

ESTHER EXPLAINED

פֶּתְרוֹן אֶחָשְׁוֶרוֹשׁ

PITRON AḤASHWĒROSH



AUTHORED BY

Ḥākhām Ya'aqov ben Re'uvēn

(11th Century CE, Byzantium)

TRANSLATOR AND EDITOR

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About the Translator: James (Ya'aqov) Walker is a married father of two from Charlotte, NC, and is CEO of Informative Technologies, a startup committed to ending the digital divide and improving digital literacy. Mr. Walker is skilled in the digital preservation of rare Hebrew and Arabic manuscripts. In 2014, Mr. Walker was a North American semifinalist in the State of Israel's International Bible Competition. He serves as an active board member for a number of Jewish non-profit organizations from Uganda to Charlotte.

About this Edition: This edition contains the Book of Esther, footnoted in Hebrew and English with *Pitron Ahashwērosh*, literally meaning “Explaining Xerxes/*Ahashwērosh*”. *Pitron Ahashwērosh* is one of the earliest available Jewish commentaries on the Book of Esther, and is part of the Karaite (“Scripturalist”) Jewish scholar *Ya'aqov ben Re'uvēn's* 11th-century biblical commentary *Sefer ha'Osher* [*The Book of Wealth*]. The translation of the Book of Esther is the first known English-language translation of the book by a Karaite, and the translation of *Pitron Ahashwērosh* is the only known English-language translation of the commentary to date. The translator has added biblical citations in parentheses to both the Hebrew and English text of *Pitron Ahashwērosh*. Certain words in *Pitron Ahashwērosh* are written in Judeo-Greek, and the translator has identified those in both the Hebrew and English of the commentary. The reader will notice that the Karaite Jewish convention of preserving the original pronunciation of proper nouns has been

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maintained, with the accommodation that names more familiar to Western audiences are used once in each chapter.¹ Because every translation is interpretive, readers are encouraged to explore the significance of the Hebrew texts for their own benefit.

About this Manuscript: The text of *Pitron Aḥashwērosh* has been transcribed from folios 309–312 of the manuscript “Recueil de textes karaïtes” (c. 1625 CE) located in Paris at Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Hébreu 191. Please note that the additional diacritics, formatting, parenthetical remarks, and bracketed terminology shown in the Hebrew side of *Pitron Aḥashwērosh* were added to the original consonantal text for enhanced clarity and accessibility. Similarly, some biblical verses in the manuscript were truncated. In order to assist the reader, the editor has, in most cases, added the entire verse to both the Hebrew and English text of *Pitron Aḥashwērosh*. We have endeavored to provide the most meaningful transcription and translation of the Paris manuscript. We would welcome efforts to bring the entire text of *Sefer ha’Osher* to mainstream audiences.

Acknowledgments: The present accomplishment of introducing modern readers to a Hebrew manuscript that has lain dormant for the last thousand years could not have been achieved without a significant amount of institutional and individual support. I owe the

¹ This edition does not use the Anglicized names for *Estēr* (Esther), *Hāmān* (Haman), *Mordokhai* (Mordecai), and *Washti* (Vashti), as these names are easily recognizable to most readers.

Karaite Jews of America (“κJA”) a debt of gratitude for welcoming my family into the covenant of Sinai, and for underwriting and funding this project. The κJA was established by the generation of Egyptian Karaite Jews who found refuge in the United States from persecution in Egypt during the middle of the last century. To Shawn Joe Lichaa, thank you for your patience, foresight, and your personal investments in ensuring this work meets the highest standards of quality. To the brilliant *Ḥazzān* [Cantor] *Ēli* son of the *Hākhām* [Scholar] *Magdi Shemu’el haLēwi*, thank you for combining your native fluency in modern Hebrew with your expertise in classical Hebrew grammar to review my vocalization and formatting of the original text and commentary. Similarly, I thank the leadership of the Karaite Jewish community of Israel, especially its chairman *Neria HaRo’eh*, J.D., for raising the profile of classic Karaite Jewish works among younger generations. Through it all, my help comes from the One Who made heaven and Earth, much of which was in the form of the daily support provided by my dear wife, Leah, and wonderful children, Naomi and Elijah.

