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Kaija Ranta

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In Search of Portrayals of Valiant Women in the Hebrew Narratives

Kaija Ranta

*Master's Candidate, Department of Religious Studies,
University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario*

Many pericopes and texts in the Hebrew Bible have been acknowledged as being negative towards women and in many cases depicting hostile and violent behaviour towards women. These texts have included descriptions of rape (2 Samuel 13:1–22) and sacrifice (Judges 11:29–40), as well as murder and dismemberment (Judges 29:1–13). What is even more unsettling than the presence of such texts within sacred literature is the apparent condoning of such violence by the deity, by members of the author's community, and by centuries of biblical readership. After close examination of the texts a reader may wonder if any valiant women existed within this anti-female environment.

But amongst these negative texts, and, indeed, amongst the entire patriarchal structure of religion and society depicted within the Hebrew Bible, are found certain texts which break with the status quo and show women to be administrators of the blessing of the deity. These texts are the remnants of women's experience recorded in the patriarchal texts which are scripture to many people. A few strong female characters are to be found amidst the more common representations of women as the source of evil, and as victim or the victims of violence, in the Hebrew Bible.

The book of Ruth, one of only two books in the Hebrew Bible that bear a woman's name, has often been considered a positive text for and about women. Many scholars believe the aim of this book is to show that Yahweh, the God of Israel, can work faithfulness through a woman and a foreigner. Further, it shows that this woman can serve as an example of faith to the Israelite community and progenetrix of one of their great spiritual and civic leaders.

The book of Ruth has traditionally been understood as focusing upon the actions of Ruth the Moabitess, who shows her allegiance to Yahweh, through Naomi, and acts upon it. As a result of this allegiance, and, particularly by the uncalled for devotion to Naomi, her mother-in-law, Ruth is blessed by Yahweh with the security of a husband, home and son, and a place in the Davidic genealogy.

Alice Laffey notes that “some scholars suggest that the story [of Ruth] is about God’s empowering the powerless. Since there was no one more powerless in Israel than a childless widow, and since Naomi, Ruth, and Orpah all belong to that category, the story is about how God vindicates them.”¹ To these elements of powerlessness is also added the fact that Ruth was a foreigner in Bethlehem.

It is interesting to note that this book about two strong women characters is frequently described as being “delightful” or “whimsical”. While such descriptions are readily accepted by most scholars for this text, such adjectives would seldom if ever be used to describe a biblical narrative about strong male characters. Also, the book of Ruth is regarded as a fine example of a short story with strong, complete characters. The following quotations reflect these two patterns:

Now Samuel himself succeeded in disseminating the knowledge of [the] law, and in glorifying it in Israel for all generations. He, however, accomplished his purpose peacefully and forthrightly, writing this charming and idyllic Book of Ruth the Moabitess, portraying her as she really was, in essaying her first steps as she entered the community of Israel and showed her merit and receiving her reward in full measure from Hashem, God of Israel, under Whose [sic] wings she had come to take refuge.²

Ruth is an absolutely delightful little book. Mention its name and Bible readers gently smile, warmly praise its beauty, and quietly tell what it means to them personally.... The book is profoundly human.... They [the readers] empathize readily with poor Naomi, battered by life’s tragic blows—famine, exile, grief, loneliness—and recall their own bitter bruises. They quickly admire charming Ruth, her commitment, courage, and cleverness.³

No complications are introduced which are left unresolved; no character is given a role that remains ambiguous. Heroes find their mates, villains meet their fates, dispatchers find their ultimate reward, and donors fulfill their obligations. It is not surprising, therefore, that as a tale that hews closer to folk-tale patterns than most

Biblical narratives, Ruth has constantly found favor in the eyes of a variegated audience.⁴

Yet the story contained in the book of Ruth is not always charming or delightful. Complications are introduced, gaps in the story exist, inconsistencies in major characters and their motives are apparent, and the characters are not consistently ones to whom we readily relate. Ruth's story and the character of Ruth are not allowed to develop fully, indeed her voice is silenced and her character suppressed. Her place is usurped initially by Naomi and ultimately by the motives of the narrator and/or author of the text. The character of Ruth is not allowed to be as valiant as the alert reader would expect. Neither is the character of Naomi as valiant as one would initially assume her to be.

