

# Ruth

*Jack M. Sasson*

THE literary analysis of Ruth differs significantly for those who treat it as a folktale with an earlier, oral form and for those who examine the fine elaboration of its literate narrative art, although one approach rarely excludes the other. An earlier generation of scholars, given to charting the metamorphosis of tales from single folkloric prototypes, saw Ruth as a recasting of certain incidents in the saga of the goddess Isis, as a Hebraized version of the Eleusinian mysteries, with Naomi and Ruth taking the roles of Demeter and Persephone, respectively, or as a historicized version of the epic of the Canaanite goddess Anat. All these hypotheses theorized amply about why the Hebrew story would adapt foreign myths; the general tendency was to see in Ruth an effort to create a mythological or epic backdrop for the ancestry of David.

A more recent approach has drawn on the folklorist work of the Russian formalist Vladimir Propp in order to show that Ruth follows a pattern common to folktales and as such cannot be a reliable source for information of a legal and historical nature, since folktales ordinarily eschew all such information in favor of easily accessible testimony for exemplary behavior.<sup>1</sup> In any event, even among the artful narratives of Scripture, Ruth stands out in the power of its concentration, in the limpidity of its vocabulary, in the versatility of its language, in the balanced proportion of its scenes, and, above all, in the vividness and integrity of its main characters.

The narrator of Ruth may well have had an orally circulating tale with which to work, but we have only his written version to inspect for signs of its original form. The fact that the tale divides naturally into four major episodes, each of which ends with summarizing and previewing lines, may suggest a technique by which to hold the attention of a listening rather than a reading audience. The plot is advanced mostly through dialogue, which accounts for fifty-five of its eighty-five verses, a technique that makes every scene intimate. This, the highest ratio of dialogue to narrative in any of the biblical books, is certainly rich in dramatic potential, and the audience is obliged to infer the story's meaning from minute clues in the words exchanged by the characters. On several occasions the language in Ruth also reflects an interaction between the storyteller and his

audience. For example, the famous aside in 4:7 ("Now in Israel's past days, in order to validate any legal act")<sup>2</sup> gains in impact when heard in a tone that differs from that of the flanking narratives.

Ruth is replete with examples of oral wordplay and of thematic key words meant to stimulate an audience's memory. With the exception of Genesis, another book full of folktales with versions which may have circulated by word of mouth, this type of paronomasia is nowhere else as densely deployed in Hebrew narratives. On the other hand, Ruth also requires patient visual study to unlock a few examples of gematria (a cryptograph with hidden numeric values); and this condition shows that the narrator adapted whatever came to his disposal for a learned readership.

More impressive as testimony for the narrator's skill in handling his tale, however, are the various devices he uses to structure his material. Perceptive recent writings (some more convincing than others) have uncovered carefully developed and ordered series of patterns, often guided by a reliance on sets of binary oppositions: famine/plenty, escape/return, barrenness/fruitfulness, isolation/community, reward/punishment, tradition/innovation, male/female, life/death. The narrator often distributes these themes far apart and realizes the thematic opposition only after a span of time and activity. On the other hand, he achieves intensity in each of his scenes by placing in a central position the verses which provide crucial information or development.

Much of the story's charm derives from its language. Although there are a number of words and idioms unique to Ruth, none of them is obscure enough to impede the flow of the narrative. The harmonious alliteration and repetition of key words in many clauses generate a reassuring sense of patterned thematic development. The absence of martial terminology, the underplaying of theological diction, the frequency of gently couched greetings and blessings (ten times), the constant recall in the dialogue of vocabulary that accentuates noble sentiments and compassionate motives—all these have allowed Ruth to work its magic on countless generations.

Each of Ruth's four scenes, equivalent to the four chapters in our Bible, is provided with a coda meant to summarize past activities even as it prefigures future ones. The first of these contains an initial unit (1:1-6) which serves as prologue to the story, and the last has a ballast unit (4:14-17) which provides a satisfying epilogue. The last coda anticipates a future beyond the story's immediate frame and includes a genealogy (4:18-22) trimmed unmistakably to place the story's main male character, Boaz, in the favored seventh slot, thereby conveying a moral that was of particular interest to the historically minded Hebrew: common people achieve uncommon ends when they act unselfishly toward each other.

The narrator sets the scene in the prologue with remarkable economy.<sup>3</sup> Time is at once specific and diffuse ("When the Judges used to

judge”), conveying more than the actual words imply, since during that period—as any Hebrew would know—people were constantly losing God’s grace before earning it again. This initial clause wrenches Ruth from the world of folk or fairy tales (where gods and magic reside comfortably), setting it within Israel’s chronicle of its troubled relationship with God. For the story’s immediate purpose, however, geography acquires controlling power: the narrative is specific when it mentions Bethlehem, within Israel’s orbit, and becomes diffuse when it speaks of the other world, Moab, where Judeans ought to have no business. Sandwiched between these temporal and spatial elements is an impersonal force, *ra’av*, “famine,” which in Israel could only have been God’s instrument for judgment and cannot, therefore, be thwarted by human acts. Moab, where the god Chemosh reigns, may not be experiencing famine when a Judean family seeks shelter there; but its fields will eventually kill a father and his sons and render their wives sterile.

