



Do Not Press Me To Leave You

Ruth and Naomi as survivors, friends, and redeemers.

by L. Jill Lamberton

AS A SENIOR RELIGION MAJOR AT WALLA WALLA College, I was short three credits of Old Testament course work and, due to a time conflict, I couldn't take Dr. Alden Thompson's Old Testament survey class. The only solution was to either stay in school an extra quarter or arrange an independent study. I went knocking on Dr. Doug Clark's door looking for a project interesting enough to keep me motivated "independently." I would like to complete my Old Testament credits, I told him. But more than that, I'd like to study some stories about women.

A poster that now hangs above my computer reads, "Celebrate women survivors. Invent new herstory. Shatter myths, pioneer, trailblaze." When it comes to the biblical stories, I'm convinced that the her-story doesn't

need to be newly invented: It's already there in the text. But her-story *does* need to be newly told, newly studied, newly celebrated. Within our faith community we often center our celebrations around the Bible's heroic men: Moses, Abraham, Jeremiah, David. When I turned to the Book of Ruth during my last year at Walla Walla College, I was looking for a different kind of party.

Recently I listed all the people in my life whom I hold up as models of faith: my two grandmothers, a grade school teacher, a high school teacher, a close family friend, my parents. With one exception, the list is comprised of women. Pillars of faith. Survivors. Perhaps that is why I like the Book of Ruth so much. It is the story of two women survivors who become pillars of faith for centuries of Judeo-Christian believers, yet their story seems particularly relevant in our post-modern era when women are frequently called upon to create their own destiny without the help of male relatives and friends. Whether or not we celebrate women as models of faith, the reality is that often they are the ones left to carry on

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after famine, death, divorce, and unemployment strike the land. Ruth and Naomi are all that remain of one prominent family after the famine in Moab, and together they make a pretty good story—a model of faith, friendship, patience, and redemption.

Ruth as the First Hebrew Short Story

One critic goes so far as to claim that “the Scroll of Ruth is the most perfect narrative of the Bible.”¹ Robert Alter calls the author of Ruth “one of the most brilliant masters of formal technique among biblical writers.”² Ruth is a wonderfully subtle story. The action, scene progression, and dialogue are artfully and carefully constructed. This narrative is a tight one, with few superfluous details. Samuel Sandmel says that Ruth is one of the few biblical narratives whose writing “gives every evidence of deliberate, creative plan.”³ In contrast to a structuralist literary theory, which says all plots must contain some moment of paramount conflict, the Book of Ruth is surprisingly devoid of conflict. As Sandmel notes, “Those who speak of the story as a series of vignettes are on the right track, for what takes place in Ruth is the unfolding narration of

subsequent incidents, rather than *consequent* ones.”⁴ The story opens and quickly recounts that Naomi’s husband and two sons have died, that there is famine in Moab and that Naomi’s sons have left behind two widows. Little more detail is given. When were Naomi’s sons married to Ruth and Orpah? How did they die? Why doesn’t Ruth want to return to her family? These and other questions are left unaddressed. The narrator of Ruth gives only enough information to provide a clear background for the following events. Nothing extra is added. Nor is there a fantastic element to the story; there is no need to willingly suspend disbelief, as Samuel Coleridge proposed is often necessary with great fiction. Everything in Ruth is plausible.

Well, almost everything. The incredible element in this story comes not through gripping action but through the boldness of the characters. Indeed, the characters in Ruth are the major charm of the book. As readers and believers, we are drawn to people of integrity. The Hebrew word used in this book to describe the characters of Ruth and Boaz is *chayil*: people of worth, virtue, value, or wealth. In Ruth 3:11, Boaz tells Ruth, “. . . I will do for you all that you ask, for all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman.”⁵ A worthy woman, a woman of *chayil*. When Boaz is first introduced in Ruth 2:1, he is described as “a prominent rich man,” a man of *chayil*. This Hebrew word is translated in several ways, but the important message is that Ruth and Boaz are both people whose worth and virtue are noted by all with whom they have contact. Boaz tells Ruth that “all the assembly of [his] people” know that she is a good person. The characters in Ruth attract attention and respect, creating the wide appeal of the narrative.

