The Pentateuch and its Reception in the Book of Ruth: Constructing Israelite Identity

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Abstract

This article deals with the Pentateuch and its reception in the book of Ruth. It is argued that the author/s of the book of Ruth knew most of the legislative and narrative texts in the Pentateuch and employed these in a most constructive manner to address identity issues in the Israelite community of the Second Temple Period. The main concern was the "true Israel": should Israel be an exclusive community, consisting only of the descendants of the exile, or should foreigners — non-Israelites — be included in the "community of Yahweh" which is strictly forbidden by some legislative texts in the Pentateuch. By means of narrative, the book of Ruth proposes that descent is not determinative for Israelite identity, but that loyalty to the God of Israel, as stated by the first commandment of the Torah, is far more important. The conclusion is reached that although the book of Ruth is outside the Torah, the Torah is very much inside the book of Ruth.

Introduction: The Fall of Jerusalem[1]

"The Fall of Jerusalem and the Rise of the Torah" (Dubrovský et al. 2016) is the title of a book that reflects the views of most Old Testament scholars nowadays: the roots of

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[1] This article is the outcome of a paper read at the Pro Pent conference 2017/09/02 at Bass Lake, Gauteng, South Africa under the auspices of Prof. Jurie le Roux from the University of Pretoria, Department of Old Testament Studies. The original title was "The Book of Ruth as Torah Outside the Torah". Pro Pent is a project that promotes research in the Pentateuch.

the Pentateuch can be traced back to the exilic and post-exilic period in Israelite history. Eckart Otto (2016, 155) states:

The beginning of the Pentateuch, with the primeval stories of Gen 1–11, and Deuteronomy, as its final section, together form a frame for the postexilic Pentateuch and are parts of it that reflect most intensively on the catastrophe of Jerusalem and its temple, and on the question of whether such a catastrophe will happen again.

The Pentateuch comprises legal and narrative texts which reflect the questions of the post-exilic Israelite community. Why did disaster strike, will such a calamity happen again, or could it be prevented somehow? This article addresses a further dilemma, namely, the Israelite identity crisis during the Second Temple Period.

First and foremost, the destruction of the temple and the desecration of holy symbols proved to be a major crisis, and seriously threatened the continuation of Yahweh worship, for in the ancient world, the destruction of a cult centre also implied the cessation of the worship of a particular deity. Regarding the issue of identity, it is important to keep in mind that when Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians, the major symbols of Judahite identity were also destroyed: the city Jerusalem, the temple inside the city, and the Davidic dynasty. A further disaster of the Babylonian catastrophe was that the whole of the population of the pre-exilic southern kingdom of Judah now lived in scattered communities throughout the ancient Near East. They knew they were connected somehow, that they shared the same identity, but they did not know in which ways.

During the exile, the scribes, the "literati" of Israel, were compelled to explain the reasons for the catastrophe, which they found in Israel's neglect of the laws of Yahweh. The only way to prevent a recurrence of the disaster was to return to Yahweh and his commandments. In the process, they had to devise new ways to compensate for the tragedy since Yahweh could no longer be worshipped by means of the cult in the Jerusalem temple. They also had to search for common ground with which the many disparate groups could identify themselves, and this they found in stories which everyone could relate to. The written word happened to provide an answer to these perplexing questions. In this way the legal and narrative texts, known today as the Pentateuch, took shape (Carr 2007, 40; Römer 2007, 179; Ska 2007, 179; Leuchter 2010, 50; Edelman et al. 2012, 2). Römer (2007, 179) aptly describes this collection of texts as a "portable homeland" which enabled Israelites wherever they were to remember where they came from, and how to worship Yahweh, the God of Israel.

Identity

Divine Law and Identity

Since the beginning of time, God has been presented as lawgiver (e.g., Gen 1:28; 2:17, etc.; see Schmid 2016, 129). Thus all legislative texts in the Hebrew Bible are considered to be divine law, of which the Torah was probably considered to be the most authoritative of all. According to tradition, the Torah was given by Yahweh himself to Moses on Mt Sinai and explained by Moses in much detail in the book of Deuteronomy. Soon after, it became clear that the Israelite way of life should be clearly distinguished from the ways of the nations (Levtow 2008, 148–149). Yahweh the God of Israel commands that Israelite identity be different from that of the nations, and the very first marker of Israelite identity, in terms of divine law, is the worship of one deity only, that is, Yahweh, the God of Israel. This commandment is followed by the prohibition of and warnings against apostasy, not only in terms of law but also narratively. Just how difficult it was for Israel to keep this commandment becomes evident in the many narratives found not only in the Pentateuch but throughout the Hebrew Bible.

