“Relationships across Difference in Early Jewish Narratives”
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Four times, over the span of many years, I have taught a course entitled “The Early Jewish Short Story.” In it I have included study of six biblical books: Jonah, Daniel, Ruth, Esther, Judith, and Tobit. (For Daniel, just chaps. 1–6 and not the apocalyptic portion in chaps. 7–12.) This course has proven enjoyable for both the students and me, not least because these works are marvelously multilayered and offer up an endless array of issues and concerns.

These six books share certain similarities that render this collection a logical and useful grouping. They work well together. First, and most obvious, all the books are titled by means of the name of a single character, the protagonist or even “hero” of the story who is the agent of much of the action. Such naming focalizes our interpretation through this character. These figures, along with the books’ other prominent characters, are or become leaders in their respective communities, evidencing a range of leadership styles and practices. Within the power structures of their settings, all the primary characters begin as underdogs in some fashion. Moreover, all six books share a similar genre, what might be termed a “short story.” Within this broad category, we admittedly find a range of types, from Daniel 1–6, which is more a cycle of stories than a cohering narrative, through Jonah and Ruth, which are brief and concise, to Tobit and Judith, which look toward a longer novella genre. Yet all of them are freestanding and self-contained; they present a complete story line and their events and characters are not referenced elsewhere in the biblical canon. They stand outside the larger, prominent biblical story. Also, all these books are not closely tied to history and have the air of fiction. Some of them are intentionally anachronistic, including broad inaccuracies (Judith, Tobit, and perhaps also Daniel). Others seem clearly to have been written at a later time than their setting (Esther, Jonah, Daniel). Some of these works are court tales, portraying Jews in high places in foreign government, with often ineffectual or foolish foreign rulers (Esther, Daniel, Tobit, Judith). Some of them evidence complex textual histories, with variant versions of the books or significant textual difficulties (Esther, Tobit, Daniel). These stories clearly underwent substantial rewriting and reworking by their communities. Gender concerns, especially gendered expectations and female/male relationships, are also central (Esther, Ruth, Judith, Tobit).

At the heart of all six books is the relation between peoples who are different, who are “other” in some way or another. It is this similarity among them that causes me to offer up the grouping for our discussion. All these stories have multireligious and/or multiethnic settings. They deal precisely with some of the questions and concerns of the Institute: how to relate to persons of other religious faiths, “to persons, communities, and groups that have a different comprehension of life, the world, and basic values—as these are manifested not only in religions but in political or economical ideologies and stands, ethical attitudes, and philosophical systems."

It is notoriously difficult, as we all well know, to date biblical texts such as these, which do not clearly refer to persons or events that are otherwise historically verifiable. Generally speaking, however, we can roughly consider these six works to be the products of the Persian and Hellenistic periods, with Ruth and Jonah possibly on the earlier end of this spectrum (fifth/fourth century) and Judith and Tobit on the later end (second/first century). Their provenance is equally difficult to determine. Perhaps those stories that are set outside the land of Judah (Jonah, Esther, Tobit, Daniel) were also composed abroad, but this remains only conjecture. And if so, where exactly? Persia? Egypt?

Despite such uncertainties, however, what we can conclude is that this set of biblical books reflects clearly and centrally the concerns of the postexilic era. They portray situations in which Israelites/Jews are not a self-contained community but are forced to interact with non-Israelites. Albeit in varied ways, they all fall into the category (as they are sometimes placed in introductory textbooks) of "Israel and the foreign nations." Concerns of the relations between peoples are prominent, in ways that they are not in other freestanding biblical books also composed during this time period (e.g., Qoheleth, Song, Job, Lamentations). All six of these books might be considered "diaspora stories," as they all reflect some of the large questions of diaspora Judaism: Who are we now? Do we remain Yhwh's chosen nation, and if so, how? What holds us together as a people? Can we still maintain faith? How can we survive? or even thrive? What is our mission? How can we remain unified as Judaism itself is changing in diverging directions?

In the first part of this paper I will briefly discuss each of these six books in turn. This will be a quick survey of these stories rather than in-depth analysis; my goal is to suggest areas of potential correspondence and contrast among them, and my hope is that they will raise issues that will provide fodder for our group discussion. My general focus will be on how areas of difference are represented in this biblical literature. All of these stories highlight difference of some sort as they reflect diverse communities and societies. The types of difference, however, vary, as do the manners in which the narratives treat such diversities. In some of them, *religious* difference is key. How tolerant are peoples of one religious tradition to another? To what degree is variant belief and worship allowed? How do Jews treat those who do not recognize Yhwh? In other stories, *cultural* difference is most prominent. Is there cooperation or antagonism between peoples of varying social strata? Is the dominant culture hostile or accommodating toward Jews? Are separate groups allowed to maintain their own identity and cultural heritage, or is assimilation required? Frequently, difference in *power* also must be negotiated by the characters in these stories. Who holds control or political clout? How can those who are not in positions of power manage to succeed? How should Jews relate to the leaders in foreign states?

