

RUTH

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Introduction

In the Christian Old Testament, the book of Ruth is located after the book of Judges and before 1 Samuel, most likely because it is set during the time of the judges (Ruth 1:1), but before King David comes on the scene in 1 Samuel. In the Tanak, the Jewish Bible, the book is found in its third canonical section, known as the Writings, and is part of the five Megillot (Scrolls) that are read at different times during the Jewish liturgical calendar. Ruth is read during the feast of Shavuot (Feast of Weeks), fifty days after the feast of Passover.

The book narrates the story of Ruth, a foreign woman from Moab who journeys with her widowed mother-in-law Naomi to Judah, where she meets her future husband Boaz and becomes the ancestress of the great King David. The book was written either as an apology for the Moabite ancestry of David (ca. tenth century BCE) or during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (fifth century BCE), when intermarriages between Judeans and the indigenous peoples of Yehud (Judah) became an acute concern. Although often read as a tender love story between a man and woman, the book covers a greater range of social relationships: husband/wife, mother/son, mother-in-law/daughter-in-law, owner/overseer/laborers, resident/foreigner, native/immigrant, and so forth. How one reads Ruth depends on one's context and social location. For example, readers in cultures such as China, where mother-in-law/daughter-in-law relations are quite conflicted, will have different readings of the book of Ruth than those in which this relationship is more harmonious.

The book of Ruth has a rich interpretive history (Koosed), especially in music (Leneman). For an imaginative retelling of the Ruth, Orpah, and Naomi story that takes into account the various interpretations of biblical scholarship, see Brenner 2005.

Ruth 1:1-22: To Moab and Back

■ THE TEXT IN ITS ANCIENT CONTEXT

The book of Ruth begins with a spare report of the who, what, where, when, and why. During the time of the judges, a famine in the land compels Elimelech from Bethlehem to take his wife Naomi and two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, to live in Moab, where the sons marry Moabite women. After ten years Elimelech and his two sons die, leaving Naomi with her two daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. Hearing that Judah has become fertile again, Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem. She encourages her daughters-in-law to return to their “mother’s house.” Although Orpah leaves, Ruth declares her desire to remain with Naomi. Both return as widows to Bethlehem during the barley harvest.

The Genesis ancestral narratives record several migrations to foreign lands because of famine (12:10; 26:1; 41:57; 42–43). Elimelech’s family thus become strangers in a strange land, just as Ruth will become a foreigner in Judah as the story progresses. The choice to emigrate to Moab would have provoked negative associations in the implied reader. According to Gen. 19:37, its people can be traced back to an incestuous relationship between Lot and one of his daughters. Because of their incestuous origins, no Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD (Deut. 23:3-4).

Although the preferred marriage in Israel was within one’s family lineage and ethnic group (known as endogamy), Mahlon and Chilion espoused Moabite women. Marriages with foreign women were often disparaged in Israel, because they were thought to lead to idolatry (1 Kings 11; 18). Moabite women were especially censured for using their sexuality to lead Israel astray (Num. 25:1-5). During the Persian period, the marital policies of Ezra and Nehemiah condemned intermarriage with foreign women (Ezra 9–10; Neh. 13:23-31). Some scholars think that the book of Ruth was written to counteract their strict interdictions, by highlighting a Moabite female convert to Israel, one who will be the ancestress to King David.

In 1:11-13, Naomi declares that she can no longer bear sons because of her age, and even if she could have sons, it would be foolish for her daughters-in-law to wait for them to grow up. These verses have been used to support the idea that the marriage between Ruth and Boaz was a levirate union, in which a levir, the closest male relative of a deceased husband, was duty-bound to marry the widow (Deut. 25:5-10). Naomi’s main point, however, is that she is just too old to give birth to sons for Ruth and Orpah. She does not mention the possibility of levirs in Judah, who would be obliged to marry them as widows. This lack of disclosure is significant, raising questions about Naomi’s motives for wanting her daughters-in-law to return to Moab.

