

# INTRODUCTION

In the Hebrew Bible (the Old Testament) the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther are together called the five *Megilloth* (“Scrolls”). Jews read these books during their great religious festivals: the Song of Songs during Passover, Ruth during Pentecost, Lamentations on the anniversary of the destruction of Jerusalem, Ecclesiastes during Tabernacles, and Esther during Purim.<sup>1</sup> Due to the immense popularity of the Book of Esther, it is called “The Scroll.”

## AUTHORSHIP

The text of Esther nowhere names the author. Josephus (*Antiquities* 11.6.13) considered Mordecai to be the author. Living in Susa, Mordecai would have understood Persian life and customs. As Xerxes’ Prime Minister he would have had access to court records (cf. 2:23; 10:2). The Jewish nationalism of the book certainly suggests a Jewish interest. However, it is unlikely he would have written such self-congratulatory words as found in 10:3.

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<sup>1</sup>In his book *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther* (InterVarsity, 2000), Barry G. Webb writes that “the book of Esther is indeed a festive garment, a garment to put on when we are astonished, once again, at some unexpected way God has rescued us, and when we are ready to celebrate. But it is also a garment to put on when the forces arrayed against us seem all-powerful, when to laugh may be the only way to stay sane. To put this garment on, however, is not to whistle in the dark, or to pretend that things are other than they are. It is to clothe ourselves with the truth that God is sovereign, and to be reminded that he is always with us, even when he seems most absent, and that nothing can ultimately thwart his purposes. To put on Esther is to affirm that God is our deliverer, and to share in the laughter of heaven” (pp. 132-133).

*Baba Bathra* 15a proposed that the men of the Great Synagogue wrote the book. The Great Synagogue or Great Assembly was a council of great religious authority that is traditionally linked with Nehemiah 8–10, where its earliest beginnings are suggested. The rabbis regarded Ezra as leader of the Great Assembly.

In short the identity of the author remains unknown.

Is the book the work of one author or is it composite? Alleged differences in vocabulary and style are the principal arguments for a plurality of authors.

## DATE

Since the question of authorship is insoluble, there can be no absolute certainty about the date of composition. The *terminus a quo* (the starting point) must be no earlier than the death of Xerxes in 465 B.C. (cf. 10:2). The *terminus ad quem* (the finishing point) is much harder to determine.<sup>2</sup> Scholars generally defer to one of two positions: the early date (450–350 B.C.)<sup>3</sup> or the late date (175–100 B.C.), that is, the Maccabean period.<sup>4</sup>

The early date is much more likely. The author's intimate knowledge of Persian customs, names and loan words;<sup>5</sup> the topography of

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<sup>2</sup>The colophon to the Septuagint (LXX) version of Esther provides evidence that the LXX translation of Esther must have been made sometime before either 114 B.C., the fourth year of Ptolemy VIII or 77 B.C., the fourth year of Ptolemy XII. That colophon reads: "In the fourth year of the reign of Ptolemy and Cleopatra, Dositheus, who said that he was a priest and a Levite, and Ptolemy his son brought to Egypt the preceding Letter of Purim, which they said was genuine and had been translated by Lysimachus the son of Ptolemy, one of the residents of Jerusalem."

<sup>3</sup>E.J. Young, for example, writes, "It is best to regard the author as having lived sometime during the latter half of the fifth century B.C. But of this we cannot be certain" (*An Introduction to the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977], p. 355).

<sup>4</sup>Otto Kaiser, for example, infers "a date in the first half of the second century B.C." (*Introduction to the Old Testament*, trans. John Sturdy [Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1977], p. 203).

<sup>5</sup>H.S. Gehman, "Notes on the Persian Words in the Book of Esther," *JBL* 43 (1924): 321-328; A.R. Millard, "The Persian Names in Esther and the Reliability of the Hebrew Text," *JBL* 96 (1977): 481-488; R. Zadok, "Notes on Esther," *ZAW* 98 (1986): 105-110.

