

Else K. Holt, *Narrative and Other Readings in the Book of Esther* (Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies 712), Bloomsbury, T&T Clark, London UK 2021, pp. 172.

Through the last couple of decades, thorough discussions of the role of woman characters in the Bible have developed into one of the most dynamically growing subjects in biblical studies. Among such analyses, studying the books of Esther, Judith, and Ruth became particularly popular, especially among scholars with the feminist perspective. In fact, it has been noticed that such a women’s insight into the text sometimes uncovers new aspects of the biblical book. The monograph of Else K. Holt, published as the 712th volume of the “Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies” series, corresponds to this research trend and, particularly, focuses on the topic of the Second Temple heroine. Although this biblical book has been analyzed many times already, including studies performed with the narrative method, the reviewed monograph can be distinguished from such publications as it, specifically, aims at dealing with the most problematic issues of the book.

The monograph is divided into nine chapters, which were branched into three parts. The first chapter, which is also an introduction, does not belong to part one of the book. Each subsequent part has its own conclusions, although, unfortunately, there is no summary of the entire discussion at the end of the monograph. All the chapters involve textual analysis, exegetical considerations, and intertextual comparisons. The book also includes the bibliography (pp. 159–166), the index of the references (pp. 167–170), and the index of the authors (pp. 171–172).

The introductory remarks focus on the theology and religion of the book of Esther. Holt agrees with other scholars that the book of Esther “surely has more than one message” (p. 2). In particular, together with the Joseph narratives (Gen 37–50), as well as the stories of Tobit, Daniel, and Judith, the book of Esther can be considered as an example of a diaspora novella. It reflects on living in the diaspora for better and for worse. Holt sees the book of Esther as an entertaining story, a carnivalesque, or even burlesque,

which message is far from most of the other books in the Hebrew Bible. She also recalls many different problems with analyzing this biblical book, e.g., the issue of its canonicity, moral aspects of the story, a nationalistic message, the fact that it is the most Jewish-like book among all of the books in the Bible, as well as the absence of God in its Hebrew version. In the end, Holt also discusses quite thoroughly Martin Luther and other commentators who criticized Esther as the biblical book. Supposedly, this could illustrate difficulties in the perception of the book of Esther. In particular, in her analysis, Holt seems to be inspired by the book's subtext of sex, jealousy, violence, and identity.

Part one of the monograph includes two chapters. Chapter two concerns the dates when the book was prepared, as well as its composition and reception. Holt reminds the reader that the book was transmitted in many variants: the Hebrew, the Targum, two Greek versions, the Latin, the Coptic, and the Ethiopian Esther. In this discussion, she also points out that the book of Esther can be characterized as "fan fiction". She then focuses on the narrative strategy and discusses three variants of the text: Hebrew version – Masoretic Text (MT) and the two Greek versions, the Septuagint (LXX) and the so-called Alpha-text (AT) from a synchronic perspective. In particular, Holt emphasizes that the additions in the middle of the Hebrew text do not affect its main structure. Meanwhile, the true difference between the Hebrew and Greek texts is the inclusion (additions A and F), "which creates a new literary framework" (p. 30). When discussing this issue, Holt does not share the enthusiasm of other scholars about the chiasmic structure of the Hebrew text. In her analysis of the book of Esther, there is no one turning point. Instead, there are many of them, "which all relate a radical shift" (p. 26).

Chapter three of the monograph changes the topic to focus on characters, gender, and power play. While in the previous chapter Holt noticed that it is difficult to tell precisely who the main protagonist of the book of Esther is, she now offers to track the construction of the gendered character of Esther in her relation to male characters. During this process, she realizes how remarkable for the plot, at least from the narrative perspective, is Vashti, a disobedient queen, as well as other minor characters like Zeresh, wife of Haman. The latter is "the one to predict a decisive incident in the story" (p. 33). Holt acknowledges that to take a deeper insight into the Hebrew text, the reader should remember the narrative strategies, e.g., gap-filing, folklore studies, or speculations about psychologies of the literary "personae". However, in the Greek versions, the readers do not have to guess what Esther could feel, because the text straightforwardly describes her

emotions, fears, hopes, and hates. Holt mentions here also that the beautiful queen behaves like a “sleeping agent”. At the beginning of the plot, she is presented as an ignorant teenager without the right to discuss her point of view. Instead, at the end of the story, we admire a responsible and adult woman, who is in charge of a complicated and risky plan that could change the difficult situation of her people. Nonetheless, Holt notices that Esther in the AT version loses the power, which is transferred into Mordecai, but she earns the blame for the slaughtering of the Persians.

The second part of the monograph, *Readings*, begins with Chapter 4 entitled *Now Esther was admired by all who saw her – or: How to understand Esther 2 / too?* Here, Holt finds similarities between the book of Esther and *Arabian Nights*, and with the opening section of the French erotic novel, *Story of O*. She then suggests that Esther 1–2 can be read as a “rite-of-passage” for the “queen-to-be” (p. 52) and that its literary function is to prepare the main corpus of the narrative. Holt remarks that the motif of the gathering of virgins from all over the country was known and used for centuries, while the second aspect of virgins’ preparation before they are taken to the king Ahasuerus resembles more modern erotic literature. Holt points out that this biblical book has a rich tradition for reading it intertextually. She then compares the motif of virgins’ preparation to Jezebel’s make-up (2 Kgs 9:30) and she uses the concept of “the male gaze” to read out a deeper meaning of the erotic side of the story.