Such "diaspora questions" are the same questions we must ask in our contemporary pluralistic multicultural and multireligious societies, as we ponder "how Methodists from the Wesley age to the present [should relate] to persons of other religious faiths, to persons with no traditional religious faith, and with secular institutions and movements," the concern of this Institute. These six biblical works are particularly relevant in helping us to think though such issues facing us today. Therefore, in the second part of this paper I will bring some of the ideas presented in two recent works about the contemporary church into conversation with this biblical material.

Daniel

The scenario of Daniel 1–6 is that of Jews in Babylonian territory, focalized through the adventures of four young Jewish men in the royal court. A condition of exile is clearly established from the very beginning of the book, which starts by telling of Babylon's destruction of Jerusalem and the deportation of some of its people (1:1-4). The text suggests that the Babylonian empire is broadly multicultural, as official decrees are disseminated to "all the peoples, nations, and languages" (3:7, 29; 6:25). The primary relationship highlighted throughout this story, though, is Babylonian (followed by Persian in chap. 6) versus Jewish.

The principal area of difference throughout the book of Daniel is religious. Interreligious conflict lies at the heart of this story. Indeed, this fact is prefigured as well by the introductory verses, as the enemy's devastation is depicted as ultimately Yhwh's doing and the only result of the defeat receiving mention—of all the horrors we readers imagine also must have occurred—is the theft of religious objects, the temple vessels (1:2; they themselves will later become the source of a scandal in chap. 5).

In this regime there is no room for religious tolerance. All people must worship the same god; no exceptions allowed. First it is the Babylonian deity (3:4-18; 6:8-13), and then the Jewish god (3:28-29; 6:26-27). Proper worship is enforced. The punishment for religious apostasy, not adhering to the official religion, is death—a fiery furnace, a den of lions.

In the Babylonian empire, proper religious belief is determined by means of contests (a theme that is further carried out in the apocryphal stories of Bel and The Dragon, which are also part of the Daniel cycle.) The god who "wins" is the deity everyone must worship. Which god can reveal dreams (chaps. 2, 4), interpret obscure writings (chap. 5), or rescue faithful followers (chaps. 3, 6)? The recurring result of this series of contests is that the king comes to recognize the power of the Jewish god (2:28, 47; 3:28; 4:2-3, 32-37; 5:21-23; 6:25-27). The climax of these scenes is the foreign leaders acknowledging the superiority of Yhwh.

Other areas of difference between the Jews and the Babylonians, outside religious concerns, are not treated so unilaterally. In Daniel 1–6 the regime in power comes off as relatively accommodating to minority populations and cultures. Foreigners are treated well and integrated into Babylonian society. When the four young men make their dietary request to the palace officials, their petition is approved and they are allowed to eat what they prefer (chap. 1). They are provided an extended education at the royal academy (although this may also be read as indoctrination). These Jewish foreigners are promoted to high positions in the government (2:48-49; 3:30; 5:29) and the king himself holds affection for them (6:14-24). On their part, the young men appear to be successfully assimilated. In lifestyle matters they do not reject the culture of their new home. They all have two names, one Jewish and one Babylonian. These names are used interchangeably throughout the story, suggesting how these individuals hold a dual identity, in a situation of living within two cultures.

Jonah

In the book of Jonah, the primary line of difference is between an Israelite individual and the Assyrian city of Nineveh. The conflict is established at the story's opening, in a call to Jonah to go and speak out against the foreigners (1:1-2). Difference here is also drawn along religious lines, and it is clear—at least on the surface level—how that difference is to be managed. The Ninevites have been bad (רעה), to which the proper response is repentance (3:5-9). Jonah leaves his home and travels long distances away. He is taken from his land not by enemy attack, however, but by a—to him, unwelcome—divine command to tend to the needs of persons unlike himself in religious belief and ethnic heritage. Indeed, Jonah is a poster child for the concept that even spiritual leaders who do not have a proper attitude can still foster remarkable success.

During his journey, Jonah finds himself in three environments foreign to him, first the community of sailors, then the fish, and finally Assyria. Jonah does not, however, integrate himself into these other communities. He does not engage with those unlike himself, but maintains physical and emotional distance. When the ship is in danger and all hands are working desperately above deck, Jonah goes down to sleep in the hold. When the Ninevites act in response to his prophecy, Jonah goes off by himself and sits outside the city. He does not return others' concern for him or engage others' needs, and by the conclusion of the story, Jonah remains still surly, uncaring, resentful, and isolated.

