**Ruth and Naomi:**

 **Forerunners of our Times**



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**Introduction**

This little book had its origins in 2012 when Jetty and I prepared a study for her faith community in Sint-Niklaas, Belgium. We studied together and then posted the chapters on her website. Some years before, I had established St. Junia’s House in the United States, a small house church and retreat center. Jetty saw my website and presence in our denominational Facebook pages, and we began to talk.

Jetty and I both felt a strong commitment to teaching from a scriptural foundation and closely mentoring those with whom we worked in our respective communities. Jetty was drawn to the figure of Ruth because she herself was crossing international boundaries of geography, language, culture and spiritual bonding in the Pentecostal and Catholic traditions, and ministering in both the U.S. and Europe.

Ruth is an important biblical role model for her and so she settled on the name, House of Ruth, for her small house church. Ruth was a source of spiritual nurturance as Jetty continued ministry in Belgium and also began to serve in the United States. Ruth’s story also spoke to us about commitment to spiritual principles in a sometimes hostile or indifferent world, as well as about covenant relationships.

We originally shared this series in English and Dutch in Belgium back in 2012 and later did a seminar at Saint Matthew ECC Church, in Orange, California where we both still work as clergy. Then, the manuscript lay dormant for a few years…until Covid-19 was spreading in both our countries, and Jetty was barely able to leave Belgium to return to the U.S. before everyone on both sides of the Atlantic was ordered to stay home.

Our church here in the U.S. was scrambling to minister to our flock via digital, on-line, Facebook, Skype, Zoom, messenger video-live, and recorded sessions. Jetty had long used digital technology to maintain relationships with her parish in Belgium, both while in the U.S. or while in Belgium. Her people were spread out in Belgium and coming together physically was not always possible.

But our U.S. church had not been used to such ‘social distance’ and we, as yet, have not achieved our full potential in the digital world. It is still a learning curve. With people staying at home, we began to celebrate Mass, Rosary, other prayer groups, biblical studies, music and song, and more sharing with one another on Facebook.

We also enjoyed services held by others on-line, especially our friend, Rabbi Sammy Seid [Ner Tamid Synagogue, Poway, CA]. It also seemed to me that newcomers on FB were streaming in from all over the world during this crisis. I was getting six or eight requests to ‘friend’ per day.

And we again turned back to the Book of Ruth, which powerfully speaks to our current day conditions in so many ways. The ancient Hebrews dealt with ‘foreigners’ crossing previously closed cultural boundaries, coming into their world. They dealt with starvation, pestilence and loss. They had their own traditions between males and females, between wealthy and poor, between blood relationships, between insiders and outsiders.

And the Book of Ruth may be, as Robert Alter[[1]](#footnote-1) has written, a subtle challenge to the earlier Hebrew prohibitions with marrying into outsider groups. The Moabites, from whom Ruth came, were regarded as the ultimate despised outsiders.

The book is also unlike other classical Hebrew narratives which were patriarchal, perhaps allowing some strong women but men always were in charge. There are many unnamed women in the Hebrew Bible,[[2]](#footnote-2) but not in the Book of Ruth. Notably, there is one unnamed man, who declined his right to marry Ruth.

This book in some sense reverses a patriarchal pattern, and, indeed, men are introduced but only to quickly die off except for Boaz. Women are seen weighing and making their own decisions in concert with men who may shirk or embrace their traditional roles and the spirit of the law is ultimately achieved. It is a short story – only four chapters long.

Robert Alter noted that while earlier biblical narratives were often conflictual, morally ambiguous, and even the most highly respected characters had serious moral flaws, in the story of Ruth, there are no ‘bad people’ – and only a few who are ‘less good’ -- but still respected in their moral choices. Perhaps we can learn something here from the Hebrews in how too often even in perilous situations, we judge other people’s choices.

The story depicts struggle between life and death, famine and starvation, sharing and cooperation, pestilence and loss, crossing boundaries, coming and going, returning and going forth. Alter notes that two principal archetypes of Western narrative are seen in the story: rupture from one’s home and leaving, as in the Abraham story, and a return home or finding a ‘settled place,’ as in the Ruth story [p. 630].

Contrasting the two, Trible (2000) says that Ruth “…marries outside her own people, disavows the solidarity of her family, abandons her national identity, and renounces her religious affiliation. In the entire biblical epic of Israel, only Abraham approaches this radicalness, but then he had a call from God (Genesis 12:1-3) and also a wife. Ruth stands alone, without support human or divine. Moreover, she reverses sexual allegiance. A young woman commits herself to an old woman in a world where life depends upon men [Page 146].”

