CHAPTER II

RUTH
"The book of Ruth is universally regarded as one of the most charming little idyls in all literature. Ruth demonstrates that God overrules in the affairs of ordinary men and women as He works out His eternal purposes in the redemption of mankind."¹ The story testifies that piety and trust in God will be rewarded, and that God's goodness is not constricted by nationalistic frontiers. It is a story of delightful simplicity and purity, telling, mainly in conversation, of Naomi, a mother, bereft of husband and sons, maintaining her faith in God; Ruth, a daughter-in-law, bereft of her husband and children, proving her devotion to her mother-in-law and to God; and, Boaz, an upright, generous farmer, blessed by his employees and by God. But for all its simplicity, the book poses several problems.

During the period of judges (1200 - 1020 B.C.),² a famine occurred in the land of Judah which caused Elimelech (God is king), his wife Naomi (My pleasant one), and their sons, Mahlon (Sickly) and Kilion (Failing), to leave their home in Bethlehem (House of Bread) to stay in Moab, a plateau east of the Dead Sea,³ 50 miles (80 Kms) away.⁴

The two young Israelites married the Moabite girls Ruth and Orpah. Tragedy hit the family as first Elimelech and then his sons died, leaving three widows with no means of livelihood or hope for the future. The grief-stricken
mother, Naomi, widowed, bereft of sons, and in an alien land decided to return to Bethlehem when news reached Moab that the Lord had come to the aid of his people by providing food for them. Naomi, not wishing to commit her daughters-in-law to life in an alien land, urged them who were following her to return to their homeland and their relatives:

Go, return each to her mother’s house: the Lord deal kindly with you, as ye have dealt with the dead, and with me.

The Lord grant you that ye may find rest, each of you in the house of her husband.

(Ruth 1:8-9)

She kissed them good-bye, but they said they would go with her. In a series of rhetorical questions, Naomi, with the levirate marriage provision in mind, urged that she could not hope to bear sons to provide them with husbands and in any case they could not be expected to wait.

If brethren dwell together, and one of them die, and have no child, the wife of the dead shall not marry without unto a stranger; her husband’s brother shall go in unto her, and take her to him to wife, and perform the duty of an husband’s brother unto her. (Deut. 25:5)
Orpah, evidently convinced by the argument, bade farewell and returned. It is unjust to blame Orpah for her decision. We do not know all the circumstances; for example she may have known of Ruth's determination and that Naomi would not be left alone.

But Ruth, with a stronger loyalty and closer bond of affection, clung to Naomi. Ruth's course was inspired by the altruistic motives of sacrificial love and service. Orpah, moved by utilitarian considerations, is ready to reerect the barriers of national and religious feeling between her and her late husband's mother. Conversely, Ruth's course implies renunciation of her own people with all that that involves. Once back in the familiar scenes of her youth, she gives way to a burst of self-pity which carries her close to rebellion against Jehovah. She fails altogether to regard the loving devotion of Ruth. All the latter's self-sacrifice failed to break down the intangible barrier of national feeling.

Naomi encouraged Ruth to return after her sister-in-law who was going back to her people and her God, i.e., Chemosh (Numbers 21:29). But Ruth, firmly resolved, expressed her determination in phrases of indescribable beauty. She declared her loyalty to Naomi, her willingness to identify with the people of Israel, and her devotion to
Naomi's God. Her promise is sealed with an oath invoking the Lord's judgment if she fails to fulfil it:

Exhort me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God:

Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me. (Ruth, 1: 16-17)

This was a very brave, outspoken confession of faith. It was made by a woman, a young woman, a poor woman, a widow, and a foreigner. Spurgeon observes,

I think Naomi was quite right to drive Ruth, as it were, to take this brave stand, in which it became an absolute necessity for her to speak right straight out and say in the words of our text, "intreat me not to leave thee ... thy God my God." .... I should think that Naomi was - certainly she ought to have been - greatly cheered by hearing this declaration
from Ruth, especially the last part of it: "Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." Naomi had suffered great temporal loss. She had lost her husband and her two sons, but now she had found the soul of her daughter-in-law. I believe that, according to the scales of true judgement, there ought to have been more joy in her heart at the conversion of Ruth's soul than grief over the death of her husband and her sons. Our Lord Jesus has told us that "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth." I always understand, by that expression, that there is joy in the heart of God Himself over every sinner's repentence. Well, then, if Naomi's husband and sons were true believers - if they had been walking aright before the Lord - as, let us hope, they had done - she need not have felt such sorrow for them as could at all compare with the joy of her daughter-in-law being saved.5

Seeing the strength and character of Ruth's decision, Naomi stopped urging her:
When she saw that she was steadfastly minded to go with her, then she left speaking unto her.

