

BOOK OF RUTH

Ruth 1 - 4

INTRODUCTION

The Book of Ruth is one of the most popular and most appealing narratives in the entire Old Testament. It presents a romantic story; a story about love, marriage, family, faith, loyalty, faithfulness, respect, commitment, integrity, and finally, the beauty and wisdom of God's Providence, His care for those who follow Him.

In the Christian canon of Scripture, the Book of Ruth follows the book of Judges and precedes the First Book of Samuel. It thus provides an *oasis of relief* from the turmoil and horrors reported in the Book of Judges, and the trials and tribulations reported in the first and second books of Samuel.

The story takes place during the time of Judges and ends with the genealogy of David. So, the book serves as a bridge between the period of Judges, when Israel was a loose confederation of twelve tribes, led by charismatic judges; and the rise of the monarchy, when Israel becomes one kingdom, ruled by a king.

STUDY AND REFLECTION

Elimelech and His Family (1:1-5)

The story of Ruth brings us first to the town of Bethlehem, about 13 km (6 miles) south of Jerusalem. This will be the birthplace of king David, and the birthplace of Jesus, the promised Saviour. The name Bethlehem *means* "House of Bread," a place of abundant food. Apparently, the town was so named because of its agricultural fertility in ancient times.

During the time of Judges, there was a severe famine in the land, so severe, that it also affected the inhabitants of Bethlehem. For those who were hungry and left with no food supplies, the only option was to emigrate to another country that had not been affected by the famine.

There was a man living in Bethlehem, whose name was ***Elimelech***. In Hebrew, the name *Elimelech* means "My God is King." He and his family were of the tribe of Ephraim, living in Bethlehem in Judah. Because of the famine, Elimelech, together with his wife Naomi, and his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, were forced to leave their home in Bethlehem and the Promised Land, and to seek refuge in the pagan territory of Moab, a country directly east of the Dead Sea.

The Moabites were regarded as particular enemies of the Israelites, and they were often a threat to the Israelites (Judges 3:12-30). According to the Book of Genesis, Moab had its origins in the sinful act of Lot and his daughter (Gen 19:36-37).

Although God is Elimelech's king, the need to leave the Promised Land raises the question of God's Providence. Is God really providing for those who follow him and are apparently faithful to Him? How is He providing? This move to a foreign country that is hostile to Israelites, is it part of His Divine Providence and Divine Plan?

Naomi and Her Daughters-in-Law (1:6-22)

While living in Moab, Elimelech died, and Naomi was left with her two sons. In time, her sons took Moabite wives. The name of one was **Orpah** and the name of the other was Ruth. They lived in Moab for about ten years. During that time, Mahlon and Chilion died. Naomi had lost her husband, and then, she also lost her two sons.

Having heard that the famine was over and that there was abundant food available in her home country, she decided to return home. Together with her two daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, they began their journey from Moab to the land of Judah. At some point, Naomi said to her daughters-in-law: "Go, return each of you to your mother's house. May the Lord deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me. May the Lord grant that you may find a home, each of you in the house of her husband!" Then she kissed them, and they wept, saying "No, we will return to your people. But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me?... Would you therefore refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, for it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake that the hand of the Lord has gone forth against me." Then they lifted up their voices and wept again; and Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. Naomi then said to her, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." But Ruth said, "Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following you; for where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God; where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also, if even death parts me from you."

Here, in Ruth's response to Naomi, we hear her powerful confession of faith and loyalty not only to Naomi and her family, but also to the one true God of Israel. The Moabites were people deeply rooted in idolatry, the worship of many gods, and immorality. In her response, Ruth proclaimed a **covenant-oath**. She formally broke ties with her own family of origin, her own people, and their gods; and she embraced faith in the one true God of Israel, and she embraced the People of Israel as her own people.

The question now is this: Will the one true God show faithfulness to this foreign woman who has willingly and freely bound herself to Him in a covenant?

In some ways, Ruth becomes a type or prefigure of the Gentile nations that will come to faith in Jesus, the promised Saviour, and will be united to the Church of the New Testament. Both Naomi and Ruth together prefigure the Church as a New People of God, the Bride of Christ, which will include not only the Jews, but also all the nations of the earth.

