Constructing a historical context for the Ruth novelette: Dovetailing the views of J A Loader and R Albertz

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ABSTRACT

Old Testament scholars date the Ruth novelette either to the monarchic period or to the post-exilic period. Both Rainer Albertz and James Alfred Loader wrote articles on the book of Job early in their academic career. These articles reflected their respective fields of interest at that stage. For Albertz it was the religious history of Israel, and for Loader it was the wisdom tradition of Israel. However, a decade ago Loader published a commentary on Ruth and called the character Naomi ‘Job’s sister’. While reading the Ruth novelette it dawned on me that it is possible to dovetail Loader’s characterisation of Naomi with Albertz’s description of post-exilic society in Yehud. This would make Boaz a representative of the ‘righteous’ and the other relative a representative of the ‘wicked.’

Het dateren van teksten is in mijn ogen niet een historische, maar een hermeneutische bezigheid (Becking 2000:9).

A INTRODUCTION


Early in their academic careers, two Old Testament scholars, Rainer Albertz and James Alfred Loader, published books and articles on the book of Job. These
gave me food for thought concerning the historical context of the Ruth novelette. Albertz (1981) tried to link the book to a specific socio-historical situation in the history of Israel, while Loader (1984) focused on the literary qualities of the book. One may say that Loader’s fascination with the book of Job is part and parcel of his interest in the *wisdom literature* of Israel, while Albertz’s fascination with the book is part and parcel of his interest in the *religious history* of Israel. Be that as it may, Albertz’s construction (1981:349–372; 1990:243–261) of the social world of post-exilic Yehud and his reading of the book of Job against this backdrop made sense to me, as did Loader’s reading of the Ruth novelette as the story of ‘Job’s sister’ (1993:312–329, 1999:154). While writing chapters for a first year Biblical Studies textbook concerning the literature of ancient Israel (Boshoff, Scheffler, Spangenberg 2000), it dawned on me that it is possible to dovetail Albertz’s reading of Job and Loader’s reading of Ruth when constructing a historical context for the latter.

**B THE SOCIAL SITUATION IN THE PERSIAN PROVINCE OF YEHUD**

The Jewish community in Yehud was in disarray during the early phases of Persian domination. The cream of the Jewish population of Judah had been taken into exile by the Babylonians. Those who were left behind were mainly from the lower class, since they were considered incapable of stirring up trouble. This group had to bear the brunt of the Babylonian taxation. However, with the passing of time a new group of wealthy people appeared on the scene. They had little sympathy with the struggling peasants on their uneconomic farms. They often bought the land of the peasants and thus became large-scale landowners. Some of these wealthy people also took advantage of the wars which the Persians waged against the Greeks and the Egyptians on the western and south-western borders of their empire. The soldiers had to be supplied with food and other commodities and these were bought from people in the areas surrounding the theatres of war.

Another incident which impinged on the life of the peasant farmers was the return of groups of exiled people. The prospect of the return of a large number of exiled Jews was not greeted with great enthusiasm by the inhabitants of Yehud. Moreover, the reintegration of this group caused considerable problems. Some of them had legitimate property claims but these had to be pursued through the courts and this created further social tension, as is evident from Zechariah 5:1–4 (Albertz 1994:444)

During the years of the rebuilding of the Temple (520–515 BCE), the prophets Haggai and Zechariah raised high hopes of restoration. They believed that the Davidic monarchy would be restored and that Jerusalem would rise to
become a world centre. The prophecies of these prophets were never fulfilled and consequently prophecy as a whole ‘became deeply discredited among the majority of the population’ (Albertz 1994:453–454).

The members of the priesthood and lay leaders who stood behind the restoration of the Temple tried to rebuild the community. They wanted to create an egalitarian society whose members would show solidarity towards each other – similar to the society that had existed prior to the monarchy. Despite great efforts, it soon became evident that it was an impossible task and that the society they were trying to create was artificial:

There was no going back on the social differentiations which had arisen in society under the monarchy. On the contrary, they became more marked under the pressure of the rigorous Persian taxation policy, which in contrast to the Persian religious policy was anything but tolerant. Whereas the poorer families of small holders were driven further and further into misery under this burden, which became even greater in the fifth century as a result of the disastrous wars of the Persians against the Greeks, the richer families of larger estate holders profited from the developing trade and the business of making loans (Albertz 1994:447).

When Nehemiah arrived in Yehud in 445 BCE he encountered a society that was in a state of social crisis. According to Nehemiah 5:1–5, people came to him and complained that some of them had to give their sons and daughters as pledges in exchange for food to eat in order to sustain themselves. Others claimed that they had to mortgage their fields, vineyards, and homes to buy grain during a severe famine. Still others bewailed the fact that they had to borrow money to pay the king’s tax. These verses reflect how people ‘were caught in the mill of the harsh ancient law of credit, which allowed the creditor to seize the property and the family of the debtors [...] if they were unable to pay’ (Albertz 1994:495).

