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Ruth vis-à-vis Esther: Reading Intertextually Ruth the 'Widow' and Esther the 'Orphan' as Diasporic 'Immigrants'

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What is a Diaspora?[1] What defines the diasporic context, locale, or person? Is Diaspora always, and necessarily, negative (or positive) in terms of life situations and experiences? While acknowledging that not all diasporic stories and contexts can be the same, how can our study of Diasporas in the Old Testament inform our study of the Bible and be illuminating for hermeneutical

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1 The term "Diaspora" (διασπορά) denotes "a community living outside its homeland," also connoting "communities that are scattered abroad, regardless of the reason" (*EBR*, vol. 6, [2013], 74). Its Hebrew equivalent is *golah or galut* ("exile"), which is now called *tefuẓot* in modern Hebrew (*EncJud*, vol. 5, 2nd ed. [2007], 637).

relevance? How can reading the Hebrew Bible with respect to Diaspora share any interpretive insights with those who are located in the mainstream, in the margins, in their own land, outside their home, and so on?

Asking these questions, my study will focus on Ruth and Esther as "diasporas": "Ruth is the foreigner among Jews and Esther, the Jew among foreigners."[2] Both Ruth and Esther share many similarities, despite differences, together connecting intertextual reading and signifying many important messages of the diasporic lives in the ancient biblical world. These two women and their stories—replete with many dimensions of hardship, oppression, threat, survival, and heroics—can offer pertinent messages for today's church and world.

My thesis explores the following observations: (1) intertextually reading Ruth the "widow" and Esther the "orphan" as both diasporic "immigrants," we discover that in the diasporic situation where/when the (male) kingship is void, God can lift up the people from the lowest socio-ethnic place—(female) widows, orphans, and resident aliens—to do heroic and salvific works for the community; (2) it may not matter whether the Diasporas reside inside or outside their home, or whether Diasporas assimilate into or separate from the dominant socio-ethnic identities, but rather what matters is if and how they will practice the acts of hesed (חֶסֶד) especially in solidarity with the powerless, disadvantaged, and marginalized; (3) diasporic reading underscores the hermeneutical reciprocity in which all of us are related to various kinds of "diasporas" (geography, status, gender, privilege, etc.) as well as the reciprocity between the outside disadvantage and the inside privilege.

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2 Kandy Queen-Sutherland, "Ruth, Qoheleth, and Esther: Counter Voices from the Megilloth," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 43 (2016), 230.

1. Two Diasporic Heroines and Their Intertextual Connections

1) Ruth

Ruth is a Diaspora. She is a Moabite woman who migrates into Judah with her mother-in-law and eventually settles in Judah. Though younger than Naomi, she is also a widow and an immigrant (foreigner), which places her at the lowest rung of society. From the perspective of a Jewish reader, Ruth may not be a Diaspora per se, but more of an immigrant or a proselyte. However, leaving her homeland and sojourning in a foreign place as a minority immigrant, Ruth is a Diaspora in her own right.[3]

What essential aspects can we retrieve from reading Ruth as a Diaspora? First, Ruth represents the life experiences of refuge, (forced) migration, and the ensuing traumas of suffering. The tragic loss of her husband after ten years of marriage causes Ruth to relocate to another land called Judah (1:1-4).

Second, Ruth's status as a refugee migrant (2:12) places her at the enormous socio-economic disadvantage. Ruth's vulnerability is associated with her multiple identities as a "woman, worker, and foreigner."[4] Thus, in terms of her socio-ethnic status as a foreign migrant worker, the text points to the real and common threat of exploitation in the fields of Bethlehem (2:8-10, 22; cf. Lev 19:9; Deut 24:19), which recalls the incidents of atrocious abuse in Judges 19-21.[5] Likewise, in terms of Ruth's gender status, Musa W. Dube asserts that

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3 See Jione Havea and Peter H. W. Lau (eds.), *Reading Ruth in Asia* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015).

4 David J. Shepherd, "Ruth in the Days of the Judges: Women, Foreignness and Violence," *BibInt* 26 (2018), 528.

5 Shepherd, "Ruth in the Days of the Judges," 530-537. Athalya Brenner similarly compares such a liable status of Ruth with that of the single, female workers in modern Israel ("Ruth as a Foreign Worker and the Politics of Exogamy," Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Ruth and Esther* [2nd ed.; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999], 158-162).

the story underscores her subordinate(d) role in the service of the interests of Naomi/Judah: "Ruth/Moab is a wife, the subordinate one, who leaves her interests to serve the interests of Naomi/Judah, her husband."[6]

Third, Ruth as a vulnerable, subordinate(d) foreign woman may nonetheless depict a woman of agency and strength. As stated above, some interpreters like L. L. Bronner argue that "as attractive as her character is, Ruth is not independent, autonomous and free of male control; on the contrary she is docile and submissive, and this is why the sages laud and honor her."[7] In contrast, however, others such as Sarojini Nadar propose that "Ruth's character is independent, autonomous, strong-willed, and even subversive."[8] Ruth as a survivor thus "emerges as a woman who takes control of her destiny and who changes it from hopelessness to happiness."[9]

Ruth's speech to her mother-in-law, Naomi, bespeaks a prime example of hesed (חֶסֶד, 1:8; cf. 3:10). In a moving speech, her willingness to die with

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6 Musa W. Dube, "Divining Ruth for International Relations," Musa W. Dube (ed.), *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2001), 193. Consider also Gale A. Yee, "'She Stood in Tears amid the Alien Corn': Ruth, the Perpetual Foreigner and Model Minority," Rita Nakashima Brock et al. (eds.), *Off the Menu: Asian and Asian North American Women's Religion and Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 60: "Ruth is also the perpetual foreigner—*a nokriyah*—whose consistent label of Moabite implies that she, not unlike Asian Americans in the United States, is not fully assimilated in the text's consciousness of what it means to be Israelite." See also Andrew J. Niggemann, "Matriarch of Israel or Misnomer?: Israelite Self-Identification in Ancient Israelite Law Code and the Implications for Ruth," *JSOT* 41 (2017), 376.

7 L. L. Bronner, "A Thematic Approach to Ruth in Rabbinic Literature," Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 168. Anna May Say Pa, "Reading Ruth 3:1-5 from an Asian Woman's Perspective," Linda Day and Carolyn Pressler (eds.), *Engaging the Bible in a Generated World: An Introduction to Feminist Biblical Interpretation in Honor of Katharine Doob Sakenfeld* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 57: "There is a dark side, however, to this image of a devoted daughter-in-law."

8 Sarojini Nadar, "A South African Indian Womanist Reading of the Character of Ruth," Musa W. Dube (ed.), *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2001), 164. See also John T. Dekker and Anthony H. Dekker, "Centrality in the Book of Ruth," *VT* 68 (2018), 41-50.

9 Nadar, "A South African Indian Womanist Reading," 172.

her mother-in-law is telling (1:16-17). Rather than following someone with fame and fortune, Ruth willfully chooses to stick by her impoverished and ill-fated mother-in-law even to the point of death: "where you die I will die—there will I be buried ⋯ if even death parts me from you."[10] Paul K.-K. Cho highlights this willingness to die, as in Ruth's decision, as an example of strong faithfulness.[11] Likewise, Ruth's pursuit of Boaz rather than younger men could "put her at risk of never producing children—one of the ultimate purposes of a woman's life in the ancient world."[12] Such a resolute commitment coincides with the Korean concept of 'euri', which I propose to be analogous to one of Uriah Y. Kim's twofold definitions of חֶסֶד—loyalty (i.e., 의리/euri) and compassion (i.e., 정/jeong).[13]

Fourth, Ruth's place as a Moabite woman may denote metaphorical or symbolic hints at the international or interethnic relations. Musa W. Dube expounds the Ruth-Naomi relations through the international relations between Moab and Judah, for which she considers the book's description to be flawed: "This sharp contrast between lands of blessings [Judah] and curses [Moab] does not speak well of the relations between Judah and Moab."[14] Whether we take these relations to be hostile or amicable, this symbolic reading is insightful, as Tinyiko S. Maluleke confers that "the focus

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10 All English translations of the biblical texts are from the NRSV, unless noted otherwise.

