

Interpreting Historical Books in the Old Testament: Case Study on the Book of Ruth

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ABSTRACT

Biblical interpretation (hermeneutics) is essential for understanding God’s revelation. In Luke 10:25–37, Jesus emphasizes both the written text and its meaning, demonstrating the necessity of proper interpretation. Since the Bible consists of various literary genres—especially historical books—interpreting these texts requires a sound hermeneutical approach.

Despite the importance of historical books in Scripture, there is often a lack of clarity on how to interpret them accurately. Many readers either view them as mere historical records or impose allegorical meanings, leading to misinterpretation. This raises the question: What hermeneutical principles should guide the interpretation of biblical historical books to ensure faithfulness to the text and its theological message?

This study aims to establish a hermeneutical framework for interpreting historical books in the Bible. It provides general principles of biblical interpretation and applies them specifically to Old Testament historical books. The book of Ruth serves as a case study to demonstrate how these principles function in practice. A proper hermeneutical approach ensures that historical books are interpreted within their literary, historical, and theological contexts. By following sound principles, readers can better understand and apply biblical narratives, preserving their theological integrity.

Keywords: Ruth, Interpretation, Historical Narrative, Method, and Bible.

INTRODUCTION

Background

Interpretation matters. In Luke 10:25 Jesus was asked by a lawyer who wanted to know the requirement for inheriting eternal life. In Jesus’ response, He referred him to what was written in the law and the meaning or the interpretation of what was written (verse 26). The lawyer in verse 27 responded with what was written in the law as found in Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Further down from verses 30-37 Jesus interpreted verse 27 through the Good Samaritan story. In this passage, we have what was written (the Old Testament) and its interpretation or meaning.

The technical word used for interpretation in the theological setting is the word “hermeneutics”. It comes from the Greek verb *hermeneuein*, which means “to interpret, translate or explain.” This is the basic meaning of the word in Luke’s account of Jesus’ exposition (*diermeneusen*) to the disciples on the way to Emmaus (Luke 24:27) (Donkor, 2020).

The General Conference of Seventh-day Adventist Believe [GCSDAB] (2018) records that God has revealed Himself and His will to humans through nature (Psalm 19:1; Romans 1:20) and Scripture (Hebrews 1:1-2; John 17:3; Ephesians 4:21). Through nature we behold “insight into God’s character that history, human behavior, and conscience provide”. On the other hand, since sin obscured God’s self-revelation through creation by limiting our ability to interpret God’s testimony in love, God gave us a special relation of Himself to help us get answers to great and perplexing questions of life (GCSDAB, 2018). Since we know God

primarily through Scripture, knowing God and accepting the Bible as God's Word, inspired by the Holy Spirit, are related (2 Pet 1:19–21; 2 Tim 3:16–17).

According to Paul, the Bible is inspired by God and profitable for every practice of its adherents (2 Tim. 3:16). It was written by several authors who lived in different locations with different influences. Yet it is called the "Word of God". Above all, it was written in languages that are of little use today mainly among scholars. These unique characteristics make it more important for proper interpretation. In other words, without proper interpretation, its adherents will miss out on its message and thus be led astray.

The Bible is not just a composition of different authors' writings, but different literary styles such as history, poetry, letters, prophetic, etc. From a casual observation, most part of the Bible is History. Even epistles addressing specific issues were written in a historical sense. According to Michael G. Hasel, (2020), history is important because all life is rooted in history. It is the ground of all human existence. There is no human existence outside of historical experience. The Bible's story and teachings are all rooted in history. The authors interacted with God in time and space. The interpretation of historical books is very important because the Bible contains more literature that fits under the history literary style than any other literary genre (Kaiser & Silva, 1994). Almost half of the Old Testament (OT) is of this nature, and over one-third of the entire Bible (Kaiser & Silva, 1994). This interprets historical books and genres of principal importance in the interpretation of the Bible.

Problem

Interpreting Scripture is essential for understanding God's revelation, as seen in Luke 10:25–37, where Jesus emphasizes both the written text and its meaning. However, biblical interpretation faces challenges due to diverse literary styles, historical contexts, and linguistic barriers. Historical books, which form a significant portion of Scripture, require careful exegetical and theological approaches.

Despite their importance, there is often a lack of clarity on how to interpret historical narratives, especially on the practical side. This raises the key question: What hermeneutical principles should guide the interpretation of biblical historical books to ensure faithfulness to the text and its theological message?

Purpose

Therefore, this paper's main purpose is to suggest a hermeneutical principle that can be used to read/interpret the historical books of the of the OT. This will be done in the context of outlining some general principles of biblical interpretation across the Bible. In the end, the derived principles will be used to do an exercise using the book of Ruth which is a historical book.

METHODOLOGY

This study is structured in two main sections. The first section addresses the question, "How should one read the Bible in general?" This section examines the key biblical presuppositions and general methods of biblical interpretation.

