

## CHAPTER SIX

### The Portrayal of the King

#### **Introduction**

Characterisation per se has received little attention in Esther studies, presumably because the author is not interested in characterisation. Moore(1983:Iiii), for example, maintains that the narrator's 'emphasis was not on plot and action, not character or personality. Thus, more often than not he simply states what was said or done....without saying why or how....' (see also Anderson 1984:831; Gordis 1973:45).

Now the fact that the narrator does not deal with the 'why or how....' of the actions of characters, hardly means he is not emphasising character, only that he does not make clear the motives and other psychological details of the character. This is not the main part of characterisation in O T literature anyway, as is pointed out by Jonker (1995:130) who says: 'one will have to be forewarned, however, that biblical narratives show far less interest in the psychological aspects of characters than their modern narratives do. In biblical narratives the characters serve the plot/story line; they are seldom employed in the narrative for the purpose of fixing the attention on the characters themselves.' About the

Barkhuizen (1988:56) says: 'die figure ontstaan en [word] opgebou uit 'n wisselwerking tussen vertelsituasie and vertelde situasie.' Concurring, Bowman (1995:290) comments: 'A character cannot be portrayed apart from events involving that character, and the events that involve a character cannot be separated from a depiction of the character' (cf. also Day 1995:19). It also belies the numerous studies in recent years on characterisation in Esther of which Day (1995) is but one example.

We contend that characterisation is vital in the discussion of the integrity of Esther since there is a very close *link between characterisation and narrative integrity*. In fact, it is one of my main contentions that narrative integrity can be accounted for in terms of characterisation.

In the present chapter we give attention to this literary device. Character can be a key to the integrity of a narrative, and Speiser (1981:203) reminds us about this when he remarks concerning the Isaac stories that: '[t]he section groups together several episodes in the life of Isaac, a *further unifying factor being the presence of Abimelech of Gerar*' (my emphasis), (cf. also Brown 1996:60,115; Okorie 1975:274;). Whybray (1991:67,138; cf. also Brown 1996:21) similarly comments with respect to the Pentateuch and the Exodus story that, '[f]rom the literary point of view it is clear that it is *the*

and gives it a focus....[t]he *figure of Moses* which dominates the whole work from Exodus on and *gives these books their literary and religious unity....'* (my emphasis). These remarks affirm the close link between characterisation and narrative integrity. We believe such to be the case also in Esther, as the following example makes clear. We have only two places in Esther in which the name AHASUERUS appears without any addition or modification, i.e. 1:1 and 9:30. The construction of the clauses is also similar:

1:1 אהשורוש הוא אהשורוש  
המלך מהרו ועד-כוש שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה  
9:30 אל-שבע ועשרים ומאה מדינה  
מלכות אהשורוש

We have here symmetry as a result of the inclusion of 1:1 and 9:30, showing the inseparable link between character and narrative integrity.

Of equal interest are 3:1 and 10:2b, in which are recorded the promotion of Haman and Mordecai respectively, by the king. Again we have a very similar construction:

3:1 גדל המלך אחשורוש

אח־המן

10:2a מרדכי

אשר גדלו המלך

Once again the inclusion indicates the link between character and narrative integrity. Consequently, attention is given to the characterisation of the king, who holds the main cycles together and provides the integrity of the narrative.

### 1. Characterisation in Narratology

There is a great deal of disagreement about characterisation as the comment above by Moore shows. But what is characterisation? A M Okorie defines it as 'the technique by which the author fashions a convincing portrait of a person within a more or less unified piece of writing' (1995:274), and the author does this in several ways:

a) by investing the character 'with an attribute or set of attributes, [the latter are] traits which correspond to verbal and non-verbal actions' (1995:275). Concurring, Bowman (1995:30) states that '[in] biblical literature character is revealed in four ways:

1. through the character's own actions and his/her interaction with other characters;
2. through the character's own speeches;

3. through the speeches of other characters about a specific character; and
4. through the narrator's specific comments about the a character.'

The fourth way is the most authoritative assessment of a character (see also Schutte 1989:63).

According to Grabe (Schutte 1989:63) 'Sodra spesifieke karaktereienskappe aan akteurs toegeken word, promoveer hulle van karakters in die storie na personasies of karakters in die verhaal. In artistieke verhale word die hoof karakter of karakters gewoonlik as redelik volledige en gekompliseerde mense uitgebeeld met 'n vermening van slegte en goeie eienskappe.' Characters are shaped, therefore, through the attribution of traits to personages in the story by the author.

b) by showing and telling. 'In showing the author presents the character of his characters in actantial function while leaving the reader to infer the various motives or dispositions that are behind the characters' roles. In telling characterisation the author personally intervenes to expound the motives and dispositions of the actants' (Okorie 1995:275).

c) by depicting the character as either flat or round. 'Flat characters, also known as type or two-

single idea or quality and are presented in outline without much individualising detail. A round character, by contrast, is complex in temperament and motivation (and thus difficult to describe) and capable of surprising the readers' (Okorie 1995:275). Since all characters do not function in exactly the same way in a narrative, different *types of characters* need to be identified and for this purpose the following methods are used:

1. simple method: flat and round characters.
2. static and dynamic characters.
3. fully fledged characters, types and agents.
4. actant model (see Schutte, 1989).

d) by the 'process of naming' (Okorie 1995:276). With round characters, characterisation takes on the process of naming. According to Okorie this means: 'the reader is led to name the character with more precision' (1995:276). This process of naming is dependent on whether the character is 'dynamic, [i. e. the] character is developed because he changes and grows while the reader watches'; [on the other hand] 'a static round character is revealed by the author. The character never changes, but the reader's

him gradually. The process of naming a static, round character is, as it were, a revelation of a name whose meaning the reader already knows. The process of naming a developing, round character, has the note of mystery for the reader can only name him provisionally step by step until the end' (Okorie 1995:276). Given this rather broad, diverse and complex description of characterisation, it is rather strange how the one dimensional description of, especially Ahasuerus, has dominated Esther studies.

## **2. Evaluating past characterisations of the king**

We have pointed to the very close link which exists between characterisation and narrative integrity. Because the portrayal of the king has an important bearing on the narrative unity of Esther, traditional descriptions of the character of the king are also surveyed here.

