

MAKING A DIFFERENCE: TRANSLATING THE SCROLL OF AHASUERUS¹

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Introduction

How do we deal with, describe or resignify our own ‘otherness’? This set of questions arose in the course of working on a document titled מגילת אחשוורוש (*Megillat Ahasuerus*), ‘The Book (or Scroll) of Ahasuerus’ (hereafter MA). In a brief anonymous preface, it claims to be “The letter of King Ahasuerus, which impious Haman sent into all the provinces of India and Ethiopia, in the name of the King. Translated from the Biblia, written in the Greek Tongue by the Seventy Elders in the days of King Ptolemy”.² Despite the view of one editor that “on comparing the [manuscript] with the Apocryphal chapters of Esther, as now extant in the Septuagint, the translation is found, on the whole, to be faithful and perspicuous”,³ a simple translation of the Greek additions into Hebrew it is not.

The manuscript was found, along with a canonical Esther Scroll, מגילת אסתר (*Megillat Esther*) in one of the synagogues of the so-called ‘black Jews’ at Cochin on the Malabar coast of India, in the early nineteenth century. Believed to be about 150 years old at the time of discovery, it was copied (so it is asserted by the aforementioned editor) “from an ancient Roll bearing the same title”, itself transcribed from “brazen tablets preserved at Goa”.⁴

¹This article was originally presented to the Bible and Critical Theory Seminar held at Monash University on August 24, 2000, under the title: “Re-inscribing difference: translating the Scroll of Ahasuerus”.

²*A Collation of an Indian Manuscript of the Hebrew Pentateuch* (Trans. T. Yeates, 1812) 53.

³J. Palmer, “Note on the Manuscript”, *A Collation*, 52.

⁴*Ibid.*, cf. title page, *A Collation*, 42. A textual analysis of the Hebrew would suggest a relatively late date for the translation here transcribed (with respect to the Septuagint ‘original’), containing as it does a mixture of somewhat flawed classicising (e.g. the non-combinative use of the particle ל and the definite article [MA V.7, 20, 23], the unusual form of the infinitive for נתן [MA V.8, 20], and a general awkwardness with the construct form [e.g., אנשי יקיים, MA V.20]), more modern Hebrew vocabulary (e.g., use of הרבה and משום [Preface], and of the particle של instead of construct [e.g., MA III.15], use of combinative particle -ש in

At the start of the twentieth century the Jewish community at Cochin on India's south-western tip numbered between 2,000 and 2,500—still sub-divided according to racial origins into the *Paredesi* or foreigners, who were white Jews, and the black Jews.⁵ Legend and the study of ancient trade routes combine to suggest that the Jewish presence on this coastline is an ancient one.⁶ More certain, however, is the influx of Jews to India in the sixteenth century following the Portuguese conquest of Panjim in 1510. Many of these European Jews joined the previously isolated Jewish communities further south upon the establishment of the Inquisition at the vice-regal seat of Goa in 1560. The early to mid-seventeenth-century date proposed for the scribal activity which concerns

preference to relative pronoun אשר [e.g., MA III.16. cf. II.8] of combinative form באם [e.g., MA V.14] and of בשכיל [e.g., MA I.4]), modern reflexive verbs (e.g., עצמה, MA III.2), abstract nouns formed from the hitpael (e.g., ההענות, MA III.2) and other abstract nouns (e.g., במיה, MA III.13, and an abundance of those formed with the -ות ending, e.g., האחדות, I.4), and use of modern idioms such as עיר פעם (IV.15, lit. 'yet a time', i.e., 'again'), and להם כה (MA V.20, lit. 'to do to them a power', i.e., 'to do them violence'). A single verse which exemplifies some of these features in the sort of concentration that is typical of the work as a whole is MA IV.7:

וכשנשא המלך את עיניו וראה את אסתר בועף ובחרון אף נבהלה אסתר
 מפניו ופניה נתהפכת כפני נה ונפלה כחולשת כוחה עם ראשה על אמותיה

in which we note the long subordinate clause uncharacteristic of biblical Hebrew, the -ן- noun-forming suffix in later Hebrew, the use of the preposition עם where in biblical Hebrew one would expect a circumstantial clause (simply, 'her head on her maid'), and the nitpael form which is also not biblical, although it is mishnaic. I am grateful to Dr Evan Burge for his assistance in identifying the linguistic features listed here and for his companionship in re-reading the entire Hebrew text of MA.

