

The Chiastic Structure of Ruth 2

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INTRODUCTION

"Never the twain should meet" is a sad lament where the natural duet between exegetical and literary studies should be performed. Occasionally there are important passages of Scripture that have received considerable attention in one discipline or the other, but not in tandem. These specialized expositional or literary-structural contributions may parallel each other like railroad tracks. But, without an intersection point, there cannot be the resulting combined insights into the biblical text.

The elegant little story of Ruth is an important case in point. Over the last two decades in particular,¹ it has been the subject of increased exegetical and related background works.² On the other hand, structural (notably chiastic) studies have not been lacking either.³

So far, though, there is a paucity of research in which *both* the exegetical and structural lenses are focused on Ruth simultaneously.⁴ That point, if anything, is even more valid in regard to the closer study of Ruth 2, as will be seen in the next section.

1. From a literary standpoint, Ruth should be understood as a short story instead of a novella. See the excellent discussions of E. F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary* (AB 7; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975) 3-10; and R. L. Hubbard, Jr., *The Book of Ruth* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 47-48.

2. See the recent select bibliography in Hubbard, *Ruth*, 76-80. Of some 110 items listed, about 60 per cent have appeared since 1970.

3. A useful list of contributions approaching Ruth from a chiastic understanding is found in John W. Welch, ed., *Chiasmus in Antiquity* (Hildesheim: Gerstenberg, 1981) 336-37.

4. This deficiency was not balanced appreciably by the long-awaited publication of F. B. Huey, Jr., "Ruth" in *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), although it certainly still could be in F. W. Bush, *Ruth and Esther* (WBC; Dallas: Word, forthcoming).

RECENT STUDIES OF RUTH 2: A "BIRD'S-EYE VIEW"

For the purposes of perspective in regard to this examination of Ruth 2, only two primarily exegetical, then two chiasmic, treatments will be briefly discussed. First, the prestigious commentaries by Edward F. Campbell, Jr. (1975) and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. (1988) will be considered as to their approaches to, and overall understandings of, Ruth 2.⁵ Following that, the seminal structural studies of Stephen Bertman (1965) and Y. T. Radday (1981), both of which basically relate Ruth 2 to the overall framework of the book, will be probed for their contributions.⁶

The Overbalanced Exegetical Approach

Both Campbell and Hubbard evidence considerable awareness of the form and meaning of chiasmus in ancient Hebrew literature.⁷ However, neither develops the self-contained chiasmic structure of Ruth 2 in their extended exegesis of that chapter.

That is not to say that either is insensitive to the literary features of the Ruth 2 narrative. In fact, Campbell goes so far as to compile a listing of "literary signals" in the chapter.⁸ Considering his vantage point in the earlier 1970s, Campbell's discussion represents an amazingly insightful step in the right direction of increased sensitivity to literary design.

For his part, Hubbard does mention chiasm directly in his discussion of Ruth 2;⁹ however, he only sees chiasmus operating at what could be called the "micro-chiasmic" level (i.e., within a single verse).¹⁰

5. Campbell, *Ruth*, 85-113; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 132-95. It is worth noting that Hubbard's NICOT volume is some two-thirds longer than Campbell's earlier AB offering. At over 300 pages, Hubbard's treatment is certainly one of the most detailed commentaries on Ruth available.

6. Stephen Bertman, "Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth," *JBL* 84 (1965) 166-67; Y. T. Radday, "Chiasmus in Hebrew Biblical Narrative," in *Chiasmus in Antiquity*, 72-73, 75-76.

7. Campbell admits to being partly persuaded by Bertman's overall chiasmic outline of Ruth, especially the mirroring effect between Ruth 2 and 3 (*Ruth*, 14-16; Hubbard (*Ruth*, 115, 126, 144, 258) also interacts with Bertman's ideas (8, 15, 17) though he relegates the possible significance of Bertman's overarching chiasmic hypothesis to the prologue (Ruth 1:1-5) and concluding genealogy (4:18-22).

8. Campbell, *Ruth*, 109. This analysis seems to indicate that, in a broad general sense, Campbell is sympathetic to the type of literary investigation pursued in the present study.

9. Hubbard explains the double mention of the divine name in 2:4 as a chiasmic construction (*Ruth*, 144).

10. The only other mention of a chiasmic construction in Ruth relates to the reversing of names in a grouping in 4:9, 11 (*ibid.*, 258).