The Hebrew verb used to describe Ruth “clinging” to Naomi in 1:14 is the same one used in Gen. 2:24 to describe a man “clinging” to his wife in marriage and becoming “one flesh” with her. Ruth declares her commitment in a well-known speech that culminates in her desire to die and be buried in the same land as Naomi (1:16-17). Although most scholars interpret these verses as a literary expression of fidelity, others suggest that they may refer to a contractual relationship in which Ruth works for Naomi in some capacity in Judah (Brenner in Brenner 1999; Yee).

■ THE TEXT IN THE INTERPRETIVE TRADITION

Even though there is no value judgment in the biblical text on Elimelech's migration to Moab, some rabbis have argued that Elimelech was a wealthy man who could have fed the whole country with food for ten years. However, he fled to Moab instead of helping the poor out of his own bounty and was justly punished (*Ruth Rabbah* 1:4; Rashi). While the text does not disparage the intermarriage between Elimelech's sons and Moabite women, the Targum on Ruth 1:4 says that they died because "they transgressed the decree of the Word of the LORD and took unto themselves foreign wives, of the daughters of Moab." Orpah herself is raped by "a hundred heathen" on the night when she separates from Naomi. She is also identified as the mother of the Philistine Goliath (*Ruth Rabbah* 2:20).

One of the main interpretive difficulties that confronted the rabbis was in dealing with a Moabite woman who, because of her ethnicity, was forbidden to enter the assembly of the LORD (Deut. 23:3), yet became a praiseworthy character and ancestor of King David. To explain these incongruities, the Targum on Ruth 1:4 and *Ruth Rabbah* 2:9 describe Ruth as the daughter of Eglon, king of Moab (see Judg. 3:12). David's line thus has royal blood on both paternal and maternal sides. Turning her back on Moab and embracing the God of Israel, Ruth becomes the exemplar of the perfect convert (see Targum on Ruth 1:16; 2:16, 11; 3:10), teaching Israel the true meaning of *hesed* ("loving-kindness": *Ruth Rabbah* 2:14).

Philip Hermogenes Calderon's painting *Ruth and Naomi* (1902) interprets their relationship homoerotically, by depicting a very feminine-looking Ruth passionately embracing a masculine-looking Naomi. The 1960 celluloid adaptation *The Story of Ruth* creates a backstory of Ruth as a Moabite princess who was sold by her parents to be raised in the temple of Chemosh.

■ THE TEXT IN CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSION

Ruth's heartfelt speech to Naomi in 1:16-17 has become a popular reading in heterosexual Christian wedding services. Furthermore, because two women are involved in this intimate relationship, these verses have also been adopted in same-gender blessing and marriage ceremonies. In the movie *Fried Green Tomatoes*, the character Ruth sends her female "friend" the text of Ruth 1:16 to inform her of her desire to leave her abusive husband and live with her.

Even though the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law in the book seems to be amiable and collaborative, in Western cultures these relations can be strained, and in some Asian cultures, downright oppressive. Care must be taken in imposing Ruth and Naomi's relationship on present-day relations between mothers and daughters-in-law in exploitative ways.

Migration to foreign lands because of famine, drought, and poverty still occurs in many parts of the world today. The book of Ruth presents a positive picture of assimilation in the intermarriage between Judeans and Moabites and the devotion between mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. Nevertheless, we must recognize that migrants often face intolerance and great hostility from the host country as they try to assimilate into new surroundings and cultures, and partake of their resources.

