
Yoram Hazony, *God and Politics in Esther*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016, 254 pp., \$29.99 (cloth).

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Yoram Hazony's *God and Politics in Esther*, an expanded edition of his previous book on the subject, *The Dawn*,¹ takes the form of a translation and commentary on the short, ten-chapter book of Esther, part of the Wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible. For those unfamiliar with the story: it concerns the machinations of Esther, wife of King Ahashverosh² of the Persians, and her foster father and cousin, Mordechai, as they try to prevent a massacre of all the Jews of Persia mandated by the vizier Haman because of Mordechai's refusal to bow to him. Disaster is averted, Haman is hanged on the gallows intended for Mordechai, and the Jews defeat their enemies in a two-day war waged in every province in Persia. This narrowly won victory is celebrated yearly as the Jewish holiday of Purim, a general festival of merrymaking which includes boisterous readings of the book.

Hazony's book is absorbing without ever being dense; indeed, I had to slow myself down while reading so as not to move through it too quickly. It is a pleasure to read, and an engaging work not only as biblical or philosophical commentary, but also as an exercise in close reading more generally. The discussion is wide-ranging, spanning the history of Western philosophy, current books on Esther, and the Talmudic commentary; this last aspect of

¹ Yoram Hazony, *The Dawn* (Jerusalem: Genesis Jerusalem Press, 1995).

² Ahashverosh is known in Greek as Xerxes—the same Xerxes who led the disastrous invasion of Greece thwarted by the Athenians at Salamis and a pan-Hellenic army at Plataea, as related by Herodotus. The king appears as unruly and dissolute in the biblical text as he does in the Greek.

the book was especially helpful, as Hazony manages to marshal the daunting profusion of religious commentary into an admirable order.

To begin with the title: it is not immediately clear that either God or politics plays much of a role in the book of Esther. It is, in fact, the only book of the Bible in which God is not mentioned; nor, as Hazony points out, do the protagonists evince much reverence for Jewish law (1). As for politics, the book seems to hinge on a series of coincidences: the queen just so happens to be Jewish, Ahashverosh's suspicion just so happens to fall upon Haman, Mordechai just so happens to have foiled a plot on the king's life in the past. Even though, as Hazony notes, there has been much recent scholarship on Esther, most of it reads the book as a quasi fairytale, full of miraculous coincidences.³ As for religious practice, while the book of Esther is read during the Purim celebration, it is accompanied by noise making (at every mention of Haman) and, often, drunkenness (Purim is the only Jewish festival in which one is commanded to drink to excess). The book, Hazony suggests, is not given the attention it deserves.

The matter was much different for the rabbis. Hazony cites frequently the Talmud: the rabbis thought that Esther ranked alongside the books of Moses in importance. The law, they said, had been given to the Jews twice, once at Sinai and once more, in exile, during the time of Esther. They even went so far as to state that Esther holds the key to an understanding of miracles (1–2).

It is in the spirit of recovering the meaning of the book of Esther, then, that Hazony begins his rereading of the book, and reading Esther along with the Talmudic tradition has the paradoxical effect of returning Esther to contemporary concerns. In Hazony's reading (as in the rabbis') Esther appears as a book about exile, a hidden god, and the possibilities of morality and politics in a corrupt world. Hazony's sources are not only rabbinical, however; while Plato on *thumos* and Nietzsche on godlessness both have their say, Hazony's primary Western philosophical companion through Esther is Machiavelli.

³ Hazony's scholarly interlocutors include Jon Levenson, *Esther: A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997); Frederic Bush, *Ruth and Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1996); Caroline Bechtel, *Esther*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2012); Adele Berlin, *Esther*, JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2001); Michael Walzer, *In God's Shadow: Politics in the Hebrew Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012); Michael Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); Aaron Koller, *Esther in Ancient Jewish Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

Hazony's Machiavellianism consists in the idea that power is necessary to secure stability and peace. One is not free to desist from power for the sake of purity; indeed, morality commands that one engage in the otherwise dirty task of political maneuvering if only to spare oneself, one's loved ones, and one's country from the machinations of those who have no qualms about purity or morality, such as the Amalekites in the Torah, Haman in Esther, or the armies of the kings of France and Spain in *The Prince*. Seen from this perspective, what other commentators consider to be coincidences in the book of Esther appear instead as Mordechai and Esther's reaping of the fruits of careful planning, the result of having built "dykes and barriers" against the rampaging tides of fortune (174–75).⁴

Hazony is concerned, in much of the book, with the means by which Mordechai and Esther position themselves so as to turn a potentially adverse fortune to their benefit. He reads the book as detailing the careful ways in which the two slowly cultivate power in order to drive a wedge between the capricious Ahashverosh and his scheming vizier Haman, with Esther finally becoming courageous enough to approach the king, though to do so unbidden risked death. Hazony derives the general principle that one cannot be saved by remaining weak but pure: "In politics, weakness does not attract the interest of strength, does not bring strength around to its cause, does not move strength to action. But strength attracts strength, and power attracts power. The strong have every reason to be attracted to those they believe to be strong, and to assist them in attaining their aims" (129). One must become strong or appear to become strong if one wants protectors and allies.