In this story, the non-Israelites (sailors, Ninevites) are presented positively. The reference to the sailors crying out "each to his god" (1:5) suggests that the ship's crew is multireligious and, as deities were connected to geographical places in the ancient Near East, most likely multiethnic as well. Though they recognize that the ship, and their very lives, are in danger because of Jonah's actions, the captain and other sailors do not turn against him. Even when, in a perhaps suicidal desire, Jonah asks that they toss him overboard, they still work mightily to preserve his life instead (1:11-13). The Ninevites likewise respond in an exceptionally conscientious and receptive manner toward Jonah and his message. They listen and react immediately to this foreign prophet.

Moreover, both of the non-Israelite peoples show themselves to be more pious and faithful than the Israelite Jonah. The sailors are first faithful to their own gods. When in danger, their first action is to pray, and they urge Jonah to likewise pray. They trust, or at least hope, that their gods will care for them and keep them safe (1:5-6), and they recognize the wrongness of disobeying a divine directive (1:10). Both of these peoples are also hopeful that a deity who is not their own will care about them also: "Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish" (in the words of the ship's captain; 1:6); "Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish" (the Ninevite king; 3:9). Their perspective changes to recognition of Jonah's religion, and if not outright conversion, at least a recognition of the power of Yhwh. The sailors and the Ninevites pray to Yhwh (1:14; 3:8); the sailors also make sacrifices and vows to Yhwh and "fear Yhwh" (1:16); and the Ninevites also repent, fast, don sackcloth and "believe God" (3:5-8). In all, the non-Israelites' theological understanding is greater than that of Jonah.

And they are correct. Yhwh does appear in this story as a god who is kind and compassionate toward all. Yhwh spares the sailors' lives and relents on punishing the Ninevites. Yhwh's care, however, does not stop with humans. The nonhuman realm—fish, bush, worm, cattle—also are recipients of Yhwh's attention and compassion. In the book of Jonah, the Israelite god is a universal god, not nationalistic or otherwise particularistic, taking care of all persons, all animals, and all elements of the created order.

Ruth

In the story of Ruth, the main area of difference is ethnic, though economic disparities play a significant role as well. Israelites (from the village of Bethlehem, in the hill country outside Jerusalem) interact with Moabites, Israel's neighbor to the east. What is remarkable about this connection is that elsewhere in the biblical tradition, Moab is treated with singularly hostile and derogatory attitudes. The Torah, for example, stipulates that "no Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of Yhwh. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of Yhwh. . . . You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live" (Num 23:3-6), and Moabite women are viewed as particularly dangerous (Numbers 22–25, esp. 25:1-5; also Isaiah 15–16; Jeremiah 48).

Yet this story evidences no trace of such animosities. The relationship between the Bethlehemites and the Moabites is instead one of reciprocal kindness and generosity. A small Israelite family moves to Moab (1:1-5). The initiating reason for this migration—as it has been through the ages for so many peoples in so many places—is famine. The Moabite people give them food, for a full ten years. They also give these foreigners their daughters, allowing Orpah and Ruth to marry the family's two sons, thus not only keeping the immigrants from starving but also entering into intimate connection with them. These Moabites demonstrate hospitality far beyond what would typically be required in ancient practice. Then as Ruth chooses to leave her people to assist the elderly Naomi back home, she personifies her people's kindness.

Tables turn as the two women enter Bethlehem, and Ruth now becomes the new immigrant in a strange land. In Bethlehem, Ruth also meets with kindness, generosity, and even respect. She is allowed to glean in a field whose owner takes pains to protect her from danger (2:8-9) and gives her more grain than the legal requirement (2:14-16). The townspeople give her their blessings (4:11-15). We see, therefore, a distinct parallel between Moab and Israel. As Moab provided food and intermarriage to impoverished foreigners, so now Israel provides its harvest and a husband to the impoverished Ruth. Both peoples sustain the very life of the other.

Unlike Daniel and Jonah, religious difference does not play a prominent role in this story. Physical need (for food, spouses, babies) drives the characters' choices. Ruth's heartfelt statement in 1:16-17 is sometimes treated as a religious conversion. Perhaps in some way it can be seen as a statement of faith, but to understand it as a relinquishment of Moabite religion and a conversion to Yahwism would be overreading. Ruth does not, for instance, change religious loyalties on recognition of the power of Yhwh or on conviction of Yhwh's superiority over other deities. Instead, Ruth chooses to align herself with a person (Naomi) and take on that person's homeland and local deity only secondarily. She refers initially to Naomi's god (or gods) only generically (אלהים), just like Orpah's god(s) (1:15-16), and only later with the proper name of that god (יהוה). Ruth chooses first a new ethnic identity, and only rather after the fact, a new religious identity.

