

Ruth: a *hesed* story

Bernard Bell, April 1996

I. Introduction

That the Bible, whether this be the “Hebrew Bible” or the “Christian Bible,” is the primary textbook of theology is assumed by all, but there the agreement stops. A careful read of the first three chapters of the OT and the last three chapters of the NT shows a considerable number of links between the two. It seems obvious that the writer of the last three chapters was aware of the first three chapters. What are we to make of the chapters in between? More fundamentally, how are we to read the individual chapters along the way? These two questions form the primary subject matter of two disciplines within biblical studies. The theological passage from one end of the Bible to the other is the subject matter of Biblical Theology. The manner in which individual texts are to be read is the subject of Biblical Criticism. Ideally, the latter precedes the former, although, all too often, people have approached the text with their theology already determined. The construction of a biblical theology is to be built up from Scripture, not imposed upon it.

The Bible is a text made up of numerous individual texts. The manner in which we read each individual text will have a profound influence on our reading of the larger text. In this Introduction I examine first the field of biblical criticism then that of biblical theology, illustrating both from the book of Ruth. Our aim is to learn to read the text of Ruth carefully, and so determine its place between the two covers of the Bible.

Looking first at the reading of individual texts, that is, at the discipline of biblical criticism, all reading is conditioned by the reader’s presuppositions concerning the genre of his reading matter. Encountering “Once upon a time” as an opening line causes us to orientate ourselves differently to the text than if we encountered “In the days when the judges judged” (Ruth 1:1), for the author of the latter seems deliberately to anchor his story into history. Biblical criticism can be considered a search for genre definition. The assumption is that if we can assign a document to a meaningful genre, then we know how to read it with literary competence. This literary competence depends not upon our ability to understand individual words and phrases, but upon our ability to understand larger assemblies of those words and phrases into sentences, paragraphs, pericopes, sections and texts.¹

For much of the history of the church, genre definition has occurred subconsciously within the reader’s mind. The medieval exegetes removed the OT from the genre of normal historical literature, considering it a document which required interpretation on up to four different levels, tantamount to reading it as four different genres, of which the allegorical reigned supreme. The reformers restored the Bible to the historical genre, endeavouring to read it against its historical and grammatical background. It was after the Enlightenment that Biblical scholars consciously set themselves to explicating the different types of material in the Bible, a task that arose out of the recognition that the Bible was an anthology of numerous types of literature. Since such an anthology could not itself be a valid genre, the scholars picked the text apart in search of what they considered valid genres, often dissecting the text into minute fragments and reassembling it into new texts that looked little like the original text. In search not only of recognizable genre, but of the original meaning of the original author of the original text, these critics engaged in detailed historical and grammatical research, to the great benefit of all subsequent scholars, but to the detriment of theology for the theologies that these scholars developed were built upon other texts of their own creation since the biblical text could not possibly be the original text due to its invalid genre.

This eagerness to dissect the text started to unravel when redaction critics, examining the manner in which redactors had assembled and edited the original documents into the biblical text we now have, began to realize that these redactors had considerable literary skill.² Brevard Childs nailed shut most of the lid of the coffin of the older criticism when he called for texts to be read canonically. Each book is to be read in the form in which it has come down to us through the community of faith, and is then to be read in the context of its near and far neighbours in the biblical canon. More recently, secular literary critics have brought their skills to bear upon the biblical text. Accustomed to reading texts holistically, and to examining them as whole documents rather than as assemblages of different sub-documents, these critics have led biblical scholars to do likewise.

¹ This paragraph owes much to Barton’s chapter on “ ‘Literary Competence’ and Genre Recognition” (Barton, 8-19).

² This observation provokes the problem of the “Disappearing Redactor” (Barton, 56). The redactor has worked his material so carefully as to produce a literary whole, but the assumption of a redactor is based upon the observation that the text is a literary hodge-podge. Barton, 219, attributes the phrase to N. T. Wright, who in turn credits it to J. A. Motyer.

The great enthusiasm with which Childs' work and now the structuralists' work has been greeted is indicative of the barrenness of the earlier criticism, which, although it contributed greatly to the understanding of history, culture, society and philology, nevertheless left the extant text unexplained. In the case of Ruth, Rauber notes that critical research concentrated upon the sandal in 4:8. While their findings do contribute to our understanding of the socio-cultural customs of ancient Israel, they do not contribute to literary competence, for the narrator has given us all the explanation we need in 4:7.

