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English 115

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**Book of Esther Outline**

**Overview:**

It is not a work of history but a historical novella, a fictional story within a historical framework. The story’s purpose is to entertain, but more importantly demonstrate the inevitability of retributive justice and the need for oppressed minorities to act shrewdly and boldly for that justice to prevail. The story also serves as a background for the Jewish holiday of Purim.

Story is set around 100 years after the Israelites Babylonian Exile. Though some Jews returned to Jerusalem, some did not. It is about a community of Diaspora Jews living in the Persian Capital Susa. The primary characters of this story are the orphaned Esther, her cousin/adoptive father Mordecai, the often-drinking King Ahasuerus of Persia, and the wicked Haman who plots the destruction of the Jews.

**Key Things to Remember:**

God is never mentioned in Esther

Irony, Reversals, Foreshadowing, and Symmetries

Females in the Bible

Syncretism

What boundaries are crossed?

**Ch.1**

Starts with King Ahasuerus throwing an extravagant feast that lasts for 180 days all to celebrate his greatness. On that last day of feast, the Ahasuerus, merry with wine, asks his wife Queen Vashti to appear before his guests to show off her beauty but she refuses. In a drunken rage, Ahasuerus consults with his sages who fear Vashti’s actions will cause all the women of Persia to rebel against their husbands. The sages come up with the idea for King Ahasuerus to depose Vashti and make it a royal decree that every man should be the master of his own house.

1.1: Ahasuerus is probably Xerxes I, son of Darius I

1.2: Susa: Ahasuerus’s winter capital 200 miles east of Babylon

1.3: “Drinking was by flagons, without restraint...” King Ahasuerus is often drunk during critical parts of story

1.12: Queen Vashti’s refusal to appear before Ahasuerus is the reversal to Esther appearing uninvited before the king’s presence

1.17: “King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought before him and she did not come.”

1.18: King Ahasuerus’ royal advisers fear of feminine insurrection against patriarchal order due to Vashti

1.19: “If it pleases the king...”; commonly used to address the king; “...let it be written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes so that it may not be altered...”; this decree was at the suggestion by the king’s advisors and a king’s royal decree is final and cannot be revoked

1.20: “...all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike”; narrative irony due to King Ahasuerus’ own failure to control his own wife

**Ch.2**

After these events happened and King Ahasuerus’ anger abated, the king’s servants suggested for him to hold a beauty pageant for beautiful young virgins so he could find a new queen to replace Vashti. This is where Esther and Mordecai are introduced. Esther was part of these beautiful young virgins with Mordecai telling her to hide her Jewish identity. When it was Esther’s turn to go see King Ahasuerus, the king was so taken aback by Esther’s beauty that she won his favor and devotion and made her the new queen of Persia. Ahasuerus threw a great banquet for Esther and during that banquet, Mordecai had overhead two of the king’s eunuchs planning to assassinate the king, so Mordecai relayed this news to Esther who then relayed it to the king who then had those men hanged.

2.1: “...he remembered Vashti...”; Ahasuerus may regret his decision to exile Vashti after he is sober and his anger abated; his decision to exile Vashti and make his royal decree was due to the influence of those around him during his stupor which is a recurring theme for the king

2.5: Mordecai’s name may be derived from the chief Babylonian god Marduk, parallel to Esther’s name coming from Ishtar; the names in Mordecai’s Benjaminite ancestry link him to King Saul

2.7: Esther is an orphan adopted by her cousin Mordecai who becomes her adoptive father; her name is derived from the Babylonian goddess of love and war Ishtar who comes from the Sumerian goddess Inanna

2.10: Mordecai has told Esther has not revealed her identity as a Jew

2.17: “...the king loved Esther more than all the other woman; of all the virgins she won his favor and devotion”; King Ahasuerus’ “favor and devotion” to Esther is proven numerous times

2.18: Esther’s banquet foreshadows the later banquets

21: Mordecai’s interference can be a sign of divine intervention

22: Esther’s connection as queen and Jew allows her to convey Mordecai’s information to King Ahasuerus; social connection or bridge between the two

23: the king’s life being saved and the villains being hanging by gallows is foreshadow latest events of those saved and hanged

**Ch.3**

Introduces Haman, son of an Agagite, a descendant of the Amalekites. The king advanced Haman’s rank above all the officials leading to all the king’s servants bowing to Haman, all except Mordecai who refused. This infuriates Haman so when Haman discovers Mordecai is a Jew, he plotted to destroy all the Jews by paying the king to put out a royal decree for the destruction of all the Jews in Susa. They decided the day of the Jews’ annihilation by casting a Pur. The date was the thirteenth day of the twelfth month which was the month of Adar. After sending out the decree, the king and Haman then sit down together to drink.