⁵A *Historical atlas of the Jewish people* (ed. E. Barnavi; London: Kuperard, 1992) 183. N. de Lange adds the category of 'brown Jews' to this schema (*Atlas of the Jewish World* [Oxford: Equinox; 1984] 215).

⁶A *Historical atlas*, 182; For example, B. Netanyahu outlines the widespread commercial activity of the 'Radhanites'—international Jewish merchants whose agents "traversed routes that embraced Eastern Europe as well as enormous stretches of Asia, reaching India long before Vasco da Gama" (*The origins of the Inquisition in fifteenth century Spain* [New York: Random House, 1995], 60).

us here coincides with the start of a period of relative prosperity for Jews under Dutch rule in Cochin between 1663 and 1795.⁷

The relevance of this background will become more apparent with the formulation of an hypothesis regarding MA once we have considered its text more closely. The question behind the investigation which follows takes as its starting point David Clines' thesis that "the function of the Septuagint [hereafter LXX] additions is not wholly or even primarily to introduce explicit language of divine causation into a deficient Hebrew original, but to recreate the book in a mould of post-exilic Jewish history".⁸

What, then, might we make of the translation of these additions back into Hebrew from the Greek—or at least, a copying of this translation—in India, at that point in the history of its Jewish communities?⁹ In

⁷A *Historical atlas*, 182f.

⁸D. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: the story of the story* (JSOT Sup 30; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984) 169. Clines points out that the additions narrate only two moments when God is seen to intervene decisively in proceedings (LXX 5:1 and 6:1), although in LXX 10:4 the whole narrative is explicitly said to be God's doing. *Ibid.*, 171.

⁹It is assumed for the purposes of this analysis that there is no direct relationship between the Greek additions and earlier Hebrew versions of Esther—certainly not such as the Cochin community would have had knowledge. In summing up her review of scholarly investigation into this problem since C. C. Torrey's thesis of two Greek versions (A-text and B-text) in 1944, Linda Day comments: "It has been thoroughly and persuasively demonstrated that the bulk of the A text arose from an alternate stratum of the early Esther story which differed from the Masoretic text (hereafter MT), that the Septuagint (B text) reflects the translation of a Hebrew version much like the Masoretic text *except for the six extended additions*, and that the A text is dependent upon the same source as the B text for these six passages" (*Three faces of a Queen: characterization in the Books of Esther* [JSOT Sup 186; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995] 18, my emphases. Cf. the chart in Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 140. In this chart Clines does suggest that both Greek and Semitic additions contribute to the LXX as we now have it, but here he is principally referring to MT 9:1-19, 20-32 and the appendix of 10:1-3, which he sees as having been added to the pre- and proto-Masoretic narratives, i.e., MT chaps. 1-8. For a slightly different approach to the redaction of MT see C. V. Dorothy, *The books of Esther: structure, genre and textual integrity* [JSOT Sup 187; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997] 226-73, 327-31. Dorothy does argue for a Semitic *Vorlage* in the case of additions C and D, see *ibid.*, 132f, as indeed does Clines with respect to additions A, C, D, and F [*The Esther Scroll*, 69], here following C.A. Moore). The possibility that MA is in fact a translation of the A-text additions and not of LXX as stated in the scroll's preface was considered (the original Greek is not supplied in this document, only the Hebrew and the Hebrew and Greek translations) given the view that the A-text and the MT derive from the same *Vorlage* (see T. Linafelt and T. K. Beal, *Ruth and Esther* [Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1999] "Esther", xviii). However the differences between the Greek and Hebrew translations which appear cannot be accounted for by the

particular, what might the ‘additions to the additions’ —the translator’s relative freedom with the text—tell us about the function of the Esther narrative in the Cochin Jewish community at that time?

The relationship of this inquiry to my opening question hinges around this mould of post-exilic Jewish history to which Clines refers. As he sees it, the principal emphasis of the LXX additions is upon the religious beliefs and behaviour of key characters. The prayers of Mordecai and Esther which comprise the whole of the longest addition (C = LXX 13:8–14:19), whilst serving narrative functions such as explaining Mordecai’s behaviour towards Haman and the nature of Esther’s participation in the life of the Persian court, primarily

assist in remoulding the book into the form of an exemplary tale¹⁰—which does not only record divine deliverance or divine human co-operation but also gives advice on how a Jew should behave religiously in a foreign environment or a situation of crisis.¹¹

By way of anticipation of my hypothesis, it is not hard to imagine how, for a long-established Diaspora community suddenly bolstered by an influx of Spanish and Portuguese Jews fleeing the Inquisition, such a document—especially one whose Masoretic complement refers to India in its opening verse (Esth 1:1)—could take on renewed relevance.

