

Dr. Elaine Phillips, Esther, Lecture 1

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This will be a series of four lectures presented by Dr. Elaine Phillips on the book of Esther. After receiving her undergraduate degree in social psychology from Cornell University and the MDiv from Biblical Theological Seminary, Elaine Phillips, along with her husband Perry, studied and taught for three years in Israel. Elaine earned her Ph.D. in rabbinic literature from the Dropsy College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning in Philadelphia and has taught biblical studies at Gordon College since 1993.

She recently completed a book-length commentary on Esther, which is included in the Expositor's Bible Commentary edited by Tremper Longman and David Garland. This is lecture one, providing an overview as well as an introduction to the book's theological and ethical challenges and concluding with an introduction to the literary genre and structure of Esther, presented by Dr. Elaine Phillips.

The Scroll of Esther is a wonderful narrative full of delicious ironies and reversals, and we're going to get started by reviewing that narrative.

Xerxes, Ahasuerus, or Ahasheverosh, in the Hebrew text, is the ostentatiously powerful king of the mighty Persian empire. He lost a battle of wills with his wife Vashti when she refused to display herself before the men participating in the king's drinking feast. Apparently rendered incapable of decisiveness by his rage at this affront, he was advised by his chief wise counselor to escalate this domestic affair into a state crisis and thereby issued a decree that Vashti should never appear before him again, which was, of course, what she intended to do in the first place.

Further, in spite of his supreme position, he was unable to undo his decree when he regained his equilibrium, and this time, he was dependent on the wisdom of his young servants to rearrange his personal life and find for him a new queen in the person of Esther. As the narrative continues to unfold, Xerxes is astonishingly oblivious to the Jewish identity of this queen, inattentive for five full years to the loyalty of Esther's cousin Mordecai as he foiled an assassination attempt upon the king's own life, and blind to the ominous implications of Haman's maneuvers to elevate himself and destroy an entire people with one decree sealed with Xerxes' own signet ring. Haman was a high-level political appointee, in fact, second to the king.

Nevertheless, he was beside himself with wounded pride when he learned that Mordecai would not bow in his presence as commanded. The mention of Mordecai's Jewish existence and identity served up to Haman the possibility of a truly malevolent reprisal against the entirety of Mordecai's people. Haman arranged this

by casting a lot, called a “pur,” to determine the day for the slaughter of the Jews, and then he obtained the king's approval in a particularly devious manner.

When the king's edict, which was really Haman's edict, was publicized, Mordecai challenged Queen Esther to risk her life to intervene. After three days of fasting, Esther crossed the boundary into the king's chambers, won his favor, and piqued his curiosity with an invitation to a private banquet to be attended solely by himself and Haman. Haman headed home elated until he encountered his nemesis Mordecai, whose refusal to rise in his presence sent him into another rage, which was soothingly addressed by his wife's suggestion of a public hanging for Mordecai.

In the meantime, the king just happened to have a bout of insomnia, and the antidote was a soporific reading from the court chronicles. Discovering his lapse in court etiquette, that he had not rewarded Mordecai, the king determined to set matters right and inquired of Haman, who at that very moment happened to arrive at his bedroom door in order to get permission to hang Mordecai, what should be done for the person the king wished to honor. Haman, his ego well in order, was certain that the king intended this for him and described an elaborate public display, which he was then compelled to exercise on behalf of Mordecai.

Humiliated, he got home just in time to be escorted back to the second banquet that Esther was throwing for him and the king. These two banquets had sufficiently softened both the king and Haman so that her stunning revelation of her Jewish identity and Haman's treachery infuriated and terrified the king and Haman, respectively. In a scene fraught with apprehension and rage, Haman's scheme exploded in his face.

His appeal for mercy was unheeded and he was hanged on the pole intended for Mordecai. Amidst these reversals, the character of Esther develops from an initially submissive charge of her cousin to a remarkably courageous authority figure. Together she and Mordecai countered the deadly decree of Haman with a royal authorization for the Jews to defend themselves in the face of organized empire-wide attacks on their persons and property.