Edward F. Campbell, Jr. proposes that the intricate construction of Ruth places the book as one of the first and best Hebrew short stories: “it is an exemplar of a particular literary



form in Israel, and a classic example at that.”⁶ Beyond the characters, the prose of Ruth is memorable, employing tools of repetition in dialogue, characterization, and even action that is unquestionably tantalizing. Take, for example the threshing floor scene: “When Boaz had eaten and drunk, and he was in a contented mood, he went to lie down at the end of the heap of grain. Then [Ruth] came stealthily and uncovered his feet, and lay down. At midnight the man was startled, and turned over, and there, lying at his feet, was a woman!” (Ruth 3:7, 8). In choosing the Hebrew verb *skb* to convey Ruth’s action in this passage, the author intentionally employs a double entendre. The verb can mean “to prostrate oneself at the feet of one in a gesture of petition,”⁷ and this is the translation officially given to the text. However, the verb can also mean “to sleep with” or “to have sexual intercourse.”⁸ Certainly the author of Ruth purposely left the scene ambiguous in order to tease the audience. Most of the Hebrew Bible uses the verb meaning “to know” when referring to sexual encounters, but the author of Ruth cleverly and purposefully chooses a different verb. The choice of a word that clearly has double implications is certainly artful. Campbell stresses the integrity of the implications in the threshing floor scene:

Entertainment and edification in Hebrew storytelling, especially when closely bound to the common life of real, if typical, men and women, do not turn squeamish at the last minute. The situation at the threshing floor is told as it is, precisely because it would have had a quite different outcome with different people from this remarkable threesome with whom the story is dealing. Every bit of suspense is intended. But the audience has been led to realize that in chapter two Boaz and Naomi both have Ruth’s best interest very much at heart and that both approve of her modesty and fidelity. Now the storyteller presents the conditions for the acid test.⁹

There is no denying that the author creates suspense in this story and does not shy away

from the moral difficulties that come even to loyal, faithful people. Ruth’s venturing onto the threshing floor, a place where only men are allowed, is suggestive no matter what happens once she gets there. The author of the text does not wish to exclude the audience from the tension, the risk, that Ruth takes that night on the floor. Whatever happens, the audience is meant to know that the moment was tense, questionable, and even exciting. Having accomplished the desired narrative purpose, the author quickly “shifts from a focus upon sleeping to a focus upon redeeming.”¹⁰ Redemption, after all, is the theme of this story.

The characters are redeemed in a variety of ways by a number of different people. Ruth is portrayed throughout as “the defier of custom, the maker of decisions, and the worker of salvation.”¹¹ Her determination angers Naomi, silences Boaz, and shocks the audience. When she pleads with Naomi, “Do not press me to leave you, or to turn back from following you!” (Ruth 1:16), the audience knows we are dealing with a woman of conviction, and we remember her words. This story catches our attention because of its sharp contrast to other popular Old Testament tales of the warring, bumbling Israelites. The Book of Ruth offers much in its subtly crafted construction of friendship, commitment, and social consciousness. We remember the story for its relationships, for the ways the characters embrace, contradict, empower, and redeem each other.

Ruth as a Sacred Text for Women

Perhaps the most-needed gift that the story of Ruth offers 20th-century readers is its strong female characters. In this age we are all too aware that the Bible is the product of a patriarchal society. Biblical genealogies list fathers and sons; the mention of a female

ancestor is rare and significant (thus the excitement over the narrator's claim in this book's closing verses that Ruth is the great-grandmother of King David and, for a much later audience, an ancestor of Jesus). A biblical census gives the number of adult males only; women and children must be inferred and estimated. The result is a patriarchal sacred text that contains few stories of complex female characters. In fact, many contemporary women believe that the Bible is strictly a "man's book," that its stories have little to offer women.

Recent scholarship, particularly literary criticism of the Bible, asserts there is more to be gleaned from the female biblical characters than was traditionally thought. Biblical scholarship has been, until very recently, male-centered, and critics such as Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer fault the scholarship more than the Bible itself for the current lack of female-centered interpretations:

Although the texts of the Hebrew Bible have been shaped by male authors and editors, we believe that it is *interpretive traditions* more than biblical texts that leave women feeling excluded. Too often, women recognize ways in which a traditional text speaks to their experience as women, but when they turn to commentary, they find little that speaks to either their experiences as women or their experiences as women reading/confronting a biblical text.¹²

This cry for interpretations that speak to the female is not new, but we see increasingly that it can no longer be ignored. This, for me, is the

treasure hidden within Ruth. The biblical canon here answers the cry for female-centered stories, and the task for modern readers and scholars is to tell the stories that have been previously silenced or neglected.

