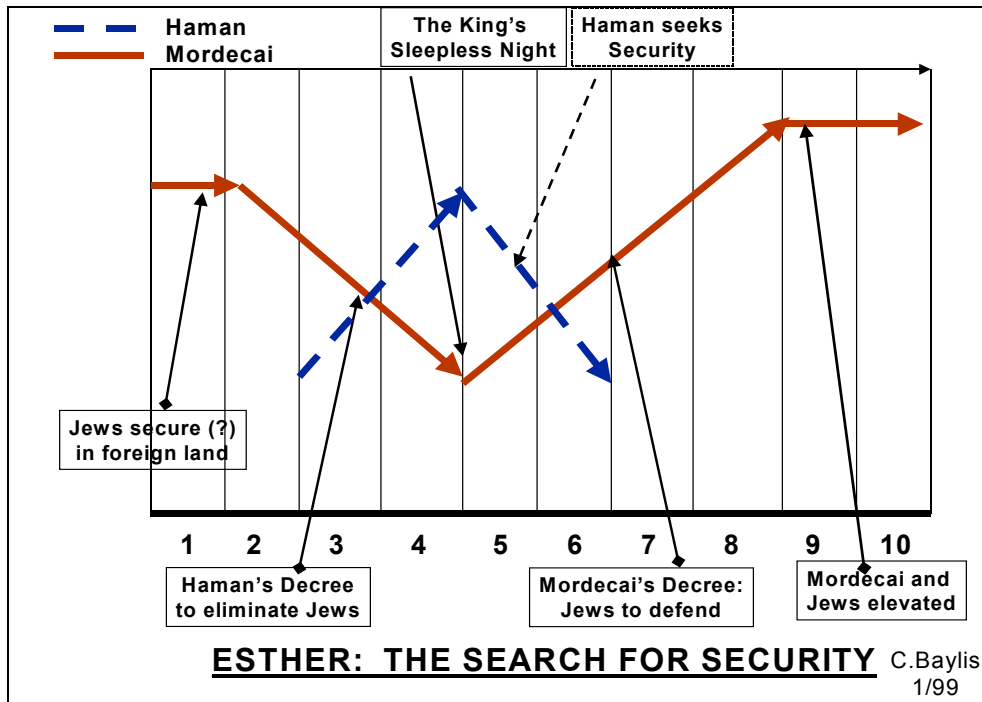
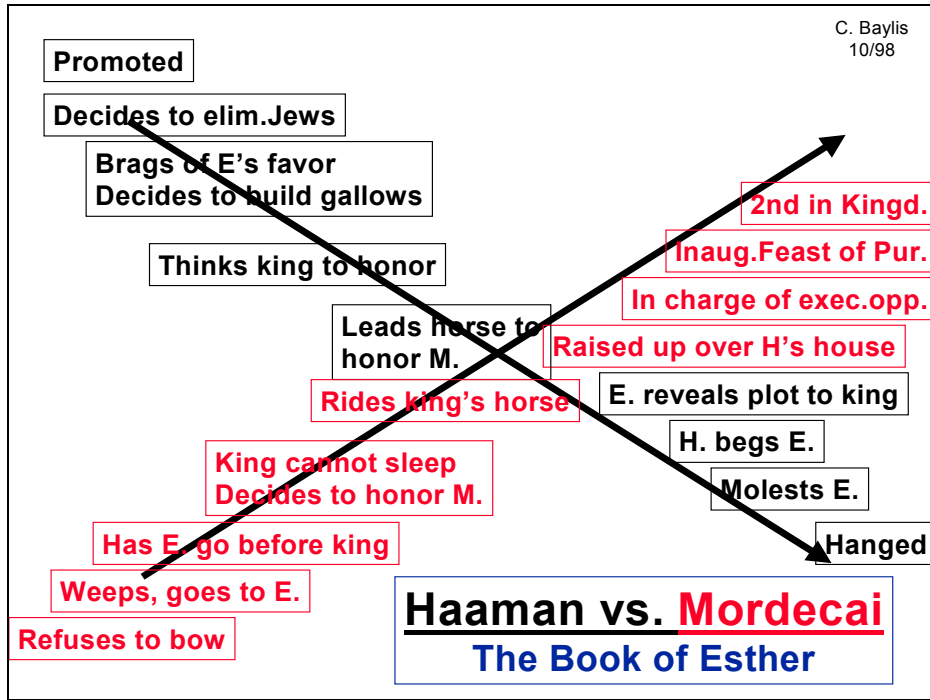


