Getting the Story Straight:
Plot Structure and Eventfulness
in Judean (and Egyptian) Novellas

.....a case study in Esther

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Overview of today's paper: 1st argument

- The plot structure of Esther falls into two parts, the first being highly **episodic**, the second being highly non-episodic, or **continuous**.
- The pivot between these parts is in 3:7, with the second use of a regnal dating formula to introduce a new scene, the one where the lot is cast before Haman.

Overview of today's paper: 2nd argument

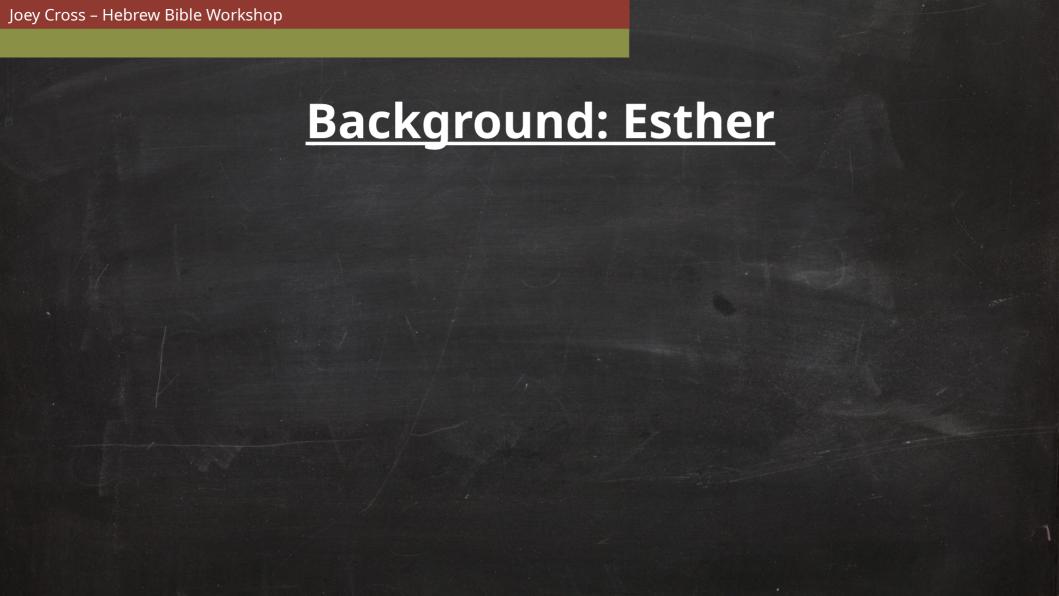
Why did the author do this?

Overview of today's paper: 2nd argument

- Why did the author do this?
- Three arguments:
 - 1. Rhetorical
 - 2. Aesthetic
 - 3. Literary-historical

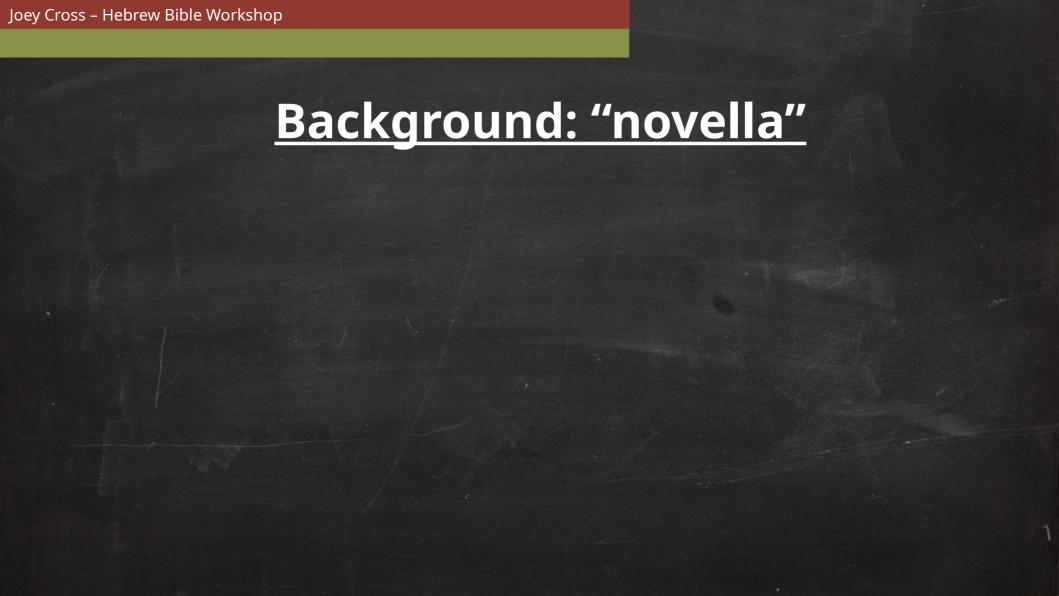
Overview of today's paper: conclusion

• Implications for understanding Esther as literature: a unique kind of storytelling and literary artistry that is a particular product of its time and place.



