

The Book of Ruth

Medieval to Modern

אל תפגעי בי לעזבך
לשוב שאחריו כי אל
אשר תלכי אלך
ובאשר תליני
אליו עמך
עמי ואלהיו
אלהיו



Director's Foreword

Famine and flight. Emigration and immigration. Foreignness. These are some of the societal issues touched upon by the anonymous author of the Bible's book of Ruth. The story tells us how hunger drives Naomi and her family from their home. There is famine in the land. Settling abroad, they find food, but tragedy strikes: Naomi's husband and two sons die unexpectedly. The widow must return to her people. Ruth, her widowed daughter-in-law, refuses to abandon Naomi and emigrates with her. Ruth is now the stranger in a foreign land. Suspicions run high. Boaz, a relative of Ruth's late husband and a wealthy landowner, does the right thing: he dutifully marries Ruth, the outsider. This marital resolution ultimately results in Ruth's becoming a great-grandmother of King David and, in the Christian tradition, an ancestor of Jesus Christ.

This exhibition celebrates the gift in 2018 by Joanna S. Rose of the Rose Book of Ruth to the Morgan Library & Museum. The accordion-fold vellum manuscript, measuring nine inches tall but an amazing eighteen feet long, was designed and illuminated by New York artist Barbara Wolff, who worked on the project for two years (2015–17). The complete biblical text of the book of Ruth is written in Hebrew on one side and in English on the other, the work of calligrapher Izzy Pludwinski. The Hebrew side features twenty colored illustrations and a continuous landscape, with accents and lettering in silver, gold, and platinum; the English side has forty images executed in black ink. The manuscript is housed in a modern "treasure binding," a custom-designed box covered in shot silk and decorated with 24-karat gold lettering that reads "Your people shall be my people and your God shall be my God" in Hebrew. The manuscript joins two other creations by Wolff in the Morgan's collection: *You Renew the Face of the Earth: Psalm 104* and the Rose Haggadah, both gifts of Joanna S. Rose in 2014, which were the subject of the 2015 exhibition *Hebrew Illumination for Our Time: The Art of Barbara Wolff*.

The Joanna S. Rose Illuminated Book of Ruth is juxtaposed with twelve manuscripts drawn from the Morgan's holdings that unfold the Christian traditions for illustrating the story of Ruth during the Middle Ages. These manuscripts, dating from the twelfth to the fifteenth century, encompass a variety of genres: Bibles, in Latin and French; a *Speculum humanae salvationis* (Mirror of Human Salvation); and three leaves from the Morgan's famed Crusader Bible, the text of which comprises Latin, Persian, and Judeo-Persian inscriptions. Through the conversations between these ancient works and the modern manuscript, visitors will discover how Wolff was inspired by the techniques of medieval illumination. Her approach to iconography, however, differs from that

of her medieval forebears. Medieval illuminators illustrated pivotal events in the biblical narrative by depicting the people involved—mainly Naomi and her family, Ruth, and Boaz—arrayed like characters on a stage set.

Wolff takes a different approach. On the Hebrew side of her manuscript, she paints few human figures, illustrating instead such elements as a landscape, harvest grains, flowers, a pivotal shoe, and a significant wedding belt to tell the story. The vignettes on the English side function almost like an archaeological gloss to the text, illustrating tools, weights, pottery, and other artifacts typical of the early Iron Age, in which the story is set. With no Jewish tradition for illustrating the book of Ruth, Wolff created her own illustrative scheme, one in which the characters are evocatively conjured up by the objects they would have touched, handled, or worn.

The Book of Ruth: Medieval to Modern is made possible by Joanna S. Rose, the David Berg Foundation, Joshua W. Sommer, and the David Klein, Jr. Foundation.

COLIN B. BAILEY
Director, The Morgan Library & Museum

An Illuminated Book of Ruth

Jews are known by their books—ancient sagas, collected laws, ethics, philosophy, prayers—words that chronicle a people’s historical journey and mark the passing seasons and festivals of the year. This narrative, the book of Ruth, is a beautiful example of a story in the Bible told from a woman’s perspective.

Most biblical narratives concern kings, priests, and warriors—the lives of men. In the book of Ruth, however, women’s voices speak to us from the world of the early Iron Age in the Middle East. They tell of lives lived in close contact with the natural world, dependent on the gifts of sun, rain, and dew, “each in its season.” In that ancient setting, women sustained the family, the tribe, and the community.

