The Gospel of Ruth: an Evangelical Feminist Reading

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Abstract

This paper presents an evangelical feminist reading of selected portions of Ruth 2 and 4. It also suggests that while the identifier “evangelical feminist hermeneutics” has a relatively short history, it has a much longer past. It calls attention to the proto-evangelical feminist hermeneutic found in the writings of three women (Christine de Pizan, Marie Dentière and Mary Astell) who found the book of Ruth life-giving to women. It concludes that the book of Ruth truly can be called the gospel of Ruth—a gospel that proclaims good news to women and men and calls us to bring the good news it to the world.

In keeping with the theme of this conference, “Toward an Evangelical Feminism: Scripture, Theology, Gender,” I am going to present an evangelical feminist reading of selected portions of the book of Ruth. I have been writing a commentary on Ruth for the Zondervan’s Story of God series this year. Although I was not consciously reading Ruth as an “evangelical feminist,” preparing for this conference has helped me to reflect more self-consciously on two important interpretive lenses that I bring to my work as an evangelical feminist Old Testament scholar. We all know that the terms “evangelical” and “feminist” are highly emotive and mean different things to different people in different parts of the global church. They are terms that divide or unite depending on the context in which they are used. My interests in presenting an evangelical feminist reading of Ruth are uniting rather than dividing and in this paper, I am using CETA’s wide and generous ecumenical understanding of “evangelical” and a wide and generous definition of “feminism” which proclaims the full humanity and equality of all persons. I am very aware that some Christians believe that evangelical and feminist hermeneutics are incompat-

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1 This paper was first given at the fall regional theological conference of the Canadian Evangelical Theological Association (CETA) on October 18, 2014 at Wycliffe College at the University of Toronto. Carolyn Curtis James also refers to the book of Ruth as the gospel of Ruth in her work, *The Gospel of Ruth: Loving God Enough to Break the Rules* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).
ible approaches to interpreting Scripture. In his essay in *Tamar's Tears: Evangelical Engagements with Feminist Old Testament Hermeneutics*, Todd Pokrifka asks the critical question, “Can our Hermeneutics be both Evangelical and Feminist?” Like Pokrifka, I answer a strong YES! I affirm with him that “we can have a hermeneutic that is feminist because it is evangelical.”

Although the identifier “evangelical feminist hermeneutics” has a relatively short history, it is important to recognize that this hermeneutical approach has a longer though forgotten past. Recent efforts to recover the forgotten voices of women interpreters throughout history have uncovered precursors to an evangelical feminist approach to interpreting Scripture. I am going to briefly mention the writings of three early women who used the book of Ruth to speak into contemporary debates about women.

The first example of a precursor to an evangelical feminist approach is found in the writings of fourteenth-century professional European writer, Christine de Pizan (ca.1364-ca.1430). In her renowned *Le Livre de la cité des dames* (1405), Christine enters into the debate over the nature and status of women known as *Querelle des Femmes*. To counter the misogyny of the men in her day who were claiming that there were few virtuous and chaste women in the world, she Christine calls attention to exemplary women in Scripture such as Ruth. She concludes on the basis of Naomi’s and Boaz’s praise for Ruth’s ḥesed (lovingkindness) (Ruth 1:18; 3:10) that Ruth modeled chastity “during her marriage as well as her widowhood.” Christine also recognized Ruth’s importance in the longstanding interpretive tradition that exalted Ruth as type of Christ.

A second example of a proto-evangelical feminist approach is found in the writings of Genevan reformer Marie Dentière (1495-ca.1561). Like Christine de Pizan, Dentière’s importance in the reformation was only more fully recognized in 2002 when her name was added to the Wall of the Reformers in Geneva. Mary B. McKinley, “Dentière, Marie (1495-ca.1561)” *Taylor, Handbook*, 158.

