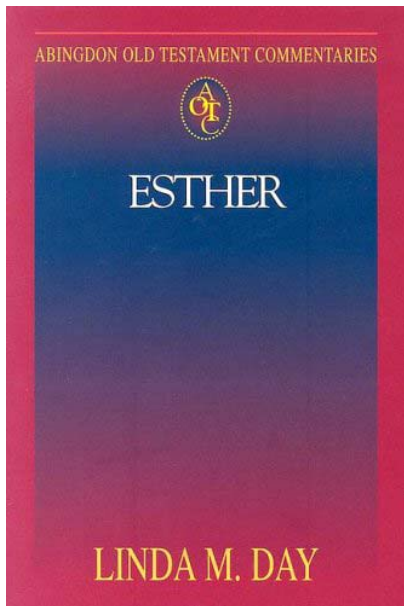


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**Day, Linda M.**

*Esther*

Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries

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I greatly enjoyed reading Linda M. Day's *Esther* commentary. The book teems with positive qualities, its reader-friendly style not being the least. Clearly, Day's commentary is a work of love. It is to be ranked with the best of the recent studies on *Esther*, displaying in general a welcome scholarly acumen that Professor Day uses wisely. When the following review turns below to a number of critiques, these will not detract from the general assessment of excellence. Their *raison d'être* is to be perhaps considered later on at the time of a second edition of the commentary.

The book follows the structural instructions given to the AOTC collaborators by general editor Patrick D. Miller (see the foreword [vii–ix]). The present work by Day displays also the main qualities of the series, offering a “compact, critical commentary for the use of theological students and pastors, and other researchers.”

The introduction (1–22) is remarkable for its conciseness, vigor, and roundedness. Especially rewarding is its decisive contextual implantation. The author wants to read *Esther* with us, in today's world, “after the Shoah” (21), and with an avowed sensitivity to the biblical book's (and the reader's world's) issues of minorities, genders, and pluralism.

Day perceptively judges that “the book works as a whole” (4) and that “its tone is humorous throughout ... even funny” (5). She mentions, after Kenneth Craig and Adele Berlin, the presence of “the genres of literary carnivalesque, farce, and burlesque, with its low comedy, parodies, exaggerations, somatic concerns, and ludicrous effects” (12). I for one am particularly pleased with this acknowledgment, as I would insist much more than she does on this aspect of Esther (see my *Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading*, forthcoming; incidentally, Mikhail Bakhtin is not mentioned by Day but is listed in the bibliography under Kenneth Craig).

The commentary proper is divided into subsections following a logical pattern: a summary of the pericope under examination; a “Literary Analysis”; an “Exegetical Analysis”; and a “Theological and Ethical Analysis” of the said section of Esther. This clear serialization of the problems posed by the biblical text presents the great advantage in terms of a rational and intellectually satisfying approach.

The English translation of the Hebrew text of Esther is mainly that of the author and only occasionally according to the NRSV. As is well known, there are Greek versions and Greek Additions closely related to the MT. These documents are, of course, mentioned by Day but, surprisingly, practically ignored all along. I shall return to this omission below.

In consideration of the nature of the AOTC series, numerous sources of information (e.g., Herodotus) are used by the author without specification; in addition, there are no end- or footnotes. Modern critics’ names and dates of works are referred to in parentheses in the course of the commentary, the bibliography serving as the full reference.

Day’s fine exegesis efficiently contributes to the scholarly dimension of her analysis. All along she demonstrates poise and equanimity, for instance in her treatment of the Persian measures that demean women or of the complacent display of violence in the Jewish defensive slaughter of anti-Semites. As I said earlier, one of the main characteristics of the commentary is its connection of the biblical book with “pressing questions about ethnicity, gender, genocide, those who must remain hidden within their own culture for whatever reason,” as Carole Fontaine says (on the back cover of the volume). As an example, I quote an excerpt from page 42: “The only way that these individuals [the king and his courtiers] can see to build themselves up is by putting someone else down.... Yet they try to achieve honor by decree rather than through honorable action.” Day’s reflections on the anti-Judaism and the plotted “ethnic cleansing” in Haman’s speech to the king are remarkable for their depth and compassion for the victims.

