



Research article

## THE BOOK OF RUTH: A SPIRITUAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSE TO ISRAEL'S DEEPEST DESIRE DURING THE JUDGES' ERA.

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Doi: <https://doi.org/10.54513/BSJ.2023.5307>

### ARTICLE INFO

### ABSTRACT



The book of Ruth reflects Israel's innermost longing during the Judges' era, which is discreetly described in Judges 21: 25. Ruth 1:1-6, on the other hand, portrays the chaotic Judges' cycle. On the other hand, the genealogy in Ruth 4:18-22 appears to be a light at the end of the tunnel. As a result, this study demonstrates how these two emphasized passages respond to the book of Judges, providing a spiritual interpretation of Ruth 1:1-6 and a social meaning of Ruth 4: 18-22. The book of Ruth is a reaction to the Israelites' hardships and challenges outlined in the book of Judges, particularly their desire to form a kingdom and so solve their political, social, and religious strife.

#### Article history:

Received 04-05-2023

Accepted: 28-9-2023

Available online:30-09-2023

#### Keywords:

*Judges, Ruth, Israelites, liberation struggles, tribal conflicts, religious chaos, Moabite.*



## **I. Introduction**

Ruth 1:1-6 briefly hints at Israel's challenging times during the Judges' era. The period was marked by chaos and leadership struggles that occasioned perpetual conflicts and death among peoples, and tribes. It was "an era of bloody warfare between Israel and the Moabites."<sup>1</sup> What exactly happened? From chapters 17 to 21, the book of Judges depicts a dire scenario in which the Israelites had no monarch; everyone was doing what he felt best, as Judges 21:25 ends. The lack of a monarchy indicates social, political, religious, and economic instability and chaos. The book of Ruth begins with a connection to the book of Judges. The first portrays the Israelites' chaotic circumstances, which had far-reaching consequences such as starvation, anarchy, and brutal battles. In 4:18-22, the book of Ruth reacts to the Judges' chaotic reign by restoring order and putting light on problems surrounding David's familial heritage. The paper discusses Ruth 1:1-6 as it hints at the Judges' chaotic era before exploring the latter issue and its deepest desire. Before concluding, the paper discourses Ruth 1:1-6 and 4:18-22, respectively, from a spiritual and social perspective in response to the book of Judges. The paper argues that God always intervenes, works, and remains active in our daily lives, even during our daily hardships. It will call for persistent patience and spiritual perspicacity to observe and realize divine presence and intervention.

## **II. RUTH 1:1-6: A Reflection of Chaotic Judges' Cycle**

The book of Ruth appears directly after the book of Judges in the Catholic Bible as a continuation of the Judges' period. The book's first opening line situates the event and connects it to the book of Judges: "In the days when the judges reigned, there was a famine in the country. So, a man from Bethlehem in Judah, together with his wife and two sons, went to live for a while in the country of Moab." (Ruth 1:1) The pericope, Ruth 1:1-6, alludes to the Judges' chaotic age, which was marked by hunger, namely the loss of food, which compelled the family to flee to Moab from Bethlehem. Besides, there was death: Elimelech, Naomi's husband, died, and later on, her two sons died too, which precipitated Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah's widowhood, leaving the three women childless. The sad situation leads to fruitlessness, childlessness, lack of a leader and a protector in the family, and lack of an heir because there was no offspring. Thus, the family needs a leader and children.

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<sup>1</sup> Victor Zinkuratire and Angelo Colacrai, eds., *The African Bible* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulist Press, 1999), 387.



Furthermore, the strong chaos also manifests in the marriage between a Moabite woman (Ruth 1:4) since it was forbidden to marry a stranger; it was an aberration to say that the Israelites married a Moabite. (Dt 23:3) This chaotic situation brought about hardships and problems that suggest the absence of God. Hence, the book of Ruth, through chapter 1:1-6, leads us back and connects to what happened in the Judges' era, serving as an informative conclusion of the book of Judges. The book of Ruth emphasizes Judges' chaotic happenstances and expresses Israel's desire to have a king. The next paragraph discusses in depth the Judges' chaotic era.

