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Samjung Kang-Hamilton  
sxk02a@acu.edu

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#### Recommended Citation

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# A STRANGER'S JOURNEY LESSONS FROM RUTH

SAMJUNG KANG-HAMILTON

Abilene Christian University

The famous Dominican theologian and activist Timothy Radcliffe once noted that “most religions live from a narrative that shapes their relationship with the divine other, God or the gods, and with the human other, the stranger.”<sup>1</sup> He worried about the tension between the particularities of the Christian truth claims and our commitment to love our neighbors, including respect for their views as an act of love. Commitment to welcoming others and embracing life must lie at the heart of Christian mission and theology.

Today, therefore, let us remember one of our ancestors, a woman who chose life as a stranger.<sup>2</sup> Ruth will become the foremother of David and his descendant the Messiah, but she is also a woman and an immigrant. She carries two passports for her dual identity that allows her to bear the signs of God’s mercy to all. Her story is the story of millions of people, not just in ancient times, but even today. And it can be all of ours if we choose to embrace the migrant like the people of Bethlehem did.

She means a great deal to me because our immigrant journeys are similar. I was born on an island off the south coast of South Korea, Jeju Island. I am the second of four children, a “sandwich child,” as the saying goes. We grew up together with our parents and grandparents in the same house in a farming and fishing village. There, from an early age, I was surrounded with people who believed the spirit world lived all around us. They consulted the shamans at moments of transition. They offered food and prayers to the ancestors on special days. My grandfather, in particular, began each morning by going outside and praying to the sea god for help and guidance. Although my father was an atheist, he tried to respect all religions.

When I was in middle school, some Christian missionaries came to our town and I was baptized, more out of curiosity and a sense of adventure than any real commitment to the message. But over time I began to go to church and

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Radcliffe, “‘Go and Make Disciples of All Nations’: Preaching the Kingdom or Religious Imperialism?” *New Blackfriars* 84 (2003): 324.

<sup>2</sup> This speech was delivered to the Moulmein Church of Christ in Singapore during its retreat in Malacca, Malaysia, in June 2019. Another version of the address was given earlier to the chapel of the Graduate School of Theology at Abilene Christian University.

to believe. My practice went off and on for a while until my father told me that I should either commit or not and not be lukewarm.

After high school I moved to Seoul, where I felt alone for the first time in my life. I worked with missionaries from Churches of Christ and went to college at night. It was a hard life. For quite a while, I searched and prayed for some direction for my life. One day I walked past a church with an open door. A revival was going on. Something drew me inside, and I heard the preacher talk about God's love for us and presence in our lives as well as God's vision for restoring humanity. I heard and believed that God wills the best for all of us and that my job is to live in response to God's call. I knew then what I still know—if you are looking for God you should know that God is also looking for you. That is why I like Ruth. She looked for God while trying to be faithful to Naomi, her mother-in-law.

Tradition calls Ruth the “mother of the Messiah”—that is, the ancestor of David, the anointed king chosen by God to lead the Jewish people to its greatest heights in the land of Israel. But Ruth is not important just as the ancestor of a male, but as a faithful woman in her own right. She chose life. We tell her story because we see in it our own stories of struggling for integrity and love of God under difficult circumstances.

But the story does not concern Ruth alone. To understand her story, we also must understand Naomi and Boaz as well as their entire interconnected community, which was subject to the rule and blessing of God. God lives with these people, as they themselves come to understand.

There are several important themes flowing through the book of Ruth.

First, with a few significant exceptions (Mary and Elizabeth, Rachel and Leah), the book contains some of the few real conversations between women in the Bible. Ruth differs from the male-dominated perspectives we see in some parts of Scripture and certainly in the life of the church. The book of Ruth shows women as courageous, faithful, insightful, articulate, trusting people who make realistic decisions that fit within their lives of faithfulness to God.

Second, the Jewish community today reads Ruth during the feast of Pentecost, or Shavuot, which also commemorates the giving of the Law on Mount Sinai. This fact should alert us to possible connections with the Torah. In particular, we should pay attention to how the book describes people choosing life, fully in keeping with the major ideas of Deuteronomy about the shape of that life. The book of Ruth relates the story of how women find God's presence in spite of the differences in their backgrounds. Ruth the Moabite becomes the ideal Israelite. It is not where you are born, but how you act that counts.

