



CROSSING BORDERS  
EXPLORING BREXIT  
THROUGH THE LENS  
OF RUTH

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## READING THE STORY

### CHAPTER 1 – CROSSROADS DECISIONS

After a life of successive tragedies Naomi decides to return home to Bethlehem and her own people. Her widowed daughters-in-law, both Moabites, seek to return with her, but Naomi tries to persuade them to stay, after all, what is there for them in a foreign country? One decides to return home, and one, Ruth, insists on continuing with her back to Judah, and will not be persuaded otherwise. Important decisions are made at the crossroads.

### CHAPTER 2 – THE MIGRANT WORKER

The two women reach home at the beginning of the barley harvest and Ruth finds work gleaning in the fields of a man called Boaz. We are introduced to the fragile lives of those who are poor and to the potential dangers that face those who are migrant workers. And we are surprised by the kindness of Boaz, the landowner, who is moved to be generous by the character and kindness of Ruth. Nevertheless, there is no permanent fix to the economic and social circumstances of the two women.

### CHAPTER 3 – WHO IS FAMILY?

Naomi takes charge now to try and fix their plight and we are exposed to the risks vulnerable people often have to take to survive. Ruth takes the physical and reputational gamble of visiting Boaz at the threshing floor in the dead of night and a curious encounter takes place. The result is that Boaz is finally persuaded to act to restore Naomi and deal finally with Ruth's status in the community.

### CHAPTER 4 – A COMPLICATED END

The final chapter opens with an elaborate ritual which takes care of the issue of land and in the process confirms the marriage of Boaz and Ruth. She is now welcomed into the community and it appears that the whole town is delighted with the development, all the more so when Ruth gets pregnant and gives birth to a boy. Now Ruth disappears from the story entirely and it ends with the patrilineal line of King David.

# THEMATIC STUDIES

## LITURGICAL SETTING

When the book of Ruth is viewed in its Jewish liturgical setting at the feast of Shavuot or Pentecost, a fascinating hermeneutical possibility emerges. Ruth is always read alongside the great epic setting for the giving of the Law at Mount Sinai, placing an intimate story of survival alongside the great world-shaking events of Sinai. It presents us with the possibility that the story of Ruth is the appropriate lens through which to view the Law and that kindness and love for the Other, rather than ritual purity is the proper intent of the Law.

## COUNTER NARRATIVES

There is no clear agreement among scholars about who wrote the book of Ruth, nor about when it was written. Some say Samuel wrote it to set the scene for the introduction to kingship in Israel and the family line of David, the great King. The book also introduces some ambiguity into the notion of racial purity by the inclusion of a foreigner in the kingly line. Some say it was written in the post-exilic period, when leaders like Ezra and Nehemiah were trying to reconstruct national identity. If this were so, then the book of Ruth is again a strong counter-narrative to the idea of racial purity and the imposition of forced divorce of foreign women in the post-exile era.

## ADDRESSING STEREOTYPES

The story constantly reminds us that Ruth was Moabite, a people whose relationship with Judah is characterised by a deep and historical antipathy. The story also tells an unexpected and surprising narrative, that a family from Judah found a welcome in Moab. But would this welcome be reciprocated when Ruth reaches Bethlehem? The book of Ruth begins the process of challenging stereotypes and invites the reader to consider a new understanding of community based more round character and relationship rather than blood and ethnicity.

## COMPASSION AND THE LAW

The story of how Ruth is wrapped up into the people of Bethlehem involves a community review of the laws and traditions that shape it. In the end the people agree to reshape their laws to expand the scope of those who are included within their protection. And so, by the end of the story a foreign woman is included within the embrace of the community, and becomes an ancestor to their greatest king. But a principle is also established, that the law should ensure compassion, and if it doesn't it must be changed.

## ENLARGING THE CIRCLE OF KINSHIP

There are big questions in this book about the basis on which one can belong to this people, but also about the social responsibility that attaches itself to national identity. The book uncovers for us a startling possibility that belonging can come not simply from blood but also from behaviour. In fact, socially responsible behaviour may even trump the rights of blood belonging. The narrative presents us with a scenario in which kindness and good character draw reciprocal kindness from others which results in inclusion for the stranger and the foreigner.

# INTRODUCTION

## BREXIT & CORRYMEELA

The Brexit referendum campaign in June 2016 and the subsequent triggering of Article 50 in March 2017 didn't just set the agenda for the UK government for the foreseeable future. These momentous events have also exposed ruptures and fault lines in UK society and reignited tensions in relation to the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

Corrymeela has always found itself active at those places where the tectonic plates of conflicted communities threaten to crack and split apart. So the situation post-Brexit on the island of Ireland and in UK society as a whole is a natural space for Corrymeela which has dedicated itself for more than 50 years now to the healing of fractures and the building of new and healthy relationships in the aftermath of trauma.

We seek to enter into the conversation, or the silence, in faith communities in relation to Brexit not to re-run the referendum or the debate but to ask ourselves what kind of a society do we aspire to in the future. We want to do so by providing conversation material based around the sacred text of our Christian communities because this seems the sensible thing to do when we acknowledge that among our communities there will be contrasting views. Putting our shared text at the centre enables us to navigate the complexity and the pain of the conversations we need to have.

## THE BOOK OF RUTH

Now the Book of Ruth wouldn't ordinarily be a book that we would flock to for wisdom and advice on a contemporary issue like this one. The stereotype we often carry is that this is a romantic book of the young, beautiful woman fallen on hard times who meets a good man, they fall in love, get married and have children, or at least a child. Of course there is some questionable activity as the heroine seduces her soon-to-be husband, but by and large this can be glossed over, and at least it is tasteful, though only barely.

Perhaps the most well known part of the story is the transcendent declaration of loyalty on the part of Ruth who commits herself to her mother-in-law to go where she goes, live where she lives, to worship Naomi's God in such a way that only death would part them.

As we engage deeper with the characters and their lives though, there are other profound things which reveal themselves. Like the mystery of relationships between women. Like the trauma of surviving one's children, of childlessness and marriage and patriarchy.

And of course as we think about Brexit the story features a number of border crossings. Elimelech and Naomi and their boys leave Bethlehem (due to famine) and move to Moab (the place of the traditional enemy) and fall on hard times. When Naomi seeks to go home, things change. Ruth becomes a woman in a man's world, a foreigner in a country that doesn't like her sort, childless in a society that required sons, a widow in a family-based culture, and poor in a community that lacked a safety net.

The Book of Ruth can be read as a form of counter-narrative to



Ezra and Nehemiah, telling a story where ethnic and religious purity is perhaps not as critical as they might have claimed. In Jewish tradition it is read at Pentecost alongside the reading of the ground-shaking events of Sinai. This story thus preserves the importance of the ordinary lives of individuals alongside great world-making events and dares us to find ways of making personal what could otherwise be overwhelming.

The book challenges us on the issue of welcoming the stranger; on redrawing our stereotypes through encounter with those who are 'other;' on finding the gaps where compassion can thrive in the midst of technical debates about law and tradition; on carrying losses that cannot really be grieved. It presents us with questions of how to protect the rights of vulnerable minorities, particularly those who are politically and socially marginal to the mainstream, and also the responsibility towards the poor of those who are financially and socially secure.

The story features those who are forced to migrate to another country because of poverty or famine and encourages communities to face the question of what constitutes national identity and belonging to the tribe.

There are many questions ahead for us in the light of the political choices made in 2016 which may take a generation to wash through. And when we are done these islands will be profoundly changed. In Corrymeela we're committed to ensuring that the imaginative, creative and caring voices of people of faith are heard clearly in the debates to come. We want to ensure that our voices are informed and shaped by our text as well as by the disorienting fog of expert political opinion.

The book of Ruth will not deliver answers, but will help form better questions for us to explore together as communities of faith but also to empower us to take an effective place in the public square where decisions are being made which affect the whole community.

These conversation pieces on the book of Ruth do not take a

position in the Brexit debate either for or against. We assume from the beginning that the UK will be leaving the EU and we're interested in stimulating dialogue around the kind of community and nation we want to be. But we acknowledge that as we engage diligently with the text of Ruth we will be led into complex discussions and debates about the issues at the core of the national debate; about the exact nature of national identity and who belongs: about the rights of EU citizens in the UK and of UK citizens remaining in EU countries; about our commitments to human rights; about combating racism and xenophobia; about legislation to protect the environment and the future of our rural areas; about migration and immigration; about inequality in wealth distribution.

## HOW TO USE THIS MATERIAL

It is our hope that these materials will stimulate discourse in all manner of places with all types of people, but not every group, we imagine, will be completely familiar with the story of Ruth. So a word about how this resource can be used.

First, there are nine modules included here. Five of them are thematic in that they take a theme from the text overall and explore it in the light of Brexit. So, for instance, there is a thematic study on the issue of stereotyping and how we can often operate our relationships through stereotypical understandings of people groups or communities. This was a particular problem in the relationship between people in Judah and people from Moab, where Ruth was born.

Then there are four modules based on each of the four chapters in the story. These explore in more detail the movement of the story and examine the text in a close way.

