

Esther, Lecture 1

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Session One – Introduction

1. General Overview of the narrative

The Scroll of Esther is a wonderful narrative full of delicious ironies and reversals and we will get started by reviewing that narrative. Xerxes (Ahasuerus, or *Ahashverosh*, in the Hebrew text), the ostentatiously powerful king of the mighty Persian Empire, lost a battle of wills with his wife, Vashti, when she refused to display herself before the men participating in the king's drinking feast. Apparently rendered incapable of decisiveness by his rage at this affront, he was advised by his chief wise counselor to escalate this domestic affair into a state crisis, and thereby issued a decree that Vashti should never appear before him again, which was, of course, what she refused to do in the first place. Further, in spite of his supreme position, he was unable to undo his decree when he regained his equilibrium, and this time was dependent on the wisdom of his young servants to rearrange his personal life and find for him a new queen in the person of Esther.

As the narrative continues to unfold, Xerxes was astonishingly oblivious to the Jewish identity of this queen, inattentive (for five years!) to the loyalty of Esther's cousin, Mordecai, as he foiled an assassination attempt upon the king's own life, and blind to the ominous implications of Haman's maneuvers to elevate himself and destroy an entire people with one decree sealed with Xerxes' own signet ring. Haman was a high-level political appointee, in fact, second to the king. Nevertheless, he was beside himself with wounded pride when he learned that Mordecai would not bow in his presence as commanded. The mention of Mordecai's Jewish identity served up to Haman the possibility of a truly malevolent reprisal against the entirety of Mordecai's people. He arranged this by casting a lot (*pur*) to determine the day for the slaughter of the Jews, and then he obtained the king's approval in a particularly devious manner. When the king's edict (which was really Haman's) was publicized, Mordecai challenged Queen Esther to risk her life to intervene. After three days of fasting, Esther crossed the boundary into the king's chambers, won his favor, and piqued his curiosity with an invitation to a private banquet to be attended solely by himself and Haman. Haman headed home elated until he encountered his nemesis, Mordecai, whose refusal to rise in his presence sent him into another rage which was soothingly addressed by his wife's suggestion of a public hanging for Mordecai.

In the meantime, the king just happened to have a bout of insomnia and the antidote was a soporific reading from the court chronicles. Discovering his lapse in court etiquette (that he had not rewarded Mordecai), the king determined to set matters right and inquired of Haman, who at that very moment happened to arrive at his bedroom door in order to get permission to hang Mordecai, what should be done for the person the king wished to

honor. Haman, his ego well in order, was certain that the king intended this for him and described an elaborate public display which he was then compelled to exercise on behalf of Mordecai. Humiliated, he got home just in time to be escorted back to the second banquet that Esther was throwing for him and the king. These two banquets had sufficiently softened both the king and Haman so that her stunning revelation of her Jewish identity and Haman's treachery infuriated and terrified the king and Haman respectively. In a scene fraught with apprehension and rage, Haman's scheme exploded in his face, his appeal for mercy was unheeded, and he was hanged on the pole intended for Mordecai.

Amidst these reversals, the character of Esther develops from an initially submissive charge of her cousin to a remarkably courageous authority figure. Together she and Mordecai countered the deadly decree of Haman with a royal authorization for the Jews to defend themselves in the face of organized, empire-wide attacks on their persons and property. They were successful, a commemorative celebration called Purim (named in response to the *pur*) was established, and the Scroll ends with peace and stability reigning.

Because the plot is so beguilingly engaging, the reader easily overlooks the complexity and richness that are packed into this text. The narrative is at the same time bitingly sarcastic as it pokes fun at the entire Persian court and horrifyingly ominous as one man's wounded pride and hatred spell potential disaster for the entire Jewish people. The text raises very timely and perplexing questions about ethnicity, gender, violence, and adherence to traditional orthodoxy.

