

# Esther: Secular or Sacred?

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## A Brilliant Literary Design

Esther is an exciting book of the Bible. It contains all your classic storybook ingredients: a bold, beautiful heroine (Wonder Woman, anyone?), shifting love interests, a life or death threat to the good guys, a villain you absolutely love to hate, and of course a happy ending. There are suspense and dramatic irony and reversals of fortune and poetic justice. Really, this story has it all! That is, except for God. Or God's name at least. The most curious thing about the book of Esther is that God is never mentioned. Not even once! Isn't the Bible supposed to be a book about God? So, what's up with this?

## Godless Story?

This curious fact has bothered a lot of people throughout history. Some resolve the tension by classifying Esther as a "secular" book of the Bible. In fact, the eminent Hebrew scholar S. R. Driver said that "In passing to Esther from the other books of the Old Testament, we 'fall from heaven to earth.' Not only does the name of God not occur in the book, but the point of view is throughout, purely secular: the preservation of the Jewish race as such and its worldly greatness... are the objects in which the author's interest is manifestly centered. It must be admitted that the spirit of Esther is not that which prevails generally in the Old Testament." - *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (pages 486-487)

So is that it? Esther is the "secular" book of the Bible. Or is this interpretation seriously missing something? Could it be that the absence of mentioning God is directly connected to the book's brilliant literary design? Maybe God's apparent "absence" is actually part of the book's very sophisticated way of talking about God's providence? Perhaps the point is that God is always at work, even when we can't see that work explicitly.

Hmmm... let's take a look at the book's amazing literary structure to explore these questions. The entire story has been designed as a "chiasm."

## Wait—What's a "Chiasm" and Why Does It Matter?

A chiasm is a literary technique in a piece of literature (narrative or poetry) is designed with a symmetrical pattern that highlights certain themes and points of detail as being really significant. The name "chiasm" comes from a letter in the Greek Alphabet "chi" which is identical in shape to the modern English letter "X." The shape of the letter illustrates the idea: two separate lines meet together in the middle, creating a symmetrical shape. As a literary device, a Chiasm shows how the way words and ideas are structured can communicate a message just as powerful as the words themselves. It's a brilliant technique that good authors often use. And the anonymous author of Esther is no exception.

The book of Esther is designed in perfect symmetry. Right down to every scene, you'll find key-words and scenes that match the keywords in their partner scenes on the other side of the symmetry. It's pretty amazing actually. Check it out:

A The splendor of the Persian king + Two banquets [1:1-8]

B Esther becomes Queen + Mordecai saves the king [1:9-2:20 + 2:21-23]

C Haman elevated to power [3:1-6]

D Haman's decree to destroy the Jewish people [3:7-15]

E Esther and Mordecai's plan to reverse the decree [4:1-17]

F Esther's 1st banquet + Haman plans Mordecai's execution [5:1-8 + 5:9-14]

**X - PIVOT: Haman humiliated & Mordecai exalted [6:1-14]**

F' Esther's 2nd banquet + Haman executed instead of Mordecai [7:1-10]

E' Esther and Mordecai plan to reverse the decree [8:1-8]

D' Mordecai's counter-decree to save the Jewish people [8:9-14]

C' Mordecai elevated to power [8:15-17]

B' Queen Esther and Mordecai save the Jewish people [9:1-19]

A' Two feasts + The splendor of Mordecai [9:20-32 + 10:1-3]

When we look at the pattern of the book we see that the events in A-F display a dark, ominous negative pattern moving progressively towards the demise of the Jewish people, including Esther and Mordecai. But, after the pivot in chapter 6, the events in F-A offer a positive counterpart for the previous events, correcting every crisis and deficiency leading to the exaltation of Mordecai and the Jewish people. Jewish scholar Jon Levenson notes the importance of recognizing this chiasmic structure as key to uncovering the meaning of the book:

“Our identification of chapter 6 as the pivot offers another angle of vision on the structure of the book of Esther. It uncovers a larger pattern of symmetry where the scenes before the pivot all correspond to the scenes on the other side... It is beyond doubt that the book displays a bilateral chiasmic structure in which the events of the first half (A-F) consistently have a negative, foreboding cast, whereas those in the second half (F'-A') are uniformly positive and correct the deficiencies of their counterparts... This feature of the book is best summed up in the narrator's comment about Purim in 9:1 “the tables were turned” (Heb. *nahpok hu* = “the reverse took place”, see 9:1).

Once we recognize the carefully patterned structure of the book (the chiasm) and the pivot in chapter 6 leading to the fall of Haman and the rise of Mordecai, we're able to see the profound message being communicated. The shape of the story itself provides us with a sense of order and meaning to the events taking place.

“The center of the story portrays a dramatic parallel between Haman's decree and Mordecai's counter-decree: The author of Esther sees justice unfolding itself in history... This means first of all that history is portrayed as a sequence of ordered events rather than as a random collection of coincidences. This view of history is in itself reassuring for a people in exile, buffeted by forces which they have little power to influence, which would easily lead to despair. The author of Esther fights it [the despair], in his own way, by revealing a meaningful order in human affairs, particularly an order that involves reversal of the expectations of the wicked.” - Michael V. Fox, *The Structure of Esther*.

## **Not So Secular After All**

So even though the events in this so-called “secular” story are seemingly random coincidences isolated from divine planning or intervention, the structure by which these events are recounted tell us otherwise. Though God's name is not mentioned, all of the events - the downfall of Vashti and rise of Esther, Mordecai's discovery of the assassination plot, the short-lived exaltation of Haman, the insomnia of the king, the book read to the king reminding him of Mordecai's heroics and the exaltation of the Jewish people - reflect the providential design of God's handiwork moving history towards his redemptive end.

In fact, by never mentioning God and simultaneously conveying the events with perfect literary symmetry the author is making a profound theological point showing us that God's providence is at work in everything to save and deliver his people. It's a technique meant to push you, the reader, to explore God's providence even in the darkest moments of history. It invites you to see how God can and does work in the real mess and moral ambiguity of human history to accomplish his divine purposes.

“When we scrutinize the text of Esther for traces of God's activity, we are doing what the author has made us do. The author would have us probe the events we witness in our own lives in the same way. He is teaching a theology of possibility. The willingness to face history with an openness to the possibility of divine providence, even when history seems to weigh against its likelihood, as it did in the dark days after Haman's decree. In this way, the book offers a stance of profound faith” - Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*).

Far from being secular, Esther pushes us to look at our own lives and consider how God might be actively working behind the scenes, even in the face of great threat or tragedy, to accomplish his good and perfect purposes. We're called to trust in God's providence even when we can't see it working or don't understand what's happening. The message calls us to deeper levels of faith where we choose to believe that no matter how horrible things get, God is committed to redeeming his good world and overcoming evil.