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## **Ruth and Esther as Models for the Formation of God’s People: Engaging Liberationist Critiques**

### **Introduction**

It is safe to say that the biblical narratives of Ruth and Esther are known in most, if not all, Christian faith communities. The stories about these two female characters are presented early, in children’s Sunday school classes, and they are presented regularly in sermons and Christian education classes for adults. The books of the Bible that bear their names are readily recognized as part of the Christian canon and, as such, they offer guidance for our faith and serve as “a measuring stick” to evaluate our lives in accordance with that faith.<sup>1</sup> We know Ruth and Esther to be exemplary models of loyalty, faithfulness, and commitment to the people of God and we are told to act likewise.

However, we tend not to know (or, if we know, we tend not to consider) the critiques of that dominant portrayal of Ruth and Esther offered by feminist/womanist, queer, and postcolonial readings, referred to here collectively as “liberationist critiques.” The goals of this paper are to engage these critiques, by presenting the challenges they pose to conventional readings of these texts, and, after discussing these critiques, identify themes yet within these texts that avoid the problematic implications. Finally, an interpretive approach will be proposed that allows Ruth and Esther to be read as models of Christian formation that are inclusive and mutually enriching.

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<sup>1</sup> Daniel J. Harrington, “Introduction to the Canon,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 7.

In general, the books of Ruth and Esther have much in common. Not only are they both found in the Writings of the Hebrew Bible, they are in the *megillot*, or five scrolls and, as such, they are each associated with a specific Jewish festival: Ruth (Pentecost) and Esther (Purim).<sup>2</sup> More specifically, though, the female character after whom each book is named acts within a foreign environment. Ruth is a Moabite in Judah and Esther is a Jewish woman in Persia. Their respective narrative contexts express a concern with the formation of Jewish identity in the Second Temple period (538 BCE to 70 CE).<sup>3</sup> The underlying questions are the following: Should we include foreigners in our Jewish community (Ruth)? And, correspondingly, when we are in the midst of foreigners, how can we maintain our Jewish identity (Esther)? Even though these questions about community identity and its preservation were posed in another time and place, they remain of critical importance for people of faith today—both Jewish and Christian. The easy answers to these questions would be to exclude all who are different or simply assimilate by adopting the dominant religious and cultural identity, but the books of Ruth and Esther resist such easy answers. Nevertheless, such answers have been given to or have been adopted by certain marginalized groups. It is therefore as a form of resistance that liberationist readings have developed and their critiques are considered in the following sections of the paper.

## **Ruth: A Woman, a Daughter-in-Law, and a Moabite**

### **A. Feminist/Womanist Critiques: Empowering the Marginalized**

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen, [A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament](#), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 449.

<sup>3</sup> Birch and others, [Theological Introduction](#), 429.

The story of Ruth can be a positive one for women. For example, the black South African biblical scholar, Madipoane Masenya, reads the book in the context of post-apartheid South Africa with its legacy of white superiority that severely damaged African self-identity.<sup>4</sup> In that context she argues, the story of Ruth the Moabite is one that reminds “all of us, particularly the powerful, that God is not partial to any person. . . . Therefore, what is important to God is not how we are defined on the basis of race or gender, but our availability as agents of God’s transforming *hesed* in the lives of our neighbors,” where the Hebrew word *hesed* means “kindness, lovingkindness, faithfulness, or loyalty.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, for the Taiwanese biblical scholar, Julie Chu, Ruth is the story of a woman whom a man, Boaz, describes as “worthy,” hence she is an equal partner to some extent (3:11) who is valued “more than seven sons” (4:15).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, she finds in Ruth a demonstration that a mother and her daughter-in-law can cooperate rather than compete, as is sometimes the case in her cultural context.<sup>7</sup> For women of color, who are in contexts where issues of race as well as gender are constantly before them, Ruth’s story is one of “a subversive character in that she subverts gender and ethnic boundaries in her actions.”<sup>8</sup> In her South African Indian womanist reading of Ruth, Sarojini Nadar articulates the power of Ruth’s story in the following way:

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<sup>4</sup> Madipoane Masenya (ngwana’ Mphahlele), “Ruth,” in Daniel Patte, ed., Global Bible Commentary (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 86.

<sup>5</sup> Masenya, “Ruth,” 89.

<sup>6</sup> Julie L.C. Chu, “Returning Home: The Inspiration of the Role Dedifferentiation in the Book of Ruth for Taiwanese Women,” *Semeia* 78 (1997), 50–51.

<sup>7</sup> Chu, “Returning Home,” 51–52. In contrast, Amy-Jill Levine finds ambivalence in the relationship between Ruth and Naomi and a lack of appreciation on Naomi’s part for her daughter-in-law’s efforts. See Levine, “Ruth,” in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., Women’s Bible Commentary, expanded edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 84–90. See also Ellen Van Wolde, “Texts in Dialogue with Texts: Intertextuality in the Ruth and Tamar Narratives,” *Biblical Interpretation* 5 (1997): 1–28.

<sup>8</sup> Sarojini Nadar, “A South African Indian Womanist Reading of the Character of Ruth,” in Musa W. Dube, ed., Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 171.

