

Ruth (Part 2)

Subverting Expectations

Ruth is one of only two books in the Bible named after a woman. The story begins immediately after every male character has died. The absence of men in this opening scene subverts expectations and gender dynamics in ancient Israel. Although there are male characters, they serve a peripheral role in the plot. Boaz, for example, seems to be a part of the story only because he serves a particular purpose. He is necessary only for Ruth to produce an heir so that the family line will continue.

By contrast, the female characters and their relationship to one another are essential in this narrative. Ruth and Naomi's relationship is particularly unique. It could be that their dynamic is mapped onto the patriarchal norms of ancient Israel. Naomi's command to Ruth, for example, models the kind of obedience one would typically expect of a son to his father.

Naomi's circumstances force her to break with tradition. When a woman was left widowed and without sons in ancient Israel, she became the head of her household, but because Ruth and Orpah were younger they would typically have been expected to return to their father's house after becoming widows. Yet Naomi tells Ruth and Orpah, "Go back each of you to your *mother's* house" (1:8). Although this change seems to be intentional, its reason is up for interpretation.

Ruth's "Kindness"

Boaz speaks of a "kindness" that Ruth does for him on the threshing floor (3:10). It is often assumed that this "kindness" is of a sexual nature, which may or may not be the case. Readers are not told exactly what happened on the threshing floor. There is an innocent and sincere tone to this story. Boaz only indicates that he appreciates Ruth choosing him over a younger man.

Some interpret Ruth's story to be an empowering example of female agency in the Bible. Yet it could be that Ruth only has a veneer of agency in this text. How much control and decision-making power did she truly have? Ruth exhibits great devotion (*hesed*) to Naomi when she chooses to stay with her in the first scene. This seems to be a kindness Ruth offers to Naomi. She doesn't have to protect Naomi's land, name, and family line. She does so anyway. The same is true with Boaz.

The Book of Naomi?

One wonders whether this book would be more aptly titled “the book of Naomi.” The story begins with male death and concludes with birth of a new male heir. Ruth seems to be a great hero because she saves the patriarchy, similar to how Tamar (Gen 38) also saves the patriarchy. Yet the genealogy later names Ruth, not Boaz, as King David’s ancestor. In the end, “a son has been born to Naomi” (4:17). The female characters get the final word.