The Bible as we have it is our starting point. This anthology of texts must have been a valid genre in ancient Israel, else it would never have been compiled.³ While we can borrow the historical and philological findings of the author-based critics, we must be text-based critics, for what we have is the text not the author. We should read the text canonically, as a canonical collection of canonical components. This means we read the book of Ruth as a canonical whole, then read it in relation to the rest of the canon. As we read, we make use of the work of the literary structuralists who have taught us *how* a text means so that we can then determine *what* it means.⁴

From a canonical and structuralist reading of the Bible, we arrive at meaning for each book. How do we then assemble these individual pieces of meaning into a coherent biblical theology? This requires that we first determine what the Bible is. It is taken as a matter of faith that the Bible is inspired by God, that it is a record of his revelation to mankind, and that it is authoritative for our understanding and practice. Though it has numerous human authors, it has one superintending divine Author of whom it bears witness. Barton is quite right to note that Childs' call for a canonical approach is predicated on theology not criticism.⁵

Our method will inevitably be different from those who do not accept the Bible as a divinely given record of revelation, or have not undertaken the same reading of the components. Source critics, breaking the biblical text into multiple documents, developed theologies of the presumed authors of those documents: a theology of J, or a contradictory theology of P. A biblical theology is impossible if the Bible as we have it is an invalid object of study since it is not the original text. From the source critical development of individual theologies it was but a short step to the study of the history of Israelite religion which developed out of source and form criticism. Other critics, more favourable to God's involvement while yet engaging in criticism, have sought to trace the history of God's acts. None of these three approaches is an adequate extension of the manner in which we have decided to read our text, nor fits the Bible we hold by faith. While it is possible to talk meaningfully of an individual theology of an author of one of the canonical texts, the idea of a theology of J or P falls with the documentary hypothesis as formulated by Graf-Wellhausen. Progression beyond form criticism has left behind the history of religion approach. The Bible is not a record of God's acts in history, but a record of his revelation concerning those acts. Again using the example of Ruth, the author has given us not a detached historical account of the sojourn of Naomi in Moab and her return to Bethlehem, but an interpreted history which emphasizes dialogue and character rather than 'mere' events. If we restrict ourselves to the historical events we completely miss what God is revealing through history.

In his survey of OT theologies, Hasel identifies ten broad categories of methodology,⁶ though it is sometimes difficult to differentiate between his categories. The multiplicity of approaches arises out of the obvious difficulties with prosecuting an OT theology. Recognizing that the biblical story features a number of major themes, should one pursue a synchronic or a diachronic description of these themes? A synchronic approach would attempt a complete cross-sectional description of all themes at a given moment. A diachronic approach would trace one or more themes through time. For a synchronic approach, what are the critical moments at which to attempt a cross-section? For a diachronic approach, what are the critical themes? Should one develop a theme all the way through to the end and then return to the beginning for another theme, or should one attempt to trace several themes simultaneously?⁷ Is there a major theme? How is one to reconcile the different genres, e.g. a covenantal book such as Deuteronomy with a book of universal wisdom such as Proverbs? We have already determined that our approach must be text-based, but it is difficult to develop a theology that is faithful to the text as we have it. God has not given us revelation in the form of a systematics textbook, nor in the form of periodic cross-sections, nor in the form of an orderly diachronic development of a key theme. The more one attempts to pull out a coherent theology, the more the OT seems a seething bouillabaisse. Rather than give up in despair, we must conclude that what we have is what we have, and, more importantly, that it is what the Lord intends us to have.

³ Barton, 27.

⁴ Barton, 129, praises the benefits of structuralism as a theory for explaining meaning, but warns about the dangers when it becomes a method for extracting meaning. Kermode, 80, agrees with Paul Ricoeur's similar observation that structural analysis should lie behind interpretation, not become a structuralist method of interpretation

⁵ Barton, 79.

⁶ Hasel, 28-114.

⁷ From my own experience of developing a biblical theology course, this question alone has occupied me for years, let alone some of the other questions.

What we have is a collection of texts in a canon. We must therefore use all our literary competence to read those texts carefully so that their inherent themes emerge. Having discerned meaning in individual books, we can move up to blocks of books, again reading them in such a manner that their themes emerge. And so on until we read the whole canon as a single unit. Along the way, we will pick up whatever themes emerge and develop them synchronically and diachronically, while trying to find the dynamic unity that holds it all together. Hasel calls this a “multiplex canonical OT theology.”⁸ It is a daunting task, for it means that each scholar must be an expert on every book in the canon. He must be simultaneously a detached reader of the text, so as not to smother it with his own ideas, but he must be passionate if the emergent themes are to hit him with the force intended by both divine and human authors, for what canonical awareness and structuralist theory have made very clear is that the biblical texts, whether prose or poetry, pack a more powerful punch than was ever realized.