In a mostly satisfying analysis of the text of Esther, Day does display a clear tendency to press for too much logical consistency in a “novella” that pertains more to popular legend

than to a historical statement—the novella is only history-like. This is one of my main reservations regarding Day’s book. She has not taken Esther’s literary genre of seriously enough. Her repeated mention of the “overblown” features of the text, of the “funny” sides of the plot, or of the carnivalesque dimension remains at the surface of things. The purpose(s) of the composer in so doing is not touched on. The parodic in Esther constituted the grand entry into the a-religiosity of the document, but the absence of the religious, while duly mentioned, remains unexplained. The question of how it was at all possible to bring the most secular of all the biblical books into the canon of Scripture is left unanswered and hardly broached. The stark contrast with the Greek Additions and the Greek versions of the book, all going in the same direction of “spiritualizing” the story, should have been stressed. At least, they show how uncomfortable already the early readers of the MT felt from the beginning. Retrospectively, we must conclude that the composer of Esther in Hebrew was purposely subversive. Was he only a-religious or rather a polemist against the religious establishment?

Day does not draw the necessary conclusions from the historic rivalry between Israel and Amalek evidenced in the genealogical indications regarding Mordecai and Haman. Thus, she remains puzzled by Mordecai’s refusal to do obeisance to Haman, and, about the highly humorous scene of Esth 6, she wonders “why Mordecai permits Haman, of all people, to do this [glorification] for him” (111). The humiliation of Amalek certainly needs no “permission” from Mordecai! Had he had himself the authority to do so, he would not have missed the occasion. And, as to his change of mood, adorning royal attire in contrast to his refusal to change clothes at Esther’s bidding in 4:1–4, the transformation has a self-evident rationale.

The same criticism applies to Day’s surprise at the necessity to have the ten sons of Haman hanged with their father (see 148) or, in the same line of thought, to have Esther petition for a second day of attack in 9:13 (see 151). This is all the more surprising on her part as she is aware of the 1 Sam 15 background to the Jews refraining from looting their enemies (see 149). She never uses the term “ban” (חרם) in her analysis. As to Esther’s request for prolonging the carnage, the resulting eradication of three hundred more foes in Susa shows that the request was not superfluous or callous (see 9:14–15). Day, it is true, is not obfuscated by the whole development in Esth 9. She points out that here again the Hebrew text is overblown and hyperbolic, but in reality it is more than that: it is not only ahistorical but unrealistic. It is a wishful-thinking expression of a minority that finds itself time and again on the “wrong” side of the power game. When the text states that the non-Jews in Persia trembled before Mordecai or the people and that many of them “Judaized” themselves (8:17), this is a big laugh. The roaring mouse makes the cats flee away!

The role of the non-Jews is preeminent in the story. They wield power and are largely whimsical and unpredictable, benefactors or Jew-haters, generous or vicious. As to the Jews, they appear at times arrogant or fearful, seditious or members of the establishment. The relations between the two communities are, therefore, delicate. There is, however, a considerable change of attitude in Esther vis-à-vis the “nations,” and the biblical book unabashedly demonstrates the Jewish intent to stay in Persia rather than leave, as in the days of the exodus from Egypt. (The contrast with the book of Exodus in the commentary would have been welcome.) The non-Jews may harbor anti-Semites, but the general population is described as sympathetic to the fate of Esther’s people. Furthermore, Purim is celebrated also by “all who join” the Jews (9:27), a diasporic situation that deserved more reflection in the commentary.

Finally, the striking shift in Esther from theocentricity to Judeo-centricity is enormously important. Although Day broaches the motif (see 92, 116, 143, 168), it never congeals into a strong concluding statement. Further, whether or not the AOTC series generally speaking allows room for it, a concluding wrapping-up of the commentary about the astonishing originality of Esther is needed. The “secularism” of the book has provoked a historic Christian disregard of it, while the story is highly regarded in the Jewish community. On this score, Esther constitutes a point of contention between the two traditions. In the end, I concur that Linda M. Day’s work is a “reliable guide to the book of Esther.... [S]he makes Esther’s story accessible and meaningful to modern readers” (Bruce C. Birch, on the back cover of the volume). It is highly recommended.