

BOOK REVIEW

Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading

by JONATHAN GROSSMAN

(Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2011)

Reviewed by
Yitzchak Blau

Tanakh study in contemporary Modern Orthodoxy may include such disparate elements as rabbinic midrashim, traditional biblical commentary, academic biblical scholarship, and the new school of interpretation popular in Machon Herzog and elsewhere in Israel. Only rarely does a work integrate contributions of each of these approaches; fortunately, Jonathan Grossman's *Esther: The Outer Narrative and the Hidden Reading* is just such a work. This volume should help introduce Grossman, a faculty member at Bar Ilan University and a rising star in the Israeli Religious Zionist world, to the English speaking public.¹ (In the interest of full disclosure, I note that I live in the same neighborhood as Grossman.)

Midreshei Hazal and the commentaries of Rashi and Ibn Ezra make frequent appearances in this volume. Even *aharonim* less frequently cited by moderns, such as Malbim, find a place. Malbim suggests that Haman used purposefully ambiguous language never clarifying to Ahasuerus his plan to kill the Jews. This accounts for the king's shock when Esther reveals her danger. Grossman adds that, since the verb "*abad*" can also refer to exile and loss of freedom, Haman's words before the king could speak of servitude or destruction. Support for this idea comes from a later verse when Esther tells the king that she would have remained silent if her people had been sold into slavery (7:4). Here, she informs her husband that he understood Haman as talking about slavery but his minister truly wanted to annihilate her people.

In one instance, greater usage of traditional commentary would have helped Grossman. He includes a chapter discussing our moral struggle with the sheer number of people the Jews killed and the inclusion of women and children among the victims in the letters allowing the Jews to kill their enemies. In his argument that the Jews had no bloodlust, Grossman

¹ In addition to his work on *Tanakh*, Grossman has published several important articles on the thought of R. Tsadok ha-Kohen of Lublin. See, *inter alia*, "*Tefisat ha-Elokut shel Rabbi Tsadok ha-Kohen mi-Lublin*," *Al Derekh ha-Avot*, ed. A. Bazak, M. Munitz, S. Wygoda (Tevunot, 5761) and "*Tefisat ha-Safah ve-haOtiyyot be-Hagut Rabbi Tsadok ha-Kohen me-Lublin*," *Shana be-Shana* 5760.

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points out that the Jews chose to celebrate the day of rest rather than the day of fighting. In this, he was preceded by R. Meir Simha ha-Kohen of Dvinsk.² In terms of the women and children, both Ibn Ezra and the GRA explain that the only method for reversing the royal decree was to claim that the original letters mistakenly switched the identities of the Jews and their enemies. When composing new letters, Esther and Mordecai were compelled to maintain the same formulation including women and children. Enthusiasts of modern approaches should acknowledge how much insight the standard commentaries still provide.³

Academics also make helpful contributions in this volume. Adele Berlin suggests that the city of Shushan serves as a chorus conveying the mood in Persia. Moshe Weinfeld points out historical support for the idea that hanging was the appropriate punishment for crimes of treason. If so, Zeresh suggested accusing Mordecai of treason and, in the end, her husband received punishment for the same crime. Most interestingly, Linda Day comments that the three day fast serves as a “silent rebellion” against the orgies of the palace culture. Fasting both aids in the supplication to God and symbolizes rejecting the hedonism of Ahasuerus’ parties.

Grossman makes significant usage of the literary techniques of the new school associated with Machon Herzog, including chiasmus, *leitwort*, and intertextuality.⁴ A chiasmus runs through the entire Megilla, helping further the theme of reversal. “Grossman points out how the root “*melekh*” appears six times in the verse in which Esther approaches the king (5:1).” This emphasizes the power and authority of Esther’s husband and reinforces the trepidation involved in her brave endeavor.

More than any other technique, intertextuality serves as the foundation of Grossman’s work. The volume includes potential parallels between elements of the book of Esther and Joseph, Daniel, Saul, David and Batsheba, Jezebel and Naboth, Sarah, the Temple, Nineveh, Esau, and more. To this reviewer, some of these parallels seem forced, especially because the sheer number of suggested parallels makes it unlikely that the

² *Meshekh Hokhma*, Exodus 12:16.

³ In the recent Hebrew version of Grossman’s book, *Esther: Megillat Setarim* (Maggid, 2013), he adds these sources.

⁴ Of course, Machon Herzog faculty have no monopoly on these techniques; academics utilize them as well. On the new school, see Yaakov Beasley, “Return of the Pashtanim,” *Tradition* 42:1 (2009) and Yaakov Blau and Yaakov Beasley, “The ‘New School’ of Bible Study: An Exchange,” *Tradition* 42:3 (2009).

biblical author intended all of them.⁵ Let us investigate two examples and evaluate their cogency.

