

The Book of Ruth: A tale for our times

Welcome to our new TFTD on the book of Ruth —with an introduction from Philip Alexander.



Moab in the 8th century BC

The book of Ruth is set in the period of the Judges (Ruth 1:1), in our reckoning the 11th century BC, and that is why in our Bibles it has been placed after the Book of Judges. This was a time when the ancient Israelites were a loose confederation of tribes, without a national leader – a king.

The book tells the story of Elimelech, a man from Bethlehem in Judah, who, when famine strikes, goes off with wife Naomi, and his two sons, Mahlon and Chilion, to Moab, a small kingdom on the eastern shores of the Dead Sea, an area now in Jordan (see map below). No sooner do they arrive there than Elimelech dies leaving Naomi to bring up the boys single-handed. The boys grow up and marry local girls: Mahlon marries Ruth and Chilion marries Orpah; but after ten years both the sons die. Naomi, having heard that the famine has passed, decides to return to Bethlehem. Her two daughters-in-law accompany her part of the way, but she advises them to return to their

family homes. Orpah reluctantly follows her advice, but Ruth refuses, famously declaring, “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16). So Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem.

It is the time of the barley harvest, and Ruth, to try and support herself and her mother-in-law, goes out into the field to glean. Gleaning was a system of poor-relief in ancient Israel, whereby the poor were allowed to go out and follow the reapers at harvest time and pick up any grains which the reapers left behind. Farmers were also not supposed to reap the corners of their fields but leave them for the poor (Leviticus 19:9; 23:22; Deuteronomy 24:19). Ruth chances to glean in a field of a local wealthy farmer called Boaz, who turns out to be a relative of Elimelech. Boaz notices her and treats her kindly, and after several twists and turns in the plot marries her (I won't spoil it for you – read the story for yourself!). They have a son called Obed who is the grandfather of the great hero of ancient Israel, King David.

A simple tale, beautifully told, which has charmed readers and inspired artists for two thousand five hundred years, because it speaks to us across the ages at a profound, universal human level. We can easily empathize with the characters and appreciate the problems they faced. But as part of Scripture it resonates in our world in some surprising ways. It is a tale about migration. Elimelech and his family are economic migrants. How were they accepted as foreigners in Moab? But then there is a second migration. Ruth the Moabitess emigrates to Judah and throws in her lot with the people there, apparently not from economic necessity (on the contrary!) but out of love and concern for her mother-in-law. How was she treated in her new homeland? The Book of Ruth invites us to think about one of the burning issues of our own time – migration. What is our attitude to strangers and foreigners in our midst?

In fact, the debates we are having over migration are by no means new. We find them in the Bible. Ruth is part of an inner-biblical debate about “the stranger”, the foreigner

resident within the community. There were those within ancient Israel who wanted to exclude foreigners. In the 5th century BC, after the return from exile in Babylonia, the reformers Ezra and Nehemiah wanted to purge the Jewish community of aliens. They insisted that Jewish men divorce their foreign wives and repudiate the children that they had had by them (Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 13:1-3). The Law of Moses itself was rather ambivalent on the point: though there were laws that protected the immigrant (Exodus 22:21; 23:9; Leviticus 19:33-34; 23:35; Deuteronomy 10:19; 23:16; 27:19), it was also specified that “No ... Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord”, i.e. a Moabite could not become a member of the chosen people, because of the historic enmity between Israel and Moab way back at the time of the Exodus (Deuteronomy 23:3-6). The Book of Ruth speaks into this debate. It challenges the xenophobia of the nationalists. It says, in effect, “Hang on a minute! What about Ruth the Moabitess who was the great grandmother of King David?” It appeals to experience, against law and dogma. It is important to grasp that the Bible does not speak with a single voice. It is a polyphony, and sometimes the notes it strikes in one place jar with those it strikes in another. This challenges us to exercise our prayerful discretion, guided always by the supreme revelation of God’s mind in the teachings of Christ.

But there is another way in which the Book of Ruth speaks to us across the centuries. It addresses another burning issue of our times – the role of women in society. It is a book about women, and that is rather rare in the Bible. The author is giving a voice to women. I wonder was it written by a woman? But it depicts women as totally subordinate to men, as relying on men for their economic security and social standing. It depicts what would be called today a patriarchal society. It is true that Boaz behaves honourably within the norms of the society within which he lived, but should Ruth ever have been put in the position where to have a secure economic future she had to risk rape by offering herself to Boaz in the dead of night at his threshing floor (Ruth 3:6-14)? The scenario is thought-provoking. Are there any signs that our author wanted to challenge patriarchy? If there are not, this does not mean that we have to accept

patriarchy because it is depicted in a part of our Bible. I come back to the point that revelation is progressive. Where can we find the countervailing voices *within Scripture itself* which will interrogate and challenge the Book of Ruth's apparent acceptance of patriarchy?

These are only some of the themes of the Book of Ruth, which will be explored in later studies. The Book of Ruth may be small but it is mighty and I for one am grateful that the Jewish people in their wisdom preserved it as Word of God, and that the Church in its wisdom took it over from them.

Philip Alexander

06/07/2020