

UPSIDE THE WORLD TURNED DOWN

THE BOOK OF ESTHER

“This is arguably the most ironically comic scene in the entire Bible. While Haman plots Mordecai’s outrageous death, the king plans to honor Mordecai’s faithful service.” -Karen Jobes

Recap of Ch. 3-4: For Such a Time as This

In **Esther 3-4**, Haman plots the destruction of all the Jews in the Persian Empire as a petty act of revenge against Mordecai, the Jewish official who refused to bow down to Haman. Mordecai tells Esther about the danger their people were facing and begged her to speak to the King on their behalf—even though this might cost her her life. Despite the risk, Esther agreed to go and plead for mercy from the King.

Esther 5: The Plot Thickens

This chapter focuses on two conversations. First, Esther visits King Xerxes unannounced on behalf of her people. Second, Haman’s wife gives him some bad advice on how to sooth his sullen soul.

Esther 5:1-3: Esther Visits the King

- **Third Day (v. 1)** — Good things happen on the third day!
- **“He was pleased with her” (v. 2).** Literally she found favor (**grace**) in his eyes (one of the words for God’s character in Exodus 34:6).

- **“What is Your Request?” (v. 3)** is the question a king or ruler would ask if a person found favor (grace) in their eyes.
- **Example of Providence:** It wasn’t just a lucky coincidence that Xerxes was positively disposed towards Esther...it was **Providential!**

Esther 5:4-8: Esther Asks For a Group Date

- **The World Turned Upside Down:** In 5:4-5, Esther requests a banquet (the first of two), and the King gives orders so that *he can obey her*.
 - The King keeps showing that he’ll basically go along with any plan that is presented to him.
- **Haman and Xerxes (and Esther?) are Drinking Wine (v. 6)**— Big surprise, right? But, compare this to **Ruth 3** when Naomi instructed Ruth to wait until Boaz had had his fill of wine before making her move. Maybe this was the best time for Esther to strike... or maybe not, considering Vashti was deposed when the wine was flowing (**Esther 1**).
- **The King Asks Again—What Do You Want? (v. 6).** He suspects that there is more here than the Banquet... who would risk their life just to have dinner?
- **Esther's reply:** Let’s do this again (Banquet #2)!

Esther 5:9-10a: Haman's Mood Swings

Esther's first meeting with Xerxes was in the palace when he extended his scepter and offered her grace. The second meeting was during the first banquet that just wrapped up. A second banquet is then planned. Between the two banquets, there is an **interlude** focusing on Haman's conversation with his wife (ch. 5) and the King's sleepless night in the palace (ch. 6).

- **The World Turned Upside Down: Haman is actually happy for once!** (v. 9). I guess dinner with the King and Queen (and a lot of wine) will do that.
- ...But then he sees Mordecai, remembers how upset he is and goes back to his natural state of being **enraged** (5:10).

Esther 5:10b-14: Gruesome Advice

- **Haman boasts to his family about his vast wealth and privilege** (v. 11-12) — Compare to **Esther 1:4**, when Xerxes threw the opening banquet to impress all his nobles and military officials.
 - **Haman is like Xerxes Jr. or Diet Xerxes**— Cut from the same cloth, but much more sinister.
- **Notice the Significant Foreshadowing in 5:11!** Haman brags about the fact that the King had “*elevated* him above the other nobles and officials.”
 - Haman is speaking metaphorically, but by the end of the story he will literally be elevated (on a 75 foot pole) above everyone else...
- **Haman Can't Get No Satisfaction** (v. 13) — Apparently all the status and wealth in the Empire isn't enough to satisfy Haman so long as Mordecai is still in the picture.
- **More Terrible, Violent, Selfish Advice from the Gallery** (v. 14) — Makes sense, so go kill him! This part of the story has a rough parallel to **1 Kings 21:1-16**, where King Ahab wants something that isn't his, and his wife Jezebel tells him to murder the person standing in his way to get it.

Esther 6: God Opposes the Proud, But Shows Favor to the Humble.

