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The book of Ruth and the house of David

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The view that the book of Ruth is a late work, written to counteract the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah banning exogamous marriages, continues to find many supporters.[1] In this article I am not trying to demolish that approach so much as bolster the case for an alternative way of reading the book of Ruth. My aim is to show that the Ruth narrative can be read in relation to the house of David, namely that its main point is the providential preservation of the family that produced King David and the implications for the Judean royal house. My arguments are as follows: none of the canonical positions assigned to the book of Ruth suggest that ancient readers understood it as a critique of restrictive views of intermarriage, whereas two of them assume a connection between the book and David; the genealogy in Ruth 4:18–22 is not easily removed from the book and forges an explicit link between the family history of the book of Ruth and David; the link with David is more than an endorsement of the message of the book that does not as such relate to David; the theme of God's control of events and that of his 'kindness' toward the ancestors of David prefigure God's dealings with David and his house; lastly, scenes that depict turning-points in the plot in chapters 1 and 3 (Ruth's refusal to part from Naomi, and Ruth's appeal to Boaz) find later parallels in the life of David.

I. The differing canonical positions of the book of Ruth

The position of the book of Ruth varies among canons, but the purpose of the present discussion is not to discover its *right* position (if such a concept has any meaning, for the positioning of biblical books is a paratextual phenomenon that reflects the varying perceptions and evaluations of later generations of readers, and no one canonical position need be privileged above the others).[2] In Hebrew

1 E.g. Margo C. A. Korpel, *The Structure of the Book of Ruth*, Pericope 2 (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2001), 230–33; Tamara Cohn Eskenazi and Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, The JPS Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: JPS, 2001), xxiv, xxv; Yairah Amit, *Hidden Polemic in Biblical Literature*, trans. by Jonathan Chipman, Biblical Interpretation Series 25 (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 84–87; Victor H. Matthews, *Judges and Ruth*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: CUP, 2004).

2 See L. B. Wolfenson, 'Implications of the Place of the Book of Ruth in Editions, Manuscripts, and Canon of the Old Testament', *HUCA* 1 (1924), 151–78 here 171–75; Julius Steinberg, *Die Ketuvim: ihr Aufbau und ihre Botschaft*, BBB 152 (Hamburg: Philo, 2006), 125–29. For the general issue of biblical book order, see Greg Goswell,

canonical orders, Ruth is found in the third canonical division (Writings) and put either before Psalms as a kind of biography of the psalmist David, or it is placed after Proverbs, making the heroine Ruth an example of 'a good wife/worthy woman' (cf. Prov. 31:10–31). In Greek orders, Ruth comes after Judges, in an apparent effort to put it in its historical setting, because the story is set 'in the days when the judges ruled' (Ruth 1:1).[3] In such a setting, it is a *third* Bethlehemite story (after Judges 17–18, 19–21; N.B. 17:7; 19:1) and forms a delightful contrast to the final chapters of Judges.[4]

Are we to read the book of Ruth as a lead-up to David the chief psalmist, as providing a wisdom model in the person of Ruth, or as an historical book following Judges? There may be no right or wrong answer, rather the point is that the differing canonical positions make a difference to how one views and reads a book. Different sorts of questions arise out of distinct literary contexts. The fact that a book like Ruth can be placed in quite different positions in the Hebrew Bible and Greek Old Testament, shows that book order reflects readerly perception of what a book is about.[5] The positioning of a book due to thematic considerations means that alternative placements are possible, for any book is likely to have more than one theme. Ruth appears to work well in all these canonical positions, but I need to look at the alternative canonical settings in a little more detail.

The order of the individual books within the Writings greatly fluctuates in the Jewish tradition.[6] According to the Babylonian Talmud (*B. Bat.* 14b), the book of Ruth comes at the beginning of the Writings, maybe due to the chronological principle that the events narrated belong to the time of the judges,[7] but the presence of the ten-generation genealogy leading to David (Ruth 4:18–22) was

'The Order of the Books in the Hebrew Bible', *JETS* 51 (2008), 673–88.

3 Jerome states that this is the reason for this placement (*Prologus Galeatus*); for a translation, see Roger Beckwith, *The Old Testament Canon of the New Testament Church and Its Background in Early Judaism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 119–20. In Josephus, *Ant.* 5.318–37, the story of Ruth follows that of the judges. So too, in the list of Melito (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.26.13–14), Ruth follows Judges, and in Origen (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 6.25.2) Ruth is joined to Judges as one book.

4 Michael S. Moore tries to interpret Ruth in continuity with and in contrast to Judges; see 'To King or Not to King: A Canonical-Historical Approach to Ruth', *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 11.1 (2001), 27–41. Cf. Warren Austin Gale, 'Ruth upon the Threshing Floor and the Sin of Gibeah: A Biblical-Theological Study', *WTJ* 51 (1989), 369–75.

5 With regard to books like Ruth and Lamentations found in the Writings in the Hebrew canon, Seitz speaks of their later (according to him) migration in the Greek canon 'toward other books with which they have intentional literary or theological affiliation'; see *The Goodly Fellowship of the Prophets: The Achievement of Association in Canon Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 101.

