

“Ruth” by Gale Yee

Reviewed by Diane G. Chen, Palmer Theological Seminary

In Gale’s note to us, she indicated that her intended audience comprises of seminarians and students in theological departments. I would also include pastors who may not have time to read technical commentaries and do a full blown exegesis for sermon preparation, and lay teachers of the church who would need something heftier than devotional commentaries for a Bible study or a Sunday School lesson. This is precisely the audience whom I love to teach and for whom I love to write, which makes me a positively biased respondent to this *Fortress Commentary*.

Since the Old Testament is not my field, it is not difficult to align myself with Gale’s target readers as I read her article on Ruth. I remember thinking to myself, “Oh, really! I never knew that! That’s interesting. Hm!” I thoroughly enjoy this piece. It caused me to smile, raise my eyebrows, or let out an ah-ha here and there. Thank you, Gale, for a rich gift in a small package. You model the art of “less is more” by selecting things that you must comment on, and letting go of everything else under the sun that has ever been written on the Book of Ruth – something OCD scholars often are unable to do. I arrive at the last paragraph feeling well fed and motivated to further ponder the questions you raise. Your article provides much food for thought and leaves a very good aftertaste.

Ancient context, interpretive tradition, and contemporary discussion – this three-pronged approach is comprehensive and ambitious, especially within a very restricted word limit. The discussion on **ancient context** alone could have taken up the whole article and some, since rhetorical, cultural, and lexical-grammatical issues are all fair game in this section. There is enough information to reconstruct the narrative in my mind, but there must have been many other interesting tidbits that cannot be included. Gale draws my attention to places where the story actually shows a departure from, rather than an alignment with, normal socio-cultural and legal practices of the time. Exposing the gap between ideal and praxis makes the text ambiguous, and therefore provocative. By the time I get to the end of Gale’s article, Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz all look different. All three become more complex characters in my mind; I actually like them less, in spite of Ruth’s faithfulness, Naomi’s resourcefulness, and Boaz’ generosity. This strikes me as akin to how people are in real life, with motives and actions that

can be praiseworthy and questionable at the same time. After all, many biblical stories are messy and ambivalent. Even with Ruth's happy ending, the loose ends resist domestication, and in some weird way, I respect that. I can't control the story, and I am forced to let it speak for itself.

Much of the data in the **interpretive tradition section** is drawn from rabbinic literature. Going to the Midrash Rabbah and the Targums is a no brainer, since the Hebrew Scripture is the sacred text of the Jews and their discussions would be highly relevant and illuminating. I am quite dismayed, however, to see the extent to which the rabbis filled in the blanks and simply made things up. Granted that they wanted to make sense of the story, I wonder if the rabbis' agendas and how they account for what is not stated in the text end up stifling the original author's point in preserving the story. Nowadays, we call that eisegesis, imposing our own ideas on the text. Apparently this did not bother the rabbis. My indignation is instructive, for it exposes my own bias, favoring one methodology over another. This raises the question of prioritization of interpretive methods – are some methods inherently better, safer, more faithful, or has more integrity than other methods? Perhaps even thinking of it as a hierarchy of interpretive approaches is not helpful. Is a circle of conversation a better way to describe our engagement with the text? Where then are the boundaries between solid biblical interpretive method and an anything-goes type of reader-response?

Gale also makes reference to other sources besides rabbinic writings. Her description of Calderon's painting of Ruth and Naomi sends me right away to the internet to take a look. Indeed that Naomi looks very manly. Poetry is not my thing, so John Keats' Ode to a Nightingale gets no much more than a cursory read. And have I seen the movie Fried Green Tomatoes? Yes I have. But will I go see it again because there's a quote from Ruth? Probably not. I'm not quite sure what else to do with the painting, the poem, and the movie. I wish for a bit more guidance as to what to do with these other ways of interpreting and using the text.

Then I come to the **contemporary discussion section**, in which I am invited to step back, put my world side by side with the world of Ruth, and look for transferable frames. One prominent theme is that of oppression, under which topics such as human trafficking, food shortage, the plight of the poor, migrant workers, new immigrants, and destitute women are subsumed. These challenging issues pull me out of my safe individualized Christian cocoon, and hold me

accountable to the corporate and public nature of Christian discipleship. If I claim to read the Book of Ruth as my sacred text, then what is God calling me to do about the exploitations and inequalities in this world? I cannot say, “Oh, Ruth is a story long time ago,” because elements of Ruth’s story is still played out in our world today. This section does not allow me to walk away from the text unscathed; it forces me to be a responsive and responsible reader.

Now I’d like to offer two short observations concerning the Commentary as a whole.

First, I am not sure how the other books of the OT lend themselves to this 3-pronged structure. I’d think one size doesn’t fit all, and the same template works better with some genres than with others. I’d imagine the commentary on Jonah or Esther to look somewhat like this one on Ruth, but how do you work with Proverbs, Leviticus, or Job?

Second, I am a bit concerned about losing the big picture. We have 4 chapters in Ruth (1, 2, 3, 4), 3 sections per chapter (a, b, c). Gale’s article runs from 1a 1b 1c to 2a 2b 2c to 3a 3b 3c to 4a 4b and 4c. While there is interesting information in each section within the same chapter, I struggle a bit to stay focused. If I were to ignore the sections on interpretive tradition and contemporary discussion, and only read 1a 2a 3a and 4a straight through, it’d be like reading a “normal” commentary. The flow from 1a to 2a to 3a to 4a is held together by the biblical text itself. If I read only 1b 2b 3b and 4b, I’d begin to lose the story line, and if I read only 1c 2c 3c and 4c, I don’t think I could even reconstruct the story line.

Obviously the commentary is designed for us to read all 3 sections in all 4 chapters, and not just the interpretive tradition section or just the contemporary discussion section. But this silly little exercise highlights the benefit of using section a, the ancient context, as the anchor point. Grounded in “a”, we can branch out to “b” and “c” without losing the big picture. Without “a”, “b” and “c” feel like free associations that go in many different direction. The tendency with people in the church is to jump right to the contemporary discussion and start talking back to the text before listening to the text in its ancient context. I hope this layout will encourage readers to start from a, then move to b, then c, and not take interpretive shortcuts. The order, “a”, then “b”, then “c”, makes pedagogical sense.

In biblical interpretation, it is not enough to focus exclusively on the ancient world, nor is it beneficial to engage the text solely through modern lenses. We need both and, ideally,

everything in between, for the living Word of God was as alive then as it is now, across all times and cultures. The *Fortress Commentary* demonstrates for us the richness of hearing the whole spectrum of voices in dialogue with the text. Somewhere, among the voices, we find our points of identification and resonance.

Thanks, Gale, not only for writing this article, but also for co-editing this volume. I hope the commentary on Leviticus will be as interesting as yours!