### *2.1 Wisdom Tradition and Characterisation in Esther*

When we come to the matter of characterisation in the Esther narrative, one meets with a surprising consensus, a consensus which revolves around the idea of characterising the dramatis personae of Esther on the basis of the Wisdom Tradition. So Loader (1977:103, cf. also Talmon 1963:440-452), for example, finds the following wisdom themes in Esther: a) 'the power of the king is dangerous'; b) 'the

time'; c) 'the folly of loquacity, anger and hatred....found in Haman'; d) 'the reversal motif'; e) 'the king drinking with his courtiers'; f) the 'hubris' displayed by Haman. For these themes references are given in both Proverbs and Qoheleth resulting in the conclusion that '....many similarities can be demonstrated....between the Book of Esther and general wisdom literature.' Because of these similarities the dramatis personae in Esther have been characterised in terms of the Wisdom Tradition. Thus, we are told, the king represents the dumb fool of Proverbs because:

- a) he does not know what is going on,
  - b) he is slow in getting to know what is going on.
- Esther and Mordecai, on the other hand, are the sages of Proverbs who act wisely.

In the same vein Schutte (1989:64-79) contends that the king is 'die personifikasie van die tradisionele "dwase koning" soos wat dit in die wysheidsliteratuur, en veral in die boek van Spreuke, bekend staan. Regdeur die verhaal vertoon hy 'n ongelooflike domheid [because]: a) [d]ie koning word maklik deur sy onderdane gemanipuleer (1:15); b) Hy is maklik beïnvloedbaar; c) Hy word maklik omgekoop (3:10)...; d) hy neem omtrent almal se raad (1:21; 2:4; 6:10); e) sy daad is onnadenkend en impulsief....; f) Hy word ook gou kwaad (1:12; 7:7); g) Hy tree voortvarend op (5:5); h) hy veroordeel 'n



nie (7:9). Die hele vertelling is daarop ingestel om hom te teken as die dwase koning' (cf. also Berg 1977:59-63,70,73,74,78).

This consensus, in my view, is the result of the undue influence accorded the Wisdom Tradition over the last three decades.

The main reason for the dominating influence of the Wisdom Tradition on characterisation in Esther has been the work of Talmon (1963:419-455). He characterised the story of Esther as a 'historicized wisdom tale' (cf. also Loader 1977:102). By doing this he hoped to provide a solution to the historical critical difficulties identified by scholars regarding the composition of Esther as well as the short-comings of certain literary solutions proposed to overcome the difficulties (Talmon 1963:419-428).

He says in fact '[t]he proposed recognition of a wisdom-nucleus in the Esther narrative may help us better to understand some salient features of the canonical book which scholars often view with perplexity, even with consternation' (ibid. 1963:427). He points to the following as indications of the wisdom-nucleus in Esther:

1. The lack of Jewish religiosity in the book;
2. The idea of a remote deity who lacks an individual personality;
3. Absence of any mention of Jewish history in the

Failure to mention a link between Jewry in Susa with Jewry outside Persia, or more specifically outside Susa;

5. The lack of a social setting and the preoccupation of the author with the characters as individuals;

6. The typological approach of the author;

7. The one-dimensional depiction of the main characters; and

8. The link between Esther and comparable literature (ibid. 1963:427-453).

Now Crenshaw (1969:129-142) develops a methodology for determining wisdom influence on non-chokmatic literature. The method comprises five principles:

1. The matter of definition. First there should be a definition of the movement, that is Wisdom School Tradition and then the definition should not be too inclusive so that everything is wisdom, nor should it be too narrow so that it excludes salient traits of wisdom. Talmon errs in the latter respect (cf. Brown 1996:4; Crenshaw 1969:130-131; Talmon 1963:426);

2. Wisdom themes must be ideologically and stylistically particular to wisdom literature and not part of the common stock of the society (1969:132);

3. Differences in the nuance of words and phrases must be explained (1969:133). Though Talmon gives numerous references from Proverbs and Qoheleth, he

in meaning between the words and phrases as used in Esther and the quoted wisdom literature. For Murphy (1981:138, cf. also Crenshaw 1969:130,) remarks that 'wisdom language does not constitute wisdom';

4. Account for the negative attitude to wisdom in the Old Testament (1969:134). For example, although Mordecai is characterised as the paragon of wisdom by Talmon (1963:447-448), yet because of his obstinate refusal to obey a command of the king (3:1-6) he endangers the existence of the whole nation. So Edwards (1989:34-35) comments 'I maintain very strongly that this refusal [of a *political* command], by a king's subject, placed not only *that* subject at risk....but that this act...also endangered the lives of Mordecai's fellow Jews and risked the possible future proscription of the Jewish faith' (emphasis original); and

5. Take into account the history of wisdom (1969:135; cf. also Brown 1996:151). The point here is that one must consider the stage in the development of wisdom into which the wisdom one deals with, falls. Commenting on the concepts of the wise and the fool, Spangenberg (1992:25) states that this typology of fool and wise fits the phase of the wisdom movement called the phase of 'inflexibility, [a phase which] no longer describes deeds, but types of people and....[h]ere it is no longer *what* you do and *when* you do it, but *who* you are. When you compare only a

Ecclesiastes....it is clear that the writers of these books protest against these oversimplified and rigid views' (emphasis his).

Talmon's effort in determining the wisdom-nucleus in Esther fails in respect of all five principles above, making his description of Esther as a historised wisdom tale, debatable to say the least.

Loader also claims that the dramatis personae in Esther can be characterised in terms of the 'one-dimensional depiction of character types typical of wisdom literature' (Loader 1977:103, Talmon 1963:440). This view is, however, problematical. It is to be questioned that wisdom literature in general depicts characters in a one dimensional manner, for if there is no 'continuing wisdom tradition', and no 'common definition of the term wisdom' which the wisdom writers are presumed to have had in common (Whybray 1991:227-228), on what grounds can it then be said that wisdom literature in general depicts characters one dimensionally as fools or as wise? The most one could say is that this holds true for Proverbs and to a limited extent for Qoheleth, but that this is true for the wisdom literature as a whole, is debatable. Furthermore, a close reading of the narrative shows that the single trait description of the king is too simplistic. While some of the behaviours of the king accords with that of the fool, others fit the description of the

simplistic fool-wise categorisation (cf. Buzzell 1995:333-338; Hogland 1995:339-352; Ogden 1994:331-340; Woodcock 1995:111-124).

The problem of this genre approach to characterisation is also evident from Schutte's (1989:78) comment regarding Bigthan and Teresh, namely, 'Hulle twee verskyn net vir 'n oomblik op die toneel, vervul hulle funksie en verdwyn dan weer.'

Yet in terms of the genre approach, to which Schutte subscribes, Bigthan and Teresh should be classified as fools on the basis of Proverbs 10:20 (see Ogden 1994:340), but he does not do this. Why not?

Also, this wisdom reading of character in Esther fails to see the link between reversal and character, resulting in the stereotyped treatment of the Esther characters generally and Ahasuerus specifically.

