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The Book of Ruth as Social Commentary in Early Judaism

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1 Introduction

There is widespread agreement that the book of Ruth is one of the more colorful and poignant stories in the Hebrew Bible, even as interpreters continue to debate implicit ideological messages in the narrative and the date for this work.¹ This memorable tale depicts the inspiring resilience and “dedication” (דסה) of the three main characters (Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz), along with their resourcefulness. Moreover, the book reflects engagement with key legal traditions, including the rules for levirate marriage, laws concerning gleaning, and the acceptability of betrothal with presumed outsiders. When assessing these elements in the story and the overall thrust of the work, commentators are divided over the exact period of composition and any social critiques in the text. Because of this uncertainty, many readers caution against definitive conclusions or the advisability of exploring in much detail the social message(s) of Ruth.²

Yet contextual inquiry into the meaning of fictional accounts can be fruitful for understanding the cultural world of ancient Israel and Second Temple Judea. Memorable stories often provide key insights into customs, cultural dividing lines, presumed opponents, and societal norms. Even if fictional and indicative of a specific perspective, the book of Ruth offers information on debated practices. Contextual inquiry is common with Second Temple works such

¹ It is a privilege to offer this essay in a volume dedicated to Ben Wright, a leading scholar in the study of Second Temple texts and their contexts. Professor Wright does groundbreaking work in textual studies, but he also pays close attention to the social settings for the material he examines. He is a generous scholar who takes an interest in the work of junior colleagues and offers critical feedback. For these and other reasons, including his ability to maintain interests and hobbies outside of the field, Ben is a helpful role model for me and other scholars.

² For a summary of scholarly positions in this regard, see LAU, *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth*, 12–18.

as Esther, the Court Tales of Daniel, Tobit, and Judith. The book of Ruth does not receive as much attention in this regard, primarily because of uncertainty about the date, unclear motivations behind the story, and the tendency to see the book as a timeless account of loyalty rather than culturally specific commentary on certain social practices.

The current discussion will highlight Ruth as a window into the socioeconomic and cultural dynamics of Judea during the Second Temple period. The various elements of social commentary in Ruth, coupled with other factors (e.g., the language of the text), tilt strongly in the direction of a postexilic narrative that makes courageous and assertive claims about ethnicity, acceptable marriage partners, economics, and the difficulties facing women in a patriarchal, “house of the father” system.³ Rather than ignoring these aspects of Ruth because of doubt about the date and message, it is profitable to ask key questions about the narrative and the messages it conveys. For this is more than a memorable story about רות: through intricate details and social commentary, the book of Ruth resists the exclusivist perspective found in Ezra–Nehemiah and other Second Temple works. This story of innovation and heroism ends with a Moabite widow marrying an Israelite and then giving birth to the ancestor of King David. Arguments that minimize the provocative nature of this plotline are ignoring some of the more compelling and significant aspects of the book of Ruth, as subsequent analysis will seek to demonstrate.

2 Genre and Date

Before proceeding with an exploration of any ideological agendas present in the Ruth narrative, it is necessary to consider the type of story we are dealing with and the date. The generic classification of Ruth is a relatively straightforward matter. This is a short story set in the period of the judges, addressing the precarious situation of two widows and how they and their property can survive the intrinsic obstacles of a patrilineal and patrilocal society.⁴ The tale includes intensive engagement with various Israelite legal traditions and how these might apply to the difficult situations that unfold in Ruth. Much of the narrative occurs

³ For background on the dominant social structure of the ancient Near East, predicated on household networks with patriarchs at the head of hierarchical groupings, note the landmark study of SCHLOEN, *The House of the Father as Fact and Symbol*. See below for further discussion.

⁴ SCHIPPER, *Ruth*, 16–18.

through dialogue, as the protagonists consider how best to respond to the deaths of Elimelech, Mahlon, and Chilion, and what legal precedents or customs might apply to their particular situation. Like many colorful stories, the Ruth narrative addresses such timeless topics as loyalty, ingenuity, gender inequality, and ethnicity.

