

**Female Agent of God  
– Exegesis on the Book of Ruth**

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## Introduction

Irmtraud Fischer describes the book of Ruth as “the women’s book in the First Testament”.<sup>1</sup> The statement is not an exaggeration: The only other Old Testament book, which has a woman as a protagonist, is the book of Esther, and it can be well argued that Esther just follows Mordecai’s guidance. Ruth is more autonomous, but still an opposite of a selfish or harsh person.

I start with examining the book’s style and structure, as knowing them helps to understand how the book is intended to be understood, that is, what kind of questions it can answer. The following part is dedicated to other similar stories and how the book of Ruth differs from these. Third there is another kind of intertextual approach, as I try to see how Ruth fits into its place in the canon. Final part, including the conclusion, is about the interpretation especially as what the story tells to us, Christians living in the third millennium.

## State of the art

“Ruth is one of the best-structured books in the Old Testament”, Kirsten Nielsen writes. She presents the four different acts being made up of three different scenes, which match one another forming “an almost perfect chiasmic composition.” The first act describes the background and Naomi’s and Ruth’s journey to Israel, ABC. The second act is about the first encounter between Ruth and Boaz, DEF. The third act starts the chiasmic structure’s other wing, D’E’F’, while showing how Ruth approaches Boaz. The final act ends the structure, B’C’A’ and concludes the story with a happy solution of marriage and a birth of an heir.<sup>2</sup> Katrina Larkin adds that actually each chapter has similar stylistic approach, highlighting thus centre points: widows’ misfortune (1:11-13), Boaz’s kindness (2:10), Ruth’s appeal to Boaz (3:9) and blessing to their marriage (4:11).

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<sup>1</sup> Irmtraud Fischer, *Women Who Wrestled with God – Biblical Stories of Israel’s Beginnings*, transl. Linda M. Maloney, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2000), 129

<sup>2</sup> Kirsten Nielsen, *Ruth*, transl. by Edward Broadbridge (London: SCM Press LTD, 1997), 2-3

The centre point of the whole story is in between chapters two and three,<sup>3</sup> where Boaz is recognized as a hopeful solution to both Naomi and Ruth.

The text has also other notable qualities in it. According to Larkin it is “prose of a very high quality which frequently borders on poetry, containing many examples of parallelism and of vocabulary and idioms with a poetic flavour”. These opposites cover famine/plenty, barrenness/fruitfulness, old age/youth, isolation/community, reward/punishment, male/female and tradition/innovation,<sup>4</sup> with the movement from emptiness to fullness. Nielsen points out that even the timeline is artistically crafted in each act, starting from describing a long time, following with shorter and shorter periods, until after the conclusion there is again a longer phase.<sup>5</sup> Different studies disagree whether the genealogical material in the end is authentic, but at least the most recent of my sources claimed it to be original.<sup>6</sup>

The genre of the book is another thing that raises several different interpretations. It is relatively clear that is a short story, written by a single or a small number of authors, meant to be read instead of recited, is self-contained and is focused on characters and the plot. To bring the broad definition a bit more down, Larkin suggests that is an idyll, “a simple pastoral story, with no evil characters in it”.<sup>7</sup> Another feature, which separates it from other Old Testament material, is the heavy use of dialogue: out of 85 verses 55 are dialogue.<sup>8</sup> This contributes a lot to the character interaction and plot development. Likewise there is no general agreement on the date of the writing: it has a pre-exilic setting, but has post-exilic finishing touches. It seems likely that the text has originally been written during the monarchical period, but been edited to deal with post-exilic is-

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<sup>3</sup> Katrina J.A. Larkin, *Ruth and Esther* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 42-43