But political power is not to be valued for its own sake. As the title reminds us, the subject is not merely politics in Esther, but God as well. Esther begins with a demonstration of Ahashverosh's misshapen *eros*, as he, among other erotic misdeeds, throws a six-months-long drinking festival in the royal palace in order to demonstrate his wealth and win the love of his subjects. As a counterpart to Ahashverosh's *eros*, Esther also presents the figure of Haman, whose *thumos* is so outraged at Mordechai's refusal to bow to him that he vows to kill every Jew in Persia. Hazony interprets these figures as reminders of the monstrous aspect of the human spirit, the inordinate lust for power, ultimately tying this desire for power to the concept of idolatry. One way of viewing the proscription on idolatry is that God hated it and would punish those who indulged in it, as if it were itself harmless but God so happened

⁴ Compare *The Prince*, chap. 25.

not to like it. The rabbis, though, wrote that “the ultimate end of every idol was that it came to life in order to spit in its master’s face”; there is something inherently self-refuting and self-confounding about idolatry (42). It is from this point that Hazony begins to develop his theology.

The idol itself comes to life to spit in its master’s face; that is, the natural outcome of idolatry is destruction. *God and Politics in Esther* contains three chapters not originally printed in Hazony’s previous book on Esther, and in these three chapters Hazony attacks the common distinction between natural and divine causation.⁵ The common view, trained by natural science, is that nature is rationally explicable by its regularity; any violation of this regularity appears as a miracle (193). God, in this view, is relegated to “a god of the gaps,” that is, a mere explanatory device for those elements of nature that we do not yet understand (188). Nature and the world chug along as they are wont to until God intervenes in order to reward or punish, as he sees fit. Modern commentators misread Esther (as well as the whole Bible) in terms of this distinction between natural and divine causation.

Over against this view, Hazony posits God’s will as emergent from, but not reducible to, human and natural actions in a manner analogous to that in which tables and glasses of water, as objects, emerge from the atomic and sub-atomic particles which constitute them (193–94). As Hazony puts it: “Worldly justice is...understood to be the result of a law or regularity imposed by God. What we see as wonders or miracles are unusual or striking instances of justice appearing in the world. These wonders take place through human action or physical causes, with God’s action in the world being emergent upon these causes” (193). God’s will is not something over and above human beings that impinges upon them, but is, rather, the right ordering of human life. Or, as Mordechai puts it to Esther when she doubts whether she can convince Ahashverosh to prevent the destruction of the Jews: “Who knows whether it was not for such a time as this that you came into royalty?” (Esther 4:14). That is, who can say whether this is not God’s will that you risk death to go before the king to prevent the destruction of the Jews? This is why the rabbis considered Esther to be *the* book on miracles: miracles are real, but they depend on human action in order to become manifest.

Even beyond the Machiavellian analysis of power, which constitutes the bulk of Hazony’s work, this final lesson of Esther is what is most remarkable

⁵ The addition of these three chapters to the original twenty-three of *The Dawn* brings the final number of chapters to twenty-six, coincidentally the same number of chapters as in *The Prince*.

in it. Hazony has nothing less in mind than to provide a framework through which it is possible to read the Bible in a vital way, by making explicit (and so disarming) contemporary prejudices. The book of Esther, rather than being one aspect of this task, turns out to be central to it. This book concerns the survival of God's law in an idolatrous empire inhospitable to it, in which God himself is absent or unspeaking. Hazony notes that Esther's name has a dual meaning: On one hand, her name is Persian for "star," thus flattering the sensibilities of a Persian court that placed great value in astrology. In Hebrew, on the other hand, "Esther" has a root meaning "to conceal," reflecting both Esther's concealment as a Jew in the Persian court and God's own concealment (195). With the prophets no longer speaking in the marketplace, the book of Esther, Hazony suggests, allows us again to recognize God.