
THE BOOK OF ESTHER AS LITERATURE?

A New Approach To An Old Story

Wilma McClarty

Ever wonder why the book of Esther is in the Bible? Others have. Martin Luther wished it didn't exist because of what he considered pagan indiscretions. Ancient Jewish teachers questioned whether the reading of it would defile the hands. No allusions to Esther exist in the New Testament. Nor is the book represented in the Dead Sea scrolls. Today's women fault the story because of its chauvinistic attitudes.

And even if all of these objections could be answered, other puzzling ones persist: Why is there no mention of God in it? Of prayer? Why did Esther keep her Jewishness hidden? Daniel surely didn't. Why such a revengeful spirit against Haman's sons? Why did a follower of the true God marry a pagan king in the first place? And most bothersome of all, how about the beauty pageant motif of the queen selection process?

What would you tell a teenager who used Esther as a model for Christian courtship behavior to justify secular relationships, a pagan life-style, or premarital sex?

Wouldn't it be helpful to ask the author of the Esther story the above questions? But since the writer is both dead and unknown, we can't get even secondary hints by comparing other works by the same narrator. Too bad.

However, we may find answers to many of the troublesome questions asked by critical readers of

the Esther saga—those whose interests are deeper than just plot—by treating the Esther story as the masterful piece of literature that it is.

A Literary Approach

With its fascinating *plot*, its psychologically interesting *characters*, its historically based *setting*, its omniscient third-person *point of view*, its craft-conscious *style*, and its provocative *themes* (plus what it does not say)—all have combined to make Esther a recognized short-story masterpiece, the literary analysis of which can clarify the author's purposes. To illustrate, one theme in particular becomes even more evident with a literary analysis: the theme of God's providence and human free choice.

Plot analysis, a logical first step, involves determining structure and development. Tellers of tales—even true ones—must all make choices, even when writing of history. The Esther story with its exposition, followed by inciting force, building action, and then turning point reflects a craft-conscious author. The story begins with all in prosperity, then descends into possible tragic events, and then quickly ascends to a happy finale. Tension is increased and then released. The plot develops in three stages of prelude, struggle, and aftermath, with the ascending action of the story describing how various

hurdles to the deliverance of Esther's people are overcome.

Similarly, as a whole the Bible starts with a God-perfect earth, descends into generations of human-misery, and ends with a brand-new world of complete joy and victory over sin.¹ Hence, even the structure of a well-crafted plot can be thematically significant, symbolizing the ultimate victorious outcome of God's people.

Plot analysis involves determining how the author used such development devices as conflict, dramatic irony, dialogue, and foreshadowing to support the story's theme. The most significant thematic conflict is the one between Haman and Mordecai, which is symbolically more than just personal. It is a feud between a son of Kish and a son of Agag (2:5; 3:1), which is a specific instance of the long rivalry between God's people and the Amalekites (see Exodus 17:16).

Dramatic irony, another plot development device, is used numerous times throughout the story. After Esther reveals her Jewishness and saves her race, she "presents some of the most effective dramatic irony in the Bible."² Haman's hanging on his own gallows is most ironic of all.

The author combines the plot development devices of dialogue and foreshadowing when Haman's wife and wise men prophetically warn him: "If Mordecai be of the seed of the Jews, before whom thou hast begun to fall, thou shalt

not prevail against him, but shalt surely fall before him" (6:13, KJV). This quote makes a thematically significant statement—anyone who contends with a Jew (symbolically, any of God's people) will come to ill.

Characters in stories are labeled as being either flat or round, the round or complex ones being seen as capable of change. In the story Esther herself is the most complex of all. As the narrative unfolds, Esther progresses from Mordecai's manipulated, helpless niece to becoming his mentor. She overshadows both her uncle and Haman in cleverness of plan and execution. From Chapter 4 on, Esther, not the men, is in control, having changed from sex object to gifted sage, an observation that might help answer the question on sexual behavior raised previously.³ In addition, all the characters make real choices that propel the plot along and ultimately determine their individual destiny.

A third narrative element is setting, the time and place of a story. Whoever the author was, scholars agree that person certainly was well acquainted with Persian court life, artifacts, and customs. The specific details of the story lend credibility to the author's claim for historicity. Consequently, these details of time and place also give support for the story's themes.