11 Paul K.-K. Cho, *The Dead Give Life: Willingness to Die in the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

12 Charles Halton, "Seduction on the Threshing Floor," Bible Odyssey (https://www.bibleodyssey.org:443/people/related-articles/seduction-on-the-threshing-floor).

13 Uriah Y. Kim, *Identity and Loyalty in the David Story: A Postcolonial Reading* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2008), 50. See also Hyun Chul Paul Kim and M. Fulgence Nyengele, "Pursing Happiness across Cultures: Positive Psychology, Ecclesiastes, African *Ubuntu*, and Korean *Jeong* in Creative Dialogues," Denise Dombrowski Hopkins and Michael Koppel (eds.), *Bridging the Divide between the Bible and Pastoral Theology* (Newcastle, U.K.: Cambridge Scholars, 2018), 29-43.

14 Dube, "Divining Ruth," 193.

on international relations helps avoid a completely individualist reading of the book of Ruth."[15]

If we read these relations as symbolic of international relations, perhaps against the later postexilic context of the text, we can also consider them metaphorically as intra-Yehud conflicts between the "remainees" and the golah-"returnees." Paul L. Redditt thus elucidates that "the book of Ruth displays a far more inclusive vision of who belonged to Israel and stands as an alternative biblical view to post-exilic exclusionary perspectives found in Ezra-Nehemiah that regarded the Moabites as impure."[16] Similarly, the designation of Moab has puzzled scholars because "most of Moab received even less rainfall on average than Canaan."[17] Accordingly, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld posits Moab as a cipher for an enemy: "It may be that the narrator designates Moab not because it was fertile territory but because it was regarded as one of Israel's most hated enemies."[18] In this perspective, the complex relations between Ruth/Moab and Naomi/Judah may signify many comparable relations of tension, against which the book ironically portrays an irenic society of non-betrayal relationships.[19]

Fifth, Ruth as a Diaspora aligns her, comparatively or contrastingly, with

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15 Tinyiko S. Maluleke, "African 'Ruths,' Ruthless Africas: Reflections of an African Mordecai," Musa W. Dube (ed.), *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2001), 246.

16 Paul L. Redditt, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2014), 193, cited from Queen-Sutherland, "Ruth, Qoheleth, and Esther," 234-235.

17 Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Just Wives?: Stories of Power and Survival in the Old Testament and Today* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 31. J. Andrew Dearman (*Reading Hebrew Bible Narrative* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019], 48) conjectures that due to famine, Elimelech ("my God is King") may not have been able to pay the lien (a debt) he may have loaned against the property he owned, resulting in their leaving Bethlehem ("house of bread").

18 Sakenfeld, *Just Wives?*, 32.

19 Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (4th ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 104-107.

many correlated characters in the Hebrew Bible. For example, Ruth as a Moabite apparently contrasts with Naomi and Boaz the Judeans. Likewise, Ruth the Moabite refugee contrasts with Orpah the Moabite who never leaves her own land of Moab.[20] If Ruth is a foreign migrant into Judah, Naomi is a golah return-migrant back into Judah (1:6, 22; 4:3).[21] At the same time, if we take Ruth as a migrant who ends up in the land of Canaan, then as Chloe Sun suggests, Ruth can be considered "a new 'Abraham' [and Sarah], leaving her country of origin for a new land."[22] By the same token, the story of Ruth may be compared to the story of Jonah. John Dominic Crossan posits the story of Ruth as a parable, posing a question, "what if there was an exception?," such as the surprising Moabite ancestry in David's lineage.[23] If so, just as the book of Jonah may conjecture a (shocking/hyperbolic) object lesson through the Assyrian king who repents, the book of Ruth presents the (honorable) acts of חֶסֶד by a Moabite (cf. Deut 23:3-6; Ezra 9:1-2; Neh 13:1-3).

2) Esther

Esther too is a Diaspora. In fact, insofar as the reader/interpreter reads the stories from the Judean standpoint, Esther is more diasporic than Ruth—Esther resides outside the land, whereas Ruth enters into the land of Judah. Whereas Ruth is a widow, Esther is an orphan, which can still place her social

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20 Scholars debate whether Orpah's severing relationship with her mother-in-law Naomi should be interpreted negatively or positively.

21 Consider also Ronald T. Hyman, "Questions and Changing Identity in the Book of Ruth," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 39 (1984), 189: "Ruth can be seen as a female symbol of the new Israelites who return to the Land of Israel after their years of slavery in Egypt."

22 Chloe Sun, "Ruth and Esther: Negotiable Space in Christopher Wright's *The Mission of God?*" *Missiology: An International Review* 46 (2018), 155.

23 Cited from Queen-Sutherland, "Ruth, Qoheleth, and Esther," 234.

location as a foreigner (ethnic minority) at the lower point of the society. Yet, Esther ends up a queen, at the highest social level (here we may posit that Ruth too ends up an ancestress of David the king; cf. Matt 1:5-6).

What are some essential aspects about reading Esther as a Diaspora? First, she too is a young woman exiled among the captives through forced migration (2:6). Although the text does not specify exactly when it occurred, Esther became orphaned (2:7). Despite her adoption under the protection of Mordecai, the traumas of the loss, war, uprootedness, forceful relocation, and minoritization in the empires of Babylon, and ultimately Persia, must have been extremely harsh upon this young Jewess.

Second, Esther's ethnic minority status places her at detriment under the overbearing imperial regime. That Mordecai advises Esther to hide (the name Esther connotes "to hide") her Jewish identity (2:10, 20) indicates not only that Esther has the external attributes to blend into the dominant empire but also that revealing her ethnicity can put her in harm's ways. Put another way, hiding her ethnic identity was not a luxury but a necessity for survival or success in the empire. The records of the Persian king's remission of taxes (2:18; 10:1) likewise demonstrate the burdensome colonial taxes and tributes enforced upon the subject ethnic groups. Tsaurayi K. Mapfeka observes that under the shadow of the empire, "suppressing markers of Esther's ethnic identity and traditions and assimilating to the empire" may have been the only way to enhance "her chances of winning the contest and subsequently, living prosperously in the very heart of the empire's power centre."[24]

Third, alongside her socio-ethnic statuses of an orphan and a Jewess,

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24 Tsaurayi K. Mapfeka, "Empire and Identity Secrecy: A Postcolonial Reflection on Esther 2.10," Johanna Stiebert and Musa W. Dube (eds.), *The Bible, Centres and Margins: Dialogues between Postcolonial African and British Biblical Scholars* (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 94.

