

Sunday Message Notes – Better Bible Reading in 2026

Ruth: Survivor or Sellout?

Ruth is placed between Judges and Samuel (in the middle of the *Deuteronomistic History*, DtH – refer to your Glossary of Terms, section: *Biblical History & Early Christianity*). However, *Ruth* is not included in the DtH because the story of these individuals does not speak directly to a national narrative. *Ruth* is set in an early period of Israel's history (around 1250 BCE).

Ruth begins with famine. Naomi's family migrates from Bethlehem to Moab for survival (**Ruth 1:1**). Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion die (**Ruth 1:3–5**), leaving Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah widowed and economically vulnerable within a patriarchal society. Ruth returns with Naomi to Bethlehem (**Ruth 1:16–19**) and survives by gleaning at the edges of fields (**Ruth 2:2–3**). Exploitation and sexual assault are implicitly acknowledged in Boaz's warning to his men not to "touch" her (**Ruth 2:9**). When Ruth "happens" to glean in the field of Boaz, Naomi shifts from survival to security planning: "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you" (**Ruth 3:1**).

Far from a romance, *Ruth* reveals a system where women obtain safety through attachment to male power, property, and reproduction. Naomi instructs Ruth to bathe, perfume herself, and approach Boaz secretly at night (**Ruth 3:3–4**), a scene marked by economic and sexual vulnerability. The text frames Ruth's actions as faithful and strategic, yet her "choices" are greatly impacted by famine, widowhood, migration, and poverty. *Ruth's* celebrated inclusivity is conditional: **Ruth, the Moabite, is welcomed only after leaving her homeland, assimilating into Israel, and becoming useful to Israelite lineage through childbirth (Ruth 4:13–17)** - ultimately feeding the genealogy of King David (**Ruth 4:17–22**). Rather than dismantling patriarchal and ethnonational systems, *Ruth* exposes how marginalized women negotiate dignity and survival within structures fundamentally organized against them.

Ruth 3:1-5 Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, "My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you." ² Now here is our kinsman Boaz, with whose young women you have been working. See, he is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. ³ Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor, but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. ⁴ When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then go and uncover his feet and lie down, and he will tell you what to do." ⁵ She said to her, "All that you say I will do."

Ruth 4:13-17 So Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. When they came together, the Lord made her conceive, and she bore a son. ¹⁴ Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin, and may his name be renowned in Israel!" ¹⁵ He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him." ¹⁶ Then Naomi took the child and laid him in her bosom and became his nurse. ¹⁷ The women of the neighborhood gave him a name, saying, "A son has been born to Naomi." They named him Obed; he became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

World Behind the Text: *Ruth's* "kinsman-redeemer" logic resembles other traditions that sought to preserve a dead man's household, property, and name through a close male relative (e.g., **Hittite laws**, 1650–1500 BCE) that expect a brother (or comparable kin) to marry the widow, **Middle Assyrian Laws** (14th–11th c. BCE) that obligate a brother or other male relative to "take" the widow in order to produce heirs, and Mesopotamian/Babylonian provisions (including the **Code of Hammurabi**, 18th c.

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BCE) that protect widows' status and property and keep inheritance within the family. Naomi's instruction to "uncover his (Boaz's) feet" (**Ruth 3:4**) symbolizes appeal for protection/covering or a euphemistic/sexually suggestive idiom?

World of the Text I: Ezra 7:1-2; Nehemiah 13:23-25 (hints toward Judean insularity – forbidding mixing with other cultures). And, some of the Judeans who were exiled took Moabite wives (e.g.- Ruth and Orpah – distinction btwn exile and survival).

