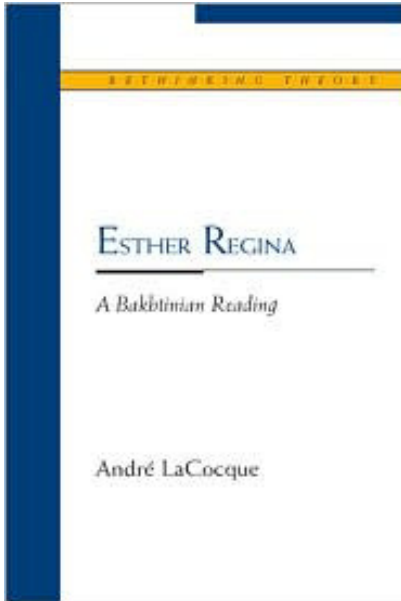


RBL 12/2009



LaCocque, André

Esther Regina: A Bakhtinian Reading

Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2008. Pp. 200. Paper. \$24.95. ISBN 9780810124592.

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As its subtitle announces, *Esther Regina* is a Bakhtinian reading of the book of Esther, particularly focused on its Hebrew version. The book belongs to Northwestern University Press's series Rethinking Theory. It is indeed a welcome tool in the enterprise of rethinking biblical hermeneutics out of new encounters and challenges. It is not, and this is clearly stated by the author from the start, a commentary on Esther. Therefore, it is no surprise that the book's outline and development do not follow those of the book of Esther.

The book is divided into eight chapters (plus an appendix with the book of Esther's structure). The first is the longest chapter of the book. It is also by far the one where Bakhtin's insights are dealt with more systematically. It deals with Esther's literary genre (the *Diasporanovella*) and with issues related to it, such as time and space within the story (Bakhtin's *chronotope*), irony (the carnivalesque), the canonical status of Esther, possible dating, and others. Although LaCocque has reflected for a long time on the use of irony in this and other novellas, Bakhtin has fed him anew on this matter. The Bakhtinian concepts of laughter and the carnivalesque as ironic and subversive means are profusely used throughout the chapter (indeed, throughout the whole book); monologism or dialogism, and *monoglossia*, *poliglossia*, and *heteroglossia* are discussed in relation to the

use of the language (*langue*) by the different actors and actresses in Esther (25–31). Other concepts, such as *unfinalizability*, are mentioned but do not play a key role in LaCocque’s analysis. A perusal at his endnotes throughout the book, however, show that there are abundant references to and quotations of Bakhtinian concepts.

Chapters 2 and, to a certain extent 3, are the least innovative, yet they prepare the ground for the remaining chapters. In chapter 2 LaCocque deals with the worldly powers (“The Book of Esther and The Powers That Be”), particularly with oppressive, authoritarian “Persian” political power. Here he tackles issues of historicity and dating, as well as more philosophical and dangerous questions that pertain to the realm of ethical decisions, long-past and recently past regimes that deem their laws (and whims) immutable, and even the quality of Mordecai’s and Esther’s authority as they hold the royal signet. While dating the book to the Hellenistic era and especially to Antiochus’s dark times, LaCocque contends that the Babylonian Akitu, merged with the New Year festival, provides the background for the casting of lots (*purim*). Marduk’s victory will become Mordecai’s (33), and the Queen of Heaven, Ishtar, will become the Queen of Persia.

Mainly by comparison and contrast, chapter 3 (“The Secularism of the Book of Esther”) deals with the secular character of this *novella* over against other biblical texts. Attention is called to its lack of any Zion theology, Mosaic law, land and temple nostalgia, and especially to no qualms on the part of Esther in sharing her table and bed with a pagan tyrant. These are, indeed, remarkable facts. However, “secular” is perhaps a misleading adjective, as even the hero’s and heroine’s “public” names reflect the religious realm in which they move.

