Ruth's story as our story

Introduction

For generations the book of Ruth has held a prominent place as one of the Bible's greatest love stories. Ruth has an attractive "happily-ever-after" quality where a widow's fortune turns on a dime from death to resurrection. This places her in the arms of a powerful man who rescues her from poverty and restores the fortunes of her family. In fact, some people enjoy reading Ruth almost entirely for its romantic qualities. After all, what short story could beat the stunning combination of death and widowhood that concludes with a happy marriage and the birth of a beautiful baby boy! Some believe that when Benjamin Franklin was a diplomat to the French courts, he read the book of Ruth in a meeting of the French King and French nobles in order to impress them with an example of the most profoundly beautiful love story that he had ever heard. If this is true, Franklin was not alone in his assessment of Ruth as an amazing short story. One theologian says, "It is a tale of charm and delight." Another hails it as "the loveliest complete work on a small scale, handed down to us as an ethical treatise and idyll." Still another scholar asserts that "no poet in the world has written a more beautiful short story."

The book of Ruth is named for one of the principal characters of the story. Neither Ruth nor the two other main characters, Naomi and Boaz, dazzle us with any of the mythical qualities so common to the heroes or the heroines of classical antiquity. For instance, none of the cast of players would leap onto the pages of Plutarch's Lives or demand a place in one of Homer's epic poems, and Boaz is certainly not Beowulf. In fact, we do not have any record of the main characters accomplishing any extraordinary feats in war or politics. Rather, they seem to be ordinary people dealing with the ordinary problems of life, but with a steady faithfulness to God. This might be exactly the quality so striking in the story of Ruth. Still, we cannot overlook the fact that the book of Ruth is packed with the attractive features of a beautiful young woman discovering love after the death of her husband.

Ruth is certainly filled with a moving portrait of love and emotion. Ruth's story, however, is more than a quaint little tale of deep sorrow and passionate love, and this is where the story becomes the most genuinely satisfying. Ruth is actually a work of redemptive history. When you read Ruth with attention to its theological qualities, you pleasantly discover that Ruth contains much more than a beautiful love story about how a boy meets a girl. Indeed, when theology guides the reader through the story of Ruth it doesn't dampen its quality as a love story like an overly professorial preacher. To the contrary, the reader is dazzled with a miraculous combination of human love flawlessly and providentially guided by the sovereign and artistic hand of divine love. Human romance becomes a guide and even a faint reflection of the more stunning qualities of heavenly love that fills the brief pages of this amazing little story. Indeed, Ruth virtually explodes the soul with meaning that only heaven could begin to contain. This is especially the case when the reader who lives in faithfulness to God discovers that Ruth's story is also their story; it is the story of the gospel.

Date

Ruth doesn't provide any direct identification about the date in the story itself. However, the narrative opens during the end of period of the Judges ("when the judges judged" 1:1). The setting we discover in the opening lines points us to a probable date for the book. That is to say, it appears that the best estimate of the date for the writing of the book of Ruth is most likely during the early monarchy of Israel (c. 1000 b.c.). As arranged in most English versions of the Bible, Ruth follows
the book of Judges. This arrangement, though not consistent with its sequence in the Hebrew canon, accords well with the chronology of the story itself.

The earliest date that Ruth would have been written was probably when David was anointed King (1 Samuel 16). It was most certainly not written after David's reign, especially since the genealogy at the end of the book of Ruth is only three generations before David. The genealogy indicates that the latest date for Ruth was probably during the pinnacle of David's fame, since a later date would more than likely have required the inclusion of Solomon's name in the genealogy. It is hard to imagine that the author would have written during or after Solomon's reign and yet would have ignored this great king's place in the genealogy.

The time when the "judges judged" is also the time when two other accounts from the Bethlehem Trilogy occurred (e.g., Micah and the Levite, recorded in Judges 17-18, and the Levite and His Concubine, recorded in Judges 19-21). Here then Ruth might have been what some scholars call the third Bethlehem episode in the period of Judges, but Ruth is recorded not as a part of the book of Judges, but rather as an important separate story on its own. Hence, we conclude that the book was written during the early monarchy of David, or perhaps at the end of the reign of King Saul, but certainly before the enthronement of Solomon (c. 1000 B.C.). This may shine light on the reasons that David, fleeing from King Saul, would seek refuge for his family with the king of Moab (1 Samuel 22:3).

Author

It is reasonable to ascribe authorship of the book of Ruth to the prophet Samuel. Some have argued that the prophet Nathan wrote Ruth. Yet, the author was most probably Samuel, who also wrote the book of Judges. The book itself doesn't declare its author, but Hebrew tradition from the earliest of times ascribes the book to Samuel, and there is no reason either in the text or from external sources to question this tradition.

Internal evidence allows for Samuel as the author of Ruth. For instance, the brevity of the genealogy in 4:18-22 argues for an earlier rather than a later date of composition, which would align nicely with Samuel. Samuel had good reason to author such a book. He knew that his anointing of David (1 Samuel 16) would cause potential division between the northern and southern tribes of the nation (2 Samuel 1-5). Thus, he was happy to demonstrate that David was from the line of Judah, fulfilling Jacob's prophecy (Ruth 4:12, 18; cf. Genesis 38; 49:8-12). The exclusion of Solomon from the genealogy at the end of the book also supports Samuel's authorship of the book of Ruth.

