

Ruth - A Case for Women, or a Case for Patriarchy?

Robert Martinez

University of New England

This article analyses the Old Testament character, Ruth, in the social, historical, and religious context of the biblical book that bears her name. The study employs a feminist literary perspective to show that popular readings are misplaced in suggesting that both the character and the book of Ruth is emblematic for women's issues and concerns. It is also argued that it is naive to try to reclaim both the character and the book for feminism given the patriarchal ends which both serves. Like the other main characters in the book, Ruth is shown to be a complex figure with mixed motives and this prohibits any facile stereotyping of her character as a paradigm of virtue or the like.

By any account, Ruth is a classic narrative. It has been described “an elegantly wrought classic version of the rags-to-riches story, of hard work and proper reward, told from the point of view of women” (Tischler, 1993: 151). To the degree that this book elevates and makes prominent women and their concerns it is an atypical Biblical narrative. Throughout, Ruth shows herself to be a loyal and courageous woman, being praised by the Bethlehemite women as being better “than seven sons” (Ruth 4:15, NIV) to Naomi, her mother-in-law. Nevertheless, despite Ruth’s obvious strengths and virtues, there remains a deep ambiguity with regard to the place of women in general, and Ruth in particular, in this narrative. Carmody’s suggestion that in this narrative “we find the fully positive story of two women developing a mature friendship and loyalty” (1989: 142) is overstated. I shall demonstrate this by highlighting the way Ruth’s character is exalted almost exclusively in the context of **patriarchal ends**.

As the narrative unfolds it becomes evident that Ruth’s world was circumscribed by patriarchy. She inhabited a world where “women were recognised only in relationship to some man... They had no honour: they reflected the honour of the man who was their sponsor” (Saunders, 1996: 8)¹. Ruth moves from being a ‘wife’, to being a ‘widow’, to being a ‘wife’ again, and to being a ‘mother’. Though the key relationship in the book is between Ruth and Naomi, “the reader cannot escape the importance of the relationship to men in defining women” (Tischler, 1993: 154). Thus, Ruth’s identity, as Naomi’s, is established in relation to males. Far from being a charming romance, this narrative has more to do with the grim and calculating realism that accompanies the need for security and survival of women in a man’s world.

Ruth is not only defined in relation to males but also in relation to her

'nationality'. She is a 'foreign woman', specifically, a 'Moabite' (Ruth 1:4, 22). At this point we must ask how the average Hebrew would have 'felt' about Moab and the Moabite people. What kind of echoes would resonate in the Israelite memory in relation to these people? According to Israel's religious and historical tradition the Moabites were "the descendants of deception and incest" (Fewell & Gunn, 1990: 69), and all the echoes of Moab that resonated in the Hebrew memory were pejorative (see, Genesis 19; Deuteronomy 23: 2-4). Moabite women were specifically blamed for Israel's spiritual harlotry in Numbers 25:1-4. Read through an ethnic lens, then, Moab represents a stumblingblock to Hebrew religious purity and piety. So, from a feminist literary perspective, Ruth is marginalised, firstly, as a woman in the context of patriarchy and, secondly, as a foreigner ('Moabite') in the context of Jewish ethnic exclusivism.² The ambiguity that attaches to Ruth's character stems from the fact that she is both a 'heroic figure' who makes risky and courageous choices out of fidelity to Naomi, and the reality that she is absorbed in a man's world. In this sense Ruth's initiative is outlined in order to promote the happy ending of men. Like Naomi, she is the victim of a patriarchal society that is "personified in its sons, not its mothers" (Exum, 1985: 80).

In a more positive light, Ruth constitutes the human vehicle for the fulfilment of her Hebrew mother-in-law. She tenaciously clings to a woman who is at pains to create distance from her. Like Abraham, she has left her native land in order to go to a people and place that she knew not (compare Ruth 2:11 & Genesis 12:1) - Ruth's departure from Moab is specifically cast in terms of the Abrahamic narrative (Genesis 12). Tate suggests that the narrator likens Ruth's faithfulness to Abraham's in order to portray "Ruth as a matriarch of the Davidic line" (1991: 94). The role of Hebrew matriarchs was "to bear the children of the promise" (Exum, 1985: 75), the focus, of course, being on sons. Ruth, then, is depicted more like a hero than a heroine, and her faithfulness is praised because it promotes the Hebrew patriarchal worldview.

