
Eugene F Roop, President of Bethany Theological Seminary in Richmond, Indiana, and Wienand Professor of Biblical Studies, writes his commentary on the books of Ruth, Jonah, and Esther from what he describes as ‘a lifelong enjoyment and study of biblical narrative’ (p 303). His enthusiasm for biblical stories is contagious.

Particularly helpful for those new to biblical narrative and for those familiar with the genre who want a quick reference is his section entitled ‘Essays’ (pp 260-283). Quite frankly, it is the book’s strongest feature, its distinguishing feature, and its selling point. Formatted in smaller print than the text of the book, the ‘Essays’ provide essential foundational material for reading, enjoying, and teaching Hebrew Bible Narrative. The ‘Essays’ deal with general topics like characteristics of Hebrew narrative, character types in Hebrew narrative, narrative structure, poetry, the short story, the narrator, and comedy (which Roop defines as humour, irony, and satire). Roop also includes essays on specific aspects of the commentary’s three books like Moab, village farming, kinship marriage, the Persian Empire, Nineveh, Redeemer/go’el, and khesed (which he defines as uncommon and faithful action). Roop, an ordained minister in the Church of the Brethren, employs an Anabaptist hermeneutic approach to Ruth,
Jonah, and Esther, three beloved and exquisitely crafted texts. His writing shows the intelligent sensitivity and spiritual discernment of a man who combines a great love for the biblical text with an appreciation for the genre of the short story (p 13). The commentary series targets its series to a specific audience: those who seek more fully to understand the original message of the texts and its application in today’s world.

The series is designed for those who want more than a superficial approach to the biblical text and gears itself toward Sunday school teachers, study groups, pastors, and students (p 11).

Roop notes that the books of Ruth, Jonah, and Esther differ from Gospel and saga genres by their ‘brevity, simple plot, and limited number of characters’ (p 14).

Roop looks at the character of Ruth in detail. He argues that Ruth is introduced as someone not wanted by Naomi, her mother-in-law, or at least not wanted enough to accompany her back to Bethlehem; Ruth also is overlooked at the book’s end when Naomi, Boaz, and Obed receive textual space. Furthermore, Ruth represents not so much a self-sacrificing servant model but instead someone who throughout the text takes significant risks and pushes the boundaries of social conventions in her communities (p 88).

Of the three biblical books in his commentary, Roop’s section on the Book of Jonah is his best (pp 93-158). He seems to enjoy the tangle of interpretations the book has elicited over the years. Roop analyses two key words in Jonah, great and evil. A great storm and great fish and great evil prevail in the story (p 107). Roop notes that the word evil appears in every scene but chapter 2. Furthermore, just as Jonah and God are connected by the word great, they likewise are linked with the word evil (4:1, 2, 6) (p 107). Roop correctly observes that the Book of Jonah presents a character that seems to be a model of disobedience and stubbornness (p 95). Traditionally, the story of Jonah has been seen as an allegory of Jesus’ death and resurrection (p 95). Roop, however, notes that a more thoughtful approach to Jonah indicates that both book and main character remain puzzling. Do they portray a prophet, as Jerome argued, motivated by a love for his people or, as John Calvin argued, one whom believers dare not emulate (pp 95-96)? Roop believes the Book of Jonah is a short story and not a parable or allegory because each reader is open to enjoy, experience, and learn from the narrative; indicatively, that learning is not prescribed ahead of time (p 97). ‘We have been entrusted with the responsibility of listening carefully to the story, anticipating that various threads and themes will speak to different readers and to us at different times,’ he says (p 99).

Roop wisely advises modern readers to refrain from judging Jonah too harshly for his flight to Tarshish. Roop notes that God does not condemn Jonah. Those who appear to reject God’s call may well foresee the enormous cost to themselves and to others by their compliance. Roop observes that Jonah’s
response of flight to God’s commission and call ‘may be a far more normal response to such a commission than we care to admit’ (p 111).

Roop defines the Book of Esther as a festival novella (p 164) and therefore more complex than the biblical short stories of Ruth and Jonah. He rejects views that it is a historical account or morality tale (pp 165, 168). The text’s length permits Esther to develop as a main character. She not only takes control of her own life but also uses her position to benefit others (p 164). She is beautiful in face and form, faithful to her God, and ruthless on behalf of her people. She does not stop with her own safety but uses her position to ensure the safety of her people by requesting an additional day for her people to kill their enemies in the capital city (9:5, 13).

The Book of Esther shows the political strategies required by God’s covenant people who live as a minority in an alien setting (p 167). Additionally, the Book of Esther testifies to God’s work in the existing drama of life; God works out his plan in the normal course of human events and in cooperation with all those of good will (p 167).

Roop writes with sensitivity about women in the biblical text. He notes that because of their gender, they must act carefully, creatively, and quickly in the situations in which they find themselves. Roop commends Esther and other women for acting wisely and courageously in meeting their goals; these goals often entail saving their lives and the lives of others (p 208). Roop sees the placement of Esther as queen and the life-and-death situation that quickly faces her as acts of God. God not only opens up special needs and opportunities, but also accompanies his people through danger or difficulty (p 210).

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