

Proper 26
Cycle B RCL
Revised

Ruth 1:1-18

Ruth is a work of short fiction like Esther and Jonah. Because the first verse of Ruth dates the story “in the days of the judges,” the Greek Bible placed it after the Book of Judges instead of after Proverbs where it stands in the Hebrew Bible. Christian Bibles follow the Greek order. Although there is no agreement among scholars about the date of Ruth, there is now broad agreement that Ruth focuses on questions about David’s origins and legitimacy as king, not the question of intermarriage between Hebrews and foreigners as an earlier generation of scholars held. The death of Elimelech and the subsequent deaths of his two sons without sons of their own (verses 1-5) are far from impossible yet no less sad for their possibility. On the other hand, verses 6-18 describe a very unusual situation in which the two Moabite wives of Naomi’s sons decide to follow their Hebrew mother-in-law back to Judah out of their great love for her (verses 9, 14). Naomi dissuades Orpah (verse 14), but Ruth refuses to leave Naomi in words that remind us of the love poetry in the Song of Songs (verses 16-17). Naomi never agrees to accept Ruth’s company and does not return her affection. Rather, Naomi sees that Ruth will not obey her and so says nothing further to her (verse 18).

Psalm 146

Psalms 146-150 are all *hymns* that begin with the expression *hallelu-jah!* (“Praise the LORD!”) and may be part of a larger collection of hymns. Hymns typically celebrate the presence of the LORD in the temple and ordinarily focus upon some particular aspect of God’s power and goodness. Here the focus is upon God’s defense of the poor and disenfranchised.

OR

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Many interpreters have believed that Deuteronomy 5:1-6:3 existed at one time as an introduction to the body of laws in Deuteronomy 12-26. This would mean that an editor inserted an originally independent unit, 6:4-11:32, after 6:3. This independent unit began with the *Shma* (“Hear, O Israel ...”). The meaning of the *Shma* within its context has occasioned considerable debate, but Jews have long used it as a statement of their monotheism, and it is the central focus of the evening liturgy. The command to teach the law to one’s children (6:7) corresponds to Jeremiah’s prediction that the time would come when all Israel would have memorized the law and would be responsible for keeping it (Jeremiah 31:31-34). As always in Deuteronomy, Israel’s tenure in the Land of Promise depends upon its faithfulness to the law of the Lord.

Psalm 119:1-8)

Psalm 119 is a *wisdom psalm* and an extended acrostic. The verses of each strophe begin with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and there are enough strophes to treat all of the letters in succession. So, in the present selection, the first eight verses all begin with the letter *aleph*, and verses 9-16 all start with *bet*, etc. Although this scheme does not make for excellent poetry, it does comprise a powerful learning device with which to instruct young men in their duties to God and their neighbors. The wisdom psalms had no particular use in the liturgy of the First Temple and seem to have been confined to the wisdom academies.

Hebrews 9:11-14

After revealing the mystery of Christ's Melchizedekian priesthood (chapter 7) and arguing that this secret has created a new covenant (chapter 8), the author proceeds to work out that covenant's implications for our world, the world of sinners. Christ the high priest brings us redemption not in an earthly sanctuary but in the heavenly temple where the atoning sacrifice is Christ's own blood. The work of atonement in Hebrews actually occurs in heaven, not on earth, possibly a point of contention between the author and those Melchizedekians who believed that Melchizedek made atonement only for the angels and did so in heaven while Christ made atonement only for humans and did so on the earth.

Mark 12:28-34

It was common for Pharisaic teachers to give their students summaries of the Jewish law, heuristic statements that would catch up the whole meaning of the law as the teacher understood it. Many such summaries are contained in the collection of sayings called the *Pirke Avot* ("Chapters of the Fathers") in the Mishnah. Jesus's summary includes two verses of scripture, Deuteronomy 6:4-5 and Leviticus 19:18, and in that respect is not particularly unusual. Within the context of Mark 12, however, what is so important about Jesus's wise answer is that it works together with the other teachings of 11:27-13:37 to establish Jesus' teaching authority within the holiest city in the world.

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