

# GUIDELINES

BIBLE STUDY FOR TODAY'S  
MINISTRY AND MISSION

MAY–AUG 2023

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# GUIDELINES

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# Suggestions for using *Guidelines*

Set aside a regular time and place, if possible, when and where you can read and pray undisturbed. Before you begin, take time to be still and, if you find it helpful, use the BRF prayer on page 6.

In *Guidelines*, the introductory section provides context for the passages or themes to be studied, while the units of comment can be used daily, weekly or whatever best fits your timetable. You will need a Bible (more than one if you want to compare different translations) as Bible passages are not included. Please don't be tempted to skip the Bible reading because you know the passage well. We will have utterly failed if we don't bring our readers into engagement with the word of God. At the end of each week is a 'Guidelines' section, offering further thoughts about or practical application of what you have been studying.

Occasionally, you may read something in *Guidelines* that you find particularly challenging, even uncomfortable. This is inevitable in a series of notes which draws on a wide spectrum of contributors and doesn't believe in ducking difficult issues. Indeed, we believe that *Guidelines* readers much prefer thought-provoking material to a bland diet that only confirms what they already think.

If you do disagree with a contributor, you may find it helpful to go through these three steps. First, think about why you feel uncomfortable. Perhaps this is an idea that is new to you, or you are not happy about the way something has been expressed. Or there may be something more substantial – you may feel that the writer is guilty of sweeping generalisation, factual error, or theological or ethical misjudgement. Second, pray that God would use this disagreement to teach you more about his word and about yourself. Third, have a deeper read about the issue. There are further reading suggestions at the end of each writer's block of notes. And then, do feel free to write to the contributor or the editor of *Guidelines*. We welcome communication, by email, phone or letter, as it enables us to discover what has been useful, challenging or infuriating for our readers. We don't always promise to change things, but we will always listen and think about your ideas, complaints or suggestions. Thank you!

To send feedback, please email [enquiries@brf.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@brf.org.uk), phone +44 (0)1865 319700 or write to the address shown opposite.

# Writers in this issue

**Bill Goodman** encourages and enables lifelong learning in the Anglican diocese of Sheffield. *Yearning for You*, the published version of his PhD, is a conversation between the Psalms, Song of Songs and contemporary songs.

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**Michael Parsons** was until recently the minister for discipleship at Lechlade Baptist Church. He has previously been a theology lecturer in the UK and Australia and commissioning editor for Paternoster and BRF.

**Rosalee Velloso Ewell** is a Brazilian theologian from São Paulo. She holds a PhD from Duke University, USA, and serves as director of church relations for the United Bible Societies. Rosalee lives with her family in Birmingham.

# The editors write...



God's word is 'better to [us] than thousands of gold and silver pieces' (Psalm 119:72, NRSV). This issue of *Guidelines* gives treasure upon treasure as our contributors unpack God's word and lead us closer to him.

We're excited to start a new five-issue series by Bill Goodman, who will be taking us all the way through the Psalms, one book at a time. We also continue three series from the previous issue. Andy Angel continues taking us through Matthew 15–28, this time focusing on Jesus' various confrontations with religious leaders. Following on from Pauline Hoggarth's series on the oft-neglected minor prophets, Alison Lo looks at Joel, Obadiah, Micah and Zephaniah. Finally, Stephen Finamore brings us part three of his four-part study of Romans. We have 'unwrapped' Romans and 'run with' Romans; this time we are 'rolling with' Romans as we look at chapters 9–12.

We have some wide-ranging themes to explore too. George Wieland gives us a fascinating tour through intercultural Bible reading. His notes are written out of a research project where people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds read and discuss the same Bible passage: groups of Māori, Samoan, Ni-Vanuatu, Fijian, Indian and Sri Lankan, Burmese, Chinese, Filipino and other readers. Sally Nash also brings us reflections on her PhD topic of shame and the church, looking at different types of shame and what the church can learn from these. Rosie Button brings us a reflection on refugees, which unfortunately is always a relevant topic.

Finally, we have excellent contributions from Steve Walton and Ashley Hibbard on Ruth and Deuteronomy respectively. And in the New Testament, Michael Parsons brings us detailed notes on 2 Peter, while Rosalee Velloso Ewell unpacks Philippians.

The Bible truly is a treasure chest full of gold and silver, and we hope that these reflections will help you further understand what a gift we have in this treasure.

