

# The Literary Motifs of the Book of Esther

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## I. The Motifs

### A. The Feasts

The most obvious literary motif of the Book of Esther is the banquet or feast. Indeed, many see the book as primarily an etiological tale to explain the origin of the feast of Purim. Ten separate events are described using the root שָׁתָה: nine events with the noun מִשְׁתֶּה (*mishteh*), and one with the verb שָׁתָה (*shatah*). The king gave a banquet for all his “officials and ministers” with the “army of Persia and Media and the nobles and governors of the provinces” in attendance (1:3 NRSV), followed by a banquet for “all the people present in the citadel of Susa, both great and small” (1:5). Meanwhile, Vashti gave a banquet for the women (1:9). When the king fell in love with Esther and crowned her queen, he gave a great banquet to all his officials and ministers—“Esther’s banquet” (2:18).

After Haman’s edict of extermination was sent out, “[t]he king and Haman sat down to drink” (לְשִׁתּוֹתָם)—the fifth banquet. There is a discordant note to this event, for instead of the celebration and rejoicing that should accompany a banquet, “the city of Susa was thrown into confusion” (3:18).

The sixth and seventh banquets are Esther’s two banquets for the king and Haman (5:4-5; 7:1). When they received the king’s edict granting them self-defense, the Jews throughout the empire responded with “gladness and joy, ... a festival (בְּשִׂמְחָה) and a holiday” (8:17)—the eighth banquet. The final pair of banquets is the twin celebration of what would become the festival of Purim, first throughout the empire (9:17), then in Susa (9:18).

Several features of this theme of feasting are worthy of comment. Many have noted the parallel between the first and last pair of banquets—the king’s banquets and the Jews’ celebration of deliverance. In each case, the first banquet of the pair is for those throughout the empire, and the second for those in Susa.

Clines notes the transition from Persian to Jewish celebration.<sup>1</sup> The first five feasts are given by King Ahasuerus or by Queen Vashti. The final five feasts are

given by Jews: two by Queen Esther, and three by the Jewish people for themselves.

Interspersed with the theme of feasting is its foil, the theme of fasting, symbolic of mourning. When the Jews learn of the king’s decree “there was great mourning... with fasting and weeping and lamenting” (4:3). When Mordecai finally succeeds in arousing Esther’s involvement, she tells him to gather all the Jews in Susa to “hold a fast on my behalf” for three days, while she and her maids also fasted (4:16). Clines notes the emotional ordeal this would have given Esther, living in the palace characterized by ostentatious feasting, while herself observing a strict fast. Furthermore, on the third day of the fast, she prepared a banquet for the king and Haman, at which they would eat while she would continue her fast (5:4).

Resolution of the themes of feasting and fasting is given at the end of the book, in the rationale for the celebration of Purim as the month “that had been turned for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday; days of feasting (בְּשִׂמְחָה) and gladness, days for sending gifts of food to one another and presents to the poor” (9:22). The triumph of the theme of feasting over that of fasting is symbolized in the tradition of sending gifts of food to one another on Purim (9:19, 22).

### B. The King

A second set of motifs revolve around the king. Although several different motifs are identified, they are best treated as a set because they all centre on the king.

#### 1. The King’s person

One of the most notable features of the Book of Esther is the complete absence of the name of God. By contrast, the book is suffused with the king’s name and title. The king’s name אֶחָשֶׁרֶשׁ Ahasuerus occurs 28 times.<sup>2</sup> The title מֶלֶךְ “king” occurs 196 times,<sup>3</sup> the title

<sup>1</sup> Clines, 37-38, though he fails to recognize the eighth banquet. His enumeration of only nine banquets allows him to contrast the first and last pairs, and the second and penultimate pairs.

<sup>2</sup> אֶחָשֶׁרֶשׁ seems to be a transliteration, using the available Hebrew phonemes, of the Old Persian name *Khshayarshan*. The Greek transliteration, using the available Greek phonemes, is Ξεργης, *Xerxes*. LXX misidentifies the king, translating throughout as Ἀρταξέρξης. Of the English Versions, KJV, NASB, REB, NRSV render the king’s name throughout as Ahasuerus; NIV as Xerxes.

מְלִכָּה “queen” 25 times, the adjective מְלִכוּת “royal” 26 times, and the verb מָלַךְ “rule” four times.<sup>4</sup> The king is as conspicuously present as God is conspicuously absent.

