



RUTH

A COMMENTARY

LISBETH S. FRIED

RUTH



A Critical Commentary

*Like fluttering birds, thrown out of the nest, so are
the daughters of Moab at the fords of the Arnon.*

*Give counsel, grant justice; make your shade like
night at the height of noon; hide the outcasts, do
not betray the fugitive; let the outcasts of Moab
settle among you; be a refuge to them from the
destroyer.*

—Isaiah 16.2-4

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i>
AJS Review	<i>Association for Jewish Studies Review</i>
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament with Supplement</i>
Ant.	Flavius Josephus, <i>Antiquities of the Jews</i>
ET	English Translation
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
HUCA	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JHS	<i>Journal of Hellenic Studies</i>
JSOT	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, Supplement Series</i>
LHB/OTS	Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies
Nbk	J.N. Strassmaier, <i>Inschriften von Nabuchodonosor, König von Babylon</i> (Leipzig: Pfeiffer, 1889)
NEAEHL	<i>The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land</i>
SBL	Society of Biblical Literature
SJOT	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament</i>
TAD	B. Porten and A. Yardeni, <i>Textbook of Aramaic Documents from Ancient Egypt: Volumes I–IV Newly Copied, Edited and Translated into Hebrew and English</i> (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1986–1999)
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The impetus for this commentary on the book of Ruth began several years ago, in the spring of 2021, on the eve of Shavuoth, when I offered to give a talk on the book of Ruth at our local synagogue. I knew nothing about the book before this, but I remembered studying the ‘Bible as Literature’ at the University of Michigan with Prof. Piotr Michalowski many years before. Among the various theories of literature that he taught was that of Vladimir Propp’s *Morphology of a Folktale*. Since Ruth is often referred to as a folktale, for the purposes of the talk, I wanted to see if Propp’s analysis would fit Ruth. I was shocked to find that it fit the story like a glove! I gave the same talk at a conference at New York University in memory of Baruch A. Levine and again at the International Society of Biblical Literature meeting in Salzburg. The reactions of the audiences were always the same—shock and disbelief. I hope you, Dear Reader, do not mind having your expectations overturned, and that you enjoy reading this commentary as much as I have enjoyed writing it.

I want to thank Rav Nadav Caine of Ann Arbor for allowing me the first opportunity to explore this book, as well as Profs. Piotr Michalowski, Peter Machinist, Lawrence Schiffman, Daniel Flemming and everyone both at the University of Michigan and at New York University who taught me so much about how to approach the biblical text. I also offer a big thank you to Profs. Jack Sasson and Pamela Milne for their friendship and for many fruitful conversations on applying Propp to the book of Ruth. I thank Edward Greenstein, E. Jay Mills, and Lawrence Wills for reading and critiquing parts of the book, John Schmale for translating Gunkel’s fractur, Jodi Magness for explaining women’s dress code in the ancient Near East, and Duncan Burns for the indexes. Thank you.

Again, I thank the people at Sheffield for accepting this book into their Critical Commentary series and Paul Kobelski for his painstaking editing of the manuscript. I extend many thanks to the wonderful people at the University of Michigan Department of Middle East Studies for their unflagging support and encouragement of my work. I dedicate this book, as always, to Mike Fried, in grateful appreciation for his love and support over many years of marriage.

Ann Arbor
October 6, 2023
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INTRODUCTION

Who is an insider and who is an outsider in the stories of the Hebrew Bible (Wills 2008: 1)? The book of Ruth is about the quintessential outsider and asks if he or she could ever step over the border and become a Jew. Would (or should) the Judean community accept or even trust the outsider? Indeed, would it have been possible—whenever Ruth was written—for the outsider to have become an insider?

As Lawrence Wills points out (1990: 1), many Jewish narratives tell the story of a wise and righteous Jewish courtier who, although an outsider, undergoes adventures while serving in the court of a foreign king. Wills points to the stories of Joseph (Gen. 37–50), Esther, Daniel (1–6), and 1 Esdras 3–4, and dubs them ‘court narratives’, narratives that present ‘ideals of popular wisdom in a narrative form’ (Wills 1990: 1). Rather than preaching or simply listing ideal behaviors, these stories display the protagonist as embodying these ideals.

