

HOW THE LITERARY FEATURES OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER  
SUPPORT ITS PRIMARY PURPOSE

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## ABSTRACT

The Book of Esther is controversial for a variety of reasons. Amid the countless debates about the book, it is easy to look past its literary beauty and powerful message. This study is an appreciation of the Book of Esther's literary features. The first part will examine how the book has been viewed throughout history. The second part will compile different opinions on the purpose of the book. The third part will specifically treat Esther's literary features. By the time I am finished, I intend to have proven that the literary features of the Book of Esther serve to heighten emotional impact in order to support its primary purpose.

## INTRODUCTION

“It’s complicated.” This is what Esther would say if you asked her what she thought of her relationship with King Xerxes. “It’s complicated.” This is also what many scholars would say if you asked them what they thought of the Book of Esther. It is very difficult to know what to make of Esther. The book has been widely accepted as part of both the Jewish and Christian canons. Yet, the book has at the same time been widely questioned regarding its morality and historicity. The controversy surrounding the book is not surprising. Esther contains the killing of thousands of civilians. It contains the woman who is supposed to be every little Hebrew girl’s number one example of strength and purity cavorting around the sex-and-alcohol-crazed Persian royal court. It contains not one mention of God’s name in any form. Early skeptics of Esther were caught up in the book’s moral and theological issues. Modern skeptics of the book have been occupied by its historical issues. There is limited external evidence to verify many of the events and people in the story. Some of the extra-biblical sources that have been uncovered seem to conflict with the biblical story in their portrayal of names and customs at the time of King Xerxes.<sup>1</sup> Then there is the history of the Book of Esther itself. Why is there an Old Greek version that is considerably different from the Hebrew? Why were there no copies of the book found in the caves of the Qumran community?<sup>2</sup> All these concerns, while important, can quickly take the focus off the *message* of the Book of Esther, not to mention the book’s overarching masterful storytelling and fascinating small details.

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1. Karen Jobes, *Esther*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1999), 31.

2. Mervin Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1993), 277.

My goal is to get to the bottom of the purpose of the Book of Esther. And I feel that a mere study of the book's moral controversies and historical accuracies does not lend itself to achieving that goal. The words of Joyce Baldwin resonate with me: "I believe it would be true to say that a study of literary themes has done more to promote an understanding of the book than all the discussions about historicity, which so occupied scholars earlier this century."<sup>3</sup>

With that in mind, this is foremost a study of the literary features of Esther and how they relate to the book's purpose. It is not primarily a study of the historical accuracy or canonical status of the Book of Esther. To admit my bias, I believe the events did happen based on what the Holy Spirit has convinced me of concerning the Book of Esther and based on my view of the truth of Christian Scripture as a whole. But at the same time, it would be foolish and inauthentic to ignore the historical and moral concerns of so many before me. Just as important, perhaps these are some of the same concerns the reader shares.

So, to open the door to allow the reader to see past the controversies of the book, this study will first examine and evaluate others' views on the book's historical and moral issues. Second, this study will look at different possibilities for the purpose, or primary message, of the book. This second part will draw from some of the same sources as the first and follow their opinions to their conclusions. Third, this study will expound on the literary features of Esther to show that they serve to heighten emotional impact in order to support the book's central purpose. This third part will be primarily original work with the translated Hebrew text of the Book of Esther.

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3. Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther: An Introduction and Commentary*, TOCT (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 29.

## I. VIEWS ON THE BOOK OF ESTHER'S HISTORICAL AND MORAL ISSUES

Concerning the controversial contents of Esther, the views of Jews and Christians throughout the years can be placed in three groupings: Those that take issue with the book's morality, those that take issue with the book's historical accuracy, and those that have no complaint against the book. These groups are somewhat generalized for the sake of maintaining clear categories. There are different nuances and opinions within these groups that will be mentioned.

Note that while the historical issues will be raised and answered in this section, most of the moral issues will be raised, but not answered until the "literary features" section. This is because I believe that some of the perceived moral issues of the book are intentional choices of the author which fall more directly under literary features designed to speak a message to the reader.

### **Moral Issues of the Book of Esther According to the Talmud**

The Book of Esther is estimated to have been written sometime in the fifth century B.C.<sup>4</sup> Issues with the morality of the book flare up as early as the second century A.D. There is evidence from the Talmud of a discussion about whether the Book of Esther (along with Ruth and Song of

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4. Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*, Vol. 3: The Writings (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc, 2019), 713. Jobes, *Esther*, 30. Many factors for authorship date must be considered like vocabulary (Persian loan words), script, and historical events. See Alter and Jobes for more information, also Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 290.

Songs) “makes the hands unclean.” Somewhat counter-intuitively, if a writing makes the hands unclean, that means that it is part of canonical Scripture. Perhaps the idea behind the expression is that human hands are not worthy to touch something so sacred. The debate about the canonicity of Esther seemed to carry on for about a century, along with arguments about whether the scroll required a mantle to be read. In the end, the debate was settled, and there was full agreement that the Book of Esther makes the hands unclean. That Esther should not fall under the same category as the rest of Scripture appeared to be a minority view among the rabbis. Nevertheless, this debate shows that there was some discomfort among Jewish teachers concerning the canonical status of the book early on.<sup>5</sup> Why? Beckwith proposes on the basis of *Jubilees* (a pseudepigraphal work found in the Qumran caves) that second-century Jews were extremely concerned with marriage to foreigners. This concern was a product of the times as Hellenization was in full swing, and many devout Jews were trying to remain faithful to their culture and religion.<sup>6</sup> This is a likely explanation for the hesitation on the part of these early rabbis to endorse a book starring a Jewish woman who marries a pagan king.

But the unclean hands debate goes deeper than Esther’s marriage to the king. There are hints of other moral issues in the eyes of early rabbis. *Targum Rishon* contains rabbinic views from 500–700 A.D. It is not hard to miss the rabbis’ concern with the apparent lack of God’s name in the book. For example, in the commentary on Esther 6:1, it is stated that the women of Israel cry out to the LORD, and he hears them and sends an angel to disturb the sleep of the

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5. Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1996), 275–6.

6. Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 292.

king.<sup>7</sup> While it is understood that the purpose of the Targum is to fill in scriptural gaps, the fact that God's name and explicit activity is brought up so frequently in contrast to the Book of Esther itself shows that Jewish teachers felt a need to insert God directly into the story. There was an opinion among rabbis, whether stated explicitly or not, that the Book of Esther was perhaps too secular compared to the rest of Scripture. Yet the lack of God's name is not the only secular aspect the early Jews had issues with.

Also in the Targum, great care was taken to emphasize the virtuousness of Mordecai and Esther. Mordecai is described as a devout Jew who is faithful to the Torah and his community. Esther is a pious and obedient woman.<sup>8</sup> But in the Book of Esther, straightforward descriptions of the main characters' morality are glaringly absent. The reader doesn't know what to make of Esther's involvement in the king's harem and the Persian royal court. The rabbinic commentary on the book impresses upon the reader on multiple occasions the absolute purity of both Mordecai and Esther's actions. As with the case of the inclusion of the LORD's name in the section above, this shows that early commentators of the book had concerns about Esther and Mordecai's moral character to the degree that they felt obligated to expound on the characters' motives and reputations.

Finally, in the opinion of some early Jews, the greatest moral stumbling block for the acceptance of Esther was the fact that the book institutes a mandatory festival apart from the already established festivals of Moses. There seemed to be a hesitancy among Jewish teachers to

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7. Alinda Damsma. "The Targums to Esther," *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 47, no. 1 (2014), 131. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42751220>.

8. Eliezer L. Segal, "The Babylonian Esther Midrash: An Overview." *Vol. 3 The Babylonian Esther Midrash: A Critical Commentary: Esther Chapter 5 to End*, Brown Judaic Studies (2020), 247–9. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzpv4t6.10>.



acknowledge the legitimacy of a festival if it was not given through Moses, the prophet to whom God spoke face to face, especially since Purim was established so much later than the others. Nothing was to be added to Mosaic law.<sup>9</sup> The *Seder Olam* (a second century Old Testament chronology<sup>10</sup>) tries to get around this by claiming that Esther was a prophetess, which gave her and Mordecai the authority to institute Purim for future observance.<sup>11</sup> But this is unprovable.

Later, it seems most Jews were not troubled by the institution of the festival. The events of Esther were unique and extraordinary. The festival need not be seen as a religious observance or an addition to the law in the same way the others were, and even the word used for the Exodus festivals is different (*hag* versus *mišteh* in Esther). Purim is also a slightly different situation since it was not established strictly by the LORD (see Lev 23 compared to Est 9). Besides, based on what is seen in the Gospels, the Pharisees had no issues adding to the Mosaic law in various instances.

In addition to the scandal of adding to the Mosaic festivals, there was documented in the later Palestinian Talmud a fear among early rabbis that the celebration of such a fervent patriotic holiday could draw unwanted negative attention from other nationalities.<sup>12</sup> It also didn't help matters that the festival of Purim was initially viewed tongue in cheek as an excuse to party and

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9. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 275.

10. Wikipedia, "Seder Olam Rabbah," last edited October 2021.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seder\\_Olam\\_Rabbah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seder_Olam_Rabbah)

11. Eliezer, "The Babylonian Esther Midrash," 249.

12. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon*, 313. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 275.

get so drunk that “one can no longer distinguish between ‘Cursed be Haman’ and ‘Blessed be Mordecai.’”<sup>13</sup> Purim looks more like a carnival than a religious observance, even today.

