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Citation for the published article:
Fischer, Irmtraud
The Book of Ruth As Exegetical Literature
European Judaism, 2006, 1-7

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THE BOOK OF RUTH AS EXEGETICAL LITERATURE

Irmtraud Fischer

Because of its literary quality, the Book of Ruth is to be classed as world literature. In this book, Hebrew prose writing reached an artistic climax as in hardly any other passage of the Hebrew Bible, particularly as regards its scenic structure, its creation of guidelines for reading by means of interpretive words and the quotations from older texts that are brought in cleverly and with great precision. Something that is often quoted in exegetical literature is the saying that the Book of Ruth, “the high intention of which is to give a king of Israel decent and interesting ancestors, is at the same time... the loveliest little epic and idyllic whole... that has been passed on to us.”¹ This saying is attributed to Goethe, although he was not the first to see it. Since then, the ghost of the idea of a lovely, idyllic little Book of Ruth has haunted scholarly work. Can points be found in the text’s content that give rise to this, or are these criteria that are brought in from the outside, caused for example by the gender of the two main persons, Naomi and Ruth, the repeated use of the diminutive form of speech, and the trivialization of what is narrated? In order to respond to this question and to be able to make a decision, we must begin with issues regarding the literary genre of the Book of Ruth, whereby the answer to questions concerning the book’s *Sitz-im-Leben* as well as what it intended, contribute what is essential in clarifying its genre.

1. The literary form of the Book of Ruth: an examination of how the genre is determined

By characterizing the book as “epic” and “idyllic”, Goethe already indicated something as regards its genre. As an *idyll*, the Book of Ruth would be primarily interested in creating a beautiful atmospheric setting. However, ever since Gunkel introduced genre criticism, the Book of Ruth has been called a *short novel*, since it contains extensive dialogues and its main interest can be seen in the depiction of a numerically limited number of characters.² If in addition, concentrated brevity is considered to be characteristic of short novels, one cannot deny that the Book of Ruth has the quality of a short novel, even though in my opinion, the “hawk” that is obligatory for short novels cannot be determined unequivocally. Moreover, a well-developed dialogue style can be found in almost all the narratives in Genesis, and these are not considered to be a collection of short novels.

¹ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Noten und Abhandlungen zu besserem Verständnis des west-östlichen Divans*, in: *ibid.*, *West-östlicher Divan*, ed. by Hans-J. Weitz, Frankfurt 1986, p. 129.

² On the following cf. also the short summaries of the history of research in Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ruth*, NICOT, Grand Rapids 1988, pp. 47f. and Erich Zenger, *Das Buch Ruth*, ZBK.AT 8, Zürich 1986, pp. 22-25, who discusses extensively the genre characteristics of the short novel.

More recent German-language commentaries can be roughly described as accepting for the most part that the book has the characteristics of a short novel. In contrast, Anglo-American scholarly work has often decided in favor of the specifically English genre name “*short story*”, the point of which can be not only to entertain but also to teach; it can be written in refined prose, be interested in typical people in everyday life, and contain certain historical information.

All of the characteristics that are thus named in determining the book’s genre observe something correctly; but do they really understand the Book of Ruth in the dimensions of meaning that it intends? Is this book really a piece of the Bible’s edifying “entertainment literature”, as the genre names discussed would suggest? In order to clarify this, we must ask about the socio-cultural situation in which this book was written.

2. The *Sitz-im-Leben* of the Book of Ruth

The *Sitz-im-Leben* of the Book of Ruth is certainly not the desk of an artistically creative person. Even though many texts in the Old Testament can be considered to be high epic art, nevertheless their purpose cannot be seen in the artistic creation itself, but rather their intention was to pass on the theologically interpreted reality of life. We have reason to assume that the Book of Ruth was created in the context of the “theological writing of history”. There are many things in the text of the Book of Ruth that indicate this, only a few of which can be named here. They connect the Ruth narrative, the date of which places it in the period of the Judges, to the past and to the future of Israel’s narrated history:

- By situating the time recounted in the book in the period of the Judges, the book evidently wants to fill the gap between the Book of Judges and the Book of Samuel, as is also shown by the order of the canon in the Septuagint. This intention is made explicit above all in the statement in 1:1a and in the genealogical notes at the end (4:17-22) that point towards David. However, for reasons of literary criticism, some exegetes³ set aside precisely these passages as secondary, whereby at first glance the reference to David is eliminated. Nevertheless, in so doing, this reference is not done away with, as the example of Elimelech’s introduction highlights. The only two persons introduced in the Hebrew Bible as “Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah” are he and Jesse, David’s father (Ruth 1:2; 1 Sam 17:12). Now if the book ends with a genealogy pointing towards David, the son of Jesse, this repetition of words is no coincidence, but is to be taken as a reminder by means of quotation, which also emphasizes the ancestral line through the common place of origin.
- The Book of Ruth is not only close to the narratives about the patriarchs and matriarchs because of its narrated milieu as a family account, but it picks these up again explicitly. The wedding congratulations wish the woman coming into the house of the Judean Boaz, who is of the line of Perez, that she become like “Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel” (4:11). And they refer to Tamar, who bore Perez to Judah (v. 12). These wishes not only make the Moabite woman Ruth, a foreign woman, equal to the female ancestors of Israel, but with this genealogy based on women, the narratives about the patriarchs and matriarchs also

³ Cf. Zenger, Ruth, 10-14; my publications on Ruth written before 1995 fall back on his theses concerning literary criticism. Zenger also no longer holds this view, which is the only really logical solution—if you do literary criticism of the Book of Ruth at all (cf. Erich Zenger, *Das Buch Rut*, in: *ibid.* and others, *Einleitung in das Alte Testament*, KStTh 1.1, Stuttgart 1998³, pp. 202-210).

continue to be told in the “women’s book” of Ruth. This becomes entirely clear through the genealogy at the end, 4:18-22, which has the form of *toledot*, and which according to the results of my research⁴ was clearly the original closure to the Book of Ruth. The last *toledot* in Genesis were those of Jacob in Gen 37:2. None of his sons is given a family tree in the form of *toledot*. Thus, all twelve brothers are shown to be equal, representing *the one* main line after Jacob and constituting the people of Israel. If now the Book of Ruth continues Judah’s genealogy through Perez, the son of Tamar, as *toledot*, the line of Judah is belatedly made to be the main line of the twelve sons of Rachel and Leah and their servants. Thus, with the genealogy of Perez, the Book of Ruth continues the Genesis narrative from Gen 38 without a break.

Of course, in so doing, the Book of Ruth is robbed of its idyllic dimension, since with this understanding, it is seen on the one hand as the prehistory of the historical account of the period of the kings, and on the other hand as the continuation of the history of the people’s origins in Genesis. As such, Genesis uses the literary form of family accounts to describe the people’s political history during Israel’s early period, and this is imitated in the Book of Ruth. By connecting with the narratives about the patriarchs and matriarchs, which can also be verified by means of quotations⁵ from the Abraham and Rebecca traditions (cf. for example Gen 12:1-4 with Ruth 2:11; Gen 24:27 with Ruth 2:20), the Book of Ruth also receives a popular political dimension.⁶ One cannot deny its edifying, teaching function, but the *Sitz-im-Leben* of the Book of Ruth was more the need to interpret Scripture and to update it (within the Bible) in the post-exilic period than a pre-exilic desire to entertain people with short novels, as scholarly work postulated.

3. What is the narrative’s intention?

It can thus be considered certain that the Book of Ruth was not created simply out of the joy of creating—also not solely out of a theologically motivated joy in narrating, for example in continuing the Genesis narrative like in a serialized novel. For the Book of Ruth works not only with *narrative texts* from the Torah, but also with *legal texts*.

Exegetical work on the Book of Ruth has always noted that particularly the two legal institutions of Levirate marriage and of redemption play a part. But the right to the second gleaning (cf. Deut 24:19-22) and the so-called paragraph on the Moabites in Deut 23:4-7, which prohibits the acceptance of Moabites into the community of Israel to the tenth generation, are also important in the Book of Ruth, which causes Michael Goulder⁷ even to consider whether the Book of Ruth was created as a homily on deuteronomical community law.

- According to the legal text Deut 25:5-10, Levirate marriage stipulates that, when a man dies without children, his brother who lived with him on the undivided land inheritance should engender a child with his widow, and this child is considered by law to be the deceased man’s

⁴ On this, cf. the detailed reasons I give for the literary unity of the Book of Ruth: Irmtraud Fischer, *Der Männerstammbaum im Frauenbuch*, in: Rainer Kessler and others, ed., “Ihr Völker, klatscht in die Hände!” (Ps 47,2), FS Erhard S. Gerstenberger, ExuZ 3, Münster 1997, pp. 195-213.

⁵ For more detail on this, cf. Irmtraud Fischer, *Rut*, HThK, Freiburg 2005², pp. 66-76.