The book of Ruth speaks of courage and devotion. Ruth and Naomi craft the means of their survival, and their strength helps build the foundation of the House of David. Though each chapter has a distinct character, visual language, and ethical message, together they blend into a pastoral narrative set in the springtime ingathering of the grain. While the backdrop of the agricultural setting is a bountiful harvest, the story of Ruth begins with a phrase repeated for thousands of years: “And there was famine in the land.” These words reflect the precarious climate of the Middle East and the vulnerability of its inhabitants.

Illuminations and drawings that evoke the atmosphere of each chapter have been shaped by rabbinic commentary and folklore, natural phenomena, customs and agricultural practice, the occupations and tools of the people of that time and place, and the plants and animals familiar to them. The earliest physical form of the book of Ruth is suggested by its Hebrew title, *Megillat Ruth* (Scroll of Ruth). Although the text is now read in codex form, the Joanna S. Rose Illuminated Book of Ruth, with its joined but folded pages, preserves the feeling of a scroll.



The silk-covered box binding was designed to allow the manuscript to be read from either the Hebrew or English side. The text on the front cover was crafted by master silversmith Joshua Marrow, who fashioned the Hebrew letters from 24-karat gold.

The Hebrew Side

A PANORAMA FROM BETH-LECHEM TO MOAB TO JERUSALEM

The colored images on the Hebrew side of the Rose Book of Ruth are united by a painted border that, over the course of twenty-four pages, traces the geographic arc of Naomi and Ruth’s story. It follows the journey from a Beth-Lechem (literally, “house of bread”) in famine to the fertile fields of Moab, and a return to a once again bountiful Beth-Lechem. The border chronicles the grain harvest—ripening barley, awaiting the reapers and gleaners, and wheat, awaiting harvest under a setting sun. Finally, envisioning a future foretold by the book’s concluding genealogy, it depicts Jerusalem, city of David, set on a hilltop amid the forests of the Judean mountains.





PERFUME AND FLOWERS

“Bathe, anoint yourself with perfume,” Naomi advises Ruth. “Dress festively and go down to the threshing floor and do not reveal yourself to the man until he has finished eating and drinking.” This, she tells her, in preparation for Ruth’s nighttime visit to Boaz.

In the biblical world of the early Iron Age, ointments and perfumes compounded of oils, aromatic resins, spices, and fragrant flowers were precious and reserved for important occasions. I illustrated this passage with some of the plants—almond, lavender, and jasmine, among others—that could have been used to make Ruth’s perfume.

THE THRESHING FLOOR

In the narrative, Ruth has her nocturnal encounter with her future husband, Boaz, at Beth-Lechem’s threshing floor, a meeting that changes the direction of the story. There are many references to threshing floors in biblical literature, some literal, others symbolic. To mark the end of a plague sent as punishment, God commands



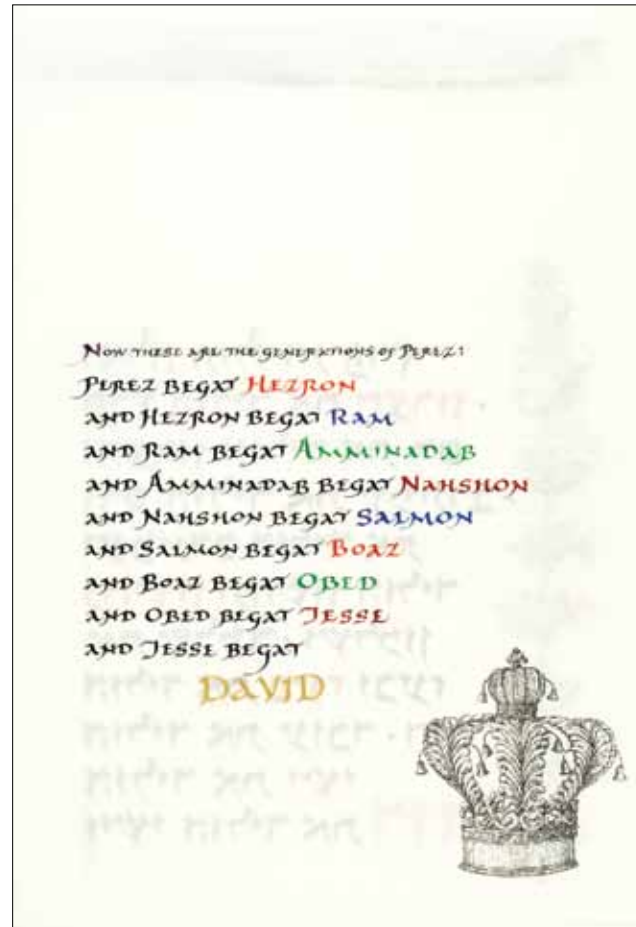
David to buy the site of a threshing floor from its owner, Ornan, and to build there a sacrificial altar. King Solomon, David’s son, later builds the Temple of Jerusalem on that site. For me, it was but a short distance from the threshing floor to the

