

The Book of RUTH

INTRODUCTION

1. Title. The book of Ruth forms an appendix to the book of Judges, and an introduction to the following two historical books of Samuel. It receives its title from the name of the person whose story it tells. Hebrew proper names have meanings. These are lost to the reader of the English translation of the Bible, because the translators have simply transliterated the proper names without attempting to give their meanings. Ruth was a Moabitish woman, and naturally her name is not Hebrew. The derivation and meaning of the name are uncertain, though some think it may be related to the verb *ra'ah*, "to associate with," and thus mean "friend," or "friendship."

The book of Ruth gives us, not the story of romantic love, but of the reverential love of a young widow for the mother of her deceased husband. The love portrayed in the character of Ruth is of the purest, most unselfish, and extraordinary kind. Though a Moabitess, Ruth accepted Naomi's faith as her own, and was rewarded by marriage to a Jewish nobleman, Boaz, by whom she became the ancestress of David, and thus, eventually, of Christ.

4. Theme. There is narrative that is historic, and narrative that is epic. The word *epic* is applied to narrative whose appeal is not primarily to our sense of information but to our creative imagination and to the emotions. An epic is usually written in poetic form. A peculiarity of Hebrew poetry, however, is that its verse system is based on parallelism of thought rather than on exact meter and rhyme. This characteristic also appears, to a lesser extent, in Hebrew prose. Thus, in Hebrew, the classification of literature depends more on the nature of the thought than on the form of expression. Hebrew epics are portions of the national history fitted into their proper place in the narrative. Appreciation of the Bible as literature calls for a recognition of the different forms of narrative used by Bible writers.

The chief purpose of the book of Ruth is to give information concerning the immediate ancestors of David, the greatest of the kings of Israel, the one in whose line was to come the Messiah. Christ is to be the eventual ruler of the kingdom of Israel after the spirit, the leader of the eternal theocracy. Christ spoke of His kingdom as the kingdom of heaven, to distinguish it from the kingdoms of this present world. The book of Ruth thus provides a cheering link in the inspired narrative of the kingdom Christ came to establish.

At the same time Ruth presents a most appealing picture of the blessings of the ideal home. There are two institutions that have come down to us from before the fall of man—the Sabbath and the home. The home was established by God Himself on the sixth day of the first week of time, and the Sabbath on the seventh day of the same week. The Sabbath is not Jewish, for, as the Creator Himself said, "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Both the Sabbath and the home have become the special objects of Satan's attacks.

The relationship of mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is a subject of amusement to many. But not so that of Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi. After a sojourn of ten years in the land of Moab, Naomi, whose husband and two sons had died, learned that a condition of plenty again prevailed in the land of Judah, and decided to return. Ruth, with a devotion that speaks

almost as much for Naomi as it does for Ruth herself, broke all ties of home and kindred to accompany her. With a last look at the fertile fields of her homeland, Moab, and with an impassioned outburst to Naomi, “Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God,” she entered a strange land, united with God’s true people, and became a worshiper of the God of heaven. This devotion to her mother-in-law resulted, finally, in her becoming one of the progenitors of David, the sweet psalmist of Israel; Solomon, the wisest of the sons of men; Zerubbabel, the later Moses; and the Messiah, the son of David. Finally the story is replete with superb examples of faith, piety, humility, industry, and loving-kindness revealed in the ordinary occurrences of life.

Thus we have in the story of Ruth, not only a charming gem of Hebrew literature, but also a significant comment on a part of the genealogy of Christ (see on Matt. 1:4–6).

Israel should have been prepared by a study of this narrative to understand God’s plan for the salvation of individuals of all nations who would do as Ruth the Moabitess did—accept the God whose character had been represented to them by His servants. It was God’s plan that many would thus be so transformed in character as to be prepared individually to become citizens of the eternal kingdom of Christ (see COL 290).