To King or Not to King:
A Canonical-Historical
Approach to Ruth

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Contemporary approaches to Ruth tend to focus on the book's internal structure and contents. Only rarely is sufficient attention given to the book's external context, particularly its canonical-historical context. In Judges 17-21 all of the major characters balk in the face of challenge. Priests, landowners, husbands, wives, and warriors all abandon their responsibilities. In Ruth, however, the main characters valiantly shoulder their responsibilities, however burdensome. In Judges, men treat women insensitively, shamefully, even violently. In Ruth, women are treated like partners on a common mission. Why? Having been led by the book of Judges (particularly the self-contained anthology incorporating chaps. 17-21) to wonder whether the one-and-only source of Israel's agony is kinglessness, Ruth is a canonical-historical surprise. Both Ruth 1-4 and Judges 17-21 come from the premonarchical period of the "judges," yet each offers a radically different response to this fluid situation. To read Ruth against its canonical-historical context not only reconnects us with some of the book's earliest interpreters, it also generates newer literary and sociological insights into the theological message of this beloved short story.

Key words: Old Testament, Ruth, Judges, political criticism, canon criticism, Septuagint, leadership, theological criticism

One day the trees went out to anoint a king for themselves. They said to the olive tree, "Be our king:"
But the olive tree answered, "Should I give up my oil, by which both gods and men are honored, to hold sway over the trees?"
Next, the trees said to the fig tree, "Come and be our king."
But the fig tree replied, "Should I give up my fruit, so good and sweet, to hold sway over the trees?"
Then the trees said to the vine, "Come and be our king."
But the vine answered, "Should I give up my wine, which cheers

both gods and men, to hold sway over the trees?"
   Finally all the trees said to the bramble, "Come and be our king."
   The bramble said to the trees, "If you really want to anoint me
king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, then let
fire come out of the bramble and consume the cedars of Lebanon!"
(Judg 9:8-15)

   As Shechem crowns Abimelech its first "king,"[1] Jotham, the sole
survivor of Abimelech's "royal purge," climbs to the top of Mt. Geri-
zim and shouts out a parable about olive trees and fig trees and vines
and brambles, doubtless to some pretty startled party guests. Ever
since this coronation-interruption scene, Jotham's parable has gen-
erated a number of questions about the nature of kingship, some
of which have plagued biblical scholarship for millenia. Is this, as
Martin Buber once called it, "the strongest anti-monarchic poetry
of world literature?"[2] Or does Jotham merely intend to *criticize* the
monarchy, not *condemn* it?[3] Is this even a text about "monarchy" per
se, or is it more about "leadership?"[4] Are there deep theological
questions at stake here or merely political sour grapes?[5] Should we
read it intertextually alongside the biblical stories of Saul and David
and Solomon and Ahab and Jehoiakim and interpret it as part of an
overall biblical invective against slavery?[6] Or do such readings tend
ironically to ignore the more immediate context: "in the days when
the judges judged?" (Ruth 1:1).

   1. "And they crowned Abimelech king" (Judges 9:6, וַיַּמְלִיכוּ אֶת־אֲבִימֶלֶךְ לְמֶלֶךְ).
   2. R. Bartelmus traces this quotation to Martin Buber ("Die sogenannte Jotham-
fabel: Eine politisch-religiöse Parabeldichtung," *TZ* 41 [1985] 97-120), then argues
against seeing an independent parable here prior to Judges.
   3. B. Lindars ("Jotham's Fable: A New Form-Critical Analysis," *JTS* 24 [1973] 355-
66) thinks it an overinterpretation to view this parable as a protest against the intro-
duction of monarchy into Israel.
   4. E. Maly ("The Jotham Fable: Anti-monarchical?" *CBQ* 22 [1960] 299-305)
thinks that originally the fable was directed not against kingship itself but against
those who refused, for whatever reasons, the burden of civic leadership. Thus, since
the original fable offers no general condemnation of kingship, neither does the biblical
adaptation.
   5. D. K. McKee ("The Role of Self-Interest in Politics: The Biblical Fable of the
Trees and the Bramble," *Religion in Life* 29 [1960] 598-607) sees in the "trees-vs.-the-
bramble" conflict two possible interpretations: (1) an idealistic approach to politics
("the trees") which grounds itself in an overly optimistic view of human nature, and
(2) a realistic approach ("bramble") which recognizes the first approach to be rather
pollyannish. "Bramble"-politicians operate out of political self-interest and believe
that political power is dangerous when it is based upon a single interest. The short-
coming in the "trees"-approach is the danger of self-righteousness, while the danger
in the "bramble"-approach is cynicism. Each is required to correct the shortcomings of
the other.
   6. H. W. Wolff, "Masters and Slaves: On Overcoming Class Struggle in the Old
Testament," *Int* 27 (1973) 259-72.

