



RUTH

Survey of the Old Testament: The Writings

Fall 2006

Introduction

Name & Location

The book is named Ruth after its primary character, in both the Hebrew and Greek arrangements of the Old Testament.

In the English bible, Ruth is sandwiched between Judges and 1 Samuel. Judges tells of a time of great apostasy in Israel. 1 Samuel tells of the rise of Israel's golden age under King David. Ruth bridges those events by showing that in the midst of Israel's great sin under the Judges, there was still a remnant who were faithful to Yahweh, and that from that remnant came David.

In the Hebrew bible, Ruth begins the Megilloth, a series of 5 poetic books which are read at five different Jewish festivals during the year. Ruth was read during the Feast of Weeks (also known as Pentecost). The Megilloth follows Proverbs. Proverbs ends with a description of the ideal wife. Ruth is a living example of that ideal¹.

The Megilloth (Scrolls)

Ruth (read at Pentecost)
Song of Songs (read at Passover)
Lamentations (read on the 9th of Ab)
Ecclesiastes (read at the Feast of Booths)
Esther (read at Purim)

Date & Author

The author is technically anonymous. Jewish tradition states that Ruth was written by Samuel. No matter the author, the book could not have been written before David was born, and most likely occurred after David became king. Most likely it was written after David was made King of Judah, but not yet of all Israel (see *Purpose* below).

Historical Background

In Ruth 1:1 the author tells us that this story takes place during the time of the judges. This time of judges was a 400 year period between Israel's conquest of Canaan and the rise of the monarchy under King Saul. During this time Israel began worshipping the gods of their neighbors (Judges 2:11-13) and the nation plunged into a four century period of political and moral chaos. As a result, God no longer gave Israel an easy conquest of those nations (Judges 2:20-21) and instead raised up foreign oppressors. The moral chaos is summarized in the book of Judges as follows:

In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes. (Judges 21:25)

Purpose

Ruth was most likely written to support the Davidic claims to the throne of Israel by showing:

- 1) The royal Messianic line goes through Boaz and Ruth to David,
- 2) David comes from a heritage of people who were faithful to Yahweh through the period of the judges.

¹ Barry Davis. "Ruth." *Genesis through Song of Solomon*. (Class notes from Multnomah Biblical Seminary, fall 2003), 1.

However, Ruth also has Messianic overtones. Boaz and Ruth are clearly put in the royal lineage of David, from whom also Jesus will descend. Furthermore, Boaz's role as kinsman-redeemer is a type of our redeemer, Christ.

Structure

The narrative of Ruth is a short story or novella, which divides easily according to the location of the events taking place.

Ruth & Naomi Return to Bethlehem	Ruth Gleans in Boaz's Field	Ruth Visits Boaz at Night	Boaz Obtains Legal Right to Redeem Ruth	Boaz & Ruth's Marriage and Offspring
Setting: In Moab	Setting: Boaz's Field	Setting: Boaz' Threshing Floor	Setting: The City Gates	Setting: Boaz's House
(Chapter 1)	(Chapter 2)	(Chapter 3)	(4:1-12)	(4:13-22)

Theme

Through Ruth will come a redeemer, both presently in Boaz, but also prophetically in the coming of the Messiah-King through the descendants of Boaz and Ruth.

Blessed is Yahweh, who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name become famous in Israel (Ruth 4:14)

Ruth & Naomi Return to Bethlehem (Chapter 1)

Family Background (1:1-5)

The book of Ruth begins with a background to the story. Elimelech and Naomi are from Bethlehem, but because of famine, they moved to Moab. Their two sons took Moab women for wives. Interestingly, while we know the names of the sons (Mahlon and Chilion) and their wives (Ruth and Orpah), we do not know which woman married which son. Soon afterwards, all of the men die, leaving three widows.

