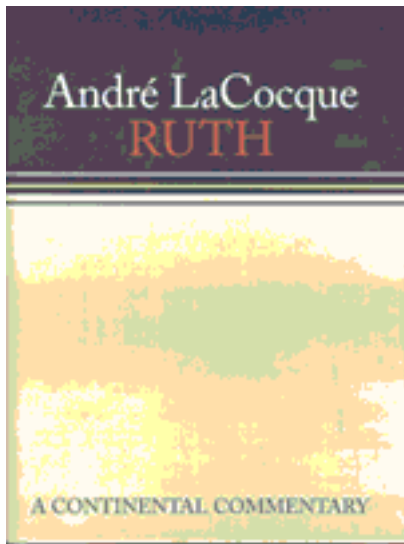


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**LaCocque, André**

***Ruth***

Translated by K. C. Hanson

A Continental Commentary

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This commentary adds a valuable volume on Ruth to the already well-established Continental Commentary series. The author is Emeritus Professor of Old Testament at the Chicago Theological Seminary, and the book represents a translation of his original French version published the same year. In a lengthy introduction (1–32), the author treats typical introductory matters (e.g., textual criticism, literary criticism, date, theology). He joins those scholars who date the book to the era of Ezra and Nehemiah (or slightly thereafter), who believe its intention is to counteract the policy toward foreigners typical of that era, and who define its genre as that of a novella. Unlike many, however, he accepts the genealogy as integral to the book, though fictional in origin. More important, the author also discusses the book of Ruth’s “social environment” (21–27)—that is, the social issues of the Second Temple period that underlie it. This discussion is crucial since the author characterizes his work as a “socio-legal commentary” (2), and the reader soon discovers in the commentary (33–154) how profoundly that social setting, especially the negative attitude in Judah toward foreigners, has shaped his interpretation. Structurally, the commentary’s four main sections correspond to Ruth’s four chapters, with each section broken up into literary subunits. In each subunit the author first lists quotations of important intertextual “Reference Passages” and then offers lengthy introductory remarks, his own translation, and notes on specific verses. A lengthy bibliography of predominately English-language sources concludes the volume (155–76), but most of those sources do not find their way into the footnotes.

What is the social world in which the book of Ruth arose and which it seeks to address? In LaCocque's view, the world of mid-fifth century Judah (cf. Ezra and Nehemiah) was a world in which ruling religious elites pursued a rigid, meticulous interpretation of the law, especially the prohibition against Moabites (Deut 23:3) that Nehemiah implemented (Neh 13:1). Purity and an abhorrence of intermarriage with non-Israelites, authorized by their reading of Torah and institutionalized in Israelite practices, preoccupied these "conservative fundamentalists" (135) whose rigidity left them "immobilized in their ideology" (85). To overcome that view, LaCocque avers, the female author of Ruth invented Ruth the Moabite, a "midrashic fiction built on . . . 1 Samuel 22" (12), to argue the provocative thesis "that only love (*hesed*) triumphs, so only the generous interpretation of Torah prevails over meticulous but narrow observations" (108). In other words, the story aims to moderate the cultural attitudes toward women in general and Moabites in particular by replacing the "hermeneutic of power" applied to Torah (26) with a hermeneutic of love with its "amplifying and nonrestrictive norm" (27). Thus, ultimately, Ruth is "not a romance, but a commentary on the Torah" (121). In pursuing revolutionary changes in both social relations and the hermeneutics of Torah, LaCocque characterizes the book as "subversive"—that is, presumably that it works slowly, subtly, and nearly invisibly—and one that, in reality, is so "gospel-like" as to anticipate the teaching of Jesus and the Christian Gospel (108). To this reviewer, LaCocque's pursuit of an interpretive thesis from a sociolegal perspective strikes me as offering more a "reading" of Ruth than an actual commentary in the usual sense.

