

**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

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

Background: "novella"

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

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Background: “novella”

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

Background: “novella”

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

Background: “novella”

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

Background: “novella”

- A corpus of Egyptian novellas is contemporaneous

Background: "novella"

The first basic argument: observations

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

<u>Scene structure of Esther</u>	<u>Plot summary</u>
1:1-22 – regnal date	Ahasuerus and Vashti
2:1-20 - אחר הדברים האלה	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
4:1-17 – ומרדכי ידע	Mordecai and Esther's response
5:1-14 – ויהי ביום השלישי	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

<u>Scene structure of Esther</u>	
1:1-22 – regnal date	→ followed by <u>unspecified</u> time
2:1-20 - אחר הדברים האלה	→ followed by <u>unspecified</u> time
2:21-23 - בימים ההם	→ followed by <u>unspecified</u> time
3:1-6 - אחר הדברים האלה	
3:7-15 – regnal date	
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3:1-6 - אחר הדברים האלה	→ followed by <i>specified</i> time
<u>3:7-15 – regnal date</u>	→ followed by <i>specified</i> time
4:1-17 – ומרדכי ידע	→ followed by <i>specified</i> time
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1:1-22 – regnal date	Beginning
2:1-20 - אחר הדברים האלה	Beginning
2:21-23 - בימים ההם	Beginning
3:1-6 - אחר הדברים האלה	Beginning
3:7-15 – regnal date	Middle (rising tension)
4:1-17 – ומרדכי ידע	Middle (rising tension)
5:1-14 – 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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Episodic vs. continuous narrative

Episodic vs. continuous narrative

- If “scene” is a basic unit of spacetime in a story...

Episodic vs. continuous narrative

- If “scene” is a basic unit of spacetime in a story...
- 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)

Episodic vs. continuous narrative

- 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)

Episodic vs. continuous narrative

- 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.

The first basic argument: summary

- Two portions: through 3:7, and afterwards

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- The successive events are conveyed in a clear sequence with a precise chronology, building towards the climax

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- Two portions: through 3:7, and afterwards
- 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 first basic argument: summary

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

Mordecai and Esther's introduction

אִישׁ יְהוּדִי הָיָה בְּשׁוּשַׁן הַבְּיֵרָה וּשְׁמוֹ מֹרְדֳכָי

“There was a Judean man in Susa the fortress whose name was Mordecai...” (2:7)

Mordecai and Esther's introduction

וַיְהִי בְּהִשָּׁמַע דְּבַר־הַמֶּלֶךְ וְדָתוֹ וּבְהַקְבֵּץ נְעָרוֹת רַבּוֹת אֶל־שׁוֹשַׁן הַבֵּירָה

אֶל־יַד הַגִּי וְתִלְקַח אֶסְתֵּר אֶל־בַּיִת הַמֶּלֶךְ

“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)

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

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

בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם “in those days.”

The fourth episode (3:1-6)

The introduction of Haman: takes place at an unspecified time, just **אַחַר | הַדְּבָרִים 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

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- 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

Second argument: why?

Second argument: why?

- 1. Rhetorical:

Second argument: why?

- 1. Rhetorical:
 - 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.**

Second argument: why?

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

Second argument: why?

- 1. Rhetorical:
 - The author used episodic narrative **to build tension for the story, a kind that involves significant misdirection enabled by the episodic structure.**
 - **Cf. Iser’s “wandering viewpoint”**

- אַחַר הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה כַּשֶּׁךְ חָמַת הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶחְשִׁירוּשׁ זָכַר אֶת־וַשְׁתִּי וְאֵת
אֲשֶׁר־עָשָׂתָה וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר־נִגְזַר עָלֶיהָ

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)

- וַיֶּאֱהָב הַמֶּלֶךְ אֶת-אֶסְתֵּר מִכָּל-הַנְּשִׂיִם וַתִּשְׂא-חֵן וַחֲסֵד לְפָנָיו
מִכָּל-הַבָּתּוּלוֹת וַיִּשֶׂם כְּתֹרֶת-מַלְכוּת בְּרֹאשָׁהּ וַיְמַלִּכָהּ תַּחַת וַנְּשִׂא

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)

- אֵין אֶסְתֵּר מְגִידַת מוֹלְדוֹתָהּ וְאֶת-עַמָּהּ כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה עָלֶיהָ מָרְדֳּכָי
וְאֶת-מֵאֲמַר מָרְדֳּכָי אֶסְתֵּר עֲשָׂה כַּאֲשֶׁר הִיְתָה בְּאֲמִנָּה אֶתּוֹ

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)

Second argument: why?

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

Second argument: why?

- 2. Aesthetic:

Second argument: why?

- 2. Aesthetic:
 - Cf. Adele Berlin: Esther imitates historiography

Second argument: why?

- 2. Aesthetic:
 - Cf. Adele Berlin: Esther imitates historiography
 - Esp. the royal annal, episodic narrative *par excellence* (White)

Second argument: why?

- 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)

Second argument: why?

- 2. Aesthetic:

Second argument: why?

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

Second argument: why?

כִּי אִם-הִחַרְשׁתָּ תַחֲרִישִׁי בְּעֵת הַזֹּאת רֹחַ וְהִצֵּלָה יַעֲמֹד
לִיהוּדֵי... וּמִי יוֹדֵעַ אִם-לְעֵת כְּזֹאת הִגַּעַת לְמַלְכוּת

“...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)

Second argument: why?

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

Second argument: why?

- 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.

Second argument: why?

- 3. Literary-historical:

Second argument: why?

- 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.

Second argument: why?

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

Second argument: why?

- 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

Second argument: why?

- 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!!

Second argument: why?

- 3. Literary-historical:

Second argument: why?

- 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.

Second argument: why?

- 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”

Second argument: why?

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

Second argument: why?

- 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

Second argument: why?

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

Second argument: why?

- 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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