The book of Judges is a dour book, a book preoccupied with grainy questions about power and politics and filled with some of Israel's most chilling horror stories. The last major section, Judges 17-21, is a grim collection of vignettes all tangled together into a terrifying melee of material. Taken together, these final stories illustrate what the narrator thinks is *the* major reason for Israel's political, social, and spiritual chaos: "In those days there was no king in Israel" (Judg 17:6; 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). This sweeping observation, repeated no less than four times in the final five chapters, summarily re-positions these stories under a single ideological umbrella. In Judges, the absence of a king is not a factor, it is *the* factor responsible for Israel's slide into moral apathy, religious apostasy, and criminal violence.[7]

Following Jotham's parabolic lead, each story realistically explores a different side of this mounting chaos—or, to use Jotham's metaphor, this "exploding bramble." In chap. 17, an Ephraimite named Micah hires an unemployed Levite to establish an idiosyncratic priesthood, literally in his own backyard. Why? Because "there is no king in Israel" to stop him. In chap. 18, a gang of Danites convinces this same Levite to abandon Micah and bless their conquests. Why? Because "there is no king in Israel" to stop them. In chap. 19, another Ephraimite hides in a stranger's house while a gang of thugs rapes and murders his concubine outside, publicly, in the streets of Gibeah. Why? Because "there is no king in Israel" to protect her. With each story the argument gathers momentum. Only kings have the authority to police "apostate" cults. Only kings have the will to enforce the law. Only kings have the power to punish criminal sexual behavior. Tribal authority is too weak. Israel *needs* a king. What can anyone say to such an "obvious" conclusion?

CANONICAL-HISTORICAL CONTEXT

As Ruth begins, the narrator seems to agree with the narrator of Judges. Ruth 1:1-15 seems to take up where Judges 17-21 leaves off. A famine ravages Judah. A father dies. Survivors remain childless. A firstborn son dies. A remaining son dies. Widows grieve. Within the span of five short verses, a world comes miserably into focus which

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7. E. E Campbell (*Ruth* [New York: Doubleday, 1975] 36) sees only Judges 19-21 as a unit, but P. Satterthwaite (" 'No King in Israel': Narrative Criticism and Judges 17-21," *TynBul* 44 [1993] 75-88) offers several substantive arguments for viewing all of Judges 17-21 as a coherent narrative unit. Michael K. Wilson ("As You Like It: The Idolatry of Micah and the Danites," *Reformed Theological Review* 54 [1995] 73-85) thinks that Judges 17-18 forms a logical sequel to that which has been presented in Judges 1-16. Whereas in Judges 1-16 the accent falls on the incorrigibility of Israel with respect to idolatry, in Judges 17-18 the narrator describes, via carefully crafted dialogue, the very psychology of idolatry.

seems every bit as anguished, every bit as dark, every bit as hopeless as the world within which it comes to life.

But looking more closely, there is something different about this world. Difficult to see at first, it becomes clearer and clearer as the story unfolds. In Judges 17-21 all of the major characters balk in the face of challenge. In Ruth, they persevere. In Judges, priests, land-owners, husbands, wives, and warriors all abandon their responsibilities. In Ruth, people shoulder their responsibilities, however burdensome. In Judges, men treat women insensitively, shamefully, even violently. In Ruth, men treat women as partners on a common mission.

And there is no king *here*, either. No king appears in *either* text. Having been led by the book of Judges to wonder whether the one-and-only source of Israel's agony is kinglessness, Ruth is a surprise. In other words, to read the Judges 17–Ruth 4 narrative *as a narrative* is to raise the following question: If kinglessness is not the determining factor behind Israel's chaos, then what else might be responsible?

This is a *canonical-historical* question—*canonical*, because the MT is not the only, nor in many cases the preferable, canonical context for the book of Ruth;[8] *historical*, because the book itself claims (and there is little reason to doubt it) to come from the "days in which the judges judged" (Ruth 1:1). Certainly Ruth can be fruitfully explored from a variety of angles. Historical interpretations ask questions about dat-

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8. In the Masoretic Hebrew canon (MT), Ruth appears in the third section called *Kĕtûbîm* ("Writings") and is one of the five *Mĕgillôt* ("scrolls"), the other four being Canticles, Qoheleth, Lamentations, and Esther. Doubtless the book finds a home here because of a felt need to connect Scripture more intentionally to Israel's liturgical calendar. Just as Esther is read at Purim, and Canticles at Passover, so Ruth is read at Shavuoth, the Feast of Weeks (Exod 34:22). The scribal tradition of placing it in *Kĕtûbîm*, however, is fluid and indeterminate. The Talmud, for example, preserves a chronological tradition where Ruth (written by Samuel) is followed by Psalms (written by David), then Proverbs (written by Solomon; *b. B. Bat*. 14b). The LXX, one of several Greek translations based on a Hebrew text-tradition predating "by several hundred years the complete manuscript on which our Hebrew Bible is based" (M. Peters, "Septuagint," *ABD* 5.1102), situates it after Judges, in the section of Scripture the Masoretes call (Former) Prophets (note the phrase *hannĕbî'îm hāri'sōnîm* in Zech 1:4). Though there will always be some who argue for the priority of MT's canonical order, such discussions tend to ignore the results of newer research on "text types" and "text families" arising from the discovery and publication of all the known Dead Sea Scrolls. Knowing what we now know about the fluidity and flexibility of the Qumran canon in the second century BCE, we can state unequivocally that "it is . . . no longer possible to posit that Ruth was moved to the Prophets by hellenized Jews whose canon is reflected in LXX. . . . Different arrangements of the Prophets and the Writings arose among different elements of the Jewish community and existed side-by-side until the time of Jerome" (F. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* [WBC 9; Dallas: Word, 1996] 8-9). Therefore, taking all four of these factors into account (ascription of the book to the historical period of *the judges*; antiquity of LXX; witness of Talmud; and lateness of Qumran's canonical fluidity), we must conclude that there is no longer any convincing reason for reading Ruth *solely*