In chapter 4 (“A Trio of Women: Vashti, Esther, Zeresh”), trios and duets abound. On the one hand, there is a very unconventional trio of women. A Persian queen, deposed and probably turned into a concubine, sets the story in motion and disappears from it. At the same time (although appearing later in the story), there is another well-established, well-off, presumably Persian woman, Zeresh. She is married to the kingdom’s vizier, Haman, before losing everything: husband, prestige, estate, and sons. Finally, an orphan Jewish girl manages to turn her luck around and becomes the new queen. These are three but amount to more, either because of the development of their character (“Clearly, the Esther figure has gone through a dramatic transformation: from a coy harem inmate to a wise, independent, and prudent woman,” 51) or because of the ambiguous role they play in the story. These women hardly are what they appear to be at first. Vashti is not a parade sexual object, Esther is more than a nice Jewish girl, and Zeresh is an (unwitting?) prophetess of doom. The chapter deals also with the masked, Janus-like, double-faced characteristics of Esther and Mordecai. Not only have each of them two names corresponding to two identities, but they “are the two faces of one reality” (57).

Furthermore, not even the worse villain in the story (and to a certain extent also Ahasuerus by default) is plain in his evil intentions. All of them are more than they appear to be, and some of them are (morally) less than they should be!

Perhaps this chapter would have been an appropriate place to reflect on the dyadic nature of several affairs and characters of the story and more generally on “juggling with numbers,” which the author discusses at the end of chapter 7 (111–15).

By far the most interesting chapters are, in my view, chapters 5 and 8. In the former, “In the Background: Israel versus Amalek,” LaCocque explores the intertextuality between our text and 1 Sam 15. King Saul had fought Agag and had prevailed against him, but he had failed to observe God’s command of *herem*, of utterly destroying all lives and devoting all property to the Lord. That serious breach of obedience had cost Saul his kingship. But even more serious, he had missed one chance of righting a wrong in the ongoing strife against evil, the ongoing strife between Israel’s and Amalek’s descendants. Against this background information, Esther represents a new encounter between these two forces, LaCocque argues persuasively. “In short, the most important feature of 1 Samuel 15 was the representative role of its characters.... In Esther, these are replaced by Esther and Mordecai as the Janus-face of diaspora Jewishness, with Haman as the latest monological avatar of (Amalekite) wickedness” (68).

This heavy background explains both the counterdict that allows the Jews to attack their enemies and the fact that no personal belongings are taken from those killed. Booty is not the goal, but annihilation of the enemy forces. Yet, LaCocque ponders, the enemy’s possessions must change hands in order to observe poetic justice. Thus, Mordecai is entrusted with his estate and the dilemma is solved.

Chapter 6, “Banqueting and Festivities,” pays especial attention to Purim, to its Babylonian background (Old Babylonian *puru*, “fate”), to the Greek versions of its name in the different manuscripts, and to several other facts. The chapter indeed shows LaCocque’s extensive knowledge, which is displayed not for its own sake but for the sake of showing how religious Esther actually is—religious in the best sense of the word, religious in that it relates to its neighbors and their own sacred times. Purim is to Esther what Passover is to Exodus, LaCocque shows. In both a new festival is created for the Jews’ benefit. In both, life is at risk and deliverance is expected. In both, celebrating is called for. Yet, in order to have a feast, Esther must first fast. The casting of lots by Haman and the impending peril for all Jews in “Persia” at the time of Easter turns into deliverance, even if Yahweh is very much in the background on this stage.

Chapter 7 (“The Book of Esther Interprets and Is Interpreted”) looks at the Greek versions of the book and at intertextuality, especially with Exodus and Daniel, another wise man in a foreign court. As one might expect, there are several comparisons with another persecuted Jew from the same period, Joseph (these are interspersed throughout the book, especially in the last chapter). He and Esther are socially low as they start, both get to know some kind of prison in their exile (in Esther, it is the harem), and both suffered sexual harassment or at least unwanted sex. Yet, and this is not clearly stated in *Esther Regina*, because of his being a man, Joseph was given the possibility of saying no to sexual harassment, which is seen as hideous. True, he ended up in jail, but he did not have to submit to unwanted, albeit legal, sex.