6 See the tabulation of eleven alternative orders provided by C. D. Ginsburg, *Introduction to the Massoretico-Critical Edition of the Hebrew Bible* (London: Trinitarian Bible Society, 1897; New York: Ktav, 1966), 7.

7 Rolf Rendtorff, *The Old Testament: An Introduction*, trans. by John Bowden (London: SCM, 1985), 245.

probably another factor taken into account. In that *baraita* (preserving a pre-AD 200 Tannaic tradition), the relevant listing is 'Ruth and book of Psalms and Job and Proverbs' (coupled together in the way indicated), so that this is a four-book mini-collection, with Ruth (ending with the genealogy of David) positioned as a preface to Psalms. In line with this, the Psalter goes on to portray God helping David in his troubles and David as one who takes 'refuge' in God (e.g. Pss. 2:12; 7:1 [Heb. 2]; 11:1; 16:1) just as did Ruth herself (Ruth 2:12).[8] David praises God as the one who 'shows kindness (חסד) to his anointed, to David and his seed for ever' (Ps. 18:50 [Heb. 51], my translation).[9]

Ruth as the first of the five scrolls of the *Megillot* follows immediately upon Proverbs (in the Leningrad Codex), apparently due to a link in their subject matter. Proverbs closes with a poem celebrating the 'worthy woman' (אשת חיל) (31:10–31) and the book of Ruth goes on to describe just such a woman. In Ruth 3:11, Boaz actually calls Ruth a 'worthy woman' (אשת חיל).[10] The description in Prov. 31:31 fits Ruth ('her deeds will praise her in the gates'; cf. Ruth 3:13) and Prov. 31:23 applies to Boaz ('Her husband is known in the gates, when he sits among the elders of the land'), for both verses sound like allusions to the scene at the city gate in Ruth 4. This placement suggests a reading of Ruth as a wisdom piece, with Ruth the Moabitess a real life example of the piety taught in Proverbs and embodied in the exemplary woman of Proverbs 31.[11] Ruth followed by Song of Songs in the *Megillot*, or preceded by it according to the order of the annual festivals (assuming the year starts with the month Nisan: Song of Songs [Passover], Ruth [Weeks], etc),[12] emphasises the love story aspect of the book. The Ruth narrative, for its part, gives an agrarian setting for the pastoral images of Song of Songs. Ruth read at Weeks (during the wheat harvest) picks up the barley and wheat harvests featured in the book (e.g. 1:22; 2:2, 23).[13] In the order of books – Proverbs, Ruth and Song of Songs (Leningrad Codex) – both Ruth and Song

8 Steinberg, *Die Ketuvim*, 444, 445; cf. Jerome F. D. Creach, *Yahweh as Refuge and the Editing of the Hebrew Psalter*, JSOTSup 217 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996).

9 For the 'kindness' theme in Ruth, see below; cf. Rolf Rendtorff, 'The Psalms of David: David in the Psalms', in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception*, ed. by P. W. Flint and P. D. Miller, Jr., VTS 99 (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 53–64; and J. L. Mays, 'The David of the Psalms', *Interp* 40 (1986), 143–55.

10 Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes and commentary*, AB 7 (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 34, 35; Moshe Weinfeld and S. David Sperling, 'Ruth, Book of', *EncJud* (Jerusalem: Keter, 2007 second edition), 17.592–95, here 595.

11 Carlos Bovell wants to relate Orpah to the 'strange woman' of Proverbs; see 'Symmetry, Ruth and Canon', *JSOT* 28 (2003), 175–91, here 183–86.

12 Wolfenson, 'Implications of the Place', 157; Johannes B. Bauer, 'Das Buch Ruth in der jüdischen und christlichen Überlieferung', *Bibel und Kirche* 18 (1963), 116–19.

13 David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (London: The Athlone Press, University of London, 1956), 48, 49; Jennifer L. Koosed, *Gleaning Ruth: A Biblical Heroine and Her Afterlives* (Columbia: The University of South Carolina Press, 2011), 121–26.

of Songs develop the picture of the virtuous and assertive woman pictured in Proverbs 31,[14] and it is worth noting that the woman is the main speaker in the song.[15] When followed (or preceded) by Song of Songs, the romance aspect of the book of Ruth is highlighted.

On the other hand, Ruth 1:1 locates the action in the period of the judges, and the Ruth narrative forms a sharp contrast with the story of the Levite from Bethlehem (Judg. 17:8, 9), with that of the Levite's concubine who comes from Bethlehem (19:1, 2), and with the drastic method used to provide wives for the surviving Benjaminites (Judg. 21). Judges 21 concerns the preservation of an Israelite tribe (Benjamin) threatened with extinction (Judg. 21:6); the book of Ruth depicts God's providence in preserving the Bethlehemite family that eventually produces David (Ruth 4:5, 10, 18–22). Notably, the idiom 'to take wives' used in Judg. 21:23 (נשׂא) recurs in Ruth 1:4.[16] Despite the variety in the Greek lists of Old Testament books,[17] what we can say is that the books Genesis–Ruth are a set grouping (Octateuch) and Ruth is always placed after (or joined to) Judges.[18] In other words, in the Greek Bible Judges serves as a foil for the following book of Ruth.