In conclusion, the basis of our work is the Bible as a complete document, containing Old and New Testaments. The task is two-fold: identification of the theology of the individual books of the bible through competent reading, and the assembly of a coherent biblical theology from those component theologies. The method for competent reading is to read the text canonically with the aid of structuralist theory, allowing the inherent meaning of the text to emerge without our smothering it with our preconceptions. The method for assembling the biblical theology is a synchronic and diachronic development of all the themes, without initial value judgments as to which are dominant, but undertaken with the assumption that there is some form of dynamic unity.

II. Theological Themes of Ruth

Once regarded as a straightforward narrative, the book of Ruth is now considered “a perfect example of the art of telling a story,”⁹ “a locus of biblical literary art,”¹⁰ “perhaps the supreme masterpiece of narrative art in the Bible.”¹¹

Though there are alternative ways of dividing the narrative,¹² the most convenient is to see it as four scenes, to which the four chapters of our text correspond. Rauber, one of the earliest literary critics to turn his attention to Ruth, came to recognize that “the great key to the reading of Hebraic literature is sensitivity to pattern.”¹³ The book of Ruth contains multiple elaborate patterns, testimony to the narrator’s skill and guides to our understanding of the text. The best way to expose the theology of the book is to undertake a careful reading of it, looking for the patterns.

A. 1:1-22

The scene opens with a famine in the land of Judah and closes with the first barley harvest after the famine. In between, the narrator has crafted a “skillfully managed downward spiral”¹⁴ on the theme of emptiness-fullness.

The stage is very quickly set in the first five verses, into which are condensed ten years devoid of dialogue. This is in marked contrast to the rest of the narrative which is rich in dialogue¹⁵ and slow in chronological pace. In these verses we are introduced to six characters, all of whom are named. Most of the names have significance, though Naomi’s is the only one that is specifically explained (1:20f). Gordis interprets the pair Mahlon and Kilion as “sickness and death.”¹⁶

Elimelech and his family flee the famine in Judah and settle in Moab where his two sons take Moabite wives. Without more ado, the narrator tells us that first Elimelech dies, followed by his two sons. The narrator skillfully emphasizes that Naomi is left alone, changing but a single consonant to move from leaving her with her two sons (וְהָאִשָּׁרָה הָיָא וּשְׁנֵי בָנֶיהָ) to leaving her without her two sons (וְהָאִשָּׁרָה הָאִשָּׁה בְּשֵׁנֵי יְלָדֶיהָ). Naomi and her daughters-in-law are in a precarious position, bereft of male protectors, living in a society where there is no hint of a social

⁸ Hasel, 111-114.

⁹ Tribble, 842.

¹⁰ Rauber, 27.

¹¹ Ryken, 120.

¹² Tribble, 843, divides it into two halves, each of five sections.

¹³ Rauber, 29.

¹⁴ Rauber, 30.

¹⁵ Of the 85 verses of the book, only 24 contain no dialogue, including the opening stage-setting (1:1-7) and the concluding genealogy (4:18-22).

¹⁶ Gordis, 298.

safety net as there is across in Judah.¹⁷ Hearing that the famine has ended in Judah,¹⁸ Naomi set off to return home, introducing us to a key word of the first chapter. Return (שׁוּב) is used 11 times in this first chapter (vv. 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15bis, 16, 21, 22). Three times Naomi tells her daughters-in-law to return (שׁוּב) to their own home, always with the same argument: so that they can find husbands. Naomi's first speech is presented in a skillful chiasm which demonstrates several important themes of the story:

לְכַנָּה שְׁבִנָּה אִשָּׁה לְבֵית אֹמִי	Go, return, each to her mother's house.	<i>Mother's house</i>
יַעַשׂ יְהוָה עִמָּכֶם חֶסֶד	May Yahweh do <i>hesed</i> with you	<i>Benediction</i>
כַּאֲשֶׁר עָשִׂיתֶם עִם־הַמֵּתִים וְעִמָּדִי	as you have done with the dead and with me	<i>Example</i>
יִתֵּן יְהוָה לָכֶם וּמְצֹאֵן מְנוּחָה	May Yahweh give you and you find rest	<i>Benediction</i>
אִשָּׁה בֵּית אִישָׁה	each in her husband's house.	<i>Husband's house</i>

