

BOOK OF RUTH

CLASS NOTES

The Book of Ruth is set during the dark period of the Judges. It is a story of how faithful and righteous people can be used of the Lord to restore empty and brokenhearted people. While it is easy to focus on the exhilarating relationship between Boaz and Ruth, the central relationship in the book is really the relationship between Yahweh and Naomi.

Introductory Issues

Message

We suggest that the message of the book is, “The faithful and righteous are a means for God to restore empty and brokenhearted people.”

Title

The title of the book in English, Latin, Greek (LXX), and Hebrew is “Ruth,” the namesake of a principle character of the book. The name Ruth (רוּת) means “friendship.” In the Jewish arrangement of the books, Ruth is included in the Writings, and in particular among the Megilloth or “five scrolls, a collection that also includes Song of Solomon, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther.

Authorship

The Book of Ruth is silent regarding the identity of its author. Later Jewish tradition identified Samuel as the author (*Baba Bathra* 14b). Another suggestion is the prophet Nathan. But, the fact is, interpreters simply do not know for certain who authored the book.

Date

The issue of dating Ruth really involves two issues: (1) the date of the events, (2) the date of writing. The date of the events contained in the Book of Ruth is tied to the dating of Exodus from Egypt since the events of Ruth are linked to the period of the Judges and the period of Judges is linked to the Conquest. We have already suggested that the Exodus from Egypt occurred in 1446 B.C. and that the Conquest and events described in Joshua covered approximately 1406–1380. The period of the Judges then covers 1380–1045 B.C. Ruth is set during the period of the Judges (1:1). More specifically one might surmise that Ruth lived during the latter half of the twelfth century by tracing the genealogy back from David who began to rule in 1010/11 B.C. If this is correct, then Ruth may have lived during the judgeship of Gideon.¹

¹ John W. Reed, “Ruth,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press Publications, Victor Books, 1985), 415-16.

The dating of the writing of the book is tied to the issue of authorship but more significantly to the genealogy which closes the book. If one assumes that this genealogy was not merely appended to the book at a later time then the reference to David would obviously point to a date of composition during or after David's lifetime. The date of writing might also be related to one's perception of the purpose of the book. For example, some suggest that Ruth was written to explain David's origins or as a response to exclusivist tendencies in the post-exilic period.

Original Audience

The original recipients of Ruth are not explicitly identified. Presumably, it was originally written during the period of the united monarchy since David is mentioned in 4:22.

Historical Setting

As we have already noted, Ruth is set during the period of the Judges (1:1). For the historical background to the Book of Ruth see the discussion in the argument on Judges. The only internal evidence that the reader is provided is that the events of the book occurred during a period of famine, a not too unusual occurrence in Canaan.

Purpose

The exact purpose of Ruth is debated. The options are too numerous to discuss in detail, but several are worth noting:² Ruth was written to (1) provide an account of David's ancestry, (2) to protest against the nationalism and exclusivism of Ezra/ Nehemiah by pointing out that David married a Moabite, (3) to provide an illustration of Levirate marriage, (4) to teach about God's sovereignty, and (5) to provide a contrasting picture of faithfulness and hope in the midst of the dark age of the Judges. While there are elements of truth in all the purposes stated above, we suggest that the last is the main purpose for the book.

Structure

Many interpreters outline the Book of Ruth either in a fairly straightforward narratival fashion. Some such as Frederick Bush go one step farther and take the narratival sections and present them as acts in a play (complete with scenes and acts).³ While Bush's approach might be didactically helpful, it is unlikely that Ruth was structured this way, if for no other reason than, the dramatic form was not developed until well after Ruth was likely written. Other interpreters

² For a more comprehensive listing of the various purposes see F. B. Huey, Jr., "Ruth," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 511–12.

