

The Politics of Esther and Mordecai: Courage or Compromise?

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[p.75]

In the classic stage and film production "Fiddler on the Roof," Sholem Aleichem leads his audience, with increasing degrees of reluctance on their part, towards the nontraditional marriages of Tevye's daughters. First the eldest, Tsaytl, "makes her own match" with her childhood sweetheart Motl Komzoyl, though they are willing to "ask permission of the papa." The second daughter, Hodl, moves further from the traditional life-style of her community when, without asking permission, she chooses to marry Pertchik, a radical, revolutionary Jew from Kiev.

The major reversal¹ takes place when Tevye finds Chava, his third daughter, talking with Chvedka, a Ukrainian village scribe who is not Jewish. At this important turning point in the play, the patriarch's otherwise jovial and benign character changes. No longer does the audience smile as he moves "from one hand to the other" in a semi-humorous struggle with traditions whose origins the would-be rabbinical scholar cannot remember. Instead, he wrestles now with Torah proper, which teaches that Chvedka "is a different kind of man." Because of this, Tevye sees the blossoming relationship as a threat to the very core of his socio-religious identity as a Jew. To allow such a compromise would be no less than a denial of his faith, and thus he concludes, "there is no other hand." When Chava and Chvedka decide to marry secretly, the parents treat her as dead to them.

Early in the play the stage had been set for this reversal by means of a scene in Tevye's home which finds his family gathered around their modest Shabbat table. In addition to the frequent visitor Motl, Tevye has also invited Pertchik to join them. As Golda lights the candles, she sings a prayer for their daughters:

[p.76]

May you be like Ruth and like Esther.
May you be deserving of praise.
Strengthen them, O Lord,
and keep them from the stranger's ways.

With a firm, protective glance at Pertchik on behalf of her daughters, the strong woman of the house silently but clearly underscores the last stanza: "...and keep them from the stranger's ways."²

¹ The rhetorical term is "peripety," that is, "the sudden or unexpected reversal of circumstances or situation in a literary work" (Carey A. Moore, "Eight Questions Most Frequently Asked about the Book of Esther," *BibRev* 3/16-32 [Spring 1987] 28, n. 27).

² Television version of "Fiddler on the Roof" (dir. Norman Jewison; Mirisch Production/ United Artists, 1971). Plot and characters taken from a collection of Yiddish short stories by Sholem Aleichem (Rabinovich), "Tevye the Dairyman" (1894 1916), now available in English translation *Tevye the Dairyman and The Railroad Stories* (Hillel Halkin, trans.; New York: Schocken, 1987).

What is surprising in all of this is that there is an inherent contradiction in this traditional prayer, also reflected annually at Purim celebrations, which usually goes unnoticed by Jewish as well as non Jewish audiences. Specifically, one should be surprised by the naming of Ruth and Esther, who were made famous by their mixed marriages, as examples of socio-religious separation. This is especially puzzling in a prayer for protection of one's daughters from marriage "outside the faith."

While the reference to Ruth might be justified by the Moabitess' conversion to Judaism, as well as by the fact that Boaz does not hide his identity in order to secure the marriage relationship, this line of reasoning does not follow regarding Esther.³ In this otherwise entertaining narrative, the "heroine," without any hint of protest, conceals her Jewishness in compromise of her faith by marrying a gentile king. Moreover, not the slightest mention of faith, prayer or the Deity appears in the entire account.

In spite of these inconsistencies, the message of the book continues to be interpreted as pointing to God's providential intervention on behalf of his people through the faith and courage of Esther and Mordecai. So Joyce G. Baldwin concludes that the crisis in the Persian Empire "was averted through the bravery of Esther, the wisdom of her stepfather and the unity of the Jewish people." Elsewhere she reasons that "though no mention is made of God's providence, it nevertheless plays a prominent part, and may even give the book its *raison d'être*."⁴ In similar fashion W. Lee Humphreys sees Esther's "life-style," like Daniel's, as a model for the

[p.77]

Jewish people in the ancient diaspora.⁵ Traditionally, the book has become one of "the best known of all the Books of the Bible" to the Jewish people, due in large measure to the perception of its three main characters as "clearly drawn heroine, hero and villain."⁶

