

## Bringing “Fullness” to Naomi: Centripetal Nationalism in The Book of Ruth

**Benjamin Mangrum**

Baylor University  
Waco, TX  
Benjamin\_Mangrum@baylor.edu

---

### Abstract

Many interpretations of the Book of Ruth read the relationship between the Judean woman and her Moabitess daughter-in-law as the expression of an inclusive school of thought within Israel's attempts to define itself. The foreigner, in this view, becomes accepted into the covenant people of God, demonstrating Israel's multi-ethnic horizons and Yahweh's universal concern. Yet this essay uncovers the presence of an ideological subtext undergirding the narrative: the nations, represented in the character of Ruth, are the means for Judah's exaltation—an ideological position that I expose through a literary reading of the narrative. This reading has concomitant implications for the book's *Sitz-im-Leben*. This article focuses primarily on two episodes in the narrative, 3:14-18 and 4:13-17, exposing the underlying centripetal ideology that anticipates the restoration and exaltation of Judah through the gifts (or “fullness”) brought in by the nations.

### Keywords

nationalism, ideology, centripetal, foreigner, Jerusalem, nations, post-exilic

The Book of Ruth engages a range of social and theological issues through creative and subtle literary devices. This fact has led many commentators to approach the story of Ruth and Naomi as a didactic narrative,<sup>1</sup> with a purported “message” behind the book that enjoys relative consensus: the foreigner (i.e., Ruth), in this customary view, becomes accepted into the covenant people of God, demonstrating Israel's multi-ethnic horizons and

---

<sup>1</sup> Edward F. Campbell, Jr., *Ruth* (AB 7; Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), considers Ruth a *Novelle* or a historical short story. A similarly didactic approach is taken in Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999), 9-16.

Yahweh's universal concern.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly, the narrative of Naomi and her Moabitess daughter-in-law illustrates such an inclusive vision, but this essay focuses on the presence of a particular subtext and its appearance in literary devices that reveal an alternative and more ideological "message" propagated through the didactic narrative.<sup>3</sup> This reading therefore problematizes interpretations that view the Book of Ruth *solely* as a statement of inclusivity by exposing an ideological subtext that the nations, for the author, are the means for Judah's exaltation. One consequence of my argument is that a literary reading suggests that the narrative's *Sitz-im-Leben* was an early, post-exilic Judean community concerned with identity crises.<sup>4</sup> Although there is no consensus that a post-exilic audience is

<sup>2</sup> See Michael S. Moore, *Ruth* (New International Biblical Commentary; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2000) 300-06.

<sup>3</sup> I use "ideological" throughout as an indication of the concerns and agendas of one group or school of thought over against another; I am not making a qualitative judgment through this term. Furthermore, I recognize that many Marxist theorists (e.g., Louis Althusser) view every perspective as "ideology." I do not necessarily have this semantic nuance in mind, although certainly the power politics involved between groups distinguishes mere "opinion" from "ideology" as it appears in art, sacred texts, etc.

<sup>4</sup> The diverse methods used to provide a date of composition typically revolve around the internal reference in 1:1, a variety of linguistic problems (archaisms, Aramaisms, etc.), and the ways in which the book purportedly supports the lineage of King David. Although internal evidence may be appropriated for a variety of periods, earlier dates (i.e., eighth century BCE) must account for a significant time-lapse between the setting and the final state of composition, although neglecting to distinguish between the time of Josiah (640-609 BCE) or the composition of Ezra-Nehemiah (464-358 BCE). I follow a post-exilic date of composition, largely on the basis of my literary reading, as I will argue at the end of this article. For textual and linguistic arguments, see (earlier dating): Campbell, *Ruth*, 23-28; R.L. Hubbard, Jr., *The Book of Ruth* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 23-35. (Later dating): F.W. Bush, *Ruth, Esther* (WBC 9; Dallas: Word, 1996) 18-35. Also, Johanna W.H. van Wijk-Bos, *Ruth and Esther: Women in Alien Lands* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001) 11-13, provides a brief survey of the interpretive ramifications of the three common dates for the book (during the reign of Solomon, immediately before or after Babylon, or as a direct response to Ezra-Nehemiah). In the terms of Wijk-Bos's schema, I assume a post-exilic *Sitz-im-Leben* dealing with the issues of identity and exclusivity apparent in the time of Ezra-Nehemiah's situation (although Ruth is earlier than those books' composition). Regardless, as Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translators' Handbook on The Book of Ruth* 2nd ed. (New York: UBS, 1992) 1, observe, despite the paucity of information for answering the date-authorship question within the text itself, 1:1 and 4:7 indicate unequivocally that the retelling takes place centuries later than the time of the action.

envisioned in Ruth—and, consequently, a contemporary final author/redactor—many elements within the narrative make the *best* sense in this light. Specifically, seen most clearly in 3:14-18 and 4:13-17, Ruth and Naomi function as literary types that support a centripetal ideology of the restoration and exaltation of Judah through the gifts (or “fullness”) brought in by the nations.

In order to perceive the thrust of these passages and their participation in the agenda of the narrative, one must view not only the texts in chapters three and four but also the story itself as set within a broader context. The Book of Ruth is itself a part of the collection within the Jewish canon known as the Scrolls, or *megillot*, which share some degree of association with various Jewish festivals.<sup>5</sup> The author’s imagery often recalls or alludes to the harvest and the Festival of Pentecost—or, the festival of Weeks (Shavuoth) that occurs fifty days after the second day of Passover—such that the original Jewish readers would have in mind the emotions and meanings of this feast. The original celebration of the Festival of Weeks was the consummation of the harvest. This feast later became more commonly associated in Judaism with the giving of the Law, but in both cases the idea of “the harvest of something with great value” remains the subtext of the festival (c.f., Tob 2:1; 2 Macc 12:31-32).<sup>6</sup> The “harvest” theme carries significant import in correctly interpreting the characters of both Ruth and Naomi, but we will explore this connection more thoroughly after the literary context of the narrative is established.

