

not describe every possible 'spiritual' phenomena but it does offer clear guidelines as to the characteristic marks of a biblical spirituality and of a genuine encounter with God. We may even need to point out that there is an openness to the Spirit which delights the Devil; where we are biblically undiscerning he can easily appear as an angel of light!

It is at this point that the rubber hits the road! We ourselves need both to understand Scripture sufficiently well as to be able to offer convincing biblical grounds for our beliefs and, perhaps above all, we need to demonstrate in our own lives the fact that the biblical way does generate lives characterized by a genuine and warm (even self-evident!) spirituality.

Ruth 1:1–22

Trust and Obey

STEPHEN DRAY

This is the first of three studies

Encouragement for 'Nobodies'

The book of Ruth has always been a favourite with Bible readers; perhaps because its happy story contrasts with the dark days of the book of Judges or, more likely, because nearly everyone likes a good love story! Whatever the reason and despite some major cultural differences the book has a timeless quality which seems to appeal to us all.

Perhaps, however, a large part of the attractiveness of the book is due to the fact that Ruth is a book about people like us. Ruth was no great leader or heroic sufferer; she was not like a David or a Samuel, a Nehemiah, an Elijah or a Job. Ruth was a simple, ordinary person; just like most of us. Moreover, her experience of God was similar to ours. Hers was not the privilege of a prophet; she did not have great visions nor did she have any oracles direct from God. Yet, like us, Ruth found God in her daily life. The same was true of all those around her.

Thus, Ruth is an important book. Most of the stories of the Bible are full of kings and great leaders, of wars and of extraordinary appearances of God. It is sometimes difficult for us to feel the same as such people. But it is not difficult for us to feel like Elimelech and Naomi, Ruth and Orpah, Boaz and the un-named kinsman. How encouraging, moreover, is the fact that the God of the Exodus is also the God of Ruth's move to Bethlehem; the God who provided for a nation in the wilderness is the same God who looked after Ruth and fed her and the God who gave Abram and Sarah a son is the same God who gave Naomi an heir.

Whoever Finds His Life Will Lose It: 1:1–5

These verses set the scene for the whole book of Ruth. They are introductory words; but no less significant or important for that since they contain some very practical lessons which remain of relevance today.

The words, 'in the days when the judges ruled' offer us a hint as to how we should understand the early verses of Ruth. They take us back to the book of Judges in which a repeated cycle of disobedience—disaster—repentance and renewal is found. Probably, the precise time of the book of Ruth is that of the Midianite conquest described in Judges 6. This helps us to recognize that the tribe of Judah (of which Bethlehem was a part) was under the judgement of God for its evil ways (see especially Judges 6:1). This interpretation seems to be confirmed by the fact that the land which God had described as, 'a land flowing with milk and honey' (Ex. 3:8,17; 13:5; 33:3 etc.) was suffering famine. God had threatened famine on the people if they sinned against him (Dt. 28:22–24). Even Bethlehem, a place whose name means the house of bread, and which was usually a fertile area, was suffering.

How does a people desert God? Only because individuals one by one do so! This is why we are introduced to one particular family in Bethlehem who, as we shall see, failed God. They were probably a wealthy family since we are told that they moved to Moab. Anyone who has moved to a new home knows that it is often an expensive thing to do and only the richer families in Bethlehem could have afforded to do

so. (Verse 21 might also suggest that they had been a wealthy family).

The author of the book of Ruth clearly believed that names could be significant. He introduces us to a man named Elimelech; a name meaning the Lord is my king. Perhaps this name expressed the hopes of Elimelech's parents or, possibly, it was the name given to him by his contemporaries as a sort of nickname. Sadly, despite his name, Elimelech acted in a thoroughly unspiritual way, as we shall see.

Yet we can sympathize with Elimelech. His two sons were named Kilion and Mahlon. These were almost certainly nicknames, for they mean sickly and pining and are hardly the sort of names one picks for one's own children! Thus, it would appear that Elimelech had two sickly sons in a society where sons were essential since sons would look after their parents when old age came. In time of famine, of course, the weak always seemed to suffer first and, doubtless this would have caused Elimelech great anxiety. This concern for himself and his wife as well as for his sons naturally led him to explore possible ways out of the famine. Eventually he decided to go and live temporarily in Moab. However, for an Israelite this was a quite astonishing decision. In the first place, for an Israelite to leave the land which God had given to the nation was equivalent to deserting his God. God's presence was believed to be especially linked to the land, the tent of God (probably at Shiloh) was a symbol and testimony that God was the God of this people in this land; but Elimelech left it! Secondly, God had made it clear that Moab, a people who worshipped the fire god Chemosh, were a people to be avoided by the people of God (see Dt. 23:3-6 and compare 2 Ki. 3:27 and Nu. 21:29). Yet Elimelech was ready to live with them! Moreover, no sooner was Elimelech in Moab than he allowed both his sons to marry Moabite women, Deuteronomy 7:3, 4 would probably have been understood by the Israelites at the time as including the Moabites and prohibiting marriages between Moabites and Israelites. Nevertheless, in this, as in other matters, Elimelech seems to have behaved with hardly a thought for what God required him to do.

In this way, Elimelech is typical of many believers. Living in sinful days, he adopted the attitudes of men and women around him and gave little thought to God. He was self-willed and unsubmitive to God. Instead of seeing that the famine was a reason for him to come in repentance to God, he added to his sin; and doubtless he excused his behaviour by appealing to the needs of his family. Here, then, is a son of Jacob acting like a son of Esau, despising his birthright (see Gen. 27).

