
Interpretation Bible Studies Leader's Helps—Esther and Ruth

The IBS Leader Helps are designed to facilitate group study by providing lesson plans for the ten units in each of the Interpretation Bible Studies. These lesson plans utilize a variety of interactive methods, which have been chosen for the express purpose of engaging participants in the learning process. Each participant in the group should have a copy of the IBS study book and should make a commitment to do the assigned preparation for each session.

The sessions are planned for one hour. If the time allotted is shorter than an hour, it will be necessary to be selective about the activities, choosing those that are most appropriate for your group.

Leader Preparation

- *Read the books of Esther and Ruth* in their entirety before beginning to teach. It is important to familiarize yourself with the overall content of the two books, so you can see how the individual passages fit into the larger scope of the book.
- *Skim through the whole study book* to discern its flow. This is especially helpful if there are multiple teachers, in order to prevent leaping ahead into the next lesson.
- *Prepare the room ahead of time.* For informal discussion and ease of sharing, a semicircular arrangement of chairs works best. Position yourself as one of the group, instead of setting yourself apart as “the authority.”
- *Secure necessary teaching aids.* A newsprint easel is an invaluable asset. Be sure to have markers and masking tape if you wish to display the sheets for future reference. A map of the ancient world in Old Testament times is very helpful. Check

the teaching suggestions for other necessary materials, such as hymnals, paper, pencils, art materials, and so on.

- *Prepare necessary handouts.* A folder for each participant's handouts is helpful, but not essential.
- *Keep the key idea firmly in mind.* Make sure all activities point participants toward this goal.
- *Pray for God's guidance.* Prior to making preparations for the session, allow time to pray for each participant and for yourself.

Parties, Politics, and Power (Esther 1:1–2:4)

Key Idea: The beginning of the story of Esther, while not directly mentioning God, does broaden our view of scripture and of the concerns and modes of speaking in God’s Word.

Advance Preparation

- Read each book out loud as a group before beginning the study. If you decide to use this approach, you may want to set aside an hour to read Esther as a Reader’s Theater before beginning, and another hour to read Ruth in the same way before beginning Unit 7. You can find a list of characters of both books on pp. 1–2.
- On a large sheet of newsprint paper, a chalkboard, or a white board, print the names of the books of the Bible.
- If the members of your group have little knowledge of the history of Israel, refer to a timeline of Old Testament history (check in your church library for a history of the Old Testament, or ask your pastor or educator for a resource). Print on newsprint or the chalkboard the following couplet:

V VASHTI for Pride
Was set aside

- Also print on newsprint the list of characters in Esther from the sidebar on p. 1.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. **Sing a hymn.** Invite the group to sing “God of Grace and God of Glory” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal* #420).

2. Pray. Pray the following or a prayer of your own choosing:

*God of grace and God of glory,
As we come together to study your word,
We ask that you would open our eyes and ears.
Make us receptive to your word.
Grant us wisdom, grant us courage. Amen.*

Presentation (20 minutes)

3. Introduce the study. Call participants' attention to the list of the books of the Bible that you posted. Ask: What do you notice about this list? Someone will probably identify it as the books of the Bible; allow them to make other observations about the books. Then ask: How many of these books seem to carry the name of a person? Allow them time to count, then point out that there are forty books carrying someone's name. Ask: How many are named for women? Note that only the books of Esther and Ruth bear the names of women.

Point out the list of characters you prepared from the book of Esther. Ask: What important biblical character is missing? (God) Tell participants that although this book is important to both Christian and Jewish traditions, the versions in our scriptures are different. They will examine these differences later in the study.

Summarize for participants the information on p. 1 and the top of p. 2 in the introduction. Then read the following paragraph from Esther (*Interpretation A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching: Esther* by Carol Bechtel):

The one unalterable fact of life for Jews in the book of Esther is *limited power* . . . For readers who have gone canoeing, the situation could be compared to trying to steer from the front of the canoe. It *can* be done, but only with a lot of exhausting effort, and even then, not always successfully. Esther and Mordecai spend the entire book trying to steer from the front of the canoe. (p. 11)

Ask if anyone in the group has had the experience of canoeing. What are some of the dangers of trying to steer

from the front? What are some of the challenges? Have participants ever had the experience of trying to wield power in this way?

- 4. Examine the uniqueness of Esther and Ruth.** Point out that both of these stories are freestanding narratives—short stories independent of the primary storyline of the Bible.

Discuss the following: Given the invisibility of women in Old Testament culture, why do you think these two books are included in our canon? Jot down observations on newsprint and set aside until the end of the study.

Exploration (20 minutes)

- 5. Set the context.** Quickly set the context for the story. If the members of your group have little knowledge of the history of Israel, refer to a timeline of Old Testament history.

The place: If you have a map of the Persian Empire, refer participants to it as you point out the setting for the book of Esther: Persia's capital city, Susa. Otherwise, group members can find Susa just north of the Persian Gulf on the map on p. 7.

The time: The time is the early fifth century B.C.E. (that is, Before the Christian Era). The Jews are living here as a result of the Babylonian Exile. That empire was overthrown by Cyrus of Persia.

