

# RUTH AND ESTHER

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# ***Introduction***

## ***Why Ruth? Why Esther? Why Now?***

Every day we wake up to news reports of violence—mass shootings at schools, colleges, concerts, churches, and nightclubs. Gun violence is committed by and against persons who are victimized within educational, political, penal, economic, and/or religious systems and by persons in authority.<sup>1</sup> Police violence and shootings are on the rise.<sup>2</sup> Hate crimes and hate speech have been on the rise, and the 2016 presidential campaign and the years since have made all of us fully aware of the violence of hate speech.<sup>3</sup> September 11, 2001, shattered the myth of the United States as an innocent nation, and many of us are now more fully conscious of the relationship between religion and violence in domestic and global terms.<sup>4</sup>

1. Al Jazeera, “Timeline: The Deadliest Mass Shootings in the US,” <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/10/deadliest-mass-shootings-171002111143485.html>; BBC News, “Guns in the US: The Statistics behind the Violence,” January 5, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34996604>.
2. Mapping Police Violence, <https://mappingpoliceviolence.org/>.
3. Conor Friedersdorf, “America’s Many Divides over Free Speech,” *The Atlantic*, October 9, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/10/a-sneak-peek-at-new-survey-data-on-free-speech/542028/>; Jessica Guynn, “‘Massive Rise’ in Hate Speech on Twitter during Presidential Election, *USA TODAY*,” Oct. 23, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/tech/news/2016/10/21/massive-rise-in-hate-speech-twitter-during-presidential-election-donald-trump/92486210/>; Peter Eisler, “Hate Speech Seeps into U.S. Mainstream amid Bitter Campaign, *Reuters.com*,” Nov. 8, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-hatespeech-insight-idUSKBN13225X>; “Hate Speech Is on the Rise Following U.S. Presidential Election, *NBC Nightly News*,” Dec. 4, 2016, <https://www.nbcnews.com/nightly-news/video/hate-speech-is-on-the-rise-following-u-s-presidential-election-824559171837>; Dan Bauman, “After 2016 Election, Campus Hate Crimes Seemed to Jump. Here’s What the Data Tell US,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 16, 2018, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/After-2016-Election-Campus/242577>.
4. The September 11 Digital Archive, “Saving the Histories of September 11, 2001,” <http://911digitalarchive.org/>; Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004), chap. 6; Mark Jurgensmeyer, Dinah Griego, and John

I introduce this commentary by speaking about types and events of violence of which most of us are aware. But there are many forms of violence in which we participate or to which we fall victim—namely, cultural, psychological, or spiritual violence—without being fully aware of the harm being committed. Indeed, I think that we should push ourselves to consider how violence is constitutive of the social fabric of our lives—how we live complicit in the omnipresence of violence. In other words, violence is not only the events that make the news, it is also the way we daily disrespect, silence, marginalize, objectify, and fear “the Others” among us because of characteristics such as gender, race, ethnic, economic, political, or religious differences and cognitive or physical disabilities.

Both public and private, overt and covert, acts of violence are committed in the name of God—justified with religious beliefs and theopolitical ideologies. Violence can be and is religiously motivated against various groups within society as well as faith communities. Much religiously motivated violence in the twenty-first century is ascribed disproportionately to Muslims, especially by persons in the

**To single out one religion as sole perpetrator of terror in the world would be to distort the historical record and contemporary reality, as well as to misjudge the extent and complexity of the problem.**

Oliver McTernan, *Violence in God's Name: Religion in an Age of Conflict* (London: DLT, 2003), ix.

United States following September 11, 2001. However, adherents of Christianity, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism also commit religious violence today.<sup>5</sup>

There is a tendency to teach and preach about Ruth and Esther as *individuals* who are exemplars of women's friendship, familial loyalty, and sacrificial courage. The intent of this commentary is to discover

how the books of Ruth and Esther help us to think about how violence is constitutive of the social fabric of life, particularly the dynamics of gendered violence. The United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment for Women reveals that violence

Soboslai, *God in the Tumult of the Global Square: Religion in Global Civil Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).

5. Mark Jurgensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God: The Global Rise of Religious Violence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

against women is manifest in diverse private and public arenas of life. This violence includes domestic and intimate partner violence, human trafficking and exploitation, and psychological harassment and threats. This violence happens to women and girls at home or in school and on social media, and it intensifies when women are displaced because of environmental or economic factors.<sup>6</sup> The books of Ruth and Esther provide avenues for preachers, teachers, and laypersons to reflect on how religious beliefs, traditions, customs, ethnicity, and laws are among the sources used to perpetuate interpersonal, domestic, and global violence against women.<sup>7</sup> The social ethical reading of these books opens them up as theo-ethical resources for addressing the violence of our lives as social groups in church and society.

