

TABLE 13.1 *Dates of the reigns of the first kings of Israel and Judah*

Israel	Dates	Judah	Dates
Jeroboam	926-906	Rehoboam	926-909
Nadab	906-905	Abijam	909-907
Baasha	905-882	Asa	907-867
Elah	882-881		
Zimri	881		

Source: Gunneweg 1972.

military attack on northern Israel. Galilee was devastated, and as the Israelite king turned his back on the south to concentrate on the enemy in the north, Asa took the chance to build his own border fortress in Ramah, using the materials already present.

Baasha of Israel and his successors (15:25-16:14)

(15:25-32) **Baasha's coup d'état** The narrative now turns its eyes on the kingdom of northern Israel. Here Nadab, son of Jeroboam I, attempted to found a dynasty in the manner of the Davidides in the south. He failed after only a short time (which does not keep him from receiving a poor rating from the editors—it is enough that he was Jeroboam's successor). Nevertheless we see Nadab waging war against the Philistines, indeed upon Philistine territory. He apparently resumed the war which Saul had begun (1 Sam 13-14; 31). We find out nothing about his motives or those of Baasha, his overthrewer. The entire royal family is liquidated in the coup, partly due to collective thinking, partly in fear of blood-revenge. The Bible is not interested in this, however, only stating that everything came to pass as it had to: Jeroboam was sinful, his 'house' had to disappear. The prophet Ahijah had announced as much and Baasha carried it out. Is this a licence for political murder? Not at all: we are told in 16:7 that Baasha and his son will pay for the bloodbath he brought upon the house of Jeroboam. Even if God uses humans as instruments of his judgement, he does not condone their crimes.

(15:33-16:7) **Baasha's Reign** We already know a significant amount about the second (if you include Saul, the third) founder of a dynasty: where he came from, when and how he came to power (15:27-8), and how he became involved in a war on two fronts against Judah and Syria (15:17-22). Now all we learn is that he reigned for twenty-four years in Tirzah, a Manassite city which Jeroboam had already used as a residence (14:17) and which is generally identified as el-Far'ah (about 10 km. north of Nablus). Despite his bloody slaughter of the previous dynasty, the editors regard Baasha as 'walking in the way of Jeroboam'. The criteria for judgement are not political but religious. Baasha may have destroyed a sinful dynasty, but left its sin, the bull cult of Bethel (and Dan), untouched. Thus a prophet confronts him, as with Jeroboam, and gives him a warning and a scolding (vv. 2-4) very similar to that of Ahijah of Shiloh (14:7-11). Both the Deuteronomistic authorship and a conscious effort to draw parallels between the two dynasties are unmistakable. Their fates, as we shall see, are indeed strikingly similar. One can assume that only the name of the prophet, Jehu ben Hanani, and the fact of his appearance at the time of Baasha were known to

the editors. This may be implied by the separate note 16:7, the core of which stems from the Annals, according to some critics.

(16:8-14) **Zimri's reign** As was the case with Jeroboam, woe does not befall the founder of the dynasty, but his son, very soon after his accession. This time it is not war that gives the usurper his chance to strike, but a drinking bout. The rebel Zimri is a high-ranking officer, commander of half the chariot troop, a military form used in Israel since Solomon's times (1 Kings 5:6, 10:26). Again one can draw parallels, this time with the later putsch organized by another officer of a chariot troop, namely Jehu (2 Kings 9). The army often seems to have a hand in overthrowing regimes in northern Israel. The ideas of charismatic leadership and democracy do not seem to have been important factors in their view of monarchy (see Alt, 1951 = 1964). The underlying instability in northern Israel could, however, be attributed to its tribal origins: attempts to centralize power conflict with the centrifugal force of the regions. The editors are not interested in such assumptions. They are only convinced that YHWH steered the history of Israel with justice and purpose. Those who ignore his will cannot expect a stable mutual co-existence.

The period of Omri's dynasty (1 Kings 16:15-18:29)

The dynasty founded in northern Israel by King Omri is of great significance to the political development of the country, which may only have become a true state at this time. Archaeological studies of Palestine have shown that a great amount of building took place during the ninth century across the entire land: city walls and fortifications, administration centres etc. Non-biblical sources from Assyria, Aram, and Moab show reluctant respect for the far-reaching power and influence of Israel at the time of Omri's dynasty. The biblical authors, however, are not interested in the kingdom's fame, describing it as thoroughly godless. Thus the prophets are increasingly brought to the fore, especially Elijah and Elisha. Always loyal to YHWH, they become necessary counterparts to and sometimes comrades of the kings. They set the standards of what is important and right in Israel.

Omri and Ahab of Israel (1 Kings 16:15-34)

(16:15-28) **Omri's Seizure of Power** The rebel Zimri (cf. 16:9) sweeps to power in the place of Baasha's son Elah whom he has murdered. He only survives for one week, however (which does not hinder the editors from bestowing him with the standard judgement given to all Israelite kings: they did nothing to undo 'Jeroboam's sin' of maintaining holy sites in Bethel and Dan, v. 19). Embroiled in war with the Philistines, the army is not pleased with the coup in its capital. Being a chariot officer, Zimri probably represented the urban, Canaanite elements of the state too strongly for the army to tolerate, it being dominated by more Israelite, tribal forces. In any case, the army chief Omri is spontaneously hailed by the 'people' (i.e. the soldiers) as their leader and immediately marches with them to the royal residence in Tirzah. The city is quickly taken, Zimri loses the citadel after apparently setting it alight himself, and is then killed. Not only Zimri, however, yearns for power, but also a certain Tibni: either a loyal follower of Zimri or precisely the opposite, someone

particularly faithful to tribal Israel. Four years later Tibni dies (cf. the dates in 16:15 and 16:23), probably not of natural causes. The victor's name, Omri, is not Israelite, but might be Arabian. Perhaps he worked his way from army general to head of state due to his unusually charismatic personality. He certainly created Israel's first long-living dynasty and achieved political stability. By founding a new capital city belonging to the crown, as David had done before him (cf. 2 Sam 5), Omri took a first step towards such stability. Samaria (later Sebaste) was geopolitically and strategically well situated and could be built without taking larger, existing structures into account. Omri equipped it with a generous acropolis (about 180 × 90 m., from Ahab's time about 200 × 100m.), and created an opulent city in all respects (cf. Isa 28:1), which served as the royal residence of the Israelites until the destruction of the state. The editors report that the Israelite rulers' religious failings were even worse than those of their predecessors, though they do not explain why.