In the other direction, there are connections between the figures of Ruth and Hannah, who through her offspring Samuel (the anointer of the first two kings) is also related to the coming monarchy (1 Samuel 1–2). The marriage of Boaz and Ruth and the birth of a son thematically prepare for Elkanah and Hannah and their (at first) childless relationship. In the Greek canon, Ruth 4:15 and 1 Sam. 1:8, with their similar but different expressions about being better than seven/ten sons, are only a dozen verses apart.[19] The book of Ruth covers much the same ground as do the books of Samuel, namely, the period from 'the days when the judges ruled' (Samuel being the last judge, 1 Sam. 7:15) to David.[20] The book of

14 Cf. Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 2.

15 See the statistics provided by Athalya Brenner, 'Women Poets and Authors', in *The Feminist Companion to the Song of Songs*, ed. idem (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 86–97 here 88.

16 Yair Zakovitch, *Das Buch Rut: Ein jüdischer Kommentar: Mit einem Geleitwort von Erich Zenger*, Stuttgarter Bibelstudien 177 (Stuttgart: Verlag Katholisches Bibelwerk GmbH, 1999), 33, 79.

17 There is no uniform Greek order; see B. Botte and P.-M. Bogaert, 'Septante et versions grecques', in *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible*, ed. by L. Pirot and A. Robert (Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1996), 12:535–691 here 541–43.

18 H. B. Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek, Appendix Containing the Letter of Aristeas*, ed. by H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge: CUP, 1902; rev. R. R. Ottley; New York: Ktav, 1968), 226, 227.

19 David Jobling, 'Ruth Finds a Home: Canon, Politics, Method', in *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. by J. Cheryl Exum and D. J. A. Clines, JSOTSup 143 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 125–39 here 133, 134.

20 Jobling, 'Ruth Finds a Home', 131. The transitional character of the book of Ruth between Judges and Samuel is argued for by Tod A. Linafelt, see 'Ruth', in Tod A. Linafelt and Timothy K. Beal, *Ruth, Esther*, Berit Olam (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999), xvii–xxv.

Ruth may, therefore, be treated as a 'prehistory' of the Davidic house, for, according to the genealogy provided by Ruth 4:18–22, Ruth and Boaz are the great-grandparents of David.[21] Without insisting that the *only and proper* position for Ruth is following Judges, my reading of the Ruth narrative takes that positioning of the book as its starting point and looks for possible connections between the book and the house of David.

II. The David connection

The interpretation of the book of Ruth in recent scholarship has made little of the David connection that is explicit in the final form of the book, but what I offer is a kind of *backwards* reading, viewing the David-connection as fundamental to the elucidation of the book's theme and purpose. The habit of readers establishes the principle that a consideration of the end of a book transforms how one reads the book as a whole.[22] Eager to discover what a book is about, the average reader may turn to the ending of the book and use what is found there to guide the reading of the whole. The critic reads a book more than once, and second (and subsequent) readings are done with a knowledge of how the book ends and are truly critical. As stated by Jonathan E. Dyck, 'Reading the ending first is simply a shortcut to a critical reading of the text'.[23] The uncovering of the link to David in the last number of verses of the book requires the reader to reread the story and to discover what might have been missed on the first reading.

According to F. W. Bush, the final resolution of a plot, and especially the dénouement (outcome or consequences of the resolution) and any accompanying coda of a complex narrative are important indicators of theme.[24] In the case of the narrative of Ruth, the plot centres on the filling of Naomi's emptiness (1:21). All the other characters – her husband, her sons, her two daughters-in-law, Boaz, even the son whom Ruth bears – stand in relation to Naomi (see 1:3, 5, 6; 2:1; 4:17).[25] All this tends to focus the story from Naomi's perspective. Her loss of family (husband and sons) at the beginning of the book (1:5b) is compensated by the provision of a son (through Ruth) at its end (4:13–17a). Though the son is born to Boaz and Ruth (4:13), 4:17a underlines the significance of the son for Naomi. This does not have to be taken as meaning that the issue of an heir for the

21 Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folkloric Interpretation* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 250, 251.

22 For this paragraph I acknowledge my dependence on Jonathan E. Dyck, *The Theocratic Ideology of the Chronicler*, Biblical Interpretation Series 33 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 77, 78.

23 Dyck, *Theocratic Ideology*, 78.

24 Frederic William Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, WBC 9 (Dallas: Word Books, 1996), 48, 49. Bush is dependent on John Beekman, John Callow and Michael Kopesec, *The Semantic Structure of Written Communication* (Dallas: SIL, 1981, fifth revision), 135, 137.

25 Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative*, Bible and Literature Series 9 (Sheffield: The Almond Press, 1983), 83, 84.

line of Elimelech is only a secondary concern (*pace* Bush),[26] for the dénouement moves beyond the temporal needs of Naomi and shows that the son turned out to be an ancestor of illustrious David (4:17b), and the connection with David is reinforced by the genealogy given in the coda (4:18–22).