### **III. Exploring the Judges' Chaotic Era and Israelites' Deepest Desire to have a King.**

Judges 21:25 summarizes Judges' chaotic era, "In those days, there was no king in Israel; everyone did what he thought best." The same verse is found in Judges 17:6; 18:1-2 and 19:1-2 to intensify the gravity of this period. Israel expresses the desire to have a king, to create unity and order. According to John R. Franke, "Whether in secular or sacred contexts, poor leadership and/or the failure to respect one source of authority leads to discord and division [...] Each person, indeed, abandons the teachings [...] arrogates to himself an authority in dealing with certain questions, making his own private rules."<sup>2</sup> Such a lack of kingship and lack of law created a state of indecision and chaos. "The state of political anarchy has been especially manifested in the story of the concubine at Gibeah [Judges 19:1-2] and the civil war it triggers, and perhaps in the war's aftermath as well [Judges 19:2230—20:48]. The refrain sets the stage for the book of Samuel, which will move in swift steps to the founding of the monarchy."<sup>3</sup> Thus, the Judges' era can be described as a period of chaos, disorder, injustice, disunity, division, conflicts, calamity, migration, famine, and corruption since there was no king to represent and organize their unity. The nation became a jungle, with neither a king nor laws; a nation whereby everybody did what he thought best. (Judges 17:6; 18:1-2; 19:1-2; 21:25)

Furthermore, the book of Judges "deals with the struggles of the various elements of Israel in settlement of Palestine under the leadership of dynamic men of sagacity and

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<sup>2</sup> John R. Franke and Thomas C. Oden, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2Samuel*, Old Testament IV (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2005), 179-180.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Alter, trans., *Ancient Israel: The Former Prophets: Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings* (New York, London: Norton Company, 2013), 203.



authority before the institution of the Monarchy.”<sup>4</sup> The book shows that the Israelites lived without a great leader, and this became their desire and daily struggle; it was indeed for them to organize themselves, define and determine their destiny, fight against “marauding neighbors [...] how do groups of Israelites interact, a tribe with tribe, a clan with clan, village with the village, region with the region.”<sup>5</sup> The book, therefore, demonstrates the power struggles that the Israelites went through, including bloody fighting (Chapter 4), tribal conflicts and liberation struggles (chapter 7), and Abimelech’s tyranny that brought them oppression and killing of people (chapter 9). The chaos continued in chapter 9 described as the Israelites’ stubbornness and idolatrous acts toward foreign gods. Chapter 20 talks about atrocities, rape, violence, and tribal conflicts between the Benjaminites and Israelites, which led to the death of many people.

The Judges’ era symbolizes political, social, and religious chaos. The Israelites served the Baal and Ashtaroth (other gods); they offended and “abandoned the Lord, the God of their fathers, who had led them out of the land of Egypt [Exodus 12:37-18:27], they followed the other gods of the various nations around them, and by their worship of these gods provoked the Lord.” (Judges 2:11). The Lord, in his anger, delivered them over plunderers who despoiled them. They fell into the power of their enemies, and became unable to defend themselves, and this occasioned their complete failure because the Lord turned into a disaster in all their undertakings. Their failure resulted from their stubbornness, as clearly expressed, “Even when the Lord raised judges to deliver them from the power of their despoilers, they did not listen to their judges, but abandoned themselves to the worship of other gods. They were quick to stray from the way their fathers had taken, and did not follow their example of obedience to the commandments of the Lord.” (Judges 2:16-17). Surprisingly, though the Lord was with the Judges and saving Israelites through the Judges, “when the judge died, they would relapse and do worse than their fathers, following other gods in service and worship, relinquishing none of their evil practices or stubborn conduct.” (Judges 2:19). This attests to their unfaithfulness and disobedience to God, who, in return, chose to abandon and deliver them into the power of their enemies. (Judges 2,20-23).

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<sup>4</sup> John Cray, ed., *The Century Bible: Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, New Edition Based on the Revised Standard Version. (Lagos, Nairobi, Dar Es Salaam: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1967), 202.

<sup>5</sup> Raymond E. Brown, Joseph Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds., “Judges,” in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Bengaluru: Theological Publications in India, 2019), 132.



Therefore, the Judges' era suggests a time when there was no national cohesion among the Israelites, "traces of this late compilation are probably to be detected in the unrealistically exaggerated figures [...] and the ideal unity of Israel, which could be automatically convened by an obscure Levite, though it is twice emphasized that 'every man did that was right in this own eyes.'"<sup>6</sup> This means that "Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." (Judges 6:1)<sup>7</sup> M. O'Brien states that 'Judges 17-21, as a whole, functions in the manner of the repeated accusation in Judges that "Israel did what was evil in the sight of the Lord." The chapters continue the negative assessment of the judges' period, and the reference to the absence of a king in the repeated refrain shows that they are intended to foreshadow the emergence of the monarchy.'<sup>8</sup>

In addition, "The rest of Judges presents a view of Israel as a federation, an association of tribes with no ongoing central authority; the judges afforded interim leadership. [...] The stories tell of judges leading a tribe or group of tribes; the largest group is in the Song of Deborah and includes apparently all the northern tribes but not Judah or Simeon. The editorial framework has expanded the scope of the judges' activities to all of Israel."<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, "the leaders that arise in such systems are temporary, and their service is based not on inherited position (like a king) nor permanent structures."<sup>10</sup> Catharine Doob Sakenfeld summarizes Judges' chaotic era;

Judges features warfare, violence, and repeated instances of Israel's disobedience. More specifically, the book of Judges ends with escalation of intertribal warfare. After the assembled Israelite tribes go to battle against one of their own and kill off all members of their brother tribe of Benjamin except for six hundred men, the victors suddenly become anxious that the Benjaminite tribe will be "cut off" (Judges 21:6) without progeny. Their solution to obtaining suitable wives for these six hundred Benjaminites requires further wholesale killing, followed by mass kidnapping. The need to preserve a family line is accomplished only by an outpouring of violence. In

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<sup>6</sup> Cray, *The Century Bible: Joshua, Judges and Ruth*, 240.