Thank you to everyone who has taken the time to send in feedback since we took over as editors. We really appreciate receiving feedback, positive or negative, as it helps us to develop *Guidelines* further. If you have a comment, please share it by emailing [enquiries@brf.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@brf.org.uk), phoning +44 (0)1865 319700 or writing to the address on page 2.

# Ruth

Steve Walton



Much of life is a 'messy middle', when events or people seem against us: bereavement, job loss, house move, kids' difficulties at school or retirement. The book of Ruth involves migration, refugees, bereavement and bitterness, and shows how God works with his people through these tough times.

It is set in troubled times in Israel: the period of the judges (1:1), between 1400 and 1100BC. These are lawless days, when everyone does what is right in their own eyes (Judges 17:6; 21:25). Think: Wild West in cowboy movies. Ruth opens a window into ordinary Israelites' lives: the characters are not the great and powerful, but farmers, widows, refugees. There are three key human characters: Naomi, Ruth and Boaz.

Naomi is a double refugee, having migrated with her husband Elimelech to Moab during a famine (1:1–2), and then returning to Bethlehem as a bereaved widow and mother (1:3–6). Naomi maintains her faith in the God of Israel in Moab, as Ruth the Moabite recognises (1:16–17), and yet returns home as a broken woman. At one level, the book tells the story of her recovery.

Ruth is from Moab, the widow of Mahlon, Naomi's son (4:10). She loves Naomi deeply and is determined to go with her (1:18). She commits herself to Israel's God in doing so (1:16). She acts with courage and resourcefulness, taking initiative (2:2) and adopting Naomi's plan (3:1–9).

Boaz is a man of standing (2:1), a farmer and businessman. He is a relation of Naomi's late husband and has a particular responsibility for Elimelech's family. He is generous and kind towards Ruth and Naomi, and is a wise negotiator in their interests.

God is only mentioned twice as acting (1:6; 4:13). Nevertheless, the way events turn out shows God's hand at work and, ultimately, he will bring amazing fruit from this ancient love story.

Unless otherwise stated, Bible quotations are from the NIV. These notes will also work well with the NRSV.

# 1 A tragic tale

## Ruth 1:1–7

Think of how movies or TV dramas tell stories: sometimes long periods of time fly by in a few on-screen seconds, and at other times the storytelling slows down to show viewers the moment-by-moment development of crucial events. We enter the book of Ruth in one of those ‘time flies by’ sections: these verses cover more than ten years (v. 4). The author is setting the scene for the story of this short book with key information.

First, we meet the Israelites Elimelech and his wife Naomi, from Bethlehem (ironically meaning ‘house of bread’) in Judah but emigrating because of famine to the other side of the Dead Sea to Moab, accompanied by their sons Mahlon and Kilion (vv. 1–2). They aren’t the first biblical characters to migrate in famine: Abraham and Isaac do it too (Genesis 12:10; 26:1), and such travel was common in the ancient world. However, Moab is a traditional enemy of Israel; they worship the god Chemosh (1 Kings 11:33), and so this is a place of spiritual danger for worshippers of Israel’s God. As refugees, they are hoping for better than the place they left, and yet are aware that they are different from the people of their new place and thus potentially subject to prejudice and harm.

Tragedy follows, for Naomi experiences triple bereavement in the death of her husband (v. 3) and then the death of her two (now-married) sons (v. 5). So Naomi is left as the head of a household of two other widows, her Moabite daughters-in-law Ruth and Orpah (v. 4). Naomi lacks financial security, for she has no husband to provide for her. The usual options open to her are slavery or prostitution. Her situation is bleak – she will describe it later as the Lord turning his hand against her (1:13) and dealing harshly with her (1:21).

Nevertheless, Naomi engages with the situation, rather than giving up. When good news comes that the Lord has ended the famine (v. 6 – the first mention of God in the book), she decides to return to Bethlehem (v. 7). Surely there will be something better in her homeland and hometown, especially since God has blessed Israel by a fresh harvest. Naturally, Ruth and Orpah accompany Naomi and, as we picture the opening titles rolling on the movie, we wonder what will happen to these three widows.



## 2 Turning a corner

### Ruth 1:8-21

After the rapid overview of the first seven verses, the book slows down and this section takes place over a few days, inviting us to pay careful attention to the conversation between Naomi and her daughters-in-law.