Katharine Doob Sakenfeld would only see the David connection acting as 'an imprimatur' on the implied ethic of the book about the need for the Israelite community to adopt a generous view of outsiders.[27] She states: 'Because of David's stature in Judean tradition, just the mention of his name is sufficient to drive home the storyteller's point of view.'[28] While by no means denying the canonical link to David, the effect of Sakenfeld's view is to minimise its significance for the message of the book, since its only role is as *support* for its controversial implied ethic rather than being part of the message of the book as such. Likewise, for André LaCocque, 'the authority of the interpretation of the law presented in the book of Ruth finds its foundation in the person of David'.[29] Again, on this interpretation, the unquestionable prestige of David is used as support for the challenging message of the book, but makes no further contribution. The connection with David is more than this, for, as noted by Adele Berlin, the canonical link to David not only 'tends to elevate the status of the story', it 'tends to elevate David'.[30]

III. The genealogy leading to David

An examination of the genealogy is necessary, for the originality of 4:17b–22 is commonly rejected in recent scholarship, with 'all but universal agreement' that the verses are a later *appendix* to the story proper,[31] but the case is anything but decisive.[32] We do not need to discount the genealogy as a later addition and in so doing reject any *original* Davidic connection. The Ruth narrative has a symmetrical design, with a series of parallels found between chapters 2 and 3 and between chapters 1 and 4.[33] The chiastic balance of the story requires some kind of 'family history' at the end, matching what is found at the beginning (1:1–5), and that is what the genealogy provides.[34] Shimon Bar-Efrat has commented on the chiastic structure of this book,[35] noting that the book opens with information

26 Bush, *Ruth*, 51: 'his significance relates entirely to Naomi'.
27 Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox, 1999), 4, 5.
28 Sakenfeld, *Ruth*, 84.
29 André LaCocque, *Ruth*, Continental Commentaries, trans. by K. C. Hanson (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), 12.
30 Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 110.
31 Campbell, *Ruth*, 172.
32 See the detailed review and critique of the majority position provided by Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 15–21.
33 Bezalel Porten, 'The Scroll of Ruth: A Rhetorical Study', *Gratz College Annual of Jewish Studies* 7 (1978), 23–49 here 23.
34 Stephen Bertman, 'Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth', *JBL* 84 (1965), 165–68.
35 Shimon Bar-Efrat 'Some Observations on the Analysis of Structure in Biblical Narrative', *VT* 30 (1980), 154–73, here 156, 157.

about (three) people who died before the beginning of the main action (Elimelech, Mahlon, Chilion, 1:1–5) and ends with a list of the (three) generations that were born after the conclusion of the main action (Obed, Jesse, David), with the matching numbers supporting the point made by Bar-Efrat.[36]

The name of Perez begins the genealogy (4:18) and he has already been named in the body of the book (4:12). The portrait of Perez as ancestral head is common to both 4:12 and the genealogy, which, therefore, suits its context and was presumably tailored to fit the narrative it caps. So too, whatever the exact relation between the genealogy in Ruth 4 and the genealogy provided in 1 Chr. 2:5–16, both passages give special prominence to the line of Perez, and the linear genealogy in Ruth 4 may be crafted to highlight the names of Boaz (7th generation) and David (10th generation).[37] The effect of the genealogy is to link the story of Ruth with the Bible's 'main narrative' (= Primary History), namely Genesis to Kings, in which kingship is a major concern,[38] and, in fact, the theme of kingship is sounded immediately before the Ruth narrative in the refrain that punctuates the closing chapters of Judges: 'In those days there was no king in Israel' (Judg. 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The name Perez takes the reader back into the patriarchal stories (*Vätergeschichten*) of Genesis (notably the circumstances of the birth of Perez in ch. 38); then we move forward to David (whose final years are recorded in 1 Kings 1–2) so that the genealogy helps to establish continuity between earlier Israelite history and the beginning of the Davidic monarchy.[39]

In other words, Ruth 4:17b, 18–22 show the wider significance of the story. In support of this, the blessing provided by the family to Israel as a whole has already been suggested by 4:11–12. The blessing speaks of the future fame of the house (קרא־שם), and this is picked up and widened in verse 14 ('and may his

36 *Pace* Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 17 n.46: 'Against Bar-Efrat, however, one notes that only the last three members of the list fit that description.'

37 This is the thesis of Sasson (*Ruth*, 183–184, 186), and it is evaluated by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, 'Why Perez? Reflections on David's Genealogy in Biblical Tradition', in *David and Zion: Biblical Studies in Honor of J. J. M. Roberts*, ed. by Bernard F. Batto and Kathryn L. Roberts (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 405–416, here 410–16; cf. Porten, 'The Scroll of Ruth', 47–48.

38 Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation*, 110; cf. David M. Howard, Jr., 'The Case for Kingship in the Old Testament: Narrative Books and the Psalms', *TrinJ* 9 (1998), 19–35; idem, 'The Case for Kingship in Deuteronomy and the Former Prophets', *WTJ* 52 (1990), 101–15.

