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Stephanie Dalley, Esther's Revenge at Susa: From Sennacherib to Ahasuerus

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Dalley, Stephanie, *Esther's Revenge at Susa: From Sennacherib to Ahasuerus* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Pp. xv + 262. Hardcover, US\$99.00. ISBN 978-0-19-921663-5.

Stephanie Dalley argues the book of Esther is a demythologized adaptation of a myth involving Marduk and Ishtar that was based on the Assyrian sack of Susa in c.647 BCE. Esther therefore reflects actual events of the Late Assyrian period. Dalley presents her argument in two parts, "The Background in Assyrian History and Literature" (chs. 1–6) and "Transition to a Jewish Story" (chs. 7–9).

The first two chapters highlight the reigns of the Sargonid kings, the fall of the empire, and the post-imperial history of Nineveh, which flourished into Seleucid times. Chapter three reviews the vexed relations between the Assyrians, Babylonians, and Elamites. The Assyrians, in an attempt to shift guilt, blamed the Elamites for the necessity of Assyrian hostilities against Babylon in 689 and 648. In a brutal act of retribution, the Assyrians sacked Susa in 647. Assyrian inscriptions describe this event as an attack led by Marduk and Ishtar, who defeated the Elamite god Humban. Dalley believes this act of revenge and its mythological depiction in Assyrian texts lie at the root of the book of Esther, where Mordecai, Esther, and Haman replace the three gods. This background also explains why the book portrays "so bloodthirsty an act of vengeance" as it does (82).

Throughout these chapters Dalley emphasizes how historical events inspired literary texts. For example, the *Ordeal of Marduk*, a cultic commentary that depicts Marduk's imprisonment and ill-fortune, may reflect Sennacherib's destruction of Babylon and taking Marduk into captivity in 689. The *Tale of Ahiqar* may be connected to Esarhaddon's involvement in the murder of Sennacherib. And the *Demotic Tale of Ashurbanipal and Shamash-shum-ukin* from the fourth century bce depicts the seventh century Assyrian civil war. The destruction of Susa in 647 may also have elicited a mythological text, an idea explicitly assumed in chapter eight and discussed in chapter nine.

Chapter four examines Assyrian influence on Palestine and Egypt. Presenting a new understanding of Assyrian-Egyptian relations in the seventh century, Dalley demonstrates that both powers affected one another culturally, though Assyrian influence on Egypt continued long after the empire's demise. One notable Egyptian impact on Sargonid Assyria is the novel prominence given to queens in inscriptions and sculpture, a prominence reflected also in the book of Esther.

In chapter five Dalley discusses the cultic commentaries, the Demotic tales about the Assyrian period, and letters to the gods in more detail. She also surveys court narratives written in

Akkadian, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek and shows how these were sometimes updated, creating anachronisms and historical infelicities in the process. Throughout the chapter Dalley emphasizes the role of the heroine in the stories she discusses, women like Sammu-ramat, Sherua-eterat, Naqia, Semiramis, and Judith. She also finds an explanation for the “elements of ridicule and satire” in Esther by appeal to the Assyrian court jester (Akk. *aluzinnu*), who “satirized pretentious behaviour” (132). The literary discussions in this chapter range far and wide, but each is presented in order to throw new light on the biblical book or to explain how late literary texts can reflect events of a much earlier time in a distant land (e.g., fourth century bce Demotic tales about Ashurbanipal). This chapter rewards the reader with far more than some new suggestions for the background of Esther.

In chapter six Dalley posits a genetic relationship between the dates in the Book of Esther and festal characteristics of Purim and between the cultic calendar of Ishtar-of-Nineveh and various festal activities associated with her. Although the chapter is informative, the evidence for her main point is slender and tenuous.

Part II begins with chapters dedicated to finding more connections between Esther and Late Assyria. Chapter seven briefly catalogs various loanwords (e.g., Assyrian *pūru*), calques (e.g., Heb. כסא מלכות for Akk. *kussi šarrūtīšu*), customs (e.g., consulting court experts), and stylistic features (e.g., “the use of pairs and triplets of words with the same meaning,” p. 182) in Esther that indicate Assyrian influence. Dalley believes these items provide clues that an early, Aramaic version of what would become Esther was composed shortly after the fall of Susa in 647. Later elements in the book are explained as editorial reworkings.

