

Article

“Right on, Vashti!”: Minor Characters and Performance Choices in the Synagogal Megillah Reading

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Abstract: Every Purim, synagogues read the biblical Book of Esther aloud in liturgy, a tradition that exemplifies how synagogue performance practices elaborate on, revise, and refine minor characters in the text. This paper studies four such minor characters in performance from the second century to the present: Haman’s sons, Zeresh, Harbona, and Vashti. These characters evince ways in which performance practices of biblical texts construct moral and psychological assessments of characters in the story, through the interaction of audience, performer, text, and liturgical framing. Further, biblical characters are performed differently in ways which parallel textual interpretation of biblical texts as well as changing social trends and values. In performance, the narrative-critical work of characterization comes alive.

Keywords: biblical performance criticism; performance criticism; Book of Esther; megillah; Purim; minor characters; Haman; Vashti; narrative criticism



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1. Introduction

In performance, characters come alive. When telling a narrative, a performer embodies textual characters by enacting their speeches, bodily movements, and displays of emotion. The way such embodiment happens depends on the performance genre: for example, ancient Roman conventions of political oratory and theatre differed greatly.¹ Yet as Schechner quips, “Performances exist only as actions, interactions, and relationships” (Schechner and Brady 2013). The meanings in a performance event are found not just in the performers’ choices. Rather, characters are constructed in the meaning-making that happens in the interactions between audience, text, performers, and situation (Perry 2019; Iverson 2021; Hearon 2014). Performers and audiences collaborate to interpret the text in real time.

Here, I show how performers and audiences interpret biblical characters through a look at how performance traditions of the Book of Esther in synagogue liturgy flesh out, script, and embody minor characters: Haman’s sons, Harbona, Zeresh, and Vashti. Though the biblical text itself treats these bit players as mere narrative props for the main characters’ story, performance traditions embellish the script and embody them in diverse ways. Further, the ways synagogue performances depict these characters parallel broader theological and political issues from which Jewish communities use this biblical text to engage. Performance reveals the fact that narrative criticism is inseparable from the real readers who inevitably bring their own lenses to ancient texts.

The Book of Esther provides a wide array of minor characters, figures relatively ignored in the text who sometimes grow in reception, including in performance (Grossman 2012; Branch and Jordaan 2009). Jewish tradition almost unanimously loves the heroes (Esther, Mordecai) and hates the villain (Haman). But minor characters provide more varying examples of characterization in performance. Such characters—the servants, soldiers, messengers, and, most often, the women—typically remain unnamed and exist only as the ‘supporting cast’ for the main characters’ stories.² As Reinhartz writes:

The ways in which we construct anonymous characters, delight in, or deplore the contrast or coherence between role designations, and engage with the permeability of personal identity involve us in the text as more than innocent bystanders. In allowing ourselves the freedom to engage the characters and bring them into proximity with others and with ourselves, we not only construct their identities but also our own. (Reinhartz 1998, p. 91)

These minor figures are underdetermined by the text, which allows readers to fill in the narrative gaps in ways that engage their own interests. While formalist narrative criticism tends to ignore these figures, the narrative-critical ‘turn to the reader’ emphasizes that readers co-construct characters in dialogue with the text—allowing for readers’ empathy, imagination, and diverse but valid interpretations (Rüggemeier and Shively 2021; Dinkler 2019). While none of these minor figures in Esther ever becomes major in Jewish tradition, they do grow larger.

2. Characterizing the Synagogal Esther Performance Tradition

In his survey of biblical performance criticism, Peter Perry argues that current research needs more “specific descriptions of ancient performances” (Perry 2016, pp. 158–59). Esther provides a useful case study for this task. Every year, during the springtime month of Adar, Jews traditionally celebrate Purim, a carnivalesque holiday on which Jews feast, drink, and listen to the oral performance of this humorous biblical text in synagogue. The Book of Esther (or just “the megillah” in Jewish tradition) is performed liturgically in synagogue every Purim—an observance suggested by the text (9:28) and described as early as the Mishnah (c. 200 CE; m. Meg. 1:1). We can thus speak of a synagogal tradition of the Esther performance, first articulated in late antique sources and continuing to the present.³

Three main sources provide data on the synagogal Esther performance tradition. First, sources used in Jewish law (*halakhah*), such as the Mishnah, the Jerusalem Talmud, and the Babylonian Talmud, attest to late antique practices and debates. Medieval law codes and responsa (individual rabbinic legal opinions) attest to the fixed and mandated aspects of Purim observance—though Jewish movements since the eighteenth century vary widely in how they keep these traditions. Such sources attest to both practices mandated by binding law (*halakhah*) and non-binding customs observed by particular communities (*minhag*). Second, some written sources of biblical interpretation, such as *targumim* (late antique Aramaic biblical translations) and *piyyutim* (liturgical poems), reflect synagogue performance to varying degrees. Most importantly for performance, the lockdowns mandated by COVID-19 led many synagogues to livestream, record, and post their communal Purim celebrations. I watched six such recordings from 2020 to 2022 (see Appendix A). I avoided recordings of services fully on Zoom, with no in-person communal component; while Zoom is a performance space, I wanted to see audience–performer interactions and the use of physical space and staging in ways which reflect typical Jewish practice.⁴ That said, the videos largely focus on the performers, and reveal less about audience responses beyond what can be heard. These recordings do not represent how all Jews today celebrate Purim: all are American, and none are Orthodox. But they do provide fascinating windows into performance choices.