In 1994, a group of women in Boston published an anthology of essays on the book of Ruth entitled *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*. The introduction tells how the book grew out of a Bible study group, formed by women who came to the Bible and to each other in an effort to create "a room of their own." What these

women found in Ruth and in one another was a new interpretive tradition, a place to celebrate the women survivors in the Bible, thereby giving dignity to the women survivors of our own time.¹³

The Book of Ruth is a model for feminist interpretation because it so successfully captures the issues women deal with in their continued yet strained commitment to a patri-

archal religion. Kates and Reimer, the editors of *Reading Ruth*, suggest that "perhaps more than anything else, the story is an emblem of women like ourselves seeking to feel at home in a patriarchal tradition and discovering support and sustenance in both the resources of that tradition and the voices of other women."¹⁴ We must lift up these emblems for the women who are pillars of faith in our own communities.

The advent of feminist biblical scholarship has been long in coming, but exciting. It is also a frustrating, and in some cases, largely speculative task. The Bible contains many passing references to females, but much of their stories

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must be inferred or sought out from other sources. In many cases, we simply do not and cannot know the history of biblical women. But the Book of Ruth is different. Refreshingly so.

The story of Ruth is particularly illuminated under feminist interpretation because so many of the established social norms are reversed in its narrative. Phyllis Tribble summarizes the story of Ruth and Naomi this way: "These women bear their own burdens. They know hardship, danger, insecurity, and death. No God promises them blessing; no man rushes to their rescue. They themselves risk bold decisions and shocking acts to work out their own salvation in the midst of the alien, the hostile, and the unknown."¹⁵

The book opens as the husbands of three women, Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah, have died. There is famine in the land and no one to care for these women. They must look after their own needs, and Naomi, the mother-figure, decides to journey to her homeland in Judah. Since these women have no husbands and no sons, they very literally have no hope of life. Naomi is especially grieved because her family will die out with her own death; she has no descendants. At the start of the story she is determined to return to the land of her childhood where she can find food and die a peaceful and forgotten death. What she does not plan on is her stubborn daughter-in-law.

Naomi urges each of her daughters-in-law to return home, saying, "Go back each of you to your mother's house" (Ruth 1:8). The phrase, "to your mother's house" is surprisingly unexpected in the context of a patriarchal culture where the home is always the house of the father and the mother's presence is generally excluded. Some critics suggest that Naomi's adaptation of the phrase in this case indicates the total absence of males in the narrative of Ruth. All the men have died, while the "females live; they are persons; their presence in the story continues."¹⁶ When there

are no men around to save them, the women still go on.

Ruth announces she will go with her mother-in-law to a foreign land, making the famous pledge to Naomi, "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there I will be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" (Ruth 1:16,17). Ruth may be unusually loyal to her mother-in-law, as generations of critics have assumed. More likely, however, Ruth simply has nowhere to go. Returning home is not an option for Ruth, and she must therefore find a place for herself. Apparently Ruth decides the safest place is with Naomi. Naomi, who has seen her whole family die, and is no doubt alone and scared, decides not to argue with Ruth, although she does make it clear to Ruth that Orpah, who returns home, makes the wiser decision (Ruth 1:15). Tribble stresses that Ruth's choice makes no sense: "If Naomi stands alone by force of circumstances, Ruth stands alone by the force of decision."¹⁷ Ruth's decision is indeed radical, but one must remember that this entire narrative turns established social norms about-face. Ruth, through her choice to follow Naomi, has nothing. She rejects her family, her God, her homeland, and apparently her possibilities for offspring. She leaves everything that is known for what is unknown.

Ruth and Naomi as Models of Female Friendship

The story of Ruth speaks to readers on many levels of religious experience, and it would be misleading to limit the scope of Ruth's application to feminist issues alone. The Book of Ruth is not only a story of assertive and inventive women, but also a poignant account of human need and emo-

tion. The relationship between Ruth and Naomi is admired as one of intense loyalty and enduring friendship. It is precisely because Ruth and Naomi are so vulnerable with each other that they are so appealing to successive generations of readers. We feel their need, admire their commitment, and desperately want them to win.

As we have already seen, Ruth's choice to follow Naomi is surprisingly radical precisely because of what she gives up in choosing her mother-in-law over her own family. Tribble points out that "not only has Ruth broken with family, country, and faith, but she has also reversed sexual allegiance. A young woman has committed herself to the life of an old woman rather than to the search for a husband. . . . One female has chosen another female in a world where life depends upon men."¹⁸ So Ruth gambles with Naomi, perhaps because of her immense love for her mother-in-law, or perhaps because she really has no other choice. In any event, Ruth's decision to stay with Naomi is not totally selfless; she stands to gain by Naomi's eventual prosperity.

