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**Nielsen, Kirsten**

***Ruth: A Commentary***

Old Testament Library

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Timothy M. Willis  
Pepperdine University  
Malibu, CA 90263

A comparison of Nielsen's commentary with many earlier volumes in the OTL series provides an excellent example of a "sea change" that has occurred in the exposition of the Hebrew Bible in the past half century. While those earlier volumes are intent on exposing various literary layers and developments in Israelite thought by means of traditional literary (source) criticism and other historical-critical methods, Nielsen primarily employs new literary criticism and its close methodological relatives to get at the message of the book in its present form. Two such divergent approaches can yield either complementary or contradictory perspectives on the biblical text. Nielsen's well-considered contribution provides the latter. Her reading of Ruth constitutes an alternative to many earlier scholarly readings, effectively undermining both their methods and their conclusions. What she presents is a cautiously conservative reading of Ruth, which will put a smile on many in the pulpit, but a frown on just as many at the university chalkboard.

The commentary falls into two major blocks. In the first block (pp. 1-35), Nielsen briefly discusses the structure and genre of the book before embarking on some occasionally controversial discussions of its literary, historical, and theological contexts. The second block (pp. 39-99) consists of a section-by-section exposition of the book, divided according to the chapters in the biblical book, and subdivided into sections distinguished primarily by location of action. Instances in the book that illustrate the ideas presented in the first block are succinctly brought out in the second.

For the basic structure of the book, Nielsen primarily follows the outline of M. D. Gow (*The Book of Ruth*, 1992), who points to "a roundedness [within each chapter] and a forward drive [between chapters] in the narrative" (p. 5). Nielsen skillfully utilizes and refines these insights. Of particular interest is the contention that the concluding Davidic genealogy (4:18-22) is original to the book, because it serves as a structural antithesis to the threat to the lineage of Elimelech which opens the book (1:1-5). Further, she finds literary parallels to this in the story and genealogy configuration of the patriarchal narratives.

This points toward Nielsen's most significant contribution: her intertextual reading of Ruth as part of "a larger network of texts" (p. 9). Naturally, there are parallels, both explicit and implicit, with the story of Tamar (Genesis 38; Ruth 4:12). Like Tamar, Ruth is to be praised for her concern for the "survival of the family" (pp. 70-71). The principles of levirate marriage are employed by both Tamar and Ruth, but in ways not specifically mandated in Israelite law. Nielsen notes similar parallels to Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, and even Abram. Ruth's abandonment of her homeland is compared with Abram's sojourn from Mesopotamia. Her eventual role as ancestress in the line of David implies that Yahweh credits her with righteousness just as he had credited Abram generations earlier (p. 49). Obstacles that threaten the plans of Ruth and Naomi parallel the obstacles to the fulfillment of the promises faced by the patriarchs (p. 78). Thus, the informed reader recognizes the hand of God in the life of Ruth, even though such activity is clearly mentioned but once in the text (Ruth 4:13).

Nielsen argues that the early hearers of this story must have known the other stories in order to understand the story of Ruth as it is told. For example, only one who knows the stories of Yahweh working through the wombs of Israel's ancestresses would be able to recognize the significant role played by Yahweh in the life of Ruth. By acknowledging that conceptual backdrop, Nielsen demonstrates the literary and theological beauty of the book. Without that backdrop, numerous questions crucial to a coherent interpretation of the story cannot be answered.

These conclusions present a major hurdle, however, when wedded with Nielsen's views on the historical context of the book. Though not committing herself absolutely, she leans toward a tenth-century date for the book's origin. "[A] text that culminates in the birth of King David must have had a political purpose when it came into being" (p. 21). For Nielsen, the most likely occasion is the time of the North-South schism, with the reigns of Hezekiah and Josiah providing slightly less plausible occasions. In any case, she reads the Book of Ruth as a love story which draws on the foundational stories of Israel to support the dynastic claims of the Davidic family. The problem with this early date, of course, is that it implies that the patriarchal narratives, conjoined with the genealogies, must have "come into being" no later than the United Monarchy. Current Pentateuchal studies would lend little--if any--support to such a position. So, it would seem prudent for Nielsen to reconsider possible pro-Davidic motivations for the composition of Ruth at a

later date. This is not to say that Nielsen's position is necessarily wrong, however. She argues her position well enough that it should cause those in Pentateuchal studies at least to reconsider their own assumptions about the compositional history of the patriarchal narratives.

In sum, Nielsen presents a sensitive reading of the story of Ruth which, unfortunately, does not adequately deal with historical-critical questions. For those, one must still consult previous commentaries and studies. It is hoped that these two approaches can be brought together in the future in a more complementary way. For now, we have a work which inadvertently seems to minimize the importance of a traditional approach just so it will not detract from a newer one. Still, the author has provided us with a welcome exposition of the story of Ruth, revealing how intertextual sensitivities and careful attention to a text's literary beauty can unveil implicit theological messages.