

# THE BOOK OF RUTH AND ITS PURPOSE

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The contents of the short but very beautiful book of Ruth included in the canon of the Old Testament is well known. Famine in Judah compels Elimelech, a native of Berthlehem, to leave with his wife Naomi, and two of his sons Mahlon and Chilion, for the fertile plains of the neighbouring town of Moab. Before the famine subsides, Elimelech dies at Moab. In the meantime his two sons wed Orpah and Ruth, Moabite women. Destiny, however, strikes Naomi hard for both her sons die childless on foreign land.

Naomi abandoned with the two foreign women decides, upon learning that the famine had ended in Judah, to return to her native country accompanied by her two daughters-in-law. Upon reaching the borders of Judah and considering how difficult life would be for her daughters-in-law to live in a foreign land she urges them to return to their paternal home where in the midst of fellow countrymen their life would be more easy. To influence the delicate and sensitive feelings of the childless women she portrays to them how vain it would be to accompany her to Judah, in as much as being old and no longer able to bear children which they might possibly marry. Orpah convinced by Naomi's arguments leaves in the midst of lamentations, whilst Ruth persistently attaches herself to Naomi, declaring that only death would separate them and that she was prepared to abandon her country and her God in order to live in a new country embracing the Judean religion. Thus, mother and daughter-in-law strongly attached to each other, arrive at Bethlehem during the wheat harvest. For a time the arrival of the two women in the small town of Bethlehem becomes the topic of the daily gossip, which was discussed in various ways (Ruth 1,19).

The poverty in which the once wealthy Naomi was now reduced (Ruth 1,21) compels Ruth to go into the fields to gather the ears of wheat which fell from the hands of the reapers and which according to the Israelite law were allocated by right to widows, orphans and the poor<sup>(1)</sup>. By chance Ruth enters in the fields of Boaz a relative

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1. Deut 24,19 Lev. 19,9 ff. 23,22.

of Naomi. Upon seeing Ruth, and having heard from his attendant of the loyalty and devotion towards her husband's home, he affords her every facility for the gathering of stalks as a reward for her devotion to Naomi (Ruth 2,12). Having thus gathered a great quantity of wheat from the fields, Ruth returns to Naomi and tells her all about Boaz's favours towards her. Quite experienced Naomi soon realises that Boaz's favours might turn into something more substantial and immediately conceives a plan that might bring to a good end her purpose which is to marry Boaz to Ruth.

She bases her project on the Israelite law which refers to leviratical marriages, more so, as Boaz is one of the closest relatives compelled to marry Ruth. Naomi does not, however, reveal her ultimate plans to Ruth, but only insinuates it to her and advises her to continue going to Boaz's fields in order that she may gain time for her plan to mature and for Boaz's disposition to be properly adapted.

After the harvest Naomi presents Ruth with an entire well arranged plan as a very experienced woman would do in such a case. She advises her, after taking a bath and dressing appropriately, to go in the night to the threshing floor and lie down next to Boaz, who was sleeping in the open air. The plan is not developed into its full details but it is left to Ruth, entirely, to use her wits, skill and ability for the rest.

Ruth faithfully follows her mother-in-law's instructions. Boaz, when the time for him to lie down comes, notices the presence of Ruth and upon enquiring about the reasons of her presence there, she reminds him that as a close relation of hers he was compelled to abide by the Israelite law and thereby marry the childless widow. He readily declares that he is willing to perform his duty, provided another close relative of hers forfeits his claim to this right. This being accomplished Boaz marries Ruth from whom Obed is born and of whom Jesse the father of David is born (Ruth 4,17); after this verse two more, the last ones, follow (4,18-19) which contain the genealogy from Pharez to David, and the whole narrative ends at this point.

## II

Even though the entire story about Ruth is presented, in its points, clearly and well arranged, the book of Ruth contains a number of problems to solve which have been dealt with by a lot of experts of past and present times. One of the most important subjects arising is to determine the purpose for which the story has been written. Ruth's story being one of the most beautiful and artfully written narrative

proof of Israelite literature develops in such a manner that the author does not easily betray the purpose for which he has compiled it. This is the reason why since the ancient and up to modern times different opinions have been formulated which have tried to explain the purpose of this story but no unanimous conclusion has yet been reached by the researchers, which would in some way or an other facilitate to solve another also important problem, that of determining the date the book has been written. After the quotation and the examination of all the important formulated opinions we shall, also, venture to formulate some opinion of our own on this controversy.