Memory and Identity

However, divine law was not the only determinative for Israelite identity. Besides the laws were the narratives, stories of a shared past, the history of the nation, the memories shared by the people who called themselves Israel. Memories that bring about strong feelings of group cohesion, feelings of belonging together, also play an important role in construing the identity of a group (Ben Zvi 2011, 100; Lau 2011, 175; Southwood 2012, 20; Edelman 2013, i). Shared memories remind a community of its history, of people and events that contributed to making a people into a unique nation; in the case of Israel, a unique nation different from all others. Ben Zvi (2011, 100) refers to such a community as a "mnemonic community" who would, for example, remember a homeland, the ancestors, villains that undermine, and heroes that rescue.

Memories of a shared past may seem to evoke feelings of nostalgia, sentimental yearnings for the past, whether in terms of the "good old days" or in terms of communal suffering. Yet these memories do not necessarily reflect "real history" as actual events in the past—for those who remember were, more often than not, not there. Memories of the past are rather memories that are orientated towards a present situation (Edelman 2013, i). To quote Katherine Southwood (2012, 56): "By retrojecting contemporary norms into the past, 'history' provides a distorted reflection of the values of the present through which group ideologies are legitimised and bolstered." Thus, history consists mostly of distorted memories, designed to fit contemporary interests. Edelman (2013, i) furthermore points out that memories are not simply about remembering, but also about deliberate forgetting. Particular individuals and events are never mentioned in collective memory, not because they were unimportant—on the contrary! Individuals and events are deliberately erased from memory precisely because they appear to

threaten the common interests of the group, and obviously also their identity. History as portrayed as a shared past, in terms of shared memories, is never an empirical report of past events, rather, it is an interpretation of events from a particular perspective in order to reinforce present ideologies and to confirm the unique identity of a particular group.

The memories that played a cardinal role in construing the history of Israel were memories of the ancestors, the exodus, the Sinai events, the wanderings through the desert, and ultimately the Davidic dynasty. Although these memories appear to be from Israel's past, they are construed from the present, that is, the post-exilic period. The exile caused a painful, traumatic rupture and a deep sense of discontinuity between past and present, and memories played an important role, forming a kind of a "healing bridge" of continuity between then and now. Israel's memories of the past would reaffirm that Israel's identity was already established in its pre-exilic history, would perpetuate unchanged well into post-exilic times, almost under the pretense of the exile never having happened (Grabbe 2004, 170–171; Ben Zvi 2011, 123–124; Blenkinsopp 2011, 463; Lau 2011, 175; Southwood 2012, 20; Ben Zvi 2013, 6; Wetter 2013, 148–149).

To conclude this section of the article: it is important to keep in mind that Israelite identity was construed by means of two determinatives: divine law and memories. Divine law set Israel apart from the nations primarily by means of the worship of one God only—that is, Yahweh the God of Israel, and following his commandments. Memories recalled a shared past, but, in the case of Israel, the course of events were steered by Yahweh. Yahweh gave Israel his law: Israel remembered who was obedient to this law and who was not, and how history unfolded accordingly.

The Book of Ruth, Memories, Torah, and Identity

Turning now to the book of Ruth, this article first explores the Ruth narrative and allusions to the memories in the history of Israel.

Memories that are evident in the first chapter of the Ruth narrative are those of the ancestors, the exodus, and the Davidic dynasty. Although the Torah is never mentioned directly, the narrative is certainly intensely aware of its content, as will become evident in the rest of this article. And as one reads this simple little novella, as it is sometimes called, one should really note the literary artistry and skill with which the author—or authors—of the book of Ruth interwove national narratives into what seems to be a family story.

Identity Crisis in the Second Temple Period

As a point of departure, this article accepts that the book of Ruth may be dated to the late post-exilic period and be read in the same vein as a historical novel—that is, a deliberate choice for a particular historical period for the story in order to comment on

a contemporary situation. An important issue during the Second Temple period was the question of identity: the crisis was that Israel, after the exile, was not a homogenous group that lived in one land but consisted of several groups living in various regions throughout the known world of the ancient Near East.

