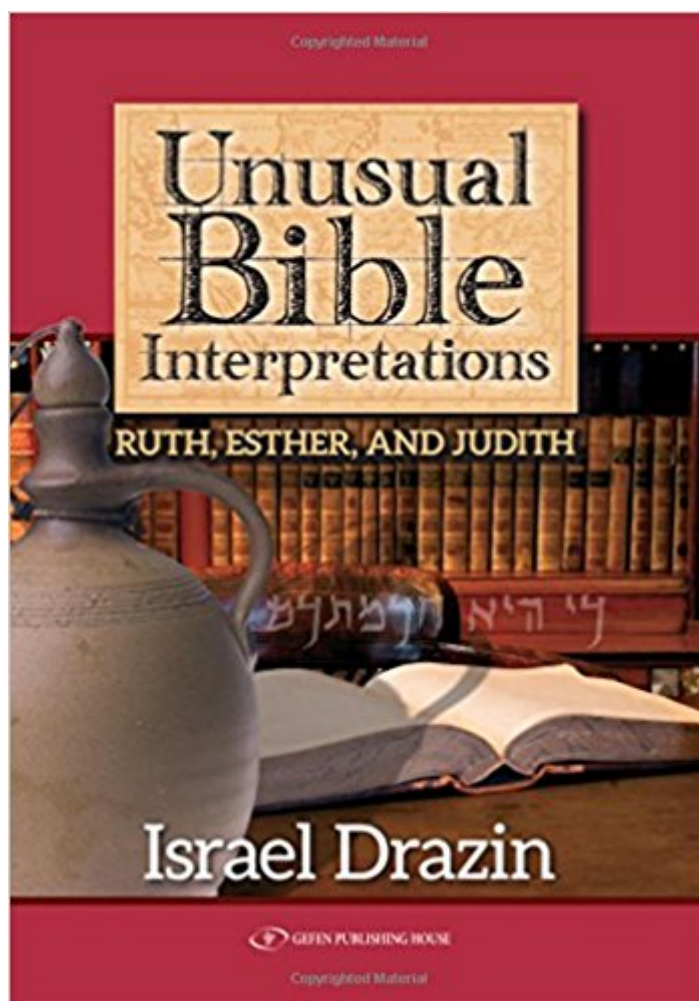


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Unusual Bible Interpretations: Ruth, Esther, Judith



Synopsis

This fourth volume of the Unusual Bible Interpretations series explores the biblical books Ruth and Esther and the apocryphal book Judith, which Jews and Protestants did not include in the Bible. Similar to Joshua and Judges, neither Ruth nor Esther shows any familiarity with the laws in the Five Books of Moses. Remarkably, Judith contains more religious expressions than either Ruth or Esther. Why, then, did the rabbis exclude it from the Bible? After a detailed analysis of the story, this book offers an answer to this age-old question. The volume contains a plethora of unexpected and thought-provoking facts, such as: Although many rabbis suggest that Ruth converted to Judaism, the story stresses repeatedly even at the end that Ruth is a Moabite. No mention is made that she converted. Indeed, the practice of conversion most likely did not exist prior to 125 BCE. Mordecai is the hero of Purim. It is he, not Esther, whom the book praises in its conclusion. According to II Maccabees 15:36, Adar 14 was called the Day of Mordecai. Both Esther's and Mordecai's names, although considered Jewish names today, are Persian names most likely based on the idols Ishtar and Marduk. In the book of Judith, the Judeans prayerfully wait for God to save them from the Assyrian siege. In contrast, Judith devises a plan to kill the general and save her people.

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Customer Reviews

Dr. Israel Drazin served for thirty-one years in the US military and attained the rank of brigadier general. He is an attorney and a rabbi, with master's degrees in both psychology and Hebrew literature and a PhD in Judaic studies. He developed the legal strategy that saved the military

chaplaincy when its constitutionality was attacked in court, and he received the Legion of Merit for his service. Dr. Drazin is the author of twenty-nine books, including a five-volume series on the Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Bible which he coauthored with Dr. Stanley M. Wagner, and a series of three books on the twelfth-century philosopher Moses Maimonides.