They were successful. A commemorative celebration called Purim, named in response to the poor, was established and the scroll ends with peace and stability reigning. Because the plot is so beguilingly engaging, the reader easily overlooks the complexity and richness that are packed into this text.

The narrative is at the same time bitingly sarcastic as it pokes fun at the entire Persian court and horrifyingly ominous as one man's wounded pride and hatred spell potential disaster for the entire Jewish people. The text raises very timely and perplexing questions about ethnicity, gender, and violence and inherits the traditional orthodoxy. It's also brimming with ambiguity at every turn.

What are we to make of the choices and activities of Vashti, Ahasuerus, or Xerxes, Mordecai, and Esther? Apart from the thoroughly evil Haman, every major figure in the narrative has garnered an astonishingly wide range of character assessments from centuries of commentators. Likewise, the communities represented from the vast Persian empire to the Jews of the diaspora elicit both praise and scorn. Even God himself is subjected to scrutiny.

How are we to understand his apparent absence from the stage of human events? It is with these theological and moral challenges that we will start our investigation. In rabbinic tradition, Esther was read as a book of divine concealment based on the lexical connection with Deuteronomy 31:18, part of which reads, quote, I will assuredly hide, “astir,” my face. The connection with Esther is clear.

Both God's apparent absence and the choices of Mordecai and Esther have engendered a range of assessments of the book's theological significance. There are scholars who have labeled the book secular, claiming it primarily reflects cultural compromise followed by excessive nationalism, neither of which is exemplary. In this context, the absence of God's name, the lack of evident prayer and piety, and the questionable behavior of Esther are all seen as evidence that she and Mordecai represent a diaspora community that was decidedly irreligious.

It was not intent on keeping the covenant. It had lost a sense of the presence of God, and it was fundamentally disobedient in remaining in the diaspora. This view, however, misses several significant issues that affect the interpretation of the text.

Primarily, while post-enlightenment thought easily establishes a dichotomy between secular nationalism and religious intention, this was unthinkable in late antiquity. E.P. Sanders noted, quote, that loyalty to the community was inseparable from loyalty to the deity who called it into being. Group identity and devotion to God went together.

Atheism was almost unknown in the ancient world. Virtually all believed that there really was a divine sphere, close quote. In addition to that, God is characteristically present in much more subtle ways in narratives that have to do with foreigners.

This is evident in both the Joseph and Ruth narratives as well as Esther. I would suggest that there are indications of God's presence and activity in the narrative, which demonstrate that both the characters in the drama and the authorship identified themselves as members of God's covenant community. First, there are allusions to God's activity.

Mordecai's appeal in chapter 4, verse 14, to help coming from another place is the most evident one. But likewise, Mordecai's Jewishness is the basis for Haman's wife

to acknowledge that something bigger and uncontrollable is going on. In chapter 6, verse 13, we'll look at all of these later.

Second, there are appeals for God's intervention, notably by fasting. Third, the whole array of what are often termed coincidences is cumulatively significant. The most notable of these is the king's insomnia, but coincidences appear from beginning to end in the narrative.

Finally, the comprehensive structure built around the unexpected reversal of human expectations attests to divine control of circumstances and the hope for ultimate justice. This principle is articulated in chapter 9, verse 1, with the expression, it was overturned in reference to the malevolent plan of the enemies of the Jews. Presuming that the text does reflect God's providential orchestrating of the critical events, as well as the main character's awareness of his doing so, then why did the narrator not overtly name God and attribute these activities to him? Medieval Jewish exegetes posed explanations ranging from the author's concern not to offend Persian authorities, on one hand, to the fear of profaning the name of God during the frivolity that came to characterize the Purim festival, notably excessive drinking.

These possibilities have continued to surface in recent commentaries, but both suggestions are problematic. Notably, excessive drinking in conjunction with the Purim festival developed only in the fourth century of the Common Era, and that was in Babylon, so certainly, there would be no connection there. More substantially, the ambiguity regarding God's presence in the narrative allows for very significant and wide-ranging applications for us.

The numerous providential coincidences were lodged in contexts that demanded responsible and faithful human choices and action. In the face of recurring divine silence, God's people are compelled to choose between the imperfect alternatives that arise in the real ambiguities of life, just as Esther and Mordecai did. At the same time, people of faith are confident that God will address injustice and suffering and will preserve his people in his wisdom and in his time.

