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Setting the Book of Ruth in its literary context with special reference to the Epilogue of the Book of Judges

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Living in West Africa and working in Bible translation, I have had the opportunity, in the Sissala language of Burkina Faso, to be involved in the translation of the book of Ruth, to listen to groups reading it in their mother tongue and discussing its content. However, when the book of Judges was subsequently translated and read, my interest was sparked in this subject because Ruth was now being discussed in the context of the book of Judges. Set side by side they share some common features and also provide interesting contrasts. The interpretation of Ruth is enriched by these contrasts. Details that would have been overlooked in Ruth become meaningful. I would like to show in this paper that the author of Ruth consciously intended the book to be viewed in the context of the book of Judges, as a contrast to the epilogue of Judges,⁵⁰ indeed as an alternative epilogue to that of the book of Judges.

Ruth and the epilogue of Judges (chapters 17-21) share common features in their historical setting and geographical connection. The historical setting of the book of Ruth is, as its author clearly points out, during the days of the judges (Ruth 1.1). The events in Ruth seem to have taken place toward the end of the era of the judges, because the scene is set three generations before David.⁵¹ The book

⁵⁰ Gooding, D.W., 'The Composition of the Book of Judges' *Eretz-Israel, Archaeological, Historical and Geographical Studies* 16, H.M.Orlinsky Volume, Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society (1982) 75.

Webb, B.G., *The Book of the Judges: An Integrated Reading* (JSOTSS 46; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987)

⁵¹ Merrill, Eugene, 'The Book of Ruth: Narration and Shared themes' *Bibliotheca Sacra* 142 (1985) 131.

of Judges itself portrays the epoch by a succession of cycles⁵² that get progressively worse for Israel in terms of religious practice, civil strife and increasing lawlessness, of which there are hints in the book of Ruth. By the end of Judges the author paints a very bleak picture of Israel as a nation, whereas Ruth, despite the hints of lawlessness, portrays a positive picture of individuals from the town of Bethlehem, who bring salvation to others. The geographical connection is that of Bethlehem, emphasized by the repeated use of 'Bethlehem (in) Judah', a distinctive phrase used at the beginning of the two main narratives that comprise the epilogue of Judges and at the start of the book of Ruth (Ruth 1.1).

Ruth and the book of Judges both contribute to the larger narrative framework that extends from Genesis to Kings. On the one hand, they both anticipate the book of Samuel in which the monarchy will be established and, on the other hand, they presuppose the biblical sweep from Genesis to Joshua in which the tribes of Ephraim and Judah are juxtaposed. In the epilogue of the book of Judges the two main stories have the refrain:

בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם אֵין מֶלֶךְ בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל

'In those days there was no king in Israel.' (17.6; 18.1; 19.1; 21.25) This seems to be the only glimmer of hope, which the narrator sees, in the midst of civil strife where every other method of human, governmental institution has failed. Another refrain is sounded at the beginning and at the end of the epilogue (17.6; 21.25):

אִישׁ הַיֵּשֶׁר בַּעֲיֵנָיו יַעֲשֶׂה

'Every man did what was right in his own eyes.' The word 'right' (Hebrew יָשָׁר) in this context seems to exclude the notion of anarchy and emphasize the idea of human justice disconnected from God. Within this bleak situation the tribe of Benjamin is portrayed in a very bad light. They have acted worse than any foreigners, not respecting the sanctity of hospitality to the traveler that ought to be observed between tribes. It is ironical that the Levite chose not to

⁵² Wenham, Gordon J., *Story as Torah, Reading the Old Testament Ethically* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd. 2000) 47. Wenham refers to the 'degenerative cycles', which occur in the main body of the book.

spend the night in Jebus, among foreigners, but in Gibeah among the tribe of Benjamin. If one takes the elements mentioned in this second story – the tribe of Benjamin, Gibeah, Mizpah and the all-tribal assembly, it is hard not to anticipate 1 Sam.10 when Saul is anointed as king and all these elements are mentioned again. The book of Ruth, in contrast, begins with Elimelech (meaning ‘my God is king’) and depicts Boaz and Ruth as righteous, using the epithet *hesed* when describing them.⁵³ They are the ancestors of that lineage whose descendant is David, a fact that is noted at the end of the book on two occasions (Ruth 4.17,22). The book of Ruth portrays an exemplary story for the annals of David, anticipating him being anointed as king in 1 Sam.16.

