WISDOM COMMENTARY

Volume 8

Ruth

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Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ArBib	The Aramaic Bible
AYBRL	Anchor Yale Bible Reference Library
BA	*Biblical Archaeologist*
BibInt	Biblical Interpretation Series
BJS	Brown Judaic Studies
BLS	Bible and Literature Series
BT	*The Bible Translator*
CBQ	*Catholic Biblical Quarterly*
CF	Cistercian Fathers Series
COS	*The Context of Scripture*. Edited by William W. Hallo. 3 vols. Leiden: Brill, 1997–2002.
CurBR	*Currents in Biblical Research*
EvQ	*Evangelical Quarterly*
FCB	Feminist Companion to the Bible
GBS	Guides to Biblical Scholarship
GTR	Gender, Theory, and Religion
HSM	Harvard Semitic Monographs

IEJ	*Israel Exploration Journal*
IFT	Introductions in Feminist Theology
ISBL	Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature
IVBS	International Voices in Biblical Studies
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JBL	*Journal of Biblical Literature*
JFSR	*Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*
Josephus, *Ant.*	Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*
JRAS	*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*
JSOT	*Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series
KTU	*Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit*. Edited by Manfried Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquín Sanmartín. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2013. 3rd enl. ed. of *KTU: The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani, and Other Places*. Edited by Manfried Dietrich, Oswald Loretz, and Joaquín Sanmartín. Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995.
LCBI	Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OTL	Old Testament Library
Proof	*Prooftexts: A Journal of Jewish Literary History*
SB	Sources bibliques
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SemeiaSt	Semeia Studies
SemeiaSup	Semeia Supplements
SIDIC	*Journal of the Service internationale de documentation judeo-chrétienne*
SJOT	*Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament*
SymS	Symposium Series
VT	*Vetus Testamentum*

VTSup	Supplements to Vetus Testamentum
WAW	Writings from the Ancient World
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
ZAW	*Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*

Mishnah, Talmud, and Related Literature

b. B. Bat.	Bava Batra
b. Ber.	Berakot
b. Šabb.	Šabbat
b. Sanh.	Sanhedrin
b. Soṭah	Soṭah
b. Yebam.	Yebamot
Midr. Yal. Lekach Tov	Midrash Yalkut Lekach Tov
Midr. Yal. Shimoni	Midrash Yalkut Shimoni

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Authors' Introduction

A few months ago, while working on this commentary, Alice had dinner at the home of Marianne Flynn, a friend, and told her about our project. She responded enthusiastically that she loved the biblical Ruth because of her compassion. In the course of the conversation Marianne contrasted Ruth's behavior with acting ruthlessly. The exchange led Alice to return home and look up the history of the word "ruth." She found the following:

Contemporary English does not use the noun "ruth." The word may originally derive from the Nordic language; it can be traced back to twelfth-century England where it meant "pity or compassion, sorrow or grief because of the fate of another." The adjective and adverb developed in the fourteenth century; the adjective "ruthful" was used as late as the seventeenth century. Someone who is "ruthless" is, according to the dictionary, "without pity or compassion; cruel; merciless."[1] Much to our surprise, no dictionaries we examined derive the word ruth and its extended usage from the biblical character Ruth.[2]

1. Dictionary.com, adapted from the *Random House Dictionary*, 2015. *The Collins English Dictionary Complete and Unabridged* 2012 digital edition provides a similar definition and includes the word "hard-hearted." Other dictionaries contain similar definitions.

2. These dictionaries include the following: *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 2, *N–Z* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993); *A New English Dictionary on Historical Principles*, vol. 8, collected by the Philosophical Society, ed. James A. H. Murray

Retelling the Story

We begin with a simple retelling of the story. We also recognize, and want our readers to recognize, that our summary is inevitably a slight distortion, but we retell the story so that the reader who is unfamiliar with it can appreciate issues that emerge later in our introduction. Retelling any narrative is an interpretation. A teller includes some details and omits others; the details she omits tend to emphasize those she includes. A teller may paraphrase and select words in her retelling that have multiple meanings and nuances. A teller may use synonyms for words in the "original" text, and that "original" may be, as in the case of the book of Ruth, already a translation. These are caveats as we here, very briefly, retell the story of Ruth.

The book of Ruth recounts the story of a family from Bethlehem in Judah—a mother, father, and two sons—who travel to Moab during a time of famine in their own country. While they are in Moab, the father, Elimelech, dies. The sons, Mahlon and Chilion, marry Ruth and Orpah, Moabite women. Ruth and Orpah are both childless when Mahlon and Chilion die. When Naomi learns that the famine is over in Bethlehem, she (now a childless widow) decides to return home. Ruth and Orpah expect to accompany their mother-in-law to Judah, yet Naomi tries to convince them to remain in their own land, arguing that they have more chances for a better life in their own country. Orpah goes back home to her mother's house, but Ruth chooses to remain with Naomi. Ruth, though a Moabite, pledges loyalty to Naomi—to her land, to her people, and even to her God, YHWH.

When the two women arrive in Bethlehem, women of the town greet them, welcoming Naomi back. Naomi shares with them the blessing and loss of her husband and sons that she understands to be her God's doing. The two women have arrived in Bethlehem during the barley harvest, and Ruth sets out to glean, consistent with a provision available in Israel to widows. She gleans in Boaz's field. When Ruth meets Boaz, he is protective of her. When Ruth learns from Naomi that he is

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(Oxford: Clarendon, 1910); and *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1979). Webster includes one entry for both the biblical book and character Ruth and another entry for the noun "ruth" meaning "pity, tenderness." It considers both Ruth and ruth a probable contraction of the Middle English word *ruethe*, which it understands to mean compassion. Of course, it is not credible to derive the name of a biblical book and character that predate the Common Era from Middle English. It is possible that the Middle English word *ruethe* derives from the biblical book and character, but we could find no evidence to that effect.

a close relative and may therefore be a potential source of support for the women, Ruth does as Naomi directs: she goes to the threshing floor and, in an encounter with Boaz (the details of which are ambiguous), Ruth asks him to provide security for her. He readily agrees to redeem her, if a closer relative declines. Boaz then meets Naomi's closer kinsman, and they agree that Boaz may acquire both Naomi's land and her daughter-in-law Ruth. Boaz proceeds to marry Ruth; Ruth bears a son, Obed, thereby becoming the ancestress of Israel's King David.

This summary is a skeleton and cheats the richness of the narrative, as we hope our commentary will show, but its intent is to allow the reader unfamiliar with the story to understand the references and allusions embedded in the remainder of the introduction.

A Feminist Approach

The book of Ruth, as even our short retelling shows, lends itself to feminist commentary. Not only is the title of the book named after a woman who is one of the narrative's major characters, but also women (namely, Naomi and Ruth) and women's interests drive the narrative. Even Orpah, who drops out of the narrative after her decision to remain in Moab in chapter 1, reveals herself to be her own person. Obedient to Naomi's urgings, Orpah deviates from the path Ruth chooses. Each of the women's decisions has significant consequences. Of the four named male characters in the story, three die before the end of chapter 1. Boaz, introduced in chapter 2, carries the story through to its ending.

Feminists who read the story today laud the courage of Naomi and her ability to overcome loss; they praise Ruth's determination, and her willingness to risk the known for the unknown, to claim as her own a foreign land, a foreign people, and even a foreign God. They read the story of women who, in the face of tremendous hardship, are determined to survive. The women depend on each other and, at least through part of the narrative, are not dependent on men. They are women who, just as they have cared for their husbands, care for one another. While no one denies that a culture in which men dominated produced the story, and that elements of that patriarchal culture are evident in the story, still the story provides role models for strong, courageous, caring, and risk-taking women in a more egalitarian culture.

The commentary that follows provides considerably greater detail, highlighting feminist values evident in the story while also acknowledging how the narrative has lent itself to reinforcing patriarchal values.

Jewish and Christian Theology/ies of Ruth, Briefly

Though Judaism is more commonly associated with practice than with theology, if one were to identify a Jewish theology for the book of Ruth, it would center on the Hebrew term חסד (which we will refer to through this commentary in terms of its transliteration *ḥesed*), meaning "loving kindness" or "kindness." God acts with loving kindness toward all of creation, toward all human beings, and, in particular, toward God's chosen people. God calls people to act with loving kindness toward one another. A critical theme and value that permeates Israel's identity and the Ruth narrative is this *ḥesed*, which in the Bible is demonstrated, for example, by God (Gen 24:12, 14; Exod 20:6; 2 Sam 2:6); by Jonathan toward David (1 Sam 20:8) and David toward Jonathan (2 Sam 9:1); and by the narrative's key characters in the book of Ruth. As we progress through our commentary, we will pay close attention to this quality.

Christians do not have a theology of the book of Ruth, per se, although they see the narrative's characters acting with godly virtues, which they try to imitate. In addition to loving kindness, they see generosity and courage and, depending on how they interpret the characters' behaviors, fidelity, self-sacrifice, humility, obedience, and perseverance. These are virtues that Christians associate with following Christ.

The Enigma of Ruth

The character of Ruth may well be every bit as wonderful as the above endorsements and a cursory reading of the text suggest. We know what she does, and what she says, and what others say of her, including the praise she receives. Yet we do not know what she is thinking or what inspires her actions and speech. Perhaps selflessness inspired the childless widow to leave her homeland and her culture and her mother's house in order to travel with her mother-in-law to Naomi's homeland, where she might or might not be welcomed. Her mother-in-law likely was at least a little older than she, and she was also a childless widow. Ruth's accompanying her, lest Naomi have to go alone, could merit praise, especially if the trip were dangerous. But perhaps Ruth thought that she was infertile, given that she had been married for ten years without having produced a child, and that going to Judah with Naomi would avoid the shame her infertility might have brought at home. Perhaps Ruth was infatuated with her mother-in-law and intrigued by the thought of a kind of independence from men. Perhaps the thrill of a new place and a new people called to her adventurous spirit. Perhaps she was not quite

so selfless. In other words, there are other ways of reading the character of Ruth and the book of Ruth than as a story that reinforces behaviors that are the stereotype of what every "good" woman should do.[3] The character of Ruth may be every bit as wonderful as tradition suggests, but for different reasons.

The Book of Ruth in Jewish and Christian Worship

Jews read the entire book of Ruth annually, on the festival of Shavuot,[4] the holy day that commemorates the giving of the Torah at Sinai. Its reading is meant to engender heartfelt appreciation of Torah and the practice of *ḥesed*, which always requires struggle and sacrifice. It is also a common text for Modern Orthodox B'not Mitzvah (the Jewish coming-of-age ritual for twelve-year-old young women).

Christians, by contrast, read the book selectively and sparsely. Not on any Sundays and only twice every other year on two weekdays do passages occur in the Roman Catholic Lectionary,[5] and these in the form of intermittent verses: Ruth 1:1, 3-6, 14b-16, 22 (paired with Matt 22:34-40,

3. In a recent feature in the *New York Times* (March 8, 2016), the actress Sarah Paulson discussed her portrayal of the lead prosecuting attorney in the O. J. Simpson murder trial, Marcia Clark (John Koblin, "Sarah Paulson on Playing the Bruising Role of Marcia Clark," http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/09/business/media/sarah-paulson-on-playing-the-bruising-role-of-marcia-clark.html?_r=0). In the article, Paulson admits to her criticism of Ms. Clark's appearance and demeanor during the trial (Paulson was nineteen years old at the time). Now, as an older woman and the actress chosen to play the part of Ms. Clark, Paulson realizes the arrogance and stupidity of her judgments and describes the media's criticism of Ms. Clark during the O. J. Simpson trial as a "witch trial" of Ms. Clark. Paulson states, "The idea that a woman who was very strong, who wore maybe shorter skirts than people thought was appropriate, had a bad haircut, didn't wear a lot of makeup, looked a little tired because she was raising a 3- and 5-year-old and was going through a divorce and was trying the trial of the century, should be taken to task for her lack of concealer and her bad haircut?" Looking back, Paulson realized that the media was demanding the "stereotypical good woman" when judging Ms. Clark, including a feminine hairstyle and a smile. What the article reveals in relation to Ruth is the ease with which interpreters can make facile, albeit incorrect, judgments of women.

4. Leviticus 23:15-22 describes this harvest festival, often called the festival of weeks, that takes place the day after seven weeks after the offering of first fruits. The festival comes into Greek as Pentecost.

5. The lectionary is a book that contains the biblical readings most mainline Christians officially designate to be read at specific religious services.

Jesus' teaching on the two great commandments)[6] and Ruth 2:1-3, 8-11; 4:13-17 (paired with Matt 23:1-12, Jesus' denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees).[7] Apparently the pairing of the verses from Ruth with the selected passage from Matthew 22 was done because the reading from Ruth depicts the love of God and neighbor of which the gospel speaks. The verses record the family's journey to Moab, the death of Elimelech, the marriages of Chilion and Mahlon, their deaths, and then Ruth's pledge of loyalty to Naomi, including to her land, her people, and her God. The verses from Ruth paired with the passage from Matthew 23 detail the barley harvest, Ruth's gleaning in Boaz's field, Ruth's marriage to Boaz and the birth of their son, the fact that Ruth is worth more to Naomi than seven sons, and the genealogy that links Obed to David. The text provides a strong contrast to the behavior that Jesus is denouncing and, in the likely interpretation of the liturgists, embodies Jesus' teaching that "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted" (Matt 23:12). While a feminist critique laments the fact that the lectionary relegates these important passages from the book of Ruth to biennial reading and omits entirely other significant passages from Ruth,[8] the pairing of these texts with the Matthean texts does highlight their importance.

Couples often choose Ruth 1:14-16 as a reading for wedding ceremonies.[9] In the text Ruth pledges lifelong loyalty, and even loyalty beyond death, to her mother-in-law Naomi. Read as a covenant of lifelong commitment similar to the one the two persons marrying wish to make to each other, the reading is very appropriate. Some feminists who read the text more literally—Ruth pledging loyalty until death and beyond to another woman—believe the use of the text at a marriage between two heterosexuals distorts the actual text and is an example of how heterosexuality has dominated all relationships.

6. Matthew 22:34-40 is also read on the Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A.

7. Matthew 23:1-12 is also read on the Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A.

8. We cannot help but notice and lament the omission of the threshing-floor scene in Ruth 3, which has much to say about loyalty and courage and which could easily be paired with any of many readings central to the New Testament. Another egregious omission from the lectionary readings is the passage in the book of Esther (1:1–2:4) that details another woman's (Queen Vashti) courage in the face of her drunken husband (a text that, unfortunately, would resonate with the experience of many women).