Using, as above, the change of a single consonant, the outer layer of Naomi's speech expresses her desire that by returning to their mothers (אֹמִי) Orpah and Ruth will find husbands (אִישָׁה). The intermediate layer of Naomi's speech, lines 2 and 4, carries a pair of benedictions. Though the story opens under conditions indicative of Yahweh's curse, it quickly becomes a story of blessing, in which the narrator presents eleven blessings or benedictions (1:8, 9; 2:4bis, 12bis, 20; 3:10; 4:11, 12, 14). The themes of Naomi's benedictions can be summarized as *hesed*, home and husband.¹⁹ The first blessing that Naomi calls down upon her daughters-in-law is Yahweh's *hesed*, his covenant loyalty. This is extraordinary given that these women are not members of Yahweh's covenant community; indeed, they are members of a nation that God has cursed and with whom he has forbidden his people to have any contact. This extraordinary element is heightened still further when we reach the centre-line of the speech, onto which the chiasmic structure focuses attention. The model of *hesed* is these two Moabite women, who have demonstrated their *hesed* in their treatment of Naomi and her dead relatives.

Orpah accedes to Naomi's third plea and returns to Moab, vanishing from the story and from history, having served her purpose as a foil to her sister-in-law.²⁰ The narrator's lack of censure for her departure from Naomi, serves to emphasize Ruth's extraordinary loyalty to Naomi. Ruth's persistence in clinging to her mother-in-law evokes a fourth plea to return home, but Naomi changes the basis of her plea from the need for a husband to solidarity with her Moabite people and gods. This evokes Ruth's famous five-fold response in which she expresses her total identification with Naomi (chronologically arranged: going–lodging–dying), with her people, and, most significantly, with her God. Ruth seals this avowal with an oath sworn in the name of Yahweh (כֹּה יַעֲשֶׂה יְהוָה), consistent with her new identification. Faced with a choice of abandoning Naomi and abandoning her people, Ruth has chosen the latter.

The return of the two women to Bethlehem causes a stir in the whole town, in which the men are noticeably absent. In a mournful speech, Naomi gives expression to what has been a major theme of this chapter: she went out full (מְלֵאָה) and came home empty (רִיקָם).

B. 2:1-23

Though 1:22 closed scene 1, it acts as a janus verse, simultaneously setting the stage for scene 2, which thus opens “as the barley harvest was beginning” (בְּתַחֲלֵת קְצִיר שְׁעָרִים) 1:22) and closes when “the barley and wheat harvests were finished” (עַד־כְּלֹזֹת קְצִיר־הַשְּׁעָרִים וְקְצִיר הַחֲטִיִּם) 2:23).

In the first verse the narrator introduces a new character through a four-fold characterization: he is a relative of Naomi's husband, he is a man of standing (אִישׁ גְּבוּר חַיִּל), he is from the clan of Elimelech, and his name is Boaz. Such excessive characterization is not superfluous, but has important consequences for the story. As in 1:2, 4, the narrator is concerned to name his characters. When Boaz strides onto the stage (2:4), both giving and receiving blessings, his behaviour matches the narrator's earlier characterization.

Ruth's first address to her mother introduces yet another key theme, that of finding favour in the eyes (בְּעֵינַי) (מְצֹאֵן) of someone. The key word of chapter two is the verb gather or glean (לְקַט), used twelve times. The narrator's note that, “as it turned out” (וַיִּקְרַח מִקְרָהָ), the field in which Ruth starts to glean belongs to Boaz, should cause us to wonder if there isn't One behind the scenes directing the affairs of these players on earth.

¹⁷ Ozick, 370.

¹⁸ This news includes a delightful piece of alliteration: לָהֶם לָהֶם לָהֶם.

¹⁹ cf. Dumbrell, 231.

²⁰ Ozick, 375.

The climax of the scene is in the middle of the chapter, in the dialogue between Boaz and Ruth. Twice Boaz addresses Ruth, and twice Ruth responds in gratitude and in self-identification. Both times she expresses gratitude that she has found favour in Boaz’s eyes; the first time amazed that she has, the second time longing that it continue. In her first response she identifies herself as a foreigner (נִכְרִיָּה) amazed that Boaz should recognize (נִכַּר) her; in her second reply she calls herself a servant girl (שִׁפְחָה), but in his intervening reply (2:10-12), Boaz redefines her as a woman who has sought refuge under Yahweh’s wings (2:12).

