

## CHAPTER ONE

### **Statement of the Problem and Hypothesis.**

The question of the integrity of the text of Esther remains unresolved, yet studies on the book of Esther in the last twenty years have not concentrated on issues of the composition of the book, but have focused on :

1. The theology of the narrative;
2. The historical and religious background of the book;
3. The archaeological concerns of the book;
4. Inter-textual approaches to the book; and
5. The meaning and derivation of the names of the main characters.

Concurring, Day (1995:10-11) remarks: '....during the last two or three decades it (i.e. Esther) has been the recipient of a wealth of scholarly attention. Discussion has focused around questions of historical accuracy of the events and characters, genre, original purpose, layers of composition, theological meaning (or lack thereof), thematic elements, literary style, and connection with other biblical materials.'

In addition, studies have concentrated on personae dramatis like Esther, Haman, Mordercai, and Vashti. Furthermore, when the composition and integrity of

Esther have been addressed, it has been done, primarily, from a historical-critical point of view. From this perspective the composition of Esther has been viewed as consisting of early stories and traditions which have been transformed by the author so that chapters 1-8 now constitute a continuous narrative. The same cannot, however, be said for chapters 9-10. Critical investigation shows, it is believed, that these chapters are a later addition to the original story of chapters 1-8. Clines (1984:1-65; cf. also Bush 1996:280-294) is representative of this critical position. He gives the following reasons for regarding chapters 9-10 as a later addition:

1. In 9:1 the Jews overcome their enemies whereas 8:11 envisions the Jews being slaughtered by their enemies;
2. In 9:2 the Jews attack their enemies while chapters 1-8 depicts the Jews as defending themselves;
3. 9:13 extends Adar to two days and shows the Jews attacking their enemies rather than defending themselves;
4. 9:15, 17-19 introduces a discrepancy; it is not an improvement of 3:13 and 8:12-13. The former verses restrict the pogrom to one day;
5. 9:1-10:3 depicts a black and white situation of the Jews on one side and their enemies on the other.

It ignores those sympathetic to the Jews (3:15, 8:15);

6. Chapter 9 has a conflicting concept of 13 Adar, (cf.9:1-15 with 9:6);

7. 9:17-18 further complicates the conflicting conception of 13 Adar by making the day of killing a day of rest, thus down-playing the victory aspect, and so brings it into line with 9:10,15,16;

8. 9:1-10:3 is artistically inferior to 8:1-17;

9. 8:1-17 shows that the Jews have one enemy but in chapter 9 they have 75,000 enemies; and

10. 8:1-17 depicts the king very differently from chapters 9-10. In the latter chapters he is very generous, which is not the case in the former chapters.

But Lacocque (1999:301-321), who also approaches the story of Esther from a historical-critical perspective, and who discusses the reconstruction of the Esther narrative by Clines, comes to very different conclusions. This suggests that a fresh look at the question of the composition or narrative unity of Esther is valid.

The latter half of this century, however, and the last three decades in particular, have seen the emergence of literary approaches to the text of Scripture as a result of the influence of literary theory. This development is described by Thiselton (1992:471) in the following words: '[t]he turn

towards literary theory in biblical studies constitutes one of the three most significant developments for biblical hermeneutics over the last quarter of a century. It is comparable in importance for biblical interpretation with the impact of post-Gadamerian hermeneutics and the emergence of socio-critical theory and related liberation movements' (cf. also Goldingay 1990:191, Pratt 1990:103). Elsewhere in the same work Thiselton remarks that '[i]t provides the most radical challenge to traditional hermeneutical models which has yet arisen' (1992:473), because this development sees the plurality of textual meanings not merely as a contingency but as a hermeneutical axiom. The newer literary approaches make very useful contributions to biblical studies (cf. Thiselton 1992:475-479; Goldingay 1990:192-193), but they also have numerous problem areas, not least of which is the tendency to de-historise the text.

The terms commonly used to describe this shift are: diachronic vs. synchronic; historical vs. literary; objective vs. subjective; what the text meant vs. what the text means (Snyman 1996:540). These approaches treat the Bible more seriously as a literary product. Its literary features receive much more consideration than before. One result of this development has been the emphasis on the unity of the text, taking as a starting point the text as a whole

in its final form (cf. Longman III 1987:22-25; Alter 1992:63-64). Denis (1992:2-3), for example, writes that '[f]or many decades now [Old Testament scholarship] has been preoccupied with looking through the text to what may or may not lie behind it...[e]xciting things are happening, however. Since the mid-seventies, with a few trailblazers before that, many books have appeared which approach the text not as a window but as a picture. They have been concerned to look at the text, what it says, and how it says it. They have encouraged not a detachment from the text, but an engagement with it' (cf. also Jonker 1996:397-398). The outcome of this can be seen, for example, in the synchronic approaches which are used at present in the study of the biblical text (see Yee 1995; and also Jonker, et al 1995).

It is my belief that the literary approach referred to above can make a very useful contribution to the debate around the integrity of the text of Esther and therefore I state as my hypothesis that:

1. A literary reading of Esther will demonstrate that it is a narrative unity. This reading should be primarily synchronic in nature, based on a careful analysis of the structural composition of the story;
2. Careful attention to the literary devices of chiasmus and characterisation will be a very important part of such a literary reading because they are vital in making evident the narrative

integrity of Esther; and

3. The person of the king is germane to the narrative integrity of Esther and therefore his role and portrayal receive special attention.

