

INTRODUCTION AND RUTH 1:1-5

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Introduction

I. Authorship

A. The book gives no hint as to the identity of its author. The Rabbinic literature known as the Babylonian Talmud, which was completed around A.D. 500-550, attributes the authorship of Ruth (and Judges) to Samuel.

B. A major problem with that claim is that Samuel lived in the late Judges period and there are clear indications that the book, at least in its final form, was written a significant time after the Judges period. It is possible that Samuel wrote an earlier form of the book that was later put in its final form, but that is pure speculation.

II. Date

A. Ruth 1:1 makes clear that the author is writing about events that took place in a former time, a time identified as "the days when the Judges ruled." The period when Judges ruled in Israel commenced not long after the death of Joshua (Judg. 1:1), which one can reasonably estimate occurred around 1366 B.C., and ended with the anointing of Saul as king (1 Samuel 10) around 1051 B.C.¹

B. The fact David's genealogy is given at the end of the book means it was written after David had become king, after he had become someone whose genealogy was of special interest and significance. So it could not have been written before around 1011 B.C.

C. Ruth 4:7 shows that the book was written so long after Boaz redeemed Elimelech's property that the custom for confirming such transactions had been forgotten and thus required an explanation. It seems it would take at least several generations for that to occur, which takes one to the time of David at the earliest (and probably beyond).

D. Based on certain linguistic evidence, most scholars today are convinced the book was written prior to the Babylonian exile in 587/586 B.C., but the proposed dates vary widely from the tenth to the sixth centuries B.C.

III. Themes and Purpose

¹ See Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 146-151 and Walter C. Kaiser, *A History of Israel From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998), 178-179.

A. It is easy to read the Book of Ruth simply as an engaging story that promotes the virtues of loyalty, kindness, and generosity by showing that God rewards such behavior, but as Raymond Dillard and Tremper Longman state in *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 133, doing so "distorts the book and misses its profound theological teaching."

B. There is a link to David at the beginning of the book (1:1-2) through the identification of Elimelech as "a man of Bethlehem in Judah" and the more specific identification of his family as "*Ephrathites* from Bethlehem in Judah" (see 1 Sam. 17:12). There is also a link to David in the genealogy with which the book concludes. This suggests that the book was written *primarily* to reinforce the truth that the Davidic dynasty was instituted by God, that David's family ruled by divine right.

1. It reinforces that truth by implying God's providential hand in David's ancestry, paralleling his guidance of Israel's patriarchs, by highlighting that lowly Bethlehem was an oasis of honor in the dark days of the Judges, and by answering presumed criticism of David's Moabite heritage by asserting the nobility of his Moabite great grandmother and her Jewish husband.²

2. This purpose suggests that the book was written during a time when the Davidic monarchy was being resisted. There was resistance to the Davidic monarchy during the reigns of both David and Solomon, and a number of scholars date the book during one of those reigns.

3. Daniel Block in *Judges, Ruth*, New American Commentary (Broadman & Holman, 1999), 590-598 makes an interesting case for the book being written to silence detractors during the renaissance of the Davidic dynasty under Josiah (640-609 B.C.) This not only accounts for the presence in the book of both standard biblical Hebrew and late biblical Hebrew better than a date during the reigns of David or Solomon but also better accounts for the distance from the time of the Judges suggested by 4:7.

C. Though the author's primary goal seems to have been to exalt David by telling the story of his roots, he develops additional themes in the process.

1. God's kindness and mercy are shown through his working in and through the everyday lives of ordinary people to preserve Elimelech's lineage and to reverse Naomi's (and to a lesser extent Ruth's) dire circumstance of childless widowhood, even exalting them within Israel by bringing through them the great King David, in whose lineage the far greater Lord Jesus would be born. William Lasor, David Hubbard,

² Robert Hubbard, Jr. thinks it unlikely there was any intent to defend David's Moabite ancestry. He states in *The Book of Ruth*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 38, "since David's ancestry was probably well known at the time, the chances of successfully reshaping public opinion would seem unlikely. How probable is it, then, that a writer would make such an attempt?" But certainly familiarity with the details of David's ancestry could vary at different times and places, and those details would need to be reasserted whenever or wherever the Moabite criticism began to gain traction.

and Frederic Bush state in *Old Testament Survey*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 524-525:

In much of the Bible, God intervenes directly and supernaturally in human affairs to effect the purposes of redemption. But in Ruth no guidance comes through dreams, visions, angelic messengers, or voices from heaven. No prophet arises to announce "thus says the Lord." Instead, God "is everywhere – but totally hidden in purely human coincidences and schemes. . . ." God's firm, loving providence lurks behind Ruth's "lucky" meeting with Boaz (2:3-4) and Naomi's risky plan (3:1-5). In short, the book stresses that God works behind the scenes *in* the deeds of faithful persons like Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz.

