

# **Crossing Borders**

## **Through the Lens of Ruth**

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In Jewish tradition Ruth is the second of five short books which are called, collectively, the Megilloth or the Five Scrolls.<sup>1</sup> Each of these books has an annual setting in the Jewish calendar and are read in their entirety in the Synagogue on these special holidays. The Book of Ruth is associated with the festival of Shavuot, or Pentecost, and is read alongside the Torah reading from Exodus 19 and 20 which records the story of Moses on top of Sinai and the giving of the Ten Commandments.

This liturgical setting is fascinating. The Exodus reading is epic and magnificent, full of fiery images of smoky mountains and trembling earth. There's thunder and lightning and deafening trumpet blasts and over all the din, Yahweh speaks. No wonder the people were terrified. In Ruth though, the atmosphere is different. It's the intimate story of survival in the face of the overwhelming ordinary. There's bereavement and hunger, isolation and hard work in the struggle to survive as a migrant. Finally, there is a great and transformational kindness that results in the securing of a place for displaced people. It also results in the transformation of the life of the one who acted in kindness—Boaz, the wealthy landowner who opens first his fields and then his home life to the stranger, finds a wife, then a child and then an honored place in the family line of King David.

And the community is transformed as well. In the story a community manages to overcome its antipathy and suspicion towards the stranger from Moab. In doing so it reaches a new understanding of itself, crafts a system of laws which pays attention to the plight of the vulnerable, and welcomes someone into the web of kinship who would otherwise be excluded.

The festival liturgy connects the struggles of ordinary people and their lives into the great ground-shaking events of Sinai. It thus preserves the significance of the common experience of regular people in the face of great

world-making events and dares us to find ways of making personal what could otherwise be overwhelming.

## CHAPTER 1 — CROSSROADS DECISIONS

After a life of successive tragedies Naomi decides to return home to Bethlehem and her own people. Her widowed daughters-in-law, both Moabites, seek to return with her, but Naomi tries to persuade them to stay, after all, what is there for them in a foreign country? One decides to return home, and one, Ruth, insists on continuing with her back to Judah, and will not be persuaded otherwise. Important decisions are made at the crossroads.

## CHAPTER 2 — THE MIGRANT WORKER

The two women reach home at the beginning of the barley harvest and Ruth finds work gleaning in the fields of a man called Boaz. We are introduced to the fragile lives of those who are poor and to the potential dangers that face those who are migrant workers. And we are surprised by the kindness of Boaz, the landowner, who is moved to be generous by the character and kindness of Ruth. Nevertheless, there is no permanent fix to the economic and social circumstances of the two women.

## CHAPTER 3 — WHO IS FAMILY?

Naomi takes charge now to try and fix their plight and we are exposed to the risks vulnerable people often have to take to survive. Ruth takes the physical and reputational gamble of visiting Boaz at the threshing floor in the dead of night and a curious encounter takes place. The result is that Boaz is finally persuaded to act to restore Naomi and deal finally with Ruth's status in the community.

## CHAPTER 4 — A COMPLICATED END

The final chapter opens with an elaborate ritual which takes care of the issue of land and in the process confirms the marriage of Boaz and Ruth. She is now welcomed into the community and it appears that the whole town is delighted with the development, all the more so when Ruth gets pregnant and gives birth to a boy. Now Ruth disappears from the story entirely and it ends with the patrilineal line of King David.

## LITURGICAL SETTING

When the book of Ruth is viewed in its Jewish liturgical setting at the feast of Shavuot or Pentecost, a fascinating hermeneutical possibility emerges. Ruth is always read alongside the great epic setting for the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai, placing an intimate story of survival alongside the great world-shaking events of Sinai. It presents us with the possibility that the story of Ruth is the appropriate lens through which to view the Law and that kindness and love for the Other, rather than ritual purity is the proper intent of the Law.

## COUNTER NARRATIVES

There is no clear agreement among scholars about who wrote the book of Ruth, nor about when it was written. Some say Samuel wrote it to set the scene for the introduction to kingship in Israel and the family line of David, the great King. The book also introduces some ambiguity into the notion of racial purity by the inclusion of a foreigner in the kingly line. Some say it was written in the post-exilic period, when leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah were trying to reconstruct national identity. If this were so, then the book of Ruth is again a strong counter-narrative to the idea of racial purity and the imposition of forced divorce of foreign women in the post-exile era.