building plan for Solomon’s structure, which I based on a drawing by the great twelfth-century philosopher Maimonides.

WEDDING BELT

The entire community witnesses and blesses Boaz’s declaration that he intends to take Ruth as his wife. In ancient times, Boaz’s public statement of intent before the town would most likely have comprised the entire marriage ceremony.

Ruth’s ornate wedding girdle is based on the festive clothing of Bedouin and Yemenite women—both ancient and modern. Their brightly woven wedding belts are sewn with hammered silver ornaments, tinkling silver bells, colored beads, and cowrie-shell amulets.



THE MYRTLE AND GENEALOGY

Myrtle, with its evergreen and delightfully fragrant leaves, has since ancient times been a symbol of the continuity of life, strength, and vitality. With its ability to flourish in adverse conditions, growing stronger and more abundant, the plant is a potent image of survival and renewal. A sprig of myrtle marks the lineage of David, revered king of Israel.

The genealogy at the conclusion of the Rose Book of Ruth pays tribute to those whose practice of *hesed* (kindness) made that lineage possible and links the time of the Judges (when Ruth's story took place) to the birth of the Israelite monarchy. Shown here are the genealogies from both the Hebrew and English sides of the manuscript.

The English Side

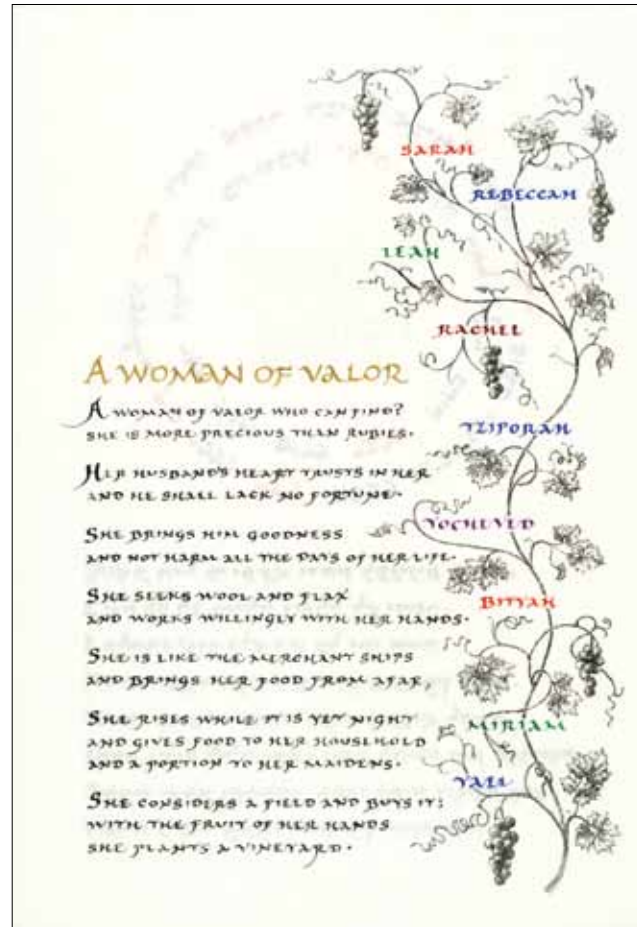
Although written no earlier than the sixth century BCE, the book of Ruth is set in the early Iron Age, 1200–1000 BCE, the period before the Israelite monarchy or, as the text says, “In the days when the Judges judged.” The age of the Judges (more precisely, chieftains or military leaders) was a lawless time when there was no king in Israel and “every man did that which was right in his own eyes.” It is described as an era of crises and intratribal conflict, filled with unease and violence.

Against this backdrop of anarchy, the author of the book of Ruth contrasts a tale of *hesed*: of kindness, generosity, loyalty, and of responsibility for the poor, the stranger, the widow. It chronicles the lives of ordinary people in the pastoral setting of the grain harvest.