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2 Pokrifka also advocates “a hermeneutic that appropriately handles the patriarchal and androcentric features of the biblical text as an expression of reverent submission to the authority of the Bible.” Todd Pokrifka, “Can our Hermeneutics be both Evangelical and Feminist? Insights from the Theory and Practice of Theological Interpretation,” in *Tamar’s Tears: Evangelical Engagements with Feminist Old Testament Hermeneutics*, ed. Andrew Sloane (Eugene, Or: Pickwick Publications, 2012), 315.


6 Dentière’s importance in the reformation was only more fully recognized in 2002 when her name was added to the Wall of the Reformers in Geneva. Mary B. McKinley, “Dentière, Marie (1495-ca.1561)” *Taylor, Handbook*, 158.
Dentière was empowered by Scripture’s models of courageous women. In her 1539 publication “Épître très utile, faicte et composée par une femme chréstienne de Torney . . . (A Very Useful Epistle Composed by a Christian Woman of Tournai . . .), Dentière enters into the debate over the Woman Question. In her defense of women, she counters those who used the commonplace notion of Eve’s responsibility for the fall to support their misogynist argument that women are inherently evil. Like Christine, she generates a long list of examples of named and praiseworthy women in Scripture, including Sarah, Rebecca, Deborah, the Queen of Sheba, Mary, mother of Jesus, Elizabeth and Mary Magdalene. She asks rather tongue in cheek, “Must we condemn Ruth, who even though she was of the female sex, had her story told in the book that bears her name?” Dentière certainly recognized the importance of Ruth’s role in salvation history. Her approach like that of Christine de Pizan’s was both life-giving to women and gospel centered.

The third example of an early witness to an evangelical feminist hermeneutic, which finds Ruth the woman and Ruth the book life-giving to women, is found in the work of biblical English writer Mary Astell (1666-1731). In Reflections upon Marriage published in 1700, Astell lists Ruth as one of the many women in Scripture who exemplify Paul’s proclamation, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Moreover, the examples of both Ruth and Esther who have books named after them counter what Astell regards as the World’s very low esteem of the words of women:

The World will hardly allow a Woman to say anything well, unless as she borrows it from Men, or is assisted by them; But GOD Himself allows that the Daughters of Zelophehad spake right, and passes their Request into a Law. Considering how much the Tyranny shall I say, or the superior Force of Men, keeps Women from Acting in the World, or doing anything considerable, and remembering withal the conciseness of the Sacred Story, no small part of it bestow’d in transmitting the History of Women famous in their Generation’s: Two of the Canonical Books bearing the Names of those great Women whose Vertues and Actions are there recorded. Ruth being call’d from among the Gentiles to be an Ancestor of the

7 Dentière, A Very Useful Epistle Composed by a Christian Woman of Tournai, 54 as cited by McKinley, “Dentière, Marie (1495-ca.1561)” in Taylor, Handbook, 156.
Messiah, and Esther being rais’d up by GOD to be the great Instrument of the Deliverance and Prosperity of the Jewish Church.\textsuperscript{10}

Like Christine de Pizan and Marie Dentière, Astell and countless other early women interpreters of Scripture found in Ruth and in the book that bears her name a compelling counter example to prevailing negative views about women.

At this point I want to present a feminist and evangelical reading of selected parts of the canonical book that as Astell claims records the virtues and actions of that great woman Ruth who was “call’d from among the Gentiles to be an Ancestor of the Messiah.”\textsuperscript{11} The book of Ruth as many early interpreters recognized is woman-centered or to use Richard Bauckham’s terminology, the book of Ruth is “a gynocentric text” that allows us a window into women’s culture and women’s concerns.\textsuperscript{12} Some scholars have even proposed that Ruth was written by a woman, perhaps David’s daughter Tamar; others posit that Ruth was either written by a group of women or that women first told the story as it uniquely features the words, perspectives, and traditions of women.\textsuperscript{13} As such, the book of Ruth challenges the many widely-held negative stereotypes and judgments about the relationships between women and men in ancient Israel that Carol Meyers calls us to put aside in her recent study of ancient Israelite women in context.\textsuperscript{14} Indeed Meyers suggests that we should replace the term patriarchy with its associations of general male domination and the oppression of women with the term “heterarchy” to describe the complexity of gender dynamics books such as Ruth.\textsuperscript{15}