3.1: Haman is the son of an Agagite, descended from King Agag of the Amalekites from Almek, an enemy to the Israelites

3.2: Mordecai’s refusal to bow Haman is reference to the genealogy of the characters; King Saul defeated King Agag

3.7: Pur: Akkadian for “ the lot” and Hebrew for “dice”

3.9: “If it pleases the king...”; Haman persuades Ahasuerus to enact a royal decree to kill all the Jews in the kingdom

3.10: The king’s handing of his signet ring to Haman to seal the decree and make it official meaning it cannot be revoked; the king gives the same ring to someone else later

**Ch.4**

When Mordecai heard news of the royal decree, he relays that information to Esther and asked her to go before the king to retract his decree. However, Esther points out that anyone who goes to the king without being called is punishable by death. Mordecai however says that even if Esther remains silent that deliverance for the Jews will rise from another quarter and suggests that maybe Esther became queen for this purpose. Esther then ordered Mordecai to gather the Jews to fast for three days on her behalf and after that she will go to the king.

4.14: “...relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter...”; reference to divine providence

4.16: ”...and if I perish, I perish.”: Esther parallels father Israel in Gen. 43: 14, “...if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.”

**Ch.5**

Esther appeared before the king where she asked for him and Haman to come to the banquet, she had prepared for them. At that banquet, Esther said to the king and Haman for them to come to the banquet she will prepare the day after where she will tell them her request. After Haman left that banquet, he encountered Mordecai but restrained his anger towards. However, when he came home to his wife Zeresh and his friends, they said for Haman to make gallows specifically for Haman to be hung from in the morning which Haman did.

5.2: Esther appearing uninvited before the king is a reversal of Vashti’s situation where she refuses her summon

5.4: “If it pleases the king...”; Esther uses a banquet to indirectly achieve her goal, a common trope for women confronting powerful men alone

5.10: Like Queen Vashti, Haman’s wife Zeresh can be a counterpart to Esther

5.14: At his wife Zeresh and his friend’s advice, Haman builds the gallows to hang Mordecai from; the gallows were not of Haman’s mind but his wife’s and his friends; similar to how Ahasuerus’s decrees were due to the influence of others; the gallows and hanging is further foreshadowing like the deaths of the king’s assassins

**Ch.6**

On that same night, the king can't sleep so he orders for the book of records, the annals, to be read to him. In it, the king was reminded of how Mordecai had been the one to save him from the assassination attempt by his two eunuchs. Haman then enters the king’s court to ask for Mordecai’s execution, but instead the king tells Haman to honor Mordecai by having Haman give Mordecai royal robes and a horse then lead Mordecai through the city. Haman then goes home to his advisers and his wife who suggests his downfall and Mordecai’s rise.

6.1: King Ahasuerus insomnia is another instance of fateful opportunity; like the Pharaoh and Joseph in Gen. 41:14

6.4: Climax of ironic reversals: rather than having Mordecai hanged, Haman is in the humiliating position of presenting the royals rewards to his nemesis; Mordecai’s rise and Haman’s downfall

6.13: Haman’s wife Zeresh and his advisers foreshadow Haman’s fall

**Ch.7**

At Esther’s 2nd banquet, Esther reveals her identity as a Jew with her petition that she and her people be spared stating that Haman is an enemy. Enraged by the news, the king leaves but Haman stays with Esther to beg for his life. When the king returned, he found Haman throwing himself onto Esther and thought he was assaulting her. He then has Haman be hanged from the very gallows that were meant for Mordecai.