The inadequacy of characterisation solely in terms of the Wisdom Tradition is indicated by Humphreys (1973:215) who says, regarding Haman, that: '[t]here is a degree of complexity in the characterisation of Haman. A *cool control and cleverness* is displayed in the careful presentation of his plot. However, these qualities are overshadowed and destroyed by his *blind hatred* of Mordecai....' (my emphasis).

About Talmon's attempt (1963:419-455) to apply wisdom categories to Esther Murphy (1981:154) remarks: 'His analysis incorporates new insights, but whether this evidence really determines the genre [i.e. that

implication is that wisdomised characterisation is also questionable.

Crenshaw's verdict (1969:141) that 'it is difficult to conceive of a book more alien to wisdom literature than Esther', which is a response to Talmon's attempt to find a wisdom-nucleus in Esther might be too negative. For Brown (1996:20-21), in a groundbreaking study, states that '[a]lthough biblical wisdom is not narrative by nature, it must be acknowledged that the corpus is not without its narrational dimensions....[w]ith the exception of Job, the wisdom corpus does not exhibit the standard features that are constitutive of the *genre* of narrative. Yet their narrational dimensions cohere with the language of the developing self and the formation of character [so that] the idea of character constitutes the unifying theme and center of the wisdom literature, whose *raison d'etre* is to profile ethical character.'

Now, Brown and Crenshaw work with similar definitions of wisdom. Crenshaw (1969:132) states that '[w]isdom, then, may be defined as the quest for self-understanding in terms of relationships with things, people and the Creator.' Brown does not give a definition of wisdom per se, but at least two of the comments he makes can be taken to constitute a definition of wisdom. He writes (1996:3,4), '[w]isdom begins and ends with the self, in recognition that

knowledge....[T]he goal of biblical wisdom lies in the literature's focus on the developing self in relation to the perceived world....'. Given this similarity Brown's study opens the possibility for a less negative view of the influence of wisdom in a non-chomatic book like Esther. The matter of procedure, however, must receive adequate attention. On the basis of the work done by Brown it is clear that the first step is to determine the profile of character(s) in the specific wisdom literature and thereafter the attempt to draw lines and conclusions regarding the chokmatic nature of non-chokmatic literature in question. Only then will the problem alluded to by Brown (1996:18-19) be avoided, when he remarks '[i]t is a reductive mistake to identify that which shapes character as a specific genre, let alone the only genre [because] there are countless factors and diverse "genres" that can make moral conduct intelligible and shape the capacity for intensional action: legal codes, sermons, moral principles, liturgical traditions, words of insight, and predictions of social consequences.' In other words a variety of genre shapes and have an influence on character and a genre approach ought to take this into account.

## 2.2 Irony and Satire and Characterisation in Esther

The other major approach to the characterisation of

the literary devices of satire and irony. This is particularly notable in interpretations of Esther in the last ten years.

When we discussed characterisation in terms of wisdom traits we noted Crenshaw's five methodological principles for determining a wisdom-nucleus in Esther. The first was that of definition, and it is this criterion we will use to discuss attempt at satiric and ironic characterisation in Esther. The focus will be on the literary definition and understanding of 'satire' and 'irony'.

Satiric and ironic descriptions of the characters in Esther are obviously literary descriptions. It follows consequently, that the concepts of satire and irony should be literarily informed. So we look at the literary description of the terms satire and irony.

The first thing to note is that satire and irony assume a relationship between literature and society. The relationship is one in which both the satirist and ironist seek to bring about or facilitate *change* in the society. The change can happen in the society generally, within individuals themselves, or both.

In addition, both literary devices deal with the concrete world, i.e. with humans in relation to themselves, others, deities, and things, as well as facts and opinions (Johl 1988:51, van Zyl 1990:116, Weisberger 1970:170).



from that of the ironist. The satirist attacks the concrete situation and exposes it as something opposed to an ideal or the ideal, norm or standard which should obtain and in this way seeks to motivate/mobilise people to restore the absolute standard or norm.

The ironist, on the other hand, seeks to create doubt in the mind of the audience. He is a skeptic and questions the status quo, insinuating that the way things are is not the way they should be; he does not say how things ought to be either, thus leaving it up to the individual or the society to search and find out what is supposed to be and to change the existent reality to reflect the way things ought to be. Irony therefore mobilises people to go on a search for the truth in order to find the truth which is best for them.

Another aspect is the sharing of some common values between satirist, ironist and the society as well as the possession of some intellectual sophistication on the part of the society to grasp, understand, and engage both satire and irony.

We now look at some definitions of satire and irony.

2.2.1 Weiserger (1970:170-171) says that '[t]he satirist attacks the reverse of the norm he wishes to impart....Satirists say that p is false, from which the reader is to conclude that not p is

the reality attacked.' This means that satire operates with black and white categories and wants to change the world so the black is replaced by white, as it were. On the other hand, '[t]he ironist states something different from his intended message....irony states that p (surface meaning) is pretendedly true but is qualified or contradicted by q (hidden meaning). So what is actually true? [I]rony....casts doubt on everything. [In irony] the deal is different from the the reality being questioned; besides it requires further knowledge of the context as well as a greater sophistication.'

2.2.2 van Zyl (1990:115) maintains that there is much confusion regarding the term irony and therefore, despite the seeming presumptuousness of outlining the essential nature of irony, it must be attempted. Irony, according to van Zyl '....is die evaluerende enigsins skeptiese, maar tog versoenende en aanvarende reaksie van die gevoelige mense op die waarneming van menslike beperktheid en van die onoplosbare meestal tragikomediesel ewensteinstrydighede.' Rather, a distinction is drawn between primary (as above) and secondary irony. The latter is an external verbalisation of primary irony. Vital to the concept irony is the presence of a 'basiese, onoplosbare kontradiksie....'(1990:116).

Johl (1988:44) describes literary irony as '....'n dualiteit waarvolgens dit wat op een vlak

in 'n proses waartydens die oëskynlike op 'n ander vlak genegativeer word tot die dialektiese teengestelde daarvan....'. This corresponds to van Zyl's concept of primary irony.

We will now use this background to look at attempts to interpret Esther satirically and ironically.

Goldman (1990:15-31), in *Narrative and Ethical Ironies in Esther*, maintains that the Scroll of Esther has been read to date primarily as 'a story of plot reversal' (1990:15). The "ironic reversals" [however] go beyond plot movement' (1990:15). They serve:

- 1.'as a tenable model for survival in the Diaspora;
2. [To] offer insight into how irony function as a narrative device; and
3. [And] how irony functions as ethical value in the story' (1990:16).

Goldman utilizes Good's definition of irony which conceives of irony as 'an incongruity between what is and what ought to be that is transmitted via either *overstatement or understatement....*' (Goldman 1990:29 n12, but cf. van Zyl 1990:116 who describes this as secondary irony) (my emphasis).

