

St Mark's, 25 May 2023

Launch of Jeanette Mathews, *Reading the Megillot: A Literary and Theological Commentary*

Thank you, Jeanette, for the invitation to launch your new book – it is indeed an honour to do so. Some of you may know that Jeanette and I did our doctoral studies at the same time – here at St Mark's – and you may also have heard me say that I would never have finished “on time and on budget” without her modelling of steady, day by day, commitment to the work. Jeanette's new book, like those that have preceded it, is the result of this same faithful commitment.

And I have learned so much from engaging with *Reading the Megillot*. First, I have to admit, I learned that the Megillot is not a gigantic prehistoric sea creature starring in a B grade movie, but the Hebrew term for “scroll” – and refers, in fact, to a collection of five scrolls, or books of the Hebrew Bible, that are connected to five different Jewish festivals. (Alas, if I'd studied Old Testament with Jeanette I would have known this already!) Five scrolls or books – the Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther – gathered as a collection in contemporary Jewish Bibles. I'm going to forgive myself though – as this way of collecting these books wasn't fixed until the 10th century CE. By contrast in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible these works are scattered amongst other books according to assumed historical affinities or literary genres.

So already – from page one of Jeanette's masterly book – my usual way of thinking about these five books is disrupted. Even the way we order these books in the collection we call the Bible can impact how we read them.

Second, I have really appreciated, in fact delighted, in the way in which Jeanette paints for us the festival context for each of the scrolls or books. For example, Lamentations is read at Tishah B'Av (the ninth day of the month of Av) – the day which commemorates the destruction of the First Jerusalem temple in 587 BC and the Second temple in 70 CE – along with the seemingly endless occurrences of destruction in the story of the Jewish peoples, including the Holocaust. The

solemn reading of Lamentations in the synagogue is accompanied on this day by fasting and prayer. Similarly, the links between the book of Ruth and the festival of *Shavuot* (the 50 days after Passover) – with its roots in the spring grain harvests really helps illuminate the story of Ruth.

Jeanette points out that the pattern of festivals together with the reading of their particular scrolls offers an ordering of human life. In the Christian tradition our ordering of time into various seasons and our lectionaries (the pattern of readings that accompanies the seasons) do the same thing. So, for example, we are just nearing the end of the Easter season – 50 days following Easter Day (I wonder where we got that idea?!) – during this season we read, each year, the Gospel of John (particularly Jesus' last teaching) and the Acts of the Apostles (the post-Easter story of the first disciples). The rhythm of readings set within the Sunday gathering for worship shapes the hearers, over time – like water carving rocks in a stream.

Now we get to the main game - the particular gift of Jeanette's book. The festival context of the Megillot is an invitation to consider these five scrolls as performed texts – as more than words on a page. And Jeanette offers us scripts to aid the performance. For each of the scrolls Jeanette offers a careful translation of the ancient Hebrew text *and* a creative transposition into a contemporary performative genre. The scroll of Ruth becomes a mini-series, complete with a Morricone film score. The Song of Songs is styled as a Greek play, with male and female choruses. Lamentations becomes a piece of performance poetry. Esther an outrageous pantomime. And Ecclesiastes – well you will see!

Jeanette's purpose here is not just an enlivening of the text – though it does this in spades – but rather to help us hear (and see) the text in new ways. In part to hear the text as it might have been heard by its first audiences, but also to hear it now, in our own context. Jeanette's own commentary, placed after the scripts, draws out the things she has heard by listening in this way, and her connections sections offer possibilities for contemporary resonances. But really her invitation is for us to hear and see differently – for us to do the work too.

And we will work! In her approach to translation Jeanette is committed to formal, word-for-word translation of the Hebrew text – rather than the functional or dynamic equivalence or “sense-for-sense” approach that drives most of our modern Bible translations. This commitment means that Jeanette will translate the same Hebrew words and roots with the same English words. And, more challengingly, she retains the original Hebrew sentence structures.

So, for example, in English we might say “Jane kicked the ball” (Subject “Jane”, verb “kicked”, object “ball”). *Subject*, verb, object – standard English word order. In Hebrew the order is more commonly *verb*, subject, object. So “She kicked – Jane – the ball.”

Let me give you an example from the script you are about to hear (from Ecclesiastes chapter 1.)

NEB: The sun rises and the sun goes down; back it returns to its place and rises there again. ⁶The wind blows south, the wind blows north, round and round it goes and returns full circle.

JM: And it rises – the sun, and it sets – the sun, and back to its place it hurries....

Around and around it goes – the wind, and over and around him comes the wind ...

The translator is a juggler, trying to be faithful to the source language (here Hebrew) and the target language (English).

Franz Rosenzweig, one of the most important twentieth-century translators said “Translating means serving two masters. It follows that no one can do it.” (And of course, in partnership with Martin Buber, he did have more than a go!)

Schleiermacher famously summarised the problem in this way:

Either the translator leaves the writer as far as possible in peace, and moves the reader towards him; or else he leaves the reader as far as possible in peace, and moves the writer towards him.

Who moves most? Do we move the reader to the text? Or the text to the reader?

The delight of Jeanette's work is that she does both. In a really clever way. She wants us to do a lot of moving – her word-for-word approach demands that we travel to the text. But by providing a script, with a familiar genre, she provides a secure scaffold for us to do that work. So, the text moves toward us too. The result is that the translation feels both strange and not strange! Distant but near!

Well, this evening you will have a chance to taste the results of Jeanette's scholarly and creative labours – and experience this for yourselves. For now, it simply remains for me to declare this rich and thought-provoking book – *Reading the Megillot* – launched.