ESTHER



Author and Date

Some hold that Ezra or Nehemiah wrote the book because it contains evidence of an eyewitness account. 10:2,3 seems to indicate that it could have been written during the reign of Artaxerxes (464-424) or late in his father's reign (470-465).

Background

The book takes place in the Persian period (539-331) following a time when many Jews had returned to the land. The book occurs between Ezra 6 and Ezra 7, from 483 BC (1:3) to 473 (3:7). (cf. Martin in the Bible Knowledge Commentary). However, there does not seem to be the slightest hint within the book that these were people who had missed the boat in going back to the land. Neither Ezra nor Nehemiah had returned yet).

Literary Characteristics

The book is almost totally lacking any mention of Godly things, such as the Name of God, the sacrifices, the Law, the Covenants, prayer, etc. The avoidance of it could be said to be intentional, for the nature of its theme is highly spiritual. Further the book is never quoted in the New Testament.

The casting of the lot (3:7) (Lot = Purim). Casting of lot by Haman turns out to establish the feast day.

Recipients

This book has almost no information concerning the readers. It seems possible that the author lived in Palestine and wrote this book to encourage his fellow returnees concerning God's protection of those still in exile. If God could keep the Jews alive and give them success in exile, He would surely make the returnees successful. However, there is no evidence in the book itself which would indicate the initial audience. Thus it becomes necessary literarily to point out that the readership is not important to the understanding of the book (else the author would have included it).

Purpose

Message:

The helpless remnant of Israel is protected and preserved by God through His control of natural events despite the evil plans of mightier men and nations.

Goal

To encourage Jews both in exile and returning to the land that God could preserve them despite overwhelming Gentile opposition and without supernatural 'miracles.'

- I. The situations: Ahasuerus holds the Jews in exile. Mordecai raises Esther. (1:1-2:23).

The first two chapters provide the setting for the main story to take place. These chapters introduce the main characters; Ahasuerus, Esther and Mordecai. These

characters are introduced and given color. Haman, the only other main character will be introduced in chapter 3, but his color will be active, that of a problem maker.

A. Ahasuerus deals with a non-submissive Vashti. (1:1-2:4).

The first character introduced is Ahasuerus. The situation that surrounds Ahasuerus demonstrates how his own foolishness actually results in the fact that God's person, Esther, will be placed in a position of control.

Now in 1:1-9 the reader is given a picture of Ahasuerus as a very rich and powerful man. One could even say that the literature makes the reader feel that he is the most rich and powerful man living on earth at the time. And in fact, he is generous (1:5) and respectful (1:8) of each person's desires.

However, the king (by chance) loses his normal composure of respect for everyone's desires, and compels Vashti the queen to show off her beauty before all the people and the princes (1:10-11).

Of course, Vashti refuses. The reader is not told the reason was, but nevertheless, the king is embarrassed. His pride and dominion are hurt. But this thing gets all blown up, and following the consultation of his elders, the king is persuaded to ban Vashti, otherwise no man in the kingdom will be able to control his wife. (1:11-22).

But now the king realizes he has cut off his nose to spite his face, and remembers his loss of Vashti through decree. (2:1). But the elders again come to his rescue and propose a beauty contest to find a replacement. (2:2-5).

So thus in the first chapter the reader saw the content situation of the King. Because of his irrational behavior, his contented situation has been overturned, and the whole nation becomes involved in order to return him to contentment once more. Because of involving the whole kingdom, the way has been made clear for a Jewess (incognito) to come to a place of power long before the crisis is created which calls for her to rise up.

B. Mordecai raises Esther, sees her chosen as queen. He saves the king. (2:5-23).

Now the next person to be introduced to the situation is Mordecai. Mordecai is pictured here as a responsible Jew. He takes on Esther as his own when she becomes parentless. However, Esther is taken to the king's palace as a potential queen in his beauty contest. Yet Mordecai still watches over her (2:10-11).

