

Reading the Book of Esther

The title of this presentation is ‘The Book of Esther: an irreducible disturbance.’ My purpose is not to persuade you of anything, or for that matter, to persuade myself of anything. I am going to point at something, and to provide two concepts which will make it possible for you to see what I am pointing at.

I take as my beginning this statement by Emmanuel Levinas from his essay *Enigma and Phenomenon* (1965).

“Everything depends on the possibility of vibrating with a meaning that is not synchronized with the speech that captures it and cannot be fitted into its order. Everything depends on the possibility of a signification that signifies an irreducible disturbance.”

I begin with this statement, and I will return to it at the end of this lecture.

There are two prologues before we turn to the Book of Esther. The first concerns a key discovery by James Hutton which he made in the year 1785. Hutton was a Scot who belonged to a weekly conversation group which called itself the Oyster Club. Other members of the group familiar to us were Adam Smith, David Hume, Joseph Black, who discovered CO₂ and worked out the basic concepts of heat capacity, and Hutton’s protégé John Playfair. James Watt, who was developing his steam engine for harnessing the power of heat, participated in these conversations from time to time, as did Benjamin Franklin, who had demonstrated that lightening is electricity, during some of his several visits to Edinburgh.

Hutton had trained as a physician, left medicine for farming, and eventually left farming for geology. He was the first person who recognized that the earth exists dynamically rather than statically—that the processes we observe today, erosion of mountains into streams, stream deposits into alluvia, alluvia into consolidated sediments on the sea floor, and powerful thermal upheavals and volcanic intrusions, have gone on for spans of time far far longer than the 5500+

years derived from traditional biblical chronology. Far longer. Here (Figure 1) is what Hutton discovered and what he needed to discover to demonstrate his Theory of the Earth. This drawing of the Jedburgh site was made two years later in 1787 by Hutton's friend James Clerk and found again only in 1968. Though Hutton was of course not the first person to view this formation, he was the first to understand what he saw here. His word for it was 'angular unconformity.'

Hutton saw three worlds here. The top layer is our world, its soil sustaining grasses and trees and a road with a two-horse carriage (a phaeton) hurrying along, and traveling in the opposite direction a man mounted on his horse. Underneath this world is another world, this one made of what Hutton called 'Old Red Sandstone' lying in masonry-like horizontal strata. These strata with their marine fossils, Hutton realized, had been deposited and consolidated on the floor of the ocean. Each stratum is a separate epoch. By the aligned vertical cracks one can see that the formation had been lifted as a whole from the bottom of the ocean to its present elevation in Scotland. Underneath the Old Red Sandstone is what Hutton called the 'schistus.' Layers that had once been horizontal were now nearly vertical. Some of the vertical strata have been softened and re-consolidated in the wavy patterns you see. Hutton understood for the first time that these strata had themselves once been horizontal on the ocean floor, and before the Red Sandstone had been deposited on top of them, had been raised up from the horizontal to the near vertical, and then in that position worn down by erosion to a new horizontal which then sank back down to the ocean floor to underlie and receive the Red Sandstone above it. Each stratum had marine fossils distinct from those in adjacent strata. Each stratum was its own world. Here, from Hutton's notes on what he reported to the Royal Society, are his thoughts about the meaning of this discovery:

“Having thus ascertained a regular system in which the present land of the globe had been first formed at the bottom of the ocean and then raised up above the surface of the sea, a question naturally occurs with regard to time; what had been the space of time necessary for accomplishing this great work?

We shall be warranted in drawing the following conclusions;
1st, That it had required an indefinite space of time to have produced the land which now appears, 2^{ndly}, That an equal space had been employed upon the construction of that former land from which the materials of the present came; Lastly, That there is presently laying at the bottom of the ocean the foundation of future land....”

John Playfair, more eloquent than Hutton, wrote about this same unconformity when he saw it with Hutton at Siccar Point in Devonshire:

“On us who saw these phenomena for the first time, the impression made will not easily be forgotten.

The palpable evidence presented to us, of one of the most extraordinary and important facts in the natural history of the earth, gave a reality and a substance to those theoretical speculations, which, however probable, had never until now been directly authenticated by the testimony of the senses. What clearer evidence could we have had of the different formation of these rocks, and of the long interval which separated their formation, had we actually seen them emerging from the bosom of the deep? ...
Revolutions still more remote appeared in the distance of this extraordinary perspective. The mind seemed to grow giddy by looking so far into the abyss of time.”

What Hutton predicted and then found is now called ‘deep time’, time so vast that we cannot fathom it, cannot experience it even imaginatively. There is no clock,

there is no measuring device that will register both the phaeton racing along the road and the 50 some prior worlds beneath it. Time has been de-synchronized.

