SOUTHEASTERN

THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

Vol. 1, No. 1 Winter 2010

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Southeastern Theological Review
is published biannually for the faculty of
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ISSN 2156-9401
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STR 1/1 (Winter 2010) 15-28

When Samuel Met Esther: Narrative Focalisation, Intertextuality, and Theology

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The book of Esther continues to be regarded as one of the strangest books of the Bible. Quite apart from being the only book in the Bible that definitely does not mention God,[1] it seems to go out of its way to avoid obviously theological statements. Even its most famed comments in 4:14 about help arising for the Jews from 'another place' and asking whether Esther has come to power for 'such a time as this' are more oblique in their theology (if indeed there is any theology) than we might wish.[2] Indeed, we only need to reach 4:16 to find Esther ordering a severe three day fast that excludes any reference to prayer, though this has not stopped the GNB from including it.[3] In short, Esther not only does not mention God, it seems to do its best to avoid mentioning God, and in this way can be distinguished from any other book of the Bible. Indeed, although it seeks to validate the feast of Purim as a continuing element within Jewish life, its reason for doing so is not overtly theological.[4] On the other hand, its place within the Bible suggests that, from the perspective of the canon, it is regarded as a theological text, albeit one that seems to avoid that which is generally regarded as central to a theological process.

This has not stopped scholars and popular readers deploying any number of methods for finding something theological in Esther. If we set aside the purely

1. Song of Songs 8:6 might mention Yahweh, but this is disputed.

2. See John M. Wiebe, "Esther 4:14: 'Will Relief and Deliverance Arise for the Jews from Another Place?'," *CBQ* 53 (1991): 409–15.

3. There is no reference to prayer in either MT or LXX, though curiously AT 5:11 (the equivalent verse) has prayer but no fast.

4. Many scholars dispute the historical link between the book of Esther and the feast of Purim, most recently Jona Schellekens, "Accession Days and Holidays: The Origins of the Jewish Festival of Purim," *JBL* 128 (2009): 115–34. There are important historical issues involved, but the important point is that even if Esther does not provide the historical basis for Purim (and this is the point that is debated) its function as literature is still to provide that foundation. However, this debate is linked to the larger question of the historicity of the narrative, and since there are no points at which its history can absolutely be rejected there remains sound reason for also assuming that the association with Purim has a basis in history. Cf. Barry G. Webb, *Five Festal Garments: Christian Reflections on the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther* (Leicester: Apollos, 2000), 112–13.

allegorical as an exegetical process which lacks any control,[5] then we are left with varying approaches which seek either to recognise the 'God shaped holes' left in the narrative[6] or to seek the theological intent of the narrative through its literary form, in particular through its intertextual relations with other parts of the canon. By far the most popular suggestions here are that Esther draws on themes of wisdom[7] or that there are links with the Joseph story, the Exodus or the book of Daniel.[8] In reality of course, since there is no necessary limit to the number of texts with which a text may create intertextual allusions, we need not rule out any of these, though exactly how the presence of such intertextuality creates theological intent is somewhat complex and under-explored. Of course, neither are the concepts of 'God shaped holes' and intertextuality contradictory to one another since these intertextual links may help readers recognise the theological discourse evident within the narrative, though they are not necessary to the intertextuality.

So, we can reasonably suggest that some progress has been made in exploring how Esther develops its theological intent. Nevertheless, we need to take this one step further and ask how it is that intertextuality develops theology within the book. The answer developed here is that Esther develops its theology through its narrative technique, specifically through limiting the field of vision available to us as readers, so that the intertexts to which it alludes become the theological prism through which we are to read the narrative. We will consider this through the book of Samuel since this is an important intertext for Esther, though to date the relationship between Esther and Samuel has not been raised as an important one for the book despite some often noted key links between Esther and Samuel.

Narrative Focalisation in Esther

That Esther is a narrative text hardly needs proving, and its narrative skill has been widely recognised, especially as it has been an important text in testing out literary models of interpretation. Even 9:20–10:3, which is much more a record of letters and notes from various sources than a narrative in the classic sense, contains narrative elements that develop the themes of the main story even if these verses are much more concerned with the institution of Purim as an ongoing festival within Judaism than the main story as such.[9] This does not mean that the main narrative lacks problems – such as why Esther seems to delay her request for a

5. Seen, for example, in Major Ian W. Thomas, *If I Perish, I Perish: The Christian Life as Seen in the Book of Esther* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1967).

