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Empire and Gender in LXX Esther

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This book provides a synchronic literary reading of LXX Esther with the Additions by combining various approaches to expose the intersection of gender and imperial power. It consists of eight chapters. At the beginning of each chapter, Stone clearly outlines the objectives and methodically presents how the subordinates negotiate power, as portrayed in the protagonists (Vashti, Mordecai, and Esther). In the conclusion of each chapter, Stone recaps what was discussed and introduces the topic of the following chapter. Also posited in each chapter is how earliest audiences may have found connections with the protagonists' acts of defiance and how these acts might empower them to defend, defy, or maneuver in a land not their own.

Chapter 1 is devoted to laying out the premises and methods of the research. It starts with an extensive discussion on the textual history, dating, and provenance of LXX Esther. This is needed largely due to the difficulty of dating the translation/compilation/writing of the book. Also addressed are the two plausible reading locations for the earliest readers of LXX Esther: Jews in Ptolemaic Alexandria and Hasmonean Judea in the first century BCE. To conduct the synchronic reading of LXX Esther, Stone employs imperial-critical approaches, which comprise literary criticism, historical criticism, social-scientific models, postcolonial studies, and gender studies. She mainly relies on the work of James C. Scott and concepts from postcolonial studies to define the varied and complex forms of negotiation of power that subordinate people employ. A review of the various approaches employed prepares readers for their applications in the biblical texts.

In chapter 2 Stone argues that “Addition A (11:2–12; 12:1–6) frames LXX Esther as a theocentric story in which the competition for hegemonic masculinity between God and Artaxerxes is waged by their representatives—Mordecai (and eventually Esther as well) and Haman respectively” (69). Mordecai is portrayed as someone with an ambivalent colonized, hybridized identity: he is a Jerusalemite captive who rises to power within the Persian king’s court; he is both a faithful Jew and a loyal Persian subject. Mordecai’s dream in Addition A functions as a symbolic inversion, giving agency to those under oppressive power to express their discontent in coded language and to imagine a reversal in which the oppressed become the oppressors. The dream contains prophetic/apocalyptic imageries (dragons and rivers) to demonstrate God’s intervention against oppressive rulers and deliverance of righteous people. The result of this cosmic clash is God’s victory over earthly rulers and God’s superior hegemonic masculinity over Persian imperial power and the cosmos. Stone ends the chapter with a discussion of Mordecai’s negotiation of imperial power by performing an act of deference. He reports the eunuchs’ plot to assassinate the king and is rewarded by being elevated to a position of power.

Chapters 3 and 4 examine Vashti’s defiance against Artaxerxes and Persian imperial power (1:1–12a) and the imperial responses to Vashti’s defiance (1:12b–2:20). To defy the king is to challenge his hegemonic masculine power and “the hegemonic masculinity upon which Persian imperial power is built” (101). Stone presents Vashti’s public protest and negotiation of defiance (ch. 3). Vashti hosts a drinking party for the women in the same palace where the king has his drinking party with his male guests. When she is summoned to come to the king in order to proclaim her as queen, to place a diadem on her head, and to have her display her beauty to demonstrate and bolster his masculine imperial power, Vashti defies the king’s command. In doing so, she rejects the king’s claim over her body and refuses to “play her part in the performance of power” (124). Fearing Vashti’s insubordination could threaten the masculine imperial order, Artaxerxes acts to stabilize by issuing two decrees: all women must be submissive to their household patriarchy, and Vashti must be replaced (ch. 4). Vashti’s defiance and banishment set the stage for the rest of the story. Esther, a Jew, is chosen as Vashti’s replacement, and her agency of negotiation intensifies as the story unfolds.

