



# ETHICS IN CONVERSATION

DECEMBER 2022 | 26.10

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## *Ruth, Romance, Racism*

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Hennie Niemann Jr, *Pensive Woman in Uncertain Times*

The modern church most commonly associates the book of Ruth with romance—a love story after which young women are encouraged to model their search for their very own Boaz. While Ruth and Boaz are models of relational-bedrock attributes such as faithfulness and virtue, in other ways, this is a strange story to vaunt as a romantic ideal. Ruth seems *significantly* younger, with Boaz calling her “daughter” and claiming to be flattered that she didn’t pursue someone more age-appropriate.

Furthermore, Ruth’s interest in Boaz is arranged by Naomi, who wants Ruth to marry for the money—we never learn how Ruth feels about the courtship. It’s not as ideal a romance as is sometimes made out.

It’s a shame that this is the go-to lesson, because if we look beyond it, the book offers valuable critiques of what are still some of our most pressing corporate sins, and these often pass unnoticed.

### **SOCIAL JUSTICE**

Ruth was the official text read during the Feast of Weeks, a barley-harvest festival that celebrates the giving of the Law seven weeks after the exodus. At the heights of celebration of the harvest—a time of prosperity and abundance—Israel is called to remember their slavery and the unmerited grace that gave them the good land that they enjoy.

The connection of Ruth to these events is very apt. Jacob’s family and Ruth’s family both escape famines by fleeing into the surrounding nations, and both families eventually find themselves in desperate need of deliverance. Exodus tells how God freed Israel from slavery in a foreign land, made them a nation, and gave them his Torah. For Ruth and Naomi, God’s deliverance comes about through a *provision written into the Torah*: Ruth goes out gleaning.

The Torah prescribed that landowners allow the poor to *glean*: they could pick for themselves whatever the harvesters had missed. More than this, owners were required not to harvest so efficiently as to make gleaning pointless (Lev 19:9; 23:22). Gleaning allowed the rich to help the poor, and the poor were afforded the dignity of working for their daily bread. Boaz acts lawfully (and indeed generously) in ensuring that Ruth, a foreigner, is able to feed her family off of the good that God has provided for him. To read *this* book during the harvest festival served to remind Israel of God's provision of blessing, of their responsibility to *be* a blessing, and of their own outsider status.

devices are always debatable. However, Hebrew narrative *characteristically* avoids overt moral lessons and prefers its reader to wrest its treasures from the depths; the subtlety of a point is not necessarily a challenge to its importance.

As an example, we are never told how we should judge Naomi's family. Was the departure of Naomi's family to Moab a valid escape, as with that of Jacob, or lack of faith in God's promises? Was it bad for her sons to marry Ruth and Orpah (but good for someone like Rahab to join God's people or for Boaz to marry Ruth)? Was the death of Naomi's sons God's punishment or just one of those



Edwin Long, *Study for Ruth Gathering Wheat*



Jules Guérin, *The Dead Sea and the Mountains of Moab*



Koloman Moser, *Mourning Women*

Ruth confronts us too with several uncomfortable truths. Even in the midst of prosperity, we are to remember our duty of care for those who are in need. Social welfare, mercy and generosity are central to God's self-expression and are written into God's law. For all the hand wringing in evangelicalism about the alleged dangers of social justice, God offers this reminder: faithfulness is expressed by looking out for the vulnerable and taking up the cause of the outsider.

## RACISM<sup>1</sup>

Another contribution of the book of Ruth is its confrontation of prejudice.

It is rare for this aspect of the book to be commented on because so much of its critique emerges from subtleties such as ambiguity and allusion, and such

things? We're not told.

The role that ethnicity plays in this story emerges in several ways. The first is the way in which Ruth is characterised. Even more so than her youth, the story draws regular attention to her ethnicity. Twice the narrator calls her a Moabite woman and a further three times "Ruth the Moabite." That phrase is found on Boaz's lips twice more.

Boaz's tactical deployment of this description serves to underline its pejorative nature. Boaz only refers to Ruth in this way during his negotiation with the kinsman redeemer who is first in line. He purposefully draws his competitor's attention to the fields that he stands to gain by doing his duty—something that the man clearly finds enticing. It is only once Boaz has the man persuaded that he brings up the matter of the woman who comes along with the deal—Ruth *the Moabite*. This seems to be enough to put the man off and he withdraws his agreement to redeem.

1. I don't intend to make any careful distinctions between race and ethnicity; my interest is in the kinds of prejudice that are relevant to racism, nationalism, xenophobia and the like.



Racial prejudice is central also to Naomi's plan to secure a marriage to Boaz. Naomi discovers that a kinsman redeemer has taken an interest in Ruth, so she waits until the height of the harvest festivities and, late at night, sends Ruth to declare marital intentions to—and to obey the instructions of—an inebriated man at a party. This is exactly as questionable as it sounds. We know that this is the Judges period; the appalling abuse of the Levite's concubine takes place at this time just 20 km north in Gibeah. The book of Ruth itself raises the threat of abuse even during the day (2:8–9). Naomi puts Ruth at risk. Moreover, Hosea 9:1 directly associates prostitution with the threshing floor, and Boaz urges Ruth to leave under the cover of dawn so that she is not seen (3:14)—not something that would be required were this an innocent interaction.



Rupert Bunny, *Whither Thou Goest*

So, what is Naomi sending Ruth to do that explains its highly irregular timing?