Esther is successful in becoming queen, yet Mordecai watches over her and still sits at the king's gate. It is this conscientious attitude that places him precisely in the situation where he can overhear the plot on the king's life. He tells Esther. The men are hanged. The deed is recorded in the king's book (for later).

Now at this point the literary emphasis of these paragraphs must be analyzed. First of all, this section is not about Esther, but Mordecai. The reader learns nothing of Esther's morals, her obedience to anything, her feelings. We see simply that she was taken, that she was beautiful, and that she was successful in pleasing the king and others in many areas. The reader knows not whether she was willing or unwilling to do these things. The reader does by default get the implication that Esther was not a particularly moral woman. Yet the author seems to avoid any statement emphasizing Esther's attitude toward the events

happening to her. It seems the point was that it was not important to the movement of events or the author's purpose. What is important is that Mordecai is conscientious in raising Esther, and reporting a death plot on the king. Esther, at this point, is merely part of the situation. She is not an active personality literarily.

II. Haman raised to power, insulted by Mordecai, seeks to kill the Jews. (3:1-15).

The third section now is revealed. This introduces Haman. But this is not simply an introduction section for now the two main characters come into conflict for the first time. Haman is raised up over all the kingdom, yet Mordecai will not serve him by bowing down.

It appears that the issue here is not whether Mordecai refuses to give respect to a gentile authority. For it seems that Mordecai had respect for the gentile authority when he preserved the king from the death plot on his life. It would more likely be that it was the heritage problem that Haman had which required Mordecai's refusal. Back in 1 Samuel 15:20 Agag was the king of the Amalekites. The Amalekites became a scourge of Israel (Ex. 17:8-16, Dt. 25:17-19). Mordecai would not bow down to an enemy, especially such an enemy of God's people.

Haman, then is a natural Jew hater. And he, rather than just killing Mordecai, reveals that he has a larger vendetta, that of annihilation of the whole race. Thus, since the king takes the advice of those he has appointed (1:13), and gives Haman the control over these Jews to kill them all on an appointed day.

It is clear now that the problem is not a problem of Mordecai, but a problem of God's protection of His people against the people of evil.

III. The solution worked out. (4:1-7:10).

A. Mordecai, through Esther, seeks the king's help. (4:1-17).

Now in chapter 4, Mordecai now seeks to have the king overturn the Amalekite's destruction of the Jews through Esther. However, Esther is not so attuned to the problems of the Jews, but seems to feel that she is not in danger since she is in the palace. Mordecai, who has no compunction about being identified with his people, refuses to quit mourning in front of the king's palace.

Mordecai then instructs Esther to the facts of life. Here is the essence, the pinnacle of the story. For Mordecai declares some sureties. God will protect the Jews, with or without Esther. And the palace will not save her when the Jews are persecuted. Thus she needs to identify herself with the Jews and present herself as available for God's use in working out His sovereign plan. In essence, do not look to Gentile powers for salvation, but God through the promise.

Esther then responds in a way that demonstrates her alignment with God and His plans. It is not an indication that God will preserve the Jews through her, but that she is willing to present herself in God's service even to her death.

B. Esther approaches the king. (5:1-14).

Chapter 5 allows the reader to see more of Haman. Not only is he a Jew hater, but he is a man full of pride. He has not done anything to deserve his position,

yet is proud of his successes. He brags to his wife of how things are really going his way. Human observation of events is not accurate. In fact he goes so far as to pit himself against Mordecai, and prepares to hang him.

C. The king rewards Mordecai. Haman's downfall. (6:10-7:10).

Now during the delay, that Esther has requested, the reader sees God working through circumstances. The king lies sleepless. He, by chance, reviews the Chronicles of the kingdom. Out of all the stories that he might have read, he reads the story of his preserved life through the act of Mordecai.

It is at this time He desires to reward him. Had he rewarded him at the time, it would be forgotten now. But through God's providence the reward was delayed until now.

