

BIBLICAL WOMEN: 3 BOOKS

Although various women fulfill important roles in both the Old Testament and the New, only three biblical books are named for their female principals: Ruth, Esther, and Judith. Their placement in the Bible and their usage in liturgical rites has been limited, both for Judaism and Catholicism. Although the Church includes all three in the Old Testament canon, the language of their texts has led to different treatments by Judaism and by Protestant churches.

Only Ruth is found in an all-Hebrew version, and is thus the only one fully incorporated into both the Jewish Bible and the Christian Old Testament. However, Judaism places it among the Writings, a collection of generally later-written scriptural books. Christian churches place it between the Books of Judges and 1st Samuel, because the book's setting is "in the time of the judges" (Ruth 1:1). This placement also implies an earlier date of composition, although scholars are divided on that issue. The time of the story is about 1100 B.C.; the composition could have been as early as during Solomon's reign (mid-900s) or as late as after the Exile (late 500s).

Esther exists partly in Hebrew, which is most likely the original composition. The Greek text freely translates the Hebrew and blends six considerable additions into the book. Since Judaism accepts only Hebrew texts as Scriptural, the Greek portions aren't part of the Book of Esther in their Bible. The Catholic Church accepts the Greek texts as being equally inspired and part of the Scriptural Book of Esther. Protestant churches place the Greek portions among the Deuterocanonicals, or Apocrypha, which they generally put between the Old and New Testaments in printed Bibles. Esther was probably composed between the 5th and 2nd Centuries B.C.

Judith is found only in Greek and thus is not part of the Jewish Bible and is counted among the Apocrypha by the Protestant churches. It was likely composed between the 1st Century B.C. and 1st Century A.D.

All three books are dramatic fiction, useful for teaching principles of fidelity to the covenant and trust in God's unfailing power. Although all include many pseudo-historical details, these facets cannot easily be matched to known history. Ruth was traditionally considered historical, but that may be true only in a general way, with details embellished by the retelling of the story over a long period before it was written down.

The central role of women in these three books is a clear departure from the usual patriarchal heroism of Jewish writings. Although many Old Testament women played important roles in Israel's history, including Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel, Miriam, and Deborah (a judge), none was a central character in a biblical book named for her.

Readings from these three books are barely found in our liturgies. There are no passages from them in any of the three cycles of Sunday readings.

The only weekday reading from Esther is on Thursday of the First Week of Lent, when we hear part of her prayer to God for his help, but nothing of her exploits. In some votive masses, part of her uncle Mordecai's prayer is read from the Book of Esther, but nothing about Esther herself.

The only readings from Ruth are on Friday and Saturday of the 20th Week in Ordinary Time, in odd-numbered years, when we hear the basics of her story.

A few verses from Judith are available as a "Psalm response" in Masses of the Blessed Virgin During the Easter Season. The only narrative about Judith is in one of the optional readings for widows in the Common of Saints in Ordinary Time. While it presents her as a pious and devout woman, it includes nothing of her heroic actions.

The next several presentations will focus on the stories about these women.