So Ruth immigrates to Bethlehem and settles there. To what degree, we might ask, does this foreigner assimilate into Israelite culture? On the one hand, she is welcomed into Bethlehemite society and marries the town's most prominent resident. She becomes part of the royal lineage, the great-grandmother of King David. A person can hardly become more integrated than that! Yet the narrative stubbornly continues repeatedly to refer to her as "Ruth the Moabite," resisting her full assimilation. To a degree, therefore, Ruth's otherness persists. The question of Ruth's identity is not only that of us readers but is also articulated at the level of the story. Twice Ruth is asked, "Who are you?" (מי־את), first by Boaz (3:9) and then by Naomi (3:16). A central exchange for the topic of the Institute comes in 2:10, where Ruth asks Boaz, "Why have I found favor in your sight, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner (נכר)?" He replies that it is because Ruth unselfishly left her own people to help her mother-in-law. This perspective guides the book's overall perspective on foreignness, on ethnic difference. Good character and honorable action trump nationality and religion. In this perspective, a poor foreign widow, a “minority person,” can be as “worthy” as a wealthy native “majority” person (2:1; 3:11).

Esther

The book of Esther is set in the Persian empire, relating the experience of the Jews Esther and Mordecai in the royal court and the Jewish people in the city of Susa and the surrounding territories. Like Daniel, the narrative includes direct reference to the exile and the diaspora situation when introducing Mordecai as a descendant of one of the original captives (2:5-6). The story’s central premise, with regard to the relationship between social groups, is that it can be dangerous to be a minority population. Here, it is particularly the Jews in the Persian empire whose existence is in danger, and of course the story regrettably regains its relevance whenever Jews have suffered actual persecution and genocide at various points throughout history. The primary level of difference is ethnic. Religious difference plays no part at all—as Esther is famously the book that includes no mention of God. Later editions of the story, which we now have in two Greek versions, bring religious concerns to the forefront, retelling the conflict in terms of a cosmic divine battle and recharacterizing Esther as a paragon of separtist piety who keeps kosher even in the palace and despises “the bed of the uncircumcised and of any alien” (14:15).

The Persian empire, in this story, includes ethnic diversity beyond the Jewish families still there after the Babylonian exile. The three official letters are sent “to all the royal provinces, to every province in its own script and to every people in its own language” (1:22; 3:12; 8:9); clearly Persian society is multicultural and multinational. It also appears to accommodate difference. Rather than insisting that all citizens must learn a single sanctioned language (think, for instance, of those in the U.S. who advocate for “English only”), people are allowed to continue to use their mother tongue. Moreover, not being ethnically Persian appears to be no impediment to holding high government office: the post of second-in-command is given first to an Amalekite (Haman) and then to a Jew (Mordecai). Nor is there a litmus test for the lineage of the queen, as candidates are to be sought throughout “all the provinces of the kingdom” (2:3). The official attitude appears to welcome diversity.

The two Jewish protagonists, Esther and Mordecai, choose differing approaches to the dominant culture. Esther chooses to assimilate. When brought to the palace she willingly enters into the lengthy preparation process for the young women, excelling in her education to the degree that she is chosen as the best. Esther is able to “play Persian” well enough that no one knows her not to be. Though her two names—Persian Esther and Hebrew Hadasseh—reflect her dual identity when she is first introduced (2:7), henceforth she is called only Esther. Mordecai, on the other hand, chooses a path of resistance to the majority culture, refusing to obey Persian law (3:2-3). Esther’s choice of assimilation, within the context of the story, proves wise, whereas Mordecai's choice only brings great trouble to the entire population in Persia.

Problems arise when ancient ethnic rivalries are allowed to fester. Back in the time of King Saul, according to the biblical tradition, Amelekites were Israel's enemy (1 Samuel 15). Now two proud and stubborn men choose to continue this old animosity in the present day. Ancient prejudices are held through generations, causing great destruction and death. It is one sole individual—one "radical"—who, unchecked, brings mayhem to the entire empire. Haman's argument to the king, to allow him to destroy the Jewish population, is masterful hate rhetoric. Acknowledging the existence of a minority population, he argues that the very fact that they have a different heritage renders them a threat to the empire. In other words, merely to be different is to be deemed dangerous.

This animosity is not at the level of the general population. The people are faced with a terrible dilemma, to follow the royal decree and attack their Jewish neighbors on the assigned day, or to break the law. In the conflict many of them choose to side with the Jews, showing solidarity with the threatened minority. (The meaning of the unusual expression מתיהדים in 8:17, a hapax, is not fully clear; it is a hithpael participle derived from the noun יהודי, "Jew.") Though the Jews act in self-defense, the violence at the conclusion of the story remains troubling. Within the story world of Persian laws that cannot be repealed, it is presented as the only option. Yet in situations of disagreement and conflict between peoples, we see in this story—as so often in real life as well—how easy it can become to find the use of force, whether physical violence or other means of coercion, an acceptable solution.

