Why is the Name of God not Mentioned in Megillat Esther?

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Why in Megillat Esther is the name of God not mentioned even once, considering that it was the hand of God that altered a near catastrophe for the Jewish people living in Persia?

God's name, Y-H-W-H, meaning "He [=God] is in a state of continuous and eternal being," is not mentioned in the Esther Scroll. Since the religious theme of the Scroll is that God watches over the world, the obvious question is: why is God's name not mentioned even once throughout Megillat Eshter? This question lays the seeds for the Scroll's deconstruction, and yields for the attentive reader a Biblical theology of Israel. For the religion of the Jews, God appears as a character in the national Book, the Hebrew Bible. The image of God that appears in the national, canonical Book provides a finite, human language description of how God's presence is perceived by the pious, practicing Jew in everyday life.

Let us first summarize the questions that the narrative raises:

1. What is it in the Hebrew Divine Name that makes its absence notable?
2. How was this absence misunderstood by the Qumranide Dead Sea sectarians?
3. Who are the characters and what are their names?
4. Where does the narrative begin and where does the narrative end?
5. Why does the Scroll's opening sound so much like Plato's Symposium?
6. Why is it imperative that God not appear in the narrative by name?

1.What is it in the Hebrew Divine Name that makes its absence notable?

The Divine Name in Hebrew, Y-H-W-H, is a third person imperfect form, meaning “He is being.” In the First Temple times this verb form signified an imperfect tense, or continuing action. In later Hebrew, this originally imperfect form assumed the sense of a future tense. By remaining hidden beneath the narrative’s surface and story, God, as a literary character—and statement of Jewish theology, is never present to the secular eye yet is ever present to the pious, inner, introspective eye. The secular or mundane eye is able to notice from a distance the pious actions of the believing, behaving and identifying Jew, but is unable to appreciate, much less decode, the meaning of the strange, foreign, alien and therefore alienating gestures of the Jew whose laws do not conform to the edicts of a human king. The absence of the Divine is therefore ironic; the God Whom the mundane mind is unable to sense is the God Who pulls all the strings, arranges all events, settles every account, and directs history toward its providential telos, or goal.

2. How was this absence misunderstood by the Qumranide Dead Sea sectarians?

The Dead Sea sectarians were religiously very strict, theologically very stark, simple, absolute, and extreme. Deep down, this sect was theologically rather shallow. Their reading of Scripture and their understanding of Torah were not nuanced; the Qumranide reading of both Bible and reality was enchanted and apocalyptic, where the cosmic “forces” of evil are arrayed against the “forces” constructively striving for good. Their commentaries are re-writes of Hebrew Scripture called “mediations,” or pesharim. Since the Esther Scroll did not mention God’s name, this no nonsense, no nuance sect misread the Esther Scroll as a secular tale and thus excluded the Scroll from its community canon; there was not one exemplar or fragment of the Esther Scroll found at Qumran. On the other hand, both the Pharisees and their rabbinic successors composed commentaries called midrashim, highly nuanced and insightful observations regarding the multi-valenced meanings which are sought in Israel’s Divinely inspired, canonical documents. The rabbis, with their nuanced religious—and literary—sophistication, understood that God is hidden in a violent social, hierarchic political world that that cannot tolerate a Divinity that demands that humankind “do the right and the good.” [Deuteronomy 6:18]

3. Who are the main characters and what are their names?

Ahashuerus is the King of Persia and Media, which really was a double monarchy in antiquity. He ruled from India to Ethiopia, the precise range of Aramaic documents, the lingua franca of the Achaenamid empire, for which Persian was used for private, religious purposes. The Hebrew Scripture reports that in this empire, the Jews/Judeans of the 587 BCE exile seem to retain but are in danger of losing their religious and ethnic identity. According to Persian reports, the empire was divided into 20 administrative districts, or satraps. But Scripture reports that Persia possessed one hundred- twenty medinot. The historically aware, linguistically sensitive and theologically attuned reader does not find a contradiction here, as do the secular critics. The Persians thought as tyrant rulers in administrative terms—how to control the masses; the Jews/Judeans believed in an ethical ethnic identity, which is preserved in the city, the original meaning of medina, a place of localized law, or din in Arabic, Aramaic, as well as Hebrew—in order to nurture a sense of autonomous moral agency in every Jew. Ahashuerus rules blindly, almost always influenced by alcohol, women, intrigue and a congenital addiction to physical pleasure, over a vast kingdom. Bigtan and Teresh tried to initiate a coup d'etat, and were foiled by Mordecai, whom the King ineptly forgot or otherwise fails to reward for his efforts. We see a very human king who presents himself to be all powerful yet is unable to manage, much less master, the power that is at his disposal.