Ruth Anna Putnam is intrigued by the question of whether the friendship between Ruth and Naomi is one of equality, or more specifi-

cally, whether friendship, to be truly classified as such, must exist between two people of equal standing. Ruth and Naomi, she insists, are not equals: "both women were widows and of the same social class, but because Ruth was young and healthy while Naomi was old, broken perhaps in body as well as in spirit, Ruth made all the hard choices, did all the hard work, and took all the risks."¹⁹ Whatever the case, in the opening scenes of this story Ruth and Naomi are both losers, both have lost. So the possibilities for manipulating or taking advantage of one another are slim. They hold each other up, but they have no way of knowing how long the other will remain on her feet. For each woman, taking the other as companion is a gamble. It's also one they are willing, out of desperation and perhaps out of hope, to wager.²⁰ There is a point, however, when such discussions become irrelevant. Ruth says she will stay with Naomi, and she does. Naomi permits Ruth to follow her, and once in Judah, they work together for their mutual security.

Ruth and Naomi know they also need each other and maintain a commitment amid intense hardship and, ultimately, reward. Ruth is a radical, and she chooses Naomi for the same reasons. Neither woman is confined by the social dictations of their separate traditions. Ruth is a Moabite, Naomi a Jew. Were these women enemies, their varied backgrounds would be an adequate explanation for their tension, but neither Naomi nor Ruth is hung up on senseless tradition. Ruth chooses Naomi because Naomi is willing to break the rules. Putnam argues, "It is important to realize that Ruth would never have loved Naomi if Naomi had not acted in ways that ran counter to her tradition. . . . Ruth chose Naomi out of a deep love, a love kindled by Naomi's character. Ruth was an extraordinary human being, but Naomi was her model."²¹ Ruth and Naomi, whatever their initial motives, are friends. Theirs belongs in the line-up of our favorite



friendships: David and Jonathan, Laurel and Hardy, Batman and Robin, Lucy and Ethel, Calvin and Hobbes, Thelma and Louise.

An important point that seems almost forgotten in this discussion of friendship is that it grows and deepens based upon mutual experience. The reason Ruth chose to follow Naomi in Moab would be only a small fraction of the reason she would choose Naomi when Ruth bears Obed and, out of trust and love for Naomi, presents her mother-in-law with a son. Once Naomi and Ruth have endured together what they face throughout their story, their friendship is sealed in such a manner and for such a plethora of reasons that it is impossible to say why they are friends. Maureen Duffey has captured what I believe to be the essence of this sort of friendship. The poet chooses the thoughts of Ruth as the standpoint from which to tell her version of the story of inexplicable commitment:

“Whither thou goest,” she said thinking:

“Gods but that’s a hellhole desert dry
arsehole no man’s land but here would
be an aloneness too stark to suffer there
would be you.”

So she said, elaborating, “Thy people will
be my people,” meaning take me into your
family and added as an afterthought because
she knew it would please her sometime
mother-in-law (does death sever such legal
bonds)? “and thy god shall be my god”
thinking: “Now what was he called?”

..... “Listen,”

she said to Boaz. “Your kinsman’s widow,
she’s been like a second mother to me. I
couldn’t just walk out and leave her.” And he
looking at her rich pastures said: “Fine,
bring the old lady if you want her.” And Ruth
said: “I do, I do.”²²

Duffey ends her poem with the words “I do,” an allusion to the traditional English marriage vow. Her poem is an excellent illustration of the literary effect achieved through careful word choice. When one considers the depth of Ruth’s commitment to

Naomi, it is not surprising that Ruth’s vow, “Whither thou goest, I will go . . .” has become a sort of secondary marriage vow for many couples. Ruth and Naomi have endured to become a model of commitment, mutual sacrifice, and mutual devotion.

Where Did God Go?—Ruth as 20th-Century Theology

Through careful analysis of the characters and their story, we come to the theology of the Book of Ruth. While Ruth may serve as a model of female friendship and female action, many see the book as rather silent on the role of God in human life. God, in Ruth, is elusive; while God is present in the text, it is not clear where, nor for what purpose. There is no direct divine action. The narrator does not interject to say what God has done for Ruth and Naomi, except at the end of the book to say that God has made Ruth conceive a son (Ruth 4:13). In general, God does for Ruth and Naomi what Naomi says God has done. In other words, God is an explanation offered by Naomi for her own struggle and redemption. In many ways, the Book of Ruth provides a helpful theological model for 20th century readers. I suppose I am drawn to the Book of Ruth because the God of the 20th-century is often depressingly elusive, silent in the moments of greatest crisis. It often seems that God exists only where believers say so. And indeed for many believers, the only divine goodness and blessing we can see are those that friends and relatives, other humans, give.