6. J. A. Loader, "Esther as a Novel with Various Levels of Meaning," *ZAW* 90 (1978), 417–21.

7. See, for example, Robert Gordis, "Religion, Wisdom and History in the Book of Esther – a New Solution to an Ancient Crux," *JBL* 100 (1981), 359–88, and S. Talmon, "'Wisdom' in the Book of Esther," *VT* 13 (1963), 419–55.

8. See W. Lee Humphreys, "A Lifestyle for the Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel," *JBL* 92 (1975), 211–23.

9. Esther 9:24 – 25 does contain a summary of the main plot, though it differs in numerous

reversal of Haman's decree – but on the whole it is a well developed narrative with a clear introduction and a neatly developed theme of the reversal of fortunes motif.

Since this much is generally recognised we can focus more specifically on narrative techniques employed. Although consideration of narrative technique can draw on a range of options, one aspect that merits particular attention is the use of narrative perspective, especially what Genette has called focalisation,[10] though this is sometimes considered as a point of view. As we shall see, focalisation is a matter worth considering because Esther employs it in a distinctive manner, standing outside the more typical approach of Old Testament narrative. Although Genette recognises the possibility of multiple modes being employed within a given narrative, he notes three basic modes of focalisation which show a sliding scale of knowledge on the part of the narrator relative to the characters within the narrative. Focalisation is thus concerned with how much the narrator knows (or at least chooses to disclose) relative to that known by the characters within the narrative. The three options he develops are:

Zero focalisation, where the narrator knows more than the characters, and is thus the traditional omniscient narrator. This is the model that Sternberg regards as normal within the Old Testament apart from those circumstances where the narrator is a character within the narrative such as we find in the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah.[11] But as we shall see, Esther represents a much more restrained model that is broken directly only in 6:6 where we read of what Haman 'said in his heart,' though in 1:11 we do read that Vashti's beauty was the reason for inviting her to the royal party. Although this suggests that the narrator could have operated with zero focalisation, it is clear that the narrator has chosen not to do so. It is, in effect, the narrative equivalent of 'I have more to tell you than I have space for here', a nod to readers that there is more to be said than actually will be said. Readers are thus invited to reflect on the events narrated to see what hints are provided as to their meaning.

Internal focalisation, in which the narrator knows only as much as the characters. As a model this is best suited to those who narrate from within a narrative (though this is not strictly necessary), but is not employed in Esther apart from reports by characters within the narrative, such as Esther to Ahasuerus in chapter 7. The obvious examples in the Old Testament are found in the memoirs of Ezra and Nehemiah.

External focalisation, in which the narrator knows (or discloses) less than the characters, following them around but not showing or developing insights into their character or motivation that cannot be deduced from their direct actions.

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details from the main plot. However, these differences are probably because of the emphases of the summary rather than matters of substance.

10. Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980), 185–211. See also his responses to criticism of his work in, idem, *Narrative Discourse Revisited* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 72–79.

11. Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 12, 84–87.

This, apart from the direct observation at 6:6, is the principal mode employed within Esther, meaning that Esther's mode of narration stands outside the dominant approaches of the Old Testament.

External Focalisation: Ahasuerus & Vashti

To demonstrate the use of external focalisation we need to note a few examples as proving this comprehensively would require us to work through the entire text, which is plainly impractical. Hence, two examples will need to suffice. First, we read in Esther 1:1–9 of a sequence of parties thrown by Ahasuerus, initially one lasting six months which is perhaps better thought of as a festival, and then one for one week for the palace staff, the latter of which apparently involved a great deal of drinking. In passing, we should note that this establishes both a recurring motif through the book, which is particularly interested in feasting, and also key elements in Ahasuerus' characterisation, but we are never told this directly. We are left to infer from the way the story is told that he is fond of a feast, and especially of a drink since the book's preferred term for feast (משתה) is particularly associated with drinking, though we will later read of the 'banquet of wine' (5:6, 7:2), a term which adds emphasis to their normal process. The narrator thus points to elements of his characterisation which could be developed by making direct comment but which is developed through the narrative. As this is relatively common in the Old Testament we do not need to develop it here.[12] But the point is that this is consistent with the refusal to tell us anything about the motivation of the characters. Thus, at the end of the second feast Ahasuerus decided to send for his queen, Vashti, to show her beauty. Exactly what this means is left unsaid, and rabbinic texts develop the point, with some suggesting she was to come naked apart from the royal crown. However, the important point for the narrative as a whole is that Vashti refused to come and we are never told why this was so. Here is a pivotal moment in the narrative that fundamentally affects all that happens since it opens the way for Vashti's removal and Esther's arrival, but it is never explained, and contrary to the more common patterns of the Old Testament we are not given hints that allow us to fill the gap. Hence, by adopting external focalisation the narrator refuses to fill the gap for readers, though as we shall see, provides hints by reference to the books of Samuel that give us guidance of both a practical and theological nature on this event, but not on Vashti's own intentions.

