

Esther Notes

Protagonist and Antagonist

The protagonist is Mordecai. The author goes to great lengths to establish Mordecai's character as upright by revealing the following: an extensive list of Mordecai's family names and his tribe, in the process implying that Mordecai is a man of God [2.5]; that Mordecai is raising his cousin like a daughter after her parents died [2.7]; that Mordecai counsels Esther [2.10]; that Mordecai asks after Esther's welfare every day [2.11]; that Mordecai reveals a plot to kill the king [2.21-23]; and that Mordecai [ostensibly for religious reasons, since in discussing it he revealed he was a Jew (3.4)] won't pay homage to Haman [3.2].

The antagonist is Haman. The author presents Haman in a way that does not make him likeable by revealing the following: that Haman is given an unreasonable amount of power over the fate of others [3.1]; that Haman demands homage of everyone [3.2]; that Haman's ego drives him to rage [3.5]; that Haman's rage drives him to irrational vindictiveness [3.6]; that Haman is pagan [3.7]; and that Haman is deceptive [3.8].

These two characters are well contrasted: Mordecai was a Jew [2.5] while Haman was a pagan [3.7]; Mordecai had a servant heart [2.7, 10-11] while Haman was proud and hateful [3.5-6]; Mordecai favored honest pleading [4.14] while Haman was conniving and deceptive [3.8-9]; Mordecai – while suffering under foreign rule and vulnerable to religious persecution [2.6] – was loyal and honorable toward the king, not interfering with the gathering up of Esther with the other virgins [2.8] and potentially acting to save the king's life when it was threatened [2.21-23] while Haman – who had been blessed greatly as a citizen of this empire [3.9] and how had been given great power by the king [3.1] – acted selfishly, not in the king's interest, and deceptively toward the king [3.8-9].

The foil is Ahasuerus [probably Xerxes I], the king. He is revealed to be given to excess [1.3-8], and to be weak-willed and open to persuasion [1.13-22].

Setting and Plot Development

This story was set during the time of Persian control of the promised land [1.3], with the empire led by Xerxes or one of his descendents [1.1: "Ahasuerus"]. This places the story in the fifth or fourth century BC, after the original return of Jews to Jerusalem. The place was the Persian capital of Susa [1.2]. Mordecai, Haman, and Ahasuerus were introduced as related above. Esther was put into place when Queen Vashti refused the king's order to appear before him and was thus banished from his sight [1.12, 19]. In the search to replace her, the king gathered attractive virgins, including Esther [2.3-8]. Interestingly, she went through a year of "beautification," then had to have sex with the king, and then – if not chosen – would have gone to the harem of concubines [2.12-14]. She was saved from this last fate by pleasing the king well enough to be crowned queen [2.17].

The plot depends first on the weakness of mind and character of the king. The author reveals him to be dependent on his advisors [1.13-14], who steer him into over-reacting to Vashti's snub [1.16-22; a foolish decision (character flaw), for her part as well]. This creates the opportunity for God to put Esther into a place of influence, for without Vashti's banishment [1.19], there would have been no gathering of virgins to find the king a new queen [2.1-4]. The king also put his trust in a man with poor character, Haman, giving him great power throughout the kingdom [3.1], and later allowing him to decree in the king's name that an entire race be slaughtered, even giving Haman his signet ring [3.11].

The central conflict is between Haman and Mordecai. As noted above, there is a contrast in their general characters and also in the loyalty and honor they show their king. There is also a physical conflict developing, as Haman has manipulated the king into authorizing the deaths of Mordecai and all the other

Jews. Haman sought to destroy the Jews because Mordecai would not pay him homage [3.2-6]. Haman convinced Ahasuerus to destroy the Jews for reasons of general disobedience to the king's laws [3.8-11]. Haman got authority to send out letters throughout the empire ordering the destruction of the Jews on a specific date [3.13-15]. This physical conflict can be said to have some spiritual overtones, in that the Jews are to be seen as God's chosen people and Haman is a pagan. The author creates suspense quickly, raising questions of who will prevail, Mordecai or Haman, whether the Jews will be slaughtered, what, if any, role Esther will play now that she is so strategically placed next to a king open to persuasion, whether God will act miraculously or by manipulating events or not at all, and what will become of these characters so vividly portrayed in so few pages.