If you are hosting a one-off event on a day or an evening, you may be best choosing from among the thematic modules. This will enable you and your group to get an understanding of the whole story without having to spend time in detailed consideration of individual verses or passages. Choose the theme or themes that are most relevant to your group.

Alternatively, if you are planning a series of sessions, perhaps with a bible study group in your church or community it might be sensible to walk through the chapter modules on successive weeks. And of course, if you have nine weeks you could do the thematic sessions as well!

## HOSTING HEALTHY CONVERSATIONS

If you are planning on using this material we assume that you have some experience of leading group discussions and bible studies. We should probably acknowledge though that many of our bible-based conversations in faith settings rarely stray intentionally into matters of such public contention and political difference like Brexit. Given our local history here in Northern Ireland we should all be experts at this form of discourse, but we're not. So these sessions may require a bit more prior preparation than you might otherwise do.

We offer these as a few basic primers for a healthy conversation.

1. Be aware that in your group there may be people who voted in different ways on Brexit and who hold divergent emotions about the outcomes and the future. The variety of views should not be stifled, but your job is to enable them to be aired, perhaps for the first time with those who differ, in a healthy and constructive way.
2. In the light of the above, it would be wise to encourage participants to listen actively in order to really hear the hopes, fears and aspirations of others in the group and to respect the variety of opinions which are put forward.
3. One person speaking at a time, to facilitate number 2.
4. Nobody should feel under pressure to speak but everyone should be encouraged to do so and space created to enable this to happen. It is your job to manage those who might seek to dominate the discussion.
5. With the Brexit issue in particular, try to ensure that the referendum is not re-run in your setting and focus discussion on the issues not on the persons making the argument.
6. Allow the text of the Book of Ruth to shape the conversation.

## CONCLUSION

We offer this material in all humility, and desperately keen to place the bible text right in the middle of the most difficult and profound issues in the public square. We are passionately committed to reading the bible in this way, and it is a source of genuine wonder to us that this ancient text can play such an active and stimulating role in informing and preparing us for this future.

We do want to hear from you about your experiences of using the material. Not just whether or not it was effective but also about the nature of the discussions stimulated by it. What did your group learn? What would your group have to say to the respective national and supra-national governments involved? What kind of a society do we want post-Brexit? And above all, as people and communities of faith, how should we now respond?

## WHAT YOU WILL NEED

A copy of the bible text, perhaps some pens/pencils and paper

## READING THE TEXT

6 When Naomi heard in Moab that the LORD had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them, she and her daughters-in-law prepared to return home from there. 7 With her two daughters-in-law she left the place where she had been living and set out on the road that would take them back to the land of Judah.

8 Then Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back, each of you, to your mother's home. May the LORD show you kindness, as you have shown kindness to your dead husbands and to me. 9 May the LORD grant that each of you will find rest in the home of another husband." Then she kissed them goodbye and they wept aloud 10 and said to her, "We will go back with you to your people."

11 But Naomi said, "Return home, my daughters. Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands? 12 Return home, my daughters; I am too old to have another husband. Even if I thought there was still hope for me—even if I had a husband tonight and then gave birth to sons— 13 would you wait until they grew up? Would you remain unmarried for them? No, my daughters. It is more bitter for me than for you, because the LORD's hand has turned against me!"

14 At this they wept aloud again. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law goodbye, but Ruth clung to her. 15 "Look," said Naomi, "your sister-in-law is going back to her people and her gods. Go back with her." 16 But Ruth replied, "Don't urge me to leave you or to turn back from you. Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. 17 Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the LORD deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me." 18 When Naomi realized that Ruth was determined to go with her, she stopped urging her.

## CONSIDERING THE BACKGROUND

Sometimes it helps to have a little of the background to what we're reading. That may be a little more detail about the original language, or some detail to understand the cultural setting. It all helps to get a better understanding about what's happening or being said in the text we read.

- After further loss Naomi's thoughts turn to home, after all, what is there to keep her in Moab now? This is the first appearance of the Hebrew word *teshuvah* meaning repentance or return. One or another of the forms of the verb *lashuv* appears eleven times in the remainder of the chapter. Soon argues that this indicates that *teshuvah* is not a single event in time but a process.

## CROSSING BORDERS RUTH 1: CROSSROADS DECISIONS

*Teshuvah* towards God is a journey with many acts of turning along the way and with many ups and downs.<sup>1</sup>

- 1:8 features the first mention of the Hebrew word *chesed* which means lovingkindness, and in this case it is an act done towards the dead. The rabbis say this act is the preparing of the burial shroud. The lovingkindness towards Naomi, the living, is shown by not demanding compensation from her after the deaths of their husbands.
- 1:10 This is curious in that Ruth indicates her desire to return (*lashuv*) to a place she has never been. Like Abraham she goes to a place she doesn't know and this is what Boaz commends her for (2:11).
- "Don't urge me to leave you" (1:16) is literally translated as "Don't hurt me to leave you." Naomi is being invited to transcend her own pain to avoid causing pain to Ruth. The negotiation is based not on power but on mutual concern and caring.
- Or perhaps Ruth is worried in 1:16 that Naomi threatens to transfer her pain to Ruth by shutting her out of the hurt. So perhaps Naomi is being asked by Ruth to keep her pain open to Ruth so that the pain she feels, and the vulnerability, can be transformed by relationship and community.
- Similarly, Ruth's great declaration is not a decision to choose Israel's God and their faith, but to choose Naomi's God and Naomi's people. It is, therefore, a relational choice. And it is a choice to embrace the God who had, apparently, so decisively rejected Naomi. Ruth refuses to add to her distress by rejecting her.
- "May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely.." (Rut 1:17) is similar to the phrase used in 1 Sam 20:13 with respect to the relationship between David and Jonathan. This elevates the significance of the relationship between Naomi and Ruth.
- Naomi has attempted to shut down any hope for the future for Ruth, yet Ruth continues to use the future tense (Ruth 1:16-17) as if determined to find a way of saying No! to death.
- Naomi is silenced in the face of Ruth's determination (Rut 1:18).

## ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Good questions help uncover hidden things in the text, like motive and intention, or patterns and connections. All of this helps towards better understanding.

- Imagine a correspondence years later between Orpah and Ruth. What might they say to each other about their life choices?
- what factors might have been taken into account by Ruth and Orpah in the making of their respective decisions?

## EXPLORING A LITTLE DEEPER

As we move from the text to the world and the time we live in we need to do a little bit more imaginative thinking about what we're reading. Sometimes this comes quickly, and other times we need to spend a bit more effort in reflection, contemplation or conversation to make some connections.

- This exchange represents a real and a metaphorical crossroads in the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. Ruth retains some power of choice over her future and in that is the reminder that in any given moment lies the possibility for change and for claiming agency over one's life.
- One way of looking at this incident is perhaps that Ruth chooses a more diverse way and to live with difference, while Orpah turns back to what and who she knows best.
- If we view Ruth's move as one involving a break with the status quo and an embrace of an uncertain future, what opportunities open for newness, that wouldn't be there if she had stayed?

## DISCOVERING A RESPONSE

All the thinking and talking and reflection should lead somewhere—this is our response to the text and is an attempt to discover what we should do now. This is the “so what?” of the text.

- What crossroads choices does this island face in the coming years?
- Where is the power of choice and decision?
- As we leave the EU, what opportunities open up for acts of solidarity with those from whom we are parting?
- How can we prevent the turn from our neighbours from becoming a mono-ethnic and mono-cultural move?
- Lovingkindness of the sort displayed here is costly and radical and involves the valuing of another above one's own obvious needs. Where are the opportunities for radical *chesed* as the story of Brexit unfolds?
- What radical and costly surrenders are necessary in the various debates that threaten to divide our communities or the church?
- Where are the opportunities for new journeys of adventure and mystery where the outcomes are unknown as yet? How can we build the courage and strength for such undertakings? §

## CROSSING BORDERS

# RUTH 2: THE MIGRANT WORKER

### WHAT YOU WILL NEED

A copy of the bible text, perhaps some pens/pencils and paper

### READING THE TEXT

**2** And Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, “Let me go to the fields and pick up the leftover grain behind anyone in whose eyes I find favour.” Naomi said to her, “Go ahead, my daughter.” **3** So she went out, entered a field and began to glean behind the harvesters. As it turned out, she was working in a field belonging to Boaz, who was from the clan of Elimelek.

**4** Just then Boaz arrived from Bethlehem and greeted the harvesters, “The LORD be with you!” “The LORD bless you!” they answered. **5** Boaz asked the overseer of his harvesters, “Who does that young woman belong to?” **6** The overseer replied, “She is the Moabite who came back from Moab with Naomi.” **7** She said, ‘Please let me glean and gather among the sheaves behind the harvesters.’ She came into the field and has remained here from morning till now, except for a short rest in the shelter.”

**8** So Boaz said to Ruth, “My daughter, listen to me. Don’t go and glean in another field and don’t go away from here. Stay here with the women who work for me. **9** Watch the field where the men are harvesting, and follow along after the women. I have told the men not to lay a hand on you. And whenever you are thirsty, go and get a drink from the water jars the men have filled.”

