

RUTH

RUTH AND NAOMI LOST EVERYTHING....
EXCEPT EACH OTHER

*Where you go, I will go;
Where you lodge, I will lodge;
Your people shall be my people,
And your God my God. 1:16*

For the first time reader of Ruth, it is enough to focus on the devoted love between Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi as they journey from sorrow and despair to hope and new life. The story begins with a famine, which drives Naomi, her husband and two sons from Bethlehem to the enemy territory of Moab. Naomi's husband dies; the sons marry local women. When her sons die, Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem. Ruth insists on moving with her. The story unfolds as the foreigner Ruth works in the fields to support her mother-in-law. This story has a happy ending: welcome, respect, a new marriage, and a new baby who grows up to become the grandfather of the great King David.

Ruth is one of only two Old Testament books named after a woman – in fact, the entire Bible. It is the only Old Testament book named after someone who is not Jewish. This is significant. Ruth is repeatedly identified in this story as a foreigner. During times when religious or ethnic purity is over-emphasized, the story of Ruth, the courageous foreign great-grandmother of King David, has been a powerful reminder that God is concerned about – and welcomes – all people. Ruth lifts up the Scriptural theme that God intended the Israelites to be a witness to the world. Ruth is a reminder to us today, also, to welcome strangers and immigrants.

The story of Ruth shows some unfamiliar, but very important, practices in Jewish law. Gleaning, their way to provide for the poor, is described in Leviticus 19:9-10 and Deuteronomy 24:19-22. The next-of-

kin had an obligation to protect the name and property of family, especially if a man died without sons. Leviticus 25:25, Deuteronomy 25:5,6 and Joshua 20:3 describe these practices. Ruth is a good basis for exploring our practices and attitudes about poverty, property, marriage, and male/female relationships.

The story of Ruth is probably very old. I can easily imagine this story being told over and over, perhaps from mother to daughter, and certainly part of the oral tradition in the town of Bethlehem where King David and Jesus were born. According to the Talmud, the prophet Samuel authored this story as well as Judges and the books of Samuel. However, it uses words from a later time and cultural customs are explained for later hearers. Likely, it was updated around the time of the Babylonian captivity.

In the Hebrew Bible, Ruth is a part of the Kethubhim or Writings which was the third and last group of writings accepted as Jewish scripture. It was placed after Proverbs which ends with a chapter about the blessings of a good and industrious wife. (The Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible placed it among history books between Judges and I Samuel.)

Ruth is one of the five Megilloth or Scrolls which are read at special occasions throughout the year: Song of Solomon on Passover, Ruth at Shavuot (Pentecost), Lamentations on the ninth of Ab, Ecclesiastes at Sukkoth (Feast of Booths) and Esther at Purim. It is a fitting text for the harvest celebration of Shavuot because the action in Bethlehem occurs during the harvest. Ruth picks up the grain left by harvesters so that she and Naomi will have food. There she meets Boaz, the relative of Naomi who becomes her husband.

Those who had nothing thank God for rich blessings.

*RUTH, brief enough to read in 15 minutes, is a delight.
The German poet Goethe called it "the loveliest complete work on a small scale."*

The Student Bible, New Revised Standard Version