Point out the historical inconsistencies in the story. Then ask someone to read the sidebar on p. 6. What other examples of this kind of truth can they name?

- 6. Discuss more inconsistencies.** Ask someone to read aloud Esther 1:1–9 (or if you read the book in its entirety as a Reader's Theater, have them refer to that passage). Tell participants that a clue as to how we may need to read the book is found in the very first verse: closer to thirty provinces are known to have been under Persian control at this time, not 127 provinces. Ask them to scan the passage and name other details of this banquet that hint at wild exaggeration. Then ask someone to read verse 9, the description of Queen Vashti's banquet. Why is this description so brief?

- 7. Read Vashti's refusal.** Ask participants to silently read Esther 1:10–22 as well as the section “The Refusal of the Queen” (pp. 9–10). Call participants' attention to the couplet you printed on newsprint or the chalkboard:

V VASHTI for Pride
Was set aside

Tell participants that this was an entry in the *New England Primer*; one of the earliest texts used in our country. Then discuss Question 2 (Questions for Reflection, p. 12).

- 8. Put on a beauty pageant, conscription, or —?** Ask someone to read aloud chapter 2:1–4. Then ask a volunteer to tell the story of Cinderella. Are there parallels? Contrasts? Let participants read over the information on pp. 10–12. Then have them respond to Questions 3 and 4 on p. 12.

Response (10 minutes)

- 9. Respond in writing or drawing.** Choose one of the following as a way to have participants respond:
- Write new couplets.* Suggest that participants write some new couplets for a “new” New England primer that reflect their assessment so far of the characters of King Ahasuerus and Queen Vashti.
 - Lifestyles of the rich and famous.* Tell participants that the word *banquet* used here could more accurately be translated “drinking parties.” Have them write a brief description of how these banquet scenes might be described today, or draw a sketch or a cartoon of the scene.

Closing (5 minutes)

- 10. Reflect.** On p. 5 Patricia Tull describes what she calls “having an Esther moment” for the many times when themes from the book seemed to rise up and envelope a moment of personal or

community life. Ask participants to reflect silently on times or places where people, especially women, in the world must live in difficult circumstances not of their making.

11. Pray. Pray this closing prayer:

God of Wisdom, God of courage, grant us those qualities as we respond to a world where excesses often seem to rule and where people without power or voice, especially women, suffer because of it. Grant us wisdom; grant us courage, for the living of this hour. Amen.

Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 2, “Personnel, Programs—and Pogroms” and reflect on the sidebar on p. 15. They should be ready to respond to this question: How is our culture like that of ancient Persia as presented in the book of Esther? How can the church respond?

2

Personnel, Programs—and Pogroms (Esther 2:5–3:15)

Key Idea: Remaining faithful in a cultural context indifferent or hostile to the life of faith was Esther’s challenge—and ours.

Advance Preparation

Storyboard the events in the book up to this point: On separate sheets of colored construction paper, print the following:

- King Ahasuerus holds an extravagant drinking party.
- He sends for Queen Vashti, who refuses to come.
- The king’s officials suggest that Vashti has wronged the king and that she will influence other wives to disobey their husbands. Therefore, by written decree she is to be banished from the king’s presence and her position as queen is to be given to another.
- The king sends letters to all the provinces declaring every man is to be master in his own house.
- The king’s servants suggest gathering all the beautiful young virgins in the land to the king’s palace and prepare them for one year with beauty treatments. Then they will be brought one at a time to the king.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. **Read a responsive psalm.** Have the participants turn to Psalm 137 and read it responsively. Remind them that although the Psalm is set at the time of the Babylonian Captivity, Jews in Persia would have experienced a similar sense of alienation at being in a foreign land.
2. **Pray.** Say the prayer for serenity:

God, give us the serenity to accept what cannot be changed, courage to change what should be changed, and wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

—attributed to Reinhold Neibuhr

Presentation (15 minutes)

- 3. Review “Previously in Esther . . .”** Remind participants that often on television series, an episode will begin with a synopsis of what happened in the previous episodes. Pass out the sheets you prepared and ask each participant to quickly read aloud the portion of the story on his or her sheet. Post the sheets in order. Then ask the participants to quickly read over today’s scripture and call out story details in order of their happening. Print each detail on a sheet of paper and add to the storyboard.

Exploration (20 minutes)

- 4. Discuss Haman and Mordecai.** Point out that the text tells us that for some unexplained reason, Mordecai refuses to bow to Haman. Tull mentions “ancestral bad blood” (p. 16). Tell them that Carol Bechtel notes that the writer of Esther takes the trouble to lay out Esther and Mordecai’s family tree, attempting to establish a connection between Mordecai and the house of Saul, Israel’s first king. Ask someone to read 1 Samuel 9:1–2 and someone else to read 1 Samuel 15.

In response to Question 2, Questions for Reflection, p. 20, ask participants to name others who have refused to bow down and compare these persons with Mordecai and his circumstances.

- 5. Examine biblical views of gender and race.** Tull says, “What happens to Vashti and Mordecai, and to those they are viewed as representing, establishes a firm parallel in the book between thoughtless contempt for women and thoughtless contempt for ethnic minorities” (p. 19). Ask participants to respond to this statement, and discuss Question 3 (p. 20).