An examination of the major characters in this story reveals that many of them demonstrate a motivational ambivalence not always in the best interests of Ruth. Characters who ostensibly act in favour of her are subsequently revealed to be protecting their own interests at her expense. Naomi is such a character, for she withheld information that would have been beneficial to Ruth, such as: the fact that Boaz is her next of kin and eligible for levirate marriage (2:1), the danger of being bothered/molested by the servants while winnowing in the fields (2:21-22), Naomi's own desire to procure a son for herself (4:16-17).

Through these actions Naomi proves that she is motivated more by her own interests than by a strong bond of love or loyalty to her daughter-in-law Ruth. With such an evaluation of Naomi, the team of Ruth and Naomi may not be as harmonious as Athalya Brenner would suggest: "Whatever the internal shifts in the balance of power may be, they are in the struggle for survival together and thus co-operate."⁵ I would argue that it is the tension, and not the harmony, between Naomi and Ruth which propels the narrative.

While the book of Ruth might not be described as a text of terror, as Phyllis Tribble has described the stories of Hagar, Tamar, an Unnamed Woman, and the Daughter of Jephthah,⁶ this text must not be understood as being positive for women. It is a text fraught with difficulties and inconsistencies. In subtle ways the power, voice and presence of the woman Ruth is

diminished until she has disappeared entirely from the narrative. Ruth's motives are undermined by those of the narrator/author of the story, which give way to the actions of the patriarchal God Yahweh, and the concern for the documentation of a patriarchal accounting of lineage, initially of Mahlon (4:10) but ultimately of Boaz (4:18-22).

While there is time to laugh and dance with the character of Ruth, we must also weep and mourn for her.⁷ We weep and mourn for her lost voice, dignity, child, and very presence in the narrative that bears her name. To be able, fully, to laugh and dance with Ruth, one must reclaim a rightful ending for the narrative that bears her name. A feminist alternative reading of the book of Ruth would maintain the narrator's initial focus on the actions of Ruth (as in 1:15) and would develop her character and storyline to reach an ultimate and logical conclusion. A more satisfying conclusion to the story would include the following elements: 1) Ruth and Boaz, and not Yahweh, conceive the child; 2) Ruth names the baby, and not the women of Bethlehem; 3) Ruth, not Naomi, is the baby's nurse; 4) it is stated not that a son has been born to Naomi, but to Ruth; and 5) Ruth is listed as the ancestress, not Boaz and certainly not Perez. For the book of Ruth to be understood as being a positive text for or about women, and a portrayal of truly valiant women, a re-working of the text that utilizes a critical analysis must be done.

Such a critical analysis and reworking is the goal of a feminist approach to the text. Previous scholarly readings of the text cannot be immediately accepted as being accurate interpretations of the meaning of the text for they are coloured with preconceived notions as to the meaning of the text. Neither can the impact of the text on the reader be anticipated, for each reader will develop and interpret the meaning of the text differently. The text must now be re-read, several times, this time with the aid of a woman-centred critical lens which searches to uncover assumptions and inconsistencies within the story as well as misrepresentation and misinterpretation of characters.

Let us examine a few alternatives to the traditional way of evaluating the characters of Naomi and of Ruth.

Jack M. Sasson's *Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation* offers a critical re-reading of the text with an emphasis on the

actions and motivations of the characters. Sasson's examination of the book of Ruth in the genre of folk/fairy tale is helpful in illuminating difficulties within the text. Sasson utilizes Vladimir Propp's categorization of the functions of characters, which Propp discovered while examining a great number of Russian folk tales. Sasson then applies these categories to the characters which he has identified in the book of Ruth. By using Proppian categories, the function of the major characters present in this text can be identified and described.

