

# Topos and Originality in the Book of Esther

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## Abstract

*This study navigates the intricate nuances woven into the fabric of the Book of Esther, unravelling the interplay between „topos” and „originality”. By scrutinizing the recurrent themes (“topoi”) and their dynamic engagement with elements of literary innovation, the article discerns the delicate balance between established motifs and the emergence of distinctive narrative expressions. The analysis contributes to the broader discourse on biblical literature, shedding light on the complex relationship between conventional literary norms and the evolution of unique storytelling within the context of Esther.*

**Keywords:** originality, topos, Esther, nuances

## Résumé

*Cette étude explore les nuances complexes tissées dans la trame du Livre d'Esther, en démêlant l'interaction entre « topos » et « originalité ». En examinant les thèmes récurrents (« topoi ») et leur engagement dynamique avec des éléments d'innovation littéraire, l'article discerne l'équilibre délicat entre les motifs établis et l'émergence d'expressions narratives distinctives. L'analyse contribue au discours plus large sur la littérature biblique, en mettant en lumière la relation complexe entre les normes littéraires conventionnelles et l'évolution d'une narration unique dans le contexte d'Esther.*

**Mots-clés:** originalité, topos, Esther, nuances

## 1. Prolegomena

Among the texts that are found in the Biblical canon, *the Book of Esther* is distinguished by a number of specific elements, but also by the existence of *topoi* borrowed from the cultures that were in confluence at the time of its genesis (Sumerian, Assyro-Babylonian, Persian, Greek influences etc.). The writing is therefore placed in a complex literary and historical context, and spatial and temporal delimitation is *a priori*

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imperative. Otherwise, it would not be possible to operate with certain concepts – such as 'originality'.

In this regard, it should be noted that in the specialized literature (Reid 2008: 21-24) several variants of the dating of *the Book of Esther* have been indicated and demonstrated, some starting from the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC, and others going forward to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Considering the idea (to which we adhere) that the antiquity of the Hebrew language used in terms of style, expression, syntax etc. seems characteristic of the period before the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC (Driver 1960: 484), and because the text itself fits faithfully into the spirit of the time (the period of the Achaemenid kings/emperors), we consider it possible to date *Esther* to the 5<sup>th</sup> to 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries BC, to which we will also refer in our analysis.

Spatially, the action in *Esther* takes place in Shushan (or Susa; *Esther*<sup>185</sup> 1:2), in the Persian Empire. We can therefore speak of the Mesopotamian area and of a writer of the book being an official in the court of king Ahasuerus – Mordecai (*Esther* 9:20) or another one – a diaspora Jew (in the Achaemenid Empire).

In doctrine (Torrey 1944) there was also a controversial but argued idea, later refuted by exegetes. Namely, the fact that the Masoretic text would be subsequent to the Greek Alpha textual version, both this and the Septuagint version of the book (larger than the Masoretic one) coming from an earlier and lost Aramaic writing. We can thus distinguish an extension of the Mesopotamian space into the Greek/Aramaic area and thus, also an extension of the area of discussion.

In order to have a thorough understanding of the terminology with which we operate, we will point out, as a fundamental approach, the definition of the term „topos”, as we will take it into consideration throughout this paper. Thus, in the doctrine it has been pointed out that: „The classical focus on *topos* or the *topoi* was concerned with ways of structuring arguments as analogical reasoning from a probable rather than a factual basis. A *topos* provides a general setting for a discussion, a framework for arguments rather than a fixed set of rules, standards or axioms” (Hunter 1991: viii) and „*topos* may be naturalised into cliché the closer it gets to the semantic content of current ideology” (*Ibidem*: xiv).

Consequently, we will refer to 'topos' as a symbolic, common place that serves as a foundation for exploring and treating different aspects of a target topic or as a central motif in different writings, where its recurrence within the field of study reflects its relevance over time. Despite the fact that the *topos* is always associated with a profoundly

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<sup>185</sup> A translation of the Biblical book in the version of Rabbi Şlomo Sorin Rosen (2023) was taken into account in the writing of this article.



visual element, this does not exclude the possibility of abstracting the concepts it targets/encompasses.