The power dynamics between the women in the book of Ruth are highly complex: when Naomi commands her daughters-in-law to return to Moab, Orpah obeys Naomi, Ruth does not (Ruth 1:11-12); Ruth asks Naomi’s permission to glean and later agrees to follow Naomi’s dangerous plan to propose to Boaz on the threshing floor (Ruth 2:2; 3:5); Ruth selectively reports on what happens on the threshing floor, only to have Naomi declare that her plan is out of their hands.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{12} My comments on introductory issues related to the book of Ruth and on Ruth chapters 2 and 4 are adapted from my forthcoming commentary on Ruth in Zondervan’s Story of God Commentary series.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Heterarchy is a word anthropologists use to describe societies that have hierarchies that are not necessarily linear; it acknowledges that different power structures can exist simultaneously in any given society, with each structure having its own hierarchical arrangements that may cross-cut each other laterally. Ibid.
\end{itemize}
and in the hands of men (Ruth 3:16-18). Another set of female hierarchies is present in the informal network of women who witness Naomi’s declaration of emptiness when she arrives in Bethlehem (Ruth 1:19), and later speak words of hope, encouragement and truth as they remind Naomi that Ruth the Moabite is of more value to her than the seven sons (Ruth 4:14-15) — in the ancient world, seven sons in the ancient world constituted the ideal family. We also witness a variety of hierarchies at work in Boaz’s field and at the city gate and in the book’s concluding genealogies related to ethnicity, gender, age and socio-economic status. All this is to say that while book of Ruth is a woman-centered text that allows us a window into women’s culture and women’s concerns, it also bears witness to the complex culture of ancient Israelite society which is patrilineal, (kinship was traced through the male line); patrilocal (a woman left her family to join her husband’s family when they married) and heterarchal (a society containing multiple and cross-cutting hierarchcies).

At this point I want to turn to Ruth chapter 2 which reminds us of the challenges Ruth faced as an unattached Moabite widow gleaning in the fields on the one hand and of the unexpected treatment she received by Boaz on the other. When the destitute widows arrived in Bethlehem at the beginning of barley harvest, Ruth devised a plan for survival. Naomi, an older woman, was perhaps unable to do hard physical labour; Ruth, a poor and childless Moabite widow, had few honorable options open to her for employment. She chose the hot, backbreaking job of gathering up grain left behind by those working the fields from dawn to dusk. Ruth recognized she was at risk of abuse and exploitation and needed to find a person to glean behind “in whose eyes [she found] favor” (Ruth 2:2). The theme of Ruth’s vulnerability as a widow working in the fields is mentioned three times in chapter 2 (twice by Boaz Ruth 2:8-9,15-16, and once by Naomi who in verse 22 advises Ruth to pick up grain alongside the women working in Boaz’s field: “Who knows what might happen to you in someone else’s field!” (Ruth 2:22 CEV).

“It just happened” or “as it turned out” (Ruth 2:3), Ruth chose to glean in the field of Elimelech’s relative—a detail that is so important that the narrator mentions it twice (Ruth 2:1, 3). According to the kinship structures of ancient Israel,

16 Heterarchy seems to more accurately describe the complexity of relational dynamics in the book of Ruth reveal than the traditional descriptor patriarchy.
17 The threat of sexual abuse in the field was not just one faced by Ruth in this particular story; it is also addressed in other ancient Near Eastern texts, such as The Egyptian Instruction of Amenemope from the Ramesside period (1292-1069 BC), which commands “Do not expose a widow if you have caught her in the fields, Nor fail to give way if she is accused. Do not turn a stranger away [from] your oil jar that it may be made double for your family.

God loves him who cares for the poor, more than him who respects the wealthy. From Instruction of Amenemope chapter 28:1-6. http://www.touregypt.net/instructionofamenemope.htm#ixzz37vw5boy
relatives were responsible for caring for family members. But as we find out later in the story when we meet Naomi’s relative peloni ‘almoni, a rhyming wordplay likened to the English, “Joe Schmoe,” relatives did not always come through for vulnerable family members (Ruth 4:6). But for his refusal, to act as Ruth’s redeemer and preserve the name of the dead, Joe Schmoe’s real name was not preserved.

