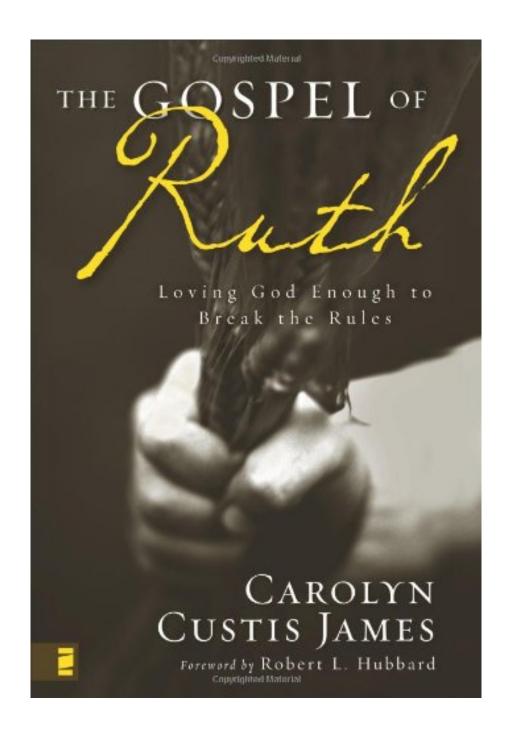


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This isn't the Ruth, the Naomi, or the Boaz we thought we knew. Carolyn James has unearthed startling new insights from this well-worn story ... insights that have life-changing implications for you. Naomi is no longer regarded as a bitter, complaining woman, but as a courageous overcomer. A Female Job. Ruth (typically admired for her devotion to Naomi and her deference to Boaz) turns out to be a gutsy risk-taker and a powerful agent for change among God's people. She lives outside the box, and her love for Yahweh and Naomi compels her to break the rules of social and religious convention at nearly every turn. Boaz, the Kinsman Redeemer, is repeatedly caught off-guard by Ruth's initiatives. His partnership with her models the kind of male/female relationships that the gospel intends for all who follow Jesus. Carolyn James drills down deeper into the story where she uncovers in the Old Testament the same passionate, counter-cultural, rule-breaking gospel that Jesus modeled and taught his followers to pursue. Within this age-old story is a map to radical levels of love and sacrifice, combined with the message that God is counting on his daughters to build his kingdom. The Gospel of Ruth vests every woman's life with kingdom purposes and frees us to embrace wholeheartedly God's calling, regardless of our circumstances or season of life. This story of two women who have lost everything contains a profound message: God created women not to live in the shadowy margins of men or of the past, but to emerge as courageous activists for his kingdom.

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It's all good until Chapter 10

By L. Wiggins

My first real experience in the book of Ruth came as a single college student. My RUF girlfriends and I spent one summer reading Ruth and discussing how to be a "Ruth" in order to catch the attention of a "Boaz." Let's

be honest, we attended college for our educations and careers, but we also hoped to meet our husbands at the next social. By the end of our study, we were all praying for a romantic, fairy-tale ending just like Ruth's. Today, more than ten years later, I am learning that Ruth isn't simply a romance nestled between Judges and 1 Samuel. Rather, Ruth is the story of Naomi and her daughter-in-law who will risk everything to rescue her. "This is the book I was born to write," writes Carolyn Custis James of her latest, The Gospel of Ruth: Loving God Enough to Break the Rules.

James wants to answer two questions through her study of Ruth: is God good for women? and what happens to men in the presence of strong women? On the way to answering those questions, James must also teach the reader about men, women, the culture of the day, widowhood, barrenness, and the important themes that occur in Ruth, like compassion, love, and selflessness versus self-preservation.

