

The Book of Ruth

Ruth occupies a unique place in the biblical canons in that it is the only book to be named after a foreign woman. Its title and Moabite heroine immediately raise questions of gender, ethnicity and otherness. These thorny issues are taken up subtly and are sometimes even obscured in a story that on the surface reads like an idyll....

Content, Structure and Composition

Often heralded as a model short story, the book of Ruth has been carefully crafted to move us from problem to solution, from tension to resolution. It opens with a problem – a crisis, in this case famine, displacement, barrenness and death and ends with fulness, community and life. The first three scenes of Chapter One, full of the language of loss, famine, calamity are balanced by the final three scenes of Chapter 4 with their language of blessing, restoration and fruitfulness. The repetition of contrasting words and images in these chapters emphasise the central themes of the story.

At the centre of the story is Naomi, a woman who has been stripped of everything that gives her life meaning and security. Into this woman's emptiness comes Ruth, her daughter-in-law, who brings resourcefulness and faithfulness which reconnect Naomi to her family (Boaz) and her community.

Remarkably, this ancient story dwells extensively on women's experience and women's voices, so much so that some commentators have seriously considered the possibility of female authorship. While that cannot be proven, the prominent presence of women invites readers to probe the ways in which it subverts the concerns of patriarchal discourse. It demonstrates the possibility of recovering the feminine without idealising the past or whitewashing its patriarchal tendencies.

Date and Purpose

Debates around the date of composition of the book abound with proposals ranging from the time of David and Solomon to the postexilic era. Arguments revolve around the language of the texts, the customs assumed in the story and its ideological and theological orientation. All this taken into account, there is still no consensus among biblical scholars! The combination of standard and late biblical Hebrew linguistic features suggests a transitional period in the language allowing for a relatively broad window between the late pre-exilic to the early postexilic eras.

Some scholars who date it to the latter of these settings regard it as a protest against the exclusionary policies of Ezra and Nehemiah and the forced dissolution of foreign marriages.

For these scholars, the inclusion of Ruth, in the line of David no less, was also meant to subvert the establishment's constrictive interpretation of who constitutes Israel.

The book however does not necessarily have an overtly polemical or propagandistic tone and to tie it narrowly to a political agenda runs the risk of obscuring its multiple layers of meaning – social, political, religious and aesthetic. Ruth is a masterful literary composition meant both to delight and to provide a model of faithfulness. It witnesses not only to divine *hesed*, covenantal faithfulness, but also to human acts of *hesed* that are *transgressive*. That is, they defy convention and cross cultural boundaries and go beyond the requirements of Torah to ensure the preservation of a family, and by extension, the flourishing of a nation. In doing so, the book commends an inclusive attitude toward outsiders, challenging both personal and communal constitutions of identity and otherness. Indeed, regardless of how the book is dated, it functions as an important counterpoint to those biblical texts that are not hospitably disposed to the 'other'. Neither is Ruth entirely innocent of the xenophobia that overtly characterizes those such as Ezra and Nehemiah, but it treats these issues in a way that highlights the possibility of mutual transformation by the presence of a stranger in 'our' midst.

Canonical Context

In the Christian Canon the book is located between Judges and I Samuel as a kind of transition between the era when “there were no kings in Israel” and the emergence of the Davidic monarchy. The connections to Israel's larger historical narrative are made explicit in the book itself. The opening verse sets the narrative in the time of the Judges, marked by warfare and increasing violence as the tribes of Israel vied to establish themselves in the land. In its final chapters the book of Judges depicts a terrible escalation of violence, especially towards women. Next to these disturbing tales of moral disintegration, Ruth offers an alternative vision of a caring community.

Scandal and Valour

In Ruth Chapter 3 the atmosphere is marked by secrecy, ambiguity and danger. Identities are kept secret and interestingly it is the night that becomes a moment of *uncovering* on multiple levels. The scene repeatedly employs words relating to knowing and not knowing, recognising and not recognising to suggest interplay between concealment and disclosure.

Ruth is courageous, even audacious in this scene, putting herself in all kinds of danger and taking the lead in a way that was uncommon for a woman at the time. Her audacity shocks Boaz into recognition of a neglected dimension of his identity. The resonances with Tamar's story suggest that Boaz has a moment of epiphany. Judah declares of Tamar, “She is more in the right than I” (Genesis 38:26) and here Boaz confesses to Ruth “You

are a worthy woman” (3:11). The Hebrew word for 'worthy' may also indicated 'strength, valour or wealth'. Boaz thus acknowledges Ruth as a fitting mate (even an ideal wife cf Proverbs 31:10), equal to him in strength and character. He commends her loyalty, *hesed* understanding that she has chosen him out of faithfulness to Naomi's family. Boaz will no longer let ethnic or socio-economic barriers stand in his way. There is a possible complication with another kinsman redeemer who has prior rights, but Boaz vows to see to Ruth's needs one way or another.

In fact, in Chapter 4, Boaz skilfully maneuvers the right outcome for Ruth and Naomi. He goes beyond legal requirements to protect not only Elimelech's patrimony but also the women's welfare. Accordingly, the narrative that has belaboured the importance of a man's name now memorialises Boaz's however, as the witnesses at the gate heap renown upon Boaz they also remember the names of Israel's matriarchs, Rachel and Leah as well as Tamar who bore a son to Judah. Here, Bethlehem's court of justice cannot but acknowledge the critical agency and partnership of women in the forming of its dynasty.

The final verses of the book have been considered by some scholars to be a later addition, however they incorporate the women's story into a chronicle of patrilineal descent. The official record sees procreation exclusively as a male phenomenon but at this point in the book of Ruth, it is impossible to read this steady succession of males without relishing the pivotal role of women. Indeed it stands as a reminder that nay androcentric discourse that erases the agency of women is partial and deficient. Moreover, the genealogy begins with Perez, the son born of Judah's shameful union with Tamar and, it turns out, neither of Obed's parents has a pure pedigree.

In the NT, Ruth's place is valorized by her inclusion in the Matthean genealogy where she is joined by Tamar, Rahab and the wife of Urriah the Hittite. These women, some of questionable repute, and non-Israelite descent prepare the way for the scandal of Jesus' birth and the for the gospel's gracious inclusion of all nations.

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