The question then becomes when we date this story. This is a difficult issue to determine, since the book of Ruth lacks definitive historical markers. A full review of the debate is beyond the scope of the present discussion, but a few observations become necessary as we situate the work.⁵ Efforts to place the story in the Solomonic era or an early period in the history of the Israelite monarchy are thoroughly unconvincing: the type of Hebrew in the narrative and the reworking of longstanding legal customs work against an earlier date. Consequently, answering this question becomes a matter of determining whether Ruth is late preexilic (e.g., the reign of Josiah), exilic, reflective of Persian period ideas and debates, or perhaps even later. In deciding between these options, engagement with antecedent legal traditions, the style of Hebrew, the similarity in genealogies between Ruth (4:18–22) and other texts (e.g., 1 Chron 2:3–15), and the placement of Ruth in the Writings category all factor into consideration.⁶ One cannot determine this question on the basis of just one characteristic of the book, especially the argument for Late Biblical Hebrew or the number of Aramaisms.⁷

Zevit analyzes these and other features in tentatively arguing for an early Persian period date (ca. 525–500 BCE).⁸ He examines several key features of the book, including a later, more flexible application of the law concerning levirate marriage (Deut 25:5–10), a liberal understanding of the redemption/property laws in Leviticus 25, and a more nuanced depiction of widow inheritance rights. Zevit also considers some of the terminological elements in the text that point towards a later date (e.g., נשא + אשה [“to take as a wife”] in Ruth 1:4 as opposed to the more common לקח + אשה in BH) and orthographic considerations such as the more frequent use of *matres lectiones* than what one finds in clearly preexilic works. None of these factors alone is decisive for dating the narrative, but

⁵ For more detailed analysis, see LAU, *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth*, 44–54; 145–190; SCHIPPER, *Ruth*, 18–22.

⁶ LAU, *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth*, 45. One should also consider the placement of Ruth in the Megilloth grouping in the Hebrew Bible. This is not necessarily a late grouping based on festival observances, but could be a reflection of common themes in this five-book collection. See STONE, *The Compilational History of the Megilloth*.

⁷ HURVITZ, *The Chronological Significance*, 234–240.

⁸ ZEVIT, *Dating Ruth*, 574–600.

Zevit takes into account the cumulative effect of the evidence and tentatively places the book in the Persian period. Many efforts to locate Ruth in an earlier period reflect more of a confessional agenda on the part of the commentator than the rigorous consideration of the language and contours of the story that Zevit provides.

When considering this question of date, the sociocultural issues at stake in Ruth are more indicative of a Second Temple context. Not just the creative application of levirate marriage laws, but the inclusive understanding of foreigners in the text and tolerant views on acceptable marriage partners provide a startling contrast to the rigid understandings found in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Ezekiel 40–48. The characters Naomi and Boaz, along with the neighbors, welcome Moabites as full-fledged members of their community and even consider a Moabite widow to be worthy of betrothal with an influential and respected Israelite (Boaz is an *איש גבור חיל* in Ruth 2:1). The actions of Naomi and Ruth in the story indicate bravery, perhaps coupled with trickery in pursuit of survival, but they also point to a fluid context in which cultural norms were very much open to debate, and social commentary came in a variety of forms, including through short stories like Ruth, Esther, Tobit, and Judith. Even if somewhat earlier than clearly Hellenistic works, the Ruth narrative belongs in this discussion of Second Temple culture. Subsequent analysis will seek to underscore the nature of the message in Ruth and the cultural features undergirding it.

3 The ‘House of the Father’ System and the Legal Claims of the Ruth Narrative

As with most settlement patterns in the ancient world, persons in Israel and Judea largely organized themselves around household networks, with a patriarch at the top of a hierarchical grouping. Numerous references to a “house of the father” system in both narrative and legal passages of the Hebrew Bible, as well as extracanonical texts, attest to this framework, which continued in large measure after the exile.⁹ A man’s stability and in many instances his survival remained far more likely if he enjoyed secure attachment to a functioning household, with all of the attendant property rights, possibilities for inheritance, and the solidarity that came from a loyal, stable network. The situation

⁹ BENDOR, *The Social Structure of Ancient Israel* examines “house of the father” terminology throughout the Hebrew Bible.

and rights of women in this structure were more complex and varied, but women usually fared better when they had membership in a secure household and clan membership.¹⁰ Those who lacked this type of association, particularly widows and orphans, faced many disadvantages, including the possibility of social marginalization, destitution, and even death. This core social structure is critical background for events in the Ruth narrative; any extreme measures in the story represent an effort to overcome the lack of connection to a functioning household. One cannot understand the story without taking into account this system and the dangers widows faced in the social structure (Deut 16:11–15; 14:27–29; 24:19–21; 25:5–10; Mal 3:5; Tob 1:8; Sir 35:17–19).