ing and authorship and ancient Near Eastern context.[9] Literary interpretations remind us that we are reading a book of timeless beauty and amazing intricacy.[10] Broader canonical interpretations invite us to consider the book's intentions within the context of Scripture as a whole.[11] Each of these approaches has hermeneutical advantages and disadvantages.

Yet to read Ruth against its canonical-historical context is to review the book alongside some of its earliest interpreters.[12] The Talmud, for example, preserves a chronological tradition where Ruth (written by Samuel) is followed by Psalms (written by David), then Proverbs (written by Solomon; *b. B. Bat*. 14b). Rabbi Hanina suggests that Ruth descends from Eglon, the Moabite king mentioned in Judg 3:12-25 (*b. Nazir* 23b). Augustine even sees Ruth as a short-story introduction to the book of Kings.[13] This approach also provides us another angle into the book's literary structure. Judges 17-21 and Ruth 1-4, for example, both end in climactic courtroom scenes, an observation which seems obvious, yet is seldom noted. Comparing and contrasting these scenes greatly helps us to appreciate better each narrative's theological intentions.

At Mizpah, for example, Israel's leadership wrestles with the problem of what to do with the Benjamites, a tribe in trouble because of its refusal to hand over the Gibeonite murderers of the Levite's concubine (Judg 20:1-11). This crime generates a major crisis, yet no one in Mizpah seems to know what to do about it. Israel's eventual response, its "crisis management strategy," is so poorly conceived and so clumsily implemented that a civil war breaks out and Benjamin is brought to the brink of annihilation.

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against the ahistorical background provided by the *Mĕgillôt*. Practically speaking, what this means is that all the old arguments for the *priority* of one canonical context (MT) over another (LXX) are antiquated. On the contrary, LXX's canonical order is just as legitimate, just as interesting, and just as authoritative as that of MT.

9. Historical questions often lead to theories about whether the book comes from a premonarchic period (*b. B. Bat.* 14b has Samuel as the author); a monarchic period (Campbell, *Ruth*, 24; R. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988] 35); a postmonarchic period (J. Vesco, "La date du livre de Ruth," *RevBib* 74 119671 235-47); or an extended period covering all three eras (G. Glanzman, "The Origin and Date of the Book of Ruth," *CBQ* 21 [1959] 201-7).

10. S. Bertman, "Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth," *JBL* 84 (1965) 165-68; M. Bernstein, "Two Multivalent Readings in the Ruth Narrative," *JSOT* 50 (1991) 15-26; R. Grant, "Literary Structure in the Book of Ruth," *BSac* 148 (1991) 424-41.

11. R. Bauckham, "The Book of Ruth and the Possibility of a Feminist Canonical Hermeneutic," *BibInt* 5 (1997) 29-45.

12. By "earliest interpreters" I refer primarily, but not exclusively, to those tradents responsible for arranging the LXX's canonical order.

13. Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.8.13.

Not so in Ruth. In Bethlehem, another council convenes to deal with another potentially explosive situation, the problem of Elimelech's inheritance. Particularly delicate is the problem of how, exactly, Ruth the Moabite is to be incorporated into that inheritance. Yet the solution here is markedly different from the one at Mizpah. The social, legal, and political dimensions of this problem are in many ways as flammable as those at Mizpah, yet the Bethlehem council's decision leads to restoration and healing, not war and devastation. Why? Why are these situations so similar, yet so radically different?

