

The Book of Ruth: A Contrast to the End of The Book of Judges

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The Book of Ruth provides a contrast to the last two narratives in the Book of Judges. The impression one gains from the end of Judges is that of a nation in chaos, with no moral compass or sense of right and wrong. Ruth presents a very different view of that era, in which people lead peaceful lives and help one another. In the final chapters (17-21) of the Book of Judges, Israelites repeatedly perform acts that seem moral to them on the surface, but which in fact lead to theft, murder, rape, and ultimately civil war. By contrast, those figuring in the Book of Ruth perform many of the same acts morally and virtuously, looking beyond the surface of Ruth as a foreigner and recognizing the goodness within her. In this way, the story of Ruth serves as a thematic contrast to the depravity recorded in the closing chapters of Judges. The Israelites transform themselves from a society that is superficially virtuous, but in reality corrupt, to a society that learns to look beyond surface appearances and to recognize virtue from within.¹

In this article I will briefly outline the basic connections between Judges and Ruth, highlighting select words in these two books that indicate the patterns of corruption and virtue outlined above and which show, thematically, how the Book of Ruth serves as a contrast to the evil deeds recorded in the final chapters of Judges. This analysis will accentuate the difference between the ending of the Book of Judges and that of the Book of Ruth. While the last chapters of Judges include a refrain that ultimately turns into the declaration, *In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as he pleased* (Judg. 21:25), the Book of Ruth concludes, in stark contrast to the chaos and anarchy described in Judges, with the pronouncement of a new era of kingship, the birth of King David (Ruth 4:22).²

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BASIC CONNECTION BETWEEN THE BOOK OF JUDGES AND THE BOOK OF RUTH

The Book of Ruth opens with the words, *In the days when the judges judged* (Ruth 1:1). In these first words we are told that the story unfolds within the time period of Judges. The Babylonian Talmud also connects the authorship of both books, ascribing Judges and Ruth to the prophet Samuel (TB *Bava Batra* 14b).

LINGUISTIC CUES

In Judges, the Israelites mustered for a devastating civil war are designated "warriors who draw [*sholef*] the sword" (Judg. 20:2). This is the only instance in the Tanakh where those drawing their swords are called *fighting men on foot*. In Ruth, the verb "to draw" [*shalaf*] is again used in the context of feet. Here, though, Boaz virtuously redeems his kinsman's field when he draws off [*va-yishlof*] his shoe (Ruth 4:7-8). The root *sh-l-f* appears 25 times in the Hebrew Bible, six of these in chapter 20 of Judges. Furthermore, on 21 of these occasions, it refers to men who draw swords, twice more to wishing that ill befall the wicked and enemies of Israel. Only in the Book of Ruth does *sh-l-f* occur in an entirely peaceful context, when it is used twice to describe how Boaz redeemed Elimelech's field.

The root *d-v-k* in Judges is used to describe Israelites chasing each other in battle. For example, the men who lived near Micah are said to have overtaken [*va-yadbiku*] the Danites (Judg. 18:22). Then, during the civil war, when the Benjamites tried to escape to the wilderness, *the fighting caught up with them* [*hidbikat'hu*] (20:42). In the Book of Ruth, *davak* takes on the meaning of virtuous loyalty, both when Ruth clings [*davekah*] to Naomi, her mother-in-law after the death of her husband and when Boaz tells Ruth to stay close [*tidbakin*] to his maidens and field in order to collect food for Naomi and herself (Ruth 1:14; 2:8; 2:23). The *d-v-k* root appears three times in three consecutive chapters at the end of Judges and four times in two chapters of Ruth. In its next most common occurrence, it appears eight times in of 24 chapters of Deuteronomy.³

The root *l-y-n*, meaning "to lodge" or "stay overnight," is used 71 times in the Tanakh: 13 times in chapters 18-20 of Judges, 12 of these occurring in the concubine of Gibeah episode, a tale of perverse hospitality that leads to rape,

killing, and ultimately civil-war (see, for example, Judg. 20:4-5). The recurrent use of *l-y-n* in these chapters is in direct contrast to the way it is employed when Ruth professes her loyalty to Naomi and when Boaz offers her protection and honorable treatment (Ruth 1:16; 3:13).

