

Esther and Ruth, Grain and Fruit

1 Introduction

ESTHER and RUTH are similar stories. Each details the changing fortunes of a young woman. Each begins with the protagonist in a destitute situation. The fortunes of each reverses by story's end. Intriguing parallels exist:

Scenes: The stories transition through a similar set of scenes, see Table 1. Each begins with the loss of a spouse, then describes the protagonist's entry and distinction within a group of women, both women violates a space of the book's authority figure, this man has a night time disturbance, the night time disturbance leads to an exchange of position. Finally, there is a fortuitous resolution that brings rest and includes a catalog of ten sons.

Table 1: Scenic Movements in RUTH and ESTHER

scene	ref	RUTH	ref	ESTHER
Background	1:1	In Moab, no king	1:1	In Assyrian king's court
Bereavement	1:3	Elimelech dies,	1:19	King divorces Vashti
Incorporation	2:8	Ruth joins women in Boaz' field	2:8	Esther joins king's harem
Boundary Violation	3:6	Boaz' bed on winnowing floor	5:1	Ahaseurus' throne room
Fated finish	3:18	Naomi: 'he will finish it'	6:13	Zeresh: 'you will surely fall'
Reversal	4:1	Boaz and nearer kinsman	7:10	Mordecai and Haman
Resolution	4:18	ten son link to David	9:7	ten sons of Haman hung

Intertextuality: Each story provides a historical corrective to an earlier biblical episode.

Ruth's approach to Boaz on his bed on the winnowing floor and the events following, trigger associations with the episode involving Lot and his daughters, narrated in G19:30-38. Each share motifs of a female initiated boundary violation, a drunk patriarch, darkness, Moab, conjugal kinship between older man and younger woman, and births. These elements lead to an ominous outcome in Genesis, but a hopeful outcome in RUTH .

ESTHER links to 1Sam 15. Saul is commanded to destroy the Amalekites, sparing not humans or animal. Mordecai and Esther descend from Saul, while Haman descends from the Amalekite king from this episode. ESTHER ends with a total destruction of Haman and his household. Saul's dereliction in SAMUEL is corrected in ESTHER .

Roles: The stories have corresponding roles.

- Each story has a lost spouse, a young woman protagonist, an older family custodian, and an older authority figure.
- Both stories have a character who occupies a similar station, a *double*, to the female protagonist. Their responses to the wishes of another are contrasted.

- Orpah and Ruth are widows to Naomi’s sons. Naomi counsels them to return to their people. Ruth clings to Naomi, Orpah returns.
- Vashti and Esther are beauty queens. The king wishes to parade their beauty. Vashti refuses, Esther complies.
- Both stories have a double to the male protagonist. The two reverse position.
 - The *peloni-almoni* of R4:1 is a land-owning kinsman of Naomi. He is a nearer kinsman than Boaz. The primary kinsman role transfers to Boaz.
 - Haman and Mordecai are court sycophants. Haman has the king’s ear, while Mordecai loiters at the gate. Haman is executed and Mordecai is given the king’s signet ring.

Table 2: Roles in RUTH and ESTHER

role	RUTH	ESTHER
lost spouse	Elimelech	Vashti
young woman protagonist	Ruth	Esther
older authority	Boaz	King Ahasuerus
familial custodian	Naomi	Mordecai
<i>relation</i>	(mother-in-law)	(older cousin)
female double	Orpah	Vashti
male double	<i>paloni-almoni</i>	Haman

1.1 Polarities

A number of polarities exist in these two books.

- Ruth is a gentile assimilated into a Hebrew community. Esther is a Hebrew assimilated into a gentile community.
- The setting for RUTH is a humble village, ESTHER is set in the court of an imperial king.
- RUTH precedes the Israelite kingdom, ESTHER happens after Israel’s dissolution.
- Young woman and custodian roles in RUTH are occupied by ancestors of king David, those roles in ESTHER involves descendants of king Saul.
- RUTH begins with famine and austerity. ESTHER begins with feasts and beauty parades.
- RUTH occurs in Bethlehem, the *House of Bread*, during the barley harvest. The events in ESTHER follow from a *mishteh*/משטה, a *drinking*, of wine.
- Characters in RUTH are pious, invoking the name of God and offering blessings. Mention of God is missing in ESTHER.

- Esther is thrown a feast and is paraded before the king (E2:15,18). Mordecai parades through the town on a horse with royal robes (E6:11). Ruth and Boaz are discreet. She comes and leaves unnoticed in the dark, Boaz instructs Ruth to keep the encounter secret (R3:14).
- Ruth and Boaz are chaste. Esther is taken into the king’s harem. Mordecai seems to approve.
- RUTH withholds names of characters absent from David’s ancestry. Four character in RUTH are given non-vocative names. The dead sons are: *Mahlon = diseased, Chillion = finished*. ‘*Orpah*’ is derived from the word for ‘neck’, this term can connote being stubborn and is probably not vocative. The near-kinsman earns the rhyming non-vocative *peloni-almoni* (R4:1).