Boaz is introduced as a socially and economically well-positioned, gibor hayil “a man of standing” (Ruth 2:1). Was this chance or was it God’s providence that brought Ruth to Boaz’s field? Although the narrator does not tell us that God explicitly directed Ruth to Boaz’s field, such a conclusion is implied. Boaz’s question, “Who does that young woman belong to?” reminds us again that this story is set in a time and place where there were many different kinds of hierarchies—women, as well as male servants and slaves, for example, lacked autonomy. A woman’s identity was associated with that of her father, husband, or in the case of a widow, her sons or distant male relatives. Male servants and slaves were similarly identified with the person they served.

But Ruth belongs to no man—she has committed herself to Naomi, Naomi’s people, and Naomi’s God (1:16-17). Boaz’s initial words to Ruth concern her personal welfare as he knew she was at risk of physical and/or sexual abuse by his men whom he directs not “to lay a hand on” or “touch” her (Ruth 2:9). Boaz advises Ruth to “cling” (NIV “stay”) to the women who were likely binding the stalks cut by the men. Boaz continues to anticipate Ruth’s needs when he invites her to drink from the jars filled with the water drawn for his regular workers. As Daniel Block suggests, Boaz’s “extraordinary” invitation breaks with ancient convention and inverts two interlocking hierarchies- as foreigners would normally draw water for Israelites and women for men.

The high point of chapter 2 is Boaz’s testimony to Ruth’s character. He calls attention to Ruth’s exceptional care for Naomi and her courageous Abraham-like decision to leave family and country to accompany Naomi (Ruth 2:11). He believes that Ruth’s ḥesed-like actions and her decisions had placed her under Yahweh’s protective wings. He prays that Yahweh will repay and reward Ruth. And as the story unfolds, we watch Boaz become part of the larger divine plan of rewarding Ruth for her decision to leave behind the gods of Moab to take refuge under the Yahweh’s wings (Ruth 2:12). Boaz’s favor includes extravagant and generous acts of ḥesed that offer Ruth protection, provision, and inclusion. He

19 Isaac, for example, expects Esau to ask the men who were bringing him gifts, “Who do you belong to?” (Gen 32:17); likewise, David’s men ask an unidentified Egyptian slave in the open country who he belonged to (1 Sam 30:11).
20 Daniel I. Block, Judges, Ruth, NAC 6 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 660.
invites Ruth to leave her place of separateness as a foreign gleaner to join the community for a meal. He offers her bread for dipping in either wine vinegar (NIV) or some kind of sour sauce for moistening and flavoring the bread.\textsuperscript{21} 

Boaz continues to break with custom when as the male head of the community he serves the Moabite outsider enough roasted grain to satisfy her hunger and have leftovers for Naomi. Boaz’s remarkable hospitality to the Moabite gleaner as Block suggests is not just about “feeding the hungry.” Instead it “shows how Boaz took an ordinary occasion and transformed it into a glorious demonstration of compassion, generosity, and acceptance— in short the biblical understanding of ḥesed.”\textsuperscript{22} Boaz continues to demonstrate ḥesed with his instructions that his men make Ruth’s gleaning easier by pulling out some of the stalks from the bundles. In addition, he adds to his earlier directive that the men not lay a hand on Ruth (Ruth 2:9), with his orders that they not harass her (Ruth 2:16).

While Ruth 2 is very rich in terms of meaning, an evangelical feminist approach calls us to focus on Ruth, the destitute foreign woman at risk of physical and psychological abuse who courageously seeks to provide food for her family. It also calls us to focus on Boaz, an extraordinary Israelite who exceeds the requirements of the Mosaic Law regarding the provision, protection, and inclusion of at-risk women. Boaz’s care for Ruth reminds us of many of Jesus’s encounters with women in the gospels; for example, the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years (Mark 5:25-34); the widow of Nain whose desperate situation provoked Jesus’s compassion (Luke 7:11-17); the crippled woman healed by Jesus (Luke 13:10-17). Boaz, like Jesus, models a life of ḥesed for Christians who are reminded by James that “Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress” (Jas 1:27).