Thematic and literary parallels between Joseph and Esther/Mordecai are numerous enough to convince a hardened skeptic. Not only are both stories of a Jew rising to prominence in a foreign royal court; identical terms appear again and again in both tales. Others have noted this parallel, but Grossman adds an important methodological point in his argument in favor of “dynamic analogies.” According to this theory, the same work can use a parallel in multiple ways and switch who is being compared to whom in mid-work. The text can first compare Joseph with Esther and then compare him with Mordecai.

Those who utilize parallelism sometimes argue that a strong indication of a linkage occurs when a phrase only appears twice in Scripture. Thus, the phrase “*kakha ye’aseh la-ish*” connects the ride Haman gives Mordecai with the *halitsa* ceremony when a man declines to marry his deceased brother’s widow. Grossman tentatively suggest that both episodes address issues of honor and debasement. However, alternative accounts for the parallel exist. Perhaps the phrase happens to appear twice without the author intending a parallel. For example, Shakespeare twice employs the imagery of the world as a stage but this does not mean that he wanted us to connect *As You Like It* (Act 2 Scene 7) with *The Merchant of Venice* (Act 1 Scene 1). Secondly, even if the author thought of the parallel, the intended effect may simply be the aesthetic pleasure of a resonant phrase rather than a deeper thematic connection. Along similar lines, I doubt an author intended a parallel between *Esther* 8:6 and *Shir ha-Shirim* 5:3, even after acknowledging that the word “*eikbakha*” appears only in these two verses. Grossman proposes that the author contrasts the passivity of the beloved who cannot get out of bed with the activism of Esther. Admittedly, comparisons may prove instructive irrespective of authorial intent. Contrasting Jezebel’s influence on Ahab with Zeresh’s advice to Haman can provide insight but that is not the same as saying that the biblical author intended the association.

Grossman is a highly sensitive reader alert to subtle literary shifting. He notes how Hathach’s name appears repeatedly in the beginning of the dialogue between Esther and Mordecai regarding the crisis but then disappears as the conversation continues, and sees this as the discourse moving to an internal Jewish dialogue in which the Persian middleman has no place. Grossman points out how the many feasts and parties in the tale do

⁵ To be fair, Grossman often introduces these parallels with a qualifying term such as “perhaps.”

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not include an expression of joy until the Jews establish a holiday incorporating “*mishteh ve-simha*” (8:17, 9:19). True joy emerges not from drunken revelry or hedonistic orgies but from pleasure within a morally and religiously uplifting context.

Many note a transition in the text from Mordecai’s leadership to that of Esther. Initially, he directs and she listens; then, she takes the initiative in setting the fast days and in her strategy to ensnare Haman. Grossman adds a third stage in which the two work together. Indeed, the concluding two chapters refer to their joint efforts in defeating the enemy and in establishing a new holiday (8:7, 9:31).

Ahasuerus first wants to show off his wealth (1:4) and later his wife (1:11). The similar wording conveys his view of Vashti as another ornament in his treasury. Exaggerated time spent in oils (half a year!) also indicates the crazy way the king views women. The phrase “*ki ken yimle’u*” appears regarding the immersion in oils in Esther (2:12) and regarding the embalming of the deceased in Egypt (*Bereshit* 50:3). Thus, the author cleverly teaches us how Ahasuerus treats his women as inert bodies devoid of personal relationships.

Grossman successfully identifies major themes of this work. Decisions to cast lots and wise men who know “the times” represent a worldview believing in fate, but the tale indicates how God overcomes all determinism and astrological systems. Furthermore, the story begins and ends with the Persian king, which sets up a surface reading of Ahasuerus as the dominant figure. Yet the work clarifies how God runs the world, whereas Ahasuerus does not even truly run his own kingdom. At each key moment of decision, a member of the royal court instructs the Persian king how to proceed.

Of course, God’s name never explicitly appears in this work, yet He clearly orchestrates the proceedings throughout. Indeed, Grossman contends that hidden meanings constitute a prominent motif pervading this work. Esther hides her identity, Haman conceals the true nature of his plan, Ahasuerus seems to control the kingdom but is truly led by others, and God runs the world for those who know how to discern between the lines.

At the same time, reading implied ideas into the narrative comes with the danger of tenuous interpretations. I am convinced that God is omnipresent in *Megillat Esther* despite the lack of explicit mention since everything proceeds so perfectly. Vashti’s removal and the plot of Bigthan and Teresh place Esther and Mordecai in position to save the Jewish people. The precise nature of each reversal – Haman honors Mordecai with a

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royal ride, Haman is hanged on the tree he prepared for Mordecai – indicates a divine hand at work. On the other hand, I was less convinced by Grossman's viewing the story as an implied critique of Jewish life in exile. The fact that the phraseology for the king raising Haman's status (3:1) resembles that of the Babylonian king raising Jehoiachin's status (2 Kings 25:27-28) does not clearly indicate a critique of Persian Jewry for staying in exile rather than returning to the land of Israel to take part in Jehoiachin's promotion.

Grossman has made an important new contribution to our understanding of this intriguing biblical work and we look forward to his next installment.