Point of view, the fourth narrative element, refers to the way a story is told, Esther's being related through the third-person rather than through the first person. A writer using third-person point of view can reveal each character's intimate thoughts, as when Mordecai said to Esther, "For if thou altogether holdest thy peace at this time, then shall there enlargement and deliverance arise to the Jews from another place" (4:14, KJV). Again, the author

ably uses yet another narrative element to enhance the theme of the ultimate victorious ending for God's people.

A fifth narrative element is style, the language a writer uses. One aspect of style Esther's author used frequently was the employment of symbols, a person or thing standing for something other than itself. In Esther the characters themselves are some of the strongest symbols of all, with Esther representing the troubled people of God then—and now—who while making momentous decisions, fit into God's providential plan of deliverance.

To heap up "superfluous synonyms" is yet another literary device the narrator used: "The Jews are to be destroyed, slain and annihilated. . . all of them, including young and old, women and children" (3:13). Further on, Esther used "the same three verbs of destruction when she tells the king what Haman has ordered (7:4). They are all used a third time when the edict is reversed (8:11; 9:12)."⁴ Again, the ultimate victory of God's people is stylistically emphasized.

The final narrative element—to which all the others should lead in a well-crafted story—is theme. Plot is simply what happens; theme is what it means. The *Seventh-day-Adventist Bible Commentary* summarizes the religious and moral teachings of the Esther story into four themes: God's providence; the origin of the feast of Purim; the fleeting nature of human power, with God humbling the proud and exalting people who trust him; and the union of heavenly power and human effort.

Other scholars discuss additional themes they feel are developed in the Esther story, such as the diaspora theme. But the most troublesome thematic issues concern the absence of obvious religious elements, with no

references being made to God or religious practices such as praying. However, all the examples in this literary analysis illustrated ways the craft-conscious author used the six basic narrative elements to emphasize a very religious theme—the ultimate victorious end of God's people in the context of free human choices.

Do other scholars underline the same theme? In doing my research for a detailed literary analysis of the Esther story, I came across at least half a dozen scholars who emphasized the providence theme too.⁵ One quote was particularly striking since it mentioned the literary skill of the author:

Esther is unique among the Old Testament Scriptures in the way in which it deals with religious and moral issues. The writer certainly seems to have stressed the value of political intrigue and human intellectual acumen, and to underplay, if not actually to disregard, the possibility of divine intervention. At the same time the literary skill of the author leaves the reader in little doubt that he is observing the operation of divine providence as the narrative proceeds, and that the indestructible nature of the Covenant People will ultimately be made evident.⁶

Although the story of Esther is an entity in itself, nevertheless its theme of divine providence puts it into the mainstream theme of the Bible in general—the ultimate victory of God's people, then and in the future. Ellen G. White, who deals briefly with Esther, alludes to the symbolic nature of her experience.⁷ Again, even the shape of the story reflects the shape of the entire biblical narrative, all 66 books: the Garden of Eden, the Fall, and Eden restored.

The Bible as Literature

The dominant genre of the Old Testament is the narrative, although about one-third of the Old Testament is poetry. Other genres represented in the Bible include the parable, the letter, the chronicle, the sermon—all genres with their own set of literary characteristics.

Thus to approach all the Bible—not just the book of Esther—in the same way or in a non-literary way is to miss not only the wonder that comes with awareness of any author's craft but more importantly, the wonder of increased comprehension of content.

The more I analyze the literature of the Bible, the more I realize that a literary approach is more than just recommended. It is imperative. An awareness of the ways structure can support theme and techniques can emphasize main points—the artistic symbiotic relationship of "sound and sense"—and this awareness enriches the reader in a way no other approach can.

To view the sacred canon as literature may be a difficult concept for some. And yet it is a fact that the Bible contains some of the earliest and most memorable short stories and poems known to us. So what would be more natural, really, than that the grandest themes conceivable would have been penned by talented writers, capable with their God-given talents to record God-inspired messages, giving purposeful form to their writings.

The telling [of Bible writers] has a shapeliness whose subtleties we are only beginning to understand, and it was undertaken by writers with the most brilliant gifts for intimating character, defining scenes, fashioning dialogue, elaborating motifs,

balancing near and distant episodes, just as the God-intoxicated poems of the psalmists and prophets evince a dazzling virtuosity in their arabesques of soundplay and syntax, wordplay and image.⁸

Although there are other themes beside God's providence in the Esther story, nevertheless a literary analysis can certainly support that theme as being a main one. And just as important, this same literary analysis process can help us understand that some of the questionable incidents in the narrative—such as Esther's marrying a pagan king or her hiding her Jewishness—are not related to the author's themes nor are they presented as models of conduct. The incidents were facts of the plot, of history. God did the best he could with the people he had—as with Moses, David, and Peter—while allowing them to exercise their free will.