In the present study, I am challenging this long-standing tradition by suggesting that the author's omission of any reference to Deity in Esther actually serves to highlight the secular nature of the people of God in the ancient diaspora. This should not be taken in the broader sense of picturing "unredeemed humanity" in general,⁷ nor should it be understood as coming from the pen of "a religious cynic who no longer believes in divine intervention in human affairs" and thus "makes no demands on God and expects that God makes none on him."⁸ Such a line of reasoning has led many scholars to level

³ Joyce G. Baldwin indiscriminately mixes three very different situations when she asserts that "Ruth and Jonah ... like the book of Esther, show that meaningful relationships are possible across national barriers. Not only so; the Lord even works to bring them about" (*Esther* [TOTC; Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity, 1984] 25).

⁴ *Ibid* 13. For a summary of the pre-twentieth century interpretations of Esther, see Lewis Paton, *The Book of Esther* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1908) 97-100.

⁵ W. Lee Humphreys, "A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel," *JBL* 92 (1973) 211-23.

⁶ S. Goldman, "Esther," *The Five Megilloth* (ed. A. Cohen; London: Soncino, 1946, 1980) 193.

⁷ L. E. Browne, "Esther" (PCB; London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1962) 383.

⁸ Robert Pfeiffer, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1941) 747.

strongly negative criticisms against the canonical and theological value of the scroll.⁹ It is not the book of Esther that is secular, but its characters. That the writer addresses the issue of secularism in an otherwise religiously oriented people is a theological statement in itself. Again Tevye illustrates the point when he asserts: "Because of our traditions everyone of us knows who he is and what God expects him to do." In contrast, the Book of Esther portrays what can happen when the Jewish people forget this sometimes dubious calling and choose instead to accommodate their heritage for the sake of personal advancement under foreign domination.

While espousing such a critical view of the people of God in the Book of Esther, one need not conclude at the same time that God's sovereignty over the affairs of mankind and providential care for his people are absent from the book's theology. If indeed the story points in some way to the "hiddenness of Yahweh's presence in the world,"¹⁰ then it is a hiddenness caused in part by the lack of self-disclosure of the Jewish people. It is precisely with regard to this cause-and-effect relationship that the motif of secularism stands in sharp relief against the backdrop of God's enduring grace towards the Jewish people, despite the relative ease of their compromise at this time in their history.

[p.78]

Though we differ in our understanding of the theme of Esther, with regard to methodology I am much indebted to the work of Sandra Beth Berg, who has pointed out that "the intentions of the author ... are to be located in his story's plot, and in the words and actions of the dramatis personae."¹¹ In doing so, she follows the lead of Werner Dommershausen in "concentrating attention on the narrative and stylistic features of Esther as the primary focus" for her understanding of the text.¹² Working on this assumption, the purpose of this study is to reexamine the literary structure, plot and characterization of the book in order to discover the governing motifs, and thus to understand more clearly its dominant *themes*.¹³ Table 1 provides a summary of this analysis.

1. FEASTS AND FASTS, LOYALTY AND REVERSALS

Yehudah T. Radday, Michael V. Fox and Sandra Beth Berg¹⁴ have all demonstrated a chiasmic dimension to the narrative of Esther, though they find its center respectively in 6:1 ("During that night the king's sleep fled from him"), 6:9 ("Thus it shall be done to the man whom the king desires to honor") and 4:13-14 ("who knows whether you have not attained royalty for such a time as this?"). Instead, I have utilized their foundational work

⁹ Thus the often quoted comment by Samuel Sandmel, "I should not be grieved if the Book of Esther were somehow dropped out of Scripture" (*The Enjoyment of Scripture* [New York: Oxford, 1972] 44).

¹⁰ Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther: Motifs, Themes and Structure* (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1979) 178.

¹¹ *Ibid* 15.

¹² Werner Dommershausen, *Die Estherrolle* (SBM 6; Stuttgart: Katholiches Bibelwerk, 1968).

¹³ The term "motif" (whether governing or auxiliary) is used to mean "a situation, element or idea which recurs ... in such a manner that the repetition contributes to the unity of the narrative." The term "theme" is used to mean "the message or idea which the author conveyed by his use of the story's motifs" (Berg, *Esther* 16-17).