2. The story points out that God welcomes into the covenant non-Israelites who are willing to give him their allegiance and loyalty. Ruth was a Moabite by birth, but she chose to come to God and was blessed to become the great grandmother of King David.

3. The story also displays the goodness of practicing *hesed* and the blessings that accompany doing so. God not only blesses the one practicing *hesed* but uses that person as a vehicle to bring blessing to others. Regarding the word *hesed*, which often is translated "kindness," Block states (p. 605):

Hesed is one of those Hebrew words whose meaning cannot be captured in one English word. This is a strong relational term that wraps up in itself an entire cluster of concepts, all the positive attributes of God – love, mercy, grace, kindness, goodness, benevolence, loyalty, covenant faithfulness; in short, that quality that moves a person to act for the benefit of another without respect to the advantage it might bring to the one who expresses it.

The Book of Ruth

I. Tragedy Brings a Crisis (1:1-5)

A. Ruth 1:1 specifies that the events reported in the book took place in "the days when the Judges ruled," which is the period from soon after Joshua's death in roughly 1366 B.C. to Saul's anointing as king around 1051 B.C.

1. This was a dark period in Israel's history, a time when there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in his own eyes (Judg. 17:6, 21:25). The people repeatedly abandoned the Lord, were oppressed by a foreign power as divine punishment, cried out for deliverance, and then were delivered by a Judge whom God raised up, only to repeat the cycle time after time. Robert Hubbard, Jr. remarks in *The Book of Ruth*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 84, "The book of Judges teems with violent invasions, apostate

religion, unchecked lawlessness, and tribal civil war. These threatened fledgling Israel's very survival."

2. Despite Israel's faithlessness at this time, we will see in Ruth that God was guiding history to bless the nation through the future birth of King David.

B. In those days, a famine came on the land of Israel, which prompted Elimelech, an Ephrathite from Bethlehem in Judah, to move to Moab with his wife, Naomi, and their two sons, Mahlon and Chilion.

1. The author points out in 1:6 that the Lord provided food for Israel, the implication being that the famine was the result of his withholding food.

a. Given the widespread disobedience in the days of the Judges, perhaps one is to understand this famine as fulfillment of God's promise in Lev. 26:19-20 and Deut. 28:23-24 to punish his people with droughts should they persist in rebellious and pagan behavior. But the fact the author gives no hint of such a connection suggests that it is not significant for his point.

b. Mentioning the famine may serve merely as background for how this Jewish family found itself in Moab, or it may be intended to remind readers of the patriarchs, such as Abraham (Gen. 12:10), Isaac (Gen. 26:1), and Jacob and his sons (Genesis 41-50), who were driven by famine to sojourn in foreign lands. The purpose in the latter case would be to signal that God was at work and thus heighten interest in how the story would unfold.

c. The severity of the famine is perhaps implied by the fact Bethlehem in Hebrew means "house of bread." The town presumably was so named because wheat, barley, and other crops were plentiful in the area. If a famine forces one to leave the "house of bread," one can imagine the situation elsewhere in Israel.

2. Some commentators are convinced that Elimelech's leaving Israel for Moab was an act of faithlessness for which he and his family were punished.

a. They reason that the famine was punishment for Israel's sin, and since God promised he would lift his punitive curse if his people would repent (Deut. 30:1-3, 8-10), faith would require one to stay and work to bring about repentance rather than flee to a foreign land (e.g., Block, 626-627).

b. The fact Elimelech went to Moab, a longstanding enemy of Israel, is seen as a corroborating indication of an impure heart, and Naomi's declarations that her suffering was God's punishment (1:13, 20-21) are assumed to relate to the family's move to Moab and to be a correct assessment of her circumstance.

c. Moab refers to the region east of the Dead Sea. Some claim that it is too close to be free of a famine in Israel, but God is the one who withholds the food and thus determines the scope of the famine.