As far as theological themes, G-d is the author of life, and there is no correlation of reward or punishment. It is what it is. What you get is what you get. Primitive nationalism of self-interest gives way to a more universalist and open perspective to others outside the tribe. A theology of seeming to rely on chance is matched with divine intentionality: But we must be there at the moment, living faithfully and then be willing to say yes to receive the blessings of G-d.

Trible (2000) says that Naomi is the dominant character of the book, where “her plight shapes the narrative, and her plan brings it to resolution [Page 130].” She loses all the sources of her identity. Naomi first depicts herself as a bitter victim, afflicted by Yahweh and then rising to participate in change and receiving blessings.

The primary theme is captured in the Hebrew words, *hesed*, and *baruk/berukah*. We bless others and act in faithfulness toward them. Isn’t that what we see going on in the world during the Covid-19 crisis? We are awed by the acts of *hesed* going on around us during this time. Perhaps as in ancient times, our best is called forth in the face of disasters.

There are various perspectives as to the structure of the book. Phyllis Trible (1992) characterized the book as a novella and elaborates that it is “…probably a piece of historical fiction set in the time of the judges (2000, Page 146). Alter (2019) describes it as fine literary artistry and almost poetic in the Hebrew. The reader can get the best sense of this with Alter’s reading, because he does his best to retain the feeling of the Hebrew in his English translations. There are poetic elements of meter, parallelism, and vocabulary. He says the story turns on four themes, based on three verbs and one noun:

* *Lashuv* - to go back or return
* *Talekhet* – to go
* *Lidbog* – to cling
* *Hesed* – acts of kindness, faithfulness, loyalty

Trible says there is an underlying poetic nucleus which has suggested to some scholars that an oral poem existed for centuries before it evolved into a prose narrative [Page 843].

Indeed, some passages which read like poetry are well known and often used in wedding rituals or commitment ceremonies: ‘Where you go, I will go….’ Trible points to a design in the first two chapters, which are matched in reverse, in chapters 3 and 4:

* Ruth given Naomi’s permission to glean [2:2]; Naomi sends Ruth to the threshing floor [3:1-5]
* Ruth gleans the fields [2:3]; Ruth goes to the threshing floor [3:6]
* Boaz asks Ruth to stay, gives her food, protects her from male workers, and says she is worthy of blessing [2:8-17; 3:10-15]
* Ruth returns to Naomi and listens to her counsel [2:18-23; 3:16-18]

In any case, whether we are simply drawn to a good story from ancient times and its literary qualities, or we come to realize that we are faced with many of the same basic questions in our time as those in Ruth, or we infer patterns of divine intervention and learning from them that are universal to us all, let us enjoy this time together and grow in *hesed.*

We have relied upon a few excellent resources which we strongly recommend for those who want to go further. Most of our sources have been from Jewish scholars. After all, they have been studying Hebrew scriptures for several millennia and debating possible meanings. Their style of midrash has been lost to much of Christianity, which in our view became too focused on dogma, to the point of imposing it on the text.

While doctrine can guide, it is a double-edged sword. It can also be like a horse wearing blinders, preventing vision of a broader view. From our perspective, we revere the Jewish tradition and feel that Christianity has lost so much by not maintaining a closer relationship with its Jewish roots.

We aspire for this study to speak across faith traditions or to those who increasingly fall in the “nones.” We aspire to share meaningfully with those whose faith practices are central to their lifestyles and also those who are curious as to why anyone in our time would still turn for guidance to manuscripts thousands of years old. We hope to learn as well as to teach as we make no claims as far as being scholars in Hebrew. However, we know how to find those who are, and we are always open to any other perspectives or corrections others may provide to us.

 *Shalom,*

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**Annotated Bibliography:**

**Robert Alter (2019). *The Hebrew Bible. Volume 3: The Writings*, page 622.**

Alter is a Hebrew literary scholar who approaches the Hebrew Bible from a literary and etymological standpoint. His culminating lifetime work, after many books over the years, analyzing various books in the *Tanakh*, is a three-volume work with his own translation and commentary of the entire Hebrew Testament. We think it is an essential study resource. It is now available in either print, weighing several pounds, or in kindle for about $50. The cost has come down since it was first published in 2019, and in any case, it is well worth the investment. Martha had the privilege of hearing Alter speak on the wisdom books in 2009 at Temple Bat Yahm in Newport Beach and to chat with him for a bit. He is a genuine and unassuming man, who teaches in a conversational manner. He is very accessible both as a writer and teacher.

