

A Celebration of Female Friendship in the Book of Ruth



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It is hard to find a conversation in the Bible between two women. Sarah and Rebecca never speak to another woman in Genesis. Rachel and Leah speak with one another just once. Deena, Jacob's daughter, never speaks at all. In the Book of Esther, Esther speaks often, and with power, but never to another woman. Against this background, the Book of Ruth stands out as a celebration of female friendship.

As the book begins, Naomi does not see the value in women's relationships. She urges her daughters-in-law to leave her, noting bitterly, "Why should you go with me? Have I any more sons inside of me who can be husbands for you?" (Ruth 1:11). In the next verses, she points out that even if she were to conceive sons that night, it would not make sense for her daughters-in-law to wait until the babies had grown to marrying age. Naomi understands her relationship to her daughters-in-law as existing only by virtue of their connection to her sons. Since her sons have died, and she has no other sons who could be potential husbands, Naomi believes that she has nothing to offer the younger women.

Orpah heeds her mother-in-law's advice and returns home. Ruth, though, is determined to stick with Naomi. She declares her loyalty in a powerful, poetic speech that has become a timeless testimony of devotion. She promises, "Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge, I will lodge; your people are my people; and your God is my God" (Ruth 1:16). Ruth tells Naomi that she does not want to be with her because of any potential suitors that Naomi can provide. Instead, Ruth explains that she just wants to be with Naomi—now, forever, until death separates them.

Naomi seems not to know what to make of Ruth's dedication. She walks on in silence as the two women make their way to Bethlehem. Upon their arrival, Naomi declares, "I left here full, but God has returned me empty" (Ruth 1:20-21). Despite Ruth's pledge of love and loyalty, Naomi does not even acknowledge Ruth's presence.

As the story progresses, Ruth continues to demonstrate her devotion to Naomi. Disregarding the danger, she goes out on her own to glean in the fields for barley for Naomi. When Boaz offers her lunch, she carefully saves some of the food to bring back to Naomi (Ruth 2:18). She cares for the older woman, making Naomi's comfort and security paramount, and she seems to want nothing in exchange other than Naomi's company.

Naomi, though, continues to understand her value to Ruth as connected to her ability to provide Ruth with a husband. She constructs a plan where Ruth will surprise Boaz in the middle of the night on the threshing floor in an attempt to persuade Boaz to marry her. Ruth has not evinced any particular interest in Boaz, but keen to make Naomi happy, she responds that she will do whatever Naomi asks her to do (Ruth 3:5). Boaz turns out to be amenable, and he sends Ruth home in the morning with six measures of barley. When Ruth returns to Naomi, she presents the barley to her, saying, "He gave me these six measures of barley, for he said that I should not come empty to [you]." This is an important moment. We have no evidence in the text of Boaz intending the barley for Naomi. It seems instead that because Ruth is always thinking of Naomi, she understands any gift as a gift for Naomi. In addition, the language of not coming

home empty-handed to Naomi recalls Naomi's painful statement upon her return to Bethlehem that God has brought her back empty. Ruth is aware of Naomi's emptiness, and she is trying her hardest to fill the void.

By the middle of chapter 4, Ruth and Boaz have married, and Ruth has given birth to a son. This could be understood as a validation of Naomi's worldview. She has proved valuable to Ruth by providing Ruth with a husband and a son. The chorus of women in the town, though, understands the events in a different manner. They say to Naomi, "[This baby] will revive you and sustain your old age because your daughter-in-law who loves you bore him, she who is better to you than seven sons" (Ruth 4:15). The women urge Naomi to recognize that the primary person in her life is Ruth. Through Ruth's love and devotion, Naomi has been redeemed and made full. Ruth is important not because she has provided Naomi with a son, but because of the way she herself cares for Naomi. In this way, the women of Bethlehem, and the author of the Book of Ruth, honor the relationship between Ruth and Naomi. The final verses may be about the male genealogy leading to King David, but the principal drama of the story resides in the power of the friendship of these two women. ❁