³ Bush's four main acts are as follows:

- Act 1. Prologue and Problem: Death and Emptiness (1:1–22)
- Act 2. Ruth Meets Boaz, Naomi's Relative, on the Harvest Field (2:1–23)
- Act 3. Naomi Sends Ruth to Boaz on the Threshing Floor (3:1–18)
- Act 4. Resolution and Epilogue: Life and Fullness (4:1–22)

Frederic Bush, *Ruth/Esther*, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 9 (Dallas: Word, 1996), 56.

have outlined the book along the lines of plot structure.⁴ André LaCocque suggests that the structure of the book follows the changes of fortune and movement of the characters.⁵ While something can be said for all of these approaches, we will develop a more traditional narrational outline.

Analytical Outline

- I. Naomi and her family experience tragedy (1:1–22).
 - A. Fleeing famine in Bethlehem Naomi’s family finds death in Moab (1:1–5).
 - B. Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem (1:6–10).
 - C. Ruth decides to return with Naomi (1:11–18).
 - D. Naomi and Ruth arrive in Bethlehem and Naomi expresses her bitterness (1:19–22).
- II. Ruth meets Boaz, Naomi’s kinsman while gleaning in his field (2:1–23).
 - A. Ruth gleanes unknowingly in Boaz’s field (2:1–3).
 - B. Ruth meets Boaz who treats her with kindness (2:4–16).
 - C. Ruth obtains much grain and Naomi identifies Boaz as one of her kinsman redeemers (2:17–23).
- III. Naomi instructs Ruth to go to Boaz on the threshing floor (3:1–18).
 - A. Naomi instructs Ruth (3:1–5).
 - B. Ruth follows Naomi’s instructions and Boaz offers to redeem Ruth (3:6–13).
 - C. Ruth obtains much grain and Naomi expresses confidence in Boaz (3:14–18).
- IV. Ruth is redeemed and Naomi is restored (4:1–22).
 - A. Boaz acquires the right of redemption (4:1–12).
 - B. Boaz redeems Ruth and a son is born restoring Naomi to fullness (4:13–17).
 - C. A genealogy completes the picture of Naomi’s restoration (4:18–22).

⁴ For example George Coats has identified the following plot structure for Ruth.

The exposition (1:1–2)

The first complication (1:3–22)

The solution (2:1–23)

A second complication (3:1–18)

The resolution (4:1–17)

Genealogical epilogue (4:18–22)

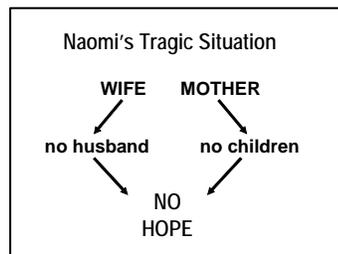
G. W. Coats, “Tale “ in *Saga, Legend, Tale, Novella, Fable: Narrative Forms in Old Testament Literature*, ed. G. W. Coats (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 64–7.

⁵ André Lacocque, *Ruth*, ed. Continental Commentary, trans. K. C. Hanson (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 17.

Exposition

I. Naomi and her family experience tragedy (1:1–22).

- A. Fleeing famine in Bethlehem Naomi's family finds death in Moab (1:1–5).
- B. Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem (1:6–10).
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II. Ruth meets Boaz, Naomi's kinsman while gleaning in his field (2:1–23).

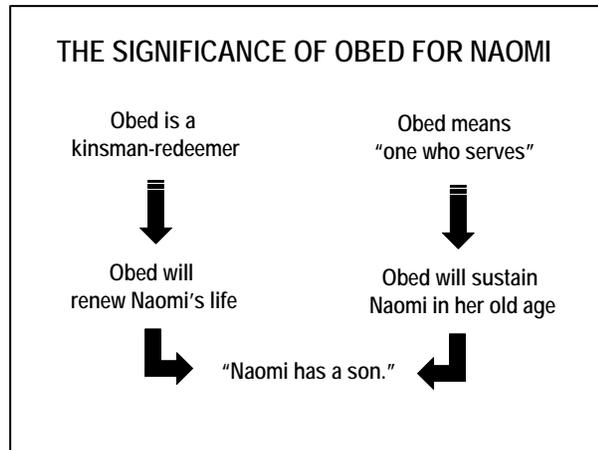
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