1. The last quotations which are found at the end of the whole narrative in verse 4,17 which refers to the genealogical record of David (Ruth-Obed-Jesse-David) and which was later extended according to many interpreters by verses 4, 18-19<sup>(1)</sup>, already caused in early Christian times the version that the purpose of this story was to reveal the descent of David. Since the Messiah has descended from David the ultimate purpose then which appears is to define the origin of the Messiah in whom, by his descent from the house of Judah, the old prophecy of Jacob concerning the Royal scepter of the tribe of Judah is fulfilled (Gen. 49, 8 ff). In early times, already this opinion was represented by Theodoritus of Cyrus<sup>(2)</sup> and among the modern writers several and especially Roman Catholics and Orthodox have agreed to this opinion<sup>(3)</sup>.

This opinion, however, does not seem to stand. Besides the fact that verse 4, 17, containing the genealogy of David, is not according to some experts equitted from every doubt<sup>(4)</sup>, it would have been suf-

1. Cp. par example, A. Bertholet, Die fünf Megilloth. Tübingen 1898. S. R. Driver, Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament 1913. H. Gressmann, Die Anfänge Israels<sup>2</sup> Göttingen 1922. H. Gunkel, Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart<sup>3</sup> Tübingen 1930 (word Ruth). O. Eissfeldt, Einleitung in das Alte Testament. Tübingen 1934. R. Pfeiffer, Introduction to the Old Testament<sup>5</sup> New York 1941. Ad. Lods, Histoire de la littérature Hébraïque et Juive. Paris 1950.

2. Migne P. G. 80,520 «Πρώτον μὲν διὰ τὸν Δεσπότην Χριστόν, ἐξ αὐτῆς γὰρ κατὰ σάρκα βεβλάστηκε».

3. Cp. C. F. Keil, Lehrbuch der historisch-kritischen Einleitung in die Schriften des Alten Testaments<sup>9</sup> 1873. Fr. Kaulen - G. Hoberg, Einleitung in die Heilige Schrift. Freiburg 1913. L. Fillion, Dictionnaire de la Bible (word: Ruth). Alf. Schulz, Das Buch der Richter und das Buch Ruth. Bonn 1936. B. Antoniadis, Εἰσαγωγή εἰς τὴν Παλαιὰν Διαθήκην. Ἀθήναι 1936. P. Bratsiotis, Εἰσαγωγή εἰς τὴν Παλαιὰν Διαθήκην. Ἀθήναι 1937.

4. Cp. H. Gunkel *ibid.* O. Eissfeldt *ibid.* M. Haller, Die fünf Megilloth. Tübingen 1940. Ad. Lods *ibid.*

ficient, for the sake of meeting success, to record the genealogical list of David such as that which frequently appears in the Old Testament, without it being necessary to work up an entire and detailed story in order to end it up with just a small genealogical list. In addition it may be noted that verse 4,17 with the genealogical list is in essence a praise to Ruth and not to David. But the above opinion entirely passes over the fact that the prevailing figure of the whole narrative is Ruth and not David. The admittance of this opinion would mean an inversion of the subjects in this narrative so that, what is accentuated and emphasized, would then be shifted from the main body to the margin and the praise to Ruth which governs all along the narrative and her attachment to her mother-in-law which is so accentuated remain according to the above version completely uninterpreted. It should finally be noted that the association of the Messiah with David is correct, as proved by other verses, but our story does not in any way refer to this.

2. These shortcomings, however, are attempted to be filled up by another version whereby, the aim of the book is to exhibit Ruth's piety and to teach how boundfully God rewards piety, even, when it is revealed by a non Israelite woman whom God destines to become David's grandmother and the ancestor of the Messiah. Theodoritus of Cyrus already accepts this as a secondary purpose of the book, and notes: «Ἴδοι δ' ἄν τις καὶ τὴν Ῥοῦθ διὰ τὴν εὐσέβειαν, τοὺς μὲν γεγεννηκότας καταλιπούσαν, ἀκολουθήσασαν δὲ τῇ πενθερᾷ... ἔλαβε γὰρ τὸν μισθὸν πλήρη παρὰ Κυρίου, πρόγονος γενομένη τῆς τῶν Ἑθνῶν εὐλογίας»<sup>(1)</sup>. This opinion is also held by a number of modern researchers<sup>(2)</sup>. But it has already been observed by others that this version cannot be adopted<sup>(3)</sup>. There is nowhere in the narrative where the piety of Ruth is specially exalted so that it could constitute the main sense of the entire story of the book. ~~The story emphasizes Ruth's devotion and attachment to her husband's house. The classical phrase «Your people shall be my people, and your God my God» (1,16) does in fact present Ruth as being ready to adopt the Israelite religion, but this occurs in order to show that nothing not even the difference of religion could separate Ruth from her mother-in-law. If one were to notice the text of the narrative, one would no doubt see how rarely the name of God is made use of, and if one were to compare the plot of Ruth's story~~

