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978-0-521-09920-2 - The Books of Ruth, Esther Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, Lamentations: The Five Scrolls

Wesley J. Fuerst

Excerpt

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THE BOOKS OF
RUTH, ESTHER,
ECCLESIASTES, THE SONG OF
SONGS, LAMENTATIONS

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THE FIVE SCROLLS

In the Hebrew Bible there are gathered together in one collection near the end several small books which in Western traditions have been placed at different points in the Old Testament. These books – Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, and Lamentations – are called in Hebrew the *Megilloth*, which means the ‘Scrolls’. The earliest record of the location of these books in the Old Testament comes from the oldest complete Greek manuscripts. In the fourth-century manuscript Codex Vaticanus, Ruth follows after Judges, Lamentations after Jeremiah, Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs after Proverbs, and Esther (along with Judith and Tobit, both now in the Apocrypha) is placed just before the prophets. This order probably reflects the earliest associations of the books with material that was historically linked or traditionally related; it belongs to a period not long after the era when the books’ authority and sanctity were decided and accepted in Judaism and in Christianity.

Over the course of some centuries, these five small books gradually came to occupy a special place in Hebrew tradition as selected readings for major festivals, and accordingly in the Hebrew manuscripts they were brought together to form a group of five scrolls (after the analogy of the five books of the law, Genesis to Deuteronomy, and the five books of the Psalms). The major festivals and the associated scrolls which were read in connection with them are: the Passover,

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celebrating the Exodus – Song of Songs; the Feast of Weeks, marking the end of the harvest season and remembering the giving of the law on Mount Sinai – Ruth; the Ninth of Ab, in memory of the fall of Jerusalem in 587 B.C. – Lamentations; the Feast of Tabernacles, six months after Passover and celebrating the grape harvest – Ecclesiastes; Purim, the festival of national deliverance and victory over enemies – Esther. In Hebrew manuscripts and printed editions the Five Scrolls are placed in this same order, and follow the Hebrew calendar of festivals for the year beginning with Passover in the first month of the Hebrew year.

The Five Scrolls offer a fascinating variety of material, including a short story (Ruth) and a historical novel or festal legend (Esther), speculative wisdom (Ecclesiastes), poetry (Song of Songs), and lamentations and dirges (Lamentations). They all come down to us in their present form from rather late in the Old Testament historical period, although some portions or underlying strata of tradition may well be centuries older. Each book is very different from the others, bringing its own unique message and viewpoint, and reflecting a distinct faith.

It was about several of the books in the final third of the Hebrew Bible, including the Scrolls, that debate took place on the authority and holiness, that is, the canonicity, of certain parts. Esther, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs were all questioned at some time or other by famous rabbis. The Scrolls therefore represent a kind of frontier for the Old Testament, and they pose some of the thorniest problems in interpretation.

The oldest records of debates about whether these books were holy or not are from the Mishnah and the Talmud, documents from Judaism in the second and following centuries A.D. which collected teachings and sayings from the rabbis, as well as reflections on scriptural meanings and stories from Jewish tradition. Although it must be taken for granted at the outset that prevalent opinion favoured these books, some weighty

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uncertainty must have existed for a long time. Regarding Ecclesiastes, the strict school of Rabbi Shammai opposed it but the liberal school of Rabbi Hillel accepted it as holy; they disagreed in the same way over Ecclesiasticus, which ended up in the Apocrypha outside the collection of Jewish holy books. Debate over Ecclesiastes and the Song of Songs is recorded from the early second century A.D., and even much later it was still declared by some rabbis that Ecclesiastes did not 'defile the hands' (see below) because it was the human wisdom of Solomon, and that Esther was not given from the Holy Spirit.

The word 'canon' means measure, or standard, and was applied to the body of holy books centuries later in Christendom. But it is a useful term to use for understanding the earlier discussions because they were based on certain criteria, or standards, for determining whether a book was holy or not. An early date associated with a book was important; this applied however to literature in general in an era when the traditions were taken to be so important, and therefore many books written during the last centuries B.C. and the first centuries A.D. bore titles with the names of ancient figures like Solomon, Moses, and Enoch. Another measurement for canonical status was whether the book was orthodox in its teaching, agreeing with the Torah (the Law, the five 'books of Moses', Genesis to Deuteronomy) and consistent within itself and with the revelation in the Torah.

Still another measurement was described in the expression already used: whether a book 'defiled the hands', which probably included elements from the other criteria but which also said something in addition. In ancient thinking, holiness was regarded as a substance as well as a quality; it could be physically transmitted. When a person held and read what was really a holy book, holiness was held to pass to the person's hands; this kind of holiness could be a dangerous thing, and the hands therefore needed to be cleaned afterwards. So when a rabbi said that Ecclesiastes does not defile the hands, he meant that he did not feel that he had to clean his hands after

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reading it. This was a psychological as well as an intellectual matter; either one was moved by the scroll, emotionally, spiritually, and intellectually, or one was not. So personal as well as collective judgements were applied to the books.

