

RUTH IN CONTEXT

CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUNDS TO THE BOOK OF RUTH

A Bible Handling Exercise in the Use of 'Context'

Andy R. Avery

Acknowledgement

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A Bible Handling Exercise in the Use of 'Context'

This is not a commentary nor a set of study questions but an exercise in how context can add to or even considerably change our understanding of a Bible passage. Context is the key word for properly understanding any Bible passage and we can only determine the full meaning of a passage by considering its literary, historical, theological, cultural and Biblical contexts. Thus the aim here is to help individuals, whoever they are, but particularly small group leaders, to read and discover for themselves the exciting truths contained in Ruth through capable handling of the Bible texts.

Aspects of Bible understanding covered here include the place of Ruth within the Bible as a whole, the purpose of the Book and the author's intention, specific references/allusions to other Bible passages, the Messianic expectations of Ruth, the literary structure of Ruth, the place of idiom, and the meaning of people and place names.

FAMILIARITY WITH THE BOOK

Exercise – Read through the Book of Ruth several times to become familiar with its contents. Write down initial thoughts on the message of the Book.

Always use an accepted translation such as the NIV, ESV, RSV or KJV, or more than one of these. However, even with these there may be translation differences, e.g. Ruth 3:15, 'Then he went back to town' (NIV) is translated, 'Then she went into the city' (ESV). Other versions of the Bible can tend in varying degrees towards interpretation rather than translation.

Being very familiar with the passage to be studied is essential and allows formation of an overview. The flow of a passage, its structure, links within the passage, the development of its arguments, and the sequence of events become apparent. Also look at the detail of the wording as well as the broad sweep of the passage, e.g. 2:22 where the end of the harvests is not only a statement of fact but also expressing a dilemma for Ruth and Naomi on their future welfare, as 3:1 continues; and watch out for surprises, e.g. who is the kinsman-redeemer in 4:14,15?

'WHOLE BIBLE' CONTEXT

The whole Bible context is given by the Bible time-line. This is the history of God's relationship with His people and consists of a series of peaks and troughs in their obedience and commitment to their Creator-Saviour God, and consequently in their fortunes under God's providential rule, up to and in expectation of Christ's coming.

Within the Old Testament time-line, the calling of Abraham (God's people in God's land under God's blessing), the Exodus, and then the giving of the law are foundational moments in the history of God's people.

Exercise – Look at these passages:

Genesis 12:1-3

Genesis 15:6

Exodus 3:7-22

Exodus 19:1-6

Exodus 33:18 - 34:7

Deuteronomy 28

What do we learn from these about God and His relationship with His people?

These passages particularly, but not exclusively, provide the background to a large proportion of the Old Testament. Within any Old Testament passage the context for understanding the passage is given by key questions such as 'How is God fulfilling His purposes?', 'How is God's grace being manifested?', 'How are God's people fulfilling their purpose?', and 'Are they being faithful or unfaithful, obedient or disobedient?'

Exercise – Where does the Book of Ruth sit in the context of the Bible as a whole; i.e. in its time-line; and therefore in how God's purpose to bring redemption to the world is being fulfilled?

The Book of Ruth is specific in its location on the Bible time-line. Ruth 1:1 sets the events of the Book in the time of the judges, and the genealogy in 4:18-22 places the events a few generations before King David. Therefore, as we learn from the Book of Judges, the people of God were settled in the Promised Land but still surrounded by, and interspersed with, the Canaanites. They were unfaithful to the LORD God and insecure in the land and not fulfilling God's redemptive purposes. However, the events of Ruth lay a foundation for the following book, 1 Samuel, which introduces the monarchy of Saul and the anointing of David as king, as an agent for God's redemptive purposes, not only for Israel but, through his offspring, Jesus Christ, for the whole world. Indeed it is likely that the events of the early part of 1 Samuel were concurrent with those of Ruth. Through the everyday events recorded in Ruth God securely establishes his people in his land under the blessed rule of his anointed king, David.

Exercise – What was happening to God's people at the beginning of the Book of Ruth? Also refer to Judges, especially Judges 21:25. Were they faithful or unfaithful? Were they a light to the nations? Were they prospering? Were they secure in the land?

As the Book of Judges shows, at the beginning of Ruth God's people as a whole were unfaithful, becoming like the surrounding nations rather than a light to them and they were afflicted by famine and leaving the land.

Exercise – What was happening to God's people at the end of Ruth? Were they faithful or unfaithful? Were they being a light to the nations?