Susa; and the Persian royal palaces argues for a date in the Persian period.<sup>6</sup> Such detail would not likely have survived till the Maccabean period. In fact, “the latest terminus ad quem is prior to 330 B.C. since there are no traces of Greek influence either in language or in thought to be discovered in Esther.”<sup>7</sup> Comparison of literary Hebrew of the second century B.C. from Qumran with Esther “would rule out a second-century date for Esther, and make a third-century date unlikely.”<sup>8</sup>

Many late-date advocates argue that the anti-Semitism of Haman is historically appropriate *only* after the persecutions of Antiochus IV Epiphanes (175–163 B.C.). A.E. Morris has even suggested that Haman was Antiochus IV in disguise.<sup>9</sup>

## PURPOSE

Many interpreters assert that the major purpose of the Book of Esther was to explain and legitimate the feast of Purim.<sup>10</sup> This is unlikely since only chapter 9 deals specifically with the feast.

Clearly, the Book of Esther is written to demonstrate God’s providential care of His people. “The book of Esther,” writes Young,

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<sup>6</sup>According to Moore and Clines, the details of Persian life confirmed by extrabiblical sources include: the extent of the empire under Xerxes from India to Ethiopia (1:1); the council of seven nobles (1:14); the efficient postal system (3:13; 8:10); the keeping of official diaries including records of the king’s benefactors (2:23; 6:8); the use of impalement as a form of capital punishment (2:23; 5:14; 7:10); the practice of obeisance to kings and nobles (3:2); belief in lucky days (3:7); setting crowns on the heads of royal horses (6:8); reclining on couches at meals (7:8) (Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971], p. xli; D.J.A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, New Century Bible Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984], p. 261).

<sup>7</sup>Gleason L. Archer, Jr., *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1978), p. 417.

<sup>8</sup>Moore, *Esther*, p. lvii.

<sup>9</sup>A.E. Morris, “The Purpose of the Book of Esther,” *ExpTim* 42 (1930–31): 124–128.

<sup>10</sup>Bernhard W. Anderson writes, “It [Esther] is an emphatically Jewish book whose primary purpose is the authorization and regulation of a purely Jewish festival, Purim” (“The Place of the Book of Esther in the Christian Bible,” *JR* 30 [1950]: 32).

“serves the purpose of showing how divine providence overrules all things; even in a distant, far country, God’s people are yet in His hands.”<sup>11</sup>

Berg has noted that the Book of Esther parallels the Joseph story (Gen 37–48) at a number of points. In addition to verbal parallels (Esth 6:11/Gen 41:42-43; Esth 3:4/Gen 39:10; Esth 8:6/Gen 44:34; Esth 2:3-4/Gen 41:34-37), the stories have other similarities: both stories are set at the court of a foreign king; both Esther and Joseph become the means by which the Jews are saved; in both stories the disturbed sleep of the king results in the promotion of a Jew (Esth 6:1-3/Gen 41); the reward of both Joseph and Mordecai includes a gift of garments and a ride through the city; and both Joseph and Esther reveal their Jewish identities at a banquet (Esth 7:1-6; Gen 45).<sup>12</sup>

Like the Book of Esther, the Joseph Story illustrates God’s overruling care of his people, even in a distant country. Joseph’s words to his brothers express the truth: “And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will not be plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance” (Gen 45:5-7).

## TEXT

The Hebrew version (the Masoretic Text) of Esther contains 167 verses, as does the NIV. The Greek version, the Septuagint (or LXX), of Esther contains six additions totaling 107 verses that supply the religious element that is lacking in the Hebrew text. These verses make frequent reference to God and give prominence to prayer. These verses are collectively called “The Additions to the Book of Esther,” and can be found in the Apocrypha. These verses have little or no historical value. The six additions (as numbered in the LXX) are (1) Mordecai’s Dream [11:2–12:6], (2) Text of the King’s

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<sup>11</sup>Young, *Introduction*, p. 358.