### **Esther and Qumran**

Another source to consider regarding the moral issues ancient Jews raised with the book of Esther is the Qumran caves. Biblical archeologists have found no trace of the Esther scroll at Qumran. Why is there evidence from the Qumran community of every other book of the Hebrew Bible except for Esther? The same issue of marriage to an outsider has been proposed, but the book of Ruth features a Moabite marrying an Israelite, and copies of Ruth were found at Qumran. If foreign marriage was the issue for the community, this seems inconsistent.<sup>14</sup>

Robert Alter and Mervin Breneman have suggested that the reason the book is not found at Qumran is because of its secular setting and lack of God’s name.<sup>15</sup> This is not the first time, and it will not be the last that we see a group or individual offended by the absence of God’s name and by the secular setting of the book. But Beckwith proposes a different solution. He maintains that the primary reason the book was not found at Qumran is that the community didn’t celebrate Purim. They couldn’t because of their unique 364-day calendar. Purim fell on a Sabbath for the Qumran community, therefore, the festival was invalid, so the book by extension

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13. Adele Berlin, *Esther*, JPS (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), xlvi. Author’s summary of a statement from Talmud B. Megillah 7b.

14. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon*, 292.

15. Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 713. See also: Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 277.

was compromised.<sup>16</sup> This is an interesting theory, but it is impossible to prove that the calendar was the reason for the book's exclusion.

The reason for Esther's exclusion at Qumran will likely never be known definitively, but these options are at least enough to give a theory. However, it is also possible that the missing scroll at Qumran has no bearing on whether the community made use of Esther. The copy might simply have gone missing or been destroyed somehow.

### **The Additions of Old Greek Esther**

Keeping in mind the various issues noted above about the secularity and questionable morality of the Book of Esther, it should come as no surprise that a longer Greek version of Esther exists. Widely accepted by most serious biblical scholarship as an addition to the Hebrew original, it is estimated that the Old Greek version of Esther was produced very early, likely sometime from 178–78 BC (seeing as it was already widely in circulation by the second century).<sup>17</sup> It is thought to have been produced during the Hellenistic period by a Jew who sought to cushion the secularity of the book (much as the comments in the Targum did), especially as Jewish audiences were understandably clinging to pure Judaism in the face of Greek secular culture.<sup>18</sup> In a roundabout way, the very existence of Greek Esther is evidence of the book's skeptical

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16. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon*, 292-3.

17. Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 290. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 278. For more on the dating of the Old Greek version, see Breneman 298 or see Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon*, 312.

18. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon*, 312.

reception. There was a desire to create a book of Esther that was morally palatable. Here are just a few examples from the 105 additional verses found in the Old Greek version of Esther.<sup>19</sup>

This is a section from Mordecai's dream that takes place before any of the events in the Hebrew text. "They cried out to God; and at their outcry, as though from a tiny spring, there came a great river, with abundant water; light came, and the sun rose, and the lowly were exalted and devoured those held in honor. Mordecai saw in this dream what God had determined to do, and after he awoke he had it on his mind, seeking all day to understand it in every detail" (Greek Esther 1 Addition A 11:10–12, NRSV).

This is the beginning of Mordecai's prayer before Esther goes before the king to ask him to come to her dinner. "Then Mordecai prayed to the Lord, calling to remembrance all the works of the Lord. He said, 'O Lord, Lord, you rule as King over all things, for the universe is in your power and there is no one who can oppose you when it is your will to save Israel'" (Greek Esther 5 Addition C 13:8–9).

This is the beginning of Esther's prayer before the same situation. "Then Queen Esther, seized with deadly anxiety, fled to the Lord. She took off her splendid apparel and put on the garments of distress and mourning, and instead of costly perfumes she covered her head with ashes and dung, and she utterly humbled her body... She prayed to the Lord God of Israel and said: "'O my Lord, you only are our king; help me'" (Greek Esther 5 Addition C 14:1–3).

These sections of Old Greek Esther make it clear that the author was trying to eliminate some of the "problems" of the original version. With the addition of a divine dream, God's name, prayer, and humbling oneself before the Lord, the book appears designed to change Esther into

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19. Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 298.

something more closely resembling the rest of the biblical narratives. The Jewish author was concerned that the people would not accept Esther because of its general secularity, its lack of God's name, and its failure to mention worship. These are the same concerns brought forth by the Talmud.

### **Ancient Christianity and the Book of Esther**

Much has been said in this study so far about the moral objections of ancient Jews to the Book of Esther, but just as prominent were those found among early Christians, many of which overlapped with those of their Jewish counterparts. In the early Christian community, the silence about the book speaks volumes. In the first seven centuries of the Christian church, not a single commentary was written on Esther.<sup>20</sup> Either these ancient Christian commentaries were lost in history or they never existed. It is not too wild an assumption that perhaps no commentaries have been found because early Christians were not sure what to make of the book and its controversial contents.

There are a handful of early Christian church fathers that have a word or two on Esther. Clement of Rome mentions Esther but does not comment on the book's reception or canonicity. At the end of the second century A.D., Esther is referred to three times by Clement of Alexandria. He calls Esther "a type of redemption who adorned herself mystically." Hippolytus of Rome in the third century A.D. also mentions Esther but states nothing substantial about the book. Origen includes Esther in his Old Testament list around 230 A.D., and many Western Church fathers follow his list. This evidence so far at the very least shows that in the Western Church and Egypt, Esther was widely used and accepted as part of the canon. Some members of

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20. Jobes, *Esther*, 21.

the Eastern Church, however, had greater difficulty accepting the legitimacy of Esther. Melito does not include the book in his Old Testament list. Gregory of Nazianzus and Athanasius follow him in omitting the book. Esther and Ezra/Nehemiah were the last two books to be accepted into the Syrian church canon. All this being said, both the Eastern and Western Christian churches eventually accepted Esther as Scripture, even if there was little commentary on the book's contents.<sup>21</sup>

### **Reformation Era Christianity's View of Esther**

At the time of the Reformation, the use of biblical allegory was very popular, so it should come as no surprise that many Christian commentators of the sixteenth century desired to turn Esther into something symbolic rather than literal.<sup>22</sup> Other Christian theologians of the time, such as John Calvin, avoided Esther altogether, never writing a commentary or recording a sermon about the book.<sup>23</sup>

It seems the Reformation era Christian church, much like the ancient rabbis, took issue with the book's secularity including, but not limited to, Esther's (the character, not the book) distinct lack of moral fiber, the lack of God's name, and an alleged Jewish nationalistic agenda. Given that this era in church history was one of hatred and ridicule toward the Jews, the last issue is almost expected. The two former issues also are typical of this period as the Christian church, in general, was extremely concerned with outward piety. Martin Luther's statements on

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21. Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon*, 296-7, 309.

22. For more on how the Esther has been misinterpreted by Christians in Medieval Europe, see Veronika Bachmann, "The Esther Narratives as Reminders for Jews and for Christians," *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 47, no. 1 (2014): 117-26, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42751219>.

23. Jobes, *Esther*, 21.

the Book of Esther are reflective of these views. Allegedly, in one of his table talks, Luther wished that Esther did not exist because it “Judaizes too much” and it “contains a great deal of heathen naughtiness.”<sup>24</sup>

### **Modern Christianity’s Moral Concern with the Book of Esther**

Modern Christians have added one more moral concern to the usual mix of issues. More recently, there has been controversy surrounding the second decree to wipe out the Persians and Esther’s request to extend the killing an extra day (Est 9:1, 13).<sup>25</sup> Modern society, in general, is more sensitive to anything perceived as propaganda, so the Jews’ seeking vengeance over their enemies has not aged particularly well. Apart from the pro-Jewish nature of this edict, the sheer violence of it has disturbed consciences. Esther 8:11 says that the king’s decree allowed for the destruction of men, women, and children. The text does not say that the Jews took advantage of this allowance. Yet it is hard to imagine that every person killed that day was an advocate of Haman’s evil plot. There were probably innocents caught in the crossfire, which is a disturbing thought.

This moral concern about mass killing will be addressed now because it will not be covered later in this study. There need not be too much said about this objection. The author of Esther is silent on the issue. God did not decree this mass killing. Mordecai, and by extension, King Xerxes did. The text contains no indication of whether this was a good or just action.

Breneman focuses on the fact that this event was simply a reversal of the original edict. Just as

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24. Jonathan Magonet, “Introduction to the Book of Esther,” *Bible Week, Osnabruck* (28 July-3 August 2013), *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 47, no. 1 (2014), 100. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42751216>.

25. Jonathan Magonet, “The God Who Hides: Some Jewish Responses to the Book of Esther,” *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 47, no. 1 (2014), 115. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42751218>.

Haman could do with the Jews what he pleased (3:11), so also, the Jews could now do with the Persians what they pleased.<sup>26</sup> The text states that the Jews were given the right to assemble and defend themselves (8:11). The Jews are careful not to lay their hands on any plunder (9:10) presumably to avoid any connotation of greed or power as a motivation.<sup>27</sup>

This leads to the conclusion that the second edict, whether right or wrong, was carried out primarily for the protection of the Jews. Instead of an act of revenge, it could more accurately be called a pre-emptive strike performed in self-defense. If the Jews had not routed the Persians here, they themselves would have been routed. One could also see in this edict God's judgment on an unbelieving people. God's judgment on an entire nation is observed elsewhere in Scripture. This brings us to a larger conversation that doesn't need to happen here. It is enough to say that God is just, knowing every heart and having every right to punish sin and unbelief. The Christian who sees this as God's judgment need not be troubled by it. Equally, the Christian who sees God's judgment sees God's grace to preserve his people and the lineage of Jesus Christ in the same event.