If we assume that, at least in part, the crisis faced by the community in Cochin was a crisis occasioned by identity, then what Clines calls the

differences between A and B texts (A-text and translation are provided by Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 215–47); in fact, notwithstanding significant differences, the Hebrew corresponds more closely with the B-text than the A-text.

¹⁰The word מִשַּׁל (parable) occurs in MA V.23.

¹¹Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 171. In a work exploring comparisons between Armenian and Jewish literary responses to catastrophe, Runbina Perroomian describes the Hasidic worldview (cf. use of חֲסִידִים, MA V.15) as one that “looked to the past, reviving ancient archetypes and presenting them as role models for the present” (*Literary responses to catastrophe: a comparison of the Armenian and the Jewish experience* [Atlanta: Scholars press, 1993] 50). Perroomian notes that in eighteenth-century India there was a conflict between Hasidic and traditionalist Armenian responses to their respective plights one the one hand and the liberal ideologies of nationalist Armenian and Zionist responses which rejected diasporan existence in favour of return to and/or struggle for homeland—an observation which suggests that the question of how to respond to such a crisis was acutely alive to the Indian consciousness. The ultimate ascendancy of the latter response is perhaps reflected in the unusually high rate of emigration of Indian Jews to the new state of Israel. De Lange remarks that after 1948 only a few Jewish families remained in Cochin (*Atlas of the Jewish World*, 215).

'anti-Jewish document'¹² (Addition B = LXX 13:1-7, cf. Ezra 4:11-16) takes on particular significance. This is heightened upon realising that MA has rearranged the order of the Septuagint additions such that the document begins with this text: the letter of Ahasuerus, by which, indeed, it is named (see fig. 1 for an outline of comparative structures).

Figure 1

Addition <i>cf. MT</i>	LXX	MA	MA
		<i>Trans. of Grk</i>	<i>Heb. ch. (Eng. Trans)</i>
A. 1-17 (before 1.1)	11.2-(12)-12.(1)-6	XI.2-12 ¹³	א (VI.1-12) ¹⁴
B. 1-7 (after 3.13)	13.1-7	XIII.1-7	ב (I.1-7)
C.1-30 (after 4.17)	13.8-(18)-14.(1)-19	XIII.8-(18)-XIV.(1)-19	ג (II.1-[10]- ד (III.[1]-19)
D. 1-16 (alt. to 5.1-2)	15.1-16	XV.1-16	ה (IV.1-16)
E. 1-24 (after 8.12)	16.1-24	XVI.1-24	ו (V.2-24)
F. 1-10 (after 10.3)	10.4-(13)-11.1	X.4-13(and XI.1)	ז ¹⁵ (VII.1-10 and V.D) ¹⁶

¹²Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 174.

¹³12:1-6 is missing from MA. This represents an unlikely omission at a redactional level as these verses detail Mordecai's discovery of the plot against Ahasuerus. It is possible that the function of these verses in LXX as first or partial dream fulfilment (see Dorothy, *The Books of Esther*, 51) is obviated by the juxtaposition in MA of A 1-11 with F, which begins with Mordecai's assertion: "God has done these things". An alternative explanation would be that this section of text was missing also from the document being translated. Dorothy's observations with respect to differences in arrangement of the Greek additions between the A-text and the B-text (*The Books of Esther*, 193) suggest that some rearrangement of existing structures would not be a feature unique to MA.

¹⁴In moving this section from the scroll's beginning, the introduction and genealogy of Mordecai which is logical in the LXX order has not been shifted to MA II (Mordecai's first mention in the Hebrew text) but is left at the start of his dream, with the anachronistic affect that the document's chief interpreter is introduced only at its end.

¹⁵Neither Palmer nor Yeates (see nn. 1, 2), one of whom is most likely to have added the Roman numeral chapter markers to the English translation of the Hebrew, remarks upon the fact that what appears as 'CHAP. VII' in the translation as published is headed ז פרשה (section three) in the Hebrew—a heading already used in its more logical place in parallel with 'CHAP. III'.

¹⁶MA V.1 is separated from the rest of the text which corresponds with LXX addition F (i.e. MA VII.1-10) and situated between additions D and E.

