

HEARTS UNBOUND

Engaging Biblical Texts of God's Radical Love
through Reader's Theater

by David R. Weiss

1

HIDDEN IN THE KING'S BLOOD:
A Faithful Outsider Brought In

THE BOOK OF RUTH

National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force



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by David R. Weiss

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Dedicated to

Michael J. Adee, M.Div., Ph.D.

in honor and celebration of his 13 years as
Executive Director and National Field Organizer
for More Light Presbyterians, for helping break down barriers
to full inclusion within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),
and for his role in helping found and shepherd the
ever-growing Multi-Faith Welcoming Movement.

Introduction to Reader's Theater as a form of biblical engagement

Reader's Theater is the experience of reading a play script out loud using only the spoken lines — nothing else. The beauty of its simplicity is that it doesn't require memorized lines, costumes, sets, or polished acting, but it nevertheless invites participants to *step inside* the text — to *inhabit* it through their roles — and to experience the text more fully because they are involved in it themselves. Most of us were introduced to reader's theater during our first experience of dramatic works in middle school. These scripts invite you to revisit those middle school days as you use Reader's Theater to capture the drama and surprise of these biblical texts.

Because these scripts are only intended for use as Reader's Theater experiences, there are no extra instructions about costuming, stage movement, etc. — only the dialogue assigned to each reader.

Most biblical passages require a measure of context and scholarly insight in order for us to really understand them. In these scripts the dialogue is crafted to allow biblical characters themselves — as voiced by you, the participants — to unpack and explore key biblical texts about welcome. Also, because the biblical story (the message of God's abounding love that runs from Genesis through Revelation) is ultimately an *experience* of good news, these Reader's Theater experiences are best done in groups of 6-8 persons — so that, *just as in our faith*, there are no spectators.

Whether used by persons skeptical, curious about, or eager to explore the biblical theme of God's surprising welcome to outsiders, these Reader's Theater experiences are effective because they do three things:

1. They engage minds *imaginatively*, using the power of the participatory-narrative experience to open up and fully involve participants' intellects.
2. They help participants *evocatively* make the connections between the biblical dynamic of a welcoming God and the challenge to be welcoming today.
3. They enable participants, through scripted comments, to begin *rehearsing* what they might say in their own voices to explain and apply the dynamic of welcome in their own contexts today.

Lastly, one of the challenges of bringing biblical texts to life today is negotiating the "cultural sensitivities" that have transpired across the years. This plays out in several ways.

For instance, most of the biblical material was originally written by — and for — Jewish persons. (Though even the word "Jewish" isn't quite accurate; historically, we'd need to say "Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish persons" as each of these words best names these people at different points in their history.) So when these texts challenge *these people* to recognize God's surprising welcome, it's an example of *self-criticism*. But when Christians read these texts — especially after generations of both implicit and explicit anti-Semitic assumptions — it's very easy to hear them suggesting that the Jewish faith or tradition is intrinsically stubborn or narrow-minded, while we (of course) are not. But the truth is that stubbornness and narrow-mindedness are *human* tendencies *not* Jewish ones. In fact, it is our own stubborn, narrow-minded tendencies that tempt us to read these texts as challenging people other than ourselves. Please remember that insofar as we claim these texts as authoritative for us, they

are seeking to challenge *us*. In every text, whenever someone is challenged to recognize that God is “bigger” than they assumed, that person, no matter what their ethnic or religious background is in the text, *stands for us*. We need to hear what they need to hear. Be sure to listen.

Also, we know that gender roles were very different in the biblical era than they are today. This is not because God so ordained them, but because culture and society develop and change over time. This means, however, that some biblical texts are very male-centered and some texts display gender assumptions that we would no longer make today. I have tried to treat these instances with a balance of respect for the history they represent and sensitivity to the way we regard gender equality today.

And, you will discover, in my attempt to have these texts speak *to us* today, I occasionally allow the biblical characters to speak directly to us across time. They sometimes make references to historical or contemporary persons and events in order to help us see into the biblical text with greater insight. But even this is tricky, because my cultural and ecclesial (church tradition) knowledge and assumptions may differ markedly from yours. I try to offer references that are culturally diverse, but, if my attempts fall short or miss the mark, I hope that you will do your best to hear past my shortcomings and listen for the truth of these welcoming texts as they seek to speak to us still today.

Indeed, each of these texts invites us, as we take our place inside them as participants in God’s great drama of welcome, to find our hearts unbound. Yes, God’s radical love can be described, but every description dims next to the experience. One definition of the literary form of “gospel” explains it as a genre that aims to bequeath to its hearers the very experience it narrates. It doesn’t simply tell “good news”—*it bears good news to each person who encounters the story*. In their own humble way, each of these Reader’s Theater scripts seeks to be gospel: not simply to recreate tales in which hearts are unbound, but to unbind the hearts that do the reading. I offer them to a church that yearns to know God’s radical love more deeply in its own life. In these tales, retold in our own voices, may we discover our own hearts unbound.

~ David Weiss
Easter 2013

Introduction

This script invites you to explore the story of Ruth from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key biblical tale. These roles are: (1) Naomi, (2) Ruth, (3) Boaz, (4) Townspeople — assorted voices in the background, (5) 3rd Isaiah — a prophetic voice contemporary to the book of Ruth, (6) Author — the unknown author of Ruth, and (7) Narrator. If necessary, to accommodate groups of six or eight, Third Isaiah and Townspeople can be read by one person, or the Narrator role can be shared by two persons.

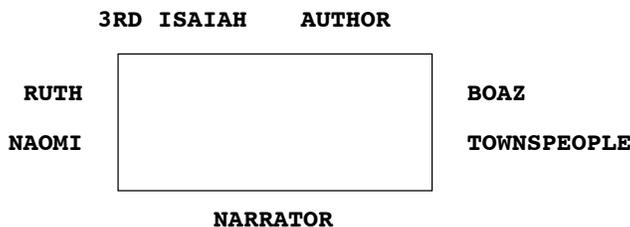
The two largest roles are the Narrator and the Author, followed by the roles for Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, and 3rd Isaiah. The Townspeople is the smallest role of all. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than 10 sentences at a time and most are only 4-5 sentences long. But you may appreciate having the option of choosing a larger or smaller part overall.