No further sensitivity to the considerable evidence (see below) for a chiastic infrastructure of Ruth 2 is detectable.

Interestingly, both representative commentators pull together their concluding thematic discussions of Ruth 2 with similar emphases.¹¹ Among these overarching ideas for both is that God is showing his favor (תִּשְׁבַּח) to Ruth through Boaz's generosity (2:10-12).¹² Both seemed to have arrived at their conclusions in keeping with a "grass roots" feel for the biblical text. In other words, their sense of the whole in Ruth 2 is apparently related more to a cumulative understanding of the "trees" (i.e., lexical and grammatical building blocks) the most comfortable focus for the exegete, than the overall "forest" (i.e., the recurring ideas and holistic movement of the chapter).

The Overbalanced Structural Approach

Bertman and Radday approach Ruth 2 from a very different perspective than that evidenced by Campbell's and Hubbard's commentaries. Admittedly, specialized studies are frequently quite different from standard commentaries, but Bertman and Radday seem interested in Ruth 2 almost *only* as it relates to the broader chiastic structuring of the book.¹³

Bertman's article is only four pages long and basically is designed to make a unified point about Ruth's overall structure.¹⁴ In his concentration on the "macro-chiastic" level, he has failed to consider the possible "intermediate-chiastic" structuring of any section of the book other than as a "mirror" of the part of the grand inverted structure it reflects.¹⁵ In Bertman's scheme the whole is more than the sum of its parts, and the parts' function is basically what they contribute to the grand design. There is little if any sense of sectioned significance.

Radday's approach is more sensitive to individual passages, though he is most intent to demonstrate the proliferation of chiastic structures as a prime feature of Ruth (and Hebrew biblical narrative

11. Campbell, *Ruth*, 112-13; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 193-95.

12. Campbell, *Ruth*, 113; Hubbard, *Ruth*, 194-95.

13. E. E. Johnson advocates an initial "big picture" stage of study that he calls "Recognition" (*Expository Hermeneutics* [Grand Rapids: Academie / Zondervan, 1990] 73). However, in Johnson's scheme "Recognition" is intended to interact with closer "Exegesis" in a developing spiral to clarify meaning. See also G. R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991).

14. Bertman, "Symmetrical Design," 165-68.

15. Note particularly the initial chart of parallels in Ruth 2, 3 and the concluding overall chart of Ruth's structure (*ibid.*, 165, 167).

literature in general).¹⁶ Though he does offer a plausible possibility for a modified chiasmic outline of Ruth 2, he does not answer (or even *ask*) the essential "why" question in regard to the overall meaning and significance of such a structuring of the chapter.¹⁷

So, for both Bertman and Radday, chiasmus is definitely a decisive factor in studying Ruth 2. But the observing of the center-facing structure is very close to an end in itself. No substantive discussion of the crucial "so what?" dimension of study, which is a giant step toward determining a passage's contemporary significance and application, is forthcoming. They have mapped the "forest" of Ruth well. But, for them, textual cartography seemingly is enough.

ANALYSIS OF THE STRUCTURE OF RUTH 2

As Hubbard correctly notes, the syntax of Ruth 2:1 indicates the narration of a new event. The *waw* consecutive beginning Ruth 3 suggests sequence and the context makes clear that some time had elapsed;¹⁸ therefore, the second chapter is set off as a separate episode.¹⁹

That Ruth 2 has many points of contact with Ruth 3 has been noted elsewhere (especially e.g., Bertman). In addition, there is much to suggest a chiasmic arrangement within Ruth 2.

D. Ralph Davis lightheartedly describes chiasmic structure as a literary sandwich, likening the first and last sections to the slices of bread; the second and second-from-last sections to the pieces of lettuce; and so on until you reach the middle section, the meat. He continues, "Obviously, the meat is the most important—and expensive—part of the sandwich." This is the writer's way of telling us that he considers the central section the most important part of the "sandwich."²⁰ If this is the structure of Ruth 2, then the theme of the middle section, finding "favor" or "grace," is being emphasized.²¹

16. Radday, "Hebrew Biblical Narrative," 72-73.

17. *Ibid.*, 73.

18. Hubbard, *Ruth*, 132.

19. H. Kennedy accurately describes it as "the third scene, laid in a field near Bethlehem, where the grain harvest was in progress" ("Ruth," in the *Broadman Bible Commentary*, ed. Clifton Allen [Nashville: Broadman, 1970] 2.470).