Third, Ruth has been called the book of *chesed* (loving kindness). Ruth dramatizes core biblical ideas about human life before God and highlights how the *chesed* of women toward each other arouses the community to live up to its own ideals.<sup>3</sup>

Fourth, the book attends to these ideals by including blessings at strategic locations. Naomi blesses Ruth, and so does Boaz. The elders bless both Ruth

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<sup>3</sup> See Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth*, OTL (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 31.

and Boaz. And the women bless Naomi and Obed. The blessings welcome people into the community and praise their good actions. Blessings are a form of prayer that asks God to do positive things in the lives of these people, not just to give them things but to orient their entire being in the proper direction.

Fifth, one of the most amazing features of the story is that Ruth is not an Israelite at all, but a Moabite, a convert, an outsider. But she becomes the model of the outsider who comes into the community and by her commitments, her love and trust and risk-taking, becomes a model for all within the community.

The book of Ruth seems like a particularly fruitful place to explore the riches that women's points of view might yield. Many experiences, qualities, dilemmas, and issues traditionally of concern to women surface in this text. It tells the story of marriage, childbirth, widowhood, and childlessness from within women's lives. It evokes the experience of mothers and daughters while highlighting the tensions in a mother-in-law's relationship to her daughter-in-law. It addresses the problems of women's powerlessness and vulnerability and illustrates the power generated when women mobilize their resources. It is a story of women caring and women plotting, women mourning and women rejoicing. And perhaps more than anything else, the story is an emblem of women seeking to feel at home in a patriarchal society and discovering support and sustenance both in the resources of that world and in the voices of other women.

There are two critical moments in the book. One comes near the beginning when Ruth promises her mother-in-law, one immigrant woman to another, "Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die—there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" (Ruth 1:16–17 NRSV).

The other comes near the end of the book where the Bethlehem chorus in front of their elders, the keepers of the community's values and commitments, asks, "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" (Ruth 4:11–12 NRSV). We see a commitment, one woman to another. Then comes the hope for a future in which a chain of blessing pulls people together across the generations. We live between those two moments most of the time.

To see what lies between them, we must walk off further into the story. Its consistent storyline is held together by various short speeches, such as blessings, songs, and prayers. The drama unfolds in four scenes.

### Scene 1: What Does Ruth Owe Naomi?

As the story opens, we soar over the hill country of Palestine, across the Jordan as it snakes its way to the Dead Sea, maybe a hundred miles to the barren country of Moab. Little streams here and there break up the brownish landscape.

A famine forces a man from Bethlehem, Elimelech, to leave Judah together with his wife, Naomi, and their two sons. They seek refuge in Moab, where their sons marry two Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. Both marriages remain childless, and after some years Elimelech and his sons die, leaving the three women alone. Ruth then chooses to stay with her mother-in-law, Naomi, and returns with her to Judah.

Consider the first two main characters in the book. Naomi's name means "lovely" or "pleasant." Naomi is Everywoman: Everywoman who struggles with the problems of life and death, of perpetuating life and losing life. Everywoman who has lost her mate. Everywoman who worries about fertility and its loss or absence. Everywoman who has lost her children, the fruits of fertility. A sufferer of some of the most painful losses a woman can know, Naomi is a female Job, which is why in 1:21 she can say that God has placed burdens upon her.

The second character is Ruth. She comes onto the stage merely as the wife of an Israelite man. We wonder why he married out of his own group—perhaps the necessity of famine made him do this. Why did she marry a man with such poor prospects? We do not know.

But Ruth surprises us because she does not go home when Naomi tells her to. She had every right to return to her parents, wait for a new, Moabite husband, settle down, and live a normal life. Yet she chose a nobler, harder way. Her radical statement in 1:16, "Your people will be my people and your God my God," signals that Ruth is changing her identity in a world where it was not easy to do so. The ancient world knew no mechanism for religious conversion or change of citizenship. A Moabite was always a Moabite, wherever he or she lived. Indeed, certain parts of the book refer to Ruth as "the Moabiteess." But she is becoming an Israelite. She is joining herself to Naomi and all her people.

