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INTERPRETATIONS OF THE BOOK OF RUTH:
A CRITICAL STUDY

by
Kari Johansson Myers

A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
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Approved by


John Oswald, Ph.D.

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CHAPTER 1

Statement of the Problem

The Story of Ruth

Cherished as one of the great treasures of the Old Testament, the book of Ruth is a beautiful Hebrew story of a young widow's courage and selfless devotion. It is a story of romance and divine design. "In the days when the judges ruled," the story begins, an Ephrathite man, his wife and two sons sojourned for a while in the hostile, but fertile land of Moab to escape the ravages of famine in their homeland of Bethlehem.¹ There Elimelech died, and the sons who had married Moabite women, died also leaving the three women childless (Ru. 1:1-5). Upon hearing that the Lord had lifted the famine in Bethlehem Naomi determined to return home while urging her daughters-in-law, Ruth and Orpah, to remain in Moab among their own people. Orpah tearfully consented, but Ruth pledged her unending loyalty to Naomi and would not be deterred (Ru. 1:6ff.).

It was the beginning of the barley harvest when the two returned to Bethlehem (Ru. 1:22), so Ruth set out to glean after the harvesters as the law allowed (cf. Lev. 19:10; Duet. 24:21). As it happened, she found herself on the land of Boaz, a prominent man in the community and a relative of her late father-in-law. He took notice of Ruth immediately and showed her great kindness, providing her with an abundance of food and pledging his protection until the end of the harvest (Ru. 2:1ff.). When Naomi heard of Ruth's good fortune which Boaz had bestowed upon her, she devised a plan to persuade Boaz to marry Ruth. Carrying out Naomi's instructions, Ruth spent the night with Boaz at the threshing floor and obtained a promise that he would assume the responsibility of kinsman-redeemer on the one condition that a relative previously unknown to Ruth and Naomi, nearer than Boaz, first be given the opportunity to do so (Ru. 2:19-3:18).

¹ See Gen. 12:10. Several hundred years earlier Abram made a similar choice in fleeing Canaan to avoid a famine.

The following morning at the city gate Boaz offered the near-kinsman the opportunity to redeem a heretofore unmentioned piece of land supposedly owned by Naomi. When the near-kinsman responded affirmatively Boaz informed him of the added obligation of marrying the widow Ruth. Fearing that this condition would endanger his own inheritance the near-kinsman withdrew his pledge and his sandal and offered it to Boaz (Ru. 4:1-8). Immediately Boaz announced his intention to marry Ruth and so it was. A son was born to them named Obed who would sustain Naomi in her old age, continue the line of Elimelech, and become the grandfather of the great King David (Ru. 4:9-17). The book ends with one final verse consisting of a genealogy linking Boaz and Obed back to Perez and finishing with David (Ru. 4:18).

Introduction

The artistry and eloquence with which this short story is told is unparalleled. Yet despite its literary merit and brevity, it is not without troublesome ambiguities and gnarly problems of interpretation. Delightful and intriguing as the story is, it is easy to understand why so many scholars have devoted themselves to its study. What is surprising is that up until recently this work has been predominantly done by men. Although the book is of obvious interest to women, the field of biblical studies was virtually closed to women for the better part of this century. Now, as the situation has begun to change and the field has increasingly allowed female scholars to advance their views, the book has received a good deal of attention from a feminist perspective. In recent years, feminists, both women and men alike, have proposed new interpretations of Ruth which are in some cases radically different from the traditional interpretations of prior decades. Some of these are of a decisively subversive bent, questioning motives of characters historically praised for their virtue, even accusing the narrative of perpetuating sexism in the form of patriarchy,

rather than commending the story as a picture of life as it should be. The resulting picture reveals a dizzying myriad of conflicting interpretations. Several questions emerge. What new insights have feminist scholars brought to the study of Ruth? Which aspects of traditional interpretations remain unrefuted? Which interpretation best explains the claims of the text? In order to answer these questions the various interpretations both traditional and feminist must be examined, compared and reevaluated.

Statement of the Problem

This is the overarching question which will be explored and discussed in this thesis as a whole. What are contemporary feminist interpretations of the book of Ruth and how do they compare with traditional interpretations? The question may be broken down and conceptualized into five major sub-parts. The first asks, "how has the book of Ruth historically been interpreted?" This question, which will be addressed in the next chapter, will review the traditional literature on Ruth since the turn of the century. Traditional views written prior to 1900 have been represented adequately in the writings of this century. Early Jewish interpretations will be discussed only incidentally as they relate to the work of 20th century scholars. Because of the tremendous amount of literature on the subject this review will be limited to discussing the possible purposes for which the book was written, in addition to exploring the various ways in which the major characters in the Book of Ruth have been historically interpreted. The review will explore traditional understandings of the date of composition, historicity, and other such questions only as they influence interpretation. Finally, amidst the diversity of opinion in this literature, commonly held elements of interpretation will be underscored.

Chapter three will address the second sub-question which asks, "what are the contemporary feminist interpretations of the book of Ruth?" Answering this question will involve a literature

review of the relevant feminist scholarship to date. Again, common interpretations will be illuminated, but it will be seen that broad diversity better characterizes the field of feminist interpretations of the book of Ruth.

The purpose of the fourth chapter will be to review both the traditional and feminist literature pertaining to the third sub-part of the thesis, that is, the assumptions and methods which have undergirded each approach to the book of Ruth. An attempt will be made to uncover subtle, often unstated assumptions resulting from differing gender perspectives. As to the question of method, this review will primarily explore the use of historical, form and literary criticism, the dominant methodologies utilized in the study of Ruth.

These three chapters will be foundational to the discussion of the final two sub-problems which will comprise the analysis and conclusion of the thesis. In the analysis of chapter five the traditional interpretations of chapter two will be compared to the contemporary feminist approaches of chapter three. By specifically seeking to determine how and where the feminist and traditional interpretations diverge and what if anything they share in common, this chapter will explore the fourth sub-part of this thesis. Finally, in chapter six the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches will be evaluated and conclusions as to which is more congruent with the claims of the Ruth narrative, the cultural-historical context of the story, and the canonical context of the book will be discussed. This thesis will thus proceed from exploration to comparison to evaluation of the traditional and feminist interpretations of Ruth.

CHAPTER 2

The Review of the Traditional Literature

Introduction

Since the turn of the century the Book of Ruth has been a favorite subject of study among biblical scholars and still continues to be so today. As might be expected, the body of literature is vast. Nearly every detail of the book has been analyzed and debated. That being the case, the present literature review will limit its discussion first, to the question of the author's purpose for writing the book, and second, to the interpretation of its major characters.

Purpose

The purpose of the Book of Ruth has long been debated and consensus has yet to be achieved. Six major theories have been proposed over the years. Scholars have argued that the book was written to (1) provide support for the enforcement of social institutions, (2) record the family history of David and/or support his claim to kingship (3) encourage universalist and/or anti-exclusivist ideas, (4) edify, (5) entertain and be enjoyed as a literary work of art, and (6) express a combination of purposes.¹ The supporters of each of these theories will be discussed along with a few lesser held theories.

Support for the Enforcement of Social Institutions

Some scholars have suggested that the intent of the author of the Book of Ruth was to encourage Jews to fulfill the obligation of levirate marriage and/or redemption. William McKane proposed that the book was written as a call for social justice. The author's concern was to encourage obedience to the laws of levirate marriage and redemption for the welfare of the family.² He explained that the two institutions are linked in the Book of

¹ Categories adapted from Susan Niditch, "Ruth, Esther, Daniel 1-6," in The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters, eds. D. A. Knight, and G. M. Tucker (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 453-454.

² William McKane, Tracts for the Times: Ruth, Esther, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), 13.

Ruth because of the family's special circumstances.³ S. R. Driver agreed that encouragement of these social institutions was at least a secondary concern of the author of the Book of Ruth.⁴ Calum M. Carmichael is perhaps the most recent supporter of this view. He argued that at the time of the story the customs of levirate marriage and redemption were not being practiced or enforced. This explains why neither Boaz nor the near kinsman took any steps of their own accord to fulfill their obligation toward Ruth, and why Naomi did not approach them about the matter directly.⁵

This theory has found few other supporters, however, and in fact, many scholars believe that the idea of levirate marriage was not original to the story. In the early 1900s Julius A. Bewer argued that the idea of levirate marriage was not an original element of the Ruth story.⁶ For reasons which will be discussed further below, Bewer suggested that the story was interpolated during the postexilic era in order to introduce the idea that the marriage of Ruth and Boaz was levirate. Later A. A. Anderson revived Bewer's theory supporting it with additional evidence. He concluded that the marriage of Ruth and Boaz was not originally levirate.⁷ Jack M. Sasson argued that the marriage of Ruth and Boaz and the law of the levirate in Deut. 25:5-10 have nothing at all to do with one another.⁸ Several other

³ William McKane, "Ruth and Boaz," Glasgow University Oriental Society 19 (1961-2): 29-40.

⁴ S. R. Driver, An Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament (New York: World Publishing Company, 1963), 454.

⁵ Calum M. Carmichael, "A Ceremonial Crux: Removing a Man's Sandal as a Female Gesture of Contempt," Journal of Biblical Literature 96 (1977): 334-336.

⁶ Julius A. Bewer, "The *Ge'ullah* in the Book of Ruth," American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures 19 (1903): 143-148; Bewer, "The *Goel* in Ruth 4:14, 15," American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures 20 (1904): 202-206.

⁷ A. A. Anderson, "The Marriage of Ruth," Journal of Semitic Studies 23 (1978): 171-183.

⁸ Jack M. Sasson, Ruth: A New Translation with a Philological Commentary and a Formalist Folklorist Interpretation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 125, 128-129; Sasson, "The Issue of *Ge'ullah* in Ruth," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 5 (1978): 52-68.

scholars have rejected the idea that the purpose of the book was to encourage the enforcement of levirate marriage, including Robert Gordis⁹ and D. R. G. Beattie.¹⁰ Gordis argued that the marriage of Ruth and Boaz is better explained as an example of redemption of land than of levirate marriage.

Others have suggested there is a link between the marriage of Ruth and Boaz and the institution of levirate marriage, but do not relate it to the purpose of the book. Millar Burrows¹¹ and Eryl W. Davies¹² agreed that levirate marriage and the marriage of Boaz and Ruth both serve the same purpose, that is to provide an heir in order to continue the name of the dead. Davies alone supposed a secondary purpose which was to provide security for the widow.¹³ Burrows¹⁴ and H. H. Rowley¹⁵ maintained that the marriage of Ruth and Boaz represents a transitional legal stage in Israel's history before the law was finally formalized and recorded in the Pentateuch. According to this view Deut. 25:5-10 limits the circumstances under which a man was obligated to marry a childless widow. This theory helps to explain the confusion which appears to have existed between the laws of redemption, inheritance and levirate marriage at the time when the story emerged. Alternately, Davies explained the similarity between levirate marriage and the marriage of Ruth and Boaz by maintaining that the Book of Ruth records an extension of the law of the levirate. The responsibility to raise up a son to a childless

⁹ Robert Gordis, "Love, Marriage, and Business in the Book of Ruth," in A Light Unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers, eds. H. N. Bream, R. D. Hiem, and C. A. Moore (Philadelphia: Temple, 1974), 243.

¹⁰ D. R. G. Beattie, "The Book of Ruth as Evidence of Israelite Legal Practice," Vetus Testamentum 24 (1974): 251-267.

¹¹ Millar Burrows, "Levirate Marriage in Israel," Journal of Biblical Literature 59 (1940): 33; Burrows, "The Marriage of Boaz and Ruth," Journal of Biblical Literature 59 (1940): 445.

¹² Eryl W. Davies, "Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage: Part I," Vetus Testamentum 31 (1981): 139-142.

¹³ Ibid., 142-143.

¹⁴ Burrows, "Boaz and Ruth," 445-454.

¹⁵ H. H. Rowley, The Servant of the Lord and Other Essays on the Old Testament (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952), 169-170.

widow in the name of her dead husband was no longer limited to the brother-in-law, but extended to the closest male relative. Furthermore, the custom referred to in Ruth was no longer obligatory as it had first been conceptualized in Deut. 25:5-10.¹⁶

Recording of David's Family History/Support for His Kingship

The theory that the Book of Ruth was written in order to record the family history of David has been suggested by scholars throughout this century. In fact it has been supposed that the book received canonical status because of its link to David.¹⁷ In 1911 Louis B. Wolfenson viewed the book as part of early Hebrew history and as such, he argued that its main purpose was to record the family history of David.¹⁸ Later J. Alberto Soggin¹⁹ and most recently Jack W. Hayford suggested that the main purpose of the story was to establish David's genealogy.²⁰ W. W. Cannon proposed that the book was probably written during the divided monarchy (800-620 B.C.) when prophetic tradition foretold the Messiah would come from the family of Jesse in Bethlehem (Mic. 5:1-5; 1 Sam. 17:12; Isa. 11:1-10; Isa. 6:13). In response to growing curiosity, the author may have written the book in order to make known the tradition surrounding the ancestors of Jesse in Ephrata.²¹ Noticing that the Book of Ruth follows two other stories which also took place in Bethlehem (Micah and the Levite in Judg. 17-18, and The Levite and his concubine in Judg 19-21), Eugene H. Merrill concluded that the author's main concern was to

¹⁶ Eryl W. Davies, "Inheritance Rights and the Hebrew Levirate Marriage: Part II," *Vetus Testamentum* 31 (1981): 266-267.

¹⁷ Alex J. Goldman, *The Eternal Books Retold* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1982), 283; Arthur Lewis, *Judges and Ruth* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1979), 106; F. B. Huey Jr., "Ruth," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. F. E. Gaebelin (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 512.

¹⁸ L. B. Wolfenson, "The Purpose of the Book of Ruth," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 69 (1912): 331; L. B. Wolfenson, "The Character, Contents, and Date of Ruth," *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 27 (1911): 286.

¹⁹ J. Alberto Soggin, *Introduction to the Old Testament*, trans. J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 458.

²⁰ Jack W. Hayford, ed., *Redemption and Restoration: Reversing Life's Greatest Losses* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996), 77.

²¹ W. W. Cannon, "The Book of Ruth," *Theology* 15 (1928): 314-315.

connect David's ancestors with Bethlehem.²² C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch suggested that the purpose of the book was to glorify the righteous conduct of David's ancestors.²³ Oswald Loretz recognized that the story which revolved around a family's struggle to produce an heir and continue the family name, was significant because the family was David's.²⁴

Some scholars have suggested that the author had political reasons for writing the Book of Ruth. Jack M. Sasson proposed that the author sought to justify David's claim to the throne by appropriating Near Eastern metaphors which were used to legitimize royal figures and by recalling the righteous acts of his direct ancestors and the divine blessings with which they were rewarded.²⁵ Similarly Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. argued that the author's primary purpose was to legitimize David's kingship by showing how God's providential hand had guided David's ancestors.²⁶ Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman recently supported Hubbard's conclusions.²⁷

Carmichael proposed a variation on this theory. He suggested that the author of the book sought to reconcile Yahweh's apparent change of mind on kingship. Originally there was divine opposition to the idea of an earthly king (1 Sam. 8:6-9), but later divine involvement in and support of the institution. The Book of Ruth demonstrates how Elimelech, whose name means "My God is King," sought refuge from famine in Moab which was governed by an earthly king. He and his sons were punished for abandoning their belief in the theocracy, but God later restored his family

²² Eugene H. Merrill, Kingdom of Priests: A History of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 182.

²³ C. F. Keil, and F. Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament, vol. 2., trans: J. Martin (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 466.

²⁴ Oswald Loretz, "The Theme of the Ruth Story," The Catholic Biblical Quarterly 22 (1960): 392, 394.

²⁵ Sasson, Ruth, 239-240.

²⁶ Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., The Book of Ruth (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 39-42.

²⁷ Raymond B. Dillard, and Tremper Longman III, An Introduction to the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 131.

and chose to raise up the great King David through it. In this way the author seeks to reconcile The Lord's change of heart by explaining that he chose to raise up a king through a family that had at least originally believed in God alone as King.²⁸

This theory, however, has not found popular support. Many scholars agree that the genealogy in 4:18-22 was not original to the story, but was added at a much later date. This led Otto Eissfeldt to conclude that Ruth and Boaz actually had nothing to do with David, but "were subsequently made into the ancestors of David."²⁹ Yet as Brevard S. Childs pointed out, the later addition of the genealogy does not negate the historicity of the link between Ruth and David, although it does rule out the possibility that the original purpose of the story was to record the family history of David.³⁰ Interestingly, many scholars who uphold the original authenticity of the genealogy are still not convinced that it has anything to do with the purpose of the book.³¹

Anti-Exclusivist Propaganda/ Universalist Message

Around the turn of the century a theory emerged from German scholarship which was to become very popular among scholars who believed that the Book of Ruth was written ca. 400 B.C. The supposition was that the Book of Ruth was written as a polemic against the exclusivistic policies of Nehemiah and Ezra. Upon his return from captivity (ca. 444 B.C.) Nehemiah instituted a number of regulations aimed at preserving the distinctiveness of the Jewish people, among which was a prohibition against mixed-marriages (Neh. 13:23-31). Later the great scribe Ezra extended

²⁸ Calum M. Carmichael, Women, Law, and the Genesis Traditions (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1979), 91-93.

²⁹ Otto Eissfeldt, The Old Testament: An Introduction, trans. P. R. Ackroyd (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 479-482.

³⁰ Brevard S. Childs, Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 566; See also James L. Crenshaw, Story and Faith: A Guide to the Old Testament (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 333-336; W. E. Staples, "The Book of Ruth," American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures 53 (1937): 145-157.

³¹ Gordis, 244.

Nehemiah's prohibition by requiring Jews to divorce their foreign wives (Ezra 10:1-44). Many scholars proposed that the Book of Ruth was written to counter the intolerant climate of postexilic Judaism. By showing that the great King David was descended from such a marriage, the author attempted to show how God blessed such unions. As G. A. F. Knight explained, the message of the story was meant to encourage Jews to stay with their foreign wives and to do so with God's blessing.³² S. L. Shearman and J. B. Curtis aptly summarized the sentiment this way:

At the very least the book must be saying that, inasmuch as David, the greatest of the kings and the ideal hero of Judah, was himself a direct descendant of a marriage between a man of Judah and a Moabitess, intermarriage cannot be inherently wrong and may indeed be quite beneficial.³³

During the early 1900s Bewer argued that the fictional story had been effectively used as a polemic against the exclusivistic demands of Ezra and Nehemiah's party. Later the story was subtly modified, introducing the idea of the Levirate in order to support the claims against intermarriage. Since Boaz was obligated by the levirate to marry Ruth their union could no longer be used to support marriage to foreigners. Mahlon and Chilion were examples of what could happen to those who disobeyed.³⁴

For Samuel Sandmel the purpose of the Book of Ruth was to tell how a foreigner not only obtained a place in the community of Israel, but a place in the genealogy of David. While he allowed that the story is old he argued that its present version was composed between 450 and 250 B.C. during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah. Viewing its composition in this context led him to maintain that the book was written as propaganda against the exclusivistic demands of the religious leaders of the postexilic

³² G. A. F. Knight, *Ruth and Jonah*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 1950), 15-21.

³³ S. L. Shearman, and J. B. Curtis, "Divine-Human Conflicts in the Old Testament," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 28 (1969): 236.

³⁴ Bewer, "The Goel in Ruth 4:14, 15," 206.

era.³⁵ Similarly, James M. Efird likened the style of the book to haggadah and regarded the book as a product of the postexilic era. As such he supported the theory that the book was written as a protest against the exclusivistic demands of Ezra and Nehemiah. He also suggested the possibility that the book was written to encourage the returning exiles to be faithful to the law, since the story revolves around an Israelite who returns home, and emphasizes the importance of keeping the law particularly when times are hard.³⁶ As recently as 1986 B. Porten and E. Strouse viewed the book as propaganda which gently rebuked the intolerance of the postexilic period. Observing the quiet beauty of the story they maintained that its polemical purpose is perfectly "concealed in the perfection of its art."³⁷

There is a significant number of scholars who are ambivalent about the polemic theory, yet agree that the author's purpose for writing the book had to do with tolerance and the acceptance of foreigners. Eissfeldt found no bias in the book which would suggest that it was written to criticize Nehemiah and Ezra's policies, yet he likened its intent to that of the Book of Jonah in its acceptance of foreign proselytes.³⁸ Bernhard W. Anderson neither rejected nor endorsed the polemic theory, but asserted that even if the story had not been written as a direct response to Ezra and Nehemiah's policies, it was a dissenting voice for tolerance at a time when racial and religious purity was en vogue.³⁹

In his brief introduction to the Book of Ruth, Peter Ellis admitted that the author's purpose for writing the book was

³⁵ Samuel Sandmel, The Hebrew Scriptures: An Introduction to Their Literature and Religious Ideas (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 489-493.

³⁶ James M. Efird, The Old Testament Writings: History, Literature, and Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), 260-263.

³⁷ B. Porten, and E. Strouse, "A Reading of Ruth," in The Hebrew Bible in Literary Criticism, eds. A. Preminger, and E. L. Greenstein (New York: Ungar Publishing, 1986), 537-539.

³⁸ Eissfeldt, 483.

³⁹ Bernhard W. Anderson, Understanding the Old Testament, 3rd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975), 492.

unclear, but suggested that he was probably influenced by the universalistic Deutero-Isaiah in emphasizing that a Moabite woman could become an accepted member of the covenant community, even an ancestress of David and the Messiah.⁴⁰ D. R. Ap-Thomas also recognized the universalistic intent of the author who, he suggested, sought not to criticize the policies of Ezra and Nehemiah, but to encourage the acceptance of foreigners who embraced the Hebrew faith.⁴¹ Soggin⁴² and most recently Hubbard⁴³ argued that the main purpose was the establishment of David's genealogy, but maintained that a secondary purpose was to encourage the acceptance of foreign proselytes.

The theory that the author wished to encourage the acceptance of foreigners has drawn less criticism than the theory that the Book of Ruth was written as a polemic against the exclusivistic policies of Ezra and Nehemiah. The latter has been refuted on several points. Scholars who maintain that the story was written long before the postexilic period reject it on those grounds.⁴⁴ Although some allow the possibility that the book may have been used as a critique of the ban on mixed-marriage, they reject the idea that it was written for that purpose.⁴⁵ Criticism of the theory has also come from scholars who accept a fourth century date of composition.⁴⁶ They are quick to point out that this gentle, pleasant story contains no trace of polemic, however subtle. Furthermore, as a convert to the Hebrew faith, Ruth's marriage to Boaz would not have been prohibited by Ezra and Nehemiah and thus "could hardly have been used as an

⁴⁰ Peter Ellis, The Men and the Message (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1963), 180.

⁴¹ D. R. Ap-Thomas, "Book of Ruth," Expository Times 79 (1968): 378.

⁴² Soggin, 458.

⁴³ Hubbard, 42.

⁴⁴ Wesley J. Fuerst, The Books of Ruth, Esther, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, Lamentations: The Five Scrolls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 10.

⁴⁵ Crenshaw, 334.

⁴⁶ G. A. Cooke, The Book of Ruth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1918), 13.

argument in favor of mixed marriages."⁴⁷

Edification

In 1968 G. Fohrer suggested that edification was the author's sole purpose for writing the Book of Ruth.⁴⁸ The many scholars who have adopted this view generally agree that the author intended to teach three messages. R. M. Hals championed the idea that the primary message was theological. The story was designed to demonstrate the providence of God, he argued.⁴⁹ Otto Kaiser articulated the message of God's providence in this way: although God may not be seen or heard he is in control of all things small and great.⁵⁰ Edward F. Campbell Jr.⁵¹ emphasized the intertwining of common life and the purposes of God, whereby divine blessings are brought about through human acts of *hesed* done by one to another. Similarly W. S. Prinsloo advanced the idea that Yahweh accomplishes his purposes through human initiative in the story of Ruth. At the same time he recognized that there are limits to human initiative. The narrator tells us that it was Yahweh who "enabled her to conceive" (4:13)⁵²

Brevard S. Childs⁵³ observed that God's providential care was directed at an ordinary family, while David and Pat

⁴⁷ Huey, 511; Dan G. Kent, Joshua, Judges, Ruth and Jonah (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1980), 142.

⁴⁸ G. Fohrer, Introduction to the Old Testament (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), 250-252.

⁴⁹ R. M. Hals, The Theology of the Book of Ruth, Facet Books, Biblical Series 23 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1969), 2ff.

⁵⁰ Otto Kaiser, Introduction to the Old Testament: A Presentation of Its Results and Problems, trans. J. Sturdy (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1975), 192.

⁵¹ Edward F. Campbell Jr., "The Hebrew Short Story: A Study of Ruth," in A Light Unto My Path: Old Testament Studies in Honor of Jacob M. Myers, eds. H. N. Bream, R. D. Hiem, and C. A. Moore (Philadelphia: Temple, 1974), 93-99; Edward F. Campbell Jr., and Peter J. Ackroyd, "The Book of Ruth," in Harpers Bible Dictionary, ed. J. P. Achtemeier (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 886.