Nehemiah reprimanded the nobles and officials who were the creditors (Neh 5:6–9) and asked them to agree on a general remission of debt (Neh 5:10–12). This brought some relief to the small farmers but it was not a long-term solution to the crisis. The impoverishment continued. As the crisis deepened, the upper class was confronted with an ethical and religious challenge. They could ignore the social plight of their fellow Jews and use the credit system to their own advantage, or they could show solidarity with their brothers as these became poorer (Albertz 1994:498). A section of the upper class believed that the social problems were none of their business and that it would be for the good of the country if the small farmers and their businesses collapsed. Another section of the upper class, however, felt obliged to show their solidarity with those in need.

As the years went by, the lower class became disillusioned with the politics of the upper class and therefore believed that only God could relieve their misery.
They therefore cherished the prophetic tradition as it gave them hope for the future. God, they believed, would soon bring about a great upheaval in nature and society, in which the lofty would be brought low and the lowly raised up (Is 29:17–21). He was the only one who was inclined to favour the poor.

C ALBERTZ’S READING OF JOB


In the poetic section of the book (Job 3:1–42:6), the Job character is a person who belonged to the upper class of society. He was extremely wealthy. He possessed gold (Job 31:24–25), fields, flocks of sheep and herds of camels (Job 30:1; 31:20). He owned slaves (Job 19:14–15; 31:13) and herdsmen (Job 30:1). He was a respected citizen whose advice was sought after. He acted as a judge at the city gates and formed part of the city’s management body (Job 29:7–10, 21–23).

Not only was Job a wealthy man, he was pious as well. His piety is primarily reflected in his attitude towards his wealth. In the section where he laments his afflictions and declares his innocence, he says:

If I have made gold my trust,  
or called fine gold my confidence;  
if I have rejoiced because my wealth was great,  
or because my hand had gotten much;  
this also would be an iniquity to be punished by the judges,  
for I should have been false to God above (Job 31:24–25, 28).

He clothed the poor and gave them something to sleep under (Job 31:19); shared his food with orphans (Job 31.17); and took pity on the widows and fulfilled their wishes (Job 31:16). Moreover, he took up the cudgels on behalf of the oppressed and the exploited (Job 29:13–16). ‘His piety demonstrates above all else that he used without reservation his position and possessions to improve the life of impoverished groups in the population’ (Albertz 1990:248).

Job was therefore a wealthy aristocrat who kept a healthy distance between himself and his riches. His aim in life was not to amass wealth — on the contrary, he knew that he had been blessed and that he had a responsibility towards those on the lower strata of society. He fulfilled his social obligations and on account of this expected to enjoy honour, health, prosperity and longevity.
The theory of divine retribution (that good deeds are rewarded and evil ones punished) formed part of Job’s philosophy of life. Job’s lament therefore reflects the tension between his philosophy of life and his present situation:

I call out to you, God, but you do not answer,
I stand up to plea, but you keep aloof.
You have turned cruelly against me;
with your strong hand you persecute me ...
Yet no beggar held out his hand to me in vain for relief in distress.
Did I not weep for the unfortunate?
Did not my heart grieve for the destitute?
Yet evil has come though I expected good,
and when I looked for light, darkness came (Job 30:20–21, 24–26).

What puzzled Job was the fate of the ‘wicked’ — the other segment of aristocrats who enjoyed economic prosperity, and claimed for themselves prominent social positions. They were concerned only with their own advantage and were not bothered by religious obligations in their business dealings. They drove the lower class into poverty and dependency (Job 21:7–3, 23–24, 28–33; 22:8; 34:23–30). ‘In this critical situation, the members of the pious aristocracy must have come to bitter realization that their confident, religious way of life, which was expressed particularly in a high degree of social involvement on behalf of the impoverished lower class, did not produce a direct payoff’ (Albertz 1990:257).

The authors of the book of Job wrestled with the question of the utility of piety. The impious aristocrats ‘could simply deny that piety had any useful purpose’ but the pious aristocrats could not do this ‘for they did not wish to betray their philosophy of life’ (Albertz 1990:157).

