

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

An Exegetical Study of the Book of Ruth

Submitted to Dr. Donald Holdrige,
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the completion of

OBST 515 – D05

Old Testament Orientation I

by

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August 11, 2019

Introduction to Ruth

The Books Place in Jewish and Christian Canon

The Book of Ruth is a historical Biblical work considered canon by both Jews and Christians.¹ It is part of the earliest known lists of canonical books and is referenced in the Gospel books of Matthew and Luke, as well as by the Jewish historian Josephus. In Hebrew manuscripts it is one of the five Festal Scrolls to be read at the five major festivals of the Jewish liturgical year. There is no evidence of the historical author of Ruth outside of late Rabbinic tradition, but this was common in Ancient Near East literature.²

Historical Background

The Book of Ruth took place in Judah and Moab during the period of the Judges. It was a 300-410-year period between the death of Joshua and the birth of Samuel. This would place the events either around 1400-1050 B.C. or 1220-1050 B.C.³ In these periods of history the major powers of the Ancient Near East such as the Egyptians, Hittites, and Mesopotamians were in decline. This allowed smaller nations to grow in the Levant such as the Moab and Israel.⁴ Since the setting of the book is “when the judges ruled,” (Ruth 1:1)⁵ it was written in a later period.⁶

¹ The only known challenge to canonical status came from a 9th Century AD Nestorian Christian commentator. See Word Biblical Commentary on Ruth-Esther.

² Frederick W. Bush. *Word Biblical Commentary: Ruth-Esther*. (Zondervan, 2015), Kindle.

³ John H. Walton, and Dale W Manor. *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary: Joshua, Judges & Ruth*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), Kindle.

⁴ Walton, Ruth Introduction.

⁵ Unless otherwise noted, Bible verses are sourced from *The Holy Bible: New Testament: ESV English Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009.

⁶ Arthur E. Cundall, and Leon Morris. *Judges and Ruth: An Introduction and Commentary*. Vol. 7. Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 218. Logos.

At the start of the book a land-owning family in the tribe of Judah lived in the town of Bethlehem, which means “city of bread”. This family included a husband Elimelech “God is King”, a wife Naomi “my pleasant one”⁷, and two sons Mahlon “blotted out”⁸ and Chilion “perished”⁹ (Ruth 1:1-2). There is debate over whether the son’s names are historical or if they symbolize the condition of the family in Moab. There are historical instances of such names in other languages such as Ugaritic and Phoenician.¹⁰

Bethlehem was roughly 5 miles south of Jerusalem, which was under the control of the Jebusites as it had not yet been conquered by King David.¹¹ Israel existed as a loose confederate of tribes in Canaan that were surrounded by other Levant peoples such as the Moabites, Phoenicians, Syrians, Ammonites, and Philistines.¹² While they had conquered some of Canaan under the leadership of Joshua, Israel would not see its greatest land holdings until the monarchy and would have many battles with its neighbors.

The nation was under the dominion of Yahweh, the God of gods (Deuteronomy 10:17). Yahweh created all things but placed the Gentile nations under the dominion of members of His Heavenly Host after mankind’s rebellion at Tower of Babel (Deuteronomy 32:8-9). Leaving Israel was a big deal because it meant entering a territory that was under the dominion of these other beings who themselves had rebelled against their maker (Psalm 82:6-7).

⁷ Victor P. Hamilton. 2008. *Handbook on the Historical Books: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles, Ezra-Nehemiah, Esther*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), 190. Word Search Bible.

⁸ Kenneth A. Matthews. “Mahlon (Person).” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 476. Logos.

⁹ Kenneth A. Matthews. “Chilion (Person).” in *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*. (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 908. Logos.

¹⁰ Matthews, 908.

¹¹ Freedman, 476.

¹² Walton, Ruth Introduction.

Moab was a nation that existed between the Dead Sea and the Arabian Desert in what is modern day Jordan. The people of Moab were descendants of Abraham's nephew, Lot who was tricked into engaging in incestuous sex with his daughters.¹³ While they had common descendants, the Moabites ran afoul of Yahweh and His people during the Exodus. Their king, Balak, hired the seer Balaam to curse Israel (Numbers 22-24) (Deuteronomy 23:3-4). In the period of the Judges, Moab was hostile towards Israel and periodically conducted successful invasions when Yahweh strengthened their king as a judgement against Israel (Judges 3:12-30).