External Focalisation: Mordecai & Haman

As a second example we can note Mordecai's refusal to offer homage to Haman in 3:1–6, even though homage had been ordered by the king. Of course, in indicating that the king had ordered homage be given there may be a hint that Haman was hardly worthy of respect since it would normally be given anyway, and the

12. Reticence in developing characterisation is not unusual in either the Old Testament or the New, and that we are usually only given sufficient information about particular characters as is needed to develop the plot is normal. See Tremper Longman III, *Literary Approaches to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 88–91.

other officials in the king's gate do offer the respect required. Indeed, so strange is Mordecai's behaviour that the narrator notes that even the other officials were troubled by it, constantly asking him why this was the case, but that he refused to answer them. According to most translations, the only response he gave is that he was Jewish, though it is not impossible that 3:4 should be understood impersonally so that it was the fact that they knew Mordecai to be Jewish that led to them taking their question to Haman. In either case, practically all commentators note that being Jewish is no reason for failing to give proper respect. The narrator knows Mordecai has not given homage, but does not provide a direct answer to the question of why, adopting the position of external focalisation. Similarly, we are not told why Haman then decided to launch a pogrom against all Jews within the empire. Adopting external focalisation means that we are left to ask questions, just as we are also left to ponder why Esther decided to have two banquets. But, again, we shall see that the way the story is told is specifically designed to allude to other parts of the Old Testament because of the narrator's hints that more can be known. Although this includes many parts of the Old Testament, these passages make particular reference to Samuel, so readers are directed to those intertexts which provide us with a mechanism for reflecting on both the motivation of the characters and the theology of the book.

Adopting an external focalisation is thus an important strategy for the book of Esther and may provide at least one reason why God is never mentioned directly within it. Put simply, barring some form of prophetic insight, as readers we can generally only recognise God's involvement in events retrospectively. But since prophetic insight is comparatively rare, retrospective recognition is the situation in which God's people generally find themselves. External focalisation is not a denial of God's involvement in the narrative world created by the book, but rather a key device for encouraging readers to identify its theological concerns through the intertextual allusions it makes.

Intertextuality and Theology

Although intertextuality can mean many things in contemporary literary theory, it is enough for our purposes to think of the term as an intentional reference or allusion to another text that is in some way significant for the meaning of the text under consideration. The term, of course, is only of relatively recent coinage, reaching back to the work of Julia Kristeva (though building on the concept of dialogism in Bakhtin),[13] but it adds to the older concepts of allusion or influence

13. For an overview of the development of the concept, see Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein, "Introduction" in Jay Clayton and Eric Rothstein (eds.), *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 3–29. On the specifics added by Kristeva, see Roland Francois Lack, "Intertextuality or Influence: Kristeva, Bloom and the *Poésies* of Isidore Ducasse," in Michael Worton and Judith Still (eds.), *Intertextuality: Theories and Practices* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 130–42.

in that the text is recognised as intentionally doing something through a reference to another text – it is not simply a matter of being clever for the sake of it. Texts are taken up and redeployed in subsequent texts, so that the meaning of the intertext is also shaped by the reading of it in subsequent texts. As a result, the reading experience is much richer. Readers may also initiate intertextual considerations, though we will not consider this aspect here because such concerns are much harder to control when looking at the intertextual relationship of two specific texts. We should also recognise that although the term 'intertextuality' is a recent one, the concept is not – as Still and Worton note, the concept is 'at least as old as recorded human society.'[14] What is new is recognising that it contributes to the processes of analysis available to us, not the practice itself because authors have almost always been saturated in other texts. The question for us is how that saturation expresses itself and its import for reading a particular text.