What is remarkable about the canonizing process in Judaism, which took place actually over a long period of time, with many fluctuations and in the process of using the books, is not its legalism but its openness and liberality. Ruth of course was a lovely story from the early days, with a very traditional message. Lamentations was a hard and painful book, but from a climax in Israel's history and with a striking word of prophetic truth. Esther did not offer discourses about God and his work, but did speak of vital national experience, and was beloved by the people. But Ecclesiastes bore a very difficult message, challenging the foundations of the traditional beliefs and of orthodoxy; and the Song of Songs was enjoyed, but was not understood, at least as a religious or theological book. That these books were kept is a sobering testimony to the vigour of a process which could accept and tolerate variety, difference, and challenge.

Our reaction to these books is confronted with the same test. We are asked also to weigh their messages against the whole of the traditions which we have received, as well as the whole of our faith. But we must also let them speak to us about their religious experiences, faiths, observations of the world and life and God, and their conclusions.

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RUTH

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THE NATURE OF THE BOOK

The book of Ruth is a story about people, their problems, and their deepest concerns. It is told primarily through conversations which are clustered around six scenes and which reveal a deep and complicated network of common human experiences, desires, and reflections. The account is of one piece, without any seams or other signs of the combining or adding of traditions, except for the last few lines (4: 18–22).

It tells the story of a family in Bethlehem, and of how Ruth the daughter-in-law who was from Moab came to a full and happy life, and through this brought about new life for the family, by meeting and marrying Boaz. The book does not relate a major incident in the history of Israel; rather, with sensitivity and strict artistic control it exposes the question of human need and how that need is met under divine providence.

Ruth is a short story, comparable with Esther and other such closely-knit narratives in the Old Testament. It is often compared with the Joseph story in Gen. 37–50; many scholars use the technical term ‘novella’ for this kind of short story. But the similarities with the Joseph story exist more in content or in issues affecting the content of the stories than in their literary form. Scholars have observed a remarkably symmetrical design in the structure of the book; this design demonstrates the great artistry of its composition.

HISTORICAL REFERENCES AND SETTING

At the outset the book establishes the setting in which the story belongs: ‘in the time of the judges’. Thereby Ruth has

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been associated with the book of Judges, and placed beside it in the Greek manuscripts of the Old Testament. Judges ends with the observation, 'In those days there was no king in Israel and every man did what was right in his own eyes' (Judg. 21: 25), and its last chapters depict the chaotic and lawless situation when 'no king ruled in Israel' (Judg. 19: 1). Ruth fits into this context, but bears an impression – serene, charming, pastoral – which is very different from those times.

The book exhibits an easy familiarity with ancient customs, although it should not be assumed that we have anything like photographic detail from the period of the judges. The ancient institution of levirate marriage, whereby a man assumed responsibility for the wife of his dead brother (or, in an early form, other near male relative) and for raising children by her in the name of the deceased (see under 1: 8–14 and 4: 5 below), is represented only in Ruth and in Gen. 38, though the law is set forth in Deut. 25: 5–10. Gen. 38 is referred to in Ruth at the end of the book. The genealogy of Perez (Ruth 4: 18–22), and therefore of David and of Jesus, included both these levirate marriages: Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38), Boaz and Ruth (Ruth 4). In Ruth this practice is combined with the old Hebrew provision for the role of *go'el*, that is, the next-of-kin who acts as a 'redeemer', that is, one who keeps intact the property and name of the family, by recovering land (cp. the story in Jer. 32: 6–12) and ensuring the continuance of the line (as in Ruth and in Gen. 38).

Bethlehem is the location for the story, and no doubt the place where the tradition was handed down. It was the home of David's family, and the town where Jesus of Nazareth was born; otherwise there was little of distinction in its history.

Moab is mentioned already in the wilderness traditions in Numbers, in the efforts of Balak son of Zippor the king of Moab to persuade Balaam to curse Israel (Num. 22–4). Old Testament references to it include oppression of Israel by Eglon king of Moab and Israel's deliverance by Ehud the judge (Judg. 3), hostilities against King Saul of Israel (1 Sam.

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Ruth

14: 47), subjugation under David (2 Sam. 8: 2), and finally freedom from Hebrew rule when King Mesha of Moab revolted from Ahaziah the son of Ahab of Israel (2 Kings 3: 4–5). The Moabite language was closely related to the Hebrew, and Moabite and Hebrew political fortunes alternated from mutual enmity to co-operation against some more powerful foreign aggressor.

HOW THE BOOK CAME TO BE

Speculation concerning the date of the book's composition has ranged from the days of Samuel (who, according to Jewish tradition in the Mishnah, was its author) to a time long after the exile. Arguments based on alleged late Hebrew expressions and Aramaic words in the book have been adduced to support a theory of final composition after the exile; but this evidence is meagre, and its conclusiveness is debatable. A recent proposal has suggested three stages in the origin of Ruth: (1) an old poetic tale, perhaps transmitted in oral form, coming from the days of the judges; (2) a version written in prose in the ninth or eighth centuries; (3) a final edition of the material into its present form after the exile. Another recent view maintains that there are no serious objections to the idea that the book of Ruth was written in the time of Solomon. There is of course no direct evidence to prove such a date, and no final conclusion is possible.

