

International Day of Study

Leader's Guide: The Biblical Text

Part I: Background Reading

CANON

The book of *Ruth* is found in the section of the Hebrew Bible referred to as *Ketuvim* or “Writings.” *Ketuvim* consists of a variety of books including; poetry (*Psalms*), short stories (*Ruth*, *Esther*), collections of wisdom (*Ecclesiastes*, *Proverbs*), and history (*Ezra*, *Nehemiah*, *Chronicles*). Concerning the book of *Ruth*'s exact placement within *Ketuvim*, Jewish tradition offers at least three possibilities:

1. According to one tradition (*BT: Baba Bathra 14b*), the book of *Ruth* is the first book in *Ketuvim* and is immediately followed by the book of *Psalms*. Since the book of *Ruth* ends with a genealogy for King David, the supposed author of *Psalms*, the book of *Ruth* serves as a fitting introduction to the *Psalms*.

2. According to our oldest existing manuscripts of the Bible (*The Aleppo Code* and *The Leningrad Codex* both dating to the tenth-eleventh century CE), the book of *Ruth* follows the book of *Proverbs*. In this tradition, *Ketuvim* opens with *Psalms*, *Job* and *Proverbs* followed by the five *megillot* (scrolls read in the synagogue on Jewish holidays). In these early manuscripts:

Ruth is the first of the five *megillot* because its setting, the time of the judges (*shoftim*) precedes historical settings of the other *megillot*.

Song of Songs and *Ecclesiastes* follow because they are traditionally dated to the time of King Solomon.

Lamentations is next because it is dated to the time of the destruction of the First Temple.

Esther is the last of the *megillot* since it is dated to the Second Temple period.

It is interesting to note that the book of *Ruth* follows the book of *Proverbs* because the last chapter of *Proverbs* describes the *aishet hayil* “the woman of valor” and *Ruth* is called an *Aishet Hayil* (*Ruth* 3:11).

3. A third Jewish tradition arranges the five *megillot* in the order of the holidays on which they are read (*Song of Songs* on Passover, *Ruth* on *Shavuot*, *Lamentations* on *Tisha B'Av*, *Ecclesiastes* on *Sukkot* and *Esther* on *Purim*). As a result, *Ruth* is found between *Song of Songs* and *Lamentations*. Although this system of ordering the *megillot* is probably not the oldest tradition, today it is found in most modern printed editions of the Bible.

Beyond these three Jewish traditions, there is one more noteworthy tradition about the placement of the book of *Ruth* which is based on the *Septuagint* (the translation of the Bible from Hebrew into Greek). According to this tradition, since the book of *Ruth* is set in the time period of the judges, before there were kings in Israel, the book of *Ruth* is found between the book of *Judges* and the book of *Samuel*. This places the story of *Ruth* in the transitional period between leadership of the judges and the period of the monarchy in ancient Israel, and in particular, the selection and reign of

King David. Interestingly, the book of *Ruth* ends with the statement: “He will renew your life and sustain your old age; for he is born of your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons” (4:15), and the book of *Samuel* begins with Elkanah asking Hannah: “...am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?” (1:8).

DATING

The dating of the writing of the book of *Ruth* is a matter of much dispute.

Some scholars argue that the style of Hebrew used in the text is quite old and dates to the beginning of the monarchy (tenth-ninth century BCE). These scholars argue that this dating also explains the text’s interest in the genealogy of David providing a charming story of the origin of King David during his reign or the reign of his son.

Other scholars, however, argue that the style of Hebrew used in the text only pretends to be old in order to make the book seem to have been written in the time of the early monarchy, but features of the book’s Hebrew suggest it was probably written during or after the Babylonian exile (sixth century BCE). These scholars also argue that the story may be a polemical protest against the efforts of Ezra and Nehemiah to ban foreign wives (fifth century BCE). However, many scholars stress that the tone of the story is not polemical and conclude that the date of the book cannot be determined.

SYNOPSIS OF THE BOOK OF RUTH

In the days of the judges, Elimelech and Naomi and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, migrated from Bethlehem to Moab due to a famine. Elimelech died in Moab. Mahlon and Chilion married Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah, but then they too died leaving their wives childless. Naomi was thus left widowed without her sons but with two daughters-in-law. When Naomi heard that the famine had ended, she decided to return to Bethlehem and her daughters-in-law announced their intentions of accompanying her. Naomi urged them not to go with her but to return to their mothers’ homes. Orpah consented but Ruth insisted on going with Naomi.

