

Sitting in the Gap Study Guide – November 4, 2018

[Ruth 1:1-18](#) & [Mark 12:28-34](#)

(Click on scripture above to link directly to each passage in the *NRSV* on biblegateway.com.)

Suggested Study / Prep

1. Read the passage(s) in several different translations and/or paraphrases (e.g. *NRSV* and *The Message*)
2. Read the provided commentary(s) below
3. Visit and explore some of the additional resources links (and/or explore your own commentaries, resources, etc)
4. Reflect on the provided questions
5. Generate your own questions and “wonderings”

Commentary on Ruth 1:1-18

(From *Homiletics*; “Lines That Shape Our Lives”, November 4, 2018)

With the possible exception of the Song of Songs, there is no book in the OT as idyllic in its entirety as the book of Ruth, from which today’s lesson comes. The story is the gentle folk tale of two women — one Israelite, one Moabite — and the circumstances that brought them together, kept them together and bequeathed their story to Israel’s national epic, to world literature and to the liturgies of both synagogue and church.

The book is noteworthy in several respects. It is among the briefest in the OT (only four short chapters). It is peopled by only a small handful of characters, who, apart from Boaz, are not mentioned elsewhere in the OT. It focuses on the plight of a single imperiled family in a circumscribed locale, with no sustained attention to national or international concerns. Its main characters are women. Its heroine is (initially, at least) a non-Israelite. Apart from passing references, God plays almost no direct role in the book. The book of Ruth is an altogether remarkable addition to the biblical canon.

Although set in the historical period of the judges (ca. 1200-1020 B.C.; Ruth 1:1), the book as we have it is difficult to date with precision. In its final form, it certainly dates from after the reign of David (ca. 1000-960 B.C.), and could be as late as the exilic or post-exilic period, based on some late linguistic features, as well as the book’s concern with the continuation of family lines and the Davidic dynasty, both of which featured prominently in Israel’s exilic and post-exilic consciousness.

Regardless of its date, the book ought not to be read primarily as a source of historical information (despite its several allusions to various customs, such as the institution of levirate marriage, 4:9-12; property redemption, 4:1-6; and the sealing of contracts, 4:7). It is a tale, pure and simple, parabolic in its presentation of the importance and role of divine and human *hesed*, traditionally translated as “lovingkindness,” but also as “kindness” (2:20), “loyalty” (3:10) and, in its verbal form, “deal kindly with” (1:8). The word denotes willful, directed compassion and faithfulness arising out of a committed relationship.

In a few brief verses (1:1-5), the geographical setting of the story is established (Bethlehem, Judah and Moab), most of the characters are introduced (Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon, Chilion, Orpah and Ruth), and the plot-driving crisis is outlined (the deaths of a family’s males). The economy of the narrative is remarkable, and the swift sketching of

background essentials in these verses contrasts with a much slower pace later in the story (3:1-18), revealing a narrator of considerable skill.

The names of the characters in the book are all symbolic, although neither the exact meaning of their names nor their full symbolic value is always clear. The name Elimelech, for instance, is usually translated as “My God is king,” and is taken as a pointer to the period prior to Israelite kingship, when Yahweh was regarded as Israel’s king. Elimelech’s name can also be translated, however, as “El is king” or even “Milku is my El/God,” using the names of the ancient Canaanite deities El and Milku. If these “old-fashioned” divine names were intended, Elimelech’s name may suggest, along with the names of Mahlon and Chilion — which might be translated as “Sick” and “Spent” — a passing era, when patriarchal authority was becoming viewed as unreliable and female self-determination was becoming viewed as a viable alternative lifestyle.

Likewise, Naomi’s name, “Pleasant,” is changed to Mara, “Bitter,” when she is bereft of her male kinfolk (1:20), and the name Orpah, the daughter-in-law who returns to her Moabite family of origin, means “Back of the Neck,” an appellation that can hardly be coincidental in the context of the story. Ruth’s name, similarly, is usually understood to be derived from the root meaning “associate with,” and is the feminine form of the noun “friend, companion,” the obvious role she plays in the narrative.

Elimelech’s family is driven into exile in Moab, opposite Judah on the east side of the Dead Sea, and one of Israel’s historic enemies (but with whom Israel acknowledged ancient ties, Genesis 19:30-38). Frequent migration due to famine was a way of life in the rain-based agriculture of Syria-Palestine, and is a recurrent theme in the stories of Israel’s ancestors (e.g., Abraham, Genesis 12:10; Jacob, Genesis 42:1).

The marriages of the Judahite men Mahlon and Chilion to the Moabite women Orpah and Ruth is reported without comment (1:4). Intermarriage to foreigners was a perennial concern in biblical Israel, with varying degrees of sanction imposed to attempt to curtail or tailor the practice. The passing comment that “about ten years” elapsed without either marriage producing issue (1:4-5) may be a subtle expression of the narrator’s disapproval of the brothers’ marriages, as childlessness was considered a sign of divine displeasure in the ancient world. (Ruth is regarded as a convert to Judaism on the basis of her story, and her offspring are born only after she declares her loyalty to the Israelite Naomi, Naomi’s Israelite people and Naomi’s Israelite God, i.e., after her *de facto* conversion, vv. 16-17.)