(16:29-34) **Ahab and Jezebel** Omri's son and successor, Ahab, sinks some degrees lower in the editors' rating system by marrying the Phoenician princess Jezebel, building a temple for Baal in Samaria, and erecting a cult symbol in honour of the goddess Asherah. Baal is the classic Canaanite god of fertility, responsible for nature's rebirth. Asherah is the mother goddess of the Canaanite pantheon and stands at El's, Baal's, or even YHWH's side, presumably symbolized by some wooden object such as a stylized tree. Perhaps these really are signs of Phoenician influence (cf. Jezebel's father's name: Ethbaal). Ahab, however, must have been driven by the need to appease the religious influence of Israel's urban Canaanite population, since Bethel and Dan were mainly Israelite YHWH-worshipping sites (cf. 1 Kings 12:25-30). The note in v. 34 could stem from the 'Annals'. It is unclear what had been constructed in Jericho by that time, although according to archaeological studies it is unlikely that the entire city had already been built. Two sons of Hiel, who was responsible for the construction of Jericho, died during the building of it (they were not ritually killed, cf. Kaiser 1984)—an event interpreted by the editors as an example of God's unambiguous word: Joshua's curse upon Jericho (Josh 6:26) was a prophetic statement.

Elijah and Ahab (1 Kings 17:1-19:21)

(17:1-6) **Elijah's Conflict with Ahab and his Flight** The description of Ahab's mistake is followed immediately by the prophet Elijah's sudden appearance. His name alone is telling: 'My God is YHWH!' Such exclusive worship must have been unusual at that time. Elijah confronts the king with YHWH's word against Ahab's policy of ensuring harmony by syncretizing the worship of YHWH and Baal: the land will suffer drought and hunger. This is a declaration of war against Baal, god of fertility and rain. It will finally be YHWH, not Baal, who brings rain. From here onwards, a tense conflict begins between the two deities which is resolved only in 18:41-5. The prophet of YHWH withdraws to a small east-Jordanian river valley as soon as he has made his declaration. The narrative lays great store by ensuring that each change of scene is directed by a divine order. It is said that Elijah is a man led by God and obedient to him. Miraculously it is ravens,

usually greedy (ravenous) birds, that feed the hermit Elijah. Who can harm such a man?

(17:6-16) **Elijah and the Widow in Zarephath** But Elijah suffers the same fate as his people: his water runs dry. So God sends him on to the Sidon region, home of Queen Jezebel, the lion's den. He expects to find a widow to feed him there. Men of God are often poor, needing the help of others, especially of women. Elijah does not know that the one God has chosen for him this time is terribly impoverished herself. He learns this only after having randomly asked a woman at the gates of Zarephath for water and then for bread. She claims, 'as the Lord your God lives', that she and her son are starving themselves. Elijah repeats his wish, but adding the soothing words, 'Do not be afraid', and continues by prophesying an endless supply of food. The editors explicitly remark that it comes to pass as Elijah had predicted. The power and truth of a prophet's word is proved repeatedly, it being a hallmark of the Deuteronomistic view of prophets.

(17:17-24) **Elijah Awakens the Dead** This story was probably an unconnected piece, attached to the previous episode by the editors. Both stories contain the same three people and deal with the question of whether it is worthwhile to support itinerant men of God. vv. 7-16 show clearly that those who share their food with them end up eating more rather than less. In this passage we learn that their presence does not bring only death (by seeing guilt and bestowing punishment, v. 18), but also life. This story is closely related to that in 2 Kings 4:18-37, and perhaps even stems from it. The prophet plays the role of a magician reviving a dead soul by a ritual action. It is of course God making all this possible—the prophet calls upon and pleads with him twice. Finally death withdraws, though not permanently. The entire OT accepts death, while showing us how to use God's guidance in shaping life. Passages such as this stress that death is not an independent supernatural power, contrary to other oriental beliefs which feared and revered death as a deity. Thus this story is central to the main theme of the Elijah cycle: the true God versus false gods.

(18:1-20) **Elijah and Obadiah** The theme of drought and rain is now resumed in the narrative. The land of Israel thirsts and even the king suffers under the drought. YHWH sends for Elijah in order to bring about the crisis and then the solution to the unfolding conflict. The meeting between the prophet and the (godless) king is preceded by one with a (God-fearing) minister. His name is also telling: Obadiah, 'servant of YHWH'. He is said to have come to the aid of YHWH's servants during a purge of prophets. On unexpectedly seeing Elijah standing before him, he falls to the ground in fear and respect. Elijah can obviously be everywhere and nowhere: a repeating theme for which Elijah was famous. We also learn that Ahab organized a search for Elijah and that Jezebel pursued prophets of YHWH in general. Thus we begin to understand why Elijah's journey took him across the lonely river of Kerith into the foreign territory of Phoenicia.