7.2: Another situation where the king has drunk wine right before Esther tells him her request

7.6: Esther calls Haman “a foe and enemy,” referring to how he is a descendant of the Amalekites who are the enemy of the Israelites

7.10: An ironic reversal of the first banquet where the first ends with Haman leaving “happy and in good spirits” while the second banquet ends with him hung by his own gallows

**Ch.8**

Esther is given the house of Haman who then gives it to Mordecai. Esther then went to the king to have him revoke the decree devised by Haman. However, he told Esther a king’s decree cannot be revoked. Instead, the king allows Esther and Mordecai to issue a counter decree that allows the Jews to assemble and defend themselves from their enemies on the thirteenth day of Adar. Jews throughout the kings celebrated news of this decree.

8.1: King Ahasuerus gives Esther Haman’s wealth which Haman originally offer to bride the king; transfers to Mordecai

8.2: Haman’s elevated rank becomes Mordecai’s with the transfer of the signet ring

8.5: “If it pleases the king...if I have won his favor…if the thing seems right before the king...”; Esther diplomatically dissociates the king form the royal edict “devised by Haman”

8.9: It follows the same general structure as 3.12-13 with Haman’s decree while reversing the effect

8.10: Reversal of Haman’s own decree with Mordecai using the king’s signet ring to create a counter decree to Haman’s

8.12: The day of the Jews’ destruction turns to their day of triumph

**Ch.9**

The thirteenth day of Adar came. The Jews spent the thirteenth and fourteenth day of Adar destroying all their enemies who plotted against them which included Haman’s family and his accomplices. Mordecai then recorded these events calling it Purim after the Pur. Esther then gave authority for Purim to be a holiday, a two-day feast to celebrate the Jews’ deliverance from their enemies.

9.13: The hanging of Haman’s sons parallels with the hanging of the eunuchs

9.22: “...from sorrow to gladness...”; Purim occurs on the day not of their military triumph but on the day, they obtained their relief

9.26: Purim comes from the word Pur that is “the lot” which Haman used to decide the date

9.32: “The command of Queen Esther...”; Esther is the only woman in the Bible credited with establishing a religious observance

**Ch.10**

A short epilogue where Mordecai is elevated next to the rank of king, essentially taking the seat that once belonged to Haman. Due to Mordecai's greatness, the Jews and their descendants were able to thrive in their exile.

10.3: The book ends without reference to Esther, focusing on the greatness of Mordecai and the model of a successful Diaspora Jew (Jew living outside of Israel) and responsible for Jews living harmoniously in the gentile world

**Where is God:**

Not once is God mentioned by name in the book of Esther as it focuses on the story of Esther and Mordecai. It begs the question if God has abandoned his people and his promises at this point in history. This is because of the setting of the book taking place after Israel's Babylonian exile. However, this absence of God in the text is an invitation to the reader to try and see signs of God’s presence or activity in the story

The greatest sign of God’s presence comes from Mordecai in 4:14, “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.”

What Mordecai says first is very suggestive of God at work because he states deliverance for the Jews will come from elsewhere. Even if Esther remains silent, Mordecai is confident in this deliverance for the Jews being delivered which hints at his faithfulness towards some form of divine providence. It asks who is the one that will give this deliverance if not Esther. The most likely candidate that Mordecai is referring to is God, though Mordecai does not refer to him by name.

Mordecai further emphasizes this higher work at play when he suggests Esther’s appointment as queen may have been part of this plan of deliverance for the Jews. It turns the idea of coincidence and chance with Queen Vashti’s dethroning and Esther’s crowning into a preordained fate along. It then turns all the other instances of coincidence for Esther as opportune fate such as the king’s favor and devotion towards her, her survival of breaking the law of appearing before the without a summon.

Other signs of God’s work behind the scene includes Esth 2: 21 where Mordecai stumbles upon the attempted assassination against the king. This event later shows itself again when the king is struck with insomnia and remembers this act of Mordecai reinforcing the significance as some form of divine intervention. The king’s insomnia is further suggestion of more divine intervention like Gen. 41:14 where Pharaoh was plagued with dreams and required Joseph to explain and interpret them. Even the actions of the antagonists in the story suggest some work being at play with Haman’s construction of the gallows he hangs, and the date decided for the Jews’ destruction which would eventually be known as the holiday of Purim.