Background: Esther

- The original novella is preserved in Esther 1-8
- MT Esther is an authored expansion



 A work of fiction that is longer than a short story but shorter than a novel.

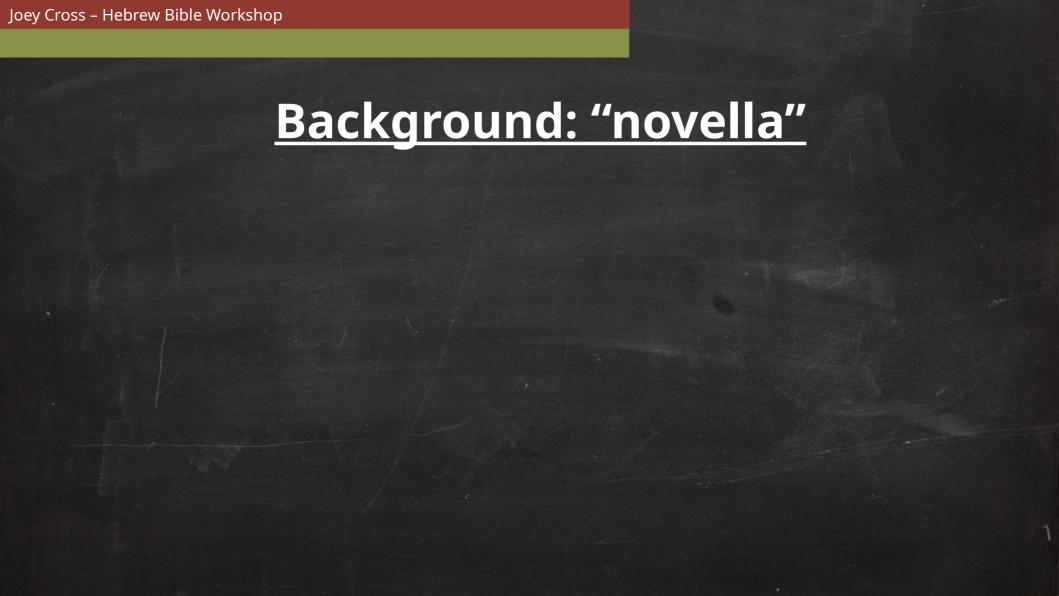
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- A work of fiction that is longer than a short story but shorter than a novel.
- Complex works of storytelling, but concise
- Newness

- Judean novellas:
 - Esther
 - Ruth
 - Tobit
 - Judith
 - 4Q550

- Judean novellas:
 - All date to the Achaemenian period and afterward

A corpus of Egyptian novellas is contemporaneous



The first basic argument: observations

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- There are ten scenes in the novella
- Each introduced by a clear verbal cue

Scene structure of Esther	Plot summary
1:1-22 – regnal date	Ahasuerus and Vashti
אחר הדברים האלה - 2:1-20	Ahasuerus and Esther
2:21-23 - בימים ההם	Mordecai and the conspiracy
3:1-6 - אחר הדברים האלה	Haman vs. Mordecai
3:7-15 – regnal date	Haman's anti-Judean decree
1:1-17 – ומרדכי ידע	Mordecai and Esther's response
ויהי ביום השלישי – 5:1-14	Esther approaches Ahasuerus
6:1-7:1 – בלילה ההוא	(lots)
7:2-10 – ביום השני	Esther beseeches Ahasuerus
8:1-17 – ביום ההוא	Conclusion and denouement