Irony, as defined above, Goldman believes, helps resolve the problem of assimilation and maintenance of identity in the Diaspora, as well as the vexed ethical problem of the Jews' slaughter of defenceless

conception of irony is subject to two weaknesses:

1. Irony as described here is in fact secondary irony and not of the essence of irony, as van Zyl (1990:115) says: '[v]erder word ook nie altyd onderskei tussen die letterkundige of ander geverbaliseerde uitings wat as ironies of ironies gekleurd beskou kan word en die wat bloot berus op stylfigure soos onderbeklemtoning of antifrase....'. Thus according to van Zyl the idea of irony here is not literary. The weakness then of Goldman's attempt is that a fundamentally non-literary concept of irony is used to read a literary work. Again van Zyl (1990:116, cf. also Johl 1988:44) says of secondary irony that it 'berus op 'n oënskynlike diskrepansie tussen twee elemente....Daar is dus in hierdie soort uiting 'n kontras of teenstelling teenwoordig, maar geen basiese, onoplosbare kontradiksie soos by die primêre ironie nie'; and

2. It actually does what irony is not able to do, that is, provide solutions to the incongruity /contradictions in the narrative as the comment of Goldman (1990:27) intimates: 'The reader passes judgement, however, by being forced to question, to criticize, and finally, to formulate a recomprehension of Jewish survival in the Diaspora in its inhumanity and its humanity.' But in true irony

Zyl (1990:116) says, '[v]ir die onoplosbare teenstrydighede van die menslike bestaan-waarop die ironie 'n reaksie is - is daar geen korrektief nie'; which is different from the way Goldman use irony in his reading of Esther. Concurring, Johl (1990:53) states that '[b]y ironie geld geen *voorskrif* (my emphasis) nie....'. The main point to be noted here is that irony as defined by Good and used by Goldman is secondary irony and not genuine literary irony. Thus one can only speak of *traits* of irony in Esther and that Esther is not genuine irony. As a genre approach to characterisation in Esther this ironic approach suffers from the same weakness identified by Crenshaw (1969:129-142) regarding the determining of a wisdom-nucleus in Esther.

James Williams (1982:81) describes Esther as 'a satiric nationalistic fiction with comic elements.' Consequently he reads the narrative satirically and ironically and says: '[i]n the events that lead *ironically* (my emphasis) to the rewarding of Mordecai, [and] the hanging of the malicious intriguer Haman....'. Again (1990:80) '[p]ermission is granted, and thus begins the heart of the *satire* (my emphasis) in which Haman is finally hanged on the gallows that he erected for Mordecai.' Now apart from the fact that Williams suffers from the same weaknesses as Goldman and is also subject to the

satire and irony here, precisely the problem identified by van Zyl who remarks '[d]ie ironie en die satire word dikwels verwar, waarskynlik omdat lg. dikwels gebruik maak van indirekte taalmiddele, wat verkeerdelik as ironie bestempel word. Meuke (1980:5) wys daarop dat daar geen essensiële verband tussen die twee bestaan nie....'. Thus Williams's attempt suffers the same fate as that of Goldman. Further, Williams' concept of satire and irony does not differ much from the wisdom genre given his seeing satire and irony in terms of reversal primarily.

Brenner (1994:38-55) does a satiric-ironic reading of Ahasuerus among other foreign rulers found in the Hebrew Bible. He does this under the umbrella concept of *humour*. According to him this satiric-ironic/humourist reading in the final analysis 'serves endurance and acceptance, that is, passive resistance; but it also facilitates rebellion against its unworthy subverted object, that is, active resistance to an oppressive Other' (Brenner 1994:51). Brenner (1994:38,41,43) says of humour that it '....is primarily associated with playfulness, joy, and lightheartedness...[i]n short, humour and wit are tools for *shaping opinion* and for *changing attitudes*.' More specifically he writes: 'Biblical humour....consists less of joyous or non-tendentious, unconscious joking and more of wilful and angry

other disparaging sentiments....Hence biblical *humour* mostly assumes the literary forms of satire, parody, irony, (which is not always humorous), grotesque presentations, burlesque and dark comedy....biblical humour....is of a contentious/subversive kind. It undermines convention and authority....It is born of anger and frustration, and it carries a sting...Humour consists in the way that *incongruity* is suddenly recognised, and the recognition will extend to the cultural or physical norms that are breached' (my emphasis).

The relevant terms in this description of humour are the words and phrases, shaping opinions, changing attitudes, literary forms of satire and irony, and incongruity. It is this terminology that gives humour a literary orientation, and therefore the possibility of applying it to biblical literature as well. But from a *literary* point of view humour as applied to the Esther story by Brenner has some weaknesses, as follows:

1. Confusion of terms and categories. Humour is described as an umbrella term for satire and irony, in that it 'assumes the forms of satire and irony.' Then it is placed on the same plane as secondary irony when Brenner says 'humour consists in the way that incongruity is suddenly recognised.' In fact, at one point there seems to be an identification of



this satiric configuration is a double-edged sword....'. This lack of clarity weakens the humoristic reading of Esther by Brenner as a truly literary reading (cf. van Zyl 1990:115-117);

2. Brenner believes humour to be a literary device, but fails to define it literarily. He offers a Freudian psychoanalytical description as is clear from the statement that '[o]ne would do well, I think, to consult Freud on the function of such humour, which is the release of social aggression that, simultaneously, exposes this same aggression.' This compounds the lack of clarity referred to above. And it is to be questioned that a psychoanalytical understanding of humour is adequate for a literary reading of Esther; and

3. Brenner (1994:51) sees the purpose of humour as serving 'endurance and acceptance, that is, passive resistance; but also it facilitates rebellion against its unworthy subverted object, that is, active resistance to an oppressive Other' This gives to humour a very aggressive and active shape. But van Zyl (1990:117) says Johl gives a more cold, objective slant to irony 'waardeur hy dit [ironie] onderskei van die humour wat "meer verdraagsaam as korrektief ingestel (is)" (my emphasis).'



is conceived of by Brenner, and this is the result of starting with a psychoanalytical definition of humour instead of a literary description of humour.

We have briefly surveyed attempts at profiling the characters of Esther on the basis of the literary devices of satire and irony. Although they provide very interesting insights and present rather different results they fail not only on the basis of literary considerations but also because the important inseparable link of character and chiasmic-reversal is not given attention in this attempt to find a satiric-ironic nucleus in the Esther story. It is also subject to the same criticism that Crenshaw (1969:141) leveled against the attempt to find a wisdom-nucleus in the Esther narrative.

Further, the readings discussed here appear to be primarily left to right readings, i.e. from the context of the interpreter to the text, which results in simple appropriations and transplanting of meanings to the present situations, ignoring the differences between biblical history and literature and the sensibilities of our modern and western world.