<sup>12</sup>Sandra B. Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure*, SBLDS 44 (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1979), pp. 124-128.

First Letter [13:1-7], (3) The Prayers of Mordecai and Esther [13:8-14:19], (4) Esther Appears before the King Unsummoned [15:1-16], (5) Text of the King's Second Letter [16:1-24], and (6) The Interpretation of Mordecai's Dream [10:4-11:1].<sup>13</sup>

## CANONICITY

The great Jewish scholar Maimonides (A.D. 1135-1204) ranked Esther after the Pentateuch, declaring, "When all the rest of the Old Testament passed away in the days of the coming of the Messiah, only Esther and the Law would remain."<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, Martin Luther wrote, "I am so hostile to [2 Maccabees] and to Esther that I could wish they did not exist at all; for they judaize too greatly and have much pagan impropriety" (*Table Talk*, xxiv).

Even though Josephus (A.D. 37-100) regarded Esther as canonical (*Against Apion* 1.38-41), the book was disputed by some Jews and rejected by others. Melito, the bishop of Sardis about A.D. 170, during a visit to the east, ascertained the number and names of the books of the old covenant. His list, derived from a Jewish source, includes all the books of the Hebrew Bible except Esther.

According to Carey Moore, among the Christians in the East, Esther was often denied canonical status, whereas, in the West, Esther was nearly always regarded as canonical.<sup>15</sup> Both the Council of Hippo in A.D. 393 and the Council of Carthage in A.D. 397 recognized the canonicity of Esther.

Jew and Christian may have objected to the book because it "seemed too anthropocentric since it does not even mention God. Moreover, apart from fasting, no distinctively religious practices or concepts seem to be in the canonical version."<sup>16</sup>

To date no satisfactory reason has been suggested to account for the absence of the Book of Esther at Qumran. The absence of Esther from the Qumran library may be an accident of the preservation of

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<sup>13</sup>Carey Moore, "On the Origins of the LXX Additions to the Book of Esther," *JBL* 92 (1973): 382-393.

<sup>14</sup>Quoted in Joyce G. Baldwin, *Esther*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1984), p. 51.

<sup>15</sup>Moore, *Esther*, pp. xxv-xxviii.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. xxxi.

manuscripts. It seems more likely that Esther was not found at Qumran because the Essenes did not include Purim in their liturgical calendar.

## GENRE

What type of book is Esther?<sup>17</sup> Shemaryahu Talmon classified the book as a *historicized Wisdom tale*.<sup>18</sup> Robert Gordis postulated that a Jewish author undertook to write his book in the form of a *chronicle of the Persian court*, written by a Gentile scribe.<sup>19</sup> W.W. Hallo classifies Esther as a *historical novel or novella*. “It is full of authentic historical memories of the Persian period and the Persian setting of Jewish life after the Babylonian exile, and thus conforms in interesting details with archaeological evidence, but it is not to be read as the authentic record of actual events.”<sup>20</sup> Likewise, Carey Moore writes, “We conclude that Esther is neither pure fact nor pure fiction: it is a historical novel.”<sup>21</sup> W. Lee Humphreys suggests that Esther is a *life-style tale* for the Diaspora. Esther presents “a style of life for the diaspora Jew which affirms most strongly that at one and the same time the Jew can remain loyal to his heritage and God and yet can live a creative, rewarding, and fulfilled life precisely within a foreign setting.”<sup>22</sup> Michael V. Fox argues that Esther is a *historical story*, a self-contained narrative mainly concerned to recount what a particular event was and how it happened, but given contours conceived in the writer’s particularizing imagination.<sup>23</sup> Some have labeled Esther a *festival eti-*

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<sup>17</sup>For an excellent treatment of this question, see Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), pp. 141-152.