Esther also represents courage and agency amid her limitations. Her "beauty" (2:2) may have been the only measure of her worth valued by the empire—recalling the way Abraham hands the "beautiful" Sarah over "for sexual service" (cf. Gen 12:11).[25] Similar to Ruth, interpreters may find the gender portrayals as either Esther's subordination or her agency. Some may conclude that "although the book bears the name of a woman, it is actually a story about the man Mordecai (9:4) and the Jew Mordecai (3:3; 5:13; 8:7). It is thus a national male story. Mosala is right when he argues that, in the book of Esther, Esther is used to achieve the national male agenda."[26] Alternatively, others regard Esther's actions not as docile or acquiescent but rather as obedient, witty, and courageous. In her comparative study with the Sotho folktales, Madipoane Masenya avers that Esther "is a listening type, and she therefore proves to be a wise daughter. … When her uncle charges her not to reveal her identity to the people, she obeys (2:10). When Mordecai advises her to appear before the king for the sake of her people, she listens (4:15ff.)."[27]

Here again, Esther's pivot speech (4:15-16) displays her courageous action of חֶסֶד. Amid the crisis of her ethnic community (3:13-14), at that crucial moment, the now queen Esther chooses to be willing to die for her people, risking not only her newly acquired power and privilege but also her own life: "If I perish, I perish" (4:16; cf. 7:3-4). If Ruth's decisive action shows her "loyalty" (의리/euri) to her dispirited mother-in-law, Esther's risk-taking action

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25 Carolyn J. Sharp, "Character, Conflict, and Covenant in Israel's Origin Traditions," Gale A. Yee (ed.), *The Hebrew Bible: Feminist & Intersectional Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 49.

26 Madipoane Masenya, "Esther and Northern Sotho Stories: An African-South African Woman's Commentary," Musa W. Dube (ed.), *Other Ways of Reading: African Women and the Bible* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2001), 30. See also Itumeleng J. Mosala, "The Implications of the Text of Esther for African Women's Struggle for Liberation in South Africa," *Semeia* 59 (1992), 129-137.

27 Masenya, "Esther and Northern Sotho Stories," 38.

portrays her "compassion" (정/jeong) toward her people—together forming the dual definitions of חֶסֶד. Moreover, the careful plans and implementations of the two banquets provided by Esther exhibits, what Paul Cho describes, "Esther's tactical and strategic brilliance."[28] Accordingly, Esther the trickster may meet Jacob the trickster, except that whereas Jacob tricks his own twin brother which leads to rivalry and enmity, Esther tricks her enemy and saves her entire people.

Fourth, in the story of Esther, we also note the tension within the interethnic relations. In a narrow way, it is the rivalry between the Agagites/Amalekites and the Benjaminites/Saulides (1 Samuel 15). Yet, in a broad way, the tension hints at the threat of genocide lurking at the vulnerable ethnic "Others" (3:8-9; 8:5-6), as though the text reminisces the decree of genocide in Exodus (Esth 3:13; Exod 1:16, 22). Esther's heroics is as important and magnificent as Moses's heroics, thereby deeming her worthy as a "new Moses."[29] Furthermore, the ubiquitous occurrences of the number "seven" (e.g., 7 days [1:5], 7 eunuchs [1:10], 7 princes [1:14], and 7 chosen maids [2:9]) may imply more than the common round number, thereby hinting at the 7-day creation (Gen 1:1-2:4): as it topples the Babylonian hegemony, now it also subverts the Persian domination: "this is the theater of colonial mimicry that laughs at, even as it celebrates, salvation won wholly within the absurd logic of empire."[30]

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28 Cho, *The Dead Give Life*. Paul Cho borrows the theory of tactics and strategies by Michel de Certeau.

29 On reading Mordecai as the "second Saul," in his genealogical ties to the Benjaminite Shimei and Kish (Esth 2:5; cf. 1 Sam 9:1; 2 Sam 16:5-8), see Jon D. Levenson, *Esther* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 56-57.

30 Cho, *The Dead Give Life*. For reading Genesis 1-2 as cultural memory of the exilic diaspora, see John Ahn, "Story and Memory," Samuel E. Balentine (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Theology* (vol. 2; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 335-337.

Fifth, Esther as a Diaspora also aligns her, comparatively or contrastingly, with many parallel characters in the Hebrew Bible. For example, Esther, though adopted as a daughter to Mordecai, is technically his cousin. Albeit distinct between Esther's female passive role and Mordecai's male advisory role, both parallel Joseph insofar as they help deliver their people from grave danger and they all end up in ranks next to King Ahasuerus (10:3) or Pharaoh (Gen 41:43). Esther, in collaboration with Mordecai, also plays the role of nemesis against Haman. Simply put, Haman is the quintessential example of the divine reversal of fortune (6:8-11): "whoever curses you, I will curse" (Gen 12:1-3).[31] Haman's scheme to annihilate the Jews is foiled by Esther's ingenious counterplan, resulting in Haman's and his people's own doom (8:15; 9:16). Therefore, Esther is to Ahasuerus, just as Joseph is to Pharaoh, and Daniel is to Nebuchadnezzar: the king Ahasuerus "could not sleep" (6:1; cf. Gen 41:8; Dan 2:2; 4:5).[32]

Additionally, Esther the new queen corresponds to Vashti the former queen. If Orpah functions to set up Ruth's journey with Naomi, then it is Vashti who paves the way for Esther's collaboration with Mordecai.[33] Similar to that of Orpah, Vashti's role has been seen in contrasting ways. Recently, many interpreters have attempted to highlight Vashti's courage and dignity at the face of the domineering challenge of the king. Yet, comparing with the South African women's context, Masenya differentiates that "while Vashti's boldness is exemplary, it cannot be as helpful to women in poverty."[34]

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31 Sun, "Ruth and Esther," 152-153.

32 For the intertextual links of Esther with other biblical books, see Adele Berlin, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Esther* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2001), xxxvi-xli.

33 Queen-Sutherland, "Ruth, Qoheleth, and Esther," 230.

34 Madipoane Masenya, "Their Hermeneutics Was Strange! Ours Is a Necessity! Reading Vashti as African-South African Women," C. Vander Stichele and T. Penner (eds.), *Her Master's Tools? Feminist*

On the one hand, Esther contrasts with Vashti. Without pitting one character against the other, Paul Cho explicates how, contrary to Vashti who insists on maintaining her lofty place only to lose it, Esther tactfully uses her minority status to survive and even save her people from the impending massacre.[35] On the other hand, a modern midrashic re-reading by Carol Lakey Hess fills in the literary gap, imagining the mutual recognition and consultation between Esther and Vashti, in which Vashti encourages Esther's own action: "No you are not me and my way is not the only way."[36]

3) Ruth and Esther: Intertextual Dialogues

The Five Scrolls (Megilloth) place Ruth and Esther—the only two books named after female characters in the entire Hebrew Bible—as the bookends of the five books.[37] While we may be content to read each of the Megilloth independently, it remains valid to read them collectively as well.[38] In fact, the five books in the MT canon (according to the Leningrad Codex) form a chiasm:

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and Postcolonial Engagements of Historical-Critical Discourse (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2005), 193.

35 Cho, *The Dead Give Life*.

36 Carol Lakey Hess, *Caretakers of Our Common House: Women's Development in Communities of Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 28. Consider also Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (Philadelphia: Innisfree, 1988), 108: "King Ahasuerus might not have been so predisposed to forgive Queen Esther her brazen disobedience had not his first wife [Vashti] taught him that, like it or not, some women will make their own decisions."

37 Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth: The JPS Commentary* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2011), xxv: "The books of Ruth and Esther function like bookends, delineating the range of women's lives, as well as the scope of women's salvific activities, moving from the domestic to the national."