The second prologue to the Book of Esther also concerns a discovery which, as it happened, also occurred in 1785. And as it happened, it was made in an amateur's observatory near York only 119 miles from the Jedburgh site where James Hutton made his first discovery of an angular unconformity. The astronomer, John Goodricke, deaf since early childhood and only 19 years old, had achieved recognition in 1783 for his observations and explanation of the light curve for the variable star Algol (beta Persei) (Figure 2). Goodricke, with only opera glasses and a good clock and careful observations, was able to establish that Algol's variation in luminosity was periodic and that its period was 2.8646 days minimum to minimum. This was accurate to within 8 seconds. Goodricke established that the dimming and re-brightening of the star was symmetrical. His proposed explanation was that Algol is an eclipsing binary star (the first one ever discovered), too far away to be resolved into two images. For his observations and his striking explanation he was awarded the Copley Prize by the Royal Society. He remains the youngest person ever to have received this high honor.

John Goodricke's second discovery, which provided the key to the universe, was worked out in the brief months after the Copley Prize and before his early death at age 21. In 1785, now in possession of a small telescope, Goodricke observed a variable star he had spotted in the circumpolar constellation Cepheus—delta Cephei. During the ten months before his death he studied it with more than 100 night-long observations. What he knew for sure about it was that its period maximum to maximum was precisely 5.3662 days, and that its light curve was asymmetrical. (Figure 3) It took four times as long to dim from maximum to minimum as it took to brighten from minimum to maximum. There was no way to explain this asymmetry through external causes such as an eclipse. The source of its variation must therefore be internal. The star is pulsing like a beating heart.

120 years after John Goodricke's crucial discovery, the astronomer Henrietta Leavitt, consigned because of her deafness to examining photographic plates at the Harvard Observatory, identified hundreds of Cepheid variable stars (1770+) in telescopic photographs of the small Magellanic Cloud. Noticing what seemed to be

a pattern, she chose 25 of them for more careful study. What she found, and because of being a woman had to publish under the name of her male supervisor Edward Pickering, was a direct correlation between the length of a Cepheid variable's period and its brightness at maximum. With this further insight, Goodricke's pulsing variable star became what is called a 'standard candle'—a way of measuring astronomical distances beyond what can be determined by optical parallax. Two years after Henrietta Leavitt's death in 1921, Edwin Hubble, using the new 100-inch Newtonian reflector at the Mt. Wilson Observatory in California, found individual Cepheid variable stars in Andromeda. Using their apparent luminosity at maximum as his index of distance, he calculated that the Andromeda nebula was 900,000 light-years away—about 10 times the diameter of our own Milky Way galaxy. Later he and others corrected this value to 2,500,000 light-years distant from us. Andromeda is our closest neighbor in the heavens beyond our own galaxy and its Magellanic Clouds. Hubble, using the work of John Goodricke and Henrietta Leavitt, was the first person to enter what is called 'deep space'. Not only was the earth no longer the center of the universe, which Copernicus had demonstrated, nor was our solar system the center, nor even was our galaxy the center—which was asserted right up until Hubble's work. There is no center that we are not at because there is no center. The galaxies go on strewn out forever. Goodricke provided the key that led 140 years later to 'deep space'—space de-centered.

With these two concepts and their concomitant intuitions on the table, angular unconformity and deep de-synchronized time on the one hand, and asymmetric patterns and deep de-centered space on the other, let us turn to the Book of Esther. It is comprised of only 167 verses. These verses convey a narrative of events in the Persian court which started c. 485 b.c.e. These are the years just after the Greek victory over Darius at Marathon in 490 b.c.e., and around the time of the Greek naval victory over Xerxes at Salamis in 480 b.c.e. The Persian ruler, Achashverosh, is, then, Xerxes. Some 500 to 600 years after the events it describes the Book of Esther, after long rabbinical debate, was added to the canonical books of the Hebrew Bible with the understanding that there would be no further additions. If it is a revelation, it is the final revelation. It is the only biblical text written by a woman.

The author of the book has two names (2:7). This is not a small detail. Almost everything in the book has two names or is said twice in two different ways or happens twice. These doublings are asymmetric. The author's name is given both as Hadassah, a Hebrew word meaning 'myrtle', and as Esther. In Hebrew Esther would be a version of the word *הסתר*, which means 'to hide' or 'hidden.' There is an unresolved controversy in the Talmud (Megillah 13a) in which it is argued that her real name is Esther, while Hadassah, a nickname, meant graceful and fragrant like the plant. The opposed view is that her real name is Hadassah, but she is called Esther because her Jewish identity is hidden from Xerxes until the key moment of reversal in chapter 7. One rabbi notes that the name Esther resembles an Aramaic word '*shra*', meaning 'star' or 'moon'. Many years ago a graduate student here at the College pointed out what the rabbi was suggesting but wouldn't say: that Esther resembles Ishtar or Astarte, names of the middle Eastern goddess of the moon and of femininity.