The only way to answer such questions is to examine Ruth carefully against its canonical-historical context. True, Ruth can be profitably read as a romantic novella, as a human comedy, as a response to nativistic fear about intermarriage, as a Messianic preamble, as a Yahwistic response to ancient Near Eastern fertility myths, and many other ways.[14] All these approaches have genuine merit and bear legitimate exegetical fruit. Yet they remain inadequate, not because they are mistaken or misguided, but because they cannot answer the questions just posed. Most contemporary approaches tend to focus solely on the book's internal structure and contents. Only rarely is sufficient attention given to the book's external context, particularly its canonical-historical context.[15]

SOCIAL CONTEXT

One of the most pertinent contributions of a canonical-historical approach to Ruth is the insight it can bring to understanding the volatile state of Israelite society during a chaotic period in Israelite history. Historians have thoroughly investigated this transitional period in Israelite history, yet the focus so far has been on *macro-diachronic* concerns. Historians have tended to focus on whether there are twelve actual "tribes" in premonarchic Israel, on whether these "tribes" are organized into a tribal "league," or on whether Israel's sociopolitical shift from "judges" to "kings" might best be described as *pro*gressive or *re*gressive.[16]

14. These are the interpretations (in order) of H. Gunkel, *Reden und Aufsätzen: Ruth* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1913) 65-92; P. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 195; J. Vesco, "Ruth"; *Ruth Rabbah* (London: Soncino, 1983); and W. Staples, "The Book of Ruth," *AJSL* 53 (1936-7) 145-57. Note also the medieval work *HaNe'elam*, which imagines Ruth's events and characters as veiled allusions to divine realities (L. Englander and H. Basser [eds.], *The Mystical Study of Ruth: Midrash HaNe'elam of the Zohar to the Book of Ruth* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1993]).

15. Gunkel (*Reden und Aufsätzen*, 81) notes the contrast between Boaz and Mr. So-and-So in 4:1-6 as well as that between Ruth and Orpah in 1:14-15, but such observations fail to capture the book's canonical-historical impact.

16. N. K. Gottwald, *The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-literary Introduction* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985) 276-78.

Today there is considerably more interest in microsynchronic inter-
pretation.[17] This paradigm shift is having an enormous impact on
Ruth research.[18] Recent interest in the book's gender roles, for exam-
ple, is rather unexplainable apart from some understanding of this
shift. Today in many circles gender is not simply *an* issue, it is *the* issue
attracting readers to the book of Ruth, and not simply because the
book has two female heroines, but because the present sociopolitical
climate demands that the book be read in congruence with pressing
contemporary concerns. Older scholarship says almost nothing about
gender. Contemporary scholarship, however, is honestly attempting
(in some cases, courageously attempting) to interpret the book with
an eye to contemporary as well as ancient cultural realities.[19]

Two major obstacles, however, stand in the way of progress. *First*,
too many interpreters, regardless of their gender presuppositions,
fail to employ critically defensible research methods in their study of
Ruth. *Second*, too many ignore the book's canonical-historical con-
text. The result, in many cases, is shallow politicization instead of
convincing interpretation. Too often the air over Ruth is breezy and
speculative, whether the discussion has to do with Ruth's (alleged)
sociopolitical beliefs or her "strategy" for deconstructing "tradi-
tional" gender roles or her alleged "sexual orientation."[20]

We all know better, but sometimes act as though we don't. Inter-
pretations which abandon historical, literary, and canonical controls
tend to be embarrassingly narcissistic.[21] Tikva Frymer-Kensky, in a
definitive study of the development of goddess religion in Israel,
makes this point quite forcefully, reminding us that "in some areas

17. E W. Dobbs-Allsopp ("Rethinking Historical Criticism," *BibInt* 7 [1999] 35-71)
thoughtfully searches for theoretical common ground upon which both diachronic-
historical and synchronic-literary critics can stand.

18. J. Holbert, "The Bible Becomes Literature: An Encounter with Ruth," *Word
and World* 13 (1993) 130-35; Leo Perdue, *The Collapse of History: Reconstructing Old Testa-
ment Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 7-11.

19. S. Heine, *Christianity and the Goddesses* (London: SCM, 1988); T. Frymer-
Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses: Women, Culture, and the Biblical Transformation of
Pagan Myth* (New York: Free Press, 1992); A. Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to
Ruth* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

20. I. Ljung, *Silence or Suppression: Attitudes towards Women in the Old Testament*
(Stockholm: Almqyist, 1989); J. Berquist, "Role Dedifferentiation in the Book of Ruth,"
JSOT 57 (1993) pp. 23-37; L. Bollinger, "Models for Female Loyalty: The Biblical Ruth
in Jeanette Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit*," Tulsa Studies in Women's Liter-
ature 13 (Fall 1993) 363-401; R. Alpert, "Finding Our Past: A Lesbian Interpretation of
the Book of Ruth," in *Reading Ruth* (ed. Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer; New
York: Ballantine, 1994) 91-96.

