The Book of Ruth as an Exemplar for Faith Communities

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From beginning to end, the story of Ruth captures the attention of the reader.1 Though a story of the ebb and flow of ancient human existence—famine and death, gleanings and feasting—the story and the character of Ruth have transcended these ordinary occurrences. Ruth contains many elements that make for good story—tragedy, conflict, romance, and redemption to name a few. This gripping story causes “the emotions of the reader to fluctuate between hope and despair until the very end when what began with multiple tragedies comes to a triumphant and happy conclusion.”2 Perhaps the evocative nature of the story contributes to the vastly different uses of this book and the character of Ruth. Dante calls her the “gleaner-maid, meek ancestress” of David; Bunyan casts her as Christina’s youthful companion Mercy; and Milton uses Ruth as the paradigm for a virtuous young lady.3 Indeed, the book of Ruth continues to be one of the most beloved among the OT scriptures. In four short chapters, the author draws the reader into the ancient Israelite experience and tells a delightful story of faithfulness and redemption. When compared with OT literature containing harsh denunciations and warnings for the Israelites regarding their conduct, Ruth’s simple tale describing a time when Israelite society functioned as God intended is refreshing.4

Ruth continues to challenge the faith community by holding her up as a model to be emulated. Ruth’s life, faith, and faithfulness are the standard to which believers should compare themselves. Ruth has become more than a mere figure in Israelite history. She displays characteristics that epitomize a strong, faithful, God-fearing woman. Moreover, while living in a patriarchal society, Ruth vividly embodies someone who wants to contribute to the community despite obstacles and social mores. The book confronts nationalism, racism, bigotry, prejudices, and misogyny. As such, it still has much to teach our faith communities. To such ends, this article will focus on the nature of Ruth as an example of faithfulness and acceptance.5

Hesed6—the foundation of community

On the surface, Ruth appears to be a simple historical narrative about days gone by. However, closer study reveals rich theological application. The story is set in the time of the Judges (Ruth 1:1) —a distressing stretch of Israelite history to be sure. Over and over again, Judges portrays startling examples of individuals and the people of Israel as a whole disregarding the covenant by their treatment of each other and of God. Judges concludes with the worst of these accounts—a woman is raped, cut into twelve pieces, and civil war ensues (chs. 19–21). Despite the abuses and injustices so prevalent during this time, the author of Ruth paints a picture of a time when the covenant was lived out and society worked as God intended. This setting, combined with heavy covenantal language,7 has led many to see Ruth as the supreme example of covenant living: “When Israel raises the question about the meaning and practice of covenant, she need only consider the interaction of Naomi and Ruth, the concern of Boaz, and the somewhat negative stance of the unnamed redeemer.”8 The story holds up Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz as the ideal for which the Israelites should strive.

While exploring the dynamic of the relationship between Ruth and Boaz, the author also sets up their treatment of one another as a witness to what God desires in all relationships. Ruth cannot be confined to a love story only. Rather, it is the story of hesed—of covenantal loyalty among people. While so much of the history of Israel concerns itself with God’s call to holiness, including holiness as a pattern of distinction from surrounding peoples, the book of Ruth instead hones in on the message of hesed. Rabbi Ze’ira states, “This scroll is not concerned with either purity or defilement, either prohibition or permission. Why, then was it written? To teach you of a magnificent reward to those who practice and dispense hesed.”9 Similarly, Israel Bettan characterizes Ruth as “little concerned with what is clean and unclean, what is permitted or forbidden. It describes customs and practices, but with no attempt to confirm or deny their validity.”10 Instead of focusing on these customs, the author of Ruth chooses to explore the real application of these holiness laws—“the religion of love” that “exalts the magnanimous spirit.”11 Indeed, the story of Ruth shows how one of the least of the Israelite community, one who was not even an Israelite by birth, could through her faithfulness play a part in bringing about David, and thereby join David as a hero of the faith.

Though the author exemplifies the characters of Ruth and Boaz as models of faithful living, he or she also sets up foils to these two. Orpah is not impugned for her choice to return home, yet she does not display the same remarkable character that Ruth does. Orpah does the expected in such a situation. Rather, the author focuses on proper conduct yet makes it clear that matters such as caring for widows and keeping a family’s lineage intact are applications of hesed.