1. Migne P. G. 80, 520.

2. Cp. L. Fillion *ibid.* O. Eissfeldt *ibid.* P. Bratsiotis *ibid.*

3. Cp. H. Gunkel *ibid.* Ar. Weiser, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament.* Stuttgart 1939. Ad. Lods *ibid.*

with those of other stories of the Old Testament, one would soon spot in contrast how much God is kept far from the whole development of events which are plotted in such a way that the Religious character is either absent or is very weak. Such an economy and plot material, Ruth's piety, cannot be considered to be the core and the heart of the whole story.

3. A more prevalent theory than the above is the one that many early and modern scholars have accepted. We know from the Book of Ezra (9,1 ff) and of Nehemiah (15,1 ff) that both the men strongly fought against a marriage between Israelites and persons of another faith, and demanded the dissolution of such contracted marriages. Such marriages, for historical reasons, were frequent during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (5th century B. C.).

The book of Ruth not only presents the marriage of people of another faith as non prohibited but, all on the contrary, as a blessed one, by the fact that Ruth, an alien, was awarded the honour of becoming David's grandmother, by many has been interpreted as a protest against the measures taken by Ezra and Nehemiah by the party which was opposed to their ideas. They had more broadminded views and underestimated the risks that such marriages could bring upon their national existence. The intermingled marriages were therefore encouraged and the conversion of non Israelites to the Israelite religion was not prevented. Upon this point the story of Ruth is very much alike, in spirit, to the book of Jona, for those who accepted the above views<sup>(1)</sup>. In spite of the plausible appearance, such version, as this, does not also seem to be correct, as it is pointed out by a number of researchers, who have violently opposed it<sup>(2)</sup>. A book which was written in those troubled times of Ezra and Nehemiah, as a protest against those men, could not possess that beautiful atmosphere and those idyllic surroundings which, so skilfully, the author of Ruth creates, nor could it be possible to possess an unforced, serene and

1. Cp. Alf. Bertholet, *ibid.* W. Nowack, Richter, *Ruth und Bücher Samuelis*. 1902. C. Steuernagel, *Lehrbuch der Einleitung in das A. T.* Tübingen 1912. Kautzsch - Bertholet, *Die Heilige Schrift des A. T.* Tübingen 1923. J. Hengel, *Die althebräische Literatur*. Potsdam 1930. E. Mc. Fadyen, *Introduction to the O. T.* London 1932. Ar. Weiser *ibid.* Ad. Lods *ibid.*

2. Cp. H. Gunkel, *Reden und Aufsätze* Göttingen 1913. E. Sellin, *Einleitung in das A. T.* Leipzig 1925. Alf. Schulz *ibid.* J. Goettsberger, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*. Freiburg 1928. O. Eissfeldt *ibid.* M. Haller *ibid.* R. Pfeiffer *ibid.* H. H. Rowley, *The Marriage of Ruth* (in his work: *The Servant of the Lord and other Essays on the Old Testament*. London 1952).

calm tone of style. In the book one cannot trace the slightest sort of controversy, even though the author was given so many opportunities in the course of his narrative, to fight against these measures. The usual argument, that an able propagator does not attack ideas directly but simply presents his own points of view, may in rare cases be applied, but it is difficult in this case to explain why even the slightest mention to the measures of Ezra has not been made. When comparing the true character of controversy in the book of Jona it shows how the Jew conducts, in writing, his spiritual struggles by beautifully counterviewing both the party oppositions. In the book of Ruth the opponent parties are entirely absent and thereby no opposition is apparent. It is only from the book of Ezra and Nehemiah that we have arbitrarily transposed and inserted it into the book of Ruth.

But, as it is evident, the book of Ruth does not fight against the measures of Ezra, at the same time it does not either advocate in favour of intermingled marriages with aliens. We should have expected such a defence if this book was actually the product of that Age. The author just only presumes of such marriages being permissible.

4. We also find a mistake in the assumption that the purpose of this book is to emphasize the leviratical law about marriage, at which point the narrative is concluded (<sup>1</sup>). But as we know, the institution ruling such weddings was in force up to the times of the New Testament, so that to write such a book with this definite purpose, before the New Testament period, is inconceivable. The author does not defend the institution but takes this for granted, as being an ancient and already existing fact during his days. As a matter of fact, in the book of Ruth the leviratical wedding is quite a subordinate element, useful only to the plot or the narrative, without it actually being the heart of the whole plot, hence the rejection of the above assumption by many modern researchers (<sup>2</sup>).