At the beginning, Ruth is portrayed as oppressed in every sphere. She is a woman, a foreigner, a widow, and childless. By the end, we see that Ruth, through dexterity and intelligent action, has managed to cast aside all oppressive roles assigned to her.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, some feminist scholars in the United States find certain aspects of the Ruth narrative to be deeply troubling. Summarizing the work of biblical scholars Katherine Sakenfeld, Amy-Jill Levine and others, the theologian Kwok Pui Lan writes that it “does not challenge patriarchal and heterosexual familial structures.”<sup>10</sup> More specifically,

...a widow can only find economic security through remarriage; marrying a man with some means (no matter the age difference) guarantees financial gains; giving birth to a son is the greatest responsibility of women; a male child is more valuable than a female child; and the authority of the mother-in-law is over the daughter-in-law.<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, Masenya, who otherwise sees Ruth as a positive text for women, acknowledges that the suggestion of a sexual encounter between Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor (3:6–15), implies in a patriarchal society (both Israelite and African) “that women would even risk to avail their bodies for male abuse as a coping strategy.”<sup>12</sup> She notes, furthermore, that “in a world where women are not expected to have control over their bodies, it is common place to find women availing their bodies, whether willingly or

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<sup>9</sup> Nadar, “A South African Indian Womanist Reading,” 171.

<sup>10</sup> Kwok Pui Lan, “Finding a Home for Ruth: Gender, Sexuality, and the Politics of Otherness,” in Robert M. Fowler, Edith Blumhofer, and Fernando F. Segovia, eds., New Paradigms for Bible Study: The Bible in the Third Millennium (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 141.

<sup>11</sup> Kwok, “Finding a Home,” 141. See also Danna Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn, Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990).

<sup>12</sup> Masenya, “Struggling with Poverty/Emptiness: Rereading the Naomi-Ruth story in African-South Africa,” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 120 (November 2004), 58.

not, as a coping mechanism to survive through marriage.”<sup>13</sup> Likewise, Anna May Say Pa, in her Asian (Burmese) woman’s reading of Ruth 3:1–5, sees the text as reinforcing cultural notions of submission, self-sacrifice, and obedience that often work to the detriment of Asian women.<sup>14</sup>

Just the same, Kwok acknowledges that “feminist scholars want to retrieve liberating moments in the story, since it is rare to find women with such major roles in a book in the Bible.”<sup>15</sup> As Masenya identified, one of those “liberating moments” is that, in spite of the constraints of patriarchal hierarchies and ethnic boundaries, Ruth is not defeated by her circumstances but takes action to change her dire situation and, as such, she is a model for impoverished and marginalized women in southern Africa—and elsewhere.<sup>16</sup>

### **B. Queer Critiques: Challenging the Exclusive Focus on Males**

Another of the “liberating moments” offered in the book of Ruth is that, contrary to earlier notions of Ruth as a woman committed to her deceased husband, she can be seen as “a woman-identified woman who is forced into the patriarchal institution of levirate marriage in order to survive.”<sup>17</sup> From this perspective, other elements of “a woman-identified” world are evident. Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to return to “your mother’s house,” rather than the usual reference to the father’s house (1:8); and both

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<sup>13</sup> Masenya, “Struggling with Poverty/Emptiness,” 58.

<sup>14</sup> Anna May Say Pa, “Reading Ruth 3:1–15 from an Asian Woman’s Perspective,” in Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler, eds., *Engaging the Bible in a Gendered World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 47–59.

<sup>15</sup> Kwok, “Finding a Home,” 141.

<sup>16</sup> Masenya, “Struggling with Poverty/Emptiness.”

<sup>17</sup> Laura E. Donaldson, “The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth Through Native Eyes,” in Athalya Brenner, ed., *Ruth and Esther, A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 132.

Naomi and Boaz recommend that Ruth stay among the women in the fields (2:8, 22–23), indicating that “it is in the company of women that Ruth, like Naomi, will find safety.”<sup>18</sup> Finally, when Ruth’s son is born, the women of the neighborhood name him and he is referred to as Naomi’s son rather than that of her deceased husband or sons (4:17).

The clearest statement by Ruth as “a woman-identified woman,” of course, is found in the first chapter.

‘Do not press me to leave you  
or to turn back from following you!  
Where you go, I will go;  
where you lodge, I will lodge;  
your people shall be my people,  
and your God my God.  
<sup>17</sup>Where you die, I will die—  
there will I be buried.  
May the Lord do thus and so to me,  
and more as well,  
if even death parts me from you!’

As Rebecca Alpert writes in her lesbian (or queer) reading of the text, if the speakers here were of opposite sexes, such a statement would certainly be read as “a poetic statement of (sexual) love” and its affirmation and commitment of and to a woman results in its widespread use in lesbian ceremonies—both Jewish and Christian.<sup>19</sup> Alpert rightly contends that “without romantic love and sexuality, the story of Ruth and Naomi loses much of its power as a model for Jewish lesbian relationships,” and that to add such elements is a form of midrash, “reading between the lines,” is supported by “literary,

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<sup>18</sup> Levine, “Ruth,” 86.

<sup>19</sup> Rebecca Alpert, “Finding Our Past: A Lesbian Reading of the Book of Ruth,” in Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, eds., *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 91–96.

historical, and logical possibilities.”<sup>20</sup> For example, a literary possibility is based on the statement in 1:12 that Ruth “clung” to Naomi because the Hebrew verb there (*dabaq*) is the same used in Genesis 2:24 to describe the model heterosexual relationship: “Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.”<sup>21</sup>

Alternatively, the story of Ruth and Naomi portrays a non-sexual affirmation of women as friends, in other words, female bonding, that develops across various differences. As expressed by womanist biblical scholar, Renita Weems, “Ruth and Naomi’s legacy is that of a seasoned friendship between two women that survives the test of time despite the odds against women as individuals, as friends, as women living without men.”<sup>22</sup> Weems then suggests that, from this narrative, we should “take seriously the quality of our relationships with the women and men in our lives” and “refuse to be forced to choose between two good relationships—a romantic partnership with a man and a sustaining friendship with a woman.”<sup>23</sup>

### **C. Postcolonial Critiques: Struggling against the Colonial Empire**

Ruth is a Moabite, a tribe descended from an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters (Genesis 19:30–38) and barred from membership in the ancient Israelite community by law (Deut. 23:3–6). In the narrative, Ruth ignores the possibility of exclusion and goes to Judah with Naomi, but, in so doing, she loses her land, her

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<sup>20</sup> Alpert, “Finding Our Past,” 95.