39 Marshall D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies: With Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus*, SNTSMS 8 (Cambridge: CUP, 1969), 78; cf. Harold Fisch, 'Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History', *VT* 32 (1982), 425–37, here 435; Gillis Gerleman, *Ruth, Das Hohelied*, BKAT 18 (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1981, second ed.), 10, 11. Cf. W. S. Prinsloo, 'The Theology of the Book of Ruth', *VT* 30 (1980), 330–41, here 340: the genealogy 'adds a new and wider dimension to the book'. For linear genealogies as a way 'to support the political claims of the kings', see Robert R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 195; cf. idem, *Sociological Approaches to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 60, 61.

name be renowned [ויקרא שמו] in Israel'). The blessing also speaks of multiple 'offspring' (הזרע read as a collective) and this finds its fulfilment in the family genealogy leading to David. The blessing that likens Ruth to Rachel and Leah 'who built up the house of Israel' (4:11) and the hyperbolic commendation of Ruth in 4:15b ('[she is] more to you than seven sons') also hint that she will be ancestress of a famous figure with pan-Israelite significance.[40] Likewise, the analogy of foreign Tamar who becomes an Israelite matriarch (4:12),[41] to which we might add a reference to Rahab (Joshua 2; cf. Matt. 1:5),[42] supports the thesis that Ruth's role will affect the destiny of the nation as a whole.

Scholars have problems with 4:17b because there seems to be no connection between the name Obed (v. 17b) and 'a son has been born to Naomi' (v. 17a), but the assigning of the name 'Obed' (= he who serves) is appropriate for one who will serve the needs of Naomi in her old age (the role assigned to him in 4:15 by the Bethlehemite women who name him).[43] As well, as suggested by Hubbard, the importance of the birth of Obed is more than just signifying the survival and future of the threatened family, for the LORD's intervention strongly implies that the child has a special destiny (cf. Samson, Samuel).[44] This is supported by the fact that 4:13 is the only time *the narrator* describes God as active in events ('the LORD gave her [Ruth] conception, and she bore a son').[45]

IV. The hidden polemic of the book of Judges

It has been recently argued that the book of Judges presents a polemical view of early Israelite history that promotes the interests of the tribe of Judah, and specifically the Davidic dynasty, by exposing the flaws of the judges originating from the northern tribes.[46] On this theory, the success of the tribe of Judah (1:1–20) is set over against the failures of the northern tribes (1:21–36) in order to demon-

40 Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 21, 22.

41 E.g. Ellen van Wolde, *Ruth and Naomi* (London: SCM, 1997), 127–31.

42 See Laura E. Donaldson, 'The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes', in *Ruth and Esther*, A Feminist Companion to the Bible (Second Series), ed. by Athalya Brenner (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 130–44, here 138, 139.

43 See Frederic William Bush, 'Ruth 4:17: A Semantic Wordplay', in *'Go to the Land I will Show You': Studies in Honor of Dwight W. Young*, ed. by Joseph E. Coleson and Victor H. Matthews (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 3–14, here 13; Porten, 'The Scroll of Ruth', 47; D. R. G. Beattie, *The Targum of Ruth*, Aramaic Targums 19 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1994), 32 (the Targumic rendering of 4:21b connects the name Obed with his later wholehearted service of God); idem, *Jewish Exegesis of the Book of Ruth*, JSOTSup 2 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1977), 131.

44 Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 20, 97.

45 Ruth 1:6 is not, despite the assertion of some (e.g. Campbell, *Ruth*, 29), another instance of the storyteller directly asserting God's involvement, for it only states what Naomi *heard* (from whom? on whose authority?), namely 'that the LORD had visited his people and given them food'.

46 Marvin A. Sweeney, 'Davidic Polemics in the Book of Judges', *VT* 47 (1997), 517–29.

strate the benefits of Judean (= Davidic) rule.[47] Othniel (from Judah) could be viewed as the model judge (3:7–11), whereas the judges from the other tribes appear in a less favourable light. Marc Brettler suggests that most of the body of the book of Judges (3:7–16:31) should be read *allegorically*, so that the supremacy of southern leadership emerges as the clear theme of the central section of the book. There is polemic against Benjamin (1:21; chs.19–21), and against the towns of Gibeah and Jabesh-Gilead in particular (19:14–3; 20:9; 21:10). The first was Saul's home town and the second was his burial place (cf. 1 Sam. 11:4; 31:11–13). Using this approach, Judges 17–18 is read as polemic against the later Danite sanctuary established by Jeroboam (1 Kgs 12:29, 30) and Judges 19–21 is viewed as critical of the emergent kingship of the Saulide dynasty. At least a couple of stories display a non-Ephraimite (Judean) viewpoint (8:1–3; 12:1–6) and behind this may lie the later use of 'Ephraim' as an epithet for the Northern Kingdom (cf. Isa. 7:2; 11:13; Ezek. 37:16; and frequently in Hosea).

The weakness in this approach, however, is that it involves a lot of reading in, and Yairah Amit is frank in admitting that it is *hidden* polemic.[48] The most that can be said with certainty is that the presentation in Judges puts a question mark over Saul's kingship from the first (cf. 1 Sam. 9:21). This is different in principle from viewing the events of the book of Ruth as relevant to the fortunes of the house of David, for the final genealogy makes *explicit* the Davidic connection of the Ruth narrative (4:17b–22), and so the reader is invited to discern what the story says or implies about later Davidic rule.