9. The Roman Catholic edition of the lectionary provides a choice of readings for wedding Masses but does not include the Ruth passage.

Cultural Interpretation

While Jewish and Christian and other biblical scholars have interpreted the book of Ruth throughout history, literary and visual artists have also contributed their interpretations of the book and its characters. In his *Divine Comedy* (*Paradiso*, canto 32: Tenth Heaven: The Empyrean), Dante Alighieri (1265–1321) describes Ruth as "the gleaner-made, meek ancestress of David the psalmist"; in John Bunyan's (1628–1688) *Pilgrim's Progress*, Ruth is the model for Christiana's youthful companion Mercy; and in John Milton's (1608–1674) *Paradise Lost*, Ruth is the paradigm for his virtuous young lady.

Visual artists, including those anonymous artists who produced illustrations in early Bible manuscripts, have also depicted characters and scenes from the story of Ruth. One can find depictions of Ruth clinging to Naomi, of Ruth and Boaz, of Naomi nursing Ruth's child as Ruth stands by, and more. Because most of this art is small, painted at the corner of a page, the facial features and emotional qualities are hard to determine. Later, Michelangelo portrayed Ruth as a Madonna figure with Obed in a fresco on an arch in the Sistine Chapel (between 1508 and 1512). Rembrandt's 1650 sketch of "Boaz pouring six measures of barley into Ruth's veil" depicts Ruth leaning gracefully toward Boaz in a manner that communicates her pleasure. Nicolas Poussin's "Ruth Meets Boaz" (1660) depicts Ruth kneeling before Boaz. The characters are small, set in a large landscape with other gleaners and harvesters in the background; still, Ruth is kneeling at Boaz's feet. William Blake's 1795 painting "Ruth and Naomi" portrays Naomi with hands outstretched as if she were saying to Ruth, "I have nothing to offer." Both James Tissot (1896) and Marc Chagall (1960) have paintings titled "Ruth Gleaning." While Tissot's watercolor contrasts Ruth with the other women gleaners (they are working back-to-back, while Ruth stands alone), Chagall captures the heat of the sun under which Ruth was working with bright reds and oranges. Chagall produced a series on Ruth in 1960, including "Ruth, Naomi and Orpah," that depicts the three women working in the field clinging so closely to each other that their bodies look almost inseparable. Also in the series are "Ruth and Boaz Meet," which captures the joy and exuberance of their encounter, and two paintings on the threshing floor. In "Ruth at the Feet of Boaz," Chagall has depicted Ruth's breasts bared but her head is at his feet. In "Boaz Wakens and Sees Ruth at His Feet," Boaz is standing. Both are naked, and the paintings leave open the possibility of an intimate sexual encounter. Philip Hermogenes Calderone's

1920 "Ruth and Naomi" is deeply expressive and worth noting. We will discuss it more at length later in the commentary.

Whether in the form of literary production or artistic expression, Ruth became an ongoing meaningful ingredient in Western culture and lent herself to a wide range of interpretations. What the artist intended to capture in the work and what the viewer or reader sees are to some extent determined by the cultural circumstances in which the work was produced (conformity to or divergence from them). How the reader or viewer engages the work is similarly dependent. The feminist may prefer one or another production because of his or her interpretation of the character of Ruth and how the work of art confirms or challenges that interpretation.

We are aware that men have dominated Western public culture, as the art examples above illustrate. But two women artists are worth noting. The Dutch-French Romantic painter Ary Sheffer produced "Ruth and Naomi" somewhere in the mid-nineteenth century. She captures the moment when Naomi is directing Ruth to return home and Ruth, placing her hand over Naomi's, seemingly declines. While considered sentimental, Sheffer's work captures well the poignancy of the exchange. In 2006, the American artist Sandy Freckleton Gagan produced an oil-on-canvas painting of Ruth and Naomi titled "Whither Thou Goest," which brings the two women together under a shared cape. Each is full of personality, with Naomi having gray hair and a walking stick but also eyes determined and looking outward. Ruth is looking at Naomi with a posture that depicts the seriousness of their situation and of her commitment. The two women are clearly en route together.

A Pleasure, an Opportunity, and a Challenge

Introducing the book of Ruth is a pleasure, an opportunity, and a challenge. It is a pleasure because the book has the distinction of being one of only three books in the Old Testament[10] named after a woman, a woman who is the book's leading character. The other books are Esther and Judith. Esther rises to fame as queen because she is beautiful and more sexually seductive than the other women with whom she competes. (King Ahasuerus had banished the former queen, Vashti, because she refused to obey the directive of her drunken husband to come to his party and display her beauty.) Judith, who is well represented in Renais-

10. As the general introduction suggests, we are using the term "Old Testament" to refer to the books included in the Tanakh and also those books considered by some Christian communities as Deuterocanonical.

sance art, exchanges her widow's clothing for attractive attire, seduces the Assyrian general Holofernes, and cuts off his head, thereby saving not only her own city, Bethulia, but Jerusalem as well. Susanna, whose tale appears in the Greek versions of Daniel, is technically not its own book of the Old Testament, yet she deserves mention. She is known for her beauty and her purity and for rejecting the advances of some lascivious elders, even at the risk of death.

Ruth provides support for her mother-in-law and becomes the great-grandmother of King David. While these narratives may be, in contemporary terms, fiction,[11] like all narratives they communicate cultural values important at the time of their composition—either reinforcing them, resisting them, or demonstrating a complex combination of both—and they continue to do so today. Because these narratives all have women at their center, the values they impart affect women in particular.

Writing a commentary on the book of Ruth for the Wisdom Commentary series is also an opportunity. It is an opportunity for the writers, and ideally for the readers as well, to reflect deeply on the character of Ruth in her own time and in ours. Who she was in her own time is important for who she is and can be for us. Ruth, like all of us, lived in a world of limited choices, yet she broadened those choices. She did not passively accept the status quo, the stereotype, the expected; she chose a future and pursued it. She disobeyed her mother-in-law to remain with her; in traveling west, she risked the known for the unknown; she chose unfamiliarity and insecurity; she worked hard and risked her reputation. And when Ruth did the stereotypical thing that women often do—marry and have a child—it was because she chose to do it. If she could behave thusly in the culture of ancient Israel, surely she provides a role model for what women can do today. The complex character whose life is set in the time of the Judges but whose story may date from centuries later can be interpreted in multiple ways; reading Ruth from our vantage point can, among other things, deepen our compassion, increase our perseverance, and affirm our sexuality.

Although Ruth is the leading character in the narrative, she is not the only character. Women dominate the story: Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi, her sister-in-law Orpah, and the women of the city. Yet Boaz is not to be forgotten; nor should we forget the three men of Bethlehem—Elkanah, Mahlon, and Chilion—whose deaths left three women widows. Some

11. The distinction between "truth" (fact) and "fiction" is a modern one. Sometimes fiction is the best conveyor of truth.

of Ruth's actions, and the decision making that leads to them, take place in response to circumstances beyond her control. Her responses to those circumstances allow the narrative to unfold as it does, and they allow contemporary readers to bring their stories to her story—for comparison and contrast, for insight and inspiration, for challenge and change.

Finally, writing a commentary on the book of Ruth is a challenge. As with all books of the Bible, the book of Ruth has been studied and reflected upon for centuries, from multiple perspectives using multiple methods. While the last fifty or so years have added the insights of more women scholars regarding the text, the contributions of these scholars are as diverse as the women themselves, and they have added to the complexity of the history of interpretation. The challenge in a new feminist commentary is to collect and present what we consider the best of traditional and contemporary scholarship while adding our own voices, the insights to which our study and reflection have led. We have tried to do our best.

The co-authors of this commentary, Mahri and Alice, both believe that Barbara Reid has done an excellent job in presenting, in the general introduction, "methodologies." She has taken the reader on a whirlwind tour from modernity's introduction of objectivity and historical criticism to postmodernity's critique of the possibility of total objectivity, and the introduction of methods that admit that the reader/interpreter's social location or, more precisely, subject position (for we are both products of our context and individuals) matters. We note that some premodern assumptions and methods have resurfaced as a part of postmodernity. Communities infused by faith, the assumption that dominated premodernity, now understand themselves as comprising a distinct social location as well as a distinctive interpretive lens.[12] The plurality of interpretation and the legitimacy of contradiction, which are integral to early rabbinic interpretation, reassert themselves in postmodernity.

Placement of the Book in the Canon

We assume that a presumption of historical truth is the reason behind Christians' placement of the book of Ruth between the books of Judges

12. Sandra M. Schneiders has been a leader among Roman Catholic feminist scholars in arguing for a privileged place for the believing community in postmodern interpretation in *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999).

and 1 Samuel. The first-century Jewish scholar Josephus similarly places Ruth after the book of Judges (ending with Samson) and before the birth of Samuel in his *Antiquities of the Jews*. The Jewish canon places the book among the Writings (Ketuvim), between the book of Proverbs and the Song of Songs. Ruth, the woman of strength (3:11), resonates with the woman of strength depicted in Proverbs 31:1 and with the independent young woman in the love story of Songs of Songs, who goes after her beloved in the middle of the night (Song 3:1-4; 5:6-7). The book of Ruth is the second of the "Five Megillot" or scrolls in the Writings that include Song of Songs, the book of Ruth, the book of Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and the book of Esther.

Neither position necessarily accords the book greater or lesser status. However, Rajkumar Boaz Johnson, one of our contributing voices, reflects below, from his context, on the importance of the placement of the book.

The Book of Ruth and the Slums of India

I was reared in one of the slums of New Delhi. The slums are composed of low-caste and outcast peoples' groups who have fled extreme forms of slavery and humiliation in rural India. They are looking for an escape. Women and children—girls and boys—are property of high-caste landowners in rural India, where 80 percent of India lives. These high-caste landowners use and abuse them in whichever way they desire, all in the name of religion. Yet, when these people come to urban areas like Delhi, Mumbai, and Mother Teresa's Calcutta, they find themselves in deeper enslavement to the high-caste lords of the slums. The low-caste and outcast, shudra and atishudra, according to Hindu religion, deserve their lot. They are fulfilling their karma. I made up my mind, from the time I was a child, that when I grew up I was going to do something to change this.

Every year between 10,000 and 20,000 farmers commit suicide in India. Eighty percent of India lives in the rural, agriculture-based economy. Sure, India has experienced economic growth in recent years. But this economic growth has only helped the minority high-caste communities further enslave the majority low-caste and outcast communities—all in the name of religion.

This, in brief, is the background to these comments on the book of Ruth. The story of Ruth and Boaz takes on quite a different meaning when read by a low-caste and outcast person. The story addresses the issues I have raised from two different

perspectives, the LXX, Christian Bible canonical perspective and the Hebrew Bible canonical perspective.

The LXX puts the book of Ruth right after the book of Judges. This canonical sequence follows the narrative in Judges 21, where the elders of Israel advise the Benjaminite young men to violently seize the daughters of Shiloh (vs. 21). Judges 21:23 reports that they did indeed "lift up" (נשא) women into what may be termed sexual slavery.

The book of Ruth follows the book of Judges with a description of the attitude of the sons of Elimelech and Naomi toward the women of Moab. Ruth 1:4 reads, "They took [נשא] for themselves Moabite women." In other words, they did precisely the same thing to Moabite women that the Benjaminite young men had done to the daughters of Shiloh, i.e., they raped them. In the NRSV as in most English Bibles, the text reads, "they married Moabite women." However, the Hebrew word is more descriptive of certain groups of women, like the daughters of Shiloh, who were used, "raised" for temple prostitution.

This is indeed a very disturbing picture. Such aggression is commonplace in rural and slum India. High-caste men consider it their right to rape low-caste women, because it is their religious duty to do so. Low-caste women and boys are called *nautch*, dance girls and boys. They belong to castes like the *kanjaris*, prostitutes. Therefore, they are forcibly taken by high-caste men and raped in a religiously oriented and religiously sanctioned act. It seems clear to me that the story of Ruth is addressing this horrible practice and attitude—both then and now.

In the Hebrew canon, the book of Ruth follows the book of Proverbs, where Ruth, like the capable wife/valiant woman of Proverbs 31:10 is described as an אשת חיל (*eshet ḥayil*)—a physically, mentally, spiritually strong woman (Ruth 3:11, 4:11).

Rajkumar Boaz Johnson

History of Interpretation

Premodernity

The biblical book of Ruth is part of both the Jewish and Christian canons of Scripture and has therefore been the subject of interpretation and a participant in the development of culture, especially in the West,

throughout history.[13] Jews reflected on the book and tried to determine its purpose. The authors of Ruth Rabbah 2.8 reasoned that the book's purpose was to tell us how great the reward is for those who practice loving kindness.[14] The Midrash Yalkut Lekach Tov asserts that the book is meant to establish the greatness of King David's lineage,[15] whereas the Midrash Yalkut Shimoni states that the book is meant to show that if one does the right thing, one will eventually see success. According to this medieval-period midrash, which likely repeats interpretations from earlier rabbinic texts, many Jewish communities read Ruth on the festival of Shavuot.[16]

Jews consider Ruth the "model of faith, the mother of all converts to Judaism."[17] The rabbis recognized her as a righteous person,[18] but she was also a Moabite. While the narrative of Ruth does not disparage the Moabites, Deuteronomy 23:3-6 forbade the Moabites' admission to the congregation of the Lord.[19] The rabbis needed to reconcile her righteous character and her Moabite identity. They found a way: basing their interpretation on the masculine singular form in the biblical text, מואבי (Moabite, Deut 23:3), only *male* Moabites were forbidden to come

13. Ruth does not appear in the Qur'an and is therefore not the object of Islamic interpretation.

14. *Ruth Rabbah*, trans. L. Rabinowitz, vol. 8 of *Midrash Rabbah*, 2nd ed. (London: Soncino, 1971). Ruth Rabbah is a sixth-century compilation of earlier rabbinic traditions that was first printed as *Midrash Ruth* in 1545 and later became known as Ruth Rabbah when it was printed together with midrashim on the Torah and other scrolls. Midrash (plural midrashim) is a genre devoted to exegesis and analysis of passages in the Tanakh; midrashim span the tannaitic period (pre-200 CE), the amoraic period (c. 400 CE), and into the early Middle Ages and beyond.

15. From the *Zohar Hadash* on the book of Ruth, 31b, cited in Rabbi Yehuda Y. Steinberg, *Harvest of Kindness: Megillas Rus and the Power of Chesed*, 18 (Southfield, MI: Targum Press, Inc., 2010). The Zohar is a library of medieval kabbalistic texts that come from late thirteenth- to early fourteenth-century Spain. The library contains twenty-four documents comprising three separate bibliographic entries: *Zohar Hadash*, *Tiqqune Ha-Zohar*, and the *Zohar* itself. Not surprisingly, early Christian commentary on Ruth agrees with Jewish sources regarding the importance of the book's genealogy of David, since David is the ancestor of Jesus (Matt 1:1-16).

