



The Bible Becomes Literature: An Encounter with Ruth

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When I was in graduate school, immersing myself in the eddies and whirlpools of the Hebrew Bible, treading water in the Jordan while drowning in Semitic syntax, I first encountered the book of Ruth. It was a lovely read, clean Hebrew, almost completely unmarked by poor textual transmission—and a pleasant story to boot, an altogether delightful pastoral idyll. It struck me as worthy of a script for television, a sort of ancient forerunner of “Days of Our Lives.” A lonely widow happens to meet a rich, available bachelor; they fall in love, marry, and have a child who stands directly in the line of Israel’s greatest king. My now-20-year-old notes remind me that we spent the bulk of our classroom discussions of Ruth on that enigmatic little sandal swap that seals the bargain between Boaz and the unnamed next-of-kin, allowing Boaz to purchase the property of the dead Elimelech, husband of Naomi (4:7-8). I remember spirited debate concerning just which one of the parties took off his sandal and gave it to the other, and how that action was rooted in older Semitic practice, from Akkadian to Nuzian to Marian (not to be confused with the mother of Jesus, but referring to the second-millennium BCE city-state of Mari). We concluded our reading of Ruth with the stern admonition of the instructor that we all “should love Moabites more,” whoever the contemporary equivalent of Moabites might be (African-Americans? Anglos? Chinese Communists? You may fill in the blank for 1972). Because the great king David had a Moabite great-grandmother, the book of Ruth was a lesson in tolerance, a propaganda piece exhorting the faithful to a wider acceptance of their fellow humans. And thus was Ruth studied in my classroom in 1972.

I was completely unaware that my appreciation and understanding of Ruth was about to undergo a significant change. In fact, two years before my encounter

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with Ruth an article was written that would have suggested, had I known of it, a completely different approach to the book. D. F. Rauber, a teacher of English at San Diego State College, had read much of the traditional historical-critical scholarship on the book of Ruth and was quite frankly appalled.¹ He found the discussions “extremely elementary,” “on a freshman level,” and revelatory of an “extraordinary degree of literary naiveté.” In short, Rauber suggested that professional critics of the Bible quite simply did not recognize what they were reading when they read a book like Ruth.

The task of the literary critic is to explore the complex world of the artist and to suggest ways in which we can respond as fully as possible to its multiplicity, its suggestiveness, its richness. But all this is denied us, if lurking in the back of our

minds is the secret conviction that art is really little more than the decorative embellishment of the prosaic, that the purpose of a great artist can be reduced to copybook maxims.²

When I read Rauber, the book of Ruth *became* literature. But of course that statement is hardly accurate. The book of Ruth had always *been* literature. Its true genre had seldom been taken with real seriousness. When I add the rich feminist reading of Phyllis Tribble³ to that of Rauber, Ruth has become to me one of the Bible's greatest achievements, a story rich in suggestiveness and possibilities, as Rauber insists, and one to which we, men and women of twentieth-century faith, may respond as fully as possible. Ruth is far more than a soap opera, climaxed by an obscure legal sandal swap, a shaggy-dog illustration of David's Moabite ancestry. It is a story of courage, of hope against hope, of a woman triumphant in a man's world, of a love beyond all loves which can never be defeated. And much, much more.

I. HOW LITERARY EYES DISCOVER RUTH

If I am to gain a fresh appreciation of Ruth as literature, I need to retrain my eyes and ears. No longer will I begin my examination of Ruth with questions like: When was this written? Who wrote it? What are the sources used by the author in writing? Is Ruth a real person? Is Boaz? Now I will ask questions like: How has the author devised the plot of the story? In what ways has the author characterized the people of the story? In what ways do the word choice and scenic design impede or advance the story? In short, I will now ask the sorts of questions I ask when I read any piece of literature, whether Homer, Dante, or Shakespeare.

But, you may now be saying, Ruth was not written by Shakespeare; Ruth is part of the canon of sacred Scripture. Does that fact not make reading it like one reads Shakespeare rather dangerous or even blasphemous? My answer is no, and for one simple reason: Ruth *must* be read as literature for that is what it is! The

¹D. F. Rauber, "Literary Values in the Bible: The Book of Ruth," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 89/1 (1970) 27-37.

²*Ibid.*, 37.

³Phyllis Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, chap. 6, "A Human Comedy" (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 166-199.

church's decision, with the prodding of the Holy Spirit of God, to canonize Ruth does not make the book any *less* a piece of literature. It does not change its genre because it is in the Bible. The danger, in fact, is quite on the other side. *Not* to read Ruth as literature is to miss the great power of the book, just as I missed it in 1972. *Not* to read Ruth as literature will lead to misapprehension of the book and thus will deny the piece a full hearing. If I am to hear the full range of this inspired literature, I must become attentive to its full riches. To do any less is to blunt the Spirit of God, manifest in God's word.