As Ruth eats at the invitation of Boaz, the narrator emphasizes her fullness (הִיא כָּלָה וְהִשְׁבַּע וְהִתְרַ), another sign that the story is on a journey from emptiness to fullness.

Ruth returns home, “in her enormous and touching innocence” having understood very little of the significance of what transpired in the field, but Naomi understands perfectly well.²¹ As previously she had recognized the *hesed* of Ruth and Orpah to the living and the dead, so now she realizes that *hesed* is again being shown to the living and the dead, but the text is vague, probably deliberately so, as to whether this *hesed* is on the part of Boaz or Yahweh.

As noted above, the second scene closes with the end of the harvest, followed by the superfluous but significant detail that Ruth lived with her mother-in-law (וְהִשְׁבָּ אֶת־חַמּוּתָהּ), emphasizing the former’s loyal devotion.

C. 3:1-18

The third scene is enveloped within the theme of rest. Whereas in 1:9, Naomi desired that Yahweh would provide a home (בְּנוּחָהּ) for Ruth, now in 3:1 she wonders whether she shouldn’t herself attend to the matter of providing a home (בְּנוּחַ). The scene closes with Naomi urging Ruth to wait because Boaz will not rest (שָׁקַט) until he has attended fully to the matter.

A major emphasis of the third scene is fidelity to instructions, characteristic of both Ruth and Boaz:

v.4	וְהוּא יֹגִיד לְךָ אֵת אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשִׂין	He will tell you what to do	Naomi to Ruth of Boaz
v.5	כָּל אֲשֶׁר־הֵאֲמַרְתִּי אֵלַי אַעֲשֶׂה	all which you have told me I will do	Ruth to Naomi
v.6	וַתַּעַשׂ כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר־צִוְּתָהּ חַמּוּתָהּ	and she did all which her mother-in-law commanded	narrator of Ruth
v.11	כָּל אֲשֶׁר־הֵאֲמַרְתִּי אֵלֶיךָ אֶעֱשֶׂה לְךָ	all which you ask I will do for you	Boaz to Ruth
v.16	כָּל־אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה־לָּהּ	all that he had done for her	Ruth to Naomi

When this pattern is recognized, it is a surprise to see that in the central scene it is Ruth who tells Boaz what to do, not vice versa (3:9). This central scene is a replay of the central scene of chapter 2, but with some significant changes. Whereas in chapter 2 Boaz asked whose (לְמִי) Ruth was, he now asks who she is (מִי). Whereas Ruth formerly identified herself as a שִׁפְחָה, she now identifies herself as אֲמָהָה. Taking the initiative she asks Boaz to make good on his blessing of 2:12, where he commended Ruth for taking refuge under the wings (כַּנֶּף) of Yahweh. Now she seeks shelter under the corner of his garment (בְּכַנֶּף). Just as Naomi has moved beyond a wish to take an active role in fulfilling her benediction, so it is now time for Boaz to take an active role in fulfilling his benediction.

The character of Boaz is shown in his recognition of Ruth’s request as an act of *hesed*. As he redefined Ruth in chapter 2, he again redefines her, this time as a woman of noble character (אִשָּׁה חַיִּיל). The echo of the description of Boaz as a man of noble character (אִישׁ...חַיִּיל 2:1) leads us to recognize that Boaz and Ruth are perfectly matched. Furthermore, Ruth’s character is recognized by all the people, (כָּל־שַׁעַר עַמִּי) literally, by all the people in the gate, which prepares us for the first part of scene 4 which takes place in the gate.

The problem of a nearer-of-kin occasions a further demonstration of Boaz’s character, for his supreme act of virtue or *hesed* is not marrying Ruth but willingness to inform the closer relative, setting aside his personal desires for the requirements of covenant law.²²

After this climactic centerpiece, the scene winds down with Ruth again taking food home, this time given her by Boaz so that she not return empty (רָיקָה). As noted above, the scene closes with Naomi’s counsel to Ruth which forms an *inclusio*, and again shows that Naomi has a clearer understanding than Ruth of the events unfolding.

²¹ Rauber, 32.

²² A. Berlin, cited in Kenneth A. Mathews, “Boaz,” *ABD* 1:765.