The Narrator will guide you through the story of Ruth, summarizing the plot line and helping transition from one scene to the next. The Narrator likely hasn't seen any of this material before either, so this person isn't the "expert" — their role is simply to keep things moving along. You'll have a chance to add your own comments and questions at the end, so feel free to make marks in your booklets along the way, but follow the script until you're invited to make your own remarks at the end.

Remember, this isn't a play where the goal is "perfect performance;" rather, it's a series of invitations to slip into the text ourselves and listen for a moment to discover what more we can hear within and between the lines of the story of Ruth.

Note: The Book of Ruth presents some complexity in how the events described in the tale, the overall message of the story, and the historical context of its writing, relate to each other. It's too important a tale to set aside just because of this complexity — but impossible to understand without addressing these things. The characters explain this in the Theater itself, but there is also a chart at the end of the script that allows participants to see this complexity laid out on a timeline. The chart might be distributed and referred to as necessary.

Suggestion: *It may help keep the roles/voices clear for everyone if the Narrator sits at one end of the group, with Ruth and Naomi to one side and Boaz and the Townspeople to the other side. 3rd Isaiah and the Author might sit opposite the Narrator. You might also consider making large name places to put in front of people to identify their role.*



Note: While the book of Ruth is only four chapters long, it's too long to incorporate in its entirety into this Reader's Theater, so the characters summarize the action and lift up the key points. Everyone will be able to follow things, even if they haven't read the whole book, but it would be helpful to encourage participants to read the entire book of Ruth beforehand. (By generous permission of the publisher, the Book of Ruth appears in its entirety as an appendix to this Reader's Theater.)

READER'S THEATER SCRIPT**NARRATOR:**

Our task is to revisit each of the scenes in the Book of Ruth and reflect on them from the perspective of the original participants. Let's begin by going around the table to introduce ourselves by our real names and then also by the roles we'll be reading.

NAOMI:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Naomi**, a Hebrew (Jewish) woman, now widowed and the mother-in-law of Ruth.

RUTH:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Ruth**, a Moabite (that is, a Gentile, a non-Jewish) woman, now widowed and the daughter-in-law of Naomi.

3rd ISAIAH:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Third Isaiah**, the author of the final chapters (56-66) of the Book of Isaiah. Although not a participant in the scene here, his words belong in this conversation, so his voice has been introduced into this Reader's Theater.

AUTHOR:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Author**, the unknown writer who created the Book of Ruth. In this role I will offer "behind the scenes" comments to help you understand the story from the author's perspective.

BOAZ:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Boaz**, an upright Hebrew (Jewish) man and a close relative of Naomi's deceased husband.

TOWNSPEOPLE-FIELDWORKERS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the Hebrew (Jewish) **Townspeople-Fieldworkers** of Bethlehem, the city to which Naomi returns with Ruth.

NARRATOR:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Narrator**. In this role I will summarize the plot from the Book of Ruth. I'll also help us transition from scene to scene, and I'll occasionally offer some extra insight into the text.

NARRATOR:

Okay, we'll begin with a few background comments on the Book of Ruth. Then we'll turn to the story itself.

AUTHOR:

I would introduce myself, but since I'm "unknown" that's a little difficult. You see, like most of the books of the Bible, the Book of Ruth does not identify its author. There's not even a tradition or legend about who I might be. So I'm about as "unknown" as they come. Even the date for my writing is unknown. Some scholars believe I wrote within a couple generations of the story I tell – maybe around the time of King David (1000 BCE). But most of them place me hundreds of years later. That's because my message fits most clearly in the time after the Exile, 500-600 years *after* King David (500-400 BCE). During these years the people of Israel wrestled with the place of foreigners in the community of God's people.

NARRATOR:

Let me explain how we're dating things. "BCE" means "Before the Common Era;" it's the same timeline as "BC," which means "Before Christ," but the designation BCE is used by scholars today to recognize that not everyone regards Jesus *as Christ*. Still, Jesus' birth *is* what marks the beginning of the "Common Era," so when you hear BCE it simply means the number of years *before the Common Era* began, which is also the number of years before the birth of Jesus.

3rd ISAIAH:

Okay, to make matters even more complicated, I'm also an "unknown" author. I'm the voice behind the final chapters of the Book of Isaiah. Virtually all scholars acknowledge that most of the first 39 chapters of Isaiah have roots in the actual prophet Isaiah, who was active from 740-687 BCE. That's right *before* and right *after* Israel's Northern

Kingdom fell to the Assyrian Empire. But the material in chapters 40-55 comes from a different voice and reflects a different time. This material is often referred to as "Second Isaiah." It comes from an un-named prophet active around the time that the Babylonian Exile was ending, some 150 years later than the original Isaiah. And many scholars hear yet another voice in chapters 56-66, a *third* prophet who sees himself continuing the legacy of Isaiah, but who is now speaking to Israel's reality *after* they've returned from the Exile, perhaps just a generation or two after Second Isaiah. *That third voice is me.*

[Participants might pause and locate Third Isaiah on the Timeline – page 24 – and keep the Chart close by as the next four speakers fill out the history and context for the story.]

AUTHOR:

I know this can all seem kind of complicated and a bit hard to follow. After all, this isn't your history, it's *ours*. But bear with us, because the history sets the context for understanding my story about Ruth. While this tale describes events that happened 500 years *before* the Exile, when heard against the backdrop of Israel's life *after* the Exile, it reveals an astonishing message about God.