¹⁴ Yehudah T. Radday, "Chiasm in Joshua, Judges and Others," *LB* 3 (1973) 613; Michael V. Fox, "The Structure of the Book of Esther," *I. Seligmann Festschrift* (ed. Alexander Rofe; in press); Berg, 103-13.

wherever possible and therefore begin with the question, "Which motifs are primary and thus most useful in discerning the book's pattern and themes?" In response, I have employed the motifs of feasting and loyalty, contrasting them with the key auxiliary motif of fasting,¹⁵ resulting in the structure delineated in table 1.

1. Feasts and Fasts

There is no question that a literary pattern is formed in the story by references to feasts and fasts. Moreover, the analysis in table 1 supports Berg's conclusion that the center of the structure is to be found in the encounter between Mordecai and Esther in 4:13-16.¹⁶

¹⁵ Berg, 31-39.

¹⁶ Ibid 103-13.

[p.79]

TABLE 1 Feasts and Fasts, Loyalty and Reversals in the Book of Esther

	Event	Location	Duration	Participants	Circumstances
A	Ahasuerus' Feast (1:1-4)	Susa, palace	180 days	Ahasuerus with princes, servants, army officers, nobles from 127 provinces	displayed wealth
	Ahasuerus' Feast (1:5-8)	Susa, palace courtyard	7 days	Ahasuerus with all people	drinking per the king's bounty and law but with no compulsion
B	Vashti's Feast (1:9)	royal house	—	Vashti and her women	—
	Esther's Feast (2:8-23)	palace	—	Ahasuerus and Esther, princes and servants	honor for Esther, national holiday, gifts given per the king's bounty (the king's life is saved by Mordecai)
<p><i>[personal reversal: due to her disloyalty to Ahasuerus, Vashti is dethroned as queen (1:10-22)]</i> <i>[personal reversal: due to her loyalty to Mordecai, Esther replaces Vashti as queen (2:1-7)]</i> <i>[national reversal: due to his disloyalty to Haman, Mordecai and his people face the threat of genocide (3:1-15)]</i></p>					
C	Jews' Fast (4:1-3)	every province	—	Mordecai and all Jews	Haman's edict, mourning, sackcloth, ashes
	Jews' Fast (4:4-17)	Susa	3 days	Mordecai and all Jews, Esther and maidens	Mordecai's threat, no eating or drinking, Esther sent to Ahasuerus
B ¹	Esther's Feast (5:1-8)	—	1 day	Esther, Ahasuerus, Haman	drinking wine, request for another feast
	Esther's Feast (7:1-10)	—	1 day	Esther, Ahasuerus, Haman	drinking wine, request for deliverance of Esther and Jews; death of Haman
<p><i>[national reversal: due to her loyalty to Mordecai, Esther turns the threat of genocide into deliverance of the Jewish people (8:1-14)]</i></p>					
A ¹	Mordecai's Feast (8:15-17)	every city and province	1 day	Mordecai and Esther, all Jews and converts	light, gladness, joy, honor, a holiday, many become Jews out of fear
	Mordecai and Esther's Feast of Purim (9:1-10:3)	all the provinces	2 days	Mordecai and Esther, all Jews of all times	rejoicing, feasting, food sent to others, gifts for poor, fasting, lamentations

[p.80]

Moving outwards from this point one finds pairs of feasts, first the women's, then the men's. By putting the queens' feasts (B, B₁) closer to the center, the writer focuses attention on Vashti and Esther (especially Esther) more than on Ahasuerus and Mordecai. In examining the broader structure, one notices also that the king is set in parallel with Mordecai (A, A₁), accenting the latter's image as the Jewish counterpart to the Persian royalty. This is further reinforced by his royal treatment in 6:7-11 and 8:15.

A similar sense of balance is achieved by the listing of the participants at each feast. In connection with both sets of women's feasts (B, B₁) there are exclusive lists, implying a selection of relatively few attendants. For example, in the "B" set Vashti invites the women only; then, Ahasuerus and Esther are attended by just the princes and servants. Similarly, in the "B₁" set Esther invites Ahasuerus and Haman only on both occasions.