(Ruth 1:18)

Naomi was so sorrowful that she could not talk, her heartbreak was so great that she could not converse, but such silence must have been very trying to Ruth. Still Naomi's silence did not discourage Ruth; she was evidently a strong-minded though gentle young woman, and she gave herself up to God and His people without any reserve. Even though she might not be helped much by the older believer and might even be discouraged by her and still more by the departure of her sister-in-law Orpah, still she pressed on in the course she had chosen.

Naomi and Ruth arrived in Bethlehem in April, at the time of the barley-harvest season, a busy but joyous time for the people. Their arrival caused considerable excitement. The women's question "Is this Naomi?" suggests that the intervening years and her bereavements had altered her appearance. Naomi picked up the meaning of her name and replied:

Call me not Naomi (pleasant), call me Mara (bitter): for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me.
I went out full, and the Lord hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me. Naomi, seeing the Lord hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me? (Ruth 1:20-21)

Spurgeon observes, yet Ruth seemed to say, 'I do not care how they treat me; they are God's people, even if they have a great many faults and imperfections, and I am going to join them.'

Ruth spoke very positively, "Thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God." This was her resolve, but it was a resolve which had already been put to the test and had in great measure satisfactorily passed through it. First, it had been tested by the poverty and the sorrow of her mother-in-law. When Naomi said, "The Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me," Ruth said, "Thy God shall be my God." Naomi had lost her husband, she had lost her song, she had lost everything; she was going back penniless to Bethlehem, and yet her daughter-in-law said to her, "Thy God shall be my God."

Next, Ruth's decision had been tested when she was bidden to count the cost. Naomi had put the whole case before her. She had told her daughter-in-law that there was
no hope that she should ever bear a son who could become a husband to Ruth and that she had better stay and find a husband in her own land. She set before her the dark side of the case.

Ruth had been tried, too, by the apparent coldness of one in whom she trusted and whom she had a right to trust, for Naomi did not at all encourage her; indeed, she seemed to discourage her. And though Naomi showed her love to Ruth, she did not seem to have any very great desire to bring her to follow Jehovah. But this young woman said to her mother-in-law, "Entreat me not to leave thee... thy God my God."

It was hard for widows to earn a living but Ruth took advantage of an ancient Jewish law which allowed poor people to collect up corn left for them by the reapers at the side of the field. Reapers were forbidden to reap to the very borders, nor were they sent over the fields a second time (Lev. 19:9 and 23:21; Deut. 24:19).

Ruth, as it turned out, came to a field owned by Boaz, "a man of wealth." As far as she was concerned, it was by chance, but God overruled it: a fact which is not stated but everywhere implied. Ruth, having left her old companions, had come among strangers. She was not yet at home in the land of Israel but confessed herself "a stranger." She knew
Naomi, but in the whole town of Bethlehem she knew no one else. When she came into the harvest field the neighbors were there gleaning, but they were no neighbors of hers. No glance of sympathy fell upon her from them; perhaps they looked at her with cold curiosity. They may have thought what business this Moabiters had to go there to take away a part of the gleaning which belonged to the poor of Israel. Ruth was a foreigner, and, of course, in their eyes an intruder. She felt herself to be alone, though under the wings of Israel's God. Boaz very properly felt that she should not think that courtesy and kindness had died out of Israel; and he made a point to go to her and speak a word of encouragement to her.

When Boaz asked his servant "Whose damsel is this?" (2:5) he answered, "It is the Moabitish damsel that came back with Naomi out of the country of Moab" (2:6). He continued that she had asked permission to glean and that she had worked with only a short rest. Knowing of Ruth's loyalty to Naomi and to the Lord and aware of the possibility of her being driven off or molested, Boaz showed concern and advised her to glean with his maidservants and drink of the water drawn by his men and informed her that he had instructed them not to harm her. Ruth bowed to the ground, an action symbolic of humble gratitude, and said to him:
Why have I found grace in thine eyes, that thou shouldest take knowledge of me, seeing I am a stranger? (Ruth 2:10)

She said again,

Let me find favour in thy sight, my Lord; for that thou hast comforted me, and for that thou hast spoken friendly unto thine handmaid, though I be not like unto one of thine handmaidens. (Ruth 2:13)

She had little self-esteem, and therefore she won the esteem of others. She felt herself to be a very inconsiderable person to whom any kindness was a great favor. Boaz answered that he knew of her dealings with Naomi and her faith in leaving her kindred and entrusting herself to an unknown people:

The Lord recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the Lord God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.

