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CHARACTERIZING ESTHER FROM THE OUTSET: THE  
CONTRIBUTION OF THE STORY IN ESTHER 2:1–20

## CHARACTERIZING ESTHER FROM THE OUTSET: THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE STORY IN ESTHER 2:1–20

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

The main plot of Esther begins in Chapter 3, with the description of Haman's decree and the developments that follow. The first two chapters serve as extended expositions, introducing the main characters of the story. Chapter 1 introduces King Ahasuerus while Chapter 2 introduces Mordecai and Esther.<sup>1</sup>

Scholars have written extensively on the character of Esther, her development over the course of the story, and the changes that she undergoes. However, their focus has been concentrated mainly on the transformation that takes place in chapters 4–7.<sup>2</sup> Less attention has been paid to her character as described in the first part of the book. This article focuses on Esther's character as portrayed in 2:1–20.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the first two chapters as an exposition of the rest of the narrative, see, e.g., C. V. Dorothy, *The Books of Esther, Structure, Genre and Textual Integrity* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Pr., 1997) 231.

<sup>2</sup> See, e.g., B. W. Jones, "Two Misconceptions About the Book of Esther", *CBQ* 39 (1977) 172–177; M. V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Pr., 1991) 196–211; K. M. Craig, *Reading Esther, A Case for the Literary Carnavalesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Pr., 1995) 94–99; J. A. Berman, "Hadassab bat Abibai: The Evolution from Object to Subject in the Character of Esther", *JBL* 120 (2001) 647–669. For a comprehensive review of the various scholarly positions concerning the character of Esther, see L. Day, *Three Faces of a Queen, Characterization in the Books of Esther* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Pr., 1995) 11–15.

<sup>3</sup> This article addresses only MT Esther. For a comparison between the MT of chapter 2 and the Greek translations, see e.g. K. De Troyer, "An Oriental Beauty Parlour: An Analysis of Esther 2.8–18 in the Hebrew, the Septuagint and the Second Greek Text", *A Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna* (ed. A. Brener) (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Pr., 1995) 47–70; H. Kahana, *Esther, Juxtaposition of the Septuagint Translation with the Hebrew Text* (Dudley, MA : Peeters, 2005) 65–125.

Chapter 2 records the suggestion of the king’s advisors, the many young women who gather in Shushan (Susa), the treatment that they are given, and the selection of Esther as queen at Ahasuerus’s side. The purpose of this article is to address four important interpretative issues concerning this chapter:

- a) Who is the main character in the chapter: Ahasuerus, Mordecai, or Esther?
- b) How does the author shape Esther’s character in the chapter?
- c) What is the general theme of the chapter and its purpose, within the overall framework of the aims of the book?
- d) In what way do the lengthy descriptions of the maidens gathering at the palace of King Ahasuerus contribute to the general message of the chapter?

The present discussion will include an analysis of the boundaries of the chapter, its structure, analogies, key words, and other literary devices.

## 2. ESTHER 2: STRUCTURE

Chapter 2 contains a literary unit marked off from the preceding and the following units within the book by the fixed opening formula (“after these things”) in 2:1 and 3:1.<sup>4</sup> This unit contains two narratives: (a) the primary story in vv 1–20, which deals with the coronation of Esther, and (b) the

