Episode 133 Reading Ruth final

**Havilah Dharamraj**

Hello, I'm Havilah Dharamraj, and I teach Old Testament at a seminary in Bangalore, which is in India. I love storytelling. And I help my students recover their heritage they have of storytelling in our part of the world so as to use it in ministry, and preaching and teaching. I have a husband, two children-grown up, and a garden and two dogs.

**David Capes**

Havilah, thank you for being with us today on the Stone Chapel. Welcome.

**David Capes**

Thank you.

**Havilah Dharamraj**

It's your first time at the Lanier Theological Library.

**Havilah Dharamraj**

Absolutely the first time and it's like being in fairy land. Yeah, it's surreal, so surreal.

**David Capes**

Yeah, it isn't that you come on campus. And you see the bunnies hopping around the trees, and you see the swans in the lake. And then you come in here and you see this gorgeous library. Pretty interesting isn't it. Well, we hope you'll be back.

**Havilah Dharamraj**

I hope so too.

**David Capes**

Yeah, we're just excited. You're here to give a lecture. And that lecture will be on our YouTube channel. And we're doing this podcast in a way as a primmer to that. We'll be here for 20 minutes, but your lecture will go on a little bit longer, and you'll go into more detail on that. And there'll be a question and answer time tonight after that. So you've written another book on the Song of Songs. Tell us a little bit about that.

**Havilah Dharamraj**

Yeah, the Song of Songs is rather an odd book, and most people don't know what to do with it, even how to preach it. So it sort of gets left out in the Canon. And this is my attempt to put it back into the Canon and show how the Song of Songs has themes that run right across the Old Testament and the New Testament as well. So I looked at themes, four themes in the Song of Songs, and matched each theme with other texts in the Old Testament. So for example, I've looked at the 'seeking' poems, in the Song of Songs, poems in which the woman is going out at night looking for her beloved. And I've put those two poems in conversation with Hosea 2, which is another 'seeking' poem, but here's the man looking for the woman. So I've done that with four themes. It's called intertextuality, intertextual readings, and some very interesting conversations have happened when the Song of Songs begins to talk with parallel texts in the Old Testament.

**David Capes**

Now, what's the title of that book, if anybody's wanting to find it?

**Havilah Dharamraj**

It's titled, 'Altogether Lovely, Thematic, and Intertextual Reading of the Song of Songs'.

**David Capes**

Now, some people refer to that book as the Song of Solomon, I think, right? But it's the same book.

**Havilah Dharamraj**

It's the same thing. The Song of Songs is its Hebrew title. And so being an Old Testament scholar, we feel a little obliged to stick to the Hebrew.

**David Capes**

Stick to the Hebrew that's always good. Now, we're here to talk today about the book of Ruth. Now, what kind of book is the book of Ruth? It's four chapters, it's tucked away. And some people don't know exactly what to do with that book, either. Right? It's sometimes referred to as the period of the judges, and is related to that time period. But what kind of book is it? Is it a history book? Is it a storybook? What is it?

**Havilah Dharamraj**

As a storyteller, I love the book of Ruth for the literary gem that it is so beautifully constructed. What kind of book is it? People like to think of it as a love story-I think superimposing our idea of what constitutes a happy marriage onto it. But I'm not so sure that it's a love story. It is a piece of history. It speaks about community, a microcosm of Israel, a little community in a little town called Bethlehem. And is there for more history, I think, than drama, or love story.

**David Capes**

As I read your paper, and thank you for sending it on ahead. It was wonderful to read. It was artful. It was smart. I just really enjoyed it. It struck me that the book begins with Naomi and her struggles, but it also ends with Naomi and sort of the victory. Now she finally has a son after being childless all this time, and I found that just kind of wonderful. I was wondering why it wasn't named Naomi, instead of Ruth.

**Havilah Dharamraj**

Exactly. In fact, Naomi has the longest speeches in the book. She's a talkative woman. And Ruth has very little to say-little bits and pieces here. Of course, she makes that very beautiful confession in chapter 1. But otherwise, it's Naomi that has the longest lines. And Naomi, opens and finishes the book. And I love that it does that. Because it's a message of hope for the most vulnerable class in Israelite society of that day, or perhaps even now, certainly so in South Asia, where I come from. The widow. The widow, who is now too old to remarry, and has no sons to care for her. That's the most vulnerable you can be in society. And so it starts with a vulnerable person who is now bitter against God for what has happened to her. And in a short period of four verses, she has lost her husband, she's lost sons. And when we come to the end of the story, the end circles back on the beginning, and shows us how Naomi has moved from bitterness to joy, from death into life, because now she's looking forward to old age,

**David Capes**

Instead of fearing it right? Because it's a scary place to go when you're by yourself.