Naomi’s instruction to her daughters-in-law to return to their mothers’ houses (v. 8) is unusual, as women across the ancient Near East (as in the ancient world in general) were ordinarily identified by their membership in their fathers’ houses. The statement is even more striking in the overall context of the narrative, which focuses on the precarious social and economic condition of women without male relatives (reinforced by such statements as v. 9).

While Naomi is touched by the initial refusal of Orpah and Ruth to leave her when she decides to return to Judah, she appeals to pragmatic concerns to convince Orpah to attempt to start a new life with a different family. The situation is peculiar, as it was ordinarily the role of men to provide other men for their dependent women (daughters and sisters, primarily); that Naomi has taken on this obligation (by her admission that she is unable to fulfill it, vv. 12-13), and not for blood relations but for in-laws, stretches the bonds of familial obligation well past their customary and legal boundaries.

One of the reasons the book of Ruth should be approached cautiously for information about legal or social customs is that although well-known customs are alluded to or even depicted, they are not portrayed in conformity with information about them found elsewhere in the OT.

For example, Naomi’s rhetorical question in vv. 12-13 — that even if she were to marry and bear sons again immediately, would Orpah and Ruth wait until those sons were of marrying age to marry them? — suggests levirate marriage, the practice of a dead man’s brother marrying his brother’s widow for the purpose of fathering children considered to be the offspring of the dead man (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). However, the marriages in the scenario Naomi presents would not be true levirate marriages since her new sons would not be actual brothers of Mahlon and Chilion.

Similarly, later in the story, when Boaz seeks to redeem the property of Naomi from a nearer kinsman (4:5), he says that the one who redeems Naomi's property also must perform the duty of levirate marriage for Ruth, a conjunction of duties not specified anywhere in levirate legislation. This may reflect a loss of information about the various permutations of levirate marriage or it may be a ploy on Boaz's part to discourage the nearer kinsman. Regardless, the book's depictions of various customs should be considered carefully in the light of parallels elsewhere in the OT.

Ruth's famous declaration of loyalty to Naomi amounts to a *de facto* conversion, listing the various components that constituted identity in the ancient world: physical location (v. 16), people (v. 16), God (v. 16) and place of burial (v. 17). No reason is given for Ruth's pledge of fealty to Naomi, which contrasts with later expressions of gratitude for acts of kindness rendered or the worthiness of the recipient (3:7-11). This may be one of the several points about *hesed* the book is seeking to make, that true kindness operates irrespective of merit or reward.

Commentary on Mark 12:28-34

(From *Homiletics*; "A New Test", November 1, 2015)

The scene opens when "[o]ne of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another ..." (v. 28a). Looking back for the identity of the antecedent "them," the plural pronoun refers to Jesus and some Sadducees who were debating convoluted resurrection realities (vv. 18-27). After one particular scribe is near enough to hear an ample portion of their dialogue, Mark reports the following, "... and seeing that [Jesus] answered them well, [the scribe] asked him, 'Which commandment is the first of all [ποια εστιν εντολη πρωτη παντων]?' " (v. 28b).

One fascinating characteristic of Mark's narration of this episode is the way in which his version differs from both Matthew's and Luke's. For instance, while Mark's scribe speaks of the *first* commandment, Matthew reports that a lawyer from the Pharisees asks, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the *greatest* [ποια εντολη μεγαλη εν τω νομω]" (cf. v. 28; Matthew 22:36; emphasis added). Moreover, Mark's *scribe* is portrayed in a positive way, but Matthew's *lawyer* adopts an adversarial role, namely, he acts as a representative of the Pharisees and challenges Jesus (cf. v. 28; Matthew 22:34-35).

Although Luke and Matthew agree against Mark -- both record that Jesus is questioned by a lawyer -- Luke diverges from Mark and Matthew in several ways. First, Jesus is not in Jerusalem, but rather on his way to the capital (cf. Mark 12:38-44; Matthew 22:34-40; Luke 10:25-37). Second, it is the lawyer, not Jesus, who answers the question about the greatest commandment (cf. Luke 10:25-28). Furthermore, Luke significantly expands this anecdote -- assuming the synoptic authors are making use of the same oral tradition -- with his addition of the parable of the Good Samaritan when the lawyer attempted "to justify himself" (Luke 10:29). This narrative expansion suggests that loving one's "neighbor" is critical in Luke's narrative, but not so in Mark or Matthew.

Since this scribe is viewed favorably, so much so that this is the only occasion in Mark's gospel when a scribe is depicted sympathetically, it seems reasonable to assume he wasn't attempting to entrap Jesus. (In virtually every citation in Mark, scribes are portrayed as Jesus' combatants who eventually conspire to arrest and execute him [cf. 1:22; 2:1-17; 3:19b-30; 7:1-15; 8:31; 9:14; 10:33; 11:18, 27-33; 12:38; 14:1, 43, 53; 15:1, 31]. Even so, there are two occasions when scribes are mentioned with neither positive nor negative connotations [9:11; 12:35].) Given this, it's possible Jesus felt completely at ease answering the scribe's query about which commandment is first.

