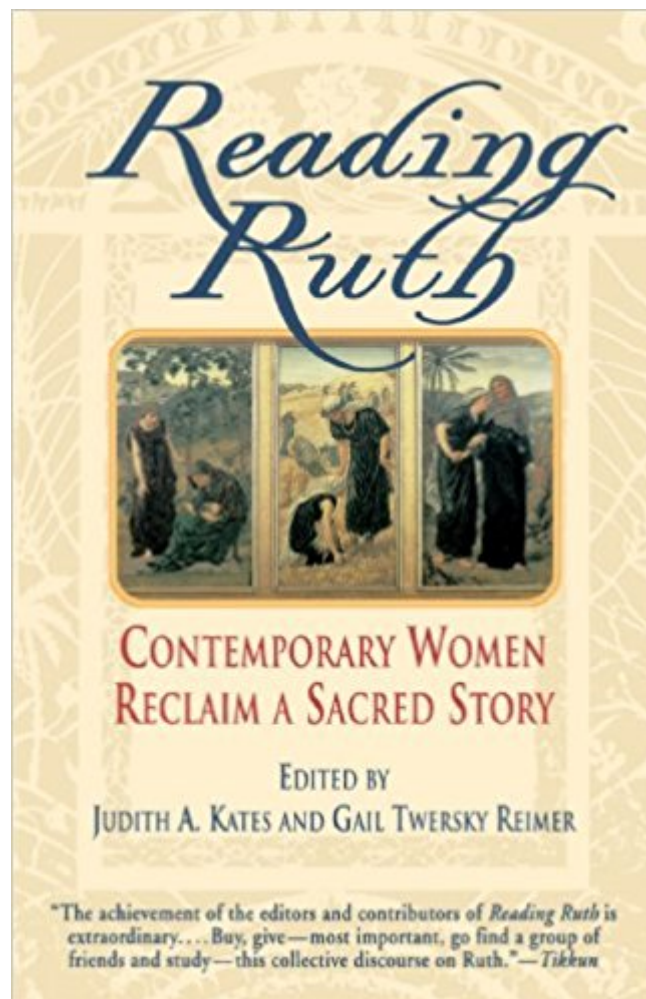




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# Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim A Sacred Story



## Synopsis

"The Book of Ruth is one of Western civilization's great narratives of women's relationships. This collection of modern-day interpretations brings together the wisdom, sensitivity, and spirituality of the biblical story with the struggles and insights of contemporary women. Readers will be moved and inspired by these essays."--Susannah Heschel Editor of *On Being a Jewish Feminist* With *Reading Ruth*, two creative scholars have brought together an amazingly eclectic group of Jewish novelists, essayists, poets, rabbis, psychologists, and scholars--including Cynthia Ozick, Marge Piercy, Francine Klagsbrun, and Nessa Rapoport--to explore one of the most beloved stories in the Bible. In lively essays, poetry, fiction, and personal narrative, the gamut of women's experience in the modern world is illuminated by this ancient story. Whether the essayists explore relationships between sisters, the complex bond between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, the place of the "other" in society, the heartache of loss, the limitations of loyalty, or the elaborate connections of family, they give voice to an exciting array of thought and interpretation that endows this sacred tale with new life."[A] rich, diverse, and thought-provoking collection."--Judith Plaskow Author of *Standing Again at Sinai* "Filled with passion, humor, insight, and just the right combination of irreverence and awe, *Reading Ruth* puts the Book of Ruth right where it belongs--in the hands of women. All of us are the richer for it."--Ari L. Goldman Author of *The Search for God at Harvard* "The book of Ruth is a gem in its own right. Through *Reading Ruth* the gem becomes a multifaceted diamond that reflects and refracts a multiplicity of images....Read this book."--The Rocky Mountain News