What, then, of the name Mordechai? Esther calls him Mordechai, but both Achashverosh and Haman call him 'Mordechai the Jew.' This would indicate that there were other men around (not Jews) named Mordechai (Megillah 16a). The rabbis remark that Mordechai is the Hebrew version of the name Marduk—the Persian god of the sun. It was, they said, a common name among Persian courtiers. Mordechai is traced in the text as having descended from the tribe of Benjamin, but the name 'Mordechai the Jew, *מרדכי היהודי*' means he is descended from the tribe of Judah. The rabbis have an intriguing explanation for this doubleness (Megillah 12b).

Also Haman, the man full of rage at Mordechai and at his people because this man, Mordechai the Jew, refuses to bow down to him, has two very dissimilar conferences with his wife and friends. Some of the Talmudic rabbis even assert that he has two names—Haman and Memuchan. Memuchan, the councilor who jumps rank (he is last on the list of councilors but speaks first when he proposes the patriarchal 'Vashti decree' to Xerxes), means (according to them) 'the fated one'. For his proposal he is promoted and doomed.

I will list a few instances, large and small, to establish that asymmetric doubleness is fundamental to this text:

- 1) Vashti refuses to come to Achashverosh when summoned, but continues her wine party. She is banished, forever silenced. She disappears. Esther, risking her life, dares to appear unsummoned after fasting from all food and drink for three days. She is granted the king's favor.
- 2) There are two beauty contests, one elaborately described (2:8-18), in which Esther is selected, and a second one briefly mentioned (2:19), in which she is already the queen.
- 3) Esther gives two wine parties on successive days, one at which Haman is elevated, and one at which he is destroyed.
- 4) There are two confrontations of the Jews with their enemies, one everywhere on the 13th of the month of Adar (the date selected by Haman), and a second one on the 14th of Adar only in Shushan, the capital.
- 5) There are two letters about these events, one from Mordechai and one with crucial differences from Esther.
- 6) There are two irrevocable decrees sealed with Achashverosh's ring, one granting permission to exterminate the Jews, and one granting permission to the Jews to organize and pre-emptively defend themselves.

Even in small details there is doubleness. The supervisor of the young girls is named **הגא** (2:3), but after interacting with Esther his name is modified to **הג' (2:8)**-- 'my Hege'. I am struck by the verse (9:19) in which we read that the village Jews dwelled in villages (where else should they dwell?), but the basic word for 'village' is spelled two different ways in the same sentence. There are many other instances.

The events set down in the Book of Esther became the basis of a holiday called Purim—a Persian word 'pur' translated not once but twice in the text (3:7 and 9:24) as **פור הו הגורל**, which is the Hebrew word for the lot by which the scapegoat and the sacrificial goat are distinguished from each other on Yom Kippur. The Persian singular 'pur' becomes the Hebrew plural 'Purim'.

The asymmetric doubleness throughout the text continues in the observance of the holiday. There are two different days for the celebration, the 14th of Adar in some places and the 15th of Adar in others. There are two different months of Adar in 7 out of every 19 years. (This is to adjust for the fact that the period of the moon

is not synchronized with the period of the sun). The rabbis in the Talmud are divided about which month, Adar I or Adar II, is the correct month for the celebration. There are good reasons on both sides. On Purim one is obligated to give two gifts of ‘delicate’ food to one friend, and one gift of common food to two different poor people. On whichever day one observes Purim, one is obligated to hear the Megillat Esther read twice, once at night and once the following day. The person reading it may sit or stand, but it must be read, not recited from memory. The reader must actually look at and see the letters (the script) and the words on the scroll (Megillah 18a). And like none other of the canonical books, one is explicitly permitted to hear it read by two different readers (reading different parts?) at the same time (Mishnah Megillah 4:1, Megillah 21a). The text, as we see, has been de-textualized by being partially dissociated from particular places, from times, from human postures, even from a specific voice.

This all-pervasive asymmetric doubleness means that the events narrated in the Book of Esther, like John Goodricke’s insight into delta Cephei, are not to be understood as an intricate mechanical puzzle with pieces put together externally, behind the scenes, by a hidden master mechanic, but as arising from internal pulsation like a beating heart.