I enjoy James' writing style; she is concise and interesting. As I read, I made lots of notes and highlights. She is very good at translating the lessons from Ruth to the 21st century. I noted a few things I wanted to go back to and think through more deeply. For example, God has specific purposes for widowhood and barrenness in all of our lives. James writes, "The widow is and has always been a litmus test to measure how much theology we've truly absorbed and how much is just talk." And regarding barrenness she writes, "Every once in a while, God pulls back the curtain and shows us how things really work. He does that with the barren woman who shows us that we are all infertile. Every child conceived is a miracle...It reassures me that God will work through me too, even though I am spiritually infertile...The simple, encouraging truth that keeps me going is the fact that God's preferred method of saving the lost is to work through us." God doesn't use widowhood and barrenness solely for the ultimate good of the widow and the barren woman; He is after something in my heart.

In Chapter Four, Breaking the Rules in Bethlehem, James reminds her readers to seek to fulfill the spirit of God's laws rather than the letter. Ruth "broke the rules" when she asked Boaz if she could follow behind the gleaners rather than gather at the edges of his field. James writes, "The letter of the law says, `Let them glean.' The spirit of the law says, `Feed them.'" Short lines like that one have rolled back and forth in my mind for several days after reading them.

I particularly enjoyed her explanations of the Hebrew word, hesed. "It's the way God intended for human beings to live together from the beginning - the "love-your-neighbor-as-yourself" brand of living, an active, selfless, sacrificial caring for one another that goes against the grain of our fallen natures...In a nutshell, hesed is the gospel lived out." James beautifully explains how Ruth shows hesed to Naomi and Boaz shows hesed to Ruth, which is actually the hesed of God poured out on all of them. Though Naomi believed that God had forsaken her, she finds, through the love and sacrifice of Ruth, that God never withdrew his steadfast hesed from her life. What are we to think when things seem to go wrong? James points out that we will experience pain and joy, but it is important to remember that God is sovereign and always present with his hesed.

I enjoyed nine chapters of The Gospel of Ruth; however, the tenth chapter disappointed me.

In Chapter ten, Good to Great, James answers the questions she poses in the preface. I was disheartened to find, after enjoying most of the book, that James has an agenda besides sharing the fruit of her years of studying the book of Ruth. Chapter 10 is tinged with resentment over gender roles. First, after earlier chapters that encourage submission and faith and trust, this last chapter encourages women to be aggressive and to take risks, even implying that it would be better for a woman to pursue a ministry even if the male leadership of her church said not to. No one would argue that Ruth's actions were risky, however, her actions proved to be good for her (and Naomi) precisely because of the godly man she approached. Boaz had shown

Ruth kindness; therefore Naomi made a calculated decision for Ruth to visit him during the night with her proposal. Ruth did not do what she did all alone; it is incorrect to make personal applications from Ruth based on the removal of godly Boaz. Women will be sadly mistaken if they ignore God-ordained leadership, whether in the church or the home, in an effort to apply James' lesson to take risks.

Second, James' bitterness toward the traditional roles of women in society comes through when the story closes on the union of Boaz and Ruth and the birth of Obed. She calls marriage and family, weddings and babies, "a weak conclusion." What happened to Ruth, the ezer-warrior? James seems to praise Ruth as long as she is fulfilling her role as God's image bearer on her own, and she likes it when Boaz sees something in Ruth and so decides to join her on her exciting mission of hesed toward Naomi, but James feels let down when Ruth appears to settle down as Boaz's wife. James downplays the "ordinary" tasks of Ruth and Naomi while praising them for taking risks that make King David's birth (and much later, Jesus' birth) possible. I was deflated to read that, in James' estimation, the ordinary tasks of a wife and mother are too cautious for God's image bearers. James concludes, "We don't know what happened between them after the birth of Obed, but it's a safe guess that the two of them took up other projects. Boaz was marrying a woman who understood his business from the ground up and wasn't shy about proposing new ideas." I guess Ruth must have gone on to help Boaz grow his barley business, which I'm sure offered Ruth great purpose and posed many risk-taking opportunities for the glory of God.