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The subtle mixing of voices to create a cohesive whole is accomplished with some success in this work. Academics Kates and Reimer have brought together the voices of female Jewish writers, rabbis, teachers, wives, and mothers such as Cynthia Ozick, Merle Field, and Nessa Rapoport to offer insight into the biblical tale of Ruth the Moabite as daughter-in-law, childless widow, stranger, and loyal friend. The essays that work best are those that steer clear of what one writer calls "imaginative reconstruction." The dynamism of Ruth is found when it answers Field's challenge: "What happens when people, when women, stand at a crossroads? How do you find your true path in this world?" The new ground this book plows lies in the reclamation by Jewish women of this ancient, female-centered drama. Footnoted with abundant Hebrew and English translations; recommended where greater depth is needed in feminist religious writing. Sandra Collins, SLIS, Univ. of Pittsburgh Copyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

A generally superb collection of both traditional and unorthodox readings of the Book of Ruth. The biblical story of Ruth--the young Moabite widow who followed her Israelite mother-in-law, Naomi, to the Land of Israel, married her husband's kinsman, and became mother of the messianic line through her descendant, King David--is an intriguing one, especially for women, who find few active female role models in the Bible. Kates, and Reimer, both teachers of Jewish texts with doctorates in literature, have assembled 30 essays, poems, stories, and dramatic narratives by contemporary female scholars, authors, psychiatrists, rabbis, and poets. All the contributors bring their professional and personal experiences to their interpretations of the Ruth story: Some are subjective accounts, such as the joint effort ("Feminine Plurals") of psychiatrists Roberta Apfel and Lise Grondahl--an older Jewish supervisor and her young Christian supervisee--who use the relationship between Naomi and Ruth to understand and enrich their own; others, like Tamar Frankiel's kabbalistic approach to the messianic lineage in Ruth ("Ruth and the Messiah"), are more strictly scholarly. Often the two aspects are combined: Cynthia Ozick's "Ruth" is one part personal reminiscence, three parts textual analysis. These autobiographical and scholarly pieces are nearly always more interesting than the vanilla literary retellings of the story that add little to the conventional understanding of the text, although Gloria Goldreich's inclusion of Ruth's sister-in-law, Orpah, in her "Ruth, Naomi, and Orpah: A Parable of Friendship" adds a beautiful dimension to the

relationship of Ruth and Naomi. Aviva Zornberg's shiur, or oral lesson, ``The Concealed Alternative," stands out as the most unusual; she draws on ancient commentaries as well as on Kafka, Nietzsche, and Buber to present a compelling understanding of the concept of redemption in Ruth. Despite occasional redundancies--only natural given the 400 pages of commentary on a brief text--this book is absorbing and provocative. -- Copyright ©1994, Kirkus Associates, LP. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

This was an outstanding reference book that served as the impetus for a study session I led. I was inspired to create my own dramatic skit followed by a Q&A facilitated discussion. I recommended the book to all who attended and am so grateful to have found and ordered it! Thanks !

Great book, well written, informative and inspiring. The diversity of points of view adds rich perspective to the Book of Ruth.

I had to buy it for a cousin in Germany, so sight unseen (except for what the seller said), bought it and shipped it to her w/o looking at it. She rec'd it and said it was perfect for what she needed. Thanks!

I have always found the book of Ruth interesting, and had read all the midrash (stories, commentaries, thoughts, lessons, etc.) written on it. All the traditional midrash, however, were written by men, and are hundreds of year old. This book was a refreshing change: Stories, poems, essays, and thoughts on the biblical book of Ruth all written recently by women. We read this book in my Jewish Women's Book Discussion Group, and it was the only book whose discussion had to be continued for a second session.

No book of the Bible so clearly calls for a women's commentary than the Book of Ruth. Not only are the two central characters both women, but their relationship is the engine which drives the plot and is what accounts for much of our affection for the book. Reading Ruth, edited by Judith Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer is so successful that no one wanting modern views of this book can ignore it. It begins with the Hebrew text of Ruth, plus the JPS translation, followed by a commentary on selected verses by Ruth Sohn, which sometimes focuses on midrash or spiritual implications of the verse. Next is the heart of the book, 7 sections, each anchored to a single verse. Some are familiar ("For wherever you will go, I will go ....") And others puzzling ("A son is born to Naomi" --- when the