(18:21-40) **Elijah and the Competition Between the Gods on Mount Carmel** The king asks Elijah, as soon as he meets him, the same question as his minister had (18: 7, 17), only he does not call the prophet 'my lord', but 'troubler of Israel'. Elijah

immediately throws the accusation back at him (which is followed by a longer explanation, probably added by the editors). Ahab organizes a gathering of the people on Mount Carmel, after which he has no further role in the story. This is another unconnected story which is probably only placed in its present context out of necessity (cf. for instance the wastage of water in v. 34–5, although there is a drought everywhere). It has been suggested that this story reflects a real political and religious conflict at the time of Ahab regarding a holy place on Mount Carmel near to the Phoenician border (Alt 1964b: 135–49). It is more probable that it is a theologically planned anticipation of Jehu's bloody deeds against Baal followers (2 Kings 10:18–27, see Smend 1987). In this sense the horrifying ending in v. 40 is both necessary and highly unsettling. But before this point, a bitter struggle concerning the true god and the right religion flares up. Elijah stands against the people. They do not seem to understand the choice Elijah offers at all: 'YHWH or Baal', since the idea of YHWH monotheism was not yet sufficiently established in Israel. Elijah then turns to the Baal prophets and suggests a competition between them. They do not answer, but the people do, on their behalf. A miracle must bring truth to light. Those who have read 1 Kings 17 know that YHWH can perform miracles. It is quickly revealed that Baal is incapable of doing this. Here the cultic and ritual activities of Baalistic religion are reliably reported: their prayer, rhythmic movements, and self-mortification building up to ecstasy (vv. 26–9). But Baal remains inactive. By contrast, YHWH-religion concentrates on the spoken word (prayer) and can immediately work miracles. The people to whom this is demonstrated turn to YHWH's side at once. This call of faith, 'The LORD indeed is God', unmistakably reminds us of Elijah's name ('my God is YHWH'). Elijah's belief has become that of the people.

(18:41–6) Elijah Brings Rain The return of the rains is another triumph for Elijah. The theme of drought reappears along with king Ahab. King and prophet are no longer enemies, but in agreement. The fact that the king can eat again is perhaps a sign that he was once depicted as a remorseful and therefore God-fearing king (Würthwein 1984). Elijah acts like a magician who uses his superhuman powers—as symbolized by the gesture in v. 42—to call for rain seven times. At the climax, he slips into ecstasy, similar to the Baal prophets' trance earlier. He differs from them decisively, however: the 'hand of the LORD' grasps him and he storms ahead of the royal chariots for more than 20 km. from Carmel (some see Samaria as the starting-point) to Jezreel. This archaic-sounding anecdote again shows how YHWH breaks the boundaries of what is humanly possible. The opening conflict of 16:32–3 and 17:1 is thus solved as YHWH proves himself to be the only effective God (although not necessarily the only one that exists).

(19:1–8) Elijah's Flight to Horeb Even Elijah is human, as Jezebel proves. According to the LXX, she opens her warning of revenge—sworn by 'the gods'—with the proud statement, 'If you are Elijah, I am Jezebel!' The fact that this woman repeatedly plays the role of Elijah's (and YHWH's) strongest antagonist in his stories may have to do with the real history or be a further version of the text written shortly after Ahab's death, which made Jezebel rather than Ahab the main villain (see Steck 1968). Both interpretations could depend too heav-

ily on the story's historical precision and not set enough store by the theological freedom of the narrator—who after all wrote at a much later time. The struggle for the exclusive worship of YHWH and against Baalism was much more long-term and less triumphant than 1 Kings 18 suggests—a fact reflected in Elijah's sudden need to flee. His destination is Horeb, the name used by Deuteronomy and the editors for Sinai. Mention of Beer-sheba and Elijah's loss, in the desert, of all will to live remind us of Hagar and Ishmael's fate in Gen 21. Here too God's messenger brings salvation in the form of food and water. He must, however, encourage the dispirited man of God twice before he is willing to make his way to the mountain of God, inspired by miraculous powers (cf. 18:46).

(19:9–18) Elijah's Meeting with God on Horeb As Moses had done before him (Ex 24; 33) Elijah hopes to meet God on Mount Horeb. He does not appear: at least, not in impressive natural phenomena (which one would have connected with the weather god Baal) and not in demonstrations of violent power (as were sometimes cherished in religious arguments, e.g. in 18:40 and in countless other examples up to the present day). Elijah encounters a completely different God on Mount Horeb. The description of his approach is extremely powerful and quietly beautiful. The image of God suggested here is in clear contrast to that of 1 Kings 18 and especially 2 Kings 10. Hosea's criticism of Jehu's bloody wrath (Hos 1:4) is probably the background to this scene. Although it is difficult to see the figure of Elijah as an ironic reflection of Moses in general (see Hauser and Gregory 1990), this story does show ironic traits. The prophet is twice asked the reason for his presence, and twice the same frustration breaks out in him, as if God had not appeared to him in the meantime. In speaking of the 7,000 Israelites who do not kneel before Baal in the ensuing battle, God redresses the balance of Elijah's complaint about his complete solitude. At the same time Elijah is charged with enlisting three warriors for YHWH's cause of whom at least two draw a line of blood through history: the insurgents Hazael of Aram and Jehu of Israel. The third in the group is the prophet Elisha who doubtless belongs historically more with the other two than Elijah does (see 2 Kings 8:7–15; 9:1–10). The latter's enormous influence seems to have attracted various traditions and not least the figure of Elisha.

(19:19–21) Elijah Charges Elisha The first of Elijah's three required appointments in 19:15–16 is that of Elisha. In fact it will be the only one, since Elisha immediately takes over Elijah's staff—or his mantle!—and carries it further. Elijah's mantle was apparently his hallmark (cf. 2 Kings 2:8, 14; in 1:8 a different Heb. word is used). By enveloping Elisha with it, Elijah passes on to him his spirit and his mission. Elisha appears as a rich farmer, Elijah as a restlessly wandering prophet. Acceptance of this duty requires Elisha's relinquishment of his property and family. He seems to be prepared to do this on certain conditions. Elijah's answer can be interpreted in two ways: as scoldingly rejective ('Go back again; for what have I done to you?') or as understandingly warning ('Go, but [remember] what I have done to you', Gray 1977: 413). It is also unclear whether Elisha bids farewell to his parents, but he determinedly takes leave of his property and gives it to the people. From now on he is Elijah's servant and 'follows him', cf. Mt 4:19; 8:18–22. The two men were historically not so

closely tied as it appears here. They stand for different styles of prophecy, being representative of single and group prophets (Schmitt 1972: 183–4). Our text may mark the beginnings of the idea of prophetic succession.

