOOKS AND TEXTS

Edited by
JAMES W. WATTS



500 B.C | Original book of Esther found in Iran with a pure Golden Literature



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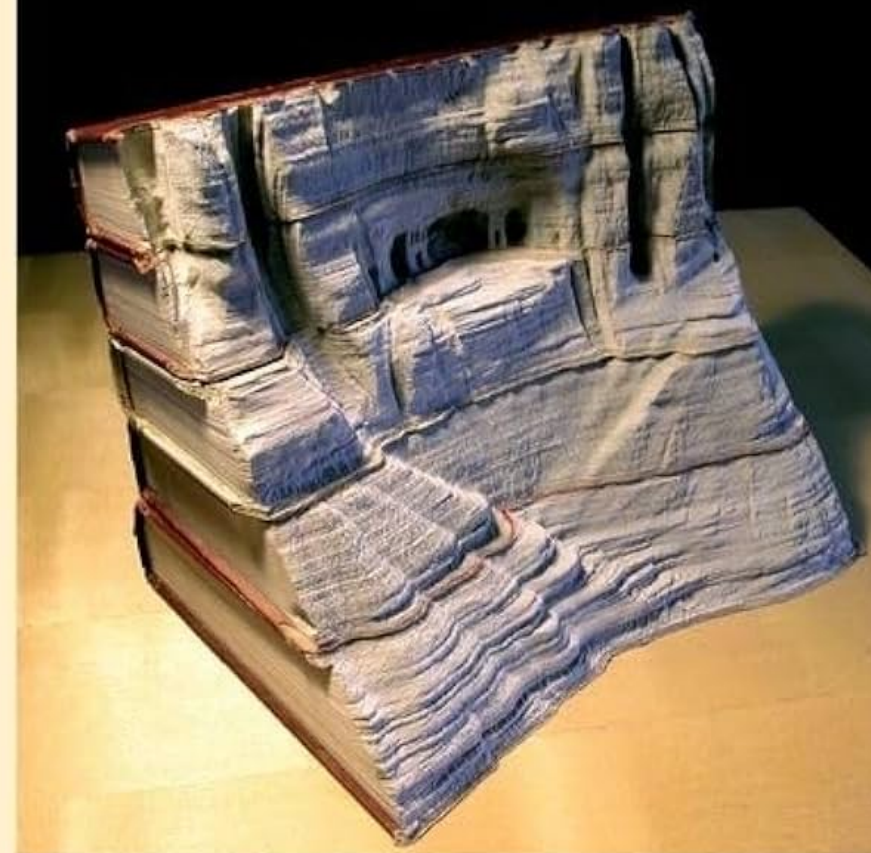
3,876 views Mar 19, 2022

The original book of Esther was recently found in Iran by a Jew who lived there. The scroll is from 1500 years ago. The beauty is everything written in pure gold.



THE LITERARY
IMAGINATION
IN JEWISH
ANTIQUITY

EVA MROCZEK



In view, then, of all the instructions in this letter (הַאֲגֵרֶת הַזֹּאת) and of what they had experienced in that matter and what had befallen them, ²⁷ the Jews undertook and irrevocably obligated themselves and their descendants, and all who might join them, to observe these two days in the manner prescribed and at the proper time each year. (9:26-27)

Avraham Gombiner's *Magen Avraham* (c. 1665-1671), a commentary on the *Shulkhan Arukh*:

“As he says ‘this letter’ (Esth 9:26), he shakes the scroll (יַעֲנֹעַ הַמַּגִּילָה).”

Haman's Ten Sons

וּבְשׁוֹשַׁן הַבִּיזָה הִרְגּוּ הַיְּהוּדִים וְאַבְדַּ
חֲמֵשׁ מֵאוֹת אִישׁ: ⁷וְאֵת | פֶּרְשֵׁנְדָּתָא
וְאֵת | דִּלְפּוֹן וְאֵת | אֶסְפֶּתָא: ⁸וְאֵת | פּוֹרְתָא
וְאֵת | אֲדִלְיָא וְאֵת | אֲרִידְתָּא: ⁹וְאֵת |
פֶּרְמֶשְׁתָּא וְאֵת | אֲרִיסִי וְאֵת | אֲרִדִּי וְאֵת |
וִיזְתָּא:

(Esth 9:6-9)

דכלבניין דכן לא קאים

“Since any such building will not stand” (y. Meg. 3:8; cf. Mass. Sof. 13:2)

שלא תהא תקומה למפלתן

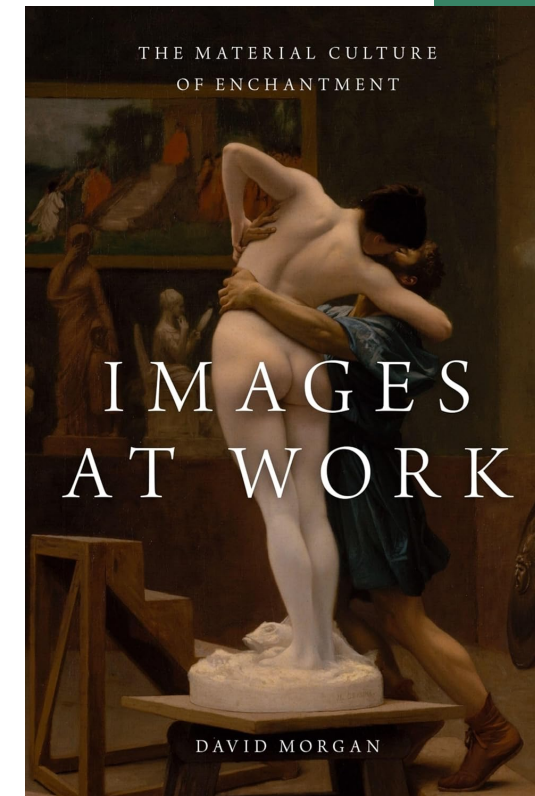
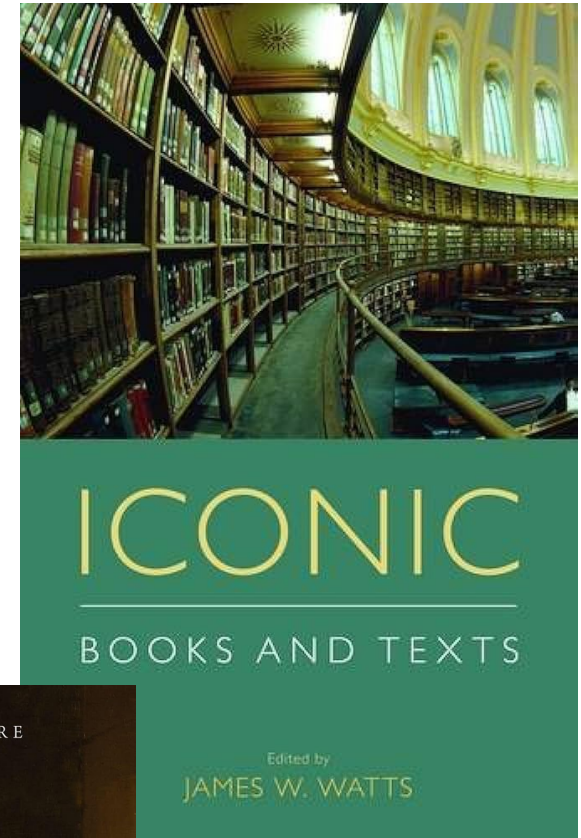
“So that they should never rise from their downfall.” (b. Meg. 16b)



See also Jordan S. Penkower, “An Esther Scroll from the 15th Century: Determining Its Type among Five Traditions (Oriental, Sefardi, Ashkenazi, Italian, Yemenite),” *Textus* 26 (2016): 209–70.

Productive conflations and the bibliographic imagination

1. Texts depicted as being written/recorded in the narrative:
 - The Persian Chronicles (5:1)
 - The letters written by Esther and Mordecai to authorize Purim
2. The text of the Book of Esther as it stands (in Hebrew)
3. The actual copy used in liturgy





Then Queen Esther
daughter of Abihail
wrote [ותכתב אסתר],
with Mordecai the
Jew, a letter to
confirm with full
authority the letter of
Purim.