5. Because of Ruth's heathen origin, who is the principle figure in the story, it became the cause to believe that the purpose of the book is to teach that even a heathen could be invited to take part in the Religion of Israel and to become a member of the Israelite community (<sup>3</sup>). Thereby according to this conception, the book of Ruth is

1. Cp., par exemple, O. Eissfeldt *ibid.*

2. Cp. C. Steuernagel, *ibid.* H. Gunkel, *Reden und Aufsätze*. Göttingen 1913. J. Goettsberger *ibid.* J. E. Mc. Fadyen *ibid.* M. Haller *ibid.* R. Pfeiffer *ibid.*

3. Cp. E. Sellin *ibid.* Al. Vincent, *Le livre des Juges, le livre de Ruth*. Paris 1952.

a parallel to the book of Jonah, which more or less aims to a similar purpose and to certain chapters of the book of Isaiah and Job which sprang from the circle of those who stressed upon the missionary duty of Israel over the nations.

It is certain that the author of Ruth's book does admit, without any hesitation and without any further questioning, the penetration of heathens into the religious community of the Israelites. The author of Ruth agrees on this point with Isaiah and the author of the books of Job and Jonah. But if one were to analyse the narrative, one would obviously see that this, undoubtedly, important point is not made the essence of the entire narrative, so that if it were to be removed the whole story would be destroyed, as this in fact happens to be the case with the book of Jonah. Even though it is positively stated that Ruth was a Moabite, the fact that she was converted into the Israelite Religion is not mentioned. This possibility is only expressed. This point, however, should have been of a paramount importance if the book in fact aimed at the aforesaid assumed purpose (1).

6. But in recent years some also have sought to understand the book of Ruth through the prism of myth taking this as a distorted form of a narrative such as Midrash, a supposed ancient myth, which has to do with the worship of TAMMUZ - Adonis and Astarte or of Issis and Ossiris, in the sense of the dying and returning to life God of fertility (2). This assumption quite justly has been rejected (3). There is no mythological element that can possibly be traced in the story in question. Nothing therein is fantastic or supernatural or impossible to be accomplished, as a matter of fact, of all the Old Testament narratives this one is distinguished by its naturalistic description of related events, which cannot exist in narratives taken from a transformed legendary creation and which in many ways reveals Mythicism and in many ways slips out from every real element. There is, no doubt, coherence and sequence of events in the narrative of the book. Such a constituted diagram, such a mastery and artful handling of the plot could not possibly be observed in a narrative that depended on a myth already existing and that originated from a refashioned subject, where the remodeller depended on a prescribed material and on an already planned out background. It is most unsatisfactory to

1. Cp. R. Pfeiffer *ibid.*

2. W. E. Staples, *The Book of Ruth* (*American Journal of Semitic languages and literature* 1937 p. 145 ff.). M. Haller *ibid.* Cp. Alf. Jeruias, *Das Alte Testament im Lichte des alten Orients.*<sup>4</sup> Leipzig 1930.

3. Cp. Ar. Weiser *ibid.* R. Pfeiffer *ibid.*

attempt to prove that the names mentioned in the narrative are of a Mythical origin. These names contain nothing of a Mythical nature, or any element that may be attributed to the origine of the book of Ruth. The worship of the aforesaid Gods, ceremonial practices, symbolic performances are entirely missing from this narrative, though they should have appeared in abundance if the story derived from the field of worship of other Gods.

7. The improbability of these assumptions, which have been briefly commented, have led a number of modern exegetists to maintain that the story of Ruth does not aim to any definite purpose and is therefore vain to try to find any scope. The author of this story according to this version is endowed with an unusual literary talent and ability and aims at producing a pleasing and satisfying feeling to his readers, by the gradual unfolding by stages of the different phases of his story. In other words, the book of Ruth is a literary creation written by an excellent writer, who derived utmost pleasure in creating and shaping out his narrative and it is this pleasure that he tries to convey to his readers (<sup>1</sup>). This does not seem very probable, for it is difficult for us to assume that the author, whose work was included in the canon of the Old Testament, were just written for the sake of Art, without a deeper and definite purpose attached to it. It is most impossible for even a writer who writes just for the sake of art, not to have in mind one or more purposes upon which he would formulate the material and sketch out the diagram, in order to set up his work. It is also impossible for anybody to imagine a book without a purpose. It is difficult for a literary author to conceive the idea of writing without a definite aim. It is therefore most certainly true that the literary style of this narrative is excellent and the reader no doubt feels a deep pleasure and admiration for its artistic beauty, but even this does not imply that the narrative aims to no purpose.