Haman's plot begins to unravel at the same time that Mordecai's fortunes experience a dramatic improvement.

Esther 6:1-3: “Sleepless in Susa-ttle”

- **Example of Providence:** It's not a coincidence that Xerxes has a sleepless night at the perfect time, it's Providence. And it's not a coincidence that his

spontaneous history lesson just so happened to remind him of Mordecai's act of loyalty (from **2:19-23**) that was never properly rewarded on the very night that Haman would ask permission to execute him. **It's all the Providence of God!**

- **The World Turned Upside Down: “What honor and recognition has Mordecai received for this?”** (v. 3) Xerxes is thinking about someone other than himself! Is this the first time in the story he's cared about someone else?

Esther 6:4-6a: A Little Dramatic Irony

- **Dramatic Irony** is the literary term that describes a moment where the audience in a story knows more than the characters do.
 - Here, the audience knows about Xerxes' sleepless night, the history lesson, and his desire to repay Mordecai for his act of loyalty. Haman however, has no idea about this.
- **“The man the King Delights to Honor”** (v. 6) The audience knows Xerxes is talking about Haman, but Haman assumes he's talking about him.

Esther 6:6b-9: Haman, a Case Study in Narcissism

- **“Who is there that the king would rather honor than me?”** (v. 6b) — It's pretty obvious that Haman was a narcissist.
 - **Haman** is the **Gaston** of the story, the chauvinistic, egocentric villain from *Beauty and the Beast*.

*♪♪ No one eats like Haman
No one drinks like Haman
No one dreams up such terrible things like Haman
He's incredibly good at manipulating
My what a guy that Haman! ♪♪*
- **The King's Plan for the Man He Delighted in:**
 - Royal robe worn by the King
 - Horse ridden by the King, with royal crest.
 - Calls this man a “noble prince”
 - Led through the city like a parade of honor.
 - *Like a game-day jersey from a professional athlete, or the same wedding gown worn by your grandmother, or a chance to fly on Air Force One.*

Esther 6:10-14: Haman is Humiliated and Mordecai is Honored

- **The World Turned Upside Down: Haman is ordered to give this honor to Mordecai, the man he despises (v. 10).**
- The Bible has a consistent theme of God opposing the proud while elevating the humble:
 - **Proverbs 3:34**, “The Lord mocks proud mockers but shows favor to the humble and oppressed.”
 - **James 4:5 / 1 Peter 5:12**, “God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.” (based on Proverbs 3:34)
 - **Luke 1:52**, “He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.”
- **Haman’s reaction to this is to cover his head in grief (v. 12).**
 - The Jews in the Empire are in sackcloth and ashes, mourning the impending destruction of their people.
 - Their grief is a result of a credible threat of genocide against their people.
 - Haman is in grief because he was forced to honor someone he despised.
- **The World Turned Upside Down: Finally... Some Good Advice from the Gallery! (v. 13).**
 - For once, the crowd of advice-givers finally has something constructive to offer: You’ve awakened a sleeping giant.
 - Stop antagonizing the Jews, because you will come to ruin if you do (more foreshadowing).
- **God opposed the proud (Haman) but showed favor to the humble (Mordecai).** And now it was time for the third and final meeting between Esther, Xerxes, and Haman (v. 14).
 - We are left to wonder... what will happen next?

Chiastic Structure of Reversals in Esther

3:10—the king gives Haman his ring	8:2—the king gives Mordecai the same ring
3:12—Haman summons the king’s scribes	8:9—Mordecai summons the king’s scribes
3:12—letters written, sealed with ring	8:10—letters written, sealed with same ring
3:13—the Jews, even women and children, to be killed on one day	8:11—the enemies, even women and children, to be killed on one day
3:14—Haman’s decree publicly displayed as law	8:13—Mordecai’s decree publicly displayed as law
3:15—couriers go out in haste	8:14—couriers go out in haste
3:15—the city of Susa is bewildered	8:15—the city of Susa rejoices
4:1—Mordecai wears sackcloth and ashes	8:15—Mordecai wears royal robes
4:1—Mordecai goes through city crying	6:11—Mordecai led through the city in honor
5:14—Zeresh advises Mordecai’s death	6:13—Zeresh predicts Haman’s ruin