## ADDRESSING STEREOTYPES

The story constantly reminds us that Ruth was Moabite, a people whose relationship with Judah is characterized by a deep and historical antipathy. The story also tells an unexpected and surprising narrative, that a family from Judah found a welcome in Moab. But would this welcome be reciprocated when Ruth reaches Bethlehem? The book of Ruth begins the process of challenging stereotypes and invites the reader to consider a new understanding of community based more round character and relationship rather than blood and ethnicity.

## COMPASSION AND THE LAW

The story of how Ruth is wrapped up into the people of Bethlehem involves a community review of the laws and traditions that shape it. In the end the people agree to reshape their laws to expand the scope of those who are included within their protection. And so, by the end of the story a foreign woman is included within the embrace of the community and becomes an ancestor to their greatest king. But a principle is also established, that the law should ensure compassion, and if it doesn't it must be changed.

## ENLARGING THE CIRCLE OF KINSHIP

There are big questions in this book about the basis on which one can belong to this people, but also about the social responsibility that attaches itself to national identity. The book uncovers for us a startling possibility that belonging can come not simply from blood but also from behavior. In fact, socially responsible behavior may even trump the rights of blood belonging. The narrative presents us with a scenario in which kindness and good character draw reciprocal kindness from others which results in inclusion for the stranger and the foreigner.



## THE BOOK OF RUTH

Now the Book of Ruth wouldn't ordinarily be a book that we would flock to for wisdom and advice on a contemporary issue like immigration and the movements of people. The stereotype we often carry is that this is a romantic book of the young, beautiful woman fallen on hard times who meets a good man, they fall in love, get married and have children, or at least a child. Of course, there is some questionable activity as the heroine seduces her soon-to-be husband, but by and large this can be glossed over, and at least it is tasteful, though only barely.

Perhaps the most well-known part of the story is the transcendent declaration of loyalty on the part of Ruth who commits herself to her mother-in-law to go where she goes, live where she lives, to worship Naomi's God in such a way that only death would part them.

As we engage deeper with the characters and their lives though, there are other profound things which reveal themselves. Like the mystery of relationships between women. Like the trauma of surviving one's children, of childlessness and marriage and patriarchy.

And of course, as we think about our borders in our nation the story features a number of border crossings. Elimelech and Naomi and their boys leave Bethlehem (House of Bread) due to famine and move to Moab (the place of the traditional enemy) and fall on hard times. When Naomi seeks to go home, things change. Ruth becomes a woman in a man's world, a foreigner in a country that doesn't like her sort, childless in a society that required sons, a widow in a family-based culture, and poor in a community that lacked a safety net.

The Book of Ruth can be read as a form of counter-narrative to Ezra and Nehemiah, telling a story where ethnic and religious purity is perhaps not as critical as they might have claimed. In Jewish tradition it is read at Pentecost alongside the reading of the ground-shaking events of Sinai. This story thus preserves the importance of the ordinary lives of individuals alongside great world-making events and dares us to find ways of making personal what could otherwise be overwhelming.

The book challenges us on the issue of welcoming the stranger; on redrawing our stereotypes through encounter with those who are 'other;' on finding the gaps where compassion can thrive in the midst of technical debates about law and tradition; on carrying losses that cannot really be grieved. It presents us with questions of how to protect the rights of vulnerable minorities, particularly those who are politically and socially marginal to the mainstream, and also the responsibility towards the poor of those who are financially and socially secure.

The story features those who are forced to migrate to another country because of poverty or famine and encourages communities to face the question of what constitutes national identity and belonging to the tribe.

The book of Ruth will not deliver answers but will help form better questions for us to explore together as communities of faith but also to empower us to take an effective place in the public square where decisions are being made which affect the whole community.

## HOW TO USE THIS MATERIAL

It is our hope that these materials will stimulate discourse in all manner of places with all types of people, but not every group, we imagine, will be completely familiar with the story of Ruth. So, a word about how this resource can be used.

Then there are four modules based on each of the four chapters in the story. These explore in more detail the movement of the story and examine the text in a close way.

## CONCLUSION

We (Corrymeela Community) offer this material in all humility, and desperately keen to place the bible text right in the middle of the most difficult and profound issues in the public square. We are passionately committed to reading the bible in this way, and it is a source of genuine wonder to us that this ancient text can play such an active and stimulating role in informing and preparing us for this future.

# RUTH 1: Crossroads and Decisions

## READING THE TEXT

6 When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. 7 With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

8 Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, “Go back, each of you, to your mother’s home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. 9 May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband.” Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud 10 and said to her, “We will go back with you to your people.”

11 But Naomi said, “Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? 12 Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even

if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— 13 would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD’s hand has turned against me!”