Tobit

The book of Tobit (like Daniel and Esther) also refers to a situation of destruction, deportation, and exile—except that here the action is set at the time of the Assyrian destruction of Samaria back in the eighth century. The story both begins and ends with the idea of exile. Tobit introduces himself as a captive taken to live in Nineveh, along with his wife Anna and son Tobias (1:2, 10). Other characters continue to emphasize their situation of exile, first Sarah, Tobias's wife-to-be (3:15), and then Tobias and his angel guide Raphael (7:3). Tobit again speaks of the affliction of exile, with hope that God will gather the people back home (13:3-6), and on his deathbed sixty years later the experience of exile and hope for return is still at the forefront of his mind (14:3-7). And Tobias's last act, in the book's final verse, is to rejoice at the captor Nineveh's defeat by the Persians (14:15). Thus, the theme of homelessness and displacement pervades the story. Their situation of exile is central to these people's sense of existence; they always feel themselves to be outsiders, away from their true home.

Perhaps surprisingly, against this large Assyrian backdrop, this story takes place almost completely within the narrow sphere of Jewish family life. There is occasional mention of other persons but no significant interaction with them. For instance, marriages must take place only within one’s own clan, as Tobit warns his son not to “marry a foreign woman, who is not of your father’s tribe” (4:12; also 3:15; 6:16). Investments are to entrusted only to kin, and travel guides must be relatives, as Raphael takes pains to show himself to be (chap. 5). Is this emphasis on family to preserve identity and culture, or because no one outside one’s kind is seen as trustworthy? Are those who are unlike oneself automatically suspect? Perhaps Tobit’s experience of working for the royal administration has led him to the second conclusion. Depending on who was on the throne, he was the object of either benevolence or persecution (1:10–2:1). Foreign regimes can be unpredictable, one might reason, so it is best to maintain as much separation as possible from the outside world.

In this story is a line of difference not only between Jew and non-Jew, but also between one Jew and another. Faithful, obedient Jews are to be clearly distinguished from unfaithful, disobedient Jews—or at least they are in Tobit’s mind. He tells how, back in Israel, everyone practiced apostasy but him, and when coming to Nineveh, he again is performing many more pious actions than anyone else in the exiled Jewish community (chaps. 1-2). Even those within minority communities can practice differing levels of adherence to ethnic tradition and thus place varying level of value on the degree to which one assimilates or maintains traditional practices.

Judith

The story of Judith presents us with a situation of active hostility and violence against the other. Non-Jews—here, the chronologically impossible “Assyrians”—are mounting a military campaign against other peoples, bent on their annihilation. The power differential is great; the small nations have no chance to withstand this dominant empire. Even those peoples who surrender to the Assyrian army are destroyed anyway (chap. 3). The Assyrians’ swath of destruction is geographically immense, as lands from Mesopotamia to Egypt fall before the devouring army. The narrative gives a sense of the enormity of the populations affected, as it lists a full forty-nine place or people names within the first two chapters. This great diversity of populations within the entire Near East is brought under the thumb of this single bully. Moreover, the army itself is diverse, a “mixed crowd” (2:20) of “many nations” (1:6) that attacks “all . . . dialects and tribes” (3:8). Just as Judea includes foreign persons in its midst (4:10), so the other populations are likely mixed; no nation is “pure.” And all nationalities will suffer.

As the invading army arrives at Judea’s doorstep, therefore, we have a sense of the broadly multiethnic environment that surrounds the Jewish nation. Though this story occurs on Judean territory, an atmosphere of exile and diaspora remain; when Judea is finally introduced, it is as having recently returned from exile and reestablished worship in the land (4:3). As the story now narrows to focus on the plight of the Jews in the village of Bethulia, remembrance of the pain of their vanquished neighbors continues to echo. We are aware that the Jews do not exist in isolation; they are not unique but just another small and insignificante population to be mowed down by the conquering army.

Lines of difference in the book of Judith are not only national, however, but religious as well. The purported reason for the massive military campaign is religion. Nebuchadnezzar, the Assyrian king, insists that all people worship him, and him alone, as a god (2:5-6; 3:8; 6:2-4; 11:1). Those who do not, merit destruction. There is no room for tolerance of religious difference. When Judith infiltrates the Assyrian camp, she finds a situation in which all the harem women are expected to convert (11:23). Judith succeeds in her mission precisely by playing into the enemy's expectation that she has converted, that she has changed her religious beliefs. Using "double-speak" language that can be understood as professing allegiance to either Nebuchadnezzar or Yhwh, she pretends to be siding with the Assyrians while also carefully not denying Yhwh. Egotistical and powerful people often hear only what they want to hear! Judith uses religion as her ruse to be allowed outside the camp at night, and even suggests that God has switched sides and is now abandoning the Jews (chap. 11). Her actions in the enemy camp play on religious ignorance and difference, which she uses for her benefit.

