Structure of the Book of Ruth

I. Introduction: Naomi's Tragedy in Moab (Ruth 1:1-5)
II. Scene One: Naomi and Ruth Travel to Bethlehem (Ruth 1:6-22)
III. Scene Two: Ruth meets Boaz (Ruth 2:1-23)
IV. Scene Three: Ruth proposes to Boaz (Ruth 3:1-18)
V. Scene Four: Boaz Redeems Ruth (Ruth 4:1-13)
VI. Conclusion: Naomi's Restoration (Ruth 4:14-17)
VII. Genealogical Coda (Ruth 4:18-22)

or more extensively,

I. Introduction – Naomi's tragedy (Ruth 1:1-5)
II. Naomi returns with Ruth to Bethlehem of Judah (Ruth 1:6-22)
    (a) Naomi pleads with her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab (Ruth 1:8-18)
        i. Naomi's first plea (Ruth 1:8-9)
        ii. Her daughters-in-law choose to stay with Naomi (Ruth 1:10)
        iii. Naomi's second plea (Ruth 1:11-13)
        iv. Orpah turns back, Ruth stays with Naomi (Ruth 1:14)
        v. Naomi's third plea (Ruth 1:15)
        vi. Ruth's short poetic reply and self-imprecation (Ruth 1:16-17)
        vii. Resolution; Ruth remains with Naomi (Ruth 1:18)
    (b) Ruth and Naomi arrive in Bethlehem (Ruth 1:19-22)
        i. First statement of arrival in Bethlehem and the response of the townspeople (Ruth 1:19)
        ii. Naomi's short poetic speech to the people of Bethlehem, summarizing her misfortunes in Moab (Ruth 1:20-21)
        iii. Second statement of arrival in Bethlehem (Ruth 1:22)
III. Ruth goes to the fields in search of food (Ruth 2:1-23)
    (a) Narrative aside introducing Boaz, a kinsman of Naomi's deceased husband, Elimelech (Ruth 2:1)
    (b) Ruth's decision to glean food from the fields (Ruth 2:2-3)
    (c) Boaz takes notice of Ruth (Ruth 2:4-16)
    (d) Ruth returns home with food and informs Naomi of Boaz (Ruth 2:17-23)
        i. Boaz identified as a relative with the right to redeem (Ruth 2:20)
IV. Ruth goes to the threshing floor in search of a husband (Ruth 3:1-18)
    (a) Naomi instructs Ruth in a plan to secure the goodwill of Boaz (Ruth 3:1-5)
    (b) Ruth seeks out and confronts Boaz about his obligation to her and Naomi, according to Naomi's instructions and Israelite customs (Ruth 3:6-14)
    (c) Ruth returns home with food and reports to Naomi (Ruth 3:15-18)
V. Boaz redeems Ruth and the property of Elimelech (Ruth 4:1-13)
    (a) In the presence of the city elders, Boaz settles a matter of priority in the case of Ruth and Elimelech's property with another kinsman (Ruth 4:1-6)
    (b) Narrative aside explaining a custom (Ruth 4:7-8)
    (c) Boaz claims right as a kinsman to acquire Elimelech's property and marry Ruth, which is witnessed and blessed by the city elders (Ruth 4:9-14)
VI. Conclusion – Naomi's restoration (Ruth 4:14-17)
VII. Genealogy of Perez (Ruth 4:18-22)

Genre, Setting and Theme

The book of Ruth is primarily historical short story narrative. It divides into four scenes (Ruth 1:6-22, 2:1-23, 3:1-18, and 4:1-12), enclosed by an introduction (Ruth 1:1-5) and a conclusion (Ruth 4:13-17). There are two short poetic sections (Ruth 1:16-17; 20-21) in the first scene and a genealogical coda (Ruth 4:18-22) that follows the conclusion. The action of the story takes place almost exclusively in the rural, agricultural setting of Bethlehem in Judah, in the period of the judges of Israel, with only a brief introductory setting in the neighboring country of Moab. The four scenes are the intimate and personal account of a daughter-in-law's faithfulness and loyalty within a familial setting. Her faithfulness and loyalty is a response to the tragic introduction and results in the restorative conclusion. The language of blessing and curse illuminates God's activity and organizes the narrative.

