

# RUTH

## INTRODUCTION

Every so often in the course of life, ordinary people discover God at work. This possibility gives courage in the face of uncertainty, strength in moments of exhaustion, and comfort in times of trouble. In the book of Ruth, the work of God is discovered — truly — but not in lightning flashes or in rumbly thunder as upon Sinai. Neither does it beckon from a cool garden path as did a voice in Eden. Here, the discovery is much more unobtrusive and restrained, perhaps even unnoticed by all except the narrator (and careful reader!). Yet despite a quietness, it is no less effective than the larger “displays” favored by those who prefer a God who swoops down and dashes in, in might and fury. Such vindications are, without a doubt, terrible and wonderful to behold, but quite removed from the experiences of most folk.

The charm — even mystique — of the book of Ruth rests in the ability of the narrative to suggest the work of God in the midst of ordinary life. Who could guess that the earthy smell of an open grave, the golden hues of the harvest sun, the whisper of voices in the dark, or the legal maneuvering of a public hearing are actually the ingredients for a monarchy, much less a Messiah! By means of this superbly crafted narrative, the reader finds himself or herself drawn into a world that is, in some ways, quite different than his/her own, and yet, in other ways, is very much the same. Like Naomi, we grow bitter. Like Orpah, we go home. Like Ruth, we try to be loyal. Like Boaz, we seek to do the right thing. Understanding how these characters relate to each other, to the story-line, and ultimately to us, is essential to understanding the book and the God who works in it. So grows the task.

Through careful attention to language and syntax — what is said as well as what is not said — the goals of the book may be approached. But before this can begin in earnest, the contours of some larger contexts must be traced. This is attempted in five moves

here: text and language, presentation and structure, time and space, literature and law, and finally, message and faith.

## TEXT AND LANGUAGE

The Hebrew text of the book of Ruth is relatively free of problems. Some 1,300 words are organized into 85 verses and grouped into four chapters. Within this well-defined set, those responsible for preserving and pointing (vocalizing) the text identified ten occasions where they believed alterations were necessary.<sup>1</sup> These are of little consequence, however, consisting mostly of spelling corrections. Only one (4:5) is significant enough to impact the text's understanding. Not surprisingly, it has generated much discussion and will be addressed below.<sup>2</sup> Other linguistic debates center around examples of what appear to be gender disagreements,<sup>3</sup> the presence of the "paragogic *nun*,"<sup>4</sup> and the presence of possible Aramaisms.<sup>5</sup> Such debates are recognized, but cannot be pursued here. Suffice it

<sup>1</sup>1:8; 2:1; 3:3 (two instances); 3:4; 3:14 (two instances); 4:4; 4:5; and 4:6.

<sup>2</sup>To tap into this discussion see the work of D.R.G. Beattie, either his "Kethibh and Qere in Ruth IV 5," *VT* 21 (1971): 490-494, or his "Ruth III: A Response," *JOT* 5 (1978): 39-48.

<sup>3</sup>Robert L. Hubbard outlines these disagreements into three categories. In the first category there is an apparent disagreement between a 2 mas. pl. verb and a fem. pl. subject (1:8). In the second category there is an apparent disagreement between suffixial pronouns (2 or 3 mas. pl.) and their antecedents (f) (1:5,8,9,11,13,19; 4:11). In the third category, a 3 mas. pl. pronoun is used with a fem. antecedent (1:22). Hubbard also offers a brief bibliography of proposals for dealing with these grammatical issues. See his *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup>2:8,21; 3:4,18 all contain verbal forms with a final, unexplained, "paragogic *nun*" (נ). GKC (para. 47m) points out that these are found especially in the "older books" and may possibly be the result of euphony or the remnants of a still older form.

