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**Review of: Vialle, Catherine, Une analyse comparée d'Esther TM et LXX:
Regard sur deux récits d'une même histoire (BETL, 233; Leuven: Peeters,
2010)**

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Vialle, Catherine, *Une analyse comparée d'Esther TM et LXX: Regard sur deux récits d'une même histoire* (BETL, 233; Leuven: Peeters, 2010). Pp. Iviii + 406. Paperback. €76.00. ISBN 978-90-429-2285-3.

Scholarship on Esther over the past few decades has shown definitely that there is not just “one Esther,” but several. Beside the Hebrew Masoretic text version (MT), there are two Greek versions: a longer version usually referred to as the Septuagint version (LXX) and a shorter one usually called the Alpha-text (AT). Additionally, J. C. Haelewyck's contributions highlight the importance of a fourth ancient version, the Old Latin (Vetus Latina).[1] There is also a rich collection of texts witnessing a vivid ancient reception of these Esther stories such as the version told by Flavius Josephus (Jewish Antiquities XI) and the treatment of Esther in rabbinic literature. The comparison between the oldest textual versions and the corresponding literary analyses to this point have played supporting roles in the service of hypotheses about the growth of the text. This approach has benefited significantly from the growing interest in the Septuagint text version(s) of the Bible in general. Translations of these Greek versions continue to become available in an increasing number of modern languages.

As the title states, Catherine Vialle's book *Une analyse comparée d'Esther TM et LXX* focuses on the MT and the LXX version. The book is a slightly revised version of the author's doctoral thesis written under the supervision of Prof. André Wénin at the Université Catholique de Louvain and defended in 2007.

Unlike most previous comparisons of the two texts, Vialle is not primarily interested in elucidating historical questions such as the growth of the text. Her approach is “d'abord littéraire et synchronique” (XXVII). She centers on the MT and on the LXX version since “la LXX, comme le TM, présente un texte reçu sur le plan canonique à un moment donné de l'histoire et jusqu'aujourd'hui” (XXV). This statement highlights that Vialle in fact not only pursues a “literary and synchronic,” but also a canonical approach. One of the methodological results is that she omits consideration of comparative non-biblical literature. The two canonical corpora (MT and LXX) shape her horizon. Furthermore, Vialle acknowledges her Christian perspective and attempts to construct a reading of Esther (especially in its MT form) that is compatible with the image of God of Jesus Christ (XXXV).

Vialle does not further outline or reflect on her canonical approach in the introduction (XXV–LVIII). She does, however, provide an introduction to narrative criticism and its most important technical terms[2] before briefly presenting the different Esther versions and addressing issues such as the historicity of the story, the book's genre (unfortunately without distinguishing which proposals were made for which text version) and the literary relationships between the earliest Esther versions.

The main body of Vialle's book consists of two parts: the first section is dedicated to narrative analysis of the MT version (1–161), while the second part focuses on narrative analysis of the LXX version (163–340). Both sections follow the same pattern: Vialle first determines the nature of the overall plot (“l'intrigue d'ensemble”) and provides a close reading analyzing the plots of the individual episodes (“les micro-intrigues”). Second, she also focuses on the different characters of the story. She third considers what she calls “le monde du récit.” In this subsection she first examines a few motifs (“the law” and “the banquets” in the MT, “the laws of the Jews,” “the banquets,” and “the glory, the glorious ones, and the glorification” in the LXX) and thereafter proceeds to discuss the image of God (the underlying theology) and the image of human beings (the underlying anthropology).

The short concluding section (341–48) is followed by the bibliography and by indices of authors and of biblical references. An appendix addressing the canonicity of the Book of Esther within Judaism and Christianity closes the book (397–405).

Two significantly different readings emerge from Vialle's narrative observations. In her view, the MT version, by its means of exaggeration and irony, leaves its readers stunned, especially by Mordecai's behavior after his elevation. Vialle considers Mordecai to be no better than his predecessor Haman, as Mordecai is caught in the trap of ambition and the desire for vengeance (cf. 157–59, 343). As a result, Vialle rejects the idea that the MT version was intended to be a popular comedy or a Hellenistic novella, instead interpreting it as a wisdom tale (“récit de sagesse”) meant to provoke critical reflection on human behavior motivated by ambition and the desire for vengeance alone (cf. 160–61, 344).

According to Vialle the LXX version, by employing less of irony than the MT version, does not evoke such reflection but instead emphasizes another aspect. In her view, God's manner of acting, which is explicitly mentioned by the narrator in this version, illustrates that God's plan of salvation includes all humanity, not just the Jews as Esther and Mardokhaïos believe (cf. 334, 336). She concludes that this Greek Esther was written for Jews living in the Diaspora, providing them a perspective on how to avoid both cultural dilution and cultural segregation (cf. 340, 347).

Vialle's contribution provides a rich pool of textual observations, especially concerning the LXX version. In this respect, Vialle indeed succeeds in bringing to light “la richesse d'un texte injustement méconnu et souvent négligé” (345). With regard to her overall interpretation, a certain tension remains between her aim to apply the method of narrative criticism (what motivates her search for the narrative intent in each textual unit, cf. XXVII) and her canonical and Christian perspective (which, for instance, leads her to skip over careful consideration of the meaning and significance of the Purim etiology for each text version). In the light of growing interest in a canonical approach especially among Roman Catholic exegetes in Europe, deeper reflection on her methodology also would have been helpful.[3] Furthermore, it is astonishing that Vialle skips any reflections on Christian anti-Jewish readings of Esther. She only lists a number of reasons why some Christian commentators depreciated this writing in her appendix. Along with that, she omits consideration of the political implications of her own “Christian” readings and her discourse about “the Jews.”[4]

In sum, although offering numerous interesting textual observations especially for readers interested in the LXX version, Vialle's book remains an ambiguous contribution to scholarship. It illustrates that not only the historical background but also the narrative character of the different “Esthers” are still worthy of further exploration.

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[1] J. C. Haelewyck, “The Relevance of the Old Latin Version for the Septuagint, With Special Emphasis on the Book of Esther,” *JTS* 57 (2006), 439–73; idem, *Hester* (Vetus latina, 7/3; Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 2003), 84–94. [↑](#)

[2] Vialle mainly builds on D. Marguerat and Y. Bourquin, *Pour lire les récits bibliques* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1998) trans. as *How to Read Bible Stories. An Introduction to Narrative Criticism* (London: SCM Press, 1999), S. Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Bible and Literature Series, 17; Decatur, GA: Almond Press, 1989) and S. Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978). [↑](#)

[3] For a discussion of different reading methods and their underlying understanding of “text” see, for instance, H. Utschneider and E. Blum (eds.), *Lesarten der Bibel. Untersuchungen zu einer Theorie der Exegese des Alten Testaments* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2006), especially the introduction to the canonical approach of G. Steins, “Kanonisch lesen” (ibid., 45–64) and the contribution of H. Utschneider, “Was ist alttestamentliche Literatur? Kanon, Quelle und literarische Ästhetik als LesArts alttestamentlicher Literatur” (ibid., 65–83). [↑](#)

[4] Cf. statements referring to the MT version such as “... le narrateur l'invite [le lecteur] à prendre distance vis-à-vis du comportement des juifs et du cousin d'Esther” (344) or “... si les païens peuvent être des instruments utiles au plan de Dieu, les juifs, objets de la protection divine, tombent, en finale, dans une dynamique de violence et de vengeance” (157). [↑](#)