

IRREALIS IN BIBLICAL NARRATIVE: WHAT DIDN'T HAPPEN¹

“Events that do not take place have significance only in relation to what actually does happen.”
(Grimes 1975, 65)

INTRODUCTION²

While preparing this paper, I asked several people to define “story”. Their answers were uniformly along the lines of “A story tells [us] what happened,” which approximates Webster’s definition of “story” as “a connected narration of past events” (1953). The statement “[T]hat reminds me of a story” leads nearly everyone to expect to hear an account of a string of related events, whether in this world or the invented world of an author’s fiction events.³

Stories tell us “what happened”. They describe “what happened” when Goldilocks went into the woods, “what happened” when Arthur pulled the sword out of the stone, “what happened” when Abram was called by God, when Elisha was mocked, when David faced Goliath, when Esther became “queen”, when Peter stepped out of the boat. They depict events, including internal thoughts and external words and actions, and unfold successive events so that their readers or hearers see how they are related and interdependent.

Narratives do more than list events, including information in addition to the mere “happenings”, such as setting (time and place), description (of setting and characters), and evaluation (of a character’s actions, motives, &c.).

This paper looks at a specific kind of information in narrative, and asks why authors tell us that certain events did not occur.

¹A very rough version of this paper was read at the annual meeting of the Eastern regional division of the ETS (April 2005); a more finalized version has been accepted for the annual meeting of the SBL (November 2006).

²This list largely reflects that in Grimes 1971.

³Stories also have a “point”; they are not merely chronicles or lists of events. To say: “I got up. I washed and dressed. I ate breakfast. I went to work and worked all day. I went home and ate dinner. I went to bed. Then I got up and it started all over again.” is not to tell a story. A story requires a narrative “profile” that includes a pattern of tension and release, or conflict and resolution. Without this there is no story. A conflict- or problem-free story is a contradiction in terms.

KINDS OF INFORMATION

Events & Non-Events

Most readers would find the following “story” understandable, if a bit silly:

Once upon a time a king and queen lived with their beautiful daughter in a castle. When their daughter was christened, she received the blessings of the good fairies, but could not escape the curse of the wicked witch. One day a handsome prince came from a far-off land to save her and win her heart. He did, and they lived happily ever after.

The End.

It is [barely] possible to imagine a parallel “story” made up of non-events, such as this:

There was no king, queen, daughter, or castle. The-princess-who-was-not was therefore not christened, and so neither received the blessings of good fairies (there were none), nor escaped the curse of the non-existent wicked witch. No prince (handsome, ugly, or otherwise) ever came from a far-off non-land in order to fail or refuse to rescue her from the curse which was never given, or to win her heart (after all, no princess means no heart), nor did He-who-was-not so rescue or win. And no one lived (at all).

Stop.

[Not “The End”, because that which does not begin cannot end.]

After the first one or two sentences, most readers find themselves waiting for a “but”, “however”, or some other adversative that would start the actual story by introducing something that *did* happen, since that is “what stories do”. Note the language of that sentence: the phrase “actual story” is not random. Since stories—by definition and experience—tell us about “events”, this example quickly becomes a rather irritating joke, with listeners and readers grimly wondering “How long can this go on?”⁴

An “event-free story”, like a “non-occurring event”, is a contradiction in terms.⁵

Stories do *not* merely tell us “what happened”. Any story worthy of the name includes many different “kinds of information”⁶ in addition to identifying the “mere” events.

If we examine *every* sentence in a story, analyzing its “kind(s) of information” according to the categories described by, e.g., Grimes (1971, 1985), we find that stories offer information about many kinds of things, and range far beyond a mere recitation of events. For example, the

⁴The line is from “Working in a Coalmine”, by Lee Dorsey.

⁵After reading the horrific short story “The Secret Chamber” (by Alain Robbe-Grillet), in which nearly all of the events occur within a span of a few sentences, I have attempted to write “event-free stories”, and am investigating the possibility that certain biblical visions are very nearly “event-free”. In Robbe-Grillet’s horrific story, a single event (deed, action) is described in the first paragraph; a later paragraph describes a series of five or six events. The rest of the story’s five pages consists of non-event information.

⁶I am using the terms following Grimes (1971, 1985), not Bergen (1984a-b). Grimes uses it in the sense of semantic information (understanding “semantic” very broadly), whereas Bergen refers to specific grammatical choices (nouns, verbs, &c.) that fulfill particular syntactical rôles.

descriptions of the events themselves often entail explicit or implicit (but non-event) information about their chronological and logical relationships (e.g., event sequence, overlap, separation, causation, duration), and stories always contain further [“ancillary”]⁷ information about people, places, and things, such as setting (time and place) and background.

In a sentence such as “Seeing that the fire had gone out, he went to look for more wood”, the narrated event is his going [to some undesignated place]; the circumstances (which are not events in themselves) are (1) the extinction of the fire;⁸ and (2) the purpose of his venturing forth.

Non-event information is thus quite varied, encompassing everything in the story beyond the bare event-line or storyline,⁹ including references to and descriptions of participants, setting (time, place), background, definitions (identification), rhetorical questions, [authorial] evaluation, &c., all of which may be either narrational (part of the narrative frame) or quotational (put into the mouths of characters).¹⁰

Another type of information in many narratives has been called “collateral” (Grimes 1975, 64; following Nabov), and “*irrealis*”¹¹ (Longacre 2001, 74, 79). Authors often include statements like “Now Abimelech *had not approached* her” (Gn 20.4a), “Now Samuel *did not yet know* Yahweh; Yahweh’s word *was not yet revealed* to him” (1 Sam 3.7), or “The men rowed in order to return to the dry land, but they *could not*” (Jon 1.13).¹² Statements that tell the reader that something did not happen or had not happened, or that a certain condition did not exist, are examples of *irrealis*—identifying that which “was not”, or which “did not occur”.

Although it is highly instructive and profitable to examine every phrase and clause in a [biblical] narrative in order to identify its function and kind of information, that process is far too

⁷I am following Longacre in using this term etymologically; *ancilla* in Latin referred to “handmaid”, so that this other information “helps” or “assists” the storyline, or (at least) helps the reader understand the story (Longacre, lecture delivered at the Westminster Theological Seminary Seminar on Discourse Analysis, January 2001).

⁸Although the going out of the fire “happened”, it is noted only in its result, not as an event. This simple example, off the top of my head, is actually quite complicated, since the going out of a fire is actually the cessation of an activity—the fire stops burning (or, to complicate it further, the fuel—wood, in this case—stops being consumed by combustion).

⁹I am not here distinguishing the “preterite chain” or “narrative backbone” (Grimes, Longacre) from the rest of the story, since a flashback that describes an antecedent or previous event still describes an event. I am rather referring to *all* of the non-event information in any story (again, following Grimes).

¹⁰Boaz’s statement to Ruth is an example of quotational evaluation: “The whole gate of my people know that *you are an upright woman* []” (Ru 3.11), telling the reader something that is not explicit in the narrative—namely, that Ruth was well thought of by the people of Bethlehem—and confirming the reader’s positive interpretation of Ruth’s behaviour to that point in the story. Quotational evaluation tends to be much more powerful than the same information conveyed by the narrator, since it comes from *within the story*, rather than being added to it, and because it tends to be unsolicited (and thus unexpected) by the reader.