Objects are defined in relation to the king, using the adjective מְלִכוּת “royal.” The king sits on his *royal* throne (עַל כִּסֵּא מְלִכוּתוֹ, 1:2), displays his *royal* glory (קְבוּד מְלִכוּתוֹ, 1:4), serves *royal* wine (יַיִן מְלִכוּת, 1:7). Queen Vashti gave a banquet in the *royal* house (בֵּית הַמְּלָכּוּת, i.e. the palace (1:9). The king summoned Vashti to appear wearing her *royal* crown (כִּתְרָה מְלִכוּת, 1:11). When she refused, Memucan suggested he issue a *royal* decree (דְּבַר־מְלָכּוּת) and give here *royal* position (מְלָכּוּתָהּ) to another (1:19). Esther was taken to the *royal* palace (בֵּית מְלִכוּתוֹ, 2:16), where she so pleased the king that he set the *royal* crown (כִּתְרָה מְלִכוּת) on her head (2:17). Esther put on her *royal* robes (מְלִכוּת, 5:1) and stood opposite the king who was sitting on his *royal* throne (כִּסֵּא מְלִכוּתוֹ, 5:1). Haman suggested they clothe the one “the king wishes to honour” in *royal* robes (לְבוּשׁ מְלִכוּת), and even crown the horse with a *royal* crown (כִּתְרָה מְלִכוּת, 6:8). After the fall of Haman and Mordecai’s appointment in his place, he wore the *royal* robes (בְּלִבוּשׁ מְלִכוּת) that Haman hoped he would himself wear (9:1).

Still other objects and people are defined in relation to the king using the construct + הַמֶּלֶךְ. Most of the action takes place in the *king’s* palace (בֵּיתֵן הַמֶּלֶךְ, 1:5; or בֵּית הַמֶּלֶךְ, 2:8, 9, 13; 4:13; 5:1; 9:4) and in the *king’s* gate (שַׁעַר־הַמֶּלֶךְ, 2:19, 21; 3:2; 4:2, 6; 5:9, 13; 6:10, 12). The *king’s* verbal decrees (דְּבַר הַמֶּלֶךְ, 1:12; 5:8; מֵאִמַר הַמֶּלֶךְ, 1:15) are issued from the *king’s* mouth (מִפִּי הַמֶּלֶךְ, 7:8). The *king’s* written decrees (דְּבַר הַמֶּלֶךְ, 2:8; 3:15; 4:3; 8:14, 17; 9:1; פְּתָגִים הַמֶּלֶךְ, 1:20; מִצְוֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ, 3:3; דְּתֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ, 3:8) are issued in the *king’s* name (בְּשֵׁם הַמֶּלֶךְ, 3:12; 8:8, 10), sealed with the *king’s* signet ring (בְּטַבַּעַת הַמֶּלֶךְ, 3:12; 8:8, 10), and sent to the *king’s* provinces (מְדִינֹת הַמֶּלֶךְ, 1:16, 22; 3:13; 4:11; 8:5, 12; 9:12, 16, 20). These written and verbal decrees are executed by a variety of servants: the *king’s* eunuchs (סְרִיסֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ, 2:3, 14, 15, 21; 4:5; 6:2, 14), the *king’s* servants (עֲבָדֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ, 3:2, 3; 4:11), the *king’s* secretaries (סֹפְרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ, 3:12; 8:9) the *king’s* officials (שְׂרֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ, 1:18), and the *king’s* satraps (אַחַשְׁדַּרְפָּנֵי־הַמֶּלֶךְ, 3:12). The king is known for his generosity (כְּנִד הַמֶּלֶךְ, 1:7; 2:18), literally “according to the *king’s* hand,” which perhaps explains why Haman

proposes a scheme to replenish the *king’s* treasures (וַיִּגְוֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ, 3:9; 4:7). Both Vashti and Haman arouse the *king’s* rage (חֲמַת הַמֶּלֶךְ, 2:1; 7:10).

On two occasions a Persian loan-word אַחַשְׁתָּרֵן is used as the adjective “royal.”<sup>5</sup> In both cases the mounted couriers who carry the king’s decree granting the Jews the right of self-defense are said to ride “fast steeds bred from the royal herd” (הָרָכֶשׁ הָאַחַשְׁתָּרָנִים, 8:14).<sup>6</sup>

The effect created by this great weight of vocabulary is that everything revolves around the king. There are but few people and objects in the book that are not defined in relation to the king. Yet this is not the complete story, for the king is relatively absent from the latter chapters, replaced by Esther and Mordecai who assume the dominant role.

## 2. The King’s Law

The king’s verbal and written decrees have been noted above. A rich variety of different words is used, and often the narrator uses several of them together to build up the overall picture of a bureaucratic empire, characterized by officials and laws. The most prominent feature of the bureaucratic nature of the empire is the various written decrees that are issued. Seven different sets of written orders are issued through the course of the book.

The first edict is issued by the king in response to Vashti’s refusal of his verbal order; it declares that “every man should be master in his own house” (1:22). It was Memucan who suggested that a royal order (דְּבַר־מְלָכּוּת) be issued, and that the decree (פְּתָגִים) be proclaimed throughout the kingdom (1:19-20). Accepting this advice, the king sent letters (סְפָרִים) to every province, written in every script and every language (1:22). Over time the king’s anger abated, and he remembered Vashti and “what had been decreed against her (וַיִּגְוֵר עָלֶיהָ) (2:1). But his memory is selective: he forgot Vashti’s rebellion, remembered his fondness for her, remembered her banishment, but forgot that he was the one who issued that decree. This is the man at the center of this vast bureaucratic empire.