At first this family is introduced anonymously: “a certain man from Judah,” his wife, and his two sons trek eastward; and only when they reach Moab do they acquire personal names. Given their abandonment of God and his land, the parents’ names must certainly be ironic (Elimelech, “My God Is King”; Naomi, “Winsome” or “My Lovely One”), while those of the sons could be foreboding—even sinister, given their crackly rhyme: Machlon and Chilion (“Weakening and Pining” or “Blot Out and Perish”). Symbolic names of this sort are not typical of Hebrew narrative and may once more betray an edifying purpose in Ruth.<sup>4</sup>

The remaining portion of introduction has four short verses that nicely emulate the relentlessness of fate. Naomi loses her husband, and, without the guidance of a father, the boys marry two Moabite women whom the narrator deceptively presents in conventional Hebrew style. Orpah is introduced first: “Nape (of the neck),” according to some who read the name prefiguratively; “Scented” or “Cloudy,” according to some philologists. As is common in Hebrew narrative technique, Ruth, a major character, gets second mention. Her name, edifyingly but falsely understood to mean “Friendship,” is related to a Semitic root meaning “to be soaked, irrigated,” or the like. As is to be expected, the marriages have no issue, for there could be no future for the sons of Israel in Moab, and the narrator reverts to Naomi, the only Judean to survive this calamity. The gloom, inaugurated so impersonally with the word “famine,” gives way to hope as Naomi hears of the restoration of God’s bounties to her homeland. The language here (1:6) is rich with assonance and alliteration (*latet lahem lahem*), ending with the word for food, *lehem*, which unsubtly directs Naomi, as well as the reader, back to Bethlehem, “Storehouse for food.” The story of Ruth really begins here. Because it is a deceptively simple tale whose themes, loyalty and love, are manifest, Ruth is accessible to all on first reading. However, its intricately worked out plot relies on

an awareness of legal and social mechanisms obtaining among the Hebrews, and the best way to clarify these is simply to follow the narrative.

Her future limited by the days remaining to an old woman, her survival severely compromised by the absence of male helpers, her past totally obliterated as long as she remains in Moab, Naomi resolves to go back home. As a widow, *'almanah* (a term which in biblical Hebrew is applied only when women are bereaved of husbands, sons, and fathers-in-law), Naomi must depend on Ephrathites for minimal help; but she has to be in Bethlehem to receive it. She could not wish for her daughters-in-law to accompany her, for in Bethlehem each of them would be a *nokhriyah*, a "foreign woman," too distant from her own kin to receive care and sustenance. Luckily for us who cherish noble sentiments and beautiful rhetoric, Naomi cannot easily persuade them to face this reality.

She pursues on three levels her arguments against taking Moabite women back to Bethlehem. She first (1:8-9) wishes them godspeed and good remarriages—a powerful indication that levirate marriage (discussed below) is not at stake in this story. When Orpah and Ruth "break into loud weeping" and insist on accompanying her, Naomi turns mordant and self-pitying: she is too old to bear the sons who could revive their marriages; bereft though they may be, her daughters-in-law cannot match the sheer misery God has inflicted on her.

Wisely, Orpah understands the predicament and, after much weeping, goes home. That later legends made her an ancestress of Goliath shows, however, how reasonable decisions can nevertheless be remembered as betrayals. Ruth, on the other hand, "clings" (the verb *dabaq*, repeated with slightly differing meanings four times in two chapters) to Naomi, thereby holding center stage for the next three major scenes.

Ruth's supplication to accompany Naomi is not registered in poetic language; but it does reach a lyrical perfection rarely matched in other Hebrew narratives. She cannot be persuaded to desert Naomi, and will go with her anywhere; she will share her shelter, whatever its quality (so; rather than, as commonly translated, "where you lodge, I will lodge"); her fate will be with Naomi's people and with God, and she will never return home, for she expects to be buried by Naomi's grave. Ruth invokes a powerful oath, placing herself in her mother-in-law's bondage: "May the Lord strike me anytime with afflictions, if anything but death parts us" (v. 17). Because of the oath, Naomi has no choice but to accept Ruth's decision.

Bethlehem hums (the city is here personified, and the verb is onomatopoeic) at their arrival, but we cannot be sure to what effect. The inhabitants' reported speech—"Could this be Naomi?"—is brief, but it conveys bewilderment, sadness, puzzlement, excitement, shock, delight, or any combination of these and a dozen more emotions. Naomi's response, though obscure in its Hebrew construction, nevertheless shows

that the bitterness she previously displayed has not faded. “Call me Mara [‘Bitter One’],” she says, and allows them no time to ask why before she delivers her second tirade against God’s injustice. Bethlehem’s women do not attempt to soothe her rage: when two impoverished women enter a town with no men to lead them, the tragedy of the situation needs no elaboration.

