

Background and Exegetical Analysis: The Book of Ruth

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Historical/Contextual Setting

The Book of Ruth is set in the time “when the Judges ruled,” during the pre-monarchical period when the tribal system was still in effect, about 1100 B.C.E. The age of the judges is referenced as a period of chaos predating the centralization of the tribes of Israel, during which “every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (Jud. 21:25). In contrast to the book of Judges, which concentrates on intertribal and international power struggles, community apostasy, war and death, the book of Ruth focuses on the actions of two vulnerable women who against all odds not only survive but thrive through acts of kindness, loyalty, creativity, and courage. In the Book of Ruth, women are given “personhood;” they are named, operate independently, act resourcefully, think inventively and are recognized with respect. This serves as a striking contrast to the progressively dehumanizing, de-personalizing and humiliating way women are portrayed in Judges, which devolves rapidly from the story of the respected prophetess Deborah (Jud.4-5) to the thoughtless sacrifice of Jephthah’s daughter (Jud. 11) to the brutal humiliation and dismemberment of the unnamed concubine (Jud 19). While the book of Judges ends with a mass slaughter of men and kidnapping of women to preserve the Benjamite family line, the Book of Ruth ends with the preservation of the family line through peaceable means. The problem of progeny is not resolved through murder and mayhem, but through the bold and caring action of women and the upright response of a leading male citizen, Boaz, who makes a moral choice to go beyond the minimum requirements of legal duty and beyond the usual boundaries of acceptable choices for marriage partners.¹

¹ Sakenfeld, *Interpretation*, p. 8

Canonical Placement and dating of the Text

In the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagent) and consequently in most Christian Bibles, the book of Ruth is placed between Judges and 1 Samuel. There, it breaks the narrative flow from the description of anarchy that ends Judges to the explanation for the monarchy that begins 1 Samuel. In the Jewish canon, Ruth is included among the *Ketubim*, or “Writings,” along with Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. As part of the “megillot,” the five scrolls which are read during the liturgical seasons of the Jewish year, it is traditionally read on *Shebu'ot* (the feast of “weeks”), during the spring harvest festival. This is also known as Pentecost because it was celebrated fifty days after Passover as a remembrance of Moses receiving the law. By association with Pentecost or the Feast of weeks, the story of Ruth represents the *spirit* behind the Law in a radical way.

The actual date of composition has been the subject of much debate.² Some linguistic analysis suggests a period as early as the Solomonic empire (ca. 950 B.C.E). Furthermore, the book ends with a genealogy tracing the child borne of Ruth by Boaz to Jesse, and then to David, indicating the author and earliest audience lived at least several generations later. Some view the book as having been written to legitimize David’s claim to the throne, which would explain the emphasis on genealogy and the location of the story in Bethlehem; in addition, having an ancestor like the loyal Ruth, a Moabite, would serve both to glorify David’s house and to excuse the various international marriages of his son Solomon. However, based on aramaisms and the positive treatment accorded Ruth, a Moabite, most scholars conclude the book was written much later, after the end of the monarchy and during the Babylonian or Persian periods. Many view the purpose of the story was a polemical response to the postexilic laws against intermarriage

² See Sakenfeld, Karen, Interpretation, pp.1-5

(Ezra 9-10; Neh. 10:30; 13:23-29), proposing a more inclusive view of Israelite society, in which foreigners are welcomed into the congregation of worshipers of Israel's God. If the later date is accepted, the text may be a reaction against enforced divorce even as it reflects the society's suspicion of foreign wives.³

Significance of Moab

While the name Moab means little to most modern people, for ancient hearers of the story, it would have been freighted with meaning (*Interpretation Bible Study*, p. 52). The move of Elimelech and his family was to a place with a long history of close but difficult, often hostile, relations with Israel. The Moabites are presented in the bible as descendants of Lot's incestuous relationship with one of his daughters (Gen 19), as inhospitable enemies who tried to call down a curse on the wandering Israelites (Num. 22-24) and who succeeded in ensnaring some Israelites in sexual sin (Num.25). According to law, no Ammonite or Moabite was admitted to the worshiping assembly (Deut 23:3). To early hearers of the story, Elimelech's choice to seek refuge in Moab would have seemed odd if not downright foolhardy, and his family's ill fortunes there completely *unsurprising*. Rather, surprise would have come later in the book, as a Moabite woman emerged as the story's heroine.⁴