In the Book of Ruth, the line between human action and divine action is clouded. Perhaps the question of God’s presence was not as relevant for the initial audience of the book as it is for the 20th-century reader. Or perhaps their questions were surprisingly similar to ours. Whatever the case, it is clear that God is not the focal point of the narrative in

the Book of Ruth . . . humans are. For Ruth, "God is somewhere between belief and practice, the words and actions, the relating of the human characters in this very human story world. God is not to be pinpointed, God's point of view cannot be determined, and God's providence is not to be equated with the speech or the action of any one of the characters."²³

Ruth and Naomi clearly act for themselves. Once Naomi is aware of Boaz's kindness toward Ruth, she immediately begins scheming her plan of attack. Tribble notes, "[Naomi] does not wait for matters to take their course or for God to intervene with a miracle. Instead, she herself moves from being the receiver of calamity to becoming the agent of change and challenge."²⁴ It is impossible to distinguish between what comes to Naomi because God is looking out for her and what comes because she hedges her bets, looks out for herself and her daughter-in-law. This story does not distinguish between the giver and the recipient. Naomi is blessed by Ruth, Ruth by Naomi, Naomi and Ruth by Boaz, Boaz and Ruth and Naomi by God, etc., etc. The point is that blessings come. From whence they come is unimportant.

The distinct character of God is secondary, if not altogether irrelevant—Ruth and Naomi are God to each other and don't spend much time waiting for divine rescue. The Book of Ruth is theologically woven to carefully "correlate God's will and human action so inextricably as to make each of the main protagonists the servant of God to the other."²⁵ Of course God is wherever believers say God is because only in those places can God be effective. This theological explanation may seem anti-climatic in comparison to the God who has a definitive presence and personality in many other Old Testament stories. Sometimes the God of the 20th century is, however, unquestionably anti-climactic to the God of preceding generations.

Viewing God's action as interposed with human action is not meant to say that God is irrelevant, but simply that the specifics of God's nature do not come to those who wait. Tribble argues that the theological interpretation of the Book of Ruth is "women working out their own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in them. Naomi works as a bridge between tradition and innovation. Ruth and the females of Bethlehem work as paradigms for radicality. All together they are women in culture, women against culture, and women transforming culture."²⁶ Naomi is blessed with a son because she plans her own blessing. She is also blessed because Ruth is her friend and companion and because Boaz is a man of principle and responsibility who does not shun his social and moral obligations. God is seen in the characters of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz because divine nature is revealed in the people of *chayil*. God blesses through the actions of Ruth, of Naomi and of Boaz. And in the end, the miracle of conception and birth is completed, but again with the cooperation of Ruth and Boaz. The theology of Ruth is the religion of people committed to people, committed to ethical living, and committed to God. They know which rules to break, and which ones to keep. When the crisis is over, they know whom to thank for their blessings: themselves, and their God, together.

When we insist that God's presence is seen through the characters in the Book of Ruth, in their words and their actions, then the theological interpretations of this story become as complex as the people in it. Naomi's cry, "I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty" (Ruth 1:21), is no longer a pronouncement of divine absence but rather the crucial background for Ruth's entrance. Naomi is in need of spiritual blessing and Ruth therefore has a role to fill. Her purpose as a worthy and virtuous woman is to become the social and spiritual redeemer of Naomi. Naomi

will concurrently provide Ruth the same type of redemption. Ruth vows she will be loyal to Naomi even in death, and she thus brings life and the assurance of lineage to Naomi through the birth of Obed.

"Do not press me to leave you," Ruth pleads, not beginning to fathom that she is intended to fill Naomi where the Almighty has left her empty. The words of Ruth become the vow of a companion and redeemer, the assurance of divine presence and forthcoming blessing. Somewhere in all this we see that we, too, are redeemed and

blessed by those who say, "do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you!" in the midst of famine, death, and emptiness. When the famine has passed and the redemption is clear and complete, we, too, are compelled to lift up the pillars of faith among us, those who have helped lead us to blessing and salvation. Redeemed, how I love to proclaim it. Redeemed by my friends and my relatives, my fellow believers. Redeemed by those who believe and endure in spite of the odds.

Celebrate the survivors.

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