

*Literary and Empirical Readings of the Books of Esther*, by A. Kay Fountain. *Studies in Biblical Literature* 43. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2002. Pp. xiv + 314. ISBN 0-8204-5570-9. US\$ 65.95.

The present volume is a revised version of an Auckland University, New Zealand, Ph.D. dissertation (1999), advised by Tim Bulkeley. Its author, Kay Fountain, is presently a faculty member and director for Postgraduate Studies at Asia Pacific Theological Seminary, Baguio City, Philippines, and thus a fellow missionary to the Philippines, coming from a Western background and interested in the broad field of Hebrew Bible research. Her study is unique since it develops two important areas, the second of which is not receiving enough attention from current scholarship in biblical studies: first, she studies the characterization of the main characters of the book of Esther in three different texts, i.e., MT, the LXX and the Greek Alpha text. This particular aspect of her dissertation follows along fairly standard paths of literary criticism and narrative analysis. However, her second objective, although built on the study of characterization of the main characters in the three texts, is more ambitious and involves both the development of ethical judgment in the modern reader and an empirical, qualitative study. Fountain presents three hypotheses in her introductory chapter (pp. 1–11): (1) the characters portrayed in the Masoretic text of Esther differ from the characters portrayed in both of the Greek texts; (2) the impact the characters in the story of Esther make on the male reader is different from the impact the characters make on the female reader; (3) the impact the characters in the story of Esther make on the church reader is different from the impact the characters make on the unchurched reader (p. 6).

Chapter two contains a helpful, though not necessarily comprehensive, literature review (pp. 13–29). Fountain focuses on six major issues, including ethics and the book(s) of Esther, law and justice, the textual history of the book(s) of Esther (reviewing current opinions concerning the textual differences between MT, LXX, and the Greek Alpha text), and effects of the different texts. She also briefly reviews the issue of the absence of God (pp. 22–23) and the general effect and purpose of biblical narrative (pp. 23–25) before distinguishing her study from similar recent studies by Linda Day, Karen Jobes and Charles Dorothy. While the study design of Fountain is clearly literary (as well empirical), I wonder why she has not delved into the highly controversial issue of the relationship between narrative (or story) and history (see, for example, Alan R. Millard, "Story, History, and Theology," in *Faith, Tradition and History* [ed. Alan R. Millard et al.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1994], 37–64), an issue which is at the

forefront of the current historiographical discussion of biblical studies. While a purely literary reading of a biblical book such as Esther is definitely a legitimate option to frame a dissertation, the issue of the development of ethical judgment that drives Fountain's second section of her study, seems to this reader to require an answer concerning the historicity of the Esther story. Fountain seems to be aware of the tension, but discounts the effect of this factor on the modern reader arguing that "whether the book of Esther is a fictional story or historical fact does not change the effect the story has on the reader" (p. 5). Since I am currently writing a commentary on the books of Ezra-Nehemiah and Esther in the *Apollos Old Testament Commentary* series (Apollos/InterVarsity) and have been struggling with similar questions and issues, I wonder if this question can be resolved in such a lapidary manner. When reading contemporary literature, even outside the realm of religion, a novel may challenge my ethical choices, but definitely does not impact me as much as a historical, first-person account of the atrocities of the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina or of the cruelties of the Pol Pot Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. In this sense, I would argue that historicity does play an important role in the development of ethical judgment, a point lacking in Fountain's work.

Chapters three to five focus on a literary analysis of the three text types, discussing each time the seven (or sometimes six) characters (Mordecai, Haman, the king, Vashti, the men, Esther, and [God]). In chapter three, the author studies two elements of biblical (or any) narrative, i.e., the order of story elements and the narrative's pace (pp. 31-74). As with the rest of the volume, Fountain includes many helpful tables and figures (all in all 43 tables and 36 figures throughout the book) and summarizes the findings of her close readings of the three texts in a very useful table on pp. 69-70. Compared to both Greek texts, the MT describes a hidden God, including covert suggestions of his work, it is often non-religious and ambiguous, and it seems to ridicule law and authority figures (p. 70).

Chapter four contains the second part of Fountain's literary analysis and works systematically through the chapters of MT, LXX and the Greek Alpha Text, paying particular attention to the viewpoint of the narrator (pp. 75-129). The author suggests that the MT hides the emotions of the Jewish protagonists and leaves decisions about the heroes and villains to the reader. Sometimes it narrates in an ambiguous and dispassionate manner (p. 127). Both Greek texts show more emotion and seem to take the side of the Jewish people more frequently.