Of course, the climax of the book is seen as Haman is coming in to request permission to kill Mordecai, and the king's servant is going out to find someone to honor him. They meet and Haman's fame begins to sink, while Mordecai's star begins to rise.

It is also important to recognize that Haman's wife and friends recognize God's hand in the situation (6:13) as they prophesy Haman's doom and the Jew's success. Haman joins the king and Esther. She reveals the plot by Haman to kill her and her people. The king is angry. Haman pleads for his life on Esther's couch. The king misinterprets (circumstances override Haman's sincere acts) Haman's motives and thus Haman is hung on Mordecai's gallows.

IV. The result: Mordecai elevated. The Jews celebrate. (8:1-10:3).

A. Esther and Mordecai issue an edict to save the Jews from their enemies. (8:1-17).

In this chapter all the fortunes that were to befall the Jews are totally reversed. Rather than Haman ruling and Mordecai dead, Esther and Mordecai are set over the house of Haman. In order to reverse the previous annihilation edict, the Jews are allowed to annihilate anyone who comes against them. Thus Esther issues the order that Jews are to defend themselves on the day previously issued as the day of slaughter.

The end is that the Jews rejoice instead of mourn, and many of the people, rather than pitying the Jews, are becoming proselytes (8:17).

B. The Jews annihilate their enemies. Establish the feast of Purim. Mordecai second in command. (9:1-10:3).

Now the final chapters emphasize the feasting and the elevation of the Jews and Mordecai. This is fairly lengthy with respect to the rest of the book. The point is to emphasize the thoroughness and completeness of the Jews reversal of fortunes. Because of evil men and evil plots (especially the king's drunkenness) God had worked the opposite of their desires. The Jews were in control in a pagan land.

Notes

1. Note the occurrence of individuals (minor characters) who influence the major characters simply by being in the right place at the right time. Their advice is not always (though it could be) based on good solid thinking, but it affects the major characters and the activities of the story plot in a major way.

Mehuman (1:14-22)

Mehuman changes history to allow Esther to come to power based on a tenuous philosophy, at best, regarding the rebellion of women in their homes. It is of little concern to the plot, however, as this small individual had his advice followed.

- 16 And in the presence of the king and the princes, Memucan said, "*Queen Vashti has wronged not only the king but also all the princes, and all the peoples who are in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus.*"
- 17 "*For the queen's conduct will become known to all the women causing them to look with contempt on their husbands by saying, 'King Ahasuerus commanded Queen Vashti to be brought in to his presence, but she did not come.'*"
- 18 "*And this day the ladies of Persia and Media who have heard of the queen's conduct will speak in the same way to all the king's princes, and there will be plenty of contempt and anger.*"
- 19 "If it pleases the king, let a royal edict be issued by him and let it be written in the laws of Persia and Media so that it cannot be repealed, that Vashti should come no more into the presence of King Ahasuerus, and let the king give her royal position to another who is more worthy than she.
- 20 "And when the king's edict which he shall make is heard throughout all his kingdom, great as it is, then all women will give honor to their husbands, great and small."
- 21 And *this* word pleased the king and the princes, and the king did as Memucan proposed.
- 22 So he sent letters to all the king's provinces, to each province according to its script and to every people according to their language, *that every man should be the master in his own house* and the one who speaks in the language of his own people.

The King's Attendants (2:2)

In combination with Mehuman's idea is the idea of the king's attendants, who suggest beautiful young virgins be brought. This opens the door for Esther. (Note here that such a large undertaking which goes to the very basis of each household for the sake of the king's fleshly gratification, will be used to thwart this plot which will later occur.)

- 2 Then the king's attendants, who served him, said, "Let beautiful young virgins be sought for the king.
- 3 "And let the king appoint overseers in all the provinces of his kingdom that they may gather every beautiful young virgin to Susa the capital, to the harem, into the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the women; and let their cosmetics be given *them*.
- 4 "Then let the young lady who pleases the king be queen in place of Vashti." And the matter pleased the king, and he did accordingly.

Hegai (in charge of the women) (2:8-11)

Again a minor character in a place of influence is affected enough to place Esther in a good light to prepare the way for her entrance as a person in control.