In addition, satirical interpretations of Esther are not successful since satire seeks to to encourage the *transformation* of reality based on a ideal, as Weiserger (1970:160) remarks, '[h]is [i.e the satirists'] is typically a view from above....he

Applied to the Jewish nation it means resistance to subjugation by foreigners, something which true for Jews neither in the story world of Esther nor in the history of the world of the Esther narrative.

Irony requires scepticism on the part of the audience/reader, in which the present reality is questioned. Where it would fall down in respect of the Jewish community is the other aspect vital to irony, namely, that of doubting irony itself, which means uncertainty about that which should replace the present reality. But in the case of the Jewish community, however, this is not true. They certainly know with what the present reality ought to be replaced. In this respect then a satiric reading fails.

This brief exploration suggests that wisdom, satiric and ironic readings of the characters in Esther are problematic and partial to say the least.

### **3. Characterisation of King Ahasuerus in Esther**

Alter(1981:151-152) depicts Saul in the following words: 'inept, foolishly impulsive, self-doubting, pathetically unfit for kingship, and also a heroic and poignant figure, equally victimised by Samuel and by circumstances, sustained by a kind of lumbering integrity even as he entangles himself in a net of falsehood and self-destructive acts. The greatness of

opposition in the characterisation....'. What Alter calls 'this rich tension of internal opposition in the characterisation' is what we will see as we turn to the characterisation of King Ahasuerus in the next section. Humphreys (1973:22n33) bears this out when he writes that the 'figure of *the king undergoes a remarkable development* in both the tales of Esther and Mordecai....[h]e becomes a stock figure. Respected and feared...., he is yet a malleable figure, and at times foolish,....[t]he ruler becomes a plastic, well intentioned, easily misled figure, but one, however, who is able to recognise and desire what is right when the proper moment arrives' (my emphasis). The complexity of the character of the king in Esther is something our discussion in the next section will seek to demonstrate. Our approach in this and every other cycle will be to critically engage the portrayal of King Ahasuerus by other scholars. In the process our own portrayal of the king will become clear.

### 3.1 The portrayal of Ahasuerus in 1:1-2:20

We have, tucked away in 1:8, a phrase which gives a very interesting perspective to the character of the king. He told his servants that the drinking of wine was to be כדה אין אנס. Drinking was therefore to be according to the tradition and custom of people and no one was to be forced. Here we have a picture of

traditions and customs of Persian society and yet allowing those who wanted to abstain to do so. It shows sensitivity on the part of the king to the taboos of the culture and religion of some sections in the society, especially in the light of the fact that the second banquet was a 'people's banquet'. **So we have a flexible and sensitive Ahasuerus in charge of the feast.**

We have a major crisis (1:10-22) in the first cycle of the story. The crisis is the result of the king commanding the queen to appear in her royal regalia before his guests; the queen refuses, thus our crisis situation. There are some interesting aspects of the king's character revealed in this incident.

In 1:13-15 we have a dialogue between the king and his advisors. One way in which a character is portrayed is through dialogue with other characters as is the case here. This dialogue follows on from Vashti's refusal to obey the command of the king, but more specifically it follows the comment by the narrator that 'the king was very angry, and his anger burned within him' (1:12). Verse 13 begins with the adverb 'then'. We ask the question: When did the king have this dialogue with his counsellors? Immediately after Vashti's refusal was reported to him or was it soon after he received the report?

We suggest that there is a pause between 1:12 and

is calm and has a reasoned approach in his dealing with this crisis. Instead of responding hastily and rashly, he calls the council together and the matter is discussed. A rash, despotic and unpredictable monarch would have acted impulsively, and immediately ended the life of the queen, but not so Ahasuerus. **Thus we have here a portrayal of a rational Ahasuerus in control of his emotions.**

The picture of the king in 1:13-15, we are told, is that of an irrational *drunk*, a point which Portnoy (1989:188-89) seems bent on making. This is clear from several expressions he uses: '[t]his happy *drunk* turns angry....[t]he story illustrates the essential character of the king - moody, *fond of drink*, utterly dependent;....he makes her queen, and guess what? - has a *drink*;....[a] decade of drink has obviously made it impossible for him to govern....the king after so many years of *drinking* and womanising....he and Haman- guess what?- have a *drink*.'

But the person we encounter in the first cycle of the story is hardly the irrational drunk Portnoy makes him out to be. Two behaviours on the part of Ahasuerus gainsay Portnoy's description, actions Portnoy notes but the significance of which he prefers to ignore. He notes that this happy drunk seeks advice from his advisors on what to do regarding Vashti's refusal. What drunk normally



unusual drunk. Furthermore, Portnoy notes (1989:189) in the incident of the reported attempt on the king's life, that the matter was investigated. Portnoy seeks to make light of this fact, ignoring its significance, because it does not fit his one dimensional characterisation. He also finds that the story 'reports no direct act on the part of the king against Bigthan and Teresh' (ibid.). If by this Portnoy means taking Bigthan and Teresh and hanging them himself, the criticism is misguided, for nowhere else in the story does the king act directly against anybody. His behaviour in this incident is consistent with what we see of him throughout the story. In any case, a command issued by the king is the king acting directly. Portnoy's characterisation has very little foundation in the narrative itself. It is based on what he would have liked the king to be. What we get from Portnoy is a caricature, a straw man, which he conveniently demolishes. It might be interesting and entertaining but it fails to take the text seriously. He also ignores the pause in the text between 1:12 and 1:13. For a careful reading will show that 1:13-15 could not follow on directly from 1:12. The mood of the two scenes is too different for this. The drunk Ahasuerus of 1:12 is very different from the cool, composed, rational Ahasuerus of 1:13. We have a similar mood change in 2:1-4 regarding Vashti. The characterisation of Ahasuerus as the uncontrollable

It is usually held, in regard to the crisis in the first cycle, that the conflict between the king and Vashti is a *domestic* problem which the king turns into a national issue. It reveals, so we are led to believe, the despotic and unpredictable traits of the king. Brenner (1994:48) is but one example. He says 'Ahasuerus....has woman trouble. He is portrayed as a husband first and a ruler later.'

The first thing to note, particularly in regard to Brenner's comments, is the false dichotomy between personal and public, domestic and national. It is a fact that these aspects of the life of public figures are intertwined and the one has a bearing on the other. So Berlin (1983:33) in discussing the character of king David remarks '....the David stories alternate between a presentation of the private man and the public figure, so that in the end family affairs and affairs of the state are intermingled, each having an effect upon the other....'. It is invalid for Brenner to contend that Ahasuerus is 'husband first and ruler later', whatever 'later' might mean. This is simply not true. Ahasuerus is both husband and ruler all of the time, therefore the incident can be regarded as a national, public incident.

