

Wordplay & Hased in the Book of Ruth

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The book of Ruth has long been recognized as work of artistic literature. The author uses character development, plot, and literary devices to maximum effect in order to compose a short story that not only instructs but entertains.¹ Among the literary devices deployed in Ruth, one that figures prominently is wordplay. More than just an artistic afterthought, wordplay takes center stage in presenting the plot and major themes of the book. The author's use of wordplay is central in communicating the theme of *hesed*, Yahweh's covenantal kindness and faithfulness.

Methods

Since this examination approaches the text as dramatic literature, a literary analysis serves as the primary method of study. Evidence of the book of Ruth's artistic style is found in its use of elevated prose, its attention to character development, and the author's keen awareness of structure.² Since wordplay is a literary device, a literary analysis is best suited to examine how it might be deployed, what intended effect it may have on the plot of the story, and how it might serve the story's themes. A historical analysis is also prudent as this examination deals with the meaning and history of names and customs. How one understands the ancient Hebrew practice of kinsman redemption and levirate marriage can have an effect on the interpretation of the text. In this study, wordplay will be identified and examined in each chapter, followed by an analysis of how it may contribute to the theme of *hesed*.

One potential drawback of literary analysis is the assumption by some scholars that the book of Ruth must be fictional given the heavy-handed literary style. Wordplay can especially feel suspect, since it relies on

¹ Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 2009), 251.

² Robert Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*. 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing CO 1989), 47.

the clever craftsmanship of the author. The genre of the text that this analysis has chosen is discussed below and attempts to address this issue.

As it pertains to literary and historical analysis, the following considerations regarding the composition and history of the book of Ruth are relevant:

Wordplay - Definition and Classification

At the present time there is no universally recognized definition or classification system for wordplay. Definitions borrowed from the larger literary world from Watson and Kjerkegaard have been insightful, but too limited in scope for formal analysis.³ Seminal work on the use of wordplay in the Old Testament by Casanowicz brought much needed attention to the subject, but how he defined the device was comparatively limited to what is considered wordplay today.⁴ Furthermore, Casanowicz was content to simply list his findings and did not provide formal evaluation and discussion.

As a starting point for this study, Knut Heim puts forth the following: “Wordplays are playful but significant uses of one and the same word or phrase with different meanings or of different words or phrases with the same ‘meanings’.”⁵ Backfish explains that wordplay understood in this way is ultimately a play on both meaning and sound. This play on meaning or sound or both, in varying degrees, is what many scholars have defined as wordplay and this approach is adopted here.⁶

Genre

³ Elizabeth Backfish, *Hebrew Wordplay and Septuagint Translation Technique in the Fourth Book of the Psalter*. (Edinburgh, Scotland: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), chap. 2, Kindle.

⁴ Backfish, *Hebrew Wordplay*, chap. 2, Kindle.

⁵ Backfish, *Hebrew Wordplay*, chap. 2, Kindle.

⁶ Backfish, *Hebrew Wordplay*, chap. 2, Kindle.

This analysis approaches the composition as a work of dramatic literature best classified as a “short story.”⁷ Adopting Campbell’s definition, short stories exhibit distinct literary style, involve the life affairs of typical people, and serve to entertain and instruct.⁸ Importantly, unlike “folklore” or “novella” which some have classified Ruth, a “short story” can contain historical information even though the form is stylized.⁹

Unity

This analysis also takes the position that the book of Ruth is a unified work. While earlier work by Gunkel and Myers have attempted to trace precursor materials, recent scholarship examining the literary structure of the book have led to the general consensus that the composition is more or less one of unity.¹⁰ The most disputed portion is the genealogy 4:18-22, which many have proposed to be a later addition.¹¹ But once again, literary analysis favors it as original, as it serves as an effective coda that balances with the family history found in the introduction.¹²

Analysis

Chapter 1

The predominant type of wordplay in the first chapter of Ruth is etymological.¹³ In this type of wordplay, the historic meaning of proper nouns¹⁴, such as names and places, contribute to the color and meaning of the story.

7 Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 46.

8 Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 4.

9 Hill, *A Survey of the Old Testament*, 251.

10 Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 7.

11 Lawson Younger, *Judges, Ruth*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2011), 392.

12 Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, 393.

13 Leif Hongisto, “Literary Structure and Theology in the Book of Ruth,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23, no. 1 (1985): 21.

14 Backfish, *Hebrew Wordplay*, chap. 2, Kindle.

The first etymological wordplay the reader encounters occurs in the very first line as the setting is introduced, the town of *Bethlehem*. The literal meaning of *Bethlehem* is “house of bread.”¹⁵ Hubbard suggests that this name was based on the historic reputation of the region as Bethlehem was well known for its wheat and barley. The wordplay is found in the juxtaposition of *Bethlehem* with the famine the characters face (1:1). It is a point of irony that Naomi and her family must leave the “house of bread” in order to find food.