<sup>5</sup>Four examples of possible Aramaisms have been noted. נָשָׂא (wayyis'û, "to take [wives]") in 1:4, תִּשְׁבְּרָנָה (šabbērāh, "would you wait") of 1:13, יִקְרָא (l'qayyēm, "to confirm") of 4:7, and שָׁלַף (šālah, "took off") of 4:7. As Edward F. Campbell, Jr. writes, "there is nothing compelling about any of these, either as Aramaisms or as necessarily late vocabulary" (*Ruth*, AB [Garden City: Doubleday, 1975], p. 24). Robert Polzin notes how difficult it is to use lexicographic items to draw conclusions regarding the development of biblical Hebrew. More telling, in his opinion, is grammar and syn-

to say, the language of Ruth is classical Hebrew in form and is reminiscent of the patriarchal stories in style.

Apart from that which has been preserved by the Masoretes (the Masoretic Text or MT), other texts of Ruth are known and noted for their comparative value. Fragments from the caves along the Dead Sea have been recovered, studied, and published.<sup>6</sup> The Greek tradition of the Old Testament (the Septuagint or LXX) has been carefully combed in search of clues some believe to be helpful for determining the development of the Hebrew text.<sup>7</sup> The more “free-flowing” Syriac version is currently being studied and published.<sup>8</sup> Early elaborations on Ruth are available in Josephus (*Jewish Antiquities* V, ix), the Aramaic Targum to Ruth,<sup>9</sup> and the aggadic midrash known as *Ruth Rabbah*.<sup>10</sup> All these weigh in during the opening centuries of the first millennium AD and are helpful witnesses.

## PRESENTATION AND STRUCTURE

The book of Ruth is a short story celebrated for its artistry and drama. It can be read in a single sitting, and, at a glance, appears

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tax. See his *Late Biblical Hebrew: Toward an Historical Typology of Biblical Hebrew Prose* (Missoula, MT: Scholars, 1976), pp. 2, 123, 159. Evaluated according to Polzin’s criteria, the text of Ruth clearly has more in common with classical biblical Hebrew than with Late Biblical Hebrew.

<sup>6</sup>Fortunately, a critical edition to the Megilloth is now available in the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* series (Vol. 18, Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2004). This valuable resource utilizes material from the Dead Sea Scrolls as well as other recent textual discoveries in its apparatus.

<sup>7</sup>For a survey of the study of the Greek text of Ruth and an outline of how this has prompted theories concerning the development of the Hebrew text, see Campbell, *Ruth*, pp. 36-40.

<sup>8</sup>An English translation has been available for many years as a result of the work of George M. Lamsa (*The Holy Bible from Ancient Eastern Manuscripts* [Philadelphia: A.J. Holman, 1957]). A critical edition is forthcoming from the Peshitta Institute at the University of Leiden.

<sup>9</sup>Etan Levine, *The Aramaic Version of Ruth*, AnBib 58 (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1973).

<sup>10</sup>Access to the text in English is available in the work of H. Freedman and Maurice Simons, eds., *The Midrash*, vol. VIII, *Ruth and Ecclesiastes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Soncino, 1951), and in the work of Jacob Neusner, trans. *Ruth Rabbah: An Analytical Translation*, Brown Judaic Studies 183 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1989).

quaint and simple. However, a quick read is not always the best one; the subtleties of presentation can be easily overlooked. This is especially true here, where expectations of (or a distant familiarity with) what the story says may run ahead of what is actually written. A slow read reveals a small cast of round, flat, and functionary characters. Naomi is perhaps the most fully revealed (or round) of these. She is, in many ways, at the book's center. Ruth is a foreigner and yet *the* namesake for reasons beyond the sympathy that she so naturally attracts. She is less revealed as a character (flatter) than Naomi; her words are few and weighty. Boaz appears pious, clever, and vigorous, in contrast to other male characters of the book. These are functionary, impious, part of an anonymous chorus, or dead! Together, this small cast of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz speaks and acts in ways that may not be as straightforward as expected. Word choice, surprise, ambiguity, gapping, repetitions, inter- and intratextual play are among the sharpened tools in the narrator's kit. Taken together, these direct the plot and purpose of the book. In connection with this, it should be remembered that the recognition of this narrative artistry need not imply raw invention; put differently, well-told stories cannot be relegated to the category of fiction simply because they are well told! Successful historians have always been those who truly understand the craft of language and engage it toward specific goals.