THEMATIC CONNECTIONS

Although many of the actions performed by the Israelites in Judges are good and moral in their eyes, they are in fact wicked and perverse. These actions are again performed, morally and virtuously, in Ruth. They include invoking God's name in a blessing, offering hospitality, and attempting to save a lost part of the House of Israel.⁴

BLESSINGS

The final chapters of Judges begin with the story of Micah, which has many positive elements. When he returns lost money to his mother, she proclaims *'Blessed of the Lord be my son'* and dedicates the whole amount to God (Judg. 17:2). They consider themselves to be acting righteously and appropriately, but the acts they perform are utterly corrupt. Micah tells his mother that he knows where the money is because he stole it; and she consecrates the money to God by requesting her son to have an idol made with it (17:3). This story ends with a refrain that will recur in the succeeding chapters: *In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did as he pleased* (17:6).

By contrast, in the Book of Ruth, people bless God while acting virtuously. We meet Boaz as he greets his servants, *'The Lord be with you!'* and they reply, *'The Lord bless you!'* (Ruth 2:4). When Naomi sees Ruth returning with an abundance of sheaves, she declares: *'Blessed be he who took such generous notice of you'* (2:19). After Ruth tells Naomi that it was Boaz who allowed her to glean in his field, Naomi replies, *'Blessed be he of the Lord'* (2:20). When Boaz learns that it is Ruth who came down to his threshing floor, he exclaims: *'Be blessed of the Lord, daughter!'* (3:10). Subsequently, after Boaz has redeemed Elimelech's field, all the people at the gate and the elders bestow many blessings on Ruth and Boaz; and after they have a son, the women tell Naomi, *'Blessed be the Lord, who has not withheld a redeemer from you today!'* (4:11-14).

HOSPITALITY

In Judges, the protagonists in the concubine of Gibeah story also believe that they are acting righteously, whereas their behavior is in fact sinful. The story begins with a reminder of the prevailing anarchy: *In those days, when there was no king in Israel. . .* (Judg. 19:1). On the surface, this a tale of remarkable hospitality. A Levite follows his concubine to her father's house to bring her back home after she cheated on him. There they are repeatedly urged to *stay* and enjoy more hospitality. When they finally depart, the Levite, his servant and his concubine reach Gibeah in the territory of Benjamin, where an old Ephraimite living there invites them to *stay* at his home, provides fodder for their donkeys, bathes his guests' feet, and gives them food and drink. That night, depraved men surround the house, wishing to have intercourse with the Levite, and the man from Ephraim seeks to protect him.

However, the Ephraimite is prepared to do his duty as a host by sacrificing two women under his roof instead of the Levite. He offers the perverts his own virgin daughter and the Levite's concubine. These men rape and abuse the poor concubine all night long. When the Levite finds her lying dead the next morning, he takes her body home, cuts it into twelve pieces, and sends them around the Land of Israel. These actions lead to the anarchy of civil war. They recall the episode in which Lot shelters the angels in Sodom (Genesis 19), but they also contrast with an episode in the Book of Ruth.⁵

There, Boaz shows how to treat a guest properly. Naomi encourages Ruth to seek Boaz as a husband by secretly lying close to him at night. When Boaz discovers Ruth is at his feet, he tells her not to be afraid because '*all the elders of my town know what a fine woman you are*' (Ruth 3:12). He then asks Ruth to *stay* with him [*lini*] until morning. As previously indicated, *l-y-n* is the root used by the concubine's father, as well as by the old Ephraimite in Gibeah. However, in this story, Boaz tells Ruth to stay, pointing out that local folk know her to be virtuous. In Judges 19:22, the locals demand that the visitor be sent out for their depraved enjoyment. They say *ve-neda'ennu*, "so that we may know [be intimate with] him," in marked contrast to the knowledge townsfolk have of Naomi's daughter-in-law (Ruth 3:12). Boaz sends Ruth back safely with food for Naomi and an undertaking to provide for them.

SAVING ONE'S BROTHER

The final episode in Judges is, in many ways, the most glaring example of an action that leaves a deceptively positive impression, war between the tribes. On the face of it, the Israelites unite and gather as *one man before the Lord* (Judg. 20:1), declaring that they intend to *stamp out the evil from Israel* (20:13). During this conflict they bring offerings to God and ask Him for guidance.