This stands in contrast to the more inclusive lists connected with the men's feasts. In the "A" set Ahasuerus first invites all his princes, servants, army officers and nobles from 127 provinces; then, to the second feast, all the people. Likewise, in the "A₁" set one finds Mordecai, Esther, all the Jews plus many converts; then in the second it is Mordecai, Esther and all Jews of all time.

The same effect is discernible when one compares the location and duration of the feasts, though the structure is more complex and achieved through a slightly different means. In this case higher numbers (180 days; seven days) identify the duration of Ahasuerus' feasts (A), while more extensive geographical ranges (every city and province; all the provinces) are associated with the location of Mordecai's (A₁). In contrast, less extensive geographical ranges (Susa, palace; Susa and palace courtyard) are connected with the location of Ahasuerus' feasts (A) and lower numbers (one day; two days), with the duration of Mordecai's (A₁).

Likewise, with the women's feasts one finds the less extensive geographical ranges (royal house; palace), associated with the location of Vashti's and Esther's first feasts (B) set over against the lower numbers (one day each) connected with the duration of Esther's latter feasts (B₁). In response, there is an absence of any reference to the exact duration of Vashti's and Esther's first feasts (B), or to the exact location of Esther's latter feasts (B₁), though one might easily guess the duration and location in each of these cases.

The same kind of pattern can be seen, though admittedly not as clearly, in the circumstances surrounding each occasion. Regarding the men's feasts, the lighthearted celebrations associated with Ahasuerus (A) are contrasted with the mixture of celebration and conversions, fasts and lamentations in Mordecai's feasts (A₁). Likewise,

[p.81]

Haman's edict against Mordecai forms a counterpart to Mordecai's threat against Esther in the context of the fasts (C). However, the drinking of wine and personal requests mentioned at both of Esther's latter feasts (B₁) do not find a clear parallel in the combination of an omission of specifics regarding Vashti's feast connected with an

abundance of data associated with Esther's first feast (B). It is possible that the lack of a complete symmetry here may serve to indicate the level of the author's commitment to the historical data at his disposal.

2. Loyalty and Reversals

A second dominant motif, that of loyalty, is woven into the fabric of the reversals, adding a rich texture to the structure of Esther.¹⁷ This phenomenon presents itself in two major pairs, with the first half of the first pair subdivided further into two parts (see table 1). The broader pattern is "personal reversal—national reversal."

In the first set of women's feasts (B), the twofold personal reversal, which replaces Vashti with Esther, involves the dethroning of Vashti due to her disloyalty to Ahasuerus set in parallel to the enthroning of Esther due to her loyalty to Mordecai (again Ahasuerus and Mordecai appear in parallel positions). Combined as one, this pair of personal reversals is then set over against the national reversal experienced by all the Jewish people due to the disloyalty of Mordecai to Haman.

The same phenomenon repeats itself in Esther's latter feasts (B₁), where a personal reversal again divides the two feasts and a national reversal follows the second, just as their counterparts did in Vashti's and Esther's first feast (B). In this case, the personal reversal involves Mordecai's replacement of Haman due to his loyalty to Ahasuerus, which parallels nicely the "replacement" dimension in the earlier twofold personal reversal of Vashti and Esther, also due to loyalty. Likewise, the second national reversal (B₁), where Esther's loyalty to Mordecai results in deliverance from the threat of genocide, forms an opposite parallel to the first national reversal (B), where Mordecai's disloyalty to Haman resulted in the threat of genocide.

In summary, there is a clearly discernible sense of unity in the book of Esther, brought about by the careful utilization of the motifs of feasting, fasting and loyalty. The writer skillfully blends these into a rich chiasmic pattern, mixing them with well-placed reversals that carry the reader through the story in a delightfully entertaining

[p.82]

manner. The pattern is clear, though not without variation. The writer is concerned with literary style, yet shows respect for the historical data at his disposal.

II. THE COMPROMISE OF ESTHER AND MORDECAI

Following the markers provided by the motifs and reversals discussed above, I have set forth below a fresh reading of the book, developing more fully one of its primary themes, that of the secular nature of the people of God in the ancient diaspora. This came at a tragic time when many Jews (perhaps most) had forgotten their calling to separateness and had chosen to compromise their socio-religious heritage for the sake of

¹⁷ Despite other differences in their arguments, Radday, Fox and Berg agree on this point (ibid 109).

personal advancement under Persian domination. This critical choice eventually led to the assimilation of many into the gentile world around them.

