

Commentary on Ruth

Milton Acosta Benítez

The book of Ruth is a beautiful story. With a symmetry that provides literary and thematic coherence, it almost feels like a novel since it ends on a high note with a wedding and a baby. Yet novels are never as short as the book of Ruth; nor was the novel known as a literary genre in biblical times and cultures. Even so, the book has novel-like qualities, just as real life can sometimes be novelesque.

In our Bible, and for chronological reasons, Ruth comes after Judges. For theological reasons, the Masoretic Text places Ruth between Proverbs and Song of Solomon, as if Ruth were a book of wisdom. Proverbs ends with the wife “of noble character,” and Ruth herself is called a woman “of noble character”; these are the only instances in the Bible in which a woman is designated as such. Proverbs 31 describes the woman of noble character; Ruth tells the story of one.

In terms of history and theology, the book of Ruth is important for three reasons:

Since 1999, Milton Acosta Benítez has been a professor of Old Testament and biblical theology at the Biblical Seminary of Colombia (FUSBC) in Medellín. He is also the theological editor for the Old Testament of the *Comentario bíblico contemporáneo*.



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1. It provides much-needed relief from the depression caused by all the evil in Judges;
2. Ruth, though a foreigner (see chapters 2 and 6 of Joshua), was part of the most important genealogy in the Bible, that of David and Jesus (Ru 4:13–22; Mt 1:1–16);
3. The story in the book of Ruth comes about because of the solidarity of a “foreigner,” of one man, and of an Israelite community; and because of the faithfulness of each to the law.

Our interpretation here will explore the book as literature, history, and theology.

Introduction

Author, Date, and Historical Context

The author of Ruth is unknown. Two facts indicate that it was edited after the events described therein: the need to explain forgotten customs (3:7) and the inclusion of the genealogy of David (4:18–22).

Though we do not know who wrote Ruth or for whom it was written, the book appeals to those who have been displaced, expatriated, or uprooted. Israel and Judah have experienced displacement since the eighth century BC.