This part of the story has always meant a lot to me. In my culture, South Korea, the relationship between a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law is not easy. Traditionally, the oldest son inherits all the family's property when his father dies, and he must now care for his mother, who lives with his family. The wife always defers to the mother-in-law because she has earned this respect. You can imagine what kinds of challenges this sort of arrangement presents for everybody! We say that even in the hot summer there is ice whenever the mother-in-law and daughter-in-law get together. Ruth's actions surprise us. She breaks down the boundary of cross-generational kinship by building with Naomi a relationship of mutual respect and love.

As I said, I grew up in a community that had few Christians. Most people consulted shamans for help in controlling spirits. They venerated the ancestors to bring blessings. My own father would say that these people were wasting their time. Right before I left my home to go to Seoul to work and study, he told me, "If you have found the truth, stick to it." So he gave me his blessing when I left my home island to go to the capital city and study. I can see the price Ruth has to pay and appreciate her bravery as she commits to be loyal to the one God.

## Scene 2: Ruth in a New Land

Now the scene changes. We are going one hundred miles or so back across the Jordan to little Bethlehem, the “House of Bread.” In chapter 2, Ruth and Naomi return to Bethlehem, where they must go to work as poor people, gleaning the corners of the field. Naomi, apparently, is too old to work, so Ruth must go to work for both of them. As luck would have it, she ends up in the field of Boaz, who is very kind to her.

Some provocative little pieces of this story reveal a foreign woman finding a new home among the people and with the God she has chosen. For example, in 2:10 she thanks Boaz for his kindness to “a foreigner” by bowing down to him. She is surprised that in Israel people are measured not by where they come from but by how they act. Thus in 2:11 Boaz responds to her reminder that she is foreign by remarking on her kind treatment of Naomi. Then in 2:12 he blesses her in the name of Israel’s God and acknowledges that she has sought refuge under God’s wings. She is not just a foreigner anymore; she is one whose life reflects the highest ideals of God’s people. Just as the first scene broke down the barrier of family, this one breaks down the barrier of ethnicity.

Something else is interesting here. In verse 20, Naomi offers a prayer of thanksgiving. This reverses her prayer of lament in 1:21. While it seemed that God had brought suffering on her in the past, now God has brought blessing. What changed? The verses in between these two prayers show a change in Ruth’s relationship to the people of Israel. She has been accepted, at least by this one man, Boaz, who helps her work in dignified ways, protects her when she is vulnerable, and most of all honors her for the powerful commitments she has made in her life. He sees her beauty, not just physical beauty, but her character.

## Scene 3: The Seduction

Now the scene moves from outside to inside, with two women planning together. Naomi recognizes the possibilities that Boaz’s interests raise, so she advises Ruth to make a good impression. Naomi knows that Boaz is a man of integrity, and she cares enough about Ruth to want such a man as her husband, hence the dialogue between Ruth and Boaz. She asks him to marry her. “Spreading your garment” over a woman is a ritual act for marrying her in Ezek 16:8, and it is here too. This was her plan, of course, which is why she cleaned herself—she has been working hard—and put on perfume, which must have been hard for such a poor person to pay for. Again, she and Naomi are betting everything on the success of this plan.

How risky it is may be debatable. Part of the discussion revolves around 3:4, which could say either “uncover his feet and lie there” or “uncover yourself at his feet and lie there.” Either translation is possible. Even if we take the first translation, which shows up in most English versions, it is not clear what she is to uncover.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Jack Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1989), 69–71; André LaCocque, *Ruth*, CC (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 91–92.

More interestingly, Boaz does not take advantage of this situation, but comments on his frustration at wanting to marry her but not being legally entitled to. In 3:11 (NRSV) he pays her the ultimate compliment, saying that “all the assembly of my people know that you are a worthy woman” (*eshet chavil*), using the same expression as in Prov 31. In both texts, a woman’s virtue is a subject of comment in the city gates. Boaz thus says that Ruth, the foreigner, exemplifies the ideal woman of ancient Israel.