ESTHER has 32 named characters. Seven speak, but only three have significant dialogue. Here it is the two Israelite protagonists who likely have non-vocatives: *Mordecai* is associated with the head pagan god. *Esther* means *star* or may refer to the pagan deity *Ishtar*.

- RUTH begins with two dead sons and ends with a regal genealogy. ESTHER begins in an imperial king’s court, and closes with the annihilation of Haman’s named sons (E9:7).

This paper argues that the similarities and contrasts between the two stories is not incidental. The two should be considered a pair and read as a single unit.

1.2 Organization:

Table 3: Thematic movements in ESTHER and RUTH

	scene	RUTH	ESTHER
A	prelude	no king	world king
B	♀ female double	(widows) Ruth-Orpah	(queens) Esther-Vashti
C	♂♀ boundary violation	winnowing floor	throne room
B'	♂ male double	(kinsmen) Boaz-Peloni	(sycophants) Mordecai-Haman
A'	postlude	ten son link to king David	Haman’s ten sons executed

Table 1 catalogued common movements and scenes from the two books. Table 3 distills the narrative trajectories in both stories.

At the front and back members, **A-A'**, RUTH moves from death to life, while ESTHER tracks the reverse course. RUTH begins with the death of three ancestors of King David. It ends with the line restored, described by a ten segment genealogy. ESTHER begins in the thriving court of an imperial king. It ends with the destruction of Haman, the king’s sycophant, and his sons.

The transitional elements of this table, **B-B'**, are complements. **B** presents female doubles: two females occupying the same station. **B'** consists of male doubles. In RUTH the female double consists of Moabite widows, the male double is kinsmen redeemers. The female double in ESTHER is beautiful queens, the male double is court sycophants.

At the center of each book, **C**, the woman protagonist violates the sanctum of the male authority figure at the prodding of their custodian.

2 Scenes

This section records observations of corresponding elements in the different scenes. The weight of correspondences suggests that these stories are a pair that were meant to be considered together.

2.1 Background: Ruth 1:1-5, Esther 1:1-9

Similarities:

- Each story is placed into a historical and political context. Both occur when there was no king in Israel.
- The trigger crisis for both stories is the loss of a spouse. In RUTH Naomi's husband Elimelech dies. The king divorces Queen Vashti in ESTHER.
- Both describe the consequences listed in Deuteronomy 28 of not keeping covenant.
 - In RUTH, the skies became bronze, and the earth iron. Famine prevailed causing Elimelech, and Naomi to sojourn in Moab (Deut 28:20-24).
 - ESTHER shows Israel plucked off the land, scattered over the earth. The people serve other gods. (Deut 28:36-42)

Contrasts:

- RUTH happens when there was no king in Israel, ESTHER takes place in the court of the king.
- RUTH unfolds after a ten year famine (R1:4), ESTHER describes ten separate feasts E1:3,1:5, 1:9, 2:18, 2:21, 3:15, 4:3, 5:4, 6:1,7:1,8:17, 9:17, 9:19.
- RUTH happens in Bethlehem, the house of bread, during the barley harvest, and on the grain winnowing floor. ESTHER opens with a series of feasts. The word for feasts derives from the verb describing drunkenness implying wine.
- Life in RUTH is humble. ESTHER portrays decadence.

2.2 Bereavement: Ruth 1:6-21, Esther 1:10-2:7

Similarities:

- Each woman is contrasted with a double.
 - Ruth and Orpah are two Moabite widows to Naomi's sons. Orpah returns to her home and people, while Esther clings to Naomi.
 - Vashti and Esther are beauty queens. Vashti refuses to be paraded, losing favor amongst the counselors (E1:16). Esther appears before the king, finding favor in the eyes of all, E2:17
- Name changes: Naomi no longer wants to be called Naomi (*sweetness*), rather she wants to be called Mara (*bitterness*). Esther's Hebrew name is Hadassah, which means *myrtle*.

Contrasts:

- Ruth virtuously clings to Naomi, who can offer her nothing (R1:12). King Ahaseurus pettily divorces Vashti simply for refusing to parade her beauty before the court (E1:11).
- There is an ironic contrast of agency. The peasant Ruth persists despite Naomi's urging to return to Moab (R1:16). The king is powerless to revoke his decree against Vashti (E2:1, 8:8).