NRS Deuteronomy 23:3 No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the LORD,

NRS Nehemiah 13:23 In those days also I saw Jews who had married women of Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab;²⁴ and half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod, and they could not speak the language of Judah, but spoke the language of various peoples.²⁵ And 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.²⁶ Did not King Solomon of Israel sin on account of such women? Among the many nations there was no king like him, and he was beloved by his God, and God made him king over all Israel; nevertheless, foreign women made even him to sin.²⁷ Shall we then listen to you and do all this great evil and act treacherously against our God by marrying foreign women?"

NRS Jeremiah 48:40 For thus says the LORD: Look, he shall swoop down like an eagle, and spread his wings against Moab;⁴¹ the towns shall be taken and the strongholds seized. The hearts of the warriors of

³ Levine, Amy-Jill, "Ruth," *Women's Bible Commentary*, p. 85

⁴ Tull, *Interpretation Bible Studies: Esther and Ruth*, p. 52

Moab, on that day, shall be like the heart of a woman in labor.⁴² Moab shall be destroyed as a people, because he magnified himself against the LORD.⁴³ Terror, pit, and trap are before you, O inhabitants of Moab! says the LORD.⁴⁴ Everyone who flees from the terror shall fall into the pit, and everyone who climbs out of the pit shall be caught in the trap. For I will bring these things upon Moab in the year of their punishment, says the LORD.

It is helpful to note in the Jeremiah passage the contrasting use of “wings.” Whereas in Ruth, the Moabite seeks and ultimately receives refuge under the “wings” of the God of Israel, in Jeremiah, it is God’s wings that spread against Moab to destroy it. This might be an interesting piece of evidence of the polemic going on between biblical schools of thought regarding Moabites. In any event, it reinforces the concept that Ruth had to overcome immense resistance to her ethnic origin to be accepted in Judean society.

Authorship/ Literary analysis

As with the dating of the book of Ruth, the authorship is also uncertain. Jewish tradition attributed the book to the prophet Samuel. Yet, in recent decades, scholars have raised the possibility that the book was written by a woman and passed on by a guild of women storytellers, or was orally transmitted by women and finally put to print by a male scribe. The features of the story identified to support this conclusion include: the motif of cooperation (rather than competition) among women; the references to “mother’s house,” (*be’ t em*, rather than the traditional *be’ t ab*, or “father’s house); and the focus on sons as a protection for women, rather than as perpetuators of male lineage (cf. 4:11-12) in 1:11 and 4:15.⁵

In addition, the story is replete with woman-to-woman dialogue and attention to the woman-to-woman relationship. It is almost entirely a woman’s tale. Though the ancient Israelite population presumably included as many women as men, the biblical stories disproportionately chronicle the names, deeds, and speech of men. Even when women appear, they generally appear in relation to men. As a result, conversations between women are

⁵ Sakenfeld, Interpretation, p. 5

extremely rare in the pages of the Bible, found only in a handful of passages: Gen.30:14-15 (between Rachel and Leah, about Jacob); Exodus 2:7-9 (between Pharaoh's daughter and Moses' sister, and then his mother, about Moses); Mark 6:24 (between Herod's daughter and wife, about the head of John the Baptist); Luke 1:42-55 (between Elizabeth and Mary, about their unborn sons). In other biblical passages, such as the story of Sarah and Hagar (Gen.16, 21), and Martha and Mary (John 11:28 - about Jesus), conversation is one-way, without dialogue. In all these texts, the ultimate focus is on the males of the story, and the relationship between women tends toward competitiveness, not cooperation.⁶

But the tiny book of Ruth devotes more verses to speech between women than the rest of the Bible combined: 29 verses encompassing eight dialogues. In addition, dialogue (both male and female), represents 2/3 of the entire book.⁷ No other book in the Hebrew Bible has a higher ratio of dialogue to text. The first spoken words in the book are Naomi's to Ruth and Orpah (1:8-13) and the final words are those of the townswomen to Naomi (4:14-17); thereby forming an inclusio which wraps the text in women's words. The dialogues are notable not only for their frequency, but also for their subject matter: not only men, but one another's welfare, expressions of grief and joy, the day's events, food, plans for their security, and their future.