It is also brimming with ambiguity at every turn. What are we to make of the choices and activities of Vashti, Ahasuerus (Xerxes), Mordecai, and Esther? Apart from the thoroughly evil Haman, every major figure in the narrative has garnered an astonishingly wide range of character assessments from centuries of commentators. Likewise, the communities represented, from the vast Persian Empire to the Jews of the diaspora, elicit both praise and scorn. Even God himself is subjected to scrutiny. How are we to understand his apparent absence from the stage of human events? It is with these theological and moral challenges that we will start our investigation.

2. Theological and Moral/Ethical Challenges

In rabbinic tradition, Esther was read as a book of divine concealment, based on the lexical connection with Deuteronomy 31:18, part of which reads "I will assuredly hide (h[^]sT@r A[^]sT!r) My face" (cf. Hullin 139b). The connection with *Ester* is clear. Both God's apparent absence and the choices of Mordecai and Esther have engendered a range of assessments of the book's theological significance. There are scholars who have labeled the work "secular," claiming it primarily reflects cultural compromise followed by excessive nationalism, neither of which is exemplary. In this context, the absence of

God's name, the lack of evident prayer and piety, and the questionable behavior of Esther are all seen as evidence that she and Mordecai represent a diaspora community that was decidedly irreligious. It was not intent on keeping the covenant, had lost a sense of the presence of God, and was fundamentally disobedient in remaining in the diaspora.

This view, however, misses several issues that significantly affect the interpretation of the text. Primarily, while post-enlightenment thought easily establishes a dichotomy between secular nationalism and religious intention, this was unthinkable in late antiquity (Fox). E.P. Sanders noted that "Loyalty to the community was inseparable from loyalty to the deity who called it into being; group identity and devotion to God went together...atheism was almost unknown in the ancient world. Virtually all believed that there really was a divine sphere...". Second, God is characteristically present in more subtle ways in narratives that have to do with foreigners. This is evident in the Joseph and Ruth stories as well as Esther.

I would suggest that there are indications of God's presence and activity in the narrative which demonstrate that both the characters of the drama and the authorship identified themselves as members of God's covenant community. First, there are allusions to God's activity. Mordecai's appeal in 4:14 to "help from another place" is the most evident one but Mordecai's Jewishness is the basis for Haman's wife to acknowledge that something bigger and uncontrollable is going on (6:13). Second, there are appeals for God's intervention, notably by fasting (4:3,16). Third, the whole array of what are often termed coincidences is cumulatively significant. The most notable of these is the king's insomnia, but coincidences appear from beginning to end in the narrative. Finally, the comprehensive structure built around the unexpected reversal of *human* expectations attests to divine control of circumstances and the hope for ultimate justice. The principle is articulated in 9:1 with the expression "it was overturned" in reference to the malevolent plan of the enemies of the Jews.

Presuming that the text does reflect God's providential orchestrating of the critical events and the main characters' awareness of his doing so, then why did the narrator not overtly name God and attribute these activities to him? Medieval Jewish exegetes posed explanations ranging from the author's concern not to offend Persian authorities to the fear of profaning the name of God during the frivolity that came to characterize the Purim festival (Walfish). These possibilities have continued to surface in recent treatments, but both suggestions are problematic. Notably, excessive drinking in conjunction with the festival developed only in the fourth century CE in Babylon so there would be no connection (Segal, *Prooftexts*).

More substantially, the ambiguity regarding God's presence in the narrative allows for very significant and wide-ranging application. The numerous providential coincidences were lodged in contexts that demanded responsible and faithful human choices and action.

In the face of recurring divine silence, God's people are compelled to choose between the imperfect alternatives that arise in the real ambiguities of life, just as Esther and Mordecai did. At the same time, people of faith are confident that God will address injustice and suffering and will preserve his people in his wisdom and in his time. This is extremely important as the text would be read and re-read through centuries filled with pain and suffering for the people of God.