The text contains a number of words not found elsewhere in the Old Testament, and it is written in a classical form of Hebrew. Severe textual problems and radical textual variants are not numerous.

In later Judaism Ruth was read at the celebration of the Feast of Weeks, the festival observed seven weeks after the Passover, which marked the end of the harvest of wheat in the agricultural calendar.

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RUTH I: 1-5

Naomi and Ruth

WHAT THE BOOK WAS MEANT TO SAY

Despite scattered efforts in the past to see behind the book a Canaanite religious festival celebrated at Bethlehem, there is general agreement that Ruth was intended to tell a story about simple folk from the early days of the Hebrews. It has been argued that Naomi, and not Ruth, is the principal character in the book; Naomi is indeed an important person in the narrative, but Ruth is really the central character.

The story is about all three principal characters, Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz, and about what happens as their lives intertwine. The hand of God does not intrude explicitly in their lives; they rather experience his presence, will, and action as they try to live faithfully with each other and confident of his promise and blessing. If the book is also designed to say something about the Hebrews and their neighbours – in this case the Moabites – and so to present a wider outlook than some of the strongly nationalistic stories in Judges, it is done incidentally and without emphasis (cp. the comments on pp. 10 and 30).

* * * * *

Naomi and Ruth

NAOMI'S MISFORTUNES

- 1 **L**ONG AGO, in the time of the judges, there was a famine
in the land, and a man from Bethlehem in Judah went
to live in the Moabite country with his wife and his two
2 sons. The man's name was Elimelech, his wife's name was
Naomi, and the names of his two sons Mahlon and
Chilion. They were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in
Judah. They arrived in the Moabite country and there
they stayed.

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RUTH I: 1-5

Elimelech Naomi's husband died, so that she was left 3
with her two sons. These sons married Moabite women, 4
one of whom was called Orpah and the other Ruth. They
had lived there about ten years, when both Mahlon and 5
Chilion died, so that the woman was bereaved of her two
sons as well as of her husband.

* The story of Ruth begins with a very compact and condensed summary of the details which provide the background to the drama. The stage is set in order that the reader may understand Naomi's plight: without husband and sons, she is now about to migrate once more in order to seek some measure of shelter and security in the land of her youth. All the main characters except one, Boaz, are quickly introduced into the plot, and the meanings linked to their names suggest the mood of the story.

1. *Long ago, in the time of the judges*: is literally in the Hebrew, 'and it happened in the days when the judges judged'; the word for 'to judge' in this instance can also signify 'to govern'. The narrative mood of the story may suggest a tale from 'long ago', but the text itself does not explicitly say that.

Time of *famine* was the occasion for other stories in the Old Testament; for example, Jacob and his sons had been forced to emigrate to Egypt years before (Gen. 42-7) by just such a famine in Palestine. *Bethlehem* is a town located about 6 miles (nearly 10 km) south of Jerusalem on the Judean hills, and the name means literally in Hebrew, 'house of bread' (*Beth-Lehem*), an ironic note during a famine. The journey to the *Moabite country*, which is visible across the Dead Sea from the heights east and south of Bethlehem, was not a long one, and a 40- or 50-mile trip (about 64-80 km) from Bethlehem would bring the sojourners around the north end of the Dead Sea, through the country of the Ammonites, into Moab.

2. Commentators feel that the names are suggestive of

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RUTH I: 1-5

Naomi and Ruth

foreboding, or are meant to convey at least something about the characters. *Elimelech* means 'God is king', a name suggestive of a sure confession of faith in God. *Naomi* means 'my pleasant one', or 'my darling'. But *Mahlon* and *Chilion* are traced to Hebrew words meaning 'to be sick' and 'to be weakening', although other explanations have also been proposed; these names correlate well with the fate of the young men, adding to the effect of the story. All the names except Mahlon are found in the Canaanite texts from Ugarit (Ras Shamra, on the coast of modern Syria) belonging to the fourteenth century B.C.; this may indicate that the names were simply old ones, and widely known.

Ephrathites here refers to members of a family or clan dwelling around and in Bethlehem; compare Mic. 5: 2, 'But you, Bethlehem in Ephrathah, small as you are to be among Judah's clans, out of you shall come forth a governor for Israel.' Elsewhere (cp. Judg. 12: 5) it refers to a member of the tribe of Ephraim.

3-4. Even within the brief compass of the introduction to the book there is room for a dramatic change in fortune. The husband dies, bereaving Naomi; but her sons marry, opening the possibility of new hope and fulfilment in grandchildren. Any rules or feelings against Moabites, such as one encounters in Deut. 23: 3, may have been non-existent and therefore not at issue when this story originated. Some scholars believe that the book of Ruth was deliberately written against such discriminatory rules and practices in the days of Ezra around 400 B.C. Most probably however the story of Ruth is simply older than the discriminatory rule, and comes from a time when the Hebrews were not so concerned with purity of race. The matter is discussed further at the end of the commentary (p. 30).

Scholars have identified the name *Orpah* with an ancient word for 'cloud', or with words meaning 'to drip, to trickle', or 'nape of the neck', and therefore signifying someone who is stubborn or obstinate. Although the matter remains un-