Rabbinic sources, past and present, explain how Esther is to be performed in Purim. Every Jew must listen to the Book of Esther being read in a communal setting (y. Meg. 1:1, b. Meg. 2b), once by night and once by day (b. Meg. 4a), in order (m. Meg. 2:1). It is traditionally chanted (cf. b. Meg 32a), though less liturgically traditional or informed communities may merely read the Hebrew. Though rabbinic law is clear that Esther must be read from a written scroll (y. Meg. 4:1:9; b. Meg. 19a), some level of memorization is required since the *te’amim* (cantillation marks) and vowels are not in the liturgical scroll.⁵ At various times, communities have abbreviated the reading: the Babylonian Talmud records a debate over how much of the text needs to be read to fulfill the obligation (m. Meg. 2:3; b. Meg. 19a), and some communities omit Esther 8–9 due to its violence (Boeckler n.d.). The reading can be done by one person or by a group of readers taking turns, as in all the

videos I watched; it is not impossible that multiple readers could perform simultaneously (b. Meg. 21b). Unlike with Torah reading, the megillah can be interrupted (m. Meg. 2:2). Traditionally, only men could read the megillah to the whole community (m. Meg. 4:5–6), though this has changed dramatically in recent decades (Kresh 2014; Homrighausen 2023). Further, the reader may stand or sit (m. Meg. 4:1).⁶ Over the centuries, various customs have arisen around the megillah reading, such as certain verses read more loudly or quietly, more quickly or slowly, or chanted in a different tune (Jacobson 2017; Beer 2018; Boeckler n.d.; Birnbaum [1891] 1976).

Liturgical performance of the megillah theologically frames the biblical text in what Elsie Stern describes as “the synagogue Bible” (Stern 2012). The synagogue Bible includes paratexts, choices of lections, and performance choices, such as translation. Rabbinic sources specify blessings to be read with the megillah (b. Meg. 21b; Mass. Sof. 14:4–7), which emphasize miracles and divine deliverance in the Purim story. Other biblical texts are chanted alongside Esther, concerning the commandment to blot out the memory of Amalek (Deut 25:17–19 in m. Meg. 3:4; Exod 17:8–16 in m. Meg. 3:6; 1 Sam 15:1–34 in b. Meg. 30a). Beginning in late antiquity, liturgical poems (*piyyutim*) were written for Purim, which may have been inserted before, during, and/or after the reading.⁷ These paratexts emphasize a deeper narrative: Jews as an eternally persecuted minority who must find creative means to survive—diplomacy or violence. The synagogue Bible’s framing of Esther also emphasizes God as the one who saves and enacts vengeance.

Audience experiences of the megillah reading vary depending on how well congregants understand the language in which the megillah is being read. Though the megillah is traditionally read aloud in Hebrew, Jewish law has allowed for vernacular reading since late antiquity, instead of or in addition to the Hebrew. If Esther is translated orally as it is read, the translation is usually read by a different person to distinguish between the Hebrew original and the Aramaic translation.⁸ These translations begin with the Greek Esthers, and, between the fifth and ninth centuries CE, Aramaic translations created for vernacular reading and synagogal use. Both the Greek and Aramaic Esthers greatly expand the text, present God explicitly at work in the story, and depict Jewish characters as Torah-observant in a way not seen in the Masoretic text.⁹ Though extant written targums do not flatly transcribe late antique oral performances in late antique synagogues, especially in the case of Esther, they still reflect oral delivery. In the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue and B’nai Israel Esther performances, Hebrew and English alternate: in the former, different readers choose to either read the English or the Hebrew, and in the latter, each chapter is first chanted in Hebrew then read aloud in English. Since the mass printing of Bibles enabled by moveable type, congregants who do not know the Hebrew can follow along silently from a copy of the megillah in translation.

Starting as early as the sixteenth century, Ashkenazi Jewish communities also wrote Purimspiels, vernacular plays that parody the Book of Esther or other biblical narratives (Rozik 2013; Freedman 2011; Belkin 1999). Historically, such plays were performed separately from the megillah reading, often in settings such as private homes (Belkin 2009). In recent decades, however, some communities have brought them into the liturgy, interspersing Purimspiel scenes between sections of the megillah (Freedman 2011, pp. 102–3). In several Purim recordings studied in this article, community members also interjected musical numbers or comedic skits between chapters of the biblical text. Such comic interludes bring out the drama of the story, ‘translate’ it for audience members who do not understand the Hebrew, and likely help audience members (especially children) pay attention.

Visual and material aspects of the performance also add to its meaning. Traditionally, the scroll itself is part of the visual display of the reading: its handling, its unrolling, its symbolic value.¹⁰ Visualizations of Esther on painted on synagogue walls are also part of its performance, such as the Purim panel at the third-century Dura-Europos synagogue in modern-day Syria (Fine 2005). For a modern parallel, the Hebrew Educational Association megillah reading incorporates a slideshow of Esther-related internet memes that mock the

pretentious and evil enemies of the Jews and relate the story to current events.¹¹ Furthermore, in many communities, it is customary to wear costumes and masks to heighten the sense that Purim is an alternate world in which one can express and enact ideas and desires that are verboten the rest of the year. Even in traditional Jewish communities, in which gender separation permeates communal life, men dress up as women for Purim and play-act women in Purimspiels (Ben-Lulu 2018; Fishbane 2018). Such tongue-in-cheek gender-bending makes for good comedy, especially around villainous women, such as Vashti and Zeresh.

Audience response forms an essential part of the synagogal Esther reading. A very popular and old tradition is for the audience to make loud noises to drown out the name of Haman, the Jews' enemy, every time the cantor reads it.¹² In some communities, the congregation repeats verses after the reader chants them to emphasize their significance (Beer 2018). Some Jewish communities encourage drinking on Purim (Fishbane 2018, pp. 79–90; Rappeld 1998). For them, the nighttime reading of the megillah may feel very different from the morning reading!

Although the synagogal megillah performance tradition largely parallels the Torah reading tradition, it is generally laxer and allows for more creative license and theatricality (Summit (2016). See also description in Ben-Lulu (2018, p. 146)). This freedom extends to performers and audience alike. Performers often heighten the drama of narrative moments by reading narrative discourse in a different voice. In the Romemu service, the reader for chapter 4 performs the first verse about the Jews' mourning the genocidal decree in a slow, pained voice. Performers can also dramatize characters by embodying them in different voices and body language (*ethopoieia*). (Lieber 2023, pp. 230–88) One journalist describes a megillah reader:

Cash acts out the different roles when she reads, using different voices for each character. She sang me a few sample lines of text. Her Esther sings in a girlish soprano, while Haman's voice is aggressive and scratchy and Ahasuerus sounds dopey.¹³

This technique can be seen in the Romemu service's reading of chapter 3. The reader, while chanting the Hebrew text, swaps hats to switch characters, and pantomimes some of the actions, such as Mordecai refusing to bow (3:2). To visualize Haman's desire to kill the Jews, he dons his Haman hat and holds a fake gun up to a star of David in his other hand. In the B'nai Israel performance of chapter 4, the reader pantomimes crying as the Jews mourn their imminent death under Haman's decree. Other times, performers interject. In the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue service, the English reader interjects that Esther went before the king "in her Gucci dress." In the Reform Temple of Forest Hills service, a puppeteer interrupts the cantor throughout chapter 2 with a puppet of Mordecai attempting to talk to the cantor.

