

Aesthetic Qualities in *the Book of Ruth*

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[**Abstract**] *The Book of Ruth* in *the Bible* bears its unique beauty as a complete literature work. This paper tends to explore its aesthetic qualities from three aspects: its unusual background and setting, well-designed story structure, and the importance of the main characters so as to better appreciate the exquisite narrative skills of this story and fully demonstrate its beauty as a masterpiece in *the Bible*.

[**Key words**] *the Book of Ruth*; aesthetic qualities; *Bible*

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When reading *the Old Testament of the Bible*, one cannot help admitting that *the Book of Ruth* is the most exquisite romance. In this short narrative of only four chapters we have the most charming and attractive story of the whole of extant ancient Hebrew literature. The whole story prevails against loss, hardship, and hopelessness and is suffused with grace, kindness, and gentility. Readers can easily be attracted by such a paradisiacal farming world, moved by such a harmonious scene with noble characters, and educated by such a beautiful story of good deeds getting rewarded. In order to better appreciate the exquisite narrative skills of this story and fully demonstrate its beauty as a masterpiece in *the Bible*, this paper tends to explore its aesthetic qualities from the following aspects: its unusual background and setting of the book, well-designed story structure and self-evident theme, and the importance of the main characters and their shining virtues.

I. The background and setting of the Book of Ruth

The story happened "in the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land" (Ruth 1: 1). *The Book of Judges* was about the terrible days of civil war and death, thievery and murder, rape and fire. As was told in *the Bible*, "In those days there was no kings in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (Judge 21: 25). No one could expect that in such dark atmosphere, *the Book of Ruth* produced

some virtuous figures who did what they saw right things and also turned the history into a different age. Naomi, a firm and determined female, after losing her husband and sons in the foreign country, returned to their native land and was compensated with not only land but a rearer of her old age. Ruth was kind enough to take mercy on her lonely mother-in-law Naomi, and chose to cling to her and followed her to a foreign land, thus her loyalty and kindness were richly rewarded; not only she was blessed with an equally-kind husband but later got a famous descendant; the father of Jesse, who is just the father of David, the great king of Hebrew. Boaz, Ruth's later husband, his generosity, selflessness and sense of responsibility redeemed the two poor widows from poverty and helplessness, thus he not only got a beautiful wife, but he himself was put in an important position in *the Bible*. It is obvious that there is a sharp contrast in *the Book of Ruth* with the other stories in the Judges. Compared with the previous history, *the Book of Ruth* is a story with a serene tone and loving characters. There is no war and enmity among different tribes, there is no mistrust between God and men, no conflict and rivalry among men. Everything happened and is dissolved in such a loving and graceful way. That's why we say *the Book of Ruth* is just like a sparkling star shining in a long dark night, a beautiful pearl glittering in the hillock. It surely has its unique beauty.

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What's more, the setting of the story where it happened also possesses its own beauty. Just like a fascinating painting which could lead one into wonderland, it portrays a paradisiacal farming world. As is shown to the viewers, the atmosphere of *the Book of Ruth* was redolent of ripening corn, mown grain, and merry shouts of reapers as they gather the golden harvest. And so the story of Ruth and Boaz became typical of the restful quiet of country life and of harvest-time and plentiful crops. The connection of the book with harvest was found in the fact that the scene of the story proper is laid in the harvest-season, while the action was for the most part bound up with the harvesting.

II. The inner structure of *the Book of Ruth*

The Book of Ruth possesses a unifying plan, a symmetrical design within itself, which has been noticed by many critics. In the following diagram given by Stephen Bertman from Florida State University, (Stephen Bertman : *Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth* 167), the story's perfect beauty of the inner structure could be fully demonstrated.

A1. Family history (1 1-5)

B1. Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah travel toward Judah (1 6-7)

(1) Ties of kinship are at issue (1 8-18)

Naomi and Ruth travel and come to Bethlehem (1 19)

(2) The women of Bethlehem speak to Naomi; the afflictions received by Naomi from the Lord are spoken of; Naomi gives herself a name. (1 19-21)

Naomi and Ruth travel and come to Bethlehem (1 22)

[Mention of Boaz (2 1)]

C1. (1) Ruth asks Naomi if she may go to the fields and tells him what she would do; Naomi bids her go. (2 2)

(2) Ruth goes to the fields (2 3)

(3) Boaz asks the identity of Ruth and is told (2 4-7)