38 These five books are recited annually throughout the key holidays in the Jewish calendar, alongside the readings of the Torah and Haftarot. Ruth is read during Shavuot/First Fruits, and Esther during Purim. See Amy Erickson and Andrew R. Davis, "Recent Research on the Megilloth (Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther)," *CBR* 14 (2015), 298-318.

a Ruth (narrative, female heroine)

b Song of Songs (poetry, predominantly female speaker)

c Qoheleth (sukkot = wilderness motif)[39]

b' Lamentations (poetry, predominantly feminine Zion speaks)[40]

a' Esther (narrative, female heroine)

Femininity abounds in the five books of Megilloth, as though complementing—or completing—the five books of the male-dominant Mosaic Torah. The scribal arrangement of Ruth and Esther to bracket the Megilloth thus seems deliberate. Just as both Jonah and Nahum are meant to be read together,[41] both Ruth and Esther beckon readers to dialogically interrelate them. Reading the two books, and two characters, together can be not only informative for intertextual interpretation but also illuminating for multivalent issues of Diaspora, in terms of both similarities and differences.

Concerning the similarities of the two characters and plots, on the one hand, both Ruth and Esther endure the harsh ordeals of relocation, following the loss of their loved ones—also their indispensable social guardians. As ethnic minorities and women, both encounter immense social, economic,

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39 Of the five books, Qoheleth seems an anomaly and exception toward femininity. At least, however, the word "Qoheleth" is feminine. For the suggestion of Qoheleth as a "female wisdom teacher," see Soon-Young Kim, "A Research of the Identity of Ambiguous Name Qoheleth," *Korean Journal of Old Testament Studies* 24 (2018), 94-124. Also, as it is read during the festival of Tabernacles (Succoth), its motif is closely linked to the wilderness motif—an undercurrent theme of the diasporic texts. I am indebted to Prof. Yeong-Mee Lee for this insight.

40 Consider select catchwords and motifs in Lamentations 1 which may allude to the other books in the Megilloth: e.g., Lam 1:1-2: "How like a *widow* (אַלְמָנָה); cf. Ruth 1:5) she has become, she that was great among the nations! She that was a *princess* (cf. Esth 1:18; 2:17-18) among the provinces has become a vassal… She weeps bitterly in the night, with tears on her cheeks; among all her *lovers* (cf. Song 3:1) she has no one to comfort her."

41 Hyun Chul Paul Kim, "Jonah Read Intertextually," *JBL* 126 (2007), 497-528.

and political threats. Furthermore, both are restricted within the confines of the androcentric culture, as both "marry an older powerful man from another culture."[42] Likewise, both embody their dual (hyphenated) ethnic identities, a Moab-Israelite and a Jewish-Persian, as they maneuver in the domineering, exotic culture.[43]

In both plots, we can find specific details of affinities between Ruth and Esther. Ruth loses her husband and Esther loses her parents. Yet, both are not completely abandoned but figuratively or literally adopted into the guardianship by Naomi for Ruth and Mordecai for Esther. Thus, consider how Ruth is called "my daughter" by Naomi (2:2, 22; 3:1, 16, 18; cf. also addressed by Boaz in 2:8; 3:10-11), while Esther is adopted by Mordecai "as his own daughter" (Esth 2:7). Both female characters come under the protection of their male benefactors, through precarious tactics replete with sexual euphemism, as Ruth "uncovered [Boaz's] feet" (Ruth 3:4, 7; cf. v. 9, "spread your wing") and Esther "touched the top of the scepter [from the hand of King Ahasuerus]" (Esth 5:2). Against the odds, both are successful in their assigned missions. Thus, Boaz assures Ruth, "Do not be afraid, I will do for you all that you ask" (Ruth 3:11), and King Ahasuerus offers to Esther, "It shall be given you, even to the half of my kingdom" (Esth 5:3, 6).

Most compellingly, both vulnerable young women make their own decisive resolution, even to the point of death: "where you die I will die (אָמוּת)" (Ruth 1:17); "If I perish, I perish (אָבַדְתִּי)" (Esth 4:16). Their utmost courageous actions of defiant loyalty (의리/euri) and compassionate solidarity (정/jeong) testify to the extraordinary examples of חֶסֶד. We should note that

42 Sun, "Ruth and Esther," 151.

43 Sun, "Ruth and Esther," 151.

the political milieus of both plots attest to Israel's monarchy-less times: "The setting of Ruth is in the days of the judges, before there was a king in Israel. Esther's setting in the Persian empire is post-kingship."[44] Against the literary backdrops of Judah's void of kingship, we thus learn of two heroic women who take up the redemptive roles of the absent kings, bringing about the reversal of fortunes from emptiness to fullness, from peril to liberation. The literary setting of the book of Ruth—"In the days when the judges ruled…. there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (1:1; 21:25)—signifies Ruth the Moabite as a truly "righteous (new) Judge." Without the Davidic male leadership, these two unenviable women act as heroic role models of חֶסֶד, rightfully placing them on the pedestals of true kings—as "new Davids."[45] It is no coincidence that Boaz acknowledges Ruth, "you are a worthy woman (אֵשֶׁת חַיִל)" (Ruth 3:11; cf. Prov 31:10), not unlike Judah's acknowledgment of Tamar's righteousness (Gen 38:26; cf. Ruth 4:12).[46] Esther's bravery and solidarity too have won her the honorable place in parallel to Abraham and Joseph—whose heroics would reach toward not only their own people but also "many" others (Esth 8:17; cf. Gen 12:1-3).

Concerning the notable contrasts, on the other hand, Ruth and Esther can showcase two opposite poles, while essentially suggesting complementary correlations nonetheless. Ruth plays her main role on the society's margin at the threshing floor, at the bottom of the social strata. Esther enters the mainstream at the royal palace, at the society's pinnacle. Notably, it was when

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44 Queen-Sutherland, "Ruth, Qoheleth, and Esther," 230.

45 Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Israel in the Persian Period: The Fifth and Fourth Centuries B.C.E.* (trans. Siegfried S. Schatzmann; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2011).

46 In the MT (BHS and BHQ editions), Ruth immediately follows Proverbs. We may wonder the implication that Ruth is one prime example of the "worthy woman" (see Queen-Sutherland, "Ruth, Qoheleth, and Esther," 229).

Ruth severed her ties with her Moabite origin that her חֶסֶד began to work for Naomi, and eventually the whole family. In contrast, it was when Esther retained (or returned to) her Jewish origin, thus severing her Persian-imperial identity, that her חֶסֶד helped deliver her people. In terms of their identity, thus, Ruth denotes ethnic "assimilation/relinquishment" while Esther signifies ethnic "separation/retention." Nevertheless, when read together, the two characters and plots present not only contrary motifs but also complementary themes. After all, both are diasporic (im)migrants, adjusting to survive in the new relocated places. Whether at the bottom or the top of a society, both as ethnic minorities in their foreign lands model the same courageous sacrifices for those in despair and dire needs. Defying the simplistic binary dichotomy, the two stories present the complementary common denominators in these two heroines: both Ruth and Esther, from the opposite socio-political locations, strive to help others live, ironically through their own willingness to die for the sake of others.[47]

The two plots also markedly differ with regard to the literary notions of the divine presence and divine absence. In the book of Ruth, numerous characters refer to God in their intentions, conversations, and prayers (e.g., Naomi's complaints, Boaz's transactions, Ruth's vows, and even the village women's chorus-like comments).[48] In the MT of Esther, nowhere is God mentioned (while in the LXX, God is overtly addressed). Nevertheless, despite this stark contrast, the two plots insinuate certain thematic reciprocity. As commentators posit, even in the MT version of Esther, God is subtly or

47 Consider Dong-Gu Han, "A Calling for Serving 'the Others' and the Gentiles, and Formation of Such an Identity: Implications and 'Sitz im Leben' of a Kingdom of Priests, the Servants of Yahweh, and Yahweh's Priests," *Korean Journal of Old Testament Studies* 22 (2016), 196-222.

