

RELIGION AND FANTASY IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

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I want to examine the imagined world of the Book of Ruth as a people's religious literature. In the end, Ruth has faithfully reflected back to the readers and the communities the image of their own features. Ruth's imaginative qualities are well established.

The literary critic Mary Ellen Chase wrote:

The Book of Ruth is one of most graceful and charming of short stories not only in ancient literature but of any time and in any language.¹

The plot moves with deft economy of time and setting. Naomi's sojourn in the land of Moab is starkly described: a woman and two daughters-in-law in a foreign land (1.1-5). In her celebrated declaration Ruth chooses Naomi, Naomi's land, her people, her God (1.16-17). Arriving in Bethlehem, Ruth encounters Boaz, her deceased husband's kinsman (2.1-17) and Boaz' advantageous patronage of Ruth his distant kinswoman continues throughout all the harvest days (2.18-23). Naomi proposes an audacious plan for Ruth's security (3.1-15). On the threshing floor in the middle of the night, Boaz accepts Ruth's marriage proposal. Next day, in the city gate, Boaz acquires Ruth as his wife, Naomi ensures the continuation of her family, and her plot of land acquires an owner who will keep it in the family (4.9-10).

As regards skill in character-portrayal, Edward E. Campbell, Jr. writes:

The speeches fit the characters who speak them ... Ruth marvels. For Naomi, there is marvelling as well, but always under the shadow of the mood established for her in the first chapter, the mood of complaint. Ruth is pleased by every good thing done for her; Naomi moves as though she were

gradually realising that things are not as bitter as she had thought. As for Boaz, he moves through the story like the patriarch he is, warmly greeting his workers in the field, ceremoniously blessing Ruth in the name of Yahweh, recovering his composure on the threshing-floor so as again to bless Ruth, conducting the hearing at the gate methodically, but with alacrity ... The story-teller's words about all three bring out the differences in their personalities.²

The book's imagined world has the charm of the people's idealised past. "In the days when judges ruled" [Heb. *bîm ê sepot hassopetîm* (1.1)]. The narrator helps the audience feel at ease in this world:

Now this was the custom in former times in Israel concerning redeeming and exchanging: to confirm a transaction, the one drew off his sandal and gave it to the other, and this was the manner of attesting in Israel. (4.7)

A chorus of townswomen greet Naomi on her return to Bethlehem (1.19) and finally in the gate a men's chorus invokes blessings on Ruth (4.11-12), and on the birth of a child, a chorus of women chant Naomi's blessings (4.14-15).

In Ruth, the world is peopled with noble characters. Foreigners seem accepted. The harmony between character and setting seems complete.³ The book indeed evokes an idealised and unrepeatable past. Can this imagined world be described as fantasy?

The question entails at once the relation of the text to its reader or audience. I will understand fantasy as the unhelpful shadow of the creative imagination.

In the ... writings of Geoffrey Chaucer [fantasy] means a mental image of something that does not exist. It can be a delightful image, but the tone usually implies hallucination, delusion and the unstable wanderings of wishful thinking.⁴

In fantasy, the imagined world's relation to the real is a delusion. However the line between fantasy and the creative imagination may be finely drawn. Even a believer may consider the imagined

world of the Hebrew prophets irrational and hard to enter into.

For behold the Lord will come in fire, and his chariots like the stormwind, to render his anger in fury, and to rebuke with flames of fire. (Is. 66.15)

However unlike such prophetic or apocalyptic images, the world of the Book of Ruth is firmly anchored in the soil of Bethlehem. Neither can the genre of Ruth be fairly described as historical illusion. In the book the social customs are skilfully described as credible, but of an age that is past.⁵

What then of the relation of this world to the real? I will mention two attempts to discover this.

The imagined world of Ruth was understood to be in conflict with the real. The story of the Moabitess who became King David's great-grandmother would be an expression of religious and social liberalism in a closed, even xenophobic society.⁶

On the other hand, Ruth's imagined world is said to have an integrative function in relation to the real. As even a cursory perusal suggests, in Ruth, the family story is closely linked to the family land. Ruth's story of the ancestors, then, would legitimise the property-claims of returning exiles asserting a Judahite family descent.⁷

These two examples, drawn from the multiple ways in which the book can be considered to relate to past society, suffice to make the point that the quest for the real world of the book at its inception falters through lack of evidence as to how the book was at first understood. In the criticism of Hebrew literature, the metaphor of "reflection" oversimplifies the relation between the imagined and the real.⁸

This relationship is better documented in the history of the book's subsequent interpretation. The first translations of the Book of Ruth open up avenues to understanding the translator's times. Here the question of Ruth and fantasy can once again be raised.