Old Testament stories and our interpretative approach

Because of his rich mercy towards men, God has given us the gospel message in beautiful stories. In fact, the bulk of biblical literature is in narrative form, in stories. One of the best known is Jonah's prophecy. Jonah's story is a true tale filled with as many colorful and ironic images of redemption as almost any book in the Bible. Yet Jonah's words, like the story of Ruth, are redemptive history.

These Old Testament stories contain images of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ on every page. What the reader discovers when reading the story is not merely a love story or a series of moral lessons; one finds the message of redemption; the reader comes face to face with the gospel in this story. Hence, we approach the text as a literal narrative of Ruth's actual experience as well as one filled with theology. It is theological narrative. We want to try to read the narrative the same way that Christ taught his disciples to read the Old Testament after the resurrection — with the story of Jesus as the theological center of the story of the Old Testament. Jesus' own approach to the Old Testament is clearly seen as he speaks to the disciples on the road to Emmaus:

"And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself."

(Luke 24:27)
Here Jesus treats the texts of the Old Testament as redemptive history that has himself as the focus. This means that, although we must handle the text of Scripture according to its literal, historical, and grammatical meaning, yet we are not allowed to neglect the redemptive or Christ-centered purpose of the text. In other words, a literal approach is not in conflict with a redemptive-historical approach to the text. Indeed, they must go hand-in-hand.

By *redemptive-historical* we mean the connections the story has, not only immediately to the people in Ruth’s day, but to salvation history and to the story of the gospel as it relates to Jesus. This means that Ruth's story is our story because we hear a fresh, beautiful account of the gospel and God's love for sinners, which is connected to the coming of Jesus our savior.

This is true of Old Testament stories in general. Jonah, for instance, was a literal man who actually and historically experienced the events that are described in his prophecy. Jonah is not a parable or a work of fiction. It is not an allegorical or mythical illustration of theological truths. It is an actual, historical and prophetic narrative; it is a theological/redemptive story.

### Covenant theology

This is exactly how Jesus interpreted the Old Testament. We approach Ruth's story in the same way Christ approached the Old Testament, as part of the words of the covenant. We approach it assuming that Christ is present in the narrative and that by this story we will be called to follow after our Lord faithfully. Ruth's story fits into and is connected to the unfolding of God's covenant of grace in Jesus Christ. As Meredith Kline notes about the Old Testament,

> Thus a literary dimension is added to the functional in our identification of the Old Testament in all its parts as a covenantal corpus. Our thesis is then that whatever the individual names of the several major literary genres of the Old Testament, as adopted in the Old Testament their common surname is Covenant.²

Ruth’s story, you see, is part of the unfolding covenant of grace and the message of the gospel. And what a beautiful gospel story it is! God is holy and sovereign as well as tender and compassionate towards needy sinners of all tribes and all nations.

This gospel message is unmistakably clear in the story of Ruth. In remarkable and vivid images God tells us one of sweetest and most touching stories of all time. No matter who you are or what you think about yourself, if you submit to God, you will be blessed. If, however, you do anything else, you will be damned and you will deserve it. This message burst the bounds of any manmade theology. To the contrary, this message unfolds before us in all of the vivid colors of browned fields burned into a famine-riddled countryside. We feel the faith dilemma of Naomi and Ruth not in the pounding of a pulpit, but in the heart-pounding and gut-wrenching loss of fathers, sons and husbands combined with the torturous humiliation of returning to a land of certain ridicule and painful memories of days gone by. Yes, this is the gospel in a story that one will not soon forget.

Jesus offers us insight into this approach with respect to Jonah. He speaks of Jonah as a literal, historical figure. Jesus refers to Jonah as a man whose actual historical experience points forward to Christ's coming experience as Redeemer (Matthew 12:39). He speaks of the experience of Jonah as having redemptive design and redemptive purposes. Thus, Jonah's story contains literal facts, which have been divinely structured and beautifully arranged to point us forward to Jesus. That is to say, the literal events of the prophecy act as redemptive images of the coming work of Christ. Jesus even refers to Jonah's experience in the belly of the fish as a "sign." Thus, he cites the repentance of the city of Nineveh as another redemptive event that had correspondence to the events of his own ministry.

> But He answered and said to them, “An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with
this generation and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed a greater than Jonah is here.

(Matthew 12:39-41)

Old Testament narrative is not randomly pulled from the memory of ancient Jews because they make for good bedtime stories for little Jewish children. The stories in the Old Testament are a record of redemption that God has sovereignly structured to contain a twofold yet singular purpose of telling us about a specific historical story while also teaching us about our own story in Christ. The story doesn't contain a "different or higher sense, but a different or high application of the same sense." You will experience this for yourself as you study your way through the story of Ruth. As the disciples on the road to Emmaus, you will feel your heart burn within you as you encounter your own story in the story of Ruth.