14 At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. 15 “Look,” said Naomi, “your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her.” 16 But Ruth replied, “Don’t urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me.” 18 When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

## CONSIDERING THE BACKGROUND

Sometimes it helps to have a little of the background to what we're reading. That may be a little more detail about the original language, or some detail to understand the cultural setting. It all helps to get a better understanding about what's happening or being said in the text we read.

- After further loss Naomi's thoughts turn to home, after all, what is there to keep her in Moab now? This is the first appearance of the Hebrew word *teshuva* meaning repentance or return. One or another of the forms of the verb *lashuv* appears eleven times in the remainder of the chapter. Soon argues that this indicates that *teshuva* is not a single event in time but a process.

*Teshuva* towards God is a journey with many acts of turning along the way and with many ups and downs.<sup>1</sup>

- 1:8 features the first mention of the Hebrew word *chesed* which means lovingkindness, and in this case it is an act done towards the dead. The rabbis say this act is the preparing of the burial shroud. The lovingkindness towards Naomi, the living, is shown by not demanding compensation from her after the deaths of their husbands.
- 1:10 This is curious in that Ruth indicates her desire to return (*lashuv*) to a place she has never been. Like Abraham she goes to a place she doesn't know and this is what Boaz commends her for (2:11).
- "Don't urge me to leave you" (1:16) is literally translated as "Don't hurt me to leave you." Naomi is being invited to transcend her own pain to avoid causing pain to Ruth. The negotiation is based not on power but on mutual concern and caring.
- Or perhaps Ruth is worried in 1:16 that Naomi threatens to transfer her pain to Ruth by shutting her out of the hurt. So perhaps Naomi is being asked by Ruth to keep her pain open to Ruth so that the pain she feels, and the vulnerability, can be transformed by relationship and community.
- Similarly, Ruth's great declaration is not a decision to choose Israel's God and their faith, but to choose Naomi's God and Naomi's people. It is, therefore, a relational choice. And it is a choice to embrace the God who had, apparently, so decisively rejected Naomi. Ruth refuses to add to her distress by rejecting her.

- “May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely..” (Rut 1:17) is similar to the phrase used in 1 Sam 20:13 with respect to the relationship between David and Jonathan. This elevates the significance of the relationship between Naomi and Ruth.
- Naomi has attempted to shut down any hope for the future for Ruth, yet Ruth continues to use the future tense (Ruth 1:16-17) as if determined to find a way of saying No! to death.
- Naomi is silenced in the face of Ruth’s determination (Rut 1:18).

### ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Good questions help uncover hidden things in the text, like motive and intention, or patterns and connections. All of this helps towards better understanding.

- Imagine a correspondence years later between Orpah and Ruth. What might they say to each other about their life choices?
- what factors might have been taken into account by Ruth and Orpah in the making of their respective decisions?

### EXPLORING A LITTLE DEEPER

As we move from the text to the world and the time we live in we need to do a little bit more imaginative thinking about what we’re reading. Sometimes this comes quickly, and other times we need to spend a bit more effort in reflection, contemplation or conversation to make some connections.

- This exchange represents a real and a metaphorical crossroads in the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. Ruth retains some power of choice over her future and in that is the reminder that in any given moment lies the possibility for change and for claiming agency over one’s life.
- One way of looking at this incident is perhaps that Ruth chooses a more diverse way and to live with difference, while Orpah turns back to what and who she knows best.
- If we view Ruth’s move as one involving a break with the status quo and an embrace of an uncertain future, what opportunities open for newness, that wouldn’t be there if she had stayed?

## DISCOVERING A RESPONSE

All the thinking and talking and reflection should lead somewhere—this is our response to the text and is an attempt to discover what we should do now. This is the “so what?” of the text.

- What crossroads choices does our nation face in the coming years?
- Where is the power of choice and decision?
- Lovingkindness of the sort displayed here is costly and radical and involves the valuing of another above one’s own obvious needs. Where are the opportunities for radical *chesed* as it relates to our border issues?
- Where are the opportunities for new journeys of adventure and mystery where the outcomes are unknown as yet? How can we build the courage and strength for such undertakings? §

<sup>1</sup> Ruth H Sohn, “Verse by Verse: A Modern Commentary” in *Reading Ruth, Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (ed. Judith A Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, Ballentine Books, New York 1994) 18



## RUTH 2: The Migrant Worker

### READING THE TEXT

**2** And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favour.” Naomi said to her, “Go ahead, my daughter.” **3** So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek.

4 Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, “The LORD be with you!” “The LORD bless you!” they answered. 5 Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, “Who does that young woman belong to?” 6 The overseer replied, “She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi. 7 She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.’ She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter.”

