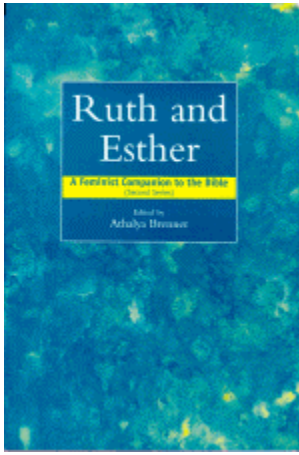


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Brenner, Athalya, ed.

Ruth and Esther

A Feminist Companion to the Bible

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In the six years since the publication of the first *Feminist Companion* for Ruth and the five years since the *Feminist Companion to Esther, Judith and Susanna*, much has changed in biblical studies and in feminist approaches to the biblical texts of Ruth and Esther. These shifts in focus and the desire to increase the number and diversity of voices in the scholarly discussion, prompted the compilation of the second series of the *Feminist Companion*. The current volume, combining scholarship on both Ruth and Esther, presents a multi-cultural and multi-disciplinary array of articles on the only two books named for women in the Jewish and Protestant canons. Not only are the authors of the fourteen essays from different cultures and disciplines, but they also represent a wide range of experience and recognition. Included within the roster of contributing authors are such well known scholars as Carol Meyers, Mieke Bal, and Athalya Brenner (also the text's editor); as well as some younger and/or lesser known scholars like Musa Dube, Laura Donaldson, and Klara Butting. This multitude of voices and approaches provides a richness to the text that is often missing in other collections of essays by biblical scholars. However, this same quality also makes the review of *Ruth and Esther* more difficult. It is not possible to review the book as a whole without considering the individual essays and approaches taken by the different authors.

The first section of Part I of the volume contains the ten essays considering the book of Ruth, which seems to be the only common denominator among the various pieces. Each author takes a different approach from those preceding/following them. In "The Book of Ruth: A 'Feminist' Commentary on Torah?", Irmtraud Fisher argues that not only

is the Ruth scroll an authentic expression of a "female voice," but it also is an attempt to exegete texts from the Torah (e.g., Deut 23:4-5; 25:5-10; Lev 25:23-34; etc.). Fisher goes so far as to suggest that the female author of Ruth was creating new halakhah intended to serve as a counterbalance to the dominant voice of her male contemporaries. The result is "a story that interprets it (Torah) in a creative and vigorous way" (p. 49). In the following essay, "Ruth, The Model Emigrée: Mourning and the Symbolic Politics of Immigration," Bonnie Honig considers the biblical texts in light of "issues of nearness and distance, friendship and strangeness, national identity, kinship and foreignness" (p. 50). Using Cynthia Ozick and Julia Kristeva as conversation partners, Honig argues (against Ozick and Kristeva) that the book of Ruth provides "a tale of incomplete mourning, a fable of failed transition" (p. 72).

The transition to the next essay, "Facing the Other: Ruth-the-Cat in Medieval Jewish Illuminations," by Carole Fontaine, reflects the dissimilarity of the pieces collected in this section. In a complete change of approach, Fontaine considers the portrayals of Ruth as a cat in some medieval Jewish manuscripts and uses such depictions as avenues for exegetical insight. She contrasts the symbolism of the cat in the Jewish tradition with that of the Christian community. Whereas in the former, the cat was valued as a symbol of modesty, in the latter community the feline was feared and loathed. Ruth as a feline, Fontaine argues, is not only representative of the Jewish feeling of kinship with this animal but also reflects the understanding of Ruth as "like the domestic cat, a fertile and useful addition to the household of the future King David, the Lion of Judah" (pp. 89-90). Ursula Silber, in her piece "Ruth and Naomi: Two Biblical Figures Revived Among Rural Women in Germany," recounts the experiences she had with a women's gathering as part of the "Educational Days for Rural Women" held in 1996/97. The sharing of this biblical story among the women who participated in the event helped them to assume "the inheritance of Ruth and Naomi in the here and now of their lives, to be friends and witnesses of the blessings of God's goodness" (p. 109).

The first section concludes with Carol Meyer's "'Women of the Neighborhood' (Ruth 4:17): Informal Female Networks in Ancient Israel." In this adaptation of her longer article, "Guilds and Gatherings: Women's Groups in Ancient Israel" (in *Realia Dei: Essays in Honor of Edward F. Campbell, Jr.*, P. M. Williams, Jr. and T. Hiebert, eds.), Meyers makes the case that Israelite women "led more complex and probably more interesting lives than is generally assumed" (p. 127). Using data collected from ethnographic research, she shows how the book of Ruth reflects the existence of, and the valuable contributions by (e.g., familial links for marriage partners, emergency supply of food for neighbors, etc.), women's informal networks in ancient Israel.