⁵² W. S. Prinsloo, "The Theology of the Book of Ruth," Vetus Testamentum 30 (1980): 338-339.

⁵³ Childs, 564-565.

Alexander,⁵⁴ Julius A. Bewer,⁵⁵ and William S. Lasor⁵⁶ all emphasized that it extended from the individual to the family, nation and world. Harold Fisch further established the breadth of God's providence by comparing the Book of Ruth to the stories of Lot and his daughters, and Tamar and Judah. He proposed that the three are meant to be read together as part of salvation-history. Not only did he observe structural similarities between the three stories, but he noticed a "moral advance" from the first to the last.⁵⁷ He concluded that the theme of redemption found internally in the Ruth story is also present in an inter-textual sense. The Ruth story redeems the other two and places the trilogy within "the pattern of *Heilsgeschichte*."⁵⁸

The second message which is closely related to the first is that loyalty, love, and selfless devotion are greatly rewarded by God. Judah J. Slotki maintained that this was the main purpose of the story.⁵⁹ That it was an important lesson which the author intended to teach has been unanimously accepted by the scholars mentioned above. They also agree that the author sought to portray the characters of the story as believable models of faith and virtue, worthy of emulation. The point was well made by Childs who claimed, "The figures are not dehistoricized to become stereotyped vehicles of virtue, but evidence signs of genuine character in the midst of historically conditioned circumstances."⁶⁰ Interestingly the scholars who argue that the characters of the book are meant to be emulated tend to maintain the historicity of the book, although they disagree about its date of

⁵⁴ David Alexander and Pat Alexander, eds., Eerdmans' Handbook to the Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 226.

⁵⁵ Julius A. Bewer, The Literature of the Old Testament, 3rd ed (New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), 314.

⁵⁶ William S. Lasor, David A. Hubbard, and Frederic W. Bush, Old Testament Survey (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 614.

⁵⁷ Harold Fisch, "Ruth and the Structure of Covenant History," Vetus Testamentum 32 (1982): 433-434.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 436.

⁵⁹ J. Judah Slotki, "Ruth," in The Five Megilloth, ed. A. Cohen (London: Soncino Press, 1952), 38.

⁶⁰ Childs, 567.

composition. The characters of the story who were meant to be emulated were actual people who faced real hardship.

William S. Lasor observed that the author praised Ruth for her "faithfulness and commitment," Naomi for her "sagacity and perseverance," and Boaz for his "unusual kindness and fidelity." All are nearly the "personification of *hesed*."⁶¹ Even Orpah and the near kinsman are virtuous, though to a lesser degree. Indeed, many scholars have argued that the author meant to praise the conduct of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz.⁶² However, James L. Crenshaw argued that the author's emphasis was on Ruth's remarkable loyalty and both women's courage and initiative "to secure their future."⁶³ Similarly, Fohrer argued that the author sought to lift up Ruth and Naomi for their faithfulness to Yahweh despite hardship, their mutually self-sacrificing love for each other, and their fulfillment of familial duties.⁶⁴ Childs, who was inclined to find fault in Naomi, lifted up Ruth and Boaz as the true models of faith.⁶⁵ Prinsloo claimed that the author meant to commend Ruth for adopting the Hebrew religion, while he described Naomi and Boaz as instruments of Yahweh.⁶⁶

Appreciation as a Literary Work of Art

Perhaps the one thing on which all scholars agree is that the Book of Ruth is one of the most exquisite literary works ever written. Yet some scholars have argued that the author's sole purpose for writing the book was simply to compose a good story.⁶⁷ In 1948 R. H. Pfeiffer described the Book of Ruth as a "charming romance" written for no other purpose than "to tell an

⁶¹ Lasor, 614; See also Nelson Glueck, Hesed in the Bible (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967), 41; B. Rebera, "Yahweh or Boaz? Ruth 2:20 Reconsidered," The Bible Translator 36 (1985): 319.

⁶² See Bewer, Hals, Kaiser.

⁶³ Crenshaw, 333-336.

⁶⁴ Fohrer, 250-252.

⁶⁵ Childs, 567.

⁶⁶ Prinsloo, 333-334, 337.

⁶⁷ James A. Fischer, Song of Songs, Ruth, Lamentation, Ecclesiastes, Esther (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1986), 27.

interesting tale of long ago."⁶⁸ Based on his understanding of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz as exemplary figures, the symbolic significance of their names, the idealistic picture of the world in which the story took place, the depiction of pure faith without ritual, and the fortunate coincidences leading to a favorable conclusion, Pfeiffer regarded the book as fiction, written around 400 B.C. Artistic license explains the variant use of the levirate law and the sandal ceremony (Deut. 25:7-10), as well as how Ruth became an accepted member of the Israelite community despite the law of Deut. 23:3. Almost three decades later the work of Robert Gordis reinforced Pfeiffer's conclusions.⁶⁹

Not surprisingly, literary critics have devoted much study to the structure and origin of the book of Ruth. In 1955 Jacob M. Myers proposed the theory that the earliest form of the story was poetic and was transmitted orally. Analysis of the structure and literary features of the book's present form reveals evidence of its poetic origin, he claimed.⁷⁰ Albright agreed that the story circulated orally and suggested that it was first written during the eighth century B.C.⁷¹ Building on the work of Myers, G. S. Glanzman suggested that the present Book of Ruth evolved in not two, but three stages. The original story probably circulated orally in poetic form. Some time during the monarchy (8th or 9th century) the story was changed into prose and given a Hebrew context. It came into its present form during the postexilic period.⁷²

⁶⁸ R. H. Pfeiffer, Introduction to the Old Testament (New York: Harper & Row, 1948), 718-719.

⁶⁹ Gordis, 241-264.

⁷⁰ Jacob M. Myers, The Linguistic and Literary Form of the Book of Ruth (Leiden: Brill, 1955), 42-43.

⁷¹ W. F. Albright, review of Introduction to the Old Testament, by R. H. Pfeiffer, Journal of Biblical Literature 61 (1942): 124.

⁷² G. S. Glanzman, "The Origin and Date of the Book of Ruth," Catholic Biblical Quarterly 21 (1959): 201-207.

D. R. Ap-Thomas⁷³ and later William Watters⁷⁴ painstakingly critiqued Myers' work and concluded that there was no evidence to support Myers theory that the Book of Ruth was poetic at any of its hypothesized stages of development and certainly is not in its present form. Most recently, Edward F. Campbell Jr. argued against the idea that the book evolved in stages, maintaining instead that the book has been exposed to very little edition.⁷⁵

Several authors have noticed the book's unity. Outlining the content of the book, Stephen Bertman observed its symmetrical design in which both contrasting and analogous elements are balanced against each other.⁷⁶ Murray D. Gow offered a more detailed analysis of the literary structure of the book emphasizing the influence form and structure have on meaning.⁷⁷ His analysis also highlighted the symmetry and corresponding elements found in each of the four chapters. D. F. Rauber also argued for the unity of the book, drawing attention to the vast amount of evidence, particularly its intricate structure, which points to one author who wrote each word with great care and skill.⁷⁸ He also warned against paying too much attention to legal problems in the book since these are peripheral to the story.⁷⁹

Multiple Levels of Intent

Many scholars have thought it presumptuous⁸⁰ to support one single theory as to the author's purpose for writing the Book of Ruth, and instead have argued for various combinations of pur-

⁷³ Ap-Thomas, 369-373.

⁷⁴ William R. Watters, Formula Criticism and the Poetry of the Old Testament (Berlin and New York: De Gruyter, 1976), 122-126.

⁷⁵ Edward F. Campbell Jr., "The Hebrew Short Story: A Study of Ruth," 83-99.

⁷⁶ Stephen Bertman, "Symmetrical Design in the Book of Ruth," Journal of Biblical Literature 84 (1965): 164-168.

⁷⁷ Murray D. Gow, "The Significance of Literary Structure of the Translation of the Book of Ruth," The Bible Translator 35 (1984): 318.

⁷⁸ D. F. Rauber, "The Book of Ruth," in Literary Interpretations of Biblical Narratives, eds. E. G. Louis, J. Ackerman, and T. Warshaw (Nashville: Abingdon, 1974), 163-176.

⁷⁹ D. F. Rauber, "Literary Values in the Bible: The Book of Ruth," Journal of Biblical Literature 89 (1970): 27-37.

⁸⁰ Huey, 512.

poses. In 1918 G. A. Cooke argued that the original intention of the author was threefold. The main purpose of the story was to illuminate the character and integrity of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, but the author was also concerned to show how a Moabitess became a model of Hebrew piety and an ancestress of David, and to commend marriage which fulfills the spirit of the law of the levirate.⁸¹ In his introduction to the Book of Ruth, S. R. Driver followed Cooke's interpretation of the purposes of the book. Like Cooke he argued that the story was based on historical, although idealized events.⁸² Walter Harrelson also accepted the purposes outlined by Cooke and Driver in addition to affirming the piety of Naomi and Ruth in seeking to perpetuate the name of Elimelech, and encouraging the acceptance of foreigners into the Israelite community.⁸³

In 1959 N. Gottwald proposed two purposes of the Book of Ruth. During the period of the monarchy when the story was probably circulated orally he maintained its purpose was edification. The loyalty and faithfulness of Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz were meant to be emulated. In its later written form, Ruth's foreign ancestry was emphasized for the purpose of encouraging acceptance of proselytes.⁸⁴ Later in 1985 Gottwald suggested that the story may have also been written to entertain and perhaps to theologize about a God who works unobtrusively through the lives and activities of common people.⁸⁵ In this second article Gottwald recognized that it is the women of the story who persevere in the face of death and despair and move the man to action. He also observed that the story represents two cultures and two sets of values determined by gender. He asserted that Ruth and Naomi re-

⁸¹ Cooke, xii-xiii.

⁸² S. R. Driver, 453-456.

⁸³ Walter Harrelson, Interpreting the Old Testament (New York: Hold, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), 439-440.

⁸⁴ N. Gottwald, A Light to the Nations (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 518-520.

⁸⁵ N. Gottwald, The Hebrew Bible: A Socio-Literary Introduction (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 552.

fuse to accept male values, and instead consistently "operate out of their own culture with their own values in mind."⁸⁶ Their actions are oriented toward attaining life and security first. Concern for continuing the name of the dead was only a secondary concern.

In 1975 Edward F. Campbell generally agreed with Gottwald's conclusions about the purpose of the book. He recognized its usefulness for edification, emphasizing that the characters of the story are fully human and not two dimensional. He indicated the possibility that the book could have been written to entertain and to be enjoyed as a fine literary work. Like Gottwald, Campbell also noticed the theme of God's providence which runs throughout the story. He did not argue, however, that the author sought to encourage acceptance of foreigners or any other such universalistic theme.⁸⁷

John J. Davis,⁸⁸ R. K. Harrison,⁸⁹ Wesley J. Fuerst,⁹⁰ and Dan G. Kent⁹¹ all published articles between 1969 and 1980 suggesting that the primary purpose of the book was to provide a glimpse into the family history of David. They also agreed that a secondary purpose was to express the universal nature of God's love. Fuerst specifically argued that the author intended to challenge the discriminatory law of Deut 23:3. Harrison emphasized that it was the acceptance of foreign converts which the author wished to encourage. All agreed that a third purpose of the author was to edify. Loyalty, courage, selfless devotion, and godliness, particularly as it was exemplified in the person of Ruth, was meant to be emulated. Davis drew attention to the fact that such piety was practiced in the context of the apostasy of the period of the

⁸⁶ Ibid., 557.

⁸⁷ Edward F. Campbell Jr., Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary (Garden City: Doubleday, 1975), 5-6.

⁸⁸ John J. Davis, Conquest and Crisis - Studies in Joshua, Judges, and Ruth (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), 157.

⁸⁹ R. K. Harrison, Introduction to the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 1063.

⁹⁰ Fuerst, 29-31.

⁹¹ Kent, 142-143.

Judges. In addition to these purposes, Knight and Fuerst observed the book's emphasis on divine providece, and Davis suggested that the author intended to illustrate the theological concept of redemption. In 1991 J. Vernon McGee proposed that the illustration of redemption was the primary purpose for the book's composition. The recording of David's family history was of secondary importance.⁹²

C. R. Anderson⁹³ and Roland Murphy⁹⁴ both understood the purpose of the book to be the demonstration of God's providence both in the lives of a particular family and in the whole of covenant history. They also agreed that the author sought to portray the faithfulness and loyalty of the characters so that they might be emulated. Murphy suggested that the importance of continuing the family name was also an important purpose of the book.

Other Theories

During the 1930s W. E. Staples and Herbert G. May both proposed theories which linked the Book of Ruth with the fertility cult. Staples argued that many of the proper names in the book had cultic associations. His bizarre interpretation involved gods and goddesses, reincarnation, and cycle motifs. Ruth, whose name had no connection with the cult, was not even considered an important character in this fictional story, according to Staples.⁹⁵ Herbert G. May's unusual theory associated the threshing floor of Ruth 3 with the Bethlehem high place. Since the local high place was the designated location where cultic worship of the grain god and sacred prostitution were practiced, as well as the place where a woman desiring conception would go to make her petition, May suggested that Boaz spent the night at the threshing floor not to guard his grain, but to participate in rituals celebrating the harvest, Naomi sent Ruth there to make

⁹² J. Vernon McGee, Ruth (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1991), ix-x.

⁹³ C. R. Anderson, The Books of Ruth and Esther (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), 16.

⁹⁴ Roland Murphy, Wisdom Literature (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 87.

⁹⁵ Staples, 145-157.

her petition for a child, and there Boaz hired Ruth's services with "six measures of barley" (3:15). The present story which has been stripped of its overt references to cultic practices in order to make it conform with prophetic warnings, is a generally historical record of David's ancestry with some mythological elements.⁹⁶ Both theories have been unanimously dismissed by the scholarly community.

In an article written several years later, May revised his position in favor of more popular theories. He suggested the main purpose of the story was to show that under certain circumstances Gentiles may be admitted to the community of Israel. He noted as secondary themes the delineation of David's ancestry, Ruth and Naomi's great friendship, and divine providence.⁹⁷ Unlike Staples, May maintained the story's general historicity.

Interpretation

On the interpretation of the main characters of the Book of Ruth the traditional scholarly community has generally agreed. Although the vast majority of the work on the Ruth narrative has been devoted primarily to questions of form and historical criticism, these have uniformly assumed that Naomi, Ruth and Boaz were models of faith and piety.⁹⁸ The relatively small number of traditionalists who have focused their study on the interpretation of the story have also, for the most part, taken this view. They have tended to see in the main characters of the book idealized, flawless figures who demonstrate quiet piety in all their ways. Yet in recent years there have been some dissenting voices in the traditional community who have been unwilling to accept wholeheartedly the glowing interpretation of the characters of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. They have asked difficult questions of the text and have found evidence to suggest that the main characters were

⁹⁶ Herbert G. May, "Ruth's Visit to the High Place at Bethlehem," Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (1939): 75-78.

⁹⁷ Herbert G. May, "The Book of Ruth," in Interpreter's One Volume Commentary, ed. C. M. Layman (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 150.

⁹⁸ See Cooke, xi; Gordis, 241ff; Porten and Strouse, 546-547.

more human and their motives less pure than traditionalists have commonly held. These interpretations of each of the main characters will be detailed below.

Naomi

Historically, Naomi has been understood in a positive light. Most scholars have characterized her as strong, courageous, and pious. That she blamed Yahweh for her misfortune is an integral part of the story, yet most have agreed that she was devoted to Yahweh and that her bitterness was ultimately transformed into hope and faith.⁹⁹ Others have argued that even in her bitterness Naomi never lost her faith in Yahweh, whom she called by name (1:20).¹⁰⁰

Scholars have also characterized her as loving and devoted toward her daughter-in-law and her husband's family. As a model mother-in-law, ever concerned for the welfare of her daughters-in-law, Naomi urged Ruth and Orpah to remain in Moab.¹⁰¹ She knew they would have a much better chance of finding husbands among their own people.¹⁰² This was her only motivation for leaving them behind.¹⁰³ In fact, Harrelson suggested that Naomi had secretly wanted Ruth to accompany her back to Judah.¹⁰⁴ The two women shared a deep, mutually self-sacrificing¹⁰⁵ love for each other.¹⁰⁶ As a faithful wife even in death, Naomi was devoted to preserving the name of her husband.¹⁰⁷

It is out of this devotion to Ruth¹⁰⁸ and to her deceased husband that Naomi sends Ruth to the threshing floor.¹⁰⁹ Her

⁹⁹ Hayford, 29-30, 32; Marvin R. Wilson, "Ruth," in NIV Study Bible, ed. K. Barker (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 363.

¹⁰⁰ Hubbard, 113; Lewis, 112.

¹⁰¹ Hubbard, 105; Keil and Delitzch, 475; May, "The Book of Ruth," 151.

¹⁰² Kent, 145; Davis 160; McGee 20ff.

¹⁰³ McKane, Tracts, 18.

¹⁰⁴ Harrelson, 439.

¹⁰⁵ Fohrer, 251.

¹⁰⁶ Harrelson, 439; Goldman 284-285.

¹⁰⁷ Ap-Thomas, 372; Kent, 149; Davis, 165; Harrelson, 439; Knight 38.

¹⁰⁸ May, "The Book of Ruth," 152; Wilson, 366; Hubbard 198.

¹⁰⁹ Goldman, 288; Kent, 149; Keil and Delitzch, 482.

plan, which has been deemed clever, sophisticated, wise, and culturally and morally acceptable,¹¹⁰ was designed to secure Ruth's future through marriage, and to produce an heir who would carry on the family name and secure Elimelech's inheritance.¹¹¹ She sent Ruth not to seduce Boaz, but to impress upon him his duty as a near kinsman.¹¹² In fact, "the very suggestion of a midnight tryst is inconsistent with the character of Ruth and Boaz and the spiritual nobility of the book."¹¹³ Naomi's instructions were intended to provide privacy which would enable them the opportunity to talk without embarrassment.¹¹⁴

In recent years, however, a few scholars have questioned Naomi's character on several points. Far from understanding Naomi as the loving and concerned mother-in-law, Shearman and Curtis found her to be motivated throughout the story by "self-pity and self-interest"¹¹⁵ Edward Robertson argued that Naomi urged her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab not out of concern for their well-being, but because she saw them as liabilities. As Moabitesses they would be a source of embarrassment, and as widows they would be a financial burden.¹¹⁶ Even Murphy whose interpretation is otherwise traditional recognized that Naomi did not find Ruth's devotion to be of any comfort upon their return to Bethlehem. Although he did not identify Naomi as self-centered he inadvertently made the point when he observed that Naomi did not at first realize that Ruth was "the key to a happy future."¹¹⁷

In fact, it was not until Boaz showed kindness to Ruth that Naomi realized Ruth's value to her. Carmichael suggested that

¹¹⁰ Murphy, 92; Fuerst, 23; Hayford, 50-53; Fischer 35; May, "The Book of Ruth," 152.

¹¹¹ Davis, 165.

¹¹² Goldman, 288; Kent 150; McKane 21.

¹¹³ Hayford, 55.

¹¹⁴ Ibid; Hubbard, 200.

¹¹⁵ Shearman and Curtis, 236.

¹¹⁶ Edward Robertson, "The Plot of the Book of Ruth," Bulletin of the John Rylands Library 32 (1950): 210.

¹¹⁷ Murphy, 90.

Naomi's attitude changed from bitterness to hope when she recalled that Moabites were known for resorting to extreme measures to produce heirs. Naomi was aware of the story of Lot and his daughters (Gen. 19:30-38) and she was also aware that the threshing floor at harvest time was a place where prostitution frequently occurred.¹¹⁸ Boaz' interest in Ruth then provided the opportunity for Ruth to seduce Boaz.¹¹⁹ Knowing that she could not depend on social or legal means to persuade Boaz to marry Ruth, she resorted to seduction.¹²⁰ Naomi's shrewd plan, according to Carmichael,¹²¹ and Anthony Phillips,¹²² was designed to take advantage of Ruth's powers of seduction and Boaz's drunken state at the threshing floor. She needed Ruth to produce an heir to insure her own future security, as well as to continue the family name. Whether she had Ruth's well-being in mind is questionable. Robertson argued that Naomi's scheme was partly motivated by the desire of finding Ruth a home.¹²³ At best, Naomi's motives for sending Ruth to the threshing floor in her best clothes at midnight were mixed.¹²⁴

While these conclusions put Naomi in a negative light, some still see her as a positive figure. Robertson characterized Naomi as a strong, determined, capable and clever. He maintained that Naomi was justified in sending Ruth to seduce Boaz for

Naomi's methods were condoned and justified by the moral standards of the age and the land in which she lived... It was a woman's way of solving her problem. She had no other weapons to use in the struggle but womanhood, and of that she made clever and effective use.¹²⁵

¹¹⁸ Robertson, 216.

¹¹⁹ Carmichael, "A Ceremonial Crux," 335.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 335-336; Shearman and Curtis, 23-237; Anthony Phillips, "The Book of Ruth - Deception and Shame," Journal of Jewish Studies 37 (1986): 13-15, Robertson, 215-216.

¹²¹ Carmichael, "A Ceremonial Crux," 335-336.

¹²² Phillips, 13-15.

¹²³ Robertson, 222.

¹²⁴ Fischer, 36, 38, 40.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 228.

Indeed, many traditional scholars have recognized and praised Naomi's and Ruth's initiative and independence.¹²⁶ Instead of passively waiting for men to provide for their needs as was expected of women, they courageously took on traditional male roles in order to secure their future.¹²⁷ Robertson, however, gave Naomi all the credit calling Ruth "a mere pawn in the game,"¹²⁸

Ruth

Overwhelmingly, traditional scholars have viewed the character of Ruth as the epitome of virtue and a model Israelite woman.¹²⁹ Her Moabite ancestry makes her pious behavior all the more exceptional. Few have found any fault or defect in her. In fact, she has been so highly praised that she has become almost larger than life. Goldman's description of Ruth expresses this romanticized view

she is understanding, intelligent and perceptive, her love manifested in family loyalty, sincerity. One senses that Ruth is beautiful... Through the ages she has remained a symbol of womanliness - a charming, gentle, kind, respectful, discerning, and interesting personality who possesses the secret of true friendship revealed in her modest, even-tempered ways.¹³⁰

This review will discuss traditional understandings of Ruth's most noted qualities of loyalty, obedience, initiative, and purity.

Of Ruth's many virtues loyalty is perhaps the one for which she is best known. In fact, she has been considered by many scholars to be the personification¹³¹ of "heroic devotion."¹³²

¹²⁶ Gottwald, The Hebrew Bible, 555; Crenshaw, 336; Kent, 147.

¹²⁷ Jon L. Berquist, "Role Differentiation in the Book of Ruth," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 57 (1993), 23-37.

¹²⁸ Robertson, 227.

¹²⁹ Fuerst, 30.

¹³⁰ Goldman, 284.

¹³¹ Shearman and Curtis, 236.

¹³² C. R. Anderson, 24.

Jack Hayford even compared her loyalty to that of Christ.¹³³ It was a thoroughly selfless devotion. After her husband's death Ruth was in no way obligated to Naomi.¹³⁴ Yet her famous speech in 1:16-17 attests to the radical self-denial and permanency by which she bound herself to Naomi. Some have hypothesized that Ruth was attracted to something about Naomi's character and/or faith in God.¹³⁵ That Ruth's loyalty was directed first toward Naomi is undisputed. Whether or not she pledged her devotion to Yahweh has been a subject of some debate, but most have considered her to be a devout proselyte of Yahwism.¹³⁶ Scholars have also tended to agree that Ruth, like Naomi, was fiercely devoted to her deceased husband and sought to continue his name.¹³⁷

Ruth has also been praised for continually putting Naomi's needs above her own. Every selfless act was characterized by remarkable initiative, humble submission, and heroic courage. Binding herself to Naomi and certain poverty was a courageous act of initiative and submission. Though she defied Naomi's instructions she submitted her life to Naomi.¹³⁸ Going out to the fields to gather food (2:2) is another example of her courageous initiative and obedience.¹³⁹ As a foreign widow in a strange land she was particularly vulnerable to danger,¹⁴⁰ yet she held herself responsible for providing for her mother-in-law. At the same time, many scholars have noted that Ruth asked Naomi's permission before going out to glean.¹⁴¹ Others have drawn attention to Ruth's submissive and deferential attitude toward Naomi and Boaz.¹⁴² Finally, Ruth demonstrated a combination of courage, obedience and

¹³³ Hayford, 33.

¹³⁴ Hubbard, 103.

¹³⁵ C. R. Anderson, 24-25; Lewis, 111.

¹³⁶ Kent, 146; Prinsloo, 334; Fischer, 31; McKane, Tracts, 19; Hubbard, 120.

¹³⁷ Ap-Thomas, 372.

¹³⁸ Hayford, 21-27, 49ff.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 37; Kent, 147.

¹⁴⁰ Wilson, 366; Hubbard, 137.

¹⁴¹ C. R. Anderson, 33; Keil and Delitzsch, 477.