48 Kristine Moen Saxegaard, *Character Complexity in the Book of Ruth* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), 195: "Through the actions of Ruth and Boaz (Ruth 1:8; 2:[12], 20; 3:10) God is involved."

secretly alluded to in key literary plots (Esth 4:14). If Naomi's lament discloses the divine abandonment (Ruth 1:20-21), Mordecai's fasting is rooted in the divine presence (Esth 4:1-3).[49] Alternatively, Ruth also intimates the setting of divine absence. Thus, Renita J. Weems expounds, "Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth were left to the integrity of their faith and the strength of their relationship with one another. The women had to make their own decision, without the help of intervening powers."[50] Likewise, as Michael V. Fox elucidates, "in Esther, no miracles, but inner resources—intellectual as well as spiritual—even of people not naturally leaders, are to be relied upon in crisis."[51] Both Ruth and Esther thus enact with their own decisions and actions, even with their acknowledgment of the divine guidance. In other words, it is because of their unwavering faith in God, they take matters into their own hands and lives.

2. Hermeneutical Implications of the Diasporic Readings

1) Key Themes from Reading the Two Heroines together

What aspects of Diaspora can we glean from reading Ruth and Esther together? Before applying these aspects for today's pertinent issues, we will review key select themes on the Diasporas out of the analysis above.

First, Diasporas in most cases undergo challenging changes of life situations, whether physical relocation, ethnic replacement, or socio-cultural

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49 Concerning Naomi as the "Old Zion" and Ruth as the "New Zion," see Anne-Mareike Wetter, *"On Her Account": Reconfiguring Israel in Ruth, Esther, and Judith* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 92-96. See also Marjo C. A. Korpel, "Memories of Exil and Return in the Book of Ruth," Marjo C. A. Korpel and Lester L. Grabbe (eds.), *Open-Mindedness in the Bible and Beyond: A Volume of Studies in Honour of Bob Becking* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), 151-164.

50 Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, 29.

51 Michael V. Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 205.

status.[52] Such changes may be voluntary, but they are primarily involuntary or forced. Ruth's relocation is caused by loss, famine, and familial ties (to her mother-in-law). Esther's relocation is derived from loss, exile, and adoption. Many of these changes would result in lower status and harsher disservice, as is Ruth's case. There are exceptions, as in Esther's case, that some may not only survive but even thrive in a new environment (consider Joseph and Daniel). However, even in such rare cases, we should not dismiss that Esther originally hid her ethnic identity.[53] We may even wonder whether Esther had any choice to opt out of the nationwide beauty contest, because the text hints that the young girls were "taken" into the (mandatory) contest (Esth 2:8). As a Diaspora, one's ethnic identity may be a minor personal trait or marker. But, in some contexts, it can be a matter of life or death, as in the genocidal decree of the Pharaoh or of the king Ahasuerus.

Second, Diasporas are naturally located in the hybrid, liminal spaces, causing them to juggle between two or more identities and belongingness. The question has been whether one ought to assimilate into or distinguish from the dominant culture/identity of the relocated place. While Ruth and Esther may suggest two opposing perspectives on this issue, it also makes sense to find the commonality of חֶסֶד which underscores their courageous decisions to share solidarity with the weak, poor, and marginalized. Both heroines, albeit seemingly contrasting routes, display the common issue

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52 For example, in Roman Egypt, "among the Alexandrian Jews, some owned land in various places whereas others had difficulty in making a livelihood, as can be seen from the papyri of Abusir el Meleq" (*EncJud*, vol. 5, 639).

53 Johnny Miles, "Reading Esther as Heroine: Persian Banquets, Ethnic Cleansing, and Identity Crisis," *BTB* 45 (2015), 141: "Through the hero paradigm of Esther, diasporic Jews could embrace their dual identity, and do so without compromising one identity at the expense of the other when acting out of concerns for justice for the benefit of others."

of חֶסֶד as a measure and qualification for the heroics. As Marc Zvi Brettler delineates, "kindness [חֶסֶד] is far more important than ethnicity."[54]

Third, Diasporas are often caught in between multifarious power dynamics. In reading Ruth and Esther together, we may thus align the located nations' dominance as follows:

Moab < Judah < Persia

In such concatenated, complex power dynamics, Ruth is almost at the base of the social ladder, whereas Esther's place is at the top of the most powerful superpower. When we read the two stories completely independently, such concatenated power dynamics may not matter at all. But, what happens when we read Ruth and Esther in mutual interpretive dialogues? The "implied readers" may then be caught—or hermeneutically invited—into the middle of the two comparable relocated/immigrant diasporic characters. The implied readers may have to reckon with how they (or we) ought to treat the resident aliens (ethnic minorities) like the Moabites and also behave as the exiled aliens (ethnic minorities) in the Persian empire. If we identify with the implied readers, we would then be surprised to learn of the exceptional faithfulness of a Moabite woman, who becomes the source of blessing. We may also be probed as to how we can give the חֶסֶד to "Moabites" in return. By the same token, we would be taught what it means to be privileged in "Persia." That is to say, we would be challenged about whether or not we would risk our privilege—e.g., recall the Korean "pro-Japanese" elites (= 친일파) during the

54 Marc Zvi Brettler, *How to Read the Jewish Bible* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 2005), 271 … See also Miles, "Reading Esther as Heroine," 141: "And yet, 'Everyjew' could also be Esther (and Daniel, who also provided a model for diasporic Jews interfacing with the dominant culture) since, as heroine, she modeled the potential that all who struggled with an identity crisis, whether as strangers in a strange land or not, could actualize."

Japanese occupation era—in solidarity with those in need of redemption.

Fourth, Diasporas, especially ethnic minorities, women, or the underprivileged, cannot survive or thrive alone. Whether due to their socio-ethnic or gender discrimination, these heroines had to benefit or take advantage of various surrounding constituents. For example, both women follow indispensable advices from their mentors—Naomi the mother-in-law and Mordecai the cousin/guardian. Undoubtedly, Ruth and Esther are the active agents of their own destiny by prudently and covertly executing the tasks. Yet, as heroic as Ruth and Esther are, their mentors are catalysts in helping these heroines maneuver through numerous dangerous routes of survival. The sage wisdom and daring confrontation of the masterminds, Naomi and Mordecai respectively, stand crucial for the plot resolution: "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you" (Ruth 3:1); "For if you keep silence at such a time as this, relief and deliverance will rise for the Jews from another quarter" (Esth 4:14). The response and integrity of Boaz in the process of becoming the next of kin as well as the shrewd manipulation in utilizing the indulgent yet menacing king Ahasuerus, demonstrate how the minorities need essential aids for sheer survival. We may even wonder whether some of the eunuchs, such as Harbona (Esth 7:9), may have been fellow Jews or "Persian Schindlers"? For Ruth and Naomi, "the all-important task of naming the newborn is entrusted to the community of women" (cf. Ruth 4:17).[55] Although some of these are mere supporting characters or pawns for the plot at best, these figures highlight the importance of the communal collaboration and solidarity for

55 Johanna W. H. van Wijk-Bos, *Ruth and Esther: Women in Alien Lands* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), 62.

survival and success.