#### **Objectives of the research.**

1. To affirm the narrative integrity of Esther.

The discussion on the structure of the Esther narrative, and in particular the place of the principle of chiasmic-reversal will greatly help in this attempt.

2. To demonstrate the pivotal nature of the role and portrayal of the king for the narrative unity of Esther. The discussion on the structure of the Esther narrative and the description of the king's role in each of the cycles of the narrative will go a long way to accomplish this objective.

3. To discuss the relation of characterisation to the narrative unity of Esther. The discussion on the characterisation of the king contributes significantly to meet this objective.

4. To discuss the portrayal of the king against the background of the 'traditional' approach used to characterise the king.

#### **The Method of Research.**

The reading of a narrative text requires a method appropriate for this purpose. According to Walsh

(1992:210) such a method reads the text paradigmatically (i.e. structuring the the deeper level of the text) and syntagmatically (i.e. analysing the surface structure of the text syntactically). A synchronic reading of Esther accords with this description of method.

Further, such a reading being literary in nature 'is committed to the integrity of the biblical text....[and] offers the possibility of appreciating a dimension of the text that transcends the history in which the text was composed' (Williams 1982:13), yet at the same time giving attention to aspects of history where the text demands it (see also Goldingay 1993:5, Marais 1993:643,646,647; Ryken & Longman III 1993:61). Commenting on the most important methodological point of departure in a text-theoretical approach to the interpretation of the New Testament, Botha (1990:27) says: '[d]ie belangrikste metodologiese uitgangspunt in die interpretasie van die Nuwe Testament is dat alle uitleg sy vertrekpunt vanuit die Bybelse teks sal neem. Alle uitleg moet bewustelik onder die dissipline en kontrole van die teks geplaas word....Historiese, persoonlike, teologiese en ander derglike gegewens kom ter sprake in soverre die teks dit aan die orde stel. Tog speel al hierdie sake noodwendig altyd ook 'n rol in alle teksinterpretasie....Die keuse van die teks as vertrekpunt is nie willekeurig nie. Die teks vorm die

knooppunt van die hele verstaansgebeure'. This statement is descriptive of the approach to be used in this investigation.

The synchronic reading done in this study will make use of the method commonly known as the Text Immanent method. It involves two procedural perspectives referred to by Loader (1977:96,97,99) in the following words: 'Synchronous perspectives form the framework within which diachronous work is done' (see also Claassens 1996:8-14; Eslinger, 1989:3 n3, 4 n4; Kunin, 1994:58-59, n5). The method consists of the following facets according to Viviers (1990:4):

1. Pericope division
2. Text-criticism
3. Form criticism
4. Gattung-criticism
5. Tradition-criticism
6. Redaction-criticism
7. Synthesis.'

Of the above procedures, pericope division, synthesis and text-criticism and general diachronic aspects are of immediate relevance for our purposes and will be used in this investigation.

Since we are reading a narrative, attention will also be given to narratological aspects of the story. For our purposes the most important will be the literary element of characterisation. In terms of Esther studies this last mentioned element has not received a lot of attention, thus contributing to the distortions, stereotyping and unfair character judgements about the king. In fact, not much has been



said about King Ahasuerus and his role in the narrative, and this in spite of the fact that there are some 250 references to him in 167 verses of the story. Such 'over use' (Klein 1989:71) must be significant. Instead, he is used as an argument against the integrity of the narrative (Clines 1984:47). But a close reading of the story shows that the king is portrayed consistently throughout the narrative, and that he is pivotal in each of the main reversals which forms the backbone of the narrative. In fact, each of the main reversals is dependent upon a decision of or action by the king.

His role is therefore crucial to the whole story and should receive more serious attention than has been the case to date.

This is precisely what we will seek to do.

### **Procedure**

The narrative will be investigated in its entirety. Since structural analysis is basic to our understanding of a synchronic reading, as well as the method to be used in this study, various models which have been used in the analysis of Esther will be described and evaluated.

Our own structural analysis of Esther comes next. To do this the narrative will be divided into cycles. The presence of chiastic-reversal in each cycle will be demonstrated giving careful attention to syntactic

considerations. Concerning the literary device of chiasmus, which plays an important role in our investigation, Bensusan (1989:71) suggests that it has a particular focus, namely, 'individuals and groups of people.' If this concept of chiasmus is applied to Esther, it will become evident that the narrative consists of three main cycles:

1. The Vashti-Esther Cycle
2. The Mordecai-Haman Cycle
3. The Jews-Enemies Cycle

What is not evident from the diagram above and yet is critical is *how* the reversal of the fortunes of the main characters in the narrative happens. The diagram below takes this *how* into account:

1. Vashti ===== KING ===== Esther
2. Haman ===== KING ===== Mordecai
3. Enemies ===== KING ===== Jews

Following the detailed description and discussion of the structure of each cycle, the role of the king in each of the cycles will be discussed.

The results of this analysis and discussion will be used to deal with the characterisation of the king in the narrative as a whole, as well as the contribution this characterisation makes toward the integrity of the narrative.



The main conclusions of the research will be drawn together in a concluding summary.