Let me suggest, all too briefly, the discoveries that may be unearthed in a literary reading of Ruth.

1. Plot

A. The story is focused squarely on Ruth. She risks her life three times, each time on behalf of her mother-in-law. In chapter 1, on the Bethlehem road, she throws both her life and her death away, when she announces, in the face of the strongest evidence to the contrary, that she *will* go with Naomi. In chapter 2, she risks her very life to go to glean in a foreign field, to pick up the most meager of livings among a people she does not know, among rough field hands and greedy owners. The fact that she is even now centered on the fate of Naomi is made certain by her gift to Naomi of the leftover food she saved from her noon meal with Boaz (2:18). Later she will again give Naomi food after her encounter with Boaz on the threshing floor, lying to Naomi that the gift was Boaz's idea (3:17). Naomi is *always* the motivator of Ruth's remarkable actions.

Finally, she risks reputation and perhaps life on that threshing floor with Boaz, becoming the central character in Naomi's scheme of sexual entrapment. She claims as she leaves for the threshing floor that she will do "all" that Naomi asks (3:5), but in fact she does not. Rather than wait for Boaz to play his socially demanded role of redeemer for the widows Ruth and Naomi, she proposes marriage to him (3:9), a remarkably cheeky act by a foreign woman toward a respected Israelite whom she hardly knows.

The plot is focused on Ruth and her incredible devotion to Naomi, but other elements of the plot add to this emphasis.

B. The focus falls on the women of the story as all the males are dead by 1:6.

C. The location of the great speech of 1:16-17 heightens its impact as Ruth throws away her present and her future right after Naomi has strongly urged her two daughters-in-law to go back to Moab, advice finally taken by the sensible Orpah.

D. The location of Naomi's cry of embittered anguish concerning her "emptiness" (1:20-21), uttered *after* the return to Bethlehem, intensifies Ruth's isolation and strengthens for the reader Ruth's resolution.

E. The small note that they have arrived in Bethlehem "at the beginning of the barley harvest" (1:22) becomes an important piece of chronological information, as we discover in 2:23. The time lapse between the beginning of the barley harvest and the conclusion of both barley and wheat harvests may be as much as seven

weeks. Such a long delay between Boaz's initial interest in Ruth and his unexplained unwillingness to act further with regard to her heightens the tension of the women's plight and leads directly to the outrageous plan of chapter 3.

F. The story dispensed quickly with the men at the beginning, and so it does at the end as well. All males, save the infant son of Ruth and Boaz, disappear at 4:14 as the women alone announce the conclusion of the plot and summarize the story's focus for the reader. The women announce that Ruth is "more to you than seven sons," an astonishing claim in a patriarchal world. However, the plot has made such a claim inevitable; Ruth *has* moved the plot along through her marvelous risking love for Naomi. This reading of the plot suggests that far from an old "boy meets girl" story, Ruth is primarily the story of a remarkable woman and the amazing ways she transforms her world from emptiness to fullness.

2. Character and Characterization

In the Bible characters are delineated by two general devices, actions and speeches. This is made necessary due to the almost complete lack of description in the texts. Unlike English, the Hebrew and Greek of the Bible employ very few adjectives in their styles. Thus, the reader is forced to pay most careful attention to what characters say and what they do. In this brief article I have time only for a few examples from Ruth.

A. *Actions.* As an example, let us examine the actions of Boaz as indicators of who he is in the story. All his actions portray him as a “man of stature” (the phrase means more than the size of his bank account; he is a pillar of the community), a description shared with the reader by the narrator at 2:1. He is well-liked by his workers (2:4), and well-respected by his peers (the trial scene in 4:1-12). His one blemish seems to be his extreme reticence with regard to Ruth; as I noted above, he fails to act toward her for some seven weeks. However, when he is asked to play his part as redeemer by Ruth, albeit on a threshing floor, alone, at midnight (!), he acts honorably and later cleverly at the trial to gain Ruth as his bride. By watching Boaz act, we can gain a clear picture of the kind of man he is.

B. *Speeches.* What characters say is especially revelatory of them. The most famous speech of the book is a classic example of the importance of speech.

Do not force me to abandon you, to return from following you. Surely, wherever you go, I will go, and wherever you lodge, I will lodge. Your people will be my people, your God, my God. Wherever you die, I will die, and there I will be buried. Thus may Yahweh do to me, and even more, if death divides me from you! (1:16-17 author’s translation)

Naomi has just convinced Orpah to return to Moab; she, and we, are astonished to see that Ruth has no intention of leaving her. The narrator draws Ruth’s character with care in the speech.