The book of Ruth is organized chronologically, clearly marked with a beginning and an end. Scenes, or "acts," are composed of dialogue, usually limited to two characters at a time, or a character and a "chorus."<sup>11</sup> Each dialogue is framed by the cues and comments of an anonymous and omniscient narrator. When the text is considered carefully, it is surprising to note how little action is actually encountered; the characters move into position at the beginning of

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<sup>11</sup>Terms such as *novelle*, *novella*, or "little novel" have been used as form-critical terms to describe the genre of Ruth (e.g., Campbell, *Ruth*, pp. 3-4; Richard L. Pratt, Jr., *He Gave Us Stories* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1993], p. 300). Such terms are reminders that Ruth is a brief presentation, composed of episodes, has a purpose, and, in the minds of many, is fictional in character. On this last point, a snippet from Meir Sternberg is appropriate: "Were the narrative written or read as fiction, then God would turn from the lord of history into a creature of the imagination, with the most disastrous results" (*The Poetics of Biblical Narrative* [Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1985], p. 32).

each scene and stay put (with the possible exception of 1:8-18 where Naomi urges Ruth and Orpah to return home seemingly as they travel down the road). The actions of the characters are mostly functional, moving them from one scene to the next. The real “guts” of the story are carried in conversation.

Some measure of symmetry is achieved when these scenes are considered end to end against the larger construction.<sup>12</sup> Elements of chapters one and four correspond at points: family histories are given (1:1-5 and 4:18-22); Naomi and the women of Bethlehem converse (1:19-21 and 4:14-17). Similarly, chapters two and three follow similar trajectories: Ruth and Naomi exchange plans (2:2 and 3:1-5); Ruth’s identity is sought by Boaz (2:5-7 and 3:9); Boaz gives Ruth food and protection (2:8-16 and 3:10-15); and Ruth reports to Naomi (2:18-23 and 3:16-18). This balanced structure (a chiasm of sorts) is identified by most commentators, although few are bold enough to make the leap from structure to purpose.<sup>13</sup>

One other note should be offered. Critical scholars are prone to dismiss the genealogy of 4:18-22 as a later addition, coda, or appendix. This conclusion bespeaks an assumption that, at some point, the narrative existed independently, apart from the genealogy (or perhaps is offered as an explanation of it?). Against this critical view stands a host of recent literary approaches that view the genealogy as essential to the narrative. This is a view maintained here, not only on the grounds of literary analysis, but also given the unanimous consensus of text traditions that deliver the book to us as a seamless whole (always including 4:18-22).

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<sup>12</sup>Stephen Bertman, “Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth,” *JBL* 84 (1965): 165-168.

<sup>13</sup>Tod Linafelt is an exception to this. He points out how this structure assists the argument that Ruth “bridges the gap” between the text of Judges and the story of David found in Samuel. Additionally, he notes how the structure of Ruth finds a parallel in 2 Sam 5:13-8:18. See his contribution in *Ruth and Esther* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999), pp. xx-xxv. Some of Linafelt’s other points will be taken up below.

Daniel I. Block suggests an outline of the book that zigzags between complications and solutions. However in his exposition, he uses a more dramatic model that divides the work into four “Acts” and an “Epilogue.” See his *Judges, Ruth*, NAC (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999), pp. 616-621.

