

Ruth: A Poor, Migrant Woman Who Becomes a Savior

The book of Ruth is the story of the devotion of a young woman (Ruth) for her mother-in-law (Naomi). However, on a deeper level, it is so much more than this. It is about a crisis the Israelite people faced at a particular time in their history and the role played by these women in that crisis. Having lost her husband and two grown sons, Naomi represents a vulnerable Israel, an Israel that seems to have only a past but no future. Ruth, on the other hand, is a migrant (“a Moabite,” Ruth 1:4), a strange and potentially dangerous woman who, rather than threatening the nation, actually saves it from extinction.

Although the book is named for Ruth, one wonders if Naomi might not be the principal character of the story. After all, it is her family that migrates to Moab; she is the one who is left widowed and childless with no possibility of remarrying and producing children (Ruth 1:1-5); she directs Ruth to capture the interest and the commitment of Boaz (Ruth 3); and finally, it is Naomi who is said to have gained an heir in the child Obed (Ruth 4:17).

The story is filled with tensions in which there is destruction and hopelessness as well as prosperity and new life. It opens with famine but it closes in Bethlehem, which means “House of bread.” It begins with the death of Naomi’s husband and the end of his lineage, and it ends with the birth of the child who will restore that lineage, which will produce King David. The family is forced to migrate to a foreign land, then returns to Israel. The foreigner Ruth leaves her home and is incorporated into the Israelite family. In each of these tensions, God’s plan for the family, and ultimately the monarchy, is fulfilled through Ruth, the resident alien woman.

Several biases are addressed in this story. It is the story about women, told from a woman’s point of view, a point of view that is very rare in the Bible. It demonstrates God’s provident care for those who seem to slip through the cracks of society’s social services. Finally, it underscores the dignity and loyalty of a resident alien, an immigrant. In each of these instances, Ruth is the center of the story.

Perhaps the best known passage of the book is Ruth’s impassioned avowal of commitment to Naomi and all that is part of Naomi:

But Ruth said, “Do not ask me to abandon or forsake you! For wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Wherever you die I will die, and there be buried. May the LORD do so and so to me, and more besides, if aught but death separates me from you!”
(1:16-17)

This story reminds us that God chooses the weak of the world to confound the strong. And it happened here because of the love of a young migrant woman for her mother-in-law.

Sister Dianne Bergant, CSA