The intent of the pen-and-ink drawings accompanying this English translation is to expand and supplement the illuminations on the Hebrew text. The drawings set the scene of a small hill town in ancient Israel and the domestic lives of its inhabitants—their surroundings, occupations, customs, and foods.

Among the household possessions of the people of Beth-Lechem, one might have found a highly polished bronze mirror or a bone comb, a lyre, a beer jug, a wooden threshing fork, or a sieve.





A WOMAN OF VALOR

Although the actions of Ruth and Naomi ensured the future Kingdom of Israel, women are excluded from the book's concluding genealogy, an omission I have always found unsatisfying. As the creator of this manuscript, I have added (on both the Hebrew and English sides) to this traditional ending the final verses of Proverbs, known as "A Woman of Valor." Since the sixteenth century, it has been the custom in some Jewish homes to chant these lines at the beginning of the Sabbath as a celebration of women—their wisdom, courage, and kindness.

—BARBARA WOLFF—



The Book of Ruth: The Medieval Tradition

SUMMARY IN A SINGLE INITIAL

In contrast to the lush illustrations of the Joanna S. Rose Illuminated Book of Ruth, it was the medieval tradition to give the text of the book of Ruth a single picture. The elaborate suite of sixteen scenes that unfold in the Morgan's famous Crusader Bible (discussed below) is a grand exception to this custom.

In this leaf from a large, folio-sized Bible from the thirteenth century, however, that single picture—the initial *I* that commences the biblical text (*In diebus unius iudicis*, "In the days of one of the judges")—summarizes the story's entire narrative arc. Beginning at the top is Naomi, departing Bethlehem Judah (the name of Bethlehem in the Christian tradition) for Moab because of famine (her husband, Elimelech, is not shown). Below, their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, accompany her. All three use walking sticks, medieval emblems of those on a long journey. Beneath the boys are their future wives, Ruth and Orpah. Shown next is Naomi's return journey to Bethlehem with her daughter-in-law Ruth following the deaths of Naomi's husband and two sons. Below them is the depiction of Ruth's wedding to Boaz. The next two images show the fruit of that marriage: their son, Obed, followed by his son, Jesse, the future father of King David. This series of scenes highlights the important role Ruth played as a progenitor of the royal House of David.

RUTH'S BACKSTORY

During the Middle Ages, Bibles and other religious manuscripts followed two main iconographic traditions for the single picture customarily used to illustrate the book of Ruth. One tradition depicted the event described in the text's opening words: Naomi, her husband, Elimelech, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, departing famine-stricken Bethlehem for Moab. It may strike today's viewers as odd that Ruth—the protagonist of the narrative, who later in the story marries one of Elimelech and Naomi's sons—is nowhere to be seen in the single picture that illustrates the book that carries her name. Medieval artists, however, often illustrated the first

Single leaf from a Bible, in Latin; France, ca. 1260. Gift of the Estate of Belle da Costa Greene, 1951; MS M.851.1, detail.



Bible, in French; France, Paris, ca. 1275–80, illustrated by the Charlemagne Master and the Paris-Acre Master. Purchased by Pierpont Morgan, 1912; MS M.494, fol. 169r, detail.



Speculum humanae salvationis (Mirror of Human Salvation), in Latin and Dutch; Belgium, Bruges, ca. 1450, illuminated by a Master of the Gold Scrolls. Purchased by Pierpont Morgan, 1909; MS M.385, fols. 28v–29r, details.

lines of a text they were commissioned to illuminate, and in the opening event of the story, Ruth is literally out of the picture.

The highly burnished gold illumination in the background of the image, typical of the High Gothic era, is of the type that inspires artist Barbara Wolff.