The desperation of Naomi and Ruth stems from an acute awareness of their precarious circumstances in the house of the father system. In the first chapter, Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth lose the security of their household and face grave uncertainty. The story then describes in large measure the radical actions of the central characters in overcoming the breakdown of Elimelech's previously functioning household. For example, Naomi's pronouncement to Ruth just prior to the threshing floor scene with Boaz indicates the central agenda in the book: "Naomi her mother-in-law said to her, 'My daughter, I need to seek some security for you, so that it may be well with you...'" (Ruth 3:1). The events before and after this declaration represent a concerted effort to provide the "security" or "resting place" (מנוח) of a household for Naomi and Ruth through assertive and at times unconventional means. The Ruth narrative is a vivid depiction of widows and other individuals whose status in a house of the father structure was precarious or non-existent.

One example of this precarious status in the narrative is the endorsement of ingenuity as a necessary attribute for those lacking membership in a secure household. The cryptic description of the threshing floor scene in chapter 3 leaves open the possibility that Ruth initiates a sexual encounter as an understandable step, given her identity as a Moabite widow without a secure clan/familial membership.¹¹ Like some of the antecedent narratives in Genesis

10 Women did have property rights in some instances and the ability to inherit, but the extent of their legal claims in the ancient world varied according to locality and time period, and we lack a full picture of their options. For more detail, see ADAMS, *Social and Economic Life in Second Temple Judea*, 41–80.

11 Much attention has focused on whether Ruth initiates a sexual encounter on the threshing room floor in chapter 3. The suggestive nature of the language in 3:7 leaves open this possibility, but the question is unprovable in either direction. For present purposes, the important point to note is that Ruth and Naomi felt sufficient urgency that she engaged in a risky gambit (i.e., sneaking to the threshing room floor during the harvest) in order to preserve her future

where the characters resort to trickery in the service of survival or advancement (e.g., Lot's daughters in Gen 19:30–38; Rebekah and Jacob tricking Isaac in Gen 27:5–27) one can interpret Ruth 3 along similar lines.¹²

In this respect, the Ruth narrative offers flexible interpretations of legal traditions related to the “house of the father” system. This is not the work of an author whose main objective is rigorous adherence to the rules for levirate marriage (Deut 25:5–10) or the Jubilee Year legislation (Leviticus 25).¹³ Rather, one find in the dialogues and transactions that occur an awareness of legal precedent, but with a fluid response and a message of inclusivity. The relevant laws, including the one about widows inheriting property in the absence of male heirs (Num 26:1–11), are background material for the exchanges in the story, usually with a creative application of the law in question.

One relevant illustration of such flexibility in the narrative is the willingness of Boaz to “redeem” the land belonging to Elimelech/Naomi and thereby marry Ruth in the process, even though he is not Elimelech's brother or even a particularly close relation. The “next-of-kin” (גא), who is presumably a closer relative to Naomi than Boaz, initially accepts but then declines his right of redemption because of concerns about his own inheritance (Ruth 4:1–4). One factor at work in this refusal seems to be his initial assumption that he would have to marry Naomi, who is past childbearing years, rather than Ruth.¹⁴ Once the “next-of-kin” discovers that Ruth is part of the transaction, he balks. In contrast to this unnamed fellow, Boaz accepts the redeemer role, and he seeks attestation of his promise:

Today you are witnesses that I have acquired from the hand of Naomi all that belonged to Elimelech and all that belonged to Chilion and Mahlon. I have also acquired Ruth the Moabite, the wife of Mahlon, to be my wife, to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance, in order that the name of the dead may not be cut off from his kindred and from the gate of his native place; today you are witnesses. (Ruth 4:9–10)

and presumably Elimelech's estate. Her Moabite ancestry and delicate place in the “house of the father” structure certainly play a role here.

12 FEWELL/GUNN, *Compromising Redemption*, find understandable human inclinations in the Ruth narrative, including duplicity in the service of survival.

13 LEVINE, *Legal Themes in the Book of Ruth*, 95–106, demonstrates awareness of antecedent legal traditions in the Ruth narrative.

14 DAVIES, *Ruth IV 5 and the Duties of the *gō'el**, 233. Boaz tells the relative that Naomi's selling her husband's land, but he does not mention Ruth (4:2–4). The unnamed fellow first hears about Ruth *after* he expresses initial interest in the transaction (v. 5).