The arrival of Ruth and Naomi in Bethlehem coincided with the beginning of the barley harvest and Ruth immediately went out to the fields to glean (to gather crops left behind by the reapers for the poor to collect for themselves, see Deut 24:19). By chance, Ruth happened to go to the field of Boaz, a farmer who treated her kindly and, as it turned out, was a relative of Elimelech.

When Naomi heard about Ruth’s successful gleaning and Boaz’s kindness to Ruth, she developed a plan for Ruth and Boaz to marry based on the laws of levirate marriage (*Deut* 25:5-9, *Gen* 38) and the laws of redemption of a kinsman’s land (*Lev* 25:25). As a result of this marriage, Ruth and Boaz became the ancestors of King David.

Refer also to the final section (Conclusion, p.11) of the Leader’s Guide that gives a summary of some themes that are found in the book of Ruth; keep these themes in mind as you guide the discussion through the various interpretive exercises.

ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SOURCES AND STUDY MATERIAL

In the lesson to follow we will be discussing different interpretations of the Bible. If you want to read more about either feminist or literary interpretations, you might want to consult the following sources.

Feminist Interpretation: On the idea that the Bible does not stereotype behavior as masculine or feminine, see Tikvah Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture and the Biblical Transformation of Pagan Myth*, chapter 11.

Literary Theory: For more information on reading the book of *Ruth* as similar in form to a folktale, see Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist Folklorist Interpretation*.

PART II: LEADER'S GUIDE

OBJECTIVES

Students will be introduced to a number of techniques for reading a Biblical text that include *intertextual analysis, literary analysis, and feminist interpretation*.

Students will use these various interpretations to read and enhance their understanding of the book of *Ruth*.

Leader: *Was there a time in your life when you chose to take a risky path rather than a safer course? If so, who served as your mentor; what were you given to help you accomplish your goal and how did you grow as a person?*

[Have some example in mind, in case no one is able to offer something to inspire discussion. Let the group discuss this for a few minutes, and tell them that we will come back to this later in the session.]

Leader: *In our discussion of the Biblical text of Ruth, we will use a number of interpretive styles: intertextual analysis, feminist interpretation, and literary analysis. We will identify how each method works, and use it to interpret different aspects and themes in the story of Ruth.*

INTERTEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Leader: *We often find in the Bible references or allusions to other biblical passages. This type of literary allusion is called **intertextual**. One example of an intertextual reference is the allusion in Ruth 2:11-12 to Abram (Abraham's early name) in Genesis 12:1-3.*

Before we read and compare these two texts, we need to review the two stories.

Ruth Chapters 1 & 2: Synopsis

Naomi, her husband and two sons migrate from Bethlehem to Moab due to a famine. Her husband dies. Her sons marry Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah, but then, after about ten years of marriage, they too die leaving their wives childless. Naomi is thus left widowed without her sons but with her two daughters-in-law.

When Naomi hears that the famine has ended, she decides to return to Bethlehem and her daughters-in-law announce their intention of accompanying her. Naomi urges them not to go with her but to return to their mothers' homes.

Orpah consents but Ruth insists on going with Naomi, uttering the famous statement: "*Wherever you go, I will go; your people will be my people; your God will be my God.*" Ruth and Naomi then journey to Bethlehem. [No details are given about their journey except that their arrival there coincides with the beginning of the barley harvest.]

On Ruth's first day in Bethlehem, she decides to go gleaning in the fields, picking dropped grain to help feed herself and Naomi. By chance she goes to the field of Boaz. Boaz notices Ruth working, asks his workers who she is and then counsels Ruth to glean only in his fields where he will make sure that his workers will watch out for her. Ruth asks Boaz why he is so kind to her, a foreigner. Boaz replies:

"I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before. May the Lord reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge!" (2:11-12)

You might want to summarize with a quick review of some of the facts of the story, perhaps using these questions:

- How long had Ruth been married to Naomi's son? (10 years)
- How many children did Ruth have? (none, she was widowed childless)
- Who told Ruth to go to Bethlehem? (no one; Naomi tried to talk her out of it)
- or what acts does Boaz praise Ruth? (being good to her mother-in-law, and leaving her parents, leaving her birthplace, and going to a people she didn't know)

A COMPARISON: SYNOPSIS OF THE ABRAHAM STORY

When the story begins, Abram is living with his wife Sarai and his whole extended family (father Terah, brothers and sisters-in-law, nieces and nephews). They live in Haran which is north of Canaan. Abram and Sarai have no children although they have been married many years. (Abram is 75 and Sarai is 65 years old when our story takes place.) One day, God tells Abram:

"Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you." (Genesis 12:1-3)

Abram follows God's orders and journeys with Sarai and his nephew Lot and all their wealth from Haran to the land of Canaan. No details are given about their journey but when they arrive, God promises the land that Abram sees to his descendants.