The name of God does not appear in the Book of Esther. Why? Is it the case, as some post-Talmudic rabbis would explain to us, that from then on God and God’s workings are hidden from us like the Hebrew meaning of the name Esther. The traditional way of reading the Megillah on Purim would indicate the opposite. Unlike reading from a Torah scroll, in which the passage being read is preceded by passages already read and re-rolled up, re-concealed in the past on the reader’s right hand, and future passages on the reader’s left hand not yet read, not yet unrolled into the field of vision, the Esther scroll is opened completely and held in large swaths draped loosely over each other with all columns visible at once. Nothing is hidden by the order of time. The whole is shown, and one is required to hear the whole book being read. There is in Yiddish a humorous phrase ‘die ganze Megillah’ (the whole Megillah) meaning any long occasion which must be sat through in its entirety—similar in notion to the phrase used in New Mexico—‘the whole enchilada.’ The Megillah is not presented as parts following one after the other, but as a whole.

The word Megillah has the same root as נָגַל את האבן מעל פ' הבאר (Genesis 29:10) where, upon encountering Rachel, Jacob ‘rolls’ open the heavy stone covering the mouth of the well, and also as the passage נָגַל כמים משפט וצדקה כנחל in (Amos 5:24): “Let justice well up like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.” It means roll open or well up into the open, not roll up.

The Megillah tells the story of a plot “to destroy, to kill, to exterminate all Jews, young and old, children and women, in a single day” (3:13), and of the Jews’ organized resistance. They survive and celebrate. What more to it is there? This issue underlies a centuries-long controversy among the greatest rabbis: Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Akiva, Rabbi Meir, and in Talmudic times Shmuel and Rava. Each points to something in the text which could indicate that the Book of Esther was written ברוח הקודש —‘with the Holy Spirit’—and in that sense is not merely a book of human wisdom but a book of prophesy. Each rabbi presents an argument about some specific detail in the book no human being (no matter how talented and insightful) could have known. All are suggestive, but none compels. Rava refutes one by one all but Shmuel (Megillah 7a). Shmuel had pointed to a lone instance of asymmetric doubleness (9:27) such as those listed above, “the Jews confirmed and took upon themselves...” (ק'מו וקבל ה'הודים על'הם), and interpreted it to mean “the heavenly council confirmed and the community on earth took upon themselves...” Such are the terms of rabbinic commentary.

Not only does the name of God not appear in *Esther*, but Jerusalem is mentioned only once and that in passing. The Temple, which some 30 years earlier had been re-built, re-dedicated, and re-activated, is not mentioned at all. There are no more tribal identities—no Levites, no Ephraimites, etc., only a new identity encompassing all—‘הוד’ (Jew). This word ‘הוד’ occurs only twice in the Book of Jeremiah and a handful of times in the books of Nechamiah (10), I Chronicles (2), and Zachariah (1). These are all late books, and in them ‘jehudi’ is a newly-minted word. In Megillat Esther it occurs 44 times, and is misspelled in a very interesting way 6 of those times. ‘הוד’ is a new take on who and what these people are.

Again, *Esther* tells the story of a plot against these people and their successful resistance to that plot. Successful in the sense that, although explicitly permitted by Mordechai’s nearly but not quite symmetrical decree countering

point-by-point Haman's original decree, they did not lay a hand on the property of those they had to kill. They maintained the precarious distinction between people and things. This fact is stated three times. What more is there to it than that?

The very common word 'more' (עוד) occurs as a positive only once in the Book of Esther. At the end of the 13th day of the month of Adar, when Esther's request for her own life and her petition on behalf of her people has already been granted in full, Achashverosh reports to Esther what the text has just told us: 500 men have been 'killed and annihilated' in Shushan, and 10 sons of Haman slain. (Figure 4) This is what the text looks like in print. (Photographs of an actual scroll are avoided). It is arranged quite differently than the text before and after in which it is embedded. Just below this scribal unconformity Achashverosh gives his report of the same information and then asks Esther (9:12):

“What is your request? And it shall be granted you.

And what more do you petition? And it shall be fulfilled.”

Where did this question 'what more' come from? From Achashverosh's devotion and submission to Esther's personal authority. A comparable act of submission had already happened with Mordechai (4:14-17), who began by commanding Esther, and then upon hearing her response (“and if then I perish, I perish” וכאשר 'אבדת' אבדת), being commanded by her. Even earlier in the text we see Hege being transformed from Esther's supervisor into her servant (2:8-9). Here in chapter 9, just beyond the passage that is so visually distinctive, Esther responds (9:13):

“Allow the Jews who are in Shushan to act tomorrow as

they did today, and let Haman's 10 sons be hanged on the gallows.”

Haman's sons are already dead, already slain. Esther asks for them to be executed a second time. From where did Esther's response arise? Where, indeed?

As an analogue to James Hutton's angular unconformity let us look more closely at this scribal unconformity in chapter 9. (Reading right to left) it reads: “500 men...(empty space) ... and (ואת) (back to the right) Parshandasa...(empty space)...and (ואת) (back to the right) Dalphon...(empty space)...etc.