Again some observations from Clines on the LXX additions provide a useful background to a comparative reading of these texts:

There is more than a trace here of Jewish nervousness and not a wholly misplaced anxiety over their own status in the eyes of their neighbours and rulers, and undoubtedly one function of these 'Persian' documents is to reassure a self-conscious community that it is possible to look with comparative favour on the Jewish people, peculiar and deviant though their life may seem (cf. Esth. 3.8).¹⁷

It is primarily the phrase 'self-conscious community' that the following selective comparison of sections of MA with the corresponding LXX passages seeks to explore.¹⁸

*Comparison of selected verses*¹⁹

MA I.4, 7 = LXX 13:4, 7

Here Ahasuerus is reporting the opinion of Haman concerning the Jews, along the lines of Esth 3:8 ("There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king's laws ..."). In v. 4 of MA, however, the Greek *δυσμενη λαον τινα* (rendered in the MA translation as "a certain malicious people") is omitted from the Hebrew, as is the corresponding *δυσμενεις* from v. 7.

MA III.11 = LXX 14:11

In this section of text from Esther's prayer, MA adds the phrase "the adversary that presumptuously accuseth us with lying words", not found

¹⁷Clines, *The Esther Scroll*, 174. Clines remains undecided as to whether the so-called 'documentary' additions (B and E) were drafted to meet a real historical need or to imitate the form and content of existing Persian histories (Daniel, Ezra and Nehemiah). The possibility he describes was precisely the experience of the Jews of the Malabar coast under Akbar the Great (1556-1605): during the reign of this Mogul Emperor the *Paradesi* synagogue was established in Goa.

¹⁸A similar exercise has been undertaken by Day with respect to LXX 14:1-19 (Esther's prayer) and the corresponding section of the A-text (*Three faces*, 63-84, see especially pp. 76-79), and with LXX 15:1-16 (ibid., 84-104, see especially pp. 98-104), here comparing the two Greek versions of Esther's appearance before the king to the shorter Hebrew alternative to the same episode (MT 5:1-2). Dorothy's comparative work on the two Greek texts (which he designates *ó* [= LXX] and *Λ* [= A-text], *The Books*, 14-15), although much more detailed and extensive than Day's, is primarily oriented to the production of a textual history, as opposed to an interpretive history with which Day's approach and that taken here are more concerned.

¹⁹In this section the translation provided by Yeates for both the Hebrew and Greek texts has been adopted, as a common translator is unlikely to exaggerate any differences that might be caused by the process of translation itself.

in the text of the LXX addition. It may also be significant that Esther's prayer in MA is inspired not by her own fear of death (as in LXX addition C.13) but on account of צרה ישראל, "Israel's trouble" (MA III.1).

MA III.18 = LXX 14:18

Later in Esther's prayer, the source of her only hope of joy is expanded from the LXX "in thee, O Lord God of Abraham" to "with the princes of the people[s] when they shall be gathered together, the people of the God of Abraham". There is a sense here that Esther's pleasure comes from contemplating the day when Israel enjoys a position of leadership in the world, whose peoples are gathered under the God of Abraham—a nationalistic flourish entirely absent in the Greek.

MA IV.10 = LXX 15:10

As King Ahasuerus comforts his swooning Queen, MA has him explain that "the decree, that none should come unto the king without being called for, is commanded for others, but not for thee", as distinct from the LXX's "Thou shalt not die, though our commandment be general".²⁰ The effect of this interpolation is that the word אחרים (others) comes to be dissociated from Esther and applied to the king's subjects as a whole, under his and Esther's mutual (κοινοῦ) command.²¹

MA V.3, 8, 12, 20, 21; VII.8 = LXX 16:2, 8, 12, 20, 21; 10:11

On several occasions MA specifically attributes evil or some corollary to Israel's adversaries: to the Persian court (V.3: לעשוה כל רע V.8: רשעים הנוכרים), to the "wicked Haman" (V.20, 21: הרע; V.12: לההנאה), and to the nations (VII.8: הגוים היו מלאים גאווה) where there is no such attribution in the Greek.

MA V.7 = LXX 16:7

In Ahasuerus' second decree we can perhaps detect a scribal tendency towards contextualisation, where the LXX's "what hath been wickedly done of late" becomes the much more pointed גם בזמנינו ` בכל יום ("but also in our own times ... in every day"). This may also account for the apparent confusion of pronouns in V.23, where Ahasuerus refers to the Jews in the second person (ימים טובים שלכם, "your festivals") and

²⁰Dorothy observes a similar expansion taking place at this point in the A-text (i.e. 6:9 in the A-text and translation provided by Clines (*The Esther Scroll*, 232f) whereby what is implicit in LXX is spelled out (*The Books*, 134f).