The author of the frame narrative (Job 1–2, 42:7–17) gave one solution to the problem of the utility of piety. He emphasised the importance of being willing to serve God ‘for nought’ (Job 1:9). The authors of the poetical section (Job 3:1–42:6), however, suggested other modes of explanation that could help the pious aristocrats to come to terms with their situation. In the poetical dialogues (Job 4–27) the inadequacy of the doctrine of retribution to explain suffering and to console the sufferer is demonstrated. Furthermore, the right of the sufferer to complain and to accuse God is underwritten. The Elihu speeches (Job 32–37) try to explain suffering by comparing it with testing and discipline. Illness, social suffering, and even political upheavals are seen as educational acts of God. The divine discourses (Job 38–41), on the other hand, emphasise the sovereignty of God and mock all rational theological models. No theological model can adequately explain God and the living relationship between him and human beings (Albertz 1981:370–371; cf also Loader 1984:27–30).
E  LOADER’S READING OF THE RUTH NOVELETTE

In an article published in 1993 James Loader argued convincingly that there are a number of parallels between the stories of Naomi and Job. On account of these parallels he called Naomi ‘Job’s sister’. He even revisited these parallels in his inaugural lecture at the University of Vienna in 1998. On that occasion he compared the Ruth novelette and the book of Job with the music of Franz Schubert and Gustav Mahler (Loader 1999). The parallels between the Ruth novelette and the book of Job, which he identified, are:

C The opening and closing scenes of the stories correspond.
C The stories unfold in the same way.
C The stories end when redress is brought to both characters.
C No answer is given to the question as to the cause of the suffering of Naomi and Job.
C In both stories the doctrine of retribution plays an important role.
C In both stories God is accused of not applying the doctrine as he should be doing.

Both Naomi and Job experience calamities on a grand scale early in the stories. It was a famine that caused the family of Elimelek to migrate to Moab. While living there as resident aliens, Naomi’s husband (Elimelek) and her two sons (Mahlon and Chilion) died (Ruth 1:1–6). Although Job did not need to migrate he also experienced natural disasters (and attacks by vagabonds), which stripped him of all his possessions — even his children (Job 1:13–22). When the stories draw to a close, Naomi and Job discover that God is not behind their suffering. On the contrary, he again blesses them when their fortunes are restored and children are born to them (Ruth 4:13–14; Job 42:13). Throughout the stories neither Naomi nor Job received an answer or were given an explanation for the suffering that they experienced. In the end they both had to accept the mystery of unexplained suffering.

Strange as it may seem, Loader argues that the book of Ruth originated in the period of the united monarchy (1000–930 BCE) and not in the post-exilic period (539–333 BCE). He dates the book of Job to the post-exilic period, however. There is thus a time gap of at least four centuries between the two books. The arguments that serve as warrants for his dating of the Ruth novelette are the following:

C The genealogy in Ruth 4:18–22 does not agree with the Deuteronomic law of lineage (Deut 25:5–6) prescribed for a levirate marriage. According to this law the first-born son should
be regarded the son of the deceased. Obed should thus have been described as the son of Mahlon, and not as the son of Boaz (Ruth 4:21). On account of this, Loader concludes that the story must have been written before the Deuteronomic law was ‘promulgated’ — thus prior to the seventh century BCE.

C The description of the city of Bethlehem as ‘Bethlehem in Judah’ indicates that the author was aware that there was another city with the same name but located in the northern part of the country (Joshua 19:15). This reflects a time before the schism in the kingdom of Solomon — thus a time prior to the end of the tenth century BCE.

C The fact that women were allowed to possess land, reflects a situation similar to the story narrated in 2 Kings 8:1–6 (the woman from Shunem), which again reflects a date long before the exile.

F DOVETAILING THE VIEWS OF LOADER AND ALBERTZ

Rainer Albertz does not refer to the Ruth novelette in his book A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period (1994). However, his description of the social situation in Yehud during the Persian period, in my judgement, fits the Ruth novelette like a glove.

During the heyday of Persian rule, Jewish society in Yehud (according to Albertz) consisted of two tiers: the wealthy and the poor. Among the wealthy there were those who cared nothing for the poor, but there were others who were moved by the plight of the impoverished. This group is frequently referred to as the ‘just’ or ‘righteous’ and the main character of the book of Job belongs to this group. In my opinion this applies to Boaz as well.

When we read the novelette against the background of the social conditions in Yehud during the Persian period as described by Rainer Albertz the story comes alive in the same way as the story of Job.

The novelette reflects the conditions that the returned exiled people were confronted with in Yehud. They had legitimate land claims, but were often dependent on the solidarity of the landowners (or aristocrats). The story appeals to the aristocrats to fulfil their social obligations towards the returning exiled people who were in dire need. What makes the story of Naomi and Ruth interesting is that Boaz was a wealthy man who fulfilled his duty towards a widow, while another (equally wealthy) family member withheld his assistance because it might have endangered his financial position (Ruth 3:12–14; 4:1–6).

Although the novelette has the title ‘Ruth’, the story concerns the experiences of Naomi, the wife of Elimelek. Her reply to the astonished outcry of the Bethlehem women is an important focal point in the story. She said to them:
Do not call me Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has made my life very bitter. I went away full, and the Lord has brought me back empty. Why call me Naomi? The Lord has pronounced against me, the Almighty has brought me misfortune (Ruth 1:20–21).

