

CHARACTER AND IDEOLOGY
in the
BOOK OF ESTHER

CHARACTER AND IDEOLOGY
in the
BOOK OF ESTHER

SECOND EDITION
with a New Postscript on
A Decade of Esther Scholarship

Michael V. Fox

WIPF & STOCK • Eugene, Oregon

Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W 8th Ave, Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther
Second Edition with a New Postscript on A Decade of Esther Scholarship
By Fox, Michael V.
Copyright©1991 by Fox, Michael V.
ISBN 13: 978-1-60899-495-3
Publication date 3/9/2010
Previously published by Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991

C. 1991 University of South Carolina
New Postscript c. 2001 Wm. B. Eerdmans

CONTENTS

Abbreviations ix

I. INTRODUCTION 1

1. The Art of Simplicity 1
2. The Aim of This Study 2
3. What Is Character? 6
4. The Texts of Esther 9
5. Reading This Book 10
6. The Main Thing 11

II. COMMENTARY 13

Preliminary Remarks 13

Act I. 1:1–22. The Deposal of Vashti 13

Act II. 2:1–23. Esther Becomes Queen; Mordecai Uncovers
a Plot 26

Act III. 3:1–15. Haman's Scheme 41

Act IV. 4:1–17. Esther's Mission 56

Act V. 5:1–8. Esther Goes to the King 67

Act VI. 5:9–6:14. Haman's Humiliation; Mordecai's Exaltation 73

Act VII. 7:1–10. Esther Defeats Haman 82

Act VIII. 8:1–8. The Grant of Authority 89

Excursus: The Two Days of Acts V–VIII 95

Act IX. 8:9–17. The Counter-decree 98

Act X. 9:1–19. The Battles of Adar 107

Act XI. 9:20–32. The Establishment of the Festival of Purim 116

Act XII. 10:1–3. Epilogue: Mordecai's Accomplishments 128

III. HISTORICITY AND DATING 131

1. Historicity 131
2. Date 139

CONTENTS

IV. GENRES 141

1. Wisdom Literature? 142
2. A Persian Chronicle? 144
3. Historical Novella or Historical Romance? 144
4. Diaspora Story 145
5. History 148
6. Festival Etiology 151
7. Festival Lection 152

V. STRUCTURES 153

1. Structures and Meanings 153
2. Sequence and Segmentation of Events 154
3. A Major Motif: Feasting 156
4. A Major Theme: Reversal 158

VI. VASHTI 164

1. Vashti's Refusal 164
2. Views of Vashti 164
3. Evaluation in Objective Narration 166
4. Vashti and the Men 167
5. Vashti and Esther 169

VII. XERXES 171

1. A Soul's Surface 171
2. Showing Honor 172
3. Showing Generosity 172
4. Authority and Irresponsibility 173
5. The Sin of Laziness 173
6. King and Kingdom 176

VIII. HAMAN 178

1. Haman's Transparency 178
2. Haman's Motives 179
3. Haman's Folly and Cleverness 182

CONTENTS

IX. MORDECAI 185

1. Mordecai as an Ideal Figure 185
2. Mordecai's Reserve 191

X. ESTHER 196

1. Passivity 197
2. Activity 199
3. Authority 202
4. Esther as an Ideal 204

Excursus: The Image of Woman in the Book of Esther 205

XI. THE JEWS 212

1. What the Jews Do 213
2. The Character of the Jewish People 217

XII. GOD 235

1. God's Absence 235
2. God's Presence 237
3. The Message of Silence 244

XIII. THE WORLD 248

1. Society 248
2. History and Freedom 249
3. Order 251

XIV. THREE BOOKS OF ESTHER 254

1. Three Versions of Esther 254
2. The Proto-AT 255
3. The Massoretic Text 262
4. The Septuagint 265

Appendix: Philological-textual Notes 274

Postscript: A Decade of Esther Scholarship 288

Bibliography 304

Index 319

1. *Topics 319*
2. *Scriptural References 323*

CONTENTS

- 3. *Postbiblical Texts (Apocrypha, New Testament, Rabbinic)* 329
- 4. *Greek Words* 330
- 5. *Hebrew and Aramaic* 330
- 6. *Other Languages* 331
- 7. *Authors and Scholars, Ancient and Modern* 331

ABBREVIATIONS

Addition(s)	(Capitalized): the deuterocanonical Addition(s) A–F that appear in the Septuagint and, subsequently, the Alpha Text, Vulgate, and Old Latin.
Ag. Est.	<i>Aggadat Esther</i> , Buber 1897.
AT	The Greek Alpha-Text; see chapter XIV, §2. AT's chapters are given in lower case roman, while LXX's and MT's are given in arabic numerals (e.g., AT's v 1 is the equivalent of MTs 4: 1).
AT-end	The ending of the AT (without Adds E and F), namely viii 39–52.
b.	Babylonian Talmud
BH	Biblical Hebrew
BDB	Brown, Driver, and Briggs, <i>Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
BHS	Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia
Est. Rab.	Midrash Esther Rabba
Gen. Rab.	Midrash Genesis Rabba
GKC	Gesenius–Kautsch–Cowley, <i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> . 1910.
Her.	Herodotus, <i>The Persian Wars</i> .
Jos.	Josephus, <i>Antiquities of the Jews</i> , XI 184–296 (= chap. vi). References are all to <i>Antiquities</i> , ad loc., unless otherwise cited.
j.	Jerusalem Talmud
LXX	Septuagint (the Göttingen text, ed. Hanhart, is used throughout). Manuscript designations are according to Hanhart.
Meg.	Tractate Megilla
MH	Mishnaic Hebrew
Mid.	Midrash

ABBREVIATIONS

MT	Massoretic Text
NJV	New Jewish Publication Society Version: <i>The Writings</i> . Philadelphia, 1982.
NT	New Testament
OL	Old Latin version
R.	Rabbi
R-AT	The redactor who produced the present Alpha Text
R-MT	The redactor who produced the present Massoretic Text
Syr	Syriac version (Peshitta)
Tar ¹	Targum Rishon (the first, more literal Aramaic translation of Esther)
Tar ²	Targum Sheni (the second, highly paraphrastic and expansive, translation of Esther)
Vul	Vulgate
//	Parallel to, equivalent to
{ }	Possible later additions
[]	In the translation: words added to the translation.

Bibliographical references: In the text, commentaries and some other important works (marked by an asterisk in the Bibliography) are referenced by name of author only; other works are cited by author and date.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

1. The Art of Simplicity

The characters of the book of Esther, including its heroes, have not always fared well at the hands of their commentators. They have been excoriated for moral failings ("There is not one noble character in the book"¹), scolded for sexism ("buried in Esther's character is also full compliance with patriarchy"²), and put down for flatness and simplicity ("[the] major characters are so superficially drawn that it is difficult to identify very long or intensively with either the book's villains or heroes"³). Such strictures do not correspond to my own response to the book, nor do they explain why its characters have lived on, reborn and remolded in numerous retellings of the tale. In many readers—probably most—they have evoked affection and emulation; in some they have aroused disgust and contempt; rarely have they met with indifference.