<sup>21</sup> For a bisexual reading that challenges reading Ruth as a story about *either* a heterosexual relationship (Ruth and Boaz) *or* a homosexual one (Ruth and Naomi), see Celena M. Duncan, “The Book of Ruth: On Boundaries, Love, and Truth,” in Robert E. Goss and Mona West, eds., Take Back The Word: A Queer Reading of the Bible (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 92–102.

<sup>22</sup> Renita J. Weems, Just A Sister Away, revised and updated (West Bloomfield: Warner Books, 2005), 27.

<sup>23</sup> Weems, Just a Sister Away, 36.

people, and her own gods. In other words, the price of inclusion is relinquishing who she is and all that she has known. Some scholars from groups that have experienced forms of Western colonialism notice the striking similarity between their stories and that of Ruth. Indeed, their encounter with a colonial or the global empire has meant the loss of land and of indigenous traditions, with two specific comparisons readily identifiable.

First, as African American biblical scholar Randall Bailey has written, the same association of deviant sexuality with the Moabites and Ammonites has been made with African Americans in order to justify our social oppression and our devaluation as a people.<sup>24</sup> In the very same way, Andrea Smith (Cherokee) notes that the early colonizers in this country marked Native Americans as a sexually perverse group to justify their actions.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, the pattern is to associate deviant practices particularly with the women in the targeted community, whether it is “the wanton Jezebel” of the black community or “the exotic hooker Suzie Wong”<sup>26</sup> of the Asian community, to give just two examples. From this perspective, Ruth the Moabite’s behavior with Boaz on the threshing floor (Chapter 3) illustrates such associations of “foreign” women with deviant sexuality. Consequently, Ruth’s brazen actions may only be acceptable in the narrative because she is a foreigner. In that case, Levine argues, “it is the reader’s task to determine whether the book affirms Ruth or ultimately erases her, whether she serves as a moral exemplar or as a warning against sexually forward Gentile women.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Randall Bailey, “They’re Nothing But Incestuous Bastards: The Polemical Use of Sex and Sexuality in Hebrew Canon Narratives,” in Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert, eds., Reading from this Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States, vol. 1 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 121–138.

<sup>25</sup> Andrea Smith, Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide (Cambridge: South End Press, 2005), 7–33.

<sup>26</sup> Gale Yee, Poor Banished Children of Eve: Woman as Evil in the Hebrew Bible (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 159.

<sup>27</sup> Levine, “Ruth,” 85.

Second, Ruth is erased from the narrative, as a Moabite, by the end of Chapter 4, when Ruth's voice is not heard and the emphasis shifts to the genealogy of the Davidic line. Ruth has been absorbed into the community, even if not fully accepted as a member, and the strategy of assimilation has been used by colonial powers to conquer indigenous populations even in more contemporary eras. As Laura Donaldson points out, Thomas Jefferson's solution to "the Indian problem" was intermingling between whites and certain Indian groups, and severe disruption of cultural patterns, land loss, and the elimination of leadership roles for Native women resulted.<sup>28</sup> In this context, postcolonial readings of Ruth have been proposed which seek to counter the cultural erasure that comes about from assimilation. Correspondingly, Orpah, the other Moabite daughter-in-law in the narrative, the one who does return to her mother's house, as Naomi suggests (1:6–14), becomes more important as a model for colonized populations. Because Orpah, unlike Ruth, symbolizes the preservation of indigenous cultures, Donaldson feels that, for Native women, Orpah becomes "the story's central character."<sup>29</sup>

To Cherokee women, for example Orpah connotes hope rather than perversity, because she is the one who does not reject her traditions or her sacred ancestors. Like Cherokee women have done for hundreds if not thousands of years, Orpah chooses the house of her clan and spiritual mother over the desire for another culture.<sup>30</sup>

From this perspective, one postcolonial reading of the book of Ruth is to emphasize Orpah as a biblical character. Another postcolonial reading, done by Musa

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<sup>28</sup> Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah," 137–138.

<sup>29</sup> Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah," 142.

<sup>30</sup> Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah," 143. See also Judith E. McKinlay, Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004), 37–56.

Dube, is to imagine that Ruth never forgot her heritage and that, after returning home, Orpah became the regent queen and a priestess.<sup>31</sup> Then, according to Dube, in the last of a series of “unpublished letters from Orpah to Ruth,” Orpah, asks that Ruth instill in her children a respect for her native people (and theirs), the Moabites. In this imagined correspondence, Orpah writes to Ruth that she should tell her children the stories of the Moabites: “of their origins, of their kindness, of their hospitality, and of their struggles for survival.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, the harmful effects of cultural absorption can be reduced if those in the midst of a colonial power remember who they are and inform those in power of the humanity and dignity of their people. The positive but usually limited view of Ruth’s acceptance as an individual must be expanded to mean that a deeper understanding and respect results for her group—and other traditionally excluded and despised groups.

Dube, in a more recent article, sees in Ruth and Naomi’s relationship the same unequal relationship that exists between nations in today’s international setting.<sup>33</sup> Specifically, Dube determines that the relationship between Ruth and Naomi is an unequal one since Ruth pledges herself to Naomi but Naomi does not reciprocate. Consequently, “Ruth’s pledge to Naomi has the tones of a slave-to-master relationship rather than an expression of mutual love between women or two friends” and this human relationship “connotes the relationship between Judah and Moab.”<sup>34</sup> In the narrative, she argues, Moab, the subordinate nation, is associated with death (most notably, Elimelech

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<sup>31</sup> Musa Dube, “The Unpublished Letters of Orpah to Ruth,” in Athalya Brenner, ed., *Ruth and Esther. A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 145–150.

