

Ruth - Week 3

The Story of Ruth

Reading Ruth Through a Postcolonial Lens

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A postcolonial approach (a study of the legacy of colonialism) wants to know how the reality of colonialism impacts upon the people, cultures, traditions and history of the biblical story.

Colonialism as we experience it today will not be seen in the Bible but what we can see are the power relationships between the characters and groups inside the text.

We can also ask the questions: who benefits in the text and how have we come to read the story since then?

A postcolonial approach also takes into account the imbalances in the relationships of those who read it.

No one reads the Bible unbiased.

How we read it is influenced by our context, social location and experience.

Reading the story of Ruth from a postcolonial perspective brings out three important theological themes that are relevant for our context today:

- Firstly, the narrative of Ruth resists the idea that ethnicity is the most important part of an identity. The inter-cultural marriage between Ruth and Boaz celebrates multiculturalism and denounces monocultural identity based on ethnicity.
- Secondly, in the story of Ruth, we recognise YHWH, the divine, as not being confined to the temple settings. God is understood in different ways in different contexts and yet God's sovereignty remains.
- Thirdly, the narrative of Ruth resists any borders that stop people from moving and migrating. Ruth's story shows people who are free to cross borders for life, livelihood and security.

The story of Ruth calls for a spirituality of resistance, where we stand in courage to resist and protest any dominance and discrimination today.

Resistance is a gift from God for all people of God. Be bold and be strong to stand for the values of the Kingdom of God with no compromise.

Approaching the Text

- Pray:** Focus your mind and ask God to open up the passage to you and teach you new things.
- Read:** Ruth chapter 3 twice – you might want to read two different translations, for example New International Version and The Message or The King James Version.
- Explore:** Identify the characters and their role in the text. Choose the character (Ruth, Naomi or Boaz) that you identify with most. Consider why you chose this character
As this particular character, do you have power in the story? Why do you behave the way you do?
- Relevance:** How might your socio-political, cultural and religious experience influence the way you respond to the story? How does the postcolonial reading of Ruth challenge you in your context? Think about how your faith might help you resist.

To read an NIV Version of Ruth, Chapter 3, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

To hear an NIV Version of Ruth, Chapter 3, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

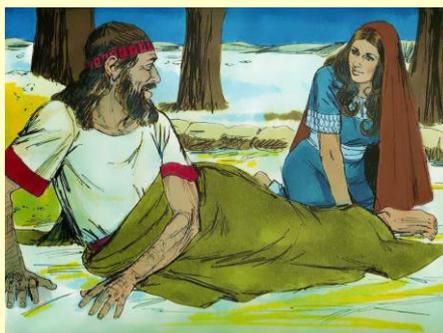
To hear a Dramatised Version of Ruth, Chapter 3, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

To read The Message Version of Ruth, Chapter 3, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

To hear The Message Version of Ruth, Chapter 3, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

To read The King James Version of Ruth, Chapter 3, hold **Shift** and **Ctrl** together and click [here](#).

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Commentary by Dr Rachel Starr

Abridged Version

Encouraged by her mother-in-law, Ruth takes further action to secure a home for herself and Naomi. Both women resist their fate as poor widows. Under cover of the riotous festivities, Ruth rebels against social protocol, seeking out Boaz at night and demanding he redeem her.

Resisting (Ruth 3:1-5)

Once again, the chapter begins and ends with Ruth and Naomi at home, making plans and reviewing them. While the first plan, to glean, is Ruth's idea; this second plan, coming at the end of the harvest, is more desperate. The morality and motivations of the characters remain blurred.

Is Naomi concerned or careless about Ruth's reputation?

Is Ruth a willing participant, or a victim?

Is Boaz a righteous redeemer or hapless fool?

All such readings (and more) are possible. Naomi states her intention clearly: to seek rest (in the NRSV 'security') for Ruth, and therefore herself also.

Refuge from the precariousness of their existence as widows can only be ensured through marriage. But Naomi realizes (although she never states it directly), it will be difficult for her to marry off Ruth, because she is a foreigner. She sees in Boaz a chance for Ruth.

As a local, Naomi knows that as the harvest is celebrated, Boaz will be found at the threshing floor. The threshing floor was a large open space, far enough outside the gates for the grain to be processed without the chaff being blown into the town. It was a place of gathering and distributing, of transactions and thanksgiving. And during the carnivalesque atmosphere of the harvest feast, it was a place outside the bounds of the everyday. With the crops safely gathered, wine would flow and anything could happen.

