Rebecca W. Hancock

*Esther and the Politics of Negotiation: Public and Private Spaces and the Figure of the Female Royal Counselor.* Minneapolis: Fortress, 2013. Pp. 159.

Through a careful analysis of the characterization of the biblical figure of Esther in her book, *Esther and the Politics of Negotiation*, Rebecca Hancock establishes the need for a new paradigm within biblical studies for assessing gender in the context of public and private spaces. Illustrating female figures moving fluidly between public and private spaces within the biblical text and the ancient world, she explores the consequent implications for understanding the character of Esther.

Hancock's first chapter identifies how scholars' analyses of the way Esther navigates public and private spaces in the biblical text control their interpretive conclusions. Most scholars adopt one of two interpretations: Either Esther is typical, remaining in private space and upholding patriarchal norms; or she is exceptional, traversing into public space and providing a model for female liberation. Hancock observes that these two interpretations assume a problematic dichotomy, namely that males are restricted to public space and females are restricted to private space. Additionally, she suggests Esther's depiction may reflect social realities other than gender, such as Israel's postexilic experiences of imperial domination.

In Chapter 2, Hancock demonstrates that while feminist scholars’ emphasis on private space as female space has successfully brought female characters to the fore of biblical scholarship, obsessive application of this notion has problematically concretized the dichotomy. Scholars’ imagining of public and private spaces as demarcated by gender is not reflective of lived realities. Hancock deconstructs the dichotomies of public and private and of male and female, revealing the fluid movement between these spaces by people of both genders. From Proverbs 31 and records of *naditum* women in Babylon, Hancock argues that female roles included movement between public and private spaces.

Hancock concludes in Chapter 3 that the book of Esther incorporates Greek literary tropes and motifs of humor, as well as depictions of female wisdom, and draws upon biblical and extra-biblical literary traditions. Against this literary backdrop, Hancock examines the text's depictions of space, gender, and female authority, as well as the characterization of Esther. She concludes that not only the borders of public and private spaces but also social expectations are far more fluid for both genders than the majority of biblical scholarship recognizes.

The fourth chapter compares Esther to Greek literature on Persia and sources on Persian society. Hancock argues that there is no evidence suggesting that
women in Persia were confined to private spaces; rather, Persian royal women owned property and traveled. Greek literature characterizes Persian women as cruel and manipulative to insinuate that Persian kings are weak and effeminate. The author of Esther depicts Esther as a foil to the Greek stereotype of a Persian woman: Esther is kind and compliant.

In her fifth chapter, Hancock explores the role of female royal adviser by reviewing the work of Claudia Camp, who examines female biblical figures counseling kings, often to prevent violence. Contra the perspective that the monarchy is a limiting force upon women, Hancock argues that the ancient Near Eastern monarchical structure is based on familial relationships and therefore provides royal women access to the king. Hancock demonstrates that Esther is portrayed as a female royal counselor and concludes that her tale is a contribution to counselor tales in the biblical text.

Concluding her project, Hancock ties together the various threads of her argument before addressing possible objections to her thesis. Relying upon the works of Silvia Schroer and Carole Fontaine, Hancock outlines public roles explicitly filled by females within the biblical text. Additionally, she identifies a difference between the woman of valor in Proverbs 31 and the “foreign” or “strange” woman of Proverbs 7: Their behavior in public spaces results in praise for one of them and scorn for the other.

Hancock’s argument is compelling and ought to be seriously considered by future scholarship on the matter of spaces within the biblical text. The strength of Hancock’s project in *Esther and the Politics of Negotiation* is her excellently executed critique of the assumption within biblical scholarship that gendered bodies are confined to concrete spaces, bifurcated into public and male, private and female. Her employment of Esther as a case study provides an insightful backdrop for creating a nuanced picture of the ways in which gendered bodies fluidly move between public and private spaces within the ancient world.

Nevertheless, her argument suffers from certain weaknesses. Specifically, Hancock does not incorporate any current gender theory into her work; therefore her terminologies lack significant nuances, such as the distinction between sex and gender, that one might anticipate given the nature of her project. Furthermore, while Hancock admits that her thesis does not deny differences between genders, she never highlights in her book any significant differences between them. For example, she does not thoroughly consider the different implications of men’s navigation of private spaces or their use of beauty and family relationships to gain power and favor. Demonstrating the ways in which public and private spaces are fluid for male bodies in addition to female bodies would have enhanced the overall impact of this work. Hancock states that her
project’s methodological approach is social history, examining both literary and historical materials. While this book demonstrates this method, the extensive employment of a myriad of scholarly voices substantially obscures it. Additionally, these voices threaten to drown out Hancock’s own voice and, consequently, deemphasize her unique contribution.

Regardless of these shortcomings, Hancock’s interpretative work effectively demonstrates the need for a paradigm shift within biblical scholarship regarding space and gender. It further provides a theoretical model for a similar shift within communities of faith that struggle with influences that, to the detriment of both women and men, try to coerce women to remain within private spaces and compel men to dominate public spaces. Overall, Rebecca Hancock’s work calls us to reconsider preconceived notions about public and private spaces in a way that is liberating for all.

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