20. D. R. Davis, *No Falling Words: Expositions of the Book of Joshua* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988) 25.

21. R. E. Murphy, citing Dommerhausen, has pointed out the catchwords of Ruth 2: "Glean" is used thirteen times (These have an even distribution throughout.); "Moabite" is used three times (It is used in the first section, the last section, and once elsewhere.); "Find favor in the eyes of" is found three times (it occurs in the first section and in the two middle sections; it is balanced in the last section by the usage of the word "lovingkindness."); Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, Ecclesiastes, and Esther* (FOTL; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981) 90.

Visualizing the Ruth 2 Chiasmus

This inverted, chiasmic structure of Ruth 2 may be schematized as follows:

- A SECTION ONE 2:1-3. Introducing Boaz, the channel of grace; the situation needing grace; and the action, "chancing into Boaz's field," setting up the opportunity for grace.
- B SECTION TWO 2:4. Gracious, kind greeting by Boaz, "Yahweh be with you."
- C SECTION THREE 2:5-7. Ruth identified by the head worker, and her extraordinary request for grace.
- D SECTION FOUR 2:8-10. Boaz begins to grant favor (note "girls"); RUTH'S QUESTION: "Why have I found grace?"
- D' SECTION FIVE 2:11-13. BOAZ'S ANSWER: God is repaying your faithfulness and your faith. Ruth requesting continued favor (note "girls").
- C' SECTION SIX 2:14-16. Boaz's extraordinary invitation and Ruth's protection from the other workers.
- B' SECTION SEVEN 2:17. Ruth, recipient of Boaz's generosity: Yahweh was with her!
- A' SECTION EIGHT 2:18-23. Recounting to Naomi her "luck" in Boaz's field, having found favor with Boaz and God.

Explaining the Ruth 2 Chiasmus

The outer layer begins to direct the reader's attention to the theme of favor and grace. The first section (2:1-3) clearly bears a close correspondence with the last section (2:18-23). In these two units, the theme of seeking and finding grace is introduced and completed. In Section One, the need for Ruth to find favor [יָחַד] is presented; in Section Eight, abundant grace [רַחֲמֵי] has been found. Even before he enters, Boaz is named and described in Section One. The reader is tantalized by the knowledge that he is an acquaintance of Naomi's family,²² a mighty man, and most significantly, from the clan of Elimelech; this makes him an ideal possibility for the finding of the thematic favor and grace.

The satisfaction in Section Eight is exquisite! Boaz is again named and described, this time with the notice that the man who

²² Following the Qere. Campbell insists that the *Kethibh* should be followed, indicating, as he says, "a clue to an archaic societal picture" (*Ruth*, 89). He therefore translates the word "covenant-brother." J. P. Lewis notes that the Septuagint follows the *Kethibh* ("עֲבֵדִי," *TWOT* [eds. R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, and B. K. Waltke; Chicago: Moody, 1980] 1.367).

has already been Ruth's friend, benefactor, patron, and protector is also a near kinsman who is one "from our redeemers" (מִגְאֻלֵּנוּ). The plot thickens! Section One also presents Ruth taking the initiative by pleading for the opportunity to seek favor, "Let me go . . ." and "Let me glean. . . ." ²³ Whereas the implied immediate response is found in Naomi's encouragement, these two cohortatives have already found their final object when Section Eight is presented, for the action of the perfect verb is a previous past and must be rendered "She had gleaned."

In Section One, Ruth announces that she wishes to glean "among the sheaves of one in whose eyes I will find 'favor' or 'grace' [חֵן];" the account says that she "happened to happen" [וַיִּקְרַח בְּמִקְרָהָ] upon the field of Boaz. ²⁴ Even though they had heard it many times, the readers must have been overjoyed with anticipation at this point as they recognized that what was on the surface a chance occurrence was in actuality being specifically guided by divine providence.

The sequel is spelled out in Section Eight, where Naomi asks the question, "Where . . . ?" (2:19), seeking the place in which Ruth has found such success. So, whereas Section One anticipates Ruth's adventures in the field of Boaz, Section Eight relates Ruth's recital of those adventures to Naomi.

