

# Why the Book of Ruth Still Speaks to Us Today

May 30, 2008

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*The book of Ruth is about the commanding voice of love. Ruth teaches that all of life's hardships and obstacles can be overcome -- through love and through extraordinary acts of human kindness. What message could be better than that?*

The focus of my teaching tonight is: why the book of Ruth still speaks to us today.

I picked the book of Ruth not only because it is one of the most beautiful books of the Bible, but also because on June 8 and June 9 we shall celebrate Shavuot, the festival that celebrates the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Ruth is the biblical book that is read on Shavuot. In a few moments, you will understand why.

In order to understand the meaning and messages of the book of Ruth, you need to know three things:

- 1) In the beginning of the story, Naomi moves with her husband and two sons to the land of Moab in search of food. All three of the males in the family pass away in catastrophic succession
- 2) Naomi's daughters-in-law are Ruth and Orpah. They are not Jews. They are Moabite women
- 3) The story hinges on the biblical custom of levirate marriage (Deuteronomy 25:5-10). What is levirate marriage? A brother-in-law was obligated to marry his brother's widow. This afforded her protection and companionship. And this kept the family line going because the children would be deemed as the children of the deceased brother.

Now what are the messages of the book of Ruth? Why was the book of Ruth written and for what audience? Why do we read the book of Ruth on Shavuot?

In Ruth, all the major characters engage in *chesed*, extraordinary human kindness, a kindness that goes above and beyond. For example, after the deaths of her husband and sons, Naomi urges her daughters-in-law to leave her, to find new husbands and make new lives for themselves. Naomi wants what's best for her daughters-in-law, even though that would leave Naomi completely and utterly alone in the world. That's *chesed*.

Orpah does leave Naomi. But Ruth insists upon staying with Naomi and looking out for her. Even though Ruth knows it means she must leave her homeland and live as a stranger in a strange land, she wants to stay with Naomi even though it means she might never find a husband and have children of her own. That's *chesed*.

Ruth's famous words to Naomi have been described as "incandescent": "Do not urge me to leave you, to turn back and not follow 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. Where you die, I will die, and

there I will be buried. Thus and more may the Lord do to me if anything but death parts me from you” (Ruth 1:16-17).

Another example of *chesed* is shown by Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi. Boaz marries Ruth, fulfilling the practice of levirate marriage that we talked about before. Boaz marries Ruth, even though their children would be treated as Machlon’s, and not his own. That’s *chesed*.

Thus, we come to understand a core teaching of the book of Ruth. The book of Ruth is about the commanding voice of love. Ruth teaches that all of life’s hardships and obstacles can be overcome – through love and through *chesed*. What message could be more beautiful than that?

The book of Ruth also teaches us something very important about God. The book of Ruth describes a community that constantly invokes God’s blessing upon others. For example, Boaz says, “I have been told of all that you did for your mother-in-law after the death of your husband, how you left your father and mother and the land of your birth and came to a people you had not known before. May the Lord reward your deeds. May you have a full recompense from the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have sought refuge.” (Ruth 2:11-12)

But Boaz doesn’t wait for God to take care of Ruth. He just does it. This pattern is repeated over and over in the book of Ruth. The community asks for God’s blessing upon someone; then the community proceeds to fulfill it, to make it come true. What does the book of Ruth teach about God? It teaches that God works through us. We are God’s co-partners in the perfection of creation. We are the vessels through which God’s love and compassion are made manifest in this world. What could be more beautiful than that?

Finally, the book of Ruth also makes a statement about interfaith marriage. Over and over again, the book reminds us that Ruth is not a Hebrew; she is a Moabite. It may come as a surprise to you, but the debate over whether or not Jews should intermarry is not at all new. In the mid 5<sup>th</sup> century, around 445 BCE, this was a big and controversial issue between the Jews who returned to the land of Israel after the Babylonian exile and those who never left. The Judeans who never left Judea did not intermarry. But many of the Judeans in Babylonia did. When they returned to the land of Israel they brought along their non-Jewish wives and husbands with them. In an effort to re-establish a strong Jewish community in Judea, Ezra and Nehemiah started an anti-intermarriage movement (Ezra 9:10-15; 10:1-4).

The book of Ruth takes a strong position in this ancient debate over intermarriage. And its message is clear. The book of Ruth rejects and refutes Ezra’s condemnation of intermarriage. The book of Ruth teaches that Ruth is an amazing person with utmost loyalty to God and to the Jewish people. The book of Ruth teaches that intermarriage brings and will continue to bring incredible, wonderful women within the fold of the Jewish community. Women who will be just like Ruth. So, the book of Ruth argues that interfaith marriage is a good thing for Judaism and for the Jewish people. And this is in the late 5<sup>th</sup>/early 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE!

And the correctness of this interpretation is clinched in the genealogy found in chapter 4:16-17: “This is the line of Perez: Perez begot Hezron, Hezron begot Ram, Ram begot Amminadab, Amminadab begot Nahshon, Nahshon begot Salmon, Salmon begot Boaz, Boaz begot Obed,

Obed begot Jesse, and Jesse begot David.” What David is this? Yes, King David. Ruth is the great-grandmother of King David! So what message is this genealogy subtly communicating? The message is: intermarriage is good for the Jewish people. Why? Because Ruth, a Moabite woman, was the great-grandmother of King David, the greatest king the Israelite people have ever known.

From our discussion this evening, I hope you have learned that every biblical book is written with a particular message and a particular audience in mind. This is how the ancients debated the great controversial issues of their day. They didn’t have talk radio, CNN, or Macneil-Lehrer. What did they do? They wrote a book. So if you want to truly understand any book of the Hebrew Bible, you must ask and answer what is the message and for whom was the book written.

It is also my hope that everyone now has a greater appreciation for the book of Ruth. Now you understand why Ruth is the perfect book for the festival of Shavuot, the festival that celebrates God’s gift of the Torah to the Jewish people at Mount. Sinai. Ruth’s loyalty to God, to Jewish people, and to *chesed* were second to none.

I hope you will agree with me that the book of Ruth is truly one of the most beautiful books in the entire Hebrew Bible. It still has much to teach us, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, about interfaith marriage, about love, about God, and about extraordinary deeds of human kindness.