

Monday Evening Bible Reading Group: Some notes on the Book of Ruth (2025/6)

Abel Clerk's "Bibel": Nomads, we journeyed into distant parts.... Then plague riddled us. The men all died, tuberclosed. We, the decimated weak, were left to face the famine and abandoned loneliness. I said (to my daughters in law) "Go, my girls." And Orpah did. But Ruth...replied... "I am part of your house, your people and your ways". I ...said "Come with me to Bethlehem. We go empty, seek fortune in the plenty of my cousin Boaz. He knows about being without. His mother made ends meet by being a prostitute in Jericho.....My kind but stranger cousin....gave her protection from male scavengers..... I told her to whisper to him you are no more maid to him, but lover.....He told her ..he wished to marry her....but to wait while he asked a closer relative to quit his prior claim....A shy and lonely man brings joy to both a widow in her prime and a widow of maturity. *Can we conclude that subterfuge may be justified when life and death could be at stake; and man is stupefied when a pretty girl's around?*

Derek Williams "An Idiot's Guide to the Bible": Ruth was King David's Granny.... The book reminds us that Christ was descended from a foreigner.... Widowed and childless meant the nearest relative had to marry her (even if he was married already)...Boaz, as "Kinsman Redeemer" "redeems" the family line and brings hope and new life.....Christ is called Redeemer.... Big theological ideas expressed in ordinary people's experience.... Date around 1100 BC (the period of the Judges)....Moab is 200 miles south east of Bethlehem, across the desert and around the bottom of the Red Sea. [While Williams says 200, others say 50! Bethlehem is 5 miles south of Jerusalem,]

Simon Jenkins "The Bible from Scratch": Ruth would take up 7 pages in a paperback novel...Ruth's loyalty to Naomi is impressive. [Puts all the old Mother in Law jokes in perspective!] God blesses, and blesses through, Gentiles.

Notes that follow make use of E.C. Rust's "Judges, Ruth and Samuel", Robert Fyall's "Ruth, Esther.....", and David Atkinson's "The Message of Ruth".

The obvious questions about any book are: what is it about? who wrote it? when? why? for whom? The story line is clear enough, and we can identify the main characteristics of the three main characters. We don't know who wrote it: some think it was a woman, perhaps because it has two heroines and one hero. It must have been written after the time of the Judges, and some think long after: perhaps when the Jews were returning from Exile, and there were some taking a strong line against marrying foreigners. (Though there never seems to have been the same hostility to converted foreigners.) Maybe the best description of likely purpose is to emphasise God's active presence and our individual and collective responsibilities.

Redemption is a strong theme, and the concept of redemption implies God's activity in our lives. BUT it also implies things going wrong, including bad things happening to good

people. Redemption often takes time, and can be much slower showing itself than we would like. And, oddly, we have a role in it: we are not just sitting with infinite patience at the receiving end of redemption. The idea that God's activity at point A can be better understood years, even centuries later, at point B makes sense. However, I don't know about you, but I find it very hard to reconcile redemption with the notion of God being responsible for everything: God giving cancer, God causing fatal accidents, God giving constant pain, God bringing about relationship failures....and then God, very selectively, bringing relief.

One bit of context might be helpful. Barley Harvest (the time of Naomi's return with Ruth) was an annual reminder of the fertility god temptation: when people who depended on the land for survival were easily lured back to the harvest god cult which meant fertility rituals which meant rampant sex in shrines on hills where the fertility gods could see what was going on....and in the fields.

The popularity of the Book of Ruth as a children's story is somewhat clouded by the way Naomi encourages Ruth into forcing Boaz's hand. Looks very much like seduction.