Structural and Thematic Analysis

Introduction: Ruth 1:1-5

The beginning of the book sets the tragic state for its two main characters, Naomi and Ruth. In the initial phrase, the narrator informs the reader that the events of this story take place in the time of the judges, which draws the reader to a time when "there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Jdg 17:6, 21:25). Thus, in its canonical setting, the narrator creates the expectation of a story of unfaithfulness and apostasy. Indeed, the narrator delivers on the reader's gloomy expectations immediately. Naomi's family experiences famine in Judah and then, in the foreign land of Moab, the family is cursed with the death of Naomi's husband and her two sons. Naomi and her two Moabite daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, are left alone. It is unclear if these tragic circumstances befall Naomi's family because of unfaithfulness; there is no explicit judgment passed upon them in the introduction. This tragic opening leaves the reader with little expectation for the rest of the story. Nevertheless, a tension is created by the plight of the three women—left alone, what further disasters are going to befall them?

Scene One: Ruth 1:6-18

This scene is set within a highly structured framework: an introduction (1:6-7), a discourse between Naomi and her daughters (1:8-18), the arrival episode (1:19-21) and a conclusion (1:22).

The introduction to scene one offers a glimmer of hope for the three women; there are rumours of God's blessings in Judah. The curses against Naomi's family contrast the blessings received by the Judahites. Yet, the ominous atmosphere prevails, as the three women must embark on a journey alone. Moreover, the Moabite women are now leaving their land and there can be little hope for them if they come into a land that will treat them as aliens and outcasts. This dire reality of Orpah and Ruth's circumstance precipitates a discourse that begins in v.8.

The discourse between Naomi and her daughters uses a number of rhetorical devices to convey the dire circumstances. The discourse consists of three pleas (vv.8-9, 11-14, 15-19), each increasing in length, in which Naomi urges her daughters to return to Moab. The presence of the imperative phrase "turn back" in each unit ties the three pleas together and heightens the tension of the discourse. While in the first and second units Naomi is the dominant speaker, Ruth dominates the third unit with an oath of self-imprecation. Ruth's oath echoes the possession passages of the Torah in which God takes Israel as his people (Ex 6:7; Lev 26:12). Her self-imprecation carries forward the curse motif as she calls on God to punish her—"Thus and more may the Lord do to me" (v.17)—if she does not fulfill her covenant with her mother-in-law—"if anything but death parts me from you" (v.17). Ruth's oath, written in poetic form, demonstrates and foreshadows Ruth's ongoing faithfulness and loyalty throughout the story.

The arrival episode continues the curse motif of the preceding narrative. Though once again there is a slight hint of optimism in the expression of excitement from the people of Bethlehem, Naomi's reply to the women of Bethlehem re-emphasizes the gloomy predicament set forth in the introduction. The reply is the second of the two poetic sections in the book. In content, it affirms that God has been the source of her tragedy and hints that it was indeed the result of the unfaithfulness of her husband and sons (by the use of a legal phrase of judgment,

"testified against" in v.21). The juxtaposition of the two names, Naomi, meaning 'pleasantness' and Mara, meaning 'bitterness', heightens the tragic circumstances of the character.

The conclusion of scene one provides another small glimmer of hope: Naomi and Ruth have returned safely to Bethlehem and it is the beginning of the harvest.

Scenes Two and Three: Ruth 2:1-23 and 3:1-18

The two central scenes are structured in very similar ways: Ruth gets advice from Naomi (2:1-3a; 3:1-6), Ruth interacts with Boaz (2:3b-17; 3:7-15), Ruth reports backs to Naomi (2:18-23; 3:16-18). The common, cyclical pattern of these scenes emphasizes Ruth's faithfulness and loyalty to Naomi. Each scene begins and ends with Ruth honoring her mother-in-law in tangible ways: seeking her advice, providing her food, obeying her instructions, etc. These scenes introduce the kinsman-redeemer tradition that is central to rest of the plot. Being a relative of Naomi's deceased husband, Boaz can act to redeem Ruth and bring restoration to the family.

In scene two, Ruth meets Boaz. Boaz extends his hospitality to her (2:3b-17) by providing water, food and safety. He explains that his hospitality is in response to Ruth's acts of faithfulness and loyalty to Naomi. In its canonical setting, Boaz's hospitality is a sharp contrast to the lack of hospitality extended to the concubine in Judges 19. The fate of rape and torture that the concubine suffers in that story is the very fate that Boaz offers his hospitality to prevent in the case of Ruth: "I have ordered the men not to molest you" (v.9).

