

SILVERSTEIN, Adam J. Veiling Esther, *Unveiling Her Story - The Reception of a Biblical Book in Islamic Lands*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, 243 p.

Francisco Marcelino da Silva¹
¹Universidade Federal do Ceará

The book *Veiling Esther, Unveiling Her Story* aims to discuss the biblical book of Esther and its reception in Islamic culture. The approach used can benefit both Biblical and Islamic studies. Silverstein points out three pillars for his research: I) materials that have been produced by pre-Islamic cultures; II) a comparative approach to Near Eastern studies, taking into account culture, language and religious tradition; and III) Middle Eastern, specifically “Persian” tradition, as the author says Esther is a “Persian” story in many ways. At the end, Silverstein shows what he got from his research work to those fields that he presented at the beginning of the book, being them: Islamic studies, Biblical studies and Jewish studies.

The writer of this book tells the reader that there is no single Islamic reception of Esther’s story. We will see that from medieval Persian Muslims to a nineteenth-century feminist writer and to a culturally Islamic Samaritan writer retell of Esther’s story. A lot of characteristics have changed along the time and inside each context.

In this first chapter, the character of Haman is analysed in a comparison between the Biblical one – which is the second man in

**BY**

Esta obra utiliza uma licença Creative Commons CC BY:
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

the kingdom of Ahashwerosh – and the one who appears six times in the Qurān– but they are portrayed in such different contexts that are difficult to associate them. The questions proposed are: How did Haman make his way from the Bible to Qurān? What about the other characters?

Before getting into further discussion, it is essential to highlight the similarities between Biblical and Qurānic Hamans, they both have a high position in the court and “are identified as corrupt, boastful, and disbelieving sinners.” These two figures have been associated throughout history until the modern studies. Silverstein (2018) presents explanations to the questions asked above and to the “transportation of Haman from an Achaemenid context to a Pharaonic one.”

The first one is that there is a literary relationship between the courts of Ahashwerosh and Pharaoh that allowed the appearance of this character in both places. The second one is that there is a genealogical relationship between Haman and Pharaoh. The third and last one is that reassessment in the light of Assyriology developments.

It is also presented the possibility of Esther and Haman’s stories being dissociated from each other with Haman being a common Near Eastern villainous figure.

The possibility that ‘Haman’ featured independently as a villain in non-Esther contexts allows us to suggest that the two Hamans are indeed the same ‘person’, but that neither the biblical nor the Qurānic context is the historically accurate or original one against which other Hamans are to be judged (Silverstein, 2018, p. 37).

In the second chapter, the author shows us reasons that explain why or why not the story of Esther has been assimilated in the Islamic

sources. The first one is a geographical explanation; they believed Haman lived in the Pharaonic court during Moses's career. The second one is that the Muslims had more ancient and prestigious Persian sources that were completely against what was said in Esther.

Al-Kisā'ī used Esther's story only in a way to add information about Pharaoh and Haman that he knew from Qurān. By doing so, Esther is almost ignored and has her story taken from focus. Another attempt to dissociate Islamic sources from the Biblical one is the change in the Haman's name to "Haymūn".

Al-Ṭabarī focuses his work in the ancient Iranian kings mostly, that is why he makes very few references to Jews, and he only does because some events occurred during Ahashwerosh reign.

In al-Ṭabarī's account, Haman plays no role in the events—there is, therefore, no threat to the Jewish people, no miraculous reversal of fortunes, and nothing particularly interesting about Mordecai and Esther. In other words, by doing away with Esther's Haman altogether, Ṭabarī is also doing away with the tension, drama, and basic plot of the story (Silverstein, 2018, p. 52).

Ṭabarī also refers to a campaign in India led by Ahashwerosh. In that event, Haman and Mordecai tried to make a rebellion that was suppressed by the king. The author was very apt to do this because he ignores the Islamic heritage and exalts the Persian one.

Al-Bīrūnī managed to maintain "the plot, tension and significance of Esther – including a relatively full range of its characters—even in the face of contradictory data emanating from his Persian and Islamic heritages" (Silverstein, 2018, p. 56). An exception for the Muslim writers.

To talk about the third chapter, it is important to say that this version of Esther was not written by a Muslim author, but Silverstein considered relevant for two reasons: I) it is a product of Muslim society – Islamicate; and II) the attempt to retell helps to construct a historicization of Esther combined with the forthcoming chapter.

Although Samaritans exclude the Purim festival from their calendar, the author thinks that is worth having a closer look at this version. The Samaritan version shows Esther more like a “political history survey” rather than a “religion-national memory” of Samaritan people.

