

Dec 17 –Ruth

Introduction

In Matthew chapter 1, Ruth is one of only 5 women named in Jesus' genealogy (Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, the wife of Uriah –Bathsheba-, and Mary). As Christians, we remember the story of Ruth with fondness as she is one in a long line of bold women in Jesus' family tree. For Jews, this story has both historical significance (Ruth is, after all, King David's great-grandmother) and theological significance. Some believe Ruth was written by Samuel shortly after the establishment of the Davidic dynasty, other believe that this novella may have gone from oral tradition to literary tradition during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah –after the return from exile, when the issue of Jews intermarrying with other races/religions was hotly debated by those in power (in fact, Ezra is most famous for sending all the foreign wives away from Jerusalem). Those in places of religious power saw the marrying of foreign women as an issue because they did not want the Monotheism of Israel threatened by the polytheistic influence of these wives from foreign countries. The story of Ruth paints a picture of a woman who did grow up in a foreign country (Moab), with foreign deities, and yet she swore loyalty to the family of a Judean (Naomi) and pledged herself to faithfully worship the God of Israel. Her story illustrates the counterpoint to Ezra, namely that foreign wives CAN convert and be faithful followers of God and make important contributions to Jewish life (like raising up the ancestors of King David).

Ruth tells the story of two women, separated by age, race, and culture, yet bound to one another in covenant with the God of Israel to procure a future together –whatever it takes. A future for both women means figuring out how to get a husband for Ruth and a son to carrying on their bloodline and take care of them in their old age. Naomi uses her wisdom to make the match between Ruth and Boaz, while Ruth uses her wisdom and ambition to make sure she and Naomi don't starve in the process. God is seen both through the faithfulness of the people, but also at work, once again, behind the scenes through phrases such as "it just so happened." There are no such things as coincidences in the Bible, these "God moments" are the surprising ways in which God moves our stories and God's story forward through time.

The scroll of Ruth is read during the Jewish harvest festival of Shavuot (Pentecost, 50 days after Passover), because the Barley harvest begins in March/April (around the time of Passover), and the wheat harvest concludes 50 days later with the harvest festival of Shavuot (Pentecost).

Chapter 1

Ruth begins with an irony- Bethlehem (literally translated as "the house of bread") has been afflicted with famine, which causes a man to move his wife and his sons to Moab to search for a better life. The distance between Bethlehem and Moab by road is 2063 miles. Once they arrived in Moab, Elimelech (Naomi's husband) dies. As there were no eligible Jewish brides to be found, the sons then took Moabite wives (which was the custom when living in foreign lands) to continue on their family name. Their wives were Orpah and Ruth, and they lived in Moab for 10 years, when both sons also died. Naomi was now left with no husband, no sons, and two foreign daughters in law. She was as low as a woman could possibly be brought in this society, she would be relegated to relying on charity in order to survive, and her chances of receiving such charity were better in Bethlehem –where at least she still had distant relatives and friends who may help support her. She received word that after 10 years, the famine had now ended. She immediately, began the 2000+ mile journey home with both of her daughters

in law, but Naomi considered the situation of Orpah and Ruth, they were both still very young widows (in a culture where it was normal for women to marry around 15, they could have only been between 25-30 years old). If they stayed in their own families' homes, they had a better chance at finding a new husband and having children and a future of their own than if they came with poor old Naomi, who was in the deepest grief. As "foreigners" their chances of finding husbands in Bethlehem would be minimal, as foreign women were often viewed with suspicion. Naomi offers them each a blessing in vs. 8-9 "*May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. The Lord grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband.*" At first, they were determined to stay with her, but Naomi continued to urge them to go, as she was no longer able to provide sons for them to marry (echoing the tradition of the Levirate marriage, where widows would marry the next available brother of their deceased husband to raise up sons in his name). Naomi assumed what her culture had taught her –that the foundation of her relationship with her daughters in law was in her own ability to provide sons for them to marry. Orpah obeyed Naomi and returned to her own family so that she could become a wife again, but Ruth was stubborn and refused. For to Ruth, Naomi's love and kinship was worth more than her ability to provide her with an eligible bachelor. Rather than seeking to become a wife again, Ruth felt called to remain a daughter to Naomi. She loved her mother in law and was determined to stay by her side and faithfully care for her. The two women essentially created their own countercultural family unit in this passage, with Ruth's pledge of loyalty in vs. 16-17 functioning as the new covenant between the two women. Ruth promises to stay with her, to follow her, to take on her people, her customs, and even her faith in the one God of Israel. Through this covenant of love and loyalty, Ruth pledged herself to remain not as Naomi's daughter in law, but as her own daughter, and she pledged her conversion to Judaism.

