

Judges and Ruth

by Mark Glanville

These two books emerge from a turbulent time in ancient Israel's history when the nation was without a king. God's people were hopelessly unfaithful to Yahweh and to Yahweh's purposes. The characters and stories in the book of Judges are famous: Deborah, Gideon, Samson. The stories rehearse a recurring pattern, of: unfaithfulness – judgement - God's raising up a judge - God's deliverance through this person—only to return to unfaithfulness again. The book of Judges ends with the wholesale moral and spiritual collapse of the nation. We finish the book of Judges crying out for a good king to come and put rights.

As you read the book of Judges, look out for careful and often playful literary devices. For example, consider in the narrative of Samson, when the angel appears to Samson's mother:

And the angel of the Lord appeared to the woman and said to her, "Behold, you are barren and have not borne children, but you shall conceive and bear a son. Therefore be careful and drink no wine or strong drink, and eat nothing unclean, for behold, you shall conceive and bear a son. No razor shall come upon his head, for the child shall be a Nazirite to God from the womb, and he shall begin to save Israel from the hand of the Philistines." (Jud 13:3-5)



Art by Janice Tolcamp

It is interesting that the woman isn't named in this story, and you might like to ponder the literary strategy of referring to her as "the woman". Next, "the Woman" retells the message to her husband, 13:7-8) Notice what she adds: she doesn't mention Samson's hair—the razor prohibition. And, she adds: "he will be a Nazirite . . . until the day of his death" – ominously introducing the idea of Samson's death into the story before he is even conceived. In these

ways, the writer is anticipating the tragic conclusion of the tale.

The book of Ruth is located in the time of the judges. This tender book, with tender characters, displays God's gracious way in human life. God provides for the weakest, the refugee and widow. God's compassion for foreigners and the divine provision for foreigners through God's people is a major theme.

There was a famine in ancient Israel, and so Elimelech and his wife, Naomi, along with their two sons, relocated to the neighbouring kingdom of Moab in order to survive. Elimelech died, and Naomi was left with her two sons. These sons married, and then the sons died. Naomi said to her daughters in law: "Go, return each of you to her mother's house." She told them to return three times. Orpah returned to her family of origin—as we would expect her to. But Ruth, very unusually, made a pledge of kinship with Naomi:

"For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the Lord do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you." (Ruth 1:16-17)

The cost to Ruth is enormous. Ruth is cutting ties with her family of origin, her land, her security, and throwing her lot in

with an impoverished widow. Probably, Ruth's pledge to Naomi must have come from a deep bond with Naomi and also out of fears for Naomi's survival.

And so, Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem in Israel, destitute, at the time of the barley harvest. You can see that this story is all about kinship, vulnerability, responsibility, and protection.

Of course, Ruth ends up gleaning in the field of Boaz, one of Naomi's kinspersons. In a striking phrase, that is later repeated, Boaz says to Ruth:

The Lord repay you for what you have done, and a full reward be given you by the Lord, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge!" (Ruth 2:12)

Later in the story that line reappears in a fresh way. Ruth says to Boaz:

"I am Ruth, your servant. Spread your wings over your servant [there is that phrase again], for you are a redeemer. (Ruth 3:7)

Ruth is as much as saying: "You be Yahweh's person here. Spread your wings over your servant."

The book finds its place within the scope of the history of God's people as Ruth and Boaz are a part of the lineage of king David (Ruth 4:18-22). Ultimately, Jesus is born of David's line, the good king through whom the One True God is 'mending all things'.

"Spread your wings over your servant"