The verbs used to describe the king are intransitive, signifying a state of being. This king merely "is." He drinks, sits on his throne and enjoys the presence of beautiful women. He does almost nothing without wine, and what he does focuses upon gainful winnings and pleasuring himself. If someone wants to advance in this monarchy that Machiavelli could have imagined, one must anticipate the only real rule of the realm, that which pleasures the prince. See Esther 1:19, 3:9, and 5:4-5, 'im 'al ha-meleh tov.

Haman is an Agagite. Agag was the Amaleqite king that King Saul, the Benjamin tribe member, was supposed to execute according to God's explicit command but did not. As a "professional courtesy" to a fellow human monarch, he allowed Agag to live. Like the Amaleqites of Saul's time and the Amaleqite tribe in Moses' time, Haman hopes to destroy Israel because Israel is Israel; because there is no reason in reality for baseless hatred, no reason is offered for it. But we may find a hint in the case that Haman makes before Ahashuerus, that ancient Israel, now known as the people of Judea, i.e. the Jews, must be annihilated. Haman claims that "there is a nation scattered and dispersed among the people [of the empire], they have laws that are different from all the nations, and it is not worth it to the king to leave them be." [Esther 3:8] Realizing that his own hatred of Israel is irrational,

Haman appeals to the king's utilitarian, greedy instincts: the people are not indigenous; this people by habit resists the acculturation needed for administrative order, social cohesion, and most critically, tax collection, and it simply is not worth it to the king to suffer their potentially irredentist presence. And to seal his maniacal deal, Haman pays the King for the right to stage a pogrom. [Esther 3:9] By portraying Israel as "other," the nation whose Laws demand that one treat others with dignity, Israel is subversive of every hierarchy, tyranny, and aristocracy. Because of its Book- based ethic that enshrines an inalienable human dignity, Israel the nation thinks critically, makes its own choices, and is born to be free. In narrative contrast, Haman is so possessed with himself that his evil plans are thwarted, as we will see below, by his own sick sense of misplaced importance that ends in impotence. Recall that he enters the King's courtyard for the right to hang Mordecai, not aware that the King could not sleep, was read the account of the Bigtan and Teresh abortive coup d'etat and Mordecai's unrewarded act of good—and salvific—citizenship. We here see, even before Haman makes his murderous claim, that it is indeed worth it to have citizens who keep the law like Mordecai the Jew. The King, now for the only instant in the narrative sober--a state unnoticed by the egotistical Haman—plays Haman the way the King was hitherto played by Haman. The King, now scared sober, wants to know what's on Haman's clearly twisted mind, being invited to the King's rolling bar by the King's favorite wife and entering the King's courtyard in the dead of night. The King asks, with grim sobriety, high anxiety, and remarkably piercing insight, playing on Haman's ironically hapless hubris, "what shall be done for the man whom the King desires to honor?" [Esther 6:6a] The now scared, sober, and sleepless King is playing the player even as he is being played by the ultimate Player, the unseen King of kings, who providentially keeps the inept human king from slumber. Realizing that Haman does not suffer from modesty, but is obsessed with ambition, the King asks Haman what his wildest wish would be. And Haman's hubris overtakes his malevolent cunning; he would wear the royal robe, ride the royal steed, don the royal crown, and be so proclaimed as the friend of the Throne in public. The signet ring of administrative power on his finger is not enough for Haman; he who would destroy Israel for no reason now unwittingly tells the king that it is he who cannot be trusted, any more than Bigtan and Teresh, whom Mordecai had thwarted, from assaulting the Kingdom in the dead of night to kill the human king who at that very moment is unable to sleep.

Esther is the Scroll's round character who undergoes development in the Scroll that bears her name. Her name is cognate to the pagan deity Ishtar; yet, she has a private hidden Hebrew name, Hadassah. Raised by her pious uncle, Mordecai,

the Jew or Judean, Esther is on one hand named by her now deceased parents as the pagan “star,” and grows in Judaism, the cult of the Judeans who serve the unseen God Who is King of the Cosmos, the Father in Heaven and its stars, the Redeemer of Israel, and the Player who plays and preys upon those who would prey and play upon His people. If her Indo-European name represents the visible shining star, the very same word in Hebrew, the language of her people [Esther 8:9 and Esther 9:27] means “hidden,” the root str in Hebrew. When God’s presence is hidden and God’s Presence is unseen, the nations hear the decree to destroy the Jews in their vernaculars and scripts [Esther 3: 12]; Esther’s name and God’s now apparent presence appear when Israel, now redeemed, is recognized as a nation.