Ruth's courage is evident in her choice to follow Naomi to Bethlehem (Hebrew - 'the house of bread' where, ironically, there had been famine - see Ruth 1:1), but it would be mistaken to see Ruth as being without mixed motives (so Atkinson, 1983; Huey, 1992). Brenner suggests that Ruth was forgoing any guarantee of protection, physical provision, or a husband (1985: 119), but as Fewell and Gunn suggest, her prospects in Moab were not much better, for "who would want to marry a barren widow, much less one that had been living with a foreigner?" (1990: 98) In any case, Ruth was a woman "stripped of power and in dire need of protection" (Tischler: 155). Notwithstanding Ruth's courage and loyalty ('hesed'), it is fair to say that she saw 'subjection' as the fulfilment of her destiny. Out of loyal friendship to Naomi she subjected herself to this woman's patriarchal world and all that it entailed. Ruth is a character of initiative, but it should not be overlooked that she often moves in response to other characters - as when she seduces Boaz upon Naomi's request (Ruth 3).

The form of the book of Ruth is definitely not 'feminist', though it may fairly be described as 'feminine' since it highlights the virtues and concerns of women.

Nevertheless, the ultimate purpose for the book, at least for the narrator, is 'masculine' - to "chronicle the genealogy of David" (Tischler, 1993: 156). Unlike many short novellas, this narrative has no villain, though from a feminist literary perspective one may identify **patriarchy**, **androcentrism** and **ethnocentrism** as the villains. Ruth's courage is expressed within the patriarchally-prescribed "domestic terrain of woman" (Tischler: 158) so she comes to represent an almost-archetypal 'Bride' and 'Mother', which for all their merit, are the two roles that patriarchy promotes and feels comfortable with in relation to women.

Naomi, reflecting the Hebrew outlook, stresses the importance of husbands (Ruth 1:11-14), but Ruth is not primarily in search of a husband. She is quite content with the love of her mother-in-law, so she clings tenaciously to her, to her people, and to her god (Ruth 1:16-18). It is important to note that Ruth's pledge of loyalty is to Naomi, and not primarily to Naomi's deity. In a sense, Ruth's determination exemplifies the love and 'fidelity' that can create a family bond without males. Naomi, on the other hand, is too absorbed in the world of patriarchy to see any of this. In terms of the text, Ruth succeeds because of her faith, and because she serves the right cause - she has embraced Israelite society and religion (Brenner, 1985: 119). One may be forgiven for detecting something of a double standard when the text praises a foreign woman for actions (namely, Ruth's sexual advances towards Boaz in chapter 3) that would ordinarily bring shame upon an Israelite woman. Faithfulness to the covenant community was obviously paramount!

The avenues of personal salvation for a destitute woman in Israelite society were basically restricted to 'wifhood' and 'motherhood', other than begging or prostitution. Brenner suggests that Ruth is motivated "neither by pleasure-seeking nor by financial or social ambitions....the chief motive.....is the desire to produce a male heir for their deceased husbands" (:108). This is debatable, since Ruth's loyalty appears to lie exclusively with Naomi. Even if this were the case, from a feminist literary perspective, these noble actions would be tainted by the fact that they serve a system of power relations where men's interests and purposes are paramount. Our aim in emphasising this is, of course, not to chastise Ruth, but simply to highlight that she is both a 'heroic figure' and a 'victim'. In biblical perspective a woman "is confined to a biological-social function which is extremely important for the continued existence of society, but is not significant politically" (Brenner, 1985: 133). It should not be forgotten that, as much as women's concerns may surface in the book of Ruth, the central theology focuses on the birth of a **male** heir. In this case the newborn is the grandfather of King David. Ruth's redemptive purpose is to provide an heir for Naomi - "another male, that is, for the word 'heir' masks 'son'" (Fewell & Gunn, 1990: 12).