**10** At this, she bowed down with her face to the ground. She asked him, “Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me—a foreigner?” **11** Boaz replied, “I’ve been told all about what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband—how you left your father and mother and your homeland and came to live with a people you did not know before. **12** May the LORD repay you for what you have done. May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.”

**13** “May I continue to find favour in your eyes, my lord,” she said. “You have put me at ease by speaking kindly to your servant—though I do not have the standing of one of your



servants.” **14** At mealtime Boaz said to her, “Come over here. Have some bread and dip it in the wine vinegar.” When she sat down with the harvesters, he offered her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and had some left over. **15** As she got up to glean, Boaz gave orders to his men, “Let her gather among the sheaves and don’t reprimand her. **16** Even pull out some stalks for her from the bundles and leave them for her to pick up, and don’t rebuke her.”

**17** So Ruth gleaned in the field until evening. Then she threshed the barley she had gathered, and it amounted to about an ephah. **18** She carried it back to town, and her mother-in-law saw how much she had gathered. Ruth also brought out and gave her what she had left over after she had eaten enough.

### CONSIDERING THE BACKGROUND

Sometimes it helps to have a little of the background to what we’re reading. That may be a little more detail about the original language, or some detail to understand the cultural setting. It all helps to get a better understanding about what’s happening or being said in the text we read.

- The previous chapter ends with just a hint that there may be a change of fortune in the wind. The women have returned home just as the barley harvest is beginning. Not only that, though they had previously believed themselves to be alone it turns out they have a relative, who is also a man of standing. (1:22). Nevertheless Naomi remains silent, perhaps even sullen. There is a possible implication in 1:18 that Naomi’s silence was resentful; she doesn’t want the



responsibility for an extra mouth to feed, and a foreign one at that.

- Or maybe Naomi's silence is genuine human concern, that on top of the challenge of their poverty, Naomi knows that Ruth is opening herself to the possible resentment of her foreignness (Ruth does indicate she's aware of this possibility, and may even have been on the receiving end of discrimination, so that Boaz's behaviour surprises her in 2:10,13). Naomi knows herself to be part of the dispossessed domestic poor and her plight is bad enough. Ruth will have to cope with the additional stress of being a migrant and being poor.
- There seems to be a cultural acceptance in the story that women gleaning in the fields are vulnerable, hence Boaz and Naomi's concern in 2:8-9, 15, 22-23. If this is the case then Naomi should be aware and possibly should have warned Ruth in advance. Not only that, but in reality, it might be argued that Naomi, who is familiar with the ways of Judah, should have taken the initiative to meet their needs. Perhaps though she is paralysed by grief and the disappointment that the townspeople had not taken responsibility to do more for them (1:19-21).
- 2:4-6 "Harvesters" is a masculine term in the Hebrew and it seems Ruth went to the fields and started work behind the men. When Boaz arrives he notices this unusual behaviour and asks about it. The foreman is somewhat embarrassed and explains that it's a foreigner, a Moabite woman. The implication is that she won't understand. But he also notes that she's the one who came back with Naomi, which reminds Boaz of her kindness. Boaz, in a kindly way, tries to help by explaining to her that we don't do things that way here and says that she should stay in the field, but work with the women.
- 2:5 Boaz is asking "to whom does this young girl belong?" and it is parallel to a question asked about Ruth's descendent David in 1 Sam 17:56-57. After David has slain Goliath Saul asks "From whom is this lad?" Saul's question is less about the identity of David—after all he had met him and had tried to fit him with his armour and sword. It is more a question of how can such a boy accomplish such a feat. It is unexpected and surprising. It is perhaps the same here with Boaz. How come he has seen such kindness and resourcefulness from a Moabite. Perhaps this is the very point at which his theology starts to change.
- 2:6 the most notable thing in the mind of the overseer is Ruth's ethnicity. He mentions it twice in a curious redundancy—"the Moabite from Moab."
- 2:8-9 The foreman has acceded to her request to glean behind the harvesters. Is this an indication that he was deliberately putting her in the way of danger, perhaps excused by the fact of her ethnic identity. Boaz acts in a kindly fashion, explaining the culture to her, even the darker side of culture, and urging her to stay with the women (2:8-9). But more than that, he warns the men twice to leave her alone (Ruth 2:15,16).
- Another possible take on the story is that Boaz's farm is special place where the Law is practiced with fairness and kindness. Maybe this is behind Boaz warning Ruth not to go to the fields of another where she might not be so well looked after (2:8). Thus on Boaz's idealised

farm the foreign labourer and the seasonal worker have an abundance of water (2:9), bread, and wine vinegar with which to flavour it (2:14), an abundance of roasted grain to eat with plenty left over (2:14, 18) and gleaning is practiced generously (2:15-17). There even appears to be a strongly relational bond between the farm owner and those who work for him (2:4,14). In a sense this may be an idealised description of the eschatological community.

- 2:11 Boaz describes Ruth's journey as one akin to that taken by Abraham and Sarai in Gen 12:1. In this case though Ruth has responded not to the voice of God but to the imperative of love—her love for Naomi.

## ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Good questions help uncover hidden things in the text, like motive and intention, or patterns and connections. All of this helps towards better understanding.

- Compare and contrast what the overseer sees and what Boaz sees in relation to those working in the field.
- On two occasions Ruth talks about being looked upon with favour (2:10,13), why might this have made such a mark on her? What might she have expected?
- How do Boaz's actions towards Ruth serve to humanise her, or recognise her as being more than simply "a Moabite from Moab"?

## EXPLORING A LITTLE DEEPER

As we move from the text to the world and the time we live in we need to do a little bit more imaginative thinking about what we're reading. Sometimes this comes quickly, another times we need to spend a bit more effort in reflection, contemplation or conversation to make some connections.

- In what ways might this incident from the story of Ruth open us to an understanding of the plight of migrant workers in our community?
- If the description of Boaz's farm is idealised, how might the characteristics of the arrangement be translated to our day?

## DISCOVERING A RESPONSE

All the thinking and talking and reflection should lead somewhere—this is our response to the text and is an attempt to discover what we should do now. This is the "so what?" of the text.

- Is there a role for the church now, and perhaps more particularly in a post-Brexit world, to help the strangers among us to navigate the complexity of life in a foreign country? If yes, what might we do?
- In relation to the stranger and the outsiders among us, how can people of faith individually and institutionally both provide for the needs of vulnerable people, including our domestic poor, but also act to protect and advance their safety and security?
- Take some time to learn about the dangers and hardships faced by migrant workers. §

## WHAT YOU WILL NEED

A copy of the bible text, perhaps some pens/pencils and paper

## READING THE TEXT

1 One day Ruth's mother-in-law Naomi said to her, "My daughter, I must find a home for you, where you will be well provided for. 2 Now Boaz, with whose women you have worked, is a relative of ours. Tonight he will be winnowing barley on the threshing floor. 3 Wash, put on perfume, and get dressed in your best clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor, but don't let him know you are there until he has finished eating and drinking. 4 When he lies down, note the place where he is lying. Then go and uncover his feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do."

5 "I will do whatever you say," Ruth answered. 6 So she went down to the threshing floor and did everything her mother-in-law told her to do.

7 When Boaz had finished eating and drinking and was in good spirits, he went over to lie down at the far end of the grain pile. Ruth approached quietly, uncovered his feet and lay down. 8 In the middle of the night something startled the man; he turned—and there was a woman lying at his feet! 9 "Who are you?" he asked. "I am your servant Ruth," she said. "Spread the corner of your garment over me, since you are a guardian-redeemer of our family."

10 "The LORD bless you, my daughter," he replied. "This kindness is greater than that which you showed earlier: You have not run after the younger men, whether rich or poor. 11 And now, my daughter, don't be afraid. I will do for you all you ask. All the people of my town know that you are a woman of noble character. 12 Although it is true that I am a guardian-redeemer of our family, there is another who is more closely related than I. 13 Stay here for the night, and in the morning if he wants to do his duty as your guardian-redeemer, good; let him redeem you. But if he is not willing, as surely as the LORD lives I will do it. Lie here until morning."

14 So she lay at his feet until morning, but got up before anyone could be recognised; and he said, "No one must know that a woman came to the threshing floor."

15 He also said, "Bring me the shawl you are wearing and hold it out." When she did so, he poured into it six measures of barley and placed the bundle on her. Then he went back to town.

16 When Ruth came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, "How did it go, my daughter?" Then she told her everything Boaz had done for her 17 and added, "He gave me these six measures of barley, saying, 'Don't go back to your mother-in-law empty-handed.'"

18 Then Naomi said, "Wait, my daughter, until you find out what happens. For the man will not rest until the matter is settled today."

## CROSSING BORDERS RUTH 3: WHO IS FAMILY?

### CONSIDERING THE BACKGROUND

Sometimes it helps to have a little of the background to what we're reading. That may be a little more detail about the original language, or some detail to understand the cultural setting. It all helps to get a better understanding about what's happening or being said in the text we read.