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<sup>4</sup> A similar demarcation of the story is presented by Fox, *Character*, 26; Dorothy, *Esther*, 235; and A. Berlin, *Esther* (The JPS Bible Commentary; Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001) 21. However, this view is not universally accepted. L. B. Paton, *Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther* (ICC 22; Edinburgh: Clark, 1908) 186, was one of the first to regard vv. 19–23 as an independent unit. Similarly, R. Gordis, “Studies in the Esther Narrative,” *JBL* 95 (1976) 47–48 elaborates on the connection between vv. 19–20 and v. 21 onwards. Many other scholars have demarcated the stories as follows: first story – vv. 1–18; second story – vv. 19–23. See C. A. Moore, *Esther, Introduction, Translation and Notes* (AB, 21; New York: Doubleday, 1971) 15, 29; D. J. A. Clines, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 284, 291. F. W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (WBC, 9; Dallas: Word Books, 1996) 360, 371; Bush (359–360) divides the unit comprising vv. 1–18 into three parts: 1–4, 5–11, 12–18, and lists the many stylistic links between them. I believe that the direct parallel structure proposed below, according to which vv. 19–20 parallel vv. 10–11, helps to connect vv. 19–20 with vv. 1–18. To my view the link that the above commentators propose, between vv. 19–20 and vv. 21–23, should also be rejected; see note 5 (below) for the considerations for regarding vv. 21–23 as an independent story. A different approach is adopted by L. M. Day, *Esther* (AOTC; Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005) 43. To her view, the story of Vashti’s refusal ends at 2:4, and the story of Esther’s coronation begins at 2:5. In an earlier study (see Day, *Faces*, 30), Day proposes that the story includes only vv. 7–20. J. D. Levenson, *Esther, A Commentary* (OTL 21; London: SCM, 1997) unites the first two chapters of the Book under a single heading: “A New Queen Is Chosen”.

brief story of the treason committed by Bigtan and Teresh in vv. 21–23.<sup>5</sup> As per its title, this article deals with the coronation story only.

In many cases the structure of a narrative helps to define the main character and the central idea of the chapter.<sup>6</sup> Chapter 2 of Esther is a good example, because the structure of the chapter is of great assistance in clarifying some of the questions posed at the outset. The structure follows an a–b–c—a’–b’–c’ pattern.<sup>7</sup>

a	1–4	Advice of the attendants to bring maidens for the king “and let <i>their ointments</i> be given them”
b	8–9	<i>Esther</i> in the custody of Hegay “[ <i>Esther</i> ] was brought to the king’s house... and the girl obtained favor in his sight”
c	10–11	<i>Esther</i> and Mordecai “ <i>Esther</i> had not made known her people or her descent... Mordecai went about...”
a’	12–14	<i>Esther</i> and the other maidens—implementation of the suggestion
b’	16–18	<i>Esther</i> before Ahasuerus “And <i>Esther</i> was taken to King Ahasuerus... and she obtained grace and favor in his sight”
c’	19–20	<i>Esther</i> and Mordecai “Mordecai was sitting... <i>Esther</i> did not make known her descent or her people

Lines a–a’ present the advice of the king’s attendants and servants that maidens be brought before the king so that he can choose a new queen, (and the implementation of this suggestion). The stylistic element that serves to connect these two lines is the description of the ointments.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The secondary story is an independent narrative with a new introduction: “In those days”; it features new characters – Bigtan and Teresh, and it contains an independent plot. This is a preliminary story necessary for the plot that will develop later on, in Chapter 6. See, for example, T. S. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther* (Atlanta: Scholars Pr., 1998) 61.

<sup>6</sup> Concerning the importance of the structure of a biblical narrative, see e.g. F. Polak, *Biblical Narrative - Aspects of Art and Design* (Heb.; Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1994) 214–227.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of direct parallel in a biblical narrative, see e.g. Polak, *Narrative*, 221–227; S. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1989) 103–109. Mention should also be made of Moore, who argues that this chapter is built on a chiasmic parallel. However, he includes only vv. 10–20, while ignoring the first part of the chapter. See Moore, *Esther*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Verses 5–7 are a later exposition, presenting the new characters—Mordecai and Esther—as a “flashback”; for this reason they are not included in the structure of the chapter. See Moore, *Esther*, 19; Clines, *Esther*, 284; Fox, *Character*, 28; Bush, *Esther*, 359–360. Concerning the later exposition in a biblical narrative, see, e.g., Bar-efrat, *Narrative*, 117–120; R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*

Lines b–b' present Esther as being taken, at the first stage to the women's house and then in a second stage to the king's house. In both units Esther is placed opposite Hegay, and at both stages she finds favor in the eyes of her beholders: first Hegay, the keeper of the women, and then the king himself.