Chapter eight continues looking at Esther for links to Late Assyria and tackles the issue of how this strange book and its peculiar festival found their way into the Jewish canon. Dalley identifies several groups who would have pushed for its inclusion, including Jews in Egypt. But she focuses on eighth century Israelite deportees to Assyria who never returned to Israel. All of the proposed groups “had reason to call [Purim] by an Assyrian word and to relate it to a story which was linked to the cultic calendar of Ishtar-of-Nineveh” (p. 189). The keys to her argument are the supposed vestiges of Ishtar-of-Nineveh’s cultic calendar in Esther and the assumption that the sack of Susa elicited a mythological text much like the *Ordeal of Marduk*. She goes on to explain how assuming the Assyrian sack of Susa as the story’s background explains several features in the text: e.g., the casting of lots, the massacre of multitudes, and the weakness of an imperial king. Dalley then bridges the time between the book’s putative origin and its inclusion in the Jewish canon with two steps. First, she shows the continuation of some local Mesopotamian cults and the ritual texts associated with them. The cult of Ishtar-of-Nineveh *may* have continued into the Common Era and some Jews living in the area *could have* adapted some of their practices and texts into their religious repertoire. Second, she appeals to the kingdom of Adiabene, located in the former Assyrian empire, and its famous royal family, Queen Helena and her son Izates, who converted to Judaism in the mid-first century ce. Finding themselves ruling over Jews who celebrated Purim, this royal family “may have been influential in gaining acceptance for the book of Esther and the Purim festival” among Jews outside their kingdom. I think it is reasonable to believe some Mesopotamian cults continued into the Common Era and plausible to appeal to the royal family at Adiabene as benefactors of Mesopotamian Jews. But gaps in the evidence (e.g., we do not actually know how long the Ishtar-of-Nineveh cult persisted after the Assyrian

empire) and questions these raise for Dalley's developmental scenario (see below) cause her ideas to fall short of convincing.

In chapter nine Dalley offers a synthesis of how a story about the gods sacking Susa became a Jewish "historical" tale. Beginning with the presumed Assyrian texts about the sack of Susa, Dalley explicates the evolution of the tale, how this relates to the diverse Jewish versions of the story, and how, due to its genre as court literature, its updating created (for us) the historical infelicities we see in the text (she compares Esther with Ahiqar, Judith, Tobit, and *The Cambyses Romance*). Dalley then examines possible Samaritan involvement in the acceptance of Esther. She argues the book of Esther may have originated with an early, unorthodox Samaritan group living in Mesopotamia, perhaps in Nineveh, Arbela, and/or Harran. These Jews would have eventually come under the rule of the Adiabene royals, who, as argued in chapter 8, may have pushed for the book's inclusion in a Jewish canon.

There is much for one to learn reading through this wide-ranging and daring hypothesis. But the nature of the evidence and the several requisite assumptions required by the argument will probably hinder biblical scholars from accepting the thesis as a whole. One especially glaring problem in the hypothesis that nagged me throughout the book is admitted by Dalley only near its end: "The transformation of the deities Marduk and Ishtar into the mortals Mordecai and Esther has no parallels in other court narratives" (224). One assumes, of course, that monotheistic Jews would have made this transformation. But that reasonable assumption does not speak to the presumption that they borrowed the myth in the first place. On a more methodological note, one expects at least a brief discussion or definition of "myth" in a book that talks so much about historical events transforming into such. Dalley assumes, apparently, "myth" is any story about the gods. A more nuanced view, e.g., "myth" is an authoritative narrative that reflects and simultaneously shapes communal ideology, would have underlined how the book of Esther, although set among mortals, is also a myth because it legitimizes Purim.

The book is well-edited (though note נגג in Esther 7:7 is incorrectly identified on p. 173 as a plural construct), includes a bibliography, glossary, and two indices (general and selected-words), but is overpriced.

We should thank Stephanie Dalley for her original, thoughtful, and bold ideas. Even if one does not accept her hypothesis, the book offers many insights that will enrich one's reading of Esther.

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