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-44

<sup>5</sup> Nielsen, *Ruth*, 4-5

<sup>6</sup> Fischer: *Women Who*, 130

<sup>7</sup> Larkin, *Ruth and Esther*, 9, 36

<sup>8</sup> Nielsen, *Ruth*, 2

sues. But even if that has happened, text critical exegetic methods are not of any help: texts found from Qumran are the same as the later Masoretic version. There are lots of marginal notes and gender confusion with suffixes, but these do not present any real problems understanding and translating the text.<sup>9</sup>

## The story of Tamar retold

The genre of the story has certain similarities with those found in Judges and the book of Job. Even more accurate comparisons are in Genesis, where Israelite and a foreign culture meet and cause major results for the future generations. Larkin claims that the author of Ruth was fully aware of these stories and entered into a dialogue with them. Book of Ruth, story of Lot in Sodoma (Gen. 19) and Tamar, the wife of Judah's sons (Gen. 38) have a very similar structure:<sup>10</sup>

- descent and separation
- disaster resulting from separation
- abandonment, with the only hope of the preservation of the family residing in a woman
- redemption, as a nearer kinsman is made to accept responsibility for continuation of the family
- a bed trick, in which the woman takes the initiative
- a celebration
- a levirate union
- the issue

The story about Tamar is especially influential, so much so that Larkin calls Ruth as “an answer to Tamar”. Both stories feature a foreign woman as a main protagonist, who saves the same family of Judah, which eventually leads to David. Widows overcome childlessness with cunning sexual means, even though the marginalized women show deep loyalty to the family.<sup>11</sup> The crucial difference is, however, that Tamar is often seen as an immoral woman, who seduces Judah into incest. The fact that Judah himself admits that Tamar is right and he himself did wrong when he refused the marriage between his third son and Tamar (Gen. 38:26) has not been enough to clear

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<sup>9</sup> Larkin, *Ruth and Esther*, 25, 31-32

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11, 37

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 16-17. This is not just a wild guess, as there is a reference to Tamar in the book itself, Ruth 4:12

Tamar's reputation in the later tradition. Ruth can be seen as taking up the same story about David's Moabite ancestress but telling it in a more positive light.

## In the canon

There has been no disagreement about the book of Ruth belonging to the sacred canon. The divine name is widely used and it introduces an important tradition about David's background.<sup>12</sup> However, the book is set in different places: in Hebrew version it belongs in the Megilloth, following the Proverbs, while in the Septuagint it is found between Judges and the first book of Samuel. Both of these can be seen as some sort of interpretative guidelines.

According to Fischer the last proverb describes a good wife, which the book of Ruth then shows in action.<sup>13</sup> As in the Megilloth Ruth was a lection at Pentecost or the feast of the weeks, which was a harvest feast. The events of the book are set in the harvest time and as has been mentioned earlier, overcoming emptiness is central in the book. Pentecost was also connected to receiving the law at Sinai and convert Ruth was clearly seen as an example of following the law. Finally the jubilee was connected to David, so reading about his ancestress was understandable.<sup>14</sup> The position in the Septuagint underlines the preceding era of monarchy, which culminates in the reign of David. The lack of a king causes illegality, which the last chapters of Judges describe. Along the same terms the widowed women have to be clever, because at that time no institution enforced the social responsibility found in Torah. It also works as an interlude to the story of David.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 33

<sup>13</sup> Fischer, *Women Who*, 143

<sup>14</sup> Larkin, *Ruth and Esther*, 35

<sup>15</sup> Nielsen, *Ruth*, 20

## Actual theology

As has already been pointed out, the book of Ruth has a place among the Old Testament writings because it justifies Davidic dynasty.<sup>16</sup> However, the book has also other dimensions and theological perspectives, which are not only for Jews or about the history of Israel. These interpretations are the ones present-day Christians can pick up, even if they most likely were known and appreciated already by the ancient Jews.