<sup>7</sup> Zaine Riddling, ed., *The Bible New Revised Standard Version*, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> Mark A O'Brien, *The Deuteronomistic History Hypothesis: A Reassessment* (Zurich: University of Zurich, 1989), 97.

<sup>9</sup> Brown, Fitzmyer, and Murphy, "Judges." 134

<sup>10</sup> Brown, Fitzmyer, and Murphy, "Judges." 134.



the story of Ruth, the theme of preserving a family line also appears (cf. 4:5, 10), this time for lack of men rather than women.<sup>11</sup>

#### **IV. Discussing Ruth 1:1-6 And 4:18-22 As A Response to the Book of Judges**

##### **A. Interpreting Ruth 1:1-6 from a Spiritual and Contextual Perspective**

The book of Ruth, through 1:1, connects with the book of Judges, emphasizing the chaotic period of the Judges' era. From the pericope Ruth 1:1-6, the narration shows scatteredness, chaos, death, and many other related issues in the time of Judges because there was no king, as clearly stated above. The lack of leadership led to chaos, anarchy, famine, and death, among many issues. After the death of Naomi's husband and her two sons, "Then all that remains is an old woman—who lacks the protection of father or husband or son, an old woman who lacks even the protection of her land and her people, a truly powerless person—and two young women, but both attached through marriage to Naomi but both now widowed and childless."<sup>12</sup>

Additionally, Naomi's future expectations are crushed when both of her boys die, leaving no progeny. She is now alone, without a husband or boys to defend her in a world where they were the first and sometimes only lines of defense, and she is a foreigner living in a country where she has no family or conventional ties. From the perspective of that day, she is in dire condition and is terribly vulnerable.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Naomi, "without a husband and sons, she migrated once more to see some measure of shelter and security in the land of her youth."<sup>14</sup>

Thus, the introductory sentence is programmatic. The author shows that calamities and chaos befall us when we go away from God. The chaotic era means that God had abandoned his people. The chaotic period also means that the Lord who fights for these people has left them. Therefore, there is a connection between famine and Bethlehem: a place

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<sup>11</sup> Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, *Ruth: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, ed. James Luther Mays (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1999), 8.

<sup>12</sup> Raymond E. Brown and Joseph Fitzmyer, eds., "Ruth," in *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Bengaluru: Theological Publications in India, 2019), 555.

<sup>13</sup> Wesley J. Furst, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary: The Books of Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, Lamentations*, ed. P.R Ackroyd, A.R.C Leaney, and J.W Packer (London, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 11.

<sup>14</sup> Furst, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary: The Books of Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, Lamentations*, 9.



called the “House of Bread” (Bethlehem) now has no bread, denoting complete chaos. It intensifies the problems of the Judges. As Ruth 1:6 confirms, God’s visit to his people represented restoration of life, fruitfulness, and abundance in everything, including having offspring and material possessions. “The lesson of Ruth underlines the value of pietas in the eyes of God—the religious duty of fidelity to family and people. This secures the blessing of God; although the story began with human misery, it ends with a blessing.”<sup>15</sup> The family’s migration to Moab is similar to Joseph, who left for Egypt (Genesis 37:2-50:26); the same happens to Elimelech. It means the faith of their grand grandfather remains the same faith of Elimelech. They all had to die in exile.

Furthermore, the pericope also suggests that the moment we do not have Elimelech (My God is King) in our nations, people who fear God, we will die of hunger, chaos, and other calamities. When God is not at the center of human life, there is chaos. In other words, our life and all our activities should be theocentric and God-oriented to avoid chaos and related crises. The spiritual conception leads to the realization that “we are creatures, limited and dependent, and that we can grow and find happiness only if we open ourselves to God.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the solution would be to return to God as suggested in Ruth 1:6, which means a spiritual return, a conversion. Naomi’s radical change makes her closer to God. She even succeeds in persuading Ruth to accept Naomi’s God, showing that her God is now not far away but close. After having a spiritual experience, one realizes that when they are not with God, they feel chaos and disaster. “There she spoke of God who had dealt bitterly with her, brought calamity upon her. Now she perceives that this same God has not abandoned kindness to her and her family. [...] Naomi has begun a healing journey, a journey from despair to hope, a journey from living death to a life worth living.”<sup>17</sup> The same pericope shows that God never abandons his people despite the struggles and crises in one’s life. Naomi and Ruth’s spiritual journey calls for human perspicacity, faithfulness, and patience for God’s proper time to rescue them. It equally suggests that God always dwells among us despite our daily struggles, and the same God helps us overcome our struggles. This, therefore, concludes that there is no reason to worry about our daily challenges, God journeys

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<sup>15</sup> Roland E. Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticle, Ecclesiastes and Esther*, vol. XIII (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 87.