¹¹I realize that the term “*irrealis*” has a long use referring to a type of condition, the “contrary-to-fact” (e.g., “If you had come, you would have had a good time.”). The form of the conditional protasis and apodosis tells us that the person did not come, and so (presumably) did not have that particular good time.

¹²A similar statement (which I have not yet re-traced) in *The Thin Red Line*, James Jones’ fictionalized account of World War II in the Pacific, tells the reader that a severely wounded character did not die, but ten or twelve pages after describing his removal from the front line.

complex even to begin to present the results of in a paper of this length (even for a relatively short passage). This paper attempts instead to ascertain the function of narrational *irrealis*, or negative statements by the narrator that tell us that a character did not do something or that a particular situation did not exist.

Put simply, why do narrators tell us what *didn't* happen?

Authors control the content of their stories. All storytellers, and not merely biblical authors, must choose what to report from the welter of detail—the undifferentiated stream of experience—that makes up life. Although the apostle John meant more than this, he at was at least referring to this limitation upon his ability as an author when he ended his gospel by saying, “And there are also many other things which Jesus did, which if they were written one by one, I suppose that not even the world itself would have room for the books that would be written” (John 21.25). Since authors necessarily elide most things that *did* happen from their stories, why do they use their precious space and time noting things that did not happen?

First, a disclaimer. This is not an analysis of the [universal] function of *negation in Language*. That is a matter for philosophers and professional semanticists.¹³ Nor does it attempt to analyze and describe *all types of negation* in biblical stories (which would be a dissertation), although I will note them very briefly in order to distinguish what I am looking at.¹⁴

The burden of this paper is quite simple: Why does the narrator’s voice tell us that some events happened, and that other events did not? What is the *narrative purpose and function* of naming, describing, or identifying *non-events*, or the way things *weren't*? And, most specifically, how do statements of narrational *irrealis* function in the book of Esther?

Negation in Biblical Narrative

Works on the grammar and syntax of Biblical Hebrew [BH] routinely discuss the morphosyntax of negation.¹⁵ They list or outline different negative “particles” or “adverbs” (e.g., *l* , *'al*, *bal*, [*l*']*biltî*), and discuss various types and constructions of conditional statements, rhetorical questions, prohibitions, &c. They do not, however, address the rôle or function of negation itself. If this is

¹³ A brief but elegant paper on the notion of negational “range” by Mr. Merle Brubaker discusses the semantic reasons for the dual meaning of the sentence: “You can’t cook broccoli too long” (personal communication).

¹⁴ This paper also reflects the conviction that we need to be sure that we are actually reading the story that stands written before us (and not merely what we have heard or read about it, or remembered)—*before* attempting to interpret it (see “Conclusion”, below). Reading carefully in order to understand is the task of studying literature, biblical or not. Questions that help us read stories include: (1) What is this author telling me [us] here? (2) Why does this author introduce *this* information *at this point* in the story? (3) What does this add to what he or she has already said?

¹⁵ Cf., e.g., IBHS §39.3.2-3 (under “adverbs”) (Waltker & O’Connor 1990); Gibson (1994, §58b, 64a); van der Merwe (2000, 318-20); Gesenius (1910, §152); Joüon-Muraoka (1991, §102j). [References are to primary discussions.]

because narrational negation is considered part of the exegetical or hermeneutical quest, it is perhaps more surprising that this subject is also not addressed in works on literary, linguistic, or discourse analysis of biblical narrative (although negation is occasionally mentioned).¹⁶

This paper addresses the functions of *irrealis* (narrational negation) in the book of Esther, looking first at various types of negation, and then assessing the significance of negation in the story contained in that book.¹⁷

TYPES OF NEGATION IN ESTHER

Quotational *Irrealis*¹⁸

Quotational [spoken] *irrealis* is a negative statement in the mouth of a character in the story that reflects the experience, opinion, or desire of a character (and is therefore “perspectival” *irrealis*), whereas narrational *irrealis* reflects the conclusion(s) of the narrator (storyteller, author, &c.). Both types of negation are therefore perspectival, and need to be evaluated in the light of the entire narrative in which they occur. Both are placed in the story by the narrator, since the storyteller controls the story, and therefore determines what material either to include or omit.

Authorial control means that the narrator decides not only which events to report (above), but also which speeches to quote, and how much of each speech. He (or she) also decides how to introduce (i.e., semantically characterize) those speeches (“He said/shouted/called/lifted up his voice and said”), which then (of course) colours them for the reader. The narrator, however, intrudes most into the account of events in his or her description of the events—or, for our purposes, in which non-events (if any) he or she mentions.

That is, since exhaustive narration is patently impossible¹⁹, narrational [authorial] choice means that *most* non-events are *not* mentioned in the story. In the story of Abimelech (Jg 9), for example, we are never told what happened to Jotham after he fled Shechem. Nor are we told about the commerce of Shechem, the weather, who was born, who died, who married whom, the quantity

¹⁶In analyzing the account of Samuel’s call—a story in which narrational negation plays an extremely significant rôle—Halberg very briefly discusses “non-event information, such as collateral” (1989, 22).

¹⁷Although the paper focuses on the book of Esther, I began with a brief survey of negation (narrational and quotational *irrealis*) in seven biblical stories, chosen because they are more or less identifiably “contained” narratives: Abraham (Gn 11.27-25.10), Joseph (Gn 37-48), Samuel (1 Sam 1-3), Ruth, Jonah, and Hezekiah (Is 36-39). I chose to focus on the book of Esther truly at random, largely because I felt that I had to choose *something*, not because I had any inkling that there would be any results.

¹⁸Quotational negation is the other authorial means—in addition to narrational—by which he or she lets readers know what did not (indicative), should not (prohibition), or will not (prediction) happen, or of offering a choice (polar questions) or answering a polar question in the negative (simple negation). The last two types of quotational negation do not occur in Esther.

¹⁹I.e., it is highly unlikely that anyone—even Boswell or Proust!—could record *every* internal (i.e., emotional, including such “invisible” events as physiological changes in the bodies of the participants) and external (i.e., physical) aspect of an experience, without limiting the setting and duration of the event, and the number of participants so severely that the account would sound rather like “playing” a Bach fugue by merely pressing every key used at the same time for one or two seconds—such a “story” would be dense but meaningless.

or value of the grape harvest (9.13), or most other things that must have happened alongside the events mentioned in Judges 9.

A further interplay of expectations is that readers naturally trust the voice of the narrator, whereas they interpret a participant's speeches according to their impressions of that character's veracity (or narrational information). When Jacob deceives Isaac, pretending to be Esau, for example, the reader knows that Jacob is lying, but only because the narrator has told us that "*Jacob* said to his father 'I am Esau, your firstborn' (Gn 27.18). The [trustworthy] narrator has faithfully reported the speech of a [untrustworthy] participant.

Based on the texts reviewed for this paper, most biblical negation in biblical narratives occurs within direct speech.²⁰ Quotational negation is a less direct way of communicating *irrealis*, informing the reader that something did not happen through the mouth of a character (e.g., Es 6.3), rather than omnisciently via the narrator.

