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Reading for Orpah: Rethinking the Bible's Marginal Characters (Part One)

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For the past several years, I've gotten obsessed with Orpah: Naomi's *other* Moabite daughter-in-law **in the biblical story of Ruth**.^[1] Often overshadowed by the story's eponymous hero, Orpah can be read as Ruth's opposite. When Ruth leaves everything to follow Naomi, Orpah returns to her people and her land. Ruth becomes an Israelite, Orpah remains a Moabite.

I've been interested in Orpah ever since reading Laura Donaldson's piece, "**The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes**."^[2] Donaldson urges us to rethink this character's often-maligned decision to remain a Moabite in light of contemporary assimilation pressures and erased cultures. What does it mean, she asks, to read Orpah's choice as brave instead of bad?

My course, The Bible and Ethics, encourages students to get curious about Orpah's story, to relate to her point of view, and to understand her choice to return home as intelligible, even heroic. This encouragement is part of a larger effort to humanize biblical characters that are often ignored or disparaged either within a given biblical story or in the history of its interpretation. If we can get curious about people less visible in a powerful text, the theory goes, it might prime us to see humanity more acutely elsewhere. The idea is to notice beauty, complexity, and pain in individuals and communities we have learned to ignore.

But this kind of reading and seeing is difficult. Getting curious about Orpah is particularly challenging both because we have learned to overlook her and because her biblical mentions are scant. Sometimes my students don't see the point. Why consider the story of Orpah when we have the compelling duo of Ruth and Naomi? Why follow Michal when we can think about her captivating husband, David? Why imagine the perspective of Lot's wife or of the children who die in the smoking ruins of Sodom and Jericho when Abraham, Lot himself, and Joshua are demanding our attention? The pull of the biblical authors' own attention is strong. Following the stories of Orpah, Michal, Lot's wife, or a child in Sodom is like sitting in a darkened theater and trying to keep track of a character who has left the stage. Maybe they never walked on stage to begin with. Either way, it would be easier to just keep watching the show.

Fortunately, we have examples of scholars and poets who have taken up the challenge of reading for characters whose stories have been lost, erased, or never written. **Saidiya Hartman's "critical fabulation"**[3] and **Wilda Gafney's "Womanist Midrash"**[4] offer cues and strategies to grapple with absence and to shine a light on individuals – fictional and actual, ancient and modern – whose presence we ignore.

I want to be clear that this way of reading rarely makes converts. And that's not really the point. Students, by and large, remain committed to our biblical protagonists and find accessing curiosity and empathy for marginal characters quite difficult. Poetry helps. Poetic re-imaginings of biblical stories are some of the most potent teaching tools I have both because they are pithy enough to be experienced collectively during a class meeting and because they invite us to explore the emotional quality of this kind of reading.

Natalie Diaz's "Of Course She Looked Back"[5] is a great example. Diaz's poem – affectingly unpacked by **Pádraig Ó Tuama in his Poetry Unbound podcast episode**[6] – witnesses the destruction of Sodom from the perspective of Lot's wife. What I love about this poem is where it begins. Of course Lot's wife looked back at the ruination of her adopted home, the poet declares. In fact, "you would have, too." As she fades from the biblical story, together with the silenced screams of Sodom's children, Lot's wife asks us to imagine ourselves as among the forgotten.

Notes & Bibliography

[1] <https://www.sefaria.org/Ruth.1?lang=en>

[2] <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9780470775080.ch10>

[3] <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/241115>

[4] <https://www.wjkbooks.com/Products/066423903X/womanist-midrash-volume-1.aspx>

[5] <https://onbeing.org/poetry/of-course-she-looked-back/>

[6] <https://onbeing.org/programs/natalie-diaz-of-course-she-looked-back/>

<https://wabash.center/2025/09/reading-for-orphah-rethinking-the-bibles-marginal-characters-part-one/>