This is extremely important, as the text would be read and re-read through centuries filled with pain and suffering for the people of God. Turning to the issue of responsible actions, there are those who have suggested that both Mordecai and Esther suffered severe moral lapses that resulted in the silent disapproval of God. That Mordecai was living in Susa to say nothing of serving in some capacity in the court, instead of having returned with the exiles, is posited as evidence of his disobedience.

Perhaps a small recapitulation of history would be in order here. Judah and Jerusalem had been ravaged by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 before the Common Era. The

temple Solomon had built was destroyed and there was wholesale deportation of the population to Babylon.

In that context, their own religious identity was undermined by the loss of connection to the land, and by re-education in the Babylonian language, literature, and culture. We get a feeling of this from Daniel chapter 1, and by the seductive appeal of the dominant culture. Nevertheless, Babylonian superiority was relatively short-lived.

The Persian Empire replaced the Babylonians, and Cyrus the Great issued his edict in 539, sending the faithful remnant back to Judah in accordance with the prophetic declaration of Jeremiah that they would indeed return. Notably, however, it was only a remnant that returned. The majority did not, having comfortably settled in their various diaspora contexts.

Those who did return encountered serious opposition, but nonetheless responded to the prophetic ministries of Haggai and Zechariah, and finally completed the second temple in 516 during the reign of Darius. Now, what is important for our purposes is that Xerxes took over the realm of Persia from Darius in 486, about a generation after the completion of that second temple. It seems that Jewish communities were established throughout the diaspora with little intention of returning to the land.

This might justifiably be construed as disobedience and lack of loyalty to God and his covenant people, who were significantly defined in the context of that very land. To keep this in its wider biblical context, however, it is significant that both Ezra and Nehemiah, at the outset of their individual stories, were also in high-profile positions in Susa. In fact, it is telling that those events took place just about a generation after the crisis narrated in the Book of Esther.

Perhaps the wave of pro-Jewish sentiment and the pattern set by Mordecai's position paved the way for the prominent roles that both Ezra and Nehemiah held in the Persian court prior to their respective returns to Judea. A further charge against Mordecai centers around his willingness, perhaps to further his own interests, to send Esther into the den of iniquity that was the Persian court. Moreover, he forbade Esther, once she found herself in that context, to reveal her identity with God's covenant people.

This could smack of his complete disregard for the spiritual aspects of his heritage and his intended assimilation into that dominant culture. Contrary to this picture, however, there are indications very early in the text that he was not nearly so callous. In the absence of Esther's parents, he cared for her and adopted her as his daughter.

The description of Esther emphasizes her extraordinary beauty, which far exceeds the criteria for being rounded up. Being taken was unavoidable. Once she was trapped in the harem, Mordecai's concern for her was evident in his daily walk outside the palace.

We'll develop each of these further in conjunction with the text. Critics of Esther have risen in several quarters as well. From a feminist perspective, she is a seriously deficient role model in contrast to Vashti, who courageously refused to be an object in the king's possession and forwarded her crown as a result.

Esther, by way of contrast, passively did what she was told, allowed herself to be controlled by one man after another, and exercised manipulative feminine wiles as a powerful queen. This has prompted some readers to view the text as unpleasantly subversive. Further, Esther seems to have had no qualms about entering the harem and participating in a contest, the sole focus of which was to satisfy the pagan and lascivious king's sexual appetite.

Now, from the outset of Israel's history, intermarriage with people groups in Canaan was forbidden. We see this in Deuteronomy chapter 7 because of the temptation to idolatry. The same motivation was behind the severe measures during the reform activities of Ezra and Nehemiah chronicled in Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 13.

Foreign wives were put away at that time. These activities took place in the mid-fifth century BC, about a generation after the time of Xerxes and Esther. The determinative factor, however, was that Esther was taken, again, as part of the roundup of young women to fill the king's harem.

