Roop, Eugene F.

Ruth, Jonah, Esther

Believers Church Bible Commentary


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Eugene F. Roop is president of Bethany Theological Seminary, Richmond, Indiana, and Wieand Professor of Biblical Studies there. He has served as a minister in the Church of the Brethren and is author of several books, including Genesis in the same series of commentaries, the Believers Church Bible Commentary (BCBC). The aim of this commentary series is to make the original message of scripture and its meaning understandable for today, especially to Sunday school teachers, members of Bible study groups, students, and those serving in ecclesiastical office. To that aim no Hebrew or other ancient languages are used in the commentary. Nevertheless, the results of recent scholarship have been integrated in as far as this did not impair readability. The authors of volumes in the series do the basic work, but while writing they consult counselors, work together with the editors, and receive feedback from another biblical scholars. As it is said in the foreword, “thus these commentaries combine the individual writer’s own good work and the church’s voice.”

At the end of the commentary to every pericope there is a section “The Text in the Life of the Church,” with summary references to the understanding of
previous generations. It is preceded by a section “The Text in Biblical Context,” where interesting links to other biblical passages are indicated. The text is read within its biblical context, without any claims as regards dependence of one text on another. In this way a diachronic understanding of the text tends to be blocked. The commentary closes with a collection of essays on important words and concepts occurring in the biblical book (e.g., khesed; narrative structure; the Persian Empire; Purim; redeemer/go’el), a not altogether up-to-date bibliography and an index of ancient sources (Bible texts and other ancient texts).

In the rather confined space of 304 pages Roop discusses the books of Ruth, Esther, and Jonah. The link between these three books is their genre. They are all short stories. Moreover, in all three books fierce struggles for life are described, which at least in Ruth and Jonah lead up to a struggle with God.

The commentary of Ruth covers pages 15–91 and starts with an introduction to the book. About the author of the book, Roop remarks (with references to Hubbard, Campbell, Brenner, and Gottwald) that a story centering on women might well be a story by a woman. This way of writing (a statement with reference to others) is characteristic for Roop’s commentary. Often he refrains from taking a stand of his own. On the date of the book, for example, Roop simply lists the different views (from a story of olden times and a story looking back from the tenth century to a story dating from the time after the exile), without arguing his own position. For the reader in church this might be somewhat disappointing because it robs the story from its embedding in a concrete historical situation. It floats as it were timeless space. But there is no space without time outside our imagination. To real people in a real world timeless tales have little to offer. This is why the exegete cannot leave the questions of authorship and historical background dangling. He or she has to make bold choices in this respect. In my opinion, the undeniable links of the book of Ruth with Lamentations and Second Isaiah undoubtedly prove that the story was composed or thoroughly reworked in postexilic times in order to describe how God as a go’el “redeemer” will marry his wife Zion again and will give her a glorious future (see my The Structure of the Book of Ruth [Pericope, 2; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001], 230–33).

Roop has divided the book of Ruth into subsections (an outline of the book is given at the end of the Ruth part [90–91]), and at some places he even divides verses (e.g., Ruth 1:5a and 1:5b). However, it does not become clear which arguments he used for his division. It is evident that he did not take into account the divisions of the Masoretes and manuscripts of the ancient versions. No doubt
Roop has read the text with a keen eye and has noted many significant repetitions and cross-links in the book. But this alone is not enough to fully appreciate the literary structure of ancient Hebrew compositions.

The commentary of Jonah covers pages 93–158. Also in the discussion of Jonah Roop pays much attention to the use of key words, such as the Hebrew verbs *tul* “to hurl,” in 1:4, 5, 15 and *yare’* “to fear,” in 1:5, 16, which marks a complete change in the mariners, from fear for the storm to fear for YHWH. Incidentally, it is unclear to me why Roop does not include the use of *yare’* in 1:9, 10 in his discussion.

Several problems in the text remain unsolved, such as the offering on board by the mariners (1:16) and the fasting of both man and beast (3:7). In Jonah the problem of the division into textual units crops up again. Roop discerns several subsections, but again his reasoning remains fuzzy. It is quite unclear why he treats 3:1–3a as if it were a chapter (concluding with the standard section on the biblical context and the text in the life of the church) just as is the case with the much larger passage 3:3b–4:11, whereas the Tiberian Masoretes divide chapters 3–4 into two different halves, namely, 3:1–4:3 and 4:4–11, a division also supported (be it with some subdivisions) by the Greek codices Sinaiticus and Alexandrinus. The type of argument Roop is using is not uncommon: “Even a quick reading can spot a literary division within this unit. The action opens in Nineveh proper (3:3b–10).” At least Roop should have wondered why the Masoretes and the Greek translators were not so clever to see this literary division in the middle of verse 3 immediately, even though they were undoubtedly able to read the Bible much quicker than us. Interpretation starts with division of a text: What belongs together? Where starts a new pericope? Apodictic statements such as the one quoted above obscure the circular reasoning on which they rest and have led to a confusing variety of divisions in Bible translations and commentaries.

The book of Esther is discussed on pages 159–259. Roop gives a succinct overview of the specific problems with the book: the lack of the name of God; the existence of the Greek versions that do mention God; the hostility of readers (among them Luther) against a book that seems to glorify cruelty and violence on the part of the Jews even though not a single Israelite has actually been killed by the enemy.

Roop shares the view of many scholars that Esther and Mordecai are pious Jews who find in their faith the strength to “act in anticipation of the coming reign of...
God.” Nowhere in Esther, however, can any sure sign of faith be detected: no prayer to God, violation of many Jewish religious precepts, and so on. Did not the author of the book of Esther deliberately leave out the name of God because of the cruelty and seeming lack of piety of the main characters of the book? The book of Esther seems to be a story about Jews in the Diaspora who preserve only the vaguest idea of their own roots, just as in modern times religion appears to be more and more secularized. In my opinion, the book should be read as a warning against what happens if people no longer communicate with God about their autonomous decisions.

Characteristic and of great value in this commentary are the many sections on related texts in the Bible and in contemporary texts, situating Ruth, Jonah, and Esther in their literary, religious, and cultural context. The same goes for the sections on key words. Roop has paid much attention to these two specific parts of the commentary. Because of the character of the BCBC, the author does not offer us many new ideas on the books he comments upon, but he does give the reader a helpful and clear overview of the different scholarly views of the books, and the problems one encounters in them. Last but not least, he does not shun to speak out on the importance of the books for today. For use in church and Bible study groups, this commentary is warmly recommended.