Christ calls us to be involved with the marginalized, the oppressed, the poor, and the suffering. In her theological response to the problem of violence against women and girls, The Cross and Gendercide, Elizabeth Gerhardt calls the church to take up Jesus’s mission of freedom and healing:

The time for ministering to abused women and girls is now. The time to work for structural change that will improve the lives of women and girls is now. The time to speak on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves because of oppressive systems that deny their human dignity is now. Gendercide is a confessional issue . . . [Jesus demands] ‘Come, follow me.’\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} Ellen F. Davis, \textit{Who are You, My Daughter?}, 55.
\textsuperscript{22} Block, \textit{Judges, Ruth}, 667.
Focusing on Ruth’s initiative and courage rather than her vulnerability, Joan Chittister offers another feminist take on Ruth chapter 2. She sees Ruth as the ideal Christian woman whose courage, strength, and independence calls women of faith to step outside their comfort zones to take risks for the higher good, as Ruth did in providing food for Naomi and herself. According to Chittister, “Ruth calls women to be everything they can be, whatever the odds, whatever the world thinks otherwise. Ruth goes out into strange fields alone—and takes all the women of the world with her, not simply for their sakes alone, but for the sake of the whole world.”

It is this very call for courage and risk-taking initiative that proto-feminist interpreters Christine de Pizan, Marie Dentière, and Mary Astell recognized in the gospel of Ruth.

The history of the interpretation of Ruth chapter 2 reveals that Christian readers throughout history have explored its fuller or spiritual senses as they looked for what the book teaches about Christ, and about how to live in this life and in preparation for the next. Like Christine de Pizan and Mary Astell, many theological interpreters found great significance in the relationships between Ruth, Boaz, Obed and David’s greater son Jesus. Typological interpretations of characters in the book of Ruth abound: Ruth is seen a type of the Gentile believers described in Eph 2:19 who were “no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household” and of believers who delivered out of afflictions and blessed with fruitfulness; Boaz, Ruth’s redeemer and husband, is commonly regarded as a type of Christ; and Naomi and Ruth the Moabite are thought to foreshadow the unity of Jew and Gentile in the church.

Other Christian readers have interpreted this image-laden chapter 2 of the book of Ruth allegorically. In his three-point sermon entitled, “Spiritual Gleaning,” nineteenth-century preacher Charles Spurgeon (1834-1892) presents a mini-course on the Christian life using the metaphor of “the heavenly art of spiritual gleaning.”

Boaz is a type of God, “the great husbandman,” who encourages believers to glean in his various fields—God’s doctrine field with its sheaves of election and final perseverance; God’s overflowing promise field; the field of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord’s Supper; and the most excellent hedged and sheltered field on a hill, called “Fellowship and Communion with Christ.”

Spurgeon’s Ruth, the humble gleaner, is the hard working and tired believer who has to glean the soul’s food ear by ear and then thresh and winnow it. Finally, Boaz, Ruth’s secret lover and redeemer is our lover and redeemer, Jesus, the husband of the church. Spurgeon concludes his sermon with the striking exhortation: “Glean

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25 http://www.spurgeon.org/misc/glean.htm
on with humble industry and hopeful confidence, and know that he who owns both fields and sheaves is looking upon you with eyes of love, and will one day espouse you to himself in glory everlasting. Happy gleaner who finds eternal love and eternal life in the fields in which he gleans!"26

The anonymous Anglican writer M.G. (fl. 1893) offers yet another allegorical reading of chapter 2. M. G.’s Boaz is Christ who offers Ruth inclusion in the mystical body of Christ, and the bread and wine vinegar Boaz offers Ruth are types of the body and blood of Christ:

The whole history of Ruth’s work in the field, her meeting with Boaz, her being numbered among his maidens, unworthy though she considered herself of the honour, and his blessing her, is a beautiful allegory of the Holy Communion, where we meet our Elder Brother, though at first we scarcely realize it, and where with His Blessing we are assured of our membership with ‘the blessed company of all faithful people,’27 and where we receive heavenly Food from the hands of His servants as often as we will come for it. The morsel of bread, and the vinegar (a sort of common wine), which she might drink, is a plain type of the Bread and Wine given to us in the Holy Eucharist.28

Most modern and post-modern interpreters are uncomfortable with full-blown typological and allegorical readings of the book of Ruth. Peter Hawkins describes the downside of traditional Christian interpretations of Ruth, which he says “tend to drain the biblical text of particularity—despite their relevance as examples for us. With a kind of plodding predictability, characters become ideas, and individual stories are subsumed into a theological master plan that offers few surprises.”29 Still I have come to believe that reading Scripture with the great clouds of witnesses that have come before us with critical discernment can have great value: like a beautiful glass prism, our forebears can open our eyes to theological truths we have not seen in the text, or that we might not even be able to see.

At this point, I want to leave the theologically rich chapter 2 and move to the book’s conclusion. Ruth 4 moves us away from the very private threshing floor to the city gate, away from a world negotiated by women to a world where men control land and female sexuality. We see Boaz take the lead to move Naomi’s

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26 Ibid.
27 Here M.G. is quoting the prayer used after communion in the Anglican service of Holy Communion.
28 M. G., Women like Ourselves: Short Addresses for Mothers’ Meetings, Bible Classes, etc. (London: SPCK, 1893), 77.
plan for Ruth to marry Boaz forward. When Joe Schmoe changes his mind about redeeming Naomi’s land and marrying Ruth, Boaz buys the land and marries Ruth who conceives and gives birth to a son. The women respond with praise and blessings. They name Ruth and Boaz’s son Obed and present him to Naomi. The book closes with a short and then longer genealogy which draws this story into the larger story of God.

An evangelical feminist reading of this chapter needs to respond to the concerns of contemporary readers who find the focus on men in the closing chapter of a book focused on women jarring and off-putting. Sakenfeld speaks for many when she writes:

A story with such promising beginnings, as women seek to make their own way, ends very conventionally (albeit through unconventional behavior along the way) with the women’s security achieved by reintegrating themselves completely into the existing traditional economic and family structure. And it is the men who arrange the details of the reintegration.”

And to top it off, the women are not included in the final ten-member genealogy.

But is there a way to read the genealogies in the final chapter of Ruth that promotes life instead annoyance or even rejection? I think a consideration of the canonical and theological functions of the two genealogies in Ruth 4 is a good place to begin. Ancient genealogies, of course, served a number of purposes. Horizontal or segmented genealogies, such as the Table of Nations in Genesis 10 show how families, clans, and nations are related by means of their common ancestry. Vertical or linear genealogies trace a line of descent from the first person named to the last and often legitimate the rights and privileges of last person named in a particular political or religious office. Like the genealogies in Genesis, the genealogy that closes Ruth begins with the formulaic expression, “these are the generations of” or as the NIV puts it, “This then is the family line of Perez” (Ruth 4:18; cf. Gen 2:4; 5:1, 6:9; 10:1; 11:10, 27; 25:12, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2).

The closing genealogy begins with Judah and Tamar’s son, Perez, whose birth story in Genesis 38 has many important connections to the book of Ruth, including the prayer in Ruth 4:12 that Boaz and Ruth’s family would be like that of Perez. With Judah’s strong connections to royalty (49:8-12), we might expect Judah to begin this second genealogy that ends with David (Ruth 4:17). But in this genealogy, like those ten-member genealogies of Noah (Gen 5) and Abraham (Gen 11), the tenth person enters into a new covenant with God that marks as El-