Ruth 2:1-23: In the Fields by Day

■ THE TEXT IN ITS ANCIENT CONTEXT

Chapter 2 opens with the detail that Naomi had a prominent wealthy kinsman on her husband's side whose name was Boaz, leading the reader to suspect that this character will play a major role in the coming narrative. Gleaning the land's leftovers was an institutionalized social practice to provide for the most vulnerable and impoverished in the community: the alien, orphan, and widow (Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22; Deut. 24:19). Entitled to glean as both a foreigner and a widow, Ruth obtains Naomi's consent to glean in the fields with the express purpose of finding a patron of some sort who will look favorably on her (2:2). And "as luck would have it" (JPS), Ruth ends up gleaning in the field belonging to the self-same Boaz, who takes notice of her and finds out from his overseer that she is the Moabite who returned with Naomi (2:3-6). Boaz tells Ruth not to glean in anyone else's field, but to keep close to his young women and to where they reap. He orders his men not to "bother" her, perhaps because female reapers were targets of sexual harassment, and instructs Ruth to drink water from the vessels the men have drawn (2:8-9).

Ruth prostrates herself before Boaz, wondering why she has "found favor" in his sight despite being a foreigner, recalling 2:2, where she hopes to encounter someone "in whose sight I may find favor." Boaz responds that he has heard of what she has done in leaving her native land and family to come with her mother-in-law to a strange land and people. He prays that the God of Israel, under whose wings Ruth finds refuge, will reward Ruth for her all her deeds (2:10-12). These divine maternal wings (*kanap*, see Deut. 32:11; Ps. 17:7-9; 36:6-8; Matt. 23:37) will have a human male complement in 3:9, when Ruth asks Boaz to spread his protective cloak (*kanap*) over her as her next of kin.

When Ruth returns home with a large stash of barley, an astounded Naomi asks where she gleaned and invokes a blessing on the man who took notice of Ruth. Upon discovering that Ruth's patron is Boaz, she tells Ruth that this man is a near relation, more precisely, a *go'el*, one with the right to redeem. Redemption in the Bible refers to the responsibility to assist impoverished relatives during times of hardship (Eskenazi, liii-liv). Because Naomi did not tell Ruth that there was a close male redeemer in Bethlehem and did not warn her about the dangers women faced in the fields during harvest, some interpreters think that Naomi was ambivalent about Ruth's welfare (Eskenazi, 29; Sakenfeld, 38-39; Nielsen, 64). In any case, Ruth continues to live with her mother-in-law and glean in Boaz's field, close to his young women until the end of the barley and wheat harvest (2:19-23).

■ THE TEXT IN THE INTERPRETIVE TRADITION

Why does Ruth catch Boaz's eye? Although the biblical text does not describe Ruth's appearance, later rabbis comment that Ruth was beautiful, modest, less greedy, and did not flirt with the reapers, compared to the other women in the field (Ibn Ezra, *Ruth Rabbah* 4.6; Rashi). The Targum to Ruth expands on Boaz's speech in 2:11 with the details that God's prohibition of intermarriage with Moab affected only the men, not the women, and that Boaz had received a prophecy that kings and prophets will be Ruth's descendants because of the kindness she has shown to her mother-in-law.

Perhaps the most famous literary reference to Ruth gleaning in the fields is in John Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale," where the nightingale's song that Keats hears is "the selfsame song that found a path / through the sad heart of Ruth when, sick for home, / She stood in tears amid the alien corn" (65–67).

■ THE TEXT IN CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSION

U.S. agriculture depends greatly on immigrant menial laborers, many of whom enter the country illegally. They are subject to poor working conditions, lack of medical benefits, sexual harassment, and the threat of deportation. Some feminists have interpreted Ruth from the perspective of migrant foreign workers and their lower-class status in their host country (Brenner in Brenner 1999; Yee).

The ancient biblical practice of gleaning still continues today, causing us to reflect on those who must resort to gleaning in our world in order to survive: the global poor and destitute. One major area of food waste in the United States is in fields where crops that do not meet top quality standards are left to rot on the fields or to be plowed under. Some 96 billion pounds of food are wasted each year, according to some statistics. A number of humanitarian organizations, such as the Society of St. Andrew, coordinate thousands of volunteers from many different social groups to glean the fields to deliver food to the hungry. Gleaning not only occurs in agricultural fields but also appears in the heartrending face of urban dumpster diving, as depicted in Agnès Varda's 2001 documentary *The Gleaners and I*.