Elimelech's line was under serious threat: he and his both sons had died and his wife Naomi was already old. However, the original problem is not so much the lack of Elimelech's heir but the position of Naomi being a widow (Ruth 1:5, 13, 20-21). Ruth appears as a merciful foreigner, who refuses to leave her mother-in-law alone, and accompanies her till the end of her life (Ruth 1: 16-17). Ruth is so strongly united with Naomi that when Ruth gives birth to a child, he is considered to be Naomi's son (Ruth 4:13-17). This kind of procedure is familiar from Genesis, where barren wives guide their husbands to make love to their slaves in order to have children (cf. Gen. 30:1-6).<sup>17</sup> The crucial difference is, of course, that Ruth takes the position of a slave from her own will and initiative. The son and the marriage of Ruth and Boaz do not actually take place in order to save Elimelech's line, but to sustain Naomi's old age (Ruth 4:15). Truly Ruth's love for Naomi is a strong example, competing even with Jesus' parable about the merciful Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37).

This lovingkindness and loyalty, which Ruth and Boaz show, do not go without the compensation. Boaz prays for a blessing to Ruth because of her honourable actions (Ruth 2:12,

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<sup>16</sup> Larkin, *Ruth and Esther*, 54

<sup>17</sup> Again, it is definitely not a mere coincidence that there is a reference to Rachel and Lea in Ruth 4:11.

3:10) and Naomi does the same for Boaz (Ruth 2:19). Clearly both prayers are answered and heroes receive their reward in the end (Ruth. 4:11-12).<sup>18</sup>

God does not seem to interfere in the situation, no matter how difficult it is: there is not even direct communication with Him, unlike in Joseph's story (cf. Gen. 39:2-5, 21-23 and 41:25). But contrary to the book of Esther (Hebrew version), God is still mentioned and referred to several times.<sup>19</sup> This is to say that God is constantly active, but hidden. He does not manifest His powers with supernatural feats, but He acts through human agents.<sup>20</sup> God's lovingkindness, *חסד* (Ruth 1:8), is shown in the kind actions of poor Ruth and rich Boaz. There can also be a certain thread of God's provenance, to quote Nielsen: "Each of them thinks their own thoughts, and out of all these individual plans grows a unity that leads the reader to sense that in this way God's plan is being carried out".<sup>21</sup>

## **Conclusion: Trashing some other interpretations**

When Bible texts are interpreted, in my opinion the goal should be the original interpretation. In other words, the text should be seen as a part of its own socio-cultural atmosphere. If the text is transferred as such to our world, its meaning is quickly distorted. As the previous chapter shows, the original interpretation does not mean something that is alien to our own time: Deep, meaningful truths hold water as long as humanity exists.

Larkin refers to a negative feministic interpretation, according to which Ruth remains an outsider: She is not mentioned in the genealogy and she is found useful only because of her pa-

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<sup>18</sup> Larkin, *Ruth and Esther*, 50-51 and Nielsen, *Ruth*, 30

<sup>19</sup> Nielsen, *Ruth*, 30

<sup>20</sup> Larkin, *Ruth and Esther*, 50-52

<sup>21</sup> Nielsen, *Ruth*, 31

gan sexual manipulativeness.<sup>22</sup> This, of course, misses the point. Ruth is not mentioned in the genealogy *exactly because* she plays the humble role. She is not into it because of herself, but to help Naomi. And in the end her efforts are rewarded, as she is no longer a widow. Sexual manipulation or seduction is hardly the thing that moves Boaz. Their kindness is not gender-related: it is something what God asks from us all.

Fischer on the other hand sees Ruth as Mary's prefigure and Boaz foreshadowing Jesus.<sup>23</sup> This allegorical interpretation might narrow down various persons into simple archetypes. Both Ruth and Mary "agree to follow a path that is unconventional for a young woman", but are still very different characters. Ruth can stand firm on her own two feet and show us an example of right attitude and action without her being connected or regarded as any other person.

## Bibliography

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<sup>22</sup> Larkin, *Ruth and Esther*, 55

<sup>23</sup> Fischer, *Women Who*, 145