¹⁴² Fischer, 34.

initiative at the threshing floor. Certainly she risked physical harm and humiliation by carrying out Naomi's instructions, yet many have argued that she executed them perfectly.¹⁴³ Some, however, have argued that Ruth significantly diverged from Naomi's instructions by taking matters into her own hands. Rather than waiting for Boaz to tell her what to do, as Naomi had advised, she requested that he redeem her (3:9)¹⁴⁴ Here again, Ruth asserted her own initiative in order to benefit Naomi. Ruth's request was a petition for Boaz to provide not only for herself but for Naomi as well.¹⁴⁵ As a redeemer, Boaz would be responsible for raising up an heir who would take care of Naomi in her old age. Throughout the story Ruth placed the needs of Naomi over her own. While some have interpreted her submission negatively, viewing her as "a naive and pliable tool in the hands of Naomi,"¹⁴⁶ most have recognized Ruth's self-reliance and resourcefulness.¹⁴⁷

Ruth's moral purity at the threshing floor has been maintained by the majority of traditional scholars for various reasons. While Ruth's actions appear to be risqué, many have insisted that what she did was actually culturally and legally appropriate.¹⁴⁸ They explain that Ruth's mission was to remind Boaz of his obligation as a redeemer. She prepared herself as a bride in order to request that he marry her.¹⁴⁹ Her intentions were pure,¹⁵⁰ although some have been willing to admit that Naomi hoped desire would encourage Boaz to fulfill his obligation.¹⁵¹

¹⁴³ Fuerst, 23; Hayford, 49ff.

¹⁴⁴ Fischer, 36.

¹⁴⁵ Hubbard, 213; Sasson, Ruth, 80ff.

¹⁴⁶ Shearman and Curtis, 236; see also Robertson, 224.

¹⁴⁷ McKane, 19.

¹⁴⁸ Keil and Delitzsch 483; Hayford 50-52; Davis 167; Wilson 368; A. G. Auld, Joshua, Judges, and Ruth, The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984), 273; C. R. Anderson, 15.

¹⁴⁹ May, "The Book of Ruth," 152-153; Wilson 368.

¹⁵⁰ D. A. Leggett, The Levirate and Goel Institutions in the Old Testament with Special Attention to the Book of Ruth (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack, 1974), 233.

¹⁵¹ Fuerst, 2-23; Hubbard, 201.

Childs argued that the reference to Tamar proves by analogy that Ruth's actions were motivated by "extreme loyalty" to her deceased husband, and as such were appropriate.¹⁵² Many scholars also point to Boaz's response of praise of Ruth's *hesed* (3:10-11) as proof that she did nothing impure or improper.¹⁵³ They also argue that Boaz would not have had intercourse with Ruth since the near kinsman had prior rights to Ruth.¹⁵⁴

Many of these same scholars tend to ignore or dismiss the sexual language and *double entendres* of the threshing floor scene. For example, in 3:7 some interpret *regel* literally and not euphemistically, thus eliminating the sexual innuendo.¹⁵⁵ Yet others have paid very close attention to the sexual language of chapter 3 and have still defended Ruth's integrity. Campbell argued, "It is not prudery which compels the conclusion that there was no sexual intercourse at the threshing floor; it is the utter irrelevance of such a speculation."¹⁵⁶ He and later Moshe Bernstein identified a list of words in this passage which have sexual connotations: *bo'*, "enter" (3:4, 7, 14); *yd'*, "know" (3:3, 4, 14); *skb*, "lie" (3:4, 7, 8, 13, 14); *rgl*, "feet" (3:7, 14); *glh*, "reveal" (3:4, 7); *knp*, "garment" (3:9). They maintained that in none of these cases does the text demand the sexual connotation as the primary meaning.¹⁵⁷ However they recognized that there must have been a reason why the author used such sexually charged vocabulary in telling the story. Campbell suggested that the ambiguous language was intended to create question as to whether Ruth and Boaz would act with integrity. The uncertainty is cleared up in 3:13 when the author uses the unambiguous word *lyn* "lodge the night." This word which is never used in a sexual

¹⁵² Childs, 567.

¹⁵³ Auld, 273; Keil and Delitzch, 483.

¹⁵⁴ See below under Boaz for explanation.

¹⁵⁵ See Lewis, 118.

¹⁵⁶ Campbell, *Ruth*, 138.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 132; Moshe J. Bernstein, "Two Multivalent Readings in Ruth," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 50 (1991), 17-18.

sense, is also the same word which Ruth used to bind herself to Naomi (1:16). According to Campbell, this is proof that Ruth and Boaz refrained from sexual activity that night.¹⁵⁸ Dissatisfied with this explanation, Bernstein suggested instead that the author used the *double entendres* to express the emotional tone of the scene without diverging from his main task of telling what actually happened. Bernstein explained

The artistic function of the conflicting connotations of words versus sentences must be to furnish, on a level beyond the literal, the sense of the sexual and emotional tension felt by the characters in the vignette...The words point beneath the surface, to the might-have-been which the characters felt might be, while the combinations of the words emphasize the opposing reality.¹⁵⁹

Campbell and Bernstein demonstrate that Ruth and Boaz's integrity may be defended without ignoring or dismissing the sexual language of the text.

Yet Ruth's character has not gone completely unquestioned. Some traditional scholars have been less inclined to defend Ruth's purity, viewing her instead as a seductress. Jon L. Berquist suggested that Ruth intended to find a man of means who could provide for Naomi and herself when she announced that she was going out to glean in the fields of "anyone in whose eyes I find favor" (2:2). Arguing that this phrase and others used in the dialogue between Ruth and Boaz at the field have sexual connotations, he surmised that Ruth had attempted first to seduce the supervisor, and then Boaz. It was not until she approached Boaz at the threshing floor that she had success in seducing him.¹⁶⁰ Other scholars have agreed that "The nature of this scene, far from being a matter of pure idyll and innocence, is

¹⁵⁸ Campbell, *Ruth* 137-138.

¹⁵⁹ Bernstein, 19-20.

¹⁶⁰ Berquist, 28-30.

heavy with underlying sexual allusion."¹⁶¹ Carmichael suggested, in addition to the sexual imagery that has already been discussed, the word for threshing can also refer to intercourse,¹⁶² and the sandal ceremony in chapter 4 is symbolic of the act.¹⁶³ Phillips and Carmichael interpreted *regel* euphemistically and argued that Ruth uncovered Boaz's genitals.¹⁶⁴ Carmichael and Beattie agreed that Ruth's request in 3:9 to "spread your garment" is a sexual invitation. Beattie took the phrase literally arguing that Ruth maneuvered herself into his bed by laying down beside him and asking him to spread his blanket over her.¹⁶⁵ Rowley agreed Ruth's request "implied both protection and union."¹⁶⁶ Indeed her hope was not simply that he would sleep with her but that he would marry her and in so doing, provide protection and security for both women.¹⁶⁷

What actually happened that night between Ruth and Boaz is a matter of some speculation even among these scholars. Carmichael and Crenshaw concluded that the erotic language of the scene and Ruth's bold behavior leave the reader wondering.¹⁶⁸ Yet Carmichael appears to believe that Boaz put off Ruth's advance in order to wait until matters could be settled properly.

In the Ruth story the combination of activities, circumstances, and setting carries the suggestion that Boaz should now proceed to do some treading - in the sexual sense, with Ruth as his footwear. Boaz is agreeable, but because he is not in fact the nearest kinsman he wishes such a step to be postponed until the entire matter is taken up publicly.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶¹ Carmichael, Women, Law, and the Genesis Traditions, 74; See also Shearman and Curtis, 236-237; Phillips, 11.

¹⁶² Ibid., 75.

¹⁶³ Carmichael, "A Ceremonial Crux," 332-333.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 329; Phillips, 14.

¹⁶⁵ D. R. G. Beattie, "Ruth III," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 5 (1978): 43.

¹⁶⁶ Rowley, 180.

¹⁶⁷ Beattie, "Ruth III," 43.

¹⁶⁸ Carmichael, "A Ceremonial Crux," 334; Crenshaw, 335.

¹⁶⁹ Carmichael, Women, Law and the Genesis Traditions, 76.

Phillips also argued that they did not have intercourse, although Boaz could not remember because he was drunk.¹⁷⁰ On the other hand, Beattie argued that they did indeed consummate their marriage that night on the threshing floor.¹⁷¹ This interpretation of Ruth as seductress shows that she was not a model of piety, but she is not blamed for her behavior since she, like Lot's daughters and Tamar, had no other choice.¹⁷²

Boaz

Boaz too has been traditionally understood as a model Israelite and a hero. His name indicates that he was a man of wealth and high social standing. As such he probably wielded great power and influence in the community.¹⁷³ That he was genuinely devoted to Yahweh has been widely accepted in traditional circles based on his frequent invocation of the divine name,¹⁷⁴ and his pious behavior. Indeed, his generosity and protection of Ruth in his field (ch. 2) and his acceptance of the role of redeemer (ch. 4) exceeded the requirement of the law.¹⁷⁵ His kindness, generosity, and moral integrity have been generally recognized in his disposition to Ruth in his field (ch. 2), his behavior at the threshing floor (ch. 3), and his actions in behalf of Ruth and Naomi at the city gate (ch. 4). The following discussion will review the traditional interpretation of Boaz in these three chapters.

Boaz's generosity and kindness to Ruth in chapter 2 have been generally extolled by traditional scholars. By law Boaz was obligated to allow her to glean in his fields (Lev 19:9-10; Deut 24:19ff.), but he did much more for her by protecting her from his male servants, inviting her to his table to eat and drink all

¹⁷⁰ Phillips, 14. See below for further discussion of his theory.

¹⁷¹ Beattie, "Kethibh and Qere in Ruth 4:5," Vetus Testamentum 21 (1971), 493.

¹⁷² Phillips, 14, 17.

¹⁷³ Hubbard, 133.

¹⁷⁴ May, "The Book of Ruth," 152; Keil and Delitzsch, 479; Kent, 147.

¹⁷⁵ Wilson, 367; Fischer, 34-35; Keil and Delitzsch, 480; Goldman, 288; Davis, 162.

she wanted, and allowing her to glean among the sheaves. Some have suggested that he gave her this special attention because he was attracted to her.¹⁷⁶ Others have preferred to describe his feelings toward Ruth here as "admiration" for her devotion to Naomi.¹⁷⁷ He has been criticized for not offering his help sooner, since he knew of the widows' situation before Ruth stumbled upon his fields (2:11).¹⁷⁸ The traditionalist response has been that Boaz was waiting for the nearer kinsman to fulfill his responsibility.¹⁷⁹

Most traditional scholars agree that Boaz maintained his moral integrity at the threshing floor and showed Ruth new kindness and generosity. Many of the arguments used to defend Ruth's purity have already been discussed. A few arguments remain which attempt to prove that Boaz acted honorably and graciously. First, general consensus assumes that Boaz was not drunk when Ruth approached him.¹⁸⁰ Second, some maintain that he did not perceive her actions as immodest or in any way improper. He understood her appeal, not as a sexual advance, but as a request that he marry her for the purpose of raising up an heir to carry on the name of her deceased husband. For this family devotion he praised her¹⁸¹ and promised to see that she was provided for. Others argue that Ruth's offer was a sexual invitation, but Boaz refrained even though he was attracted to her.¹⁸² Both interpretations preclude the possibility of their having had intercourse.¹⁸³ Furthermore, there was the matter of the near kinsman that had yet to be resolved. It has been commonly argued that

¹⁷⁶ Kent, 147; Harrelson, 439.

¹⁷⁷ Lewis, 115.

¹⁷⁸ See below.

¹⁷⁹ See Lewis, 117.

¹⁸⁰ Davis, 166; Hubbard, 208.

¹⁸¹ Sasson, Ruth, 84; Sasson, "Ruth III: A Response," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 5 (1978): 50.

¹⁸² Rowley, 181-182.

¹⁸³ Murphy, 93; Knight, 38; McKane, Tracts, 221; May, "The Book of Ruth," 153; Auld, 273.

Boaz would not have infringed on the rights of the near kinsman by sleeping with Ruth before giving him the opportunity to marry her.¹⁸⁴ Finally, Boaz urged her to stay the night out of concern for her safety and their reputations. He knew that their midnight tryst could easily be misunderstood.¹⁸⁵ Indeed, if word got out the near kinsman could have brought charges of adultery against Ruth and Boaz.¹⁸⁶ Some have recognized Boaz's gift of grain as a symbol of fertility and a pledge that he would keep his promise.¹⁸⁷ Others think it was given as a precaution to protect Ruth's (and Boaz's) reputation. She would have an excuse for being out so early if she were recognized and questioned.¹⁸⁸ Regardless, his gracious response to Ruth at the threshing floor has been compared to "God's loving reception of the petitions of His children."¹⁸⁹

Traditionalists have generally agreed that Boaz emerged as a hero at the city gate in chapter 4. It is not possible within the constraints of this thesis to review the considerable debate over the legal problems regarding the relationship between redemption and levirate marriage in the Book of Ruth. It will have to suffice here to present the commonly accepted view of Boaz's role in redeeming Ruth and Naomi. Rowley suggested that Ruth had unwittingly created a serious problem by mistaking Boaz as her nearest kinsman and approaching him at the threshing floor. If it were discovered that she had come to him by night Boaz would certainly face scandal and legal repercussions. In addition, there was the problem of how to induce the near-kinsman to renounce his rights to Ruth. If he discovered that Boaz wanted to marry her, he might exploit the situation. But Boaz cleverly

¹⁸⁴ Rowley, 180; Davis, 166; Knight, 38; Lewis, 119; Fischer, 36.

¹⁸⁵ Knight, 38; May, "The Book of Ruth," 153; McKane, 23; C. R. Anderson, 40; Murphy, 93; Goldman, 288.

¹⁸⁶ Keil and Delitzsch, 486; Rowley, 180-181.

¹⁸⁷ Auld, 273.

¹⁸⁸ Hayford, 57; Hubbard, 222.

¹⁸⁹ Hayford, 58.

overcame these problems by concealing his desire for Ruth and by introducing the issue of Naomi's field.¹⁹⁰ Once the near kinsman agreed to buy the field, Boaz informed him that marrying Ruth was a condition of purchasing the field. Davis explained that

Boaz, at this point, used some legal skill, for strictly speaking, the kinsman redeemer was not responsible to fulfill every legal obligation of the goel. Boaz, however connected the two and made one contingent upon the other.¹⁹¹

Ap-Thomas agreed that the condition was imposed by Boaz and not by the law.¹⁹² That is why the near kinsman was taken by surprise.¹⁹³ Boaz knew that if he combined the two duties the near kinsman would have nothing to gain by acting as redeemer. Furthermore, he enhanced his own reputation by doing that which the near kinsman would not.¹⁹⁴ Alternately, some have argued that the law somehow required both the duty of redeeming the land and marrying Ruth.¹⁹⁵ These scholars understand Boaz' act of redeeming Ruth and Naomi as particularly gracious and honorable since he doubtless had as much to lose as the near kinsman.¹⁹⁶

Most traditionalists have seen the blessing of Boaz and Ruth by the townspeople (4:11-12) as a prayer created by the author "to be uniquely applicable to Boaz and Ruth."¹⁹⁷ The comparison of Ruth to Rachel and Leah, two of Israel's foremost matriarches, has been commonly understood as a wish that Ruth's descendants be numerous and influential.¹⁹⁸ Likewise the comparison of Boaz to his ancestor Perez, whom Tamar bore Judah, was intended as a

¹⁹⁰ Rowley, 181-182.

¹⁹¹ Davis, 168.

¹⁹² Ap-Thomas, 369ff.

¹⁹³ Auld suggested the possibility that the near kinsman simply was unaware of Ruth's existence. 275.

¹⁹⁴ Rowley, 182; Lewis, 122.

¹⁹⁵ Keil and Delitzsch, 488; Campbell, Ruth, 159..

¹⁹⁶ Burrows, "The Marriage of Boaz and Ruth," 452; Keil and Delitzsch, 491; Hayford, 61; Hubbard, 246.

¹⁹⁷ Bernstein, 20.

¹⁹⁸ Hubbard, 258-259.

prayer for the proliferation of Boaz's descendents. The clan of Perez was the largest in the tribe of Judah.¹⁹⁹ Ruth like Tamar, was a foreigner who "perpetuated a family line threatened with extinction"²⁰⁰ by invoking the practice of the levirate.²⁰¹ Alternately, Bernstein argued, for reasons which will become evident below, that the blessing of 4:11-12 was a standard wedding prayer. For this reason he argued that the comparisons between Boaz and Perez, and Ruth and Tamar should be understood loosely, since they were generally applied to all brides and grooms in Bethlehem.²⁰²

A few traditionalists have diverged from this popular understanding of Boaz and have argued instead that he had clay feet. One of the criticisms that has been leveled against him is that he needed to be prodded each time he helped Ruth and Naomi. If he was such a generous, pious man why did he do nothing to improve the situation of the two widows until Ruth stumbled onto his field? Sasson maintained that Boaz did "little more than custom and tradition demanded" in allowing her to drink as much as she wanted (2:9).²⁰³ He interpreted Ruth's statement "I do not have the standing of one of your servant girls" (3:13) as a complaint, to which Boaz responded by allowing her to eat at his table.²⁰⁴ Similarly, Shearman and Curtis observed that Boaz seemed to be "moved by puritanical guilt feelings"²⁰⁵ Indeed, by the end of the harvest Boaz still had not taken any steps to see that the long-term security of the two widows was assured. Why did he, in effect, force Naomi and Ruth to take matters into their own

¹⁹⁹ Hayford, 69; Keil and Delitzch, 491; Wilson, 370; Hubbard, 261.

²⁰⁰ Hubbard, 261.

²⁰¹ Wilson, 370.

²⁰² Bernstein, 20-22.

²⁰³ Jack M. Sasson, "Divine Providence or Human Plan?" review of Ruth: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes, and Commentary, by Edward F. Campbell, Interpretation 30 (1976), 419.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Shearman and Curtis, 236.

hands? Hubbard tentatively suggested that the reason may have had something to do with Ruth's nationality. Perhaps both the near kinsman and Boaz hesitated to act as redeemer because of prejudice.²⁰⁶

Regardless of the reason for Boaz's failure to act on his own accord, the question remains as to how Ruth changed his mind at the threshing floor. Boaz's and Ruth's possible indiscretion has already been explored. Phillips offered an alternative theory in which he suggested that Boaz was deceived into marrying Ruth. When Boaz, who had had too much too drink during the festivities of the evening, woke up to find himself uncovered and Ruth the Moabite in his bed, he undoubtedly suspected the worst. She may have taken advantage of him while he was drunk just as her ancestresses had of Lot in order to produce an heir. Furthermore, his previous show of generosity to her would make it obvious that he was the father. In order to avoid scandal he immediately arranged to perform his family obligation to her.

If he acted quickly no one need know that he had in fact been deceived into it (3:14). It is therefore wrong to interpret his sending away of Ruth secretly before dawn as an attempt to save her reputation... Rather Boaz seeks to save his own reputation and keep Naomi quiet at the same time by signalling by the gift of grain that he will now do what he ought all along to have put in motion.²⁰⁷

So the next morning at the city gate he concealed his own deception by deceiving the near kinsman. Boaz waited to tell him that he would also be expected to marry Ruth until after he had already agree to purchase the land. By doing this he made the near kinsman appear selfish while he made himself look magnanimous. By focusing on the matter of the land, he concealed his real interest in Ruth. This interpretation along with the others present a very negative view of Boaz.

²⁰⁶ Hubbard, 205.

²⁰⁷ Phillips, 14.

Conclusion

As it has been seen, traditional interpreters tend to view the book and its characters in a generally positive light. The major theories regarding the purpose of the book all suggest that the narrative was written for constructive reasons: to support social institutions, to reinforce David's claim to the throne, to promote tolerance, to edify, and to entertain. Likewise, Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz are understood by the majority of scholars as examples of faith, whose pious deeds are meant to be emulated. Naomi's courage and devotion to her husband's family and her daughter-in-law are generally praised. In the same way, Ruth is regarded as the epitome of virtue, a model of Israelite piety. Boaz too is widely recognized as a God-fearing man above reproach, and a hero. Yet it has been shown that there are a few scholars who tend to find fault in these characters rather than virtue. They suggest Naomi and Boaz are motivated by self-interest and question Ruth's moral integrity.

CHAPTER 3

The Review of the Feminist Literature

Introduction

Over the past twenty-five years dozens of feminist biblical scholars have contributed to the literature on the Book of Ruth. Although this proliferation of material shares in common certain feminist assumptions it can hardly be described as a uniform body of literature. Rather it may be better characterized as a conglomeration of widely diverging interpretations. In 1991 Alice Bellis identified six major authors and placed their interpretations on a spectrum with Phyllis Trible on one extreme and Esther Fuchs on the other.¹ For Trible the Book of Ruth is tremendously liberating as the story revolves around women who struggle to transform the patriarchal status quo. In diametric opposition to Trible, Fuchs argued that the purpose of the story is to perpetuate patriarchal ideology. The interpretations of Andre LaCocque, Mieke Bal, and the writing team of Danna Fewell and David Gunn fall on the continuum between the two extremes. The present review will begin with an historical overview, followed by a discussion of the interpretations of the scholars named above, in addition to that of Athalya Brenner. The remainder of the literature will be discussed as it relates to the interpretations of these major authors.

Historical Overview

Up until the late nineteenth century the field of biblical studies was virtually closed to women largely because they were prevented from holding religious offices and were denied the educational opportunities necessary for serious study of the

¹ Alice Bellis, Helpmates, Harlots and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994), 206-211. See also Kathryn Pfisterer Darr, Far More Precious than Jewels: Perspectives on Biblical Women (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 74-75; Danna N. Fewell, "Feminist Reading of the Hebrew Bible: Affirmation, Resistance and Transformation," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 39 (1987): 81.

Scriptures.² Inspired by the Women's Movement during the turn of this century, Elizabeth Cady Stanton initiated a project in which she and a small group of women identified and interpreted biblical passages of particular interest to women. The result of their work was The Woman's Bible which was published in 1898. Although it was never considered scholarly material, it became a landmark volume because it was the first in which women interpreted the Scriptures "self-consciously as women."³ The Woman's Bible attempted to expose the androcentric bias with which the Bible had been historically interpreted in addition to the misogyny within the Bible itself.⁴ Ironically, while Stanton's treatment of the Book of Ruth, contained within this volume, freely embellished the text, her interpretation was quite traditional.⁵ Still, the idea that women could enhance and even correct the study of Scripture had been conceived.

The idea was to remain undeveloped, however, for more than half a century. The few women who had struggled to advance in the field of biblical studies and had achieved a level of academic respect were reluctant to follow Stanton's lead. Rather than consider the Scriptures from a feminist perspective, they continued to work from a traditional standpoint, ignoring the question of male bias and patriarchal ideology in both the Scriptures and the traditional, male-dominated scholarship. Margaret B. Crook's interpretation of Ruth, published in 1948, is an example of such traditional scholarship. She proposed a two story theory of the book in which she argued that the "Old Story" was pre-Davidic and that the "Second Telling" was written in the ninth century B.C., perhaps by the priest Jehoiada for the purpose of validating his reforms in the southern kingdom. The

² Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., The Women's Bible Commentary (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), xiii.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., xiv.

⁵ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "The Book of Ruth," in A Feminist Companion to Ruth, ed. A. Brenner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 20-25. Originally published in The Woman's Bible, Vol. 2 (New York: European Publishing House, 1898).

major theme of both stories was the preservation of the family line.⁶ Enlightening though her study was, her concern was clearly not with interpreting the book from a woman's point of view. In the same way, Louise Pettibone Smith argued along traditional lines in her introduction to Ruth in The Interpreter's Bible where she supported a post-exilic date of composition and suggested that the book was written for the purpose of refuting the exclusionary claims of Deut. 23:3, as well as those of Ezra and Nehemiah. Her exegesis failed to take seriously the feminine emphasis of the book. Only as a secondary theme did Smith recognize the devoted friendship between Naomi and Ruth.⁷ In 1968 Thomas and Dorothy Thompson attempted to explain some of the apparent contradictions between Deuteronomic law and Ruth with regard to levirate marriage and redemption.⁸ The study, however, did not discuss the implications of these laws for the status of women.

In 1964, Crook published a book entitled Women and Religion which did serve to further the feminist movement in biblical studies. Although she refused to be identified as a feminist, Crook raised a fundamental feminist concern in her discussion of the status of women in Judaism and Christianity. Quoting the cry of Miriam, "Does the Lord speak only through Moses?" Crook contended that every aspect of Biblical religion has been monopolized by men with the result that "the expression of the religious genius of womankind" has been severely limited.⁹ This state of affairs was to change significantly during the 1960s and 1970s as increasing numbers of women obtained seminary training, and interest in the study of the Scriptures from a feminist perspective among both women and men surged. Since then feminist

⁶ Margaret B. Crook, "The Book of Ruth: A New Solution," Journal of Bible and Religion 16 (1948):155-160.

⁷ Louise Pettibone Smith, "The Book of Ruth" in The Interpreter's Bible, eds. G. A. Buttrick, W. R. Bowie, P. Schrer, J. Knox, S. Terrien, and N. B. Harmon (New York: Abingdon Press, 1955), 831.