What the textual absence of God implies is that God is still at work in human history behind the scenes. Even though God may seem absent, God is still at work in human history behind the scene fulfilling the promise he made to his people by making the Jews of Susa be able to thrive in their exile.

**Ironic reversals:**

1 and 10: Ahasuerus’s greatness and Mordecai’s greatness

2 and 9: Esther and Mordecai first save the king and in then they save all the Jews

3 and 8B: Haman’s rise and royal decree vs Mordecai’s rise and royal decree

4 and 8A: Esther and Mordecai’s plans to reverse the decree

5 and 7: Esther’s two banquets and Haman’s making and dying by his gallows

6: Haman leading Mordecai through the city to honor him

When looking at the whole structure of the book of Esther, it is filled with ironic reversals from beginning to end. It ends and begins the celebration of someone’s greatness with the first chapter celebrating Ahasuerus and the last chapter celebrating Mordecai. King Ahasuerus still possesses his greatness in the end, but it is Mordecai who acquires greatness himself throughout the story. It then makes the whole structure of the book of Esther about the rise of Mordecai’s greatness.

In chapter two and nine, Esther and Mordecai save first King Ahasuerus from the assassination form his eunuchs and then the Jewish people from Haman’s plot. Here, the eunuch foreshadows the actions of Haman with them being the antagonists to the story with Esther and Mordecai being the heroes who foil their plans.

In chapter three Haman rises to power and makes the royal decree to destroy the Jews. This is countered by Mordecai’s rise to power who enacts a counter-decree to Haman’s. Haman is essentially a foil to Mordecai due to the complete ironic reversal of their situations. It praises the character of Mordecai while punishing Haman primarily due to their heritage, Mordecai coming from the Israelites and Haman coming from the Amalekites, enemy of the Israelites. It reminds the reader that this is still a story about the Israelites with God still fulfilling his promise to his people even when it seems he is not there.

At the beginning of chapter four and eight, both Esther and Mordecai are planning to reverse the royal decree devised by Haman. The situation of these planning is in the reverse because during chapter four Esther and Mordecai were first trying to find a way to stop Haman’s plot. In chapter eight, they have found the solution which is to create a counter-decree to Haman’s decree, further reinforcing the structure of ironic reversals.

In chapter five and seven, they hold the two banquets that Esther holds for King Ahasuerus and Haman where the first one ends with Haman and Ahasuerus happy together while the second one ends Ahasuerus angry at Haman. It is also after the first banquet that Haman makes the gallows to hang Mordecai from but after the second banquet he is hanged from those very same gallows.

Lastly, chapter 6 is the start of these ironic reversals that take place in the latter half of Esther. This is the climax and center of the story where it shifts from Haman’s rise to Mordecai’s rise while simultaneously showing Haman’s downfall.

The point for these reversals and twists of fate is to put focus on Mordecai's rise to power and the fall of the wicked Haman with Mordecai inheriting Haman’s wealth and seat. It turns the narrative craft of the book of Esther into that of poetic justice showing how the good will always triumph over the wicked just like Hannah mother of Eli had sung in Sam 2:7 : “The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.”

**Haman the Tragic Hero:**

Despite Esther and Mordecai being painted as the Jewish heroes of the story, it does not change the fact that the Jews are the outsiders in this story for they are the one who come to King Ahasuerus’ kingdom. Haman’s royal decree to destroy the Jew can then be treated as an act of patriotism to prevent the syncretism of Jewish culture mixing with that of Persian.

Haman best demonstrates this idea with how he tells the king about the Jews 3:8, “There is a certain people scattered and separated among the peoples in all the provinces of your kingdom; their laws are different from those of every other people, and they do not keep the king’s laws, so that it is not appropriate for the king to tolerate them.” The reason for Haman’s statement about the Jews towards the king as not keeping his law is due to Mordecai refusal to bow to Haman. Despite being a king’s demand, Mordecai refuses to listen so when Haman learns Mordecai’s identity as a Jew Haman then believes all Jews are the same. In effect, Haman’s plot to destroy the Jews was due to Mordecai’s own disobedience and refusal to obey the law.