The issues of morality and sexism will be addressed in the appropriate places⁴ (where I will argue that the imputations of immorality and sexism are misreadings). More problematic is the question of literary quality. This problem lies in the book's simplicity; it is more difficult to analyze simplicity than to respond to it.

In fact, much is going on beneath the "artless" surface of these simple but powerful characters. Their surface clarity and vividness make them fascinating and meaningful to children, but these qualities are the products of a sharp and subtle craft that makes the characters intriguing to adults as well, and worthy of repeated scrutiny. These characters become vehicles in conveying a surprisingly sophisticated—in some ways strikingly modern—view of person,

1. Paton, p. 96.

2. Laffey 1988:216.

3. Moore, p. LIII. Moore is typical in thinking it a failing that "[n]either Vashti nor Zeresh is a believable life-and-blood individual." But (whatever the validity of this judgment) they are *not* "life-and-blood" individuals, and there is no *a priori* value in making them believable as such. The question is how effective these "unbelievable" individuals are in serving the author's purposes.

4. Chap. XI §§2a-b; chap. X, Excursus.

nation, and religion. With a few episodes, a brief and straightforward plot, and a few clear-cut characters, the author of Esther says much about the world, humanity, Jews, history, and even God—who is not mentioned at all. To explore all this is the aim of the present study, and it will do so by focusing on character.

2. The Aim of This Study

The name of this series, “Studies on Personalities of the Old Testament,” reminds us that we may (and probably must) choose a particular point of focus when reading a literary text, such as the text’s story line, its moral and spiritual messages, its historical or social information, its language and stylistic texture, its aesthetic qualities, and more. Or we may decide to concentrate on its characters, the people of the text. The latter is an especially rewarding approach to the book of Esther, where the central ideas are embodied in, rather than merely enunciated by, the persons in the text.

This study approaches the Scroll⁵ with a primary guiding question: What are the persons in the story like? This question will quickly lead us to other issues, in particular the ideology of the author—his⁶ assumptions, ideas, values, and teachings. Characterization does not, it must be stressed, exist in isolation from a great array of other artistic and conceptual concerns, and these will not be neglected. But as an interpretive strategy I will look at the complex of other features from the standpoint of character and deal with them primarily insofar as they contribute to the shaping and functioning of the book’s persons.

There is much that the present study does not attempt to provide, such as an investigation of the origins of Purim, a full textual-philological commentary (but some essential technical underpinnings of my translation and commentary are discussed in the

5. The book of Esther is one of the Five Scrolls, each of which is read on a Jewish holiday (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Qohelet [= Ecclesiastes], and Esther). In Hebrew, Esther is usually called simply *hamm’gillah*, “the Scroll”—i.e., the scroll *par excellence*.

6. I refer to the author (and narrator) as “he” because of the overwhelming likelihood that this writer, like virtually all the ones we know about from the ancient Near East, was male and that the narrator too was assumed to be male. I will not, however, make such assumptions about the reader.

Appendix), a survey of the history of interpretation,⁷ a discussion of archaeology and realia,⁸ and a comprehensive literary-stylistic analysis.⁹ For these I refer you to the many fine studies of Esther treating the various historical, literary, and religious issues.¹⁰

For the most part I will offer my own observations without arguing against others, but even in “neutral” discourse there is often implicit argumentation against other readings, and I will not pretend to neutrality. Beyond the numerous interpretations I simply disagree with, there are other readings that I consider fundamental misapprehensions—some of them quite disturbing—of the characters and their author. To give you an idea of what these readings are, all but one of the chapters describing characters (chaps. VI–XII) have epigraphs that, it must be emphasized, express an attitude that the chapter *repudiates*. Haman alone has evoked no contrary view and so gets no epigraph. These epigraphs and my rebuttal show that the qualities of all the figures in Esther are not a cut-and-dried issue. Like living persons, they can call forth conflicting opinions among different acquaintances.

This study is called “Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther” because it will analyze character portrayal less for its entertainment or aesthetic values than for its role in imparting the author’s ideas about realities outside the book. The emphasis on ideology is in accord with the author’s own intentions, for the book has little that does not contribute to ideas about religious, moral, and national issues.

The Scroll’s principal message is obvious: Jews everywhere in all generations should celebrate Purim. The author succeeded fully in making this point; the holiday is alive and meaningful, and it is celebrated widely and enthusiastically in much the way originally envisioned. But I will be giving less attention to this theme than to

7. For which see Herrmann 1986, as well as the commentaries. For Jewish midrashic interpretations see Katzenellenbogen 1933.

8. See the survey by Moore (1975), as well as the commentaries.

9. For this see Berg, Clines, and Striedl (1937). Dommershausen’s book (1968) is a painstaking but unproductive detailing of literary and stylistic features.

10. In particular I recommend the literary-ideological studies of Berg and Clines, the solid commentaries of Moore, Bardtke, Meinhold (who has some interesting insights into the book’s ideology), and Paton (whose extensive quotation of sources and meticulous, if often misguided, text critical notes keep his commentary useful).

INTRODUCTION

others of subordinate—but by no means negligible—importance. The Purim theme is less a function of characterization than are the others, and it is hafted on to the narrative proper in such a way that it does not permeate and govern its development; in other words, the Scroll's principal theme is not its *central* theme. (Indeed, it is hard, and perhaps artificial, to single out one of the themes in this book as the central one, since they all interlock and overlap.) The Purim message is, moreover, too simple to require much discussion. The ideas that will receive more attention can be conceived of as answers to the following questions, which, I believe, are provoked by the story's own perspectives and emphases:

How can Jews best survive and thrive in the diaspora?

What is the nature of the gentile state?

What must Jews do in times of crisis?

What is the nature of the Jewish community in exile and how does (and should) it work?

How do men and women treat each other?

Where do we see God?

Though something of a synthesis is offered in chapter XIII, where I describe the world that the characters both constitute and inhabit, I omit a standard chapter summing up the "message of the book of Esther." Its messages will be explained and analyzed, but not in isolation from the dramatic substance of the book. The book's themes and teachings will be viewed as expressions of characterization and narrative progression, which is the way they were meant to be seen. In any case, there is already too pervasive a tendency to reduce Bible stories to their "morals," and it won't hurt to take a step away from that habit.