Naomi's Plan & Blessing (1:6-13)

With the death of her husband and sons, Naomi plans to return to Bethlehem. Naomi's decision to return to Bethlehem was a result of a report that Yahweh had visited his people and that the famine was over (1:6). Bethlehem means "house of bread," in Hebrew, making this report more poignant.

Naomi suggests that her daughters-in-law go back to their families, and she sends Ruth and Orpah on their way after asking Yahweh's blessing on them (1:8-9). When her daughters-in-law resist returning to their families, Naomi asks them "do I have sons yet in my womb?" (1:11). According to the Law of Moses (Deuteronomy 25:5), when a man dies leaving a widow, the brother of that man is to marry the widow and take her under his protection. Furthermore, any children which come from the brother are to be considered the deceased's children and will therefore inherit the property of the dead brother. When Naomi states that she is too old to bear additional sons, she is telling her widowed daughters-in-law that they aren't going to find any replacement husbands from her.

Ruth's Statement of Faith (1:14-18)

Orpah takes Naomi's advise and, after a tearful farewell, returns to her Moabite family. Ruth, however, decides to leave Moab and accompany Naomi back to Bethlehem.

What motivates Ruth to stay with Naomi? Does she have some sense of loyalty to her mother-in-law? Does she think she has a better chance of finding a husband with Naomi? Ruth stays with

Naomi not as much because of her loyalty to her, but because, having lived with Naomi, she has become a follower of Naomi's God.

We know Naomi was a follower of Yahweh, the God of Israel, for she believes that Yahweh is the one who provided food to Bethlehem (1:6) and she believes in the sovereignty of Yahweh, declaring that he is the cause of her current plight (1:13). Her faith must have intrigued Ruth, and so she desires to also become a follower of Yahweh. This is made evident in a statement of faith in Ruth 1:16:

For where you will go, I will go, and where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people and your God, my God.

The Return to Bethlehem (1:19-21)

So Naomi and Ruth return to Bethlehem. There the women of the city are surprised to see Naomi return. Naomi, however, asks them to no longer call her Naomi, which means beautiful and agreeable, but Mara, which means bitter (1:20). For Yahweh has dealt with her very bitterly. Naomi is like Job, in that she understands that her God, Yahweh has dealt her the bitter blow, but she has not abandoned her faith in Him. As she grieves through her losses, she continues to have a contagious faith that Ruth finds intriguing. It is through Naomi's faith in the God in the midst of tragedy that Ruth comes to trust in her God.

Ruth Gleans in Boaz's Field (Chapter 2)

Ruth Asks Permission to Glean (2:1-3)

Once in Bethlehem, these two widows have no means of support. So Ruth asks her mother-in-law if she can go glean in the fields. According to the Law of Moses, the Israelites were to not harvest the corners of their fields or pick up grain which might fall out during the harvest so that the poor could come and glean the fields (Leviticus 19:9, Deuteronomy 24:19). This was God's welfare program in Israel.

How did Ruth end up in Boaz's field? Boaz was obedient to the law by leaving the corners of his fields un-harvested and by leaving the droppings for the gleaners. Most people during the time of the judges would not have. Ruth went to Boaz's field for his would have been one of the few where there was something to actually glean.

Boaz Meets Ruth (2:4-7)

Boaz doesn't just leave his field available for gleaners, but he rides out to greet and bless those who are gleaning in his field. Boaz is reminding the gleaners that it is not he who is providing food for them, but Yahweh, through his perfect law is providing for them. This tells us something of Boaz's character. He is a follower of Yahweh and he is a humble man.

As he greets the gleaners, Ruth catches his attention, and he asks his servants "whose young woman is this?" (2:5) Those who are more romantic might see this as a "love at first sight" for Boaz. More likely Boaz was familiar with his normal gleaners, and Ruth was new in the field. His concern does not seem to be romantic, but pragmatic, for his question is really asking "under whose protection does this young woman fall?" Boaz was showing genuine concern for this new gleaner, wanting to make sure she was okay.