The first scene ends here. In his summary of these events, the narrator adds that “they reached Bethlehem at the beginning of the barley harvest” (v. 22) and thus assures us that famine is not a deprivation that Naomi will experience again. This notice also allows us to gauge the time spanning the remaining scenes as no more than about ninety days, when the winnowing seasons for barley and wheat come to an end.

Chapter 2 opens by introducing a rich landowner, Boaz, who is kin to Naomi’s husband. His name may include “strength” (*ʿoz*) as part of its meaning; but it is more relevant to recall that Boaz was the name of one pillar in Solomon’s temple, and hence may have had a dynastic implication. Boaz, then, is related to Elimelech and can be a potential redeemer of his deceased kinsman’s land; but his kinship is not so immediate as to give him first opportunity to do so. At any rate, it is Ruth who suggests a way of linking her fate to him: “Should I go to the field and glean among the ears of grains, *in the hope of pleasing him?*” (v. 2);<sup>5</sup> for Ruth urgently needs to find a way to change her situation, from being a *nokhriyah* to becoming a *shifhah*, a “maidservant.” Lowly as this last status may be within a clan, it nevertheless affords its holder protection from hunger and from violence.

Ruth actually wants permission to gather the grain from among the sheaves, a privilege (we learn from v. 15) reserved for members of the clan, which only a landowner can grant. Boaz notices the woman as she stands waiting for his reply. An overseer identifies Ruth and even attempts a weak jest. “Notice,” he tells Boaz, “she had little time to stay at home” (v. 7). Boaz asks no questions from this unprivileged soul but readily offers advice: stay in my field, stick to my girls; even drink a little water if you care to. However, he does not respond to her original request. Ruth is not ready to give up. With a gesture of exaggerated servility—usually only kings and gods receive such prostrations—Ruth gently cloaks her expectations: “Why is it that I pleased you enough to notice me? I am but a foreigner [*nokhriyah*]” (v. 10). Boaz responds with another speech but is now more personal: you are wonderfully loyal and brave; God will surely reward you for seeking his protection.

Ruth, who has yet to receive permission, tries again, this time with more *chutzpah*: “I must have pleased you, my lord, since you have comforted me and have spoken tenderly to your maidservant [*shifhah*]. Yet I am not even considered one of your maidservants” (v. 13). Finally grasping Ruth’s intent, Boaz waits until lunchtime to make up his mind. Then,

in full view of his workers (an act which may well have a legal implication), he seats her among them, personally fills her bowl with grain and mash, and gives her the permission he has not granted previously. In short, Ruth has come to be a member of Boaz's clan and need no longer be a burden to her mother-in-law.

As she returns home, loaded with twenty kilograms of grain through Boaz's generosity, Naomi praises her deed and blesses Boaz, invoking a delicious pun as she lauds his goodness: "Boaz [*bo'az*] . . . who has not withheld [*'azab*] his kindness" (v. 20). When Naomi reveals that Boaz is also in a position to redeem the land left her by her husband, the stage is set for the next encounter between Ruth and Boaz, for the story of Ruth cannot end when hunger is replaced by satiety; there is yet the matter of perpetuating the memory of men who left no sons behind.

It is Naomi who provokes the next meeting. She wants Ruth to enter Boaz's home, perhaps not as a wife but certainly as a concubine. Were this to happen, the bonds of kinship that kept the two women together would surely be broken. Yet this could not be acceptable to Ruth, whose oath demanded otherwise. The rest of the story tells how Ruth resourcefully resolves her dilemma.

Harvest time has just come to an end, and owners of fields are customarily celebrating God's bounty on the threshing floor, under the warm and cloudless sky of a Judean spring. Boaz has drunk enough to feel free from daily care. Ruth, handsomely dressed and fetchingly scented, waits until midnight before approaching the sleeping Boaz. Naomi's instructions at this point are hard for us to establish: Is Ruth merely to remove the covers at his feet? Or is Naomi asking her to risk a bolder move?

Whatever the charge, we learn that Boaz momentarily panics at finding a woman so close to him, and the scene is obviously meant to be humorous. Ruth quickly opens with a twofold proposal. "I am Ruth your handmaid," she says (3:9), using the term *'amah*, which ordinarily denotes a woman who can be taken by a freeman as either concubine or wife. Her next statement, "spread your robe over your handmaid," may well be teasing Boaz, who earlier praised her for seeking shelter under God's wings but who ignored her request. The statement's implication, however, could not be plainer, for it is an appeal to be brought into Boaz's immediate household (see Deut. 23:1 and Ezek. 16). When, finally, Ruth entreats Boaz to become Naomi's redeemer, his turn comes to rebuke her gently. Her last request, he tells her, is better than the preceding one, for she urged him in behalf of Naomi only *after* she had made a plea for her own future. Whatever their sequence, these two requests betray Ruth's strategy for a happy ending to all concerned: by entering the household of the man who redeems Naomi, Ruth can retain kinship to her, though in a different fashion.