Response (15 minutes)

- 6. Discuss responses to the assignment.** Ask participants to share their responses to the sidebar on p. 15. Are we living in such a time and place? How does the church respond?

Closing (5 minutes)

- 7. Expand the prayer of serenity.** Invite participants to find a comfortable position for sitting and to center themselves. Ask them to inhale, imagining they are breathing in God's presence, and then exhale to release distractions and worries. Breathe in and out slowly several times. Then ask participants to extend their hands and picture themselves offering up to God those things in their lives that they cannot change, praying for serenity. After a moment or two, invite them to imagine offering to God those things in their lives that they can change, praying for courage to do so. Then pray a closing prayer, asking for wisdom and discernment from God to distinguish the two sets of concerns.

Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 3, "Such a Time as This." Also ask that those who have an edition of the Bible that includes the Apocrypha read the rest of the chapters of the book of Esther (i.e., those from the Greek version of the book). If you have a copy of the *Interpretation Commentary* on Esther by Carol M. Bechtel, ask a volunteer to read pp. 85–98.

“Such a Time as This” (Esther 4:1–5:8)

Key Idea: In the book’s decisive turning point, the world changed for Esther as she summoned the courage to face “such a time as this.” We, too, are faced with such times and such decisions.

Advance Preparation

- On newsprint, chart out the three versions of Esther (see “Other Tales,” p. 24).

Opening (10 minutes)

1. **Pray.** Pray this prayer or one of your own choosing:

God-with-us, we know you are with us always, even when we are blind to your presence.

We know that even when the hand of providence is hidden from us, you are working for good.

Open our eyes and our hearts to your purpose. Amen.

2. **Add to the storyboard.** Review the storyboard. Ask participants to scan chapter 4:1–8 to find additional details. Add sheets to the storyboard.

Presentation (10 minutes)

3. **Dramatize scripture: The crucial interchange.** Ask for volunteers to read the parts of Esther, a narrator, and Mordecai in verses 9–17.
4. **Compare versions.** Ask participants who read the Greek version from the Apocrypha to read the prayers in Addition C and D. Tull also notes that in the A Text the speeches of Esther and

Mordecai both refer to God. Ask participants to respond to the following, discussing their own perspective on the additions: "Readers respond differently to these additions. Some enjoy the extra details; others resist them, saying they leave too little to the imagination" (p. 25). Discuss Question 2 (p. 28).

Exploration (20 minutes)

- 5. Review irony and the arcane.** Divide the group into two small working groups. Ask one group to review the arbitrary regulations in Persian law listed on p. 23. Ask the other to read "Pleasing the King Once Again" (pp. 26–28) and examine the examples of irony. Then ask the whole group to consider: What is the function of each of these elements in the story?

Response (15 minutes)

- 6. Discuss going against prevailing odds.** Ask the group to reflect in silence on Question 3 (p. 28). Then ask those who are willing to share a time in their lives when they had to make a sudden change, and why they did it.

Closing (5 minutes)

- 7. Pray a litany of intercession.** Invite the group to consider how we may have been called to respond "for just such a time as this." Ask them to name situations in the community, church, and world that are of concern and call for a response. List them on newsprint or a chalkboard. Print the litany response: "Lord grant us the discernment for just such a time as this." Then read each situation and have the group respond with the litany response.

Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 4, “Plots, Parades, and Providence.” Assign to half the group to read chapter 5:9–14, and the other half chapter 6:1–14 and be prepared to summarize the story line. Ask a volunteer to make storyboard sheets for the details in today’s passages.

4

Plots, Parades, and Providence (Esther 5:9–6:14)

Key Idea: The biblical theme of reversals, of divine justice turning things upside down, plays out in the events surrounding Haman and Mordecai.

Advance Preparation

- If you did not ask a volunteer to do it, make sheets with story details to the storyboard for the events in the unit.
- On each of two sheets of newsprint or poster board, make two simple outlines of human figures.
- Check to see with which of the suggested hymns in the response activity your group is familiar and obtain hymnals.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. **Pray a litany.** Divide the participants into two groups and open with the following litany:

Leader: The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because
the Lord has anointed me;
He has sent me:

Group 1: to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release
the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;

Group 2: to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes;
the oil of gladness instead of mourning
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.

—Isaiah 61:1–3b

- 2. Review the storyboard.** Do a quick review of the story to this point, including the detail sheets you added.

Presentation (10 minutes)

- 3. Summarize the scriptures.** Ask for volunteers to summarize each of the two scripture assignments. Ask: Did anything surprise you? Were there any aspects of these parts of the story that seemed “over the top” to you?

Referring to the information in Carol Bechtel's commentary (p. 55), tell participants that the gallows Haman had constructed—literally “piece of wood” or “tree,” was roughly eighty feet tall—as tall as a six-story building. It might have been a huge pole or stake designed for impaling the unlucky victim.

Bechtel calls this “overkill.” Ask participants to recall other examples of exaggeration or overkill in the story thus far.