(4) Boaz asks Ruth to stay, declares her worthy of being blessed, and gives her food (2 8-14)

[Boaz instructs his men to let Ruth glean; she does so (2 15-17)

Ruth returns to Naomi (2 18)]

(5) Ruth speaks with Naomi; Ruth tells her what has happened and Naomi gives her counsel (2 18-23)

C2. (1) Naomi bids Ruth go to the threshing-floor

and tells her what she should do (3 1-5)

(2) Ruth goes to the threshing-floor (3 6)

(3) Boaz asks the identity of Ruth and is told (3 7-9)

(4) Boaz declares Ruth worthy of being blessed, asks her to stay, and gives her food. (3 10-15)

(5) Ruth speaks with Naomi; Ruth tells her what has happened and Naomi gives her counsel (3 16-18)

B2. (1) Ties of kinship are at issue (4 1-12)

Boaz and Ruth wed and have a son

(2) The women of Bethlehem speak to Naomi; the blessings received by Naomi from the Lord are told of; the women of Bethlehem give Naomi's nursing a name (4 14-17)

A2. Family history (4 18-22)

(Stephen Bertman *Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth*)

Examining the above content of the Book, we may easily notice that the beginning of the Book is the account of the family history (A1; 1 1-5), is comparable to the account given at the end (A2; 4 18-22). Surely the former referred to a time before the main events of the story, while the latter referred to a time after those events. (Section A1 and A2)

In section B1 and B2, the elements are presented in the same sequence in each section. Even as Ruth accepts allegiance to Naomi (B1; 1 8-18), Boaz accepts allegiance to Ruth (B2; 4 1-12). And as Orpah breaks her ties with Naomi (B1; 1 8-18), so the unnamed kinsman of Ruth's husband declines to accept levirate responsibility (B2; 4 1-12). In each case, ties of kinship are at issue, and in each case one individual accept them. Also Naomi's afflictions (she was bereaved of her two sons) clearly stay contrasted with her blessings (she was blessed with next-of-kin, a daughter-in-law who is more than seven sons and is a rearer of her old age, a nursing who has been born to Naomi.) Also in the first half of this section, Naomi and her daughter-in-law traveling direction and destination echo each other.

Finally the central part of section C, the process of how Ruth and Boaz came to know each other was divided into two matching sub-parts, which formed a symmetrical beauty in the structure of the story. There are five elements of content in the first half part which correspond to elements of content in the latter. In both sections the sequences which the presentation of the elements followed are basically the same.

Thus all the three sections clearly presented in such a diagram form a unifying design of a symmetrical story plan. These elements of the content, either analogous or contrasting, stand over against each other in the structure of the story and appear to counter one another, which render the Book of Ruth bear the beauty of architecture in its remarkable writing even though the reason of why's that may be intangible and the motivation for such composition may be the result of psychological disposition. Yet whatever it is, the arrangement of the material could be a product of aesthetic preference and a perfect masterpiece of architectural beauty.

III. The importance of Ruth and Boaz in *the Bible*

The Book of Ruth has its unique position in *the Bible* for it is only one of the two books which named directly after women's names; one is *the Book of Ruth*, and the other is *the Book of Esther*. Similarities and differences could be found when the two special women and the two remarkable books are put into comparison. Similar things could be summarized as the following points: Firstly, they both had unusual marriage: Ruth, a Moabite woman, married a Jew and had her important role in Israeli family tree. And Esther, a Jewish girl married the Persian King Ahasuerus and sought goodness for her people. Secondly, they two achieved great deeds and were considered heroines in the Hebrew history. For Ruth's great grandson King David ended the painful and anguish days of the Judges. And Esther succeeded in helping Jews destroy their enemies. Thirdly, Ruth and Esther were both beautiful. Needless to say that Esther was extremely beautiful; she was chosen to be the queen for her remarkable charm. Though Ruth's appearance was not directly shown and depicted in the book, at least we can get a hint that Ruth was pretty enough because after she arrived in Bethlehem with Naomi, she had been sought by many young men. For later Boaz said to Ruth in the threshing floor: "this last instance of your loyalty is better than the first; you have not gone after with young men, whether poor or rich" (3 10) As to why they were singled out by the LORD and were given great responsibility to achieve their reputation, it is obvious that their inner shining nature worked and even outweighed their outer beauty.