- 3:1-6 Back at the beginning of Chp 2 Ruth took command of the situation to provide for her listless mother-in-law, but now the harvest is over (2:23) and the gleaning proved no more than a temporary fix to the problem. Here at the opening of Chp 3 even Ruth is resigned in much the same way that Naomi was previously, for despite the hope they had placed in Boaz he still hasn't acted to resolve their predicament. But this time Naomi has recovered her voice. She has new energy here and for the first time she acts as a caregiver. She clarifies the issue concerning Boaz and instructs Ruth in what she should do. And the previously active and initiative-taking Ruth is now taking instructions. Perhaps this was an act of respect for her mother-in-law, returning to her the dignity of agency.
- 3:7-9 There is a risk here however for Ruth. Everything depends on how Boaz reacts to her. Will he respond to her like any other foreign widow, coming to the threshing floor selling sex? Or will he recognise family?
- 3:9 "Spread the corner of your garment over me." Naomi had previously told Ruth to watch and listen, and Boaz would instruct her in what to do. But here Ruth takes complete control, she doesn't wait for Boaz to decide but takes decisive action herself, guiding the newly awakened (and perhaps slightly inebriated) Boaz on what to do next. And she does this in a conscious echo of his earlier prayer for her, that she would find refuge under the wings of Yahweh (2:12). The same root word for wings or skirt/cloak is used again here (*kanap*) when she asks him to spread the wings of his cloak over her. Boaz figuratively and literally becomes the sheltering wings of Yahweh in answer to his own prayer.
- It is unclear whether or not there is anything sexual implied here, though there does seem to be a suggestion of it. The language used is an echo of the actions of Yahweh towards Israel in Eze 16:8 which does appear to have sexual over-tones. What is absolutely clear however is that Ruth is seeking

to redraw Boaz's understanding of what constitutes family, and who might be considered part of that family and who might be excluded. And Boaz does seem concerned to protect Ruth's reputation (3:10-14)—which in and of itself is worth noting. This foreigner has done enough in the host country to be seen to have a noble character. But is she family? The future depends on his response.

- The tension in the narrative is quickly resolved. First, Boaz, who by implication is older, wealthy but unmarried with no children, is astonished that this young woman should choose him (3:10). Secondly, he accedes to Ruth's request (or instruction?).
- Ruth, unlike her deceased father-in-law, has responded to the vulnerability in another and in so doing opens the door to the possibility of a new kinship. Ruth is thus redeemed as 'the other.' Kristen writes "Ruth enables the opening of the patriarchal masculine with the troubling, foreign, feminine presence."<sup>1</sup> Ruth remains a foreigner but is included in the family line.
- 3:12 Boaz has recognised his responsibility and considers himself, Naomi AND Ruth to be family. But there is a public dimension to family which also must be acknowledged and done right, and so he must also draw attention to the existence of a 'nearer relative.' It's almost as if he says "If we're going to do this, we're going to do it right!"
- 3:13 Boaz has had his understanding of kinship and family expanded but he also has a new insight into how the law of *yibbum* or levirate marriage expanded. He is concerned not for the strict application of the law but the application of the spirit of the law also (see the material on the role of narrative and the adjustment of law and tradition).
- 3:15-18 As Boaz measures out a share of barley into Ruth's shawl it is a sign and a promise that he understands the totality of his responsibilities to both women. If he marries Ruth, he is also taking Naomi. Or at least Ruth reads it in this way, for it is not recorded that Boaz actually said what Ruth reports to Naomi. There is also a possible development in Ruth's understanding of the world. Twersky Reimer writes, "By telling Naomi that the six measures of barley given to her by Boaz were given out of concern for her mother-in-law, Ruth assimilates Boaz's action into her worldview, insisting that the chesed that matters most to her has to do with personal devotion to the live woman and not the dead male."<sup>2</sup>
- There is also a beautiful metaphor of promise here. Ruth lifts her apron and it is filled with grain so that as she walks home she walks with the look and the gait of a pregnant woman. She carries actual fullness with her and the promise of a more profound fullness. Thus the chapter ends in stark contrast to the ending of the previous one where both women were silent and

isolated. And the chapter which opened with the plans of Naomi now ends with the promise of a complete transformation to a new status in the community.

## ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Good questions help uncover hidden things in the text, like motive and intention, or patterns and connections. All of this helps towards better understanding.

- Does it matter to the story whether or not sex is involved in the encounter on the threshing floor? If yes, how? If not, why not?
- How does Ruth balance both her loyalty to her dead husband with her commitment to Naomi?
- What practical, family or legal considerations might Boaz need to take into account in considering whether or not to create a place at the family table for Ruth?

## EXPLORING A LITTLE DEEPER

As we move from the text to the world and the time we live in we need to do a little bit more imaginative thinking about what we're reading. Sometimes this comes quickly, at other times we need to spend a bit more effort in reflection, contemplation or conversation to make some connections.

- In Chapter 2 Boaz prays for Ruth (2:12) and in Chapter 3 he becomes the answer to his own prayer (3:9-13). Are there ways in which we as people of faith or as communities, through our prayers and best aspirations, have avoided responsibility for vulnerable people.
- How does the encounter on the threshing room floor help you understand the plight of vulnerable people.
- In what ways might this story help us understand the proper balance between loyalty to history and commitment to the present?
- Who might you consider difficult to include as 'family' in the national debate around Brexit? Does this story challenge your view in any way?

## DISCOVERING A RESPONSE

All the thinking and talking and reflection should lead somewhere—this is our response to the text and is an attempt to discover what we should do now. This is the "so what?" of the text.

- Think now about ways in which you, your church and/or your community could become the answer to your best prayers and aspirations for vulnerable people in your community after Brexit.
- If you were challenged to include a group previously excluded how might you go about doing that? §

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Caroline Bruce "Response-ability: Identity in Alterity in the Book of Ruth," from [https://www.academia.edu/6091467/The\\_book\\_of\\_Ruth](https://www.academia.edu/6091467/The_book_of_Ruth) accessed on 15 February 2018, 19

<sup>2</sup> Gail Twersky Reimer, "Her Mother's House" in *Reading Ruth, Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (ed. Judith A Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, Ballentine Books, New York 1994) 102-103

## CROSSING BORDERS

# RUTH 4: A COMPLICATED END

### WHAT YOU WILL NEED

A copy of the bible text, perhaps some pens/pencils and paper

### READING THE TEXT

1 Meanwhile Boaz went up to the town gate and sat down there just as the guardian-redeemer he had mentioned came along. Boaz said, "Come over here, my friend, and sit down." So he went over and sat down.

2 Boaz took ten of the elders of the town and said, "Sit here," and they did so. 3 Then he said to the guardian-redeemer, "Naomi, who has come back from Moab, is selling the piece of land that belonged to our relative Elimelek. 4 I thought I should bring the matter to your attention and suggest that you buy it in the presence of these seated here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you will redeem it, do so. But if you will not, tell me, so I will know. For no one has the right to do it except you, and I am next in line."

"I will redeem it," he said.

5 Then Boaz said, "On the day you buy the land from Naomi, you also acquire Ruth the Moabite, the dead man's widow, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property." 6 At this, the guardian-redeemer said, "Then I cannot redeem it because I might endanger my own estate. You redeem it yourself. I cannot do it." 7 (Now in earlier times in Israel, for the redemption and transfer of property to become final, one party took off his sandal and gave it to the other. This was the method of legalising transactions in Israel.) 8 So the guardian-redeemer said to Boaz, "Buy it yourself." And he removed his sandal.

9 Then Boaz announced to the elders and all the people, "Today you are witnesses that I have bought from Naomi all the property of Elimelek, Kilion and Mahlon. 10 I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon's widow, as my wife, in order to maintain the name of the dead with his property, so that his name will not disappear from among his family or from his hometown. Today you are witnesses!"

11 Then the elders and all the people at the gate said, "We are witnesses. May the LORD make the woman who is coming into your home like Rachel and Leah, who together

built up the family of Israel. May you have standing in Ephrathah and be famous in Bethlehem. 12 Through the offspring the LORD gives you by this young woman, may your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah."

13 So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When he made love to her, the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son. 14 The women said to Naomi: "Praise be to the LORD, who this day has not left you without a guardian-redeemer. May he become famous throughout Israel! 15 He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age. For your daughter-in-law, who loves you and who is better to you than seven sons, has given him birth."

16 Then Naomi took the child in her arms and cared for him. 17 The women living there said, "Naomi has a son!" And they named him Obed. He was the father of Jesse, the father of David. 18 This, then, is the family line of Perez:

Perez was the father of Hezron,  
19 Hezron the father of Ram,  
Ram the father of Amminadab,  
20 Amminadab the father of Nahshon,  
Nahshon the father of Salmon,  
21 Salmon the father of Boaz,  
Boaz the father of Obed,  
22 Obed the father of Jesse,  
and Jesse the father of David.

### CONSIDERING THE BACKGROUND

Sometimes it helps to have a little of the background to what we're reading. That may be a little more detail about the original language, or some detail to understand the cultural setting. It all helps to get a better understanding about what's happening or being said in the text we read.

