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Introduction to the Old Testament
Integrative Project
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The Book of Ruth

The mother daughter group has decided to have a dinner and Bible study on Ruth. I am known both for my seminary studies and for my cooking abilities, so the group has asked me to lead this meeting. The group welcomes the chance to dine together and learn at the same time.

Since Ruth begins with Naomi, her husband, Elimelech, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, leaving for Moab because of famine, rather than serving dinner as everyone arrives, I will begin with the Bible study. The group will more easily understand famine if everyone is a bit hungry and smelling dinner cooking in the adjacent kitchen. As the Bible study progresses, I will serve either some wheat or barley bread at the time in the study where Ruth comes home from her first gleaning in Boaz's fields. This will be similar to smelling your neighbor's food when you have only bread. Compared to the famine though, they will be grateful for the bread. While there is no dinner mentioned at the conclusion of Ruth, I will serve a roast beef dinner after the study to celebrate both Ruth's marriage and the birth of Obed.

On the next several pages, I have the leader's information and a hand out for everyone attending the Bible study.

Background Information

Ruth is referred to by some commentators as the better version of Tamar. Tamar was the wife of Judah's (Israel's) oldest son, Er. Er dies and leaves Tamar childless. According to levirate law, Er's brother, Onan, must marry Tamar and have children to continue the family name but Onan also dies. Since the third and final son, Shelah, is still young, Judah sends Tamar back to her family to wait for Shelah to grow up. Tamar waits a fairly long time and realizes Judah may not send for her. She decides to seduce Judah by disguising herself as a prostitute and becomes pregnant with twins by Judah. Judah is shown that he is the father and admits that she was right in what she did. Her sons are Perez and Zorah. Perez shares the same lineage as Boaz and King David. We will watch how Ruth finds herself in a similar position as Tamar but handles it differently.

Bethlehem means "house of bread" or "place of food." It is ironic that Bethlehem is the place of the famine in chapter one. This famine is what causes Naomi and Elimelech to leave Bethlehem originally.

Chapter 1

1-5 Ruth is set in the time of judges. While no specific date is given for the text, we know that it is before kings rule Israel. Although Bethlehem is in a fertile area, which the name "House of Bread" suggests, it has been struck with a famine. Elimelech, his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, move to Moab where there is no famine. This is an extremely interesting choice of locations since Moab was not held in high regard by the Israelites. Moabites were descendants of an incestuous relationship between Lot and his eldest daughter. Israelites did not think anything good would come from Moab. The book of Ruth begins with a situation of want that worsens when Elimelech dies. Kirsten Nielsen in her commentary on Ruth comments about Elimelech's death with the following. "Later traditions could not allow such an event to remain unexplained, however, and have interpreted his death as a just punishment for leaving his homeland and failing to show solidarity during the famine." At this point, both sons take Moabite wives, Orpah and Ruth. After ten years, both sons also die, leaving three widows. Again, no reason is given for their deaths but their names may give some clues. Mahlon can be interpreted as "sickness" or "infertility" and Chilion as "consumptive," leading us to think they may have been in generally poor health.

6-14 Naomi learns the Lord had considered his people's hunger and there is now food in Bethlehem. She begins the journey home with her two daughters-in-law. As they begin the journey, Naomi encourages Orpah and Ruth to return to their mother's homes and not travel to the foreign land. She blesses them with the same faithful, constant care that they have given to her. Both want to stay but Naomi presses for them to return to their homes. She explains that she is old and has no sons left in her womb. Even if they were willing to wait for the birth of a son to marry when he became an adult, the wait would not be reasonable. Naomi is essentially saying there is no future for them with her. Orpah leaves and returns to her home.

15-18 This is a beautiful passage about Ruth staying with Naomi.

“But Ruth said,
‘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!’”

The beauty of this passage is in two areas. First a strong woman to woman connection is formed. Ruth is willing to just be present with Naomi and go with her wherever she decides to go. Even though Naomi has spoken of her bitter past and an impossible future, Ruth promises to be an abiding presence with her even when everyone else has gone. Second, Ruth shows an excellent example of someone converting to the faith by wanting Naomi’s God as her God.

19-22 Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem. Many of the town’s women come to speak to them. Naomi laments the emptiness of her life. Naomi’s name means “sweetness” or “my joy” but by this point, she wants the name of Mara, “bitterness.” She feels God has caused her hardship for she left Bethlehem full and has returned home empty. Her desire to change her name is very interesting since it was a famine that caused Naomi, Elimelech and their family to leave. Naomi seems to be talking about the loss of husband and sons which would be most important to women of this time. No mention is made of Ruth at this point. The last phrase in verse 22 is a hopeful sign that things are about to change. Ruth and Naomi arrive at the beginning of the barley harvest.

Chapter 2

1-7 The opening of the chapter is important because the reader learns about the wealthy, prominent relative of Elimelech, Boaz. This introduction gives a clue that Boaz will be important through out the book. In verse 2, Ruth takes the initiative to go out and do what Israel’s destitute are permitted to do, glean grain behind the harvesters. Naomi approves of the plan but with very little ado. The important part here is that Naomi refers to Ruth as “daughter” signaling her understanding she and Ruth belong together. By chance, Ruth goes to Boaz’s fields. The text does not seem to indicate that Ruth preplanned choosing this particular field.