3. The evidence cited in support of the view that Elimelech's move to Moab was sinful is weaker than it may initially appear.

a. As previously indicated, the fact the author gives no hint that the famine was punishment for Israel's sin suggests that, even if it was, its being so was not significant for his point. It therefore does not seem valid to make it a key to the story by inferring from it that Elimelech's leaving was an act of faithlessness (because he should have remained to work for the lifting of the curse through repentance).

b. Moab and Israel did indeed have a long history of enmity, but that need not mean that choosing to reside there temporarily during a famine would be an affront to God. 1 Samuel 22:3-4 reports that David, a man of undeniable faith, entrusted his parents to the king of Moab when he was running from Saul. David himself lived among the Philistines in 1 Samuel 27, and though he was fleeing from a king who wanted him dead, famine can be every bit as dangerous and threatening as a human enemy.

c. The fact Naomi attributed her suffering to God need not mean he had punished her for moving to Moab (or for allowing her sons to marry Moabites). She had certainly suffered, but as in the case of Job, God may have allowed it for some nonpunitive purpose to which we are not privy or as part of his orchestration of David's ancestry.

4. Weighing against the notion that Elimelech's sojourning in Moab was an act of faithlessness is the fact the author gives no hint of condemnation regarding the move or their lives in Moab. As Frederic Bush states in *Ruth/Esther*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word Books, 1996), 67:

While noting the implications of this highlighted detail [of the origin of Elimelech's family], it is also important to stress the *lack* of implications in the broad general statements with which our author sketches the rest. There is not the faintest suggestion, for example, that there is any opprobrium to be attached to the move to Moab or that the famine is Israel's punishment for her sin. Especially there is not the slightest hint that the tragic deaths of Elimelech and his sons in any way resulted from their having forsaken their people in a time of trouble or their having moved to Moab where the sons married Moabite women. Later rabbinic exegesis used such themes of retribution and punishment to the full (for details, see Campbell), but they are read into the story, not out of it. . . . [N]one of this is relevant to [the story's] meaning simply because the author leaves all such questions totally in the background – by design, in my opinion. To raise such questions, indeed to give any more details, would have been a distraction, for the complete journey to and from Moab

and its cause are but the background and setting for the main problem the story addresses, which is depicted in the second section, vv 3-5.

5. Also weighing against the notion that Elimelech's sojourning in Moab was an act of faithlessness is the fact God graciously spares Elimelech's line from extinction and reverses Naomi's emptiness without any indication of a change in Naomi's heart. Naomi did return to Bethlehem, but she did so only after she learned that God had ended the famine there. Since the famine was why she was in Moab in the first place, the fact she returned to Israel only when the famine was over is consistent with her attitude all along. In other words, one cannot take her returning to Israel when the famine was over as an indication that she believed it was wrong to have left during the famine or not to have returned before the famine was over.

C. The names of the family members – Elimelech, Naomi, Mahlon, and Chilion – occur only here in the O.T., but all the names except Mahlon have counterparts in other literature from the ancient Near East (Amarna, Ugarit, and Mari). Naomi means "good, pleasant, lovely," and since her name is the only one whose meaning is played on in the story (1:20), the meanings of the other names, even if they could be known with confidence, do not seem relevant.

D. The author is careful to note the origin of Elimelech's family.

1. He first states in v. 1 that Elimelech was from "Bethlehem in Judah" and then further specifies in v. 2 that he and his family were "*Ephrathites* from Bethlehem in Judah." As Hubbard notes (p. 90), "this expression was probably an ethnic way of specifying the clan within the tribe of Judah to which the family belonged" (see also Bush, 64-65).

2. Given that David "was the son of an Ephrathite from Bethlehem in Judah" (1 Sam. 17:12), this repeated detail would almost certainly raise in the minds of the audience a connection with David. So at the very beginning the expectation is created that this family somehow will play a role in the coming of David.

