

LITERARY STRUCTURE AND THEOLOGY IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

In recent years I have had a growing awareness of chiasmic literary patterns that exist in the biblical literature on a broad scale, rather than simply and solely in a narrower and more limited way within poetic passages. My literary analysis of Ruth differs from conventional outlines of the Book. I suggest two patterns of chiasmic structure: one pertaining to chapter one of Ruth (Figure 1), and the other embracing the entire Narrative (Figure 2). After setting forth these two pieces of literary analysis, some suggestions are offered as to the relationship of structure to theology in Ruth, and in so doing, take note also of several of the more important theological themes that are highlighted by our author's broad chiasmic structure.

The Literary Arrangement of Ruth 1:1-22

- A A famine in the land (1:1a)
- B Emigration from Bethlehem (1:1b)
- C "Naomi" = "Pleasant" (1:2-5)
- D Leaving Moab for Bethlehem (1:6-7)
- E Naomi's speech (1:8-9a)
- F Naomi kisses Orpah and Ruth goodbye (1:9b)
- G All weep loudly (1:9c)
- H The daughters'-in-law desire to stay with Naomi (1:10)
- X NAOMI IS TOO OLD TO CONCEIVE (1:11-13a)**
- H' Naomi's desire for her daughters'-in-law to return (1:13b)
- G' All weep loudly (1:14a)
- F' Orpah kisses Naomi goodbye (1:14b)
- E' Ruth's speech (1:16-17)
- D' Entering Bethlehem from Moab (1:18-19)
- C' "Marah" = "Bitter" (1:20-21)
- B' Immigration to Bethlehem (1:22a)
- A' A barley harvest (1:22b)

Figure 1.

Literary Arrangement of the Book of Ruth

- A Introduction: Ten years at Moab with death (1:1-6)
- B Naomi is too old to conceive (1:7-22)
- C The possible redeemer is introduced (2:1)
- D Ruth and Naomi make a plan (2:2)
- E Ruth and Boaz' field (2:3)
- F Boaz comes from Bethlehem (2:4)
- G Boaz asks: "Whose is that young woman?" (2:5-7)
- H Ruth becomes part of the Boaz household (2:8-16)
- I Naomi blesses Boaz (2:17-19)
- J Boaz, the one who is in position to redeem (2:20)
- K Ruth joins Boaz' workers (2:21-23)
- THE PLAN LAID BY
X NAOMI AND RUTH
(3:1-8)**
- K' Ruth identifies herself as Boaz' handmaid (3:9a)
- J' Ruth challenges Boaz to act as a redeemer (3:9b)
- I' Boaz blesses Ruth (3:10)
- H' Boaz promises to marry Ruth (3:11-15)
- G' Naomi asks: "Who are you?" (3:16-18)
- F' Boaz goes to Bethlehem (4:1)
- E' Ruth and a field (4:2-12)
- D' Ruth and Naomi's plan is fulfilled (marriage) (4:13)
- C' The redeemer was not denied (4:14-16)
- B' A son was born to Naomi! (4:17)
- A' Epilogue: Ten generations of births (4:18-22)

Figure 2.

In a real sense, this Narrative has the character of drama, in view of its large amount of discourse, its introduction of each scene with a clear definition of the place or setting in which the action is to center, and the use of the early scenes to build up a tension which is resolved in the later scenes. As evident from the above chiasmic structures, our writer provides an integrated and unified literary composition, which may be starkly contrasted with what would be the case if the Narrative had developed from a collection of originally independent sources (i.e., the JEPD theory).

From Structure to Theology

Generally speaking, the center of a chiastic pattern is considered as pointing to the essential theme of the passage or text at hand (i.e., its axis: **X**). In Ruth, this is not precisely the case. The drama reaches, in a sense, a central point at the chiastic axis; but the theological implications are brought to attention only somewhat later, toward the end of the Narrative. However, that central scene of the story itself (**X: 3:1-8**) is, in fact, anticipatory of, and points toward, a later passage (4:13) which serves as the key theological passage.