Exploration (25 minutes)

- 4. Prepare before and after posters.** Divide into two groups. Give each group one of the sheets of poster board or newsprint you prepared and crayons or markers. Remind the participants that in this section of the book, Haman and Mordecai each experience a radical reversal in status. Assign Haman to one group and Mordecai to the other. Have each group decorate their figures to indicate “Before” and “After.” They can draw details (such as the change in clothing for Mordecai) or use words or phrases. Allow a few minutes for the groups to complete their work, then have them share their posters.
- 5. Discuss the concept of coincidence or providence?** Author Frederick Buechner is said to have remarked that “a coincidence is just God's way of remaining anonymous” (as quoted in Bechtel, p. 57). Ask participants if they agree or disagree with that statement. Then ask the group to quickly name events in the story that could be coincidence or could be evidence of the hidden hand of God working in the story. Discuss Question 3 (p. 35).

Response (5 minutes)

- 6. Sing a hymn.** Sing a hymn that celebrates the biblical theme of reversals, such as “Song of Mary” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal* #600) or one with the theme of God’s purpose, such as “O God, in a Mysterious Way” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal* #270), “Sing Praise to God, Who Reigns Above” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal* #483) or “Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal* #478).

Closing (5 minutes)

- 7. Pray.** Ask participants to find a comfortable position for sitting and center themselves with deep breathing. Then ask them to focus on a situation in their lives in which, like Esther, they need courage. After a few moments of silent prayer, say,

We ask you, O God, for the courage to face these difficult situations we have brought to you in prayer.

Response: Hear our prayer, O God.

Now ask the group to reflect on a situation in their lives in which they may be reacting like Haman, with envy, bitterness, and fear. After a few moments of silent prayer, say:

Forgive us, O God, for those places in our lives where we allow envy, bitterness, or fear to be in control.

Response: Hear our prayer, O God. Amen.

Assignment

Ask participant to read Unit 5, “Counterplots and Counter-edicts.” Again ask a volunteer to bring the storyboard up to date.

Counterplots and Counter-edicts (Esther 7:1–8:17)

Key Idea: The book of Esther emphasizes that the written word is dead unless it is heard. God’s Word must also be heard to have power.

Advance Preparation

- Print the following on a sheet of newsprint: “For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated” (chapter 7:4a).
- Prepare some homophone pairs on index cards: there and their, here and hear, pare and pair, and so forth.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. **Pray.** Pray a prayer of your own, or ask one of the participants to pray.

Presentation (25 minutes)

2. **Listen to scripture.** Ask a volunteer to read chapter 7 aloud in its entirety as participants follow along in their Bibles.
3. **Play a word game—a deadly game.** Call the attention of participants to verse 4a on newsprint: “For we have been sold, I and my people, to be destroyed, to be killed, and to be annihilated.” Ask a volunteer to read the words from the original edict sent out by the king (3:13).

Have volunteers read the translations of the end of the verse found at the top of p. 38.

Hand out the index cards you prepared with pairs of homophones. Ask participants to take turns reading their cards and ask the group to give a definition of the word. If no one comments on it, point out that when the words are heard, it is impossible to tell which word of a homophone is intended.

But when seen, it is clear whether the number “two” is meant or the preposition “to,” for example.

Then share the following about the original edict:

There is no possibility of misunderstanding Haman’s intentions in the written form of the decree. But there is an important level of ambiguity in the oral version. Sandra Beth Berg points out that the words for “destroy” (*abad*) and for “enslave” (*abad*) are virtual homophones, that is, they sound alike, but are quite different in meaning and derivation (Berg, 101–2). . . . Berg suggests that [when Ahasuerus heard Haman’s request,] he could well have heard, “If it pleases the king, let a decree be issued for their enslavement” (Bechtel, p. 42).

Bechtel further suggests that Esther’s references to being sold into slavery make no sense unless one understands this possible play on words. So Esther’s words here suggest that she believes the king was tricked by the ambiguity of what he heard into agreeing to the killing of the Jews, which became all too clear when it was written down.

Ask participants to respond to this possible theory. Does it seem plausible, or do they prefer Tull’s explanation that the ambiguity in the verse is intended? Discuss Question 1 (p. 42).

Exploration (10 minutes)

- 4. Discuss the power of the written word.** Tell participants that chapter 8:8 makes it clear that an edict written in the name of the king and sealed with the king’s ring cannot be revoked. Now ask someone to read aloud verses 9–14. Refer the group to the discussion of the two ways to interpret the edict found on p. 41. How do they interpret this ambiguity?
- 5. Examine poetic justice.** Have participants discuss Question 2 (p. 42).

Response (15 minutes)

- 6. Write an edict.** Divide the group into pairs. Ask each pair to think of a difficult situation in the United States or in their community where an injustice needs to be redressed. Ask them to write an edict in the style of the book of Esther designed to address that issue. When participants are finished, ask for volunteers to read their edicts.

Closing (5 minutes)

- 7. Pray Kyrie eleison.** Remind participants that Esther had throw herself on the king's mercy. For different reasons, we are constantly in need of God's mercy. A way of engaging in intercessory prayer is the Greek response: Kyrie eleison, Christe eleison, Kyrie eleison. Ask participants to offer intercessory prayers with the group responding after each prayer request. Use either the Greek or the English translation of the response:

Lord, have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy.

Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 6, "Dueling Decrees and Purim Parties." Those with the Apocrypha should also read the alternate ending found there. Ask someone to bring the storyboard up to date. Also ask a volunteer to research the festival of Purim. A good Web site is www.jewfaq.com.

6

Dueling Decrees and Purim Parties (Esther 9:1–10:3)

Key Idea: Like Esther, each of us, with God’s help, can step forward on behalf of those we care for, to engage in small acts of courage. When we do so, we may carry forth God’s good purposes for the world.

Advance Preparation

- Prepare three sheets of newsprint. Label them “Jewish and Protestant Version,” “Greek Version,” and “A-Text Version.”
- If you have not asked a volunteer to do so, bring the storyboard up to date.
- On the Internet or in the newspaper or a news magazine, find a short news article. Try to find one about an event that your participants are not already familiar with. Make four or five copies of the article.
- Gather some party noisemakers or children’s rhythm instruments for the Purim enactment.
- In a post-9/11 world and with the United States currently fighting a conflict, questions about justifiable war and violence are more hotly debated than ever before. They strike at the very core of our values. Consider your group and how these questions are likely to play out. One session is not nearly enough time to address these troubling questions. This session may be a time to raise the questions without spending a lengthy time debating them.
- You will need hymnals for the closing activity. Check to see if your group is familiar with the suggested hymn.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. **Read a responsive psalm.** Psalm 124 is part of the only lectionary reading to include a passage from the book of Esther. Read it responsively:

*If it had not been the LORD who was on our side
—let Israel now say—
if it had not been the LORD who was on our side,
when our enemies attacked us,
then they would have swallowed us up alive,
when their anger was kindled against us;
then the flood would have swept us away,
the torrent would have gone over us;
then over us would have gone
the raging waters.*

*Blessed be the LORD,
who has not given us
as prey to their teeth.
We have escaped like a bird
from the snare of the fowlers;
the snare is broken,
and we have escaped.*

*Our help is in the name of the LORD,
who made heaven and earth.*

2. Pray.

*Helper and defender of Israel,
rescue the peoples of the world from destructive anger,
and set us free to love and serve each other
in the peace of Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*—From Book of Common Worship (Louisville, Ky.:
Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 758*

Presentation (10 minutes)

- 3. “Gossip.”** Divide the group into four or five smaller groups, depending on how many participants are in the total group. Give one person in each group a copy of the news article you brought. Ask those persons to read the article silently, then take the article back. Tell the first person to whisper a short summary of the article’s contents to the next person in the group. That person then repeats the story to the third, and so

forth until all the people in the group have heard and repeated the gist. Compare the last person's account with what the first person in each group remembers about the article.

Ask someone to read the sidebar on p. 43. The differences in the three endings of Esther resemble what happens when people do not remember the same event in quite the same way.

- 4. Review the three accounts.** Ask participants to briefly summarize each of the three endings of Esther. Jot down the summaries on the appropriately headed sheet of newsprint. The writer comments that differences in versions of the same narrative are common in the biblical narrative. Important themes, however, are the same. Ask: What is common to all three of the endings of the book of Esther?

Exploration (25 minutes)

- 5. Examine the problem of justified violence.** Read the following paragraph from the text aloud:

A world in which enemies rise up to kill or be killed faces people of faith with extremely difficult questions. Is it right to kill in self-defense? What constitutes self-defense? At what cost is security attained? What is the cost to our families and to civilization of the refusal to defend one's community? (p. 48)

Ask participants to reflect on Question 2 on p. 50 in the light of their reading. What do they make of Esther's seemingly bloodthirsty response?

- 6. Learn about Purim.** Ask the participants to share what they found out about how Purim is celebrated in the Jewish community today.

Response (10 minutes)

- 7. Read the storyboard.** Hand out rhythm instruments or noisemakers to the participants. If not already mentioned in the activity about Purim, tell participants that it is customary dur-

ing the reading of the scroll of Esther for the hearers to use their groggers (sound makers) or boo whenever the name of Haman is heard. Take turns reading the storyboard sheets, pausing to make noise and boo Haman lustily.

Closing (5 minutes)

- 8. Sing or read a hymn.** Sing “Now Israel May Say” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal* #236). This hymn is a setting of Psalm 124. If your group is not familiar with the hymn, read it aloud as poetry.

Assignment

Tell participants that in the next session the group will begin a study of Ruth, another story of a foreign woman and of God’s providence. Ask that they read the entire book of Ruth in advance of the session as well as Unit 7, “Naomi No More.”

If you have decided to schedule another Reader’s Theater, do a reading of the book of Ruth prior to the study of the next unit.

7

Naomi No More (Ruth 1)

Key Idea: In the face of uncertain circumstances, Ruth, a Moabite, deals with Naomi with loving, faithful care.

Advance Preparation

- Locate a map of the kingdoms of Israel, Judah, and Moab in Old Testament times.
- Find an Old Testament timeline.
- Recruit three persons to be readers for the Response time. Read through the process of spiritual reading, and explain to the readers what they are to do.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. **Pray.** Use the following prayer or one of your own choosing:

*God, we come hungry,
Not for bread, but for your Word.
Grant us the nourishment that comes only from you. Amen.*

Presentation (5 minutes)

2. **Esther and Ruth—make connections.** Briefly summarize the information in the first two paragraphs on p. 51, making comparisons between the books of Esther and Ruth.