In the second section, the focus shifts to the interpretation of historical books in the Bible. The book of Ruth, the second book in the Bible named after a woman, will be used as a case study. The interpretive principles established in the first and second sections are applied to the book of Ruth, demonstrating how they function in practice.

How to Read the Bible

How to read the Bible can also be known as how to read and understand the Bible's teachings or how to rightly interpret the Bible. Ekkehard Mueller (2020) posits that the purpose of interpreting Scripture is not just to understand ancient literature, but to know God and whom He has sent Jesus Christ, our Savior, and Lord which leads to eternal life (John 17:3).

There are two major biblical schools of thought of interpretation. Each comes with its presuppositions and approaches. In his article, “Interpreting Scriptures According to Scripture: Toward an Understanding of Seventh-day Adventist Hermeneutics”, Richard M. Davidson (2003) compared the two major modern hermeneutical methods of biblical interpretation: *Historical-Critical and Historical-Grammatical Methods*. The historical-critical method is an attempt to verify the truthfulness and understand the meaning of biblical data based on the principles and procedures of secular historical science. The aim is to arrive at the correct meaning of Scripture, which is the human author’s intention as understood by his contemporaries. It is secular, judgmental, and critical, and denies the self-claimed authority of the scriptures. On the other hand, the Historical-Grammatical Method attempts to understand the meaning of biblical data by means of methodological considerations arising from Scripture alone. Its purpose is to arrive at the correct meaning of Scripture, which is what God intended to communicate, whether it is fully known by the human author or his contemporaries (1 Peter 1:10- 12). It accepts the self-claimed authority of the Bible as from God. Unlike the first approach, this method allows the Bible to speak for itself regarding how it should be interpreted.

The two methods of interpretation is shaped by presuppositions. To come up with principles of biblical interpretation for the entire Bible or section of it (in this case, Historical), one needs to have a healthy worldview about the Bible. To begin with, here is what Donkon (2020) and Hasel (2005) say about presupposition. “We all hold several beliefs that we presuppose or accept when we come to the task of interpreting Scripture. No one can approach the biblical text with a blank mind”. Our assumptions, presuppositions, or world views affect our interpretations.

In doing theology, presuppositions should be drawn from the Scriptures which believers should accept without support from other beliefs, arguments, or evidence. Among the things we assume without proof are that God exists (Heb 11:6) and that He has revealed Himself reliably in the Bible (Nash, 1992). The next paragraphs will provide some presuppositions that are consistent with the Bible that can assist anyone better interpreting the Bible that is in line with the Historical-Grammatical Method.

Revelation and inspiration of Scripture are both divine acts, as affirmed by the Bible itself (Dan 2:28; Gal 1:12; Eph 1:17; Rev 1:1; 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21). Canale (2005) explains that in revelation, God implants ideas in the minds of prophets and apostles, while in inspiration, He enables them to accurately convey these ideas in writing (Canale, 1993). Revelation represents God's vertical work—His direct communication to human agents—whereas inspiration is His horizontal work, ensuring the faithful transmission of divine truths through human language (Canale, 1993). Thus, anyone approaching the Bible must recognize this divine origin and process.

A fundamental principle of biblical authority is *Sola Scriptura*, meaning that the Bible alone is the final standard of truth. Scripture attests to its own supreme authority in doctrine and practice (Isa 8:19-20; Matt 15:3, 6; 2 Tim 3:16) (Davidson, 2003). The Bible is entirely sufficient to lead one to salvation (2 Tim 3:15) and serves as the ultimate criterion for testing all doctrine and experience (Ps 119:105; Prov 30:5-6; Isa 8:20; John 17:17; Acts 17:11; 2 Thess 3:14; Heb 4:12). Hasel (2005) affirms that Scripture alone is the ruling norm, governing all other sources of authority, including religious experience, human reason, and tradition. It is also self-interpreting, meaning that Scripture explains itself without external authorities overriding its meaning.

The *Tota Scriptura* principle emphasizes accepting the entirety of Scripture—the full canon of 66 books. Unlike Martin Luther, who questioned the book of James, the apostle Paul upholds that all Scripture is God-breathed and should be regarded in its totality (2 Tim 3:16) (Davidson, 2003). Rejecting any portion of Scripture undermines the wholeness of divine revelation and its intended message.

The unity of Scripture affirms that the Bible contains no contradictions since it is inspired by God (2 Tim 3:16) and did not originate from human invention (2 Pet 1:20-21) (Davidson, 2003). This unity is also known as the *Analogy of Scripture (Analogia Scripturae)*, which asserts that because all Scripture is inspired by the same Spirit, its various parts are fundamentally harmonious and coherent (Davidson, 2003). This principle safeguards biblical interpretation, ensuring that difficult passages are understood in light of clearer ones.

