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Five Things About Ruth That Nobody Talks About

by Jeffrey Still | May 10 2021

The book of Ruth is a fascinating short story from the Hebrew Scriptures. Where other biblical books tell of the dramatic history of the nation of Israel and even of humanity and creation itself, the story of Ruth zooms in on a day-in-the-life account of everyday people living in rural Israel in 1100 BC. But it's not a merely sweet story of rural life. It's bluntly honest about the hardships and challenges faced by women in that society, which may be familiar to women today.

As a non-Jewish person living more than 3,000 years later, I find it to be one of the most captivating and relatable of biblical stories. Like me, Ruth was a non-Jewish person who came to put her faith in the God of Israel and found blessing under the wing of His care. But Ruth's story also resonates with and even closely mirrors some of my personal experiences. Ruth was a young, single woman who traveled across a barren desert to find a new home in a small town, where she met and married a farmer. In 1988, my young, single mother packed me and all of our belongings into a Volkswagen Beetle and drove us from the sprawling metropolises of Southern California across the barren deserts of western America to make a new life for us in a tiny mountain town where she met and married a local rancher.

Ruth's story challenges society's prejudices with subtle, yet powerful narrative turns.

That might sound like a formula for a charming and romantic story, but it's actually the story of a courageous woman's harrowing journey across unforgiving country to settle among a new community. I see a lot of this same courage and gumption in so many women, from my own mother to many of the great heroes of the Bible. Like Tamar, Deborah, Esther, and others, Ruth's is an ancient story about a woman who challenges their society's prejudices with subtle, yet powerful narrative turns. And it demonstrates how the God of Israel works within the everyday lives of normal people to bring about personal, national, and universal redemption.

So, let's take a look at five things in this book that don't get talked about enough.

1. Ruth was disadvantaged in every way that mattered.

Most people know that Ruth was a foreigner in Israel, but being a foreigner was only part of her challenge. In fact, she was marginal in just about every way that mattered in the ancient Near East.

She was the ancient equivalent of an undocumented alien, hailing from an enemy foreign power. Her arrival would have aroused the same kind of unease that the arrival of Syrian refugees in European and American cities does today. And everything from her accent to her hair to her dress would have broadcast to everyone in Bethlehem, "This girl ain't from around here."

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On top of that, she was a religious outsider. She came from a land where people worshipped hideous idols and practiced human sacrifice (2 Kings 3:27). She had renounced her people's gods, but many of the good people of Bethlehem would be more than a little wary of her.

She was also a husbandless and sonless woman. In ancient Near Eastern society, where the value of women was largely based on their relationship to male relatives, that was a problem. Seeing as she had already been married for some time—perhaps even 10 years (Ruth 1:4)—and failed to produce a son, her prospects of finding another husband were not great, to put it mildly.

Without a male relative, Naomi and Ruth also had limited legal ability to manage their own affairs. Naomi moved back to her late husband's estate in Bethlehem, but she could do little to work the land and had no right to sell it.¹ She needed a husband or a son in order to gain access to that potential wealth.

Modern readers often don't see the heart of the struggle that Naomi and Ruth had. They weren't merely bereft of loved ones. The ancient listener would see a much bigger, all-too-familiar problem in their story—the lopsided lack of power and independence for women in the Near East world at that time.

When Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, she was the epitome of an outsider.

Considered all together, we can see that when Ruth arrived in Bethlehem, she was the epitome of an outsider—wrong heritage, wrong religion, wrong gender, wrong marital status. The only thing she could offer Naomi beyond mere companionship was her ability to glean—the ancient equivalent of gathering social welfare.

2. Ruth lived in constant fear of assault.

Travel in remote, sparsely populated regions of the world has never been without its dangers. On my own trip across the desert with my mother, we were taken advantage of by predatory mechanics who managed to squeeze a thousand dollars out of us. I remember my mother calling a family friend in tears from a tiny mechanic's office, asking for a wire transfer loan while this crew of mechanics stood around leering at her.

The world that Ruth and Naomi faced had far worse dangers. There was very little government, and the only law enforcement was handled by regular townspeople. Travelers on the road between cities were always in danger, and cities themselves could be terrifying places (Judges 20:22, 25). Two lone women, traipsing through the desert for several days and then wandering into Bethlehem uninvited could only pray that they wouldn't fall into the hands of people who would take advantage of their situation.

Even in the idyllic fields of Bethlehem, she might be assaulted.

What's more, Ruth's status as an enemy foreigner made her more vulnerable still. Boaz has to tell his hired hands "not to touch" her (Ruth 2:9). Then he warns Ruth not to glean in another farm because,

even in the idyllic fields of Bethlehem, she might be assaulted. Beyond the inherent danger of assault, she also faced an additional unfair risk: for young, single women, even a hint of impropriety with a man could lead to ostracism or worse.

3. Ruth broke nearly every social norm of her time.

Teaching about Ruth too often overlooks one of her most striking character traits: Ruth was a mold breaker. Ruth's society was full of boxes, especially for young women, and she broke pretty much every box that can be broken without engaging in immorality. That's an accomplishment!

Ruth lived in a culture where you were expected to stick with your particular ethnic group, and you're born into worship of your people's gods. Ruth abandons both of those to follow Naomi. Ruth lived in a culture where younger people were expected to obey older people, but Ruth refused to obey Naomi when she bid her to go back home. Later, she boldly told Boaz, an older man, what to do (Ruth 3:9)!