Third, James asks the question, what happens to men in the presence of a strong woman? "Is his manhood diminished?" She concludes that strong women are great for men because "after joining forces with Ruth, [Boaz] stands even taller, for he exits as the great-grandfather of King David and a forefather of Jesus." He was already a good man, but now that he's with Ruth he's a great man. James believes that Boaz wouldn't be great had Ruth not proposed to him. James plays up the idea that Ruth is all she needs to be in order to be a fulfilled woman, while downplaying Boaz status prior to his relationship with Ruth. James ignores how Boaz raises Ruth's status (she goes from "girl" to "a noble and competent woman"). Furthermore, she ignores the traditional interpretation of Boaz as the Christ figure in the story, instead attributing that archetype to Ruth because she saves Naomi. Purposefully ignoring these few key facts in the book of Ruth diminishes the strength and validity of the chapter.

For the most part, I enjoyed The Gospel of Ruth. James shares many important lessons when she addresses living out the teachings of Christ. She has an engaging writing style that I enjoy. Plus, she's a scholar. Though she doesn't appreciate it (because it's too neat), she even touches on the Hebrew writer's creation of a chiasm. I would still recommend this book based on the good in nine out of ten chapters. When it comes to men and women, however, be aware that James takes a more egalitarian stance.

17 of 19 people found the following review helpful.

A New View of an Old Story

By Ecowboy

I started reading this book a bit skeptical that a whole new perspective of the story of Ruth was going to be revealed by Carolyn James, but I was profoundly mistaken! This is a fascinating book, and James has done a tremendous job in researching and explaining the biblical text.

By expertly teaching about the historical context of ancient Israel, James reveals the deep meanings and undertones found in the book of Ruth that remain hidden to the typical reader. James also bridges the timegap by applying the truths and principles found in Ruth to our lives. Many times that sort of application can feel like a stretch, but not here.

Okay, but is this book just for women? Definitely not. First, it's wonderful exegesis of biblical text. Granted

the story of Ruth contains women, but that shouldn't impact the readership. Yes, many of the applications are for women, but not exclusively. Think that submission, love, kindness, generosity, etc. are primarily female virtues...then you need to read this book! Highly recommended.

14 of 17 people found the following review helpful.

Good insights, not the best writing

By L. Tam

The biggest "problem" I had with this book is the amount of guesswork storytelling that happens in it. Certainly there is much that can be reasonably assumed from well known cultural contexts - that Naomi and Ruth faced certain difficulties and discriminations being widows, and Ruth childless. They were probably presumed to be sinful women to have found themselves in such a dire situation. However, the following passages will help to illustrate my point:

No one knows whether Boaz was a decorated military hero, but given Israel's frequent bloody clashes with neighboring nations during the period of the judges, that is entirely possible.

As Ruth explains everything that happened to Naomi, Boaz is already heading for Bethlehem's gate, where he will keep his word. He may have had cold feet in the night, but as morning breaks across the Judean horizon his heart is deeply warmed by hesed.

Even if Boaz were a soldier in the military, we have no reason to believe he was either decorated, or a hero. And we have no idea if he had cold feet, or that if he did, his heart warmed as he walked. Maybe he was terrified, but stuck to his grits. The point is, we have NO IDEA about these things, but the writer makes up a lot of possible - even probable, but entirely unsubstantiated stories to fill in the blanks. As someone who carefully studies and scrutinizes the Bible critically, this was very distracting throughout the entire read.

However, that is not to say this book does not offer value; the guesswork storytelling, though aggravating to someone like me, does not detract from the central core of the story of Ruth. Although I found it difficult to emotionally relate or identify with the plight of widowhood and childlessness (which I could tell the book was trying to do), it could at least lay it out mentally for someone to understand. The book also points out items that are logical, but would not be immediately obvious to modern readers in a completely removed cultural context.

Reccommend this book? Yes, but perhaps not for readers who are academic by nature, as the lack of evidence towards the guesswork storytelling will rather irritate you.

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