Moab was also under the dominion of the god Chemosh. Chemosh was associated with the god Ashtar in the Baal cycle and the god Ares during the Hellenistic period. In the Divided Kingdom during the reign of Jehoshaphat, another king of Moab attempted to use supernatural means to defeat Israel and was more successful than his predecessor. He sacrificed his first-born son to Chemosh, leading to a "great wrath against Israel" that caused Yahweh's people to retreat to their own lands.¹⁴ 2 Kings 3:6

Theme (What the book is about)

Yahweh will work through the loyalty and kindness of His servants to bless the lives of others.

¹³ Cundall, p. 889.

¹⁴ K. van der Toorn, Bob Becking, and Pieter Willem van der Horst. *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible (D.D.D.)*. (Leiden, Netherlands: E.F. Brill, 1995), 186-188. It should be noted that this victory wasn't over Yahweh, but only over His people who lost faith in Him at the sight of the human sacrifice. See the Faithlife Study Bible entry on 2 Kings 3:27.

Purpose (Why the book was written)

Yahweh will work in the life of His faithful servants, whether they are from His covenant people or the disinherited Gentile nations.

Key Verse

Then the women said to Naomi, “Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! (Ruth 4:14)

Interpretation and Exposition

Famine and tragedy for the family of Elimelech (Ruth 1:1-5)

With such animosity between Israel and the Moabites it was surely a dire situation that led Elimelech and his family to leave the “city of bread” and the land of Yahweh to live on the plains of Moab. While Israel was in a drought, strong winds from the Jordan Valley often brought more moisture from clouds and help Moab avoid the same fate.¹⁵ At some point after the move Elimelech died leaving Naomi a widow. She is then provided for by her sons, Mahlon and Chilion, who married the Moabite women Ruth “friend” and Orpah “mane”¹⁶ respectively. After 10 years both sons also died, leaving behind three widows and no children. (Ruth 1:1-5).

¹⁵ Walton, *Ruth Enters Judah*.

¹⁶ James Strong. *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible*. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009)

The plight of widows and cosmic geography in the Ancient Near East (Ruth 1:6-18)

In the Ancient Near East, a widow who had no male relatives to rely on for support often had to resort to prostitution, selling themselves into slavery, or death. Naomi heard that the drought is over in Bethlehem and decided to return, possibly to find extended family or at least to be under the laws of gleaning¹⁷. However, there was no good reason for her daughters-in-law to follow her, so she blessed them and suggested that they find new husbands in Moab. Interestingly, she asked Yahweh to bless them instead of Chemosh, even though she planned for them to remain in the land of Moab. This showed that Naomi, despite the common belief of the Ancient Near East in cosmic geography,¹⁸ understood that Yahweh was the true God and could give blessings, even in territory under the dominion of his rebellious subordinates.

After some convincing Orpah agreed to remain in Moab, however Ruth was determined to journey to Israel with Naomi. In a now famous speech, she told Naomi that “Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried.” (Ruth 1:16-17). Not only did Ruth give up her land and her god to follow Naomi, she wanted to be buried with Naomi instead of having her bones returned to her homeland which was custom.¹⁹

¹⁷ Walton, *Ruth Enters Judah*.

¹⁸ Michael S. Heiser. *The Unseen Realm Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*. (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2015), 114-123.

¹⁹ Walton, *Ruth Enters Judah*. Perhaps the burial aspect has something to do with the fact that she is giving up her nation’s god for Yahweh. It seems likely that in her mind, having her bones returned to Moab would have exposed her to retribution from Chemosh, while being buried in Judah would give the protection of Yahweh.

The return to Bethlehem and opportunities provided by gleaning (Ruth 1:19-2:8)

Ruth and Naomi returned to Bethlehem to much excitement. This may mean that she was distinguished in the community²⁰ or that Bethlehem was a smaller community where anyone new would be news. Naomi felt that Yahweh had brought calamity upon her and suggested that her name be changed to Mara “bitter” (Ruth 1:20). Even though they were in Bethlehem, the two women were still destitute and in need of food. To remedy this Ruth asked Naomi for permission to glean in the fields as it was harvest season. Because barley matured faster than wheat, their return and her career as a gleaner most likely started in mid-to-late April.²¹ Naomi’s response of “Go, my daughter” is short and may show how “bitter” she was with her new life.²²

Gleaning was a concept set up in the Torah to allow the poor to gather grains and other foodstuffs after the harvest. What was left included the corners of the field, any crop dropped during the harvest, and any crops missed during the harvest.²³ While the wording of the beginning of the second chapter of Ruth is tricky, apparently she ended up in Boaz’s field by complete chance. The phrase used to describe Boaz is gibbor hayil which is rendered “mighty man of valor”, or a man of ability. This denoted a man that was wealthy enough to have armed employees to keep him safe. In the turmoil of the period of the Judges this made Boaz a valuable option for a mate and protector.²⁴ Thus before she had even realized it, Ruth’s gleaning had two purposes: solving the need for food and providing a chance to interact with a potential redeemer.