The collection of "Ruth Papers, Orpah Papers" from the Semiotics and Exegesis Session of the 1997 SBL Annual Meeting compose the second section of Part I. The first two essays, by Laura Donaldson and Musa Dube, consider the often overlooked character in the book of Ruth, her sister-in-law Orpah. Donaldson's approach, in "The Sign of

Orpah: Reading Ruth Through Native Eyes," is to present an indigenous view of Ruth. She argues against the more traditional interpretation of Orpah's returning to Moab as being a cowardly act and shows how Orpah's actions took as much courage as did Ruth's remaining with Naomi. In "The Unpublished Letters of Orpah to Ruth," Dube uses an imaginative methodology to compose the letters which Orpah might have written to Ruth after their separation. In these epistles, Orpah explains her and Ruth's royal heritage and tells her sister that she (Orpah) returned to Moab to be with their widowed mother and to eventually become "regent queen and priestess" (p. 150). Both of these essays add a fresh lens through which the biblical reader may view the book of Ruth.

The next two essays return the focus to the character of Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi. Judith McKinlay's contribution, "A Son Is Born to Naomi: A Harvest for Israel," addresses the text from the perspective of a native of New Zealand. McKinlay makes the case that Ruth can be a dangerous text for women who live in a racially charged political system. She believes that the biblical book "reinforces a sadly persisting and pervading colonial ethos" (p. 157). In "Ruth as a Foreign Worker and the Politics of Exogamy," Athalya Brenner emphasizes the importance of social class in human communities. She argues that since Ruth was both an outsider and of a lower social class (not to mention being female), her complete integration and acceptance into Israelite culture was impossible. The final essay of this section is the response made by Roland Boer to the presentations of the preceding papers at the SBL session and was by far the least enlightening.

Part II of the volume consists of two articles which deal with the issue of mother-daughter relationships. Leila Bronner's "The Invisible Relationship Made Visible: Biblical Mother and Daughters," uses the rather scarce texts available in the Hebrew Bible which give insight into this relationship. Bronner draws from the stories of Jochebed and Miriam, Leah and Dinah, Maacah and Tamar, Naomi and Ruth, Rebekah and her mother, along with the references to the female's mother in Song of Songs, to make her case of the importance of this relationship between two women. She also concludes that these relationships reflect the "varied and significant roles" women played "in the public and private life of ancient Israel" (p. 191). In "Black Mother Women and Daughters: Signifying Female-Divine Relationships in the Hebrew Bible and African-American Mother-Daughter Short Stories," Cheryl Kirk-Duggan utilizes generations of literature about female relationships. She integrates short stories from the African-American culture with the biblical texts to present a wonderful mosaic of the potential for harm and reward in the connecting between a mother and a daughter.

The third and final part of the volume, has the only two essays devoted solely to the story of Esther. The well known rhetorical critic, Mieke Bal, presents the text from an evaluation of the power involved in literacy within a given culture. As the title indicates, "Lots of Writing" is Bal's demonstration of the important place writing holds in the story of Esther. Reflecting on two pieces by Rembrandt that depict scenes from the text, Bal

concludes that the festival of Purim presents the reader with a warning about being blind to "the writing on the wall" and opportunity to reflect on issues of "gender, power and the state; genocide and otherness; submission and agency" (pp. 237-8). In "Esther: A New Interpretation of the Joseph Story in the Fight Against Anti-Semitism and Sexism," Klara Butting reads the text of Esther as an a fresh retelling of the story of Joseph in which the main character has been divided into two persons, Esther and Mordecai. The main difference between the two tales is the ending. Whereas Joseph's story ultimately ends with his joyful reunion with family and retention of a place of power, Esther disappears at the end of her story representing the power of history in excluding women.

The delightful characteristic of *Ruth and Esther* is that there are many ways for reading and utilizing the valuable materials contained within its covers. One may read the book straight through and encounter a diverse audience of perspectives on these two biblical texts, choose to read only the essays which fit a particular research interest. However one chooses to employ its resources, the importance of this volume will become readily apparent. It is one of the books that all scholars of the Hebrew Bible, as well as those simply curious about the stories of Ruth and Esther, should have on their shelf and use in their teaching and study.