Finally, the concept of *Spiritual Things Spiritually Discerned* (*Spiritalia spiritualiter examinatur*) shows that only those who are spiritually attuned to God can truly comprehend His Word (1 Cor 2:11-14) (Davidson, 2003). The guidance of the Holy Spirit is essential for interpreting and applying Scripture correctly, as human wisdom alone is insufficient to grasp divine truth.

These fundamental presuppositions help every reader and student of the Bible to approach it as what it claims to be, that is, the Word of God. They help one to approach Scripture with respect. Theologians call it the high view of scripture.

General Principles of Interpretation

Having considered the two major schools of thought of biblical interpretation and have narrowed down on the biblical-grammatical method with its basic presuppositions, now we will consider major ways to approach the text itself in line with the above-listed presuppositions.

Dr. Ekkehardt Mueller (2020) identifies three different issues that relate to the interpretation of Scripture. We may read and study passages of Scripture and need to understand/interpret it. The in-depth study of biblical texts and passages is called “exegesis.” We may not study biblical texts but may look for biblical topics and Scripture’s big themes. This study is referred to as doing biblical theology. We may encounter modern challenges or problems to which we have to react as Christians. Such a study deals with biblical principles that help us formulate a biblical-theological response, which some associate with systematic theology and/or ethics.

Exegesis: To do exegesis, Davidson (2003), Frank (2020) and Reid (2006) recommend the following steps:

- a. Turning to God in Prayer: The Scripture was given by the Inspiration of the Holy Spirit; therefore, we need to ask Him for Illumination in order to understand it.
- b. Taking Enough Time
- c. Text and Translation: Consulting the original text as much as possible (Neh 8:8; Matt 1:23; Mark 5:41; 15:22, 34; John 1:42; 9:7; Acts 9:36; 13:8; Heb 7:2) Deut 4:2; 12:32; Prov 30:5, 6; Rev 22:18, 19; cf. Deut 31:9-13, 26).
- d. Historical Context: The Bible’s stories happened in real historical time; so, the historical information of that time is needed to better understand the Bible.
- e. Literary context/analysis: This is concerned with the passage in its immediate literary context in terms of paragraphs, periscope, or stanzas.
- f. Grammatical/Syntactical/Semantic Analysis: This deals with words and their contextual meaning, and their relationship to each other.
- g. Theological Context/Analysis: This deals with the implication of the scripture.
- h. The Deeper Meaning of Scripture: This aspect looks at the typology and fulfillment of prophecies.

Contemporary Application: The application for the current people.

Biblical Theology: To do biblical theology which can be either a topical study in a biblical book or an entire testament, and a theological study throughout the Bible.

Interpreting Modern Challenges and Ethical Issues: In dealing with relevant Christian issues that are not directly mentioned in Scripture, but need a biblical answer, one should consult the Scripture for guidance, not in the form of individual biblical texts, but in the form of biblical principles. The principles are regardless of genre. They can apply to any part of scripture or book. Both theological and Ethical discussion still rely on the exegesis.

How to Read Historical Books

With these presuppositions in mind about the Bible and the general principles of interpreting Scripture, let us now narrow in on the interpretation of Historical books. At this point, it is assumed that all the general principles discussed above are applied before these specific principles of historical books.

Read the Passage

In the historical narrative, as well as other biblical genres, it is very important to pay close attention to the details of the story, even the ones that may seem insignificant (Reid, 2006). For example, many, especially in graphics, think that fire was coming down on Sodom and Gomorrah while Lot and his family were escaping for their lives. Genesis 19:21-24 says the contrary. Another example of reading the story closely is the number of years and time intervals Jacob worked for his two Leah and Rachel. Many think that he worked for the first seven years and got Leah and worked an additional seven years before getting Rachel. According to Genesis 29:27-30, he worked for seven years and got his two wives before working for the last seven years.

Study Literary Features

According to J Duval and Hays (1999), the major literary features are plot, characters, setting, and narrator's viewpoint.

Plot: Plot answers the questions of what and how. What happens and how it happens. It is the sequence of events that compose the narrative. It is what that holds the story together. Plots refer to the main events in the story that are related of what the author wants to convey.

Characters: The characters are the people involved in the story, those who move the plot forward. It is very important to analyze how the various characters are portrayed in order to interpret historical narratives correctly. For example, a careful analysis of the character of Samson pays rich dividends in the interpretation of Judges 13-16. Though one of the strongest men who ever lived, he is at the same time one of the weakest. His weakness with women manifested in previous dalliances (Judges 14 and 16), prefigures ultimate undoing at the hands of one (Reid, 2006).

