

The Book of Esther: A Chiastic Peripety

Matthew L. Tinkham, Jr., M.Div.

One of the most fascinating aspects of the book of Esther is its masterful artistry manifest in its unique literary structure. The book of Esther was written in a symmetric pattern called **chiasm** (from the Latin term *chiasmus*, which is derived from the Greek word *χίασμα* [*chiasma*], meaning “crossing” and its verbal cognate *χιάζω* [*chiázō*], meaning “to cross” like the Greek letter *chi* [X]). This type of symmetric literary structure occurs when the words, grammatical-syntactical constructions, and/or conceptual themes of the first section of a given passage are presented in introversion—that is, repeated in reverse order—in the second section. A chiasm can have (1) evenly matched units as in a-b-c || c'-b'-a' (i.e., an *even* chiasm) or (2) evenly matched units with the exception of an unmatched central unit that links together two matching sections as in a-b-c-b'-a' (an *uneven* chiasm). In the former case, the structure emphasizes the conceptual theme(s) within the external units (i.e., a and a'), and, in the latter case, the content of the unmatched central unit is emphasized (i.e., c).¹ The book of Esther was written as an uneven chiasm, having an unmatched central unit (i.e., Esth 6:1–14) that connects the first (i.e., Esth 1:5–5:14) and second (i.e., Esth 7:1–10:3) matching sections of units after the book’s prologue (i.e., Esth 1:1–4). Therefore, the emphasis of the book’s storyline is placed upon the scene recorded in Esth 6:1–14, which serves as its unmatched central unit.

The uneven chiastic structure of the book of Esther is particularly intriguing because it skillfully features the literary phenomenon of **peripety** (from the Greek term *περιπέτεια* [*peripéteia*]), a sudden or unexpected reversal of circumstances/situation in a literary work or a major turning point in a narrative. The first section of the book (i.e., Esth 1:5–5:14) sets the context of the storyline and progressively unfolds Haman’s (an Agagite²) hateful plot to destroy the Jews and particularly Mordecai (a Benjaminite³); from the reader’s perspective, it appears that the fulfillment of this evil plan is certain and inevitable. However, the unmatched central unit of the book (i.e., Esth 6:1–14) serves as an unexpected scene of reversal in the storyline that begins the unraveling of Haman’s plot with the particular turning point being Esth 6:10. By divine providence, King Ahasuerus recalled his neglect to honor Mordecai for his act that resulted in the king’s salvation from an assassination attempt on his life (Esth 6:1–3); he subsequently ordered Haman to bestow public honor upon Mordecai for his faithful service to the king. This key moment of reversal flows into the second section of the book (i.e., Esth 7:1–10:3), which narrates Esther and Mordecai’s counterplot to rescue the Jews from their decreed death sentence in such a way that each subsequent unit unravels in reverse order that of its matching unit in the first section. In the end, a series of complete reversals are manifest: Esther replaced Vashti as queen, Mordecai’s obedience to Esther replace Esther’s obedience to Mordecai, Esther’s certain death because of an unsummoned approach to the throne room was instead life and royal favor for her, Haman honored Mordecai instead of Mordecai honoring Haman, Esther no longer hid her Jewishness, Haman was hung upon the gallows built for Mordecai, Haman’s household were given to Esther and Mordecai, Mordecai replaced Haman as “second in rank” in Medo-Persia, Mordecai’s edict replaced Haman’s edict, the Medo-Persian fear of the Jews replaced the Jewish fear of the Medo-Persians, the Jewish people kill those who sought their genocide, the Jews’ mourning and fasting became joy and feasting, and two feasts of Purim for the Jews are held as foils of the two feasts of King Ahasuerus and Queen Vashti for the Medo-Persians.

Some commentators suggest that the book of Esther has no clear theological purpose because of its lack of the mention of God or anything overtly religious (other than fasting in Esth 4:16). However, embedded within its unique literary form as an uneven chiastic peripety is found the two pervading theological themes of its narrative: (1) *divine providence* present but veiled in human history and (2) *divine reversal* as realized hope. Following a series of seven feasts, Esther’s story depicts a *divine reversal* of evil that resulted in the rescue of God’s people from certain death by *divine providence* orchestrating the seemingly ordinary circumstances of history through imperfect but willing agencies, Esther and Mordecai. “In Esther the idea of reversal as the manifestation or actualization of hope is very important and may even point to the cosmic reversal at the close of the cosmic conflict. ... The great cosmic controversy between Christ and Satan will conclude with a mighty and awesome deliverance of God’s people from certain death and a final destruction of sin and the enemies of God and His people (Rev. 19–22).”⁴

¹ See David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis–Malachi* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 30–32.

² Haman is presented as a descendant of Agag (Esth 3:1), the king of the Amalekites (one of the ancient enemies of Israel [Exod 17:8–16]) who was defeated by King Saul and destroyed by the prophet Samuel (1 Sam 15:1–33).

³ Mordecai is presented as a descendant of King Saul (Esth 2:5–6); his great-grandfather Kish (v. 5) bears the same last name as King Saul’s father (1 Sam 9:1–2). “The conflict between Samaan and Mordecai mirrors the earlier conflict between their ancestors, Saul and Agag” (*The ESV Study Bible* [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008], 856nEsth 3:1).

⁴ A. Rachel Wells, “Esther,” in *Andrews Bible Commentary*, 2 vols., ed. Ángel Manuel Rodríguez (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2020), 1:605.