By the end of Ruth God had set in motion a chain of events leading to King David, under whose reign the people returned to God, were secure and prosperous in the land and were a light to the nations. This latter is particularly seen in the following reign of King Solomon, when people came to the land to hear his God-given wisdom.

Exercise – Remember that the Book ends with a double mention of the future King David (4:17,22). What is the significance of King David in the Bible?

Note on the significance of King David in the Bible: The New Testament mentions a number of 'types' or 'shadows' for Christ – David as king is the predominant one but Melchizedek as high priest, Moses as prophet/deliverer, Adam, etc. are others. Therefore the mention of any of these in any part of Scripture is significant and points to the coming Christ, including here in the Book of Ruth the key mention of David.

CROSS-REFERENCING

Relevant cross-referencing is important because one part of the Bible can often control another. This is particularly the case between the Old Testament and the New Testament but also within each. Where reference is made to another part of the Bible – and this may not always be a direct quote – then the other passage should be understood within its own context and that understanding brought into the context of the passage being studied.

The Book of Ruth is full of allusions to other parts of the Old Testament and to understand Ruth it is necessary to know and understand the preceding books and to know the stories of the people mentioned including some at least in the genealogy.

Especially relevant to understanding the Book of Ruth is a knowledge of the promises in Genesis, the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy and the God-ordained Hebrew system of poor-relief specified in the law.

Exercise – To what other parts of the Bible does the Book of Ruth make reference?

See:

- 1:1 Refer to the whole of Judges, Numbers 25:1-4, Deuteronomy 28
- 1:2 Refer to Judges 19:1-4
- 1:6 Refer to Exodus 3:7-22 – see note below
- 1:7 Refer to Genesis 49:8-12
- 1:11 Refer to Genesis 38:8, Deuteronomy 25:5-6
- 1:20 Refer to Exodus 15:22-24
- 2:3 Refer to Deuteronomy 24:19-22
- 2:12 Refer to Exodus 19:3-6
- 2:20 Refer to Deuteronomy 25:5-6
- 3:3 Refer to 2 Samuel 12:20
- 4:11 Refer to Genesis 28 onwards, re. Rachel and Leah
- 4:12 Refer to Genesis 38
- 4:17 Refer to 1 and 2 Samuel re David and see note below
- 4:18-22 Refer to Genesis including 49:8-12, re. genealogy

The Promises in Genesis: Genesis 12:3 talks of Abraham’s descendants as God’s people in God’s land under God’s blessing but, as Genesis 15:6 shows, this is not a reference to the physical descendants of Abraham but rather to those who believe, who trust and act on that trust, of any nationality. Another relevant promise is Genesis 49:8-12, namely the fact that rulers of God’s people will come from the tribe of Judah, ultimately in the form of the Messiah.

Exercise – Compare Genesis 12:3 with Ruth 1:1 and 4:17,22. Assess Genesis 49:8-12 against Ruth 4:12 and 18-22 where Judah the father of Perez is mentioned. Perez is not the ‘right’ person, i.e. not the eldest son, and, given that his twin staked an early claim for precedence, he was actually the youngest. Who else in the Bible were not the ‘right’ people, as far as the ways of the world are concerned?

God does not choose as man does. Look at:

Cain and Able	Genesis 4:1-16
Ishmael and Isaac	Genesis 16; 17; 21:1-7; Romans 9:6-9
Esau and Jacob	Genesis 25; 27; Romans 9:10-15
Judah and his brothers	Genesis 49
King David	1 Samuel 16:1-13
Solomon	1 Kings 1
Jesus Christ	Isaiah 53

Blessings and Curses of Deuteronomy:

Exercise – Read Ruth 1:1 in the context of Deuteronomy 28. Were God’s people Israel faithful or unfaithful?

As previously mentioned God’s people were unfaithful, so incurring the curses of Deuteronomy 28, i.e. famine and leaving the Promised Land for the forbidden territory of Moab. The ungodly predatory character of labourers is shown in Ruth 2:9,22 and the closer kinsman-redeemer disregards the law and his responsibilities under it in Ruth 4:6.

Poor Relief: One duty placed on God’s people was care for the poor. The role of kinsman-redeemer, i.e. the idea that a relative will rescue a family member from the poverty that widowhood could bring and also prevent the extinguishing of a family, comes from Deuteronomy 24:17-22; 25:5-19 although Genesis 38:8 suggests that it pre-dates Deuteronomy.