These are Persian names meaningless in Hebrew rendered with Hebrew script. The syntactical particle in the left column putting the names in the right column into the accusative case is spelled with the letter vav (and) and the first and last letters of the Hebrew aleph-beis. Rashi comments that the empty spaces in the middle, which he calls ‘whole bricks,’ do not support the half-bricks on either side. There is nothing to support them. Under the 10 identical syntactical particles is the word עשרת—ten. It is like a column of digits added up. On the right, beneath the names of the sons are the words “sons of Haman”—בני המן. This column is a logical group summarized by its unifying trait written under it. These words, unlike the column on the left, are not a number, but they contain a number. Three of the letters in the names are much smaller than the matrix script, and one is larger. They have always been this way. This is the way Esther wrote them.

The small ת (toph) is the first ת available. It means 400. There is a ש just before it in the same name, but it is skipped over. The next ש that occurs in the order of reading is the one that is small. It means 300. There is no ז (zayin) available until the last name. It means 7.

If the first ש (shin) just before the ת (toph) in the first name had been used, the three small letters would not be a number because they would not be in the correct order of largest to smallest: 400 plus 300 plus 7. The number is 707. Which 707? The first one—707? The second one—1707? (There is no sign for zero, concept of zero, or number places in Hebrew). The third one—2707? It is the sixth 707. The enlarged vav ו in the last name is six. The number is 5707. This is how the number 5707 is written in Hebrew.

On the Hebrew calendar of years the New Year 5707 (Rosh haShanah 5707) started on September 25th, 1946. In the mid-point of the ten days of Awe, the Yomim Noraim of the New Year, 12 men of the Nazi high command were sentenced by the military tribunal at Nuremburg to death by hanging. One of them had escaped capture. One committed suicide on the eve of the executions. Starting at 1:00 a.m. on October 16th, Hoshanah Rabbah, the 10 war criminals were hanged one by one from the same gallows. The tenth one, Julius Streicher, having been forced up the scaffold and nearly hysterical, just before the black hood was placed over his face and the trap door dropped beneath him, cried out “Purimfest

neunzehn hundert sechs und vierzig” (Purim celebration 1946). These facts were documented with photographs by the U.S. Army and reported to the world in the October 28th, 1946 edition of *Newsweek*. You can now read the Army’s full report and see this edition of *Newsweek* online.

This scribal unconformity in the Book of Esther puts us at the threshold of deep prophesy. It is the analogue of deep time and deep space. It is prophesy that is no longer expressible using language available to us for expressing thoughts and feelings and insights. The name of God does not appear in the Book of Esther because the source of its prophesy can no longer be named. As the analogue to James Hutton’s deep time in which time is de-synchronized, and deep space as discovered by John Goodricke, Henrietta Leavitt, and Edwin Hubble, in which space has been de-centered, the Book of Esther gives us deep prophesy in which the God-source is de-named.

If *Esther* is a book of prophesy, what then *is* the prophesy? What does the de-named God require of us? We are not told. We are shown.

It is this: in the outer court of life where Haman stands (6:4 בחצר הח'צונה), where business is transacted and justice administered, one does not humiliate another, and one does not allow oneself to be humiliated. One does not bow down to another (3:2 ומרדכי לא כרע ולא 'שתחוה): “Mordechai did not prostrate himself and he did not bow down.” Each group is addressed in its own language and script. There is no cultural hegemony. This is the contested world in which Mordechai lives. It proceeds by approbation of the majority. (10:3 מרדכי גדול ל'הודים ורצוי לרב אהיו) This is the distillate of the second of the ten commandments (לא תשתחוה להם Exodus 20:5): “You shall not bow down to them and you shall not serve them....”

And also this: in life’s inner court (5:1 בחצר הפנימית), the realm of intimacy, one reaches toward the other, and the other reaches back and touches (5:2-3).

“When the King noticed Queen Esther standing in the (inner) court, she won his favor. The King extended to Esther the gold scepter that was in his hand, and Esther approached and touched the tip of

the scepter.” (*In this moment, this surprising and mysterious gesture, they become equals. Listen, now, to Achashverosh.*) “The King said to her, ‘what is your petition, Queen Esther? Even if it be half the kingdom, it shall be granted you.’”

The realm, i.e. reality, has become a bi-valent domain—each may claim “up to half” of it (5:3 and Baba Metzia 1:1). One speaks to the other only by name, not as a member of a group. This is the uncertain terrain upon which Esther enters at the risk of her life. Her courage and considerateness find favor in the eyes of all (2:14), not just of the majority. Mordechai’s self-sense and public rights are not the issue in this inner court. Esther says to Achashverosh: “We have been sold to be destroyed, slain, and annihilated. Had we been sold as slaves and servant-girls I would have kept silent...” (7:4) Not only to be slain, להרג, but to be annihilated as if we had never been, לאבד. These words arise in her from a far deeper source than the desire for personal and political liberty. The very existence of Esther and of her people is at stake. Her actual life. This is the first word of the first of the ten commandments, אנכי, spoken and heard as a plea: “I exist....”