Fifth, Diasporas are, more often than not, more vulnerable in a society than the common people, let alone the elites. It is thus no coincidence that, when read together, the two heroines are a widow (Ruth) and an orphan (Esther). The legal codes of the Torah repeatedly stipulate not to abuse or neglect the "widows" and "orphans" (e.g., Exod 22:22). The third group, "resident aliens or immigrants," in these law codes also applies to both Ruth and Esther (e.g., Deut 24:17-21; 27:19). The prophetic literature likewise upholds the Torah ethos not to oppress the widows and orphans (e.g., Isa 1:17, 23; 10:2; Jer 7:6; 22:3; Zech 7:10; Mal 3:5), as does the wisdom tradition (e.g., Job 22:9; 24:3). That the two biblical books are named after a widow and an orphan—also both as foreign immigrants—is telling. These books present to the implied readers a revolutionary version: in times of monarchy-less society under the imperial hegemony, it can be the widows, orphans, and (female) immigrants—not the kings, priests, or (male) elites—who would rise to do the most virtuous and heroic acts for the community amid rampant oppression and hardship.

2) Implications of Diaspora Hermeneutics for Today's Church and World

In light of the observations and explorations above, as a Korean Diaspora in the U.S., I would like to pose the following implications of diaspora hermeneutics for today's church and global world.

First, diaspora hermeneutics underscores the pain and trauma of the Diaspora's relocation, whether voluntary or involuntary. Diasporas are strangers, often labeled as disenfranchised ethnic minority. In a nutshell, they are second-class (or lower) citizens in a new place. Ruth symbolizes

the "Other," the refugees, and so does Esther the exiled, the migrants. Therefore, even as women, these stories intentionally present to us the most disadvantaged strangers in our midst. Any sensitive readers ought not to discount or turn blind eyes to their suffering and hardship (Ruth 2:8-10, 15-16, 22; Esth 2:10, 20; 3:6, 13).

Second, not all Diasporas are alike, just like one's life story is not the same as another's. We should acknowledge that some Diasporas may get out of misery and end up fortunate, e.g., Joseph, Daniel, and Esther. They may deny and even abandon their ethnic origin and roots. However, diaspora hermeneutics cautions us not to downplay the all too horrifying danger of attack, realizable in an instant, by the dominant top dogs or enemies (cf. Gen 19:1-11; Exod 1:15-22). Therefore, these stories are all the more powerful that heroines did not get bogged down to self-advancement only, but rather put an effort to share solidarity for the fellow people, risking their status, dignity, or even lives.

Third, the extreme poles of Ruth's lowest status vis-à-vis Esther's highest rank are intentional authorial (or canonical) reminders of the divergent situations and even blindsides of diasporic situations. L. Daniel Hawk observes the complementarity: "The two books present complementary reflections on Israelite identity in the context of interactions with other peoples. Ruth utilizes story as a vehicle to think through how Israel should relate to foreigners living in its midst. Esther, on the other hand, takes the opposite track: how to live as a minority within a dominant and sometimes hostile culture."[56] To put it more dramatically, reading the two stories in dialogue, in the story of Ruth we/readers are more like the "Persians" (of

56 L. Daniel Hawk, *Ruth* (Apollos Old Testament Commentary 7B; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity,

Esther), while in the story of Esther we/readers are more like the "Moabites" (of Ruth). In the case of Ruth, we should note that Naomi's family relocated to the "country [literally, 'fields' שָׂדֶה] of Moab" (Ruth 1:1, 2, 6, 22; cf. 4:3), hinting that Naomi too may have been a migrant labor worker in Moab, just as Ruth would later become one in the "field" (שָׂדֶה) of Judah (Ruth 2:2, 3, 6, 8, 9, 17, 22). Like the parable of the Good Samaritan in the New Testament (Luke 10:25-37), rather than identifying with the Judeans/Jews in both texts, the texts may also be nudging us to be placed in the literary, social, or cultural locations of the "Other." Therefore, diasporic hermeneutics can alert us not to be blindsided by our falling into the bias trap in that the oppressed, when liberated, may become the oppressors to the more vulnerable "Others" (consider the parable of the unmerciful debtor in Matt 18:21-35).

Fourth, such thematic and interpretive complexities lead to the question as to the definition of "diaspora." Should diasporic identity be limited to the geographical setting or be broadened to encompass other aspects, such as culture, language, status, and so on?[57] While respecting its narrow definition, it is my contention that "diaspora" can embrace broader meanings, encompassing all those who are "displaced" or "ostracized" in a society, be it status, power, gender, disability, and the like. Accordingly, diaspora hermeneutics accentuates the theology for the marginalized and the powerless. It also emphasizes the composite and intersectional aspects when it comes to the issue of "identity," which involves the fluctuating flexibility: negatively, when I return to Korea to reside, I may join the mainstream,

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2015), 19.

57 Fernando F. Segovia, "Toward a Hermeneutics of the Diaspora: A Hermeneutics of Otherness and Engagement," Fernando F. Segovia and Mary A. Tolbert (eds.), *Reading from This Place: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in the United States* (vol. 1; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 57-74.

relinquishing my diasporic ethnic minority status as a Korean-American; yet, positively, even so, I may retain solidarity with many disenfranchised groups, recalling: "Don't mistreat or oppress an immigrant, because you were once immigrants in the land of Egypt" (CEB, Exod 22:21; cf. Lev 19:34; Deut 10:19).[58]

Fifth, diasporic hermeneutics places חֶסֶד as significant as—and at times even more than—the blood ties, ethnicity, or class. Over against the saying that "blood is thicker than water," Ruth showed her loyalty even when she did not give birth to a child/son for Naomi's family yet. That may be why Naomi's letting her daughters-in-law stay back in Moab signifies Naomi's caring concern for her young daughters-in-law, not careless dismissal of them. Moreover, we should recall that Naomi's status was not too envious for the daughters-in-law to stay with her. Ruth's חֶסֶד thus surpasses "blood ties," as she shares care for her miserable mother-in-law. In the case of Esther, she values her blood ties with Mordecai, but at the same time bypasses her lofty "class" to sacrifice for her people. Therefore, by way of חֶסֶד in metaphorical senses, the Ruth-Naomi and Esther-Mordecai relations can signify the kinds of transformed reconciliation and trust amid the conflicts between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, between conservatives and liberals, between South Korea and North Korea, between Korea and Japan, and so on.[59]

Sixth, like most interpretive approaches, reading through diaspora hermeneutics has its challenges. Not unlike the conquest narrative in Joshua, which can easily (yet wrongfully) make some Bible readers criticize its

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58 Yee, "She Stood in Tears amid the Alien Corn," 60: "Ruth's story thus becomes an indictment against those of us who live in the first world and exploit the cheap labor of developing countries and poor immigrants from these countries who come to the first world looking for jobs."