The predominance of quotational negation probably reflects the general style of biblical stories, in which quotation is often the major means of advancing the story. The nearly equal distribution of quotational and narrational negation in the book of Esther reflects its atypical makeup (about two-thirds narration to one-third quotation). Nonetheless, at least one quotational negation, the statement that "Nothing was done for him" (6.3) offers new information about a non-event.

One type of negation is quotational, but could also be considered pseudo-narrational. At some points in the story, the reader learns of a non-event from the mouth of a character, rather than from the narrator. At the turning point of the book, when the insomniac Xerxes asks how Mordecai had been rewarded for foiling the assassins' plot, the reader learns for the first time that Mordecai had not been rewarded:

And the king's men, his ministers, said,
"Not a thing was done for him" (6.3).

This failure is new information for the reader, and certainly counter-expectational. In Persian society as generally, someone who saved the king's life would have been rewarded most richly (as the story goes on to show); the negative statement highlights Xerxes' *faux pas*—for us

²⁰This of course begs the question of whether or not and to what extent the narrator has shaped "direct" quotations in biblical narrative. For the purposes of this paper, I assume that the words recorded as speech acts were actually spoken by the individuals to whom the narrator credited them. In 1 Sam 1-3 (the birth of Samuel and his establishment as a prophet), there are fourteen instances of narrational *irrealis* versus twenty-eight quotational negations (a 1:2 ratio, which is very high compared to the other passages that I reviewed).

(certainly), but even more strongly for the original readers, who would have assumed that the narrator simply omitted mention of the culturally obligatory reward.

Memucan’s statement that Queen Vašti “*did not do* the word of King Xerxes ... and *she did not come*” (1.15, 17) is another example of new information. In contrast with the narrator’s positive statement (see “semantic negation”, above) that “*Vašti refused to come* at the king’s command” (1.12), Memucan’s description functions as a form of “delayed antithetical paraphrase” (below). The narrator said merely that Vašti had “refused to come” (1.12), but we have no way of knowing whether or not he or his servants somehow forced her to come. Memucan lets the reader know that she successfully resisted the king, not only refusing to come at his command, but failing to appear at all in response to his summons.

Compound (Unitary) Negation

A “compound” or “unitary” negation consists of statements that can be grammatically analyzed as at least two separate negations, but that are functionally unitary. Mordecai’s refusal to honour Haman is described by the narrator via two negatives:

but Mordecai *would not bow* and he *would not show respect* (3.2b)

When the same event is described from Haman’s point of view in a parallel “indirect discourse”, however, Mordecai’s non-actions are united under a single negation:

And Haman saw that Mordecai *was not bowing or showing him respect*, ... (3.5).

This suggests that Haman (at least) saw the two actions as a functional unity, which seems also to have been the view of the king and his other courtiers (3.2a).²¹ In a parallel example, Haman is again enraged at Mordecai’s lack of respect, this time after his private *soirée* with Esther and Xerxes.²²

“... but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king’s doorway,
that [and] *he did not rise* and *he did not tremble* because of him ...” (Esth 5:9)

²¹If this interpretation is correct (and I am inclined to think that it is), it allocates three instances of narrational *irrealis* to Mordecai, Esther, and “the Jews”, suggesting that each is equally important to the plot—and to the import—of the story (from this perspective, at least).

²²This could be narrational *irrealis*, although I have chosen to treat it as indirect discourse. If it is narrational, it would read “When Haman saw ... (now he neither stood nor trembled at him), Haman was filled with rage” (i.e., Haman was angry at merely seeing Mordecai, not specifically because of what Mordecai failed to do). Are there other cases of indirect discourse introduced with *w* in BH???

The story of Esther contains two other “compound” negations. When she asks the Jews to support her visit to the king, Esther parallels positive and negative commands.

... and fast on my behalf, and *do not eat* and *do not drink* (Ex 4.16)

This parallels Mordecai’s non-act in that eating and drinking together form a single action (eating meals), as do bowing and showing respect (honouring someone). Incidentally, Esther’s entreaty is also an example of “negated antonym paraphrase” (below),²³ in which a negation is immediately preceded or followed by a positive statement with the opposite value (function).²⁴

The fourth unitary negation, in the account of the establishment of Purim, also describes two closely related actions, but the second actually extends the first, rather than merely paralleling it.

and these days of Purim *shall not pass* from among the Jews,
and their memory *shall not cease* from their seed (Es 9.28).

The narrator first says that the Jews would not fail to observe the days of Purim, the second that this was a permanent statute that extended to their offspring (i.e., Purim would not be celebrated for only one generation (by those who had been delivered), but would become part of the Jewish liturgical calendar).

Negated Antonym Paraphrase

In negated antonym paraphrase (cf. on Es 4.16), parallel clauses say “the same thing” because the negative clause *negates the opposite* [the antonym] of the positive clause. In other words, a negated antonym is a synonym (e.g., “live” “not die”; “wise” “not foolish”).

This function is fairly common in biblical poetry, especially wisdom poetry, where negating an antonym often creates synonymously parallel lines (e.g., Pr 3.1, 5, 7). Which clause—positive or negated—is the “paraphrase” may simply depend on their order. If the positive clause precedes (as often), then the negation is the paraphrase, and *vice versa*.

²³The term is from Longacre (1983, 78-79 *et passim*).

²⁴Probably because of the “parallelizing” nature of biblical narration (not to mention poetry), “antithetical paraphrases” are not uncommon in biblical stories. In each case, both clauses describe the same circumstance. Although the positive usually precedes the negative in the stories that I studied, this is not universal; cf., e.g., “*Now the chief steward did not remember Joseph*, but he forgot him” (Gn 40.23; cf. Es 6.13b [below]).

Although often narrational in other stories,²⁵ negated antonym paraphrase in Esther occurs only in quotations.

Haman's family and friends use negated antonym paraphrase to warn Haman of the dangers of opposing Mordecai. Haman will fail to *overcome* Mordecai, i.e., he will fall.²⁶

“If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is from the seed of the Jews,
you will not overcome him, but you shall surely fall before him” (Es 6.13b).

The king's negative edict about non-compulsory drinking is followed by a positively worded explanation (1.8):

And the drinking was according to the edict:
‘There is no one who compels [drinking]’,
for thus the king set on every chief of his house:
to do according to each man's pleasure (Es 1.8).

There was to be no compulsion, but neither was there to be any neglect. The second and fourth clauses contain the negated antonym paraphrase; perhaps the edict was stated in both negatively and positively, lest there be any misunderstanding or confusion.