Turning to the issue of responsible actions, there are those who have suggested that both Mordecai and Esther suffered severe moral lapses that resulted in the silent disapproval of God. That Mordecai was living in Susa, to say nothing of serving in some capacity in the court, instead of having returned with the exiles, is posited as evidence of his disobedience. Perhaps a small recapitulation of history would be in order here. Judah and Jerusalem had been ravaged by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 BCE, [time line] the Temple Solomon had built was destroyed, and there was wholesale deportation of the population to Babylon. In that context, their own religious identity was undermined by loss of connection to the land, by re-education in Babylonian language, literature, and culture (Dan 1), and by the seductive appeal of the dominant culture. Nevertheless, Babylonian superiority was relatively short-lived. The Persian empire replaced the Babylonians and Cyrus the Great issued his edict (539) sending the faithful remnant back to Judah in accordance with the prophetic declaration of Jeremiah that they would return. Notably, however, it was a remnant; the majority did not return, having comfortably settled in their various diaspora contexts. Those who did return encountered serious opposition, but nonetheless responded to the prophetic ministries of Haggai and Zechariah and finally completed the second Temple in 516 during the reign of Darius. Now, what is important for our purposes is that Xerxes took over the realm of Persia in 486 about a generation after the completion of that second Temple. It seems that Jewish communities were established throughout the diaspora with little intention of returning to the Land. This might justifiably be construed as disobedience and lack of loyalty to God and His covenant people, who were significantly defined in the context of the Land. To keep this in its wider biblical context, however, it is significant that both Ezra and Nehemiah at the outset of their individual stories were also in high profile positions in Susa. In fact, it is telling that those events took place just about a generation after the crisis narrated in the book of Esther. Perhaps the wave of pro-Jewish sentiment and the pattern set by Mordecai's position paved the way for the prominent roles that both Ezra and Nehemiah held in the Persian court prior to their respective returns to Judea.

A further charge against Mordecai centers around his willingness, perhaps to further his own interests, to send Esther into the "den of iniquity" that was the Persian court. Moreover, he forbade Esther, once she found herself in that context, to reveal her identity with God's covenant people. This could smack of his complete disregard for the spiritual aspects of his heritage and his intended assimilation to the dominant culture. Contrary to

this picture, however, there are indications early in the text that he was not so callous. In the absence of Esther's parents, he cared for her and adopted her as his daughter. The description of Esther emphasizes her extraordinary beauty which far exceeded the criteria for being rounded up; being taken was unavoidable. Once she was trapped in the harem, Mordecai's concern for her was evident in his daily walk outside the palace. We will develop each of these further in conjunction with the text.

Critics of Esther have risen in several quarters. From a feminist perspective, she is a seriously deficient role model in contrast to Vashti who courageously refused to be an "object" in the king's possession and forfeited her crown as a result. Esther, by way of contrast, passively did what she was told, allowed herself to be controlled by one man after another, and exercised manipulative feminine wiles as a powerful queen. This has prompted some readers to view the text as unpleasantly subversive (cf. Brenner)!

Further, Esther seems to have had no qualms about entering the harem and participating in a contest the sole focus of which was to satisfy the pagan and lascivious king's sexual appetite. From the outset of Israel's history, intermarriage with the people groups in Canaan was forbidden (Deut 7:1-4) because of the temptation to idolatry. The same motivation was behind the severe measures during the reform activities of Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 9:1-2; Neh 13:23-27) when foreign wives were put away. These took place in the mid-fifth century BCE, about a generation after the time of Xerxes and Esther. The determinative factor, however, was that Esther was "taken" as part of the roundup of young women to fill the king's harem. Further, while the most obvious interpretation seems to be that Esther did indeed prove herself on the first night to be a more memorable sexual partner than all the other candidates, more than one scholar has suggested that the king was intrigued with her specifically because she did not capitulate to his whims (Judith Rosenheim). After all, he had access to a full harem for those pleasures.

