

David G. Firth – Brittany N. Melton (eds.), *Reading Esther Intertextually*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 725, Bloomsbury T&T Clark, London 2022, pp. 240.

A monograph entirely devoted to the intertextuality of the book of Esther has finally seen its publication. While it remains hard to cover this broad topic in a single monograph, a reviewed collection of texts prepared by experts in the field thoroughly illustrates the variety of different ways to approach this subject.

A publication of this type can always be seen from different perspectives. First, as a potential inspiration for future scholarly work. Second, as a useful reference gathering and summarizing past research. Finally, it can also add new ideas to enrich the discussions in the field. Given the number of authors who contribute to the monograph, it is convenient to analyze separately different chapters of the monograph and discuss to which extent the newly published work is able to achieve the aforementioned goals.

The monograph mainly refers to the relationship between Esther and the rest of the Hebrew Bible. This relationship is studied in terms of narrative focalization, storytelling techniques, reversals, and allusions. It also includes papers on the relationship between the book of Esther and works beyond the Hebrew Bible, e.g., Qumran, the Gospel of Mark, or Josephus. In its fifth part, it discusses further connections to more modern literature.

The monograph is divided into sixteen chapters, which are branched into five parts. The book does not have any common conclusions, although each chapter contains its own summary. Instead, a more comprehensive discussion, which tries to encompass the scope of the monograph, is provided in the introduction, which does not belong to part one of the book. The introductory remarks focus on explanations of how to read this collection of papers published together under the broad umbrella concept of intertextuality. The division of the remaining text into different parts has basically one purpose, namely, to separate chapters thematically into Esther in dialogue with: the Torah, the Former Prophets, the Latter Prophets,

the Writings, and beyond the Hebrew Bible. Each chapter presents a point of view of its individual author. The reader should keep it in mind, to avoid confusion due to the lack of full consistency between the contributed texts. On the other hand, the monograph reveals rich and sometimes even diverse ways of perception of Esther.

Part one of the book focuses on the intertextuality between Esther and the Torah. It includes two chapters. The first one, by Gabriel F. Hornung, deals with the subject of foreign courts. The juxtaposition of the character of Esther with Joseph in Egypt and Daniel is a well-known and recognized theme, as Hornung demonstrates. In particular, it has been discussed in studies on the topic of diaspora novellas, which is properly acknowledged in the chapter. Notably, while Daniel is certainly a good example of a biblical character living under foreign rule, the book of Daniel belongs to the Writings, and not to the Torah. The main subject of the second chapter, written by J. Gordon McConville, is the exodus, the Passover, and food laws. The author tries to analyze many allusive traits contained in the book of Esther, like the law, the Passover, dates, priestly echoes, Moses allusions, feasts, significant reversal techniques, nationalistic problems in the text, the theme of honor and shame, wisdom tale, absence of God, postexilic diaspora, power, and a foreigner. It is a useful summary of possible intertextual connections of Esther, which should motivate further work on the topic.

The second part of the monograph includes three chapters studying the intertextuality of Esther and the Former Prophets. Chapter three was written by David G. Firth, who presented a perspective of Jewish identity through the land. He convincingly justifies his point of view on theology in the book of Esther, comparing the second chapter of this book and Joshua. The author deliberately draws the reader's attention to the two terms *דָּרָשׁ* and *הִרְבֵּה*, which are keys to understanding the conclusions of the chapter. As he argues, *both similarities and differences make much clearer the possibility of Jewish life in the empire, showing that such a life is possible outside the land* (p. 45). The fourth chapter was prepared by Isabelle Hamley, who portrays Esther along with Judges. The author lists several common words, motifs, and styles that can be found in both books. She also extracts from the text some additional themes: gender, sexuality, collective identity, otherness, and violence. Emphasizing all of them, Hamley aims to say that the book of Esther is more than a comedy or just a simple explanation for Purim. The last, fifth chapter of this part belongs to Rachelle Gilmour, who introduces Esther with the book of Samuel and argues that *parallels between Esther, Mordecai, and the Benjaminite line of Kish should be*

*read as a parodic shift in power from the glory days of the Israelite royal court to diaspora political life* (p. 67). To show her position on this issue, the author focuses on a demonstration of three sets of characters: Vashti–Mordecai–Saul, Esther–David–Saul, and Ahasuerus–God. Noteworthy is the passage on the parody of the Israelite royal court, which presents the complexity of the intertwining threads.

The third part of the book includes two chapters that discuss the Latter Prophets. Chapter six belongs to Andrew T. Abernethy, who offers *three perspectives on how a dialogical reading of feasts in Esther and the feast in Isaiah 25 results in a coordinated, canonical vision: perspectives on time, people and place, and the host* (p. 81). The author reliably analyzes the nine feasts mentioned in the book of Esther along with a passage from Isaiah (25:6–10). This essay proves that Abernethy not only has a good understanding of the methodology he uses, but also can use it convincingly. The seventh chapter, written by Heath A. Thomas, presents the complex problem concerning mourning which can be found in the Latter Prophets. He pays particular attention to the juxtaposition of Esther 4 along with Joel 1–2, Jonah 3, Isaiah 37, and Isaiah 58. The author points out that these types of mourning should, according to Olyan's taxonomy, be considered as petitionary mourning. Thomas suggests that the penitential prayers in Daniel 9, Ezra 9, and Nehemiah 9 should be compared with Esther 4 in the same way.