When the women arrived in Bethlehem, "the whole town was stirred up" and Naomi continued to mourn and weep and changed her name to Mara –bitter. Everywhere else in the Bible, the verse goes "I went away empty and returned full." What Naomi is describing in her current circumstance is the opposite of how God normally operates. You can tell through her theological wrestling that she's angry with God over the losses she's sustained. This is a normal reaction to loss.

Chapter 2

Fortunately for Ruth and Naomi, they arrived in Bethlehem late March/early April, just in time for the barley harvest. Ruth asked Naomi's permission to go out into the fields and glean, to provide food for the two of them. It was an important part of the law of Moses for the owners/workers of the fields to leave some grain behind in the fields so that the poor and disenfranchised (widows and resident aliens) could come and glean that section of the food for their survival. This was one of the expected social safety nets in ancient Israel. Ruth understood how humiliating it would be for Naomi –the former mistress of Elimelech's manor- to be reduced to gleaning for survival, so Ruth (who was both a widow and a resident alien) asks permission from her elder to go out and glean. Ruth hopes to "find favor" so that she may earn extra grain to provide for the two of them. She is literally "trying her luck." But, with God there's no such thing as coincidence or "luck." It just so happens that she ends up in Boaz' field –one of the closest male relatives to Naomi's husband. And Ruth just so happened to end up in that field, just as Boaz was coming out to supervise the harvest. God was watching her and providing for her. Boaz noticed Ruth immediately, as she was a woman who didn't fit in among the normal crowd in the field. When he asked where she'd come from, his foreman gave an account of her appearance. It seems that she –a Moabite, not fully

understanding the law of Moses yet- had made a faux pa when she first arrived –asking not only to glean what was left behind, but also from some of what would have been harvestable crop (thus, overstepping and asking for more than what was acceptable charitable practices). It seems that she was permitted to glean what was the accepted amount, and she was such a hard worker that now the foreman commends her to Boaz and pleads her case for allowing her to glean more than the norm. Boaz’ response to the foreman’s story (I have ordered the young men not to bother you) suggests that perhaps she was made fun of by the harvesters for her lack of understanding, or perhaps they spoke lewdly towards her. Boaz has protected her from further assault by chastising his own workers and making space for her to work in safety among the other women. This is the best possible place for a vulnerable young woman to find herself. Were she to go to another field, she could face similar verbal or even physical abuse from those workers. Boaz urges her to stay and to enjoy the same generous provision of food and drink that his own workers receive. Boaz is extreme in his generosity and kindness to this widow and alien. Boaz connects his own generosity with God’s blessing upon Ruth for the kindness and generosity she has shown Naomi, for the sacrifices that she has made in giving up her own land, God has blessed her in this land. When lunchtime came, Ruth was invited to share in Boaz’ hospitality (the meal which he himself served to her). She ate until she was satisfied, and still had enough left over to bring home so that Naomi could eat her daily bread as well. This is a model of to goodness and provision of God. Boaz then instructs his workers and foreman to allow Ruth what she must have asked accidentally for in the first place –to pluck grain not just from the gleanings, but from the harvestable crop as well. Boaz is offering to Ruth a cut of his own profits of the harvest by doing so. At the end of the day, she leaves with an ephah of grain -29-50 pounds!!! When she returned to Naomi she told her of her good fortune, and the wheels began turning in Naomi’s head. Naomi needed to find a goel (kinsman-redeemer). Since both her husband and her sons had died, Naomi needed to find a redeemer willing to buy Elimelech’s land at a fair price, because that money would then be all Naomi had to live on. The redeemer would then have been required to allow Naomi and Ruth to live on that land, and to provide for their needs until the time of their deaths, at which time the land would be added permanently to the redeemer’s property parcel. This was the best that Naomi was hoping for really, given that Boaz seemed a generous sort, she hoped he would buy her land at the end of the harvest and give her a good price for it.