The study is of interest because the exploration of *Esther* from a literary point of view is deficient in the Romanian doctrine and not exhaustively covered in foreign doctrine; in other words, there is still a void to be filled. Moreover, by illustrating the *topoi* and the elements of originality, the writing in question acquires new interpretative dimensions and hitherto neglected aspects are brought to light. Last but not least, the analysis sketches a unique framework through which a deeper understanding of a specific but multifaceted area of literary history can be generated.

## **2. Original motifs in the *Book of Esther*. The role of imagination as a central element in the book**

Beyond the oriental *topos* that characterises it and its particular elements insinuated in the content of the writing, *the Book of Esther* is identified in the literature of its time by certain idematic and thematic innovations in terms of motifs and symbols, imagery and narrative technique (style, focalisation etc.). Thus, as far as innovations in the area of ideas are concerned, the important role of women in a patriarchal society, played in this case by Esther – who also gives the title of the book – can be categorically noted.

Moreover, *Esther* and *Ruth* are the only books in the corpus of Biblical canon that have female names as their titles. This is not just a nominal detail, but signals the special attention given to women as protagonists and their crucial influence in the unfolding of events – for example, Esther assumes the sacrifice when she decides to appear before King Ahasuerus; the punishment for this act, done without the king's prior request, was death (*Esther* 4:16) – Esther is resisting personal risk in order to intervene on behalf of the Jewish people, to save them from imminent massacre.

This is a significant change in the literary landscape, or at least a revival of that change, thanks to the important role given to a female character in the unfolding of the plot and the resolution of the conflict. Esther is therefore a powerful female figure and an influential heroine. Through her actions, she is a character whose actions transcend the usual boundaries of the narrative; her courage and determination to intervene in a complicated political and social context underlines her fundamental role in the story's development. It is notable that Esther does not passively submit to an imposed destiny, but becomes an active agent, disrupting the conventional timeline of women of the period. A similar behaviour can be seen in Queen Vashti, only much more resolute, as she categorically



refuses to obey the wishes of King Ahasuerus – an aspect that becomes a literary motif of opposition to tyranny and oppression of women.

However, by that time there were other writings that put women in the foreground, and we can suggest as examples in this case the Sumerian and Assyro-Babylonian works that focus on Inanna/Ishtar (such as „The Descent of the Goddess Inanna into the Underworld/Inferno”) or Sophocles' tragedy „Antigone” (5<sup>th</sup> century BC), in which Antigone, like Esther, acts with great courage and fights for the fulfilment of moral principles (*cf.* Adams 1955). Antigone and Esther remain significant figures in world literature, illustrating the complexity of moral dilemmas, the risk-taking of death and the relationship between the individual and authority.

Thematically, in terms of motifs and symbols, we distinguish between unique ideas and symbols and ideas found in other cultures. For example, the motif (or even *topos*) of the banquet is also associated with Greek writings, but there are also oriental nuances which, from a certain point onwards, delineate it from elements particular to the Persian Achaemenid Empire (see, in this regard, *Esther* 1:3-8).

The symbol of power in the oriental context, materialized by the golden sceptre, is an original and exotic element, not just a simple object/accessory, but an instrument of such great power that it could bring honour to a person (the call before the emperor) or, on the contrary, death. The antithesis between Haman and Mordecai and the clash of their personalities is also unusual, as there is also an interethnic conflict between the two. Although not entirely unprecedented in the writings of the time, the interethnic conflict has its own specifics, namely that Mordecai refused to bow down to Haman (*Esther* 3:2).

Ethnicity and religious tolerance motifs are obviously centred on Jewish-Persian relations [but not only – for example, Haman was an Agagite (*Esther* 3:1) – reflecting his descent from Agag, king of the Amalekites, a people in conflict/war with the Jews]. The interaction between multiple cultures and peoples is a key element of the story, highlighting the complex aspects of living together in a diverse political and social environment. Esther, as a Jew in a majority Persian context, is caught in the midst of these cross-cultural relationships – themes of identity, acceptance and tolerance are emerging. The literary motif of 'reversal of fortune/luck', considering its impact and complexity, is novel, drawing a comparison, for example, with Greek tragedies, where although there are dramatic twists and unexpected turns, these are often associated with suffering rather than triumphant release. In *the Book of Esther* there is a type of reversal that has positive implications, such as the restoration of justice and righteousness.