## TIME AND SPACE

The book of Ruth is firmly rooted in time and space. Within the text, time is sensed irregularly and at different speeds. The cadence increases and decreases with the story's focal adjustment. Years and years are "gapped" in the grinding struggle between life and death described in the first five verses of the book. The events of the remainder of chapter one and all of chapter two transpire in only a matter of weeks. Chapter three brings focus to arresting events that transpire in a single night. The bulk of chapter four is concerned with the morning after (the night of chapter three), while in a quick dash to the finish, the closing verses of chapter four describe the passing of the months, years, and even centuries that are required to describe the conception, birth, and the enduring legacy of a child. In the end, the reader feels like an observer standing beside a long straight stretch of highway. A car is noted in the distance, moving almost imperceptibly at first. But sound and speed are increasingly experienced, until, in a roar, the car passes in a blaze of fury, and then it's gone, slowly disappearing over the horizon. This is how Ruth moves.

In the larger sweep of time, almost external to the book itself, two notations are discovered. Each is pivotal for different reasons. The first is the mention that these events occurred "in the days when the judges ruled" (1:1). This statement places the narrative within a context that is obviously clear to the reader, both ancient and modern.<sup>14</sup> The days of the judges may be characterized by many things, few of which are positive: infidelity, genocide, anarchy. For the modern reader of the English text, the eye ambles up the page and locks on a single phrase that says it all: "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (Judg 21:25). The book of Ruth is a welcome respite against this dark background, or, in the words of others, "a moment of serenity in the stormy world."<sup>15</sup> In the place of infidelity, Ruth offers loyalty. In the place of genocide, Ruth offers

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<sup>14</sup>2 Kgs 23:22 also alludes to the period of the judges in a way that assumes recognition by an ancient audience.

<sup>15</sup>Danna Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1990), p. 11.

*hesed*-kindness. In the place of anarchy, Ruth offers a picture of conscientious law keeping. This temporal note of 1:1, therefore, offers a setting that speaks as much to *mood* as years. Still, the years are there, vaguely. Given the conventions of modern scholarship, the described events are located in the closing centuries of the second millennium B.C. In other configurations, this might be called the end of the Late Bronze Age, the beginning of the Iron Age, or, for biblicists, the stretch between the conquest of Canaan and the establishment of the monarchy.

The second temporal note of importance comes as a result of the genealogy found in the closing verses. Assuming a genetic unity to the work, the mention of the lineage of the great king David makes it clear that the account would not have been written before his day. But how much time passes after David before the writing occurs? Such questions have occupied scholars for generations. Early interpreters felt constrained to offer early dates: could the book have been written even while David was alive?<sup>16</sup> Later critical scholars think not, and on the basis of language, themes, and the explanatory note of 4:7 (“Now in earlier times”), push the date of authorship well out of the lifetime of Israel’s monarchy altogether.<sup>17</sup> Campbell has prudently grappled with these issues, outlining the arguments with their presuppositions, and suggests that the book emerged early in the period between 950–700 BC.<sup>18</sup> It is a comfortable conclusion.

Not only is time given definition in the book of Ruth, the same is true of space. Bethlehem is at the center. Its fields, threshing floor, and gateway offer stages for successive scenes. With respect to

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<sup>16</sup>The Jewish tradition recorded in the Babylonian Talmud (*Baba Bathra* 14b) presents the opinion that Ruth is an early book in Israel’s history, written by the prophet Samuel. Such an early date is difficult to accept, given the testimony to the character of David. For the tradition, see I. Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud. Seder Nezikin, Baba Bathra* (London: Soncino, 1935).

<sup>17</sup>Frederic W. Bush (*Ruth, Esther*, WBC [Dallas: Word, 1996], pp. 18-30) is a recent champion of a postexilic date for Ruth. The hinge of his argument swings on the conclusion that a number of instances of Late Biblical Hebrew appear in the text. Of course, others such as Hubbard, work from the same data and suggest a preexilic date for the composition of Ruth. As this disparity demonstrates, these lines of thinking are troubled, convoluted, loaded with assumptions, and as the conclusions themselves show, are prone to manipulation.