The story of Ruth exemplifies this wisdom genre in Ruth’s care and solicitude for her mother-in-law (Joüon 1986: 2; Quick 2020). It also turns the genre on its head. Rather than the Jew serving in the court of a foreign king, it is the story of a foreign woman, Ruth, serving in the court of a Jewish king, or at least in the court of the ancestor of that king, of Boaz.

As with other court narratives, this setting determines the historical consequences of the tale. In Wills’s words, ‘the high court setting of the drama communicates the universal, empire-wide consequences of the story’ (Wills 1990: 9). Here the ‘empire-wide’ consequence results from the fact that Ruth’s descendant is none other than King David himself. Like Esther and Daniel, it is also a Diasporanovelle, in that Ruth, the protagonist, has left her home and taken unto herself a foreign god and a foreign way of life. If Esther is marked as an exemplar of Jewish morality because she finally admits her Jewish identity, Ruth is all the more the heroine, because she, in spite of a non-Jewish identity, becomes a mother in Israel. Nevertheless, the Davidic line to which she gives birth is now irrevocably infected with the Moabite strain. Viewed this way, we may interpret Ruth as a bawdy tale of comeuppance, in which the usual values of wisdom tales are turned upside down.

*The Place of the Book of Ruth
in the Liturgical Calendar*

In the Hebrew tradition, this book is known as Megillat Ruth, or the Scroll of Ruth, and it is read in the synagogues on the festival of Shavuot, that is, the festival of Weeks, or Pentecost. The Old Testament includes five such books that are labeled Megillot, or scrolls—Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes and Esther. They are placed together in the Tanach (the Hebrew Bible) and placed according to the order in which they are used in the synagogue service. The Song of Songs is read during Passover (March–April, early spring, the beginning of the liturgical year). The book of Ruth is read on Shavuot, or Weeks–Pentecost, which occurs seven weeks after Passover in late spring (Num. 28.26). Lamentations is read on Tisha b'Av, the Ninth of Av (mid-summer), the anniversary of the destructions of both the first and second Jerusalem temples, as that book mourns their loss. Ecclesiastes, or Qohelet, is read during Sukkot, or Tabernacles, the festival of Booths, which is celebrated in the early fall. Esther is read in February, late winter, at the end of the liturgical year, during the holiday of Purim as it provides the impetus for that holiday. Ruth, the story of a Moabite woman, is considered appropriate for the holiday of Weeks since the holiday commemorates not only the festivals of the barley and wheat harvests but also the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai. This is because Ruth participated in both the barley and wheat harvests as a gleaner (2.17) and had also accepted the Judean god (1.16).

Position in the Canon

In the Hebrew Bible these five Megillot are placed together in the third and last section of the Bible: the first section being the Torah, or the Law of Moses, the second being the Prophets, and the third being the Writings. Among the Writings, these five scrolls are currently placed after Job and before Daniel. This must not have been the original order of the books, however, since according to the Talmud (*B. Bat.* 14b), Ruth was at one time first in the Writings, even before the Psalms (Rudolph 1962: 23). This may be because it was viewed as being composed by Samuel, and thus earlier than the psalms of David and a fitting introduction to it (Rudolph 1962: 23). The Leningrad Codex, the oldest extant manuscript of the Hebrew Bible and dated to 1009 CE, arranges the five Megillot in their presumed chronological order in which Ruth is first, as it is dated to the time of the judges (Ruth 1.1). In Christian Bibles, however, the book, 'like a lost maverick, wanders around in the canonical order' (Campbell 1974: 83). Most often it is placed right after the book of Judges, but sometimes it is separated from the book of Judges and placed at the beginning of the Writings or in any

of the positions in that group (Campbell 1974: 83) Placing the book after the book of Judges, gives it a historical context and a historical implication. This is the order in the Septuagint, leading the author of Matthew to include Ruth in Jesus's genealogy (1.5). Placing Ruth among the Writings, however, gives it, in contrast, a sapiential context (Sonnet 2021: 13). In this arrangement, the reader is intended rather to ask what can be learned from the book about how one should live a life.

