

that its original audience may have considered erotic. The Song's attitudes and wording resemble other ancient Near Eastern poetry of those genres. It was not written as an allegory, although rabbinic tradition has treated it that way. Its hearty approach to sexuality does not fit most depictions of love and sex elsewhere in the Bible; but given the nature of the Bible as a diverse collection itself, this should not be surprising. The ambiguity of the imagery in this book contributes to its beauty. Finally, the Song may have become part of the Bible even while the ancient Israelites cherished it as a secular work that celebrates human love.

26

“Why Are You So Kind . . . When I Am a Foreigner?”

Ruth vs. Esther

Primary Reading: Ruth and Esther.

Surface Similarities

Ruth and Esther are two of the best-known books of the Hebrew Bible. At first glance they seem quite similar. Both are short stories named for female figures. In each one, women and foreigners play a prominent role. This chapter will compare these two similar works. This comparison will raise explicitly a central issue that has until now been largely implicit: how the Bible functions as a *collection* that expresses a diversity of views.

Beyond History: The Genre of Ruth and Esther

As we have seen, identifying a work's genre can help us understand how to read or interpret that book.¹ Both Ruth and Esther are historical in the sense of “narratives that depict a past” (see “The Bible's Limits as a Source for History” in chapter 4), but neither is history in the sense of depicting an actual past. In fact, both works signal that they are *not* to be read historically.

The Book of Ruth

Ruth, at least in its final form, dates from much later than “the days of the chieftains [judges],” the period mentioned in its opening verse. This is certain because it introduces the ceremony in 4:7 with the words “Now this was for-

merly done in Israel in cases of redemption or exchange." In other words, the narrator needed to explain a ceremony that had long since become defunct.²

Although a work that has literary merit may also be historical,³ Ruth is more easily labeled as literature than history. It is remarkably well formed from a literary or rhetorical perspective (though such features do not always come through clearly in the translation). In this story, a *gibbor chayil* (גִּבּוֹר חַיִּיל, "a valiant warrior or gentleman"; translated as "prominent rich man," 2:1) meets an *eshet chayil* (אִשָּׁת חַיִּיל, "valiant woman"; translated as "worthy woman," 3:11), and they live happily ever after. The story also highlights Ruth's movement from being under God's general protection to being espoused by Boaz, by playing on two senses of the word *kanaf* (כָּנָף, "extremity"): *lchasot tachat kenafav* (לְחַסוֹת תַּחַת כְּנָפָיו, "under whose wings you have sought refuge," 2:12) and *ufarasta khenafekha* (וּפָרַשְׁתִּי כְנָפַי, "spread your robe," 3:9). In other words, Boaz resolves the difficulties facing Naomi and Ruth by acting as a surrogate for God. Such verbal links suggest that good storytelling is the goal of the book, rather than history.

The book gives additional hints that it is not historical. It begins with an image that ancient readers would have found ironic—a famine in Bethlehem (בֵּית לֶחֶם), literally "house of bread." More significantly, with the exception of the name Ruth, the personal names at the start of the book do not fit patterns we find elsewhere in the Bible. Instead, they are clearly symbolic: Naomi means "sweetness"; her sons who die young are named Mahlon ("Illness") and Chilion ("Cessation"); and the daughter-in-law who follows Naomi only partway to Israel is named Orpah—literally "back of the neck," meaning "back-turner." In ancient Israel, no parents would have named their children Mahlon and Chilion. Surely the author employs those names so as to signal that the book should be read symbolically and not as straightforward history.

The Book of Esther

In addition to being substantially longer than Ruth, Esther employs a very different style. It combines real historical circumstances with fancy or fantasy, much like modern historical fiction. Its description of the Persian royal gardens, the extent of the empire, and its division into "satraps" (bureaucratic divisions) are all accurate. Even some of the names, such as Esther and Mordecai (Babylonian names related to the goddess Ishtar and the god Marduk), were real personal names in the Persian period. However, other aspects are at odds with the known historical record: a queen's being chosen through a "Miss Persia contest"⁴; a king's

not caring if Haman kills off a portion of his tax base; Haman's offering to give the king ten thousand talents of silver⁵; and the rule that the decrees of Persian kings could not be changed once they were sealed. All of this is fanciful. Indeed, contrary to the picture presented in Esther, the Persian kings typically tolerated minorities; they did not persecute groups because of ethnicity or religion per se.