Sadly, this passage also describes the consequences of Elimelech's rebellion against God. He had to learn the bitter lesson spelt out in 1 Corinthians 11:27,28; Matthew 10:39; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24 and John 12:25

(and note how, unusually, all four gospels repeat the same words);. Thus, the security and protection which Elimelech sought was denied him. Both he (verse 3) and his sons (verse 5) died; leaving his widow a helpless woman in a strange land. Selfish rebellion against God brought disaster on the whole family.

Whoever Loses His Life Will Gain It: 1:6-22

In the light of the first paragraph, the remainder of the first chapter of Ruth describes the response of three women, Naomi (Elimelech's wife), Orpah and Ruth, to the challenge of full commitment to God.

Naomi had been an inhabitant of Bethlehem. However, her departure to Moab with her family was an act of rebellion against God which, eventually, she clearly recognized when she said, 'The Lord has testified against me' (v. 21).

Yet God does not leave his backslidden children alone but he seeks to win them back. Sometimes, as with Naomi, personal disaster is the method he uses since the sorrow of bereavement and loss often awakens a longing for a return to a former intimacy with God. Initially, this did not appear to work with Naomi; perhaps because her bitterness (v. 20) was too great.

However, eventually her old desires were re-awakened when she heard of God's blessing on others back at her home (v. 6). She heard of the blessing which had followed repentance (see Jdg. 6:16) and so she determined to go home to her people and her God.

Naomi had no false hopes of what to expect. She did not expect God's blessing necessarily to follow her and she knew that she would have to live with the consequences of past failure (v. 21). Nevertheless it was the Lord who was bringing her back and she wanted to follow him anew. Thus, when she returned, her life was characterized by joyful trust and obedience to God (see especially 2:20-22). She had left Israel to secure her family and her food. When she returned it was for these two things especially that she showed humble dependence on God. She had learned to trust and obey God.

Orpah was the Moabite wife of Kilion (see 4:10). She must have been a pleasant and lovable young woman for she had stayed with Naomi when she had been widowed rather than return home (as would have been expected) to her parents. She was clearly fond of her mother-in-law (v. 14) and she also seemed to share some of the desires of Naomi for her God. We have already seen that Naomi's motive for returning to Israel was a desire to return to God and it is hardly likely that Orpah would have planned to go to Israel except for

the same reason, So Orpah set out with Naomi and Ruth (v. 7).

Naomi's conversation with her daughters-in-law in verses 8–13 has been differently understood by Christian interpreters. However, the most likely explanations of her words is this. Naomi had to face the cost of her own re-commitment to the Lord. She was anxious that her daughters-in-law did the same. With great wisdom, therefore, she put the difficulties of commitment to the Lord before them. She did not want them to be deceived as to what they might expect. She recognized that, for them, residence in Israel might well mean permanent widowhood (vv. 11–13), a loss of old family ties (v. 10) and, consequently, poverty was likely.

Sometimes following Jesus has the same consequences for people today. Jesus taught that there is a cost to following him (see Mk. 8:34–38; 10:42–45). To gain life, we must lose it first (there is, of course, another side; Mk. 10:29–31). Thus, Naomi sought to emphasize to Orpah the cost of discipleship, Sadly, like the rich young ruler (Mt. 19:16–30; Mk. 10:17–22;

Lk. 18:18–30), the demands of discipleship were too great for her. Naomi understood the significance of Orpah's choice; she was returning to her gods (v. 15).

Perhaps, as Christian preachers, we rarely emphasize the cost of discipleship today. Naomi, however, was realistic. She knew it was essential to explain the full cost of discipleship to those who might show a desire to be God's children.

In contrast to her sister-in-law, Ruth's resolve was strengthened by Naomi's challenge. Humbly (v. 16) she pledged her permanent commitment to Naomi, to her people and to her God (v. 16,17). Her words show that she had counted the cost and was resolved on a permanent life of discipleship. Sensibly (v. 18), seeing this resolve, Naomi no longer urged Ruth to go back home.

Thus, in poverty, alone, helpless and yet in humble trust in the Lord, Ruth and Naomi arrive at Bethlehem

Stephen Dray is the Editor of Evangel.

Exegesis: Prophecy and Scripture

IAN REES

An investigation into 2 Peter 1 v. 16–21 and what it has to say about the way the Scriptures were given to us

When I was about six I got my first (and only) glimpse of royalty. Princess Margaret was due to drive past our school, so we trooped out and lined the roadside to wait for her. We stood for about fifteen minutes in the rain, waving at everything that passed, before she appeared. Her car was in view for all of ten seconds; I remember the white glove waving back to us, and the silhouette of her face; and then she was gone. I guess that makes me an eye-witness, but it could hardly be called reliable, or even informative!

Eye-Witnesses of His Majesty

Peter has just told his readers that his intention is to remind them of the truths they have been taught, so that they do not forget them (is that a proof-text for repeat sermons?!), and will be able to withstand the onslaught of false teaching, but he begins in 1:16–21 by reminding them where those truths originated.

He tells them that the apostles were not yarn-spinners; they were not being asked to believe a cleverly invented story (*muthos*—myth) when they heard about the Lord Jesus Christ. Religious fables were commonplace then, as now (The Book of Mormon, for instance), but the gospel cannot be fitted into that category. Rather, it is the testimony of those who were 'eye-witnesses of his majesty' and those who 'heard the voice that came from heaven when [they] were with him on the sacred mountain'.

It is vital that we understand what Peter means by this, since eye-witness accounts of a particular event are not always the most reliable source: I couldn't have told you (for instance) what Princess Margaret looked like on the day that I saw her.

In order to establish their credentials the apostles frequently state that they were witnesses of what Jesus did and said. Take John, for example: 'The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. **We have seen his glory** . . . (Jn. 1:14). And when he says he has