Ruth 3:1-18: In the Fields at Night

■ THE TEXT IN ITS ANCIENT CONTEXT

According to 2:23, the grain harvests are coming to an end, and so with them is Ruth and Naomi's economic livelihood. Naomi therefore suggests a daring plan to secure financial security for Ruth and, implicitly, for herself. Her instructions that Ruth wash, anoint herself, and don her best clothes can signify the end to Ruth's period of mourning (2 Sam. 12:20, a preparation for a wedding celebration (Ezek. 16:9-10), or even sexual seduction (Jth. 10:3-4). Ruth is then supposed to go down to the threshing floor secretly, mark where Boaz lies down after eating and drinking, and in an audacious act, uncover his feet and lie down (3:3-4).

The whole encounter between Ruth and Boaz is filled with sexual innuendo and ambiguity (3:6-16). The meeting occurs at night, the favorite time of many carnal assignations. The threshing floor is associated with illicit sexuality (see Hos. 9:10). Although it can simply mean to "lie down" to sleep, the verb *shkb* can also imply sexual intercourse (Gen. 19:33-35). Its eight occurrences in this chapter highlight the eroticism of the scene (v. 4, three times; v. 7, twice; vv. 8, 13-14). Ruth is instructed to *uncover* Boaz's *feet* and "lie down" (3:4, 7). The verb "uncover" (*qlh*) evokes unlawful sexual intercourse (Lev. 18:6-18; Deut. 23:1; 27:20); "feet" can refer to genitalia (Isa. 6:2; 7:20). Nevertheless, the text is completely silent about whether Ruth and Boaz actually had sexual intercourse that night, leaving it to the imaginations of many of readers and interpreters.

When Boaz awakens at midnight and blurts out “Who are you?” the woman lying at his “feet” informs him of her identity and bids him to spread his cloak (*kanap*) over her, because he is a *go’el*, a redeeming kinsman (3:8-9, JPS translation). Just as Boaz evokes God’s blessing on Ruth, under whose wings (*kanapim*) she has come for refuge (2:12), so now Ruth requests the same patronage from Boaz. Because *kanap* as a “cloak” or “skirt” is spread over a woman who will become one’s wife (cf. Ezek. 16:8), one can also say that Ruth is proposing marriage to Boaz, as well as asking for his protection.

Boaz responds by blessing Ruth, praising her for her acts of *hesed* (meaning “loyalty” in this instance), the first by accompanying her mother-in-law to Judah, and the second by choosing him as *go’el* over younger men, whether rich or poor. Ruth picks someone within Elimelech’s line when she doesn’t have to, thus reinforcing her kinship with Naomi. Boaz agrees to do what Ruth asks, but points out that there is “another kinsman more closely related” than he. If this kinsman will not agree to be a redeemer-kin for Ruth, Boaz will do so on her behalf (3:10-13).

Ruth remains the rest of the night “lying at his feet until dawn,” leaving the reader to speculate what might have happened between the two during that interval. That Ruth’s nocturnal appearance at the threshing floor was unconventional and perhaps even scandalous is evident when Boaz says, “It must not be known that the woman came to the threshing floor” (3:14). Boaz gives Ruth a significant supply of grain, which she carries back to Naomi. After relaying to Naomi what Boaz has done for her, she explains the gift of grain as Boaz’s intention that Ruth not return to her mother-in-law empty-handed, even though this detail is not recorded in their interchange. This is the last time Ruth speaks in the book. Her fate now rests with the man who “will settle the matter today” (3:16-18).