**Havilah Dharamraj**

And now she's looking forward to her old age. And she said she was empty. But now her lap is full, with little baby Obed. When the book started, the women of Bethlahem said, 'Oh, can this be Nomi?' Nomi, meaning pleasant. Even the name itself now is almost not sitting well with who she is having come back like this a widow. Can this be Naomi? And she said 'No, don't even call me Naomi. Don't even call me by the word pleasant. Call me bitter instead'. And now those same women who said, 'Oh, is this Nomi?', now at the end of the book, they're saying, 'Look, Naomi, she has a son.' and they congratulating her. And so where the book begins with the loss of Naomi's two sons, interestingly, in Hebrew, it's not sons, but children. Yeah. And so she's lost two children, grown children. But now when you come to the end of the book, she's gained two, she's gained that little fella Obed, who's bouncing up and down on her knee. And she's gained, ironically, a son in Ruth, Ruth whom she totally disregarded.

**David Capes**

Yeah, it was interesting, because I had not seen that before. Maybe I read it, but it didn't ever strike me. Ruth as a son.

**Havilah Dharamraj**

Exactly. Because she says, I've come back empty if Ruth didn't even count. That's what she says in chapter one. But when we've come to chapter four, the neighbors are pointing out to her that she has a son in Ruth. Better to her than seven sons. Now, that's an affirmation. High praise.

**David Capes**

High praise. Indeed. I mean, so that means the daughter-in-law, well, we would say the daughter-in-law has just a profound effect upon Naomi. So why do they call it Ruth and not Naomi you think?

**Havilah Dharamraj**

Simply because the book in Judaism has traditionally been read for the festival of Shavuot? Which is the Festival of Weeks, the Harvest Festival. The festival of in-gathering. It's traditionally been read then. And why? For several reasons. One, maybe because the setting of the book is agrarian. There's fields and there's a wheat harvest, there's a barley harvest, maybe that but more because this festival also celebrates the giving of the law. You see 50 days from when Israel left Egypt and arrived at the foot of Mount Sinai is when they received the law. And so the law, interestingly is closely tied to Ruth. Ruth is the model executor of the law, the observant...

**Havilah Dharamraj**

She's the observant outsider. She's this Moabite, who's sort of comes into this community.

**Havilah Dharamraj**

And she's not even a man, she's a woman. And she is held up as someone who respected the law, appropriated it and tried to enact it. Execute it, even. So, in chapter three, she's at the threshing floor with Boaz. Here, I wonder if Naomi hadn't hatched a rather dodgy scheme. And trap Boaz, who's now is drunk and you know, he's not responsible for his actions. So I don't know what Nomi had in mind. But that's where Ruth moves beyond the script that her mother-in-law has given her. So when Boaz wakes up and says, 'And who are you?', she says, 'look, this is who I am. I am a relative to you. And by law, you owe it to me to marry me, you are my kinsman redeemer, she says. So she speaks the words of the law at a time, like you said, if this is set in the period of the Judges, we know how lawless it was. So even though there was the law, and it was in disuse. So here's Ruth, appropriating the law, and asking for it to be executed. And so perhaps, that is why this book is traditionally read and right to this day, at a festival that commemorates the reception of the law.

**David Capes**

The law, and then that wheat harvest too as well. I hadn't thought about that. But Ruth too, now has moved into the kingly line, the royal line, right? I mean, that's, an important part, the book ends with a genealogy, a genealogy that I think Matthew probably picks up in the New Testament, at least certain parts. I don't know how many generations

**Havilah Dharamraj**

10

**David Capes**

Is it 10 generations?