In chapter 5, Holt analyses *the function of clothes in the Esther narrative*. She describes them as a symbol of status, rank, and gender. Because of that, she notices, they become an effective vehicle of communication. Holt then gives a deeper insight into the cultural context of the book of Esther in her exegesis of its selected several fragments: *Vashti’s crown and Esther’s* (Esth 1:10–12; 2:17), *Haman and the King’s signet ring* (Esth 3:10; 8:2), *Mordecai in sackcloth and ashes* (Esth 4:1–17), *Esther meets the king* (Esth 5:1), *dressing up Mordecai* (Esth 6:6–11). At the end of the chapter, she suggests that this special focus on clothing in the whole book is something characteristic of the Diaspora novellas.

In Chapter 6, Holt asks a question whether it is possible to call Haman a scapegoat of the story. To this end, she recalls the concept of René Girard mimesis and mimetic desire (p. 92). Haman and Mordecai, because they both desired power in Persia, become brothers or doubles. From one side, it is Haman’s idea to annihilate all Jewish people in Persia, while from the other, Mordecai provoked Haman, when he did not want to bow down to him. Holt then points out that “Mordecai causes the threat to the Jews” (p. 100) and concludes this chapter with an interesting statement: “No! Haman is not

‘not guilty’. That would have disqualified him as a scapegoat. But Haman is not the only guilty person in the book of Esther [...]” (p. 104).

The third part of the monograph, *Ideologies*, begins with chapter 7 called *There is certain people – or: How the Judeans became the Jews*. Holt first notices here that the book of Esther has been criticized for being overtly nationalistic. She then stresses out that, according to her, the book should not be discussed from the nationalistic, theological, or even ethical point of view. Instead, she suggests considering issues of ethnicity, sociology, and religion. The part of the later discussion is devoted to the meaning of the word ethnicity in an ancient context. Holt shows that the book of Esther is one of the steps on the road to the “invention of Judaism” (p. 113), although the conflict described in its story is more general or human, not specifically ethnic. It is because the book of Esther is not about the concept of *Ioudaismos* or *yahādut*, but rather about “otherness”. The rest of chapter 7 is dedicated to *Purim*. The author states that, without the Purim, this book would not be biblical. Similarly to Gerleman, Lavenson, Laniak, and Cohen, Holt also observes that Esther is a “community-building” book, as well as she compares Esther and Mordecai to Moses and Aaron. As the author notices, “Esther and Purim draw on the intertextual connection to Exodus and Pesach” (p. 125). In the end, she finds in both stories many points of tangency, especially between (re)written decree and Decalogue.

In chapter 8, Holt discusses the book of Esther as a chosen trauma. She borrows the term from Vamik D. Volkan, who claims that “sharing the chosen trauma links the members of the group together, even if the traumatic memory can lie dormant over generations – the chosen trauma becomes woven into canvas of the ethnic or large-group tent” (p. 127). For Holt, it is clear that the conflict between Mordecai and Haman was a picture of the one between Judeans and Persians. Only the eradication of the enemies could unite Judeans in Persia, but the motif should be as strong as a past traumatic experience, which all Judeans shared. Here, Holt discusses in more detail the carnivalesque character of the book of Esther, especially the genocide of the Persian people. She shares the opinion with Erich S. Gruen that the common Judean life during their exile in Persia was not unambiguously unpleasant. She disagrees with him, however, when it comes to describing the genocide of Persians as a “slapstick”. Holt concludes this chapter with the various open questions, e.g., “What to do with the book of Esther? [...] Are we amused or offended?” (p. 138).

The final chapter of the monography is dedicated to the genocide described in the book of Esther. Holt tries to tackle the problem of slaughtering 75,311 people. She refers to 1 Sam 15, which is intertextually connected to Esther.

In here analysis, the ancestors of Haman and Mordecai, who were earlier discussed in chapter 6 (p. 94), become an excuse for such cruel violence. In this context, Holt presents an attitude similar to other scholars. However, she tries to point out the weak sides of their reasoning and she puts very accurate and uncomfortable questions that remain, unfortunately, not answered in her monography. After such a rich and brilliant presentation of the genocide problem in the book, Holt concludes everything in two short sentences. This appears to be insufficient and leaves the reader with an unclear picture of the author's view of the problem.

Else K. Holt's monograph about the book of Esther testifies to a profound knowledge of the subject by the author and her great erudition. The work merits particular attention of not only biblical scholars, who deal with the problematic sections of the book but also specialists in studies of literature, sociology, or psychology. The scholar offers a fresh look at all the difficult issues in the book, which were earlier intentionally omitted or not fully discussed, although selected such problems are still only provisionally treated and would require further studies in the future. In general, however, the monograph by Holt is a very important contribution to the studies of the book of Esther.

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