Like Ruth, the Book of Esther employs markers to indicate that its main interest is not historical. Like Ruth, this book features various literary symmetries. For example, the clause "The text of the document was to the effect that a law . . ." (3:14) is mirrored by "The text of the document was to be issued as a law . . ." (8:13). Some view the book as structured around party scenes in particular.⁶

However, unlike Ruth, the storytelling in Esther is humorous in a variety of places. For example, Haman is eager to know why Esther called him to her party, and the king asks Esther what she wants; after much buildup, rather than discussing any matter of substance, she unexpectedly answers, "If Your Majesty will do me the favor, if it please Your Majesty to grant my wish and accede to my request—let Your Majesty and Haman come to the feast which I will prepare for them; and tomorrow I will do Your Majesty's bidding" (5:8).

All of these pieces of evidence—the factual errors, the literary symmetries, and the lighthearted style—point to the fact that Esther is not a historical account. Rather, it is more like comedy, burlesque, or farce. Probably the original social setting for this book was the annual party in celebration of the already existing holiday of Purim; the book, when read aloud, functioned as a justification for the upside-down festival.⁷

Women in Esther and Ruth

My intention here is not to explain why Ruth and Esther were written. Instead, considering both works to be mainly imaginative rather than factual, I will compare how they each imagine two themes: the role of women, and the Israelite attitude toward foreigners.

Discerning the role of women according to the Book of Esther is not at all straightforward. Partly this derives from the fact that the book is comedy. With comedy, it is normally difficult to untangle what the author really believes from what is meant tongue-in-cheek. On one hand, Esther is a model of bravery when she approaches the king to plead for the Jews because she believes that merely by doing so she risks being put to death (4:11). On the other hand, Esther does not risk her life on her own initiative, so arguably she is an agent⁸ rather than a

primary character or hero. The book's true stance is likely revealed in its final verse, from which Esther is missing: "For Mordecai the Jew ranked next to King Ahasuerus and was highly regarded by the Jews and popular with the multitude of his brethren; he sought the good of his people and interceded for the welfare of all his kindred." In other words, Esther plays a crucial role at one juncture—a role she is able to play because her beauty moves the king (in 2:17: "she won his grace and favor"; in 5:2: "she won his favor")—but the book could just as well have been named the Book of Mordecai.

In contrast, Ruth depicts a very different world, in which a community of women exists in parallel with that of men. Its protagonists are two women who face a problem largely defined by the society's gender roles: because women may not inherit ancestral land holdings outright, they must find an appropriate man, a "redeemer," who can give them access to the field belonging to Naomi's deceased husband, Elimelech. They do not need a man to tell them how to do this—Naomi advises the younger Ruth, and Ruth follows her mother-in-law's instructions. Ruth also shows her own initiative when she improvises what to do at Boaz's granary.

The Book of Ruth also highlights the larger community of women in which Ruth and Naomi function. After their husbands die, Naomi begs each daughter-in-law, "Turn back, each of you to her *mother's* house" (1:8; emphasis added). In 4:17, it is not the father but rather the women neighbors who name Ruth's child. A few verses earlier, the people bless Ruth in the name of Israel's great Matriarchs:

May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, both of whom built up the House of Israel! Prosper in Ephrathah and perpetuate your name in Bethlehem! And may your house be like the house of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah—through the offspring which the LORD will give you by this young woman (4:11–12).

Women thus play a much more prominent and positive role in Ruth than in Esther.

Foreigners in Esther and Ruth

It is difficult to characterize the attitude of the Book of Esther toward non-Jews. The book mentions some good foreigners, like Harbonah, who suggests that Haman be impaled on the tree he wanted to use to impale Mordecai (7:9). The predominant non-Jews in the story, however, are Ahasuerus and Haman. The

author depicts Ahasuerus as a fool, spending his time partying instead of ruling; he is clueless and easily manipulated. For his part, Haman is a megalomaniac with an irrational fear of Jews who therefore wants them killed. After messengers announce Haman's plan far and wide, nobody either protests on the Jews' behalf or offers to come to their defense. Indeed, the populace includes "enemies" who appear willing to do the killing. In short, this farce generally depicts non-Jews in a negative fashion.

Ruth is quite different. In choosing a Moabite woman as its protagonist, the author picked someone whom the audience would view negatively from the start, for two reasons. First, the Torah portrays the origin of the Moabite people through incest. In Genesis, Lot sleeps with his elder daughter, who names the resulting child Moab, which was understood in Israel to come from *me'av*, "from daddy" (19:30–38). Second, the Torah continues to hold the Moabites at arm's length. When Deuteronomy lists nations with whom intermarriage (being "admitted into the congregation") is questionable, its most extreme strictures apply to the Moabites:

(23:4) No . . . Moabite shall be admitted into the congregation of the LORD; none of their descendants, even in the tenth generation, shall ever be admitted into the congregation of the LORD. . . . (7) You shall never concern yourself with their welfare or benefit as long as you live.