**Havilah Dharamraj**

Yeah, but it might be a bit telescoped, you know, just like Matthew's genealogy. It might not have all the younger generations, they'd usually telescope it for stylistic reasons. So maybe the 10 generations, the number corresponds to the 10 years with which the book starts, 10 years they'd stay 10 years in Moab, and it was 10 years of barrenness, neither Orpah nor, Ruth had sons. So that's a barren widow, you know, and when the book ends, it's 10 generations, you know, reeling off into the future and ending with a king. Yeah, and you can't have a more dramatic reversal of a person's story.

**David Capes**

So if there's any one big idea to your lecture tonight, what is that big idea from Ruth?

**Havilah Dharamraj**

For me reading as South Asian, I'm seeing in it, at least three themes that speak to the heart of anyone who thinks of themselves as vulnerable in society. There is the theme of widowhood. There is the theme of the barren or the infertile woman. There is the theme of a woman being set aside and not really counted, simply because she's a woman. That's Ruth. And so I'm looking at those three themes. And I'm thinking those match the profiles of the vulnerable, to be a widow, to be unfruitful and barren, and to even just be a woman These are vulnerable places, to be. And to have a book in which the two main protagonists, two out of the three protagonists, all of these things, women, and widows, and barren. That is something really big for me.

**Havilah Dharamraj**

That is-okay. That's exciting. I mean, I'm looking forward to it. I'm really looking forward even as man looking forward to it in this.

**Havilah Dharamraj**

Yeah. So that's why it's somewhat sad that Ruth, at least in my country, is often relegated to women's Bible studies. When, like we said, just now, it's read at a festival to commemorate the ideal Israelite and that idealism like that, Torah, observant Israelite is really a Moabite and a women.

**David Capes**

Yeah. Fantastic. Well, this is gonna be great. Thank you for being here and coming all the way from Bangalore, India, to the Lanier Library in Houston, Texas, and being a part of this, Havilah. God bless you. Thank you so much.

**Havilah Dharamraj**

My pleasure, David. God bless.

**David Capes**

Standby for a nugget of wisdom from our guest, Dr. Havilah, Dharamaraj.

**David Capes**

One of the things I love about doing these podcasts is that inevitably, I learned something, whether I wanted to or not. And I did and I hope you enjoyed that as much as I did. For more info about our guests, check out our show notes. They're there for you. Subscribe to the podcast. We'd love to hear from you. Leave us a comment- rate us. You know the drill. We're on Apple and Google and Spotify and iHeartRadio and Stitcher and other places. I want to say thanks to those that make this podcast possible. Cathy Capes, Jocyln Soliz , Phil Keaggy, and the Lanier Foundation. Let's give it up for them. Cue the applause track. Thanks for listening.

**Havilah Dharamraj**

In my part of the world when we wish to pass on wisdom, we tell a story. And so this is a story of a man who was walking through a forest and he turned the corner, and there he saw a tiger trapped in a cage. And as he passed the tiger rather fearfully the tiger said to him, 'Please, could you let me out of this cage?' And the man said, 'Let you out, of course not. You want to jump on me?' And the tiger said, 'No, no, no, not not, not you, not you. Because I'm going to be so grateful to you, you will be my benefactor. And of course, I'm not going to harm you'. So the man thought for a bit, and then he had pity on the tiger. And he let the tiger out. And the minute the tiger came out, the tiger went on to be a tiger and said, 'Good, here's my snack'. And of course, the man was totally taken aback. And he pleaded, and as this conversation was going on, a fox came around. The fox said, 'What's going on here?' And the man proceeded to tell the story. And he implored the fox to adjudicate, and the fox said, 'Right, now let me get this straight. So here was a tiger and it was walking along the path. And the man was in the cage?' And the tiger, very impatient for that snack said', 'No, no, no, no, that's not the way it was'. And the fox said, 'Okay, let me get this right. So the man was walking along the tiger. He was the man he was walking along, and cage was in the tiger?' The tiger was furious. 'Of course, that that wasn't how it was. Let me show you, you silly old fox'. said the tiger and the tiger jumped in the cage. And I think you know what happened next, the fox slammed the door shut and that was the end of the tiger. The moral of the story, well, there are many. The moral of the story, one of them can be, keep going, don't get detained by tigers, tigers, people or habits that have the potential to do you a lot of harm. Don't play with tigers. Don't let tigers detain you. Just keep going. Keep going in the will of God. Keep going in the great plan that He has for you. And let the Tigers be.