The Bethulian townspeople also welcome the foreign stranger into their midst—although unlike Judith, he is honest toward his hosts. Achior is the leader of the Ammonites. Ammonites were a traditional enemy of Israel, and like Moabites (who came into focus in the book of Ruth), were never to be allowed to join the Israelite community (e.g., Deut 23:3-5; 2 Samuel 10–12; Amos 1:13-15). Therefore, when the Assyrian general Holofernes requests an accounting of why the Jews will not surrender, the Ammonite Achior is the last person we would expect to speak on their behalf. Yet Achior displays a surprising lack of prejudice by telling about Israel's history without bias, just as the Bethulians do not show prejudice when they rescue and protect him (chaps. 5–6). They even praise Achior and welcome him with a banquet, and after the Jewish victory, Achior chooses to convert and "join the house of Israel" (14:10). Within a situation of grave danger, the Jews' trust and hospitality toward a stranger is striking.

Achior and Judith serve as parallel figures in many ways. They both function as representatives of their "types": Achior, the righteous gentile who aids the Jews; Judith, the pious Jew whose respectable lineage extends way back into her people's history (8:1). Even her name is the grammatically feminine form of "Jew." Judith acts as the quintessential Jew, observant, pious, and faithful to her death (16:18-25). But her greater theological understanding, her avowed widowhood, and her residence up on the roof separate her from the rest of the Jewish population. Thus Judith and Achior are in situations of otherness and isolation within their own people, Jews and Ammonites respectively. Both of these figures are ultimately separated from their communities, physically as well as ideologically.

Contemporary Context

I have chosen to bring to our conversation two recent books that seem to have become widely read these days in Christian and Methodist circles: Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperCollins, 2012; Kindle edition), and Gil Rendle, *Back to Zero: The Search to Rediscover the Methodist Movement* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2011; Kindle edition). Both of these authors discuss issues facing the contemporary church and propose ways by which the church might move forward into a positive future. They speak of the challenges and opportunities currently facing the church at large. Throughout their work both Butler Bass and Rendle include issues of religious plurality and multiculturalism as well as the need for diversity in the new types of Christianity and Methodism for which they advocate. Their recognition of the vital contemporary importance of interfaith concerns is most likely part of the same larger movements that also provided the impetus for the planning committee to choose its topic for this Institute.

Butler Bass argues that we are in the midst of a large religious awakening (the fourth such awakening since the European settlement of North America). Christianity, as well as other religions, is in the process of changing, adaptations that are part of larger social shifts. The rise in the number of persons who consider themselves "spiritual but not religious"—roughly one-third of the U.S. population and over half of the population of most European nations—reflects not only how few regularly attend religious services but also a desire for different types of religious experience. People are yearning for more experiential belief and practice, Butler Bass argues. The old religious institutional model that once worked well no longer does, and traditional forms of faith are being replaced by new spiritual, ethical, and even nonreligious choices. Speaking in threefold terms of believing, behaving, and belonging, traditional religion of the twentieth century has tended to start with proper belief. In her mind, however, the order needs to be reversed, not requiring persons first to learn proper doctrine but instead first to enter into a community that will form their identity (belonging). This transformation to new ways of doing religion, this awakening, requires us to learn to see from different perspectives and to change our lives and our world.

Rendle similarly views the present age as a time of great and deep change for the mainline church. His focus is on the current challenges facing The United Methodist Church in particular, advocating that it begin to act more like a movement again than the bureaucratic institution it has become. We are in the midst of a paradigm shift when old structures no longer work and old rules no longer apply—everything needs to go "back to zero." To become a movement, he argues, all entities in the church must move from imagining themselves as consumers, passively dependent and waiting for the community to meet their needs, to citizens, actively moving the church ahead even at the expense of their own self-interest. Our new purpose should be missional, anticipating a changed outcome of no longer seeking to make church members but instead to make disciples, persons who will go out into our new world and work to renew it.

The six stories, in varied ways, all reflect situations of social and religious change. Thus, I think, they might fruitfully be brought into discussion with these two contemporary books. I will highlight some of the proposals put forward by Butler Bass and Rendle, and then make brief suggestions about their connections with the biblical stories. These two works, admittedly, do not predominantly speak to ecumenical affairs (the overall Institute topic) nor reflect directly on these particular biblical texts. Nonetheless, there may be useful comparisons to be made. My goal is not to be comprehensive in any sense, but rather merely to bring forward concepts from these two books that might provide starting points for our group discussion.

Both Rendle and Butler Bass speak of the current crisis facing the church in ways quite similar to Israel's situation of exile—disorientation, grief, loss, and questions of identity. The ways they envision response to the crisis in which people find themselves is not unlike the variety of responses we find in these biblical stories.