The heightening function of irrealis probably shows up most clearly in negated antonym paraphrase, as Grimes suggests:

Collateral information [Grimes's term for narrational negation], ...
relates non-events to events. By providing a range of non-events that
might take place, it heightens the significance of the real events.
(1975, 65)

²⁵Cf., e.g., Is 36.21 (“But they were silent, and did not answer him a word”); Is 38.1 (“... for you shall die [are dead!], you shall not live”); Jon 3.10 (“God relented of the disaster ... and he did not do it”); Gn 11.30 (“Now Sarai was barren; she had no children”); 37.4 (“they hated him, and could not speak peace[fully] with him”); 37.22 (“Shed no blood; throw him in this pit ..., but do not set a hand on him” [double paraphrase!]); 37.24 (“Now the pit was empty; there was no water in it”); 40.23 (“But the chief steward did not remember Joseph, but forgot him”); 43.8 (“... that we may live, *and not die*”); 48.10 (“Now Israel's eyes were dim with age; he could not see”; cf. 1 Sam 3.2; 4.15); 1 Sam 1.13 (“Hannah was speaking in her heart ... and her voice was not heard”); 3.1 (“Now Yahweh's word was rare in those days; no vision broke through”); 3.18 (“And Samuel told him everything, and he did not hide [anything?] from him” [perhaps the Hebrew text means that Samuel himself did not hide (reflexive), rather than that he hid nothing (transitive)]); 3.19 (“... and Yahweh was with him, and he let none of his words fall to the ground”). These are all the examples of narrational antithetical paraphrase in the stories that I investigated. Note that, e.g., 1 Sam 2.12 (“Now Eli's sons were worthless [sons of Belial]; they did not know Yahweh”) is a related, but not identical function; at the time of his call, Samuel did not [yet] know Yahweh (3.7), but was not a “son of Belial”.

²⁶In another of the many ironies in the book of Esther, this warning apparently comes from the same group of people who had counseled him to build a gallows on which to hang Mordecai (5.13), even though they knew at that time that he was Jewish, the fact that now leads them to this [contrary] conclusion.

Even though the “range of non-events” in these examples from Esther is quite narrow—two possibilities (often polar opposites), naming the antithesis highlights the positive statement.²⁷

Negative Explanation (“because/for/since” there was no ...)

As in Es 4.2, in **Es 2.7b** the narrator tells us that Mordecai was supporting his cousin Esther because she was an orphan:

He was supporting Hadassah (she was “Esther”), his uncle’s daughter,
because *she had no father or mother* (2.7).

The negative circumstance explains the positive deed described in the first half of the verse. It characterizes Esther as an orphan—but more strongly, and emotionally(?)—in terms of her loss, rather than merely her status, and also anticipates the reader’s question about how a cousin could have the degree of control over this young woman’s life that appears as the story unfolds.²⁸

The main difference between this explanatory negation and that in 4.2 is that we might expect the original readers to have known the first (a legal custom), but not the others, which describe individual circumstances, apart from knowing the story.

Semantic Irrealis (“Positive” Negation)

A negative statement does not tell what happened unless it is an absolute statement. For example, life and death are mutually exclusive and polar states, so that the statement “He didn’t die” means “he lived”, although we may not infer anything about the quality of his life, or whether or not he ever again played the harp, unless the narrator chooses to tell us.

“Semantic negation” entails implicit negation—*irrealis* without a negative or negated predicate. That is, some lexemes by their very nature describe a non-action, e.g., “be silent”, “refused to ...” (i.e., “did not ...”, or “was not willing to ...”), “reject” (i.e., “not accept”). This means that negative statements can be made by using positive predicates, which occurs twice in the book of Esther. To “stop” or “cease” (e.g.,) is another semantic negation.

²⁷A closely related phenomenon, not found in Esther, is the use of *polar questions*, which are “... a useful device for introducing more than one alternative at once” (Grimes 1975, 67).

²⁸It is possible that “orphan” in BH refers not to a parentless child, but to a fatherless one, since the culture was extremely patriarchal; if this is true, then the negation in this v. makes her complete desolation explicit. On the other hand, this statement may be intended to suggest that she was an only [surviving] child, or at least that she had no [older] brothers.

According to Es 1.12, “Queen Vašti *refused* to go ...”, which (as we have seen) means that “she did not come [go]” (1.17), and in Es 6.1 we read that “That night the king’s sleep *fled*, ...” (i.e., a non-event—the king’s insomnia [lack of sleep]—is described as an event).²⁹

Neither of these statements tells us what did happen. Did Vašti throw a fit, beat the messengers, or send an insult back to the king (her refusal was probably quite insult enough)? Did Xerxes try counting sheep, visiting the harem, drinking himself into a stupor, or some other means of going to sleep? We are told that “[she] refused”³⁰ and “[his] sleep fled”, but we are *not* told *what happened instead*.

The statement “I didn’t go to work yesterday” does not tell us whether the speaker was sick, went fishing, played tennis, or read a book, or anything else! We know only that he or she did not go to work. That is, when we read that someone *didn’t do* something, we are not necessarily told *what they did*,³¹ just as we are not told *what happened instead*.

On the level of discourse, one effect of semantic irrealis in Biblical Hebrew is that it raises non-events to the level of the narrative backbone (preterite chain), rather than relegating them to the status of background (the normal function of *irrealis*, which usually occurs in disjunctive rather than story-line clauses).³²

²⁹This negative statement (“... the king couldn’t sleep”) is in fact the nearly unanimous rendering of all English, French, and German versions that I could find. The few that rendered this with the biblical metaphor were Young’s Literal, Darby, Holman Christian Standard, and a [very] few German translations. One of the “theological plusses” in LXX says that “The Lord took [or “kept”] sleep from the king that night” ().

³⁰Only occasionally is the alternative action described when is used (cf., e.g., 1 Sa 8.19; 2 Sa 13.9; Jr 3.3; 5.3; 11.10; Zc 7.11).

³¹Another example of this function is found in Lv 10.3b: “... & Aaron was silent” (), but we do not know what he did instead of speaking. We do not in fact even know the reason for the sentence. Did Aaron *refuse* to speak, or was he perhaps *unable* to speak (because he was, e.g., mourning his sons, agonizing over their guilt, or stricken by Yahweh)? Does the clause merely contrast his silence with Moses’ prophetic speech (10.3a)? The narrator gives us no information beyond the semantic negation.

³²This function parallels the use of predicate *wayhî* (i.e., *wayhî* followed by a subject, rather than a circumstantial clause, as in, e.g., Gn 12.10), another syntagm that elevates a non-event (or at least a non-sequential event) to the level of the narrative backbone. See Putnam 1996.

NARRATIONAL NEGATION IN ESTHER

There are more than thirty explicit negations in the book of Esther. This paper explores their function in the narrative—i.e., how being told what didn't happen is related to and affects our understanding of what did. Negation in Esther is both quotational and narrational; this paper focuses on *narrational negation*, or *irrealis* proper, i.e., those negative statements that are made by the narrator, rather than being contained in direct or indirect quotations.

Kinds of Information in Irrealis

Perhaps the simplest way to describe negation in Esther is to look at the information offered *via* narrational negation. The author of Esther used irrealis to convey three kinds of information: (1) *custom* (what was not allowed or done); (2) *state* or *condition* (the way something or someone was not); and (3) *non-event* (what didn't happen). Each has a specific narrational function.

Customs

Customs provide background information that enables the reader to understand events (or non-events), as when we are told that Mordecai “went [only] as far as the king's gate”:

And he went only as far as the king's gate,
since [*it was*] *not* [*permissible*] *to enter the king's gate in sackcloth* (4:2).

The other custom explained by the narrator by using negation was that members of the harem had either limited access or no access to the king—even after having slept with him. Rather than say that a woman who had pleased the king would go to him whenever he called, he tells us that

She *would not go* the king again
unless the king was pleased with her and she was called by name (2:14).

This anticipates Esther's hesitation to approach the king after *not being summoned* for thirty days (4.11); its presence implies the author's concern that readers might not know this particular royal regulation.