Because it is the voice of women that is heard throughout this text, it has often been used by feminist biblical scholars and women seeking to reclaim their biblical foremothers. As Carol Meyers aptly observes, the book of Ruth assists in "rescuing women of biblical antiquity from the invisibility of traditional concerns."⁸ As such, it is an excellent resource for raising

⁶ Tull, *Interpretation Bible Study*, pp. 53-4)

⁷ See discussion on the effects of female dialogue in the Book of Ruth by Ilona Raskkow in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth*, pp. 26-41 and by Carol Meyers, pp.91-94

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 85

awareness of marginalized individuals, because it facilitates a more direct connection between their lives and concerns to those of the people of God as depicted in the Bible.

The abundance of dialogue in the book serves also as a very effective literary technique for engaging the reader and communicating the message of the story. Because the narration of the story is sparse and non-judgmental, the reader is invited, through participation in the rich dialogue, to experience the situation of the characters in the story in a direct, transparent way. This is a powerful tool for changing attitudes regarding race, gender and social status. As with Mark Twain's *Huck Finn*, the reader enters in to the experience of "riding the raft with Huck and Jim," and through it experiences both characters' humanity and kindness. Even though Mark Twain never explicitly preached against prejudice in this novel, the opinions of his readers regarding the treatment of African Americans in America were, and continue to be, dramatically transformed after this novel was published. Such is the case with the book of Ruth.

The Biblical Story – Summary of the Book of Ruth⁹

Chapter 1:

The story begins in the city of Bethlehem, where the man Ebimelech, his wife Naomi, and their two sons reside. When a famine strikes their village, the family migrates to Moab, where the two sons marry Moabite women, Ruth and Orpah. Naomi's husband and sons die, leaving the three widowed women alone. Naomi hears that God has provided food in Bethlehem ("house of bread") and decides to return home. He urges her daughters-in-law to return to their own families in Moab, but Ruth insists on accompanying her mother-in-law to Bethlehem. (Where she gives the famous pledge, often used in wedding ceremonies: "where you go, I will go...your people will be my people, your God my God...where you die I will die.) Upon arriving in Bethlehem, Naomi, which means "pleasant," tells the village women to call her "Mara," which means bitter," because "the Almighty has dealt bitterly" with her (v.1:20)

Key Concepts and Terms:

- Moab, Moabites: significance in the story.
- Security: limitations for women and foreigners in patriarchal culture of Israel.
- *Hesed*
- Names of Characters and their meaning: Naomi, Ruth, Ebimelech, Malon, Chilon
- Bethlehem – "house of bread"

⁹ The summary is a modification of an excerpt from Katherine Sakenfeld's "Ruth and Naomi: Economic Survival and Family Values." P. 28-9.

- *Shuv* (turn, return), *Bet Em* (“mother’s house”), *Lekah* (Go!)
- Ruth’s famous speech; used in wedding ceremonies; the word *davaq* (cleave). Consider its contextual meaning.
- Condition of widows and foreigners in Israelite Society
- Ruth’s “Oath” – understanding of oath formula
- Parallels to Job, Tamar, Song of Songs, Wisdom literature
- Singularity of Naomi/ “pairing”
- Emptiness vs. Fullness; Famine/Harvest

Themes: Famine, death, grief, lament, loyalty, risk-taking, change, transformation, aging
Love that goes above and beyond the call of duty (hesed).

