

Ruth Introduction

The book of Ruth begins with a famine and 3 funerals and ends with a wedding and the birth of a special baby. There's no story quite like it in the entire Bible.

Three objects could be used to tell the story: some puffed wheat (a traditional Australian breakfast cereal), a sandal, and a nappy. Like pop corn, wheat explodes when heated (under pressure) to give what has become traditionally known as "puffed wheat." It's likely this was the basis of the sort of meal that Ruth would have eaten on Boaz' threshing floor the night she "propositioned" him. According to Middle Eastern custom, the sandal was a legal symbol of forfeiting the right and responsibility to be a kinsman-redeemer. And the nappy is obvious. It's the symbol of a baby which is the highlight of the story.

You cannot understand Ruth apart from two special provisions in God's law. But describing the content of much of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy as "God's law" can be misleading. Perhaps it would be more helpful to talk of family rules. In the conflict with Pharaoh in Egypt, God describes the nation of Israel as his "son" (Ex 4:22, 23, cf. Deut 1:31) and later his "treasured possession" (Ex 19:6). So the nation that hears God speak at Mt Sinai (Exodus) and masses on the threshold of the Promised Land (Deuteronomy) are already redeemed from Egypt and loved by God. What he expects in return is love (Deut 6:4-8) which shows itself in obedience to the Father's rules.

Amongst the rules are two provisions for retaining family land and keeping the family name alive. If circumstances cause the loss of family land, which was given to them on trust by God, their nearest relative was expected to step in, redeem the land, even if it meant self sacrifice, and recover their stake hold (Lev 25:25 – 28).

Another crisis might emerge if the premature death of a husband left no male children to carry on "the name" of the family. Again a very close male relative was expected to act and sire a *male* child who kept "the name" of the family alive (Deut 25:5-10). It's too easy to read this as patriarchal and misogynist. But the emphasis is on preventing the "blotting out" of the name. No "name" or family was seen as effective termination of a place in the Promised Land and the equivalent of being cut off from God. In other words, if your name was "blotted out" this was effectively a declared judgement by God that you had no place in his presence. Perhaps there was also the expectation that "the seed" (male) of the woman would crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15) and that, from some family in the tribe of Judah, the Messiah would come (Gen 49:10).

Naomi, Ruth and Boaz are all realistically portrayed. Their stories intersect with our lives in many ways. For instance, Naomi shows that it is possible to be go away from God and recover, by his grace, and that even a widow can and should be proactive. Ruth shows us that the alien, the widow and the poor are not beyond the grace of God and simple obedience brings great blessing. And Boaz shows us the use of affluence and dedicated obedience in godless times brings unexpected blessing and privilege to a man with a doubtful ancestry. But to understand these nuances you and your group need to get into the story.

There are several places on the web which provide helpful resources:

<http://soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/ruth.pdf>

<http://www.blueletterbible.org/kjv/Rth/Rth001.html#top> .

Like all resources from the web, great care and discernment needs to be exercised in utilising the information.