

epistemology overlooks. These contributors contend that even in ordinary and mundane affirmations, affirmations one would consider it irrational to doubt, what one affirms is often merely plausible rather than self-evident—yet one affirms it nonetheless. That is to say, even in ordinary and mundane cases a rational affirmation's grounds often include an element of affectivity, choice, commitment. One may affirm X because within one's total concrete context one assesses X not just as plausible but also as desirable; and such an affirmation can be thoroughly rational. But if ordinary and mundane affirmations can rest in part on volitional grounds without their rationality being comprised, so too can the affirmation of God. The latter does not rest on one's direct, unmediated awareness of some basic and self-evident cognitional content. On the contrary, within the total concrete context of one's life, the affirmation of God rests on one's assessment of God as both plausible and desirable. And even though such grounds are partly volitional, that affirmation can be thoroughly rational.

Both Reformed epistemology and many of its respondents helpfully highlight that in any discussion of the rationality of belief in God, the basic issue at stake is the character of human rationality itself. On the other hand, both groups often fail to distinguish adequately among experience, interpretation and verification, a failure that restricts the usefulness of their positive contribution. The present book neatly illustrates both the strength and the weakness.

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Esther in Medieval Garb: Jewish Interpretation of the Book of Esther in the Middle Ages

Barry Dov Walfish

Albany: SUNY Press, 1993. xiv + 386 p.

As Walfish (Jewish Studies, University of Toronto) remarks in his Introduction, "Jewish biblical exegesis is relatively uncharted territory in the world of Judaica scholarship," and "studies of the exegesis of particular books are few and far between." The dazzling wealth of material assembled and discussed in the present volume is the clearest proof of how regrettable and surprising that situation is. In keeping with the wide variety of approaches which were applied to scriptural studies, this ostensible description of how Jews interpreted a particular book of the Bible can serve as a valuable index of their general cultural history, a study whose importance extends far beyond the specific domains of religion and philology.

For purposes of this study, Walfish has meticulously examined close to 30 different commentaries on the Book of Esther, composed from the 11th century through to the year 1500. The commentaries, including several which have not yet been printed, reflect the geographic dispersion and cultural diversity of Jews at the time (Europe, Spain, North Africa and Byzantium). Walfish has wisely chosen to arrange his treatment topically rather than historically. Having identified the phenomena and methodological issues which are reflected in the commentaries, he deals with each issue separately. The book is divided into two main sections. The first focusses on what the commentaries have to contribute to our understanding of

the biblical text and the history of exegetical methods, while the second discusses what the authors' scriptural interpretations tell us about their own times and places. The selection of topics is appropriate to the evidence that emerges from the sources, and the lucid presentation strikes a readable balance between the author's own descriptive generalizations and direct quotations from the commentaries.

Walfish is exhaustive in applying to his corpus all the requisite methodological tools and approaches. The necessary preparatory labours include the imposing bibliographical tasks of searching out and identifying all the commentaries which fall within the scope of his investigation, establishing reliable texts, and reading and digesting their contents both on their own terms and in relation to appropriate scholarly questions. Indeed, it would have been a valuable contribution to scholarship if he had confined himself to a description, classification and analysis of the commentaries and their bearing on the elucidation of the Book of Esther. Walfish's achievement, however, adds an important comparative dimension as he places each topic within a broader cultural context. As each exegete is discussed in terms of their place within the evolution of exegetical approaches and methodologies, the reader is treated to concise introductions to such disparate topics as the history of Jewish religious movements and literature, Hebrew grammatical, lexicographical, literary and rhetorical scholarship, the spread of translations of Aristotle's works, medieval views of astrology, science, theology—all of which are essential for a full appreciation of the biblical commentaries. Similarly, in the course of his demonstration of how the commentators' portrayals of the *realia* of Esther reflected their own environments, Walfish conducts us through a remarkable tour of the medieval world, including the coronation practices of 14th-century Catalonia-Aragon, Durandus of St. Pourçain's concepts of natural and civil law, the royal courts of Islamic and Christian Spain, the expulsions of Jewish communities from England and Germany, and more.

Esther in Medieval Garb has much to offer to anyone with an interest in either the specific exegetical problems of the Book of Esther or in the broader field of biblical interpretation. Even more, perhaps, it is an important resource for the student of medieval civilization. It provides us with an exemplary lesson of the immense scholarly efforts that must be invested in the diligent study of medieval Jewish biblical commentaries and of the wonderful rewards that can be reaped from those efforts.

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Vasantotsava: The Spring Festivals of India

Leona M. Anderson

New Delhi: D. K. Printworld, 1993. 254 p.

The modern Hindu spring festivals are colourful and exuberant. They point to an enduring need among people to acknowledge ritually the juncture which demarcates winter's departure and the advent of spring. In this book Leona Anderson (Religious Studies, University of Regina) examines a broad range of Sanskrit literature to uncover the forms of ancient Hindu spring festivals and their ritual activi-