James E. Walker, II (יַעֲקֹב בֶּן־אַבְרָהָם הַדְּנִי)
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PROLEGOMENA

Esther as a Victorian Jewish Woman's Guidebook for Empowerment

The Karaite (“Scripturalist”) Jewish approach to *Esther* is one that emphasizes the keen leadership qualities of both the male and female protagonists. This is particularly evident in the Judeo-Arabic translation and commentary on the Book of *Esther* by the 10th century Karaite sage *Ḥākhām Yefet ben ‘Ēli*, who asserts that it was *Esther* who played the leading role in saving the Jewish people and opines that *Esther* herself wrote the initial text of the biblical book which came to bear her name.²

Rarely, however, does one encounter historical *women’s* perspectives on biblical matters. In that regard, the following selections from Grace Aguilar’s 1845 commentary entitled *Women of Israel* are meant to stir readers with the message of a prominent female writer, as well as to revive interest in a brilliant British commentator – sadly forgotten by history. Ms. Aguilar, herself a Sephardic

² A wonderful analysis and translation of *Ḥākhām Yefet ben ‘Ēli’s* work was produced by Dr. Michael G. Wexler and published by Brill, under the title *The Arabic Translation and Commentary of Yefet ben ‘Eli the Karaite on the Book of Esther*.

Jewish woman, identified as an adherent of “Scriptural Judaism”.³

**Selections from Grace Aguilar’s 1845 Commentary
“Women of Israel” (Vol. II, pp. 113–118)**

*On Queen Esther’s Lasting Influence
Among Political Leaders*

If Mordecai retained so much influence, years after the events which had occasioned his accession to greatness had faded into the past, it is not likely that Esther retained less. Her public and private positions must both have been very much happier than before. Her influence over

³ Writing on the topic of “Jewish Religious Thought in Early Victorian London”, Steven Singer observed the direct link between the Judaism practiced and advocated by Ms. Aguilar and the “Neo-Karaism” of many progressive Torah-observant Jews in England during her time:

“The writings of Grace Aguilar, a leading Anglo-Jewish author of this period, provide a good example of how Neo-Karaite thinking was adopted by the progressives . . . Alarmed by Christian attempts to convert her brethren, she was moved to write a series of books in order to explain Judaism to English-speaking Jews and give Jewish youth pride in their religious heritage . . . In her writings Aguilar continually placed the Bible on a pedestal of unquestioned authority and simultaneously downgraded the Oral Law as having little importance . . . Again she criticized Jews who, ‘earnest in the cause, yet mistaken in the means, search and believe the writings of the Rabbis, take as divine truths all they have suggested, and neglect the Bible as not to be compared with such learned dissertations.’ . . . The views expressed by Aguilar were characteristic of the thinking of other progressives as well. For example, Aguilar developed the idea of a ‘scriptural Judaism’ that would be faithful to the Bible rather than the Oral Law.”

(AJS Review, Vol. 10, No. 2 [Autumn, 1985], pp. 189–191.)

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the heart of her lordly husband had been acknowledged, by a concession, which, in a Persian Emperor, was as unprecedented as it was extraordinary . . . Besides, he knew her faith, her race, and yet he continued, nay increased, his favor towards her: thus proving forgiveness of her previous silence on that important point. The beloved guardian of her youth was ever near her, second in rank to the king himself; her people honored and protected; and many who had before been heathens, embracing the covenant of the Lord, and swelling the Hebrew ranks; and all this, under the blessing of the Eternal, had been achieved by her conquest over herself, and her influence with the king. Was it likely, with such memories, that Esther would sink into a mere nonentity in the Persian Court? That she would not, even as Mordecai, use all her influence for that holy people to whom her whole heart still clung? And when we think attentively over all this, her character, her eventful history, her power over her husband, may we not, in some degree, be justified in the supposition, that the Artaxerxes who permitted the departure of his favorite Jewish cup-bearer, Nehemiah, and gave him letters to the keepers of the king's forests, and to the governors, &c., in furtherance of the rebuilding of Jerusalem, and to insure the safety of the Jews in Judea, was [of] the same monarch[y], who, under the name of Ahasuerus, had already so favored them in Persia?

*Purim as a Celebration of the Dignity of
Israelite Women in Every Generation*

It was not that Esther was a free agent, or had powers more extended than our own. Though the wife of a mighty monarch, she was captive; and so too are we. We, too, may individually be thrown into positions begirt with sadness, where the rites and ceremonies of our faith must be adhered to in the secrecy of our own hearths and hearts. Yet may we still be ready at the first call to identify ourselves with those who suffer for our faith – still be enabled to serve the good and holy cause... We can, each and all, determine to honor our religion ourselves, and so make it honored. We can infuse such seeds into the hearts of our sons, that Judaism may never want defenders, or such representatives as will raise it, even in its captive state, in the respect and consideration of the nations. Yes! though through the infinite mercy of the Eternal, such intercession as Esther's is no longer needed, still let us emulate Esther in the elevation and the acknowledgment of our holy faith – in our individual adherence to its spirit and form through every difficulty and through every woe. Let every returning festival of Purim find us as women, and in our own retired spheres, still loving, still knowing, still working for our holy religion, and determined, through social and domestic conduct, to make its glory, and its comfort, and its beauty, evident to all. We shall not see the fruit of this still and silent working; but we shall feel its efficacy in the calm and tranquil gladness of our hearts and homes.