

“If You Bless the Women . . . ”: An Intercultural Analysis of Blessings in the Book of Ruth

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ABSTRACT

Engaging feminist and intercultural criticism, this examination of the blessings in the book of Ruth studies the narrative and the interpretative aspects that affect the rhetoric of both intercultural and women’s issues. This analysis investigates blessings as an ancient Hebrew concept and the impact of blessings within the narrative. Womanist critiques and recent contextual interpretations from the continental African context, as found in the writings of several African women scholars, are surveyed. The survey highlights that several African women scholars have resisted flattened reductionist readings, identified the layers of complexity in the narrative, and revealed liberating aspects in Ruth and Naomi’s actions. This intercultural criticism uses ethnographic examination that is informed by dialogue with Maasai Christian theologians to support the analysis. Through intercultural and feminist criticisms, the book of Ruth demonstrates that interpersonal blessings are inherent in the biblical worldview, women are multipliers of blessings, and the result of women’s blessings is *shalom* for family, community, and society.

Introduction

Blessings are often simply dismissed as nice words or pleasantries in Euro-American contexts, especially in ecclesial circles that hold that only ordained clergy can pronounce the Aaronic blessing (Num. 6:24-26) upon other people. In contrast, the book of Ruth illustrates a biblical context where interpersonal blessings – that are empowered by YHWH – were prevalent and palpable. This intercultural-feminist analysis of the book of Ruth demonstrates that interpersonal blessings are inherent in the biblical worldview, that women are multipliers of blessings, and that the result of women’s blessings is *shalom* – or peaceful well-being – for family, community, and society.¹

1 Terese Okure, “Reading from this place: Some problems and prospects,” In *Reading from This Place, Vol. 2: Social Location and Biblical Interpretation in Global Perspective*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 54. In intercultural hermeneutics, it is important to foreground one’s socio-location and major influences that shaped one’s worldview. Teresa Okure, states that it is important to take “full cognizance of the influence that the social location of the interpreter

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