Biblical scholars are trained to separate layers of tradition, such as texts, translations, commentaries, and interpretive traditions. But the synagogal megillah reading blurs the boundaries between biblical text, liturgical paratexts, and performance choices. For most premodern Jews, when literacy was lower and books scarcer, the synagogue Bible *was* the Bible. In the twenty-first century, many communities still pour immense energy, creativity, and time into performing the megillah at Purim.

3. The Sons of Haman

Perhaps the earliest elaborations on minor characters in the synagogal Esther performance are traditions around the sons of Haman. These figures do next to nothing in the biblical text itself yet become a site of mockery and playfulness in the performance. The performance of Haman's sons highlights the importance of audience responses in creating characterization.

In the Book of Esther, the sons of Haman appear solely to die alongside other enemies of the Jews (9:7–9). Because they are killed in the first skirmish, they do not seem to be innocent bystanders, but Jew-haters along with their father.¹⁴ By naming them in a list,

the narrator paints them as faceless and anonymous, like the palace courtiers (1:10, 1:14). Given that these sons do nothing and receive no individual treatment, it is odd that their individual names appear in the text at all—especially since biblical narratives often omit names of characters who display far more individual characterization and agency than these ten sons (Reinhartz 1998). Their names must serve a purpose. In this case, it is comedy: these multisyllabic Persian names sound odd to the Hebrew ear (Berlin 2001; Radday 1990). After being killed (9:10), they are then hung (9:14), as a shame for them and perhaps a warning to others.

The synagogal performance of Esther mocks these men and their names. The Palestinian Talmud records a tradition: “The names of the ten sons of Haman and ‘ten’ must be recited in one breath” (y. Meg. 3:8). The recitation of these names would stand out for the synagogue audience. The names sound quite foreign to a Hebrew or Aramaic ear, and many have more syllables than a typical Hebraic biblical name. The Babylonian Talmud explains the custom: “For what reason? Their souls all departed together” (b. Meg. 16b). This comment emphasizes the miracle that all ten sons died at the same time—just another of the extreme coincidences in the story of Purim. A medieval midrashic compilation on Esther, the *Lekach Tov* compiled by Tobias ben Eliezer (c. 1100) clarifies:

All these names, the reader of the megillah must pronounce in one breath, and must speak the *vav* of Vaizatha with elongation, just as the *vav* of Vaizatha is written elongated; thus “and he shall be impaled on it” (Ezra 6:11), because all of them were impaled on one pole.¹⁵

The sons’ names are recited in one breath to emphasize that they all died at once from their wickedness. This practice develops these characters beyond the biblical text and removes any doubt that they deserved to die. Some congregations even join in chanting these names (Birnbaum [1891] 1976, pp. 99–100; Beer 2018, pp. 25–26). In his guidebook for cantors, Joshua Jacobson writes that

Before beginning to read these verses, the *ba’al kerī’ah* [cantor] takes a deep breath. It is customary to read the twenty-one words which include these ten names and the following word (עשרת[“ten”]) before taking another breath! For that reason, most *ba’aley kerī’ah* [cantors] will read these twenty-one words quite fast, even chanting them on a monotone rather than taking the time to articulate the proper *te’amim* [cantillation tropes]. (Jacobson 2017, p. 661)

Cantors mark these names as odd not only by reading them in one rapid breath, but by suspending the musical quality of chant entirely. Perhaps, the cantor suggests, these men do not deserve beautiful chant!

This aural focus on Haman’s sons most likely stems from the well-known practice of audience participation of booing or jeering every time Haman’s name is mentioned in the recitation of the scroll, a fulfillment of the commandment to “blot out the name of Amalek” (Exod 17:14).¹⁶ Both Talmuds attest to some kind of verbal curse of Haman. The Babylonian Talmud records an infamous tradition that one should become so intoxicated on Purim that one cannot tell the difference between “cursed be Haman” and “blessed be Mordecai” (b. Meg. 7b). The Jerusalem Talmud connects cursing Haman to cursing his sons:

Rav said, “One has to say, ‘Haman be cursed, his sons be cursed.’” Rabbi Phineas said, “One has to say, ‘May Harbona be remembered for good.’” (y. Meg. 3:8; cf. Mass. Sof. 14:3)

Neither source explains who does the cursing or at what point in the service. Cursing Haman’s sons may relate to Purim intoxication, a custom which rabbinic authority and popular custom has alternately condoned or condemned across Jewish history and cultures (Fishbane 2018, pp. 79–90; Rappeld 1998). Given how late in the scroll the ten sons of Haman appear—the ninth chapter!—one suspects that those hearing the megillah while drunk might be fairly plastered by this time. Drunkenness may beget mockery and gaiety. From a narrative-critical perspective, this performance tradition further cements the

impression that Haman's sons are not so much independent characters as accessories to their father—and to his crimes. In the conventions of Roman theatre, we can imagine them portrayed as stereotyped characters with one fixed emotion (Shiner 2003, pp. 90–92).

While reading Haman's sons differently is constant in Jewish history, performers and audiences vary in how they perform it and the meanings they ascribe to it. Some suggest rage, as in one Purim service in 1930s Berlin: "Never had I heard such applause in a synagogue when the names of Haman's ten sons were read, describing their hanging from the gallows... Every time we read 'Haman' the people heard 'Hitler' and the noise was deafening." (Quoted in Horowitz 2006). Another option: comedy. All ten drawing their last breaths in unison is outlandish enough to seem comical. Cantors can 'ham it up' to make body humor of the deep breaths and rapid recitation required to say the names in one breath. In the Romemu performance, the reader dramatically paused before the ten names, read them in a rapid monotone, and received cheers, laughter, and applause when finishing. A third option has emerged more recently: a desire to read through them quickly to downplay the Jews' violence in the story, which some Jews have rejected in recent decades. The rapid reading of the names reminds hearers that one should *not* gloat over the deaths of their enemies.¹⁷ In the Stephen Wise Free Synagogue performance, before the reading, a rabbi explains the meaning of the grogger (a noisemaking device used whenever Haman's name is read); his explanation suggests a certain discomfort with the custom's history.