E. After Elimelech died, Naomi's two sons each took a Moabite wife; one was named Orpah and the other Ruth. The statement "They lived there about ten years" could refer either to Mahlon and Chilion's entire time in Moab (e.g., Bush, 65) or to the time they lived there as married men (e.g., Hubbard, 91 fn. 2, 95). I think the latter is more likely, given that Naomi in 1:11 is beyond the age of child-bearing. After the statement that they lived there for ten years, one expects some comment about their lives during that time (e.g., the children born to them) but hears only news of the sons' tragic deaths.

1. A number of scholars believe the author expected the readers to understand that the sons' marrying Moabite women was something improper that Naomi should have prevented. In this view, her failure to do so was an indication of her faithlessness, which then provides the explanation for her suffering. I am not convinced that is correct.

2. As I already said, God reverses Naomi's emptiness without any acknowledgement of wrong or change of attitude on her part. If the author intended to suggest that Naomi was faithless for allowing her sons to marry Moabites, then certainly one would expect some indication of repentance to precede her being blessed by God. Otherwise, the implication would be that God blesses the impenitent. Since there is no indication of repentance on her part (the return to Bethlehem does not qualify for the reasons stated above), it seems better not to read disapproval of the marriages into the author's silence.

3. Though the issue is complicated, I side with those who conclude that the Law did *not* forbid Mahlon and Chilion from taking Moabite wives (e.g., Hubbard, 93).

a. The Jews were expressly forbidden in Ex. 34:11-16 and Deut. 7:1-4 (see also Josh. 23:12-13) from marrying people from the nations they were dispossessing, but that does not include Moab. Indeed, Deut. 21:10-14 provides for marrying foreign women who were taken in wars against distant enemies, so at least at that time there was no absolute ban on having foreign wives.

b. Deuteronomy 23:3-6 forbids any Moabite from "entering the assembly of the Lord," but that is not a prohibition against marrying them.

(1) Like eunuchs (Deut. 23:1) and those born of forbidden marriages (Deut. 23:2), Moabites could be members of Israel but not full members of the worshipping community. Regarding Deut. 23:1-8, Christopher Wright states in *Deuteronomy*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, MA: 1996), 247:

The assembly of the Lord means the assembly of those who belong fully to the covenant community and gather for worship, for the reading of the law, and for festivals. This body is not quite coextensive with the whole nation, which includes various people who are not full members of the worshipping community. Three groups are here excluded from membership of the assembly.

(2) Given that Ruth presumably was a convert to Judaism (see Ruth 1:16, 2:12b), the ban on Moabites entering the assembly of the Lord would not apply to the offspring she bore to the Israelite Boaz. Craig Keener states in "Marriage" in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds., *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000), 685, "A child conceived in the womb of a proselyte was himself a full Israelite."³

³ To similar effect, Bruce Waltke states in *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 853 (fn. 7), "The Mosaic law forbade a Moabite male and his sons *even* to the tenth generation (i.e., forever) to 'enter the assembly of the Lord' (Deut. 23:3-4). Ruth's offspring are not descended from a Moabite male."

c. I do not believe that 1 Kings 11:1-8 establishes that marrying a Moabite comes within the prohibition of Deut. 7:1-4 (contrary to Charles Baylis, "Naomi in the Book of Ruth in Light of the Mosaic Covenant," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 [Oct. 2004], 421 [fn. 28]).

(1) The meaning of 1 Kings 11:1-2 seems to be that Solomon loved many foreign women from the nations identified in Deut. 7:1 *along with* foreign women from other nations. In other words, the listing of foreign women from the nations in v. 1 is parenthetical: "Now King Solomon loved many foreign women – along with the daughter of Pharaoh, Moabite, Ammonite, Edomite, Sidonian, and Hittite women – from the nations concerning which the LORD had said to the people of Israel, 'You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods.' Solomon clung to these in love."

(2) The "Hittites" of 11:1 are not the same group as the "Hittites" of Ex. 34:11 and Deut. 7:1, so the distinction between the nations in 1 Kings 11:1 and Deut. 7:1 is complete. Philip Satterthwaite and David Baker state in "Nations of Canaan" in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 602:

Apart from these Hittites in Palestine, further references to Hittites in the north of Israel should be identified with the Neo-Hittites, city-states that had belonged to the Anatolian Hittite Empire before its fall and continued to be identified by that name (Judg. 1:26; 1 Kings 10:29; 11:1; 2 Kings 7:6; possibly Josh 1:4). . . .