An important reason for employing intertextuality within the composition of a text is to place it within a tradition. This is a well known technique among novelists and poets,[15] but is equally plausible within the biblical material. Indeed, where there might be reasons not to express one's theological perceptions too directly, intertextual allusion might serve as a primary means of alerting readers to the framework with which they are to read a text. Thus readers encounter a new text, but the intertextual framework it creates, a framework which might be reinforced by the history of its interpretation for subsequent readers, is itself of considerable importance for its interpretation. That is, author-introduced intertextuality becomes a primary pointer that guides readers on how they are to interpret a text. Poststucturalist critics, such as Roland Barthes or Jacques Derrida take intertextuality far beyond this, but their concern is with reader-introduced intertextuality and once we have taken this step we have surrendered the possibility that the text itself might mean something. Although it is fair to suggest that ancient texts employed intertextuality as a compositional technique, there is no evidence that they did so with the expectation that readers would simply make them an object of play.[16] Rather, meaning is intended to exist within the text, but that meaning may itself be intertextual. As readers, therefore, we are to be attuned to the intertextual references that the text initiates, but we can no longer claim to be practising exegesis if we move to other forms of intertextuality. This is because doing so means moving away from the pointers to the tradition in which the text wishes to be read. It is, of course, a perfectly legitimate reading strategy to read a particular text against the grain, but one can only do that once we have established what that

14. Judith Still and Michael Worton, "Introduction" in Worton and Still (eds.), *Intertextuality*, 2. They then demonstrate (pp. 2–7) that the concept was already being analysed by classical writers, usually in terms of imitation.

15. Still and Worton, "Introduction," 19.

16. But see George Aichele, Peter Miscall, and Richard Walsh, "An Elephant in the Room: Historical-Critical and Postmodern Interpretations of the Bible," *JBL* 128/2 (2009), 403, on the value of reader introduced intertextuality.

grain is. As readers concerned with the interpretation of a particular text, therefore, we need to establish the tradition within which a text seeks to place itself.

Such an approach therefore leads us back to the author and the possibility of authorial intent. But is this possible within an intertextual framework? Theorists differ here, but unless all texts are indeterminate and thus subject only to free play it is not unreasonable to assume that texts were composed with the intention of communicating something. What that is can only be determined on the basis of the evidence of the text itself – we cannot attempt to enter the author's psychology through anything but the text – but barring obvious evidence of sloppy composition we can work towards understanding that intent, though we should certainly guard against some of the excesses of the past.[17] Not least, we should note that a text may intend to be open in its meaning, as Thistelton argues happens with the parables,[18] though this is not quite the same as saying that all texts are indeterminate, merely that there may be more than one level of meaning possible, each of which is valid in its own terms.

Although one could expand this considerably, the presence of some degree of intertextuality that serves to establish the tradition within which a text like Esther is to be situated can be seen in a similar light. One can read the narrative of Esther perfectly well without seeing the varying levels of intertextuality and still appreciate the meaning communicated by the text, but at the same time it is the intertextuality that enriches our reading of the text. Indeed, given Esther's apparent eschewing of overt theological language it will be seen that it is through the intertextual links it employs that we can see both its theological tradition and the particular ways in which it interprets this tradition.

The question of how to identify such intertextual allusions has been effectively addressed within Biblical studies generally by Richard Hays.[19] Hays has noted that intertexts move on a spectrum from direct citations through to very faint echoes, and that within the spectrum the demands on the reader to identify the intertext varies inversely with the extent of the allusion.[20] In the case of Esther we do not find direct citation, but it will be seen that there are a number of direct allusions to other texts that informed readers can recognise. Hays has established seven criteria by which he recognises these echoes,[21] though as Sim has observed, only

17. On the restoration of both author and text within a communicative model, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is there a Meaning in this Text? The Bible, the Reader and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Leicester: Apollos, 1998), 197–366 and, more accessibly, Jeannine K. Brown, *Scripture as Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 79–99.

18. Anthony C. Thistleton, "'Behind' and 'In Front of' the Text: Language, Reference and Indeterminancy," in Craig Bartholomew, Colin Greene and Karl Möller (eds.), *After Pentecost: Language and Biblical Interpretation* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2001), 103–6.

19. Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

20. Hays, *Echoes*, 14–16.

21. Hays, *Echoes*, 29–32, proposes availability, volume, recurrence, thematic coherence, historical plausibility, history of interpretation and satisfaction.

the criteria of availability and volume are strictly necessary.[22] By availability we simply mean that the proposed intertext was available to both author and readers (since intertexts not available to readers cannot develop meaning). By definition, this means that author-initiated intertextuality can only work from a later text back to an earlier one. The criterion of volume is concerned with whether or not there are enough points of verbal or thematic contact for an intertextual allusion to be capable of being recognised.[23] That is to say, intertextuality works best when both author and readers share a pool of common literature so that the later text can develop a web of reference that readers can identify and thus enrich their reading experience of that text. This is particularly important in the case of canonical literature since later readers can identify not only the tradition within which a piece of literature stands but may be more aware of the subtleties of the earlier texts than would be the case with non-canonical traditions, though this would not preclude a writer including elements that are relevant to at least some of the more literate readers of that text.

Samuel in Esther

We have suggested that one text of considerable importance for the book of Esther is the books of Samuel. Coming as a later text in the Old Testament, this is of no immediate surprise, since Esther has a high probability of knowing a wide range of texts. In terms of Hays' criterion of availability, few would doubt that Samuel was a text available to the author of Esther. Moreover, given the importance of the Davidic covenant across a wide range of texts within the Old Testament,[24] we can reasonably assume that, by the time Esther was written, Samuel would already have had some form of canonical recognition even if we cannot quite express that in terms identical to a modern notion of the canon of Scripture. So, Samuel is certainly an available text, but there is also a particularly high concentration of references to Samuel. Although these allusions can also include other texts,[25] our focus will only be on the way Esther develops themes from Samuel. Interestingly, when alluding to David and Saul's story, Esther almost never makes verbal connections to events recorded in Chronicles. This means that where an echo might be from either Samuel or Chronicles within their shared

22. David C. Sim, "Matthew and the Pauline Corpus: A Preliminary Intertextual Study," *JSNT* 31.4 (2009), 404. Sim builds on the work of Robert Brawley, though I have not been able to access his work.

23. With Yitzhak Berger, "Ruth and inner-Biblical Exegesis: The Case of 1 Samuel 25," *JBL* 128/2 (2009), 254, we can note that the larger the cluster of allusions we can definitely observe to one text, the greater the probability is that others can also be observed, though this does not mean that any and every allusion can be considered an echo of an earlier text.

24. See, for example, William M. Schniedewind, *Society and the Promise to David: The Reception-History of 2 Samuel 7:1 – 17* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

25. Some of the references to Samuel continue through Samuel to Deuteronomy or other parts of the Pentateuch, though this does not limit the impact of the association with Samuel.

tradition we can rule out Chronicles as the relevant intertext. The only possible reference to Chronicles occurs in 1:13 where there may be an allusion to 1 Chronicles 12:32 [MT 12:33], but this is so slight that it may simply reflect a common idiom. Indeed, to take one example, Esther 9:16 alludes to 2 Samuel 7:1, 11 (and through it to Deut 12:10 and Josh 23:1) since we find here the combination of the verb נוח plus a reference to the enemies, but this phrasing is absent from the parallel in 1 Chronicles 17.[26] One could therefore argue that Esther thus excludes Chronicles from its intertextual field, but this would be an argument from silence, and we can be content with noting that where an allusion might be to their shared tradition it is in fact an allusion only to Samuel. Although Esther never cites Samuel directly, we will see that its allusions are seldom indistinct echoes. Rather, like the allusion to 2 Samuel 7:1, 11 in 9:16, there is enough volume present for readers to recognise the intertext though of course the criterion of volume needs to be considered on a case by case basis.