When Naomi saw that Ruth was determined to go with her, she said no more. They arrived in Bethlehem sometime in May-June, at the beginning of the barley harvest.

The Courtship of Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 2:1-23)

Now in Bethlehem, there was a relative or kinsman of Naomi's deceased husband, Elimelech, a man of wealth. His name was **Boaz**. So, Ruth said to Naomi, "Let me go to the field, and glean among the ears of grain after him, in whose sight I shall find favor" (2:2). And Naomi said to her, "Go, my daughter."

According to the Law of Moses, the poor were permitted to glean the fields, i.e. to pick up what was left after the reapers had passed. In the Book of Leviticus, we find the following law:

"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap your field to its very border, neither shall you gather the gleanings after your harvest. And You shall not strip your vineyard bare, neither shall you gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and for the sojourner: I am the Lord your God" (Lev 19:9-10).

So, Ruth set forth and went and gleaned in the field after the reapers; and she came to the part of the field that belonged to Boaz. Boaz himself had come from Bethlehem to oversee the work. When he saw the woman gleaning after the reapers, he said to the servant in charge, "Whose maiden is this?" The servant replied, "It is the Moabite maiden, who came back with Naomi from the country of Moab. She asked if she could glean and gather among the sheaves after the reapers.

Then Boaz came up to Ruth, and he said to her, "Listen, my daughter, do not go to glean in another field or leave this one, but keep close to my maidens... And when you are thirsty, go to the vessels and drink what the young men have drawn" (2:8-9). Then Ruth fell on her face, bowing to the ground, and said to him, "Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, when I am a foreigner?"

But Boaz answered her, "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. May the Lord recompense you for what you have done, and a full reward be given to you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!" (2:11-12).

Then she said, "You are most gracious to me, my lord, for you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your maidservant, through I am not one of your maidservants" (2:13). So, Ruth gleaned among the sheaves after the reapers until evening.

When she returned home, she told her mother-in-law with whom she had worked, and said, "The man's name with whom I worked today is Boaz... and he said to me, 'you shall keep close by my servants, until they have finished all my harvest.'" (2:19, 21). And Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, "Blessed be he by the Lord, whose kindness has not forsaken the living or the dead!" (2:20).

So, Ruth kept close to the maidens of Boaz, gleaning until the end of the barley and wheat harvests; and she lived with her mother-in-law, Naomi.

Ruth and Boaz at the Threshing Floor (3:1-18)

“Threshing” was the process by which the seeds of ripe cereals such as barley and wheat were removed. After the harvest, the gathered sheaves were untied and spread out to dry on a flat, open surface, called a “threshing floor” (1 Chron. 21:2-23). The dried stalks were then beaten with flails; or a donkey or ox pulled a heavy board with sharp stones embedded into it across the threshing-floor.

The husks (the chaff) were then separated from the grain by a process called “winnowing”. Using a special hand tool called the “winnowing fork” or a shallow and wide basket, threshed seeds were thrown into the air, where the wind blew away the chaff, and the heavier grain fell to the ground and was gathered.

After the harvest was over, Naomi said to Ruth, “See, Boaz is winnowing barley tonight at the threshing floor. Wash therefore and anoint yourself and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to him until he has finishing eating and drinking. But when he lies down, observe the place where he lies; and go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do” (3:2-4).

And Ruth replied, “All that you say I will do” (3:5).

So, she went to the threshing floor and did what her mother-in-law told her to do. After Boaz had finished eating and drinking, he went to lie down and the end of a heap of grain. Then Ruth came up quietly, uncovered his feet, and lay down.

At midnight, Boaz was startled, and turned over. “What is this?” He finds a woman laying at his feet. He says to her, “Who are you?”

And she answered, “I am Ruth, your maidservant; spread **the wing of your garment** over your maidservant; for you are next of kin.” The “spreading of the wing” of a garment was a betrothal ritual in Israel. Ruth is asking for betrothal and marriage. She wants to be the wife of Boaz. As her closest male relative, Boaz would have the first right to take Ruth as his wife.