Further, while the most obvious interpretation seems to be that Esther did indeed prove herself on the first night to be the more memorable sexual partner than all the other candidates, more than one scholar has suggested that the king was intrigued with her specifically because she did not capitulate to his whims. Judith Rosenheim, among others, is a lead proponent of this. After all, Xerxes had access to a full harem for those pleasures.

Somewhat more favorable presentations attribute to Esther a character transformation from initial passivity to forthright courage. More accurately, however, she is an actor from the outset within the wider machinery of the royal household and the court. She won favor with key people.

One favor is a more dynamic Hebrew idiom than the usual found favor, and it is used consistently with Esther throughout this text. She successfully acted as an intermediary between Mordecai and the king when Mordecai uncovered the assassination plot at the end of chapter two. When it came time to move into the

public arena, Esther was ready to do so and was extraordinarily strategic about the entire operation.

She enlisted the support of the Jewish people, as well as her own maidens. She confronted the king and Haman, and she arranged for self-defense measures for the Jewish populations, and finally instituted the festival. And that leads us to a sharper focus on the purposes of the text.

It's clear that there are two interrelated primary intentions in this text. One is the establishment of the annual celebration to commemorate the deliverance of Jews across the empire from annihilation. Reading the story would become an integral part of that commemoration.

Chapter nine firmly establishes the two-day festival. This emphasis was particularly important because, unlike major Jewish festivals, Purim had not been instituted at Sinai. Nevertheless, some scholars see the connection between the deliverance narrative in chapters one through eight and the festival observance, chapter nine, as secondary and contrived.

Scholars of the 19th century proposed creative hypotheses that attempted to explain satisfactorily why the story of a Jewish deliverance would be connected to what they assumed was to be a pre-existent pagan celebration, whether it was of Assyrian, Babylonian, or Persian origin. The nature of this hypothetical festival, however, was as tentative as its proposed point of origin. Some suggested the new year, others a spring festival, and still others connected with a feast in the memory of the dead.

What does seem to be clear is that the Akkadian term *Puru* or *Purim*, which can be traced through both Assyrian and Babylonian texts, did mean lot and secondarily fate. In other words, the practice of casting lots in order to determine the outcome of history was a long-established practice. Judith Rosenheim observed that in Persian culture, the results of casting *Pur*, or lot, were perceived as evidence of the predetermined decisions of a pagan deity.

Thus, the lot did not indicate random chance. Instead, maybe Haman was consulting his gods. Given this wider socio-religious context, it is important that this narrative unfold as it does, with God apparently silent and thus not predictable but sovereignly free to reverse the date that had been set by casting the *Pur* and to do so particularly in conjunction with the tradition of the deliverance at Passover.

Because there was a mandate to commemorate the event, it was necessary to establish recitation of the narrative so that it would indeed be, according to Esther chapter 9 verse 28, remembered and performed. It is this mandate that draws together the narrative of chapters 1 through 8 with the legislation regarding the

feast. It had to be told and heard to recapture the experience from generation to generation.

Esther was to be read annually so that Israelites would relive blotting out the memory of their enemy until the kingdom of God comes. Medieval Jewish commentators saw the narrative of Esther as a foretaste of the final redemption when the forces of evil, epitomized in the Malachites, would finally be destroyed. Thus, the narrative took on cosmic proportions.

As a result, through the succeeding century, Purim plays, known as Purim spiels, have become an integral part of this commemorative aspect. The narrative not only authenticated the festival, however. It's the one biblical text focused solely on life in the diaspora.

Unlike the rest of the post-exilic literature in the Bible that emphasizes the return to the land, this narrative presents the complexities involved with the choice to remain in the dispersion, as well as the vulnerability of those diaspora communities. On the one hand, the close of this story presents the reader with a fully integrated Mordecai, apparently devoid of tension between his association with the pagan court and life among the people of God. Instead, both he and Esther creatively used the mechanisms of the existing system for the benefit of their people.

But on the other hand, there is no mistaking the fundamentally untrustworthy nature of the pagan realm. The opening farcical tone of the narrative simply intensifies the forthcoming shock, as pride and egotism mutated into murderous hatred very quickly. Throughout the history of the Jews in the diaspora, both in eastern and western contexts, the tide has turned against them with appalling frequency, and attempts at self-defense have themselves been often deemed illegal.