Discussion Question. *In what ways is Abram's journey similar to Ruth's?*

Some possible answers (there are no wrong answers):

- Abram leaves his native land (Haran) and Ruth leaves her native land (Moab)
- Both go to the land of Canaan
- Both leave their parents
- For both, it would have been easier not to go
- Both are childless and both will have children in Canaan
- No details of the journey are given, just the decision to go and their arrival
- Abram chooses to heed God and go as Ruth chooses to go with Naomi (though not heeding Naomi)
- Both will receive blessing as a result of his or her journey
- Abram set out on his own charting his own way (religiously) and Ruth is charting her own way as a foreigner in Bethlehem
- Both Abram and Ruth would have “died” as characters if they had not undertaken their journeys (i.e. their stories would have ended if they had stayed home)
- Abram is called by God to go and Ruth is called by loss and personal crisis
- Abram's going shows loyalty to God and Ruth's going shows loyalty to Naomi (and also to her deceased husband, Mahlon, whose name she will preserve through a future child)

Discussion Question: *In what ways is Abram's journey different from Ruth's?*

Some possible answers (some of these differences may contradict the similarities listed above because different people can interpret the same story differently):

- Abram goes with his wife and nephew (he is not alone) but Ruth goes without a husband and only with Naomi who doesn't want her (Ruth is alone)
- Abram goes by order of God, Ruth is not ordered to go and even dissuaded from going by Naomi
- Abram is called by God to go, Ruth goes out of love
- Abram goes with his wealth, Ruth goes as a pauper to glean in the fields
- Abram is 75 years old, Ruth has only been married 10 years and is still of child-bearing age
- Abram is promised blessings by God if he goes, Ruth is promised nothing to go and Boaz only commends Ruth for going and blesses her afterwards
- Abram goes with God's voice reassuring him, Ruth just has Naomi (who, in her grieving, is no support)
- Abram set out on his own, charting his own way (religiously), Ruth just follows Naomi back to Naomi's hometown

- Ruth decides how to act based on love and loyalty (bringing her to the same ideal as Abraham)
- Abram goes to a land, Ruth goes to a people. Re-read what Boaz says to Ruth and what God says to Abram to make sure everyone notices the difference in language between going to a land and going to a people.

Discussion Question: *In comparing Ruth to Abram, what do you think the biblical storyteller is saying about Ruth?*

Some possible answers:

- As Abram is the hero of *Genesis* 12 - 24, so Ruth is the hero of this story (not Naomi or Boaz)
- As Abram is a patriarch, so Ruth is a matriarch
- As Abram is the father of the Israelite nation, so Ruth will be mother of the Davidic line (see *Genesis* 17:6 where Abram is told kings will come from him)
- As Abram is a risk-taker, so is Ruth willing to take risks
- As Abram undergoes many tests (one test is being told to leave his home and go to a land he does not know; another is to sacrifice Isaac), so does Ruth undergo tests. She is told to return to her parents' home but she passes the test by not going home; she gleans successfully avoiding the dangers about which Boaz warned; she follows Naomi's instructions and meets Boaz at night on the threshing floor (chapter 3).
- As Abram has children after a period of barrenness, so does Ruth have Obed
- As Abram is loyal and faithful, so is Ruth

Contrasts are also possible:

- Abram and Ruth are loyal and selfless but in different ways: one is deserving of God's blessing by being loyal to God and the other is deserving of God's blessing by being loyal to people, living and dead.
- Abram started a new relationship with God, a new community and a new religious outlook. Ruth didn't start a new community but brought her different religious sensibilities to an existing community.

