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Review of Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation and Esther*, and Timothy S. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*

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Crawford, Sidnie White, "Review of Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation and Esther*, and Timothy S. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*" (2000). *Faculty Publications, Classics and Religious Studies Department*. 101. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/classicsfacpub/101>

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## REVIEW

Timothy K. Beal, *The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation and Esther* (Biblical Limits; New York/London: Routledge, 1998). Pp. xiii + 152. Cloth \$65; paper \$22.99.

Timothy S. Laniak, *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther* (SBLDS 165; Atlanta: Scholars, 1998). Pp. [xiii] + 205. \$34.95.

These two recent books on the Book of Esther by young scholars illustrate the vitality of new methods of interpretation of the biblical text; at the same time, they raise questions about the limits of these new methods. Laniak, approaching the Book of Esther from an anthropological perspective, uses its categories of honor and shame. Beal uses postmodern critical theory to illuminate the shifting meanings of "self" and "other" in Esther. The two books have several things in common—rather surprisingly, given their very different orientations. Neither author gives much attention to the historical value of the Book of Esther; both approach it purely as a literary text, although Laniak (p. 3 n. 5) states that he does not count himself "among those who reject the book of Esther as a source of history." Both authors use the MT as their primary text, with only passing reference to the LXX and the Greek alpha text, and both share an interest in later rabbinic interpretation of Esther. There, however, the similarities end.

Laniak, whose book is the publication of his dissertation at the Harvard Divinity School, considers shame and honor structurally and thematically central in the story of Esther. In his introduction he discusses the categories of honor and shame in anthropological discourse, as well as the semantic fields of the Biblical Hebrew words translated "honor" or "shame." He concludes that honor and shame are public categories of reputation having to do with self (respect), status (reputation), and substance (wealth); one can earn honor or shame by one's own activities, but also by the activities of one's dependents (in the case of the biblical world, one's wives, children, and servants or slaves). In the subsequent chapters of the book he considers the dynamics of honor and shame in the story of Esther. He divides that story into the four movements of a pattern of "challenge and honor" (a pattern very similar to that of the Royal Courtier tale): favor (Esther 1-2) > crisis (Esther 3-5) > reversal (Esther 6-7) > and new status (Esther 8-10). I will use chap. 1 of

Laniak to illustrate his use of the categories of shame and honor. In his view, Esther 1 opens with King Ahasuerus accruing honor to himself with his public display of wealth and status. The culmination of that accrual, the public appearance of his beautiful wife Vashti, is turned to scorching shame by her public act of disobedience. That shame is redressed both by Vashti's banishment and by the law which orders all women to honor their husbands. The king's honor is completely restored when he makes the beautiful and supposedly pliant Esther his queen.

Laniak's approach to the text, I found, opened up new avenues of interpretation and understanding, although it was not sufficient to answer all the questions raised by the text. For example, he thinks that the author of Esther assumes involvement of God in the story of Esther, but he does not confront head-on the absence of God in the text. Nevertheless, his book is a welcome addition to contemporary studies on Esther.

Beal's goal is somewhat more ambitious. He wishes to take the theoretical work of such postmodern writers as Luce Irigaray, Emmanuel Levinas, and Hélène Cixous and apply their insights to the biblical Book of Esther, as he looks especially at the categories of gender and ethnicity. He says on p. 2 of his book that "the meeting place between Esther and current discussions of gender and ethnicity becomes a site for rethinking broadly relevant questions about the categories of self and other in relation to religion, nationalism and the ever-looming legacies and future possibilities of annihilation." He argues that identity in the Book of Esther is constantly shifting, that Esther's multiple identities make it impossible to fix her in a particular social location. While I agree that Esther has multiple identities, it is precisely the author's argument that they can be reconciled in the Diaspora. This statement, of course, reveals a large area of disagreement with Beal, who is less interested in the author's point-of-view than in his own as reader. His reading is a radically ahistorical one that will not appeal to all readers. Also, his discussions of postmodern critical theory will be heavy going for those who are not devotees. In fact, I found myself wondering whether such a slender book as Esther can bear the weight of so much critical theory. I am not convinced that it can.

Beal, nevertheless, is bridging the gap between postmodern theory and biblical scholarship. His approach promises to yield fresh new insights into the biblical text.

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