In view of this, two factors should especially be taken into consideration as we follow the development of the narrative by the structure:

1. It is essential to analyze carefully what the main characters of the narrative convey by their opinions and actions; and
2. aside from introducing the divine reality in history at the beginning (the LORD had “visited His people” in terminating the famine, 1:6), the narrator leaves unexpressed the full and precise theological perspective until very near the end of the story. In fact, various commentators have pondered the meaning of Ruth 2:3, the question why the author attributes Ruth’s presence in Boaz’ field to “chance” or “happenstance.” Is there anything left for chance in the plan of God? It seems that here the deliberate purpose in the Narrative is to refrain at this point from becoming involved with theology, with that being saved, instead, for a forceful climax later, toward the end of the Narrative. To put it in another way, we first are to follow the unfolding of the story itself through the events and dialogue, and then to follow the unfolding of the theology.

In tracing the story, we must not miss the initiative taken by Ruth and Naomi, as given in Ruth 2:2. This verse, which uncovers a key point, is frequently misunderstood. It contains the same idiom that is used in Ruth 2:10 to refer to Boaz, but that idiom has sometimes been obscured in the English translations of Ruth 2:2. A proper translation of this verse would be:

“Ruth of Moab said to Naomi: ‘Should I go to the fields and glean among the ears of grain, in the hope of pleasing him?’”

This particular statement is essential for the chiasmus, for it is the opening point of the story where the two women decide upon a particular action.

Did the plan work? In Ruth 4:13, the chiastic counterpart, we read: “So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife.” The buildup of the story has reached its end

here. What follows does not so much add to the development of the Narrative as it has theological significance.

If we turn now to the theology, we can see that the revelation of God's actions leads us also to Ruth 4:13. At this point the author's own silence is broken. Furthermore, for the only time in the Narrative, the LORD is mentioned directly as the subject of a verb. Here the author reveals the LORD as breaking in and acting indeed: "And the LORD enabled her [Ruth] to conceive." Thus, in Ruth 4:13 the human story and the divine come together in an obvious way. Therefore, and with some justification, this verse has been considered the most important one in the entire Book.

Some Theological Themes

In the chiasmic pattern which were given in Figure 2, Ruth 4:13 is designated as D'. What follows in C' and B' is an elaboration of this verse; but as we pick up the themes, it is necessary for us to note also some of the questions raised earlier in the Book. What is dealt briefly here are only three of these theological themes.

Naomi's God

The first chapter of Ruth pictures scenes similar to those in the Book of Job. Naomi is faced with one calamity after another. Although she does not speak of any reason why this distress has come upon her, she bitterly states that the LORD has caused her sad situation (1:20-21). This situation may be summarized as follows:

1. the family had been forced to emigrate because of famine;
2. Naomi's husband and both of her sons had died; and
3. she was left without any descendants, although her sons had been married for several years.

Thus, Naomi was convinced that there was no future for her. She had lost everything, and even if someone would marry her, she was too old for having children again (1:11-13).

Commentators commonly present the opinion that the author of Ruth shares Naomi's conviction that the LORD has caused the evil to happen. However, it must be kept in mind that the author's response to the Narrative comes only toward the end, as I have noted above. In fact, possibly there may even be indication of a rebuke to Naomi, as the women neighbors utter blessings to God while Naomi is speechless (4:14-16). What the LORD has caused is the opposite of what Naomi had earlier claimed to be cause by God. She has now received what seemed impossible--a "son" through the levirate, an event which she had referred to at the beginning of the story as affording no realistic hope (1:11-13 and 4:17).

“Lovingkindness” and God’s Manifest Providence

“Lovingkindness,” a translation of the Hebrew word רַחֲמִים, is an expression which denotes in a deep and profound way a loyal relationship and a desire to do good for the other person, comes into view quite early in Ruth. It is the Hebrew word used in Ruth 1:8 to express the true, caring concern that Ruth and her sister-in-law Orpah had for their husbands. Naomi’s wish is that the LORD might show similar kindness to them, even if she herself, because of the situation in which she has found herself, is unable to be good toward them as they deserve. Ruth’s genuine and deep love for Naomi is also expressed in the oath that she makes to Naomi, sealing it by calling upon the LORD’s name (1:17). As the story continues, Boaz describes Ruth’s deeds as “goodness” (2:11-12) and “lovingkindness” (3:10).