### **Modern Scholarship and Historical Objections to the Book of Esther**

While the early concerns about the Book of Esther were moral objections, more recent commentary on Esther has centered on historical issues. The majority of modern commentators categorize the Book of Esther as a sort of historical novella because they cannot accept the historical details as presented in the book. To generalize, Esther is viewed as a slightly more accurate version of a fairytale. It has some truth in it. It takes place in a real country and culture.

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26. Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 359.

27. John F. Brug, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, PBC (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 193.



Some of the details in the story might have been true, but overall, the events and characters were either exaggerated or made up.<sup>28</sup> But, the author of Esther presents the book as history, taking care to include dates, places, rulers, and records (see Est 1:13; 9:1 for examples). Why then have so many questioned the book's historicity? Let's look at some of the issues.

### **Limited Extra-Biblical Evidence**

One large historical issue that Robert Alter, Adele Berlin, and David Zucker mention is the limited extra-biblical evidence for the events and descriptions in the book.<sup>29</sup> There are quotes from Herodotus that line up with the biblical King Xerxes. There is the fact of early canonical acceptance by the early Christian church and the rabbis. There are archeological discoveries that show the lavishness of Persian court life. There is a cuneiform tablet from the period featuring a certain Marduka who served in the court of Susa.<sup>30</sup> These pieces of evidence are not exactly resounding see-it-to-believe-it proof to silence critics of the book. Add to the scant extra-biblical evidence the fact that the Book of Esther is not mentioned anywhere else in Christian Scripture, and this is a recipe for skepticism regarding the book's historical accuracy.<sup>31</sup>

As a counter to the limited evidence argument, C.F. Keil believes that Herodotus's descriptions of King Xerxes are quite significant in the case for the historical accuracy of

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28. Baldwin, *Esther: An Introduction*, 34.

29. Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 714. Berlin, *Esther*, xvii. David Zucker, "The Importance of Being Esther: Rabbis, Canonicity, Problems, and Possibilities," *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 47, no. 1 (2014), 103. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42751217>.

30. Longman III and Raymond B. Dillard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 216.

31. Brug, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 154.

Esther.<sup>32</sup> Baldwin finds it compelling that there is a fifth-century tablet with “Marduka” inscribed on it. If there is evidence of Mordecai’s existence, who’s to say other characters and details of the book couldn’t be true? Widespread use of the book in Christian and Jewish circles as early as second century A.D. is also a positive indication that it was taken seriously if not by all as a historical text, at the very least as a wisdom text. Despite not being abundant, the extra-biblical evidence we do have demands consideration.

### **Persian Court Details**

The accuracy of some of the Persian cultural details, especially pertaining to the king and his court, has been questioned as well. Adele Berlin and Karen Jobes have noted the strangeness of King Xerxes’ marriage to an “outsider.” Typically, Persian royals married within seven royal families.<sup>33</sup> Robert Alter has noted that based on the Cyrus Cylinder (a record of Cyrus’ entrance into Babylon), the Persian empire is famously tolerant and peaceful toward its ethnic minorities, so for Xerxes to accept a decree to massacre the Jews would’ve been out of character for the nation.<sup>34</sup> Finally, there is the matter of the irrevocable decree of the king. In Esther 8:8, King Xerxes tells Esther and Mordecai to write another decree to take the place of Haman’s original one because “no document written in the king’s name and sealed with his ring can be revoked” (NIV 2011). Jobes indicates that the main issue with this practice is that there is no extra-biblical

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32. C.F. Keil, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2011), 192.

33. Berlin, *Esther*, xvii. Jobes, *Esther*, 31.

34. Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 713.

evidence for it.<sup>35</sup> Berlin asks a question of logic: How could a nation function that way and get any governing done?<sup>36</sup>

Whereas Berlin, Jobes, and Alter see the Persian cultural details as a weak point of the book historically, Keil, Baldwin, Longman, and Dillard see them as a strong indication that the book is historical. The vast extent of Xerxes' empire is consistent with extra-biblical sources. The prohibition of mourning in the court of the king was a cultural feature of the Persians (4:2), as was the use of dispatches, or horse riders ("runners"), that delivered messages throughout the kingdom (3:13; 8:10). The Persian monarchy indeed was advised by seven counselors (1:10). Under the Persians, the property of a traitor typically was given back to the crown, just as it happened with Haman's property in Esther 8:1. Herodotus backs up the fact that impalement (or hanging) was one of the Persians' preferred techniques of execution. He also confirms (concerning Haman's boast in Esther 5:11) that a large family of sons was something sought after culturally.

Finally, regarding Xerxes' irrational and frankly unbelievable behavior throughout the Book of Esther, Herodotus would attest that this is par for the course for King Xerxes. Xerxes is described as a cruel man of luxurious indulgences. Keil relays a story from Herodotus about Xerxes that "he once beheaded the builders of the bridge over Hellespont because a storm destroyed it. He commanded that the sea be scourged and chained by sinking a few fetters to it."<sup>37</sup> Even if this is only a legend, it shows how those closer to the period remembered King Xerxes. Is it any surprise then that King Xerxes in the Book of Esther apathetically allows a

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35. Jobes, *Esther*, 31.

36. Berlin, *Esther*, xvii.

37. C.F. Keil, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 192.

genocide attempt within his walls (3:7–11), leaves life or death decisions in the hands of others (even to a roll of the dice), throws a 180-day party (1:4), chooses a queen from a beauty contest (2:2–4), and spends his time drinking instead of listening to his subjects (3:15)? To lean into a non-historical, “burlesque” view of the book, Magonet accuses Xerxes of being a “silly caricature,”<sup>38</sup> Berlin “a pampered and bumbling monarch.”<sup>39</sup> Yet, according to Herodotus, that is what the historical king Xerxes truly was. Many of the objections about the normal functioning of the Persian court can be traced back to an abnormal, dysfunctional ruler in King Xerxes.

### **Suspect Names**

Then, there is the issue of names. Frederic Bush mentions some (among them Jensen and Zimmern) who assert that the Book of Esther is a historicization of Babylonian myths in which the Elamite gods, Human and Mashti, were defeated by the Babylonian gods, Marduk and Astarte/Ishtar.<sup>40</sup> Allen Clifton thinks that Esther is possibly a mix of these Babylonian myths and some Old Testament stories from Israel’s history.<sup>41</sup> It is true that the names of these gods sound similar to Haman, Vashti, Mordecai, and Esther from the biblical account. But this is not strong enough evidence to say that the Esther story was formed out of Babylonian mythology. Although Jonathan Magonet falls on the side of the book being historically questionable, he points out that the names of Esther and Mordecai were likely popular Persian names because of their

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38. Magonet, “The God Who Hides,” 113.

39. Berlin, *Esther*, xx.

40. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 298.

41. Allen J. Clifton, *Esther-Psalms*, BBC (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1971), 3.

connotation with the gods.<sup>42</sup> Much like how Daniel and his friends had their Hebrew names and their Babylonian names, Esther and Mordecai had theirs. Esther's Hebrew name is mentioned in 2:7, Hadassah. Similarly, Haman and Vashti may have just been popular names. It is not unheard of even in the rest of Scripture to see people named after gods.

Another potential problem with Esther's name in the eyes of many commentators such as Jobes, Longman, Dillard, Baldwin, and Berlin is the fact that the records we have from Herodotus state that Queen Amestris was on the throne at the same time that Esther is supposed to be according to the biblical account (the seventh to the twelfth year of Xerxes' reign).<sup>43</sup> Amestris is not mentioned at all in the biblical account, leading to an apparent historical contradiction. Who truly was queen at this time?

There are a couple of possible explanations that would allow both Herodotus' account and the Book of Esther's account to be true. Baldwin proposes one theory that "Amestris" is a long form of "Esther," and that the two queens are the same person. This theory, however, leads to another difficulty that according to historical record, a third son was born to Xerxes and Amestris in 483 B.C., when Esther likely was not yet of marrying age. Others have tried to identify Amestris as Vashti. But Baldwin favors a different option. King Xerxes had multiple "queens." Esther may have been one of two queens, or one of many. This explanation seems rather fitting of Xerxes' reputation as a womanizer.<sup>44</sup>

One final naming issue concerns the festival that is issued at the end of the book, Purim. According to the Book of Esther, Purim comes from the word *pur*, which means "lot," referring

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42. Magonet, "The God Who Hides," 113.

43. Baldwin, *Esther*, 20. Berlin, *Esther*, xvii. Jobes, *Esther*, 31. Longman, Dillard, *An Introduction*, 217.

44. Baldwin, *Esther*, 20.

to the lot that had originally been cast to determine in what month the Jews would be destroyed (9:23–26). Berlin calls *Purim* a false etymology.<sup>45</sup> Clifton proposes that the word is of Babylonian or Persian origin and that it could be more emblematic of the Esther story as a whole, adding to the evidence that the book is a hodge-podge of different sources and myths.<sup>46</sup> Both of these commentators perhaps take this incident a little too far. It is just as likely that the word, *pur*, is a natural evolution of language that is not indicative of a wider problem in the book. Yes, the word is not Hebrew or Aramaic, but language spreads quickly. If the word is Persian or Babylonian, it's likely the Jews picked it up from exile. If the word is of another origin, like the Assyrian word for “stone” as Brown, Driver, and Briggs suggest, then it could be that the word was picked up by the people at an earlier point in history.<sup>47</sup>

### **The Festival of Purim**

Changing topics from names, but staying with Purim, some modern commentators have questioned the historicity of Esther because of the festival. Berlin sees Purim as a sort of escape for the Jewish people, an excuse to channel strong emotions and get the immorality out of their systems.<sup>48</sup> The Book of Esther then, from one perspective, becomes more an excuse to celebrate Purim and less a set of events that warrant remembrance. Clifton takes this “excuse for Purim” further by suggesting that maybe Purim was celebrated before the Book of Esther even came to

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45. Berlin, *Esther*, xlvi.

