

“Ruth” by Gale A. Yee

Reviewed by Rachel Adelman, Hebrew College

With its tri-partite approach to the Bible, the *Fortress Commentary* furnishes the reader with a unique lens into the classic texts of the Old Testament. Gale A. Yee comments on each chapter, or “sense unit” in the Book of Ruth through three distinct lenses: the text in its Ancient context, the text in its interpretive tradition (both Christian and Jewish), and the significance of the text for the contemporary reader. Yee provides us with a brief introduction summarizing the story and the place of the Book Ruth in the Christian and Jewish canons; it is found either among the Writings (in the Jewish canon), in accordance with liturgical reading of the scroll at the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot), or between *Judges* and *First Samuel* (as a segue to the establishment Davidic monarchy). Yee then addresses the central question as to why *Ruth* was written by foregrounding the controversial status of the book’s eponymous heroine. Ruth is quintessentially the “stranger in a strange land.” As Yee points out, her status as a Moabite is at odds with much of the Hebrew Bible, which emphasizes the importance of endogamy, in a particular not to inter-marry with Moab (Deut. 23:3-4 and Neh. 13:1). In its ancient context, the question is whether the scroll serves as an apology for David’s Moabite ancestry (composed perhaps during King Josiah’s reign, circa 10th c. BCE) or as a polemic against Ezra and Nehemiah’s stance against foreign women (circa 5th c. BCE). As the quintessential foreigner, Ruth continues to challenge traditional readings and contemporary values about the position of the insider and outsider in society. Yee draws on midrash, Medieval Jewish commentators, and later artistic renditions to fill in ambiguities in the text. On the question—did Ruth seduce Boaz in the granary? —*Ruth Rabbah*, Rashi and the painters, James Tissot and Marc Chagall are brought to bear.

Unique to Yee’s commentary is the way Ruth models the plight of the destitute foreign woman worker in the contemporary setting, whose only route out of poverty is through marriage or concubinage to a wealthy man. Although the Book of Ruth ends “happily,” the more common fate of the modern woman, beguiled by similar “Cinderella stories,” is to become the victim of sexual exploitation and human trafficking. The combination of literary and scholarly insights, as well the sensitivity to critical social issues today, makes this commentary most compelling. It reaffirms our belief that the Bible can serve as a well-spring of eternal truths even for contemporary secular readers.