No author can be held accountable for doing more than was set out to do—and not one scholar of dozens I researched even mentioned, let alone developed, a theme in any way related to Christian dating behaviors and marriage practices.

A literary analysis helps see not only what is thematically germane but what is not. And almost all of the questions raised at the beginning could be partially or completely explained with similar analysis geared to each issue.

In another article I have suggested a dozen reasons for approaching the Bible as it is—great literature.⁹ The following quote summarizes those reasons:

The Bible demands a literary approach because its writing is literary in nature. The Bible is an experiential book that conveys the concrete reality of human life. It is filled with evidences of

literary artistry and beauty, much of it in the form of literary genres. It also makes continuous use of resources of language that we can regard as literary. A literary approach pays close attention to all of these elements of literary form, because it is through them that the Bible communicates its message.¹⁰

Thank God for words and for writers who use them well—meaningfully, articulately, memorably. And nowhere did they write better than in the Bible. But a good piece of writing demands a good reader. So take to your next reading of a Bible passage your awe, your humility, your worshipful attitude, your willingness to listen and to learn—all of these. But take also your literary knowledge. It will enrich and deepen your understanding of God's Word.

NOTES

1. Leland Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), pp. 75, 83.

2. Leonard L. Thompson, *Introducing Biblical Literature: A More Fantastic Country* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1978), pp. 127-128.

3. Bruce Jones, "Two Misconceptions about the Book of Esther," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 39 (1977), 172-173, 176.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 178.

5. Wilma McClarty, "An Analysis of the Book of Esther as Literature" (Prepared for the Institute for Christian Teaching Seminar held at Union College, Lincoln, Nebraska, in June 1988).

6. R. H. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Association, 1969), pp. 1098-1099.

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good Adventist presence and to find suitable accommodations.

We are aware that much still needs to be done in providing adequate support for our students as they leave their home and church to attend a secular college or university. But leaders at the division and in each of the unions are committed to finding better ways of ministering to their special needs and to involve them in reaching out to the millions who, in our countries, are looking for a message of hope and reconciliation.

Jim Huzzey

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7. Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1948), vol. 5, p. 450.

8. Robert Alter, "Introduction to the Old Testament," *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, eds. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 15.

9. Wilma McClarty, "Why Teach the Bible as Literature?" *The Journal of Adventist Education*, 51:4 (April-May 1989), p. 23.

10. Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1985), p. 30.

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DISCUSSION Esther as Literature

1. Are you satisfied with the argument advanced by the author? Is there a risk of losing the spiritual message of the Word of God by approaching it as literature? Why?
2. In what sense can a literary approach enrich and deepen your understanding of the Bible? Can you give some examples from other books or passages of Scripture?
3. How would you describe psychologically the characters in the book of Esther? Do they seem real to you? Can they serve as models of Christian behavior? To what degree does their conduct reflect their cultural context? Do we now have a better understanding of God's ideal of human behavior than in Esther's time? Why?

Human Personality

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creativity, and the various core characteristics upon which they are built. My personal testimony is that a clearer understanding of the image of God has brought to me a new sense of the value, dignity, and purpose of life. What more could I ask!

NOTES

1. D. J. A. Clines, "The Image of God in Man," *Tyndale Bulletin* 19. (London: Tyndale Press, 1968).

2. James W. Sire, *The Universe Next Door* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), p. 62.

3. See his book, *Personality Theories: A Comparative Analysis*. (Homewood: Dorsey Press, 1972).

4. See her book, *The Person in Psychology* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1985).

5. Del Ratzsch, *Philosophy of Science* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986).

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DISCUSSION Human Personality

1. What does it mean, for you, to have been created "in the image of God"? Since the Bible is not explicit on the meaning of this expression, should we speculate about it? Which are the strong and the weak points in the model proposed by the author? Would you add anything to it?

2. Are human beings truly free to make moral choices? What arguments would you use to support your view? What role do home, church, school, and society at large play in conveying values and in influencing our choices? Can we do anything about those influences? Does the Bible shed any light on this topic? If we are not really free, what are the implications for our self-understanding, our concept of God, and our view of human destiny?

3. The author states that "human personality is a psychosomatic unity through which all of the psychological dimensions of human existence are expressed." Do you agree? Why? Do the Scriptures support this view? In what way has Ellen White enriched our understanding of the mutual influence between mind and body?