<sup>32</sup> Dube, “Unpublished Letters,” 150.

<sup>33</sup> Dube, “Divining Ruth for International Relations,” in Musa W. Dube, ed., *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 179–195.

<sup>34</sup> Dube, “Divining Ruth,” 192.

and both sons die there) but the resources of Moab (Ruth's fertility) can be used for the benefit of Judah, the dominant one. Consequently, for Dube, Ruth's story is "unusable as a model of liberating interdependence between nations" yet creating and maintaining mutually beneficial relationships is "indispensable" to healing our world today.<sup>35</sup>

The preceding discussion shows that interpretations of Ruth vary widely, even within liberationist circles. Such lack of uniformity, of course, is related to the variety of social contexts in which the text is interpreted. At the same time, though, some of the diversity is due to the text itself. In Carolyn Pressler's opinion, the range of readings is attributable, to some degree, to the storyteller and the artful way in which various themes are woven into the book: "Ruth is about economic survival *and* about loyalty *and* about accepting foreigners *and* about the loyalty of one woman to another." Pressler is aware that "the storyteller has put a number of ideas in conversation with one another" and, therefore, "the conversation continues through centuries of interpretation."<sup>36</sup> Clearly those conversations continue in our own day and time. As we will see in the next section of this paper, such a range of interpretations also exists for the book of Esther.

## **Esther: A Woman, a Queen, and a Minority**

### **A. Feminist/Womanist Critiques: Who really wins?**

At first glance, Esther is a biblical character who has three strikes against her: she is female, an orphan, and, as a Jew in the Persian empire, a member of a marginalized group. In spite of the odds against her, she marries the king, making her the queen, and she uses her influence with the king to save her people when their lives are threatened.

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<sup>35</sup> Dube, "Divining Ruth," 194.

<sup>36</sup> Carolyn Pressler, *Joshua, Judges, and Ruth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 264 (italics in original).

All of this should make her the obvious hero/ine of the story, but her role has not always been given its due. As Sidnie Ann White Crawford tells us, “the tendency among scholars was to exalt Mordecai as the true hero of the tale and to downplay or even vilify the role of Esther.”<sup>37</sup> For example, one commentator wrote that “Between Mordecai and Esther the greater hero is Mordecai, who supplied the brains while Esther simply followed his directions”<sup>38</sup> and another questioned her sexual ethics, accusing her having sought to join the king’s harem “for the chance of winning wealth and power.”<sup>39</sup> An early stage of feminist critique, then, was to simply acknowledge Esther’s efforts in the unfolding of the story.<sup>40</sup>

It did not take long, though, before questions were raised about Esther’s appropriateness as a feminist model. Essentially, the concern was that “the book of Esther is about the status quo, maintenance of it, and finding a proper place within it.”<sup>41</sup> Addressing the gender messages in the story, Susan Niditch shows that

its heroine is a woman who offers a particular model for success, one with which oppressors would be especially comfortable. Opposition is to be subtle, behind the scenes, and ultimately strengthening for the power structure.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Sidnie Ann White Crawford, “Esther,” in Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., Women’s Bible Commentary, expanded edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 133.

<sup>38</sup> Carey A. Moore, *Esther*, Anchor Bible 7B (Garden City: Doubleday, 1971), lii; Crawford, “Esther,” 133.

<sup>39</sup> Lewis Bayles Paton, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Esther, International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1908), 96; Crawford, “Esther,” 133.

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, Katheryn Pfisterer Darr, Far More Precious than Jewels: Perspectives on Biblical Women (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 164–193; and Jon L. Berquist, Reclaiming Her Story: The Witness of Women in the Old Testament (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1992), 154–166.

<sup>41</sup> Susan Niditch, “Esther: Folklore, Wisdom, Feminism, and Authority,” Esther, Judith, and Susanna, A Feminist Companion to the Bible Series 7 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995) 33.

<sup>42</sup> Niditch, “Esther,” 33.

According to South African biblical scholar, Itumeleng Mosala, the maintenance of the imperial status quo is represented by repeated messages that the property of the ruling class was left intact. He notes that in Chapter 9, the phrase “they [the Jews] did no looting” [NRSV: they did not touch the plunder] appears three times (verses 10, 15, and 16) and that “this principle of upholding the sanctity of property over the life of the people is well known as part of ruling-class ideology.”<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, Mosala points out that patriarchal gender roles are not challenged in the text either: “Esther struggles, but Mordecai reaps the fruit of the struggle.”<sup>44</sup> Not only is Mordecai the one who ends up with the deceased Haman’s house and royal position (8:1–2), but the text clearly indicates that gender struggles are less important than the struggle for national survival.<sup>45</sup> In an immediate crisis, it might be true that national survival is the most pressing issue, but all too often, marginalized groups are always in a struggle for survival and so the issue of gender equality is infinitely deferred. Instead, gender equality must be seen as an integral part of national survival here and now. There is indeed a reversal in the book of Esther—a threat against the Jews becomes a threat against the Persians. Yet as Nicole Duran surmises, “what has not reversed is the relative positions of men and women” because Esther accomplishes what she does “by using the gender role assigned to her, not by opposing it.”<sup>46</sup> So who really wins in the narrative? Not Esther!