⁸ Thomas and Dorothy Thompson, "Some Legal Problems in the Book of Ruth," Vetus Testamentum 19 (1968): 79ff.

⁹ Margaret B. Crook, Women and Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 1.

biblical scholarship has played an important part in influencing the direction of biblical research.

Not only are women prominent in the discussions of traditional topics in biblical studies, but the new questions women have posed and the new ways of reading that women have pioneered have challenged the very way biblical studies are done

observed Carol Newsome and Sharon Ringe.¹⁰ As for the study of the Book of Ruth, feminist scholars have produced a formidable, if not uniform, body of literature over the past thirty years.

Trible: Transforming Patriarchy

Phyllis Trible has been called "the first modern feminist Hebrew Bible scholar to offer an interpretation" of the Book of Ruth.¹¹ Although Crook's interpretation preceded Trible's by nearly three decades, Trible was the first woman to consciously reinterpret or "reread"¹² the story from a feminist perspective. According to Trible the story of Ruth is about women who defy culture and custom, who transform patriarchy in their struggle to survive in a world dominated by men.¹³ They make their own decisions and shape their own destinies. Ruth's decision to risk all to commit herself to Naomi, with neither divine calling nor promise of blessing, defies reason.¹⁴ The decision to commit herself "to an old woman rather than to the search for a husband... in a world where life depends upon men" defies culture.¹⁵ Even Orpah who conforms to cultural norms by returning to her "mother's house" (Ru. 1:8) nevertheless, makes up her own mind

¹⁰ Newsom Ringe, xv.

¹¹ Bellis, 207.

¹² Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," Journal of the American Academy of Religion 41 (1973): 31.

¹³ Phyllis Trible, "Two Women in a Man's World: A Reading of the Book of Ruth," Soundings 49 (1976): 279; Phyllis Trible, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 196.

¹⁴ Phyllis Trible, "The Radical Faith of Ruth," in To Be a Person of Integrity, ed. R. J. Ogden (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1975), 47.

¹⁵ Trible, "Two Women in a Man's World," 258.

and chooses for herself which path she will take.¹⁶ Furthermore, the women of the story act independently. In a world where women are subject to men, they initiate and men react. Ruth courageously embarks on a mission to find food. The powerful Boaz responds to her with kindness. "The favor that Boaz gives her is the favor which she has sought."¹⁷ Although he was already aware of the dire circumstances of these two kinswomen (Ru. 2:11) he did nothing to help until Ruth appeared in his field.¹⁸ Hers is the initiative; his the reaction. Similarly in chapter three, rather than wait for Boaz to intervene on their behalf, Naomi devises a plan of her own. Ruth carries out the dangerous scheme and Boaz again finds himself in a reactive position. Then Ruth goes one step farther. Instead of allowing him to tell her what to do as Naomi had instructed, Ruth tells Boaz what to do (Ru. 3:9). Again Boaz responds to Ruth's initiative.¹⁹

If Boaz is subordinated to Ruth in chapters two and three, he certainly takes control in chapter four, where together with the men at the city gate, he decides Ruth and Naomi's fate. This final chapter with its strong patriarchal overtones poses a threat to Tribble's interpretation that the story is about women transforming a male-dominated culture. Ruth and Naomi disappear from the story and in their absence

Boaz presents the situation of these women quite differently from their own understanding of it. He subordinates both of them to male perogatives - the buying of land and the restoration of the name of the dead to his inheritance.²⁰

Furthermore, the reason he publicly gives for wishing to marry Ruth (Ru. 4:5) does not match that which he said to her the previous night in private (Ru. 3:13). Instead, "he makes Ruth

¹⁶ Ibid., 256.

¹⁷ Ibid., 261.

¹⁸ Ibid., 262.

¹⁹ Ibid., 267.

²⁰ Ibid., 275.

the means for achieving a male purpose."²¹ Preservation of the lives of two women is subordinated to preserving the name of deceased men.²² Finally, the comparison of Ruth to Israel's great matriarches places her squarely in the traditional role of mother (Ru. 4:11).²³

But Tribble observed that men do not have the final word. The women of Bethlehem reclaim the story and reinterpret the meaning given to it by the men at the city gate. In their celebration of the birth of Ruth's son, they fail to comment on the preservation of the name of Elimelech, suggesting that this was never their concern. In contrast they celebrate the baby as "a restorer of life" who will sustain Naomi in her old age" (Ru. 4:15). In fact, survival is the only motive presented for finding Ruth a husband throughout the entire story. Procuring a male heir to continue the family name is exclusively a male priority.²⁴ Furthermore, the birth of the male child is put into perspective when the women of Bethlehem remind Naomi that Ruth is worth more to her than seven sons (Ru. 4:15), "a powerful assertion in a male-dominated society."²⁵ When the scene closes the women are still in control. With the words, "A son has been born to Naomi" (Ru. 4:17) not to Boaz, as might be expected, the women name the boy.

Finally, Tribble's assessment of Ruth, Naomi, Boaz, Orpah, and the near kinsman will be important in distinguishing her interpretation from others. Throughout the story Ruth is characterized by her "radicality."²⁶ She demonstrates tremendous loyalty and faithfulness to her mother-in-law at great personal sacrifice and risk from beginning to end. She is independent and defies both culture and custom. Tribble described her faith as

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 277.

²³ Ibid., 275.

²⁴ Ibid., 275-276.

²⁵ Tribble, "The Radical Faith of Ruth," 53.

²⁶ Tribble, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality, 196.

superseding that of Abraham.²⁷ And though Tribble interpreted the language of the threshing floor scene as sexually connotative,²⁸ Ruth's character remains untainted.

Naomi's character is less well understood. Tribble described her attitude toward her Moabitess daughters-in-law as altruistic,²⁹ and the language of her response to Ruth's decision to go out in search of food as intimate.³⁰ Yet her motives for not directing Ruth to the fields of her kinsman Boaz are impossible to ascertain with certainty. Tribble offered several possibilities. Perhaps her bitterness prevented her from remembering her kinsman. Perhaps her loss had left her emotionally unable to act. Maybe Naomi was simply following cultural prescriptions by waiting for the man to initiate.³¹ Whatever the reason for her initial delay, she initiated a bold move in the following scene by sending Ruth on a midnight visit to the threshing floor. According to Tribble, this plan was motivated by an altruistic concern for the welfare of Ruth. In her final assessment Tribble suggests that "Naomi works as a bridge between tradition and innovation."³²

The figure of Boaz is complicated as well. His kindness and generosity to Ruth, a foreigner, prove him to be a God-fearing man. But as it has already been made clear, he did not offer his assistance until it was requested. Tribble allowed the possibility that he was waiting for the near-kinsman to fulfill his responsibility to the widows,³³ but there is another reason to question Boaz' integrity. In private his concern is for Ruth's provision, but in public his concern is instead for the preservation of Elimelech's name. The question remains as to which is

²⁷ Tribble, "Two Women in a Man's World," 258.

²⁸ Ibid., 266.

²⁹ Ibid., 256.

³⁰ Ibid., 260.

³¹ Ibid., 263.

³² Tribble, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality, 196.

³³ Ibid., 268.

his primary concern: Ruth or the maintenance of the patriarchal status quo?

As for Orpah, it has already been shown that she is an independent person who chooses the sensible, ordinary, culturally acceptable path. For this she is not censured. She is simply left behind as the story follows the radical choice of Ruth. The near-kinsman, on the other hand, does not fare as well. Just as Orpah is a foil for Ruth, so the near-kinsman is for Boaz. Like Orpah, the choice he makes is in his best interests. In contrast to Orpah, he is judged for putting his own interests before his familial responsibility. "Since he refused to 'restore the name of the dead to his inheritance,' he himself has no name."³⁴

Related Interpretations

For Tribble, the Book of Ruth is a liberating story for and about women.³⁵ Many feminist scholars have adopted Tribble's view of the book and have contributed to the understanding of Ruth as transforming the patriarchal status quo. Adrien J. Bledstein pointed to the violent period of the Judges when the story of Ruth took place and suggested that the intent of the possibly female author was to portray characters who "transcend the patriarchal abuses rampant in those days of Israelite dementia."³⁶ Ruth, Naomi and Boaz all defy the accepted customs of the androcentric society in which they live through acts of *hesed*. Ruth and Naomi demonstrate mutual concern for each other throughout the entire story, while Boaz lives up to the name given him by the narrator in 2:1, *is gibbor hayil*, "mighty man of valor."

The consideration each has for the other becomes clearly evident in Bledstein's unique interpretation of the threshing

³⁴ Ibid. 272-273.

³⁵ Darr, Far More Precious than Jewels, 73.

³⁶ Adrein Janis Bledstein, "Female Companionships: If the Book of Ruth Were Written by a Woman...", in A Feminist Companion to Ruth, ed. A. Brenner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 118.

floor scene. Out of concern for Ruth's well-being Naomi devises a scheme to persuade Boaz to marry and thus provide for Ruth's needs. An heir who would provide for her own needs was of secondary importance. Likewise, Ruth makes sure that Naomi is included in Boaz's generosity.³⁷ Recognizing the valor of Ruth Boaz does not reject her as a prostitute, but praises her for her concern for Naomi which Bledstein suggested is the last instance of *hesed* referred to in 3:10. The first instance of *hesed* was the uncovering of his "legs" accompanied by her marriage proposal.³⁸ Bledstein then suggested that Boaz has intercourse with Ruth in order to consummate a secret marriage. Drunkenness, seduction and lust have no part in this act which was intentionally done to prevent the near kinsman from marrying Ruth but, like Tamar's brother-in-law Onan, refusing to provide an heir. The near kinsman is thus viewed as a negative figure in Bledstein's interpretation.³⁹ Ruth and Boaz are seen as acting on Naomi's behalf. And so Bledstein concluded that Ruth and Naomi defy the patriarchal restraints of their culture by their devotion for each other, while Boaz "in his magnanimity and sensitive appreciation of these women, does not fear women nor experience the need to dominate them."⁴⁰

Johanna Bos understood Ruth's alliance to Naomi, which she faithfully maintains throughout the story, as a challenge to the patriarchy. Since marriage between man and woman for the purpose of raising up sons is a fundamental value of the patriarchal system, the primary importance given to Ruth's alliance to Naomi, which is described in terms of love (4:15), overshadows her betrothal to Boaz, which by contrast, is a secondary relationship, performed out of necessity for the survival of the two women, and is used as an opportunity for Ruth to demonstrate her love for

³⁷ Ibid., 124-125.

³⁸ Ibid., 124.

³⁹ Ibid., 125-127.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 131.

Naomi.⁴¹ In fact, Ruth herself acts as Naomi's redeemer. Yet Bos agreed with Tribble that Naomi does not begin to recognize Ruth's worth until the end of chapter 2 when hope counteracts her bitterness. Only then does she begin to show concern for her daughter-in-law's future.⁴²

The story also challenges the patriarchy by portraying women who act autonomously and stay one step ahead of the male protagonist.⁴³ It is only because of the powerlessness afforded to women by the patriarchal system that they must align themselves with men and use deception to survive. If they are accused of continuing the patriarchal status quo it is because they live in a patriarchal society. Moreover, Bos recognized that in building the house of Israel Ruth is participating in a divinely ordained plan of salvation.⁴⁴ She also noted that it is the women of Bethlehem who have the final word on the significance of the birth of Obed.

As for the character of Boaz, Bos like Tribble, viewed him as a generally positive figure, though not completely without fault. His generosity is admirable and yet falls far short of his responsibility as redeemer. His reluctance to act on the widows' behalf is also questionable. While she assumed that Boaz treats Ruth honorably at the threshing floor, since it would have been out of character for the protective Boaz to take advantage of Ruth, (besides that, the text surely would have made it clear had intercourse taken place), she questioned his motives at the city gate. There he "acquires" Ruth as a possession for the benefit of his dead relative Elimelech. No word of concern for the interests of Ruth and Naomi is found on his lips.

⁴¹ Johanna W. H. Bos, "Out of the Shadows; Genesis 38; Judges 4:17-22; Ruth 3," *Semeia* 42 (1988): 37, 58-64.

⁴² Johanna W. H. Bos, *Ruth, Esther, Jonah* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1986) 15ff.

⁴³ James Williams, *Women Recounted: Narrative Thinking and the God of Israel* (Sheffield: Almond, 1982), 84-87.

⁴⁴ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 38.

June Jordan followed Tribble in recognizing the "brave" choices Ruth and Naomi made for each other in a world which constrained their freedom.⁴⁵ Renita Weems added that not only did the women in the story make their own decisions, they did so without the benefit of divine guidance.⁴⁶ Yet for Weems, like Bledstein, the transformational nature of the book lies in Ruth and Naomi's undying faithfulness and commitment to each other through which they survived the trials of life.⁴⁷

Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore added to Tribble's interpretation with regard to Orpah. She emphasized that Orpah is more than a model of sanity and common sense. She is a woman who refuses to be constrained by "patriarchal structures."⁴⁸ Her decision to return to her "mother's house", to have a family, was her final but not her first choice. Struggling between the desire to go and the desire to stay, she is a "woman caught between cultures."⁴⁹ Nowhere in the text is she censured for staying. Her choice is no more right or wrong than Ruth's. In fact, according to Miller-McLemore, Orpah defies the patriarchal status quo in her own way. For in the phrase "mother's house" Miller-McLemore detected a protest against "a system in which men control motherhood in order to maintain patriarchy."⁵⁰ Her interpretation suggested that motherhood is as valid an option for the feminist as venturing out into the world like Ruth.

Fuchs: Supporting Patriarchy

Esther Fuchs considered the Book of Ruth only as it related to her discussion of the characterization of women in the Bible, but her interpretation clearly stands in diametric opposition to

⁴⁵ June Jordan, "Ruth and Naomi, David and Jonathan: One Love," in Out of the Garden, eds. C. Buchmann and C. Spiegel (New York: Fawcett Columbine, 1994), 86.

⁴⁶ Renita J. Weems, Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible (SanDiego: LuraMedia, 1989), 29.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 33.

⁴⁸ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Returning to the 'Mother's House': A Feminist Look at Orpah," The Christian Century 108 (1991): 430.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 429.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 430.

Trible's understanding of the story and its characters. Rather than transforming the patriarchal system, Fuchs contended that the story actually supports and reinforces it.⁵¹ In fact, Ruth is praised not for her faithfulness to Naomi, "but for her success in finding and marrying a direct relative of Elimelech, her father-in-law, and giving birth to children who would carry on the patrilineage of her deceased husband."⁵² Furthermore, the biblical narrator fosters a patriarchal ideology by depicting Ruth as seeking to continue the family line for her own self-serving purposes. In this way the narrator cleverly projects his own androcentric desires onto females so that patriarchal interests appear not to be the unwelcome burden that they are, but that which women deeply desire for themselves.⁵³ Not surprisingly, the reward for Ruth's support of the patriarchy is a son and like so many other biblical mother figures, she disappears from the story once her son is born. She is important not in her own right, but only in relation to men.⁵⁴

Another technique the biblical narrator uses to perpetuate the patriarchal ideology is the characterization of women as deceptive. For this they are judged harshly unless the deception is somehow done for the purpose of obtaining progeny for one's deceased husband. Accordingly, Ruth is rewarded with a son for her daring use of deception during her midnight visit to the threshing floor.⁵⁵ However, Fuchs argued that the characterization of women as deceptive, regardless of whether the deception is condoned or not, is "an effective ideological tool that perpetuates the suspicion and distrust of women, and that validates

⁵¹ Esther Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers and Sexual Politics in the Hebrew Bible," in Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship, ed. A. Y. Collins (Chico: CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 130.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 130-131.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 135.

⁵⁵ Esther Fuchs, "Who is Hiding the Truth? Deceptive Women and Biblical Androcentrism," in Feminist Perspectives on Biblical Scholarship, ed. A. Y. Collins (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985), 141-142.

women's subordination."⁵⁶ Therefore, Fuchs maintained that the Book of Ruth, far from containing material to be emulated, rather perpetuates the patriarchal status quo by exalting Ruth as a hero for her efforts to preserve the family name, as well as by the narrator's characterization of Ruth as deceptive and thus subordinate.

Related Interpretations

David Jobling drew similar conclusions about the Book of Ruth, namely that it reinforces patriarchal ideology. He refuted those who see in the story a critique of the patriarchy, suggesting that Ruth and Naomi may appear to act independently, but in the end it is the men who decide their fates. The recurring theme of ownership of women and the glorification of virilocal marriage (where the wife joins the husband's family) supports his view. Orpah who chooses to return to "her mother's house" is written out of the story. By contrast, Ruth's decision to remarry in her husband's family is rewarded by making her the ancestor of David.⁵⁷

Amy-Jill Levine also appears to agree with Fuchs and Jobling when she suggested that the message of the book may be "that women's principal worth is in producing sons and that Gentile women, sexually manipulative and therefore dangerous, should not be fully incorporated into Israel."⁵⁸ This decisively negative view is supported by Ruth's erasure from the story, which Levine attributed to Ruth's nationality. Obed is given to Naomi and the family line is thus racially purified.⁵⁹ Furthermore she concluded that

Ruth's actions offer no means for improving the social system of Bethlehem. The book of Ruth offers no

⁵⁶ Ibid., 143-144.

⁵⁷ David Jobling, "Ruth Finds A Home: Canon, Politics, Method." in The New Literary Criticism and the Hebrew Bible, eds. J. C. Exum and D. J. A. Clines (Sheffield, England: JSOT Press, 1993), 132-134.

⁵⁸ Amy-Jill Levine, "Ruth," in The Women's Bible Commentary, eds. C. A. Newsom and S. H. Ringe (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 79.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

prescriptions for changing the circumstances in which women, either native or foreign, find themselves impoverished and unprotected.⁶⁰

Her interpretation will be reviewed further below as it relates to that of Fewell and Gunn.

In her description of Ruth as a model of loyalty and faithfulness, Katharine Doob Sakenfeld appears to follow Fuchs in suggesting that Ruth's loyalty is not only to Naomi but to her dead husband. Although she seeks to provide security for Naomi and herself she also seeks to continue the name of the dead "within the structure of the system of levirate marriage" thus supporting and perpetuating the patriarchal system.⁶¹ In Sakenfeld's study of the use of *hesed* in Ruth 2:11 she suggested that

Ruth's first act was one of comfort and support for Naomi. Her second act is on behalf of her dead husband, for in offering herself to Boaz Ruth is opting for fulfillment of the law of levirate... Ruth was acting on the basis of her personal relationship to her husband who after death had no recourse in the survival of his name.⁶²

She was not expected or legally bound to perform these acts of *hesed*.

LaCocque: Subverting Exclusivism

Between these two extremes lies the interpretation of Andre LaCocque. For him the key to understanding the purpose of the book depends upon the determination of its date of composition and its literary genre. He maintained that the book was composed after the Babylonian exile and does not necessarily record an historical event. Accordingly, he understood its genre as a novella or "postexilic parable" in contrast to a "preexilic apo-

⁶⁰ Ibid., 78.

⁶¹ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, Faithfulness in Action: Loyalty in Biblical Perspective (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 32.

⁶² Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, The Meaning of *Hesed* in the Hebrew Bible (Missoula, MO: Scholars Press, 1978), 43.

logue." He wrote, "Apologue sets an ethical model; its purpose is edification and confirmation of world. Parable questions ideology; it subverts world."⁶³ Like Tribble, he believed the book to be subversive. Yet for LaCocque, the subversiveness of the story lies not in the undermining of the patriarchal status quo. In fact, he argued that Ruth's mission was to perpetuate the name of her dead husband,⁶⁴ thus maintaining the patriarchal agenda. Instead he understood the subversiveness of the story in a political sense, in the undermining of the exclusivistic Jerusalem ruling class led by Ezra and Nehemiah who were calling for ethnic purity.⁶⁵ What could be more scandalous than a story about a Moabite woman who becomes a model of Israelite virtue? Worse than just a foreigner, Ruth's race is unanimously condemned in the Law and the Prophets.⁶⁶ Yet the levirate law, which was reserved for Israelites only, is applied to Ruth.⁶⁷ More shocking still is the use of *hesed* to describe Ruth in 3:10, a term which was typically used of Yahweh's covenantal love for Israel.⁶⁸ Finally, the comparison of Ruth to Tamar is subversive in the implied comparison between the unnamed near kinsman, who refused to marry Ruth, to Onan and Shelah, Tamar's brothers-in-law who also failed to fulfill their levirate duty. LaCocque concluded, "Thus, by artistic transpositions, Tamar the Canaanite becomes Ruth the Moabite, and Judah's sons or Judah himself become 'So and so.' The symbolism is transparent; the postexilic Judahites of the exclusivist party in Jerusalem are put on a par with Shelah or with Onan."⁶⁹ The message of the Book of Ruth, then is subversive in its emphasis on the importance of foreigners to Israelite society.

⁶³ Andre LaCocque, The Feminine Unconventional: Four Subversive Figures in Israel's Tradition (Minneapolis: Fortress, Press, 1990), 91.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 87, 100.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 100.

⁶⁶ Deut. 23:2-6; Ezra 9:1-10:44; Neh. 13:1-3, 23ff; Zeph 2:9.

⁶⁷ LaCocque, 86.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 87.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 95.

LaCocque also recognized that the story is told from a distinctly female perspective. He noted that Ruth's first act of *hesed* is to Naomi, a woman.⁷⁰ Furthermore, he observed a contrast between the portrayal of women and men in the book. Women are seen as foundational to the story and demonstrate positive attributes, while the men of the story are peripheral to the story and are generally represented as "hostile or dangerous." Even Boaz, whom LaCocque regarded as a noble figure, has to be prompted to action by Ruth and Naomi and demonstrates a lack of self control while drinking at the threshing floor.⁷¹ Yet Boaz preserves his virtue by not responding to Ruth's ostensibly seductive behavior in kind.⁷² As further evidence of the female perspective of the book, LaCocque cited the work of Tribble⁷³ and Adele Berlin⁷⁴ who argued that the story is told from Naomi's point of view.⁷⁵

Related Interpretations

Alice Laffey appears to follow LaCocque in suggesting that an important message of the Book of Ruth is the importance of faithfulness to Yahweh over national identity and gender.⁷⁶ Ilana Pardes also recognized the theme of inclusiveness which applies broadly to the entire history of Israel, and not just to the specific time of Ezra and Nehemiah.⁷⁷ Laffey's and Pardes' interpretations will be discussed further below in connection with Brenner and Bal respectively.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 105-106.

⁷¹ Ibid., 106.

⁷² Ibid., 106-107.

⁷³ Tribble, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality, 169-170.

⁷⁴ Adele Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative, Bible and Literature Series (Sheffield: Almond, 1983), 84ff.

⁷⁵ LaCocque., 110-111.

⁷⁶ Alice Laffey, An Introduction to the Old Testament: A Feminist Perspective (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 298-300.

⁷⁷ Ilana Pardes, Countertraditions in the Bible: A Feminist Approach (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 99.

Bal: Subverting Legalism

Mieke Bal's literary approach to the Book of Ruth complements LaCocque's interpretation.⁷⁸ Her understanding of the subversiveness of the book, however, is not confined only to undermining the exclusivism of the law restricting Moabites from entering the assembly of Israel. To this she merely stated that Ruth's acts of *hesed* identified her as an Israelite in spirit, therefore the spirit of Deut. 23:2-4 does not apply to her.⁷⁹ Moreover, the larger implication is that legalistic interpretation of biblical law in general is undermined in the Book of Ruth.⁸⁰

Bal found further support for a broad understanding of the subversiveness of Ruth in the comparison between Boaz and Perez in 4:12. Her interpretation of Boaz' character is important here. Based on her interpretation of 3:10 she broke with the traditional view of Boaz as a generous and upright man who marries Ruth out of moral obligation, and instead suggested that he is a weak, even fearful (3:8) man, who appears capable only of reacting to the initiatives of women, and whose generosity toward Ruth is motivated by sexual attraction.⁸¹ Seeking his own interest, Boaz tricks the near kinsman into giving up his rights to the land and to Ruth by illegitimately presenting the two separate laws of the redemption of property and levirate marriage as one. While the text explicitly states that the near kinsman refused to marry Ruth for financial reasons (to preserve his own inheritance), Bal suggested that had he married Ruth he would have been in danger of transgressing the law of Deut 22:22 which forbids adultery, since he is not Ruth's brother-in-law as the law of

⁷⁸ Bellis, 208.

⁷⁹ Mieke Bal, Lethal Love: Feminist Literary Readings of Biblical Love Stories, Indiana Studies in Biblical Literature (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987): 80.

⁸⁰ Bellis, 209.

⁸¹ Bal, 70-78.

levirate requires. He is, therefore, legalistically speaking, in the right, and no worse than Boaz for acting in his own self-interest.⁸² Against this backdrop Bal interpreted the comparison between Boaz and Perez.