Atmosphere and Expectations

The author quickly creates the tension necessary to drive the plot. After introducing the four main characters [Xerxes, Esther, Mordecai, and Haman] and quickly mixing them together, he sets the stage for by creating conflict between Mordecai and Haman. The atmosphere, as noted above, is one of suspense, as the reader wonders at the outcome of the conflict, how the various characters will interact to bring about this outcome, whether and how God will intervene, and how the characters will fare. My expectations as a first-time reader would be that God will intervene in some way to save the Jews. This is a Bible story, after all. And the beginning of the plot, with all well in Mordecai and Esther's lives followed by a great peril, suggests to me that this will be a "comedy" as defined by Ryken: "It is usually a U-shaped story that begins in prosperity, descends into tragedy, and rises again to end happily."¹ There are some plot devices associated with comedy in the first three chapters of Esther [e.g. mistaken identity, as in Esther's heritage not being known to the King and his people] and potential for several others [miracle, providential assistance to good characters, sudden reversal of misfortune, rescue from disaster, and poetic justice].²

There is potential for this to be a tragedy, in that the situation as it stands at the end of chapter three was built on flaws in all the four main characters [one of which might be the "tragic hero"³]: the King, wallowing in opulence and easily misled; Esther, involved perhaps in part because she did not disclose her heritage or religion [though this is more likely God's tactic to provide the great emphasis on the significance of this heritage and religion when it can be most useful later in the story]; Haman, full of ego, selfishness, and anger, vindictive and manipulative; and even Mordecai, who is willing to let his "daughter" Esther sleep with the king and to loyally try to save the king's life, but not to pay homage to the king's top officer, apparently because he was an Amalekite.⁴ However, "tragedy stresses what is inevitable, [while] comedy is built around the unforeseeable,"⁵ and the beginning of this story leaves the reader with the feeling of suspense, not of inevitability. There are possible elements of a heroic narrative – e.g. the triumph of Mordecai's goodness over Haman's evil nature [a "representative struggle"⁶] and the battle against persecution and for the right to live honorably in obedience to God [a "model of the religious experience of the human race"⁷] – but the story seems to hinge on the actions of more than one protagonist and his enemy, and the case for this being a model of the religious experience or even a representative struggle is weakened if we accept that Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman was for personal prejudice rather than religious reasons.

¹ Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature... and Get More Out of It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; 1984), 82.

² Ryken, 82.

³ Ryken, 83.

⁴ Kenneth Barker, Gen. Ed., *The Zondervan NASB Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House; 1999), 682.

⁵ Ryken, 82.

⁶ Ryken, 75.

⁷ Ryken, 76.

My expectations, therefore, would be that God will somehow intervene to allow Mordecai to triumph over Haman and save the Jews, but the many questions raised in suspense at this point would surely encourage me to continue reading to see how that would come about, how each character would play his/her part, and what interesting things would happen along the way.

Resolution and Application

Mordecai provided information to Esther and urged her to plead before the king for the Jews [4.7-8]. When Esther revealed hesitation, Mordecai urged her again, noting this might be the very reason she was placed in this situation, presumably by God [4.14]. The implication was that Esther must trust in God's deliverance and do what was right. This is Mordecai's philosophy: he urged Esther to trust in [God for] her deliverance while taking the opportunity to do what was right [4.7-8, 14], which was the same pattern established for his own life when his character was introduced [2.5-3.4].

Esther skillfully made her plea, in the process revealing that Haman's plot included the death of Esther herself [7.3-6; 8.3-6]. Thus, Ahasuerus hung Haman [7.10], elevated Mordecai to power [8.1-2], and allowed Mordecai to issue a decree allowing the Jews to defend themselves [8.7-14]. Mordecai is vindicated in the story in that the narrator reveals that Haman's scheme was "wicked" [9.25] and that Mordecai was great among the Jews, seeking the good of the Jewish people [10.3]. Thus the Jews were able to rid themselves of their enemies, being delivered by God from this problem [9.1-22].

The application to Israel was to trust in God's deliverance and continue to do what was right, despite this being a time of Gentile domination. The application to the church-age reader is similar: to trust in God's deliverance and continue to do what is right, regardless of circumstances or apparent likelihood of success. Perhaps a secondary application was/is to relish God's sense of humor as he carries out justice, as revealed in the irony of 5.14-6.12 and 7.9-10.