Scene structure of Esther	
1:1-22 – regnal date	→ followed by <u>unspecified</u> time
אחר הדברים האלה - 2:1-20	→ followed by unspecified time
2:21-23 - בימים ההם	→ followed by <u>unspecified</u> time
3:1-6 - אחר הדברים האלה	
3:7-15 – regnal date	
4:1-17 – ומרדכי ידע	
ויהי ביום השלישי – 5:1-14	
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4:1-17 – ומרדכי ידע	→ followed by specified time
ויהי ביום השלישי – 5:1-14	→ followed by specified time
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Scene structure of Esther	Plot summary
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2:21-23 - בימים ההם	Beginning
3:1-6 - אחר הדברים האלה	Beginning
3:7-15 – regnal date	Middle (rising tension)
ומרדכי ידע – 4:1-17	Middle (rising tension)
1-14 – ויהי ביום השלישי	Middle (climax)
6:1-7:1 – בלילה ההוא	Middle (climax)
7:2-10 – ביום השני	Middle (climax)
8:1-17 – ביום ההוא	End

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 If "scene" is a basic unit of spacetime in a story...

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- An "episode" is "a bounded, internally coherent sequence of situations and events that can be chained together with other such narrative units to form larger narrative structures."

(Wellek and Warren, Theory of Literature, 217)

- If "scene" is a basic unit of spacetime in a story...
- Episodes are "demarcated by a coherence in the temporal or spatial setting or both," furnishing "a thematically distinctive topic requiring a shift in the reader's understanding."

(David Miall, "Episode Structure in Literary Narratives" [2004], 112)

- Aristotle: plot is systasis, a construction
- An episodic plot is one where episodes predominate
- This is the case for the first part of Esther, but not the second.

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- The successive events are conveyed in a clear sequence with a precise chronology, building towards the climax
- Before 3:7: a series of discrete episodes that happen at unspecified times

 The events of the climax are due to what happens in the episodic portion of the novella



Mordecai and Esther's introduction

אָישׁ יְהוּדִׁי הָיָה בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירֶה וּשְׁמְוֹ מְרְדְּכִיי

"There was a Judean man in Susa the fortress whose name

was Mordecai..." (2:7)

Mordecai and Esther's introduction

וִיְהִי בְּהִשְּׁמֵע דְבַר־הַמֶּלֶדְ וְדָתׁוֹ וְּבְהִקְבֵּץ נְעָרְוֹת רַבְּוֹת אֶל־שׁוּשַׁן הַבִּירֶה אָל־יֵד הַגְי וַתִּלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל־בֵּית הַמֶּּלֶדְ אָל־יֵד הַגְי וַתִּלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל־בֵּית הַמֶּּלֶדְ

"When the king's word and edict were proclaimed, and many girls assembled in Susa the fortress...Esther was taken to the palace..." (2:7)

The episode of the conspiracy (2:21-23)

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The temporal relationship of this episode to what came before is not specified: it just happened

בּיָמִים הָהֵׁם "in those days."

The fourth episode (3:1-6)

The introduction of Haman: takes place at an

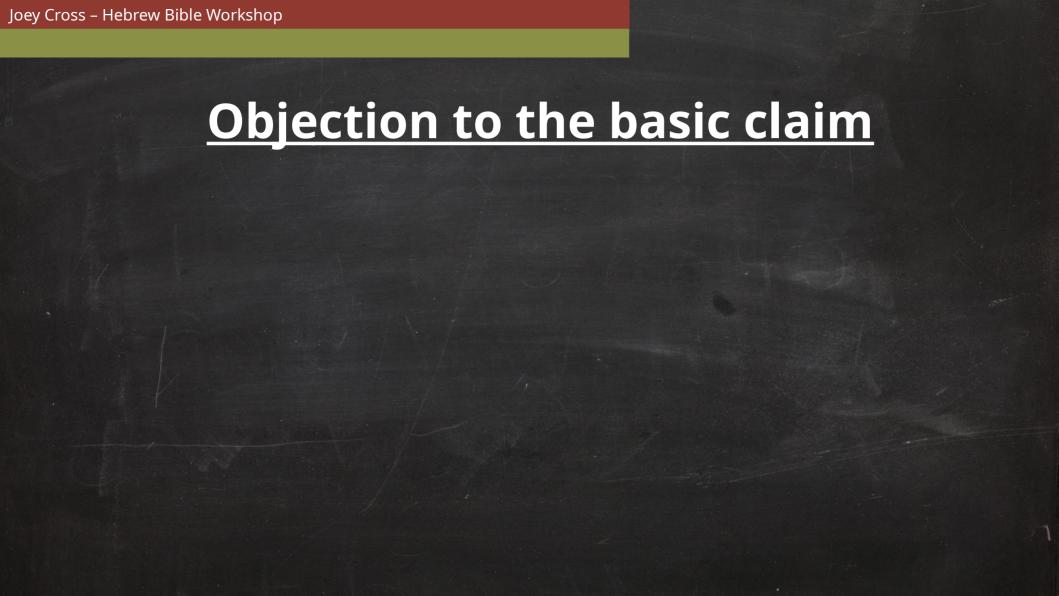
unspecified time, just אַרֶר בּרָרִים הָאֵּלֶּה "after" אַבֶר בּרָרִים הָאֵלֶּה "after

these things."