Boaz arrives at the field and gives a blessing to his reapers which they return to him. He then immediately asks whose the young woman is, gleaning behind them. The reapers respond she is the Moabite who has returned with Naomi. They further report she asked to glean and has worked tirelessly all day. She is seen as hard working and diligent, deserving of respect.

8-16 Boaz speaks to Ruth directly and gives her instructions to protect her. These include glean only in my field, keep a close eye on my women, and follow behind the reapers. He has given orders for his young men not to touch her and has left further

instruction that she is permitted to drink from the water that the men have drawn. Ruth is so surprised and grateful that she throws herself on the ground. She asks why she has found favor with him. Apparently, Boaz has heard of all she has done for Naomi and recites them to Ruth. He asks God to reward her for all she has done. The reference to Ruth being under God's wings will come up again when Ruth visits Boaz at the threshing floor. Ruth continues by requesting to continue in Boaz's favor and refers to herself as "your servant" even though she is not one of his servants. Boaz continues his kindness and concern by inviting Ruth to eat and giving her some of the finest parched grain. He also gives her some extra to take home for Naomi. When Ruth leaves, Boaz gives additional instructions for his reapers to pull out some handfuls from the bundles so she is sure to have plenty to glean.

17-23 Ruth gleans until evening on this first day and after beating the grain has about 2/3 of a bushel (an ephah) to take home. Ruth returns home and shows Naomi all she gleaned on this first day. Afterward, Ruth gives Naomi the remainder of the fine parched grain Boaz had given her when they ate together earlier. Naomi inquires where Ruth has worked and asks a blessing on the man who took notice of her. Ruth tells her that it was Boaz. Now Naomi tells Ruth that Boaz is a relative and agrees that Ruth should only glean in his field. This will be much safer than going to another field. Ruth continues gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests which would be about seven weeks.

An important concept that emerges at the end of this chapter is of Boaz being "one of our nearest of kin" or being our kinsman. This introduces the concept of Boaz as the redeemer. Old Testament laws indicate "When an Israelite is forced to sell his land for financial reasons, the closest relative acts as redeemer and buys the land so that it can remain in the family and not be handed over to an alien." (Nielsen, page 74-75.) While there is no actual mention of Naomi owning land from her husband, it seems to be the case and will come up again in chapter four. Naomi and Ruth's condition of emptiness that began the book is slowly reversing.

[At this time in the study, I will give everyone some home made bread signaling the end of the famine.]

Chapter 3

1-6 Naomi takes the initiative to plan for Ruth's security. Naomi instructs Ruth to wash and perfume herself and go to the threshing floor where Boaz will be in the evening. Ruth is to wait until he has eaten and falls asleep, uncover his feet and lie down. There is some sexual connotation in this as feet sometimes refers to genitals. Naomi's plan is somewhat surprising in two ways. First, because a decent woman would not do this but Ruth is following the instructions Naomi has given her. Second, Naomi, who has expressed concern for Ruth's safety, suggests an action that could put Ruth in a socially unsafe situation. Ruth does not question her mother-in-law's directions but prepares herself and goes to the threshing floor.

The concept of a levirate marriage as taught in Deuteronomy begins to come into play. This type of marriage occurs when a husband dies and leaves no children. The husband's brother is required to marry the wife and produce heirs to keep the dead brother's name alive. While Boaz is not Ruth's husband's brother, he may be willing to marry Ruth.

7-13 When Ruth arrives, Boaz is at the threshing floor and everything Naomi has instructed occurs. At midnight, Boaz awakes startled and asks who was there. After Ruth identifies herself, she asks Boaz to spread his cloak over her. This action goes back to the previous mention of being under God's wings. Ruth is requesting both general protection and marriage. Boaz praises her loyalty since she could have gone after younger men but has chosen to remain with family. He thinks more highly of her for her loyalty. He tells her there is another closer next of kin whom he will ask if he is willing to take on the responsibility. If not, Boaz agrees to do it. While the possibility of a sexual encounter existed, it never occurred. Boaz asks Ruth to stay until morning.

14-18 In the very early morning, Boaz sends Ruth back to Naomi with six measure of barley. Again he is protecting her by sending her out before anyone would know she was there. Upon arriving home, Ruth tells Naomi everything that occurred during the night and Naomi tells Ruth to wait to see how things will turn out, believing Boaz will not rest until the matter is settled. A point of interest is Naomi having described herself as being empty but with Ruth around she has never been empty. There also seems to be a double meaning of seed here. Seed is needed to end both famine and childlessness. The meeting at the threshing floor gives the promise of marriage that could result in children.