### **Ruth and the Harvest: Finding Context for 3:14-18 and 4:13-17**

#### *Centripetal Ideology*

In addition to the setting of the Festival of Weeks and the harvest, a post-exilic audience would also hear any narrative featuring a relationship between a Judean and an outsider as speaking directly to one of the most controversial contemporary issues: the presence of the foreigner in the

<sup>5</sup> Bruce C. Birch, Walter Brueggemann, Terence E. Fretheim, and David L. Petersen, *A Theological Introduction to the Old Testament* 2nd ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005) 449.

<sup>6</sup> Mark J. Olson, “Pentecost,” in *ABD* (eds. David Noel Freedman, et al.: New York: Doubleday, 1992) 222-23, here 222.

midst of the community. One of the manifold ways in which post-exilic Judaism dealt with this dilemma was to reframe the Abrahamic call in Gen 12:3 so that it takes place through a centripetal ingathering of the nations to Jerusalem. This ingathering took on several rationales, but the three most prominent offered throughout Israel's history are: (1.) the nations flock to Jerusalem to worship Yahweh (e.g., Ps 22:27; 72:11; 86:9; Isa 56:7); (2.) the nations come bearing gifts to Israel, contributing to the Temple treasury, or offering their wealth as an "inheritance" (e.g., Ps 68:29; 111:6; Isa 60:5; 61:6; 66:12); and (3.) the nations come to Jerusalem to be judged by the universal King, who sits on the throne in the Temple (e.g., Is. 2:4; Amos 1:2-2:16).

These rationales constitute various currents within the larger stream of Israel's centripetal ideology concerning the nations, which itself is a particular school of thought within an ever-evolving religious presupposition in the Hebrew Scriptures known alternatively as centripetal nationalism or Zion theology.<sup>7</sup> This school of thought not only understood Israel to be the holiest people whom God had elected and Jerusalem to be the holiest, central city. This brand of theology also quite literally understood Mt. Zion—Jerusalem, being set on a hill, was designed in such a way that the Temple itself was placed at the highest point (i.e., the Temple mount), and this was called Mt. Zion—to be the place where Yahweh dwelled (e.g., 1 Kgs 8:10; 2 Chr 7:2; Ezra 1:5; Isa 56:7). Zion theology encountered significant challenges in the exilic and post-exilic writings, but even in post-exilic texts like Isa 56:7 Jerusalem features prominently ("for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples").

Tension began to occur in this religious milieu: Israel moved away from its earlier henotheism, and the Yahwehist cult seems to have settled definitively into a monotheistic religion. The tension, then, came about from the theological question that, *if* Yahweh still dwells among the Jewish people, and—according to the universal Kingship of Yahweh in many of the prophets (e.g., Amos) as well as the *shema* in Deut 6:4—*if* Yahweh is the One God over all the world, *then* the presence of foreigners implies a mixed population among whom the Lord tabernacles. Furthermore, Yahweh is King over these foreigners, so how should the community

<sup>7</sup> See the study by Jon Douglas Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985). For a helpful survey of the nuances within this understanding, see Anthony Gelston, "Universalism in Second Isaiah," *JTS* 43 (1992) 377-98.

respond both to those who do not recognize this kingship and those who are not ethnically included in Israel? And what of those foreigners who confess Yahweh as King?

Third Isaiah deals with this dilemma through an inclusive attitude: “Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, ‘The Lord will surely separate me from his people’: and do not let the eunuch say, ‘I am just a dry tree’” (Isa 56:3). Yet, in the same vein as the second rationale for the ingathering of nations noted above (2.), Isa 60:5 imagines an ideological future of the inclusion of the nations through the incorporation of their wealth, which demonstrates the interconnectedness of various schools of thought. For our purposes, this particular vein of thought offers a uniquely pertinent and contemporary correlation to the Book of Ruth in terms of the relationship between the titular character and Naomi. Viewing the incorporation of the nations’ wealth as the means for the inclusion of foreigners is obviously a divergent decision on the issue from the Book of Ezra. This narrative’s perspective runs in direct tension with third Isaiah; it does not look for the time when the nations will flock to Jerusalem or advise that the outsider be assured of a position within the community. Instead, Ezra exhorts the assembly to “separate yourselves from the peoples of the land and from the foreign wives” (10:11). The Book of Ezra even concludes with a list condemning those who married foreign women (10:18-44). In a similar ideological vein, Nehemiah bluntly praises the assembly’s response after reading from the book of Moses: “they excluded all foreigners from Israel” (13:3). Nehemiah derives this exclusivity from his reading of the Book of Moses’ command that “no Ammonite or Moabite should ever enter the assembly of God” (13:1). This clearly stands in direct tension with the presence of Ruth, a Moabitess, who contributed to the lineage of David and participated in the community as a “woman of excellence” (Ruth 3:11).

