



Stephanie Day Powell

Narrative Desire and the Book of Ruth

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This book is a revision of Stephanie Day Powell’s dissertation, defended at Drew University in 2015 under the title “‘Do Not Press Me to Leave You’: Narrative Desire and the Book of Ruth,” written under the guidance of Danna Nolan Fewell. The dissertation won the Rabbi Dr. Sheldon J. Weltman Prize for Excellence in Biblical Studies (2015). Its published form in the Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies series bears the subtitle of the dissertation, which immediately makes it clear what the book is all about: the narrative desire of the reader of the book of Ruth, especially based on women-identified hermeneutics. The book has six chapters, including the introductory and concluding chapters.

The first chapter (1–46) introduces the research and explains Powell’s motivation, as a lesbian biblical scholar, to wrestle with the book of Ruth. This personal story reflects the general problem of readers who have trouble recognizing themselves in biblical texts or figures. Powell has had the courage and perseverance not to lose biblical texts but rather to fight for them, especially for the book of Ruth. She writes, “as a Christian I needed Ruth to speak a divine word of good news to women and men like myself who have been marginalized in our communities of faith” (9). She also provides examples of scholarly dismissals and rejections of reading the bond between Ruth and Naomi from a woman-identified, lesbian, or queer view, it is shocking to read the terms used in this resistance: unorthodox, misfit, unthinkable, desperate, an affront. Powell clearly emphasizes that, not only are methods criticized by these words, but also suggests that readers using these

methods can hope to find inspiration in the book of Ruth. In her view, the Hebrew Bible is not just a literary text to be analyzed by scholars but also a book of inspiration for millions of readers who need modern reading methods.

The introduction also provides an overview of woman-identified hermeneutics and discusses the problem of biblical scholarship: Do we search for the intention of the author, or do we as readers interpret the text? Day Powell discusses the fourfold approach of Deryn Guest (*When Deborah Met Jael: Lesbian Biblical Hermeneutics*, 2005): (1) resistance (commitment to a hermeneutic of hetero-suspicion); (2) rupture (commitment to the disruption of sex-gender binaries); (3) reclamation (commitment to the strategies of appropriation); and (4) reengagement (commitment to making a difference) (13). This scheme forms the book's main structure, taking the reader-oriented approach as the guiding principle in order to "trace ways of negotiating the book of Ruth that deny, limit, or affirm the subjectivity of woman-identified readers" (44).

Chapter 2, "Ambiguity and Artistry in the Book of Ruth" (47–79), assumes ambiguity in the book of Ruth. Several scholars already proposed different dates for the book, from preexilic into postexilic times; this implicitly shows that the book must have had meaning for its readers in different times. What remains central are the relationships among the main characters. However, because the nature of these relationships is not elaborated in the book of Ruth, there is room for reading between the lines. Therefore, Powell takes a closer look at the linguistic features of the book. By "embracing certain interpretive problems" (48), resistance to the biblical text is turned upside down in order to find a positive way of reading the text. One of the specific literary features of the book is the "doubling" of names and words. Powell correctly shows that this doubling may lead to different interpretations, such as the verb *lûn* ("to spend the night") in 1:16 and 3:13 (50–52). Powell collects those texts that leave room for more emphasis on the relationship of Naomi and Ruth.

In chapter 3, "Rupture: Ruth and Fried Green Tomatoes" (81–101), the 1987 American novel *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Café*, by Fannie Flag, is discussed in an intertextual analysis. This chapter also mentions some characteristic stills from the 1991 film adaptation, *Fried Green Tomatoes*. The story has ambiguous scenes that are compared to the book of Ruth and its reception over the ages. The parallels between Ruth and *Fried Green Tomatoes* suggest that the narrative dynamics employed by ancient writers to negotiate issues of sexuality were perhaps similar to those of their contemporary counterparts. The conclusion is that "woman-identified relationships can take multiple forms" (98). Powell is right in suggesting that the book of Ruth tries to normalize social relationships that were "atypical" in ancient Israel. Thus the book of Ruth presents a view that opposes that of Ezra-Nehemiah. Relationships with foreigners are described in a positive way.

Chapter 4, "Reclamation: Ruth and *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*" (103–34), provides an intertextual analysis of Jeanette Winterson's novel *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985).