At this point, the female character in the book that takes on new importance is Vashti, the first queen mentioned in the book, whom King Ahaseurus deposes. While he

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<sup>43</sup> Itumeleng J. Mosala, “The Implications of the Text of Esther for African Women’s Struggle for Liberation in South Africa,” *Semeia* 59 (1992), 135–136.

<sup>44</sup> Mosala, “Implications,” 136.

<sup>45</sup> Mosala, “Implications,” 136.

<sup>46</sup> Nicole Duran, “Who Wants to Marry A Persian King?: Gender Games and Wars and the Book of Esther,” in Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, ed., *Pregnant Passion: Gender, Sex, and Violence in the Bible*, *Semeia Studies* 44 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003), 81.

was enjoying a banquet, attended by all of his top (male) officials, he commanded that Queen Vashti be brought before him “wearing the royal crown, in order to show the peoples and the officials her beauty; for she was fair to behold,” but she refuses to go (1:11–12). As could be expected, the king is furious and his advisors warn him that word of Vashti’s actions will spread to all women and when that happens, the women will “look with contempt on their husbands” (1:13–17). To head off that crisis, Vashti is sent away, a new queen is to take her place, and a royal decree is sent out that “every man should be master in his own house” so that “all women will give honor to their husbands, high and low alike” (1:17–22). After this incident, any doubt about the patriarchal nature of the culture described here is eliminated. As Linda Day observes, “men are the acting subjects, gaining their power by means of the objectification of women,” “the degree of their worthiness is the degree to which women are able to, or choose to, please men,” and “female worth is measured by male assessment, adjudicated in the eyes of a man.”<sup>47</sup>

In such a context, Vashti’s refusal is truly a massive act of disobedience, and her banishment functions as a warning to other women who might consider acting in this way. Vashti’s apparent strength and willingness to speak her mind when the odds are against her make her an attractive role model for feminists. Often, though, too strong a contrast is made between a supposedly independent and rebellious Vashti and a relatively passive and obedient Esther. It must be pointed out that both women are “guilty of disobedience in terms of approaching the king, hence of taking control over her relationship with her husband.”<sup>48</sup> Vashti refuses to appear before the king when invited,

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<sup>47</sup> Linda M. Day, *Esther*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2005), 42.

<sup>48</sup> Mieke Bal, “Lots of Writing,” in Athalya Brenner, ed., *Ruth and Esther, A Feminist Companion to the Bible*, 2<sup>nd</sup> series (Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 227, n.27.

but Esther appears before the king without being invited, an act that was punishable by death (4:9–17). Moreover, Esther may have owed Vashti a debt of gratitude.

King Ahasuerus might not have been so predisposed to forgive Queen Esther her brazen disobedience had not his first wife taught him that, like it or not, some women make their own decisions. At least with Esther, the king was willing to hear her out.<sup>49</sup>

Even if this book offers somewhat positive images of women in Vashti and Esther, there is still a problem with the sexual exploitation of young girls in the text. In Chapter 2, the king chooses his next queen by having “all of the beautiful young virgins” from all of the provinces brought to him and “the girl who pleases the king [will] be queen instead of Vashti” (2:1–4). Each girl is brought to the king for a night. The obvious implication is that the king had intercourse with each of these females (probably teenaged girls), because they were returned to a different harem, the harem of the concubines, the next morning (2:12–14).<sup>50</sup> For the females who are forced to participate in this competition, there are dramatic consequences “in a society where virginity is a girl’s only ticket to respectable adulthood.”<sup>51</sup> The selection scheme described is an abuse of power that denotes “an all-powerful monarch, whose every need, including sexual ones, had to be taken care of, irrespective of the women he violated in the process.”<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, 118.

<sup>50</sup> Sidnie Ann White Crawford, “Esther,” *New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. III (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 889.

<sup>51</sup> Nicole Duran, “Who Wants to Marry a Persian King,” 73.

<sup>52</sup> Sarojini Nadar, “‘Texts of Terror:’ The Conspiracy of Rape in the Bible, Church, and Society: The Case of Esther 2:1–18,” in Isabel Apawo Phiri and Sarojini Nadar, eds., *African Women, Religion, and Health* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2006), 88.

Given the plot's development, Sarojini Nadar contends, little attention is paid to King Ahasuerus's selection process—the narrative quickly shifts from Vashti to Esther – and the result is to “erase” from our awareness the sexual violence against females that occurs.<sup>53</sup> The problem is that when such texts are read today in contexts with a high incidence of rape, whether South Africa or, I would add, the United States, they tend to desensitize us to that violence, similarly erasing it from our awareness. Correspondingly, the only way to start contesting contemporary violence against females is to start contesting that violence in biblical texts.<sup>54</sup> Going beyond the hyperbole and humor in the book of Esther, Nicole Duran is left with two key questions: “what *really* happens to a woman who disobeys her husband, in a society that gives the husband complete authority over his wife?” and “what *really* happens to the girls whom the man in power considers unworthy?”<sup>55</sup> So who really wins in the narrative? Not females.

### **B. Queer Critiques: To “Pass” or Not to “Pass” is the Question**

When Esther is presented to the king, she does not divulge that she is Jewish (2:10). Interestingly, Mordecai had told her not to tell even though Mordecai had identified himself as a Jew (3:4). His warning Esther not to inform anyone of “her people or her kindred” means that Mordecai either sensed or knew from experience that being non-Jewish brings about privileges and opportunities that being Jewish in the Persian court forecloses. In the same way, African Americans have known that to be non-African American in a racist society would confer advantages. As a survival strategy, some light-

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<sup>53</sup> Nadar, “Texts of Terror,” 88–89.

<sup>54</sup> Nadar, “Texts of Terror,” 89–90. See also Cheryl B. Anderson, Women, Ideology, and Violence: Critical Theory and the Construction of Gender in the Book of the Covenant and the Deuteronomic Law, JSOTSupp 394 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 101–117.