Lines c–c' concern Mordecai's instruction to Esther not to reveal her people or her descent. Here, too, there is a strong stylistic connection between the two lines.

The stylistic parallels between the structural lines show that the chapter is carefully shaped. I believe that the chosen structure is also designed to demonstrate the centrality of Esther in Chapter 2. Esther is onstage throughout the chapter,<sup>9</sup> while all the other characters surrounding her—including Mordecai and Ahasuerus—are secondary figures that appear only for the purposes of illuminating her character.<sup>10</sup> This chapter serves to present Esther to the readers. But how is she characterized?

The existing research offers a range of different approaches to understanding Esther's character. Jones asserts that in this chapter, Esther "appears stupid... either dumb or at least helpless"<sup>11</sup>. Day argues that Esther is a sophisticated, scheming character who pulls the right strings to achieve the royal status that she seeks.<sup>12</sup> Fox adopts an approach somewhere in between these extremes, viewing Esther as a passive character who is subservient to Mordecai.<sup>13</sup> The view position advanced here does not match any of these readings of the character of Esther. This view is based on an analysis of her character from three different perspectives: (a) her status prior to her meeting with the king; (b) her status following her meeting with the king; and (c) a literary comparison between her and Ahasuerus.

### 3. ESTHER PRIOR TO THE MEETING WITH THE KING

Some initial details concerning the "girl" are provided by the last part of the background (vv. 5–7).<sup>14</sup> The first two verses of the background concern Mordecai.<sup>15</sup> The third verse addresses Esther, and follows a chiasmic structure:<sup>16</sup>

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(Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981) 80–81; Polak, *Narrative*, 116.

<sup>9</sup> Except for limb a, which precedes her appearance. Clearly, lines b, c, b', c' focus on a description of Esther. Below we shall demonstrate that limb a' (11–15) also centers on her, with the description in these verses of the maidens who come to the king being secondary to the description of Esther.

<sup>10</sup> Concerning the role of secondary characters in the biblical narrative, see e.g. Polak, *Narrative*, 255–262; Bar Efrat, *Narrative*, 86–88; U. Simon, *Reading Prophetic Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Pr., 1997) 263–269.

<sup>11</sup> See Jones, "Misconceptions", 175–176.

<sup>12</sup> See Day, *Esther*, 48–49.

<sup>13</sup> See Fox, *Character*, 197–199. See also Berman, "Evolution", 649.

<sup>14</sup> Concerning the later background, see above, n. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Day, *Esther*, 44, argues that although Mordecai is presented before Esther,

- a. He brought up Hadassa
- b. for she had no father or mother
- c. and the girl was fair and beautiful
- b. and since her father and mother had died
- a. Mordecai took her as his own daughter

The first and final lines of this section tell the reader that Esther is an orphaned girl, and that she is Mordecai's cousin. Mordecai has adopted this orphan<sup>17</sup> with a view to raising her up and educating her.<sup>18</sup>

At the centre of this chiasmic structure, there is a bodily description of Esther. She is fair and beautiful (7). Here it should be noted that Vashti, too, is described as "beautiful" (1:11), and therefore the king's attendants propose to bring "beautiful virgin maidens" before the king (2).

The presentation of Esther as "fair" (יפת תאר) as well as "beautiful" (טובת מראה) anticipates the future selection of Esther as queen in place of Vashti,<sup>19</sup> because of the fates of other biblical characters who are described in similar terms. Rachel, "fair and of fair appearance" (Gen 29:17), is selected by Jacob. Joseph, who is similarly "fair and of fair appearance" (Gen 39:6), is desired by Potiphar's wife. Abigail, who is "fair" (1 Sam 25:3)

Esther is the main character of the chapter. For the opposite view, maintaining that it is Mordecai who is at the center of the story, see Fox, *Character*, 30.