Ruth lived in a culture where young women were supposed to commit their lives to men. But Ruth committed her life to an elderly woman who had no access to resources and power. She chose caring for her mother-in-law over potential opportunities for romance, status, security, and children in her homeland.²

And her rebel spirit was apparently catching. Young women in Ruth's day were expected to stay home and avoid the appearance of scandal at all costs, passively waiting upon a suitor to pursue them. But at the direction of Naomi, Ruth blew all of that up by approaching Boaz in the middle of the night at the all-male threshing floor party/camp out. She threw Boaz's blanket over herself and said the 1100 BC equivalent of, "You better marry me!" This was a very savvy but also a very risky gambit. "Let it not be known that a woman came to the threshing floor," Boaz told her (Ruth 3:14). But Ruth and Naomi leveraged the potential scandal of their actions to inspire Boaz to take decisive action on their behalf.

Boaz saw her love for her mother-in-law as a virtue worthy of high esteem.

Then Boaz caught her spirit. To him, her integrity made up for her status (Ruth 2:11). He welcomed her. He ate with her. And he saw her love for her mother-in-law as a virtue worthy of high esteem. Then he carried the torch of revolution to the legal situation at the city gate. There, he shook things up when he assumed Naomi's right to sell her dead husband's family property (Ruth 4:3). That was unprecedented.³ And he insisted to the nearer kinsman that if he bought the land, he'd have to marry the owner's widow. That was not a requirement of the law for anyone but a brother-in-law (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). In making those two assumptions, Boaz risked his own cultural capital in order to gain cultural capital for Ruth and Naomi.

In the conclusion of the story, we see the impact that Ruth's quiet rebellion had on changing minds in the community. The women of Bethlehem declared Ruth's value to Naomi to be "better ... than seven sons" (Ruth 4:15 NIV). Seven being the biblical number of totality, this is essentially saying that Ruth's bravery and love make her inestimably more valuable than the average son. That was a deeply counter-cultural statement.

4. The connection between Ruth and David is about more than ancestry.

The resolution of Ruth's story has a sort of postscript which tells us that Ruth is a close and direct ancestor of King David. Every time I've heard this talked about, the takeaway is always something like: "Isn't it neat that God could use Ruth to make babies that would become kings?" But if that's all we can see of her legacy, we miss the point.

Can we not see a reflection of Ruth's character in David's courage, daring spirit, and commitment to God?

In patriarchal societies, bearing a son was one of the only ways that a woman could take part in the future of her people. She would bear and raise up the men who would become her community's future leaders. As mothers in King David's line, Ruth and Naomi shaped and influenced the character of the man who would rule the nation, thus leaving a lasting legacy on their people's history. Can we not see a reflection of Ruth's character in King David's courage, daring spirit, and commitment to God?

Thankfully, we now live in a world where women have more avenues for influence on their communities beyond child-rearing. But Ruth and Naomi didn't live in that kind of world. They were forced to navigate an unfair society through sheer gumption, emotional honesty, shrewd risk-taking, and a fierce commitment to each other.

5. Ruth's story of conversion to Jewish faith is unlike any other.

Whereas other foreigners mentioned in Scripture came to faith by seeing God's saving and healing power, Ruth was motivated to abandon her pagan religion and put her faith in God out of a deep, loving commitment to her Jewish mother-in-law. In desperation to keep Naomi from setting out alone, Ruth swore an oath to her saying,

"Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you stay, I will stay. Your people will be my people, and your God will be my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord do this to me and more so if even death separates me from you." (Ruth 1:16-17, CEB)

In this moment, we see this foreign woman display a kind of love that is usually attributed to God Himself in the Scriptures: *hesed* (Psalm 103:8). This Hebrew word has no parallel in English. It denotes a passionate commitment to bless another. And it's the word used twice in this story to describe Ruth's actions (1:8 and 3:10) and once to describe the love of God for His people (2:20). Ruth demonstrated her conversion, not only in an outward show of solidarity, but in an inner expression of the same love expressed by the God of Israel.

God's own *hesed* was shining through this marginalized, foreign woman to bless Naomi and Boaz. What's more, we see that this blessing from God overflows to the whole nation through David and beyond.

God works through the lives of faithful people to bless a community, a nation, and the world.

The subtle message of the story of Ruth shows us what it looks like for faithful people to live lives shaped by God's law of love (Matthew 22:35-40). And it reveals how God works through those lives to bless a community, a nation, and the world.

That's why it makes so much sense to me that this is the story from Scripture that accompanies the celebration of Shavuot. In celebrating the harvest of God's provision and the giving of the Law at Sinai, Jewish people remember a Gentile woman who was brought to faith in Israel's God and written into the story of Israel's kings through her sheer, unrelenting love for her Jewish family members. That hesed love is the very heart of God that we see throughout the Tanakh—which might be why this Gentile woman became the namesake of a book in the Hebrew Scriptures.

In Ruth's bold risk-taking for the sake of love, I can't help but be inspired and reminded of the courage of other biblical women and of my own mother. But I'm also reminded of Jesus, who, like Ruth, was always ready to knock down manmade social barriers for the sake of love—even to the point of giving up his own life. I can only pray that God would give me the grace to follow their great example.