Somewhat more favorable presentations attribute to Esther a "character transformation" from initial passivity to forthright courage (Fox, Jobes). More accurately, however, she is an *actor* from the outset within the wider machinery of the royal household and the court. She "won favor" with key people, a more dynamic Hebrew idiom than the usual "found favor." She successfully acted as an intermediary between Mordecai and the king when Mordecai uncovered the assassination plot (Esth 2:22-23). When it came time to move into the public arena, she was ready to do so and was extraordinarily strategic about the entire operation, enlisting the support of the Jewish people as well as her maidens, confronting the king and Haman, arranging for self-defense measures for the Jewish populations, and instituting the festival. And that lead us to a sharper focus on the purposes of the text.

3. Purposes of the Text

It is clear that there are two interrelated primary intentions. One is the establishment of the annual celebration to commemorate the deliverance of Jews across the empire from

annihilation. Reading the story would become an integral part of that commemoration. Chapter nine firmly establishes the two day festival. This emphasis was particularly important because, unlike the major Jewish festivals, Purim had not been instituted at Sinai. Nevertheless, some see the connection between the deliverance narrative in chapters 1-8 and the festival observance as secondary and contrived. Scholars of the nineteenth century proposed creative hypotheses that attempted to explain satisfactorily why the story of a *Jewish* deliverance would be connected to what they assumed was a pre-existing pagan celebration, whether it was of Assyrian, Babylonian, or Persian origin. The nature of this hypothetical festival, however, was as tentative as its proposed point of origin. Some suggested the New Year, others a spring festival, and still others connected it with *Farvardigan*, a feast in memory of the dead. What does seem to be clear is that the Akkadian term *puru(m)*, which can be traced through both Assyrian and Babylonian texts, meant “lot” and secondarily “fate.” The practice of casting lots in order to determine the outcome of events had a long history.

Judith Rosenheim observed that in Persian culture, the results of casting *pur* were perceived as evidence of the predetermined decisions of a pagan deity. Thus, the lot did not indicate random chance. Instead, maybe Haman was consulting his gods. Given this wider socio-religious context, it is important that this narrative unfold as it does, with God apparently silent and thus *not* predictable, but sovereignly free to reverse the date that had been set by casting the lot and to do so particularly in conjunction with the tradition of deliverance at Passover.

Because there was a mandate to commemorate the event, it was necessary to establish recitation of the narrative so that it would be “remembered and performed” (Esth 9:28). It is *this* that draws together the narrative of chapters 1-8 with the legislation regarding the feast. It had to be told and heard to recapture the experience from generation to generation. Esther was to be read annually so that Israelites would relive blotting out the memory of their archenemy until the Kingdom of God comes. Medieval Jewish commentators saw the narrative of Esther as a foretaste of the final redemption when the forces of evil, epitomized in Amalek, would be finally destroyed. Thus, the narrative took on cosmic proportions. As a result, through the succeeding centuries Purim plays, known as *purimschpiels*, have become an integral part of this commemorative aspect (cf. *Trial of God*).

The narrative not only authenticated the festival, however; it is the one biblical text focused solely on life in the diaspora. Unlike the rest of the post-exilic literature that emphasizes return to the land, this narrative presents the complexities involved with the choice to remain in the dispersion and the vulnerability of those diaspora communities. On the one hand, the close of this story presents the reader with a fully “integrated” Mordecai, apparently devoid of tension between his association with the pagan court and life among

the “people of God.” Instead, both he and Esther creatively used the mechanisms of the existing system for the benefit of their people. On the other hand, there is no mistaking the fundamentally untrustworthy nature of the pagan realm. The opening farcical tone of the narrative simply intensifies the forthcoming shock as pride and egotism mutated into murderous hatred very quickly. Throughout the history of the Jews in the diaspora, in both eastern and western contexts, the tide has turned against them with appalling frequency and attempts at self-defense have themselves been deemed illegal. Ironically, extensive cultural assimilation, viewed as a protection, has often resulted in a backlash of catastrophic proportions, of which the last two centuries of western European history are the most recent sobering reminder. In sum, the text of Esther is vital, demonstrating a “theology... for the dispersion” in which Jewish *action* is as necessary as trust in God’s providence. It prepared Jews for their precarious existence in those scattered communities for centuries to come. In that regard, it is an absolutely essential part of the canon.

