
Reviewed by Rachel Adelman, Hebrew College, Newton MA, USA

On the back cover, the author, Thamar Eilam Gindin poses in a hijab as an “Iranian” linguist, an expert of Ancient and Modern Iran. In truth, Gindin completed her studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, with a specialty in the Persian language from (in her own words) “Ahasuerus to Ahmadinejad.” She is associated with the Ezri Center for Iran and Persian Gulf Studies at the University of Haifa. Yet her mask (the hijab) is fully in the spirit of this line-by-line interpretation of the Book of Esther in Hebrew, where the commentary oscillates between in-depth serious philological work and playful, comic readings of the very parody that she comments upon. She also moves fluidly between the Ancient and modern context of Persia/Iran, drawing upon quirky cultural and linguistic artifacts. Gindin draws upon deep understanding of Ancient Persian culture, history, and language, while citing a broad range of classical sources, from the Septuagint and the Alpha text (two Greek versions of Esther, distinct from the Masoretic text [http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/17-esther-nets.pdf](http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/nets/edition/17-esther-nets.pdf)), to the Greek historian, Herodotus, as well as rabbinic aggadah (from the Talmud and Midrash). This slim volume (156 pages) was funded through crowd-sourcing on Headstart, and is easily available online. The advantages of accessibility, however, come somewhat at the expense of rigor in editing.

The author squarely identifies the historical setting of Esther as the period of the Achaemenid Empire (c. 550–330 BCE), founded by Cyrus the Great who, in 539 BCE, famously decreed that the Jews could return to their Homeland and rebuild the temple. This Empire was renowned for its embrace and tolerance of many peoples and cultures, for its emancipation of slaves, for its centralized, bureaucratic administration, for building infrastructure such as a postal system and extensive roads, and the use of an official language across its territories (Aramaic), becoming the largest empire in ancient history, from “India to Ethiopia” (Esther 1:1). Most scholars concur that King Ahasuerus may be identified with Xerxes I, who reigned from 486-465 BCE (or Artaxerxes I (465-424) in the Greek version. Yet, the history of his reign is strikingly at odds
with the depiction in Esther, where the Jews are slandered by the nefarious Haman and subject to a genocidal decree.

Gindin is quick to point out the discrepancies or resonances between the “story” and “history.” For example, the mode of the drink-feast [mishteh] was common practice in the emperor’s court, to the point where it was customary for the king to issue edicts while drunk and/or enraged (consider Ahasuerus’ banishment of Vashti in Esther 1:19), and for those laws to be considered irrevocable (as in the decree to decimate the Jews Esther 8:5, 8). In the comment on Esther 1:8, Gindin traces the word “rule [dat],” which serves as a leitwort throughout the Scroll of Esther, to its ancient Indo-European root, data, meaning “law.” She claims that the Greek doron (gift), the Latin datum (fact), the French donner (to give), the English donor or donation, derive from this root, all unilateral actions that are irreversible. Ironically the scroll is all about reversals (nahafokh hu)! And this is the title, “Nahafokh hu” (lit. turn-around), Gindin gives to Chapter Nine, which centers on the inauguration of the Carnivalesque Holiday of Purim. As she points out, these wild, spring festivals are a common feature of the Ancient World – as in the Roman Saturnalia, or the Mesopotamian Zagmuk.

Another fascinating analogy between fiction and history lies in the depiction of women in the Book of Esther. On the surface, the Megillah depicts a highly misogynist world – the so-called beauty contest, the harem, a queen rejected for her assertiveness, another chosen because she only aimed to please. While Vashti called her own feast (true to Persian custom), by the end of the first chapter an edict is issued that every woman must obey her husband as ruler in the house (1:22). This edict is sent out to all the provinces in the wake of the queen’s refusal to appear before the king (“wearing a royal diadem”, according to Midrash, wearing nothing but the diadem), and so she is removed, “disappeared,” from Court. Gindin traces the name Vashti to the Persian terms for “desired one” (think of the English “wish”), or, alternatively, “the best [hatoval beyoter],” though Vashti is supplanted by “one who is better than she” (tovah memenah, 1:19). Yet, according to historical accounts, Amestris, wife to Xerxes, wielded a great deal of power of her husband. She bore the king many sons, namely Atarxerxes I as heir to the throne. That is, she was never deposed. Herodotus recounts how Amestris, suspicious that the king was having an affair with Artaynte (his niece), waited for Xerxes to give his royal birthday banquet,
for on this occasion “no request could be refused.” At the banquet, Amestris asked for Artaynte’s mother to be given to her. Amestris then mutilated her and sent her home. The story ends with the murder of Masistes, the husband of the unfortunate woman and the father of Artaynte. Similarly, through “feminine power” (koach nashi, Gindin’s title for Chapter Seven), Queen Esther uses the occasion of a banquet to make a request of the king and to get revenge on her enemy. Like their historical double, both Vashti and Esther are no shrinking violets. They are an amalgam of the Persian queen, Amestris, as Vashti “refuses the king” and Esther, to whom the king will not refuse even half his Kingdom (Esther 5:3, 6 and 7:2). Despite the overt patriarchal and misogynist portrayal of the Persian Empire in the Megillah, which seem to belie historical accounts, the women characters play covertly a powerful role.

In this thorough, yet whimsical commentary, Gindin has provided us with memorable insights into the Persian setting of Esther, especially with her forays into creative linguistic connection. The introduction gives us an overview of the History of the Achaemenid Period. Each chapter is delightfully given a title, as in “A Queen is Born” for Chapter Two, which is a clever play on the popular movie with Barbara Streisand, “A Star is Born,” and Esther’s Persian name. As Gindin points out, Esther is related to the word “star,” specifically the Morning Star associated the goddess of love and fertility, Astarte/Venus, both in Ancient Greek and Mesopotamian myth. The PDF version (accessible online) provides colour pictures, maps, models of the Citadel of Sushan (Susa), even the occasional topsy-turvy sentence (just freeze your screen, and turn the iPad upside down). The author also provides an Appendix on how to read Cuneiform Script (Ancient Near Eastern texts were inscribed on clay tablets in this stick-like form). She also adds fascinating post-scripts about the fate of Sussa (or Shushan, the Persian capital), and the site of Esther and Mordecai’s supposed tomb in Hamadan, Iran. The commentary is written in clear, accessible Hebrew, free of scholarly jargon. Because there are no footnotes (or even a bibliography), it is very hard to evaluate the nature of her scholarship. Further, there are no references to the modern, literary commentaries on Esther (such as Adele Berlin, Jon Levenson, or Michael Fox), and the heavy emphasis on philology and historical context in a verse-by-verse reading, neglects the overall sense of the narrative. Nevertheless, for
Hebrew readers looking for an enriched reading of Esther against the historical setting of the Persian Empire, this is a wonderful resource.