<sup>16</sup> See Day, *Esther*, 47.

<sup>17</sup> This is the only place in the Bible where we find a description of the adoption of a girl. The Talmudic sages (Meg 13a) teach that Mordecai took Esther as a wife, and the verse is interpreted in this way in the Septuagint (LXX) too. Concerning the Midrash and the Septuagint, see M. Zipor, "When Midrash met Septuagint: the Case of Esther 2, 7", *ZAW* 118 (2006) 89–92. Support may be found for the view that Esther was Mordecai's wife from the language of v. 7 – "Mordecai **took** her as his own...". Many times in the Bible, "taking" is done for the purposes of marriage. See, for example, Gen 24:44; Deut 25:7. On the other hand, this is difficult to accept in view of the fact that the king is looking for "virgin maidens" (2). Likewise, the text states explicitly that she was taken as a "daughter". Later on, too (v. 20), the text compares Esther's new situation with her previous one, using a formulation that is more appropriate to adoption: "as when she was in his custody". See Moore, *Esther*, 21. Clines, *Esther*, 287, and Bush, *Esther*, 364, also maintain that Esther was adopted as a daughter. It may be possible to combine these two views: the verb "*l-k-b*", mentioned above as support for the view of the Talmudic sages, is a key word that appears four times in our chapter. Twice it refers to Mordecai taking (vv. 7, 15), and twice it is Ahasuerus who takes (vv. 8, 16) – and in his case Esther is certainly taken as a wife. Perhaps the analogy between Mordecai taking and Esther being taken hints that Mordecai did indeed adopt the girl, but with a view to marrying her in the future, as practiced in ancient Persia; see Bush, *Esther*, 364. See also Ibn-Ezra on v. 7. Day, *Esther*, 53, uses the key word "*l-k-b*" as the basis for deducing Esther's passivity.

<sup>18</sup> "He brought up (אמן את) Hadassa" (7); cf. Moses' relationship with Israel: "as a nursemaid (*omen*) carries the infant" (Num 11:12), and Naomi's relationship with Ruth's son: "And she became his nursemaid (*omenet*)" (Ruth 4:16).

<sup>19</sup> Jones, "Misconceptions", 173–174 points to the word *tov* (good) as a key word in the first chapters of Esther. See also Bush, *Esther*, 367; Laniak, *Shame*, 62–63.

is chosen by David. Esther is characterized in a way reminiscent of these personages, and such a characterization hints already at Esther's selection by Ahasuerus.

Aside from her family situation and outer appearance, the text provides no other explicit details about Esther. Her inner characterization must be sought within the body of the narrative. As it will be shown, the text construes Esther as not only being physically beautiful, but also as possessing a pleasant nature and qualities that impress all those who encounter her. The text conveys this message through the use of the unique expression, "she obtained grace and favour."<sup>20</sup> To illustrate, in v 9 it reads "The girl pleased him and she obtained his favour;" in v 15, "And Esther obtained grace in the eyes of all who beheld her;" and in v 17, "And she obtained grace and favor from him, more than all the other maidens."

Esther's character is revealed to the readers through the eyes of the literary personages surrounding her.<sup>21</sup> Everyone who comes into contact with her is charmed --starting with Hegay, the keeper of the women, who handles thousands of young maidens yet pays extra attention to this special girl (v 9). Whoever sees Esther is impressed by her special character (v 15). Finally, the king himself—who spends every night with a different girl – finds that his attention is drawn only to her (v 17).

It should be noted that, according to the original plan, "the girl who *pleases* the king shall reign in place of Vashti" (v 4). However, as the text describes the implementation of the plan, it notes that "the king loved Esther more than all the women... and he made her queen in place of Vashti" (v 17). In other words, the king favours Esther not only because of her external beauty, but because she captures his heart completely. What is the secret of Esther's magic? In what way is she different from all of the other maidens, and worthy of being selected by Ahasuerus?