NAOMI'S DESPAIR

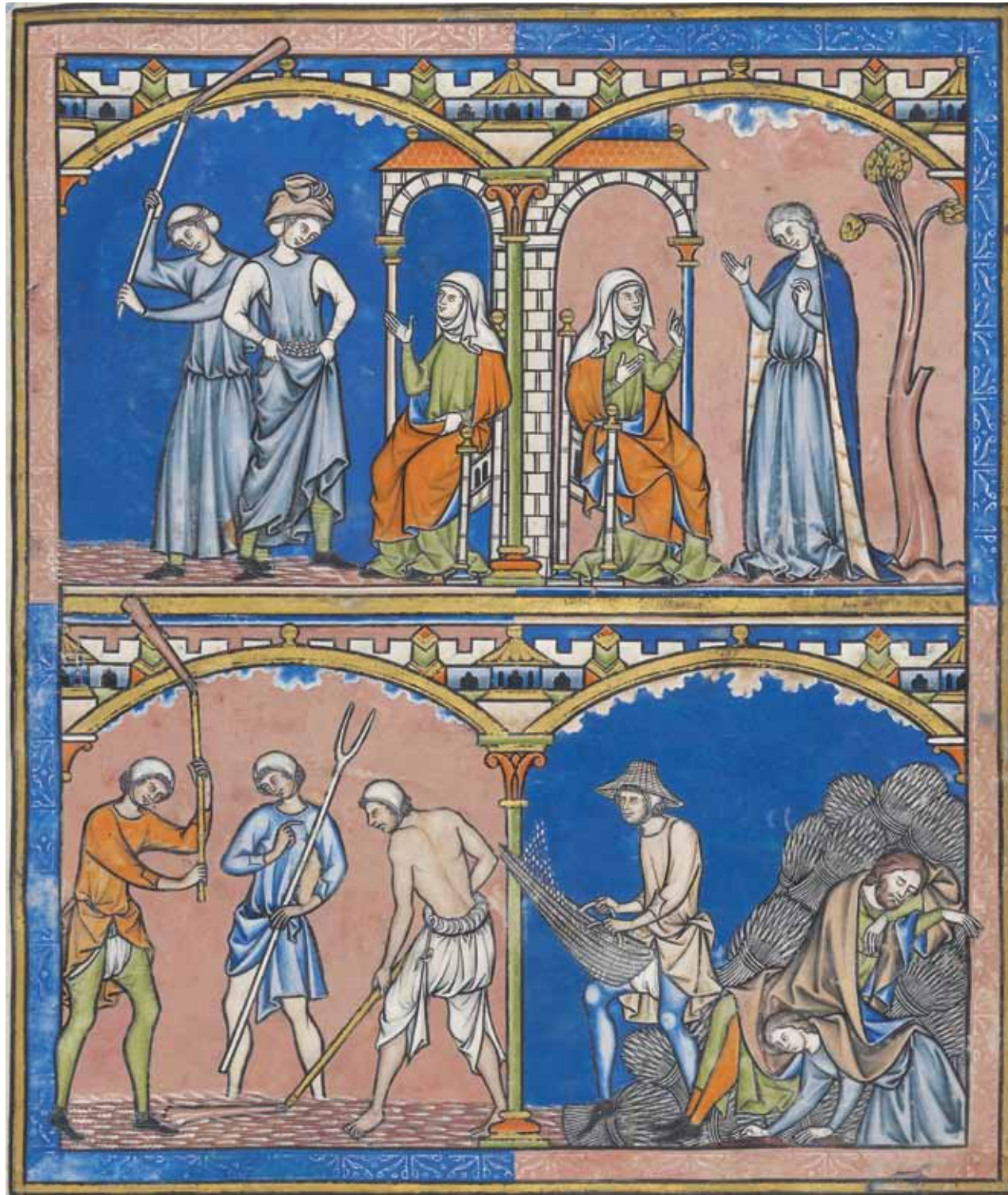
The *Mirror of Human Salvation* was one of the more popular medieval tracts on typology—the theology of identifying people or episodes in the Old Testament as prefigurations for people or events of the New Testament. At the far left is the Deposition, the moment when the Virgin Mary receives the dead body of Christ from the cross. As illustrated in the scenes that follow, her great sorrow was prefigured by three Old Testament events: Jacob's shock upon seeing the bloody coat of his (presumably dead) son Joseph; Adam and Eve's mourning their murdered son, Abel; and, lastly, Naomi's lamenting the deaths of her husband and two sons. In the Bible, she wails, "Do not call me Naomi [beautiful], but call me Mara [bitter]." The two figures flanking Naomi represent the women of Bethlehem. Ruth had accompanied

Naomi on her return to Bethlehem and, entering the city with her, heard her complaint. Although she is not depicted, Ruth's presence is implied: the first chapter of her book is authoritatively cited as the source of the episode—*Ruth p[ri]mo cap[itulo]*—at the foot of the image.