How can he [Boaz] be compared with the fruit of Tamar's wit and Judah's double standard? Integrating the two laws, Boaz is transgressing as well... When Boaz goes to court at the city gate, he identifies with Perez [sic] the transgressor of rules, son and grandson of Judah, who is like himself a mediator. Boaz becomes the mediator, between generations, sexes, classes, and people, between law and justice, the public and the private, economy and history."⁸³

The subversiveness of the comparison, then, is in the triumph of justice over legalism.⁸⁴

Bal understood the comparison of Ruth to Rachel and Leah as another form of subversion. She suggested that it is to one particular story of the two sisters (Gen. 30:14-24) that Ruth is specifically compared. When Leah and Rachel cooperate with each other in order to accomplish their own goals, they "break out of the narrow limits set by their father and husband."⁸⁵ It is the freedom from male imposed constraints which is accomplished by the cooperation of females to which Ruth is identified. It is the patriarchal agenda that is subverted.

Related Interpretations

The work of Nehema Aschkenasy lends support to Bal's view that the Book of Ruth subverts the legalistic interpretation of the law. She contended that Ruth and Naomi demonstrate an extraordinary use of language "to challenge and modify patriarchal

⁸² Ibid., 80.

⁸³ Ibid., 86.

⁸⁴ Bellis., 209.

⁸⁵ Bal, 85.

rules while ostensibly submitting to them."⁸⁶ Ruth cunningly arranges an introduction between Boaz and herself by asking for permission to glean in his fields. She then skillfully uses the opportunity to establish her familial relationship to him and to get him to reveal his prior knowledge of her. Underneath her profuse words of thankfulness for his generosity is a subtle reminder of his responsibility to provide for Naomi and herself.⁸⁷ Ruth's dialogue at the threshing floor is another example of "her ability to combine the language of deference with that of implied challenge."⁸⁸ When Ruth suggests that marriage is Boaz's responsibility as a redeemer she goes beyond the letter of the law. She uses the patriarchal system to her own advantage by adapting it to meet her specific needs. This she accomplishes by challenging Boaz to fulfill the spirit of the law, thus educating and directing him "toward a more humane interpretation of God's law."⁸⁹

Naomi and Ruth also use language to create "a seemingly unattainable reality through the power of the word."⁹⁰ In her attempt to persuade her daughters-in-law to remain in Moab she elaborately describes the impossibility of her being able to provide sons to redeem them. (1:8-13). Yet Aschkenasy maintained that behind the desperation of her words lies the hope for a miracle. In fact, "her protestations create an imaginary world in which the unlikely might indeed come true."⁹¹ Moreover in 1:15, she refers to Orpah not as Ruth's sister-in-law, as in most translations, but as her *yebimtekh*. The noun *yebamah* from which the word is derived designates Orpah "as the childless widow in

⁸⁶ Nehema Aschkenasy, "Language as Female Empowerment in Ruth," in Reading Ruth, eds. J. A. Kates and G. T. Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 112.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 118-119.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

relation to her dead husband's brother."⁹² Aschkenasy suggested that Naomi deliberately used this term in order to introduce the possibility, however unlikely, of levirate marriage into the story. Ruth accomplishes the same thing at the threshing floor. When she calls Boaz a "redeemer" he, in effect, becomes one.⁹³

Ruth and Naomi's religious language also places them on a par with men. Ruth adopts Naomi's God as her own and invokes his name. Naomi challenges Yahweh for causing her emptiness. In so doing they align themselves with the great men of faith, such as Abraham who leaves his land and gods, and Job who questions God's justice. Naomi particularly sees herself as the object of God's attention. Her suffering is not meaningless. And where there is divine retribution there is also the hope of divine deliverance.⁹⁴ Yet her words suggest an acceptance of patriarchal ideology when she equates fullness with having a family. But like Ruth, it is only the appearance of acceptance since Naomi certainly understands her significance and importance before God.⁹⁵ Indeed, the ability of these women to use words to their advantage is a source of power which serves to counteract the powerlessness of their social circumstances.

Similarly, Ilona Rashkow argued that it is the skill of their discourse that empowers Naomi and Ruth to rise above poverty to achieve prominent social status.⁹⁶ In support of her theory she illuminated Ruth's assertiveness which leaves both Naomi and Boaz speechless (1:1:18, 2:13), and Naomi's calculated instructions to Ruth to insure her daughter-in-law's successful seduction of Boaz (2:20-3:4). Rashkow concluded with a discussion of how Ruth's skillful discourse at the threshing floor enabled Naomi's plan to succeed.

⁹² Ibid., 113-114.

⁹³ Ibid., 121.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 114.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 117.

⁹⁶ Ilona Rashkow, "Ruth: The Discourse of Power and the Power of Discourse," in A Feminist Companion to Ruth, 29.

Ilana Pardes agreed with Bal on the comparison of Ruth to Rachel and Leah, which is the subject of her article. While she recognized that the comparison underscores Ruth's identification with Rachel and Leah in her support of the fundamental patriarchal value of "building the house of Israel" through sons, (4:11) she saw in the comparison a revisionistic element. In her undying devotion to Naomi, Ruth represents the perfection of the minimal cooperation between her predecessors "who *together* built the house of Israel" (my emphasis). Indeed, "The Book of Ruth offers an antithetical 'completion' of the limited representation of female bonding in Genesis."⁹⁷

Fewell and Gunn: Compromising Redemption

In their prolific writing on the book of Ruth Danna Fewell and David Gunn find much in common with Trible, LaCocque, and Bal, yet their interpretation radically diverges with regard to their understanding of the characters of Naomi and Boaz, the threshing floor scene and the scene at the city gate. This radical divergence is largely due to two significant inferences they make which influence their interpretation of the entire book. First, pointing to the narrator's persistent reminders that Ruth is a Moabite, Fewell and Gunn inferred that prejudice is "a, perhaps *the*, major complication to the plot."⁹⁸ Second, the authors argued that there are allusions to the story of Tamar and Judah throughout the Book of Ruth and so they rely heavily on Gen. 38 in their interpretation.

Accordingly, the authors portrayed Naomi "not as a model of faithfulness, but as a character caught and compromised by her cultural context,"⁹⁹ as a woman motivated by prejudice and self-

⁹⁷ Pardes, 101.

⁹⁸ David M. Gunn and Danna Nolan Fewell, Narrative in the Hebrew Bible (London: Oxford University, 1993), 164.

⁹⁹ Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "Boaz, Pillar of Society: Measures of Worth in the Book of Ruth," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 34 (1989): 45.

interest.¹⁰⁰ Her attempt to persuade Ruth and Orpah to remain in Moab is not motivated by altruistic intentions, but rather by a belief that her personal tragedy was God's judgement for her entanglement with Moab. She is concerned about how she will be received by her fellow Israelites with two Moabite women in tow. She, therefore, seeks to rid herself of all ties with Moab. When Ruth persists in accompanying Naomi she reluctantly, even grudgingly acquiesces. The authors suggested that "Ruth has become to Naomi what Tamar was to Judah, namely, an albatross around her neck."¹⁰¹ They cited the paucity of words spoken to Ruth by Naomi until Naomi recognizes Ruth's usefulness through her relationship with Boaz, and her blatant lack of concern for the safety of her daughter-in-law as evidence supporting this distinctly unflattering interpretation. Naomi's chief concern is to have a son, not for the well-being of Ruth. That is why the women of Bethlehem must remind Naomi that Ruth is worth more to her "than seven sons" (4:15).¹⁰² Naomi is thoroughly bound to the value system and the social structure of the patriarchy.¹⁰³

Likewise, the authors depicted the character of Boaz unfavorably as a proud and devious man whose public act of kindness to Naomi and concern for the continuance of the line of Elimelech is actually a clever plan to obtain Ruth, the object of his sexual desire, while maintaining his high social standing in the community.¹⁰⁴ The authors proposed that Ruth, being a Moabite, was not suitable for an Israelite to marry, therefore Boaz devises a scheme to provide a praise-worthy rationale for marrying Ruth. The sudden urgency to marry Ruth is explained by his need

¹⁰⁰ Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "'A Son is Born to Naomi!': Literary Allusions and Interpretation in the Book of Ruth," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 40 (1988): 99-108; Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, Compromising Redemption: Relating Characters in the Book of Ruth (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 70ff.

¹⁰¹ Fewell and Gunn, Compromising Redemption, 28ff.

¹⁰² Fewell and Gunn, "'A Son is Born to Naomi!'" 102.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 105.; Fewell and Gunn, "Boaz, Pillar of Society," 53-54.

¹⁰⁴ Fewell and Gunn, Compromising Redemption, 85ff.; Fewell and Gunn, "Boaz, Pillar of Society," 46-54.

to avoid scandal and preserve his reputation since, it is argued, he believes that he may have had intercourse with her while drunk at the threshing floor. His confrontation with and deception of the near kinsman at the city gate not only prevents scandal, but earns him the praise of the Bethlehemites. Publicly he pays homage to the patriarchy by acting in the interest of his dead kinsman and vowing to continue his name. And yet the fact that Elimelech and Mahlon's names are nowhere to be found in the genealogies at the end of the book testifies to the emptiness of Boaz's words. He marries the one he desires and in so doing subtly mocks the system.

Even Ruth's character is not completely self-sacrificing. Fewell and Gunn suggested that the request Ruth made of Boaz at the threshing floor "eclipsed her loyalty to Naomi"¹⁰⁵ Here Ruth acts on her own behalf. "Naomi and Naomi's welfare are not part of this nocturnal discussion."¹⁰⁶ Moreover, if Boaz's reputation is threatened by scandal, how much more so is Ruth's.

Fewell and Gunn described their interpretation as "a (relatively) subversive reading - a reading that offers no model heroes, no simple messages, no unambiguous examples of how we are to live."¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the characters which emerge from this interpretation are complex figures whose motives are often less than altruistic and are quite unlike those models of faith found in traditional interpretations. They concluded that the purpose of the book may be social, as well as theological. Its aim may be to counter prejudice while demonstrating the indistinguishability between divine and human action.¹⁰⁸

Related Interpretations

Amy-Jill Levine's interpretation, reviewed above in relation to Esther Fuchs, resembles that of Fewell and Gunn on a few important points. Levine recognized that beneath the surface of

¹⁰⁵ Fewell and Gunn, "Boaz, Pillar of Society," 47.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 48.

¹⁰⁷ Fewell and Gunn, Compromising Redemption, 13.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 157.

this idealistic story lie "complex social issues, gender relations, and personal motivations."¹⁰⁹ Thus she saw Naomi as an ungrateful, uncaring mother-in-law whose sense of self-worth depends solely on husband and sons. In fact, Naomi never really acknowledges Ruth's value.¹¹⁰ Levine also agreed with Fewell and Gunn that Boaz needed a socially acceptable excuse to marry Ruth since she was of an inferior nationality. By calling him a redeemer Ruth provided him with such a rationale for marrying her. This he publicly declares the next day to insure his reputation. He does not marry her out of love and respect, but out of duty to her dead husband.¹¹¹ With regard to Ruth, Levine is ambivalent: "It is the reader's task to determine whether this book affirms Ruth as a moral exemplar or as a warning against sexually forward Gentile women."¹¹²

Brenner: Critiquing the Female Stereotype

On two important points of interpretation Athalya Brenner and Fewell and Gunn agree. First, like Fewell and Gunn, Brenner understood Naomi as a "manipulative mother-in-law" who uses Ruth to accomplish her own purposes, namely to provide an heir for her dead husband.¹¹³ Second, Brenner likewise maintained that whether or not any sexual activity actually occurred at the threshing floor, Ruth succeeded in compromising Boaz, thereby insuring his marriage proposal.¹¹⁴ Brenner's interpretation begins to diverge, however, when she emphasized that Ruth's seductive behavior, like Tamar's, was not only necessary, but praiseworthy because in so doing she courageously placed the welfare of her adopted community over her own personal interest.¹¹⁵ Furthermore,

¹⁰⁹ Levine, 78.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 83-84.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 78, 83.

¹¹² Ibid., 79.

¹¹³ Athalya Brenner, The Israelite Woman (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), 97.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.; Athalya Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth: Further Reflections," in A Feminist Companion to Ruth, ed. A. Brenner (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1993), 141.

¹¹⁵ Brenner, The Israelite Woman, 119.

in graciously giving up her rights as Obed's biological mother she demonstrated "that a woman is capable of acting out of devotion and selfless love for another woman" even when that love is not returned.¹¹⁶ This observation that Ruth stands in diametric opposition to the biblical "stereotype of female social behavior" in which women fight with each other, particularly over their sons, husbands, and lovers,¹¹⁷ makes Brenner's interpretation unique.

Such a critique of the female stereotype probably originated from women's culture,¹¹⁸ Brenner suggested. Because the women of the story are portrayed as having strong and full personalities while the men play limited roles,¹¹⁹ because female joy and desires are acknowledged, and because neither Ruth's initiative nor her sexuality is denied or judged,¹²⁰ Brenner tentatively suggested that the book may be a product of female authorship. Her proposition that the birth of Obed was an unplanned benefit for which neither Naomi nor Ruth had anticipated, is further evidence of the feminine source of the story. Brenner questioned whether the idea of maternity as an essential part of being a woman was a value actually held by ancient Hebrew women, or if it was just "another example of tendentious (textual) propaganda designated to further social (male) ideology... or another case of biased reading?"¹²¹

Brenner also offered a theory suggesting that the story of Ruth can be divided along both textual and psychological lines.¹²²

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 97.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 96; Athalya Brenner, "Female Social Behaviour: Two Descriptive Patterns Within the 'Birth of the Hero' Paradigm," Vetus Testamentum 36 (1986): 265-267.

¹¹⁸ Athalya Brenner and Fokkeliën van Dijk-Hemmes, On Gendering Texts: Female and Male Voices in the Hebrew Bible (Leiden: Brill, 1993).

¹¹⁹ Brenner, "Female Social Behaviour," 272-273.

¹²⁰ Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth: Further Reflections," 141-142.

¹²¹ Ibid., 142.

¹²² Athalya Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth," Vetus Testamentum 33 (1983): 385-397.; Athalya Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth," in A Feminist Companion to Ruth, ed. A. Brenner (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1993), 70-84.

The book appears to be the result of the intertwining of what were originally two parallel stories, one about Ruth and the other about Naomi. Brenner maintained that it is still possible to discern the work of the editor who joined the two tales together. At the same time, the characters of Ruth and Naomi so complement each other that they appear to be "two facets of a single personality, dramatically split...together they present a synthesized figure of 'full', ideal(ized) femininity, sexual as well as matronly."¹²³ The question of whether this division was made for androcentric purposes, or rather reflects a feminine voice is influenced tremendously by the gender of the reader.

Related Interpretations

Other scholars have noted that Ruth transcends the female stereotype presented in the Old Testament. The implication of those authors noted above who recognize the radical and courageous nature of Ruth's behavior is that Ruth is anything but stereotypical. J. Cheryl Exum specifically observed that Ruth is one of the few foreign women who is portrayed positively in the Bible.¹²⁴ Alice Laffey also viewed the women of the story as "exceptions within a patriarchal culture."¹²⁵ As the recipient of a formal blessing (4:11), Ruth stands alone among the women of the Bible. Although the blessing is patriarchal in content, Laffey recognized the importance which it bestows on Ruth as a model. She also noted Ruth's courage as exemplary. Finally, the Bethlehemite women's statement of Ruth's value in 4:15 is a challenge to the patriarchal value judgements. The Jewish scholar Sylvia Barack Fishman conceded that while the stories of great women are often overshadowed by their sons in the Bible, "The Book of Ruth and the stories of many biblical women provide female models of cleverness, courage, resilience, and leader-

¹²³ Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth: Further Reflections," 144.

¹²⁴ Cheryl J. Exum, Fragmented Women: Feminist (Sub)versions of Biblical Narratives (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 68.

¹²⁵ Laffey, 198-200, 208-210.

ship."¹²⁶ This view contrasts with Fuchs' argument, discussed above, that Ruth is stereotypical in that she is deceptive and seeks to fulfill androcentric purposes through motherhood.

Brenner's argument that the Book of Ruth originated from a feminine source rests largely on the work of Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes who suggested that the Book of Ruth may be "a collective creation of women's culture, a story shaped by the cooperation between (a tradition of) wise women narrators and their actively engaged (predominantly F[emale]) audience."¹²⁷ Van Dijk-Hemmes' hypothesis is supported by evidence which shows that the author's intent is other than androcentric. Brenner's observation that the devoted relationship between Ruth and Naomi is a stark contrast to the biblical stereotype of female rivalry which serves androcentric purposes, demonstrates the point. Furthermore, van Dijk-Hemmes argued that if indeed the Book of Ruth is a product of women's culture it should include "a (re)definition of reality from the female perspective."¹²⁸ Based on Carol Meyers' study of the phrase "mother's house,"¹²⁹ he suggested that its appearance in Ruth exemplifies Naomi's attempt to redefine reality from a woman's perspective.¹³⁰ Van Dijk-Hemmes cited two other examples of women redefining reality based on the work of Tribble. First, Naomi redefines the significance of bearing sons as insuring security for women instead of continuing the male name. Second, the women of Bethlehem "redefine the reality wished for Boaz by the men of Bethlehem - the creation of a noble line of descent (4:11-12)- by proclaiming that a son has been born to Naomi

¹²⁶ Sylvia B. Fishman, "Soldiers in an Army of Mothers," in Reading Ruth, eds. J. A. Kates and G. T. Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 283.

¹²⁷ Fokkelien van Dijk-Hemmes, "Ruth: A Product of Women's Culture?" in A Feminist Companion to Ruth, ed. A. Brenner (Sheffield: Academic Press, 1993), 139.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 136.

¹²⁹ Carol Meyers, "'To Her Mother's House': Considering a Counterpart to the Israelite Bet 'ab," in A Feminist Companion to Ruth, ed. A. Brenner (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 44-15.

¹³⁰ van Dijk-Hemmes., 136-137.

(4:17)."¹³¹ Meyers' study of the phrase "mother's house" and her observation of the unusually high percentage of dialogue in the book led her to argue, with van Dijk-Hemmes, that the book is a product of women's culture, a culture in which women wielded power with regard to domestic matters.¹³²

Brenner's observation that neither Naomi nor Ruth initially planned to have a son is the subject of Gail T. Reimer's study of the book. As for Naomi, she argued that her identity is inextricably meshed with motherhood. When she pleads with her daughters-in-law to return to their "mother's house" her wish is for them to become mothers. Although her concern appears to be about finding husbands for Ruth and Orpah, marriage is only a means to an end.¹³³ Naomi's childlessness is the cause of her bitterness and the motivating force behind all of her actions. Even the women of Bethlehem in their comparison of Ruth with Rachel and Leah reveal their belief that bearing children is the most important thing a woman can do.¹³⁴

Ruth, however, does not share in this desire for sons. As Reimer observed, Ruth gives up her chances of having a family by following Naomi back to Judah. She seeks marriage with Boaz instead of a younger man so that she may have a child by a relative who will provide for her mother-in-law. Ruth's concern for Naomi is the motivating force behind her actions at the threshing floor. This is evidenced by Ruth's statement that the barley Boaz sent was meant as a gift to Naomi.¹³⁵ Even more striking is Ruth's silence at the birth of her child. She does not celebrate with the women of Bethlehem. Indeed, "They recognize that it is Naomi and not Ruth who is fulfilled by the child's birth, hence their insistence that the child born 'of' Ruth is born 'to'

¹³¹ Ibid., 137.

¹³² Carol Meyers, "Returning Home," In A Feminist Companion to Ruth, 85ff.

¹³³ Gail T. Reimer, in Reading Ruth, eds. J. A. Kates and G. T. Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 98.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 100.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 102-103.

Naomi."¹³⁶ Their statement that Ruth is better to Naomi "than seven sons" (4:15) speaks of Ruth's love for Naomi. Reimer concluded that Ruth's security in herself apart from being a mother "undermines the patriarchal premise that structures the whole of this narrative: that women are fulfilled by sons."¹³⁷ In this way Reimer's interpretation supports that of Tribble.

Like Brenner, and Fewell and Gunn, Susan Niditch emphasized the similarities between Ruth and Tamar. She does not go as far as they do in suggesting that Ruth and Boaz had intercourse. And instead of Ruth compromising Boaz, she argued that Ruth put herself in a compromising situation.¹³⁸ With Brenner she agreed that Ruth's seductive behavior at the threshing floor is sanctioned by the author.¹³⁹

Women Continuing the Traditional Interpretation

Despite the proliferation of feminist literature on Ruth a few female scholars continue to propose interpretations that are more traditional than feminist. In 1982 Barbara Green contributed a significant study of Ruth in which she offered solid solutions to some troublesome problems in the story, such as the introduction of Naomi's field in chapter 4. By asking questions of the text she underlines the centrality of the field as a symbol of the woman and as the place where resolution occurs. She determined that the plot of the book revolves around the "restoration of seed" which she broadly understands to include food first for Bethlehem, then for Naomi and Ruth, and a son/redeemer first for Naomi, then for the nation.¹⁴⁰ Green recognized the sexual connotations of the threshing floor scene where Ruth approaches Boaz as a bride, but made no judgement of impropriety. Naomi sends Ruth to request a levirate marriage

¹³⁶ Ibid., 100.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 101.

¹³⁸ Susan Niditch, "The Wronged Woman Righted: An Analysis of Genesis 38," Harvard Theological Review 72 (1979), 148.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

¹⁴⁰ Barbara Green, "The Plot of the Biblical Story of Ruth," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 23 (1982): 56.

which involves the raising up of a son in Mahlon/Elimelech's name. This Ruth does, but also requests redemption. Boaz agrees to marry her and promises to arrange the redemption.¹⁴¹ Relying on the *kethibh* for 4:5 Green suggested that Boaz did not trick the near kinsman into giving up his rights to the field, but only reminded him of consequences which the kinsman had not considered.¹⁴² For Green the main message of the book is not only a love story between Ruth and Boaz, but "It is the story of the liberation of God's people from the land of oppression and death and the re-seeding of them and their land."¹⁴³ Although her insights are valuable and she is sensitive to the possibility that the author may be female,¹⁴⁴ she does not question how the patriarchal context of the story influences the plot or the characters, and thus does not consciously study the book from a feminist perspective.

In 1983 Adele Berlin offered an enlightening analysis of the poetic structure of the Ruth narrative. Since interpretation of the story was incidental to the main concern of identifying its poetic aspects, the article yielded few opportunities to comment on the text from a feminist perspective. Although she did observe that the story is written from Naomi's perspective and that the story does not portray Orpah and the near kinsman negatively,¹⁴⁵ some of her other interpretive insights reinforce traditional views. For example, she interpreted Boaz in an entirely positive light.¹⁴⁶ In fact, in an article on Ruth in Harper's Bible Commentary she suggested that not only Ruth, but Naomi is characterized by *hesed* as well.¹⁴⁷ Furthermore, her unique interpretation that Naomi sent Ruth "on a romantic mission

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 63.

¹⁴² Ibid., 58.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 65-66.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 55.

¹⁴⁵ Adele Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative, 84-86.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 84, 90.

¹⁴⁷ Adele Berlin, "Ruth," in Harpers Bible Commentary, ed. J. L. May (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988), 262.

but she [Ruth] turned it into a quest for a redeemer" because she misunderstood her mother-in-law's instructions,¹⁴⁸ supports the traditional view of Ruth as a hero for preserving family and nation. Berlin argued that Ruth's visit to the threshing floor "shows that Ruth's actions were not motivated by selfishness, but out of family solidarity."¹⁴⁹ This idea is reinforced in her most recent article in which she suggested that the comparison of Ruth to Rachel, Leah, and Tamar, "lead us to view her in the mold of the heroic women who preserved the people of Israel and ensured its continuity."¹⁵⁰ Although Berlin may have some points in common with Tribble and other feminists, her interpretation of Ruth is predominantly traditional.

If Berlin's interpretation is traditional with feminist leanings, Barbara Ferguson's is thoroughly traditional. In 1988 she published a commentary which adopted the theory that Ruth was written as a gentle reaction to Ezra and Nehemiah's exclusivism.¹⁵¹ Its secondary purpose is to teach that God rewards those who live in self-giving love, of which Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz are models.¹⁵² Apparently oblivious to issues of patriarchy in the story she did not question whether or not the story has a male agenda, explained away the hint of scandal at the threshing floor, idolized Boaz, and summarized the book primarily as a love story between Ruth and Boaz.

Conclusion

From the preceding review it is clear that feminist interpretations of the book of Ruth and its characters are decidedly less favorable than traditional interpretations. Feminist study of the book revolves around the question of whether the narrative offers a critique of the patriarchy or reinforces it. The answer

¹⁴⁸ Berlin, Poetics and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative, 90-91.

¹⁴⁹ Berlin, Harpers Bible Commentary, 266.

¹⁵⁰ Adele Berlin, "Ruth and the Continuity of Israel," in Reading Ruth, eds. J. A. Kates and G. T. Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 258.

¹⁵¹ Barbara Ferguson, Joshua, Judges and Ruth (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 127.