<sup>18</sup>Campbell, *Ruth*, pp. 23-28.

its fields, the highlands of Judah and its agricultural potential have been variously described.<sup>19</sup> Terraced hillsides and pockets of fertile fields mark rolling terrain. Likewise, the dynamics of cereal farming are recognized, particularly as a means of subsistence in the Judean highlands. Unfortunately, little is known of Bethlehem's history as a result of archaeological investigation; modern construction has prevented exploration. For this reason, no specifics with respect to structures or installations may be offered. There are simply no discoveries to report.

Curiously, as Linafelt has already suggested, this Bethlehem center may also add gravity to a view that slips Ruth into the gap between the book of Judges and the book(s) of Samuel. As argued, the author is fully aware of both accounts and practices literary reflection and anticipation.<sup>20</sup> Hence, the tragic story of the unfaithful concubine that closes down the book of Judges unwinds from Bethlehem. As a vignette of life "in the days when the judges ruled," it threads into Ruth's beginning. On the back side, it continues to the anointing of David, also in Bethlehem (1 Samuel 16). At risk of overreading, could it be said that the arrival of monarchy and the end of the period of judges is signaled, in part, by the use of this important place name? Some might call it clever fiction; other presumptions demand different conclusions.

Apart from the immediate environs of Bethlehem, the region of Moab is mentioned. No specifics are offered in the text though; Elimelech's family sojourns in the "fields of Moab." It is possible that these "fields" are located in the Jordan Valley, northeast of the Dead Sea.<sup>21</sup> However, by the period known as the Iron Age II, the likely time of the book's composition, the kingdom of Moab is developed and well known.<sup>22</sup> From a geographical perspective, this "essential Moab" is

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<sup>19</sup>For excellent examples, see David C. Hopkins, *The Highlands of Canaan* (Sheffield: Almond, 1985), or Denis Baly, "The Hill Country of Judah," in *The Geography of the Bible* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), pp. 177-190.

<sup>20</sup>In the classroom I encourage students to do this kind of intertextual exercise by reading "with their lights on and their mirrors adjusted."

<sup>21</sup>John Gray (*Joshua, Judges, and Ruth*, NCB [London: Nelson, 1967], p. 408) takes this position.

<sup>22</sup>No indication of state formation in Moab is suggested by the text. Undoubtedly, "Moab" in the time of the judges and "Moab" in the period of the monarchy were different. Moab, like Israel, experienced dramatic social development between the second and first millennium B.C.

concentrated on the western edge of an elevated plateau (soaring up to 4,500 feet) in what is now the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. It is strung between people groups known as Ammonites and Edomites, and between the Madaba plains on the north and the Wadi el-Hesa (biblical Zered) on the south.<sup>23</sup> A final observation notes that this “essential Moab” rests on the far side of the Dead Sea, only 35 miles due east of Bethlehem. Interestingly, because the village of Bethlehem and the region of Moab are both situated in elevated areas, they are within eyeshot of each other on a clear day. This raises the possibility that the scarps of Ruth’s Moab may have been visible from Naomi’s front door.

### LITERATURE AND LAW

The NIV follows the well-worn tradition of the English Bible and the tradition of the LXX in positioning the book of Ruth between Judges and Samuel. Reasons for this placement have already been raised and discussed.

The MT, alternatively, places Ruth in the third part of the Hebrew canon known as “the Writings” (*Kethubim*). Within this section, it is grouped with other books (collectively known as the *Megilloth*, or the five “scrolls”) designated for public reading on special days of feasting and fasting.<sup>24</sup> Within this tradition, Ruth is slated for the second day of Pentecost (*Shabu’ot*, or “Weeks”). Connections between the harvest celebration of Pentecost and the harvest context of Ruth are clear. Christian interpreters recognizing this link may anticipate the

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<sup>23</sup>For more on Moab, see G.L. Mattingly, s.v. “Moab,” in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. by David Noel Freedman, Allen C. Myers, and Astrid B. Beck (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000); Denis Baly, “The Tableland of Moab, the Land of the Shepherd,” in *The Geography of the Bible*, pp. 229-233; or Burton MacDonald, “Moabite Territory and Sites” in *“East of the Jordan”: Territories and Sites of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Boston: ASOR, 2000), pp. 171-183.