While Haman's sons are barely present in the biblical text, in performance they come alive in the history of Purim—even as they are assimilated closely to their father. They can become the target of rage, gaiety, or discomfort at Jewish fantasies of violence. This spectrum of responses can coexist in one audience. Just as narrative-critical readers of the Bible emphasize the significance of diverse readers and diverse readings, the meanings ascribed to liturgical acts need not be uniform throughout the congregation.

4. Zeresh

Like her sons, Zeresh is mostly assimilated to Haman both in the biblical text and its performance. Unlike her sons, the biblical narrator records her speech. Performers can thus embody her character via speech and gesture. Purim performance, like Jewish textual traditions, typically mock her. However, some performance traditions depict her more sympathetically as Haman's victim rather than accomplice.

In the biblical text, Zeresh appears explicitly only twice. The first time, Haman returns to his home, angry that Mordecai will not bow to him. He sends for his friends "and Zeresh his wife" (5:10), to whom he recounts his great prestige, his many sons, his wealth, the honor of being invited to dine privately with the king and queen—and the fact that all he cares about is Mordecai refusing to honor him. Zeresh and Haman's friends advise him to "Make a tall tree, fifty cubits, and in the morning speak to the king and let Mordecai be hung up on it, and go with the king to the drinking party rejoicing" (5:14, my translation). The Hebrew syntax suggests that Zeresh serves as chief advisor in this scene. She comes off as "a woman who is determined, brutal, and devoid of scruples," a moral match for her husband (Macchi 2019). Zeresh tells Haman what to do, which is ironic in light of the Persian elite men's concern that every man is supposed to run his own home (Day 2005, pp. 97–98). She validates his insecurity and rage, rather than providing wise counsel.

Even more ironic, when she next appears—after Haman is forced to lead Mordecai through the streets with honor—she and his wise friends warn him: "If from the seed of the Judeans is Mordecai, whom you have begun to fall before, you will not be able to overcome him, for you have already fallen before him" (6:13). In 5:14, Zeresh is the main agent telling Haman to build the gallows; in 6:13, the syntax suggests that the wise friends are the main advice-givers and she is less active. Her words echo other biblical Gentiles who predict Israel's victory over its enemies, such as Rahab (Josh 2:9–14).¹⁸ Perhaps she speaks more for the narrator than for herself: her words seem uncharacteristically insightful, and she does not explain why she says the Jews are undefeatable.¹⁹ If she knows so little of her

husband's genocidal plans that she did not even know he was targeting the Jews, then she seems ridiculously ignorant. By contrast, Day finds her more sympathetic, one no longer willing to "play the role of the 'good wife'" (Day 2005, p. 113). The text does not specify her fate. Was she executed along with her sons (9:7–10)? Was she handed over to become property of Esther, with the rest of Haman's house (8:1)? Day reads Zeresh through a feminist lens as another victim of her husband. But the narrative does not itself seem to cue the reader into caring for her, given that the reader is not told what happens to her (Day 2005, p. 129).

Classical sources vary in how they treat Zeresh (Kadari 1999; Bronner 1995). At times she is unsympathetic, an adulteress with many lovers.²⁰ Other sources depict her as wise—though is it sagacity or devious cleverness?²¹ One targum tells us her fate: she fled and was reduced to begging.²² It is not clear whether this fate should elicit pity or *schadenfreude*.

Late antique performers fleshed out Zeresh's characterization by embodying her character like an actor (*ethopoieia*) (Lieber 2023, pp. 234–37). and through adding longer speeches to her brief biblical utterances (*prosopoeia*) (Lieber 2023, pp. 230–88; Shiell 2004, pp. 89–90, 170–79). The targums elaborate on her praise of the Jews, placing a lengthy recounting of Jewish history in her mouth in which she recalls many times when Jews prevailed against their enemies.²³ We can imagine a performer rendering this as a sudden change of heart on her end—or for comedic effect, like Balaam's talking ass (Num 22:28–30). One late antique piyyut both narrates Zeresh's grief at her sons' death and voices her sorrow in her own words (Lieber (2018, pp. 109–12). See discussion in Münz-Manor (2012)). Each stanza ends with the refrain: "Alas for her, for what happened to her/for the fate of her son X," with each stanza ending with a different son. At the end of the poem, she kills herself. Lieber reckons this poem "emotionally complicated," with Zeresh a "strikingly sympathetic, tragic figure"—yet, as she wonders, "it could have been delivered in tones ranging from ambivalently compassionate to unironically gleeful." In this poem, Zeresh presents herself as Haman's victim. The performer's delivery of the poem would impact whether the audience sympathizes with her claim of victimhood or mocks it. Just as many interpreters read the biblical Book of Esther as rife with irony—the narrator saying one thing and hinting at another—so these paratexts suggest a tongue-in-cheek quality to how some performers portray Zeresh (O'Connor 2003).

Other performance traditions around Zeresh are much less ambiguous. Some audiences respond "Cursed is Zeresh" after the megillah reading or to make noise at the name of Zeresh, building on the cursing and noise-making mentioned above in connection with Haman and his sons.²⁴ Cantor and scholar of Jewish liturgy Annette Boeckler explains: "Haman's wife, Zeresh, was as bad as he was; for the sake of egalitarianism some make noise when mentioning her name, as well." (Boeckler n.d.; Jacobson 2017, pp. 660–61). Contemporary performers at times embody her character through changes in voice and body language when they voice her words. The Hebrew Educational Association reader for chapter 5—a man in costume as a woman—imitates her in an annoyingly nasal voice. The B'nai Israel readers make her loud and whiny in both 5:14 and 6:13. In the latter, although the Hebrew syntax of 6:13 suggests that Haman's friends were the primary speakers of the advice to build gallows, the performer erases them and makes Zeresh the sole speaker of that line—thus enlarging her role. Further, the B'nai Israel performance features a musical interlude between the chanting of chapters 5 and 6. In the song, a duet between Zeresh and Haman, she fully endorses his plan—"Have yourself some fun!"—and his assessment of the Jews—"They're disturbed!" This Zeresh woman is just as wicked as her husband.

