

OLD TESTAMENT BIBLICAL LITERACY

Lesson 18

RUTH

This story of familial loyalty and interracial romance provides a glimpse of life, love and law in Israel during the time of the Judges. The story begins when Elimelech, an Israelite from Bethlehem ("house of bread") leaves home during a famine and goes across the Jordan to Moab seeking food. He takes with him his wife Naomi and two sons Mahlon and Chilion. In Moab both sons marry local girls. Elimelech dies, followed by his two sons.

The famine ended, Naomi decides to return home to Bethlehem. She urges her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, to stay in Moab and find new husbands. Orpah stays but Ruth refuses to leave her mother-in-law and the two return to Bethlehem.

In Israel, the poor had the right to glean -- to follow reapers at harvest and to pick up grain that they missed or dropped. It was also the duty of wealthy kin to care for their poor or widowed relatives. Ruth goes gleaning in the field of a wealthy man named Boaz. Boaz sees Ruth and instructs his workers to leave extra grain for the gleaners.

1. Under Israelite law, if a man died with no heirs, his brother or other relatives had a duty to marry the widow and provide her opportunity to produce a son who would inherit the dead man's position and property. This practice is often called "Levirate marriage." The widow had to marry the first man in prescribed order who offered to take her.
2. Ruth then goes to the threshing-floor where Boaz is sleeping and lies at his feet -- the customary way of claiming her right to a Levirate marriage. Boaz wants to marry Ruth, but he is not closest male kin to her deceased husband. He goes to the city gate where business was conducted and calls for city elders to act as witnesses. Then he calls for the man who is first in line to marry Ruth and asks if he wishes to inherit Ruth and her dead husband's property. The man declines, and hands one of his sandals to Boaz -- the symbol of passing the right of Levirate marriage to Boaz.
3. Boaz marries Ruth and they have a son named Obed. Obed later has a son named Jesse, who becomes father to David the King. David is an ancestor of Jesus Christ through Mary and through Jesus' adopted father Joseph. This also means that Ruth, a foreign woman from Moab, was an ancestor of the Savior who came to save people from all nations and not only Jews.