In his study of the book of Ruth, Sasson states that his reading of Vladimir Propp's work has led him to understand the book of Ruth as belonging to the genre of fairy tale. If this is a correct assumption, are we to understand that Ruth or Naomi is fulfilling the role of heroine in the story? If this text is read as a folk/fairy tale, several questions regarding the evident inconsistencies arise: Can two heroines exist in the same story? What roles do Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, and the next-of-kin play? Does Yahweh, the God of Israel, have an identified role in this story at all?

Sasson maintains that understanding the story correctly depends on recognizing its generic affinity with the folk tale.⁸ Yet contrary to Sasson's assertion, complications are in fact introduced which are then left unresolved, and expectations are indeed nurtured that are ultimately left unfulfilled.⁹

Special attention needs to be paid to the character of Yahweh, a character that is noticeably missing from Sasson's critique. While the role of villain is assigned by Sasson to a "state of lack", it is ultimately fulfilled by Yahweh, the God of Israel. Naomi reports that it is Yahweh who causes the lack of food for Bethlehem and for Elimelech's family, and causes the lack of life for her husband and two sons. "Though virtually absent as a character, the deity pervades the story."¹⁰ Yet this will be true only if the reader is familiar with the function of the character of Yahweh recorded elsewhere in the epic of the Hebrew people.

It appears that the reader of the book of Ruth must possess some prior information concerning the character of Yahweh, the God of Israel, in order to understand the complexities of the text. Thus the question needs to be asked: Can the book of Ruth be successfully read as an independent folk tale or only as part of Hebrew Scripture? What part do the author and

the narrator play in our understanding of the text? Can we, as readers, distinguish between the author and the narrator of the text, and is there a distinction to be made? Do we help to create the authority of the narrator? Does the biblical narrator duplicate God's omniscience? Do we trust the narrator to be knowledgeable?¹¹ And finally, if the narration of this story were altered, would a different interpretation be attained?

One answer to the problem of competing main characters/heroines in the book of Ruth is to recognize that the author of the text was working as a creative redactor. Athalya Brenner, in her article "Naomi and Ruth", challenges the commonly held understanding that the book of Ruth is the product of a single literary source. What would be the ramifications in viewing the narrative as a composite of two separate and pre-existing narratives which have in common the theme of the reversal of fortune? Brenner attempts to dis-assemble and re-assemble this story to reveal possible origins of the biblical book of Ruth. Recognizing that the characters of Naomi and Ruth compete for heroine status, and that the text contains several inconsistencies that cannot be overlooked, Brenner examines the book as a compilation of two previously known distinct but similar stories; one of an older heroine Naomi, and the second of a younger heroine Ruth.¹²

Brenner maintains that the seams which combine the two stories are still discernible to the alert reader.¹³ Some of these seams are: the exchange of dominant roles, the confusion over motherhood, inconsistencies regarding levirate marriage, the genealogy recorded through Boaz and Perez and not Mahlon and Elimelech as originally intended, as well as the absence of concern for the survival of Chilion's name. Once the narrative has been taken apart, it can be examined to inquire why an author would compile one story about two women characters instead of maintaining two stories of separate women in a male-dominated collection of scripture.

In analyzing our perception of any biblical narrative, recognition must be given to the influence that we as readers have on our understanding of a text, and why texts are understood differently by different persons. Factors that influence our reading of this particular text include: which character(s) we relate to, engenderment of the narrator's voice, what prior understanding we have of the Hebrew Scriptures and culture, especially the

attributes there ascribed to Yahweh and the Davidic dynasty, attitudes towards Moab and the practice of levirate marriage. Also important to a study of the book of Ruth and the evaluation of its characters is our categorization of the story as fiction or non-fiction, i.e., whether we read it as historicized fiction or as fictionalized history.