- 3 "And let the king appoint overseers in all the provinces of his kingdom that they may gather every beautiful young virgin to Susa the capital, to the harem, into the custody of Hegai, the king's eunuch, who was in charge of the women; and let their cosmetics be given *them*.

8 So it came about when the command and decree of the king were heard and many young ladies were gathered to Susa the capital into the custody of Hegai, that Esther was taken to the king's palace into the custody of Hegai, who was in charge of the women.

9 *Now the young lady pleased him and found favor with him. So he quickly provided her with her cosmetics and food, gave her seven choice maids from the king's palace, and transferred her and her maids to the best place in the harem.*

15 Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai who had taken her as his daughter, came to go in to the king, she did not request anything except what Hegai, the king's eunuch who was in charge of the women, advised. And Esther found favor in the eyes of all who saw her.

Bigthan and Teresh (2:21-23)

While not speakers in the plot, these men enter the plot by speaking to each other and change the face of the plot at a later date.

21 In those days, while Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate, Bigthan and Teresh, two of the king's officials from those who guarded the door, became angry and sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.

22 *But the plot became known to Mordecai, and he told Queen Esther, and Esther informed the king in Mordecai's name.*

23 Now when the plot was investigated and found *to be so*, they were both hanged on a gallows; and it was written in the Book of the Chronicles in the king's presence.

All the king's servants who were at the king's gate (3:2-5)

These provide the evidence to Haman concerning Mordecai's insubordination. This directly results in Haman's anger. It was these men who understood that he was a Jew and passed it to Haman, thus insuring Mordecai's affront would not be ignored.

2 And all the king's servants who were at the king's gate bowed down and paid homage to Haman; for so the king had commanded concerning him. But Mordecai neither bowed down nor paid homage.

3 Then the king's servants who were at the king's gate said to Mordecai, *"Why are you transgressing the king's command?"*

4 Now it was when they had spoken daily to him and he would not listen to them, that *they told Haman to see whether Mordecai's reason would stand; for he had told them that he was a Jew.*

Zeresh and all his (Haman's) friends

It is Zeresh and the friends who actually move Haman to make decisions that will later affect him. Not only that but their decisions will provide the maximum irony to Haman's death.

14 Then Zeresh his wife and all his friends said to him, "Have a gallows fifty cubits high made and in the morning ask the king to have Mordecai hanged on it, then go joyfully with the king to the banquet." And the advice pleased Haman, so he had the gallows made.

Hatach (4:4-17)

Hatach appears as a messenger of most importance between Esther and Mordecai. While his importance does not seem to be of critical nature, nevertheless the author notes that this eunuch had been appointed to attend her and thus was available for this very important purpose.

- 5 Then Esther summoned Hathach from the king's eunuchs, whom the king had appointed to attend her, and ordered him *to go* to Mordecai to learn what this *was* and why it *was*.
- 6 So Hathach went out to Mordecai to the city square in front of the king's gate.
- 7 And Mordecai told him all that had happened to him, and the exact amount of money that Haman had promised to pay to the king's treasuries for the destruction of the Jews.
- 8 He also gave him a copy of the text of the edict which had been issued in Susa for their destruction, that he might show Esther and inform her, and to order her to go in to the king to implore his favor and to plead with him for her.
- 9 And Hathach came back and related Mordecai's words to Esther.
- 10 Then Esther spoke to Hathach and ordered him *to reply* to Mordecai:
- 11 "All the king's servants and the people of the king's provinces know that 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. And I have not been summoned to come to the king for these thirty days."

The King's servants who attended him (6:3)

It is these men who are familiar with Mordecai enough to establish that there was nothing done to reward him. Note that they did not say they didn't know. They knew and were aware of this inconsistency. They are also the ones who also identify Haman as being in the outer court.

- 3 And the king said, "What honor or dignity has been bestowed on Mordecai for this?" Then the king's servants who attended him said, "Nothing has been done for him."
- 4 So the king said, "Who is in the court?" Now Haman had just entered the outer court of the king's palace in order to speak to the king about hanging Mordecai on the gallows which he had prepared for him.
- 5 And the king's servants said to him, "Behold, Haman is standing in the court." And the king said, "Let him come in."