Esther challenges all readers to consider in what manner God has prepared them “for such a time as this” and just what those “times” might be in each of our lives. One message of the text has to do with living faithfully in systems that may be significantly at odds with *our* faith traditions.

4. Historical Contexts

Moving from purposes to historical and literary concerns, we have already noted the general timeline of the transition between the Babylonian and Persian empires and the position of the diaspora Jews in that context. Let us develop the character of Xerxes (or Ahasuerus) just a bit more. The primary extra-biblical source is Herodotus, with some additional details found in works by Xenophon (*Cyropaedia*) and Ctesias of Cnidus (*History of Persia*). There are also Persian inscriptions and archaeological evidence that illuminate our understanding of the period.

Prior to the death of Darius (under whom the Second Temple was completed), Xerxes was crown prince and governor of Babylon. Upon becoming king (486-465), his military activities took him to Egypt and he was compelled to put down a rebellion in Babylon (Herodotus VII.4-7). He then spent the next four years mustering a massive force for the attack on Greece, a venture which desolated Athens but ended in his defeat at Salamis (Herodotus VII.8, 20-21; VIII.50-51, 86). According to Herodotus (VII.37-39; VIII.118; IX.108-113), Xerxes was a cruel and lascivious despot, a characterization that fits well with the Esther narrative. When Xerxes was assassinated, Artaxerxes I (464-425 BC) took the throne.

In addition to the Persian context, the book of Esther reverberates with echoes from all of Israelite covenant history. The primary one is, without question, the long-standing enmity between Israel and Amalek. We learn in ch 2 that Mordecai was of the tribe of Benjamin and one of his ancestors bore the name Kish. The reader is supposed to connect that to

king Saul whose father was Kish. The arch-enemy, Haman, on the other hand, is also explicitly linked to a venerable line, that of Agag! The astute audience would recognize some significant unfinished business from the early period of the Israelite monarchy when king Saul was commanded by the Lord to obliterate the Amalekites whose king was Agag (I Sam 15). This was not capricious; the judgment upon the Amalekites was a fulfillment of God's declaration in Exodus 17:14 that He would erase the memory of the Amalekites for their attack on Israel as described earlier in the chapter. The brutality of that assault becomes clearer in Deut 25:17-19 where it says they attacked those who were weak and straggling behind the Israelites. [READ] Underlying that military encounter is an earlier hostility; Amalek was a descendant of Esau (Gen 36:12) and we know there was little love lost between Jacob/Israel and Esau. Saul disobeyed the Lord and left Agag alive. The confrontation between Mordecai and Haman revisits that old ethnic tension, this time shot through with the apparent injustice of Haman's rise to power while Mordecai remained unrecognized.

There are additional biblical connections that sharpen the enmity expressed against the Jews by Haman. The decree to destroy, kill, and annihilate the Jews was written on the thirteenth day of the first month (Esth 3:12-13), the day before Passover. Instead of celebrating on that festive occasion, the Jewish population of the Persian realm was thrown into mourning. The corporate remembrance of both brutal oppression and subsequent deliverance would reverberate through the entire Jewish community, both on that occasion and as the narrative was read in the intervening centuries. The two days of commemorating the deliverance were established as the fourteenth and fifteenth of Adar, the last month of the year, and they too are parallel to the celebration of Passover on the fourteenth and fifteenth of the Nisan, the first month. Both were to be kept forever.

Further connections with the Egypt and Exodus context may be found in the parallels between the Joseph narrative and Esther/Mordecai. These range from mirroring the actual language to the broad themes represented (Berg). In each case, the presence of God is muted; it was after all a foreign country.

