



# EXPLORING THE BOOK OF RUTH

with  
Pastor Ritva H. Williams

(Painting "Whither Thou Goest" by Sandy Freckleton Gagon)

## **Introductory Matters**

The book of Ruth is an anonymous Hebrew text, perhaps first recorded between the time of King David and the end of the Northern Kingdom (950-700 BCE), and revised during or after the Babylonian Exile (597-539 BCE).

In the Hebrew Bible, the book of Ruth is located in the "Writings" (*Kethuvim*) among the "Five Scrolls," each of which is read publicly on a specific festival or day of commemoration. Ruth is read on *Shavuot*, the Feast of Weeks, which occurs seven weeks after Passover, and marks the harvesting of wheat in the land of Israel. The events in the story of Ruth occur over a seven week period of time beginning with the barley harvest and ending with the wheat harvest. *Shavuot* is also the traditional date associated with the birth and death of King David, whose life is rooted in the story of Ruth. *Shavuot* also celebrates the giving of the *Torah* to Moses at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19-20). In the rabbinic tradition, Ruth is seen as a model convert, who takes the *Torah* upon herself just as the ancient Israelites did at Mount Sinai.

In Christian Bibles, the book of Ruth is regarded as a historical text, located in between the book of Judges and the 1st book of Samuel. The story in the text is set in the time of the judges (1:1) and ends with a genealogy of King David (4:18-22). It thus provides a link between the chaotic period when Israel was a tribal confederacy ruled by judges and the stories that lead up to the establishment of the monarchy.

## **Read Ruth 1:1-5**

These verses introduce us to:

- the time period — when the judges ruled (1250-1050 BCE), there was a famine
- the cast of characters all of whom have symbolic names:
  - Elimelech = my God is king
  - Naomi = pleasant
  - Mahlon = sickness
  - Chilion = consumptive or spent
  - Orpah = back of the neck
  - Ruth = companion, friend

- the family are described as “Ephrathites from Bethlehem,” i.e. a subgroup of the Judean population associated with this geographic area. Ephrath is associated with Bethlehem in several biblical passages (Genesis 35:16, 19; 1 Samuel 17:12; 1 Chronicles 2:18-24, 42-50; Micha 5:2).
- the geographic location — a family moves from Bethlehem in the land of Judah to the country of Moab. Bethlehem literally means “house of bread.”
- Moab is associated in the Bible with hostility (Numbers 22-24; Judges 3:12-30), sexual perversity (Genesis 19:30-38), and leading Israelites into idolatry (Numbers 25). Moabites are excluded from the assembly of God (Deuteronomy 23:3-6).



1. How do you think Elimelech, Naomi and their sons felt about migrating to Moab?
2. What might have prompted the sons to take Moabite wives?
3. How might we describe the trajectory of Naomi's life so far?

### **Read Ruth 1:6-22**

1. Why does Naomi urge Orpah and Ruth to return to their mothers' houses? What does she see as the best hope for each of these women?
2. What does Ruth's vow to Naomi say about her? What does Naomi's response say about her?
3. How might we describe Naomi's understanding of and relationship with God?



# EXPLORING THE BOOK OF RUTH

with  
Pastor Ritva H. Williams

*(Painting "Whither Thou Goest" by Sandy Freckleton Gagon)*

## **Recap**

The book of Ruth is an anonymous Hebrew text that tells the story of a family from Bethlehem in Judah, that migrates to the land of Moab because of a famine. The family originally consisted of Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Elimelech dies, and the two sons marry Moabite women Orpah and Ruth respectively. After ten years, the two sons die and all three women are left widowed.

Hearing that there is food once again in Judah, Naomi determines to return to her homeland. Her two daughters-in-law indicate that they will accompany her, but Naomi urges them to return to their mothers' homes where they might still hope to acquire husbands and children. Orpah does so, but Ruth clings to her mother-in-law, vowing to go wherever Naomi goes, to live with her until she dies, taking her people and her God for her own. Seeing that Ruth is determined to accompany her, Naomi stops arguing with her, and the two travel to Bethlehem, arriving there at the beginning of the barley harvest.

When the women of Bethlehem recognize Naomi, she tells them to call her "Mara" (bitter) because she left Bethlehem "full" and returns "empty," feeling that the LORD has dealt harshly with her. Naomi is here engaging in "lament," naming the loss and sorrow that has come to define her life.

## **Historical Context**

In Bethlehem, Naomi's and Ruth's status is reversed. Naomi is home among her "kin," as a native Israelite widow she can expect/hope to be cared for by members of her and/or her dead husband's extended families. She would have been an object of pity and charity.