Further, Gordis (1973:45-46) has shown on grammatical and syntactical grounds that this argument, which

hold and therefore the description of the king derived from it is suspect as well. Key to his interpretation of 1:18 is the principle: 'When an all-inclusive term is in juxta-position to a more limited one, the general term includes the entire category, *except those in the specific term*' (his emphasis). This principle is now applied with the following result: in vs. 17, the generic term *kol hannasim* occurs; in vs. 18, the specific terms *sarot, paras, and umaday*. Hence the former means 'all the women (except the ladies of the court)', i.e. the generality of women, while the latter phrase means 'the ladies of the aristocracy.' In this context it is worth remembering that Persian class-distinctions were evidently strictly observed, being referred to twice in the chapter. The king gives two banquets, first for the nobility (1:3,4), followed by one for the masses of the people (1:5-8). The sequence in vss. 17,18 of the ordinary women followed by the noble women is in chiastic relationship to the order of the banquets (vss. 3-4, 5-8). This structure is not merely literary. Vashti's defiance of the king had taken place during the second feast 'for all the people (*kol-ha'am*, vs. 5). Their wives (*kol-hannasim*, vs. 17), would, therefore, be the first to know of it; the women of the nobility would hear of it a little later (vs. 18).' On this reading of the grammar, syntax and semantics of vss. 17, 18 one is



reading we are dealing with more than just a domestic dispute but with a national incident which should be dealt with from a national point of view.

From a cultural perspective Vashti's behaviour dishonors the king and 'just as honor is personal or individual as well as collective or corporate (for instance, family honor, ethnic group honor, and the like)', the action taken by the king and his advisors are thus not so extraordinary (Malina 1993:44). The usual ridicule and contempt with which the king is regarded is unfounded and to be rejected. Day (1995:212-213), in comparing the characters of Vashti and Esther as depicted by the M text, states that 'Vashti in this narrative, is feared to have the potential for affecting the people to a larger degree', and so it is valid to see her actions in a national context.

A further pointer to the possible national nature of the crisis in 1:18 is the comment of Fox (1991:22) that in 1:18 'Memuchan predicts literally, "enough" contempt and anger, apparently a facetious understatement.' I wonder whether this is not a 'facetious understatement'. Memuchan might be expressing the exasperation of the court with the persistent rebellious attitude of Vashti?

Regarding 1:18, Bush (1996:341) remarks that 'The Hebrew is cryptic and unclear, reading literally 'according to sufficiency (will be) contempt and

as consisting of ך + ן + ן, and then adding the meanings of the various elements together to give the overall meaning. But וכרי is a compound form (see BDB 1975:191, Gesenius 1910:130.1, Lev.25:26, Deut.25:2, Neh 5:8, Jer 51:58, Hab.2:13). And we do not translate each element of a compound to determine its meaning. For example כרי נאלהו means 'enough for its redemption.' Moreover, the expression וכרי in verse 18 is in a construct chain which is translated: 'enough of the contempt and of the strife.' The subject of the construct chain is Vashti, as the context makes clear, so that we can translate it, 'enough of the contempt and of the strife of Vashti.' Therefore, this is not the first time such a thing has happened. Enough is enough, she must be dealt with since her behaviour could have national consequences in that there could be 'an outburst of contempt and anger since all the [women] will do what Vashti did' (Fox 1991:19). Fox restricts the outburst to the wives of the nobles; I have broadened it in the light of the comments of Gordis (1973:45-46).

The behaviour of the king in 1:13-22 is also clarified when we put it against the background of 5:1-2. Here Esther also appears to 'disobey' the king and he acts quite differently. The answer seems to be that the context is quite different, namely, the queen and king are alone in the inner palace. This is not a public meeting. In fact Day (1995:104) states

rational and calm person.' This is a turn up for the books indeed.

We conclude then that we have an incident with a national dimension in 1:10-22. The king is thus portrayed as acting in the national interest as he de-thrones Vashti. We have therefore a king for whom the kingdom comes first before his personal needs and desires; **he puts the interests of the nation first**, as can be seen in the pathos with which 2:1-4 portrays the king.

There is still another perspective on the behaviour of the king and his advisors in dealing with the crisis of 1:10-22. This perspective is a cultural one. And in this the study of Bruce Malina (1993), *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, is helpful (see also Claassens 1996:8-14, 1997:397-407 who argues for this perspective). The section in Malina's work that is relevant for our study can be summarised as follows (1993:28-62):

1. Ancient societies were organised on the basis of the basic values of **honour** and **shame**. These building blocks make for stability and harmony in the society.
2. It follows from the above that the relationships between people in society are governed by the values of honour and shame. So the relationship between male-female, equals, superior-inferior, individual-community, child-parent, etc. are all controlled in

3. The values of honour and shame are 'likely to persist, in some cases, for thousands of years' (1993:54; cf. also, Claassens 1996:27,2.3.1).

4. Honour refers to a person's 'social standing....rightful place in society' (Malina 1993:54), which forms the basis for the manner in which one interacts with others in the society. It determines how one relates to various persons in society, i.e. as equals, superiors, subordinates, and so on. It refers to a person's feeling of selfworth and the public and social acknowledgement of the worth (1993:50), and applies to both male and female. Shame, on the other hand, refers to a person's sensitivity to what others think of them; it indicates acceptance of the rules of human interaction, the socially recognised boundaries which make human relationships and interactions possible and workable. This implies that the shameless person does not accept the general rules and boundaries of the society.

5. In these societies honour is symbolised by the head of the group, for honour has both an individual and corporate dimension (1993:40-41), and '[t]he heads of both natural and elective groupings set the tone and embody the honour rating of the group, so to say' (1993:55).

6. The collective or corporate honour mentioned above

city, village, with their collective honour, are examples.

With this background we now return to the crisis of 1:10-22. We have all the ingredients of a honour-shame scenario: power, gender status and 'religion' in the sense of behaviour towards controller of one's existence. The narrative shows that the king is the head of a natural grouping, cf. 1:1-2, 10:1-2a; 3:1-2a, 6:3, 6-11; 10:2b. He is thus a person to be honoured. Since honour emerges where the 'three defining features called power, gender status and "religion" come together' (1993:30), we have a situation of honour in 1:10-22. And a socially recognised boundary in the world of the text is that of implicit obedience to the head of the group, in our case the king as is evidenced by 4:11, 6:11, 3:2. Disobedience would spurn the honour of the king. This is exactly what Vashti did. She acted shamelessly in terms of the accepted social boundaries of the society, showing no sensitivity to what the guests of the king would think of her and consequently of the king, for after all this was a public gathering (banquet). Her behaviour not only dishonoured the king but also the society as a whole (1:20-22). Because this was shameless behaviour against the group it was regarded as outrageous, inexcusable and irredeemable and hence the action taken against

Thus, from a cultural anthropological viewpoint the crisis was a group (national) one and not just a domestic dispute, and the actions of the king and his advisors quite appropriate in the circumstances.