(Esther 9:29)



Aryeh Leib ben Daniel of Goray Sepia Esther Scroll

Italy, 1740s

Paris, Musée d'art et d'histoire du Judaïsme Paris (MAHJ), inv. D.98.04.073.CL

Caption:

“ותכתב אסתר” = “And Esther wrote”

<https://cja.huji.ac.il/esther/browser.php?mode=alone&id=328199>

Visualizing Esther as Author and Agent

B. Megillah 7a

Rav Shmuel bar Yehuda said: “Esther sent a letter to the Sages: ‘Establish me for all time.’ They sent a letter to her: ‘You will arouse jealousy against us from the nations.’ She sent a letter to them: ‘I am already written about in the Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia.’

Ibn Ezra, Introduction to First Commentary on Esther

In this megillah there is no mention of God—and it is among the holy books!

... In my opinion, the truth is that Mordecai composed this scroll, and this is the meaning of “and he sent dispatches” (Esth 9:20), and all of them were copies of one book which is the megillah, like “text” (Esth 3:14). And the Persians copied it, and it is written in the chronicles of their kings, but they are idolators, and they write the name of their abomination instead of the glorious and awe-inspiring Name [of God]. ... And thus Mordecai did not mention Him in the megillah out of respect.



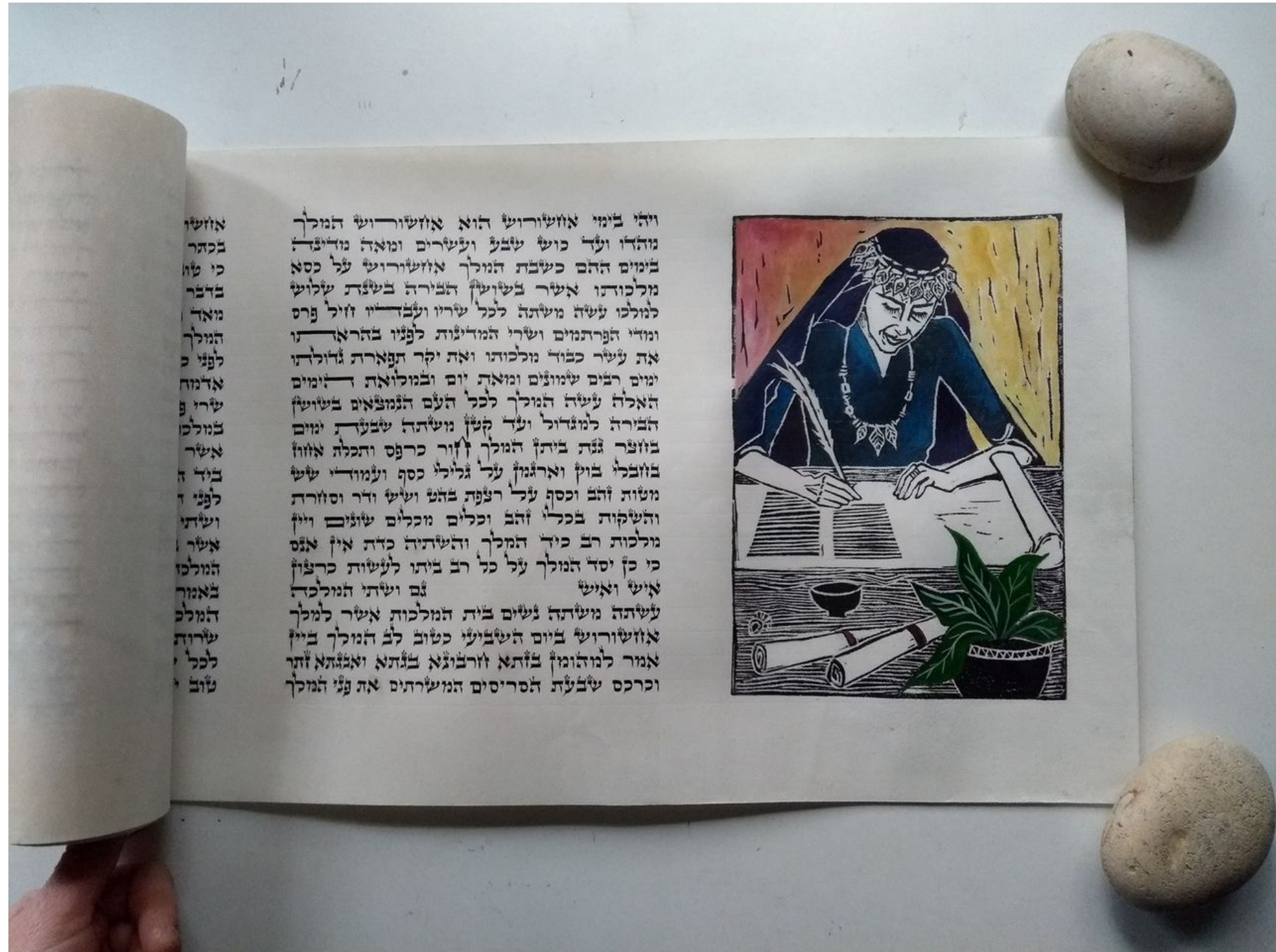
Nava Levine-Coren

Ebbo Gospels (9th
century)
Evangelist portrait of
St. Matthew



Nava Levine- Coren

Image is both Esther
writing scroll and
writing to Sages of
Assembly



Jen Taylor Friedman

אנכי יונה אסתר הסופרת כתבתי זאת המגילה וסיימתי אותה יום
שני בשבוע ה' ימים לחדש תמוז שהוא יום ז' ליולי בערב
שנת ו'תש"א ח"כ לפ"ק פה מוצטריאל: אל תשייתי עלי ח ת
חטאת אם תמצאו בה שגיאת כי אשה מינקת אנכי:

Colophon:

“I, Yonah Esther the soferet, wrote this megillah and completed it ... [the dating formula follows]. Do not lay blame upon me if you find error in it, for a nursing woman am I.”

Formula copied from a *taj* (Pentateuch codex) copied by Yemenite scribe Miriam bat Benayah (15th-16th cents.)

Braginsky Collection Megillah 102
Venice, 1564



First dated and signed decorated megillah

Scribe: Estellina, daughter of Menachem, son of Jekutiel

ISBN-13
(Hardback)

9781800505513

Price
(Hardback)

£75.00 / \$100.00

ISBN-13
(Paperback)

9781800505520

Price
(Paperback)