Two other important points that support the author's thesis merit mention. The first concerns the role of David, introduced in the book by his genealogy (4:17b, 18–22), in this scenario. The combination of the story and the genealogy leads some scholars to suggest that the book aims theologically to support David's monarchical claim by tracing the workings of divine providence in his ancestral history. LaCocque draws on the book's Davidic motif, including its providential theme, to support his interpretation. In his view, "the authority of the interpretation of Law presented in the book of Ruth finds its foundation in the person of David," whose greatness derived not from "impeccable antecedents" but from "the providential passage of history" (12). Thus, LaCocque's view of David seems to compare with the Chronicler's portrait of David as the founder of the Israelite cult, although LaCocque makes no such connection explicitly. The second point specifies how, in LaCocque's view, the story goes about arguing its alleged thesis. As is well known, the two laws that seem to shape the Ruth narrative are those of levirate marriage and redemption. Much scholarly discussion has sought to define precisely what background (if any) either or both provide the narrative events, especially with respect to the marriage of Boaz and Ruth and the disposition of Naomi's property. In LaCocque's interpretation, it is the *hesed* of Ruth and Boaz—*hesed* LaCocque likes to describe as

“extravagance” (120, 126)—that musters the moral force to compel acceptance of their liberal application of law, namely, the combination of both the levirate and redemption laws (84, 116, 137).

This book has much to commend it. It is well-written and carefully argued, and LaCocque everywhere reads intertextually—both backwards and forwards. He skillfully links parts of Ruth to earlier biblical texts, especially the scandalous stories of Moab’s ancestry (Gen 19) and Tamar’s tricking of Judah (Gen 38). Its striking, frequent citation of interpretive insight from Jewish traditional sources (e.g., Midrash, Targums, Talmud) enriches the volume, although it also occasionally runs the risk of reading later situations into the earlier biblical book. Christian interpreters will appreciate how frequently LaCocque relates themes in the book of Ruth to important themes and episodes in the New Testament (e.g., his linking of *hesed* as love with love in the New Testament and of Obed as Naomi’s redeemer with the New Testament messianic theme [e.g., 122–23]). The commentary teems with illuminating insights and quotable turns of phrase from LaCocque’s skillful pen. For example, he typifies Ruth’s finding of Boaz’s field (2:3) and the wait of Naomi and Ruth for Boaz to act (3:18) as moments “where chance becomes opportunity” (106). Commenting on 4:15, he writes provocatively, “If Ruth is more precious in the eyes of Naomi than seven sons, . . . [then] the Moabite is dearer to the eyes of God than many Israelites” (143). This reviewer was particularly struck by LaCocque’s suggestion that the story traces the transformation of Boaz from a petit bourgeois (ch. 2) who “represents the conservative party of the fifth century” (72) to a “doctor of the Law” (126) daring to offer an innovative legal interpretation (ch. 4). Finally, scholars working on the legal background of Ruth will find within his discussion of legal matters some stimulating and creative ideas (e.g., the possibility that a nonkinsman stood ready off scene to buy Naomi’s field unless a kinsman redeemed it [114]).

At first glance, LaCocque’s interpretation resonates well with what this reviewer regards as Ruth’s key themes: the preservation of Elimelech’s family line, the concern for foreigners, the providence in David’s ancestry, and the promotion of *hesed* in Israel. Ultimately, its success will hinge on three things: whether the language of Ruth requires a postexilic date for the book; whether the configuration of the above central themes within his interpretation—that is, what theme(s) is (are) primary and which are supporting ones—comports well with the book’s contents; and whether that thematic configuration best fits the Ezra-Nehemiah era, as LaCocque claims (30). On the language issue, LaCocque argues for a postexilic date by appealing to the book’s allegedly “late” forms, but his defense of this point could have been stronger. He merely footnotes the evidence offered by F. W. Bush’s commentary (15 n. 35) and omits consideration and critique of alternative views. When he faces what he calls “certain archaic forms (?)” [*sic*] in 3:3–4

(cf. 4:5), he theorizes that they may derive from “popular stories with a comparable motif” that preceded the present book’s composition and applauds the Ruth author’s genius for using “the ancient forms of narrative language with brio [to] give a greater density to her discourse” (90–91). This theory is on the surface plausible, provided that LaCocque defines what “greater density” is and demonstrates persuasively the literary function of the alleged “archaisms” (he does neither). Without such argumentation, they still might point to an earlier date and an earlier setting to LaCocque’s supposed postexilic one.

