

Sunday July 11, 2021
 Lesson 6: Listening to the Stories
 Scripture: Ruth 2: 4-16

Context:

This week we continue with the unit Respond with a focus upon the section titled “The People Next Door.” We will examine how to care for the strangers in our land. Today’s lesson comes from the book of Ruth in the Old Testament.

The book of Ruth reads as a narrative with a woman as the main protagonist. In the Jewish canon, the book of Ruth is one of the Writings, placed after the book of Proverbs so Ruth provides an illustration of “the woman of valor,” the focus of the ending chapter of Proverbs.¹ In the Christian canon, Ruth comes between Judges and 1 Samuel because the opening establishes the story taking place in the time of the judges.² The dates of the composition are debated, yet most scholars place the date of the book sometime between the tenth to the fourth centuries BCE.³ As the book reveals, the events mentioned have already taken place and the author(s) are presenting the story with all the details as part of a larger whole.

There is not a clear purpose of the book in comparison to other writings though. One hypothesis is the genealogical conclusion paving the way for any opposition to King David’s mixed ancestry as Ruth is shown to be the model proselyte, a foreigner who is with valor.⁴ To have a Moabite woman as part of the lineage of a king, especially over the Israelites, would have been embarrassing. Yet Ruth is an exception to the norm and the crisis is mitigated.

Another theory is the book was meant to help the Israelites with community. If written in the postexilic period, it may have been a counter to the limitation of membership in the community to those of pure lineage.⁵ Ruth shows how inclusivity is so important to the Israelites living into the neighbors God calls them to be.

This particular section highlights Israelite rural life and legal traditions. We see Boaz as a righteous man as he fulfills the practice of gleaning in which the residue is left for those on the fringes of Israelite society – the poor, widows, orphans, and resident aliens.⁶ His protection of Ruth demonstrates his own holiness and piety, which will be

¹ Michael D. Coogan, ed. *The Old Testament: A Historical and Literary Introduction to the Hebrew Scriptures*, (Oxford: University Press, 2011), 228.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. 229.

fully developed more in later chapters.

Application

When you think of Ruth, how do you picture her in your mind? Sometimes when I read about people in the Bible or books in general, I try to imagine what they might look like. In the case of Ruth, I imagine she probably looked like other Middle Eastern women I've encountered, but upon closer examination, there are differences. She doesn't wear her clothes the same way, her skin a slight shade different than the other Israelite women. Maybe her piercings were different, or there were scars from where piercings used to be when she was a Moabite woman before marrying her husband.

Whatever she looked like, Ruth was considered a foreigner to the land of Israel. She was a Moabite, a group despised by the Israelites for numerous reasons from their cultic worship and their proximity as neighbors a little too close for comfort. When Ruth landed in the land of Israel, she was an immigrant, someone who was not one of God's chosen people.

Yet Ruth played a prominent role in the genealogy of David, and later on, provided the roots of Jesus Christ. This woman, by many accounts, should not have had a place on the family tree. And yet she is there, containing a whole book in the Christian canon, the only other woman to hold the title being a Jewish woman who was married to a foreigner. Ruth, the immigrant, reminds us of how God does not fall prey to the human norms or expectations of who plays a role in God's story.

Yet there is another character in this narrative who perhaps stands closer to where a majority of us might stand in this country, especially those of us who are affluent and economically secure. There is the character of Boaz, an Israelite who owns land and has resources at his disposal. He is respected in the community and follows the Israelite law of taking care of the orphan, the widow, the poor, and the stranger. And in this case, Boaz seeks to take care of the foreigner, advocating for her to receive goods and to be protected from those who might harm her.

The story and relationship of Boaz and Ruth is not just a biblical fairy tale version of Cinderella. The story of Ruth demonstrates to us the importance of God's call on our lives to remember and take care of the strangers in our land. These are themes not just unique to the Israelites as we see these themes of hospitality and inclusion pop up throughout the scriptures, in both the Old and New Testament.

We are first and foremost reminded that although there may be deeds and we may have spent the money to purchase it, the land is not ours. The land first and foremost belongs to God. Humans have been quite adept at drawing boundaries and lines, sometimes fairly and other times, less than fairly. Anything to come from the land comes from God. And we are called to be good stewards sharing our resources and the fruits of the land with whomever God sends our way.

Secondly, we are reminded of how strangers or immigrants or whatever you would like to label them, are children of God who deserve just as much love and respect as those who look like us. One of the reasons this country often struggles with issues around immigration and race is because we have forgotten our own stories of immigration and the formation of our own country as a refuge for others. It is much easier to demean or diminish others, especially those who do not look like us.

Instead, God invites us on a different journey. God invites us to remember to care

for the strangers in our land by sharing resources and also treating others with respect. This does not mean there are not boundaries or procedures. Instead, this reminds us of how our call as Christians is to take care of those God sends us as we have had others who have taken care of us and those who have come before us.

Why do you think God calls us to take care of the strangers in our land? What are ways you can take care of others, especially those who are different than you? How does Ruth inspire you to look at people different than you and to think of how God might be using them in an incredible way? Who has been a stranger who has shown you the love of our Lord?

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