And perhaps also this: we now understand that *all* speaking of the Name is speaking in vain and is to be avoided--“to You silence is praise” לך רמיה תהלה (Ps.65:2).

There are two courts in our life—the outer and the inner. They are asymmetric. Neither maps into the other. Each needs the other. Vashti invokes the mentality of the outer court, her right to refuse, in the inner. She is destroyed. Haman brings the solipsistic inner counsel of his confidant wife and close friends, the counsel of hatred of what is other than himself, into the outer court of the world. He is destroyed. The ethical architecture of our lives, our hope for wholeness and truth, Esther’s שלום ואמת (9:30), is asymmetric and pulsating between the two courts like a beating heart. It is ‘vibrant’ in the literal sense of the word ‘vibrate’—and very dangerous.

Just as there were two prologues to this lecture, so I will offer in closing two epilogues—both stories, both brief.

Deep de-synchronized time, deep de-centered space, and the encounter with the de-named God of deep prophesy all involve us in changes of scale that are both abrupt and enormous. William Wordsworth in his *Two-Part Prelude* of 1798 tells the story of his boyhood experience of such an unanticipated change of scale.

I read:

...“one evening ...
I went alone into a shepherd’s boat,
a skiff, that to a willow-tree was tied
within a rocky cave, its usual home.
The moon was up, the lake was shining clear
among the hoary mountains; from the shore
I pushed, and struck the oars, and struck again
in cadence, and my little boat moved on
just like a man who walks with stately step
though bent on speed. It was an act of stealth
and troubled pleasure. Not without the voice
of mountain echoes did my boat move on,
leaving behind her still on either side
small circles glittering idly in the moon,
until they melted all into one track
of sparkling light. A rocky steep uprose
above the cavern of the willow-tree,
and now, as suited one who proudly rowed
with his best skill, I fixed a steady view

upon the top of that same craggy ridge,
the bound of the horizon—for behind
was nothing but the stars and the grey sky.
She was an elfin pinnacle; twenty times
I dipped my oars into the silent lake,
and as I rose upon the stroke my boat
went heaving through the water like a swan—
when from behind that rocky steep—till then
the bound of the horizon, a huge cliff,
as if with voluntary power instinct,
upreared its head. I struck, and struck again
and, growing still in stature, the huge cliff
rose up between me and the stars, and still,
with measured motion, like a living thing
strode after me. With trembling hands I turned,
and through the silent water stole my way
back to the cavern of the willow-tree.
There in her mooring-place I left my bark
and through the meadows homeward went with grave
and serious thoughts; and after I had seen
that spectacle, for many days my brain
worked with a dim and undetermined sense
of unknown modes of being. In my thoughts
there was a darkness—call it solitude,

or blank desertion—no familiar shapes
of hourly objects, images of trees,
of sea or sky, no colours of green fields,
but huge and mighty forms that do not live
like living men moved slowly through my mind
by day, and were the trouble of my dreams.”

Ten years later Wordsworth is still thinking about this experience from his early life as it recedes in time when he writes in his *Ode on Intimations of Immortality*:

“The thought of our past years in me doth breed
perpetual benediction: not indeed
for that which is most worthy to be blest;
delight and liberty, the simple creed
of childhood....
Not for these I raise
the song of thanks and praise;
but for those obstinate questionings,
fallings from us, vanishings:
blank misgivings of a creature
moving about in worlds not realized....”

A few lines earlier in this *Ode* Wordsworth had addressed these verses I just read to a child whose innocence and purity of thought recall those same traits that, miraculously, survived in Esther. We might re-address Wordsworth’s evocation of these traits to Esther and to her book:

“Thou, whose exterior semblance doth belie
Thy Soul’s immensity,

Thou best philosopher, who yet dost keep
Thy heritage, thou Eye among the blind,
That, deaf and silent, read'st the eternal deep,
Haunted forever by the eternal mind,--
Mighty prophet! Seer blest!
On whom those truths do rest,
Which we are toiling all our lives to find,
In darkness lost, the darkness of the grave;..."