Were the two groups ethnically distinct? The Hittite Empire never extended as far south as Hebron (Damascus [Apa] probably being the furthest south they came; ANET, 319), suggesting that the two groups were not identical.

See also, Gregory McMahon, "Hittites in the OT" in *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 233 ("We must then distinguish between the 'sons of Heth' of Palestine and the 'men of Hatti' of Anatolia and northern Syria").

(3) First Kings 11:1-8 demonstrates the danger that all unconverted foreign wives pose, whether included in the ban of Deut. 7:1-4 or not, but that is different from a flat prohibition against marrying them. Moreover, the pull toward idolatry that foreign wives exert would not exist in the case of foreign wives who genuinely embraced their husband's faith, which may have been true of Orpah and Ruth.

(a) Naomi's statement on the road to Judah that Orpah had gone back to her people and to her gods (1:15) does not specify when Orpah had left them. She may have left her people and her gods in an identifying and devotional sense when she married Chilion and only returned to them when she turned back on the road to Judah.

(b) Ruth's declaration in 1:16 that Naomi's people shall be her people and Naomi's God shall be her God need not reflect a new commitment. Rather, it may express her refusal to go back on a commitment she made when marrying Mahlon. As Naomi urges her to turn back, Ruth not only reasserts her prior commitment but reveals its great depth.

d. When Israel returned to Palestine after the exile, the principle of not marrying *indigenous* foreigners applied to those of other nations who *now* were in the land.

(1) Ezra 9:1 decries the people of Israel not having separated themselves "from the people of the lands with their abominations, from the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Jebusites, the Ammonites, the Moabites, the Egyptians, and the Amorites," which the following verse makes clear involves their having married them. The description in Ezra 9:10-12 of the commandment they violated refers to the people in the land they were entering, i.e., the Promise Land. As they returned from the exile, they apparently disobeyed this command by marrying resident non-Israelites, women from foreign communities within Israel.

(2) The marrying of resident non-Israelites presumably is also behind Nehemiah's rebuke of mixed marriages in Neh. 13:23-27. As Hubbard remarks (p. 93, fn. 10), "Esther shows that [Ezra's and Nehemiah's] prohibition was apparently not considered valid in a foreign land." Indeed, her marriage to the Persian king Ahasuerus, whose Greek name was Xerxes, was God's means of delivering his people from disaster.

(3) Though Boaz married Ruth in the land of Israel, Moabites presumably were not an established community within Israel at that time (Ex. 34:11; Deut. 7:1), and in any event, theirs was a levirate or a kinsman-redeemer marriage, which is different from other marriages because it is in fulfillment of a duty.

F. Mahlon and Chilion both die without having had any children, leaving Elimelech's line on the verge of extinction and leaving Naomi without provision or protection.

1. As a childless, aging widow, she is in the worst possible position for an Israelite woman. Bush (p. 68) quotes Phyllis Trible's assessment of Naomi's dire state:

From wife to widow, from mother to no-mother, this female is stripped of all identity. The security of husband and children, which a male-dominated culture afforded its women, is hers no longer. The definition of worth, by which it values the female, applies to her no more. The blessings of old age, which it gives through progeny, are there no longer. Stranger in a foreign land, this woman is a victim of death – and of life.

2. You can feel Naomi's anguish in her description of her situation as "too bitter" in 1:13, in her statement in 1:20 that the Almighty had dealt "very bitterly" with her, and in her statement in 1:21 that she was "empty" and that the Almighty had brought "calamity" on her. I do not take these as sinful accusations against God but as the cry of an afflicted soul that, like Job, sees God behind her suffering and is convinced that she has done nothing worthy of such severe discipline.

3. I think there is more than a little truth in the statement by Bill Arnold and Bryan Beyer in *Encountering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 188: "Though the book is named for Ruth, the story is really about Naomi and the reversal of her life's sad circumstances." Similarly, Block states (p. 588), "Based on the plot, the book is more appropriately titled 'The Book of Naomi.'"