D. 4:1-22

3:18, like 1:22, serves as a *janus* verse to introduce the reader to scene 4 which opens with Boaz doing just as Naomi understood he would: going up to the city gate to settle the matter. Hitherto the narrator has explicitly named all the individual characters, of which there have been seven so far. He breaks this pattern by not giving a name to the next character, the closest of kin. Alas, all the English translations completely obscure the narrator's point.²³ Though Boaz no doubt knew his relative's name, the narrator intends for him to be faceless; therefore Boaz calls him *פְּלֹנִי-אֶלְמוֹנִי* (*pēlōnî-ʾalmōnî* 4:1), which could be translated "so-and-so," or in modern idiom we might call him Joe Blow. The reason for the narrator's faceless portrayal becomes evident later in the scene.

The key word in this scene at the gate is the verb "redeem" and its nominal relatives, with the vocabulary especially concentrated in verses 4 and 6. In verse 4 the verb "redeem" (גָּאַל) is used five times; in verse 6 the verb is used three times, the noun "redeemer" (גֹּאֵל) once and the noun "redemption right" (גְּאֻלָּה) once.

The dialogue between Boaz and his relative is unfolded in two stages so as to expose the true character of both men. Joe Blow is initially eager to fulfill his duty as a *gōʿēl* when this is presented as just a matter of land, for he can then re-interpret the duty to help a widow as the right to expand his holdings. When Boaz adds that with the land comes responsibility, the relative backs out. As we have come to expect from our skillful narrator, Peloni-almoni's second speech is finely crafted in a chiasmic structure 4:6.

לֹא אוּכַל לְגַאֵל-לִי	I am not able to redeem [it] for myself
פֶּן-אֶשְׁחִית אֶת-יְנֻחָתִי	lest I spoil my inheritance
גֹּאֵל-לְךָ אֶתֶּה אֶת-גְּאֻלָּתִי	Redeem my redemption right for yourself
כִּי לֹא-אוּכַל לְגַאֵל	for I am not able to redeem [it]

It is now clear why the narrator portrays the nearest-of-kin as faceless. Concerned for himself, not for his relatives in need, he has failed to show *hesed*, serving as a foil to emphasize again that Boaz does do *hesed*. His behaviour is contrasted with Boaz's self-sacrifice in favour of upholding covenant law. Having excused himself from his covenant responsibility, Joe Blow disappears from the story and from history, as had Orpah before him. "He is too ordinary to be the husband of Ruth."²⁴ Like Orpah, he has no vision.

Boaz calls upon the elders and all the people to witness his assumption of the duties of the *gōʿēl*, beginning and ending his speech with the words "today you are witnesses" (עֲדֵיכֶם אִתְּכֶם הַיּוֹם). The elders and the people respond by invoking blessings upon Ruth, upon Boaz, and upon their offspring, with reference back to three other women in Israel's history, Rachel, Leah and Tamar.

After the scene at the gate, the narrator resumes in 4:13 the rapid narrative pace of 1:1-3, with marriage, consummation, conception, and birth squeezed into one verse. As yet another indicator of curse turned to blessing, of emptiness to fullness, it is Yahweh who gives the conception to Ruth which he had withheld from her in Moab. As in chapter 1, the rapid pace serves to fast-forward the action so we can slow down for another round of speeches and benedictions. The birth of a son to Ruth prompts the reappearance of the women of the city, absent since 1:19. These women opened the events in Bethlehem and, with the men from the gate out of the picture, it is these women who will now close the events in Bethlehem. We are no longer surprised that their speech should be a blessing, praising Yahweh for providing a *gōʿēl*, and, as the men in the gate the previous year, invoking a blessing that this son would become famous throughout Israel (וַיִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל). With echoes of chapter 1, the narrator picks up the theme of return, as the women tell Naomi that Yahweh will renew (שׁוּב) her life.

The book closes with a genealogy, arranged so as to highlight Boaz in the favoured seventh slot, and David in the tenth slot of completion.²⁵

E. Conclusion

Looking back over the story, what are we to make of it? Frequently considered a beautiful love story,²⁶ we surely miss the narrator's point if we read it on that level. It is a story not of love, but of *hesed*, shown by Ruth, by Boaz, and by Yahweh.

²³ "my friend" NIV; "friend" NASB, NRSV; "Calling him by name" REB; ὁ οὐτος LXX.

²⁴ Ozick, 381.