These words speak of disillusionment and breakdown. Naomi is disappointed with God’s actions. She feels that she has been left in the lurch. It is therefore not surprising that Loader (1993) calls Naomi ‘Job’s sister.’ These verses are discussed in depth in his two articles (Loader 1993, 1999). It is specifically these verses that suggested a link between the story of Job and the story of Naomi.

Through this story of disillusionment and breakdown the author tries to address the different groups in the community of the province of Yehud. Ellen van Wolde (1997:127) formulates this succinctly: ‘The narrator narrates his text with a view to a particular public of readers and listeners.’

First, he tries to offer hope to the returning exiles by emphasising that through ordinary people God can work miracles. Naomi returned to Bethlehem an embittered woman. She was so embittered that she wanted to change her name to Mara. She saw herself as a lonely childless widow with a bleak future. Towards the end of the story, however, she is once again Naomi, the attractive one, the joyful one, because God had radically changed the circumstances of her life with the assistance of a faithful daughter-in-law and a wealthy family member (Ruth 1:20–21; 4:13–16).

Secondly, through this story the author encourages the wealthy of Yehud to fulfil their social obligations towards the returning exiles. Like Boaz, the wealthy aristocrats should take pity on widows and orphans and thus act righteously. If they act like the other redeemer in the story (Ruth 4:1–6) they will become ‘wicked persons.’

Lastly, the author also addresses the community’s social prejudices. In this story Ruth plays almost the same role as the Samaritan in the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:25–37). According to Deuteronomy 23:3, a person of Moabite descent may not be part of the Jewish nation, and Ezra and Nehemiah rebuked the people of Yehud on the score of their foreign wives (Ezr 10:10–11; Neh 13:23–31). However, this story emphasises that through the goodwill and devotion of a foreigner, God can create a new future for his people. God changes the circumstances of Naomi’s life through the behaviour of a faithful Moabite daughter-in-law on whom people were in fact expected to look down.

G CONCLUSION

Phyllis Trible (1992:846) advises readers to avoid the tendency to relate the novelette’s purpose to one specific historical setting. In my opinion this is
unavoidable. A reader needs to assign the novelette to a specific historical setting in order to make sense of it. One may even argue that the meaning, which the reader discovers in the text, is directly linked to the historical setting of the narrator. Depending on whether the reader situates the narrator of the Ruth novelette in (1) the *monarchic period*, or in (2) the *post-exilic* period, a different meaning will be discovered in the text (Van Wolde 1997:119–126). The primary reasons why I regard a post-exilic setting for the Ruth novelette as more tenable than a monarchic setting are the following:

C  The state of Moab came into being during the tenth to ninth century BCE when some settlements in the region east of the Dead Sea became nodal points of economic production, commodity exchange, political power, legal authority and religious practice (Routledge 1997:132–137). It must have existed for some time in order for stories to be told about contact between Judeans and Moabites.

C  The number of legal issues in the book — gleaning on the field of others (Ruth 2:2–3, 7–8, 15–17), the right of a widow to inherit land (Ruth 4:3), the law of levirate and the role of the redeemer (Ruth 4:4–5) — reflect a fairly legalised society. Such a society existed in Yehud during the Second Temple period.

C  The language of Ruth is definitely late, as Frederic Bush (1996:18–30) has recently indicated. It belongs to the phase which scholars nowadays call ‘Late Biblical Hebrew’.

To these may be added as secondary arguments:

C  The social levels which existed in the post-exilic community of Yehud as described by Rainer Albertz (1981, 1990, 1994).


Our post-modern world has opened our eyes to the fact that our research is not wholly objective but can be linked to our life setting, age, sex, political convictions, and what we have read through the years. Daniel Marguerat and Yvan Bourquin (1999:141) correctly emphasise that ‘[t]here are no readers whose way through the text coincides exactly with that of their neighbours’. One merely needs to study the different commentaries and articles on the book of Ruth to realise the wisdom of this statement.

In the guild of biblical scholars you need to motivate the choices and guesses that inform your reading of a text and then leave your work for others to criticise or praise. Since the early years of his academic career James Alfred Loader’s reading of biblical texts has elicited praise (cf Lohfink [1981:112–113] and
Whybray [1980:17]) even when scholars were not convinced by some of his arguments and warrants. His reading of the Ruth novelette as reflected in the commentary (Loader 1994a) and articles (Loader 1992, 1993, 1994b, 1994c, 1995, 1999) is creative and highly entertaining, although I’m not convinced by his arguments and warrants for a date during the ‘Solomonic Enlightenment’. However, by dovetailing his views with that of Rainer Albertz the reader may discover new meaning in the text.

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