⁶ Cf. the more detailed reasons including examples in exegetical literature in Irmtraud Fischer, *Das Buch Rut – eine „feministische“ Auslegung der Tora?*, in: Erhard S. Gerstenberger / Ulrich Schönborn, ed., *Hermeneutik – sozialgeschichtlich*, ExuZ 1, Münster 1999, pp. 39-58.

⁷ Michael D. Goulder, *Ruth: A Homily on Deuteronomy 22-25?*, in: Heather A. McKay / David J.A. Clines, eds., *Of Prophets’ Visions and the Wisdom of Sages*, FS R. Norman Whybray, JSOT.S 162, Sheffield 1993, pp. 307-319.

descendent. The beneficiary in this legal text is the deceased man, who however has no legal right to Levirate marriage through his widow. If the brother refuses, the woman can only shame him; but she cannot sue him with demands to be cared for (vs. 7ff.). Only after the rite of the shoe has been performed as the renunciation of the patriarchal right, can the widow marry a man of her choice from outside of her deceased husband's family. Both Gen 38, the story of Judah and Tamar, and the Book of Ruth pick up this legal text from deuteronomic community law. In Gen 38, Tamar is not freed from Levirate marriage when her husband dies. But her father-in-law Judah refuses to care for her in his own house, nor does he give her the youngest son in Levirate marriage even after he has become an adult. So she gets the descendent he has refused her through his son from Judah himself. The two sons to whom Tamar gives birth, one of whom, Perez, is seen to be the ancestor of Boaz, are not considered to be the sons of the deceased, but rather of their biological father Judah, since the Levirate marriage was not practiced in the regular way. According to Gen 38, the beneficiary of marriage to the brother-in-law is clearly the widow, who through Levirate marriage has the right to be cared for, and Judah himself acknowledges this belatedly in his judgment: "She is more in the right than I!" (38:26)

In the Book of Ruth, Levirate marriage is referred to twice. By means of rhetorical questions in 1:11-13, Naomi demonstrates the absurdity of the idea that she could care for the widows of the two deceased men through sons to whom she must still give birth. Even in this utopic idea, Naomi sees the women as the beneficiaries of this legal institution rather than her two deceased sons. In Ruth 4, the legal text in Deut 25:5ff. is not only alluded to, but as Georg Braulik⁸ has shown, it is quoted extensively. The many expressions to be found that use the same words indicate a deliberate discussion of the legal provision that is adapted as follows in Ruth 4: on the one hand, with the relative Boaz, the group of those under obligation for Levirate marriage is substantially enlarged, and in addition, it is linked to the institution of redemption; and on the other hand, Levirate marriage is applied to a foreign woman. It is true that because of these irregularities, Ruth 4 does not use the technical term for "practicing Levirate marriage", *ybm*, but it clearly speaks to the legal idea that finally makes it possible for the widow Ruth to be cared for in the house of a new husband and thus to be integrated into society.

- The institution of redemption, the purpose of which is to save relatives who have become poor from being completely ruined economically and socially, is juridically laid down in Lev 25:23ff. In the Book of Ruth, Naomi benefits from the fact that a relative of the members of the extended family who have hit hard times is morally obliged to stand in as "redeemer". Already in Ruth 2:20, Boaz is called "one of our redeemers". But he only becomes redeemer when he is prepared to care for both widows, one through the legal institution of Levirate marriage, the other through the institution of redemption.

In the Torah, these two institutions obliging relatives to be in solidarity with one another are nowhere linked. The connection is only created *ad hoc* in the Book of Ruth⁹ in order to solve in an appropriate way the special case created by the narrative about two widows who are not cared for and who live together in a common life that is insoluble (cf. 1:16f.). And it is the foreign woman Ruth who creates the connection: in the night scene on the threshing floor, she requests marriage of the relative, and the reason given is the fact that he is a redeemer. In so doing, a *halakhah*, an interpretation of a law is given that brings it up to date, and Boaz accepts this fully in the scene at the gate. It is therefore no coincidence that Boaz' "redeeming" activity

⁸ On this cf. Georg Braulik, *Das Deuteronomium und die Bücher Ijob, Sprichwörter, Rut*, in: Erich Zenger, ed., *Die Tora als Kanon für Juden und Christen*, HBS 10, Freiburg 1996, pp. 61-138.