Naomi has evidently kept her faith in Israel's God while in Moab, for she speaks about the Lord, the covenant name of God (vv. 8, 9, 13, 21) and wants him to do good for Orpah and Ruth (vv. 8-9). She has nothing to offer them and believes God is against her (vv. 11-13, 20-21). Upon Naomi's return home to Bethlehem, the local women even question, 'Can this be Naomi?' (v. 19), implying she is physically changed by her grim experiences. Naomi means 'pleasant' or 'lovely', but she wants to be called 'Mara', 'bitter' (v. 20). For these reasons, Naomi gives Orpah and Ruth a way out, inviting them to return to Moab, where they may find husbands (vv. 8-9).

Orpah accepts Naomi's offer, and we hear no more of her (v. 14). But Ruth, remarkably, 'clung' to Naomi (v. 14) – the same word used of a man clinging to his wife (Genesis 2:24, NRSV), signalling deep commitment. Notice how much Ruth uses 'you' and 'your' (vv. 16-17): she really wants to stay with Naomi. Her commitment is not only to Naomi, but also to Naomi's God: 'your God my God' and then she names the Lord (v. 17). Ruth has evidently seen something in Naomi which draws her to Israel's God, and she's wholehearted about this decision: she will even go to the point of death (v. 17). Ruth stakes her life on the Lord, rather than going back to the land of the god Chemosh, even though she can have no idea what this will bring.

Where is God in this story? Naomi is in the 'messy middle' of bereavement, being a refugee and feeling hurt by God. And yet she twice calls the Lord 'the Almighty' (vv. 20, 21). She understands that God reigns and complains about how God is treating her (vv. 13, 21). Amid this, she (indirectly) asks God's blessing on Orpah and Ruth (vv. 8-9), showing her hope for God's blessing in the future, even if faint. Naomi speaks *about* God in this passage, but there is no indication that she speaks *to* God as the psalms of personal lament do (e.g. Psalms 6, 130). Nevertheless, God hears Naomi, he hasn't forgotten or abandoned her and he is planning good things for her through Ruth.

### 3 Back in Bethlehem with Boaz

#### Ruth 1:22–2:23

Here, the third key human character is introduced: Boaz. He has land and hires reapers to gather his crops. He's related to Naomi's husband (v. 1). Ruth doesn't know this until later (vv. 19–22), but the author lets us in on this information now. Naomi does not approach Boaz before he meets Ruth, perhaps because she is ashamed.

Gleaning is a key activity here, mentioned multiple times (vv. 2–3, 7, 8, 15–19, 23), always with Ruth as the gleaner. Israelite law provides for people in poverty – widows, orphans and resident foreigners– by allowing them to gather harvest leftovers: stray stalks of grain, plus any sheaves the reapers left behind (Deuteronomy 24:19). Reapers should not harvest to the edges of the field but should leave grain in the margins for needy people (Leviticus 19:9; 23:22). Ruth certainly qualifies, for she is both a widow and a resident foreigner.

The potential problems in gleaning are real, though. Male reapers might sexually harass a woman gleaning, particularly if she was young. They could make it harder for gleaners to gather much. Ruth struck gold in her chosen field, for not only was Boaz's foreman helpful in giving her permission to glean (vv. 6–7), but when Boaz appears he is generous beyond the law's requirements. 'As it turned out' (v. 3) signals God's providence in taking Ruth there. Boaz is impressed by Ruth's care for Naomi (v. 11) and recognises Ruth's commitment to Israel's God (v. 12). So he advises her to stay in his field with other young women gleaning and he ensures that his reapers will not harass her (vv. 8–9). Moreover, he tells his reapers to help her by pulling grain stalks from the sheaves to glean (vv. 15–16).

Ruth gleanes a large amount (v. 17): an ephah is 12–13 kilos, worth about two weeks' wages at the time. When Ruth returns home and Naomi learns that Boaz has been generous and kind, Naomi's dark mood changes: she thanks God for Boaz and for God's kindness through Boaz (v. 20). 'Kindness' is a rich word for God's loyal love and for such love among his people: we saw it twice in 1:8. Further, Boaz is a 'guardian-redeemer' (NIV), 'one with the right to redeem' (NRSV note) – in law, he has responsibility for his late relative's family, to keep his property in the family (Leviticus 25:25–55). God's hand is on these two women, and Naomi is starting to see that.

## 4 A surprising proposal

### Ruth 3:1–18

The barley and wheat harvests take two months (2:23). Perhaps Naomi hopes Boaz will propose marriage to Ruth. In that society, the parents arrange marriage, normally by the respective fathers negotiating. That possibility is not open to Naomi, so she devises a daring and risky plan to persuade Boaz to marry Ruth.