Having examined several alternatives to evaluating the characters of Naomi and Ruth, we now return to the initial questions posed in this essay, "Do valiant women exist in the Hebrew narratives and are Naomi and Ruth examples of such valiant women?" To answer this question we must redefine it and ask not simply whether valiant women existed in the history of Israel (for we can easily imagine that Naomi and Ruth were valiant people, either as individuals or as a team), but, we must ask whether or not the author/redactor's presentation of these female characters allows us to regard them as valiant. I maintain that both characters, Naomi and Ruth, represent valiant women. However, their stories are not fully told in the narrative which they share. Two strong characters must alternate as heroine: eventually Ruth is silenced in the end. Such an imbalance leaves this reader and others unsatisfied with the ending and as a result, with the entire narrative.

At this point the reader has at least two options: to recognize that the narrative is not a portrayal of valiant women and to reject it, or to rethink and rework the narrative so that it is indeed a portrayal of both valiant characters. If the option to reject is chosen, then the path of action is clear and one may search elsewhere for portrayals of valiant women. The second option however, is more involved. This process involves examining how we read a text, what impacts our understanding of the text, and how we evaluate the text during and after the reading of it.

When we read a text we almost always rely on previous knowledge and assumptions of a text to formulate conclusions about it. Interpretation of biblical texts through religious education, sermons and biblical commentaries are three sources which impact greatly on our understanding of texts such as the book of Ruth. For example, if we have been taught that Ruth was self-sacrificing and that Naomi acted only in the best interest of Ruth, then we will interpret the narrative as portraying Naomi and Ruth as such, regardless of the fact that the text

may or may not portray these characteristics. To make unencumbered evaluations we must read the text as if we were reading it for the first time, paying constant attention to how we read and understand the text and how the narrator/storyteller has put forth the characters and the entire narrative. We can question why the author has chosen to elaborate on some areas of the text and why s/he has left other areas painfully brief. For example, one may ask the following questions: Why were the characters of Elimelech, Mahlon and Chilion not given any development or dialogue? Why did Naomi not mention Boaz as a possibility for levirate marriage when they came to Bethlehem? Why does Ruth not have any dialogue in the fourth chapter and why is Ruth's and Boaz's wedding not elaborated upon? Brevity alone cannot be the reason why these areas and others are not elaborated upon by the author, for dialogue is extensive and at times duplicated in other areas of the narrative. An active reader can take her/his cue from the text and go on to develop the story of the Naomi and Ruth characters to a fuller extent. To accomplish this one must venture from the canon and from tradition. Using a style similar to midrashic commentary one could elaborate on the development of each of the characters of Naomi and Ruth and the facets of their stories that are told in this narrative. One could expand on Naomi's and Ruth's journey from Moab to Bethlehem, Ruth's and Boaz's wedding night, and the birth and naming of Obed.

By creating full voices for the characters and by giving equal development to both Naomi and Ruth, we can fill in the gaps that are evident in the portrayal of these characters and recognize them as portraying valiant women. The interpretation of narratives and their characters is, after all, a triologue between the author's intentions when writing the text, the text itself as a vehicle of transmission and the reader's experience of the author's intent and the text.

Notes

- ¹ Alice Laffey, *An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988) 208.
- ² Yehoshua Bachrach, *Mother of Royalty: An Exposition on the Book of Ruth in the Light of the Sources*, trans. Leonard Oschry (Jerusalem and New York: Feldheim Publishers, 1973) 6.

- ³ Robert L. Hubbard, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988) 1.
- ⁴ Jack M. Sasson, *A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist-Folklorist Interpretation*, Second Edition, The Biblical Seminar series (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989 [1979]) 216.
- ⁵ Athalya Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth," *Vetus Testamentum*, XXXIII/4 (1983) 396.
- ⁶ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives*, Overtures to Biblical Theology series (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 1.
- ⁷ Ibid. xiii.
- ⁸ Sasson, *A New Translation*, 197-202.
- ⁹ Ibid. 216.
- ¹⁰ Danna Nolan Fewell and David Miller Gunn, *Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth*, Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation series (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990) 104.
- ¹¹ Mieke Bal, *On Story-Telling: Essays in Narratology*, Foundations and Facets series: Literary Facets (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press, 1991) 61-62.
- ¹² Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth," 385.
- ¹³ Ibid. 385.