

Naomi's neighbors

Ruth 1:19-22

1:19 So they two [*Naomi and Ruth*] went until they came to Bethlehem. And it came to pass, when they were come to Bethlehem, that all the city was moved about them, and **they** [*the older women of the city*] said, Is this Naomi? **1:20** And she said unto **them**, Call me not Naomi, call me Mara: for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. **1:21** I went out full, and the LORD hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing the LORD hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me? **1:22** So Naomi returned, and Ruth the Moabitess, her daughter in law, with her, which returned out of the country of Moab: and they came to Bethlehem in the beginning of barley harvest.

Ruth 4:13-17

4:13 So Boaz took Ruth, and she was his wife: and when he went in unto her, the LORD gave her conception, and she bare a son. **4:14** And **the women** said unto Naomi, Blessed be the LORD, which hath not left thee this day without a kinsman, that his name may be famous in Israel. **4:15** And he shall be unto thee a restorer of thy life, and a nourisher of thine old age: for thy daughter in law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons, hath born him. **4:16** And Naomi took the child, and laid it in her bosom, and became nurse unto it. **4:17** And **the women her neighbours** gave it a name, saying, There is a son born to Naomi; and **they** called his name Obed: he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

favorite characters

Who is your favorite character in the book of Ruth?

Although some might choose Boaz and a few might select Naomi, the most common answer to this question is, of course, Ruth. The faith of the young widow from Moab is wonderful to behold. (See 1:6-18.) Her loyalty to and love for Naomi are also highly praised (4:15). And her high moral standards and work ethic are evident as well. So it is no wonder that the book is named after Ruth rather than someone else!

We can learn many things from Ruth. That said, however, there is a great danger in choosing her or anyone else in the book as our favorite character. Doing so tends to blind us to the important lessons that are to be learned through the lesser characters.

The neighborhood women who appear in the first and final chapters play a larger role in the overall story than many realize. Through them, as well as Boaz and a few others, we see what Bethlehem was really like.

negatives

Most of the negatives from the Book of Ruth are directed toward Naomi. *She should not have gone to Moab (1:1). She should not have told her daughter-in-law to go back to idolatry (1:15). She should not have been bitter (1:20-21).*

Otherwise the main less-than-he-should-have-been character is the close relative who was unwilling to redeem Ruth (4:4-6). His refusal to do the right thing sounds like the priest and the Levite in the parable of the good Samaritan who refused to help the man who fell among thieves. (See Luke 10:29-37.)

The main negatives that can be said about Naomi's neighbors concern their obscurity. Nevertheless, we know more about these women than some realize. So at least one of the A lines in the worksheet below is not fully correct.

Secondly it may be helpful to compare the neighborhood women with other people in the Book of Ruth and, beyond that, with Anna who praised God for Jesus' birth in Luke 2:36-38. These comparisons are made in the B lines below. Only about half of them are fully correct, however.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

A	() Naomi's neighbors are obscure characters.
A-1	() We do not know how many of them there were.
A-2	() They are not mentioned in chapters two or three.
A-3	() They are just pronouns, <i>they</i> and <i>them</i> , in 1:19-20.
A-4	() We do not know if they were rich or poor (3:10, 4:15).
A-5	() We do not know if they were young or old (1:19, 4:17).
B	() Naomi's neighbors are not the main characters.
B-1	() They had not suffered like Naomi and Ruth.
B-2	() They did not help Naomi as much as Boaz did.
B-3	() They are just props used to help others speak.
B-4	() They did not say as much as Naomi and Boaz did.
B-5	() They were insiders rather than from outside like Ruth.
B-6	() They are minor characters like Anna in Lk. 2:25-38.

positives

Obscure characters in the Bible, and other books, usually do not say much, if they speak at all. The women of Bethlehem, however, said more than we might expect. Indeed, in the final chapter they speak up while Naomi and Ruth remain silent.