Ironically, extensive cultural assimilation, viewed as protection, has often resulted in a backlash of catastrophic proportions, of which the last two centuries of western European history are the most recent sobering reminder. In sum, the text of Esther is vital. It demonstrates a theology for the dispersion, as one commentator says, in which Jewish action is as necessary as trust in God's providence.

It prepared Jews for their precarious existence in those scattered communities for centuries to come. In that regard, it is an absolutely essential part of the canon. And then, finally, Esther challenges all readers, us, to consider in what manner God has prepared us for such a time as this and just what those times might be in each of our lives.

One message of the text has to do with living faithfully in systems that may be significantly at odds with our faith traditions. Moving from purposes to historical and literary concerns, we've already noted the general timeline of the transition from the

Babylonian and Persian empires, and the position of diaspora Jews in that context. Let's develop the character of Xerxes, or Ahasuerus, just a bit more.

The primary extra-biblical source is Herodotus, with some additional details found in works by Xenophon and Ctesias of Cnidus. There are also Persian inscriptions and archaeological evidence that illuminate our understanding. Prior to the death of Darius, under whom the second temple was completed, Xerxes was crown prince and governor of Babylon.

Upon becoming king, and he reigned from 486 to 465, his military activities took him first to Egypt, and then he was compelled to put down a rebellion in Babylon. He then spent the next four years, and this will be important, mustering a massive force for the attack on Greece, a venture which desolated Athens, but ended in Xerxes' ultimate defeat. According to Herodotus, Xerxes was a cruel and lascivious despot, a characterization that fits well with the narrative.

When Xerxes was assassinated, Artaxerxes I took the throne. In addition to the Persian context that we've just outlined, the Book of Esther reverberates with echoes from all of Israelite covenant history. The primary one is, without question, the long-standing enmity between Israel and the Amalekites.

We learn in chapter 2 that Mordecai was of the tribe of Benjamin, and one of his ancestors bore the name Kish. The reader is supposed to connect that to King Saul, whose father was Kish. The archenemy Haman, on the other hand, is also explicitly linked to a venerable line, that of Agag.

The astute audience would recognize some significant unfinished business from the early period of the Israelite monarchy, when King Saul was commanded by the Lord to obliterate the Amalekites, whose king was none other than Agag. This is 1 Samuel chapter 15. This was not a capricious command from the Lord.

The judgment upon the Amalekites was a fulfillment of God's declaration in Exodus chapter 17 verse 14, that he would erase the memory of the Amalekites for their attack on Israel, as described earlier in the chapter. The brutality of that assault becomes clear in Deuteronomy chapter 25, verses 17 through 19 are particularly important. In summary, they say that the Amalekites attacked those who were weak and straggling behind the Israelites.

This was vicious activity. It was heinous. It was reprehensible.

Underlying that military encounter is an earlier hostility. Amalek was a descendant of Esau, Genesis 36 verse 12, and we know there was little love lost between Jacob, or Israel, and Esau, his brother. At any rate, Saul disobeyed the Lord and left Agag alive.

The confrontation between Mordecai and Haman revisited that old ethnic tension, this time shot through with the apparent injustice of Haman's rise to power, while Mordecai remained unrecognized. There are additional biblical connections that sharpen the enmity expressed against the Jews by Haman. The decree to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate the Jews was written on the 13th day of the first month.

That's the day before Passover. Instead of celebrating on that festive occasion, the Jewish population of the first month of Passover celebrated the 14th and 15th of Adar, the last month of the year. The corporate remembrance of both brutal oppression and subsequent deliverance would reverberate through the entire Jewish community, both on that occasion and as the narrative was read in the intervening centuries.

The two days of commemorating the deliverance were established as the 14th and 15th of Adar, the last month of the year. They, too, are parallel to the celebration of Passover on the 14th and 15th of Nisan, the first month, and both were to be kept forever. Further connections with the contexts of Egypt and Exodus may be found in the parallels between the Joseph narrative and Esther slash Mordecai.

These range from mirroring the actual language to the broad themes represented. In each case, the presence of God is muted. It was, after all, a foreign country.