It will be instructive to explore Ruth's identity by analysing her relationship with Naomi. The popular (pious?) view describes their relation in positive, glowing terms, Naomi being an exemplar of generosity and altruism (so, Trible, 1978; Huey, 1992). However, Naomi is less motivated by altruism than by a desire to restore her

hold on the patriarchal system. If there is any altruism in the book it belongs to Ruth, for she is “the woman whose radical fidelity to another woman challenges the male-centred values that permeate both the story and Naomi’s worldview” (Fewell & Gunn, 1990: 82). From the narrator’s perspective, however, Ruth’s ‘foreignness’ enhances the impact of her deeds because it bolsters the Hebrew national identity. Ethnocentrism raises its ugly head once more!

As Naomi decides to return to Bethlehem she urges Ruth to stay in Moab, seemingly motivated by the desire that Ruth find another husband (Ruth 1:9). However, her words betray that her main concern and her sense of calamity attach to the fact that she herself has no prospect of husband or sons (Ruth 1:11-12). That is, she is without security and she indicates that God has caused her calamity (Ruth 1:13). But why? She does not say, but we can tease out an answer both from what she does and does not say. If she, like most Israelites, viewed Moab and Moabites with suspicion then she probably attributes her calamity at the hand of God to the fact that she has sojourned in ‘Moab’ and her sons had married ‘Moabite’ women.

The parallels between this narrative and the Judah-Tamar narrative (Genesis 38) are instructive here, and can illuminate our text. Both Ruth and Tamar lose their husbands and then attempt to produce a male heir to continue the dead husband’s name. Both are young and helpless widows. Both are foreigners. Both fulfil their lack of a husband/son by resorting to charade and seduction. Both are successful in their venture. Finally, both are involved with a father figure (Brenner, 1985: 106). Ruth, like Tamar, breaks social mores and steps outside social boundaries in order to redeem a situation that seemed intolerable to her.

In Tamar’s case, Judah suspected that she was the cause of the death of his two sons. Naomi almost certainly suspects that her family’s association with Moabite women lies behind the deaths of her husband and sons. As Judah tried to persuade Tamar to return to her ‘father’s house, so Naomi urges Ruth to ‘go back/return’ (Ruth 1:8,11,12,16) to her ‘mother’s house’. This sheds light on Naomi’s motives and overturns the popular altruistic interpretation. Seen in this light, Naomi’s parting blessing for Ruth reveals a desire to distance herself from the Moabites under the cloak of polite rhetoric (Fewell & Gunn, 1990: 74). To Naomi, Ruth is the cause of God’s frown upon her and a potential source of embarrassment in Bethlehem.

Ruth’s marginalisation is accentuated by Naomi’s declaration that having left Bethlehem ‘full, Yahweh has brought me back empty’ (Ruth 1:21). The implication, of course, is that Ruth is nothing. Naomi is strangely silent about her faithful daughter-in-law, and “speaks as though the loyal companion at her side were invisible” (Fewell & Gunn, p.75). Ruth, then, becomes the backgrounded other vis-à-vis Naomi. Her vulnerability and oppression are further highlighted by the dangers she faces while gleaning in the harvest field. These involve **sexual harassment**, something which is acknowledged by both Boaz (2:8-9) and Naomi (2:22). Interestingly, Naomi mentions this only after she has found Ruth to be a potential breadwinner! Her initial silence about this when Ruth leaves to glean (2:2) is revealing.