16. See n. 4.

17. Athalya Brenner, *I Am . . .: Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 102.

18. Ruth Rab. 2.12.

19. The text explains that the Moabites did not meet the Israelites with food and water on their journey out of Egypt; they also hired Balaam, the prophet, to curse the Israelites.

into the congregation of the Lord. The rabbis thus permitted both the conversion of and marriage to Moabite women.[20]

Another aspect of Ruth's identity that concerned the rabbis was Ruth's beauty. While many contemporary feminists lament the amount of attention given to (and money spent on) women's physical beauty, other times and other cultures have considered the outside (physical appearance) as an expression of the inside (the heart). For whatever reason, the rabbis speculated whether or not Ruth was beautiful and concluded that she was. According to Ruth Rabbah 4.4, Boaz noticed her because she looked much younger than her age: about Naomi's referring to Ruth as daughter, Rabbi Jannai commented: "She was forty years of age and yet you call her daughter? The answer is that she looked like a girl of fourteen."[21] Today, some Orthodox Jewish communities have embraced reading Ruth along with certain other biblical texts as a way to increase women's liturgical participation. Some women host all-women readings, an innovative practice that is encouraged by the Jewish Orthodox Feminist Alliance (JOFA).[22] Historically, men have read the scroll on the afternoon of Shavuot, though some communities have added the practice of having women read the scroll for the congregation.

Early Christian biblical interpretation focused on Jesus, whom Christians believe to be the center of history. For early interpreters of the Christian Bible, the content of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament was helpful insofar as it shed light on the person of Jesus and the central tenets of the Christian faith. Themes such as creation and the fall (Genesis), the praise of God and petition to God in the Psalms (read a-historically), and the promise of a Messiah received much more attention than the depiction of the giving of the Torah to Moses on Mount Sinai or even the exile. David was of course important because he was the king of Israel, ancestor of the new "King of the Jews." It is not surprising, therefore, that for early Christians (remember that those having close access to the biblical texts were almost, if not exclusively, all men) the book of Ruth derives its importance because of Ruth's identity as the great-grandmother of

20. B. Yebam. 76b–77a, cited in Leila Leah Bronner, *From Eve to Esther: Rabbinic Reconstructions of Biblical Women* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 64.

21. Cited in ibid., 75.

22. See https://www.jofa.org/megillat-ruth-book-club. We are indebted to Lynn Kaye for her insights into contemporary practices of Orthodox women.

David and therefore an ancestor of Jesus. Matthew 1 includes Ruth in the genealogy that traces Jewish history from Abraham to Jesus.[23]

Early Christian interpretation of elements of the book of Ruth and the character of Ruth, like that of most biblical books and characters, did not originally take place in formal commentaries but in comments that were often embedded in sermons or in letters or essays written for other purposes. Hippolytus of Rome (170–236) and Origen (c. 184–253), while saying nothing of Ruth's physical appearance, present her as a role model and an ideal based on her perceived virtues. St. Ambrose (c. 340–397), commenting on the Gospel's extension to all peoples, references Ruth, the foreigner who married a Jew and who is included in Jesus' genealogy. St. Jerome (c. 347–420), writing to someone who had just lost a loved one, praises Ruth for her protection of the bereaved Naomi and identifies her reward as becoming an ancestor of Christ.[24] Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636) identifies Ruth as a "type"[25] of the Gentiles, representing the pagans who converted to Christianity or of the church.[26] Aelred of Rievaulx (1110–1167) uses Boaz's treatment of Ruth as a model of friendship and of how to treat others.[27] Hugh of Saint-Cher (c. 1200–1263) describes the book of Ruth as being a "little story of Christ and the Church, in which

23. Matthew also includes Tamar, Rahab, the wife of Uriah, and Mary in the genealogy. Because both Tamar and Rahab figure in the book of Ruth, we will discuss the inclusion of these women in the Matthean genealogy later.

24. John R. Francke, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Old Testament*, vol. 4: *Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1–2 Samuel* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 181–82.

25. Christian exegesis often saw an Old Testament person, object, or event as a type, that is, a prefigurement of some person, object, or event in the New Testament or in the church.

26. Lesley Smith, *Medieval Exegesis in Translation: Commentaries on the Book of Ruth* (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 1996), 8. See also Elena Giannarelli, "Ruth in the Church Fathers," *SIDIC* 23 (1990): 12–15.

27. Aelred writes, "When Boaz observed the poverty of Ruth, the Moabite, he spoke to her as she was gathering ears of corn behind his reapers, consoled her and invited her to the table of his servants, and sparing in kindly fashion her embarrassment, he ordered his reapers to leave ears of corn even purposefully so that she might collect them without shame. In the same way we ought the more adroitly seek out the needs of our friends, anticipate their requests by good service, and observe such demeanor in our giving that the recipient, rather than the giver, appears to be bestowing the favor" (*On Spiritual Friendship*, ed. Marsha L. Dutton, trans. Lawrence C. Braceland, CF 5 [Collegeville, MN: Cistercian Publications, 2010], 119).

the sacraments lie hidden."[28] Finally, "none of Augustine's writings contains any comments on Ruth," perhaps because "Ruth contains no theological problems or doctrinal difficulties; its problems are only the understanding of linguistic queries and Hebrew custom."[29]

While premodern Christian biblical interpreters presumed the literal accuracy of the biblical text, insofar as nothing they knew contradicted it, they understood literal accuracy to be of minor importance.[30] Of considerably greater importance were the text's spiritual purposes. Assuming that God inspired the biblical text and that it contains revelation, early Christians believed that the Bible's primary purpose was to reveal God and to inspire God's people to be faithful to God's teachings.

Modernity

Early rabbinic and early Christian interpretation of biblical texts was dependent on assumptions tied to faith and the sacred character of the Bible as well as the interpreters' own personal and communal social locations in a culture of faith. In contrast, the Enlightenment and modernity deemphasized faith and questioned divine authorship and divine inspiration of the Bible. Consequently, those interested in studying the Bible began to do so while bracketing faith assumptions and commitments. With the ascendancy of reason, scholars began to ask what could factually be known about the world that produced the biblical texts and what the Scriptures meant for that world. History began to increase in importance. Understanding the texts required knowledge of the political,

28. Smith, *Medieval Exegesis in Translation*, 41. We have no record of what Hugh of St. Cher was identifying as the sacraments, but, in accord with the definition of sacrament, we can assume that he was referring to various acts of kindness embedded in the narrative that would make God present.

29. Man Ki Chan, *A Comparative Study of Jewish Commentaries and Patristic Literature on the Book of Ruth* (PhD diss., University of Pretoria, 2010).

30. Early Christian acceptance of the literal accuracy of the biblical texts differs significantly from contemporary fundamentalism insofar as the literal accuracy of the texts was assumed but of relatively little importance to early Christians. Their concerns were spiritual, and their methods of interpretation were often symbolic and allegorical. Contemporary fundamentalists, on the other hand, defend with great commitment the literal accuracy of the biblical texts. For them, God cannot err, and since the Bible is the word of God, everything contained in it must be *factually* true. Fundamentalists differ also from many modern and postmodern Christians who, while continuing to consider the texts inspired and sources of revelation, recognize factual errors in the text, which they associate with the limited knowledge of the texts' human authors.

cultural, and social contexts in which they were produced, that is, *the world behind the texts*. The study of archaeology and the geography of the Ancient Near East rose in importance, as did the study of cognate languages, including Sumerian, Egyptian, Phoenician, Ugaritic, and eventually Eblaite.[31] Histories of Israel became common.[32]

Rather than asking what was going on *in* the book of Ruth, scholarship shifted to what was going on in the world that produced the book of Ruth. The biblical texts became subject to analysis as any ancient document would be—Who wrote them? When? Why? How did their literary form contribute to the accomplishment of their purpose?

At the same time historical scholars came to recognize the instability of the text: the difficulty in determining the earliest manuscripts and the discrepancies among hand-copied texts.[33] Text-critical scholars developed rules to try to determine which readings were more accurate. Moderns came to separate what the ancients believed from what they [the moderns] believed. Ruth was no longer forty, as Rabbi Jannai had said (who could know her age?), nor was she a type of the church, as Isidore of Seville had posited. They assumed that Old Testament texts had primary meanings in their own historical contexts and were not written as predictors of the coming of Christ, nor did they contain details about a Messiah yet to come. The author of Ruth was human, not divine, and therefore, his (or her, or even their) knowledge was limited. Even had Ruth lived when the book said she did, "in the days when the Judges ruled" (1:1), the book could not have been written before the time of David, since David is mentioned in the text. But did Ruth live at all? Perhaps its author *created* the narrative for some political or social purpose, such as to reinforce or challenge existing values or practices. These were modern issues. There is, indeed, an objectivity in who wrote a text, when it was written, and the identification of its literary form, and there is an objectivity in the effort to establish the cultural world that produced the text; to the extent that this information can be known, it can reveal

31. For translations of many ancient Egyptian, Assyrian, and Babylonian texts, see James A. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

32. Among the standard histories of Israel are Martin Noth's *History of Israel*, 2nd ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1960); John Bright's *A History of Israel*, 4th ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), and J. Maxwell Miller's *A History of Ancient Israel and Judah*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006).

33. See, for example, Bruce Metzger and Bart Ehrman's work on the New Testament (*The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2005]).

objectively the text's purpose.[34] Answering modernity's questions and wrestling with its issues led, in the case of the book of Ruth, to several theories about when the narrative was written, why, and by whom.

Dating

Scholars have theorized that Ruth is a folktale that recasts certain incidents in the myth of the Egyptian goddess Isis;[35] others see the story as a Hebraized version of the Eleusinian mysteries in which Naomi and Ruth take the roles of Demeter the goddess of grain and Persephone, her daughter brought to the underworld;[36] still others find in Ruth a story of a sacred prostitute from Moab, who goes to Bethlehem's "sacred high places" (the threshing floor) to be impregnated as a mother-goddess of the Davidic line.[37] The scholars who developed these theories believed that the Israelites adapted one or another of the foreign myths to create a mythological or epic backdrop for the ancestry of David.[38] "Older"[39] scholars who put forth these views, which are for the most part abandoned today, represent a period in historical criticism that sought insight into biblical texts from the literature of surrounding peoples.

While the intent may have been to provide a backdrop for the ancestry of David, these comparisons with deity also served to raise Ruth's stature. Most recently, building on comparative literature, the feminist Susan McCaslin has brought together Naomi and Ruth with Persephone and Demeter in her poem, "Persephone Finds Ruth on the Threshing

34. Dennis J. McCarthy examined the historical and cultural shifts in "God as Prisoner of Our Own Choosing: Critical-Historical Study of the Bible, Why and Wither," in *Historicism and Faith*: *Proceedings of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars*, ed. Paul L. Williams (Scranton, PA: Northeast Books, 1980), 17–47.

35. Herman Gunkel, "Ruth," in *Reden und Aufsaetze* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), 65–92, esp. 90–92; cited in Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 248.

36. Michael C. Astour, *Hellenosemitica: An Ethnic and Cultural Study in West Semitic Impact on Mycenaean Greece* (Leiden: Brill, 1967), 278–79; cited in Sasson, *Ruth*, 248.

37. Sasson and others criticize this line of thinking; see Sasson, *Ruth*, 248; also H. G. May, "Ruth's Visit to the High Place at Bethlehem," *JRAS* (1939): 75–78.

38. Jack M. Sasson, "Ruth," in *The Literary Guide to the Bible*, ed. Robert Alter and Frank Kermode (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 320. These theories assume the proximity and interdependence of cultures or of later civilizations borrowing from earlier ones.

39. Ibid.

Floor."[40] McCaslin's poem highlights the "woman to woman" relationship between Naomi and Ruth, Persephone's encouragement of Ruth's seduction of Boaz, and then, assuming sexual intercourse on the threshing floor in Ruth 3, speaks of Jesse and David and "numberless unnamed daughters" who proceed from their union that night.

In attempting to determine when the book of Ruth was written, scholars have examined the Hebrew used in the narrative—its vocabulary and grammatical structures.[41] Answering the question requires that one look for words and phrases contained in the book that appear only in later, exilic (roughly 586–539 BCE) or postexilic (post-539 BCE) Hebrew. If one finds no such vocabulary or grammar, one may credibly date the book sometime in the preexilic period, which could be as early as the tenth century or as late as the seventh century BCE, although there is increased wariness of dating any of the biblical books as early as the tenth century based on the lack of evidence for writing in ancient Israel during the early monarchic period. "Preexilic" has more often come to mean the time after the fall of the northern kingdom of Israel to the Assyrians (722 BCE).[42]

The book of Ruth does contain some linguistic markers that occur only in later biblical Hebrew, most important of which is the presence of four "Aramaisms" (words adopted from Aramaic).[43] The influence of Aramaic on Hebrew became significant during and after the Babylonian exile, and the presence of Aramaisms could therefore support the notion that the book is exilic or postexilic.[44] However, the number of Aramaisms is

40. Susan McCaslin, "Persephone Finds Ruth on the Threshing Floor," *JFSR* 28 (2010): 101–2.

41. For discussions of the question of language in relation to the dating of the book of Ruth, see Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth*, AB 7 (New York: Doubleday, 1975), 23–28; Sasson, *Ruth*, 244–46; and Tamara Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *The JPS Bible Commentary: Ruth* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 2011), xvii–xviii.

42. Scholars have reconstructed Israel's history, taking into consideration both the dominance and perseverance of the oral tradition as well as an increased incentive to create a written record after the Assyrian invasion.

43. These four Aramaisms are the following: (1) The *piel* infinitive construct of קום (לקים) in 4:7, denoting "to confirm" or "to fulfill"; (2) the use of שלף and נעל together in 4:7 and 4:8, denoting "remove a sandal"; (3) the rare verb שבר in 1:13 meaning "to hope, wait for"; and (4) the *hitpael* form of the verb עגן in 1:13, meaning "to hinder (oneself), keep (oneself) from" (see also Robert H. Holmstedt, *Ruth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* [Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010], 37–39). See also Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, xvii.