My interest in ideology is not meant to imply that the Scroll is heavily didactic. The author does not seek to drive home most of his perceptions and their attendant lessons, but (what is more effective) to make them the readers' own by re-presenting our world in a miniature literary one. Themes do not always become messages. In some matters—the relations between the sexes and the nature of gentile rule, for example—the author observes without inculcating specific lessons. But taken together his ideas constitute an ideology, for he tries to persuade us to see the world the way he does. The Esther story is a metaphoric world, a concentrated vision of

the reality of exile, and the vision itself teaches Jews how to make their way through the life they face.¹¹

This study asks about the artistry and function of characterization in the book of Esther, but my interpretation is not meant to give *the* answer—a complete and definitive description of the characters the author intended to create. Such a description is not possible. If it were, Bible studies—indeed, literary study in general—would come to an end or degenerate into transmission of stale doctrines (as happens in orthodoxies, each of which asserts the finality and definitiveness of its own readings). The impossibility of finality is due not to a shortcoming inherent in reading or in criticism, but to the unlimited potential of literary portrayal. As open-ended constructs, literary characters (like real ones) can always evoke new, deeper, and broader speculations, revisions, and reassessments. Hence I am offering only one reading. This reading does, I believe, account for the characters of Esther more adequately and accurately than have previous treatments of the book—largely because it is so indebted to them. But I certainly do not imagine or hope that my reading will exhaust the valid interpretations the text invites.

You will not agree completely with my assessment of the characters in Esther. Even if we were discussing real persons we both knew, especially ones we knew well, we would probably not reach full agreement. We might have different views of their moral strengths, motivations, stability, intelligence, and so on. Moreover, we might agree on some of that person's qualities yet evaluate him or her differently. Nevertheless, our discussion—if conducted in good faith and with a minimum of extraneous presuppositions—would deepen our understanding of those acquaintances, giving it greater nuance, clarity, and subtlety, and making us aware of facets of their character that we had not previously considered.

This book is my side of such a discussion, and although it is obviously not a real dialogue between us, the conversation is not one-sided. This exposition responds to the views of earlier commentators by selectively continuing their ideas, building on them, rejecting them, reshaping them, replacing them, and supplementing them with ideas of my own. I would be pleased if my ideas in turn elicit the response of future commentators. I would also be

11. On the truth-claims and teachings of the "metaphoric worlds" of fiction, see Booth 1988:324–73.

interested in learning something of your own views—your reaction both to my interpretations and to the characters in the book we are studying. You can write me at the Hebrew Department, University of Wisconsin, Madison, WI 53706.

3. What Is Character?

I will be speaking about the characters of the book of Esther much as if they were real. This “as if” is an important convention in reading literature. I take it as a given that readers commonly learn about, react to, and speak about the creations of a writer’s imagination as if they had intentions, thoughts, feelings, even sub-conscious minds of their own. We can even imagine them leading lives *outside* the events narrated in the text. And in the book to follow, I will be speaking as a reader not a theoretician.¹²

Of course, while real people may have a “self” that remains the same even through radical changes of character (though the notion of “sameness” quivers a bit under close examination), literary figures do not. They have no space (such as the heart [according to the ancient notion], or the brain, or, more abstractly, a continuous consciousness with a persistent sense of self) that might be considered an organ or a location of character. They have no “core” or “essence” apart from the various things said by and about them. Esther (I mean the Esther of the book, not a woman who might have actually lived in Achaemenid Persia) exists solely in the words spoken about and by her.

12. The theoretical basis for this approach is a strong one. The best discussions of theories of character and their practical implications are those of Chatman (1978: 107–45), Harvey (1965: chap. 1 and *passim*), Hochman (1985: chap. 2), and Phelan (1989: chap. 1 and *passim*). The following remarks draw upon and synthesize their approaches (particularly Hochman’s), and make use as well of Forster’s seminal study (1927).

Chatman makes a strong case for the affinity between figures in literature and people in life and for the similarity in the ways we “retrieve” character (what Phelan calls the “mimetic component” of character). This affinity allows us to draw conclusions about the past and future of literary figures beyond the scope of the text. Hochman argues that what links characters in literature to people in life, as we fabricate them in our minds, is the “integral unity of our conception of people and of how they operate” (p. 36). Even the clues we use in constructing the image of a person are virtually identical in literature and in life. Thus we “read” life and art in much the same ways (pp. 35–44). This is basically persuasive, though he may be pressing this point too far, not giving sufficient weight to the teleology of traits and even incidentals in literature.

In other words, we have a bunch of pieces, which we must join together into a person who never existed apart from those pieces. But an amazing thing happens: through reading, a person is created (or re-created) who can then even possess a measure of autonomy and exist apart from the text. The proof is the way that Esther can show up in other Esther stories—in the Septuagint, for example, or even the drama of Racine—where she says and does quite different things and yet is somehow the same person with a modified personality. Another proof is the way we can often recall literary figures vividly even after forgetting the words and the events of the text in which they first came alive.¹³

We reconstruct character in reading in almost the same way that we come to know people in “real life.”¹⁴ All we know about anyone besides ourselves is pieced together from things they do and say, and even these things we must often construct at one remove, from events that are supposed to have ensued from their actions and from things others say about them. We sort through these bits and pieces, looking for (and creating) order and meaning, linking them together by postulating motivation, and seeking (constantly but usually unconsciously) the patterns or principles by which the fragments cohere. When we find types of behavior that endure and recur, and especially when we can organize the types into patterns, we call the complex of patterns *character*. On the basis of these patterns, especially by reliance on the types of motivation we have inferred, we can deduce a person’s thoughts, even subconscious ones, and even speculate on what he or she might yet do. This is a legitimate deduction from type: what is such a person likely to do, based on our knowledge of his or her past actions and those of other persons of this sort? In other words, we continually *read* character in the stories of others’ lives. We do the same in reading texts. Literary characters are “images of possible people.”¹⁵

In some ways, as reader-observers we can know literary characters far better than real-life ones. This is one of the sources of literature’s power—a power it transmits to its readers. There are several reasons why literary characters are in some ways more knowable than real ones. For the former, the facts are complete. Insofar

13. Chatman 1978: 118.

14. The quotation marks, not to be repeated, remind us that the dichotomy is imperfect insofar as it neglects the very real intrusion of literary characters into realms of life outside of literature.

15. Phelan 1989: 2, speaking of the “mimetic component” of character.

as the text is intact and we understand its language, we readers have all the data that can and ever will exist, and they will not change. (If anyone adds facts, a different book is created.) Also, these facts stand still for repeated scrutiny and are always available for verification. Moreover, if the narrator is reliable (as in Esther)—and not somehow undermined by his own words—then these facts are reliable. We cannot suspect that the narrator is giving us an untrue picture of the character, because the picture is the character.¹⁶ Finally, when the narrator is omniscient (as in Esther), we are often allowed direct access to the characters' thoughts, feelings, and motives—even unconscious ones.¹⁷ We may even be told what might have happened but did not, or what might have been thought but was not. Thus reading can make us privy to information we could never have in real life.¹⁸

Literary figures exist (and are not only known) *pars pro toto*, meaning that we can extrapolate a whole person from the small part we are given.¹⁹ They live in an organized, purposive world, all of whose parts are, at least potentially, created to constitute the world in just the way it is. This fact charges even minor character traits with potential significance. (This is not the case, however, for faceless "actants" whose only function is to move the plot along, for example the conspirators in 2:21–23; but it is doubtful that they should even be called "characters.")

16. We may, however, take a step back and doubt the narrator's or author's *evaluation* of this character. We might say, as some do, that the author considers Mordecai an ideal person but he really is quite arrogant, duplicitous, and so on.