The second edict is issued by the king to initiate a beauty contest to find a new queen. This time it is his servants who initiate this course of action, suggesting he “appoint commissioners (וַיִּשְׁלַח... פְּקִידִים) in every province to gather all the virgins (2:3), and so “the

<sup>3</sup> In only two places is the definite article *not* used: when describing King Jeconiah and King Nebuchadnezzar (2:6). The other 194 uses of the noun, all with the definite article, refer to King Ahasuerus.

<sup>4</sup> Word counts are generally from Lisowsky.

<sup>5</sup> אַחַשְׁתָּרֵן is derived from the Persian *Khshatra*, “lordship, realm.”

<sup>6</sup> The full phrase is רָכְבֵי הָרָכֶשׁ הָאַחַשְׁתָּרָנִים בְּנֵי הָרָמָכִים בְּסוּסִים, literally “on horses, riders of royal steeds, sons of mares.”

king's order and his edict (דְּבַר־הַמֶּלֶךְ וְדָתוֹ)" were proclaimed (2:8).

The third edict is issued by Haman in the king's name, "to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day"—the thirteenth of Adar—"and to plunder their goods" (3:13).<sup>7</sup> He suggests to the king, "let a decree be issued (וַיִּכְתֹּב)." "An edict...was written (וַיִּכְתֹּב)" and "letters (סְפָרִים) were sent by couriers (הַרְצִיִּם)" to every province (3:13). The decree (הַדָּת) was also issued in Susa (3:15). The "king's command and his decree (וְדָתוֹ וְדְבַר־הַמֶּלֶךְ)" was greeted with mourning by the Jews (4:3). Mordecai gave Hathach "a copy of the written decree (כְּתֹבֶת־הַדָּת)" for Esther (4:8).

The fourth edict is issued by Mordecai in the king's name, permitting the Jews to defend themselves on the thirteenth of Adar. This decree is initiated by Esther, who pleads with the king to "let an order be written (וַיִּכְתֹּב) to revoke the letters (הַסְּפָרִים) devised by Haman" (8:5). The king replies, "You may write as you please" (8:8). The secretaries are summoned and "an edict was written (וַיִּכְתֹּב)." Like the earlier edict this one was in every script and language of the empire (8:9).

The fifth edict (דָּת) was issued only in Susa, granting the Jews a second day to kill their enemies and hang the ten sons of Haman (9:14). This, too, is initiated by Esther.

The sixth set of written orders was a set of letters (סְפָרִים) sent by Mordecai to all the Jews throughout the empire, enjoining them to observe the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar as a perpetual feast (9:20-22).<sup>8</sup>

The seventh and final written order is from the hand of Esther. She "gave full written authority (וְאֶת־כָּל־הַתְּקִיף) confirming this second letter (אֲגָרָה)"<sup>9</sup> about Purim" (9:29). Letters (סְפָרִים) were sent to all the Jews throughout the empire (9:31). The body of the story ends on the note of Esther's written decree (וּבְאֵמַר אֶסְתֵּר) (9:32).

<sup>7</sup> Clines, 33-34, observes that the plot proper begins only with Haman's response to Mordecai's refusal to give him obeisance. Chapters 1-2 do far more than give the time, place and personages of the story; they engage in extensive character portrayal. Contrast the book of Ruth where the stage is set in a mere five verses.

<sup>8</sup> Clines, 49, asks whether the issuing of these letters isn't a cultural capitulation on the part of the Jews to Persian bureaucracy, constituting a symbolic crisis for Jewish identity.

<sup>9</sup> אֲגָרָה is late, probably a loan-word from Akkadian. Elsewhere it is used 4 times in Neh and twice in 2 Chron. L. J. Coppes suggests "it refers to the ancient practice of writing the full text on a clay tablet and covering the tablet with an envelope of clay upon which a summary of the contents was written. Finally, it was properly sealed." ("iggeret," *TWOT* 1:9).

Just as there is a transition in the feast motif from Persian feasts to Jewish feasts, so there is the same transition in these seven decrees. The first three decrees are initiated and issued by Persians, the last four by Jews.

In addition to the written decrees, the king issues several verbal orders. When he wanted to impress his officials with Vashti's beauty, he summoned her with a command (דְּבַר הַמֶּלֶךְ, 1:12; also called בְּאֵמַר הַמֶּלֶךְ, 1:15). The king's word (הַדְּבָר) is sufficient as Haman's death sentence (7:8).

