

What's a "Chiasm" and Why Does It Matter?

A chiasm is a literary technique in a piece of literature (narrative or poetry) is designed with a symmetrical pattern that highlights certain themes and points of detail as being really significant. As a literary device, a Chiasm shows how the way words and ideas are structured can communicate a message just as powerful as the words themselves. It's a brilliant technique that good authors often use. And the anonymous author of Esther is no exception. The book of Esther is designed in perfect symmetry. Right down to every scene, you'll find key-words and scenes that match the keywords in their partner scenes on the other side of the symmetry. It's pretty amazing actually.

A The splendor of the Persian king + Two banquets [1:1-8]

B Esther becomes Queen + Mordecai saves the king [1:9-2:20 + 2:21-23]

C Haman elevated to power [3:1-6]

D Haman's decree to destroy the Jewish people [3:7-15]

E Esther and Mordecai's plan to reverse the decree [4:1-17]

F Esther's 1st banquet/Haman plans Mordecai's execution [5:1-8 + 5:9-14]

G - PIVOT: The King's sleepless night. Haman humiliated & Mordecai exalted [6:1-14]

F' Esther's 2nd banquet + Haman executed instead of Mordecai [7:1-10]

E' Esther and Mordecai plan to reverse the decree [8:1-8]

D' Mordecai's counter-decree to save the Jewish people [8:9-14]

C' Mordecai elevated to power [8:15-17]

B' Queen Esther and Mordecai save the Jewish people [9:1-19]

A' Two feasts + The splendor of Mordecai [9:20-32 + 10:1-3]

When we look at the pattern of the book, we see that the events in A-F display a dark, ominous negative pattern moving progressively towards the demise of the Jewish people, including Esther and Mordecai. But, after the pivot in chapter 6, the events in F-A offer a positive counterpart for the previous events, correcting every crisis and deficiency leading to the exaltation of Mordecai and the Jewish people.

Once we recognize the carefully patterned structure of the book (the chiasm) and the pivot in chapter 6 leading to the fall of Haman and the rise of Mordecai, we're able to see the profound message being communicated. The shape of the story itself provides us with a sense of order and meaning to the events taking place.

"The center of the story portrays a dramatic parallel between Haman's decree and Mordecai's counter-decree: The author of Esther sees justice unfolding itself in history... This means first of all that history is portrayed as a sequence of ordered events rather than as a random collection of coincidences. This view of history is in itself reassuring for a people in exile, buffeted by forces which they have little power to influence, which would easily lead to despair. The author of Esther fights it [the despair], in his own way, by revealing a meaningful order in human affairs, particularly an order that involves reversal of the expectations of the wicked." - Michael V. Fox, "The Structure of Esther."