This transaction concerns property rights, the safeguarding of a family estate, and the public willingness of a prominent figure to take Ruth as his spouse. Here and throughout the narrative, we witness playful engagement with legal traditions, including implicit criticism of those who would apply an overly rigid interpretation of regulations at the expense of vulnerable persons. The fact that this type of social commentary can occur in somewhat veiled fashion in a narrative context does not necessarily mitigate the forcefulness of the statement. As James C. Scott has shown, “hidden transcripts” can occur in a variety of forms, and folktales allow for social commentary to occur in more secure fashion, somewhat removed from “the intimidating gaze of power.”¹⁵ Such an interpretive move make the most sense after the legal traditions had been established for a lengthy period and during a time in which acceptable practices were a matter of great debate. The Persian period remains the most likely context in this respect, as exclusivist groups (e.g., the parties behind Ezra-Nehemiah) fought against a more inclusive society (see below for further discussion).

4 The Protest against Exclusivism

The fact that Ruth is described as a “Moabite” in Boaz’s public declaration at the end of the book is noteworthy, as the narrative makes a striking statement on the acceptability of his betrothal to a Moabite widow. By making intentional links to the Judah and Tamar story (Ruth 4:12) and connecting the offspring of this union to David (Ruth 4:17), the Ruth narrative crosses social boundaries that were very much open to dispute. The invocation of Ruth’s Moabite ancestry at several points (Ruth 1:22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10) seems to underscore the provocation that her full acceptance would raise in certain circles. At several points in the Hebrew Bible, Moabites receive negative attention, such that reputable Israelites/Judeans are to avoid their company and in some cases refrain from marrying them (Num 25:1–5; Deut 23:3; 1 Kgs 11:1–2; 2 Kgs 3:4–27; Ezra 9:1–4; cf. the Mesha stele). The repetition of the main character’s Moabite identity in the story is almost certainly not incidental.

Since this is a self-contained narrative without overt social commentary, some interpreters have questioned our ability to know which of these anti-Moabite perspectives, if any, the content of Ruth is intended to counter. The Ruth narrative never directly addresses, whether through dialogue or back-

¹⁵ SCOTT, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, 4.

ground information, the negative treatment of Moabites in other texts. Consequently, Schipper argues that “a nonnegative assessment is not necessarily an endorsement of Moab, but simply not a condemnation. A text does not necessarily bless Moab by default just because it does not curse Moab.”¹⁶ Schipper proceeds to highlight more positive or at least neutral assessments of Moab in other biblical passages (e.g., 1 Sam 22:3–4), along with David’s marriages outside of his clan group (e.g., 2 Sam 3:3). He also points to the Ephrathite ancestry of Elimelech and Mahlon, and he argues that foreign marriage was not atypical for persons of this background who came “from Bethlehem.” In searching for the rationale behind so many citations of Ruth’s Moabite ancestry, Schipper cites a plausible literary connection between the Ruth narrative and the origins of Moab through Lot and his daughters in Genesis.¹⁷ Since we have a complex portrait of Moab in the Hebrew Bible, he suggests that conclusions about an ideological agenda in Ruth, especially related to exogamy, are venturesome.

Yet the vast majority of references to Moab and Moabites in the Hebrew Bible are negative, and we have specific texts from the Persian period that urge avoidance of this group, particularly when it comes to marriage. Claude Lévi-Strauss defines endogamy as “the obligation to marry within an objectively defined group,” and the content of Ezra 9–10 and Nehemiah 13 offers an insular, defensive understanding of acceptable partners.¹⁸ The message is not an ambiguous one in these sources, which draw upon antecedent legislation in an effort to prohibit intermarriage.¹⁹ In Ezra, Moabite women receive explicit mention among the nations as unacceptable marriage partners. Such unions represent an appalling act, because “The holy seed has mixed itself with the peoples of the land, and in this faithlessness the officials and leaders have led the way” (Ezra 9:2). Similarly, Moabite women are rebuked in Neh 13:23–27, such that the postexilic community should not replicate Solomon’s most famous treachery of marrying foreign women. Even if the historical accuracy of these passages and the displacement of foreign wives are in doubt, the concluding section to Ezra

¹⁶ SCHIPPER, Ruth, 38.

