

Ruth (Part 1)

Ruth: a “wandering” book

In the Christian canon, the book of Ruth typically follows Judges. This is not the case in the Jewish textual tradition, however, where Ruth shows up later, after Proverbs. The two texts are linked in Hebrew scriptures through the word אִשָּׁת הַיָּלִד, meaning “woman of valor,” which is used in both Proverbs and Ruth.

Although Ruth’s narrative is set in the same time period as Judges, the two books are quite different. While Judges emphasizes its characters’ immoral behavior (e.g., “everyone did what was right in their own eyes”), Ruth’s protagonists demonstrate extraordinary moral fiber, even under extreme duress.

What is Ruth really about?

There are many different themes for readers to consider in this text. The story reveals patriarchal norms, but also subverts those norms with Naomi embodying the role of patriarch. Although many have argued that the story is about “conversion,” this perspective is somewhat anachronistic. Ruth’s statement of devotion to Naomi (1:16b) arguably expresses adoption rather than conversion.

Return to the Land

Questions about who will inherit the land are central to this story. Ruth borrows from many different biblical narratives and sometimes alludes to other texts by tweaking familiar plot points and phrases. In Genesis 38, for example, Tamar tricks her father-in-law Judah into impregnating her after her husband dies to ensure their family line continues. Sticking Points

There are several key tensions that lie at the heart of these texts. How does Israel make sense of its relationship to the people who lived on the land before them? If the historical consensus is now that the conquest likely did not happen, then why did Israel create this story? How do we deal with the conquest and genocide of an entire indigenous people described in this text? What role has this narrative played in justifying colonization, imperialism, and genocide throughout history, and how is that legacy of violence still impacting our world today? These questions and more will be the focus of the next few sessions of this Bible study.

Return to the Past

It is unlikely that Judges and Ruth were written in the same time period. The book of Ruth might be an early attempt to weave together several stories and themes from a rich and varied textual tradition. While it is a story of return to the land (from Moab to Judah), it also depicts a return to an idyllic fantasy of the past. The time of Judges seems like an odd choice, however, given its apparent emphasis on this period's characteristic immorality and violence.

The book of Ruth ends with an affirmation of its narrative importance to the biblical corpus, stating that Ruth's child is David's ancestor. This may have been a later addition intended to couch this text within the larger textual tradition. Regardless, this unique book may be best understood as a piece of historical fiction.