

Article of the Month – September 2010

Missiological Observations in the OT (1) – Ruth

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Before embarking on a more extensive series of articles containing missiological observations in the New Testament, I offer you a short series of four on such reflections about some Old Testament books; interrupted once and ended by the last two in the series about power encounters. Today we will consider the book of Ruth; as usual from a Theology of Missions perspective.

Ruth's story took place in the time of the Judges.¹ This beautiful little book is like an oasis of spiritual comfort in the midst of national crisis and turbulence. The famine referred to, may well have been in the time of Gideon.²

Naomi, affected by the famine, grants us some insight in Israel's spiritual condition in those days, by her attitude and words. She reacted, as many do today, without understanding for the *national* reasons behind it. Naomi thought *individually* rather than *collectively*. She had (in her opinion) not sinned *personally* and therefore didn't see why she should be victim of the *national* sinful condition.

Many people in Western societies also forget that they are part of a world that suffers under a great weight of sin – whether they are personally responsible for it or not. Naomi struggled with the old malady of misunderstood human suffering. She concluded that God hadn't treated her fairly, reacted with bitterness and hardened her heart against Him,³ so much so, that she actually 'anti-evangelized'.⁴ Because of the famine she and her family had gone to Moab,⁵ thus showing their conviction that it did not matter whether you belonged to God's people, as long as you had food to eat. Neither did she care about a God Who (again in her opinion) had left His people. So, why would she advocate Him in front of her Gentile daughters-in-law?⁶ Her sons had intermarried with Gentile women, apparently also without her protest.⁷

An interesting aspect in this book is that the Lord does not say anything Himself; He only appears in the sense that people speak *about* Him. That He is the One Who guides events from behind the scenes is obvious from the moment that Naomi and Ruth (re)-entered Israel, as the barley harvest was beginning.⁸ This tells us that, whether God speaks or not, He does not abandon His plans, nor

¹ Ruth 1:1

² Judges 6:3-5,11

³ Ruth 1:3-5,11-13

⁴ Ruth 1:20,21

⁵ Ruth 1:2

⁶ Ruth 1:11-15

⁷ Deut. 7:3; Judges 3:6

⁸ Ruth 1:22b

does He forsake His people – in spite of the fact that they may misunderstand Him or become bitter and indifferent about Him.

Naomi represents nominal Christianity which loses its fire when disappointments are experienced due to a lack of spiritual insight and unmet expectations. She had become hostile and bitter and even suggested that this is what her name should be from then on – Mara.⁹ Her bitterness became her adopted identity. She also represents today's part of the church that has lost all missionary zeal; a church that has fossilized because it failed to evangelize. It was only later, in the next chapter, when she found the Lord was blessing her again, that a revival took place in her heart and that she could praise Him again.¹⁰

We see for the first time in biblical history that a Gentile lady, Ruth, understood so much about Israel's God that she happily left her gods behind in Moab to join Him and His people. In the process, with her beautiful confession of faith¹¹ and her magnificent attitude,¹² she brought Naomi back to the faith as well.

Boaz is called the 'kinsman-redeemer',¹³ who did not only redeem the property that belonged to Naomi's late husband, but also married Ruth. We see that the redeemer (and at the same time 'the lord of the harvest') married a Gentile bride and so became a type of Jesus Christ the Redeemer, Who is also obtaining a Bride from Gentile nations.

After all, Ruth, a Gentile and Boaz, a half-Canaanite because Rahab was his mother,¹⁴ established an ethnic link in the Messianic family line. Boaz became the great-grandfather of King David¹⁵ and Jesus Christ was born centuries later from this Davidic line. This shows that Jesus Christ would be a Messiah for *all nations*. Here we see the main missiological significance of this book.

There is an interesting relationship between the books of Ruth (where God does not speak) and Esther (in which He is not even mentioned). In *Ruth* we see this lady of *Gentile* descent, together with Boaz, become a link in the Messianic family line, in the midst of the *Jewish* people. In the book *Esther* we see this Queen of *Jewish* descent in the midst of the *Gentiles* secure and save the people to which that family line belonged, about seven centuries later. This family line was of utmost importance because in His name the *nations* will put their hope.¹⁶

⁹ Ruth 1:20

¹⁰ Ruth 2:20

¹¹ Ruth 1:16,17

¹² Ruth 2:2,7,10,13,17,18,23

¹³ Ruth 2:20; 3:9

¹⁴ Matt. 1:5

¹⁵ Ruth 4:17,22

¹⁶ Is. 11:10; 42:1,4; Matt. 12:18,21; Rom. 15:12