

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ROLE OF THE KING

Introduction

Literary integrity is closely bound up with characterisation. This chapter seeks to develop and examine this concept by looking at the very close link which exists between chiastic-reversal and character in the Esther narrative.

In the previous chapter our aim was to demonstrate that chiastic-reversal is present in the entire Esther narrative. It is the structural principle on which the whole narrative is based. In our view this has substantially been accomplished based on the synchronic reading of the narrative done in that chapter.

In this chapter we focus on the second aspect of this inseparable link, namely, character. More particularly though, we will focus on the element of character and characterisation called the **role** of the character in a story. In terms of this investigation that character is **the king**. In so focusing on the one character we attempt to address the *HOW* of chiastic-reversal in the Esther narrative. For by means of the structural analysis we showed *that* chiastic-reversal is basic to the whole Esther narrative. Now our focus is on *how* the chiastic-reversal basic to the Esther

narrative takes place in the story.

Further, the how of chiastic-reversal in Esther is the result of the particular type of chiasmus we find in the narrative. The nature of this type of chiasmus is discussed below.

If there is this inseparable link between chiastic-reversal and character, and if chiastic-reversal tipifies the structure of Esther, it follows that character should be viewed against the background of the narrative as a whole. In this regard Fox (1991:153,n1) remarks, that the '[s]tudy of character, then, cannot confine itself entirely to an analysis of individual figures, but must consider the text's overall shape.' In the case of Esther, the 'overall shape' of the text is represented by the following schema:

Vashti ----- reversal ----- Esther
Haman ----- reversal ----- Mordecai
Enemies ---- reversal ----- Jews

The important feature of the shape of the Esther text is the element of reversal, as can be seen from the above diagram. But what is the nature of reversal here? We suggest it is the reversal of the position, fortune and destiny of the main characters in the story.

Following from the above, the question arises: Who

reverses the position, role, fortune and destiny of the main characters in Esther?

1. Chiasmus in the Esther narrative

To answer the question posed above, Bensusan's remarks regarding chiasmus are helpful as a starting point. He says (1988:71): '[c]hiasmus is a stylistic device expressing a contrast or a reversal of a role or a situation. It can sometimes be associated with a form of concealment which may be of a temporary nature, or delay. However the concealment technique is, almost invariably, used by authors in relation to actual events or sets of circumstances, *but a cross-over technique, known as chiasmus, is one which is usually associated with individuals or groups of people*' (my emphasis). According to Bensusan, then, chiasmus functions as reversal in the case of individuals or groups of people, that is, characters. This description of chiasmus could serve as the background for the comment of Loader (1977:102), who says: '[n]ow this same *deus ex machina* pattern, so typical of the great tradition strata of the Old Testament, is also found in the Book of Esther - but without the *deus*' (my emphasis). This pattern may be schematized:



x	y
	?
y	x

The reason for the question mark is the fact that God, who is associated with the changing of events and circumstances, is absent in the narrative. In this schema chiasmus functions as a demonstration of the absence of God. Given the theological perspective from which chiasmus is viewed by Loader, this is understandable.

I want to suggest, though, that viewed from a narrative (rather than a theological) perspective the question mark in the schema of Loader should be replaced by a narrative character. In this way the narrative character becomes the heart of the plot development in Esther (cf. Phelan 1989:9). This means that, from a narrative perspective, chiasmus is associated with people, individuals and groups, namely, with characters. This is contrary to the view of Fox (1991:159-163) who sees chiasmus and reversal primarily in terms of 'distinctive repetition of vocabulary' (my emphasis). And Boda (1996:55-70) argues that chiasm based purely on word repetition cannot be regarded as genuine chiasmus. When the passages that Fox (1991:157-162) lists are examined, however, they appear not merely to have repetitive vocabulary but are, in fact, mirroring images of each

other. On the basis of this mirroring pattern they are defined as reversals/chiasmus.

From a narrative perspective then, we suggest that chiasmus in Esther has the following schema:

x	y	
		King
	y	x

The schema makes the king the pivot of the chiastic-reversal pattern in Esther. He is the critical factor in the reversal of the roles of the main characters in the story, as McBride (1991:222, cf. also 212-213) emphasises with his remark: '....our kingpin Xerxes occupies the characterological center of the chiastic cluster Vashti-Esther / Haman-Mordecai....' Similarly, McCarty and Riley (1986:99) comment that '....the king completes the reversal when he hands over Haman's house and possessions to Esther, and bestow his signet ring, which he recovered from Haman, on Mordecai (8:1-2).'

Goldman (1990:15-31), in a section entitled 'Irony of Characterisation' refers to the ironic reversal in the characterisation of main characters like Esther, Mordecai, Haman, and even a minor character like Zeresh but nothing is said of Ahasuerus. Is this because nowhere in the narrative do we have the ironic reversal in the characterisation of Ahasuerus?