59 Kyoung Hee Lee, "Naomi and Ruth's Transformation Analyzed by Three Methodologies," *Korean Journal of Christian Studies* 105 (2017), 187-206.

ideology, readers may remain puzzled at the ideology that applauds Ruth's assimilation over Orpah's independence. Some even compare the type of Ruth (akin to that of Rahab in Joshua 2) with that of Pocahontas, while finding Orpah as the more ideal model.[60] The counter-slaughter of the enemies of Jews led by Esther and Mordecai is another hermeneutical impasse to many modern readers. These dilemmas are as complex as today's political perspectives about the Diasporas, alongside immigrants and refugees, in many countries. Should we then side with Orpah or Ruth? At the least, it seems plausible to consider that the book of Ruth itself does not castigate either Orpah or Ruth.[61] Such interpretive cruxes remind us, therefore, how we ought to humbly listen to the voices of the "Others" from various angles and locations.[62] Similarly, some may be appalled by the violence recorded against Haman and fellow enemies of the Jews. Violence which begets violence should not be condoned or praised. Yet, should we so simply condemn Esther and Mordecai's violence against their organized attackers? We also need to keep in mind that Esther's people were on the verge of being annihilated. How would those who were brutally abducted and abused by the Nazi leaders react to our sanitized theological claims that the counterattack upon Haman and his people should be condemned (Esth 9:5-15) and that the Nazi leaders should be given amnesty? Ruth and Esther together may thus ask

60 Laura E. Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes," R. S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 159-170.

61 Hyman, "Questions and Changing Identity in the Book of Ruth," 192: "Orpah, Ruth's foil, is not bad or disrespectful. Naomi has stated already that both Orpah and Ruth have shown lovingkindness to the dead and to her [Ruth 1:8]."

62 Consider Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), 43-49.

contrary questions, with counterpoints, like the yin-yang dynamics.[63]

Seventh, diaspora hermeneutics, which is intrinsically critical of reading from the dominant/mainstream location, should also be self-critical. All interpretations are limited by subjectivity, and thus my own interpretation of Ruth and Esther has shortcomings, especially with my own gender dynamics.[64] Tinyko S. Maluleke's humble admission rings loudly: "For too long, African men—like white males—have assumed the right to speak on behalf of, and to speak at, African women."[65] It can be more dangerous and damaging if someone claims to fully understand and represent "Others" in different, often difficult, situations. I have read some works of select European and American historians of modern Asia (especially Korea) and find them at times too overgeneralized, prejudiced, and even offensive.[66] As a result, I must confess the same hermeneutical problem in my engaging the issues on female characters, their life experiences, and pertinent implications. I thus fully concur with Maluleke's self-critical warning: "But Ruth must not and cannot be romanticized…. Do not rush to rescue Esther from the lake,

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63 Hyun Chul Paul Kim, "Interpretative Modes of Yin-Yang Dynamics as an Asian Hermeneutics," *BibInt* 9 (2001), 287-308.

64 Juliana Claassens borrows the concept of "compassion" ("Mitleid" in German, "to suffer with another") from Martha Nussbaum, posing whether or not one can "recognize similarities between one's own situation and that of the other" ("'Give us a portion among our father's brothers': The Daughters of Zelophehad, Land, and the Quest for Human Dignity," *JSOT* 37 [2013], 334). See Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 315-316: "This is a judgment of *similar possibilities*; compassion concerns those misfortunes 'which the person himself might expect to suffer, either himself or one of his loved ones' ([Aristotle, *Rhet.*] 1385b14-15)."

65 Maluleke, "African 'Ruths,' Ruthless Africas," 238.

66 Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). See also Hyun Chul Paul Kim, "'The Myth of the Empty Exile': A Comparative Exploration into Ancient Biblical Exile and Modern Korean Exile," *JSOT* (forthcoming).

for you might come out with Mordecai instead."[67] Just as I should not claim to speak for all Koreans or all Korean-American Diasporas, neither can I state that I accurately understand what Ruth and Esther would have been like. My endeavor with diaspora hermeneutics should at least teach me not only that I should diligently listen to counter-narratives and counter-arguments from the viewpoints of "Others," but also that I should humbly yet authentically acknowledge many possible hypocritical pitfalls and biases in my own ("romanticized") perspectives. Maluleke's authentic admission is worth a lengthy quote:

> Why must role models be successful anyway? Many African Ruths are not 'successful.' Patriarchy, culture, and globalization will not let them succeed…. Unlike Achille Mbembe (1988), however, I would be reluctant to declare the Africas in which African Ruths find themselves L'Afriques indociles. Who am I to pronounce these Africas indomitable? Can I, a mere African Mordecai, know the price that African Ruths have to pay for these Africas to appear indomitable, even for a brief moment?[68]

3. Conclusion

My maternal grandmother grew up in a quite affluent family in Gaeseong (=Kaesong) in northern Korea. But, just prior to the breakout of the Korean War, her husband (my grandfather) was killed (for reasons that remain unexplained) and she became a widow as a young bride and mother. During

67 Maluleke, "African 'Ruths,' Ruthless Africas," 244.

68 Maluleke, "African 'Ruths,' Ruthless Africas," 245, 249.

the Korean War, she miraculously managed to escape and migrate to southern Korea with five children, including toddlers. Although she may not be considered a "Diaspora" per se, her life journey in South Korea as a widow and, technically, an orphan (if we note that her parents could not escape but remained in North Korea) was filled with relocation, poverty, and hardship. Nevertheless, my grandmother who lived to the age of 99 years, with her strong will and devout faith, raised all her children, as her presence and influence have blessed many people around her; and she continues to inspire her grandchildren, including me, her great-grandchildren, and beyond.

Recalling my own grandmother's life, as well as the stories of Ruth and Esther, I find it decisively significant that the books of "Ruth" and "Esther" are included in the canon. That such an inclusion ascertains the heroics of these two female characters—widow, orphan, and immigrants—seems indisputable, making them as venerable as David, Moses, Abraham-Sarah, Joseph, Judges like Deborah, Daniel, and so on. Furthermore, their lowly, disenfranchised statuses and their tenacious actions of חֶסֶד present important messages both for those in diasporic situations and for those who care about the Diasporas.

In Korea's modern history, especially during the occupation period of Imperial Japan (1910-1945), there are numerous stories of the "diasporic" heroes and heroines who risked and sacrificed for the greater causes, in solidarity with those suffering under atrocious injustice. This year marks the 100th-year anniversary of the nationwide March 1st non-violent independence movement in 1919.[69] We recall the heroics of Dosan Changho

69 In the inaugurating independence movement on 1 March, 1919, more than 2 million people participated in the non-violent resistance march that lasted about two months, which amounted to one-tenth of the entire population (Institute of Historical Studies, *The Modern and Contemporary History of Korea*

Ahn, Jung-geun Ahn, Ki-chol Chu,,[70] Koo Kim, Dongju Yun,[71] and especially Gwansun Ryu and Esther Eisook Ahn—female heroines,[72] along with so many others. Some of them fought for their people and country at the diasporic places outside Korea, while others resisted within the land. Unlike the miraculous endings of Ruth and Esther, many of these Korean diasporas met tragic ends by arrest and execution. Nonetheless, their defiant courage against evil and solidarity toward justice have inspired countless Koreans even to our time. The testimony of Yongsoo Lee at the U. S. Congress on February 2007, for the resolution of conviction concerning "comfort women" (HR121) of the Japanese military, testifies to the defiant will of the "comfort women" survivors to speak the truth and seek authentic apology. The legacy of these women and men, in their indomitable courage and heroic solidarity, has been and will continue to be the vital spirit of Korea and Korean Diasporas.

Yet, we may still ask, "What do diasporic readings and issues have anything to do with those who do not consider themselves as Diasporas?" Besides those who have never left their own hometown, can the third, fourth, or fifth-generation Korean-Americans be considered "diasporas" in the U.S., when many equivalent European-Americans, Caucasians, might not call themselves

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(Seoul: Seohaemunjib, 2004), 136-138). A great majority of the participants were poor peasants and common people, including teenage students and female factory workers (see Kyung-mok Park, *A Study of the Records of the Seodaemun Prison during the Japanese Occupation* [Ph.D. diss., Chungnam University, 2015]).