The question of reward may be raised here, and it is important to note that the Book of Ruth pictures Ruth as acting from a pure lovingkindness toward Naomi, for there was definitely no reward in sight (a very significant theme since the narrative time is within the time of the “judges”). However, in the progress of the Narrative, the author does make it clear that the kind deeds of human beings form the basis of their supplication to the LORD to bestow His blessings.

The ultimate in “lovingkindness” is the lovingkindness of the LORD Himself. As the story builds toward its chiasmic apex, we find that Ruth “happens” to glean in the fields of Boaz; and when receiving this news, Naomi, in her expression of praise to God, declares, “Blessed be he of the LORD, who has not left off His lovingkindness to the living and to the dead” (2:3, 20). The significant providence evident here is that Boaz was a near kinsman (2:20), naturally raising the hope of the redemption of Naomi’s and Ruth’s inheritance. The chiasmic center that we have noted comes with the planning between Naomi and Ruth for challenging Boaz to become indeed such a “kinsman redeemer” (3:1-7). The final outworking of the LORD’s lovingkindness which Naomi expresses in Ruth 2:20 comes, again, to its high water mark or focus in Ruth 4:13, both as a culmination of the Narrative itself and as a key to the Book’s theological perspective: “So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife. And the LORD enabled her to conceive, and she gave birth to a son.” And what a son that was!! He was Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of King David (vv. 17, 21), who was the ancestral parent of Jesus!

Redemption

Very closely related to the “lovingkindness” of the LORD is His manifest providence for the family of Elimelech, Naomi, and Ruth is the concept of redemption. At the stake was the property of Elimelech, Chilion, and Mahlon, the deceased spouses of Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth, respectively. The narrative in this respect picks up with a note of genuine despair as Naomi, before departing from Moab, endeavored to convince her two daughters-in-law to remain there. “Am I going to have any more sons,

who could become your husbands?" (1:11), she asked bitterly. And the record of her continuing conversation only reinforces the existence of that despair.

But redemption came! The thematic high-point for this redemption is again Ruth 4:13, in the statement about Boaz marrying Ruth. However, the prelude should not be missed in Ruth 4:1-10: there was a closer "kinsman-redeemer," but because he might endanger his own estate (cf. 4:6), he declined to go through with the redemption. For Boaz, the true redeemer, a sacrifice was involved, for he was to lose by buying the field from Naomi and by providing a son who could later claim it back to the family of Ruth and Naomi. On the other hand, the marriage between the redeemer and the redeemed make them both part of the same inheritance.

God's supreme lovingkindness was manifested in the culmination of this redemptive activity, which in the final verse of the Book of Ruth looks even beyond the immediate story of the Book. For that child who was born to Boaz and Ruth was none other than the grandfather of David, a fact that is twice stated in the conclusion (4:17, 21).

But we can carry the outcome of this Narrative of redemption even a step further: In the genealogy of Matthew 1, it is linked to the great Redeemer for the whole world (Matt. 1:5). Only from the perspective of the New Testament can we understand all the implications involved.

Encounter at the Threshing Floor (Ruth 3:1-18)

Ruth 3 exhibits a clear literary pattern via the content of speeches, narrative elements, repetition of words and sometimes in the reversal of earlier actions. Examples of the latter include E and E', which both continue the secrecy motif (but in E Ruth lies down, while in E' she arises again), or C, which describes her departure from her mother-in-law, while C' describes her return.

There are similarities between Ruth 2 and Ruth 3. Ruth 4 begins with a dialogue with Naomi giving Ruth instructions that will lead to an encounter with Boaz. There is a central section describing the meeting of Boaz and Ruth in which it is noteworthy that the central climax again consists of Boaz' praise and prayer for blessing upon Ruth. Finally, Ruth returns with grain and Naomi evaluates the encounter, ending with advice for Ruth and hope for the future.