Chapter 3

As the months went by, Naomi began thinking about broader options. She wanted security not just for herself, but for Ruth as well (Ruth who worked in the fields every day to provide for them). If their goel were to not just buy their land, but also marry and sire a child with Ruth, then that child could (in theory) become the legal heir to Elimelech’s bought property when they came of age, and could carry on Elimelech’s name and legacy. But where, in all of Israel, would they find a man so giving, so selfless as to lay down his own rights and ego for the sake of a dead man and two widows? Naomi thinks there’s a chance that Boaz may be the one. Naomi tells Ruth to put on her best dress and perfume, to highlight all her best assets, and to meet Boaz on the threshing floor after everyone else had left. Naomi sends Ruth to “propose marriage” to Boaz, but she does so in an extremely bold and intimate way. There were risks in this plan. Would Boaz throw her out as a loose woman? Perhaps. But Naomi trusted that Boaz had gotten to know Ruth well enough out in the fields these last two months to know that she was a woman of integrity, whose morals were above reproach. Would Boaz –feeling relaxed from eating and drinking- have his way with her that one night and cast her off without any thought of marriage? Naomi knew Boaz well enough to know that he was a man of integrity

and faithfulness. Naomi instructs Ruth to “uncover his feet” and lay down at his feet as her way of making her intentions clear. This sounds strange. The feet was a Hebrew euphemism for genitals. So, either she really did uncover his feet and lay down at them in an act of submission and intimacy (I’ll take your feet and every other part of you as my own), or she lay down at his “feet” and some kind of sexual behavior constituted a proposal of marriage. Regardless of what actually happened, the act did come across loud and clear to Boaz and he did behave honorably toward Ruth. To say “spread your cloak over me” is to say “marry me.” Even in this deeply intimate scenario, Boaz makes sure that everything is done with righteousness. He knows that he is not next of kin, and wants to make sure that he isn’t marrying her when another is the closest relative, so he hatches a plot to ensure that everyone gets what they want –for he wants to obey the law, and he does want to marry Ruth. Ruth’s visit to him must be kept secret so that no one suspects her of unchastity –just in case she ends up being someone else’s wife. Boaz sends her on her way in the dark with yet another giant helping of grain.

Chapter 4

Boaz, eager to marry Ruth and to serve as redeemer for both Ruth and Naomi, wastes no time in approaching the closer kinsman. He has full faith that the other man will not want to marry Ruth, and he uses this to his own advantage. He follows the established law, hailing the other kinsman by the city gate with 10 elders. He offers the land first to the other kinsman (who, in a small town, already knew of Naomi’s situation and perhaps had plans to make Naomi an offer after the harvest was over). It’s possible that Boaz makes his kinsman aware that by buying the land he also has to marry Ruth as part of the role of being goel, but Vs. 5 is likely mistranslated. It makes more sense legally for it to read “on the day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, I acquire Ruth the Moabite.” For, if the kinsman buys the field, and Boaz marries Ruth and has a son by her on behalf of Mahlon (Elimilech’s dead heir), then within a year the couple could win back legal rights to the property that the man is paying for today. It doesn’t make sense to pay for a parcel of land that could fall out of your hands next year through the birth of an heir to another man. Therefore, the kinsman understands that the most logical thing is for Boaz to play the role of redeemer for both Ruth and Naomi, and keep the property in the family through both means. This is perceived by the kinsman and the elders as a righteous thing, that Boaz saved his kinsman from making a terrible legal and financial blunder. And when the marriage is announced, the elders offer their blessings on the union. Ruth does conceive and bears a son, Obed. Naomi was no longer “empty”, Ruth’s love alone was worth 7 sons –the best compliment possible. The child is the “restorer of life” –not only because the love of infants brings great joy, even after great sorrow has been known, but also because this tiny infant is now the heir to all that was Elimelech’s. He is the new “redeemer” of the family, thus Naomi has a new son.