<sup>18</sup>S. Talmon, “‘Wisdom’ in the Book of Esther,” *VT* 13 (1963): 419-455. See also Jonathan Magonet, “The Liberal and the Lady: Esther Revisited,” *Judaism* 29 (1980): 167-176.

<sup>19</sup>R. Gordis, “Religion, Wisdom and History in the Book of Esther — A New Solution to an Ancient Crux,” *JBL* 100 (1981): 375-382. Baldwin approves of Gordis’s suggestion (*Esther*, p. 36).

<sup>20</sup>William W. Hallo, “The First Purim,” *BA* 46 (1983): 23.

<sup>21</sup>Moore, *Esther*, p. lii.

<sup>22</sup>W. Lee Humphreys, “A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel,” *JBL* 92 (1973): 223.

<sup>23</sup>Fox, *Character*, p. 150.

ology. An etiology is a narrative that explains the origin of some existing aspect of society, religion, or nature.<sup>24</sup>

## HISTORICITY

The most serious objection raised against the historicity of Esther is that the only known wife of Xerxes was called Amestris. Persian records mention neither Vashti nor Esther. It may be that Xerxes had more than one wife but that Herodotus<sup>25</sup> mentioned only the most prominent. J.S. Wright has argued that an identification of Vashti with Amestris can possibly be made.<sup>26</sup> Vashti would have been her Hebrew name and Amestris her Persian name.

The four years between the demotion of Vashti (1:3) and the installation of Esther as queen (2:16) coincide with the four years Xerxes was busy with the expedition against the Greeks.

As to the objection that Esther could not have become the queen because Amestris/Vashti wielded power when her son Artaxerxes I came to the throne in 464, Shea responds:

In essence, Herodotus breaks off his account of Xerxes' reign at this point, after the description of these events that took place in Xerxes' 7th year subsequent to the king's return from the Greek campaign. This is an overstatement of the case to say that Amestris was Xerxes' queen between his 7th and 12th years, since we have no further information about her until the time her son Artaxerxes I occupied the Persian throne. In view of this silence of our sources, there is no specific evidence to

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<sup>24</sup>S.R. Driver, *An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1963), p. 486.

<sup>25</sup>Herodotus (ca. 484–424 B.C.), the “Father of History,” an ancient Greek historian, whose *The History* is an important source for the history of the Persian period. For a convenient summary of his life and accomplishment, see William E. Pemberton, “Herodotus,” *The Ancient World*, vol. 1, Dictionary of World Biography, ed. Frank N. Magill (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 1999). In this commentary the references to and citations of Herodotus are from Aubrey de Sélincourt, *Herodotus: The Histories* (New York: Penguin Books, 1954).

<sup>26</sup>J.S. Wright, “The Historicity of the Book of Esther,” in *New Perspectives on the Old Testament*, ed. J. Barton Payne (Waco, TX: Word, 1970), pp. 40–43. William H. Shea (“Esther and History,” *AUSS* 14 [1976]: 236–237) agrees.

indicate whether or not Amestris was Xerxes' chief wife from his 7th year to the end of his reign. This silence at least allows a place in Persian history for Esther, although it does not prove that she occupied it.<sup>27</sup>

Some have objected to Esther, a Jewess, becoming queen, since the Persian queen had to come from one of the seven royal families (Herodotus, 3.84). This objection is historically inaccurate. As J.S. Wright has pointed out, "Certainly Darius married other wives besides one from the Seven; and his son, Xerxes, who succeeded him, was not the son of this wife. Xerxes' wife, Amestris, was the daughter of Otanes; but this Otanes was the son of a certain Sisamnes, while the Otanes who was one of the Seven was the son of Pharnaspes."<sup>28</sup>

## THEOLOGY

A remarkable feature of the Book of Esther is the complete absence of the name of God. It is agreed that this feature must have been intentional. There is a veiled reference to the deity in 4:14, "relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place." The omission of God's name does not detract from the book's theological worth, rather it enhances it. The Book of Esther affirms that the God who appears hidden nevertheless remains present.

