

STORY-TELLING AND FAITH

At the 2019 Sea of Faith Network Annual Conference we will be launching a new initiative on 'Story-telling and Faith'.

Starting from the SoF understanding of religion as a human creation, we will explore the role of story-telling or narrative in framing and sustaining religious faith. We hope to gain new insights into the nature of both story, and faith.

At the Conference, each of us will lead a Forum session or workshop, taking a short Biblical text and discussing it *as a story*. David will be looking at the Book of Ruth, while Martin will look at the final chapter (the 'Resurrection' chapter) in Luke's Gospel.

We are asking people to read the texts, and to think about them critically, in advance of the Conference. Do they work as stories? Are the characters, and relations between the characters, engaging? Does a situation or problem 'unfold' over the course of the text? If so, how is this achieved? Is there a sense of tension? Is there a satisfying resolution? And how might all of this inspire, or sustain, religious faith? (Please come with your thoughts at the ready !)

The two texts that we will be working with are reproduced below. Please read them, enjoy them, and think about them – and we look forward to seeing you at the Conference in Leicester in July.

David Lambourn & Martin Spence
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Ruth: a short story

Chapter 1: Ruth and Naomi

Once in the time of the Judges when there was a famine in the land, a man from Bethlehem in Judah went with his wife and two sons to live in Moabite territory, the man's name was Elimelech, his wife was Naomi, and his sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They came to Moab and settled there.

Elimelech died, and Naomi was left a widow with her two sons, the sons married Moabite women, one of whom was called Orpah and the other Ruth. They had lived there about ten years when both Mahlon and Chilion died. Then Naomi, bereaved of her two sons as well as of her husband, got ready to return to her own country with her daughters-in-law, because she heard in Moab that the Lord had shown his care for his people by giving them food. Accompanied by her two daughter-in-law she left the place where she had been living, and they took the road leading back to Judah.

Naomi said to her daughters-in-law, 'Go back, both of you, home to your own mothers. May the Lord keep faith with you, as you have kept faith with the dead and with me; and may he grant each of you the security of a new home with a new husband.' And she kissed them goodbye. They wept aloud and said, 'No, we shall return with you to your people.' But Naomi insisted, 'Go back, my daughters. Why should you come with me? Am I likely to bear any more sons to be husbands for you? Go back, my daughters, go: for I am too old to marry again. But if I could say that I had hope of a child, even if I were to be married tonight and were to bear sons, would you, then, wait until they grew up? Would you, on their account remain unmarried? No, my daughters! For your sakes I feel bitter that the Lord has inflicted such misfortune on me.' At this they wept still more. Then Orpah kissed her mother-in-law and took her leave, but Ruth clung to her.

'Look,' said Naomi, 'your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and her god. Go, follow her.' Ruth answered, '*Do not urge me to go back and desert you. Where you go, I shall go, and where you stay, I shall stay. Your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I shall die, and there be buried. I solemnly declare before the Lord that nothing but death will part me from you.*'

When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said no more.

The two of them went on until they came to Bethlehem, where their arrival set the whole town buzzing with excitement. The women cried, 'Can this be Naomi?' *Do not call me Naomi,' she said; 'call me Mara, for the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty, Why call me Naomi? The Lord has pronounced against me, The Almighty has brought me misfortune.'*

That was how Naomi's daughter-in-law, Ruth the Moabite, returned with her from Moab; they arrived in Bethlehem just as the barley harvest was beginning.

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Chapter 2: Ruth and Boaz.

Naomi had a relative on her husband's side, a prominent and well-to-do member of Elimelech's family; his name was Boaz. One day Ruth the Moabite asked Naomi, 'May I go to the harvest fields and glean behind anyone who will allow me?' Yes, go, my daughter,' she replied. So Ruth went gleaning in the fields behind the reapers. As it happened, she was in that strip of the field which belonged to Boaz of Elimelech's family, and there was Boaz himself coming out from Bethlehem. He greeted the reapers, 'The Lord be with you!' and they responded. 'The Lord bless you!' 'Whose girl is this?' he asked the servant in charge of the reapers. The servant answered, 'She is a Moabite girl who has come back with Naomi from Moab. She asked if she might glean, gathering among the sheaves behind the reapers. She came and has been on her feet from morning to now; she has hardly had a moment's rest in the shelter.'