This episode may also be divided into three main sections: 3:1-7; 3:8-14a; and 3:14b-18 (contra Rudolph, Gerleman, Sasson, Witzernath, Joüon, Hertzberg, Würthwein and Porten). This division harmonizes with the overall symmetry of the episode in that the use of ...וַיָּהִי ("and it came to pass") at the beginning of verse 8, and ...וַתִּקַּם ("and she arose") at 14b, both being words that may function as division

markers. This schema also has the advantage of having three distinct temporal settings--at evening, at midnight, and at dawn. Thus, this three-fold division has the clear advantage of beginning both sections with recognized division markers, which mark definite time breaks and change of characters.

LITERARY STRUCTURE OF RUTH 3:1-18

- A Naomi's plan to get Boaz and Ruth together (1-4)
(Naomi's advice on its execution: dress up . . . uncover his feet--he will tell what to do).
- B Ruth's reply: "All that you say to me, I will do." (5)
- C Ruth went down to the threshing floor and did just as commanded by her mother-in-law (6).
- D Boaz ate and drank and in good heart came to lie down beside the grain heap (7a-d).
- E Ruth came quietly, uncovered Boaz's feet and laid down (7e-g).
- [Evening to Midnight]
- F At midnight Boaz finds a woman lying at his feet (8).
- G Boaz asks her identity. Ruth identified herself and requested marriage, identifying him as the redeemer (9).
- Boaz praised Ruth again (cf. 2:11-12). He blessed her by the LORD for this latter X kindness. He would do all that she wished, for all the people knew that she was a worthy woman (10-11).**
- G' Boaz admitted his identity as a redeemer, but there is one closer. Ruth was to stay the night. If the redeemer would redeem, fine, otherwise Boaz would redeem. "Lie down until the morning." (12-13)
- F' Ruth laid at Boaz's feet until the morning (14a)
- [Midnight to Dawn]
- E' Ruth arose before anyone could be recognized, for Boaz had said, "Let it not be known . . ." (14b-f).
- D' Boaz commanded her to bring a shawl, fill it with 6 measures of barley, set it upon her and he came to the city (15).
- C' Ruth came to her mother-in-law (16a)
- B' Naomi asked her identity. Ruth told all that the man had done for her (16b-d).
- A' Ruth produced the barley, reporting that Boaz had said she must not return empty to her mother-in-law. Naomi gives advice: "wait, for the man will not rest until he has completed the matter today" (17-18).

Literary Structure of Ruth 4:1-12

- A The elders assemble at the city gate to hear Boaz's case involving Ruth (1-2).
- B **Boaz** raises the matter of the field of Elimelech which Naomi offers (or offered) for sale (3).
- C **Boaz**: "And I said I would uncover your ear saying, 'Buy before those seated and before the elders of my people'" (4a-c)
Speech concerning redemption: Boaz gives first option to
- D redeem, otherwise Boaz is prepared to redeem. The unnamed man accepts option (5).
Boaz: In addition to buying the field from the hand of X Naomi, Ruth is to be married, to establish the name of the deceased upon his inheritance (5).
Speech concerning redemption: the unnamed man relinquishes his
- D' redemption option in favor of Boaz, lest he impairs his own inheritance (6).
- C' The unnamed man to Boaz: "'Buy for yourself', and he drew off his sandal" (8).
Boaz again raises matter of Elimelech's property (plus that of Chilion
- B' and Mahlon); from the hand of Naomi: also Ruth whom he will marry to establish the name of the deceased on his inheritance. People and elders called to be witnesses (9-10).
- A' The elders at the city gate give their blessing on the marriage agreement (case concluded) (11-12).

David Dorsey, in his book, [*The Literary Structure of the Old Testament*](#) (p. 125), offers the following suggestion for Ruth 4:13-22.

- A Boaz and his son (4:13)
- Boaz marries Ruth, and they have a son
- B women bless child (4:14)
- "may his name be called (qr') (great) in Israel!"
- C Naomi (4:15a)
- women bless Naomi and child
 - "may he bring you renewed life, and may he care for you in your old age".
X CENTER: praise of Ruth (4:15b)
- C' Naomi (4:16)
- Naomi takes child and suckles him (renewing his life)
 - she becomes his foster-mother, taking care of him in her old age
- B' women name child (4:17)
- "and they called his name (qr') Obed"
- A' Boaz and his son (4:18-22)
- the place of Boaz and his son, Obed, in the line of David