In Ahashuerus’ empire, people are passive pawns to be exploited and manipulated by power people. In need of a trophy talent to replace his deposed Vashti, who actively and insubordinately refused the royal order to appear before the King in order to display her natural assets, [Esther 1:17] a beauty contest was suggested to pick her appropriate replacement. The notion that Vashi was asked/ordered to appear/come in the nude, with her crown on her head her only attire, reflects the Midrashic suggestion that the king’s drinking assembly’s intentions were not honorable. [Esther Rabba 3:13] Read the end of the verse, and mQeddushin 1:1.

Esther is taken to the the King’s harem, ina passive voice. [Esther 2:18, 16] As a subject of the tyrant, she is subject to that very tyrant. When challenged by Mordecai that she cannot hide in the Harem in order to escape the King’s decree, she is in a bind. Recall two at first seemingly insignificant narrative facts: that edict which is signed and sealed with the King’s seal cannot be rescinded. [Esther 8:8] and that the King’s decree against the recalcitrant Queen Vashti by the de jure omnipotent King could not be overturned, even by the by the King himself. The deliciously caustic irony is that the Law the human King advances, a Law that once given, cannot be changed, is precisely the Law of the Jews given by the God Who does not change and Who in this Scroll does not appear. [Deut. 4:2, 13:1, and the Epilogue to Hammurapi would have that Code, written in stone, not to be effaced or changed.] Ahashurus acts as if he is a god but appears, except when he is scared sober, to be an inept drunkard.

Esther risks her life with an active leap of faith when she appears before the king uninvited and unannounced. [Esther 4:11] The human King is very aware that he sits on a very fragile throne, especially after the Bigtan and Teresh incident. Unless one is called/yiqqarei in the passive, one is subject to the death penalty for

the legitimate fear that one who appears before the king without an appointment may indeed be intent upon regicide. The word for scepter, sharvit, is a Babylonian causal form meaning “to cause one to bow down,” i.e. make the requisite gesture of passivity before the King, who alone is authorized to be active. The King of kings predisposed the human king to look favorably upon his nervous first lady of the harem. After all, we, the omniscient readers, realize that Esther was not called to the King’s bedroom for thirty days [4:11] not because she fell out of favor with her royal husband, as Esther at first feared, but because her fearful husband King was in nervous terror for his own life. Note well that Esther “was not called,” she was not deemed worthy of being passive in the presence of the appropriately paranoid impotent potentate.

Esther grows into religious maturity by being active, by being a moral agent, and by taking a dangerous risk. Idolatrous religion makes a man into a god and people into slaves, as in the case of Pharaoh, or into passive subjects, as in the case of Ahashuerus. As noted by the great Henri Frankfort, in Mesopotamia the king is a god while in Israel—and in the Esther Scroll, God is the King.

Mordecai’s family heritage stems from the tribe of Benjamin and Saul. Neither Saul nor Benjamin’s tribe acted honorably, and neither did those who gave Mordecai his non-Hebrew name, a name he shared with the pagan god called Marduk. In pagan Persia, the king is a tyrant. No one speaks independently but the human King; so the real King, God the Creator, speaks silently. See Psalms 19:4. By protecting the politically legitimate King [the narrator is keenly aware of Jeremiah 9 29:23-28], adopting and nurturing Esther, by mourning publically and praying the unmentionable word in Persia, Mordecai’s external acts testify to his internalized politically astute enlightened piety. Throughout the Esther Scroll, the human king regularly gives orders that render his subjects passive. But at Esther 2:22, the matter of insurrection is made known to Mordecai; there is a Commander/King Who talks and makes His will known to Mordecai. And Mordecai acts upon this information! Haman’s “critique” of the Jews, mean-spirited as it is, ironically, is correct. There is a nation that obeys the commands of God before the drunken bumpkin who sits on Persia’s peacock throne, ever true to the Hebrew nationals who answer to an even higher authority.

4.Where does the narrative begin and where does the narrative end?