From this brief data, it seems that Zeresh in the biblical text is a kind of 'initial draft' that readers, performers, and hearers can elaborate on, refine, and revise.²⁵ The performer of targum or piyyut can choose how they enact the script—how they depict Zeresh. Other times, audiences characterize her through their engaged replies. In performance, Zeresh fluctuates between good and evil, between flat wicked stereotype and complex sympathetic figure. These fluctuations may correlate with different attitudes towards gender,

power, and victimhood. Performers embody her speech to characterize her, to dramatize her—and perhaps, to ironically poke fun at her even while seeming to sympathize with her.

5. Harbona

Compared to Zeresh, Harbona's character is even scarcer in the text. In performance, he becomes more prominent—and more praised.

Harbona only appears twice in the Book of Esther. He is one of seven courtiers sent to bring Vashti before the king (1:10); the word used to describe these courtiers, *saris*, is often translated as “eunuch” but the term is not quite that specific.²⁶ Biblical narrators typically omit royal servants' names, so including his name reveals the storyteller's intentional choice (Reinhartz 1998). The intent may be humor: as with the names of Haman's sons, Berlin notes that “the sound of the multisyllabic, foreign-sounding names is amusing” (Berlin 2001, p. 85). Harbona underscores the king's lack of agency: he cannot even summon his own wife for himself (Bechtel 2002, p. 23). In his first appearance, he is not an independent character—just one of a pack of courtiers.

Harbona disappears until 7:9, when he returns as an individual acting on his own: he gives Ahasuerus the idea to hang Haman upon his own gallows. The narrator does not explain why Harbona jumped in at this crucial moment: Did he detect which way the king's favor had swayed and wished to ingratiate himself? Perhaps he favored Esther and was working on her behalf in the palace intrigues, as Hathach may have (4:5–9) (Levenson 1997). He could have known that Haman was technically innocent of the crime Ahasuerus accuses—trying to sleep with Esther—since he seems to have been in the palace courtyard during Ahasuerus's garden stroll. Does he hasten Haman's hanging to prevent him from defending himself and reentering the king's favor? The narrator does not ask or pry.

Synagogue performance renders Harbona as a morally positive character. In the Jerusalem Talmud, in the same passage that discusses the names of Haman's sons, the text continues: “Rebbi Phineas said, one has to say, ‘May Harbona be remembered for good’” (y. Meg. 3:8). This source does not clarify where the saying “May Harbona be remembered for good” is placed in the performance. Some Ashkenazi traditions insert it after the singing of the piyyut *Shoshanat Ya'akov* after the megillah reading, along with the congregational response “Cursed be Zeresh” (Hammer 2005, pp. 220–21). None of the Purim performances I watched elaborated on Harbona in any other way.

In Purim liturgy, the morally ambiguous and minor Harbona becomes the model of a righteous Gentile who risks himself to help the Jews. If Haman and his family's names are to be blotted out, Harbona's name is to be remembered and for good. Why does Harbona receive such praise? Other classical Jewish sources depict him negatively.²⁷ My gut feeling: many Jews see themselves in Harbona. He first appears as a face in a crowd, one of a comical crowd of funnily-named courtiers—then unexpectedly speaks his mind and individuates himself. Like Esther and Mordecai, he refuses to assimilate and risks his life to be a true individual in a foreign palace.

6. Vashti

Vashti's treatment in Jewish thought has changed a great deal in recent times. While I found no evidence of premodern synagogal performance traditions around her, Jewish textual tradition has by and large characterized her as immoral and cruel. However, since the 1970s, some feminist Jewish thinkers have recast her as a victim. They have introduced new performance practices in how cantors narrate and embody her and how audiences respond to her. Like Zeresh, Vashti becomes a Rorschach test for Jewish understandings of gender, power, and victimhood.

The biblical text, contrary to later Jewish interpretation, provides no sense that Vashti did anything wrong in the narrator's eyes.²⁸ The king commands his attendants to bring her, not to request her presence (1:11); the narrator conditions the reader to discern Ahasuerus' evil intent by divulging that he was “glad of heart with wine.” The narrator does not psychologically explain or morally evaluate her action directly, only revealing through

dialogue that she has offended the king and, in his courtiers' eyes, all the men of Persia (1:16). This charge is so ludicrous that we might question whether the narrator intends readers to accept it at face value. Though the narrator avoids fleshing out Vashti's character or explaining her motives, he does indirectly characterize her through comparison with characters that are more explicitly described: the drunken king, the corrupt courtiers (Fox 2001, pp. 164–69). As with Harbona, her agency highlights the king's ironic powerlessness. When he punishes her, he implicitly admits that her act of defiance may empower other women (Beal 1999, pp. 12–14). At worst, Vashti is a stubborn and impolitic woman who is "motivated by sense of rank" (Fox 2001, pp. 164–70). At best, she might be called "prophetic" and proud of defying her husband (Day 2005, p. 43).

While traditional Jewish interpretation vilifies Vashti, some recent Jewish readers rehabilitate her reputation and claim her as a hero. Classical Jewish interpreters shame Vashti as a wicked queen whose punishment by Ahasuerus (and indirectly, by God) was right and just.²⁹ These traditions narrate that she degraded her Jewish maidservants by forcing them to work nude on Shabbat. Her lack of piety highlights the explicit piety that rabbinic readers see in Esther. By contrast, in 1976, Jewish feminist Mary Gendler proposed that "Vashti be reinstated on the throne along with her sister Esther," seeing the former as a source of "dignity, pride and independence" (Gendler 1976). For Gendler, the Esther as presented by much Jewish tradition is a flawed figure, a woman who chooses luxury over female empowerment. Vashti, by contrast, claims her bodily autonomy, says "no" to the king, and becomes a feminist hero. Rather than a victimizer, she is a fellow victim of Ahasuerus's patriarchal system.³⁰ Still, other readers, including some who identify as feminist, object that Vashti complies with and benefits from power structures that oppress minorities and women (Suskin 2007; Krisch 2018).