70 Hyun Chul Paul Kim, "Crossing Boundaries: Daniel's Three Friends Meet Rev. Ki-chol Chu of Colonized Korea," John Ahn (ed.), *Landscapes of Korean and Korean-American Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 195-215.

71 Hyun Chul Paul Kim, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dongju Yun, and the Legacies of Jeremiah and Suffering Servant," Marianne Grohmann and Hyun Chul Paul Kim (eds.), *Second Wave Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2019), 289-309.

72 Esther Ahn Kim, *If I Perish* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1977).

"diasporas" any longer?[73] Alternatively, how would the diaspora hermeneutics be relevant to the interpretive perspectives from the Native Americans in the U.S., or from the Africana people residing outside the African continent?[74] How about the so-called Third-World migrants in Korea, as well as second- or third-generation Korean-Chinese, Korean-Russians, and Korean-Americans who recently returned to reside in Korea?[75] Can refugees from North Korea (both during the Korean War and the current century) be embraced within the definition of Diaspora? Thus, so what for the Koreans and Korean-Diasporas in the world?[76]

The study above yields that we are all connected to the Diasporas in various ways, just as some of us are, or can become, Diasporas.[77] Unlike the countries such as USA, Russia, or Australia that comprise multiethnic population, Korea boasts of its 5000-years of monoethnic history. However, without even

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73 Consider John Ahn, "Diaspora Studies," Steven L. McKenzie (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Biblical Interpretation* (vol. 1; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 218: "The examination of geopolitics, hybridity, nomadism, creolization, and symbols…. the chief questions are: Will 'we' be fully accepted? And one day, can we also become hosts?"

74 Jemima Pierre trenchantly points out the African Diaspora dilemma in that by separating African setting from the Diaspora (outside African) settings, scholars tend to "keep Africa in a distant past and deny Africa its place in the modern community of Blackness" (*The Predicament of Blackness: Postcolonial Ghana and the Politics of Race* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013], 214).

75 Helene K. Lee, *Between Foreign and Family: Return Migration and Identity Construction among Korean Americans and Korean Chinese* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018); Takeyuki Tsuda and Changzoo Song, eds., *Diasporic Returns to the Ethnic Homeland: The Korean Diaspora in Comparative Perspective* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

76 According to a 2003 study, "the diaspora's 5.7 million ethnic Koreans are scattered all over the world in 151 countries…. The United States and China have the largest numbers of these Koreans, with respectively 2.1 million and 1.9 million, or 38 and 33 percent, of them" (Inbom Choi, "Korean Diaspora in the Making: Its Current Status and Impact on the Korean Economy," C. Fred Bergsten and Inbom Choi [eds.], *The Korean Diaspora in the World Economy* [Washington, D.C.: Institute for International Economics, 2003], 26).

77 Alice L. Laffey and Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, *Ruth* (Wisdom Commentary 8; Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2017), 11: "Today there are more than sixty-five million people rightly identified as refugees and internally displaced persons."

going through the DNA ethnicity tests, we know that Korea has adopted and internalized the Chinese civilization and Indian religions. Accordingly, as Korea has embraced the Mediterranean and Western Judeo-Christianity, with its religiosity and ethos, we can also obtain the themes and messages from the Diasporas in the Bible.

If so, why not also be inspired by the diasporic heroics of Ruth and Esther and thus envision our own practices? We would then want to welcome the "Ruths" in our midst and share hospitality. We would need to build a society—and church—of honesty and integrity, upholding fairness, transparency, and justice. We would aspire to follow the "Esthers" who share compassion for and unity among the people, amid the turbulent world that tempts us to be divided and conquered. The ideals of חֶסֶד —loyalty (의리/euri) and compassion (정/jeong)—of Ruth and Esther can humble and remind us that God indeed cares for the least of the people (cf. Matt 25:31-46). Ultimately, Christians (whether Koreans, Korean-Diasporas, or all Diasporas) are all immigrants and thus Diasporas on this earthly globe as followers of Christ—the paramount example of a Diaspora, who relocated, suffered, and gave all for the world.[78]

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Keywords

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구약성서와 디아스포라:

'과부'인 룻과 '고아'인 에스더를 디아스포라적 '이민자'들로서 본문상호 비교해석

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본 연구발표는 '구약성서와 디아스포라' 라는 주제를 다루면서, 두 공통되고 연결된 '룻'과 '에스더'를 디아스포라로서 비교 해석한다. 이 두 인물들과 이야기들이 비춰주는 고대 성서시대의 디아스포라의 삶을 고찰함과 동시에 이를 통해서 오늘날 한국과 미국과 글로벌 세계에서의 교회와 사회에 대한 관련된 메시지를 찾아본다. 룻과 에스더는 여러가지로 공통된 점들을 나타내고 있다. 첫째로, 두 인물 모두 난민 또는 (강제)이주자로서의 고난과 트라우마를 겪는다. 둘째로, 두 인물은 소수인종이요 여인으로서 차별과 위험에 쉽게 노출된다. 셋째로, 역경의 위치에서도 두 인물은 독립적이고 능동적인 자세로 대처하며 강인한 믿음과 용맹으로 인한 '헤세드'(חֶסֶד) — '의리'와 '정'— 를 실행한다. 넷째로, 두 인물의 다른 이들과의 관계는 동족간이나 타민족이나 집단들 간의

관계를 상징한다고도 볼 수 있다. 다섯째로, 두 인물의 '의리'와 '정'의 결단과 행동은 룻을 새로운 '아브라함'이나 '사사(드보라)', 그리고 에스더를 새로운 '요셉'과 '모세'와 '다윗왕'에 견주어 볼 수 있다.

본문상의 직접 또는 간접적 상호연결성에 있어서 많은 공통된 단어나 문구의 표현들을 찾을 수 있다. 메길롯(Megilloth) 다섯 권에서 (레닌그라드 문서에 의하면) 룻기와 에스더서가 대칭적으로 처음과 끝에 위치해 있다. 이는 남성성이 강한 모세오경에 비해서, 메길롯은 여성성을 강조함을 뜻한다. 특히 룻이 '과부'이고 에스더가 '고아'이며 둘 다 '이민자'라는 것은 당시 고대사회에서 가장 소외되고 멸시받는 신분의 인물들로서 그러한 위치에서 곧 백성의 영웅이고 구원자가 나온다는 놀라운 메시지를 내포하고 있다. 심지어, 표면적인 상반대적 차이점들 속에서도 찾을 수 있는 상호적 공통점은 천한 위치든지 특권적 지위든지 '헤세드' 즉 힘없고 억눌린 자들을 위한 헌신은 두 여인을 가장 고귀하고 존경받는 위치에 놓는다.

룻과 에스더가 전하는 '헤세드'의 의미는 결국 약자를 위하고 타자의 입장을 생각해야 함을 일깨운다. 그로 인하여 다양한 디아스포라에 있는 자들에 귀를 기울일 필요가 있는데 이것은 20세기 일제시대때 민족의 독립과 자유를 위해서 희생하신 수많은 여성 및 남성 영웅들의 삶과 결단에서도 배울 수 있다. 이와 아울러 우리 자신들과 주위에서도 신뢰와 공정과 투명한 교회의 모습, 정치적 관행, 그리고 공동체 지역사회를 이루어야 하는 과제를 제시한다 볼 수 있다.

검색어

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과부
고아
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