46. Clifton, *Esther-Psalms*, 3.

47. F. Brown, S. R. Driver, C.A. Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 807.

48. Berlin, *Esther*, xxii.

be. Esther was created to justify a celebration that had already existed.<sup>49</sup> But there is no evidence to prove this claim, so it is best to take the author of Esther's explanation that the festival was instituted because of the joyful conclusion of the book.

### **Esther's Similarity to Other Old Testament Narratives**

There are two more historical issues that modern commentators have raised which merit discussion. One is the book's similarity to other Old Testament narratives. Garleman and Clifton point to connections with the Exodus narrative.<sup>50</sup> For example, both Esther and Moses were adopted, both Esther and Moses hide their identities, and both books feature the Amalekites as enemies of the Jews (Haman is thought to be an Amalekite in the Esther story).<sup>51</sup> Alter and Berg feel the Book of Esther is suspiciously close to the Joseph story.<sup>52</sup> Examples of this similarity include Jews that rise to power in a foreign court, rulers that have trouble sleeping which leads to an opportunity for the main characters, and Jewish identities that are revealed at a banquet scene.<sup>53</sup> The conclusion that these scholars draw from the similarities is that in one form or another, the story of Esther was copied from these already prominent Old Testament stories.

Baldwin dismisses the connections between the stories as nothing more than the fact that they have similar contents and vocabulary due to related situations in the stories (the three stories

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49. Clifton, *Esther-Psalms*, 3.

50. Clifton, *Esther-Psalms*, 3.

51. Longman, Dillard, *An Introduction*, 218.

52. Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 714.

53. Longman, Dillard, *An Introduction*, 218.

do after all feature Israelites living in foreign lands and dealing with the political scenes there).<sup>54</sup> Longman and Dillard note the numerous details of the Esther story that are different from the Exodus and Joseph story. In Esther, the people are living in the land, not seeking to escape it as in Exodus. In Esther, the king lives and even continues to rule. Moses works against the government administration. Esther works through it. In the Joseph story, there is no personal enemy of the Jews like there is in Esther, and Joseph reveals his identity to his family, not to a king.<sup>55</sup> The differences in the stories are as numerous as the similarities. And just because a story contains some similarities to another, that does not mean it was copied.

### **An Unbelievable Sequence of Events**

The final historical objection raised by some scholars is that the chain of events in the Book of Esther is unbelievable. Alter feels that the book is too perfect. It's too much of a story to be true, and it must have been fabricated with an agenda.<sup>56</sup> Berlin finds it irrational that all of the events in the story could go Esther and Mordecai's way, especially the detail that Esther was somehow able to keep her Jewish identity a secret.<sup>57</sup> Magonet shares the same sentiment as Berlin, and Clifton sees the book's events as fabricated as well.<sup>58</sup> Many more commentators could be added to this list. The chain of events in the Book of Esther is unbelievable, but that doesn't mean they didn't happen.

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54. Baldwin, *Esther*, 25.

55. Longman, Dillard, *An Introduction*, 218-19.

56. Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 714.

57. Berlin, *Esther*, xvii.

58. Clifton, *Esther-Psalms*, 3. Magonet, "The God Who Hides," 112.



### Commentators That Take No Issue with The Book of Esther

In contrast to the commentaries examined above, Keil applies the classic saying: “Truth is stranger than fiction.”<sup>59</sup> There are commentators and groups that believe that not only did the events of Esther happen but that they happened for a reason. As has already been seen in this study, some of these commentators have taken up the task of defending the historicity of the book. Baldwin sees the Book of Esther as true and historically accurate, quoting Robert Gordis: “There is nothing intrinsically impossible or improbable in the central incident when the accretions due to the storyteller's art are set aside.”<sup>60</sup> Longman, Dillard, and Jobes feel that the historical issues in the Book of Esther are not insurmountable. They can be resolved with some thought and effort. Longman and Dillard also feel that the book should be read as a historical narrative since the author presents it as history.<sup>61</sup>

Beyond individual commentators, many modern-day Jews and Christians have embraced the Book of Esther. Orthodox Jewish groups have held to the historical validity of Esther because of their high view of Scripture.<sup>62</sup> Conservative Christians have done the same. More than that, both Jewish and Christian groups have treasured the book because of the connection they have felt with its characters and themes. The Jewish people have been persecuted throughout history, and many have clung to the Book of Esther as a ray of hope.<sup>63</sup> In fact, Jewish philosopher Moses

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59. Keil, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 192.

60. Baldwin, *Esther*, 24. Also, see page 33 for a list of other scholars who have viewed the book of Esther as historical. In addition to the names mentioned in this study: J. Hoshander, J.D. Schildenberg, J.S. Wright, R. Gordis.

61. Jobes, *Esther*, 31. Longman and Dillard, *An Introduction*, 218.

62. Magonet, “The God Who Hides,” 112. Magonet quotes Rabbi Meir Zlotowitz: “Belief in the authenticity of every book of the Torah is basic to Jewish faith, and we proceed from there.”

63. Baldwin, *Esther: An Introduction*, 37.

Maimonides ranked the book as equal to the Pentateuch for that reason: the “eschatological hope” that God has not forgotten Israel and that God will make all things right in the end.<sup>64</sup> In a more general way, Christians too have found comfort in the book. It is an assurance that despite his perceived absence, God still has control over the course of history.<sup>65</sup> Esther also serves as a reminder of God’s victory over the enemies of the Church, and by extension, God’s greatest victory over the devil through the work of Christ.<sup>66</sup>

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64. Jobes, *Esther*, 21 (quoting Moses Maimonides).

65. Brug, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 156.

66. Arie C. Leder, “Celebrating Relief from the Enemy: Discerning and Preaching Esther’s Post-Canonical Adversary,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 50, no. 2, pages 230-246 (2015), 235.  
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,cpid&custid=ns101346&db=rh&AN=ATLAn3825858&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

## II. THE PURPOSE OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

I hope studying the moral and historical issues of Esther has helped get rid of some of the controversy surrounding the book. I hope the reader is in a place of being open toward seeing the book as historical and meaningful to Christians and Jews. The prep work has been done. The rocks are removed so that a road can be paved toward understanding why the book was written. There is a wide variety of purposes that scholars have put forward. Many of these proposed main points are consistent with their respective commentator's view of the book's genre and historical accuracy.

Alter believes that the purpose of Esther is entertainment. The book is a "tale of national triumph that offered to diaspora Jews a pleasing vision of safety from imagined enemies and a grand entrée to the corridors of power." It's a clever, empowering, well-written fairytale in his opinion.<sup>67</sup> Berlin feels the same about the purpose of the book. She sees the book as a farce, a burlesque comedy. Both Berlin and Alter feel that the book may have been made to match the carnival atmosphere of Purim.<sup>68</sup> Magonet falls into the same camp, crediting Berlin in his essay for informing his view of the burlesque purpose of the book.<sup>69</sup> Zucker talks about the same farce

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67. Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 716.

68. Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 715. Berlin, *Esther*, lx. Berlin's genre label of farce could be accused of being a little too convenient, as she herself says on page xxii that "the largest interpretative problems melt away if the book is seen as a farce or comedy."

69. Magonet, "The God Who Hides," 112. Magonet also quotes on p. 115 perhaps the most cynical view of the book of Esther from Jewish philosopher, Emil L. Fackenheim: "(Esther is a story about) the Jews simply getting lucky over and over again. Deliverance coming from another place is merely an allusion to the fact that the Jews, just like the English muddling through, always find a way...The book is merely an explanation of the Jews' good luck. Esther is strange, no more."

genre but also highlights the serious events of the book that serve to give “a cautionary tale about the abuse of power” and an encouragement to stay vigilant in a hostile world.<sup>70</sup> Clifton as well ends up in a place not far from Berlin, Alter, Magonet, and Zucker, calling the book a “cult legend” designed to explain Purim much like Exodus was told to promote the Passover.<sup>71</sup>

The farce opinion of Berlin that has recently gained traction is proposed because of the book’s ironic sense of humor (an example from Berlin would be Haman’s misunderstanding of who the king is honoring in Esther 6:6–7<sup>72</sup>), its alleged sexual innuendos (one such case according to Alter is when Esther touches the top of the king’s scepter in 5:2<sup>73</sup>), and its larger-than-life characters (see the impulsiveness of King Xerxes in the previous section). Some of these humorous elements will be mentioned later in the “literary features” section in connection with my opinion about the book’s purpose.

Veronica Bachmann and Monica Isaac put forward a purpose of the book that focuses on humanity’s ability to make change. Because of the absence of God’s name and other religious themes in the book, they are led to say that the purpose of the book is to show the importance of taking one’s initiative and to show how individual effort can transform a community from distress to hope. Isaac especially emphasizes the leadership of the main characters.<sup>74</sup> Bush says something similar in his explanation of the main message of Esther. He believes the story part of

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70. Zucker, “The Importance of Being,” 102.