- The Hebrew word *ge'ula* (redemption) occurs 14 times in various forms in this chapter. It acts as a parallel to *teshuva* (repentance or return) in chapter 1. It reminds the reader that *teshuva* is our movement towards God and *ge'ula* is God's movement towards us.
- In 4:4-6 appears that Boaz takes a tradition or law within Judah that is designed to provide protection economically and socially for Judahite women who have been widowed, and he expands its application to include Ruth, a foreigner. Technically the law applies neither to Naomi nor to Ruth, but Boaz acts as if it does. Presumably he does this because he knows, and he knows the community knows, of the good character of Ruth (3:10-11). And in a sense he appears to argue that if the Law doesn't provide protection for people like Ruth, and include her within its scope, then it should do, and if necessary it should be expanded or adjusted to do so.
- 4:10 Boaz' intention is honourable. He goes through this elaborate ceremony in order to protect the names of Elimelech and Mahlon, so that the names of the dead can live on in the community. What becomes clear in the story of course, is that their names

disappear altogether. The actions of Boaz have the effect of preserving his name both in the folklore of the community (as told in the book of Ruth) and in the line of David. Ruth's name is preserved also, again in the lore of the community though not in the official biography (4:18-22).

- 4:11 The Elders bless Boaz for his purchase of Ruth and align her with the matriarchs assuming that a woman's strongest desire is for children. They also associate the blessing of fertility with the continuity of a name.
- 4:12 The introduction of Tamar here means that the reader is faced with three stories of women behaving in unusual ways. First there is the immediate story of Ruth, but secondly, this story also reminds us that Ruth happens to be a Moabite whose origins come from the incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters. Thirdly there's the story of Tamar who dressed as a prostitute to seduce Judah. In all three stories women had to resort to desperate measures to get men to do what they were required to do.
- 4:13 There are more common biblical phrases to describe the end of a long period of childlessness. God is sometimes described as "remembering" the woman, or God "opens her womb." The phrase here is literally "the LORD gave her conception" referring neither to a biological problem to be corrected nor to prayers that must be answered. Twersky Reimer writes, "Here God intervenes not to facilitate a longed-for conception, but almost it seems to force one. The absence of any description of Ruth's joy over birth or her maternal responsibilities—she neither names her child nor nurses him—reinforces the possibility that divine intervention was necessitated by Ruth's reluctance to become a mother."<sup>1</sup> The narrator essentially concludes Ruth's story with this line ( again assuming this was the zenith of the aspiration of a woman). The narrator also concludes the whole book with a genealogy (4:18-22) which celebrates the birth and the patrilineal line of Perez to David. Ruth disappeared once she gave birth. But there is an alternative ending offered by the women of the town.
- 4:14-17 Naomi is finally truly restored to herself. Strangely, the primary relationship of adult and newborn is with the grandmother. Understandable I suppose when one remembers that it was her need, her journey from life to death that sets the pattern for the story. The blessing of the women is thus addressed to Naomi (4:14). The child becomes Naomi's *go'el*. And he will restore Naomi because Ruth, her daughter-in-law, "who is more to you than seven sons has borne him."
- Ruth is not accepted and made worthy because of bearing a son, she is already worthy (3:11). The child is made worthy and is of benefit to his grandmother because of the devoted affection of his mother for his grandmother."The importance of the women with

no power or status or official legal function for the blessing of family sets the story in marked contrast with the subsequent genealogy in which only the men are mentioned. Once again, family is defined by mutual relationships of affection and commitment."<sup>2</sup>

- This alternative ending falls between the ending of Ruth's story and the genealogical list. The women realise that it is Naomi who is fulfilled by the birth of the child, for though the child is born "of" Ruth he is born "to" Naomi. The women realise that the birth is not just about the carrying on of a lineage (though they do acknowledge it in 4:14). They know that the child will renew Naomi in her old age and help her to recover her original name. "Can this really be Naomi?" (1:19) is transformed by "a son is born to Naomi" (4:17).
- In reality the women are more concerned with Naomi than they are with Ruth, but they reveal something of their attitude to Ruth in their brief comment about her. They speak not about her maternal love for her newly born son, but of her love for Naomi; "your daughter-in-law who loves you and is better to you than seven sons." They recognise the degree to which Ruth has undermined the patriarchal premise that structures the whole of the narrative, that women are fulfilled by sons.
- The narrative does provide a structural and linguistic hint to this as well. In 1:2 the names of the sons are ordered Mahlon and Kilion. In 1:4 their wives are ordered Orpah and Ruth. It is reasonable to assume that Orpah has married Mahlon and Ruth has married Kilion. Yet in 4:10 Ruth is described as Mahlon's widow. Twersky Reimer says that this is significant in that it suggests that Ruth was not personally defined by her husband.<sup>3</sup>
- 4:18-22 The text, having been utterly concerned with having children now switches and all the women disappear. And in this miraculous world, the men do all the begatting! Women are no longer important as the men take power.
- "The child who was born to Ruth as *go'el* to Naomi, becomes *go'el* to the whole community as one of the ancestors of David. The implications are clear. Without family redefined, there can be no promised future for the nation, no messianic promise for the world. The salvation of the world depends upon this redefined notion of family that celebrates the inclusion of a foreign enemy, an immigrant widow, as daughter-in-law, wife, and finally mother. Because family is taken out of the categories of property law and firmly ensconced in the category of covenant and commitment, promise is possible. The recognition of family, newly defined as growing out of acts of love and devotion and inclusive of persons whom the law might be apt to exclude, marks the book of Ruth as a crucial witness to the often overlooked radical nature of the biblical view of family."<sup>4</sup>

## ASKING GOOD QUESTIONS

Good questions help uncover hidden things in the text, like motive and intention, or patterns and connections. All of this helps towards better understanding.

- Throughout this story Ruth appears to be a decisive and determined woman conscious of her own power and agency. She speaks and acts in every other chapter of the book yet here in chapter 4 she is silent, compliant, and things happen around her and to her. How do you think this would have felt? Why might she have suddenly gone quiet?
- After all the struggle and the suffering, what, if anything, has changed in Bethlehem for women like Naomi or Ruth or the unnamed women?

## EXPLORING A LITTLE DEEPER

As we move from the text to the world and the time we live in we need to do a little bit more imaginative thinking about what we're reading. Sometimes this comes quickly, another times we need to spend a bit more effort in reflection, contemplation or conversation to make some connections.

- One possibly way of reading the implications of this text is that in the pursuit of *chesed* or lovingkindness, all sorts of unusual, even unorthodox, 'family' arrangements are possible. And not just temporary

arrangements, but wholesale permanent adjustments. This is evident in the fact that the 'official' genealogy of David includes this story. What are the implications for discussions on the island of Ireland?

- In what ways might the motivations, events or outcomes of this chapter challenge contemporary Christians?

## DISCOVERING A RESPONSE

All the thinking and talking and reflection should lead somewhere—this is our response to the text and is an attempt to discover what we should do now. This is the “so what?” of the text.

- The law of levirate marriage as originally understood did not embrace Ruth because she was a foreigner, yet Boaz acts to extend it in the light of her vulnerability and her good character. Law in the Hebrew bible was intended to ensure kindness in the community, yet in this instance, the unintended outcome of a strict application was unkindness. This was motivation enough for Boaz to seek to change it. What are the implications of his actions for us as a community facing into Brexit? §

<sup>1</sup> Gail Twersky Reimer “Her Mother’s House” in *Reading Ruth, Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story* (ed. Judith A Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, Ballentine Books, New York 1994) 103-104

<sup>2</sup> Diane Jacobson, “Redefining Family in the Book of Ruth,” *Word & World* 33, 1, Winter 2013 10-11

<sup>3</sup> Twersky Reimer “Her Mother’s House” 102

<sup>4</sup> Jacobson, “Redefining Family,” 11

## CROSSING BORDERS THE LITURGICAL SETTING FOR THE BOOK OF RUTH

### ENCOUNTERING THE STORY

What are your feelings associated with any discussion about Brexit?

In what ways do you feel that Brexit is passing you by?

Have you seen in your friends or neighbours, or in yourself, a temptation to switch off in order to survive?

Read Lev 19 with an eye to kindness as the proper way to understand it's intent. How might this change your impression of the content? How do you imagine Brexit will change our society for the good?

To achieve that good what will need to be renegotiated? What inner or outer boundaries will need to be crossed?

In Jewish tradition Ruth is the second of five short books which are called, collectively, the Megilloth or the Five Scrolls.<sup>1</sup> Each of these books has an annual setting in the Jewish calendar and are read in their entirety in the Synagogue on these special holidays. The Book of Ruth is associated with the festival of Shavuot, or Pentecost, and is read alongside the Torah reading from Exodus 19 and 20 which records the story of Moses on top of Sinai and the giving of the Ten Commandments.

This liturgical setting is fascinating. The Exodus reading is epic and magnificent, full of fiery images of smoky mountains and trembling earth. There's thunder and lightning and deafening trumpet blasts and over all the din, Yahweh speaks. No wonder the people were terrified. In Ruth though, the atmosphere is different. It's the intimate story of survival in the face of the overwhelming ordinary. There's bereavement and hunger, isolation and hard work in the struggle to survive as a migrant. Finally, there is a great and transformational kindness that results in the securing of a place for displaced people. It also results in the transformation of the life of the one who acted in kindness—Boaz, the wealthy landowner who opens first his fields and then his home life to the stranger, finds a wife, then a child and then an honoured place in the family line of King David.