8 So Boaz said to Ruth, “My daughter, listen to me. Don’t go and glean in another field and don’t go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. 9 Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled.”

10 At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, “Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?” 11 Boaz replied, “I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. 12 May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”

13 “May I continue to find favour in your eyes, my lord,” she said. “You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your

servants.” 14 At mealtime Boaz said to her, “Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar.” When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. 15 As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, “Let her gather among the sheaves and don’t reprimand her. 16 Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don’t rebuke her.”

17 So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. 18 She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough.

## CONSIDERING THE BACKGROUND

Sometimes it helps to have a little of the background to what we're reading. That may be a little more detail about the original language, or some detail to understand the cultural setting. It all helps to get a better understanding about what's happening or being said in the text we read.

- The previous chapter ends with just a hint that there may be a change of fortune in the wind. The women have returned home just as the barley harvest is beginning. Not only that, though they had previously believed themselves to be alone it turns out they have a relative, who is also a man of standing. (1:22). Nevertheless Naomi remains silent, perhaps even sullen. There is a possible implication in 1:18 that Naomi's silence was resentful; she doesn't want the responsibility for an extra mouth to feed, and a foreign one at that.

- Or maybe Naomi's silence is genuine human concern, that on top of the challenge of their poverty, Naomi knows that Ruth is opening herself to the possible resentment of her foreignness (Ruth does indicate she's aware of this possibility, and may even have been on the receiving end of discrimination, so that Boaz's behavior surprises her in 2:10,13). Naomi knows herself to be part of the dispossessed domestic poor and her plight is bad enough. Ruth will have to cope with the additional stress of being a migrant and being poor.
- There seems to be a cultural acceptance in the story that women gleaning in the fields are vulnerable, hence Boaz and Naomi's concern in 2:8-9, 15, 22-23. If this is the case then Naomi should be aware and possibly should have warned Ruth in advance. Not only that, but in reality, it might be argued that Naomi, who is familiar with the ways of Judah, should have taken the initiative to meet their needs. Perhaps though she is paralyzed by grief and the disappointment that the townspeople had not taken responsibility to do more for them (1:19-21).
- 2:4-6 "Harvesters" is a masculine term in the Hebrew and it seems Ruth went to the fields and started work behind the men. When Boaz arrives he notices this unusual behavior and asks about it. The foreman is somewhat embarrassed and explains that it's a foreigner, a Moabite woman. The implication is that she won't understand. But he also notes that she's the one who came back with Naomi, which reminds Boaz of

her kindness. Boaz, in a kindly way, tries to help by explaining to her that we don't do things that way here and says that she should stay in the field, but work with the women.

- 2:5 Boaz is asking “to whom does this young girl belong?” and it is parallel to a question asked about Ruth’s descendent David in 1 Sam 17:56-57. After David has slain Goliath Saul asks “From whom is this lad?” Saul’s question is less about the identity of David—after all he had met him and had tried to fit him with his armor and sword. It is more a question of how can such a boy accomplish such a feat. It is unexpected and surprising. It is perhaps the same here with Boaz. How come he has seen such kindness and resourcefulness from a Moabite. Perhaps this is the very point at which his theology starts to change.
- 2:6 the most notable thing in the mind of the overseer is Ruth’s ethnicity. He mentions it twice in a curious redundancy—“the Moabitess from Moab.”
- 2:8-9 The foreman has acceded to her request to glean behind the harvesters. Is this an indication that he was deliberately putting her in the way of danger, perhaps excused by the fact of her ethnic identity. Boaz acts in a kindly fashion, explaining the culture to her, even the darker side of culture, and urging her to stay with the women (2:8-9). But more than that, he warns the men twice to leave her alone (Ruth 2:15,16).
- Another possible take on the story is that Boaz’s farm is special place where the Law is practiced with fairness and kindness. Maybe this is behind Boaz warning Ruth not to go to the fields of another where she might not be so well looked after (2:8). Thus on Boaz’s idealized farm the foreign laborer and the sessional worker have an abundance of water (2:9), bread, and wine vinegar with which to flavor it (2:14), an abundance of roasted grain to eat with plenty left over (2:14, 18) and gleaning is practiced generously (2:15-17). There even appears to be a strongly relational bond between the farm owner and those who work for him (2:4,14). In a sense this may be an idealized description of the eschatological community.
- 2:11 Boaz describes Ruth’s journey as one akin to that taken by Abraham and Sarai in Gen 12:1. In this case though Ruth has responded not to the voice of God but to the imperative of love—her love for Naomi.

## ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Good questions help uncover hidden things in the text, like motive and intention, or patterns and connections. All of this helps towards better understanding.

- Compare and contrast what the overseer sees and what Boaz sees in relation to those working in the field.
- On two occasions Ruth talks about being looked upon with favor (2:10,13), why might this have made such a mark on her? What might she have expected?
- How do Boaz's actions towards Ruth serve to humanize her, or recognize her as being more than simply "a Moabitess from Moab"?

## EXPLORING A LITTLE DEEPER

As we move from the text to the world and the time, we live in we need to do a little bit more imaginative thinking about what we're reading. Sometimes this comes quickly, another times we need to spend a bit more effort in reflection, contemplation or conversation to make some connections.

- In what ways might this incident from the story of Ruth open us to an understanding of the plight of migrant workers in our community?
- If the description of Boaz's farm is idealized, how might the characteristics of the arrangement be translated to our day?

## DISCOVERING A RESPONSE

All the thinking and talking and reflection should lead somewhere—this is our response to the text and is an attempt to discover what we should do now. This is the "so what?" of the text.

- Is there a role for the church now to help the strangers among us to navigate the complexity of life in a foreign country? If yes, what might we do?
- In relation to the stranger and the outsiders among us, how can people of faith individually and institutionally both provide for the needs of vulnerable people, including our domestic poor, but also act to protect and advance their safety and security?

- Take some time to learn about the dangers and hardships faced by migrant workers. §

## RUTH 3: WHO IS FAMILY?

### READING THE TEXT

1 One day Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi said to her, "My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. 2 Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight, he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. 3 Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. 4 When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do."

5 "I will do whatever you say," Ruth answered. 6 So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do.

7 When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. 8 In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet! 9 "Who are you?" he asked. "I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family."

10 "The LORD bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. 11 And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character. 12 Although it is true that I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I. 13 Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to do his duty as your guardian-redeemer, good; let him redeem you. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it. Lie here until morning."

14 So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognised; and he said, "No one must know that a woman came to the threshing floor."

15 He also said, “Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out.” When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and placed the bundle on her. Then he went back to town.

16 When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, “How did it go, my daughter?” Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her 17 and added, “He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, ‘Don’t go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.’”

18 Then Naomi said, “Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today.”

### CONSIDERING THE BACKGROUND

Sometimes it helps to have a little of the background to what we’re reading. That may be a little more detail about the original language, or some detail to understand the cultural setting. It all helps to get a better understanding about what’s happening or being said in the text we read.

- 3:1-6 Back at the beginning of Chp 2 Ruth took command of the situation to provide for her listless mother-in-law, but now the harvest is over (2:23) and the gleaning proved no more than a temporary fix to the problem. Here at the opening of Chp 3 even Ruth is resigned in much the same way that Naomi was previously, for despite the hope they had placed in Boaz he still hasn’t acted to resolve their predicament. But this time Naomi has recovered her voice. She has new energy here and for the first time she acts as a caregiver. She clarifies the issue concerning Boaz and instructs Ruth in what she should do. And the previously active and initiative-taking Ruth is now taking instructions. Perhaps this was an act of respect for her mother-in-law, returning to her the dignity of agency.
- 3:7-9 There is a risk here however for Ruth. Everything depends on how Boaz reacts to her. Will he respond to her like any other foreign widow, coming to the threshing floor selling sex? Or will he recognize family?
- 3:9 “Spread the corner of your garment over me.” Naomi had previously told Ruth to watch and listen, and Boaz would instruct her in what to do. But here Ruth takes complete control, she doesn’t wait for Boaz to decide but takes decisive action herself, guiding the newly awakened (and perhaps slightly inebriated) Boaz on what to do next. And she does

this in a conscious echo of his earlier prayer for her, that she would find refuge under the wings of Yahweh (2:12). The same root word for wings or skirt/cloak is used again here (*kanap*) when she asks him to spread the wings of his cloak over her. Boaz figuratively and literally becomes the sheltering wings of Yahweh in answer to his own prayer.