The answer to this is provided by allusions to Israel's history. The first is to the origins of the Moabites:

In Genesis 19, Lot's daughters find themselves in hiding in the mountains beyond Zoar, and they fear that they will be left without descendants to keep their names alive. So they get their father drunk and conceive by him. One of these children is Moab. Secondly, in Numbers 22–24, the Moabites approach the diviner Balaam in order to have him curse their Israelite enemies, a plan that ultimately leads only to him blessing Israel under YHWH's command. Balaam doesn't give up, however, and he sends Moabite women to entice the Israelite men into immorality, thereby cursing themselves (Num 25; 31:16).

It seems, therefore, that Naomi is sending Ruth the Moabite to *do what the Moabites do*. A nation birthed from bedding a drunken relative. A race of women who'll prostitute themselves to get ahead. Naomi is not as crass as to instruct Ruth to impregnate herself by him—and part of the joy of the story is how not-on-Naomi's-wavelength Ruth is—but this is surely one of the outcomes that Naomi has in mind.

If this seems doubtful to you, a second allusion to Genesis concerns the origins of *Naomi's and Boaz's* family via Perez. Perez appears twice in the book: once in the blessing of the townsfolk: "May your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah ..." (Ruth 4:12), and once in the genealogy at its end.



Casimir Alchimowicz, *Ruth and Boaz*

As sweet as this blessing sounds, Perez's birth has striking similarities to the stories of Moab and of Naomi. Judah had married a Canaanite woman and she had borne him three sons. Tamar was married to the eldest son who died without leaving an heir. Onan, the second son, acted as kinsman redeemer and married Tamar, but abused her and was struck dead for it. Judah was afraid that his third son would die too and so delayed marrying him to Tamar. When it became clear to Tamar that Judah intended to deny her an heir and a future, she put on prostitute's garments, veiled her face, and enticed Judah to hire her. The twins produced by this union included Perez.

Like Lot's daughters and like Tamar, Ruth and Naomi are at risk of being left without descendants, without a name, and without a future. Like Lot's daughters and like Tamar, Naomi's plan flirts with having Ruth play the prostitute

with an older relative and seemingly to force Boaz's hand by immoral means.

## THE PROBLEM WITH STEREOTYPES

The problem with prejudicial stereotypes is that they tend to exist only in the mind of the prejudiced. And so it proves here.

Ruth's integrity and virtue have already been established in the story and have become renowned in the area—a fact to which Boaz himself testifies (3:11). Whereas Naomi had instructed her to do whatever Boaz wanted, Ruth seems almost not to understand why Naomi sent her there. Ruth is so unlike the “typical” Moabite woman that she uses this completely unsuitable circumstance to begin a formal negotiation of marriage—something that might as easily have taken place in daylight. Boaz too—even after drinking—only has thoughts about how to honour Torah and to marry her properly.

So, the Moabite stereotype that underlies Naomi's plan and scares off the rival redeemer is shown to be false. The book of Judges returns regularly to the self-deception of God's people—they imagine themselves as faithful even as they engage in idolatry. It is in this context that a Moabite woman shows herself to be exemplary among the Israelites in faithfulness and virtue.



John Macallan Swan, *Refugees*

## READING RUTH NOW

The book closes with a genealogy that reveals that Naomi and Ruth do indeed preserve their name before God,

and in fact become ancestors of King David. Apart from being a happy ending and a nice Aha! moment on which to close, this conclusion to the book underlines that romance isn't what this book is about. It has far more to do with inclusion.

Naomi's family chose a self-imposed exile from the Promised Land and were soon at risk of being cut off completely from their inheritance. Yet not only did God graft Naomi back in, she became a mother in the line of Messianic hope. Ruth belonged to an enemy nation with no inheritance rights among God's people. And yet she too was grafted in. God loves the outsider.

If we identify with Ruth in the story, it should not be in the hunt for the ideal Significant Other, but rather to adopt the perspective of the outsider who is unfairly maligned by those who see themselves as insiders to God's favour.

It is common in my experience for conservative Christians to assume that we occupy pride of place in God's purposes, that God must repay our high view of Scripture with a high view of us. When we read Judges and Ruth—and indeed the Gospels—we should notice the degree to which rigid Scripture-keepers are often missing the point. By contrast, God embraces the outsider and the unloved, adding Rahab, a Canaanite prostitute, and Ruth, a maligned Moabite, into the lineage of the Messiah.

Jesus condemned the “righteous” Pharisees and preferred to feast with the tax collectors and “sinners.”

We have a long history of assuming that God stands with us against the Liberals or the Feminists or the Critical Race Theorists or anyone else that we care to “other.” What we can be sure of is that God loves them, and he doesn't care for our self-righteousness.

I think the book of Ruth would have us identify more closely with Naomi than anyone else. She is, after all, the one who enacts all the failed and misguided plans that drive the book along; Ruth merely does what she is told. Naomi is the character

that undergoes the most change. And Naomi is the one who is celebrated at the end. Naomi, like most of us, is a mess. Her faith is patchy and compromised. She grumbles against God, seems to reciprocate very little of Ruth's bottomless goodwill, and nothing that she does in the book is good. All the good that comes to her is by the faith of others and the grace of God. Ruth's is the loyalty and integrity to which we should aspire. Naomi's is the grubby faith that most of us live out.

Seeing ourselves in Naomi's shoes should provoke the

humility that comes from a realistic appraisal of our own natural state. It should dispel all of the insider myths that we speak over ourselves and by which we malign apparent outsiders. It should prompt humility and gratitude as we observe all the good that God graces us with in spite of ourselves.

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*Ruth and Naomi, St James Anglican Church, Halifax*