Chapter 8 reflects on two facts that converge in Esther: her femaleness and her Jewishness (“Otherness: The Women and the Jews”). Here LaCocque takes up some concepts already developed in an earlier book (*The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990], 49–83). Like several of her biblical sisters, Esther is an example of the Bible’s appreciation of women who act wisely, astutely, valiantly, and at times with great piety, to achieve what needs to be achieved for her own and her people’s sake. True, it took some work and some time for her to develop from “a Barbie doll” to a queen in her own right, but she managed. Womanhood and Jewishness are two characteristics that conflate in Esther, an association that, LaCocque states, is not accidental in the book (126). However, these two conditions (“liabilities” in many people’s minds) are not treated together but as separate issues. I cannot but wonder if and how could LaCocque (and perhaps even Bakhtin) have illuminated this explosive combination. There is no doubt whatsoever that anti-Semitism and chauvinism are among the evils most fiercely fought by LaCocque.

LaCocque’s writing style is clear and elegant, and he is well versed in the available scholarship, including rabbinic sources and literary theory. His work will best be appreciated by colleagues from the biblical and theological fields as well as from literature and philosophy. He has put into practice himself that *dialogism* so much praised in Bakhtin. Most used is the theme of the carnivalesque, in its manifold manifestations, old and current, from the north and the south, as a counterpolitical manifestation in countries with totalitarian regimes or as an exotic, ethnic festival. Carnival, LaCocque amply demonstrates, can momentarily erase ethics as well as politics; it can uplift laughter and irony; it can become the chosen tool for prophetic denunciation, court intrigue, or sheer survival. Esther is full of ironies, of ambiguities, even of death, and this essay manages to bring them to light in dialogue with past and present ironies, ambiguities, and even death.

Since our own experience determines how we read, I submit two final comments stemming from the fact that the place from which I read is quite different from the author's. These in no way lessen the value of the book reviewed. Rather, they are issues *I* would have stressed further.

First, I would have liked something more about women in Esther. I appreciate the author's optimism, especially when he can hardly be accused of naiveté. See, for instance, his comment on Esther when she is brought to the palace: "Beauty here is not a static quality, however.... Thus, sexuality suddenly takes on a meaning beyond eroticism and reproduction" (118). Similar comments on the use of sex and power by the king would also apply, to the author's credit. And while it is true that this little story has a positive approach toward women, at least those women who gain access to the elite in power, and "Esther accedes from king's bedfellow to real queenship" (130), it is also true that once her mission is accomplished, she (like Ruth, Judith, and many others) is retired by the narrator to the background, never to have any role again. LaCocque recognizes this in passing in an note, but there is no reflection on a phenomenon that happens too often to be chance, a phenomenon, furthermore, that is part also of the appreciation of women in the Bible.

The second point has to do with the very thorny issue of the state machinery that allows for a people's annihilation without further ado. At times LaCocque voices strong opinions, especially when discussing Haman's intended annihilation or "final solution" of the Jews. Yes, any attempt at annihilation of a people should raise strong voices against it, and, yes, there is a long and tragic history of persecution of the Jews, so that the awareness that Amalek rises time and again from its own ashes is well-founded. However, this reviewer cannot help consider "the powers that be" at work in our present day and that LaCocque's book is intended mainly for people in the United States, one of those powers that be that has made enemies all over the world, that has issued death blows against unarmed peoples with no "second edict" that would allow them self-defense, that has aided dictatorial regimes that have killed thousands. Thus, I wish the book's lament came equally strongly over those killed by the Jews after the second edict, because, in the end, that second edict was still issued by one of the powers that be, penned by a different hand, yet sealed with the same royal signet. I recognize the great irony in such a development, and indeed that is a constraint set by the book of Esther itself and not by its scholar. However, I would have liked the author to explore other possibilities that would, at least, have lessened the fundamentalistic (Bakhtin and LaCocque call it "monologic") answer to a fundamentalistic attack, for one fundamentalism needs another in order to find its justification.

In sum, there are people in our professional or academic lives who remain a teacher. No matter how much we grow, they are always a step ahead of us. André LaCocque is one of them, to whom I am very grateful.