

Esther (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)

Joyce G. Baldwin

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'The Beauty Queen' might have been the headline for the story of Esther had the Persians had newspapers. A girl whose uncle's plan gained her the highest place in the realm, overturned the plot of an early Jew-hater, and won permission to kill his race's enemies, is an unlikely heroine for a book of the Bible. And the place of the book in Scripture is startling. for God is never named in it. No Christian commentator appears to have written about it in the first seven centuries, nor did Luther or Calvin. Publishers' demands for complete series yielded two major commentaries this century, Paton's (ICC, 1908) and Moore's (Anchor Bible, 1979). Now Tyndale presents its useful contribution, the author, suitably a lady, already known for her volume on Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi.

Esther presents two major problems: firstly, is the story historical, secondly, is the story ethically acceptable. In her Introduction Miss Baldwin discusses historical accuracy and literary genre. She points out that the background of life in Susa agrees with the impression archaeology and ancient texts give, that the king's behaviour agrees with what is known about Xerxes, and that recent research indicates the Persian kings were not so lenient upon their subjects as previous understanding of the Cyrus Cylinder led many to believe. Of the chief actors. Ahasuerus is identified with Xerxes of the Greek historians beyond doubt (it can be added that contemporary Aramaic documents write his name almost exactly as in the Hebrew text). Vashti is probably the Amestris Herodotus mentions, Esther and Haman are otherwise unknown. Mordecai may possibly be identified with an official named Mardukaya appearing in a cuneiform document of about the right date. The purpose of the Book of Esther, however, is to explain the Festival of Purim. On the basis of a recent study. Miss Baldwin can throw light on the use of the lot (*pūru*) in ancient Assyria. Whatever the accuracy of the background and characterizations, most commentators label the book as fiction or an historical novel. Paton epitomized the matter. 'History here arises from custom, not custom from history' (cited on p. 106). Our author plainly does not accept these views; we could wish she had expanded her remarks, for the problem is not peculiar to Esther. it relates to large sections of both Testaments. In fact, too little is known about Persian history for the book to be dismissed at that level. Where points can be checked it stands up well. and the coincidences which many adjudge fictional elements are of the sort that do make 'truth stranger than fiction'. To Miss Baldwin, the whole book attests the over-ruling of God on his people's behalf, and so the coincidences are evidence of his care.

Esther is commonly viewed as a book of human vengeance. Those who were to destroy the Jews wholesale are themselves wiped out by the Jews. The author discusses this major ethical difficulty with care, although rather briefly, giving a special note on 'Avenge oneself, Vengeance'. She supports the rendering of 8:11 adopted by the NIV, which permits the Jews to attack only their attackers, not their families as well. While not justifiable in a perfect World, the Jews had to take action in an imperfect, hostile world, as we do. The precise scope and limited time of the vengeance permitted are notable.

God is absent from the Book of Esther by name, but this commentary shows how much he was active 'behind the scenes' in coincidences and other ways, as the believer can still see him at work to-day.

Alan R. Millard, "Book Review: Esther (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)," *Evangel* 3.4 (Winter 1985): 17.

One other lesson can be learnt: Esther's delicate boldness saved herself, her uncle, the Jews in Susa, and Jews under threat throughout the Persian Empire, however real or feeble their faith. Is our loyalty to the Christian Church to-day equally broad in its solidarity?

This is a worthwhile and suggestive addition to the Tyndale Old Testament Commentary Series, one which can open the riches and the value of a book Christians neglect.

A. R. Millard
Liverpool

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