<sup>24</sup>Robert Gordis suggests that the book of Ruth, like its companions in this section of the Hebrew Bible, is concerned with questions of חֵכְמָה (*hokmāh*) or “wisdom.” It is a narrative that shows how *hokmāh* “operates and succeeds in human affairs.” See his “Love, Marriage, and Business in the Book of Ruth” in *A Light unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers*, Howard N. Bream, Ralph D. Heim, and Carey A. Moore, eds. (Philadelphia: Temple, 1974), p. 243.

mission of the New Testament and explore how Ruth, a Moabite, prefigures the announced movement of God in the “last days.”<sup>25</sup> Here, as in Acts, the “Kingdom” is extended to one “who calls on the name of the Lord” (Acts 2:21). Similarly, the position of Jesus as the ultimate “descendent of David” is also a point of contact between Ruth and Peter’s Pentecost sermon of Acts 2.

Legal, familial, and social customs are among the most interesting, yet tangled, aspects of the book’s interpretation. This is due to the fact that specific dynamics such as the practices of inheritance, adoption, property vesting, kinship marriage, and *gō’el*-redemption consist of elements drawn from the larger Near Eastern setting generally and from *torah* specifically. As will be noted, the narrative not only assumes – but requires – these precedents in order for tensions to be created and relieved. That being said, two responses are raised. One is a caveat, the other is an observation.

First, the caveat. It must be recognized that the story of Ruth is precisely this: a story, and a dramatic one at that! As such, selectivity is expected of the storyteller, and some degree of “social memory” is expected of the audience.<sup>26</sup> If Ruth were intended to be an article of jurisprudence, it would undoubtedly have a very different flavor. Many other details, such as the questions asked by the elders in the gateway, for example, would be provided. For now, it is sufficient to note that the story “works,” as generations of readers and a steady stream of commentaries attest. Moreover, the story is consistent with what is known about law and custom from this time and place.<sup>27</sup> The evidence for this continues to be drawn out slowly, but drawn out nonetheless.<sup>28</sup> Still, care must be taken not to squeeze the text needlessly for details that are beyond the point of the narrative or

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<sup>25</sup>Alternatively, the feast of Pentecost is also connected to the issue of the Law at Sinai. This connection may be significant, elevating the character of Ruth for her willingness to honor *torah*.

<sup>26</sup>I thank my colleague Tom Thatcher for pointing out the value of this approach. See his work on this in his *Why John Wrote a Gospel: Jesus-Memory-History* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005).

<sup>27</sup>As Hubbard states, the story is coherent (it meets the test of intelligibility), it is complete (it meets the test of self-sufficiency), and it is believable (it meets the test of credibility). See his *Ruth*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>28</sup>See the recent bibliography on the “Legal and Social World Studies” by Victor H. Matthews in his *Judges and Ruth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2004), pp. 215-216.

the purpose of the narrator. If given, such “fine print” would, in all likelihood, derail the story line and detract from the simple elegance of its telling.

Beyond this caveat is an observation. The legal code offered in Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy is not substantially different from legal codes known elsewhere. Such codes are often written in general and generic ways. They are not intended to cover every case imaginable. Interpretation is required to match the intent of the code with the particulars of the situation. This basic principle of law appears to be the case here. As an example, kinship marriage, as codified in Deuteronomy 25, requires that the brother of the dead marry the widow of the dead for the purpose of raising an heir for the dead. But what if the dead has no brother? And what if the widow is not an Israelite? Must this code still be honored? By whom? How elastic is the law? If such questions challenged those who sought to apply legal principles in their own time (and may have required a meeting of the elders to sort it out), how much more challenging is it for us to *interpret the interpretations* of those living in a distant time and place? It is, therefore, no wonder that the book of Ruth has become a textual playground for expositors of all stripes. Naturally, predispositions plug the gaps every time.