- It is unclear whether or not there is anything sexual implied here, though there does seem to be a suggestion of it. The language used is an echo of the actions of Yahweh towards Israel in Eze 16:8 which does appear to have sexual over-tones. What is absolutely clear however is that Ruth is seeking to redraw Boaz's understanding of what constitutes family, and who might be considered part of that family and who might be excluded. And Boaz does seem concerned to protect Ruth's reputation (3:10-14)—which in and of itself is worth noting. This foreigner has done enough in the host country to be seen to have a noble character. But is she family? The future depends on his response.
- The tension in the narrative is quickly resolved. First, Boaz, who by implication is older, wealthy but unmarried with no children, is astonished that this young woman should choose him (3:10). Secondly, he accedes to Ruth's request (or instruction?).
- Ruth, unlike her deceased father-in-law, has responded to the vulnerability in another and in so doing opens the door to the possibility of a new kinship. Ruth is thus redeemed as 'the other.' Kristen writes "Ruth enables the opening of the patriarchal masculine with the troubling, foreign, feminine presence."<sup>1</sup> Ruth remains a foreigner but is included in the family line.
- 3:12 Boaz has recognized his responsibility and considers himself, Naomi AND Ruth to be family. But there is a public dimension to family which also must be acknowledged and done right, and so he must also draw attention to the existence of a 'nearer relative.' It's almost as if he says "If we're going to do this, we're going to do it right!"
- 3:13 Boaz has had his understanding of kinship and family expanded but he also has a new insight into how the law of *yibbum* or levirate marriage expanded. He is concerned not for the strict application of the law but the application of the spirit of the law also (see the material on the role of narrative and the adjustment of law and tradition).
- 3:15-18 As Boaz measures out a share of barley into Ruth's shawl it is a sign and a promise that he understands the totality of his responsibilities to both women. If he marries Ruth, he is

also taking Naomi. Or at least Ruth reads it in this way, for it is not recorded that Boaz actually said what Ruth reports to Naomi. There is also a possible development in Ruth's understanding of the world. Twersky Reimer writes, "By telling Naomi that the six measures of barley given to her by Boaz were given out of concern for her mother-in-law, Ruth assimilates Boaz's action into her worldview, insisting that the chesed that matters most to her has to do with personal devotion to the live woman and not the dead male."<sup>2</sup>

- There is also a beautiful metaphor of promise here. Ruth lifts her apron and it is filled with grain so that as she walks home she walks with the look and the gait of a pregnant woman. She carries actual fullness with her and the promise of a more profound fullness. Thus the chapter ends in stark contrast to the ending of the previous one where both women were silent and isolated. And the chapter which opened with the plans of Naomi now ends with the promise of a complete transformation to a new status in the community.

### ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Good questions help uncover hidden things in the text, like motive and intention, or patterns and connections. All of this helps towards better understanding.

- Does it matter to the story whether or not sex is involved in the encounter on the threshing floor? If yes, how? If not, why not?
- How does Ruth balance both her loyalty to her dead husband with her commitment to Naomi?
- What practical, family or legal considerations might Boaz need to take into account in considering whether or not to create a place at the family table for Ruth?

### EXPLORING A LITTLE DEEPER

As we move from the text to the world and the time we live in we need to do a little bit more imaginative thinking about what we're reading. Sometimes this comes quickly, at other times we need to spend a bit more effort in reflection, contemplation or conversation to make some connections.

- In Chapter 2 Boaz prays for Ruth (2:12) and in Chapter 3 he becomes the answer to his own prayer (3:9-13). Are there ways in which we as people of faith or as communities, through our prayers and best aspirations, have avoided responsibility for vulnerable people.
- How does the encounter on the threshing room floor help you understand the plight of vulnerable people.
- In what ways might this story help us understand the proper balance between loyalty to history and commitment to the present?
- Who might you consider difficult to include as ‘family’ in the national debate around migration? Does this story challenge your view in any way?

### DISCOVERING A RESPONSE

All the thinking and talking and reflection should lead somewhere—this is our response to the text and is an attempt to discover what we should do now. This is the “so what?” of the text.

- Think now about ways in which you, your church and/ or your community could become the answer to your best prayers and aspirations for vulnerable people in your community after Brexit.
- If you were challenged to include a group previously excluded how might you go about doing that? §

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Caroline Bruce “Response-ability: Identity in Alterity in the Book of Ruth,” from [https://www.academia.edu/6091467/The\\_book\\_of\\_Ruth](https://www.academia.edu/6091467/The_book_of_Ruth) accessed on 15 February 2018, 19

<sup>2</sup> Gail Twersky Reimer, “Her Mother’s House” in *Reading Ruth, Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (ed. Judith A Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, Ballentine Books, New York 1994) 102-103

## CROSSING BORDERS RUTH 4: A COMPLICATED END

### READING THE TEXT

**1** Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat down there just as the guardian-redeemer he had mentioned came along. Boaz said, “Come over here, my friend, and sit down.” So he went over and sat down.

**2** Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, “Sit here,” and they did so. **3** Then he said to the guardian- redeemer, “Naomi, who has come back from

Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our relative Elimelek. 4 I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line.”