Objection to the basic claim

• "Isn't the episodic nature of Esther 1:1-3:6 simply due to the storyteller's need to achieve certain rhetorical goals, with pragmatic features of narrative form falling into place accordingly?"

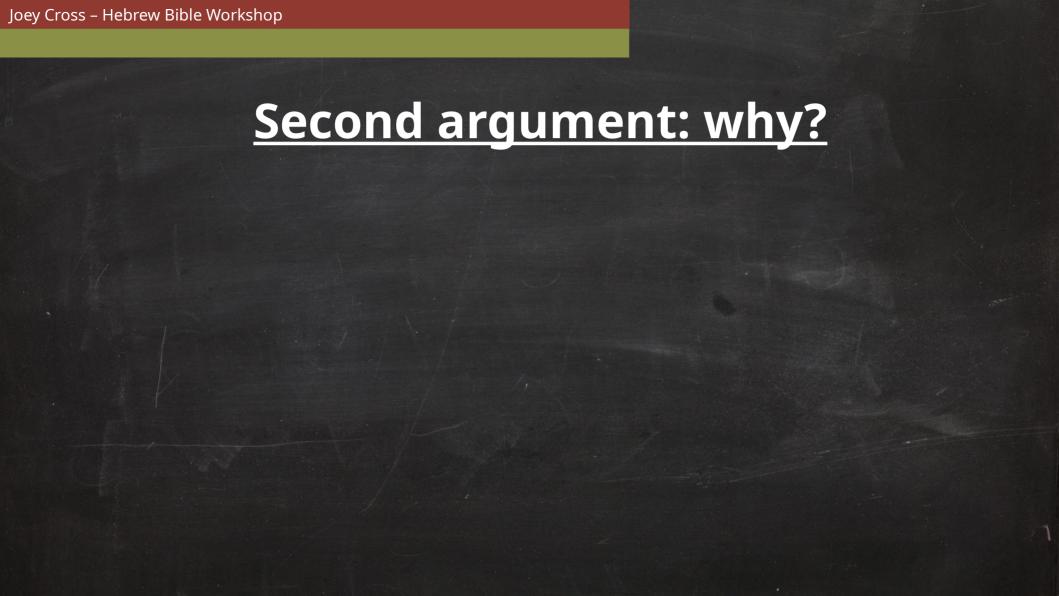


Objection to the basic claim

- But cp. Ruth...
 - Takes place over a relatively long period of time with only a small section finding narration
 - Scenes taking place over periods
 - Indeterminate time spans between scenes

Objection to the basic claim

- But cp. Ruth...
 - Not a single adverbial phrase like those found in Esther is used, nor a temporal clause at the boundary of a scene



• 1. Rhetorical:

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 - The author used episodic narrative to serve their storytelling purpose, helping to put together the delicate balance of plot-lines and themes that converge in the novella's breathtaking climax.

- 1. Rhetorical:
 - The author used episodic narrative to build tension for the story, a kind that involves significant misdirection enabled by the episodic structure.

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 - Cf. Iser's "wandering viewpoint"

אַשֶר־נְאָת אֲשֶׁר־נְאָת הַשֶּׁלֶך אֲחַשְׁוֹרְוֹשׁ זָכַר אֶת־נִשְׁתִּי וְאֵת
 אַשֶּׁר־נְאָת אֲשֶׁר־נִגְזַר עָלֶיהְ

After these things, when the anger of Ahasuerus died down, he remembered Vashti, what she had done, and what had been decreed concerning her... (2:1)

• וַיָּאֲהַב הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת־אֶסְתֵר מִכָּל־הַנְּשִׁים וַתִּשָׂא־תֵן וָתֶסֶד לְפָנָיו מִבָּל־הַבְּתוּלְוֹת וַיִּשֶׁם כֶּתֶר־מַלְבוּת בְּרֹאשָׁה וַיַּמְלִיכֶהְ תַּחַת וַשְׁתִּי

The king loved Esther more than all the other women, and she found beneficial favor(?) with him, more than any of the other young women. Then, he placed the royal crown on her head, and made her queen in place of Vashti (2:17)