²⁰ Cundall, 239.

²¹ Walton, Ruth Enters Judah.

²² Joseph Coleson, Lawson G. Stone, and Jason Driesbach. *Cornerstone Biblical Commentary: Joshua, Judges, Ruth*. (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 2012), 520. Logos.

²³ James M. Freeman, and Harold J. Chadwick. *Manners & Customs of the Bible*. (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1998), 199. Logos.

²⁴ Walton, Ruth Meets Boaz.

Ruth asked for permission to glean from the foreman and then proceeded to follow behind the reapers, gathering what they dropped or left behind. Instead of there being separate fields owned by different people, the crops in Bethlehem would all be in one large field outside of town, partitioned with stones for the family that owned each part.²⁵ While Ruth was working, Boaz came to his field from Bethlehem and saw her. He asked the foreman who the woman was and was told that she was the Moabite that came with Naomi from Moab. The foreman also comments that she has been working for a long period with only a short rest.

Ruth and Boaz meet and Boaz's kindness (Ruth 2:8-17)

Boaz approached Ruth and referred to her as “my daughter.” This showed the age disparity between the two. According to sources their ages ranged from eighty for Boaz and forty for Ruth in the Midrash Zutta,²⁶ to mid-forties for Boaz and twenty-five to thirty for Ruth.²⁷ Boaz instructed her to only glean from his field and to do so alongside his female workers. He also offered her access to water, a resource that had to be either brought out to the field or gotten through a trip back to the town well. Finally, he instructed his young male workers not to touch her. The lemma used her for touch means to strike, touch violently, or afflict.²⁸ While gleaning was part of the Law, one can imagine that the employees might act violently against those gleaning too close to the harvest to prevent theft of harvestable crops. Given that this was the time of the Judges when “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25), it is also possible that field owners might forcibly discourage gleaning to maximize their crop yields. This

²⁵ Cundall, 261.

²⁶ “Boaz” JewishEncyclopedia.com. <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/3444-boaz>. (retrieved August 9, 2019). In addition, the Midrash claims that Boaz passed away the day after the wedding!

²⁷ Hamilton, 198.

²⁸ Jeremy Thompson. Bible Sense Lexicon: Dataset Documentation. (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2015)

seems likely due to Ruth's decision to glean only in the fields of anyone who would let her.²⁹ A final benefit of his employees leaving Ruth alone was that she was able to glean areas of the field before anyone else.³⁰

One way or the other gleaning was a dangerous job and Ruth must have realized the special treatment she was being given as she fell on her face and asked Boaz why he was being so kind to a foreign woman. (Ruth 2:10). He responded that he had heard about Ruth's loyalty to Naomi and apparently wished to reward her for helping his relative. He stated that she had come to take refuge under the wings of Yahweh, a statement that would have additional meaning later that night. Boaz then fed her lunch and when she left to continue working, instructed his employees to leave some of their bundled barley for her to glean. Between Ruth's industrious work ethic and the special treatment, by the end of the day she had gathered an ephah, or around four gallons of barley. This would have fed both women for several weeks.³¹

²⁹ Coleson, 522.

³⁰ Cundall, 266.

³¹ John D. Barry, Douglas Mangum, Derek R. Brown, Michael S. Heiser, Miles Custis, Elliot Ritzema, Matthew M. Whitehead, Michael R. Grigoni, and David Bomar. *Faithlife Study Bible*. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016), Ruth 2:17. Logos.

Naomi and Ruth work to redeem their family (Ruth 2:18-3:14)

When Ruth returned to her mother-in-law, Naomi was surprised at the large amount of grains and asked who had shown Ruth such favor. When she revealed it was Boaz, Naomi began to reverse her feelings towards Yahweh. Where before she wanted to be called “bitter” due to Yahweh’s treatment of her, she then declared that He had shown kindness to both the living and the dead. From this point on in the narrative, Naomi would increasingly see the blessings of Yahweh on her and her family.