3rd ISAIAH:

So before we turn to the tale, keep this in mind. In 722 BCE the Northern Kingdom, comprising almost all of Israel, was conquered by the Assyrian Empire and scattered to the four winds. After 722 BCE these ten tribes were effectively lost to history; they're sometimes referred to as "the lost tribes of Israel." About 130 years later, between 597 and 587 BCE, another regional superpower, Babylon, conquered Assyria and swallowed up the last remnant of Israel, then known as the Kingdom of Judah. These last Israelites – members of the tribes of Judah and Benjamin – were deported to Babylon, where they lived in exile for about fifty years.

AUTHOR:

Around 539 BCE, a third regional superpower arose, the Persian Empire led by Cyrus, and they conquered the Babylonians. Cyrus decided to let the Israelites, who had been living in exile in Babylon, return to their homeland. Many of them did. And over the next hundred years

one of the driving theological questions for the people of Israel became, "What went wrong... why did the Exile happen?" One of the reasons most often given was that Israel had been "too friendly" with her neighbors, and the resulting intermarriages had led to their being attracted to foreign gods.

3rd ISAIAH:

One response was an emphasis on ethnic purity. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah convey this response. First a priest (Ezra) and then a governor (Nehemiah) declared that God was opposed to all intermarriage. But this wasn't the only view. There were other biblical voices – like mine, and the authors of both Ruth and Jonah – who understood God in ways that ran counter to Ezra and Nehemiah. So the story of Ruth offered itself to the imagination of Israel in the midst of this debate about how to treat foreigners – and about how God regards foreigners. Most scholars consider the story of Ruth to be *historical fiction* or *purposeful folklore*. But that doesn't mean it was any less "inspired" than other imaginative tales like, say, Jesus' parables. Just like the parables, the truth of Ruth doesn't rest on the history it tells but on the theology it offers.

AUTHOR:

Enough already! If I've done my work well, the story will stand on its own. You know the context now, so let's turn to the tale itself. I begin by putting the two main characters in place – or, more accurately, by putting them clearly *out-of-place*. Naomi is a Hebrew widow. Ruth is her daughter-in-law. Years earlier, during a famine, Naomi journeyed with her husband from the land of Israel to the land of Moab, only to have him die there, leaving her alone with two boys. The boys grew up and both of them married Moabite women. But soon both of Naomi's sons die as well, and she is left only with two foreign daughters-in-law, in a foreign land. Now, to be a widow in your own land in the ancient world was bad enough; to be a widow in a foreign land, tied only to other widowed women – and foreign women, at that – Naomi was truly to be *out of place*.

NARRATOR:

The rest of chapter one can be summed up like this: Naomi learns that there was food again in Israel, so she decides to return to her people.

Although her two daughters-in-law initially set out with her, Naomi does not wish them to now be out of place in her land. So she urges them to stay in Moab and expresses her hope that each of them may find security by finding a new husband among their own people. After a bit of protesting, one of her daughters-in-law agrees to stay in Moab, but the other one, Ruth, is almost defiant in her loyalty to Naomi. And ultimately Naomi allows Ruth to return with her to Bethlehem.

AUTHOR:

Wait! You can't sum it up and leave out the best parts. Think about this: in an almost exclusively patriarchal society I dared to write a short story ... featuring *women*. I dared to think that their feelings and their words might be ... *memorable*. In fact, at least a few scholars wonder whether *I* might have been a woman storyteller myself to craft such lines for women. This is what Ruth said when Naomi encouraged her to go back to Moab:

RUTH:

"Please don't ask me to leave you and turn away from your company. I swear to you: Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I'll die there too and I will be buried there beside you. I swear – may YHWH be my witness and judge – that not even death will keep us apart." (Ruth 1:16-17, "*The Inclusive Bible - TIB*")

AUTHOR:

No wonder Naomi relented and welcomed Ruth's company. These words have been echoed as expressions of fierce friendship – even borrowed for use in weddings – for thousands of years since I penned them!

3rd ISAIAH:

But remember this, too, that Ruth, who makes this stunning pledge of loyalty, is a *Moabite*. Her people are *cursed* in the Book of Deuteronomy, where it says that no Moabite shall be allowed to join the "assembly of the Lord" not even after ten generations – which is a fancy way of saying "not ever!" And after the Exile both Ezra and Nehemiah insist on breaking up all intermarriages between Hebrew men and Moabite women. Ruth carries some pretty significant ethnic baggage with her, but here her loyalty to a Hebrew widow is given an eloquence

that makes it a fitting metaphor even for God's loyalty to us.

NAOMI :

I was blessed by Ruth's companionship. I knew that she would be an outsider among my people, but, as a widow myself, I would also be an outsider even in my own land. Who can explain the depth of Ruth's loyalty to me? But who can question such loyalty either? Hers was a gift of grace to me. In a world where widowed women had nothing, *we chose to have each other.*

NARRATOR :

So the two women arrive in Bethlehem, where the relatives of Naomi's dead husband lived. The townspeople are "abuzz with gossip" at their arrival. Naomi has been gone for more than a decade – and she had left with a husband and two sons. Now here she is: a widow without children, in the company of a foreign woman. Her fortunes have changed, to say the least. They arrive in town just as the barley harvest is being gathered. And Ruth, showing compassion for her mother-in-law, offers to go into the fields to glean barley for them to eat. By chance – or by Providence – she gleans in the fields of Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's husband.

AUTHOR :

Hold on! Does everyone know what "gleaning" means? See, the people of Israel recognized that God wanted mercy shown to the poor, to those at the margins of society. Thus, Israelite law required those harvesting the fields to leave a portion of the harvest *in* the field, so that

No Ammonite or Moabite, even down to the tenth generation, may enter the assembly of YHWH, for they did not come to meet you with food and water on your journey out of Egypt. You are not to seek their welfare nor their goodwill as long as you live. (Deuteronomy 23:3-4, 6 *TIB*)

Shecaniah ben-Jehiel, of the family of Elam, told Ezra, "We have been unfaithful to God by marrying the foreign people of the land. But there is yet hope for Israel. Let us now make a covenant with YHWH to disown our foreign spouses and children." And they dismissed them and their children. (Ezra 10:2-3, 44 *TIB*)

It was in those days that I [Nehemiah] saw Judeans marrying Gentiles from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab. Half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod or some other tongue, and not the language of Judah. I scolded them and cursed them; I beat some of them and pulled out their hair, and made them take an oath in God's name, saying to them, "You shall not give your children in marriage to their children. Nor will you take their children in marriage for your children, nor for yourselves." (Nehemiah 13:23-25 *TIB*)

the poor could follow behind and “glean” – that is, “gather” – this leftover grain for themselves. In this scene, Ruth sets aside any of her own remaining dignity to enter the field and gather barley in order for her and Naomi to survive.