In the Old Testament God sometimes expressed his displeasure with his people by withdrawal (Ezek 11:23) and silence (Amos 8:11), in short, hiddenness. The absence of God's name from the Book of Esther implies then his displeasure with the sinfulness of his people.<sup>29</sup>

Mordecai and Esther were not blameless. Mordecai advised Esther to conceal her identity (2:10,20) in order to become queen (Lev 19:11). Mordecai's pride led to the confrontation with Haman. J.S. Wright writes, "The Christian judgment of the Book of Esther has been unnecessarily cramped through our feeling that because Mordecai is a Bible character, he must be a good man. Yet, like

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<sup>27</sup>Shea, "Esther," pp. 240-241.

<sup>28</sup>Wright, "Historicity," p. 38.

<sup>29</sup>F.B. Huey, Jr. explores this theme in "Esther," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 4, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), pp. 793-794.

Samson and Jehu he may have been little more than a time-server. The Bible makes no moral judgment upon him, but it expects us to use our Christian sense. He was raised up by God, but he was not necessarily a godly man.”<sup>30</sup> Esther was willing to hide her identity to become queen and was not reluctant to indulge the king’s sexual appetite (2:15-16; cf. Deut 7:3). Moore has suggested that “Esther’s Jewishness was more a fact of birth than of religious conviction.”<sup>31</sup>

Clearly, then, the actions of Mordecai and Esther reveal them to be less than exemplary. They both failed in consistently living according to the standard of God’s holiness.

In spite of God’s displeasure, the Book of Esther still implicitly teaches God’s providential care of his people. According to Fox, four types of evidence have been adduced to demonstrate God’s presence and activity in the Esther story: allusions, coincidences, reversals, and themes.<sup>32</sup>

Various statements have been thought to allude to God. In point of fact, both Esther and Mordecai believe that their God is present. When Esther instructs Mordecai to “gather together all the Jews who are in Susa, and fast for me” (4:16), she is expressing a belief in the efficacy of prayer. (In the OT fasting is associated with praying.) Mordecai’s words to Esther in 4:14 reveal his belief in the certainty of divine deliverance. Additionally, the story of the institution of a festival (Purim) must be, for Israel, a story of a mighty deed of its God.<sup>33</sup>

Esther 9:1 reads, “On this day the enemies of the Jews had hoped to overpower them, but now the tables were turned and the Jews got the upper hand over those who hated them.” The verse provokes the question, turned by whom? The answer is obvious: God.

The “coincidences” reported in the Book of Esther cannot be mere chance; God surely brought them to pass. The coincidences include: the timely vacancy of the queenship at the Persian court, the opportune accession of a Jew to queenship, Mordecai’s discovery of the eunuchs’ conspiracy, Esther’s favorable reception by the king, the king’s insomnia, Haman’s early arrival at the palace, and Haman’s reckless plea for mercy at Esther’s feet.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>Wright, “Historicity,” p. 45.

<sup>31</sup>Moore, *Esther*, p. liv.

<sup>32</sup>Fox, *Character*, p. 240.

<sup>33</sup>Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, p. 269.

<sup>34</sup>Fox, *Character*, p. 241.

The author consistently uses the technique of reversal (peripety) to highlight the providential intervention of God. Take note of these examples.