¹⁷ SCHIPPER, Ruth, 41, notes the striking parallels between Ruth 3 and the account of Moab’s birth in Gen 19:30–38b, especially if Ruth does initiate a sexual encounter. He does not consider Ruth 3 to be a counter to the negative portrait in the Genesis passage, since the latter contains no specific rebuke of Moab.

¹⁸ LÉVI-STRAUSS, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, 45.

¹⁹ There are a number of different sources utilized by the author of Ezra 9–10, including Deuteronomy 7, 23, and Lev 18:24–30, in order to arrive at a highly restrictive position. For this type of intertextual reading that we find in Ezra see FISHBANE, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, 116–121; HAYES, *Gentile Impurities and Jewish Identities*, 24–26.

and Nehemiah 13 make cultural, economic, and theological statements about restrictive understandings of marriage. The authors behind the prohibition were concerned with communal identity, including the possibility of female inheritance among outsiders, and both of these passages specifically mention Moabites as unacceptable partners.²⁰

The perspective in Ruth is markedly different and represents a vivid response to the more rigid understanding of marriage and foreigners during the Persian period. Even if the book of Ruth is not responding to the actual content of Ezra-Nehemiah (though it certainly could be), the narrative almost certainly represents a plaintive counter to the exclusivist perspective. Lacocque is on the mark when he suggests that those who date Ruth earlier than the Second Temple period or understate the sociocultural aspects of the book overlook the “subversive” agenda in the narrative, an agenda that includes openness to foreigners and a flexible interpretation of the Torah.²¹ When reading this story, we run the risk of sanitizing and domesticating its message by characterizing the Ruth narrative as a folktale on general loyalty, rather than a more intricate statement on such cultural issues as the rights of widows, marriage partners, and attitudes towards outsiders.

Other Second Temple works struggle with these questions of communal identity. With Jonah, another postexilic work that depicts foreigners (the Assyrians) in a favorable light, with the book of Judith and the Ammonite character of Achior, who shows awareness of the power of Israel’s Deity in his explanations to Holofernes (Judith 5–6), and even with Nebuchadnezzar’s actions of repentance in the Court Tales of Daniel (Dan 2:46; 3:31–33 [4:1–3], 6:26–27), many postexilic works explore the status of foreigners and their attitudes towards Judeans.²² The book of Ruth belongs in this conversation regarding the social contours of early Judaism and the identity debates that took place during the Second Temple period.

When such arguments are advanced about Ruth (or similar narratives), accusations of circular reasoning often follow. Without unambiguous historical markers, doubts arise about our ability to place the Ruth narrative in the midst of Second Temple debates. Yet as the recent social-scientific study of Lau argues, the dynamics at play in this narrative, including the assertive actions of Boaz and Ruth, work in favor of a later setting and a fictional response to more dominant ideologies. In the story, mere survival requires initiative and creativ-

²⁰ On female inheritance during this period, see ESKENAZI, *Out from the Shadows*, 25–43.

²¹ LACOCQUE, *Ruth*, 20–21.

²² LACOCQUE, *Ruth*, 24.

ity: “In breaking from the normal societal mold, the characters in the RN illustrate how a post-exilic reader can behave in supraconventional ways.”²³ In the social world of the Second Temple period, the supraconventional bravery of the characters could function as a paradigm for inclusivity and loyalty. Lau reasonably cites such a later context as the most likely background for the message in Ruth, when considered alongside the other evidence.

He further suggests that an rural-urban divide could be at work in distinguishing between Ruth and Ezra-Nehemiah. If the latter represents the perspective of a literate elite with ties to the Persian bureaucracy, the Ruth narrative speaks to a more rural, egalitarian bias.²⁴ The focus on everyday village life, along with the hope of Davidic restoration, stands in contrast to the more overarching, institutional emphases of Ezra-Nehemiah. It is venturesome to associate this tension too specifically with actual factions in the society, but the inclusive vision of Ruth does seem to reflect an alternative viewpoint from what we find in Ezra-Nehemiah. Fictional accounts can be effective vehicles for social commentary (cf. Esther).