The narrator shapes Esther's character through contrast to all of the other maidens by means of two secondary descriptive sentences that precede the description of Esther herself. Every maiden who is brought to Shushan undergoes a two-stage preparation. The first stage is described in vv. 8–9, and involves being accepted into the "house of the women" by Hegay, the keeper of the women. The second stage, described in vv. 12–15, concerns the encounter with the king.<sup>22</sup> The text describes in both instances the procedure followed by the other girls before turning to Esther.

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<sup>20</sup> The expression "obtain favor" occurs only in Esther (2:15, 17; 5:2). The more common expression used in the Bible is "find favor" (some forty appearances), and in every instance the reference is to inner refinement rather than outer beauty. For example, "Noah found favor in the eyes of God" (Gen 6:8); "And now, if then I have found favor in Your eyes, I pray You – make Your ways known to me, that I may know You, in order that I may find favor in Your eyes" (Exod 3:13), and many others. The combination "to grant favor" (six times in the Bible) likewise refers to inner refinement rather than outer beauty.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. U. Simon, "Minor Characters in Biblical Narrative;" *JSOT* 15 (1990) 11–19.

<sup>22</sup> Attention should also be paid to a third stage. Following this first, single

The first stage is reported in an unusual way. The verse opens with a lengthy secondary clause – “And it was, when the king’s command and his decree *were heard*, and when many maidens *were gathered* to Shushan, the capital” (v 8). This clause serves as an introduction to the main clause, namely “that Esther *was taken* to the king’s house...”. This structure, with the secondary clause preceding the primary one, encourages the reader to compare them. Esther is not “gathered”, together with all the other women; rather, she is “taken”.<sup>23</sup> Is this not perhaps an allusion to a strong inner character, inner grace that equals her outer beauty? All the maidens in the kingdom are surely standing in line, hoping for the chance to be chosen as Ahasuerus’s queen. Only Esther is “taken” against her will, to the women’s house. It would seem that her modesty and inner charm are what drew the special attention of Hegay (“[a]nd the girl pleased him and she obtained favor from him, and he speedily provided her ointments and her appointed rations... and he advanced her and her maids to the best place in the women’s house.”)

The comparison between Esther and the other women is even more prominent in the second stage of the description, where they visit the king’s house. Verses 12–14 describe at length the preparations undertaken by each maiden in anticipation of her encounter with the king. Scholars have advanced various explanations of the reasons for which the narrator provided such detail.<sup>24</sup> My proposal is that that these verses represent—

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encounter with the king, the girl returns – not to the patronage of Hegay, in the women’s house, but “to another women’s house, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king’s chamberlain, keeper of the concubines” (14). In other words, after this single encounter she is demoted from the status of “woman” to the status of “concubine”. It is reasonable to assume that, following her sexual encounter with the king, a woman would never go back to her home; rather, she would remain as a concubine to the king until her death. See Ibn-Ezra on v. 14; Day, *Esther*, 50–51; Berlin, *Esther*, 28. For other suggestions for understanding the word “*sheni*” (“another women’s house”), see Moore, *Esther*, 23–24; Gordis, “Studies”, 53–54.

<sup>23</sup> “And Esther was taken?—against her will, and contrary to her benefit, as it is written concerning our matriarch Sarah (Gen 12:15), And the woman was taken to Pharaoh’s house – against her will and contrary to her benefit” (Aggadath Esther, par. 2, 8). See also Tg Esth I: ואידברת אסתר באונסא and Bush, *Esther*, 367–368. It should be noted that many scholars maintain that Esther went willingly to the palace. See: Paton, *Esther*, 173; Moore, *Esther*, 21; Clines, *Esther*, 288; Fox, *Character*, 33–34; Levenson, *Esther*, 60.