Note on Exodus 3:7-22: In this passage God declares his name as ‘I am who I am’ and in the context of Exodus 3 this is a compassionate, redeeming, delivering God. Also see Exodus 6:2-8 and Exodus 33:17-19. The Israelites wrote ‘I am who I am’ as YHWH or Yahweh, rendered as LORD – all upper case – in most English translations. This is not a statement of God’s ‘existential state of being’ but, given the way Hebrews thought, is active and about his character, purpose, commitment and activity, i.e. here his covenant

redemptive mercy. Whenever the name LORD appears in the Bible it's a reminder that God is a compassionate, redeeming, delivering God and is sometimes emphasised as such, as in the Exodus passages noted here.

Exercise – Where is Ruth quoted in other parts of the Bible? Why?

There is much that is unexpected in the line that leads to Christ and Ruth is one of four Gentile women in Matthew's genealogy (Matthew 1:2-6). However, there is no commonly agreed answer as to why Ruth is mentioned. Is it to emphasise the outsider being accepted? Is it to show that God's children are of promise not race? Were Gentiles grafted in because Israel was unfaithful? Also, interestingly, Ruth is not listed among those of faith in Hebrews.

LITERARY CONTEXT

Exercise – What is the literary context of the Book of Ruth? Look for the literary structure.

In terms of literature the Book of Ruth is a narrative of actual events, i.e. it is historical. However, in the Bible narrative is not simply and only history because the material is selected to tell a particular story from a particular perspective and with a particular purpose in mind, rather than a mere recounting of facts. Narrative books such as Ruth – or Esther or Samuel, Judges etc. – need to be read and studied as a whole, or certainly in large sections, rather than simply verse by verse.

The literary structure of Ruth has:

- An introduction 1:1-2
- Scene 1 – the rest of chapter 1 starting 'now' and ending 'so ...' (1:19,22)
- Scene 2 – chapter 2:1-23 starting 'now' and ending 'so ...' (2:23)
- Scene 3 – chapter 3:1-18 starting 'one day' and ending 'so ...' (3:14)
- Scene 4 – chapter 4:1-17 starting 'Meanwhile' and ending 'so ...' (4:13)
- A conclusion 4:18-22.

The structure suggests that the conclusion is the reason for the Book, the author's intent, namely to show the continuation of the family line commencing with Judah/Perez (see 4:12), in fulfilment of God's purposes (Genesis 49:8-12). Determining the author's intent is key to a correct understanding of the Bible. The facts are given and then the author's interpretation of those facts, namely how God fulfils His promise regarding the descendants of Judah.

Also the Book has chiastic elements. This is an often used Hebrew literary form where the climax of a story is often placed in the centre of the narration for emphasis, with the other parts of the story arranged symmetrically in opposite pairs either side of this, e.g. the account of the Tower of Babel from Genesis 11:

- A Now the whole world
- B had one language and a common speech ...
- C they found a plain in Shinar and settled there.
- D They said to each other, 'Come, let us make bricks ...'
- E Then they said, 'Come let us build ourselves a city, with a tower ...
- = But the LORD came down
- e to see the city and the tower that the men were building ...
- d The LORD said '... Come, let us go down and confuse ...'
- c ... it was called Babel – because there
- b the LORD confused the language
- a of the whole world.

Exercise – Look for the chiastic elements of the Book of Ruth. What is the turning point in the story, i.e. the centre of the chiasm?

The Chiasmic Elements of the Book of Ruth:

A	1:1	... the judges ruled
B	1:3,5	Elimelech died ... Mahlon and Kilion also died, and Naomi was left without her two sons and her husband.'
C	1:11	'Am I going to have any more sons, who could become your husbands?'
D	1:20	'... the Almighty has made my life very bitter.'
E	2:2	'Let me ... pick up the leftover grain ...'
F	2:10	'Why have I found such favour in your eyes that you notice me – a foreigner?'
=	2:12	'May you be richly rewarded by the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come to take refuge.'
f	2:13	'May I continue to find favour in your eyes, my lord ... your servant ...'
e	2:14 3:15	'Have some bread ...' He poured into [her shawl] six measures of barley and put it on her.
d	4:14	'Praise be to the LORD, ...'
c	4:14	'... the LORD, ... has not left you without a kinsman-redeemer.'
b	4:15	'He will renew your life and sustain you in your old age.'
a	4:17	... David.

Exercise – In narrative writings it is useful to look at each character and ask, 'Were they godly or ungodly, and why?' Ask these questions of each character in the Book of Ruth.