And the community is transformed as well. In the story a community manages to overcome its antipathy and suspicion towards the stranger from Moab. In doing so it reaches a new understanding of itself, crafts a system of laws which pays attention to the plight of the vulnerable, and welcomes someone into the web of kinship who would otherwise be excluded.

The festival liturgy connects the struggles of ordinary people and their lives into the great ground-shaking events of Sinai. It thus preserves the significance of the common experience of regular people in the face of great world-making events and dares us to find ways of making personal what could otherwise be overwhelming.

It is also worth considering another dimension of this liturgical coupling. Perhaps the story of Ruth is the appropriate hermeneutic for interpreting the purpose of the Law. What I mean is that placing these two stories side by side is designed to alert us to the fact that kindness and love for the Other, rather than ritual purity, is the proper intent of the Law.

For many people Brexit is a distant thing that they know will affect their lives but about which they feel powerless and impotent. The great temptation then is to disengage and to try to ensure that I and my family can navigate these choppy waters and to let everyone else fend for themselves.

At a national level there will be the temptation to revert to legal definitions and the creation of impersonal, international agreements which in their application find little space or patience for the plight of real people.

The liturgical setting for Ruth challenges us to something else and something better. <sup>S</sup>

### MAKING A RESPONSE

How can people of faith help preserve the voice of people in the big political debates over Brexit?

How can the liturgies of our churches speak effectively into the debate? How can they acknowledge the presence of diversity in our midst?

What do we need to do to create a stronger culture of welcome and hospitality? How can the church serve to ensure the voices of people are heard in the cosmic scale debate around Brexit?

How can we make personal what threatens to be overwhelming?

How can we support, and hold to account those who represent us at local and national level?

How can we support EU citizens in our community who may feel threatened during Brexit negotiations and in the aftermath of withdrawal?

<sup>1</sup> The other books in order are Song of Songs, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther.





## CROSSING BORDERS COUNTER NARRATIVES: WRITING THE BOOK OF RUTH

### ENCOUNTERING THE STORY

In what ways might a story like Ruth's serve as a counter-narrative to that of Ezra and Nehemiah in relation to foreign marriages?

What feelings and emotions are stirred by these kinds of alternate stories?

What is the significance of stories in the Brexit conversations and in shaping society post-Brexit?

How would you respond to the ideas of the two scholars above?

We have no certainty really about who wrote the book or when it was written and speculation bounds across all sorts of time periods and all sorts of writers. Some say Samuel wrote it, and that would certainly account for its placement between the book of Judges, which sets the scene for the introduction of the kingship in Israel, and the books attributed to Samuel. These latter books tell the story of the appointment of the first Leader/King Saul and then the great King David. The Book of Ruth gives us the detail about the family origins of David.

One contemporary scholar, Dewey Williams argues that the book was written long after the events it narrates.<sup>1</sup> In fact, he says, it was written after the return from exile in Babylon, sometime in the fifth century BCE. In those days, as the Hebrews sought the reconstruction of their culture and traditions, the issue of marriage to non-Hebrews was a significant one and was counted as one of the causes of exile in the first place. Biblical characters like Ezra and Nehemiah set about addressing it in a very forceful way and sought to purge the nation of these strange, foreign women, imposing divorce on Hebrew men who had married them. This, it was believed, was an essential step on the road back to greatness for the nation which henceforth would be defined by racial and ritual purity.

Another scholar, Gary Knoppers writes, "Ezra and Nehemiah's backing of divorce (and dispossession) of Gentile wives (and their children) is pivotal to defining and consolidating the post exilic community in [Judah]."<sup>2</sup> Williams proposes therefore, that the Book of Ruth is about issues other than, or in addition to, the the simple recording of a story. He suggests it is written as a counter-argument, making the assertion that ethnic and religious purity was not as important as Ezra and Nehemiah had claimed. He writes, "As a matter of fact this counter argument suggests that ethnic and religious mixing had positive outcomes for nationalism. The Book of Ruth offers a new approach to nationalism."<sup>3</sup> §

### MAKING A RESPONSE

Can you tell some of the stories that swirl around in the Brexit debate?

How might competing stories be imagined or what counter-narratives exist?

What kind of a society do you want after all the Brexit noise dies down?

<sup>1</sup> Dewey Williams, "Exegesis of the Book of Ruth," from [https://www.academia.edu/7480425/Exegesis\\_of\\_the\\_Book\\_of\\_Ruth](https://www.academia.edu/7480425/Exegesis_of_the_Book_of_Ruth) accessed on 15 February 2018

<sup>2</sup> Gary N Knoppers, Sex, Religion, and Politics: The Deuteronomist on Intermarriage, (Columbus: The Hebrew Bible review, 1994). 121

<sup>3</sup> Williams, "Exegesis"



## CROSSING BORDERS ADDRESSING STEREOTYPES: THE SCANDAL OF MOAB

### ENCOUNTERING THE STORY

Where in the book of Ruth do you see evidence of people acting out of stereotypical understandings?

Spend some time imagining the stranger's life and experience—Naomi in Moab and Ruth in Judah.

How do the different people and groups in the story navigate the fact of Ruth's ethnicity?

In what ways might the story of Ruth shine light on the experience of contemporary refugee women?

Read aloud the story told in Num 22:1-6 and then the injunctions in Deut 23:1-7. How do you find yourself reacting to these readings?

It is not insignificant that Ruth is a woman from Moab, a fact which the text reminds the reader of again and again (Rut 1:4, 22; 2:2, 6, 10, 21; 4:5, 10). There is also a certain amount of implied scandal in the fact that Elimelech leads his family to Moab to escape famine in Bethlehem. The rabbis say that Elimelech, although a man of substance (his name means "may kingship come my way") he leaves Bethlehem (the House of Bread) during famine because he was stingy and unwilling to share what he had with those who were in need.

But he and his family were quite possibly shocked and surprised to find shelter among the Moabites. After all, in Hebrew tradition, Moab was known for its lack of hospitality, and with some justification. There was the story of how, when the Children of Israel were wandering in the wilderness after escaping Egypt, they were hungry and thirsty and passing through Moab. So terrified were the Moabites that the Israelites would consume all the resources that they hired a man to curse the people (Deu 23:3; Num 22). Furthermore, they had a reputation for licentiousness (Num 25:1-3). Perhaps more than all of this, Israel knew the origin of these people was to be found in the scandal of incest (Gen 19:30-36).

This perhaps helps explain why Ruth is never allowed to forget her ethnicity. In fact, when Boaz questions his manager as to the identity of the strange woman in the fields, she is described as "Ruth, the Moabite from Moab," (Rut 2:6).

The antipathy towards Moab was deep and lasting. So much so in fact, that forgiveness and inclusion was deemed possible, eventually, for Edom and even for Egypt, but never, never for Moab (Deut 23:3, 7-8) As one writer says, "Moabite spite has a lasting sting."<sup>1</sup>

All of this history and tradition lies behind the story of Ruth. And it should be said that the antipathy went both ways. In Moabite tradition the Israelites were perceived as greedy and voracious, mopping up scarce resources as they wished. They were looked upon as a nameless, faceless horde who would lick up everything (Num 22:1-4).

### MAKING A RESPONSE

What stereotypes have we functioned under in the Brexit debate?

Describe the type of country or community you wish to live in in a post-Brexit environment.

What is necessary for us to redraw our stereotypes?



<sup>1</sup> Cynthia Ozick, "Ruth" in Reading Ruth, Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story (ed. Judith A Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, Ballentine Books, New York 1994) 216

The book of Ruth begins the process of challenging stereotypes and invites the reader to consider a new story. In the beginning, embittered Bethlehemites might perceive Moab as the proper place for mean and tightfisted Elimelech during a famine. But as the story proceeds the reader must face the uncomfortable prospect that Moab takes in the family, and the widow Naomi finds a lasting home there and her boys find wives.

Ruth and Orpah continue to care for their mother-in-law even after the deaths of their husbands when tradition would dictate that their marriage contracts were ended. Indeed, by not leaving Naomi then, and continuing to live with her they are, in effect, acting as if their marriage contracts were still in effect. They were entitled to claim a contract sum from Naomi and return home, but they refuse. Naomi has to plead with them and only then does Orpah turn around. But Ruth professes deep loyalty and commitment to her widowed mother-in-law in language that remains profoundly moving even to today (Rut 1:16-18).

Boaz redraws the stereotypes still further by drawing attention to her loyalty and care for Naomi (Rut 2:11-12; 3:10-11). The women of the town witness to something similar (Rut 4:15).

The final evidence that the stereotypes have been undermined and a new understanding of community has been created is the inclusion of the family line of Perez. First we should note that, ostensibly, the whole purpose of the marriage between Boaz and Ruth was to preserve the family line of Mahlon and through him Elimelech. But the list mentions Boaz and is silent on the position of Mahlon.

Secondly, and perhaps most significantly, we must reckon with the uncomfortable fact that the great king David has a Moabite in his bloodline. The self-understanding of the nation has extended to include a foreigner even in the line of succession for royalty. §

## ENCOUNTERING THE STORY

Which individuals or groups in your community might find themselves in similar situations to Naomi and Ruth?