The empire of the Persians and the Medes is bound by laws, to which even the king is subject. When Vashti refused to obey his command, the king "consulted the sages who knew the laws (הַעֲתִים)." It was the king's custom (דְּבַר הַמֶּלֶךְ) to consult sages "who were versed in law and custom (דָּת וְדִין)" (1:13).

Most of the written edicts are written into the law code of the empire. Memucan suggested that the first edict "be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes (בְּכִתְבֵי פַרְסִיּוֹמָדִי)." Concerning Haman's decree, a "copy of the document (כְּתֹבֶת־הַכְּתָב) was to be issued as a decree (דָּת) in every province" (3:14). Concerning Mordecai's edict permitting self-defense, "a copy of the writ was to be issued as a decree (לְהִנְתֵּן דָּת) (כְּתֹבֶת־הַכְּתָב)" (8:13).

It seems that there is a law for everything. There is a law for the drinking of wine at a feast: what the NRSV translates as "Drinking was by flagons" is literally, "drinking was by law (הַשְּׂתֵיָה כְּדָת)," i.e. by custom (1:8). The king asked his sages what should be done with Vashti "according to the law (כְּדָת)" (1:15). When the young virgins underwent their regimen of cosmetic treatment, it was governed by "the regulations for the women (כְּדָת הַנְּשִׂים)" (2:12). There is a law governing uninvited appearances before the king (4:11).

Haman preys upon the king's concern for law, basing his appeal for an edict to destroy the Jews upon the fact that "their laws (דְּתֵיָהֶם)" are different from "the king's laws (דְּתֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ)" (3:8).

### 3. The King's Pleasure

The manner in which the story revolves around the king is further emphasized by the motif of the king's pleasure. Memucan suggests that, "if it pleases the king (וּבְאֵמַר־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב)," he should issue a decree forbidding Vashti to ever enter his presence again (1:19). Indeed, "this advice pleased the king (הַדְּבָר בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ)" (1:21). In the beauty contest, whichever virgin "pleases the king (וְהַיִּטֵּב בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ)" should be queen in place of Vashti; this, too, "pleased the king (וְהַיִּטֵּב בְּעֵינֵי הַמֶּלֶךְ)" (2:4). Haman suggests that, "if it pleases the king (וּבְאֵמַר־עַל־הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב)," he issue a decree

for the destruction of the Jews (3:9). Esther invites the king to a banquet, if it pleases the king (טוב) (אם-על-המלך) (5:4). During that banquet she invites them to a second banquet “if it pleases the king” (5:8). During the second banquet, Esther asks for her life, “if it pleases the king (טוב) (אם-על-המלך) (7:3). After Haman’s death, when the king has forgotten that the Jews are still under the cloud of the his decree, Esther pleads for salvation “if it pleases the king (טוב) (אם-על-המלך) (8:5).

#### 4. In the Presence of the King

Ahasuerus is depicted as an oriental despot, in or out of whose presence is danger. Coming into the presence of the king is a major motif of the book, used nearly twenty times. Most of the plot of the book could be described in a diagram showing the entrance into and exit from the king’s presence on the part of the various characters. The king’s eunuchs are ordered to bring Vashti into his presence (לפני המלך) (1:11), but she refuses to come (לבוא) (1:12), and is henceforth forbidden to ever again enter that presence (לפני המלך) (1:19). The seven officials had access to the king’s presence (ראי פני המלך), literally, “saw the king’s face,” (1:14), Memucan gives his counsel in the presence of the king (לפני המלך) (1:16), and the royal decree goes out from the king’s presence (מלפניו) (1:19).

During the rounds of the beauty contest, before a girl went to the king (אל-המלך) (2:12), she had to complete twelve months of beauty treatment, whereupon she would go to the king (אל-המלך) (2:13). In the evening she went in (בא) and in the morning she returned (שבה), but thereafter could not return to his presence (אל-המלך) (2:14) unless summoned. “When the turn came for Esther...to go in to the king (אל-המלך) (2:15), “she was taken (אל-המלך) (2:16), but there is no record of her leaving his presence, because she won the contest and was crowned queen.

Mordecai’s discovery of the plot against the king was recorded in the king’s presence (לפני המלך) (2:23). After discovering Haman’s plot against the Jews, Mordecai urged Esther to enter the king’s presence (אל-המלך) (4:8), but she replied that any one who goes to the king (אל-המלך) (4:11) is liable to die (4:11). At his further pleading she agreed, saying “I will go to the king (אל-המלך) (4:16),” despite the risk of death (4:16). Winning the king’s favour, she approached (תקרבו) him (5:2). Accepting her invitation, the king ordered that Haman be brought at once (מיהרה) (5:5). After the ban-

quet, Haman went out (ויצא) “happy and in good spirits” (5:9) and “went home (אל-ביתו) (5:10).