It is not that Samaritan authors deemed this book of the Bible to be incorrect or offensive, for which reason it needed to be “corrected”: After all, much of the Jewish Bible is incorrect or offensive to Samaritans but they have not methodically rewritten the Prophets or Writings from a Samaritan perspective. Rather, it would appear that the Esther story was deemed by Abū'l-Faṭḥ to be part of history (as opposed to Scripture), an approach to the story that is in line with the Muslim recounting of Esther discussed in Chapter 2. Crucially, this episode of history took place during the reign of King Ahashwerosh, at the height of the Jewish–Samaritan rivalry referred to in Ezra 4. Thus, in rewriting the Esther story from a Samaritan perspective, Abū'l-Faṭḥ might simply have been seeking to set the historical record straight (Silverstein, 2018, p. 78).

The author decided to take a more like regionalist approach in the fourth chapter, which means, he is going beyond religion what is different from the previous chapters too. This chapter is divided into two sections; they both work with the figure of Abraham. In the first part, it will be shown a comparison between Abraham’s cycle and Esther’s story. In the second, it will be focused in a

modern Persian text that describes Abraham and Haman as being related, brothers indeed.

In the first section, some parallels are described such as the attempt to conceal Sarah/Esther by Abraham/Mordecai respectively and in both contexts. Linguistics parallels connect them too, which are the terms used to refer to Haman that is also used to nominate Abraham's enemies, besides that, the use of the verbal root נ.פ.ל appears in both stories.

The second section starts by saying that Akbar Deh Khodā's dictionary of Persian language, *Lughat Nāma*. The entry on Haman presents "Haman was the name of the brother of our Master Abraham, and he was consumed by fire at the time when the idols were burned" (Silverstein, 2018, p. 84). The entry on Haman is followed by an entry on Purim, known in Persian as "Hāmān-Sūz" based on the work of Deh Khodā relies on the argument of Haman and Abraham being brothers.

Of more direct relevance for us is the fact that the important Muslim historian and exegete, al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), who—as his name implies—was a native of the Tabaristan region of Iran, tells us that there are two leading theories about Abraham's birthplace. The second of these is the expected idea that he was a native of Iraq. The first theory, however, is that Abraham was a native of Susa.²¹ Again, this detail has not been salvaged from a long-lost source of dubious materials; the association of Abraham with Susa is the first option offered by a first-rate Muslim scholar. From a "Persian" perspective, Abraham and Haman may well have overlapped geographically (Silverstein, 2018, p. 87).

Silverstein defends his point of view saying that even if this is a mistake it is an interesting one, in a sense that provides some unexamined parallels between Abraham and Haman. Another

relevant fact it would be the name of their mothers, Amthelia, which is put as the same one. For many locals, the supposed fact that Haman and Abraham being brothers is somehow consistent.

This fifth chapter is an attempt to show how Esther's story goes away long before the rise of Islam – centuries ago, to be more precise. That explains the numerous versions of this narrative that has been reimaged, retold and reconstructed throughout time. “Esther and ancient Persian stories share general plots, subplots, themes and motifs, descriptions of celebration, name etymologies, and so forth” (Silverstein, 2018, p. 93).

Al-Tabarī points out two details that connect ancient Persian mythology and storytelling. The first one is when the story takes place, which is, during the reign of Baham under whom Ahashwerosh ruled, and the second one concerns about Mordecai and Esther, more precisely about the woman who breastfed them. These observations may look random, but the author intends to explain them better in the chapter.

It is said that there is no intention to say that other sources rather than Persian one are inferior, but they have to be taking into account considering their antiquity. There are presented some stories very different from Greek (or Biblical) versions, but that share themes, plots, motifs in common between Esther and Persian Stories.

For example, there is an interesting comparison between Esther and *The 1001 Nights*. So, some similarities are recognized such as the fact that the kings were looking for new wives in the third year of their reign – for some reason, they were not pleased with their spouses – and even though their edicts had different purposes they both were looking for virgins.

Another important source is *ShāhNāma* that contributes in three ways: the first of them is the record of King Baham's existence;

the second is a reference to a famous, heroic horse, Raksh, that appears in Esther and the legendary hero Rustam, and the third and last one is a suggestion of an ancient origin for Haman, Esther's villain.

This chapter has sought to demonstrate that an acquaintance with ancient Persian storytelling, as it is represented in Islamic-era sources, contributes to our understanding of Esther (whether the MT or the Greek versions), and of the early midrashim on it, within their cultural contexts. Underpinning the discussion in this chapter is the assumption that the authors of the works surveyed here were not acquainted with Esther, for which reason commonalities between these works and Esther and its midrashim may be attributed to the shared "storytelling" culture on which they and their Jewish neighbours drew (Silverstein, 2018, p. 125).

The title of chapter six –"Bougaïos"- The Islamic Evidence– refers to an epithet given to Haman that replaces the biblical one Agagite. The author brings up what he calls an old question and an old answer that is about a Persian functionary(ies) known as – "Bagoas" - who is equated to Haman.