Ruth is a resident alien, a Moabite, and hence a person who would stereotypically be associated with hostility, sexual perversion and idolatry. She is perhaps 24-26 years of age (having been married for 10 years before being widowed). Since she owes allegiance to no man, father or husband, she is a free agent. Many people in ancient Israel would have expected her to earn her keep through prostitution.

Bethlehem would have been a medium sized rural village, consisting of several extended families living in close proximity to each other. The male heads of these families would have been the village "elders" who provided community guidance and direction.

### **Read Ruth 2:1-22**

Some things to take note of:

- **Boaz** is “a man of substance,” a prosperous patriarchal figure, and a kinsman of Elimelech.
- **Gleaning:** Israelite/biblical law required farmers to leave the edges of their fields unharvested, and leave “the gleanings” (i.e. whatever fell to the ground) for orphans, widows, and resident alien; ditto for orchards and vineyards (Leviticus 19:9-10; Deuteronomy 24:19).
- **Redeeming Kinsman:** a system built on the understanding that the land was given to each tribe, clan, family in perpetuity, hence (a) if a family member was in dire straits and had to sell part or all of his land, the closest relative with the means to do so was required to “redeem” what was sold, i.e. buy back the land so that it remained in the “family”; (b) if a man died without an heir, his brother or other close relative was required to marry the widow: their first born son would legally be the son and heir of the dead brother/relative.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. What do we learn about each of the characters in this chapter? How do their actions reveal what they value and care about?
2. A central value in the Hebrew Bible is *hesed*, variously translated as lovingkindness, faithfulness, mercy, goodness, steadfast love. There is no precise English word that captures the entirety of this concept, perhaps the closest we can get is “loyal-love.” Which characters demonstrate this value? How? Who is the object of their loyal-love?
3. How do you think the residents of Bethlehem felt about Ruth? Would they have been surprised by her behavior? Why?
4. Think about our context here in Cedar Rapids:
  - (a) What is the equivalent of gleaning in this community?
  - (b) How is your experience of immigrants similar to or different from common stereotypes?
  - (c) What role can you (or we as a church) play in helping newcomers adjust to life here?



# EXPLORING THE BOOK OF RUTH

with  
Pastor Ritva H. Williams

*(Painting "Whither Thou Goest" by Sandy Freckleton Gagon)*

## **Recap**

The book of Ruth is an anonymous Hebrew text that tells the story of a family from Bethlehem in Judah, that migrates to the land of Moab because of a famine. The family originally consisted of Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion. Elimelech dies, and the two sons marry Moabite women Orpah and Ruth respectively. After ten years, the two sons die and all three women are left widowed.

Hearing that there is food once again in Judah, Naomi determines to return to her homeland. She persuades Orpah to return to her mother's house, but Ruth vows to follow Naomi wherever she goes, to live with her until she dies, taking her people and her God for her own. The two women travel together to Bethlehem where Naomi is recognized and welcomed, but laments the bitterness of her life as a childless widow.

Her daughter-in-law, Ruth who is also a childless widow and a foreigner (a Moabite!), determines to provide for their household by gleaning in the fields, i.e. picking up what is dropped or left untouched by the harvesters. The field she is working in belongs to Boaz, a devout and wealthy local landowner. He notices her, learns who she is, speaks with her commending her for her loyalty to her mother-in-law, encourages her to glean in his fields for the duration of the harvest, and commands his overseer to make sure that extra sheaves are left behind for her. When Ruth returns home with a large amount of barley, and tells Naomi how she acquired it, she learns that Boaz is a kinsman of Elimelech.

## **Historical Context**

The threshing floor is a communal grain processing center, often built in a circle with a hardened floor surface of packed earth, rock or brick. Men would beat the grain stocks on the floor so that the grain would collect on the floor. The chaff was tossed aside. To protect the harvested grain, the owner and/or other men of the village stayed overnight, eating, drinking, and partying. For ancient hearers, this location and the story that unfolds would be rated X, equivalent of a daytime soap or racy novel today.



### **Read Ruth 3:1-5**

1. What is Naomi's goal?
2. What does she instruct Ruth to do?  
N.B. Naomi's instructions are quite ambiguous. They may mean just what they say, but "feet" is sometimes used as a euphemism for the sexual organs (see Isaiah 7:20), and "to lie" with someone is an euphemism for sexual intercourse (e.g. Leviticus 18:22).
3. How would Naomi's instructions be perceived in an ancient Israelite village?