“I will redeem it,” he said.

5 Then Boaz said, “On the day you buy the land from Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the dead man’s widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property.” 6 At this, the guardian-redeemer said, “Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it.” 7 (Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalising transactions in Israel.) 8 So the guardian-redeemer said to Boaz, “Buy it yourself.” And he removed his sandal.

9 Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, “Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelek, Kilion and Mahlon. 10 I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon’s widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from his hometown. Today you are witnesses!”

11 Then the elders and all the people at the gate said, “We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together

built up the family of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. 12 Through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.”

13 So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. 14 The women said to Naomi: “Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! 15 He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth.”

16 Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. 17 The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!" And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. This, then, is the family line of Perez: Perez was the father of Hezron, Hezron the father of Ram, Ram the father of Amminadab, Amminadab the father of Nahshon, Nahshon the father of Salmon, Salmon the father of Boaz, Boaz the father of Obed, Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David.

## CONSIDERING THE BACKGROUND

Sometimes it helps to have a little of the background to what we're reading. That may be a little more detail about the original language, or some detail to understand the cultural setting. It all helps to get a better understanding about what's happening or being said in the text we read.

- The Hebrew word *ge'ula* (redemption) occurs 14 times in various forms in this chapter. It acts as a parallel to *teshuva* (repentance or return) in chapter 1. It reminds the reader that *teshuva* is our movement towards God and *ge'ula* is God's movement towards us.
- In 4:4-6 appears that Boaz takes a tradition or law within Judah that is designed to provide protection economically and socially for Judahite women who have been widowed, and he expands its application to include Ruth, a foreigner. Technically the law applies neither to Naomi nor to Ruth, but Boaz acts as if it does. Presumably he does this because he knows, and he knows the community knows, of the good character of Ruth (3:10-11). And in a sense he appears to argue that if the Law doesn't provide protection for people like Ruth, and include her within its scope, then it should do, and if necessary it should be expanded or adjusted to do so.
- 4:10 Boaz' intention is honorable. He goes through this elaborate ceremony in order to protect the names of Elimelech and Mahlon, so that the names of the dead can live on in the community. What becomes clear in the story of course, is that their names disappear altogether. The actions of Boaz have the effect of preserving his name both in the folklore of the community (as told in the book of Ruth) and in the line of David. Ruth's name is preserved also, again in the lore of the community though not in the official biography (4:18-22).

- 4:11 The Elders bless Boaz for his purchase of Ruth and align her with the matriarchs assuming that a woman's strongest desire is for children. They also associate the blessing of fertility with the continuity of a name.
- 4:12 The introduction of Tamar here means that the reader is faced with three stories of women behaving in unusual ways. First there is the immediate story of Ruth, but secondly, this story also reminds us that Ruth happens to be a Moabite whose origins come from the incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters. Thirdly there's the story of Tamar who dressed as a prostitute to seduce Judah. In all three stories women had to resort to desperate measures to get men to do what they were required to do.
- 4:13 There are more common biblical phrases to describe the end of a long period of childlessness. God is sometimes described as "remembering" the woman, or God "opens her womb." The phrase here is literally "the LORD gave her conception" referring neither to a biological problem to be corrected nor to prayers that must be answered. Twersky Reimer writes, "Here God intervenes not to facilitate a longed-for conception, but almost it seems to force one. The absence of any description of Ruth's joy over birth or her maternal responsibilities—she neither names her child nor nurses him—reinforces the possibility that divine intervention was necessitated by Ruth's reluctance to become a mother."<sup>1</sup> The narrator essentially concludes Ruth's story with this line (again assuming this was the zenith of the aspiration of a woman). The narrator also concludes the whole book with a genealogy (4:18-22) which celebrates the birth and the patrilineal line of Perez to David. Ruth disappeared once she gave birth. But there is an alternative ending offered by the women of the town.
- 4:14-17 Naomi is finally truly restored to herself. Strangely, the primary relationship of adult and newborn is with the grandmother. Understandable I suppose when one remembers that it was her need, her journey from life to death that sets the pattern for the story. The blessing of the women is thus addressed to Naomi (4:14). The child becomes Naomi's *go'el*. And he will restore Naomi because Ruth, her daughter-in-law, "who is more to you than seven sons has borne him."
- Ruth is not accepted and made worthy because of bearing a son, she is already worthy (3:11). The child is made worthy and is of benefit to his grandmother because of the devoted affection of his mother for his

grandmother.” The importance of the women with no power or status or official legal function for the blessing of family sets the story in marked contrast with the subsequent genealogy in which only the men are mentioned. Once again, family is defined by mutual relationships of affection and commitment.”<sup>2</sup>