There appears to be a big time gap between the identification of an influential relative (2:1) and the actual resolution of the plight of the women (4:11-16). Recall a situation you found yourself in when the resolution of a problem took a long time to manifest itself, or where you found yourself institutionally misunderstood. What did it feel like over the course of that period of time? How does this help you understand the experience of Naomi or Ruth?

Can you identify a instance where the application of the Law was insensitive to compassion?

How can we ensure that, in all the technicalities of Brexit, we don't lose sight of compassion for those who are vulnerable?

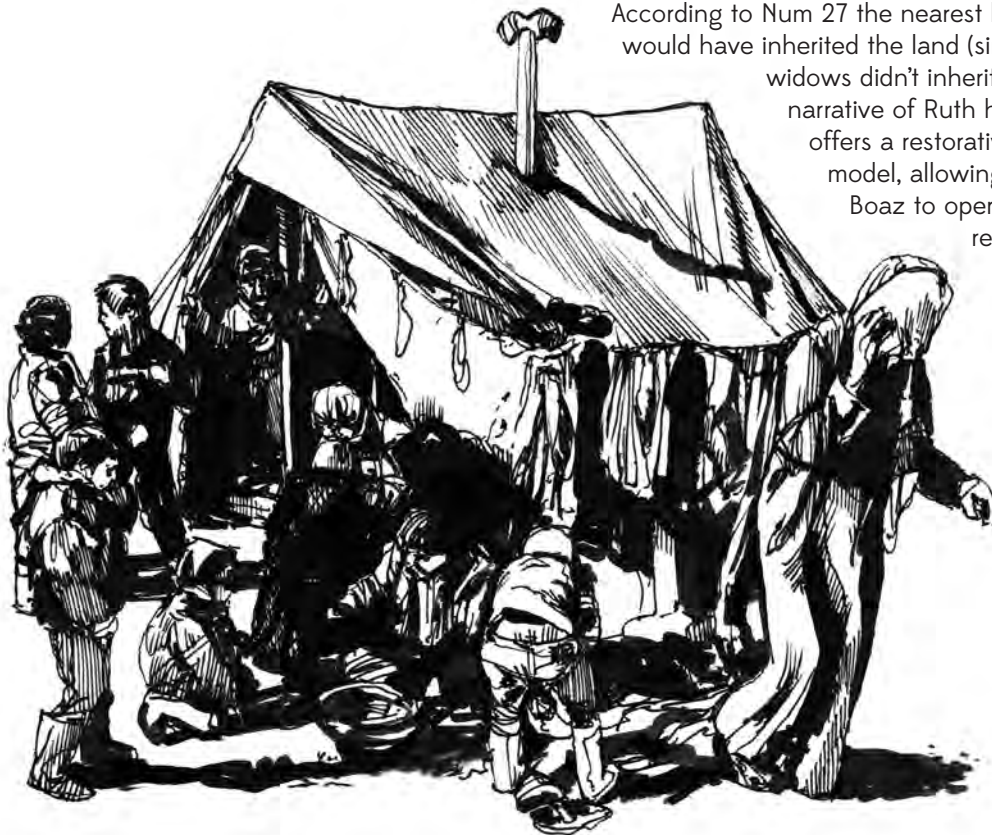
One Jewish writer, Prof Rabbi Pamela Barmash<sup>1</sup> argues that the idea behind the book is the reformation of tradition in Israel. Specifically it is the reformation of three legal institutions—laws of inheritance, of redemption and of levirate marriage—so that they operate for vulnerable people, and that the reformation is done through the vehicle of narrative.

The narrative allows the reader to see the backstory to the dry legal actions of chapter 4 and brings to the foreground the tragedy that occurred to these women and the reasons they had to turn to the law. The three legal actions do not necessarily operate for the benefit of widows, but the narrative ensures that they are reshaped with a view to restorative justice which repairs the harm which has been caused.

From Num 27:8-11 it is clear that Naomi should be bypassed in inheritance law—the nearest male relative should inherit the land in her case. But in 4:3 it is clear that she has some limited title to the land. She is planning on selling the land, according to Boaz, presumably to protect against destitution. The straight sale outside the family would have the effect of separating the dead man from his property (4:5). Given that she has inherited this limited title she can also make use of the institution of redemption over which Boaz and the unnamed kinsman contend.

Redemption laws are designed for the protection of a person who found himself or herself in difficult economic circumstances. The nearest male relative could reclaim land sold by a member of his extended family (Lev 25:25; Jer 32:7-8) or buy the freedom of a relative sold into slavery (Lev 25:47-49). In either case the redeemer did not own title of the land but the relative for whom he acted did.

According to Num 27 the nearest kinsman would have inherited the land (since widows didn't inherit). The narrative of Ruth however offers a restorative model, allowing Boaz to operate as redeemer, not as heir.



## CROSSING BORDERS COMPASSION AS THE INTENT OF THE LAW

### MAKING A RESPONSE

Familiarise yourself to the legal and personal situation of refugees, migrant workers, those on zero-hours contracts, or other vulnerable groups. How might you or your community act as Boaz to these individuals or groups?

Can you identify a cause where your advocacy or that of your community might help ensure a more compassionate framework of Law after Brexit?

The narrative is also reshaping the law of yibbum or levirate marriage. This stipulates that the deceased husband's brother (Deut 25:5-10) or even his father (Gen 38) should marry the widow. If levirate followed these rules Naomi and Ruth would be out of luck. But the narrative connects the laws of inheritance, redemption and levirate so that one widow (Naomi) holds title, a redeemer (Boaz) redeems the land from her and marries the widow of child-bearing age (Ruth).

Barmash writes,

"The narrative has created a situation in which levirate does not apply, according to statute, but where it should apply. In the case of a widow with no living brother-in-law or father-in-law, the levirate marriage should take place with more distant relatives because levirate provides security for widows, according to the narrative. Widows are portrayed as eagerly pursuing levirate but men are hesitant and see only the harm it will do to their estates."<sup>2</sup>

This latter point may also be a further reason behind the rejoicing of the women in 4:14,17. Not only are they happy about Naomi's transformed circumstances but also of the additional security for them, should it be needed, afforded by the transformation of the laws.

The narrative has lured us into the back-story and the hurt and humiliation of Naomi and her need for redemption. It reveals how difficult it is sometimes to make people live up to their legal responsibilities—Naomi had given up on the nearest relative before she even started. But it also shows that resolution of problems through the law is a laborious process. Barmash points out that from the first mention of Boaz to the resolution of the problem, 47 verses have passed.

Furthermore, the story reveals that people sometimes have to go beyond the confines of normal activity to get justice. Initially in the story Boaz simply treats her generously, but he doesn't do much more than make sure the gleaning is not as unpleasant as it could be. Only after Ruth makes her extraordinary appeal after the harvest is ended (creeping up on Boaz at night and possibly engaging in sex), does he finally go to the law and do what he had no need to do; redeem the land and marry the widow. Boaz's inaction is reversed by Ruth's extraordinary action.

The ultimate aim of the narrative therefore, is the protection and restoration of the widows and their access to justice. Barmash writes,

"Narratives, like that of the book of Ruth, unveil the disorderly and unpredictable side of life. They shed light on the emotional texture and moral dimensions that law strains to recognize and handle...By contrast, law fashioned by statute and custom tries to fit the multiplicity of human actions into a limited set of categories. It attempts to organize human behavior and tries to provide predictable results. It reduces the complexity of human actions and makes them fit patterns, principles, and remedies. Law aspires to the predictable, to expected results and outcomes, to known cases and expected penalties. By its very nature, narrative can permit a different model of justice emerge that is distinct from the paradigm of justice afforded by the formal law of statutes and legal institutions. It can overcome the gap between what is prescribed by statute and custom and what is just. It can go beyond the accepted pathways of the law to find a better remedy to a legal problem. The narrative is a portrayal of justice as it should be."<sup>3</sup>

Under this reading of the story there are several borders crossed. The reader moves from a confined and well-ordered world defined by clean and predictable laws. The cross-over is made into a world less predictable and more in need of being read and deciphered and interpreted. In the country of the book of Ruth the intent of the law is more important than its application. In that sense it is an effective illustration of what Jesus meant when he said Sabbath was made for people and not people for the Sabbath (Mark 2:27).

It also alerts the reader to the futility of fitting the scope of a person's life into legal categories. The drama of a life-story will spill over the containers into which we try to fit it. Relationships characterised by compassion will always try to navigate the law and are often not amenable to control by law. §

<sup>1</sup> Professor Rabbi Pamela Barmash, "Book of Ruth: Achieving Justice Through Narrative" from [www.thetorah.com/book-of-ruth-achieving-justice-through-narrative/](http://www.thetorah.com/book-of-ruth-achieving-justice-through-narrative/) accessed 15 February 2018

<sup>2</sup> Barmash, "Book of Ruth" 2

<sup>3</sup> Barmash, "Book of Ruth" 4

## CROSSING BORDERS ENLARGING THE CIRCLE OF KINSHIP

### ENCOUNTERING THE STORY

What are the implications of extending the bonds of kinship to someone who is not naturally kin?

How do you imagine it would feel to be a stranger to a nation's laws and customs and yet to be dependent on them?

