

Literary Themes in Esther

There are five themes that run through the book of Esther. First, there is the theme of power. When the book opens, we see the extreme wealth of King Ahasuerus. The inspired human author emphasizes **the king's** extensive empire, **his** capital city of Susa, **his** wealth and **his** power. **He** was a man to be reckoned with. Though **his** style, as opposed to the ideal leadership of the king of Isra'el could hardly have been more different (**Deuteronomy 17:14-20**), **Ahasuerus** was powerful, whereas Isra'el had no more kings. But in reality, who actually had more power? The author had other ideas about leadership, and a different yardstick by which to who was really in control.

Secondly, there is the theme of feasting and role reversal. From appearance alone, the author seems impressed with the newly built palace, the unlimited amount of provisions, and the months of revelry. But a reversal of roles came about with the downfall of the queen and the rise of **her** successor. **Esther**, also, holds two feasts, the second of which **Haman** falls from power and meets **his** end. **Mordecai** institutes two days of feasting to be observed by all **Jews**. The despised and powerless exiles living in Persia, shared in the exaltation of **Esther** and **Mordecai**, through whom they were saved from certain death (**4:3**), but then the Persians were in awe of *them* (**8:17** and **9:2**). These three parallel examples of feasting, spread as they are from the beginning to the middle to the end of the story, illustrate how roles were reversed when feasts took place.

A third theme, scarcely less obvious, is that of conflicting loyalties. As residents of the Persian empire **the Jews** were committed to **their king**, but **they** also owed **their** allegiance to **their** God. Conflict began when **the king** expected all to prostrate themselves before **Haman** (**3:2**). But **Mordecai** would not kneel down or pay him honor (**3:2**). The only explanation for **his** refusal was that **he was a Jew** (**3:4b**). To **Haman** it was a personal insult, but to **Mordecai** it was a matter of obedience (see my commentary on **Exodus Dk - You Shall Have No Other Gods Before Me**). The insubordination of **Mordecai** brought about the mortal threat that required **Esther** to disobey **the king** (**4:11**). **Her** natural desire to obey was confronted by the need to save **her** people from death. The obedience to **king** and **husband** had to give way to the overriding importance of saving the people of **ADONAI**. Once convinced that **she** must identify **herself** with the needs of **the Jews**, **she** acted with courage and became a leader who took the initiative and changed the dynamic.

Then fasting is seen as a fourth theme. Between the two banquets of **the king** (**1:4** and **1:5-8**), and the two banquets of **Esther** **5:5-6** and **7:1**, the theme of fasting is mentioned twice (**4:1-3** and **4:16**). Fasting, as well as feasting, took place in the company of

others, and demonstrated the solidarity of all **Jews** in facing the threat of annihilation. By tearing their clothes, wearing sackcloth and ashes, wailing loudly and bitterly, **Mordecai** and all **the Jews** made sure that **their** protests were seen and heard by the Persians, who were **thrown into confusion (3:15b CJB)**, but latter **held a joyous celebration (8:15b)**. When **Esther** had to risk **her** life by invading **the king's** throne room on behalf of **her** people, **she** needed their support. The three-day fast in which all **the Jews** participated demonstrated that **they** stood or fell together.

Finally, the providence of God is seen as a theme running throughout the book. What appear to the participants to be coincidences are shown in the long run to be evidences of **God's** hand at work.

1:19 The demise of **Queen Vashti** opened the door for the arrival of **Queen Esther**.

2:5-7a **Mordecai** just happened to be taken captive to **Susa**, where **he** would raise the future queen of Persia.

2:7b The one **Jewess** who would need to be attractive to **the king** just happened to be a knockout.

2:9 The keeper of **the king's** harem, **Hegai**, favored **her**.

2:17 **Now the king was attracted to Esther more than to any of the other women.**

2:22 **Mordecai found out about the plot and told Queen Esther.**

3:7 Even **Haman's** cast of the *lots* was controlled by the hand of **God** so that **the Jews** would have eight months to prepare for their defense.

4:14 **Esther came to her royal position for such a time as this.**

5:2 **When Esther** appeared uninvited before **the king**, **he was pleased with her and held out to her the gold scepter.**

5:14 The **pole** that **Haman** built for **Mordecai** ended up being his own means of execution.

6:1 **The king couldn't sleep and ordered the book of the chronicles read to him.**

6:4 **Haman** came to visit **King Ahasuerus** just minutes after **he** remembered what **Mordecai** had done.

6:13 The continuing survival of the Jewish people to this present day continues to point to the providence of **ADONAI**.

8:2 **Haman's** estate was confiscated and given to **Esther**, who appointed **Mordecai** to **over see** it.

8:11 A pagan **king** granted **the Jews the right** to defend themselves.

9:32 Purim was then given royal authority by the hand of **Queen Esther**, so it had the status and protection of Persian law.

10:3 As **Joseph** had become prime minister of **Egypt**, **Mordecai** became prime minister of **Persia**.