²¹Ibid., 135.

the third person (באמונתם, “confidence in them”), and, somewhat awkwardly, to the Persians in the third person (הפרס, “the Persians”) but to himself and his court in the first person (שייטב אדני לנו, “that God may do good unto us”).

MA V.19; VI.2 = LXX 16:19; 11:3

Haman’s hopes of identification—of self-sameness—with the king are dashed in MA which gathers third person pronouns around Haman and associates first person pronouns with Mordecai and Esther. Where one might expect “and not one shall perish by our hand” from Ahasuerus in V.19, the third person plural is used to refer to Haman and his associates in the project of extermination (בידם, “by their hand”). This sense of reversal is emphasised near the conclusion of MA (as it has rearranged the LXX text) where Mordecai is introduced prior to the account of his dream and its interpretation as הנגר (VI.2), which Yeates translates “a stranger”, whereas the Greek has Mordecai οἰκῶν (LXX 11:3), “living” or “dwelling” in Susa.²²

MA V.22-23; VII.10 = LXX 16:22-23; 10:13

Towards the end of the king’s second edict MA includes a degree of detail regarding the observation of Purim which is lacking in the Greek (V.22: יום ארבעה עשר לחדש שנים עשר, “the fourteenth day of the twelfth month”; V.23: היום טוב הזה יהיה בכלל כל ימים טובים, “And this feast day shall be among all your festivals”). This is repeated at the conclusion of the document where, as in V.22, the festival is referred

²²Whilst it may be that הנגר carries that same technical sense as οἰκῶν, the contiguity of “He was a stranger in the city ... and renowned in the court of the palace” is more striking in Yeates’ translation of MA than that of “He was a Jew and dwelt in the city ... being a servitor in the king’s court” as he renders the Greek. Indeed, notwithstanding the fact that MA refers to Mordecai as יהודי (‘a Jew’) in the previous verse, as it stands in Yeates’ translation, the words ‘Jew’ and ‘stranger’ appear interchangeable. For Hegel, the Judaeo-Christian tradition’s foundational story of Abraham’s nomadic journey represents a fundamental disjuncture with all ties of family, society and geographical belonging: “With his herds Abraham wandered hither and thither over a boundless territory without bringing parts of it nearer to him by cultivating and improving them ... he was a stranger to men and soil alike ... The whole world Abraham regarded as his opposite; if he did not take it to be a nullity he looked upon it as sustained by a God who was alien to it” (As cited by R. Plant, *Hegel* [London: Phoenix, 1997] 13). Levinas does not regard such self-imposed alienation in the same light, favourably comparing Abraham, who stepped out into the unknown, with Ulysses who sought only that which had been left behind (see C. Davis, *Levinas: an introduction* [Oxford: Polity/Blackwell, 1996] 35).

to by name (VII.10: וְהַיָּמִים הָאֵלֶּה הֵנִקְרְאוּ פֻרִים, “Now these days that are called Purim”).²³

MA VII.7 = LXX 10:10

Perhaps the most explicit inscription of the translator’s and the reading community’s own otherness, as represented by the Jew-as-other in this narrative, occurs in the fourth last verse of the text. According to LXX, in interpreting his dream Mordecai explains: “Therefore hath [the Lord] made two lots, one for the people of God, and another for all the Gentiles”. Our scribe, however, has Mordecai say כִּין עָמֹ וּבִין הַגּוֹיִם הוּא הַבְּדִיל תְּמִיד, “for he hath ever made a difference between his people and the heathen”. The word Yeates gives here as “difference” is a hiphil (causative) form of the verb *badal*, to separate, distinguish between, make a distinction, segregate from or detach.²⁴

Conclusions/hypothesis

What conclusions or hypothesis might we draw from this brief synopsis? In his proposed textual history, Dorothy argues that the final verses of both the A-text and the LXX suggest these additions served a cultic or synagogal function,²⁵

based broadly on a theology of creation and sustenance, and specifically ... a concretization or actualization of a Yahwistic צְדָקָה (i.e. a cosmic order/justice) and a צְדָקָה (a ‘righteousness’ or

²³The colophon in LXX (11.1) which provides data including verification of the translator (see Dorothy, *The Books*, 28, 219) also names the feast indirectly (επιστολην των Φουσαι), and it is possible that the addition of the name in MA VII.10 is designed to compensate for the loss of this key word at the document’s end due to the repositioning of the colophon between additions D and E.