The next morning Haman “had just entered the outer court (בא להצר) (6:4), when the king enquired who was there. Told that Haman was there, he commanded his servants, “Let him come in (ויבוא) (6:5), so Haman came in (ויבוא) (6:6). The king sent Haman out of his presence with the urgent command “Quickly (מהרה) (6:10). After honouring Mordecai, Haman “hurried to his house (גדרתו אל-ביתו) (6:12). He was given little time to ponder his fate, for the king’s eunuchs arrived to “hurry Haman off (ויבהלו להביא) to the banquet,” and he once again is back in the king’s presence (6:14). Whereas it is usually auspicious to be in the king’s presence, this is no longer true for Haman, for it is in the king’s presence that Esther reveals Haman’s plot. The king asks, “Who is he, and where is he?” (הוא) (מי הוא זה ואיזה) and Esther replies “this wicked Haman (הקמן הרע הזה),” i.e. “he is right here in your presence” (7:5-6). Uncovered, Haman was terrified in the presence of (מלפני) the king and the queen (7:6).

After Haman’s death, Mordecai came into the presence of the king (לפני המלך) (8:1). Though he later left that presence (מלפני המלך) (8:15), he did so wearing royal robes, indicative of the king’s continued favour (8:15).<sup>10</sup>

At the end of the book, reviewing the story, the narrator attributes the turning point to the moment when “Esther came before the king (ויבאה לפני המלך) (9:25).<sup>11</sup>

#### 5. The King’s Decisions

Though Ahasuerus is the most powerful man in the world, ruler of the dominant empire, and though the narrator surrounds him with the trappings of power, it is all a veneer. The king issues many decrees but never actually makes his own decision. When Vashti refused to come at his command, he asked his seven sages what he should do and Memucan suggested that a decree be issued (1:15-21). When the king’s anger over Vashti turned to longing, it was his servants who suggested that a beauty contest be held (2:2-4). Haman suggested the edict to annihilate the Jews (3:8-9). The king was told about Mordecai’s faithfulness (6:2), even though the narrator has been careful to tell us that Mordecai’s heroism was recorded in the king’s presence (2:23).

<sup>10</sup> Clines, 39, observes that the “topographical code” is “abolished in the appointment of Mordecai: in going out of the king’s presence clad in royal robes, he manifests that the imperial power is now no longer located within the throne-room, but is concentrated in his person.”

<sup>11</sup> The subject is ambiguous, for, while the verb is feminine, there is no subject.

Esther told the king about Haman's plan (7:6) even though the edict was issued in the king's name (3:12). The eunuch Harbona told the king about Haman's gallows (7:9). Esther had to remind the king that Haman's treachery was still on the books (8:1).

## C. Esther

### 1. Passivity

Esther and Mordecai, the key characters, are not introduced until the second chapter. When they are, Mordecai is portrayed in an active role, Esther in a passive role. Mordecai had taken (לָקַח-לוֹ) his orphan cousin Esther as his own daughter (2:7, 15). She was taken (Niph'al וּתְלַקַּח) into the palace, into the custody of Hegai (2:8). She did not reveal her Jewish identity for Mordecai had *commanded* her not to tell (אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תַגִּיד) (אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תַגִּיד, 2:10). Whereas each girl was allowed to take in to the royal bedroom whatever she asked for (תְּאָמַר בְּקִשָּׁהּ דְּבָרָה) (אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תַגִּיד, 2:13), Esther asked for nothing (אֲשֶׁר לֹא-תַגִּיד) but what Hegai suggested (2:15). This passivity is further indicated by a subtle change of verb: whereas each other girl went (בָּרָחָה) to the king when her turn came (2:14), Esther was taken (Niph'al וּתְלַקַּח, 2:16). At the end of the beauty contest, the narrator again tells us that Esther did not reveal her identity, just as Mordecai had *commanded* her (בְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה עָלֶיהָ) (בְּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה עָלֶיהָ), adding that this obedience characterized her whole childhood under Mordecai's adoptive care (2:20).

Mordecai and Esther continue their active and passive roles in the next scene. When Mordecai uncovered the plot against the king and passed the information on to Esther, she informed the king "in the name of Mordecai" (2:22).

In chapter 4, Esther begins to show initiative and take an active role. Having taken commands from Mordecai, she now issues commands. When she is told that her uncle is sitting at the gate clothed in sackcloth and ashes, she sends garments to clothe him (4:4). She *commanded* Hathach to go to Mordecai (עַל-מַרְדֵּכָי) (וּתְצַוֶּהוּ) to find out why he has refused the garments (4:5). In his reply, Mordecai tells Hathach to *command* her (וּתְצַוֶּהוּ עָלֶיהָ) to go to the king (4:8). Esther refused, again *commanding* Hathach to go to Mordecai (עַל-מַרְדֵּכָי) (וּתְצַוֶּהוּ אֶל-מַרְדֵּכָי, 4:10). Though Esther acquiesces to Mordecai's second message, it is clear that it is now Esther who calls the shots. She tells Mordecai what to do (4:16), and he "went away and did everything as Esther had *ordered* him (אֲשֶׁר-צִוָּתָהּ עָלָיו) (4:17).