In the Book of Ruth the characters Naomi, Ruth and Boaz each choose the LORD God. Naomi does this in her decision to return home (1:6); Ruth in her decision to accept God as her god (1:16); and Boaz in his submission to God's law in his compassionate care for Ruth in chapter 2 and in his following of the duties of God's law in 3:7-14, even though that may have been to his worldly detriment.

Elimelech's actions in leaving the Promised Land (1:1) are hard to judge but he placed his family in an ungodly environment and his sons disobediently married Moabite women (1:4), of whom Orpah chose her own people and gods rather than the LORD God (1:14). Neither the labourers (2:9,22) nor the closer kinsman-redeemer (4:6) show godliness in their behaviour.

Finally, throughout the Bible one frequent teaching technique is the use of contrast.

Exercise – What contrasts are drawn in the Book of Ruth?

In the Book of Ruth there is a contrast between the actions of Ruth and Orpah, between the men of Boaz and those of other landowners and between the actions of Boaz and the nearer kinsman-redeemer. Also there is a contrast between the situation at the start of the Book, with God's people insecure and leaving the land and that at the end of the Book with – prospectively – God's people secure in the land under God's king. Also, as already seen, comparisons can be made between different parts of the Bible, e.g. Genesis 12:3 with Ruth 1:1 and Ruth 4:17,22.

CULTURAL CONTEXT

Exercise – What is the cultural context of the Book of Ruth?

We observe that the Book of Ruth, as with the whole Bible, is written from within the Hebrew culture. Therefore, knowing and understanding the Hebrew mindset is important in understanding the Bible. The Hebrew mindset is essentially active not passive. To a Hebrew, who a person *is*, or what a thing *is*, is nothing like as important as what that person or thing *does*. So in 1:6 'When she heard' does not refer to a passive act of hearing but a hearing that leads to action. 2:13 'May I continue to find favour' is not a wish but a declaration by Ruth that she will continue to behave as she has been doing. 3:4 '... note the place where he is lying ...' is a prelude to action. Again 3:15 'Then he/she went back to town' is a prelude to action. Also see the note on 'Yahweh' above.

Also, knowing something of the culture of a people and their traditions prevents the wrong conclusion being drawn from some actions. So knowing that, at the time of Ruth, servants would often sleep at their master's feet puts a different and useful perspective on the incident in 3:7-13 and in 3:9 Ruth refers to herself as the servant of Boaz. This is very, very different from the act of seduction that many commentators ascribe to Ruth's behaviour.

Understanding the way the ancient world linked together a land, the people of that land and the god of that land gives a greater understanding of Ruth's declaration in 1:16-18. When one moved from one country to another one took the god of the new land as one's own. This connection comes through in Genesis 12:1-3 where Abram leaves a land and people, and by implication, the gods of that land and follows the LORD and is promised a new land and people.

The culture of the Hebrews was the culture of God's law. The law was engrained in them – or was meant to be – which is why the disobedience described in Judges is so horrendous.

Exercise – How, in the Book of Ruth, do the lives of the principal characters demonstrate their covenant loyalty to the LORD God by the way they live?

Boaz is the prime example of covenant loyalty. This is shown by his willing submission to the law as the driving force in his life with his compassionate treatment of Ruth in chapter 2, his moral integrity in 3:7-14 and his willingness to allow the care of Naomi and Ruth to pass to a nearer kinsman-redeemer in 3:12-13. Naomi shows covenant loyalty by 'returning home' (1:6), and Ruth in accepting the LORD God as her God (1:16).

Note also that in Hebrew culture eating together is a sign of acceptance, e. g. Ruth 2:14

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Any relevant history, that is such as is essential for us to know in order to be able to interpret the Bible appropriately, is to be found within the Bible itself since the Bible is sufficient in itself and explains itself. Other history outside of the Bible may be interesting but can never be essential to understanding the Bible message.

Exercise – Find out as much as possible about the historical context of the Book. Read Judges. What do we learn about the state of God's people from Judges? What is the connection with Rahab, another non-Hebrew who joined God's people (and who also appears in Matthew's genealogy of Christ)? How may that have influenced Boaz's view of Ruth?

As already mentioned, God's people at the time of the Book of Judges were unfaithful and becoming like the Canaanites among whom they lived.

Rahab was Boaz's mother.

MESSIANIC EXPECTATION

There is an expectation of the coming Christ throughout the Old Testament and the questions have to be asked 'How does an Old Testament passage point to Christ? Is there fulfilment of a promise or a typological fulfilment?'

