

HEARTS UNBOUND

Engaging Biblical Texts of God's Radical Love
through Reader's Theater

by David R. Weiss

HIDDEN IN THE KING'S BLOOD:
A Faithful Outsider Brought In

THE BOOK OF RUTH

**National Gay and Lesbian
Task Force**



Preview
Edition

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This resource was created for the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Institute for Welcoming Resources in partnership with the ecumenical Welcoming Church Programs:

Affirm United/S'affirmer Ensemble
Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists
Brethren Mennonite Council for LGBT Interests
GLAD Alliance
Integrity USA
ReconcilingWorks: Lutherans for Full Inclusion
More Light Presbyterians
United Church of Christ Coalition for LGBT Concerns
Reconciling Ministries Network
Room for All
Welcoming Community Network

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Dedicated to

Michael J. Adee, M.Div., Ph.D.

in honor and celebration of his 13 years as
Executive Director and National Field Organizer
for More Light Presbyterians, for helping break down barriers
to full inclusion within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.),
and for his role in helping found and shepherd the
ever-growing Multi-Faith Welcoming Movement.

Introduction to Reader's Theater as a form of biblical engagement

Reader's Theater is the experience of reading a play script out loud using only the spoken lines — nothing else. The beauty of its simplicity is that it doesn't require memorized lines, costumes, sets, or polished acting, but it nevertheless invites participants to *step inside* the text — to *inhabit* it through their roles — and to experience the text more fully because they are involved in it themselves. Most of us were introduced to reader's theater during our first experience of dramatic works in middle school. These scripts invite you to revisit those middle school days as you use Reader's Theater to capture the drama and surprise of these biblical texts.

Because these scripts are only intended for use as Reader's Theater experiences, there are no extra instructions about costuming, stage movement, etc. — only the dialogue assigned to each reader.

Most biblical passages require a measure of context and scholarly insight in order for us to really understand them. In these scripts the dialogue is crafted to allow biblical characters themselves — as voiced by you, the participants — to unpack and explore key biblical texts about welcome. Also, because the biblical story (the message of God's abounding love that runs from Genesis through Revelation) is ultimately an *experience* of good news, these Reader's Theater experiences are best done in groups of 6-8 persons — so that, *just as in our faith*, there are no spectators.

Whether used by persons skeptical, curious about, or eager to explore the biblical theme of God's surprising welcome to outsiders, these Reader's Theater experiences are effective because they do three things:

1. They engage minds *imaginatively*, using the power of the participatory-narrative experience to open up and fully involve participants' intellects.
2. They help participants *evocatively* make the connections between the biblical dynamic of a welcoming God and the challenge to be welcoming today.
3. They enable participants, through scripted comments, to begin *rehearsing* what they might say in their own voices to explain and apply the dynamic of welcome in their own contexts today.

Lastly, one of the challenges of bringing biblical texts to life today is negotiating the "cultural sensitivities" that have transpired across the years. This plays out in several ways.

For instance, most of the biblical material was originally written by — and for — Jewish persons. (Though even the word "Jewish" isn't quite accurate; historically, we'd need to say "Hebrew-Israelite-Jewish persons" as each of these words best names these people at different points in their history.) So when these texts challenge *these people* to recognize God's surprising welcome, it's an example of *self-criticism*. But when Christians read these texts — especially after generations of both implicit and explicit anti-Semitic assumptions — it's very easy to hear them suggesting that the Jewish faith or tradition is intrinsically stubborn or narrow-minded, while we (of course) are not. But the truth is that stubbornness and narrow-mindedness are *human* tendencies *not* Jewish ones. In fact, it is our own stubborn, narrow-minded tendencies that tempt us to read these texts as challenging people other than ourselves. Please remember that insofar as we claim these texts as authoritative for us, they

are seeking to challenge *us*. In every text, whenever someone is challenged to recognize that God is “bigger” than they assumed, that person, no matter what their ethnic or religious background is in the text, *stands for us*. We need to hear what they need to hear. Be sure to listen.

Also, we know that gender roles were very different in the biblical era than they are today. This is not because God so ordained them, but because culture and society develop and change over time. This means, however, that some biblical texts are very male-centered and some texts display gender assumptions that we would no longer make today. I have tried to treat these instances with a balance of respect for the history they represent and sensitivity to the way we regard gender equality today.

And, you will discover, in my attempt to have these texts speak *to us* today, I occasionally allow the biblical characters to speak directly to us across time. They sometimes make references to historical or contemporary persons and events in order to help us see into the biblical text with greater insight. But even this is tricky, because my cultural and ecclesial (church tradition) knowledge and assumptions may differ markedly from yours. I try to offer references that are culturally diverse, but, if my attempts fall short or miss the mark, I hope that you will do your best to hear past my shortcomings and listen for the truth of these welcoming texts as they seek to speak to us still today.