44. Amy-Jill Levine suggests that the text is postexilic based on the Aramaisms present ("Ruth," *Women's Bible Commentary*, ed. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, exp. ed. [Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998], 84–90, esp. 85). Levine

quite small, to some even negligible;[45] moreover, the Hebrew influenced by Aramaic may have entered an earlier established text at a later date. As such, the presence of Aramaisms does not "prove" a late dating and may be unreliable as a means of dating a text.[46]

Dating Ruth is not just a matter of language. What was going on in the world behind the text that would have made its production more likely at one time than another? Certain aspects of the text make it "fit" in the preexilic period, while others suggest its composition after the exile. Here, we examine both sides with our distinct voices; Mahri presents the preexilic argument and Alice the postexilic one. Readers may see contradictions in the two arguments presented here, which is the result of two people interpreting the same text differently. It is up to the reader to decide which argument she or he prefers.

The Preexilic Argument

We consider first why numerous scholars (including Mahri) support the possibility of a preexilic dating.[47] When examining the book of Ruth as literature, the story and its style compare well to older, preexilic nar-

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comments that if the text is postexilic, then it may be written as a reaction against the idea of enforced divorce of foreign wives in Ezra–Nehemiah, "even as it reflects the society's suspicion of foreign wives." In other words, while one could argue that the text reflects an alternative perspective to Ezra–Nehemiah in the postexilic period, the narrative itself is not entirely void of suspicion of foreign women, as demonstrated in the consistent focus on Ruth's Moabite heritage. Levine's comments indicate uncertainty about the date of the book's origin.

45. See the careful discussion in Campbell, *Ruth*, 22–23. Others have argued that some grammatical structures in Ruth are used elsewhere only in late passages, yet this is debatable; nowhere, it seems, does the book employ language, syntax, or grammar that is clearly and inescapably limited to late biblical Hebrew.

46. Holmstedt (*Ruth*, 31) finds it difficult to determine definitively the date of the book of Ruth on its linguistic features, as there are earlier and later linguistic indicators present in the book. He concludes that "the data suggest that the book sits on the relative dating line between books like Gen–Deut, Josh–Kings on the one side and Ezra–Neh, Chronicles, and Qohelet on the other." See also Sasson, who objects to the use of these Aramaisms to date Ruth; he writes that "dating a Hebrew text on literary and linguistic bases will continue to be a most unreliable approach as long as our extrabiblical corpus of Hebrew vocabulary remains as sparse as it is presently" (*Ruth*, 244; also A. Hurvitz, "The Chronological Significance of 'Aramaisms' in Biblical Hebrew," *IEJ* 18 [1968]: 234–40; and Campbell, *Ruth*, 24–25).

47. Arguments for preexilic dating can be found in, among others, Campbell, *Ruth*, 26–27; Sasson, *Ruth*, 250–52; Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 46; and Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 28–29.

ratives in Genesis, Judges, and the narrative about David.[48] It is folkloric in nature[49] and recounts the tale of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz memorably and somewhat oddly, similar to stories such as Ehud in Judges 3:15-29, the "left-handed" Benjaminite who surprises King Eglon on the privy to kill him; Jerubbaal in Judges 7, whose troops YHWH sends home from battle for not lapping up water like dogs; and the tale of young David in 1 Samuel 17, who kills the great Philistine Goliath with a slingshot. It is self-contained and, while it holds many parallels to other biblical stories, the core narrative and its characters (until the genealogy of David in Ruth 4) is independent from other biblical texts and could have been written separately from these stories.

Some of the stories that provide the most striking parallels to the book of Ruth are those that are similarly focused on foreign women and etiologies for foreigners. Lot and his daughters in Genesis 19:30-38 is one such story; the daughters get their father drunk and sleep with him, giving birth to Ammon and Moab, the ancestor of Ruth. The story does not condemn the incest or "rape" of Lot overtly, yet the purpose is an etiology that explains the hostilities between Israel and two of its closest neighbors. The story of Tamar in Genesis 38 is quite positive toward the heroine Tamar, though the absence of any pedigree may suggest she is non-Hebrew; she covers her face and allows her father-in-law Judah to mistake her for a prostitute, thus getting pregnant with his children and giving birth to the line of King David (Tamar and Perez, her son, are part of the genealogy in Ruth 4:12). We will discuss the stories of Lot and his daughters, and Tamar and Judah, throughout this commentary as they relate to the narrative of Ruth.

The narrative also portrays the marriage between a Moabite woman and an Israelite man positively; David descends from their line in the final genealogy in Ruth 4. Regardless of the dating of this final genealogy, the core story and its characters therefore become a source of pride in David's ancestry, giving him pedigree with enough nuance to make his ancestors unusual and memorable in a way that accords more with the style of these older narratives than it does with the Chronicler's pristine story of David.[50] Among the earlier stories of David, Ruth is similar to 1 Samuel 22:3-4, in which the king of Moab offers asylum

48. See also Campbell, *Ruth*, 5.

49. The notion of Ruth as folklore is the backbone of Sasson's *Ruth* study.

50. The postexilic books of Chronicles delete much of what is detrimental to the character and reputation of David as it is depicted in the David story of 2 Samuel, including the stories of Bathsheba (2 Sam 11) and Tamar (2 Sam 13), and David's ordering the census (2 Sam 24).

to David's parents at David's request. There is no polemic in this text, which presents the king of Moab as one of David's allies as he flees from Saul. Similarly, Ruth is not a polemical text. While other biblical texts display hostility toward Moabites (e.g., Deut 23:4-9; Neh 13:1-3), the book of Ruth does not. Yet neither does the book exhibit awareness of some of the postexilic concerns regarding inclusion/exclusion, including Ezra–Nehemiah's concern with genealogical purity, or Third Isaiah's (Isa 55–66) focus on inclusion around worship of YHWH. While Ruth pledges to worship Naomi's YHWH, what primarily defines Ruth is not worship of YHWH but loyalty to Naomi.

One of the main arguments for a postexilic dating is that the book engages with this postexilic debate regarding the inclusion of foreigners (see below for a more careful discussion of this argument). Yet for Mahri and others, it is reductive to assume that the story *must* be written during a later time, simply because it deals in some sense with the inclusion of a foreign woman. There is nothing exclusively postexilic about the narrative that would unarguably point toward this later framework. As shown above, plenty of earlier stories discuss "foreigners" in some sense; Israelites were clearly aware of and interested in people on their periphery early on. Indeed, the self-understanding of Israel is based on the memory of being foreigners in Egypt, and no matter how we date the written Torah, a fundamental and likely deep-rooted principle of Israel was that it treat foreigners well (see Lev 19:33-34). To assume that a biblical text must be postexilic if it focuses on the inclusion of a foreigner therefore draws an invisible and fabricated line between the complexities of preexilic and postexilic realities and considerations.

Not only is the narrative independent of a particular historical time period, but its geography is similarly independent. Elsewhere, the geography of certain texts betrays historical context; for example, texts that depict an expansive landscape that runs far south of Jerusalem and far into the northern territories suggest a later, preexilic context after the political expansions under King Omri (ninth century BCE) yet before the fall of the northern kingdom. Yet the landscape in the book of Ruth is self-contained—the story begins in Moab but is centered in Bethlehem of Judah, so it is clearly Judahite—yet it is unaware of palace, temple, monarchy (with the exception of the final genealogy for David), any kind of religious or political structure aside from the communal language of clans and elders, or even a community centered in Jerusalem, whether pre- or postexilic.

For these reasons, Mahri and other scholars would argue that a substantial core of the book of Ruth could date to the preexilic period, even

while the narrative continues to be redacted, reinterpreted, and possibly added to in light of the exile and in the postexilic periods. Biblical texts written in the preexilic period continued to be edited and changed well into the last few centuries BCE, in light of shifting present realities that reinterpret the past. In other words, just because a book is relevant in the postexilic period does not mean that it was authored only then; to assume so is historically impoverishing. The book of Ruth may have been reworked and added to at a later date, while earlier elements remained but took on a different meaning.

The Postexilic Argument

Despite good reasons for dating the book of Ruth to the preexilic period, many scholars (including Alice) date the majority or entirety of the narrative to the period after the exile.[51] Preexilic and postexilic peace would have been understood very differently. According to the postexilic argument, postexilic peace in the Persia Period would come at the price of submission to a foreign power rather than as a consequence of the Israelites' infiltrating and conquering the land that had belonged to the Canaanites. The Persian Empire dominated the Jews politically, and it appointed leaders from Yehud, the name now given to the former southern kingdom of Judah, who would govern the returned exiles and others in the land; the Persians required them to pay tribute, thus weakening an already weak economy. However, the locals in Yehud could control their religious practice (e.g., Ezra 9:9). Returnees from exile and those who had never left the land had an enormous incentive to use religion to reestablish their identity.[52] Sacred time could replace or complement sacred space (the temple). Religious authorities could require of the aliens who lived among them the same practices required of the Israelites themselves (e.g., Ezek 14:7; 47:22-24).

51. See Ziony Zevit, "Dating Ruth: Legal, Linguistic and Historical Observations," *ZAW* 117 (2005): 574–600; also Frederic W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, WBC 9 (Dallas: Word Books, 1996), 30; Campbell, *Ruth*, 26–27; and Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, xvi–xix.

52. As a monarchic feast, the Sabbath was linked to the feast celebrating the new moon (e.g., 2 Kgs 4:23; Amos 8:5) and was a feast shared with other ancient Near Eastern peoples. During the exile and after, the Sabbath became a separate institution, a sign of the covenant between Israel and the Lord and lacking a parallel among other peoples (e.g., Ezek 20:20; see also Neh 10:31). See also K. Kohler, "The Sabbath and Festivals in Pre-Exilic and Exilic Times," *JAOS* 37 (1917): 209–23, esp. 211.

Whereas leadership during the monarchy demanded that the Israelites have nothing to do with foreign women who would lead them to worship foreign gods, many of the Israelites living in exile likely married foreign women. Consequently, many of those returning from exile may themselves have been the offspring of sexual unions or marriages with foreign women, or would have taken foreign women as wives (e.g., Ezra 10:18-43). While Persia would have no reason to object if Israelite males married foreign women who worshiped other gods, Israelite religious leaders certainly would. Their creation of a postexilic identity for the people meant a total commitment to YHWH, and the best way to ensure such fidelity was to remove peoples associated with idolatry (e.g., Ezra 9:1-2; Neh 13:23) and forbid intermarriage (e.g., Neh 10:30; 13:25). Purity of bloodlines would also help to guarantee that foreigners would not come to possess ancestral land. According to Ezra–Nehemiah, it became imperative to forbid Israelite men from marrying foreign women and even to rid themselves of the foreign wives they had already taken; it became mandatory that they divorce foreign wives who had come to Israel with their own gods and their own languages, and who were raising their children in their own languages and potentially teaching them allegiance to their gods (see Neh 13:24).

Foreign women thus posed a religious threat, not a political or economic one. The issue became whether or not all foreign wives, simply because they were foreigners, should be rejected even if they committed themselves to Israel's God. That is the historical context in which many scholars situate the book of Ruth and on the basis of which they believe the book to be postexilic. While Ruth is a Moabite, she professes total commitment to YHWH by committing to Naomi; further, she marries her dead husband's next-of-kin to ensure that Naomi's land remains within the family. A subtext of the book of Ruth is that Ruth (that is, foreign women who profess and demonstrate loyalty to the covenant community and their God) should be embraced, not expelled. Those who argue for a postexilic setting understand the book of Ruth as a polemic against Ezra and Nehemiah—to allow foreigners into the congregation of the Lord. The book represents a universalistic trend similar to the exilic prophecy of Deutero-Isaiah[53] and texts such as Isaiah 25:6: "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food."[54] The Ruth

53. Campbell, *Ruth*, 26–27.

54. Isaiah 24:1–27:12 is dated to the sixth century BCE.

narrative, if produced during the Persian Period, accomplishes several exilic and postexilic goals. It presents a foreign woman who does not lead Yehudites to worship foreign gods (in fact, she comes to worship YHWH); it integrates well the foreigner; and as if that were not enough, it reminds Yehudites that they are heirs of the Davidic promise, thereby ideally igniting aspirations for the reestablishment of David's monarchy.[55]

The book of Ruth is not alone in its defense of foreigners. The narrative of Jonah, also four chapters in length, presents a prophet of YHWH who disobeys divine directives while the hated Assyrians hear and obey the warning Jonah brings them. It is not the insiders, the Jews, but the despised outsiders, the Assyrians (like the Moabite), who take YHWH seriously. Ruth and Jonah both make the case that being foreign is not the problem; being uncommitted to YHWH is. The narrative of Ruth functioned both *to undermine* the prohibition against mixed marriage and also *to protest* the insistence on ethnic purity by Judahite leadership.[56]

Telling or retelling a story in a difficult political and/or religious climate can be very powerful. Vaclav Havel wrote two plays, *The Garden Party* (1963) and *Memorandum* (1965), in Czechoslovakia when it was under Communist rule. Both plays explore the self-delusions and moral compromises that characterize life under a totalitarian government. Seeing the works as dangerous political propaganda, the Soviets banned both. Havel later became the first president of the non-Communist Czech Republic. In the case of Havel's plays, he "harmlessly" confronted citizens with the compromising behaviors of which they were guilty; no

55. Peter H. W. Lau, "Another Postcolonial Reading of the Book of Ruth," in *Reading Ruth in Asia*, ed. Jione Havea and Peter H. W. Lau, IVBS 7 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2015), 15–34, esp. 33.

56. Jon L. Berquist provides an excellent description of how people behave who are forced to live under foreign rule. The analysis presented above, positing a postexilic dating of Ruth, resonates with his description; what Berquist describes as "imperialization" and the reactions it engenders can apply more broadly to diverse expressions of domination: "Imperialization is a strong and momentous force in human history, but it always breeds resistance. The interaction of imperial and local cultures urges some people to hold more tightly to their traditional ways of life and thought, as well as to the previous pre-imperial autonomy. When imperial intensification creates a new class of local ruling elites, other social segments form as well, through social stratification, and this creates competing interests of different groups. The process of imperialization simultaneously generates the process of resistance. Within a society, this happens in a variety of institutions at once" ("Resistance and Accommodation in the Persian Empire," in *In the Shadow of Empire: Reclaiming the Bible as a History of Faithful Resistance*, ed. Richard A. Horsley (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 54.

longer able to deny, they needed to resist. With respect to the book of Ruth, the narrative offers an imaginative scenario that may be countercultural while also encouraging its audience to resist cultural control. By setting the narrative in the "harmless" past, the author diminished the story's true agenda.