Focalisation and Intertextuality: "Merry with Wine"

We can note how this affects our two sample texts for focalisation. At the point where Ahasuerus summons Vashti in 1:10, we are told that his heart was 'merry with wine' (טוב לב־המלך ביין). Within Esther, we will find a similar comment about Haman in 5:9, but although there is a reference to the Philistine leaders (Judg 16:25), only two other individuals are ever said to have hearts merry from the consumption of alcohol. These are Nabal (1 Sam 25:36) and Amnon (2 Sam 13:28). In both instances, the individual whose heart was merry from alcohol made a foolish decision, a decision that led to their downfall. In Nabal's case he had resisted David and so would be struck down by Yahweh after Abigail had prevented David from killing him, whereas Amnon was struck down by Absalom for raping Tamar, though this in turn began to fulfil the punishment announced by Nathan in 2 Samuel 12:10–12 for David's sin in 2 Samuel 11. The motif of a heart merry from alcohol (טוב לב) thus occurs within narratives that show the powerful being made powerless. Nabal had been a wealthy landowner and grazier whilst Amnon was the king's son. Within the books of Samuel such changes in position are placed in a narrative context through the Song of Hannah (1 Sam 2:1–10) which introduces the motif of the reversal of fortunes as a central element in its theology (1 Sam 2:4–8). This element works itself out within Samuel through the fall of the houses of Eli and Saul as well as the more specific cases of Nabal and Amnon. Readers attuned to the placement of this motif in Samuel are thus aware that it points beyond itself to offer a further reflection on how the reversal of fortunes might occur. Both Nabal and Amnon appear to act independently of Yahweh and

26. Admittedly, a similar construction does occur in 1 Chronicles 22:9, but an allusion to Solomon here is less likely because although the perfect verb is used in each instance, the Chronicles text clearly has a future reference, whereas both Esther and Samuel refer to an established fact. Hence, this text, like Esther, refers back to 2 Samuel 7 and through it to the earlier passages in Joshua and Deuteronomy, and not Chronicles. It is also possible that Chronicles was not an available text, thus precluding it from being employed as an intertext.

might be deemed simply to reap the outcome of their own folly. But the structure of the books of Samuel indicates instead that although Yahweh might act to bring down someone independently, the reversal of fortunes might also come about as a result of their own actions. Even so, it is no less an example of Yahweh reversing fortunes for all that.

Thus, when Ahasuerus acts in this condition, the narrator points us to other texts, because those who are in this condition act with folly.[27] The king's reversal of fortunes is not so immediately apparent until we recognise the element of satire that has run through the presentation to this point. He has so far been presented as all powerful, the one whose power is so vast that he can entertain his army for six months and can even give orders at the subsequent palace party requiring all to drink whatever they want (1:8). But all his pretensions to power are about to be shown for what they are, and this will happen through a woman simply refusing to come to the party. Ahasuerus' claims to power are completely shot through when his wife refuses to do his bidding, though this in turn prepares for him to be completely dominated in turn by Esther. Indeed, that his actual power level is very low becomes evident as he engages in discussion with his advisers who must tell him what, according to law (דת), is to be done when the queen will not come to the party (1:13–15). In reality, his advisors are unable to answer the king's question, notably avoiding the fact that Persian law provided no guidance on this particular issue, and so come up with an unenforceable decree (1:19–22). The king has not lost his position, but the narrative has already changed his fortunes. The intertextual allusion to Samuel in turn provides a theological reading of this reversal, a reading that is of value within the Diaspora because those schooled in the literature can recognise it without having to take the politically dangerous step of expressing such thoughts about a monarch directly.

But the allusion to Samuel is more precise because the same phrase (טוב לב) is also applied to Haman in 5:9. Just as two characters are brought down when drunk in Samuel, so also two are brought down in Esther. In Haman's case, he was drunk after his first banquet with Esther and the king at which Esther had effectively convinced the king to grant her request – up to half the kingdom – if he turned up to the next day's banquet (5:4–8).[28] Here again is a key example of external focalisation as we simply do not know why Esther decided to follow a strategy of two meals to request her people's deliverance. Yet, an allusion to the reversal of fortunes motif through this reference to Haman immediately after this may be a hint that God is at work in the story. In any case, Haman's drunkenness is also about to initiate his own downfall. In his case, it led him to be angry that Mordecai continued to ignore him so that he accepted the advice of his wife and other friends to erect an absurdly high stake in his garden on which to have Mordecai impaled the following day so he could enjoy the next banquet with the king