Is this not because he himself is responsible for the ironic reversal in the characterisation of the main and minor characters in the story? This is contrary to the view of Clines (1990:36) who says '[a] structural analysis, then, dealing solely with the evidence of the text, registers the text's lack of identification of a sender as a crucial distinctive of the story.' He refers of course to the use of the actant model. In our view, however, the king would be the sender in the actant model when it is applied to Esther. So, then, the role of the king in the chiasm of the narrative is that he reverses the positions, roles, destiny and fortunes of the main characters.

2. Reading from right to left: the key to chiasmus in Esther

To see the role of the king in this reversal, the narrative must be read in true Hebraic fashion, that is, from *right to left*.

By this I mean that chapters 1-8 of the story should be read from the perspective of 9:20-28. Put differently, the role of king should be viewed in the light of 9:20-28. In this regard Lacocque (1999:314) remarks: 'If, therefore, the ending in the MT is to be taken seriously, it becomes not only possible but even probable that we must reverse Clines' linear reading of Esther and start with the narrative end (Esth 9-10)....' What Okorie (1995:277) says regarding characterisation applies here as well,

namely, that '[c]haracterisation should be described in a spiral rather than a linear model, because characterisation as a process in the reader's mind does not occur linearly. New information does not always build on previous information...characterisation comes with the style of repetition. Through repetition, personages and events are caught in a finer web of reiteration. Redundancy in biblical characterisation is therefore a conscious literary device which aids in developing memory, expectation and reinforcing the thematic words and phrases' (cf. also, Alter 1982, Rhoads and Michie 1982).

It is commonly believed that 9:20-28 generally, and 9:24-26a in particular, is a summary of chapters 1-8 (Bardte 1963:390-397; Bush 1996:480; Day 1995:158; Lebram 1972:212; Lacocque 1990:312,321; Murphy 1981:169; cf. 2:18 with 9:20-22). Such a reading is therefore possible. It requires, however, a careful look at 9:20-28, which we will now undertake.

Esther 9:20-28 divides as follows (cf. Bush 1996:476-484, Murphy 1981:169):

9:20-23	Purim Regularised
9:24-26a	Origin of Purim
9:26b-28	Purim Commemorated

In 9:20-23 Mordecai instructs the Jews in the provinces, who were celebrating only 14th Adar as a feast day, to celebrate both days, that is, 14 and 15 Adar with feasting, rejoicing and sharing of gifts. In 9:26b-28 the Jews obey Mordecai and commit themselves to keeping the days as a perpetual memorial.

What is very important is the reason Mordecai gives for the celebration of Purim. This is recorded in 9:24-26a: first, a change has come about in the meaning of the word פֹּר. פֹּר which usually means 'that which decides the fate of a thing or a person', has been given a new meaning which originated in their own historical experience (cf. Fox 1991:121). פֹּר now means the reversal of the fate (destiny) which is intended for a person or thing; secondly, in this whole process which resulted in the Feast of Purim, the king played a pivotal and critical role. He foiled Haman's plot; he had Haman executed when he became aware of his plot to exterminate the Jews, so that Haman's plot recoiled upon his own head. His decree, which Mordecai merged with his own, served as a counter-decree (Bush 1996:481). These details of 9:24 indisputably point to the central role of the king. Now Bush comments that in this passage '[t]he king, then, is *made to appear* (my emphasis) as virtually the sole agent in the Jews' deliverance' (1996:481), and that by Mordecai. The question is:

Why would Mordecai find it necessary to depict the king in this way if he had, in fact, not played such a vital role in the reversal of the fate of the Jews? What motivated Mordecai to 'skillfully transform' the role of the king? The truth is, in terms of the concept of chiasmus used in the whole Esther narrative, the king does not merely appear, or is not merely made to appear by Mordecai, but is in fact the primary, pivotal and determinative agent of the deliverance of the Jews. Bensusan (1988:76-77) sees a typological significance in the seating arrangement at the second banquet and comments that 'the typological significance is that the King is seated between Esther who represents the Jewish interests and Haman who represents the anti-Semitic interests.' The king is seated in the centre as the pivotal person of the story who reverses the positions, fortunes and destiny of the characters. Concurring Bal (1991:77) points out that in the Rembrandt van Rijn portrait of 1660 the king is also seated in the middle of the two characters.

The primacy of the role of the king is also evident from the syntax of 9:25a especially. It reads **המלך** **ובבאה לפני**. The 3rd person singular feminine suffix has been variously interpreted as referring either to Esther or Haman. Bush (1996:481-482) has argued convincingly that the 3rd person singular feminine pronominal suffix refers to the plot of Haman which the king became aware of, resulting in his action to

reverse it. This understanding of the pronominal suffix depicts the king as the one who reverses the positions, fortunes and destiny of the main characters of the story. It is also affirmed by 9:25b which reads **אמר עם הספר ישוב מחשבתו הרעה**.