Several scholars address the complex demographical situation and the diverse groups during the Second Temple Period who all considered themselves, or wanted to consider themselves, as "Israel" (see Grabbe 2003, 168–171; Japhet 2006, 69–100; Nihan 2011, 67–68; Edelman et al. 2012, 68–75; Knoppers 2015, 3):

(i)   Within the pre-exilic Kingdom of Judah, which came to be known as the Persian province Yehud, were the descendants of those who did not go into exile but remained living in the land.

(ii) Also in Yehud, sometime after the take-over by the Persians, the returnees arrived, the descendants of those who did go into exile. Among these returnees were those appointed by the Persian authorities to govern and administer the province. There are several indications that this group was the most influential during the Second Temple period, displayed an attitude of superiority, considered themselves the "true Israel", and held strong and exclusive views on "Israel"—which excluded all who did not directly descend from an ancestor who went into exile (see Japhet 2006, 67; Kessler 2006, 103; Römer 2007, 167–169; Lau 2011, 162–163; Rom-Shiloni 2011, 133–134).

(iii) Outside the land were the Israelites living in the diaspora, who did not want to return to Yehud, probably because they worked out a good living for themselves under a foreign government. Books such as Daniel and Esther, and the Joseph narrative attest to such occurrences. Interestingly the Hebrew Bible does not comment negatively on this group; in fact, it portrays them as "true Israelites" living in a strange land.

(iv) There was also a settlement in Egypt (see Jer 44:24–27; Becking 2011, 403–419; Knoppers 2015, 4).

(v) Last, but not least, were the foreigners, the non-Israelites who also wished to be part of "Israel", perhaps because of intermarriage during the exilic or post-exilic period, or perhaps because of personal conviction.

It appears that the leaders in post-exilic Israel had different opinions on the constitution of "Israel". For the exclusivists (see [ii] above), ethnic descent was of prime importance, that is, a genealogy which could be traced back to an ancestor who went into exile. But in due course voices towards a more inclusive community were raised, emphasising not ethnicity, but faith in Yahweh, the God of Israel, regardless of descent or nationality. The book of Ruth addresses the last issue: the inclusion of foreigners who by law (e.g., Deut 23:3–4) should be excluded from the community of Yahweh.

Ruth 1: Memories, Loss of Identity, and a Theological Decision

The book of Ruth is set in the time of the "judges", from which point it looks back at history but also forward to what is to come. Within the first five verses of the first chapter, there are clear allusions to the ancestral narratives, the exodus, and the Davidic dynasty. It starts with a crisis—famine—which causes a family to leave their homeland. Due to famine, both Abram (Gen 12:10) and Isaac (Gen 26:1) left their land with their families, and famine was the main reason why Joseph brought his father and brothers to Egypt (Gen 42–47; Zenger 1986, 33; Zakovitch 1999, 76; Fischer 2001, 122; Köhlmoos 2010, 3; Cohn Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky 2011, 4). In the case of Joseph, famine functioned as a precursor to the exodus back to the land. Similarly, Naomi and her family left their home country due to famine, but Naomi's exodus from the foreign country back to where she came from would hold some surprises for her.

Next, Elimelech and his family are introduced as Ephratites of Bethlehem, which is also the way that David is introduced in 1 Sam 17:12: "Now David was the son of that Ephratite of Bethlehem Judah" (see Zenger 1986, 33; Zakovitch 1999, 76–78; Fischer 2001, 125; Cohn Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky 2011, 4, 6). David is only indirectly alluded to in the Pentateuch, namely with the rise of Judah in the blessings of Jacob on his deathbed (Gen 48:8–12). However, this seemingly insignificant remark about an insignificant Judahite family at the beginning of the book of Ruth is of utmost importance and forms the backdrop to an understanding of the rest of the plot: since Naomi's return to Bethlehem at the end of Chapter One, the rest of the narrative develops and ends in Bethlehem, with the announcement of the prospective of the birth of King David at the end of the book.