Feminist appropriation of Vashti generates new performance traditions. In the Hebrew Educational Alliance performance, a slideshow projects memes commenting on the story as it is chanted in Hebrew. The memes for Vashti clearly imagine her as a feminist hero (Figures 1–5), paralleling her with the #MeToo movement and women's marches. They suggest that Vashti is no oppressor of other women, but one who "compar[es] notes with the other women in the king's herem" with whom she stands in solidarity (Figure 1). They lampoon Ahasuerus via Mel Brooks' depiction of King Louis XVI in *A History of the World, Part I*, pairing Ahasuerus's disturbing search for a queen with the French monarch's lecherous "It's good to be the king!" catchphrase (Figure 5). Similarly, in a musical duet performed between chapters 1 and 2 of the B'nai Israel reading, Vashti refuses Ahasuerus as she proclaims, "I suddenly am woke!" Ahasuerus, for his part, boasts of his desire for a woman who is merely pretty, obedient, and "not insane."³¹ On the audience side, feminist ritual innovators have created a Vashti flag to be waved celebrating her name when it is read in the megillah (Cohen 2002). In one Reform synagogue's Purim I attended in 2020, the audience was instructed to cheer "Right on, Vashti!" whenever her name was read.

Like Zeresh, Vashti may arouse different emotions and characterizations in a diverse audience. One audience member might love her. Another might revile her. Their views will, in part, derive from the performers' choices. All can be faithful to the narrative—they merely apply different scripts and values to it. In one script, she is an enemy of the Jews, no different from the Persian men of the palace in vanity or avarice. In another, Vashti is neither a Jew nor an oppressor of the Jews—but she is oppressed by patriarchy, making her Esther's Gentile ally who chooses a different strategy of empowerment. Like Zeresh, she can be read as a woman who suffers from men's bad decisions. However, it is much easier to make Vashti a Gentile feminist hero than Zeresh. Zeresh's cruelty to Jews is in the biblical text while Vashti's only appears in postbiblical Jewish traditions. In both text and performance, Vashti perfectly exemplifies that these minor characters are initial drafts that readers build on and flesh out.



Figure 1. Hebrew Educational Alliance Purim Performance. Used by permission from Hebrew Educational Alliance.

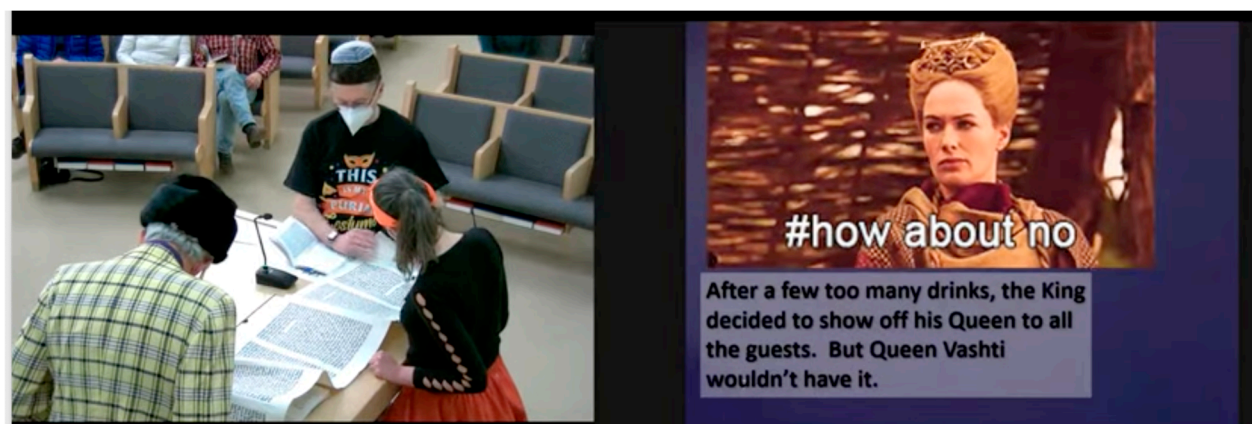


Figure 2. Hebrew Educational Alliance Purim Performance. Used by permission from Hebrew Educational Alliance.

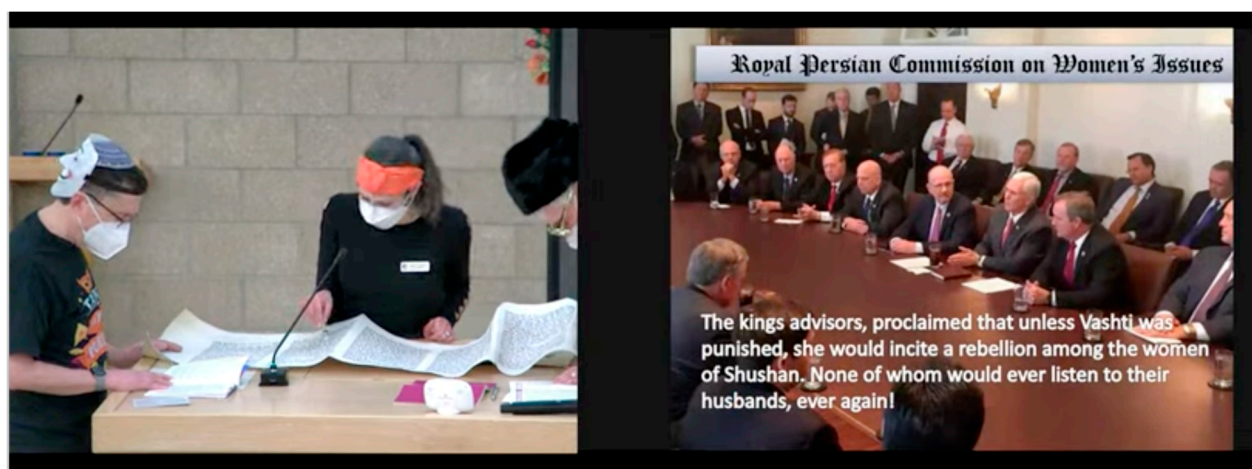


Figure 3. Hebrew Educational Alliance Purim Performance. Used by permission from Hebrew Educational Alliance.



Figure 4. Hebrew Educational Alliance Purim Performance. Used by permission from Hebrew Educational Alliance.