■ THE TEXT IN THE INTERPRETIVE TRADITION

Rashi has Ruth questioning Naomi’s orders: “If I go down all dressed up, anyone who meets me and sees me will think I am a harlot.’ Therefore she went down in the first place to the threshing-floor and afterwards adorned herself as her mother-in-law had instructed” (Beattie, 107). To settle the problem of Ruth’s uncovering Boaz’s “feet,” Salmon ben Yeroham says that Ruth really uncovers her face, which was covered to conceal her identity as she went through the threshing floor (Beattie, 47). The rabbis are thus at pains to exclude any possibility that Ruth and Boaz had sex that night. Commenting on 3:7, they highlight that when Boaz was “in a contented mood” (lit. “his heart was good”), “he occupied himself with the words of the Torah,” and that he was looking for a wife (*Ruth Rabbah* 5:15), and that he “blessed the name of the Lord” (Targum on Ruth). According to the Targum on Ruth 3:8, when Boaz sees Ruth sleeping at his feet, he “subdues his evil inclination” and resists drawing closer to her, like Joseph who refused to sleep with Potiphar’s wife, and Paltiel who put a knife between himself and Saul’s daughter Michal. *Ruth Rabbah* 7:1 also highlights Boaz’s virtue in not giving in to sexual temptation.

Several artists render Ruth sleeping at Boaz’s feet literally: for example, an anonymous illustrator in the Wenzel Bible (Codex 2760); James Tissot, *Ruth and Boaz* (1900); and Marc Chagall, *Ruth at the Feet of Boaz* (1960).

■ THE TEXT IN CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSION

While the biblical text is circumspect about the matter, many Western readers in the twenty-first century most likely will have no problem imagining Ruth and Boaz having sex on the threshing floor that fateful night. Explicit sexuality can be found in many aspects of Western culture, such as film, television, advertising, books, and so forth. However, this was not the case in ancient Israel and is not for a good part of today's world where sexual expression among the genders is strictly enforced and can have insidious undersides. We must never forget the desperate circumstances of poverty that compelled Naomi and Ruth to transgress the norms of their culture to carry out such a scandalous plan. Ruth, as a poor foreign woman, already a target for sexual harassment, secretly approaching an important landowner in the middle of the night, had the most to lose. For many destitute women today, marriage or concubinage to a wealthy man are their only sure routes out of poverty. Others must resort to or be forced to selling their bodies to men who sexually exploit them. While the book of Ruth ends "happily," it could have ended in humiliation, rejection, and sexual exploitation, which many impoverished women experience today in order to survive (Sakenfeld 2002).

Ruth 4:1-21: At the City Gate

■ THE TEXT IN ITS ANCIENT CONTEXT

In this chapter, Boaz cleverly maneuvers this nearer kinsman to decline his role as redeemer-kin for Ruth before the elders at the city gate. Precisely *how* Boaz negotiates the transaction is problematic. In the first place, Boaz tells the nearer kinsman that Naomi is selling a parcel of land that belonged to Elimelech. The land redemption laws in Lev. 25:25-28 specify that the next-of-kin (*go'el*) must buy the land of an impoverished "brother" to prevent its leaving the family lineage. However, why wasn't Naomi's piece of land mentioned earlier? Its economic value would have saved Ruth from the backbreaking work of gleaning. Second, why wasn't this nearer-kinsman mentioned earlier as a possible redeemer-kin for Naomi and Ruth? Was he simply a literary functionary brought in to create suspense in the "romantic" story of Ruth and Boaz? Third, although many interpret Boaz's coupling of land redemption with the obligation of a levir to marry the widow of the dead man (Deut. 25:5-10), the redemption of land does not require marriage with the widow of the deceased kinsman. These are two separate issues. Furthermore, the ritual of the sandal described in Deut. 25:9 is enacted between the rejected widow against the man who refused to be her levir, humiliating him by spitting in his face. The ritual in Ruth 4:7 is a more understated legal transaction between Boaz and the nearer-kinsman. Ruth plays no part in the negotiations.