Setting: The setting of the answer the questions, "When", and "Where". It is concerned with the place and time of the story. For example, Judges 1:1 tells us that the story that follows took place after Joshua died – that is the time. It also takes into consideration place, that is geography. For example, in Jonah 1:3 we are told that Jonah was fleeing to Tarshish. Geographically, that was the end of the known world. Geographically speaking, he was escaping to the end of the end of the earth.

Narrator's viewpoint: The narrator's viewpoint refers to the theological perspective of the one who relates the narrative –to the point he or she is trying to make. This may be seen in the arrangement of the story or comments, or summary statements made by the narrator. For example, in Judges 21:25 the Narrator says, "in those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes". The conclusion or statement of the narrator explains why the story went the way it did (Reid, 2006).

Take Note of Repetitions

In a historical narrative recurring words and phrases can help determine the meaning intended by the author. In 1 Kings 15:34; 16:7, 26 there is a repeating phrase "He walked in all the way of Jeroboam the son of Nebat". Any king said to follow the ways of Jeroboam clearly will be not an agent of spiritual revival (Reid, 2006).

Look for the Divine Perspective

According to Scripture itself, both revelation (e.g., Dan 2:28; Gal 1:12; Eph 1:17; and Rev 1:1) and inspiration (2 Tim 3:16; 2 Pet 1:21) are acts of God. In Revelation, God generates the ideas in the minds of the prophets and apostles. In Inspiration, God helped the prophets and apostles to write down the ideas He (God) gave them through Revelation (Canale, 1993). This shows that God has something through His Word to communicate

with us. There is also a divine perspective. Historical narratives are not meant to merely relate the story of people who lived in ancient times, but they are mainly about how God worked in and through His children and sometimes despite them (Reid, 2006). The last few verses of 2 Kings are not only trying to tell us of the good fortune of Jehoiachin in being released from prison and in being allowed to eat at the table of the Babylonian King; rather, this passage is attempting to show that God has not abandoned his covenant people and is still working redemptively on their behalf, even in the dark night of exile.

Recognize the Exemplary Nature of Narratives

Historical narratives do not normally proclaim a direct biblical command or teach a biblical doctrine. They may well assume and illustrate a command, or a doctrine taught elsewhere ((Reid, 2006).. This is illustrated in 1 Kings 17-18. The assumption of not worshipping another God, a command elsewhere, is implied.

Evaluate the Actions of the Characters

Historical narrative records what actually happened, and not necessarily what God wanted to happen (Reid, 2006). So, not every story should be seen as God's will and practiced. For example, Cain kills his brother (Genesis 4:8), and Rehab lies (Joshua 2:4-6). In some cases, God explicitly condemns the actions (2 Samuel 11:27), while in other areas there is not recorded condemnation as in the case of Rehab lying.

Reading between the lines carefully (self): The Bible is

silent on many things. For example, there is nothing said about the age of Adam and Eve when they bore Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:1,2), but certainly, they were not 130 years old when Seth was born (Gen 4:25; 5:3). Reading in between the line, one can conclude that Adam and Even were less than 130 years they had their first two children, though the Bible is silent on that detail. Another example is in Genesis 4:17, when Cain and his wife bore a son, in Genesis 5:4b Adam and Eve had other children including daughters. The Bible is silent on who was the wife of Cain, however informs us the Adam and Eve had daughters (Genesis 5:4); so, one can conclude that his wife was one of his sisters bore by his parents because God did not create another family save Adam and Eve. This is reading in between the lines. This principle has be followed very carefully.

Case Study: The Book of Ruth

The Book of Ruth will be used as a case study. The below historical interpretive method will be used while the historical-grammatical school of interpretation and its presuppositions and general principles of interpretation will be assumed/presupposed.

- Read the text/passage or story closely.
- Literary Features
 - ❖ Plot: (covering leg and removing sandals)
 - ❖ Characters:
 - ❖ Setting
 - ❖ Narrator's viewpoint
- Take Note of Repetitions
- Look for the Divine Perspective
- Recognize the Exemplary Nature of Narratives
- Evaluate the Actions of the Characters

- Reading between the line carefully (self):
- Lessons

Read the Passage

A careful reading of the book, reveals the following:

- i. The book is the first of two books named after Women in the Bible. The second is Esther. Ruth is about foreign woman in the land of Israel, while Esther is about an Israelite woman in a foreign land.
- ii. Ruth was not a lazy woman (2:7).
- iii. The book seems to fit in the narrative of Judges as a chapter or chapters (Ruth 1:1:).
- iv. Naomi spend a long time in Moab-10 years, (1:4); suggesting that the family stay very long in Moab.
- v. Elimelech, the father died before the sons took wives (1:3-4); Probably if he was alive his children could not have married foreigners or Moabites wives.
- vi. Ruth was a very kind lady both to her husband and Mother-in-law (2:11)
- vii. The Genealogy ends on David (4:22). This suggests that this is what the author wanted to proof. The author lived and wrote during or after David's reign.
- viii. The Book begins and end in Bethlehem; It begins with no food in Bethlehem (the house of bread) but ends with enough food in the same area.
- ix. Mahlon and Chilion mean "sickly" and "failing." The earthly death of these sons in Moab shows that their names were appropriate.
- x. Paradox in the Story: Elimelech and family left Israel/God and the house of Bread to Moab; Ruth left her land, Moab/gods to come to Israel/house of bread; Naomi, whose name means "delight" experiences bitterness.
- xi. There is a redeemer who redeems.
- xii. The Genealogy is focused on the kingship line of Israel and ends on David. A careful reading of the genealogy show that the author wanted to show that David was worth becoming King over Saul because he was in the kingship lineage of Judah (Gen 49:10; Ruth 4:18-22; 1 Chron 2:4-15; Matthew 1:3-6)
- xiii. The book shows that God's love is universal – not limited to the Israelites alone. Even Moabites could benefit.

Literary Features

In this section, we will consider the plots, characters, settings, and narrator's viewpoint

Plot: There are several plots in this short narrative that make the story very interesting. Some may decide to arrange the plots by chapters. This work is arranged by major events and how they happened.

Plot 1 - Famine and Relocation (1:1-3). The famine in Israel/Bethlehem (House of Bread) caused Elimelech (God is my King) to relocate to a foreign land along with his wife Naomi and their two sons. Elimelech could have been one of those who did what was right in their own eyes as recorded in Judges 21:25 when Judges were intermittently ruling. Unfortunately, his fear came upon him – he died. Naomi became a widow in a foreign language. He and his family left their land denied his name, and went to find refuge in other land and

gods. This is not the first time God's people left their land and God for another land and gods (Genesis 12:10; 26:1; 42:5; 45:9-11) because of famine. The famine was the result of Israel's sin against God (Deuteronomy 2:15-19; Judges 21:25).

Though it is not said the number of people that left Bethlehem at this time, there are clues in the narrative that others did not relocate. The information in Ruth 1:6, 19-22 showed that some stayed home during and after the famine.

The last verse in Judges (Judges 21:25) and the first verse in Ruth (1:1) appear to be a continuation of the book of Judges. These verses show the connection between the two books and the historical context for Ruth as well. Some lessons to learn from the plot:

- a. Situations in life should not cause us to deny our God nor land for another. Though we live as pilgrims in this world/land, our real home is awaiting us in heaven. Nothing now should distract us from our heavenly home.
- b. Safety with God in time of trouble is better than safety outside of God in time of peace.

Plot 2 – Marriage and Death of Naomi's Two Sons (1:4-5). Intermarriage was forbidden by God (Deuteronomy 23: 3-4) because of religious reasons. However, at the death of her husband, Naomi decided to compromise her faith by allowing her sons to marry Moabite women. Probably if Elimelech was alive he would not have allowed the marriages to happen. This is only a probability; if he could leave his land and God to flee for refuge elsewhere, he could have also allowed the marriages as did his wife. However, the marriage of Ruth the Moabitess with Mahlon seems at first to run counter to the law as laid down in Dt 23:3, 4, and certainly in post-exilic times such a union was held to be unlawful (see Ezr 9:1, 2, Neh 10:28), but the law quoted says nothing about marriage, and differs in its terms from that of Deuteronomy 7:3 (Redpath, 1912). Unfortunately, again for Naomi her two sons died. In Israel's history, the Moabites women caused the Israelites to sin against God by committing adultery and worshipping others gods (Numbers 25:1-3). Like their father, the also died. We are not giving their reasons for their death. However, the meaning of their names suggests reasons - Chilion חִלְיוֹן (wasting away) and Mahlon (sickly). Probably they had poor health. I do not see why Elimelech will allow his sons to carry bad names. Some lessons from the plot:

- a. The story of Ruth is a story of God's grace. It shows that God deals with us as individuals not as a group. Ruth, though a Moabite was dealt with by God as an individual who was willing to leave her people and gods to follow Him.
- b. Names matter. It's good to give names of our children (Genesis 32:28; 35:18).

Plot 3 - Return to Bethlehem (1:6-22). She went full of husband, and sons; but she is return with none of them. She went with husband and sons to seek food outside of the house of bread but lost all. Ruth was persistent and her wish to return with her mother-in-law prevailed. While Orpah accepted to return to her people and gods (1:15), Ruth left her people and gods and to follow Naomi and her God (1:16). Ruth's statement in 1:16 shows her confidence and trust in the God of Naomi. She makes up her mind to follow God for the rest of her life. Naomi returned home bitter because of the lost of husband and children and even preferred a name opposite to her name to show her current state of mind. Interestingly, Naomi returns home at the time of abundance of food – the reason for which she and her family relocated (1:22).