At least one other major theme can be discerned in Esther, that of God's steadfast grace and providential care for his people. However, because this is commonly recognized by interpreters of the scroll, I have chosen to focus my comments primarily on the contrasting theme of secularism, for it is here that I take the greatest exception with the mainstream of Esther studies. Consequently, the bulk of the following discussion centers on Esther 1-4 (table 1 A, B, C), with just a few remarks at the close regarding chaps. 5-10.

1. *Compromise to Crisis (Esth 1-4)*

The stage is set for the development of these themes at the outset of the story in the feasts given by Ahasuerus (table 1, A), who is presented as a generous ruler who gives lavish feasts for his subjects, including even servants and army officers. Moreover, in the context of these feasts he allows his guests to participate in the drinking of wine "without compulsion... according to the desires of each person" (1:8). His benign character is further evidenced in his response to Vashti's disloyalty when she is ordered to appear as the crown of his possessions, but refuses. Instead of executing the rebellious queen immediately, the king consults with his advisors in an attempt to resolve the embarrassing situation some other way. Finally facing the inevitable, he issues an edict that Vashti can no longer come into his presence and that her royal position be given to another (1:19). Even in this decision some degree of remorse is discernible, for when the king's anger subsides, he "remembers Vashti and what she had done and what had been decreed against her" (2:1). The king's reluctance to discipline his wife makes it necessary for his attendants to take the first steps in suggesting the replacement of Vashti with another

[p.83]

woman (1:19), and this even has to be repeated before the king finally acts on their advice (2:2-4). In short, the portrait of Ahasuerus is painted to look like that of other Persian monarchs, such as Cyrus the Great, whose rulership over the exiles within his kingdom came as a relief in comparison to his predecessors.

It is in this context that the next two dominant characters in the story, Esther (Hadassah) and Mordecai, are introduced as Benjaminite exiles from Jerusalem, whose ancestors had been taken from their land by Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon. Esther's parents had died, and her cousin Mordecai was raising her as his daughter. Two items deserve comment regarding the nature of their introduction into the narrative.

First, Esther's Hebrew name Hadassah is mentioned only here, perhaps as a matter of genealogical reference. However, for the remainder of the story she and Mordecai choose to use her Persian name, Esther. This phenomenon may reveal their tendency toward assimilation even before the events recorded in this book take place, or it may have been part of their deliberate attempt to hide Hadassah's Jewishness at the time of the contest for the queen's throne.

Second, the reader notices that many Jewish people, including Esther and Mordecai, are continuing to live in Susa (though without compulsion) more than fifty years after Cyrus had opened the door for exiles to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their broken homeland. This is especially noteworthy since Mordecai's and Esther's families were taken from the city of Jerusalem itself (2:6).

The scenario which follows, along with Mordecai's famous encounters with Haman in 3:2-5 and with Esther in 4:13-16, are perhaps the most often misinterpreted sections of the story. Each is considered separately concerning the role it plays in the development of the plot.

a. *Esther's Marriage to Ahasuerus.* Regarding the marriage contest, it is commonly assumed at this point that Esther had little or no choice but to lie about her Jewishness and marry the king. After all, it is argued, had she refused to participate in the contest, or even had she revealed her identity and agreed to the possibility of marriage, her life would have been endangered. But the context does not warrant such an assumption. Rather, as demonstrated above, Ahasuerus is presented as a gracious, benevolent monarch who entertains guests "without compulsion ... according to the desires of each person" (1:8). Even when the queen herself refuses a direct command in front of her husband's dinner guests his response is relatively irenic. There is no hint that Ahasuerus would have killed Esther for simply revealing her Jewishness, and perhaps not even for refusing to participate in his contest.

[p.84]

Instead, one finds here a diaspora Jewess who desires a chance at the throne so greatly that she is willing to betray her heritage at the advice of her cousin without a hint of resistance. Moreover, she participates in the contest with no evident reluctance, resulting in the king being pleased with her more than all the other women and thus giving her the crown (2:16). The section ends with Esther's feast (table 1, B) set in parallel to Vashti's, demonstrating that what the previous queen had the courage to do (i.e., stand against the command of the king), Esther did not. Thus, her blind loyalty to Mordecai is followed by blind loyalty to Ahasuerus (again one notices the kingship motif associated with Mordecai).