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ISBN (eBook)

9781800505537

Price (eBook)

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Publication

01/02/2025

Pages

256

Size

234 x 156mm

Readership

scholars

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Gender and Sacred Textures

Entanglements of Materiality, Embodiment, and Sacred Texts in Religious Identities

Edited by

Marianne Schleicher [+]

Aarhus University

[View Website](#)

This anthology asks if or how the handling, use, and embodied enactments of sacred texts regulate, entangle, occlude, tolerate, or even subvert religious and gendered identities? While many studies have looked at the semantic content of sacred texts to answer this question, the anthology mends a knowledge gap by looking at the effects on gender that follow both from uses of sacred texts as directly accessible, material objects and from embodied enactments of sacred texts in indirect ways. To signify the embodied enactment of sacred texts, not directly at hand, the editor Marianne Schleicher coins the term “sacred texture” in the introduction to extend sacred text studies to capture both the textuality of poetic and narrative expressions in oral cultures and how most lay people, often women, have expressed their religiosity through indirect uses of sacred texts through bodily enactments.

“Then Queen Esther Daughter of Abihail Wrote”: Gendered Agency and Ritualized Writing in Jewish Scriptural Practice

Jonathan Homrighausen

Duke University

jdhomrighausen@gmail.com

This article focuses on how the material form of the Esther scroll and the ritualized practices of copying it reflect changes in how Jews remember the events of Purim. I demonstrate how Purim and writing intersect with contemporary changes in women’s roles in Jewish ritual, as well as new interpretations of the Book of Esther informed by feminist readings and heightened awareness of the relationship between gender and agency. I examine Esther scrolls made by contemporary female ritual scribes (*soferot*) who add their own creative marks to the scrolls they copy: Nava Levine-Coren, Avielah Barclay, Jen Taylor Friedman, and Rachel Jackson. These creative touches convey their readings of the biblical text, which magnify women’s perspective and agency.

