

Ruth

Against the black cloth of Judges, Ruth sparkles like a white pearl of great price. Joshua and Judges have mostly to do with Israel's relationship to the land. Ruth focuses more on the seed promise of the Abrahamic Covenant with special emphasis on the line of the king. As such it serves as a bridge between Deuteronomy and Samuel—from the anticipation of a king over Israel to the divine selection of a monarch. It does so through a marvelous display of the sovereign, elective grace that was working providentially in the people of the covenant, even during the distressing days of the Judges.

Authorship

Along with Judges, the author of Ruth is traditionally thought to be Samuel (*B. Bat.* 14b). Unless one places it very late (post-exilic) it is not unreasonable that Samuel would have finalized such a work in light of its concluding information on the genealogy of David.¹ In fact one of the proposed purposes of Ruth is validation of the Davidic kingship.²

Date

The events depicted in the story take place during the time of the Judges (1:1). The latest datable event is the birth of David (1041 B.C.), however it would not be until David's ascent to the throne, or at least his selection as the successor of Saul, that the

¹ So conclude Charles Dyer and Gene Merrill, *The Old Testament Explorer* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 197-98.

² See Arthur E. Cundall and Leon Morris, *Judges and Ruth*, in Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries series (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1968) 239-42 for a summary of the major proposed purposes.

significance of his descent from Ruth and Boaz would be recognized. David's anointing took place at about 1025 B.C. and Samuel's death not too long after that. On this basis a date of 1020 B.C. for the final form of the book has been suggested.³

Historical Setting / Original Readers / Occasion

If the book was produced in connection with David's replacement of Saul as Israel king, the setting would be that period covered in 1 Samuel. Saul had failed as Israel's monarch and the kingdom was being taken from him. David had been divinely selected as Saul's replacement, though that did not mean that it would be clear to all concerned. Even after Saul's death it took David a number of years to solidify his rule. One could argue that the Book of Ruth served "to clarify the fact that David was fully qualified to be king not only because God had chosen him but also because of his pedigree that connected him directly back to Judah, the tribe through which the promised Ruler would come"⁴

Special Issues

Relationship of Ruth to Judges. Ruth's position in the Hebrew Bible as part of the writings known as the *megillot* might suggest that it was not originally connected to Judges. However, ancient Jewish tradition considered it to be part of Judges.⁵ Furthermore, a good case has been made for considering Ruth as the third piece of a "Bethlehem Trilogy," the first two being the last two segments of the Book of Judges.⁶ According to

³ Dyer and Merrill, *Explorer*, 198.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1987, 1996), 182.

⁶ *Ibid.* 178-88.

this understanding, Ruth, then, offers a counterpoint to the general tenor of Judges. It shows that there was faith in Israel, and that God's presence was having a positive impact on some.

Relationship of Ruth to the Monarchy. As noted above the date of Ruth's writing is bound up with its assumed purpose. One of the major purpose theories connects Ruth with the legitimizing of David's selection as king. This view best explains the genealogical material that concludes the book and also fits well with the book's emphasis on the hidden providence of God in the lives and affairs of His people to work out His program.⁷

Custom of Levirate Marriage. The book assumes knowledge of this custom and proceeds to show how it was worked out in Ruth's case. However, the actual circumstances in Ruth do not exactly correspond with the instructions set forth in Torah (Deut 25:5–10). The institution appears to have been broadened in Ruth, since it was actually Naomi to whom the provision applied. Secondly, as Boaz confronts the near kinsman about his responsibility it is clear that property redemption is part of the package (cf. Lev 25). This too goes beyond the regulations of Torah. Whatever the case, it is clear that God is working behind the scenes to accomplish His purposes through the customs and laws as they were being practiced in Israel at that time.⁸

⁷ Merrill writes: "It is clear that a major purpose of the biblical narrator was to establish links between Judah and Tamar on the one hand and Boaz and Ruth of the other, links binding the royal promise given to Judah with the fulfillment in the Davidic dynasty The second function of the story of Ruth is to supply a genealogical link between the patriarchal and monarchical eras." (Ibid., 184-85).

⁸ For a summary discussion and bibliography see David M. Howard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1993), 132-33.

Message

God providentially works in the daily affairs of His people to bless the obedience of faith and to prepare for and further the outworking of His predetermined purposes for the earth.

Outline

- I. To Moab and Back: The Israelite Naomi experiences a tragic reversal during her sojourn in Moab. 1:1–22
 - A. She goes to Moab with husband and sons who die and leave her only two daughters-in-law. 1:1–5
 - B. She returns to Judah with only Ruth. 1:6–22
 1. She expresses her hopeless situation with respect to regaining the security of a family. 1:6–13
 2. She is joined by Ruth who will accept her God. 1:14–18
 3. She returns to Bethlehem “Bitter” rather than “Pleasant.” 1:19–22
- II. In a Barley Field: The Moabite Ruth encounters the Israelite Boaz who treats her kindly. 2:1–23
 - A. Ruth “happens upon” the field of Boaz. 2:1–3
 - B. Boaz treats Ruth well because of her faithfulness to Naomi. 2:4–13
 - C. Boaz supplies Ruth with an abundance beyond her expectation. 2:14–23
- III. On a Threshing Floor: Naomi and Ruth conspire to get Boaz to act as kinsman redeemer. 3:1–18
 - A. Naomi instructs Ruth to approach Boaz by night. 3:1–5
 - B. Ruth obeys Naomi. 3:6–7
 - C. Boaz responds by promising Ruth a redeemer and blessing Ruth with grain. 3:8–18
- IV. At the Gate: Boaz Redeems Ruth at the balk of the near redeemer. 4:1–12
 - A. Boaz confronts the near redeemer with his responsibility. 4:1–4
 - B. The near redeemer defers to Boaz to protect his own inheritance. 4:5–6
 - C. Boaz redeems Elimelech’s possession and enters into levirate marriage with Ruth. 4:7–12
- V. On the Throne: Boaz becomes the ancestor of David. 4:13–22
 - A. Boaz begets a son by Ruth who is counted as Naomi’s. 4:13–17
 - B. Boaz becomes the ancestor of David. 4:18–22