Chapter 2:

Immediately Naomi and Ruth need food, and Ruth goes out to glean.¹⁰ She comes to the field of Boaz, the most prominent citizen of the village, who treats her kindly. He recognizes the kindness, or “*hesed*,” she has shown to her mother in law, Naomi, praises her for seeking shelter under Yahweh’s “wings,” and prays that that shelter yield concrete change in Ruth’s life. Boaz provides protection for her in his fields and sends her home with extra barley. Upon her return to Naomi at the end of the day, Naomi sees the hand of God at work in their encounter, for Boaz is one of her dead husband’s relatives.

Key Concepts and Terms:

- Gleaning
- Wings – *canaf*
- Kinsman/redeemer
- Word for “servant,” *ish hayil* – “man of stature”
- Naomi’s revival – concern for Ruth
- The barley harvest
- Condition of vulnerable women in patriarchal culture: the widow, the foreigner, the childless (or, more specifically, the “son-less”)
- Clan/mishpahah
- Leitmotif of *hen* – “finding favor”
- Ruth fits all categories of the needy people given permission to glean: the stranger, the fatherless, and the widow (Deut 24:19, Lev. 19:9-10).

Themes: Independence, respect, recognition, insight, divine coincidence.

Chapter 3:

Time passes. The harvest is at its end. Naomi announces that she needs to “seek some security” for Ruth (3:1) and proposes a plan for Ruth to approach Boaz on the threshing floor during the night and then follow Boaz’s lead. Ruth agrees, but when the actual encounter with Boaz takes

¹⁰ Gleaning was the primary means of support for the destitute prescribed in Israelite law: “When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien.” (Lev 19:9-10) As a poor non-Israelite widow, Ruth seeks out this means of survival designated for her by Israelite law. (Sakenfeld, Karen, *Interpretation*, p. 39)

place, Ruth herself takes the initiative in the conversation, in effect proposing that they be married. She implores Boaz to “spread your cloak (or *canaf*, “wing” in Hebrew) over your servant,” a gesture symbolizing marriage. The use of the word “wing” has another level of symbolic meaning, however, for the word “wing” appeared earlier in 2:12 on the lips of Boaz as he spoke of God’s wings under which Ruth has sought refuge. Now Ruth in effect invites Boaz to make good on the prayer he made earlier on her behalf, by providing some measure of the “full reward” of refuge under God’s wings through his own action, by marrying her. In other words, she asks him to “walk the walk.” Boaz is not resistant to the idea, but replies that there is a nearer kinsman (or *goel*, “redeemer in Hebrew),¹¹ another man in the village who is first in line for such a responsibility; Boaz will marry Ruth if that man does not.

Key concepts and Terms:

- “Security” – options available to women in Biblical World.
- Review Ruth’s status: widow, childless, Moabite, non-Jew.
- “*hesed*” – used in Chap. 1 by Naomi to describe Ruth; now by Boaz to describe Ruth..
- Sexual overtones; potential for risk/abuse.
- *Goel* – review concept of kinsman/redeemer
- Levirate Marriage
- “Spread your cloak over me” – connect to Chap. 2 “wings” (*canaf*)
- Worthy woman (*eshet hayil*) – connect to “man of stature” (*ish hayil*) – used in reference to woman Proverbs 31.

Themes: Empowerment, self-definition/changed identity, risk-taking, mutual respect.

Chapter 4:

In a meeting of the town elders, Boaz explains the situation to the nearer kinsman, who after contemplating the ramifications of carrying the responsibility for Ruth’s land without the benefit of inheriting it, declares that he is not in a position to marry Ruth. Boaz, after some legalistic and apparently staged maneuvering, then announces that he will marry her. In other words, “Boaz bends the rules to establish higher justice.”¹² The men of the village offer words of blessing to Boaz, concentrating on the fertility of his bride, the marriage is consummated, and a boy Obed is born to Ruth. The village women bless God for the arrival of Obed, telling Naomi that he will be a “restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age; for you daughter-in-law who