Boaz assures her on all counts. She need no longer look for other men to protect her. Indeed, because of her marriage to Machlon, her reputation as an *'eshet hayil*—a woman married to a man of standing—is well known to the whole town. Therefore, there is nothing to prevent her from entering his household as an *'ishah*, a *primary* wife. The matter of becoming Naomi's redeemer is more complex, since another man has prior rights to redeem her land. Nevertheless, he will do all that is in his power to fulfill the obligation himself. To all this, Boaz invokes a powerful oath and asks Ruth to stay the night.

Ruth has triumphed; but she needs to persuade Naomi that Boaz will be a suitable redeemer, and it is only in the last verses of the third chapter that this occurs. Naomi herself has no cause to meet Boaz, let alone to prefer him to another redeemer. Ruth therefore uses the enormous bounties (another twenty kilograms or so of grain) that Boaz gave her at dawn to frame her last persuasive act. "He gave me six measures of barley, telling me not to return empty-handed to my mother-in-law," she reports to Naomi (v. 17). Boaz, of course, has said nothing of the sort; but what better way to sway her mother-in-law than to recall at such an auspicious moment a term (*reyqam*, "empty-handed") that Naomi used in her deepest despair ("but the Lord had brought me back *empty*," 1:21)?

For the last episode, the narrator switches from a series of intimate encounters to a crowd scene. Again, chance occurrences are made to seem natural. Just as Boaz reaches the city gate, where business transactions take place, the potential redeemer steps into the limelight. In a tale in which names enhance characters and prefigure their development, the potential redeemer is anonymous, for his future, unlike Boaz's, will ultimately be anonymous: an interesting fate for someone who will shortly fret about his estate. He is asked to purchase the land available to Naomi and thus become her redeemer. Otherwise, Boaz will do so. The man readily accepts, for Elimelech's land will become his after the death of a widow without issue. Boaz then plays his trump card.

He tells the assembly that on the very same day that the redeemer acquires Naomi's land, he, Boaz, will acquire Ruth, widow of Machlon, "*in order to perpetuate the memory of the deceased upon his estate*" (4:5). I have italicized this clause because it explains how Boaz persuades the redeemer to give up his land. Boaz uses the verb *qanah* to declare what must be done with Ruth. When the Masorites vocalized this verb centuries after the tale was written, they made it read "You must acquire," *qanita*, whereas the verb's consonants are *qnyty*, "I have acquired." For this reason, generations of readers have thought that laws regarding levirate marriages were at stake: Ruth had to marry this anonymous redeemer unless he gave up his rights to Boaz. But this could not be the case, since levirate marriages were in fact no marriages at all, and a widow who found herself in this situation automatically entered her brother-in-law's household, at least until she bore a son for her dead husband. In fact, as Boaz him-

self previously acknowledged (3:10), Ruth was free to select her own protector.

Before a lawfully constituted assembly, Boaz appeals to an old custom, fully and legalistically formulated in 4:10, which encouraged a man to beget a child on a widow so that “the memory of the deceased may not be obliterated from among his kinfolk.” The union’s first child would therefore be Machlon’s, and when he grew up, the land redeemed from Naomi would revert to that child. This is why, when the redeemer hears of Boaz’s resolve, he gives up his claim to redemption. In all these details, then, the nice distinctions of social and legal institutions become an integral part of the storyteller’s subtle art.

The story of Ruth could end here. The narrator, however, uses a few more verses to refresh his audience’s memory of past customs of validation and attestation (4:7), to record Boaz’s legal declarations (4:9–10), and to savor the beautiful blessing—actually a royal blessing—with its rich promises for the couple’s future (4:11–12). The coda is deftly used to tie up loose ends and to recapitulate themes. After Boaz makes Ruth his wife (*’ishah*), God allows her to conceive, but the boy that she bears is really Naomi’s. Women in chorus praise God for preventing the end of Elimelech’s line and thus overturning a fate that seemed so sinister in the prologue. They laud Boaz as an ideal redeemer, the child Obed as a perfect comforter and a solicitous sustainer, and Ruth as Naomi’s beloved.

A curious notice follows, alerting the audience to unfoldings exceptional in Scripture: “female neighbors”—and not the parents—invent a name for Obed; Naomi adopts him and becomes his keeper. In the ancient Near East, these acts symbolize the legitimacy of royal power. It is, however, enough simply to pursue the text a few more verses (18–22) to discover that the child born to Ruth eventually fathers Jesse, who in turn fathers King David.

