

**Anne-Mareike Wetter, “On Her Account”:  
*Reconfiguring Israel in Ruth, Esther, and Judith.*  
Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies, 623.  
London: Bloomsbury, 2015**

*Zanne Domoney-Lyttle, University of Glasgow*

Published in the Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies, Wetter’s monograph is based upon her doctoral thesis, submitted to Utrecht University in 2014. Concerned with the major themes of gender, ethnicity, religion, and identity in the Bible, Wetter focuses on the books of Ruth, Esther, and Judith, arguing that, as narrative figures, these three women can be “construed as embodiments of Israel” (1) in a manner which marks them as different from surrounding characters. Likewise, the books (rather than characters) of Ruth, Esther, and Judith can be read as attempts to reframe Israel “as both a religious community and an *ethnie*” (1), themes which, Wetter argues, are encapsulated in the contrasting structures of othering and familiarization (2).

Wetter’s approach to the study of gender, religion, and ethnicity in Ruth, Esther, and Judith is outlined in her theoretical framework set out in part one of her book. In this section, Wetter explores a methodology that includes elements of discourse analysis, cognitive linguistics, and gender studies (24). When combined, these approaches create a critical resource which enables a broad sociological reading of the texts, as well as a specific reading of the female protagonists that connects each character with the groups they come to embody and represent. This is an innovative and neat solution to the problem of reading Ruth, Esther, and Judith intersectionally as well as across disciplines, and is mostly clear throughout Wetter’s study, though at times the application of the framework overshadows analysis of the texts in the case studies.

These case studies appear in part two of the book, where the texts of Ruth, Esther, and Judith are critiqued using the above approaches. Wetter’s work shines in these chapters, as she carefully discusses, highlights, and evaluates the depiction of religious, gender, and ethnic identities within each character and book as a whole, framed around the question of if and how these female protagonists embody Israel.

Ruth’s identity as a foreigner, an outsider in Israel, poses an immediate challenge to Wetter’s thesis. Wetter works through this problem by arguing that several themes emerge when religious and ethnic identities are interrogated in Ruth. One of the central themes is that of “house,” a theme which Wetter argues comes to represent a “social reality of the community of Bethlehem” (60). Ruth builds the house of herself, Boaz, and Naomi in Bethlehem, which goes on to have lasting consequences for the land of Israel in genealogical terms, but also connects Ruth’s story to that of Rachel, Leah, Tamar, Judah, and Perez who are also linked to a “house” in Genesis—the house of Israel. This connection is developed in Wetter’s analysis of ethnic identity in Ruth, where she argues that intertextual allusions to Pentateuch stories imply to the reader

that Ruth shares historical commonalities with the people of Israel which, though not genealogically Jewish, make her worthy of being considered one of the people (70-2).

Finally, a gender analysis of Ruth reveals her character as an embodiment of Israel through her relationship with Boaz, a relationship which does not conform to stereotypical gender assumptions. Wetter argues that, in this relationship, Ruth becomes an embodiment of *hesed* which is loosely defined as “an act of kindness taking place in an enduring relationship or even a covenant-relationship” (54). As it is usually the superior party within the contract that is obliged to practice *hesed*, the fact that Ruth is often associated with its practice challenges gendered assumptions within the text. As an embodiment of *hesed*, Ruth comes to represent Israel because *hesed* is a core principle upon which the house of Israel is founded (96).

In the same manner, an exploration of religious, ethnic, and gender identity is carried out on Esther and Judith. In Esther, the focus is on Esther’s hidden identity throughout her story, an identity ultimately exposed at the conclusion of an act which saves and restores the Jewish community. Esther represents an embodiment of Israel in her qualities of self-assurance and assertiveness, which are reflected in the diaspora community of her heritage (247). Likewise, in the book of Judith, Wetter identifies an “impenetrable” character who also plays with gendered and ethnic stereotypes, presenting an alternative view to the land of, and consequently an embodiment of, Israel.

Wetter’s study of Judith is the least concrete in applying a linguistic or discourse-based analysis on the text, but this perhaps reflects the fantastical and heavily-metaphorical literary style of Judith. Certainly, though it may be the weaker argument of the three studies, it is still persuasive in Wetter’s conclusive argument that Judith represents a dual embodiment of Israel. First, she represents an imagined community of Israel through her connections with patriarchal narratives, Psalms and some Deuteronomistic histories; second, Judith acts as an “icon of the divine” (240) rather than a representation of her human community, but this serves to remind the reader of covenantal relationships between God and God’s country. These dualistic strands serve to represent Judith as an embodiment of Israel.

Wetter’s aim in this book is to reveal and expose how expressions of identity—religious, ethnic and gender-based—are formed in the books of Ruth, Esther, and Judith through the use of female protagonists (243) who themselves become embodiments of Israel. This aim is achieved through a careful consideration of each character and her place within the book that bears her name, and the methodological framework which considers multiple approaches, enriching the overall argument. The argument that Ruth, Esther, and Judith can be “construed as embodiments of Israel” is seamlessly woven throughout the chapters for the most part, and the result is a persuasive case of viewing these figures from a non-traditional perspective while still situating them within traditional concepts of identity in the Hebrew Bible. Though of primary interest to biblical scholars, the interdisciplinary approach evident in the methodology would also be useful to scholars of gender studies and those interested in

ethnicity and identity in ancient texts. It is a thoroughly stimulating and innovative study which is also timely in its discussion of the place and use of women in the Bible.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)