

Study 13: A Light to the Gentiles

Introduction.

At this point in our study we will step back and look at two relatively short books: Ruth and Jonah. We take them up at this point because they were likely written shortly after the exile. The long years of captivity in Babylon had deeply impressed the exiles with the need to preserve a *remnant* to return to the Land of Promise. At great sacrifice they refused to be assimilated into the melting pot of Babylon. Had they not, they would have disappeared. And so they were steadfast in maintaining their identity as a people in preparation for their ultimate return.

This return to Judah, however, didn't solve all their problems. And contrary to the expectations of many neither did it usher in a time of prosperity and peace. Instead, it presented them with a whole new set of challenges and conflicts.

As you will recall from the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, the returned exiles, after nearly 70 years of struggling to maintain their identity in the darkness of the Babylonian captivity, now faced the same problem on the sacred soil of Judah itself. The danger of absorption and gradual disappearance through intermarriage with the neighboring peoples was very real; and so the nation was fighting for its very life.

Viewed in isolation, the prohibition against intermarriage decreed by Ezra could easily lead to a narrow and exclusive emphasis on racial purity as the basis of God's favor. John the Baptist was not the first to protest against such legalism when he said: "*And do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God can raise up children to Abraham from these stones.*" [Mt 3:9]

The Book of Ruth and the Book of Jonah – these two little gems in the Old Testament -- were both likely written or, at least, edited during the period following Ezra's reforms. They provide a perfect balance to the tendency of some to push Ezra's directives beyond reasonable bounds and make them the sole content of religion for God's people. They emphasize that a legitimate fear of the dangers of intermarriage with pagans in general doesn't mean that pagans are outside of God's providence (Jonah) or that in a particular case such a marriage cannot actually help realize God's plan (Ruth).

Some scholars, however, believe that Ruth was actually composed during the time of the Judges and rabbinic tradition claims that Samuel was the author. Since the book was written in large part to glorify Ruth as an ancestor of David, it's quite possible that its date of composition was in the Davidic or post-Davidic period.

Reading. Now open your Bible and read:**Ruth 1-4****Jonah 1-4**

Behind the Words.

A casual glance at these two books would seem to indicate that they're attempting to report straight history; but most scholars now believe that both Ruth and Jonah represent a type of Biblical literature similar to our modern historical novel. Like the historical novel, both are about real people and real events, but both are also stories with a point. The authors, if they wrote after the Exile, most likely drew from the ancient traditions of their people and selected historical figures through whom they could make an appeal for tempering the need to maintain fidelity to the Covenant with the saving mission of Israel to the nations.

The author of Ruth chose to point out that the great King David was a direct descendent of a "mixed" marriage. Perhaps he selected this particular ancestor of King David because of his friendship with the Moabites. [See 1 Sam 22:3 ff.]

The Book of Ruth, as a splendid testimony to God's providence and direction, has an abiding religious value. Ruth, of course, achieves her greatest nobility by her incorporation into the genealogy of Jesus Christ (Mt. 1:5), but the book also has wonderful artistic qualities that have made it a favorite among many. The great German poet, Goethe, once referred to it as "the loveliest little volume that has been ethically and idyllically handed down to us."

The author of Jonah chose the prophet Jonah (See 2 Kings 14:25) to stress the universality of God's mercy. He contrasts the narrow self-righteousness of this "son of the Covenant" with the humble repentance of the gentile Assyrians. The fact that the Assyrians were a particularly warlike nation and among the greatest enemies of the people of Israel and Judah just reinforces the author's point.

Some Key Passages. I suggest that you mark and pay particular attention to the following passages in your Bible:

Ruth 1:15-18 – A lesson in Fidelity

Ruth 4:17-22 – David, descendent of a gentile

Jonah 3:4-10 – Nineveh repents

Jonah 4:1-3 – Jonah embittered

Historical Background. Now let's examine the historical background of these books so we can better understand their message.

Ruth 1:1-5 – The Days of the Judges. The Book of Ruth is set in the period of the conquest of Canaan (c. 12th Century B.C.) described in the Books of Joshua and Judges. As we know from our earlier studies, these were troublesome times. The Land of Canaan was torn by war and strife, with famine a frequent consequence of war. Fields were often burned by marauding armies or left unsown while the men went off to war. Moab was the high country to the east of the Jordan River. It's interesting to note how careful the author was to ensure his historical facts were presented accurately.

Ruth 1:8-14 – The Plight of the Widow. In ancient times the plight of the widow was difficult. Life was precarious with no husband to act as her champion and protector. She was also without position in the social order of the times. Because there was no opportunity for a single woman to earn a living, she was forced to rely on the help of relatives, something she could not always count on.