These were actions to restore the national honour violated by the behaviour of Vashti. **So we have a king who acts honourably.**

Further, given the cultural perspective, the behaviour of Esther (5:1-2, 4:11) is then adjudged honourable, for she accepts the socially recognised boundaries of the society and she is sensitive to what others will think of her behaviour. Esther acts honourably, Vashti acts shamelessly.

The king is usually ridiculed as dependent, and *relying on others* to make decisions since he is always 'consulting' with others before deciding, 1:13-15 being an example of this. But Gordis convincingly show that wayyo' mer hammelek cannot mean 'and the king consulted.' It must be understood as, 'and the king said', i.e. the words of the king are quoted.

Moreover, the fact that he does bring in the advisors is positive. He could decide the fate of Vashti on his own, but gets the input of others for he faces a major decision. It is his wife, after all, who is



encounter a person here, who acts sensibly, tempered with some emotion.

Throughout the narrative Ahasuerus is either named *the king*, or *Ahasuerus the King*. There are only two instances in which we find Ahasuerus without any qualification, i.e. 1:1 and 9:30. Ahasuerus is depicted predominantly in his role as king, as national ruler. Thus in 1:10-1:22 Vashti is not refusing a domestic request, or a request from her husband, but a command of the ruler, making it a national issue. Vashti is both wife and citizen, and therefore subject to the laws of the ruler (cf. in this respect, Esther's reason for not going to the king on the instruction of Mordecai, 4:10-11; also 3:3).

Vashti is not the innocent victim of the blousted ego of a rash, insecure, despotic king as is sometimes maintained, so that it is common to argue that the king and his advisors overreact to Vashti's refusal. For we note that in 1:9 Vashti gives her own banquet. Now the tension between Ahasuerus and Vashti is clear from the verse. It begins 'also', i.e. in addition to the banquet Ahasuerus made. Next the location of the banquet is described as 'the royal house which was to the king' (cf. also 9:4). So we have a separate banquet organised by Vashti in the house belonging to the king when he has arranged another banquet.



We have here the makings of a confrontational situation. Since banquets were the sites in the story where major events happen, (cf. Fox 1991:156-157), Vashti's banquet might not be as innocent as it seems. It could be seen as an act in which she challenges the power of the king, and the banquet is thus a figure for the power struggle between king and Vashti (cf. Fox 1991:158). Therefore, the exasperation expressed in 1:18. Further, why does it take seven eunuchs to convey the king's command to Vashti? Is this also perhaps an indication of the struggle between her and Ahasuerus? When the servants are sent to bring Haman, it is interesting that no number is mentioned.

Instead of overreacting, Ahasuerus acts reasonably in his handling of the crisis described in the first cycle of the narrative.

The first leg of the first main reversal of the story which results in the banishment of Vashti, portrays a king who is **flexible and sensitive; who acts rationally and is in control of his emotions**. We also have portrayed to us a king for whom the kingdom comes first before his personal needs and desires; **he puts the interests of the nation first**, as can be seen in the pathos with which 2:1-4 portrays him. Furthermore, **we encounter a person who behaves sensibly, tempered with some emotion**.



contemporary descriptions in Esther studies.

4. The portrayal of Ahasuerus in 2:21-8:17

The portrayal of Ahasuerus in this cycle begins with the incident in which Bigthan and Teresh plot to assassinate him, 2:21-23. Mordecai comes to hear of it and informs Esther who in turn informs the king. How is Ahasuerus going to respond to this information? His normal rash, despotic, hasty self as some would have us believe? No. We are told **וַיִּבְקֹשׁ הַדָּבָר**. The verb is Pual PC 3 person singular masculine. Since the Pual is passive of Piel the subject is not mentioned, but it can be none other than Ahasuerus. He has the matter investigated. The Piel stem, which is intensive, indicates that the matter was investigated *thoroughly*. Far from making an impulsive, reactionary decision, the king makes an effort to establish the facts before acting, and so does not condemn Bigthan and Teresh on mere hearsay, however reliable the hearsay might have been. **Ahasuerus is concerned about the facts of the case as the basis for decision making.**

The second leg of the first main reversal which results in the enthronement of Esther begins with the king in a very pensive mood, 2:1-4. There is a pathos about his portrayal in this pivotal passage. We are told that Ahasuerus **זָכַר אֶת־וְשֵׁתִי**. He specifically

happened to her. The text gives the impression that he recalls the events of the recent past with a tinge of sadness. He felt for Vashti, after all she was his wife. **We have then the portrayal of Ahasuerus as person of deep emotion.**

In 5:3-8 is recorded the dialogue between Esther and Ahasuerus. Verse 3 contains Ahasuerus's question to Esther, which asks what it is she wants, and that she could ask up to half the kingdom, meaning he is willing to give up to half the kingdom. Instead of half the kingdom, Esther requests that he and Haman attend her banquet. At the banquet Ahasuerus repeats the question he asked in the throne-room. We were told in 2:17 that the king loved Esther, so what we have here, is the expression of loving concern on the part of Ahasuerus. No price can be placed on his care for her, and even if a price was to be mentioned, up to half the kingdom is what he is willing to give to her. **Ahahsuerus is portrayed as a person with a capacity for love, care and concern for others, especially those whom he loves.** In this regard Day comments 'Ahasuerus also shows a greater concern to know what Esther wants.'

The honouring of Mordecai by Haman is preceded by the dialogue between the king and his servants, 6:3-6a. The main point of the dialogue is the attempt by Ahasuerus to establish whether Mordecai has been

the king. He is not just going to overlook this, even though some time has elapsed since it happened. He is concerned for fairness, and wants to express his appreciation for what Mordecai has done. He is grateful to Mordecai and the reward is an expression of this. **Here we meet a king who is concerned for fairplay and is capable of appreciation.**

When Ahasuerus asks Haman for his view on what is to be done for the person the king wants to honour, 6:5-10, he does not mention the name of the person he has in mind. This concealment of the person's name by the king, especially since this person is Mordecai the Jew, may suggest that he is aware of the conflict between Mordecai and Haman. And if this is true, it shows that **the king is a shrewd judge of human nature**, for he knows that if the person he desires to honour was known, the most insignificant act of honour and dignity will be recommended.