21. A good example of this is Julius Wellhausen's reading of an absolutist evo-
lutionary paradigm, the dominant historical paradigm in 19th-century Germany,
into Israelite history (M. S. Moore, "Role Pre-emption in the Israelite Priesthood," *VT*
[1996] 324-5).

the Bible does not offer extensive discussion of matters that people need to consider."[22] In other words, we still know very little about gender roles in the ancient Near East, especially in Syria–Palestine. For all of the speculation (from the left as well as the right), the present dearth of information ought to lead us to more circumspection and less speculation, not only about gender roles, but about the entire sociopolitical shape of the book.[23]

Yet if we're methodologically cautious enough, we can still observe how *particular* women function in these *particular* texts, then try to formulate from this comparison some specific questions about *their* gender roles. Here the canonical-historical approach can be of great value. Take, for example, the roles enacted by the Levite's concubine versus those enacted by the Moabite Ruth. The Levite's wife is a "concubine" (*pîlegeš*, Judg 19:1).[24] Ruth, however, is a "foreign woman" (*nokrîyyâ*, 2:10), a Moabite widow who eventually becomes the "wife" (*'iššâ*, 4:10) of an Israelite "nobleman."[25] What do these terms mean? What roles do they signify? One does not have to know the Hebrew language to see that these are differing kinship terms. And since anthropologists are agreed that kinship terms are better studied as parts of dynamic continuums rather than static categories, one of the least speculative things we can say is that "concubine" and "foreign wife" probably refer to gender roles relatively close together on the Israelite social continuum, somewhere between the extreme poles of "female slave" (*šipḥâ*) and "(Israelite) wife" (*'iššâ*).

Why is it important to see this? I believe it is because the similarities on the *social* continuum are what make the dissimilarities on the *moral* continuum stand out so sharply. Each of these women lives in the same geographical area (Bethlehem), moves within the same social circles, and enacts a number of roles relatively close together on the same Syro-Palestinian societal continuum. Yet each experiences a vastly different fate. One follows an unprepared, foolish man

22. Frymer-Kensky, *In the Wake of the Goddesses*, 213.

23. "To attempt to transplant gender roles, the roles of parents and children, polygamy, monogamy, celibacy, and a host of other specific features of the Israelite family into contemporary cultures would be naïve" (L. Perdue, "The Household, Old Testament Theology, and Contemporary Hermeneutics," in *Families in Ancient Israel* [ed. L. Perdue et al.; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997] 254; see also C. Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* [New York: Oxford, 1988] 4-6; Karel van der Toom, *From Her Cradle to Her Grave: The Role of Religion in the Life of the Israelite and the Babylonian Woman* [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994] 141-45).

24. *Pîlegeš*" is probably a non-Semitic loanword, according to M. Ellenbogen, *Foreign Words in the Old Testament* (London: Luzac, 1962) 134. K. Engelken translates it as "secondary wife" in *Frauen im Alten Israel: Eine begriffsgeschichtliche and sozialrechtliche Studie zur Stellung der Frau im Alten Testament* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1990) passim.

25. Israel is profoundly ambivalent toward "foreign women" generally (Prov 5:20; 6:24; 7:5; M. Bal, *Lethal Love* [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987]).

on an ill-conceived journey only to be raped, murdered, chopped into pieces, and mailed (!) to Israel's tribal leaders.[26] The other follows a Hebrew mother-in-law only to find in her hometown a compassionate nobleman who protects her, marries her, and restores through her the heritage of her dead Hebrew husband.

THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

Interpreted in its canonical-historical context, then, the book of Ruth is a masterfully crafted response to the politics of despair in Judges 17-21. Ruth's literary structure provides the perfect vehicle for communicating this subtly subversive response. No prophetic oracle, priestly torah, or psalmic lyric can match the short story for subtlety, ambiguity, and memorability.[27] Character by character, episode by episode, Ruth is a well-crafted, entertaining story, but *in its context* it is something much more. *In its context*, Ruth is a sharp chisel in the hands of a master sculptor, methodically chipping away at Israel's despair until a marvelous theology of hope begins to emerge. The structure of this theology remains hidden and covert, never becoming as visible as, say, the theology of Isaiah or Deuteronomy. Yet Ruth does have a theological message, and one way to see it is to filter its contents through the following polarized lenses: the *wandering - restoration* lens, the *religion - ethics* lens, and the *chaos - kindness* lens.

Wandering - Restoration

Hebrews are wanderers. In fact, the very word "Hebrew" probably means "wanderer" (from '*abar*, "to cross over, wander"). This "wandering" begins with Abraham's decision to leave Ur and climaxes in Moses' return from Egypt (Gen 12:1-4; Num 10:11-36:13). It continues through David's flights from Saul and climaxes again in the exiles of Assyria, Babylon, and Persia (Jer 2:1-3; Ezek 20:33-38). For rabbinic Jews, this theme continues into the Talmud, where the rabbis discuss, among other things, the final destinies of those "wandering" in the wilderness behind Moses (*b. Sanh*. 110b). For Christians, it transforms into something universally inclusive in the NT letter *To The Wanderers/Hebrews*. All believers in the One God, as

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26. R. Hisda (*b. Git.* 6b) comments, "The concubine of Gibeah was terrorized by her husband."