Some lessons for the plot:

- c. Naomi must have impacted the life of Ruth for her to return with her.
- d. Ruth was persistent (Matthew 7:7).
- e. Naomi's focus on the bad things around her caused her to fail to see the good things. Though she lost her husband and sons, she had Ruth who returned with her (1:21).

Plot 4 - The Redemption of Ruth through the Levirate marriage (2-4). According to Hwang (2016), Ruth benefited from the levirate marriage. It happens when the male relative of a deceased who leaves behind a widow with no child “redeemed” the widow from her childlessness through marriage (Deut 25:5–10). This is unfolded in Chapters 2-4. In Chapter 2 God providentially connects Ruth and Boaz through the field of harvest. In Chapter 3 Naomi recommends to Ruth what to do to get the attention of Boaz to redeem her. In Chapter 4, Boaz allowed the un-named relative who should have redeemed Ruth with all her benefits but refused through marriage. Then Boaz finally redeemed her. Lessons from the plot:

- a. Providence is at work in the children of God’s lives.
- b. Like Boaz, Christ is our Redeemer and the Husband of the Church for who He died to redeem (Ephesians 5:23-28).
- c. Listening to right counsel is part of God plan for His children. Ruth took the counsel of her in-law and it went well with her (3).

Plot 5 - The Birth of Obed and Genealogy of David (4:13-22). After their marriage, the Lord blessed them with Obed who was supposed to be the son of Ruth’s first husband. Greatness was proclaimed upon his name by the women of Bethlehem. The genealogy of the family is given in this last part of the book. It begins and ends with Pharez, Judah’s son, and David. Since genealogy matters to Israelites because it could approve and disapprove a king or priest, having a genealogical account from Pharez, Judah’s Son to David meant a lot for the audience of the book of Ruth. Judah was given the kingship (Genesis 49:10) while Levi was given the priests (Exodus 28:41; Numbers 18:8; Hebrews 7:5a). Lessons from the plot:

- a. It is good to value our roots/origins. As God’s children we were created by God (Genesis 1:26). That is our origin, and it defines us.
- b. Like the priests and kings, it is good to work in the perimeter of God’s desire for you.

In addition to these major plots, some cultural issues in statement forms should be taken into consideration. “God dealt with me” (1:20-21). Naomi accused God of making her life bitter by killing her husband and two sons. She changed her name to Mara, meaning bitter. The Old Testament (OT) contains many examples of people’s names being changed to better fit their circumstances. God changed the names of Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah (Gen 17:5, 15); He also changed Jacob’s name to Israel (Gen 32:28). Moses changed Hoshea’s name to Joshua (Num 13:16). The name Mara means “bitter.” Given her circumstances, Naomi thinks “bitter” is a more fitting name than “pleasant” However, she is never referred to as Mara because—despite her claim—Yahweh did not deal bitterly with her (see 4:14–15). She said in 1:21 “Shaddai has brought calamity upon me”. Naomi attributed the loss of her husband and sons to God. The term *ra'a'*, meaning “to bring calamity,” is often used when someone accuses God of unjustly harming (Exod 5:22; Num 11:11; 1 Kgs 17:20). Like Job, Naomi felt God had become her enemy (Job 16:9; 19:11). However, just as with Job, Naomi’s tragedy was part of a larger series of events that would result in God’s blessing (Ruth 4:14–15) (Barry et al, 2016). Also it is used when God allows anything to happen according to men’s will which He (God) has the power to stop. For example, Exodus 7:13, 22; 8:15, 19, 9:12, 34; 10:1. I think this last view is the one in mind when Naomi said that God has dealt with her.

Sitting in the Gate and Removal of Sandals (4:1, 7): The Bible shows that nobles and decision-makers were the ones who sat in the gates (Genesis 19:1, 34:20; Deuteronomy 21:19; 22:15; Joshua 20:4; Proverbs 1:21; 8:3). Removing and giving sandals stood for completing a transaction (Deuteronomy 25:8-10).

Gleaning in the field after the reapers (2:3): Israelites were commanded by God to always leave behind some food in the feed during their harvest for the strangers and poor (Leviticus 19:10; 23:22; 24:2). God is a compassionate God and also cares for the poor, widows, and strangers.

Uncovering feet (3:1-10): A sign of submission and needing deliverance.

Characters: There are several characters in the story playing diverse roles.

