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Review of: Esther: A Commentary, by Jon D. Levenson

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Esther: A Commentary, by Jon D. Levenson. OTL. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997. Pp. xvi + 142. \$22.50.

Jon Levenson's new commentary on the book of Esther is an excellent addition to the Old Testament Library series. Highly erudite yet accessible, this commentary belongs on the shelves of students, clergy, and professional scholars as well as the serious layperson.

Like other volumes in the series, *Esther: A Commentary* begins with an introduction that discusses the standard issues of biblical commentary: plot, structure and style, historicity and date of composition, and versions. Because Esther is a short story or novella, Levenson is particularly concerned with structure and style, discussing at length the structuring motif of banquets, the symmetry of the plot surrounding the pivotal scene of Mordecai's rise and Haman's fall in chapter 6, the literary style of the author, and the comic elements present in the book. When Levenson notices the humorous moments in Esther, his own dry sense of humor peeps through; for example, in the midst of an explanation of Ahasuerus's decree that all the virgins in the empire be gathered into his harem, Levenson notes "celibacy not being Ahasuerus' forte . . ." (p. 2). Levenson's own clarity of style and gentle wit makes the book a pleasure to read from beginning to end.

Since the versions of the book of Esther pose particular problems of interpretation, Levenson also spends considerable time exploring the differences between the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint, and the Greek Alpha Text. He reaches the conclusion that MT Esther and AT Esther both descend from a hypothetical Hebrew proto-Esther, while the Septuagint is an expanded and reshaped translation of the MT. In this he finds himself in agreement with the majority of Esther scholars today.

Levenson treats one particular issue in Esther scholarship in great depth in the introduction: the message or theology of the book. It is well known that the book of Esther makes no mention of God and in fact lacks any overt reference to the practices or beliefs of Judaism. The absence of religion raises the question of whether Esther, a biblical book, contains any theology at all. Levenson answers the question affirmatively and proceeds to tease out a subtle and provocative theology. As he states: "A hidden force arranges events in such a way that even against the most daunting odds the Jews are protected and delivered . . . Esther's God is one who works behind the scenes, carefully arranging events so that a justice based on the principle of 'measure for measure' will triumph and the Jews will survive and flourish . . ." (p. 21). In a profound insight, Levenson sees within the book of Esther an acknowledgment of the ambiguity of human events in the absence of direct knowledge of God's purpose. Esther, he suggests, speaks directly to the equally ambiguous situation of the average reader in the late twentieth century.

The commentary consists of a translation by Levenson, textual notes, and interpretation. One decision that every commentator to Esther must make is how to handle the six substantial Additions found in LXX Esther. The ideal solution is to treat MT Esther and LXX Esther as completely separate literary works, with notes and comments on each. Most commentators, however, do not have the luxury of space to enable them to do that. Levenson's solution, which works well, is to focus on MT Esther but translate and comment on the Additions in their proper place in the text.

The strengths of this commentary are Levenson's use of rabbinic sources, his literary analysis, and his ability to bring out the theological implications of Esther and apply them to the contemporary world. Levenson commands the rabbinic literature and brings it to bear on his comments, showing in many cases that "contemporary" insights were proposed long ago by the rabbis. He is particularly interested in "inner-biblical" exegesis, showing how the author of Esther drew on the stories of Joseph and Judith as well as the figures of Moses and Daniel. Finally, Levenson connects the plight of Esther and the Jews to events in the twentieth century, particularly the Holocaust. His contem-

porary applications are often very moving, as when he says concerning the end of MT Esther: “The scene with which Masoretic Esther closes is one for which Jewish communities in the Diaspora have always longed: Jews living in harmony and mutual goodwill with the Gentile majority . . .” (p. 134).

There were only a few places in this commentary where I found myself in disagreement with Levenson. I will discuss two. First, on p. 33 Levenson mentions that the MT changed its source by *removing* all explicit references to God or the gods. While I agree that MT *avoids* all mention of religion, pagan or Jewish, it seems counter-intuitive that it would remove references to God in its source. The usual practice is to *add* explicit references to God, a process clear from the Septuagint’s treatment of MT Esther. Levenson does not have a convincing argument for MT’s practice of removal, except to say that it is in the service of its subtle theology. This seems to be carrying subtlety too far. The reason for the absence of religious references in MT Esther remains opaque, but removal seems unlikely.

Second, Levenson states on p. 88 that the Esther portrayed in the LXX, especially Additions C and D, has “greater individuality and heroism” than MT Esther. On the contrary, the Esther of the Septuagint becomes a stock religious romantic character. In fact, in LXX Esther God is the hero: at the crucial moment in the narrative, Esther’s unsummoned approach to the king, Esther faints away in terror, but God “softens the heart” of the king and saves the day. MT Esther acts on her own and successfully manipulates Ahasuerus to save the Jews by herself.

These disagreements are, however, mere quibbles with a very fine work. Levenson’s commentary should become one of the “must-haves” in the field of Esther scholarship, and I highly recommend it.