



on reverence for the third of the Ten Commandments,<sup>1</sup> the Jewish people imbibed such a weighty respect for the name that they likely stopped pronouncing it around the time of the Babylonian exile.<sup>2</sup> Some scholars argue that because Esther omits the Tetragrammaton the book was considered less sacred than other members of the Hebrew canon. On the other hand, the erudite Dr. Eva Frojmovic of the University of Leeds argues, The rabbinical prohibition against the printing of Biblical scrolls to be used in synagogue services also applied to Megillot, just as it applied and still applies to Torah (Pentateuch) scrolls, Mezuzot... and Tefillin.<sup>3</sup> So strict was the prohibition that a rabbi once commanded that a copy of Esther be destroyed to prevent a printed scroll being used in synagogue by mistake, though the ban did not apply to private ownership or reading.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, Frojmovic confirms that a decorated Esther scroll would not have been used for the communal reading of the Megillah in synagogue and certainly not by the cantor. Rather, such a decorated scroll would have been intended for private use, possibly in the home, while also representing a status symbol.<sup>5</sup> Liturgical scrolls used during synagogue worship including Megillot remained the exclusive domain of the *sofer*, the Hebrew scribe with his rigorous technical and religious training.<sup>6</sup> Because synagogues traditionally read from a folded Megillah (remembering that the original was sent out by Mordecai and Esther as a letter) during the festival of Purim, many traditional assemblies keep a copy of the Megillah beside their Sefer Torah.<sup>7</sup> During public reading, audiences commonly

means.<sup>1</sup> Mesmerizingly painted, garlanded, adorned, and illuminated, the Megillah features numerous miniatures that guide the reader through the text by depicting King Ahasuerus banqueting, Mordecai's procession on a white horse, Haman's sons hanging from a gallows, Vashti, and Esther at appropriate points, and other decorative figures such as lions, cherubs, unicorns, a peacock, an elephant, and more. Even the list of the names of Haman's sons who were hanged is distinctively set off from the rest of the text. Indeed, these features are not uncommon considering that scrolls of Italian origin oftentimes display allegorical representations, nude putti, the signs of the zodiac and the twelve tribes, heavenly Jerusalem, and scenes depicting the daily life of the Jews of the time, including those related to the celebration of Purim, such as sending friends and family gifts of food or drink in a basket... merrymaking, and masquerades.<sup>2</sup> As the *Jewish Virtual Library* continues, Examples of decorated *megillot* are extant from Turkey, Greece and the Balkans, and Morocco, where they were mainly decorated with floral, architectural, or other decorative designs.<sup>3</sup>

Surprisingly enough, Among Hebrew liturgical texts, the Megillah appears to be the only book which was not decorated or illustrated during the Middle Ages or, indeed, until after the mid-sixteenth century due to the same aniconism imposed on Torah scrolls until that time because Esther was part of the canon.<sup>4</sup> In Jewish culture, the *Encyclopedia Judaica* records that

The decoration and illustration of Esther scrolls, mostly by unknown Jewish artists, reached its height during the 17th and 18th centuries, in Italy and other countries in Europe, particularly Holland. The great demand for an illustrated megillah led the makers to produce engraved scrolls, printed from copper plates, while the text was still copied by hand, as required by Jewish law.<sup>5</sup>

In the Christian tradition, at least, as Paul Johnson records, monasteries began, from the early seventh century, to produce illuminated manuscripts of great beauty and elaboration.<sup>6</sup> In stark contrast with the quality of scribal output, the copyist's setting within the monastery's *scriptorium*<sup>7</sup> was ascetic: No candles or warming fires were allowed, for the safety of the manuscripts. The scribe could not exchange labor with another, nor could he let his mind wander, because he might well be questioned later about the material he had copied.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Frojmovic, 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Jewish Virtual Library*, Scroll of Esther (2008), accessed February 18, 2014, [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.o-5\(8\)-5\(nETBT0\)-8yLut](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.o-5(8)-5(nETBT0)-8yLut)

## **Preservation**

Thanks in part to the scroll's composition in vellum<sup>1</sup>—animal hide from the skin of a kosher lamb or kid—the Scroll of Esther remains intact. In the past, the copies themselves were not the only elements to receive special treatment, for many were housed in ornamental silver cases or exquisite gold-plated silver cases made in a delicate filigree technique.<sup>2</sup>

While some scholars argue that the Essenes would have dismissed the content of Esther for various reasons—choosing not to keep it along with the Dead Sea Scrolls

## Bibliography

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