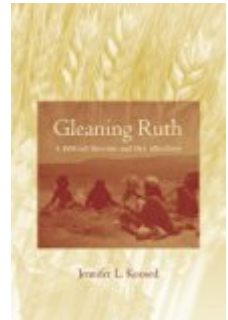


Jennifer L. Koosed. *Gleaning Ruth: A Biblical Heroine and Her Afterlives.* Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2011. xiv + 173 pp. \$39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-57003-983-6.



Reviewed by Talia Sutskov

Published on H-Judaic (February, 2012)

Commissioned by Jason Kalman (Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion)

Gleaning Ruth, by Jennifer L. Koosed, examines the characters of the book of Ruth and their relationships, and offers a pleasurable reading and learning experience. In part, it is pleasurable to read because in some of the chapters the author draws on her personal experience where it is relevant to her subject. For instance, in the second chapter, titled “Agricultural Interlude No. 1,” the author gives the reader a glimpse into her childhood summers in the branches of a cherry tree in Ohio. This writing technique does indeed have an effect on the reader, because through contemporary personal experience, we are gently taken into the ancient world of gleaning, the making of bread, and altogether, of surviving. The reader acquires a better understanding of the world of Ruth, and is better prepared for the fresh perspective presented in the book.

Koosed’s *Gleaning Ruth* is also a pleasurable learning experience, because aside from the author’s new findings, the discussion of each of the topics contains a thorough scholarship survey. Careful attention is given not only to the author’s

own conclusions but to those of other interpreters, as well. I find that Koosed often offers a new and even brave perspective on various topics. For instance, when commenting on Agnès Varda’s documentary *The Gleaners and I* (2001), she writes, “Even though Varda does not mention Ruth in her documentary, the biblical heroine might easily be considered a shadow presence, following behind and beside the contemporary gleaners Varda documents” (p. 6). Linking a modern documentary with the book of Ruth, even though there is no explicit reference in the documentary, and constructing an interpretation based on this link is, in my view, a courageous and creative act of interpretation.

Gleaning Ruth includes a preface and nine chapters. Chapter 1, “Gleaning,” serves as an introduction to the book and a summary of some of the main and well-known scholarly works on Ruth. Here, the author explains her own methodology, which is an eclectic approach to the biblical text.

In chapter 2 the author speaks about the unique agricultural background of Ruth, the special repetition of the word “field” (*sadeh*), and the focus of the book on hunger and the search for food in the field. Relevant issues such as the climate in Canaan and Moab, and the nutrition of the ancient Israelites are also interestingly addressed.

Chapter 3, “Ruth and Orpah,” deals with Orpah’s decision to separate from Ruth and Naomi, and to remain in Moab. In order to impart a better understanding of this, the chapter discusses other issues, such as the multifaceted attitude of biblical texts to the Moabites, which is linked to the issue of postcolonial readings of Ruth. It is stimulating to see, for example, how H. Rider Haggard’s novel *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) engages Ruth in colonized Africa. This analysis skillfully clarifies what a postcolonial reading is, in addition to offering some new understandings about Ruth.

Chapter 4, “Ruth and Naomi,” discusses the intricate relationship between these two female characters, pausing to elaborate on three possibilities: is it a case of two women coming together and helping each other in order to survive in a man’s world; is the relationship one-sided (is Ruth more devoted to Naomi than Naomi to Ruth); or are the two women in love with each other (references to each view on p. 51)? Koosed adds an interpretation of her own, suggesting that it is possible to see Ruth as “a verbally adroit trickster, as a jester of words” (p. 51), and later, as “a border crosser who embodies plurality” (p. 63). This is a fascinating and creative possibility, which may explain some of the ambiguities in the dialogues in Ruth.

Chapter 5 is the second “Agricultural Interlude,” in which the difficult and long process of making bread in the ancient world is described, a process which, as it turns out, cannot be accomplished alone. In explaining this process the author also explains why, although Naomi owned a

field, she still could not produce bread on her own. Since the process required time, money, and a large group of helping hands, Naomi could not do it by herself. This chapter offers an interpretation of Ruth’s disappearance at the end of the narrative. Koosed explains this disappearance not as an erasure of Ruth, as is generally maintained, but rather as Ruth’s active resistance against a final incorporation into the Israelite community (p. 71).

Chapter 6 discusses the relationship between Ruth and Boaz, and the role of God in the narrative. Chapter 7 is the third “Agricultural Interlude,” a discussion about grain, which Koosed actually describes as another protagonist in Ruth. Here, the characteristics of grain are observed metaphorically. Chapter 8 discusses Ruth, Obed, and the question of kinship relations. The question of Naomi’s proclamation as the boy’s mother (instead of his grandmother) is addressed here. The last chapter, chapter 9, discusses Jewish and Christian liturgical uses of Ruth.

The notes are gathered at the end of *Gleaning Ruth*. The book includes a scriptural index, a subject index, a bibliography, and, at the beginning, a preface describing the structure and content of each of the chapters of the book.

In addition to an exhaustive survey of other works written about Ruth, the reader of *Gleaning Ruth* will find many enlightening and new notions about the characters in Ruth and their actions. One such notion concerns Ruth’s response to Boaz’s suggestion that she attach herself to his gleaners and glean only from his field (Ruth 2:8-9). In response to Boaz’s words, she falls to the ground, her face in the dirt (2:10). On this, Koosed comments: “Even though Boaz takes Ruth seriously, even though commentators follow his lead and take her seriously as well, I cannot. Boaz is acting the rich patriarch, opening his hand to those who are in need. But Ruth does not need his munificence to glean—it is her right under the law.... It is no virtue to let the poor pick up after your har-

vesters. The joke may be lost on Boaz, but she is mocking his show of ‘generosity’” (p. 76).

This book is not a verse-by-verse commentary on Ruth. However, it successfully deals with the central literary, textual, linguistic, and social problems raised by a reading of the biblical text.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-judaic>

Citation: Talia Sutskov. Review of Koosed, Jennifer L. *Gleaning Ruth: A Biblical Heroine and Her Afterlives*. H-Judaic, H-Net Reviews. February, 2012.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33646>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.