From Karen Jobes’ Commentary on Esther (NIV Application Series)

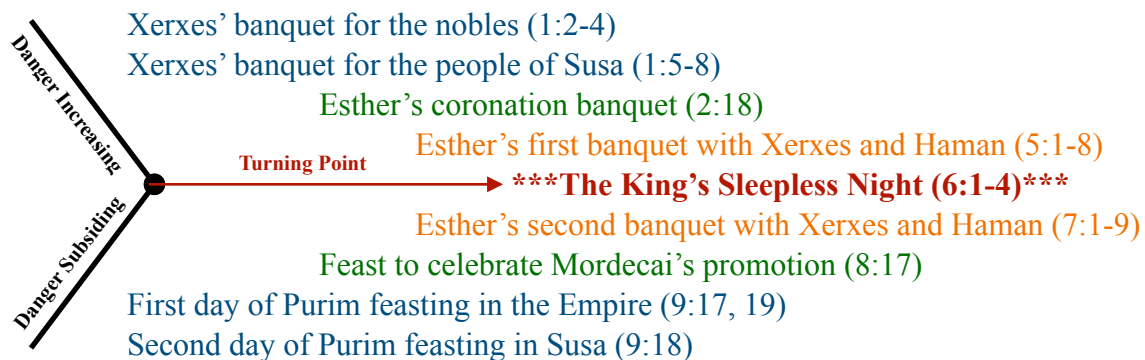
Literary Analysis of the Book of Esther

Adapted from Karen Jobes' Commentary on Esther (NIV Application Series)

Banquets and Feasting in Esther

The book of Esther has a **parallel literary structure** centering around the different feasts, banquets, and celebrations. Xerxes' two banquets in the beginning of the story correspond to the Jews' two feasts at the end. Esther's coronation banquet corresponds to a later feast that celebrates Mordecai's promotion. And of course Esther throws two banquets for Xerxes and Haman, which are separated by a key event in chapter 6: the King's Sleepless night.

This color-coded outline attempts to show the parallel structure in the book of Esther. And even more specifically, this is an example of chiasmic structure¹, a specific kind of parallelism where the elements that correspond to one another build up in one order and then repeat in reverse order.



The Turning Point in the Story

A literary analysis of the book of Esther reveals that the turning point in the story is the King's sleepless night (in red above), which prompted the history lesson which revealed the need to honor Mordecai. Karen Jobes offers the following thoughts on the significance of this detail:

“The King’s sleepless night is the pivot point of the literary structure of the story around which the great reversal of destiny occurs. By making the pivot point of the peripety [turning point] an insignificant event rather than the point of highest dramatic tension, the author is taking the focus away from human action. By separating the pivot point of the peripety in Esther from the point of highest dramatic tension, the characters of the story are not spotlighted as the cause of the reversal. This reinforces the message that no one in the story, not even the most powerful person in the empire, is in control of what is about to happen. An unseen power is controlling the reversal of destiny. It is particularly appropriate for the pivot point of the peripety that reverses the expected outcome to occur at an ordinary and insignificant event in a book whose meta-message is about divine providence.”

The takeaway in this is that the content of the book of Esther (i.e. a message about God's providence) is communicated not only in the *events* of the story, but also in the *form* of the story. We can learn something about God based on what happens, but also from the way that the narrator constructs the story from a literary perspective. As a work of literature, Esther reveals the King's sleepless night as the turning point in the story, and that reinforces the theological point about God's Providence.

God is ultimately responsible for the events in our lives, and he often works through the seemingly insignificant moments to accomplish his grand purposes.

¹ Chi is a Greek letter that looks like an English X. The literary structure resembles the left half of an “X”, where the story comes to a point and then repeats the elements in reverse order.