⁹ For more detail on this, cf. Fischer, *Rut*, p. 55.

both as regards Naomi and as regards Ruth in Ruth 4:4.5.8.9.10 is passed on with the word “acquire” *qnh*, which is the technical term for the practice of redemption in Lev 25, as also in Jer 32, the only narrative account of a redeemer in the Old Testament other than the Book of Ruth. Thus, by using this word, the marriage with Ruth is not equated with buying a piece of land, as if one could buy a woman like one buys a field, as some exegetes have suggested. In choosing to use this language, Boaz’ act of solidarity with both women is qualified as being “in conformity with Scripture”.

- As Jürgen Ebach¹⁰ has shown, the Book of Ruth’s new *halakhah* as regards the paragraph concerning Moabites is given in a midrashic form in Ruth 1. In Deut 23:4-7, the reason given for excluding the Moabites is that these refused to give the people of Israel water and bread on their journey through the desert; here, the welcome and care given to Naomi’s Judean family in Moab is shown in contrast. Thus in the narrative, the bottom is knocked out as to the reason for prohibiting the acceptance of Moabites, and thereby the commandment based on this reasoning also comes to stand on shaky ground: the foreigner Naomi was welcomed in Moab with her hungry family; therefore, the in Judah foreign widow of a Judean, the Moabite woman Ruth, who in addition confesses her mother-in-law’s God and who considers her mother-in-law’s people to be her own (1:16), must be welcomed in the people’s community, leaving aside the prohibition given in the paragraph on the Moabites. The Book of Ruth works so intensively at these efforts for acceptance that ultimately in 4:11f., the Moabite woman is not only given equal rank with the women of the people of Israel, but even with the ancestral women. With the triple assent and testimony of the elders and the whole people at the gate, Ruth 4 inscribes this foreign woman, who makes real the kindness of God in that part of Judean genealogy that goes directly towards the Davidic royal house, whence people at this time were certainly already awaiting a shoot from the root of Jesse who would bring salvation (cf. Isa 11).

Thus, the Book of Ruth as one that interprets Scripture, evidently not only refers to narrative texts, but also to legal ones. In view of its literary intent, the Book of Ruth should therefore be positioned close to the later genre of halakhic midrash. By means of its narratives, it seeks to apply the teachings of the Torah in a life-giving way, and in so doing, its aim is above all the wellbeing of women. Where that is concerned, one could speak of a “feminist” interpretation of the Torah, as I expressed it in an article, whereby the quotation marks indicate the anachronism in giving it this name. However, we have to accept the fact that women fought for their rights throughout the entire period of patriarchal history.

4. What was the milieu in which the book was created?

Our knowledge of the people’s narrative tradition as well as of legal texts and their specific use in a current situation requiring a creative process of adaptation, lets us come to the conclusion that the book’s author was from an educated milieu. If the narrative and therefore unpolemical argument against the paragraph concerning Moabites gives us an indication as to the *Sitz-im-Leben*, we are obviously directed towards groups of people who were learned in Scripture and working on the Book of Nehemiah. In Neh 13:1-3, they argue against the acceptance of foreigners and thus also against marriage with foreign women (Neh 13:23-29) by referring explicitly to Deut 23:4-7. If we take this indication seriously, then the passages by the author of the Book of Ruth take up a

¹⁰ For the following, cf. Jürgen Ebach, *Fremde in Moab – Fremde aus Moab*, in: *ibid.* / Richard Faber, eds., *Bibel und Literatur*, München 1995, pp. 277-304; 280ff.

stand contrary to these groups' rigorous prohibitions, which situate them in the sphere of the Scripture scholars who were against mixed marriages and who were even in favor of annulling mixed marriages that had already taken place. These groups held up Solomon, the son of David, as an example warning against foreign women (Neh 13:26f.). Since even he who was famous for his wisdom was seduced by foreign women to become unfaithful to his God, ordinary people have to be warned of such women to a far greater extent.

Whoever may have written the Book of Ruth was convinced that such generalized judgments were untenable. What is important is realizing God-like kindness in everyday life and in one's whole plan of life—not whether or not one is of the right origin. For as the Book of Ruth says, even Solomon's father David had a God-fearing foreign woman from Moab in his family tree, and she led her later husband Boaz to a righteous life according to the teaching. The person who in his or her kindness is similar to YHWH's kindness is not excluded from YHWH's people. In this, the tendency in the Book of Ruth in favor of kindness towards foreigners is in agreement with the latest texts in the Book of Isaiah (cf. for example Isa 56:1-8).

