

LITERARY STRUCTURE AND THEOLOGY IN THE BOOK OF RUTH

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In recent years there has been 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. Account may be taken, for instance, of the work of Paul Lamarche, Joyce Baldwin, and Philip Payne on Zechariah;¹ of William H. Shea on Amos, Mark 13, and other passages;² of Joseph S. Kidder on Matthew 23-25, and Luke 21;³ of George Rice and others on the book of Hebrews;⁴ and of Kenneth A.

¹Paul Lamarche, *Zechariah IX-XIV* (Paris, 1961); Joyce Baldwin in the Zechariah section of *Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Chicago, 1972); and Philip Payne, "Chiastic Structure in the Book of Zechariah," Appendix Essay IV in Kenneth A. Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation: Hermeneutical Guidelines, with Brief Introduction to Literary Analysis*, 2d ed. (Naples, Fla., 1979), pp. 81-84.

²William H. Shea has discovered a large number of broad chiasms, but for the most part has not as yet published his materials on this subject. Three items which have been published in journals are as follows: "The Chiastic Structure of the Song of Songs," *ZAW* 92 (1980): 378-396; "Chiasm in Theme and by Form in Revelation 18," *AUSS* 20 (1982): 249-256; and Chiastic Structure of Mark 13, Diagram 2 in Joseph S. Kidder, "This Generation in Matthew 24:34," *AUSS* 21 (1983): 209. In addition, Shea presented "The Chiastic Structure of the Book of Amos" as a paper to the Rhetorical Criticism Section, Society of Biblical Literature, annual meeting, San Francisco, California, Dec. 20, 1981.

³Kidder, in the article cited in n. 2, above. For a quick overview, see Diagram 1 on p. 208; and for a sketch of the chiasmic form of Luke 21, see Diagram 3 on p. 209. A more detailed outline of the chiasmic pattern of Matt 23-25 appears on p. 204, within the general discussion given on pp. 203-207.

⁴George E. Rice, "The Chiastic Structure of the Central Section of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *AUSS* 19 (1981): 243-246. (This "central section" is Heb. 6:19-10:39.) Albert Vanhoye, *La structure littéraire de l'Épître aux Hébreux* (Paris, 1963), and John Bligh, *Chiastic Analysis of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Oxon, 1966), represent other attempts at analysis of this epistle—in either a broad scope for the entire book (Vanhoye), or a series of some thirty-three more-limited chiasmic structures (Bligh). Rice's persuasive study covers ground not embraced within either of those earlier

Strand on the Apocalypse.⁵ The book of Ruth has not been bypassed in this regard, and an intriguing chiasmic pattern for it has been set forth by Stephen Bertman.⁶

My own analysis of Ruth differs in some respects from that of Bertman, and in the present article I suggest two patterns of chiasmic structure—one pertaining to chap. 1 of the book, and the other embracing the entire book. After setting forth these two pieces of literary analysis, I offer some suggestions as to the relationship of structure to theology in Ruth, and in so doing, take note also of several of the more important theological motifs that are highlighted by the book's broad chiasmic structure. Inasmuch as focus here is on the *literary* patterns and their significance, it is beyond the scope of this article to delve into questions of authorship, date, provenance, etc.—matters which, in any event, are discussed rather fully in various of the commentaries and other studies.

1. *Structure in the Book of Ruth*

Scholars are generally agreed that the book of Ruth takes the form of a *novella*—a highly artistic story which develops a plot through various scenes before reaching a climax.⁷ In a sense, this book also has the character of a *drama*, in view of its large amount of discourse, its introduction of each episode with a clear definition of the place or setting in which the action is to center, and the use of the early episodes to build up a tension which is resolved in the later episodes. In any case, Ruth provides an integrated and unified

works; and moreover, in a subsequent study, Rice disputes the existence of an overall chiasmic framework for Hebrews as suggested by Vanhoye. (*Editor's note*: On the last-mentioned point, see the article by Rice appearing in the present issue of *AUSS*.)