Naomi saw the providence in Ruth meeting Boaz and knew that he could become their kinsmen-redeemer. This was a Levirate practice that would not only see the women taken care of, but would restore the line of her husband, Elimelech.³² She informed Ruth that Boaz was a close relative that could redeem them. She also told Ruth to continue gleaning in Boaz’s field “lest in another field you be assaulted” (Ruth 2:22), another indication that gleaning was a dangerous profession. The gleaning in Boaz’s field continued until the end of the harvest season, roughly two months.³³

When it came time for the threshing and winnowing of the harvest, Naomi formulated a plan to improve the future of her daughter-in-law and herself. She had Ruth anoint herself,³⁴ hide her identity with her cloak, and sneak to the threshing floor where Boaz would be guarding his grain. There, she was to note where Boaz would sleep, then sneak there once he is asleep to “uncover his feet and lie down” (Ruth 3:3-4). There are different theories about Naomi’s instructions. One is that uncovering Boaz’s feet would make him cold so that he would wake up

³² Barry, Ruth 2:20.

³³ Barry, Ruth 2:23.

³⁴ Some commentaries have her getting dressed in her best clothes and others doubt that she would have more than one set of clothes due to her financial status. Would it be possible that, due to the large amount of grain she gleans, that the two women sell some of the excess? There does not seem to be anything prohibiting the practice.

to notice she was there.³⁵ Another takes “feet” to be a euphemism for genitals. This term is used elsewhere in the Bible such as in Exodus when Moses’s wife, Zipporah, performed a circumcision-by-proxy. She touched her son’s foreskin to Moses’s “feet” to appease Yahweh and prevent Him from killing Moses.³⁶ Neither option, however, implies a sexual act. One would make Boaz cold and the other would make Ruth’s marriage intentions overtly obvious. If fornication had occurred, it very likely would have made Boaz ineligible as a kinsmen-redeemer.³⁷

One way or the other, Ruth followed the directions and headed to the threshing floor, a flattened area of hard earth away from the town where barley and wheat were threshed or crushed to help separate the stalks from the grains. Winnowing involved throwing the crushed grains up in the air to allow the lighter stalks to be blown away.³⁸ After working, Boaz would have celebrated the harvest with food and drink, and then slept with his harvest to protect it from thieves.³⁹ Once he had gone to sleep, Ruth quietly approached him and enacted Naomi’s plan.

³⁵ Barry, Ruth 3:4.

³⁶ John I. Durham. *Word Biblical Commentary: Exodus*. (Texas: Word Books, 1987), Kindle. In addition, the Exodus event covers another group descended from Abraham, the Midianites, who unlike the Moabites evidently kept at least some form of Yahweh worship since Zipporah knew exactly what to do to save her husband.

³⁷ Cundall, 284.

³⁸ Cundall, 277.

³⁹ Walton, Ruth Proposes Marriage to Boaz.

At midnight, Boaz was startled and woke up, most likely either from being cold or finding himself partially naked. He asked who the young woman lying at (his feet?) who she was. Ruth revealed her identity and used a similar statement to Boaz's previous blessing in the field, asking Boaz to marry her with the phrase "Spread your wings over your servant, for you are a redeemer." (Ruth 3:9). Boaz understood the request as the imagery was used when a man redeemed a widow. Interestingly, the practice of spreading one's garment over a widow to claim her as a wife is still practiced by some Arabs.⁴⁰

Boaz was highly flattered and touched that instead of trying to find a husband her own age, Ruth followed Israelite custom to come to him as a kinsman-redeemer. If a closer relative who has first rights to be a redeemer could be dealt with, Boaz would marry Ruth. Of note Boaz used the phrase "as Yahweh lives", making his promise an oath on God's name. If Boaz were to break his oath, he would be a blasphemer and subject to the death penalty.⁴¹

Boaz redeems the family of Elimelech (Ruth 3:15-4:12)

The agreement made; Boaz had Ruth leave early in the morning so that there was no gossip of impropriety. As stated earlier, such aspersions could have ended the Levirate marriage process before it began. Ruth was sent home with six measures of barley, probably 6 seahs or 88 pounds of grains, either as a gift or a bride price to Naomi.⁴²

⁴⁰ Cundall, 280.

⁴¹ Barry, Ruth 3:13.

⁴² Barry, Ruth 3:15.