And that brings us to the style of the narrative and the historicity. We'll deal with historicity first. The narrative has a concern for dates, numbers, names, and procedures, and this indicates that it was at least intended to be read as history.

Furthermore, in many details, the correspondence between Esther and the extra-biblical sources is remarkable, a point conceded by most scholars. Nevertheless, even though it has been increasingly demonstrated that the author represents Persian customs, culture, language, and court manners in a plausible manner, this plot and these characters are otherwise unattested. This leaves many to suggest that the text was intended as some form of historical fiction.

If that's so, questions of historicity in regard to details may be deemed irrelevant. On the other hand, if it is indeed a historical narrative, then it's important to establish the veracity of its rendition. It should give the skeptic pause that Purim was indeed adopted and practiced with enthusiasm, something rather inexplicable if the basis was entirely fabricated.

The essence of the narrative is God's deliverance of his people from a very real catastrophe in the making. This message of hope is severely diminished if that deliverance was never, in fact, accomplished. Virtually every introduction to the text has addressed the alleged inaccuracies from one perspective or the other.

They provide a list of the problems. They occasionally categorize them according to their degree of improbability and indicate why they are either insoluble or they marshal evidence to demonstrate that this problem ought to be viewed as a red herring. My intent here is simply to survey again the major issues.

It's been noted first that the likelihood of Esther's becoming queen was slim because the queen was supposed to be chosen from among the seven families whose nobles had participated in the overthrow of the magi when Darius came to power. We can read about this in Herodotus book three. The record in Herodotus, however, reflects an agreement among those conspirators that occurred just one generation before Xerxes.

This was not a long-standing tradition and, in fact, this would omit the line of Cyrus himself. Therefore, this does not seem to be a very valid criticism of historicity. More challenging is the fact that there's no external corroboration of Mordecai's position as second in the empire.

Note the parallel with Joseph. There's an undated cuneiform document from the Persian period that refers to a Marduka who was thought to be in high office either late in the reign of Darius or at the beginning of Xerxes' rule. First published in 1940 and referred to repeatedly by subsequent scholars, it was hailed as evidence of the well-positioned Mordecai whom the biblical text indeed represents.

Unfortunately, more recent appraisals of the text question whether the Marduka of this text really was as prominent as initially thought and whether he was in office after 502 which would be long before the time of Xerxes. Given the religious significance of Marduk himself, the gods, and the Pantheon, it is not unusual to find the variance of that name woven into a number of personal names from the period. So, we really don't have evidence one way or the other.

On the other hand, the biblical figure of Mordecai does not emerge on the pages of secular histories; it may be but one reflection of the millennia of history writing in which Jewish actors and events that were indeed determinant for Jews have been neglected. The most challenging problem is the identity of Vashti. Ostensibly the reigning queen only until her deposition in 483, three years after Xerxes came to the realm, to the throne.

Her relationship to the notorious Amestris, Xerxes' wife, whom Herodotus described as participating in a royal intrigue after the campaign to Greece in 480, is our question. One possibility is simply to state that either neither Esther nor Vashti rose to the surface in Herodotus' record of royal women, of which there seemed to have been quite a number. Amestris, after all, was a much more colorful figure, and Herodotus tended to go for color.

Herodotus noted in passing that in her old age, for example, Amestris buried alive 14 sons of notable Persians as a thank offering to the god of the netherworld. The narrative of her cruelty to the wife of Macistes, to which we shall return, is equally horrifying. Amestris was still alive and influential when her son Artaxerxes came to power after the assassination of Xerxes himself.

It appeared that she had not lost her knack for brutality as she crucified one Inaros, beheaded 50 Greeks, and buried alive Apollonides from Kos. In other words, she was a colorful figure, and she was still somewhat on the scene. Having said all that, it may be possible that Amestris and Vashti were the same individual.

Two scholars, Shay and Wright, have dealt with this extensively. I'll just present a summary of what they have to say. First off, names are notoriously fluid in transition from one language to another.