¹⁵² Ibid., 126.

to this question, to a large extent, determines the interpretation of the characters of the story. Accordingly, Naomi, Ruth and Boaz are understood and evaluated in terms of whether they support or undermine feminist values. As it has been shown, there is little consensus as to how the book should be understood. Feminist interpretations span a wide spectrum. On one extreme, Tribble has argued that the women of the story attempt to transform and free themselves from patriarchal constraints. On the other extreme, Fuchs championed the idea that the author of the book intentionally sought to reinforce the patriarchal status quo and subjugate women. Between these two positions fall the interpretations of LaCocque, Bal, Fewell and Gunn, and Brenner. LaCocque proposed that the book was written to subvert the exclusivism of postexilic Judaism, and like Fuchs, reinforces androcentric purposes. Bal suggested that the story subverts legalism in favor of justice, and like Tribble, challenges the patriarchal agenda. Fewell and Gunn contended that the story portrays persons who support or reject the patriarchy according to which serves their own self-interest at the time. Brenner similarly viewed Naomi and Boaz in a negative light, but understood Ruth as a challenge to the biblical stereotype of women. Since feminist scholars have taken a broad variety of positions on the purpose of the book, their interpretations of the characters of the story also vary widely.

CHAPTER 4

Review of Assumptions and Methodologies

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss traditional and feminist assumptions and methodologies which have undergirded the study of the Book of Ruth. This review will attempt to uncover the subtle, often unstated assumptions relating to gender perspective in both the traditional and feminist literature. With regard to the question of method, this review will explore the various approaches employed in the traditional literature, including historical, form, and literary criticism. Since feminist scholarship on the Book of Ruth is primarily concerned with matters of interpretation based on the literary characteristics of the text, such as structure, style, point of view, vocabulary, word repetition, etc., the review of feminist methodology will focus on the use of literary criticism. Under this broad heading a variety of methods of analysis have been employed, including structuralism, deconstruction, discourse analysis, and poetic analysis.

Traditional Assumptions and Methodologies

While traditional scholars have generally recognized patriarchalism and sexism in the Old Testament,¹ gender issues related to the study of the Ruth narrative have been largely ignored. Only the most basic observations of inequality have been articulated. The most obvious of these is the recognition of the social and economic disadvantage of women, particularly those deprived of living male relatives, in the ancient near eastern world. Most traditional scholars have recognized that Naomi and Ruth's hardship was exacerbated by a socio-political system which forced women to be dependent on men. A few traditionalists have noticed the objectionable reference to the "buying" of Ruth in

¹ Rashkow, 26.

4:5. Even so, these same scholars have attempted to defend the text by arguing that the implication is not that Ruth was considered to be property, but that she was tied to the land which would one day belong to her son.² Similarly some have suggested that the word *qnh* in this case means "to marry as part of a legally valid transaction" rather than "to purchase" a bride.³ Generally, traditionalists have agreed that the book contributes to the understanding of providence, faith, and love, and that Ruth, Naomi, and Boaz are models of virtue.

Regarding the question of methodology, the traditionalist approach to the Book of Ruth has been varied, yet the majority of the scholarship has been done from an historical critical standpoint. From the turn of the century until recently the study of the Ruth narrative has been focused on questions of date of composition, genre, historicity, authenticity of the genealogy, theme, and purpose. There is little consensus on any of these questions. Opinions on the presumed date of composition range from the preexilic to the postexilic era. Likewise there are scholars who maintain that the Ruth story is based on historical material, while others contend that it is pure fiction. Even the authenticity of the genealogy in 4:17b and 4:18-22 has been debated. A discussion of the possible purposes of the book is detailed in chapter 2. Historical critics have also been concerned with difficult legal problems involving levirate marriage, redemption and inheritance presented in the book. The sandal ceremony of 4:7 has also been the focus of much attention.⁴

Other scholars have approached the study of the book from a form critical perspective. These scholars are primarily concerned with the genre of the book and the process by which the story evolved to its present form. Myers was the first to

² May, "The Book of Ruth," 153; Auld, 275-276.

³ Hubbard, 243-244; Weiss, 244-248.

⁴ T. H. Gaster, Myth, Legend, and Custom in the Old Testament (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 449; E. R. Lacheman, "Note on Ruth 4:7-8," Journal of Biblical Literature 56 (1937); 43-56; Carmichael, "A Ceremonial Crux," 321-336.

suggest that the story was originally transmitted orally and was poetic in form. This he surmised by careful analysis of literary features of the book, such as word pairs and parallelism.⁵ Glanzman accepted Myers' theory of the poetic origin of the book, but argued that the story evolved in three, not two, stages.⁶ Nearly two decades after Myers proposed his theory Watters refuted it with his own analysis of the literary features.⁷ He found no evidence to suggest that book was originally poetic. A few scholars who have studied the form and literary aspects of the book to determine its genre have compared it to folklore. Gottwald,⁸ and Porten and Strouse⁹ noticed how each of the threads of the story are brought to a satisfactory resolution as is characteristic of folktales. Sasson¹⁰ later developed this understanding of the Book of Ruth as folktale into an approach to interpretation which he called formalist-folklorist. His methodology also relied heavily on philological considerations.

Several scholars have relied on in depth word studies to shed light on particular verses, themes, and legal problems. Bewer¹¹ and Sasson¹² studied the terms *goel* and *ge'ullah* in an attempt to clarify legal problems regarding the relationship between redemption and levirate marriage. Glueck,¹³ and Clark¹⁴ illuminated a major theme of the book by analyzing the use of *hesed*. Rebera specifically looked at its use in 2:20 in order to determine whether Yahweh or Boaz was the doer of the noun.¹⁵

⁵ Myers, 1-7.

⁶ Glanzman, 201-207.

⁷ Watters, 122-127.

⁸ Gottwald, The Hebrew Bible, 554-555.

⁹ Porten, and Strouse, 546-547.

¹⁰ Sasson, Ruth, 196-252.

¹¹ Bewer, "The *Ge'ullah* in the Book of Ruth," 143-148; Bewer, "The *Goel* in Ruth 4:14, 15," 202-206.

¹² Sasson, "The issue of *Ge'ullah* in Ruth," 52-64.

¹³ Glueck, 40-43.

¹⁴ Gordon R. Clark, The Word *Hesed* in the Bible (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), 20-21, 167, 177, 186-210, 262.

¹⁵ Rebera, 317-327.

Weiss' study focused on the use of *qnh* in 4:5.¹⁶

In 1957 Northrop Frye noticed the absence of literary criticism in the study of the Bible and pointed to the lack of understanding of symbolism as a direct result.¹⁷ Two decades later Robert Alter articulated the need to study the Bible as literature and repeated Frye's call for the use of literary criticism in the study of the Scriptures.¹⁸ He described the approach as

the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else.¹⁹

Since then literary criticism has become a popular approach to the study of the Book of Ruth among traditional scholars. It has been effectively employed alone and in conjunction with other methodologies.²⁰

In some important ways literary criticism has contributed to the study of the Book of Ruth. Rauber discussed three tendencies common in the study of Ruth which literary criticism corrects. One tendency of scholars is to try to isolate a problem, or study a single verse or passage, such as the shoe ceremony in 4:7 or the matter of levirate marriage. Often the result of such analysis is that the importance of the passage or problem becomes inflated and the story becomes distorted. For example, Rauber observed "in most scholarly treatments discussion of the legal problems tends to occupy center stage and to push into the wings what most deeply concerned the artist."²¹ The literary critic avoids this difficulty by analyzing the narrative as a whole,

¹⁶ D. H. Weiss, "The Use of *qnh* in Connection with Marriage," Harvard Theological Review 57 (1964): 244-248.

¹⁷ Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 315.

¹⁸ Robert Alter, "A Literary Approach to the Bible," Commentary 60 (1975): 70-77.

¹⁹ Robert Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 12.

²⁰ See Sasson, Ruth, 14ff; Berquist, 23-24.

²¹ Rauber, "Literary Values in the Bible: The Book of Ruth," 36.

paying attention to balance and structure.²² Another tendency of scholars is to attempt to determine with certainty the precise purpose and meaning of the book. Rauber argued that one of the important tasks of the literary critic is to recognize the ambiguity, the richness of the text which both allows and invites multiple levels of meaning.²³ Finally, Rauber warned against the tendency of making superficial judgements about the book's so-called "simplicity" or "gracefulness" which he considered both condescending and misleading. He urged scholars instead to view the book as a serious work of art and to pay attention to its pattern.²⁴ Bertman's work in this area has uncovered an intricate symmetrical design.²⁵

Structuralism, an approach closely related to literary criticism, has been applied recently to biblical studies for the purpose of countering another tendency in the traditional literature, namely "the historical obsession of biblical critics who are after all dealing with literary products."²⁶ Indeed, until the advent of literary criticism in biblical studies scholarship on the Book of Ruth focused on questions of date, historicity, authenticity, purpose, and form. Literary criticism has helped to move the focus onto the story and the characters.

In a recent study, Berquist approached the interpretation of the Book of Ruth from a sociological framework which he suggests could be used in conjunction with literary approaches to interpretation. Specifically, he observed that the main characters of the story behave in ways which correspond to the sociological theory of dedifferentiation. This theory predicts that "persons respond to crisis through adding roles, including roles that would be socially inappropriate in normal times."²⁷ He argued

²² Ibid., 36-37.

²³ Ibid; See also Bernstien, 15-26.

²⁴ Rauber, "The Book of Ruth," 164-165.

²⁵ Bertman, 165-168.

²⁶ Robert A. Spivey, "Structuralism and Biblical Studies: The Uninvited Guest," Interpretation 28 (1974): 134-135.

²⁷ Berquist, 24.

that this theory helps to understand the behavior of Ruth, Naomi and Boaz.

Feminist Assumptions and Methodologies

What does it mean to study the Hebrew Scriptures from a feminist perspective? The question has been answered in a variety of ways, some positive and some negative. It has been said that to study the Scriptures from a feminist perspective is "to read the Bible self-consciously as a woman" bringing to the text those questions, insights, and experiences which are distinctly feminine.²⁸ A more negative answer suggests that feminists must view the Bible from "a stance of radical suspicion," whereby attempts are made to recognize and challenge the patriarchal bias and androcentrism inherent in the text.²⁹ Phyllis Trible answered the question in terms of "depatriarchalizing" the Bible in order "to translate biblical faith without sexism."³⁰ She, and others like her, look for underlying themes within the Bible that critique the patriarchal status quo.³¹ Many feminist scholars use a literary approach to study passages about women. They examine these passages to determine the extent to which male authors and editors have altered them in order to express their own views and concerns. They also seek to discover those places in which the authentic woman's voice can still be heard. Each of these responses reflect ways in which feminists approach the study of the Scriptures. The degree to which they vary is directly related to the attitudes and assumptions which the scholar holds about the Bible. It is the aim of this section to explore the assumptions and methodologies which have undergirded the feminist approach to the study of the Scriptures and to the Book of Ruth in particular.

²⁸ Carol A. Newsom, and Sharon H. Ringe, eds., xiii-xv.

²⁹ Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials," in Feminist Interpretation of the Bible, ed. L. M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 55.

³⁰ Phyllis Trible, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," 30-31.

³¹ Sakenfeld, "Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials," 59-61.

Perhaps the most common assumption among feminist scholars is that the Bible is inherently patriarchal. The form of this bias is both explicit and implicit. The patriarchal ideology is often unashamedly declared, and at the same time, hidden in the unstated androcentric world-view of the biblical authors.³² There is, however, disagreement among feminist scholars about the extent to which this is true. While Tribble is quick to point out patriarchal bias in the Book of Ruth, she contended that the voice of women can still be discerned in certain places.³³ Though female perspectives are often subordinated or lost beneath male agendas and androcentric concerns, Tribble recognized the presence of feminist models and ideals. Other feminists contend that, without exception, the Bible promotes patriarchal ideology and the subordination of women.³⁴ They argue that the Book of Ruth, like other biblical stories about women, has been altered to reflect male values. They locate the source of this bias in the seemingly objective narrator³⁵ who in reality has altered the words and actions of female protagonists so that they support the patriarchal status quo.³⁶ In this view Ruth is no champion of feminism, but rather an unwitting pawn used to fulfil male desires.

It is commonly believed then that, to a greater or lesser degree, the authors of the Bible were biased by androcentric values. Most feminist scholars would also agree that bias has occurred at other levels as well. They hold translators and interpreters perhaps even more responsible than the original authors.³⁷ Translators of the ancient manuscripts have been

³² Ibid., 55-56.

³³ Tribble, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," 31.

³⁴ Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers," 117ff.

³⁵ Gunn, David, "Reading Right: Reliable and Omniscient Narrator, Omniscient God, and Foolproof Composition in the Hebrew Bible," In The Bible in Three Dimensions (Sheffield: JSOT, 1990), 53-64.

³⁶ Darr, 74.; Jobling, 132-133.

³⁷ Fewell, "Feminist Reading of the Hebrew Bible," 79.

blamed for contributing their own patriarchal bias to the Scriptures. Feminists also allege that interpreters are guilty of androcentric bias on at least two counts. They contend that not only have interpreters generally ignored patriarchal bias in the Bible itself, as well as in its translations, their interpretations also have been flawed by their own androcentric bias.³⁸ Thus feminist scholars recognize and lament the presence of patriarchy at every step of the process of biblical composition, redaction, translation and interpretation.³⁹

This leads to the question of biblical authority. Recognizing the Bible's "religious bias"⁴⁰ is a preliminary observation to the discussion of authority. The question feminist scholars ask is how can a book which purportedly supports, and continues to be used to perpetuate patriarchy be authoritative or have any use for feminists? It is difficult to discern the Bible's usefulness for Kate Millet who has argued that "Patriarchy has God on its side" and that certain passages have deliberately sought to make women the cause of all wrong.⁴¹ Indeed, many feminists choose to reject the authority of the Bible on the grounds that it undermines feminism.⁴²

On the other hand, there are feminists who are not willing to reject the Scriptures or condemn them as perpetuating patriarchy. In fact, Tribble contended that, "In rejecting Scripture women ironically accept male chauvinistic interpretations and thereby capitulate to the very view they are protesting."⁴³ Tribble and others have argued that far from sanctioning the subordination of women, the Bible was written for the purpose of showing the way of salvation for all human beings, men and women alike.⁴⁴ These scholars base this claim on the literary observa-

³⁸ Ibid.; Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 38.

³⁹ Meyers, "To Her Mother's House," 40.

⁴⁰ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 38.

⁴¹ Kate Millet, Sexual Politics (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1970), 51-54.

⁴² Fuchs; Jobling; Levine.

⁴³ Tribble, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," 31.

⁴⁴ Ibid.; Fewell, "Reading the Hebrew Bible," 85.

tion that the Scriptures contain many differing perspectives. Fewell maintained that "some will inevitably undermine others."⁴⁵ Furthermore, Tribble contended that there are major biblical themes which "disavow sexism" and thus critique the patriarchal status quo.⁴⁶ In this way, these authors have attempted to demonstrate how the Hebrew Bible has the ability to critique itself. Through the use of literary criticism they seek to "reread" the Scriptures inclusively, without sexist bias. As Fewell concluded,

Our task is not to produce a woman's reading to oppose or to parallel a man's reading; our task is to produce a closer reading, an inclusive reading, a compelling reading that allows for a sexually holistic view of human experience."⁴⁷

Such a reading is authoritative to many feminists.

Yet there are certain problems with this line of reasoning as Sakenfeld is quick to point out. She claimed that a critique of patriarchy is a marginal theme in the Bible if, in fact, it is there at all. It is, therefore, inconsistent to suggest that the Bible critiques the patriarchal status quo when its dominant themes and message are androcentric and its attitude toward women is generally negative. Recognizing the few glimpses of female liberation within the Bible only serves to reinforce the extent of female subjugation. Furthermore, the church has never recognized the counter-theme critiquing patriarchy, but has instead perpetuated the dominant themes which oppress women.⁴⁸ Each of these arguments serve to undermine biblical authority.

Literary criticism has not been able to resolve the controversy. In fact, literary critics have arrived at conclusions which fall on both ends of the interpretive spectrum. Fewell attributed this, in part, to the inability of the critic to attend to all elements of the text, including those that are

⁴⁵ Fewell, "Reading the Hebrew Bible," 84.

⁴⁶ Tribble, "Depatriarchalizing in Biblical Interpretation," 31-35.

⁴⁷ Fewell, "Reading the Hebrew Bible," 85.

⁴⁸ Sakenfeld, "Feminist Uses of Biblical Material," 63-64.

incongruous with the critic's interpretation.⁴⁹ For this reason, Rashkow argued in contrast to Fewell, that "reading is an activity which can never aspire to exactitude" because feminists and traditionalists alike are biased. Therefore, feminist readings of the Scriptures are no "closer" to the true meaning than traditionalist readings.⁵⁰

Another factor which allows literary critics to arrive at various interpretations is the ambiguity of the text. All literary works have "gaps" which the reader consciously or unconsciously fills with her or his own assumptions. Words and phrases may have more than one meaning, leaving the reader to guess which one the narrator intended.⁵¹ Words and actions of a character may have various meanings depending on the character's motive, therefore the reader must question everything.⁵² Based on principles of deconstructionism, Fewell explained that a literary work is created anew each time a reader fills in the gaps with his or her own interpretive assumptions. At the same time, the literary critic must fill the gaps of the work with assumptions which are consistent with the value system of the work.⁵³ In this way the task of the literary critic is not arbitrary, but is constrained to some extent by the text.

A variety of other literary techniques have been employed in the study of the Book of Ruth. Bos employed literary criticism in order to study Ruth as a "counter-type-scene" to the betrothal

⁴⁹ Fewell, "Feminist Reading of the Hebrew Bible," 80-82.

⁵⁰ Rashkow, 27; See also Sydney Janet Kaplan, "Varieties of Feminist Criticism," in Making a Difference: Feminist Literary Criticism, eds, G. Greene and C. Kahn (New York: Methuen, 1985), 37ff.

⁵¹ Gunn and Fewell, Narrative in the Hebrew Bible, 156ff; Meir Sternberg, The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading, Indiana Literary Biblical Series (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University, 1985), 164-165, 239.

⁵² Gunn and Fewell., 164-165.

⁵³ Ibid., 77.; Fewell and Gunn, Compromising Redemption, 16ff.

type-scene first defined by Alter.⁵⁴ Tribble's interpretation is based on structural analysis whereby she attended to language, sentence structure and literary patterns. Rashkow employed discourse analysis in her study of the story of Ruth. Similar to structuralism, discourse analysis focuses on linguistic units of characters' speech in order to discover how they fit together and what meaning they have. Observing that the majority of verses in the Book of Ruth record speech, and particularly that of female characters, Rashkow studied how discourse is related to power in this narrative.⁵⁵ Berlin employed poetic analysis to examine point of view, presence of the narrator, level of characterization, symbolism of names, and use of poetic markers in the Book of Ruth. Her study of point of view complemented Rashkow's work on discourse, for she observed that when information is presented through direct discourse it has the effect in the Book of Ruth of causing

ambiguity that comes from seeing points of view through mirrors. One character's point of view is reflected through another's. Boaz perceives what the foreman perceives about Ruth (2:7); Ruth perceives what Boaz knows about her (2:11); Naomi perceives what Ruth perceives about Boaz (3:17).⁵⁶

Finally, Brenner employed source criticism to examine evidence which suggests that the Book of Ruth may be the result of the compilation of two parallel stories, one about Ruth and the other about Naomi.⁵⁷ Other scholars have explored the possibility that the book was written by a woman.⁵⁸ Each of these methodologies are employed for the purpose of interpreting the story.

Although feminist scholars have overwhelmingly employed literary criticism in one form or another to study the Book of

⁵⁴ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 38-39; Alter, The Art of Biblical Narrative, 51-59; See also James G. Williams, Women Recounted: Narrative Thinking and the God of Israel, 40-41.

⁵⁵ Rashkow, 26-41.

⁵⁶ Berlin, Poetic and Interpretation of Biblical Narrative, 97-98.

⁵⁷ Brenner, "Naomi and Ruth," 70-84.

⁵⁸ Brenner; van Dijk-Hemmes; Bledstein.

Ruth, a few have approached the book using historical criticism. In her study of the phrase "mother's house," Meyers employed historical criticism in the specific sense of uncovering the historical context to which the phrase refers. Others have combined historical and literary methodologies to answer traditional questions of date of composition, historicity, theme(s), and place in the canon.⁵⁹ For some scholars who lean primarily on historical criticism⁶⁰ interpretation of the story appears to be a secondary concern.

Conclusion

Clearly, this review of the traditional and feminist assumptions and methodologies reveals the substantial disparity between the two approaches. While traditionalists widely recognize the patriarchal environment of the Old Testament, they do not believe that such concerns are important to the understanding and interpretation of the story of Ruth, which rather has to do with faith, love, and divine providence. Conversely, feminists focus their discussion of the interpretation of the book around the question of whether the story challenges or reinforces the patriarchy. Gender inequality and male agendas are central to their understanding of the characters and purpose of the book. Traditionalists and feminists also diverge in terms of the methodologies with which they choose to study the book. Traditionalists have tended to show more interest in considering the book's genre, historicity, theme, purpose, etc. and therefore have tended to favor historical criticism. Traditional scholars have also employed form and literary criticism in their study of the Ruth narrative. Feminists, however, have almost exclusively employed literary criticism in their quest to understand the book's story and characters.

⁵⁹ Berlin; LaCocque.

⁶⁰ Jobling; Levine; Niditch.

CHAPTER 5

Analysis

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to compare the traditional approaches reviewed in chapter two with the contemporary feminist approaches in chapter three. This analysis will specifically seek to determine what if anything the feminist and traditional interpretations have in common, and how and where they diverge. Since the feminist literature is extremely diverse and there are dissenting voices even among traditional scholars, this analysis will begin with a review of the various interpretations in both camps.

Review of Traditional and Feminist Approaches

Two ways traditional scholars have attempted to interpret the Book of Ruth is by determining the purpose of the book and by understanding the main characters of the story. As to the purpose there is considerable debate. Six major theories have been suggested. On the interpretation of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz the traditional scholarly community has generally agreed that they were models of faith. Yet in recent years there have been a few dissenting voices which have challenged this view. The various theories on the purpose of the book and the interpretations of the main characters will be discussed below.

One of the lesser held theories about the author's intent for writing the book is that he wished to provide support for the enforcement of levirate marriage and/or redemption which had both fallen into disuse. McKane and others viewed the book as a call for social justice for he argued that these institutions were intended to provide security for the family. Yet many scholars have agreed that the primary purpose of levirate marriage, and the marriage of Ruth and Boaz, however it may be classified, was to produce an heir for the purpose of preserving the family name. Only Davies supposed a secondary purpose was to provide security for the widow.

Other scholars have long suggested that the Book of Ruth was written in order to provide a record of the family history of David and/or to support his claim to the throne. These scholars have tended to hold a very positive view of the characters of the story since they were David's ancestors. The theory has been challenged, however, by the widely held view that the genealogy linking the story to David was added later. Another theory which has found support since the turn of the century is that the book was written in the postexilic period to counter the exclusivistic policies of Nehemiah and Ezra. Others who are not satisfied that the book is a polemic have claimed that the book teaches tolerance and acceptance of foreigners in general. Ruth, a Moabitess became a model Israelite and Boaz became an example of tolerance and acceptance. Like the first two theories, this one also requires a positive view of the main characters.

Edification remains a popular theory as to the purpose of the book. Scholars who hold this view argue that the author intended to teach two messages. The first is that God's providential care works quietly behind the scenes and in conjunction with human initiative. The second message is that godly behavior is greatly rewarded. Accordingly, these scholars have viewed Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz as models of *hesed*, worthy of emulation. They are careful, however, not to view them as idealized characters, but as actual people who faced real hardships with integrity. Conversely, other traditionalists have argued that the book was created solely to be enjoyed as a work of art. These scholars view the book as a masterful piece of fiction. Here too the characters of the story, though not historical, are viewed as exemplary figures. Still other scholars have supported a combination of theories, maintaining that the purpose of the book has multiple levels.

As the discussion of the purpose of the book has indicated, the common interpretation of the main characters of the story is overwhelmingly positive. Naomi has been generally understood as a strong, courageous, pious woman, devoted first to her deceased

husband and second to her daughter-in-law. Likewise, Ruth has been characterized as the epitome of virtue, demonstrating heroic devotion to her deceased husband, as well as to her mother-in-law. Her dual mission, to provide for Naomi and to preserve the name of her husband, was marked by self-denial, a combination of initiative and submission, courage, and moral purity. Boaz too has been traditionally understood as a model Israelite and a hero, praised for his generosity and moral integrity. Each one is worthy of emulation.

In recent years, however, a small number of scholars have dared to challenge the motives of these heroes of faith and have pointed out some serious character flaws. Some have suggested that Naomi's behavior is better explained by self-interest and self-pity. In fact she used Ruth, without concern for her well-being, in order to achieve her own purposes. Robertson was the only one of these dissenting traditionalists to condone Naomi's behavior, arguing that she had no other choice. Ruth's moral purity has also been called into question by some scholars who suggest that she went to the threshing floor to seduce Boaz. Beattie even argued that they had sexual intercourse that night. Boaz has been criticized on several points. Some have found him to be negligent in performing his duty as redeemer in a timely fashion. Others have questioned his moral integrity, suggesting that he married Ruth out of fear that he may have had sexual relations with her while he was drunk at the threshing floor. Furthermore, it has been suggested that he used deception in order to get the near-kinsman to abdicate his rights to Ruth. A distinctly unflattering picture of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz has emerged.