Chapter 5 centers on another challenger of Artaxerxes’s hegemonic masculinity—Mordecai (2:21–3:13; 13:1–7; 3:14). After Artaxerxes promotes Haman to second-in-command in all of Persia and when Artaxerxes issues a command requiring all to give Haman obeisance, Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman. Mordecai does not give him the recognition he deserves or the hegemonic masculinity he represents. Mordecai’s refusal elicits anger from Haman, for his honor and masculinity have been challenged. By proxy, it also jeopardizes the king’s honor and hegemonic masculinity and the Persian state’s masculine imperial rule. To restabilize imperial order, Haman employs a discourse of difference and defiance to recommend the extermination of all Persian Jews, a recommendation that Artaxerxes accepts. This ensues in Esther’s (and Mordecai’s) involvement as God’s agents in the negotiation for the deliverance of God’s people from annihilation.

Chapters 6–8 present Esther as the negotiator of power. In chapter 6 Stone examines the public and hidden subordinate transcripts of negotiation in response to the irrevocable imperial decree of extermination and Esther’s progression in agency to negotiate as God’s representative, not Mordecai’s (3:15–4:17; 13:8–14:19). In 4:8 Mordecai asks Esther to change her mode of negotiation from disguised to overt by going to the king and begging him directly on behalf of their people. Esther’s response is one of refusal, which suggests that Esther prefers the disguised mode—a method that works best for her. Stone then shifts the focus to Esther’s preparation for negotiation by beseeching God for help. Chapter 7 proceeds with Esther’s first negotiation with Artaxerxes as a representative of God (15:1–16; 5:3–6:13), highlighting Esther’s methods of negotiation, which include flattery, euphemism, deference, and performances of feminine frailty and sexuality in anonymity. Chapter 8 continues with Stone’s analysis of Esther’s second and third acts of negotiation (6:14–8:12; 16:1–24; 8:13–14; 8:15–11:1), in which Esther utilizes methods of deference, performances of sexuality, and mimicry. Stone points out that Esther’s primary means of negotiation are performances of frailty and sexuality (259). Her efforts result in the elimination of Haman, the deliverance of her people, and the establishment of God’s superiority. Mordecai becomes the king’s second-in-command, replacing Haman. It thus brings Mordecai’s symbolic dream of inversion to fulfillment, and God’s universal hegemonic masculinity is secured.

Stone’s work is a welcome addition to scholarship on LXX Esther, specifically reading it through the lenses of empire and gender. It demonstrates careful research and Stone’s competent command of the subjects. Readers not acquainted with empire and gender studies will be able to follow easily Stone’s writing, which is lucid and engaging, coherent and compelling, readable and direct without sacrificing critical scholarship. Greek words are used but are followed by English translations. In Stone’s work readers will find an excellent model and an effective platform of how to conduct synchronic readings of other biblical texts with imperial and gender perspectives.

A surprising aspect of the book is Stone’s assertion about God’s masculinity and sexuality. In her discussion of Mordecai and Esther’s hidden conversation of negotiation (4:4–17), Stone asserts: “Sexual potency has been found to be a fundamental characteristic of masculinity, especially for kings. Therefore Esther urges God not to surrender God’s own phallus, God’s life-giving power, to worthless idols that have no being, or possibly even to Haman or Artaxerxes, so that God’s own sexual potency and masculinity are not defeated” (218). Stone’s assertion warrants further attention. Nowhere in the book does Stone connect God’s masculinity with sexuality or God with sexual potency. Given the weight of the statement, Stone does not provide textual evidence or engage with other scholars to substantiate her assertion. A thorough explanation might not change readers’ minds, but it will at least explain how Stone comes to such a conclusion.

Aside from the observation raised in the preceding paragraph, this study deserves the attention of scholars, students, and other readers of LXX Esther. In it readers will find Artaxerxes not as the savior of the Jews but as someone who is primarily interested in the maintenance of his power and

hegemonic masculinity. Readers will also find that Esther is not as submissive to patriarchy and gendered expectations as often interpreted but is a gender-liminal and subversive character who negotiates imperial power through her body or performances of gender, including sexuality and femininity. She becomes “a beneficiary and agent of imperial power” (299). As second-in-command, Esther “holds the power to bend Persia to her will” (290). Stone’s integrative analyses of the plot of the story and the characters, particularly Esther, are illuminating and thought-provoking.