

***The JPS Bible Commentary – Ruth* – Commentary by Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky. Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 2011.**

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Only two books in the entire corpus of the Bible feature the names of women in their titles: Esther and Ruth. Although very different books, with quite different heroines, each is read as the megillah reading for a major Jewish holy day: Esther for the festival of Purim and Ruth for the festival of Shavuot.

Some years ago (2001), the Jewish Publication Society published an excellent commentary on Esther [which is included in the journal's Vol. 9:1], and a decade later (2011) there follows an equally fine commentary on Ruth.

Tamara Cohn Eskenazi – Professor of Bible at HUC-JIR LA, joined with Tikva Frymer-Kensky Professor of Hebrew Bible and the History of Judaism in the University of Chicago's Divinity School. Their collaboration is an eminently readable, thoroughly researched study of the book of Ruth. Understandably, it earned the 2011 National Jewish Book Award.

While this commentary on Ruth was a joint effort of these two well-respected scholars, regrettably Professor Frymer-Kensky died in 2006 in the midst of working on the project. Fortunately, she left extensive notes, which addressed the first two chapters, as well as some notes concerning the Introduction. Professor Eskenazi's voice is reflected in chapters three and four, as well as being the principal voice of the Introduction.

Even more than the book of Esther, in the figures of Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi, the book of Ruth features women as central characters. Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky explain that this has led several “scholars [to] entertain the possibility that the author was a woman. They note the unusual extent to which the book is attentive to women's lives and perspectives (comparable only to Song of Songs in this respect)” (p. xvi). Another view suggested is that Ruth was written by “a circle of women” (p. xvii).

*JPS Commentary – Ruth* divides into two main sections, of approximate equal length, a fascinating Introduction, and then the text of the book itself, both in Hebrew and English, along with a running commentary at the bottom of the page. This commentary which addresses each and every verse in the book provides a forum for the authors to address a variety of subjects: these might be the plain meaning of the text, or it could be placing some matter in historical or cultural context, or they might refer to varied rabbinic commentaries on a particular word or verse. On other occasions, the running commentary refers to material, which will appear later in the story, or in other parts of the Bible. There are analyses of the names of all the major characters and places, as well as descriptions of institutions, such as levirate marriage.

Each of the four chapters commences with a paragraph overview followed by a simple three single sentence outline accompanied with appropriate verse numbers. These divisions help the reader to understand the direction of the chapter itself. In addition, as one reads the commentary each of these chapter divisions features additional introductory explanations for the section it addresses.

Over the past decades, the book of Ruth has been analyzed from a variety of perspectives. It is of particular interest in terms of women's' studies, for example Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, eds., *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (1994), and there have been some fine general commentaries written about Ruth by Edward F. Campbell (1975), Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. (1988), Jack M. Sasson (1989), Frederick W. Bush (1996), Kristen Nielsen (1997), and Tod Linafelt (1999). What makes this work special is that it is a *full-length* treatment of the book of Ruth written by two women who could provide a feminine perspective, something that among the works cited immediately above, only the Nielsen book had achieved. The added plus is that these were Jewish women scholars.

The near ninety page Introduction provides the reader with a wealth of information. For example, although many scholars and commentators in the past suggested that the Boaz-Ruth marriage was a levirate union that does not appear to be the case. Such a view “is nowadays challenged by a number of scholars” (p. xxxv). The Introduction itself divides into seventeen sections: Authorship and Date; Genre/Style; Ruth's Place in the Canon; Ruth's Relationship to Other Biblical Books; Ruth and Shavuot; Background Issues and Themes; Levirate Marriage; The

Marriage of Boaz and Ruth; Intermarriage; 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 are subsections on Feminist Interpretations and Modern Jewish Interpretations (although clearly some of these could overlap each other).

*The JPS Bible Commentary – Ruth* is a product of the contemporary world and gives voice to contemporary concerns. Notable in this volume are sections on Intermarriage and Conversion, as well as Feminist Interpretations.

At times, the language is consciously playful. The authors describe 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 the story of “a journey from famine to fullness, from futility to fertility” (p. xv).