The plot of *Esther* – with its dramatic elements and crucial decisions – is set in a unique historical and cultural context – the Persian Achaemenid Empire. In this distinctive setting, the individual dramas of the characters are interwoven with the great events of the time, reflecting the specific Persian cultural 'texture' and colours, marked by opulence and splendour as well as courtly rigours.

Compared to most books in the corpus of Biblical writings, *Esther* is unique in the (explicit) absence of the name of God. In the literature, however, it has been pointed out that from the initials of some words the tetragrammaton of God's name can be formed – as a form of acrostic – the Hebrew theonym YHVH (Magonet 2014: 110). Although *the Book of Esther* seems to avoid direct mention of God's name, the divine influence is indirectly apparent through the way the critical situation is turned around in favour of the Jewish people, after the Diaspora Jews fast for several days and as a result of their humility – Mordecai pouring dust and ashes on his head (*Esther* 4:1), but also, of course, because they were wronged and doomed to perdition and would not have been left by God to a terrible fate.

In the latter respect, referring to narrative technique, it should first be specified that the writing uses a style that favours the building of suspense; this is made possible by the inclusion of intriguing elements, such as the characters' elaborate plans and subsequent revelations (*Esther* sharing with the king that she is a Jewess – *Esther* 7:3). The scenes in which *Esther* cleverly reveals the truth to the king, with a well thought-out speech and by holding two successive banquets, reflect the use of rhetoric and persuasion to a specific end.

Secondly, the story is constructed episodically, with different events unfolding in sequence, in stages. For example, in the first instance, *Esther*, at Mordecai's urging, hides her true identity, only to reveal it in a later „episode” of the book. There is also a certain kind of parallelism, as both Mordecai and *Esther*, who later takes on the mission of protecting her own people, take the same course of action (on behalf of the Jewish people).

Thirdly, from the point of view of **focalisation**<sup>186</sup>, it is important to note that *Esther* is distinctive from most of the Old Testament texts. This is because, in general, in the corpus of Biblical writings the focalisation is zero, *i.e.* the narrator knows more than the characters (the narrator is omniscient). In contrast, *Esther* uses predominantly **external focalisation**, in which the narrator knows (or reveals) less than the characters, following them on their journey, but without showing or developing insights into their character or motivation that cannot be

<sup>186</sup> *Focalisation* involves how much the narrator knows (or at least chooses to reveal) in relation to what the characters in a story know (*cf.* Firth *op. cit.*: 17).



inferred from their direct actions. An exception is found in *Esther* 6:6, where we learn what Haman said „in his heart”, an aspect that reflects zero focalisation. The exception presented above plays a key role in highlighting that the author of the writing **knew** how to operate with zero focalisation, but **chose** not to (Firth 2010: 17-18).

Imagination in *Esther* plays a key role in creating and maintaining narrative tension. It is used to build up dramatic events and highlight the major conflicts, thus increasing narrative impact. By introducing unexpected, suspenseful elements and assumed (yet creative from the writer's perspective) decisions into character development, imagination contributes to the unpredictability of the plot and its cohesion. For example, imagination is incidental when the plan to save the Jewish people is revealed, creating an exciting climax (*Esther* 8:7). The plot is interwoven with suspense and twists and turns in a way that strongly engages the reader's attention and highlights the author's ability to use imagination to maintain interest and highlight key moments in the story.