Sometimes the comparison sheds new light on specific parts in the story of Ruth and Naomi. For example, the suggested return of Ruth to her mother's house is interpreted alongside the story in the novel, thus conceiving "Ruth's original separation from her biological mother as the beginning of a lifelong homecoming" (117). It is a journey of maturation. In this chapter Powell also describes Ruth as a kind of cipher for those Yehudites who struggled after exile to find their own place in a pluralistic world and to understand the real meaning of "home" (130). The return of Ruth represents the return of the exiles to Zion, and Ruth represents an "*internally conflicted* Israel dramatized in her choratic struggle with Naomi" (131, emphasis original), a view that I share with Day Powell.

Chapter 5, "Re-engagement: Ruth and *Golem, The Spirit of Exile*" (135–61), offers an intertextual analysis of Ruth with the Israeli filmmaker Amos Gitai's 1991 film *Golem: The Spirit of Exile*. Characteristic stills from the film retell the story of Ruth in modern Paris. The filmmaker chose the Ruth story because of its theme of displacement and return. In the film, however, Ruth and Naomi never arrive "at home." They remain wandering people, and an erotic attachment between Ruth and Naomi develops. However, it never becomes clear what happens; the two women experience an endless journey of losses and melancholy experiences. As Powell concludes, "In our journey with the book of Ruth, we have come face to face with the personal and collective trauma that attends the bearing of a disqualified identity" (160).

Chapter 6 concludes the study and gives some "(un)final gleanings," among them the view that the relationship between Ruth and Naomi negotiates communal boundaries and gives room to new relationships of mixed ethnicities and also of widowed women, so that already in ancient times people of different walks of life, both traditional and new, could recognize themselves in the book of Ruth (167). In the story of Ruth, the return to Zion after the exile could be envisioned. Readers could identify with Ruth the foreigner, and the question "Who are you?" could have resounded for those returning to Zion. Furthermore, biblical texts seem to form an "archive of feelings" that "reflects and shapes traumatic memory" (169).

One might differ with Powell on the way in which the space between words and lines is filled in, but she is right that we have to deal with ancient texts for which no ancient hearers and readers exist. Thus we have to discern the meaning of the text from the context and the space between the lines. Powell's honesty in dealing seriously with the Hebrew text and finding a sense that can be worthwhile to lesbian readers must be appreciated. Sometimes, however, one might ask whether the space in the text has been stretched too much. In the discussion of Ruth 3:3–4 (67–68), for example, Powell suggests that one might ask whether not only Ruth but also Naomi was present on the threshing floor, for which she bases herself (with Exum) on the *ketiv* in 3:3, reading "I will go down to the threshing floor," and similarly in 3:4, "I will lie down," thus making the scene a *ménage à trois*. The two *ketiv* forms always have been read (*qere*) by ancient readers (also the Septuagint and Vulgate) as a second feminine singular, just as the other verbs in the verse. The

ending *-ti*, the archaic form of the perfect second feminine singular, is also attested in Ugaritic and Arabic and occurs frequently in Jeremiah and Ezekiel (e.g., Jer 31:21; Ezek 16:18; also Mic 4:13). Of course, Powell has the right to read a first feminine singular, but her suggestion that this text shows that Naomi is also present on the threshing floor and that the two women were one flesh (Gen 2:24) seems to stretch the textual evidence too far.

The comparison with novels and films reveals other parts of the biblical story that are often hidden by traditional readings. The suggestion that the biblical story of Ruth and Naomi contains several losses (ch. 5) provides the reader with another view on the Ruth story rather than the traditional romantic one that the story ends with happiness after many losses. Naomi does not marry again and finds no new relationship after years of widowhood and of lamenting over her dead sons. Powell could have strengthened her point by also taking into account Irmtraud Fischer's 1991 article on the Italian Affidamento ("Affidamento in einer patriarchalen Gesellschaft: Frauenbeziehungen im Buch Ruth," in *Paris–Milano–Graz: Feministische Projekte in Entwicklung*).

The reader unfamiliar with lesbian or queer readings might feel somewhat uncomfortable with this study, but maybe this feeling is comparable to that which many lesbian readers may have had for centuries with traditional interpretations of the book of Ruth that rejected any woman-identified special relationship between Ruth and Naomi, whereas every reader should recognize the strong bond between the two women. Powell has opened up new vistas on the book of Ruth, and scholars should consider the new readings offered in this study, if only so as not to put forward one's own vision as the one and only, ignoring certain ambiguities in the text. For lesbian readers and scholars, this book hopefully offers the space in the Ruth narrative that it offers Powell.