²⁵ The genealogy of Gen 5 is similarly arranged, highlighting Enoch in the seventh generation and Noah in the tenth.

²⁶ e.g., Ryken, *Words of Delight*, 120.

III. Place in the Progress of Revelation

Reading Ruth canonically, we are immediately confronted with the problem of which canon, for Ruth is not in the same place in all the canons. All Hebrew canons place Ruth among the Writings (כְּתוּבִים), and most place it among the *Megilloth* (מְגִלּוֹת), the collection of five scrolls read on various Jewish feast days, but there the agreement ends. The order of the individual books of the *Megilloth* in the *Tanakh* is Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Qohelet, Esther; and the whole collection follows Psalms, Proverbs and Job in the *Ketuvim*. BHS follows Leningradensis and many Sephardic manuscripts in ordering the *Megilloth* in the sequence Ruth, Song of Songs, Qohelet, Lamentations, Esther; the whole following Psalms, Job and Proverbs.²⁷ The English versions follow LXX which moved many of the components of the *Ketuvim* into locations that presumably seemed more logical to a Hellenistic mind. Ruth was intercalated between Judges and Samuel in the Former Prophets.

The opening verse of Ruth contains many hooks whereby the narrator ties the story into Israel's history. His opening statement "In the days when the judges ruled" (Ruth 1:1) places his story within the historical context of the book of Judges. That book opened on a very positive note with Yahweh's selection of Judah to be the first tribe to go up against the Canaanites (Judg 1:2), affirming the pre-eminence of Judah that was first announced in Jacob's blessing (Gen 49:8-12). Though Judah was able to take the hill country of Judah (Judg 1:19), including presumably Bethlehem, the other tribes were not able to take their allocated territory. With the rise of a second generation who "knew neither the Lord nor what he had done for Israel" (Judg 2:10), Israel went into free-fall. Fourteen chapters (3-16) of meaningless cycles of history lead to a climax in the final 5 chapters of the book (17-21) in which two stories relate the near elimination of two tribes. Bethlehem of Judah (cf. Ruth 1:1) features in each story. Dan went off into theological oblivion when it moved to the far north and established its own religion with a Levite from Bethlehem in Judah as its priest (Judges 17-18). Benjamin was nearly eliminated entirely when it sank to behaviour reminiscent of that in Sodom and Gomorrah, raping a Levite's concubine from Bethlehem of Judah (Judges 19-21).²⁸ As Judges opened with Israel enquiring of Yahweh who should be the first to go up into battle and Judah being chosen, so the book ends with the same scenario; Judah leads the attack on Benjamin (Judg 20:18).

Returning to Ruth, the decay of Israel is illustrated theologically by the narrator's statement that "there was a famine in the land" (Ruth 1:1). Since the Promised Land was sensitive to the spiritual condition of the people (Deut 28), this famine indicates what we have already learned from Judges, that the people are far from the Lord and under his judgment. Although Judah is portrayed in positive light in Judges, leading the tribes against the Canaanites, capturing its allotted territory, and leading the attack on Benjamin, this famine extends to Judah, indicating that she, too, is in poor spiritual condition.

This is not the first time that a famine has prompted one of God's people to leave the land in search of food. Abraham went to Egypt (Gen 12:10) as did Jacob's sons (Gen 42:3,5). All three events express the precariousness of this land that Yahweh has covenanted to give to Abraham and his descendants (Gen 15). Famine in the land indicates Israel's sin which threatens God's covenant. Each time a man flees famine in the land, we must ask, "Will God be faithful to his covenant?"

The departure of Elimelech and his family from the land is a reversal of the victorious entry into the land under Joshua. The land of promise had become a land of curse. Furthermore, Elimelech and his family move to Moab, a nation whom the Lord cursed and warned Israel to avoid (Dt 23:3-6). The statement that this man and his family are from Bethlehem in Judah serves as yet another link back to the book of Judges, as noted above. That the family entered into "good relations" with the Moabites, as forbidden by Yahweh, is shown by the two sons taking Moabite wives. The death of Elimelech and his two sons heightens the picture of the spiritual condition of Israel.

Re-reading chapter 2 in the light of the rest of Scripture, we notice further links to previous history. Ruth's identification of herself as a foreigner would evoke in the Israelite audience powerful memories of her one-time status as foreigners. Yahweh required that she treat foreigner with compassion since she too had been a foreigner in Egypt.