Our second story, from Rabbi Jose who lives on for us in the pages of the Talmud, takes up the situation of a man moving about in darkness. The question being discussed on this page (Megillah 24b) is whether a blind man is permitted to say the blessing publicly for light which he cannot see:

Rabbi Jose said: All my days I was troubled over this verse: "And you will grope at noonday as the blind man gropes in darkness." (Deut. 28:29) Now, (I wondered), what difference is there between darkness and light to a blind man? until I witnessed the (following) incident (which illuminated the verse for me): One time I was walking in the darkness of nighttime, and I saw a blind man who was walking on the road, and (he had) a torch in his hand. I said to him, "My son, why do you need this torch?" He answered me, "As long as a torch is in my hand, people see me and save me from ditches, thorns, and briars."

When Rabbi Jose's blind man says "ditches, thorns, and briars" he means in the rabbinic idiom of discourse "nihilism, pointed skepticism, and intellectual crankiness."

Let us now close with the two sentences from Emmanuel Levinas with which we began:

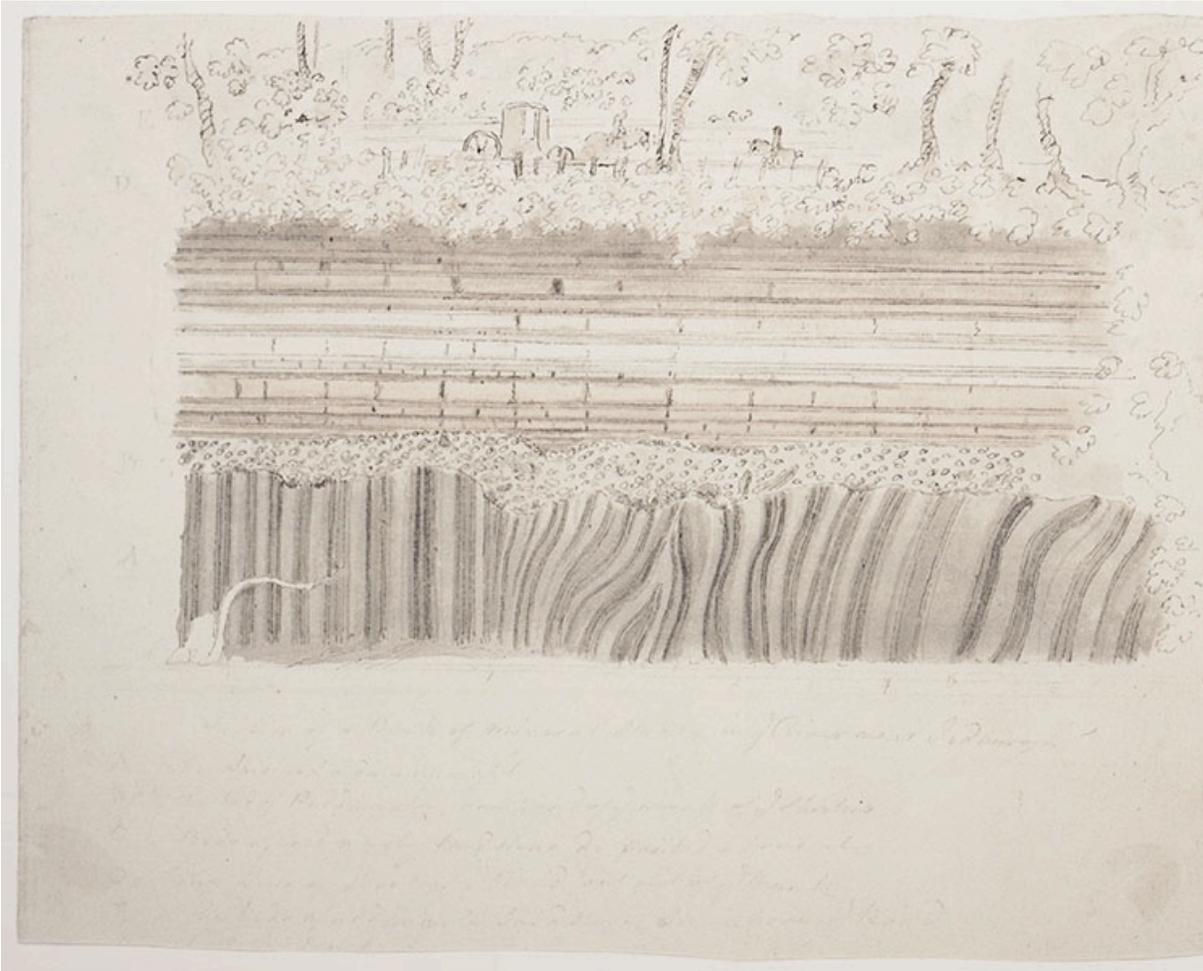
"Everything depends on the possibility of vibrating with a meaning that is not synchronized with the speech that captures it

and cannot be fitted into its order. Everything depends on the possibility of a signification that signifies an irreducible disturbance.”