The *type of chiasmus* used in Esther also supports the pivotal role of the king, as argued above. McBride (1991:212-213) states that scholars make mention of two types of chiasmus, a symmetrical (ABBA) and a dissymmetrical (ABC-D-CBA) kind of chiasmus. Regarding the ABC-D-CBA type of chiasmus, he says that '....[a] number of critics have each in their own way pointed out that this "D" member - this dividing element, center, plane, axis - although valueless and substanceless with regard to the exchange, acts nonetheless as the "general space" of that transaction's possibility; that is to say, it acts as its "ground" (1991:212). McBride (1991:213) now concludes from this dissymmetrical concept of chiasmus, also found in Esther, that '[i]n the Book of Esther, King Xerxes inhabits the characterological "center" of the book's chiasm, acting as a kind of Postmaster General in absentia, presiding over the mechanical sorting and shifting of subjects and scrolls, mediating between Haman and Mordecai, Vashti and Esther [Jews and Enemies]. He mediates, however, without neutralising' (cf. also Bensusan 1988:71). We would aver, though, that in Esther the 'dividing

element, center, plane, axis' is neither valueless nor substanceless. Thus, the structure, language, syntax and the literary device of chiasmus, as shown above, demonstrate that in 9:20-28 the king has the pivotal role of reverser of the positions, fortunes and destiny of the main characters of the Esther story. He is depicted as virtually the sole deliverer of the Jews in 9:20-28.

This view is strengthened further by the fact that in the Esther narrative the king is powerless to reverse events and circumstances. For example, in 2:1 the king remembered Vashti and her dethronement but he could not reverse that event, so the search started for a replacement for Vashti; in 3:1-15 the decree for the extermination of the Jews is promulgated. Esther requesting the reversal of this is told by the king that he could not do this (8:1-8). What the king however is able to do is to reverse the position, role, fortunes and destiny of the various main characters in the narrative. Therefore, to the question: Who reverses the position, role, fortune and destiny of the characters in the Esther narrative? (cf p196), the answer is *AHASUERUS the king*.

We have established, then, the vital role of the king in the chiasmus underlying the Esther narrative on the basis of the analysis of 9:20-28. Next we look at the role of the king in each of the main cycles identified in the previous chapter.

2. The role of the king in 1:1-2:20

The backdrop for the discussion of the role of the king in 1:1-2:20 is 1:1-9. This backdrop paints a picture of the king as powerful, acting directly, and acting indirectly. To help us focus on *the role* of the king, we approach this topic from the perspective of crises in Esther, of which there is a number. We will pay careful attention to the resolution of the crises. Further, the approach is going to be descriptive and summary in nature rather than syntactic-analytical.

The cycle 1:1-2:20 divides into a number of units:

3.1 Chapter 1:1-9

The importance of this section for this cycle is summed up in the words of Claassens (1996:55) who writes: 'Die volgende drie verse word gewy aan 'n beskrywing van Jefta. Op hierdie wyse word 'n prentjie van Jefta geteken wat tersake is vir die plot van die verhaal.' It is demarcated by an inclusion as follows:

1:1b (המלך) אחשורוש; and

1:9b אחשורוש (המלך)

What is the picture of the king in this unit? The unit is an introduction, the introduction of the main

character of the story, in my view. It is not a historical introduction with the focus on chronology but it is a description of the main character in terms of a specific quality, namely, power. The power is now depicted in terms of:

- a) Geography: Ahasuerus reigned from India to Ethiopia over 127 provinces (1:1b);
- b) Position: King Ahasuerus sat on his royal throne in Shusan the capital. The specific indication here that his throne is in the capital (that is, the center of the kingdom) is a symbol for his power (1:2b);
- c) Social power: he gave a banquet for ALL....(1:3a);
- d) Personal glory: he displayed the riches of his royal glory....the splendour of his great majesty (1:4a);
- e) Duration of the banquet: for....180 days (1:4b);
- f) The scope of the banquet: the king gave a banquet for all the people lasting seven days (1:5a);
- g) Garden description: the picture painted of the garden speaks of the power of the king (1:5b-6);
- h) Golden vessels: the fact that they were of different kinds and varieties speaks of the wealth/power of the king (1:7a);
- i) The wine: this was in plentiful supply according the hand (כִּיד) of the king (1:7b);
- j) Changing a tradition: none should be forced to drink (1:8); and

k) Feast of the women: the location of this feast is described as the palace belonging to the king (1:9).

When we put all of this together we have a picture of a very powerful king.