This "unified" and "virtuous" battle, however, amounts to a civil war! The Israelites brag about their unity as they fight against their own brethren. They finally kill at least 25,100 of the Benjamite men, drive another 600 into the wilderness, and destroy all the remaining towns, inhabitants and livestock they can find (20:35, 47-48).

When the war ends, the Israelites attempt to redeem themselves. Earlier on, they took an oath not to marry Benjamite men, vowing that anyone who failed to take that oath would be killed. Now they bitterly regret the slaughter of Benjamite women, for if there are no surviving women to marry the last 600 men of Benjamin, the tribe will cease to exist. The Israelites realize that the people of Jabesh-gilead were not at the oath-taking ceremony; hence their daughters can still marry Benjamites. The Israelites send fighters to Jabesh-gilead, ordering them to kill all the townsfolk, *women and children included* (21:10). Since the oath stated that anyone who failed to take part in the war *shall be put to death* (21:5), the Israelites believe that they are "simply" fulfilling their oath by killing the people of Jabesh-gilead. Under the cloak of an ill-advised vow, supposedly upholding the word of God, they save 400 virgin brides for the men of Benjamin, thus abrogating an otherwise unbreakable oath. However, the Israelites are still short of 200 virgins, so they tell the Benjamites to hide in the vineyards near Shiloh and kidnap the girls dancing at a religious festival there (21:20-21).

In the last chapter of Ruth, Boaz also faces the likely disappearance of an Israelite clan, since the names of his kinsmen, Naomi's husband and sons, will be lost if her field is not redeemed. Boaz meets Naomi's closest relative and asks if he will accept the responsibilities of a *go'el*, redeemer (Ruth 4:3-5). After the latter declines, Boaz proclaims before witnesses that *the name of the deceased shall not disappear from among his brethren*, performs the ritual act of redeeming the field, and then marries Ruth (4:6-10, 13). Instead of the

slaughter of brethren, this act of redemption ends in new life, the birth of a son.

In the Book of Judges, while the Israelite warriors initially proclaim their unity, they finally disperse, *each to his own tribe and family; everyone for his own territory* (21:24). Judges then ends with the refrain: *In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did as he pleased* (21:25). At the beginning of the Book of Ruth, Naomi suggests that her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, also go back to their own land and maternal home. Ruth's reply, however, is: *'Wherever you go, I will go; wherever you lodge [talini], I will lodge; your people shall be my people and your God my God'* (1:16). Furthermore, in contrast to the end of Judges, where everyone returns to his own home, the Book of Ruth ends with the public celebration of a new home in Israel, that of Boaz and Ruth.

ADDITIONAL LINGUISTIC CONNECTIONS

Aware of the literary and thematic connections between these two stories, the reader can now appreciate the significance of various words that describe perverse actions in Judges and virtuous ones in Ruth. Taken together, the abundant parallels suggest a deliberate comparison.

For example, when the Israelites realize that they will lose the tribe of Benjamin as a result of civil war, they turn to God and accuse Him of having caused a breach [*peretz*] in Israel (Judg. 21:15). In Ruth, the word *peretz* becomes part of a benediction. After Boaz successfully prevents the loss of a family in Israel through his redemption of Elimelech's field, he and Ruth are given a blessing that *their house may be like the house of Perez*, the son of Judah and Tamar, from whom Boaz traced his ancestry (Ruth 4:12, 18-21).⁶

In Judges, the name Tamar also refers to Baal-tamar, a place that figures in the civil war (Judg. 20:33). In the Book of Ruth, however, Tamar figures as the wife of Judah and her name is associated with a blessing.

The root *p-k-d* is used in Judges to describe how the Israelites weep and wail before God over the likelihood that one tribe, Benjamin, will "now be missing [*le-hippaked*] from Israel" because too many of them have been killed during the civil war (Judg. 21:3). This contrasts with the way Naomi is specifically told that God has "taken note of [*pakad*] His people" and will not let them die of starvation (Ruth 1:6).