Ahab and YHWH's Prophets (1 Kings 20:1–22:40)

(1 Kings 20:1–34) Ahab's Victory over the Arameans Following a Prophetic Oracle In 1 Kings 20 and 22 we are told of a series of wars between an Aramean king, Benhadad, and King Ahab of Israel. This does not fit the fact proved by Assyrian sources that Ahab and the Aramean king, Adad-idri (Aram. Hadadezer), were closely allied to each other (ANET 276–7). It is probable that the Omri dynasty was at peace with Aram, and that this relationship deteriorated only under Hazael (cf. 2 Kings 8:12–13, 28–9; 13:3, and elsewhere). Thus, should our stories reflect historical fact, they belong to the time following Jehu's coup. At this point, however, they wish to describe the confrontation between King Ahab and the prophets of his time. It has been suggested that scenes containing the prophets were added to the text at a later point, and that originally the stories dealt with profane scenes of war. This is possible, though not certain. In ch. 20, the Israelite king repeatedly defeats an aggressive and arrogant enemy with the help of prophetic oracles of war. Interestingly, the Arameans considered YHWH to be a mountain god who had no power on the plains (v. 23), a belief that stemmed from underlying religious and social history. YHWH's home was originally the mountains of southern Sinai and Edom (Ex 3; Judg 5:4) and Israel itself initially developed into an ethnic and political power on the mountains of Palestine (Judg 1:27–35; 1 Sam 13–14; 2 Sam 2:9). Now, however, so the story tells us, the entire country belongs to YHWH (and his Israelite people)! Ahab even manages to force Ben-hadad to agree to an Israelite trading office in Damascus (v. 34).

(20:35–43) A Prophetic Warning to Ahab The initially positive outcome of the war against Aram is tarnished by the following scene, as Ahab transforms from being a victor to a sinner: he should not have made business contracts with Benhadad, but should have 'devoted him to destruction', i.e. killed him. Devoting to destruction, or 'banning', passing spoils of war and their previous owners on to God, later became an underlying principle of Deuteronomistic theory and historical writing (Deut 13:12–18; 20:16–18; Josh 6–7; 11:10–15, and elsewhere). It was probably practised in the early times of the kings in Israel as in Moab—although not in every war, but only out of extreme necessity (cf. Dietrich 1996a). As gruesome as this ritual is, it is equally clear that war is being waged without prospect of material gain. Once a 'banning war' had been declared, it seems that especially prophetic, i.e. strictly YHWH-following circles, insisted upon its compliance (cf. also 1 Sam 15). In this case, the prophet's ingenious scheming forces the king to catch himself out and bring judgement upon himself—as Nathan had once done to David (2 Sam 12).

(21:1–16) Ahab's and Jezebel's Judicial Murder of Naboth This story is a paradigm for the conflict between the demands of the state and the rights of the people. The farmer Naboth has the right and indeed the duty to bequeath his land to his family and not to outsiders. The ruling ideal in ancient Israel was that each farming family—over 90 per cent of the popu-

lation—was given a secure economic existence and thus firm citizen's rights by the allocation of sufficient land. This is shown by the attempt to legally protect landownership for everyone (Lev 25; Deut 5:21). Initially, King Ahab was forced to capitulate to this (probably still unwritten) right of his subjects: an idea which paints a positive picture of the monarchy. Nevertheless, this story shows how unscrupulously the king's power over the civilian rights could still be used and how compliant the lay assessors' court was to his wishes. The queen is the driving force behind this, since she comes from abroad and does not respect Israelite ethics, or perhaps does not know them. In any case, nobody attempts to stop her, so that evil can poison society from the top down—not merely a modern experience. If the scandal of Naboth is still an individual case for which the royal court is responsible, the theft of land by the ruling class 100 years later becomes an economic principle (Isa 5:8; Am 2:6; Mic 2:1–2).

(21:17–29) Elijah's Judgement against Ahab and his Court The loss of the farming population's rights in Israel did not occur without resistance. This can be seen in the bitterly outraged tone of the Naboth narrative, though it lacks further elaboration or explanation of this point (*contra* Würthwein 1984, who sees vv. 1–16 as a closed short story in its own right). Someone is required to confront the king and under such circumstances this is normally a prophet. A parallel rendering of this story in 2 Kings 9:25–6 shows that although a prophet apparently did protest against the judicial murder of Naboth (and his family) it can hardly have been Elijah. The latter's appearance in these verses has obviously been reworked several times. Originally, there was probably only a brief scene: suddenly, Elijah stands before the king in the vineyards of Naboth. He listens to Ahab's surprised question (v. 20: 'Have you found me, O my enemy?'), briefly and firmly throws his accusation at him (v. 19: 'Have you killed, and also taken possession?'), and immediately announces his judgement (v. 19: 'In the place where dogs licked the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood'). This prophecy does not come true to the letter. Editors ensured that God gives Elijah detailed instructions regarding his task (vv. 17–19, in which the slight discrepancy of the setting between Samaria and Jezreel is glossed over). Elijah must scold and warn Ahab in a lengthy speech (vv. 20b–22, 24, closely related to the speeches in 1 Kings 14:7–11 and 2 Kings 9:7–10) in which the king's religious failings are repeated (vv. 25–6). Ahab's transformation into a repentant sinner postpones his judgement to the next generation (vv. 27–9). v. 23 does not (as suggested by Steck 1968) belong to a particularly anti-Jezebel authorial layer dating from the time following Ahab's death. The reference in 2 Kings 9:36–7 ascertaining the fulfilment of the prophecy proves that this section must clearly be Deuteronomistic. The text describes Elijah angrily breaking his staff over Omri's dynasty, preparing the reader for terrible deeds in the future.