A reliable narrator is not necessarily telling the truth. The story may be quite different from history—as we understand it. The author may be distorting the facts—as he or she understands them—or simply be mistaken. The reliable narrator is a stance within the text that the author chooses to give to the speaking voice; it is a literary convention; see chap. IV, n. 29. However, with regard to features which are the author's creation—such as literary character—the reliable narrator is, by definition, reliable.

17. Literary figures have an unconscious, about which we can legitimately form hypotheses based on their actions, inasmuch as their characters are constructed on the pattern of people in life. "Language is a key element in this [process], as is the imagery for which language is the vehicle" (Hochman 1985:71).

18. "[The characters in novels] are people whose secret lives are visible or might be visible; we are people whose secret lives are invisible.

"And that is why novels, even when they are about wicked people, can solace us; they suggest a more comprehensible and thus a more manageable human race, they give us the illusion of perspicacity and of power" (Forster 1927:99; see also 74–75, 97–99).

19. For real people, we must reason *pars pro toto*, but we know that the part is not the substance of their being.

How do we judge the adequacy of evidence in proving hypotheses about something that (in our world) never existed? We can only compare literary figures with our own experience of human character. In other words, character analysis is finally a matter of introspection, whereby every reader looks inward to describe, analyze, organize, and interpret what happens when he or she reads this text. Literary criticism is essentially a way of describing the results of this common reflexive act.

As readers and critics we join a community that extends through the centuries and around the world: the community of those who re-create the characters of the book of Esther by reading, thinking, and speaking about them. The author of Esther has projected a world from his imagination, and we can enter it, explore it, explain it, and return yet again for new pleasures and insights.

4. The Texts of Esther

The present study directs its attention primarily to the Massoretic Text (MT), the Hebrew text accepted as authoritative by Jews and most Christians. In contrast to a common usage in modern literary studies of the Bible, I do not speak of this text as "the final form" of the Esther story; rather, it is an intermediate form. The "final" form is, I would imagine, the Septuagint (the authoritative Bible of Eastern Orthodoxy); or perhaps it is the Latin Vulgate (which has canonical status alongside the Hebrew text for Roman Catholics). These "final forms" show certain minor differences from the extant Hebrew version as well as some major ones. Nor is the MT the *earliest* form of the book of Esther.²⁰ However, the MT is (in my view) the form most rewarding for literary study. Also, being in Hebrew, it has not undergone the distortions inevitable in translation.

Two other forms of the Esther story I will be mentioning for comparative and (occasionally) textual purposes are the Septuagint (LXX) and the Alpha Text (AT), both of them in Greek. The LXX, the standard Greek translation, was finished no later than 78 B.C.E., when (according to a note at its end) it was brought to Alexandria. It is a smooth rendering, usually faithful to the gist of the Hebrew where it attempts to translate, but also flexible, paraphrastic, and

20. This will be argued in chap. XIV, esp. §3a.

sometimes innovative, often making adjustments for the sake of clarity and vividness. Hence it can never clearly witness to a different Hebrew text, and I will use it merely as supplemental evidence.²¹ The most notable feature of the LXX is the addition of six supplements, Additions A-F. These Additions and other significant changes are surveyed in chap. XIV §4a.

The Alpha Text is a highly variant Greek version. It is very close to the LXX in the Additions and in the ending (viii 39–52, parallel to MT 8:17–10:3); these sections were borrowed from the LXX. Once they are removed (together with a few miscellaneous verses also borrowed from the LXX), there remains an earlier version, the proto-AT, which tells the story of Esther quite differently. The proto-AT is not a revision of the MT, but an independent, collateral version. I discuss it in chap. XIV §2; for full analysis and argumentation see Fox 1990. The AT is nowhere a translation of the MT and has no value in establishing the text of the latter. It does not even help much in establishing the original text of the LXX, since it makes numerous changes, some of them tendentious, in the passages copied from that version.

5. Reading This Book

The Scroll's themes are not the sum of certain statements and symbols; rather, they grow out of the interaction of the story's components in its dramatic progression. Thus I begin with a Commentary that follows the sequence of reading and traces the movement and dynamic shaping of character (chap. II).²² The Commentary, like the rest of this book (except for the Appendix), requires of the reader no knowledge of Hebrew nor any other technical background. Of course, the translation and interpretation presuppose decisions in philological-textual matters; these are discussed in the Appendix.

Chapters III-V treat matters that pertain to the book as a whole—its historicity, genres, and construction. Chapters VI-XII

21. The only place I prefer the LXX reading (though with modification) is 3:7b, and here I recognize that the LXX might have *produced* the right reading rather than *preserving* it. For some sensible remarks about the use and misuse of LXX-Esther, see Wellhausen 1903.

22. Phelan 1989 (*passim*) shows the importance of narrative progression for character analysis, because progression (rather than, say, binary oppositions) directs the reader's experience and controls thematizing.

describe each character in turn, seeking to offer a picture of each character as a whole. Chapter XIII describes the world they inhabit. Chapter XIV moves to a very different, somewhat more technical, type of literary analysis: a diachronic reading, tracing the growth of the Esther story in three versions and analyzing the changing portrayals of the characters.

Throughout I call upon and react to the views of earlier readers, frequently in footnotes. The footnotes are not extraneous. Their purpose is to help clarify the crucial issue of how we are to read the book of Esther and respond to the persons in it.

6. The Main Thing

The present study addresses a significant aspect of the meaning of the Scroll, but not the most urgent and vital one—its existential bearing on the individual reader. In this matter I cannot speak for you; I cannot even communicate fully my own experience, but I will here attempt to point to it obliquely.

Although I doubt the historicity of the Esther story, and as a critical reader I must make that clear (see chap. III §1), every year at Purim when I hear the Scroll read in the synagogue, I know that it is *true*, whatever the historical accuracy of its details. Indeed, I relive its truth and know its actuality. Almost without an effort of imagination, I feel something of the anxiety that seized the Jews of Persia upon learning of Haman's threat to their lives, and I join in their exhilaration at their deliverance. Except that I do not think "their," but "my."

We are concluding a century blackened by antisemitic horrors. From 1903 to 1906, hundreds of Jews were killed and thousands raped, mutilated, and despoiled in a series of pogroms in southern Russia, particularly around Kishinev and Odessa. These riots were organized by the minister of the interior, V. Plehwe, who, unlike Haman, did not need to deceive his emperor, and were carried out by the bands of the Black Hundreds and deluded peasants, who had been taught to blame the Jews for Russia's self-afflictions. In 1919–1920, the remnants of the hapless Ukrainian nationalist army, along with masses of peasants and opportunists, eased their frustrations by murdering some one hundred thousand of the Jews who came within their grasp. A generation later, the Persecutor of the Jews—now not vizier but supreme leader—no longer had to resort to ruse, but could proceed directly to execute his scheme, with the

INTRODUCTION

enthusiastic participation, or at least the criminal complicity, of most of his subjects. One-third of the Jews in the world were wiped out, millions of others tormented beyond telling. Haman's goal, "to slaughter, slay, and destroy all the Jews, young and old," was nearly realized. And other Hamans are always in waiting to revive the attempt.