Ruth is to wash, perfume herself and wear her best clothes (v. 3) – all marks of a woman prepared for her wedding (Ezekiel 16:8–12). Then she is to go to Boaz at the public threshing floor at night. But that is a men's place, especially at night: the only women there then would be prostitutes (see Hosea 9:1). Ruth may be seen by other men and attacked, particularly if they were drunk after harvest celebrations. And the outcome is entirely in Boaz's hands – he might take advantage of Ruth to have sex. Ruth raises the stakes even on this high-risk strategy.

Boaz sleeps behind the grain heap, giving some privacy (v. 7). Ruth's uncovering Boaz's feet causes him to 'shudder' from the cold (a better translation than 'startled', v. 8) and wake to the shock of finding a woman there. It's dark, and his initial assumption may be that this is a prostitute seeking custom – hence his question, 'Who are you?' (v. 9). Rather than follow Naomi's plan and wait for Boaz to tell her what to do (v. 4), Ruth asks Boaz to spread the corner of his garment over her, literally 'to spread the *wing*', using the same word as 2:12. It's a Hebrew idiom for marriage (Ezekiel 16:8) – remarkably, Ruth proposes marriage to Boaz, a daring request for a woman significantly younger than Boaz and a foreigner, and especially so in these circumstances. More, she urges him to act because he is a guardian-redeemer (v. 9, NIV) with legal responsibility to care for Elimelech's family.

Boaz is willing, although he's surprised to have this proposal, recognising that Ruth could have sought a younger husband (v. 10). However, another guardian-redeemer is a closer relative, so he has prior responsibility for Ruth and Naomi (v. 12). Boaz honourably commits himself to act on this and to act quickly (v. 13). Throughout, he invokes the Lord's name in thanksgiving (v. 10) and as his witness (v. 13) – this is a godly man. Indeed, Boaz sends Ruth away with a gift of barley, perhaps the first instalment of a wedding gift to Naomi (vv. 15, 17).

## 5 Marriage and land in the town gate

### Ruth 4:1–12

Here, the focus shifts from the female focus so far, with Naomi and Ruth at its heart, to a male-dominated scene. The patriarchal society is clear, and God works in ways which engage with the realities of that society. This part of the story tackles the question of whom Ruth will marry.

This is a vivid scene, set in the town gate where men gather to do business. It is probably a substantial building with rooms in the sides of the gateway itself. God's timing is evident in the other guardian-redeemer appearing just as Boaz arrives (v. 1; compare God's hand in Ruth's choice of field, 2:3). The translation 'friend' for the other guardian-redeemer renders an odd phrase which means 'Mr So-and-so': the author conceals his name, for it is irrelevant. Boaz assembles ten of the town elders, whose presence makes this a formal, legal setting (vv. 2, 4).

Boaz then gives new information to the story: literally, 'Let me uncover your ear' (v. 4). There is land involved: maybe Elimelech sold it and the guardian-redeemer could repurchase it for the family; perhaps it was left while Naomi was in Moab and now needs selling to support her and Ruth. This sounds like a good deal, and Mr So-and-so jumps at it! But then, Boaz introduces the complication that with the land goes Ruth's hand in marriage (v. 5). Israelite law requires a brother to marry his dead brother's widow if there are no children, and to have children on behalf of his brother (Deuteronomy 25:5–10). But we know no requirement in Israelite law connecting redeeming land with marrying a relative's childless widow. It may have been a custom at this time, or perhaps Boaz is putting public moral pressure on Mr So-and-so. Mr So-and-so withdraws as a result – he cannot do both things (v. 6).

We then learn the custom of handing over a sandal to formalise a business deal (v. 7): the author's explanation shows that the book is written significantly later. Boaz thus gains the right to buy the field and to marry Ruth and makes a formal declaration in the presence of the ten elder-witnesses that he will do so (vv. 9–10).

Interestingly, Boaz mentions Ruth's Moabite nationality twice in this section (vv. 5, 10), making it clear that she is being incorporated into Israel – having taken refuge under the Lord's wings, she is now also under Boaz's protection (see notes in section 4 on 2:12; 3:9).

