

Kandy Queen-Sutherland, *Ruth and Esther*. Macon, GA: Smyth and Helwys, 2016. (517 pp.) [ISBN: 9781573128919]

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This volume which Queen-Sutherland describes as having been “a lifetime in the making” (p. xiii) is an excellent commentary offering multi-layered insights into the only two books in the Hebrew Bible named after women, Ruth and Esther (p. 5). It is one of the many volumes constituting the *Smyth and Helwys Bible Commentary* series. The commentary aims to be an insightful resource for interpreting the books of Ruth and Esther for a wide range of readers, be it in a church setting or a seminary. In analysing these two books Sutherland, like all the other Smyth and Helwys authors, divides the volume into ‘*Commentary*’ and ‘*Connections*’ sections. The commentary focuses on the Biblical text and the theological issues raised in a passage. The ‘connections’ section highlights possible approaches to preaching on relevant issues and themes. Sutherland starts with a thoughtful and comprehensive introduction to the books of Ruth and Esther, highlighting the relationship between them regarding their canonicity both as part of the ‘Five Scrolls’ or the *Megillot*, and as part of the *Ketuvim* or Writings section of the Hebrew Bible (pp. 1–5). As far as the concept of being a ‘foreigner’ or the ‘other’ is concerned, Ruth and Esther are like the two sides of a coin, in the sense that Ruth’s story is that of a foreigner among the Jews, whereas Esther’s story is that of a Jewish woman living in a foreign land. Both stories chronicle the challenges these women face as they each try to survive as the ‘other.’ The difference between the two is that Ruth’s ethnicity is mentioned several times in the text, whereas Esther must initially hide hers to survive (pp. 5–7).

Queen-Sutherland begins with a detailed introduction of the Book of Ruth outlining not only its place in the canon but also its liturgical use during *Shavuot* or the Feast of Weeks. In the commentary, Queen-Sutherland outlines the book’s literary framework by identifying a chiasmic structure given the story begins with the death of three male members of Naomi’s family, but there is reversal as the book ends with the birth of Obed and the list of subsequent generations up to king David (pp. 31–32). As to authorship, Queen-Sutherland is of the view that the unknown author penned this story before Israel had the kingship system since the book ends with David’s genealogy. Queen-Sutherland dates the book in the late Persian period (p. 34). She considers the central theme to be *hesed*: “the deepest level of covenantal commitment in Yahwism” (p. 37). Queen-Sutherland shows Ruth’s *hesed* towards Naomi, her widowed mother-in-law, as she insisted on accompanying her back to Bethlehem following her own husband’s death. Subsequently, Naomi and Boaz also show *hesed* towards Ruth by ensuring Ruth’s redemption. Sutherland also acknowledges that some contemporary readings suspect that Naomi might have had mixed motives in her dealings with Ruth (p. 35–38). Along the way, Queen-Sutherland’s study touches on the other essential and sometimes sensitive issues raised in the narrative. These include issues around the patriarchal ancient Israel culture, levirate marriage, treatment of foreigners and some of the customs around these issues. Throughout the commentary, Sutherland draws from a wide range of scholarship including lesbian (p. 62), indigenous (p. 17, 19, 134) and

other kinds of readings. The work, while broad is not comprehensive, however. She has not addressed some important debates in Ruth such as those around Ruth 4:14 -whether Boaz or the child Obed is the *goel*, or whose name will be renowned—the child's or YHWH. Despite such omissions, the Ruth commentary provides many excellent insights.

In her introduction to Esther, Queen-Sutherland details the different views on the importance of the book of Esther to the Jewish canon. Some consider Esther to be Scripture while others do not, mainly because the Hebrew text does not mention God. However, in the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Bibles God is present (pp. 188–96). She describes the Greek additions to the book of Esther that are not in the Hebrew Text in the introduction and throughout the commentary (p. 192–93). As for the authorship of the book of Esther, Queen-Sutherland says it is unknown. She similarly argues that the story was initially communicated orally (p. 196). While there is no conclusive evidence, Queen-Sutherland accepts the date of composition to be most likely to be during the Hellenistic period rather than the Persian period. She bases this on the fact that Persians are believed to have been more open to ethnic diversity whereas the Hellenistic period had antagonism towards Jews and their practices (pp. 196–202). Queen-Sutherland discusses at length the plight of women in the Esther narrative. From the banishment of Queen Vashti to the roundup of the virgins and the new rule forcing women to submit to their husbands all at the hands of the powerful (pp. 238–270). She makes connections between the experiences of the women in the Esther story with those of modern-day girls and women, be it the Filipino women abducted into sex slavery during World War II or the Nigerian girls kidnapped by Boko Haram (pp. 266–67). Through most of her commentary on Esther, the theme of power and its (mis)use keeps resurfacing.

There are constant comparisons and connections between the stories of Ruth and Esther (p. 93, 125, 422), and intertextuality with other books of the Hebrew Bible such as the Wisdom writings and the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife in Genesis (p. 20, 278, 290). Queen-Sutherland's volume considers the latest scholarly literature from various fields such as ancient history, sociology, linguistics, and anthropology to illuminate the realities of what life might have been like in Ruth and Esther's time. Her attention to the transliterated Hebrew language throughout the commentary is unintimidating to the non-Hebraist. However, those desiring to analyse the intricacies of the Hebrew text will find this volume lightweight, as much of the information in the language hyperlinks are mainly word studies. Nevertheless, this user-friendly volume is replete with many lists of handy resources for those who wish to gain further in-depth knowledge of select scripture texts and other topics (p. 492–494). The accompanying CD containing the volume's digital version also provides excellent searching functionality. Overall this volume is a suitable resource for seminary students, small group Bible study groups and any general reader interested in the books of Ruth and Esther.