V. Rereading the book of Ruth

The connection of the family with David is hinted as early as Ruth 1:2, which specifies the Ephrathite lineage of Elimelech and family ('they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem'), this being the clan-name for a section of the population of Bethlehem (cf. 4:11).[49] From the start, therefore, the biblically-literate reader of the narrative of Ruth would suspect that there is a link to the family of David, for in 1 Sam. 17:12 David is said to be the son of 'an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah'.[50] The reader's suspicion that the story might have some connection with

47 Marc Brettler, 'The Book of Judges: Literature as Politics', *JBL* 108 (1989), 395–418; Robert H. O'Connell, *The Rhetoric of the Book of Judges*, VTS 63 (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 305–29.

48 Yairah Amit, 'Literature in the Service of Politics: Studies in Judges 19–21', in *Politics and Theopolitics in the Bible and Postbiblical Literature*, ed. by H. G. Reventlow, Y. Hoffman and B. Uffenheimer, JSOTSup 171 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 28–40, here 38–40; idem, 'The Book of Judges: Dating and Meaning', in *Homeland and Exile: Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Honour of Bustenay Oded*, ed. by Gershon Galil, Mark Geller and Alan Millard, VTS 130, (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 297–322, here 319, 320.

49 See the discussion provided by Bush, *Ruth,* 64, 65, 67.

50 Cf. Mic. 5:2 (Heb. 5:1): 'But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah'; Ps. 132:6: 'Lo, we heard of it in Ephrathah'.

the family of David is confirmed at the close of the book (4:17b, 18–22).

Likewise, the refuge taken by Elimelech and family in neighbouring Moab during the time of famine (1:1–5) is later replicated when David leaves his parents in the safekeeping of the king of Moab during the period when he is on the run from Saul (1 Sam. 22:1–4). In other words, an episode in the early history of the family (the sojourn in Moab) foreshadows what will happen in the experience of its most famous descendant. This is in line with Israelite storytelling generally, wherein typological parallels drawn between earlier and later historical events support a belief in the providential ordering of history (e.g. the description of what is, in effect, an Egyptian sojourn and exodus of Abram in Gen. 12:10–13:1).[51] Kirsten Nielson views the book of Ruth as written 'to champion the right of David's family to the throne', such a *Realpolitik* defence being needed because of his dubious Moabite ancestry.[52] This view may find support in the repeated reference to Ruth's Moabite heritage (e.g. 1:22; 2:2, 6, 21), but we have no other indicator in the Old Testament that the part-Moabite ancestry of David was an embarrassment to the ruling house of Judah. The discovery of these intertextual links in the opening section of the book of Ruth encourages the reader to look for other connections with the later history of David.

VI. Divine providence

As noted already, God's direct involvement is stated by the narrator only once (4:13), but God is repeatedly referred to by characters within the story (1:6, 9, 16–17, 20–21; 2:12, 20; 3:10, 13; 4:11, 12, 14).[53] This creates an expectation of how God will (or should) act to remedy problems or reward right behaviour. More subtly, the apparently *chance* event of Ruth entering the field of Boaz (2:3) and the arrival of Boaz and of the unnamed close relation on the scene at just the right time (2:4; 4:1) support the same theology of the God's superintendence of events.[54] As noted by Campbell, a striking feature of the story is the way in which each of the three main characters acts in the way that God is expected to act, the correspondence implying that they are divine agents. Naomi asks that God may provide her daughters-in-law with a 'home' (1:9), but later it is she who seeks a 'home' for Ruth (3:1, מנוחה in both instances). Boaz calls on God to recompense Ruth as one who has taken refuge under God's 'wings' (2:12 כנף), but later Ruth, in effect, calls on Boaz to act as God's agent by spreading his 'corner-garment' (= wing) over her (3:9 כנף). Above all, God's 'kindness' (חסד) toward the family (2:20)

51 See the discussion by U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part II From Noah to Abraham Genesis VI 9 – XI 32 with an Appendix: A Fragment of Part III* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964), 334–37.

52 Kirsten Nielson, *Ruth: A Commentary*, OTL trans. by Edward Broadbridge (Louisville: WJK, 1997), 23–29; cf. Murray D. Gow, *The Book of Ruth: Its Structure, Theme and Purpose* (Leicester: Apollos, 1992), 130–39, 203–10.

53 See Ronald M. Hals, *The Theology of the Book of Ruth*, Facet Books Biblical Series 23 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969).

54 Campbell, *Ruth*, 29.

is shown in part by Ruth's 'kindness' (חסד) in thinking of the needs of the family and being willing to marry Boaz (3:10).[55] It is significant that these examples of human characters as divine agents (3:1, 9, 10) are found in the lead-up to or within what might be viewed as the key scene in the book: the clandestine meeting between Ruth and Boaz on the threshing floor (3:7–13).

