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RUTH

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The Book of Ruth is acknowledged as one of the finest stories in the Hebrew Scriptures. It is a story. There are many ways of communicating truth. The writing of history is one way. It involves the careful establishing of the data (what actually happened), as well as a careful attempt to express something of the significance of what happened. The writing of history, however, is only one way of attempting to communicate truth. There are the many ways in which art of various kinds aims to awaken the imagination – as distinct from appealing to the logic of discursive reasoning – and through the imagination to open the way to insight. A video can tell us something of what was actually going on, but so can a painted portrait or a film. These take us ‘inside’ the facts to what is really going on! Stories can have the same effect. Story-telling in ancient Israel, as throughout the ancient world, was one way people handed on their traditions. Anyone familiar with the Newer Testament knows how Jesus used story to communicate his insights. The parable of the Prodigal Son speaks powerfully of God’s love. Still today we know the power of a well-told story.

Prior to the Greek Period (late 4th century BC) the writing of what we today would recognise as history was rare. People were, of course, interested in reality, in the way things were in their past and how this impacted on their present experience, but they expressed their insights not in ‘history’, but in epic, saga, song and story. This should come as no surprise when we recall that many of the stories that we find in the Hebrew scrolls were told and retold through a long oral tradition before they were captured in a written text. Other writings from the ancient world chose the elevated, poetic and sophisticated style of epic literature, a style typical of an aristocratic and ruling class. Not so, Israel. In the Bible we find a more popular style, open to everyone. This style links immediately with experience, and provides a simple and effective way of sharing experience, and so truth. Examples abound. One thinks of the marvellous stories about Joseph in Genesis 37-50; or, in the Book of Judges, the stories of Gideon (Judges 6:11 - 8:32), or of Samson (Judges 13:1 - 15:20). There is the story of Jonah, and hundreds of other entertaining stories that tell of God and of how we are to respond to God.

The Book of Ruth, like the books of the Torah and the early prophetic writings of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings (books which we sometimes speak of as ‘history’, but which are included in the Hebrew Bible among the prophetic scrolls), uses story to communicate what its author wanted to say about God and about how we should live so as to be open to God’s blessing. Robert Alter concludes his *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Allen & Unwin, 1981, page 189) with the following statement:

The Hebrew writers manifestly took delight in the artful limning [depicting] of these lifelike characters and actions, and so they created an unexhausted source of delight for a hundred generation of readers. But that pleasure of imaginative play is deeply inter-fused with a sense of great spiritual urgency. The biblical writers fashion their personages with a complicated, sometimes alluring, often fiercely insistent individuality, because it is in the stubbornness of human individuality that each man and woman encounters God or ignores Him, responds to, or resists, Him. Subsequent religious tradition has by and large encouraged us to take the Bible seriously rather than to enjoy it, but the paradoxical truth of the matter may well be that by learning to enjoy the biblical stories more fully as stories, we shall also come to see more clearly what they mean to tell us about God, man, and the perilously momentous realm of history.

The author of this lovely story has succeeded in offering a realistic portrait of life in Judah in the period just before the emergence of the monarchy. The economy is a simple agricultural one which involved the need to emigrate when the seasonal rains failed. The reader is invited to picture the threshing floor, the obligations to care for a widowed relative, and the simple government exercised by the elders gathered in the square at the city gate.

Ruth is a story of divine providence. Though we witness blessings, invocations and lamentation – all addressed to God – God’s presence and intervention is witnessed in and through the presence and intervention of human beings (notably Boaz) who are living the covenant that is at the core of the life of Israel. This is something fundamental also to Christianity, for we hear Jesus saying: ‘I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another’ (John 13:34). Our covenant of love with God is expressed in our covenant of love with each other.

A feature of this story is the fact that the initiative comes from a widow from Judah, Naomi, and her widowed Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth. The story concludes with the birth of Obed who is declared to be the grandfather of King David (Ruth 4:17). This may be based on an old tradition. The First Book of Samuel recounts that at the time when King Saul was pursuing David, David placed his parents in the protective care of the king of Moab (see 1 Samuel 22:3). This is more plausible if David’s grandfather’s mother was from Moab.

There is no consensus about the dating of the written scroll. The story itself, in one form or another, could well be quite ancient, but we have no way of ascertaining which, if any, of the elements of the story had a pre-history in the oral tradition, or how long any such elements had been circulating. What is clear is that the story as we have it in the written text is beautifully crafted as a story. As we examine the text, we will be pointing out the elements that make it work so well. The story-teller can be heard weaving his magic.

One suggested context for the committing of the story to writing is the middle of the fifth century BC, the period of the governor, Nehemiah, and the priest-scribe, Ezra. It is likely that this was the period when the Book of Jonah was also published. It was a period of special pressure to rid Judah of elements of foreign culture that were considered to be corrupting the purity of the people as God’s covenant people (see Ezra 9-10; Nehemiah 13:23-29). Jonah tells the story of a repentant Nineveh and of God’s care for the city that, traditionally, was seen as the capital of the evil empire. At a time when Jewish men were pressured to get rid of their foreign wives, Ruth tells the story of a Moabite woman who was the great-grandmother of no one less than King David.

Many English Bibles place the Book of Ruth after the Book of Judges and before the Books of Samuel. In this they are following the tradition of the Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate, which place it there among the early prophetic writings. The New Jewish Publication Society’s English translation (1985), in keeping with ancient Jewish tradition, places Ruth among the Writings along with the other Festival Scrolls. It is read during the festival of ‘Weeks’ (‘Pentecost’) which traditionally celebrates the cereal harvest (May-June in the modern calendar).

The traditional land of Judah, with Moab to the east.