The decisive moment in the narrative occurs in verse 5 of the first chapter. In verse 3, Elimelech, the *pater familias*, passes away; in verse 4; the two sons take Moabite women for themselves; and in verse 5, both sons, Mahlon and Chilion, die suddenly and without any explanation. This incident may vaguely resemble the narrative of Judah and Tamar in Gen 38—the taking of a foreign wife and the sudden death of two sons—yet in the cases of Er and Onan, a reason was given: both did something that was displeasing to Yahweh (Gen 38:7, 10). In all these cases, it is important to note that sudden death was not caused by the taking of foreign wives: Judah's sons did something wrong; Elimelech's sons died in the same inexplicable way as their father.

On a narrative level, this may be Naomi's existential crisis. The loss of her husband followed by both her sons must have been devastating, since in the ancient world a woman was completely dependent on the men in her family to survive (Zenger 1986, 35, 122; Frevel 1992, 49; Fischer 2001, 126; LaCocque 1990, 43; Köhlmoos 2010, 8). An elderly widow was cared for by family members, usually the family of her elder son. A young childless widow was given to the next brother of her deceased husband in levirate marriage, not necessarily to care for her, but to continue the bloodline of the

brother who had passed away. Thus, on a very basic level, Naomi had no-one to care for her in her old age, and she was clearly past child-bearing age (Ruth 1:12-13).

Yet there is something else. In the ancient world a woman was identified in terms of the men in her life: she was the wife of some man, or the mother of some son. When Naomi lost her husband and both sons, as Frevel (1992, 50) observes, she also lost her identity. And from this point, a narrative that apparently started as a simple family story, seems to take on national dimensions, as becomes apparent in some verbs and expressions that pertain to especially exodus terminology: the verb שׁוּב (to return) occurs no less than twelve times in the first chapter (Zenger 1986, 18; Frevel 1992, 54; Fischer 2001, 130), which Naomi decided to do after she heard that Yahweh had visited/remembered (פָּקַד) his people (cf. Exod 3:16; 4:31; see Zenger 1986, 38; Frevel 1992, 53; Fischer 2001, 132; Cohn Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky 2011, 9). That, together with the verb יָצָא (to go out) which Naomi does in verses 4 and 7, indicate the exodus events as well as the return from exile (Fischer 2001, 132; Köhlmoos 2010, 13).

Both Zenger (1986, 124) and Frevel (1992, 34) agree that "widow Naomi" and her return from Moab becomes paradigmatic for "widow Israel" and her return from exile. If one accepts that this narrative signifies the collective dimension of Israel's history (Frevel 1992, 55), one may draw a further parallel: widow Naomi lost her identity—her husband and sons—in her exile in Moab. Widow Israel lost her identity—her temple, city, and Davidic dynasty—in exile in Babylon. Both widows experienced a former identity lost; and both face an identity crisis when returning to their homeland, because they do not return alone. At Naomi's side is her Moabite daughter-in-law, Ruth; likewise, the post-exilic Israelite community is no longer a homogenous group living in the territorial kingdom of Judah, but a heterogeneous group living not only in the former home country but also in the diaspora, and consists of different people, including "foreigners" who—like Ruth—also wish to worship Yahweh with the rest of the Israelite community (see above).

The book of Ruth is written to address this problem: which criteria determined the "true Israel"? Books like Ezra and Nehemiah were already written at the time, and probably originated in exclusivist circles. A text such as Ezra 10 ordered that Israelite men with foreign wives had to divorce them and expel them and their children from the community of Yahweh; Nehemiah 13:1–2 alludes directly to Deut 23:3–4 with the same result: the dissolution of marriages with foreign women and rather violent measures taken against those who did so (see Neh 13:25). For the exclusivist circle, foreigners appeared to threaten Israelite identity. Nehemiah recalled the memories of Solomon's foreign wives who led him into temptation and were partially responsible for the downfall of Israel (Neh 13:26). The question is: do non-Israelites pose a threat to Israelite identity in the post-exilic period, or should they be accommodated?