In line with this, the rise of David to the throne in the books of Samuel is shown to be providential (1 Sam. 16:13, 18; 18:12, 28 etc). What is more, the term 'wing' (כנף) recurs in two important episodes in 1 Samuel concerning the rise of David to the throne.[56] In 1 Samuel 15, Saul's act of tearing the 'hem' (כנף) of Samuel's robe (15:27) is turned by Samuel into a prophetic sign (15:28: 'The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you this day, and has given it to a neighbour of yours, who is better than you'). Likewise, in 1 Samuel 24, David deftly cuts off the 'hem' (כנף) of Saul's robe (24:5 [Heb. 6]), with David's restraint in not slaying Saul acknowledged by Saul himself as proof that David is more righteous than him and will receive the kingdom (24:16-22 [Heb. 17-23]). Another connection of the scene at the threshing-floor in Ruth 3 with events in David's life is Ruth's deferential self-reference as Boaz's 'handmaid' (3:9 [אמה x2]). Abigail repeatedly uses the same term about herself in her meeting with David in 1 Samuel 25 (vv. 24, 25, 28, 31, 41), and that meeting also leads to subsequent marriage (25:42).[57] Just as Boaz invokes a divine blessing on Ruth (3:10), David blesses Abigail, whom he views as God's agent, for her initiative in intercepting him on the way to kill Nabal saved him from blood-guilt, which would have imperilled his rise to the throne (1 Sam. 25:32, 33). By their courage and resourcefulness, Ruth and Abigail, each in their own way, play a vital role in securing the welfare of the Davidic house.[58] In what amounts to a record of the prehistory of the Davidic house, the author of Ruth shows that the workings of divine providence (through human agency) on behalf of David began during the lives of his ancestors.

VII. Kindness, human and divine

It is widely recognised that the entwined themes of divine and human 'kind-

55 I have chosen the translation 'kindness' for this admittedly difficult to translate Hebrew word, because, as demonstrated by Francis I. Andersen, חסד denotes non-obligatory generous action; see 'Yahweh, the Kind and Sensitive God', in *God Who Is Rich in Mercy: Essays Presented to Dr. D. B. Knox*, ed. Peter T. O'Brien and David G. Peterson (Homebush West, NSW: Lancer Books, 1986), 41–88. Andersen examines the three uses of the term in the book of Ruth on pages 59–60.

56 Only the first connection is noted by Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, xxiv.

57 Zakovitch, *Das Buch Rut*, 61; for further allusive links between Ruth 3 and 1 Samuel 25, see Yitzhak Berger, 'Ruth and Inner-Biblical Allusion: The Case of 1 Samuel 25', *JBL* 128 (2009), 253–72, here 259, 267–69.

58 Cf. Gillian Feeley-Harnik, 'Naomi and Ruth: Building Up the House of David', in *Text and Tradition: The Hebrew Bible and Folklore*, ed. by Susan Niditch (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 163–84, here 179: 'the book of Ruth depicts women's work as essential to creating the Davidic monarchy'.

ness' (חסד) are important in the book of Ruth (1:8; 2:20; 3:10). In being willing to return with Naomi, the two daughters-in-law show 'kindness' to their deceased husbands and to her (1:8), and this quality is confirmed in the case of Ruth by her adamant refusal to part from Naomi (1:16, 17). In line with this, Boaz later blesses Ruth for her 'kindness' (3:10). This verse actually speaks of her *two* acts of kindness ('you have made this last kindness greater than the first'). The first was her loyalty to Naomi and the family (cf. Boaz's praise of Ruth in 2:11–12), and the second is her willingness, for the sake of the family, to marry a relative of her deceased husband, though Boaz is an older man.[59] Naomi asks that God may repay the kindness of her daughters-in-law with kindness (1:8: 'May the LORD deal kindly [חסד] with you'), and she sees in the new development reported by Ruth (Boaz's favour toward Ruth) a signal that God is acting in kindness toward the family (2:20). The sentence in 2:20 is ambiguous ('who has not forsaken *his* kindness to the living or the dead'), with the pronoun's antecedent either the LORD or Boaz ('Blessed be he [Boaz] by the LORD'). The second alternative is the one most often favoured by scholars, namely it refers to Boaz's kindness, but if the ambiguity is deliberate (and I believe that it is), the reference is to God's kindness shown through that of Boaz.[60]

As noted by Sakenfeld, a remarkably similar scene to that in Ruth 1:8–18 is found in 2 Sam. 15:19–23, which depicts David leaving Jerusalem and attempting in vain to discourage someone going with him.[61] What is more, foreign (Philistine) Ittai's forceful declaration in the form of an oath that he will be with David 'whether for death or for life' (15:21) is close to that of Ruth (cf. Ruth 1:16, 17).[62] David urges Ittai the Gittite, who has served him for only a short while, to go back and not go with him, concluding with an invocation of divine kindness (15:20 MT: 'and take back your brethren with you in kindness [חסד] and faithfulness'). This difficult text is commonly amended using the Septuagint (positing missing words dropped out by homoioteleuton) to read: 'and take back your brethren with you; and may the Lord show kindness and faithfulness to you' (cf. RSV).[63] Even without textual repair, however, the reference must be to *divine* kindness

59 See Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective*, OBT (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 32; Peter H. W. Lau, *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth: A Social Identity Approach*, BZAW 416 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011), 107–09.