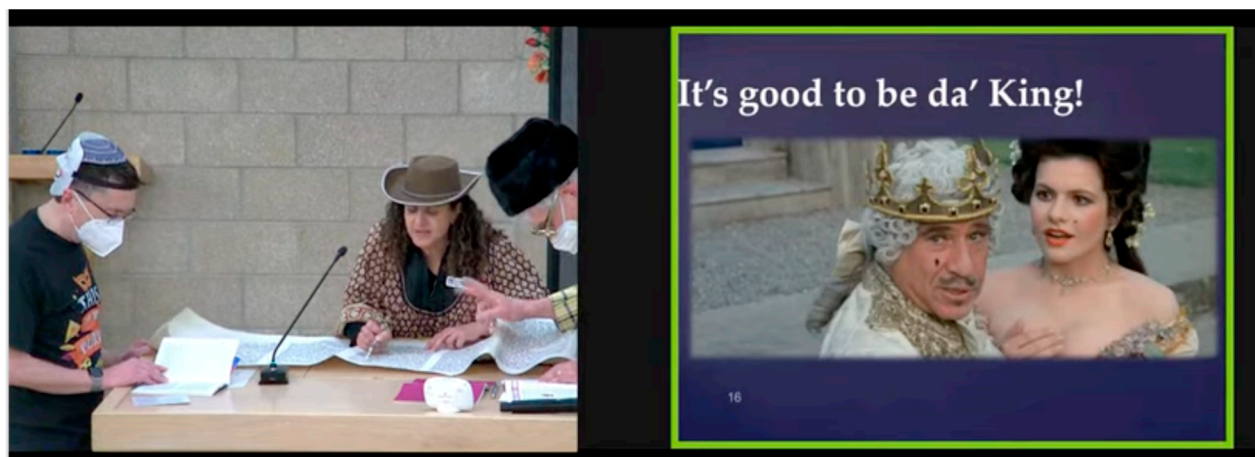


Figure 5. Hebrew Educational Alliance Purim Performance. Used by permission from Hebrew Educational Alliance.

7. Conclusions

As scholar of Jewish liturgy Laura Lieber writes: “A script is merely an artifact until a performer brings it to life... it is performance that gives the narrative life and the characters voices and bodies” (Lieber 2015). Far from the stereotype of the scholar as a solitary reader discerning the truth of written texts, acts of interpretation in performance are dialogical and messy. Traditions around Haman’s sons and Vashti suggest that audiences need not agree on how they morally evaluate and psychologically understand biblical characters and the performance practices treating those characters. Zeresch shows how performers invoke irony and ambiguity in the gap between what the text says, what paratexts say, and how both are voiced and embodied. By contrast, Harbona suggests that, at times, morally ambiguous characters are made into simplistic good guys. All of these performance traditions reveal how performance traditions can make minor characters into jumbo shrimp, if not whales. In real performance events, performances and audiences make choices regarding characterization, treating the biblical figures as ‘initial drafts’. Changing foci and views on these characters in turn reflect the broader scripts that performers and readers bring to the book itself and to its larger questions. In performance, characters and characterization alike come alive.

As a coda, I suggest that the way I employ performance criticism can relieve a major issue in the subfield: the dearth of evidence for performance traditions in ancient Israel. Biblical scholars, like all ancient historians, try to grasp the long-gone past. We hope to reimagine and reconstruct. Proceeding from the assumption that “oral performance was

the original foundation for written texts of Scripture,” performance critics seek to, in the words of Jeanette Mathews, “get behind the written script to analyze the whole performance event and not just the aspects that have been transmitted in written composition” (Mathews 2020).

Yet as a Hebrew Bible scholar dipping his toes into this New Testament-dominated subfield, I rapidly became discouraged: we simply lack the quantity of data for performance cultures in ancient Israel that we have for the cultural matrix of early Christ-followers within Second Temple Judaism and the Greco-Roman world.³² To know how ancient Israelites translated written tradition to oral performance, we must know about Israelite performance practices, traditions, and spaces. Unfortunately, we know quite little (Miller 2015, 2011). When Giles and Doan (2008) explain that “just as a playwright’s script gives clues about the actual performance of the play, so too, clues of oral presentation and performance remain embedded in the Hebrew Bible,” we must ask: How do we know we are discerning the right clues? How do we know we are interpreting them correctly? Such persistent and basic methodological issues cannot be ignored. And while I affirm performance as a mode of creative scholarship, it is not historical reconstruction. Jeanette Mathews’ staging of Esther as a pantomime, for example, is imaginative, funny, and should be staged in a Purim service (Mathews 2023). But it is a different kind of project. She does “not aim to reproduce a drama as it may have played out in ancient Israel.”³³

I suggest that we turn from re-imagining performance in ancient Israel, or performance ‘behind’ the text, or ‘original’ performance, and instead turn to performance as a mode of reception. Indeed, Peter Perry argues that one of the biggest lacks in current performance criticism is “specific descriptions of ancient performances” (Perry 2016, pp. 158–59). Late antique Jewish sources provide a large amount of data for these descriptions, as do contemporary videos. Let us take up the challenge.

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Appendix A

1. Romemu; Renewal; New York, NY; 2022; accessed on 13 March 2023; https://youtu.be/tR_SBuCFhaE
2. Hebrew Educational Alliance; Conservative; Denver, CO; 2022; accessed on 13 March 2023; <https://www.youtube.com/live/GPF9YxfAdAY>
3. Congregation B’nai Israel; Conservative; Tustin, CA; 2022; accessed on 13 March 2023; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N3UAQX_Y9VA
4. B’nai Jeshurun; unaffiliated; New York, NY; 2020; accessed on 13 March 2023; <https://www.youtube.com/live/sjdCgC5uDYI>
5. Stephen Wise Free Synagogue; Reform; New York, NY; 2022; accessed on 13 March 2023; <https://fb.watch/kUFgbl8j8l/>
6. Reform Temple of Forest Hills; Reform; Forest Hills, NY; 2022; accessed on 13 March 2023; <https://www.youtube.com/live/-sQLdzwGe50>

