

68. Ruth

Ruth opposed Ezra's ethnic exclusiveness by showing that irreproachable David was himself the product of a mixed marriage.

The days in Exile were shattering for those from Jerusalem who were now resident in Babylon, deprived of their previous religious and social context. What did they have left? Basically, their identity as a people, the descendants of certain ancestors. And so we see a hardening of ethnic consciousness. This finds one expression in the prohibition of foreign wives, recorded in Ezra 9 (where it led to mass divorces) and more gently echoed in Nehemiah 9-13

This gave one answer to the question: Who is a Jew?¹

The story of Ruth gives another answer. Like many later writings, it is addressed to the emotions of readers. Ruth's reply to her Jewish mother Naomi, who after the death of her Moabite husband is returning to her home in Judea, intends to be affecting. And affecting it is. Here is the whole of it:

Ruth 1:16. Entreat me not to leave thee, and to return from following after thee, for whither thou goest, I will go, and where thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my god. Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried. Yahweh do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me.

Those who can read that dry-eyed should seek another line of work.

The plot of the story is simple enough. After some legal niceties are settled (another has a prior claim), Ruth marries Boaz, and bears Obed,² father of Jesse, the father of David. Ruth being herself the daughter of a Moabite father, it follows that *David himself is the product of a mixed marriage.*

The Moab Connection

So far Ruth, but there may be more to the link between David and Moab. When David was first trying to establish himself, with his band of 400 men, what did he do? He turned to Moab:

1Sam 22:3. And David went thence to Mizpeh of Moab, and he said unto the king of Moab, Let my father and my mother, I pray thee, come forth with you, till I know what God will do for me. [4] And he brought them before the king of Moab, and they dwelt with him all the while that David was in the stronghold.

Why Moab, unless its ruler had a reason to be concerned for David's parents? Here may be one germ of the tale of Ruth *the Moabitess*.

¹For a linguistic indicator of this new sense of self, see §58, Yehud.

²The historicity of Obed, perhaps rightly, has been doubted; see ABD (Mathews). Real or invented, Obed served the author of Ruth well enough for her purpose.

An Authorial Text

Ruth gives us a rare opportunity to study the structure of a relatively uncomplicated authorial text. It is in four chapters of almost equal size:

1. Prologue: Naomi returns to her original home in Judah; Ruth follows
2. Ruth gleanes with Boaz at the harvest
3. Boaz is attracted to Ruth, but a kinsman has a superior right
4. Boaz buys his kinsman's right; marries Ruth

It turns out that the moment with which we began, Ruth's loyalty to Naomi, is not the point of the story. It is emotional preparation; it serves as prologue. The *point* is the way Ruth and Boaz get together, and after the niceties are settled, produce an ancestor of King David. The Book of Ruth closes this way – and is then followed by a small later addition (here *italicized*):

Ruth 4:17. And the women her neighbors gave it a name, saying, There is a son bon to Naomi; and they called his name Obed; he is the father of Jesse, the father of David.

[18] *Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez begat Hezron, [19] and Hezron begat Ram, and Ram begat Amminadab, [29] and Amminadab begat Nahshon, and Nahshon begat Salmon, [21] and Salmon begat Boaz, and Boaz begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David.*

The current consensus is surely right to see 4:18-21 as an addition.³ The author of Ruth, in arguing for a racially mixed David, needed only to insert the Moabite Ruth into David's ancestry, adding Boaz and Obed to what was previously known. So far Ruth 4:17. The added genealogy in Ruth 4:18-21 links David to Judah's son Perez (mentioned in Genesis 38), and adds Ram, Amminadab, and Salmon,⁴ otherwise found only in 1 Chr 2:9-11. The likeliest possibility is that someone wrote Genesis 38 to create the long genealogy, and Chronicles copied those names, with the addition of two more generations, into its own story of David. The expansion would then look like this:

Ezra 9 > Ruth original) > Genesis 38 > 1 Chronicles 2:9-11 > Ruth 4:18-21

It helps the case, as we saw in the Joseph Story (§15) that Gen 38 was interpolated into the Joseph story, and thus is later than that already late story.

Tamar

We now go back to the Joseph story. It has just begun in Gen 37, when in Gen 38 we meet this tale of Judah. As many have seen, it is an interpolation; when it is over, the story of Joseph picks up where it had left off, with Joseph sold to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh. But though interruptive, Gen 38 is a *well-designed* interruption: it lasts 22 years, just enough to bring Joseph from childhood to the maturity he shows as the servant of Potiphar.

³Schipper **Ruth** 186; for an opposing view, see Bush **Ruth/Esther** 13f.

⁴Chronicles "Salma." Japhet **Chronicles** 77 notes that the new genealogy gives ten generations from Judah to David, surely an ornamental rather than a historical detail.

The Gen 38 “Judah” story may be summarized thus:

Judah, while visiting “a certain Adullamite, whose name was Hirah,” marries a Canaanite woman, the daughter of one Shua. She bears him three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. Judah found a wife, Tamar, for his eldest son Er. For reasons darkly hinted at (he was “wicked”) Yahweh slew Er, who dies without having fathered children. Judah tells Onan to be intimate with Tamar to “raise up seed to thy brother.” Onan does, but spills his seed on the ground. For this, he too is slain by Yahweh. The third son, Shelah, is too young to fulfil that duty; in any case, Judah wants to preserve him from the fate of his brothers. Tamar is sent to her parents’ home, seemingly for the time being, but as Judah intends (for the safety of his one remaining son, Shelah), permanently.

Time passes. Shelah is of age, but Judah does not order him to fulfil his brotherly duty to Tamar. She takes her place at the city gate, veiled and dressed as a harlot. Judah, passing by, wants to lie with her. She demands his seal as security against his promise of later payment. She becomes pregnant, and Judah, in his role as father-in-law, orders her to be burned. She proves that she is pregnant by Judah himself, and he admits “She is more righteous than I.”

All this is preparatory to yet another “younger son” story. Tamar gives birth to twins, first seemingly Zerah, who at the last minute is superseded by Perez. And that is as far as Gen 38 takes us.

Perez, the more aggressive younger brother, was the ancestor of Hezron and Hamul (so Gen 46:12, later in the Joseph story; also Num 26:21 and 1 Chr 2:5). It then occurred to someone to make Perez also *an ancestor of David*, giving David a Patriarchal ancestry. This connection is first made in 1 Chr 2:9-10. It is this that was added to the end of Ruth, extending the original Ruth genealogy (which had consisted only of Boaz, Obed, Jesse, and David) back to Perez. That addendum reads:

Ruth 4:18. Now these are the generations of Perez: Perez begat Hezron, [19] and Hezron begat Ram, and Ram begat Amminadab, [20] and Amminadab begat Nahshon, and Nahshon begat Salmon, [21] and Salmon begat Boaz, and Boaz begat Obed, [22] and Obed begat Jesse, and Jesse begat David.

and as noted above, we have this probable chronological sequence:

Ezra 9 > Ruth (rebuttal) > Genesis 38 > 1 Chronicles 2:9-11 > Ruth 4:18-21

Gen 38, as incorporated into Chronicles, is the missing link between Ruth and the final four-verse addendum to Ruth. Thus do these apologetic texts, first one and then another, back and forth, continue to embroider and elaborate the ancestry of David. To make a complex story short, David is the focus for every post-Exilic hope of national renewal. The attention given to David, here and elsewhere, is by no means excessive.

For the writers of that period, David was the whole ballgame.