## NOTES

1. I have explored possible avenues of interpretation when Ruth is assessed as a folktale in *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Baltimore, 1979).

2. All translations in this essay are my own [AT] and are based on my philological analysis of Ruth in the commentary cited above.

3. The reading of Ruth offered below is defended at length in my commentary, cited above. E. F. Campbell’s commentary to Ruth, Anchor Bible, VII (Garden City, N.Y., 1975), provides a different interpretation of the plot’s structure. Both contain extensive bibliographies.

4. Gen. 14 is another text whose unfolding acquires fuller meaning when we recognize the symbolic character of the names mentioned in v. 2.

5. This sentence does *not* imply that Ruth is trying to trap Boaz into marriage, for at this stage her hopes are much more modest.



SUGGESTED FURTHER READINGS

Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York, 1981), pp. 58–60.

Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield, 1983), pp. 83–110.

D. F. Rauber, "Literary Values in the Bible: The Book of Ruth," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 89 (1970), 27–37.

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# Esther

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THE Book of Esther tells Jews that their national liberation festival originates in a historical event. It explains to them why such a festival bears the non-Hebrew name Purim and instructs them how to observe it. It also seeks to imbue them with pride at the accomplishment of Jewish ancestors who lived in a strange land and faced ruthless foes.

The teller spares no effort to convince his audience of the story's historical setting: he frequently adopts the style of an archivist, giving dates for specific activities and providing genealogies for his main characters; he flaunts his (imperfect) knowledge of the Achaemenid Empire and its administration, scattering Persian words for which he gives Hebrew equivalents; he invents a few of the names he needs, imitating Persian nomenclature; he challenges readers to check his facts in the chronicles of past Persian kings—certainly an impossible assignment for the average reader.<sup>1</sup>

The exotic behavior of the foreigners and their court is also stressed. The storyteller makes observations on details in passing, as with the crowning of royal horses at parade time (6:8), or he builds a major subplot around them, as with the procedure for securing an audience with the Persian king (4:11). In telling how the king finds a replacement for Vashti (2:8–15), the storyteller lingers over stylized elements which are better known in the *Arabian Nights*: the need for two semesters to prepare a young woman physically for just one night with the king, and the tribulation of a king who must nightly rise to the occasion until he is released from it by the one true love.<sup>2</sup> This particular scene may not be the teller's most successful invention, for it is neither crude enough to arouse prurient interest nor focused sharply enough to keep us mindful of Esther's bounteous charm and appeal. It does, however, remain typical of Jewish romances of the Hellenistic period (such as Judith, Tobit, Susanna, and segments of Daniel) in exaggerating the manners and mores of others, and thus it vividly illustrates why Esther cannot be judged on its distortion of Persian practices.

The tale can be heard or read in a single session. It alternates action and description, although the two are rarely allowed to merge. The storyteller has in mind an audience who will not grow tired of repetitions,

and he adopts a chatty, possibly vernacular, Hebrew. Although sometimes lackluster and often prolix, this idiom nevertheless promotes ambiguity by depending on certain verbal forms which lack temporal precision (for example, the infinitive absolute). The teller is careful to use a language with a restricted vocabulary only when narrating action. However, when lingering on descriptions of specific scenes (such as the banquets or the search for a new queen) he uses a cataloguing style, rich in a vocabulary for luxurious living, often without conjunctions. The narrator often masterfully juxtaposes simultaneous activities within the confines of a single verse. An excellent example is the brilliant contrasts afforded in 3:15: "As the couriers swiftly fanned out with the king's resolution and as the decree was proclaimed in Susa's citadel, the king and Haman settled down to drink while Susa was struck dumb."<sup>3</sup>

The Book of Esther has far less dialogue than other narratives in Hebrew Scripture, and the storyteller sometimes attributes statements to groups rather than to individuals (as in 3:3, 5:14). Occasionally the teller flaunts his omniscience when revelation of a character's inner thoughts is important to the plot (as at 6:6). He is not beyond expecting his audience to suspend plausibility for the sake of a brilliant ending. Thus the story requires that Haman know nothing of Esther's relationship (let alone kinship) to the Jew Mordecai. In this ignorance he may be alone: Mordecai, after all, himself paced daily in front of the harem before Esther was chosen, and afterward everyone seems to be transmitting information between the two and among the Jews of Susa (see especially 2:22). There are other ambiguities, especially in the dialogues, whose precise import cannot easily be assessed. For example, Mordecai warns Esther that although she may feel safe within the palace, the help which comes to the Jews from "another quarter" could lead to her death and to that of her "father's household" (4:14). Esther, of course, is an orphan and may well be an only child.