AN UNUSUALLY ELABORATE CYCLE

In a rare exception to the medieval norm, the Morgan's famous Crusader Bible contains an elaborate Ruth cycle with a suite of sixteen separate scenes spread over five folios. The cycle begins, as does the Joanna S. Rose Illuminated Book of Ruth (see the illustrations on the front and back covers), with Ruth's refusal to leave her mother-in-law, Naomi, and their return to Bethlehem Judah together. It continues with illustrations of Boaz allowing Ruth to glean in his fields and inviting her to share a meal with him.

In the leaf reproduced on page 12, Ruth threshes her gleanings and brings the grain to an appreciative Naomi, the second major pictorial tradition in medieval treatments of the book of Ruth. Upon learning that the field where Ruth has



Crusader Bible, added inscriptions in Latin, Persian, and Judeo-Persian; France, Paris, ca. 1250. Purchased by J. P. Morgan, Jr., 1916; MS M.638, fols. 18r (facing page) and 19r (above), details.

gleaned belongs to Boaz, Naomi tells her that he is her kinsman. She counsels Ruth to perfume herself and put on her best garments. In the image at bottom, workers finish threshing Boaz's crop as Ruth quietly slips in to where Boaz sleeps and, following Naomi's instruction, uncovers his feet and lies down. The back of this folio, continuing the narrative, depicts Boaz's agreeing to marry Ruth.

The Ruth cycle in the Crusader Bible concludes in the top register of the folio shown above. Ruth, now the wife of Boaz, has had a son, Obed. Still abed, she gestures toward Naomi, who gently holds the infant. Prescient neighboring women congratulate the family upon the birth of a son who will be the grandfather of King David.

MARRIAGE OF RUTH AND BOAZ

The initial / commencing the book of Ruth in this Bible is illustrated by a rare scene of Ruth and Boaz in bed. This is their marriage bed, in which they sleep peacefully. (The scene is not to be confused with Ruth's prostration at the feet of Boaz at the threshing floor, as seen in the Crusader Bible.) The marriage bed, signifying future