len Davis suggests, “a fresh and redemptive beginning after a long period of history marked by human violence.” The placement of Boaz, husband of Ruth, the woman who has just been lauded as better than seven sons (Ruth 4:15), in the significant seventh place (4:21) also signals the importance of this story of God’s blessing of ordinary people who make extraordinary decisions and live extraordinary lives of ḥesed —ordinary people who God providentially uses to bring forth his greater purposes. The prominence of Perez, the son of the Canaanite mother, and of Boaz, husband of Ruth the Moabite in this genealogy, also signals an openness to foreigners, an acceptance of David’s “foreign blood,” and perhaps even the end of the ten generation ban of Ammonites and Moabites and their descendants from the assembly of the Lord (Deut 23:3). The mention of David in the tenth place in the genealogy also ties the book’s conclusion to its beginning, as Elimelek’s family were Ephrathite from Bethlehem, Judah (1:2) and David was introduced as “the son of an Ephrathite named Jesse, who was from Bethlehem in Judah (1 Sam 17:12).

The closing ten-member male genealogy arches back and connects to Israel’s history and arches forward to the kingship of David. It also anticipates “the Lord’s anointed, Great David’s greater son” who as the hymn writer, James Montgomery recognized, “comes to break oppression, To set the captive free, To take away transgression, And rule in equity.” The book’s anticipatory links to the messiah are made explicit in Mathew’s genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:5-6, 17). The story of Ruth then is a bridge to the future story of God—it looks forward to David’s greater son Jesus and the blessings that his incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection brought to the world (Gen 12:1-3).

But what of the short genealogy in Ruth 4:17 that is introduced by the declaration “Naomi has a son!” The placement of Naomi at the beginning of this short genealogy of David brings the world of women into the world of men as Bethlehem’s women redefine kinship based on genealogical lineage. This short genealogy was strictly speaking neither legal nor biological as Ruth not Naomi is Obed’s biological mother.

But there is more to be said about the women’s genealogy which reads as the climax of the section that begins in 4:13 with “So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife and the Lord enabled her to conceive and she gave birth to a son.” Here we are reminded that of what has been called the “arduous (if often elsewhere...
unacknowledged) work of women” and of Ruth and Naomi’s active involvement in the planning and processes that led up to the marriage that eventuated in Obed’s birth.\textsuperscript{36} This focus on women’s involvement in producing the males in typical patrilineal genealogies Eshkenazi suggests “actually transforms the patriarchal focus of the male genealogies so prevalent in the Bible. . . .[It] weaves a story of women back into the larger fabric of Israel’s history, thus augmenting and fleshing out both the world of women and the world of men.”\textsuperscript{37} It reminds us that women as well as men were integral to the story of God, even though women’s roles in that story are not usually given the attention that they are given in the book of Ruth. Women’s inclusion in this short genealogy and in this story as a whole reminds us to look for women’s hidden footprints in other stories where women are less visible.

I want to close with words of one of my favorite nineteenth-century women commentators, Elizabeth Rundle Charles who like many women throughout history was particularly drawn to the stories of women in Scripture. In her 1884 retelling of the book of Ruth, \textit{An Old Story of Bethlehem: One Link in the Great Pedigree}, Charles calls attention to the “eternal” significance of Ruth and Naomi. She writes:

\begin{quote}
And so this old story of Bethlehem ends, with sweet and sacred joy in a birth, and the name of Ruth, daughter of the outcast nation, and of Naomi, widowed and childless, are engraven in the pedigree of the Son of Man, of Him through whom none are outcasts, and in whom are not desolate hearts.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

Here Charles recognizes the theological importance of the two genealogies that close the book of Ruth. Their significance does not lie in their exclusion of women, but rather in women’s inclusion in the story of salvation. Charles reminds us that Ruth and Naomi are engraven in the lineage of the one who embraced outcasts such as Ruth the Moabite widow and reached out to the desolate, and broken such as Naomi bringing healing, restoration, and new life. The book of Ruth truly can be called the gospel of Ruth- a gospel that proclaims good new to women and men and calls us all to bring the good news it to the world.

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 93.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38} Elizabeth Rundle Charles, \textit{An Old Story of Bethlehem: One Link in the Great Pedigree} (London: SPCK, 1884), 31.