(Ruth 2:12)

This was the language of Boaz, a man of substance and of note in Bethlehem, to a poor stranger of whom he had
heard that she had left her kindred and the idols of her nation that she might become a worshiper of the living and true God. He acted a noble part when he cheered her and bade her be of good courage, now that she was casting in her lot with Naomi and the chosen nation. He saluted her with words of tender encouragement.

Boaz invited Ruth to join his party at meal-time and showed special favour by offering her freshly roasted grain. He instructed the reapers to let her glean among the sheaves rather than after the reapers and even to pull out for her some stalks already gathered into bundles:

Let her glean even among the sheaves, and reproach her not. (Ruth 2:15)

Ruth had no right to go among the sheaves to glean, but Boaz gave her a right to go there by saying, "Let her do it." For her to be allowed to go among the sheaves, in that part of the field where the wheat was not already carted, was a special favour; but to go among the sheaves, and to have handfuls of corn dropped on purpose for her, was a further proof of the kindness of Boaz. The reasons that moved the heart of Boaz to let Ruth go and glean among the sheaves are he loved her and he was related to her.
Ruth worked until evening, threshed the ears of barley and found she had gathered an ephah, equivalent to 22 litres or 4 gallons 6 3/4 pints. This, with what was left from the midday meal, she took to Naomi, who asked where she had gleaned and, realizing by the amount that someone had been specially helpful, added,

... blessed be he that did take knowledge of thee. (Ruth 2:19)

When Ruth told her it was Boaz, Naomi prayed the blessing of the Lord upon Boaz and spoke of the Lord's kindness in not having forgotten the living and the dead. Naomi went on to tell that Boaz was a close relative. Ruth told her of Boaz's instruction to stay with his workers until they had finished harvesting and Naomi agreed she should do so "because in someone else's field you might be harmed." Ruth did so through the barley and wheat harvests, i.e., April and May.

Naomi felt obliged to help Ruth remarry so that she could raise an heir to carry on the family name. She knew that Boaz would be sleeping out of doors, perhaps to guard his harvest, so she sent Ruth to lie at his feet before he woke up. When Boaz woke up, Ruth asked him to spread his cloak over her, symbolically asking him to marry her and
provide a son who could be the legal descendant of her dead father-in-law, Elimelech:

I am Ruth thine handmaid; spread therefore thine skirt over thine handmaid; for thou art a near kinsman. (Ruth 3:9)

Boaz invoked on her the blessing of the Lord and praised her devotion saying, in effect, that her loyalty to her deceased husband in marrying a middle-aged kinsman to perpetuate his name and inheritance instead of seeking a husband from among the younger set was greater evidence of her devotion than that shown by returning with Naomi. He assured,

... fear not; I will do to thee all that thou request: for all the city of my people doth know that thou art a virtuous woman.

(Ruth 3:11)

Boaz emphatically acknowledged he was a near of kin but said there was one nearer (3:12). He told Ruth to lie until morning and promised with an oath to redeem the property if the "next of kin" with prior claim declined (3:13). The laws of kinship of Israel gave members of a
family a strong obligation to help and protect one another. Boaz accepted Ruth's request, but first of all had to sort out the ownership of the family property with another, closer, relative.

To safeguard their reputation, Ruth left before there was sufficient light to recognise anyone. Boaz poured six measures of barley into her shawl. The measure is not specified but according to the Targum it was six seahs, a load of 88 lbs. Returning to Naomi, Ruth told her what had happened, adding that Boaz had sent the barley saying that she must not return empty to Naomi, who would no doubt recall her own complaint (1:21). Naomi was confident that Boaz would deal with the matter that same day and told Ruth to wait.