Boaz's identification of Ruth as one who has left her father, mother and homeland to come live with a people she did not know (2:11) evokes memories of Abraham who left his country, people and father's household to go to

²⁷ The *Tanakh* order of the *Megilloth*, which is probably late, reflects the order of the feasts at which the components are read: Song of Songs at Passover, Ruth at *Shavuot* (Pentecost), Lamentations on the 9th of Ab, Qohelet at *Sukkot* (Feast of Booths), and Esther at Purim. The BHS *Megilloth*, which must predate 1008 (Leningradensis) is ordered chronologically. The *Megilloth* is unknown to the Babylonian Talmud which orders the Ketuvim: Ru, Ps, Job, Pr, Eccl, Ct, Lam, Dan, Est, Ezr-Neh, Chr. (H. Eldon Clem, "Megilloth," *ABD* IV:680).

²⁸ Alter, *World of Biblical Literature*, 111-113.

a land Yahweh would show him (Gen 12:1).²⁹ This leads us to conclude that the narrator is presenting Ruth as a new Abraham, as a new mother of Israel even as Abraham was the father of Israel.³⁰

If read theologically, the book of Judges forces us to ask two questions “Is there any *hesed* left in the land?” and “Will God yet show his *hesed*?” The answer of the book of Ruth is “Yes” to both questions. There is *hesed* in the land, although it initially has to come from outside the land, even from Israel’s enemy. Ruth’s *hesed* evokes the *hesed* that is latent in Boaz. Yahweh shows *hesed* all the way through the story, to Naomi, to Ruth, to Boaz, to Elimelech’s name, and to Israel. God accomplishes the theologically unthinkable: he restores the fortunes of his people by using a humble Moabite woman who would have been less than a nobody in the eyes of the Israel.

We turn from looking back to the past sources of echoes noted in Ruth, to consider echoes from Ruth in as yet future texts. The women’s statement to Naomi that Ruth loves her and is better to her than seven sons looks ahead to another story featuring a humble woman where Elkanah asks Hannah, “Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?” (1Sa 1:8).

The *hesed* and spreading of the corner of the garment that characterized the courting relationship between Boaz and Ruth is picked up by the later prophets. Yahweh declares to Israel, “I will betroth you to me forever; I will betroth you in righteousness and justice, in love (*hesed*) and compassion (חַסֵּד cf. Ruth 2:13). I will betroth you in faithfulness, and you will acknowledge the LORD.” (Hos 2:21f NIV). In an extended allegory of unfaithful Jerusalem, the Lord says, “Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you (וְאַפְרָשׁ כְּנָפֵי עִלְיָי) and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into covenant with you...and you became mine.” (Ezk 16:8). Viewed against the later history of Israel, Frye observes that Naomi’s “story becomes that of Israel in miniature.”³¹

Though Hasel argues that his approach to OT theology is a theology of the canonical OT,³² he proposes that the individual books of that canon be presented in their historical order rather than in their canonical order since other than theological reasons dictated the order of both Hebrew and LXX canon.³³ Sailhamer notes that the Hebrew order places Ruth immediately after Proverbs 31:10-31, the beautiful acrostic of the “*virtuous woman*” (אִשָּׁה חַיִּל, Pr 31:10) whose deeds “praise her in the gates” (Pr 31:31), who is illustrated in real life by Ruth to whom Boaz says, “All those *in the gate* of my people know that you are a *virtuous woman*” (Ruth 3:11).³⁴ Such con-textuality is lost in the English Bible and would never be recovered if Hasel’s method were pursued rigorously, but it a con-textuality that works only for BHS not for the *Tanakh*.

The book of Ruth is not quoted in the NT, but it has a vital place within the progress of revelation. Ruth is included in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus (Mt 1:5), along with three other women, Tamar, Rahab, and Uriah’s wife (Bathsheba). All four women were foreigners, and all four experienced difficulties, if not outright scandal, in the bringing forth of sons in the messianic line.

Abbreviations

ABD *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

IV. Bibliography

Alter, Robert. *The World of Biblical Literature* (New York: Basic Books, 1992). A more popular sequel to Alter’s two epochal books, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* and *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, this is an easier read for the layman.

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²⁹ Rauber, 32.

³⁰ Alter, *Art of Biblical Narrative*, 59; *World*, 51f.

³¹ Frye, 212.

³² Hasel, 111, 203f.

³³ Hasel, 113f, 204.

³⁴ Sailhamer, 213f.

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