

# **A LOOK AT A BOOK: Ruth**

## **June 9, 2013**

### **Name and Contents**

The book is named from its principal character, Ruth the Moabitess, who had married into the family of Elimelech, a Judahite from Bethlehem. Because of famine, Elimelech had gone to dwell in Moab, together with his wife, Naomi, and their two sons. In the course of time all three men die, and Naomi is left alone with her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah. Resolving to return to Judah, where the famine has ended, Naomi seeks to send the two back to their families. Orpah complies reluctantly, but Ruth resolutely refuses in language that has become the paradigm of the love and devotion that one woman can give to another (1:16f.). She and Naomi return to Bethlehem, where Ruth, having gone out to glean, chances on the fields of Boaz, a distant kinsman of Elimelech. At the end of the harvest, Naomi sends Ruth to the threshing floor to request that Boaz fulfill the levirate responsibility of the next of kin to marry the widow and raise a son to bear her dead husband's name. He is willing, but a nearer kinsman has prior right. In the climax of the story, Boaz skillfully persuades the nearer kinsman to give up that right and then marries Ruth. The son born of this marriage is celebrated as a "son...born to Naomi." This preservation of the family line is of no small moment, for the child Obed becomes the father of Jesse, father of David.

### **Date and Authorship**

Like so many Old Testament narratives, the book of Ruth is anonymous and without a single clue to suggest its author.

### **Social Features**

One difficulty facing the modern reader is that interpretation of the story involves two social customs of ancient Israel which have no modern western exemplars: the levirate and red emption of land. The levirate, described in legal form in Deuteronomy 25:5-10, refers to the fact that if a man in ancient Israel died without a son the obligation fell upon the next-of-kin to marry the widow and produce a son, "that his [the deceased's] name may not be blotted out in Israel" (v. 6).

But here a complication is introduced: another kinsman nearer than Boaz has not only prior obligations but prior right. Since Boaz may not safely ignore that prior right, he assembles the elders at the city gate, invites the nearer kinsman to attend, and then informs him that Naomi is "selling the parcel of land which belonged to

our kinsman Elimelech. So I thought I would tell you of it, and said, But it...” (4:3f.).

Land was inalienable; it could not be sold outside the family. If poverty forced such an action, the next of kin was obligated to purchase the land and so keep it within the family.

Thinking himself faced with this obligation alone, the nearer kinsman responds affirmatively (4:4). Boaz then prompts him to give up his right by informing him: “The day you buy the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also buoying Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of the dead, in order to restore the name of the dead to his inheritance”(v. 5). The kinsman then responds that to do so would impair his own inheritance (v. 6), so he is forced to withdraw.

The book centers on the lineage of David (4:17b). The genealogy in vv. 18-22, clearly a later addition, also makes that clear. The original point of the narrative thus is extended beyond showing God’s providence and care in the life of one family. It concerns the entire life of the nation, for in the son born to Naomi the history of God’s rule under David has begun. In this way the book relates to the Bible’s main theme of redemptive history. Thus it is striking to note that the author identifies Ruth as “the Moabitess” in several places where her ethnic origin is uncalled for and even superfluous.

### **Theology**

The book certainly bears witness to the fact, stressed elsewhere in the Old Testament (e.g., Jonah), that God’s mercy was not limited exclusively to Israel. The ideal king, David, and ultimately the Messiah sprang from such a line.

However, the primary purpose of the narrative is to show the gracious guidance of God in the life of this family. In fact, the major actor in the drama is God, whose presence in the story leads from Naomi’s bitter complaint in 1:20f. This is a book about God’s ruling over the events of the lives of those who trust him. It is a divinely granted “rest” (KJV 1:9; 3:1) that “a scheming old lady and a nicely perfumed young woman can bring about with a little strategy.”

And yet the book of Ruth stresses God’s “all-causality” differently from much other Old Testament literature. No guidance comes through dreams, visions, angelic visitations, or voices from heaven, and no prophet is sent with his “thus saith the Lord.” God works behind the scene through the ordinary motivations and events of the story. He “is everywhere – but totally hidden in purely human

coincidences and schemes, such as a young girl's accidental steps and an old woman's risky plan." The author stresses thus one particular aspect of God's providence – its hiddenness. He conceals God's guidance in normal human causality simply because he believes it is by nature hidden.

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Lasor, William S., David A. Hubbard, and Frederic W. Bush, *Old Testament Survey* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982)