

Dear Friends,

“In the days when the judges ruled ...” So begins the book of Ruth. These were the days when Israel was getting established in the Promised Land. In the past lay their time with Moses, when they had escaped from slavery and travelled through the wilderness. In the future lay their time with Kings, when they would rise to greatness, then fall to defeat. Although Ruth is set in the early days of Israel, the book is thought not to have taken its present form until much later. There may well have been a long period of development as people told and retold the story. Maybe then the moment came when someone looked at what was happening around them, felt that this was the story that people needed to hear, and put pen to parchment.

What was happening around them? The people of Israel were returning home after their exile in Babylon. They were a small community. Their chances of survival as a nation were slim. They felt the need to build a kind of ark, where they could preserve their identity and the treasures of their tradition as they sailed through the floods which continued to engulf them. One way of protecting that ark was for them to close ranks and keep within their own group. This meant isolating themselves and not marrying outside of their own community. The dangers of this are obvious. In some it showed itself in the ugliness of prejudice.

The books in the Bible called Ezra and Nehemiah are set in the time when Ruth was thought to have been written. Ezra and Nehemiah demand that people remain pure and not intermarry. In Ezra it says, “The land that you are entering to possess is a land unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations. They have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness. Therefore do not give your daughters to their sons, neither take their daughters for your sons, and never seek their peace or prosperity, so that you may be strong and eat the good of the land and leave it for an inheritance to your children for ever”.

Nehemiah was outraged when he saw Jewish men who had married outside of Judaism, including marriage to women from countries like Moab. He described what he did when he met them. He says, “I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God saying, - You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their daughters for your sons or for yourselves”.

Some had a particular dislike for the people of Moab. They remembered their story of how Moab began in an act of incest between Abraham’s nephew Lot and one of Lot’s daughters. Maybe they said “Can anything good come out of Moab?” I wonder if the writer of Ruth looked around, saw these attitudes and thought “There must be better songs to sing than this”. Maybe the story that came to mind was the one about a woman from Moab, a woman called Ruth”. They thought long and hard about how to start and then began, “In the days when the judges ruled ...”

God bless you,

Tony