60 Mordechai Cohen, '*Hesed*: Divine or Human? The Syntactic Ambiguity of Ruth 2:20', in *Hazon Nahum*: *Studies in Jewish Law, Thought, and History Presented to Dr. Norman Lamm on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday*, ed. by Yaakov Elman and Jeffrey S. Gurock (Hoboken: Ktav, 1997), 11–38; Nelson Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible*, trans. by Alfred Gottschalk (Cincinnati: The Hebrew Union College Press, 1967), 41, 42; Bush, *Ruth*, 134–36.

61 The parallel is noted by Sakenfeld (*Faithfulness in Action*, 34); cf. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 103.

62 Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky, *Ruth*, 18, 19.

63 For repair of the text using the Septuagint, see S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and the Topography of the Books of Samuel* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), 314.

(cf. David's use of the word-pair 'kindness and faithfulness' in 2 Sam. 2:5–6). The texts in Ruth 1 and 2 Samuel 15 both depict an aborted leave-taking, in which someone not in a position to repay kindness (Naomi, David) asks God to do what they cannot do themselves.

There is a close relation between God's 'kindness' and the Davidic covenant tradition,[64] whose fountainhead is the dynastic oracle in 2 Samuel 7, wherein God promises (through Nathan) that he will not take his 'kindness' (חסד) from David's son (7:15; cf. 2 Sam. 22:51). Solomon said that God showed 'great kindness' to David in giving him an heir to sit upon the throne (1 Kgs 3:6; 2 Chr. 1:8). Behind the special position given to the house of David stands God's kindness. The word 'kindness' (חסד) is used seven times in Psalm 89 (vv. 1, 2, 14, 24, 28, 33, 49 [Heb. 2, 3, 15, 25, 29, 34, 50]).[65] The psalm opens with praise of the LORD's acts of kindness (חסדי יהוה v.1), for God's kindness is firm and enduring (v. 2), as illustrated by his covenant with David (vv. 3, 4). God's kindness enabled David to defeat his enemies (vv. 22, 23). It is expected that the covenant will stand firm due to God's kindness (v. 28), even in the face of disloyalty by David's descendants (v. 33; cf. 2 Sam. 7:11b–16), but the unthinkable has happened and it appears that God has renounced the covenant (vv. 38–51). Compared to either 2 Samuel 7 or Psalm 89, Ps. 132:11–12 places greater stress on the conditionality of the covenant arrangement with the Davidic house.[66] The Ruth narrative can be understood as giving hope for the future of the Davidic house. Despite the ancestors of David experiencing a time of extreme peril, God's kindness did not fail the family, and likewise (by implication) God's kindness will not fail the dynasty of David.

VIII. Conclusion

If the Ruth narrative is read as addressing the issue of political legitimacy, it might be viewed as reflecting the vested interests of a pro-David or pro-Judahite party (e.g. aiming to answer those who cast aspersions on the Davidic house due to Moabite ancestry of its founding king). I have instead provided a theological reading of the book that interprets it within the wider story of God's purposes for Israel, with divine providence and kindness upholding the dynasty of David for the benefit of Israel as a whole.

A number of factors point to the conclusion that the book of Ruth is best read

64 For this paragraph, I acknowledge my dependence upon Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action*, 52–63; idem, *The Meaning of Hesed in the Hebrew Bible: A New Inquiry*, HSM 17 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978), 139–47.

65 See Marti J. Steussy, *David: Biblical Portraits of Power* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999), 137–43.

66 Kenneth E. Pomykala notes that it is an explicitly conditional version of the dynastic promise, see *The Davidic Dynasty Tradition in Early Judaism: Its History and Significance for Messianism*, EJL 7 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995), 13; cf. F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 233.

as preparatory to God's dealings with David and his house. None of the canonical positions assigned to the book in Hebrew and Greek canons (before Psalms, after Proverbs, or between Judges and Samuel) suggest that ancient readers viewed it as written to promote a more generous view of foreigners. If its placement after Judges in the Greek Old Testament (and subsequent Christian canon) is allowed to have an impact on reading, the events in the book of Ruth are to be seen as preparing for David. The symmetrical design of the book requires the presence of the genealogy in 4:18–22, and the genealogy explicitly connects the family history given in the book of Ruth with David. The link with David is more than a commendation of the message of the book that does not as such have anything to do with the house of David, and evidence for this is that key scenes in Ruth 1:8–18 and 3:7–13 have significant parallels in the life of David. The later history of David and his house is anticipated by the Ruth narrative's depiction of the workings of divine providence on behalf of the family that produced David and by its exploration of human and divine 'kindness' in the lives of his forebears.

Abstract

Recent scholarly evaluation of the Ruth narrative has paid little attention to the Davidic connection that is explicit in the canonical book. However, if the story is read in relation to the house of David, its leading theme is the providential preservation of the family that became the Judean royal house. This thesis is supported by the fact that two out of the three traditional canonical positions assigned to the book of Ruth assume a connection with David. The genealogy in Ruth 4:18–22 forges an explicit link between the family history of the book of Ruth and David. The link with David does more than endorse the book's message that otherwise has nothing to do with David (e.g. a critique of exogamous marriage). God's control of events in the Ruth narrative and his 'kindness' toward the ancestors of David prefigure his later dealings with David and his house. Finally, key scenes in Ruth 1 and 3 (Ruth's refusal to part from Naomi, and Ruth's appeal to Boaz) find parallels in the life of David.