For feminist scholars, the question of how one interprets the main characters of the story is inextricably linked to the question of whether the book offers a critique of the patriarchy or reinforces it. Since there is a wide spectrum of opinions on the later, it follows that there would be an equally wide variety

of interpretations of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz. Indeed there is little consensus among feminist scholars about the meaning of the Book of Ruth. Six general interpretations have been identified and reviewed in chapter 3. Each of these positions will be summarized below.

Trible argued that the story is about women struggling to survive in and transform a male dominated society. Their mission is not to preserve the name of the deceased, as the patriarchy prescribes, but to survive. Ruth and Naomi make their own decisions and act independently, while Boaz reacts to their initiatives. This pattern is reversed, however, in chapter 4 when Boaz asserts his authority over the fates of the women while they passively wait. The announcement of his intention to marry Ruth for the purpose of preserving the name of Elimelech and the comparison of Ruth to the matriarches of Israel force androcentric values back into the story. Yet the women of Bethlehem reclaim the narrative by reinforcing feminine values.

For Tribble, Ruth is a positive figure who should not be judged for her seductive behavior at the threshing floor. Naomi is more influenced by the restraints of her culture than Ruth, while Boaz actively works to enforce the patriarchal status quo. He is kind and generous yet is slow to act on the widows' behalf. Other scholars have agreed with various aspects of Tribble's interpretation, including Bos who emphasized that Ruth and Naomi's relationship was a challenge to the patriarchy. Bledstein, on the other hand, argued that all three characters defy the patriarchal status quo through their acts of *hesed*.

A number of feminist scholars, however, have come to the opposite conclusion about the meaning of the book. Fuchs was the first to champion the idea that, far from transforming the patriarchal system, the book instead supports and reinforces it. She, along with Jobling, Levine, and Sakenfeld have maintained that the book fosters the patriarchal status quo in several manipulative ways. First, the author makes Ruth into a hero because of her determination to preserve the name of her deceased husband.

He makes this obviously androcentric concern appear to be Ruth's only desire, and once she has achieved it, she disappears from the story. Her value depends on her ability to bear sons. Second, the author characterizes Ruth as sexually deceptive and although her actions may be condoned because she acted in the interest of her deceased husband, the idea that women, particularly Gentile women are to be distrusted and subjugated is perpetuated and even validated. Furthermore, she is not accepted into the Israelite community. Instead her son is given to Naomi for the purpose of maintaining racial purity. Third, the world in which Naomi and Ruth live is dominated by male preogatives. Ownership of women is emphasized and virilocal marriage is glorified. Finally, the Book of Ruth offers no challenge to the patriarchal system or to the subjugation of women. Ironically, Ruth and Naomi act independently to achieve androcentric purposes, but passively wait for men to decide their own fates.

LaCocque's understanding of the meaning of the book falls somewhere between that of Tribble and Fuchs. Like Tribble he argued that the book is subversive, but like Fuchs he held that Ruth's devotion to her deceased husband and her commitment to the patriarchal institution of levirate marriage served to reinforce androcentric purposes. The subversiveness of the book then is political rather than ideological. He maintained that the author's intent was to undermine the exclusivism of postexilic Judaism. The story of a Moabitess who becomes a model of Israelite virtue was intended to promote the acceptance of foreigners into the Jewish community. LaCocque also recognized that the book was written from a female perspective. Men are peripheral to the story and Boaz who is a generally positive figure, is not completely without character faults.

Bal's understanding of the book's subversiveness is broader than LaCocque's interpretation. Instead of simply undermining the law prohibiting Moabites from entering the Hebrew community, she understood the subversiveness in terms of favoring justice

over legalism. Bal also recognized in the comparison of Ruth to Rachel and Leah a challenge to the patriarchal agenda. As Rachel and Leah once worked together to accomplish their own purposes, so Ruth and Naomi worked together to survive in a man's world. Pardes also argued this point. Aschkenasy and Rashkow located the source of Ruth and Naomi's power to challenge the patriarchal status quo in their skillful use of language and discourse respectively. Bal's interpretation of Boaz is decidedly negative, however, she does recognize him as a mediator of justice.

Fewell and Gunn's interpretation of the book is also subversive, but for different reasons. It undermines the traditional understanding of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz as models of virtue. For Fewell and Gunn, the characters are complex figures whose motives are often less than altruistic. Naomi is thoroughly bound to the value system and the social structure of the patriarchy. She is a woman motivated by prejudice and self-interest. Her primary concern is to produce an heir. She has no use for Ruth until she realizes that she can use her to accomplish her purposes. Boaz is a proud and devious man who is sexually attracted to Ruth, but does not want to risk damaging his social standing by marrying a Moabitess. When Ruth compromises him at the threshing floor he comes up with a clever plan to obtain the object of his desire while avoiding scandal. He publicly upholds the patriarchal system, yet subtly mocks it. Neither is Ruth a picture of integrity. At the threshing floor she shows herself to be less than self-sacrificing and morally pure. Levine echoed many of these conclusions in her interpretation of the book.

Brenner shared Fewell and Gunn's interpretation of Naomi and Boaz. It is her understanding of Ruth that is unique. She argued that Ruth should be commended for her seductive behavior at the threshing floor because it was necessary for the good of her husband's family. In so doing she acts within the patriarchal system. Yet Brenner and others have emphasized that Ruth challenged the biblical stereotype of women in several ways. Her selfless devotion to her mother-in-law challenged the stereotype

of women fighting over men. By giving her son to Naomi, Ruth also challenges the stereotype that a woman's greatest desire is to raise children. She is one of the few foreign women in the Bible who is characterized favorably and she is a rare female model of typically masculine attributes such as courage, strength, cleverness, and leadership. In this way, Ruth's behavior is subversive. For these very reasons she and van Dijk-Hemmes proposed that the book may have originated from women's culture.

Similarities and Differences

The literature is too diverse to make many sweeping similarities between the traditional and feminist scholars. The comparisons which follow will be between specific traditional and feminist theories about the purpose of the book and the interpretation of the main characters of the story.

Purpose

Support for Levirate Marriage and Redemption

According to feminist scholars, the theory championed by McKane, that the Book of Ruth was written to provide support for the enforcement of levirate marriage and redemption, is consistent with Fuchs' position that the book supports the patriarchal system. This is so because feminists view the laws as part of the patriarchal system in which women are used as tools for accomplishing androcentric concerns.¹ For them the purpose of levirate marriage, to raise up a son who will carry on the name of the deceased husband, is primarily for the benefit of men. The widow's welfare is only incidental.² Feminists also identify the desire to preserve the family name as a male concern which is often projected onto women so that it appears to be their own.³ They assume that women in that culture found no personal fulfillment in bearing children, and therefore, the duty had to be ex-

¹ Tribble, "Two Women in a Man's World," 275.

² Davies, "Inheritance Rights: Part I," 142-143.

³ Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers," 130-131.

ternally imposed upon them. Feminists also consider the law of redemption to be part of the patriarchal system since it appears to involve the ownership and the objectification of women. They suggest that in 4:5 the redemption of the land is linked to the purchase of Ruth.⁴

Based on these assumptions, Fuchs and those who follow her agree with McKane that the author of the story intended to support the practice of levirate marriage and redemption, and thus the patriarchal status quo. Ruth was praised not for her devotion to Naomi, but for successfully producing an heir to carry on the name of her deceased husband.⁵ By submitting herself to levirate marriage, she was working within the patriarchal system.⁶ Furthermore, the biblical narrator deliberately fostered the patriarchal ideology by projecting onto Ruth his own androcentric desire to preserve the family name, so that it appeared as if it was Ruth's own desire and not the unwelcome burden that it was. Finally, it is the men who have the power to decide the women's fates by choosing whether or not to accept the responsibility of redeemer.⁷

Alternately, Tribble and the large majority of feminist scholars who maintain to varying degrees that the story challenges the patriarchy, disagree that the book was written to encourage the practice of these social institutions. Tribble recognized the patriarchal overtones of the gate scene, but argued that women reclaimed the story by redefining the significance of Obed's birth. They do not call him the son who will carry on the line of Elimelech, but a restorer of life who will sustain Naomi in her old age (4:15).⁸ They also remind Naomi that Ruth is worth more than seven sons which again counters the

⁴ Jobling, 132-134.

⁵ Fuchs, "The Literary Characterization of Mothers," 130.

⁶ Levine, 78; Sakenfeld, Faithfulness in Action, 32.

⁷ Jobling, 132-134.

⁸ Tribble, "Two Women in a Man's World," 275-276.

androcentric concern to carry on the family name.⁹ Fewell and Gunn,¹⁰ and Brenner¹¹ argued that Ruth did not rely on the law of levirate marriage to ensure Boaz's proposal, but instead used seduction and trickery to compromise him into providing for them. Furthermore, Bos made the point that if Naomi and Ruth are accused of continuing the patriarchal status quo it is because they live in a patriarchal society. It is only because of the powerlessness afforded to women by the patriarchal system that they must align themselves with men and use deception to survive.¹²

However, it can be convincingly argued that by reading the book in terms of modern concerns, feminists have imposed their own agenda onto the book and have not allowed the text to speak for itself.¹³ In effect, feminists have projected their values onto women of the ancient near eastern world, the very thing Fuchs' accused the biblical author of doing. These assumptions will here be identified and refuted. First of all, feminists identify the desire to have children and to preserve the family name as submission to the patriarchy.¹⁴ They assume that women would not desire, much less strive, to have children unless there was some other external reason for doing so, either male pressure or financial security (survival). The implication is that women did not value motherhood, in and of itself. Yet there is substantial evidence which suggests that women in the ancient near eastern culture did indeed find fulfillment and joy in the ability to produce children, the result of which was the continuation of the family line.¹⁵ For Sarah,¹⁶ Rachel,¹⁷ Hannah,¹⁸

⁹ Tribble, "The Radical Faith of Ruth," 53.

¹⁰ Fewell and Gunn, Compromising Redemption, 85ff..

¹¹ Brenner, The Israelite Woman, 97.

¹² Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 38.

¹³ John Oswalt, letter to author, 15 Apr. 1997.

¹⁴ Oswalt.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gen. 16; 18:12.

¹⁷ Gen. 30:1.

¹⁸ 1 Sam. 1.

Elizabeth,¹⁹ and no doubt countless others, barrenness was understood as a disgrace and experienced as one of life's most bitter sorrows.²⁰ The extreme lengths to which Tamar,²¹ and later Ruth, went to press their rights also testifies to the importance they placed on preserving the family.²² Thus traditionalists are justified in contending that Naomi and Ruth *wanted* to produce an heir *and* to preserve the name of their deceased husbands.²³

Second, feminists suppose the laws of levirate marriage and redemption are designed to advance a male agenda. In so doing, they fail to recognize the true intent and benefit of the laws. Traditionalists argue that in a world that was intensely patriarchal, the laws were a call for social justice. McKane argued that the purpose of encouraging obedience to the laws was to ensure the welfare of the family.²⁴ Burrows, among others, observed that support of the widow was part of the redeemer's obligation.²⁵ Traditionalists have also offered explanations which soften the implication of 4:5 that women may be bought and sold. The word for "buy," *qnh*, was likely the legal term used when marriage was negotiated "in conjunction with other actual purchases."²⁶ Coxon observed that Boaz concerned himself with the redemption of the land solely for the benefit of the two widows.²⁷ He also dismissed the idea that Ruth used seduction and trickery to force Boaz to perform his obligation as far-fetched and unnecessary since Ruth had already fully declared her desire to adopt Naomi's people and God.²⁸ Furthermore, the law of levi-

¹⁹ Luke 1:25.

²⁰ See also Isa. 54:1.

²¹ Gen. 38.

²² Oswalt.

²³ See Ap-Thomas, 372.

²⁴ McKane, *Tracts*, 13.

²⁵ Burrows, 452.

²⁶ Hubbard, 244; See Weiss, 244-248.

²⁷ Coxon, 35.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

rate marriage gave women the legal right to publicly shame any man who refused to accept the obligation of raising up a son for the widow.²⁹ The laws then not only served to provide security for women, but improved their social status and acknowledged their value as human beings by giving them legal rights. The fundamental error of reading the text through a feminist bias is that it requires that one impose her/his own values onto the text, which often results in making unwarranted assumptions, and misunderstanding the purpose of the laws, and in fact, the purpose of the entire book.³⁰

Promotion of Universalist and/or Anti-Exclusivist Ideas

Some feminists agree with the traditional theory that the purpose of the book was to encourage anti-exclusivist and universalist tendencies. LaCocque agrees with Bewer, Knight, and Shearman and Curtis, that the book was intended to undermine the exclusivistic Jerusalem ruling class led by Ezra and Nehemiah who were calling for ethnic purity.³¹ He argued that the message of the book is subversive in its emphasis on the importance of foreigners to Israelite society. With those traditionalists who see in the story more of a call for tolerance and acceptance of foreigners, Fewell and Gunn agree that one of the central purposes of the book may be to counter prejudice.³² In fact, they inferred from the frequent references to Ruth's nationality that prejudice influences much of what happens in the story. Pardes also recognized the theme of inclusiveness which is applicable not just to the postexilic period, but to the entire history of Israel.³³ Laffey agreed that the book emphasizes faithfulness to Yahweh over national identity and gender.³⁴

²⁹ Deut. 25:9.

³⁰ See below for further discussion.

³¹ LaCocque, 100.

³² Fewell and Gunn, Compromising Redemption, 157.

³³ Pardes, 99.

³⁴ Laffey, 298-300.

Recording of David's Family History and Edification

Both of the traditional theories that the Book of Ruth was written to record the family history of David and/or to support his claim to the throne, and to edify require positive interpretations of the main characters. Keil and Delitzch argued that it was the author's intent to glorify the piety of David's ancestors.³⁵ Sasson observed that it was not an uncommon practice to recall the righteous acts of a king's ancestors in order to legitimize his claim to the throne.³⁶ Obviously, if the purpose of the story was to edify, as Fohrer first suggested,³⁷ the characters must be worthy of emulation. Indeed, most traditionalists have interpreted Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz as models of faith and righteousness. Feminists, however, have tended to view them more critically, finding them to have serious character flaws. The comparing and contrasting of the various feminist and traditional interpretations of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz is the subject of the following section.

Interpretation of Naomi

This discussion will compare and contrast the traditional and feminist interpretations of each major aspect of Naomi's role in the story, including her attitude toward Ruth, her plan to send Ruth to the threshing floor, and her level of compliance to the patriarchal system. As to the question of whether or not Naomi acted out of concern for Ruth, traditionalists and feminists have argued on both sides. Historically, traditional scholars have understood Naomi as a loving, self-sacrificing, and devoted mother-in-law, ever concerned for the welfare of Ruth. She urged her daughters-in-law to stay behind in Moab for their own good, though she dearly loved them, and she sent Ruth to the threshing floor in part to secure her future through marriage to

³⁵ Keil and Delitzch, 466.

³⁶ Sasson, Ruth, 239-240.

³⁷ Fohrer, 250-252.

Boaz.³⁸ In response to Fewell and Gunn's negative interpretation Peter Coxon defended Naomi's character.³⁹ Arguing from a literary standpoint himself, he systematically challenged their interpretation of silences and allusions in the text, and concluded that their unfavorable view of Naomi is not only unnecessary, but completely unwarranted. Some feminists have also viewed Naomi in a positive light. Tribble and Bledstein understand her as a devoted mother-in-law, motivated by an altruistic concern for Ruth's best interests.⁴⁰

Yet a few traditional and feminist scholars have not found Naomi to be so kind. Shearman and Curtis found Naomi to be far from altruistic, but rather motivated by self-interest and self-pity.⁴¹ Robertson argued that Naomi actually wanted to rid herself of Ruth and Orpah whom she viewed as a potential source of embarrassment and a financial liability.⁴² Moreover, Carmichael observed that her attitude did not change until Boaz's interest in Ruth made her realize that she could use Ruth to preserve her deceased husband's name and to secure her own future.⁴³

Feminist scholars have tended to judge her even more harshly. Self-interest and prejudice caused Naomi to treat Ruth with extreme disregard argue Fewell and Gunn. She no doubt believed that God had punished her family for their entanglement with Moab so she sought to free herself from Ruth and Orpah. She also sought to avoid the embarrassment that these Moabite women would cause her among her own people. Ruth's persistent devotion was entirely unwanted. So when Ruth declared that she was going out to look for food, Naomi did not warn her of danger, nor did she direct her to the safety of her kinsman Boaz's field.⁴⁴ Bos

³⁸ See p. 23ff.

³⁹ Peter W. Coxon, "Was Naomi a Scold?" Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 45 (1989): 25-37.

⁴⁰ Tribble, "Two Women in a Man's World," 258; Bledstein, 118.

⁴¹ Shearman and Curtis, 236.

⁴² Robertson, 210.

⁴³ Carmichael, "A Ceremonial Crux," 335-336.

⁴⁴ Fewell and Gunn, Compromising Redemption, 85ff.

argued that it was not until Boaz showed an interest in Ruth that she recognized Ruth's worth and began to show concern for Ruth's future.⁴⁵ Brenner even less favorably observed that Naomi manipulated Ruth to accomplish her own purposes, namely to provide an heir for her deceased husband.⁴⁶ Similarly, Levine described Naomi as an ungrateful, uncaring mother-in-law who never acknowledged Ruth's value. Since her self-worth was completely wrapped up in her husband and sons,⁴⁷ her chief concern was to produce an heir. That is why the women of Bethlehem must remind Naomi that Ruth is worth more than seven sons.⁴⁸

As to the exact nature of Naomi's plan to send Ruth on a midnight visit to the threshing floor, there are similarities and differences between traditionalist and feminists. The prevailing traditional view holds that Naomi's plan was designed to encourage Boaz to fulfill his duty as their near kinsman. A marriage between Boaz and Ruth would ensure Ruth's long-term well-being and would likely produce an heir to carry on the name of Elimelech. For this reason Naomi instructed Ruth to prepare herself as a bride, to go to the threshing floor by night in order to ensure privacy, and finally to uncover and lie innocently at his feet, all of which was perfectly acceptable by cultural and moral standards of the day.⁴⁹

Yet some traditionalists have understood Naomi's instructions as a plan to seduce Boaz for the primary purpose of producing an heir. Some traditionalists have argued that since Naomi could not depend on social or legal means to persuade Boaz to marry Ruth, she resorted to seduction. Indeed they argue that Naomi's plan was designed to take advantage of Ruth's powers of seduction and Boaz's drunken state at the threshing floor.

⁴⁵ Bos, Ruth, Esther, Jonah, 15ff.

⁴⁶ Brenner, The Israelite Woman, 97.

⁴⁷ Levine, 78.

⁴⁸ Fewell and Gunn, "A Son is Born to Naomi!" 102.

⁴⁹ See p. 23-24.

Whether she actually had Ruth's well being in mind is questionable.⁵⁰

Feminist scholars tend to agree with the dissenting traditional view. Most agree that Naomi's instructions were far from pristine and socially acceptable. Fewell and Gunn, Rashkow, and Brenner have specifically maintained that Naomi intended for Ruth to seduce Boaz. Since Boaz would not act on his own accord, Naomi followed Tamar's example and resorted to seduction.⁵¹ There is some debate, however, as to her motive. Brenner's suggestion that Naomi used Ruth to accomplish her own purposes has already been noted. Yet Tribble and Bledstein argued that Naomi designed the plan for the benefit of Ruth.⁵²

On the question of Naomi's level of compliance to the patriarchal system, feminists are generally divided according to whether or not they believe Naomi sought to preserve the name of her deceased husband, which they have unanimously identified this as an androcentric concern. A few have agreed that Naomi acted in the interest of the patriarchy by preserving the family name at all costs.⁵³ Indeed Fewell and Gunn maintained that "Naomi is thoroughly bound to the value system and the social structure of the patriarchy."⁵⁴ Yet in Naomi's defense, Bos argued that it is only because of the powerlessness afforded to women by the patriarchal system that she had to align herself with men and use deception to survive.⁵⁵ In fact, most feminists do not believe that Naomi supported the patriarchal system. Tribble's interpretation of Naomi sees her caught between the demands of the patriarchy and independence. Her actions at times betray her allegiance to the patriarchy as when she waits for Boaz to fulfill

⁵⁰ See Carmichael, Phillips, Shearman And Curtis, and Robertson.

⁵¹ Fewell and Gunn, "Boaz: Pillar of Society," 45ff; Rashkow, 29; Brenner, A Feminist Companion to Ruth, 141.

⁵² Tribble, "Two Women in a Man's World," 258ff; Bledstein, 124-125.

⁵³ Brenner, A Feminist Companion to Ruth, 141.

⁵⁴ Fewell and Gunn, "A Son is Born to Naomi!" 105.

⁵⁵ Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 38ff.

his obligation as redeemer. At other times she takes the initiative in securing her future and that of Ruth, as when she devises the plan to influence Boaz at the threshing floor.⁵⁶ Bledstein argued that Naomi defied the accepted customs of the androcentric society in which she lived through her acts of *hesed*.⁵⁷ Van Dijk-Hemmes suggested that Naomi redefined the significance of bearing sons as insuring security for women instead of continuing the male name.⁵⁸

The overwhelming majority of traditional scholars have understood Naomi to be primarily dedicated to the preservation of her deceased husband's name, yet it has already been noted that traditionalists do not understand this as a submission to the patriarchy. Moreover, it can be argued that by judging the text as either for or against the patriarchy feminists have introduced a false dichotomy which prevents them from allowing the possibility that the author may have written the book for other reasons.⁵⁹ In fact, it is very likely that the author did not have anything like a feminist agenda in mind. Rather, he or she appears to have been more concerned with showing that, despite the fact that the ancient near eastern world was thoroughly patriarchal, within Israel women were considered to be valuable members of the community of faith who even participated in the history of salvation.⁶⁰ Traditionalists have also recognized the book's emphasis on the remarkable initiative and independence of the two women.⁶¹ Therefore, the question of whether or not Naomi and Ruth conformed to the patriarchy forces the text to speak to modern feminist concerns and fails to allow the story to speak for itself.

⁵⁶ Tribble, God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality, 196; Fuchs, 130ff.

⁵⁷ Bledstein, 118ff.

⁵⁸ Van Dijk-Hemmes, 137.

⁵⁹ Oswalt.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Crenshaw, 336; Gottwald, The Hebrew Bible, 555, 557.

Interpretation of Ruth

Traditional and feminist interpretations of Ruth's character, the nature of her behavior at the threshing floor, and her level of compliance to the patriarchy will here be compared and contrasted. On the question of Ruth's character traditionalists have unanimously praised her as a model of virtue. That she repeatedly risked physical harm and humiliation in order to provide for her mother-in-law and to preserve the family name is generally accepted. With few exceptions⁶² her selflessness, unswerving devotion, humility, resourcefulness, and courage has remained unchallenged. For the most part feminist scholars have not challenged this positive view of Ruth. In fact, as will be shown below, most hold Ruth as model of feminist values. Yet there are a few dissenting voices who have questioned Ruth's character. Fewell and Gunn's interpretation casts a shadow of doubt over her intentions. They suggested that her request of Boaz at the threshing floor was for herself alone and did not include Naomi's welfare.⁶³ Levine's interpretation is ambiguous. She indicated that Ruth may be understood either "as a moral exemplar or as a warning against sexually forward Gentile women."⁶⁴

Indeed the mystery shrouding the events of the threshing floor has spawned a complicated array of interpretations. At stake is the moral integrity of Ruth and Boaz. Although there are dissenting interpretations on both sides, generally traditionalists and feminists disagree on the fundamental nature of the threshing floor scene. Most traditional scholars have maintained the innocence of the scene. Ignoring or dismissing the sexually suggestive language of the text, they insist that no misconduct took place. Ruth's intentions were pure and her behavior was culturally and legally appropriate by the standards of

⁶² Shearman and Curtis, 236.

⁶³ Fewell and Gunn, "Boaz: Pillar of Society," 47-48.

⁶⁴ Levine, 113.

the day. Her mission was not to seduce but to remind Boaz of his obligation as redeemer, although some have admitted that Naomi hoped desire would encourage Boaz to fulfill his obligation.

Alternately, feminists have maintained that the threshing floor scene was anything but innocent. They have tended to find in the reference to Tamar, and the numerous double *entendres* more than enough evidence to conclude that the scene was one of seduction. All agree that Ruth's behavior was sexually suggestive. Some contend that she acted deceptively⁶⁵ and compromised Boaz in order to force him to marry her. Whether or not they actually had sexual intercourse, the important thing is that Boaz thought they might have while he was drunk.⁶⁶ Bledstein argued that they intentionally had intercourse in order to consummate a secret marriage.⁶⁷ Most have agreed that Ruth, like Tamar, was justified in taking these measures because Boaz was negligent in fulfilling his responsibility,⁶⁸ although some suggest that it taints her character.⁶⁹

A few traditional scholars have similarly viewed Ruth as a seductress. Berquist suggested that Ruth went to the field, not to glean, but to seduce a man of means.⁷⁰ In addition to the double *entendres* in chapter 3, Carmichael recognized sexual allusion in the word for "threshing" and in the sandal ceremony in chapter 4.⁷¹ Carmichael, Beattie, Phillips, and Rowley saw in Ruth's request a sexual invitation.⁷² Yet, of all these, only Beattie believed that Ruth and Boaz actually had intercourse. Campbell maintained that no sexual misconduct took place, ex-

⁶⁵ Fuchs, 141-142.

