

"Etude"



WHAT'S IN A NAME?

In our society, the meaning of people's names is not normally very significant. Most parents name a child because they like a particular name, which might be that of a grandparent or other family member, or even the name of their favourite footballer or film star! Of course, Christians often name their children after Biblical characters.

It was quite different in Biblical times, when the names given to newborn children often reflected the circumstances of their birth, as well as indicating something of their personality or status. Place names were also of great significance, and in the small book of Ruth, there are rich lessons to be drawn from considering the names of some of the people and places mentioned.

The narrative in Ruth ch.1 begins with a very evocative sentence: "In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a man from Bethlehem.....went to live...in the country of Moab".

A famine in Bethlehem ("house of bread, or food")! Times were so hard that Elimelech ("my God is King") and his family fled to neighbouring Moab to escape the ravages of the famine. But wait a moment! Note again the meaning of Elimelech's name – "my God is King". Did Elimelech really believe this, or was he just paying lip service to the rule of the Lord in his life? And fleeing to Moab! Surely that was against the Lord's instructions? You see, the Israelites had been forbidden by God from allowing the Moabites (who, along with the Ammonites were descendants of Lot (Gen.19:30-37)) to participate in the worship of Jehovah because they had not helped the Israelites when they were fleeing from the Egyptians, and also because they worshipped other gods. So why was a man with the name Elimelech going to live among such people?

Who could blame a man for trying to provide for his wife and children? Especially when you reflect that the sons were called Mahlon ("sick") and Kilion/Chilion ("pining"), no doubt indicative of the distressing circumstances into which they had been born. We don't know how they fared in Moab, but they must have been content enough because they stayed for ten years and the sons married local girls. I wonder if they thought much about their homeland? Perhaps news filtered through from time to time that the famine had deepened, and they were glad they had made the move. Perhaps they just got on with life in their adopted country, with its false gods. And then tragedy struck! Whether from illness, disease or old age we do not know, but Elimelech died, followed by his two sons, neither of whom had any children.

What grief Naomi, the widow experienced. In a foreign land, bereft of husband and sons to provide for her, with no Welfare State to turn to, no wider family support, and with two pagan daughters-in-law. No wonder she later said "Don't call me Naomi ("pleasant"), but Mara ("bitter") (ch.1:20). Naomi then did the only sensible thing left to her – she decided to

go back home. By this time she had heard that the famine was over and that the Lord was helping His people.

The remainder of the story in ch.1 is well known. Naomi tried to persuade her two daughters-in-law to go back to their own people *and their own gods*. Orpah did so, but Ruth determined to stay with her mother-in-law. Perhaps she had seen something of the worship of Jehovah in the lives of her in-laws to make her willing to uproot and go and live in a foreign country. In any event, her love for Naomi prevailed, and they returned to Bethlehem “as the barley harvest was beginning”, when the Passover was finished, sacrifice made and accepted by God. Abundance and fullness were all around. How Naomi's heart must have rejoiced in the Lord's provision for the wanderer. She was accepted back into His family!

The lessons scarcely need to be spelled out. At a time future to this lovely story, God's Son was born in Bethlehem, that One whom we know as the Bread of Life or the Bread from God. We, who have eaten of that Bread and know the satisfaction and nourishment it brings do well to stay close to the Giver, even when the going is rough. So many of our modern songs remind us that the Lord is King. Do we sing these glibly, or with real meaning, knowing that God can be trusted to look after us in difficult days? Have we wandered away from Him? Let us take comfort and hope from the story of Naomi who found a welcome and abundance when she returned to the Lord.

For God's own invitation, read Isaiah 55:1-7.

[To be continued]

“E tude”



GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Last time we considered the significance of some names in the book of Ruth. Now we want to consider what happened to Naomi and Ruth when they returned, penniless, to Bethlehem.

Barley harvest had just begun and there was great activity in the fields. Grain needed to be cut, gathered, threshed and winnowed before it was either used or stored for use during the winter months. The law of Moses stipulated that field owners were to allow gleaners to gather up the fallen stalks after the reapers had done their work, so as to provide for the poor. There was always generosity in the Lord's provision, but not all farmers were inclined to allow this to happen.

Ruth was not lazy. Although a foreigner, she must have been aware of the practice of gleaning and decided this was something she could do to make provision for herself and Naomi. Perhaps her mother-in-law was too old or not fit to work in the fields, so Ruth set off and “as it turned out” she found herself working in the field belonging to Boaz, a relative of her late father-in-law.

There is no such thing as “chance” in the life of the believer who places him / herself in the care of God. We know that in all things God is working for our good (Rom.8:28), and Ruth's experience was no different.

Boaz (whose name means “in him is strength”) is described as a man of standing. He was obviously a wealthy landowner, but more importantly, a godly man who treated his employees well. We know this from the way he greeted them and from their response (ch.2:4). Sincere greetings like this between bosses and staff might resolve a lot of industrial relations problems!

While Ruth worked throughout both the barley and wheat harvesting period, Boaz had plenty of time to observe her diligence and vulnerability. He treated her with great kindness and generosity, making sure she was under his protection. He had, of course, learned who she was from local gossip and was clearly impressed by the decision she had made to stay with her mother-in-law. One could be forgiven for thinking that the man had already fallen in love with this delightful woman!