(22:1–40) Micaiah ben Imlah's Prophecy and Ahab's Death Although great punishment only befalls his sons (the OT thought collectively right up to the period of exile), Ahab is not left unreprimanded. Despite his dying of natural causes according to the Annals of the Kings (22:40), the editors emend this. They insert an account of the Israelite king's

II. Ruth

GRACE I. EMMERSON

INTRODUCTION

A. Description, Date, and Purpose. 1. At first sight Ruth is a delightfully simple tale of domestic life. It moves from sorrow to joy, from emptiness to fullness, largely through the initiative and resourcefulness of two women. This description, however, masks many intractable questions not only of date and purpose but of relationship to OT law and practice. In the prominence it gives to women, and its unconventional attitude to society, it resembles Esther, although contrasting with this in its overtly religious dimension. Although YHWH's active intervention in human life is acknowledged only twice (1:6; 4:13), the frequent invocation of the Name in blessing affirms that he is in ultimate control. Yet this aspect is deliberately muted; at times God seems not even 'in the shadows' (Campbell 1975), and twice significant events are attributed to chance (2:3; 3:18). Throughout it is a story of faithfulness (*hesed*) human and divine. Each of the blessings invoked is fulfilled ultimately through human agency.

2. The questions of date and purpose are interrelated. Uncertainty as to the one compounds the problems concerning the other. Arguments can be adduced for both a pre-exilic and a post-exilic date. In neither case are they conclusive and the matter remains unresolved. From a general consensus on linguistic grounds that it belongs to the post-exilic period and, despite its non-polemical tone, may have been a protest against the exclusivism of Ezra and Nehemiah, preference has moved now to a pre-exilic date on the grounds that the alleged Aramaisms are, with few exceptions, open to other explanations. Neither the fact that it is included among the *mēgillōt* (the five scrolls) in the third section of the Hebrew canon, nor comparison with the attitude to foreigners in the book of Jonah, justifies assigning it to a late date. The setting of the story in the period of the Judges, which accounts for its position in the Christian canon, is, however, clearly remote from the author's own time (1:1; 4:7). If the concluding references to David are original they provide a *terminus a quo* for its written form and open the possibility that it may have had a political purpose in supporting David's claim to the throne, whether in his or in Solomon's time (Hubbard 1988). The acceptance of Moab as an appropriate refuge for a Judahite family, and of Ruth as the wife of a prominent Israelite, suggests a time prior to the growth of the intense hostility represented by Deut 23:3–6. Whatever its original purpose, its position in the Christian canon introduces a note of hope after the negative anarchical tone of the end of Judges and restores woman, and the male–female relationship, to an honourable position after the sordid, misogynist events of Judg 19–21.

3. In the HB the position of the book of Ruth varies. When it immediately follows Proverbs Ruth herself is to be seen as an example of the 'capable wife' (*'ēšet ḥayil*) of Prov 31. In Judaism the book of Ruth is associated with the harvest celebration of Pentecost, the biblical Feast of Weeks, and the giving of the law.

B. Literary Structure. Of all the OT books Ruth has the highest ratio of dialogue to narrative, hence the immediacy of its appeal. Best described as a short story (novella), it is a skilfully structured interweaving of darkness and light. It begins with death and ends with birth, the transforming of emptiness into fullness. The central chapters 2 and 3 are parallel in structure; beginning and ending with scenes in which only Ruth and Naomi participate, their main focus is on Ruth's encounters with Boaz which bring for her blessings both material and spiritual. Their settings, however, are strongly contrasted; the former takes place in public in the countryside by daylight, the latter in the intimate privacy of a threshing floor by night.

C. Feminist readings. Although written from a female perspective and illustrative of the courage and resourcefulness of a woman, it is merely speculative to suggest that a woman was its author. Feminist commentators are divided in their appraisal of Ruth's character. For some she is an example of strength and independence, for others she merely subserves a male agenda, for in the end it is a man who makes the decisions and a male child over whom the women rejoice and with whom the future lies.

D. Text. Fragments of four Hebrew MSS of the book of Ruth dating from the last century BCE and the first CE, found in caves 2 and 4 at Qumran, attest only slight variations from the MT.

COMMENTARY

(1:1–5) The references to time and place (v. 1) have a significance beyond the simply chronological and geographical. They point to a time of anarchy (Judg 21:25) from which Ruth's descendant, David, will deliver Israel, and to a foreign land outside the covenant, yet within which God works out his purpose. The contrast between Ruth, this Moabite heroine through whom Israel's future is secured, and the Moabite women who led Israel into idolatry on their journey into the promised land (Num 25:1–3), cannot have escaped either the author or the readers of this narrative. The intimate relationship of Ruth and Boaz, with its promise of a glorious future for Israel under David, redeems the apostasy and degradation of the earlier incident.

From conventional beginnings with its focus on Elimelech and his sons, the narrative quickly becomes a woman's story. Through bereavement and barrenness (v. 5) it appears as a story without a future. But the death of sons at the story's beginning is counterbalanced at the end by a son whose birth holds promise of a future, not only for the family concerned but for the nation (4:14–17).

(1:6–13) Naomi's initiative marks a new beginning. But the real initiative is YHWH's in showing his care for his people by 'giving them food' (v. 6, in Hebrew an alliterative phrase, *lāṭēt lāhem lāhem*). This is the first of only two references in the