The actual Esther Scroll narrative begins with Amaleq at Exodus 17:8 with the gratuitous attack on Israel by the Amalaqite enemies of Israel, who attempted to eradicate a society where every citizen is a moral agent who “embodies” the image of God, whose disposition leads to freedom. The narrative ends with Ezra

2:2 and Nehemiah 7:7, when Mordecai goes home, to Judea. Saul was told by Samuel that God does not lie, I Sam. 15:29, and Mordecai told Esther that if she is not willing to be an active player and moral agent, Israel's aid will come from another place, [Esther 4:14], she and her household will not survive—because as noted above the human King's commands, including his command to kill all of the Jews, cannot by pagan law be rescinded—but that God's care for the Judeans will nonetheless not be abandoned. [Psalms 94:14]

5. Why does the Scroll's opening sound so much like Plato's Symposium?

Plato's Symposium tells a story about the best, brightest, and most beautiful people of Athenian antiquity. Plato the narrator recalls that there was a drinking party, where men discussed—and tried to put into practice—love amongst themselves. The Hebrew word for such a party is called a mishteh, an occasion for party drinking. This is where the affairs of state take place in the Esther Scroll. The hero of the Symposium party, Socrates, wins the day by speaking about true agape love, holding down his wine, and rejecting the advances of the knave general, Alcibiades.

The Jews in Esther join the first drinking party in anonymity, as individuals in the mob. Drinking wine at the party of redemption exemplifies the difference between the two cultures: the Greeks, and the
Persians who to our view are the "Greeks" for whom, under Greek rule, it is politically correct to mock and belittle others cleverly and to drink to and for diversion. The Jew drinks with a benediction, praising the Creator for creating the fruit of the vine, and showing how one may be both joyous and pious. The "ethic" and protocol of Plato's Symposium was limited to invited male aristocrats alone, where we get to see Socrates say "no" to Alcibiades and his advances not because of sexual morality, but because the latter person was not to the former's taste. In contrast, the Jewish Purim meal requires wine for all, sending of gifts to others, and caring for the poor. When the Passover offering was being observed, only those listed to eat from the offering could legally do so; once the offering became defunct, "all who are hungry may come and eat, all who are in need are invited to join for the solidarity of the seder." The Greeks, and the Persian characters who portray them, believe in fate, aristocracy, and honor; the Jew, like Mordecai, believes that there is a Judge and there is a judgment, there is a law which promotes an aristocracy of ethics, because everyone is to walk humbly before the silent God Whose acts speak loudly.

The human aristocracy of the Greek or Persian pagans demanded humility from the masses, expressed literarily by the passivity that is imposed by the inept

human King upon his chaotic, multi-national empire that appeared from afar to be powerful but upon close look was out of control.

When some men [women do not do this] press others to be humble, they are asking the “other” to nullify her or himself, to defer out of self-disrespect to someone mistaken to be one’s “better,” to accept the truth of others while being passive and denying one’s self-worth. The ideal Jew is a moral agent who acts out of ethics for good. The ideal Jew’s God created the world, gave a Torah, and commissioned the Jew to put God in the world by acting as Divinely commissioned moral agents.

6. Why is it imperative that God not appear in the narrative by name?

Because Esther’s narrative setting, ancient Persia, and historical setting, the Hellenistic cultural challenge, makes no place for God, God only appears to be absent to those who do not possess the insight of God’s immediacy. The monarchical diction honors protocol and one singular person, Ahashuerus the king. In this amoral pagan setting, great men are petty and morally small; Mordecai’s and Esther’s acts of faith do not resonate within these pagan cultures, so pious Jewish gestures are described as meaningless motions at best and as defiant non-conformity at worst. The engaged reader realizes that what the Jews do indeed are in fact profound acts of religious faith, a point lost upon the narratives pagans but obvious to the attentive reader.
\Ezra 1:1-3 reports:

1”Now in the first year of Cyrus, king of Persia, in order that the word of the Lord given by the mouth of Jeremiah might come true, the spirit of Cyrus, king of Persia, was moved by the Lord, so that he made a public statement through all his kingdom, and put it in writing, saying,
2These are the words of Cyrus, king of Persia: The Lord God of heaven [an Aramaic idiom common to pagans, see Jonah 1:9] has given me all the kingdoms of the earth; and he has made me responsible for building a house for him in Jerusalem, which is in Judah.
3Whoever there is among you of his people, may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem, which is in Judah, and take in hand the building of the house of the Lord, the God of Israel; he is the God who is in Jerusalem.” [my italics]

The setting of Ezra is filled with the Presence of God, where Cyrus replaced Ahashuerus as King of Persia. It is a world in which God moves people, and people are moved to put God in the world. God appears in the world when humans let God enter the social construction of ethical reality that is humankind’s to make. In the Esther Scroll, paganism does not allow for religious discourse so God’s name

is unmentionable in pagan settings. The Esther Scroll is a commission to the Jewish people to allow God-talk to be part of our spiritual conversation and to beware of leaders who demand less than the fulfillment of the moral agency of each person who by dint of humanity, carries God’s’ image.