Through the remainder of the book, it is Esther who controls the action. She appoints Mordecai over Haman's estate (8:2). Though Mordecai issued the first decree, and a second letter concerning Purim, it took a

letter from Esther—"Esther's decree (מֵאֲמַר אֶסְתֵּר)"—to confirm the Purim regulations (9:32). The main body of the text, prior to the appendix in 10:1-3, ends on this note of Esther's decree.<sup>12</sup> It is Esther who, quite literally, has the last word.

### 2. Finding favour

Despite the passivity of Esther, she pleases all around her. When brought into the harem, she pleased (וַתִּיבֹט) Hegai and "won his favour (וַתִּשָּׂא חֶסֶד לְפָנָיו)," so that he gave her the best place in the harem (2:9). Though she has initiated no action of her own, she "was admired by all who saw her (וַנְּשָׂאתָ חַן בְּעֵינֵי כָל-רְאִיָּה)" (2:15). The other girls sought to arouse the king's favour with the help of aids they took into his bedroom, but Esther used nothing artificial. Nevertheless, "the king loved (וַיֵּאָהֵב) Esther more than all the other women; of all the virgins she won his favor and devotion (וַתִּשָּׂא חַן וְחֶסֶד לְפָנָיו)," so that he chose her to be his new queen (2:17).

Esther risked her life when she entered the king's presence without invitation, but "she won his favor (וַנְּשָׂאָה חַן בְּעֵינָיו)" and was accepted (5:2). Inviting the king and Haman to a banquet, she presages her request, "If it pleases the king (אִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב, 5:4). The king's acceptance implies that she continues to please him. Inviting the king to a second banquet, she starts with "If I have won the king's favor, and if it pleases the king (אִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב) (אִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב)" (5:8). Again, the king's acceptance implies continued approval. At the second dinner, she again prefaces her request, "If I have won your favor, O king, and if it pleases the king (אִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב) (אִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב)" (7:3).

The death of Haman removes the Jews' prime enemy, but not the prospect of imminent annihilation. Falling at the king's feet, Esther prefaces her plea with four terms of entreaty, "If it pleases the king, and if I have won his favor, and if the thing seems right before the king, and I have his approval (וְאִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב וְאִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב וְאִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב וְאִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב)" (8:5). Esther's final request of the king is for a second day of vengeance against the enemies of the Jews, prefaced with the simple statement, "If it pleases the king (אִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב) (אִם-עַל-הַמֶּלֶךְ טוֹב)" (9:13). Throughout the drama of chapters 4–9, Esther has continued in the king's good graces.

<sup>12</sup> Gordis, 44, identifies three appendices: Mordecai's letter (9:20-28), Esther's letter (9:29-32), and Mordecai's career (10:1-3). "The integrity of the book is clear until 9:19."

## D. Clothes

Clines has noted the motif of clothing. The verb לבש and the noun לבוש are used six times each. When Mordecai learned of the king's decree to annihilate the Jews, he "tore his clothes (בגדיו) and put on sackcloth and ashes (וילבש שק ואפר)" (4:1). This attire prevented him from gaining access to Esther to warn her directly, "for no one might enter the king's gate clothed with sackcloth (בלבוש שק)" (4:2). Throughout the empire, Jews joined Mordecai's mourning, and "most of them lay in sackcloth and ashes (שק ואפר יצע)" (4:3). When Esther was told by her maids and eunuchs, she was deeply distressed and "she sent garments (בגדים) to clothe (להלביש) Mordecai" (4:4). Before going to see the king, Esther clothed herself (והתלבש) in a royal robe (5:1).

When the king asked what should be done for "the man the king wishes to honor," Haman suggested that "royal robes (מלכות) be brought, which the king has worn (לבש)," that "the robes (הקלבוש) ... be handed over to one of the king's most noble officials," and that he "robe (והלביש) the man the king wishes to honour" (6:8-9).<sup>13</sup> Haman presumed this honour would be given him (6:6), but instead the king commands him to accord the honour to Mordecai: "Quickly, take the robes (הקלבוש)...as you have said, and do so" (6:10). With no option but to obey, "Haman took the robes (הקלבוש) ... and robed (וילבש) Mordecai" (6:11).

Haman never receives the honour that he coveted. Instead, it is Mordecai who wore royal robes (מלכות) after being appointed to replace Haman (8:15).