Intertestamental literature provides evidence of the abiding expectation of the form of centripetal ideology that allows for the nations’ inclusion through their wealth, particularly as this leads to the exaltation of Judah or Jerusalem. Tobit (c.a. second century BCE),<sup>8</sup> similarly prophesies, “A bright light will shine to all the ends of the earth; many nations will come to you from far away, the inhabitants of the remotest parts of the earth to

---

<sup>8</sup>) Allen Wikgren, *Hellenistic Greek Texts* (Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1950), 28-29.

your holy name, bearing gifts in their hands for the King of heaven. Generation after generation will give joyful praise in you; the name of the chosen city will endure forever” (13:11). Although even the latest suggestions for the composition of Ruth are far earlier than Tobit, the notion of an ingathering of the nations into the people and place of Yahweh is clearly an enduring fixation extant even in this late text. The point, in other words, is that the notion of the nations pilgrimaging to Judah and participating in the fulfillment of the people of God (both spiritual and material) had popular acceptance even late into Second Temple Judaism. This particular version of an ideological future envisions the nations as gift-bearers, bringing about “fullness” for Yahweh’s chosen people and making space for a faithful remnant from among the foreigners to become incorporated. These outsiders, too, are a part of the people of God through their contributions.

Admittedly, the setting of the Book of Ruth alters slightly this formula. Instead of Jerusalem, Bethlehem is the locale for the insider-outsider drama. In part, Bethlehem fills the literary role of providing the narrative with irony: “Bethlehem” literally means “house of bread,”<sup>9)</sup> yet Ruth 1:1-2 begins with a famine in the town, and Elimelech’s flight is from this place of historical plenty to the ominous land of Moab. Apart from the author’s irony, however, Bethlehem was also the famous town known primarily in Israelite history as the location for King David’s birth (1 Samuel 16). Therefore, it was necessary for the full inclusion of Ruth into the people of God and the author’s ultimate trump against exclusivist ideologies (e.g., Ezra and Nehemiah) for the setting to be Bethlehem of Judea and not Jerusalem. Furthermore, if one views Ruth as a narrative promoting a centripetal ideology concerning the exaltation of Judah through the nations, then there is no better place for the exaltation to begin than in the town where the halcyon days of the nation began. In other words, Ruth’s role as the bearer of restored fullness furthered the nations hopes that a “king-like-David” may also be restored, even if it comes about through the startling events of a foreigner’s participation. (Could this be a startling, veiled support for Cyrus?)<sup>10)</sup>

<sup>9)</sup> Younger, *Judges/Ruth*, 414.

<sup>10)</sup> See Jack M. Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* (JSOT: Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1989) 178-90 and esp. 232-40. Sasson finds the “political” thrust of the narrative to be an advancement of

*“There Was a Famine in the Land”*

A post-exilic audience would, of course, have heard the difficulties of Elimelech’s family with empathy. They, too, had gone to a foreign nation as a result of a crisis that took place in their homeland. Life in Babylon was difficult and, even as Elimelech and his sons, more than a generation of the people had died in that foreign exile (Ruth 1:1-5, 20-21; cf. Jer 7:29).<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, when the remnant returned to the land, their lives were impoverished and tenuous.<sup>12</sup> The walls of the city had been destroyed, and they encountered an onslaught of social, economic, political, and religious dilemmas. It is in this context, therefore, that the Book of Ruth follows a “from emptiness to fullness” theme that speaks to its audience’s situation.

Naomi’s poignant exclamation upon returning from the land represents the dire situation that constitutes the first half of the book’s theme (i.e., “emptiness”). Naomi cries out, “Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me” (1:20). The word-play at this point is fairly evident: Naomi’s name means “pleasant,” but the disaster in the land of Moab leads her to consider her state “bitter” (i.e., the meaning of “Mara”). Naomi then articulates her misfortune (and the initial dilemma of the narrative) that she encountered during the season away from Bethlehem: “I went out full, but the Lord has brought me back empty” (1:21). She finds herself bereft of all that afforded her “fullness” and hope.<sup>13</sup> Those things that were most valuable to her were

---

King David’s legitimacy. He provides a survey for his decisions on authorship (240-41), although his analysis refuses to settle definitively on a date of composition. Sasson does not posit that Ruth’s “foreign” contribution to the Davidic lineage may perhaps be veiled support for Cyrus.

<sup>11</sup> Bush (*Ruth, Esther*, 67) cautions against relating the death of Elimelech with putative sinfulness. I agree, but I am suggesting a literary relationship and not a theological precept.

<sup>12</sup> For a description of the post-exilic economic situation, see the eighth chapter (“The Impact of the Post-exilic Economic Changes”) in William Domeris, *Touching the Heart of God: The Social Construction of Poverty among Biblical Peasants* (New York: T & T Clark, 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Although she posits an earlier date and Davidic interpretation, Nielsen’s explanation of the threatening situation of Naomi’s hardship is helpful; see K. Nielsen, *Ruth: A Commentary* (OTL: Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1997) 43-44.

destroyed, lost in the death that took place in a foreign land.<sup>14</sup> In this way, she functions as a literary type for the post-exilic community much in the same way that Jonah likely represents a literary characterization of Jewish nationalism. Naomi (the destitute community returning from exile) reenters her homeland without a husband, children, material security, or hope.<sup>15</sup> Although she is most likely barren in the sense that she may be post-menopausal (1:11-13), Naomi is also barren in the sense that she has no posterity and, even as Zion in the Book of Lamentations, she is thereby desolate (cf. Lam 1:1; 1:15; 2:4, 21; 4:2, 9).