3:1 After these events, King Xerxes honored Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, elevating him and giving him a seat of honor higher than that of all the other nobles.	10:3 Mordecai the Jew was second in rank to King Xerxes, preeminent among the Jews, and held in high esteem by his many fellow Jews. . . .
3:7 . . . they cast the <i>pur</i> (that is, the lot) in the presence of Haman to select a day and month. And the lot fell on the twelfth month, the month of Adar.	9:24-25 For Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of all the Jews, had plotted against the Jews to destroy them and had cast the <i>pur</i> (that is, the lot) for their ruin and destruction. But when the plot came to the king's attention, he issued written orders that the evil scheme Haman had devised against the Jews should come back onto his own head, and that he and his sons should be hanged on the gallows.
3:10 So the king took the signet ring from his finger and gave it to Haman son of Hammedatha, the Agagite, the enemy of the Jews.	8:2a The king took off his signet ring, which he had reclaimed from Haman, and presented it to Mordecai.
3:11b . . . and do with the people as you please.	8:8a Now write another decree in the king's name in behalf of the Jews as seems best to you. . . .
3:12-15 See the commentary at 8:9-16.	8:9-16 See the commentary at 8:9-16.
4:1 When Mordecai learned of all that had been done, he tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and ashes, and went out into the city, wailing loudly and bitterly.	8:15 Mordecai left the king's presence wearing royal garments of blue and white, a large crown of gold and a purple robe of fine linen. And the city of Susa held a joyous celebration.
4:3 In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes.	8:17a In every province and in every city, wherever the edict of the king went, there was joy and gladness among the Jews, with feasting and celebrating.
5:14 His wife Zeresh and all his friends said to him, "Have a gallows built, seventy-five feet high, and ask the king in the morning to have Mordecai hanged on it."	7:9-10 Then Harbona, one of the eunuchs attending the king, said, "A gallows seventy-five feet high stands by Haman's house. He had it made for Mordecai, who spoke up to help the king." The king said, "Hang him on it!" So they hanged Haman on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.

<p>6:6-9 When Haman entered, the king asked him, "What should be done for the man the king delights to honor?" Now Haman thought to himself, "Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?" So he answered the king, "For the man the king delights to honor, have them bring a royal robe the king has worn and a horse the king has ridden, one with a royal crest placed on its head. Then let the robe and horse be entrusted to one of the king's most noble princes. Let them robe the man the king delights to honor, and lead him on the horse through the city streets, proclaiming before him, 'This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!'"</p>	<p>6:11-12 So Haman got the robe and the horse. He robed Mordecai, and led him on horseback through the city streets, proclaiming before him, "This is what is done for the man the king delights to honor!" Afterward Mordecai returned to the king's gate. But Haman rushed home, with his head covered in grief.</p>
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Finally, the presence of religious themes bears witness to God's presence. For example, the deliverance of the Jewish people from Haman's attempted genocide is clear enough, for they are the people of God's covenant.

The Book of Esther also teaches that human initiative and divine action can be complementary. "The story of the loyalty of Mordecai, the courage and cunning of Esther, and the providence of God makes a strong statement about the complementarity, the synergism, of divine and human action in effecting the deliverance of the people of God."<sup>35</sup> "The narrator understandably refrains from any reference to the deity in order to accentuate the role of human responsibility in shaping history, and to indicate the hiddenness of God's control of history."<sup>36</sup> "God's action is indeed involved, but it seems clear that the Book of Esther sees the manner of God's action . . . as strategic help periodically supplied to those who with full awareness struggle for his cause and theirs."<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup>Frederic Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 1996), p. 334.

<sup>36</sup>Berg, *Esther*, p. 179.

<sup>37</sup>Ronald M. Hals, *The Theology of the Book of Ruth* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), p. 52.

## STRUCTURE

According to Fox, the structure of the Book of Esther is ordered according to the theme of reversal. The narrated events are organized “as a symmetrical series of theses and antitheses, situations and their reversals. The theses are situations portending disaster for the Jews and success for their enemies, situations which could be expected to lead, in the natural course of events, to the Jews' destruction. But events do not run their natural course, but lead to the antitheses, which are the exact opposites of the result potential in the theses.”<sup>38</sup>

If the plot of the book is built and the message conveyed through the technique of reversal, then it is not surprising to find that the ten chapters of Esther are chiasmically arranged. Accordingly, Yehuda T. Radday offers the following outline, with 6:1 (the king's insomnia) the turning point in the book.<sup>39</sup>

- I. Opening and Background (ch. 1)
- II. The King's First Decree (ch. 2–3)
  - III. The Clash between Haman and Mordecai (ch. 4–5)
    - IV. ‘On that night, the king could not sleep’ (6:1)
  - III'. Mordecai's Triumph over Haman (6:2–7:10)
- II'. The King's Second Decree (ch. 8–9)
- I'. Epilogue (ch. 10)<sup>40</sup>

<sup>38</sup>Quoted in Berg, *Esther*, p. 106.