### **3. Topos (topoi) and their importance in shaping the specifics of the book**

As indicated above, certain *topoi*, such as the oriental *topos*, are incident in *the Book of Esther*, and are reflected in particular in *Esther* 1:3-8, where the great feast given by King Ahasuerus in the capital city of Susa to the rulers and officials of the 127 provinces of the empire is described at length, highlighting the grandeur and nuances of the Persian Empire. This is perhaps the most important of the *topoi* that will be mentioned, as it gives the specific atmosphere and the historical, social and cultural hallmarks. The capital of Susa – *topos* of the royal/imperial court – is a kind of *centrum mundi*.

The oriental *topos* is a broad one, and can also be seen as a genus of the Persian (Achaemenid) *topos*. In turn, it can be seen as a framework for the Jewish diasporic *topos* (the Jewish people who, although in the midst of the Achaemenid Empire, retain their specific colouring and customs – for example, fasting and humbleness).

The Persian space (which could be called, in the context of the article, the „Persian cultural matrix”) sketched in *Esther* is rendered in the same manner as in Greek writings – this is not surprising, considering that authors such as Herodotus, Xenophon, Ctesias and others either visited or lived for a time in Persian-occupied areas, particularly in Asia Minor, as indicated in the doctrine. Their writings, for example Ctesias' *Cyropaedia*, deal with themes related to the Persian Empire (as do many other early Greek writings); and the Persian royal court is presented in a similarly romanticized manner as in *Esther* (Johnson 2005: 585, 588-589).



In the specialized literature (*e.g.*, Moyer 2010: 602) attention has consistently been drawn to the 'Hellenistic' charge that seems to fill the literary dimensions of the book. A parallel has even been drawn between it and *Chaereas and Callirhoe* – books 5 and 6 (a novel dated to the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD – *Ibidem*), reflecting the presence of a large-scale literary device operating in both narratives in the form of a 'compound *topos*' (in fact, small-scale *topoi* that 'agglutinate' and their combined effect transpires). In other words, it is a „constellation of literary motifs” that is used to direct the reader's expectations, to produce suspense, humour, delight and so on. At the same time, these motifs lead from the outset to the prediction, broadly speaking, of the denouement – as happens in many Greek writings of this kind. For example, it is no coincidence that Vashti is removed at the beginning of the story, as this sets the stage for Esther's entrance.

One might also mention, regarding the construction of the text and the rigours of the literary mechanism by which small *topoi* make it up, the *chiastic* structure – there is a growing consensus that *Esther* was conceived in this way. The refinement of the text and of the writing *per se* is given by the elegance of the symmetries – for example, the banquets held usually came in pairs, and were eventually followed by the reversal of the initial situation (Tomasino 2019: 101).

As for the similarities between *Esther* and *Chaereas and Callirhoe*, there could be mentioned, among others (Moyer *op. cit.*: 607 *et seqq.*):

- Persian risible/carnavalesque framework;
- the unmistakable beauty of the non-Persian women (*Esther* – Jewish and *Callirhoe* – Greek);
- the king/emperor's growing affection for them;
- the role of queen is obtained by a non-Persian woman etc.

The *topos* of the „idyllic” (and oversaturated) landscape is outlined as a symbolic element reflecting the state of harmony and prosperity in the narrated events. A significant example is found in Chapter 1, where the royal palace garden is mentioned as a place of joy and hospitality. The association between the landscape/setting and the inner state of well-being subtly underlines the connection between the natural environment and the positive feelings of the characters, thus contributing to the atmosphere of the book, in which there is a link between the setting, what is seen, and the inner world. At the same time, but in the opposite direction, opulence and exaggeration in nuance and detail lead to tension, oversaturation and rebellion – Vashti's flat refusal to listen to the king, followed by the hyperbolized retort of Ahasuerus and his advisers (rulers/servants), who extend the dispute to all the houses of the kingdom (*Esther* 1:13-21).





The *topos* of the „initiator journey” is present in the evolution of the main character, Esther, who goes through a journey of transformation and self-discovery. An illustrative example is when Esther assumes the role of leader and intervenes to save her people from the imminent danger of genocide. Compared to her initial reserve (*Esther* 4:11), her taking of personal risk represents a watershed moment in her journey and reflects her maturation and spiritual growth.