Zeresh and all his (Haman's) friends

After having been the ones who put Haman up to his egotistical highest, they are now the first to perceive his doom. It is interesting that they now, not earlier notice that there is an underlying theology going on. This theological pronouncement becomes one of the important statements of the text, that is, that even these pagans recognize the sureness of the Jews (as established elsewhere under the Abrahamic Covenant, "I will bless those who bless thee, and curse those who curse thee.")

- 13 And Haman recounted to Zeresh his wife and all his friends everything that had happened to him. Then his wise men and Zeresh his wife said to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish origin, you will not overcome him, but will surely fall before him."
- 14 While they were still talking with him, the king's eunuchs arrived and hastily brought Haman to the banquet which Esther had prepared.

Harbona (7:9)

Harbonah, a previously eunuch of no notation, steps up at precisely the time and notes that there is a gallows which happens to be doing nothing. (To add to the irony, Haman had made it at his own house.)

- 9 Then Harbonah, one of the eunuchs who *were* before the king said, " Behold indeed, the gallows standing at Haman's house fifty cubits high, which Haman made for Mordecai who spoke good on behalf of the king! "And the king said," Hang him on it. "

10 So they hanged Haman on the gallows which he had prepared for Mordecai, and the king's anger subsided.

Use of the Word "It pleased..."

1:21 And *this* word **pleased** the king

2:4 And the matter **pleased** the king, and he did accordingly.

2:9 Now the young lady **pleased** him and found favor with him.

5:9 Then Haman went out that day glad and **pleased** of heart;

5:14 And the advice **pleased** Haman, so he had the gallows made.

9:5 Thus the Jews struck all their enemies with the sword, killing and destroying; and they did what they **pleased** to those who hated them.

LAYOUT OF BOOK

Scene 1: The setting of Susa (1:1-2)
 The events leading to major tension (1:3--2:23)

Incidental tension #1 developed in the King (1:3--2:18)

The king's decision to have a banquet (1:3-9)

The tension developed and removed in the King (1:10--2:18)

Preface: The king's request and the queen's refusal
(1:10-11)

The tension defined and solution proposed: (1:12-2:4)

The tension removed (2:2-2:18).

Incidental happening: Plot discovered (2:19-23)

Notes: While these events have been occurring in the king's life
two things have occurred incidentally

Esther has become queen

Mordecai (since he was watching Esther) has saved the
king's life.

Scene 2: The Tension

Haman and the tension introduced. (3)

Mordecai & Esther react to the tension (4)

Basis for reaction explained (4)

The setting for the interactions: The two banquets (5--7)

The first banquet and the delay

Haman elevates self

Interaction with Mordecai elevates anger

Interaction with friends excites him to hang Mordecai.

The King's sleepless night

The reward of Mordecai, humiliation of Haman

The conclusion of friends

The second banquet and the conclusion of events

Identification of Esther with people
 Response of Haman for his life.
 Response of Harbonah

Note: Had Esther condemned Haman at the first banquet Mordecai would not have been elevated, Haman would not have made such a fuss over the gallows and Mordecai would not have come so close to death and so close to elevation.

Conclusion Setting:

The expansion of Esther's judgment on Haman expands to the Jews

Listing of results

House of Haman given to Esther
 Mordecai gets signet ring of King
 Mordecai over house of Haman
 Decree saves Jews
 Jews annihilate others

Mockery of results

Feast of Purim (or the Lot) is done as a mockery of Haman's "chance", now the chance of YHWH takes over

Questions of morality

- 1:8 Why does the author make a big deal about the non-forcing of people to drink?
- 1:11 Was it right or wrong for Vashti to turn down the king regarding the display of her beauty. The text avoids any indication. One is not told whether she was simply to walk in front of the men or something more. While the 20th century reader might read something terrible into this recall that the same king had a beauty contest held for his own pleasure in the next chapter. These certainly had to parade in front of him (and perhaps others). So such a chauvinistic item was certainly acceptable unless something else is not told.
- 1:12 Was it right for the king to ask this of Vashti?
- 1:15-22 Was it a legitimate reason, that women would rebel, that the king acted on these suggestions?
- 2:2 Was it right that the king had virgins brought for his own use. The text makes a total avoidance of any physical activities between the young women and himself, yet it is almost unthinkable that a pagan king had legitimate items in mind.
- 2:6 Was it right that these Jews were not back in Jerusalem with the returnees? The text only notes that they were in the exile, not that they had not returned.
- 2:7 Was it right for Esther to go before the king as a Jew regarding Jewish morality? Nothing is said by the text.