Structural Outline of the Book of Esther⁵

Prologue: The Wealth and Splendor of the Medo-Persian Empire of King Ahasuerus (i.e., Xerxes I the Great [r. 486–464 BC]) Showcased in the 180-day Feast (1:1–4)

- Feast 1**
- A** 1 Two Feasts of Seven Days in Susa (1:5–9)
a King Ahasuerus’s Feast for the Men (1:5–8)
b Queen Vashti’s Feast for the Women (1:9)
2 King Ahasuerus Deposed Queen Vashti (1:10–21)
3 Letters of King Ahasuerus’s Decree Were Sent Throughout the Empire (1:22)
- B** Esther Was Granted the Royal Crown by King Ahasuerus (2:1–18)
- C** 1 King Ahasuerus’s Life Was Saved by Esther and Mordecai (2:19–22)
2 Those Plotting to Kill the King Were Killed (2:23)
- D** 1 Haman’s Plot (3:1–6)
2 Haman’s Request of King Ahasuerus: “‘If it please the king, let it be decreed’” (3:7–9)⁶
3 King Ahasuerus Granted Haman’s Request (3:10–11)
4 Edict Was Written in All Languages, Sealed with the King’s Signet Ring, and Sent by Couriers Hurriedly (3:12–15b)
a “to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, ... women and children” included, “in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods” (3:13)
b “A copy of the document was to be issued as a decree in every province by proclamation to all the peoples to be ready for that day.” (3:14)
c “The couriers went out hurriedly by order of the king, and the decree was issued in Susa the citadel.” (3:15a–b)
5 Response to Edict (3:15b–4:3)
a King Ahasuerus and Haman Drank (3:15c)
b “the city of Susa was thrown into confusion” (3:15d)
c Mordecai Dressed in Sackcloth and Ashes (4:1–2)
d The Jews Mourned (4:3)
- E** Mordecai and Esther Foiled Haman’s Plot (4:4–17)
- Feast 4**
- F** Esther’s First Feast with King Ahasuerus and Haman (5:1–14)
1 Esther Approached King Ahasuerus (5:1–2)
2 King Ahasuerus’s Inquiry: “‘What is your wish? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.’” (5:3, 5–6)
3 Esther’s Requests: “‘If I have found favor in the sight of the king, and if it please the king ... , let the king and Haman come to the feast that I will prepare for them.’” (5:4, 7–8)
4 Haman Had the Gallows Made to Hang Mordecai (5:9–14)
- G** King Ahasuerus’s Inquiry Concerning Mordecai: “‘What should be done to the man whom the king delights to honor?’” (6:1–6)
- H** Haman’s Response: “‘For the man whom the king delights to honor, let royal robes be brought, which the king has worn, and the horse that the king has ridden, and on whose head a royal crown is set. And let the robes and the horse be handed over to one of the king’s most noble officials. Let them dress the man whom the king delights to honor, and let them lead him on the horse through the square of the city, proclaiming before him: “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the

⁵ Adapted from David A. Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis–Malachi* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 163.

⁶ All quotations of Scripture are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016), unless noted otherwise.

king delights to honor.”” (6:7–9)

I REVERSAL: “Then the king said, to Haman, ‘Hurry; take the robes and the horse, as you have said, and do so to Mordecai the Jew, who sits at the king’s gate. Leave out nothing that you have mentioned.” (6:10)

H’ Haman’s Shame: “So Haman took the robes and the horse, and he dressed Mordecai and led him through the square of the city, proclaiming before him, ‘Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.” (6:11)

G’ King Ahasuerus’s Honoring of Mordecai: “Thus shall it be done to the man whom the king delights to honor.” (6:11d–14)

Feast 5

F’ Esther’s Second Feast with King Ahasuerus and Haman (7:1–10)

1 King Ahasuerus and Haman Approach Esther (7:1)

2 King Ahasuerus Inquired, “What is your wish ... ? It shall be granted you. And what is your request? Even to the half of my kingdom, it shall be fulfilled.” (7:2)

3 Esther Requested, “If I have found favor in your sight, O king, and if it please the king, let my life be granted me for my wish, and my people for my request.” (7:3–4)

4 Haman Was Hung on the Gallows Made for Mordecai (7:5–10)

E’ Mordecai and Esther Were Given Haman’s Estate (8:1–2)

D’ 1 Haman’s Plot Was Averted (8:3–4)

2 Esther’s Request of King Ahasuerus: “If it please the king, ... let and order be written” (8:5–6)

3 King Ahasuerus Granted Esther’s Request (8:7–8)

4 Edict Was Written in All Languages, Sealed with the King’s Signet Ring, and Sent by Couriers Hurriedly (8:9–14)

a “to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate any armed force of any people or province that might attack them, women and children included, and to plunder their goods, on one day ... the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar” (8:11–12)

b “A copy of what was written was to be issued as a decree in every province, being publicly displayed to all peoples, and the Jews were to be ready on that day.” (8:13)

c “So the couriers ... rode out hurriedly, urged by the king’s command. And the decree was issued in Susa the citadel.” (8:14)

5 Response to Edict (8:15–17)

a The Jews Feasted (8:17a)

b “the city of Susa shouted and rejoiced” (8:15b)

c Mordecai Dressed in Royal Robes and with a Golden Crown (8:15a)

d The Jews Had Gladness and Joy (8:17)

C’ 1 The Jews’ Lives Were Saved by Esther and Mordecai (9:1)

2 Those Plotting to Kill the Jews Were Killed (9:2–10)

B’ Esther Was Granted a Request by King Ahasuerus (9:11–14)

Feasts 6 & 7

A’ 1 Two Feasts of Purim (9:15–19)

a The Fourteenth Day of Adar for the Jews in the Villages and Towns (9:16–17, 19)

b The Fifteenth Day of Adar for the Jews in Susa (9:15, 18; cf. 1–10)

2 King Ahasuerus Promoted Mordecai (10:1–3)

3 Letters Commanding Observance of Purim Were Sent Throughout the Empire (9:20–32)