The Ruth narrative responds to this problem in a remarkable way. Although Naomi does not know it yet, the turning point for her that would give shape to a new identity occurs on the plains of Moab, just before entering the land. In Ruth 1:16, Ruth delivers her first and longest monologue in the whole book, and she speaks only thirty words (Köhlmoos 2010, 17). Some scholars see here parallels between Ruth's actions and those of the ancestors (Abram: Gen 12:1; Rebecca: Gen 24:58; see Fischer 1995, 179; LaCocque 2004, 53; Cohn Eskenazi and Frymer-Kenski 2011, 21), and link this incident to memories of the ancestors. Yet, as Köhlmoos (2010, 17) points out, the resolution to join a people and follow their religion is a radical theological decision. In the ancient world, religion was not to be separated from identity; religion was an integral part of identity (Edelman et al. 2012, 17; Southwood 2012, 19; Schweitzer 2013, 21–22; Wetter 2013, 146). At this point, Orpah chooses to adhere to her initial identity and her god or gods; Ruth is here at the point of assuming a new identity determined by her religious convictions.

What is furthermore significant is that this resolution is made at the borders of Moab, just before entering the land. One may recall that at the end of the exodus, also at the borders of Moab, a decision about entering the land had to be made (Köhlmoos 2010, 20). The Israelites had to take a vow to obey the commandments of Yahweh, which Moses explained in detail in the book of Deuteronomy—on the borders of Moab. The very first commandment of the Torah is to worship Yahweh only and have no other gods beside him, and that is exactly what Ruth intended to do. Several scholars remark that Ruth's words take on the character of an oath (Fischer 2001, 143; Köhlmoos 2010, 18; Cohn Eskenazi and Frymer-Kenski 2011, 18); one can thus say that Ruth, before entering the land with widow Naomi, took a vow to obey the first commandment of the Torah.

Consequently, some brief remarks on issues of identity are required. When Naomi returns to Bethlehem the women hardly recognise her, for loss and grief changed her appearance. She herself admits that her identity was changed by tragedy for she asks them to call her "Mara", meaning bitterness. Here may be an allusion to the bitter water at Mara (Exod 15:23), but in ancient times a name was not only a name but conveyed something of the essence of one's very being (Neumann 2006, 325). Naomi then embroiders: The Almighty has dealt bitterly with her, afflicted her, she went out full but Yahweh brought her home empty (Ruth 1:20–21). Once again reference is made to a bitter and empty identity. In the confusion about Naomi, Ruth's presence goes by almost unnoticed, and one may perhaps infer that Naomi was not too happy with this daughter-in-law, as she also had to be fed and cared for — as if Naomi did not have enough problems of her own. Yet as the story unfolds, widow Naomi's empty identity will be filled by her Moabite daughter-in-law in a very special way.

Ruth 2: Radicalising the Law, Memory, Deliberate Forgetting, and the Torah

"Gleaning on the fields of Boaz" forms the background to the second chapter of the book of Ruth. When the two widows, Ruth and Naomi, arrive in Bethlehem at the beginning of the harvest season, Ruth requires her mother-in-law's permission to glean heads of grain on the fields of someone who would allow her to do so. Initially it seems that Ruth appeals to the laws on gleaning in texts like Leviticus 19:9–10, 23:22, and Deuteronomy 24:19. These laws stipulate that when the Israelites reap their harvest in their fields, they should not turn round to collect a sheaf of grain that had accidentally fallen out of the bundle, but leave it for the "stranger, orphan and widow". Ruth appears to be a widow and a stranger, therefore she should be entitled to the means of survival for her mother-in-law and herself. However, this request is not as innocent as it seems.

Especially Braulik (1999, 1–13) pointed out the ways in which these laws (Leviticus 19:9–10, 23:22, and Deuteronomy 24:19) are bent and radicalised by Boaz. Firstly, these texts indicate "foreigner" with the word גֵּר. Several exegetes agree that the term גֵּר concerns strangers in the Israelite community, in other words, a fellow countryman who happens to be unknown by the locals (Braulik 1996, 118; 1999, 14; Zenger 1986, 56; Frevel 1992, 74; Fischer 2001, 175; Köhlmoos 2010, 41). When Boaz allows Ruth to glean from his fields, she is overcome by his kindness, she bows before him and applies the term **נָכְרִיָּה** to herself (Ruth 2:10). Within the context of post-exilic Israel, this would be most significant. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah use נָכְרִיָּה when they refer to "foreign wives" (cf. Esra 2:10,11,14,17,18,44; Neh 13:27-30). Fischer (2001, 175), LaCocque (2004, 70), and Siquans (2009, 449) see a direct link between Ruth's appropriation of נָכְרִיָה and Ezra and Nehemiah's policy of excluding foreigners from the community of Yahweh, for **נָכְרִיָּה** would carry negative overtones, especially in the post-exilic community.