Significantly, the return of Naomi and her daughter-in-law from the land of Moab is, similar to those who came back from Babylon, described by the verb *s'ub* (typically translated as “turn back” or “return,” which, according to the BDB, often connotes a return from exile).<sup>16</sup> This verb appears approximately fifteen times in the book, and the most concentrated usage is in this first chapter. The consequence of this repetition is a resounding parallel to the return from exile. Furthermore, perhaps one of the reasons behind the author’s choice of stylizing Ruth as a Moabitess (as opposed to a Philistine or Aramaean, who lived to the west and the north, respectively) is that Naomi returns from the east, just as the Babylonian exiles themselves made the long journey from that direction. Moab was a direct, eastern neighbor to Judah, situated on the opposite side of the Salt Sea; the Zered Brook to the south and the Arnon River to the north enclosed its territory. According to Genesis 19, the Moabites were the descendants of the incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughters. They frequently opposed the Israelites throughout their early history (e.g.,

<sup>14</sup> Although he does not deal with Ruth, Gowan understands the drama of the prophetic corpus to follow a “death and resurrection” paradigm. This comedy of “death and resurrection,” in other words, characterizes the crisis of the exile and, (again) assuming a later date for the Book of Ruth, is flush with the desolation and restoration of Naomi. For a treatment of the “death and resurrection” theme in the prophetic corpus, see Donald E. Gowan, *Theology of the Prophetic Books: The Death and Resurrection of Israel* (Louisville: John Knox, 1998).

<sup>15</sup> Korpel is the only author that I am aware of who reads Naomi, Ruth, Boaz, and Obed as literary types for national aspirations. See Marjo C. A. Korpel, *The Structure of the Book of Ruth* (Pericope 2: Assen, Nether.: Koninklijke van Gorcum, 2001) 230-33. Yet, Korpel, unlike the present interpretation, views Naomi as the *old* Zion and Ruth as the *new*.

<sup>16</sup> Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, “שוב” *BDB* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1996).



Numbers 22-24), and the conflict became so heated that “Moabite” became a designation for heathen wickedness: “Moab is my washbasin,” says Yahweh in Pss 60:8 and 108:9, and Zephaniah condemns the nation to the fate of Sodom because of their “taunts” (2:8-9). Isaiah 15 likewise delivers a terrible prediction of Moab’s destruction.

Yet even first Isaiah (c.f., also, Jer 48:31-47) expresses God’s compassion for the Moabites. Similar to the implicit exhortation of the Book of Ruth, Isaiah depicts Yahweh commanding Judah to “let the outcasts of Moab settle among you” (Isa 16:4). Obviously, the prophetic corpus is replete with examples of the return of God’s compassion toward Judah, and their return to the land from exile represents Yahweh’s “repentance” from the judgment that brought them to Babylon. Yet God’s compassion and promise of restoration in the prophetic corpus also on occasion came with the accompanying suggestion of redemption for Moab, even if historically this restoration went unfulfilled because of the complete annihilation of the Moabites by Assyria (Isa 16:2-4). In some sense, however, Naomi’s return to the land (historically prior to the exile) and Ruth’s perpetuation of Moabite blood may represent later attempts to accomplish the redemption of these nations.

Regardless, the surprising covenant love between Naomi and Ruth in 1:9 occurs in simultaneity with the return to the land. The covenant between the woman of Judah and the Moabite in 1:15-18 is articulated through the verb *s’ub* (“return to, restore”). The presence of this verb introduces a return-motif that pervades the narrative, and it also carries connotations of restoration and the return of fullness (c.f., Isa 58:12).<sup>17</sup> In effect, the use of *s’ub* in chapter one along with the covenant between Naomi and Ruth signals the beginnings of the restoration process, although the fruition of this event does not take place until 4:13-17, with precursors in 2:17-23 and 3:14-18. The revelation of Naomi’s restoration begins, however, in the possibilities created by hospitality shown to the foreigner (i.e., her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth), and this suggests that Israel has a part to play in the inclusion of the nations.

The first chapter closes with a subtle hint at the possibility of hope for Naomi by recording that the unfortunate pair “came to Bethlehem at the

<sup>17</sup> William Lee Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 362.

beginning of barley harvest” (1:22). The significance of this season cannot be underestimated for a largely agrarian society. The beginning of the harvest culminated in the Festival of Weeks, which came fifty days after the second day of Passover, which also featured the presentation of the first barley sheaf during the ceremony. The Festival of Weeks represented the celebration of God’s yearly faithfulness to provide for the people.<sup>18</sup> Although Elimelech left Bethlehem because of a famine, the audience finds in 2:1-16 that Yahweh has again caused the ground to produce, and a certain kinsman named Boaz is reaping the harvest. The conjunction shifting from 1:22 to 2:1 indicates a transition in the narrative, and so it is significant that the narrator does not conclude the former, poignant section of Naomi’s desolation and barrenness (1:19-22) without a final hint of anticipation that undoubtedly comes with the advent of the harvest. In other words, before concluding Naomi’s destitute return from Moab and transitioning to the next pericope (2:1-16), the narrator insinuates that the narrative is about to take a promising turn.<sup>19</sup>

In particular, this hopeful note intensifies when Boaz enters the narrative drama. There are several ancient cultural customs and idiomatic issues for translation in 2:1-16.<sup>20</sup> Yet, for the present analysis, the most pertinent issue is that the kindness of a kinsman (2:1, 20) equates to hospitality for the foreigner (2:8-16, 23). Boaz piously provides for the outsider by allowing Ruth to glean from his field; in effect, he fulfills the imperatives in Torah to take care of widows and foreigners (Deut 10:18; see esp. 24:19 where the Law specifically commands Boaz’s practice of leaving the leftovers in a field for widows and foreigners to glean). In no way, at least as far as the text indicates, does Boaz initially express love or sexual attraction to Ruth; he simply responds as a faithful Jew fulfilling Torah-piety. As a result, the restoration of Naomi occurs simply through the grace and compassion of hospitality inherent in the Law, which perhaps a Judean post-exilic community had begun to neglect in light of their affliction and identity crisis.