whole narrative to YHWH's direct intervention in human life. In both instances he acts to secure the future, first by the provision of food, and second by the conception of a child (see 4:13). The sixfold repetition in this section of the verb 'return, turn back' (*šûb*) indicates a keynote of these verses. With v. 8 the dialogue begins. Naomi's command to her daughters-in-law, 'Go back', is repeated in vv. 11–12 in a more peremptory way. The expression 'mother's house' is to be noted. It occurs elsewhere in contexts of love and marriage (cf. Gen 24:28; Song 3:4; 8:2). In general, however, a widow returned to her father's house (Gen 38:11; Lev 22:13), but the death of Ruth's father is not implied (cf. 2:11). Naomi's horizons are restricted to the idea that 'security' (v. 9) is to be found only in marriage, a thought which continues through vv. 11–13. It is debatable whether or not the idea of levirate marriage (Lat. *levir*, 'brother-in-law'; see Deut 25:5–6) is present here. In a strict sense this was the responsibility of a dead man's brother within a tightly knit family unit. Future sons of Naomi's would be but half-brothers to the dead. Her words are better understood as an outburst of hopeless despair and possibly self-pity. The ambivalence of Naomi's character already becomes apparent. Does her instruction to her daughters-in-law arise from genuine concern for their future, or is it a cynical rejection of them in despair? The alternatives turn on the meaning of the ambiguous v. 13b, whether it expresses self-pity, 'it has been far more bitter for me than for you' (NRSV, taking the Hebrew preposition *min* to indicate comparison), or altruistic concern, 'it is exceedingly bitter to me for your sake' (RSV). YHWH is regarded as the source both of blessing as reward for meritorious action (v. 8), and of catastrophe which, however, is not necessarily regarded as punishment (v. 20).

(1:14–18) portrays the depth of Ruth's commitment to Naomi and to YHWH. The terminology of v. 16 is reminiscent of marriage vows (cf. Gen 2:24) and of covenant making (Ex 6:7; Lev 26:12). Ruth's action demands comparison with that of Abraham who left his homeland with promise of a future; Ruth at this moment has no promise and no future. Naomi's silence is significant. Nowhere does she respond to Ruth's devotion. Ruth's allegiance to YHWH is signified by the form of her oath (v. 17). Her use of the name YHWH here, and here only, implies renunciation of Chemosh, god of Moab, and the aligning of herself with Israel.

(1:19–22) The deficiencies of Naomi's character are exposed. She defines 'full' and 'empty' (v. 21) simply in terms of male relatives. In fact, she left for Moab not 'full' but famine stricken; she returned to Israel not empty but with Ruth's remarkable devotion.

The narrative in this chapter is skilfully structured and powerful in its simplicity. From famine (v. 1) it moves to harvest (v. 22), from Moab to Bethlehem. It began with Elimelech; it ends with Naomi's story. There is both pathos and irony. Despite Ruth's extraordinary avowal of loyalty to Naomi and her God, choosing a future without promise or hope, she is ignored by Naomi and the townswomen in Bethlehem. She is still designated a foreigner (v. 22) even though it is with her that the future lies.

(2:1–7) The sequence of events is interrupted by a circumstantial clause (v. 1) which supplies details germane to the

story as it unfolds. Boaz is better described here as 'friend' rather than 'kinsman', for *mōda* (a rare word) is not strictly a kinship term but refers to acquaintance or familiarity (cf. Prov 7:4, 'intimate friend'). The vocalized Hebrew text differs here from the consonantal text which indicates a more common word of comparable meaning (*mēyuḏda*; cf. 2 Kings 10:11; Ps 55:14). Boaz is bound to Naomi by friendship with Elimelech, as well as by ties of kinship as members of the same clan (*mīšpāḥā*), an intermediate grouping between the smaller family unit ('father's house') and the larger tribe. The phrase translated 'a prominent rich man' (*gibbōr ḥayil*) signifies, in some instances, a man of military prowess (Judg 6:12; 1 Sam 16:18) as well as wealth (2 Kings 15:20). An element of physical prowess is not to be excluded too readily from this portrayal of Boaz (cf. LXX, 'powerful in strength').

Ruth had for 10 years been the wife of an Israelite (1:4) yet still she is reckoned an outsider and designated as 'the Moabite' (vv. 2, 6). The situation at the beginning of ch. 1 is reversed. It is Ruth now, not Naomi, who is a widow without family in a foreign country. Thus she claims the right of the poor, enshrined in law, to glean at harvest (Lev 19:9–10). Ruth's arrival on Boaz's land (v. 3; the picture is of unfenced strips of land with various owners) is attributed to chance (*miqreh*). There is no overt intervention here by YHWH in the course of events (contrast 1:6), yet the frequent invocation of his name in blessing throughout the narrative (2:4; cf. 2:12, 20; 3:10; 4:14) affirms his ultimate responsibility in human affairs. The greeting of v. 4 is a traditional one (see Ps 129:8). The nature of Boaz's question, 'To whom does this young woman belong?' (v. 5), reflects the assumptions of the patriarchal society of the time. The answer identifies Ruth impersonally, not by name but by her foreign origins and her relationship to Naomi.

(2:7) presents two difficulties, in v. 7a an apparent disjunction with the following narrative in v. 15; in v. 7b an exegetical problem arising from the ambiguity of the Hebrew. As regards the latter, NRSV 'without resting even for a moment' (following the LXX) is to be compared with REB 'she has hardly had a moment's rest in the shelter' (a more literal rendering of the Heb.; cf. NIV). Either way Ruth's unstinting activity is emphasized. The former relates to her request to glean 'among the sheaves' (v. 7a, an advance on v. 2) which fits awkwardly with v. 15 where this is clearly an outstanding privilege accorded to her by Boaz, not a matter of right. Sasson (1989) attempts to resolve this difficulty by understanding v. 7b, 'she has been on her feet from early this morning until now', to refer not to Ruth's untiring gleaning but to her patient waiting for her request to be granted, a privilege outside the competence of the overseer and finally granted by Boaz himself only in v. 15. Two considerations, however, militate against this view: (1) it is unrealistic to assume that a woman in Ruth's needy circumstances would refrain from gleaning in the customary way while requesting permission for an uncertain privilege; (2) it disregards the explicit statement that she 'gleaned in the field behind the reapers' (v. 3). A possible solution consists in emending *bā'ōmārīm* ('sheaves') in v. 7 to *bā'āmīrīm* ('swathes'; cf. NEB), thus creating a clear distinction from v. 15. Some prefer to omit v. 7a following the Vulgate and Syriac.