<sup>39</sup>Yehuda T. Radday, “Chiasm in Joshua, Judges and Others,” *Linguistica Biblica* 27-28 (1973), pp. 9-10. “Chiasm(us)” or “antimetabole” is a “grammatical figure by which the order of words in one of two parallel clauses is inverted in the other” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). A classic example of this is “I do not live to eat, but eat to live.”

<sup>40</sup>In *Mastering the Old Testament: Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), Mark Roberts adapts Radday's structure as follows,

- Prelude to the Story of Esther (1:1-22)
- Mordecai and Esther in Relationship with the King (2:1-23)
  - A Royal Decree to Destroy the Jews Issued by Haman (3:1-15)
  - Esther Responds to Haman's Plot (4:1–5:8)
    - Haman's Prideful Obsession (5:9-14)
    - The King's Sleepless Night (6:1-3)
    - Haman's Prideful Obsession Leads to Shame (6:4-14)
  - Esther Defeats Haman (7:1-10)
  - A Royal Decree to Save the Jews Issued by Mordecai (8:1-17)
  - Mordecai and Esther Establish Purim (9:1-32)
  - Epilogue in Praise of Mordecai (10:1-3)

## WISDOM IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER

According to S. Talmon, “What the Esther narrative in fact does is to portray *applied* wisdom. The outline of the plot and the presentation of the central characters show the wise man in action, with the covert, but nevertheless, obvious implication, that his ultimate success derives from the proper execution of wisdom maxims, as set forth, e.g. in Proverbs and to a certain degree, in Ecclesiastes.”<sup>41</sup> Here are some of the wisdom themes Talmon has detected in the Book of Esther.

King Xerxes is so easily duped that his weakness becomes the source of his courtiers' corruption.	“If a ruler listens to lies, all his officials become wicked” (Prov 29:12).
Unaware of his folly, Xerxes is conceited, irritable and unpredictable.	“A king's wrath is like the roar of a lion; he who angers him forfeits his life” (20:2). “A king's wrath is a messenger of death, but a wise man will appease it” (16:14).
Haman violates all the rules of wise behavior. His hatred and rage eventually overpower him.	“An angry man stirs up dissension, and a hot-tempered one commits many sins” (29:22).
Haman discloses his thoughts before others like any proverbial fool (5:10-13).	“A prudent man keeps his knowledge to himself, but the heart of fools blurts out folly” (12:23).
Haman acts when he is controlled by rage and impatience.	“A quick-tempered man does foolish things” (14:17a; cf. 29b).
Mordecai triumphs over Haman.	“A king delights in a wise servant, but a shameful servant incurs his wrath” (14:35). “A king's rage is like the roar of a lion, but his favor is like dew on the grass” (19:12).
Haman hanged on the gallows he had prepared for Mordecai.	“The righteous man is rescued from trouble, and it comes on the wicked instead” (11:8). “If a man digs a pit, he will fall into it; if a man rolls a stone, it will roll back on him” (26:27; Ps 7:16; Eccl 10:8).

<sup>41</sup>Talmon, “Wisdom,” p. 427.

Mordecai plans carefully and never rushes into action.	“Better a patient man than a warrior, a man who controls his temper than one who takes a city” (16:32).
Esther builds her house in wisdom, and were it not for her designs her people would have come to ruin.	“The wise woman builds her house” (14:1a). “For lack of guidance a nation falls” (11:14a).
The victory of the good (Esther and Mordecai) over the evil (Haman) is just cause for celebration.	“When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices; when the wicked perish, there are shouts of joy” (11:10). “The prospect of the righteous is joy, but the hopes of the wicked come to nothing” (10:28). “Misfortune pursues the sinner, but prosperity is the reward of the righteous” (13:21).

