

The Book of Ruth and the Ways of Providence

It is written concerning certain nations in relation to Israel: “an Ammonite or a Moabite shall not enter into the congregation of Yahweh; even to their tenth generation shall they not enter into the congregation of Yahweh for ever ...” (Deut. 23:3). The Ammonites and Moabites, for particular given reasons, were excluded from the congregation of Yahweh. Yet in the story of Ruth, we find a Moabitess who not only became part of that congregation, but also became an ancestor of our Lord Jesus Christ (Mat. 1:5). Here we have the Ways of Providence being worked out, in the way in which an excluded sinner of the Gentiles was taken to embrace Israel’s Hope, and be used as part of the means whereby Messiah was to be born.

The book of Ruth begins by describing how that there was a famine in the land of promise, and that due to the shortage of sustenance “a certain man of Beth-lehem-Judah went to sojourn in the country of Moab, he, and his wife, and his two sons. And the name of the man was Elimelech, and the name of his wife Naomi, and the name of his two sons Mahlon and Chilion, Ephrathites of Beth-lehem-judah. And they came into the country of Moab, and continued there” (Ruth 1:1-2). In the course of time, Elimelech died, leaving Naomi with just her two sons. They took them wives from the Moabitish women, one named Orpah, the other Ruth. About 10 years later, Naomi’s two sons died, leaving her with just her two daughters-in-law.

Having heard that the famine was over, Naomi, and her two daughters-in-law set themselves on their journey back to Naomi’s land and people. The way in which the inspired narrator describes this is enlightening:

“then she arose with her daughters in law, that she might return from the country of Moab: for she had heard in the country of Moab how that **Yahweh had visited his people** in giving them bread” (Ruth 1:6).

From this statement that the famine ended with Yahweh visiting his people in providing bread, we have the implication that Yahweh had caused the famine in the first place. That is, it was not part of the natural weather patterns of the area, but was a famine with a specific purpose in view, ordained by the Creator of all things. The unseen Divine Hand brought about the famine, creating circumstances whereby a Moabitish woman would be brought out of her land to worship Naomi’s God.

There are a number of other places where we are told that Yahweh visited his people. Luke chapter 1 recounts the prayer of Zecharias (John the Baptiser’s father):

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel; for **he has visited** and redeemed his people” (Lu. 1:68).

Here, the visitation was in the form of a Son, given the title “Emmanuel, which being interpreted, is, God with us” (Mat. 1:23). John the Baptist spoke of he that was to come, and so also became part of that Divine Visitation.

Another use of the phrase relates to the future time of our Master’s return - and interestingly, in the context of Gentiles accepting the Truth:

“Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul; Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles: that, whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God **in the day of visitation.**” (1 Pet. 2:11-12).

This provides us with an interesting insight as to what will happen among the Gentile nations when Messiah comes again - a second “day of visitation”. We ought to be living the spirit of the Kingdom

now, so that when the time comes, folk will be more ready to accept the Lord when the Gospel of the Age is preached to them (see Rev. 14:6). Then, like Ruth, some Gentiles will glorify God, for the good works we have shown to them, and enter into the Kingdom as mortal inhabitants. This is perhaps an aspect of our preaching that is not often thought about. We know that “God at the first did visit the Gentiles, to take out of them a people for His Name” (Acts 15:14), in the first Century AD, and this work will continue until Messiah’s reappearing. But there is also the role of preparing men and women to accept him when he comes. Psalm 72 (amongst other places) shows us that there will indeed be people and rulers who accept him, hence part of our preaching now, is making preparation for that time to come.

YAHWEH HATH AFFLICTED ME

When Naomi and Ruth reached Bethlehem, Naomi described her perception of what had taken place in Moab:

“all the city was moved about them, and they said, Is this Naomi? And she said unto them, Call me not Naomi (which means Pleasant), call me Mara (which means Bitter): for the Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and Yahweh hath brought me home again empty: why then call ye me Naomi, seeing Yahweh hath testified against me, and the Almighty hath afflicted me?” (Ruth 1:20-21).

In these words, Naomi intrinsically recognizes that her circumstances were due to the hand of Providence. “The Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me” was her perception of things - and sometimes we can exclaim the same lament during difficult times in our lives. But Naomi’s affliction was but the means to a greater end, and when our thoughts incorporate the wider view of the greater scheme of things, often our own troubles seem to diminish in significance.

