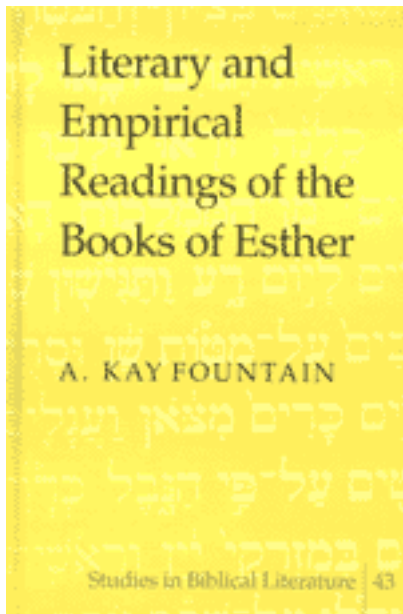


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Fountain, A. Kay

Literary and Empirical Readings of the Books of Esther

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Unlike some other books of the Hebrew Bible found in the Ketubim, the book of Esther is relatively well studied from the literary viewpoint (research by Berg, Brenner, Clines, Craig, Fisch, Fox, Greenstein, and others). However, certain important aspects of the book have been neglected until recently. The monograph by A. Kay Fountain, which represents a reworked version of her doctoral thesis (written at the Auckland University under the supervision of Dr. Tim Bulkeley), is, in my view, a breakthrough in the literary research of Esther and a valuable contribution to biblical studies as a whole. It offers an exceptionally high level of scientific exactitude—a rare quality in our field—and can also be regarded as a successful application of the “reader-response” approach, alongside the immanent analysis of the biblical text. The author also endeavors to test the literary theory empirically, something that is almost never done in biblical studies. Her attempt seems to me interesting and convincing.

In fact, Fountain analyzes three books of Esther: the Masoretic Text (MT) and two Greek versions—the Alpha Text (AT) and the LXX translation (BT). Until recent times research on Esther progressed along two parallel paths: the textual history was of interest for the relationship between the various versions of the text (see, e.g., the well-known monograph by Clines), while literary analysis focused on the MT. The first to provide a

literary approach to the three variants of the book *on equal footing*, without giving preference to one variant over the others, was Linda Day's monograph *Three Faces of a Queen: Characterization in the Books of Esther* (1995), which focuses on the character of Esther and neglects other characters. Fountain also mentions the work of Karen Jobes (1996) and Charles Dorothy (1997), but according to her own characterization of these studies they belong to the field of text history and not to that of the biblical literary analysis (25–26).

Fountain's monograph is, in fact, the first attempt at a literary approach to the book of Esther that systematically takes into consideration three versions of the text and provides a parallel description of all its main characters. The research consists of two stages. In the first stage (chs. 3–5) the author focuses on an immanent literary analysis of the texts, while in the second one (ch. 6) she studies the responses of different groups of readers to the book(s) of Esther, which confirm her conclusions. Such a double procedure is, as I have remarked above, virtually unique in our field. However, even the first stage of the research is quite original from the methodological viewpoint and leads to interesting results. The author studies the impact of such factors as the order of story elements, narrative speed (the last term is borrowed from Bar Efrat), and point of view/perspective on the characterization of the literary characters of the book. This is the advantage of the parallel analysis of several versions of the same text: one can see how minor differences in the narrative structure influence the system of characters. For example, in the Greek versions of Esther the uncovering of the eunuchs' plot by Mordecai is placed *before* the king's banquet. In AT the king rewards Mordecai by appointing him a doorkeeper and making Haman his assistant. In BT Mordecai is "commanded . . . to serve in the court," while Haman "[seeks] to do evil to Mordecai and to his people on account of the two eunuchs of the king." The effect of the order of the story elements upon the characterization of Haman is clear: his hatred toward Mordecai is more personal than it is in the MT. At the same time, "[while] Haman is still seen as an insecure and despotic person, he is somewhat more understandable than the character in the MT who would kill an entire race simply because one person wouldn't bow down to him" (35). According to Fountain, variations in the narrative structure of the book affect the characterization of Mordecai, Esther, and Ahasuerus as well (31–39).

Another important aspect of the text structure affecting, among others, the system of characters, is the narrative speed. According to Bar Efrat, the narrative speed (and its opposite, the narrative density) is related to "variations in narrated time in relation to narration time, ranging from scenic representation to summary account," enabling one to "discover the narrative's focal points and the relative importance of its various subjects" (quotation on 39). Fast narrative speed means low narrative density, and vice versa. The author measures the narrative speed/density by means of the word count (in absolute

terms and in relationship to the text length). She arrives at interesting results, some of which, it is true, allow a different interpretation from that proposed in the monograph. So, while discussing chapter 1 of MT, the author notes that the narrative speed becomes especially low when the text deals with the reactions of the men to Vashti's refusal and with the speech of Memucan. She rightly concludes that these events constitute the focus of the whole chapter and offers the following interpretation: "[the variation of the narrative speed in this chapter] shows [the men] as insecure and hysterical in the face of a single challenge to their authority" (41). This interpretation is quite acceptable (although one should not exaggerate the "protofeminism" of the implied author of the MT), but, without rejecting it, I would like to supply another one, more in accordance with the tendencies of the text itself. In my view, the slowing down of the narrative speed at the end of Esth 1 highlights one of the central themes of the MT, that of the established order, custom, and law, a theme that finds its expression in the frequent use of the word *dāt* (cf. 138–43) and in the question "What is to be done to . . . ?"

Generally speaking, one can say that the approach to the texts chosen by Fountain bears a quantitative character already at the first, "theoretical" stage of the research. It can be viewed in the context of such methods as content analysis or "quantification of ideology" proposed by the Russian scholar Boris Yarkho as early as in the twenties. In fact, the author could be more explicit about the methodological context of her work. For example, already the study of the point of view/perspective (ch. 4) is a fine specimen of reader-response criticism, which is not mentioned in the monograph, although the author uses the term "implied reader," introduced in the framework of this approach. It is still truer regarding the second, "empirical" part of the research, where the author deals not with implied readers but with real ones. The empirical analysis of the perception of the three variants of the book of Esther by different groups of contemporary readers, carried out with the help of statistical methods, largely confirms the conclusions made by the author at the "theoretical" stage of her research. It shows significant differences between churched and unchurched, male and female readership.

Summarizing, one can say that Fountain's monograph is both methodologically novel and convincing. Therefore, this book can be recommended to biblicists of different profiles, not only to those interested in the literary study of Esther.