(2:8–16) This section is dominated by the first encounter between Ruth and Boaz, the main characters in the narrative. Ruth's status above that of a servant is acknowledged by Boaz in relieving her of the menial task of drawing water (v. 9; the vessels would be either large clay pots or goatskins). Boaz's protection of Ruth (v. 9), 'I have ordered the young men not to touch you', contains echoes of the divine protection afforded to Sarah (Gen 20:6) and Rebekah (26:11). Ruth's response plays on the verb 'acknowledge' (root *n-k-r*) and the noun 'foreigner' (*nokri*), a category of persons distinct from the 'resident alien' (*gēr*) who had legal rights of protection within the community.

Boaz alone, in contrast to Naomi, appreciates the cost of Ruth's loyalty to her mother-in-law (v. 11). The motif of reward (v. 12) has occurred already in 1:8. The figure of YHWH's protective wings (*kānāp*) derives either from bird imagery (Deut 32:11; Isa 31:5), a figurative description of deities found elsewhere in the ancient Near East, or from the cherubim in the sanctuary, symbolizing YHWH's presence, which provided a place of refuge in times of need (Ps 36:7; 57:1). The combining of YHWH's blessing and Boaz's favour in vv. 12–13 is significant. Only YHWH can pay her 'wages in full' (*maš-kurtek šēlēmā*; NRSV 'full reward'), but Boaz himself is to be the agent of this blessing for under his 'skirts' (*kānāp*) Ruth will eventually find security (3:9). Behind Ruth's bland words 'you have . . . spoken kindly' (literally 'to speak to the heart', v. 13) lies a more ambivalent meaning; in some contexts this expression signifies the tender wooing of a lover (Hos 2:14). The narrative is rich in such ambiguities which foreshadow the outcome of the story. The overwhelming generosity and superabundance of Boaz's provision for Ruth (vv. 14–16) is reminiscent of YHWH's unstinting provision for his people (Ps 81:10; cf. also 1:6).

(2:17–23) The picture in v. 17 is of grain beaten out with a stick (cf. Judg 6:11). The weight of an ephah is unknown. Although a surprisingly large quantity to result from gleaning, it was not more than Ruth could carry home—possibly, but by no means certainly, about 25 kilos.

The most significant aspect of Boaz's relationship to Naomi and Ruth is now disclosed (v. 20). He is a 'kinsman redeemer' (*gō'el*; Lev 25:25, 47–9). v. 21 has a playful, humorous touch. Boaz's instruction, 'keep close to my young women' (v. 8), becomes on Ruth's lips, 'keep close to my young men'. Naomi responds with an appropriate warning!

The chapter's close marks the end of harvest (June) and the start of a new uncertain future. Where will provision be found? Once again the initiative is Naomi's (cf. 1:6).

(ch. 3) Unlike chs. 1 and 2, ch. 3 has no public aspect. It begins and ends with private conversation between Ruth and Naomi, and pivots on the intimate scene between Ruth and Boaz at the threshing floor.

(3:1–5) Naomi continues her efforts to secure Ruth's, and with it her own, future by the only means she understands, namely marriage (cf. 1:9). To this end she plans an extraordinary and entirely unconventional scheme, although whether from genuine concern for Ruth or from self-interest is unclear. Certainly its outcome is to her own advantage (4:15). The ambivalence of Naomi's character remains unresolved. The instruction to Ruth to wash, perfume herself, and put on her

'best clothes' (an interpretative rendering of 'cloak', *simlā*) may suggest deliberate preparation as a bride (v. 3). There is a hint of unconscious irony in Naomi's words, '[Boaz] will tell you what to do' (v. 4). In the event it is Ruth who tells Boaz what to do (v. 9). In Naomi's eyes Ruth is merely passive and unquestioningly obedient; in her dealings with Boaz she proves herself independent and resourceful (cf. 2:11).

(3:6–14) This dramatic scene is couched in tantalizingly obscure language, perhaps deliberately so. It is unclear whether the expression 'uncover his feet' (vv. 4, 8) implies sexual intercourse. That a threshing floor with its piles of grain afforded considerable privacy is evident from its use as a haunt of prostitutes (Hos 9:1). Moreover the word 'feet' (*raglaim*) occurs in some instances as a euphemism for 'genitals' (cf. Isa 6:2). Yet the word used here signifies rather 'the place of his feet' (*margēlōt*; see v. 14), hence the REB rendering, 'the covering at his feet', is to be preferred to the NRSV. Nevertheless, sexual overtones are undoubtedly present both in the repeated use of the verb 'lie' (*šākab*, vv. 4, 7, 8, 13, 14) and in Ruth's request, 'spread your skirt [literally "wings"; cf. 2:12] over your servant', a highly unconventional proposal of marriage (cf. Deut 22:30; 27:20; Ezek 16:8). Far from finding this morally offensive, Boaz gives Ruth his blessing and reaffirms the public regard for her as 'a worthy woman' (v. 11, 'ēset ḥayil; cf. Prov 31:10). Yet the unconventional nature of her behaviour is implied by the secrecy which Boaz urges (v. 14). There is no suggestion that Ruth is a woman of loose morals. Her action is motivated by the fact that Boaz is 'next-of-kin' (*gō'el*, v. 9).

This, however, raises acutely the question of the relationship of the book of Ruth to OT law, for nowhere else in the OT are the obligations of a *gō'el* said to include marriage. His duties were the restoration of property to his impoverished kin and the redemption of their persons from slavery (Lev 25:25, 47–9). The *gō'el*'s responsibility in the matter of Elimelech's property is not made specific until 4:3–4. The focus here appears to be solely on Ruth's marriage. Yet for the story to have credibility Ruth's request must have appeared reasonable. Indeed Boaz does not question it. It may be that, in different areas, local practice varied and that the laws of Leviticus were formulated in order to regulate the matter, or the term *gō'el* is used here in a less technical sense. What is involved here is not to be confused with levirate marriage, an obligation imposed only upon the brother of a dead man and then only in the case of brothers living together in a closely knit family unit (Deut 25:5). Whereas the refusal to undertake the obligation of levirate marriage was regarded as a grave dereliction of duty (cf. Gen 38:14, 26; Deut 25:7–10), this was not so in Ruth's case. Marriage to her was clearly a voluntary undertaking (v. 13).