It is written that “the wicked are overthrown, and are not: but the house of the righteous shall stand” (Prov. 12:7). Ultimately, “the house of the righteous” is the house of our Lord Jesus Christ, which, like the walls of Rahab’s abode, will stand tall when the antitypical walls of Jericho shall be cast down. This is the house later promised to King David, referred to in his prayer of thanksgiving:

“And now, O Yahweh Elohim, the word that thou hast spoken concerning thy servant, and concerning his house, establish it for ever, and do as thou hast said. And let thy name be magnified for ever, saying, Yahweh of Hosts is the Elohim over Israel: and let the house of thy servant David be established before thee. For thou, O Yahweh of Hosts, Elohim of Israel, hast revealed to thy servant, saying, ***I will build thee an house:*** therefore hath thy servant found in his heart to pray this prayer unto thee” (2 Sam. 7:25-27).

The incorporation of Ruth into the congregation of Israel was an intrinsic part of the building of this household of faith. Matthew chapter 1 describes the position of Ruth in the lineage of our Master:

“... Salmon begat Booz of Rechab; and Booz begat Obed of Ruth; and Obed begat Jesse; and Jesse begat David the king ...” (Mat. 1:5-6).

The house of Ruth then, became part of Messiah’s household: the House promised to David, and to our Lord Jesus Christ. This being so, it is interesting to consider the words of the people to Naomi concerning Ruth:

“Yahweh make the woman that is come into thine house like Rachel and like Leah, which two did build ***the house*** of Israel: and do thou worthily in Ephratah, and be famous in Bethlehem. And let this house be ***like the house*** of Perez ...” (Ruth 4:11-12).

Ruth then, despite being a Moabitess was able to enter into the congregation of Yahweh, and perpetuate the House of Faith.

Returning to Ruth and chapter 2, we find that the Moabitess was sent out by Naomi to glean in the fields, to provide sustenance for them both. Then we read that:

“And she went and came, and gleaned in the field after the reapers: and her hap was to light on a part of the field belonging unto Boaz” (Ruth 2:3)

Notice how that there is dropped into the record this expression: “**her hap was to** light upon a part of the field ...”. It just happened that things worked out that way, as if it is all part of a natural coincidental order of things. There are other examples in Scripture of this type of thing: Esther 6:1-2 describes how that it just so happened that the king could not sleep, and he just happened to take out and read in the “book of records” about Mordecai’s role in securing the king against a rebellion. 2 Kings 8:5 shows how it just so happened that Gehazi was telling the king about a particular woman, when she arrived back in the land. 1 Kings 22:34 tells of how it just so happened that a soldier in the Syrian army randomly “drew a bow at a venture”, which just happened to smite the king of Israel between the joints of his armour. The list could continue: things seem to just happen according to the normal course of things - yet of course, all these things were being guided by the unseen Hand of Providence. We wonder how many things in our daily lives ‘just happen’ to take place, yet which direct our lives towards destinations that we would not ordinarily choose!

THE HOUSE OF BOAZ

Being directed by Angelic hands to glean behind the reapers of Boaz’s field, Ruth was brought to his attention. Boaz asked his servant set over the reapers: “Whose damsel is this? And the servant that was set over the reapers answered and said, it is the Moabitish damsel that came back with Naomi out of the country of Moab” (Ruth 2:6). Notice the emphasis here: “the **Moabitish** damsel ... out of the country of **Moab**”. She was a Gentile woman, and not only so, but she was of a despised nation who were forbidden to enter into the congregation of Yahweh. But again, we see the all-sufficient Hand of Providence at work even here. Boaz was himself the son of Rahab the Canaanitish prostitute (Mat. 1:5). He had seen the principles all before, in his own family: his mother was a Gentile - and a harlot as well - yet she was able to embrace Israel’s hope, and marry into the chosen nation through the expression of faith.

It would appear that Boaz conducted his affairs with Godly principles. “Behold, Boaz came from Bethlehem, and said unto the reapers, “Yahweh be with you”. And they answered him “Yahweh bless thee” (Ruth 2:4). Here is an expression of true fellowship: the Master and his servants in a mutual recognition of Yahweh’s provision to them.

