

“An Immigrant’s Gift”

I love the story of Ruth for many reasons. I love what it is supposed to teach us. I love the layers of the story. I love how by learning a little bit about the Israelite context we learn about the oral tradition it came out of. I love to wonder how people in ancient times might have received the story given that it was in their context and it did not have to be explained. For example, each name in the story has a meaning and the names tell us something about the character.

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 Jews under Joshua and before Saul 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 context of Ruth.

The other part of the context 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’s 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 only to have a run-in with Pharaoh that enriches them.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 a different Pharaoh².

Instead of going to Egypt this family from Bethlehem heads to Moab. Moab was a neighbor of Israel but not a friendly neighbor. But they have food so the family from “the house of bread” sojourns there. Once they arrive in Moab we learn their names. The father is Elimelech which means “my God is King.” His wife is Naomi or “pleasantness.” Very good names altogether. However, the meanings of their sons’ names are odd. Mahlon names mean “consumption” or “sickly” and Chilion “dies young” or “dies suddenly.” These are not the typical names that parents give their children. Imagine hearing those names in translation when the story is first read to you. The listener is being told that these two are not long for this world.

But before they meet their demise along with their father, they marry two young women from the area. 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 the patriarch has died and later his two sons, Naomi decides 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 good 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 implies. Ruth remains steadfast and refuses to leave Naomi’s side and thus lives up to her name “companion.”

¹ Genesis 12:10-20

² Genesis 37 and 42-46

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* (חֶסֶד) in Hebrew. The most frequent translation of this word is “lovingkindness.” When used of God in relationship to the people of Israel it is how God’s love for them is unwavering, resolute, persistent, 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 most remarkable is that she is a foreigner, and from a despised foreign group at that, and ultimately an immigrant as she returns with Naomi to Bethelhem.

When Jesus is asked in today’s Gospel what is the greatest commandment he did not pick one of the Ten Commandments that Moses brought down from Mt. Sinai. Instead he chose what Jews call the Shema, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.”⁴ To that Jesus added “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”⁵

Ruth the foreigner exemplifies these two commandments in her devotion to Naomi and her God. Ruth is the mother of Obed who is an ancestor of King David.⁶ In Matthew’s Gospel Ruth is listed as an ancestor of Jesus.⁷ 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.

³ Ruth 1:16-17

⁴ Deuteronomy 6:4-5

⁵ Leviticus 19:18

⁶ Ruth 4:21

⁷ Matthew 1:5