## 6 To us a child is born!

### Ruth 4:13–22

For only the second time in the book, God is said to act directly, here in giving Ruth and Boaz a child (v. 13); the previous occasion was restoring food and harvest to the land (1:6). Ruth was childless for perhaps ten years (1:4–5) and belongs among other childless women in scripture to whom God gives a child (e.g. Genesis 17:19, 21; 18:9–10; 21:1–3; 25:21; 29:31–32; 30:22–24). Ruth is a ‘woman of *noble character*’ (3:11), using the same word as for Boaz, the ‘man of *standing*’ (2:1) – and God loves and blesses their marriage with a child.

The focus here, though, is on Naomi, who is a transformed woman. She was bitter (1:20), but now is happy, cuddling her grandson (v. 16). She was empty (1:21), but now is full, for she has three people in her life (Ruth, Boaz and Obed), mirroring the three she lost (Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion). Naomi passes from triple bereavement (1:3–5) to restored life (v. 15). This has all come through Ruth, and the author hints that *Ruth* is also Naomi’s guardian-redeemer (v. 14), without excluding Boaz. Indeed, one Ruth is better than seven sons – the number of perfection (v. 15), and the women of the town embrace Naomi and Ruth into their circle (v. 17).

Just when we thought this was simply a lovely ancient love story, the author shows us that God is working here with his big purposes of history in mind (v. 17). Ruth the Moabite is great King David’s great-grandmother; the greatest king of Israel is not a pure-bred Israelite at all! The mini-genealogy which closes the book (vv. 18–22) presents edited highlights of Perez’s family, down to David (see the fuller genealogy in 1 Chronicles 2). We met Perez in the blessing of Boaz and Ruth (4:12); Perez’s birth resulted from Judah having sex with Tamar, his daughter-in-law, after her husband Er’s death (Genesis 38). And Er himself was the result of Judah marrying a Canaanite woman, Shua. Israel’s history is full of messy family life!

God plays a long game in working in history. Matthew gives Ruth an honoured place in his genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:5), one of four non-Israelite women included, alongside Tamar (Matthew 1:3), Rahab (Matthew 1:5) and Bathsheba, Uriah’s wife (Matthew 1:6). So Jesus himself is not from pure-bred Israelite stock, either – God’s love for the world extends to including the world in his family.

## Guidelines

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The book of Ruth sees events through women's eyes, by contrast with the stories of men in much of scripture. Ruth and Naomi are women of their time, and they work with the social and cultural constraints of their time and place. They're concerned for security, which means a husband and children (3:1; 4:11). They understand possible dangers to women: Ruth could be molested by the reapers (2:9, 22) and her reputation might be damaged by spending the night with Boaz (3:13–14). These women know how the world of men works: Naomi recognises they need to wait to see how things play out when Boaz talks with the other male guardian-redeemer (3:18).

This book makes women and their concerns visible. It shows us the situation of ancient Israel, which is very different to the west today. It's not saying, of course, that Christian women today should be like Naomi and Ruth, leaving men to run things. But it is offering female models of discipleship from which believers, both women *and* men, can learn (as is true also for the male models of discipleship in scripture). Ruth and Naomi invite us to reflect on how we respond to dire circumstances with trust in God, imagination, creativity and boldness. They encourage us that God stands with his people in tough times and walks with them through to the other side of those times. God doesn't take the problems away, but he does provide ways through them.

The book is certainly not anti-men, for the key male character, Boaz, is an honourable and godly man who acts for Ruth and Naomi's welfare. In this, Boaz offers us a model of how people with power can act in godly and just ways to support those who lack power.

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### FURTHER READING

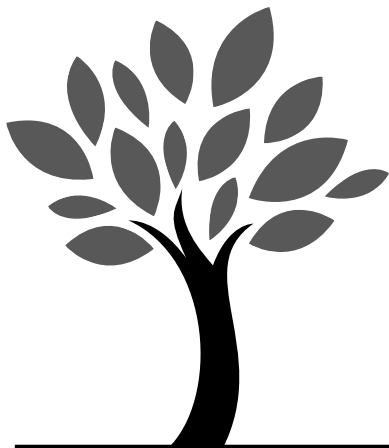
Havilah Dharamraj with Philip Ewan Yalla, *Ruth: A pastoral and contextual commentary* (Langham Global Library, 2019) – an insightful study by an Indian Bible teacher and scholar, drawing on her south Asian context in reading Ruth.

Richard Bauckham, *Is the Bible Male? The book of Ruth and biblical narrative* (Grove, 1996) – a fine short study which highlights the female-centred storytelling in Ruth.

David Atkinson, *The Message of Ruth: Wings of refuge*, revised edition (IVP, 2022) – a section-by-section study drawing out key themes and ideas.



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