More instances of etymological wordplay occur as characters are introduced. The meaning of *Elimelech*, the husband of Naomi, is best understood as “God/Yahweh is king.”¹⁶ This introduction of the kingship of Yahweh is significant in two senses. For one, the story of Ruth occurs during “the days when the judges ruled” (1:1a) when Israel had no king. Second, in a tragic twist of irony, the family led by “God is king” must in a sense leave the king’s territory and live in a foreign land in order to survive.¹⁷ His eventual death in the prologue highlights the perceived absence of Yahweh.

The final instance of wordplay in chapter one is made explicit by the author - the name *Naomi*. The name is best understood as “pleasant one” or “lovely one.”¹⁸ In her homecoming, Naomi’s insistence that she no longer be called “lovely” but instead *Mara*, or bitter¹⁹, speaks to the dissonance between her given name and the bitter reality of her future as a childless widow.

The etymological wordplay in chapter one serves not only an entertainment function but contribute significantly to the plot of the story and the theme of *hesed*. From a plot standpoint, it is evident that the use of wordplay thus far has been decidedly ironic. This is the author’s intentional and skillful

¹⁵ Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, 414.

¹⁶ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 87.

¹⁷ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 87.

¹⁸ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 87.

¹⁹ Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, 426.

introduction of the primary conflicts in the story. At one level, *Elimelech*, *Naomi*, and *Bethlehem* speak to the destitution faced by the two childless widows. At another level, these instances of wordplay also speak to the absence of kingship and the tenuous future of Davidic covenant. Hubbard suggests as the reader we are to ask at this point, “where is God in all of this?”²⁰

Both levels of conflict are to be addressed and resolved by *hesed*, the covenant faithfulness of Yahweh. In this sense, the wordplay of chapter one points the reader forward in anticipation to how the conflicts will ultimately be resolved. The clearest example of this is *Elimelech*. At the moment, “Yahweh is king” is incongruous to the circumstances, but what if his name is also to be taken *not* in ironic fashion? Then embedded in his name is the hope of kingship that will be realized and recognized in the concluding genealogy.²¹

Chapter 2 & 3

The predominant type of wordplay found in chapter two and three can be categorized as polysemantic. This category of wordplay takes advantage of the multiple meanings a word or sound can carry.

The first instance of polysemantic wordplay is found in Ruth’s reaction to Boaz’s generosity and kindness in 2:10 - “Why have I found favor in your eyes, that you should take notice of me, since I am a foreigner?” (ESV) The wordplay is found between the opposing meanings of *take notice/recognize* and *foreign woman* which share the same Hebrew root *nkr*.²² The meanings clash - recognize vs foreign - yet the sounds agree. Hubbard proposes a pun that would read “You have noticed the unnoticed” or “You have recognized the unrecognized.”²³ Younger also points to the alliterative wordplay that occurs with the

²⁰ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 87.

²¹ Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, 399.

²² Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, 444.

²³ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 163.

repetition of the consonants *n* and *k*. This instance of wordplay underscores one of the conflicts in the story, the plight of the foreigner, and begins to shine light on how the issue will be resolved.

A second instance of polysemantic wordplay occurs in Ruth's words of gratitude to Boaz in 2:13 - "you have comforted me and spoken kindly to your servant." (ESV) The simultaneous occurrence of *comfort* and *spoken kindly* (lit. "to speak upon the heart") is not unique to the book of Ruth and is found in other Old Testament texts.²⁴ Hubbard notes a number of occurrences which carry the meaning "to speak reassuringly," in the way Joseph allays the fears of his brothers in Genesis 34:3. The same expression is also used to describe how Yahweh comforts his people in Isaiah 40:2. In contrast, other instances of the phrase occur within the context of romantic persuasion, in the way Yahweh woos his people like a husband in Hosea 2:16. The author intends for both meanings to function simultaneously, a double entendre that not only expresses Ruth's gratitude but also hints at romantic intention.

Straddling the center of the book is perhaps the most intriguing wordplay involving two significant phrases in the book of Ruth. The first phrase is Boaz's request to the Lord that Ruth's kindness toward Naomi be rewarded as she finds refuge "under the wings" of Yahweh (2:12). The second phrase is Ruth's invitation to Boaz to spread the "edge of a garment" over her (3:9), essentially a marriage proposal.²⁵ The wordplay is in the shared word *kānāp* which functions as "wings" in Boaz's petition but functions as "edge of a garment" in Ruth's request. This skillful use of the same word in two different chapters imply a connection between the Lord's reward and Ruth and Boaz's marriage.