1. Ruth: Rickett (2016) observed that the first of two books named after a woman in the Bible. The first is Esther. It is about an Israelite in a foreign land, while Ruth is about a non-Israelite in Israel. Ruth (רוּת, ruth, Ρούθ, Rhouth) was a Moabite woman who left her homeland with her Israelite mother-in-law and came to live in Bethlehem as a resident alien and eventually became the great-grandmother of King David. “Ruth” is related to the word meaning “friendship” (רַעוּת, re'uth). She was indeed a good friend.
2. Naomi (נְאוֹמִי, no'omiy). An Ephrathite from Bethlehem (Ruth 1:2). The wife of Elimelech, mother of Mahlon and Chilion (Ruth 1:2), mother-in-law of Orpah and Ruth, and grandmother of Obed (Ruth 1:4, 6; 4:17). A main character in the book of Ruth (Cerone, 2016). According to Hwang (2016) Naomi's name means “kindness, pleasantness, sweetness.”
3. Boaz: (בּוֹאֵז, bo'az). The husband of Ruth and father of Obed, the grandfather of King David. Famous for his role as the kinsman redeemer in the book of Ruth (Hwang, 2016). a wealthy Bethlehemite. By the “levirate law,” the duty devolved on him of marrying Ruth the Moabite (Ruth 4:1–13). He was a kinsman of Mahlon, Ruth's first husband (Easton, 1893). His name most likely means “in him (bo) [there is] might (‘oz) (Hwang, 2016).”
4. Elimelech: (אֵלִמֶלֶךְ, elimelekh) was the husband of Naomi, father of Mahlon and Chilion (Ruth 1:3; 4:9). Elimelech was from the tribe of Judah, and he took his family to Moab during a famine in Bethlehem in the time of the judges. He died there, along with his two sons Barry et al, 2016). His name means “God his king”, a kinsman of Boaz, who dwelt in Bethlehem in the days of the judges (Easton, 1893). He did not play any major role.
5. Mahlon: (מַחֲלֹן, machlon). Son of Naomi and the first husband of Ruth, who was a Moabite. Mahlon was from the tribe of Ephraim, whose family came to Moab from Bethlehem in Judah. Mahlon's death, which makes Ruth a widow, sets up the story of the book of Ruth (Ruth 1:2, 5; 4:9–10) (Barry et al, 2016). His name means “sickly”. He was the elder of Elimelech the Bethlehemite's two sons by Naomi. He married Ruth and died childless (Ruth 1:2, 5; 4:9, 10), in the land of Moab (Easton, 1893).
6. Chilion: the pining one, the younger son of Elimelech and Naomi, and husband of Orpah, Ruth's sister (Ruth 1:2; 4:9) (Easton, 1893). Naomi's son Chilion died while the family was living in Moab (Ruth 1:2, 5). Chilion and his brother Mahlon each married a Moabite woman while living in Moab (Ruth 1:4) (Barry et al, 2016).
7. Orpah:(אֲרַפָּה, orpah). forelock or fawn, a Moabite, the wife of Chilion (Ruth 1:4; 4:10). On the death of her husband, she accompanied Naomi, her mother-in-law, part of the way to Bethlehem, and then returned to Moab (Easton, 1893). Both Orpah and Ruth were Moabites (Ruth 1:4). Unlike Orpah, Ruth travels to Bethlehem with her mother-in-law Naomi (Mangum, 2016).
8. Obed: son of Boaz and Ruth and the grandfather of David.

Setting: The two major settings in the narrative are

9. Bethlehem and Moab. Bethlehem: It means “house of bread.” A city in the “hill country” of Judah. It was originally called Ephrath (Gen. 35:16, 19; 48:7; Ruth 4:11). It was also called Bethlehem Ephrathah (Micah 5:2), Beth-lehem-judah (1 Sam. 17:12), and “the city of David” (Luke 2:4). It was the burial site of the matriarch Rachel (Gen 35:19), the hometown of King David (1 Sam 20:6; Luke 2:4), and as the birthplace of Jesus (Matt 2:1). The town of Bethlehem of Judah is located about 6 miles south of Jerusalem on a range of hills surrounded by fertile valleys. The town is set “on a very steep ridge (Mangum, 2016). Moab is the second setting the narrative. The land of Moab (Jer. 48:24), called also the “country of Moab” (Ruth 1:2, 6; 2:6), is on the east of Jordan and the Dead Sea, and south of the Arnon (Num. 21:13, 26). In a wider sense, it included the whole region that had been occupied by the Amorites. It bears the modern name of Kerak (Easton, 1893). In the Plains of Moab, opposite Jericho (Num. 22:1; 26:63; Josh. 13:32), the children of Israel had their last encampment before they entered the land of Canaan. It was at that time in the possession of the Amorites (Num. 21:22). “Moses went up from the plains of Moab unto the mountain of Nebo, to the top of Pisgah,” and “died there in the land

of Moab, according to the word of ¹ ² the Lord” (Deut. 34:5, 6) (Easton, 1893).



Israel and Moab during the time of Ruth

The map shows that Elimelech and his family traveled a long way to reach to Moab. The geographical plateau is east of the Dead Sea, south of the Arnon River, north of the Zered River, and west of the Arabian Desert. May also refer to the ancient state located within this area from the end of the Late Bronze Age through the Iron Age.

