

FR. ROLDAN'S BIBLE MUSINGS

RUTH

An Introduction

A brief story of famine, migration, loss, hardship, loyalty, intrigue, and restoration.

STYLE

Historical narrative that takes place during the time of the judges (1398-1047,) but the book itself was written much later. The judges were chieftains in charge of large territories in Israel. We know of 17 men and 1 woman who were chieftains. The book was written in Hebrew in an easy-to-understand style. Well written, clean, sophisticated writing whose simplicity betrays profound theological and patriotic themes.

It purports to be history, but is it really history?

SYMBOLIC NATURE OF NAMES IN RUTH

Elimelech (My God is king)

Naomi (Sweet One, made bitter by adversity, *Mara*)

Ruth (Companion, friend)

Orpah (Back of the Neck, stiff-necked?)

Mahlon (Sick)

Chilion (Consumptive, Ailing)

Boaz (In Him is Strength)

The most symbolic name is a pun at the start of the book. Bethlehem means "The house of bread," yet there is great famine in Bethlehem. "The symbolic nature of the names, coupled with the pun in v. 1 suggest that Ruth should not be read as a historical text" (The Jewish Study Bible.) "The Scroll of Ruth is not a legal document giving instruction on levirate marriage and land redemption. As Jack Sassoon has pointed out, it is a folk tale, with the structure and logic of the storyteller's art." (Myjewishlearning.com.) Central to the book of Ruth are the themes of Chesed (God's steadfast kindness,) Levitical rules about the proper care of the poor, redemption of the ancestral land, acceptance and devotion of Torah.

BRIEF SUMMARY

Naomi, Elimelech (husband,) Mahlon and Chilion (Children) move to Moab from Bethlehem because of famine. Elimelech dies soon after and the boys take on Moabite wives. About 10 years later, both sons die. The daughters-in-law (Orpah and Ruth) have several choices: 1. Go back to their paternal homes in the hopes of securing another marriage. 2. Stay with Naomi and return to her homeland of Bethlehem. 3. Become independent and fall for begging, prostitution, or some menial job to survive in a very difficult time in history, when women were some of the most dispossessed people in the land. Orpah returns to her father's home. Ruth pledges allegiance to Naomi and her God. The women return to Bethlehem, where they meet a kind kinsman who marries Ruth and redeems Naomi's land. The women's scarcity and deprivation turns to abundance and blessing in a great reversal of fortune often associated with God's Chesed.

CONCEPTS THAT MUST BE
UNDERSTOOD BEFORE WE PROCEED



HISTORIC ENEMIES

MOAB: It is very significant that Ruth is from Moab and the whole narrative plays on this theme. Through Ruth, even the nation's enemies are offered an opportunity to accept the God of Israel, Torah, and become incorporated into the People of God.

Numbers 21:29-30

Deuteronomy 23:3-6

Jeremiah 48:1-9

Yet, there are several episodes where Moab has been a gracious host

1 Samuel 22:3-4

Ruth 1:1

GLEANING

"When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien: I am the Lord your God." (Leviticus 9:9-10)

- a. The uttermost edge of the harvest
- b. What is dropped and left behind by reapers
- c. In prophetic times it means, *The Remnant of Israel*

Exod. 22:21-27; Deut. 24:19-21; Judg. 8:2; Ruth 2:17-23; Job 24:6; Isa. 17:5-6, 24:13; Jer. 6:9, 49:9; Obad. 1:5; Mic. 7:1.)

CHESED

"The theological importance of the word chesed is that it stands more than any other word for the attitude which both parties to a covenant ought to maintain towards each other... It conveys the idea of the steadfastness and persistence of God's sure love for his covenant-people... God's loving-kindness is that sure love which will not let Israel go... Though Israel be faithless, yet God remains faithful still... The continual waywardness of Israel has made it inevitable that, if God is never going to let Israel go, then his relation to his people must in the main be one of loving-kindness, mercy, and goodness, all of it entirely undeserved." (<http://www.bible-researcher.com/chesed.html>.)

**Ruth is the story of the
prototypical convert and
God's Chesed towards converts.
Ruth 1:16-18**

GOD'S CHESED

God's Chesed is central to the story of Ruth. The implication is that God's intervention on behalf of the women lies behind Boaz's generosity. Likewise, this generosity is a prototype and symbol of God's Chesed for the nation and for converts everywhere.

This Chesed is seen in the movement from emptiness (famine precedes mourning) to fulfillment (harvest precedes blessing and abundance,) from weakness to power and position, and from landlessness to redemption of the ancestral land.

KINSMAN REDEEMERS AND THE POWER OF GOEL

God pays the Goel
Job 19:25, Exodus 6:6

"If resident aliens among you prosper, and if any of your kin fall into difficulty with one of them and sell themselves to an alien, or to a branch of the alien's family, after they have sold themselves, they shall have the right of redemption; one of their brothers may redeem them, or their uncle or their uncle's son may redeem them, or anyone of their family who is of their own flesh may redeem them; or if they prosper, they may redeem themselves." (Leviticus 25:47-49)

Goel (price of redemption) can be paid for relatives, property, and self.

Closeness in familial relationship determines who the Kinsman Redeemer is. He will have the first right of acceptance or refusal to pay (purchase) the Goel. If the first refuses, the responsibility and honor is passed to the next male relative, who is closest to the person whose name, person, property, or honor is being redeemed.

Restoration of the family name is mandated through the marriage of widows and procreation of children (Deuteronomy 25:5, Genesis 38:8.)

The Kinsman Redeemer becomes the "Avenger of blood" in cases of murder, avenging the victim's honor! (Numbers 35:12-34, Deuteronomy 19:1-3.)

AUTHOR AND DATE OF COMPOSITION

The Author is unknown (Early Jewish teachers believed Samuel wrote both Samuel and Ruth. Others believe the author is a woman because of the "softer side of God," and the beautiful themes of fidelity and Chesed. Ruth is "the most positive portrayal of women's relationships in biblical literature" (Jewish Study Bible.) In truth, we don't know who the author of this great short book is, and it is doubtful this author was a woman.

The setting is the time before the monarchy. There are a few theories about the time of composition:

- a. Between the start of King David's reign and the Fall of the Northern Kingdom (950–722 B.C.E) This is the "Origin Story" theory.
- b. An early treaty meant to counter Deuteronomy 23:3
- c. During the exilic period (586–500 B. C. E. as a powerful motivation piece to encourage the exiles to return home after the exile.)
- d. After 500 B.C.E. as a powerful argument (and minority opinion) against Ezra 10:1–44 and Nehemiah 13: 23–31

SIX WEEKS BETWEEN BARLEY AND
WHEAT HARVESTS OR
SEVEN-WEEKS BETWEEN PASSOVER
(PESACH) AND PENTECOST (SHAVUOT)

The kindness of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz gives
readers a powerful message, "This is how people
who accept Torah in their hearts behave like!

How a book is celebrated in Jewish festivals tells us something
about the importance of the book in the life of the nation.

The Shavout feast, also called Pentecost in Jewish tradition, celebrates the wheat ingathering. At some point in history, the festival became associated with the giving of the Law at Mount Horeb (Sinai.) Ruth is always read on the second day of Shavout and holds a great place in the Jewish mind and heart.

This prized place within Judaism's liturgical life tells us more about Ruth than many commentaries. Ruth is the prototypical convert, who received Torah in her heart, accepting the God of Israel as her own God and remaining faithful to him to the time of her death. The Israelites at Mount Horeb, however, received Torah out of fear of a mighty God. Please compare Exodus 20:18, 24:7 and Ruth 1:16-18.

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