

“Ruth” by Gale A. Yee

Reviewed by Mary Joan Winn Leith, Stonehill College

Gale Yee, Nancy W. King Professor of Biblical Studies at Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts brings a uniquely rich perspective to her commentary on the familiar book of Ruth. Following the framework set for the *Fortress Commentary on the Bible*, Yee presents the book of Ruth in three steps: ancient context, interpretive tradition, and contemporary discussion. It goes without saying that this internationally renowned biblical scholar summarizes the most up-to-date scholarship on Ruth alongside a lucid and elegant plot synopsis, helpfully organized into manageable “sense units.” Yee’s sensitive exposition brings to life the key words and themes woven through this literary gem. Students at all levels and across the spectrum of disciplines will find what they need here, as will interested readers of the Bible.

Of course, despite its ancient origins the biblical text is a canonical document with an enduring and ongoing interpretive life in both Christianity and Judaism. Yee attends to the main streams of Rabbinic and Christian readings of Ruth, all of which in one way or another address divine providence, ideas of foreignness and constructions of femininity. Equally fascinating are the glimpses Yee provides of encounters in literature and the arts with the character and story of Ruth, including films like 1960’s very silly *The Story of Ruth* and Agnès Varda’s searing 2001 documentary, *The Gleaners and I*.

It is in Yee’s approach to the story of Ruth “in contemporary discussion,” however, that many readers—perhaps for the first time—will meet biblical interpretation with a truly global perspective. As Yee points out, the book of Ruth has been appreciated as a romantic pastoral idyll in which two bereaved women attain love and happiness. Yee duly recognizes and celebrates this tradition, noting that today Ruth’s impassioned promise of loyalty to Naomi is voiced in both heterosexual and same-gender blessing and marriage ceremonies. At the same time, Yee cautions, in many of today’s societies few women who share Ruth’s status as impoverished foreign women or as daughters-in-law can expect a Ruth-like fairy tale ending. In some cultures, for example, “mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations are quite conflicted” in contrast to Ruth’s and Naomi’s harmonious bond, and readers are admonished against using the biblical book of Ruth to justify familial abuse. Ruth’s dilemma also resembles that of poor women in the third world today who hope to gain upward mobility by sexual seduction, a power dynamic that encourages the contemporary sex trade and human trafficking. And migrant laborers, unlike Ruth, regularly encounter “intolerance and great hostility from the host country.” This is a Ruth commentary that informs even as it challenges readers to consider how an ancient story can resonate with modern implications.