

The Hebrew Short Story

RUTH



Canonical Context



- Jewish Canon = part of the Writings, among the ‘festal scrolls’ ...

Ruth is read publicly in synagogues during the Feast of Weeks (Shavuot) which celebrates the harvest season, a prominent motif in the book. The feast also celebrates the giving of the Torah to Moses and the book’s emphasis on faithfulness also makes it appropriate to this feast, in spite of its being about foreign women.

Canonical Context



- In the Christian Canon the book appears between Judges and 1 Samuel
- Part of the transition between a time ‘when there was no king in Israel’ (Judges) and the emergence of the monarchy (Samuel)
- Opening verse sets the story around the time of the Judges with increasing violence and warfare .. and it offers a different vision - co-operation, faithfulness and harmony resulting in blessing.

The 'Oddness' of Ruth



- Only biblical book to be named after a foreign woman
- Women are its heroines
- Naomi has been stripped of everything that offers security and it is the faithfulness of another woman that eventually brings her security
- Story dwells entirely on issues around women and women's voices

Literary Structure



- Model short story: crisis and resolution
- Structured symmetrically in 4 chapters: loss then restoration
- Movement from emptiness to fullness is emphasised by repetition of key words and phrases ...

Symmetrical:

First 3 scenes of chapter 1 - loss and lament are balanced by..

Final 3 scenes of chapter 4 - restoration and celebration

Language:

Chapter 1: Famine, calamity, full to empty

Chapter 4: Conceived, blessed, restorer, life, nourish

Date



- Much debate over date - no clear consensus
- Probably somewhere between pre and post exile. Some scholars say it could have been David and Solomon others as late as post exile. Linguistic features would suggest somewhere between late pre-exile and post exile.

Purpose and Themes



- Raises questions of gender, ethnicity and otherness
- Heseed: faithfulness that is faithfulness of God to people but people to people - both are beyond cultural norms and accepted behaviour. Ruth does not do what is expected, she remains faithful to Naomi. She is extremely forward, even audacious, in her behaviour with Boaz. God too is pictured in a transgressive way here in that he demonstrates faithfulness to Moabite women - gentiles, those outside his Covenant people.

Purpose and Themes



- Demonstrates an inclusive attitude towards outsiders - challenges norms of Israel/Judah
- Functions as a counterpoint to those books that are not so hospitable to the outsider (Ezra/Nehemiah)
- Highlight possibility of mutual transformation by the presence of a 'stranger' in 'our' midst.

Application...



- How might we use the book of Ruth today?

Faithfulness

Valuing
'Other'

Emptiness

Blessing

Lament

Resourcefulness