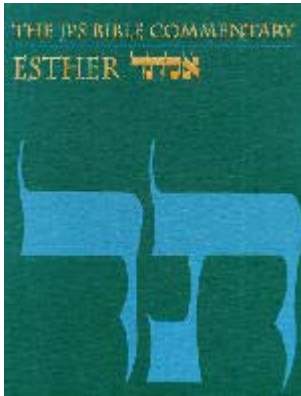


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Berlin, Adele

Esther: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation

The JPS Bible Commentary

Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001. Pp. lix + 110, Cloth, \$34.95, ISBN 0827606990.

Volkmar Premstaller
Zams-Landeck, A-6511

Adele Berlin's commentary on the book of Esther is a successful second volume of the JPS Bible Commentary series on the Five Megilloth and Jonah. It starts with an extensive introduction into Esther (xv–lix), which is itself worth reading. Berlin opens with the question of why the book of Esther was written and explains it as the authorizing document for Purim that tells the origin of this first post-Torah festival. Thus Esther contains mere imaginative storytelling and is impossible as history. One also gets to know that this most secular of the biblical books might have had a number of different stages in its development (xv–xvi), although this point is not further explained.

With the next paragraph, “Esther As Comedy,” Berlin turns to the main focus of her commentary. This Megillah is a comic story for a carnivalesque holiday (xvi) and as a comedy the most humorous book of the Bible (xvii) with a lot of comic aspects that form the essence of the book (xviii). So it should be read as a farce vulgarizing the Persian emperor and court through its elements of satire, its exaggerations, its sense of excess, and its incidents. The book of Esther is designed to provoke laughter (xix).

After a look at the book's narrative artistry, Berlin deals with the Greek storytelling about Persia, laying the foundation of the numerous citations of authors such as Herodotus, Xenophon, Ctesias, Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Plutarch, Quintus Curtius Rufus, and Diodorus Siculus. Next she gives a brief overview on the Persian period, thus illustrating the backgrounds of Xerxes' time, where the story is set (xxxiii).

In a paragraph on Esther as a story of the Diaspora, the book is seen in line with the book of Judith, the book of Tobit, and the figures of Joseph, Daniel, and Ahiqar. Like

them, Esther presents models of successful behavior promoting Jewish identity and solidarity (xxxiv).

Then Berlin turns to Esther's links with other biblical books and dates it to 400 to 330 B.C.E. But the accusation of 3:8, that the Jewish laws disobey the king's laws, could also refer to the time of the Diadochoi, where such reproaches were made.

Finally the concluding sections of the commentary's introduction deal with Esther's canonization, Purim, the Greek versions and Josephus, the rabbinic interpretations of Esther, and Esther and biblical women.

In accordance with this series, the commentary itself is based on the Masoretic Text with the new JPS translation. Berlin then interprets the text with the traditional ten chapters as sections, starting with a general introduction to the chapter, continuing with remarks on the single paragraphs, and ending in comments on the single verses and phrases.

Thus Esth 1 is called the prologue of the whole book, foreshadowing the types of actions and reactions that will figure prominently in the main plot (3). Not fewer than four possible reasons are given why Queen Vashti did not come before her husband (Esth 1:9–22). The references to Plutarch, the Candoules story, and Herodotus are very illuminating (11). Likewise, the comment on 1:19, that the idea of an unchangeable law is also found in Dan 6:8, 12 but is not attested in Persian or Greek sources, so that it must be considered as a literary motif, is helpful (18).

Esther 2 (“Sex and Spies”) appears similar to stories of harem intrigues known, for example, from Ctesias's *Persika* (22). Only in Esth 3 does the main plot of the story start, but honor and enmity will continue to hold center stage for most of the book (32–33). Berlin carefully notes that Haman the Agagite and the Benjaminite Mordechai are deliberately depicted as descendants from Agag and Saul (cf. 1 Sam 15), thus forming a continuation of the ancient animosity between the two characters (34).

The next elucidating comment appears on 3:2, which reports Mordechai's refusal to kneel or bow low before Haman. According to Berlin, this verse transmutes a Greek cultural value, which disdains bowing to Persians, into a historic Jewish enmity preventing a Jew from bowing to an Amalekite, who is often associated with Agag (35; cf. Exod 17:8–16; Num 24:7; Deut 25:17–19; 1 Chr 4:42–43).

Esther 4 (“Mourning and Planning”) is rightly named a somber chapter (44), so that here as well as in Esth 3–5 as a whole the reader of Berlin's commentary asks how these passages of the book of Esther could fit into the literary character of comedy. Further explanations on this point would have been useful.

But, of course, in Esth 6 any doubt that there is a comic nature in Esther has gone (56). Here a lot of coincidence or luck is at work (cf., e.g., 6:1), and the text truly offers a comedy of errors (cf. 6:8; 57–58). Likewise Esth 7, which tells that the villain was punished for something he did not do (65), fits into this concept. For 7:8 Berlin explains the background of Greek writings about Persia that Haman's prostration before Esther, misinterpreted as a request for her, could really be understood as a claim to the throne (70). Again the Greek literature forms an illuminating horizon for a better understanding of the biblical text.

Esther 8 is the chapter of reversals (72), and Esth 9 ("Riots and Revelry") connects the events of the Esther story with the holiday of Purim (81). Nevertheless, it remains doubtful if the massacre of over 75,000 people really forms the climax of the carnivalesque or the peak of disorder, as this chapter is seen by Berlin (81). Further explanations of this point might have been helpful—here as well as on her statement that this etiology of Purim is the work of the Masoretic author, who reshaped an earlier story (83). Again, the comment on 9:12–15, that the four repetitions of the king's question to Esther could be the single most important mechanism in comedy (85), needs more explanation due to the fact that repetition is a mechanism not only of comedy but of various forms of literature. Finally, 9:29–32 is called a later addition (91), but one wonders why and by whom?

The section on Esth 10 is rightly entitled "All's Well That Ends Well." This is also true for Berlin's commentary—despite some unclear points and statements that would need more investigation.