What visions of society are inherent in the conversation between Boaz and the unnamed male relative in 4:1-8?

Boaz extends the notion of who belongs to include those who demonstrate character, or those who are vulnerable and in need. What do you think would have been the contours of the 'national' debate around this proposal?

This apparently simple story, by the end, fills in some detail for the reader in relation to the lineage and descent of David. Reading a little deeper however, reveals that ideas of the impeccable and noble lineage of the king are a fantasy. The biological royal line was complicated and confused and not at all entirely respectable and clean.

There are big questions in this book about the basis on which one can belong to this people, but also about the social responsibility that attaches itself to national identity. The book uncovers for us a startling possibility that belonging can come not simply from blood but also from behaviour, in fact, socially responsible behaviour may even trump the rights of blood belonging. Thus Ruth can be considered legally a part of the community because of her demonstrable kindness and good character (3:10). It also deals with the possibility that the privilege of Boaz's family belonging and national identity automatically gives him responsibility for Naomi and Ruth.

This consideration of kindness and good character is opened for us when two people present themselves at the border of the land. One is Naomi, a native who left the land years previously, but has now fallen on hard times and comes back seeking re-integration. The other is a Moabite called Ruth whose people have a chequered history of relationship with Israel. The dramatic tension created here is in discovering what vision of society will prevail for there is a kindness which extends naturally to kin and then a kindness which is extended to the stranger and foreigner, but which takes a bit more effort. This latter kindness is called *chesed* in Hebrew.

The story hints that some people in the society are vulnerable to abuse (2:9,15,16,22) and it would not be hard to imagine that migrant labour or the domestic poor might be particularly unsafe. There are many questions for the community here, and in particular questions about the place of kindness in national conversation and society. Has Naomi surrendered all rights to kindness because the family left the land during a famine or because she returned with a foreigner in tow? Will costly and onerous kindness be extended to Ruth? Or will long memories and historic grudges overwhelm the best intentions of Bethlehem's most tender-hearted residents?



### MAKING A RESPONSE

What are the privileges of British or Irish nationality and belonging and what responsibilities come with that belonging?

Where, in the context of church or community, is someone on the margins because of something they have no control over—their place of birth, their orientation or colour of skin?

In what ways can the intent of a law be honoured or upheld over and above its strict application?

In what ways might we have to rewrite our traditions in a post-Brexit world?

For the strangers in our midst what would it mean if they could walk their way into kinship on the island when they can't be kin by blood?

How could we better express *chesed* or lovingkindness in our society in the context of national identity, rather than waiting for someone to qualify for belonging or for support through belief, ethnicity or any other barrier to belonging?

What would this mean for definitions of Britishness or Irishness?

In what ways might this story and its understanding of kinship challenge our ideas of nationality and belonging on the basis of blood or ethnicity?

Should personal narrative ever play a role in someone's search for inclusion or should it always be a legal qualification?

Jewish scholar Susanne Klingenstein points out that Naomi's reintegration is achieved through four social and religious conventions or obligations which are laid out in the first five books of the Hebrew scriptures or Pentateuch, generally known as the Books of the Law or Torah. Taken together they essentially form a social security system for those who are poor and vulnerable. They are;

1. instructions on agricultural gifts to the poor (gleaning) (*metanot ani'im*)
2. redemption of property from a kinsman (*go'el*)
3. levirate marriage (*yibbum*) (from the Hebrew *levir* meaning brother-in-law.
4. acceptance of a woman convert as part of Israel (*georet*)

The fourth one is interesting in that it doesn't apply to kin at all, unlike the other three. Number four is about welcoming the foreigner. But these four laws are intimately tied together in the narrative of the book of Ruth such that we hardly notice as the story develops and we make a seamless jump from biology (the rights of kin) to a new idea (the extension of kinship to a stranger).

The story reveals that Naomi has a kinsman (2:1). This indicates both her marginality (as a poor relative) but also her eligibility for certain social rights, or Jewish welfare. So when she returns from Moab she immediately re-enters the world of kinship.

Despite the existence of the kinsman, in 2:2 Ruth suggests to Naomi (or requests permission) to go into the fields. This is gleaning. Ruth takes Naomi's place so she can avoid the physical labour (and perhaps the physical danger) of the fields. Ruth is Naomi's substitute, even though technically the Law doesn't apply to Moabites.

Naomi is not eligible for Levirate marriage because Elimelech died BEFORE her children. She was left a widow with children. The Deut 25:5-10 passage is for widows without children. She can claim *geula* (or redemption) though (Lev 25:25) and this begins in chp 4.

Interestingly, in the legal transaction detailed in chapter 4 Boaz introduces the condition that the *go'el* will also 'buy' Ruth. Where did he get the authority for this? Levirate marriage applies neither to Naomi nor to Ruth who is a Moabite. It must be that Boaz considers that she has now succeeded to Naomi's rights. Is it the fact that she is Naomi's substitute not only for access to gleaning but also to marriage. Can she substitute for Naomi in a range of other rights also? If she can, that would mean that she is effectively being treated as if she was Jewish.

Boaz seems to think so.

The fact that he introduces this condition in a public place and in a legal setting shows he can consider her part of the innermost circle of kinship and that Jewish law therefore applies to her. The other kinsman disagrees, for he sees the risk. If Ruth is not to be considered Jewish then his children with her will not be Jewish and thus he risks losing his land.

Klingenstein writes, "Like Orpah, who left Naomi, [the unnamed relative] shrinks from the unknown, the untested. He clings to the familiar; the law is on his side with its admonition that "No Ammonite or Moabite shall enter the assembly of the Lord" (Deut 23:3). [The unnamed relative], like Orpah, chooses the ordinary path. Boaz...does not. He seems to know that laws based on human flaws, on hostility and misjudgment, can change as human beings amend their ways."<sup>2</sup>

Boaz understands and knows Ruth's extraordinary qualities as a daughter-in-law and sees that a novel interpretation of the law is necessary. So Boaz amends Deut 23:3. Klingenstein writes, "Boaz' acceptance of Ruth as his wife is formulated in purely legal terms to demonstrate that Jewish law has now embraced Ruth officially (4:10)." (p206)

His marriage vow in 4:10, an articulation of the law of levirate marriage, stands in place of a formal conversion by Ruth. It also looks backwards, and takes pity on those who died in exile by bringing them home to Judah. The basis for Boaz courageous step is laid by Naomi in 2:20. She already considers Ruth a daughter and not a daughter-in-law, hence Ruth could describe Boaz in 3:9 as her next of kin.

Naomi is a generation closer to Boaz than Ruth, but since the gleaning the two women have become interchangeable. Naomi considers Ruth her equal, and Naomi's view is accepted by Boaz. It is also confirmed by the blessing on the newlyweds in 4:11-12. The reference to Judah and Tamar is a reference to levirate marriage which is an allusion to the law by which Naomi claimed Boaz for Ruth.

Obed has two mothers then, which is alluded to in the reference to Rachael and Leah. Just as Perez has two fathers.

And just as Ruth substituted for Naomi in the gleaning, Naomi now takes Ruth's place in raising the child (which Naomi thought she never would have (1:12-13)) The plan comes full circle to a neat conclusion.

But Ruth makes it easy for Boaz because of her behaviour. She has become known as one of good character (2:11-12; 3:10-11) She showed *chesed* to Naomi and to Boaz e.g. she doesn't choose a younger man as she might have been entitled to do. Instead she forgoes her personal rights in order to look after Naomi. And Boaz recognises this. Above all, she has acted with all the faith and courage of none less than Abraham. She has acted consistent with the best traits of the founder of their faith. Why would they not accept her as one of their own.

Her actions are more important than her ethnicity. They override the previous prohibitions and rewrite the tradition. She walks her way into the family rather than 'believing' or being one by blood.

As the story reaches its conclusion, a new understanding of the law emerges as the laws are applied. §

<sup>1</sup> Susanne Klingenstein, "Circles of Kinship: Samuel's Family Romance" in Reading Ruth, Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story (ed. Judith A Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer, Ballentine Books, New York 1994) 203

<sup>2</sup> Klingenstein, "Circles of Kinship," 206

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This event is one in a series of meetings being held throughout these islands over the course of the next few months. They are designed to enable people of faith to talk about the type of society we aspire to in the aftermath of Brexit.

Corrymeela intends to compile a report arising from these discussions and so we would be grateful if you could complete this feedback form as thoroughly as you can. We may wish to attribute quotes from your form and so would appreciate it if you could include a name or initials and a location by which we quote you. These can be as specific or as vague as you like and we assure you that there will be no way that you will be identifiable in the report.

Thanks for taking part, Pádraig & Glenn

How may we identify you? \_\_\_\_\_

Location? \_\_\_\_\_

**Using a number between 1 and 10 where 1 is negative and 10 is positive, how would you rate the following:**

How interesting was the discussion?

How relevant was it to the Brexit debate?

How effective were the facilitators?

How effective were the materials?

In what ways has this event helped your trust that Brexit can be discussed?

If you could say something to politicians in the UK, Ireland or the EU about Brexit, what would you say?

What **values** does this bible reading have to add to the public and governmental conversation about Brexit?