

Ruth – Wendy Carter

The beautiful short story of Ruth is a Book in the Old Testament placed in our Bibles between Judges and 1 Samuel and it is set in the time of local tribal leaders or 'Judges' before the monarchy was established in Israel, with Kings Saul and David. The country of Moab is situated on the East of the Dead Sea or the Salt Sea where Jordan is now. Judah is on the West side of the lake.

I'm going to tell the story from the perspective of Naomi, a woman from Bethlehem in Judah, married to a man named Elimelech.

Some years ago when Elimelech was alive and our boys Mahlon and Chilion just young men there was a famine in Judah and In our town Bethlehem, or Ephratha as it was also known, food was very short. We decided the best thing was to leave our home, relatives and friends and give our boys a better chance on the other side of the Salt sea, so we travelled across to Moab to find food and a better life. Sadly we had not been there long when my husband died, but the boys met local girls and Mahlon married Ruth and Chilion married Orpah. For some years we managed quite well as a family of five but then the unthinkable happened! Both of my sons died. What were we three women to do now? I heard that God had relieved the famine in Judah, the people had food again, so I decided the best chance of survival was to go home, back to Bethlehem where Elimelech had owned a little strip of land. I might be able to grow some food and there were relatives from our extended families. I felt very bitter that God had inflicted such misfortune on me – I felt all my security was gone. I was old – no hope of a new husband and a new home for me, but my daughters in law might have a second chance. So, I packed my few belongings and I told them my plan.

"I am going to travel back to Bethlehem, my home, and you are to go back to your own mothers. May God keep faith with you as you have dealt so kindly with your husbands and me. May the Almighty give you each a new husband, new home and the chance of children."

We all cried and hugged each other, but they refused to leave me. We started walking, but each step took them further away from the things they knew, so again I told them, to go home. This time Orpah kissed us both and with more tears turned back and left us.

“Ruth, go back with Orpah to your gods and your own family, start again!”

But Ruth clung to me and said.

“Do not urge me to go back and desert you!

Where you go, I will go; where you stay, I shall stay.

Your people will be my people and your God shall be my God.

Where you die, I shall die and there I will be buried. I declare before God, nothing but death will part me from you.”

Well her words touched my heart!

I knew then that she really meant to stay and that the two of us would journey on together.

I was so relieved! She had always been like a daughter to me, kind, helpful, hard working and loyal, but it would not be easy for her to live in a strange land. I am old, but I know Bethlehem’s ways and many of its people -we would be able to make a life together, my knowledge and her willing hard work.

It was Spring when we reached Bethlehem. Old friends and neighbours met us.

“Naomi! Is that really you home again?”

I said “Do not call me Naomi call me Mara, because my life is bitter, the Almighty has been very harsh to me. I left full, with husband and sons, I return empty, bereft of them.”

It was April and the barley harvest was beginning. We needed food and Ruth asked leave to go and glean for dropped grain behind the reapers. Of course, I agreed she should go. As luck would have it, Ruth chose to ask permission to be in a field that was owned by a good and influential man named Boaz, a relative of my dead husband Elimelech. When he arrived to check on the progress of his workers, he noticed a girl working he did not recognise and asked the foreman about her.

“Ah, that’s the Moabite Ruth- she has returned to support your widowed kinswoman Naomi. She has worked hard this morning, and barely taken any rest.”

Boaz spoke to Ruth himself. “Daughter don’t look for anywhere else to glean, stay close to my servant girls, and work behind them; be free to help yourself from the water jars the men have filled, when you are thirsty”

When Ruth came home that evening she was delighted with the large amount of grain she had collected. Excited by the success of the day she explained:

“Naomi, I met the owner of the field, he is called Boaz. He was very kind and invited me to eat with his workers. He gave me some roasted grain for lunch, but It was more than I needed, so I brought some home for you to share. He told me to stay on his land and work behind his servants till both barley and wheat were harvested. He even told his reapers to leave me some full ears of grain to collect! Look how much we have!”

“Blessings be on him from the Lord who has not failed in his kindness to the living or the dead! Boaz is related to us, one of our very near kinsmen! Glean on his land with his workers till all the crops are harvested and be blessed!”

I would love to see Ruth happily settled, so a few weeks later when the harvest was over, I made a suggestion to her.

“Tonight, Boaz will be winnowing his barley at the threshing floor. This evening bathe and make yourself beautiful, use some perfume, dress with care and go to where he is working, but do not let him see you. When the work has finished, he will have some food and then sleep in the barn. Watch where he settles for sleep. Then go in and lie under the cover at his feet.”

Ruth did as I suggested, Boaz lay down next to the grain pile and was soon fast asleep, he did not know Ruth was there. About midnight he woke and discovered he was not alone!

“Who are you?”

“I am your handmaid Ruth, spread your robe over me for you are a redeeming kinsman.”

The words Ruth used suggest a marriage proposal. Boaz exclaimed,

“Be blessed of the Lord, daughter! You are proving yourself more devoted to the family than ever by not running after a younger man! Set your mind at rest, I shall do all you ask. It is true, I am a close relative but there is another even closer. Go to sleep now and in the morning, I will discover whether he will redeem you in the proper way. If he is unwilling I certainly will!”

Boaz wanted to protect Ruth's reputation so before it was light Ruth got up to leave. He poured 6 measures of barley into her cloak and lifted it onto her back – he did not want her to return to me empty-handed! Six measures!

When she got home we talked about all that had happened, and I reassured her that Boaz would sort things out that day.

In Bethlehem, the commercial and judicial centre was the city gate and Boaz went there to wait for the closer relative he had mentioned to come into the town. When he appeared, Boaz hailed him and explained he had some business to discuss. A business decision needed witnesses so ten elders were also gathered. Boaz got straight to the point.

“You know our cousin the widowed Naomi has returned? Mahlon's widow Ruth came with her from Moab. Now they need to sell a piece of land belonging to the family and you have first refusal,”

“I'm happy to acquire the land for it to stay in the family!”

“The only thing is,” Boaz continued, “If you take the land you must also marry Ruth to provide an heir for Elimelech's family. If you will not act as redeemer, I am next in line and I will.”

“I cannot act as redeemer for the widow – that would impair my own estate! I relinquish my claim! Redeem Ruth yourself.”

So in the presence of witnesses Boaz agreed to be responsible for all that remained of Elimelech's estate, to marry Ruth the Moabite and to perpetuate Mahlons line. There was celebration and many sincere good wishes for the marriage, for Boaz was widely respected and Ruth was recognised as a fine and honourable woman. We called on God to bless them with many children!

In Gods grace here I am a year later full again, because on my lap lies a bright and healthy grandson, Ruth's firstborn – Obed. Daily I thank God for his faithfulness and the loyalty and love of Ruth to me, her mother in law! I pray that this is the first of many children for Ruth and Boaz. “

Obed was born of Judah's line, he was the father of Jesse and the grandfather of King David, so an ancestor of Jesus.