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Review of Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther*

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Abstract

At the 2001 meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies, Michael Fox described this book as his only "Jewish" commentary. Now reprinted by a Christian publisher, in 1991 it was the only commentary on Esther written by a Jew for a general audience. (It has since been joined by Jon Levenson's commentary in the Old Testament Library series.) He ends his introduction with the remark that the book does not address the most urgent and vital aspect of the meaning of the Scroll, "its existential bearing on the individual reader" (p. 11). For his own part, he feels the anxiety of the Jews of Persia and shares their exhilaration at their deliverance. "Except that i do not think 'their,' but 'my'" (p. 11). The book performs the remarkable and necessary feat of remaining skeptical about the historicity of the Esther story while taking its thoughts about the threat of genocide against the Jews with utmost seriousness. (Fox's excursus dealing with feminist readings of the book finds them "indifferent to the severity of the crisis that stands at the story's heart: the mortal danger to the Jewish people" [p. 208].) The major question of the book, "How can Jews best survive and thrive in the diaspora?" (p. 4), is still a question today. Esther's liturgical role in the celebration of Purim is an excuse for most of us not to think seriously about the book. Fox's approach is quite different; for him, Xerxes' combination of "petty impulses and mental sloth" (p. 175) is Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil."

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critical analysis demonstrates the important role played by the phrase *mah zō't 'âšitā* in several of these stories (pp. 41–42).

As a result, this book raises a variety of interesting and important issues, whether one is convinced by all of its conclusions or not. It is a thorough, if somewhat wooden study that will reward careful attention.

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Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther, by Michael V. Fox. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 2001. 333 pp. \$26.00.

At the 2001 meeting of the Association for Jewish Studies, Michael Fox described this book as his only “Jewish” commentary. Now reprinted by a Christian publisher, in 1991 it was the only commentary on Esther written by a Jew for a general audience. (It has since been joined by Jon Levenson’s commentary in the Old Testament Library series.) He ends his introduction with the remark that the book does not address the most urgent and vital aspect of the meaning of the Scroll, “its existential bearing on the individual reader” (p. 11). For his own part, he feels the anxiety of the Jews of Persia and shares their exhilaration at their deliverance. “Except that I do not think ‘their,’ but ‘my’” (p. 11). The book performs the remarkable and necessary feat of remaining skeptical about the historicity of the Esther story while taking its thoughts about the threat of genocide against the Jews with utmost seriousness. (Fox’s excursus dealing with feminist readings of the book finds them “indifferent to the severity of the crisis that stands at the story’s heart: the mortal danger to the Jewish people” [p. 208].) The major question of the book, “How can Jews best survive and thrive in the diaspora?” (p. 4), is still a question today. Esther’s liturgical role in the celebration of Purim is an excuse for most of us not to think seriously about the book. Fox’s approach is quite different; for him, Xerxes’ combination of “petty impulses and mental sloth” (p. 175) is Hannah Arendt’s “banality of evil.”

As he did with Ecclesiastes in *Qohelet and His Contradictions*, Fox here embeds a commentary into a larger work of analysis. A brief introductory chapter is followed by a “chapter” of commentary. The rest of the book then takes up in detail subjects which would be treated briefly in sections of the introduction in a more standard format. There are chapters on the historicity of the book, its genre and literary structure, its characters, its social world, and the literary history of the “three books of Esther” (MT, LXX, and an early layer of the Greek “Alpha Text” which Fox believes predates MT or at least is independent of it; this discussion is given more fully in his 1990 *Redaction of the Books of Esther*). An appendix offers philological and textual notes to the general

commentary, which requires no Hebrew knowledge. Finally, a 15-page postscript surveys the decade's worth of books on Esther since the 1991 publication of the first edition. (The text is not otherwise updated.)

For me the most significant section of the book is the series of seven chapters on its major characters: Vashti, Xerxes, Haman, Mordecai, Esther, the Jews (as a collective), and (*acharon acharon chaviv?*) God. Each of these chapters, except for that on Haman, starts with an epigram offering "one opinion" from an earlier reader of Esther on the character, providing a counterpoint to the reading that Fox offers. This section is full of focused observation, and the observations combine to paint the picture the writer of Esther wished to paint: It is reading with the text, not against it, to think that Vashti's independence and dignity are worthy of respect. "Xerxes is all surface . . . his most dangerous flaw is his failure to think" (p. 171). Haman is devious but transparent, while Mordecai "is saved from being a Sunday-school figure by one intriguing trait: he keeps his own counsel" (p. 191). Esther "emerges as the most distinct and memorable character in the book, the one with whom the reader most naturally identifies. . . . Esther alone undergoes growth and surprises the reader by unpredictable developments" (p. 96), moving from passivity to activity to authority. The chapter on the Jews includes a balanced discussion of the book's moral stance. That on God asks, "The author is not quite certain about God's role in these events (are *you?*) . . ." (p. 247). Fox notes, "In Esther's world, God's reality shimmers on the boundary between absence and presence, just behind the screen of phenomena" (p. 253).

The book is engagingly written. Fox's reactions to the book are shaped not only by earlier scholarship, but by influences that vary from the *Vie privé de Louis XV* to Charlie Chaplin's "The Great Dictator." In his generous analysis of character and ideology in the book of Esther, Michael Fox offers a scholar's most sincere gift: the admiration of one writer for another.

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Rejection by God: The History and Significance of the Rejection Motif in the Hebrew Bible, by Monica J. Melanchthon. New York: Peter Lang, 2001. 287 pp. \$61.95.

"All of human history as seen by the Bible is the history of God in search of [humanity]," wrote Abraham Heschel almost half a century ago in his influential study, *The Prophets*. In the face of humanity's failures, God simply refuses to abandon humanity. Thus, "Israel's faith is not the fruit of a quest for God. Israel did not discover