Ironically, King Ahasuerus had married Esther, a Jew. King Ahasuerus demonstrates the fears of the husband adopting the culture and influence with his favor and devotion towards Esther because of her exotic beauty. It is only after Esther reveals identity as a Jew during the second banquet that Haman expresses that fear of marrying the Other because Esther’s strong influence over King Ahasuerus is shown with how quickly the king changes his attitude towards the Jews. Haman’s only act of salvation was to plead Esther for his life knowing she was the only one who could abate the king’s wrath.

When the thirteenth day of the twelfth month of Adar comes, Haman’s fears come true. The Jews then rise and destroy all their enemies and successfully establish themselves in the kingdom with Mordecai taking the position once held by Haman. Rather than being the villain, Haman becomes a tragic figure who loses everything to the foreign invader Mordecai.

**Book of Esther or Mordecai:**

The final chapter of the book of Esther talks about the greatness of Ahasuerus and Mordecai briefly giving an epilogue that comments how King Ahasuerus prospered thanks to the assistance of Mordecai who he elevated next to the rank of king. However, there is no mention of Esther in this epilogue. It raises the question as to why Esther is omitted and why the book is named after her.

Despite being named after its heroine, the story focuses on Mordecai’s rise to power because Esther rises to power early in the story during chapter two when she becomes the new queen. It is due to Esther’s status as queen that she establishes a connection between King Ahasuerus and Mordecai. This is best demonstrated in Esth 2:22 in which Mordecai tells Esther of the plot to assassinate King Ahasuerus who then relays that information to the king.

This is a recurring pattern in which Mordecai relies on Esther as his connection to King Ahasuerus such as Mordecai never appears before the king unless with Esther. This can be due to the law that Esther mentioned in Esth 4: 11, “...if any man or woman goes to the king without being called, there is but one law--all alike are to be put to death.” However, Esther is the only one who challenges this law and displays selfless dedication to her adoptive father Mordecai and her people saying, “if I perish, I perish.” From there it leads to the chain of events that allows Mordecai’s rise to power due to Esther’s access to King Ahasuerus.

The omission of Esther in the epilogue is bizarre, despite being the titular character, with the most likely reason for Esther's absence being a form of rhetoric by male compilers. Like how Esther navigated through a world dominated by males, the text had to do the same going through translations with patriarchal societies focusing more on the greatness of the father rather than the daughter.

**Women of Esther:**

 Esther serves as the ideal model of a Diaspora Jewish woman. Through her cleverness and boldness, she can foil the plot of the wicked Haman and save her Jewish community. She shows obedience to her adoptive father Mordecai giving him the opportunity to rise in the king’s ranks. Whereas all the other women are frowned upon to further emphasize how great Esther is.

Queen Vashti is the previous queen before Esther. Like Esther, Vashti was beautiful and when King Ahasuerus had asked her to display her beauty to his guests she refused. By law, Vashti had done wrong by refusing the king’s command which sparked concern among his royal advisors with the fear that other women would follow Vashti’s example. As a result, she is sent into exile and never appears again. Vashti showed agency as a female because she had refused the command of her husband. Interestingly, there are no details given in the text as to why Vashti refused or how she felt. It only said that she refused. Vashti’s brief appearance was because she meant to serve one role which was to make Esther look better. Like Vashti, Esther broke the law by appearing before the king without being summoned but the king allowed it, deciding not to kill her as the law permitted. What this shows is how much favor and devotion King Ahasuerus has towards Esther in contrast to Vashti. His love for Esther is so much greater than it was for Vashti that he decided to not punish Esther like he did Vashti. This favor and devotion he has can be the result that Esther was that more beautiful than Vashti wishing to do anything to keep her in his company.