Although I have not personally faced danger, I, like many Jews, have a sense of narrow, accidental escape: my grandfather left Odessa just before the pogroms, and I happened to be born outside the reach of Nazi power. Too many others whose destinies took a slightly different turn did not escape. The Haman legend has pursued us through history as an ongoing potential. Thus I know the sense of precariousness that impelled Esther's author to insist on the inner powers of a vulnerable people but also—somewhat irrationally—on the certainty of their deliverance.

As the annual reading of the Esther Scroll comes to an end, I breathe a sigh of relief, but this expresses a prayer more than a certitude, for the resolution of the crisis is less believable than its onset. Still, the dramatic intensity of the tale propels us forward from the danger to the deliverance with such momentum that we find ourselves accepting the truth of the latter as well. The literary force of the narrative thus helps us believe, or at least affirm, that "relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews"—even when God is hidden, as he seems to be in the Esther story, and as he has been so often, so inexplicably, so unforgivably, throughout history.

CHAPTER II

COMMENTARY

Preliminary Remarks

To help the reader follow the sequence of events, I date each scene, and, when possible, locate the time of day it took place. Sometimes the author gives a specific date; in other cases, the approximate date can be estimated from hints in the flow of events (see the Excursus on p. 95).

I divide the story into acts, the major clusters of events, as well as scenes, which are segments marked mostly by change of locale. In other words, if this were a play, the curtain would drop and rise to show a shift in time or place.

The Commentary includes a new translation. The translation is fairly literal. It seeks to suggest the rather baroque style of the book (rather than simplifying, as some translations do), and it tries to reflect the quality of the syntax, which is often convoluted (see, for example, 1:1-4; 2:12-13; 9:1-2; and 9:26b-28). I generally maintain the passive constructions in English, because their profusion is part of the book's unusual style, with its courtly, somewhat stiff character. The author likes to use Persian words that were undoubtedly foreign sounding to the Hebrew reader. To suggest the stylistic quality of such usages, I have rendered some of them (especially those that did not enter Hebrew and lose their foreign flavor) with French approximations. These French terms have been used in English but are recognizably foreign—just like the Persian usages in the Scroll. The translation also tries to maintain consistency in the rendering of key words that constitute motifs; for example, “feast” for *mīšteh*, “law” for *dat* (which often refers more precisely to edicts). I do not, however, aim for strict correspondence.

**Act I: 1:1-22. The Deposal of Vashti. i = 1:1-9;
ii = 1:10-22**

i

(1:1) It happened in the days of Xerxes—the very Xerxes who ruled from India to Nubia, 127 provinces in all—(2) that in those days, in the third

year of his reign, as King Xerxes was sitting on his royal throne in the Fortress of Susa, (3) he gave a feast for all his princes and servants, the forces of Persia and Media, with the high aristocracy and the princes of the provinces in his presence, (4) displaying the opulent wealth of his kingdom and the splendid honor of his greatness, for many days—180 in all. (5) And when those days were over, the king gave, for all the people who were to be found in the Fortress of Susa, from grandee to commoner, a seven-day feast in the courtyard in the garden of the king's pavilion.

(6) And oh the cloths of white, percaline and violet, bound with cords of linen and purple on silver rods and alabaster pillars, with couches adorned with gold and silver on a mosaic pavement of porphyry and alabaster, mother-of-pearl and dark marble, (7) with the drinks served in vessels of gold and vessels of various sorts, and much royal wine lavished with kingly bounty! (8) And the drinking proceeded according to law, no one setting restrictions, for thus had the king set down for all the palace butlers, to do as each and every man might wish.

(9) Likewise Queen Vashti gave a women's feast in King Xerxes' palace.

Xerxes' banquet.

Date: 187 days during year 3 of Xerxes' rule¹

(1:1) In a long, complex opening sentence (vv. 1–4) characteristic of the baroque style of the book, the narrator looks back to the reign of Xerxes in the indefinite past—"in those days." The narrator takes the stance of a later "historian" speaking from the distance of several generations; he will again remind us of this perspective in 9:28.

The biblical name Ahasueros (Hebrew *āḥašweroš*) has been positively identified with the Persian *xšayārša*, Anglicized (via Greek) as Xerxes.² The narrator identifies the Xerxes of this book as the king of a vast empire, covering virtually all the known world. The historical Xerxes—Xerxes I, son of Darius and grandson of Cyrus the Great—who reigned from 485 to 465 B.C.E., did indeed rule from India to Nubia. He was better remembered, however, by his failure to extend his rule westward, when, contrary to all expectations, he was defeated by the Greeks in a series of battles in 485–479 B.C.E. Herodotus, who traveled the East (though not as far as

1. Dates, when available, are given by calendric day, month (in lower case roman), and the year of Xerxes' reign, e.g., 13.xii.12.

2. The Greek translation (LXX), however, misunderstood the name as Artaxerxes. Josephus, surprisingly, uses "Xerxes."

Persia proper) and gathered stories some twenty-five years later, has much to say about Xerxes.

Herodotus' portrayal of Xerxes shows him as an occasionally sagacious and principled, but more often arbitrary, tyrannical, and brutal despot. This picture, held by the Greeks generally, is not necessarily contradicted by Xerxes' substantial achievements in war and administration (Olmstead 1948:230-47).

Whatever the historical validity of this portrayal, in the book of Esther we are dealing not with the historical Xerxes I, but with a literary reworking of the king and his empire. Yet this reworking is certainly not a complete fabrication, but is based on memories, traditions, and tales about the actual Xerxes. Thus the commentary will compare the way that the ancient historians portrayed this king.

In the author's view, the Persian empire comprises 127 "provinces." The standard administrative unit in the Persian empire was the satrapy, of which there were in reality only twenty to thirty. If we rely on the historical accuracy of the count, we must make the book's vocabulary conform with that number and understand "province" (*m'dinah*) as a district within a satrapy, and we must also take the terms "princes of the provinces" (*šarey hamm'dinot*) and "satraps" (*'āḥašdarṣnim*) to refer to officials of a lower order. Those adjustments would, however, run counter to the way the terms are used in Esther. The various edicts in the book (3:12; 8:9) are issued to "satraps and governors who are over each and every province [*m'dinah*]," and if "satraps" (*'āḥašdarṣnim*) did refer to subordinate governors, then the more important officials, the actual satraps, would be left unmentioned. Daniel (6:2), of Hellenistic date, speaks of 120 *satraps*, using the Persian term (*'āḥašdarṣnāyā'*). The nature of the satrapies had become vague in historical memory, and their number is here greatly inflated.³

(1:2) The phrase "in those days" resumes the temporal clause of v. 1 and again points us back to the distant past.