Boaz took up a place at the town gate, where he met the nearer kinsman and called him over. Boaz called ten elders as witnesses. Boaz informed the nearer kinsman that Naomi was selling the field portion that belonged to Elimelech, but then seemed to have been held in trust by Naomi for his heirs. Boaz gave him the opportunity to redeem the land, making it clear that should he decline, Boaz himself would redeem it. The man undertook to redeem it. Then Boaz informed him that in doing so, he must acquire i.e., marry Ruth to maintain the name of the dead with his
property. This effectively changed the whole position. Adding a piece of land to his property was one thing; taking on the responsibility of a second wife with the prospect of a son who would inherit the property was another. He passed the right and duty to Boaz. The transfer of this right was attested by the taking off and giving of a shoe. The practice of transferring a sandal in order to confirm a legal transaction is not fully understood, but, it was a common custom in biblical times. Boaz declared the elders and the people witnesses that he had bought the inheritance of Elimelech and his sons and had acquired Ruth as his wife. The people and the elders confirmed they were witnesses and added a traditional blessing:

The Lord make the woman that is come into there house like Rachel and like Leah, which two did build the house of Israel: and do thou worthily in Eppratah, and be famous in Bethlehem:

And let thy house be like the house of Pharez, whom Tamar been unto Judah, of the seed which the Lord shall give thee of this young woman. (Ruth 4:11-12)
Ruth and Boaz married, their son Obed (servant or worshipper) was king David's grandfather and an ancestor of Jesus, who was also born in Bethlehem hundreds of years later.

The marriage of Ruth and Boaz was a step taken under public approval, and only after every recognized custom of the day had been observed, and by this marriage the assimilation of the foreign-born bride to her adopted people and country was consummated. There can be little doubt that the author introduced the claims of the unknown kinsman in the third chapter, so that Boaz would be compelled to submit the whole matter to a council of the elders of the community. Thus it becomes clear that objection to the marriage of an Israelite to a foreigner, provided there are no barring circumstances, had no official warrant in the ancient social practice of Israel. Similarly, the point here made is that such mixed marriages have often proved highly beneficial, not only to those closely concerned, but to society at large. So Naomi's neighbours, after the birth of Ruth's son, named him Obed, typifying, perhaps, the values of his mother's life. They praised the Lord and prayed that the baby boy would be famous throughout Israel:
And he shall be unto thee a restorer of thy life, and a nourisher of thine old age: for thy daughter in law, which loveth thee, which is better to thee than seven sons, hath born him. (Ruth 4:15)

Likewise they did not hesitate to declare to Naomi that her foreign-born daughter-in-law had been to her "better to thee than seven sons." But Ruth's crowning honour was that she became the ancestor of David. Spurgeon observes,

What was the full reward that Ruth obtained? I do not think that Boaz knew the full meaning of what he said. He could not foresee all that was appointed of the Lord. In the light of Ruth's history we will read the good man's blessing. This poor stranger, Ruth, in coming to put her trust in the God of Israel was giving up everything. Yes, but she was also gaining everything. If she could have looked behind the veil which hides the future, she could not have conducted herself more to her own advantage than she did. She had no prospect of gain. She followed Naomi, expecting poverty and obscurity; but in doing
that which was right, she found the blessing which makes rich. She lost her Moabitish kinded, but she found a noble kinsman in Israel. She quitted the home of her fathers in the other land to find a heritage among the chosen tribes, a heritage redeemed by one who loved her.... Ruth found what she did not look for, she found a husband. It was exactly what was for her comfort and her joy, for she found rest in the house of her husband, and she became possessed of his large estate by virtue of her marriage union with him.... Ruth obtained an inheritance among the chosen people of Jehovah. She could not have obtained it except through Boaz who redeemed it for her, but thus she came into indisputable possession of it.  

Recognition of Ruth's loyalty is appropriately given as the story ends, and the tribute, "better to thee than seven sons," is a powerful one, since seven sons was proverbially the perfect family (1 Samuel 1:8 and 2:5).  

The book of Ruth has very little to say about the religion of Israel at that time, but its picture of social customs illustrates the close family ties which have always
been a feature of Jewish life. And Ruth has often been taken as an example of someone with a simple but sincere faith in a God who directs people's lives.

The story of Ruth is one of unparalleled loyalty. In our society, even friends, spouses, and relatives sometimes betray one another. Uncompromising loyalty is rare and should be greatly treasured. Like Ruth, we can commit to loyal relationships, even when it isn't convenient, personally profitable, or publicly expected.
REFERENCES


3. Charles A. Oxley, 343.