The record continues to demonstrate the integrity of Boaz. He allowed Ruth not only to glean behind his maidens - as according to the Law – but he also permitted her to eat with his reapers also. Indeed, he personally provided for her food at this time! The record informs us that:

“Boaz said unto her, At mealtime come thou hither, and eat of the bread, and dip thy morsel in the vinegar. And she sat beside the reapers: and **he reached her parched corn**, and she did eat, and was sufficed, and left” (Ruth 2:14).

The situation thus described illustrated deep principles of fellowship. Boaz not only invited the Moabitess to join in their meal, but he also personally reached out to her, giving her the sop of parched corn. What a contrast this is to another meal of fellowship which took place many years later in an upper room. Messiah at his last supper likewise extended fellowship to his disciples – and particularly Judas. Jesus used this very means to demonstrate who would betray him:

“Jesus answered, He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it. And when he had dipped the sop, **he gave it** to Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon” (Jno. 3:26)

Jesus used this token of fellowship to include the man who would be his betrayer, yet Judas disregarded the sentiment thus expressed, and went out into the darkness of the night to arrange his betrayal.

Boaz did not only permit Ruth to glean behind his reapers, but he instructed them to allow some to drop on purpose for her, that she might obtain sufficient food to feed herself, and also Naomi her mother in law:

“Boaz commanded his young men, saying, Let her glean even among the sheaves, and reproach her not: and let fall also **some of the handfuls on purpose**, that she may glean them, and rebuke her not” (Ruch 2:15-16).

The principle here, is that a Gentile could partake of the food which fell from the master’s reapers – a principle that was also used by Messiah in relation to another Gentile woman. A woman of Canaan came to him asking him to heal her daughter: “then came she and worshipped him, saying, Lord, help me. But he answered and said, it is not meet to take the children’s bread, and to cast it to dogs. And she said, Truth, Lord, yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their master’s table. Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilst ...” (Mat. 15:25-28). And we can be sure that the crumbs didn’t fall accidentally: as we meet around our “Master’s table”, we enjoy the benefits of fellowship with him. Just as Ruth gleaned the handfuls that fell to her, even so this other Gentile woman recognised her position as partaking of Messiah’s benefit to Israel, and her daughter was healed as she desired of the Master.

Through various circumstances, as Boaz was a near kinsman to Naomi, he was given the opportunity to purchase her husband’s land, as per the provision of the Law of Moses. However, there was a closer kinsman than he, who had to be given the opportunity to purchase it himself. So Ruth chapter 4 describes the transaction that took place. When given the right to purchase the land, the near kinsman said unequivocally: “I will redeem it”. But “then said Boaz, What day thou buyest the field of the hand of Naomi, thou mayest buy it also of Ruth the Moabitess, the wife of the dead, to raise up the name of the dead upon his inheritance” (Ruth 4:5). Notice the punctuation seems to be incorrect here: the word “of” is not in the original, hence it should read “thou mayest buy Ruth the Moabitess”. In other words, the land was being sold, and with it, came Ruth the Moabitess. This was something the near kinsman could not do, and he changed his approach: “And the kinsman said, I cannot redeem it for myself, lest I mar mine own inheritance: redeem thou my right to thyself; for I cannot redeem it” (vs 6). Hence Boaz did take on himself the role of a Redeemer, and the other kinsman missed out on the opportunity to be part of the lineage of Messiah himself!

When we consider Boaz as the Redeemer, we have a foreshadowing of Messiah, our Redeemer. By contrast to the kinsman who rejected Ruth out of a desire not to defile his own inheritance, Christ loves his ecclesial bride, and will wash it with the washing of water by the Word (Eph. 5:25-30). Through his shed blood, we, who for the most part are Gentiles, are “made nigh” by becoming part of the commonwealth of Israel. We can obtain a much greater inheritance (Eph. 1:11) though a faithful union with our Redeemer, after the pattern of Ruth and Boaz.

We come each week to memorialise the sacrifice of our Redeemer by the partaking of bread and wine. In the partaking thereof, let us contemplate the example of Boaz who personally extended bread to Ruth, and the way in which Messiah is an “arm of salvation” extended to us. In this simple meal of fellowship, we consider the way in which our Redeemer has provided for us, granting us the bread of life (Jno. 6). We must therefore glean with the Israelitish reapers, as it were, receiving the crumbs that fall from our Master’s Table, so that we might be invited to partake of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb when our Lord will come to take us to be a bride to himself.

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