Would You Tear Down This Statue?

This statue of Ruth stands in a kibbutz in Israel. Modern day Israeli kibbutzes quite often have statues of Ruth, to reflect something about work ethic or Israelite identity, or both. If you came across this statue, what would your reaction be? Would you be inclined to tear it down – in line with current trends in virtue signalling, cancel culture etc – in order to express an opinion about Israel's treatment of Palestinians, or about Boaz's exercise of male privilege in 'redeeming' Ruth, or perhaps about Ruth and Boaz's inappropriate overnight tryst on the threshing floor?

Perhaps, instead, the statue would represent to you other things: the dignity of women, the inclusion of foreigners, or the power of biblical stories?

Ruth's story is extraordinary for many reasons. One is that such a short biblical book stands for, and represents, so many different things. For many readers today, Ruth is a loved romantic story in which the downtrodden heroine, through extraordinary displays of devotion, finds love and acceptance. For others it is a story of profound relationship between a same-gendered couple. For those versed in ancient Israelite politics around Moabites and inter-ethnic marriage, it may be viewed either as a refreshingly inclusive and accepting story of integration, or, conversely, an expression of Ezra's exclusivism (in its portrayal of the totality of rejection of non-Israelite identity that is required for a foreigner to be assimilated into Israel).

For me, because I am an Old Testament scholar and former lawyer, it is something yet again – a fabulous story of resistance through politically subversive storytelling. All the way through the story, under the surface, its authors are engaging with the laws of Deuteronomy, and with the identity politics of the late 6th Cent. BC. The dangerous politics of a story in which one of the ancestors of King David is exposed as Moabite (cf. Deut 23:3) are camouflaged by the story's setting in the time of the judges (centuries earlier), in the domestic sphere, with prominent female characters and a heart-warming central 'romance'.

So the story of Ruth helps me to reflect on the politics of today, and the ways in which we tell stories, and especially stories about events and people from the past. It helps me to see how a single story can look incredibly different when seen from different perspectives, and therefor how somebody with an axe to grind could choose to tell it in a particular way. If it is possible for both feminists and their opponents to claim that Ruth's story supports their

views (which they can, without any trouble), then perhaps we ought be a little careful about how we evaluate people and events from our more recent past.

In its own time, religious people could very well have decided to 'cancel' or bury Ruth's story. It is, after all, sexually scandalous, quite apart from anything else. It is clear from Boaz's concern, in Chapter 3, that his workers shouldn't know that there had been a young woman lying next to his 'feet' (in Hebrew a euphemism for 'genitals') on the threshing floor all night, that this was a highly 'unusual' occurrence. But Ruth and her story weren't cancelled or buried. And today Ruth is generally remembered with admiration and affection.

The clearest indication of how Ruth was regarded *in biblical times* is to be found in the first chapter of Matthew's gospel. Matthew begins with a long 'genealogy', like the little one at the end of Ruth. The genealogy traces Joseph's family line back to Abraham, via David, and it actually mentions Ruth by name. It was very, very unusual for a genealogy to include the names of women, but Matthew included five! Equally remarkably, all of them were a little bit sexually scandalous and most were foreigners. Three of them, apart from Ruth, feature in the Old Testament: Tamar dressed up like a prostitute and had became pregnant by her father-in-law, Rahab *was* a prostitute and Bathsheba was 'taken' for a wife by David after he saw her washing herself on her roof. The fifth woman was Mary, an unmarried mother.

Why might Matthew have included Ruth and these other morally questionable women? The answer seems to be that in addition to being sexually suspect, each woman had exercised a remarkable degree of righteousness: Tamar ensured that her dead Israelite husband had a son to perpetuate his name and Ruth did the same, Rahab (a non-Israelite) harboured Israelite spies and Mary, of course, was the 'Theotokos' or 'God-bearer'. You could argue that Mary was essentially passive in her righteousness, but perhaps Bathsheba who can be envisaged as a 'hinge' between the active righteousness of the earlier women, and the passivity of Mary who, like Bathsheba (identified only as 'the wife of Uriah'), had a righteous husband (Uriah refused to sleep with his wife while his men were in military combat and Joseph forbore from sending Mary away).

Matthew didn't allow the sexual improprieties of Ruth and the other women to cancel out their righteousness. You could argue that he did the opposite of virtue signalling – boldly proclaiming Mary's unmarried status at the beginning of his gospel. Matthew wanted to declare a new standard of righteousness – not the standard of Deuteronomy and Ezra, and not the standard of 'woke' or 'cancel culture' either – but rather a 'greater righteousness' in which the least likely, most-often-shunned, people perform acts of fidelity and help to build the kingdom. This is the message that Matthew's Jesus preaches. But it was there already in Ruth.

Would you tear down a statue of Ruth? Or would you erect one?