27. Gottwald (*The Hebrew Bible*, 551) characterizes the ancient Hebrew short story as having "multiple episodes within fairly brief compass, an elevated and ceremonious style, and skillful literary techniques for shaping full-bodied character in a suspenseful plot." Ruth's "subversive" nature is emphasized by A. Ogden Bellis ("Subversive Women in Subversive Books: Ruth, Esther, Susanna, and Judith," in *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible* [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994] 10-24).

the NT writer puts it, are "strangers and exiles upon the earth" (Heb 11:13). "Israel," the "one who wrestles with God" (whether person or nation or inclusive faith-community), is an organism forever on the move, constantly traversing all sorts of spatial, temporal, ethnic, social, political, religious, theological, and spiritual boundaries. "Wandering" is a profoundly biblical theme. Every wanderer tends to ask the same questions: "Is it my fate to wander forever? Am I ever going to find my way 'home' again?"[28]

Powerful echos of this theme reverberate throughout Judges 17-Ruth 4. In particular, three Bethlehemites find themselves forced to "wander" through their own personal "wildernesses." A Levite wanders north to find work (Judg 17:8-9). A concubine wanders north to find "home" (Judg 19:1). An Ephrathite wanders east to find food (Ruth 1:1). All three have to make painful decisions about when and where to pull up stakes. All three have to cope with life on the road, packing and unpacking, pushing and pulling.

Wanderer #1 sets out, as the text ambiguously puts it, "to wander to whatever (place) he might find . . . to make his way" (Judg 17:8). The path he chooses, however, leads to territory as morally ambiguous as it is religiously uncharted. Soon dissatisfied, he throws in his lot with a band of Danites, enticed away by offers of more money and greater prestige. Nowhere does he pray or inquire of Yahweh before making these decisions, even though this is his purported function as a religious functionary. Never does he find his way "home."

Wanderer #2 sets out to follow her husband to a new land and a new life (Judg 19:1). Soon, however, the marriage fails and she returns to her father's house. Four months later, her husband arrives in Bethlehem to take her "home." Three times her father begs them not to leave, sensing something ominous waiting for them on the road north. But his advice is ignored, and the resulting tale is one of the Bible's most grisly horror stories, a terrifying nightmare about cowardice and rape and murder and war. No one here even comes close to making it "home."[29]

Wanderer #3 sets out to save his family from famine. Elimelech the Ephrathite makes a painful decision to leave his ancestral inheri-

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28. P. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968) 237-56; D. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (JSOTSup 10; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982) 17-21; W. Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1997).

29. D. Penchansky ("Staying the Night: Intertextuality in Genesis and Judges," in *Reading between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* [ed. D. Fewell; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1992] 77-88) points out a number of intertextual parallels between this story and the one in Gen 19:1-11. R. Alter (*The Art of Biblical Narrative* [New York: Basic Books, 1981] 88-113) emphasizes that repetition (three times he begs them to stay) is a common literary technique for suspense-building.

tance to scratch out a living in Moab. The text does not tell us much about this "exile," but like Jacob's in Padan-Aram (Gen 28:5-31:55) or Joseph's in Egypt (39:1-40:23), this one, too, is hard and difficult. Unlike **Wanderers #1** and **#2**, however, **Wanderer #3** eventually does find his way "home," or at least his name does. Every male in his family dies (including himself), yet two of the family's three widows stubbornly refuse to let death have the last word. Ruth and Naomi set out to make sure that the family name does not perish. Playing on the Hebrew word for "return/restore" (*šûb*) the narrator of Ruth guides us step-by-step through their journey "home." Naomi decides to "return" to Judah (Ruth 1:7). She pressures her daughters-in-law to "return" to Moab, but they refuse: "No, we will 'return' to your people" (1:10). She insists a second time, "Return!" (1:11), then a third time, "Return!" (1:12). Finally Orpah does "return," and Naomi seizes on this to pressure Ruth into doing the same (1:15). Ruth, however, refuses to give in to Naomi's depression (1:16) and accompanies her to the land of Judah, the land of Naomi's ancestors. Arriving in Bethlehem, Naomi announces, "I went away full, but Yahweh 'returned' me empty." Ruth's new co-workers begin to call her "the returnee" (2:6). Finally, after Obed is born, the people describe Naomi's grandson as the "life-returner" (4:15).

Religion - Ethics

For all their gloom and doom, the stories in Judges 17-21 are still very religious. Compared to Ruth, they might seem otherwise, but even a cursory reading shows this to be so. For example, in Judges 17 Micah builds a shrine, stocks it with an assortment of religious icons, then hires the aforementioned Levite to serve it, both as "priest" and as "father."[30] His reason for doing this is very basic: he wants to secure Yahweh's "favor."[31]

Micah overtly calls the icons in this shrine his *'ĕlohîm* (Judg 18:24),[32] a very important, yet very ambiguous term in Judges 17-Ruth 4. Most often it refers to the One God, but sometimes it can refer to the world of unseen "daemons," those mysterious beings which animate the earliest layers of the Balaam traditions, the dialogues of Job, and other ancient Near Eastern texts.[33] Micah believes that this

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30. Micah's need for religious icons illustrates well the political and ideological ambivalence in early Israel for a king/god; R. Hendel, "The Social Origins of the Aniconic Tradition in Early Israel," *CBQ* 50 (1988) 381.