To me the Book of Esther is disturbing—deeply, irreducibly disturbing. Does anything depend on it? No, everything depends on it.

Everything.

Figure 1: James Clark's drawing of the Jedburgh unconformity (1787)



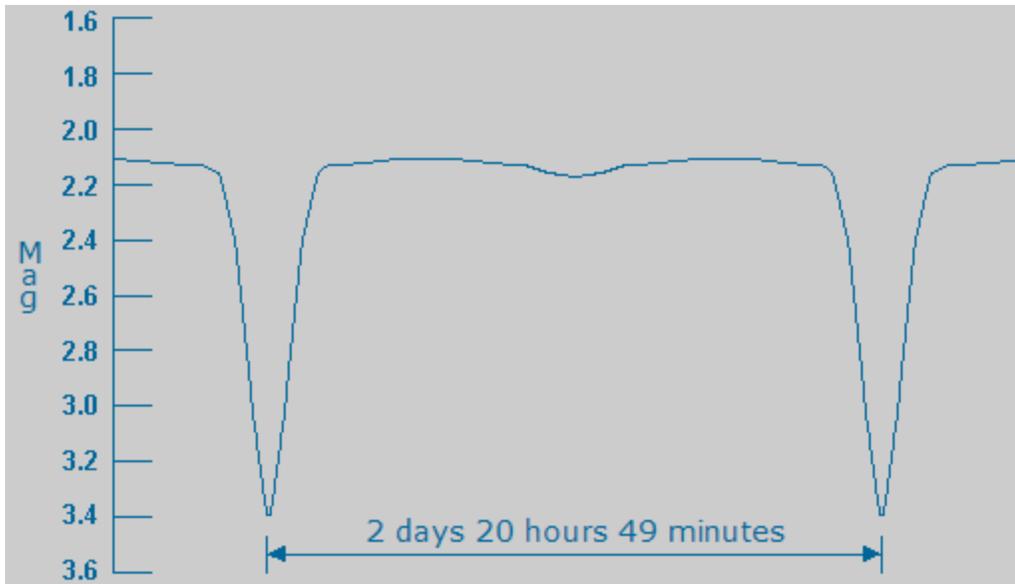


Figure 2: Light curve of the eclipsing variable star Algol (Beta Persei). The star stays at its faintest value for two hours centered on the time of mid-eclipse.

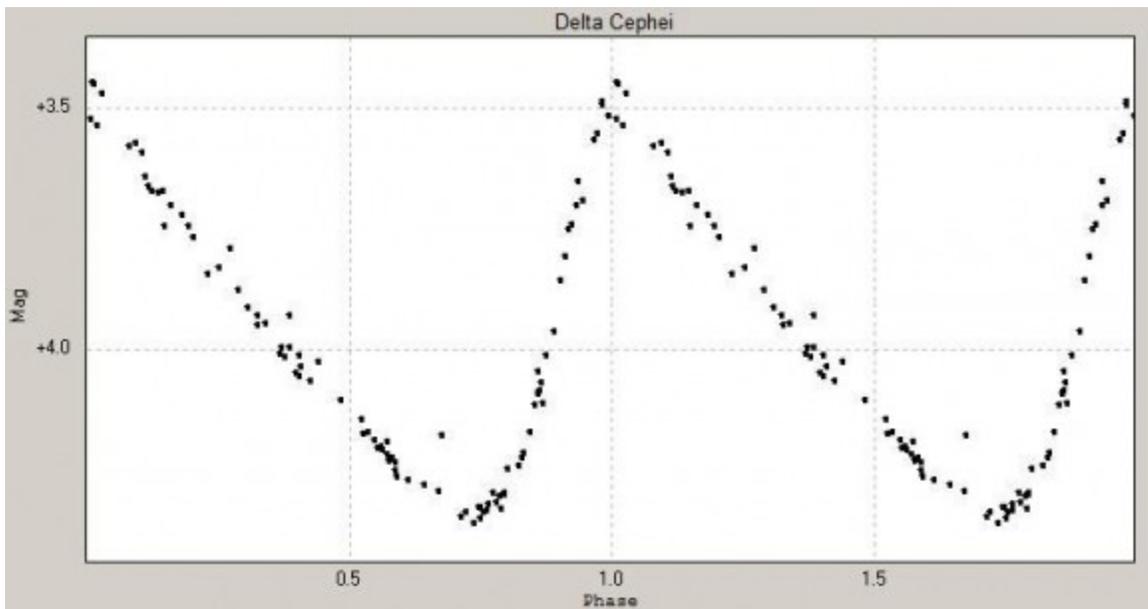


Figure 3: Light curve of Delta Cephei. The star's period maximum to maximum is 5.3662 days. The descent from maximum to minimum is about four times longer than the ascent from minimum to maximum.

