

ESTHER: SESSION 2

A STUDY OF CHARACTER

SOME GENERAL NOTES ON THE CHARACTERS OF ESTHER

- ◆ Caricatures / Cartoon Characters
- ◆ Exhibit wooden character traits which are amplified for story
- ◆ Exception is Esther who does develop and grow
- ◆ Characters are manipulated to achieve *ironic* effect

SOME DEFINITIONS OF IRONY

- ◆ The use of words to convey the opposite of their literal meaning
- ◆ An expression or utterance marked by a deliberate contrast between apparent and intended meaning
- ◆ A literary style employing contrasts between apparent and intended meaning for humorous and rhetorical effect
- ◆ Incongruity between what might be expected and what actually occurs (from *The American Heritage Dictionary*)

KING AHASUERUS

- ◆ "Question authority" is key to understanding the role this character plays
- ◆ Forgetful bumbler
- ◆ Uses power ineffectually - his law promotes anarchy
 - Banquet guests ordered to drink wine "as each one desired" (Esth 1:8).
 - Haman ordered to "do with them (the Jews) as it seems good to you" (Esth 3:11).
 - Response to Esther's first banquet invitation is "Bring Haman quickly, so that we may do as Esther desires" (Esth 5:5).
 - Orders Esther and Haman to "write as you please" concerning the plight of the Jews (Esth 8:8)
- ◆ Lusts for greater wealth
 - Note display of wealth in ch. 1
 - Accepts Haman's bribe (Esth 3:9-11)
- ◆ Incapable of controlling anger
 - Anger at Vashti in Esth 1:12 leads to the law which essentially gives Vashti what she wants
 - Anger at Haman when Esther exposes his plan leads to Haman's death as well as thousands of others (Esth 7:7)
- ◆ Poor memory leads to poor decisions
 - Memory of reasons for Vashti's absence and consequences of his own actions comes late (Esth 2:1f)
 - Mordecai saves the life of the king, but Haman is rewarded and the king has to be reminded of this (Esth 2:22-3:1, 6:1-3)

MORDECAI

- ◆ Virtuous foil to King Ahasuerus and Haman
- ◆ Adopted and cared for his cousin Esther - Accords well with biblical injunctions to care for the poor, the widow and the orphan (Esth 2:7, Deut 24:14-15,17-22)
- ◆ Demonstrates trustworthiness by revealing the plot to kill the king (Esth 2:21-22)
- ◆ Mourns for the plight of his people (Esth 4:1)

ESTHER

- ◆ Only character to show signs of development and maturation
- ◆ Initially a passive young woman who allows others to direct her life
 - Adopted (Esth 2:7)
 - “Gathered with the other young women” (Esth 2:8)
 - “Taken into the king's palace and placed in the custody of Hegai” (Esth 2:8)
 - Obedient to Mordecai
- ◆ Knows how to please others
 - “The girl pleased him (Hegai) and won his favor” (Esth 2:9)
 - “She won his (the king's) favor and devotion” (Esth 2:17)
 - Wins king's favor even when she approaches the king unbidden (Esth 5:2)
- ◆ Public mourning of Mordecai provokes a change in Esther who becomes, not angry like the king, but distressed (Esth 4:4)
 - Esther begins to realistically assess situations and take appropriate action
 - She sends clothes to Mordecai (Esth 4:4)
 - Calls Hathach and orders him to begin investigation (Esth 4:5) After hearing Hathach's report, she gives an order for Mordecai (Esth 4:10, 17) (contrast with the king who must ask his advisors, “What do I do now?”)
 - Esther's statement regarding Persian law on approaching the king often seen as example of feeble female whining - omits what the text tells us - Esther factually states what the law is (without consultation), she realistically grasps both its potential dangers and possibilities, she acts despite a realistic fear of death (Esth 4:11, 16)
- ◆ Understands the importance of timing - Esther's real request does not come out until the second banquet after the king has already stated she can have up to half the kingdom (Esth 5:3)
- ◆ Understands the importance of wording
 - Esther asks first for her own life, then the lives of her people (Esth 7:3-4) - this is not selfishness but perceptivity - everything placed in context of a loss to the king who sees all his subjects as property
 - Esther knows to place all suggestions in the context of pleasing the king (Esth 8:5) - King responds with "You may write as you please" (Esth 8:8)
- ◆ Understands proper delegation
 - Designates Mordecai as the caretaker of Haman's estate (Esth 8:1-2)
 - Fixes the practices of Purim (Esth 9:32)

HAMAN

- ◆ Villain who is granted undeserved honor and authority in contrast to Mordecai who deserves recognition for saving the king's life, but receives nothing (Esth 3:1)
- ◆ Fall is as rapid and as his rise
- ◆ Loses authority to act once Mordecai has been honored - eunuchs "hurried Haman off to the banquet"

(Esth 6:14)

- ◆ Resembles the king
 - Anger controls Haman - infuriated with Mordecai's lack of respect (Esth 3:5) disproportionate desire to kill all the Jews (Esth 3:6) also Esth 5:9 (Note: Esth 5:10 says Haman restrained himself - Did he? Is this irony?)
 - Seeks and unquestioningly follows the advice of his wife and Zeresh (Esth 5:14)
- ◆ Not law-abiding - hands out bribes (Esth 3:11)
- ◆ Self-centered and covetous of the king's throne (Esth 6:6f)