Exploration (30 minutes)

3. **Set the context.** Quickly set the context for the story.
The Place: Point out the location for the story on the large map or use the small map on p. 52. Ruth was a native of Moab, the country east of Judah to which Elimelech and his

family had fled when famine struck Bethlehem. Point out the irony in the name of Bethlehem, “house of bread.”

For more information about Moab, ask half the group to read Genesis 19:30–38 and the other half to read Numbers 22:1–21. Allow a few minutes for reading, then ask a volunteer from each group to summarize what is said in the passage about Moab. Discuss Questions 3 and 4 on p. 58.

The Time: Ask someone to read Judges 21:25 (the last verse in the book of Judges) as well as Ruth 1:1. The book is set in the time of the Judges, much earlier than the book of Esther. Now have someone read Ruth 4:18–20. What does this tell us about when the book was actually written? Use the Old Testament timeline and the information in the text on pp. 51–52 to date the book.

4. Examine the conversations between women. The author remarks:

But the tiny book of Ruth devotes more verses to speech between women than the rest of the Bible combined: 29 verses encompassing eight dialogues. (p. 54)

Ask participants to read the passages listed in Question 1 on p. 58 and discuss.

5. Discuss the three different theologies. If you did not read the entire book of Ruth as a Reader's Theater, read Ruth 1:6–22 aloud, with one person as narrator and two others reading the parts of Naomi and Ruth. After reading the passage, ask the three readers to articulate the theology expressed in their particular voice. Refer to pp. 56–57, “Three Different Theologies.”

6. Ask, “Is Naomi empty?” Have participants discuss Question 2 on p. 58.

Response (15 minutes)

7. Lead a spiritual reading. Tell participants that you are going to engage in the practice of spiritual reading of scripture. Ask

that they find a comfortable position for sitting. Tell them that they will hear the scripture read aloud three times. Read Ruth 1:16b–17 (Ruth’s speech to Naomi).

- First reading: Tell them to listen for a word or phrase that stirs, disturbs, or addresses them. When the reading is finished, ask those who are willing to simply call out the word or phrase.
- Second reading: Suggest that they attend to the feeling or image that is connected to the word or phrase they chose. Following the reading, ask participants to share this feeling or image.
- Third reading: Suggest that they attend to how the word/phrase or feeling/image connects to their lives right now. Allow time for silent reflection or for writing reflections. These reflections can be shared if participants choose to do so.

Closing (5 minutes)

8. Pray.

*God, we came hungry,
Seeking the nourishment that comes only from you.
We give thanks that we leave full, not empty.
Grant us a renewed appetite for your satisfying, comforting Word.
Amen.*

Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 8, “Reaping Redemption.” Also ask them to do some research in a Bible dictionary on the practice of gleaning and the role of the redeemer (*gō’el*), and on gleaning or feeding programs today. Suggest that they check your denominational Web site for information about programs to feed the hungry.

Reaping Redemption (Ruth 2)

Key Idea: Through Ruth's faithfulness, Boaz enters the picture as redeemer.

Advance Preparation

- Obtain some stalks of wheat, enough for each participant to have about four stalks. Also get some yarn, scissors, 3" x 5" plain white index cards, and some fine-lined markers.
- Gather hymnals, newsprint and markers, and an offering plate.
- Do some research on hunger projects your denomination supports. Also get information on gleaning or food pantry programs in your community and how they work.

Opening (10 minutes)

1. **Sing a hymn.** Sing a harvest hymn, such as "For the Fruit of All Creation" (*The Presbyterian Hymnal* #553) or "We Plow the Fields and Scatter" (*The Presbyterian Hymnal* #560).
2. **Pray a responsive psalm.** Divide the participants into two groups and have them read this portion of Psalm 36 responsively:

How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
 All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
 They feast on the abundance of your house,
 and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

3. **Pray.** Pray the following prayer or one of your own choosing:

Eternal God, you satisfy our hunger by feeding us with the bread of life, and you quench our thirst for righteousness by your mighty acts. Nourish us always by your Spirit, that we may grow into the stature of Jesus Christ. Amen.

—From Daily Prayer, *Supplemental Liturgical Resources 5*
 (Louisville, Ky.: The Westminster Press, 1987), 219

Presentation (10 minutes)

- 4. Read scripture.** Suggest that as one or more volunteers read Ruth 2:2–16 aloud, participants listen to discern what kind of person Boaz was. When they have finished the reading, print the word “Boaz” in the center of a sheet of newsprint and have the participants call out words or phrases that describe Boaz.

Call the participants’ attention to the sidebar on p. 60. Print the various translations of the description of Boaz on the newsprint along with those generated by the group.

Ask someone to read verse 1. Note that apparently Ruth was unaware of Boaz’s kinship tie to Naomi.

Exploration (25 minutes)

- 5. Learn about gleaning.** Ask participants to share what they have learned from their research about the ancient practice of gleaning. Ask someone to read each of the following passages:

Leviticus 19:9–10

Deuteronomy 24:19–22

Let participants share what they discovered about denominational and community programs for the hungry, especially gleaning or second harvest programs.