### *Women, Violence, and the Bible*

Nancy R. Bowen describes several intersections between women, violence, and the Bible. First, there are stories about the death and dismemberment of women (e.g., the Levite's concubine Judg. 19); killing or abduction of women during war (e.g., Deut. 10–14); and sexual violence against women (e.g., Tamar in 2 Sam. 13:11–14). Second, there is direct physical violence committed by women (e.g., Jael in Judg. 4:17–22). Third, there is proximate violence committed by women (e.g., Delilah's deal to deliver Samson to the Philistines, Judg. 16:4–22). Fourth, women become entangled in physical and psychological violence with one another (e.g., Hannah and Peninah, 1 Sam. 1:6–7). Fifth, divine silence becomes an implicit justification of violence against women (e.g., Jephthah's daughter and the Levite's concubine). Sixth, God is perpetrator of metaphorical violence (e.g. Hosea 1–3).<sup>8</sup> What we learn from these biblical examples

6. UN Women, "Facts and Figures: Ending Violence against Women," <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/ending-violence-against-women/facts-and-figures>.

7. Marie Fortune and Cindy Enger, "Violence against Women and the Role of Religion," National Resource Center on Domestic Violence, March 2005, <https://vawnet.org/material/violence-against-women-and-role-religion>.

8. Nancy R. Bowen, "Women, Violence, and the Bible," in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World*, ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 188–89.



of gendered violence is that violence has relational and contextual origins. In the context of patriarchy, relationships between women and men or women and women can become abusive and murderous. Women can be either objects of and/or perpetrators of violence in relationships that are interpersonal, or violence can be directed at women as social groups. In both cases, the violence is embedded in contextual dynamics and justified by cultural norms and laws. Therefore, women as moral agents must wrestle with their complicity in systems of violence (patriarchy and imperialism) as well as the way that their complicity can influence individual choices about how they engage other women individually and collectively.

Violence can thus be a lens through which we interpret texts in several ways. We can read the text asking ethical questions about how violence is used to maintain order in a racist-sexist-classist societal hierarchy as well as how women participate in liberation from that violence. Or we can read texts that justify violence as points of departure for confessing the “sins of sexism, violence, and patriarchy” while recognizing that these texts disclose how “we demonize the Other (whoever that might be).”<sup>9</sup>

Therefore, an equally important reading of these books is to consider Ruth’s and Esther’s status and choices as *members of an oppressed social gender group responding to the violence they experience in their relationships and the contexts in which they live*. Both Ruth and Esther are oppressed as women in the ways that violence happens to women—sexual objectification, legal and political constraints, economic exploitation. Likewise, Ruth and Esther are members of groups who are vilified and/or subject to persecution because of their religious and/or ethnic background; these texts might aid us as we encounter hate crimes or religiously justified violence today. The traditional emphasis on Ruth and Esther as exemplars of faithful individuals must be wedded to interpretations of these women as social actors and moral agents who subvert and resist violence against them as members of their despised social groups—Ruth as a Moabite woman, Esther as a Jewish woman. In sum, it is important to read these women’s stories to shed light on “the gendered

9. *Ibid.*, 194.

nature of violence”; “violence is essentially an instrument of power and control which perpetuates hierarchical and patriarchal social relations.”<sup>10</sup> The womanhood and foreignness of Ruth and Esther are keys to understanding the dynamics of gendered violence in these books.

### **Relational and Contextual Contributors to Gendered Violence in Ruth and Esther**

<p><b>Sexual/Gender</b></p> <p>Encounter between Boaz and Ruth Encounter between Esther and King Ahasuerus</p>
<p><b>Social/Cultural</b></p> <p>Laws Regarding Marriage to Foreign Wives Levirate Law</p>
<p><b>Economic</b></p> <p>Famine; Barley Harvest Wealth of King Ahasuerus</p>
<p><b>Political</b></p> <p>Genealogy and Kingship Male Competition for Power</p>

When these books are read as the basis of theological and ethical reflection upon gendered violence, these stories provide avenues for a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of violence. Indeed we might think of the embedded dynamics of violence revealed in these stories as what I term the omnipresence of violence. The omnipresence of violence is the social-political-economic fabric of churches, civil communities, interpersonal relationships (private and public), and the geopolitics of society and the world. I contend that how to live constructively in the omnipresence of

10. Karimi Kinoti, “Overcoming Violence: Taking a Gender Perspective,” *Ecumenical Review* 55, no. 3 (2003): 226–28. Cf. Jane Caputi, “OverKill: Why Excess and Conflict Are Both Sexy and Sacred,” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 1 no. 3 (2007): 277–92.

violence is *the religious social ethical problem* of the twenty-first century.

Ruth and Esther may provide insights about how we might respond faithfully to these issues of our time: gender oppression, immigration, nationalism, ethnocentrism, human trafficking, poverty and food insecurity, ethnic cleansing, and religious persecution, to name a few. These issues of violence are interpersonal and intercommunal as well as intercultural, geopolitical, and interreligious. Reading Ruth and Esther with diverse eyes is important for uncovering how these books can inform our theological understanding of and ethical responses to such issues today.