The wordplay of chapter two and three once again contribute significantly to the plot and theme of the story. Whereas the wordplay of chapter one set up the conflict that will be addressed by *hesed*, the wordplay in these chapters speak to the actual mechanism in which God's *hesed* will be realized. More

²⁴ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 169

²⁵ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 71.

specifically, what the wordplay in these chapters have in common is that they highlight the role Boaz will play as a faithful kinsman redeemer and also the role Ruth has played as one faithful to Naomi. God will indeed act with *hesed* and it will be found in the acts of *hesed* done by the human characters.

This is best illustrated in the wordplay involving *kānāp*. In the first phrase, “under the wings,” Younger detects covenant language, an invitation for the foreigner to find refuge under Yahweh through the faithful actions of Boaz. Ruth’s invitation then to Boaz to spread the “edge of a garment” over her takes on special meaning. On one level it is a plea for protection, an invitation for Boaz to become the wings for which the widow will find refuge through marriage.²⁶ But on another level, Ruth’s invitation takes on theological meaning and importance. Ultimately it is Yahweh’s wings where the foreigner and widow will find refuge as Ruth becomes part of the covenant people of God. This becomes doubly significant when the reader learns that it is through Boaz and Ruth’s line that king David will be born. The role wordplay plays then is critical. It highlights how Ruth and Boaz’s eventual marriage preserves not only the life of two widows, it is Yahweh’s *hesed* preserving his covenant promises to his people.

Chapter 4

The final wordplay in the book of Ruth is found in chapter four as Boaz addresses the kinsman redeemer closer in relation to Naomi. The man is not given a name, instead the author introduces him in Hebrew as *pelōnî ’almōnî*. Attempts to define *pelōnî ’almōnî* etymologically have been inconclusive. Literary analysis, however, would suggest that the expression may function as a farrago, a unique type of wordplay that “strings together words in ungrammatical fashion but whose meaning becomes clear in context.”²⁷ Examples of farrago include “hodgepodge” or “helter skelter.” In this instance, a possible translation for this anonymous redeemer is “Mr So-and-so.”²⁸ This reading is supported when the same

²⁶ Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, 462.

²⁷ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 234.

²⁸ Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, 473.

expression is examined in other Old Testament texts. In 1 Samuel 21:2, David intentionally obscures the name of a location. In this context, scholars have translated *pelōnî 'almōnî* as “such and such a place” in keeping with the rhythm and rhyme of farrago.

In chapter four, wordplay once again highlights the theme of God’s *hesed*. Interestingly, in this instance wordplay calls out one who *fails* to act in *hesed*. Given the significance that names play in the story of Ruth, both in the wordplay of chapter one and in the concluding genealogy, the absence of a formal name takes on meaning. The predominant view is that the farrago “so-and-so” is the author’s way of intentionally keeping the man nameless.²⁹ This purposeful omission implies judgment, namely that the one who failed to act as a kinsman redeemer deserves no name.³⁰ Importantly, this aspect can be lost in English translations when wordplay is not taken into account. The NIV and ESV ignore the wordplay and translate Boaz’s address as “friend.” What is lost is the potential pejorative sense the farrago “so-and-so” produces.

Conclusion

What this analysis has identified is the central role wordplay plays in presenting the theme of *hesed* in the book of Ruth. The etymological wordplay in chapter one effectively presents the primary conflict in the story and points to the need for God’s *hesed* to intervene. The wordplay in a sense asks - will the declaration that “Yahweh is king,” found in the name of Elimelech, prevail in saving Naomi from her bitterness? The polysemantic wordplay in chapter two and three are equally significant as they highlight the actual mechanism in which God’s *hesed* will be realized. Wordplay here highlights how God will indeed display his *hesed* and it will be through the faithful actions of people such as Ruth and Boaz. And finally, the farrago in chapter four stresses the primacy and esteem the author places on *hesed*. Those who act in *hesed* are celebrated and honored, but those who fail to act in *hesed* do not deserve to be named.

²⁹ Younger, *Judges, Ruth*, 474.

³⁰ Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 233.

The prominent role wordplay plays in communicating the major theme of the book of Ruth speaks to the flexibility and power of the device. The way wordplay is called out and demonstrated by Naomi in chapter one regarding her name - lovely to bitter - serves as a nod to the audience that this literary device is to be paid attention to in the story. This finding is consistent with the analysis of wordplay in other Old Testament texts such as the Psalms³¹ and Qoheleth³². When not given its proper due, wordplay can often be obscured in bible translation, but this is to the detriment of bible readers and scholars who lose out not only on the artistic quality of the text, but on the plot and theological cues that shape the message of the story. Wordplay in the Old Testament is ultimately more than just “play.” It performs the serious work of storytelling and theology and rightly deserves study and attention.

³¹ Backfish, *Hebrew Wordplay*, chap. 1, Kindle

³² Scott Noegel, ““Word play”” in Qoheleth,” *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures: ARCHIVES* 7 (2009): 1-5.

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