⁵Strand, *Interpreting the Book of Revelation*, pp. 43-52, for a major chiasm embracing the entire book. Further chiasms, more limited in scope, are noted in some of his other publications: "Chiasmic Structure and Some Motifs in the Book of Revelation," *AUSS* 16 (1978): 403, Diagram 2; and "Two Aspects of Babylon's Judgment Portrayed in Revelation 18," *AUSS* 20 (1982): 53-60, with a diagram of the structure for chap. 18 given on p. 54.

⁶Stephen Bertman, "Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth," *JBL* 86 (1965): 165-168.

⁷This has been essentially the case since the work of Hermann Gunkel. Cf. the notation concerning Gunkel's *Reden und Aufsätze* (Göttingen, 1913) in Jacob M. Myers, *The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth* (Leiden, 1955), p. 33; and see also M. Garsiel, "Literary Structure: Development of the Plot of the Book of Ruth," *Beth Mikra* 75 (1978): 444-457. Garsiel agrees with Gunkel on the genre of Ruth and considers the book to be a short story with four episodes.

literary composition, which may be contrasted with what would be the case if the book had developed from a collection of originally independent sagas.⁸

It should be noted that this book uses devices common to Hebrew poetry—a point that has been observed by various researchers, including J. M. Myers.⁹ There are, for instance, parallels in the numerical patterns (the ten years in Moab with death [at the beginning of the book], balanced by the ten generations of births [at the end of the book]),¹⁰ word plays of various sorts,¹¹ and both chiasmic microstructures and the chiasmic macrostructure embracing the whole book. As an example of a chiasmic microstructure, we may note Naomi's speech on her return to Bethlehem (2:20-21):

Shaddai has embittered my life,
 Yahweh brought me back empty;
 Yahweh afflicted me,
 Shaddai brought misfortune upon me.

An example on a larger scale—an analysis of chap. 2—has been provided by Y. T. Radday and G. W. Welch:¹²

- A. Ruth and Naomi
- B. Boaz and the reapers
- C. Boaz and Ruth
- B'. Boaz and reapers
- A'. Naomi and Ruth

⁸Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, 2d ed. (Austin, Texas, 1968), sees the story as being structured according to ancient folklores; but J. M. Sasson, *Ruth* (Baltimore, Md., 1979), pp. 216-224, regards Propp's folkloristic structure to be somewhat forced on the text. In any event, it seems to me that attempts to fragmentize the text are not persuasive.

⁹Myers, pp. 44-63.

¹⁰See B. Porten, "The Scroll of Ruth," *Gratz College Annual of Jewish Studies* 7 (1978): 23-49.

¹¹Types of paranomasia include (a) onomastic word plays, such as with personal names and place names; (b) etymological word plays, such as with the names "Naomi" and "Mara"; and (c) extended word plays, such as expressions similar in sound, or catchwords made particularly provocative by means of their placement in the text. For illustrations of word plays, see, e.g., Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticles, and Esther*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature, vol. 13 (Grand Rapids, Mich., 1981), p. 85; and J. M. Sasson, "Wordplay in the Old Testament," *IDBSup* (1976), pp. 968-970.

¹²Y. T. Radday and G. W. Welch, "Structure in the Book of Ruth," *Beth Mikra* 77 (1979): 180-187.

My somewhat detailed analysis of chap. 1 reveals that this chapter, too, has a chiasmic pattern:

OUTLINE 1
THE CHIASMIC STRUCTURE OF RUTH 1

A. FAMINE (1:1)

B. EMIGRATION FROM BETHLEHEM (1:1)

C. "NAOMI" = "PLEASANT" (1:2-5)

D. LEAVING MOAB FOR BETHLEHEM (1:6, 7)

E. NAOMI SAID: (1:8)

Go

Go back!

May Yahweh show to you kindness [ḥesed]

May Yahweh grant to you rest [menûḥāh]!