In chapter five, the author discusses some miscellaneous literary effects, including issues such as speech analysis, the use of repetition, and

passive forms of the verbs (pp. 131–65). As an example, she notes that Esther speaks more than anyone else in the MT, particularly surprising considering the fact that her prayer is not included in the Hebrew text (p. 162). Also, MT is apparently more critical to and even ridicules Persian religious and other laws.

Chapter six provides the theoretical background for the design choices of the author's empirical, or qualitative data collection and analysis (pp. 167–210). Fountain used a total of 60 subjects (20 readers for each text) and employed ANOVA (analysis of variance) data evaluation (pp. 167–68). The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to the representation and statistical assessment of the data gathered in the questionnaire, followed by a more in-depth discussion of this empirical data in chapter seven (pp. 211–33). Some of the results of her empirical analysis are worth considering here. Concerning the differences between the three texts that the theoretical literary analysis suggested, she Fountain observes that these are not easily observed in the data of the empirical study: "Real readers come to the text with their own perceptions about what is moral, just, dominating, intelligent, etc." (p. 228). Fountain also underlines the most important result of the empirical study, viz. the tremendous difference in character perception between churched and unchurched questionnaire participants (*ibid.*). However, it seems to me that research focusing on the deep penetration of worldview (including religious convictions) in all areas of human life and thought has long established this concept (see, for example, Jay L. Wenger, "Implicit Components of Religious Beliefs," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 22 [2003]: 223–29, or Stanley J. Grenz, "Culture and Spirit: The Role of Cultural Context in Theological Reflection," *AsTJ* 55.2 [2000]: 37–51).

The volume concludes with five appendices, including the three texts as they were given to the questionnaire participants, the actual questionnaire handed out to the readers, the ANOVA tables, stages of moral reasoning, as well as the raw data of the empirical study (pp. 235–99). A bibliography and three indexes (subjects, authors, and biblical texts) round off the volume.

I found the volume intriguing and generally well-researched. The close reading of the Esther narratives in three different textual versions provides an interesting angle, especially in combination with the empirical study focusing on the development of ethical judgment in the modern reader. After all, the reading of Scripture is not only an academic enterprise, but leads to ethical and moral choices in the modern reader. Fountain has put her finger on this interconnection between ancient text and

the ethical choices of the modern reader, challenging academia to leave the ivory tower and connect with their churchd, unchurchd or non-Christian environments. While the language of the volume is mostly academic and in some cases technical (esp. for those of us not used to qualitative and quantitative research), its presentation is very instructing. For those reading the book of Esther, the book comes highly recommended.

Gerald A. Klingbeil

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, PHILIPPINES

---

*Pensar la Iglesia hoy: hacia una ecclesiología adventista*, edited by Gerald A. Klingbeil, Martin G. Klingbeil, and Miguel Ángel Núñez. Libertador San Martín, Argentina: Editorial Universidad Adventista del Plata, 2002. Pp. xxxii + 524. ISBN 987-98248-4-9. US\$ 25.00.

This book is based upon the papers presented during the IV Biblical-Theological South American Symposium, celebrated between August 30 and September 2, 2001 at River Plate Adventist University in Argentina. The volume deals with the topic of an Adventist ecclesiology from a South American perspective and is published in honor of Dr. Raoul Dederen, professor emeritus of the Theological Seminary at Andrews University.

The volume is divided into five sections: (1) exegesis and biblical foundations; (2) theological reflection; (3) historical perspectives; (4) cultural context; and (5) application and praxis.

In the section entitled "Exegesis and Biblical Foundation," Gerald Klingbeil ("Entre individualismo y colectivismo: hacia una perspectiva bíblica de la naturaleza de la iglesia," pp. 3-23), describes the tension between individualism versus collectivism and discusses diverse OT passages in relation to this issue. Based on the biblical evidence, the author describes some principles that help to understand the nature of the church in a broader context. Efraín Velasquez ("La tribu: hacia una ecclesiología adventista basada en la Escrituras Hebreas," pp. 25-40) looks at archeological and ethno-archeological studies in Jordan and suggests that the "tribal model" could be useful for the development of an Adventist ecclesiology rooted in the Hebrew Bible. Martin G. Klingbeil ("De lo profundo, Jehová a ti clamo'. Conocer al Dios de Israel a través del himnario veterotestamentario," pp. 41-56) studies how, through the use of different metaphors in the Psalms, the biblical authors tried to respond to the question of knowing God. Richard W. Medina ("La unidad de la iglesia según el Salmo 133," pp. 57-69), following the historical-grammatical method, presents the theological message of Psalm 133 for the church today. The unity of the church could be