son was actually born to Ruth). For each, there are 2-4 essays that deal, in some way, with that verse. These vary widely; there is no set of controlling parameters for this book. Aviva Zornberg is quite traditional, delving into midrash in a wide ranging attempt to fundamentally characterize the actions of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz. Rebecca Albert is utterly radical, presenting lesbian readings on the relationship of Ruth and Naomi and uses of the story ("less plausible midrashim have been accepted throughout the ages" she notes). Vanessa Ochs expresses her disappointment that Ruth seems to be almost erased: "Is this the Book of Ruth or is it the Book of Naomi?" Looking at the end, she decides it's neither --- the genealogy seems to obliterate all the women. Nehama Aschkenasy has a careful look at how women use language to create a form of power. Marianne Hirsch focuses on this rarity in western literature, such a strong bond between a woman and her mother-in law, bringing in her own positive relationship with mother-in-law. Patricia Karlin-Neumann draws a similarity between Job and Naomi, in how their suffering produces isolation. And if you were to sample just one essay, read Gail Twersky Reimer's "Her Mother's House". Working purely with the text --- no midrash --- she presents Ruth as establishing another model of "woman's relationship to motherhood" --- Ruth as a woman who doesn't particularly want children, but has one anyhow. Skillfully drawing both on things mentioned (Naomi becoming the foster mother) and things unsaid (there is no mention of Ruth suffering as a result of about 10 years of childless marriage), she makes a compelling case for this reading, contrasting Ruth with Naomi's intense preoccupation with children. Also included is a short and fairly intense play, based on a women's discussion group focussing on the Book of Ruth, six "poetic movements" and some lovely woodcuts (complete with explanations!). Alas, no index. This book sets an extraordinary standard for an anthology of commentary on a single book.

This book includes a variety of essays (as well as poems and even a short play) on Ruth from a variety of points of view: from traditional to secular, from scholarly to fictional. The only thing that these works have in common is that they were written by women. Some of the essays are quite illuminating. For example, Judith Kates and Suzanne Klingenstein suggest one reason why Ruth is traditionally read on Shavuot: Shavuot commemorates the revelation of Torah, and the book of Ruth discusses a Torah-oriented society at its best. Bethlehem's Jews integrate Ruth and Naomi into their society by following four Biblical commandments: (1) allowing the poor to glean in fields (as Ruth does in Boaz's field), (2) redemption of a relative's property (as Boaz does for Naomi), (3) levirate marriage and (4) acceptance of converts. These essays add that the characters in Ruth not only follow Jewish law, but go beyond the letter of the law to show lovingkindness and generosity.

For example, Boaz does not merely allow Ruth to glean in his fields (as the Torah requires), but gives her extra food and orders his employees to look after her. And although he is only obligated to marry the wife of a dead brother if he dies without children, Boaz marries Ruth, the daughter-in-law of a relative who died after having two sons. Also of interest are a variety of essays with contrasting views on the Ruth/Naomi relationship. Some suggest that Naomi manipulates a passive Ruth for good purposes; others point out that Ruth does all the physical work and takes some initiative in dealing with Boaz, suggesting that Ruth's energy revitalizes Naomi. On the other hand, some of the essays are a little bizarre. For example, one essay suggests that Ruth's attraction to Naomi might indicate a lesbian relationship- a theory that overlooks Naomi's attempts to urge Ruth to go back home to Moab.

The Book of Ruth is familiar to most of us- we traditionally read it during Shavuot. On the surface Ruth is a pleasant story of a young woman who returns to Israel with her mother-in-law after the deaths of their husbands. But the very simplicity of the story raises many questions. Until this collection of midrashim - interpretations and extensions of the story to fill in the gaps- that is where the matter lay. Now is it possible to read what contemporary well educated women think about this story and the questions raised. If you've never studied a Midrash, this is a good place to begin. If you have studied Midrashim, you will see how different the perspectives are in this book. Other writings on Ruth are both very old and written exclusively by men. This book is a must for anyone who enjoys studying and values a full perspective.

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