**Tamara Cohn Eskenazi & Tikva Frymer-Kensky (2011). *The JPS Bible Commentary Ruth: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary.* Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society.**

 The JPS Commentary series is very in-depth with scripture both in Hebrew and English. This volume on Ruth is not for the faint-hearted or casual reader but it was our original resource and we found it to be very valuable.

**Yehezkel Kluger (1999). *A Psychological Interpretation of Ruth*. With a companion essay: *Standing in the Sandals of Naomi* by Nomi Kluger-Nash.**

The two Klugers are father/daughter and both were/are Jungian analysts. Yehezkel is also very adept in Hebrew, masterfully integrating the themes found in Ruth as they are also seen in other Hebrew scriptures. He also describes the underlying myths that preceded the Ruth story. He makes use of the *Kabbalah*, the *Talmud*, and other sources. His daughter provides her subjective experiences of the Ruth and Naomi story. This is a remarkable and deep exploration of the Book of Ruth.

**Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer (Editors) (2001). *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and Unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, the Apocryphyal/ Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament.* Grand Rapids, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.**

There is an article for each of the named women in the Book of Ruth in this volume, with references. It is well done from a scholarly perspective and yet is accessible to general readers. There is a distinct feminist perspective. Carol Meyers is a Jewish scholar at Duke University, most well-known for her translation and commentary on the Book of Exodus. Here, she teamed up to produce an excellent scholarly resource on all the women in the Bible. It is usable by anyone who is into Hebrew Bible or New Testament studies at a college level. Martha had the good fortune to study the wisdom books with her in a seminar years ago and to receive some further materials and exchange emails. Phyllis Trible, mentioned below, was the contributing writer for the articles on Ruth, Naomi, and Orpah.

**Meyers, Carol (1988). *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context*. NY: Oxford University Press.**

Meyers reconstructs the everyday lives of women in ancient Israel, demonstrating that the biblical resources give an incomplete picture of their religious lives, because it was elite males who wrote most of the biblical books, often focusing on exceptional characters rather than the unknown others around them. Being both an archeologist and a biblical scholar, Meyers analyzes the texts in light of rural Palestinian archeological findings. She deals with the problem of patriarchy and the misreadings of feminist interpreters.

**Meyers, Carol (2005). *Households and Holiness: The Religious Culture of Israelite Women.* Minneapolis: Fortress Press.**

Taking account of archeological work as well as biblical studies, Meyers delineates the role of women and their religious lives and practices, which are often left out of accounts of the Israelite religion altogether. . She says there were diverse practices, including “magic,” and other ideas which have been treated as “non-orthodox” (which to us would appear to be inappropriately projecting later ideas into the material).

**Phyllis Trible (1992). Ruth, Book of. In Freedman, D.N., Heroin, G. A., Graf, D. F. *et al.* *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, Volume 5, pages 843-347.**

The Anchor Dictionary is considered one of the most in-depth scholarly biblical dictionaries even though there are others published more recently. It is a six-volume, seven-million-word set. It can be bought for about $500 but we have the Logos biblical software and have built a digital library including this one. As a way of grasping scholarship on a book or topic when pursuing background, it is unsurpassed, but again not a casual resource. It is not, however, as demanding as the JPS Commentary.

[**New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised**](https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/New-Revised-Standard-Version-Anglicised-NRSVA-Bible/) **(NRSVA) Copyright © 1989, 1995 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.**

Within the text of our ten segments, we have incorporated the JPS translation, but in the readings at the beginning of each one, we have used the NRSV. We have not included their footnotes. Robert Alter’s translation and footnotes are invaluable, but they are only available in his published works. There are other versions that would be useful too. O line, you can go to Bible Gateway to find many different versions.

1. This story…a quiet polemic against the opposition of Ezra and Nehemiah to intermarriage with the surrounding peoples when the Judahites returned to their land in the fifth century B.C.E. The author may have picked up a hint from 1 Samuel 22:3-4, where David, said here to be Ruth’s great-grandson, is reputed to have placed his parents under the protection of the king of Moab to keep them safe from Saul. …for biblical Israel, Moab is an extreme negative case of a foreign people. A perennial enemy, its origins, according to the story of Lot’s daughter in Genesis 19, are in an act of incest. The Torah actually bans any sort of intercourse, social, cultic, or sexual with the Moabites. …Moab in this book provides refuge for the family of Elimelech fleeing from famine….’ (Robert Alter, 2019). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Carol Meyers, Toni Craven, and Ross S. Kraemer (Editors) (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)