

When we learn to read the Bible in its ancient Eastern setting, we can discover that memory and history were central to the fabric of their culture. They were very aware of ancestral relationships and the oral history that was handed down to them. They used it to understand current events. It was especially important to them when it was the first time or place they found something happening, because it usually set up relationships and patterns that would come up again and again.

Being aware of this will greatly enriched our Bible Study, because the Scriptures are written with this concept in mind. As children our Bible Stories guide us to read the Scriptures as a series of short stories, quite often they are unrelated, each having its own moral lesson. This is not necessarily a bad approach as we learn the highlights and learn the basic moral lessons that are there. Only we cannot continue at this basic level. We must begin to dig into those stories and put them into an overall story that has continuity.

By learning about the Bible's Middle Eastern setting we discover that the Old Testament especially, is a larger story with many chapters with an interwoven plot. Sometimes the Bible includes stories that hardly seem to be moral examples. Why they are there? They are there to explain the deeper meaning of these later events.

How would an ancient person read the book of Ruth? What truths would they find that we might miss because of our alienation from that time and culture. We often see it as a nice story about a widow who found a good husband because she was kind to her mother-in-law.

But if we lived in biblical times, we would be curious about Ruth's ancestors, and our ears would prick up to the fact that Ruth was a Moabite. Immediately the scandalous past of her people would come to mind, and her story would take on a different tone. We'd recall that when the weary Israelites were journeying to the Promised Land, the Moabites lured the Israelites into sexual immorality and worshipping idols.

*While Israel was staying in Shittim, the men began to indulge in sexual immorality with Moabite women, who invited them to the sacrifices to their gods. The people ate the sacrificial meal and bowed down before these gods. So Israel yoked themselves to the Baal of Peor. And the Lord's anger burned against them.* Numbers 25:1-3

From then on, the Moabites were associated with sexual immorality, even more disgusting because it was how they worshipped their pagan gods. Because of that sin, God declared that Moabites were barred from being a part of the assembly of Israel (Deut. 23:3). Was their sin unforgivable?

The origins of the Moabites (Genesis 19:30-38) began after Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed. The not-so-nice story is recorded about when Lot's daughters got their father drunk so that they could become pregnant by him, since their husbands had refused to leave the city and died. One of Lot's daughters gave birth to a son named Moab, and he became the father of the Moabite people. So we would conclude that that's why the Moabites are so immoral, because we'd expect that people would be defined by their ancestry.

Now with this in mind, now let's look at the story of Ruth. She was a Moabite woman who had returned to Israel with her mother-in-law after her husband died. As an ancient listener we would immediately wonder, was she as immoral as those who came before her? She said that she would worship the God of Israel, but would God ever accept her?

We even find her in the same situation as Lot's daughters. Like them, she was a widow who desperately needed children. Naomi even told her to approach Boaz when he was sleeping outside by his harvest, after he had eaten and drunk his fill. But unlike her ancestors, Boaz proclaimed that she was a virtuous woman (Ruth 3:10). He then married her, and her son became the grandfather of King David. Not only that, but Ruth even appears in Matthew's genealogy as part of the line of the Messiah. She turned from her people's unseemly past to embrace the God of Israel. God accepted her and cleansed her from her history and gave her a key role in His supreme act of salvation. Some of us struggle with an embarrassing family history or an immoral past. But we should rejoice to see how God redeemed Ruth and included her in His wonderful work.

Understanding how the texts interrelate gives a whole new perspective on understanding the Bible. When the stories are read individually, some of them are frustrating because they don't show us how to live. But these difficult ones have a far deeper purpose. They illustrate how the terrible sinfulness of man runs throughout history, but then how God graciously intervenes to bring Jesus into the world. We need to read with the eyes of an ancient person in order to see how that message is woven into the fabric of the Bible from beginning to end.