---

<sup>18</sup>) Olson, “Pentecost,” 222.

<sup>19</sup>) Younger, *Judges/Ruth*, 428.

<sup>20</sup>) For an excellent treatment of these issues, see Tod Linafelt, *Ruth* (Collegeville, M.N.: The Liturgical Press, 1989) 24-40.

*Ruth as the Bearer of Plenty: 3:14-18 and 4:13-17*

2:17-23 begins the characterizations of Ruth as the “bearer of plenty.” Three times in the narrative (2:17-23; 3:14-18; and 4:13-17) the language, in collusion with certain literary devices, associates the Moabitess with fullness or a measure of blessing, which she then brings as an offering to her mother-in-law, Naomi. The “ephah of barley” in 2:17 amounts to a bushel (thirty-five liters). This measure provided for Ruth and Naomi in their destitution is, admittedly, only temporary. It is a far cry from “fullness.” Yet, not only does this section slightly raise the hopeful note of 1:22, but in 2:19-23 the narrative also sets up the approval and continuation of the relationship that will bring about the complete restoration of Naomi at the end of the book.

In order not to disconnect Ruth’s first depiction as the “bearer of plenty” with the ideological perspective that envisions Judah’s future restoration and exaltation through the blessings of the nations, it is important not to separate 2:17-23 from 3:1-5. The simple conjunction *waw* (translated “Then” in 3:1 of the NASB but left untranslated in many other versions) serves to connect 2:17-23 with 3:1-5, not to transition between the two. The *waw* conjunction frequents Hebrew prose, and so the conversations ought not to be distinguished too sharply. “And,” “even,” and “then” are staples in Hebrew narrative, functioning as devices that continue the flow of the prose. The point, therefore, is this: Ruth’s harvest and slight provision to Naomi ought to connect seamlessly to Naomi’s designs in chapter three. Ruth is not given credit for the plan to establish redemption through Boaz; instead, she obeys faithfully Naomi’s agenda for accomplishing restoration (3:1-5). Ruth as the “bearer of plenty,” therefore, cannot be extracted from Ruth as the “medium for Naomi’s restoration and future exaltation.” Her initial offering brings joy to Naomi, and it is apropos to connect her thankfulness to the language of Isa 60:5, “Then you shall see and be radiant; your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you.”

*3:14-18*

The initial, increasing “fullness” of Naomi takes its next step in 3:14-18, where the narrator again depicts Ruth as the “bearer of plenty.” This pericope compounds the measure of the blessing beyond the literal amount

given by Boaz in 2:17, as if it were a rise in the notes leading to the crescendo. Discerning Ruth's role in this section depends, however, on discerning the literary genius of the narrative's use of irony and double entendre. There are several complementary examples of the narrator's literary genius: Elimelech leaves "the house of bread" because of famine; Naomi (i.e., "pleasant") calls herself Mara (i.e., "bitter"); and the bawdy, ambiguous language of 3:6-13 even suggests sexual innuendo but not consummation.<sup>21</sup> These cases represent an intentionality and literary framing of the narrative, such that the audience is expected to pay special attention to details, listen for subtle devices or wordplays, and watch for irony and foreshadows of things to come. Reading 3:14-18 with a view to this intentionality reveals another subtle example of irony that illustrates the "from emptiness to fullness" theme and reinforces the ideology of the foreigners' exaltation of Judah.<sup>22</sup>

In the first place, Ruth's request in 3:9 reverses the customary gender roles of Jewish society: she asks, "I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are a *go'el*." Although many translations render this term "next-of-kin" or "close relative" (e.g., NRSV and NASB), the root verb of the participle means, "to make a claim for a person or thing,"<sup>23</sup> and it is also used in 2:20 and 4:4-6 to indicate Boaz's role as one who is able to redeem Ruth (and, by extension, Naomi). Therefore, most likely Ruth is proposing marriage to Boaz in 3:9 and not recognizing his status as a relative, although certainly the passage carries the double entendre of proposing sexual intercourse.<sup>24</sup> Yet, most likely, the phrase "spread your cloak over your servant" is an idiomatic way of expressing

<sup>21</sup>) As is well-known, "foot" was often employed as a euphemism for the penis (e.g., Judg. 3:24; Is. 6:2). Campbell, *Ruth*, 121, sees this as sexually suggestive but only provocative. See also Linafelt, *Ruth*, 45-56. Danna N. Fewell and David Miller Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990) offer the alternative interpretation.

<sup>22</sup>) See Campbell, *Ruth*, 13. There is significant assonance between "barley," the unit of measurement in 3:17, and "gate," all of which demonstrates the author's obsession with words.

<sup>23</sup>) Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 52.

<sup>24</sup>) Linafelt, *Ruth*, 54, again reads this as intentional double entendre. Yet the humor and irony of 3:14-18 is perhaps the best indication that the language is bawdy but still empty (see below).

marital language (even if an alternative arrangement of the vowels changes the meaning to “spread your wings over your maidservant”).<sup>25</sup> In other words, it does not seem likely that Ruth secures marriage with Boaz through promiscuity or prostitution; instead, she challenges social norms by requesting a marriage union with Boaz, even as Naomi acted in an assertive manner by ordering her daughter-in-law to the threshing floor and pressing for a controversially exogamous but nonetheless lawful marriage. The TEV makes this request quite clear in its translation: Ruth asserts, “You are responsible for taking care of me. So please marry me.”