### *Reading with Feminist, Postcolonial, and Womanist Eyes*

Twenty-first-century readers can enlarge their interpretation of these two books by using three mid-to-late twentieth century methods of biblical interpretation: (1) feminist, (2) postcolonial, and (3) womanist. Although these methods of interpretation have distinctive features, they do share certain emphases that are often characterized as liberation hermeneutics. First, each of these methods privileges the histories, points of view, and lived experiences of marginalized/dominated/subjugated/minoritized social groups of people. Second, these methods of interpretation push readers to ask questions about how gender, economics, politics, power, culture, and religious values are at work in the text as well as how these factors inform a reader's or community of readers' interpretations. Third, these methods are concerned with discerning how faithful humans work for justice and liberation of oppressed people and all of God's creation. Although I am doing a womanist social ethical reading of these books, I will engage some other scholars who read Scripture using feminist and postcolonial liberation hermeneutics. Accordingly, brief descriptions of these two types of liberation hermeneutics follow below before I discuss womanist biblical scholarship and my womanist hermeneutics.

### *Feminist Scholarship*

In the introduction to *The Women's Bible Commentary*, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe make this point: "Contemporary feminist study of the Bible has not set out either to bring the Bible into judgment or to rescue it from its critics."<sup>11</sup> Old Testament scholar Kathleen O'Connor says that feminist biblical scholarship begins when women read the Bible with feminist consciousness. Feminist consciousness is "an awareness of women's subordination as unnatural, wrong, and largely determined by society rather than written into our bodies by biology alone."<sup>12</sup> Reading with feminist consciousness is thus the point of departure for feminist hermeneutics.

Feminist hermeneutics is interpretation of the Bible that is characterized by (1) suspicion about the usefulness of the Scriptures for women's empowerment and (2) the discovery of new meaning in biblical texts when read from the perspectives of women's experiences. Early feminist interpretation included a variety of approaches that highlighted (a) stories about women as role models of faith, (b) themes of liberation in Scripture that apply to women and all people, and (c) reconstruction of the history of biblical women within their own context. Further development of feminist biblical interpretation has exposed stories of violence against women found in the Bible and the way that Scripture is used to teach sexism and support misogyny. This scholarship also engages the question of how the Bible functions authoritatively for women.<sup>13</sup> Finally, feminist biblical interpretation exposes the complexity of how the Bible can be oppressive and liberating for women. By exposing social, cultural, political, and economic dynamics of gender oppression within biblical texts and the contexts from which they emerge, feminist biblical scholars are contributing to the larger movement to liberate women in church and society.

11. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., *Women's Bible Commentary*, expanded edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), xxi.

12. Kathleen O'Connor, "The Feminist Movement Meets the Old Testament: One Woman's Perspective," in *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World*, ed. Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 11.

13. *Ibid.*, 12–15.

### *Postcolonial Scholarship*

Postcolonial scholarship is concerned with deconstructing the Western history of colonizing peoples and discourses. Postcolonial biblical scholar R. S. Sugirtharajah states, “Like historical criticism, postcolonialism is committed to a close and critical reading of the text. But there are crucial differences.” The following chart highlights three differences:

#### **Differences between Historical Criticism and Postcolonial Criticism**

HISTORICAL CRITICISM	POSTCOLONIAL CRITICISM
Concentrating more on the history, theology, and religious world of the text	Concentrating more on the politics, culture, and economics of the colonial milieu out of which the text emerged
Revealing the kingdom of God and its implications for the world	Unveiling biblical and modern empires and their impact
Posing questions to the text that are driven by Reformation and Enlightenment agendas	Posing questions to the text that are not necessarily motivated by a European ecclesiastical or intellectual agenda

Summarily, Sugirtharajah asserts this: “Essentially, postcolonial biblical criticism is about exploring who is entitled to tell stories and who has the authority to interpret them.”<sup>14</sup>

The postcolonial scholar’s aim is to deconstruct Western imperialism as a complex relationship between the colonizer and the

14. R. S. Sugirtharajah, *Exploring Postcolonial Biblical Criticism: History, Method, and Practice* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), loc. 32–42, Kindle

colonized in the past and the present. Thus, another reason for postcolonial biblical criticism is to expose the role of the Bible in Christian mission and colonization. “Christian mission has been part of the colonial project of destroying people’s culture and self-esteem and associating God with gold, glory, sexism, and racism.”<sup>15</sup>

Musa W. Dube, an African postcolonial feminist biblical scholar, in *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, maintains that there are several interconnections, land, race, power, and gender, that undergird Western imperialism in the African context. The relationship between Western imperialism, colonialism, and the Bible is the connection that is exposed and examined by postcolonial biblical scholarship. “To read the Bible as postcolonial subjects, therefore, is to participate in the long, uncompleted struggle for liberation of [African] countries and to seek liberating ways of interdependence.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, Dube asserts that postcolonial interpretation of gender reveals a story of imperialism in which white males versus the Africans either subsumes women in or erases them from that story; women in colonized spaces suffer colonial oppression as well as the oppression imposed on them by two patriarchal systems.<sup>17</sup> Dube therefore challenges Western biblical feminist interpreters when they privilege white Western experiences of gender oppression, thus reproducing imperial strategies of subjugation.<sup>18</sup>

Postcolonial feminist biblical interpreters also bring their own cultural stories and religious practices to the task of interpretation.<sup>19</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, an Asian postcolonial feminist theologian, affirms overlapping and interwoven historical, dialogical, and diasporic motifs in a postcolonial imagination as her method for doing postcolonial reading of texts.<sup>20</sup> In *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible*, Dube points to methods of reading texts consistent

15. Letty M. Russell, “Cultural Hermeneutics: A Postcolonial Look at Mission,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 20, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 29, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25002488>.

16. Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Saint Louis: Chalice, 2000), 19–20.

17. *Ibid.*, 20.

18. *Ibid.*, chap 2.

19. Musa W. Dube, ed., *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 1–10.

20. Kwok, Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 29–51.

with the African cultural practices of storytelling and divination. For example, divination is an ancient means of interpretation, and Dube thinks that the assumptions and skills of this practice can be used to read Scripture and social realities for the benefit of women's thriving and justice in the world.<sup>21</sup> In sum, postcolonial interpreters deconstruct Western biblical interpretation as normative for Christians around the globe as they expose the white colonial worldview in all its dimensions—economic, geographic, cultural, social, gendered.

### *Womanist Scholarship*

Womanist refers to a term coined by African American writer Alice Walker. Walker says that a womanist is “a black feminist or feminist of color”; she offers a four-part definition of womanist that affirms the particular woman-centered and woman-identified experiences and contexts of African American women's lived experiences: cultural, historical, political and religious/spiritual.<sup>22</sup> Womanist ethicist Katie Cannon sums up why African American women religious scholars who identify their scholarship as womanist do so: “Our objective is to use Walker's four-part definition as a critical methodological framework for challenging inherited traditions for their collusion with androcentric patriarchy as well as a catalyst in overcoming oppressive situations through revolutionary acts of rebellion.”<sup>23</sup> Exposing the interacting dynamics of race-gender-class oppression in church and society is the focus of womanist analysis, and womanists then integrate that analysis into theology, ethics, and a variety of other disciplines (e.g., religious education, psychology of religion, sociology of religion, etc.).

Womanist biblical interpretation thus has liberation from race-gender-class oppression as an earmark of its hermeneutics of liberation. In the introduction to *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*, Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace describe womanist biblical scholarship as “using gender criticism,

21. Dube, *Other Ways of Reading*, 2–4.

22. Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), xi–xii.

23. Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 23.

critical race theory, and other theories and methods dealing with the interlocking oppressions of black women.”<sup>24</sup> Biblical scholars such as Renita J. Weems, Clarice Martin, Cheryl B. Anderson, and Wil Gafney offer ways to do womanist biblical hermeneutics that challenge (1) the text itself, (2) the ways that the texts have been read, and (3) exclusive principles of interpretation as well as practices of translation.<sup>25</sup>

Moreover, Byron and Lovelace note that biblical scholars and scholars in a range of disciplines have contributed to womanist interpretations of the Bible. This theological commentary is written by a womanist Christian ethicist who has developed an ethical theory and practice (religious ethical mediation) that I am using as the basis for a womanist religious ethical hermeneutics. Three womanist scholars—Renita Weems, an Old Testament scholar; Delores Williams, a theologian; and Mitzi Smith, a New Testament scholar—provide insights that inform my hermeneutics.

Renita Weems, a womanist African American Old Testament biblical scholar, describes womanist biblical hermeneutics as “re-reading for liberation.”<sup>26</sup> In Weems’ words: “An important part of womanist biblical criticism involves empowering readers to judge biblical texts, to not hesitate to read against the grain of a text if needed, and to be ready to take a stand against those texts whose worldview runs counter to one’s own vision of God’s liberation activity in the world.”<sup>27</sup>

Furthermore, Weems asserts that it is the community of readers with whom African American women identify as they read the text that influences how they interpret it. For example, Christian African

24. Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace, eds., *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 1.

25. Renita J. Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995); Clarice J. Martin, “Womanist Interpretations of the New Testament: The Quest for Holistic and Inclusive Translation and Interpretation,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 6, no. 2, 41–61; Cheryl B. Anderson, *Ancient Laws and Contemporary Controversies: The Need for Inclusive Biblical Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Wilda C. Gafney, “Translation Matters: A Fem/Womanist Exploration of Translation Theory and Practice for Proclamation in Worship,” 2019, <https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/gafney.pdf>.

26. Renita J. Weems, “Re-Reading for Liberation: African American Women and the Bible,” in *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*, ed. Katie Geneva Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 51.

27. *Ibid.*, 61.