> So what happens when old forms of belonging disappear? . . . When family ties are broken, when nationalities and ethnicities blur, and churches and denominations go into decline? People lose a sense of themselves—that is what happens. Instead of being grounded, people feel unmoored. . . . If grieving individuals turn toward questions of identity, how much more is that true for groups of people feeling the weight of loss, of not belonging anywhere? . . . Thus, at times of pitched cultural upheaval, a typical spiritual response includes heightened anxiety about identity—about who we are and the direction of our lives. . . . [W]e are faced with a question that keeps many up at night: Who am I? (Butler Bass, chap. 6)

> When paradigms shift . . . everyone feels the discomfort that comes from unrequested changes. . . . It should come as no surprise that times of deep change are stressful and prompt strong actions and reactions among people. Suddenly an ordered world that once provided security becomes a wilderness requiring new learning and risk. Reactions of people at such moments are predictable and familiar. Some will rush to defend the familiar, old practices by challenging leaders to follow the letter of the law or polity that came from the time of the earlier paradigm. Some will hunker down, feeling too old or inadequate to accommodate changes, hoping to be able to finish out their careers or membership before the change requires too much of them. Some, however, will align themselves with the change in outcomes and expend themselves missionally without guarantees of old rewards. (Rendle, chap. 4)

In our diaspora stories we find a surprisingly similar range of responses. Some of the protagonists do indeed just "hunker down" in the new situations in which they find themselves, not make waves, and hope to ride out the changes, notably Naomi and the

Bethulian town leaders. Others look backward and stick to the past paradigm, “familiar old practices . . . . that follow the letter of the law”: Tobit and his family adhering, with great pride, to traditional Jewish practice even in exile; Jonah clinging to traditional expectations about the uncompromising evil of the city of Nineveh; Mordecai holding old grudges. Yet other characters answer the “who am I?” question by forming new models of identity, blending the old with the new, the Jewish with the non-Jewish. Ruth, Daniel, Esther, and Achior position themselves well in their new paradigms and find alternate ways of belonging in their changed circumstances. We see similar varied responses in some of the other postexilic biblical literature as well; compare, for example, the inward-looking traditionalism of Ezra-Nehemiah with the wisdom literature that seems to include content from Israelite, Egyptian, and Mesopotamian traditions.

Our two authors suggest various components and qualities of the coming transformed religious landscape. One of the characteristics of this new model will be diversity.

> Today, people borrow practices from a wide number of sources. . . . Critics deride this as “cafeteria” religions, an eclectic faith constructed on the basis of personal taste and consumerism. But I think something more may be afoot. When religions are in the process of reformation or renewal, adherents frequently borrow and blend practices from other sources. From a historical perspective, borrowing simply means that conventional religious institutions—marked by “us” versus “them” attitudes—do not have adequate resources to respond to contemporary questions. . . . Blending, borrowing, mixing, and adapting often signal religious reform, as new patterns of faith and practice emerge in relation to new cultural challenges. (Butler Bass, chap. 5)

> [C]onnectedness is not dependent upon agreement. . . . This is one of the key lessons of our largest congregations that routinely bring together large gatherings of people who are amazingly diverse in age, race, theological perspective, political leanings, and personal preferences. Within mainline denominations people in such large congregations are not asked to resolve their differences by forced agreement with one another but are instead invited to become a community complete with differences. (Rendle, chap. 4)

Our stories may not explicitly reflect a blending of religious practices. But we do see a coming together, across cultural difference and diversity, of persons for common purpose. For instance, Esther’s maids (who are certainly not Jewish) join with her in fasting; Ruth is blended into the royal family; the four young men adapt to Babylonian life. In the end, in the books of Esther, Ruth, and Daniel especially, people who remain different still are able to live with one another, to join with together in a level of connectedness.

Another characteristic of the new model will be changed methods of engagement. Rendle in particular calls for a different type of action from participants, one that is active and entrepreneurial rather than passive and dependent.

> At the beginning of a movement, the number of people involved does not have to be large. . . . [E]very revolution that changed the fate of humanity started as a conversation between two people. . . . I would argue that the current development of a Wesleyan movement within The United Methodist Church is a convergence of smaller conversations that already have moved us out of despair and toward action. . . . The ambiguity for entrepreneurial leaders is that they must be able and willing to hold competing values and truths in tension rather than choose one and give up on the other. . . . [It does not] depend on the initiative of only the people with the most authority. Movements are more fluid and malleable than that. Movements are not hierarchical and, especially at the beginning, are more principled than organized. Movements more simply require those people who do have passion and new insights to talk with one another and to try new things. (Rendle, chap. 7)

Certainly in our stories changes originate from the bottom up. Change starts small, and literally at the level of an initial intimate conversation in some of these books (Esther, Ruth). It is the persons who do not have political power who take the initiative and make things happen. They take authority into their own hands. These characters indeed work in small groupings—Esther with Mordecai, Naomi with Ruth, Daniel with his three friends, Tobias with Raphael. All of initial involvement begins at a small level and change is bred through building personal knowledge and trust. Just like, for example, racism and heterosexism are best eradicated on the local level when people get to know their neighbors who are of a different race or sexual orientation from them, Esther succeeds with Ahasuerus because has come to know her for several years in the palace, and Ruth succeeds with Boaz because he has seen her commendable actions. Judith and Ruth are especially entrepreneurial, taking what small resources they have along with their own talents, and yielding remarkably successful outcomes.