## MESSAGE AND FAITH

Corresponding to this wide field of predispositions, a number of responses to the book of Ruth have been offered. Given the complexities of the text, this is not just expected, but appropriate.<sup>29</sup> Some of these responses grow from inquiry that is more intrinsic in nature, summarizing the text’s message through the lens of present-ed characterizations, scenes, and structures. Other responses grow

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<sup>29</sup>As Pratt suggests, “Old Testament authors wrote univalent, coherent texts for their audiences. Each passage has one original meaning. But univalence is not the same as simplicity (original emphasis). Writers, documents, and audiences interacted in numerous ways to produce the original meaning. Paradigmatic, syntagmatic, and pragmatic angles reveal just how complex these interactions were. Consequently, as we investigate Old Testament stories, the best we can do is to make many different summaries of the one original meaning” (*He Gave Us Stories*, p. 125).

out of inquiry that is more extrinsic in nature, summarizing the text's message through the lens of what is perceived to be the needs of the audience, either ancient or modern. Both types of summaries are helpful, although one must carefully sort the underpinnings of each. Decisions to accept or reject "controls" — such as the truth-claim of the text, the interpretive community in which the message is forged, and the larger scriptural context — seriously affect the outcome. Still, all inquiries here revolve around the same poles, albeit releasing at different points to form different trajectories. Important poles to consider include Ruth's "foreignness," societal justice, Davidic ancestry, and the *hesed*-kindness of Yahweh.

Many see the book of Ruth as protest or proselyte literature. As literature of protest, it is argued that the text contains a message directed toward those seeking to narrowly define the "people of God."<sup>30</sup> As such, the text deliberately undermines (or subverts) a so-called "purity position" seeking to expel "good" aliens (like Ruth) from the Jewish community. A variation of this view considers the message of the book to be an encouragement directed toward the gentile wives of Jewish husbands. In this, Ruth is the poster child: a model proselyte for all foreigners to imitate. Naturally, for this message to be fully embraced, the front-loaded assumption that the book is a product of the postexilic period must be accepted. This is a questionable suggestion at best. This view of the book as a polemic against "nationalistic" tendencies (such as those described in Ezra 9–10) begins with the assumption of manipulation and ends with a conclusion of conflicted Scripture.

Others find a message in the book of Ruth directed toward identifying and correcting the injustices of society. Such perspectives exploit the contrast between the powerless and the powerful, but more specifically (and indicatively of predisposition), tend to highlight the struggle of women to achieve a meaningful place in a male-dominated, patriarchal society. Moreover, it is claimed that the text collapses from within, demonstrating that the powerful may be manipulated and the pious may be corrupted.<sup>31</sup> While these views

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<sup>30</sup>An example of this approach is found in the work of Marjo C.A. Korpel, *The Structure of the Book of Ruth* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001).

<sup>31</sup>As an example, consider the work of Fewell and Gunn, *Compromising Redemption*.

highlight important themes and are even prophetic in a sense,<sup>32</sup> they cannot be embraced for many reasons: primary is a cracked methodological foundation. Such presentations crush the elegance of the ancient text under the weight of concerns that are terribly modern. Roles, attitudes, categories of thought, and at times, even language are transferred from the present and imposed upon the past. This kind of work may create grist for popular messages today, but is ultimately a cheap substitute for solid exegesis, much less, the responsible inquiry into the history and literature of the ancient world. As above, this approach begins with the assumption of manipulation and ends with a conclusion of conflicted Scripture.

