

It was about twenty years ago that I was a seminary student fresh out of undergraduate, preparing for pastoral ministry. As a science major, the world of academic, theological and biblical studies was a foreign place to me. And early in my seminary studies, I remember seeing Gale Yee's name here and there in different footnotes; it jumped out since it was a familiar Chinese surname. My first thoughts were: Cool, there are Chinese biblical scholars out there. I wonder what they are like? Are they like me or are they totally different people? How did they become bible scholars? Now some near twenty years later, it is ironic that I am one of those Chinese biblical scholars about which I found curious and that I have the privilege to be reviewing Gale's work. There are many levels for which we can evaluate this fine commentary, but today I would like to focus on the pedagogy; so let us put on our teacher hats and consider more closely how Gale's work fits into our present teaching contexts, specifically at the undergraduate and seminary levels.

Like many of the other good, all-in-one commentaries, Gale's work on Ruth introduces the reader to the big picture issues and messages and clarifies the opaque portions. However, where she exceeds other comparable works is her concision and clarity in introducing difficult critical elements without overwhelming students. For example, her survey of the problems associated with the coupling of the kinsmen redemption (Boaz and Mr. So and So [*Peloni Almoni*]) and Elimelech's land redemption can fill many pages in critical commentaries, but undergraduate and entry level seminarians do not need that. What they need is a concise survey that provides the foundation for them to further research these issues and Gale does that exactly by explaining *both* the narrative and historical/legal issues.

In addition, Gale's work, to borrow a metaphor, makes students eat their spinach without them knowing it. Teaching students how to read with a critical eye and

attention-to-detail is one of our most difficult tasks. It cannot be done overnight, it must be a constant exercise. Throughout her commentary, Gale sprinkles in these “critical-reading nuggets” that many all-in-one commentaries often fail to do. For example, Gale mentions more than once the narrative technique of silence: Naomi’s failure to speak of kinsmen redeemers in chapter 1 and 2, and Ruth’s silencing as a character in chapter 4. The narrative usage of silence, made well known by Meir Sternberg’s *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* is a relatively advanced topic, and anyone who has read his book knows that it is not an accessible read regardless of whether one has a PhD or not. These reading skills can also be developed further when teachers take advantage of the interpretive traditions section. When teachers ask why the medieval commentators and ancient translations chose to focus on certain elements of the passage, they can challenge students to think about how these seemingly eccentric, trivial, and/or odd questions and comments are significant for understanding the text. For example, the midrash and Jewish commentaries’ explanation for why the men died in the opening narration of the book is an extremely important question for understanding the book. The students may think that they are just getting a survey of the book of Ruth, but the attentive students will also be acquiring those very valuable reading skills that are often quite difficult to impart.

As teachers in universities with increasingly difficult economic situations, we unfortunately have to think about financial issues. Students these days are shying away from the humanities since they wish to concentrate upon taking classes that give the practical skills that employers desire. Low attendance and cancelled classes threaten the well being of many of our departments. As a result, university teachers will be wise to use textbooks such as this in order to remind students that living well includes the shaping of the person. The commentary’s contemporary discussion of ancient texts

reminds students that the bible, which often is not religiously authoritative for many students, is nevertheless a relevant text for reflecting upon how we choose to live. Undergraduates require classes on ancient texts to be relevant and to make a difference in how they want to mature as people. None of us wish to think about finances when we teach, but this is the sad truth in our present context, but fortunately we have a textbook that allow us to teach what is important to both teachers and students.

Shifting gears from the teaching world to the scholastic world, I would also like to offer some additional thoughts, my own quibbles with Gale's work as a commentator. The following are in the order of the passages.

1. Gale mentions that the book of Ruth opens with a 'sparse report' of who, what, when, etc. Perhaps 'sparse' is less appropriate. I think that this narrative opening is quite essential to the book's message. Gale explains well the anti-foreign sentiment among the implied readers and I would also add that by intimating the notion that these men died on account of their foreign marriages (as did the Jewish traditions), the book of Ruth through its conclusion offers an alternate voice in the scriptures for how foreign marriages can be positive.
2. In Ruth's encounter with Boaz at the threshing floor, the sexual undertones are definitely there, but I am unsure if there is an implicit sense of illicit and unlawful sexual behavior.
 - a. The threshing floor in Hos 9.1 is the place of illicit sexual activity, but I question the author's purpose in wanting to cast Ruth in a negative light. In Jeremiah we have the phrase "under every green tree" as the place for illicit sexual activity but in Song 1.16-17 we also have the couple luxuriating under a lush canopy of trees with no such connotations.

- b. As for uncovering the feet with the Piel of *gllh*, all these references refer to unlawful activity on account of the person being exposed and not on account of the usage of the word itself.
- 3. Gale astutely notes how in the final chapter Ruth drops out, Naomi takes over the narrative, and most importantly how Ruth seems to be marginalized. However, Ruth does not completely drop out and I would argue that the two little clauses in v. 4.13 are extremely important for her positive characterization.

וַיֵּימֶן יְהוָה לָהּ סְרַיִן וַתֵּלֶד בֶּן

The phrase importantly describes how God gave her pregnancy; that is, opened her womb. The narrator could have said just that she bore son, but this phrase is crucial. It aligns Ruth with the matriarchs. Thus in this little phrase we have the narrator's voice that quietly but boldly reaffirms Ruth's prominence in the chapter despite her lack of voice among the speech of the other women.

Again, these are just my quibbles with the commentary. In conclusion, I wish to reiterate how fortunate we are to have this new commentary coming out. It is exactly what we need at the undergraduate and seminary levels. I look forward to its release and the impact it will make in our academy.