⁶⁶ Fewell and Gunn; Brenner.

⁶⁷ Bledstein, 125-127.

⁶⁸ Tribble, "Two Women in a Man's World," 266; Brenner, A Feminist Companion to Ruth, 141.

⁶⁹ Fewell and Gunn, "Boaz: Pillar of Society," 47-48.

⁷⁰ Berquist, 28-30.

⁷¹ Carmichael, Women, Law and the Genesis Traditions, 74ff; Carmichael, "A Ceremonial Crux," 332-333.

⁷² Carmichael, "A Ceremonial Crux," 329; Beattie, "Ruth III," 43; Rowley, 180; Phillips, 14.

plaining that the ambiguous language was intended to create question as to whether Ruth and Boaz would act with integrity.⁷³

Bernstein suggested that the author used the double entendres to express the emotional tone of the scene.⁷⁴ Bernstein and Campbell rather effectively demonstrated that Ruth and Boaz's integrity may be defended without ignoring or dismissing the sexual language of the text.

As to the question of Ruth's compliance to the patriarchal system again feminists are divided. Some feminists have suggested that preserving the family line was Ruth's primary mission.⁷⁵ Ruth is praised not for her devotion to Naomi but for continuing the name of the dead by producing a male heir.⁷⁶ In fact, some have suggested that Ruth is important only in relation to men, for once she gives birth to a son she disappears from the story.⁷⁷ Most feminist scholars, however, have understood Ruth as an agent of change who refuses to conform to patriarchal rules and stereotypes. Her primary concern is to see that she and Naomi survive. Obed's birth was an unplanned benefit.⁷⁸ She demonstrates qualities that are typically attributed to men such as initiative, independence, and courage.⁷⁹ She uses the patriarchal system to her own advantage by adapting it to meet her specific needs, as when she challenges Boaz to fulfill the spirit of the law.⁸⁰ She skillfully employs language "to challenge and modify patriarchal rules while ostensibly submitting to them"⁸¹ Her primary devotion to Naomi, a woman, is another challenge to the patriarchy. Ruth's marriage to Boaz is performed out of necessity and is used as an opportunity for Ruth to demon-

⁷³ Campbell, 137-138.

⁷⁴ Bernstein, 17-18.

⁷⁵ LaCocque, 91; Sakenfeld, "Faithfulness in Action," 62.

⁷⁶ Fuchs, 130.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 135; Levine, 79.

⁷⁸ Brenner, *A Feminist Companion to Ruth*, 142.

⁷⁹ Tribble, "Two Women in a Man's World," 275-276; Tribble, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality*, 196; Exum, 68; Fishman, 283.

⁸⁰ Aschkenasy, 123.

⁸¹ Ibid., 112; See also Rashkow.

strate her love for Naomi.⁸² Giving her son to Naomi is another challenge to the patriarchy in two ways. For one thing, it shows that women do not have to raise children to find fulfillment in life.⁸³ It also challenges the stereotype of women fighting over men.⁸⁴ Some have understood the comparison of Ruth to Rachel and Leah as reinforcing this very point that women can work together to overcome patriarchal restraints.⁸⁵

Again the traditional response to this discussion is that Ruth intended neither to support nor challenge the patriarchal system. She rather sought to provide for her mother-in-law, find fulfillment in preserving her husband's family, and become a member of the Israelite community of faith. Traditional scholars do not find it necessary to consider Ruth's marriage to Boaz and her having a son as either submission to the patriarchy or as a means to an end, i.e. survival. Certainly, their long-term security was a factor in their urgent desire for Ruth to seek marriage with Boaz. The biblical world allowed women little opportunity to earn a living, therefore women were dependent on fathers, husbands, and sons. Yet traditionalists have emphasized that marriage and the raising of children were not simply a necessity for survival, but satisfying in and of themselves. They were duties in which most women found intrinsic value.⁸⁶ Furthermore, the feminist claim that Ruth was only important in relation to men is an unwarranted assumption.

Interpretation of Boaz

On the character of Boaz the differences between traditionalist and feminist scholars are greater than the similarities. Boaz has been traditionally understood as a model of piety and a hero. Out of admiration for Ruth he showered her with kindness and generosity above that which was required by the law when they

⁸² Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 58-64; Weems, 33; Van Dijk-Hemmes, 136.

⁸³ Reimer, 98-101.

⁸⁴ Brenner, The Israelite Woman, 97.

⁸⁵ Bal, 85; Pardes, 101.

⁸⁶ Oswalt.

met at his field. When Ruth awakened him at the threshing floor he acted honorably and graciously. Some, who understand her actions as a sexual advance, have suggested that he piously refrained from taking advantage of the situation, though he was attracted to her.⁸⁷ Others have suggested that he understood her appeal as a request that he marry her for the purpose of raising up an heir to carry on the name of her deceased husband, for which he praised her. Nothing improper transpired between them, because the near kinsman had prior rights to Ruth. Indeed the reason for Boaz's slowness to act on behalf of the two widows was probably because he was giving the near kinsman the opportunity to fulfill the obligation. Wanting to marry Ruth himself and to see that the name of the dead was preserved, Boaz cleverly outwitted the near kinsman into giving up his rights to Ruth. In comparing him to Perez the townspeople wished his union with Ruth to be fruitful. Thus traditionalists have generally held Boaz in high esteem.

Feminist scholars, however, have tended to find in Boaz less than a model of virtue. To varying degrees all have questioned his integrity, with one exception. Bledstein defended his character suggesting that he defied the accepted customs of the androcentric society through his acts of *hesed*, fully living up to his name.⁸⁸ Some have viewed Boaz as a generally positive figure, but criticize him for being slow to act on behalf of Naomi and Ruth.⁸⁹ LaCocque claimed he was guilty of drinking too much at the threshing floor, yet preserved his virtue by not responding to Ruth's ostensibly seductive behavior in kind.⁹⁰ Tribble and Bos observed that while he expresses his concern for Ruth's welfare in private, his public concern was for the preservation of the name of Elimelech. At the city gate he acquired Ruth as a

⁸⁷ Rowley, 181-182.

⁸⁸ Bledstein, 118.

⁸⁹ Tribble, "Two Women in a Man's World, 262; Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 58-64; LaCocque, 106-107.

⁹⁰ LaCocque, 106-107; See also Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 58ff.

possession for the benefit of his dead relative. It is unclear as to which was his primary concern: Ruth or the maintenance of the patriarchal status quo.⁹¹

Other feminists have criticized him more harshly. Bal characterized him as a weak, even fearful man, who appears capable only of reacting to the initiatives of women, and whose generosity toward Ruth was motivated by sexual attraction. Seeking his own interest, Boaz tricked the near kinsman into giving up his rights to the land and to Ruth by illegitimately presenting the two separate laws as one.⁹² Fewell and Gunn depicted him as a proud and devious man. Prejudice had prevented him from fulfilling his obligation to Ruth. Fear of scandal motivated him to come up with a plan to cover his indiscretion at the threshing floor, and find a socially acceptable reason for marrying a Moabitess. His public act of kindness to Naomi and concern for the continuance of Elimelech's name is actually a clever plan to avoid scandal, and obtain Ruth, the object of his sexual desire, while maintaining his high social standing in the community.⁹³ Levine agrees with Fewell and Gunn that Boaz needed a socially acceptable excuse to marry Ruth. By calling him a redeemer Ruth provided him with such a rationale. Yet she argued that he did not marry her out of love and respect, but out of duty to her dead husband⁹⁴

A few traditionalists have echoed these complaints against Boaz in their interpretations. Some have questioned his generosity claiming that he did little more than what was required of him and what he did do was long in coming.⁹⁵ Hubbard tentatively suggested that his failure to act may have been caused by prejudice.⁹⁶ Phillips proposed a theory similar to Fewell and Gunn's

⁹¹ Tribble, "Two Women in a Man's World," 275; Bos, "Out of the Shadows," 58ff.

⁹² Bal, 70-80.

⁹³ Fewell and Gunn, Compromising Redemption, 85ff.

⁹⁴ Levine, 112.

⁹⁵ Sasson, "Divine Providence or Human Plan?" 419.

⁹⁶ Hubbard, 205.

in which Ruth deceived Boaz into thinking that he had intercourse with her while he was drunk and had to marry her to avoid scandal.⁹⁷

Yet the majority of traditional scholars do not find these negative interpretations necessary to explain Boaz's actions. In fact, many of the harsh claims feminists level against Boaz appear forced. For example, it can just as easily be said that Boaz refrained from intervening in behalf of the two widows out of consideration for the nearer kinsman who preceded him in responsibility and right. As Coxon has argued it seems rather unlikely that he refrained because of prejudice for Ruth had thoroughly adopted the Israelite community and faith as her own.⁹⁸ Moreover, the theory that Ruth compromised Boaz while he was drunk in order to blackmail him into marrying her is quite fanciful and does not fit the emotional tone of the text. Boaz's gracious response to Ruth is certainly not that of a man who is being blackmailed and has had too much to drink. Furthermore, traditionalists do not recognize a discrepancy between Boaz's private promise to Ruth and his public declaration,⁹⁹ because they do not understand the raising up of an heir as an androcentric concern, but rather as answer to Ruth's request. Finally, as it has already been shown, it is not necessary to interpret 4:5 as an example of the objectification of women.

Conclusion

This analysis has revealed that traditional and feminist interpretations have very little in common with each other. A pattern has emerged in which traditional scholars generally tend to view the purpose of the book and its main characters in positive terms, while feminists judge the book in terms of its value to the feminist cause. Traditionalists find the story to be edifying, while feminists find it filled with patriarchal con-

⁹⁷ Phillips, 14ff; See also Carmichael and Beattie.

⁹⁸ Coxon, 34.

⁹⁹ Oswalt.

straints and male oppression of women. Feminists identify the laws of levirate marriage and redemption as part of the patriarchal system, and contend that the desire to have children for one's deceased husband is an androcentric concern which has been externally imposed on women.

Why have the two sides produced such different positions? The answer has to do with their differences in approach to the Scriptures. Traditionalists attempt to identify their biases and assumptions and set them aside so that they will not influence their interpretation. They seek to hear what the author intended to say with unbiased ears. Feminists, on the other hand, deliberately read the text "through the lens of their bias"¹⁰⁰ or "self-consciously as women."¹⁰¹ They approach the book looking for evidence of inequality in order to determine whether it supports or challenges the patriarchy. Therefore, when feminists encounter silences and ambiguities in the narrative they fill them in according to their bias. The result is a decisively negative interpretation. Reading the book with such modern feminist concerns in mind precludes the possibility that the author had anything to say other than that which the feminist agenda dictates, when in fact, the book probably was not meant to address such issues.¹⁰² Traditionalists also face the difficult task of filling in the gaps, but they intentionally attempt to do so without imposing their own assumptions on the text. Their approach allows the book to speak for itself.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Newsom and Ringe, xiii.

¹⁰² Oswalt.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

Introduction

Having analyzed the similarities and differences between the traditional and feminist interpretations of the Book of Ruth, it is the task of this chapter to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of each approach. What new insights have feminist scholars brought to the study of Ruth? Which aspects of traditional interpretations remain irrefuted? Where do traditional and feminist interpretations fall short? The answers to these questions lie in determining which interpretation is most congruent with the claims of the narrative, the cultural-historical context of the story and the canonical context of the book.

Evaluation of Traditional Approach

A century of traditional scholarship on the Book of Ruth has resulted in a tremendous amount of information and insight into nearly every aspect of the narrative. In fact, one of the important contributions traditional scholarship has provided is a detailed examination of historical-critical questions regarding authorship, date of composition, purpose, place in the canon, genre, themes, theology, and legal problems. Although the majority of these questions have yet to be answered decisively, an impressive array of theories have been proposed and debated.

Unfortunately however, the emphasis on historical-critical questions has had two negative effects. One is that questions about the book have tended to take precedence over serious study of the meaning of the story and the interpretation of the characters. The other is that the importance of legal problems regarding levirate marriage, redemption, and the sandal ceremony which are peripheral to the story have tended to be blown out of proportion.¹

Traditional scholars have provided insight into the meaning of the story of Ruth by attempting to determine the author's

¹ Rauber, "Literary Values in the Bible," 27ff.

purpose for writing the book. Four of the five theories proposed have some merit. The theory that the book was written to support the enforcement of such social institutions as levirate marriage and redemption is not widely held. It is unpopular because the use of levirate marriage and redemption in Ruth is not well understood and is, in any case, peripheral to the plot of the story. The suggestion that these institutions are central to the purpose is a perfect example of how intense study of details can lead to imbalance and distortion of the narrative as a whole.

There is, however, evidence to support those who suggest that the book was written for the purpose of recording David's family history. They are correct in recognizing that the story is an essential link in the history of salvation. Not only does the genealogy at the end of the book testify to this, but the genealogies in 1 Chronicles, Matthew and Luke do as well.² To those who would disagree Tamar Frankiel reminds:

The guardians of Jewish tradition insisted that the story told in Ruth, with all its bizarre circumstances, is one of the traces in history of the path to the Messiah. They also insisted on its prophetic origins, in order to emphasize that it contains messages absolutely essential to the fulfillment of our destiny. We must take seriously that this book is one of the keys to the direction of history, a trajectory along the path of grace.³

The theory that the book was written to encourage acceptance of foreign proselytes also has merit. In fact, the book appears to break down barriers of race, nationality, gender and social status. The only thing that really matters is one's devotion to Yahweh. This appears to be an important message of the Book of Ruth. However, the related theory that the book was written as a polemic against the exclusivism of postexilic Judaism is unlikely. For one thing, a strong case can be made against a post-

² 1 Chr. 2:11-12; Mt. 1:5; Lk. 3:32.

³ Tamar Frankiel, "Ruth and the Messiah," in Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story, eds. J. A. Kates, and G. T. Reimer (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994), 324.

exilic date of composition which the theory requires. Moreover, the delightful story has none of the characteristics of propaganda. It is in no way argumentative. In fact it is quite possible that the author intended the story to be entertaining, as some have proposed, although this can hardly be the only purpose.

Finally, the theory that edification was the author's intent is quite plausible. Undoubtedly, the story teaches about God's providence and the reward of faithfulness. With few exceptions, traditional scholars have historically praised Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz as models of virtue, worthy of emulation. Indeed their acts of *hesed* were meant to be emulated. The question, raised by feminists, is were Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz perfectly faithful? One possible weakness of traditionalist interpretations of the Book of Ruth is that they run the risk of presenting an idealized and superficial understanding of the main characters of the story. Traditional scholars have been reluctant to question the motives of Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz, and/or admit any imperfection in their characters. They assume the best about the characters when the text is silent, and sometimes claim these assumptions as fact.⁴ In this way they risk turning historical people into superhuman figures. All of the great heroes of faith had faults and made mistakes from time to time. Is it possible that Naomi, Ruth, and Boaz were more virtuous than Abraham, Moses, Joseph, and David? While it is not necessary to suggest, as the feminists do, that Boaz was negligent in seeing to the welfare of the two widows, or that he was just as concerned with his social standing as he was with Ruth's welfare, it is possible to suggest that his intentions were not entirely pure. Likewise, the text in no way demands a negative interpretation of Naomi, yet silences and ambiguities allow the possibility that she disregarded Ruth's safety and may have been less than a loving mother-in-law. It may be that the characters of the story demonstrate a combination of faithfulness and self-interest. The problem with many tradition-

⁴ Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, "Is Coxon a Scold? On Responding to the Book of Ruth," Journal for the Study of the Old Testament 45 (1989): 40.

alist interpretations is that they too quickly assume that the characters are flawless and often fail to justify their positions.

The traditional understanding of the threshing floor scene also has strengths and weaknesses. The idea that Ruth and Boaz preserved their moral integrity, which has been stringently maintained by the majority of traditionalists, is indeed the most likely interpretation. However, the grounds on which traditional scholars have historically defended this view are unsound. First of all, there is no positive evidence to suggest that Naomi's scheme was culturally acceptable. On the contrary, based on what is known about the kind of behavior that commonly took place at threshing floors at night, it is more probable that had she been discovered, Ruth would have been taken for a prostitute.⁵ It appears that Boaz was well aware of this danger when he warned her not to let her presence be known (3:14). It is also possible that the grain he gave her was meant to serve also as an excuse for her being out so early at the threshing floor should she have been recognized. Furthermore, in their desire to present the threshing floor scene as a picture of purity and innocence, traditional scholars have tended to ignore or disregard the sexual connotations imbedded in the language of the text. Only Campbell, and Bernstein have offered explanations of the sexual language while maintaining that they did not engage in any sexual behavior, nor was Boaz drunk. Bernstein's suggestion that the author employed sexual imagery to express the emotional tone of the scene which was fraught with temptation, is most compelling. Indeed his interpretation best explains all of the difficulties of the chapter.

Evaluation of Feminist Approach

It has been shown that feminist scholars have imposed a false dichotomy on the text by reading the Book of Ruth in terms of whether it supports or challenges the patriarchy. This

⁵ See Hosea 9:1.

fundamental error makes it impossible for this author to ultimately agree with any of the various interpretations which have emerged from feminist scholarship, since it seems highly improbable that the biblical writer meant to address a modern feminist agenda. This author also finds many feminist claims to be inconsistent with the claims of the text, the cultural-historical context of the story, and the canonical context of the book. The strengths and weaknesses of these interpretations will here be discussed.

Believing that the book was written for the purpose of supporting patriarchal values, some feminists denounce it as a tool used for subjugating women. They purport to expose androcentric biases within the text, and differentiate between male and female concerns. The objectification of Ruth in 4:5 is perhaps the most obvious example of androcentric bias which they cite in the Book of Ruth. Preserving the name of the dead is an example of a male concern made to appear as a female priority. The portrayal of Ruth as deceptive reinforces the negative biblical stereotype of women. Fuchs, Jobling, and Levine, therefore find little value in the book.

Yet this interpretation that the book reinforces the patriarchy is largely based on ambiguities in the text which may just as easily be interpreted otherwise. In fact, other feminists, most notably Tribble and Brenner, have argued that the book challenges the patriarchal status quo and subverts the negative female stereotype of women in the bible. They find numerous examples of this. Tribble contended that the patriarchal overtones of the gate scene are counteracted by the women of Bethlehem who reclaim the story by redefining the significance of the birth of Obed. She also emphasized the independence, resourcefulness, and courage of the two women, qualities which are normally used to describe men in the bible. Van Dijk-Hemmes argued that Ruth and Naomi redefine reality in their own terms. They seek an heir not to preserve a name, but to secure their futures. Brenner and Bal

observed that Ruth's devotion to Naomi challenges the biblical stereotype of women fighting each other over men.

Yet the idea that the book either supports or challenges the patriarchy can be refuted on several levels. First of all, Fuchs' claims that Ruth is praised not for her devotion to Naomi, but for her success in preserving the name of her deceased husband, betrays the assumption of feminists in general that the desire to have children is a patriarchal constraint imposed upon women. It has already been shown that there is tremendous biblical evidence which suggests that women found great personal fulfillment in motherhood. It therefore appears that it is the feminists themselves, and not dominating men, who have actually imposed their values on these biblical women. Furthermore, the argument that Ruth and Naomi sought to produce an heir to ensure their survival does not logically negate that they may have also sought the joy of raising a son who would carry on the name of their deceased husbands.

Second, within the cultural-historical context of the ancient near east in which women had few rights and were completely dependent on men, Hebrew laws provided the childless widow with a means of survival. Therefore, the assumption that levirate marriage and redemption were part of the patriarchal system misunderstands their actual purpose. Bos and others who have argued that Ruth and Naomi used the patriarchal system to their own advantage fail to recognize that they were not meant to subjugate, but to improve the status of women. Furthermore, the genealogy of 4:17-22 attests to the fact that Ruth's levirate marriage to Boaz plays a small, but important part in the history of salvation. The law enabled the couple to raise up a child who would become the ancestor of the Messiah.

Feminists have contributed to the study of the Book of Ruth by challenging the assumption that the main characters of the story are completely above reproach. They have not been afraid to question the motives of the main characters. In so doing,

they have recognized that the characters are not superhuman, idealized, or one-dimensional figures, but real, imperfect people. Silences and ambiguities in the text allow feminist scholars to legitimately draw alternate interpretations.⁶ Yet most feminists have clearly gone too far in assuming the worst.

It is possible that Naomi was less than altruistic in her dealings with Ruth. It is conceivable that prejudice and self-interest may have kept her from concerning herself with Ruth's safety, or recognizing the value of Ruth's love. Fewell and Gunn in particular made some observations which put Naomi in a negative light, that warrant consideration. Why is Naomi not more concerned for Ruth's safety? She does not warn Ruth of danger until after she returns with an abundance of grain and Boaz's favor? Again there is no warning of danger when she devises her scheme to send Ruth to the threshing floor, a highly dangerous situation. Yet, ultimately it is unnecessary to assume the worst about Naomi. Perhaps her bitterness prevented her from seeing to Ruth's safety, but it cannot be said that she completely neglected Ruth's welfare. If the text is taken at face value, 3:1 attests to the fact that Naomi, at least in part, sent Ruth to the threshing floor in order to secure Ruth's future. Furthermore, Naomi's initiative here and her loyalty to her deceased husband plays a significant part in bringing about a happy ending to the story. In these things she is indeed worthy of emulation.

Most feminists have not challenged the traditional understanding of Ruth's character. In fact she may be held in an even higher regard by many feminists who recognize that the love she showed Naomi was never returned. Feminists have also been more apt to praise her for her courage because they recognize the danger she faced as a Moabite woman venturing alone into the fields to glean, and to the threshing floor to meet Boaz at night. Fewell and Gunn, however have unfairly questioned her

⁶ Fewell and Gunn, "Is Coxon a Scold?" 40.

selflessness. Indeed their assumption that Ruth did not consider Naomi's welfare when she asked Boaz to act as redeemer,⁷ is out of character for Ruth and lacks other textual support. Others have cast a shadow of doubt over Ruth's virtue, suggesting that her behavior at the threshing floor was inappropriate.⁸

Feminists have also made a significant contribution to the understanding of the threshing floor scene, although their final conclusions are ultimately unsatisfying. The interpretation of the threshing floor scene of chapter 3 is one of the most difficult problems in the book. Feminists have legitimately challenging the traditional view that the scene was one of purity and innocence, by drawing attention to the sexual overtones of the scene. The evidence seems to support Tribble and those who argue that the events which took place at the threshing floor were sexual in nature. They have rightly argued that the long list of double entendres and sexual innuendos is more than a coincidence. Furthermore, the prophet Hosea testified to the fact that threshing floors were favorite places of prostitution and licentious behavior in Israel. However, the weakness of Tribble's explanation is that she did not explain what exactly took place that night. Fewell and Gunn, and Brenner specifically suggested that Ruth used seduction and trickery to compromise Boaz into providing for herself and Naomi. Indeed the comparison of Ruth to Tamar, who seduced Judah, seems to support the suggestion that Ruth meant to compromise Boaz. Yet this theory ultimately falls short. Boaz's response to Ruth is not that of a man who has been blackmailed. He warmly blesses Ruth, and calls her a woman of *hesed* and noble character (3:10ff.). Bernstein's explanation remains the most compelling. Building on the best traditional and feminist scholarship, his interpretation explains the author's use of sexual language, as well as the comparison of Ruth to Tamar, while maintaining the moral integrity of Ruth and Boaz.

⁷ Fewell and Gunn, "Boaz: Pillar of Society," 47-48.

⁸ See Levine, 113.

Feminist scholarship has also contributed to the understanding of Boaz's actions here by challenging the traditional interpretation that holds Boaz as a selfless hero. Feminists have asked some legitimate questions of Boaz's character. Why was he so slow to act in behalf of the two widows? It is impossible to tell whether he was waiting in good faith for the near kinsman to act or whether he was reluctant to get involved with a Moabite woman. The text allows either possibility. Yet Tribble's observation that in private Boaz's concern was for Ruth, but in public his concern was for the restoration of the land and name of his dead kinsman does not suggest dishonesty or a lack of integrity. Nor does Boaz make Ruth a tool for accomplishing male preogatives, as she suggested. His public declaration was the means by which he fulfilled his private promise to Ruth.

The theory that Ruth seduced and tricked Boaz into marrying her has already been refuted. Feminists go too far in supposing that he needed to marry Ruth to avoid scandal, since there is no reason to believe that he acted improperly at the threshing floor. It is possible that his motives may have been less than pure, yet what he did for the widows was in the end a generous and faithful act.

Conclusion

In the final analysis traditional scholarship provides the most convincing interpretations of the Book of Ruth. By reading the book through their bias, feminists have unwittingly done the very thing that they accuse men of doing, that is they have imposed their own values onto the women of the story. Most unfortunately, many have completely failed to recognize that the book demonstrates God's concern for women. Yet, by questioning traditional scholarship feminists have contributed to the discussion by challenging traditionalists to more closely identify their own assumptions and to better defend their positions. Further study will be needed to investigate more thoroughly the contributions which feminists scholars have made.

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