In order to substantiate this type of understanding, we return to the actual story and the delicate nature of the protagonist’s situation. In chapter 1, the character of Ruth faces uncertain prospects in every direction, but decides to remain with Naomi. There is absolutely no indication in this section that Ruth receives any kind of welcome in Bethlehem, only that she is accompanying her mother-in-law. In chapter 2, the situation is even more fraught with risk. Ruth seeks to glean in the fields near male counterparts whose intentions might be hostile. Boaz warns her to stay near the other young women, and he is concerned about what will happen if she does not: “I have ordered the young not to assault you (נגער)” (Ruth 2:9, translation mine). The LXX translator of this verse understood this statement from Boaz as a reference to potential molestation, using the verb ἄπτω (“to touch” or “grasp”). Ruth’s safety is in jeopardy throughout this scene, and she expresses sincere gratitude that Boaz would show kindness towards a foreigner (a Moabite) such as her (2:10–13). Even the threshing floor scene has dangerous undertones, as the narrator weaves a suspenseful thread, leaving open the question of how Boaz will respond when he sees this Moabite widow “laying at the place of his feet” (3:8). Finally, the episode with the elders in chapter 4 reveals the vulnerability of foreign widows in the social structure and the necessity of a complex transaction to secure Ruth’s future.

²³ LAU, *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth*, 166–167.

²⁴ LAU, *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth*, 184–188.

The Ruth narrative, therefore, makes an assertive social statement that clashes with the prevailing rigidity of such sources as Ezra-Nehemiah. While these latter books engage in a midrashic exercise to make the legal traditions more restrictive, Ruth works in the other direction. The parallel content and competing visions are too similar to be mere coincidence and suggest roughly contemporaneous periods of composition.

To illustrate the competing visions, we need only look at the conclusions of both works. The closing sections of Ruth (Obed's birth in Ruth 4:13–17 and the generations of Perez in 4:18–22) accentuate the ancestral line from Naomi (and by extension Ruth) to David, whose name appears in 4:17 and 4:22.²⁵ By contrast, the closing chapter of Ezra highlights the need to banish those who are not part of the returning community of exiles (Ezra 10:11: “separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives”). This chapter mentions priests, Levites, singers, and others who married foreign women, and the book closes on a strident note: “All these had married foreign women, and they sent them away with their children” (Ezra 10:44). The book of Ezra concludes with the forced displacement of the offspring of Moabite wives and children (among others), while Ruth highlights an inclusive understanding of marriage that culminates in David's birth. These strikingly different conclusions focus on the same topics of acceptable marriage partners and the resulting offspring, suggesting a fierce internal debate.

5 Conclusion

Discussion of the social contours of early Judaism has only increased in recent decades, and the scholarship of Benjamin Wright has played a critical role in this regard. Wright has offered contextual studies of Ben Sira, the sapiential literature of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Letter of Aristeas, and his lucid expo-

²⁵ The emphasis on Naomi in this section points to the conclusion that her household line continues through Obed in the eyes of the narrator, even if she is not the biological mother. The larger focus in Ruth 4 is on the larger clan structure, or “house of the fathers” (בית אבות). Witness the involvement of the unnamed redeemer figure and Boaz, neither of whom are immediate blood relatives to Ruth or Naomi. As SCHIPPER, *Ruth*, 46, explains, this larger clan structure can be defined as “a much larger transgenerational social grouping defined on the basis of real or fictive lines of descent as well as social and geographic considerations beyond simply blood-lines.” This “house of the fathers” terminology appears frequently in Ezra-Nehemiah and in Chronicles.

sitions have enhanced our understanding of these critical works and their environs.²⁶ Other studies have sought to understand the agenda in such key narratives as Esther, Tobit, and Judith. Yet in these explorations, relatively little attention has focused on the Ruth narrative as a window into the cultural and economic world of early Judaism. Usually the reticence to engage in speculation about the book of Ruth has to do with uncertainty over the date and a tendency to categorize the narrative as a timeless story on loyalty and courage. While the latter conclusion is undoubtedly correct, the Ruth narrative provides clear statements on acceptable marriage partners, the vulnerability of widows in the clan-based social structure, and the need for inclusive and flexible legal practices. In all of these areas, the story appears to respond to more rigid, dominant voices, such as one finds in Ezra-Nehemiah. Efforts to minimize this tension overlook the power of a fictional account to offer social commentary and the helpfulness of mining the Ruth narrative for disagreements about acceptable cultural practice during an era of dynamic change. The book of Ruth should be an essential resource for understanding the social landscape of the Second Temple period.

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²⁶ WRIGHT, *Praise Israel for Wisdom and Instruction* is a useful collection of some of the most important essays in this regard.

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