<sup>55</sup> Duran, “Who Wants to Marry a Persian King?,” 84 (*italics in original*).

skinned people of African descent would “pass” for white, that is, they would not divulge that they were African American, thereby enabling them to have access to education, housing, and employment that would be denied otherwise. In our post-civil rights era, the need for “passing” to avoid lawful restrictions by race is less likely to occur.<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, the need to “pass” due to sexual orientation continues. A homophobic environment means that if gays and lesbians divulge who they truly are, they confront the general population’s prejudices and discrimination by law. Before, heterosexual African Americans were discriminated against solely due to their race when some other racial/ethnic groups were exempt. Now, negative impacts are experienced by African American gays and lesbians, as well as those of all other racial/ethnic groups. To avoid that effect, some gays and lesbians “pass” as heterosexual and do not divulge their full identity.<sup>57</sup> Under these circumstances, Esther’s lack of candor feels very familiar and her strategy comes across as a viable model of survival.

Therefore, on the one hand, a queer critique recognizes that Esther’s way of dealing with prejudice may be needed. On the other hand, there is also the recognition that Vashti’s defiance is instructive and necessary. As Gary Comstock writes in his book, Gay Theology Without Apology, “Vashti’s refusal, not Esther’s behind-the-scenes manipulations” can be encouraging and empowering.<sup>58</sup> Although recognizing that her story was meant to intimidate women (and others) by demonstrating the cost of refusal and resistance, Comstock argues that “we can turn that story around.” In so doing, we

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<sup>56</sup> There is no assumption here that racism no longer exists. For a discussion of contemporary forms of racism, see Patricia Hill Collins, Black Sexual Politics: African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>57</sup> For a full discussion of “passing” and African American gays and lesbians, see Horace L. Griffin, Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2006).

<sup>58</sup> Gary David Comstock, Gay Theology Without Apology (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1993), 56.

can change her story from one of unacceptable behavior into one which shows “that Vashti’s actions were righteous and her punishment was unjust.”<sup>59</sup>

Referring to the significance of Vashti in liberationist theologies, both feminist and queer (referring specifically to Comstock’s work), Linda Day elaborates on the continuing message of Vashti’s story for any group that has been marginalized and silenced.<sup>60</sup> Pragmatism may point to Esther’s model as the better one, she agrees, but sometimes personal integrity requires following in Vashti’s footsteps.

Yet in certain situations, persons need to stand for righteousness without regard for the consequences. Freedom can prove to be expensive. But there are moments in life when enduring enslavement, in whatever guise it presents itself, is no longer an option, and one becomes willing to pay that price. At such turning points, one can only maintain personal integrity by standing up and taking the risk.<sup>61</sup>

In summary, a queer critique of Esther utilizes both Esther and Vashti as viable models. The message is clear: sometimes you have to “go along to get along;” at other times you have to “act up.” To pass or not to pass is the question.

### **C. Postcolonial Critiques: Imperial/Colonial Powers, Marginalization, and Violence**

Whether it was actually written during the Persian or the Hellenistic period, the book of Esther is set in a time when a foreign imperial power ruled Judea. In that context, Jews were a marginalized community and relatively powerless. Sidnie Ann White Crawford has argued consistently that, for these reasons, Esther becomes the

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<sup>59</sup> Comstock, *Gay Theology*, 56.

<sup>60</sup> Day, *Esther*, 43.

<sup>61</sup> Day, *Esther*, 43.

model of success for Jews. Her argument is that, because Esther is basically powerless as a woman (and an orphan), her situation is comparable to that of diasporan Jews who are also powerless with respect to the imperial dominance.

Because she was successful in attaining power within the structure of society, she served as a role model of diaspora Jews seeking to attain a comfortable and successful life in a foreign society.<sup>62</sup>

In today's context, a postcolonial critique examines how groups or nations survive their marginalization, whether that marginalization occurs politically, militarily or economically, and how the Bible has been used to support such marginalization.<sup>63</sup> According to a postcolonial critique, the book of Esther is problematic.

In Esther, a royal decree has gone out, at Haman's urging, that all Jews are to be destroyed (Chapter 3), but Esther prevents its implementation, and thousands who were "enemies of the Jews" (non-Jews), in addition to the ten sons of Haman, are killed instead (Chapter 9). In the narrative, Esther is a "trickster" because "she ultimately succeeds in reversing the evil that was supposed to befall her own people by "tricking" the king to join her side."<sup>64</sup> From a postcolonial perspective, this does indeed demonstrate one of

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<sup>62</sup> Crawford, "Esther," 133. To the contrary, Randall Bailey finds in his reading of the text a condemnation of the king and Haman as well as of those Jews, Esther and Mordecai, who collaborate with the imperial regime. See "That's Why They Didn't Call the Book Hadassah!: Intersec(ct)/(x)ionality of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Sexuality in the Book of Esther" (*Semeia Studies*, in process). I would like to thank Prof. Bailey for making a copy of his paper available to me.

<sup>63</sup> See, for example, R.S. Sugirtharajah, *The Postcolonial Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) and Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000). For a survey of recent postcolonial feminist writings, see Susanne Scholz, *Introducing the Women's Hebrew Bible Introductions in Feminist Theology* 13 (T&T Clark, in process). I am grateful to Prof. Scholz for giving me a copy of her manuscript.

<sup>64</sup> Masenya, "Esther and Northern Sotho Stories: An African-South African Woman's Commentary," in Musa W. Dube, ed., *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2001), 47.

the survival strategies of the powerless, as Masenya contends.<sup>65</sup> Unfortunately, though, groups that are forced to survive in this way are also forced to support the maintenance of the oppressive system since they dare not challenge that system itself.