<sup>16</sup> Pierre Samson, *Poverty, Celibacy, Obedience* (Nairobi: Nairobi Press, 1983), 15.

<sup>17</sup> Sakenfeld, *Ruth: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, 48.



with us and will take us through. We should, consequently, embrace hope and faith in our journey.

### **B. Social interpretation of Ruth 4: 18-22 and its contemporary effects.**

Ruth 4:18-22 satisfies Israel's deepest desire to have a king and to reestablish order in the community. The last chapter shows the outcome of the gathering, discernment, and suspicion between Ruth and Boaz, and the book shows that the issue of a redeemer is now becoming a reality. In addition, the pericope (4:18-22) facilitates the transition from barrenness to fertility, and birth; from chaos (yearning for a king) to orderliness and having a king as was wished in the book of Judges. Whereas the conclusion of the Book of Judges was chaotic and marked by confrontations on the political, social, and religious fronts, the end of the Book of Ruth was one of order, marked by the observance of traditions and regulations as well as the proclamation of King David. Order, harmony, fulfillment, fullness, pleasure, safety, and protection are all brought about by the presence of God. As women have children and accumulate a lot of material goods, the book of Ruth transitions from an anthropological fruitlessness to an anthropologically bountiful state. People were fleeing due to the troubles and other concerns that led to the instability during the Judges' reign. A redeemer is so promised in the book of Ruth; in the very end, King David is hinted at as the real Redemption. This promise brings much happiness and hopes as the people wait for their liberation and the restoration of kingship, which denotes the return of life in all its dimensions.

In its concluding verses, the book presents Ruth as David's great-grandmother, and the latter is presented as a Moabite. The book puts a significant emphasis on David's relationship with Ruth. The mention of David in the book of Ruth sheds light on the whole story and responds to the Israelites' desire to have a king. "The great king, founder of the dynasty, the ideal figure in late tradition (2Chron.28:1) and titular father of the Messiah (Son of David, Mark 12:35), proves to be Ruth's ultimate fulfillment. She becomes the mother of David and a mother in the genealogy of Jesus (Mt 1:5)."<sup>18</sup> Ruth facilitated and participated actively and directly in the history of human salvation; "Ruth never knew that her

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<sup>18</sup> Fuerst, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary: The Books of Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, Lamentations*, 30-31.





descendants would be king, and Messiah; she died content in the satisfactions granted to her during her lifetime.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, the book of Ruth gives the family background of David as clearly indicated in 4:18-22; “the central point of the Ruth story is the preservation of the name of the family, and the work is written to the glory of David.”<sup>20</sup> Ruth clearly articulates that the true redeemer is David. Thus, redeeming Naomi means redeeming Ruth and Israel. Boaz was looking for a small redeemer, but others were looking for a bigger one; thus, the redeemer is announced at the end of the book. Furthermore, Ruth 4:18-22 does “specify the genealogy which brings together Perez and David.”<sup>21</sup> Questions about David's ancestry, which were at the center of the Judges, are clarified in 4:18–22.

## Conclusion

The book of Ruth addresses the Judges' turbulent period and Israel's greatest longing for a leader. Ruth's first verse, as mentioned above, links us to the Judges and alludes to the prevailing instability at that time. During the Judges' era, Israelites had no king and suffered from all kinds of evil, including chaos, divisions, and conflicts, among many issues, leaving their nation as a jungle. The book's final chapters emphasize the chaotic era: “In those days, there was no king in Israel; everyone did what he thought best.” The book of Ruth, therefore, serves as a response to the Judges' chaotic period by its successful restoration of order and the mentioning of Davidic lineage from Ruth's son. The book of Ruth is a salvific response to the preoccupations of the Judges – lack of order and desire for a king. The paper shows God's constant presence and intervention in human life, even amidst struggles and hardships. It, therefore, calls for human perspicacity and patience in waiting for God's time for human redemption. Above all, the paper argued that hope and faith should be at the heart of human life.

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<sup>19</sup> Fuerst, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary: The Books of Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, The Song of Songs, Lamentations*, 31.

<sup>20</sup> Murphy, *Wisdom Literature: Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Canticle, Ecclesiasts and Esther*, vol. XIII, 86.

<sup>21</sup> Brown and Fitzmyer, “Ruth.” 556



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