

## BOOK REVIEW

*The JPS Bible Commentary – Ruth*, Commentary by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, Jewish Publication Society, 2011, 178 pp. Reviewed by David J. Zucker.

Appealing to scholars and laypersons alike, JPS's Bible Commentary on the Book of Ruth follows a similar pattern to the volumes dealing with Jonah, Esther, and Ecclesiastes published earlier. Here again, scholarly and traditional Jewish materials are combined, providing a contemporary commentary on Ruth, for which the JPS is to be commended. There are 75 pages of introduction, as well as a further 100 or more pages of the actual text in Hebrew and English translation, with a running commentary at the bottom of each page.

The authors of this wonderful volume, Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and the late Tikva Frymer-Kensky, both highly respected women scholars, offer the reader a rich review of this *megillah*, the only book in the entire biblical corpus aside from Esther that is named for a woman. The JPS Commentary on Ruth received the 2011 National Jewish Book Award.

Sadly, Frymer-Kensky died while working on this joint project. She did leave extensive notes that form the basis for the first two chapters, as well as some notes for the Introduction. Eskenazi's voice is heard in chapters three and four. Eskenazi also wrote the full Introduction with the exception of the subsection on *Hesed in the Bible* (see p. xlvihi).

JPS wisely chose two eminently (!) qualified women scholars to author this book, having selected Adele Berlin to write the comparable volume on Esther more than a decade ago. Women have insights different to those of men. In the past, many Jewish commentaries (written by men) spoke for all of Judaism, women and men alike; but women approach the text in a unique manner, reflecting their own feminine world view and experiences. It is, very likely, a woman's outlook that highlights, for example, the candid discussion of the "sexually charged atmosphere" created by "Naomi's provocative instructions" in Ruth 3:4, and the comments regarding a single woman's economic survival

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in biblical times implied in 4:15. At the close of the Introduction, Eskenazi refers to numerous contemporary women writers who have brought their scholarship and sensibilities to bear on the Book of Ruth.

Readers might take the time to go through the extensive Introduction, or begin with the running commentary, or choose a combination of the two.

Each chapter begins with a paragraph overview, followed by a three-sentence outline with appropriate verse numbers. These divisions help to define for the reader the direction of the chapter itself. In addition, as one reads through the commentary, each of these chapter divisions features additional introductory explanations for the section it addresses.

In the running commentary for each verse in the Book, the authors offer a variety of insights. They reflect on the plain meaning of the text and often add context to facilitate a better understanding of its meaning in the environment of the ancient Near East. They may also provide midrashic commentary and suggest connections to material that will appear later in the story or in other parts of the Bible. Proper names are analyzed, as well as the use of specific verbs.

This volume is informative and enjoyable to read. It often uses alliteration to underscore central ideas. Eskenazi describes the Book of Ruth as a "story [that] is simple but never simplistic" (p. xvi), a work that is filled with "*hesed* and *hutzpah*," telling of "a journey from famine to fullness, from futility to fertility" (p. xv); and later there is a section on "the relation and relevance to King David" (p. lx). Chapter 2 is titled "Finding Favor and Food in the Field" (p. 27), while the title of Chapter 4 is "Redemption and Restoration" (p. 69).

Commentaries reflect the age in which they are written, and the audience for which they are intended. Although, as noted below, many other topics are covered, this book prominently features sections on the issues of Intermarriage and Conversion, as well as Feminist Interpretations, which make this work special. Likewise, the commentary reflects on both Jewish and general scholarship concerning the Book of Ruth. Eskenazi notes that this particular biblical work has become "recognized as a spiritual source for contemporary women and men as a sophisticated contribution to understanding the dynamics of class, gender, and ethnicity, both in the past and the present" (p. lxv).

The Introduction itself is worth the price of the book. The categories are: Authorship and Date; Genre/Style; Ruth's Place in the Canon; Ruth's Rela-

tionship to Other Biblical Books; Ruth and Shavuot; Background Issues and Themes; Levirate Marriage; The Marriage of Boaz and Ruth; Inter-marriage; Conversion; The Status of the Moabites; *Hesed*; The Theology of the Book of Ruth; Redemption in the Bible; Pre-modern Rabbinic Interpretations; Later Jewish Interpretations; and Contemporary Readings. In this last category there are subsections on Feminist Interpretations and Modern Jewish Interpretations.

This is a welcome addition and complement to both traditional and more academic scholarship on the Book of Ruth.



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