²⁴So *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (ed. W. L. Holladay; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 34. The same verb is used in this form in Gen 1:4, 6 with respect to the light and the darkness and the waters above and beneath the firmament, in Isa 59:2 where Israel’s sins constitute a barrier causing the hiding of the divine face, in Ezek 22:26 to refer to the priests’ failure to distinguish between the holy and the profane, and in Lev 20:24 in much the same sense as in MA VII.7.

²⁵He notes that in both the A-text and the LXX, the dream interpretation flows directly into sermon speech, reminiscent of the post-interpretive doxologies in Daniel (*The Books*, 215). Mordecai’s presentation as a leader of worship here leads Dorothy to postulate that this concluding section represents an early haggadic homily preserved along with its proem, or *petichta*, as the moral and purpose of the narrative (Ibid., 215f). If anything, the rearrangement of the dream and its interpretation in MA would strengthen such a theory, heightening, as it does, the document’s rhetorical force by juxtaposing Mordecai’s dream and its interpretation as question and answer.

salvation) actualized among the people of God. Therefore the passage presents an actualization of an ongoing Torah story.²⁶ Moreover he believes that, combined with the apocalypticising dream and interpretation ‘envelope’ of the two extant Greek additions, such a reaffirmation of the promise of salvation and reassurance of Israel’s election “would speak to Diaspora needs”.²⁷

My hypothesis is that in MA we have something very similar to Dorothy’s evaluation of the A-text and LXX: namely a resignifying of an already multivalent and multigeneric narrative to suit the needs of one of the Cochin Jewish communities following their experience of the persistence of Haman’s ‘final solution’ to the problem of otherness in the form of the Inquisition. As such, MA serves a similar two-fold purpose to that ascribed by Dorothy to the Greek additions: as festal etiology (its redactional ‘intention’) and (divine) rescue novella (its authorial ‘intention’),²⁸ “probably at a time when communal identity needed to be solidified, and/or communal variations needed to be harmonized”.²⁹

To return to our opening question, what is intriguing about the particular reshaping of a core of tradition that MA represents is the way it draws its reading community’s attention to their own otherness.

In *Totality and Infinity*,³⁰ Emmanuel Levinas describes ethics in terms of the calling into question of the Same by the Other:

A calling into question of the Same ... is brought about by the Other. We name this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics. The strangeness of the Other, his (*sic*)

²⁶*The Books*, 327.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 328 (of course, the dream and its interpretation does not form an ‘envelope’ in MA as we have it). Dorothy cites J. A. Sanders to good effect on this rhetorical function of the additions: “There is no early biblical manuscript of which I am aware, ... that does not have some trace in it of its having been adapted to the needs of the community from which we ... receive it. ... All versions are to some extent relevant to the communities for which they were translated: it was because the Bible was believed to be relevant that it was translated ... Even biblical Hebrew texts are to some extent, ... adapted to the needs of the communities for which they were copied” (*Ibid.*, 355).

²⁸*Ibid.*, 339. Note, however, Dorothy’s reservations about the term ‘additions’ (*ibid.*, 348f). MA would appear to add weight to his thesis that all extant versions of Esther “went through one or more stages of becoming scripture” (*ibid.*, 349).

²⁹*Ibid.*, 341f. In this respect, MA bears some similarity with the A-text’s differences from the LXX—differences which lead Dorothy to postulate that the former is the product of a Jew writing to Jews (*ibid.*, 353) with a “‘homiletical’, or at least an ethnic, communal constitutive intention” (*ibid.*, 356), translating, resignifying Esther “so that segments of the Jewish population ... could not only read it, but appreciate it as their story, their history, their life” (*Ibid.*).