Esther has been written out, or written over. But if we pay attention to the book of Esther, we should not be overly dismayed by this. Write more. Write again. (Jobling and Roughley 2009, 333)

We save ourselves as best we can, we use whatever we have. Beauty, friends in high places, a rifle in the woods with the partisans, a fountain pen, whatever works. (Ostriker 1997, 228)

If many Jewish festivals are festivals of memory, then Purim is a festival of memory enabled by acts of writing. Purim retells the story of the biblical Book of Esther, a brief diasporic tale in which a young Jewish woman

Keywords: scribes, gender, Esther, scroll, Book of Esther, Jewish art, sofrut, feminist biblical criticism, biblical reception history

What do Productive Conflations Do?

1. Authorizes the megillah
2. Enchants the theatre of liturgy
3. Connects beholder to biblical heroes
4. Interpretive payoffs, i.e. heightening women's scribal agency and agency of women in story ... but also, questions of God and violence

→ Megillah is not “sefer Torah lite” but its own form with its own enchantments!

God's Presence (?) in Shushan



Enlarged Yod-Heh-Vav-Heh in Esther 1:20, Megillat Esther, Central Europe, c. 1740s, ink on parchment, 7 1/2 in. height. Jewish Historical Institute, Warsaw, C-326. Credit: Center for Jewish Art, Hebrew University, Jerusalem.

“Of King Aḥashverosh” (Esth 1:19). Rabbi Yudan and Rabbi Levi said in the name of Rabbi Yoḥanan: Everywhere in this scroll (במגלה זו) that King Aḥashverosh is stated, Scripture is referring to King Aḥashverosh. Everywhere that king is stated alone (למלך סתם), it can be either sacred or profane (קדש וחל). (Esth Rabb 3:10)



Arthur Szyk, Megilat Ester (Israel: Maariv Book Guild, 1974).
 Image from [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arthur_Szyk_\(1894-1951\)._The_Book_of_Esther,_Szyk_and_Haman_\(1950\)._New_Canaan,_CT.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arthur_Szyk_(1894-1951)._The_Book_of_Esther,_Szyk_and_Haman_(1950)._New_Canaan,_CT.jpg)



Arthur Szyk, Megilat Ester (Israel: Maariv Book Guild, 1974).
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What's Next?



ToRoll



Sephardic scroll, 14th-15th cent. The
Palatina Library, Parma, Italy Cod. Parm. 3602

Capital with pitchfork
Cathédrale Saint-Lazare,
Autun, Saône-et-Loire,
Bourgogne-Franche-
Comté, France
c. 1120-1135



Wrapping Up

- Monograph plans
- jdhomrighausen@gmail.com
- “Purim and the Esther Scroll(s).” In *Esther*, ed. Kristin Joachimsen and Helge Bezold. Themes and Issues in Biblical Studies. Equinox. Forthcoming.
- “Hanging with Vaizatha: One *Vav*, Many Meanings in the Megillah.” For *Origin, History, & Interpretation of Tagin and Otiyyot Meshunnot for Writing the STaM*, ed. Katharina Hadassah Wendl and Annett Martini. Studia Judaica. De Gruyter. Forthcoming
- “[Unrolling the Scroll, Revealing God: Esther Scrolls as Symbols and Ritual Objects.](#)” *Hebrew Studies*, symposium on “Reading, Writing, and Ritual: Jewish Books and Manuscripts in Late Antiquity,” ed. Laura Lieber, 64.1 (2023): 57–81.
- “[“Right on, Vashti!”: Minor Characters and Performance Choices in the Synagogal Megillah Reading.](#)” *Religions*, special issue “Narrative and Performance Criticisms—A Difference of Degree or Kind?”, ed. Christopher W. Skinner and Zechariah P. Eberhart, 14.9 (2023): 1095.
- “[“Then Queen Esther Daughter of Abihail Wrote’:](#) [Gendered Agency and Ritualized Writing in Jewish Scriptural Practice.](#)” *Postscripts*, special issue “Gender and Sacred Text(ure)s,” ed. Marianne Schleicher, 14.1 (2023): 128–61. Reprint forthcoming in *Gender and Sacred Textures: Entanglements of Materiality, Embodiment, and Sacred Texts in Religious Identities*, ed. Marianne Schleicher. Comparative Research on Iconic and Performative Texts. Equinox, 2025.