In Judges, the verb *yada* ("to know") is repeatedly used in a negative context. The men of Dan, for example, use it when they plan to steal objects from Micah (Judg. 18:14). It is used most perversely when depraved men in Gibeah wish to have unnatural relations with a Levite, urging his host to send the man out so they can be intimate with him [*ve-neda'ennu*] (Judg. 19:22). Similarly, the verb is used to describe how they ultimately rape [*va-yede'u*] the Levite's concubine (19:25). In Ruth, however, Boaz is referred to as Naomi's and Ruth's kinsman [*moda'tanu*] (Ruth 3:2). Boaz further tells Ruth that she need not fear, because everyone knows [*yode'a*] what a virtuous woman she is (3:12). Finally, unlike the villains in Judges, Boaz tells Ruth to leave by dawn, before her identity is known [*al yivvada*] (3:15). Boaz is perhaps warning Ruth to depart before anyone can assault [*yeda*] or harm her, as was the fate of the concubine in Gibeah.

In Judges, the Danites warn Micah not to shout lest desperate men attack [*yifge'u*] him (Judg. 18:25). In Ruth, the same verb, *paga*, is used to emphasize Ruth's loyalty when she begs Naomi not to urge [*tifge'i*] her to leave (Ruth 1:16). Naomi likewise employs this root when she tells Ruth to "avoid harassment" by staying close to the maidservants in the field of Boaz (2:22).

When the Levite seeks lodging for the night, his attendant suggests finding a place in the city of the Jebusites. However, the Levite refuses to stay in a town that is foreign [*nokhri*] (Judg. 19:12). This contrasts with Ruth the Moabite's appreciation of the fact that Boaz recognizes the goodness within her, even though she is a foreigner [*nokhriyah*] (Ruth 2:10).

In Judges, the word *hayil* (which has various connotations) is applied to soldiers in the deplorable civil war: for example the Benjamites are described as "brave men" [*anshei hayil*] (Judg. 20:44; 46; 21:10). However, throughout Ruth, this word denotes "valor" or "virtue," describing Boaz as "a man of substance" [*ish gibbor hayil*] (Ruth 2:1) and Ruth as "a fine woman" [*eshet hayil*] (3:12). Thus, strength is derived not from military might but from character and chastity.

The term *ah* ("brother") is often applied in Judges to Israelites in opposing camps. When, for example, the Benjamites are asked to hand over "those scoundrels in Gibeah," they refuse to listen to their Israelite brethren [*ahai-hem*] (Judg. 20:13). In Ruth, the word signifies a close relative. Boaz, Naomi's "kinsman on her husband's side," comes to redeem the field "that be-

longed to our brother [*ahinu*] Elimelech" (Ruth 4:3) and declares that "the name of the deceased should not disappear from among his kinsmen" [*ehav*] (4:10).

SEEING BEYOND RUTH'S OUTWARD APPEARANCE

We note in the Book of Ruth how the Israelites demonstrate their rejection of the scandalous behavior described in the final chapters of Judges, by learning to see beyond Ruth's outward appearance as a foreigner and by recognizing her inner righteousness. In this way, the Israelites transform their society from one that performs superficially virtuous actions that are in reality corrupt to one that looks beyond surface appearances and seeks virtue from within.

When Boaz first catches sight of Ruth and asks to whom she belongs, his servant replies: *'She is a Moabite girl who came back with Naomi from the land of Moab'* (2:6). Instantly able to see past Ruth's foreign exterior, Boaz offers her safety and grain from his field. Ruth then asks why he is so kind to her, *'when I am a foreigner?'* (2:10).⁷ In reply, he says that he has been told all about her, especially what she has done for Naomi. Boaz speaks in terms recalling the biblical account of Abram's departure from Haran (Gen. 12:1) to describe how Ruth left her own native land (2:11).⁸ When Naomi sees that Ruth has brought home a large quantity of barley flour, she declares: *'Blessed be he that gave you such generous recognition'*, i.e., saw the goodness within you (2:19).

As the story continues, more people show that they recognize Ruth's inner goodness. When Boaz discovers Ruth at his feet on the threshing floor, he tells her not to be afraid because *'all the elders of my town know what a fine woman you are'* (Ruth 3:12). When Ruth again returns safely to her mother-in-law, and with six measures of barley, Naomi asks: *Mi at bitti?* (literally, *'Who are you, my daughter?'*; 3:16). Saying "my daughter" shows that Naomi realizes it is Ruth and just wishes to know how she has fared; but perhaps she is beginning to see Ruth's inner goodness more clearly and to wonder who Ruth really is.