Silverstein presents three references regarding Bagoas before getting into Islamic evidence. The first one is the mentioning of Bagoas as an instrumental in the conquest of Egypt by Artaxerxes III, the second one is about Bagoas having a fabulous castle in Susa, and the last one is an odd anecdote preserved by Diodorus.

One of the contributions of the Islamic sources is Al-Maqdisī's in which the rising of Pharaoh's and Haman's rising from the unknown to a prominent place in ancient Egypt. "The full significance of this account is borne out by the passages in which al-Kisā'ī and al-Bīrūnī describe the rise of Pharaoh (al-Kisā'ī) and Haman (al-Bīrūnī), respectively" (Silverstein, 2018, p. 146).

The most relevant element that this chapter tells us about is the idea of Haman and/or Pharaoh being involved in a graveyard extortion because this fact promotes the connection with Bagoas.

The seventh and last chapter talks about the refusal of Mordecai to bow before Haman. Some questions and explanations are presented to clarify the reasons why he decided not to do what everyone was supposed to. One of the answers is that Mordecai did not want to adore a human being more than God; another one is a rivalry that existed between Mordecai's people and Haman and his people.

Some traces of Mordecai's story, as the plot as well, have some parallels with other narratives of the ancient near East like Ugaritic Baal Cycle in which one there is a character who refuses to bow before a senior figure of the court that is what happened in Esther's story. "Authors from both Eastern Semitic and Western Semitic cultures made use of a topos in which a protagonist refuses to bow down to an important (but not the leading) character, despite the fact that all others are expected to do so" (Silverstein, 2018, p. 157).

It is referred to other biblical histories in which the act of prostration is also seen as a wrong act because it demonstrates that the person values more another person than the deity. The example portrayed is the one in Daniel 3, the moment that he refuses to bow down before Nebuchadnezzar.

In the Extra-Biblical Literature, there is another interesting passage that tells about Satan refusal to prostrate and "worship" Adam against God's command, and it is also someone inferior in the sense of creation. These two criteria: first, the fact that the order comes from someone above and the imposition to bow down to someone else than the higher authority itself. "In Late Antiquity, the episode in which God orders the angels to prostrate themselves before Adam, with Satan refusing to do so, was repeated in numerous

sources, including versions in Armenian, Syriac, Coptic, Georgian, and other “Christian” languages” (Silverstein, 2018, p. 169).

Silverstein points out the fact that the connection established between Mordecai’s and Satan’s episodes is unparalleled because Mordecai is seen as a positive “character fundamentally”. In contrast, Satan is the complete opposite in the Islamic tradition, which means, a negative character fundamentally. “...my argument in this chapter is that Mordecai’s refusal to bow to Haman is best understood as being but one link in a long chain of such literary episodes in Near Eastern civilization” (Silverstein, 2018, p. 182).

Silverstein shows what he got from his research work to those fields that he presented at the beginning of the book, being them: Islamic studies, Biblical studies and Jewish studies. Now we are going to take a closer look at the contributions done by this research to those fields enlisted above.

Taking into account the Islamic studies, it has been shown that the Muslims have had really varied approaches and attitude towards Esther’s story which are reflected throughout history. Another interesting fact is that the Qur’ānic Haman is related to Esther’s Haman, according to the author’s point of view.

Concerning the Biblical studies, it is highlighted the episode in which one Mordecai refuses to bow before Haman as a link to a long historical chain of literary representations of “similar, rebellious behaviour”. One more indication that calls out attention is the regicidal plot in the Persian background, which seems to be the source from where Esther’s episode emerged, as suggests Silverstein.

Last but not least, the contributions to Jewish studies were made in two directions: the first one is to understand the development of the Jewish ideas that were reflected in Midrashim, and the second

one is the identification of pre-Islamic, Jewish materials that have fallen out of circulation.

If I may be permitted to belabour the metaphor, what convinced me to persevere was the stunning view that swaying at such a height offered. Combing the incredibly vast array of primary sources from Islamic cultures, and the equally daunting volume of sources available in the field of Esther studies, has allowed me to bring the one to bear upon the other. I hope that the results achieved by enduring the vertigo, abandoning my comfort zone, and taking risks throughout this book will be deemed worthwhile to biblicalists, Judaicists, and Islamicists alike (Silverstein, 2018, p. 189).

References

Silverstein, Adam J. Veiling Esther, *Unveiling Her Story - The Reception of a Biblical Book in Islamic Lands*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018, 243 p.

Recebido em: 05/08/2022

Aprovado em: 15/11/2022

Publicado em dezembro de 2022

Francisco Marcelino da Silva. Fortaleza, Ceará, Brasil. E-mail: marcelino.jr06@gmail.com. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3088-8181>