Rabbi Dr. Israel Drazin (b. 1935) is writing a series of commentaries, "Unusual Bible Interpretations" on the books of the Hebrew Bible. I have learned from several of the books in the series and gratified that Rabbi Drazin, who has become a friend, invited me to review this new book on Ruth, Esther, and Judith. Ruth and Esther are part of the Hebrew Bible while Judith was not included in the canon for reasons which are uncertain. (Catholics and Orthodox Christians view the book as canonical.) Each of these books is named for a woman who is a major protagonist. Thus, many modern readers will want to think about the way the books and the Bible generally portray women. Drazin's commentary on each book will help the reader with this issue and with many other historical, literary, and theological issues in these fascinating books. There is something of earthiness and sexuality in each of the three books, shared with some of the other books of the Bible. Thus in a pivotal scene, Ruth approaches one evening her husband to be, Boaz, alone on the threshing floor in her most appealingly sexual attire and spends the night. Drazin shows the reader differences in commentarial views of what transpires. Most modern readers will have little doubt. The book of Esther involves a queen who loses her throne for her failure to appear naked, according to many sources, before a group of revelers assembled by the king. Esther is beautified with cosmetics, ointments, and finery for a year and then appears before the king to win his heart and libido and become the new queen. Judith, a widow without children, knows the ways of men and famously seduces Holofernes, a general intent on doing the Israelites ill, and cuts off his head. Much more than sexuality is involved in the portraits of the three women. Judith, with her boldness and toughness, is the strongest character and displays the greatest traits of leadership. Ruth wins the reader's heart with her kindness and loyalty as well as with her sensuality. Esther helps save her people from destruction by the wicked Haman, but Drazin argues, she is a reluctant heroine and acts primarily under strong urging from her Uncle or guardian, Mordecai. Drazin's study addresses many other issues in the books. Ruth and Esther are known for the naturalism of their stories -- there are no miracles or divine interventions -- and this approach fits well with Drazin's naturalistic interpretations of the Bible. The book of Judith begins with several chapters suggesting God's immediate involvement in human and natural affairs before the heroine takes matters -- and Holofernes' head -- into her own hands. Throughout the study, Drazin raises and offers different

points of view on disputed parts of the text, such as whether Ruth converted to Judaism as is commonly but probably mistakenly believed. He discusses the absence of references to the Torah in both Ruth and Esther and the significance of that absence. Drazin introduces the reader to the welter of commentarial and scholarly literature on the three books, particularly on the book of Esther which he describes as the best-known book of the Bible. In each of the three books, but particularly for Esther, Drazin focuses on the literary aspect of the work, the use of irony, humor, parallelism, and the development of character. The book does not include the texts of the works. Drazin summarizes the actions in each chapter and addresses interesting points in his commentary. In a number of sections called "Excursus", Drazin examines certain aspects of the books which bear on issues of Jewish law, such as the law of levirate marriage. The excursion allows Drazin to discuss Tamar, a strong-willed woman from the Torah who becomes a prostitute for Judah, one of the sons of Jacob. Here and in other stories is an aspect of the Bible that sometimes is overlooked. The book is clearly written. It was absorbing for me to get back to these stories. Drazin's commentaries, for all their learning, have a lightness to them and this book is fun to read. Readers will learn, or refresh their learning, about these works and may be encouraged to think about them further. Robin Friedman

This is a well written and insightful work offering a perspective on ancient texts that are so important in our quest for understanding. It becomes obvious as you turn the pages that the author has put a lot of thought and a lot of research into the book. I think that if you are interested in Biblical and ancient history this book would be an invaluable source. The author writes in a way that it is easy for someone who is not versed in the subject to understand. Well-researched and affordable Biblical commentaries and plausible interpretations are hard to come by these days, making Israel Drazin's *Unusual Bible Interpretations: Ruth, Esther, Judith* a much-needed and much-welcomed addition to anyone's theological library.

Of the dozens of biblical books of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament, the books of Ruth and Esther seem to be enjoyed more than the others, probably because of the adventures and love aspects in the tales. Remarkably, neither of these books, although part of the Bible, mention God being involved in what is transpiring and in both the protagonists do not explicitly rely on divine help. The book of Judith, which is only included in the Bible of some religions, is the opposite. Its protagonist speaks about God frequently. Dr. Israel Drazin examines this and many other matters in the three books, such as: Why did the ancients consider Mordecai the hero of the book of Esther

and not Esther? Did Ruth convert to Judaism before she married Boaz and if she did why does the book keep referring to her as a Moabite and why does Boaz call her a Moabite just before marrying her?

There are so many books and sermons given about the male heroes of the Bible that it is a great pleasure to read this book on the female heroines of the Bible. I am always surprised that when I read the same passage as Dr. Drazin in the text that his analysis is always very focused on the interpretation of the text. Ruth enters into a levirate marriage in which the brother of the deceased man is obliged to marry his late brother's widow and the widow is obliged to marry her deceased brother. This fact plus the fact that Ruth is a Moabite woman who does not convert to her husband's religion gives rise to many polemics by Rabbi's and commentators. Dr. Drazin goes into the details in his book to give many excellent explanations on these problems plus the important fact that Ruth is an ancestress of King David. Purim is a wonderful enjoyable festival especially for the children who dress up to participate in the story. The girls love Queen Esther and many children are named Esther and Hadassah. However because the story is not a sacred story because God does not appear in the narrative and lack of miracles the book is omitted from the Bible. Dr. Drazin goes into great depth to give us a unusual interpretation of the book of Esther. His great erudition enables us to look at the book of Esther from a completely different perspective by focusing on the role of Mordecai in the story. Judith is the least known of the three heroines. Dr. Drazin explains to us that the book of Judith is considered canonical by Roman Catholics and eastern churches. Apocryphal literature by Protestants and non canon by the Jews. The story is how the Assyrians were outwitted by a woman who inveigled Holofernes the general of the army to come to her tent where she beheads him. Dr. Drazin explains her guile and great courage to cut off the head of a very drunk Holofernes and saves the people of Judea. Dr. Drazin also explains why the story of Judith is excluded in the Bible. Now when we read these story we have a greater insight and understanding of the lives of these remarkable women.

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