27. As is also true of the Philistine leaders in Judges 16:25 who also experience a dramatic reversal of fortunes.

28. See Frederic Bush, *Ruth / Esther* (Dallas: Word, 1996), 407.

and queen (5:14). But although Haman stayed up all night and then arrived at the palace at an unconscionably early hour the next day, he could not know that this would be the night on which the king's sleep fled from him (6:1), and that having decided to have the chronicles of the kingdom read to him,[29] he discovered that Mordecai should earlier have been rewarded for his part in preventing an assassination attempt on him (6:2–3). It is this that triggers the comic encounter between the king and Haman that leads to Haman having to honour Mordecai for the king (6:10–11). More explicitly, on his return to his wife Zeresh, she feigns surprise that Mordecai was Jewish before declaring therefore that Haman's fall before him was inevitable (6:13). Zeresh's speech, though at one level ignorant of Hannah's Song, thus points straight back to it. A theological interpretation of Haman's fall, which is complete the following day when he is impaled on the stake he erected for Mordecai (7:10), is thus provided in advance. Zeresh can see this only as something inscrutable about the Jews of the empire, but by situating the story within the traditions of Samuel, the narrative fills that out to point to Yahweh's concern for the weak. The reversal of fortunes motif becomes important for the narrative of Esther as a whole, but the key point is that these intertextual allusions point to God as the one who acts. We are not told this directly because the use of external focalisation holds it back, asking us as readers to explore further what is meant by these events, but at the same time we are guided to these intertexts as the points where this exploration needs to take place.

Focalisation and Intertextuality: Haman the Agagite

Our second example of external focalisation is also enlightened by reference to Samuel. In his introduction we are told that Haman is an Agagite, a title that refers directly to Agag the Amalekite king that Saul failed to destroy as directed by Yahweh (1 Sam 15). Evidence for this comes from the fact that the personal name Agag definitely occurs seven times in 1 Samuel 15, but not elsewhere unless we are to interpret it that way in Numbers 24:7. However, the textual difficulties there suggest either a gloss from a later reader or a corruption of the name,[30] but on either of these alternatives the current text in Numbers exists in response to the text in Samuel and not the other way around. As such, the link for Haman, who is called an 'Agagite' five times (3:1, 10, 8:3, 8:5, 9:24) must be to 1 Samuel 15. But when introducing Mordecai his genealogy (Esther 2:6) is deliberately linked to that of Saul (1 Samuel 9:1). Thus, we are brought face to face to the point of Saul's failure, though of course the account in 1 Samuel 15 has its own intertextual links to Exodus 17:8–15, with Yahweh's perpetual enmity towards Amalek declared following

29. In passing, it is worth noting that this is another example of external focalisation as we do not know why Ahasuerus asked for them to be read. It could be that he hoped that a droning voice reading what was an undoubtedly very boring text would put him to sleep, but although this is highly probable we are simply not told, and in any case that sleep had fled from him (rather than the prosaic 'could not sleep' of NIV) suggests he was not going to get any sleep anyway.

30. LXX has 'Gog'. See Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 492–93.

their attack on Israel on the way to Sinai. We are thus introduced through intertextuality to a conflict that remained at the core of Israel's identity, but one that is of particular importance for subsequent narratives in Samuel where Amalekites are invariably a problem (e.g., 2 Samuel 1:1–16). Thus, although Jews typically have no problem in offering homage where it is due, we are offered an insight into both Mordecai's refusal to bow and Haman's seemingly excessive response, matters that the use of external focalisation otherwise seemed to leave unresolved. Faithfulness to Yahweh is at the heart of Mordecai's otherwise truculent attitude whereas Haman simply represents the typical actions of Israel's enemies. But given that Amalek stands under the ban relative to Israel, we are already given a hint of the outcome because where Yahweh's faithfulness is challenged it must be vindicated. But again, although this is theologically at the heart of the narrative, the use of external focalisation holds it back.

What is striking is that this allusion also leads us to the reversal of fortunes motif in Samuel. For Saul, it was his failure to destroy Agag and the best of the Amalekite spoil that saw his final rejection for David even if that rejection took some time to work itself out. Saul there took on an adversary from a position of power and then fell. But in Esther, it is initially Mordecai, the Jew aligned to Saul, who operates from the position of weakness, and it is Haman who is powerful. But this story is one where the Agagite falls and if it is not an exact reversal of 1 Samuel 15, then it still serves to point to the reversal of fortunes. Indeed, within Esther, the title 'Agagite' is used twice of Haman when he rose to power (3:1, 10) and twice when he has fallen and is replaced by Mordecai (8:3, 5), with only one other reference in the summary account of 9:24 which also points to the reversal of fortunes. Hence, in spite of Saul's failure, Yahweh's declared enmity against Amalek (Ex 17:16) will see them defeated. External focalisation means these points are not declared, but the use of intertexts points readers to ponder the theology behind these events.