### **Read Ruth 3:6-17**

1. Pay careful attention to the sequence of events. How does Ruth carry out her mother-in-law's instructions? Does she wash, anoint herself and put on her best clothes then go to the threshing floor, or does she go to the threshing floor before beautifying herself?
2. What happens at the threshing floor? What does Boaz think happened at the threshing floor?
3. What is Ruth asking Boaz to do? What does he agree to do?
4. Why is Boaz concerned that no one know that the woman came to the threshing floor?
5. Where and how is God at work in this story?

**Redeeming Kinsman:** a system built on the understanding that the land was given to each tribe, clan, family in perpetuity, hence (a) if a family member was in dire straits and had to sell part or all of his land, the closest relative with the means to do so was required to "redeem" what was sold, i.e. buy back the land so that it remained in the "family"; (b) if a man died without an heir, his brother or other close relative was expected/required to marry the widow: their first born son would legally be the son and heir of the dead brother/relative.





# EXPLORING THE BOOK OF RUTH

with  
Pastor Ritva H. Williams

*(Painting "Whither Thou Goest" by Sandy Freckleton Gagon)*

## **Recap**

The book of Ruth recounts the story of an Israelite family that migrates to the land of Moab because of a famine. Elimelech, the father dies, leaving his wife Naomi and his two sons who marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Ten years later the sons die, and all three women are left widowed. Naomi determines to return to her homeland, and persuades Orpah to return to her mother's house, but Ruth vows to follow Naomi wherever she goes, to live with her until she dies, taking her people and her God for her own.

The two women travel together to Bethlehem where Naomi is recognized and welcomed, but laments the bitterness of her life as a childless widow. Ruth volunteers to provide for their household by gleaning in the fields. She happens upon fields belonging to Boaz, a wealthy landowner who takes notice of her, ensures that she is not harassed in the fields, and makes sure extra sheaves are left behind for her to glean. When Ruth reports whose fields she has been gleaning in, Naomi reveals that Boaz is a kinsman of her late husband's, and encourages Ruth to continue working there throughout the barley and wheat harvests.

At the end of the harvest season, Naomi devises a plan to secure a protector (husband) for Ruth. Knowing that Boaz will be spending the night at the threshing floor, she instructs Ruth to wash, anoint herself, put her best clothes, and go out to the threshing floor. She is to note where Boaz lies down for the night, uncover his "feet" (genitals), and do whatever he tells her to do! Ruth does as she is instructed, but waits until Boaz falls asleep before uncovering his feet and laying down. When he awakes startled at midnight, Ruth asks him to marry her because he is the *go'el*, the next-of-kin responsible for redeeming Elimelech's family. Boaz commends her loyalty to her mother-in-law, notes that there is another kinsman who is more closely related who must be asked first, but if he can't or won't act as *go'el*, then he will marry her. Concerned about protecting her reputation in the village, Boaz sends her home with 6 measures of barley for her mother-in-law while it is still dark.

## **Historical Context**

The **gate** to an ancient village, town or city functioned in 4 ways: (1) as the main entry and exit point to the village, (2) as the place where sentries stood guard for protection, (3) as the place for community gatherings, and (4) as the equivalent of a courthouse where legal matters were settled.

The ***go'el***, or redeemer, the next-of-kin who restores one's status and honor in the community by buying back land that has to be sold to pay debts (Leviticus 25:24-31), and

marrying a widow in order to beget children who will maintain the dead husband's name and place in the community (Deuteronomy 23:3-6).

**Read Ruth 4:1-12**

1. From the dialogue at the gate, what do we learn about the character of the “next-of-kin”?
2. What is the response of the people and elders who had gathered at the gate? Who are the three women they name — Rachel, Leah, and Tamar — and what role did they play in Israel's history (see Genesis 30-32, 38)?

**Read Ruth 4:13-22**

1. Who is the main focus of the conclusion of this story?
2. In what ways is Ruth's son, Naomi's *go'el* (redeemer/next-of-kin)?
3. What do we learn about God and/or people's expectations of God from the 6 blessings that are pronounced in the the book of Ruth?  
1:8-9  
2:4  
2:20  
3:10  
4:11-12  
4:14-15
4. What does it mean to Israel that David had a Moabite great-grandmother?
5. Naomi and Ruth represent individuals who live on the margins of society, yet the Bible does not present them as victims but rather as agents of their own survival. What groups in our community are particularly vulnerable? How do they survive?
6. Ruth, the foreigner, becomes a central figure in the story of Israel. In what ways are immigrants today viewed as promise? In what ways are they viewed as threat?