F. NAOMI KISSES ORPAH AND RUTH GOODBYE (1:9)

G. ALL WEEP LOUDLY

CENTER: "I am indeed too old to conceive" (1:11-13)

G'. ALL WEEP LOUDLY (1:14)

F'. ORPAH KISSES NAOMI GOODBYE (1:14, 15)

E'. RUTH SAID: (1:16, 17)

Where you go I will go

Where you stay I will stay

People of you, people of me

God of you, God of me

Where you die I will die

And there I will be buried

D'. ENTERING BETHLEHEM FROM MOAB

C'. "MARAḤ" = "BITTER" (1:20, 22)

B'. IMMIGRATION TO BETHLEHEM (1:22)

A'. BARLEY HARVEST (1:22)

As mentioned earlier, Bertman has suggested a chiasmic structure embracing the entire book of Ruth. On the basis of my own analysis, which differs somewhat from his, I would outline this chiasmic macrostructure as follows (on facing page):

OUTLINE 2
THE CHIASTIC STRUCTURE OF RUTH

A. NAOMI—Too old to conceive	Chap. 1
B. THE POSSIBLE REDEEMER IS INTRODUCED	2:1
C. RUTH AND NAOMI MAKE A PLAN	2:2
D. RUTH AND BOAZ' FIELD	2:3
E. BOAZ COMES FROM BETHLEHEM	2:4
F. BOAZ ASKS: "Whose is that young woman?"	2:5-7
G. RUTH BECOMES PART OF THE BOAZ CLAN	2:8-16
—servants are to offer her water	
—she is to be regarded as a maidservant and can eat with the household	
RUTH BRINGS ONE EPHAH OF BARLEY TO NAOMI	2:17, 18
H. NAOMI BLESSES BOAZ	2:19
I. BOAZ THE ONE WHO IS IN POSITION TO REDEEM	2:20
J. RUTH JOINS BOAZ' WORKERS	2:21-23
THE PIVOTAL POINT—The plan laid by Naomi and Ruth	3:1-8
J'. RUTH IDENTIFIES HERSELF AS BOAZ' HANDMAID	3:9
I'. RUTH CHALLENGES BOAZ TO ACT AS A REDEEMER	3:9
H'. BOAZ BLESSES RUTH	3:10
G'. BOAZ PROMISES TO MARRY RUTH	3:11-15
RUTH BRINGS 6 MEASURES OF BARLEY TO NAOMI	3:16
F'. NAOMI ASKS: "Who are you?"	3:16-18
E'. BOAZ GOES TO BETHLEHEM	4:1
D'. RUTH AND A FIELD	4:2-12
C'. RUTH AND NAOMI'S PLAN IS FULFILLED, marriage	4:13
B'. THE REDEEMER WAS NOT DENIED	4:14-16
A'. A SON WAS BORN TO NAOMI!	4:17
APPENDIX = What a son!—Grandfather of King David	4:19-22

2. *From Structure to Theology*

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

In view of this, two factors should especially be taken into consideration as we follow the development of the story by the structure: (1) It is essential to analyze carefully what the main characters of the story convey by their opinions and actions; and (2) aside from introducing the divine reality in history at the beginning (Yahweh had "visited his people" in terminating the famine, 1:6),¹³ the narrator leaves unexpressed the full and precise theological perspective until very near the end of the story.¹⁴ Or to put this 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 2:2. This verse, which uncovers a key point, is frequently misunderstood. It contains the same idiom that is used in 2:10 to refer to Boaz, but that idiom has sometimes been overlooked in translations of 2:2. A proper translation of this verse would be:

¹³The word *pāqad*, "to visit," has a wide range of meanings in the OT. See Henry S. Gehman, "Episkpōmai in the Septuagint in Relation to *Phqd* and Other Hebrew Roots," *VT* 22 (1972): 199. Gehman defines the term as "to attend with care." It may involve punishment, as in Amos 4:6-13, as well as the positive type of experience mentioned in Ruth 1:6. Cf. Dave Bland, "God's Activity as Reflected in the Books of Ruth and Esther," *Restoration Quarterly* 24 (1981): 132.

¹⁴Various commentators have pondered the meaning of Ruth 2:3, the question being why the author attributes Ruth's presence in Boaz' field to "chance" or "happencance." Edward F. Campbell, *Ruth*, AB 7 (Garden City, N.Y., 1975), p. 112, points out that few things in the Bible happen by chance! 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 book.

