

Irony & Incongruity

DETAILS IN THE STORY REVEAL THE HUMOR IN ESTHER

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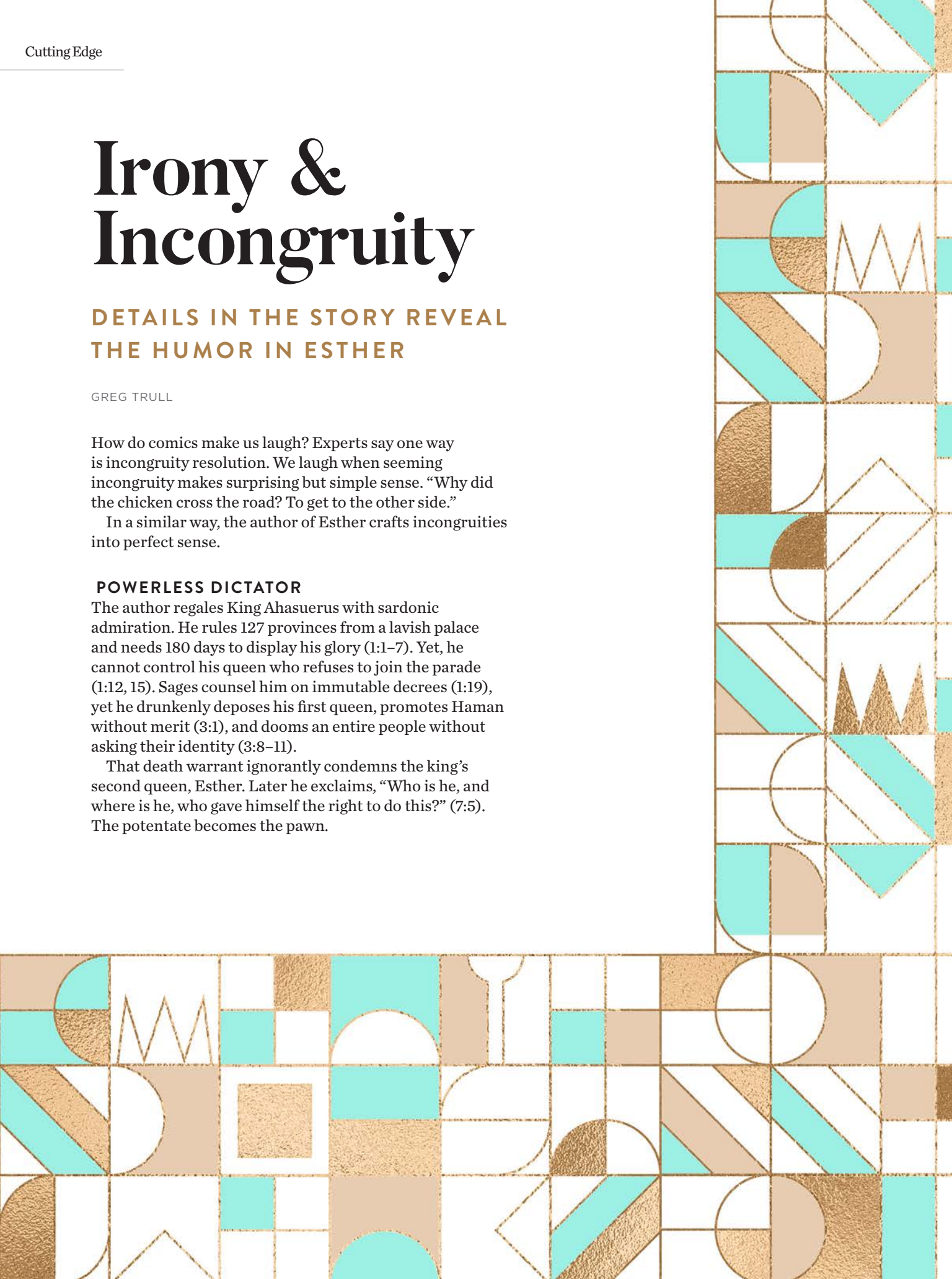
How do comics make us laugh? Experts say one way is incongruity resolution. We laugh when seeming incongruity makes surprising but simple sense. “Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side.”

In a similar way, the author of Esther crafts incongruities into perfect sense.