Except for four central figures—the king, Mordecai, Esther, and Haman—persons who are given little or no background (Vashti, Memucan, Hegai, Hatach, Zeresh, Harbona) enter the story, carry the plot forward, and leave it without unduly burdening the audience's memory. The main characters themselves are deceptively static; but the development they exhibit as they interact with each other is not expected to alter the audience's attitude toward them.

Ahasuerus is a caricature of a king who is swayed by the first advice he hears; but this trait is required by the plot: all the multiple reversals that are featured in the story could not occur easily were the king single-minded in perspective or conviction. On the contrary, the king must be totally open to suggestion. Thus, except when the intoxicated monarch brashly asks for Queen Vashti's presence at the second banquet honoring the palace personnel (1:10–11), he never acts without some expressly stated

or subtly intimated advice. Indeed, the frequency with which advice is offered from all sources and to every character is such a major feature of Esther's plot structure that it has led some scholars wrongly to locate Esther's origins in Wisdom circles.

Ahasuerus is not without his droll moments, and the writer assigns him what may be the story's most comic line. When Esther denounces the man who has sold her and her people into slavery, the accused, of course, could be the king as well as Haman. Yet the events of barely a fortnight earlier are so hazy in his memory that Ahasuerus can answer: "Who is he and where is he who dares plan such a thing?"

The writer assigns Haman a rich assortment of postures befitting his evil character. He is proud of his subordination to a capricious king; yet he is so insecure that he brandishes his *vita* even before those who must know it well (5:9-12). Haman so obsessively needs to destroy Mordecai that he departs from his own plan in order to hasten the death of his archenemy. His vanity turns him into a buffoon (6:6); so does his panicked reaction to Esther's accusation (7:8). Yet Haman is not one-dimensional. During one brief moment, in fact, he even comes to realize the consequences of his own acts, and in this regard he may well deserve to be termed "antagonist." This occurs when Haman is told: "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of Jewish stock, you will not overcome him; you will certainly come to ruin in his presence" (6:13). Haman, however, is hardly a Persian Shylock, and his fall remains comic, never eliciting audience sympathy.

Esther enters the scene already favored by circumstances. A Jewish orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai, she is pretty and winsome; but she responds to what others expect of her. She becomes a queen because she lets others make decisions crucial to her future, and she can be browbeaten by Mordecai's threat even when assured of her husband's attachment (4:13-14). Yet, like many other women in Hebrew Scripture who come into their own after men create crises they cannot resolve themselves, Esther does rise to the occasion, and even after Mordecai has become the king's main adviser, she finds the means by which to save her people (8:1-6). That she returns to Mordecai's control after her moment of triumph tells us much about the circumscribed range of movement antiquity allowed women.

The writer's fondness for Esther is obvious at all stages of the story, and he gives her the most personal voice of any character. Esther can show anxiety about her cousin's welfare (4:4) as well as elicit pathos at the burden she carries in behalf of her people (4:16). She can be feminine and mysteriously coquettish (5:8), but she can also be ministerial (8:5, 9:13). Her most brilliant lines, however, are delivered at the second banquet, when she flatters, pleads, deplures, then turns sarcastic—the last, admittedly lost on Ahasuerus—all within two verses (7:3-4):

If you favor me, O king, and if it please you, may my own life be given me as my wish, and my people as my request; for we have been sold—I and my people—to be destroyed, massacred, and exterminated. Had we been sold just to become male and female slaves, I would have kept my silence; for about such a trifle, it is not worth troubling the king.

The teller sustains tension for two more verses, allowing Esther to deliver the coup de grace: “the man, the malevolent enemy, is this evil Haman!” (7:6).

Mordecai is played like a theme in a Sibelius symphony, with fragments of his personality occurring scattered in the early chapters; only after Haman’s fall are they integrated into a full version to represent the writer’s perfect image of a partisan Jew in a position of mastery: “Indeed, Mordecai the Jew ranked just below King Ahasuerus; he was highly regarded by the Jews and was very popular among his brethren, constantly seeking his people’s welfare and interceding in behalf of his kindred” (10:3).

From the moment he first appears, Mordecai is a courtier, and his battles are with his colleagues at the royal court. The writer does not judge Mordecai when he brings his brethren to the brink of disaster either because of rancor (he had just saved the king and felt that he deserved better than to be forgotten) or because of insubordination and misplaced pride (it is the king, after all, who determines how to treat Haman). The storyteller is deadpan as he reports Mordecai’s quick forsaking of his mourning garb when Haman calls for him with royal attire and chariot (chap. 6). Mordecai has come to represent the Jew who will not be bowed by circumstances and who will seize unforeseen opportunity. Moreover, the teller, who is certainly familiar with Israel’s history, knows that under no circumstances would a descendant of Saul—in this case Mordecai (2:5)—allow a descendant of Agag—in this case Haman (3:1, 11; 9:24)—once again to escape God’s will and thus avoid extirpation (see 1 Sam. 15). Mordecai himself seems aware of the momentous aspect of this confrontation when he berates Esther: “Even if you maintain silence in this situation, relief and liberation will come to the Jews from another source, while you and your family will perish. Who knows, you may well have come to the throne just for this occasion” (4:14).