³⁰E. Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Trans. A. Lingis: The Hague: Nijhoff, 1969).

irreducibility to the I, to my thoughts and my possessions, is precisely accomplished ... as ethics.³¹

In propositional terms, ‘the Other problematizes the Same’.³² For Levinas, this problematizing has two dimensions: the sheer presence of the other; and the other’s strangeness, or irreducibility to the I. Something of both of these aspects contributes to Haman’s irritation on encountering Mordecai in the Masoretic text of Esther: his stubborn presence at the gate of the palace (Esth 2:20; 3:3; 4:2, 6; 5:9; 6:10, 12), and the difference (וַדְּהִיָּהֶם שְׁנוּה מִכָּל־עַם) of the ways of his people (3:8).³³

Haman’s reaction to Mordecai in Esth 5.9 carries something of Levinas’ sense of the challenge to spontaneity generated by the other, as his שְׂמֵחַ וְטוֹב לֵב (literally, “happy and good of heart”) demeanour instantly transmutes into one וַיִּמְלֵא חֲמָה (‘‘filled with anger’’).³⁴ One could almost see Mordecai’s ‘calling into question’ of Haman’s self-presence as a narrative form of what Levinas understands to be our constant search for a way of dealing with the shock of alterity: “as in the Hegelian dialectic, the characteristic gesture of [Western] philosophy is to acknowledge the Other in order to incorporate it into ever-expanding circles of the Same”.³⁵

³¹As cited by Davis, *Levinas*, 36.

³²Davis’ summation, *ibid.*

³³Note the narrative importance of לפני, and Levinas’ concentration on *le visage* (*ibid.*, 46)—a convergence that serves to nominate Mordecai as the Other *par excellence*. As T. A. Veling explains, “‘being faced’ places us before the other who ‘opposes’ me with the absolute frankness of his gaze. ... The face of the other is ‘the epiphany of what can thus present itself directly, and therefore also exteriorly. to an I’. Being faced means I am no longer able to stay within the realms of my own ‘being’; ... The presence of ‘me to myself’ is broken. ... *I am no longer able to have power* ... true exteriority is in this gaze which forbids me my conquest” (“In the Name of who? Levinas and the other side of theology”, *Pacifica* 12.3 [1999] 286, original emphasis). Levinas’ use of the biblical formula of the *anawim* (stranger, widow, or orphan) to characterise the Other (Davis, *Levinas*, 51) deepens Mordecai’s qualifications as a narrative representative of otherness (cf. MA VI.2, n.22, above).

³⁴Haman instantiates what Levinas calls ‘living from’: “*Living from* ... offers a mode of encounter with the world which confirms the identity and sovereignty of the self; the world is fully available to me, ready to meet my needs and to fulfil my desires.” (As cited in *ibid.*, 43). Enjoyment (*jouissance*)—what in Hebrew might be rendered by טוב לב (cf. Esth 5:9)—“is the exhilaration of the self in its possession of the world” (*ibid.*), experienced when that which is outside self is absorbed or transformed as a source of pleasure or sustenance. The most obvious example of this process (and one never far from the narrative of Esther) is food. The other, however, “makes me realize that I share the world, that it is not my unique possession, and I do not like this realization” (*ibid.*, 48).

³⁵*Ibid.*, 40. The other, by contrast, “cuts through and perforates the totality of presence” (Levinas, as cited by Veling, “In the Name of who?” 278; cf. the introduction by A. Aronowicz (trans.) to Levinas, *Nine talmudic readings* [Bloom-

The alternative to absorbing the Other is to suppress it;³⁶ and this is precisely Haman's 'ethical' (i.e. chosen) response to the challenge of Mordecai's presence and strangeness. Again, the Esther narrative bears out Levinas' sense of the inevitability of the failure of this option, for whilst I may kill innumerable others, the Other, precisely as that which is beyond my power, always survives.³⁷

For sixteenth-century Spanish/Portuguese Jews in India, assimilation rapidly gave way to the threat of annihilation as the Inquisition followed them east. This provides an obvious motivation for the scribal qualification of otherness that MA appears to represent, as these Jews fled south to Cochlin, seeking re-assimilation in an existing Jewish community. The criteria outlined by Dorothy, above, regarding the need to forge communal identity and/or the harmonising of communal variations with respect to the observance of festivals are also amply fulfilled by these circumstances, making it easy to see why the Greek additions to the Esther Scroll would be high on the scribal list of candidates for translation.

