

ALLIANCE UNIVERSITY

Old Testament Exegetical Commentary of the Book of Ruth

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BIB331 – Hermeneutics

By

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Introduction to Ruth

1. Historical Background

When there was no central authority and "everyone did what was right in his own eyes," as stated in the book of Judges, the opening statement of Ruth (1:1) places the events of the book in this chaotic time. Not only was Israel embroiled in turmoil, but most of the ancient world was as well. Egypt, the Hittite Empire and Mesopotamia were in general decline; Greece was experiencing political upheaval, and the Sea Peoples (who included the Philistines) were causing destruction in the Mediterranean basin. The reasons for these disruptions are difficult to know, but changes in the environment of some kind, connected to a flurry of earthquakes, may have contributed to the situation. The decline of the major superpowers allowed a number of smaller peoples and states to start growing in the Levant. Among them are the Moabites, Phoenicians, Syrians, Ammonites, Philistines and, of course, the Israelites.

2. Prevailing Condition (In determining the date/author)

Although the identity of the author is unknown, the book of Ruth contrasts with the book of Judges in that the former provides an example of a common person, a Moabite lady, being faithful, while the latter describes the leadership and people of Israel as being unfaithful. Some sources claim the author may be Samuel.

The date of the book has been found to most likely be after the return from exile. This determination has four reasons behind it.

- a. The language the book is written in. It contains some Aramaic as well as Late Hebrew linguistic forms.

- b. Some of the customs and legal formalities discussed. For instance, the explanation of the ceremony of the sandal implies this book was written during a period when it was no longer practiced or even understood.
- c. The attention to genealogies expressed within the book are an allusion to those expressed within the Torah and 1 Chronicles 2:3-15. This suggests a similar time period.
- d. The decision to place Ruth with the Writings rather than the Prophets. This places Ruth closer to after the exile.

However, the book could also have been written during the exile, during the reign of Josiah, or during the era of Ezra and Nehemiah.

An argument for why it could have been written during the exile is presented by scholar Frederick Bush. To him, the language is convincing of the fact that the author most likely lived after the time of Ezekiel, which is reflective of the shift between Standard Biblical Hebrew and Late Biblical Hebrew.

An argument for why the book could have been written during the reign of Josiah is its comparison to the book of Judges. Judges sets a negative tone which Ruth contradicts with its noble characters. If Judges was written as a warning to Israel during Manasseh's rule, Ruth may have been composed before the sixth century BCE.¹

Finally, an argument for why the book of Ruth may have been written during the era of Ezra and Nehemiah is the possible use of a positive attitude towards Ruth the Moabite as a protest of Ezra and Nehemiah's policies against mixed marriages.

¹ "Who Wrote the Book of Ruth." *Zondervan Academic*, 14 May 2020, zondervanacademic.com/blog/who-wrote-ruth. Accessed 13 Dec. 2022.

3. Main Characters

a. Ruth

Ruth was a Moabite lady who married into an Israelite family and later converted to Judaism, according to the biblical Book of Ruth. She is an ancestor of the Messiah because she is the great-grandmother of King David.

b. Orpah

Chilion's wife and a native of Moab. She was also Naomi's daughter-in-law.

Orpah and her sister-in-law Ruth wished to travel to Judea with Naomi after the passing of their husbands. Orpah and Ruth were both told by Naomi to go back to their respective communities and gods. Orpah decided to go back to her people and her gods, but Ruth chose to stay with Naomi.

c. Naomi

An Israelite woman who lived in the time of Judges. Elimelech was her husband, and the couple resided in Bethlehem with their two kids, Mahlon and Chilion.

Naomi's story serves as an example of how God may use difficult circumstances to accomplish good. Elimelech, Naomi, and their two sons leave Judea when there is a famine and move to Moab. Mahlon and Chilion wed Orpah and Ruth respectively, two Moabite women. A disaster occurs after around ten years.

Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah become widows as a result of Elimelech's passing and the deaths of both of Naomi's sons. After learning that there is no longer a famine in Judea, Naomi chooses to go back home.

d. Boaz

Boaz was a wealthy man from Bethlehem mentioned in the genealogy of Christ. The son of Boaz and Ruth was Obed, King David's grandfather. Everything we see about Boaz in Scripture is good; he shows himself to be a kind, generous, and honorable man of his word.

4. Argument

God used several ordinary people in the book of Ruth to accomplish His plan.

5. Purpose

To show how a Gentile woman became one of the ancestors of Christ.