NAOMI :

Why didn't I go myself? Why didn't I accompany Ruth into the fields? The story doesn't say, perhaps I was simply too old. Or perhaps the sorrows of my years had left me too frail to be much help. In any case, Ruth's gleaning – this care shown to me by a foreigner, my daughter-in-law – is what kept both of us alive.

NARRATOR :

When Boaz comes to the field where his workers are reaping the harvest, he notices Ruth, whom he doesn't recognize, following behind his workers and he inquires about her. The servant in charge tells him she is “the Moabite” who came back with Naomi, and he adds that Ruth has gleaned in the field tirelessly all day. In response, Boaz tells her that she is welcome to glean in his fields – indeed he urges her to glean *only in his fields* and invites her to share the water provided for his own workers. At the midday break he invites her to sit with the reapers and share their meal. And afterwards, he instructs his servants to allow Ruth to glean *even where they have not yet harvested* and to *toss some extra barley on the ground for her to collect*.

RUTH :

I was quite overwhelmed by his generosity, and I told him so – while bowing low to the ground in front of him. That's how we showed deep respect and honor to those whose place in life was far above our own. It wasn't just that he took his duty to the poor so seriously, but that he offered it so willingly to *me*, a foreigner. I had expected to be invisible, but he *saw me*.

BOAZ :

Word travels quickly in a small town. Although I didn't recognize her in the field, I had already heard about this foreign woman, Ruth, and her faithful companionship to Naomi, the widow of my kinsman. So I was sincere when I said to her, “May YHWH pay you in full for your loyalty! May you be richly rewarded by the Most High God of Israel,

under whose wings you have come to find shelter!" (Ruth 2:11-12 *TIB*)
 In fact, as soon as I spoke my blessing, I was strangely aware it was *she* who had spread her wings of refuge over Naomi ... and that it was *I*, through the barley in my fields, who was now spreading my wings of refuge around them both.

TOWNSPEOPLE-FIELDWORKERS:

They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder. And when the eye belongs to a beholder who is *just*, mercy looks beautiful. We could see that something sparked in Boaz already during that chance encounter in the field, but it belittles it to call it "love at first sight." Ruth was a young woman to be sure, but she was widowed already and, after working the whole morning in the field, she was hardly in a state to catch anyone's eye. But we knew Boaz to be a man moved by justice, and when he looked at Ruth he saw neither her physical beauty nor the toll of her years. He saw the mercy she showed Naomi and *that* moved him deeply.

RUTH:

At the end of the day, after separating the grain from the straw, I had an ephah of barley – about enough to fill a five-gallon bucket. It was a *very good* day of gleaning. And when Naomi saw how much I had gleaned she immediately asked whose field I had been gleaning in, because she knew someone had been looking out for me.

NAOMI:

When Ruth told me that she had been in the field belonging to Boaz my heart leapt, because he was a relative of my dead husband. This was God's kindness for sure. Most English Bibles say "close relative" or "nearest kin," but this doesn't capture the full significance of my words. More accurately, in Hebrew I told Ruth, "This Boaz is our redeemer-trustee" (Ruth 2:20 *TIB*); literally, he is the *one with the right to redeem*.

BOAZ:

"*One with the right to redeem.*" That's a big deal. It means that I might well have two significant opportunities – or obligations – with respect to Naomi. First, unless an even closer kin came forward, I would have the right to "redeem" – to claim for my use – any lands

that were held by Naomi's husband. Second, I also had the obligation to provide Naomi with an heir, through the custom of "levirate marriage." That meant that (whether or not I already had a wife – though I seem to have been unmarried) I had a duty to marry Naomi so that she might conceive an heir to care for her in her old age and to inherit her husband's land.

NARRATOR:

So Ruth gleaned in the fields of Boaz for the duration of the barley harvest, and for the wheat harvest as well. This lasted about three months, during which time Ruth became a familiar fixture following behind Boaz's fieldworkers, likely encountering Boaz on numerous occasions.

NAOMI:

This was surely God's doing, for the LORD is merciful to the poor and needy. And Ruth's ability to glean all these months ensured that we would have food for a long time. But there is more than food to security. And in this era the only *real* security for a woman was a husband, or at least a son to take care of her when she grew old. Because both Ruth and I had neither husband nor children, I began to plan for our security.

NARRATOR:

Naomi instructed Ruth in how to "seduce" Boaz. She picked a night that she knew Boaz would be alone in the grain house. She told Ruth to bathe and put on some perfume and to dress in her finest clothes. But Naomi also instructed her to hide until Boaz had eaten and fallen asleep. Then she was to go, lie down by Boaz, "uncover his feet," and wait for him to tell her what to do.

AUTHOR:

"Seduce" is a little strong, I think. There are clear sexual overtones here, but this is really a desperate attempt by Naomi through Ruth to gain security for both of them. Knowing that she herself was too old to bear a child, Naomi hoped that Boaz might be "encouraged" to "redeem" her family by taking Ruth as his wife and providing Naomi with an heir that way. Ruth's actions are pretty *forward* – in Hebrew "feet" can be a euphemism for genitals, so just what is Naomi suggesting that Ruth

uncover?! But they're also unmistakably *vulnerable*: regardless of what part of Boaz's physical anatomy she's uncovering, Ruth is also laying bare her future security, and that of Naomi as well. Boaz's response is far from certain, and she has everything to lose if this moment of sheer vulnerability on her part is not met with grace and mercy on his part.