In its effort to make acceptance in the community dependent on individual behavior, on a righteous life according to God's teaching and not on ethnic origin, the Book of Ruth is in conformity with other writings of the Old Testament. However, as regards its attitude towards women, the Book of Ruth is unique in the Bible. Nowhere else can such a book be found that from beginning to end so consistently brings in the perspective of women.¹¹ The Book of Ruth not only differs from the andro-centric way of seeing reality because of its use of language, as for example when it speaks of the family of origin not only as the "father's house", as is usual in the Old Testament, but of the "mother's house", and Ruth therefore not only leaves her father when she decides to go with Naomi, but also her mother (2:11). In addition, as was already mentioned, the Book of Ruth sees the two legal institutions of redemption and Levirate marriage as the obligation of relatives to be in solidarity for the benefit of women. In the Book of Ruth, the two main characters are also women. It is true that Boaz is a central figure in the narrative, and as a wealthy and respected man, he dominates the discourse and thus realistically reflects the patriarchal reality in the society of ancient Israel; but by means of the scenic framework that each time concentrates on the women, he is nevertheless given a secondary position in the narrative. This also becomes clear when Ruth bears her child not to Boaz, but "to Naomi" (4:17).

The world view in the Book of Ruth is unequivocally feminine. And according to this way of seeing the world, the Torah's narrative and legislative tradition is also received with the option for women. If there is any book of the Bible of which we can assume that it was written by a woman, the Book of Ruth is it.

5. Does the main characters' gender influence how the book's genre is determined?

Like no exegete before him, Jürgen Ebach broke with the scholarly tradition that described the Book of Ruth as a charming idyll, because he took women's scholarly work on the Book of Ruth seriously. In a way that is unsurpassed in its clarity, his criticism reveals the andro-centric tradition of interpretation.¹²

¹¹ On the feminine way of seeing reality that also finds expression in language, cf. my article: Irmtraud Fischer, *Rut – Das Frauenbuch der Hebräischen Bibel*, rhs 39 (1996), pp. 1-6.

¹² Ebach, *Fremde*, pp. 278f.; in his footnote 5, he explicitly refers to women's scholarly work on the Book of Ruth.

It is unequivocally clear that in determining the genre of this women's book, scholarly work used other criteria than with "men's stories". When it is said that men exert their bodies in the battle for survival, then this is mostly in military battles. Inasmuch as such stories end well, their literary genre is that of "heroic narratives". The fight against hunger and social isolation (which men often wage with weaponry) that the two widows in the Book of Ruth wage, is evidently nothing heroic in the eyes of exegetes. The story about women's battle for survival—even more so when it ends well and concludes with marriage and birth in social re-integration—is put into the genre of tear-jerking little stories in which nothing much happens.

When we are told that a man—such as Job—hits bad times, loses all his children and all his wealth, including his trust in a kind God, he becomes a proverbial tragic figure who impresses people because of his great ability to reflect. Naomi, on the other hand, who suffers the same kind of fate as Job¹³ and attributes her life's destitution to God in the same way, is trivialized as an embittered old woman.¹⁴ At least where the comparison of the enframing narrative in the Book of Job with Ruth 1 is concerned, the hierarchy of genders is obviously the most important exegetical category, which selectively devalues the experience of women and thus presents the experience of men as the only relevant one.

The linking of the story of Ruth with the word "idyllic" has had its day. It trivialized the experience of women, whether this experience was positive or negative. The Book of Ruth, like the stories about the patriarchs and matriarchs and that of David, narrates the political history of the people in the form of family stories; by means of its final genealogy, it links the early period with that of the kings in the time narrated. However, in view of its intent, the Book of Ruth is exegetical literature. In its style and in the habitat it describes, it is archaic, and as such, it wants to argue with tradition; from the *Sitz-im-Leben* of the discussion around mixed marriages, it seeks to lead in a narrative way to the correct interpretation of God's teaching for the present. In so doing, it is very attentive to not losing the rights of women.

¹³ On the parallels between Job and Naomi, cf. my commentary on Ruth, pp. 151-153.

¹⁴ Dana Nolan Fewell / David Gunn, "A son is born to Naomi!": Literary Allusions and Interpretation in the Book of Ruth, JSOT 40 (1988), pp. 99-108, make some scratches in the usual image of Naomi that shows her as a perfectly selfless woman, without any interests of her own, acting only for her daughter-in-law. The article did cause some controversy; cf. Peter W. Coxon, Was Naomi a Scold? A Response to Fewell and Gunn, JSOT 45 (1989), pp. 25-37, and their response: Dana Nolan Fewell / David Gunn, Is Coxon a Scold? On Responding to the Book of Ruth, JSOT 45 (1989), pp. 39-43.