Zeresh is another counterpart to Esther. Being the wife of the wicked Mordecai, Zeresh already possessed negative connotations due to this association. Her own wickedness even outshines her husband Haman. This is because after Esther’s first banquet Haman saw Mordecai and was filled with rage however restrained himself. At the advice of his wife, Haman had made the gallows that were meant for Mordecai. The construction of the gallows was not of Haman’s decision but of his wife’s along with his friends. The reason why Zeresh displays herself as more wicked than Haman was because Haman was showing restraint, not acting on his anger. However, Zeresh’s advice to hang and kill Mordecai does the opposite which ultimately leads to his ironic death by being hung by the same gallows. This serves as a contrast to Esther and Mordecai as what Esther does for him is to elevate his status while Zeresh’s advice indirectly led to Haman’s fall. Yet, Zeresh could have also been doing what was expected of her as a wife who had given him many sons. Just like Vashti, her fate is uncertain. The Jews had killed her ten sons, but it is not revealed if she had perished as well. This lack of concern for Zeresh’s fate is due to the same reason as Vashti which is to serve as a negative counterpart to Esther.

Overall, the other female characters seem to only emphasize how great and beautiful Esther is. Vashti highlights how beautiful is, so much so that she is permitted to break the law while Zeresh’s advice leads to the downfall of her husband whereas Esther elevated Mordecai’s status. Once these women had served their purpose what happened to them was of no importance.

**Esther and Ishtar the Goddess of Boundaries**

The book of Esther takes its name from its titular heroine with the name being cognate with Ishtar, the Babylonian goddess of love and war with her Sumerian counterpart being Inanna. Being named after this Babylonian goddess, Esther shares traits that parallels that with Ishtar’s mythology.

Physically, both Esther and Ishtar possess a divine beauty. For Ishtar it is because of her divinity and status as the goddess of love including sexual desire. For Esther, the display of her divine beauty is when King Ahasuerus was holding a contest to find the most beautiful virgin and crown them queen. Esther’s beauty was so great that when King Ahasuerus saw her, she won his favor and devotion, making her the new queen. King Ahasuerus would keep proving his devotion and attraction towards Esther such as when he allowed her to appear before him in his court without calling her and when he offered to grant her request during Esther’s second banquet. King Ahasuerus is demonstrating his allure towards Esther by permitting her actions and requests because of her beauty which had captured him when he first saw her.

Besides the association with love, Ishtar is known for being a goddess of war which Esther best demonstrates in chapter nine where violence explodes with the Jews destroying their enemies who plotted against them. Esther had also permitted the Jews to continue their violence for one more day as she was the catalyst that gave the Jews victory over their enemies and conquest throughout Susa.

Another parallel between Esther and Ishtar is their ability to transgress boundaries. Unlike most gods within Ishtar’s pantheon whose powers were static and domains were limited, Ishtar was not as she was described as claiming more power as she kept moving from one conquest to the other making her hold considerable authority compared to peers, so much so she was given the title as “Queen of Heaven.” Ishtar also demonstrates the ability to transgress life and death with her descent underworld to conquer the domain of her older sister Ereshkigal, the queen of the Underworld, or how her father Anu warned her not to destroy Mount Ebih because it challenged her own beauty, but did so anyway.

Esther demonstrates her own ability to transgress boundaries multiple times. The greatest example of Esther's ability to transgress boundaries comes from Esther appearing before King Ahasuerus without him calling her. It was the law that no one could appear before the king without being called by him and that it was punishable by death. Esther defies the laws of her patriarchal society and conquers it. Another form of Esther transgressing boundaries is how she serves as a connection between King Ahasuerus and Mordecai as it is through her that Mordecai is able to communicate with the king such as informing him of the attempted assassination which in turn leads to Mordecai’s rise in power. In this sense, Esther metaphorically serves as a bridge that allowed her adoptive father Mordecai to transgress the boundaries of Persian society and elevate him to a seat below the king. Lastly, Esther’s shows her ability to transcend stereotypes with how her character changes over the course of the narrative. She is at first a passive figure notable only for her beauty and obedience to later becoming a decisive actor and authority in the story by risking her life, issuing orders to both Mordecai and the king, and establishing Jewish holiday of Purim.

Overall, Esther draws many comparisons with the Babylonian goddess Ishtar which her name derives from. From her beauty and her ability to successfully navigate through a society designed to suppress her, Esther's greatest power that she shares with that of Ishtar is her ability to transgress boundaries that others are unable to.