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**Through multiple layers of story-telling, Maarten van
Heemskerck's RUTH AND NAOMI depicts love that crosses
ethnic boundaries.**

Love that Crosses Ethnic Boundaries

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

The story of Ruth provides models of love that cross ethnic boundaries. The story unfolds when a Jewish couple, Elimelech and Naomi, move their family from Bethlehem to the nearby country of Moab in order to avoid a famine in Judah. Moab was only some thirty or forty miles away, but its customs were very different. For instance, the Moabites worshiped the god Chemosh.

Naomi becomes stranded in Moab. Elimelech dies while their two sons are young. After their sons grow up and marry Moabite women, the sons die as well. With no source of support, Naomi becomes responsible for the welfare of her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth. Learning that Judah is no longer under famine, Naomi decides to return to her native land. She releases her daughters-in-law from their obligation of a Levirate marriage—which required that they marry Elimelech’s nearest living relative in order to provide Naomi with a continuation of her family. Orpah decides to remain in Moab, but Ruth expresses her intention to go with Naomi.

But Ruth said, “Do not press me to leave you and to stop going with you, for

wherever you go, I shall go,
wherever you live, I shall live.
Your people will be my people,
and your God will be my God.
Where you die, I shall die
and there I shall be buried.
Let Yahweh bring unnameable ills on me
and worse ills, too,
if anything but death
should part me from you!”

Ruth 1:16-17 (NJB)[†]

Despite her mother-in-law being a foreigner by birth, Ruth is devoted to Naomi and to the God of Israel. When they arrive in Bethlehem, Ruth is

now the alien. She gleans ears of corn that the law requires farmers to leave in their fields for the poor to eat. *Ruth and Naomi*, Maarten van Heemskerck's painting in the Northern Renaissance style, depicts this and subsequent events of the narrative in multiple layers.

In the right background Ruth is kneeling to gather the random stalks left over by the reapers. Boaz, the landowner, stands to her right. When Boaz learns that Ruth is the daughter-in-law of Naomi, he offers her a protected place to glean the corn. When Ruth recalls this event to her mother-in-law, Naomi realizes that Boaz is her next of kin. Naomi wants a marriage proposal for Ruth from Boaz.

Because Boaz is sleeping in a tent at the threshing floor to guard his harvest, Naomi instructs Ruth to go to him. In the foreground of the painting, Van Heemskerck depicts the end of the conversation between the women; Ruth is pointing in the direction of Boaz's tent. On the right side of the composition is the tent with the two figures: Boaz has awakened to find Ruth at his feet.

Boaz desires to marry Ruth, but he is an honorable man and sends her away until he can redeem her for a price from another man who is closer in kinship to her. Boaz and Ruth's son, Obed, became the father of Jesse, the father of King David, in whose line Jesus the Messiah was born (cf. Matthew 1:5-6, 16).

Like Naomi before them, Ruth and Boaz faced the challenges of multi-ethnic relationships. Through love and respect for one another, they made choices that led to blessings for them and for those of us who follow Christ.

NOTE

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