Argument

I. To Moab and Back: The Israelite Naomi experiences a tragic reversal during her sojourn in Moab (1:1–22).

During the times of the judges, Israel was regularly coming under God's discipline for their sin and rebellion. This resulted in frequent famines in accordance with the cursing provisions of Deuteronomy (28:17–18; 23–24). During one such episode a Benjamite resettles his family in Moab (1:1–5). The man, Elimelech, dies and His sons marry Moabites (contrary to Mosaic law apparently). When they die their mother, Naomi, decides to return to her native land of Judah and her daughters-in-law follow. When Naomi bids them to return in view of the fact that she would not be able to raise up replacement husbands for them (according to levirate law), one goes back but the other continues (1:6–15). Ruth's resolve to remain with her mother-in-law entailed making Yahweh her God and Israel her people (1:16–17). It is this resolve and this faith that warrants God's blessing among His people. Though this would have been a comfort to Naomi, it did not overturn her deep sense of emptiness in that she was returning to her people destitute of normal means of sustenance (1:19–21). The story's plot is set up for a positive reversal of Naomi's misfortune.

II. In a Barley Field: The Moabite Ruth encounters Boaz who treats her kindly (2:1–23).

The narrator sets up the coming reversal by mention of Naomi's kinsman Boaz, who will become the "hero" of the story (2:1). By social custom Ruth goes out to glean the corners of the fields with the needy and "happens" to come to the part belonging to Boaz (2:2–3). God's providence is being displayed. Ruth becomes the object of Boaz's generosity because of her positive treatment of Naomi (2:4–11). Boaz views his

action as Yahweh's reward of a faithful servant (2:12). This summarizes one of the main themes of Ruth, namely that God blesses the obedience of faith. Ruth's humble acceptance of her benefactor's goodness is honored with even more favor and abundance as Boaz gives instructions for her special treatment (2:13–16). When Naomi learns that Ruth's good fortune had come at the hands of Boaz she counsels her to continue in his field until the end of the harvest season, which Ruth does (2:17–23). Apparently aware of God's providential hand in their affairs Naomi has realized the possibility that Boaz may be His provision for their security.

III. On a Threshing Floor: Naomi and Ruth conspire to get Boaz to act as kinsman redeemer (3:1–18).

Naomi comes up with a plan by which her needs of property redemption and family might be met. Ruth is told to visit the threshing floor during the harvest and “uncover the feet” of Boaz as he slept (3:1–7). This would serve as a “proposal” of marriage, or at least as an indication that Ruth was open to marriage if Boaz was so inclined, he being significantly older than she by all indications. As a near kinsman Boaz was in effect being asked to raise up a son for Naomi through her daughter-in-law Ruth (cf. 4:17). The strategy works in that Boaz recognized the implications of near kinsman responsibilities. However, there was another who was more closely related to Naomi and he had first refusal (3:8–13). Naomi accepts this circumstance and sets herself to see how it will turn out (3:18), another statement emphasizing the theme of providence.

IV. At the Gate: Boaz Redeems Ruth at the balk of the near redeemer (4:1–12).

True to his word, Boaz undertakes the mission of seeing to it that Naomi receives the benefits of the provision of the near kinsman. He approaches the one whose

responsibility it was to redeem her land and inquired as to his willingness to do so (4:1–4). However, when it became clear that his role would also entail raising up a descendant for Elimelech’s family he balks and defers to Boaz, protesting that it would jeopardize his own inheritance (4:5–6). Boaz redeems all the was Elimelech and his sons’ and acquires Ruth as his wife to provide a descendant for Naomi (4:7–11). God has arranged the circumstances, directed the action, and overseen the outcome to the best of all possible conclusions as far as Naomi and Ruth were concerned. One reason that He would do this has already been given and it has to do with Ruth’s character and faith (cf. 2:12). The other reason has not even been hinted at, nor could it be known until long after the fact. However, the canonical composition makes it clear that not only was God providing a seed and land redemption for Ruth and Naomi, He was also providing a seed for the rule and redemption of the nation. The story’s near conclusion sees life restored to Naomi and security and joy brought to Ruth (4:13–17). However, the story’s more distant implication involves Ruth’s great-grandson, David, the great king of Israel.

Conclusion

When God undertakes His works of providence the people whom He favors are the recipients of great blessing. Happy are those people who recognize His beneficent hand and give Him thanks. However, beyond all that can ever be gleaned about God’s present actions in the lives and affairs of His people are those eternal purposes that can only be traced in a back-looking manner. When David was struggling to receive his promised kingdom He was undoubtedly aware of God’s providential protection and provision. As he, and others, then and later, would have occasion to reflect on the story of Ruth it would become even more obvious that God had been and was working

providentially in their present circumstances to establish the house of David and see the fulfillment of its promised destiny (cf. 2 Sam 7:12–16).

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