FEMINIST INTERPRETATION

Leader: *As we have seen in our discussion, intertextual analysis permits a richer reading of Biblical texts. It also opens the door for us to consider other ways of thinking about the text, such as Feminist interpretation of the story. For example, within the field of Feminist interpretation of the Bible, one thesis that has been suggested is that the Biblical author does not differentiate between male and female behavior, i.e there is just human behavior – men and women typically have the same goals and methods of accomplishing their goals.*

Leader: *Let's look at some familiar Biblical stories that support this Feminist theory that men and women have similar goals and methods.*

Discussion Question: *What Biblical characters fit these descriptions?*

Some possible answers:

- Men engage in deception (Abram said Sarai was his sister)
- Women engage in deception (Rebecca told Jacob to pretend to be Esau)
- Men are concerned about the continuity of their communities or families (Abram wants an heir.)
- Women are concerned about continuity of their communities or families (Lot's daughter, Tamar, daughter-in-law of Judah)
- Men act ruthlessly (Pharaoh killing Israelite babies)
- Women act ruthlessly (Sarai demanding that Hagar and Ishmael are sent away, presumably to die in the desert)
- Men sing and dance when they are happy (Moses at the Sea of Reeds)
- Women sing and dance when they are happy (Miriam at the Sea of Reeds, Deborah after her victory)
- Men nag (Abraham pestered God until he agreed not to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah for even just ten righteous people)
- Women nag (Delilah pestered Samson until he revealed to her the secret of his strength)
- Men use guilt (In the book of *Deuteronomy*, Moses reminds the people of all the hardships he underwent because of their disobedience)
- Women use guilt (Sarai tells Abram that all the trouble she has from Hagar is Abram's fault)

Leader: *Think back to the lists of similarities and differences between Ruth and Abram. Is it now appropriate to say that the Bible portrays both men and women as:*

- Able to turn their backs on their families, homes, past traditions when needed
- Answering a call
- Taking risks
- Being loyal
- List other actions that were taken by both characters...

Leader: *Sometimes women do act differently from men because of external factors (such as economic and biological constraints). However, the thesis that the Bible takes a gender-blind view of humanity, argues that all other things (power, economics, biology) being equal, there is no inherent difference between men and women.*

Discussion Question: *How does this modern feminist interpretation of Bible compare to the way you have studied Bible in the past?*

LITERARY ANALYSIS

Leader: *Yet another way to study the Bible is to define the specific text's literary genre. For example, is it poetry as in the book of Psalms, history like Chronicles, or a short story like Esther? Once we decide what genre it conforms to, we can then compare it to similar types of literature outside of the Bible. With this in mind, the book of Ruth is sometimes classified as short story or novella; some scholars compare it to a folktale or mythological hero epic.*

Leader: *One element found in a folktale or myth is a hero or heroine on a journey or quest. The journey is generally preceded by a call to go (like God calls Abram). However, sometimes the call is in the form of a loss recently suffered that needs to be recouped. In other words, the loss calls or compels the hero to act.*

Discussion Question: *What loss might Ruth have been looking to replace?*

Some possible answers:

- The death of her husband might have called her to rebuild the life she had and then lost when he died
- His death might have called her to search for a new identity after her identity as Mahlon's wife died with him.
- The loss of potential descendants might have called her to seek to preserve her husband's memory by having a child in his name
- The deaths of Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion might have caused dishonor to Naomi's family and called her to find a way to restore honor to the family
- Lack of prosperity in Israel may have called her to go to Bethlehem to help preserve Israelite society with a new generation

Leader: *In folktales, some characters function to protect the hero by trying to stop them from going off on a dangerous journey.*

Discussion Question: *Who might fit this role?*

- Naomi tries to talk Ruth out of going
- Orpah returns to her home, perhaps enticing Ruth to follow

Leader: *In contrast, another type of character appearing during the journey is referred to as a **donor**. A donor is usually encountered by the hero/oiner accidentally. Typically, the hero obtains from the donor something that permits the hero to avoid misfortune or to satisfy a need. [For example, Cinderella's fairy godmother gives her glass slippers; Glinda the Good Witch of the North advises Dorothy to put on the ruby slippers of the Wicked Witch of the East; and Dumbledore mentors Harry Potter and gives him a magical invisibility cloak which had belonged to Harry's father.] Before we consider who functions as a donor in the story of Ruth, we need to review the rest of the story.*

Ruth Chapters 2 – 4: Synopsis

After Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem, Ruth immediately goes out to the fields to glean. By chance, Ruth happens to go the field of Boaz, a farmer who insists that she not leave his field but stay close to his female workers for protection and to share in their water. Boaz orders his workers to make sure that Ruth is not bothered or impeded from gleaning. At mealtime he offers

her food. When Naomi hears about Ruth's successful gleaning and Boaz's kindness to Ruth, she is delighted and offers a blessing in which she thanks God for not withholding kindness from them.

