

Steven Coxhead, review of Leslie C. Allen and Timothy S. Laniak, *Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther*, *Reformed Theological Review* 63 (2004): 155–6 (used with permission, and re-edited to conform with SBL style).

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### **EZRA, NEHEMIAH, ESTHER**

By Leslie C. Allen and (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2003), xi + 290 pp., \$US11.95

This commentary is part of the New International Biblical Commentary series which is based on the NIV. The commentary has two main parts: Leslie Allen comments on Ezra-Nehemiah, and Timothy Laniak deals with Esther. According to the foreword in the commentary, the New International Biblical Commentary series is neither “precritical” nor “anticritical” in its approach, but takes an approach called “believing criticism” (pp. vii–viii). As such, the contributors “tackle the task of interpretation using the full range of critical methodologies and practices” but “they do so as people of faith who hold the text in the highest regard” (p. viii).

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The basic approach of the commentary for each of the books covered is to introduce the books as a whole before considering each major section, then for each major section, there is an introductory paragraph, which is followed by comments on each paragraph within the section. The comments on each paragraph deal with the major literary, thematic and historical issues therein, but the more technical aspects of the text are reserved for additional notes which are placed at the end of each section. While this approach allows the commentary to be useful to both general readers and to more serious Bible students, it does mean that the more serious Bible student is forced to look in two places, thus making the reading process not as straightforward or enjoyable as it could have been.

The larger part of the commentary is taken up by Leslie Allen’s treatment of the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, which he takes as being one work. His approach to Ezra-Nehemiah is to treat it as “history-related *literature*.” He generally deals with the details of the text in a helpful way, but the biggest disappointment is the lack of attention to literary concerns. His introductory comments on the structure and content of Ezra-Nehemiah (pp. 4–7) identify only a very limited number of themes. Allen sides with those who view Ezra’s return to Judea taking place before that of Nehemiah. He also takes sides with those who distinguish the editorial work of Chronicles from Ezra-Nehemiah but takes Ezra 7–Neh 13 as being “substantially the work of one editor” (p. 9). His tendency to overlook literary concerns leads him a number of times to comment on the editor’s use of sources. Such comments appear to this reviewer to be rather speculative.

Some conservative readers may have problems with the way that Allen deals with the separatism evident in Ezra-Nehemiah. Allen acknowledges that some modern readers may find such separatism as “difficult to sympathize with” or “exclusive and even racist” (p. 11), but Allen supports the rigorous stand made by Ezra and Nehemiah as something which “was necessary in times aggravated by political and economic stress” (p. 11). In this way, Ezra-Nehemiah is “an inspiring source exemplifying the

conviction and courage the church needs to face its own trials” (p. 11). Allen also views “Ezra-Nehemiah’s commitment to Scripture as a meaningful guide for living and communal worship” as something which encourages Christians to reflect upon our own lives in the light of the fulfilment of Scripture in the coming of Christ (p. 12). This is despite the fact that Allen views Ezra and Nehemiah’s use of Scripture authorising their exclusivist policies as “Clearly ... selective” in nature, and as being “a hermeneutical barrage,” the impulse for which “was spiritual expediency” (pp. 11, 74).

The overall disappointment with the commentary changes once we hit Laniak’s contribution on the book of Esther. This is in fact the redeeming feature of the commentary as a whole. It is also quite ironic that Laniak’s introductory comments on the need to view Scripture from the literary dimension as well as the historical and theological dimensions comes hot on the heels of the somewhat insipid offering served up previously in the book by Allen. One wonders: had Laniak read Allen’s contribution beforehand that his comments seem so pertinent to what the reader has just endured? Maybe not, but Laniak’s serve is just what the doctor ordered. His comments on literary issues as they apply to Esther on pp. 169–74 are well worth the read. He understands the genre of the book of Esther as basically that of a festival etiology which provides the historical background legitimising the feast of Purim. Laniak’s comments on textual, historical, theological and thematic issues on pp. 174–87 are also good value.

Overall, this commentary is two-faced: Allen disappoints but Laniak excites, yet maybe not enough to justify investing in the book.

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