Though few narratives portray Moabites as primary characters, Moab itself is a common setting. Genesis 19:30–38 describes the origins of Moab, stating that when Lot became intoxicated, his daughters seduced him. Each of them conceived a child, from which two Transjordanian states were born: Moab and Ammon. (Dodd, 2016). On their journey the Israelites did not pass through Moab, but through the “wilderness” to the east (Deut. 2:8; Judg. 11:18) (Easton, 1893).

Still, in the setting, it is worth answering the question “When did the story happen?” The simple answer is “when Judges Rule.” The events of the Book of Ruth took place before the establishment of the monarchy in Israel, but the account was written during or after David’s reign. The judges were God’s servants, who established the teachings of God’s law and righteousness during times of political, spiritual, and moral degeneracies.

Narrator’s viewpoint

The author’s viewpoint of the story can be seen in the genealogical portion (4:18-22). He connects the genealogy of Judah’s son Pharez to David. Interestingly, Pharez’s mother was Tamar who bore him by Judah, who was to be his grandfather (Genesis 38). The author is showing how God can work in the unlikely situation for His own glory.

Repetitions in the Story

“Ruth the Moabite”: Ruth’s non-Israelite ethnicity is emphasized throughout the book (1:22; 2:2, 6, 21; 4:5, 10) (Barry et al., 2016).

Divine Perspective

The author had a divine perspective while writing the book. Here are some:

- The Genealogy of David (From Judah [Israel’s son] to David)

- God allowed a foreigner (for the Israelites) to be in Christ's genealogy through their intermarriage.
- How God Connected Ruth with Boaz (2): Ruth went directly to Boaz Field (2:3-16); and happened that Ruth and her Mother-in-law returned during the time of harvest (1:6, 22b).
- The Lord gave the conception for Obed that ended with David through which Christ came (4:13-22)

Recognition of the Exemplary Nature of Narratives

Since historical narratives do not normally proclaim a direct biblical command or teach a biblical doctrine, but assume and illustrate a command or a doctrine taught elsewhere,³ the story of Ruth has applications of some laws elsewhere in the Bible:

- i. Levirate marriage: Deuteronomy 25:5–6.
- ii. Giving one's sandals to confirm a transaction: Deuteronomy 25:6-9
- iii. Leaving food in the feed for the poor and foreigners: Leviticus 19:10; 23:22; 24:2.

Evaluation of the Actions of the Characters

- i. Elimelech: Though there is not much said about him in the book, but his action of leaving Bethlehem (house of bread) is the foundation on which everything else in the book is lied. There would have been no Ruth to return with Naomi to be finally married by Boaz.
- ii. Ruth: Decided to come with Naomi; Follow her counsels; married a sick person; left her people and gods; uncovering the feet of Boaz (3:8)
- iii. Naomi: Allowed her sons to get married to Moabite women; in 1:21 she didn't recognize the effort of Ruth. However, she showed kindness to Ruth and gave her counsels that yielded good result.
- iv. Boaz: Was kind to Ruth; was willing to give the opportunity to the first person in line; took Ruth as wife (3)
- v. First Kinmen's' Redeemer: refuse to marry (maybe because a foreigner) Ruth.
- vi. Naomi:

Reading Between the Line Carefully

Though there is nothing explicit said about how Naomi behaved in Moab, but the willingness of her daughters-in-law, especially Ruth to return with her and to her God shows that she must have been a nice woman as shown in her name Naomi.

Lessons

The specific lessons were given under each plot to make them more relevant to the plots. This section will now function of the general lessons from the Book.

- a. God made all nations (Genesis 1:1; Psalm 24:1,2) and thus has the right to deal with any of them.
- b. God has always been kind to people of other nations outside of Israel who love and follow Him (Example: Rehab and Uriah)
- c. God's love has no boundaries.

³ Ibid, 156

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I used the interpretative methods of history book in the historical-grammatical, and its presuppositions in mind. I apply the interpretative methods to the historical book of Ruth and came out with some applications faithful to the story. Though I cited where necessary, the work was done following the principles learned.

The Book of Ruth examined through the historical-grammatical method, shows God's providence, grace, and redemptive plan. It emphasizes the central role of women, the importance of faithfulness in adversity, and God's sovereignty in orchestrating events for His purposes.

Naomi's bitterness contrasts with Ruth's loyalty, demonstrating the redemptive power of divine providence. Boaz, as the redeemer, foreshadows Christ, the ultimate Redeemer. The levirate marriage and the birth of Obed connect to the Davidic line, underscoring God's faithfulness to His promises.

Literary elements such as plot, character development, and setting deepen the narrative, pointing to the continuity of God's redemptive plan from the patriarchs to the monarchy. The story teaches key lessons on faith, relationships, redemption, and God's unfolding providential plan, urging trust in His sovereignty even in seasons of loss and uncertainty.

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