Boaz understands that Ruth has not been waiting merely for ample food and comfortable shelter nor for the appeasement of her maternal longings. She could satisfy these needs by marrying one of the younger men in town. Ruth, however, seeks to find a niche within the Israelites’ religious and ethical structure and therefore wishes to enter the Israelite family through the institution of the levirate marriage. This custom, intended to preserve a dead man’s name and at the same time rescue his widow from poverty, provides a framework within which Ruth finds fulfillment and a sense of completeness.<sup>5</sup> She tries to meet her serious ethical obligations. If she does something a little uncomfortable for us, maybe that is in part a sign of how sheltered our lives are.

The scene closes just before daybreak with Boaz again rewarding Ruth with needed food and protecting her reputation from the gossips in town. We know how to read what has happened when Naomi hears all about it and says that “he will not rest until he has solved this problem.”

#### Scene 4: Blessings at court

Chapter 4 closes the movie with happily ever after. But first we see a scene at court, where Boaz acting for Naomi, tries to settle her estate. The nearest kinsman wants to buy the property of Naomi, which apparently is his right. But Boaz reminds him in 4:5 (NRSV) that “The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man’s name on his inheritance.” In other words, you have to marry Ruth, and your first son will count as her first husband’s son. That is the way the levirate marriage works in Israel.

The other relative does not want to take on Ruth the Moabitess. He is not rich enough to support several wives in this polygamous culture. Boaz is. So the two men agree to let Boaz marry Ruth and fill the role of kinsman redeemer.

But the text wants to remind us that to some people Ruth is still an outsider. With Boaz’s help, Ruth’s own behavior, which reflects Israel’s highest values, nevertheless brings her into the community. She is an Israelite by action, not merely by birth.

Boaz thus acquires both the property and Ruth. In ancient Israel marriage involved the transfer of property, both to link up the families involved and to ensure that everyone had enough material goods to take care of life. Yet we can overemphasize the issue of property. We do not know how big Naomi’s field was. Boaz states his desire to carry out the duties of raising up an heir for the

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<sup>5</sup> LaCocque, *Ruth*, 100–101; Sasson, *Ruth*, 90–92.

dead first husband of Ruth. We already know that he respects and perhaps even loves Ruth. He is an ethical man who tries to live out the faith of Israel.

The scene ends with a blessing. The elders of the people welcome the Moabite woman into the community in an extraordinary way. They pray that she will resemble the people's ancestors, Rachel and Leah. That is, they pray that she will be remembered in her own right as an extraordinary woman. Of course, they pray that she will bear many children and that her family will be a founding family of the people, like that of Perez.

One last thing about the blessing. They pray that she will be like Tamar. According to her story in Gen 38, Tamar acted in extremely risky ways to bring about justice and family harmony. Yet the Bible recognizes that God can make something positive out of the messiest situations. We can be part of that cleaning-up process if we want to be. Ruth was too.

### Conclusions

What do we learn from Ruth? First, surely this is not just a story about one person. She is a young woman of great bravery and resourcefulness, and she turns that to the best possible purposes of loyalty that attracts the attention of everyone around her.

Second, it is interesting that God does not say anything here, but every character says a lot about God. On the small scale of their lives, these people see the hand of God blessing them in the utterly ordinary. Blessing reconstructs the world, breaking the barriers of age and ethnicity and even gender and creating a new humanity that is called Israel. Ruth teaches us, in the words of Francis Bacon that "If a man be gracious and courteous to strangers, it shows he is a citizen of the world, and that his heart is no island cut off from other lands, but a continent that joins them."<sup>6</sup>

The end of this book, a genealogy, emphasizes the connection of this little story to the larger story of God's people. For Ruth is the great-grandmother of David. God's promise to David is one of the areas in which God reveals himself to Israel. Ruth is a part of that. Her loyalty, echoing God's loyalty, helps create an environment in which God can show loyalty even more fully.

God's people and covenant are so large that the elders and people of Israel can bring in outsiders as long as they commit to human well-being just as Israel has. This is our commitment too. We live in a world hostile to strangers, fragmented and angry. We must choose what sort of community we will be. I hope that we—every one of us—will decide to befriend the immigrant, the refugee, the stranger. The same loyalty and loving kindness that brought Ruth into God's community can live in us as we build something new in our time. In Ruth, the community welcomed a stranger and gave her its blessing. I pray that we will do likewise.

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<sup>6</sup> Francis Bacon, "Of Goodness and Goodness of Nature," in idem, *The Major Works*, ed. Brian Vickers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 364.

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