### III

If we are to analyse with care the narrative and set aside the side slips of the text, we shall see that the outstanding point in the entire narrative, right from the beginning to the very end, is to accentuate the attachment of Ruth to the house of Naomi which in the end is re-erected. This devotion which is so often emphasised

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1. H. Gressmann, *Die Anfänge Israels*<sup>2</sup>. Göttingen 1922 p. 279 Cp. J. Goettsberger *ibid* P. Pfeiffer *ibid*. H. Gunkel, *Reden und Aufsätze*. Göttingen 1913 p. 89.



meets its manifestation in the words of Ruth «Your people are my people and your God is my God» and it is exhibited by the comparison to Orpha's conduct which constitutes the stamen round about which the entire plot of the narrative is woven. It is this devotion and the admirable feeling for unity of family bonds and sequence, that Ruth is rewarded by Boaz, on her visit to the fields, and at last by God. Ruth's devotion to her husband's house constitutes the body of the whole story. Quite rightly H. Gunkel has stressed this point of the narrative (1). If this point were to be left out the entire narrative should have been destroyed and the plot could not have been achieved. The author has made this point to become the very heart of the whole story. The remaining elements are of a secondary and auxiliary importance, working towards that central point, by promoting and developing it. It hence derives that it is at the central point and not at the sidestrips that one should look out for the purpose of writing the book. Any enquiry over the purpose, away from this basic point, is undoubtedly a mistake. Subsequently the author presents Ruth as a model of devotion and of the idea of a family sequence and stresses the point on how agreeable it is to God, that the union of the family bonds between the members be preserved, even though conditions may have been tragic as they were in the case of Ruth's story. *Therefore this stress on the family unity such as was exhibited by Ruth's example, I think constitutes the purpose of the whole story.*

The author undoubtedly must have had a right cause for emphasizing this unity. We are all well aware, that since the most ancient times, Israel considered ideal for a home to remain unbroken, for brothers and close relatives living together, in order that, family property should not be allowed to be squandered away (2). But a time came when this cohesion was weakened and the home began to dismember because of a general downfall and of society breaking up, long before the Hellenistic times, during which accorping to certain exegetics, hellenic mode of life, foreign customs, penetrated in Judaic circles and caused a shock within the various expressions of both spiritual and social life of Judaics, not excluding even their family union. Already Isaiah (8th century B. C.) notes (3.5) «The child shall behave himself proudly against the ancient and the base against the honourable». Prophet Micah somewhat younger to

1. Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart.<sup>2</sup> Tübingen 1930 (word : Ruth.)

2. Gen. 13, 6. 37, 6. 38, 7 ff.

Isaiah, gives a more vivid picture of the family break up, he says (7,6) :

«For the son dishonoureth the father  
the daughter riseth up against her mother,  
daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law :  
a man's enemies are the men of this own house».

A century later Jeremiah gives us the following picture (9,3,4) :

«Have ye heed everyone of his neighbour  
and trust ye not in any brother  
for every brother will utterly supplant  
ant every neighbour will walk with slanders».

Such was the dissolution of family links that prophet Malachi (5th century B.C.) looks anxiously forward to a reunion of family bonds and to the reconciliation of fathers to their sons, by the anticipated appearance of prophet Elija who was expected to come «and he shall turn the heart of the fathers to the children ant the heart of the children to their fathers» (Mal. 3,24).

It is evident, that the prophets viewd family conditions with an eye of bitter distrust, as they had kept in sight an ideal picture of that old harmonious cohabitation when brothers and close relatives dwelled under the same roof and by their sermons they did nothing more than ask for the return to that old model of life. It is to the same purpose and derives from the same cause that Psalm 133 refers. «Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity». This psalm has the same object in view, that, of trying to strengthen that old beautiful tradition of brothers living in the same old home. All the above mentioned quotations, including Ruth's story, have nothing more in view than of that period of broken up homes and all pursue the same purpose, the rehabilitation of former family bonds. The only difference is that the prophets, in their usual manner, condemn and fight against family dismenberments. Psalm 133 praises in verse the good that derives from a family cohabitation, whilst the author of Ruth bases his whole narrative on this central point and sets Ruth as an example to follow. If a heathen woman exhibits such a strong affection for her husband's house and such a vivid feeling for her family bonds how much more should Israelites go in a similar case. If the above definition of purpose for the compiling of this story is correct it may be then possible to proceed further with the problem of determining the time the book of Ruth was written. This, however, does not constitute an object for present comments.