Exercise – What Messianic expectation is there within the Book of Ruth?

In the Book of Ruth the fulfilment is 'typological' with the coming of God's king, David. By 'typological' we mean that in some essential, relevant, meaningful sense the 'type', here David, is a type or prototype, or pattern, or foreshadow, of the Christ to come. It doesn't mean that David is, in every sense, a 'Christ before his time', i.e. a perfect copy; but only that in the essential, important senses intended he foreshadows Christ. With David as a 'type' of Christ the important sense is that he is the Saviour-King.

Also, some commentators refer to the role of kinsman-redeemer as pointing to Christ, our kinsman-redeemer. This is not unreasonable but Boaz as a type of Christ can't here be as important as the David motif.

IDIOM

An idiom in a particular language is an expression which means something other than its direct meaning and cannot be understood from the individual meaning of its elements, particularly by people who don't usually speak that language. As an example, the English idiom 'It's raining cats and dogs' would mean something other than 'It's raining very hard', and in fact would have an absurd meaning, if said to, and taken literally by, a foreigner. Different languages, and sometimes language sub-cultures, will use different idioms and it is important to be aware of Hebrew idioms. When it comes to Biblical interpretation it is important to recognise idiomatic language for what it is otherwise disastrous misinterpretation can result.

Exercise – What Hebrew idioms are there in the Book of Ruth?

In the Book of Ruth the expression 'corner of your garment' 3:19 is an idiom. To find the meaning of this idiom we can, however, look at another part of the Bible. Scripture is its own interpreter and therefore we should compare Scripture with Scripture. Look at Ezekiel 16:8. In this verse 'corner of my garment' means protection, covenant and relationship and is being spoken of in the context of God's people. However, the expression in Ruth means the same – a request for protection through the covenant of marriage – not in the context of God's people as in Ezekiel 16:8 but in the context of a God-fearing foreigner and a faithful Israelite man.

NAMES

Often in the Bible names have meanings.

Exercise – What do the following names mean? How do these meanings of names help us to see the message of the Book?

Moab	Genesis 19:37	The water of a father or desire
Ephrath	Genesis 35:16,19	Another name for Bethlehem
Bethlehem	Genesis 35:19	House of bread
Naomi	Ruth 1:2	Sweet
Mara	Ruth 1:20	Bitter. See Exodus 15:22-24
Elimelech	Ruth 1:2	My God is king
Mahlon	Ruth 1:2	Sickly or mild
Kilion	Ruth 1:2	Dying or complete
Ruth	Ruth 1:4	Worth seeing, act of seeing, friend, friend of God. Also referred to as the Moabitess.
Boaz	Ruth 2:1	Strength, fleetness. See 1 Kings 7:21

These names add a depth of meaning to the story, in some areas with irony. So we read of a land of desire that isn't desirable and which historically leads to death (see Numbers 25:1-9), the house of bread where there is famine, a servant of God who leaves God's land – kingdom – and dies, sons who are mild and complete yet become sickly and die and of sweetness becoming bitter. The names describe a world that is falling apart. Yet a friend of God and an individual with a strong faith are used to bring wholeness to the situation.

CONCLUSION

Exercise – Now re-read the book of Ruth and compare with your original thoughts on the message of the Book.

Hopefully, having looked at the account in detail and from many different contextual aspects it can be seen that the Book of Ruth is not a story of romance between the foreign widow Ruth and the Israelite man Boaz and that it is far, far more than an account of God looking after a poor widow. The frequent application of both these interpretations to individual lives is pietistic and often very damaging to those who are the subject of such interpretations.

Rather, the Book of Ruth is a significant component in the Bible time-line linking, as it does, the almost rock-bottom state of God's people at the end of the Book of Judges with the glorious kingship of David – and Solomon – the highpoint of God's Old Testament people, faithful, settled and secure in the Promised Land and a light to the nations. It shows God's love and faithfulness to his whole people through the faithful living of three godly individuals, namely Naomi, Ruth and Boaz, and how God invites his people, through their faithful living, into partnership with himself in achieving his purposes.

USEFUL BOOKS

A fully cross referenced Bible – ESV/NIV/RSV/KJV

A good Concordance

Oxford Bible Atlas

Dig Deeper – Nigel Beynon and Andrew Sach

How to Read the Bible for All it's Worth – Fee and Stuart

How to Read the Bible Book by Book – Fee and Stuart

How to Choose a Translation for All it's Worth – Fee and Strauss

Interpreting the Bible – Wilfred Kuhrt