Focalisation and Intertextuality: Mordecai's Rise

One more example should be offered since it does not appear in the standard commentaries, but is of particular importance for our theme. In Esther 8:2 we are told that after Esther had introduced Mordecai to Ahasuerus, he was set over Haman's house, formally completing their individual reversal of fortunes. But before this, Mordecai had clothed himself in sackcloth and ashes (אפר Esther 4:1–2), in contrast to Haman who had been advanced above the other princes (or 'officials' שׂר) in 3:1, and who apparently felt it necessary to report this fact once again to his wife and friends in 5:11. Moreover, when advising the king on how to honour someone Haman had insisted that one of the king's 'most noble princes' (6:9) should go before the honouree announcing that 'This is what the king does for the man he delights to honour'. Although Esther clearly recognises many 'princes' in the realm,[31] Haman is clearly the most outstanding. Mordecai's position, by

31. Cf. Esther 1:3(x2), 11, 14, 16 (x2), 18, 21, 2:18, 9:3.

contrast, is comparatively low, even if he might be understood as a minor palace official, but after Haman's decree for the annihilation of the Jews (3:12–15) he adopted the lowest position when he clothed himself in sackcloth and ashes. His change from this position is gradual as he is first re-clothed by Haman as part of the requirements of his public honouring (6:10–11) until he emerges in royal robes after issuing his counter-decree to Haman (8:15). All of this can be understood within the narrative world of Esther on its own, fulfilling its own narrative arc of the reversal of fortunes so that Mordecai moves from sackcloth to royal robes, from ashes to the seat of the most elevated prince of the empire. But in light of the other allusions to Hannah's Song we are challenged to read this experience in light of it too, though on Hays' scale this is a thematic echo rather than a point of close verbal reference. In 1 Samuel 2:7–8, Hannah had specifically celebrated the fact that Yahweh not only brings low and exalts, he also raises the poor from the ash heap and seats them with princes. In English, at least, this looks like an exact match to Mordecai's situation since the fact that the weak are given a seat of honour (כבוד) matches Haman's self-description in 5:11. The specific language both for the princes (נדיב) and the ash heap (אשפת) is, however, different. Nevertheless, although the language is more distant, the intertextual allusion is precise in that Mordecai's experience is indeed one where the poor are exalted and made rich while the powerful are brought down. The volume of this intertextual echo is not as strong, but the narrative world of Esther still points us to Hannah's Song as the mechanism for interpreting this reversal of fortunes, and in particular of pointing to a theological interpretation of it. Hence, even though we do not actually know why the king promoted Mordecai as he did (another example of external focalisation), we are provided with an intertextual reference that points to the underlying theology – it is Yahweh who has acted because this is how Yahweh acts, even if in practice we usually realise it only with hindsight.

Conclusion

Thus, narrative method and intertextuality combine to point to a central theological theme within the book of Esther. It not only tells of a reversal of the Jews' fortunes, it does so in a way that alludes to other texts (and for our purposes Samuel in particular) that reveals its theological concerns. Esther presumes an informed readership, people who are able to note key terms and themes, but at the same time tells its story in a way that even those who do not recognise them all can still appreciate God's actions through the holes it leaves in the narrative, such as the king's sleepless night in 6:1. But for those who attend to its narrative artistry, it employs a sophisticated range of techniques that allow its theological concerns to become gradually manifest. In particular its preference for external focalisation while hinting that there is more to be told pushes informed readers to appreciate the tradition in which it places itself and thus the interpretation required of the narrative through intertextuality. The need to read Esther theologically is thus not simply a matter of faithfulness to its place in the canon. It is something required

by the way the story is told, both through what it says and (more particularly in this case) through what it does not say; for even in what Esther does not say, the author is communicating with a wink to the informed amongst its readership. Hence, amongst other intertexts, Esther looks across the banquet table to Samuel's theology of the reversal of fortunes and says, 'I'll have what they're having.'