American women belong to at least four communities of readers: American/Western, African American, female, and Christian. For example, depending on the community of readers, she may read the story of Ruth with these different foci: Ruth the woman, Ruth the foreigner, Ruth the unelected woman, Ruth the displaced widow, or Ruth the ancestress of King David.<sup>28</sup> From Weems, my womanist hermeneutics takes seriously the need to reread the stories of Ruth and Esther with my community of readers, Black Christian women, who grew up in the Black church and were taught that Ruth and Esther are biblical role models for how to be loyal and sacrificial for the sake of the needs of others, especially Black men and the Black community. Black women who are loyal and sacrificial are considered the “StrongBlack (sic) Woman.”<sup>29</sup> According to womanist pastoral theologian and psychiatrist Chanequa Walker-Barnes, “For the StrongBlack Woman strength, however, takes on a particular connotation that has dangerous consequences. Specifically, strength is intrinsically linked to suffering, that is, the capacity to withstand suffering without complaint.”<sup>30</sup> Ruth and Esther are exemplars of the StrongBlack woman, and this reading of the texts discloses how they are much more than that.

Womanist theologian Delores Williams articulates a womanist hermeneutic of biblical interpretation that derives from the biblical story of Hagar, the Egyptian slave-girl. Williams rereads the story of Hagar (Gen 16:1–16; 21:9–21) and emphasizes God’s response to Hagar in the wilderness. From her rereading of Hagar’s story, the wilderness experience is the site of God’s response to the oppressed. God responds with resources for survival, and human initiative is critical to that survival. Williams concludes that “the female-centered tradition of African American biblical appropriation could be named the *survival/quality of life* of African American biblical appropriation.”<sup>31</sup> Also, Williams opens up issues from Hagar’s story

28. Renita J. Weems, “Reading Her Way through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible,” in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* ed. Cain Hope Felder (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 57–77.

29. Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *Too Heavy a Yoke: Black Women and the Burden of Strength* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 2.

30. *Ibid.*, 21.

31. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 6.

that are of significance to Black women and the African American community: “the predicament of motherhood; the character of surrogacy; the problem of ethnicity; and the meaning and significance of wilderness experience for women and for the community.”<sup>32</sup>

Guided by a survival/quality of life hermeneutic the reader/interpreter of Scripture is pushed to ask questions about the responsibility of oppressed individuals and their community for their survival on the way to liberation. God is not only a God of liberation. God is a provider of resources for survival on the way to liberation. From this hermeneutic proposed by Williams and reading the text through the religious ethical mediation lens, Ruth and Esther’s choices are about survival and quality of life. Ruth makes a choice to remain with her mother-in-law as her choice for survival; she trusts her instinct for survival even though the history between her people and Naomi’s people belie such a choice. Esther chooses when and how to enact her power as queen in the interest of survival for herself and her community even as Mordecai seeks to direct her actions. These choices are made in the space between deception (fear of the unknown for Ruth and loss of her life for Esther) and moral courage (trusting their instincts for survival) and are ethically responsive to their understanding of what is required in the context. Even when someone else in Ruth’s case (Naomi) or Esther’s case (Mordecai) tells them what should be done, they do not simply do what others requested or expected.

New Testament scholar Mitzi J. Smith describes womanist biblical scholarship thus: “As a political act, womanist biblical interpretation seeks to critically engage, expose, and/or dismantle the interconnected oppressions found in biblical texts, contexts, and interpretations.”<sup>33</sup> Smith notes that oppressive systems are violent, and African American women and other women of color cannot be silent in the face of such violence. Moreover, she connects an imperative to speak out against violence to God’s justice for those who are oppressed. In her words, “If we love God, we love what God loves;

32. *Ibid.*, 8 and chap. 1.

33. Mitzi J. Smith, “Womanism, Intersectionality, and Biblical Justice,” *Mutuality*, June 5, 2016, 9, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/resource/womanism-intersectionality-and-biblical-justice/>.

we develop a passion for what God is passionate about. God is passionate about justice.”<sup>34</sup> God’s justice is the comprehensive framework for womanist religious ethical mediation hermeneutics. Just as there is the omnipresence of violence, there is the omnipresence of God’s justice. It is Ruth and Esther as moral agents who become the counterforce of the omnipresence of God’s justice.

In brief, this commentary is critical and constructive engagement with feminist, postcolonial, and womanist scholarship on the books of Ruth and Esther. Feminist, postcolonial, and womanist scholars are primary partners in an interpretative dialogue with my womanist hermeneutics of religious ethical mediation. Consequently, the following broad questions come to the fore: Who are the Ruths and Esthers (individuals and social groups) in our community and society, and how do they survive? What quality of life follows from their choices for survival? How are we in our communities and societies complicit in demonizing these individuals and groups of women because of their choices? What do these books say to the twenty-first century church about how to be in solidarity with marginalized people in our communities, society, and around the globe? What insights for the twenty-first-century church can we gain from these books about transformative reconciliation amid interreligious and intercultural conflicts? How can the church be a place of dialogue and intercultural encounter where we are all transformative reconcilers who are seeking what God’s justice requires?

The books of Ruth and Esther invite theological and ethical reflection on our complicity in and/or resistance to dynamics of gendered violence. Ruth and Esther must make decisions that are contrary to customs and tradition regarding the place of women in their societies.<sup>35</sup> Also, although each woman is at risk because of the religious and ethnic identity of their social groups, she is not complacent; instead, she embraces her agency and contributes fully to the outcomes of the dilemmas in the books. Importantly, the books of Ruth and Esther push us to think anew theologically and ethically about how (1) women must survive and thrive on their terms

34. *Ibid.*, 11.