Naomi then develops a plan for Ruth to dress and go to the threshing floor where Boaz will be eating, drinking and lying down for the night. Ruth follows Naomi's instructions and at midnight. Boaz notices a woman lying next to him on the threshing floor. *Ruth asks Boaz to marry him (the phrase "spread a wing over" a woman is generally understood as a metaphor for marriage) and to serve as a redeemer (if the nearest redeemer is unwilling).*

The story concludes with the nearer redeemer stepping aside to allow Boaz to serve as a redeemer for Naomi's fields and Boaz marries Ruth. As a result of this marriage, Ruth and Boaz conceive Obed and become the ancestors of King David.

Leader: *Boaz fits the form of a folktale donor when Ruth accidentally encounters him in the midst of her journey.*

Discussion Question: *What does Boaz provide Ruth to help her avoid misfortune or satisfy the needs that sent her on her original journey?*

Some possible answers:

- Boaz provides Ruth with protection from strangers whom she might encounter in the fields by insisting she glean with his workers and ordering them not to bother her
- Boaz provides Ruth with abundant gleaning, food and water so she and Naomi don't starve
- Boaz provides Ruth with acceptance into his entourage
- Boaz gives Ruth his promise to marry her

Leader: *When we compare the book of Ruth to the form of a folktale, what might we learn about the book? Folktales are often described as stories that consider the universal human condition, teach a lesson, or generally address the struggle to find meaning in life.*

Discussion Question: *What lessons does Ruth teach and how does it address the struggle to find meaning in life?*

Discuss the following possibilities and ask participants for more suggestions:

- The story of Ruth encourages family solidarity
- The story of Ruth extols loyalty and kindness
- The story of Ruth highlights the tensions between not taking risks (staying in Moab with one's family) and taking risks (going to the unknown Bethlehem) and the opportunity to grow as a person (gaining skills, maturity and confidence) that comes from risk taking.
- The story of Ruth teaches that God acts in the world through ordinary people.
- The story of Ruth offers each of us the hope that we may function as a donor in someone else's journey.

CONCLUSION

Depending on how much time you have left, you might want to summarize this quickly yourself, or you might have time remaining to discuss these themes and solicit even more examples. You will have to decide this based upon your schedule.

Leader: *As we conclude this session, we can reflect on some of the themes that are found in this story. Some of these themes will be highlighted in our other sessions today on midrash and poetry.*

The theme of risk-taking opened our session, and is a constant theme throughout the book of Ruth. This story suggests that when individuals take risks, as did its heroine, the benefit often extends beyond the individual, but also to family (Naomi and Boaz), to community, and even the nation (the story leads to the birth of David.)

A theological reading of the book suggests that God directs human destiny.

- God ends the famine in Judah (1:6).
- God makes sure that Ruth conceives a child with Boaz (4:13).

However, God also acts via seemingly chance occurrences.

- Ruth goes to Boaz's field apparently by chance (2:3);
- When Naomi hears that Ruth chanced upon Boaz's field, she praises God for not withholding kindness ("lo azav hasdo", 2:20); Naomi thus attributes the chance event to God. [This same phrase appears only one other time in the Bible. In Genesis 24:27 Abraham's servant is so grateful that Rebecca (a suitable wife for Isaac) has chanced to meet him that the servant praises God for not withholding kindness.]

Reversal of fortune is another theme in the book.

- The story begins with famine but ends with a successful harvest.
- It begins with death and ends with birth.
- It begins with exile and ends with restoration. [Ancient mythology often connects agricultural sowing and harvesting with human fertility, conception and birth as well as death and redemption.]
- Naomi has been compared to Job because both characters lose everything. She blames God (1:20-21) and later has her fortunes restored (4:14-16).
- Naomi returns from Moab destitute, bitter, hopeless, and passive. Ruth decides to go gleaning upon their return and Naomi passively consents to Ruth's idea (2:2).
- When Naomi sees the success of Ruth's gleaning, she hopes again that God will be gracious to her and then begins to concoct her plan for Ruth and Boaz to marry.

Additional Questions for Discussion

[You will probably not have time for these questions, but they might serve as future discussion topics as your Sisterhood, hopefully, will continue to reflect on the issues that we touched upon in our study of the book of Ruth.]

- What types of reward does one receive from leading a life of loyalty? Boaz blessed Ruth with reward from God in recompense for the loyalty she showed. Some of the rewards one might receive by leading a life of loyalty towards other people include: inner peace, sense of strength from learning how to be patient and tolerant of others, a supportive community.
- Does your synagogue community model itself on the Biblical ideal of gender-blindness (i.e. the essential sameness of the sexes)?