As the reader approaches the second chiastic layer, his attention continues to narrow on the subject of grace and favor. Section Two (2:4) recounts the kind, gracious greeting of Boaz to those in the field, "Yahweh be with you!" They return a similar greeting to him. The context suggests that Boaz was offering his greeting almost as a prayer toward Ruth. ²⁵

Section Seven (2:17) presents the fact that the generous wish of Boaz toward Ruth has been splendidly fulfilled. Yahweh had indeed

23. Some newer interpretations of the syntax of the cohortative would make these simply declarations (cf. T. O. Lambdin, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* [New York: Scribner's, 1971] 170-71).

24. In the seventeenth century, Thomas Fuller was perplexed by this phrase. "How does the Holy Spirit use a profane term? Does not God rule?" L. P. Smith says that his confusion would have abated had he consulted the other Old Testament usages of the phrase ("Exegesis of Ruth," *IB* 2.839, 840). She points out that the verb form is often used with Yahweh as the subject (e.g., Gen 24:12; 27:20; Num 11:23). Ecclesiastes uses the noun form with the acknowledgment that "all is in the hand of God" (Eccl 9:1). The only place the phrase apparently contradicts divine sovereignty is in 1 Sam 6:9, where it reflects Philistine theology. In short these events reflect not blind change but directed providence!

25. This is obvious, even though, as Keil points out, this is an exclusively Israelite blessing wished toward a Moabitess (C. F. Keil, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* [C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1963 ed.] 477).

been with Ruth, who had received gracious generosity (i.e., an entire ephah of barley) from Boaz.²⁶ Once again, a statement with volun-
tative intention²⁷ in one section receives its fulfillment in the corre-
sponding section, focusing inexorably upon the central sections.

The third chiastic layer carries the grace and favor focus even further. As the reader begins Section Three (2:5-7), Boaz requests information about Ruth's identification from his man set over the harvesters. The servant responds that she is the Moabite damsel who returned with Naomi. Then he tells of Ruth's request to glean (made with confidence that it would be honored, in compliance with Lev 19:9, 10) and to gather among the sheaves, and the fact that she had been doing as she had requested since morning, although she was at that time resting.

In Section Six (2:14-16) Boaz invites Ruth to eat with the harvesters and gives her special treatment. After the meal, Ruth returns to her gleaning. Boaz instructs his young men to allow her extraordinary gleaning privileges, without embarrassment or danger to her. The workers were to make it particularly easy for Ruth to glean a superabundant amount without threat.

With the fourth chiastic level, the reader reaches the heart of the matter—or the "meat of the sandwich." In this chiastic arrangement, Sections Four (2:8-10) and Five (2:11-13) emerge as the centerpiece of the chapter. Each of the preceding and following sections funnel down to these twin portions. The earlier sections (i.e., One through Three) present Ruth's need and search for grace; the following sections (i.e., Six through Eight) outline the grace that has been extended to her by God through Boaz.

As Section Four begins (2:8, 9), Boaz tenderly enjoins Ruth to glean only in his fields and to remain close to his young women. He affirms to her, "Carefully watch the reapers and follow them; you are safe. . . . You may satisfy your thirst at my harvesters' water supply." The beginning of the climax is reached in 2:10, where Ruth falls on her face and bows down to Boaz, asking why she had found grace in his eyes--especially since she was a stranger. This question is the pivot, or hinge, of the entire chapter.

Section Five then offers the gracious answer which Ruth received. Boaz responds that he is simply responding to her own faithfulness to her mother-in-law after her bereavements. Ruth had left her family and land to come to a people which she had not known previously (2:11). Boaz affirms that the answer to her question is

26. Such an astounding amount demonstrates both Ruth's industry and Boaz's intention.

27. Compare the jussive force of "May Yahweh be with you" (2:4).

based also upon her faith: "May Yahweh 'complete' your work; and may your wages be 'complete' because you have taken refuge under the protection of the God of Israel" (2:12). The cohortative form in 2:13 presents Ruth asking for grace (favor) in the eyes of Boaz.²⁸ She avers that Boaz has comforted her, for he has "spoken to the heart of" his handmaiden (2:13). Ruth apparently almost considers herself one of the "handmaidens" of Boaz. Such a statement is tantamount to considering herself under Boaz's direct protection and the recipient of his grace and favor.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RUTH 2 CHIASM

Having now completed this hand-in-hand exegetical-literary exercise, it remains to gauge the meaningful results from what has been observed. The following will likely prove to be enduring contributions:

1) The structure and meaning of this chapter cannot be adequately understood until it is considered at the microlevel (i.e., word-by-word), the macrolevel (i.e., the whole book) and the intermediate level (i.e., paragraph-by-paragraph). Structural features operate on all these levels and sometimes on more than one simultaneously. Such subtle artistry is amazingly common in biblical literature.