The fortress of Susa was the acropolis, the palace area distinct from the city proper. Susa was the chief of four capitals of ancient Persia, along with Babylon, Ecbatana, and Persepolis. According to Xenophon, a contemporary of Xerxes, Susa was the royal dwelling for three months of spring (*Cyropaedia* VIII 6.22). For a discussion

3. 1 Esdras 3:1-2, a passage clearly imitating Est 1:1-3, refers to 127 satrapies.

of the archaeology of Susa and its bearing on the book of Esther, see Moore 1975:71-73.

Merely as a designation of time, the phrase "As King Xerxes was sitting on his royal throne in the Fortress of Susa," meaning "when he was ruling," would be superfluous, since it goes without saying that by the third year of his reign he had already come to rule. Some commentators take the phrase to imply "sitting firm," "being firmly in power" (thus b. Meg. 11b; Bardtke; Dommershausen), but the expression does not in itself bear that connotation. Perhaps the author was aware, and expected his audience to know, that Susa was one of four Persian capitals, in which case the phrase would be understood to mean: during a period when he was dwelling in Susa and ruling from there. Still, the author does not refer to the other cities.

(1:3) Xerxes gives a banquet for the nobility. The author displays his knowledge of Persian words by designating the nobility with a word of Persian derivation, *partimim*.⁴

(1:4) Xerxes flaunts his wealth and splendor during a half year of feasting. The length of the feast is legendary hyperbole showing awe of Persian wealth and luxury.⁵ The Persian zest for drinking-bouts reached the ears of Herodotus (I 133) as well as our author.

(1:5) Xerxes gives a second banquet, this one for the commoners of Susa, lasting only seven days. This takes place outdoors, in the garden surrounding or before the royal pavilion—also the locale for the climax in chapter 7. The whole population of the city would not fit in the garden at once; hence we may think of the feast as a public reception.

Since we will be looking at the author's attitudes toward women, we might note that "the people" refers to the males: the "people's" wives go to Vashti's banquet.

(1:6-7) This is the real banquet of interest, since it is the setting for Vashti's deposal. But the description in 1:6-7 applies, as Ibn Ezra recognized, to the first banquet as well. The description in verses 6-7 is in the form of a one-membral sentence of a sort unusual in Hebrew—actually just a long listing of luxurious appurtenances. Striedl (1937:86) says that the short, exclamation-like

4. From *fratama*, "first" (Cameron 1958:162, 166, n.17).

5. The 120-day "feasting" of the Assyrian army in Judt 1:16, to which Xerxes' 180-day banquet is sometimes compared, may also be legendary exaggeration, though there the activity seems to be a time of relaxation and eating well rather than an ongoing dinner.

sentence-equivalents reflect the people's wonder. It would be more accurate to say that this is a long exclamation-like sentence that conveys the *narrator's* wonder. The exclamatory listing creates a mass of images that overwhelm the sensory imagination and suggest both a sybaritic delight in opulence and an awareness of its excess.

(1:8) The guests are given as much to drink as they wish. The first part of this verse has caused some perplexity, because *'ones* is almost always translated "forced," and if "no one forced" the guests, in what sense was the drinking "according to law"? Some commentators (e.g., Moore, Baldwin) explain that the drinking was according to special prescription for this banquet, contrary to the usual practice whereby the guests at a Persian banquet drank together whenever the king did (based on Xenophon, *Cyropaedia* VIII 8.18), but now they could drink when they pleased. Josephus (XI 188) believes (probably deducing this from Est 1:8) that the king would usually force his guests to drink continuously. Gerleman says that in the Persian court a strictly detailed ceremony determined social forms, and that "no one forced" (the usual translation of *'eyn 'ones*) means that the banquet master exceptionally allowed the guests to behave as they wished. The LXX solves the problem by simply adding a "not" before "law" to show that the banquet was a dissolute one. The word in question should, however, be translated "hindered" or "set restrictions" (see the Appendix). The point is not that no one was forced to drink, but that no one was kept from drinking when and as much as he wished, and that *this* was the king's "law" or edict: to let everyone do as he wished (v. 8b).

The word translated "law" (*dat*) is used throughout the book of Esther in reference to all royal decisions, from simple directives to servants (as here), to the judicial sentence punishing an illegal action (4:11), to imperial edicts allowing genocide. The empire lives in a rule of "law" for every detail of life.

This verse introduces the motif of "will"—of letting people do as they wish. The plot line will proceed by people attempting to impose their will on others, usually with success. For better or worse, this king tends to let people do as they want, sometimes deliberately, sometimes unawares.

(1:9) Queen Vashti gives a banquet for the women. Vashti's party—which rates only one sentence, in contrast to the spacious description of Xerxes' banquet—introduces the motif of the queen's banquet, which will become Esther's proving ground. More impor-

tant, it makes Vashti's refusal more understandable by segregating the sexes during the merrymaking. If Vashti were to come to the king's banquet at his command, she would be the only woman before a mass of men, whereas a call to a banquet where the wives were present would be less offensive; it would, in fact, be proper and expected.

The opening scene is unusually expansive for biblical narrative. Instead of reporting actions and words, the author scans the venue like a cinematographer, moving at a leisurely pace and describing in lavish detail what one present in the palace would have witnessed. This scene and some others in the book of Esther stand in contrast to the Bible's usually scanty use of description, a quality made famous by Auerbach's assertion that biblical narrative is "fraught with background," meaning "the externalization of only so much of the phenomena as is necessary for the purpose of the narrative, all else left in obscurity; the decisive points of the narrative alone are emphasized, what lies between is nonexistent; time and place are undefined and call for interpretation. . . ."⁶ Auerbach's statement highlights the peculiarity of parts of Esther—in particular, this scene and 5:9–6:13. The author is employing a new technique, one probably learned from Hellenistic Romance, which tends to elaborate descriptions of palaces and royal banquets.⁷

ii

(1:10) On the seventh day, when the king was lightheaded with wine, he told the seven eunuchs who attended the king—Mehuman, Bizzetha, Harbona, Bigtha and Abagtha, Zethar and Carcas—(11) to bring over Queen Vashti, wearing the royal diadem, so as to display her beauty to the peoples and princes, because she was lovely to look at. (12) But Queen Vashti refused to come at the king's order conveyed by the eunuchs. And the king became very angry and his wrath burned hot within him. (13) And the king said to the experts who understood the times—inasmuch as that was the king's procedure in the presence of all who knew royal and judicial law (14) (those close to him being Carshena, Shethar, Admatha, Tarshish, Meres, Marsena, and Memuchan, the seven princes of Persia and Media,

6. *Mimesis* (1968), p. 11. The continuation of the sentence, which speaks of the fragmentary representation of thoughts and feelings in biblical narrative, does describe Esther.

7. Josephus carried this tendency further; see Feldman 1970:149–50.

who had immediate access to the king⁸ and who had a pre-eminent position in the kingdom): (15) “In accordance with law, what should be done to Queen Vashti for refusing to obey the command of King Xerxes conveyed by the eunuchs?”

