

## Study Notes for an Overview on *The Book of Ruth* (by Rev. James W. Barnhill, Jr.)

### General Observations

In the vast majority of ancient Hebrew manuscripts, *The Book of Ruth* appears as the one of the five *Megilloth*, the five scrolls regularly read at annual Jewish festivals. *The Song of Songs* is read at Passover (*Misan*), and then *Ruth* is read at the Feast of Weeks (*Shabu·oth*) fifty days after Passover. This feast commemorates Moses receiving the Ten Commandments.

In the *Codex Leningradensis* (the oldest version of the Hebrew Bible which is commonly in use today) *Ruth* follows *The Book of Proverbs*. This is different from its placement after *Judges* in the Christian Old Testament. The placement of *Ruth* in the Jewish Cannon is widely regarded to illustrate its connection to the "virtuous woman" in *Proverbs* (see Prov 31: 10-31). Perhaps *Ruth* was originally considered the exemplar of a Jewish woman. Instead, the Christian placement of *Ruth* after the Book of *Judges* is a sign of redemption and hope after the cataclysmic demise of any form of righteousness and fairness that we read about in *Judges 19-21*. By the end of *Judges*, the wheels have really come off the wagon in the Nation of Israel. Only God's grace will be sufficient to save the Israelites from destruction at their own hand. That hope and redemption are really central to the message of *Ruth*



*Moses holding the Decalogue* by Michael Angelo (St. Peter in Chains, Rome)

### Question 1: Where is *The Book of Ruth* set?

Answer 1: Most of the story is set in the Southern Kingdom of Judah, and much of it happens in the wheat fields around 5 miles south of the capital city of Jerusalem. The importance of this will be clear when we reach the end of the story.

### Question 2: Who are the main characters?

Naomi, widow of Elimelech and a woman from Bethlehem

Ruth, Naomi's daughter-in-law and a woman of Moab

Boaz, influential man of Bethlehem who marries Ruth (It's interesting that she asks him, not the other way 'round!)

Obed, the child of Boaz and Ruth (And grandfather to someone you know)

### Question 3: When was the story written?

There are a lot of different thoughts on this one; the various Bible scholars have different views (that's what they get paid for!).

Some authorities believe that *Ruth* was written by the prophet Nathan (the guy who accused David of sinning with Bathsheba – see 2<sup>nd</sup> Sam. 12). Others think it might have been written by one of David's daughters.

I personally like the views of the scholar and theologian Daniel I. Block. He dates the writing of the story in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century BC.

To understand this conclusion and importance of Ruth's date of writing, we have to consider the various Kings of Judah as depicted in the Old Testament books *1<sup>st</sup> Kings* and *2<sup>nd</sup> Kings*. After the division of Solomon's Kingdom into North (Israel) and South (Judah), the southern Kings of Judah were:

Rehoboam, bad mostly, 933-916 BC  
 Abijah, again, bad mostly, 915-913 BC  
 Asa, good, 912-872 BC  
 Jehoshaphat, good, 874-850 BC  
 Jehoram, bad, 850-843 BC  
 Ahaziah, bad, 843 BC  
 Athaliah, downright devilish, 843-837 BC  
 Joash, good mostly, 843-803 BC  
 Amaziah, good mostly, 803-775 BC  
 Uzziah, good mostly, 787-735 BC  
 Jotham, really good, 749-734 BC  
 Ahaz, really evil, 741-726 BC  
 Hezekiah, really good, 726-697 BC  
 Manasseh, THE ABSOLUTE WORST, 697-642 BC  
 Amon, almost as bad as his father, 641-640 BC  
 Josiah, THE BEST, 639-608 BC



*Ruth in the Fields* by the French painter  
Hugues Merle (1876)

Could Ruth have been written during the reign of Josiah? Many scholars think so. The reign of Josiah (639-608 BC) was a window of autonomy and prosperity for Judah. The Assyrian empire which had taken over the Northern Kingdom in 722 BC was beginning to crumble. So folks in the south started to feel a little relaxed – kind of like the IRS wasn't going to come and audit them after all.

And the Babylonians hadn't really become a problem yet. The Babylonian King **Nebuchadnezzar II** (Don't worry about how to pronounce it; I sure don't! 😊) would defeat the Assyrians and then sack Jerusalem and destroy the temple about 20 years later, in 586 BC (This is what Jeremiah and Ezekiel would write about). But during the reign of Josiah, the Babylonians weren't yet even a proverbial blip on the cosmic radar screen.

So Josiah had some breathing room. What did he do for the people? Quite a lot, really. You may want to look at 2Kings 22-23 and find out what Josiah was able to accomplish. You will see from those two chapters of the Bible that Josiah tried to call the people back to a faithful covenant with God. In fact, that's the major theme of *Ruth*.

The Hebrew word we are talking about here which defines this major theme in Ruth encompasses the meanings of "loving faithfulness" or "loving mercy." You might try to pronounce it something like (*heh-said'*). But that's only more-or-less correct, because if we Americans were going to try and pronounce it the way people say it in Israel today, we'd probably generate so much phlegm that we'd end up spitting on each other!

We can just think about *heh-said'* as a concept like "goodness," or "faithfulness," or "loving kindness." Probably the most familiar use of this word is its appearance at the end of the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, when we read that "God's goodness and mercy (*heh-said'*) will follow me all the days of my life" (see Ps.23:8a). This concept of God's unfailing loving kindness really sums up what *The Book of Ruth* is all about.

Now, if you had been running the "Elect Josiah King of a United Israel" campaign in 610 BC, wouldn't you want to circulate material like this? When a Jew from that period read *The Book of Ruth*, he would perceive how God is faithful and good to those who are virtuous and obedient to his covenant law. That was the major theme that buttressed the reign of Josiah. It's what Josiah was trying to bring the Jews back to.

But, I don't want anyone to think about this material as some kind of "propaganda" written by people who were fabricating a story in order to achieve their political aims. We must never forget that what we are dealing with here is nothing less than the Word of God. *The Book of Ruth* may have become popular in ancient Judah because it contained a message that some influential people wanted to disseminate in that culture. But I believe the events in *Ruth* really transpired (I see no evidence contradicting this position). And I further believe that *The Book of Ruth* was inspired by God in order to remind His people how much He loves us.

And I would like to note that the convictions of the original champions of the Church of England and the position of our own Episcopal Church agree with me in this regard. If you turn to page 868 of The Book of Common Prayer, you can read Article VI of "*The 39 Articles*" on which our Church is organized. Article VI states: "Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation... In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those Canonical Books of the Old and New Testament of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church." So, this is holy and serious stuff, people!

Finally, I want to make sure the students in this study on *The Book of Ruth* understand my own personal conviction that God's word is, in the end, all about **The** Word himself – God's love made manifest – Jesus, our Lord and Savior. And that's just as true of the Old Testament as it is of the New. The complete Word of God, the entire Bible points toward God's redemptive plan for His much loved children as represented in the person of Jesus Christ.

*The Book of Ruth* foreshadows exactly this kind of love. It is truly an awesome God that you and I serve!

JWB† 5-10-2016