At a Catholic college when a mid-level administrator hesitated to admit in a public panel that he was gay, someone suggested that he tell his audience that he was going to tell four short biblical stories, stressing the incorporation of the stories' outsiders—the story of Ruth, the story of Jonah, the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), and the story of Jesus meeting the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:1-42)—and then sit down. She urged, "Just tell the stories; if they get it, they get it." Narratives have the power to present difficult content in non- or less-threatening ways. Not all narratives do that, of course, but biblical stories of the outsiders' inclusion told to a Jewish or Christian audience may help that audience recognize contemporary outsiders and become more willing to include them. Isaiah 56:3-8, clearly postexilic, echoes Ruth and Jonah; the verses include both eunuchs and foreigners among God's people, asking only that they keep the Sabbath and not profane it and that they refrain from doing evil.[57]

When all is said and done, however, there are no easy answers. Scholars date the book of Ruth to the long period of the Judean monarchy and to the postexilic (Persian) period, and they view the book as either serving to reinforce traditional values or as serving to resist and reject imposed practices. In the Bible, the treatment of Gentiles varies from book to book, with both positive and negative depictions, and across time periods. Rather than narrow the origin of the story to a confined period of time, we choose to see the themes within the story as reaching across the preexilic/postexilic divide.[58] The theme of inclusion would be pertinent in the late preexilic period as much as in the postexilic period,[59] and Ruth is not a polemical piece that responds narrowly to one option or the other.

57. Isaiah 56:3-7 reads: "Do not let the foreigner joined to the LORD say, 'The LORD will surely separate me from his people.' . . . [T]he foreigners who join themselves to the LORD . . . I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

58. Campbell, *Ruth*, 27.

59. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 5.

Authorship and Authority

If we can determine the book of Ruth's author,[60] we will be in a better position to determine the book's date of composition and/or its purpose. For centuries scholars assumed male authorship, just as they assumed male authorship of all other biblical books.

In the case of Ruth, the book contains resemblances to several biblical texts, believed to be authored by men, that detail unusual circumstances surrounding a leader's birth. The matriarchs Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel all had difficulty conceiving and then produced important sons.[61] There is nothing "miraculous" about the birth of Ruth's son, but her circumstances are also unusual. She is not identified as infertile,[62] yet she was married for ten years without conceiving a child. We can surmise, then, that behind Ruth lay a certain anxiety related to her pregnancy because of many unfruitful engagements in sexual intercourse. Moreover, Ruth was a Moabite; that in itself is not unusual, but it is insofar as she became the mother of important descendants in Israel.

Though the Genesis texts contain narratives about each of the matriarchs, whose maternal activity was essential and even determinative, the women fade in the tradition. God, for example, is identified as being "the God of Abraham," and then of the women's sons, "Isaac and Jacob," rather than the God of Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel. In a similar way Ruth fades from the narrative after giving birth to Obed, and then the male genealogy takes over to find its climax in the birth of David. The greater importance accorded men after Ruth gives birth suggests, but of course does not prove—there likely were women intent on advancing the role of men in the culture—that a man authored the book of Ruth.

Most recently (the last fifty years or so), scholars have begun to question the book's male authorship and authority.[63] The book of Ruth is different from many other biblical books in that it bears the name of its

60. According to Bava Batra 14b in the Babylonian Talmud, the prophet Samuel was the author of the book of Ruth. See also Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, xvi.

61. This is true also for Hannah in 1 Samuel and, in the New Testament, for Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist (Luke 1:24-25, 36-37, 66); Mary is likewise depicted as having unusual circumstances surrounding the conception of Jesus (Luke 1:26-35, 38).

62. A reader might conclude that Ruth's first husband was sterile.

63. See also Campbell, *Ruth*, 22–23; Hubbard, *Book of Ruth*, 24; Adrien J. Bledstein, "Female Companionships," in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth*, ed. Athalya Brenner, FCB 3 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993), 116–33; Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, "Ruth: A Product of Women's Culture?," in Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Ruth*, 134–39.

main character, a woman. Second, it contains more dialogue, an explicit expression of relationship, than any other book in the Old Testament. Third, Naomi, another female character, is also central to the narrative. The narrative depicts one of the two major relationships as that between two women, Ruth and Naomi. But there is more: Naomi is willing to travel, without family, from Moab to Judah alone; another woman is willing to go alone (as the only foreigner) to another land. For the first three of the four chapters of the book, two distinct women are the principal actors. Sounds like a woman could have written the story!

While a hypothesized gender of the author has the potential to influence one's reconstruction of the narrative's date and purpose, like the date and purpose themselves, it lacks certainty. It might also narrow our reading since as soon as we assign a male or female author, we are likely to impose stereotypes. And our stereotype of a female author could easily lead to another distortion, since not all women are alike.[64] On the other hand, it could lead to a greater sense of pride in the accomplishment of our sister(s). Because the weight of our assumption has been on male authorship, imagining female authorship could increase our awareness of other achievements of women of which we are ignorant.[65]

When considering authorship it is also important to keep in mind that the question of women's voices and women's authority in the text is just as important as that of women's authorship.[66] Texts do not have to be written by women to be driven by women's lives, concerns, and traditions. Then, we have to ask ourselves *which* women and *which* concerns these might be. For example, a womanist perspective (a movement based on the marginalization of black women and other minority women's perspectives) might be very different from a white woman's perspective; yet again, there is no singular "white woman's" or "black woman's"

64. Some African American women, for example, describe themselves as "womanist" to distinguish themselves from white, middle-class American feminists. Race, class, sexual orientation, age, and cultural background are only a few of the markers that differentiate among women.

65. History often hides the accomplishments of women, or they remain unnamed. By way of a very small sampling, women inventors include: Margaret A. Wilcox, the car heater (1830); Anna Connelly, the fire escape (1887); Mary Beasely, the life raft (1882); and Letitia Geer, the medical syringe that can be operated with one hand (1899).

66. Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes has argued that it is more valuable to search for women's authority in texts rather than "remain imprisoned by a concept of female authorship" (Athalya Brenner and Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, *On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible* [Leiden: Brill, 1993], 108).

perspective. A rich woman's perspective might be very different from a poor woman's perspective (with the same caveat that there is no singular perspective for a "rich" or a "poor" person); and the perspective of a Latina woman raised in a village in Mexico might be very different from a Latina woman raised with all the luxuries of wealth in San Juan, Puerto Rico. When we consider perspective, we must continually break down any of the stereotypes or rigid ideas of what that perspective might be.

The multiplicity of possibilities regarding the world behind the text (the identification of a text's author, the date of its composition, and its purpose)—the major concern of the Modern Period—though disappointing to some, can allow us to explore with greater openness and imagination both the world of the text and the contemporary world in front of the text. Like the ancient rabbis, we believe that the texts are fuller than any one interpretation.

We have provided the above comments that pertain to the book of Ruth and the historical-critical method since historical criticism dominated biblical scholarship for more than two centuries. Many feminist biblical scholars find it useful if incomplete, and they choose to augment the method with other methods that Barbara Reid's introduction references. The commentary that follows will use many methods that we believe provide insights into the particular verses and the appropriation of them in contemporary contexts.

Postmodernity

Postmodernity brought with it the gradual recognition that objectivity is very difficult, if not impossible, to achieve; it challenged the assumption of objectivity that had prevailed in the modern period and responded to it with the counter-assumption that almost everything is conditioned by the interpreter or the interpreting community's perspective. That does not mean that a text's history is not important or that the search for that history is irrelevant. It simply balances a false sense of objectivity by acknowledging the import of perspective.[67]

67. Thomas Kuhn brought this "false sense of objectivity" to attention in the sciences. While the educated layperson is familiar with the idea of "scientific objectivity," he pointed out that forces other than science may control research. Money supports some research while other research is denied funding. The reasons for providing or withholding funding are often political and determined by special or vested interests rather than objectivity. When a scientific theory (e.g., the earth is the center of the

Building on a "sociology of knowledge,"[68] a postmodern perspective recognizes that historical "facts" are hard to determine and that many so-called facts are really only educated guesses or even biased guesses; they are perspectival, and a person's or group's social location may determine the perspective. While there is a fact, the historical fact of the Vietnam War, for example, much that is associated with that war and presented as fact is determined by perspective. To the Vietnamese it is the "American War."[69] Likewise, a famous "history" of the Civil War, *The Blue and the Gray*[70] by Henry Steele Commager, depicts the war using original letters and documents that provide personal details, including some that are sympathetic to the Confederate soldiers. By its selection of "facts" the book achieves a very different understanding of the war than what was traditionally presented in history textbooks, at least those used in the North. For an additional and different example, while it is a fact that more women died of breast cancer than of AIDS, it was a political decision to spend more money on AIDS research, leading most Americans to conclude incorrectly that AIDS was the greater threat to life.[71]

With respect to biblical studies, increased appreciation of perspective pointed scholars back to the historical circumstances that gave rise to historical criticism in the first place; though methodologically studying

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universe) is shown to be incorrect, other theories associated with it must necessarily shift (*The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 50th ann. ed. [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012]).

68. Sociologists recognized, long before "postmodernity" became a buzzword among scholars, that the social location of groups of people affected their interests and concerns. Their studies of "gender, race, and class" (before such categories as age, sexual orientation, and other groups came into purview) showed that people belonging to one or another group tended to hold similar positions. While identifying people as belonging to these groups may lead to the wrongful stereotyping of individuals, it also establishes the reasons for stereotypes. People who grow up in a country that had been colonized, for example, "know" different experiences and tend to read differently from those who "do not know" or who have never had that experience.

69. See also Karen Gottschang Turner with Phan Thanh Hao, *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1999).

70. Originally published in 1950 and republished in New York by Wings Books/ Random House in 1996.

71. In 2006, the statistics went like this: 1.4 million people were diagnosed with cancer, while far fewer people were diagnosed with AIDS. Half of those diagnosed with cancer will die of the disease; AIDS has a higher mortality rate. $4.75 billion was spent on cancer research; $3 billion was spent on AIDS research. AIDS is 99 percent preventable; cancer is not. www.neogaf.com/forum/showthread.php?t=184291.

the world behind the text, it was the world in front of the text that had occasioned the method. A postmodern perspective takes very seriously, methodologically, that we all view reality through a particular lens. Women reading the book of Ruth may focus on, in particular, the depiction of the women characters; readers from drought-stricken areas may focus on the famine that sent Elimelech's family to Moab. Lawyers may be interested in the disposal of Elimelech's property, and the homeless may wonder where Ruth and Naomi found lodging. Postmodernity allows the social location of each of us to matter.

Therefore, a postmodern approach emphasizes *the world in front of the text* by recognizing that, ultimately, it is the reader who constructs meaning. We bring to every experience that we have our own social location; we bring our age, our sex, and our class: the totality of our experiences. However, and this is important, the meaning that we are constructing is *as a reader*; it is not constructed out of nothing or only ourselves; we construct meaning by engaging with a text or texts, and in this case, the book of Ruth and our commentary.[72]

We believe that a good commentary includes insights from premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity, that it takes into consideration *the world behind the text*, *the world of the text*, and *the world in front of the text*. A good commentary also includes insights from *the worlds that received the texts* (the history of interpretation). We also believe that a good commentary is as inclusive as possible, for which reason we welcome the voices that have made an important contribution to the commentary by adding their insights to our own.

72. To be concrete, maybe because I (Alice) am older, I identify with Naomi more than the other characters when I read the text. I particularly like Sandy Freckleton Gagon's depiction in her painting "Whither Thou Goest" of Naomi's gray hair; in the image, Ruth holds Naomi with one arm while holding up a cloth that covers the two women with the other. Naomi looks older, and she exudes strength. And since the only living members of my family (a sister and brother-in-law) have just moved from Pennsylvania, where we grew up, to Florida, where I have never spent much time, I am feeling a little dislocated and am thinking of Naomi in Moab.

I (Mahri) am younger, and I do not identify with Naomi. Perhaps I will someday, perhaps not. Yet neither do I identify with Ruth and her decisions. In fact, I have a strange sense of anger toward her, particularly the notion of a commitment that takes a woman away from family, culture, and her own identity; she becomes known only as the outsider ("Moabite") or as "daughter-in-law" to Naomi. I suppose if I were to relate to any of the characters, it would be Orpah. She is the truly liberated one: liberated from the drama of the narrative and from the reader's probing.

What Constitutes a Feminist Commentary? How Is This Commentary Feminist?

A commentary is not feminist because women have produced it. Those who think that only women are feminists and that men cannot be feminists are fewer in number now than fifty years ago, when women almost never wrote commentaries and when those who wrote commentaries did not attend to women characters. Still, as the general introduction makes clear, that which makes something feminist can differ among feminists. For some, a feminist commentary highlights the women characters, even displacing, to the extent possible, their male counterparts. For example, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob becomes the God of Sarah, Rebekah, Leah and Rachel, Ruth and Naomi, even Orpah, sidelining Boaz, Obed, and David in the book of Ruth. For others, a feminist commentary deliberately deconstructs traditional interpretation and highlights the significance of seemingly insignificant characters (e.g., awarding the many unnamed women of the Bible greater recognition than is explicit in the biblical texts).[73] For still others, a feminist commentary uses historical criticism—for example, the findings of archaeology—to explain why texts are written as they are (e.g., how plagues or pestilences or drought that threatened a people's future likely led to the protection of pregnant women, and then how that protection in the form of restrictions continued and became normative).[74] Some feminists, using a "hermeneutics of suspicion,"[75] expose and denounce the male-dominated culture that

73. See, for example, the unnamed maidservant in 2 Samuel 17 and the unnamed wise woman in 2 Samuel 20, both of whom help to save the Davidic dynasty. See Alice L. Laffey, "Naming the Unnamed: Toward a Feminist Reconstruction of the Old Testament," a paper presented at the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, Anaheim, CA, November 23, 1985 (Abstract published in *AAR/SBL Abstracts*, 1985). Not all unnamed biblical characters are insignificant, nor are they all female. Adele Reinhartz, for example, suggests that the "next-of-kin" in the book of Ruth (4:1) remains nameless because it is the relationship rather than the character that is primary. This character delays the narrative's progression rather than forwarding it (*"Why Ask My Name?" Anonymity and Identity in Biblical Narrative* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], 20).

74. Carol Meyers, "The Roots of Restriction: Women in Early Israel," *BA* 41 (1978): 91–103.

75. A term first used by Paul Ricoeur and later adopted by Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and others, a "hermeneutics of suspicion" refers to the recognition of the pervasiveness of cultures and texts in which men dominate. In response, many feminists "suspect" the cultures and texts and refuse to take statements or situations at

they consider to permeate all of the biblical texts. Other commentators seek and expose rays of light and hope in the texts, exceptions to what they admit to be a dominantly male-centered culture. Some are more tolerant of the past (i.e., that was then) while others are impatient with the present and demand a different future.