<sup>24</sup> To Clines’ view (Clines, *Esther*, 284), the purpose of these verses is to show the level of luxury and extravagance that characterize the palace, following on from the description in chapter 1, 6–8. Jones, “Misconceptions”, maintains that the text is poking fun at the empty vanity of the gentiles. Bush, *Esther*, 368, too, asserts that the aim is a satirical parody of Ahasuerus’s kingdom. Berlin, *Esther*, 27, suggests that the point in listing all of these preparations is to emphasize Esther’s natural beauty, requiring none of this excessive pampering. Fox, *Character*, 35 and Craig, *Reading*, 93–94 understand these verses as being meant to convey the absolute commitment to satisfying the king. Day, *Esther*, 59 maintains that the intention here is to paint a picture of a society that places its emphasis on outer beauty. See also De Troyer, “Oriental”, 54–55, who concludes from this description that the

incidentally, once again, a long secondary clause that precedes the main clause – Esther’s own preparations for her encounter with the king.

The two descriptions are introduced in the identical manner: Verse 12 reads, “And when the turn of each girl came to come to King Ahasuerus.” Verse 15 reads, “And when the turn of Esther... came to come to the king.” However, from this point onwards the description of the other girls is altogether different from the description of Esther. The text elaborates at great length in the description of the intensive preparations undertaken by each maiden in preparation for her meeting with the king:

After she spent twelve months under the regulations for the women – for thus were spent the days of their anointing: six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with perfumes and with other ointments of the women (12).

Likewise, the text notes that on the big day—the day of the visit to the king—each girl is entitled request whatever she wishes:

This is how the girl would come to the king: whatever she specified would be given to her, to take with her from the women’s house to the house of the king (13).

The preparations for each girl’s fateful meeting with the king appear in a subordinate clause that precedes and highlights, through contrast, the description of Esther’s preparations:

And when the turn of Esther... came, she asked for nothing but what Hegay, the king’s chamberlain, specified (15).

Esther’s behaviour is sharply contrasted with that of the other women who visit the king. Unlike the other girls, the modest and gracious Esther refrains from exploiting the unlimited options open to her by virtue of her status as a candidate for royalty. She remains modest and humble. As a result:

Esther obtained favor in the eyes of all who beheld her (15).

And the king loved Esther more than all the women, and she obtained grace and favor in his sight more than all the virgins, and he placed the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti (17).<sup>25</sup>

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chapter was written from a male perspective.

<sup>25</sup> Many different explanations have been offered for Esther’s behaviour in general and her refusal to request anything. For instance, Paton rejects the possibility that the text is commenting on Esther’s modesty, insisting that it was wise of Esther to rely on Hegay’s suggestions, as an expert on the king’s taste in women, rather than on her personal preferences (Paton, *Esther*, 182). This view is supported by Moore, *Esther*, 24, 27; De Troyer, “Oriental”, 54; and Levinson, *Esther*, 62. To Berlin’s view (Berlin, *Esther*, 28), the contrast between the other maidens and Esther is meant to emphasize the natural beauty of the latter, as

In summary, the comparison between Esther and the other women serves to illuminate Esther in a strongly approving light. Her positive personality finds expression both in the fact that she is taken against her will to the women's house, and in the fact that she remains modest, rejecting the opportunity—seized by the other candidates—of taking advantage of her status.<sup>26</sup>

### ESTHER'S CHARACTER FOLLOWING THE MEETING WITH THE KING

Will Esther retain her inner beauty, or gradually lose it to the blandishments of power? After all, there are certainly many precedents for such moral deterioration. Another look at the structure of the chapter, as set out above, serves to answer this question. The direct parallel structure creates a connection between three pairs of lines. The first two reflect development and dynamism in the plot:

Lines a–a' describe the advice of the king's attendants to bring maidens to the king, and the implementation of this suggestion, with the gathering of the girls to the capital. Lines b–b' depict two stages that Esther undergoes: first the arrival at the women's house and then the arrival at the king's house. The third pair, c–c' differs from the other two: instead of development, the same identical fact is re-stated.