Contrary to common opinion (based on ancient rabbinic interpretation), I believe that Ruth stays a foreigner throughout the book. She does not "convert to Judaism." There was no such thing as conversion in the biblical period.⁹ The famous statement of Ruth in 1:16–17 is rather a declaration of closeness to Naomi:

Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow you. For wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus and more may the LORD do to me if anything but death parts me from you.

Ruth's pronouncement does not make her into an Israelite. Indeed, *after* this declaration the narrator twice uses the phrase "Ruth the Moabite" (2:2, 21), as does Boaz (4:5, 10). Even Ruth calls herself *nochrriyyah* ("a foreigner"; 2:10). The attitude of the text seems to have been: "Once a Moabite, always a Moabite."

The author of Ruth, however, does not hold the protagonist's status as a Moabite against her. Even as a foreign woman, Ruth can enter the community. More than that, she becomes the progenitor of King David. Thus the book illustrates that kindness is far more important than ethnicity. It objects to the antipa-

thy toward foreigners that may be present in Esther, an attitude that is found in greater extreme in Ezra. According to Ezra 9:2, intermarriage is forbidden because it allows “the holy seed [to] become intermingled with the peoples of the land.” The Book of Ruth presents an opposing perspective.

In the Same Book, in the Same Room

Let’s imagine that we could place the authors of Esther and Ruth in the same room together. What might their conversation sound like? In the dialogue that follows, I play up the apparent differences in their perspective. “R” represents the author of Ruth, and “E” that of Esther.

- E:** How can you stand being married to your Moabite wife? Don’t you know that Moabites are the worst—they sin and cause others to sin! And if that isn’t enough, they are all the result of incest! You are going to dilute our “holy seed” by having children with her!
- R:** Moabites, shmoabites! People are what they become, not how they are born. A Moabite woman who performs acts of kindness is better than a Jewish man who doesn’t. Don’t listen to that fanatic “holy seed” notion—it is just plain wrong. And, while we are at it, your tone makes you sound like you don’t like women too much either.
- E:** That’s an overstatement. Some women are wonderful to look at, and when they listen to their husbands and other male relatives, good things happen. But beware the woman who shows independent initiative. She is “the highway to Sheol [hell]” (Prov. 7:27) —stay away from her!
- R:** That view sounds shortsighted: “Beauty is illusory” (Prov. 31:30). But more important, it’s unduly harsh and judgmental. I prefer to judge women as we judge foreigners—by what they do, not by what they are. Don’t you know that a Moabite woman was the ancestor of King David?
- E:** You don’t expect me to believe that myth, do you?

You might expect any person who heard such a debate to choose one side over the other. What is most remarkable about the Bible is that, here and in many areas, it takes no sides. Instead, diametrically opposed positions on such fundamental issues as “How do we relate to outsiders?” or “How do we view gender?” are included in one collection of books. This leads us to the overall question of the next chapter: How did the Bible come to be formed out of so many texts filled with conflicting viewpoints?

The Creation of the Bible

An Abundance of Ignorance

We know little about the Bible’s origin—how so many books comprising so many diverse ideas became “the Bible.”¹ Clearly, the process happened in stages, over a long time. Nobody woke up one morning, decided to create the Bible, and arranged the next day for all Jews to adopt it as such.

The process was at least as much “down-up” as “up-down.” That is, the wider population helped to determine what the Bible included; it was not primarily an official (rabbinic) decision.² Indeed, the Bible likely came into being before the publication of the Mishnah, the first great rabbinic work (ca. 200 C.E.). This is why few rabbinic opinions describe the Bible’s development. In any case, the rabbis were not interested in history for its own sake, so we need to interpret all rabbinic evidence with care. Meanwhile, some prerabbinic evidence comes from Josephus and other Jewish Hellenistic authors. Also the Dead Sea Scrolls shed light on the process of “how the Bible became the Bible,” but that evidence is indirect and often ambiguous. In short, too much of the picture is obscure to enable me to offer a definite time line of “project milestones.”

The Canon

Until recently, scholars addressed the questions raised above in terms of the “canon” of the Bible. Some of us, however, have recently emphasized that this term (related to the Greek work *kanon*, a “reed” or a “measuring stick”) may be anachronistic in reference to the Bible; it more properly refers to “a fixed standard (or collection of writings) that defines the faith and identity of a particular religious community.”³ The early Church first used this term with reference to