Perhaps the most visible and explored purpose of the book of Ruth concerns the Davidic connection. The position of the genealogy at the conclusion of the book suggests the importance of this point (4:17 and 4:18-22); it is the bull's-eye at the end of the arrow's flight. Here, David's amazing ancestry is realized: he has roots that are, at once, poor and rich, Moabite and Israelite, landless and landed, and ultimately engineered by both Yahweh and man. In terms that are strictly political, such a realization would seemingly endear him (and his heirs) to a wider audience and dispel any reservations some might have about his Moabite connections (i.e., remember that Ruth is a model of faithfulness). In larger, biblical terms, this realization continues the theme of God's amazing program to bring a Messiah to earth.<sup>33</sup> As elsewhere, threats to derail this holy program are regularly encountered and overcome. Accepting this view

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<sup>32</sup>As presented elsewhere in Scripture, people with a passion for God's reign must be open to the dispossessed and marginalized (Zech 7:10; Matt 5:14-16), must be quick to feed the hungry (Matt 5:7; Act 6:1), care for children and the elderly (Ps 139:13-14; Isaiah 61), and cannot become complacent with injustice (Amos 5:7ff; Micah 6:8). Without a doubt, such themes are essential to Kingdom-life and may be explored in the book of Ruth. However, it is difficult to see such calls to social action as "the purpose" for the text.

<sup>33</sup>Kirsten Nielsen observes how Yahweh is central to the book because of the position "he assumes in the dialogues. The sheer number of times he is mentioned (1:8-9,13,17,20-21; 2:12,19-20; 3:13; 4:11-12,14) creates an awareness of his never-failing presence, whether it be disaster striking, or dearth turning to wealth. This book can thus be read as homage to the God who performs his will despite all obstacles" (*Ruth: A Commentary*, OTL [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997], p. 30).

satisfies not only the need posed by the book's contents but the need to read it within its canonical-historical context. Taking this Davidic target seriously satisfies the implicit truth-claim of the book itself and endows it with enduring, positive, qualities.<sup>34</sup>

In keeping with this last thought, a final purpose of the text must be mentioned. Naomi's blessing of 1:8 has often been viewed as thematic for the book as a whole: "May Yahweh show *hesed*-kindness to you, as you have shown to your dead and to me." In the end, Ruth is shown to be a personal example of faithfulness. She exceeds all the expectations of her society and perhaps even the letter of *torah*. Her industry and selfless choices trigger healing and are honored by those in the gateway and by God, the ultimate source of all *hesed*-kindness. Thus, the message of the book of Ruth may be considered from at least two vantage points. Viewed in strictly human terms, it underlines the importance of persistent relationships in moments of crisis.<sup>35</sup> Viewed from a faith perspective, it communicates confidence in the ongoing work of God to fill the empty, to protect the vulnerable, and to bring joy into a broken world. In a small way, Ruth's story anticipates that which is only fully realized on this side of the cross. As Paul put it:

We wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good (Titus 2:13-14).

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<sup>34</sup>Contra Linafelt, who begins with the assumption that David was an abuser of power and represents "the failure of the institution of monarchy in Israel" (*Ruth*, p. xxiv). This presumption is consistent with other recent negative evaluations of David that idealize the decentralized, tribal nature of the period of the judges over and against the monarchy. Armed with these reversed values, Linafelt can then conclude that the story of Ruth "may not have the unequivocally happy ending that commentators so often claim for it" (*Ruth*, p. xxv). This kind of extreme thinking can only be followed when a methodology of reading is accepted that holds the text is internally inconsistent, is "shot through" with propaganda, and is either deliberately or incidentally detached from its canonical-historical context.

<sup>35</sup>In this, Jesus' parable of the "persistent widow" (Luke 18:1-8) is recalled. This parallel and some cross-textual applications are considered in Victor H. Matthews and Don C. Benjamin, *Social World of Ancient Israel 1250–587 B.C.E.* (Hendrickson, 1995), pp. 138-141.