The consequence of this assertive action on the part of Naomi and Ruth bears fruit, quite literally. 3:14-18 offers another example of wealth being given to Ruth, and Ruth then carrying this “fullness” to Naomi. This instance, however, features an interesting use of both irony and foreshadowing. Ruth holds the infamous cloak while Boaz fills it with six measures of barley (3:15), and then she leaves the threshing floor inconspicuously but walks back through the city. Most likely the narrator envisions Ruth “carrying” this fullness of the cloak around her waist, wrapped in her hands in such a way that is reminiscent of a pregnancy—that is, the load is too heavy to be carried on Ruth’s head as she might do if it were a lighter measure in a basket. Instead, Ruth leaves an episode laced with sexual innuendo “heavy laden” and carrying “fullness” wrapped around her abdomen. The narrator ironically suggests that the episode of the previous night—again, most likely humorous but innocuous innuendo—produced fullness for Ruth and, by extension, Naomi, as the Moabitess takes this blessing to her mother-in-law. The inclusion of Ruth into Boaz’s good graces, in other words, correlates to the blessings of this foreigner being offered to the returned Judean exile, Naomi, who is impoverished. 3:14-18, therefore, also functions as a foreshadowing of the marriage, conception, and pregnancy that occurs in 4:13-17.

As is the case with most parabolic and didactic narratives, it is clear that the analogies do not always fit in every way. For example, Boaz, a *Judean*, gives this “fullness” to Ruth, the foreigner, who then returns it to another *Judean*. If the narrative wants to promote an ideology that portrays Ruth (the nations) as the one who brings fullness to Naomi (Judah or the Jews),

---

<sup>25</sup> Waard and Nida, *A Translator’s Handbook on The Book of Ruth*, 52-53.

should Ruth not be independently wealthy, or at least should her wealth come from outside the Jewish nation? Three potential explanations may relieve this conflict with my literary reading.

First, this tension may represent a division (evident, e.g., in Is. 40-66) between the suffering and lack of those who go into exile and then return in privation over against those who either remain in the land or quickly gain material “fullness” upon return from Babylon. The nations, in this first solution, serve as mediators in the reconciliation and restoration taking place between the disinherited and the materially secure.

A second explanation maintains that, since Jewish literature is not beyond allegorizing God within human drama, Boaz potentially represents Yahweh, the One who is able to restore fullness to an impoverished people by the blessings he has given to the nations.<sup>26</sup> In this line of thinking, “the wealth of the nations” functions as an indirect blessing of God to Israel (c.f., Isa 60:5; 61:6).

A third option understands the source of Ruth’s “fullness” as a prophetic suggestion (or ideological propaganda) that the restoration and exaltation of Judah will take place through a proper union with the foreigner. Ruth covenants with Naomi despite the fact that it represents a less certain future (1:15-18); the foreigner, then, returns from the land of Moab as a faithful remnant along with the destitute people of God. In this way, the full inclusion of the Moabite comes about through the willful contraction of the foreigner with Judah. Consequently, “fullness” comes about according to the ideology of this narrative only through the union of the foreigner with Judah.

One could argue in any of these three directions concerning the dissonance of the source of Ruth’s “fullness” and its further correlation to Naomi’s restoration, or one could even dismiss the dilemma as a strain on the primary analogies of the narrative. Regardless, the reading as a whole makes space for Ruth’s inclusion into the community and, consequently, for blessings for Judah through the coming king, David. Furthermore, *if* one reads the story as a narrative for a post-exilic community in the midst of an identity crisis, then the narrative’s implications concerning the future of outsiders offers a hopeful outlook: not only does Ruth bring for a second time a moderated “fullness” back to Naomi in 3:14-18, but the narrator foreshadows the complete “fullness” that takes place in the end

---

<sup>26</sup> Korpel, *The Structure of the Book of Ruth*, 232-33.

of the narrative through the conception and birth of Obed. As a result, the two prior occasions of “fullness” function as literary harbingers of the promising future of Naomi and, in terms of the narrative’s audience, for Judah as well.

#### 4:13-17

The macro-narrative featuring the *return* and *restoration* of Naomi function as a kind of death and resurrection. She has now returned from the bitter land of the dead to a life of fullness. This restoration becomes evident in the fact that the women of Bethlehem in the concluding section say to Naomi, “May he also be to you a *restorer of life* and a sustainer of your old age” (4:15).<sup>27</sup> Obed’s designation as “restorer” comes from the popular verb of the first chapter, *s’ub* (“return”). This is the last and fifteenth use of the word in the book.<sup>28</sup> In this instance of the term, Obed is stylized as the “fullness” that brings Naomi from death to life by being the “wealth” of Ruth offered to her mother-in-law; as a matter of fact, the connotation of a resurrection of life in some cases accompanies the action of the verb *s’ub* (c.f. 2 Sam 12:23; 1 Kgs 13:6). Furthermore, the frequent appearance of the verb functions as a verbal harbinger of the coming restoration, the promise of an imminent “restoration to an ideal condition” (c.f., Isa 58:12).<sup>29</sup> Ruth 4:13-17 represents the culmination of this restoration as Ruth offers the apotheosis of her “fullness” to Naomi, completing the comedic drama of the narrative through the exaltation of the mother-in-law.<sup>30</sup>

Admittedly, the ethnic ideology of this concluding section delivers the final trump against an Ezra-Nehemiah complex. In sharp contrast, according to the Book of Ruth, the Moabite, too, is now a part of the people of God. The reference to Perez “whom Tamar bore to Judah” provides authoritative historical precedence for the inclusion of the foreigner (4:12), for Tamar is generally considered to be a Canaanite (see Genesis 38).