Both of these customs are explained by the narrator in the negative, i.e., as things that *were not done*. Authors explain customs either because they feel that their readers would not recognize or

understand them (or, occasionally, their origins), or because they they were at least unfamiliar enough that they [the authors] feel the need to remind readers that this custom had once existed. Explanation of customs may also, however, be a narrative device to slow down the plot by delaying the description of the next event, or (even) to heighten the tension in the story—if Mordecai can’t even get near the king to argue his people’s case (in this case), how can the Jews escape?

A third custom is explained negatively, but by a character in the story, rather than by the narrator.³³ In one of many quotational negations in the book, Esther either explains to or reminds Mordecai that the king had a law “to put to death ... any man or woman who goes *unsummoned* into the king’s inner court:

... who *had not been called* ... (4.11)

She tells Mordecai this in order to justify her hesitation to obey him. The negative statement allows her to end with the reminder of her death, and also to make the two statements morphologically parallel, and syntactically chiasmic:³⁴

...	who goes in to the king ... who <i>is not called</i> ... (4.11a)
	I have <i>not been called</i> to go in to the king (4.11b)

Phrasing the same custom in a positive manner, e.g., “Those who are summoned may go in ...” would not have had nearly the same effect,³⁵ even if it continued by saying something like “All others will die”.³⁶

Customs may thus be described—narrationally or quotationally—via *irrealis*.

State or Condition

Just as explaining a custom supplies information that the reader needs in order to understand what characters do, or refrain from doing, a narrated *state* or *condition* also offers background information that is often proleptic or anticipatory—setting the stage for later actions or events (or non-actions and non-events).

The two *narrational negations of state* in Esther have a great deal of explanatory power for the story:

³³This is thus an instance of *quotational irrealis*, because it is not reported by the narrator (cf. below).

³⁴Both clauses have *lo*’ followed by the *nifal* of the root *qr*’.

³⁵We do not know whether or not Esther was quoting a Persian statute, although if she was, we could explain the law’s form in the same way.

³⁶The last three negatively described customs entail “going in” to the king’s inner chamber (4.11) or palace (4.2), which suggests that the author was assuming that his readers would generally lack familiarity with Persian court protocol.

For she [Esther] had no father or mother (Est 2.7)

Why does the author describe Esther's parentless state in this way, since BH has a perfectly good and usual lexeme— (“orphan”)—that occurs more than forty times in the Bible?³⁷ This clause was probably used because it is more explicit than “... for [Esther] was an orphan” (*) since it specifies that she lacks any parent, rather than being merely “fatherless”³⁸.

This clause also explains (1) why Esther was under Mordecai's patronage and protection (2.7); (2) why she submitted to Mordecai, even after being separated from him by joining the royal harem (2.10); (3) why she remained obedient to him even after her exaltation as first wife or “queen” (2.20); (4) why she was so concerned for his well-being (4.4-9); (5) why she [finally] obeyed him and risked her life to approach the king (4.11-5.2); and (6) why she exalted him before Xerxes (8.1-2). In fact, without this *irrealis*, Esther's diffidence to Mordecai would not make sense, along with much of the rest of the story.

In the other negative description of a state, the author turns to the reader at the very end of the book, and asks “... *are they not written* in the record of the words [events] of the days ...?”³⁹ Like all rhetorical questions, this one is worded to involve the reader, in this case by garnering his or her assent (Grimes 1975, 64). It also describes the state or condition of being written in a certain text in order to assure the reader that what he or she has just read is an accurate record of actual events. This negative question, however, is not anticipatory (unlike Esther's orphancy, above), but *culminatory*, rounding off the record by referring interested readers to a further, presumably even more trustworthy, source.

Non-Events by Participant

Although it describes customs and states in Esther (above), *irrealis* most frequently identifies non-events—actions that characters failed or refused to take, words that were not said, and the like. The author describes ten non-events *via* narrational negation in Esther. The first three describe what *Esther* did not do (2.10, 15, 20), the next four what *Mordecai* did not do (3.2(*bis*), 3; 4.4), the

³⁷Since two of its occurrences date from the Persian hegemony (Zc 7.10; Mal 3.5), the date of the book of Esther did not preclude the author's use of .

³⁸A traditional, but unfortunate, gloss for .

³⁹Strictly speaking, this question is meta-narrational (“above” or “beyond” the narrative), i.e., not part of the story itself, since it refers to extra-narrational events and the record of them in works outside the book of Esther. Like the rest of the book, however, it is addressed to the reader (every author addresses readers, even if only him or herself).

seventh what the *enemies* of the Jews could not do (9.2), and the last three (which are identical) describe what the *Jews* did not do (9.10, 15, 16).

Esther

Esther *did not announce* (*ngd*) her ancestry, either before being chosen by Xerxes (2.10) or after (2.20), out of obedience to Mordecai (above).⁴⁰ This meant, among other things, that Haman felt himself free to move against the Jews, since he did not know that by attacking them he was also attacking Xerxes' favourite wife.

Nor did Esther presume to know how to please the king, instead "she *did not seek* anything but what Hegai ... said" (2.15). This narrator may be implying that her modesty at least partially accounts for her success with Xerxes (2.16-18), as well as with Hegai and the court [harem?] (1.9; 2.15), and anticipates her later success in gaining an audience with the king for her people's sake (5.1-6).

All the rest of Esther's actions are positive; only these three acts are described negatively by the narrator.

Mordecai

Alone(?) among the courtiers in Susa, Mordecai "*would not bow or show respect*" to Haman (3.2).⁴¹ Even when they pressed him by appealing to the king's decree (3.3) "he did not listen to them" (3.4).⁴² This is *the* inciting event of the rest of the book, the non-event that gives rise to the plot against the Jews, and to the death of Haman, his sons, and many hundreds of others as his plot was foiled. Indeed, it is the defeat of that plot that fills the most of the rest of the book. So important to the story is Mordecai's "rebellion" that without it there would be no story, and thus no book of Esther. It is by far the most important event (real or *irrealis*) in the story to this point, which is probably why it is described twice:

Now Mordecai *would not bow* and *would not show respect* (3.2).⁴³

⁴⁰For Hebrew texts not printed in the body of this paper, see Appendix I.

⁴¹Mordecai's persistent refusal to honor Haman or to acknowledge his rank (perhaps corresponding to "first advisor") was probably due to political intrigue and the jockeying for power that seems to characterize all of their interaction.

⁴²Although the statement in 3.5 appears to be narrational *irrealis*, it actually reports Haman's perception ("Haman *saw* that Mordecai did not bow ..."), and is therefore an example of [indirect] quotational *irrealis*.

⁴³I interpret the imperfect [prefix conjugation] verbal forms as describing both "ongoing non-events" (an oxymoron, like much of this discussion) and modal (hence "*would not*", rather than "*did not*").

The third statement of his disobedience describes his unwillingness to accept the advice of the other courtiers, who urged him to obey the king by honouring Haman,

But he *did not listen* to them (3.4).

Three times the narrator tells us that Mordecai did not (and, as the third makes explicit, *would not*) honour Mordecai. This repetition, in such close proximity, suggests the importance that the author assigns to this set of non-events.