As the general introduction points out, biblical interpretation throughout the Common Era, until the twentieth century, was predominantly a male endeavor, whether Jewish or Christian. Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible*, published at the end of the nineteenth century,[76] said loudly and clearly that not all women read the Bible in the same way that men do. For instance, with respect to the book of Ruth, Stanton's commentary identifies Rahab as the mother of Boaz. She therefore interprets Ruth through the gospels (Matt 1:5 states that Salmon is "the father of Boaz by Rahab"), which reveals her Christian lens, yet in doing so she deliberately brings to the fore another biblical woman. And when referring to the friendship between Ruth and Naomi, the commentary notes and highlights that such a relationship is "so unusual."[77]

Each person's priorities will differ based on such factors as sexual orientation, economic situation, culture, and religion; yet culturally conditioned and generally speaking, men's priorities have been different from women's historically.[78] What men might not notice or else ignore, many women might find offensive and wrong or, conversely, see as

face value (Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* [New York: Crossroad, 1994]; and Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, ann. ed. [Boston: Beacon, 1995]).

76. The Project Gutenberg e-book of *The Woman's Bible* by Elizabeth Cady Stanton (1898). Produced by Carrie Lorenz and John B. Hare. wattpad.com/13271-the-woman%275-bible.

77. In Matt 10:34-39 Jesus declares that he has come to bring a sword to the earth. That sword includes setting a daughter-in-law against her mother-in law (v. 35).

78. Thomas Jefferson and Charles Thompson are both men possessing culturally conditioned priorities. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson quotes and reinforces a comment by Charles Thompson, then Secretary of Congress, in reference to Ruth and American "Aborigines" women. Referring to Ruth 3:7, Jefferson identifies Aboriginal women as a threat to Christian men because, *like Moabite women who posed a threat to Israelite men*, these women are hypersexualized (*Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. Frank Shuffelton [New York: Penguin Putnam, 1999], 201). Laura E. Donaldson concludes: "Although cloaked in the rhetoric of Enlightenment gentility, the statements by Thompson and Jefferson nevertheless disseminate a cautionary tale . . . both American Indian and Moabite women exist as agents not only of evil and impurity but also of men's sexual frigidity" (see "The Sign of Orpah: Reading

courageous and well worth comment. While men, for example, might praise Ruth's humility, women reading the same passage might very well resent the circumstances that require Ruth's subservience. In more recent commentaries on Ruth, female scholars have paid more attention to the relationship between Naomi and Ruth, and some have even suggested that the two women are involved sexually.[79]

Even though the book is named after its leading character and that character dominates the narrative, men have praised Ruth for the feminine virtues espoused in the particular male-dominated culture in which the book was being interpreted; writes feminist biblical scholar Leila Leah Bronner, "[Ruth's] qualities as developed in rabbinic interpretation—modesty, obedience, devotion to wifely and maternal duties—are not the qualities sought by feminists. Ruth is not independent, autonomous, and free of male control; she is docile and submissive, and this is why the sages laud and honor her."[80] In a typical nineteenth-century Calvinist sermon delivered by Rev. Charles Spurgeon, Ruth wins praise for her faithfulness.[81]

In the twentieth century, women in the West, aided finally by access to education, began to interpret the biblical texts from feminist perspectives, even if they did not use the term. They saw in the texts what others had failed to see. For example, one commentary praises Ruth for "loving God enough to break the rules."[82] This female author evaluated Ruth's words and actions differently from Rev. Spurgeon. More recently still, the voices of women from that part of the globe considered eastern by western standards, or southern by northern standards, have begun to comment on the biblical texts in light of the particularities of their own

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Ruth through Native Eyes," in *Ruth and Esther*, FCB 3, 2nd ser., ed. Athalya Brenner [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999], 130–44, esp. 134).

79. See J. Cheryl Exum, *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women*, 2nd rev. ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2012), 161–207; also Comea M. Walthall, "Ruth's Relevance to the Same-Sex Marriage Debate," in *Global Perspectives on the Old Testament*, ed. Mark Roncace and Joseph Weaver (Boston: Pearson Education, 2014), 195–96.

80. Bronner, *From Eve to Esther*, 80.

81. E.g., Spurgeon selects five verses from the book of Ruth on which to deliver five sermons: 1:16 and then 2:12, 14, 15, and 16. He names the first "Ruth Deciding for God" and then proceeds to preach about deciding for Christ. In each of the sermons, Spurgeon uses Ruth as a springboard for preaching about faithfulness to Christ and his message (*Spurgeon's Sermons on Ruth* [Apollo, PA: Ichthus Publications, 2014]).

82. Carolyn Custis James, *The Gospel of Ruth: Loving God Enough to Break the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

cultural experiences. Surekha Nelavala, who is a contributing voice to this commentary, attests that Ruth has been interpreted in traditional Indian culture to reinforce the female qualities and behaviors that men value in women. Preachers have found those qualities in Ruth and hold them up as ideals for women.

Ruth as an Ideal Woman?

The force of the story of Ruth resides in its capacity to provoke both resistance and admiration. Ruth is admired for her faultless female personality that fits perfectly into a patriarchal society. Traditionally, sermons preach that Ruth is likable because she is an ideal woman who stands out as an example while her virtues sustain the patriarchal order. Logically, such sermons suggest that women emulate her in their own families and lives. Why not? Who would not want to be a wife/daughter-in-law like Ruth? In the story, Ruth's personality does not resist most social expectations but contains all of the virtues that a patriarchal society would appreciate in a woman: Ruth is modest, vulnerable, responsible, obedient, committed, charming, and, we assume, young and beautiful.

Surekha Nelavala

Clearly, not all feminists would reject all of the characteristics that Nelavala implies are patriarchal and that reinforce patriarchy. While the assumption of marriage as well as obedience may be troublesome, for example, being vulnerable and responsible and committed may not be. Nelavala is nevertheless rightly addressing how Ruth has been used in male-dominated societies to encourage qualities and circumstances that can make women submissive. In many African contexts, interpretations of the story of Ruth also confirm the common opinion that marriage offers the only possible meaningful life for women.[83]

Although traditional interpreters of the book of Ruth have used the book and its character Ruth to affirm traditional cultural values, the book of Ruth, more easily than many other biblical books, can be read holistically as feminist and produce feminist commentary. Composed in a patriarchal era (no matter when it was written!), it can be read as,

83. Madipoane Masenya, "Ruth," in *The Global Bible Commentary*, ed. Daniel Patte (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), 86–91, esp. 90. While we acknowledge that not all African countries and cultures are alike in this respect, we take our lead here from Masenya.

in many ways, challenging and transcending patriarchy. We hope to accomplish that goal.

The book of Ruth tells a story, but there is much that it does not say. We do not know why Elimelech, and apparently only Elimelech, in response to a famine, took his family to Moab. We do not know how difficult it was for Elimelech and his sons to settle in Moab. We do not know when Ruth and Orpah, two Moabite women, became the wives of Mahlon and Chilion, Elimelech's sons. We do not know if Ruth and/or Orpah were pretty according to the standards of beauty in Moab or the ancient Near East in general, or if they had large dowries. Other, unanswerable questions concerning Ruth and Orpah include the following: Was their marrying Israelite men a boon? Did they fear remaining unmarried, or married to men less desirable than the Israelite men they married? Did Ruth and Orpah like each other? What were their ages with respect to each other and with respect to Naomi? Was it safe for Orpah to return home alone when she left Naomi and Ruth in chapter 1?

The reason for bringing these unknowns to the fore—for asking these questions or for lamenting the lack of information and answers—is the bearing these unknowns could have on our understanding of the characters. What it cost Naomi to travel to Moab and what it cost Ruth and Orpah to marry Israelite men surely say something about the degree of the women's strength and fortitude. Their beauty and their dowries, or the lack thereof, could contribute to the likelihood of Ruth and Orpah having Moabite suitors and to their level of self-confidence. The relationship of the two Moabite women to each other has a lot to say about competition or collaboration, issues that are significant in current feminist discourse. Many women reading their story today might wonder about Orpah's safety as she returned home alone, insofar as they, concerned about their own physical safety, wonder to what extent they can identify with her in this regard. These are certainly not the only questions that the text does not answer, but at least some contemporary feminists would be interested in pondering such unknowns.

Other questions similarly remain unanswered. We do not know if the Judahite family could, or did, buy land in Moab; if they did, we do not know whether Naomi sold that land or abandoned it. If they did have land, perhaps they acquired it through Orpah's or Ruth's family, which might explain marriage to one or both of these women. If they did not have access to land, we do not know how the family members supported themselves while living away from Judah. Once Naomi and Ruth returned alone and Ruth went to work in the fields (chap. 2), we do not

know how common it was for women to be molested when they were working outside the city in the fields,[84] or how Boaz could be so sure (if he was) that the next-of-kin would be unwilling to redeem Ruth (chap. 4). Are any of these unknowns important to the reader? If not, perhaps the reader will not think to ask them. If they are, then why doesn't the narrative provide the information?

The first part of this set of unknowns comes to mind because economics dominate women's and men's lives today. One's economic situation, that is, one's class, matters, even as one's race, one's gender, one's age, and similar categories matter. It is possible that the narrative's author was deliberate in not providing the economic answers so that all classes could identify with the characters, thinking that they were "like us." But it does make a difference, at least today, whether or not you can afford to buy land, or whether you can afford to walk away from it. The extent of Naomi and Ruth's economic desperation, once they were in Judah, is ambiguous. Naomi does own land so she is not yet economically desperate; on the other hand, Ruth does glean in the fields so she shares the plight of the widow and the poor. The ambiguity may be more contemporary than we realize. No one—then or now—can eat land. Economic decisions are always value decisions. Women, who with their children comprise the largest percentage of the world's poor, must make choices: rent or food; food or medicine; money invested in this child or that one. Knowing the range of choices Ruth and the other characters in the book had (or did not have) helps us better to understand them and identify (or not) with them. As feminists we care about the plight of women, our sisters Ruth and Naomi and Orpah, and the plight of our contemporary sisters whose struggles and courage and perseverance strengthen us.

Adele Berlin explains unanswered questions in the narrative as the way in which the text "selectively represents" the information that it conveys to the reader; acknowledging "selective representation" may help us to accept unanswered questions that the text provokes.[85] Thinking

84. Genesis 34 records the possible rape (the Hebrew is vague) of Jacob's daughter Dinah; the sexual encounter took place when she had gone "out to visit the women of the region" (v. 1). Though the circumstances are different, the recorded incident (if it is rape, that is) is either a cautionary tale (don't go outside acceptable confines lest something bad happen to you) or an actual account of what has happened when women travel outside obviously protected areas.

85. Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, ed. David M. Gunn, BLS 9 (Sheffield: Almond Press, 1983), 99–100.

about these questions will never provide definitive answers, but it may help make the characters in the narrative more real, deepen our empathy for them, or help us better identify with one or another of them.

Already twelve years ago Kathleen O'Connor[86] presented a paper at the Catholic Biblical Association's annual meeting in which she merely changed the name of Job to Johanna (and made other necessary gender changes). By doing so she completely changed the reading experience of the narrative for the readers in the task force who were mostly women and who began to "connect" differently with the book's main character. They, like Job, had suffered. Though none of them, to our knowledge, had lost a child, they felt, vicariously, not only the pain of a parent who has lost a child but also the pain of a mother who has borne the child that she has lost. Since most of the Bible's main characters are men, O'Connor's choice of Job was logical; she chose a narrative with relatively few characters and a fairly straightforward theme. To our knowledge, no one has changed the genders of the characters in the book of Ruth. Doing so would be counterproductive, at least for women. There are already so many male characters with whom men can identify, and women don't need more. O'Connor geared her feminist strategy toward helping women better recognize themselves in the Bible's male characters.

A couple of years later, Athalya Brenner, in *I Am . . .: Biblical Women Tell Their Own Stories*,[87] went beyond O'Connor's efforts; she used her imagination to say what the text does not say and to make the characters better known to their readers. According to Brenner, Ruth declares herself an intellectual and claims that contemporary feminists are right to connect her with the Torah, traditionally the intellectual domain of Jewish males. While interpreters of the biblical book debate whether Ruth, a Moabite, knew the levirate law,[88] Brenner allows her readers to believe that she did. The information that Brenner presents may not be factually accurate, but many of the details reported in the biblical narrative may not be historical either; what Brenner has done by adding details that are not in the biblical text is to provide female characters, in this case Ruth, with more of a voice and personality than the biblical text itself does. Brenner's version of Ruth wants to give Ruth a voice and allow her to set the record straight: "There is no compelling textual reason to

86. See Kathleen O'Connor's *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), and *Jeremiah: Pain and Promise* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).

87. See n. 18 above.

88. The levirate law (Deut 25:5) requires an Israelite man to marry the childless widow of his brother.

think I was beautiful or sexy; there is no compelling reason to think that Boaz was old or older; if he calls me 'daughter' (Ruth 2 and 3), this is an expression of his social superiority over me more than anything else."[89]

Musa W. Dube, in "The Unpublished Letters of Orpah to Ruth,"[90] has done something similar to Brenner. Using her imagination, she has created a dialogue between Ruth and Orpah that is absent from the biblical text. Our commentary does not go as far as O'Connor or Brenner or Dube. It does, however, intermittently provide a few more imaginative questions like those we have posed earlier that the biblical text does not answer. We do this for a motive similar to the other women's: to stimulate your imaginations and to help you enter as fully as possible into the biblical text. If our questions are helpful to you, by all means, use them. If they are not, nothing is lost by our offering them.

What we are really asking is that you, our readers, make the book of Ruth your own. Join in conversation; have a voice. Read our commentary and learn about the worlds behind, in, and in front of the text, but also be conscious of the fullness of meaning that can only be found by your engaging with the story and its characters in a way that is open. For some readers, that openness may lead to new ideas, a greater appreciation of the narrative, and new insights into its wisdom. For others, in addition to those goals, it may lead to an encounter with God.