Esther had not made known her people or her descent, for Mordecai has commanded her not to make it known (10)

Esther did not make known her descent or her people, as Mordecai has commanded her" (20)<sup>27</sup>

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opposed to the artificial façade of the former. Day, *Esther*, 54 accepts both explanations and offers a third: lack of imagination. Esther simply has no idea as to what aids she could use. Fox, *Character*, 37, likewise perceives Esther's behaviour as arising from her passive personality. Obviously, these views are the opposite of the approach set forth above, since they assume that Esther is trying her wily best to find favour in the king's eyes. According to Clines, *Esther*, 290, Esther requests nothing because of her pride as a Jewess and her unwillingness to allow gentiles to help her.

<sup>26</sup> Paton, *Esther*, 182, notes that the purpose of tracing Esther's family, in v. 15 – "Esther, daughter of Abihail, uncle of Mordecai" – is to underline the distinction between the nameless women described in the previous verses, and Esther.

<sup>27</sup> The text does not elaborate as to why Mordecai told Esther not to disclose her national and ethnic identity, and many different opinions have been offered in response to this question. Some scholars maintain that Mordecai was concerned about anti-semitic sentiment in the royal palace; see Clines, *Esther*, 288; Fox, *Character*, 32; Bush, *Esther*, 368. To Day's view (Day, *Esther*, 58) what worried Mordecai was a lack of knowledge as to how to behave in the royal palace.

To address the question adequately, we must add a further question: how is it that Mordecai did not hesitate to reveal his own origins: "For he had told them that he was a Jew" (4:4)? I propose here a brief outline of a possible answer which, I believe, has not been considered to date. It is possible that Mordecai learned a

What purpose does this repetition serve? By comparing the innocent girl who enters the king's palace with the woman who has already been chosen as queen and now occupies the royal throne, the text communicates that that Esther *does not change*. The great honour that she commands as queen, alongside Ahasuerus, in no way changes her character. She remains loyal and obedient just as she had been while under the direct guardianship of Mordecai. The text emphasizes this especially at the end of v. 20: "And Esther performed Mordecai's bidding *as she had done while in his care*". From the point of view of Esther's inner character, nothing at all has changed.<sup>28</sup>

It should be noted that the word "bidding" (מִצְוָה) appears only three times in the entire Bible, all of them in the Book of Esther: concerning Vashti we read, "for not performing the bidding of King Ahasuerus" (1:15). Esther, as noted above, "performed the bidding of Mordecai" (20).<sup>29</sup> This inverse analogy shows another aspect of Esther's loyalty and of her stable character.

### ESTHER IN THE PRESENCE OF AHASUERUS

The opening chapters of the Book of Esther introduce the reader to the key characters in the story. Given that literary personages are often

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lesson from the events of Chapter 1, in which the text describes how, for the sins of a single woman (Vashti), all the women of the kingdom are made to suffer (1:20–22). According to this principle, Mordecai is concerned that if Esther's origins become public knowledge, and then at some stage she happens to incur the king's wrath, it is possible that all the Jews will be punished together with her – just as all the women suffered the effects of Vashti falling foul of the king. Therefore, Mordecai instructs Esther not to reveal her Jewish identity. When it comes to himself, on the other hand, Mordecai has no such concerns, since he does not occupy a central, influential position, and a slip on his part will not have an adverse effect on his entire nation. At this point the theme of "it was turned around", which is interwoven throughout the story, becomes manifest: it is reasonable to assume that had Esther revealed her Jewish identity at the outset, Haman would never have dared to propose his decree against her people. On the other hand, had Mordecai not been openly identified as a Jew, Haman would not have sought revenge against the entire Jewish nation, but rather only against Mordecai personally.