2) The observable structure in Ruth 2 transfers the key ideas of the chapter from the realm of subjective interpretive intuition into that of objective authorial intention. What Ruth 2 is designed to communicate need no longer be scholarly or expositional guesswork.

3) The beautiful inverted structure of this chapter makes it abundantly clear that what may appear to be good luck or blind chance (2:3) in the believer's life may well be divine favor (2:12) providentially mediated through other servants of the Lord (2:3, 13, 18-20). There can be little lingering doubt that the writer of Ruth shaped this section to forcefully make that point.

WHAT NEXT? AREAS NEEDING FURTHER ATTENTION

The present study is certainly closer to a first look than the last word on the structure and meaning of Ruth 2.²⁹ There are at least three

28. Smith asserts, "'Let me find favor' is an expression of grateful surprise, not a wish" ("Exegesis of Ruth," 842, citing Bertholet). We insist upon the traditional understanding of the cohortative form.

29. Further discussion of the questions dealt with in this article, as well as related homiletical issues can be found in A. B. Luter and B. C. Davis, *God Behind the Seen: Expositions of Ruth and Esther* (Expositor's Guides to the Historical Books; Grand Rapids: Baker, forthcoming).

significant areas that fully deserve additional consideration (besides more exegetical-structural treatments of Ruth 2).

First, to broaden the intermediate structural emphasis of this article, there are more than enough repeated terms and ideas to indicate that the two passages that border Ruth 2 (i.e., 1:6-22 and chapter 3)³⁰ are also chiastic in structure. One of the present writers is handling this phenomena in a semipopular way elsewhere, but additional balanced exegetical-literary treatments are needed.³¹

Second, broader structural considerations should become more and more a standard feature of biblical commentaries, no matter what audience they target or depth at which they work.³² Ruth 2 (and the book of Ruth) can be adequately understood only through a careful consideration of key structural factors. The same is true, to one degree or another, for every book in the Bible. Certainly the biblical writers expected their original audience to grasp the structure of their literary products. Likewise it should be possible for contemporary readers to express the structural skeleton and literary nuances of any passage in a straightforward, understandable manner.

Third, more bridges must be constructed that will make the fruit of balanced exegetical-structural studies accessible to the homiletical front lines of ministry.³³ L. Keck is right on target when he concludes that preaching is truly biblical only "when it imparts a Bible-shaped word in a Bible-like way."³⁴ It is at this point that the excellent contributions of S. Greidanus can provide wise guidance.³⁵

30. H. V. Parunak's explanation for the basic ABAB pattern (parallelism) and ABBA chiastic pattern (inverted parallelism) is most helpful ("Some Axioms for Literary Architecture," *Semeia* 8 [1982] 8).

31. Luter, *God Behind the Seen*.

32. Based on the standard features of the Word Biblical Commentary series, considerable helpful discussion of the structure of Ruth can be anticipated in F. W. Bush's *Ruth* volume. At a more popular level, D. R. Davis has excelled in explaining and expounding sometimes intricate structural patterns in *No Falling Words* and his more recent *Such a Great Salvation: Expositions of the Book of Judges* (Expositor's Guides to the Historical Books; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990).

33. It is one of the aims of the Expositor's Guide series to model suggestive exposition (including passages with sophisticated structure) that is true to the literary form of the passage. A. Ross also comes at this task from a different, but largely successful, angle (*Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988]).

34. L. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978) 106.

35. S. Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988). In regard to another prominent form of biblical literature, see Greidanus' suggestive entry, "Preaching from the Gospels," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (eds. J. B. Green, S. McKnight and I. H. Marshall; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1992) 625-30.

Scholars should do their work with the ministry bottom line in mind, and preachers must realize that they are not ready to present their messages without a substantial understanding of the exegetical and literary factors in their chosen text. When those on both sides of the aisle are doing their part, the functional unity in diversity of the body of Christ (Rom 12; 1 Cor 12) is at work linking academy, pulpit, and pew.