Lest one attempt to justify the actions of the beautiful young Jewess by citing her bravery to deliver her people, it must be kept in mind that there was no threat facing the people when Esther sold herself to a gentile for the price of the crown.¹⁸ Thus, there was no need to betray her heritage, only an opportunity for a very attractive position in the kingdom.¹⁹

It must be kept in mind further that this kind of betrayal had not been of minor consequence thus far in Israel's history. The patriarchs were quite concerned that their sons not take brides from the

¹⁸ The Midrash suggests that Mordecai advised Esther as he did because he foresaw that some great calamity was going to befall Israel who would be delivered through her (cited by Goldman, 204).

¹⁹ Rashi actually suggests the opposite when he argues that "She did not declare her royal origin (i.e., that she was descended from the family of King Saul), so that the king might think she was of humble origin and send her away." Ibn Ezra maintains that it was to "observe her religious obligations secretly. If she declared her faith, she would be forced to transgress" (ibid 204-5).

Canaanites (Gen 24:3; 28:1). Israel was clearly instructed in the Torah not to associate in such a manner with other peoples (Exod 23:31-33; 34:12-16). The Esther story itself is set in the context of an exile brought about in large measure by the foreign marriages of Solomon (1 Kgs 11) and other kings of Israel (e.g., Ahab and Jezebel [1 Kgs 16:29-34] and Judah (e.g., Jehoram and Athaliah [2 Chr 18:1; 21:4-7; 22:10-12]) that followed him. Even after the exile had run its course of seventy years, the practice of interfaith marriage continued to meet the rebuke of the religious leadership in Jerusalem (Ezra 10:9-19). Indeed, Esther's marriage to Ahasuerus tragically mimics one of the key failures of the Jewish people that resulted in her family being brought to Susa.²⁰

[p.85]

b. *Mordecai's Contempt for Haman*. In 2:19-23 the writer provides a lighter interlude, after the marriage contest and before the reversal, to the encounter between Mordecai and Haman in 3:1-6 and the dreadful edict that follows. This account, in which Mordecai saves the life of the king, serves several purposes in the story. First, it provides a positive contrast to the negative scene which will follow. Second, it sets the stage for the dream of the king and the displacement of Haman in 6:1-14.

Third, it should be noted that the positive tone of Mordecai's loyalty to the king also provides an important contrast to the negative element of disloyalty to Haman in 3:1-6. Here again, the passage is misunderstood by many commentators because they wrongly view the situation as being similar to that of Daniel's friends before Nebuchadnezzar (Dan 3). However, here the exiled Jew is not called to "worship" the monarch (or a statue of him), as were Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. Had that been the case Haman would have incurred the rebuke of Ahasuerus for attempting to usurp his throne. But no hint of this appears in the context. Rather, it is more likely that Mordecai is only being asked to declare his loyalty to the king's representative and to honor him even as others will honor Mordecai when he displaces Haman in the near future (6:7-11; 8:15-17).

Although it is possible that the writer wishes for his readers to think "worship," even though it is not explicitly stated as it is in Daniel, it is more likely that one is meant to read the story as it is written, giving full weight to the secular tone woven into narrative. Taken at face value, when Mordecai refuses to "salute" Haman it is a "breach of etiquette."²¹ The issue is one of respect, not religion.²²

But why such disloyalty to Haman after such a strong display of loyalty to Ahasuerus? Some have suggested that there is a connection between 2:19-23 and 3:1-6 in the sense that Mordecai saw Haman's promotion as being the one Mordecai deserved for his reporting of the assassination plot.²³ In effect, the king mistakenly promoted the wrong person and Mordecai knew it. This,

²⁰ H. A. Ironside stands as an exception among early Christian devotional writers in pointing out this element. He felt that Esther's position "was entirely opposed to the word of God. Providence might seem to favor her, but faith would assuredly have led her at once to declare herself as a despised Jewess, one of the afflicted of Jehovah" (*Notes on the Book of Esther* [New York: Loizeaux Bros., 1921] 24).