As we read, we see the way in which creation should work—according to hesed. By using a positive example of hesed, the
author displays the impact of right living and the blessings that follow from it. The characters are commended and rewarded for a lifestyle that takes one another's wellbeing into account, setting the example for all who come after them and take the message of Ruth to heart. Bettan summarizes, “[Ruth] teaches us of the great merit that inheres in the performance of kindly deeds. In other words, the law of kindness, which transcends national boundaries and makes all [humanity] kin, is the all embracing theme of the Book of Ruth.” Indeed, the most indicting aspect of Ruth is that true love, kindness and loyalty were displayed by a foreigner and by a woman. Though the story is entertaining and enjoyable, it is more than a mere moral tale to be told around the dinner table. Ruth provides edification, instruction and a challenge to the Israelites in what it means to reflect the hesed of their God.

**Hesed as a response to national and gender bias**

The import of hesed in Ruth can also be extended to bigotry in various forms. That is, the book functioned as a positive example for the community of Israel, displaying how they should live in faithfulness to outsiders in addition to one another. In such a light, Ruth takes on a polemical tone that chastises the Israelites for their chauvinism and provides an alternative to the nationalistic views expressed in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Thus the author may have had an implicit agenda to balance a radical understanding of holiness and nationalism with inclusion. As such, Ruth becomes protest literature.

If one accepts a post-exilic date, Ruth can be viewed as a statement against the nationalism that arose in the post-exilic period, especially in the form of prohibiting mixed marriages. By the time of Ezra-Nehemiah, the Israelites were being commanded to disassociate completely from foreigners, especially foreign wives. The OT presents precious few positive comments about foreigners; in fact, various OT texts show hostility towards the foreigner.13 Various other narratives also speak out strongly against association with the foreigner. When giving the Covenant Code, God promises he will go before them to wipe out the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Canaanites, Hivvites and Jebusites (Exod 22:23) so that they will not cause Israel to sin. The foreigners are to be conquered and killed, with no allowance for their presence or influence among the Israelites. Joshua implores the people to help fulfill this promise by completely wiping out the nations from the land of Canaan. The writer goes on to say that Joshua actually accomplished this extermination (Josh 11:12–14), but we find that various people remaining in the land. Though the command of God concerning dispossessing the Canaanites is clearly stated, it is not completely carried out. Judg 19, for example, depicts a man unwilling to enter Jebus (future Jerusalem) because it is a Jebusite city. He states in v. 12, “We will not turn aside into a city of foreigners, who do not belong to the people of Israel; but we will continue on to Gibeah” (NRSV).

Other examples could be cited to suggest a call to disassociation with foreign peoples.14 Nevertheless, early on in the history of Israel there is a general acceptance of foreign nations. Moses marries a Midianite and a Cushite (Num 12:1). Solomon has many foreign wives (1 Kgs 11:1–3). Granted, both men are critiqued for these relationships, yet this critique is later, implying that perhaps early on in Israelite history there had been more acceptance than many of the narratives and the laws permit. “The farther we move away from the historical situation the more rigid a picture appears, which shows that the laws gradually became idealized and unrealistic.”15

As the destruction of Jerusalem draws near and continuing after the Babylonian exile, the prophets clearly voice their opposition to anything foreign, especially the gods and idols that the Israelites had been serving. Rendtorff suggests that this denunciation is in the context of Israel’s struggle for identity (religious and national) and survival.16 While some of the law codes allow for care of foreigners, such a concept is not seen in much of the post-exilic literature. It is out of this opposition that Ezra and Nehemiah command the Israelites. Clearly the pain of the exile, which had resulted from foreign influence and idolatry, affects the way in which they approach the surrounding nations. The religious identity of the Israelites is no longer centered on the land but in strict adherence to the Torah. Rendtorff characterizes the content of Ezra to be dominated by the idea of separation and even, at times, hostility towards foreigners.17 Since Yahweh had been faithful and restored them to the land, the remnant could no longer live like those before the exile. They could not worship other gods or practice customs found in pagan nations. In addition, Ezra 10:10–11 calls for the divorce of all wives of foreign descent:

Then Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, “You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now make confession to the Lord the God of your ancestors, and do his will; separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives.” (NRSV)

Nehemiah echoes this command in 13:3: “When the people heard the law, they separated from Israel all those of foreign descent” (NRSV). The tone of Ezra-Nehemiah and the connection with the reading of the laws suggest an attempt to vilify the surrounding nations by hailing Israelite religion and life as supreme. Nehemiah paints a picture of disgust regarding foreign nations. Those nations could not speak the “language of Judah,” and as a result neither could their children (Neh 13:23–24); Solomon is berated for marrying foreign women, and these women are blamed for his sins (Neh 13:26); and the marriage to foreign women is considered a great evil and treachery against God (Neh 13:27). More is going on with these divorces and separations than avoiding social pollution; the writers do not allow for the possibility...
of conversion of foreign wives, and any mingling with them is considered sinful and inappropriate for a covenant people.