I. Scholarly Perspectives - Laura Donaldson¹ (postcolonial/Indigenous "contact zone") critiques interpretations that sanctify assimilation, re-centers Orpah as cultural fidelity/resistance, and reads *Ruth's* genealogical "success" as potentially echoing colonial "culturecide"; **Melissa Jackson**² treats *Ruth* as "comic" reversal and trickster strategy, where the threshing-floor's sexual/narrative ambiguity destabilizes patriarchal expectations; **Jeremy Schipper**³ sees 3:1–5 as the pivot from gleanings to redemption strategy, with Ruth's "washing/anointing" marking shift in her status; and **Laura Quick**⁴ argues against reading *Ruth* as Proverbs 31's "virtuous woman" embodied, insisting instead that the book's wisdom is dependent on the actions of others.

A. (DE) Laura Donaldson (an indigenous Native American) resists imperial *exegesis* and provides readers a new lens to interpret *Ruth* without committing "culturecide" in the "contact zone" (place where disparate cultures meet and inequality is established). Turning *Ruth's* positive value into a negative and Orpah's negative value into a positive, **Donaldson draws parallels between Ruth's assimilation into Israelite culture with that of Native Americans who gave up land, language and identity.** *The Sign of Orpah* also exposes us to colonial attempts (e.g. **Thomas Jefferson**) at "solving" cultural differences by "mixing" blood (inter-marrying) and **ultimately erasing** the less dominant ethnicity. Orpah's return to her people resists assimilation and acts as cultural fidelity, not betrayal.

B. (DE) In *Ruth*, Melissa Jackson imagines *Ruth* as a comedy. Patriarchal structures are subverted and fortunes reversed. Jackson places Ruth among the **"trickster matriarchs"** of biblical narrative (e.g., Tamar and Leah). She also argues the sexual ambiguity around **"did they or did they not do it"** is in itself comedic. **A Moabite woman becoming the great-grandmother of David** plays into her argument that *Ruth* can be read as a comedy.

C. (DE) In *Naomi's Instructions*, Schipper points out Naomi's plan for seeking **Ruth's well-being, is also her own.** Here, Ruth's preparation (e.g.- wash, anoint yourself) signals a shift from mourning widow to hopeful. Schipper points out the phrases "uncover his feet" and "lie down" are intentionally ambiguous – allowing for interpretive openness. In *Ruth's*

¹ Donaldson, Laura E. "The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes." Pages 159–70 in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*.

² Jackson, Melissa A. "Ruth." Pages 180–97 in *Comedy and Feminist Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible: A Subversive Collaboration*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

³ Schipper, Jeremy. "Naomi's Instructions (3:1–5)." Pages 141–46 in *Ruth: A New Translation with Commentary*. AYB 7D. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016.

⁴ Quick, Laura. "The Book of Ruth and the Limits of Proverbial Wisdom." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 139 (2020): 47–66.

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consenting to “do all” Naomi instructs she becomes a willing participant in the changing of her status from marginalized widow to potential inheritor.

- D. (DE) In *The Book of Ruth and the Limits of Proverbial Wisdom* Laura Quick resists comparisons of the Book of Ruth to the “**Valiant Woman**” of Proverbs 31, “She lies down upon the threshing room floor, and either uncovers a part of his body or undresses herself” (**Ruth 3:4, 7**). There is little in the book itself that would actually suggest that Ruth is behaving in any ways characteristic of the woman described in the acrostic poem in Prov 31.” Ruth’s actions are reactive, not proactive. Her success, unlike the autonomous woman in Proverbs, depends on others (Naomi, Boaz). Quick argues *Ruth’s* story subverts traditional wisdom ideals. Her foreign, widowed, and marginalized status, and the unusual tactics for gaining security, situate her outside traditional wisdom literature.

II. Tensions in Ruth

A. Ruth and Orpah.

1. Assimilative Survival vs Cultural Fidelity.
 - a. From a postcolonial and resistance reading, Orpah may emerge as the story’s heroine—the woman who refuses assimilation, remains with her own people (**Ruth 1:15**), and rejects survival as surrendering to cultural pressure. identity to imperial or patriarchal expectations.
 - b. Just as Absalom is the unexpected hero in the Davidic kingdom, **Orpah is the unexpected hero in the book of Ruth.**

B. Naomi as “Gold-digger.”

1. Naomi (elder Israelite woman – Naomi “pleasant” or Mara “bitter”)
 - a. Is the story about Ruth? Or Naomi? Naomi secures her own future (via Ruth). Naomi ends up nursing Ruth’s child.