6. Key Verse

Ruth 2:12 : The LORD recompense thy work, and a full reward be given thee of the LORD God of Israel, under whose wings thou art come to trust.

7. Major Themes

- a. A young Moabitish woman's life was enriched by a beautiful constancy and a wise choice (vv. 1:16)
- b. A young Moabitish woman's life was enriched by a humble Industry (vv. 2:2-3)
- c. A young Moabitish woman's life was enriched by accepting council from an older friend (vv. 3:1-5)
- d. A young Moabitish woman's life was enriched by a Providential Alliance (vv. 4:10-11)
- e. A young Moabitish woman's life was enriched by Exaltation to a Royal Line (vv. 4: 13-17)

Interpretation and Exposition

1. Elimelech, driven by famine into the Moab, dies there. Naomi returns home, Ruth accompanies her (Chapter 1).

The only date we know for this story is in the first few words. It occurred during the era of the Judges (v. 1), not during the chaotic years when Israel was without a king; however, it is unclear under which judge these events took place. Given that Boaz, who married Ruth, was a child of Rahab, who hosted the spies during Joshua's reign, it must have been at the start of the Judges' period. Some believe it occurred during the reign of Ehud, while others believe it occurred during the reign of Deborah. The scholarly bishop Patrick tends to agree that it occurred during the reign of Gideon because it was at his time that the Midianites invaded and caused a famine.

There was a famine in the land of Canaan, which was known for its abundance of milk and honey. According to Lev. 26:19–20, this was one of the judgments that God had threatened to impose as punishment for their transgressions. They suffered from oppression at the hands of their opponents during the times of the judges; nevertheless, when the judgment did not result in their reformation, God tried this, for when he judges, he will triumph. Even at Bethlehem, which stands for the home of bread and represents a time when the land was at peace, there was scarcity. To regulate and limit the opulence and willful disobedience of those who live there, a fertile country is converted into barrenness.

This is an account of the plight of Elimelech's family, one of many affected by hunger. His name means “my God is a king.” His wife’s name, Naomi, means “my friendly or nice one” in Hebrew. However, their sons, Mahlon and Chilion, mean

sickness and consumption, respectively. This was likely because they were weakly children and not likely to live very long.

The family moved from Bethlehem into the country of Moab due to the famine. (v.1,2) There was much more available food and supplies in Moab while there was great scarcity in Israel. Common gifts of providence are frequently given in greater abundance to those who do not know and adore God than to those who do. This is not because God loves Moabites better, but because they have their portion in life.

There are opinions which state that Elimelech did not have to move his family out of Israel. They were a small family, consisting only of two people with two sons. In moving his family, Elimelech displayed a distrust in God.

In verse 4, the two sons marry Moabite women, which was against the tradition of the time. This transgression is paid through the deaths of Naomi's sons and husband, leaving her only with her two daughters-in-law.

Verses 8 and 9 address Naomi's travels with her two daughters, and her urgency of them to return home. She dismisses them with commendation, prayer, and affection. The commendation showed her appreciation for their commitment to her sons and family. The prayer is that of a friend to a friend, and within it she directs the two daughters towards God as the one and only true God, in hopes that they would recognize Him. She ends the dismissal with a kiss to each, like a mother would her own children.

They would have been encouraged to hope for a good settlement in Bethlehem if she had any sons in Canaan or any close kinsmen who she could have expected to marry the widows, raise up seed for those who were gone, and redeem the family's mortgaged properties. She claims that she was never likely to have any sons to serve as their spouses

because she was too old to have a husband, she had no sons, and she could not think of any close kinsman who would fulfill the kinsman's duty.

After Orpah leaves, Naomi keeps trying to convince Ruth to leave as well. Her commitment to Naomi shows her great love for her, as well as a beginning love for the Lord.

2. Ruth gleans in the fields of Boaz, he takes knowledge of her and shows her favor (Chapter 2).

Naomi is related to a wealthy man named Boaz through her late husband. Boaz stayed behind while her family fled Israel and made a life for himself. The Lord provided for him at this time. Boaz is also a *goel* (kinsman), meaning he was a chieftain in the family.

Ruth's gleaning was actually a tradition set for farmers in Israel. They were to leave behind parts of their crops, as well as anything they may have dropped, for the poor and needy to pick up. Ruth was doing this, which was called gleaning.

Ruth, according to the verse, "happened" to come to the part of the field belonging to Boaz. It may have seemed that way to her, but God was guiding her to exactly where she needed to be. Verse four in chapter two introduces us to Boaz, who has a great relationship with his workers and blesses them straight away.