At the end of the story, after Boaz redeems Elimelech's field and proclaims his intention to marry Ruth, various characters celebrate Ruth's admission to the house of Boaz. *The people at the gate and the elders* pray that Ruth, though born a foreigner, may be like their matriarchs, Rachel and Leah, who

built up the House of Israel (4:11).⁹ The women also tell Naomi that Ruth is *better to you than seven sons* (4:15).¹⁰ The story ends with the son of Ruth and Boaz figuring in the history and future of the people of Israel, as he constitutes a link in the chain from Perez to King David (4:18-22).

SUMMARY

Through words, themes and actions the Book of Ruth provides a striking contrast to the depravity and corruption so evident in the Book of Judges. The narrative of Ruth deals with the redemption of a people as it learns to look beyond outward appearances, to act in a socially responsible manner, and to repudiate the transgressions enumerated in the final chapters of Judges. While Judges continually trots out the refrain, *there was no king in Israel; everyone did as he pleased*, the Book of Ruth shows how Israel deserved a new era of leadership, anticipating the birth of King David, a descendant of Ruth and Boaz.

NOTES

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1. For additional works that compare these chapters of Judges with the Book of Ruth, see S. Becher, "Va-yehi bi-yemei shefet ha-Shofetim: Mah bein Sefer Shofetim li-Megillat Rut?," *Beit Mikra* 35.2 (1989) pp. 149-154; Y. Zakovitch, *Rut: Peirush Mada'i la-Mikra, Mikra le-Yisra'el* (Tel Aviv and Jerusalem: Am Oved and Magnes Press, 1990) pp. 3-4, 15-16; D. Jobling, "Ruth Finds a Home: Canon, Politics, Method," in *The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible*, ed. J. C. Exum and D. J. A. Clines (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1993) pp. 125-139; M. Moore, "To King or Not to King: A Canonical-Historical Approach to Ruth," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 11.1 (2001) pp. 27-41. In July 2009, I shared an earlier version of this article with Y. Ziegler. Based in part on her review of the ideas contained therein, she outlined connections between Judges and Ruth in nos. 2 and 3 of a series of *shi'urim* on the Scroll of Ruth found on the Israel Koschitzky Virtual Beit Midrash website (<http://www.vbm-torah.org/ruth.html>). See especially footnote 11 in *Shi'ur* 3: "I am grateful to Jennifer Rubin Raskas for first pointing out to me the parallel between the civil war and *Megillat Ruth*."

2. See Becher, op. cit., p. 152; Zakovitch, op. cit., p. 15; Jobling, op. cit., p. 131; and Ziegler, *Shi'ur* 2, for additional notes on the contrasting ends of Judges and Ruth.

3. It is six times as common in Ruth and three times as common in Judges as in the next most common occurrence, Deuteronomy.

4. Other thematic connections between Judges and Ruth have been written about, including the themes of returning home (Zakovitch, 16; Moore, 35-37), ethics and religion (Moore 38-39),

expressions of kindness (Moore 39-40), primary loyalties (Ziegler, *Shi'ur* 3), food (ibid.), and the transformation of women from a virilocal to a patrilocal system (Jobling, 132-134).

5. See, for example, Ramban's commentary on Genesis 19:8.

6. Much has been written about the similarity between the narrative in the Book of Ruth and the Judah and Tamar narrative in Genesis 38. See, for example, Zakovitch, pp. 26-28, and E. Wolde, "Texts in Dialogue with Texts: Intertextuality in the Ruth and Tamar narratives," *Biblical Interpretation* 5.1 (1997) pp. 1-28.

7. As previously stated, in contrast to the episode in Judges where the Levite would not consider entering a city that is foreign [*nokhri*] (Judg. 19:12).

8. Boaz states that he has been told how you, Ruth, *left your father [avikh] and mother, and the land of your birth [eretz moladetekh] and came to a people you had not known before* (2:11). In Genesis, the Lord tells Abram: *Go forth from your land [artzekha], your birthplace [moladetekha], and the house of your father [beit avikha] to the land [eretz] that I will show you* (Gen. 12:1). In this way, Boaz not only shows he can see past Ruth as a foreigner, but even compares her to the patriarch of his people. For an example of another writer who has noted this comparison, see Zakovitch, p. 9.

9. Perhaps echoing Boaz's comparison of Ruth to a founder of their people.

10. This recalls how Elkanah asked Hannah if he was not better for her than ten sons (I Sam. 1:8). For more on the meaning of this comparison, see Zakovitch, p. 16, and Jobling, pp. 134-5.



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