2.3 Incorporation: Ruth 1:22-2:23, Esther 2:8-23

Similarities:

- Each story describes the young female's incorporation into a group of women. Ruth enters the field of Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's dead husband. She is sent to reap with the young women. Esther is taken and placed in the king's harem.
- Ruth and Esther both find favor in the eyes of Boaz (R2:10) and the king (E2:17).
- Each is given special provision. Boaz provides Ruth with water, a meal, and sheaves of grain (R2:15-16). Hegai oversees the harem (E2:15) and provides Esther with cosmetics and food.
- The means of later deliverance is introduced.
 - Naomi informs Ruth that Boaz is a kinsman redeemer (R2:20). The house of a failed kinsman is known as the *'house of him who has his sandals removed!'* (Deut 25:5-10).
 - Mordecai loiters at the king's gate. He detects a conspiracy on the king's life and reports it to Esther. The sleepless king later is read these events, leading to Mordecai's elevation.

Contrasts:

- Boaz is old, he commends Ruth for not pursuing a younger man R3:10, while Esther is physically attractive E2:7.
- Everyone knew Ruth was a Moabitess R2:6,11. Esther did not make known her people E2:10.

2.4 Boundary Violation: Ruth 3:1-13, Esther 3:1-6:13

The next scene involves a boundary violation: the young woman puts herself at risks as an uninvited entrant into the older authority figure's sanctum.

Similarities:

- Each violation is done on the advice of the custodian. Naomi in R3:1-4 instructs Ruth how to prepare herself and what she should do. Mordecai warns Esther of her fate and her duty as an Israelite to approach the king in E4:13-14.
- Ruth approaches Boaz, who is merry with wine. This disrupts the background of bread and austerity. Before Esther approaches Ahaseurus, she requests that all the Jews and her attendants fast for three days from food and wine. The fast evenly divides the ten feasts in the remainder of the book.
- Both women change clothes in preparation (R3:3, E5:1).

- Each woman finds favor. Boaz proclaims, 'As the LORD lives, I will redeem you,' (R3:13) Ahaseurus promises Esther up to half his kingdom (E5:2).
- The authority figure is reminded of an obligation that leads to deliverance after having their sleep disturbed. Mordecai's reporting of the conspiracy is read to the king from the chronicles (E6:2). Boaz is informed of his kinship duties when startled awake by Ruth (R3:9).

Contrasts:

- The encounter between Ruth and Boaz is done under the cover of night. Boaz can not see. Esther appears in full sight of the king. He sees her and she wins favor in his sight E5:2.

2.5 Fated Finish: Ruth 3:14-18, Esther 6:1-14

Similarities:

- A partial reversal of the Israelite's unhappy lot occurs before the full reversal. Boaz commits to redeem Ruth and send her to Naomi with six measures of barley. Mordecai is paraded through the streets on the king's horse in royal regalia (E6:10).
- The partial reversal events are reported to an older female. The elder female declares that the full reversal of events is fated.
 - Ruth returns to Naomi and reports the event of the night R3:18. Naomi replies, "Wait, my daughter, until you learn how the matter turns out, for the man will not rest but will settle the matter today."
 - Haman returns home and reports the events E6:13. His wife Zeresh replies to him, "If Mordecai, before whom you have begun to fall, is of the Jewish people, you will not overcome him but will surely fall before him."

Contrasts:

- Boaz instructs Ruth to not make the partial circumstances around the partial reversal known, whereas Mordecai's partial reversal takes the form of a parade.

2.6 Reversal: Ruth 4:1-12, Esther 7:1-10

Similarities:

- The city gate is the location of the reversals between male doubles. (R4:1 E6:10).
- There is the exchange of an article to signal a legal transaction. In RUTH the kinsmen exchange sandals R4:8. In ESTHER the king takes his signet which was entrusted to Haman and gives it to Mordecai E8:2.

Contrasts:

- The currency of RUTH is life, ESTHER trades in death. In RUTH the nearer kinsman restores life to his dead brother's house and sustains his name. In ESTHER Mordecai is scheduled to hang on Haman's gallow.

- Boaz's double is conspicuously not named, while the king asks and dramatically receives the name of Haman (E7:6).
- Protagonist Boaz is the alternate who trades position with the intended kinsman. Haman is the alternate for the gallows, which was intended for the protagonist Mordecai.