Thus, it has been proposed that the Book of Ruth was written out of this context. The author depicts Ruth as a foreigner who makes a conversion to Israelite culture and religion: “Your people will be my people, and your God my God” (Ruth 1:16b). This statement implies a full-fledged conversion.18 It should be noted, however, that Ruth is depicted as a Moabitess and not an actual Israelite even toward the end of the book (Ruth 4:5, 10). Thus, the argument runs that Ruth is a protest—albeit a subtle one—against stringent nationalism, based on Ruth’s acceptance into Israelite society and on the subtle reminder that David’s great-grandmother was a Moabite.19

The inclusive understanding of the role of foreigners among the Israelites found in Ruth stands in tension with Ezra’s rejection of foreigners. Ruth in particular displays the ability for Israelites to live with, worship with, and marry foreigners while still maintaining their set-apart status before Yahweh. Though Ruth is a Moabitess who should be shunned both from marriage and from worship (according to Ezra), she is chosen by the author to exemplify unselfish devotion that should mark the Israelite people.

The story of Ruth and Naomi can be seen together with other stories of the empowerment and liberation of OT women—such as Deborah, Rahab, Esther and Tamar. Many scholars see Ruth in a liberation and feminist light and as a “reaction to the limitations of patriarchal society.”20 The story is set in ancient Israel—a patriarchal culture that would, at times, consider women to be property. Divorced women and widows would often have a difficulty surviving, much less thriving. Thus, the two female protagonists represent, “A daring model of a woman who acts decisively to create a future for herself in a patriarchal social context where no good future was on offer for her.”21 To accomplish their successful future, Ruth and Naomi must carefully plan and execute their plan in light of their society. A stigma already surrounds Ruth based on her status as a foreign, widowed woman, and a rejection by a leading man in the society would only deepen her dishonored status. In addition, she would lose any hope of future acceptance or provision. Indeed, “The story of Ruth is about the careful negotiation between a vulnerable outsider woman and a man of substance in the community, a negotiation that has to do with honor and shame, but that is also self-consciousness about economic issues in the exchange.”22

Theological implications

The story of Ruth is different from many of the other theological texts in the OT. The story does not include angels, theophanies, key religious leaders or military triumphs. Yet close analysis of the themes of the book show that the story of Ruth can still speak to the modern reader. We see the tale unfold before us and, like the original reader, are drawn into this tale in which various tragedies and setbacks are eventually overcome. We see how the presence of God, though seemingly distant and inactive, nonetheless has a hand in the positive outcome. In Esther—another book often cited to show the providence of God—the author chooses to portray God as completely absent in name but present in the lives of the characters. The author of Ruth chooses to be less subtle since he or she does mention God’s name and intervention. A constant stream of blessings and invocations spoken in the name of God, as well as Naomi’s complaint against him, pervade the story and create the impression that God is as much an actual character as Naomi or Boaz.23 This concept of divine nearness is heightened by God’s faithfulness in answering every prayer offered up to him.24 The very words of the characters express an understanding of how God is present, though invisible, and is expected to work out his will among his people.

However, God’s providence must be seen in light of the actions and responses of the characters—human protagonists still lead the charge for redemption: “God is present and active in the Ruth story especially in the way in which people behave toward one another.”25 The correspondence of divine and human action can be seen through many examples. Boaz wishes that Ruth would find refuge under God’s wings, but he is the one who ultimately provides for her (2:12, 3:9). Naomi complains that Yahweh has brought her home “empty,” but Boaz cannot send Ruth back to her “empty” (1:21, 3:17). Naomi charges Yahweh with the responsibility of finding security for her daughters-in-law, but Ruth brings forth the plan to accomplish it (1:9, 3:1). Yahweh is blessed for maintaining hesed, yet Ruth clearly displays that characteristic as well (2:20, 3:10). Clearly, God works through these protagonists to bring about restoration. Circumstances may be out of our control—famine, death and unwillingness on the part of others to redeem or affirm us. Yet when the people of God live in faithfulness to one another, redemption does occur, just as God intends. The reader is reminded that hesed is the key element that makes up the moral order.26 God sets the example of faithfulness and expects the creation to do the same. Indeed, God’s purpose for humanity and God’s providence over this world can be seen and celebrated through the actions of the characters throughout the book of Ruth.