Meanwhile different points also exist between Ruth and Esther as the following: Firstly, they had different

family origin: Esther had noble root and was brought up by her uncle; Ruth was a normal Moabite woman. Secondly, they had different life experiences: Esther was luckily chosen by King Ahasuerus and was favored in her life; while Ruth unluckily lost her first husband and lived an uneven life. Thirdly, they had different ways to achieve their goals. Esther emerged at a crucial moment to change the fate of Jews at the cost of risking her own life, which really made her a memorable heroine, while Ruth just showed her loyalty, filial piety, kindness in those days of idolatry, thievery, and murder, to distinguish her noble-minded moral principle. Even if Ruth's importance was not recognized by the people who lived in the same age with her as Esther, her shining virtues bore her the ever-lasting beauty which was really worth praising. And it is really the case for *the Book of Ruth* was listed as one of the five Megilloth (Hebrew word, means "book scroll") which must be read during Jewish festivals every year.

The Book of Ruth is "a book without villains. The positive behavior of one figure highlights the positive behavior of another" (Zakovitz 425). Another main character, Boaz had his shining virtues of generosity, kindness, and helpfulness and also he was greatly rewarded by the LORD, for God not so much helps those who help themselves but rather helps those who help others.

Boaz in the story was not only bestowed on evident virtues, but his position in the Bible was unusual, which could be proved by reflecting the family history. From Adam to Jesus, all together there are sixty generations. Put every ten generations a group, the first three groups are just as follows:

First Group:

Adam	Seth	Enosh	Kenan	Mahalalel
Jared	Enoch	Methuselah	Lamech	Noah

Second Group:

Shem	Arpachshad	Shelah	Eber	Peleg
Reu	Serug	Nahor	Terah	Abraham

Third Group:

Issaac	Jacob	Judah	Perez	Hezron
Ram	Amminadab	Nahshon	Salmon	Boaz
(Obed	Jesse	David)		

As is clearly shown above, at the end of every ten generations there may be a greater person who appeared to shoulder much more important responsibilities and played much more important role in enacting the LORD's order. In the first group Noah's story: When

the earth was corrupt and the earth was filled with violence in God's sight, only Noah could walk with God and "found favor in the sight of the LORD" (Genesis 6 8), and he alone was considered as righteous before God in that generation and was picked out to survive with his families from the Great Flood. After Noah built an altar for the LORD and then offered burnt offerings, he and his sons were blessed and ordered by God to complete the divine mission of being fruitful and multiply, filling the earth with their offspring. Abraham was at the end of the second ten generations he was chosen to act on God's call to go from his own country and kindred and a great nation was made of his name. He was told and blessed by the LORD that his offspring shall be "as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore." (Genesis 22 17) and "shall possess the gate of their enemies." and all the nations of the earth shall gain blessing from them. Needless to say that *the Bible* dwelt a lot on the two persons' stories which really attached great importance to them. But how about Boaz, who just appeared at the end of another ten generations? Is it only a coincidence in the Bible? Could he be compared with Noah and Abraham in their respective importance? We prefer a negative answer to the former and a positive one to the latter for it has been fully proved that there was basically no coincidences in the Bible, everything was put in a subtle and deliberate way. So why is Boaz so important that he was even put in the same important position as Noah and Abraham? That's just what *the Book of Ruth* wants

to reveal. It is just Boaz who was tolerate enough to accept a Moabite woman, generous enough to shelter the persons who seek God, and responsible enough to guide a non-Israelite to share the blessing from the LORD. Thus Boaz was just acting for God and really was worth his position in the Bible.

Conclusion

Literature is aesthetic, like other art forms—pleasing music, patterns of color in paintings, photographs of sunsets, elegant dance—literature is an end in itself. Taking *the Book of Ruth in the Bible* as a literary work to explore its aesthetic qualities, we can temporarily shake off those tedious political, theological rules and principles, and fully experience the beauty of literature works. The great author's manipulation of conventions used in *the Book of Ruth* proves appealing and is worth elaborating.

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析圣经《路得记》中文学审美性

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【摘要】 《路得记》是《圣经·旧约》中一件完整的艺术品。本文试从其故事发生的背景、内在叙事结构、人物品质体现三方面分析来充分理解作品的独特性、完美性以及人物的重要性, 以充分体现《路得记》的文学审美主题。

【关键词】 路得记; 文学审美; 圣经

【英文校对】 Zhang Caifeng