2.7 Resolution: Ruth 4:13-22, Esther 8:1-10:3

Similarities:

- Both resolutions proceed from legal transactions involving the transfer of an article. The kinsmen transferred sandals (R4:7). Mordecai obtained the signet ring previously held by Haman (E8:2)
- A chorus of Hebrews praise the older custodian.
 - The village women praise: 'Blessed be Yahweh, who has not left you this day without a *redeemer* and may his name be *renowned* in Israel. He shall be a restorer of life and a nourisher in old age.' (R4:14)
 - The Jews express gladness and joy for the fear of Mordecai had fallen on their enemies. Mordecai's fame spread. (E8:17,9:4,9:13).
- The older custodian moves to the foreground.
 - Naomi is restored from a bereaved and bitter state. She goes from empty to full.
 - Mordecai moves from outside the king's gate, where he was a powerless eavesdropper to the second highest office in the empire, his word brings fear. His station rises from low to high.
- Both describe the fates of ten sons.
- Both stories display God's irresistible will playing out in history. The ten sons in RUTH manifests Jacob's vision in Genesis 49:8-12. The execution of Haman's sons is the delayed fulfillment of Saul's charge from God to annihilate the Amalekite enemies in 1 Sam 14.
- The final scene in RUTH shows the fulfillment of Naomi's wish to find rest for Ruth(R3:1). The deliverance of the Hebrews in ESTHER brought rest (E9:17-18)

Contrasts:

- RUTH turns inward bringing life, ESTHER turns outward with judgement and death.
 - RUTH moves inward from the city gate, to the home. Boaz takes Ruth as his wife and a child is conceived.
 - ESTHER moves outward from the feast, to the execution of Haman, into the city, and to the 127 provinces where the Jews annihilate their enemies.
- The ten sons listed in RUTH record a genealogy from Perez through Boaz to David. It is a vertical list, implying continuity and life. ESTHER names the ten executed sons of Haman. The list is horizontal and terminal.

2.8 Summary

To what extent are RUTH and ESTHER a single unit? Should they be read and interpreted as a pair? One is a story of Davidic beginnings and the other is about Saulide ends. One shows a lack of bread, the other an abundance of wine. One describes a pious immigrant gentile, the other a secularized exiled Hebrew. If composed, cognizant of the other, then their prominent feature is their polarity. In or outsider, male and female, decadent or austere, pious or worldly. Each story populated with details from opposite ends of various spectrums.

Justice requires consequences that match in severity and kind to actions. Mercy asks for relief or absolution from just consequences. Justice and mercy traverse the arc from life to death in opposite directions. ESTHER is a story of justice. It begins with feasts, and ends with annihilation. RUTH is a story of mercy that begins with death, and ends with a birth.

They correspond. They form a functional fitting part, they collectively show a fruitful-&-multiplying of God's people even in a formless-&-void or a diseased-&-finished setting.

2.9 Conclusion

These stories are an installment of a developing theme. The theme's initial member describes two types of seed created on day 3. Seed transmits and perpetuates the character and nature of a parent. It is either born on the wind or contained within a fruit.

The first development of this theme is on day 6. There, God creates a polarity of humans. Humanity, male and female together, bears God's image and duplicates his likeness and character. Human seed, like plant seed, is either scattered like grain or contained like fruit. This connection is reinforced by the literary parallel between the third and sixth day.

These stories describe two types of seed, two ways of perpetuating; this theme grows and scales in ESTHER and RUTH to describe how the kingdom of God takes root in nations. Common scenes and similar roles expressed using inversions and polarities invites comparison with life's primary polarity: male and female. The ESTHER story has masculine elements: it is outward. We see the Israelites scattered in gentile soil. We see power projected from throne, to court, city and provinces. Meanwhile in RUTH, we see the kingdom of God grow through scenes that become progressively more intimate; the fields of Moab, the fields of Boaz, to the village gate, to a cloister of women surrounding Naomi in a home. ESTHER shows the seeds going out to the nations. RUTH shows the nations being grafted into Israel.

The final scenes give the clearest lens on the author's intent. The very last word in ESTHER is *his seed* (זרעו). The referent is Mordecai's scattered brothers planted in the nations.

The final scene in RUTH shows the woman Naomi holding the baby Obed. Remember that Naomi's name means *sweetness*. The royal seed is a Hebrew pollinated Moabite stock. This seed is shown enveloped in the ripened bosom of a Hebrew matriarch, this is fruit imagery.

'Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies, it bears much fruit.' John 12:24. The main characters in each story are not the young female protagonists, but the older custodians, who are both imaged as sterile. Mordecai and Naomi, are presented as spent progenitors of Creation's זכר and נקב. Mordecai has not the stature to subdue and rule, and Naomi's womb will no longer be fruitful or multiply. A desiccated seed quickens, sends root and bears more seed when watered. It is the mystery of life and this mystery expresses itself in, plants, humanity and nations. ESTHER and RUTH are elaborations on this mystery. These two stories are a pair, or better yet, mates. Their union, a story of the seed scattered and the seed enveloped in sweetness, describes a conception and birth of God's kingdom.