The characterization of Mordecai changes radically in the other version of Esther available from antiquity: the redaction in Greek preserved in the Septuagint and containing 107 additional verses not found in the Hebrew.<sup>4</sup> Mordecai of the Greek version is a more detached person, more obviously aware of the cosmic struggles in which Jews are mere pawns. This version is set a full year before the Hebrew text begins its tale, and precisely ten years before Haman casts lots. Mordecai receives a dream full of enigmatic visions. He awakes and cannot resolve them but stumbles upon the plot to kill the king. He is immediately rewarded by the king,

for which he earns Haman's jealousy and hatred. The Greek text intimates Haman's involvement in the plot, and his Agagite descent is made Macedonian (Greek A:1-12). Mordecai's refusal to treat Haman as the king had commanded is given a noble reason in one of the many prayers inserted in the text: "You know, Lord, that it was not because of insolence or arrogance or vanity that I . . . did not bow down before arrogant Haman . . . But I did this in order that I might not put the glory of man above the glory of God" (Greek C:5-7). When, after many self-conscious prayers (not available to the Hebrew version), Mordecai reaches the pinnacle of power, he can recall his dream and find correlations to the events of the past ten years (Greek F:1-10). The reader of the Greek version, therefore, never needs to delve into Israel's past to appreciate fully the book's many mysteries; they are all resolved for him by a didactically explicit Mordecai.

In either version, the fate which overtakes Haman is predetermined, and in the ensuing triumph of Mordecai the writer gives his audience opportunity to hope for the future of the Jews. In the Greek account, the storyteller suppresses all that is comic, delivering his grave lesson in a serious tone; and his stylistic and structural imitation of apocalyptic literature (Daniel and the many apocalypses of the Hellenistic period) serves his purpose perfectly. In the Hebrew rendering, however, the comic potential of the story is richly exploited, and laughter at human vanity, gall, and blindness becomes the vehicle by which the writer gives his tale integrity and moral vision. Were it not for its modern pejorative connotation, "travesty" (wherein serious subjects are treated lightly) would suit Esther as a literary category. Setting aside the questions of intellectual influence or contact, we can say that this is essentially the same literary mode adopted by Hellenistic romances (for example, Apuleius' *Golden Ass*), by the medieval fabliaux, and by Voltaire in his satiric *Contes philosophiques* (such as *Candide*, *Zadig*, and *Micromégas*). In all such stylized, farcical narratives, the laughter is broad and comes from the incongruity of situations and from the sharp reversals of fate.

In the Hebrew version of Esther, banquets are a key to the tale's structure. This version opens with two successive banquets (the second also includes Vashti's own) set in Ahasuerus' third regnal year (1:3-9), and it ends with two others, set in his twelfth year, wherein the Jews celebrate their victory over their enemies (9:17-18). These parallels bracket the tale, of course, but, more important, they complete a gradual shift of interest from generalities regarding the Persian Empire to particularities of Jewish concern. The lavish descriptions of Ahasuerus' commemorative banquets are therefore balanced by the reasoned prescriptions for festivities perpetually imposed upon the Jews by Mordecai's edict (9:20-23) and by Esther's letter (9:29).

The banquet in honor of Esther's installation as queen occurs (appro-

priately enough, given the formulaic importance of the number) in the king's seventh year (2:18). The king's munificence on this occasion contrasts sharply with his moody response at the end of Vashti's banquet. The primary purpose of the king's banquet, however, is to establish the time for Mordecai's thwarting of the attempted regicide (2:21-23), an act which ultimately will affect Haman's fate more than any other. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Greek version places it at the beginning of the story, thus subordinating plot to pedagogy.

Five more years will pass before Mordecai openly clashes with Haman. In this central section of his tale the teller perceptibly quickens the narrative pace. On the first month of Ahasuerus' twelfth year, Haman casts his fateful lot, determining that the year shall not end without the Jews' full destruction. The private banquet that Haman and the king enjoy at the end of their conclave (3:15) not only is set against the despair that obtains among the Jews in Susa but also contrasts sharply with Mordecai's mourning and the Jews' three-day fast at Esther's bidding (4:15-16). These events themselves are but background for the most brilliantly conceived of the tale's banquet scenes; for within a week's time, the festivities offered by Esther will bring about a complete reversal of fortunes between Mordecai and Haman.