Also, Naomi's detachment from Ruth suddenly ends when she sees "how much she [Ruth] had gleaned" in Boaz's field (2:18). Instantly she begins to speak in inclusive terms, declaring that Boaz is "related to us, and is our next-of-kin" (2:21 NEB). Naomi, then, is using Ruth for her own self-centred ends - the recreation of Elimelech's house. That is, her own personal security. Moreover, she instructs Ruth to make herself attractive (2:3) and go at night to see if she can seduce Boaz (2:4). What is Naomi's goal? To ensnare Boaz. "Sexual intercourse, if not pregnancy, will enforce either marriage or a payoff" (Fewell & Gunn, p.78) and that is exactly what Naomi wants, since Boaz is a relative of the late Elimelech and a 'well-to-do man' (2:1 NEB).

Boaz, on the other hand, obviously desires Ruth (3:10) but knows that union with a Moabite woman is risky for a man of his reputation. Redemption of Naomi's land - in terms of levirate marriage - is the cloak that he uses to get what he really wants, Ruth, while preserving his reputation. His claim to honour the dead through his actions is a pretext which enables him both to look good before society and to have Ruth. When speaking to the male elders in chapter 4, it is interesting that Boaz never mentions the two destitute women, rather, he appeals to the male interests of **name and lineage**. Ruth becomes a means to achieve a male purpose. Incidentally, economic security within the structure of levirate marriage conceals the basic condition of this system, namely, the **economic dependence of women**. This, of course, is another word for patriarchy, and "it creates the conditions for the story. It is why both Ruth and Naomi find themselves destitute in the first place" (Fewell & Gunn, p.12). Viewed in this light, redemption in this narrative is something which reinforces the economic dependency of women; and faithfulness is loyalty in the service of patriarchy.

Naomi and Boaz, then, fall short of the altruism and faithfulness that are normally attached to them in popular readings. Naomi is the woman of convention, and Boaz the man of reputation. Both are under the thrall of patriarchy and willing to subordinate all to its rule. Boaz is trapped in terms of privilege and Naomi in terms of dependence. Ruth dances between these two characters, sometimes in terms of 'initiative' and sometimes in terms of 'subjection'. Her basic response to Naomi is loving-friendship, and for the sake of that friendship she allows herself to be manipulated by Naomi. Ruth's basic response to Boaz is that of servility - he addresses her as "my daughter" (2:8) and she refers to herself as his "maidservant" (2:13 NASB), indicating her lower-class status. Ruth ensures that Naomi is included in Boaz's generosity, though in his interest for Ruth he makes no mention of Naomi. As Fewell & Gunn state, Ruth "mediates between the two older people: she plays 'wife' to Boaz, 'husband' to Naomi" (p.103).

In the end, what we see in Ruth is a foreign woman who practices 'faithfulness' (hesed); the Moabite woman who shows Israel the way of faithfulness that leads to redemption. Nevertheless, from a feminist literary perspective, the narrative should not be read as just a story about a woman's tenacity, loyalty, and courage, but also as

“a text which invites the reader to address a challenge to the presuppositions of the patriarchal culture which sees the promise of sons as the successful narrative closure, but nevertheless grounds the narrative in woman’s experience” (Thisleton, 1992, p.434). To reiterate, Ruth, like the other main characters in this story, is a complex character with mixed motives. She both acts and is acted upon in the context of the narrative. She makes courageous decisions yet she shows herself, at every turn, to be a product of the patriarchal world which she inhabits. Her decisions and movements all take place in a socio-religious context where the honour and will of **men** is central, and this results in a deeply ambiguous text with deeply ambiguous characters. Ruth is such a character. To try to reclaim her for modern feminist ends, biblical or otherwise, is not only anachronistic but misleading.

Notes

1 Saunders’ study does not deal with women from the Old Testament period, but only with women in the first two centuries of the Common Era. It may be thought, then, that our employment of this quote is anachronistic since Ruth is an Old Testament figure. It need only be said that the reference from Saunders accurately reflects what was commonplace for women in both the first two centuries of Christianity and in the Old Testament period.

2 The importance of Israelite ethnic exclusivism in the context of Hebrew religion is such a prominent theme in the Old Testament that it scarcely requires elaboration (see, for example, Deuteronomy 7).

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