The final statement of narrational *irrealis* related to Mordecai is his refusal of the clothes that Esther sent him to exchange for his sackcloth (4.4), which precipitates his long-range interaction with Esther that leads to her intercessory visit to Xerxes. Had Mordecai accepted the clothes as Esther expected (not knowing of Haman's decree), he would not have had opportunity to communicate his desperation to Esther; rejecting them sent a signal to her that far more was at stake than a death in the family (or anything else for which he might have appeared in mourning).

The non-events ascribed to Mordecai—not bowing to or honouring Haman, not listening to the other courtiers, and not accepting Esther's gift—precipitate the major crisis of the book (Haman's plot) and a closely related minor crisis (Esther's trial, which was certainly a major crisis to her). Something that is not done or that does not occur can thus be as important—or even more important—than those things that happen.

The Enemies of the Jews

The main reason for the Jews' successful self-defence—in language reminiscent of the book of Joshua—was that “*no one stood* before them, because the terror of [the Jews] fell on them” (9.2).⁴⁴

... but a man *did not stand* before them (9.2).

The Jews' posture was therefore transformed from rather hopeless self-defence to attack against a non-resistant foe, so that “they did to their enemies as they pleased” (9.5).

The Jews

Three times the author says that the Jews, after defeating and killing their enemies, did not “send their hand on the plunder” (9.10, 15,16):

⁴⁴These two clauses sound like antithetic paraphrase (below), but the first is the cause consequence or result of the second, not a positive restatement of it. I.e., the terror made them unable to resist [stand].

..., but upon the plunder they *did not send* their hand (9.10).

This stands in direct contrast to Haman's plan to use the plunder of the Jews for his own gain (and the king's), and suggests their moral superiority to Haman (and perhaps Persian society). It also shows that they were not motivated by greed or covetousness, but merely defending themselves against attack. This has the further happy consequence of making the celebration of Purim one of thanksgiving for deliverance, untainted by accusations of base motives.

These three statements appear to be ancillary information in its purest form, in that they seem neither to advance the storyline, nor to affect significantly the reader's understanding of the story. They thus seem to accord well with Grimes's description of "collateral information" as "things that might have happened but did not" (Grimes 1975, 64).

By telling the reader what they Jews did not do, however, the narrator allows the reader to infer their moral superiority without needing to assert it explicitly. It is also possible that the threefold irrealis ascribed to the Jews (9.10, 15, 16), places them on the same narrative level as Esther, and thus serves the purpose of the book by making Purim a celebration of an ethnic deliverance, rather than a holiday that merely commemorated Esther and Mordecai.⁴⁵

NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS OF *IRREALIS* IN ESTHER

These examples of narrational irrealis in the book of Esther have at least four main functions: (1) they are *counter-expectational*; (2) they open up *alternate possibilities* for the reader; (3) they help *highlight* the actual events; (4) they illustrate the author's *literary artistry*.

These narrational non-events are all *counter-expectational*. We might reasonably expect **Esther**, as a girl among girls, to share her family and ethnic background (2.10), or even to be forced to do so in order to become first wife (2.20); we might also expect that after her training regimen she would have some confidence in her own choice of preferences for her night with Xerxes (2.15). Even if we suspect that Mordecai told her to conceal her identity so that she would be an eligible "contestant", this would not explain why she did not identify herself later,⁴⁶ after she had become first wife.

⁴⁵Its threefold repetition suggests the special significance of this non event to early readers, but the exact nature of that significance is difficult (actually, impossible) to ascertain at our cultural and temporal remove.

⁴⁶The English words "failure" or "refusal" seem inappropriate, since they would imply (in this case) that Esther either tried but could not do something ("failed") or explicitly rejected an opportunity to act ("refused"), but I cannot find a lexical substitute (and the thesauri are no help). Does English lack a value-free word for not doing something, apart from "do/did not"?

Given the king's command, and **Mordecai's** evident respect for Xerxes (he saved his life rather than join the assassination plot; 2.21-23), we ought to be surprised when he does not join the rest of the court in homage to Haman (3.1-4);⁴⁷ given his love for Esther (and their mutual knowledge of the [negative] custom), *she* would have expected him to accept her gift of clothes (4.4).

Their **enemies'** failure to defend themselves is likewise counter-expectational. The reader has no reason to suspect *at that point* in the story that the mere publication of Mordecai's decree would undo the opposition. The earlier statement that "fear of the Jews had fallen on them" (8.17), repeated in 9.2 following the narrative *irrealis*, hints at, but does not require such a response.⁴⁸

Finally, the **Jews'** failure to plunder their enemies is astonishingly counter-expectational, especially in light of the earlier agreement between Haman and the king (3.9, 11),⁴⁹ which would have been the normal cultural expectation in Persia and the ancient world in general.

Not only are these non-events counter-expectational, they also open up to the reader *alternate possibilities*⁵⁰—events that could have occurred, choices that could have been made, but were not. And because those choices were not made, we have this story and not another.

If some of the participants had chosen to do what we are told they did not (if, e.g., Esther had made her ethnicity known, or Mordecai had honoured Haman), the story could not have developed as it has. Nor does anything in the story necessarily lead us to expect or imagine (1) that the participants would have done what the author tells they did not do (with the possible exception of the response of the Jews' foes (9.2)); or (2) that what they did not do was even a possible course of action. This function overlaps that of counter-expectation, but not predictably, so that their relationship needs to be determined for each example.

Finally, non-events *highlight the actual events*, or, as Grimes says, "set off what actually does happen against what might have happened" (1975, 64), so that "what actually does happen stands out in sharper relief than if it were told without collateral [*irrealis*]" (1975, 65). This highlighting also shows up in what I call "antithetical paraphrase" (Appendix).

There also seems to be an element of *narrative artistry* in the selection and order of the non-events mentioned in the book of Esther. Because the author repeated his statement that Esther did

⁴⁷This refusal is all the more puzzling since his motive is never identified. The rabbis speculated that Haman wore a pectoral depicting a divine being, so that Mordecai was refusing to engage in idolatry; another rabbinic explanation was that Mordecai, a descendant of Saul (2.5) refused to bow to Haman, whom he would have considered a descendant of Saul's enemy, Agag (3.1). Every explanation, including the political one (above), is merely speculative.

⁴⁸Of course, to readers familiar with the stories of Joshua, this response may not have been at all counter-expectational.

⁴⁹Haman was in essence "bribing" the king by promising him a share of the plunder.

⁵⁰The phrase is from Grimes (1975, 64), and fits the generally "omniscient" point of view of the biblical narrators.

not declare her background, and the claim that the Jews refused to touch the plunder, Esther and the Jews were each credited with three non-events (below), which places them on the same level as far as their *non*-actions, although of course the non-actions of Esther, are crucial to the plot in a way that the Jews' refusal to plunder their enemies is not (or, at least, the importance of the latter is not transparent to us).

<i>Esther</i>	2.10	Esther did not declare her ethnicity
	2.15	Esther did not take anything ...
	2.20	Esther did not declare her ethnicity
<i>Mordecai</i>	3.2a	Mordecai would not bow ...
	3.2b	Mordecai would not show respect ...
	3.4	Mordecai did not listen ...
	4.4	Mordecai did not accept ...
<i>Enemies</i>	9.2	No one stood before [the Jews].
<i>Jews</i>	9.10	They did not lay ["send"] their hand on the plunder.
	9.15	They did not lay ["send"] their hand on the plunder.
	9.16	They did not lay ["send"] their hand on the plunder.