The story of Ruth also sets up a model of inclusiveness, especially in regard to ethnicity. Ruth is depicted as a Moabitess and not an actual Israelite even up to the end of the book. For the original readers, every use of the word “Moabitess” would
cause a pang of anger and hostility towards the character of Ruth. Nevertheless, as a result of her declaration and desire to follow Naomi, Ruth eventually marries Boaz and becomes included in the nation of Israel, even the lineage of David. Indeed, “The story of Ruth and Naomi is a tale of human kindness and devotion transcending the limits of national- or self-interest.”

According to conventional wisdom, Ruth should have followed Orpah’s example and returned home to her own people, where she would be cared for and accepted. She chooses instead to support Naomi—and through Naomi, Yahweh. She chooses the possibility of being ostracized because of her nationality, relegated to a second-class citizen because of her gender, and ignored because of her widowed state. Ruth’s faithful choice leads to redemption for herself and for Naomi’s line. “The fact that redemption and restoration are bestowed on this seeming outsider highlights for us the equal status of all people in God’s eyes. The riches of the kingdom of God are available to all who call upon the Lord’s name.”

In spite of gender, ethnicity or any other quality that divides humanity, God still pours out grace upon all humanity, often through the work of the church in this world. Ruth clearly portrays the “Abiding story of humans who yearn to contribute to the community in the face of all obstacles.” Ruth’s character provides an example of a resourceful woman who seeks the restoration of the various people in her life. Ruth challenges each of us to see where the hesed of God is breaking in, sometimes in unexpected places and people. More than that, Ruth paints the picture of the way community should be—filled with faithful people serving and caring for each other as God redeems our hopelessness and futility to produce everlasting results.

Notes

1. In an effort to distinguish the book and the person, the book of Ruth will be italicized and the person Ruth will be normal font.
5. A few caveats should be made as this task is undertaken. First, we should not assume a single purpose to this literature. Such an assumption does not do justice to the rich content that connects so many levels of meaning. The major understandings of Ruth are as follows: to maintain Israelite customs and encourage legal duties, to integrate law and daily life, to legitimate David and his monarchy, to tell a good story, to encourage proselytes, to promote universalism over against nationalism, to elevate the virtues of friendship and loyalty, to preserve women’s traditions, and to witness God at work. Second, since the dating and authorship are uncertain, the attempt to appropriate the text to a specific time and setting seems tenuous.
6. Consensus regarding a translation for the Hebrew word hesed is elusive. Kindness, steadfast love, and covenant faithfulness combine to define the idea behind the word. D. A. Baer and R. P. Gordon, NIDOTTE 2:211–18, note that hesed has a “strongly relational aspect that is essential to any proper definition.”
13. Various laws display the poor treatment of the foreigner: Exodus 12:43 prohibits the foreigner from eating the Passover, and Lev 22:24–25 will not allow sacrifices to be made to Yahweh if the animal has been received from a foreigner. It is prohibited to charge interest on a loan made to an Israelite but permitted to charge a foreigner interest (Deut 23:20). In the Year of Jubilee, Israelite debts are required to be released, but not debts of a foreigner to an Israelite (Deut 15:1–3). The foreigner is not allowed to enter into the temple; Ezek 44:6–9 comes out strongly against this, calling it an abomination (towébah). In contrast, material such as Jonah and certain legal texts affirm the significance and rights of foreigners.
14. According to Gen 19, the beginning of the foreign nations of Moab and Edom stem from an incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters. The forefather of the nation of Edom comes from Esau (Gen 25:30, 36:1, 8) who is portrayed as far less savvy than his brother Jacob, forefather of the Israelites.
18. Levenson sees these words from Ruth possibly as an echo of a liturgy of naturalization. Jon D. Levenson, “The Universal Horizon of Biblical Particularism,” in Ethnicity and the Bible, 162.
19. Certain other post-exilic texts allow for such a universalistic approach to humanity. For example, Isa 56:3–7 allows for the joining together of foreigners with Yahweh and even promises their presence on the holy mountain and in the temple.
24. The prayers and answers are in 1:8–9; 2:12, 19–20; 3:10; 4:11–12, 14; cf. Hubbard, Book of Ruth, 70.
26. Hubbard, Book of Ruth, 68.
27. Phyllis Trible, ABD 5:842.