RUTH:

I did just as my mother-in-law suggested. Once Boaz was asleep I crept in and lay beside him, uncovering his feet. No wonder when he awoke in the middle of the night he was startled to find me there! When he asked who I was – for he couldn't see me clearly in the darkness, I responded, "It's Ruth, your faithful one. Spread the corner of your cloak over me, for you are my family redeemer." (Ruth 3:9 *TIB*) I was not asking literally to be covered by a blanket; I was asking, begging, hoping that Boaz would *take me as his wife*.

AUTHOR:

When you realize what's happening here – that Ruth is hoping for an heir, that she is asking Boaz to father a child with her, a child that will become not his heir but Naomi's heir – you can see just how uncovered his "feet" are ... and just how desperate her hope is.

BOAZ:

I suppose I was startled – wouldn't you be? But what truly astonished me yet again was Ruth's compassion for Naomi. I told her, "May YHWH bless you, my child. You have shown yourself even more loyal to the family than you did before. You could have sought someone younger, whether poor or rich." (Ruth 3:10 *TIB*) Ruth was under no obligation to provide Naomi with an heir. She could have married solely for herself. By coming to me she made clear that she had bound up her security with Naomi's – even within a family such loyalty is rare, and here was a Moabite widow, someone who was *not* one of us, offering it to Naomi.

NARRATOR:

Boaz pledged on the spot to fulfill Ruth's request, noting that all of the Hebrews knew that she, Ruth, was a woman "of great character and integrity" (despite being Moabite). But he also cautions that he knows there is one relative closer to Naomi's husband than he is, and that

person has the first right to redeem if he wishes to.

RUTH:

Suddenly my vulnerability becomes all too clear. Having just offered myself to this man that I'd come to trust over the past several months I now learned that first thing the next morning I might be passed on to a complete stranger! This isn't a betrayal on the part of Boaz; he's simply determined to do everything with honor, but in a patriarchal society honor is measured more by the minds of men than by the lives of women.

NARRATOR:

True to his word, Boaz goes to the city gate the next morning because this is where the men gather to do the town's business. As soon as he spots the other relative, the one who has the first right to redeem, he calls him over and gathers ten elders of the city to act as witnesses. He explains that Naomi wants to sell the land that belonged to her dead husband and that Boaz is willing to redeem the land for himself but knows that this other man has first rights if he wishes to claim them.

AUTHOR:

And, of course, this other relative says, yes, he'll redeem the land. Who wouldn't want to expand their estate a bit? So he'll buy it from Naomi, and she can live off the proceeds until they're exhausted. But then Boaz adds a little "fine print." He mentions that whoever redeems the land *also* gets Ruth – and Ruth comes with the obligation to sire an heir. All of sudden this isn't such a good deal. Let's see, he pays to buy the land. He picks up the cost of having a wife. He accepts the duty to father a child. And this child will have a lineage traced back to Naomi's husband, not to him – and will one day inherit away from his family the very land he's spending money to buy today. This is no longer a good business deal and so he renounces his right to redeem and offers it to Boaz.

BOAZ:

I immediately claimed my right to redeem, announcing to the elders, "You are witnesses this day that I have bought all of Elimelech's property from Naomi, as well as the property of [her two sons]."

Further, I will marry Ruth the Moabite widow, in order to keep the name of our dead relative connected with the property, so that his name will not be forgotten among our relatives or in the town records. You are my witnesses this day." (Ruth 4:9-10 *TIB*) Those few words sold and bought the land and effectively married Ruth to me as well.

NAOMI :

True enough. Those few words put everything that had been out of place – myself, my husband's land, and my daughter-in-law – back *in place*.

TOWNSPEOPLE-GATHERED AT THE GATE :

But we – the ordinary people gathered by the gate alongside the elders – we also offered words that shaped this passing of property and people. We said this blessing: "May YHWH make Ruth, who is about to come into your home, to be like Rachel and Leah, the two who built up the family of Israel. May the children YHWH gives to you make your family like the family of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah." (Ruth 4:11-12 *TIB*) Our words of blessing set this otherwise ordinary transaction within the extraordinary story of God's care for God's people.

The story of Leah and Rachel is found in Genesis chapters 29-35. The story of Tamar is found in Genesis chapter 38.

BOAZ :

Extraordinary, indeed. You probably recognize Leah and Rachel as the two sisters married by Jacob. Along with their respective maidservants, they gave Jacob the twelve sons who became the twelve tribes of Israel. To liken a Moabite woman to the very foremothers of Israel is a pretty daring blessing. As for Tamar, she was a widow whose right to levirate marriage was denied generations earlier and who needed her own act of desperate "seduction" to gain an heir and thus continue the bloodline that eventually led to my own birth six generations later.

RUTH :

I suppose in this moment I could have felt like just another part of the property changing hands – in some ways that's exactly what I was. But remember, I was moving from a place of sheer vulnerability to a place of security – and Naomi was coming with me. We were being gathered together into the household of a man we knew to be both just

and merciful. We had a future before us again. And that was cause for wordless gratitude on my part.

NARRATOR:

And so Boaz took Ruth as his wife. Naomi was made safe as a member of their household. And in time God blessed Boaz and Ruth with a son.

TOWNSPEOPLE-WOMEN:

When he was born, we rejoiced for our kinswoman, Naomi. We said to her, "Praised be YHWH, who has not abandoned you, but provided you with yet another redeemer! May this child's name be remembered through all of Israel – and give you renewed life and support you when you are old! For your daughter-in-law who loves you and has proven better than seven sons, has given birth to him." (Ruth 4:14-15 *TIB*)

NAOMI:

Filled with joy, I took my grandson into my arms, and, cradling him, I saw hope in this tiny babe. Not just for myself and for Ruth, but for all of God's children, for the story that led to his birth is a witness to the God who seeks always to care for the poor, to bring the outcasts in, to invite those at the margins to the center – and who does all these things through the choices that we human beings make. And in this story, Ruth and Boaz and I were privileged to make choices that invited God to act in our lives.