The Hebrew version exploits a motif that was all too familiar and even realistic to audiences in antiquity: a usurper murders a king and seeks legitimacy by forcibly appropriating the reigning queen.<sup>5</sup> These crucial scenes (chaps. 5-8) change so rapidly and are filled with so much movement that the audience hardly realizes how carefully they are plotted. In fact, some scholars have mistakenly tried to use these chapters to prove that Esther is formed of two separate strands, one focusing on the harem intrigues involving Vashti and Esther, the other on the court struggles involving Mordecai and Haman. In order to appreciate the artistry of these scenes, we should recognize that Haman's fall requires the conjunction of *three* separate factors. By itself, Esther's accusation of personal malice might only have led the king to investigate the matter, as he did earlier in similar circumstances (2:23). The king himself might not have decided instantly to impale Haman if he had not very recently remembered Mordecai's loyalty. With Harbona's revelation, right after Haman's clumsy lurch at the queen, that Haman has prepared a (seventy-five-foot!) stake for Mordecai, the evidence for a conspiracy fully crystallizes in the king's mind. Moreover, the scene realizes its comic potential through the contrast between two separate points of view: that of the king, who grows increasingly suspicious, and that of Haman, who, even to the last, never knows why the king, let alone Esther, turns against him.

Esther's first appearance before the king and the latter's offer to place at her disposal half his kingdom (repeated almost moronically later) may

well have erotic implications because of the submissive tone she adopts, for the king lapses into unseemly familiarity when he talks about "Esther" (without her title "the queen") to his aides (5:5). What this first visit does, however, is to prepare us for the king's acceptance of Esther's second banquet invitation. We cannot know how Esther's deferential remarks in extending her second invitation, this time within earshot of Haman, affect the king: do they arouse his jealousy and alert him to Haman's future behavior? In Haman's case, however, Esther's words certainly raise his self-confidence and lead him to cast prudence aside in order to seek Mordecai's immediate death. It is at this point, therefore, that the noose opens wide for Haman.

Chapter 6, which tells of the king's insomnia and Haman's misplaced advice, contains a first-rate example of rude comedy and reversal of expectation. However, it also adds a bit of information that will be crucial in the next scene. When Haman advises that he whom the king wishes to honor be dressed to look and act like royalty, he is in effect proposing treatment (we know from extant cuneiform evidence) reserved for substitute kings.

Haman returns home to receive his supporters' forecast of doom. This vignette is pivotal. The mourning with which he is clothed harks back to Mordecai's own, but the language at 6:12 (*hafuy ro'sh*, "crestfallen") prefigures his despair (*peney haman hafu*, "ashen faced") when Ahasuerus accuses him of assaulting the queen (7:8).<sup>6</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, that, badly shaken by the crowning of Mordecai and by his own family's evil prognoses, Haman is not able to react coolly to Esther's accusation.

Everything falls together at Esther's second soirée. She denounces Haman; the king is angered and rushes out to reflect; a terrified Haman turns to Esther for succor; the king returns to find his vizier prostrate on his wife's couch and suspects the worst. When Harbona comes in with the announcement that Haman had planned to kill the very man whom the king recently honored for loyalty, Haman's fate is sealed. As befits the crime, the punishment is severe: the king orders the execution of Haman's whole family. Any audience in antiquity would recognize the annihilation of a whole clan as standard punishment for treason. Any Jew would find in Haman's discomfiture an excellent instance of measure given for measure; if cognizant of Scripture, a Jew would moreover realize that Haman's downfall finally completes the job of destroying the Agagites that God imposed on the Benjaminite Saul. Anyone else, including all those who now read the tale purely for pleasure, will find in it unambiguously drawn characters and fully resolved situations. In Esther, unsubtle villains meet with brutal fates; proud partisans are fully vindicated; lovely heroines retain the affection of all; and stolid, dim-witted monarchs are there to be used by all.



## NOTES

1. For an evaluation of the narrator's knowledge of Persia and its customs, see L. B. Patton's thorough study in his *International Critical Commentary to Esther* (New York, 1908), pp. 64–77. Such assessments are repeated in almost every major contribution on Esther, since the book is constantly—and, I might add, unnecessarily—subjected to historical analysis.

2. In 2:19 the text ought to read “when various [*shonot* rather than *shenit*, ‘a second time’] young women were gathered,” thus removing the likelihood of another such trial for the king. Thus 2:19–20 synchronizes with 2:12–15.

3. All translations from the Hebrew are my own [AT].

4. The Greek version is readily available in any Roman Catholic translation of Scriptures (Jerusalem Bible, Douay) or any Protestant rendering which includes the Apocrypha (New English Bible). I have relied on C. A. Moore's fine Anchor Bible commentary, *Daniel, Esther and Jeremiah: The Additions* (New York, 1977).

5. As noted above, the Greek version presumes that conspiracy is at stake and declares it to be such from the outset of the story. The Greek narrative is more obvious in this respect, and therefore less playful and interesting.

6. The Hebrew of the phrase in 7:8 is difficult.

## SUGGESTED FURTHER READING

Sandra Beth Berg, *The Book of Esther*, Society for Biblical Literature Dissertation Series, 44 (Missoula, Mont., 1979).

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