Despite these and other difficulties, Boaz successfully declares before the elders and all the people that he has acquired the piece of land that belonged to Naomi's dead husband and sons (4:9) and has also acquired Ruth the Moabite as wife, in order to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance (4:10). The elders and the people acknowledge the legality of the proceedings as Boaz's witnesses, blessing Ruth with the fertility of Rachel and Leah (the mothers of the tribes of Israel).

The people's blessing concludes ironically with references to the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah (4:11-12). Tamar was a widow who disguised herself as a prostitute to seduce her father-in-law Judah, who had refused his levirate obligations by withholding her marriage with his surviving son (Genesis 38). Both Ruth and Tamar are widows. Both use socially unorthodox means to form an alliance with older men who will secure their economic and social future.

Although the "Moabite" designation is dropped from Ruth when she marries Boaz and conceives a son (4:13), one cannot presume that Ruth has been completely assimilated into the Judean community. She actually disappears from the story at this point, and the narrative turns to Naomi. The women bless God, who has provided Naomi with a redeemer-kin (*go'el*). Without naming Ruth, they praise the daughter-in-law who loves Naomi and is worth more to her than seven sons. It is significant to note that this praise of Ruth by the women appears only after she gives birth to a son (4:14-15). These women did not acknowledge Ruth when she returned with Naomi from Moab (2:19). It is Naomi, not Ruth, who becomes the child's nurse, and it is the local women, not Ruth, who names the child "Obed" (4:16-17). The book ends with the genealogy of Perez, concluding with Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David. Although not specified as such, Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of King David.

■ THE TEXT IN THE INTERPRETIVE TRADITION

The unnamed redeemer-kin in 3:13 and 4:1-6 is given the name Tob in rabbinic literature, where he is sometimes described as the uncle of Mahlon and Chilion, while Boaz is the son of another uncle, and thus cousin to Elimelech's sons. As an uncle, Tob takes precedence over Boaz in inheritance and redemption. Other rabbis argue that Tob and Boaz were brothers, but since Tob was older, he took precedence. Some rabbis speculate that Tob refuses to marry Ruth because he was poor and had his own children to support, and could not be saddled with another wife. Another view has Tob's wife threatening divorce if he takes another spouse (Beattie, 79-82). The Targum to Ruth 4:7-8 has Boaz taking off his right glove to seal the transaction. In the biblical text, the object of exchange is a sandal, not glove, and it is unclear who removes it.

Matthew 1:5 places Boaz, Ruth, and Obed into Jesus' genealogy. Ruth joins four other women in the ancestral list: Tamar (Genesis 38), Rahab (Joshua 2), the wife of Uriah (Bathsheba, 2 Samuel 11), and Mary the mother of Jesus. Why these women? Perhaps because there is a whiff of sexual unconventionality surrounding these women. Tamar disguises herself as a hooker by the side of the road to seduce her father-in-law to fulfill his levirate obligations. Rahab actually is a prostitute. Bathsheba commits adultery with David, Mary is a pregnant unwed teenager, and Ruth places herself in a compromising position on the threshing floor with Boaz.

■ THE TEXT IN CONTEMPORARY DISCUSSION

In contrast to the Disney princess Snow White, who waits longingly for her prince to come, women in Western societies usually do not have to marry in order to become financially secure. They can acquire upper levels of education in order to make a living for themselves. They can inherit their

family's resources. They usually do not operate under the social and sexual strictures that prohibited certain gender relations in ancient Israel. However, the story of Ruth supports attitudes regarding female dependence on men and the social necessity to marry in order to live in a financially safe environment. Naomi could not inherit the land owned by her husband, which had to be purchased by a male "redeemer." The Cinderella story of finding and seducing a rich man who will become her patron is often the hope of many impoverished women today in the third world. Their hopes are usually dashed when confronted with realities of sexual exploitation and human trafficking (<http://facts.randomhistory.com/human-trafficking-facts.html>). Although Ruth's story ends "happily" in that she "gets her guy" in the end and becomes upwardly mobile, this is not the case for many poor women today, thousands of years later, whose stories often end quite tragically.

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