The blessing that Boaz addressed to Ruth (v.12) is beautiful in its simplicity. The concept of protection under the Lord’s “wings” would have been well understood by God’s people in those days. There are many similar references in Scripture, and to the idea of God bearing up His people on wings like an eagle. Jesus used the metaphor of a hen gathering her chicks under her wings as a description of how He would have cared for the people of Jerusalem had they been willing (Matt.23:37).

The story provides fascinating details of life in those days. At the end of her first day Ruth took home an ephah of barley. An ephah was a measure used for cereal, and would be roughly equivalent to 30 pounds today. Bear in mind that this was the take-home weight after gleaning and threshing, and it will be obvious that Ruth would have been very tired at the end of a long day, mostly bent over gathering the stalks of barley.

Naturally Naomi was curious to know how Ruth had fared on her first day at work. Imagine her surprise and excitement when she learned where her daughter-in-law had been working! Naomi knew the family connection with Boaz and her late husband, but more than that, she was aware of the significance of the role that Boaz could be expected to play in their lives in the future. Did she regard this as chance or good luck? No! She immediately saw the hand of the Lord in the momentous events of the day and gave the glory to Him. I suspect Naomi had a gleam in her eye as she thought of what she could do to encourage the relationship between Ruth and Boaz, but for the moment, she contented herself with encouraging Ruth to stay in the job.

The story so far in the first two chapters of Ruth is thrilling. Despite failure, bereavement and poverty, these two women held on to God and He did not fail them. Their tragedy was His opportunity to begin a redemptive work that would have far reaching effect beyond Moab or Bethlehem. His sovereign power was displayed and His will was accomplished both in their lives and far beyond anything they could have imagined.

What can we learn from the example of Naomi and Ruth? Surely it must be that far too often we surrender to the seemingly hopeless situations of life such as loss, failure or bereavement without giving God the full opportunity to exercise His power and display His glory. May we take courage from this story of triumph over adversity.

[To be concluded]

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WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?

Our final study in the book of Ruth has a happy ending. Naomi's plan comes to fruition, Boaz marries Ruth, a child is born and..... No, it doesn't say that they lived happily ever after! But the story does have a tremendous ending for the foreign woman who was brought into the family of God. Although some may think that this book is merely a recording of a lovely (even "love") story, I believe there is much more to it than that.

We are shown how the principle of the "kinsman-redeemer" operated in the life of Ruth. In order to maintain the name of the deceased man with his property, a near relative was permitted to marry the widow, ensuring that she would not be left destitute. And of course, we know that Boaz took on this role. However, let's not jump too far ahead in the story.

You will remember that Naomi, knowing that Boaz was a relative who could fulfil the role of kinsman-redeemer, formed a plan for Ruth to be noticed by him. Now she takes that plan further. The action advised by Naomi and carried out by Ruth (ch.3) seems odd to us, but must be viewed in the light of the prevailing customs. There is no hint of any impropriety on the part of either Ruth or Boaz, and the latter was careful that Ruth would not be recognised when she was leaving the threshing floor. Boaz wanted to protect the young woman from unjustified speculation. Once again, he is portrayed as a generous man who did not send her home empty-handed.

Naomi was satisfied that things were going well and advised Ruth to be patient. She knew now that Boaz would see that the matter was properly concluded.

Boaz dealt with Naomi's affairs legally and correctly. Aware that there was a relative closer than himself, he gave that man the opportunity to redeem the deceased's land. Did he deliberately keep quiet about Ruth until the other man had had a chance to consider the redemption? Maybe he really *had* fallen in love with Ruth! In any event, once the matter had been considered publicly, Boaz expressed his willingness to take on the responsibility of the family's property, and to take Ruth as his wife.

Yes, there was a marriage, and to everyone's delight, a baby boy was born. Naomi could now have said that the bitterness she had known had been taken away, and that God had not forgotten her. Little did the women who said about the child "May he become famous throughout Israel" know how true their words would become!

I was interested in a recent programme in the BBC TV series "Who do you think you are?" when Matthew Pinsent, the Olympic rower, had his ancestry traced back to King Edward I. What an exciting discovery! I'm sure the series has created a lot of interest in viewers who want to trace their family history, but there must be many who are disappointed to discover that they are descended from rogues! Whilst it is possible to delve *back* in history, there is no one who can look forward and predict who their descendents will be. Despite that, when we read the last chapter of Ruth, we know from the Scriptures that she was to have very illustrious

descendants indeed – none other than King David, and eventually, through His human father, the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, in one short story about this remarkable woman, we see the importance of all the characters in God’s “big picture”. Ruth is no longer the pagan daughter-in-law of a returning Jewish exile, but is part of God’s master plan to make His salvation available to the Gentiles through His chosen people, Israel.

Ruth experienced redemption – from a false religion, destitution and shame – through the action of Boaz, the kinsman-redeemer. How much more have we, who have been “redeemed... by the precious blood of Christ” (1 Peter 1:18, 19), experienced transformation in our lives. The Apostle Paul writes graphically: “Remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth...were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.” (Ephesians 2:11-13)

There must have been many occasions when Ruth reflected on the amazing transformation in *her* life and marvelled at the faithfulness to God of the man who became her redeemer. And so may we say with a hymn writer of a past age –

“My Redeemer! Oh what beauties in that lovely name appear;
None but Jesus in His glory shall the honoured title wear.
My Redeemer! My Redeemer! Thou hast my salvation wrought.”