Another indication of the concept of power in 1:1-2:22 is the feasts, for the feasts turn out to be the setting for the interaction of power. They are the sites of power struggles.

We also have, in these verses, a picture of the king which is important for the plot of the story. We see that the king acts directly:

- a) He made (1:3);
- b) He caused the riches of his splendour to be displayed (1:4); and
- c) He made (1:5).

From these verses it is clear that he acts actively (1:3,5) and non-actively (1:4); directly and indirectly. In 1:4a we have the verb **בְּהִרְאִתּוֹ**, which is hiphil, i.e. causative, meaning he caused. Thus he acts indirectly in 1:4a as opposed to verses 1:3,5, **עָשָׂה**. So we have in 1:1-9 three pictures of the king crucial to the story: a powerful king, a king who acts directly, and a king who acts indirectly.

Another important aspect of the actions of the king, which will be a key throughout the story, is that the



king acts **כדה** (1:8a) and not **איך אנס** (1:8a). This description of how the king acts is also very important for our understanding of the first crisis, which is 1:1-2:22. The reason given in 1:8b for the statement in 1:8a is interesting. We can see, for example, in 1:2b-15 how the king acts in terms of 1:8a (**כדה**). Moreover, this little phrase is critical for understanding 1:12a and the king's handling of the incident which happens in 1:12a.

3.2 Chapter 1:10-22

The role of the king must be viewed in the light of the plot of the story. The basic plot line of the story is the reversal of the threat of death and extermination, as is reflected in the case of the king himself (2:21-23); the Jewish nation (3:1-4:17, 8:3-14); Esther (4:11, 5:1-2); and Mordecai (5:14-6:14).

In the pericope, 1:10-22, the king deals with a potential national crisis. Queen Vashti refused to obey a command issued by the king. The refusal takes place publicly in the presence of the king's provincial leaders, so creating a national crisis. The result is that Vashti is dethroned by the king. Here we encounter the first act of reversal by the king. The position, fortune and destiny of Vashti the Queen is reversed by the king via a decree, 1:21-22. The state of the throne in the kingdom has been

reversed. Previously it was filled, now it has a vacancy.

The reversing activity of the king is alluded to by Fox (1991:21-23), who writes: '[i]n order to counteract the danger presented by debar hammalkah, "the word of the queen" (v17), a debar malkut, literally, "a word of kingship", should be issued (v19).'

3.3 Chapter 2:1-4: The picture of the king.

We have in 2:1-20 a more subdued king. He is still powerful and he still acts, but now it is first indirectly and then directly, which is a reversal of the picture of him in 1:1-20, where he first acts directly, and then indirectly. Even the feast, which is described as the feast of Esther, is characterised with far less pomp and ceremony. We do not have word pictures of the king's power. The spotlight falls not on the power of the king but on the need of the kingdom: a queen must be found. So, although power and action is present, it is so in a less dramatic form. This naturally flows from the existence of a new situation, a situation in which there is no challenge to his power.

The change in the circumstances is indicated by the temporal phrase of 2:1 'after these things.' In addition there is the description of the emotional state of the king: 'the anger of King Ahasuerus had subsided.' The king is further depicted in a

contemplative mood, 'he remembered.' We are allowed to see as it were what he thinks, namely, about the events of the recent past, about Vashti, what she did and what happened to her as a result. And what happened to her? She was banished, her position, fortune and destiny were reversed. But what happens to Vashti impacts on Ahasuerus as well, for now he has an empty throne. It seems to me that here in 2:1-4, as was the case in 1:9, Vashti is used as a foil to keep the spotlight on Ahasuerus. His inner contemplative and emotional state must have been reflected in his physical appearance, thus the response of the servants in 2:2-4a. In 2:4b we note that the king acted, but this was indirectly as **כִּן** **וַיַּעַשׂ** states. The king agreed to what the servants suggested and what they suggested was implemented.

So we have the picture of a less dramatically active Ahasuerus in contrast to 1:1-9. The reason for this is the considerable change in the circumstances.

3.4 Chapter 2:5-20 The role of the king

From 2:5-16 we have a detailed description of the implementation of the servants' idea to which the king agreed. In all this the king is not mentioned once as acting directly. He is acting in-directly through the servants in keeping with the picture painted of him in 2:1-4. Here we have an instance of role reversal of the king. He is a spectator until the right moment

arrives.

We have in 2:16-18 a parallel to the 1:10-12 situation:

1. Vashti was to be taken to the king 1:11;
2. Esther is now taken to the king 2:16;
3. Vashti was to come with royal regalia 1:11; and
4. Esther comes with what Hegai gave 2:15.