(16) And Memuchan said to the king and the princes: “It is not only the king whom Queen Vashti has offended, but all the princes and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Xerxes. (17) For report of the queen’s deed will get out to all the women, making them feel contempt for their husbands, for they will say, ‘When King Xerxes ordered Queen Vashti brought to him she would not come.’ (18) This very day the princesses of Persia and Media, who have heard what the queen said, are saying this to all the princes of the king, and contempt and anger abound! (19) Should it so please the king, let a royal declaration proceed from him, and let it be written into the laws of Persia and Media, so as never to pass away, that Vashti shall come no more before King Xerxes. And let the king give her queenship to another woman who is better than she. (20) And the declaration the king shall make will be heard in all his kingdom—and magnificent it is!—so that all the women will show honor to their husbands, from grandee to commoner.”

(21) The idea pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memuchan said, (22) and he sent letters to all the king’s provinces, to each and every province in its own script, and to each and every people in its own language, to the effect that every man should be ruler in his household and speak the language of his own people.

Vashti’s refusal and her expulsion

Date: the second half of year 3 of Xerxes’ reign, seventh day of the second feast.

(1:10) While tipsy, the king calls for Vashti to be brought and put on display. The syntactical link between Xerxes’ command and his lightheadedness (lit., “when [his] heart was good”) shows that the author views the behavior as not fully rational.⁹ The king sends seven eunuchs to bring the queen and display her beauty to his guests. The eunuchs are listed by name, as are the seven princes of Persia and Media in 1:14 and Haman’s ten sons in 9:7–9. The author shows a predilection for lists of Persian names. Such listings are probably an attempt to give the narrative historical verisimilitude, to convey the impression that the narrator has the historical

8. Lit., “who saw the king’s face.”

9. As observed in Est. Rab. V 1, where the rabbis expound at length on the evils of drunkenness.

details well in hand. In fact, however, they prove only that the author knew some Persian names, and we cannot even be sure that they are all genuine Persian.¹⁰ Still, the names do give the story some local color.

The eunuchs are more than mere messengers. One would not need seven servants merely to carry a simple message. Also, the repeated description of the message as “conveyed by the eunuchs” (1:12, 15) suggests that the particular mode of conveyance is significant. The command to Vashti to wear the royal crown also adds to the solemnity and pomposity of the invitation. The affair seems to be formalized, with some significance as a state ritual, but this significance is lost to us. Perhaps, however, it is a phony ritual created for the nonce, to show that in this court, everything, even an invitation to the queen, is thick with pomp and circumstance.

“Peoples” here, set in contradistinction to “princes,” seems to refer to the commoners.

(1:12) Why did Vashti refuse to come at the king’s bidding? Women were not necessarily separated from men at Persian banquets (see Her. IX 110; Neh 2:6); in Her. V 18, Persian ambassadors to Macedonia declare (though perhaps in guile) that Persians are accustomed to invite women to banquets. A later notion did imagine exclusion of women to be Persian custom (Jos. XI 191), and the author of Esther may share this belief, though Dan 5:2 shows that this it was not universal among Jewish writers. Esther chaps. 5 and 7 also have the queen present at a mixed banquet, but that is a small, private gathering. The segregation of the sexes in the banquets of chapter 1 suggests that the author did assume that this was obligatory or proper. If so, Vashti’s motive is clearer. The Vashti episode does not, however, require this assumption. A reluctance to display herself to a gathering of bibulous males, whom the author finds ridiculous, is enough to explain her refusal. I will discuss Vashti’s motives and the author’s evaluation of them in chapter VI.

(1:13–15) Incensed though he is, Xerxes proceeds carefully, assembling his advisers and inquiring in carefully measured terms what should be done “according to law,” which, in this context, means proper, established procedure. His concern for the rule of law is suggested by the highly emphatic positioning of the phrase

10. Some have been identified (see Haupt 1908, Gehman 1924, Duchesne-Guillemin 1953, and the commentaries), but most remain doubtful.

“according to law.” The king too is constrained by Persian law, even in the most private of decisions.

The seven nobles “who saw the king’s face” may be a reminiscence of the seven nobles who were allowed to enter the king’s quarters unannounced (Her. III 84), although once Darius came to power, there were actually only six men with that privilege. The seven nobles may also be reflect the council of seven nobles that Cyrus the Younger summoned (Xenophon, *Anabasis* VI 4 (Cook 1985:234).

Those who know the “times” are probably all-around experts rather than astrologers. A close equivalent of this phrase, *yod^{ey} binah la’ittim*, “those who have [lit., know] understanding with respect to the times,” is used in 1 Chr 12:33 with reference to members of the tribe of Issachar. The context implies their legitimacy, and the Chronicler would not view astrologers in that way.

(1:16) The king had asked, not unreasonably, how the *law* should direct his treatment of Vashti. Memuchan does not base his advice on any existing law but only warns of the consequences of Vashti’s behavior. In actuality, the law will be created ad hoc in 1:19. But lack of an existing law to guide his answer does not keep Memuchan from blundering in and, by a ridiculous overreaction, turning a domestic squabble into an *affaire d’état* and a matter of explicit sexual politics.

Memuchan promptly exacerbates the spat by informing Xerxes that female disobedience shows contempt, in other words, that the king himself is an object of his wife’s contempt and will soon be a national—which means worldwide—laughingstock. Memuchan claims that the issue is no longer one woman’s deed, but the entire web of relationships between husband and wife. As Dommershausen observes, Memuchan speaks in universals: all princes, all [common] people, all women. In Memuchan’s frantic misinterpretation, Vashti’s act signals a universal crisis, a rebellion against the sexual and social order, a violation of the harmony of every home and marriage. As he sees it, female contempt is always lurking just below the surface, waiting to pop up whenever the opportunity arises. And he is right, but only because insecure men like him make it so, for if a man’s “honor” depends on his ability to dominate his wife, then any failure to enforce obedience is tantamount to male disgrace.

(1:17) Hearing that Vashti had the gall to defy the king, other women will dare to treat their own husbands similarly. Their

husbands will seem contemptible because men can now be disobeyed, and as Memuchan sees it, a man who can be disobeyed is contemptible.

(1:18) All the women in the empire will eventually hear about Vashti's deed (v. 17), but, Memuchan thinks, the trouble will start "this very day," for the women at the banquet, who have heard what Vashti said, can be expected to throw the incident in their husbands' faces, and there will be much contempt (on the women's part) and anger (on the men's). (Memuchan predicts, literally, "enough" contempt and anger, apparently a facetious understatement.)

(1:19) This expert in "royal and judicial law" urges the king to forbid Vashti to do precisely what she had refused to do—to come to the king. (The motif of "coming" to the king will appear throughout the book. In translation the verb *bo'* must sometimes be rendered "go.") Dommershausen thinks that the concept of talion ("eye for eye") stands behind this passage: the author counteracts Vashti's "not coming" by making "not coming" her punishment and by balancing the "contempt" that she has engendered by the enforcement of "honor" for husbands. But the author is not straight-faced in the narration of this foolish decision and does not present Vashti's punishment as a worthy realization of a fundamental ethical principle.