Boaz said to Ruth, 'Listen, my daughter: do not go to glean in any other field. Do not look any farther, but stay close to my servant-girls. Watch where the men reap, and follow the gleaners; I have told the men not to molest you. Any time you are thirsty, go and drink from the jars they have filled.' She bowed to the ground and said, 'Why are you so kind as to take notice of me, when I am just a foreigner?' Boaz answered, 'I have been told the whole story of what you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband, how you left father and mother and homeland and came among a people you did not know before. The Lord reward you for what you have done; may you be richly repaid by the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge.' She said, 'I hope you will continue to be pleased with me, sir, for you have eased my mind by speaking kindly to me, though I am not one of your slave-girls.'

When mealtime came round, Boaz said to Ruth, 'Come over here and have something to eat. Dip your piece of bread in the vinegar.' She sat down beside the reapers, and he passed her some roasted grain. She ate all she wanted and still had some left. When she got up to glean, Boaz instructed the men to allow her to glean right among the sheaves. 'Do not find fault with her,' he added; 'you may even pull out some of the ears of grain from the handfuls as you cut, and leave them for her to glean; do not check her.'

Ruth gleaned in the field until sunset, and when she beat out what she had gathered it came to about a bushel of barley. She carried it into the town and showed her mother-in-law how much she had got; she also brought out and handed her what she had left over from the meal. Her mother-in-law asked, 'Where did you glean today? Which way did you go? Blessings on the man who took notice of you!' She told her mother-in-law in whose field she had been working. 'The owner of the field where I worked today', she said, 'is a man called Boaz.' Naomi exclaimed, 'Blessings on him from the Lord, who has kept faith with the living and the dead! This man', she explained, 'is related to us; he is one of our very near kinsmen.' 'And what is more,' Ruth said, 'he told me to stay close to his workers until they had finished all his harvest.' Naomi said, 'My daughter, it would be as well for you to go with his girls; in another field you might come to harm.' So Ruth kept close to them, gleaning with them till the end of both barley and wheat harvests; but she lived with her mother-in-law.

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Chapter 3: Custom and Law...

One day Naomi, Ruth's mother-in-law, said to her. 'My daughter, I want to see you settled happily. Now there is our kinsman Boaz, whose girls you have been with. Tonight he will be winnowing barley at the threshing-floor. bathe and anoint yourself with perfumed oil, then get dressed and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down make sure you know the place where he is. Then go in, turn back the covering at this feet and lie down. He will tell you what to do. 'I will do everything you say,' replied Ruth.

She went down to the threshing-floor and did exactly as her mother-in-law had told her. When Boaz had eaten and drunk, he felt at peace with the world and went and lay down to sleep at the far end of the heap of grain. Ruth came quietly, turned back the covering at his feet and lay down. About midnight the man woke with a start; he turned over. and there, lying at this feet, was a woman! 'Who are you?' he said. 'Sir, it is I, Ruth,' she replied. 'Spread the skirt of your cloak over me, for you are my next of kin.' Boaz said, 'The Lord bless you, my daughter! You are proving yourself more devoted to the family than ever by not running after any young man, whether rich or poor. Set your mind at rest, my daughter: I shall do all you ask, for the whole town knows what a fine woman you are. Yes it is true that I am a near kinsman; but there is one even closer than I am. Stay tonight, and then in the morning, if he is willing to act as your next-of-kin, well and good; but if he is not, then as sure as the Lord lives, I shall do so. Now lie down till morning.'

She lay at his feet till next morning, but rose before it was light enough for one man to recognize another; Boaz had it in mind that no one should know that the woman had been to the threshing-floor. He said to her. 'Take the cloak you are wearing, and hold it out.' When she did so, he poured in six measures of barley and lifted it for her to carry, and she went off to the town.

When she came to her mother-in-law, Naomi asked, 'How did things go with you my daughter? Ruth related all that the man had done for her, and she added, 'He gave me these six measures of barley; he would not let me come home to my mother-in-law empty-handed.' Naomi said, 'Wait, my daughter, until you see what will come of it; he will not rest till he has settled the matter this very day.

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Chapter 4: ... leading to agreements

Boaz meanwhile had gone up to the town gate and was sitting there when the next-of-kin of whom he had spoken came past. Calling him by name, Boaz cried, 'Come over here and sit down.' He went over and sat down. Boaz also stopped ten of the town's elders and asked them to sit there. When they were seated, he addressed the next-of-kin: You will remember the strip of field that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. Naomi is selling it, now that she has returned from Moab. I promised to open the matter with you, to ask that you acquire it in the presence of those sitting here and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you are going to do your duty as next-of-kin then do so; but if not, someone must do it. So tell me,

and then I shall know, for I come after you as next-of-kin.' He answered, 'I shall act as next-of-kin.' Boaz continued: 'On the day you take over the field from Naomi, I take over the widow, Ruth the Moabite, so as to perpetuate the name of the dead man on his holdings.' 'Then I cannot act,' said the next-of-kin, 'lest it be detrimental to my own holding; and as I cannot act, you yourself must take over my duty as next-of-kin.'

