

RUTH: INTRODUCTION

Like Esther, Ruth is a woman in an alien land. Like Esther, Ruth acts on behalf of family members on the basis of principles, and without clear divine guidance. And as in Esther, the beauty of Ruth's story emerges from a combination of human action and divine grace.

The book of Ruth, like Esther, also begins outside of Israel, in exile. Whereas Esther's exile was the well-known national catastrophe of the Babylonian conquest, the exile which begins Ruth stems from local, natural causes: a famine in Bethlehem sends Elimelech and his family east to the neighbouring country of Moab, a region in present day Jordan.

The setting of Ruth's story is much earlier than Esther. Whereas the events in Esther take place long after the time of the Davidic kings, when Jews were ruled by the Persian Empire, Ruth is set long before David, during the time when Israel was ruled by judges - individuals who through their leadership skills were considered rulers, but who didn't establish dynasties. At the end of the book, however, there is reference to king David, indicating that the earliest audience of Ruth were at least several generations after David.

What is the purpose of Ruth? Some believe its purpose is to establish the legitimacy of David's claim to the throne. Others suggest that its aim is to promote a more inclusive vision for Israelite society living side by side with non-Jewish neighbours. Books like Ezra and Nehemiah call for a pure Jewishness uncontaminated by inter-racial marriage and relations. Ruth's vision is quite the opposite as we will see.

In fact, Ruth herself is non-Jewish, a Moabite. Moab was one of the most hostile neighbours to Israel. The Moabites are presented in the bible as having descended from Lot's incestuous relationship with one of his daughters (Genesis 19), as inhospitable enemies who tried to call down a curse on the wandering Israelites (Numbers 22-24), and who succeeded in ensnaring some Israelites in sexual sin (Numbers 25). According to law, no Ammonites or Moabites were to be admitted into the worshipping assembly of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:3) Thus, Elimelech's choice to leave Bethlehem and go to Moab, even though it was for practical reasons of survival, would have been seen as foolhardy. Not only would he be criticized by his fellow Jews, but he would not be received very hospitably by the Moabites.

Given this background, the story of Ruth comes alive that much more with the wonders of God's grace in the lives of human beings.

RUTH 1-2

1: 1-5

The opening of the story describes a family that suffers grave misfortune. Elimelech, along with his wife Naomi and two sons, leave their hometown of Bethlehem to go to a foreign land, Moab, where they have heard that the living is good. They try to build their lives in Moab and integrate themselves in Moabite ways of life. The two sons take two Moabite wives. But things begin to go downwards at several points. First, Elimelech dies. Second, after 10 years the two sons also die. Finally, the sons die before they can have children to leave behind with their wives. Naomi is left alone with her two daughters-in-law - three childless widows.

1: 6-13

Naomi no longer sees any future for herself in Moab, and she has heard that there is good growing and living back in Bethlehem. Whether it's good fortune or bad, God is credited with it. Naomi, as we shall see, will have to go through an inner journey from thinking herself cursed by God to thinking herself blessed. For now, though, it is the curse of God that bears heavy upon her consciousness. She encourages her daughters-in-law to stay behind in Moab. It's their home and they are still young. They can find new husbands who may bear them children in time. She cannot offer them anything that she imagines they want or need.

In contrast to Naomi's view of things, the daughters-in-law refuse to leave her. There has been enough loss in the family without them having to lose their relationship with Naomi as well. But again, Naomi insists that they leave her as she has nothing left to give them. She has lost hope, and she cares for them enough that she wants them to have a better life than she feels they've had. She also sees them as different from her, from a different people with different gods. Her concept of family has not yet integrated bonds beyond cultural and racial differences.

1: 15-18

One of the daughters-in-law - Orpah - listens to Naomi. She says goodbye with tears and goes back to her family. Ruth, however, refuses to leave. Naomi is now her family and Naomi's people will be her people. Naomi's God will also be her God. Even in death, she claims, she will not be separated from Naomi. Given all the death this family has lived through, such a statement is highly significant. Ruth believes that some bonds go beyond death. Such is the bond she has with Naomi. Sadly, at this point, Naomi seems unable to reciprocate Ruth's love and devotion. She accepts Ruth staying with her because she can't persuade her to leave. But she doesn't acknowledge Ruth's profound commitment and fidelity to her, nor does she recognize God's blessing in this. She may have lost a husband and two sons, but she has gained a daughter more loyal and devoted than any daughter could be.

1: 19-22

Upon seeing Naomi return to Bethlehem, many townsfolk recognize her. They ask her if she is, indeed, who they think she is. While acknowledging who she is, though, Naomi

asks them no longer to call her by that name (Naomi means pleasant), but by the name “Mara,” (bitter). Naomi has lost everything. She is coming back with nothing and God is to blame. Sadly, at this point, Naomi makes no acknowledgment of Ruth who is a precious gift she has gained from God.

2: 1-7

Before the story proceeds any further we are given interesting information. Boaz is introduced before we ever encounter him. We’re told that he is a close relation to Naomi and that he is a prominent man of means in Bethlehem. Naomi doesn’t speak about him, nor does she tell Ruth about him, even after Ruth says that she will go out to gather some food. Gleaning is a practice that was permitted in Israel for the benefit of the poor. Once the grain was harvested and collected, a generous landowner would allow others to come and take the scraps of the harvest left behind. The more generous the owner, the more generous the scraps left behind would be.

Two things happen in our story that are amazing coincidences. First, Ruth happens to come upon the land owned by Boaz. Second, Boaz happens to be passing through his land when Ruth is gleaning. He asks about her. Whose employee is she (she is obviously not his)? He is told that she is a foreigner (from Moab) connected to Naomi, and that she is a hard worker.

2: 8-16

Now we are brought into the kind of man Boaz is. Whether it was because Ruth was connected to Naomi, or whether it was because Boaz was impressed or attracted by Ruth, he treats Ruth with lavish generosity. He gives her special treatment in allowing her to glean in the best parts of his field. He guarantees her protection and safety (from being molested or thrown off the land). He invites her to eat with his workers and gives her more food than she can eat. When she asks him why he is being so generous with her, his response is that her loyalty and devotion to her mother-in-law has been told him (Naomi has obviously been telling it around), as well as Ruth’s adoption of Naomi’s God and people as her own. Boaz’ faith in God and image of God are also more generous than Naomi’s. God is portrayed as a great provider, as well as an eagle “under whose wings” Ruth “has come for refuge.”

2: 17-23

When Ruth is finally done for the day, she has collected an enormous amount of grain to take home. Naomi is overwhelmed by it all and asks Ruth where she has gleaned this quantity and quality of food. When Ruth tells her about Boaz and his kindness, Naomi divulges to her the relationship of Boaz with the family. Again, we are given a clue about Boaz early on in the story. He is a close kinsman, a “redeemer” kinsman. This means that he has the right to claim Ruth the widow as his own. Women at this point were treated as property or possessions. While this seems inhuman, it was also a way to protect women. They belonged to some man somewhere, or else, they were vulnerable. Naomi also tells Ruth to stay close to Boaz’ female employees. Something is afoot and hope is brewing in the story. Naomi, too, is beginning to open to fresh possibilities. Ruth may be a greater blessing to her than she ever imagined.