- 6. Learn about the redeemer.** Ask for information participants discovered about the concept of the redeemer or *go’el*.
- 7. Explore the text.** Discuss Questions 1, 2, and 3 on pp. 65–66.

Response (10 minutes)

- 8. Discuss turning from empty to full.** Ask participants to reflect on question 4 on p. 66 about a time in their lives when great anger at God gave way to great joy. In the book of Ruth, the metaphor is a movement from emptiness to fullness. Ask

participants to think of such a time in their own lives and jot down a few words or phrases to describe it on the index card. Then have them tie their stalks into a small bundle and attach the index card to the “sheaf.”

Closing (5 minutes)

9. **Sing a hymn.** Sing “O God, You Are My God” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal* #198) or “On Eagle’s Wings.”
10. **Pray.** Ask that participants join in a time of silent prayer. Pass around an offering plate and ask that they offer their sheaf cards to God with thanksgiving for all that God has done for us. Close by singing the doxology together.

Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 9, “Winnowing, Wings, and Weddings.” Also assign one of the following passages to each participant:

Genesis 38

Joshua 2

2 Samuel 11–12

Ask them to read their assigned passage and be prepared to summarize the story for the group.

9

Winnowing, Wings, and Weddings (Ruth 3)

Key Idea: In the face of risks to her reputation and safety, Ruth acted with faithfulness to secure the future for herself and Naomi. At any time we may be called to do the same for others.

Advance Preparation

- Have available some magazines and newspapers with articles and photographs of vulnerable groups in society: the hungry, people in need of housing, and so forth. Also have scissors and tape or glue. Tape up a large sheet of paper and print on it the words of Deuteronomy 24:21–22.
- Locate a recording of *The Messiah* and get a CD or tape player.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. **Pray.** As participants arrive, invite them to peruse the magazines and newspapers for photos and articles about society's vulnerable, the "widows, aliens, and orphans of our culture." Ask them to cut out a picture or article and glue or tape it to the large sheet of paper.

Gather the group together in a circle and read aloud the scripture on the montage. Then invite the participants to pray silently for the vulnerable ones of our society, and to pray that God will grant us discernment in ministering to them.

Presentation (20 minutes)

2. **Read—and read into—scripture.** Ask participants to read silently today's scripture passage to refresh themselves about the details. Then point out that the ambiguities of the text might encourage one's imagination to run wild. Lay out the following possible scenarios (as detailed in Katharine Doob Sakenfeld's *Interpretation* commentary on Ruth):

- A steamy tryst between mutually desiring individuals (à la soap opera).
- A beautiful but needy young Ruth forcing herself to relate to a rough, potbellied, old (but rich) man for the sake of her mother-in-law.
- A wily, scheming Ruth cooperating with Naomi to compromise and thus force the hand of the most handsome and wealthy bachelor of the community.

Ask: Are any of these what you had pictured when you read the text?

Referring to pp. 68–70, discuss the sexual overtones of the text. Ask the group to respond to the quote in the sidebar on p. 68 (“dating protocol”).

Exploration (20 minutes)

- 3. Discuss Boaz as redeemer.** Read the following to the participants:

“Redeemers . . . are to take responsibility for the unfortunate and stand as their supporters and advocates. They are to embody the basic principle of caring responsibility for those who may not have justice done for them by the unscrupulous, or even by the person who lives by the letter of the law. Edward F. Campbell Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1975), 136, quoted in Sakenfeld, p. 60.

Ask them to respond to this information in the light of the content about the phrase “spread your wing over your maid-servant because you are a redeemer” on p. 69.

- 4. Examine a worthy woman.** Ask someone to read Proverbs 31:10 and 30–31, the only other instance in the Bible of the phrase a “worthy woman” or “a woman of strength” (*eshet chail*). What characteristics do the participants think make a worthy woman or a woman of strength?

- 5. Discuss what the genealogy says.** Ask for volunteers to summarize the stories of Tamar, Rahab, and Bathsheba. Discuss Question 4 on p. 74 in the light of the content in the text on pp. 73–74. What do the participants make of the presence of these “sexually irregular women” in the genealogy of Jesus?

Response (10 minutes)

- 6. Respond to a question.** Have participants discuss Question 3 on p. 74 in the text. How far would they go, and how much would they risk to help another human being? What lines would they draw?

Closing (5 minutes)

- 7. Listen to music.** Invite participants to sit quietly as you play a recording of “I Know That My Redeemer Liveth” from *The Messiah*.
- 8. Put together a litany prayer.** Use the montage you made as the basis for a litany prayer. Ask participants to name situations or individuals represented in the montage. As each one is named, ask the others to respond:

Lord, spread your wing over your servants and redeem us.

Assignment

Ask participants to read Unit 10, “Bartering for the Bride.” Also ask them to research the Year of Jubilee, provisions for which are laid out in Leviticus 25. If you have access to a copy of Sakenfeld’s commentary on Ruth, ask for a volunteer to read pp. 68–76.

Bartering for the Bride (Ruth 4)

Key Idea: Together, the books of Esther and Ruth and their stories of turning points in the loyal actions of individuals point up the significance of small acts of courage. Such faithfulness may have providential possibilities far beyond what we may envision.