The *topos* of the unknown is present in various forms, contributing to narrative suspense and character development. A notable example is the mystery of Esther's origins (Mordecai commands her not to reveal her Jewish origins – *Esther* 2:10). She is presented from the beginning as a beautiful woman, but with an enigmatic past. By highlighting Esther's hidden origins, the author creates an element of intrigue and psychological depth around the character. This intentional omission (including from Ahasuerus or other rulers of the court) adds a dimension of mystery and creates an intensification of the pace of the plot by assuming possible (unfortunate) consequences of learning the truth. The *topos* of the unknown is also found in the sphere of political intrigue and threats to the Jewish people. Haman's plans and intrigues are often overshadowed by unknown elements, subtle manoeuvres that create uncertainty and unrest in the kingdom. It can therefore be said that the presence of this *topos* adds further complexities to the narrative plan.

The imagery of the epic in *the Book of Esther* is influenced and highlighted by the numerous and diverse *topoi*. Their role is reflected in the shaping of the Persian atmosphere, the kingdom and the court, but also in the rendering of the inner dimension of the characters through the transgression of immanence.

An idea that is – perhaps – worth addressing in order to fully highlight the nature and relevance of *topoi* concerns the relationship between *topos* and *archetype*. In this sense, considering the *topos* as a cliché or commonplace, it has been said in doctrine that:

[...] Topics, commonplaces and clichés each provide a way of establishing the common grounds for agreement about experience necessary to persuasion or reasoning, if it is to be perceived as valid. They each argue on the grounds of analogy, claiming that nothing is self-evident; they each concern themselves with social context, recognising that persuasion has much to do with the positions of the rhetor or speaker or writer and the addressee; and they each are historically bound, constructed by current ideologies and material circumstances. [...] The archetype as probe retrieves clichés from the past, it retrieves recurrent patterns and technologies, or in other words repressed sensual emphases,





but within a present, different environment. The old clichés bring with them aspects of the senses repressed by the present, which often lead to new technologies as well as foregrounding the limitations of current ideology' (Hunter *op. cit.*: 216-218).

Thus, *topoi* lead to the idea of analogy, of contextualization and non-reduction to a single primordial element – that which can play the role of archetype. Moreover, according to the widely accepted meaning, this is the archetype, but it is not necessarily reduced to that. As the author Lynette Hunter points out in the above-mentioned paper (*Ibidem*: 199), both *topoi* and archetypes have been somewhat depersonalised/decontextualized and undervalued over time. Archetypes bring out past clichés, traditions and original manifestations, while *topoi* are relevant for their spatial and repetitive dimension from the past to the present.

In *the Book of Esther*, one archetype is that of the powerful and influential heroine. In the logic of the previous argument (the archetype is the original model, the prototype) and of Chapter 2 of this article (on originality), the example is, in principle, original (even if it is also present in other writings – also in the Bible – for example, in *Ruth*). In other words, some of the archetypes present in *Esther* evoke precisely those aspects of it that were novel (or at least rare) for the times in which it was written.

#### 4. Conclusions

The unique elements in *Esther* lie in the escape from convention, regardless of the background littered with *topoi* or borrowed motifs. They are numerous and infuse the text, contributing to literary innovation, to the shaping of a personal imprint (*Esther* is unique in the corpus of Biblical writings) and highlight the creativity and distinctive abilities of its author.

The *topoi* in *Esther* have a cohesive role and serve as literary tools that transcend mere narrative. They embed it in a story that whether fictional or real, gives the writing its specific setting. *Topoi* also contribute to deepening the meaning of the text through their recurrence and dimension. As mentioned above, one can even speak of a 'compound *topos*', a constellation of smaller *topoi* and/or literary motifs acting together to build on a particular (chiastic) scheme of a dynamic, surprising yet pre-preparing narrative of twists and turns/*status-quo* changes, being possible to predict future events by following the symmetries.

*Topoi* therefore have the ability to connect different parts of the text, playing an important role in thematic and conceptual coherence. They outline an interpretative and comprehensive framework, encouraging exploration of all dimensions of the writing.



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