In scene three, Ruth proposes to Boaz. In order to encourage Boaz to take up his role as kinsman-redeemer, Ruth comes to Boaz at night and lies at his feet. The slight undercurrent of sexual intimacy created by the phrase "uncovered his feet" in v.7 (feet is a common euphemism for genitals) does not reflect any impropriety on the part of Ruth. The relationship between Ruth and Boaz is consistently portrayed as honorable. Indeed, when Boaz awakes, Ruth proposes to him by saying, "spread your cloak over your servant" (v.9). This appeal seems unnecessary if they have engaged in sexual intercourse, which by Hebrew standards would mean they were married already. Moreover, Boaz's actions from this point forward would be circuitous if they had

had sexual relations. As such, the text does not really allow for this interpretation. Nevertheless, Ruth may still have uncovered Boaz's genitals. The act would demonstrate that she could have taken advantage of Boaz and achieved her redemption through devious and immoral means. But, by not taking advantage of Boaz in his drunken state, the narrator emphasizes Ruth's respect for Hebrew morality. Such an interpretation is supported by Boaz's compliments of Ruth's actions in vv.10-11.

Scenes two and three, then emphasize the faithfulness and loyalty of Ruth to Naomi, Boaz and Hebrew traditions. Her words and actions confirm the intentions of her oath in 1:16 that she would be faithful and loyal to the Hebrew people and their God. The gloomy expectations of the introduction and scene one have yielded to expectations of hope. There is only one obstacle left to a happy ending: there is another relative that has priority over Boaz in the right to redeem. Yet, surely God must respond by blessing Ruth and Naomi for their faithfulness? Already the abundance of food that Ruth receives from Boaz in these scenes has reversed the curse of famine in the introduction.

Scene Four: Ruth 4:1-13

The final scene of the book of Ruth brings to finality the movement from curse to blessing that unifies this story thematically. The last obstacle preventing the marriage of Boaz and Ruth is removed. Before a council of elders, the other claimant cedes his claim to Boaz and the elders affirm Boaz's right to redeem Ruth. Important to this final scene are the words of elders and the people in vv.11-12; the elders and the people liken Ruth to Tamar. It is an interesting connection. Just as the story of the concubine in Judges 19 recalls the similar story of Lot and his daughters in Genesis 19, the story of Ruth recalls the similar story of Tamar in Genesis 38. And, in the same measure that Judges 19 diverges from Genesis 19 to be the more despicable of the two, Ruth diverges from Genesis 38 to the more praiseworthy of the two. While Tamar uses deception to achieve justice from Judah, Ruth acts honorably to achieve justice from Boaz. The curses in the introduction are swallowed up in the blessings of the final scene. Famine,

exile in Moab and the death of Naomi's husband and two sons have been reversed by the abundance of food, safety and security in Judah and the birth of a son to Ruth.

Conclusion: Ruth 4:14-17

The conclusion restores to Naomi that which was lost in the introduction. Through the birth of a son to Ruth, Naomi is restored. The name and inheritance of her husband and two sons will survive through Ruth's child. Moreover, that name and inheritance will one day rule Israel in the person of David. As the story concludes with this link to David, reinforced by the genealogical coda (4:18-22), there is the sudden realization that Israel came remarkably close to losing its David and likewise, Christianity came remarkably close to losing its Christ. Yet, through the faithfulness of one woman and the providence and blessing of God, Naomi's restoration became the blessing of the nation and the world.

Application and Insight

Stories of faithfulness abound in the Old Testament. These stories communicate the blessings that God bestows upon people that are faithful and upright in their relationship to him. The story of Ruth illustrates that faithfulness and loyalty can give birth to restoration and God's wonderful blessings. It also elevates the picture of women in Scripture. There are few people in Scripture that are presented without their faults and failings; Ruth stands out as one of those few. This story of her life, therefore, affirms that God's blessings answer our most basic needs for sustenance, relationship, progeny and purpose, and are offered to people, whether male or female, Israelite or Moabite, destitute or rich, old or young. To hear this story is to hear a challenge to live above our circumstances and to place our trust in the providence and grace of God. It is a message that is relevant to our world today. Despite a fragmented society and the challenges that face us, faithfulness and commitment are not signs of weakness but evidence of trust in the greater power that directs the course of our lives:

> The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts (1 Sam 2:6-7).