- This alternative ending falls between the ending of Ruth’s story and the genealogical list. The women realize that it is Naomi who is fulfilled by the birth of the child, for though the child is born “of” Ruth he is born “to” Naomi. The women realize that the birth is not just about the carrying on of a lineage (though they do acknowledge it in 4:14). They know that the child will renew Naomi in her old age and help her to recover her original name. “Can this really be Naomi?” (1:19) is transformed by “a son is born to Naomi” (4:17).
- In reality the women are more concerned with Naomi than they are with Ruth, but they reveal something of their attitude to Ruth in their brief comment about her. They speak not about her maternal love for her newly born son, but of her love for Naomi; “your daughter- in-law who loves you and is better to you than seven sons.” They recognize the degree to which Ruth has undermined the patriarchal premise that structures the whole of the narrative, that women are fulfilled by sons.
- The narrative does provide a structural and linguistic hint to this as well. In 1:2 the names of the sons are ordered Mahlon and Kilion. In 1:4 their wives are ordered Orpah and Ruth. It is reasonable to assume that Orpah has married Mahlon and Ruth has married Kilion. Yet in 4:10 Ruth is described as Mahlon’s widow. Twersky Reimer says that this is significant in that it suggests that Ruth was not personally defined by her husband.<sup>3</sup>
- 4:18-22 The text, having been utterly concerned with having children now switches and all the women disappear. And in this miraculous world, the men do all the begetting! Women are no longer important as the men take power.
- “The child who was born to Ruth as *go’el* to Naomi, becomes *go’el* to the whole community as one of the ancestors of David. The implications are clear. Without family redefined, there can be no promised future for the nation, no messianic promise for the world. The salvation of the world depends upon this redefined notion of family that celebrates the inclusion of a foreign enemy, an immigrant widow, as daughter-in-law, wife, and finally mother.

Because family is taken out of the categories of property law and firmly ensconced in the category of covenant and commitment, promise is possible. The recognition of family, newly defined as growing out of acts of love and devotion and inclusive of persons whom the law might be apt to exclude, marks the book of Ruth as a crucial witness to the often overlooked radical nature of the biblical view of family.”<sup>4</sup>

## ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Good questions help uncover hidden things in the text, like motive and intention, or patterns and connections. All of this helps towards better understanding.

- Throughout this story Ruth appears to be a decisive and determined woman conscious of her own power and agency. She speaks and acts in every other chapter of the book yet here in chapter 4 she is silent, compliant, and things happen around her and to her. How do you think this would have felt? Why might she have suddenly gone quiet?
- After all the struggle and the suffering, what, if anything, has changed in Bethlehem for women like Naomi or Ruth or the unnamed women?

## EXPLORING A LITTLE DEEPER

As we move from the text to the world and the time we live in we need to do a little bit more imaginative thinking about what we’re reading. Sometimes this comes quickly, another times we need to spend a bit more effort in reflection, contemplation or conversation to make some connections.

- One possibly way of reading the implications of this text is that in the pursuit of *chesed* or lovingkindness, all sorts of unusual, even unorthodox, ‘family’ arrangements are possible. And not just temporary arrangements, but wholesale permanent adjustments. This is evident in the fact that the ‘official’ genealogy of David includes this story. what are the implications for discussions on the island of Ireland?
- In what ways might the motivations, events or outcomes of this chapter challenge contemporary Christians?

## DISCOVERING A RESPONSE

All the thinking and talking and reflection should lead somewhere—this is our response to the text and is an attempt to discover what we should do now. This is the “so what?” of the text.

- The law of levirate marriage as originally understood did not embrace Ruth because she was a foreigner, yet Boaz acts to extend it in the light of her vulnerability and her good character. Law in the Hebrew bible was intended to ensure kindness in the community, yet in this instance, the unintended outcome of a strict application was unkindness. This was motivation enough for Boaz to seek to change it. What are the implications of his actions for us as a community facing into our border issues? §

<sup>1</sup> Gail Twersky Reimer “Her Mother’s House” in *Reading Ruth, Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (ed. Judith A Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, Ballentine Books, New York 1994) 103-104

<sup>2</sup> Diane Jacobson, “Redefining Family in the Book of Ruth,” *Word & World* 33, 1, Winter 2013 10-11

<sup>3</sup> Twersky Reimer “Her Mother’s House” 102 <sup>4</sup> Jacobson, “Redefining Family,” 11