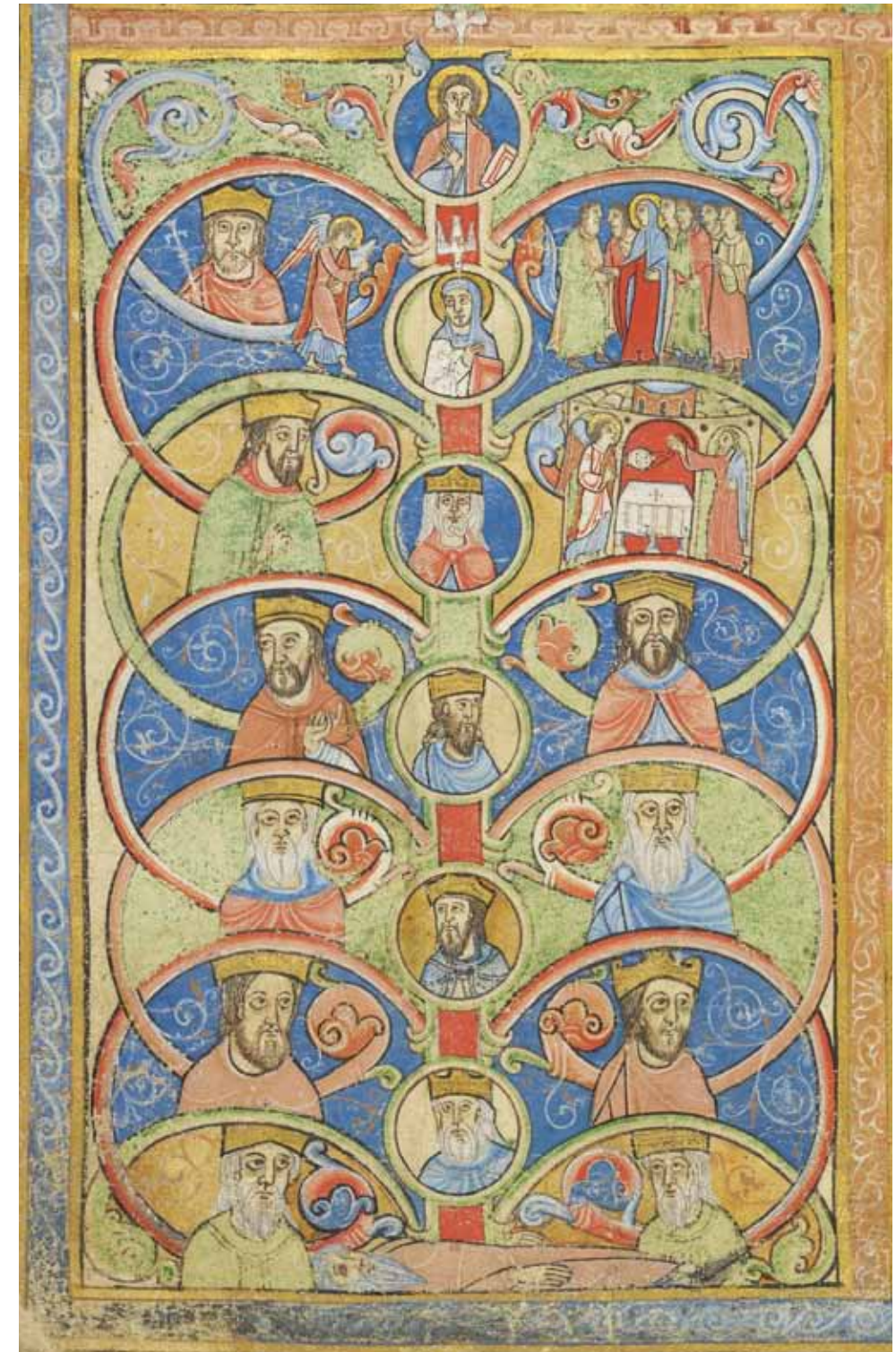


Bible, in Latin; Bohemia, Prague or Raudnitz, 1391, illuminated by the Samson Master, the Morgan Master, and others. Purchased in 1950; MS M.833, fol. 88r, detail.

progeny and domestic stability, represents the successful resolution of the difficulties that Ruth endured in her widowhood and upon her arrival in Bethlehem.

TREE OF JESSE

The Tree of Jesse is the medieval visualization of Isaiah's prophecy that the Messiah would spring from the family of Jesse, father of King David. In this detail from a twelfth-century Psalter, the prone Jesse sprouts a vigorous genealogical tree, the first member of which, represented by the bust of a crowned man in the lowest roundel, is no doubt David. The top of the tree represents the Christian climax of the genealogy: the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ. In Christian theology, Ruth played an essential role in this lineage as the mother of Jesse's father, Obed; as the great-grandmother of David, Ruth is thus also an ancestor of the Savior.



Leaf from the Eadwine Psalter; England, Canterbury, Christ Church Priory, ca. 1150. Purchased in 1927; MS M.724v, detail.

—ROGER S. WIECK—

BARBARA WOLFF

New York artist Barbara Wolff, one of today's foremost illuminators and illustrators, has exhibited at New York's Society of Illustrators, the Jewish Theological Seminary, Yeshiva University Museum, the Museum of Biblical Art, the Jewish Museum of Prague, and the Morgan Library & Museum. She has produced several films on the techniques of manuscript illumination: *The Prato Haggadah: Making of a Manuscript* for the Jewish Theological Seminary; *An Illumination in the Rothschild Miscellany* for the Israel Museum; and *Creating the Rose Haggadah: An Illuminated Manuscript for the 21st Century* and *Your People Shall Be My People* for the Morgan Library & Museum.

IZZY PLUDWINSKI

Calligrapher Izzy Pludwinski is a freelance calligrapher and teacher of calligraphy who lives in Jerusalem. He studied at the Roehampton Institute in London. He has established Hebrew calligraphy courses in both Jerusalem and London and lectured at the Emunah College Symposium. His various commissions include special-edition Haggadot, work for the Israeli President's Office, a fine edition of the Song of Songs, and Hebrew lettering for the St. John's Bible. He is responsible for both the Hebrew and English calligraphy in the Joanna S. Rose Illuminated Book of Ruth.



Still frames from *Your People Shall Be My People*: applying silver leaf and writing Hebrew calligraphy.

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FRONT COVER: *Naomi and Ruth Embracing*, from the Joanna S. Rose Illuminated Book of Ruth, in Hebrew and English; New York and Jerusalem, 2015–17, designed and illuminated by Barbara Wolff. Gift of Joanna S. Rose, 2018; MS M.1210, fol. 7r, detail.

BACK COVER: *Orpah Demurs While Ruth Joins Naomi*, from the Crusader Bible, added inscriptions in Latin, Persian, and Judeo-Persian; France, Paris, ca. 1250. Purchased by J. P. Morgan, Jr., 1916; MS M.638, fol. 17r, detail.

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