As for themes, the concern for foreigners clearly dominates LaCocque’s interpretation. With her “extravagant” *hesed* Ruth the Moabite offers the symbolic counterpoint to the policy against foreign women under Ezra and Nehemiah with its underlying literalist interpretation of the Torah. Certainly, she proves to be the key to the preservation of the family line of Elimelech, and Naomi’s reprise in 4:14–17a does not detract from her importance. For this reviewer, however, the crucial question concerns whether, having accepted the originality of the two genealogies (4:17b and 18–22), LaCocque’s interpretation adequately reckons with the importance it accords David, especially given its climactic placement at the end of the book. Strikingly, LaCocque eschews specific comment on the literary effect of the short genealogy (v. 17b) and calls the long genealogy (vv. 18–22) Ruth and Naomi’s “announcement of victory” (122) despite the fact that the author herself voices it. He also devotes more attention to Tamar, Perez, and Obed than to David.

As noted above, his argument is that David’s providential, mixed ancestral history serves to support the Ruth author’s thesis, so one is surprised at the absence of comment as to what gives David’s ancestry such persuasive force when (in essence) pitted against Moses’ instructions. So, does LaCocque’s interpretation reckon adequately with what seems to be the climactic literary placement of the genealogy? Given the narrative anticipation of that climax, including the surprising eclipse of Elimelech in 4:11–12, does not that placement itself commend more importance to David in the book’s purpose than simply as a persuasive precedent for the alleged new, liberal hermeneutic of law? Or, put differently, does the subordination of the David-related theme to that of foreigners better fit the book’s structure and contents than the other way around? Obviously, acceptance of the primacy of the former theme over the latter one would require reconsideration of the question of the book’s historical setting so essential to LaCocque’s view.

A final issue concerns whether LaCocque has correctly read the legal background of the book. His view alleges that only the replacement of the then-regnant literalist hermeneutic by a more generous one would permit the acceptance of Ruth the Moabite into Israel and rescue Elimelech’s line from annihilation. Against this, the present

reviewer observes a possible inconsistency in LaCocque's conception of Ruth's legal status. Through most of the commentary he portrays Ruth as "not covered by Israelite 'social security'" (22–23) and as "someone 'outside the law'" (63)—that is, without legal rights (63 n. 3; cf. also 102, 109, 113). Later, however, while introducing the legal process in chapter 4 LaCocque surprisingly says that Ruth "belongs to the Elimelek clan by her marriage with Mahlon" and that that makes her "coproprietor with Naomi" of the family property (115). From this, one wonders whether, to promote his interpretation, LaCocque has unconsciously exaggerated both Ruth's problematic legal status in chapters 1–3 and the resulting dangers with which her foreignness threatened her. Certainly, if she indeed "belongs to the Elimelek clan" *before* the necessary reinterpretation of law that LaCocque's view supposes, then his understanding of the whole scenario would require revision. But the more important question is whether the book's underlying legal problem (if "problem" it be) concerns not the rigidity of the reigning hermeneutic but the reluctance of the story's characters to act on the law that the story itself seems to assume they knew applied (i.e., the redemption law). Despite LaCocque's discussion, this reviewer still questions whether the levirate plays any role in chapter 4, since the dominant language throughout chapters 2–4 is that of redemption law, notwithstanding the absence of specific instructions concerning marriage in the law. But LaCocque's in-depth treatment will undoubtedly lead scholars to revisit that important issue.

These comments, however, must not overshadow the fine contribution that this volume makes to the interpretation of Ruth. In this sociolegal commentary Professor LaCocque has indeed provided a provocative and engaging book with a creative and plausible thesis. Scholars may not agree with his views on every point but will do well to mine its rich lode of insights in their own work. The publisher and translator are to be thanked for making the French original available to the English-speaking world. Our collective understanding of Ruth will surely be the better for their efforts.