Secondly, the laws on gleaning provide that the sheaves that fall out of the bundles must be left for the widow, orphan, or stranger to be picked up. Boaz orders his employees to do more: "Also let some grain from the bindles fall purposely for her; leave it that she may glean, and do not rebuke her" (Ruth 2:16). Boaz then not only allows a נָכְרִיָה on his fields, but he instructs his men not only to leave the sheaves that accidentally fall out of the bundles, but to pull out some on purpose for her to pick up.

With regards to memory, it is also remarkable that the word for gleaning in the book of Ruth is לָקַט— the same word that is used for the Israelites gleaning manna in Exodus 16 (Braulik 1996, 118; 1999, 13; Köhlmoos 2010, 29). And conveniently, all bad memories about the Moabites are deliberately forgotten, like the accusation in Deuteronomy 23:4 that they refused the Israelites bread and water during their wanderings through the desert. On the contrary, Ruth is a Moabitess who does the opposite: she sustains her mother-in-law throughout the desert period in her life by sharing with her everything she gleaned in the fields of Boaz (Braulik 1996, 115–116; LaCocque 1990, 86–87).

As elsewhere in the book of Ruth, the Torah is not explicitly mentioned in the second chapter of the book of Ruth. However, the most significant remark in this chapter is Boaz's comment in verses 11b and 12: "you left your father and your mother and the land of your birth, and have come to a people whom you did not know before ... reward be given you by the Lord God of Israel under whose wings you have come for refuge". Here again some scholars see a parallel between the actions of Ruth and the ancestors (see above), yet, this verse becomes of theological importance when read together with warnings against apostasy and the worship of other gods. For instance, Deuteronomy 13:7b warns against family members who entice Israelites to "serve other gods which neither they nor their fathers knew before". Yet by doing exactly this, by lapsing into apostasy towards her own gods and by finding refuge under the wings of a god neither she nor her parents knew, Ruth is once again demonstrating her adherence to the first commandment in the Torah.

Ruth 3: A Realisation of the Promises to the Ancestors

At the opening of the third chapter of the book of Ruth, the "air crackles with erotic tension" (Fischer 1995, 183). The plan to seduce an unsuspecting Boaz may vaguely recall the rather unsavoury origins of the Moabites (Gen 19:30–38) or the plot of Tamar (Gen 38; see LaCocque 2004, 90; Halton 2012, 32). However, for the purposes of this article, the most significant verse is Ruth 3:9b, that is, the scene in the middle of the night on the threshing floor. Boaz wakes up startled, and finds a woman at his feet, and (apparently somewhat confused) asks her who she is. She identifies herself as Ruth, his maidservant and immediately requests him to "spread his wing over her" and she gives a reason for the request: he is a גֹּאֵל—a redeemer.

It has much been debated whether Ruth's request to Boaz to spread his wing over her implies a request to some kind of sexual relationship, like marriage. This author concurs with the views of Braulik (1996, 119; 1999, 15), Fischer (2001, 211), Köhlmoos (2010, 61–62), and Halton (2012, 35) that it does. Another lengthy discussion pertains to the reason that Ruth gives for her request: Boaz is גֹּאֵל—a redeemer. Redemption in the book of Ruth pertains to the redemption of land, but this becomes evident only in the last chapter of the book. The question here is whether "marriage" and land redemption belong together as a matter of course, or whether the conflation of the two is indeed a novelty in the book of Ruth. In this regard the exposition of Adele Berlin (2010, 12–14) and her suggestion that Ruth 3:9b be read together with Ruth 4:5 and 12 in the next chapter, may be most heuristic.

Berlin (2010, 12) agrees that Naomi's return from Moab to Bethlehem-Juda may symbolise Israel's return from exile. She emphasises loss: loss of family, loss of land—not only the territorial loss of the kingdom of Judah, but also loss of family land. Naomi ran the risk of a family line becoming extinct and had to resort to selling her late husband's property to survive. The returning Israelites had to grapple with similar questions: how could the nation continue to exist after the break of the exile, and what

about the land? For Berlin, the answer to these questions may be found in the promises to the ancestors: a land, and numerous descendants. In the middle of the night on the threshing floor, Ruth attempts exactly this: to realise the promises to the ancestors. By asking Boaz to marry her, hopefully there will be numerous offspring. By appointing him as *go'el*, ownership of land may be secured (Berlin 2010, 13). Berlin doesn't mention it, but perhaps it is noteworthy that in the book of Ruth, a foreign woman devises a plan for the continuation of the promises to the ancestors in the turbulent and uncertain postexilic times.