ּ וֹאָת־מַאֲמֶר מִרְדָּבִי אֶסְתֵּר עֹשֶׁה בַאֲשֶׁר אָנָה עָלֶיה מְּרֶדְבִי אֵין אֶסְתֵּר מַגָּדָת מְוֹלַדְתָּה וֹאָת־עַמָּה בַאֲשֶׁר אָנָה עָלֶיה מְרְדָּבֵי

Esther never revealed her lineage or her people, just as Mordecai had commanded her, and as for Mordecai's bidding, she acted just like she did when during her childhood with him (2:17)

- 1. Rhetorical:
 - The author produced a narrative that relies on extra audience participation for coherence, <u>and</u> that leads to a satisfying climax and conclusion

• 2. Aesthetic:

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 - Cf. Adele Berlin: Esther imitates historiography

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 - Esp. the royal annal, episodic narrative *par excellence* (White)

- 2. Aesthetic:
 - Cf. Adele Berlin: "to create strong ties with preexilic Israel and with the traditional literature that had been or was in the process of being canonized."
 - "The burden of Diaspora stories...is to provide Jewish continuity in the face of the overwhelming dislocation of the Jewish community."

(Adele Berlin, "The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling" [2001], 7)

• 2. Aesthetic:

- 2. Aesthetic:
 - Episodic narrative works well with coincidence, being highly capable of expressing the random nature of how many things happen in real life

בִּי אִם־הַחֲרֵשׁתַחָרִישׁי בָעֵת הַזֹּאתֹ רֵוח וְהַצָּלְה יַעְקוֹד לַיְהוּדִי...וּמָי יוֹדִע אִם־לְעֵת כָּזֹאת הִגַּעַהְ לַמַּלְכְוּת

"...But if you keep silent in this urgent time, saving relief will arise for the Judeans...Who knows: perhaps it is just for an urgent time like this that you have attained royal power?" (4:14)

- 2. Aesthetic:
 - Coincidence is the most important motivation that connects the novella's events.

• 2. Aesthetic:

- Episodic narrative imitates the form of annals, and the author felt that it was appropriate to make the first part of Esther come across like a parody of an annal because of the resulting symmetry between form and content
- The episodic form is appropriate for a story whose dramatic stuff is so reliant on coincidence as both theme and motivation.

• 3. Literary-historical:

- 3. Literary-historical:
 - Episodic narrative has an unmistakable resemblance to the corpus of classical Hebrew narrative literature of Genesis through Kings
 - The author of Esther deliberately evoked the narrative style of this corpus.

- 3. Literary-historical:
 - אחר הדברים האלה, used in 2:1 and 3:6
 - בימים ההם , used in 2:21

- 3. Literary-historical:
 - אחר הדברים האלה, used in 2:1 and 3:6

Cf. Gen 15:1, 39:7, 40:1; Jos 24:29; 1 Ki 13:13, 17:7, 21:1

- 3. Literary-historical:
 - אחר הדברים האלה, used in 2:1 and 3:6
 - Cf. Gen 15:1, 39:7, 40:1; Jos 24:29; 1 Ki 13:13, 17:7, 21:1
 - & Ezra 1:1!!

• 3. Literary-historical:

- 3. Literary-historical:
 - Episodic narrative is itself an object of knowledge, a cultural form that, for the audience, is a pre-existing thing
 - This is a classic example of defamiliarization: the deliberate attracting of the reader's attention to the basic techniques of narration itself.

- 3. Literary-historical:
 - Defamiliarization in Esther:
 - Pushing episodic narrative to the brink to make the story noteworthy, engaging, and entertaining
 - "Baring the device of the form"

- 3. Literary-historical:
 - Defamiliarization in Esther:
 - Retrospective assessment of happenstance

- 3. Literary-historical:
 - Defamiliarization in Esther:
 - The traditional, classical cultural form of narrative associated with authoritative historiography is used to present an elaborately conceived fictional narrative about something that might have happened in the past, where coincidence is the main motivation

- 3. Literary-historical:
 - Defamiliarization in Esther:
 - The form of historiography, offering no explanation other than the inherent value of the act of narration itself.

- 3. Literary-historical:
 - Defamiliarization in Egyptian novellas

Conclusion

Novella fiction: a "what if" of content and form

Works Cited

Adele Berlin, "The Book of Esther and Ancient Storytelling," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 120, no. 1 (2001), 3-14.

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