31. "Now I know that Yahweh will be good to me" (Judg 17:13, *yāṭab*).

32. The NIV translates this term "gods," but the MT reads "my gods" (K)V, NRSV).

33. J. Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986); T. J. Lewis, "The Ancestral Estate (*naḥālat 'ĕlōhîm*) in 2 Samuel 14:16," *JBL* 110 (1991) 602-3; K. van der Toorn, "The Nature of the Biblical Teraphim in the Light of the Cuneiform Evidence," *CBQ* 52 (1990) 210-11;

cult will enable him to contact the world of God/the gods (Judg 17:13). Soon afterwards, the Danites ask his Levite-priest to foretell the future, and he manipulates the *'ĕlōhîm* to divine an answer (Judg 18:5). Divination occurs not only here but also in Judges 20, when the warriors from the non-Benjamite tribes go up to Bethel and inquire of Yahweh: "Which of us shall go up first to fight against the Benjamites?" Yahweh's reply—"Judah shall go up first"—is probably ascertained by the same or similar divinatory techniques used by the Levite earlier (20:18).[34]

Nothing overtly religious, however, ever occurs in Ruth. No one divines the future. No one bargains for priests. No one steals *'ĕlohîm* -icons from desperate landowners. No one manipulates the *'ĕlohîm*. This is one of the greatest contrasts between Ruth and Judges. In place of Micah's hollow religiosity stands Boaz's solid integrity. In place of the tribal elders' divination stands Naomi's Yahwistic faith. In place of the Danites' hypocrisy stands Ruth's compassion.

Doubtless there is some kind of traditional Yahwism beneath all this, yet in marked contrast to its context Ruth has very little to say about it. On the one hand, Ruth epitomizes the best of Yahwism, quietly radiating a message of inclusion in a world saturated with ethnic prejudice. Every Hebrew in Bethlehem accepts Ruth for who she is, a *nokrîyyâ* ("foreign woman"). On the other hand, tolerance for foreigners never translates into abandonment of responsibility, particularly family responsibility. The book of Ruth may *begin* by focusing on a foreigner's character, compassion, and faith. But it *ends* by focusing on the restoration of an *Israelite family*, not a Moabite individual.

The canonical-historical approach makes it easier for us to examine the loyalty of Ruth's characters versus the fickleness of Judges' characters. Micah's Levite abandons his employer without batting an eye—yet one cannot even imagine Ruth doing such a thing (Judg 17:11; 18:20; Ruth 3:11-13). The concubine's husband drags her foolishly and needlessly into harm's way—yet one cannot even imagine Boaz doing this (Judg 19:9-22; Ruth 2:8-9). The Levites concubine abandons her husband (even though she is not an *'iššâ*, "wife," she is still obligated to stay with her *'iš*, "hus-

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M. S. Moore, "Job's Texts of Terror," *CBQ* 55 (1993) 663-65; D. V. Edelman (ed.), *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

34. H. B. Huffmon, "Priestly Divination in Israel," in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth: Essays in Honor of D. N. Freedman in Celebration of His Sixtieth Birthday* (ed. C. L. Meyers and M. O'Connor; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1983) 355-59. Ann Jeffers (*Magic and Divination in Ancient Palestine and Syria* [Leiden: Brill, 1996] 58-60) characterizes the Levites as "oracular attendants and healers." One reason that Micah tries to win the Levite back is because competent diviners are hard to find (J. Nougayrol, "La divination babylonienne," in *La divination* [ed. A. Caquot and M. Leibovici; Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1968] 65).

band")—yet Ruth refuses to abandon Naomi (Judg 19:2; Ruth 1:16-18).[35]

In short, the book of Ruth quietly subverts the narrow religiosity of its context. Ruth is much more than a "lovely little composition" (Goethe).[36] Instead, *in its context*, Ruth is an "autonomous text," a world which refuses to "allow itself to be absorbed" by the world all around it.[37] This book, like no other, challenges Israel to rethink the depth of its character, the goals of its mission, and the identity of its *'ĕlohîm*.

Chaos – Kindness

Perhaps the most overlooked comparison has to do with the notion of "kindness." Ruth's term, *ḥesed*, is justifiably hailed by interpreters as one of the book's most important themes.[38] The parallel term in Judges, however (*ḥānan*), is virtually ignored. No one, to my knowledge, has ever systematically compared these synonyms for "kindness" within their common context.