²¹ Bruce W. Jones, "Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther," *CBQ* 39/2 (April 1977) 178.

²² Ironically the Yalkut paints a very different picture of Mordecai when it ascribes the concealment of Esther's identity to "Mordecai's modesty" on the assumption that "he feared the advancement and publicity which would come to him if his relationship to the queen were known." It seems that S. Goldman ignores the obvious when he judges this to be "an explanation well in keeping with Mordecai's self-effacing disposition" ("Esther" 205).

²³ Elias Bickerman, *Four Strange Books of the Bible* (New York: Schocken, 1967) 179.

however, does not square with the king's lack of awareness of anyone being honored for that act (6:3).

[p.86]

A better option is that the answer lies in an age-old resentment relating to Haman's ancestor King Agag, and Mordecai's ancestor (though indirectly within the tribe of Benjamin) King Saul. Though Saul was responsible for the capture and eventual death of Agag, the circumstances surrounding the incident eventually led to the rejection and dethronement of Saul (1 Sam 15). Both Mordecai and Haman would have had reason to be bitter about the incident.

Whatever the reason, Mordecai's arrogance towards the king's representative is what triggers Haman's edict. In response to the insubordination of the Benjaminite, the "lot" (*Pûr*, פִּזְמָה) is cast and the edict written. Then, a brief interlude is given the reader involving an implied feast where the king and Haman "sat down to drink while the city of Susa was in confusion" (3:15). This, along with the mention of the casting of the *Pûr* (פִּזְמָה), bring the reader to the end of the first major set of reversals (personal and national) and the first half of the chiasm (A, B). Together they stand in parallel to the emphasis on the Feast of Purim (פִּזְמָה), which similarly brings the reader to the end of the second half in chaps. 9-10.

Another point that can be easily overlooked here is the date of Haman's edict. It is written on the thirteenth of Nisan, which is perhaps deliberately chosen so that news would hit the Jewish people the next day, which would have been the first day of Passover. A holiday commemorating deliverance from bondage and the birth of a nation would be a sadly ironical occasion to receive news of annihilation. Almost as interesting is the fact that the actual deliverance comes on the thirteenth of Adar, one month prior to the next Passover. Unfortunately, it is consistent with the secular mood of the people and tone of the book that no mention is made of the observance of either Passover by the exiles in Susa.

c. Mordecai's Threat and Esther's Response. Set at the heart of the chiasm, the importance of the two fasts in Esther 4 is clear (table 1, C). Though auxiliary with regard to their frequency, they play a dominant role by virtue of their location. They not only bring a more sobering tone to the feast of Purim, which also is to include fasting and lamentations, but frame the turning point in the narrative, the encounter between Esther and Mordecai in 4:13-17.

Like the passages discussed above (2:8-15; 3:2-5), this one also focuses on Esther's identity with her people, but not in the way commonly interpreted. Notice carefully Esther's excuse, Mordecai's threat, and Esther's concession:

Esther claims, "...for any man or woman who comes to the king to the inner court who is not summoned, he has but one law, that he be put to death, unless the king holds out to him the golden scepter so that he may live."

[p.87]

Mordecai threatens, "If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish."

Esther concedes, "I will go in to the king ... and if I perish, I perish."

Several items deserve comment in the dialogue. First, Esther's excuse is actually quite weak in view of the picture of Ahasuerus painted earlier in the story. If he did not kill Vashti for blatant insubordination in front of his dinner guests, it is unlikely that he would kill his beloved Esther for humbly making an unannounced visit in private.

Second, when reading Mordecai's words, it is important to notice the commonly overlooked fact that he actually threatens Esther's life, regardless of the outcome, unless she goes to Ahasuerus on behalf of the Jewish people. One would have expected to read, "If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will not arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will perish," or perhaps, "If you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place and you and your father's house will not perish." But, it is puzzling to read that if Esther remains silent, the Jewish people will be delivered but she will die. Why would harm befall the queen and not the other Jews? Again, the answer lies in recognizing the secular tone in the narrative. That is, when Mordecai speaks of deliverance coming "from another place" (4:14), he is not making a veiled "allusion to God" or exhibiting "an unflinching trust in God's providential care."²⁴ Rather, he is threatening Esther with the proposition: "If you do not help you will die, even if the rest of the Jewish people are delivered!" In short, it seems that he was prepared to take matters into his own hands if she refused to help. And, if it became necessary, he would make sure that she paid the price for her disloyalty to her people.