While the name Vashti does not look much like Amestris, it represents the English version of the Hebrew rendition of a Persian name. When Herodotus put that Persian name into Greek, substitutions were necessary because neither the first nor the second consonant had an equivalent in Greek. So possibly these are the two people and two different renditions of that name.

Furthermore, Amestris was not only Xerxes' wife. She was also the daughter of one of his commanders, Otannus, who was one of the aforementioned important seven nobles. She had already born Xerxes' two sons, and Artaxerxes the third, the third son, Artaxerxes the first, the third son, was indeed born in 483, the year we're talking about.

These circumstances may have meant, practically, that while she could be banished from Xerxes' bedroom and deprived of the crown, there were limits on the banishment and good political reasons for keeping her in the extensive royal household. And then a third thing we want to take into consideration. Shortly after the events of chapter one, Xerxes headed off to wage war on the western front and he was occupied there for the next three years.

It could be that Esther chapter two verse one, which begins with, after these things Xerxes remembered Vashti, refers to this passage of time and that the wholesale roundup of young women did not commence until his return. We do know that Esther's first entrance, after a year of preparation, was in the seventh year of the king, which would have been 479. In the meantime, Herodotus dishes up a very complicated and colorful tidbit about Xerxes' dalliance with his niece, a mistress's jealousy, and her cunning and brutal revenge on the poor young woman's mother, who was the wife of Maciste, to which I referred to earlier.

It was an awful scene. Herodotus spends pages on it. It may be that after these events, Xerxes was more than ready for a new queen.

Perhaps his remembering Vashti and what she had done was not entirely with fondness if that memory included her activities in the intervening three years. In any case, the narrative in Herodotus does not state that a mistress was queen from the seventh to the twelfth years of Xerxes' reign. That would indeed be an overstatement.

Another problem. While the irrevocability of the law of the Persians and the Medes seems cumbersome and truly unrealistic in our conception of jurisprudence, it is important to place the unchangeable royal word in its theological and political culture, in which gods gave inalterable mandates, and kings imitated the gods. Persian political theology meant that the word of the king, an imitation of the gods, unified the realm.

In this context, it would indeed then be essential that the law of the Medes and the Persians was irrevocable. And it was equally essential that there were mechanisms to get around those unchangeable laws. It seems, by the way, that the Jews were sufficiently impressed with this phenomenon to write it into both Daniel and Esther.

Now we look a little bit at texts and versions, which is an unusual aspect in terms of Esther. The text of Esther poses challenges in that there are two extant Greek versions, which are at points significantly different from each other, as well as being embellished beyond the Hebrew text. The more accessible and longer the Greek versions, called the beta text or B text, appears in the Septuagint.

Broadly speaking, it consists of six major editions, all of which enhance, and this is the important point, the theological or dramatic content of the text by naming God, describing his intervention outright, reporting an apocalyptic dream that Mordecai had, and eventually its interpretation, inserting prayers of Mordecai and Esther, and describing Esther's audience with the king, as well as presenting the texts of the royal edicts. As a result of the additions, as is obvious from my summary, God and Mordecai are central in the text instead of Esther, and the narrative structure emphasizes significantly different key themes. There are also modifications within the narrative of the Septuagint beyond these six distinct units, and many clarify apparent ambiguities in the Hebrew text.

The second Greek text, which is called the alpha text, is noticeably shorter. It has the six editions that characterize the Septuagint, but once these are removed, it doesn't have any indication of the irrevocability of the laws of the Persians and the Medes, a detail that rather changes the development of the narrative. Once Haman was dead, Mordecai simply asked that the edict be revoked.

The king gave Mordecai the affairs of the kingdom, and there was no subsequent conflict between those enemies of the Jews who were still intent on their destruction and the Jews who killed in self-defense. Esther is the only text outside the Torah, the Old Testament Hebrew, that has two targums, Aramaic translations, devoted to it. The first one carefully reproduces the Hebrew text but intersperses material that effectively serves as a grammatical and interpretive commentary.

The end result is about twice as long as the Hebrew text. The second Aramaic translation is even more expanded, which reflects both the popularity of the Esther narrative and the further development of creative embellishments that accompanied the story. In both cases, there's a real concern to give religious practice and belief a greater profile.