Chapter 1: Ruth's promise/commitment to Naomi is the passage to treasure. Ruth is very much about God being involved with ordinary people and ordinary life. The names are significant. Elimelech means God is King. Naomi means Pleasant. Mahlon means Sick. Chilion means Failing. Orpah means Young Dove or perhaps Double-minded. Ruth means Beauty and Friendly. Naomi refers to God as Shaddai, which has been interpreted as The God who is at His best when man is at his worst. (Isn't God always at his best?) Boaz means Strength or Swiftiness. Ephrathites were a prominent Bethlehem family. Bethlehem means House of Bread – normally a fertile place. The Moabites were descended from Abraham's neighbour Lot – so sort of related to the Israelites; but were not popular with the Jews, and banned. Their god was particularly blood-thirsty. Jehovah is credited with kindness/agape

There was a feeling that you left your god behind you when you left that god's territory – though Naomi seems to believe God will bless the two young women if they stay in Moab. And she clearly believes that God gives her both blessings and bad things irrespective of where she is. Survival of the family line was hugely important, and reflected in the laws about kinship marriage to continue the line. That the 2 sons were married for 10 years with no children would have hurt badly. (It seems the issue may have been on the male side.) Note how at that time women were hugely dependant on men.

Family loyalty a good or a bad thing? Can we love all our relatives equally? What has been lost and gained by greater equality for women, and by the State assuming responsibility for vulnerable people. Is God how we live our daily lives or a Sunday activity? Was Orpah wrong to choose her mother than her mother in law? (It seems both young women had widowed mothers.) Is nationalism out of step with Christianity?

Chapter 2: The eagle-eyed will spot the apparent inconsistency between Naomi having Boaz in mind from the beginning, and Ruth gleaning by chance/God chance in the fields of Boaz. Where were the two women living? After all the bad stuff in Judges – see Judges 19 for the worst of Judges in Bethlehem – it is great to see Boaz being thoroughly decent to Ruth: clearly with no ulterior motive. Gleaning was a right under Jewish law for the outsiders – not something to which we have any equivalent. Indeed in 19th Century England the poverty-stricken illegal gleaner might have been deported to Australia!!

Note that Boaz greets his employer with a blessing in God's name. You can see a modern employer who did that being taken to court! Note too that Ruth, who had signed up to being one of Naomi's people, feels very much a foreigner and outsider. *How good are we at making aliens feel at home.....20 year wait for citizenship, test of Englishness many English people might fail..? Can the law enforce the welcome? Is equal sharing of resources Communism or Socialism or Christianity? (cf "God made them high and lowly, and ordered their estate"!) Faith is about relationships. Relationships are about doing,. Not just about feeling; and about how we do, not just about what we do. Grace is great, condescension is not.*

Chapter 1 is 10+ years. Chapter 2 is one day. Just to get reality in view: here we have a lot of people working all day in the fields with no portaloos.

Boaz sees himself as acting on behalf of God. *Can we go with that? What does the shelter of God's wings mean?*

Chapter 3: Faith active in love is the Atkinson heading to this chapter. Ruth is in effect disguised; and of course it is dark./and Boaz has been drinking freely. "Spread your skirt over me" is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe both human and divine love in action. It is not a delicate way of talking about sex – though this chapter does sound distinctly dodgy... and not what most mums would recommend to most daughters. Remembering the likely age gap between the two people, it seems that Ruth had reason to trust, and that Boaz recognised his responsibilities, and discharged them in full – also keeping Naomi (probably closer to his age) in mind. Duty and love went hand in hand. Boaz knew that a good-looking young woman could do better than him... and maybe stand a better chance of having children with a younger man... after her previous 10 year childless marriage,

Did God or Naomi or both prompt the night encounter? Did the fact that each knew the other to be a person of faith make a difference? Do love and duty go well together? In keeping quiet about the encounter, is Boaz thinking of Ruth's reputation or of his own reputation?

It is interesting/ indicative of human differences that some commentators think that spending the night together means what it often means, while others are dead certain that in this case it doesn't.

Chapter 4: Happy ending – short term and long term. A fascinating combination of cultural norms and individual choices. The genealogy is probably a later addition. Intriguingly, Obed means Servant/Slave. Rachel and Leah (Jacob' wives) were founding mothers of the Jewish Nation, Tamar (Genesis 38) appears with Ruth in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. Boaz does everything in the open; but the land sale thing is sprung on the un-named relative as a ploy to secure the Boaz-Ruth marriage. Nobody is quite clear about the details. *Boaz was probably a childless middle-aged bachelor. Is marriage as important now as it was then.* Here, the marriage looms large – not the wedding. *Does God-given conception challenge abortion or not?* Lovely that Naomi stays in the picture.

Are you into genealogies.. or totally indifferent to ancestors? Christ as being in David's line seems just a little odd?

What is your take-away from Ruth?