The fourth part includes two chapters focusing on the Writings. Chapter eight was written by David G. Firth and Brittany N. Melton, who are also the editors of the entire monograph. The authors argue that a small collection of Psalms 9–14 can be distinguished based on their description of a world without God (p. 102). This motif can be easily read alongside the book of Esther. From a theological point of view, the lack of God, i.e., the lack of his divine intervention, is very important for the comparison of these texts. The conclusion drawn by the authors illustrates that it is not only the Psalms that influence the way we read Esther, but also vice versa. What is noteworthy, Firth and Melton point out that theodicy, which is visible in this small collection of Psalms, can be likewise easily found in Esther. In the ninth chapter, Suzanna R. Millar introduces three concerns regarding character theme and ideology. She makes the analysis that shows how interesting it can be to read Esther along with Proverbs. The author is aware of the complexities of both books and decides to focus on the themes of authority, seduction, and justice. Based on these themes, Millar makes an intertextual analysis that provides rich conclusions.

The fifth and last part of the book includes seven chapters that discuss the connections of Esther to the books beyond the Hebrew Bible. Chapter ten belongs to Helen Efthimiadis-Keith, who compares Judith and Esther's prayer in the Septuagint. The table (p. 125) shows that the prayers share structural parallels. The author suggests a possible common literary origin. Using new thematic lenses like trauma, purity, and danger, Efthimiadis-Keith gives a fresh perspective on this well-known intertextual comparison. Chapter eleven deals with Esther and the Qumran Community. Seulgi L. Byun recalls studies on the text of Genesis Apocryphon (1Q20) and Proto-Esther (4Q550). The author argues that parallels that can be found in both texts do not give us proof that the book of Esther was known in the Qumran community. However, Byun points out to several parallels, allusions, at least ten hapax legomena, as well as unique phrases from Esther which are contained in the sectarian texts, and these examples might be treated as a proof. Chapter twelve was written by Paul Spilsbury, who introduces the complexity of issues in Josephus' translation of the book of Esther. The author leads the reader from the basic knowledge of Esther in Josephus' perspective through more specific themes, like laws, God, Haman's charges, and diaspora. Finally, Spilsbury aims to say that Josephus *projects a realistic and yet hopeful picture of the possibilities for Jewish existence in a world dominated by foreign rulers and hostile dictators* (p. 157).

The thirteenth chapter deals with parallels between Esther and Mark's Gospel. Kara J. Lyons-Pardue makes an intertextual analysis of promises made by Herod Antipas to Herodias' daughter (Mark 6:22b–23) and the favor that Artaxerxes would like to fulfill for Esther (Esth 5:3, 6; 7:2; 9:12). The author argues that this first-century reception of Esther in the Gospel clearly puts Esther story in a negative light. Lyons-Pardue can see in Esther the same victim as Herodias' daughter who *participated in the violent system in which she was entangled* (p. 168). Chapter fourteen belongs to Jonathan Grossman, who explains, based on Mordechai–Moses' example, four stages of rabbinic intertextual reading of Esther: an analogical reading within the book itself, linguistic allusions, developed plot analogy, and formal structural analogy. This essay reveals a whole mosaic of midrashic techniques that are essential for a proper understanding of rabbinic writings.

The fifteenth chapter was written by Kyong-Jin Lee, and it is devoted to modern political-theoretical reading of Esther. Certainly, the essay is worth reading, although it is difficult to see intertextuality in it, in the sense which could easily be seen in the previous papers. The book of Esther is not a text which is compared here with another one. Rather, it is a background

story to introduce some political ideas represented by Carl Schmitt and Friedrich A. Hayek. The last, sixteenth chapter deals with Esther's intertextuality after the Shoah. Marvin A. Sweeney makes an intertextual comparison between Esther and 1 Samuel 15, and also between Esther and Chronicles, through the Shoah lenses. The author aims to demonstrate the theological character of the book of Esther and its canonical significance, which has grown in importance after the Shoah experience. Since the essay mentions Chronicles, it seems that a more appropriate part for it would be the one which is dedicated to the Writings (similarly to Hornung's opening essay). The fifth part of the monograph seems disproportionately large as compared to the others. Therefore, to preserve the variety of essays it might have been appropriate to divide this part into several smaller ones, for example, concerning Jewish writings (Byun, Spilsbury, and Grossman) and the Christian Bible (Efthimiadis-Keith and Lyons-Pardue).

It is very gratifying that, finally, the book of Esther has obtained a monograph entirely devoted to its many intertextual connections. The collection of essays certainly provides a great source of inspiration for future work, as well as it introduces some original ideas. Many significant past works related to Esther have been properly acknowledged in the monograph, although one would expect more thorough coverage of the new studies discussing this dynamic subject which are not found in the bibliography of selected chapters. This, however, does not change a generally positive view of the book. Firth and Melton, with such a selection of essays, have certainly captured the extraordinary richness that lies behind, within, and beyond Esther's text.

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