However, reading this text alongside Levinas' theory of alterity, one is left wondering whether those responsible for it have unwittingly — tragically — conspired with Haman, by trying to suppress, to annihilate their own otherness? Is this act of translation a textual parallel to the

ington: Indiana University Press, 1990] xxi). Levinas' description of the 'vigilant insomnia' whereby "the other haunts our existence and keeps us awake" (Veling's paraphrase, "In the Name of who?" 278f; cf. T. K. Beal, *The Book of hiding: gender, ethnicity, annihilation and Esther* [London: Routledge; 1997] 79) begs to be read alongside Ahasuerus' insomnia (Esth 6:1). In another tantalising resonance, responsibility for the king's restlessness is laid by the rabbis at the feet of God (see the midrash cited in *The Book of legends*, [eds. H. N. Bialik and Y. H. Ravnitsky; New York: Schocken Books; 1992] 157f; cf. *Esth. Rab.* 9.4: 10 1), who for Levinas, here following Descartes, is the archetypal other (see Veling, "In the Name of who?" 283; cf. Davis, *Levinas*, 40).

³⁶So Levinas: "The meeting with the other person consists in the fact that, despite the extent of my domination, over him, and his submission, I do not possess him. ... I understand him in terms of his history, his environment, his habits. What escapes understanding in him is himself, the being. I cannot deny him partially, in violence, by grasping him in terms of being in general, and by possessing him. The other is the only being whose negation can be declared only as total: a murder. The other is the only being I can want to kill" (*Entre nous: on thinking-of-the-other* [trans. M. B. Smith and B. Harshav; New York: Columbia University press, 1998] 9).

³⁷Levinas continues: "I can want to [kill the other]. Yet ... [t]he triumph of this power is its defeat as power. At the very moment when my power to kill is realized, the other has escaped. In killing I can certainly *attain* a goal, ... but then I have grasped the other in the opening of being in general, as an element of the world in which I stand. ... I have not looked him in the face. The temptation of total negation, which spans the infinity of that attempt and its impossibility—is the presence of the face" (ibid., 9f).

southward journey of European Jews whose identity as ‘other-stranger’ is under erasure, and who seek refuge in an uneasy sameness?

If so, the document’s greatest significance may lie in its failure with respect to this accidental complicity. For, in the end, MA re-affirms the reading-writing community’s difference in categorical terms (MA VII.7). Historically, this tension between erasing and re-inscribing one’s own otherness could reflect a degree of uncertainty about the best means of survival for a community caught between otherness-as-annihilation in Goa, and otherness-as-protection in Cochin.

From a Levinassian standpoint, however, ‘self’-defense is only achievable by resisting Haman’s already-doomed final solution to the fact of the Other. This is because the separate existence of the self is predicated on the existence of the Other, which alone guarantees the disruption of a totality in which the self too is fully absorbed. Colin Davis puts it neatly: “Alterity constitutes the grounds which make separation possible; the self exists because the Other is irreconcilable with it”.³⁸ In narrative terms, although he never realises it, it is Haman’s encounter with Mordecai that renders possible any experience he has as an identifiable subject—including the spontaneity of his לֵב טוֹב (*tov leb*, “good of heart”)!³⁹

By re-inscribing the difference of the community for whom the translation is made, the scribe of MA ultimately draws back from repeating Haman’s fatal error, and defends the collective ‘othered self’ from the death of absorption into an undifferentiated totality. But the threat to the othered self is complex, and not so easily averted. In summarising Levinas on this question, Davis might easily have been speaking from the narrative point of view of Haman:

In the face to face, the Other gives my freedom meaning because I am confronted with real choices between responsibility and obligation towards the Other, or hatred and violent repudiation. The Other invests me with genuine freedom, and will be the beneficiary or victim of how I decide to exercise it.⁴⁰

In our post-Holocaust context, it would be unthinkable to suggest that a costly but noble otherness is somehow its own reward. No, the ‘ethical’

³⁸Davis, *Levinas*, 44.

³⁹Philosophically speaking, it is the structural possibility of that encounter which makes possible all other experience as self (see *ibid.*, 45). Israel’s codification of respect for the stranger carries an explicit awareness of its own alienation (e.g. Deut 24:17-21). Thus there is a sense in which the particular mixture of justice and goodness (*rahamim*) which, for Levinas, constitutes Jewishness (*Nine talmudic readings*, 28) is at once an act of worship (“The respect for the stranger and the sanctification of the Eternal are strangely equivalent”, *ibid.*) and a means self-defence.

⁴⁰Davis, *Levinas*, 49.

here belongs solely with the self who encounters that which risks being not self, not I. But Mordecai's unyielding presence as stranger within the gate serves to represent that otherness by which alone the self can know itself as such; an indelible narrative mark which neither Haman, nor the scribe of MA can fully, safely, or responsibly erase.