

Steadfast love for sorrowful people (Ruth 1:1-18)

Ruth offers a striking contrast to the chaos and moral ambiguity of the judges era.

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November 1, 2024

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The book of Ruth, a unique narrative situated in the period of the judges, is widely regarded by scholars as a composition from the post-exilic era. I align with those who argue that it was authored as a counter-narrative to the exclusivist policies in Ezra-Nehemiah, which mandated the dissolution of marriages between Jewish men and non-Jewish women to preserve Jewish identity.

Ruth exemplifies how a non-Jew can adhere to the Torah and maintain covenantal fidelity, thereby illustrating the community's capacity to integrate such individuals. Ruth, the Moabite woman, whose unwavering loyalty ensures her inclusion within the lineage of King David (4:22) and, ultimately, Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:5), highlights God's ability to work through unexpected people and circumstances to fulfill God's divine purposes.

Ruth offers a striking contrast to the chaos and moral ambiguity of the judges era. While it is difficult to divide the passages in the book of Ruth into discrete units for preaching, the lectionary designates Ruth 1:1-18 for this Sunday. This passage primarily emphasizes themes of death and grief in its opening chapter. This chapter focuses on trusting God to intervene amid pain and suffering. It explores the themes of hope in the face of despair and the affirmation of life despite the presence of

death.

The narrative recounts a famine in Bethlehem, compelling Elimelech and his family to migrate to Moab. Ironically, despite Bethlehem meaning "House of Bread," it lacks food, prompting their relocation. This recalls Abraham and Sarah's flight to Egypt during a famine. However, tragedy strikes when Elimelech and his sons die in Moab, leaving behind three widows and jeopardizing the future of Israel's royal lineage.

Naomi's conversation with her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, demonstrates her trust in God despite her belief that God afflicted her with the death of her husband and sons (v. 20). Naomi acknowledges God's mercy in providing sustenance for the people of Bethlehem and resolves to return there with her daughters-in-law. Although the text does not explicitly explain Naomi's change of heart concerning her daughters-in-law accompanying her, her dialogue suggests an increasing concern for their well-being as Moabites integrating into Israelite society.

Naomi instructs her daughters-in-law to return to their "mother's house" and bestows blessings upon them. In a patriarchal society, her directive to return to their "mother's house" rather than their father's underscores the significance of the maternal bedroom as a place of intimacy and marital union. This gesture can be interpreted as Naomi releasing Ruth and Orpah to seek new marriages and establish families. Perhaps Naomi anticipates societal reluctance in Bethlehem to accept marriages with Moabite women, thus advising them to return home as a practical option.

Naomi understands very well the vulnerability women face without male provision. Her blessings convey her conviction that God is engaged in the welfare of her family and can extend favor and protection to Ruth and Orpah. She employs the Hebrew term *hesed*, which signifies steadfast love and faithfulness, thereby invoking God's attributes of commitment and benevolence. *Hesed* denotes a profound connotation of compassionate mercy. It encompasses the notion that God will provide healing following experiences of grief. Naomi's blessing, therefore, functions as a petition for divine favor, encapsulating the mutual care and support inherent in their relationship. Divine *hesed* represents a steadfast commitment to offering comfort and support to sorrowful people.

Ruth and Orpah initially resist leaving Naomi, but Orpah relents and returns home. Ruth, however, clings to Naomi and presses her to stay with her. Ruth vows to

remain with Naomi and invokes Naomi's deity, YHWH, rather than Chemosh, the Moabite god, to guarantee her commitment to fulfill her pledge. She states, "May YHWH do X to me, and may he add Y, if even death separates me from you."

If Ruth moves to Bethlehem with Naomi, she must accept Naomi's God. Eventually, God's *hesed* is evident when Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem—where Ruth marries Boaz, gives birth to a son, Obed, and becomes a source of renewal and support for Naomi in her old age.