POWERLESS DICTATOR

The author regales King Ahasuerus with sardonic admiration. He rules 127 provinces from a lavish palace and needs 180 days to display his glory (1:1-7). Yet, he cannot control his queen who refuses to join the parade (1:12, 15). Sages counsel him on immutable decrees (1:19), yet he drunkenly deposes his first queen, promotes Haman without merit (3:1), and dooms an entire people without asking their identity (3:8-11).

That death warrant ignorantly condemns the king’s second queen, Esther. Later he exclaims, “Who is he, and where is he, who gave himself the right to do this?” (7:5). The potentate becomes the pawn.



OBLIVIOUS SCHEMER

Haman also radiated dominance. He gathered friends to boast of his wealth and position (5:10–11). Yet, like the king, his pomp did not impress his wife. When Haman was up, Zeresh gave bad advice about building a gallows (5:14). When he was down, Zeresh predicted failure (6:13). While his wealth and marriage paralleled those of the king, his ignorance exceeded the king's. Knowing readers smirk as oblivious Haman plots to kill the queen's race (3:8–9), brags on his banquet invitation (5:12), and suggests lavish honors for the king to bestow (6:6–9).

Hebrew readers enjoy the crafty use of *נָפַל* (meaning “to fall” or “to cast”) to highlight Haman's blindness. He uses the *fall* of the lot to condemn the Jews (3:7). The king orders Haman to let nothing *fall* from honoring Mordecai (6:10). Haman's misunderstood *fall* upon the queen seals his doom (7:8). This leads to the fear of the Jews *falling* on the empire (8:17).

The crowning dark humor for Haman is that, for all his subversion, it is a crime he *doesn't* commit (molesting the queen) that ushers him to the gallows designed for Mordecai (7:8–10). The trap-setter becomes the rat.

ORPHANED RESCUER

Esther inspires readers with the defenseless becoming dominant. She enters an orphan raised by her cousin Mordecai (2:7). His disrespect of Haman condemns Esther and her race (3:2–6). Her notable trait—beauty—had just cost Queen Vashti the throne (1:11, 19). Yet the powerless rises to power. The king's eunuch brings Esther into the royal harem (2:9), and the king crowns her queen (2:17). That favor allows the once helpless orphan to rescue her people (7:3; 8:5).

The king who demanded that all wives respect their husbands (1:20) yields to the queen's request before she even asks (5:3, 7:2). In a delightful transformation, Esther goes from an orphan obeying her cousin (2:20) to the commanding queen saving her nation (4:17; 7:3–4).

COVERT OPERATOR

Mordecai emerges as a man of mystery. His thinking eludes the reader. We easily see the impulsiveness of Ahasuerus and the rage of Haman. However, we never know why Mordecai prohibits Esther to reveal her Jewishness (2:10). Nor do we learn why Mordecai saves the king but despises Haman (2:22; 3:2).

We also puzzle at how Mordecai seems to know everything. He hears the assassination conspiracy at the gate (2:21). He knows exactly how much Haman offered the king to destroy the Jews (4:7). He even knows that by breaking the king's law Esther would save her people—but by honoring it she would imperil her family (4:11–14).

Clandestine Mordecai steps from shadows to displace his enemy (10:2) and save his people with the very signet ring Haman had used to threaten them (8:10; 3:12).



HIDDEN HERO

The most incongruous character is the One never mentioned: God. But he is far from missing. The many coincidences border on absurdity if not orchestrated. Did Haman just happen into the palace in the middle of the night as the insomniac king ponders how to honor Mordecai? Is it random that the saving decree fell on the very day the enemy planned to attack (9:1)? Believing that a collection of coincidences explains Esther is like believing that a junkyard explosion produces a Porsche.

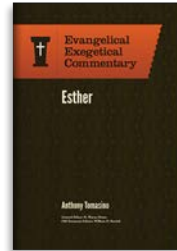
Since 1886, experts unsuccessfully attempted to identify the artist behind the *Portrait of Louis Abrahams*. Then in 2015, Christie's auction house discovered a hidden signature. Rather than tucking it into a corner, artist Tom Roberts had subtly signed his masterpiece all across the background. Holly Black of Christie's declared, "Just because you can't see it doesn't mean it's not there."

So here's a good one: "Why didn't God sign in the corner of Esther? Because he signed it everywhere else." ^{B³}

Scripture quotations are from the Lexham English Bible.



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