<sup>27</sup> The “he” in vv. 14-15 is a bit ambiguous, but there is little disagreement that it refers to the child, Obed, and not Boaz, who is also earlier referred to as the *go’el* (“redeemer”) of Naomi. (The narrator uses *go’el* in v.14 and *s’ub* in v.15).

<sup>28</sup> Kathleen A. Robertson Farmer, *The Book of Ruth* (NIB, vol. 2; eds. Leander E. Keck, et. al.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 889-946, here 941.

<sup>29</sup> Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 362.

<sup>30</sup> By “comedic drama” I mean, of course, the classical literary designation.

Even if the reference to Tamar is only meant as an allusion to another instance of the scandalous history of David's lineage, the blessing of the people of Bethlehem—"May the Lord make the woman who is coming into [Boaz's] house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel" (4:11)—invests significant import into the contribution of this foreigner to the nation's history. It subtly subverts the ethnocentrism of Judah's nationalism and carves out space for the foreigner in the community's identity, but, again, through the offering of her "fullness" to the people of God.

Therefore, the book's ethnic ideology qualifies the foreigner's inclusion through a pattern akin to the future envisioned in third Isaiah, for example, whereby the nations bring their wealth as an offering to Judah as a means for the exaltation of the elect of God (esp. chaps. 60-61). This context makes the most sense of the attribution of Ruth's child to Naomi (4:17), for only males had heirs in that patriarchal society. The absence of a male in Naomi's family means that she enters the social category of "widow": she is subject to the charity of the community. Therefore, attributing Obed to Naomi is a literary upshot, a surprising reversal akin to Ruth's proposition of marriage or the inclusion of a Moabite in the Davidic line. This episode only makes sense if one views it as the literary expression of the narrator's ideology regarding the role of the foreigner as a "bearer of fullness." Ruth, the daughter-in-law, is "more to [Naomi] than seven sons" (4:15) *only* because her contribution has brought significant material wealth to her mother-in-law and an association with the Davidic line.

One final literary device elucidates the way in which the Book of Ruth subtly endorses a centripetal future: that is, the connection that exists between the "from emptiness to fullness" theme, the nation's ideology concerning the wealth of the nations and the exaltation of Judah, and *the harvest festival* associated with the book. The traditional Jewish canon overtly associated the Book of Ruth with the Festival of Weeks by placing it alongside the other books in the festival scroll (mentioned above). This festival represented the consummation of a season of existential hope for the community.<sup>31</sup> Each new harvest brought fullness, and a season of

---

<sup>31</sup>) Precedence for this festival is cited in Lev. 23:15-16 and Deut. 16:9.



famine led quite literally to death and emptiness. Celebrating the feast of Pentecost (“fiftieth day”) functioned as a confession of Yahweh’s provision for another year, a celebration of life and new beginnings. Especially after years of famine, the harvest festival expressed restored joy and culminated in the worship of Yahweh, the Lord of hosts, who provides for the poor and the widows in due season.

For the narrator of the Book of Ruth to set the story within the context of this festival immediately adds a heightened sense of anticipation and hope. For a community struggling with literal and religious famines, as well as internal dissensions, the anticipation of harvest resounds with a note of hope. The book’s frequent “harvest” imagery (e.g., gleaning in fields) and the comedy (in a classical sense) of the narrative thereby suggest a potential future of fullness for a post-exilic Judean community. Even as the narrative opens with Ruth and Naomi returning to Bethlehem at the beginning of harvest, it concludes with the coming of a great act of “provision” in the child Obed. The concluding genealogy of the book (4:18-22) becomes singularly climactic for a nation undergoing redefinition and reconstruction: the kind of restoration that took place in Ruth and Naomi’s drama produced the idealized king of the nation’s history. As a result, the narrative asks the question, “What kind of radical new harvest of fullness awaits the people of God if they respond faithfully to this new crisis?”

The harvest festival, therefore, encompasses the narrative and imbues it with a sense of anticipation and consummation. It advocates for an inclusive centripetal ideology that looks for the exaltation of the nation through the “fullness” brought in by the nations as they become incorporated into the community. The character of Ruth, therefore, is secondary to the character of Naomi. As a matter of fact, the audience meets the titular character only after prominence is shown to Naomi, who is mentioned alongside her husband. Only rarely does a narrator introduce husband and wife simultaneously, unless, of course, the emphasis is supposed to be placed on the role of the woman in the story (e.g., Bathsheba). As a result, the note of the coming harvest chimes in tune with the comedy of Naomi’s emptiness and culminating exaltation, such that the emphasis lies on the Judah-like character of the destitute woman and not the Moabite foreigner who serves as the means for gaining fullness.