The scene of inaction is changed into one in which we have several direct actions (2:17-18) by the king:

1. He loved Esther more than the other women 2:17a;
2. He favoured her more than the other women
2:17a;
3. He placed the royal crown on her head 2:17b;
4. He crowned Esther in the place of Vashti 2:17b;
5. He made a great feast for all his leaders and
servants 2:18a;
6. He declared a holiday in all the provinces
2:18b; and
7. He gave gifts to all in the provinces 2:18b.

By means of these actions Ahasuerus reversed the destiny, fortune, and position of Esther. This is clear from the name of the feast, for it is called Esther's feast. She moves from virgin-Jewish maiden to Queen of the Medio-Persian Empire; from submissive daughter of her uncle Mordecai to powerful ruler with subjects under her; from unknown Jewish maiden

to important role player in the ultimate reversal of the destiny of her people.

The mood in the empire changed as well. From queenless it now has a queen; from sombre depression to joy and festivity. The mood of the kingdom has been reversed now that it has a queen again. The role reversing activity of the king is also alluded to by Bush (1996:336) who says: 'the second scene [2:5-18], continues the exposition of the story....by relating the events and circumstances by which Esther replaces Vashti....'. What Bush fails to mention of course is that Ahasuerus replaces Vashti with Esther, highlighting the role of king in the scene. The reversing activity of the king is also alluded to by Fox (1991:21-23) who writes: '[i]n order to counteract the danger presented by debar hammalkah, 'the word of the queen' (v17), a debar malkut, literally, "a word of kingship', should be issued (v19).' In this way Xerxes reverses Vashti's debar with his own debar, pointing to his characteristic role in the narrative.

Conclusion

In chapter 1:1-2:20 center stage is taken up by Ahasuerus. This center stage position is depicted via the metaphor of power. He is a powerful, central figure here and also in terms of the plot of the story too. He is the central power for he plays the role of the role-reverser. The position, fortune and

destiny of the first two main characters are permanently reversed as a result of the actions of the king.

4. The role of the king in 2:21-8:17

In this section Ahasuerus plays a number of secondary roles which all build up to his main role. These secondary roles relate to some of the characters and the plot line of the story. His main role is that of resolving the crisis in this cycle, namely, the threatened extermination decreed for the Jewish nation. We now look at these secondary roles:

4.1 Chapter 2:21-23

The role of Ahasuerus in this incident is depicted in a twofold manner:

a) He gives instructions that the alleged assassination plot be investigated, as the phrase **ויבקש הדבר** in 2:23 makes clear. The subject is not mentioned explicitly, but from the context it can be inferred that Ahasuerus ordered the investigation; and

b) He orders the hanging of Bigthan and Teresh: **על-עץ** **ויתלו שניהם**. Again the subject is not mentioned explicitly but the context makes it clear that the king orders both the execution and its inscription in the royal annals.

In this incident he reverses the *position* and *destiny* of Bigthan and Teresh from life to death. They fall into the hole they have dug for the king, namely, death. And from a *position of standing*, as keepers of the king's door, they now are *hanging* from a tree. The king, who was to die, now brings about the death of those who planned to kill him. His intended death is turned into life and the life is turned into death.

4.2 Chapter 3:1-6

The opening phrase of chapter 3 points to a new pericope, 'after these things'. It links directly to 2:21-23. The phrase "these things" refers to the attempt on the life of the king by Bigthan and Teresh. The promotion of Haman can be seen as an effort on the part of Ahasuerus to tighten palace security. In promoting Haman, Ahasuerus reverses two situations:

- a) A situation of inadequate security was reversed into one of tighter security; and

- b) Haman's position is reversed from that of a mere official to vizier in the kingdom. He becomes the second most powerful person in the administrative machinery of the kingdom. On another level the king's

action also moves the plot forward, and sustains the suspense in the narrative since the promotion of Haman leads to the conflict between him and Mordecai. His main action, however, remains the reversing of Haman's administrative position and of the security situation in the palace.

4.3 Chapter 3:7-4:3

The king plays a reversal role in this section. Up to this point the city of Shushan and its people have known peace and tranquility, but it is suddenly thrown into trouble, perplexity, crisis, and uncertainty (3:15, 4:1-3). The king, by his actions, has reversed a stable, quiet and peaceful situation into one of lamenting, crying, perplexity and trouble. In this way he sustains the plot line of the narrative and underscores the close link between plot and character.

Moreover, a people who have up to now lived in safety, peace, and security suddenly have their situation changed to one of insecurity and a threatened existence, all due to a decree sanctioned by the king.

4.4 Chapter 4:4-5:6

The key verses for understanding the gist of this passage are 4:8,11,16 and 5:2. The decree mandating the extermination of the Jews hangs over their heads.

Only Ahasuerus can avert the disaster about to befall them, as Mordecai makes clear to Esther. She must therefore go to him and seek his help. There is a problem, however, for no one is allowed to enter the king's throne-room without being summoned, not even the queen. So a crisis exists for the Jews. The only person able to help them is inaccessible to them. Persuaded by Mordecai, Esther decides to go to Ahasuerus despite the risk involved.