Chapter 4

1-10 Boaz goes out to the gate early in the morning to wait for the next of kin. When the next of kin who is never given a name arrives, Boaz calls him to come over and also invites ten country men to join them. Boaz proceeds to explain Naomi's situation after returning from Moab and the need to sell Elimelech's land. If the next of kin does not want to redeem it, Boaz is ready to make the purchase. No mention of Ruth is made at this point. Financially, the purchase by the next of kin appears as a very good idea because he has no idea the land would revert to Elimelech's family. As the next of kin agrees to the purchase, Boaz tells him he is also acquiring Ruth, the Moabite. Immediately, the next of kin changes his mind and tells Boaz to make the redemption. Custom at the time to attest to a transaction required the next of kin to remove his sandal and give it to Boaz. The ten men were witness to the transaction that Boaz acquired both the land and Ruth to be his wife to maintain the dead man's name.

11-22 Events unfold quickly now. All the witnesses pronounce blessings on Ruth. "They invoke tradition, but the traditions invoked are highly selective. First they say, may God make her like Rachel and Leah –the two sisters by whose collective machinations the entire nation of Israel was born. Second they say, may your house become like that of the house of Perez – the son of Judah through his unintended levirate union with Tamar, who tricked him into giving her twins." (Tull, page 79.) These wishes most likely make reference to the hope Boaz is able to father children in his older age as Judah was able and to hope Ruth is as fertile as Rachel and Leah. Boaz and Ruth are married, conceive a child and bear a son, Obed, who became the father of Jesse. The women of the town celebrate with Naomi, blessing the LORD for all he has restored to her.

The book closes with a genealogy that goes from Perez to David, showing the importance of Ruth in the Davidic line.

Conclusion

Many commentators contrast Ruth to Tamar. When faced with the similar situation of having no brother-in-law to marry her and carry on their dead husband's name, Tamar takes matters into her own hands and tricks her father-in-law to giving her children. Ruth on the other hand upholds her virtue. Even though she skirts close to losing that virtue when she goes to the threshing floor, she is open about who she is and what she needs. Boaz is able to help Ruth maintain her virtue.

A very important theme in Ruth is her loyalty and close relationship with Naomi. Ruth stays with her from the beginning to the end, showing devotion to the family and love for Naomi. Even in the end, the baby is more for Naomi to keep Elimelech's family name alive. Naomi could no longer have children but Ruth could. The strong bond between them is never broken.

Finally, God's faithfulness is seen as Naomi goes from famine to fullness. This faithfulness is demonstrated in having both food and family restored. The women of the town celebrate with Naomi saying that Ruth is more than seven sons to her and the LORD has blessed her. God is faithful and has never left Ruth or Naomi.

Meal

The meeting will conclude with a full roast beef meal. Just as Naomi and Ruth are restored after the famine with food and blessings, so will the mothers and daughters share in food and blessing. Some of the recipes for the meal will be from *The Garden of Eden Cookbook*. These recipes echo recipes from Biblical times. This meal will give the group a flavor of what may have been eaten at the time of Ruth and Naomi.

Sources Consulted:

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Wigoder, Devorah Emmet, *The Garden of Eden Cookbook* (San Francisco, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1988).

Ruth

1. Background

Tamar as the mother of Perez.

Bethlehem means “house of bread” or “place of food”

Similarity between Tamar and Ruth

2. Chapter 1

a. verses 1-5

Move to Moab

Marriage

Deaths

b. verses 6-14

Return to Bethlehem

Orpah’s decision

c. verses 15-18

Ruth’s decision

d. verses 19-22

Naomi’s name change

Hope for Naomi

3. Chapter 2

a. verses 1-7

Introduction to Boaz

Ruth gleanes for barley

Naomi call Ruth daughter

Boaz notices Ruth

b. verses 8-16

Boaz’s instruction to Ruth

Ruth’s response

c. verses 17-23

Ruth tells Naomi about the day

Importance of Boas as kin



Naomi entreating Ruth and Orpah
to return to the Land of Moab
William Blake



Ruth in Boaz’s Field
Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld

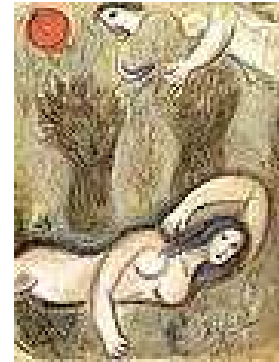


Ruth in Boaz’s House
Unknown – Illustrator of
History Bible

4. Chapter 3
 - a. verses 1-6
Naomi's Plan
Levirate marriage
 - b. verses 7-13
At the threshing floor
Boaz's cloak
 - c. verses 14-18
Ruth's return home to Naomi
"Seed"5. Chapter 4
6. Conclusion
 - a. verses 1-10
Boaz meets with the immediate next of kin
Passing the sandal
 - b. verses 11-22
Blessings
Marriage of Ruth and Boaz
Birth of Obed
Genealogy



Ruth Meets Boaz
Unknown – Illustrator of
Caspar Liuken's Writings



Boaz wakes up and
sees Ruth at his feet.
Marc Chagall



Boaz pours six measures of barley
into Ruth's veil.
Harmenszoon van Rijn Rembrandt

Pictures found on www.biblical-art.com