

“Where You Go I Will Go”

The book of Ruth has a special place in my heart, but it is not treated all that seriously in church or scholarly circles. I have never heard anyone preach on it, certainly no male preachers. Some women’s Bible studies might tackle it, but often in conjunction with the Book of Esther. In those situations, Ruth gets short shrift, because Esther is longer and more exciting. Yet the Book of Ruth is interesting and compelling on many counts. It has one of the most profound illustrations of an important theological concept. Ruth figures importantly in the Jesus narrative. Additionally, we can see how the oral tradition may have shaped the narrative. For example, each name in the story has a meaning that tells us something about the character and their fate.

The story begins when the narrator tells us that it takes place in the time of the Judges. The period of the Judges or Chieftains was between the conquering of the Land of Canaan by the Hebrews under Joshua and before Saul became the first King of Israel. This period was marked by alternating eras of calm under heroic judges such as Deborah and Gideon, and times of chaos and subjugation under foreign rulers. The writers of The Book of Judges blamed the periods of chaos and subjugation on the Israelites falling away from the worship of YHWH. That is one part of the setting of Ruth.

The other part is that there was a famine in the land, specifically famine in Bethlehem. It is ironic that Bethlehem, which means “The House of Bread” should be suffering a famine. What is more when there is a famine in the Old Testament it is often a setup for an important story. For example, Abram and Sarai go to Egypt during a famine.¹ Jacob’s sons head to Egypt during a famine only to find that the brother they sold into slavery is the right-hand man to Pharaoh².

In Ruth, the family heads to Moab instead of Egypt. Moab was a neighbor of Israel, but Moabites and Israelites were antagonists. But when there is a famine, you go where the food is so the family from “the house of bread” sojourns there.

Once they arrive in Moab we learn their names. The husband is *Elimelech* which means “my God is King.” His wife is *Naomi* or “pleasantness.” However, their sons’ names are odd and unlikely. *Mahlon* names mean “consumption” or “sickly” and *Chilion* “dies young” or “dies suddenly.” No parent would give their child such a name, but this might have been a storytelling device in the oral tradition. The listener gets a foreshadowing of what will happen to the characters.

But before they meet their demise, they marry two young women from Moab. These two women are named Ruth and Orpah. Ruth means “companion” and *Orpah* means “back of the neck.” Their names foreshadow their roles in the story. Sure, enough when *Elimelech* dies and then his two sons, Naomi decides

¹ Genesis 12:10-20

² Genesis 37 and 42-46

to head home to her family in Bethlehem. Initially the daughters-in-law follow her. However, they do not go far before Naomi tells them to return to their family and to find new husbands with whom they can make a home.

Orpah and Ruth initially refuse to do so, but eventually Orpah does return home. Thus, we see the back of her neck as she walks away just as her name predicts. Ruth remains steadfast and refuses to leave Naomi's side and thus lives up to her name "companion."

Ruth's refusal to leave Naomi is one of the most beautiful poems in the Bible. Ruth says:

"Do not press me to leave you
or to turn back from following you!
Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge;
your people shall be my people,
and your God my God.
Where you die, I will die—
there will I be buried.
May the Lord do thus and so to me,
and more as well,
if even death parts me from you!" ³

Through her actions and this poetic statement of love and care for Naomi, Ruth becomes the prime example of an important biblical concept that is usually ascribed to God. The concept is called *hesed* (hesed) in Hebrew. The most frequent translation of this word into English is "lovingkindness." When used of God in relationship to the people of Israel it is how God's love for them is unwavering, resolute, constant, and committed. It is manifest in God's tolerance of their failures and forgiveness at every turn. God treats Israel with the care and concern a loving parent has for a beloved child.

Ruth's extraordinary devotion to Naomi makes her the human epitome of *hesed*. What makes this even more remarkable is that she is a foreigner and immigrant from an enemy of Israel. Like the Good Samaritan she exemplifies a virtue that a Jewish audience might want to see in one of their own. This sterling example of *hesed* is shown in an immigrant not one of their own.

Ruth the Moabite stays with her mother-in-law Naomi as she struggles with her ill fortune as asks to be called Mara or bitter rather than pleasantness. She works beside her in the fields to glean grain after the harvest. She eventually finds a husband among the Israelites, who are impressed with her care for Naomi.

That husband is *Boaz* whose name means "strength." Ruth and Boaz will have a son Obed who is an ancestor of King David.⁴ In Matthew's Gospel Ruth

³ Ruth 1:16-17

⁴ Ruth 4:21

is listed as an ancestor of Jesus.⁵ Most importantly perhaps is that Ruth's life shows us that we are capable of lovingkindness to others just as God shows it to us.

Ruth the foreigner who exemplifies the virtue of lovingkindness becomes an ancestor in the line of King David and Jesus fulfills the prophecy that the Messiah will be from the House of David. As the adage goes, "God works in mysterious ways." Also that we may want to take the many scriptures about the treatment of strangers to heart such as the passage from Leviticus, "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the native-born among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God."⁶ And "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares."⁷

⁵ Matthew 1:5

⁶ Leviticus 19:34 NRSV

⁷ Hebrews 13:2 ESV