Indeed, each of these texts invites us, as we take our place inside them as participants in God’s great drama of welcome, to find our hearts unbound. Yes, God’s radical love can be described, but every description dims next to the experience. One definition of the literary form of “gospel” explains it as a genre that aims to bequeath to its hearers the very experience it narrates. It doesn’t simply tell “good news”—*it bears good news to each person who encounters the story*. In their own humble way, each of these Reader’s Theater scripts seeks to be gospel: not simply to recreate tales in which hearts are unbound, but to unbind the hearts that do the reading. I offer them to a church that yearns to know God’s radical love more deeply in its own life. In these tales, retold in our own voices, may we discover our own hearts unbound.

~ David Weiss
Easter 2013

Introduction

This script invites you to explore the story of Ruth from the inside, through seven roles created to bring insight to this key biblical tale. These roles are: (1) Naomi, (2) Ruth, (3) Boaz, (4) Townspeople — assorted voices in the background, (5) 3rd Isaiah — a prophetic voice contemporary to the book of Ruth, (6) Author — the unknown author of Ruth, and (7) Narrator. If necessary, to accommodate groups of six or eight, Third Isaiah and Townspeople can be read by one person, or the Narrator role can be shared by two persons.

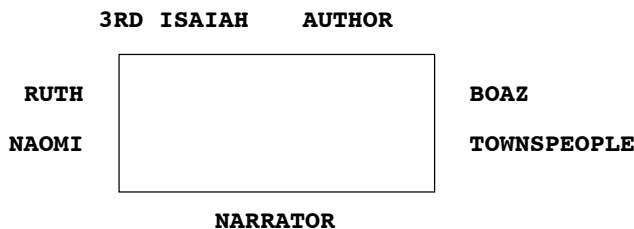
The two largest roles are the Narrator and the Author, followed by the roles for Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, and 3rd Isaiah. The Townspeople is the smallest role of all. None of the roles are overwhelming; no one speaks more than 10 sentences at a time and most are only 4-5 sentences long. But you may appreciate having the option of choosing a larger or smaller part overall.

The Narrator will guide you through the story of Ruth, summarizing the plot line and helping transition from one scene to the next. The Narrator likely hasn't seen any of this material before either, so this person isn't the "expert" — their role is simply to keep things moving along. You'll have a chance to add your own comments and questions at the end, so feel free to make marks in your booklets along the way, but follow the script until you're invited to make your own remarks at the end.

Remember, this isn't a play where the goal is "perfect performance;" rather, it's a series of invitations to slip into the text ourselves and listen for a moment to discover what more we can hear within and between the lines of the story of Ruth.

Note: The Book of Ruth presents some complexity in how the events described in the tale, the overall message of the story, and the historical context of its writing, relate to each other. It's too important a tale to set aside just because of this complexity — but impossible to understand without addressing these things. The characters explain this in the Theater itself, but there is also a chart at the end of the script that allows participants to see this complexity laid out on a timeline. The chart might be distributed and referred to as necessary.

Suggestion: *It may help keep the roles/voices clear for everyone if the Narrator sits at one end of the group, with Ruth and Naomi to one side and Boaz and the Townspeople to the other side. 3rd Isaiah and the Author might sit opposite the Narrator. You might also consider making large name places to put in front of people to identify their role.*



Note: While the book of Ruth is only four chapters long, it's too long to incorporate in its entirety into this Reader's Theater, so the characters summarize the action and lift up the key points. Everyone will be able to follow things, even if they haven't read the whole book, but it would be helpful to encourage participants to read the entire book of Ruth beforehand. (By generous permission of the publisher, the Book of Ruth appears in its entirety as an appendix to this Reader's Theater.)

READER'S THEATER SCRIPT**NARRATOR:**

Our task is to revisit each of the scenes in the Book of Ruth and reflect on them from the perspective of the original participants. Let's begin by going around the table to introduce ourselves by our real names and then also by the roles we'll be reading.

NAOMI:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Naomi**, a Hebrew (Jewish) woman, now widowed and the mother-in-law of Ruth.

RUTH:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Ruth**, a Moabite (that is, a Gentile, a non-Jewish) woman, now widowed and the daughter-in-law of Naomi.

3rd ISAIAH:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Third Isaiah**, the author of the final chapters (56-66) of the Book of Isaiah. Although not a participant in the scene here, his words belong in this conversation, so his voice has been introduced into this Reader's Theater.

AUTHOR:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the **Author**, the unknown writer who created the Book of Ruth. In this role I will offer "behind the scenes" comments to help you understand the story from the author's perspective.

BOAZ:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of **Boaz**, an upright Hebrew (Jewish) man and a close relative of Naomi's deceased husband.

TOWNSPEOPLE-FIELDWORKERS:

My name is _____, and I'll be reading the part of the Hebrew (Jewish) **Townspeople-Fieldworkers** of Bethlehem, the city to which Naomi returns with Ruth.