Now it used to be the custom when ratifying and transaction by which property was redeemed or transferred for a man to take off his sandal and give it to the other party; this was the form of attestation in Israel. Accordingly when the next-of-kin said to Boaz, 'You must take it over, he drew off his sandal and handed it over. Then Boaz addressed the elders and all the other people there; 'You are witnesses this day that I have taken over from Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon; and further, that I have taken over Mahlon's widow, Ruth the Moabite, to be my wife, in order to keep alive the dead man's name on his holding, so that his name may not be missing among his kindred and at the gate of his native town. You are witnesses this day.'

All who were at the gate including the elders, replied, 'We are witnesses. May the Lord make this woman to come into your home to be like Rachael and Leah the two who built up the family of Israel. May you do a worthy deed in Ephrathah by keeping this name alive in Bethlehem. Through the offspring the Lord gives you by this young woman may your family be like the family of Perez whom Tamar bore to Judah.'

So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. When they had come together the Lord caused her to conceive and she gave birth to a son. The women said to Naomi, 'Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without next-of-kin. May the name of your dead son be kept alive in Israel! The child will give you renewed life and be your support and stay in your old age, for your devoted daughter-in-law, who has proved better to you than seven sons, has borne him. Naomi took the child and laid him in her own lap, and she became his foster-mother. Her women neighbours gave him a name: 'Naomi has a son; we shall call him Obed.' they said. He became the father of Jesse, David's father.

[N.B. The passages in italics are in verse form in the Hebrew.]

The Gospel according to St. Luke

Chapter 24

(Preamble: On Friday, Jesus dies on the Cross. Joseph of Arimathea has taken his body and laid it in a new stone tomb. The women who came with Jesus from Galilee prepare spices to anoint the body, but they cannot visit the tomb on Saturday because it is the Sabbath. It is now Sunday morning ...)

But on the first day of the week at early dawn they came to the tomb taking the spices that they had prepared. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb but when they went in they did not find the body.

While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were afraid, but the men said to them:

“Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here but has risen. Remember how he told you, while he was still in Galilee, that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified and on the third day rise again.”

Then they remembered his words, and returning from the tomb they told all this to the eleven and to all the rest. Now it was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women with them, who told this to the apostles.

But these words seemed to them an idle tale and they did not believe them.

But Peter got up and ran to the tomb; stooping and looking in he saw the linen cloths by themselves, then he went home amazed at what had happened.

Now on that same day two of them were going to a village called Emmaus about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened.

While they were talking and discussing, Jesus himself came near and went with them, but their eyes were kept from recognizing him.

And he said to them:

“What are you discussing with each other while you walk along?”

They stood still looking sad. Then one of them whose name was Cleopas answered him:

“Are you the only stranger in Jerusalem who does not know the things that have taken place there in these days?”

He asked them:

“What things?”

They replied:

“The things about Jesus of Nazareth who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, and how our chief priests and leaders handed him over to be condemned to death and crucified him. But we had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel. Yes and besides all this, it is now the third day since these things took place. Moreover, some women of our group astounded us. They were at the tomb early this morning and when they did not find his body there, they came back and told us that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive. Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see him.”

Then he said to them:

“Oh, how foolish you are and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared. Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?”.

Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.

As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly saying:

“Stay with us because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.”

So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight.

They said to each other:

“Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road while he was opening the scriptures to us?”

That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying:

“The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!”.

Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

While they were talking about this, Jesus himself stood among them and said to them:

“Peace be with you”.

They were startled and terrified and thought that they were seeing a ghost. He said to them:

“Why are you frightened and why do doubts arise in your hearts? Look at my hands and my feet; see that it is I myself. Touch me and see; for a ghost does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.”

And when he had said this he showed them his hands and his feet. While in their joy they were disbelieving and still wondering he said to them:

“Have you anything here to eat?”

They gave him a piece of broiled fish and he took it and ate in their presence.

Then he said to them:

“These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you - that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms, must be fulfilled.”

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them:

“Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see I am sending upon you what my Father promised; so stay here in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he was blessing them he withdrew from them and was carried up into heaven.

And they worshipped him, and returned to Jerusalem with great joy and they were continually in the temple blessing God.