

Ruth 1:1-5; 4:9-22
Reading Ruth as Narrative Literature
November 4, 2007

“This suggests at once the most important thing about literature: its subject matter is human experience, not abstract ideas. Literature *incarnates* its meanings as concretely as possible. The knowledge that literature gives of a subject is the kind of knowledge that is obtained by (vicariously) living through an experience.”¹

Reading the Bible as literature → “we should read the Bible with our imaginations (image-making capacity) as well as with our reason. . . . If we have ‘antennae’ only for theological concepts or historical facts, we will miss much of what the Bible communicates and will distort the kind of book it is.”²

I. Literature – Narrative – Stories

A. Setting – time and place

1. time of the story – in the days when the judges ruled (Judges 21:25)
2. location of the story – Bethlehem and Moab
3. situational setting – famine in the land
4. time written – probably during the early monarchy (4:18-22)

B. Problem or conflict

1. no food – famine in the land
2. no land – Elimelech takes his family to Moab
3. no seed – vv. 3-5
4. Naomi leaves full and returns empty (1:21)

C. Resolution – reversal (ironic reversal)

1. Naomi has a redeemer (4:14-15)
2. Whose redeemer? (4:17)

II. Biblical Narrative: Redemption and Covenant

A. The Bible and Narrative History

1. God acts in time and space (Ps. 78:4)
2. God acts through men and women in time and space
“The implicit theology of the Hebrew Bible dictates a complex moral and psychological realism in biblical narrative because God’s purposes are always entrapped in history, dependent on the acts of individual men and women for their continuing realization.”³
3. God acts redemptively in space and time; and he records that history for us in stories (Ps. 78:5-7)

B. The Bible and Redemptive History

1. the OT stories – first and foremost – reveal Christ
Luke 24:27 ²⁷ *And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself.*
2. Christianity – a religion of revelation and redemption
“Revelation is the interpretation of redemption; it must, therefore, unfold itself in installments as redemption does.”⁴

C. Redemptive History and the Covenant of Grace

¹ Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 34-35.

² *Ibid*, 34-35.

³ Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 12.

⁴ Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2000), 6.

1. What is covenant? “[man] could never have any fruition of him as their blessedness and reward, but by some voluntary condescension on God’s part, which he hath been pleased to express by way of covenant” (WCF 7.1)
2. the point → God enters relationship with people
3. OT redemptive covenant stories → NT redemptive fulfillment
4. in other words, in Ruth, God reveals a great event of redemption, but this event is merely a shadow of a greater redemption to come

III. Narrative, Covenant, and Redemption in Ruth

A. The Bethlehem Trilogy

1. Micah and the Levite (Judges 17-18) – unfaithful line of Samson
2. The Levite and the Concubine (Jdgs. 19-21) – unfaithful line of Saul
3. Ruth – the loyal, steadfast, faithful line of David
4. Dual purpose
 - a. in the days when the judges ruled (v. 1)
 - b. Obed – the father of Jesse, the father of David (vv. 17-22)

B. The seed of the woman

1. OT – Satan’s efforts to cut off the seed of the woman
2. efforts continued in Ruth – the line of Judah
3. The LORD has not left you without a redeemer (4:14)

C. The restoration of the line of Judah

1. the royal, Messianic line (Gen. 50:10-11)
2. sin and the inheritance (Gen. 38)

Deuteronomy 23:2 ² "No one born of a forbidden union may enter the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of his descendants may enter the assembly of the LORD.
3. the restoration of the land and the line of Judah
 - a. covenant keeper – Elimelech/Naomi vs. Ruth/Boaz
 - b. faithful husband – Elimelech vs. Boaz
 - c. faithful redeemer – Judah vs. Boaz
 - d. faithful king – Saul vs. David
4. seed of the woman → Ruth (Matt. 1:1-16)

D. Ruth’s Story and Your Story

1. Ruth’s redemption = shadow of greater redemption
2. more than reality play – your redemption in Christ

Ryken’s first rule for reading Bible stories: “look upon biblical stories as an invitation to share an experience, as vividly and concretely as possible, with the characters in the story.”⁵

Flannery O’Connor: “any character . . . is supposed to carry a burden of meaning larger than himself.”⁶
3. Salvation comes, not from the proud palaces of Israel, but from humble origins in the womb of a humble woman
4. Christ → Covenant Keeper, Faithful Husband, Faithful Redeemer, Faithful King
5. God’s sovereign salvation and his people’s covenant faithfulness in ordinary, every day life

⁵ Leland Ryken, *How to Read the Bible as Literature*, 34-35.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.