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Literary Themes in Esther

There are five themes that run through the book of Esther. First, 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 Israel could hardly have been more different **(Deuteronomy 17:14-20)**, **Ahasuerus** was powerful, whereas Israel 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 the king just minutes after the king 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.