With one 'simple' action Ahasuerus reverses the crisis of inaccessibility into a hope-giving opportunity. By holding out his sceptre to Esther, Ahasuerus reverses a situation of imminent death into one of continued life. For the audience, a hopeless situation is turned into one of hope, as Esther's access to the king brings hope that the disaster facing the Jewish nation might still be averted. In addition, Ahasuerus' acceptance of Esther's invitation to the banquet adds to the hope the audience now has for the situation of the Jews. So, *inaccessibility is reversed into hopeful opportunity by Ahasuerus as he holds out the golden sceptre to Esther.*

4.5 Chapter 5:7-6:14

The first banquet ends in Haman's plan to execute Mordecai (5:14). In this way a new mini-crisis is introduced into the story. A decree of extermination hangs over the heads of the nation; Haman's death-

plan hangs over Mordecai's head. And once again the action of Ahasuerus reverses a life-threatening situation into a life-continuing situation.

The groundwork done, Haman is off to the palace to obtain royal permission to hang Mordecai. His arrival coincides with the king's question to his servants 'who is in the court'? The king is looking for someone with whom he can discuss the honouring of Mordecai. Haman is asked what is to be done to the person the king desires to honour. After giving his view, Haman is ordered to carry out in detail all that he said, but to do it to/for Mordecai the Jew. The reversing action of Ahasuerus is recorded in 6:10. In ordering Haman to carry out exactly and completely everything he has said should be done, Ahasuerus reverses:

a) Haman's plan, for instead of hanging Mordecai on his gallows, he causes him to be lifted up onto the king's horse;

b) The consequences of Haman's plan, for instead of hanging on a gallows exposed to public shame, Mordecai is paraded in the public square in honour; and

c) Mordecai's destiny, for instead of his life

being ended, Mordecai's life is preserved by

Ahasuerus.

There is another interesting reversal happening here. In 2:21-23 Mordecai saves Ahasuerus's life. Now, in 6:1-10, the situation is reversed as Ahasuerus saves Mordecai's life. Further, we have role reversals between Mordecai and Haman as well. In 4:1-3 Mordecai goes about in the city in sackcloth and ashes, lamenting the fate of his people. Now Haman runs home 'mourning and his head covered' (6:12b) as a result of Ahasuerus' decision to honour Mordecai. From the perspective of the audience the honouring of Mordecai by Haman, the archenemy of the Jews, must engender hope for a positive outcome of the crisis. The honouring of Mordecai may also be a proleptic depiction on the part of the narrator, presaging the outcome of the story on the macro-level, in which the king reverses the destiny of the Jews and their enemies. This reversal is seen in the clothing of Mordecai. He exchanges his civilian clothes for royal regalia, which shows the reversal of his position, however temporary it was.

4.6 Chapter 7:1-8:2

The next major reversing action of Ahasuerus is alluded to in 6:14. Verse 14 remarks that while Haman's counsellors and wife were still predicting his fall (6:13b), the king's servants arrive to hurry him to Esther's banquet, the banquet which turns out to be the final nail in his coffin. For in hurrying

Haman to the banquet they were hurrying him to his death, since he does not return again to his home but is hanged on the very gallows he prepared for Mordecai. Several important things are done by Ahasuerus in this incident of reversal:

- a) He sets the stage by renewing his questions / offer 7:2;
- b) He expresses his horror at what he hears 7:5;
- c) He becomes extremely angry 7:7-8a;
- d) He speaks the word, i.e. the death sentence 7:8b-10, which is the real turning point of the incident. Fox (1991:86) says that the clause translated 'the king was bent on his ruin' (7:7b) is actually passive; literally, 'the evil was completed for him from the king....This formulation suggests an impersonal working-out of Haman's fate, *with the king as the device of this process*' (my emphasis). The narrative shows the king is indeed the pivotal 'device' for the working out of the fate of all the main dramatis personae, but not in the passive manner suggested by Fox; and
- e) At this point Haman's destiny is reversed, his position is changed, **הדבר יצא מפי...חלהו עליו**. Haman's fate was sealed, Haman has finally fallen. The command of Ahasuerus completes one leg of the reversal, as the representation below indicates:

a The king's anger provoked	7:7a
b Haman's plea	7:7b
c The king returns from the garden	7:8a
d Haman falls on the couch	7:8b
e The king's reaction	7:8c
d' Haman's fate	7:8d-9a
c' The king's decree	7:9b
b' Haman is hanged	7:10a
a' The king's anger subsides	7:10b

The pivotal role of the king is highlighted by this chiastic arrangement (cf. McCarthy and Riley 1986:99; also, Fox 1991:89). With his anger pacified things are restored to normality; there is order in the kingdom again. Moreover, the hanging of Haman by the command of the king reverses the consternation, anxiety, and perplexity of chapter 3:15a and 4:1-3.