It should be pointed out, however, that the issue of the order of the books implies a codex, that is a book whose pages are stacked on top of each other and sewn or glued together at one edge. Prior to the invention of the codex, books were written separately on scrolls, and the scrolls placed randomly on shelves with no fixed order. The codex was likely invented in the first century CE and achieved parity with the scroll by the fourth century. Thus, it is only with the development of the codex that the order of the books becomes relevant.

Date

Pre-exilic

Many scholars consider the story pre-exilic. Collins suggests that the story presupposes an agrarian society where people moved easily between Judah and Moab, so that it is more likely to have been written before the exile (Collins 2018: 565). Rudolph argues that if Deut. 23.4 [ET 23.3] had been in effect, the story of a marriage between Ruth, a Moabite, and Mahlon, Elimelech's son, could never have been written, since according to Deuteronomy:

לֹא-יָבֹא עַמּוֹנִי וּמוֹאָבִי בְּקֶהֱל יְהוָה, גַּם דּוֹר עֲשִׂירִי לֹא-יָבֹא לָהֶם בְּקֶהֱל יְהוָה עַד-
עוֹלָם:

No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to YHWH's assembly. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to YHWH's assembly,

Thus, Rudolph argues that the book of Ruth must have been written before Deuteronomy. He also considers the law of the *levir* in Deut. 25.7 to be a considerable weakening of the custom as represented in Ruth 1.11. (See further at the Excursuses in Ruth 2.) Because of these two cases, Rudolph concludes that Deuteronomy must be later than Ruth and that Ruth must therefore be late pre-exilic at the latest (Rudolph 1962: 28-29, 63). Nielsen concurs, assuming a widespread agreement that the author is to be found within the royal court, adding that 'recent research generally agrees on a pre-exilic date' (Nielsen 1997: 29). Van Wolde (1997: 120) agrees that Ruth must have preceded Deuteronomy, since in Deuteronomy marriages with a Moabite are precluded. Although Hayes conspicuously omits Ruth from her discussion of *Gentile Impurities* (2002), she seems to assume a

pre-exilic date for both Ruth and the Genesis narratives, a time when she assumes that such intermarriages were permitted. Van Wolde (1997: 120) agrees that the Hebrew of Ruth is that of Genesis, Samuel and Kings, which she assumes to have been written before Deuteronomy and before the fall of Judah to Babylon. She asserts that the Hebrew is completely different from that of Esther, Chronicles, or Nehemiah, and so is not postexilic. She points in particular to the lack of *matres lectionis*, that is, letters added to facilitate the correct pronunciation, prevalent in the later texts.

Hubbard (1988: 39-40) suggests, as well, that the purpose of the story is to celebrate the joyous conclusion of the birth of a son, a son who turns out to be the grandfather of King David. Thus, to Hubbard, the story's purpose must be seen in connection to the Davidic line, and dates it to the time of King Solomon (so also Hamlin 1996: 3). Is this telling of David's ancestry positive or negative, however (Nielsen 1997: 23)? To Nielsen, a genealogy that includes the story of Tamar who produced children by posing as a prostitute and seducing her father-in-law, and Ruth, a Moabite, who produced a child by seducing the wealthy Boaz, must be seen as negative. She suggests that it may have been opponents of the Davidic dynasty who were interested in promulgating this story. Nielsen concludes that the book should be dated to the pre-exilic period, therefore, and to have been written by followers of Saul and his sons.

Exilic

Frevel (1992) sees the book as expressing the hope for a return, and Naomi and Ruth as prototypes of the returnees and as encouraging such a return (Frevel 1992: 34). He therefore dates it to the period of the exile.