The epilogue of Judges and Ruth also look back to and presuppose the writings from Genesis to Joshua in which the tribes of Ephraim and Judah jockey for position.⁵⁴ Genesis finishes by appearing to present the chosen line through Joseph/Ephraim, having also drawn attention in a striking way to Judah/Perez. Under the leadership of Joshua the tribe of Ephraim maintains its position of preeminence, but after his lifetime moral decline sets in among the Ephraimites. The book of Judges shows Ephraim in decline and Judah in the ascendancy. In Judges every mention of Ephraim is negative and refers to disobedience, civil strife or moral corruption, whereas Judah is mentioned at the beginning and at the end in terms of obedience to God and chosen by him to lead the other tribes.⁵⁵ The book of Ruth shows the ascendancy of Judah very clearly. It picks up on the importance of the chosen line. In Ruth 4 the *tôl dôt* formula occurs, combining with the themes of blessing and seed, as in Genesis, to

⁵³ Gow, Murray, *The Book of Ruth: Its Structure, Theme and Purpose* (Leicester: Apollos, 1992) 116.

⁵⁴ The Chronicler makes an interesting commentary on these blessings: ‘Reuben was the firstborn but because he polluted his father’s bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph, the son of Israel... Though Judah became strong among his brothers and a ruler came from him, yet the birthright belonged to Joseph.’ (1Chron.5.1-2)

⁵⁵ It would seem that at a later stage the tribe of Ephraim was rejected in favour of the tribe of Judah. (Ps.78.67-68)

emphasize the significance of Perez as the one who continues the chosen line to King David. The *tôlî dôt* formula supplies a link between the patriarchal and monarchical eras. It shows that the patriarchs are directly related to the Israelite royal dynasty of David. Beginning in Genesis there is the expectation of a monarchy being established. Although the seeds of this are mentioned in the Pentateuch, the expectation is highlighted in the epilogue of Judges and the book of Ruth.

Having looked at the epilogue of Judges and the book of Ruth in general terms, we shall now consider them in more detail. The common geographical connection is Bethlehem, emphasized by the distinctive phrase **בֵּית לֵהֶם יְהוּדָה** Bethlehem (in) Judah (Judg.17.7-9; 19.1,2,18; Ruth 1.1,2). The Book of Ruth seems to be part of a so-called Bethlehem trilogy, Bethlehem (in) Judah being mentioned at the start of the two main narratives in the Judges' epilogue and at the beginning of the book of Ruth. The emphasis on Bethlehem (in) Judah is particularly striking because the only other mention of this phrase in the Old Testament refers to David (1 Sam.17.12). This repetition of Bethlehem seems to be due to the fact that it was the village where David was born.

While the historical settings and geographical connections are similar, a stark contrast exists between the events reported in the epilogue of Judges and Ruth. The main themes of the epilogue of Judges are the idolatry and the moral decline of the Israelites, whereas in Ruth, the reader sees a Gentile rejecting idolatry in order to follow the God of Israel, and the exemplary behaviour of the book's main characters. The name of the Lord is used in the epilogue of Judges but it is a cover for human action, whereas in Ruth, the name of God is used aright. In the second story of the Judges' epilogue advice and legal decisions are shown to be unwise and have destructive consequences, whereas Naomi's advice and Boaz's legal decisions are wise and constructive.

The sharp contrast between the epilogue of Judges and Ruth is reflected in how the main characters are portrayed. The epilogue of

Judges is in two parts and recounts two stories in detail. Both stories, in the context of decline, refer to the tribe of Ephraim, a Levite and to Bethlehem in Judah. In the first story one of the elements of decline is the corruption within Ephraim in the person of Micah. He steals from his mother and leads the Levite astray. The second story is about a Levite from Ephraim who fails to take care of his wife. While the tribe of Benjamin is guilty of gross immorality, the end of the story recounts the unjust punishment of all Benjaminites. The author paints a bleak picture of moral corruption, even when the Benjaminites are given wives.