71. Clifton, *Esther-Psalms*, 2.

72. Berlin, *Esther*, 56.

73. Alter, *The Hebrew Bible*, 729.

74. Bachmann, “The Esther Narratives,” 119. Monica L. Isaac, “For Such a Time as This: A Social and Cultural Texture of Esther 4:1-17,” *Journal of Biblical Perspectives in Leadership* 10, no. 1. Pages 56–65 (2020) 62. <https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&AuthType=cookie,ip,cpid&custid=ns101346&db=rfh&AN=ATLAI210125001019&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

the book is meant to show both God's providence and the fact that key individuals in leadership positions can make a difference. But the epilogue (he proposes chapters 9 and 10), which he estimates was added on at a different time than the rest of the book, serves to promote the festival of Purim (he labels the genre of the book "festival etiology").<sup>75</sup>

Longman, Dillard, and Keil also see the promotion of Purim as the primary objective of the book. However, their perspective is unique from that of Berlin, Alter, and the others who propose the same because Longman, Dillard, and Keil stand behind the Book of Esther's historicity. The difference is that in their opinion, Esther was not invented or sensationalized to promote the festival, rather, real, historical events were recorded and framed by the author in the end as a reason for the celebration of Purim.<sup>76</sup>

The final group of commentators to mention is those who see the comfort of God's providence as the primary purpose of the Book of Esther. Baldwin, Brug, Breneman, and Jobes all see God's care for his people as the true message of Esther.<sup>77</sup> The reason for this view is the "improbable" or miraculous chain of events in the book that work in favor of the exiled Israelites. Jobes summarizes the providence purpose in this quote: "The Esther story is an example of how at one crucial moment in history the covenant promises God had made were fulfilled, not by his miraculous intervention, but through completely ordinary events."<sup>78</sup> Prominent in the providence purpose is the idea that an overarching objective of the book is to show how God, in his wisdom, preserved fragile Israel from whom the Messiah would later

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75. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 306, 326.

76. Keil, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 190-1. Longman and Dillard, *An Introduction*, 215.

77. Baldwin, *Esther*, 13, 42. Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 294. Brug, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 156. Jobes, *Esther*, 41-42.

78. Jobes, *Esther*, 41-42.

come. Related to this thought, Leder gives an offshoot opinion that emphasizes Christ in connection with Esther's theme of victory over the enemies of God's people.<sup>79</sup>

This last set of commentators that sees the comfort of God's providence as the purpose of the Book of Esther is the group I line up most closely with. Even though God's name is not mentioned in the book, I believe the message is proclaimed loud and clear: God takes care of his people no matter the situation. I believe that this central message is supported by the literary features of the book. These features the author has included serve to heighten the emotional impact, making the story's conclusion clear and powerful. I invite the reader to walk through these features with me and to see God's loving protection for those he has called his own.

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79. Leder, "Celebrating Relief," 230, 235.

### III. LITERARY FEATURES OF THE BOOK OF ESTHER

#### Setting

A good place to start is where the story takes place. Esther has a unique setting among Old Testament books. “This is what happened during the time of Xerxes, the Xerxes who ruled over 127 provinces stretching from India to Cush: At that time King Xerxes reigned from his royal throne in the citadel of Susa, and in the third year of his reign he gave a banquet for all his nobles and officials” (1:1–3, NIV 2011). The scene is set for Esther in Susa, the capital of the Persian Empire in Elam. The time is post-exile, post-Cyrus, and post-return. The temple in Jerusalem had been rebuilt under Zerubbabel, but the next wave of Israelite exiles had not yet come back under Ezra. Esther takes place in biblical terms between chapters 6 and 7 of Ezra, in terms of a date, around 483 B.C. (Xerxes’ reigned from 486–465).<sup>80</sup>

It’s critical to note that Esther is a story about Israelites who have been removed from the land of Israel. Daniel is the only other narrative that takes place during the exile, but most of his events happened before the Persians took control of Babylon. There are two reasons it is so important that the author of Esther includes the detail about the rule of Xerxes in Susa. First, the exilic setting shows that the author intends the book to be read as something historical. The author does not say, “Many years ago in the magical land of Jellybean City...” or something made up like that. The author establishes a real place, time, and king (although with a different

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80. Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 278. Brug, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 153.

title, Xerxes' name in the Hebrew text is Ahasuerus) so the reader knows they are supposed to read Esther like a historical narrative.<sup>81</sup>

Second, the exilic setting is essential because it prepares the reader to see some secular and irreverent things. This is not your father's Jerusalem temple worship. This is not a theocracy in the land of Israel. This is a land of evident immorality. There's the excessive seven-day banquet (1:5), the beauty contest for the king (2:2), and the attempted genocide (3:8–10). These things are seen in the book, but now add to them the things that are not seen. There is no prayer, no worship, no reading or obeying of God's Law, no mention of God's name, and no mention of any religion on the part of the Persians. There is only fasting, weeping, and tearing of robes on the part of the Jews (4:1, 16), and even this might have been only cultural. This secular setting and the details which the author includes about it (some of which are not entirely necessary for the rest of the plot) give the reader the impression that this is the last place in which one might expect God to be working. The groundwork is laid for God to work in an understated (literally) and unexpected way.

Related to the second is the third reason why the exilic setting is important. It sets up God's chosen people, "the good guys," as the underdogs. Those familiar with the rest of Scripture begin this story knowing that this is not exactly a high point for Israel. Those who had returned were underwhelmed by the new temple and by their vulnerable situation compared to the nations around them. Those still in exile were adjusting to an upside-down life surrounded by a culture and religion not their own. In this place, the minority Jews had no protection, and they seemingly had no say in what happened to them until Esther and Mordecai rose through the ranks. If one only had the first three chapters of Esther through Haman's plot, one would assume

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81. Baldwin, *Esther*, 16.



the outcome of the story for the Jews to be hopelessly bleak. The immoral setting of Persian court life already compels the reader to feel that the odds are against God's people. The stage has begun to be set by the author for a big emotional payoff.

### **Characters**

Just as important to building the emotion and tension of the story are the characters. Here the concern is not with the fact that the characters exist. If the story of Esther is taken as true, the author cannot simply invent features, flaws, or actions of the characters. It is then more a question of which character details God inspired the author to include (and exclude), and how the author portrays those details. I believe that the characters and how they are portrayed in the story contribute in a substantial way to the primary theme of the book, God's providence.

If Esther were made into a play (in fact, even today there are performances of Esther on Purim)<sup>82</sup> the narrator would be the largest part. The book is heavy on narration. So, the author becomes like a character. The author keeps the story moving at breakneck speed with a matter-of-fact description of events. Berlin correctly asserts that the story specializes in telling, not showing.<sup>83</sup>

To get an idea of this "telling not showing" concept, there are forty-nine verses containing character dialogue out of one hundred fifty-seven verses total in the Hebrew text of Esther. Roughly one-third of the book is dialogue. To compare another biblical narrative, in the book of Ruth, sixty of the eighty-five verses are character dialogue (roughly two-thirds). But it's

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82. Bachmann, "The Esther Narratives," 124. Bachmann writes about Jos Murer (1530-1580), a Swiss man who wrote plays about Esther during the Reformation Era.

83. Berlin, *Esther*, xxv.

not only quantity. When comparing Ruth to Esther, Bush points out that the nature of the dialogue is the larger factor in the different feel of the stories. In Ruth, the dialogue moves the action forward. In Esther, while there are times the dialogue does the same, there are also times when the narrator simply tells the reader what is going on.<sup>84</sup>

For example, compare Ruth 3:8–10 to Esther 8:3–4. Ruth 3: “In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet! “Who are you?” he asked. “I am your servant Ruth,” she said. “Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family.” “The Lord bless you, my daughter,” he replied.” Now, Esther 8: “Esther again pleaded with the king, falling at his feet and weeping. She begged him to put an end to the evil plan of Haman the Agagite, which he had devised against the Jews. Then the king extended the gold scepter to Esther and she arose and stood before him.” Note how Ruth asks for acceptance from Boaz, and Boaz speaks a blessing to show his approval. On the other hand, Esther is described as having begged the king and the king extends his scepter to show his approval. There is no dialogue until afterward. The narrator of Esther carries more of the weight of story development.

Although the narrator of Esther is very involved in the story, they are objective in the sense that they do not directly comment on whether the actions or words of a character are right or wrong. However, this does not mean that the author does not through style and details influence the reader to take a side. The narrator makes it particularly clear who the enemy is, Haman. Haman might be the most interesting character study of the bunch. He is the one the author reveals the most about. Fox points out that Haman is allowed no secrets. Whereas the narrator is apparently limited in their knowledge of the other characters, the reader gets to see

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84. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 311.

Haman's thoughts (6:6).<sup>85</sup> Haman is portrayed negatively at almost every chance the author gets, beginning at his very introduction into the story.

He is called "Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite" (3:1). Why include Haman's nationality? Surely it is not critical to understand the story like the Jewish identities of Esther and Mordecai are. In choosing to tell the reader that Haman is an Agagite, the author is likely marking him out as an enemy of the Jewish people. Agag could be a reference to the King Agag in 1 Samuel 15 who Samuel kills because Saul failed to. Agag could be a title for any king of the Amalekites. Agag could also be coincidental, having no relation to past names. But most commentators see an intentional connection. The author is drawing attention to Haman as a probable descendant of the longtime enemy of Israel, the Amalekites. This does not explain or excuse Haman's actions in Esther, but it is interesting that the author uses his heritage to give the reader an indication that Haman is the antagonist of the story. Even more interesting is the instance Haman's nationality is repeated, just as he gets authority from the king to enact his plot (3:10). Haman plays the role in Esther that his ancestors played long ago: enemy of the Jews.<sup>86</sup> The mention of "Agagite" would have triggered an emotional response from any Jewish reader who knew their Old Testament.