The meaning of Boaz's statement in v. 10 is not entirely clear. The 'first instance' of Ruth's loyalty was her selfless devotion in leaving homeland and family for Naomi's sake (2:11). 'The last instance', v. 10b implies, relates to her single-minded commitment to build up Naomi's family by avoiding other relationships. On these grounds Boaz pledges himself to fulfil Ruth's request (v. 11). With v. 12 (where there is a slight dislocation of the Heb.) an element is introduced into the story of which neither Naomi nor Ruth appear to have been aware, the existence of a yet closer relative.

(3:15–18) The themes of emptiness and fullness, prominent in Naomi's lament in 1:21, recur in these last verses. Naomi's physical emptiness is relieved, but this is but the prelude to the satisfying of her deeper need. Naomi had the first word in this chapter. Now she has the last word. Boaz's mention of the closer relative has introduced an element of uncertainty into her carefully conceived plan. Once again the element of chance is taken into account as she bids Ruth wait to see 'how the matter will fall' (v. 18). There is no overt reference here to Yahweh's intervention or direction, implicit though it has been in the several references to his name in blessing. The emphasis throughout falls on the human obligation to act according to loyalty (*hesed*).

(4:1–6) Action moves now from the private to the public arena and hence to exclusively male participants and the arrival of the unnamed next-of-kin, known only as 'so-and-so' (*pēlōnī 'almōnī*), a deliberately shadowy figure. The area inside the city gate, the traditional place for executing business, is the scene of a double legal transaction, the redemption of Elimelech's land and the marriage of Ruth. The exact nature of the relationship between these two issues is unclear, and this uncertainty may perhaps account both for a slight dislocation in the Hebrew of v. 5 and, more significantly, for the disjunction between the consonantal text and its vocalized form. The consonantal text is represented by the NRSV, 'The day you acquire the field from the hand of Naomi, you are also acquiring Ruth the Moabite'; in contrast the vocalic text, represented by the REB, reads, 'On the day you take over the field from Naomi, I take over the widow, Ruth the Moabite.' Either way, the mention of this young woman of child-bearing age complicates the situation. Up to this point mention had been made only of Naomi (v. 3). Ruth's prospective child, however, would inherit the land and thus disadvantage the family of the unnamed kinsman. It is this new factor in the situation that accounts for his sudden change of mind from unqualified agreement (v. 4) to instant refusal (v. 6).

A number of unanswered questions remain: why did Ruth glean as one of the landless poor if the family was already in possession of land, and why was the kinsman not aware of the existence of property (cf. 2 Kings 8:3–6)? These are not the narrator's concern.

(4:7–12) Although the marriage in question does not accord with the regulations of a strictly levirate marriage, its purpose, 'to maintain the dead man's name on his inheritance' (vv. 5, 10), is expressed in identical terms (*lēhāqim šēm*; cf. Deut 25:7). Nevertheless there are striking differences between the transaction described here and the procedures set out in Deut 25:5–10. There the removal of the sandal by the rejected widow, accompanied by spitting in the reluctant brother-in-law's face, was a potent sign of his disgrace; here the bestowal of the sandal by its wearer is the solemn confirmation of a transaction.

The amount of space proportionate to the whole narrative which is devoted to this legal transaction emphasizes its importance in the story. The agreement concerning both the property and the marriage is ratified by a properly constituted

group of elders (v. 2) and by the people (v. 11). Ruth's relations with Boaz which began furtively and unconventionally are publicly acknowledged. Theirs is no illicit liaison, and Ruth is no longer an outsider, the Moabite. Significantly the blessing (v. 11) compares her to Rachel and Leah, the mothers of the twelve tribes of Israel. v. 12 further associates her with Tamar, like Ruth a foreigner who, by unconventional means, secured the future of a line threatened with extinction (Gen 38). The clan named after her son Perez rose eventually to a degree of prominence (Neh 11:4–6; 1 Chr 27:3). Is there a hint here that the speakers knew of Ruth's unconventional behaviour at the threshing floor? Thus Ruth was not the first foreign woman with a place in the genealogy of the royal Davidic line.

(4:13–22) Now, for only the second time in the narrative, YHWH intervenes, this time in enabling Ruth to conceive (cf. 1:6). Yet, from v. 14 to the end of the book, Ruth is relegated to the shadows, regarded as little more than a surrogate mother for Naomi's child. Although no longer termed 'the Moabite' she is still an outsider. The story ends as it began with Naomi, empty through bereavement of husband and sons, filled now by the birth 'to her' of a male child (v. 17). The identity of the *gō'el* (v. 14) is ambiguous, referring perhaps to Boaz through whom Naomi's future has been secured, or more probably, in view of v. 15, to the newborn child. A woman still needs a male *gō'el*. Yet the response of the women (v. 15) puts the importance of sons in perspective; Ruth's love for Naomi is of more value than seven sons (cf. 1 Sam 1:8). But thereafter the focus is on Naomi and the child. Ruth is ignored. The concluding genealogy is entirely male. Yet the remarkable fact is that the title of the book bears Ruth's name.

Although the book of Ruth is often termed a love story, the only reference to 'love' occurs in v. 15, not between Ruth and Boaz but between Ruth and Naomi, unreciprocated though it was on the older woman's part. The women who shared Naomi's distress (1:19–21) share her joy, and, in the only instance of its kind in the OT, name the child (v. 17). Elsewhere this is a function of the parents alone.

Whether vv. 17b and 18–22 are an original part of the narrative is open to question. It is, however, arguable on literary grounds that the names of the genealogy form a counterpart to the tragic names of ch. 1. From a tale of death and bereavement they point to a glorious future. In the canonical context their importance lies in giving the story a wider significance than the purely domestic, and in introducing the promise of hope after the despair with which the book of Judges ends.

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