

This is perhaps the most taxing section of the book, but it is the section that theologians might find most rewarding to engage with.

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WHO ARE YOU, MY DAUGHTER? READING RUTH THROUGH IMAGE AND TEXT, translated by Ellen Davis, illustrated by Margaret Adams Parker, *Westminster John Knox Press, Harrow, 2003, Pp. xxiii + 123, £12.99 hbk.*

A coffee table book – in size and shape, with perhaps however a rather startlingly dark blue cover for that format – but on opening it, although the presentation is beautiful, as the style demands, what strikes one is the heavy and somewhat grimly black woodcuts which dominate it. *Not* a coffee table book! – but one which should, I think, have had a different presentation, a book not only translating and presenting the Book of Ruth but going well beyond this, showing how the Bible should be understood and some of its deepest messages appreciated. At the same time as being scholarly – though light in touch and exciting in style – it is unaffectedly, but noticeably, feminist. And those woodcuts turn out not to be grim so much as part of the message – a powerful indication as to how this somewhat odd book (Ruth) is to be read and understood.

The four chapters of Ruth are given us in ‘translation’ on the left-hand page in large print (but a little too fanciful and ethereal, I think, to represent quite adequately the down to earth chunkiness of the original Hebrew – sadly nowhere actually shown) whilst the right-hand, and sometimes the left too, is filled densely with notes and explanations. This layout is particularly successful.

I have given ‘translation’ those inverted commas because this is deliberately no translation suitable, say, for public recitation – smooth, clean, unassuming. It reads awkwardly; it is at times hardly English; it breaks many of the ‘rules’ of quality language – for it aims at presenting the original Hebrew as much as possible, in thought and action, and in feeling. The story line is set, after all, in a very primitive society, well over three thousand years ago: supposedly the immediate family background to David and his line. Ruth herself is of course none other than the great grandmother of David, one of the several foreign women in the genealogy of Christ, and Naomi, her mother-in-law, is far from a mere adjunct; it is through her primarily, not just Boaz who becomes her husband, that Ruth (a Moabite) is integrated into the life of Israel. Ruth is a book of powerful feminist undertones (despite the significance of the male saviour/hero figure) – the wood cuts emphasising this effectively.

The strength and quality of translation and the artistic representations, which do far more than just illustrate the work, should be an

encouragement to those seeking an engagement with – an ‘opening up’ of – the Hebrew Scriptures, but Ruth (*qua* story) is at the same time an unusual scriptural work. As the translator points out there are no miraculous interventions of the divine within it – it is the story primarily of love and fidelity. This concept we will return to in a moment, but first it must be said that although Ruth seems to fit quite simply into the ‘history’ of Israel – between Judges and Samuel – it is in fact a considerably artificial, ‘finely crafted’ [E.D.], work, written in a deliberately archaic style. This is part of its essence (its message?), but although Ellen Davis refers at times to its ‘almost fairytale’ quality, she doesn’t say anything more about this aspect of it – a pity. (Its ‘simplicity’ of language, however artificial, makes it a very suitable and pleasing work for the learner of Hebrew to start with – as this reviewer found many years ago in Oxford.)

Another area, in which I feel there is a weakness, is in the author’s translation of the Hebrew word *chesed* – a word of great significance in this short work (Cf. 1:8, 3:10). She puts considerable effort and scholarship into justifying her rejection of the traditional *mercy* or *kindness*, and her use of *good-faith* instead. In doing this she makes a very powerful point, but I am not sure that it works. She mentions how this word, together with ‘*emeth* (‘truth’), forms part of the very ‘name’ and nature of God (e.g. Ex 34:6). But this couplet, not actually occurring in Ruth, is effectively a hendiadys (“steadfast-merciful-loving-kindness” in the traditional translations) and the “good-faith” dimension is given basically by ‘*emeth* rather than by *chesed*. There is much more to the latter than this presentation adequately conveys. Perhaps the way in which this fits into Ruth’s lead-up to the Messianism developing in Israel through its kings is what the work is about. But we do not really have a ‘lead-up’ here; rather a ‘look-back’ for Ruth only artificially fits between Judges and Samuel; in the Hebrew Scriptures it is significantly placed between Job and Proverbs – not an item of history, but a ‘writing’, a poem. The Hebrew is a gem, crafted with great skill, and here it is presented with very considerable beauty, equally well crafted. Indeed it *should* be on your coffee table (it won’t fit into the bookshelf!)

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