

BOOK REVIEW

The Queen and the Spymaster: A Novel Based on the Story of Esther. Sandra E. Rapoport (Brooklyn, New York: Penlight, 2019). 499 + xix pp. Reviewed by David J. Zucker

At 500 plus pages, undoubtedly this is the world's longest Purim spiel. The title accurately frames the contents, as this work is "based on the story of Esther." In the JPS Bible commentary on *Esther*, Adele Berlin characterizes that work as farce, burlesque (exaggerated caricature types, preposterous situations, broad verbal humor), and satire. There are "ludicrous edicts...foppish royal court...officials, and a wooden adherence to nonsensical laws." Defining low comedy as "exaggeration, caricature...coincidences, improbabilities, and verbal humor...[Berlin explains that most] of these features are prominent in [the book of] Esther" (xix). She adds that the "facts" suggested in Esther are fantastic. They are hard to take seriously. There are no records of a Persian queen named Esther; queens are chosen from noble Persian families, not ethnic minorities; Ahasuerus treats his (first) queen Vashti like a concubine; no king could act as Ahasuerus did; and the suggested annihilation of the Jews in ancient Persia, a country relatively benevolent to its ethnic groups, is absurd. That the Persian ruler, Cyrus the Great, permitted the Jews to return to Judah goes unmentioned in the book. Further, it is incredible that Esther hides her Jewish ethnicity until the crucial moment.

Yet, on another level, the biblical book of Esther is a very serious work. Lillian R. Klein (*From Deborah to Esther: Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible*) points out that there are political aspects to this book, which highlight power and powerlessness. "As exiles, the Jews are in a 'dependent' position, one associated with females, whereas autonomy and power are associated with males. These male and female 'roles' – representing, respectively, honor and shame – not only permeate the book of Esther, but also are used to

David J. Zucker, PhD, before retiring, served as Rabbi/Chaplain and Director of Chaplaincy Care at Shalom Park in Aurora, Colorado. He led North West Surrey Synagogue, Weybridge, Surrey, UK as their interim rabbi 2014-2017. His recent publications include The Bible's Prophets: An Introduction for Christians and Jews (Wipf and Stock: 2013); The Bible's Writings: An Introduction for Christians and Jews (Wipf and Stock: 2013); and [with Moshe Reiss, z"l] The Matriarchs of Genesis: Seven Women, Five Views (Wipf and Stock: 2015. His latest book is American Rabbis: Facts and Fiction, Second Edition, (Wipf and Stock, 2019).

‘shame’ the culture in which the Israelites are exiled and, by comparison, to ‘honor’ the Israelites” (95).

Most of the above comments about the biblical book of Esther are applicable to Rapoport’s novel. Many of the characters are caricatures. Haman is cunning, cruel and rapacious (and he is not even the most villainous character in the book). Ahasuerus (in the book named Xerxes) is quick-tempered, distrustful and sexually-charged. Mordecai is brave, virtuous, powerful, resourceful, and wise. Then there are a host of sub-characters, some nineteen females and forty-eight males. In her introduction Rapoport correctly writes that in her novel one “will discover a rich and intricate tale of ambition and espionage; evil and revenge; magic and love; death and survival. [She also notes that there is] a labyrinthine hotbed of jostling factional loyalties, political intrigue, sensuality, and unrelenting tension” (xiii).

The book reads like a blend between pulp fiction, romance novels, and a book-length version of superhero comic books. My concern is that there are readers who would take this work too seriously. Recently the Anti-Defamation League published a new Guide to Anti-Semitic Tropes (2020). Two of these were that Jews have too much power and that Jews are disloyal. In terms of power, throughout the book there is the enigmatic figure of the Spymaster who works stealthily behind the scenes. In terms of untrustworthiness, Mordecai is part of a secret society termed the Sanhedrin Brotherhood (5-8; 18, 21-22, 76, etc.). They hide their being Jews. At one point Mordecai remarks to one of the Brotherhood, “You know the old saw: *How can you be a loyal and good Persian if you are also a Jew?* ... it is far better to keep our origins secret” (43, italics in original). Of course, Haman and his crew have their own group, the Amalek Baradari (111-113, etc.), and their own amplified villain.

Though a long work and almost infinitely convoluted and melodramatic throughout, it is a quick and somewhat entertaining read. Long, long descriptions are interspersed with dramatic dialogue. It is indeed the world’s longest Purim spiel.