

BOOK REVIEW

Stephen Gabriel Rosenberg, *Esther Ruth Jonah Deciphered* (Jerusalem: Devorah Publishing, 2004) 212 pp., 28 figs. Reviewed by Harvey A. Chesterman

Dr. Rosenberg tackles the enigmas of these well-loved books, each with its strong narrative line and central dominating characters. They are read publicly in synagogue and these biblical texts are among the best known to the wide Jewish audience.

The author deploys a number of deciphering techniques, showing his complete familiarity with the biblical narrative, parallel historical contexts, the effect of archaeological research, and the significance of the chosen vocabulary and syntax of the three texts. He presents the reader with many piquant problems, together with unique solutions.

For example, in the narrative of Esther we are asked to consider: How did Haman, not previously named as one of the King's confidants, achieve his sudden promotion? Why is the satisfactory conclusion of the Esther plot marred by the information that the King imposed a tax on the mainland and the islands? Why did the King need to entertain his senior advisors with a six-months-long feast, and why in the third year of his reign? The author's persuasive solutions to these and other questions, offer new light on this treasured tale and enhance our appreciation for its messages.

The seemingly straightforward narrative of Ruth has been explored by many commentators down through the generations, but Dr. Rosenberg intrigues us with some questions of his own. What was the exact relationship between Boaz and the deceased Elimelech? Who was the *Ploni Almoni* who had first refusal as redeemer? What is the significance of the night in the granary? The author supplies us with a family tree, an ancient agricultural calendar and a plan of the city gate where the climax of the narrative takes place. These and more round out our appreciation for Naomi's, Ruth's and Boaz' history – and of their later generations.

In the Book of Jonah, the author finds inconsistencies which he resolves by reference to regional power politics. He suggests that each element in the plot is an allegory paralleling the contemporary politico-military balance between the dominant superpowers. Thus the ship, the voyage, the storm, the big fish,

Jonah's eventual destination, the sackcloth and the gourd all come together to inform us about the desperate plight of the besieged city of Samaria and the frantic search for an ally who would relieve it.

The book gives the reader the full texts of Esther, Ruth, and Jonah in both the original Hebrew and English translation. There are also illustrations of contemporary artifacts, timelines, and maps. If you ever wanted to know what a *pur* looks like, this is the place to find out. Altogether, this is an innovative and provocative work which offers readers new insights into these much-loved books.

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