

*Reflection by the Rev. Elizabeth Felicetti*

What is this delightful story doing in the Bible? One theory is that it offers a different lens from Deuteronomy 23:3 (“No Ammonite or Moabite shall come into the assembly of the Lord even to the tenth generation. None of their descendants shall come into the assembly of the Lord forever”) or 23:6 (“You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live”). Despite that prohibition, in the very first verse of Ruth, Elimelech and Naomi take their two sons to live in Moab after a famine has made food scarce.

Famine was a catalyst for movement elsewhere in the Bible, such as in the twelfth chapter of Genesis when Abram and Sarai went to Egypt because of a famine, or later in Genesis when Joseph’s brothers went to Egypt seeking food, eventually prompting the entire family to move there, where generations later they were enslaved.

These famines as well as other catastrophes contribute to a biblical theme of dwelling in a foreign land. Abram, Sarai, Joseph, and all of Israel’s family dwelled in a foreign land. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus dwelled in a foreign land (Egypt) for a few years after King Herod ordered male babies killed. And in Ruth, of course, one family dwelled in Moab. The part of the book of Ruth previewed in this email precedes the final wedding to a Moabite but still contains marriage to Moabites. Naomi and her husband Elimelech and their sons lived in Moab. Elimelech died there, and the two boys grew up and got married there before they died as well.

This morning’s readings show the faithful character of Orpah and Ruth, the two Moabites whom the sons married. Orpah’s action of returning to Moab after her husband’s death has historically been criticized, but she was doing as her mother-in-law asked. Ruth steadfastly refused to leave Naomi, a faithful act which also challenges the Deuteronomy directive against marrying Moabites. Notice in the readings in the upcoming week how often Ruth is referred to as “Ruth the Moabite.”

The Bible is a collection of books that is often in conversation with itself, such as Ruth and Deuteronomy with regard to marrying Moabites. Such conversation illustrates the danger of so-called “proof texting:” that is, taking one line of biblical text—such as the prohibition about Moabites—and claiming that as *the* biblical truth.

The narrator of the book of Ruth offers few details, so when details arise, pay attention. In the coming week, read the daily snippets as slowly as you can. Pay attention to how often the word “Moab” or “Moabite” appears. How is Boaz

described? What kind of worker is Ruth? What was the meal like? How did Naomi's dialogue change from before Ruth went out to glean and after? For more details, such as what the characters' names mean, check out session one of our six-session Bible study.

The characters in Ruth constantly engage in dialogue. As you read each day, seek such exchanges, which take place between Ruth and Naomi as well as between Boaz and one of his workers and Boaz and Ruth. How would the story have differed if the information gleaned from these conversations had simply been offered as straight narration? What sort of light does dialogue shed?

I spent six weeks in seminary translating the book of Ruth in a Hebrew class. I still have my seventeen-year-old pencil translation (now with stains from the coffee I spilled while working on this email). I hope that slowly ruminating over these readings in the coming weeks as part of the Good Book Club will give you a taste of that experience. Working my way painstakingly through Ruth, word by word, taught me that translation is as much art as science, and that all translations we Christians read employ significant interpretative choices on the part of the translators.

In that long-ago Hebrew class, we worked our way through the book individually then gathered as a group to go over these translations. My translation was wooden, and sometimes hearing a more creative word choice by others illuminated the selection for me.

During my church's Bible study now, I never use just one translation, preferring to hear what different translations use for various words. When studying alone, I use a parallel Bible that has two different translations side by side. (My favorite is one that has the NASB, a very prosaic translation, next to The Message by Eugene Peterson.)

Episcopal churches generally default to the NRSV in worship, and the NRSV does not use the word "behold" as an exclamation. In the NRSV translation, "behold" doesn't appear at all in Ruth, even though the Hebrew word *hinei*, sometimes translated as "behold," appears often in Ruth. But, if you consult a translation such as King James, you will find three "beholds" in the readings this week, in 2:4 (and behold, Boaz from Bethlehem came!), 3:2 (Behold, he is winnowing barley tonight), and 3:8 (and behold, a woman was lying at the place of his feet!). I wish we used the word behold more often in our speech today, especially in Episcopal liturgy. To me, behold directs our attention to a place of excitement and import. Pay attention to Boaz. Pay attention to Ruth being at his feet in the middle of the night on the threshing floor.

Behold this week's readings as we embark on this Good Book Club journey.