In the next unit, 8:1-2, he completes *the other leg* of the reversal by promoting Mordecai. This is recorded in 8:1b-2a. Once Mordecai is in the presence of the king because of his relationship to Esther, the king takes his signet ring **ויתנה למרדכי**. We find in this section two actions by Ahasuerus, actions by which he reverses the positions, fortunes, and destiny of Haman and Mordecai:

a) הדבר יצא מפי... תלהו עליו, and

b) ויתנה למרדכי

Fox (1991:90) describes this action as follows:
'Xerxes, reversing his action of 3:10, transfers the royal signet ring to Mordecai.' With this comment Fox acknowledges the reversing role of the king in the narrative.

In the incident of the second banquet we see Ahasuerus in his role as the one who reverses the fortunes, destiny and position of the main characters, par excellence, since this incident is the climax of the narrative.

Furthermore, the promotion of Mordecai which happens in 8:1-2, points to another twofold reversing activity of the king, characterising his role in the story. Haman's death brings about a vacancy in the premiership, similar to the vacancy brought about by Vashti's dethroning. The king fills the vacancy with his promotion of Mordecai to the position of vizier; implicit also is the change in geography for Mordecai, from the gate of the palace to the inner throne-room of the palace, from the outside to the inside. Further, when he promoted Haman in 3:1-5 it was for reasons of security in the palace, while his promotion of Mordecai will lead to a sense of security for the Jews even though the threat still hangs over their heads.

4.7 Chapter 8:3-17

At the beginning of this chapter (1:1-9) we pointed out that the king acts directly (1:3,5) and indirectly (1:4); and we saw how this happened in the de-thronement of Vashti and the enthronement of Esther. In the present section we have the same phenomenon. In 7:1-8:2 Ahasuerus acts directly as he gives orders for Haman to be hanged, hands over his property to Esther, and gives Mordecai authority as vizier in Haman's place.

Now, however, he acts indirectly (8:3-8:14) in causing a counter decree to be published which empowers the Jews to defend themselves. The involvement of Ahasuerus in the production of the decree is interestingly recorded by the narrator:

a) 8:8 'You write', he tells Esther and Mordecai (i.e. use the authority I have already given to you). Authority was given to Esther when the king handed Haman's property to her, apart from the fact that she is queen; and to Mordecai, since he has the king's signet ring;

b) 8:10 and he wrote in the name of the king and sealed it with the king's ring. The narrator is at pains to point out that the king stands behind the decree; and

c) 8:11 'the king granted the Jews....', suggesting

that the power of the king stood behind the acts of defence by the Jews. In this way we see Ahasuerus 'reversing' the first decree published in his name by a second one also published in his name. In doing this, he potentially reversed a disastrous situation for the Jews, fulfilling his role as the reverser of the position, destiny, and fortunes of a nations in this case.

At the beginning of the narrative (chapters 3-4), Ahasuerus, via his promotion of Haman, reverses a situation of peace, safety and security into one of anxiety, perplexity and national crisis for the Jews. Now, because of his promotion of Mordecai (8:2,15-17), he brings about a situation of joy, gladness, and feasting in the capital and the provinces. Verse 15 indicates that Ahasuerus installed Mordecai officially as the new vizier of the empire. So we see that even in the outworking of his actions and decisions, Ahasuerus plays the role of the reverser of the position, fortune, and destiny of the characters of the narrative.

The reversing activity of Ahasuerus is evident in chapter 8 from a different perspective. In 8:3-4, just as in 5:1-4, the king holds out the sceptre to Esther. In 8:3-4, however, Esther lies at the feet of the king when he holds out the sceptre. The holding out of the sceptre results in her rising from her

fallen position to an upright position before the king. In this way the narrator symbolises the impending reversal of the position of the Jews through the intervention of the king (cf. 8:5b,10,11).

Although the king is in the background throughout 8:1-17, he comes to the fore at key moments; and nothing happens without his permission and involvement, affirming once again his pivotal role in the reversal of the fortunes of the characters.

5. The Role of the king in 9:1-10:3

5.1 Chapter 9:1-4

The picture we have of the king in vv 1-4 is one in which he acts indirectly. Several statements point to this:

9:1c 'when the king's command and his order came to be done';

9:2 'in all the provinces of King Ahasuerus';

9:3b 'the business which was to the king'; and

9:4a 'Mordecai was great in the king's house.' Behind the activities of the kingdom stands the king. He is described here as acting indirectly, as was the case in 1:4. This indirect presence is the result of the nature of these verses, namely, it is a report and not discourse.