35. Patricia K. Tull, *Esther and Ruth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003), loc. 120, Kindle.

in the context of gendered violence and (2) all of us must learn to live faithfully with one another and different “Others” in the omnipresence of violence.

## ***A Womanist Religious Ethical Interpretative Framework***

### ***Womanist Hermeneutical Presuppositions***

The womanist hermeneutics used in this commentary is a mediating ethical interpretative process that has these presuppositions:

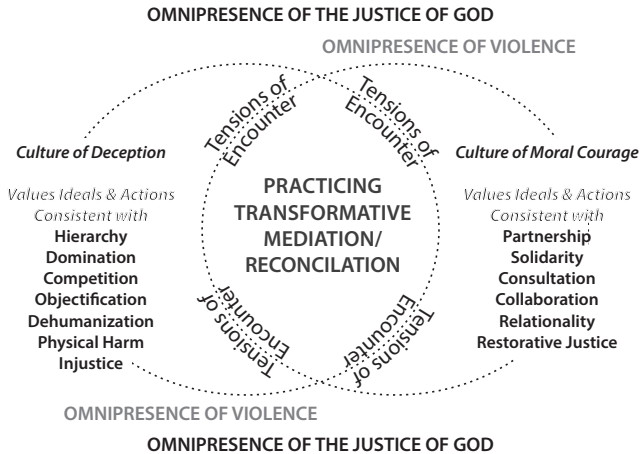
1. The authority of Scripture derives from its power to evoke from the reader/interpreter responses that reorient her or him. In other words, the authority of Scripture derives from its power to transform the reader/interpreter’s way of being and doing in the world.
2. Reading/interpreting Scriptures can nurture a person’s and/or community’s capacity for moral agency that diminishes complicity with and participation in oppressive systems and relationships.
3. This womanist ethical interpretative process means engaging the Bible as a source for theological-ethical reflection whereby readers acknowledge that they are mediating descriptions of reality presented in Scripture with their own experiences of lived reality in the past and in the present.

More specifically, Ruth and Esther are being read using a womanist hermeneutics of religious ethical mediation. Reading through this hermeneutical lens helps the reader to expose the way that God is perceived to oversee the world (religious) is interrelated with values and ideals about who the characters in the text are and how they live in the world (ethical). Readers (interpreters) thus ask questions about how characters in the text respond to tensions (mediate) between differing perceptions of God, values, and/or ideals in ways that transform destructive energies of conflict (violence) and redirect them into constructive energies of reconciling (mediating)

ethical response. In this interpretative framework, the context is perceived as synchronous cultures of deception and moral courage. There are values, ideals, and actions that sustain these cultures and prescribe behavior. Moral agency as a religious ethical mediator happens in the overlap of the cultures (see fig. 1).

### A WOMANIST HERMENEUTICS OF RELIGIOUS ETHICAL MEDIATION

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Religious ethical mediation is transformative mediation. Interpreting through the lens of religious ethical mediation means that readers acknowledge Ruth and Esther as moral agents who are practicing transformative mediation and moral imagination. Transformative mediation emphasizes conflict as a relational, dialogic interaction, and mediation is a process that promotes moral growth by bridging differences.<sup>36</sup> Moral imagination is: “The capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist.”<sup>37</sup> Overall, this commentary interprets Ruth and Esther as social actors who are moral agents engaging in transformative mediation in response to gendered

36. Robert A. Baruch Bush and Joseph P. Folger, *The Promise of Mediation: The Transformative Approach to Conflict* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2005), chap. 2.

37. John Paul Lederach, *Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), ix.

violence in its varied forms in their context (from demonizing, objectifying, imposing restrictions and limitations, and physical harm that destroys individuals, relationships, and communities). In turn, these books may help us to reflect on how we might practice reconciliation as transformative mediation that recreates relationships between individuals and groups in the twenty-first century.

Readers using a womanist hermeneutics of religious ethical mediation ask these questions:

1. How are the characters in the text enmeshed in the omnipresence of violence in their context? What are sources of conflict that sustain the violence in their context?
2. Who are the characters encountering one another, and what conflict ensues from the encounter? Who acts as a religious ethical mediator in the encounter? What does the religious ethical mediator do to redirect energies of conflict from destructive to constructive? Does the character as mediator become a transformative reconciler?
3. How is the context transformed as the characters live into the space between a culture of deception that sustains the omnipresence of violence and a culture of moral courage that is sustained by the omnipresence of God's justice? What ethical meaning and response emerges as the context becomes a site of transformative reconciliation?
4. What can we in the church today learn about living faithfully in the omnipresence of violence within and outside of the church? How do faithful disciples become transformative reconcilers in church and society?