Occasionally the distance between the book's imagined world and the reality of the community has appeared so great that descriptions of the real have appeared in the translation of the text. The Hebrew text reads:

But Ruth said: "Entreat me not to leave you or to return from following after you, for where you go I will go, and where you

lodge I will lodge; your people will be my people, and your God my God. Where you die I will die and there I will be buried". (1.16-17)

Ruth's celebrated declaration qualifies her to be raised in the story to the status of Rachel and Leah "who together built up the house of Israel" (4.11). However the Aramaic translator closed the distance between the text and the translator's world. In the targum, the cited passage reads:

Ruth said: "Do not urge me to leave you, to go back from after you, for I desire to be a proselyte".

Naomi said, "We are commanded to keep the Sabbaths and holy days so as not to walk beyond two thousand cubits".

Ruth said, "Wherever you go I will go".

Naomi said, "We are commanded not to lodge together with gentiles".

Ruth said, "Wherever you lodge I will lodge".

Naomi said, "We are commanded to keep six hundred and thirteen precepts".

Ruth said, "What your people keep I will keep, as if they were my people from before this.

Naomi said, "We have four death penalties for the guilty, stoning with stones, burning with fire, executing by the sword and crucifixion".

Ruth said, "By whatever means you die, I will die".

Naomi said, "We have a cemetery".

Ruth said, "And there I will be buried".⁹

For this translator and this community, the book's imagined world was not religious enough to be credible. Perhaps the book's imagined world was understood as fanciful.

A similar deficit in the religious imagination can perhaps explain a feature of the Syriac translation.

The original text reads, "But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law: "Go, return each of you to her mother's house" (1.8).

The "mother's house" metaphor for the family is not accepted by the Syriac translator who wrote: "But Naomi said to her daughters-in-law, "Return, go your place and to *your people's house*".¹⁰

The pitfall besetting the translator is to construe the text's imagined world according to the translator's likeness.

I have sought to understand how the text's imagined world can be measured against the real in terms of fantasy or creative imagination. The Book of Ruth has deftly evaded attempts to use it as a window through which to contemplate the real of the past. Reconstructing the world of the text's beginnings will remain a speculative enterprise. At best we may inquire why and when in their history a people would want to construe their past in such a story form, with almost an almost playful liberty in echoing the official literature, for example, the Book of Genesis. Ruth fills an enticing gap in the official story of the tribe of Judah. As I read the book today, the story breathes pride in the ancestors, especially the mothers of the people, and expresses an enduring link between family and the family land.

The text has endured throughout the ages because the people have sensed in its imagined world an opening to the real. However that reality is re-created again and again as different communities encounter the book's imagined world. The people find themselves in relation to that world. Some have found a fantasy. Others discover themselves anew as the Israel of God.

REFERENCES

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2. Edward E. Campbell, Jr, *Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Bible, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1985) 17.
3. See Chase, 181. Ruth has a pleasing pastoral quality suggesting to some readers other ancient settings of Arcadian simplicity, drawn by Theocritus or by Virgil.
4. David Jasper, *The New Testament and the Literary Imagination* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International Inc., 1987) 84.
5. For a discussion of Ruth's social and legal world in relation to other descriptions of Israelite society, see Robert L. Hubbard, Jr, *The Book of Ruth* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1991) 48-63.
6. For a discussion of the relation of Ruth to the post-exilic historical period of the legislation of Ezra-Nehemiah on mixed marriages, see Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 35-36.
7. Sean McEvenue, "The Political Structure in Judah from Cyrus to Nehemiah," CBQ 43 (1981) 353-64. McEvenue's study suggests the crucial social and economic importance of family-identity for the returning exiles. For the social setting of the book of Genesis in similar terms, see Naomi Steinberg, *Kinship and Marriage in Genesis: A Household Economics Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 135-147.
8. For a criticism of the metaphor of "reflection" to understand the relation between literature and society, see David Jobling, "Sociological and Literary Approaches to the Bible: How Shall the Twain Meet?" JSOT 38 (1987) 85-93.
9. D.R.G. Beattie, *The Targum of Ruth. Translated with Introduction, Apparatus and Notes*. J. Stanley McIvor, *The Targum of Chronicles. Translated with Introduction, Apparatus and Notes* (The Aramaic Bible, vol. 19.; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994) 20-21.
10. *wlbyt 'nsykyn*. For a discussion of the "mother's house" image, see Carol Myers "To Her Mother's House": Considering a Counterpart to the Israelite *Bet 'ab*." D. Jobling, D. Day, P. L. Sheppard (eds.) *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on his Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim, 1991) 39-51, 304-307.