Beyond his nationality serving to pit the reader against Haman, there is his obvious, sweeping, hateful, racist request to eradicate the Jewish minority of the Kingdom of Persia based solely on the actions of Mordecai (3:5–6). This request of Haman is the driving event of the whole book. But the author also includes some extra blemishes on Haman's reputation. Haman is a vain and overconfident man based on his self-centered thought in 6:6, "Who is there that the

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85. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 317.

86. Stephen Geiger, "Josephus on Esther," Ann Arbor, MI: Proquest LLC, (2017).

king would rather honor than me?” and based on his private conversation with his friends in which he “boasted to them about his vast wealth, his many sons, and all the ways the king had honored him” (5:11). These negative characterizations of Haman culminate in a person who the reader wants to see get the punishment that’s coming to him. Haman represents the enemy from which God will always deliver his people.<sup>87</sup>

Whereas the author reveals more than enough to show the reader Haman’s true colors, precious little is revealed about Esther or Mordecai, especially when it comes to their motives. It is evident from the epilogue of the book that Mordecai becomes a sort of legend to the Jewish community. He was well known for his good deeds and social justice (10:3). His honorable character is shown when he exposes a conspiracy to the king (2:21–22). He wisely urges Esther to act on behalf of their people. “Who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this” (4:14). He even vaguely hints at a statement of faith. “If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place” (4:14). Esther is similarly viewed by most as a good, virtuous character. She does what’s necessary to get an audience with the king (2:8–16). She is shrewd and intelligent in working with Mordecai to conceal her identity until the time is right (2:10). She is courageous in using her position of power to speak up and rescue her people from death (4:16; 7:3).

But unlike in the case of Haman, these actions of Esther and Mordecai are not as indicative of the characters’ morality. Jobs offers an admittedly more cynical but equally possible view of Esther and Mordecai’s actions. Esther denies her faith and her identity to win a beauty contest (2:8–16). She likely loses her virginity to a Gentile who brought her into a harem, pleasing Xerxes in one night more than the other virgins (2:17). She risks her life to make a

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87. To use the terms of Leder who, as aforementioned, sees Esther as a story about victory over enemies. Leder, *Celebrating Relief*, 235.

request of the king only after Mordecai points out that she will be killed if she fails to act (4:14). Similarly, Mordecai persuaded Esther to compromise her faith and go into the harem of the king. One wonders if Mordecai unveiled the plot against the king only because he was seeking political power. And when Mordecai warns Esther that she would not escape death, was he threatening to reveal her identity to the king, or worse?<sup>88</sup>

Again, Jobes' perspective on the main characters' actions is a touch cynical, but her perspective is useful for demonstrating that the author truly doesn't comment on the morality of Esther or Mordecai. The author doesn't say whether their motivations are pure. Their thoughts and conversations behind closed doors are not revealed as those of Haman are, and their actions alone are open to multiple interpretations. But perhaps this moral vagueness is on purpose. Esther's sexual activity in the palace is passed over quickly in the narrative, and there is no description to be found of how Mordecai felt about being promoted because these things are not the book's focus. Whereas the author wants to build the emotions of the reader to see Haman rightly as the villain, the narrator seems to have no desire to have the reader see Esther and Mordecai as virtuous heroes of faith. I believe that this is because God is the hero of this story of salvation. If Mordecai and Esther are viewed as morally ambiguous or even flawed, this actually adds to the purpose of the book to show God's providence. God can use even messed up situations and characters (Esther, Mordecai, and not to mention Xerxes) to accomplish his loving plan for his people.<sup>89</sup>

Speaking of flawed characters, there is one more main character to talk about, King Xerxes. In the case of the king, the reader is influenced by the author's descriptions to view him

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88. Jobes, *Esther*, 20.

89. Brug, *Esther*, 156.

as a selfish, indulgent, apathetic, passive ruler. He doesn't seem to care one way or another whether the Jews or even his own people are exterminated, passing off such important decisions to Haman and Esther (3:11; 8:12). Yet, he cares deeply that Queen Vashti will not "present herself" before his friends, so he has her expelled from the palace (1:12, 19). The king doesn't seem concerned with justice unless it's for his benefit or protection (6:1–10). The only thing the king does seem concerned with is drinking and partying. Esther 3:15 is King Xerxes in a nutshell. Following the edict to destroy all the Jews, "The king and Haman sat down to drink, but the city of Susa was bewildered." Could Xerxes show any less his care for the lives of thousands of members of his kingdom? It is a testament to God's power and wisdom that by the end of the story, he makes use of even the flawed and corrupt King Xerxes to accomplish his purpose.

### **The Lack of God's Name**

All this talk about characters brings to mind the absence of the most important character in the narrative, the LORD. As mentioned earlier, the omission of God's name on the part of the author is a huge topic of controversy surrounding the Book of Esther. Yet, to conclude that because his name is not found on the page, God is not present in the book is to miss the purpose of Esther, that is to comfort God's people with his promise to work all things for the good of those who love him (Rom 8:28). But, if the purpose of Esther is to show God working and being present for his people, why would the author exclude God's name from the story? There are a few theories about this.

One is that the lack of God's name mirrors the setting of the book. The author wants the reader to see that this is a time in Israel's history of extreme secular influence bordering on an

era of godlessness.<sup>90</sup> As mentioned in the setting section, God's people were in exile. They were surrounded by people who did not worship the true God. Moreover, the Jews themselves may have fallen into the customs and practices of the Babylonians and Persians seeing as there is no mention of the law, worship, dietary restrictions, or the Sabbath. Add to this the immoral actions of the characters, and the author makes it seem like God could not be present in a situation like this. Yet he is. The omission of his name functions as a literary technique to build a sense of hopelessness so that the reader desperately calling out "Who will rescue God's people?" is even more joyful and relieved when they are delivered in the end.

Closely related to the thought about the secular setting is that about the secular genre of the book. Brug, Baldwin, and Gordis have suggested that the Book of Esther may have been written in the style of a Persian Court Story. This suggestion is possible but must remain a theory at the present time because there are no comparable examples of Persian Court Stories from that period.<sup>91</sup> But, if the Book of Esther was written to mirror a secular Persian-style story, then it follows that the author would exclude God's name, leaving God in the background of the book.

Another theory about why God's name is omitted is that the focus of the narrator is on the influence of the characters in the book and the effect that brave actions at the proper time can have on the course of events.<sup>92</sup> The lack of God's name is therefore not as much an intentional omission or a literary technique, but more a side effect of the book's emphasis on human beings. This theory I cannot agree with for two reasons. The first is that there are too many occurrences

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90. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 326. Brug, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 155-6.

91. Baldwin, *Esther*, 35-6. Brug, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 155.

92. Isaac, *For Such a Time*, 56-8. Anthony J. Tomasino, "Interpreting Esther from the Inside Out: Hermeneutical Implications of the Chiastic Structure of the Book of Esther," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 138, no. 1. Pages 101-20 (2019), 118-19.

that seem too coincidental or lucky to be results of human action (more on this under “coincidences and reversals”). The second is that the author is silent on the motives and merits of Esther and Mordecai, something that I would see as counteractive if indeed the focus was on the human aspect of the story. I can appreciate the warning not to go so far as to say that human actions play no part in the unfolding of God’s will. Clearly, in the Book of Esther, they do. God works through people. But the bravery or leadership of human beings is not the primary theme of the book, in fact, in numerous cases throughout the book, the author displays the disappointing side of humanity.

There are two more thoughts to consider when thinking about why the author of Esther excluded the name of God. Returning to the idea that it could be intentional on the part of the author, perhaps the exclusion of the LORD is a sort of aposiopesis. This term literally means “becoming silent.” An example in English would be: “Get out or else!”<sup>93</sup> What follows the “or else” is implied. The rest of the phrase is enough context for the hearer to know exactly what the speaker is getting at. The speaker may actually use an aposiopesis to emphasize the missing part even more (to follow up on our example, “or else” can be more forceful in the mind of the hearer than if the speaker were to finish the statement, “Or else I will be upset with you”).

Similarly, in Esther, perhaps the author writes assuming that the reader knows the context of the book and can surmise based on its events and situations that God is present. The whole book could be an example of aposiopesis. Also, within the Book of Esther there is an example. Mordecai’s persuasive statement to Esther is traditionally understood by some rabbis as an understated confession of faith in the LORD.<sup>94</sup> Mordecai's words invite the reader to fill in the

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93. Wikipedia. “Aposiopesis.” Last edited November 2021. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aposiopesis>.

94. Magonet, “The God Who Hides,” 111.



blanks with God's name. “For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise *from another place*, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position *for such a time as this?*” Mordecai’s statements about deliverance from another place and at a proper time hint at God’s overarching providence. Aposiopesis applied to Esther asks the question: Could it be that by excluding God’s name throughout the book, the author is declaring God’s name even louder?

Lastly, there is the theory that God’s name is not present because the author wants to highlight the extraordinary found in the ordinary. The author wants to showcase how God normally works and provides in day-to-day life, that is, indirectly, through people and events, as opposed to directly through miracles and wonders (although certainly to work this way is also possible for God as evidenced by the numerous wonders elsewhere in the Bible).<sup>95</sup> This highlighting of the ordinary by the exclusion of God’s name and therefore his direct activity is a special comfort to believers who read the text today. In ordinary life, when at times it seems like God is absent, he is always present, working behind the scenes. This is a unique and powerful application that the Book of Esther offers. If Esther were originally written as the Old Greek presents it with miracles of the LORD, angels, and prayers, the book would lose that unique niche of the extraordinary in the ordinary.