She returned to her mother-in-law, who assured her that her potential fiancé will move quickly. Either from eagerness to marry Ruth or to fulfil his oath, Boaz would resolve the issue of the other kinsman-redeemer that day. (Ruth 3:18).

True to Naomi's word, Boaz wasted no time tracking down the relative that was first in line. Palestinian cities were built very compactly with no interior space for a city center, so traditionally the social as well as legal center of the town was at the city gates.⁴³ Boaz went and waited at the gates, knowing that the other man would eventually come through them. When he did, Boaz drew him aside along with ten of the city elders. The elders had extensive judicial powers in the city and the number ten may have been significant. For instance, in later history ten men would be required for certain Jewish religious obligations.⁴⁴

In front of the ten elders, Boaz informed the male relative that Naomi intended to sell the right to redeem land owned by Elimelech which had either been sold before they left for Moab or upon Naomi's return.⁴⁵ He also informed the man that Ruth was part of the bargain and that Boaz would complete the transaction if the relative would not. While this was not specifically part of the laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, there was evidently an understanding of a connection.⁴⁶ The relative refused his position as kinsman-redeemer over a concern about his own children's inheritances. Any resources he put into developing the land and supporting Ruth would eventually go to any children she had, lessening what his own heirs inherited.⁴⁷

⁴³ Cundall, 288.

⁴⁴ Cundall, 289.

⁴⁵ Coleson, 541.

⁴⁶ Walton, Ruth Meets Boaz.

⁴⁷ Hamilton, 199.

The redeemer gave Boaz his blessing to take his place. As was custom he removed his sandal and handed it to Boaz in front of the elders, making the transfer official.⁴⁸ Then Boaz, before the elders and everyone else present at the gate, declared his purchase of all of the property of Elimelech, Chilion, and Mahlon. He also announced that he would marry Ruth to perpetuate the name of the dead. The people agreed to their role as witnesses and wish him the fortune of his ancestors Rachel and Leah, as well as Perez who was also born from Levirate marriage.

The birth of Obed and the genealogy of King David (Ruth 4:13-17)

The Book of Ruth ends with the marriage of Boaz and Ruth and the genealogy of David. Unlike with her former husband Mahlon, Ruth was able to conceive with Boaz and gave birth to a son, Obed. Naomi, who had previously asked to be called “bitter”, took well to having a baby in the family and became his nurse. The genealogy that ends the Book of Ruth begins with Perez, the child born from Levirate marriage to Judah and ends with the birth of King David. At a glance this would seem to be a problem placing only ten generations between Perez and David. Perez was born centuries before the Exodus and David was born after the period of the Judges. This is massively more time than can be accounted for by the lifespans of ten generations.

⁴⁸ Cundall, 296.

However, the genealogy in Ruth is what is called a linear genealogy and has a unique function. Linear genealogies connect a contemporary person with past prominent ancestors to support claims, roles, and power. The Ruth genealogy legitimizes the position of King David by connecting him to his ancestors in the tribe of Judah. For instance, Aminadab was the father-in-law of Aaron and his son Nahshon is prominent in Exodus.⁴⁹

Conclusion/Applications

1. Yahweh works in the lives of His followers no matter where they are. While the life of Naomi is like Job in its tragedies, in the end Yahweh has put people in her path that will redeem her family and give her happiness by the end of her life. Even when she is at her most bitter, she has Ruth as a faithful companion and then Boaz as a redeemer.
2. Yahweh will work to redeem all nations, not just His covenant people in Israel. The genealogy of Jesus as found in Matthew 1:2-11 includes gentile women including Rehab and Ruth. As previously stated, linear genealogies are about connecting a contemporary person to their important ancestors. The author of Matthew, presumably the Apostle Matthew,⁵⁰ felt it was important to include a Moabite woman in the genealogy of Jesus Christ. He does the same with Rehab, the prostitute from Jericho. Both were Gentile women of little status in their day but became important ancestors of the savior of all mankind.

⁴⁹ Cundall, 306.

⁵⁰ Thomas Lea, and David Alan. Black. *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*. (United States: Andrews McMeel, 2015), 169. Wordsearch Bible.

3. God wants us to be kind to strangers and the poor, even when they are from foreign nations with foreign customs. The laws around gleaning provided a source of food to the poor, no matter if they were an Israelite or a foreigner. At the same time, the Book of Ruth shows that even though God wants us to act kindly to others, its up to the individual to follow through.

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