Notes

- ¹ Perry (2016), for example, divides New Testament scholars into those who see earliest Christian communities' oral performances of Gospel traditions as fundamentally dramatic, akin to Roman theatre, and those who see early Christian performance as more staid and formal akin to lectors reading literary texts at elite private gatherings. On different Greco-Roman performance genres and venues as they might apply to Jewish and Christian performances of biblical traditions in the Roman world, see Nässelqvist (2016); Shiell (2004); Shiner (2003); Lieber (2023).
- ² Reinhartz (1998); Hens-Piazza (2020). See also the fall 2022 issue of *The Journal for Interdisciplinary Biblical Studies* on "Unnamed and Uncredited: Anonymous Figures in the Biblical World."
- ³ Scholars have applied performance studies to Purim celebrations, but generally, they focus on the meals and festivities rather than the liturgical megillah reading. See Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1990); Epstein (1987, 1994, 1995); Shoham (2014); Levine (2020).
- ⁴ Jewish communities reacting to COVID-19's lockdowns discussed keenly the ways in which liturgy differed (Ben-Lulu 2021), as seen in the discussion of this issue in the Rabbinical Assembly's 2021 *teshuvah* (an answer to a question of Jewish law) on reading the megillah under COVID precautions (Reisner 2021).
- ⁵ On lectors needing to prepare to read a written text, see Shiner (2003, pp. 103–9). This 'reading' is thus also, in part, memorizing (Wollenberg 2017).
- ⁶ For a closer look at the significance of sitting and standing during the reading of the megillah and the sefer Torah, see Gray (2020). Some later halakhic codes rule that the reader must stand.
- ⁷ On piyyutim, especially for Purim, see, see Lieber (2010, 2018); Grossman (2019). Probably the most well-known *piyyut* for Purim today is *Shoshanat Ya'akov*; see Sacks (2009).
- ⁸ On the role of Targums in late antique liturgy, see Flesher and Chilton (2011); Graves (2007); Smelik (2007). On Esther specifically, see Smelik (2013); Flesher and Chilton (2011, pp. 297–302). Both surveys conclude that the texts under consideration are complex and disharmonious enough to suggest differences in how Esther translations were used liturgically across different Jewish communities in late antiquity. However, later medieval consensus favored allowing the vernacular: Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Megillah, 2.3–4. Evidence of medieval vernacular megillah reading can be found in Birnbaum (Birnbaum [1891] 1976, pp. 91–92).
- ⁹ On the Greek Esthers, see Boyd-Taylor (2015); Cavalier (2012). Helpful discussions on the theological foci of the Esther Targums can be found in Grossfeld (1991); Ego (2000); Flesher and Chilton (2011, pp. 246–52).
- ¹⁰ B. Meg. 19a; see also Metzger and Metzger (1988). On the iconicity of the scroll, see Homrighausen (forthcoming).
- ¹¹ On the role of visuals in Purim liturgy, see also Leitner Cohen (2022).
- ¹² On audience response in ancient performance traditions, see Lieber (2023, pp. 147–60); Shiner (2003, pp. 143–52). On drowning out Haman's name, see n. 39 below.
- ¹³ Kresh (2014). See also the Romemu service video, especially the readers for chapters 3 and 4.
- ¹⁴ Bechtel (2002). Here I disagree with Day, who suggests they may have been innocent (Day 2005).
- ¹⁵ Hebrew text found in Buber (1886). Translation mine. Tobias ben Eliezer's comment that "the *vav* of Vaizatha is written elongated" alludes to another tradition of word-image interplays in Esther scrolls around the sons of Haman, including illustrated megillot which elaborate a great deal on the hanging (Carruthers 2020).
- ¹⁶ This commandment has been instantiated in a dizzying variety of local customs, which have at times made Purim services raucous and loud (Golinkin 2011; Fishbane 2018; Sperber 1989). Other examples can be found in Kaplan (2023); Goodman (1964).
- ¹⁷ Beer (2018, p. 25); Klein (1979); Jacobs (1961). On Jewish discomfort with the violence of Purim, see especially the controversial Horowitz (2006).
- ¹⁸ See also Judg 5:20–21, 3 Macc 3:8–10 (Fox 2001).
- ¹⁹ Moore (1971); Beal (1999); Macchi (2019, p. 213). The Greek versions supply a reason for her statement: she declares that God is with Mordecai, so Haman will not prevail (6:13).
- ²⁰ *Panim Aherim* 72.
- ²¹ B. Meg. 16a; *EsthRabb* 9:2.
- ²² *TgRishon* 9:14.
- ²³ See both *TgRishon* and *TgSheni* on 5:14 and 6:13, as well as *Pirke de Rabbi Eliezer* 50:9.
- ²⁴ On "cursed be Zeresh": *Shulkhan Arukh*, *Orah Hayyim*, 690:16 (Hammer 2005). On blotting out Zeresh's name, see Golinkin (2011).
- ²⁵ I draw this language for interpreting minor characters from Gina Hens-Piazza, who employed it in a graduate seminar.
- ²⁶ "קריס," *DCH* 6:197–8; see also Tadmor (1995).
- ²⁷ *TgRishon* 1:10; *EsthRabb* 3:12, and other sources mentioned in (Merino 2002).
- ²⁸ Material from this paragraph and the next two is lightly modified from Homrighausen (2023, pp. 147–48).

- 29 See, e.g., b. Meg. 12b, and other sources mentioned in Shemesh (2002); Bronner (1995, pp. 188–90).
- 30 Other positive assessments of Vashti among Jews include Hammer (1997); Pollack (2018); Friedman (2018); Cohen (1996). See discussion in Sinensky (2020).
- 31 See also the Purimspiel described by Freedman (2011, pp. 111–12, 119–22).
- 32 The literature here is extensive. Perhaps the largest collection of data can be found in Wright (2017). On Gospels/Acts, see Iverson (2021); Keith (2020); Nässelqvist (2016); Shiell (2004); Shiner (2003). On Paul and ancient epistolary conventions of oral delivery, see Oestreich (2016); Doering (2012). On the Dead Sea Scrolls, see Williams et al. (2023); Miller (2019); Brooke (2015). On early rabbinic traditions, see Graves (2007); Hezser (2001).
- 33 Mathews (2023, p. 37). If we follow Perry's delineation between analytic and heuristic modes of biblical performance criticism, Mathews falls more on the heuristic side: Perry (2019, pp. 10–12).

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