In order to counteract the danger presented by *d'bar hammalkah*, "the word of the queen" (v. 17), a *d'bar malkut*, literally, "word of kingship," should be issued (v. 19). Memuchan counsels that Vashti be banished by means of an irrevocable Persian law and that her queenship be given to a "better" woman. By "better" he certainly does not refer to beauty, since Vashti was hardly deficient in that regard. Rather, it is submissiveness alone that constitutes wifely virtue for Memuchan and his fellow wise men. Yet no such virtue will be among the qualities tested for in the search for a bride.

The author uses Vashti's title carefully. Until now she was always "Queen Vashti," the title emphasizing the dignity that would be besmirched by the king's order. Now she is simply "Vashti," for Memuchan has already deposed her in his mind; in 2:1 also she lacks the title, for she is in fact no longer queen. The notion that the Persians and Medes could not repeal their own laws, even ad hoc decrees, is an essential presupposition in the biblical book of Esther. It is found elsewhere only in Daniel (6:8, 12, 15). It is not attested in Persian or Greek sources, and it seems an impossible rule for running an empire.

(1:20) The phrase “and magnificent it is” refers to Xerxes’ kingdom and is incidental courtly flattery.

Memuchan, identifying with all males of all classes, believes that the news of Vashti’s banishment will put a scare into all women, who will then give “honor” to their husbands.

(1:22) The author introduces the great Persian system of communications, a pony express described by Herodotus (VIII 98) as the fastest means of mortal communication. It will later be used in spreading the murderous document (3:13), the countermeasure (8:9–14), and, presumably, the letters establishing the holiday of Purim (9:20, 29). Here it is put to service in the dissemination of inanity.

The decree is not exactly what Memuchan called for, which was declaration of Vashti’s ouster. Instead, the king issues an unenforceable command that every man shall be boss in his own house and shall speak his own people’s language. As R. Huna put it, this decree showed Xerxes to be “completely stupid” (Est. Rab. IV 12).¹¹

The last phrase of Xerxes’ decree seems to reflect the belief that one’s national language is something a man would, or should, *want* to speak (this is the understanding of the older interpreters, for example, Rashi and Ibn Ezra; it is affirmed by Gordis 1976:53). Whether or not other peoples in the Persian empire actually shared that feeling, the phrase is indeed a reflex of a Jewish concern for preserving Hebrew as the Jewish vernacular. Nehemiah was furious with Jews who had intermarried, because half of their children did not know Hebrew, but rather spoke *kilšon ‘am w‘am*, “according to the language of each and every people” (Neh 13:24), that is, of whichever people they were among. (Note the similarity to the phrasing used in Est 1:22; 3:12; and 8:9.) The author of Esther frequently emphasizes that all decrees are issued in every language, as if to say that the Persian empire respected ethnic diversity by maintaining the official status of national languages within the empire.

In Act I we enter a world of crude but cheerful ostentation. The fabled king of Persia shows off his wealth and “honor” (does he distinguish them?) by inviting all the men of Susa to share his

11. After all, as R. Huna reasoned, this decree was entirely unenforceable. “If a man wants to eat lentils and his wife wants to eat beans, can he force her? Surely she does what she likes.”

largess at outrageously long and lavish and somewhat dissolute parties.

The first two scenes, which function as a single dramatic unit (designated “act”), are framed by an ironic *inclusio* playing on the theme of the royal and masculine will: The great emperor, who rules “from India to Nubia, 127 provinces” (v. 1), declares by imperial edict that every man shall be “ruler in his own household,” in other words, have his wife obey him (v. 22),¹² something the king has proved unable to enforce himself. Near the midpoint too is a royal command—a “law” no less—to the butlers “to do as each and every man might wish” (v. 8).

In a period of prosperity and ease, the court is suddenly inflamed by a clash of wills and silly sexual politics. Things start to sour when the emperor, who has his butlers do “as each and every man might wish,” cannot bend his wife to his own wishes and finds himself in a massive—and farcical—dilemma. The king and his nobility are the butt of some rather broad irony. The world-ruler banishes a wife he cannot control, only to take on later a new one who controls him completely. The king is so unsure of his authority that he has a fit when it is defied, and then to prove his strength he allows himself to be manipulated into banishing his beautiful wife. The limpness of the king’s masculine authority sends his noblemen into a tizzy, for they believe that his failure will undermine their own status. These paper patriarchs need a royal decree to back them up in their quarrels with their wives. They, like the king, are desperate for honor, and they think they can achieve it by decree. What the decree actually achieves is to broadcast to the entire empire the very news they thought so threatening.

The opening act does not at first seem relevant to the ensuing drama. In fact, it is striking for the *absence* of the chief characters and anything else that bears directly on the crucial events to come. To be sure, the opening act does set the stage for salvation by clearing the way for Esther to reach a position from which she can influence the course of events. But this bare fact could have been stated in a verse or two, so we must ask what the expansive opening seeks to achieve beyond conveying this information.

First of all, the opening gives the story a universal framework, situating it in world history, in the heart of world politics. This universal scope is true to the diaspora experience, in which Jews are

12. Different words are used for “rule” in vv. 1 and 22.

caught up in the swirl of events of which they are not supposed to be the center and in which their fate is usually incidental to the concerns—often trivial—that drive the great powers.

The opening introduces us specifically to the Persian empire, which has revealed itself from the start to be rife with instability, conspiracy, and conflict. But these conflicts are as yet more puerile than pernicious. Potentate and nobles affirm the rule of law, though the laws they come up with are less than dignified and just. All this is hardly surprising, since the empire is subject to a weak and unsteady despot. Such a king cannot be expected to care about anything besides his own pride and pleasure. Such a world cannot be expected to trouble itself much about a threat to one of its more obscure peoples.

The initial absence of the book's two heroes shows that these particular persons are in a sense not essential to the events to come; others could have filled the same role (Mordecai himself says as much in 4:14). This is a story of a world crisis in which two individuals who happen to be on the scene rise to the occasion. Their initial absence suggests that their ensuing characterization will serve larger purposes.

The opening sets a tone of humor, even farce. The tale does not at the start seem to be of the sort that will report a supreme Jewish national crisis. We encounter a story that spares the time to describe gentile ostentation and folly. As we move into a tale that reports events of utmost gravity, we bring with us the knowledge that not everything and everyone is to be taken with full seriousness. Buffoons rule the empire (if not the domestic roost), and ironies and confusions are rife. As Clines observes, "Without the rather obvious satire of the first chapter we might well be in more doubt over the propriety of ironic readings in the body of the book. Chapter 1 licenses a hermeneutic of suspicion" (p. 33).

In this way, the first act intensifies the impending shock by making the audience lower its guard. Soon our amusement at the display of wealth and the bumptious machismo of the Persian noblemen will clash with, and thus sharpen, our horror, as we see pride, egotism, and royal instability mutate into murderous hatred and sinister schemes against a people absent from the opening act.

For now, however, the world exhibits a certain stability. The first disturbance to the stasis does not seem threatening; it is a phony crisis of little consequence. But in fact it exposes the seeds of danger. It reveals a society easily destabilized. It shows that be-