The third dialogue in this cycle takes place at the second banquet, 7:2-10. Of importance firstly is the speech of the king, 7:5. The expression **אשר-מלאו לבו** means 'who has taken it upon himself' to do this deed. The implication could be that Ahasuerus expected consultation before important decisions such

attributed to him so often. He is not the impulsive lone-ranger decision maker, as the narrative consistently demonstrates. **He respects the views of others.**

Then there is the portrayal of the manner in which the king handles the revelation that Haman was the culprit. He gets up from the banquet **בהמתרו**. But instead of acting in his state of anger we are told that he goes into the garden. He is in control of himself and his emotions and he is not going to act in haste. He goes to the garden to reflect, to cool down as it were, so that he can deal with this situation in a calm manner which is his normal disposition.

The second banquet is the turning point in the narrative. And at the climax of the narrative **we have Ahasuerus portrayed as a person who takes seriously the views of others and who is in control of himself and his emotions.** So that, just as the first reversal is done by the king calmly, sensibly and yet with a measure of emotion, likewise the second main reversal is effected in the same manner.

We have an incident in which Mordecai is rewarded rather belatedly, in 6:1-10. It would seem that Ahasuerus suffers from a very poor memory, which is at times used as a basis for depicting him negatively. About this lack of memory Bal writes as

hastily ridiculed --- for ridicule is so often connected with contempt for the lack of psychological depth and of realistic plausibility that it cannot escape that charge of anachronism, if not arrogant evolutionism. Rather it should be seen as a representation of the inevitable but ambivalent development toward the predominance of writing which the text stages.' This means the fact that the king forgets is a literary convention, namely the development towards writing results in this apparent forgetfulness.

It has been common cause amongst commentators to depict Ahasuerus as weak, dependent and unreliable. But in 8:1-8 Ahasuerus is depicted as one who is in control, exercising his royal authority as Day (1995:151) fittingly says: 'Ahasuerus himself also acts this time more in his own office as king. And later, when allowing Esther and Mordecai permission to make legislation, he proposes more official obligations which their orders must meet.' **So he does act directly and independently.**

The second cycle of the narrative which records the second and pivotal, climatic reversal reveals an **Ahasuerus who is concerned about the facts of the case as the basis for decision making. We have then the portrayal of Ahasuerus as a person of deep emotion. Ahasuerus is portrayed as a person with a**



especially those whom he loves. Here we meet a king who is concerned for *fairplay* and is capable of *appreciation*. The king is a shrewd judge of human nature. He respects the views of others. We have Ahasuerus portrayed as person who takes seriously the views of others and who is in control of himself and his emotions. He also acts directly and independently.

5. *The portrayal of Ahasuerus in 9:1-10:3*

The third cycle, which is also the third main reversal of the narrative, has as its focus the turning around of events. The tables are turned on the enemies of the Jews. Instead of their enemies having 'power over them' (9:1), the Jews gain the upper hand over their enemies. This result is the outcome of the 'direct action' of the king, so that Day (1995:158) could say that in 9:11-15 '**Ahasuerus instead is the one who acts authoritatively....**'. This is against the prevailing view that Mordecai and Esther, rather than Ahasuerus, act in a way which determines the outcome of the story. The verses (i.e.9:11-15) are distinct in the sense that they record **the direct intervention of the king** as well as reveal his support for the Jews (Davis 1995:112). This makes them pivotal in the section 9:1-19.

The historical summary in 9:24-25 depicts the king according to Fox (1991:119), '**as a clear thinking,**

puttylike Xerxes of the tale can scarcely be recognised in this picture'. See 2:21 for a similar portrayal of the king). The 'bumbling, puttylike Xerxes' is not found in the historical summary nor in the rest of the story. He is discovered in the narrative by Fox and others as a result of the undue influence allowed to the supposed wisdom-nucleus in Esther. The outworking of this is the one dimensional characterisation of Ahasuerus, which has lent itself to the traditional stereotyping of Ahasuerus one encounters in much of Esther studies.

The authoritative figure of 9:24-25 is present in the rest of the narrative, as we have shown above. Thus there is no conflict in the narrative portrayal of Ahasuerus in 1-8 and 9-10.

The depiction of **the king as an authoritative figure** is continued in 10:1. The king declares a tax on the whole territory ruled by him. Thus we have a description of Ahasuerus acting authoritatively and directly, just as the historical summary and the rest of the story depicts him.

We have already referred to the other authoritative act of the king, namely his promotion of Mordecai. The greatness of Mordecai is attributed to the king for 'the king made him great' (10:2).

The Ahasuerus depicted in the final cycle of the narrative is a character who acts authoritatively and directly. He is clear in his thinking and is a proponent of justice (cf. 2:21 for a similar portrayal of the king as clear thinking, and an exemplary proponent of justice).

#### Conclusion and Summary

Characterisation is the golden thread which provides the integrity of a story. In this chapter we have sought to develop this idea by focussing on the characterisation of Ahasuerus in the three main cycles of Esther. In doing this we have critically engaged traditional, stereotypical, genre dominated depictions of the king and found them to be wanting from the perspective of a synchronic reading of the text. We have also shown that throughout the narrative the character traits descriptive of Ahasuerus are flexible, sensitive, rational, emotionally controlled, selfless, tempered by feeling; concerned for the facts instead of rashly making decisions; having a capacity for love and deep emotion, a concern for fairplay and justice, appreciating others; acting directly, indirectly and authoritatively, and clearly in his thinking. This is not the picture one finds of Ahasuerus in Esther studies as a norm. The reason? The belief that a



the genre dominated characterisation of the dramatis personae, which has been standard practice in much of Esther studies to date.

Apart from our interest in the character depiction of Ahasuerus discussed above, there is also another interest. It would appear, from the point of view of the chiasmic-reversals and his role in them, that he also has a symbolic role to play in the story. He could be conceived of as representing YHWH in the narrative. In him the incognito YHWH of Jewish faith makes his presence felt. For just as Ahasuerus is pivotal in the reversal of the destiny, fortunes and positions of the main characters in the story, so YHWH is pivotal in the reversal of the fortune, destiny, and position of his covenant people. If this suggestion is valid, it follows that YHWH is very present and involved in the survival and future of his people in the Esther narrative. Put differently, the king functions as a means by which Jahweh presence himself to his people. God is with his people even in exile, thereby emphasising his sovereignty. Baldwin (1984:38) affirms this when he remarks: '....it was the king who, in response to the information given by Harbona, said 'Hang him' [Haman]....(7:10), and who promoted Mordecai to power. *Human agents were the unwitting instruments of one who was the unseen Ruler of events'* (my



events is how Ahasuerus is portrayed in the narrative of Esther through his role as the reverser of the destiny, fortune, and position of the main characters of the Esther story. In this way chiasmic-reversal and characterisation are shown to be inseparably linked, affirming our basic contention that characterisation makes for narrative integrity.