2:10 Was it right for Esther, at Mordecai's suggestion to hide her Jewishness?

3:2 Mordecai does not bow to Haman per the king's commands.

Good things

2:5-7 Mordecai takes care of his uncle's daughter.

2:20 Esther is obedient to Mordecai.

2:21-23 Mordecai is obedient to the king.

3:4 Mordecai honors his Jewishness before Haman.

Acts of Coincidence

Esther pleasing the eunuch in charge so that he gives her priority.

Mordecai being in the right place at the right time to hear the plot of Bigthan and Teresh

The king's servants noticing Mordecai and speaking to Haman

The lot is cast in 3:7 for a "chance" day within which Haman had chosen.

Esther's choice of two banquets allows Haman and Mordecai to be brought to pinnacles of life and death.

Haman's control of himself when he saw Mordecai so that he could come up with greater egotistical solutions.

The king's sleepless night

The finding of Bigthan and Teresh's escapade revealed by Mordecai.

The knowing of the attendants that nothing had been done for him.

The perfect timing of Haman's approach into the outer court at the same time the king was looking for someone to honor Mordecai.

The final elevation of Haman (he thought) by the king's not speaking the name of Mordecai before he told him of his attributes.

The timing of the king to return from the garden just when Haman was falling on the couch. Haman's sincere act of request for his life to Esther is voided due to circumstances.

The timing of Harbonah to announce about the gallows, and his little speech regarding the good of Mordecai.

Acts of selfishness

- 2 The king's decision to have Vashti parade
 Vashti's decision to reject the king
 The king's wise man's advice to eject Vashti
 Bigthan and Teresh desire to execute the king

Acts of bravery

Mordecai turning in the plotters

Incidental advice

The king's attendants advice to have a beauty contest.

Acts of recognition of the Abrahamic Covenant

Mordecai refusing to bow to Haman (whose ancestors had cursed the Jews)
 Mordecai's speech to Esther in 4:13
 Esther's speech to Mordecai in 4:16
 The pronouncement of Zeresh and wise men concerning Haman's fate at the hands of Jews.

Evidence of the author's theme of the Abrahamic Covenant

- 2:5 Details of Mordecai's line back to Kish, a Benjamite
- 2:6 Details of the exile under Nebuchadnezzar (justification of curse)
- 2:10 Knowledge that Jews might be uniquely threatened in a pagan land.
- 3:1 Haman identified as an Agagite (1 Sam).
- 3:4 Mordecai in conflict due to his Jewishness (he announces it in this section as a conflict with Haman, not with bowing down in general).
- 3:8 Haman's knowledge that these Jews are different.
- 3:10 Haman repeated as an Agagite.
- 4:14 Mordecai's (and the author's seeming agreement) that Jew's will be delivered (and it is so).
- 4:14 Esther's seeming agreement with this as she includes herself with the Jews (not just Mordecai).
- 8:17 The dread of the Jews (also 9:2,3).
- 8:17 The proselytizing of others to Judaism.
- 9:10,15,16 Perhaps a reference to Deut. 20:10-15).

Points of Irony

Mordecai executes Haman who was in charge of him

The lot that was cast to decide the day of execution becomes the name of the feast on that very day.

The Jews execute those who were going to kill them.

The signet ring given to Haman is given to Mordecai

Haman, who risks nothing, loses. Esther who risks everything wins.

Haman proposes for himself to the king, but is actually proposing for Mordecai.

Haman is hanged on the very gallows he made for Mordecai

Haman is standing in the court to be rewarded with Mordecai's death when he is told to honor Mordecai.

the decree which was to wipe out the Jews is opposed by a decree which wipes out those who come against them.