5. Historicity of the Narrative

The style of the narrative, with its concern for dates, numbers, names, and procedures, indicates that it was intended to be read as history. Furthermore, in many details the correspondence between Esther and extra-biblical sources is remarkable, a point conceded by most scholars. Nevertheless, even though it has been increasingly demonstrated that the author represents Persian customs, language, names, and court matters in a plausible manner, this plot and these characters are otherwise unattested, leaving many to suggest that the text was intended as some form of historical fiction. If that is so, questions of historicity in regard to details might be deemed irrelevant. On the other hand, if it is historical narrative, then it is important to establish the veracity of its rendition. It should

give the skeptic pause that Purim was indeed adopted and practiced with enthusiasm, something inexplicable if the basis was entirely fabricated. The essence of the narrative is God's deliverance of His people from a very real catastrophe in the making. The message of hope is severely diminished if that deliverance was never in fact accomplished.

Virtually every introduction to the text has addressed the alleged inaccuracies from one perspective or the other, providing a list of the problems, occasionally categorizing them according to their degree of improbability, and either indicating why they are indeed insoluble or marshalling evidence to demonstrate that they ought to be viewed as red herrings. The intent here is to survey again the major issues.

It has been noted that the likelihood of Esther's becoming queen was slim because the queen was supposed to be chosen from among the seven families whose nobles had participated in the overthrow of the Magi when Darius came to power (Herodotus III.70-71, 84). The record in Herodotus, however, reflects an agreement among those conspirators just one generation before Xerxes, not a long-standing tradition. That would omit the line of Cyrus himself.

More challenging is the fact that there is no external corroboration of Mordecai's position as second in the empire. There is an undated cuneiform document from the Persian period that refers to Marduka, who was thought to be in high office either late in the reign of Darius I or at the beginning of Xerxes' rule. First published in 1940 and referred to repeatedly by subsequent scholars, it was hailed as evidence of the well-positioned Mordecai whom the biblical text represents. Nevertheless, more recent appraisals of the text question whether the Marduka of this text was really as prominent as initially thought and whether he was in office after 502 BCE. Given the religious significance of Marduk, it is not unusual to find the variants of that name woven into a number of personal names from the period. On the other hand, that the biblical figure of Mordecai does not emerge on the pages of secular histories may be but one reflection of millennia of history-writing in which Jewish actors and events that were determinative for Jews have been neglected.

The most challenging problem is the identity of Vashti, ostensibly the reigning queen only until her deposition in 483, in relationship to the notorious Amestris, Xerxes' wife, whom Herodotus described as participating in a royal intrigue after the campaign to Greece in 480 (IX.108-112). One possibility is simply to state that neither Esther nor Vashti rose to the surface in Herodotus' records of royal women, of which there seem to have been quite a number. Amestris, after all, was a much more colorful character and Herodotus tended to go for color! He noted in passing (VII.114) that in her old age, Amestris buried alive fourteen sons of notable Persians as a thank offering to the god of the nether world. The narrative of her cruelty to the wife of Masistes [to which we shall return] (IX.112) is

equally horrifying. Amestris was still alive and influential when her son, Artaxerxes, came to power after the assassination of Xerxes. It appeared she had not lost her knack for brutality as she crucified one Inaros, beheaded fifty Greeks, and buried alive Apollonides from Cos.

Having said all that, it may be possible that Amestris and Vashti were the same individual (Shea and Wright). Names are notoriously fluid in transition from one language to another. While the name Vashti does not look much like Amestris, it represents the English version of the Hebrew rendition of a Persian name. When Herodotus put the Persian name into Greek, substitutions were necessary because neither the first nor the second consonant had an equivalent in Greek. Amestris was not only Xerxes' wife but also the daughter of one of his commanders, Otanes, who *was* one of the aforementioned important seven nobles (VII.61). She had already borne Xerxes two sons and Artaxerxes, the third, was born in 483. These circumstances may have meant practically that while she could be banished from Xerxes' bedroom and deprived of the crown, there were limits on the banishment and good political reasons for keeping her in the extensive royal household.