<sup>28</sup> Above, I emphasized the fact that this message arises from the general structure of the chapter, creating a clear parallel between Esther prior to the coronation and Esther after the coronation. In this sense Esther is similar to Mordecai, who, following the great honor that he receives from Haman, returns to his regular place at the king's gate: "And Mordecai sat at the king's gate" (6:12). It should be pointed out that further on in the story, in Chapter 4, a more mature Esther is faced with an entirely different sort of challenge: her dilemma is whether to remain modest and passive and abandon her nation to the hands of their adversaries, or to act positively and decisively to save her nation. For a discussion of the development of her character, see above, n. 2. Levinson, *Esther*, 61, regards the purpose of the repetition in vv. 10–11 as indicating Esther's staunch loyalty to her uncle Mordecai.

<sup>29</sup> The third appearance is at the end of the narrative: "And Esther's bidding confirmed these days of Purim" (9:32).

characterized also, even if indirectly, by comparing them or their behaviour to other characters in the story, a comparative exploration of the characterization of King Ahasuerus and Esther is in order.<sup>30</sup>

Ahasuerus, as presented at the beginning of Chapter 1, is a great and powerful ruler. As the chapter continues, however, it becomes apparent that his power is nothing more than an outward façade. At the first hint of crisis, he turns out to be helpless, and is drawn after and in fact controlled by his servants and underlings.<sup>31</sup>

Esther, in contrast, is presented at the start as someone who appears to be obedient and controlled by others. However, her obedience flows from her loyalty and respect for the person who is responsible for her welfare, rather than from weakness or helplessness. To the contrary, an analysis of the chapter shows that Esther is inwardly strong and steadfast. Thus, this aspect of the contrast between Ahasuerus and Esther contributes towards an amplification of her positive character.

Does chapter two make a difference in the characterization of Ahasuerus advanced in chapter one? In Esther 2, he continues to adopt the advice of those who are subservient to him. More importantly, Ahasuerus is presented here as being led by his eyes and taking an interest only in external appearances:

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<sup>30</sup> It should be noted that the presentation of a king vis-à-vis a contrasting character (in our case, a young girl) is a common technique in the Bible; see, for example, Qoh 9:14–15.

<sup>31</sup> Obviously, a separate discussion would be required for a full analysis of Ahasuerus's character in Chapter 1.

Let them gather every virgin maiden *of beautiful appearance* (3)

The maiden who will *be pleasing in the eyes of the king* will rule in place of Vashti (4)

The new queen is going to be chosen on the basis of her external appearance alone. It is for this reason that the text describes in detail the long months during which the external beauty of each girl is painstakingly nurtured, with the help of ointments and perfumes (12–14).

Esther is described as being of “fine form and of beautiful appearance”. Yet, she is chosen, as noted, not by virtue of her external appearance, but rather because of her inner character that captures the hearts of all who encounter her.

By constructing this contrast between these two characters, the author of Esther hints, already at the very outset, that the covert battle for control, to be waged between King Ahasuerus and Queen Esther will ultimately be decided in Esther’s favour.

### SUMMARY

The story of the coronation of Esther (2:1–20) introduces the reader to an exemplary character worthy of emulation. Esther is a young, orphaned girl who is taken against her will from her home and forced to integrate into a foreign, alien world. She stands the test honourably, maintaining her dignity and her modesty at every stage preceding her selection as queen. More importantly, even after she is chosen, her character remains unchanged and she remains faithful to her values and her way. By virtue of the fact that Esther “asked for nothing” (15) at the outset, she receives the right to ask many things from Ahasuerus later on.<sup>32</sup> The description of Esther in Chapter 2 is an appropriate introduction for the character that will ultimately, through her wisdom, come to save her people.

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<sup>32</sup> Verbal forms from the root *בקב* serve as key words in the rest of the narrative: “What is your request (*בקשתך*)? Up to half of the kingdom...” (5:3.6; 7:2), “What I ask and request (5:7)” (*ובקשתי*); “to perform my request (5:8)” (*בקשתי*); “My life at my asking and my people at my request” (5:3) (*בבקשתי*); “What else is your request (*בקשתך*), that it may be done?” (9:12). It is interesting to note that the text ironically states that “Haman stood up to plead (request) *לבקש* to Queen Esther for his life” (7:7).