

The JPS Bible Commentary – Esther – Commentary by Adele Berlin.
Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2001.

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In all likelihood, more people know about the story of Esther, and can basically relate the major plot outline than have ever read the book itself. Set in ancient Persia, an obscure young woman, Esther (née Hadassah) becomes Queen to King Ahasuerus. In this role, she is able, with the support of her cousin Mordecai, to overcome the machinations of wicked Haman, and save the Jews from annihilation. The festival of Purim celebrates this event, even as one reads the Scroll of Esther (*megilat Esther*) on this holiday.

Yet, the book of Esther is much more complex than a simple local-girl-does-well-foils-wicked-plot. The book of Esther is unique in the Bible for many reasons. Its setting (like the book of Daniel) is completely outside of the Land of Israel. With the exception of Esther and her cousin Mordecai, all of the speaking characters are non-Jews. Although the fact is downplayed by nearly every commentator on the book, including traditional rabbinic commentators, Esther “marries out” and this is central to the plot of the book. In addition as Adele Berlin in this very fine commentary points out, the story of Esther is probably made up of whole cloth; it is not history in any sense of that word as used in common parlance.

The book of Esther is imaginative and comedic, it is “meant to be funny,” to provoke laughter (xvii). It is also a book with some very deadly serious sides as shall be noted later. Berlin describes Esther as a kind of farce, written in the manner of burlesque with exaggerated caricature types, broad verbal humor, and filled with satire. The book vulgarizes Persian court life. There are “ludicrous edicts . . . an endless hierarchy of officials, and a wooden adherence to nonsensical laws.” Low comedy is characterized by “exaggeration, caricature . . . coincidences, improbabilities, and verbal humor . . . Most of these features are prominent in [the book of] Esther” (xix).

This commentary divides into two parts, an Introduction of nearly sixty pages, and an additional one hundred plus page presentation of the text of the book itself, both in Hebrew and English, along with a running commentary at the bottom of the page.

The Introduction addresses Esther as a book and then the preponderance of the material focuses on Esther as literature, and a major focus elucidates its place within its literary world context. There are thirteen subsections: Why Was the Book of Esther Written? Esther as Comedy; Narrative Artistry: Structure, Style and Language; Greek Storytelling about Persia; The Persian Period: A Brief Overview; Esther as a Diaspora Story; Esther’s Links with Other Biblical Books; When and Where Was the Book of Esther Written?; When was Esther Included in the Canon; Purim; The Greek Versions and Josephus; Rabbinic Interpretation; and Esther and Biblical Women.

Each of the ten chapters of Esther features a detailed introduction to the events that will take place in the pages following. The running commentary on the text found at the bottom of the page, which addresses nearly every verse in the book, covers a variety of subjects. Berlin writes about Persian court life; offers historical context to the time period; draws upon traditional rabbinic commentators; defines obscure words – and there are many of them in the book –; offers explanations concerning the names of the major characters; makes reference to other books in the Bible; even as she follows the various twists and turns of the plot itself.

At times Berlin joins with the lighter side of the book. For example, there are chapter titles such as Wine and Women, Sex and Spies, Riots and Revelry, as well as Party Favors, and All’s Well That Ends Well.

Berlin notes that unlike the other biblical book set entirely in the Diaspora, Daniel, “no mention of any dietary observance is mentioned here . . . [which] marks Esther as being different from other biblical and apocryphal books . . . [although the] Rabbis were eager to fill this gap and assure us that Esther did not partake of nonkosher food” (27).

The book of Esther is all that, but it is so much more. In fact, for all the trauma and drama (and probably melodrama as well) that can be found in the book, there are very dark sides to this work.

Obviously, the commentary covers the full biblical book including the very bloodthirsty and vengeful closing chapters (by the way, most people are unaware that the story continues following the downfall of Haman in chapter seven). Here Berlin notes how the story connects with the holiday of Purim. She also writes of the scenes of violence and revenge on a major scale in the form of the massacre by the Jews of over 75,000 non-Jews” and how these particular

chapters “did not resonate well with later readers, especially Christians, and many Jews, too” (81).

Yet, for all its strange and hard to credit plot, the book rings true, certainly at the level of a high ranking official who wants to make it state policy to annihilate the Jewish population. Taken in the light of Jewish history in Europe in the Middle Ages, and how much more so throughout the brutality of the twentieth century, from Kishinev to the Shoah, there is on some level a sense of reality to this book.

There is further side to the book of Esther: the treatment of women. All readers, but especially women should approach this biblical work cautiously; there is more than hijinks and frivolity. Berlin, however, explains that her commentary focuses on a literary approach. “Accordingly, I have not posed questions about the roles of women versus men, the relationship of sex and power that are in play in the story, and similar questions that reflect modern feminist ways of reading” (p. lv). Had Berlin addressed these subjects, she may have come to a similar conclusion as did Michael V. Fox, who wrote (*Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*, second edition, 1991) “the author of Esther is something of a protofeminist. This book is the only one in the Bible with a conscious and sustained interest in sexual politics . . . The book certainly does not align itself with the men’s side in the conflict. Perhaps alone in the Bible, this author is aware of female subservience and is cynical about the masculine qualities that require it.” Other authors have addressed the book from the perspective of sexual politics, and those articles and books bear reading, but that is another matter. Berlin’s literary approach to the book of Esther is a very well done, and filled with important information.