## II. Reversal and Recognition

Recognition of the motifs is an exercise in observation. From description we move on to analysis. What all of these motifs make clear is that the celebration of Purim plays a very minor role in the story. Though it is the climax to the story, it is not the dominant message of that story. The theme of Purim is insufficiently important to justify classifying the book as an etiological tale to explain the origin of the feast.

The dominant theme that emerges from the motifs is reversal. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle classifies plots into simple and complex:

Plots are either Simple or Complex, for the actions in real life, of which the plots are an imitation, obviously show a similar distinction. An action which is one and continuous in the sense above defined, I call Simple,

when the change of fortune takes place without Reversal of the Situation and without Recognition.

A Complex action is one in which the change is accompanied by such Reversal, or by Recognition, or by both. These last should arise from the internal structure of the plot, so that what follows should be the necessary or probable result of the preceding action.<sup>14</sup>

Aristotle believed that Reversal and Recognition are "the most powerful elements of emotional interest in Tragedy."<sup>15</sup> He defined "Reversal of the situation is a change by which the action veers round to its opposite, subject always to our rule of probability or necessity."<sup>16</sup> The word that Aristotle used for Reversal is περιπέτεια. The word is still used, in its transliterated form *peripeteia* or in its anglicized form *peripety*, to define a reversal of fortune in a plot. Within the plot of the book of Esther, Reversal operates on many different levels.<sup>17</sup> The plot also has several Recognitions.

The reversal in the fortunes of Haman hinges upon recognition, as the true identities of Haman and Mordecai are uncovered in stages. When the king is unable to sleep, he orders that the court chronicles be read to him, from which he learns that Mordecai has not been rewarded for uncovering the plot to assassinate the king. This brings recognition of Mordecai for who he is, a hero who should be honoured. When the king asks Haman what he should do for such a hero, Haman assumes it is himself that he is talking about, a case of mistaken recognition that will soon haunt him. Haman is forced, against his will, to recognize Mordecai, not as his enemy but as the king's friend. Back home, his wife recognizes that Mordecai is "of the Jewish people," and that therefore the complete reversal of his own fortune is certain: "you will not surely prevail against him, but will surely fall before him" (7:13).<sup>18</sup> The final denouement of Haman's fall from power occurs at Esther's dinner table when she forces the king to recognize that the villain is the very man seated next to him, his chief official and drinking partner (7:6). The last act of Haman's life is falling at the feet of a Jewish woman, undone because a Jewish man would not fall at his feet.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, x. 1-3.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, vi. 13.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics*, xi. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Craig, 80-119, offers a lengthy analysis of peripety in the book of Esther.

<sup>18</sup> McClarty, 220-221, explores the contrast between Zeresh and Haman, one of the three male-female pairs of foils in the story (the others are Vashti to the king, and Esther to Mordecai). In contrast to many interpreters, McClarty, 219, finds a feminine bias throughout the book, in which the characterization of the men (the king, Haman, Mordecai) serves to highlight the characterization of the women (Vashti, Zeresh, Esther).

<sup>13</sup> Sasson, 341, notes that such attire was reserved for substitute kings, i.e. Haman is grasping after the monarchy itself.

He died on the stake intended for Mordecai, to be joined later by his sons.<sup>19</sup>

The change in Esther unfolds in two stages, from passive young girl to Persian queen to Jewish matriarch.<sup>20</sup> She is passive throughout chapter 2, as she wins the favour of Hegai and of the king, and is appointed queen. In the first half of chapter 4 she is prompted into activity by the report that Mordecai has clothed himself in sackcloth and ashes. Her responses to Mordecai show that, over the previous five years, she has adopted the ways of the palace. Embarrassed that her cousin and guardian has so humiliated himself, she sends clothes to make him decent. When he commands her to intercede on behalf of her people, she responds that that is not the way one does things in the palace. Esther's change in behaviour comes with Recognition of her own true identity, when Mordecai faces her with the facts: "Do not think that in the king's palace you will escape any more than all the other Jews. For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter, but you and your father's family will perish. Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this." (4:13-14).<sup>21</sup> Throughout the rest of the story it is Esther who is the dominant actor in the plot.<sup>22</sup> At the end she has the same authority as the king: the same noun מְלִכָּה is used to describe their power and authority (9:29; 10:2).

The reversal in the fortunes of Mordecai hinges entirely upon Esther, for it is Esther who tells the king "what he was to her," and it is Esther who sets Mordecai over the estate of Haman that the king had given her

(8:1-2).<sup>23</sup> In this reversal of fortunes, Mordecai has replaced Haman. The narrator carefully uses similar language to describe Haman and Mordecai after their respective elevations to power. Both received the king's signet ring (3:10; 8:2), the summoning of the royal secretaries to write an edict (3:12; 8:11), the sealing of the letter with the king's signet ring (3:12; 8:12).<sup>24</sup>

The reversal in the fortunes of the Jews is indicated by the pattern of the ten banquets and seven edicts. The first five banquets are given by Persians, the last five by Jews. The reversal in the fortunes of Esther and Mordecai as leaders of the Jews is indicated by the pattern of the seven edicts, for these two assume from the king and from Haman the role of issuing edicts.