NARRATOR:

And the story ends like this: "And Naomi's neighbors named the child, saying, 'A son has been born to Naomi; we will call him Obed [which means "faithful one"].' And Obed begot Jesse – and Jesse begot David." (Ruth 4:17 *TIB*)

[Participants might refer to the Timeline Chart as the next two speakers read their lines.]

AUTHOR:

It all ends so quickly that when you hear it today, 2500 years after I wrote it, you might think I'm simply bringing it all together and closing it up. But actually *this bursts everything wide open*. This single verse takes the whole story to another level. Remember the

context in which I wrote. David was Israel's greatest king. But 500 years after his rule and with the much more recent pain of Exile fresh in their hearts, the Israelites are wrestling with how to share their land and their faith with foreigners. Ezra and Nehemiah have called for the expulsion of all foreign wives from among the people of Israel, specifically naming Moabite women as among those needing to be expelled. And here, in the middle of this wrestling, sits my story of Ruth. I lift up from our past a Moabite woman who displays a loyalty to family and a faith in God equal to any biblical hero. And I celebrate her intermarriage with Boaz, which keeps alive a bloodline that would otherwise have died out – a bloodline that in just two more generations will produce David, the shepherd-king.

THIRD ISAIAH:

In fact, some of my most stirring words, crafted in the midst of this same struggle, are these: "Foreigners who would follow YHWH should not say, 'YHWH will surely exclude me from this people.'" *That was exactly what Ezra and Nehemiah were doing to women like Ruth.* But I responded, "For thus says YHWH: 'The foreigners who join themselves to me, ministering to me, loving the name of YHWH, and worshipping me – all who observe the Sabbath and do not profane it, and cling to my Covenant – these I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, for my house will be called a house of prayer for all peoples!' Thus says the Sovereign YHWH, who gathers the diaspora [the "scattered ones"] of Israel: *There are others I will gather besides those already gathered.*" (Isaiah 56:3, 6-8 TIB)

AUTHOR:

I like to think that my short story about Ruth and her acceptance into the people of God sowed seeds that bore fruit in Martin Luther King's famous hope: "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Grounded in the conviction of God's gracious and surprising love, that was my hope, and Ruth's hope, and Isaiah's hope. *Is it yours, too?*

* * *

[End of scripted conversation. However, instructions for an informal conversation continue on the next page.]

NARRATOR:

Now I invite us one last time, within our roles, to answer an *unscripted* question (however we choose to) based on what you've experienced in this Reader's Theater. Many persons find themselves rendered invisible, kept at the edges (or altogether outside) of our faith communities: persons of color, immigrants, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) persons, those struggling with poverty, those with special needs, and more. *If you could say anything to our churches in the 21st century as we wrestle with whether or how to welcome persons who may seem so foreign, so other to us — speaking as Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, the Townspeople, 3rd Isaiah, the Author, or the Narrator, what would you say?*

[Go around the circle and invite each person to say as much or as little as they wish.]

[Note: If more than one small group has been reading a script, this next question is a chance to briefly collect some insights that you'll share with the whole group when you re-gather. Even though each small group will have read the same narrative, each group's experience of it will have been unique. Therefore it's important for each small group to share their insights with the whole group. Otherwise, this is an opportunity for a little longer conversation that will wrap up the experience.]

NARRATOR:

Our last task is to step back into our own voices and identify some of the insights we gained. So thinking about either the story of Ruth or the challenge faced by the church to widen our welcome today — or both...

1. What insights did you gain from this experience?
2. What challenges or questions did it raise for you?
3. Of the characters in this story (Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, the Townspeople, 3rd Isaiah, and the Author) where do you see their views or experience reflected in the current church — or in your own life?
4. What difference would it make if every church went through this passage like we did?

[Take just a few minutes to do this, recording a few thoughts to share with the whole group.]

A final word of thanks is in order. It is both a risk and a gift to step into such close engagement with a biblical text. In these encounters with God's radical love we may well find ourselves challenged and encouraged, but we will hardly find ourselves unchanged. Thank you for taking the risk.

Timeline

Understanding the relationship between *the story told within the Book of Ruth* and *the historical setting of the writing of the Book of Ruth* (likely 500-600 years later).

BCE Timeline

(years before
the Common Era)

Events occurring:

1100 BCE *Approximate date for the events in the Book of Ruth.*

1075-1025 BCE Ruth gives birth to Obed, who becomes father to Jesse, who becomes father to David.

1000 BCE David becomes king in Israel.

922 BCE Civil War splits Israel into two kingdom: Israel in the North; Judah in the South.

750 BCE Approximate date for the events in the Book of Jonah.

722 BCE The Assyrian Empire conquers and scatters the Northern Kingdom of Israel. During this time the original prophet named Isaiah is active.

597-587 BCE The Babylonian Empire conquers Assyria as well as the Southern Kingdom of Judah and carries these last two tribes of Israel into Exile in Babylon.

539 BCE The Persian Empire conquers Babylon and chooses to allow all the Exiles of Judah to return to the area around Jerusalem. During this time a *second* prophetic voice writes under the name Isaiah; scholars call this voice “Second Isaiah.”

520-515 BCE The Exiles (now free) work to rebuild the Temple.

535-435 BCE During this period (about the first 100 years after the Exile ends) the people of Israel are asking the very tough question, “Why did the national disaster of the Exile happen?”

This is the period when Ezra and Nehemiah forbid inter-marriage (and break up existing mixed marriages.)