A Global Perspective

One of the goals of this commentary series is to incorporate biblical scholarship that scholars from continents other than North America and Europe have produced. If postmodernity recognizes the importance of social location in all interpretation, then not only must the interpretation of Judaism and Christianity's foundational texts take place all over the world but, to the extent that is possible, it should be shared all over the world. North American and European biblical interpretation has traveled to South America, to Australia, to Africa, and to Asia more often than South American, Australian, African, and Asian biblical interpretation has made its way to Europe and North America. There are several reasons for this, including Western assumptions of superiority, greater opportunities for wealth and education distributed more broadly among the people in the West, the colonization of peoples by the West, and so forth. This assumption

89. Brenner, *I Am*, 105.
90. In Brenner, *Ruth and Esther*, 145–50.

of Western superiority and its accompanying denigration of other peoples is, we believe, as Catholic Christians and as people who accept the UN Declaration of Human Rights, fundamentally wrong. In fact, we believe that we have much to learn from one another, that diversity and difference are to be sought and valued rather than feared. Though we have seen an increased desire for isolationist policies and a resurgence of nationalism recently, as well as attempts to legitimate religious prejudice, we do, in fact, live in a global society. None of us can deny, whether we like it or not, that we are politically, economically, and religiously interconnected.

We, therefore, have tried to include contributions of biblical scholars from as many other parts of the world as possible with respect to the book of Ruth. Yet this goal has proven to be difficult to accomplish; for example, Mahri tried to enlist two women in the Dominican Republic (where she served in the Peace Corps) to share their experiences with Ruth, yet the combination of near-to-impossible phone communication, lack of e-mail or internet, and the women's concerns with their writing abilities made the endeavor unsuccessful. We therefore recognize that even the attempt to bring in "Contributing Voices" makes certain assumptions about those voices and their privilege, including education and access to communication. We therefore admit that a good percentage of our Contributing Voices come from within the United States; we have tried to make those voices as diverse in age, sex, religion, cultural heritage, and experience as possible.

When researching recent scholarship on the book of Ruth, we found many books and articles written in the East (e.g., Asia) or in the South (e.g., Africa) by scholars whose country or people had been colonized. Many of these scholars, and Westerners who themselves or whose ancestors had lived in former colonies, acknowledge that their experience or their cultural memory of colonization affects the lens through which they view biblical texts. Having been subject to political, economic, social, and cultural controls as well as religious proselytizing by a foreign, or at least dominating, power, they read the biblical texts with an eye to how the authors of the biblical texts may have been resisting the influences of controlling foreign powers in their own time or how the texts seem to have served the interests of those powers.[91]

91. Musa W. Dube, Judith E. McKinley, and Kwok Pui-lan, among others, combine both feminist and postcolonial perspectives. See, for example, Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2000); Judith E. McKinley, *Reframing Her: Biblical Women in Postcolonial Focus* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2004), and Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

According to Peter Lau, "A postcolonial hermeneutic is one of resistance, used to rail against all forms of hegemonic power, including political, social, economic, and ideological." He continues that when "applied to biblical texts a postcolonial hermeneutic can highlight and undermine abuses of power."[92] We would argue that other experiences of oppression (e.g., gender, racial, religious, economic) provide a similar lens that affects one's reading and interpretation of the texts. But given the "history" of the peoples of the ancient Near East that the Tanakh relates, and given that most, though not all, interpreters of the Bible have been males from the West who do not claim colonized origins, we want to listen closely to this and other perspectives that have been almost always absent from biblical interpretation. Postcolonialism, then, when applied to biblical studies, focuses on the role of empires (e.g., Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian but also British, American, Russian, French, and Japanese) and reactions to them in the composition and reception of the biblical texts.

Kwok Pui-lan, currently William F. Cole Professor of Theology and Spirituality at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts, recognizes that the Bible came to Asia as the Scripture of the Christian missionaries and as part of Western colonization; as such, it sought to civilize and to save the people of Asia. She writes, "During the missionary era, Christian proclamation was essentially a one-way traffic: Christian missions presumed that they possessed the truths necessary for salvation and the people [of Asia] were treated as missiological objects, passive recipients of such [truths]."[93]

Many scholars who work from a postcolonial perspective focus on the world in front of the text (their world that has been subject to colonization)[94] and then the world of the text (determining how the text

92. Lau, "Another Postcolonial Reading of the Book of Ruth," 15.

93. "Postcolonialism, Feminism and Biblical Interpretation," in *Scripture, Community and Mission: Essays in Honor of D. Preman Niles*, ed. Philip L. Wikeri (Hong Kong: Christian Council of Asia; London: Council of World Missions, 2002), 261–76, esp. 261; quoted in Havea and Lau, "Reading Ruth Again, in Asia," in Havea and Lau, *Reading Ruth in Asia*, 12.

94. E.g., R. S. Sugirtharajah and Fernando F. Segovia, who both prioritize the world in front of the text: see Sugirtharajah, "Biblical Studies after the Empire: From a Colonial to a Postcolonial Mode of Interpretation," in *The Postcolonial Bible*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1998); additionally, the essays in *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Pedagogy of Biblical Theology*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998) emphasize contemporary social locations and concerns.

itself aligns with their experience).[95] They tend to focus on, in particular, biblical books they consider to be exilic or postexilic. Many of these postcolonial scholars have chosen to interpret the book of Ruth according to this exilic or postexilic paradigm.[96] They have determined, though they may not do so explicitly, that the book of Ruth is a product of the Persian Period; they then assume cultural imperialism toward the returned exiles to Judah, and the Jews'[97] determination not to be obliterated but to resist cultural control.[98] While Persian control in their own land may have been better than exile in Babylonia (e.g., Isa 44:24-28), the returned exiles were still subject to a foreign power, and Judahites in leadership positions may have required the common people to conform, at least in certain respects, to behaviors that coincided with their compromising agendas (e.g., taxation). Colonized peoples, who have experienced both foreign domination and excessive influence from collaborators among their own leadership, look for traces of such behavior in the biblical texts.[99]

95. E.g., Lau, who insists that the world of the text is an essential aspect of interpretation for postcolonial readings ("Another Postcolonial Reading of the Book of Ruth," 16). He does not imply the text's literal accuracy in any premodern sense, but neither is he privileging the world in front of the text (as many postmoderns do) at the expense of the text itself.

96. E.g., Lau, "Another Postcolonial Reading of the Book of Ruth," 30–33; Sin Lung-Tong, "The Key to Successful Migration? Rereading Ruth's Confession through the Lens of Bhabha's Mimicry," in Havea and Lau, *Reading Ruth in Asia*, 35–46, esp. 43–46; Yan Lin, "'Who Is More to You than Seven Sons': A Cross Textual Reading Between the Book of Ruth and a Pair of Peacocks to the Southeast Fly," in Havea and Lau, *Reading Ruth in Asia*, 47–55; Roi Nu, "A Reinterpretation of Levirate Marriage in Ruth 4:1-12 for Kachin Society," in Havea and Lau, *Reading Ruth in Asia*, 57–72; R. S. Wafula, *Biblical Representations of Moab: A Kenyan Postcolonial Reading* (New York: Lang, 2014), esp. 7.

97. The biblical authors writing after the exile tend to speak not of "Israelites" but of "Judeans" and then "Jews." After the exile monotheism becomes normative, and the religious and liturgical traditions develop enough to be securely labeled as Judaism (e.g., Neh 8 and the importance of the read scroll), a tradition that is connected specifically to the people of Judah.

98. See Naveen Rao, who dates Ruth to the time of Ezra–Nehemiah and posits that the book critiques Persian-sponsored oppression of marginal communities among the returned exiles, especially widowed women. Rao sees Ruth as unsettling the order that she joins, thus making the established society "more open to differences and otherness" (Rao, "The Book of Ruth as a Clandestine Scripture to Sabotage Persian Colonial Agenda: A Paradigm for a Liberative Dalit Scripture," *Bangalore Theological Forum* 41 [2009]: 114–34; cited in Havea and Lau, "Reading Ruth Again, in Asia," 11–12).

99. Alice was amazed when, close to forty years ago, her Roman landlady referred to the increased wearing of jeans by female Italian teenagers as "American imperialism." From Alice's perspective, the young women were not forced to wear

But scholars from colonized nations do not limit their focus and critiques to empire. In 1988, Chandra Talpade Mohanty[100] rightly criticized the Western feminist inclination to universalize the category "woman" as if all women, anywhere and at any time, faced the same traditions, structures, and histories of gender oppression. Indeed, she recognized and rejected the Western feminist tendency to generalize about women in developing countries—for example, they are all poor or they are all uneducated—and thus erase the differences among women in terms of race, class, ethnicity, religion, or national identity. Because of her, and women (and men) like her,[101] postcolonial feminist theory has significantly contributed to a growing understanding of gender dynamics in the context of other forms of oppression.

With respect to the book of Ruth, postcolonial interpretation is sensitive to border crossings and migration, phenomena that many colonial peoples have experienced.[102] Naomi journeyed to Moab, occasioned by necessity, and then journeyed back to Judah. The Moabite Orpah married a man of Judah and then was willing to journey to the homeland of her widowed mother-in-law. Ruth also married a man of Judah; she journeyed with Naomi from her homeland to Naomi's. Ruth made a life for herself in Judah and then married another Judahite; finally, Ruth converted to the religion of Judah. These experiences of crossing from one

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jeans. From Signora Salvi's perspective, because America was so dominant in the world, cultural and economic pressures caused Italians to adopt American ways. While this is not an example of colonization, it does speak of foreign influence by an economically more powerful country and the compliance, willing or not, by Italian manufacturers and retailers.

100. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review* 30 (1988), 60–88.

101. Not much earlier, Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (Chicago: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1985) and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (New York: HarperCollins, 1986) were published. These American novels, each in its own way, clearly demonstrated that the lives of white women and African American women are not shaped by the same traditions, structures, histories, and types of gender oppression (see Renita Weems, *Just a Sister Away* [San Diego: LuraMedia, 1988]).

102. For example, see Yani Yoo, "Ruth as a Marriage Migrant," in *Global Perspectives on the Old Testament*, ed. Mark Roncace and Joseph Weaver (Boston: Pearson, 2014), 193–95; Jione Havea, David J. Neville, and Elaine M. Wainwright, eds., *Bible, Borders, Belonging(s): Engaging Readings from Oceania*, SemeiaSt 75 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014); Hisako Kinukawa, ed., *Migration and Diaspora: Exegetical Voices of Women in Northeast Asian Countries*, IVBS 6 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014).

place to another, of taking on new customs and culture, or not belonging to one land or people are experiences common to many colonized peoples and aspects of the book of Ruth with which they identify.

Further, a postcolonial perspective identifies with Naomi and Ruth's agency and strength as well as Ruth's hybridity. Their circumstances may require them to take unusual initiatives and to adopt demanding behaviors (e.g., Ruth and Naomi's traveling together to Judah and Ruth's efforts to provide for herself and her mother-in-law), and they may experience themselves as having a combined identity of more than one nation and culture. Many Cubans, for example, learned Spanish in their homes, and then learned Russian in school, and then English, and then a country outside Cuba became their adopted homeland. They are their past but they are different from that past in their present. Ruth remains a Moabite even as she bears the ancestor of David, the future king of Israel. Finally, from a postcolonial perspective, Ruth's mixed marriage, as a Moabite to the Judahites—to Mahlon and especially Boaz—presents an alternative to those who would seek ethnic purity as a way to construct Judah's postexilic identity; it resists that form of cultural control even as it validates colonized peoples.

In order to enhance our understanding and appreciation of the book of Ruth as fully as possible, we have drawn on colleagues from around the world and included their insights, by way of both contributing voices and footnoted material.

Translating Ruth and the Woman of Proverbs 31:10

I have done much work on the Bible translation of an amazing Indian woman, Pandita Ramabai. She was born in 1858 and died in 1922, just about the time Gandhi was coming into India. She was a self-taught woman, who became the professor of Sanskrit at the oldest university in India. She came from a high-caste family but decided to marry a low-caste person in Calcutta. Sadly, her husband died, and during this period of grief, she became a follower of Jesus. As a very young widow, she returned back to her hometown, Pune, and engaged in a huge amount of work for the good of low-caste and outcast girls. She rescued girls from religious and secular prostitution centers. She rescued girls from the practice of *sati*, a ritual in which girls are forced to jump into the funeral pyres of their dead husbands. She pleaded with people not to kill their infant girls but instead to give them to her. Soon she had

hundreds of girls in her home called *Mukti Sadan*, the house of salvation. She began teaching them the Bible. However, when she read the Bible in the local language called Marathi, she realized that much of the language in the Marathi Bible was very demeaning to the low-caste and outcast girls she had rescued. The term for God was the word used for the high-caste deity, who was responsible for the enslavement of low-caste and outcast girls. The term for heaven was the place where only the highest caste Hindus go. There they are given many low-caste women as a trophy for their karma on earth. Ramabai saw all this as an injustice to the women of India. So, in the face of much opposition from the high-caste leadership of the Bible Society of India, she took on the task of translating the whole Bible into the language of the low-caste and outcast peoples' groups of India. She had gained the knowledge of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek and painstakingly translated each verse of the Bible. The translation was completed in 1922, just before she died.

The Indian Bible translations generally describe the woman of Proverbs 31:10 as a humble, coy, silent wife. Ramabai described her as a spiritually, mentally, and physically just person.

This was Ramabai's solution to the violence and enslavement of girls in India. It seems clear to me that the Hebrew canonical sequence in which Ruth follows Proverbs also offers a just solution to the problem of violence against women in global societies—ancient as well as modern.[103]

Rajkumar Boaz Johnson

Traditional, Feminist, Global?

"The reader's task is to determine whether the book affirms Ruth or ultimately erases her, whether she serves as a moral exemplar or as a warning against sexually forward Gentile women."[104] Obviously the book of Ruth can be read in several ways.[105] Ruth is the heroine who

103. See Rajkumar Boaz Johnson, "Pandita Ramabai's Translation and Use of Proverbs 31," in Roncace and Weaver, *Global Perspectives on the Old Testament*, 168–69.

104. Levine, "Ruth," 85.

105. In defending her "reading against the grain," Gale Yee notes what we hope this introduction has suggested, that the ambiguity of the text creates an openness to multiple very diverse interpretations ("'She Stood in Tears amid the Alien Corn': Ruth, the Perpetual Foreigner and Model Minority," in *They Were All Together in One Place? Toward Minority Biblical Criticism*, ed. Randall C. Bailey, Tat-Siong Benny Liew,

shows extraordinary kindness (*ḥesed*) toward her mother-in-law, to the degree that she leaves her own country and culture, willingly embraces Israelite identity, claims YHWH as her God, and marries Boaz. Or Ruth is the Moabite who takes advantage of an opportunity to see a new, and hopefully better, world. Ruth functions in the book to establish the ancestry of David, Israel's greatest king. Or Ruth is a heroine who models resistance to genealogical purity and the controls of Persian rule. Ruth and Naomi may be as close as sisters or as distant as Naomi's lack of expressed appreciation for her daughter-in-law might suggest. What is the "takeaway"? Should contemporary women and men seek to be like Ruth, showing loyalty, love, and loving kindness? Should they do so by conforming to their culture's expectations or by challenging them? It is important to recognize and understand why not all readers, including all women—and for good reason—will read the story in the same way.