Ruth reveals who she is early in the speech. “Do not force me to abandon you,” she says. To leave Naomi at this crucial time in her life would be nothing short of abandonment by Ruth. Naomi is bitter and angry; once full of hope and promise, she is now empty of both. The remarkable Ruth will not abandon such a one as that, and the rest of her speech is designed to illuminate further her

unshakable refusal to leave Naomi alone on the road. This is devotion, pure and simple, but by no means any less devoted by being pure and simple. Ruth ends her speech with an oath in the name of Yahweh, the only time this divine name is found on her lips in the entire story. With that oath she intends to convince Naomi, and us, that she is completely sincere in her willingness to remain with her mother-in-law.

The power of this speech has made it a staple at weddings, whether said or sung, and when analyzed as I have tried to do, one can see why it is appropriate for those occasions, notwithstanding its completely female context in the biblical book.⁴

Speeches and actions are the key to biblical characterization. Try this for yourself. Reread Genesis 3, and focus your attention on the actions and speeches of the four characters in that

drama (yes, God *is* a character, too). I think you will find that the story veritably leaps from the page when examined in this way.

II. WHAT ABOUT BIBLICAL AUTHORITY?

In this brief article I can only hint at the issues of biblical authority raised by literary readings of the Bible. The basic question is: Precisely where does the Bible's authority lie? The historical-critical method, the reigning approach to the Bible for 150 years or so, made the assumption that the *intent* of the author was the only true test of what a text meant and therefore what a text can mean for us today. And, the method went on to assert, the *only* way one can discover the intent of the text is to employ all the critical tools that allow the researcher to recapture the multiple contexts of the ancient text: language, history, economy, sociology, religion, archeology, etc. When properly used, the historical critic claimed that he or she could recover the ancient intent and hence the ancient meaning of the text. The method claimed a nearly complete scientific objectivity. But we have now learned that such objectivity is little more than a chimera. Even natural scientists are becoming increasingly aware that their so-called objectivity is in no real sense objective. The object of study is inevitably affected by the one who studies, and the results of the study are inevitably affected by the status of the researcher: gender, education, personality, and a host of spoken and unspoken presuppositions too numerous to mention.

This is doubly true in the study of the Bible. The case I began with makes this fact certain. I, as a white male, quite simply could not see the powerful feminine claims made by the story of Ruth; it took a woman scholar, Phyllis Trible, to open my male eyes. And my Anglo eyes have been opened by African-American scholars, by Hispanic and Asian scholars, even by Spanish-speaking peasants who come to the Bible with presuppositions far different from my own, ideas that open windows that would be forever closed to me. Rauber was right when he urged us to see the text's multiplicity, for richly multiple this holy text is.

⁴For a fuller account of these literary features, see John C. Holbert, *Preaching Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991) 104-114.

But where then is the authority? Are we forever doomed to a "subjective" biblical analysis, where all readings are equal, where the one who shouts the loudest wins? Surely not! Some readings of the Bible *are* better than others, are more faithful to the text than others. The literary method I have suggested above is far from a subjective one; it has rules and methods and the added advantage of working on the actual text we have, rather than some supposed source or other which we do not have. Still, it is inescapable that after we have appropriated a literary criticism, we will need to be more humble as we advance our readings. We will no longer be so willing to rely on our solitary skills as readers; we will no longer be so strident in our individual certainties. Our authority may arise from our united efforts as interpreters rather more than in our past. Perhaps what we need is a real community of interpretation, guided by a humble submission to the Holy Spirit.

Such humility in the face of different voices does not come easily. Like the friends of Job, we would far rather be *right* than helpful listeners any day. But we should remember who it was that God chose to address at the end of the day, and if you said the friends, those orthodox and

completely certain theologians, you would be wrong. It was Job to whom God spoke, Job, the loud-mouth, who dared to call into question the basic convictions of a powerful believing community.

I have found the method of literary study of the Bible to be exciting and challenging. It has rekindled my interest in the Bible, my interest in preaching the Bible, and has given me new hope that in the Bible we all can find hope for a renewed world where God through Jesus Christ is bringing the realm of God close to all of those who can hear and see.⁵

⁵Several valuable books are available for the person who wants to begin to read the Bible in a literary way. They are: Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); Adele Berlin, *Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative* (Sheffield: Almond, 1983); Shimon Bar-Efrat, *Narrative Art in the Bible* (Sheffield: Almond, 1989); David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford Press, forthcoming). For those interested in literary readings of the New Testament, see, for example, David Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) and Robert M. Fowler, *Let the Reader Understand* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991).