In this new paradigm will be not only new methods but also new expectations for leaders. Rendle calls for a certain selflessness in putting the overall mission of the church in front of our own personal fulfillment and preference.

> From output to input, members, clergy, and congregations have now been displaced as the object of attention and recipient of denominational resources to being the expendable resources of the system needed to make the critical difference of changed people who will change the world. (Rendle, chap. 4)

Among our stories, Achior can possibly be viewed as one who acts selflessly for the larger goal of a people's survival, a people who are not even his own. But it is Jonah who is a prime example of an "expendable resource." Yhwh considers Jonah's personal preferences as quite expendable in light of the larger mission for Ninevite redemption, just as when bishops are making appointments, the church's overall needs should be given priority over a pastor's desire for seniority or an accommodating congregation (see chap. 4 passim).

Perhaps the postexilic time can be seen as a new awakening. Standing from this side, we see the changes that arose from this period in Jewish history—newly composed and reworked literary masterpieces, the geographical spread of Judaism outside Palestine, increased literacy and other areas of knowledge. Jewish religion itself changed, with reshaped understandings of God and how God might be working in the world. The situation of diaspora, though most certainly difficult, painful, and confusing at its start, came to be a time of transformation. These six biblical books show us glimpses of this happening. They open up to new options for living, new possibilities for faith and tradition, new relationships with others. These diaspora stories—perhaps—hint toward new awakenings for the people of God, in all their variety. As Butler Bass asks of our own age:

> What if the 1970s were not simply an evangelical revival like those of old, but the first stirrings of a new spiritual awakening, a vast interreligious movement toward individual, social and cultural transformation? Have we lived the majority of our lives in the context of this awakening, struggling toward new understandings of God, how we should act ethically and politically, and who we are deep in our souls? What if the awakening is not exclusively a Christian affair, but rather that a certain form of Christianity is playing a significant role in forming the contours of a new kind of faith beyond conventional religious boundaries? Is America living in the wake of a revival gone awry or a spiritual awakening that is finally taking concrete—albeit unexpected—shape? . . . I believe that the United States (and not only the United States) is caught up in the throes of a spiritual awakening, a period of sustained religious and political transformation during which our ways of seeing the world, understanding ourselves, and expressing faith are being, to borrow a phrase, "born again." (Butler Bass, introduction)

Postscript: Jeremiah's Instructions to the Exiles

> Thus says Yhwh of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. And seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to Yhwh on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. (Jer 29:4-7)

For a few brief words in conclusion, let us go back to the very start of the exile. These instructions are part of Jeremiah 29, a chapter that seems to include portions of four different letters. Addressed to the first wave of deportees in the Babylonian exile, taken away in 597, the prophet sends his message from Jerusalem. Understood within its literary context, the letter asserts to those sent away that it was God who desired and caused the exile. The essential message is, "Buck up, carry on with your situation. Get along with your enemy, among whom you are living. Don't pine to come back home, because you won't be able to; only your grandchildren will." One might expect that such would not be an easy or welcome message to receive. Yet it includes the possibility of life and hope, that prosperity might be found in this unlikeliest of places under such unexpected circumstances.

Let me, however, loosen this text from its historical context for a moment and suggest that it provides a certain usefulness for our concerns of interreligious relations. We today find ourselves in new and strange territory, a place of uncertainties, of rapid and disruptive social and religious change. Our "Babylonians" are those who are different from us, and possibly who have even caused us harm in the past. They believe differently, worship differently, act differently, dress differently, and whatever. Perhaps they are not easy to like, or their beliefs are not easy to understand. What are our instructions, our obligations, in such an interreligious situation? They are twofold. First, take care of our own tradition. Plant it; tend it; make it fruitful and abundant. Make many disciples. Let it be the best it can be. But second, care for those other traditions also. Work for their fruitfulness; pray for their abundance as well. And here is the essential point for interfaith relations: it is only when other traditions do well that we will do well. Wellbeing (שׁלום) cannot be ours unless and until wellbeing is also theirs. This text suggests a vision of essential interconnectedness. Interreligious conflict must be replaced by interreligious cooperation. Wellbeing—peace—for not only us but for everyone—will become possible only when we tend not only to our own faith tradition but just as much tend to other faith traditions also.