At the beginning of the book of Ruth the reader sees that Ruth, although a foreigner, cares for her mother-in-law and wants to know her God. Ruth and Boaz are depicted as role models in terms of the life of '*hesed*'. Naomi refers to Ruth (and to God) by this term (1.8); she also refers to Boaz in this way (2.20) and Boaz refers to Ruth in the same manner (3.10). Boaz, a righteous man, follows the protocol to have Ruth as his wife, redeeming her at the gate rather than taking her at the threshing floor, in contrast to the Benjaminites in Judges who take their wives without any protocol. Boaz cares for Ruth and Naomi and once married to Ruth provides a son who, significantly, like Boaz, is designated a kinsman redeemer.

Thus when the epilogue of Judges and the book of Ruth are set side by side and considered in detail, they provide interesting contrasts. They contrast the tribe of Judah and especially the line of Boaz with the tribes of Ephraim and Benjamin. Interestingly, with all three of these tribes, kingship is associated in one way or another.

While the epilogue of Judges and the book of Ruth provide significant contrasts, each in its turn uses narrative analogy, drawing on the Book of Genesis to underline certain elements. In the epilogue of Judges the episode in Gibeah echoes Genesis 19 and in the book of Ruth an analogy is made between Ruth and Tamar (Genesis 38).⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Gunn, D.M & Fewell, D.N., *Narrative in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) 164-165.

In Gibeah the author describes how an elderly Ephraimite gives hospitality to a fellow Ephraimite and his concubine, rather than have them spending the night in the open square. Instead of upholding the sanctity of that hospitality, a crowd gathers, wanting to engage in immoral behaviour. The Ephraimites are ready to offer up their womenfolk – the host’s daughter and the traveler’s concubine. This echoes the story of Sodom, when Lot gives hospitality to two angels rather than have them spend the night in the open square. Again a crowd gathers, wanting to have sexual relations with the angels. In these circumstances Lot offers his two daughters. In the end the angels blind the offenders in Genesis whereas in Judges the Ephraimite’s concubine is raped and killed. The Judges’ episode reveals that these are dark and shocking times in the history of Israel; the analogy with Genesis 19 emphasizes this fact.

The analogy between Ruth and Tamar, while at first seemingly inappropriate, is significant. Firstly, they are both Gentile women, foreigners to the Israelite nation. Yet, by their fortitude and courage in the midst of unusual situations, they show their identification with Israel and God’s purposes for it. Secondly, Tamar and Ruth are both widowed and are unable to have offspring. Each has a problem of implementing a levirate marriage. Thirdly, in both cases Tamar and Ruth’s actions are open to misinterpretation. Tamar’s relationship with Judah casts her as a prostitute and Ruth’s outing to the threshing floor could be perceived as encouraging sexual immorality. Fourthly, both are associated with a special family lineage. In Genesis the Hebrew word זָרַע ‘seed’ or ‘offspring’ is used as a *Leitwort* to draw attention to the distinctive line of ‘seed.’⁵⁷ In Gen. 38.8-9 special attention is given to this motif, making the subsequent birth of Perez significant. In Ruth the people and elders at the gate invoke the blessing: ‘May your family be like that of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.’ (4.12) Perez’ birth is also emphasized at the end of the book (4.18).

⁵⁷ Alexander T. Desmond: *From Paradise to the Promised Land* (England: Paternoster, 1995) 103-111

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In conclusion, our reading of Ruth has noted the common features of historical setting and geographical connection with the epilogue of Judges. We have also noted the stark contrasts that occur when the two sections are considered side by side; it is easy to view them as two alternative epilogues. By setting Ruth within the literary context of Genesis to Kings our reading is enriched, especially when we observe Judah's ascendancy over Ephraim and David's kingship over Saul's.

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