About the Authors

While we have speculated about the authorship of the book of Ruth, we wish now to tell you a little about ourselves, this commentary's authors. Each of us has a voice that feminism allows us to use. I (Alice Laffey) am the older scholar, finishing my career at the College of the Holy Cross. I have a doctorate in Sacred Scripture (SSD) from the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome.

My training was predominantly in historical criticism, the world behind the text. At the time I began graduate school I was a Sister of Mercy. I wanted to study Scripture and my superior believed that the best place to do so was Europe, not because America lacked outstanding biblical scholars but because the quality of American graduate programs, as she understood them, was more dependent on particular faculty than on an established curriculum. I was sent to Rome, to the Pontifical Biblical Institute. As a Roman Catholic enrolled in a Jesuit school, I assumed that the Scriptures were inspired and contained revelation, and so I was also very much interested in, and educated to, the world of the text, what

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and Fernando F. Segovia, SemeiaSt 57 [Atlanta: SBL Press, 2009], 119–40, esp. 127). Yee claims solidarity with other scholars whose work challenges traditional interpretations, including Robert Maldonado, Laura Donaldson, Kwok Pui-lan, Francisco García-Treto, Angela Wai Ching Wong, as well as Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, Amy-Jill Levine, Tod Linafelt, and Timothy K. Beal.

Alonso Schökel spoke of as *The Inspired Word*.[106] I was already a feminist, having participated with Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza and Rosemary Radford Reuther, among others, in the Women's Ordination Conference.[107] But studying in an almost exclusively male, clerical atmosphere can quickly make one more radical. I began to notice the myriad ways the Roman Catholic Church discriminates against women. I began to ask a lot of questions having to do with why things are the way they are and why things can't be different; for example, not only why women are excluded from ordination but also why they are excluded from all significant decision-making roles of the Church. It's fair to say that I began to question all assumptions, and I pretty much still do.[108] But we live in history, and I ended up doing my doctoral dissertation on 2 Samuel 7 (David's monarchy), closer to my director's area of expertise, rather than my intellectual interest, the rape of Tamar (2 Sam 13). Had my male director, Dennis J. McCarthy, SJ, not been a feminist, I probably would not have survived.

Shortly after coming to Holy Cross in 1981 I began to teach a seminar on "Women in the Bible," and a few years later I changed its title to "Women and/in the Bible." Unfortunately, my first book,[109] prompted by my wonderful white affluent Catholic students, gave only a very small nod to the race and class and other particularities of biblical women. I provided the names of the kings' wives, as the biblical texts do, most of whom say and do nothing except bear the next king, but I ignored the unnamed women, many of whom act courageously (e.g., those who helped to save the Davidic dynasty, a "servant-girl" [2 Sam 17] and a

106. *The Inspired Word: Scripture in the Light of Language and Literature* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965).

107. An organization begun in 1975 and comprised of women and men who seek the ordination of women to a new kind of priestly ministry in the Roman Catholic Church.

108. One of the assumptions that has always haunted me has to do with money and status. Why are money and status important? When is enough enough? Why do I need to become a full professor? Can I be a professor unless I am genuinely a student? Why should Americans presume that America should be number one in the world? Why isn't it better to have long lunches with wine, like the Italians do, than to divinize efficiency? Why is something "exclusive" good, when my goal is to be inclusive? Who came up with the term "political correctness"? To what extent do political correctness and humanistic values overlap? How can Christians follow Jesus who became human and took the form of a servant (Phil 2:5-8), while spending our lives climbing ladders? The list of assumptions and questions goes on and on.

109. *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988).

"wise woman" [2 Sam 20]). By doing so, I reinforced the discrimination that accompanies class. And I had no excuse. Before going to Rome in 1973, I had taught at an inner-city girls' high school, at the time of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., where race and class were always on the front burner. But I didn't connect the dots. Within two months of my book's publication I knew that it was simplistic and wrong. But at the time (1988), there were not a lot of monographs focusing on Old Testament women and feminist issues. Somewhat to my embarrassment the book is still in print.[110]

But patriarchy and hierarchy are about the distribution of power. I have continued throughout my career to learn about the distribution of power and how cultures legitimate domination. I gravitated toward reader-response criticism[111] so that I could introduce in my work, up front, the limiting lens through which I was working. I was interested in power and therefore wanted to explore texts where the seemingly powerless or less powerful do great things. I must confess I didn't work on Ruth early on because its power relations are less overt and I didn't appreciate them. I studied, for example, the role of the ass in the story of Balaam (Num 22–24), the pet in Nathan's parable to David (2 Sam 12), Queen Vashti's courage in disobeying the king (Esth 1:1–2:4), and the six women who save the Davidic dynasty (Michal, 1 Sam 19; Abigail, 1 Sam 25; an unnamed maidservant, 2 Sam 17; an unnamed wise woman, 2 Sam 20; Jehosheba and an unnamed nurse, 2 Kgs 11).

I am a heterosexual female, happily single, born and living in the first world, the United States; I am white, upper middle class, educated, and deeply committed to faith in God as a more or less practicing Catholic. This lens colors everything I see and touch, including the biblical text.

110. Some of my other feminist work includes: "Feminist Biblical Studies as a Discipline and the Responsibilities of a Catholic Feminist Biblical Scholar," in *Themes in Feminist Theology for the New Millennium (IV)*, ed. Gaile Pohlhaus (Villanova, PA: Villanova University Press, 2006), 25–52; "The Influence of Feminism on Christianity," in *Daughters of Abraham*, ed. Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John L. Esposito (Gainesville: University Press of Florida Press, 2001); "A Liberation Perspective: Patriarchy, Monarchy and Economics in the Deuteronomistic History," in *Pluralism and Oppression: Theology in World Perspective*, ed. Paul Knitter, The 1988 Annual Publication of the College Theology Society, vol. 34 (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1991), 221–35.

111. This method pays attention to the reader's role in creating the meaning and experience of a literary work; the reader completes the meaning of the literary work through interpretation.

Fully aware that a tenured academic is secure and privileged, I have tried to choose nonconventional routes. I have tried to uncover biblical characters and biblical texts that are or present society's underdogs and yet emerge as society's heroes.

The power of domination is often subtle, and although I tried to become aware of its tyranny, I spent most of my life unaware of the power I/we exert over the natural world and the abuse in which I am complicit. The cultural norms of patriarchy and hierarchy and my culture's and Church's complacency with inequality (e.g., the "given" of women receiving unequal pay for equal work; the all-too-common expectation that wives, even though also working full time outside the home, bear greater responsibility than their husbands for work in the domestic sphere, including parenting; the continued exclusion of women from significant ecclesial leadership roles) caused me to reflect on our relationship with the natural world and my/our deliberate and unwitting participation in that abuse. I was coming to this insight just about the time that the news media began to make us aware of the environmental crisis and at the time when increasing numbers of my students were becoming vegetarians. I began to use historical criticism to try to imagine the ancients' relationship to nature. Egypt's ten plagues became ecological imbalance. Whereas the ancients knew their dependence—at least the agrarians among them—I am often blinded by affluence. Living in the first world I will eat—even if there is a drought or a flood "somewhere else." And so I have tried to become more aware.[112] The book of Ruth begins with a famine in Judah.

And that's about where I am now, struggling with a global feminism that includes postcolonialism and a global environmentalism, and interpreting the biblical texts in ways that promote equality and difference. Because these texts are Scripture for me, they have been a primary influence in shaping my identity and guiding my thought and action.

And I (Mahri Leonard-Fleckman) am the younger scholar, just beginning my career at the University of Scranton and now at Providence College, both Catholic schools.

Like Alice, I am privileged: white, upper middle class, from the United States, etc. I come from a mixed Jewish-Protestant background; my sister

112. See, for example, my books *Appreciating God's Creation through Scripture* (New York: Paulist, 1997); *The Pentateuch: A Liberation-Critical Reading* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).

and I were raised in a secular home but were steeped in religion, thanks to strong extended family. My sister was more naturally drawn to the mix of Presbyterian and Evangelical Christianity on our mother's side, while I was drawn to the Conservative and Reform Judaism on our father's side. From an early age I understood "subjectivity": the lens of my southern, first-generation Jewish grandmother was worlds apart from that of my conservative Protestant grandfather. I grew up with a sensibility toward interreligious and intercultural "dialogue" (more often tension!) and adeptness at straddling worlds without fully belonging to either. As I grew up, I was hungry to learn and to understand people; I became a bookworm, a lover of languages, literature, history, and culture.

After college, I served in the Peace Corps in the Dominican Republic. While there, I was attracted to the spirituality around me, particularly in the older women who were my friends and mentors. Their religious identities were infused with the local culture and the difficulties of their daily lives. I had never read the Bible, and after putting out a plea to relatives, I soon received two: the Tanakh (in English) and the NIV Study Bible. I read the texts as literature and as cultural documents (which was my college training, after all) and as revelation. I remember waking up early in the morning and spending hours poring over the texts by the light of a lantern. I found the Bible to be deeply consoling. Looking back, I don't think that I had a clear understanding of how the Tanakh and the Christian Old Testament were distinct at that point, nor did I realize that in turning toward the tradition of the people around me I was somehow turning away from Judaism.

I began to attend the local Catholic church, where chickens ran across the floor, a priest presided once a month (if that), and women ran the services. I loved climbing the hills to attend *horas santas*, where women crowded into tiny homes and prayed the rosary together. Simultaneously, I became friends with a Canadian family living in Santiago, about two hours from the village where I lived. They ran a nondenominational, English-speaking house church for expatriates, and I began to travel in some weekends to attend church. Eventually, I was baptized in the ocean. Despite the fact that I was again straddling cultural and religious worlds, at that point, I somehow believed there was one "Christianity."

My future plans took an abrupt turn, and after finishing my service, I left for Union Theological Seminary in New York with the goal of becoming a pastor. My first shock was in realizing that there were many, many "Christianities," each of which had a distinct identity from the others, and that I had to choose one. After a while, I wandered into the

Spanish service of a local Catholic church and felt like I had come home. The second shock was that I became Roman Catholic, after quitting and rejoining the RCIA[113] program three times (I don't know who was more shocked, I or my women friends, who have since become pastors and Episcopal priests).

Yet the more that I became immersed in Christianity, the more I ached for the Jewish world of my family. I found some solace in studying the Tanakh and Jewish-Christian relations and in taking classes in conjunction with the Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) across the street. After receiving my master of divinity, I began doctoral work in the Department of Hebrew and Judaic Studies at New York University, where I was rigorously trained in traditional, critical tools of biblical analysis and ancient Near Eastern studies. My dissertation was on the political development of the House of David in the context of literary history and in relation to early first-millennium Aramaean polities.[114] While working on my doctorate, I also fell in love with and married a man who is Buddhist, which has added another rich dimension to interreligious dialogue (and tension!).

Only a few years out of NYU, I am a young scholar who seeks integration, in scholarship as much as in life. My feminism is about justice and about the voice and dignity of all people, all life. It is rooted in the understanding of what it means to straddle worlds without ever fully feeling at home. As a feminist biblical scholar, I am drawn first and foremost to the worlds within and behind the text. In studying ancient languages, culture, literature, and history, I find keys that unlock these worlds to me and that help me understand the people I encounter there. I care about the integrity of the voices within the text, both heard and unheard, and about trying to bridge those voices to our own. Two years ago at the University of Scranton, I taught a course called "Sexuality and Gender in the Old Testament." The support for and reactions to this course were overwhelmingly positive from both students and colleagues. I found that the best way to teach was simply to sink into the text and the stories and to allow students the freedom to encounter the ancient world and tell *me* what issues emerged for them. I hope that my work in this project allows readers the same freedom.

113. RCIA: the Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults, a yearlong conversion program into the Roman Catholic Church.

114. Mahri Leonard-Fleckman, *The House of David: Between Political Formation and Literary Revision* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016).

Collaboration

Mahri and Alice met in the fall of 2014, not too long after Mahri had completed her PhD and moved with her husband to Worcester. Mahri came highly recommended to Alice by several mutual colleagues, so Alice invited Mahri to lunch. At the end of the meal or shortly thereafter we agreed to work together on the Ruth commentary. We wished to model cooperation rather than competition. It is fair to say that it has been a rewarding experience for both of us. Trained differently, and in different eras of biblical studies, we have tried to work through our different emphases and write together a feminist commentary that is integrated and cohesive. With excellent suggestions from our editor, Amy-Jill Levine, University Professor of New Testament and Jewish Studies at Vanderbilt University, with whom we were also able to work collaboratively, we have sought to diminish our differences without losing our individual voices. Alice began the introduction, providing its skeleton, but it has had many wise suggestions and much good editing from Mahri. Alice is also primarily responsible for the commentary provided in chapters 1 and 4, while Mahri has been the primary author of the commentary for chapters 2 and 3. Though Mahri "lived" in Worcester, while we were writing the commentary she was teaching in Pennsylvania, so we thank the people behind our internet services for making our communication efficient—if not always the face-to-face meetings that we would have preferred.

While the two of us have co-authored this volume, we are dependent on the knowledge and insights of others. We have "given credit where credit is due" to the extent that we could in the footnotes. The interaction we have had with those monographs and articles has greatly enhanced our work. We have also asked other voices to contribute their insights into the text and to add to our interpretations in the body of this commentary. They join in the conversation with us. We did not predetermine criteria on the basis of which we would invite contributors. We invited our friends or people whom we admired, people whom we thought would make interesting and diverse contributions. In a few cases we invited "strangers," known to us only through their writing. We are grateful for their contributions.

In reading this commentary you will notice that the authors and contributing voices do not all agree, and that is as it should be. While each segment of the book—our introduction and each of the four chapters—has been written and edited by both of us, we emphasize different meth-

ods and often, as a consequence, depend on different sources. We have therefore chosen to identify the parts of the commentary where each of us has had the greater influence.

We have also edited the work of some of our contributing authors, but those contributors agreed that we could do so. We have not diluted or changed the thrust of their contributions, but sometimes we have shortened them or tried to sharpen their focus. The greatest violence we have done to their contributions has been to take a coherent whole and present it as segments. Sometimes we have responded to their contribution. It is our hope that you, our readers, also contribute your insights. All of our voices are needed to contribute to everyone's better understanding if this commentary is to be truly feminist. Neither of us, nor any one of us alone, has all the perspectives or all the answers or all the insights. We need each other.

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