Postexilic

In a detailed examination of the features of late (LBH) and Standard Biblical Hebrew (SBH) (the latter perceived as pre-exilic Biblical Hebrew), Bush concludes, in contrast to the above, that Ruth must have been written at the beginning of the postexilic period (Bush 1996: 18-30). His dating is followed by Sakenfeld (1999: 3), Schipper (2016: 22), and de Villiers (2017). Joüon (1986: 11) also finds the language to be later than that of Jeremiah or Kings, which he considers pre-exilic. On the basis of eight lexemes, Zevit agrees (2005: 592-94), concluding, moreover, that although Ruth was not written after the sixth century, it was probably written toward its end, at the time of the return from Babylon. Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky (2011) agree with Zevit on a Persian-period date, and they like many others (e.g. Vesco 1967; Braulik 1999; Lacocque 2004; Köhlmoos 2010: xiv; Hawk 2015; Jones 2016; de Villiers 2017; and Meynet 2022) all see Ruth as a rebuttal against the exclusionary practices of Ezra–Nehemiah, which they also date to the Persian period.

I have recently tried to show, however, that the story of Ezra, of his reading the law (Neh. 8), and of the mass divorce of foreign women described there (Ezra 7–10) must be dated at the earliest to the beginning of the second century BCE (Fried 2021a: 6; Fried and Mills 2018). This is primarily because although Ben Sira knows the story of Zerubbabel and Jeshua's building the temple (Sir. 49.11–12), and the story of Nehemiah building the wall (Sir. 49.13), he does not know the story of Ezra coming to Jerusalem to teach the torah. Ben Sira, scribe and priest, would certainly have included Ezra's story had he known it. That he does not include it is telling. Thus, the chapters regarding Ezra (i.e. Ezra 7–10, Neh. 8) must have been written after Ben Sira, and so in the beginning years of the second century BCE at the earliest. Archaeological investigations reveal, moreover, that the towns listed in Neh. 11.25–36 could not have been described as belonging to Judah until after the Maccabean wars, since many were not inhabited in the Persian period (Fulton 2015; Finkelstein 2018; Fried 2021a: 319–25). Thus, if the book of Ruth is a response to Nehemiah and Ezra's putative prohibition against intermarriage, it too must be dated to the Hellenistic period.

It is argued in this commentary that the book of Ruth is a folktale, written at the same time as Ezra–Nehemiah, with its same goal, and is not a rebuttal at all. Indeed, Joüon (1986: 6) asks if the book of Ruth would ever have been admitted into the canon if it actually went against the tendencies of Ezra–Nehemiah.

Hellenistic

In contrast to estimates of a pre-exilic or a postexilic, Persian period dating for Ruth, Lawrence Wills (1994; 1995; see also Zenger 1992; Johnson 2004) has discussed the many Jewish novellas like Ruth that are still extant and dates them all to the years between 200 BCE and 100 CE. He includes such stories as Esther, Daniel, Tobit, Judith, Joseph and Aseneth, and Susanna in this grouping. Wills does not include Ruth, but Sonnet (2021: 22) does, including as well Bel and the Dragon. Wills characterizes all of these as fictitious stories marked by 'adventurous tones, happy endings, and important women characters' (1995: 1). Although he does not include Ruth, in agreement with Sonnet, Wills's description of these stories matches any description of Ruth—'adventurous tones, happy endings, and important women characters'.

This period, the beginning of the second century BCE, is the period of strong Greek influence on the culture of Israel, and in contrast to earlier periods, Hellenistic plays and novels of the classical period were likely performed in Judea (the term for Judah under the Greeks) (Wills 1995). These stories often portray important women characters. Greek women, like Judean women, had no social function in the public world of the city. Women who have the temerity to emerge from the inner chambers of the

home in these novels usually come to some violent end—committing suicide if married and sacrificed if they are virgins (Wills 1995: 12). These stories are projections of male fears, and, I argue, the same is true of the book of Ruth, although perhaps not so strongly or so overtly. Ruth neither commits suicide at the end nor is she sacrificed, but she is certainly subdued, contained and controlled. Wills suggests that the heroine in Hellenistic stories becomes the medium through which ‘certain obsessions of the [male] author and audience are expressed’ (Wills 1995: 13). According to Wills, ‘at a crucial moment in the narrative, near the middle but before the decisive action of the climax, the female protagonist enters into a process of cleansing and self-abasement’. We find in Ruth as well that just before the climax, Ruth is told to wash herself and change her clothes (3.3), and then, alone and in the dark of night, she descends from the town of Bethlehem into the bowels of the threshing floor. Ruth has descended from the Moabite stranger to an available and easy sex partner. Her change of clothes indicating a change of identity or perhaps just a disguise.