This is also the era when a *third* prophetic voice writes under the name Isaiah; scholars call this voice “Third Isaiah.” This prophet challenges the viewpoint of Ezra and Nehemiah — *this is the character in the Reader’s Theater.*

And this is the era when many scholars believe that both the Books of Ruth and Jonah were written. If true, these authors chose to write vivid tales about characters in Israel's past in order to convey their understanding of God and relate it to Israel's life in the present. The Books of Ruth and Jonah, like the message of Third Isaiah, present an image of a much more inclusive God than is seen in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

Thus, the biblical writings (Ezra, Nehemiah, Third Isaiah, Ruth, and Jonah) produced during this last era (535-435 BCE) give us a glimpse into a time when the people of God were actively wrestling with how best to speak about God in light of enormous changes and challenges in the world around them.

CHAPTER 1

Long ago, when judges governed Israel, a famine swept over the land. So a family from the town of Bethlehem in Judah, a woman and man and their two children, emigrated to the region of Moab. The man was named Elimelech, the woman's name was Naomi, and their two sons were named Mahlon and Chilon. They were Ephrathites, that is, from Bethlehem of Judah. They arrived in the land of Moab and settled there.

Soon afterward Elimelech died, leaving Naomi and the two sons to fend for themselves. The two sons eventually married two Moabite women, whose names were Orpah and Ruth. They lived in the land of Moab for about ten years when both Mahlon and Chilon died.

Now that Naomi had lost both of her children as well as her husband, she prepared to take her daughters-in-law and leave the land of Moab and return to her homeland, for she had heard that YHWH had visited the people by providing an abundance of food.

So she and her two daughters-in-law left the house where they had been living, and she set out on the road to Judah. But Naomi told each of her daughters-in-law, "Return to your mother's house. May the Most High care for you with the same kindness that you have cared for your dead and for me. May the Most High give you security and true fulfillment, and lead you to new spouses." Then she kissed them both.

But they wept loudly and said to her, "No we want to go back with you to the land of your people!"

But Naomi said to them, "Go back, my daughters. Why do you want to come with me? I have no more sons inside me that you can take as spouses. No, you must go back, my daughters. I am too old to marry again. Even if I told you that there was still hope for me, if I were to find a spouse and have children tonight, would you be willing to wait until they are grown to marry them? Would you refuse to remarry for this far-off hope? No, if you did that, it would tear me apart, for the hand of the Most High has been raised against me."

And once more they wept loudly. Then Orpah kissed Naomi and returned to her people. But Ruth stayed by her side.

Naomi said to Ruth, "Look, your sister-in-law has returned to her people and to the god of her ancestors. You too must go. Follow your sister-in-law."

But Ruth said to her, "Please don't ask me to leave you and turn away from your company. I swear to you:

Where you go, I will go;
where you lodge, I will lodge.
Your people will be my people,
and your God, my God.
Where you die, I'll die there too
and I will be buried there beside you.
I swear — may YHWH be my witness and judge —
that not even death will keep us apart."

Seeing that Ruth was determined to accompany her, Naomi said no more. And together they walked, until they came to Bethlehem.

When they arrived, the town was abuzz with gossip because of them. The townspeople said to each other, "Could this sad person be Naomi, our 'Joy'?"

But she said to them, "Don't call me Naomi. Call me Mara, 'Bitterness,' for YHWH has afflicted me, and Shaddai has brought bitter destruction on me. I was filled to the brim when I departed, but YHWH has brought me back empty. Why insist on calling me Naomi, since YHWH has passed sentence upon me and Shaddai has brought me to ruin?"

And that is how Naomi left the land of Moab with Ruth the Moabite and returned to Bethlehem, arriving just as the barley harvest was beginning.

CHAPTER 2

Now Naomi had a relative on her husband's side from the clan of Elimelech. His name was Boaz, and he was well-to-do.

One day Ruth the Moabite said to Naomi, "Let me go into the fields and be a gleaner, gathering the leftover grain behind anyone who will take pity on me."

And Naomi said, "Go ahead, my daughter."

So Ruth went out to the fields to follow the harvesters and gather the grain that they dropped. As providence would have it, she came to the part of the field that was owned by Boaz, of Elimelech's clan.

It so happened that Boaz had just returned from Bethlehem. He greeted the harvesters by calling out, "YHWH be with you!"

They shouted back, "YHWH bless you!"

Then Boaz turned to the supervisor in charge of the harvesters and asked, "Who does that woman work for?"

The supervisor of the harvesters replied, "She is the Moabite who returned from the land of Moab with Naomi. She asked our permission to collect the grain that the workers dropped. She has been working steadily since early morning, with scarcely any rest."

Then Boaz said to Ruth, "Listen to my words, my child, and accept my offer: don't collect your grain in anyone else's fields but mine and don't leave here, stay with my binders. Watch them closely, and whatever part of the field they are harvesting, follow behind them. I have ordered all my reapers not to bother you. When you get thirsty, go to the water jars they bring with them and get a drink of water."

Ruth bowed down to the ground and said to Boaz, "How have I come to deserve your favor so much that you take care of me? I'm just a foreigner."

Boaz replied, "I have heard how you have cared for your mother-in-law since your husband died, and how you left your own family and the land where you were born to come to live here among strangers. May YHWH pay you in full for your loyalty! May you be richly rewarded by the Most High God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to find shelter!"

Ruth said, "May you find me deserving of your kindness. You have treated me gently and given me solace even though I am not one of your workers."

When noontime arrived, Boaz said to her, "Come here and share my bread and dip some of it in the wine." Ruth sat with the rest of the workers while Boaz prepared a bowl of roasted barley as a snack. She ate until she was no longer hungry and still had some left over. Then she got up to continue her gathering.

Boaz ordered the binders, "Let her pick from among the bundles you have gathered, and do not hinder her. In fact, go so far as to drop some grain from your bundles, and let her collect it without fear."

Ruth continued to gather in the field until evening. Then she winnowed what she had collected and had enough grain to fill a whole basket. She picked up the basket and carried it into town.

When she arrived home, Ruth showed the basket to Naomi,

and gave her the leftovers from her meal. When she saw all this, Naomi asked, "Where did you go today? Where have you been working? God bless whoever took care of you!"