This is the reverse of the first chapter in which Naomi's old friends mostly listened while Naomi spoke (1:19-21). Naomi is often criticized for her negative words in 1:20-21. Yet it was undoubtedly good for her friends to listen silently to her. (Job's would-be-comforters should have done more of the same.)

Some believe that Naomi was not as thankful as she should have been in chapter four. According to this view, she should have said what her joyful neighbors said. This overly negative view of Naomi overlooks the closeness that she shared with the other women in Bethlehem, wrongly looking at her as an individual without a strong group connection. It was natural for Naomi to share her sorrow with those who knew her well in chapter one, and for them in turn, to voice their collective joy with her at the end of the book. Their words of praise probably showed how all the women felt, including Naomi.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

C	() Naomi's neighbors said (and did) good things.
C-1	() They did not go to Moab (1:1-2).
C-2	() They sympathized with Naomi (1:19-21).
C-3	() They probably helped with the harvest (1:22-2:3).
C-4	() They praised Ruth for her love toward Naomi (4:15).
C-5	() They spoke about Christ, the future Redeemer (4:14).
C-6	() They may have helped Naomi with her material needs.
C-7	() They were thankful for what God did for Naomi (4:13-14).
C-8	() They were not competing with each other (4:14, 1 Cor 13:4).
C-9	() They were godly women (4:14) and Boaz was a godly man (2:4).
C-10	() They prayed in 4:15 like the elders prayed earlier in 4:11-12.
C-11	() By naming Obed, they showed their closeness to Naomi.
C-12	() Some of them were probably widows like Naomi (4:15).
C-13	() They are the final speakers in the book of Ruth (4:17).
C-14	() They rejoiced with Naomi and Boaz (4:14, 17).

worksheet answers

It is only partly true to say that the women rejoiced with Naomi and Boaz (C-12) since they said nothing about Obed's father. The redeemer spoken of in 4:14-15 was the newborn baby, Obed, not Boaz. Though there are important similarities between Boaz (and Obed) and Christ as Redeemer, the women did not directly say anything about the Messiah (C-5) who would also be born in Bethlehem.

The neighborhood women sympathized with Naomi and helped by listening to her (C-2), rejoicing with her, and naming Obed (C-10). They may also have helped Naomi with some of her material needs (C-6), but only Boaz is actually credited with doing so. Thus the women of the city helped Naomi differently from Boaz but not necessarily less than he did. (Line B-2 is only partly correct.)

Naomi's friends probably did not help with the barley harvest (C-3). Only younger women are shown helping in the fields (2:8, 3:2). The women who spoke to Naomi were not young (A-6), for they had known her for many years (1:19). Older, godly men and women were highly respected in Bethlehem and were honored by having the last word (C-11). They obviously were not just props (B-3).

So what?

In the Book of Ruth, Bethlehem is a godly community of men and women, which is quite the opposite of the vile nation of Israel depicted in the final chapters of the Book of Judges. In Judges chapters 19 through 21 there was rape, homosexuality, murder, and civil war within the nation, but there is almost no hint of sinful violence in Bethlehem in the Book of Ruth. (Verse 2:22 may be the singular exception.)

This stark contrast is much like the difference between the sinful Jerusalem of King Herod (found in Matthew chapter one) and the godly Jerusalem centered on the temple depicted in Luke chapter one. Moreover, Luke's first chapters are also like the Book of Ruth because godly women, Elizabeth, Mary, and Anna, play key roles. There is no virgin birth in Ruth, but Obed was still a gift and blessing from God (4:13-14).

There is also no national temple or tabernacle in the Book of Ruth, but this lack helps show that godliness prospered in Bethlehem on the local and family level. Judges shows that the nation and its worship as a whole were corrupt, but Naomi's godly neighbors praised God for redemption (4:14-15). Like Anna in Luke 2:38, Naomi's friends were thankful for God's salvation (C-13).

applications

Apply the points which you believe are most important or seem most needful.