Another problematic aspect of the narrative is the obvious retaliatory violence involved. In the past, anti-Semitic Christian interpreters have interpreted the text in ways that condemned Judaism by “treating the story’s violence as normative and essential to Judaism rather than as a defensive response to mortal danger.”<sup>66</sup> Given the reality of the Shoah (the more appropriate term for the “Holocaust”), where the annihilation of Jews was attempted and partially successful, Christians must reconsider such interpretations.<sup>67</sup> More specifically, Christians should reflect on the damaging ways in which Christianity has been constructed unfairly in opposition to Judaism, that is, “over against the Jew in the Christian colonial discourse on Jewish Scripture.”<sup>68</sup>

Instead, the violence in the book of Esther shows the harm caused by volatile mixtures of colonialism and racial/ethnic/religious differences.

Esther reminds modern readers of the ties between colonialism and violence and of how tension and hostility, when built up among different peoples brought together by imperialist powers, result in cycles of reciprocal revenge and persecution.<sup>69</sup>

Referring to the tragedy of September 11, 2001 and the subsequent global “war on terrorism” declared by the United States government, Wong Wai Ching Angela writes

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<sup>65</sup> Masenya, “Esther,” 47.

<sup>66</sup> Day, Esther, 21.

<sup>67</sup> Day, Esther, 21.

<sup>68</sup> Timothy K. Beal, The Book of Hiding: Gender, Ethnicity, Annihilation, and Esther (London: Routledge, 1997), 12.

<sup>69</sup> Wong Wai Ching Angela, “Esther,” in Daniel Patte, ed., Global Bible Commentary (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2004), 137.

that it shows the massive damage caused when, in a “spirit of revenge” there is “a sweeping resolve from all sides to use violence for violence.”<sup>70</sup> The book of Esther, therefore, glorifies a national identity that “promotes the establishment of an exclusive community by a victory over ethnic rivals gained through revenge and destruction.”<sup>71</sup> Wong, disheartened by the interreligious/racial/ethnic struggles around the world today, must conclude that the book of Esther does not model ways for different groups to respect and accept one another. Instead, Wong contends that Esther invites us “to struggle and pursue the task” of creating “multicultural community that includes many ethnicities, languages, religions, and cultures.”<sup>72</sup> I could not agree with her more.

## Conclusions

In traditional interpretations of their narratives, Ruth and Esther are unquestionable paragons of virtue and exemplary models for the life of faith, yet the preceding discussion shows the range of challenges to those interpretations offered by feminist, queer, and postcolonial readings. Having considered these challenges, we can no longer ignore them. We have to ask ourselves: How can we now use these texts as models for the formation of God’s people, but avoid the negative consequences that the liberationist critiques have identified? An answer to this question requires a reading strategy that opens up these texts in new ways. For example, new questions must be allowed for the book of Ruth—concerning Orpah after she returned home and Ruth after her baby was born—and for the book of Esther—concerning the fate of Vashti and the slaughtered “Other.” Such a reading strategy cannot be simplistic, literal, or one that

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<sup>70</sup> Wong, “Esther,” 139.

<sup>71</sup> Wong, “Esther,” 137.

<sup>72</sup> Wong, “Esther,” 140.

reads biblical passages in isolation. To the contrary, the reading strategy proposed here is a process that looks at texts thematically, intertextually, and contextually.

Thematically, there is a strong continuity between Ruth and Esther because they both engage in the work of redemption. As Johanna Bos defines redemption, it is “the responsibility people have for one another,” therefore, “redeemers are people who are appointed to take care of people who cannot take care of themselves.”<sup>73</sup> Accordingly, Ruth is a redeemer because she makes herself responsible for Naomi’s wellbeing and provides her with a son.<sup>74</sup> Similarly, Esther is a redeemer because she makes herself responsible for her people’s wellbeing and removes the threat against their continued existence. Although there are specific biblical laws that refer to the responsibilities of the a redeemer (Leviticus 25–27, Numbers 18, as well as the law of levirate marriage found in Deuteronomy 25:5–10 and alluded to in Ruth), those responsibilities can be thought of more expansively. Following Bos’s lead, the role of the redeemer is to carry out acts that maintain the overall welfare of the community (Esther) and reintegrate into the community those that would otherwise be separated from it (Naomi and Ruth).

Furthermore, the contours of the redeemed community are discernable in Ruth 4. Sakenfeld suggests that, although it is different from the more commonly accepted eschatological texts, Ruth 4 provides a vision of hope, “an extended metaphor for God’s New Creation that we must find ways to re-express in language appropriate to God’s

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<sup>73</sup> Johanna Bos, Ruth and Esther: Women in Alien Lands (New York: General Board of Global Ministries of The United Methodist Church, 1988), 2, 4.

<sup>74</sup> Bos, Women in Alien Lands, 4.

continuing work in our midst.”<sup>75</sup> In her analysis, she identifies the following features of this vision:

a community that is characterized by reciprocal movement from margin to center and from center to margin, by racial/ethnic inclusiveness, and by adequate sustenance for all; a community of upright individuals together creating and affirming justice and mercy; a community in which weeping turns to joy and tears are wiped away; a community in which children are valued and old people are well cared for; a community in which a daughter is greatly valued.<sup>76</sup>

She acknowledges that this vision is what must be underscored in the text rather than the expressions of the ancient Israelite culture identified there or the questionable means of achieving the vision in the narrative.<sup>77</sup> In other words, perceiving the story of Ruth as the story of a new vision of community towards which we should all work means that the cultural biases of an ancient time and place do not have to carry over into our own contexts. Plus, emphasizing the role that human beings must play in bringing about that vision is another way in which Ruth 4 differs from typical eschatological texts.