Ruth then asks Boaz to glean in his field, knowing full well that the crops were hers by right. Ruth worked for a long time and was unknowingly under inspection the whole time, which allowed her to make a good impression on Boaz. This teaches us that sometimes we are being watched to see how we walk with God. Our actions have a great impact on others.

Boaz commands Ruth to stay in his field and work amongst the other young women. He offered her companionship (the other workers), protection, and refreshment. Ruth asks why this good thing has come her way, rather than asking about why the negative things in her life have happened. Boaz then encouraged her as if she was a new convert. She had given up her old life, trusted in God, and found protection under Him. This sets an example to Christians dealing with younger Christians – always be kind and encouraging.

Later, Boaz invites Ruth to eat with him, and even allows her to dip her bread in the vinegar, a privileged practice. She eats but holds back. These two events signify perhaps the beginning of the romance between the two. Boaz even allows her to glean among the already gathered crops.

Ruth then goes back out to the fields and works until the day is over. From her hard work, we can realize how to glean everything we can from God's word. We must work slowly, looking at one piece at a time, and fully understand it. And in the end, we will be nourished from His word.

3. By Naomi's instruction, Ruth lies at Boaz's feet, who acknowledges the duty of a kinsman. His present to Ruth (Chapter 3).

Naomi tells Ruth to go and put on some perfume and clothes. This implies that Ruth may have been wearing clothes of mourning up until now, as her husband and brother-in-law had recently died. Naomi tells Ruth to wait until Boaz has finished eating and lays down, and for her to then uncover his feet and lay next to him, awaiting further instruction from him. This has been interpreted by some scholars as immoral behavior or that typical of prostitutes at the time. However, given the context of the rest of the book,

this behavior would not be immoral, especially as instructions coming from a godly woman about a godly man. Naomi's only intention in these instructions is for Boaz to marry Ruth.

In this culture land ownership was very important. If a family had land, and no man to keep it, it would not be theirs any longer. Ruth was married to Mahlon, who died. The next in line to marry her and give her children was her sister-in-law's husband, Chilion. But he died, as well. Therefore, Ruth needed to find a husband to marry her and keep the land in their family. Since Boaz was the kinsman of the family, he would be the next in line to marry Ruth and he had a cultural obligation to do so. The reason why Boaz may not have made any advancements towards Ruth yet, even though he is a godly man, is likely due to a fact mentioned earlier in the chapter – Ruth still wears mourning clothing.

Later on, starting in verse six, Ruth does what Naomi told her to do. She uncovers Boaz's feet and lays there. He is startled awake, asking who the woman is at his feet. Ruth tells him and proposes (And he said, Who *art* thou? And she answered, I *am* Ruth thine handmaid: spread therefore thy skirt over thine handmaid; for thou *art* a near kinsman). Rather than rebuke her, he blesses her immediately. He then reveals another reason he would not approach her – there existed a kinsman nearer than he. Boaz suggests Ruth waits until morning to find out whether this man will do his duty as a kinsman. If not, Boaz states he will do the part for her. Ruth lays at his feet until morning, when he sends her off to her mother-in-law with six measures of barley.

4. Boaz calls the next kinsman; he is refusing the redemption. Boaz marries Ruth, she bears Obed.

The main theme of chapter four is redemption. The chapter begins with the introduction of the mysterious kinsman. Boaz sits him down, as well as some elders, and begins to offer Ruth to him. This can be seen as our relationship with Christ, with Boaz representing Christ and the other kinsman representing the law. Before we come to Christ, the law has a chance to redeem us first. Boaz states that there are two ways to redeem Ruth: either through him or through the kinsman. Likewise, we have two options in our journeys: to follow Christ or to live in total obedience to the law. The relative initially says he will redeem Ruth, until he sees her. Again, this is representative of our own journeys. The law can guide us, but in the end there is only one person who can redeem us – Christ. The reason the law cannot redeem us is because it cannot deal with our sinful nature. We can do all the good works we can possibly do, but it does not address our hearts and souls. We must give these to Christ and allow Him to save us.

Soon after Boaz marries Ruth, she bears a child. This can also be representative of our coming to Christ. When we trust God to produce the life He requires, we are fruitful as Ruth was. But when we try to do what only God can do, we make ourselves barren.

The book ends with a genealogy, and before that a blessing unto God. The women around Naomi say, “may His name become famous in Israel.” This has indeed become more than true, with God being worshipped all around the world.

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