Advance Preparation

- Make copies of the Reader's Theater at the end of this Unit.
- Gather newsprint, tape, and markers.
- Bring out the sheet of newsprint from Unit 1 on which you listed participants' speculations about why these two books are in the canon.
- Prepare a sheet of newsprint with two large overlapping circles. Label one circle "Ruth," the other "Esther." You will use this sheet for a compare and contrast activity.

Opening (5 minutes)

1. **Read a responsive psalm.** Read Psalm 89:1–4 responsively:

I will sing of your steadfast love, O LORD, forever;
 with my mouth I will proclaim your faithfulness to all generations.
 I declare that your steadfast love is established forever;
 your faithfulness is as firm as the heavens.

You said, "I have made a covenant with my chosen one,
 I have sworn to my servant David:
 'I will establish your descendants forever,
 and build your throne for all generations.'"

2. **Pray.** Pray this prayer or one of your own choosing:

God, we give thanks for your steadfast love, working through our lives for your good purposes. Grant that we may be faithful and act with loving kindness on behalf of others in your name. Amen.

Presentation (15 minutes)

- 3. Listen to scripture.** Ask for volunteers to play the parts of Boaz, the friend (“so and so”), and the narrator. The remainder of the group can be the witnesses (although they would all have been men in Ruth’s time, for the purpose of this Reader’s Theater anyone can be a witness!).

Exploration (20 minutes)

- 4. Discuss and report.** Discuss the interactions that take place in this portion of scripture, using the material on pp. 75–79. If someone read the Sakenfeld commentary, ask that person to report. Also ask participants what they have learned about the Year of Jubilee.
- 5. Examine God the actor.** Have two volunteers read chapter 4:13 and chapter 1:6. In the first instance God intervenes to provide food, in the second, conception. Ask the participants to respond to the following:

Both the loyal, faithful, and upright actions of human beings and special moments of caring divine intervention are necessary along the road to a peaceable community.

—Sakenfeld, p. 80.

How does this play out in the book of Ruth?

- 6. Discuss key themes.** Ask participants to name key themes in the books of Ruth and Esther (Questions 2 and 3 on p. 81). List these on newsprint. Discuss where in the world these themes play out.
- 7. Compare and contrast.** Using the newsprint you prepared, list characteristics of both Ruth and Esther. Similarities in their characters or methods should be listed in the overlapping portion of the circles. Look at the newsprint the group generated during Unit 1. Do they have new insights as to why these two books are part of our canon?

Response (15 minutes)

8. Write cinquains or acrostic poems. Ask participants to write a cinquain about Ruth and one about Esther. A cinquain begins with one word, the subject of the poem (in this case Ruth or Esther), followed by two words describing the subject, then a three-word action phrase, then a four word phrase expressing emotions about the subject, and finally a noun that is a synonym for the subject.

Or have participants write acrostic poems in which they print the words “Ruth” and “Esther” vertically down the page, and then write a word or phrase beginning with each letter. This form of poetry was used extensively in the Psalms.

Ask participants who are willing to do so to share their poems with the group.

Closing (10 minutes)

9. Sing a hymn. Sing “God Be with You till We Meet Again” (*The Presbyterian Hymnal* #540).

10. Pray a litany prayer.

In your presence Lord, we recall those whose small acts of courage made a difference.

We are witnesses to your steadfast love and good purpose, O God.

We give thanks for Esther, who stepped forward to act on behalf of a nation.

We are witnesses to your steadfast love and good purpose, O God.

We give thanks for Ruth, who put the welfare of a family above her own safety and reputation.

We are witnesses to your steadfast love and good purpose, O God.

We give thanks for . . . (allow participants to name a person).

We are witnesses to your steadfast love and good purpose, O God.

We give thanks for (another name. Continue as long as participants have names to offer).

We are witnesses to your steadfast love and good purpose, O God.

Holy God, we beseech you to bestow on us the faithfulness and courage of our ancestors, for who knows whether it is for such a time as this that we have each come to this particular time and place. Amen.

Reader's Theater: Ruth

Narrator: No sooner had Boaz gone up to the gate and sat down there than the next of kin, so-and-so, of whom Boaz had spoken, came passing by.

Boaz: Come over, so-and-so; sit down here.

(so and so sits down)

Boaz: *(to witnesses)* Sit down here. *(witnesses sit down)*

Boaz: *(to so-and-so)* Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land that belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. So I thought I would tell you of it, and say: "Buy it in the presence of these sitting here, and in the presence of the elders of my people. If you redeem it, you redeem it; but if you will not, tell me, so that I may know; for there is no one prior to you to redeem it, and I come after you."

So-and-So: I will redeem it.

Boaz: The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite, the widow of the dead man, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance.

So-and-So: I cannot redeem it for myself without damaging my own inheritance. Take my right of inheritance yourself, for I cannot redeem it.

Narrator: Now it was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, one took off a sandal and gave it to the other; this was the manner of attesting in Israel. So when so-and-so said to Boaz, "Acquire it for yourself," he took off his sandal.

Boaz: Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chil-

ion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses.

Witnesses: We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name on Bethlehem; and through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore Judah.