## ESTHER

Esther was a Jewish orphan who became the queen of Ahasuerus (Xerxes) the Persian king. Esther was brought up in Susa by Mordecai, who was an official in the royal court. After Xerxes deposed Vashti, his former queen, he selected her successor from the most beautiful virgins from all the provinces of his empire. He chose Esther. Her Jewish name was Hadassah.

Soon after Esther’s accession Haman, a Persian noble and vizier of the empire under Xerxes, threatened the Jews with destruction. The Book of Esther relates how Haman was destroyed and the Jews were delivered.

Nothing more is known of Esther than is revealed in the book that bears her name.

# OUTLINE

- I. OPENING AND BACKGROUND – 1:1-22**
  - A. Introduction – 1:1-9**
  - B. Xerxes Calls for Queen Vashti – 1:10-12**
  - C. Consultation Regarding Vashti’s Punishment – 1:13-15**
  - D. The Advice of the Counselors – 1:16-20**
  - E. The Advice Is Accepted – 1:21-22**
- II. THE KING’S FIRST DECREE – 2:1-3:15**
  - A. The Proposal for Finding A New Wife – 2:1-4**
  - B. Introduction of Mordecai and Esther – 2:5-7**
  - C. Esther Joins the Beauty Pageant – 2:8-11**
  - D. The Girls Are Prepared to Meet the King – 2:12-14**
  - E. Esther Is Chosen as Queen – 2:15-18**
  - F. Mordecai Foils a Plot against the King’s Life – 2:19-23**
  - G. Mordecai Will Not Bow to Haman – 3:1-6**
  - H. Plans Are Made to Destroy the Jew – 3:7-11**
    - I. The Edict Is Issued – 3:12-15**
- III. THE CLASH BETWEEN HAMAN AND MORDECAI – 4:1-5:14**
  - A. The Jews Mourn because of the Edict – 4:1-3**
  - B. Esther Is Informed of the Edict – 4:4-8**
  - C. Esther’s Hesitation – 4:9-11**
  - D. Mordecai Encourages Esther to Act – 4:12-14**
  - E. Esther Requests Moral Support – 4:15-17**
  - F. Esther Approaches the King – 5:1-2**
  - G. Esther Prepares a Banquet – 5:3-8**
  - H. Haman Exults in His Honors but Hates Mordecai Even More – 5:9-14**
- IV. ‘ON THAT NIGHT, THE KING COULD NOT SLEEP’ – 6:1**
- V. MORDECAI’S TRIUMPH OVER HAMAN – 6:2-7:10**
  - A. The King Is Reminded of Mordecai’s Loyalty – 6:2-4**

- B. Haman Is Forced to Honor Mordecai** – 6:5-10
- C. Haman’s Embarrassment** – 6:11-14
- D. Esther Pleads for the Life of Her People and Herself** –  
7:1-4
- E. Haman’s Treachery Exposed** – 7:5-10
- VI. THE KING’S SECOND DECREE** – 8:1-9:32
  - A. Mordecai Is Honored** – 8:1-2
  - B. The Plot to Destroy the Jews Is Still in Force** – 8:3-8
  - C. A Counterdict Is Issued** – 8:9-14
  - D. The Salvation of the Jews Brings Joy to the Nation** –  
8:15-17
  - E. The Jews Triumph over Their Enemies** – 9:1-5
  - F. The Jews’ Enemies in Susa Are Destroyed** – 9:6-10
  - G. Further Defense Necessary in Susa** – 9:11-15
  - H. A Festival of Joy Established** – 9:16-19
  - I. Mordecai Makes the Celebration Official** – 9:17-22
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