Ruth 1:16-22 – Ruth's Loyalty and Naomi's Destitution. The beauty of Ruth's declaration of fidelity is probably unsurpassed in all of literature. It literally defies comment. Naomi's remark on her name indicates the importance which the Hebrews attached to names. They gave their children names at birth in the hope that their character would somehow be affected and they would become worthy of the name they bore. Naomi's reference to evil as coming from God does not mean moral evil, which is sin and comes from man himself, but rather the natural calamities of death, earthquakes, famines, etc.

Ruth 3:1-13 – The Custom of Goel and Levirate. In Hebrew the word of kinsman or next of kin is *goel*. The *goel* has the right and the duty to look out for the welfare of his poor relations. In a sense he acted in place of God since the Jews regard the Lord as the *goel* of all Israelites. The custom of Levirate marriage is recorded in the Torah (Dt 25:9-10). Ruth's bold action was the customary procedure for a woman to propose marriage. Strictly speaking, Ruth, as an alien, had no right to benefit from these customs of Israel.

Jonah 1:1 – The Names of Jonah. The meaning of Jonah in Hebrew is *dove*, while his father's name, Amittai. Means *truth*. The dove was commonly used as a symbol for the Jewish people, just as the early Christians used the symbol of the fish. Thus, in Jonah we have "Israel, the son of Truth." Nineveh had been the traditional major power in the area and readily stands as a symbol of all Israel's enemies through the ages. Tarshish is the Biblical name of Tartessus, a town on the western coast of Spain on the very edge of the then known world.

Jonah 1:1 – The Hero of the Story. The title of the book might lead us believe that Jonah is the hero of the story; but, as a close reading clearly shows, the real hero is God Himself. It is God who constantly takes the initiative – Jon 1:1, 4, 17; 2:10; 3:1; 4:6, 7, 9. It is God who shows patience and is merciful to all men, while Jonah is narrow-minded and vindictive.

Jonah 1:17 – The Great Fish. The great fish is used in the book as a symbol of the Exile brought on by the infidelity of Israel and designed to lead them through the school of suffering and privation back to loving obedience to God. Through the use of this image, the author of Jonah shows that, although the people returned to obedience, it was largely a purely external conformity to the Law of God. No interior change took place. In this connection it's interesting to note that the name Nineveh, the archetype of Israel's enemies, means "town of the fish."

Unity of the Two Testaments. We encounter Ruth and Boaz, as ancestors of the Redeemer, in the Gospels of both Matthew and Luke. Aside from these direct references, though, the entire Book of Ruth is really an interesting parallel of the Gospel events. For just as the chosen people failed in their mission of being the instrument of salvation for all the nations and separated themselves from the work of Redemption carried out by Jesus Christ, so also Naomi's next of kin was unwilling to be her champion or redeemer and another, Boaz, had to perform the function of bringing the gentile, Ruth, into the family of God.

Our Lord Himself pointed out the pivotal message in the Book of Jonah (See Luke 11:29-32). Christ, who was greater than Jonah, invites all people into the Kingdom of His Father but upon the same terms as we find in Jonah: a sincere and fundamental change of heart; i.e., true repentance.

We find both books well represented in the Liturgy. Indeed, the familiar greeting, "The Lord be with you," is the greeting of Boaz to his farm hands (Ruth 2:4). This was a common form of greeting in Biblical times, but under the light of the Gospel message, it takes on a new and profound meaning. Recall Jesus' promise to the Apostles after He commissions them at the end of Matthew's Gospel: "And behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world."

Liturgically, we can think of the Book of Jonah as a brief treatise on the meaning of Lent. Fittingly, readings from Jonah are found in the Lenten liturgies as well as those of Ordinary Time.

For the Christian, the Book of Jonah charges us with a serious responsibility; for we are called to carry the Word of God to the Ninevehs in our lives: "Go and teach all nations..." We might well take some time to reflect on the effectiveness of our own personal witness to Christ's message. How whole-heartedly do we cooperate in the Church's primary task of evangelization? Are we more Jonah-Christians than Christians after the heart of St. Paul, who said, "This is good and pleasing to God our savior, who wills everyone to be saved and to come to knowledge of the truth." [1 Tim 2:4] Regular, prayerful reading of the Bible can go a long way in keeping our personal faith well balanced and in harmony with authentic Christianity.

Questions. Reflect on the following questions offered for discussion:

1. What image of marriage, widowhood, and family life is conveyed in the pages of the Book of Ruth?
2. Would you call the story of Ruth a "romance" in our modern sense of a tale of romantic love?
3. How do you explain Jonah's attitude?
4. Compare the Book of Jonah with the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:12-32).
5. Does God's way of dealing with Jonah tell us anything about human freedom?