In Judges 21, Israel drives Benjamin to the brink of extinction. Not only this, but Israel, in typical Near Eastern fashion, vengefully issues a ban against any Hebrew woman marrying a Benjamite. Mercifully, this mistake is soon realized (must Benjamites now intermarry with non-Israelites?), and Israel's leaders backpedal hard to correct themselves. An "exception clause" is hastily drafted, permitting the Benjamites to seize four hundred virgins from the town of Jabesh Gilead as wives. However, since this number is not nearly enough, they have to backpedal again and permit the Benjamites to seize even more brides from a nearby Shiloh festival. The men of Jabesh-Gilead say nothing about this "legal-rape" policy, but the Shilonites do, and Israel offers the following rationale for its virgin-management strategy:

35. G. Gerleman (*Ruth* [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1981] 10) states the point quite beautifully: "Behind this desacralized narrative stands a different conception of reality. . . . The divine leader is first and foremost the leader of the human heart."

36. Cited in Gunkel, *Reden und Aufsätzen*, 65.

37. E. van Wolde, "Texts in Dialogue with Texts: Intertextuality in the Ruth and Tamar Narratives," *BibInt* 5 (1997) 1-28.

38. N. Glueck, *Das Wort ḥesed im alttestamentlichen Sprachgebrauche als menschliche und gottliche gemeinschaftgemasse Verhaltungsweise* (Giessen: Alfred Töpelmann, 1927); K. Sakenfeld, *Faithfulness in Action* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985); G. R. Clark, *The Word ḥesed in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993); F. I. Andersen, "Yahweh, the Kind and Sensitive God," in *God Who Is Rich in Mercy: Essays Presented to Dr. D. B. Knox* (ed. P. T. O'Brien and D. G. Peterson; Homebush West, Australia: Lancer, 1986) 41-88.

> Do us a "kindness" by helping them, because we did not get wives for them during the war, and you are innocent, since you did not give your daughters to them. (Judg 21:22)

In short, "kindness" for the Mizpah council is a character trait rooted not in divine promise or in personal conviction. "Kindness" is a poker chip, a necessary political "evil." "Kindness" is an awkward imposition begged of innocent bystanders after not one but several hundred of their citizens are institutionally raped by a paternalistic elite.

In Ruth, the family of Elimelech also teeters on the brink of extinction. Famine, death, and depression have taken a huge toll. Things are so bad that Naomi actually talks of giving up her name (from Naomi, "sweet," to Mara, "bitter"). She becomes so depressed that Elimelech's daughter-in-law has to confront her about it (1:16-17). Yet as soon as Boaz enters the picture, Naomi dares to do something which no character in Judges 17-21 ever dares to do. She dares to worship. She dares to trust in Yahweh—not manipulate the *'ĕlōhîm*! She dares to imagine, even before anything is planned or dreamed or attempted, that there is a way out:

> May he be blessed by Yahweh, who does not abandon his "kindness" to either the living or the dead. (Ruth 2:20)

"Kindness" for Naomi is no poker chip to be cashed in at the threatening of one's tribal purity. No, kindness is a gift. Kindness is something rooted in the promises of Yahweh, the God of her ancestors, the God to whom she slowly (re)turns with chastened heart and hopeful countenance. It is only after opening up her heart to this God that things start to change in her life. The narrator wants us to see this clearly. It is only after her faith returns that she begins to strategize with Ruth about the future. She begins to plan a face-saving way for Boaz to do what near-kinsmen are supposed to do: raise up heirs for deceased male relatives. Astonished by *God's* kindness, Naomi dares to dream of a new life months before Obed is born, decades before David is born, centuries before Yeshuʿa of Nazareth is born.

SUMMARY

In short, Ruth is less a romantic novella than a compelling drama, less a Messianic preamble than a pastoral gift. *In its context*, Ruth's major theological themes—the yearning for "home" in the midst of homelessness, the hunger for conviction in the midst of hypocrisy, the celebration of kindness in a world filled with unspeakable cruelty—all these come into clearer focus, project a sharper image. Ruth is a bright light in a dark world.

Changing the metaphor, Ruth is a challenge to hear as well as see. Not only does each character bring a different "voice" to the "performance," each listener brings a different ear to the biblical "score."[39] One reader hears the melody line as that of a broken woman trying to find her way "home." Another resonates to the "alto part" sung by the loyal daughter-in-law. Another gravitates to the "bass line" sung by the benevolent patriarch. This trio is soon joined, however, by a much larger orchestra in which the countermelodies of justice and compassion blend and blur into the grander harmonies of a greater canonical symphony. Discerning listeners soon discover that the story of Ruth is a quiet place in this symphony where "Maras" of all sorts can find the strength to become "Naomi" again, where "wanderers" can find a reason to keep looking for "home"—and where discerning kings can learn the difference between "political power" and "servant leadership "[40]

39. Frances Young (*The Art of Performance: Towards a Theology of Holy Scripture* [London: Dartman, Longman, & Todd, 19901) uses musical terminology as a metaphor for conceptualizing biblical texts in canonical perspective.

40. Wolff, "Masters and Slaves," 272. Many thanks to Tom Parker, Eric Elnes, and Bob Hubbard for taking the time to critique this paper in its earlier drafts.