In the Hellenistic novel the female protagonist is often placed in jeopardy (Wills 1995: 14), and so we have it here as well. Ruth is told to descend to the threshing floor, to meet and seduce Boaz at night, alone, and in the dark (3.4). The Hellenistic novel exhibits ‘the association of desire, religion, and cruelty’ in the male author, and the ‘debasement of the woman’s physical body’ which is a ‘male projection ... of the sin perceived to be inherent in women’s attractiveness’ (Wills 1995: 14-15). Wills suggests (1995: 16) that the characterization of Esther is that of the Gothic heroine, but the ‘youth, beauty, sensibility, innocence, propriety, delicacy, and filial obedience’ that he sees in Esther are certainly also characteristic of Ruth. Wills continues (Wills 1995: 16) by noting that ‘in the Gothic novel, filial obedience becomes a problematic virtue for the heroine’, and this we certainly have in Ruth as well—obeying her mother-in-law puts her virtue and perhaps her life at risk. In the Hellenistic novel we also see the beginning of erotic love (Wills 1995: 18) and the beginning of an emphasis and reliance on the nuclear family, and this is also apparent in Ruth. Most of all, we see in Ruth, as in the Hellenistic novels, ‘the gaudy triumph of happiness over suffering’ (Wills 1995: 19).

By dating Ruth to the Hellenistic period of the creation of the novella, rather than to the Persian period, we are able to understand the fear of the ‘other’ that is present in Ruth (and in Ezra–Nehemiah as well). Judea was then surrounded by Greek culture, and the threat of the loss of one’s own traditions, language, laws and customs was great. The conquest of Judea by Alexander, and then by the Ptolemies and the Seleucids, initiated the dark impact of the ‘stranger’ on Judean soil. The concomitant fear of the other becomes evident in Jewish writings of the period. In 1 Maccabees, for example, the foes of Judas Maccabeus were ‘the nations’, τὰ ἔθνη. As

Gruen argues, ‘more pointedly, and more revealingly, 1 Maccabees refers to Judah’s hostile elements as ‘the nations roundabout’, τὰ ἔθνη τὰ κύκλῳ’ (1 Macc. 3.25, 1 Macc. 5; Gruen 1998: 5). Thus, it is not the Greeks per se who are described as threatening, but rather those from the ancient nations that surrounded Judah, the ones who had presented a threat to the biblical state (e.g. Deut. 2.25; 1 Chron. 14.17). They were the ones who were now described as threatening Hellenistic Judea. The author of 1 Maccabees attempts to present Judas’s military campaigns as victories over the Jews’ ancient enemies—the Canaanites, Ammonites, Moabites, Edomites and Philistines—who no longer existed—and not as victories against the Greeks themselves (Gruen 1998: 5-8). Josephus too describes Jannaeus’s military victory over the Arabs in terms of a victory over Judah’s ancient enemies of Moab and Gilead (13.374-75; Gruen 1998: 27). Placing the story of Ruth in this context in which the ancient land of Moab is suddenly viable, suddenly a threat, gives relevance to the story. These were the issues that beset the authors of Ezra and Nehemiah, whose final edition should also be placed in the Hellenistic period and at the time of the Maccabean conquest (Fried 2021a: 6, 325). The purpose of the book of Ruth then is to narrate how the people Israel should cope with strangers in their midst (Hawk 2015: 19). These are the issues that are in the background of the novellas that Wills discusses. They are in the background of Ruth as well.

