***The Book of Esther between Judaism and Christianity: The Biblical Story, Self-Identification, and Antisemitic Interpretation.***
**By Isaac Kalimi.**
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This clearly written, detailed, and passionate study, enhanced by several illustrations, explains the Book of Esther's origins, complicated textual history, and reception by both Jewish and Christian readers over two millennia. The volume is divided into three parts. The first is a comprehensive introduction to the book; the second details the generally positive and even enthusiastic Jewish reception history; the third, substantially attentive to the writings of Martin Luther and their impact, shows how Christians across the centuries have condemned the Book of Esther for its celebration of Jewish nationalism.

In terms of history, Kalimi finds the Hebrew (Masoretic) text most likely to be the oldest version, which he dates to 'the Persian Achaemenid period … between the time of Xerxes I (485-465 BCE) and the final collapse of the Persian Empire' under Alexander the Great in 330 BCE. He suggests the core of the story was composed during the reign of Ahasuerus/Xerxes, or within a generation or two after his death, ca. 475-425 BCE (19). Rejecting arguments for a later, Hellenistic setting in part because of the lack of Greek words, and accepting an earlier dating on the basis of the book's 'broad knowledge of the Persian Achaemenid Empire in the fifth century BCE' (93), he concludes that the book is not, as has often been proposed, an etiological justification for the holiday of Purim. Rather, the holiday is the 'natural outcome of the essential events' narrated in the core story (21-22). For the Hebrew text, he finds only 9:29-32, Esther's letter confirming the first sent by Mordecai concerning the celebration of the holiday, to be a late addition. The Septuagint (LXX) translation, with its six additions that became part of the Catholic Christian and Eastern Orthodox canons, he assigns to Jerusalem to the end of the second century-beginning of the first century BCE (26). Very little is made of the Alpha text, another Greek version, although Kalimi finds in the Greek additions and glosses anti-Jewish trends that he proposes could have been added by Christian authors. The idea of Jewish self-critique remains generally absent from his study.

Kalimi, who rejects labeling the book 'fictional' (contrast the readings of, for example, Michael V. Fox, Edward L. Greenstein, Jon D. Levenson, Adele Berlin), argues for the 'plausible historicity of its core story' (92). Despite its evident exaggerations regarding the numbers slaughtered at the

end of the story, its parallels to the stories of Joseph and Daniel (other Jews in foreign courts), inclusios, chiastic patterns, overstatements, typological numbers, and other literary conceits, he insists, 'Even if *the extent* and *details* of the events described … are questionable, such an intended persecution of the Jews would not be unparalleled' (126). The genre is thus 'novelistic history … a fictionalized story established in a real historical setting, and also based on some plausible kernel of historical event' (130). Otherwise put: Esther's report of a government-sponsored attempted genocide of the Jews is the first "'Final Solution" (*Endlösung*) of the Jews in world history' (127).

The text for Kalimi is also part of Israel's national story, since 'Israelites maintained a traumatic fear of their complete annihilation … rooted in, or at least illustrated by, the horrific story of the Aqedah' (66). The notion of psychologically diagnosing a people as 'traumatised' strikes me as unwarranted, but I grant the historical knowledge Jews have of attempts at genocide, both before and after Christianity, noted in Psalms 83 and 124, and starting with the beginning of Exodus if not in Genesis 22.

To support his claim that Haman's decree, issued to all of Persia, 'giving orders to destroy, to kill, and to annihilate all Jews, young and old, women and children, in one day, the thirteenth day of the twelfth month, which is the month of Adar, and to plunder their goods' (Esther 3:13) has a historical core, Kalimi compares Haman's negative description of Jews as a people who maintain their own laws and traditions with other pre-Christian antisemitic polemics, including Egyptian attacks on the Jewish colony of Elephantine in 410 BCE, Samaritan enmity against the Jews who returned from Babylonian exile after the Persian conquest of Babylon in 338 BCE, and the attempts to eradicate Jewish practice by Antiochus IV Epiphanes in 166 BCE. Cited among ancient antisemites are Diodorus Siculus and the polemicists noted by Josephus, including Apollonius Molon, Apion of Alexandria, the Roman governor of Alexandria Flaccus, Tacitus, Philostratus, and the author of 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16 (taken to be an interpolation, perhaps influenced by Tacitus [149]). That enmity against Jews existed prior to the rise of Christianity is well documented; other texts, such as 1 Maccabees 5:9-45, 3 Maccabees, and Philo's *Flaccus* describe attempts to erase Jewish existence.

