

## BOOK OF RUTH MISAMED

They got the wrong name for the book of Ruth. When this delightful story was included in the Jewish scriptures, the editors named it after the young widow who left her homeland to stick with her mother-in-law.

The young woman's name was Ruth, which means "companion." So you can see why her name stuck with the book.

But the story is more about the mother-in-law, Naomi. It's an artfully written story, almost poetic in spots, told around the themes of emptiness and fullness.

Naomi is the central character. She starts out empty and bereft, but four pages later the Lord has brought her happiness and fulfillment.

A five-verse Introduction sets the stage: Famine forces Naomi, her husband and sons to migrate to a foreign land. There her boys marry foreign wives. But soon Naomi is bereft, for all three of her men die.

The story is capped off by a five-verse Appendix which links its characters with the fabled King David.

But the real story is told between the Introduction and the Appendix. In four carefully balanced scenes the author lets us readers share Naomi's emptiness.

Then as her daughter-in-law Ruth and her dead husband's cousin Boaz court each other, the author also lets us experience Naomi's growing sense of fulfillment.

You can check out this dramatic progression in less than fifteen minutes; for the book of Ruth, aka Naomi, is one of the shorter selections in the Bible.

The First Scene (chapter 1, verses 6-22) takes place on the road back to Beth-

lehem. The widowed Naomi is returning to her home town in the company of her daughters-in-law.

At the boarder one of them turns back to the country of Moab. But the other one, Ruth naturally, vows to go on with Naomi.

Yet when her old neighbors come out to welcome her home, Naomi complains. "The Lord has made me a bitter woman," she laments. "I have come home empty."

But things start to look up in the Second Scene (chapter 2), which is set in the barley field of a man named Boaz. With Naomi's permission, Ruth goes to glean after the harvesters. Boaz sees her picking up the grain which his servants have missed.

Apparently he is so impressed that he invites her to stay in his fields, tells his men not to hassle her, and even blesses her. At the end of the day he gives her some extra food, and Ruth goes back to report to her mother-in-law.

Now the plot thickens. The Third Scene (chapter 3), set in Boaz' threshing floor, runs parallel to the second. This time Naomi sends her daughter-in-law to the end-of-the-harvest party.

After the eating and drinking are over and Boaz has gone to sleep, Ruth is to crawl under the covers with him.

Around midnight Boaz rolls over, bumps into Ruth, wakes up, and blesses her. And invites her to stay until morning! Then he gives her some more grain and sends her home.

But they are still not out of the woods. For another relative has a closer legal tie to Nomi's land and family. So the climax of the drama comes in Scene

Four (chapter 4, verses 1-17), located like Scene One at the city gate.

Naomi's closest relative on her dead husband's side is not able or willing to purchase her field and her marriageable daughter-in-law. Boaz gladly pays the price; he acquires another field and a new bride in one quick stroke.

Nine months and one verse later Naomi is holding a baby in her arms. In the First Scene she had complained to the women of Bethlehem about her emptiness.

But at the end of the story the women are blessing her because the Lord has filled up her life. "A son has been born to Naomi!" they claim, as she nurses the infant.

How about that? At least 2500 years ago a Hebrew story-teller put together a mini-drama of such sensitivity that you can still feel its emotion today.

It wasn't exactly "made for TV," but its four carefully constructed scenes could easily be translated into a prime-time script.

In the final analysis that may be one of the chief attractions of the ancient biblical documents.

In cases like the story of Ruth, better yet the drama of Naomi, you can still catch the pathos of a desperate plot and the delight of a happy ending. You get the feeling that the Lord can still give fulfillment to empty people.

[FILE 34]