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Picturing Purim: Script and Image

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Picturing Purim: Script and Image

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Introduction

The *Megillat Esther* is one of the great dramas from *Tanach*. The story of Mordechai and Esther in Persia is full of excitement, palace intrigues, murderous plots and ultimate salvation.

Depictions of Esther and the Purim story have existed from Late Antiquity to the present. Each representations were interpreted from different religious and cultural influences. While most Jews followed the Masoretic Texts, Marrano Jews and Dutch Calvinists followed the version from the Septuagint, which added prayers to the text. This paper will look at Jewish and Christian interpretations of *Megillat Esther* in 17th century Holland.



Title page: Poema de la Reyna Ester

Esther as the Perfect Marrano

Queen Esther was often celebrated in Dutch Jewish literature during the 17th century. Joao Moises Pinto Delgado, successful merchant and Marrano poet penned *Poema de la Reyna Ester* (pictured left) as an homage to his Jewish heritage. He, like Esther, would be able to be a Jew without fearing the Spanish Inquisition.

Marranos and Purim in the Dutch Jerusalem

The setting is Amsterdam, the cosmopolitan city of the Dutch Republic. It was a city that drew wealthy merchants from the rest of Europe, including Marranos, from the Iberian Peninsula. The newly minted Dutch Republic freed from Spanish rule, welcomed these newcomers for their successful business acumen, not to offer refuge for Sephardic Marranos seeking religious freedom. Gradually these Marranos became openly Jewish. The Purim story was the perfect narrative for the Diapora Jew, in general and the Marranos, in particular. Amsterdam was called the Dutch Jerusalem. Prayer books would be translated into Spanish for this growing population.



Aert de Gelder: Esther and Mordechai writing second letter of Purim

How Dutch Artists depicted Purim

Several moments in the Megillah were depicted by artists since Late Antiquity. Each culture depicted scenes that fit into its political agenda. For Jewish artists, the Triumph of Mordechai was the turning point in the story. Italian artists focused on the Swooning Esther. The following are the ones favored by Dutch artists during the 17th century.

- The Triumph of Mordechai
- Esther Presented as a Bride to Ahasuerus
- Esther conferring with Mordechai
- Esther before Ahasuerus with his Scepter
- Esther, Ahasuerus, and Haman at her Banquet

There are at least five paintings depicting Haman's reversal of fortune at Esther's banquet.



Earliest Illustrated Megillah by Shalom Italia

This illuminated 17th-century megillah (above), was engraved in copperplate by Shalom Italia in Amsterdam. The Scroll is composed of thirty texts columns framed by Italia's monumental gates each containing vignettes of the Purim story and scenes of the Dutch landscape. The overall palette is monochrome in brown ink; absent are the gilt and polychrome associated with European megillahs from the same period. This megillah is the earliest one discovered so far, c. 1640-41.

Purim and the Dutch Republic

The Purim story was a popular subject in 17th century Dutch art. This has led previous scholars to exclaim that the Dutch were philosemitic and sympathetic to their new Jewish subjects. But the motivation and inspiration was not totally the same. The themes of reversal of fortune and ultimate triumph appealed to the Dutch people.

The Dutch Republic gained freedom from Spanish rule and Catholicism in 1648, which allowed the Calvinist majority to worship more freely. The Dutch saw themselves Esther and Mordechai, who overturn the hateful decree and defeat their foes. Haman would represent the enemies of Holland, namely Spain.



Rembrandt: Ahasuerus and Haman at the Feast of Esther

Conclusions

The Purim story meant different things to different people and cultures. In 17th century Holland, the story of Esther and Mordechai represented religious freedom for former Marranos, now Jews in thriving communities in Amsterdam. For the Dutch Calvinists, it also meant freedom from Spanish rule and free to practice their Protestant religion. In addition to religious freedom, the Dutch Republic became a wealthy and powerful nation, thanks in part to Marranos looking for the opportunity to begin again.

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Further information

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