C. Ruth as a model or “virtuous woman?” (*World of the Text II*).

1. **Ruth 3:11** – Boaz declares Ruth a “virtuous woman” – (only used one other time – Prov. 31). Proverbs might picture Ruth as a “strange woman,” “adulteress” or prostitute.
2. Is Ruth required to give away her “Moabite-ness” (to assimilate) in order to be accepted (to survive) in an Israelite society (e.g.- “Where you go I will go...your God will be my God”)?
3. Are we to critique Ruth for her assimilation while also praising Ezra and Nehemiah for their insularity?
4. Is Ruth a trustworthy model for Inclusivity (i.e.- we will include you only at the price of giving up your culture, religion, identity and agency)?

D. Ruth as Esther (*World of the Text III*).

1. Striking parallels exists btwn Book *Ruth* and *Esther*. Both women navigate patriarchal systems - carefully encounters with powerful men. Naomi instructs Ruth to “wash and anoint” herself before approaching Boaz at night (**Ruth 3:3**), echoing Esther’s ritual bathing and perfuming before entering the court of Ahasuerus (**Esther 2:12**). Both stories portray women using beauty, timing, and risk to secure survival within systems where female security depends on male favor. The ambiguity of Ruth “uncovering his feet” (**Ruth 3:4**)—

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can function as a euphemism for genitals in biblical Hebrew—adds further sexual tension to the scene.

E. Ruth as Hagar (*World of the Text IV*).

1. A critical comparison exists between Ruth and Hagar: foreign women whose bodies become instruments for preserving lineage within another people's covenantal future. In **Ruth 4:17a**, neighborhood women declare, "**A son has been born to Naomi**," absorbing Ruth's child into Naomi's lineage. Like Hagar, Ruth's reproductive role (or forced surrogacy) serves the continuation of a family line not originally her own, raising questions about **how foreign women are valued**, incorporated, and remembered within patriarchal inheritance systems.

III. Closing Scene

- A. Ruth 4:11–12** "Then all the people who were at the gate, along with the elders, said, 'We are witnesses. May the Lord *make the woman* who is coming into your house *like Rachel and Leah*, who together *built up the house of Israel*. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; and, through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.'"

1. **World of the Text V:** In Genesis 38, Judah's sons Er and Onan die after Er's marriage to Tamar (38:6–10), and Judah withholds his third son Shelah (38:11, 14), **prompting Tamar to disguise herself as a prostitute and become pregnant by Judah** (38:13–18).
 - a. When Judah seeks her punishment, she produces evidence leading him to confess, "She is more in the right than I" (38:24–26), and she bears twins Perez and Zerah (38:27–30); later tradition in Ruth (**4:12**) links Boaz's blessing to Perez, foregrounding a lineage in which even the Davidic line is rooted in morally ambiguous sexual politics.
 - b. The blessing that Ruth's house be "like Rachel and Leah" (**Ruth 4:11**) is **not neutral praise** but a framing of her value in terms of reproductive capacity and "building the house of Israel," raising questions about whether her worth is defined through womb and lineage rather than personhood. Similarly, invoking Perez "whom Tamar bore to Judah" (**Ruth 4:12**) imports a genealogy shaped by deception, sexual risk, and stigma (Gen 38), implicitly echoing the ambiguity of Ruth's own threshing-floor scene and reinforcing how Israel's lineage advances through moments where **women's bodies are leveraged within patriarchal power structures**.

IV. *World in Front of the Text*: Is there a way to redeem this romanticized narrative of scheming, or survival, in a modern context?

- A.** How could Naomi be repositioned empathetically, from scheming gold-digger to a woman desperate to survive patriarchal societal woes?
 - B.** Could we utilize Ruth (an outsider, Moabite woman) to reinforce welcoming the "stranger" and the marginalized?
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