Sakenfeld notes that more conventional eschatological texts, such as Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 47, offer divine promises and indicate that human actions are not needed because “all is in God’s hands.”<sup>78</sup>

In contrast, neither the book of Ruth nor that of Esther includes a report of direct intervention by God; and in Esther, there is no mention of God at all.<sup>79</sup> However, Bos

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<sup>75</sup> Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, “Ruth 4, An Image of Eschatological Hope: Journeying with a Text,” in Margaret A. Farley and Serene Jones, eds., *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1999), 63.

<sup>76</sup> Sakenfeld, “Ruth 4,” 63.

<sup>77</sup> Sakenfeld, “Ruth 4,” 63.

<sup>78</sup> Sakenfeld, “Ruth 4,” 56.

<sup>79</sup> Bos, *Ruth, Esther, Jonah* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986), 3.

has observed, as have others, that there are similarities between Esther and the Exodus story.<sup>80</sup> She thinks of these books as two poles of the Exodus experience where Esther represents the pole of oppression and the Exodus story represents liberation. An intertextual reading of Ruth and Esther, therefore, means that redemption is associated with liberation and that to redeem (or liberate from oppression) is the work of the people of God. The relative absence of God in both books indicates that human beings are called to act and not rely solely on divine intervention. As described by Fewell and Gunn, in spite of appearances to the contrary, God is in the book of Ruth because “God can be found somewhere in the mixed motives, somewhere in the complicated relationships, somewhere in the struggle for survival, anywhere there is redemption, however compromised.”<sup>81</sup> To do acts of redemption is to do God’s work in the world. A liberationist reading of Ruth and Esther, consequently, demands that the people of God create a new kind of community, and we are to do that by redeeming/liberating/freeing those who are usually excluded because of marginalization, exploitation, or other types of oppression.

Any community must confront the various differences that exist among human beings (and other communities) based on gender, class, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, and national origin. All too often, though, a determination that a group is different based on one or more of these criteria means that group becomes “less than” or unacceptable to some degree and it then becomes acceptable to mistreat that other group. The contemporary notion of “liberating interdependence” recognizes these differences and the interconnections between (and within) cultures, sexes, races, religions, and nations but it

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<sup>80</sup> Bos, *Ruth, Esther, Jonah*, 41.

<sup>81</sup> Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*, 105.

seeks connections that are not oppressive and exploitative.<sup>82</sup> In other words, liberating interdependence “defines the interconnectedness of relationships that recognize and affirm the dignity of all things and people involved.”<sup>83</sup> Conventional readings of Ruth and Esther describe the creation of a community, but that community continues to be marked by exclusion, exploitation, and violence, as the feminist/womanist, queer, and postcolonial critiques contend. However, the vision of community offered in Ruth 4, as Sakenfeld argues, is inclusive, sustaining, and affirming. As people of faith, we are called not just to create a community, but to create a certain kind of community, one of liberating interdependence—a redeemed community in which the negative consequences of exclusion and exploitation have disappeared.

Taking seriously feminist/womanist, queer, and postcolonial challenges, then, means that conventional barriers to membership and participation are removed. For that to happen, though, the marginalized groups have to be aware that they are excluded and “to cry out on account of their taskmasters” (Exodus 3:7). To have this perspective, a reading must be contextual, that is, any group reading these texts must consider their own historical memories and their cultural/political/economic circumstances to determine if their experience is closer to that of Ruth or Orpah or to Esther or Vashti, and so forth. In other words, today’s groups must resist the tendency to immediately identify with the privileged “chosen” group in these narratives, when their realities more closely resemble those of the excluded groups. Such resistance is difficult to muster because these same marginalized groups are usually told that the traditional reading, the reading of “the chosen people,” is the only valid one. Yet, as stated earlier, if they ignore the

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<sup>82</sup> Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 185.

<sup>83</sup> Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation*, 186.

marginalization in the text, they will ignore the marginalization in their own lives. This is a complex task because any one group is comprised of individuals who may, for example, experience privileges based on race or class but may experience disadvantages based on sexual orientation or gender.

Basically, the objective is to re-consider each of these categories that are traditionally used to exclude—gender, sexual orientation, and national/cultural identity—and then ask new questions. Since the responsibility as a person of faith is to redeem, those with privileges according to these criteria must ask themselves: How have I/we excluded some groups and how should I/we act to incorporate them fully in the community? Correspondingly, those who are currently excluded or denied full participation based on these criteria must ask themselves: How can my/our voices be heard and what kind of redemption/inclusion do I/we seek? Given these elements, a liberationist reading of Ruth and Esther, or any other biblical text for that matter, is thematic, intertextual, and contextual. Finally, it is a dynamic process that requires the critical reflection and participation of all alike, incorporating the dominant and the subordinate characters in the text and the current winners and past victims in our world today.

Ruth and Esther were marginalized women who were disadvantaged in three different ways in their contexts as female, widow, and foreigner (Ruth) and female, orphan, foreigner (Esther). They are remarkable figures in a cultural setting and a biblical canon in which women are most often unnamed and are acted upon rather than able to act in their own right. From this perspective, Ruth and Esther serve as models of hope and inspiration for marginalized groups today. They also serve, though, as a

reminder that marginalized groups, those who experience the trauma of exclusion and violence, must speak out. Simultaneously, Ruth and Esther prod the privileged into doing acts of redemption that serve the wellbeing of the full community, and redemption can be achieved only by including those once excluded. God calls us to form redeemed communities, but we can only do that if we heed the voices we usually prefer to ignore. The choice is up to us.

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