The success of Ruth's plan becomes evident in Ruth 4:5 and 12 (Berlin 2010, 12). In Ruth 4:5 there is the prosperity of "raising the name of the dead on his inheritance"— although this happens to be the deceased Machlon in the Ruth narrative. Yet the elders, in Ruth 4:12, bless Boaz with wishes that his house may be like the house of Perez, born by Tamar for Judah. And if one wants to pursue the case of Tamar and Ruth—just as a family line is about to end, due to the creative intervention of foreign women, it does not. And in both the cases of Tamar and Ruth, had it not been for these two beautiful tricksters, the bloodline of Judah leading to the birth of King David would have stopped.

The book of Ruth is not an accurate depiction of legal practice, nor is it a midrash on Torah law per se. It is a fictional story of return that uses Torah texts to strengthen its audience's hope that the renewal of progeny and land will happen again in their own day. The Judean family who long ago underwent "exile" and almost lost its family line and its ancestral land, but whose continuity was restored by means of Torah laws, is a metaphor for the exilic or postexilic community which is being encouraged to see in the Torah the vehicle for its own community of people and land. (Berlin 2010, 14)

Ruth 4: A New Identity

Chapter 4 in the book of Ruth starts with the procedures at the gates of the city with Boaz executing Ruth's plans: he volunteers to redeem Elimelech's land and claims Ruth as his wife (4:1–10). The post-exilic audience would certainly notice that Boaz is taking a foreign wife; furthermore. that this act is not condemned but commended by the elders of the town. Their praises come in the form of a series of blessings which once again reflect ancestral memories (vv. 11–12). Here, the elders of Bethlehem identify the origins of Israel not in terms of the patriarchs, but in terms of the ancestral mothers, Rachel and Leah, the two wives of Jacob, which is quite remarkable, given the patriarchal and androcentric society of the time (Frevel 1992, 141–142; Fischer 2001, 246; Cohn Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky 2011, 83). Tamar is mentioned next, and reference is made to only one of the twins that she bore to Judah, namely Perez, thereby already anticipating the Davidic line of descent.

However, what is most significant and often overlooked in terms of Israelite identity, is the subtle change of Naomi's identity when she lays little Obed to her bosom. Certainly, on a very physical level, she is assured that she will be taken care of when she is old and

fragile (Frevel 2009, 40–41), but the important point is that she becomes the little baby's אומנת—a term that indicates a trusty caregiver, sometimes translated as "foster mother" or "nurse" (Cohn Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky 2011, 91). In other words, this means Naomi's identity changed from the empty bitter widow, Mara, to a joyful fulfilled woman who holds a forefather of King David to her bosom. The one who was directly responsible for this change of identity is her Moabite daughter-in-law Ruth, who put into motion the ancestral promises of descendants and land.

Thus, for the post-exilic community, the Ruth narrative indicates that Israel's identity undeniably had changed to that of "widow Israel" due to the traumatic experiences of exile and loss. To survive, a new identity has to be constructed in innovative and creative ways, which also imply a different interpretation and execution of the Torah, especially with regard to the foreigners in the community. A future, if there is to be one, can only be realised by means of the willing contributions and acts of solidarity of these foreigners.

The chapter concludes with two genealogies that both look forward to the birth of King David. Genealogies also play a major role in constructing identity, but, just like memories, genealogies do not convey a reliable account of people and descent; they are mostly invested with particular ideologies (Hieke 2010, 150–151; Nihan 2011, 68; Ben Zvi 2013, 7). Thus, genealogies of the ancient world cannot be employed to trace back people or historical events in which they supposedly took part; genealogies rather reflect the concerns of the time, and, just like memories, some names are deliberately left out of genealogies for very specific reasons.[2]

For the purposes of this article, the second genealogy at the end of Chapter 4 (vv. 18–22) is significant. It begins with Perez, one of the twins born to Judah by Tamar, and as Fischer (2001, 72) points out, it is important to keep in mind that Perez was born whilst the patriarch Jacob was still alive, and before the family moved to Egypt. Perez thus implies the presence of both Jacob and Judah and recalls the ancestral memories before the time of the wanderings through the desert. Hezron, Ram, Amminadab, Nahshon, and Salmon recall the events in the wilderness, although, with the slight exception of perhaps Nahshon,[3] none of these men play a significant role in the history of Israel —

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2   See the chapter by Hieke (2010, 149–185) for an elaborate discussion of different types of genealogies, why they are construed in a particular way, the significance of the number of persons and the position they are placed within a particular genealogy, etc.