Appendix I: Dating and Purpose of the Book of Ruth

The date of composition is significant in determining its purpose. The internal evidence allows two possible dates for the composition of this book: a pre-exilic date, probably during the period of the civil war between David and Saul, or a post-exilic date in the time of the marital purity reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The internal evidence of a pre-exilic date, in the time of the civil war between David and Saul (or even slightly earlier but after his anointing), has the most weight:

(1) The genealogical coda of 4:18-22 is the strongest proof of a pre-exilic date of composition in the time of civil war between David and Saul as it ends the lineage with David. It also indicates no knowledge of successive generations and as such, suggests a date of composition before the birth of any his sons. It should be noted, however, that the purpose of the genealogical coda is certainly not intended to be exhaustive as it only begins with Perez.

(2) The story, as it revolves around the ancestors of David and takes place in his birthplace of Bethlehem, seems to have a deep underlying concern with David. Moreover, the significance of the story culminates in the birth of Obed, David's grandfather, by whom Naomi receives her joy and restoration. This important Davidic motif of the story is best understood if it was written in David's lifetime.

(3) If a pre-exilic date is accepted, the story serves to present David's ancestors as God-fearing people, faithful to covenant traditions and blessed by God according to their honorable conduct. It, therefore, contrasts the picture of the Benjamites, the tribe of Saul, given in Judges 19-21 and serves to further legitimate David's kingship in light of the honorable conduct of its principal characters, his ancestors, Naomi, Ruth and Boaz.

(4) Also, if a pre-exilic date is accepted, the story may also have served to answer accusations that David's lineage had been 'defiled' by Boaz's marriage to a pagan Moabite, Ruth. The story counters these accusations by presenting the conduct of Boaz and Ruth as consistent with levirate marital laws and customs (Deut 25:5-10). It also

appeals to the historical precedent of Tamar, who is vindicated in her actions in acquiring the same redemption from Judah as Ruth receives from Boaz (Gen 38:26; Ruth 4:12). Such accusations against David would likely have originated among supporters of Saulian kingship.

If the book of Ruth was written in the time of David as the above evidence suggests, the purpose of the story is to illustrate David's righteous and humble origins. The book is essentially an apologetic for his lineage through Ruth.

The internal evidence of a post-exilic date of composition in the time of marital purity reforms instituted by Ezra and Nehemiah (Ezra 9-10; Neh 10:10) are not quite as persuasive but still significant enough to consider:

(1) Ezra and Nehemiah both instituted stringent marital purity reforms that prevented Jews from marrying foreigners. The case of Ruth serves as an excellent polemic against such reforms—its authority drawing upon Torah legal traditions and resting firmly within the Davidic tradition. Certainly, Ezra and Nehemiah's reforms could not have had universal appeal, especially among Jews returning from exile with foreign wives or those Jews taking foreign wives from among the population.

(2) The theme of suffering and calamity brought upon by God and a subsequent journey back to Judah/Israel and accompanying restoration as seen in the character of Naomi is consistent with the concerns and message of the post-exilic community and the Chronicler's history.

(3) The theme of God's universal provision and care to foreigners as seen in life of Ruth echoes the messages of exilic and post-exilic books such as Jonah, II and III Isaiah.

If this evidence for a post-exilic date were borne out in further study, the purpose of the book is to serve as polemic against the laws of Ezra and Nehemiah prohibiting intermarriage by appealing to this story of a righteous, foreign wife in the lineage of David. Certainly, in this setting, the weight of such a story, based on traditions of David, would have been substantial.

Appendix II: Further Study

(1) To further elucidate the question of dating Ruth, there are at least three critical areas for further study:

(a) While the custom of levirate marriage between Boaz and Ruth certainly predates the Davidic era, as seen by the Tamar-Judah incident, the custom of sandal-giving to transfer the right of redemption to another party is based on Deuteronomistic law (Dt 25:9-10) and therefore, might *not* predate the Davidic era. Assuming a date of final composition for DtrH in the 6th century, the custom may be an anachronistic editorial insertion, which reflects a custom/tradition developed after the time of David. Interestingly, no mention is made of this custom in the Tamar-Judah incident, which might call into question the antiquity of the custom.

(b) A study into the Hebrew language of the original text of Ruth could also yield important evidence regarding a composition date. A post-exilic composition would likely feature Aramaisms such as those present in most post-exilic Biblical books, including Esther and Daniel. Also, Hebrew style was significantly different in the two eras under consideration.

(c) A consideration of external evidence, outside the scope of an inductive study, could also provide insights into this question.

(2) To further investigate the message of Ruth, a literary-rhetorical analysis of the original Hebrew would likely yield word-plays and literary techniques employed ot heighten the plot and message. Also, such a study might expose verbal links between this story and others in the Old Testament, ie. Judges 19, Genesis 38.