In addition to the generalized ‘fear of the other’ which is at issue in Ruth, the literature of the Hellenistic Age also includes ‘an interest in animals (especially pets), babies, children, women, and the grotesque; common or working people and the tools of their trades; landscapes; cities; the passions of romantic love and of sinning; pathos; and the burlesque’ (Fowler 1989: 4). Women, working people, and the tools of their trades are certainly aspects of the story of Ruth. The Hellenistic period is also characterized by an interest in personalities and settings that mirror the everyday and focus on the individual (Hawk 2015: 23-43). There is also a focus on emotional issues—placing a vulnerable woman in jeopardy is key (Wills 1995: 4). We see this in Ruth—a vulnerable woman is certainly placed in jeopardy. We see, as well, an interest in the common and the ordinary, in the passion of the sexual encounter, and in sinning. We also have in Ruth, as in Hellenistic literature in general, the grotesque, that is, the transgression of boundaries, as well as a keen interest in magic and sin (Wills 1995: 5).

Hellenistic literature also includes detailed descriptions of the physical scene with rich color terms (Fowler 1989: 15-22). We see this in the description of Ahasuerus’s palace (Est. 1.6-7), but nowhere in Ruth (nor in Ezra–Nehemiah, for that matter), so that this lack of physical descriptions suggests perhaps that Ruth was written early in the Hellenistic period. Hellenistic literature is also characterized by details of the emotional and psychological reactions of the protagonists (Fowler 1989: 79-91). This is

also missing in Ruth and even in Esther, but present in Esther's Hellenistic Addition D. We are told of the deaths of Naomi's husband and sons, for example, but there is no description of her actually grieving for them. She describes herself as 'bitter', but the reader is not led to experience her bitterness or her loss with her. In any case we have an attempt to be realistic, to present life as it may actually have been. This characterizes the Hellenistic novel and is vividly, but tersely, presented in Ruth.

Fowler also describes the subtle eroticism and the role of magic and witchcraft that appears in the Hellenistic aesthetic (1989: 137-55), and to the use of a sorceress as a seducer of men (1989: 144-45). Fowler also notes the deliberate archaizing—the stories are set in the archaic past (1989: 156-67). As we will see, these characteristics are present in Ruth and combine to strongly imply that the story was written in the early years of the Hellenistic period, at the earliest, at the beginning of the creation of the novel.

Wills (1995: 26) sees the origination of the novel in the period when the biblical books were finalized and combined. A study of Nehemiah 9 convinces that at the time of its writing a fixed written torah did not yet exist, and the stories that did exist had not yet been combined into a whole (Newman 1999: 105; Fried 2021a: 268-69). Moreover, analysis of the prayer in Nehemiah 9 suggests it should be dated to the Hellenistic period, the time of the Maccabees, when the book Ezra–Nehemiah itself was finalized (Fried 2021a: 6.). This is likely the date of Ruth as well. Stressing the Moabite ancestry of King David also suggests a time period when the Davidic dynasty was no longer held in high regard, that is, the exilic, post-exilic, Hellenistic and pre-Roman periods (Fried 2002; Fried and Mills 2018). Indeed, a parallel to the story of Ruth may be found in the story of Judith, dated to the Hasmonian period (Gera 2020). In Ruth, a Moabite is described as converting to Judaism, and in Judith, an Ammonite (Jdt. 14.10). Another indication of Ruth's late dating stems from the book of Chronicles. Chronicles knows the story of Ruth (1 Chron. 2.10-15; Knoppers 2003: 305; Klein 2006: 88), but the book of Kings does not.

Although the language of Ruth has been probed and described as dating anywhere from the pre-exilic period (exhibiting Standard Biblical Hebrew) to the period of the exile or postexilic period (exhibiting Aramaisms and evidence of Late Biblical Hebrew; see review in Jones 2016: 121-26), it is interesting to note that the concept of 'acquiring a wife' (Ruth 4.5, 10), while unique in the Hebrew Bible, occurs elsewhere only in Sir. 36.24.

Moab

Moab hovers in the background as a strong, omnipresent, but silent character in the book of Ruth. The relations between Judah and Moab as described in the Hebrew Bible and on the ninth-century Moabite Stela found in Jor-