Boaz's Instructions for Ruth (2:8-16)

Upon learning Ruth's story, Boaz instructs Ruth not to glean in any other field (2:8-9). The romantics might see this as Boaz's attempt to be with his new found love. More likely, however, he recognizes her as a relative and he knows he has some responsibility for her protection. He asks her

not to go to other fields, for he knows a young woman in most fields in Israel would be subject to violence during the days of the judges.

Boaz is also impressed with Ruth because of her devotion to Naomi and her statement of faith (2:11). Boaz indicates that Ruth has sought refuge, not in his fields, but in Yahweh the god of Israel (2:12), revealing that Ruth's desire to follow Naomi was a spiritual motivation.

Boaz's statement also tells us of his humility. He considers his charity to be Yahweh's reward and protection (2:12), not his own. It is not he who is providing and protecting Ruth, but Yahweh's sovereignty and providence.

News Brought to Naomi (2:17-22)

Ruth brings news of the day's events home to Naomi. Naomi's response is to bless Yahweh (2:20), for she knows Boaz to be a relative. It was no accident that Ruth found the field of Boaz, but it was the provision of God. Naomi knew that Ruth would be safe and protected under Boaz.

Ruth Visits Boaz at Night (Chapter 3)

Naomi's Plan (3:1-5)

Naomi, however, hatches a plan so that Ruth might find even more security and provision from Boaz. She tells Ruth to clean up, put on some perfume and her finest clothes and then go down and wait for Boaz to fall asleep.

Naomi is telling Ruth to go and lie with Boaz, seducing and tempting him sexually. She tells Ruth to wait until after he has been drinking and "uncover his feet." This would analogous to today saying, "take off his pants."² When it is dark and no one can see you, say to the man, "whatever you want me to do, I will do." Don't miss the sexual nature of Naomi's suggestion.

Ruth Lies with Boaz (3:6-8)

Ruth follows Naomi's plan. After a hard day threshing the wheat, Boaz has some food and drink and falls asleep. Imagine yourself in Boaz's position. He wakes up in the middle of the night, probably slightly drunk, half-dressed (his feet uncovered) with a woman lying next to him, wearing beautiful clothes and bathed in perfume.

Boaz's first question is "Who are you?" It is dark, and Boaz can not see who this woman seducing him might be. She says, "I am Ruth, your maid." But she is not his maid-servant. What is she really saying? She is saying, "You may do with me as you like."

She also is making a request that Boaz spread his covering over her, for he is a close relative. This sounds almost incestuous to our modern ears. However, in light of the Law of Moses which states that a man is to marry his brother's widow, Ruth is asking Boaz, as her relative to fulfill this duty. By saying "I am your maid, and I am your relative," she is asking him to bring her into his household and in exchange she is willing to have sexual relations with him.

Boaz's Response (3:9-13)

Boaz's response, however, reveals his noble character. He is lying half-naked with a young woman next to him inviting him to have sex with her. But he knows he does not have that right. There is another relative who is more closely related to the family, and he has the first right to marry Ruth.

Boaz praises Ruth for not chasing after younger men. This implies that Boaz was not a young man. But Ruth is not looking for a handsome young man, but a man of character. She had developed a reputation as a "woman of excellence," (3:11), and would have been a good wife for any young handsome Israelite. But Ruth's concern was for her and Naomi's security.

² Davis, 6.

Rather than have his way with Ruth, Boaz tells her to lie down and in the morning he would talk to this other relative. When Boaz asks her to remain this night, there is nothing sexual in this request. This term is never used as a euphemism for sex in the Old Testament. Boaz retains her honor and waits until he has legal permission to marry her before having relations with Ruth.

Ruth Returns Home (3:14-18)

In the morning, Ruth gets up and leaves before anyone knows she was there. Boaz gives her some extra food and she goes home to tell Naomi what has happened.