There's a considerable lack of agreement when it comes to determining the genre of the text. In fact, some scholars are hesitant to attach a single label because the text manifests such a rich array of literary features. A definitive characteristic of the story, as we know, is the rollicking satire on the inept Persian court in stark combination with the ominous dread of genocide.

Claiming that humor is laced with improbabilities and exaggerations, the text has often been called a literary farce or a burlesque on the Persian court scene or a carnivalesque fusion of parody and ambivalence. Further suggestions are historical novel or novella. And in a related vein, the tangle of legislative language at the end has given rise to the label festal ideology.

Each of these categories implies that the work is primarily fiction. Nevertheless, given the remarkable representation of the historical context, I would suggest the best label could well be historical narrative. And when the text is read in its entirety, turning to structure, we see an overarching chiasm evident.

The outer frame of the chiastic structure consists of pairs of feasts, themselves framed by notices of the greatness of Ahasuerus and at the end Ahasuerus and Mordecai. The first chapter describes the king's lavish banquets. The first one was for the military and nobility, and the second one was for the residents of Susa.

Correspondingly, the scroll closes with two celebrations of Purim, also a festival for drinking, one on the 14th of Adar and the second on the 15th for Susa. The chiasm has as its central turning point the insomnia of the king, Esther chapter 6 verse 1, which occurred in between the two private banquets of Esther. The king's insomnia and the subsequent exchange between Xerxes and Haman were so utterly beyond the scope of anyone's plans and schemes, whether for good or ill, that they serve as stunning witnesses to the sovereign working of God.

And the placement at the center of the narrative is subtle emphasis on this. Additional pairs in the chiasm are the rise of Haman, paralleled by the rise of Mordecai. Esther's identity as a Gentile, matched by the Gentiles declaring themselves to be Jews, and the fateful exchanges between, on the one hand, Mordecai and Esther, paralleled by the tense exchange between Esther and Ahasuerus at the second banquet.

A term that repeatedly surfaces in recent commentaries is peripety, which refers to the sudden and unexpected reversal of events. These patterned repetitions and reversals both move the narrative forward and drive home the profound significance of God's sovereign presence in the lives of his people. The principle is articulated explicitly in Esther chapter 9, verse 1, which we've already referred to, and it was overturned.

Repetition occurs on a large scale as the stylistic backdrop for the reversals, but it's not limited to that medium. There is an overabundance of pairs of words, repeated indications of events, and sets of statements and requests. These doublets are evident in the description of the Persian court, which is characterized by particularly rich and excessive vocabulary to convey the opulence of the court.

The word pairs are representative of Persian officialese, as John Levinson calls it, and may be part of the humorous satire on the royal scene. In addition, these pairs lead up to the critical petition and request pattern of the king's invitations to Esther to state her case, as we will see in both of her banquets, first in Esther chapter 5 and then repeated again in Esther chapter 7. It's also possible that these verbal pairs and the pairs of feasts are all adumbrations of the two-day celebration of Purim. In other words, twoness is terribly important here.

Furthermore, perhaps the two letters at the end continue the emphasis on double attestations, and the ubiquitous duality also may reinforce the theme of dual loyalty, with which Jews in the diaspora context have always wrestled. At several key points, and this will be critical stylistically, these dyads, which are ubiquitous, are replaced by triplets, most notably in the context of sanctioning and effecting the violence. They, in turn, give way to four-fold verbal strings of jubilation as we see the Jews recovering and resting and rejoicing.

In addition to the peculiar and repeated appearance of pairs, there is an overabundance of passive verb forms in critical contexts. Esther's early appearances are almost exclusively described in this manner. She is acted upon by larger nameless forces, as are the Jewish people.

But this same anonymity has a wider circle than just Esther, her young women, and the Jews. It pervades the court scenes of the narrative, and in that context, it may

divest the bureaucracy of accountability. Most interestingly, the passive forms also allow for ambiguity in regard to who is responsible for what transpires.

And as a final point, implicit in this stylistic device, going back to our sense of purpose of the narrative, may be an acknowledgement of the unnamed divine orchestrator. And with that we'll stop the introduction.