Jesus' initial reply is explicit and on point, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength'" (v. 30). Jesus' response, although not a direct quotation, is an augmented citation based on Deuteronomy 6:4-5. Then, before the scribe has a chance to raise a valid follow-up question (i.e., "And which commandment is second of all?"), Jesus continues, "The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these" (v. 31).

Perhaps one of the most intriguing aspects of Jesus' reply is that neither commandment is taken from the Ten Commandments, which might be expected. The first commandment is based on the initial words of the Shema, which follows, not precedes, the Decalogue (i.e., Ten Commandments; cf. Deuteronomy 5:1-21; Exodus 20:1-17). The second commandment is even further removed from the Decalogue, for its source is Leviticus, the third book in the Pentateuch. Here, buried deep within this rich priestly document, is an instruction regarding one's neighbor: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD" (Leviticus 19:18). While complete interpretative certainty remains elusive, as always, one basis for this command is a shared identity -- both you and your neighbor are Israelites, the redeemed people of God.

A disappointing feature of this passage is Mark's failure to elucidate precisely what it means to love God with all of one's heart, soul, mind and strength. These all-too-familiar words are certainly idealistic, but a concrete explanation regarding how they find expression in the lives of believers is absent and must be sought elsewhere in Scripture. In addition, as previously mentioned, it is Luke, not Mark, who specifies the identity of "neighbor."

Upon hearing Jesus' reply, the scribe says, "You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that 'he is one, and besides him there is no other'; and 'to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,' and 'to love one's neighbor as oneself,' -- this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" (vv. 32-33). To be clear, neither Jesus nor the scribe devalues the Ten Commandments. Rather, they are explicitly identifying the two most important foundations for the Decalogue.

As their exchange concludes, Jesus praises the scribe, saying, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (v. 34). While not immediately obvious, this scribe has taken a huge risk. He has publicly affirmed Jesus' teaching at a time when many of his colleagues are seeking to arrest and execute the Nazarene. This scribe has also implicitly undercut the temple's sacrificial system with his assertion that these two commands are "much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices," a message that resonates fully with the prophets (v. 33; cf. Amos 5:21-27; Micah 6:6-8). Arguably, it is this remark more than anything else that justifies Jesus' declaration, "You are not far from the kingdom of God" (v. 34; cf. Mark 10:13-16, 23-27).

Before closing, a few additional comments are warranted. One, note the symmetry embedded within the pericope. Both the scribe and Jesus appreciate each other's insightful reply (cf. vv. 28, 34). In addition, the contrast between the Sadducees and scribe is conspicuous. The Sadducees "know neither the Scriptures nor the power of God," but the scribe understands both the heart of the Scriptures and seems to have sensed God's power at work in Jesus. Last, Mark ends this particular anecdote with, "No one dared to ask him any question" (v. 34b). This remark cannot be understood to be an unqualified factual statement, since Jesus' disciples will shortly ask him about the destruction of the temple and the sign that will precede this catastrophe (13:3-4). Instead, Mark's observation most likely refers to the religious leaders who had failed to trap Jesus with their queries -- they are the ones who no longer "dared to ask him any question" (cf. 11:27-33; 12:13-17, 18-27, 35-37).

Additional Resources

- [The Text this Week](#) – a huge archive of commentaries, blogs, sermons, etc. Note – this site collects resources related to ALL of the lectionary texts for a given week...not all will relate to the passage(s) being studied, but many will. You will have to sift!
- Check out other commentaries available for these texts (and others!) at [WorkingPreacher.org](#).

(Gospel reading and Alt. First Reading)

Reflection Questions on Ruth 1:1-18:

1. Consider the roles that poverty, gender, and ethnic identity play in this story. How does Ruth's story speak into our lives in these areas today?
2. Given that the book of Ruth begins with a tale of social dislocation and ends with a reference to Ruth being the great-grandmother of David (Ruth 4:13-22), what does this narrative have to say about the place of marginalized people in God's story? How does this story fit into a theology of "blessings and curses"?
3. The commentary above names Ruth declaration of loyalty to Naomi (1:16-17) as "*a de facto* conversion." If this is true, what does this "conversion" suggest about the ways of God? What is the true nature of conversion when seen from this perspective?

Reflection Questions on Mark 12:28-34:

1. What are the significant differences between Mark's account of this exchange and those found in Matthew (22:34-40) and Luke (10:25-37)? How do the various contexts of the question in these different accounts color or give emphasis to their interpretation?
2. Consider the sources from which Jesus drew his responses to the scribe's question (Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18). What might Jesus' choices here reflect about his interpretation and usage of scripture? How might we emulate and follow his example in this regard?
3. Don't you wish that Jesus would have given some concrete examples of exactly what it means to love God and neighbor?!? In the absence of such direct instruction, how ought one to apply these principles that Jesus seems to be naming as the heart of all the commandments?

What questions do you have?

What do you "wonder" about when reading these passages?