In terms of characterisation, Kalimi finds Mordecai to be 'dynamic, self-confident, and non-conformist' (35). While the Hebrew gives no explanation for Mordecai's refusal to bow before Haman, a refusal that sets Haman's genocidal plan in motion, Kalimi finds congenial the various theological explanations offered in later sources, such as Haman's insisting on divine honours: 'Presumably, Mordecai's refusal to bow down to Haman was motivated by his faith, and as such is also a martyr story' (137). For me, the text resists such easy readings; like the characters in the Torah's narratives and the Deuteronomic history, so the characters in Esther are complex. We readers are required, as we are required with most biblical characters, to

assign motives. In this case, perhaps Esther issues a warning: Jews, living vulnerably in the Diaspora, might want to show expected obeisance.

Kalimi similarly finds Esther noble: she 'courageously took the risk and put her own life in danger (and that is not nothing!)' (31); thus, she is 'best characterized as an altruist, a selfless person who is concerned for the wellbeing of her people' (31) and who 'accomplishes her goals with her rhetoric, social skills, and personal character' (33). That Esther asked no questions concerning Mordecai's order that she keep her identity quiet, that she achieves her position by winning the all-Persia beauty contest (what she did in her evening try-out to convince the king to love her goes unnoted in both the text and this commentary—I thought, when I was a child, she and the king played two-handed canasta, because that is what my parents did in the evening), and that she arranges for Haman to be executed on the charge of attempted rape all go unnoted.

The third noble character, according to Kalimi, is Vashti, the deposed queen, who 'courageously maintains her self-respect and royal dignity and does not display her beauty before the lustful and drunken males (Esth 1:12)' (29). Again, the story is more complicated: her refusal both set up a law that women must obey their husbands, and it set up a form of ancient sex trafficking, where all of Persia's virgins are taken to the palace for auditions with the king. Like Mordecai, her refusal to obey a royal command may designate her dignity, but it also endangers other people: for Mordecai, all the Jews, and for Vashti, all the women. Kalimi mentions that he will not engage with feminist scholarship; an article in which he addresses this work would nicely complement this volume and probably encourage more complex treatments of the characters.

Haman is 'egocentric and megalomaniacal' (30; I have no argument here). Ahasuerus, identified as Xerxes I, is portrayed as 'an idiot, but not as a nasty or mean person' (123; again, an apt description).

Since God does not appear in the Masoretic text, and since other than fasting the Jewish characters engage in no specifically religious activities, theologians throughout the millennia have attempted to claim Esther for theological purposes. Despite the lack of explicit divine presence in the Hebrew text, Kalimi insists the that the book is 'deeply theological' (11) given its hope for redemption and salvation. In this reading, God is hidden but present, as if behind the scenes (75, 183, 184, etc.) and faithful to the covenant. Kalimi appeals to times of *hester panim* (the 'hidden face' of the divine), the Jewish conviction that despite temporary silence, the Deity will remain faithful to the covenant and preserve the Jewish people. Thus, Mordecai's claim that, if Esther fails to act, help will come from 'another place' (4:14) becomes an allusion to divine intervention.

Fairly, Kalimi cites numerous examples in Jewish history where help did not arrive—Mainz, Worms, Speyer, the Khmelnytsky Uprising in the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth [or the Ukraine since Khmelnytsky was a

Ruthenian Cossack], Tabriz, Damascus, Kishinev… The dangers Esther depicts were, and are, real. While the book's humour helps the reader to address them, they cannot be ignored.

Turning to reception history, Kalimi devotes an entire chapter to the absence of the book from the Dead Sea Scrolls (the only other Hebrew text not yet recovered is Nehemiah). While evidence supporting the idea that Esther was known at Qumran is wholly circumstantial (for example, the popularity of the text given two Greek versions), Kalimi efficiently assesses the explanations for its absence. Dismissing common explanations (that it was rejected because of the absence of the name of God, because Esther breached dietary laws, because Purim would, given the Qumran solar calendar, fall on Shabbat) he finds more compelling concerns with Esther's intermarriage and the fact that the fast Esther proclaims would include Passover and so forbid Jews from following the mitzvah of eating matzah.