Boaz Obtains Legal Right to Redeem Ruth (4:1-12)

The Offer of Redemption Made (4:1-6)

The next morning, Boaz goes to the city gate and sits with the elders to negotiate with the closer relative. Boaz explains the situation, offering the man the opportunity to redeem the land of Elimelech. Evidently Naomi's husband has some land near Bethlehem which the family is entitled, under the law, to buy back from the current owner. The Law of Moses provided for land to be kept in the family, thus keeping the original allocation of land under Joshua. Most likely, Elimelech sold his land when he moved to Moab, and now Boaz is offering to the "closer relative" the opportunity to redeem the land from its current owner.

However, there is a catch. If you redeem the land, you also have to redeem Naomi and Ruth (4:5). If you want the land, you also have to marry Ruth and raise children with her. With this additional condition, the closer relative declines to redeem the land and his relatives.

Why did the close relative not marry Ruth? He was afraid of dividing his inheritance (4:6). Ruth's offspring would inherit all the land of Naomi, plus this offspring would get a portion of his inheritance as well. It would be a tremendous burden to raise a son who still retains the name of Ruth's husband. Furthermore, it is likely that this man may have already been married with his own offspring. So sadly, this man rejects his duty under the law to act as the kinsman-redeemer.

The Ruling of the Elders (4:7-12)

The closer relative releases his right as redeemer to Boaz in the sight of all the elders. Then, according to the tradition of the time (4:7), he removes his sandal and gives it to Boaz (4:8). Boaz restates the terms of the agreement, namely that he is buying the land that belonged to Elimelech and his family (4:9). Furthermore, he has acquired Ruth, with whom he will raise up descendants in the name of the deceased (4:10). The elders agree to the judgment, and they add two blessings:

- 1) May Yahweh make Ruth like Rachel and Leah (4:11).
- 2) May your hose be like Perez (4:12).

Rachel and Leah were the wives of Jacob, and they became the mothers of the twelve tribes of Israel. Perez was the first born of Judah and Tamar. This was the royal line of Israel, and therefore part of the Messianic line. The elders know that Boaz is part of that line, and that any child born to Boaz and Ruth would also be part of that royal lineage. The elders are blessing this family line and are very aware of this significance of this lineage. They are awaiting a Messiah-King who will be born from Boaz and Ruth's descendants.

Boaz & Ruth's Marriage and Offspring (4:13-22)

Boaz and Ruth marry, and Yahweh enables her to conceive and have a son. The birth of this son has created excitement amongst the people of Bethlehem. This cause for this excitement is found in the blessing of the women of Bethlehem.

Blessed is Yahweh, who has not left you without a redeemer today, and may his name be famous in Israel. May he also be to you a restorer of life and a sustainer of your old age; for your daughter-in-law, who loves you and is better to you than seven sons, has given birth to him. (Ruth 4:14-15).

Who is this redeemer to whom the chorus of women refer? In the most immediate sense, Boaz is this redeemer. He has restored and sustained Naomi and Ruth. But in another sense, it seems that the women are not referring to Boaz, but to the recently born child. This child shall be the redeemer, restorer and sustainer. This blessing is a highly prophetic statement.

Given the elders reference to Perez, the people of that day seem to have understood that there is some significance in this family line. Furthermore, the author of the book sees this significance as well. In 4:16-21 he shows us the lineage from Perez to Boaz, to the newly born Obed all the way to the great king, David. This was understood to be the royal lineage.

But in hindsight, we clearly see the Messianic aspect of the blessing. This child is now part of the Messianic line, and the offspring of Boaz and Ruth would become the ultimate redeemer, Jesus Christ.

Boaz and Ruth followed Yahweh at a time when Israel was at its moral and spiritual low point. Ruth, a Moabite woman, was a better follower of Yahweh than most Israelites, for, like Tamar, Ruth had concern for seeing her husband's lineage continue. As a result, God blessed her by placing her in the family line of King David and eventually of her ultimate redeemer, Jesus Christ.

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