Concluding this topic of the omission of the LORD’s name, I believe that a combination of these theories is possible. The author may have deliberately excluded God’s name for multiple reasons. To match the secular world of Persian court life, I find it fitting that the author would exclude God’s name. It builds suspense for the reader that wonders when God will arrive and rescue his people. The exclusion of his name also leads the reader to notice God’s presence in the

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95. Jobes, *Esther*, 41-42

“ordinary” events of the book, as in real life. It pushes the reader to see God even more clearly in an implicit way. This implicit style also can lead to a greater emotional payoff (an “aha moment”) compared to stating God’s work explicitly. At the close of the story, the reader finally all at once grasps the comfort that is God’s invisible guidance and protection. I am compelled to think that the author left out God’s name intentionally for one or more of these impactful literary reasons.

### **Dramatic Irony**

Another impactful literary feature of the Book of Esther is its use of dramatic irony. Dramatic irony is when the reader knows something important that the characters in the story don’t, creating a sense of suspense or excitement. One famous example of biblical dramatic irony is when Joseph meets with his unsuspecting brothers in Egypt. Esther contains two significant cases of dramatic irony. The first is when Esther hides her Jewish identity and goes “undercover” in the king’s harem (2:10). Following the first decree to destroy the Jews, Esther’s concealed identity becomes even more critical to the story. The fact that the reader knows her identity, while the king and his officials do not, builds tension and makes the reader worry about whether she will get found out, causing the whole plan to come crashing down. Of course, she does not get found out until she chooses to reveal her identity at just the right time (7:4). This case of dramatic irony ends in a sigh of relief for the reader because ultimately, the closely guarded secret of Esther’s identity comes to nothing.

The second case of dramatic irony in Esther is quite the opposite of coming to nothing. The result is humiliating and cruelly humorous. This case is found in Esther 6:1–12. After King Xerxes discovers what Mordecai had done to save him from an assassination attempt, he desires

to publicly honor Mordecai. The king calls Haman to rather vaguely ask him: “What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?” Unfortunately, Haman with his big ego is certain that the king must desire to honor him! So, Haman tells the king to have the man dressed in a fancy robe and paraded around on one of the king’s horses. Well, Haman’s jump to conclusions proves to be disastrous. The king had Haman in mind, but not in the role he imagined. Haman ends up dressing up his greatest enemy, Mordecai, and parading him around the city as the guest of honor. Haman is embarrassed, but the reader laughs at the turn of events. While this is unfolding, the reader knows both the king’s intentions and Haman’s self-centered thoughts, and they can see this coming from a mile away. It’s a hilarious effect. What are the chances that instead of being exalted by the king, Haman gets stuck serving the one man in the kingdom he can’t stand? It’s made that much sweeter because Haman is the villain of the story. Esther is a special biblical book for its ability to mix the deathly serious with the ironically humorous, and this case is a great example.<sup>96</sup> The serious side to this ironic situation is that for the reader, Haman’s downfall is becoming more predictable. This also signals that the grand victory for God’s people is becoming more predictable.

### **Structure and Repetition**

Since God’s name is not present in the book, the primary way to see God’s providence is through perfectly timed events and coincidences. The events of the book will be the final literary element covered in this study. But before that, it’s important to recognize that all events in a text happen in a structure. Even in a historical book, the author has the liberty to affect that structure by choosing to include or exclude certain words, descriptions, and events at certain times. The

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96. Berlin, *Esther*, xvi.

structure of the Book of Esther centers around reversals. Tomasino points out that whether the structure of the reversals is intentional on the part of the author is not certain. It could just be how events played out.<sup>97</sup> Additionally, the Book of Esther is short and fast-moving as a narrative, so one could make the case that its structure is not of huge importance. But most commentators endorse a simple structure with Esther 6:1 at the center of the story:

A Opening and background (ch. 1)

B King's first decree (ch. 2–3)

C Clash between Mordecai and Haman (ch. 4–5)

D "On that night the king could not sleep." (ch. 6:1)

C' Mordecai triumphs over Haman (ch. 6–7)

B' The king's second decree (ch. 8–9)

A' Epilogue (ch. 10)<sup>98</sup>

There is a simple yet beautiful symmetry to the book achieved by the repetition of similar events with different results. These reversals give the reader emotional closure. The problems of the first decree are resolved in the second, and Haman gets what's coming to him not long after his exaltation. Everything works out in the end. The structure lends itself to seeing the book as one of emotional closure. Of course, this tidy structure of events is also what has led some to accuse the book of being too perfect to be true, but it is just as possible to imagine that the reversals truly did play out that way according to God's design, while the author merely highlighted the reversals of Esther by placing them chronologically, yet in a symmetrical structure with other details and filler in between.

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97. Tomasino, "Interpreting Esther," 104.

98. Baldwin, *Esther*, 30. Breneman and Radday use this same outline, and Fox as well, although with 6:9 as the central verse.

It's hard to argue with the effectiveness of the structure. It makes for a tidy, fast-moving narrative with a powerful emotional payoff. But there have been many arguments about what belongs at the center of this "chiasitic" structure. It seems that scholars of Esther are desperate to find out where exactly the turning point is. When does the reader see the tide shift in favor of God's people? Which event is the hinge of the story? Could it be the majority view of the king's sleepless night in Esther 6:1? Or could it be the much-beloved "for such a time as this" speech of Mordecai in Esther 4:14? Tomasino says that based on his criteria, he finds Esther 5:1-8 to be the turning point of the book. Berg proposes 4:14 because this is the point in the book where the character, Esther, becomes active as opposed to passive and starts advising Mordecai versus earlier in the story. 6:1 is put forward as the hinge because the king's sleepless night is closer to the midpoint of the book, and because Mordecai's fortunes are changed only when the king has this sleepless night and realizes what Mordecai had done for him. Tomasino refutes the popular 6:1 theory by saying that the event of the king not sleeping is not significant enough (not a "substantial thematic element") in the story to truly be the turning point.<sup>99</sup>

I agree with Tomasino. While not being able to sleep happens to give the king the opportunity to hear the book of the king's chronicles read to him, in and of itself, a sleepless night is not much of a groundbreaking event. I prefer either Tomasino or Berg's opinion. Esther 5:1-8 meets Tomasino's significance criteria because this is perhaps the most anxiety-ridden scene of the book. The reader is wondering how the king will receive Esther's request. If things go wrong, this could be the death of the main character! But thankfully, the king reacts favorably to Esther's request to come to her feast. Berg's choice, Esther 4:14, also meets Tomasino's significance criteria. This is the moment in the book where Esther realizes that she must go

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99. Tomasino, "Interpreting Esther," 108.

before the king for the sake of her people. From this point onward, Esther takes the initiative and the opportunities God had provided her with as queen.

The relevant point about the structure of Esther to this study is simply to note the beauty of the symmetry in the events and reversals the author has employed. The reader is left comforted and fulfilled because all things have been made right in the end. There is a wholeness and completion brought out by the chiasm of Esther. All the events have been reversed in favor of God's people, leading the reader to see the LORD's guiding hand at work.

Along with the repetition of events within the structure of Esther, the careful reader also notices the repetition of words and ideas. The word for feast or drinking party, *mišteh*, appears eighteen times in the Book of Esther. This is striking considering the word is used only forty-six times in the whole Old Testament. There are eleven different feasts in the Book of Esther. When Esther works up the courage to speak to the king on behalf of her people, she first invites him to two feasts (5:4, 8). There is also the fact that the book begins (1:3) and ends (9:20–22) in a feast. Clearly, the *mišteh* is a key concept of the book. It gives the book unity and again contributes to a sense of fulfillment for the reader. Feasting is also a sign of wealth and joy. The Persian royals began the book feasting. By the end, the once-endangered Jews are the ones who are feasting and celebrating. The use of *mišteh* helps drive the reversal theme. Often, when *mišteh* pops up in the book, the reader is alerted that something notable has happened or will happen. Fittingly, the feast of Purim is instituted as a culmination of this feasting language, marking the institution of the festival as a secondary purpose of the book.

A small detour relating to *mišteh* and Purim. This was briefly stated earlier in the study, but some commentators (Bush, Clifton, Berlin, Alter among them) see the feast theme and its culmination at the conclusion of the book as an indication that the Book of Esther was modified

to some extent to justify a likely already existing Purim. Bush proposes that Esther 9 and 10 were written by a different late author, and then the whole piece was woven together and touched up by a redactor, possibly the same author who made the 9–10 addition.<sup>100</sup> While historically it cannot be proven that this is not the case, the author portrays the events as having happened before Purim came into existence. Since Scripture is inerrant and inspired, I am bound to say that Purim was established after the salvation of the Jews in the story. My personal bias aside, the author states that Purim came as a celebration of “the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies” (9:22). Logically, a festival needs a beginning. It needs something to celebrate. The purpose of and reason for the book must be drawn from the events that inspired the festival, not from the festival itself. Also, from a literary perspective, the fact that *mišteh* is a motif throughout the book validates chapter 9 as part of the story, not as an addition or epilogue by another author. Similar vocabulary and themes are often hallmarks of unity and singular authorship.