Then Ruth told Naomi in whose field she had been working. "The owner of the fields where I worked today is named Boaz."

Then Naomi said, "May he receive blessings from YHWH who has not stopped showing tender love to both the living and the dead!"

"This Boaz," Naomi continued, "is a close relative of ours — he is our redeemer- trustee."

Ruth the Moabite said, "He also told me 'Follow my binders until they have finished with the harvest.'"

Naomi told her daughter-in-law, "This is very good news. It will be better to stay in his fields where you will be safe than to go to someone else's fields where you will be in danger."

So Ruth stayed with Boaz's workers and worked as a gleaner until the harvest was complete. During this time she continued to live with her mother-in-law.

CHAPTER 3

One day, Naomi said to Ruth, "My daughter, it's my duty to ensure your security and fulfillment, and make sure you are provided for. And Boaz, whose workers you have been following, is our closest relative. Tonight he'll be winnowing grain on the threshing floor. Wash up and put on perfume and dress in your finest clothes. Then go down to the threshing floor. But don't let him know you're there until he has finished eating and drinking.

"When he goes to sleep, watch to see where he lies down. Then go and 'uncover his feet' and lie down with him. He'll tell you what to do next."

Ruth replied, "I will do as you tell me." So she went down to the threshing floor just as her mother-in-law told her to do.

Boaz ate and drank until he was tipsy. Then he went to sleep against the bundles of grain. When Boaz was asleep, Ruth silently approached, laid down next to him, and "uncovered his feet." In the middle of the night, Boaz awoke and was startled to find a woman lying at his feet.

"Who's there?" Boaz asked.

She replied, "It's Ruth, your faithful one. Spread the corner

of your cloak over me, for you are my family redeemer.”

“May YHWH bless you, my child,” Boaz replied. “You have shown yourself even more loyal to the family than you did before. You could have sought someone younger, whether rich or poor. Rest easy, my child, I am more than willing to do what you ask. Everyone knows that you are a person of great character and integrity.

“But there is a problem: it is true that I am a close relative, but there is another who is even more closely related to you than I am. Stay here tonight, and I’ll go and talk to him in the morning. If he wishes to carry out his obligations as a redeemer-trustee, that is his right. If not, then as YHWH lives, I will marry you! Now rest your head until morning.”

So Ruth lay at his feet until the morning, but got up before dawn so that no one else would see that she had been there. Boaz thought it best that no one know she had been to the threshing floor.

Before she left, Boaz said, “Bring me your cloak and hold it out.” When she did so, he poured out six measures of grain and lifted it for her to carry. Then Ruth went back to town.

When she returned home, Naomi asked, “So, how did it go with you, my daughter?”

Ruth told her all that had happened, and added, “Boaz also gave me six measures of grain; he didn’t want me to come home to you empty-handed.”

Naomi advised her, “Let’s wait and see what happens. Boaz won’t rest until the matter is settled today.”

CHAPTER 4

In the meantime, Boaz went to the main gate of the town and waited there for the arrival of the relative he had mentioned. When that person arrived, Boaz called him by name and said, “Come and sit with me.” When the relative sat down, Boaz stopped ten respected citizens in the town and asked them to sit there with them. When they were all seated, Boaz addressed his relative:

“You may remember that piece of land that belonged to our relative Elimelech. Naomi is selling it now that she has returned from Moab. I promised to discuss the matter with you and ask you to stake your claim on it in the presence of these august citizens. If you are willing to do your redemption duty in the family, then do so. Otherwise, please let me know, for you’re the only other person with the right

of redemption in the family — I’m in line after you.”

The relative answered, “Yes, I will fulfill my family ‘obligation.’”

Boaz continued, “If you accept this, you realize that on the day you buy the land from Naomi and Ruth the Moabite, you’re also obligated to marry Ruth, the Moabite who returned with Naomi, so as to perpetuate the name of our dead relative and keep it connected to the property.”

At this the relative said, “Oh, then I can’t redeem it. Such an obligation may cut into my already existing property. I cannot do it, you must take on the obligation yourself!”

In those times in Israel, it was the custom that when the redemption had been agreed to and the property contract had been ratified, one person should remove a sandal and hand it to the other party. This was the method for ratifying transactions in Israel. So when the relative said to Boaz, “Redeem it yourself,” he took off his sandal and handed it to Boaz.

Then Boaz addressed the group who had gathered there: “You are the witnesses this day that I have bought all of Elimelech’s property from Naomi, as well as the property of Chilion and Mahlon. Further, I will marry Ruth the Moabite, Mahlon’s widow, in order to keep the name of our dead relative connected with the property, so that his name will not be forgotten among our relatives or in the town records. You are my witnesses this day.”

Everyone who assembled at the gate, including the prominent citizens, said, “We are your witnesses!

May YHWH make Ruth,
who is about to come into your home,
to be like Rachel and Leah,
the two who built up the family of Israel.
May the children YHWH gives to you
make your family like the family of Perez,
whom Tamar bore to Judah.”

So Ruth and Boaz were married. And from their union, YHWH enabled Ruth to conceive and she gave birth to a child.

Then the women of the village said to Naomi,

“Praised be YHWH,
who has not abandoned you
but provided you with yet another redeemer!
May the child’s name be remembered through all of Israel —

and give you renewed life
and support when you are old!
For your daughter-in-law,
who loves you and has proven better
than seven of your own children could ever have been,
has given birth to him.”

Naomi took the child into her lap and she became his
caretaker. And Naomi’s neighbors named the child, saying,
“A son has been born to Naomi; we will call him Obed.”

And Obed begot Jesse — and Jesse begot David.

Here, then, is the complete lineage of the Perez family:

Perez begot Hezron;
Hezron begot Ram;
Ram begot Amminadab;
Amminadab begot Nahshon;
Nahshon begot Salmon;
Salmon begot Boaz;
Boaz begot Obed;
Obed begot Jesse;
and Jesse begot David.