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?"¹⁵

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

Did the plan work? In 4:13, the chiastic counterpart, we read: "So Boaz took Ruth and she became his wife." The build-up of the story has reached its end here. What follows does not so much add to the development of the story 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 4:13. At this point the author's own silence is broken. Furthermore, for the only time in the book of Ruth, Yahweh is mentioned directly as the subject of a verb. Here the author reveals God as breaking in and acting indeed: "And the Lord enabled her [Ruth] to conceive." Thus, in 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 book.¹⁶

3. *Some Theological Motifs*

In the chiastic pattern I have given in Outline 2, 4:13 is designated as C'. What follows in B' and A' is an elaboration of this verse; but as we pick up the motifs, it is necessary for us to note also some of the questions raised earlier in the book. I will deal here briefly with only three of these motifs.

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;

¹⁵The idiomatic expression *hn b^cny*, "favor in the eyes [of X]," is well represented in Hebrew literature. Here, the *waw* suffix (*b^cnyw*) indicates that reference is to a definite individual. Cf. Sasson, *Ruth*, pp. 42-43.

¹⁶See W. S. Prinsloo, "The Theology of the Book of Ruth," *VT* 30 (1980): 339.

(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.¹⁷ 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 anew (1:11-13).

In the midst of being bitter towards God, however, Naomi still showed belief and faith in God. This can be seen in her wishing God's blessing to her two daughters-in-law and also to Boaz (1:15 and 2:20).

Commentators commonly present the opinion that the author of Ruth shares Naomi's conviction that the Lord has caused the evil to happen.¹⁸ However, it must be kept in mind that the author's response to the story 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 caused 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).

Hesed and God's Manifest Providence

Hesed, an expression which denotes in a deep and profound way a loyal relationship and a desire to do good for the other person,¹⁹ comes into view quite early in the book of Ruth. It is the Hebrew word used in 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 Yahweh might show similar kindness to them, even if she herself, because of the situation in which she has found herself,

¹⁷Cf. Ronald M. Hals, *The Theology of the Book of Ruth* (Philadelphia, 1969), p. 8; Prinsloo, p. 333; and C. Weber, "Ruth," *The Bible Today* 98 (1978): 1753.

¹⁸Cf. Hals, p. 9.

¹⁹H.-J. Zobel, "Hesed," *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Alten Testament*, ed. Botterweck and Ringgren (Stuttgart, 1982), 3: 53. When a human being is the subject of *hesed*, the word usually describes the person's kindness or loyalty to another. See "hesed" in *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Nashville, Tenn., 1980), p. 283.

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 Yahweh's name (1:17). As the story continues, Boaz describes Ruth's deeds as "goodness" (2:11-12) and "*hesed*" (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. 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 Yahweh to bestow his blessings.

The ultimate in *hesed* is the *hesed* of Yahweh himself. As the story builds toward its chiastic acme, 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 kindness [*hesed*] to the living and to the dead" (see 2:3, 20). The significant providence evident here is that Boaz was a near kinsman (vs. 20), naturally raising the hope of the redemption of Naomi's and Ruth's inheritance. The chiastic center that we have noted comes with the planning between Naomi and Ruth for challenging Boaz to become indeed such a *gō'ēl*, or redeemer (3:1-7). The final outworking of Yahweh's *hesed* which Naomi expresses in 2:20 comes, again, to its high-point or focus in 4:13—both as a culmination of the story 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" (NIV). And what a son that was! He was Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of King David (vss. 17, 21).

Redemption

Very closely related to the *hesed* of God in his manifest providence for the family of Elimelech, Naomi, and Ruth is the concept of redemption. At stake was the property of Elimelech, Chilion, and Mahlon—the deceased spouses of Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth. 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 4:13, in the statement about Boaz marrying Ruth. However, the prelude should not be missed in vss. 1-10: There was a closer “kinsman-redeemer,” but because he might endanger his own estate (see vs. 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 *hesed* was manifested in the culmination of this redemptive activity, which in the final verses 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 story of redemption even a step further: In the genealogy of Matt 1, it is linked to the great Redeemer for the whole world (see vs. 5). Only from the perspective of the NT can we understand all the implications involved.²⁰

²⁰Of fundamental theological import is the point that God sympathizes with those who act in the capacity of *gōʾēl*, “redeemer”; for God himself was once to buy back—redeem—those who had verged into a debt. E. A. Martens, *Plot and Purpose in the Old Testament* (Leicester, Eng., 1981), p. 18.