Getting back onto the main road of repetition in Esther, the other notable repeated word throughout the book is *melek* (king). Caution is perhaps in order to not read too much into the word because King Xerxes is a primary character of the story. But the amount of times *melek* shows up is staggering, especially for how short the book is. The word is used in Esther over one hundred times. There are only five other books in the Old Testament that use it more often. If one skims through the book looking for *melek*, it is evident just how often the author uses the word. Sometimes it is added in even when the pronoun, “he,” would have been sufficient. Often, the name Xerxes (or Ahasuerus in Hebrew) is omitted, leaving the reader only with “the king.” Again, some caution is advised, as not saying the king’s name could be nothing more than a

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100. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 295.

cultural sign of respect for a king, but the prominence of *melek* if nothing else makes the reader think.

Magonet makes a further point about how in well-written Hebrew scrolls, *melek* intentionally heads each column. If looking across the top, one would see “king, king, king.” Why so much emphasis on the king? “King” is one of the most common metaphors for God. For the author to use the word so often and not once mention the King of heaven and earth suggests either an intentional choice or great restraint.<sup>101</sup> Although it appears that King Xerxes is ruling and affecting events, the LORD God is truly reigning over and guiding all things for the good of his kingdom. In the repetition of *melek*, the reader can see hints of God's powerful presence.

### **The Epilogue of Esther**

Before concluding the conversation on structure and repetition, it's necessary to mention the epilogue. The epilogue of the story is Esther 10. It quickly summarizes the characters after the story, mentioning Mordecai's promotion, King Xerxes' success, and the welfare of the Jewish people. The epilogue does not match the tone of the rest of the book because it serves a different purpose. Whereas I have a hard time seeing a different author for chapter 9 because of its importance to the feasting motif and the rest of the story in general, I feel that chapter 10 may have been written by another inspired author after the time of the events.

The most compelling detail of the epilogue is 10:2 which boasts of the power and might of Xerxes according to the annals of the kings of Media and Persia. This flattering description of Xerxes does not match the portrait of the rest of the book. One possible explanation for the epilogue's kind portrayal of Xerxes is that it was written from a Persian perspective or with a

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101. Magonet, “The God Who Hides,” 113-14.



Persian court style, as some have claimed the rest of the book to be as well. Another theory as to why the epilogue puts both King Xerxes and the Jews in a favorable light is that it was written for the protection and benefit of future Jews living under the Persians and later under the Romans. If the book were to fall into the wrong hands, it could be easily misinterpreted as a Jewish nationalistic work. Perhaps a favorable epilogue could be sufficient to ward off suspicion or persecution. Then again, maybe the epilogue need not be seen as anything more than a simple conclusion that left behind a well-meaning, historically accurate record for future readers of the book. The epilogue of Esther is a topic which, for the purpose of this study, I did not have time to research more thoroughly, yet it is a subject worthy of further exploration.

### **Coincidences and Reversals**

The final literary feature, which perhaps most clearly shows God's providence throughout the book, is found in the events themselves. The author records incredible coincidences and reversals that God's hand must be behind. Some of these reversals were brought up earlier in the study. In Esther, reversals are events that take place which are typically unexpected or ironic because they result in an outcome radically different from what was established or anticipated at the start. Coincidences can sometimes overlap with reversals. These are events that seem too good to be true, things that against the odds happen in just the right way to produce just the right result. One could call it good luck. From a Christian perspective, it could be called a blessing, a miracle, or God's providence. There are many small examples of coincidences and reversals in the Book of Esther.<sup>102</sup> I will mention a few of the more prominent ones.

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102. For some of these other cases of irony, see the list from Longman and Dillard, *An Introduction*, 120.

Beginning with the coincidences, look at Esther 2:17. “The king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women, and she won his favor and approval more than any of the other virgins. So, he set a royal crown on her head and made her queen instead of Vashti.” It truly is incredible that Esther, out of all the virgins of Susa and maybe even the wider kingdom, is the one chosen to be queen. The text states that she is beautiful (2:7), but the chances of this happening how it did, placing Esther in a position to advocate for her people, can certainly lead the reader to see God’s blessing over Esther. It was even a coincidence in the first place that King Xerxes happened to be looking for a new queen after harshly banishing Vashti.

Another important coincidence is when Haman and Xerxes cast the lot for when the annihilation of the Jews would take place. Putting his trust in fate, Haman surely was hopeful for the first or second month.<sup>103</sup> The lot landed on the twelfth month, the latest possible date to give the Jews the longest possible time for deliverance to come. Ancient Jews possibly would have remembered this coincidence together with the words from Proverbs 16:33.<sup>104</sup> “The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.”

The last noteworthy coincidence is also the last straw for Haman. Esther 7:4–8 describes how Esther calls out Haman for seeking to wipe out the Jews. While the king goes outside to think, Haman falls to his knees to beg Esther to spare his life. And just as Haman is doing this, King Xerxes walks back in at precisely the wrong moment and thinks he sees Haman molesting the queen! He orders Haman to be put to death. Again, what are the chances that the king walks back in at this exact moment and interprets this event in that light? Through this coincidence, God is punishing the enemy who sought to destroy his people.

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103. For more on the contrasting worldviews of Haman and Mordecai (fate vs God), see Breneman, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, 294.

104. Baldwin, *Esther*, 23.

Moving from coincidences to reversals, the first grand reversal of the text is noticeable in Esther 6:11. This is the section we already looked at under “dramatic irony,” but this is also a reversal scene. On one hand, Mordecai goes from outside the palace gate to being the king’s honored guest. On the other hand, Haman goes from thinking he’s the king’s number one advisor to being an embarrassed caterer to Mordecai’s pomp. The tables have turned against the enemy of God’s people. Then, in 7:10, a reversal of the most ironic nature is front and center. Haman is executed on the same pole that he so confidently set up to hang Mordecai (5:14). And finally, the salt in the wound for Haman and his family: Esther receives his estate (8:1). Haman had boasted about his vast wealth and prestige, and his numerous sons. But now, all his possessions go to a woman from the nation he sought to destroy in his hatred. The reversal of Haman’s fortunes is complete when his ten sons are killed as a result of the second decree. Haman is completely wiped out, fitting for what he had hoped to do to the Jews.

The last notable reversal that takes place in the book has to do with the second decree of King Xerxes. Haman’s plan to kill the Jews is nullified, and in its place, the Jews are allowed to act against their enemies (8:5–11). This is the resolution of the problem which surrounds the whole story. The Jewish people go from being the threatened minority to the protected victors. This serves God’s purpose for them. Not only did God desire to protect and save those he loved and chose to be his own, but God also had promised through Abraham, David, and the prophets that the savior of the world would come from their line. Jesus would be a descendent of the remnant of Judah that was living in Jerusalem under the rule of Persia. God fulfilled his promise to send the Messiah by providing all the right circumstances for this ultimate reversal to happen. In the context of the entire Bible, this last reversal is vitally important.

Beyond being possible evidence for God's providence due to the sheer improbability of these events, the coincidences and reversals also function in the story as literary devices which capture the attention and emotions of the reader. They lead the reader to feel satisfied because of justice served in the case of Haman. They lead the reader to a shocked feeling of incredulity, to wonder and consider what really is going on behind the scenes when Esther happens to win the beauty contest and the lot lands on the twelfth month. They lead the reader to feel joy and peace along with the Jews as the people cross from death to life. The extreme reversals and coincidences cause extreme emotions. They help keep the reader invested in the action. They help the reader feel what the characters feel.

Perhaps most importantly, the coincidences and reversals give closure to all the other set-ups and hints of the book. They give validation to what the reader has felt the author leading them to. Haman's boasting sets him up for a downfall that the reader instinctively knows is coming. An unjust and insane decree to annihilate the Jews hangs over the kingdom and the reader protests, "It can't be! Someone is going to stop this." Mordecai's conversation with Esther compels her to act, and the reader can sense that God is going to use her actions for something big. The reversals bring to completion what the reader has hoped for and suspected from the beginning. Things will be made right. The wicked will be punished. The problem will be resolved. God will act, albeit behind the scenes, to save his people.

## CONCLUSION

The Book of Esther is a challenging one to fit in with the rest of Scripture. It has had a rocky history of interpretation. Generations of Christian and Jewish scholars have taken aim at the book's questionable morality and alleged historical inaccuracies. After my study of the historical and moral issues of the book, I feel more confident in my view of the book as historical and inerrant Scripture. And I hope that the reader of this study has also seen that it's not unreasonable to regard Esther as true and historical. On the literary side, any claim to find God in the book could well be called an argument from silence. That's okay. It is an argument from silence. But, I can be content if I have showcased enough literary choices from the author to allow the reader to be open to the possibility of God's providence being the main theme of the book despite his name not being mentioned explicitly.

At the start, my thesis was: "The literary features of the Book of Esther serve to heighten emotional impact in order to support its primary purpose." I feel that I have broken down the literary features and shown how they emotionally impact the reader and prepare them for the grand finale of God's deliverance. The one thing I am left wondering about my research is this: Which features of Esther support the overarching theme of God's providence and which are merely symptomatic of a good story? At times it was hard to determine if a literary aspect was evidence, coincidence, or something else. Not every literary element has to serve a purpose. However, that caution being stated, overall, I am comfortable saying that the literary features heighten emotion to prepare the reader for the message of God's providence in Esther.

God arranged the events and worked through the individuals in the Book of Esther so that everything would happen at *such a time as this* with the result that hundreds of years later, Scripture could rightly testify: “*When the set time had fully come*, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship” (Gal 4:4–5). I maintain that a literary, rather than a historical study of the book gets one closer to this all-important, overarching connection.

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