Shortly after the events of chapter 1, Xerxes headed off to wage war on the western front and was thus occupied for the next three years. It could be that Esther 2:1 ("after these things...") refers to this passage of time and that the wholesale round up of young women did not commence until his return. We do know that Esther's first entrance (after a year of preparation) was in the seventh year of the king which would have been 479 (Esth 2:16). In the meantime, Herodotus dishes up a very complicated and colorful tidbit about Xerxes' dalliance with his niece, Amestris' jealousy, and her cunning and brutal revenge on the poor young woman's *mother*, the wife of Masistes (IX.108-112). It may be that after all *these* events, Xerxes was more than ready for a new queen! Perhaps his remembering Vashti and what she had done (Esth 2:1) was not entirely with fondness if that memory included her activities in the intervening three years. In any case, the narrative in Herodotus does not state that Amestris was queen from the seventh to the twelfth years of Xerxes' reign; that is an overstatement.

While the irrevocability of the law of the Persians and the Medes seems cumbersome and truly unrealistic in our conception of jurisprudence, it is important to place the unchangeable royal word in its theological and political culture in which gods gave unalterable mandates and kings imitated the gods (Bickerman). Persian political theology meant that the word of the king, an imitation of the gods, unified the realm. In this context, it was essential that the "law of the Persians and Medes" was irrevocable (Esth 1:19; also 8:18), and it was equally essential that there were mechanisms in order to get around these unchangeable laws. It seems that the Jews were sufficiently impressed with this phenomenon to write it into both Daniel and Esther.

6. Texts and Versions

The text of Esther poses particular challenges in that there are two extant Greek versions which are, at points, significantly different from each other as well as being embellished beyond the Hebrew text (MT). The more accessible and longer of the Greek versions, designated the *B-Text*, appears in the Septuagint (LXX). Broadly speaking, it consists of six major additions (107 verses), all of which enhance the theological or the dramatic content of the text by naming God and describing his intervention outright, reporting Mordecai's apocalyptic dream and eventually its interpretation, inserting prayers of Mordecai and Esther, describing Esther's audience with the King, and presenting the texts of the royal edicts (see Moore). As a result of the additions, God and Mordecai are central in the text instead of Esther, and the narrative structure emphasizes different key themes. There are further significant modifications within the narrative of the LXX beyond these six distinct units. Many of these clarify apparent ambiguities in the Hebrew text.

The second Greek text, designated the Alpha-text (*A-Text*), is noticeably shorter. It does have the six additions that characterize the LXX but, once those are removed, it does not have any indication of the irrevocability of the laws of the Persians and Medes, a detail that changes rather markedly the development of the narrative. Once Haman was dead, Mordecai simply asked that the edict be revoked, the king gave Mordecai the affairs of the kingdom, and there was no subsequent conflict between those enemies of the Jews who were still intent on their destruction and the Jews who killed in self-defense. The two days of fighting in Susa, which serves in the MT as the basis for two festival days, is absent.

Esther is the only text outside the Torah that has two Targums (Aramaic translations) devoted to it. The first one carefully reproduces the Hebrew text but intersperses material that effectively serves as a grammatical and interpretive commentary. The end result is about twice as long as the Hebrew text. The second Targum is even more expanded, reflecting both the popularity of the Esther narrative and further development of creative embellishments that accompanied the story. In both cases, there is evident concern to give religious practice and belief a higher profile.

7. Literary Considerations: *Genre, Structure, Language*

There is considerable lack of agreement when it comes to determining the genre of the text. In fact, some scholars are hesitant to attach a singular label to the text because it manifests such a rich array of literary features. A definitive characteristic of the story is the rollicking satire on the inept Persian court in stark combination with the ominous dread of genocide. Claiming that the humor is laced with improbabilities and exaggerations, it has been called a literary farce, a burlesque on the Persian court scene, and a carnivalesque fusion of parody and ambivalence.

Further suggestions range in the vicinity of historical novel or novella, the latter in

recognition of its brevity. In a related vein, the tangle of legislative language at the end has given rise to the label “festal etiology.” Each of these categories implies that the work is primarily fiction. Nevertheless, given the remarkable re-presentation of the historical context, the best label might simply be “historical narrative.”