## Conclusion

My argument, while cognizant of other theological and textual issues, focuses on the literary implications of the Book of Ruth in ways that are both unique and subversive. This reading is meant both to complement and correct other readings that neglect the manner in which Ruth, as a symbol of the nations, becomes subjected to the designs for exaltation of the Israelite community. A small group of authors have also proposed subversive readings of the book, although their interpretations have only pointed to component parts to the underlying ideology. André LaCocque, for example, views the narrative as a romantic subversion of exclusivist strains within the postexilic community and, more importantly, as a contribution to a hermeneutical struggle for the power to interpret Torah.<sup>32</sup> LaCocque notes that the narrative “insists on the role of women in the Israelite community; on the Moabite origin of its central heroine and of her illustrious descendant, David; as well as on a liberal interpretation of the Torah.”<sup>33</sup> While LaCocque’s argument is persuasive in its analysis of the power politics undergirding the book, he neglects to critique directly its nationalist vision for employing the foreigner’s wealth in order to exalt the community. In a contrasting and equally subversive interpretation, McKinlay discovers an “ideology of domination” underpinning the narrative, yet her observations point out the manner in which the narrator supports an Israelite man’s possession of land and an accompanying foreign woman.<sup>34</sup> While this politic clearly undergirds the narrative—and complicates LaCocque’s assertion that the narrator is a woman<sup>35</sup>—McKinlay does little by way of extending this ideology to a national perspective regarding the foreigner’s role in the exaltation of the postexilic Judean community. My method of viewing the literary components to an underlying ideology, therefore, combines the pervasive issues of power and domination into a discrete rendering of the narrative’s implications.

---

<sup>32</sup> André LaCocque, *Ruth: A Continental Commentary* (trans. K.C. Hanson; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004).

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>34</sup> Judith E. McKinlay, “A Son Is Born to Naomi: A Harvest for Israel” in *Ruth and Esther* (ed. Athalya Brenner. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 154.

<sup>35</sup> An earlier proponent for female authorship may be found in Fokkelen van Dijk-Hemmes, “Ruth: A Product of Women’s Culture?” in *A Feminist Companion to Ruth* (ed. A. Brenner; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 136.

As suggested throughout, my reading also has ramifications for the date of composition for the Book of Ruth, although establishing such a date is both complicated and controversial. John R. Wilch, for example, reads the narrative as a defense of David's kingship, possibly in response to the controversies of Solomon's reign, and he therefore dismisses a post-exilic composition as a "dishonest" fabrication of material.<sup>36</sup> Hubbard offers a less vitriolic and more informed argument against a postexilic date, relying primarily on the linguistic aspects of the book (e.g., archaisms, Aramaisms, etc.).<sup>37</sup> Yet the tide in scholarship is shifting away from dating the book during the early Monarchy.<sup>38</sup> In a recent reappraisal of the book's linguistic features, for example, Holmstedt tentatively suggests that composition occurred during the early Persian period. Yet, in recognition of the difficulties associated with his own method, Holmstedt qualifies his suggestion: "What makes so many of the items typically used to date the book weak or arguably irrelevant is the greater likelihood that they reflect the author's skill as a story-teller rather than the linguistic setting [...]."<sup>39</sup> Thus, in corroboration with Sasson's opinion,<sup>40</sup> the testimony of the book's linguistic evidence has not brought about a consensus.

Having thus reached somewhat of an impasse in terms of the linguistic methods for dating, the concerns and situations underlying the narrative better serve as indicators for the book's period of composition. My reading has connected the concerns of a community dealing with the difficulties of life after the exile, with its famines and identity crises, and these associations have supported the view of a postexilic setting as the impetus for the narrative. John Gray similarly recognizes the necessity of dating the book according to its relevant concerns,<sup>41</sup> as does Victor Matthews.<sup>42</sup> As a matter of fact, the latter reads the book as an attempt to deal with

<sup>36</sup> John R. Wilch, *Ruth* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 15.

<sup>37</sup> Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, 23-35.

<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, the Talmud suggests that Samuel is the story's narrator (*Baba Bathra* 14b). See n. 4 above for a brief survey of scholarship regarding the date of composition.

<sup>39</sup> Robert D. Holmstedt, *Ruth: A Handbook on the Hebrew Text* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2010), 39.

<sup>40</sup> Sasson, *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, 240-52.

<sup>41</sup> John Gray, *Joshua, Judges, Ruth* (New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 369.

<sup>42</sup> Victor H. Matthews, *Judges and Ruth* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

endogamy—an issue that leads Matthews to date the book in a postexilic setting because, although occurring throughout Israel's history, outside marriages became a topic for debate during this period.<sup>43</sup> My method and conclusion for dating, in other words, is not only a frequent and sound approach but also a more constructive one due to the complicated literary nature of the book. As I have shown that the narrative hinges on the exaltation of the Judean Naomi—a concern that develops most fully in the post-exilic setting—the weight of the evidence suggests the date of composition can be no earlier than the return from Babylon (sixth century BCE), although dates as late as the fourth century are fully tenable.

Yet, the primary concern of this essay has been to reveal an ideology underlying the narrative of Ruth and Naomi, not to determine the date of composition. In this reading, the Moabitess becomes the means for the Judean woman's return to fullness, and, by extension, it endorses a vision of the "outsider" that likewise understands alterity as a *means* for accomplishing internal exaltation. Viewing each character as literary types in a metaphoric drama leads to the confirmation of a centripetal ideology, which features the restoration and exaltation of a Judean community through the "fullness" brought in by the foreigner. The narrator hints at the possibility of "fullness" in 1:22, foreshadows it in 3:14-18, and brings it to its crescendo in the birth of Obed in 4:13-17. In this way, a post-exilic Judean audience imagined an ideological future that anticipated their restoration and exaltation through an ingathering of the "wealth of the nations"—a future that gave hope for the consummation of a new harvest season in the people's history.

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 210-11.

