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INTRODUCTION to *The Book of Esther in Modern Research*

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INTRODUCTION

Sidnie White Crawford

The last decade of the twentieth century was marked by an unusual number of articles, books and commentaries on the book of Esther. While the reason for this sudden upsurge in interest was slightly mysterious, it was clear that interest in the book was peaking, and the time seemed ripe, in the year 2000, for a conference devoted solely to the book of Esther. And so it was in April of 2000 that, as Carey Moore put it, ‘a decree was sent, and the scholars were gathered’, at the Esther2000 symposium in Omaha and Lincoln, Nebraska. The present volume bears witness to the fruit of that symposium.

The articles in the volume are divided into three general categories. The first might be called ‘commentaries on commentary’. Three writers of commentaries on the book of Esther, Adele Berlin, David J.A. Clines and Carey Moore, reflect on the challenges of writing a comprehensive commentary on a biblical book. Moore, who wrote the magisterial *Anchor Bible* commentaries on Esther and the Additions to Esther in the 1970s, recalls the trials and tribulations of producing a commentary, and ruminates on what he would do differently if faced with the same task today. Berlin, as the title of her article suggests, was writing a commentary for a specifically Jewish audience; she discusses how that audience changes the nature of the commentary from one written for a Christian or an ecumenical audience. Finally, Clines envisions the future of commentary not as a discrete book in which the commentator passes on the conclusions of his or her research in one single interpretation to a more or less passive reader. Rather, he sees the future of commentary as a ‘symphony’ of interpretations, in which the reader (or viewer in the case of a web-based commentary) is called upon to be an active participant in choosing between various hermeneutical stances and interpretations.

The second group of articles deals with questions concerning the text(s) of Esther and its interpretation as a biblical book. Kristin De Troyer takes

on the difficult question of the relationship between the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint and the A Text of Esther, focusing specifically on the passages 2.21-23 and Addition A. Michael Fox looks at the three editions of the book of Esther through the lens of the character of Esther and how she changes in each version. In my own contribution I take a feminist approach to Esther, contrasting her character and actions to the character of Judith, and speculating on why Esther and not Judith became canonical in the Jewish (and later Protestant) tradition. Timothy Laniak investigates the book of Esther by means of its post-exilic, diaspora context, in which hope and eventual redemption is found in the Jewish community itself, rather than in the institutions of Temple, Torah and monarchy. Elizabeth Groves, who gave a dramatic one-woman performance of the entire book of Esther at the Esther2000 symposium, argues for the retention of Est. 2.19 as an integral part of the narrative of Esther from a dramatic point of view.

The third and largest group of articles discusses Esther as a post-biblical, post-canonical phenomenon. Barry Walfish, whose article complements Adele Berlin's, investigates the fascinating development in rabbinic midrash that portrays Esther and Mordecai as a married couple both before and during her marriage to Ahasuerus. Ori Soltes presents the traditions of manuscript illumination of the book of Esther in European Jewish communities, especially Italy, Germany and France. Judith Neulander explores the intriguing metamorphosis of the Jewish heroine Esther into a Christian St Esther, within which tradition she is often paired with Judith and the Virgin Mary. Neulander also describes contemporary portrayals of Esther in two very different American religious communities.

Scott Langston's article describes the book of Esther's appropriation by the nineteenth-century American Jewish community, a community that struggled with problems of assimilation, integration and Jewish identity. And last, Leonard Greenspoon investigates certain problems and questions arising from 400 years of translation of Esther from Hebrew into English, contrasting translations meant for Jewish audiences, Christian audiences and 'free-standing' translations, as well as scholarly translations, formal and functional equivalence translations, and paraphrases.