According to the Law, the next of kin had the right and obligation to protect the property and honor of his kinsman and to maintain his family line.

In the book of Leviticus and Deuteronomy, we read find the following laws:

“If your brother becomes poor, and sells part of his property, then his next of kin shall come and redeem what his brother has sold” (Lev. 25:25).

“If brothers dwell together, and one of them dies and has no son, the wife of the dead shall not be married outside the family to a stranger; her husband’s brother... shall take her as his wife, and perform the duty of a husband’s brother to her. And the first son whom she bears shall succeed to the name of his brother who is dead, that his name may not be blotted out of Israel” (Dt. 25:5-6).

And so, Boaz praises Ruth for her desire to maintain the name of her dead husband, and to keep within the family the property being sold due to economic hardship.

He says to her, “May you be blessed by the Lord, my daughter; you have made this last kindness greater than the first, in that you have not gone after young men, whether

rich or poor. And now, my daughter, do not fear, I will do for you all that you ask... It is true that I am a near kinsman (relative), yet there is a kinsman that is nearer than I. If he will do the part of the next of kin for you, well; let him do it; but if he is not willing to do the part of the next of kin for you, then, as the Lord lives, I will do the part of the next of kin for you" (3:10-13).

So, Ruth lay at his feet until morning. When he arose, Boaz said to her, "Bring the mantle you are wearing and hold it out." So, she held it out, and he measured out six measures of barley and placed in into her mantle. She then went into the city.

The Marriage of Ruth and Boaz (4:1-17)

In ancient Israel, immediately inside and outside the city gate there were open squares, where most of the business of the city took place. The city gate was also the courtroom for Old Testament cities. This is where cases were heard and resolved, and where formal business transactions took place before the elders of the city.

Boaz went up to the gate and sat down there; and behold, the relative, who was the closest kinsman to the family of Naomi's husband, came by.

Boaz then asked him to sit. Then, in the presence of ten elders of the city, gathered in the gate, he presented the case. "Naomi, who has come back from the country of Moab, is selling the parcel of land which belonged to our kinsman Elimelech. So... Buy it in the presence of those sitting here, and in the presence of the elders... If you redeem it, redeem it..." But know this, "If you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also buying Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of the dead, in order to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance." Then the man, the closest kin to Naomi, said, "I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I impair my own inheritance. Take my right of redemption yourself, for I cannot redeem it" (4:1-6).

To confirm the transaction, according to the custom of the day, the two men took off one of their sandals and gave it to the other. Then Boaz said before the elders and the people present, "You are witnesses this day that I have bought from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. Also, Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of Mahon, I have bought to be my wife, to perpetuate the name of the dead in his inheritance... you are witnesses this day" (4:7-10).

Then the elders the people present at the gate said, "We are witnesses. May the Lord make the woman, who is coming into your house, Like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you prosper in Ephrathah and be renowned in Bethlehem."

So, Boaz took Ruth, and she became his wife. The inheritance was maintained within the family line of Elimelech. His name and his family line would be maintained. And further, his wife, Naomi, would be safe and secure in the Promised Land. In His Divine Providence, God had provided His faithful followers, Naomi and Ruth, everything that was necessary. In the end, they lacked nothing.

In time, Ruth gave birth to a son; and they named him Obed.

Epilogue: The Family Line of David (4:18-22)

Obed became the father of Jesse, and Jesse became the father of David, the future king of Israel.

The book of Ruth ends with the genealogy of Boaz, as a descendant of Judah and the great grandfather ancestor of King David. Perez was the first-born son of Judah by Tamar. Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, Amminadab of Nashon, Nashon of Salmon, Salomon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed by Ruth, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.

On the Sunday before Christmas, when the gospel reading is taken from Matthew 1:1-18 and the genealogy of Jesus is proclaimed in the hearing of the assembly, they will no longer be just a list of names, but a list of persons, many of whom we now know, and are familiar with their lives.

“The Book of the Genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was the father of Jacob, and Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Amminadab, and Amminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of David the King” (Matthew 1:1-6).

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