3   Nahshon appears in the fifth position in a patrilineal genealogy consisting of ten male members; therefore, he is at the centre which indicates an important place. After the departure from Sinai, he is leader of the tribe of Judah in the desert (Num 1:7; 2:3; 10:15). When Moses erected the tabernacle, Nahshon brought sacrifices to the new altar as the representative of the tribe of Judah. And lastly, Nahshon's sister Eliseba was given to the first high priest Aaron as wife (see Zenger 1986, 101; Fischer 2001, 260; Cohn Eskenazi and Frymer-Kensky 2011, 94).

their names are hardly mentioned outside of the genealogies of David in the book of Ruth and Chronicles 2:4–15. Boaz, Obed, and Jesse lead to the climax: David.

Fischer (2001, 72) describes the book of Ruth as national history in the form of a family narrative. In other words, as this article also indicates, the book of Ruth tells the story of Israel, especially Israel's return after the exile, by means of a moving account of the selfless love between two destitute widows and their strategies for survival. This article emphasises the loss of identity and the finding of a new identity in the cases of both "widow Israel" and "widow Naomi". But if a post-exilic dating for the text is accepted, the question must be asked why the book would end with a genealogy that concludes with the pre-exilic King David. Why would David be of significance in the Second Temple period?

With regards to memory, King David recalls the glorious "Golden Age" of the united monarchy. One may perhaps assume that the book of Ruth chooses to remember the David of 1 Chronicles, and not the David of the books of Samuel to 1 Kings. Towards the end of the Persian period, the uprising of a Greek empire under Alexander the Great certainly predicted the end of the relatively good times under the Persian regime. Therefore, the expectance of the coming of someone like King David may be seen as a "messianic promise". Some scholars date the second genealogy of the book of Ruth as late as the Hellenistic or even the Maccabee period (Zenger 1986, 52–53; Köhlmoos 2011, 85), which were particularly dark times in the history of Israel. Hope was necessary, and hope was found in looking forward to someone like David who would perhaps restore Israel to its "Golden Age".

The book of Ruth maintains the tradition that David descended from the tribe of Judah, particularly from Judah's son Perez, and not one of the other brothers, Shelah the elder, or Zerah the twin. However, it is not the fact that the "messianic" David will come from the tribe of Judah/Perez, but how this will happen. Particularly significant are the members Perez and Obed in this genealogy — and the memories of the ways in which they were begotten (Zenger 1986, 101–102). If it had not been for Tamar, the whole of the Pentateuch would have taken a different twist altogether; if it had not been for Ruth, King David wouldn't be there.

Conclusion

In this article, the book of Ruth is read against the background of the late post-exilic period in the history of Israel. The emphasis is on the identity crisis that the reconstituted Israelites experienced, especially regarding non-Israelites and their exclusion or inclusion by the community of Yahweh. The book of Ruth is presented as the re-telling of Israel's history in the form of a family narrative with many allusions to major events in that history. Powerful memories of the ancestors, the wilderness, and the Torah are recalled, and the book ends on a happy note with the birth of King David. In the narrative, Ruth's loyalty to her mother-in-law is stressed, but the article also emphasises

her loyalty to the first commandment of the Torah. In this way the book of Ruth proposes arguments that would hopefully persuade the Second Temple community to welcome non-Israelites in their midst who indicate their solidarity, and especially their willingness, to worship Yahweh, the God of Israel. Israelite identity, the "true Israel", should be determined not by ethnic descent, but by religious conviction.

Like Ruth, constructing Israelite identity requires thinking out of the box, yet not outside the Torah, for although the Torah seems to be outside of the book of Ruth as it is nowhere explicitly mentioned, the aim of this article is to indicate that the Torah is in fact one of the main concerns of the narrative.

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