When the Hebrew text is read in its entirety, an over-arching chiasmic structure is evident. [DIAGRAM] The outer frame of the chiasmic structure consists of pairs of feasts, themselves framed by notices of the greatness of Ahasuerus and, at the end, Ahasuerus and Mordecai. The first chapter describes the king’s lavish banquets, the first one for the military and nobility and second specifically for the residents of Susa. Correspondingly, the Scroll closes with two celebrations of Purim, also a festival for drinking, one on the fourteenth of Adar and the second for Susa on the fifteenth. The chiasm has as its central turning point the insomnia of the king (Esth 6:1) which occurred in between the two private banquets of Esther. The king’s insomnia and the subsequent exchange between Xerxes and Haman were so utterly beyond the scope of anyone’s plans and schemes, whether for good or for ill, that they serve as stunning witnesses to the sovereign working of God and the placement at the center of the narrative is a subtle emphasis of this. Additional pairs in the chiasm are the rise of Haman paralleled by the rise of Mordecai; Esther’s identity as a Gentile matched by the Gentiles declaring themselves to be Jews; and the fateful exchanges between Mordecai and Esther paralleled by the tense exchange between Esther and Ahasuerus.

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| A Greatness of Ahasuerus (1:1-8) | A= Greatness of Ahas. and Mordecai (Ch 10) |
| B Two banquets of Persians (1:1-8) | B= Two banquets of Jews (9:20-32) |
| C Esther identifies as a Gentile (2:10-20) | C= Gentiles identify as Jews (8:17) |
| D Elevation of Haman (3:1) | D= Elevation of Mordecai (8:15) |
| E Anti-Jewish Edict (3:12-15) | E= Pro-Jewish Edict (8:9-14) |
| F Fateful exchange of Mordecai and Esther | F= Fateful Exchange of Ahasuerus and Esther |

| | | |
|----------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| | (Ch 4) | (7:1-6) |
| Banquet | G. Esther's First Banquet | G= Esther's Second |
| | (5:6-8) | (7:1-6) |
| | H Royal Procession | |
| | (Ch 6) | |

A term that repeatedly surfaces in recent commentaries is peripety, referring to the sudden and unexpected reversal of events. These patterned repetitions and reversals both move the narrative forward and drive home the profound significance of God's sovereign presence in the lives of his people. The principle is articulated explicitly in Esther 9:1 – "and it was overturned."

Repetition occurs on the large scale as the stylistic backdrop for the reversals, but it is not limited to that medium. There is an over-abundance of pairs of words, repeated indications of events, and sets of statements and requests. These doublets are evident in the description of the Persian court which is characterized by particularly rich and excessive vocabulary to convey the opulence of the court. The word pairs are representative of Persian "officialese" and may be part of the humorous satire on the royal scene (Levenson). In addition, these pairs lead up to the critical "petition and request" pattern of the king's invitations to Esther to state her case (Esth 5:3,6; 7:2). It is also possible that the verbal pairs and the pairs of feasts are all adumbrations of the two-day celebration of Purim (Berg). Furthermore, perhaps the two letters at the end continue the emphasis on double attestations. The ubiquitous duality also may reinforce the theme of dual loyalty with which Jews in the diaspora context have always wrestled (Greenstein). At several key points, dyads are replaced by triplets, most notably in the context of sanctioning and effecting violence (Esth 3:13; 7:4; 8:11; 9:5). They in turn give way to four-fold verbal "strings" of jubilation (Esth 8:16; 9:19,22).

In addition to the peculiar and repeated appearance of pairs, there is an over-abundance of passive verb forms in critical contexts. Esther's early appearances are almost exclusively described in this manner; she is acted upon by larger nameless forces. This same anonymity has a wider circle than just Esther and the young women. It pervades the court scenes of the narrative, divesting the bureaucracy of accountability. The passive forms allow for ambiguity in regard to who is responsible for what transpires. Implicit in this stylistic device may be an acknowledgement of the unnamed Divine Orchestrator.