The double report of Mordecai's disobedience (3.2a, b) means that he is credited by the narrator with four non-events, making him the most prominent character from the standpoint of not acting or doing, a prominence that is likewise fitting, given his exaltation at the end of the book, and which may also suggest the oft-overlooked anomaly that he was the reason for the entire problem in which the Jews found themselves.

It is not merely their relative numerical parity in *irrealis* that makes these participants more prominent, but also the contrast with other participants in the story. No narrational *irrealis* is recorded for any other character in the book (see the discussion of "semantic *irrealis*", below for, e.g., Vashti's refusal). Perhaps in order for an author or narrator to note what someone does *not* do, that character needs to be important enough to warrant noticing or paying attention to their non-actions. To the extent that this suggestion is valid, Esther, Mordecai, and the Jews (and their enemies, which may be a synecdoche that entails Haman) are prominent enough to warrant that sort of attention.

Negational Embeddedness

How important is narrational *irrealis* in Esther? I.e., how vital are the negative statements (or any statement or detail) to either the story's ability to progress or to the reader's ability to understand

that story? The more important any individual item is, the more deeply it is embedded within the narrative.⁵¹

I suggest three “levels” of the embeddedness of material: (1) those on the surface of the text, that can be omitted without affecting either the story’s progress or the reader’s ability to understand the story; (2) those that help the reader understand the story, but are not necessary to the story itself; and (3) those embedded so deeply that they are vital to the story, those without which *this* story could not be told, because to change or remove them would either annul or destroy the story, or make it a different story altogether (which is ultimately the same thing). Negation functions on all three levels in the book of Esther.⁵²

1. Some negations could be omitted without affecting the reader’s ability to understand the story or the progress of the story (e.g., 1.8 (the edict against compulsion in drinking); 9.10, 15, 16 (the Jews’ refusal to plunder their enemies); 10.2 (the rhetorical question as “footnote”).
2. Some negations help the reader, but might not be necessary to the story itself (e.g., 2.7 (Esther’s lack of parents); 2.10, 20 (Esther’s refusal to declare her background); 4.2 (the custom regarding clothing); 4.4 (Mordecai’s rejection of Esther’s clothing)).
3. Some negations are vital to the story, i.e. those without which there would be *no story* to be told, or without which *this story* could not be told (e.g., 1.12 (Vašti’s refusal [semantic negation (below)]); 1.15-17 (Memucan’s rehearsal of Vašti’s refusal); 3.2-4 (Mordecai’s refusal to honour Haman); 5.5, 9 (Haman’s perception of Mordecai’s refusal)).

Assigning embeddedness to particular incidents of *irrealis* is difficult, and readers will doubtless disagree over the relative importance to the story of at least some of its non-events.

Without Vašti’s refusal to obey the king’s summons (1.12, 15-17), Esther could⁵³ not have become queen.⁵⁴ In itself this would *not* have prevented the major plot conflict (Haman *versus* Mordecai),⁵⁵ but it would have removed the Jewish queen from her salvific rôle.

⁵¹The larger discussion of embeddedness applies not only to *irrealis*; it is equally appropriate to ask the same questions about positive information, since some information (e.g., David’s complexion (1 Sam 16.12) does not “affect” the storyline of 1-2 Samuel, or beyond).

⁵²This list includes both narrational and [some] quotational *irrealis*.

⁵³The events of Es 1 did not ensure or guarantee Esther’s exaltation, but it *could not have happened* without them.

Had Esther not withheld her ethnic identity (2.10, 20), Haman might have been content to plot against Mordecai alone (cf. 3.6), rather than against the queen's people (and thus risk arousing her wrath). It is difficult to imagine that Haman would have moved so boldly against the ethnic group of the king's current favourite.

Without Mordecai's refusal to honour Haman (3.3-5; 5.9), there would have been no plot against the Jews, nor would it have been necessary that Esther be in a position to deliver them, and thus there would have been no story beyond Esther's promotion, no feast of Purim, and no [final] exaltation of Mordecai. Without Mordecai's rejection of Esther's gift of clothing (4.4), she might not have responded to his despair by endangering her own life by approaching the king (4.16).

CONCLUSIONS

Irrealis in Narrative ([quotational &] narrational)

1. Irrealis is *counter-expectational*, telling the reader that something that might reasonably be expected to have happened did not.
2. Irrealis *highlights* actual events, throwing them into greater relief by contrasting them with what might or could (or even should) have happened but did not.
3. Irrealis opens up *alternate possibilities* for the reader, referring to possibilities that he or she may not have imagined, and that did not (in fact) happen, but nonetheless might have.
4. Irrealis illustrates the author's *literary artistry*, which is often thematic for a story.

Functions 1-3 may reflect the viewpoint of the author or that of a character within the story.

Irrealis in Esther

Narrational *irrealis*—negative statements telling us the readers what did not happen—is integral to the story contained in the book of Esther. Without telling us what didn't happen, the author would not have been able to tell us what did.

The real point of this paper, and my reason for writing and reading it, was to look at a tiny, apparently insignificant, aspect of biblical stories, and to ask how that kind of information functions within a particular biblical story. I believe that it also demonstrates (as I discovered, *not* as I intended) that attention to detail can help us read more fully. I was quite surprised to discover that

⁵⁴Although, as McClarty suggests (Ryken 1993, 219), this incident is not strictly required for the sense of the story itself (the book could have begun, e.g., "Now Xerxes needed/wanted a wife"), it would have been a question for early readers who would have wondered why Xerxes waited until his seventh year (2.16) to select a queen.

⁵⁵If Mordecai's participation in Xerxes' court was a result of Esther's promotion (which we do not know), then Esther's promotion was a secondary, but very real factor leading to Haman's plot, since it put Mordecai in the position of being commanded to honour Haman, which would probably not have happened had Mordecai merely been a "private citizen".

the plot of the book of Esther is largely propelled by negation (both Mordecai's refusal to honour Haman and Esther's ethnic anonymity), so that Mordecai appears as both villain and hero.⁵⁶ His refusal to honour Haman threatened his entire race, and led to the deaths of many hundreds of people.

What didn't happen caused what did.⁵⁷ Without telling us what didn't happen, the author would not have been able to tell the story.

Frederic Clarke Putnam

Holy Week MMV

⁵⁶This suggests the author's ambivalence about Mordecai's rôle, but that is a topic for another paper.

⁵⁷I hesitate to suggest this, but it is also possible that the importance of *irrealis* for the plot and storyline of the book of Esther is related to another non-event for which the book of Esther is well-known—divine non-appearance and [apparent] non-participation or intervention in the events narrated in this story. If it is valid to see this relationship, then we again find the interpenetration and interdependence of form and message—non-events propel the story, and divine absence (an instance of *irrealis* as far as the *telling* of the story is concerned) undergirds it. But this too is a study for another day.