In contrast to the Dead Sea Scrolls, rabbinic literature is fascinated with Esther. The rabbis regard the book not only as inspired by the holy spirit but also (in a remarkable moment of anachronism), given to Moses at Mt. Sinai. For the rabbis, Esther not only kept kosher, she also refrained from sexual relations while menstruating. When she did have connubial relations with her intoxicated husband, she was 'merely natural soil' (that is, she did not collaborate with or enjoy the process). Jewish commentary includes two Targums (Aramaic translations and paraphrases) dating to the sixth-eighth centuries.

Rabbinic praise of Esther contrasts with varying views of Vashti: various sources describe her as refusing to appear before the king because he commanded her to wear *only* her crown (1:11), because she was suffering from a bout of leprosy, and because the angel Gabriel affixed a tail upon her body. Some rabbinic sources see her as punished for having humiliated Jewish girls and forcing them to work on the Sabbath; others see her as Babylonian and so rejecting Persian efforts to rebuild the Temple her people destroyed.

Kalimi traces Jewish appreciation of the book from the frescoes at Dura Europos to the documents from the Cairo Geniza, where Esther is the most frequently represented text, aside from Pentateuchal books, to costume-wearing Italian Jews (probably copied from Christian carnivals), to Purim spiels in Eastern Europe.

But not all Jewish reception has been positive. Kalimi finds a tendency among nineteenth and twentieth century rabbis from the Reform movement, including Abraham Geiger, Claude G. Montefiore, Schalom ben Chorin, and Samuel Sandmel, of 'adopting the Christian anti-Esther approach' (191). Kalimi summarises, 'Probably, their eagerness to integrate/assimilate with the larger Christian society or at least to become similar to it, caused them to overlook the anti-Jewish lines of the Christian scholars' (194). Perhaps, although the slaughter at the end of the book, in which 'the Jews struck down all their enemies with the sword, slaughtering, and destroying them, and did

as they pleased to those who hated them' (9:5) so that 'the other Jews who were in the king's provinces also gathered to defend their lives, and gained relief from their enemies, and killed seventy-five thousand of those who hated them; but they laid no hands on the plunder' (9:16) does give one pause.

Esther's reception throughout Christian history has been decidedly negative. While the artists Michelangelo, Filippino Lippi, Rembrandt, and others offered sympathetic depictions, their theological counterparts were far less generous. Church fathers regarded Mordecai as Jesus, Esther as the Virgin Mary or *Ecclesia* (the Church, that is, Christianity), and Vashti as *Synagoga* (Judaism), to be deposed. In "On the Jews and Their Lies", Luther speaks of how much the Jews 'love the book of Esther which so well fits with their blood-thirsty, vengeful, murderous lust and hope' (257).

Combatting this stream of anti-Jewish interpretation, Kalimi frequently appeals to the question of whether the book concerns barbaric slaughter or 'legitimate self-defense' (311). He argues that 8:11, often in English translated as depicting the Jews as killing 'both little ones and women', should be translated as the Jews protecting their own family members. Similarly, he insists that Mordecai's order applies only to 'any armed force' (316).

Kalimi is well aware that Esther can provoke violence, although he downplays this response: 'After the attack on the Muslim community in Hebron, on Purim 1994, by Dr. Baruch Goldstein, at least one rabbi called for a new Purim' (221). Before calling for a new Purim, we would do well to hesitate to celebrate any slaughter.

Kalimi wrote his volume before the 7 October 2023 attacks by Hamas, an organisation committed to the eradication of the State of Israel and the genocide of Jews, and the response by the Netanyahu government, which has to date killed thousands of Palestinians. Esther, which raises questions of self-defence and, given the exaggerated numbers of Persian dead, questions of proportionality, remains ever-relevant.

Biblical books are, primarily, texts that help us ask the right questions rather than provide all the answers. The book provokes. Is maintaining personal dignity worth the threat to entire population groups? When should identity be hidden and when should one 'pass'? For those who hate us, is slaughter, or a preemptive strike, the wisest move, and if so, should the numbers matter? How do we treat our ethnic and religious (and gendered) minorities? And if Jews cannot be safe in the Diaspora, can they be any more safe in their national homeland?

Kalimi has written an important book on an important book; we would do well to engage them both.