CHAPTER FIVE

TWO DAYS OF FEASTING (ESTH 5:1-8) AND TWO DAYS OF FIGHTING (ESTH 9:1-16) IN THE BOOK OF ESTHER

In the present chapter I seek to discern a latent meaning of the battle narrative of Esther 9 by demonstrating an analogy between this narrative and the account of the two days of feasting in Esther chapter 5. Before turning to the task of establishing this analogy, a pause is in order to first establish that the narrative of chapter 9 can indeed be categorized as a battle story. Several oft-found features of many biblical battle reports are absent here. The locale of the battle is not specified; the leaders of the armies are not named. Indeed, Israel’s foes here are listed solely as such—“the enemies of the Jews” without a definite national identity. As noted in our introduction, however, the biblical battle story does not have a set form; rather, it is recognized by typical features—themes, phrases and motifs that recur in many battle narratives. Many of these typical features are evidenced here, so much so that it creates a strong impression that the author of Esther 9 desired to cast his narrative in a manner that would classify it within the battle-report tradition.

The clash is not spontaneous between groups of rabble, but between organized battalions. The enemies that the Jews face are organized regiments (םהמ) (8:11) and the Jews themselves began to prepare for the 13th of Adar with the dispatch of the communiqué, some nine months in advance (8:11). 

Fear grips the enemy (8:17) in anticipation of a calamity (Exod 15:16; 1 Sam 11:7; Ps 105:38; Job 13:11).2 The battle account of chapter 9 attends to the issue of booty taking at numerous points (8:11; 9:10, 15, 16), and offers a breakdown of casualty figures at different stages in the conflict (9:6, 15, 16). It describes the foe as “unable to stand before” Israel, a common motif in the battle reports of Joshua (10:8; 21:44; 23:9).3 The MT graphically arranges the names

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1 C.A. Moore, Esther (AB 7B; NewYork: Doubleday, 1971) 80.
of Haman’s sons in a vertical list of vanquished foes, the likes of which are found elsewhere in the list of vanquished kings in Joshua 12. It incorporates the motif of fear gripping the enemy ($ל + מָחָה$) (8:17; 9:2, 3) as Israel emerges victorious in a nearly effortless manner, which is particularly reminiscent of the battle stories of Chronicles (1 Chr 14:17; 2 Chr 14:13; 17:10; 20:29; cf. Josh 2:9, 24).

Our analysis of the battle report of Esther 9:1-16 opens with an observation. The narrative documents events that transpired over two days of fighting. The actual achievements of the second day (9:15), however, pale in comparison with those of the first, seemingly on every scale of significance. On the first day the Jews killed 75,500 of their enemies while on the second day they added another 300 to that figure. On the first day they killed the ten sons of Haman in Shushan, who, perhaps, were affiliated with the leadership of the campaign against the Jews. Those killed on the second day, however, seem entirely nondescript. Historicist perspectives have averred that chapter 9 is to be seen as an etiology, a later attempt to bolster observance of the two-day festival of Purim. The etiological aspect of this text is undeniable. Nonetheless, even when the text is probed as a literary construct, the equality underscored between the two days of fighting seems unwarranted.

I would suggest, however, that, in its description of the 14th of Adar, the narrative is only secondarily concerned with the actual events and achievements of the second day of fighting. Note that the fighting and its results are reduced to a single verse, 9:15. The narrative’s interest in the second day is not in its results but rather in its genesis—how it came to be that the Jews received a second day to retaliate against their enemies within the city of Shushan. To this subject, the narrative devotes four verses, 9:11-14, a detailed account of the discussion between Esther and the king. A key to understanding the narrative’s interest in the second day, I would submit, is to see it as a milestone in the development of the character of Esther. I will contend that the meaning of the analogy between the two days of fighting and the two

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4 Ibid., 475.
6 David J.A. Clines, The Esther Scroll (JSOTSup 30; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1984) 48; Gerleman, Esther, 134; Moore Esther 91; Michael V. Fox, Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1991) 112.