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APPENDIX I: NARRATIONAL [NON-QUOTATIONAL] NEGATIONS IN TEXTUAL ORDER

Key c *custom* e *event* st *state/situation/condition*
 n *narrational irrealis* q *quotational irrealis* s *semantic [positive] irrealis*

Ref.			
1.8		now the drinking was according to the statue: “without compulsion” [“There is none who compels.”]	q c
1.12		And Queen Vašti refused to go at the word of the king	s e
1.15		She did not do the command of King Xerxes	q e
1.16		Not against the king alone has Queen Vašti sinned	q e
1.17		King Xerxes said to bring Queen Vašti before him, but she did not come.	q e
1.19a		... and let it be written in the laws of the Persians & Medes, and it shall not pass away ...	q c
1.19b		... that Vašti shall not come before the king ...	q st
2.7		... for she had neither father nor mother	n st
2.10a		Esther did not declare her people or her birth ...	n e
2.10b		... for Mordecai had commanded that she not declare [them].	n c
2.14		she would not go again to the king unless the king was pleased with her and she was called by name	n c
2.15 she did not seek anything except what Hegai said	n e
2.20		Esther did not declare her birth or her people just as Mordecai had commanded her	n e
3.2a		But Mordecai would not bow ...	n e
3.2b		and he would not show respect.	n e
3.4		and he did not listen to them	n e
3.5		And Haman saw that Mordecai would not bow or show respect to him	q e
3.8a		and the king’s laws they do not do ...	q e
3.8b		... and for the king there is no profit in allowing them to remain.	q st
4.2		... for it was not done to enter [there was no entering] the king’s gate clothed in sackcloth	n c
4.4		and she sent garments to clothe Mordecai and remove his sackcloth, but he did not accept [them].	n e

4.11a	...	Any man or woman who goes in to the king ... <i>who is not called</i> , one law: to put to death [that person]	q	c
4.11b		... but as for me, <i>I have not been called</i> to go in to the king these thirty days.	q	e
4.13		<i>Do not think</i> [that you will] deliver your soul [in] the king's house, from all the Jews.	q	e
4.16		... and fast for me, and <i>do not eat or drink</i> for three days night or day	q	e
5.9a		but when Haman saw Mordecai in the king's gate (now he neither stood ...	n/q	e
5.9b		... nor trembled at him)	n/q	e
5.12		And Haman said " <i>Queen Esther has not brought</i> with the king to the banquet which she has made [anyone] but me	q	e
5.13		but all this <i>does not profit</i> me	q	s
6.3		and his servants and ministers said "Not a thing has been done for him".	q	e
6.10		<i>Do not let fail</i> anything from all that you have said.	q	e
6.13		<i>You shall not prevail</i> over him, but you shall surely fall before him.	q	e
7.5		... for <i>the distress is not worth</i> the damage to the king.	q	s
9.2		... and <i>no one stood</i> before them	n	e
9.10		but on the plunder <i>they did not stretch</i> their hand	n	e
9.15		but on the plunder <i>they did not stretch</i> their hand	n	e
9.16		but on the plunder <i>they did not stretch</i> their hand	n	e
9.27		and <i>it will not pass [fail]</i> to be those who do [observe] the years of these days, according to the writing and the appointed time every year by year.	n/q	c
9.28a		and <i>these days of the Purim shall not pass [fail]</i> from amongst the Jews ...	n/q	c
9.28b		... and <i>their memory shall not cease</i> from their seed	n/q	c
10.2		... <i>are they not written</i> on the text of the words of the days of the kings of Media & Persia?	n	s

N.B.: Unfinished!

APPENDIX II: PLOT SUMMARY SHOWING NARRATIONAL & QUOTATIONAL NEGATION

1. “Vašti refused to come at the king’s command, . . . , and *she did not come*” (1.12 . . . 17), and her resultant demotion (1.19-22) led eventually to Esther’s elevation (2.5-18), described using both narrational semantic negation (“Vašti refused”) and quotational antithetical paraphrase (“. . . since she has not done [obeyed] the command of King Xerxes . . . and she did not go” (2.15, 17)). Cf. #11 (below) for another example of “semantic negation”.
2. Because “*Esther had no father or mother*” (1.7b), she was subservient to her cousin, Mordecai (2.7a, 10, 20).
3. Obedient to Mordecai (above), “*Esther did not report*” her ethnic background (2.10, 20), which meant that (1) Haman could move against the Jews with the impunity born of ignorance; and (2) that Esther could intercede for the Jews at the right time.
4. “*Esther did not ask* for anything except what Hegai . . . advised” (2.15a), which was at least part of the reason that she was selected by Xerxes (she had also “won favour in the eyes of everyone who saw her” (2.15b; cf. 2.9)).
5. **Non-Sequential:** Because “[*n*]othing was done for [Mordecai]” (6.3), at the appropriate time (i.e., after the events described in 2.21-23), Xerxes was (1) disposed to honour him; and (2) began Haman’s disgrace by forcing him to honour Mordecai (a disgrace predicted by Haman’s wife and advisors (6.13)). This disgrace, however, is rather incidental to the story of the book, although not to its [secondary?] purpose—to honour Mordecai.
6. “**Mordecai did not bow to or honour [Haman]” (3.2, 4, 5; 5.9), so that Haman decided to destroy Mordecai and his people (3.6-15).** This is the main plot mechanism of the book.
7. “*Mordecai would not accept* [the clothes that Esther sent]” (4.4), which drew Esther into his plan (4.5-16).
8. A quotational negation—that *Esther “had not been called* to come to the king for thirty days” (4.11)—is both new information for the reader (who has been given no reason to suspect this in the story), and heightens the narrative tension, since the reader does not know if Esther has fallen out of favour, so that Xerxes would not be willing to receive her when she appeared before him (5.1-2). This tension is only increased by the knowledge of the custom described in 2.14.
9. Esther and the Jews did “not eat or drink for three days and nights” (4.16); another quotational negation, perhaps mentioned to inject a vaguely religious flavour into the stream of events.
10. Mordecai “did not rise or tremble before [Haman]”, which [further] enraged Haman (5.9) so that he built the gallows (5.14) upon which he himself would be hung (7.9-10).
11. “That night *the king’s sleep fled*” (6.1), a **semantic negation** for “That night the king could not sleep”.⁵⁸ [Cf. #1 (above) for another example of “**semantic** [positive] **negation**”.]

⁵⁸This function (“sleep fled”) occurs also in Gn 31.40 (Jacob’s complaint to Laban).

Note: The Absence of Narrational Negation

Although negational statements (quotational and narrational) are scattered through the first two-thirds of the book of Esther, there is a striking lack of negation from the point at which Esther denounced Haman (7.6) until the enemies of the Jews “did not stand before them” (9.2; cf. the table in Appendix I). This is by far the longest negation-free stretch in the book. I am sure that this is significant, but I do not [yet] know what that significance is, although I suspect that it has to do with the resolution of the major tension in the book—not merely Esther’s revelation of Haman’s plot, but the king’s response of repudiation, and the death of Haman, which foreshadows the foiling of his plot and the destruction of his family.]

12. “No one stood before [the Jews]” (9.2), which meant that they were able to deliver themselves by destroying their enemies (9.5-16). This information is not, however, necessary to the reader or the plot, since the narrator copiously documented their victories, and also said that “the Jews dominated their enemies” (9.1) and further explains the negation by adding “... for terror of them fell [had fallen] on all the peoples” (9.2).
13. The Jews “did not stretch out their hand to the plunder” (9.10, 15, 16); i.e., they were not motivated by greed.

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