**Typology as a key**

When we read the Old Testament we need to appreciate what theologians call "typology." As noted already, this is how Jesus handled the scriptures with his disciples. The Old Testament is not a collection of fascinating moral stories; it is the story of redemption that in a variety of amazing literary and artistic ways teaches about Jesus. What do we mean by the word, "typology?" For a helpful look at this subject see R.T. France's book, *Jesus and the Old Testament: His Application of Old Testament Passages to Himself and His Mission.* France helps us to read Old Testament books with an appreciation for what theologians call typology.

> The word typology comes from the Greek word, tupos, which means a pattern or model. Typology will, therefore, be concerned with persons events, etc., that are viewed as models or patterns for other persons, events, etc.

This is not the same as allegory, which says that a person place or event within a story does not stand on its own, but exists merely to represent something else. An allegorical reading associates the story with mere symbolism. This is different from using typology. A type is an event that stands on its own, but as an event it also points forward to the coming of another event for which it provides a pattern. Typology is grounded not in mere images, but in actual history that contains theology. This is why we say that Jonah was an actual, historical man who truly and literally was swallowed by a giant fish that God had preordained for this purpose. The whole story was a real event of history, but one that God had sovereignly arranged and artistically designed to act as a pattern of his work in the future. This is theological history or redemptive narrative.

This approach is stunning when you imagine that God did not merely create a story, as an ingenious human author would do by using his imagination, but he brought the story to life in time and in space for his glory and for our salvation. While the best human authors craft stories that are pure fiction, God creates actual historical stories, which become better than any story every imagined in the minds of the world's most creative authors.

It is even more amazing when we consider that we are reading a story that is part of a larger narrative that God is artistically and sovereignly creating in history. In the Bible there is an overall narrative or what we might call a "metanarrative." This is the overarching story of redemption that is unfolding as it leads us directly to Jesus. So Richard Gaffin notes,

> Only gradually has orthodox scholarship come to recognize that biblical revelation is given as an organically unfolding process, that is, as a history, and that dealing with the biblical writers in terms of their respective places in this history, that is with respect to their individual contributions, is not only desirable but necessary.

This is precisely how one must approach the book of Ruth, as part of the organic unfolding of God's history of redemption. So Sinclair Ferguson says,
The book of Ruth is part of the biblical narrative of redemptive history. It describes one more stage in the purposes of God as they moved inexorably towards the final redemption of his people through Jesus Christ.\(^4\)

The Old Testament stories are all part of the unfolding story of redemption, and we should read them with this kind of theological and literary sensitivity. If we do, we will discover a wealth of meaning. France says:

> There is a consistency in God's dealings with men. Thus, his acts in the Old Testament will present a pattern which can be seen to be repeated in the New Testament events; these may therefore be interpreted by reference to the pattern displayed in the Old Testament. New Testament typology is thus essentially the tracing of the constant principles of God's working in history, revealing a recurring rhythm in past history which is taken up more fully and perfectly in the Gospel events.\(^7\)

Jesus said that Jonah's experience was a sign. It was a redemptive symbol or image of that which Christ would come to do. This is precisely how Jesus approached Jonah's story. If one may call this a "method" then Jesus taught this method in Luke 24 when he explained that the entire Old Testament should be approached with the covenant of grace and his redemptive work as the focus of the Scriptures. The narrative is filled with redemptive images that teach us of Christ and the covenant of grace.

**Our story**

Thus, when we read and when we study the book of Ruth, not merely as a love story or a moral lesson, but as theological narrative, we find that Ruth's story is also our story. The gospel of life is taught in the story of Ruth. As such, our story is hidden in her story. Like Ruth, we were dead and without hope, but for the coming into our lives of our faithful kinsman redeemer. We, like Ruth, long for bread in the midst of famine and pain; Christ provides us with nourishment. We long to go to the house of bread to find such food. We, too, long for King Jesus to reign complete in our own lives and those around us. We know he is the legitimate ruler who saves his people. We also hope as Ruth hoped that God looks kindly towards those who respond to him with faith, and so we fall down as Ruth fell down, and we cling tightly to the hope of Messiah. So much is here in this story that is also our story. Some of you may be able to relate intimately to the themes of helplessness, widowhood, and hunger. But all of us can relate to the timeless themes of redemption because they are universal to man's great need of God.

When you read the book of Ruth with Christ as its center, I hope you will experience the same thing the disciples did on the road to Emmaus. They heard the Old Testament expounded and they responded saying,

> "Did not our hearts burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?"

(Luke 24:32)

**Questions for consideration**

1. What are some of the initial reasons that Ruth is such an appealing story?
2. Who are the three main characters in the Story of Ruth?
3. How does the author describe the main characters?
4. What guides the reader through the story of Ruth?
5. What is the most likely date for Ruth? Why?
6. Who wrote the story of Ruth?
7. The Bible is written in what form or genre of literature?
8. Why is Luke 24:27 important for our understanding of the book of Ruth?
9. What role does covenant theology play?
10. What is typology?
11. What is allegory?
12. How is Ruth's story our story

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3 See Patrick Fairbairn, *Typology of Scripture*, 2 volumes in 1, originally published in 1900, Kregel Publications, 1989, 3