Furthermore, the omnipresence of the justice of God is the counterforce to the omnipresence of violence and context for moral agency. Consequently, the ethical responses to violence should be consistent with "the contours of biblical justice."<sup>38</sup> Biblical justice begins with God because "justice is not something God aspires to; it is the heart of who God is and what God does."<sup>39</sup> There are several ways that we can recognize biblical justice as reasons for ethical

38. Chris Marshall, *The Little Book of Biblical Justice* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005), 22.

39. *Ibid.*

actions : (1) to believe in God's justice is to believe in God's faithfulness and have hope; (2) God's justice is a call to action against present injustices; (3) action against injustice is more than maintaining law and order; (4) justice is complex and may sometimes be impartial or partial, and partiality is on the side of the powerless and vulnerable; (5) justice is about relationships between humans and with God; and (6) the fullness of God's justice is restoration.<sup>40</sup>

Because human beings are created in the image of God, we are to be "agents of justice."<sup>41</sup> As agents of justice, our actions may have a variety of consequences that may align with the contours of biblical justice: reparative or punitive (corrects present or past wrongs), compensatory (ensures that everyone receives her or his due), restorative (seeks repair of relationship), and/or distributive (transforms patterns of injustice and creates ongoing equity). In sum, Ruth and Esther are two women who are moral agents of justice challenging gendered violence.

### *Specific Questions for Interpreting Ruth and Esther as Religious Ethical Mediators*

- How is gendered violence happening in the text?
- What are tensions of encounter (conflicts) that sustain such violence?
- What are ways that Ruth and Esther live as religious ethical mediators transforming violence and reconciling relationships?

These questions are answered in sections entitled religious ethical mediation interpretation by exposing historical or contemporary persons or events that mirror characters, issues, and themes in the texts. I seek to mediate meaning between the text and context, helping the reader of the commentary to grapple for their own meaning for preaching and teaching.

40. *Ibid.*, 27–48.

41. *Ibid.*, 26.

## Introduction to Ruth

Some texts resist dating at all. Was the book of Ruth written during the period of the Judges, which is when the story is set? Or was it written while David was attempting to solidify his kingship, in order to explain how this Israelite ruler happened to have a Moabite great-grandmother? Or was it written comparatively late, during the time following the Babylonian exile, when some factions of the community, represented by Ezra and Nehemiah, encouraged the divorcing of foreign wives and others wanted to show that foreign wives were not only appropriate, but also divinely sanctioned?<sup>1</sup>

This quote points out the various ways by which scholars might date and understand the purpose of the book of Ruth. Scholars have dated the book either from King David's era (c. ninth century BCE) or the early postexilic period (fifth–sixth centuries BCE).<sup>2</sup> Per the opening lines of the book, the setting of the story is during the time of the Judges, and this points to the canonical placement of the book between Judges and Samuel. This placement suggests to the reader that this story can be a reminder of the connection between law and faithfulness, “an exilic (or postexilic) hope for the restoration of the Davidic monarchy,” and the function of Judges in Israel's history.<sup>3</sup>

1. Douglas A. Knight and Amy-Jill Levine, *The Meaning of the Bible: What the Jewish Scriptures and the Christian Old Testament Can Teach Us* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), loc. 369 of 9381, Kindle.
2. Judy Fentress-Williams, *Ruth*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 2012), 20–22, Kindle.
3. Arie C. Leder, “Paradise Lost: Reading the former Prophets by the Rivers of Babylon,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 37 (2002): 20–22; Carlos Bovell, “Symmetry, Ruth and Canon,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 28, no. 2 (2003): 175–91; Charles P. Baylis, “Naomi in the Book



This commentary joins Old Testament feminist biblical scholar Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, who acknowledges the difficulty in dating the book and opts to focus (as other commentators, including rabbis) on “instruction concerning the community’s view of outsiders” and how this points to the exclusivism of communities as a perennial challenge to life among diverse groups of people.<sup>4</sup> Along with this focus on the purpose of Ruth, this commentary joins Judy Fentress-Williams, who interprets Ruth through the lens of identity: “the set of characteristics and values that allows a person to be known and identified within a group. These characteristics and values assigned by any given community come out of that community and serve its interests.”<sup>5</sup> In this commentary the identities of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz are critical to the way that the tensions of encounter (relationships and conflicts) between these individuals and the social groups they represent are negotiated and transformed. Likewise, in our time social group identities have become central to debates about identity politics and the public policies that derive from such. As suggested in the introduction to this commentary, Ruth is a book that can help us think through the twenty-first-century versions of problems about how to live together amid pluralism and diversity in US society and around the globe.

Furthermore, there is debate about whether the book was authored by a female. Here again the debate cannot be fully settled; some suggest that a guild of women storytellers may have been responsible for its oral transmission, if not its written version. Also, there are points in the text that are suggestive of a female author: for example, “But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, ‘Go back each of you to your mother’s house’”<sup>6</sup> (1:8a), and the translation of the Hebrew in 1:20b when Naomi names God as El Shaddai, the translation could have been “the breasted one”<sup>7</sup> rather than the Almighty

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of Ruth in Light of the Mosaic Covenant,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (October–December 2004): 18, 19–22.

4. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1999), 4–5.

5. Fentress-Williams, *Ruth*, 24.

6. Amy-Jill Levine, “Ruth,” in *Women’s Bible Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 86. Levine notes that the term is found in other passages, such as Gen. 24:28; Song 3:4, 8:2, but various ancient Hebrew translations choose the male-defined expression, *father’s house*.

7. Fentress-Williams, *Ruth*, 59.

as in the NRSV. Likewise, the book brings the interests of women to the fore and is characterized by a female worldview. This worldview begins with (1) three women left without their husbands who (2) have different plans for their lives going forward that become the journey of an older woman and a younger woman whereby (3) Ruth offers female companionship while (4) Naomi has to learn to accept the validity of their unconventional partnership, and (5) although marriage to Boaz is central to the women's quality of life, it is a means to an end that (6) eventuates in Israel's female genealogy.

Also, there is a comedic structure to the book. Comedic structure refers to the way that the book of Ruth exhibits the goal of the literary genre of comedy—the transformation of both characters and audience.<sup>8</sup> Using a comedic structure, the book of Ruth introduces an alternate reality: a Moabite woman who demonstrates faithfulness (*hesed*) that transforms the existing reality and relationships. Ruth's faithfulness allows her to escape the role of foreigner/outsider to which she is assigned by cultural norms.<sup>9</sup> More specifically, Fentress-Williams reads the book of Ruth as a “dialogic comedy” because transformation happens through dialogue “between characters in the story and the dialogue between the reader and the text.”<sup>10</sup> This dialogical reading is consistent with reading through a womanist hermeneutics of religious ethical mediation.

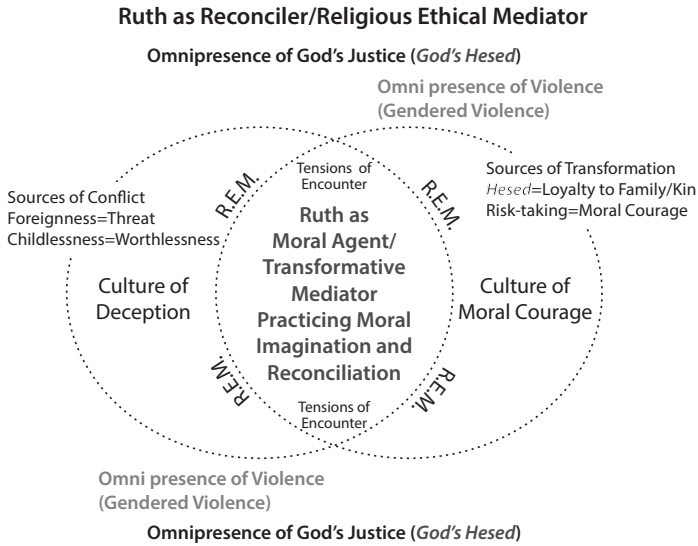
The debates about dating and authorship provide background that illuminates the book's purpose. Still, it is the understanding of how gendered violence is evidenced in the text that opens up pathways to ethical reflection upon historical and contemporary issues that sustain that violence in our time that are the foci of this commentary. Likewise, the women's worldview and the teachings of the book of Ruth about the tension between inclusivism and exclusivism within community are significant to this commentary's interpretation of the book. The book of Ruth speaks to us theologically and ethically about how (1) women survive and thrive in the face of patriarchal customs and traditions that embed gendered violence and (2) we might live faithfully with different “Others” in the omnipresence of God's justice.

8. *Ibid.*, 17.

9. *Ibid.*

10. *Ibid.*

## *Reading Ruth through the Hermeneutics of Religious Ethical Mediation: An Overview*



Reading the Book of Ruth through the hermeneutic of religious ethical mediation reveals a context in which gendered violence is assessed through an understanding of the omnipresence of God's justice as God's *hesed* (steadfastness, faithfulness). Despite Naomi's feelings of divine rejection in the face of the loss of her husband and sons, Ruth is a moral agent who mediates the tensions deriving from her foreignness (threat) and Naomi's feelings of worthlessness (childlessness) by making morally courageous decisions. First, Ruth risks rejection by Naomi and her people and accompanies Naomi as she returns to her people. Second, Ruth expresses loyalty to Naomi, even though Naomi does not acknowledge her loyalty. Third, Ruth imagines a familial relationship with Naomi, her God, and her people. Hers is a moral imagination that recognizes the reality of rejection, and still she takes a leap of faith to live into a future where she and Naomi find security. She acts as a transformative mediator/reconciler who enables Boaz to honor marital customs in a new way and ensures that a familial line continues.

Here you are encouraged to read the story of Ruth as the story of a religious ethical mediator. She lives into the tensions of encounter (dismissal and rejection) as a moral agent who is a risk-taker. Her religious ethical mediation happens from marginalization as the space from which she assesses how to engage the people and context and where faith is lived out; she believes in God's faithfulness to provide resources for survival.

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