

Dear Friends,

RUTH 4: 14-22

Women have been at the centre of the book of Ruth. Men have taken centre stage briefly while Boaz managed the business of arranging his marriage to Ruth. That is now over and the focus returns to women.

The women of Bethlehem come to see Naomi and her new grand-son. This baby, they say, will restore Naomi's life and be a support for her in her old age. The women are more concerned about the practicalities of life than preserving the line of Ruth's first husband who died.

Earlier in the story the same women gathered when Naomi arrived back in Bethlehem. Then Naomi was bitter and said that she had gone away full but had come back empty. Then the story teller begged to differ by reminding us that Ruth was with her. Now, at the end of the story what Naomi and Ruth are to each other cannot be denied. The Hebrew could be translated to say that Ruth loves Naomi, or it could be translated to say that Naomi loves Ruth. I don't think we need to waste time arguing about which it is. They love each other and have shown it in the ways that matter, by being faithful and taking care of each other.

The women say that Ruth is more to Naomi than seven sons. I'm not sure if Naomi could quite agree with that. I doubt if, in her mind, anything could replace her two boys who died. That said, given how male centred the world of this story is, it is high praise for one woman to be seen as better than seven men. Although this is being said by the women of the town. They may be thinking that their sons are not always quite as helpful as they might be. They sometimes wish that they could be a bit more like Ruth.

Naomi takes, embraces and cares for the baby. As Ruth cannot replace her sons, neither can this baby. But looking after him, as she once looked after Mahlon and Chilion, does give her some comfort.

Usually it's the father or the mother who give a baby a name. Here it's the close friends of Naomi. They call the child Obed. It's short for Obadiah and means worshipper or servant of the Lord. Then we get one of those family trees. We are told that Obed became the father of Jesse and Jesse the father of David.

That's how the book ends. I think it's a brilliant ending. It suddenly takes the whole story on to another level. It has been a down to earth story about people struggling to survive. But at the last, it turns out to be a story of national significance. It's a story all about the origins of the great King David. David was one of Israel's heroes. With David, Israel became a great nation. But David only saw the light of day because of a Moabite woman.

When we started this journey, we noticed that the book of Ruth was probably written at a time when Israel was closing ranks and doing their best to keep the

outsiders out. Nehemiah is an example of that. He describes his treatment of Jews who married outside of their own community. He said, "I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair." The book of Ruth challenges such attitudes. Ruth, a Moabite is a woman of worth. She is humanity at its best. If Boaz had acted like Nehemiah there would have been no King David. Moabite blood flowed through David's veins.

And hundreds of years later when Matthew put together a family tree for Jesus, he included a long list of men and four women, three of the women were named and one of them is Ruth.

God bless you,

Tony

Book list

The following books provided lots of inspiration for these letters on the book of Ruth.

The Hebrew Bible, a translation with commentary by Robert Alter  
Compromising Redemption by Danna Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn  
God and The Rhetoric of Sexuality by Phyllis Trible  
The Bible Month booklet 30 Days with Ruth