The books of Ruth and Esther meet here, as the young woman is instructed to bathe, anoint and adorn herself. Such actions tend to introduce a change in status, elsewhere in the Bible marking the end of mourning or the time of betrothal.

Ruth is told to 'go down' in secret and 'lie down' with Boaz. She is to make herself fully vulnerable to him. Read with attentiveness to gender-based violence, Naomi's instructions are concerning.

Is Ruth, like Esther, to be exploited for the pleasure and gain of Naomi and Boaz?

While 'to lie down' can mean sleep in the Bible, when a woman is present, it almost always implies sex.

Similarly, 'to uncover' has a range of meanings, but tends to be used in relation to nakedness. And feet (and by extension, legs, a more accurate translation of verse 4) are used elsewhere as a euphemism for genitalia.

Redeeming (Ruth 3:6-15)

The contrast between Ruth and Boaz's second encounter and their earlier meeting is stark. Instead of a midday meeting, it is night; instead of many witnesses, there are none.

If Ruth is primarily a story about food, about being empty or satisfied, that Boaz lies down 'at the end of the heap of grain' should not be overlooked. Perhaps it is the grain that Ruth wants to be close to, rather than Boaz.

Ruth's careful approach toward an intoxicated man recalls Jael's deadly movement towards Sisera (see Judges 4:21). Stealth, along with reference to the wing of a garment connects Ruth once again to the story of David, this time as he encounters Saul.

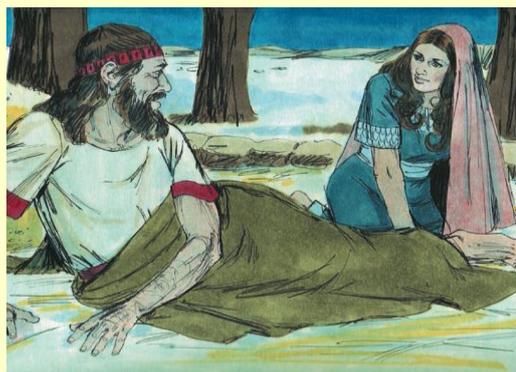
Awakened from sleep, Boaz is confused and remains 'in the dark' about what is going on (as the reader is). For a second time, he asks Ruth, 'Who are you?' Like Judah encountering the veiled Tamar, Boaz struggles to catch sight of Ruth's face in the darkness.

Although she appears to be in control of the situation, Ruth's vulnerability as a poor foreign woman remains. Her need gives her clarity. She asks Boaz to spread his cloak over her, reminding him of his stated wish that she be rewarded by the God 'under whose wings you have come for refuge', the same word being used for cloak and wing. By asking to be covered by a man's cloak, Ruth may be proposing marriage, or she may be asking for Boaz to protect her more generally. That she identifies Boaz as her next-of-kin does not help clarify the situation, since even if he were the next of kin, Boaz is not obliged to marry her.

In contrast to Ruth's abrupt demand, Boaz's response is wordy. Although he identifies Ruth as twice loyal, performing *hesed* to him and Naomi, and although he claims she is a worthy woman (a fitting match for a 'pillar' of the community), he places barriers in the way. Boaz notes that there is a closer kinsman who needs to be consulted before he can act. As elsewhere, he seems concerned to protect his own reputation.

And underlying the whole exchange is the unspoken problem: Ruth's forbidden ethnicity.

What happens between midnight and morning is left to the reader's imagination.



It may be that the story functions as a reversal of similar stories: while Lot had sex with his daughters; Judah with his daughter-in-law; and David with the wife of Uriah, perhaps the silence suggests Boaz does not take advantage of the situation.

Or perhaps we are meant to understand that this sexual encounter is entered into willingly by both parties and will result in marriage and a child that lives. That a child will be the result of the encounter is further suggested by the pouring of grain into Ruth's cloak, until it fills out.

Restoring (Ruth 3:16-18)

On arrival home, for a third time Ruth is asked "How did things go with you?" or, in the footnote for verse 16 in the NRSV, "Who are you'?"

Ruth's identity is slippery. Once again, Naomi sees in the abundance of grain, hope of a future in which she is satisfied. Just as she will fill her mother-in-law's arms with a child, here Ruth fills them with food. And with that, Ruth the breadwinner falls silent.



To read the full "Commentary by Dr Rachel Starr" click [here](#) and go to page 10.