We have in verse 1 a parenthesis from 9:1b-d, since 9:1a links logically and directly to 9:1e to read

thus: 'And in the twelfth month, that is, the month of Adar, on the thirteenth day in it (i.e. the month of Adar),they ruled the Jews over the ones hating them.' The parenthesis has this important phrase 'and was overthrown / turned around it', the it referring to the day. The day was reversed from one in which the enemies of the Jews were to overpower them to one in which they overpowered their enemies. The verse does not say how the day was turned around. But 9:22-26 will make this clear, namely, that it was the king. So we have here an indirect reference to the reversing role of the king.

5.2 Chapter 9:11-14

The nature of this section is in the form of a dialogue between Esther and the king. The dialogue is introduced by a report, 9:11. The king's speech is recorded in 9:12, and Esther's reply in 9:13, and the action of the king is recorded in 9:14a. The conclusion is 9:14b-15. This can be represented as follows:

A descriptive introduction	9:11
B king's speech	9:12
C Esther's reply	9:13
B king's action	9:14a
A descriptive epilogue	9:14b-15.

The king acts directly for or on behalf of the Jews; for the first time he is taking sides. The king has

Haman's sons gibbeted in the same way he gibbeted Haman. This may be an attempt by the narrator to emphasise the fact that it was the king who was responsible for the demise of Haman. The king reversed Haman's situation from one with a future: having 10 sons (children), to one without a future: having no children. The situation of Haman's wife is also reversed from one of security: she has a husband, sons, family, to one of insecurity, vulnerability and no future. Herein we have perhaps the answer to the question: Why gibbet the dead sons of Haman? The answer: to show the utter destruction of Haman.

5.3 Chapter 9:22b-25

In this pericope we have the most definitive description of the role of the king in Esther. It is a historical note which describes the reversing action of the king.

The first reference to the reversing activity of the king is the syntax of 9:22b. It reads: 'and the month which was turned to them from sorrow to joy, and from mourning into a good day'. The verb נהפך is passive, i.e. niph'al stem. The subject of the verb as is clear from the context is the decree of the king. Consequently, it was the king who turned their sorrow into joy and their mourning into a good day. He reverses their sorrow to joy, their mourning to feasting.

The second reference to the reversing activity of the king in this pericope comes from 9:24-25, which constitute the reason for vv22-23. It gives the reason for the change of their sorrow to joy, and their mourning to gladness. The 3 person feminine pronominal suffix of **וּבָאָהּ** refers to the decree of Haman as we showed in chapter 4. The result is the counter-decree of the king in which Haman's plot is reversed, as 9:25b states.

Once again we see that the role of the king in Esther is one of reversing the position, fortune and destiny of the main characters of the narrative.

5.4 Chapter 10:1-2a + 3

We have, as it were, a self-characterisation by Ahasuerus in 10:1-2, by virtue of two acts ascribed to him: 10:1 he taxes land and sea; 10:2 he, by his promotion of Mordecai to vizier, makes Mordecai great. The acts recorded in 10:2a are described as 'all the acts of his authority and of his might.' We have a picture in these verses of Ahasuerus as a powerful king, just as he is pictured in 1:1-9.

The other aspect of the picture of the king is in verse 3, which reads, 'For Mordecai the Jew was next to the king....' (my emphasis). This is a characterisation of the powerful position and status of the king. First Ahasuerus and next Mordecai. Thus the powerful depiction of Ahasuerus we have in 1:1-9

the powerful depiction of Ahasuerus we have in 1:1-9 is continued here in 10:1-3, providing symmetry to the narrative as a whole. Below, we now see the purpose of this depiction of the king as a powerful figure.

5.5 Chapter 10:2b-3

Chapter 10:2 has the following statement regarding Mordecai: 'Mordecai whom he made great the king'. The statement is an allusion to 8:1-2,15 as well as 3:1. It further contrasts the action of the king in 3:1, which action of the king leads to the threat of annihilation of the Jews. The statement of 10:2 therefore records, in an indirect manner, the king's reversal of the previous action and situation. In this way the statement of 10:2 is more than just a reference to the power of the king. It directs attention to his pivotal role in the Esther narrative, namely, reversing the positions, fortunes and destinies of the main characters of Esther.

CONCLUSION

Characterisation plays an important part in narrative integrity. We have sought to show this by taking one element of characterisation, namely, the role of a character, as this is developed in the narrative as a



of the king in Esther on the basis of the chiasmic-reversal which underlies Esther, we have been able to affirm that narrative integrity and characterisation are closely linked to each other. This means narrative coherence can be traced back to a single character in a story, which is the case in Esther. Henry James is well known for the dictum 'What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character?' (Brown 1996:5). This dictum is nowhere truer than in Esther as this discussion of the role of king Ahasuerus has shown.