¹¹ A redeemer in the social world of ancient Judah was a relative who bore responsibility for care of kin in a variety of ways, reclaiming property or people sold for debts (Lev.25:25; 48) or avenging a premeditate murder (Num.35:19). Since there is no biblical record of the role of redeemer extending to marriage, there has been much debate about what exactly Ruth is asking Boaz to do, and on what basis. Some scholars see in her request the custom of levirate marriage (Deut 25:5-10), in which a widow marries her brother-in-law to perpetuate her dead husband’s lineage. Others point out the primary concern voiced repeatedly by Naomi is not the death of the family name, but Ruth’s economic security.” *Interpretation Bible Study*, p. 70

¹² Alice Ogden Bellis, Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes, p. 209

loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has borne him” (4:15). The dialogue of the story thus begins as it ends, with women as its participants and subject.

Key Concepts and Terms:

- *Ploni almoni* “what’s his name” or “so and so”
- Additional insights on Levirate law and patriarchal customs
- “acquire Ruth the Moabite..widow...maintain...inheritance” Strategic ploy or denunciation?
- Ancestral mothers: Rachel and Leah
- Ruth: “more to (Naomi) than seven sons.”

Themes: Invisibility, Fulfillment, Regeneration

Conclusion/Genealogy (4: 16-18)

The story concludes with the information that baby Obed grew up to become the grandfather of King David. In the end, the story illustrates a process of regeneration. Three deaths (Ebimilech, Malon and Chilion) are contrasted with three births: Obed, Jesse and David. Overarching and undergirding themes of regeneration in the story include:

- Emptiness – Fullness
- Famine – Harvest
- Strangers – Family
- Weakness – empowerment
- Obscurity-identity
- Lack of Knowledge – Knowledge
- Deaths – Birth
- Moabite – Great-grandmother of David.

Exposition

For Christians and Jews, the story of Ruth has been a favorite for its happy ending and vision of peaceable community. As Katharine Sakenfeld states in her monograph on Ruth, “in the midst of scriptures filled with war and the threat of war, with trickery and treachery among brothers and sisters, with attempts at genocide and brutal reprisals, with disobedience and unfaithfulness, the book of Ruth has been viewed as an island of tranquility.”¹³ In it, individuals typically portrayed in tension with one another in other biblical texts cooperate, instead of competing or subjugating: Moabite and Jahwist, woman and woman (vs. Sarah and Hagar), man and woman.

¹³ Sakenfeld, *Interpretation*, p. 1

It is a story that shows how kindness and concern for others, “at times going even beyond the bounds of usual human responsibility,” leads in the providence of God to greater wholeness in the human community.¹⁴

Furthermore, the story of Ruth celebrates God’s activity in the everyday, the ordinary, the human. The story is not a presentation of God’s activity in the world in terms of miracles, theophany, direct address, or prophetic insight. Instead, it demonstrates how humans can be “God bearers” by supporting one another through the mundane challenges and opportunities of human experience: of death and birth, finding food, securing shelter, receiving comfort, giving recognition and companionship, and providing security.

Nevertheless, the potentially negative reaction this story evokes in modern readers must be acknowledged. The story is set in a patriarchal society where access to power, religious authority and property was controlled by men. A woman’s security lies in marriage and in motherhood (and especially, in the birth of male children). Critics have pointed out that the long-term economic security of the women in this story is dependent upon the marriage of one of them to a wealthy man. This approach to economic security, it is rightly argued, is not structurally adequate to the full humanity of women, at least as it is understood in most western cultures.¹⁵ This and other criticisms serve as reminders that the story must be read with sensitivity to the explicit and implicit bias of the biblical writers in light of the preference given men in Israelite society. As Katharine Sakenfeld concludes, “Faithful readers must choose which aspects of the text they find authoritative, and which aspects they will not seek to preserve in their own cultures and societal structures....it is essential to read the story as one individual

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 1

¹⁵ Ibid, p.11

picture of the true meaning of human community (and loving kindness) rather than as a prescription for how that community ought to be organized.”¹⁶

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 11