In the face of almost certain death if she does not go to the king (from either Haman's associates or Mordecai), Esther quickly chooses what she knows to be the safest path, that is, the one to the throne room of her benevolent husband, Ahasuerus. There is no need to applaud her bravery, as she is being forced now at threat of life to do what Mordecai had forbidden her to do earlier, that is to be honest about her Jewishness and stand with her people.

Before leaving the discussion of the fasts, a word is in order regarding the absence of any mention of prayer in this context. Again, the religious element is read into the text when one assumes that "to fast for her [Esther] means to pray for her, for in the Old Testament, prayer routinely accompanied fasting."²⁵ While this is generally true

[p.88]

elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, to assume it here is not only to beg the question, but in the process to ignore the possibility that the very point the writer may be trying to make is that, in fact, prayer was absent in the case of Esther and Mordecai.

²⁴ Goldman, 194.

²⁵ Moore, 28, n. 24.

Indeed, this should be viewed as the turning point in the story, "the point at which the series of 'theses' ends and the sequence of 'antitheses' begins."²⁶ However, the cause is not Esther's bravery, but rather her forced solidarity with her people. This comes as the central reversal in the story, bringing with it a sobering tone of fasting, not of feasting.²⁷

2. Solidarity to Deliverance (Esth 5-10)

A chain of events begins with Esther's decision to identify with her people (4:16), leading the reader through a second set of personal and national reversals (Esth 5-7; table 1, B₁) and reaching its climax in the subsiding of the king's anger after the death of Haman (7:10). The magnitude of what follows in chaps. 8-10 is much greater than the death of one man (Haman); nevertheless, one feels a sense of anticlimax as the story moves away from its chiasmic center toward the epilogue of Mordecai's feasts (table 1, A₁). The audience is easily convinced that if the events of chaps. 5-7 are within the scope of possibility, then anything is possible.

David J. A. Clines concludes that a primary element in the theology of Esther is the complementary nature of "divine action and human initiative."²⁸ Although that concept may be deduced from the story in a secondary manner, it is not at all explicit in the speech of Esther and Mordecai. Thus, one must take exception with Shemaryahu Talmon, who interprets Esther's actions in relation to the second set of feasts as the king of "patient planning which marks a wise sage."²⁹ On the contrary, it is better to read them as the result of her stalling for enough time to decide where her loyalty really should be placed. Meanwhile, God himself acts on behalf of his people, but without any evidence that the characters in the story recognize his involvement. God is working with them, but it is not clear that they realize they are working with him. Esther's identify-

[p.89]

cation with her people is evident, but the cause and effect relationship between that solidarity and the divine activity is not.

III. CONCLUSIONS

Sometimes it is easy to take as normative situations that in fact require immediate and radical change. So it was with the secular direction in which the Jewish people were heading at this time in their history. The events in the Book of Esther are carefully structured so as to communicate not only such a failure on the part of Esther and Mordecai but also the providential activity meant to shake them from their lethargy and to make them more fully aware of their calling as God's people.

²⁶ Berg, 110.

²⁷ This central turning point is also marked by the reversal of authority from Mordecai over Esther (2:10) to Esther over Mordecai (4:17); cf. the discussions by Jones, "Two Misconceptions" 176-77 and Shemaryahu Talmon, "Wisdom in the Book of Esther," *VT* 13 (1963) 449.

²⁸ David J. A. Clines, *The Esther Scroll: The Story of the Story* (JSOTSup 30; Sheffield, UK: University of Sheffield, 1984) 154.

²⁹ Talmon, 437.

As Judaism's most "secular" festival, Purim involves feasting and drinking wine in excess until one is no longer able to distinguish between blessing Mordecai and cursing Haman. All of this is permitted, according to Talmudic sanction, in joyous celebration of the deliverance effected in Esther's day (*Meg 7b*). However, Purim was also instituted as a time for sober reflection, a time to fast, lament (9:31) and remember that compromising one's identity as a person of God is not a necessary prerequisite for surviving as his people, even in a hostile environment.

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