In chapter 9 the narrator is explicit about this theme of reversal. The Jews struck back "on the very day when the enemies of the Jews hoped to gain power over them, but which had been changed (תִּפְּרֹךְ) to a day when the Jews would gain power over their foes" (9:1). As a result, that day and that month "had been turned (תִּפְּרֹךְ) for them from sorrow into gladness and from mourning into a holiday" (9:22). As for Haman, it happened that "the wicked plot that he had devised against the Jews should come upon his own head (וְיָשׁוּב...עַל-רֹאשׁוֹ)" (9:25).

A cataloguing of the literary motifs illuminates these patterns of reversal and recognition in the plot, patterns that are not immediately observed on a non-literary reading. From the above analysis of these themes it is clear that the dominant characters are Haman and Esther. Although Mordecai features in many of the chapters, his importance in the plot is small compared to that of Esther. A careful study of the reversals of Haman and Esther shows that their reversals hinge on two separate events. Esther's reversal hinges on Mordecai's challenge to recognize her strategic situation, "Who knows? Perhaps you have come to royal dignity for just such a time as this" (4:13-14). Haman's reversal hinges upon the king's sleepless night (6:1), an otherwise insignificant event in the plot.

These two strategic moments force us to ask who it was that put Esther in her strategic position, and who it was that robbed the king of sleep. These two questions bring us, the readers, to our own point of recognition, for we recognize that it is not the king who is the primary actor. Indeed, the narrator has made this clear all

<sup>19</sup> Howard, 412, records another aspect of this reversal of the fate of Haman and Esther: "As one ancient Jewish commentator has put it, Ahasuerus sacrifices his wife to his friend and later sacrifices his friend to his wife."

<sup>20</sup> Ryken, 118, sees Esther first as "a young person caught in an identity crisis, and then as a heroic figure transformed through ordeal." She therefore more than meets the requirements for a literary hero.

<sup>21</sup> Clines, 48, observes the confusing message of the book when read deconstructively: "the Jewish people find themselves under a death sentence because one Jew acts like a Jew and tells his people he is a Jew; they escape through the good offices of another Jew who has pretended she is not a Jew. If being Jewish is being Esther-like, no tragedy need be expected; if it is being Mordecai-like, no saviour in high places can be counted upon. This is a very confusing message from a narrative that purports to sustain Jewish identity."

<sup>22</sup> Carey Moore is typical of a generation of commentators who read the dynamic of Esther and Mordecai the other way around: "between Mordecai and Esther the greater hero in the Hebrew is Mordecai, who supplied the brains while Esther simply followed his directions" (C. A. Moore, *Esther*, Anchor Bible [New York: Doubleday, 1971], lii, quoted in Craig, 26).

<sup>23</sup> McClarty, 221-225 explores the contrast between Mordecai and Esther. She understands that, when set as a foil against her guardian, Esther finishes the story completely overshadowing him. Ryken, 118, also interprets Mordecai as subservient to Esther: he "is the conventional attendant on the protagonist, a character necessary to the action but for purposes of the story kept subordinate to the heroine."

<sup>24</sup> Craig, 86-87, provides a table comparing the plot components of 3:9-4:3 with the plot components of 8:2-17.

along. Although almost every person and event revolves around the king, and although his name permeates the book, he is a spineless despot ruled by his own fickle emotions, whose banquets have been superseded by Jewish banquets, and whose edicts have been superseded by edicts from Esther and Mordecai. We must therefore recognize that there is a greater actor behind the scenes, one who is never mentioned in the plot, but who controls that plot far more thoroughly than the one whose name is throughout the plot.<sup>25</sup> This unseen actor has brought about the great reversal celebrated ever since in Purim, turning their “sorrow into gladness (מִיָּגוֹן לְשִׂמְחָה),” and their “mourning into a holiday (וּמְאָבֵל לְיוֹם טוֹב)” (9:22).<sup>26</sup>

It is therefore surprising that the feast should be called Purim, for the lot (*pur*) actually plays an insignificant role in the plot. Nevertheless, its name is a perpetual reminder of this greater actor, for “The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the LORD’s alone” (Prov 16:33).

## Abbreviations

*TWOT* *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980).

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<sup>25</sup> Actantial analysis reveals a missing actant, the Sender. The only plausible candidate is God. It shows also the ambiguous identity of the king as both Opponent and Helper, (Clines, 36).

<sup>26</sup> This is a reversal of Jeremiah’s lamentation over Jerusalem, “The joy of our hearts has ceased; our dancing has been turned to mourning” (Lam 5:15).